

Film: 'Winter Soldier'

Vietnam Documentary Opens at Whitney

By VINCENT CANBY

"Winter Soldier," which opened at the Whitney Museum yesterday as part of its New American Filmmakers Series, is a documentary feature composed entirely of Vietnam Veterans' testimony, most of which was photographed and recorded during hearings in Detroit, Jan. 31-Feb. 2, 1971, sponsored by the Vietnam Veterans Against the War.

It includes occasional official newsreel clips, as well as still photographs supplied by the testifying veterans (including one Brownie snapshot of a triumphant, smiling G.I. standing at the head of a newly murdered Vietnamese, but it is most agonizing in its young, barely molded words and faces—the record of men trying to make some sense of an experience that to them clearly makes no sense. Yet something very important is missing from the movie and, by extension it seems, from what might be called the American character.

The movie is an oral history, told by former United States soldiers, sailors and marines who, for the most part, admit to having participated in various atrocities without question. What is obviously missing—and I suppose this is hardly news now—is some explanation as to how we could have managed to raise a couple of generations of people who could participate in the conduct described without experiencing the kind of sorrow that activates conscience. This, I assume, is the question that the film intends to raise.

The other question, which is as much a moral question as a dramatic one, is what happened to change these men's minds, and when? At what point, for example, does a man, who could pose with the corpse of someone he has just shot, decide that he doesn't want to do this anymore? About halfway through "Winter Soldier" there is a moment that tells us about all the stories we are not hearing, when a clean-cut former G.I. recalls walking down a street in Cambridge and going out of his way to push a bearded student off the sidewalk. The student, he remembers, said simply: "You make it very difficult for

The Program

WINTER SOLDIER, a documentary by Winterfilm in association with Vietnam Veterans Against the War. Running time: 93 minutes. At the Whitney Museum of American Art, Madison Avenue near 75th Street.

anyone to get to know you." The former soldier then says something on the order of: "I told my wife about this, and she helped me straighten my head out."

That is as close as "Winter Soldier" ever comes to providing an obligatory scene. The other conversions are unremembered. They take place silently, off-screen. All of which effectively limits the larger purposes of "Winter Soldier," even for one who is sympathetic to its ends. I suspect that one of the reasons that what happened could happen is that we live in a culture whose slang, among other things, persists in referring to the mind as the head. We refuse to make distinctions that can, in the long run, recognize the difference between life and death.