

World of Books



Psychological Scars Of Vietnam Veterans

— John Barkham

THE VIETNAM WAR is the only war in this century where a heroes' welcome was reserved not for returning troops but for returning prisoners. It was gratitude for survival rather than gratitude for performance which won public applause. In this respect, as in so many others, the Vietnam War has been unlike any other in our history. "Home From the War," by Robert Jay Lifton, of Yale University, is an analysis-in-depth of other singular and unexpected effects this war has had on the men who fought it.

Lifton interviewed hundreds of Vietnam veterans on their reactions to the war and discovered that many of them carried within themselves the "special taint" of the war, centered mostly on the guilt evoked by death. Many said that they were viewed by people as "monsters," "beasts," "murderers," particularly after the revelation of the My Lai massacre of civilians. According to Lifton: "They fought in an undeclared and therefore psychologically illegitimate war." Many indeed spoke to him of "sneaking back into society."

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THEIR SENSE of what Lifton calls "animating guilt" has found expression in feelings of guilt and the impulse toward violence. A number of veterans told how, when brushed by someone on the street, or simply annoyed by something another person had done, they would have the impulse to "throttle or kill him," Lifton re-

ports. "And they would directly associate this impulse with patterns of behavior cultivated in Vietnam."

One interesting and perhaps significant outcome of Lifton's conversations with Vietnam veterans was that they reserved a special tone — best described as ironic rage — for two categories they encountered: chaplains and "shrinks." The very mention of a military chaplain quickly brought forth smirks, gibes, uneasy laughter. With bitter enthusiasm they gave endless examples of chaplains blessing the troops, their missions, their guns, their killing. As one man put it: "Whatever we were doing . . . murder . . . atrocities . . . God was always on our side." References to psychiatrists or "shrinks" evoked similarly sarcastic responses.

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LIFTON sums up the dilemma of veterans as that of men who have been given the sanction to kill, though neither those who gave it nor the veterans themselves can accept it as legitimate. "They emerge more stigmatized than heroic while still able to lay some claim to the rights and prerogatives of the warrior-hero."

This is a strange, painful predicament which only time may ultimately heal. Vietnam created a high proportion of psychological casualties whose mental scars may yet prove to be the most lingering of all its costs. (Simon & Schuster; \$8.95.)