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For the Veterans, Survival Was What Mattered

By Henry Allen
Washington Post Staff Writer

The lifers were right.

"It ain't much," they said, "but it's the only war we got."

Some of them had been in World War II. A lot of them had been in Korea. They got medals from commanding officers, and fragging from the troops. They did two, three, four tours in Vietnam, from the Green Beret glamor of 1963 to the nasty resignation of 1969.

Vietnam mattered, somehow, but it didn't mean very much.

If you got killed in Vietnam it mattered. You were meat in a body bag with "HEAD" stenciled on one end. But the only place it meant something was back here, back in "the world."

You'd made "the ultimate sacrifice." You'd "laid down your life for liberty." That's what Presidents and mothers and parish priests said.

If you didn't get killed, that mattered too. You were a survivor, one of about 2.6 million who came back from Vietnam, 300,000 of them wounded.

If you were in the vast walking, thinking, able-to-feed-yourself majority, people would say: "You're lucky."

Welcome home. You were a veteran.

You got tears from your mother, a handshake from your father, maybe a block party from the neighborhood, with the little kids asking you: "Did you kill anybody?" You got the guys down at the American Legion Hall buying you beers and telling you about the war—not Vietnam, but the three-and-a-half years of World War II—a war gospel to which 11 years of Vietnam seemed only an ugly, bewildering boring footnote.

You got college kids marching against genocide. You got less G.I. Bill money than your father got 25 years ago, but after all, that had been "the" war. You had a hard time getting a job, but you got a lot of promises about that situation from the government. You got everybody telling you what it had all meant. You knew it didn't matter to them, though, because they hadn't been there. You got tired of it.

It was hard to think about. It was impossible to explain. You couldn't tell a 17-year-old college girl, the kind that seemed to view humanity as 3 billion kittens, that anybody—*anybody*—could have killed those people at Mylai, given just the right frustration and fear and dirt and hassling. You couldn't tell a hardhat, at least the kind that beat up the antiwar kids on Wall Street, that Calley wasn't defending democracy, or fighting them there so he wouldn't have to fight them here.

Calley, you knew, was shooting people one afternoon, the way a lot of Americans shot people because that's what they were there to do, or that's what they were so scared they did, or what they liked to do, or didn't give a damn about doing, or did and worried about it.

Back home, back in the world, thoughtful, reasonable, concerned Americans explained Vietnam. It was good, it was evil, it was necessary, it was arbitrary.

In "No Victory Parades," Murray Polner quotes one veteran saying; "Everything there was a contradiction. I can't stand anyone who wasn't in combat telling me how good or bad a job I did; or how we shoulda done this or that. They shoulda come to help out. I never wanted to be there; I only wanted to live and leave. The peace people confused me; the war people made it worse. They both mess up plain peoples' lives."

The biggest tickertape parade about Vietnam was in 1970 when the hardhats marauded around Wall Street, and the $85-a-week clerks leaned out the windows and dumped tickertape and showers of IBM cards, and yelled "Kill 'em! Kill 'em!" If most of them hadn't fought in any war, they at least had the decency to believe that when America went to war it meant something.

They knew it was true. They'd seen all the movies. Clark Gable squinting into a planeless sky in "Command Decision," or the grandeur of Darryl Zanuck's "The Longest Day," the nostalgia of "Twelve O'Clock High," or the Apollonian smugness of "Victory at Sea" on TV in the '50s. That was "the war," you understand.

There was only one big movie about Vietnam, "The Green Berets." Nobody wrote a big novel about Vietnam like "The Naked and the Dead." Vietnam, in the hearts and minds of the nation that veterans came back to, was 60 gray seconds of television on the 6 o'clock news, and the rest of it nobody could understand. So they pretended it was like World War II or Korea or something.

Except—toward the end there were all those drug stories, fragging stories, atrocity stories, the stories about outfits refusing to attack, the stories about the South Vietnamese army, our allies, stampeding to the rear. It didn't make sense.

The veterans knew it was true. When they told people, yeah, it was true, it seemed to mean something awful or immoral or lurid or even exciting. But it didn't really matter to most civilians, any more than 60 seconds of TV film. Veterans discovered that Americans, like anybody else, don't like you to tamper with their prejudices. And veterans, like anybody else, didn't like civilians tampering with their realities.

No heroes, no cowards, no victory, no spoils. Just memories. It was like working in a factory and finding out it was the workers who were the raw material, and the workers who were the finished product, which nobody wanted to buy.

In Vietnam, body counts were what counted.

Back in the world, though, the body counts on disabled, unemployed and drug-addicted veterans of a tour in Vietnam are hard to come by.

"We don't have to handle Vietnam theater veterans separate from veterans of the Vietnam era, people who might have served elsewhere," said a major at the Pentagon, echoing officials at the Veterans Administration, who point out that for bookkeeping purposes, a double amputee is a double amputee, whether he got hit by a land mine at Khesanh or a truck at Fort Bliss.

There were 5,976,000 servicemen who re-entered civil life between Aug. 4, 1964, the official start of the Vietnam era, and June 30, 1972, according to the VA. About 2,313,000 of them, or about 38.7 per cent, actually served in the Vietnam theater, compared with a 46.6 per cent figure for participants in the Korean conflict.

Vietnam theater veterans are apt to have far more than their 38.7 per cent share of total double amputations among the Vietnam era group, VA officials concede, but nobody knows just how much more. The VA now carries on its active compensation rolls 22,962 Vietnam era veterans who are getting 100 per cent disability compensation.

The same kind of statistical confusion results when you try to apply the 38.7 per cent figure to education and employment statistics. But among the Vietnam era veterans 40.9 per cent have participated in some GI Bill educational program, compared with 45.5 per cent for World War II veterans and 39.9 per cent for Korea veterans.

The unemployment rate of "male noninstitutional Vietnam era veterans in the United States, aged 20-29, seasonally adjusted," as the VA puts it, was 7.9 per cent in the April-June period of 1972. VA officials point out, though, that the Vietnam veteran has had more education, and is younger than his World War II counterpart, and so is less likely to have had previous civilian employment, a major factor in job-hunting.

Perhaps the most elusive statistics

involve drug use. Definition of terms, including addiction, has proved impossible in any population, including veterans. And few reports include alcohol as an addicting drug.

According to a Harris poll of Vietnam veterans, 23 per cent of them were introduced to drugs in the service, and by far the most common drug was marijuana or hashish. In a secret-ballot poll, 17 per cent admitted drug use prior to service, and 32 per cent admitted drug use during service. Again, it might be a safe bet that drug use was considerably higher in Vietnam, where drugs were more available and tolerated than in garrisons back home.

The Minneapolis Veterans' Administration Hospital studied 81 veterans of World War II, 235 from Korea, and 458 from Vietnam, all of them admitted for psychiatric treatment. They found that Vietnam veterans were different. They differed "in tendencies toward greater discontent with their life situation, greater proneness to delinquent behavior, less respect for others, less trust, and diminished feelings of social responsibility."

Dr. Robert Jay Lifton, a Yale psychiatrist, says the war has forced the Americans who fought it to adopt a "psychic numbing — the loss of the capacity to feel." He told the Senate Subcommittee on Labor and Public Welfare that, "the Vietnam veteran serves as a psychological crucible of the entire country's doubts and misgivings about the war. He has been the agent and the victim of that confusion."

Consider what Capt. Max Cleland, Silver Star winner and triple amputee, told the same subcommittee:

"To the devastating psychological effect of getting maimed, paralyzed, or in some way unable to re-enter American life as you left it, is the added psychological weight that it may not have been worth it; that the war may have been a cruel hoax, an American tragedy, that left a small minority of young American males holding the bag."

There have been no great movies or novels or TV shows to give the war some kind of mythic framework, to give it meaning. Maybe one of the great artists of Vietnam was a medical corpsman with 1st Battalion, 1st Marines, near Danang, in February, 1966. The corpsman carried a camera. He took pictures of the wounded before he treated them.

Lance Corporal Peter Dunne, for instance, got blasted into a paddy by a 60 mm mortar that left 70-odd hunks of metal in his body. He sat up spewing water and spurting blood and tearing off his trousers to see if his genitals were still intact, and when he found they were he started screaming, "I'm going home, I'm going home," and somewhere in there the corpsman took his picture. Months later, at St. Albans Hospital in the Bronx, Dunne got the picture in the mail. He treasures it the way his father might have treasured a Japanese battle flag or a German bayonet.

It shows a tiny, anonymous blur sitting in muddy water, a survivor. It's hard to explain what that picture means to Peter Dunne, but you know it matters. □

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