

Thousands of Vietnam Veterans on Welfare Here

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By CHRISTOPHER S. WREN

"It's got the longest lines in the world," the former Special Forces sergeant recalled.

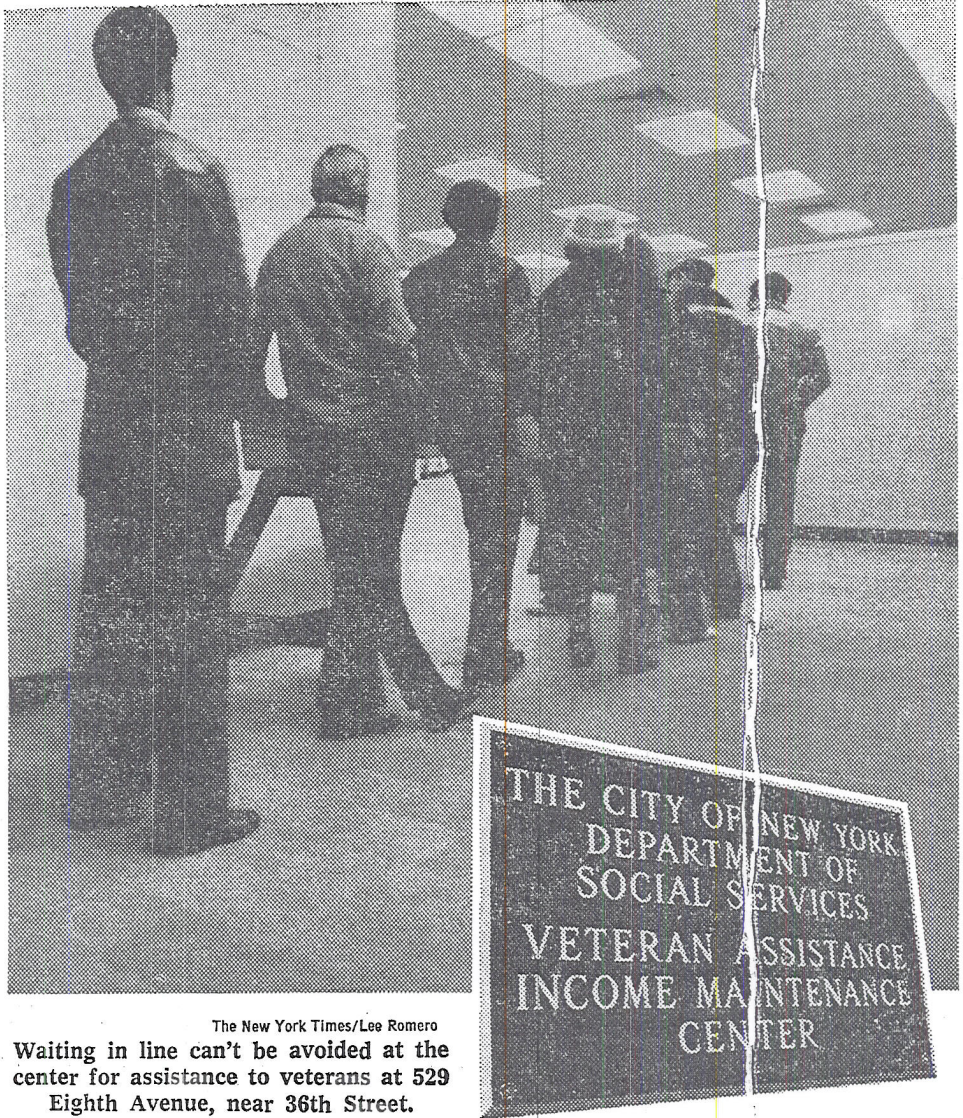
"If you're not there at 7:30 in the morning, you can't get in. You can't even get in the first day. It takes two or three days. The people who don't have anything to eat or a place to stay the night get the most frantic for help."

The former sergeant, who was wounded by mortar shrapnel in Vietnam was speaking of the New York City Veterans Assistant Center for Income Maintenance at 529 Eighth Avenue, where he had waited with other Vietnam veterans to qualify for a bimonthly welfare check. He asked not to be identified because he was still on welfare.

He is one of an estimated total of 4,000 to 4,500 Vietnam-era veterans now drawing welfare through the center.

Even that total, nearly equivalent in size to an infantry regiment, does not reflect all the young veterans who have turned to welfare because they cannot find jobs in New York City.

The center processes only



The New York Times/Lee Romero
Waiting in line can't be avoided at the center for assistance to veterans at 529 Eighth Avenue, near 36th Street.

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those who can produce honorable discharges. Anyone with a less than honorable discharge, which is often drug-related, must apply for welfare in the regular city offices.

"A man who gets a discharge that is less than honorable is not considered a veteran in the eyes of the Veterans Administration," said Otilio Mighty, director of veterans affairs for the New York Urban League. "He becomes a welfare case or a stickup case."

A spokesman for the Veterans Administration said that regular veterans' benefits were available to former servicemen with honorable or general discharges, but not to those with dishonorable discharges. Cases of undesirable or bad conduct discharges were subject to review.

No figures were available for the number of veterans with bad discharges in New York. Unofficial guesses have ranged from 6,000 to 18,000.

Mr. Mighty, a 20-year veteran of the Air Force, estimated that 75 per cent of the less-than-honorable discharges were issued to blacks and other members of minority groups.

It is the minority veteran who has been least able to find employment. If he is addicted to narcotics, he is even worse off, though he may have picked up the habit in Vietnam.

One ex-G.I. said he could not find a job because he was in a methadone-maintenance program. Now 29 years old, he draws welfare subsistence and the rent for a shabby hotel room on West 120th Street.

"There's been days before welfare when I had to rob in order to eat," he explained without apology.

"When I made a living at the end of a pistol," he went on, "I was doing well. But now that I'm trying to rehabilitate myself, nobody wants to help me. I can't even look for a job, because it costs money to look for a job."

Many on Hard Times

A spokesman for the New York City Division of Veterans Affairs said that many of the city's 300,000 Vietnam-era veterans were experiencing hard times. He estimated that in the low-income areas of New York one out of four such veterans could not find work.

"There is no mustering out pay," he said. "They find themselves with very little bread in their pockets and they need a job."

The City Commission on Human Rights begins hearings into the problems of the Vietnam-era veteran at 9:30 A.M. today at the Jewish Guild for the Blind, 15 West 65th Street. The hearings will continue on March 21 and 28.

The welfare needs of veterans from the Vietnam war have grown so large that on Friday the city will open a center exclusively for them at 90 Myrtle Avenue, near

the Brooklyn Borough Hall. Until now, they were processed with older veterans at the center at 529 Eighth Avenue, at 36th Street.

The long waiting lines last fall produced what one welfare official termed "some rather nasty incidents" resulting from pushing and shoving by the impatient young men. In a few instances, the police were called.

"A number of guys were coming in and saying, 'We don't want to be on welfare; we want jobs,'" said Charles Morris, deputy administrator for income maintenance of the Human Resources Administration.

"They're not the usual welfare population," Mr. Morris said. "They're young men and usually healthy. They haven't found a job.

"Many picked up some drug addiction while they were over there. The last G.I.'s came back with disenchantment about the war. They are more hostile clients."

Mr. Morris contended that such welfare benefits would be more effective as an ancillary service in an overall veterans' assistance program.

Lewis (Skip) Delano served as a mechanic with the 101st Airborne Division in Vietnam. He was on welfare before he found a recent part-time job. He also works with the Vietnam Veterans Against the War, which, with peacetime, plans to set up a veterans action center to help returning veterans.

"For most people, welfare is just a continuation of the Army," said Mr. Delano, who is 25. "You learn to stand around in line, working at doing nothing, so welfare is just the same scene.

"You step out of your E.T.S. [effective termination of service] line and into the welfare line."

But other young veterans have found welfare fare more frustrating and demeaning. Some approached at the center angrily refused to discuss their plight.

"It's very plain that they don't want to be on welfare," Mr. Morris said. "They want

a job or, if they have a drug problem, they want treatment.

"When they come to the welfare center, it takes a real adjustment in self-image to walk through that door. It means they've failed and the system has failed."

According to a notice at the center, the veteran must amass up to eight different documents to qualify for welfare. These include various identification papers, past pay stubs, rent receipts, a canceled bank book, utility shut-off notices and birth certificates for any dependents.

"It's like a full-time job just to get welfare in this city," Mr. Delano noted. "Most people come in and have a couple of documents missing and have to go back and get them."

The veteran must also pass through a local certification center, which is usually run by members of the American Legion or Veterans of Foreign Wars.

"Some of them are really good dudes," said David Blaylock, 23, a former fire-base security guard who now belongs to the Vietnam Veterans Against the War. "If you've served honorably, they'll be glad to help you. But if you got a bad discharge, they won't help. They think you're unpatriotic."

When a veteran has finally qualified, he begins to draw about \$38 twice a month for subsistence and an allowance for rent. If he is physically able, he must collect the checks in person and present himself for possible employment.

"The kind of jobs they show you are hellhole sweat-shop jobs, like working in a laundry for \$80 a week," Skip Delano said. "It's like they're encouraging you to stay on welfare. It's like this kind of kind of economy doesn't have any jobs for you."

As for the men who came home less than honorably discharged, Mr. Delano said, "Those guys haven't got a prayer."

David Bailey, 25, a former marine in a tank unit, said he had received an undesirable discharge because "I just didn't do everything they wanted me to."

"Because of my discharge, I was unable to get veteran's benefits," he went on, "so I've just been accepted on regular welfare. 'I'd been able to find a job, but it was a constant thing of getting laid off. Until this thing is straightened out, the hassle will continue."

Bronze Star and Heroin

A former radio operator with the 173d Airborne Brigade said that he had come home from 14 months in Vietnam with a Bronze Star and a heroin addiction. He asked not to be identified.

"They didn't take none of into consideration," he said. "I came back and gave myself up, and they gave me an undesirable discharge."

Now 22 years old, he is also drawing regular welfare.

Bad discharges, particularly those related to drugs, can be changed, but, Mr. Bailey, said "because of the system, it involves a lot of time, a lot of red tape and traveling back and forth to Washington."

The City Division of Veterans Affairs has been able to change 63 per cent of the bad discharges it has presented to the Pentagon for reconsideration. But a spokesman said, that "the forms are so complicated that a man cannot possibly fill it out by himself."

Frank Lima of DMZ (Drug Mending Zone) House, a private narcotics rehabilitation program for addicted veterans, called the reception given returning veterans one of the great sweeping jobs under the rug.

"These guys are coming home and they're not war heroes," he added. "The only war heroes are the P.O.W.'s."

Many veterans themselves believe they have suffered because of the unpopularity of the Vietnam war.

"I think a lot of people have misconceptions about what a returning veteran is really like," Skip Delano said. "There's a stereotype of veterans being drug addicts for the most part or of being a time bomb ready to explode."