Vietnam Veterans: They Need Help-Now

by Jonathan Braun

Ex-Marine William Taliaferro, shown here with his girlfriend, Susan Mientus, is one of countless Vietnam veterans now battling for a decent way of life. A POW who escaped captivity, he says, "No one gives a damn" about vets' problems.

For seven days in 1968 William Taliaferro was a prisoner of war. Today, more than five years after that nightmarish ordeal, he is once again a prisoner—of peace.

He is one of thousands who have been locked into lives of hardship, disappointment and despair after serving in Vietnam.

"Everyone's glad the war is over," says Taliaferro, a 24-year-old ex-Marine corporal, "but no one gives a damn about the veterans who are still fighting to survive."

Now they fight on welfare and unemployment lines, in government hospitals and psychiatric wards—these Americans who faced death in the jungles and rice paddies of Indochina. Some fight for jobs, decent housing, education and training, others just to be accepted as good citizens, and still others to be free of terrifying memories and the chains of drug addiction. Says one vet: "We're up against a whole system."

It's a system of arbitrary justice, insensitive bureaucracy and endless red tape, and for those who see themselves as its victims, feelings of bitterness and betrayal can be doubly intense. "Many of us volunteered to go to Vietnam," says Taliaferro. "Now we can't help but wonder if we should have gone to Canada instead."

Enlisted at 17

But Taliaferro knows that for him Canada was never really in the cards. The son of an Army officer, he enlisted in the Marine Corps at 17.

He turned 18 in "Nam," became a combat radio operator, was wounded in the chest and taken prisoner in August, 1968, during a bloodbath known as the "Tet Offensive."

Because he refused to reveal his "call signs" and "thrush points"—radio codes used to direct air and artillery strikes and coordinate troop movements—his captors cut off the middle finger of his left hand.

"They wrapped my hand in a bandage," he says, "but didn't do a thing

for the hole in my chest, so I covered it with a plastic cigaret wrapper and some tape . . . On my seventh day as a prisoner the village we were in came under attack and in the confusion I managed to escape."

In Danang doctors pulled 11 pieces of shrapnel from his chest—and one year and two hospitals later, he was a 19-year-old vet with some medals and a monthly disability check.

"I wanted to be a cop before I went into the service," he says, "but the police didn't want someone with a disability on his record. The only job I could get was running a Xerox machine. Finally, I decided to go to school—I figured it was better than going nuts."

He commutes now from a small, sparsely furnished garden apartment in Elizabeth, N.J., which he shares with another vet, to the neighboring campus of Kean College, where he is a junior majoring in psychology.

Inadequate GI Bill

Ironically, Bill Taliaferro is one of the "lucky" vets who can afford an education. "Since I'm officially 100 percent disabled," he explains, "I'm entitled to $495 a month, money for books and tuition and a monthly stipend of $170. If all I had to count on was the GI Bill I could never make it."

Because the present GI Bill does not meet today's soaring living and education costs, only 21 percent of the eligible Vietnam vets are enrolled in college programs as compared to around 50 percent of eligible World War II vets.

"The Vietnam vet has been shortchanged," says Jim Mayer, president of the National Association of Concerned Veterans. "All you have to do is look at the benefits his father received after World War II."

World War II vets received sufficient education allowances—up to $500 a year for books, tuition and fees—plus $75 a month for subsistence. Vietnam vets, on the other hand, get $220 a month—or $1980 per school year—to cover everything, obviously far from the amount needed in these inflationary times.

"Declaration of Solidarity": Georgia State Sen. Max Cleland, who lost both legs and right arm in a grenade explosion in Vietnam, looks on at the signing of a resolution urging every American to help in reclaiming "our most precious national resource—the lives of nearly 7 million Vietnam era veterans."

A chance for all vets

Recognizing the need to achieve some kind of father-and-son parity, over a third of the Senate—including Minority Leader Hugh Scott (R., Pa.) and Majority Leader Mike Mansfield (D., Mont.)—has co-sponsored the comprehensive Vietnam Era Veterans Educational Benefits Act (S. 2789), a five-bill education and job training package that would provide vets with annual tuition subsidies of up to $600. The act also carries an accelerated payments provision that would provide greater monthly subsistence payments spread over a shorter period. Thus, a vet who is now restricted to $220 a month for 36 months could receive $440 a month for 18 months.

"Acceleration would enable vets to attend law, medical and graduate schools," says Rusty Lindley, an ex-Special Forces captain who runs the Vietnam Veterans Center in Washington, D.C. "More importantly, it would allow educationally disadvantaged vets —who are either unprepared or unable to complete four-year college programs —to enter productive careers through two-year technical and vocational programs.

"The comprehensive act is really the only chance we have to grant an equal opportunity to all Vietnam era veterans."

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Certain days each month, increasing numbers of poor, unskilled vets join special morning lines, such as this one in New York City, to get on the nation's welfare rolls.

Senate bill may be our 'only chance' to grant Vietnam vets equal rights

Although roughly 2½ million men actually served in Vietnam, there are over 3 million veterans of the entire Southeast Asian theater. A total of nearly 7 million men are veterans of what is known as the Vietnam era—including more than 340,000 who are disabled.

"I'm just happy to be alive," says Tom Bratten of Silver Spring, Md., who lost his left leg and right arm when he stepped on a land mine, and spent 3½ years in Walter Reed Hospital. "Because I was an officer I was well taken care of. It's the enlisted men who need more attention."

"I'd have to agree," said a Veterans Administration spokesman, "that officers usually do a little better while they're in the military—but that's not true in VA hospitals."

The Veterans Administration, however, has been the target of criticism. Delays in sending out checks are common, and some vets angrily say they've had to wait for six months or more. A special Ralph Nader report has accused the federal agency of operating with a fundamental orientation toward older vets. Written by a Harvard University graduate student, the report concludes that "many of the basic services the nation has committed itself, at least rhetorically, to providing Vietnam vets, are simply not reaching them."

Some critics have even questioned whether the present bureaucratic setup is capable of meeting the needs of Vietnam vets. Rep. Mario Biaggi (D., N.Y.), for example, has proposed the creation of a new office of assistant administrator for Vietnam veterans affairs. According to Biaggi, "The assistant administrator would serve as an ombudsman where Vietnam veterans could go and know they'd receive help."

Unemployment and welfare

But all this is only part of the story. "Hard-core unemployment is the most acute of all the problems facing today's vet," says Carl McCarden, Commissioner of New York City's Mayor's Office for Veteran Action.

Nearly 10 percent of vets in the labor force are unemployed, and in the low-income areas of the country—rural and urban—more than 20 percent.

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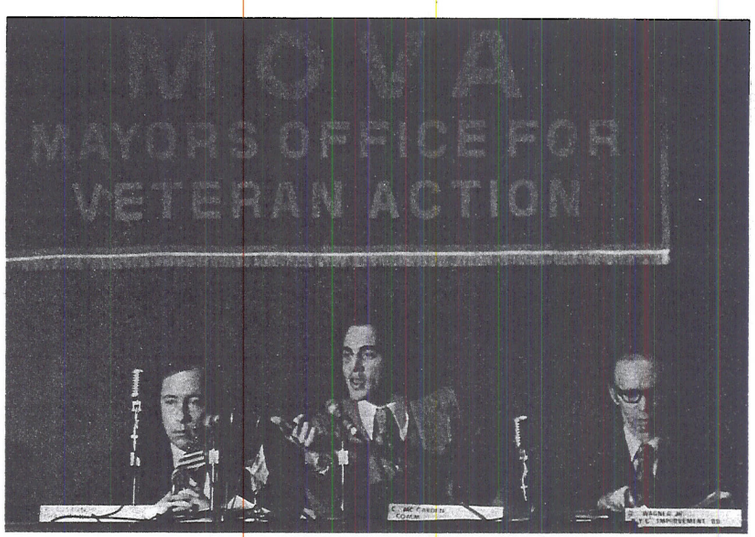


Carl McCarden, Commissioner of New York City's Mayor's Office for Veteran Action, makes a point as chairman of hearing on veterans' rights and needs. An ex-Special Forces major who saw action in Vietnam and served as adviser to Ambassador Ellsworth Bunker, he is most concerned about the problem of hard-core unemployment.

vets join special early morning lineups to get on the nation's welfare rolls. Most come from the poorest levels of society; few acquired any useful skills while serving in the military.

Even for skilled vets, however, landing a job can be a futile task—mainly because vets, like other minorities, are victims of prejudice and stereotyping. "I looked for work with about 15 different concerns," reports one vet, "and every one of them asked if I had taken part in an atrocity."

Uneasiness and discomfort felt by civilians in the presence of the men they have sent to war is nothing new; but never before, it seems, have so many Americans been so scared and so suspicious of their vets. Says Bill Taliaferro: "I get the feeling people are afraid a vet might do something wrong or crazy at any moment."

Time-bomb image

The time-bomb image of the Vietnam vet has been reinforced by the unpopularity and controversial nature of the war in which he fought—"a war with no friends and no fronts," as one vet put it.

"In Vietnam," says Yale psychiatry professor Robert Jay Lifton, "where atrocity and combat were almost indistinguishable, the GI was made into both victim and executioner . . . Whatever his struggles upon his return, many Americans continue to see him in terms of those roles . . . rather than as the lovable GI who came back from the wars."

"When I came home a lot of people criticized me for going to Vietnam," says Tom Aiken of New York, who is now blind in one eye because of wounds suffered during an artillery blast. "They told me they thought the war wasn't just.

"I had the feeling that nobody knew or cared why I was over there—that it was all a big waste of time," says Terry Campbell, coordinator of veterans affairs for Southern Illinois University at Edwardsville, Ill. "The whole attitude of the country is really the biggest problem vets have."

'Coming to terms . . .'

"The country simply hasn't come to terms with Vietnam," adds Max Cleland, who lost both his legs and an arm in a grenade explosion and is now the only Vietnam vet in the Georgia State Senate. "How then can it come to terms with its veterans?"

And Joe Garcia, an Air Force vet who is now administrative assistant to the City Manager of San Jose, Calif., asks: "How do you get a nation to accept people they hold responsible—or at least partially—for a war that no one wants to remember?"

Even the veterans organizations, which lobbied successfully for the rights of World War II vets, seem to have difficulty accepting the boys from Vietnam. In a study commissioned by the VA, the prestigious Educational Testing Service concludes that both the American Legion and the Veterans of Foreign Wars have not demonstrated enough concern over the plight of today's vets.

"I'd go to one of the veterans organizations," says Taliaferro, "and all I'd get would be talk about the big war, the great war, World War II. Nobody even wanted to hear about Vietnam—after all, we didn't win that war."

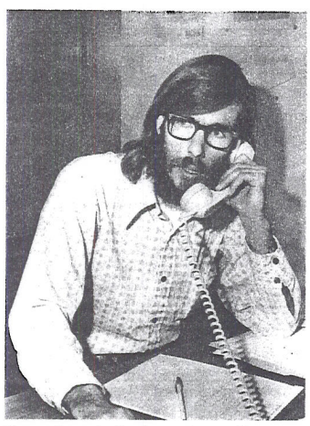
Public rejection combined with the haunting, personal memories of combat have led to the problem of "Post Vietnam Syndrome." It's a loose term, coined by psychologists to cover the feelings of rage, persecution, alienation and apathy shared by many vets.

"I felt people wanted to sweep us under the rug when I got back," says former combat medic Jack McCloskey of San Francisco. "Especially in college—a lot of my classmates hadn't been in the service, didn't know what it was like and didn't care."

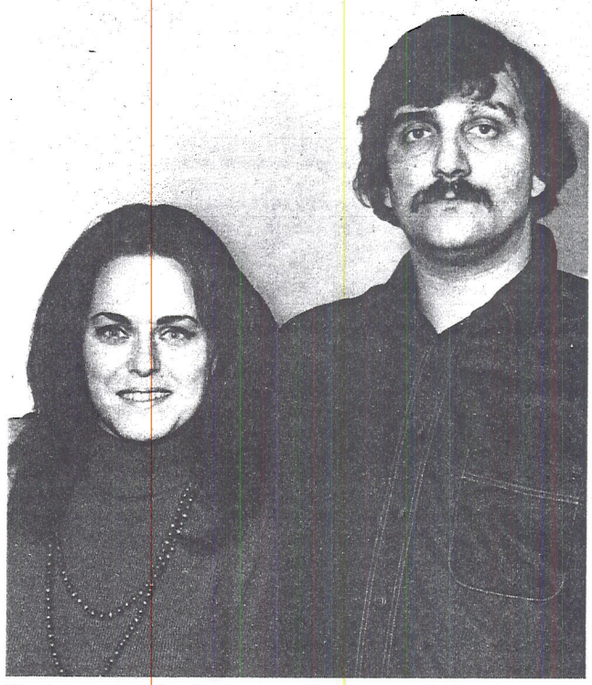
Shame and guilt

Dr. Chaim F. Shatan of New York University emphasizes the guilt that plagues many vets. "The shame and guilt of being alive," he writes, "how few of us know what that *feels* like, how it makes a man feel less than whole unless he can feel an identity with the dead."

A confidential memo from the VA's department of medicine and surgery estimates that "serious and prolonged readjustment problems exist in one out of every five new veterans, but, to a lesser degree, were experienced by all."



Terry Campbell of Southern Illinois U. says, "Nobody knew why I was over there. They thought it all a waste."



"I'm just happy to be alive," says vet Tom Bratten of Silver Spring, Md., who is seen here with his wife, Susan. He lost his left leg and right arm when he stepped on a land mine, and spent 3½ years in the hospital.

"A friend of mine hasn't been out of his house in two years," says one vet. "He just can't seem to move—not even to the corner."

But perhaps the darkest cloud hanging over the Vietnam vet is the drug problem, since a great many Americans wrongly assume that all vets have abused drugs. "Some of my oldest friends accused me of being a dope addict when I came home," says Randy Taylor, who opened a restaurant in his small Virginia hometown after serving four years as a combat medic in Vietnam. "They even spread rumors that I wore long sleeves to cover needle marks on my arms . . . It finally got so bad that I had to close up my business."

Although the drug problem has been grossly exaggerated, there is no denying that many vets came to depend on drugs in Vietnam, some to relieve the pain of wounds, others to escape the cruel realities of war.

"Other Than Honorable"

A government study states that many of the vets using drugs require immediate help if they are to avoid becoming hard-core addicts. Among them are those who received "Other Than Honorable" discharges for drug abuse—and are now denied treatment because of VA regulations!

But the more than 22,000 vets who were given "bad paper" for drug abuse represent only a small fraction of the vets who—often for the most petty reasons—have been branded with a range of Other Than Honorable discharges. Effectively shut out of most employment and education opportunities, they have even been deprived of veterans benefits; instead of getting them automatically, Other Than Honorable vets must have their benefits granted by a special VA review board. Favorable decisions are rare.

"Catch-22"

Many vets with "Undesirable" discharges did not originally contest them because they were told by the military that the designations could easily be changed in civilian life. In the best *Catch-22* tradition, they were later informed that one of the requirements for upgrading an Undesirable discharge is holding a job for at least one year. The "catch," however, is that Undesirable vets have little or no chance of being hired by anybody.

"Vietnam vets bought a dream," says Carl McCarden, who saw action as a Green Beret and served as an adviser to Ambassador Ellsworth Bunker. "They largely bought the star-spangled dream of serving one's country and trusting the judgment of those in power to do the right thing. Tragically and inexcusably, that dream has disintegrated into a nightmare, and is now dissolving into a red, white and blue struggle for survival—a struggle by forgotten Americans."