

Vietnam Veterans: War Atrocities, Social Connections and Assimilation

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Abstract

The Vietnam War was unlike any war that America has ever been a part of. The experiences of unconventional warfare affected many coming back to America. Since Vietnam, Historians have looked at Vietnam and asked “what went wrong?” When examining the failures of the Vietnam War, the most apparent problem was the failure to provide support for enlisted men to assimilate back into American culture. In order to examine the problems of assimilation, a random sample of twenty Vietnam veteran oral histories were analyzed. This paper focuses on social connections developed during and after the war, and how they affected assimilation. Many veterans did not have a problems adapting back into American society because of the support networks that the soldiers created or maintained during war.

The Historiography of Vietnam Veterans

The Vietnam War was unlike any war that America has ever been a part of. The experiences of unconventional warfare affected many coming back to America. Since Vietnam, Historians have looked at Vietnam and asked “what went wrong?” There has been a great deal of focus on military strategy failures, in particular the problems with body count. Historians have also looked at the troubles associated with media control, and how it affected public opinion back home. However, when we analyze the primary sources, it is apparent that our biggest failure in Vietnam was the support of our soldiers. All the previous questions then point to this underlining issue: how did the problems of Vietnam affect the soldiers coming back? Many veterans had problems readapting to American society and we can see this through their memoirs, interviews, and letters.

While there have been many studies conducted on the condition of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), there has been a failure to address the status of Veterans as a whole. This study illustrates that, many soldiers who did not possess the symptoms of PTSD, nonetheless still had trouble assimilating back into American culture. The atrocities of war can, and do affect many people, but people respond to conditions in different ways. This paper concludes that many veterans used social networks to deal with the problems associated with the war experience and their reentry into American life after the war.

These social networks include, but are not limited to: family, friends, veteran friends, and social clubs.

With respect to the problems associated with veterans of the Vietnam war, a 1971 essay written by Robert D. Hienel perhaps summarizes them best. This source does not contribute to the aspect of assimilation, however it does answer the important question of what were the problems during war, and the consequences of these problems. He analyzes how fragging, insubordination, drug use and morale all affected the Vietnam experience.¹ He does a great job explaining how these problems contributed to the failures on the battlefield. When used alongside other sources connections can be drawn about how the American soldier was affected by faulty military strategy or field problems.

Samuel Lipsman and Edwards Doyle address many key features of the problems soldiers in Vietnam faced. Lipsman and Doyle give, for example, an in-depth synopsis of the problems with drug use in the Vietnam War. They connect drug use with other problems associated with the battlefield like, fragging and insubordination.² Lipsman and Doyle use many governmental documents to assess the damages that drugs caused on the soldiers and the army. According to the Lipsman and Doyle drug use was an element of field insubordination, often times being the root cause of disobedience.³ This book is very dependent on documents and statistical information given by the government which would be a valuable source when looking at the grand scheme of war atrocities.

¹ McMahan, Robert J. *Major Problems in the History of the Vietnam War*. Boston, Houghton Mifflin Company, 2003. 233

² Lipsman, Samuel and Edwards Doyle. *The Vietnam Experience: Fighting For Time: The War Changes Course, 1969-1970*. (Boston, Boston Publishing Company, 1985.)

³ Lipsman, Vietnam Experience, 101

William P. Mahedy looks specifically at the problems that many soldiers had when coming back from the war. In his journal article “It Don’t Mean Nothin’: The Vietnam Experience” Mahedy says that the war affected soldiers in many ways. He said the most important ties that these men have lost are their faith in humanity and in religion.⁴ Mahedy addresses why these men lost their religious beliefs: “[the men participated in] conscious-altering, irreversible, massive evil, atrocity, hatred, wholesale slaughter and barbarous acts...”⁵ He goes on to say “The American people greeted the [veteran] with utter silence, anger and disillusionment”⁶ Mahedy also addresses a loss in social connections like jobs, divorce, and the inability to develop close relationships.

The benefits of social groups for returning veterans are analyzed in the book, *The Trauma of War: Stress and Recovery in Vietnam Veterans*.⁷ This book takes a look at the problems associated with war, and how veterans cope with the stresses associated with coming home. This book is a series of articles which focuses on many academia disciplines. Each section focuses on particular problems connected with the homecoming of Vietnam soldiers. Charles Kadushin’s 1985 article “Social Networks, Helping Networks, and Vietnam Veterans.” Kadushin addresses the different types of social networks that a veteran may form and their impact. He claimed there are four different aspects of social networks: spouses, family, friends, and Veteran friends.⁸ He found that veterans who can

⁴ Mahedy, William P. Ed: Walther Capps. *The Vietnam Reader*. “It Don’t Mean Nothin’: The Vietnam Experience” New York, Routledge, 1991 33-40

⁵ Ibid

⁶ Ibid

⁷ Stephen M. Sonnenberg, Arthur S. Blank and John A. Talbott. *The Trauma of War: Stress and Recovery in Vietnam Veterans*. Washington D.C. American Psychiatric Press Inc. 1985.

⁸ Kadushin, Charles. Ed: Stephen M. Sonnenberg, Arthur S. Blank and John A. Talbott. *The Trauma of War: Stress and Recovery in Vietnam Veterans*. “Social Networks, Helping Networks, and Vietnam Veterans.” Washington D.C. American Psychiatric Press Inc. 1985. 57-69

confide in other veterans are more likely to be able to cope with the problems they have and are less likely to need help or to show symptoms of PTSD. The author used 919 Veterans to conduct his study on help groups. He asked the veterans to list their spouses, supportive family members, best friends, and Vietnam friends. He used interviews and a series of questionnaires to support his findings. Kadushin claims that “[help] circles can backfire, although under the right circumstances, talking to other veterans is quite effective, [and] friends can be especially important if spouses are not supportive.”⁹

In the edited volume, John Russell Smith published an article on group therapy titled “Rap Groups and Group Therapy for Vietnam Veterans.” Smith claims that “The Primary work of the rap group involves building trust among members who then explore the relationship between traumatic experiences and current problems.” Throughout this article it explains how an effective rap group works, and why it is so beneficial to a suffering veteran. Smith also explains the different types of support groups available, and defines the advantages and disadvantages of each type: Open Groups Leaderless Groups, Client-Centered “hot seat” Groups, and Topic Centered Groups. The “hot seat” groups are the most frequently associated with Rap Groups. This is the most beneficial form of a rap group because it allows the group to stay focused, and can more easily avoid controversial war topics.¹⁰

Robert Jay Lifton published an article entitled; “Home from the War: The Psychology of Survival.” In it Lifton also discusses the importance of rap groups. Lifton has

⁹ Ibid 67

¹⁰ Ed: Stephen M. Sonnenberg, Arthur S. Blank and John A. Talbott. *The Trauma of War: Stress and Recovery in Vietnam Veterans*. “Rap Groups and Group Therapy for Vietnam Veterans.” Washington D.C. American Psychiatric Press Inc. 1985. 165-193

worked with many Vietnam veterans and develops several interpretive categories to explain the experiences of people who have suffered from severe trauma. Lifton asserts that veterans have “residual inner conflicts—survivor conflict—that stays with one indefinitely.”¹¹ The experiences that these veterans have endured has created an alternate life purpose, and Lifton claims that rap groups help to heal or to find that purpose.¹² He claims that rap groups “have shared with one another a bond of brotherhood around their holocaust, their corruption, and their struggle against both.”¹³ The association of brotherhood is mentioned in many letters and memoirs, an analogy which indefinitely helps the hurting heal. These groups give members “a sense in which they can fully trust those who share their experience and their mission.”¹⁴

Lifton, Smith, and Kadushin all view help groups as possible beneficial aspects of the recovery after war. The only article of these three that analyzed the role of family was Kadushin. This is an important aspect in the successful assimilation of a veteran, but it has to date been neglected in the literature.

Norma Wikler gave a similar interpretation on the problems with unconventional war in her 1990 article, “*strangers at war*.”¹⁵ Wikler also assesses the problems associated with the home front. She claims that the soldiers do not have time to adjust from war to civilian life:

¹¹ Lifton, Robert J. Ed: Walther Capps. *The Vietnam Reader*. “Home From the War: The Psychology of Survival” New York, Routledge, 1991 54-67

¹² Ibid

¹³ Lifton, *Vietnam Reader*, “Home from War,” 61

¹⁴ Ibid

¹⁵ Wikler, Norma. Ed: Charles Figley and Seymour Leventman. *Strangers at Home: Vietnam Veterans Since the War*. “Hidden Injuries of War” New York, Brunner/Mazel Publishers 1990.

Not uncommonly, a soldier...[will] travel fifteen hours...arrive on a base and six to eight hours later be on the street as a civilian. Such procedure disallowed the possibility of veterans collectively “workin through” their war experiences and possibly resolving or coming to terms with the injuries of self.¹⁶

The inability to grieve is an important aspect of failures to assimilate. Going from war to civilian life in a day was traumatizing. The national opinion of the war was torn between sides; many veterans felt that they had no one to turn to because “Veterans became the visible symbols of this unpopular and unvictorious war. Many found their status of veteran a stigma rather than a source of pride.”¹⁷ The American opinion resulted in “Most Vietnam veterans left to cope alone, for better or for worse with the personal aftermath of the war.”¹⁸

Beyond secondary sources, the use of oral histories provides primary issues related to social networks and the problems of assimilation faced by Vietnam veterans. By utilizing oral histories, this research will further the amassed secondary sources by looking at the problem of assimilation within the context of the war experience as a whole. Hienel and Lipsman analyzed the problems on the battlefield and the problems they cause in Vietnam, but they lacked to address the problems when they came back home. Mahedy brings to light the problems of assimilation, and why the soldiers had problems adapting back into mainstream society, but his work lacks evidence on how they overcame. Kadushin and Smith have a nice commentary on the importance of help groups, but it does not address what events cause trauma in the life of a veteran.

¹⁶ Ibid 103

¹⁷ Wikler, *Strangers*, “Hidden Injuries,” 104

¹⁸ Ibid 105

Finally, Lifton and Wilker address the troubles on the battlefield and develop a link to the problems of assimilation. Lifton also tries to identify how veterans conquer the evils of Vietnam. However, it seems as if he does a breezy overview of how veterans overcome, and only addresses the social importance of rap groups, rather than their function in improving a suffering veteran. This paper tries to advance Lifton's work by addressing: the problems of war, how veterans failed to readapt into American culture, how the veteran overcome adversities, and why their tactics were successful or not.

When examining the failures of the Vietnam War, the most apparent problem that came out of the war was the failure to assimilate. This is a concept that needs to be addressed. In order to look at the failures of assimilation, there needs to be a stable amount of reliable sources. This study examines 20 extensive (often running 100 pages or more) oral histories and battlefield letters which were chosen by random sampling of a large database of oral histories maintained by Texas Tech University. My goal was to obtain a random sample from the oral histories comprised on Texas Tech's website.¹⁹

The methodology for this project is as follows. The twenty oral histories are arranged in four separate categories: Positive war experience- positive experience at home, positive war experience- negative experience at home, negative war experience- positive experience at home, and negative war experience- negative experience at home. In order to determine whether the experience was positive or not, the oral histories are examined for key statements that directly reflect upon their experience. In addition, the overall perspective of the anecdotes and details in the oral histories are taken into account. If, for

¹⁹ *Vietnam Archive* Texas Tech. <http://www.vietnam.ttu.edu/oralhistory/interviews/browse/ohc.php>

example, a particular story was given a negative connotation, it was categorized as a negative experience.

In order to establish the role of social networks in aiding assimilation, the twenty men were divided by their established social connections. These included social connections that were developed on the battlefield, i.e. Comrades, family and civilians. The oral histories were used to ascertain whether the soldier maintained these contacts after returning from war. Finally, these social connections were analyzed in terms of how they affected the soldier at war, and how these connections affected the soldier coming home.

There were more officers than enlisted soldiers in the random sample; this imbalance obviously affects this study's conclusions as many officers rarely or never saw the battlefield in Vietnam and their experiences were thus often markedly different than that of enlisted men. The officers who did not see the field would have been located in the rear, where American forces were strong, and the enemy was a minimal threat. These officers would also have been subjected to less dire experiences, making their tour more pleasant than a soldier constantly fearing death. Finally, the officers who had participated in the Texas Tech study may have been more willing to talk about their experiences compared to the enlisted soldier who would have witnessed more death.

The Vietnam War Experience and its Veterans

The Vietnam War was like no other war that America has been involved with. This was the first unconventional war that America had fought in and many soldiers arrived unprepared. Many soldiers entered Vietnam untrained in jungle warfare. The Viet Cong (VC) or as the soldiers called them, Charlie, were far superior in jungle warfare. The VC mainly moved at night, during the protection of the dark. This made it almost impossible to secure an area at nighttime. In a letter home a soldier said "The days are fairly peaceful, but the nights are pure hell!"²⁰ The failure to stop VC movement at night would make all territories in the field unsafe. Holding a position in the jungle was difficult because the military could not suppress movement. The VC had also developed elaborate underground tunnel systems which would aid them in retreat.

America went into Vietnam without a well planned out strategy to win the war. Body Count was the strategy used to assess progress in the war. The assessments used to gauge progress during the war were often times spotty and did not reflect actualities on the ground. These faulty assessments created many problems for fighting soldiers. These assessments created the false impression that we were winning the war. Because of the destructiveness of war, it was almost impossible to generate an accurate assessment of progress. Body count figures were unreliable and inflated; any victims of war, including

²⁰ Allen Paul Letter home, June. 23rd 1968. Ed. Bernard Edelman. *Dear America: Letters Home from Vietnam*. W.W. Norton & Company, New York. 1985. Pg 126

civilians, were added to these totals.²¹ Numbers sent to high ranking American officials were “padded” as high as 30 percent.²² The exaggerated numbers led U.S. officials to believe that we were winning the war.

In order to determine what land was controlled by Allies, the U.S. established a grid system called Hills and Dales. The purpose of this system was to control as many hills as possible, and shoot down into the valleys that surround them.²³ There were many problems with this system. We were fighting a conventional war with the North Vietnam Army (NVA), and an unconventional war with the Viet Cong (VC). The VC was South Vietnamese fighting for northern communist ideals. It was hard to distinguish who the VC was, as Timothy Wanke remembers: “The youngest one I saw was ten. This is what the sentry told me that his age was. He was ten and then there was a man that appeared to be seventy or seventy-five. It’s not restricted just male, there are females there, too.”²⁴ Land that was considered to be safe could be saturated with these guerillas. The hills and dales policy would also lead to the total destruction of an area in order for the area to be secure.²⁵ The threat of the Viet Cong was everywhere, rural, urban and bases.

The use of hills and dales and body count systems to quantify progress in war was a grave mistake. American forces were fighting the “VC”, which were Southern Vietnamese sympathizers for North Vietnam. The American forces seriously underestimated the will of these soldiers. The VC entered the fighting based on their beliefs, and would fight till the end. Many would hide behind American lines to gather intelligence for the North

²¹ Herring, George C. *America’s Longest War: The United States and Vietnam, 1950-1975*. (Boston, McGraw Hill Press, 2002) 187-188

²² IBID

²³ Ibid

²⁴ Timothy Wanke Conducted by:Bob Vandewalker. *Vietnam Archive* Texas Tech. Pg.3 No Date

²⁵ Ibid

Vietnamese Army (NVA).²⁶ Edwin Frazier remembers “[the VC] cleaned or burned our toilets by day and fought us at night. He filled our sandbags by day and worked in our mess halls and fought us at night and that’s true.”²⁷ The information that was gathered was either to inform the NVA of field tactics or to organize guerilla attacks against the “rear.”²⁸ Nowhere was safe in Vietnam, the threat of death was everywhere. As Timothy Wanke a Vietnam Veteran remembers:

You never feel very secure especially when you’re right on the perimeter of the base as we were. See the base doesn’t have wire completely around it. So each encampment has three or four concertina strands around it with trip flares and land mines out in front of it. And you really don’t know what to expect from day to day.²⁹

The United States continued to pour more men into the field of battle. Many of the new soldiers were draftees, who did not agree with the war. The men entered battle unprepared; many had no clue about what they were getting into. One soldier reflected on his plane ride to Vietnam:

There was this big black MP that sat across from me... He kept my spirits up all the way over. He said “You just a baby. You don’t know what you in for.” Midge knew what I was in for and he tried to keep me laughing... The first dressing I changed was a guy who laid in a water filled ditch for two days... I took the dressing off his arm, he didn’t have an arm... It had gotten full of maggots in the ditch... I had to go into the little utility room...to regroup...³⁰

Many people’s first experience in Vietnam came with great shock. The effects of war were not apparent to soldiers entering; in order to survive they were forced to adjust quickly to conditions.

²⁶ Shay, Jonathan. *Achilles in Vietnam: Combat Trauma and the Undoing of Character*. (New York, Simon and Schuster, 1994)

²⁷ Edwin Frazier Conducted by: Stephen Maxner. *Vietnam Archive Texas Tech*. Pg.23 Conducted on 5/5/00

²⁸ Shay, Jonathan. *Achilles in Vietnam: Combat Trauma and the Undoing of Character*. (New York, Simon and Schuster, 1994)

²⁹ Timothy Wanke Conducted by: Bob Vandewalker. *Vietnam Archive Texas Tech*. Pg.3 No Date

³⁰ Baker, Mark. *NAM*. (New York, Quill, 1982) 69

The growing need for recruits made a need for a reassessment of the Army General Classification Test (AGCT). Officials decided to lower its standards during the course of the war. Lowering the AGCT caused many problems. The education level of a newly enlisted AGCT2 soldiers was that of fifth grade. These men had many problems with following orders, substance abuse and battle skills that the soldiers who passed the AGCT4 did possess. Arguments among soldiers and their non-commission officers were often, and some ended in fragging. Fragging is the killing of an officer; these circumstances were out of fear of safety and the use of drugs.³¹

The weather patterns fluctuated with the seasons and took their own toll on soldier morale. There were two types of seasons in Vietnam, hot and humid or rainy. The rain was particularly hard on a soldier's body. Gerald Allgood remembers his first experience in Vietnam: "once you got there... the monsoons were on, and it was wet and it was miserable."³² Many suffered from funguses growing on their feet because of being constantly wet. Keeping your feet dry was an important aspect of the Vietnam soldier. If a person did not take care of their feet, long journeys would be almost impossible tasks. Hot weather is also an important aspect when examining the war. High temperatures, as high as 130 degrees, made hydration a necessity for soldiers. The heat could easily cause a soldier to dehydrate in the field. Each soldier would carry, or as the soldier called it "hump" around 40 pounds of equipment. Heat and rain took a toll on many soldiers' body.

A soldier in Vietnam would serve a "tour." This was a yearlong service in Vietnam. This aspect was unlike any war that America has been involved with. In every American

³¹ Lipsman, Vietnam Experience, 103

³² Gerald Allgood. Conducted by: Stephen Maxner. *Vietnam Archive* Texas Tech. Pg.23 Conducted on 5/20/02 & 5/22/02

war before Vietnam a soldier would stay at war until the war was over. This created an absence of “seasoned veterans” who would know the ropes, and could help each other out. There were people who did multiple tours, but many understandably adopted the position of “one and done.”

The high turnover rate led to greater inexperience in the field. The average age of a soldier fighting in Vietnam was less than 20. Many went to war fresh out of high school. “When I was there I was 22 and I was old compared to about 90% of the people,” claimed James Matthews. “The average age was 19, 20 years old so I was a rather old man to be running around.”³³ With the average age being about twenty years old, indiscipline in the field was common. The average soldier was a kid going into the war and within their yearlong tour, would leave an experienced adult.

The many problems that the Vietnam soldier faced would force many to turn towards fellow soldiers and family members for support. These relationships would help the soldier survive the often difficult war experience. Shared experiences at war would create ties between comrades and these ties would be crucial to enabling soldiers to maintain combat readiness.

The adversities faced by the Vietnam soldier did not end in the battlefield but continued once he returned home. The adjustment back to the home front was sudden; unlike previous wars, rapid jet travel meant that soldier could leave the jungles of Vietnam one day and be home the next. This caused problems. The men did not have adequate time

³³James Matthews. Conducted by: Stephen Maxner. *Vietnam Archive* Texas Tech. Pg.18 Conducted on 10/2/99

to adjust from a war atmosphere to civilian life.³⁴ Some soldiers combated this by taking R&R before returning to the states, the men who opted to take this opportunity often benefited from the experience. It gave them a chance to wind down, tour other nations, and reflect on their experiences.

When the soldier returned to the United States, there were many problems that the soldier would face on the home front. Many veterans felt that they did not have anyone to turn to after the war. Thoughts and feelings about the war would be kept to themselves. The war was increasingly unpopular and this often led to a lack of public support for veterans. Many veterans felt guilty about serving in the Vietnam War. Soldiers were forced to ban together in order to grieve. Veterans who were more apt to take consolation by relying on one another tended to have a more positive experience after the war.³⁵

The vile nature of war can break down the psyche of a man. Habits and practices in the battlefield were survival techniques. Men developed a “kill or be killed attitude,” and it was hard for many to let go of this mentality after the tour of duty was over. After coming home many men developed guilt over the experiences of Vietnam.³⁶ The support that the soldier had back home would be thus be critically important in helping the healing process. Many soldiers came home from war and had supportive families, but they could not convey the horrors of war to them. The men who could not talk to their families about war would turn to their comrades for support.

³⁴ Wikler, Norma, *Strangers at Home*, 103

³⁵ Kadushin, *Social Networks, Helping Networks, and Vietnam Veterans*, 57-69

³⁶ Lifton, *Vietnam Reader*, “Home from War,” 57

Other soldiers did not want to relive the experiences of war. They wanted to separate their experiences of war from home. One soldier who is about to return home wrote: "Don't ask questions. When I come home, if I feel like talking about it I will, but otherwise don't ask... It's just something you don't feel like discussing and can't begin to write about."³⁷ The soldier who had a negative experience in war, were more apt to not talk about their war experiences. By talking about the Vietnam War, they would be reliving the experience. By keeping silent, they did not have to think about the war. In many of the oral histories, the veterans said they have not thought about the war in a very long time.

The lack of support on the home front also made it difficult for many veterans to integrate back into mainstream American culture. Antiwar protests would sometimes degrade American soldiers, and sometimes would result in veterans getting spat on.³⁸ Some soldiers returning home would be subjected to dreadful treatment in all realms of public life; as a result, they kept their Vietnam veteran identity quiet for fear of rejection and discrimination. The negative connotations and stereotypes associated with Vietnam veterans existed throughout the 70's, making it difficult for veterans to adapt back into American Culture.

The next three sections of this paper will examine the roles that comrades, families, and friends played in maintaining morale on the war front, and their contributions towards helping veterans readapt to American society. This will be achieved by looking at social support within the context of problems faced by soldiers during war and upon returning

³⁷ George Robinson. Letter home, Feb. 14th 1966. Ed. Bernard Edelman. *Dear America: Letters Home from Vietnam*. W.W. Norton & Company, New York. 1985. Pg 131.

³⁸ Greene, Bob. *Homecoming: When the Soldiers Returned from Vietnam*. G.P Putnam's Sons Publisher, New York. 1989. p. 17.

home. In each case, the most important variables affecting soldier morale and their ability to adjust back to civilian life were his relationships to his comrades, his family and his community.

The Importance of Social Connections during War

Social connections during war are an important aspect to look at when trying to identify why people had trouble assimilating. As mentioned before, this project categorized the social networks of veterans into three main types: comrades, family, and “other” (Vietnamese civilians and other relationships developed through war). Examining how each social network affected the soldier provides insights into soldier’s war experiences and how they adversely or positively affected their ability to assimilate upon returning home.

When examining the oral histories of veterans, we can see two trends: every soldier developed networks with comrades and almost every soldier maintained relations with family and friends back home. Each of these networks played a distinct role in the morale of the soldier. Ties between fellow soldiers could be the difference between life and death. While at war the most important network was between comrades. When fighting a war it was vital to trust and believe in your fellow soldier. These connections cannot be imitated or fabricated; they were developed through war experiences. Many soldiers claim that the connections between comrades are like no other relationship in life.

Family was the link between the war and the home front; the exchange of letters in particular was important in maintaining hope in the war effort. Letters from family members would lift the spirit of the soldier. Many soldiers did not tell their family

members the truth about war or their feelings, but maintaining a strong relationship with family gave the soldier a reason to fight on.

In contrast, developing relationships with Vietnamese civilians was uncommon; however some managed to be able to develop and maintain close networks with local people. Soldiers that did forge these local ties seemed to be able to cope with war better. They still maintained close friendships with their fellow soldiers; however they were also able to confide in someone other than military personal. This will be an important aspect in examining problems coming home. The establishment of relationships during the war can be very helpful in coping with war atrocities. However, it was very difficult to leave these people behind, especially for the soldiers who developed close personal relationships.

The many social connections that the soldiers developed or maintained would be important to the success or failure in adapting back into civilian life. The connections at war, in many cases, would play a vital role in a smooth transition back into the United States. Within this section I am going to show the importance of each type of relationship, illustrate how it affected the soldier mentally and determine why each type of relationship affected a veteran's to a experience at war.

Relationship with Comrades at War and Coming Home

Developing social connections was an important aspect in maintaining composure during the war experience. The pressures of war were at times too much to handle, and the relationships developed would be an outlet from the horrors of reality. The bonds created at war were often viewed, at the time, as more important than the relationships back home. Frank Gutierrez, a veteran who served in Vietnam from 1967- 1970 said "...veterans, Vietnam veterans especially, are some of the most loyal, dedicated, brotherhood[s]." ³⁹ The relationships developed between soldiers would form a bond that would be imperative to deal with the experiences of war.

The stresses of war could drain the morality of any soldier. David Crawley, who served in Vietnam from 1968-1969 claimed "If you can do anything, anything you can do legally, I mean, not shoot yourself, but you get malaria or you break your leg, [to] get sent back to the rear... you somehow got hurt, hey, that's okay. You might live instead of be killed." ⁴⁰ Going to the field most often meant going into hostile territories. These areas would be infiltrated with VC or NVA soldiers. The fear of death brought the soldiers together to develop bonds that would last many throughout their lifetime.

The most important aspect of social connections is the bond between fellow soldiers. In a random sample of twenty Vietnam Veterans, every single veteran had a

³⁹ Frank Gutierrez. Conducted by: Kim Sayer. *Vietnam Archive* Texas Tech. Pg.43 Conducted on 12/24/01

⁴⁰ David Crawley Conducted by: Steven Maxner. *Vietnam Archive* Texas Tech. Pg. 34 Conducted on 2/27/01

strong connection with their fellow soldiers. Often called a band of brothers or brotherhood, these networks of comrades helped to relieve the stresses of war. We can see in many letters and memoirs that the soldiers were very protective of their fellow soldiers.

George Robinson wrote home in a letter to his mother:

I never had much respect for GIs even after I was in for a while, but since I've seen what his real job is, I have more respect for him than any man on earth. To shoot and kill somebody, turn your head and walk away isn't hard, it's watching him die that's hard, harder than you could imagine and even harder when it's one of your own...⁴¹

Many soldiers did not fear dying; rather they feared their mistake could cause the death of a comrade. These protective bonds helped to ease the atrocities of war. For many protecting your fellow soldier was a priority: "You're really kind of working to protect your buddy and you respect him and he respects you and you make a life out of it and we did that"⁴² They could rely on each other. The men have experienced the same events, and they knew that when it came down to it, they fight for each other:

I didn't even know those guys in Vietnam until I got there, and it wouldn't have mattered if you came to my platoon tomorrow, if we got hit, I would go out and try to save your ass just as I would've done for anyone else I'd been with for a month, two months, three months. Instant bonding.⁴³

These bonds cannot be created through any other experience than war. Bonds formed between all who cooperated with the war effort.

In the field the support networks between soldiers was for protection. With little time to rest, many had only their comrades to talk to about home. Jerry Benson claims that "[Out in the field] if you had a chance to talk, you talked about home. Mainly you talked

⁴¹ George Robinson. Letter home, Feb. 14th 1966. Ed. Bernard Edelman. *Dear America: Letters Home from Vietnam*. W.W. Norton & Company, New York. 1985. Pg 130-131.

⁴² Robert Fischer Conducted by: Richard Burks Verrone. *Vietnam Archive* Texas Tech. Pg.30 Conducted on 3/20/03

⁴³ Robert Santos. Santoli, Al. *Everything We Had*. New York, Ballantine Books, 1981 pg 115

about being back on the block. The day that you were going to be back there. That's all you really talked about."⁴⁴ Talking about home gave the soldier something to look forward to. The stories and aspirations of the soldiers would be a chance to escape the realities of war.

Rest and relaxation (R&R) was an important tool to maintain morale and comradeship in the military. R&R would give soldiers a chance to get out of Vietnam and visit other countries with fellow soldiers. Jerry Benson remembers his R&R; "Everyday was important in your mind. If you could spend any time out of the country that was a blessing."⁴⁵ The R&R also gave soldiers time to recuperate or reunite with loved ones. It gave the soldier time to recharge his batteries while maintaining close ties with his family and comrades.

Irrespective of the bonds formed between soldiers, veterans still viewed their war experience differently. For some, it was highly negative; other soldiers felt that their experience was positive. Many of the veterans who had a positive experience at war were officers who rarely saw the battlefield. While others, mainly enlisted men, felt that their experience was negative. As one soldier wrote; "Any combat GI that comes here doesn't leave the same. I don't mean the cooks, clerks or special service workers, but the fighting man. I doubt if anybody realizes what combat was like."⁴⁶

When examining the men who had negative experiences, many of them served in the enlisted forces. Charles Moskos, author of *Surviving the Vietnam War* claims "the combat soldier underwent definite changes in attitude towards his situation. Although such

⁴⁴ Jerry Benson. Conducted by: Steven Maxner. *Vietnam Archive* Texas Tech. Pg.47 Conducted on 9/15/00

⁴⁵ Benson, *Vietnam Archives* Texas Tech, Pg 45

⁴⁶ George Robinson, *Dear America*, Pg 130-131

attitudes varied on individual personality and combat exposure."⁴⁷ In a letter home to his family Fredrick Pennel said "no one despises war more than the individual who has experienced combat."⁴⁸

The relationships that these men created would for many last long after the soldier returned home. The comradeship that war soldiers experience is deep and never forgotten. Many soldiers maintained close relationships when they came back home with as Vietnam veterans. Many used these close ties with fellow veterans as a tool for recovery.

Confiding in soldiers was important to many soldiers coming out of the Vietnam War. In particular, the veteran who had no one to turn to would be most likely to confide in his fellow soldiers. Gary Blinn assimilated without the help of his family. He was forced to turn to his brothers of war to get him through his darkest hours. Gary Blinn explains his war experience as being isolated:

My mom didn't write to me. She was an alcoholic and when she did write to me she had just bad news and I told her I just couldn't handle any more bad news, that if she didn't have something nice to say, to not write. So she didn't. My dad's a pretty quiet person so I got an occasional letter from him but it was fairly brief. My sister was in college and I'd have to say she wrote on occasion but nothing particularly meaningful. In my case, I was somewhat cut off from the real world. I'd been in love with a girl and told her to go find somebody else. I got very little mail...⁴⁹

Blinn completed two complete tours. When Blinn finished his second tour his immediate thoughts were to reenlist for a third tour so that he could protect his fellow soldiers.⁵⁰

⁴⁷ Moskos, Charles. "Surviving the War in Vietnam". Ed. Charles R. Figley and Seymour Leventman. *Strangers at Home: Vietnam Veterans Since the War*. Brunner Mazel Publishers, New York. 1990. Pg. 76

⁴⁸ Fredrick Pennell, Vietnam Veterans Collection, Madison Main Stacks

⁴⁹ Gary Blinn. Conducted by Richard Verrone. *Vietnam Archive* Texas Tech. Pg.47 Conducted on 6/24/03 & 6/26/03

⁵⁰ Ibid

After deciding to return back to the United States, Blinn found it very difficult to assimilate back into society:

I found myself just breaking everybody into two; those that had been in combat and had been shot at and those that hadn't... I have either intense friends or 'other people.' But every now and then there's somebody who isn't a Viet vet who breaks through the shell and becomes really trusted, but I know deep down that the guys in Cosron 13 and Cosron 15, the Black Cat Division, I would give my life without thinking. There wouldn't even be time for the signal to get up to your brain and go back. It would just happen. And I'm not sure that would happen with anybody else. Obviously, your family. And going back to these reunions are just absolutely priceless...⁵¹

We can see that through his war experience he developed ways to distinguish between someone who had been in war and those who had not.⁵² Blinn said that he had a difficult time trusting "other people"; that is, people who were not vets. For Blinn his identity as a Vietnam veteran was the key aspect of his social identity. Blinn describes his healing process as understanding triggers and recognizing what negatively affects veterans.⁵³

Others turned to veterans because no citizen wanted to talk about the experiences at war. Frank Gutierrez started a rap group with some of the local veterans from his area. "It was just nobody wanted to talk about it, so eventually I just wound up withdrawing and socializing with other veterans, and eventually there was about 15 or 20 of us that would get together on occasion because nobody else cared about the veterans or what we've been through or what we were experiencing."⁵⁴ Gutierrez said that the rap groups were a way to understand the soldiers' role in Vietnam.⁵⁵ Gutierrez claimed that the groups also helped veterans to assimilate back into

⁵¹ Gary Blinn. Conducted by Richard Verrone. *Vietnam Archive* Texas Tech. Pg.47 Conducted on 6/24/03 & 6/26/03

⁵² Ibid Pg.39

⁵³ Ibid

⁵⁴ Frank Gutierrez, Texas Tech Archives, pg.32

⁵⁵ Ibid

mainstream culture by helping veterans get through PTSD, emotional problems, substance abuse and relationship strains.⁵⁶

The formation of rap groups or help groups not only helped veterans cope and assimilate back into mainstream American culture, but eventually succeeded in changing preconceived notions of the Vietnam veterans. These veteran groups helped to establish credibility within society by creating memorials and dedications to Vietnam veterans. Finally, these organizations proved that the average Vietnam veteran was not a drug crazed, uncontrolled baby killer, which was a stereotype at the time.

Veteran's groups helped soldiers mesh into society in other ways. Blinn, for example, organized a veteran's group while at Harvard University. He claimed that the group was not only extremely close and really cared for each other, they also made sure each member was successful academically.⁵⁷ Others stayed connected with fellow Vietnam veterans simply because they shared common bonds. Many came back to the states and had no problems picking life up where they left off. James Ray was no different:

Well, it wasn't for me and I really don't think it was for the great vast majority of Vietnam veterans coming back from Vietnam. That was just another part of your life that you went through and you did what you did, you did your job that you believed you were supposed to have done and you're glad to be back home and I found it not difficult at all to just pick up my life from where it had been with my family and everything else.⁵⁸

Ray maintained his connections with Vietnam veterans because he enjoyed the bonds of common experience that Vietnam veterans shared.

Another aspect of maintain comradeship and readjusting back to civilian life involved the establishment of the Vietnam memorial. It allowed people to grieve and to

⁵⁶ Ibid

⁵⁷ Blinn, Texas Tech Archive, 36.

⁵⁸ James Ray Conducted by Richard Verrone. *Vietnam Archive* Texas Tech. Pg.47 Conducted on 3/11/04 pg 127

honor those who had given their lives for the war effort. Traveling to Washington D.C. became an important pilgrimage for many veterans: "I get to Washington about once a year. I usually stop over at Union Station and pick up flowers for the guys I knew personally who were killed in Vietnam."⁵⁹ Another soldier said "I have seen [the Vietnam wall] before, twice in Houston (travelling Vietnam wall). It's really a good thing to see as a Veteran."⁶⁰ Being able to honor your fallen comrades is an important ritual for many who served. The honoring of a buddy not only helps the soldier to deal with the horrors of war, it continues the tradition of comradeship. The men who served in Vietnam and died were committed to the brotherhood as Vietnam soldiers, their legacy remains in the hearts of the veterans today.

⁵⁹ Blinn, Texas Tech Archive, 41

⁶⁰ Frank Gutierrez, Texas Tech Archives

Relationship with Family at War and Home

Maintaining relations back home was an important aspect of maintaining moral. When examining correspondences during war, a soldier's morale was lifted when receiving a letter from home. As one soldier wrote: "I'm always happy when I receive letters from home. So you know what kind of frame of mind I'm in now since I received three in one day."⁶¹ These letters would allow the soldier to maintain their relationships with their friends, family and love ones. It allowed the soldier to realize that they had not been forgotten. No matter the content within the letters, it was a way for the soldier to escape the atrocities of war and to maintain the personal connections they had back home.

Soldiers would often refer to home as "back in the world." We can see this in many letters:

Today I can honestly say I did nothing but think about you...Here I sit in the midst of a group of people who are going through misery similar to mine. For all their short-timing and beer drinking, there isn't one of them who wouldn't be back in the World if they had a chance.⁶²

The disconnection between the war and home was important for many soldiers to realize that there is a place where life is normal. They would use the letters to try to hear what is going on in civilian life back home. Many wanted to finish their tour and be done. Letters focused on how life is going to be when they get back. Some soldiers listed things that they wanted to do when they were finished with the war.

⁶¹ Scott Alwin, . Letters home. Vietnam Veterans Collection Madison November 27, 1968

⁶² Edmund Fanning Letter home, May, 21st 1969. Ed. Bernard Edelman. *Dear America: Letters Home from Vietnam*. W.W. Norton & Company, New York. 1985. Pg 130-131.

There were many soldiers who would want to know every detail of their family's lives. They wanted to maintain close relationships and preserve some sense of presence back home. Joe Bob Mann served in the Navy during the Vietnam War, he claims that his letters from home consisted of "explain[ing] to me about things happening around town... she sent me letter[s], [about my] two younger sisters and she would talk about them. She [would also] put the local gossip in."⁶³ These letters would keep the soldier in touch with not only what was happening around their home, but also their families. It would give the soldier a sense of connectedness with "the world."

Soldiers were allowed to take rest and relaxation (R&R) trips during their tour in Vietnam. R&R was vital towards the maintaining of a soldier's moral. Many soldiers would take their R&R in Hawaii and would meet their families there. This would not only help the soldier morally but also mentally. It would give him a chance to reconnect with family and loved ones. Joe Gilligan a Veteran who served from July 1969-July 1970 relocated his family to Hawaii:

I moved my family to Pearl City, Hawaii, right outside of Pearl Harbor, my wife and two daughters. We got a small condominium type place, and they lived there for a year and that allowed me the opportunity, when I took my R&R...I went over [to Vietnam] in July I guess it was, I took my R&R at the holidays around Christmas and so that allowed me to fly to Honolulu which was one of the R&R sights and spend my Christmas holidays with my family.⁶⁴

Another veteran reflected on his R&R with his wife:

...She and I had our own place and then we would drive into Honolulu at night but during the day we could just eat our meals out there and we could lay on the beach and we just had a really nice time, and then I had a couple months to go on my tour when I got back.

⁶³ Joe Bob Mann Conducted by: Robert Tidwell. *Vietnam Archive* Texas Tech. Pg.4 Conducted on 8/2/03

⁶⁴ Joe Gilligan Conducted by: Gary Hayes. *Vietnam Archive* Texas Tech. Pg.58 Conducted on 1/28/02 & 1/30/02

In their letters, many soldiers assured their families that everything was fine. They did not share what was going on in the war because they didn't want their loved ones to worry. Frank Gutierrez stated in his oral interview:

I would write as often as I could, just maybe at least once a week. It wasn't a priority. I didn't want to worry my parents. That was the thing. I didn't want to worry them because I knew that they were seeing a lot of things on TV and we were in some bad situations but I didn't want to compound their stress by me telling them about what was going on, so I tried not to share or say anything, just the usual, "I'm okay, everything's alright, how's the family," and there was nothing about, "So and so got killed, we were ambushed," nothing.⁶⁵

Stephen Katz, stated that he also tried to keep his family from worrying about this welfare:

I pretty much downplayed [letters]. No need for them to worry excessively, [I said]...what I was doing was kind of interesting and I had an interesting mission on a particular day, but I did certainly try and downplay it⁶⁶

A soldier who maintained close relationships with their families while in Vietnam also had an easier time coming back from the war.

A strong family connection helped a veteran adjust to civilian life. A soldier who came back to a supportive family was far more likely to have no problems resuming life where he left off. James Mathews had a supportive family; his uncle provided him with a job when he came back, and his relatives were also available to talk when he needed them.⁶⁷ A close family would provide the strong connections needed to assimilate back into the culture of America. Within my oral histories there were three types of families: supporting non-military, non-supporting- non-military, and supporting-military. As seen in

⁶⁵ Gutierrez, Vietnam Archives Texas Tech, Page 25.

⁶⁶ Stephen Katz. Conducted by: Richard Burks Verrone. *Vietnam Archive* Texas Tech. Part 2 Pg.1 Conducted on 1/21/03

⁶⁷ James Matthews. Conducted by: Stephen Maxner. *Vietnam Archive* Texas Tech. Conducted on 10/2/99

the previous section, veterans would seek out other veterans, when they did not have the support of their families.

Many soldiers of Vietnam had military veterans in their family. These family ties could be very beneficial. The benefits of coming back to a military family were that these veterans could associate with military oriented people, who understood their wartime experiences. These people were often military careerists and would thus be familiar with the situation in Vietnam. Military families would be able to help a veteran through the grieving process. Unlike other parts of American culture, who were very disenchanted and cynical about the war and its veterans, military families remained staunchly supportive of Vietnam veterans and would not castigate a soldier for serving. When Scott Dawson came home to his military family, he claimed “There was a certain amount of respect that I felt, and so there wasn’t a feeling that I was a criminal or guilty of something. They said, ‘You went, you did, that’s okay. Good for you. Glad you got back.’”⁶⁸

A supporting family is an important aspect when examining veterans adapting back into mainstream society, after the war. A supportive family made it easier to resolve issues that the veterans were having. Supportive spouses and parents were especially important; they were the most influential people in the life of the veteran. As one soldier remembers his parent’s reaction to his service in Vietnam:

They tended to be, “We’re really proud of you. This is great”. I’m sure on the inside they were hurting a lot because we knew some people who had lost sons in Vietnam.⁶⁹

⁶⁸ Scott Dawson, Conducted by: Steven Maxner. *Vietnam Archive* Texas Tech. Pg.68 Conducted on 9/14/01

⁶⁹ Willis Fred Marshall, Conducted by Richard Burks Verrone, *Vietnam Archive* Texas Tech pg.14 Conducted on 2/18/03

However, a successful assimilation was not entirely dependent on the support of the family. There were many veterans who came back from war and did not want to talk about their experiences with anyone. These people either wanted to separate the war from their life, or needed someone that they were comfortable talking with about the war. Frank Gutierrez stated that the gruesomeness of war wasn't something that you wanted to talk about with your family.⁷⁰ These members would seek out the aid of veterans in order to find someone they trust, and could commiserate with.

⁷⁰ Frank Gutierrez. Conducted by: Kim Sayer. *Vietnam Archive* Texas Tech. Pg.43 Conducted on 12/24/01

Friendships and Relationships Developed On and Off the Battlefield

The men who had developed relationships with Vietnamese men and women were often able to cope with the war better. They had someone that they could relate to, and confide in. These connections also increased moral because of the ability to be able to see someone you care about on a more regular basis. Mike Davidson served in Vietnam from 1968-1971 and he formed relationships with Vietnamese civilians. In his oral interview Davidson claimed "I became pretty good friends [Co Ut](a (Vietnamese civilian) and on Sunday afternoons sometimes I would go to her house and sit on the porch and just talk to her [about] family, and what was going to happen after the war. Things like that."⁷¹ When the soldier was not in the field, they would have more of an opportunity to be able to maintain their relationship with people they cared about; it was a release from war tensions.

Being able to confide within a civilian would not only help the moral of the soldier, but it also gave soldiers a sense of humanity. Many soldiers felt that the war brought out the evil in people, and being able to maintain relationships with civilians would have helped to develop a justification for fighting. For example, Scott Alwin is a Vietnam veteran who married a Vietnamese woman that he met while on tour. In a letter home Alwin tried to legitimize his relationship to his parents; "maybe you see so much death and destruction

⁷¹Mike Davidson. Conducted by: Richard Verrone. *Vietnam Archive* Texas Tech. Pg. 45 Conducted on 8/11&16/04

and do so much killing that the part [of you that is] kind and gentle cries out for an object to direct itself towards.”⁷²

In some cases the men relocated their families from the U.S. to Asia. Paul Taylor relocated his family to Bangkok, and would visit them whenever he had the chance. “Living conditions were really nice in Bangkok and the schools were real good. My wife was president of the American Women’s Club. There was a lot of Americans there... [When I had time off] I would go to Bangkok.”⁷³ The strong connections and relationships that the family would make in Bangkok would make it difficult to come back to the United States.

Other soldiers would meet their future spouses or girlfriends while on R&R. This would also help to rejuvenate their spirits. It gave them someone to confide in and a new source of inspiration. These soldiers often viewed their experience of the war more positively because they found someone who was influential in their life.

Relationships outside the field of war were important to the soldiers who developed these connections. Many soldiers who bonded with the civilians of Vietnam found it harder to assimilate back in the mainstream of American society. The culture and friendships obtained in Asia were strong and many had a hard time letting these relationships go.

Developing a friendship, and having to abandon it, would not be an easy task. Two oral histories t in my random sample documented this veterans had a harder time adapting back into American society. If a person gets engrained into an Asian culture, coming back into American culture was a culture shock:

⁷² Scott A Aldwin. Letters home. Vietnam Veterans Collection Madison October 10th, 1967

⁷³ Paul Taylor, Conducted by: Steven Maxner. *Vietnam Archive* Texas Tech. Pg.47 Conducted on 9/15/00

June of '71. I started interacting with the American people again, and just people at the airport, people I was seeing on the street, I was really disgusted with the United States and the people in the United States because I felt like there was a struggle for freedom going on in Southeast Asia, and it didn't have a – people didn't have a clue what was going on because the news media reporting. I felt so many people were overweight and fat. You know the Vietnamese are very thin and skinny. So I felt sort of disgusted for quite some time.⁷⁴

Likewise, when families were moved into an area, while the soldier was at war, not only would the soldier develop relationships and networks, but so would the family. For example, Paul Taylor relocated his family to Bangkok. When the family moved to Wisconsin, Taylor's wife and kids became extremely depressed.⁷⁵ In search of starting a new, the family once again relocated to California.

Leaving social connections behind was difficult for many veterans, adapting back into society was much more difficult if close friendships with cultural people deteriorated after arriving back home. With the random sample that was generated, we cannot come to any conclusions on how these relationships helped a Veteran adapt back into society, if they stayed in contact with people from Asia. However, it is evident that leaving friendships behind was a very difficult situation. We can see through the interviews of Paul Taylor, and Mike Davidson that adapting was much more difficult when you become attached to aspects of the Vietnamese society.

⁷⁴ Mike Davidson. Conducted by: Richard Verrone. *Vietnam Archive* Texas Tech. Pg.46 Conducted on 8/11&16/04

⁷⁵ Paul Taylor, Conducted by: Steven Maxner. *Vietnam Archive* Texas Tech. Pg.47 Conducted on 9/15/00

Conclusion

The Vietnam War is unlike any war that the United States has been a part of. There were many events within the Vietnam War that led up to the failures of adjustment to the war and assimilation back to American society afterwards. The social networks established before and during the war played a key role in the ability of a soldier to endure the war experience and adapt back into American culture. An analysis of a random sample of 20 oral histories by veterans of the Vietnam War demonstrates that many veterans did not have a great deal of problem adapting back into society. Many of the men had either strong family or veteran ties that would help the soldier cope with problems when they did arrive.

Irrespective of their circumstances and experiences, social connections were very important to veterans during and after the war. Those who had strong relationships with friends, family or comrades often had a more positive experience at war. Each network that the soldier possessed had the ability to rejuvenate his spirits, or provide temporary escape from the horrors of war.

We can see that the soldiers that had both family and comrades for support were often the least likely to have problems coming back into society. Although the random sample for this study is small, it is very diverse, with men representing all types of soldiers and officers. The sample also illustrates the many ways that veterans relied on each other. The experiences documented in this paper cannot, obviously, be seen as representative of the Vietnam veteran experience as a whole; however, it does provide a clear understanding

of the importance of social networks for veterans and their role in aiding assimilation back into American society.

We cannot, nonetheless, ignore the fact that there were many soldiers who did not have the same ease of transition back to America. Therefore, more research is needed to understand why people did have difficulties assimilating. It is extremely difficult to make generalizations of the “average” experience, but further research can provide additional insight into understanding the Vietnam experience and its impact on those who served.

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