THE VIETNAM WARS
1945-1990

Marilyn B. Young

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Epilogue

History is a source of strength for us.
—PHAM HUY THONG TO AN AMERICAN STUDENT, HANOI, JANUARY 1973

... we have always been people who dropped the past and then could not remember where it had been put.
—GLORIA EMERSON, Winners and Losers (1978)

Many of us have some of the war still inside us. This creates difficulties in lives.
—LE LUU, VIETNAMESE VETERAN AND NOVELIST

Over 26 million American men came of draft age during the Vietnam War; 2.15 million of them went to Vietnam, 1.6 million were in combat. Those who fought the war and died in it were disproportionately poor, badly educated, and black. (A high school dropout who enlisted had a 70 percent chance of being sent to Vietnam, a college graduate only 42 percent; until 1971, student deferments protected the majority of students from the draft altogether.) It was also a teen-aged army—over 60 percent of those who died in Vietnam were between the ages of seventeen and twenty-one, and the average age of those who served was nineteen, five to seven years younger than in other American wars.

Between 1968 and 1972, a special Great Society program—Project 100,000—scooped up over 300,000 young men previously considered in-
eligible for the military because of their low test scores. Project 100,000, Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara declared, was the “world’s largest education of skilled men.” With lower admissions scores, the “subterranean poor” would have an opportunity to serve their country in Vietnam, simultaneously, the program had the advantage of avoiding the politically unpleasant alternative of requiring students or reservists to do the same. The benefits, especially to young black men, were said to be especially striking. As Daniel Patrick Moynihan pointed out, the military was “an utterly masculine world. Given the strains of disorderly and matrifocal family life in which so many Negro youth come of age, the armed forces are a dramatic and desperately needed change, a world away from women, a world run by strong men and unquestioned authority, where discipline, if harsh, is nonetheless orderly and predictable, and where rewards, if limited, are granted on the basis of performance.” In its first two years of operation, 41 percent of those brought into the military through Project 100,000 were black, 80 percent had dropped out of high school, 40 percent could read at less than sixth-grade level, and 37 percent were put directly into combat. Court-martialed at double the usual rate, over eighty thousand of these veterans left the military without the skills and opportunities McNamara assured them would be theirs, and many of them with service records that would make civilian life far more difficult than if they had never served at all.²

Each young man who went to war had an individual tour of duty, 365 days, and then home, on his own, with no effort on anyone’s part to prepare for the shock of return, to help make the transition from war to peace, from the privileging of violence to its prohibition, from the sharp edge death brings to the life of a soldier to the ordinary daily life of a civilian, which denies death altogether. They had spoken always of coming back “to the world,” counting each day “in country” which brought them closer to the end of their tour. But the homecoming was harder than any of them had expected. Later, many veterans would tell stories of having been spat upon by anti-war protesters, or having heard of veterans who were spat on.³ It doesn’t matter how often this happened or whether it happened at all. Veterans felt spat upon, stigmatized, contaminated. In television dramas, veterans were not heroes welcomed back into the bosom of loving families, admiring neighborhoods, and the arms of girls who loved uniforms; they were psychotic killers, crazies with automatic weapons. It was as if the country assumed that anyone coming back from Vietnam would, even should, feel a murderous rage against the society that had sent him there. The actual veteran—tired, confused, jet-propelled from combat to domestic airport—disappeared. Or rather, he became a kind of living hologram, an image projected by conflicting interpretations of the war: a victim or an executioner, a soldier who had lost a war, a killer who should never have fought it at all.

Of course there were also just the daily bread-and-butter problems of finding work in an economy far less open than it had been when the war was young. Today, from one quarter to one third of the homeless (between one quarter and three quarters of a million men) are Vietnam-era veterans. Without training or skills, without any public sense that the country owed them anything at all, many Vietnam veterans found themselves not only unrewarded but even disadvantaged by their service records. The war had begun to unravel even as it was being fought, so that by 1971 dissent and disobedience within the armed forces were endemic. The result was a tremendous increase in the number of less than honorable discharges—“bad paper”—which have followed the 500,000 to 750,000 men who received them ever since, making it difficult for them to get and keep jobs, and depriving them of educational and even medical benefits.

The lack of skills, the bad service records, the war wounds, have been only part of the difficulty many veterans face. At first, the widespread appearance of psychological problems was named “postwar trauma” and assimilated to the literature on the problems of veterans of other wars. It soon became clear, however, that Vietnam veterans were not like veterans of other wars. As early as 1970, Vietnam Veterans Against the War organized “rap sessions,” sometimes attended by sympathetic psychiatrists, to help returning soldiers deal with their experiences. Even the Veterans Administration, obviously reluctant to single out Vietnam veterans as having any particular difficulties (especially in the light of the meager benefits accorded them), reported a “greater distrust of institutions” and a “bitterness, disgust and suspicion of those in positions of authority and responsibility.”

More disturbing was the persistence—or sudden onset ten or even fifteen years after the war—of symptoms of acute distress, accompanied by flashbacks, severe sleep problems, depression, and rage. “Postwar trauma” was renamed “post-traumatic stress disorder” and assimilated not to battle fatigue or shell shock but to what people experience as survivors of floods or earthquakes. A V.A. doctor estimates that as many as 700,000 veterans suffer from some form of “post-traumatic stress disorder” (or PTSD). A massive study of Vietnam-era veterans revealed that those who had been “exposed to significant amounts of combat and/or
witnessed or were participants in abusive violence [against prisoners, civilians, etc.] demonstrate long term problems” with disabling memories of the war.

Veterans of other American wars, Robert Jay Lifton argued in his book Home from the War, had come to terms with the absurdity and evil of war by believing that their war “had purpose and significance beyond the immediate horrors [they] witnessed.” But “the central fact” of the Vietnam War,” Lifton wrote in 1973 while it was still going on, “is that no one really believes in it.” Although it is possible to challenge Lifton and demonstrate that soldiers in World War II also had difficulty discerning significance beyond the immediate horror of their situation, it is nevertheless true that when they got home, the purpose and significance of what they had done was universally affirmed and most were able to accept it. This was not the situation of Vietnam veterans, for even those who came home to families or communities who approved of the war were aware of those who protested against it. Moreover, the announced goals of the war—to repel an outside invader, to give the people of South Vietnam the chance to choose their own government—were daily contradicted by the soldier’s sense that in fact he was himself the invader, and that “the government he had come to defend [was] hated by the people and that he [was] hated most of all.”

“What kind of a war is it?” Larry Rottman, poet and veteran, asked in a poem written during the war,

where you can be pinned down 
all day in a muddy rice paddy
while your buddies are being shot
and a close-support Phantom jet
who has been napalming the enemy
wraps itself around a tree and explodes
and you cheer inside.

“To have been in a war does not mean you understand the memories of it,” Gloria Emerson has written. In published and unpublished novels, memoirs, poems, Vietnam veterans have tried to understand their memories.

For women veterans the problem was compounded by the initial inability of anyone, including themselves, to acknowledge that they too were combat veterans. No one seems to have kept close count of their numbers. The Department of Defense says 7,500 women were on active military service in Vietnam during the war; the Veterans Administration lists 11,000 women as having served there. Together with civilians working for the Red Cross or other voluntary services, the general estimate is that a total of between 33,000 and 55,000 women worked in Vietnam during the war. Like the young men who fought the war, the young women who nursed their wounds, or tried to “take their minds off the war,” were confused, often defensive, almost always pained by their memories. “Our job was to look them [wounded soldiers] in the eye and convince them that everything was all right.” It took practice, but “you finally built up a facade and could literally look at somebody dying and smile like Miss America or whatever we personified to them.” The war gave many women responsibilities and a sense of power usually denied them in civilian life. But this new status too was confusing and even distressing in that there was no way to extricate it from the death and dehumanization that were its occasion. One nurse resisted having to treat wounded Vietnamese until one day she was forced to take care of an infant and broke down: “How, I wondered, could I ever come to believe I hated a baby?”

Lynda Van Devanter tried to join a VVAW demonstration when she returned from Vietnam, but was told, “This demonstration is only for vets.” “I am a vet,” she explained. “I was in Pleiku and Qui Nhon. . . .” “I . . . don’t think you’re supposed to march,” came the answer. “But you told me it was for vets.” “It is. . . . But you’re not a vet.”

In 1982, the Veterans Administration acknowledged that women were truly Vietnam vets: for the first time groups were established for women suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder. “She is afraid to trust again,” Marilyn McMahon says in her poem “Wounds of War”:

Her days are haunted
by the texture of blood
the odor of burns
the face of senseless death;
friends known and loved
vanished
abandoned.
She sits alone in the darkened room
scotch her only hope.

“The war is never over,” one homeless man explained to a reporter in 1987. “You drink one too many beers and it pops up . . . Sometimes, I hope to settle down somewhere where I won’t be reminded of what I’ve seen. But I really don’t see a future for myself.” Being unable to
imagine a future often precludes having one. More veterans have committed suicide since the war than died in it—at least sixty thousand. Nor is the connection between their war experience and their death at all obscure. Steven L. Anderson’s parents, for example, found this note next to the body of their dead son: “When I was in Vietnam, we came across a North Vietnamese soldier with a man, a woman and a three- or four-year-old girl. We had to shoot them all. I can’t get the little girl’s face out of my mind. I hope that God will forgive me.”

In May 1971, Medal of Honor winner Dwight W. Johnson was shot dead by the owner of a store he was attempting to rob. In Vietnam, Johnson killed “five to twenty enemy soldiers, nobody knows for sure,” when the tank crew he was trying to rescue blew up in front of his eyes. “When he ran out of ammunition,” his obituary continues, “he killed one with the stock of his machine gun.” Unskilled and jobless in Detroit, Skip Johnson’s fortunes turned when he was awarded the Medal of Honor for his heroism that day. Civic notables showered him with gifts and the Army persuaded him to return to the service as a recruiter in Detroit’s predominantly black high schools. But his wife noticed some changes in him, as she had in other veterans she knew: “They get quiet. It’s like they don’t have too much to say about what it was like over there. Maybe it’s because they’ve killed people and they don’t really know why they’ve killed them.”

Eventually Skip Johnson went AWOL from his recruiter’s job and ended up in Valley Forge VA Hospital, where the head psychiatrist reached a preliminary diagnosis: “Depression caused by post-Vietnam adjustment problem.” Later, the doctor observed Johnson’s guilt over having survived the tank ambush and over “winning a high honor for the one time in his life when he lost complete control of himself. He asked: ‘What would happen if I lost control of myself in Detroit and behaved like I did in Vietnam?’ The prospect of such an event apparently was deeply disturbing to him.” The psychiatrist refrained from answering Johnson’s question; but a store manager in the western end of Detroit was more forthcoming: “I first hit him with two bullets,’ the manager . . . said later. ‘But he just stood there, with the gun in his hand, and said, ‘I’m going to kill you . . . .’ I kept pulling the trigger until my gun was empty.‘

Johnson’s mother, thinking about her son’s life and death after he was buried at Arlington National Cemetery with full military honors, wondered whether he had simply “tired of this life and needed someone else to pull the trigger.”

And many of those who have not tired of their lives, nor suffered from “post-traumatic stress disorder,” who have homes, jobs, families, ambitions, nevertheless find the war somehow remains central to their lives. George Swiers tried to explain this at a conference called “Vietnam Reconsidered: Lessons from a War,” which was held in Los Angeles in 1983. In 1970 he had flown direct from the battlefield to San Francisco airport, a survivor of an “honest-to-god magical mystery tour.”

And so, with a bravado inspired by two hours’ worth of drugs and alcohol, and his uniform disheveled beyond embarrassment, he set out to speak to his Fellow Americans. To share with them his hideous secrets, to tell them what went on daily in their names.

No one listened; no one would engage his eyes. When Swiers completely lost control, a security officer gently led him away, advising him to “have a drink, you’ll feel better.”

This week, exactly thirteen years have passed since I was last in California. I return to a place [the conference] where Vietnam is all that is spoken of. And there is some measure of comfort in that. But if I have learned anything in these thirteen years, it is this: I’m not supposed to feel better.

“Friend Patrick Finnegan,” Swiers went on,

a fellow activist and former grunt, often marvels at the government’s willingness to permit any Vietnam veteran reaccess to America. For we brought with us the awful, suffocating truth of the war: that lies, though they be cleverly camouflage, neatly packed and endorsed by presidents are still lies. And that no lie clicked out in a military press release could bury deep enough the death, dishonor, and defection that was Vietnam.

For thousands of soldiers exposed to Agent Orange, Vietnam is a daily scourge, suffered in migraines, ulcerated skin rashes, liver problems, cancer, Worse, they find themselves passing on the horrors of Vietnam to another generation. “When I came home,” one veteran tried to explain to a student interviewing him for a class project,

“I hated that I had anything to do with the war. But I knew that it was over. I got my life together and went on with it. I had a few nightmares, but it was a lot less than some of my friends had. I got married, had Billy and Johnny and I was doing well . . . Then Billy grew up and that GOD DAMN pesticle shit they dropped on us came
back to haunt me and my kid. He has live Mother Fuckin scars on his body from cancer. . . . My own government that I was fighting a war for is making my son suffer for their mistakes, and I have to live with the guilt, not them!! . . . I don’t want to talk about this anymore.”

“This is the first war that reached into our maternity wards,” Tom Val- lely, a veteran and Massachusetts state representative told Myra MacPherson. “The Vietnam experience does not belong to the past. The warfare we saw in Vietnam is the warfare of the future. Vietnam was a laboratory. Our own men were the guinea pigs.” But then, as visitors to the main Saigon maternity hospital report, so were the hundreds of thousands of Vietnamese exposed to a decade of spraying.

The soldier-poets of the war have said it powerfully. Bruce Weigl sings of napalm as he and his wife stand quietly in the doorway gazing out on a green field after a heavy rain:

But still the branches are wire
And thunder is the pounding mortar,
Still I close my eyes and see the girl
Running from her village, napalm
Stuck to her dress like jelly,
Her hands reaching for the no one
Who waits in waves of heat before her.

So I can keep on living,
So I can stay here beside you,
I try to imagine she runs down the road and wings
Beat inside her until she rises
Above the stinking jungle and her pain
Eases, and your pain, and mine.

But Weigl, braver and more honest than any of those who sent him to Vietnam, knows that it is a lie which “swings back again.”

The lie works only as long as it takes to speak
And the girl runs only as far
As the napalm allows
Until her burning tendons and crackling
Muscles draw her up
Into that final position
Burning bodies so perfectly assume. Nothing
Can change that; she is burned behind my eyes
And not your good love and not the rain-swept air

And not the jungle green
Pasture unfolding before us can deny it."

William Ehrhart returned to Vietnam in 1985, as many veterans have begun to do recently, perhaps to find an answer to a poem he wrote during the war.

Do they think of me now
in those strange Asian villages
where nothing ever seemed
quite human
but myself
and my few grim friends
moving through them
hunched in lines?

When they tell stories to their children
of the evil
that awaits misbehavior,
is it me they conjure?

A Vietnamese poet, after listening to Ehrhart’s poem, offered one of his own:

When there are no more bombs,
Shall you let me go up on earth again?
Why do you keep asking, little one . . .
I want to see the uncles and aunts I loved,
Are they still fighting, Mama?
I want to see the Yankee,
Mama, does it look like a human being?

Meeting the man against whose troops he had fought seventeen years earlier, Ehrhart, rather disarmingly, asked the Vietnamese general what he had thought of the Americans, as fighters, as warriors. “You were—brave,” the general answered. Pressed for a more specific answer, the general lists American errors: fixed positions, dependency on air support, ignorance of the land. “Would it have mattered if we had done things differently?” Ehrhart asked. “No,” he replies after a pause. “Probably not. History was not on your side. We were fighting for our homeland. What were you fighting for?” Remembering himself at seventeen, the “inflexible certainty of my decision, and the terrible collective igno-
rance of the small town that buried half a dozen of my high school classmates,” Ehrhart answers: “‘Nothing that really mattered.’”

After the Korean War, the poet Thomas McGrath memorialized the American war dead—“brave: ignorant: amazed: Dead in the rice paddies, dead on the nameless hills.” In November 1982, the brave, ignorant, amazed dead of Vietnam were remembered at the dedication of a Vietnam Veterans Memorial. Money for the memorial had been raised by the veterans themselves; the winning design, by Maya Ying Lin, provided for two black granite walls bearing the names of the Americans who died in Vietnam. There was a protest by those who deemed the design insufficiently patriotic, and so a life-size statue of three GIs, two white, one black, was added to the original conception. Maya Ying Lin protested that it was like “drawing a moustache” on her design, but in the event, the statues have a different impact, as unpredictable as that of the wall itself.

Unlike the commemoration of the flag raising at Iwo Jima, these soldiers are flagless and exhausted. They seem to be waiting for something, but the only thing visible in the direction in which they look are the giant slabs with the names of their dead comrades. At first Bruce Weigl wondered why he had come to the dedication ceremony in Washington on Veteran’s Day, 1982. “I think we came,” he wrote later, without really knowing it, to make the memorial our wailing wall. We came to find the names of those we lost in the war, as if by tracing the letters cut into the granite we could find what was left of ourselves. It turns out that, beyond all the petty debates over the monument, no veteran could turn his back on the terrible grace of Maya Lin’s wall and the names of the 57,839 who died or disappeared in Vietnam from July 1959 to May 1975: America’s longest: most vicious sin.

What militarists deplore as the Vietnam syndrome can better be understood as a relatively unique event in American history: an inability to forget, a resistance to the everyday workings of historical amnesia, despite the serious and coordinated efforts of the government and much of the press to “heal the wounds” of the war by encouraging such forgetting, or what comes to the same thing, firm instructions on how to remember. At the dedication of the Vietnam Memorial, President Reagan announced that the time had come to move on, “in unity and with resolve, with the resolve to always stand for freedom, as those who fought did, and to always try to protect and preserve the peace.” Harry Haines, a Vietnam veteran, terms Reagan’s call the “administrative version of Vietnam memory.” According to Reagan, in Vietnam Americans stood for freedom “as Americans have always stood—and still do.” The Vietnam War, Haines observes, is thus “normalized, the deaths are made rational, and the veterans are whole once again, stronger for their expiated burden.”

To Harry Haines, the design of the memorial is ambiguous, able to contain Weigl’s meaning but also that of a veteran who shouted at a group that attempted to hold a vigil for peace at the memorial: “No, not here. . . . These people died fighting against communism and for freedom. Those people [the vigil group] have no right. It’s the same thing that went on with Vietnam, saying we don’t belong in El Salvador.” How the memorial is interpreted is part of an ongoing political struggle. Its meaning, Haines insists, lies “not so much in how the dead are remembered by those of us who survived Vietnam at home or abroad, but in how that remembrance is used by power to explain—to justify—sacrifices in future Vietnams.”

What distinguishes many Vietnam veterans from those who fought in other U.S. wars, Peter Marin has written, is their exceptional “moral seriousness,” emerging from a “direct confrontation not only with the capacity of others for violence and brutality but also with their own culpability, their sense of their own capacity for error and excess.” When a friend asked Marin, as those faced with the morally serious so often do, “Well, what is it [the veterans] really want?” Marin found himself answering spontaneously, “Justice.” That is what they want, but it is not justice for themselves—though they would like that too. They simply want justice to exist for there to be justice in the world . . . .” Which is why, perhaps, Tim O’Brien insists that a “true war story is never moral. It does not instruct, nor encourage virtue, nor suggest models of proper human behavior. . . . If a story seems moral do not believe it. If at the end of a war story you feel uplifted, or if you feel that some small bit of rectitude has been salvaged from the larger waste, then you have been made the victim of a very old and terrible lie. There is no rectitude whatsoever. There is no virtue.”

Michael Herr, a reporter who breathed the war in as deeply as any combat soldier, wrote that it “took the war to teach it, that you were as responsible for everything you saw as you were for everything you did. The problem was that you didn’t always know what you were seeing until later, maybe years later, that a lot of it never made it in at all, it just stayed stored there in your eyes.” Vietnam has remained stored in the eyes of America; very slowly it is becoming possible to know what we have seen. To figure out what it might mean, to accept responsibility for it, will take much longer.