The Psychological Effects of the Vietnam War

For many Americans, the Vietnam War is over and long forgotten. Among those still suffering are several veterans who have felt forgotten, unappreciated, and even discriminated against. For some of them the trauma of their battle experiences or their physical disabilities have shattered their lives. For even more, adjustment to civilian life has not been easy. "Imagine if you had just graduated out of high school and were sent to a guerrilla war far away from your home. During the war, you were exposed to a lot of stress, confusion, anxiety, pain, and hatred. Then you were sent back home with no readjustment to the lifestyle in the states, no deprogramming of what you learned from the military, and no "welcome home" parades. You are portrayed to the public as a crazed psychopathic killer with no morals or control over your aggression. You find that there's nobody you can talk to or who can understand what you've been through, not even your family. As you re-emerge into civilization, you struggle to establish a personal identity or a place in society because you lack the proper education and job skills. In addition, there are no supportive groups to help you find your way, which makes you feel even more isolated, unappreciated, and exploited for serving your country."¹ This scenario is similar to what many Vietnam veterans have felt in their transition from battle to home.

War has always had a profound effect on those who engage in combat. The Vietnam War, however, was different in many ways. First, it was the unpopular war as viewed by most people today. Vietnam veterans were the first to fight in an American war that could not be recalled with pride. Second, it was the first to be reported in full detail by the media, historians, and scientists. And third, the Vietnam War became a metaphor for American society that connoted distrust in the government, and the sacrifice of American lives for poorly understood and deeply divided values and principles. Upon the veterans' return to the states, many exhibited significant psychiatric symptoms. These ranged from difficulty sleeping to vivid flashbacks, and are now recognized as Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD).

PTSD is a development of characteristic symptoms following a psychologically distressing event. "It begins with an event in which the individual is threatened with his or her own death or the destruction of a body part, to such humiliation that their personal identity may be lost."² Vietnam veterans who experience PTSD have a feeling of helplessness, worthlessness, dejection, anger, depression, insomnia, and a tendency to react to tense situations by using survival tactics.

During the war, the main factor that affected the adjustments made by American soldiers and their attitudes was the DEROS system (date of expected return from overseas). Every individual serving in Vietnam knew before leaving the U.S. when he was scheduled to return. An individual's rotation lasted twelve to thirteen months. Thus, for the individual American soldier, the main attribute affecting combat motivation in the war was the operation of the rotation system. The soldier's primary concern was focused on reaching his personal DEROS instead of preparing and fighting in battle. Upon arrival to his unit and the first weeks thereafter, the soldier was excited to be in the war zone and may even have looked forward to engaging with the enemy. "However, after the first serious encounter, he lost his enthusiasm for
combat. As he began to approach the end of his tour, the soldier noticeably began to give up; he became reluctant to engage in offensive combat operations.” Thus, as soldiers came closer to their expected departure, they either withdrew themselves from battle or just became more careful in order to survive and return home safely.

Drugs and alcohol played a major role in the lives of the American soldiers during the Vietnam war. In the beginning of the war, marijuana was the main drug of choice. After marijuana was banned, many soldiers turned to heroin in order to get their "high". Because marijuana, heroin, and alcohol were so abundant and inexpensive in Vietnam, veterans used them to ease the stress and sometimes to forget what they saw on the battlefield. As they returned to the states, drugs were not as easy to obtain. One of the tragic effects of the Vietnam drug situation was that some men were refused employment because they had served in Vietnam and employers considered this evidence of drug addiction. Since veterans had many problems adjusting to society, some continued to drink alcohol and do drugs not only to forget what they saw in Vietnam but to cope with the frustration and anguish of not being accepted into society.

The media had an immense effect on many individuals during the war. The public were informed about the war’s progress through the media, television, and newspapers. Consequently, much of their opinions and beliefs about war and American soldiers were shaped by how the media viewed the war. Photographers were very influential in forming, changing, and molding public opinion. Some photographers were interested in showing the suffering and anguish of the soldier, whereas others wanted to emphasize the dignity, strength, and fearlessness of the American soldier. Those at home had no experience of how the soldier lived or what he had to deal with during the war. The media built up a stereotype of the soldier's life. However, whatever the media portrayed didn't necessarily agree with what the soldier actually experienced.

Many veterans were profoundly affected by the Vietnam War after they left. It changed their sense of identity and perspective of society. The various social, moral, and psychological conflicts that they encountered in battle changed their lives. Upon returning home, the veteran felt a sense of uncertainty and alienation from himself and society. He found that he was questioning himself pertaining to his sense of identity and his existence.

Typically, the Vietnam soldier was between the ages of 17-25 years old. The fact that they were either drafted or volunteered for war had a big effect on their identity formation, depending on the kind and quality of their experiences in Vietnam. If, for example, these kids had good role models and a good sense of purpose and commitment while they were in Vietnam, then it would have been easier for them to cope with the horrifying events that took place there. Unfortunately, there was a lack of commitment to the war, most of the soldiers had little idea why they were fighting.

After they returned home, in the process of establishing a personal identity and constructing new values, most veterans had to deal with rejections and criticisms by a non-accepting society. Many individuals struggled in trying to
achieve self-unity which led to PTSD. The returning veteran needed social support, affection, and a positive welcoming from his community in order to work through the war experiences while establishing his sense of identity. Because he was unable to share his war experience with his family and friends, this led to loneliness and alienation and sometimes complete hatred of oneself.

There was a general feeling of hostility from the veterans towards the government, anti-war protesters, and even towards family and friends. The veterans were forgotten by the government and PTSD was swept under the bed. Unfortunately, PTSD had a delayed stress reaction so most veterans did not experience their symptoms until a year after they were discharged. When veterans came back to the states they were despised by protesters, isolated from their family and friends, and dejected by society. They were the victims of the worst injustice because they had given everything for their country, physically and emotionally, and received nothing, not even welcome home parades. It came to a point that veterans were in rage and felt used. It seemed as though the federal government wanted to place veterans at a disadvantage to those that did not go to war as administrations cut off veterans' preferences in the civil service, and the educational benefits given to them contained less than half of the benefits of the GI bill of WWII.

What has distinguished Vietnam veterans from most of their predecessors is that the public's detestation of the war seemed to be directed onto them, as if it was their fault. Thus they did not return as heroes, but as men suspected in participating in shocking cruelty and wickedness or feared to be drug addicts. The combination of society rejecting them, the government ignoring them, and their families not understanding to them, caused Vietnam veterans to self-destruct both mentally and sometimes physically.