[ISSUES]

VETERANS
FOR WHOM THE WAR STILL RAGES

By Nikki Meredith

"The war was beautiful at night," Philips says. "There are things that happened over there that are hard to explain. You never hear people describing the high you feel when you kill someone. It sounds so savage, but it's real."

It is warm and breezy and only a few of the shriveled autumn leaves cling to the trees scattered around the grounds of the Menlo Park Veterans Administration Hospital. Old, broken men, most of them World War II veterans, wander the well-trimmed lawns, responding to orders only they can hear, ducking enemy missiles hurled decades ago.

From the outside, Building 323 looks no different from the other sprawling brick structures housing the VA psychiatric patients — but it is. The walls reverberate with the arrested adolescent energy of the Young Vets: 90 Vietnam combat veterans who have come here to "put Vietnam to rest," from tunnel rats (the little guys who, because of their size, were assigned the harrowing task of searching for Viet Cong in Viet Cong-made tunnels) to Alexander Haig's helicopter pilot, a man who was awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross for evacuating Haig from a fire fight during the April Fool's Day massacre.

They are here because their battle continued after the war was over. For some, the struggle was open and unremitting — they fought with wives, with bosses, with police, with the bottle. For others it was submerged, seething inside, despite steady jobs and long-term mortgages. Rap groups and outreach centers were not enough — these men buckled.

The Young Vets program in Menlo Park is one of only two inpatient psychiatric facilities in the country which specializes in the treatment of post-traumatic stress syndrome — the official diagnosis given to men who are still suffering psychic effects of the war. The therapeutic objective, by medical model standards, is unconventional. Program director Fred Gusman calls it "debriefing." "We're doing what the military should have done years ago when these guys came home."

Consistent with this objective, the routine has a decidedly military flavor. The men are up for calisthenics at 6:30 every morning, living quarters are inspected daily and passes are granted on the basis of progress in the program. New recruits are required to wear VA-issue pajamas day and night for the first week and violators of important rules (no drugs, no alcohol) are sent to a locked unit, returned to pajamas and given a "new look" (a shaved head).

Although these men are often hostile to the military, Gusman says it is still a system with which they identify. They were inducted at an impressionable age (the average age of Vietnam soldiers was nineteen; in World War II it was 26) and, according to social psychologists, at a stage of life when one's "ego identity" is finally formed.

Imprinted on the psyches of these teenage warriors was a violent and gruesome way of life filled with immense suffering. But it was also a time of intense friendships and high adventure: an addicting life-on-the-edge adrenalin high which left these men emotionally tied to a system they hate and a war that crippled their souls.

David Peters (the names of all the Young Vets in this article have been changed) is a short, sober man whose postwar years have been distinguished by unyielding melancholia and obsessive instant replays of death scenes he witnessed as a Green Beret medic. Yet he talks longingly about the closeness he felt for his Vietnam buddies: "The only other time I felt anything like that was when my child was born. The bonding that takes place in combat is really unique."

Howard Philips, a tall, good-looking black man with a slightly aristocratic manner, also a former Green Beret, was a combat photographer in Vietnam. He's unable to watch war movies and has difficulty looking through the lens of a camera without images of dead and dying humans impinging on the view finder. But, he says, aversion to the war is not the whole story.

"The war was beautiful at night," he says, his dark eyes watering. "There are things that happened over there that are hard to explain. You never hear people describing the high you feel when you kill someone. It sounds so savage, but it's real."

Problems disengaging from the war range in seriousness from David Peters' postwar habit of carrying a backpack filled with emergency medical supplies to the activities of Doug Reilly who, in the years following the war, amassed an enormous number of exotic weapons and more than 20,000 rounds of ammunition. ("I was better outfitted than the local police.")

Reilly, a solidly built man with vigilant green eyes and a Bruce Dern demeanor, admits to spending hours "scoping people out" with his rifle. "What I really wanted was to catch someone robbing a bank and go down in a fire fight," he says nervously. His descriptions of Vietnam are so immediate you can practically hear rocket shells and smell gangrenous flesh.

These men were not militarily deprogrammed after the war and they also were not prepared for the psychological and cultural shock of coming home. "The government did it right with the Iranian hostages," says Gusman. "They re-entered society gradually; they were offered psychiatric assistance and there was a general recognition that they had suffered a traumatic experience."

On the journey home, Vietnam G.I.'s did not have the period of unwinding available to World War II soldiers, most of whom returned on ships with the same men they had fought with during the war. Soldiers in Vietnam were individually assigned, so when a man's tour was over, he said goodbye to his combat unit and left the war alone via commercial jet. There was no chance to decompress, no opportunity to review war experiences, plan reunions and prepare for re-entry.

A decade or more later, these men are coming home again — this time as a unit. "I am my brother's keeper" is the central theme of the Young Vets program. For most of these men, this communal experience provides the only sense of belonging they've had since the war.

"When I got home," says Peters, "students on my college campus were trying to get me involved in the peace movement. I couldn't because I felt like marching against the war would be a betrayal of my friends who were killed in Vietnam, and unfair to the ones still fighting."

Almost all of the Young Vets say they soon learned after coming home never to talk about their war experiences. Non-veterans recoiled, and few of the men had any contact with other Vietnam vets.

Some veterans dealt with their feelings of alienation by going back to Vietnam. Paul Kirby, a former member of the Navy's underwater demolition team, had three full tours of duty in Vietnam, volunteering to return de-

[Illustrations: Bill Prochnow]

spite serious doubts about the legitimacy of the war. "When I came home, I knew I was back physically, but I just wasn't back mentally. I couldn't adjust so I kept re-enlisting."

Of those who stayed home, many sought numerous ways to escape their estrangement. Some got stoned or drunk daily; some crisscrossed the continent looking for a place to fit in; some holed up in the woods, isolating themselves from family and friends.

At the Young Vets program there is no escape, no hiding, no secrets. "Full disclosure" is one of the mottos espoused by Gusman and his men. Nothing is considered off-limits for group discussion, including war atrocities, treatment of women, drug use and sexual habits.

Although most of these men have been suffering for years, post-traumatic stress syndrome didn't acquire status as a legitimate diagnosis until 1980.

This delayed recognition was due in part to the low rate of combat psychiatric casualties which occurred during the war itself: In World War II there were 101 psychiatric casualties per 1,000 men; in Vietnam there were 12 per 1,000. One of the major factors for the low rate in Vietnam was the rotation system which limited each man's tour of duty to twelve or thirteen months (unless he volunteered for more). In Vietnam it was easier for men to "hang in there" knowing they would soon be going home.

Easy access to drugs also made it possible for soldiers to repress their anguish and tranquilize their fears during combat. This psychic numbing — often referred to as "frozen grief" — was reinforced when they got home by a country which either ignored or condemned their participation in the war. This denial of their experience extended to mental health agencies, including the VA. Vets seeking help were consistently misdiagnosed and inappropriately treated.

It was only after similar cases of thousands of traumatized veterans were reported that the psychiatric community officially recognized the connection between their symptoms and the war.

The most frightening symptoms of post-traumatic stress are nightmares and flashbacks. Nightmares are often recurring and generally replay a situation of extreme terror. Jerry Walker has a recurrent nightmare about a time his unit was ambushed and his closest friend was blown up.

"His intestines were hanging out and he lost an arm. He was still alive but he wasn't going to make it. People in Vietnam made pacts with friends about what to do under those circumstances. We had made that kind of pact, so I shot him. I couldn't stand to hear him scream. I killed him because I loved him but it still hurts."

Although flashbacks occur when the individual is awake, he has no

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control over them. Paul Kirby describes a flashback he had on a San Francisco bus when a Vietnamese family got on. "They sat near me and as soon as I heard them speaking Vietnamese, I was back in Vietnam. For about ten minutes I was in the war again. The whole thing was absolutely real."

The theory, or at least one of them, is that nightmares and flashbacks are an attempt on the part of the unconscious to relive the emotions that have been repressed and to gain mastery over the troubling experience through repetition. Sometimes this "symptom breakthrough" is triggered by an event which is reminiscent of the original trauma: the return of the Iranian hostages; helicopters flying overhead; news accounts of Vietnam veterans committing crimes. Various stimuli are also suggestive of the war, like camping in a dense forest or the smell of burning garbage. A powerful emotional state can also precipitate a flashback, as it did with Howard Philips.

After returning from Vietnam, Philips got married, earned a Masters degree at a Bay Area college and was hired as an instructor. Everything was going well until his wife had a baby and the couple's financial situation became pressured. Their relationship deteriorated and during a heated argument Philips grabbed his wife and started strangling her.

"I was super angry. It was suddenly not my house, not my wife. I was in Vietnam." During the the war he strangled a Viet Cong. "When I killed him, I broke his neck sideways. But when I choked my wife and she fell forward, unconscious, then I knew who she was."

Flashbacks are not peculiar to Vietnam veterans. They have been reported by survivors of Nazi concentration camps and World War II pilots. The issue of flashbacks is controversial because it is being used increasingly in the legal defense of veterans who have committed crimes.

The Young Vets themselves approach the issue critically. During an orientation of new admissions, the men grilled a man who claimed he suffered from flashbacks. Questioning the authenticity of a described flashback, one Young Vet said, "Man, you're sitting

with men who have walked the walk. You can't bullshit us."

"We took very few prisoners. If we came across a Viet Cong who was wounded, we'd finish him off — it would be one more body count. Sometimes we'd kill them with a knife instead of a gun because we didn't want to waste the ammunition. You get callous. After a while it didn't feel like it was really killing. I cut off fingers. I saw a G.I. who had been skinned by the Viet Cong. It scared the hell out of me and it made me mad. I got kill crazy after that. We screwed that country up real bad. I wish I had never gone. What did we gain? We lost a whole lot." — A Young Vet, 1981

The jungle fight in Vietnam was against an elusive enemy whose covert methods left the troops feeling impotent and frustrated at being unable to engage in a conventional battle. The anticipation of being "blown away" and the terror of watching friends maimed and killed by invisible forces generated rage which was often indiscriminately displaced on the Vietnamese people. And since military victories were gauged by numbers of dead bodies rather than the seizing of territory, the expression of this rage was tolerated, if not encouraged, by the military.

The dehumanization of the Vietnamese, in part due to the radical difference in race, language and culture, was aggravated by the ever-present threat that even the most innocent-looking man, woman or child could be the enemy. It was brutal and brutalizing and few who fought escaped without a measure of guilt.

In a group session, a black man talks about running over a Vietnamese child with a truck. He had been angry — angry at being in Vietnam, angry at his commanding officer, angry at the way he felt blacks were being treated by the military. He says he did not hit the child intentionally but wonders if his anger contributed to his carelessness. He is tormented by the memory of the mother holding her dead baby.

Another form of guilt is that shared by survivors of various disasters. It is the burden of having lived when others in the same circumstances have died. Many Young Vets talk about being relieved, even elated, after having endured a fire fight, only later to feel remorseful and unworthy.

One of the most common expressions of consuming unresolved guilt is self-destructive behavior. Almost all of the men who have come to the Young Vets program either have attempted suicide or have seriously considered it.

One of the goals of the program is to put this guilt into perspective. "We work real hard to get the guys to take a look at the role they played," says Gusman. "One of the things we talk about is how many people who never fought over there contributed to the war and prospered from it."

The issue of guilt is also dealt with extensively in groups. "One of the healing aspects of the group is that these guys can give themselves forgiveness," says Gusman. "The only people who can forgive them are people who were there, people who know what it was like. They can say, 'We blew it, we all blew it. We have to make sure it doesn't happen again.' "

He has strong, square-jawed good looks with thick dark hair and blue eyes. But there is no life in his eyes, and he does not smile. He is a new admission so he is in his pajamas, sitting in a small chrome chair encircled by the rest of the men. It is Monday night, the time when new admissions tell their stories.

He's coming down from a week-long vodka bender. His wife, his third, recently gave birth to a baby and was at home ill. He walked out and left her alone. He hadn't wanted the baby, and he just couldn't handle it.

The men are incredulous: "Man, you just left her. I wouldn't treat a dog that way," says one Young Vet.

They ask him about Vietnam. He says one of his buddies got a Dear John letter over there and then proceeded to blow his head off. "I got real depressed and just stayed that way. I started drinking and I didn't stop."

He is so passive, it's difficult to imagine how he got himself married so many times. The group asks more about his wives and his children, trying to draw feelings of remorse from him. Nothing.

"This guy ain't back," says Gusman. "He died in Vietnam."

Women are a problem for these guys. Some haven't been with a woman for several years, and others have been married three or more times. Those who married say their wives complained that they couldn't feel close, couldn't penetrate the barrier.

It is wartime psychic numbing, it is the macho John Wayne thing, it is drugs and alcohol, it is violent outbursts, it is the memories of Dear John letters or of a welcome home with no one home. And when children come, it is too much responsibility, too much noise, too much pressure; and sometimes when their babies sleep, it is buried memories of children dead.

So the Young Vets attend couples' groups and classes on relationships and sexuality and there is much talk about feelings. The development of sensitivity and tenderness is almost a requirement for graduation with honor.

Some of the Young Vets grew up in stable, middle-class homes, but most are from working-class families, often where the parents were divorced or plagued with drinking problems. Some are high school dropouts. One was frequently beaten by his father; another was sexually molested by a relative. Their histories provoke the question: Wouldn't most of these guys be experiencing problems even if they hadn't been to Vietnam?

Gusman says he hates that frequently asked question: "People are always looking for a reason why the war couldn't have caused these problems. Why is it so hard to accept how stressful it was for these guys?

"Shrinks in our society make big bucks off 'stress': Workshops are given for the stress of divorce, a death in the family, the loss of a job — there's even a stress inventory that covers taking a vacation. The same people who are making all this money on workshops question whether it is truly a stressful experience for an eighteen-year-old to be sent to war and taught to kill, to watch close friends die every day and then to realize it was all for nothing."

What Gusman is referring to is the "fatal flaw" controversy — the debate about whether it is weakness in a man's character which predisposes him to post-combat stress. Skeptics, suspicious of all "diminished capacity" excuses for criminal behavior and wary of well-publicized kamikaze missions carried out by professional Vietnam veterans, claim that many veterans are psychological malingerers who would have made marginal adjustments to life without Vietnam.

Vietnam veteran activists claim that the numbers of combatants having difficulties are just too high to be explained by character flaws. Out of the approximately one million men who were in combat, suicide estimates range from 70,000 to 100,000 — more than the 57,000 who were killed in action. Dr. John P. Wilson, a Cleveland State University psychologist who recently completed a three-year study on the war's after-effects, says that half a million combat veterans suffer some degree of post-traumatic stress.

Veterans of all wars suffer, but one of the crucial differences between these vets and others is that Vietnam veterans have had no way to reconcile their plight, no way to morally justify the grief they felt and the pain they caused. Historically, people who have endured tragedy have been better able to integrate their experiences if they believed that the suffering had some meaning. Echoed among the Young Vets is the refrain, "It was all for nothing."

The moral vacuum encapsulating these men is attended to in a variety of ways at the Menlo Park program. Almost every day, Gusman takes out time from a group to read a poem. Sometimes it's about the war, sometimes it's about loneliness or love or beauty.

"Part of what we do is almost spiritual," he explains. "These guys' spirits have died or are dying and that's what we're fighting. Their souls are trapped and must be freed. It can't be for a car or a wife or a house, which is what many of them have tried to live for. They really have lost their understanding of what it is to live and why."

Does the debriefing work? According to Gusman, 90 percent of the men who complete the program succeed. He defines success as holding a steady job; leading a stable family and social life; and being free from the domination of drugs or alcohol. He says the 10 percent who fail, do so because they do not have enough support when they return home (he is now in the process of establishing support groups statewide). He acknowledges that so far the follow-up has been informal — he personally maintains contact with almost all of the graduates — but the VA is now preparing to do formal long-term outcome studies.

Joe Grant graduated from the program a year ago. He now works in a Bay Area hospital and is planning to get married soon. He says the program saved his life. After almost a decade of troubled living, he had felt that the only option was suicide.

He still has nightmares, but nothing like he experienced in his pre-Young Vets period. "Before, my 'joy' button wasn't functioning; that's changed now."

Grant believes that it is time for Vietnam veterans to stop being victims and says that the Young Vets program, with its motto "pride, humility and integrity," is a start. "We have tremendous potential for social contribution, once we get our shit together. Instead of victims, instead of receptacles for the country's guilt over Vietnam, we can be the moral vanguards of the nation. We have learned a lot." □