

One of our government's and society's harsh injustices: Treatment of the Vietnam vets on their return from the war

Dolph L. Hatfield, Ph.D.

Many of the protesters of the Viet Nam War and the United States government treated the Vietnam vets in a most unjust manner. These soldiers, who had done what their country asked of them, should have been treated with the utmost respect.

One of the principle points of Jerry Lembcke's book, *The Spitting Myth: Myth, Memory and the Legacy of Vietnam*, is veterans returning from the Vietnam War were treated no more harshly than vets returning from numerous earlier wars. In fact, the U.S. has a long history of treating its vets harshly from many wars that began with those who fought in the American Revolution.

My purpose in writing this article is not to maintain that Vietnam vets had been dealt with more unfairly by the U.S. government than those of previous wars, but to make us more aware that the soldiers serving in Vietnam had laid their lives on the line doing what their country had

asked of them, and they, like those soldiers serving our country today, deserve our ultimate respect.

The Vietnam War came to an end in 1975 after 20 years of fighting. Between 3 and 4 million Vietnamese and more than 58,000 Americans were killed. Approximately 2.5 million American GIs served in the Vietnam. Their average age was 21. Nearly 10% of those who served were either killed, wounded, or captured, some of whom are still missing.

When the GIs returned from Vietnam, they were treated poorly by both society and the United States government. Without government support, many became homeless and suicide rates skyrocketed. It took more than 10 years before the government and society began to appreciate that these vets had gone to war and laid their lives on the line. They had done what their country had asked of them and deserved the highest respect.

I protested the war by participating in demonstrations and justified my actions on moral grounds because I was opposed to a horrible, never-declared war by Congress. I detested the fact that Henry Kissinger and his Vietnamese counterpart, Le Duc Tho, were given the Nobel Peace Prize. The Prize was awarded to these two individuals for “negotiating a cease fire” that supposedly would end the war. It did not. Kissinger accepted the prize but Le Duc Tho refused it.

Kissinger had an opportunity to return the prize when President Richard Nixon said that the United States had a few things left to “clean up” which society subsequently learned meant bombing the North Vietnamese. This action prolonged the war and resulted in the killing of many hundreds of thousands of primarily Vietnamese innocent men, women and children. It is unimaginable that Kissinger would keep this award.

Years later I met Ron Trewyn, a fellow scientist, who had served in Vietnam and was sent home with a Purple Heart and metal in his chest from the wounds he received fighting for this country. He was proud of what he had done. He entered college wearing his fatigues minus all of the insignias and medals, letting his college mates know that he had returned from a war where he had prepared himself to meet his maker by giving his life for his country. He was rewarded by being severely heckled and often challenged by those who were in college for the same reason he was—to obtain an education.

Ron thought seriously of signing up for another tour of duty, realizing that he felt safer in Vietnam fighting for his country than being back “home.” He again would have placed his life on the line fighting for his country.

Ron wrote a book entitled *Welcome Home* about his experiences in Vietnam and his treatment upon returning to the United States. I had the pleasure of reading his book. It had the perfect amount of humor,

discussed the hell of war and the pure hell of returning home that he and other Vietnamese vets faced. I wish he had persisted and published his book. He informed me recently that he is planning to rewrite the end of his book and publish it.

Being acquainted with Ron enlightened me on how unjust and unconscionable the acts perpetrated by so many were for not respecting those who had done what their country had asked of them—give their all. I will cherish his friendship forever.