

## Lesson #27: Vietnam Veterans

### Standards:

- 8.1.12C Evaluate historical interpretation of events.
- 8.4.12 Identify and evaluate the political and cultural contributions of individuals and groups to United States history from 1890 to Present.
- 5.2.12B Evaluate citizen's participation in government and civic life.

### Objectives:

1. The students will be able to analyze the public's views of Vietnam veterans and veterans in general.
2. The students will be able to determine the general view of veterans among the American public and how they differ from each war or conflict.
3. The students will be able to create historical questions to ask a panel of speakers.

**Subject Matter:** social justice, humanitarianism, veterans, diplomacy, historical questions

### Materials:

- a. Chalkboard
- b. Chalk
- c. Computer
- d. Television
- e. Media: *Outtakes from Vietnam*
- f. [http://legacy.signonsandiego.com/uniontrib/20051111/news\\_lz1n11vets.html](http://legacy.signonsandiego.com/uniontrib/20051111/news_lz1n11vets.html)

### Procedure:

1. Set: Students will copy down the essential question upon entering the classroom:
  - a. How are Vietnam veterans portrayed in American society? How are veterans in general portrayed in American society?
  - b. How are veterans of war portrayed in the media as opposed to reality?

## 2. Media (optional):

Students will view the film *Outtakes from Vietnam*. It is to be assumed that the instructor has already viewed this film and is familiar with its content. Students will be asked to take notes on this film that will later be used for classroom activities and discussion.

## 3. Informal Lecture/Discussion:

- a. The instructor will briefly discuss the idea that many Vietnam veterans have been portrayed in various ways through the media and society in general.
  - Have issues adjusting to society
  - Use drugs/alcoholics
  - Are angry towards the government/American public
- b. The instructor will ask students why they believe this stereotype was created.
- c. The students will read the following article relating to the stereotypes of Vietnam veterans.
  - [http://legacy.signonsandiego.com/uniontrib/20051111/news\\_lz1n11vets.html](http://legacy.signonsandiego.com/uniontrib/20051111/news_lz1n11vets.html)

## 4. Panel Activity:

- a. Students will be asked to create a 'Panel Day' where they will invite a panel of speakers, war veterans that have served in the U.S. military, where they will ask them historical questions about their treatment as veterans of military wars and conflicts.
- b. Students will practice being 'historians' by writing historical questions in order to receive the best answers possible.
  - "Good historians ask good questions"
- c. The students will submit their questions for evaluation and will fix them for resubmission until questions are considered acceptable to be presented to the panel of speakers.
- d. Speakers will arrive to the classroom and will be presented with the historical questions.
- e. Each student must ask the panel at least one question.
  - Using the panel's answers – students will be asked to write a 2-page reflection paper answer the following question: How are veterans of war portrayed in the media as opposed to reality?

## 5. Close:

- a. Ask students something new that they learned from our panel today.
- b. Their 2-page reflection will be due at the instructor's discretion.
  - How are Vietnam veterans portrayed in the media?

- How are veterans in general portrayed by the American public?
- How does their portrayal in the media differ from reality?

**Assessment:**

1. The teacher will informally observe the students writing historical questions.
2. The teacher will formally observe the students speaking to the panel.
3. The teacher will formally collect the students' reflection papers.

**VETERANS DAY 2005**

Busting Vietnam stereotypes

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Studies show myths about troubled vets are no longer valid

**By Peter Rowe**  
STAFF WRITER

November 11, 2005

In 1970, Fritz Rutenbeck bought a tavern in Hawaiian Gardens, a ragged Los Angeles suburb. Over the next eight years, the bar drew a hard-drinking crowd, but few drank harder than the owner.

The former B-52 navigator had survived the Vietnam War, but the peace was killing him.

"I was in deep trouble," Rutenbeck says now. "Inside my brain, a voice was saying, 'You've had enough. You're at the end. You've got to do something about this.'" He did. A tall man with a linebacker's shoulders and a shopping-mall Santa's whiskers, Rutenbeck swore off drinking in 1978. Today, he's sober, married and a semi-retired psychologist with two college diplomas and an oceanfront condo in Leucadia.

He's also, a growing body of evidence indicates, a typical Vietnam veteran.

Not because of his troubled, boozy past.

Because of his successful present.

This Veterans Day, as Americans fight another controversial war, it's notable that an earlier conflict still retains its power to wound and provoke. During last year's presidential campaign, both major candidates were forced to defend their actions during the Vietnam War. The passion and anger these responses stirred might have surprised President Bush and Sen. John Kerry; not so Vietnam veterans. For decades, the veterans have been vilified and pitied but rarely understood. Even today, too many stereotypes obscure our view; call it the fog of peace.

But the mist is lifting. Several recent studies contradict the popular notion that many of the 3.4 million Americans who served in the Southeast Asia war zone are damaged goods, overwhelmed by the physical and mental scars of war or the demands of civilian life.

These studies do not address all aspects of postwar life or dispel every myth accumulated in the 30 years since Saigon fell. But they do sketch a different portrait of these aging warriors, one we might not recognize. Statistics indicate that compared with peers who did not serve Vietnam veterans are:

- More likely to have attended college.
- More likely to be married.



EARNIE GRAFTON / Union-Tribune

With college diplomas and a condo in Leucadia, Fritz Rutenbeck has adjusted to life after the Vietnam War.

- Less likely to be unemployed.
- No more or less likely to be imprisoned.

You cannot discuss Vietnam without indulging in controversy. Everything's debated, even the catch-all term "Vietnam veteran." In fact, this group is divided into several subsets, each with its own term:

The roughly 9 million who served in the U.S. military around the world during this period are "Vietnam-era veterans."

The 3.4 million who served in Vietnam, Cambodia, Laos, Thailand and the surrounding waters are "Vietnam-theater veterans."

The 2.6 million who were stationed in South Vietnam are "Vietnam War veterans."

And an estimated 1 million to 1.6 million are "Vietnam combat veterans."

Yet, the postwar experience of our veterans is not primarily a matter of numbers and labels. To flesh out this story, more than 100 veterans were interviewed. They were easy to find, especially here – more Vietnam veterans live in California than any other state, and a larger proportion lives in San Diego County than any other county. While overwhelmingly male, white and middle-aged, they reflect a wide range of personalities and politics. They are, for example, divided by the war in Iraq.

But they speak with one voice in insisting that today's veterans should receive more public support than did the men and women who came home from Vietnam.

"This is a cautionary tale for us," said Jon Nachison, a Vietnam veteran and chief of psychology at Bayview Psychiatric Hospital in Chula Vista. "We need to welcome home the troops, not just with yellow ribbons but with jobs and the support they need. And it's not really relevant what side of the fence you are on about the war. That's not the point. Never again should we confuse the war with the warrior."

Nachison and his comrades know something about confusion. Consider five myths that are still widely accepted as factual descriptions of the Vietnam veteran.

### ***Myth 1: The antisocial grunt***

**Source:** From Martin Scorsese's riveting 1976 film "Taxi Driver" and through a series of TV shows and novels, the criminally deranged Vietnam veteran has become a pop culture cliché.

This was not just a scriptwriter's fantasy. In 1970, Robert Jay Lifton, then a professor of psychiatry at Yale, warned Congress of a coming plague of savage, amoral veterans: "Some are likely to seek continuing outlets for a pattern of violence to which they have become habituated, whether by indulging in antisocial or criminal behavior, or by, almost in the fashion of mercenaries, offering their services to the highest bidder." Others predicted that veterans, brutalized by



SCOTT LINNETT / Union-Tribune

Jon Nachison, a Vietnam veteran, has built a successful career as a hospital psychologist in San Diego County.

what they had seen and done, would lose jobs and marriages.

**Reality:** In 1997, the most recent year the U.S. Department of Justice surveyed state prisons, 4.4 percent of the inmates were Vietnam-era veterans. In earlier surveys, one-third of the "era veterans" had actually served in Vietnam, said Christopher J. Mumola, a policy analyst for the department's Bureau of Justice Statistics.

Based on those findings, Mumola estimated that for every 100,000 male Vietnam-theater veterans in 1997, 513 were incarcerated in state prisons. The figure among male nonveterans: 512 per 100,000. Mumola cautioned that these figures are not precise. But he maintained they indicate "that Vietnam-theater vets are no more or less likely to be held in state prison than other adult males, and that the rate for both is roughly 500 prisoners per 100,000 men in the population."

Vietnam-theater veterans also appear to be holding their own in the workplace. The federal Bureau of Labor Statistics does an in-depth study of veterans every two years. In August 2003, the overall unemployment rate for the entire U.S. work force was 6 percent; for Americans 20 or older, 5.5 percent; and for those who had served in the Vietnam theater, 5.1 percent.

Matters of the heart resist empirical explanations. But in 2002, a team of political science professors at Brigham Young University analyzed the first marriages of combat veterans from World War II, Korea and Vietnam. Their key finding: Exposure to combat dramatically increased the likelihood of divorce.

But the study also found that the marriages of all veterans of these wars – including those who did not see combat – were as stable as their civilian counterparts. Moreover, those who had served in the Vietnam theater before 1969 had even fewer divorces.

"The cultural tale that Vietnam veterans came home a messed-up lot, unable to form successful marriages, simply is not supported by the data," wrote Professor Sven Wilson, a BYU professor and one of the co-authors.

Wilson also noted that Vietnam veterans in general came of age at a time when the overall divorce rate in the United States was soaring. Since the 1960s, marriages have failed at an escalating rate among civilian and military populations.

This year, two Texas Tech University scholars and their spouses met for dinner near the Lubbock campus. "Isn't this odd?" Ron Milam, a professor of history, asked James Recknor, director of Texas Tech's Vietnam Center. "We're both Vietnam veterans and we're both still married to our first wives."

### ***Myth 2: The traumatized grunt***

**Source:** Lifton and other experts argued that Vietnam's unique and troubling aspects – guerrilla warfare in the field, bitter opposition at home – produced a uniquely troubled warrior. "Indeed," Lifton testified, "the Vietnam veteran serves as a psychological crucible of the entire country's doubts and misgivings about the war."

These psychological wounds, ranging from nightmares and flashbacks to psychotic episodes, were given a new term in 1980: post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).

**Reality:** The name is relatively new; the condition is not.

In 1977, William Mahedy, a former Army chaplain in Vietnam, interviewed the last Spanish-American War veterans living in Los Angeles. "They'd say, 'Let me tell you what happened

when my best friend died in the Philippines in 1902.' It was 75 years later and it was just like yesterday," Mahedy said. "It had never gone away."

These tragedies cannot be counseled away. As Mahedy noted, "The dead remain dead, the maimed remain maimed."

But the effects seem to lessen with time. The National Vietnam Veterans Readjustment Study reported in 1992 that 31 out of every 100 male Vietnam-theater veterans had reported that they had experienced PTSD at some time in their postwar lives. That's a significant percentage, but far from a majority. And of that group, only half were still afflicted as of 1988.

Among female Vietnam-theater veterans, the rates were lower: 27 out of every 100 had reported experiencing PTSD at some time after the war. Of that group, only one-third was afflicted as of 1988.

Counseling is crucial, not to suppress these emotions, but to learn to live with them. Mahedy knows many men and women who bear these psychological scars yet have gone on to achieve material success. "Was I a bad provider?" asked Mike Charter, a former infantry squad leader who became a commodities trader in Los Angeles. "Quite the contrary."

As a prominent figure in Indian gaming, Viejas Chairman Anthony Pico has had numerous showdowns with Sacramento officials, including Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger. These meetings can be tense, but nothing close to what Pico says he felt as an 18-year-old infantryman.

"Life is a walk in the park now," he said. "Like, what is the worst thing that can happen to you compared to that?"

### ***Myth 3: The suicidal grunt***

**Source:** The support group Disabled American Veterans published a 1980 pamphlet, "Post-Traumatic Stress Disorders of the Vietnam Veteran," stating that the number of all Vietnam veterans who had committed suicide had reached 58,000 – the number of overall U.S. deaths in the war.

That estimate quickly grew. A broadcast of CBS' "60 Minutes" on Oct. 4, 1986, put the number at more than 100,000. Less than 10 years later, a California chapter of the Vietnam Veterans of America projected it to be "approximately 150,000."

**Reality:** Exact numbers are unknown. Suicide, with its social stigma, is notoriously difficult to pin down. The 58,000 figure was based on an assumption that the suicide rate during the initial postwar period had continued unabated. Instead, it dramatically slackened. In 1999, the Centers for Disease Control conducted the most extensive study to date on this issue. It found that the risk of suicide increased with exposure to combat. Still, the CDC concluded that the overall rate for Vietnam-theater veterans is roughly one per 100 veteran deaths. This would bring the current total to about 6,500.

Michael Kelley, a Vietnam veteran who lives in Sacramento, has spent years tracking the wildly varying suicide estimates.



A 1967 family snapshot shows Nachison with his wife, Sharon, before they married.

"In the final analysis," Kelley wrote in a 1999 Washington Post story, "Vietnam veterans likely die from suicide at about the same rate and for the same reasons that everyone else in America does."

#### ***Myth 4: The dumb grunt***

**Source:** Midway through the war, only 20 percent of returning soldiers were making use of the GI Bill. Why? In 1969, Time magazine reached this dour conclusion: "Because of college-draft deferments, service ranks were filled with less educated youths who now have little motivation to return to school."

**Reality:** The GI Bill, signed into law in 1944 by President Franklin D. Roosevelt, covered tuition fees plus a monthly \$75 stipend. By 1971, despite higher college costs, it offered full-time students only a flat payment of \$175 a month.

Eventually, though, stipends increased to keep pace with the cost of living, and the number of scholar-veterans soared. Millions of Vietnam-era veterans have used the GI Bill to prepare for thousands of professions. Nachison, of Bayview Psychiatric in Chula Vista, studied psychology at Syracuse University. When Cmdr. Dorothy "Dottie" Yelle retired from the Navy, the nurse used the bill to become a golf pro. She studied putts and drives at the San Diego Golf Academy.

In 2001, a U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs survey found that 49 percent of Vietnam-era veterans had used the GI Bill for college and vocational training, compared with 42 percent for Korean War and World War II veterans.

While that survey focused on era veterans, studies have found little difference in the educational accomplishments of that group and theater veterans.

And on campus, no one distinguishes between subsets of Vietnam veterans. In fact, few students or staff can distinguish veterans from nonveterans. With his clipped Vandyke beard and tweed blazers, Texas Tech's Milam resembles a 21st-century Mr. Chips. You might never guess that he once led raiding parties of fierce Montagnard tribesmen in the Central Highlands of Vietnam.

"If you become successful," one of his colleagues quipped, "you cease being a Vietnam veteran."

#### ***Myth 5: The spat-upon grunt***

**Source:** Tales of Vietnam veterans being spat upon by protesters are widespread. Versions of this story are part of "First Blood," the 1982 movie that launched the Rambo franchise; in Bob Greene's 1989 book, "Homecoming"; and in countless verbal accounts.

**Reality:** Jerry Lembcke, a Vietnam veteran turned sociologist, examined the issue in a 1998 book, "The Spitting Image." Although he found that "some guys were spit at," he's found little solid evidence that such experiences were widespread. However, he says, this hasn't slowed its progress as a cultural icon.

"I think the book spawned new stories," said Lembcke, a professor at Holy Cross College in Worcester, Mass. "And we've gone from spit to other kinds of bodily fluids – urine to feces to other things."

In fact, he found just one contemporary newspaper report of Vietnam veterans braving spittle – in a 1968 edition of The Washington Post. Beyond that, few of these wrenching tales can withstand scrutiny. "When you go looking for some sort of corroboration, it dissolves, it disappears. It's about a friend of a friend."

Perhaps much of what we've believed about these soldiers was fashioned from similarly questionable sources. Homeless Vietnam veterans? The National Survey of Homeless Assistance Providers and Clients, conducted in 1996, is still considered the most comprehensive study in this area. That survey found that all veterans account for 13 percent of the U.S. population but 33 percent of the men on the streets of America. How many of these veterans served in Southeast Asia, though, is unknown. For the past five years, organizers of San Diego's Stand Down, an annual three-day encampment of homeless veterans, have collected information on attendees.

"You come up with between 23 and 27 percent of the homeless veterans served in Vietnam," said Al Pavich, chief executive officer of Vietnam Veterans of San Diego. "This year, the biggest group, about 60 percent, were people between the ages of 31 and 50 – too young to be Vietnam veterans."

Crunch the numbers. Weigh the data. You end up with results that seem cold, incomplete, unsatisfactory. But no statistic can convey the deep emotions at work here.

Lembcke, who remembers his own 1970 homecoming as uneventful, believes that the United States is still unable to accept its defeat in Vietnam. The spat-upon soldier is a metaphor, he argues. "This is an alibi: We weren't defeated by them, the Vietnamese, we were defeated by the disloyal element on the home front."

Or perhaps this myth is rooted in the veterans' sense of disillusionment, that they had returned to a nation – a home – that was at best indifferent, at worst hostile.

This also might explain the equally false notion that their service has never been honored with marching bands and cheering crowds. In fact, dozens of parades have been dedicated exclusively to Vietnam veterans. Major efforts include a 1973 parade in San Francisco for former POWs and commandos; the 1985 ticker-tape extravaganza in Manhattan's "Canyon of Heroes" in New York; Chicago's massive "Welcome Home Parade" in 1986; and a 1993 march in Washington, D.C., dedicating the Vietnam Women's Memorial.

Branson, Mo., welcomed Vietnam veterans to Operation Homecoming USA in June. The weeklong celebration, dubbed "The Homecoming You Never Received," included a fishing tournament, rides on restored "Huey" helicopters, a concert headlined by the Beach Boys and a parade.

Some who came to Branson had marched in other parades, but noted that such public salutes are rare. They cherished the opportunity to reunite with comrades. Just ask the 14 men from the 4th Infantry Division's "Black Scarves."

On a patrol in June 1969, six members of this unit were killed. Or so one Black Scarf, Fred Golladay, believed for 36 years.



SCOTT LINNETT / Union-Tribune  
Missouri residents Jason and Amanda Ledford viewed a replica of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial wall as part of Operation Homecoming USA in Branson, Mo., in June.

In fact, five died in an explosion. The sixth, Tom Mueller of Cokato, Minn., wasn't expected to survive his wounds. But he did. And he marched with his fellow Black Scarves in Branson.

"None of us had seen or heard from each other for 36 years," said Golladay, who now lives in Sierra Vista, Ariz. "Goose bumps," he said, patting Mueller's arm. "Yeah, I'm getting goose bumps."

The little Ozark resort town's big week might be remembered as the greatest recent tribute to Vietnam veterans.

That is until today, when Las Vegas hosts a parade as part of its four-day "Operation Welcome Home."