

# For Vietnam vets, the battle drags on

By RICK WARNER

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FAYETTEVILLE — Like a character in "The Twilight Zone," Leo E. Williams often goes to sleep in North Carolina and wakes up in Vietnam.

Last summer, during one of his frequent flashbacks about the war in Southeast Asia, the former Army medic and gunner jumped up, forced his fiancée to duck for cover, grabbed a tear gas canister and pulled the pin.

"He said, 'They're coming, they're coming,'" recalled Connie Bauer, his fiancée. "He thought he was back in the jungle and the Viet Cong were coming to get him. He had this crazy look in his eyes that really scared me."

Ten years after returning from Vietnam, Williams is still reliving the experience. Nightmares rob him of his sleep, pounding headaches make it difficult for him to work and a sometimes uncontrollable temper scares even his best friends.

"I am capable of almost unbelievable rage," said Williams, a short, wiry man whose father was an Army colonel. "I've walked through a plate-glass window, I've gotten into brawls with policemen, I even shot a neighbor's dog once for stealing a steak from my grill."

The Vietnam War officially ended in 1975, but for millions of those who participated in it, the war lives on. Racked by guilt, plagued by drugs, alcohol and unemployment, and frustrated by a society that wants to forget its most inglorious conflict, many of the country's 2.8 million Vietnam veterans have been fighting a losing battle trying to adjust to peacetime American society.

A major study released in March by the Veterans Administration concluded that, as a group, Vietnam combat veterans have been plagued by "significantly more" emotional, social and educational problems than their peers who did not fight in the war.

The study, conducted by the Center for Policy Research in New York City, found that nearly one fourth of the men who saw heavy combat in Vietnam — 24 percent — were later arrested for criminal offenses. As startling as that sounds, other studies and statistics compiled in recent years paint an equally gloomy picture of the Vietnam vet:

- Their suicide rate is 33 percent higher than the national average.
- Their divorce rate is nearly double that of non-veterans.
- Their unemployment rate is twice as high as the national average.
- Drug abuse and alcoholism among Vietnam veterans are dangerously widespread.

"A lot of Vietnam veterans are a mess," said Williams, former president of the North Carolina chapter of Vietnam Veterans of America, the country's largest organization of Vietnam veterans.

"They can't hold a job, they can't stop drinking and they can't tell anybody about their problems. It's like they're caught in a bad dream and they can't wake up."

In North Carolina, which has an estimated 95,000 Vietnam veterans, the problems are the same as everywhere else. And right now, no problem is bigger than unemployment.

As of March 1, Vietnam vets in North Carolina had nearly twice the statewide unemployment rate of 7.2 percent, said Malcolm L. Anspach, supervisor of the Veterans Employment Service of North Carolina.

"It's a real problem and it seems to be getting worse," Anspach said. "An awful lot of Vietnam veterans are standing on unemployment lines."

Part of the problem has been education. Due largely to the difficulties of readjustment, only 20 percent of the Vietnam veterans who went back to school following the war went on to get their college degrees. This put them at a distinct disadvantage in the postwar job market, which was flooded by skilled non-veterans and college graduates.

"There's not much demand for tank drivers or riflemen when you leave the military," Anspach said. "It helps a lot more if you've been learning how to run a computer or getting your law degree."

When they do find jobs, many Vietnam vets have a hard time keeping them.

"A lot of these guys have had 15 or 20 jobs since coming back," said Michael Lydon, director of the Vet Center in Fayetteville, one of 91 federally funded counseling centers in the country for Vietnam veterans. "They've learned not to trust a lot of people, and that makes it hard for them to settle down."

"(Vietnam) vets take criticism more personally than other people. It's like a case we had the other day. This guy was working as a short-order cook and his boss asked him if he could speed it up a little. So the guy blew up and quit on the spot."

A hair-trigger temper is one of the main symptoms of "post-traumatic stress disorder," a psychological condition that affects 700,000 Vietnam veterans. Those suffering from the disorder, sometimes known as delayed stress syndrome, often experience depression, insomnia, flashbacks, alienation from friends and relatives, irrational anger and suicidal feelings.

Vietnam veterans aren't the first people to suffer from the disorder. Concentration camp survivors, rape victims and those who have lived through traumatic accidents and natural disasters have also displayed some of the symptoms. But, because of the unique nature of the war they fought, more Vietnam veterans have been afflicted by the syndrome than any other group in American history.

**"Normally, after a war, there's a collaborative relationship between a society and its soldiers," said John R. "Jack" Smith, a former Marine officer in Vietnam who is now working on his Ph.D. in clinical psychology at Duke University. "But that didn't happen with Vietnam.**

**"When our troops came home from Vietnam, the country was still divided over the war. There were no parades or cheering crowds waiting to greet them. As a result, a lot of Vietnam veterans felt abandoned or betrayed, and this led to the types of problems we are dealing with today."**

**The heroes' welcome given the 52 American hostages released from Iran sparked resentment among some Vietnam veterans who were virtually ignored when they returned from overseas.**

**"They came home to yellow ribbons and we came home to pink slips," said Vietnam veteran Williams.**

**For many vets, the formidable task of readjustment was made even harder by their abrupt re-entry into American society. Unlike World War II veterans, who generally returned in groups over a period of several weeks, many Vietnam vets traveled home alone on speedy commercial airlines.**

**"You could leave the battlefield on Friday and be back in North Carolina on Sunday," Williams said. "It was like traveling through a time warp."**

**He added: "You went over as an individual and you came back as an individual. That's why so many of us are loners, why we can't let anyone get close to us. That's why our divorce rate is so high. It's hard for two people to maintain a relationship when one of them is living in an emotional shell."**

**Though many Vietnam vets share a common set of**

**experiences and problems, not all of them have suffered equally since the war ended. The recent VA study reported that blacks and other minority veterans are "strikingly disadvantaged" in the areas of employment, education and overall standard of living.**

**Researchers found that, nationally, black Vietnam veterans have had three times more unemployment than white Vietnam vets. Even more revealing, perhaps, was the disclosure that black Vietnam vets have had twice as much unemployment as black veterans who did not serve in Vietnam.**

**The pattern is similar in North Carolina, where the latest figures from the state Veterans Employment Service show that unemployment for minority Vietnam veterans is 17.9 percent — four percentage points higher than the statewide average for all Vietnam vets.**

**A lot of blacks entered the service with hopes of learning a job-related skill, but they came out "worse**

**than they were before," said Lenard Latimer Jr., a black Air Force veteran who helps run Victory House, a private halfway house in Fayetteville that offers shelter, counseling and job information to Vietnam veterans.**

**Latimer said the military lowered its admissions standards to attract blacks during the Vietnam War, but then forgot about them when the war was over.**

**Blacks who did receive technical training have had a hard time getting jobs since leaving the service, Latimer said.**

**"Look at me," he said. "I was a trained aircraft technician, but when I got out I couldn't get a job. I was told I would have to go back to school for 18 months to get an FAA license and even then, I would probably have to stand in line behind hundreds of other ex-military men who were older and more experienced."**

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Like many Vietnam veterans, Latimer is critical of the Veterans Administration and other federal agencies for their handling of Vietnam-related issues. Until recently, they say, federal officials have tried to downplay the special problems of Vietnam veterans such as delayed stress syndrome and Agent Orange, a defoliant used in the war that is suspected of causing cancer and other disorders.

"Nobody wants to be reminded of the war," said Williams, whose frustration with established VA programs inspired him to open Victory House last year. "They want

college today on \$342 a month," said one vet who stopped by the Vet Center in Fayetteville recently. "You'd have to get a fulltime job to support yourself, and then you wouldn't have any time for school."

Nearly lost in the flood of depressing news about Vietnam veterans is the fact that many of them have gone on to successful careers. In fact, last month's VA study concluded that many Vietnam vets have been strengthened by their war experience, and tend to "work through" rather than suppress difficult problems.

"Some of us have been able to

to pretend that we don't exist."

Though Congress apparently is going to save the \$12 million storefront counseling program from President Reagan's budget-cutting ax, many Vietnam veterans retain a strong mistrust of government policy.

"Why should we trust them?" Williams said. "They never told us the truth about Vietnam. How do we know they're telling the truth now?"

VA officials concede that many Vietnam veterans are still bitter about the war, but they say it's not their fault.

"We don't care whether they're

turn (Vietnam) into a positive force," said ex-Marine Smith, who has done extensive work with Vietnam veterans since leaving the service in 1970. "In my case it's been helping other vets, but there are lots of examples. I know vets who have gone on to become very successful doctors, lawyers and psychologists.

"The key, I think, is to recognize that Vietnam is not going to go away. It's always going to be a major part of your life and there's nothing you can do about it. But it doesn't have to destroy you."

Despite the sour aftermath of the Vietnam War, most of its veterans

veterans of Vietnam or World War II or the Spanish-American War," said Kenneth E. McDonald, director of the VA's regional office in Winston-Salem. "As long as they qualify for our programs, they all get the same treatment."

However, Vietnam vets complain they are worse off than previous veterans because many of the benefits — particularly, educational ones — have not kept pace with inflation. Under the current GI bill, Vietnam vets who are going to school fulltime can get from \$342 to \$464 a month, depending on the size of their family.

"There's no way you can go to

remain deeply patriotic. A Louis Harris survey taken last year found that while nearly half of all Vietnam veterans thought the United States should have stayed out of the war, the majority said they would serve their country again if asked.

"We're still Americans," Williams said. "We weren't the ones who went to Canada. We weren't the ones who burned our draft cards. We were the ones who pledged allegiance to the flag.

"We'll fight again if the cause is right, but we won't get involved in another Vietnam. We won't fight another senseless war."