

Vietnam: What For?

If ever our politicians and army generals need an object lesson on how NOT to treat its returning war veterans, it need look no further than the post war history of our men in Vietnam. The evil tentacles of that war are still reaching out, wreaking havoc thirty years after it ended.

Our sons were conscripted to protect Vietnam, a country that few had ever heard of, to stop the onward march of Communism. Then, the powers that be decided to let it fall. No explanation was given. If one were to be found it would be that the climate of political thinking had changed. The western world leaders entered into a period of political détente.

Our men were brought home with the feeling that nothing had been achieved; that all the suffering, death and deprivation that they had endured counted for nothing. They were sneaked home. No words of thanks from our politicians, neither from the party who sent them nor from the party that ordered them to be brought back. It was as though they did not exist. Even the RSL treated them tardily. A recipe for post-traumatic stress if ever there was one!

Combat stress is well known and documented. During World War II, one man in ten was withdrawn from action for psychiatric reasons. (U.S. Army records: 1969). In Korea, psychiatric evacuations were reduced to 6% by the giving of immediate on-site treatment by clinicians. (Bourne: 1980). Our Army Medical officers must have known these facts. So why were our traumatised Vietnam veterans neglected for so long?

One researcher, (Pealer:1980) described evidence of bitterness, anger, anxiety, depression, and inability to get close to important others as being so severe they led sometimes to suicide, sometimes to severe disruption of family lives, thus effecting even the next generation. Uncontrollable rage caused some to lash out at whoever was nearby, even much-loved wives and children. Others were so alienated and depressed that they suicided.

Add to all this, the toxic effects of exposure to pesticides (Agent Orange). The Australian, van Tiggelen, (1983, 1984,) describes the long term effects of pesticides on the liver and brain function. Another researcher, (Jerina: 1984) describes how epoxides can be covertly bound to DNA, proteins and lipids resulting in mutagenicity. Too many veterans fathered deformed children for this matter not to be considered as resulting from exposure to the defoliants of Vietnam.

Not enough research has been done in Australia, but American research is considerable.

And, over and above the sufferings of the veterans, there is the ongoing mental suffering of their mothers, wives and loved ones.

How do I know all this? Because I am a university trained psychologist, and my son is a long term traumatised Vietnam veteran.

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