The Last Chapter: Reflecting on the Treatment of Vietnam Veterans

Brooke Garbarini

Professor Nguyen

The Viet Nam Wars

December 12, 2018

I. Reflection

While there are many ways to approach the study of history, I have always been drawn to the subject by personal narratives. Regrets, recollections, memories of daily life: to me, these are at the root of historical scholarship, providing both the material and the purpose for investigation of the past. Therefore, I was both excited for and nervous about the opportunity to complete an oral history project for this course. Excited, of course, because I would get a chance to hear and record a story which could help illuminate the past. Nervous, because more than any other historical methodology, oral history is personal, emotional, and potentially painful. I knew that speaking with a real person, unlike analyzing a document or dusting off an artifact, would bring with it a certain amount of social awkwardness, uncertainty, and potential intrusiveness. I was afraid both of asking too little and also of expecting too much during the interview.

Of course, Mr. Alejandro proved to be a wonderful and cooperative interviewee. I was immediately grateful for his sense of humor and his willingness to share with us, two strangers, personal details of his life. After the interview, I appreciated more than ever the challenges that can come with communicating personal experience, but I also realized that the people around us have more to share (and more they are willing to share) than we may initially think. Mr. Alejandro's openness and generosity in giving us his time and his stories have reminded me of the history that lives within the people that surround us everyday. I hope that I will have the chance to access more of that history in the future.

Accessing the stories around me, will, however, take practice. I definitely could tell there was room for improvement in my interviewing skills. For one thing, the fact that Anna (my partner) had decided to focus her questions for Mr. Alejandro on his first impressions of the

conflict and I had decided to focus my questions on his return from the war meant that we spent very little time discussing the bulk of Mr. Alejandro's time in Vietnam. Keeping the interview focused was good, especially given the time constraints. Still, there were many subjects Mr. Alejandro touched on which I skipped over in an effort to get to subjects I wanted to ask about. As we reached the end of my questions about Mr. Alejandro's post-war experiences, I realized we had more time but that it would seem unnatural to skip back and talk about wartime when we had already reached a natural conclusion to the story. Therefore, although Mr. Alejandro mentioned aspects of his combat experiences, his impressions of fellow servicemembers, and his life in Saigon, these topics went largely unexplored. If we were to conduct further interviews with Mr. Alejandro, these are the subjects which I would love to have the chance to ask about.

Given the way the interview unfolded, however, I feel that the decision not to try to go back to Mr. Alejandro's recollections of the war at the end of the interview was justified. What I am less certain of is the degree to which I asked about Mr. Alejandro's experiences of trauma and mental health. Since these are obviously sensitive and personal subjects, I knew I should tread carefully when discussing them. Nevertheless, I am unsure whether I struck the right balance between pushing and respecting boundaries when it came to these questions. Did I ask too much? Where can you draw the line between challenging questions which provoke meaningful responses and questions which are inappropriate and rude? I certainly hope Mr. Alejandro felt my questions were thoughtful and polite, but I feel that there is a fine line between a intriguing questions and ill-advised ones.

II. Analysis

The Vietnam War divided American opinion while it was fought, and its legacy has remained controversial in the decades since. Every year, new histories about the war are written and debated, with both the general public and scholars continuously reevaluating the meaning of the conflict, what lessons it can teach us, and who won and lost the most in the war. On one subject, however, there seems to be agreement: the treatment of Vietnam veterans. In 2000, 72% of Americans acknowledged that the US public had not treated Vietnam veterans well in the years since the war.[1] This consensus suggests that the general public has come to recognize the failings that many Vietnam veterans have experienced first hand for decades. Among these veterans is Mario Alejandro, a army draftee who served in Vietnam from April 1967 to April 1968. When interviewed in November 2018, Alejandro spoke about his feelings about the treatment he and his fellow soldiers received when they returned to the United States. His experience, though not necessarily the most dramatic undergone by returning veterans, reflects a larger trend often buried in statistical tables and voluminous congressional reports: whatever the hostility faced by soldiers returning from Vietnam, the biggest struggle for many veterans lay not in initial resentment, but in the long battle against societal indifference and bureaucratic neglect.

Indifference, however, was hardly the issue when many soldiers landed back on US soil following deployments in Vietnam. Speaking to documentarians Ken Burns and Lynne Novick, Marine veteran Karl Marlantes vividly describes the kind of reception he received when he arrived in the United States in 1970:

> When we got in [my brother's] car to drive away from the terminal, we had to wind our way through protesters that were pounding on the car with the ends of their signs and

[1] Mark Gillespie, "Americans Look at Vietnam War," *Gallup*, 17 November 2000, news.gallup.com/poll/2299/americans-look-back-vietnam-war.aspx.

> were snarling at me and pounding on the window and shouting obscenities at me. That was my welcome home to America.[2]

While Mario Alejandro's experience of homecoming is less dramatic than Marlantes', it nevertheless attests to the same tone of hostility and anger many veterans faced in the late 1960s and early 1970s. "When I got off the plane," Alejandro remembers, "people were looking at me strangely. I mean, I was in a uniform. And I can't figure out quite why, but something's off. I just don't know what it is."[3] Having joined the army in 1966, Alejandro initially had trouble identifying the reason for this odd reception. Looking back, however, he quickly noted that "the time when I went [into the army] ...the resistance to [the war] here hadn't really kicked up yet. It was still 1966, it really didn't get going till, actually, around the time I came back."[4] By then, however, opposition to the war had grown widespread enough to create a noticeable shift in public attitudes and behavior towards returning soldiers. Reporting on the challenges facing Vietnam era veterans, a report commissioned by the Veteran Administration in 1972 acknowledged that, "In many ways the society veterans are returning home to is not the same one they left."[5]

Indeed, much had changed in the United States during the Vietnam War, especially in the late 1960s and early 1970s. By the time Alejandro and Marlantes returned to the United States, opposition to the war was on the rise. By April of 1968, when Alejandro found himself back on home soil, 48% of Americans thought it had been a mistake to send troops to Vietnam, up from 37% in April 1967, when he was deployed.[6] By August 1968, footage of violence during

---

[2] *The Vietnam War*, directed by Ken Burns and Lynne Novick (Washington, DC: PBS, 2017), digital streaming.
[3] Mario Alejandro, interview by Anna Bacharach and Brooke Garbarini, 9 November 2018.
[4] Ibid.
[5] United States Senate, Committee of Veterans' Affairs, *A Study of the Problems Facing Vietnam Era Veterans On Their Readjustment to Civilian Life, United States Senate*, 92nd Cong., 2nd sess. (Washington, DC: GPO, 1972).
[6] Joseph Carroll, "The Iraq-Vietnam Comparison," *Gallup*, 15 June 2004, news.gallup.com/poll/11998/iraqvietnam-comparison.aspx.

anti-war protests at the Democratic National Convention would shake viewers across the country.[7] And only a year later, millions would gather across America for the largest anti-war demonstrations the nation had ever seen.[8] When the US finally withdrew its troops from Vietnam in 1973, over 60% of Americans considered involvement in the war to be a mistake.[9] In short, America overwhelmingly opposed the war to which it had deployed so many of its young people. Given the prevailing mood, then, it is perhaps unsurprising that opposition to the war manifested in the public's behavior towards the soldiers who had fought in it.

On the other hand, statistics do not bear out many of the stories of hostility faced by returning veterans. In January 1972, when opposition to the Vietnam War had reached its height, the Senate Committee on Veterans' Affairs released a report on the issues facing returning soldiers, including public resentment. The report, which surveyed both Vietnam veterans and members of the general public, found that 95% of the public agreed "strongly" or "somewhat" with the statement that "Veterans deserve respect for having served their country in the armed forces."[10] Similarly, 94% of the public felt that current veterans coming home to the United States deserved "the same warm reception given to returning servicemen of earlier wars," and 87% agreed that veterans "should feel proud to have served their country."[11] Furthermore, despite widespread opposition to the conflict in which soldiers fought, only 4% of Americans agreed "strongly" and 7% "somewhat" that the real heroes of the war were those who took a

---

[7] "Timeline: Vietnam War and Protests," *American Experience*, n.d. www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/features/two-days-in-october-vietnam-battlefields-and-home-front.
[8] Ibid.
[9] Lydia Saad, "Gallup Vault: Hawks vs. Doves on Vietnam," *Gallup*, 24 May 2016, news.gallup.com/vault/191828/gallup-vault-hawks-doves-vietnam.aspx.
[10] United States Senate, Committee of Veterans' Affairs, *A Study of the Problems Facing Vietnam Era Veterans On Their Readjustment to Civilian Life, United States Senate*, 92nd Cong., 2nd sess. (Washington, DC: GPO, 1972).
[11] Ibid.

stand by facing the consequences of refusing to serve.[12] These numbers testify to a surprising conclusion: while Americans did not support the war, they claimed to be overwhelmingly supportive of the veterans who fought in it.

Of course, public opinion is not necessarily the same as public action. While Americans may have responded to surveyors that they supported Vietnam veterans, it is entirely possible that they did not do so in practice. What is truly surprising about the 1972 report, therefore, is that a majority of veterans themselves expressed satisfaction with the treatment they had received upon returning home. 69% agreed that people at home had made them "feel proud to have served," while 79% concurred with the statement that "most people at home respect you for having served your country in the armed forces."[13] While these percentages varied across racial, regional, and educational groups, the overall conclusion that veterans felt their service was respected by their countrymen stands in contrast to the anecdotal evidence provided in accounts like Mario Alejandro's.

What can explain this contradiction? At least part of the answer may lie in the visibility of anti-veteran protesters, such as those who Karl Marlantes encountered outside of Travis Air Force Base. There, it is possible that a relatively small cohort of protesters had an outsized impact on the experiences of many returning veterans. More broadly, however, the kind of alienation remembered by veterans like Mario Alejandro might simply be evidence of the general disconnect experienced by veterans returning from war. Alejandro himself describes the awkwardness of returning home, where, even without strange looks at his uniform or any hostility towards his involvement in the war, "I was so uncomfortable that I remember thinking,

---

[12] United States Senate, Committee of Veterans' Affairs, *A Study of the Problems Facing Vietnam Era Veterans On Their Readjustment to Civilian Life, United States Senate*, 92nd Cong., 2nd sess. (Washington, DC: GPO, 1972).
[13] Ibid.

you know, I'd rather be back [in Vietnam]."[14] This is a particularly notable feeling because Alejandro repeatedly stressed his personal opposition to the war as a whole and his desire, while deployed, to return to the US as quickly as possible. But Alejandro was hardly alone in feeling alienated from his home and family when returning from fighting. Writing about the experiences of Vietnam veterans, one author wrote that "No returnee is spared the feelings of disorientation, self-strangeness, and varying degrees of anger and alienation."[15] While Alejandro recalls the looks people gave him and his uniform, he equally emphasizes the more general feeling of dislocation upon return. He also never mentions any direct confrontation, suggesting that while there may have been some quiet resentment towards Vietnam veterans, Alejandro's experience was not entirely out of line with the picture of support painted by statistics and specifically by the 1972 congressional report.

Interestingly, however, that same report notes the discrepancy between how the public felt Vietnam veterans *should* be treated and how it perceived they *were* treated. Even as around 95% of respondents professed respect for the soldiers who had served, only 55% felt that the American people were doing everything they could to make returning veterans "feel at home again."[16] These statistics might hint at the challenges Vietnam veterans would face, not from the anti-war movement (which many of them joined), but from the decades of bureaucratic wrangling and political neglect which would follow long after the fall of Saigon made protesting the war a moot point.

---

[14] Alejandro.
[15] Joel Osler Brende and Erwin Randolph Parson, *Vietnam Veterans: The Road to Recovery* (New York: Plenum Press, 1985), 45.
[16] United States Senate, Committee of Veterans' Affairs, *A Study of the Problems Facing Vietnam Era Veterans On Their Readjustment to Civilian Life, United States Senate*, 92nd Cong., 2nd sess. (Washington, DC: GPO, 1972).

This conclusion emerges in publications and congressional reports published in the late 1970s and 1980s. These documents tell a strikingly different story than the 1972 report on veterans' readjustment. While that report, released while soldiers were still on the battlefield and protesters were still on the streets, documented a generally positive impression of veterans' reception and of their treatment – 60% of veterans surveyed rated the Veteran's Administration services as "excellent" or "pretty good" – later publications document building frustration with failures of the government's services for Vietnam-era servicemembers.[17]

The issues with these services, however, first came up for debate in 1966, while the majority of Americans still supported involvement in the war. In that year, the US Congress passed the Cold War G.I. Bill, a piece of legislation which had been in the works for nearly a decade. Initially introduced in 1958, the Cold War G.I. Bill was initially designed not for Vietnam veterans but as a bill to help compensate and educate veterans who had served after the end of the Korean War.[18] Because of its focus on veterans who had largely served in peacetime, and therefore faced fewer serious challenges as a result of their service, various versions of the legislation had been repeatedly voted down in Congress.[19] However, backers of the bill sold its benefits as compensation for soldiers of the Cold War era, for whom the emergence of a "hot" conflict was a constant threat.[20] Therefore, "Congress abandoned any special consideration to the distinct sacrifice of combat theater veterans in Vietnam in crafting its legislation," even as the Vietnam War escalated under President Johnson.[21] As a result, "Vietnam combat veterans were

---

[17] United States Senate, Committee of Veterans' Affairs, *A Study of the Problems Facing Vietnam Era Veterans On Their Readjustment to Civilian Life, United States Senate*, 92nd Cong., 2nd sess. (Washington, DC: GPO, 1972).
[18] Mark Boulton, *Failing Our Veterans: The G.I. Bill and the Vietnam Generation* (New York: NYU Press, 2014), Kindle edition, chap. 2.
[19] Ibid.
[20] Ibid.
[21] Ibid.

lumped in with all other veterans," including those who never served in conflict zones, and "their suggested level of benefits was kept low as the lawmakers sought to reduce the costs of the program."[22] Though many of the limitations on benefits were introduced with good intentions, their ultimate effect was to significantly curtail the resources available to soldiers returning from Vietnam, especially when compared with benefits offered to veterans of World War II and the Korean conflict. As an example, the bill offered fewer educational benefits than previous G.I. bills. Congressman Olin Teague (a veteran of the Second World War) argued that "it is not the intention of this legislation to establish a program which completely subsidizes the cost of a veteran's education or training program."[23] The original supporters of the legislation (beginning in 1958) argued that smaller, but still important compensation would keep the benefits for "peacetime" Cold War veterans in line with the less-arduous nature of their service. These benefits, which many perceived as too generous for veterans who had served with little risk to their life, proved to be insufficient for the majority of veterans it came to apply to: veterans of the Vietnam War.

Mario Alejandro's recollections of the benefits he received as a result of his service reveal how the insufficiencies of the 1966 G.I. Bill manifested in the lives of those who served. Though Alejandro did end up returning to school for a higher degree after getting back from Vietnam, he received no tuition assistance. "I initially applied to them for it," he recalled, "but it was so crappy, that I just, I didn't bother anymore. It was like, the hoops they wanted you to jump through for what they gave you was not worth it to me."[24] In this way, the outdated political considerations which had defined the 1966 bill ended up having a profound impact on

[22] Boulton, chap. 2.
[23] Ibid.
[24] Alejandro.

the experiences of returning veterans, impacting their educational and employment opportunities for decades after their service ended.

Beyond education, resources for veterans included numerous shortcomings in other areas. Most notably, government response to the mental and physical health needs of veterans was repeatedly criticized for its inadequacy. Though the quality and availability of services varied across time and administrations, its overall impact might be best summarized by Mario Alejandro's assessment: "We got screwed."[25] Issues in obtaining sufficient services began almost immediately after the war and persisted over the decades that followed. In 1979, when concerns about the health risks posed by 2,4,5-T– Agent Orange– had already led the EPA to announce a ban on its use in the United States, the Veterans Administration was repeatedly denying the claims of soldiers that they were suffering health difficulties as a result of exposure to the chemical.[26] In 1981, after promising during his campaign for president to improve veteran services, President Ronald Reagan froze hiring for a key counseling program and "with a thoroughness that almost defied belief the Reagan White House then went after every single special outreach program for Vietnam veterans, including the special employment program for disabled veterans."[27] Also that year, the failures of the government to address the mental and physical health of veterans led around a dozen veterans to go on hunger strike in protest.[28] In 1982, a government evaluation declared that the VA healthcare system "was totally unprepared to meet even the most basic needs of women patients."[29] The list of failings could continue,

---

[25] Alejandro.
[26] David E. Bonior, Steven M. Champlin, and Timothy S. Kolly, *The Vietnam Veteran: A History of Neglect* (New York: Praeger, 1984), 148-149.
[27] Ibid., 76.
[28] Robert Lindsay, "Vietnam Veterans Set Up Protest Camp," *New York Times*, 6 June 1981, www.nytimes.com/1981/06/06/us/vietnam-veterans-set-up-protest-camp.html.
[29] Bonoir, Champlin, and Kolly, 159.

spanning the failure of the government to address the needs of specific subsets of the veteran population and its more general issues: red tape, inefficiency, and apparent lack of concern for its wounded warriors.

In 1972, the survey discussed earlier in this paper suggested a surprising degree of satisfaction among veterans with their treatment by the American public. By 1979, the Veterans Administration found that 63% of veterans felt that their reception was worse than the reception veterans of previous wars had received.[30] In testimonies before Congress during the 1980s, veterans repeatedly expressed their anger and frustration with their treatment. They singled out the issues with government healthcare and services, but also the public indifference which had allowed such problems to persist. "Our story is one of betrayal and neglect," declared one veteran.[31] And despite many improvements and reforms, the issues of veteran care persist into the present. When asked if he was angry about the treatment he had received, Mario Alejandro represented many veterans when he answered strongly in the affirmative. "It's interesting too because I would say I thought that I was past a lot of this stuff," he continued,

> But about a month ago, I made a call to the Veterans Administration about something, and wanted to find out if they could offer any help with something… and the woman on the phone started giving me, like, a run-around! And referring me to all these different places. And I finally stopped her, and said, "Look, I want to know, essentially, if there's anything the Veterans Administration can do for *me*. Not another agency, not this guy, but if there's something that someone can do for *me*." And she didn't say anything, and I wound up saying—I really surprised myself—I said, "Gee you're still screwing Viet Nam veterans aren't you?" And I hung up. And what surprised me was how strongly I still felt about that.[32]

---

[30] Bruce Drake, "On Memorial Day, public pride in veterans, but at a distance," *Pew Research Center*, 24 May 2013, www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2013/05/24/on-memorial-day-public-pride-in-veterans-but-at-a-distance-2.
[31] United States Congress, Committee on Veterans' Affairs, *Issues concerning Vietnam veterans, United States House of Representatives*, 97th Cong., 1st sess. (Washington, DC: GPO, 1981).
[32] Alejandro.

Speaking about his experiences in 2018, fifty years after he returned from Vietnam, Alejandro's story and strong emotional response represent the ways that America's failure of its Vietnam veterans still haunts the country. More than a anti-war protesters banging on car windows or travellers giving odd looks to a man in uniform, it is the enduring, half-century history of insufficiencies in treatment, care, and respect that has defined the experience of veterans up to the present day.

There are fewer Vietnam veterans every year: in 2016, they ceased to be the largest share of the US veteran population, being replaced by soldiers who served during the Gulf War-era.[33] Nevertheless, there are still millions of veterans alive today who served in the Vietnam War. They are still here, still sharing their stories, and still seeking the treatment and compensation they earned decades ago. Many of them may recall unpleasant memories of the welcome they received when they landed back in the United States, and many more may remember their struggles to access veteran services in the years that followed. These subjects are now open for historical interpretation and debate, and new generations of scholars can examine, with the privilege of hindsight, how America succeeded and failed in welcoming its soldiers home. But this story, and particularly its conclusion, is not fully written. As people like Mario Alejandro help define the history of Vietnam veterans' treatment with their stories of failure, neglect, and missed opportunities, America still has the chance to define how the last chapter of that history will be written. As the controversies about the war and its meaning continue, it is worth

[33] Kristin Bialik, "The changing face of America's veteran population," Pew Research Center, 10 November 2017, www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2017/11/10/the-changing-face-of-americas-veteran-population.

reexamining the treatment of Vietnam veterans and acknowledging that that treatment remains a present reality, not just a legacy of the past.

Bibliography

Alejandro, Mario. Interview by Anna Bacharach and Brooke Garbarini, 9 November 2018.

Bialik, Kristen."The changing face of America's veteran population." *Pew Research Center*, 10 November 2017. www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2017/11/10/the-changing-face-of-americas-veteran-population.

Bonior, David E., Steven M. Champlin, and Timothy S. Kolly. *The Vietnam Veteran: A History of Neglect*. New York: Praeger, 1984.

Boulton, Mark. *Failing Our Veterans: The G.I. Bill and the Vietnam Generation.* New York: NYU Press, 2014. Kindle edition.

Brende, Joel Osler and Erwin Randolph Parson. *Vietnam Veterans: The Road to Recovery*. New York: Plenum Press, 1985.

Carroll, Joseph. "The Iraq-Vietnam Comparison." *Gallup*, 15 June 2004. news.gallup.com/poll/11998/iraqvietnam-comparison.aspx.

Drake, Bruce. "On Memorial Day, public pride in veterans, but at a distance." *Pew Research Center*, 24 May 2013. www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2013/05/24/on-memorial-day-public-pride-in-veterans-but-at-a-distance-2.

Gillespie, Mark. "Americans Look at Vietnam War." *Gallup*, 17 November 2000. news.gallup.com/poll/2299/americans-look-back-vietnam-war.aspx.

Lindsay, Robert. "Vietnam Veterans Set Up Protest Camp." *New York Times*, 6 June 1981. www.nytimes.com/1981/06/06/us/vietnam-veterans-set-up-protest-camp.html.

Saad, Lydia. "Gallup Vault: Hawks vs. Doves on Vietnam." *Gallup*, 24 May 2016. news.gallup.com/vault/191828/gallup-vault-hawks-doves-vietnam.aspx.

The Vietnam War. Directed by Ken Burns and Lynne Novick. Washington, DC: PBS, 2017. Digital streaming.

"Timeline: Vietnam War and Protests." *American Experience*, n.d. www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/features/two-days-in-october-vietnam-battlefields-and-home-front.

United States Congress. Committee on Veterans' Affairs. *Issues concerning Vietnam veterans, United States House of Representatives*, 97th Cong., 1st sess. Washington, DC: GPO, 1981.

United States Senate. Committee of Veterans' Affairs. *A Study of the Problems Facing Vietnam Era Veterans On Their Readjustment to Civilian Life, United States Senate*, 92nd Cong., 2nd sess. Washington, DC: GPO, 1972.