

The Veteran and Societal Expectations J. Kimo Williams

Symposium with the Shepherd University community
Erma Ora Byrd Auditorium, 5 – 7:30 pm, March 23, 2018.
213 N King St, Shepherdstown, WV 25443

The purpose of this symposium and the other activities associated with it is to recognize the “Vietnam War Veterans Recognition Act of 2017 signed in to law on March 27th, 2017. Let me begin with a short anecdote relating to how this bill came to be.

In 2015, Vietnam veteran Harold Redding from Spring Grove, Pennsylvania determined that Vietnam Veterans needed a day of recognition for their service during the War. He realized there was Veterans Day but felt that a date set aside for the Vietnam veteran is the least that can be done to recognize those who served in that conflict. Subsequently, on Tuesday, March 28, 2017, S. 305, the “Vietnam War Veterans Recognition Act of 2017,” which encourages the display of the U.S. flag on March 29, National Vietnam War Veterans Day was signed into law. The date signified when the last combat troops were pulled out of Vietnam in 1973.

Redding is quoted as remembering a day when he was in Vietnam in 1967, and he said to himself “What if I don’t go home, and no one remembers me other than my family? What if no one knows I was here?” I find his quote similar to the thoughts I also had as a Combat Engineer serving in Vietnam in 1970. What is interesting and has always been a focus of my position on serving in Vietnam, is that Redding does not evoke the deprivation-type syntax of the “battle-scared warrior” that was perpetuated through the media and associated with the societal stereotype of the Vietnam Veteran. His quote is simple and can be applied to so many of the military service members who arrived in Vietnam as part of a political objective never realized.

As a country since World War II, we have portrayed the military soldier from a John Wayne-the-hero perspective. As a young boy, I grew up wanting to experience the type of heroism that I saw in so many movies in the 60s. There were TV series that shot into our living rooms nightly; The Rifleman, Combat, Have Gun Will Travel, Gunsmoke, Davey Crockett, The Alamo, and so many more (all white heroes by he way). Most of you are probably a little too young to remember any of these programs. At that time, we were quite saturated with the images of “Hero.” We were from my perspective, a “hero worshipping” society. Of course, this is nothing new in America; the same hero worshipping was a part of media during the invasion of the Indian lands in the West with newspapers and other monthly magazines printing the escapades of Kit Carson, George Custer, Wild Bill Hitchcock, Buffalo Bill, Wyatt Earp. Even outlaws were heroes; Jesse James, Billy The Kid, Butch Cassidy and others.

We as humans have always needed a hero: In the *Odyssey* by Homer, the hero Odysseus (oh-dis-ee-uh s) is a Greek Warrior trying to find his way back home from his service in the Trojan War. On his journey, he is confronted with many mystical obstacles he must overcome to include, sorcerers, and his own inner temptations. His primary objective was to return home to protect his loved ones. At that time, the descriptions of Odysseus overcoming these obstacles inspired Greeks young and old to imagine themselves as a hero through him. The word Hero derives from the Greek word “protector” or “defender.”

Today the younger generation live their hero fantasies through video-games, movies, and TV series. Journalist Evan Wright wrote in his book “*Generation Kill*” that soldiers were on “intimate terms with the culture of video games, reality TV shows.” Real-life combat, however, was something entirely different. “What I saw was a lot of them discovered levels of innocence that they probably didn’t think they had,” Wright continues, “When they actually shot people, especially innocent people, and were confronted with this, I saw guys break down. The violence in games hadn’t prepared them for this.”

We perpetuate the idea of Hero and manipulate our societal norms to create a false narrative that suggests the ordinary can become the extraordinary simply by mimicking the actions of the cultural icons associated with our hero-worshipping. This can easily blur the lines between reality and fantasy. In a 2010 article for the Brookings Institution, political scientist Peter Singer quoted a Special Forces soldier who was involved in the production of “*America’s Army 360*,” a video game developed to recruit and train enlistees. “You lose an avatar; just reboot the game,” the soldier said. “In real life, you lose your guy; you’ve lost your guy. And then you’ve got to bury him, and then you’ve got to call his wife.”

According to Bruce Peabody of Fairleigh Dickson University, “ordinary people and political and media leaders talk about heroes in different ways.” Donald Trump continuously refers to members of his cabinet as heroes, and first responders as heroes and he loosely utters the term as related to all those who do the job that they are paid to do. According to Peabody, the media has also followed this hero narrative “covering everything from a four-year-old cancer patient to an emergency medical technician killed by a mentally ill man, to community programs celebrating “local heroes” such as teachers and or non-profit organizations.”

In an informal survey, nine in 10 respondents said that individuals need to save lives to be considered heroes. They rejected the more achievable standard of merely “going the extra mile” or “going above and beyond their assigned tasks.” Recently, it has become a cliché to identify our soldiers as “Heroes” or “Warriors.” And specifically, to the Vietnam Vet, to extend a “Welcome Home:” or the overused platitude, “Thank You for your

Service.” To some veterans hearing this uttered during what is usually a short first-time meeting with someone, comes across as shallow, disinterested and just a politically correct reflex from the person who, having good intentions, means no harm. However, they are not interested in and have no idea what a veteran did while serving, what motivated them to join, and in most cases would not have gone themselves or volunteered their sons or daughters.

As a composer, I have used music as a way to tell what I call “my story” of serving in Vietnam and my perspective of those who have served throughout history, especially the African American Veteran. When I was commissioned by West Point and wrote my score “Buffalo Soldiers,” my research provided a clear understanding of what the African American service members then and since have had to endure in serving this country. These black service members and some who were former slaves, enlisted into the Army to fight the battles out west and were subjected to a relentless barrage of hatred in all forms not only from the perceived enemy but from fellow soldiers and from America.

So, when I hear the myth about returning Vietnam veterans being spat on, I think about these Buffalo soldiers, being metaphorically spat on merely because of their skin color. Whether or not the returning Vietnam veterans “spitting episodes” are verifiable or not, believe me when I say that many African American soldiers had that same experience, as citizens, well before they left for military service, right here on American soil. And this continues to happen today as evidenced by the spitting episode on a little black boy last week in Kansas. Black soldiers returning from Vietnam continued to be metaphorically spat upon before, during and after Vietnam, in every generation, and every war they participated in.

I try to understand this undocumented myth that seems to be perpetuated by Vietnam Veterans and the Media. According to Jerry Lembcke, an associate professor emeritus at College of the Holy Cross and his opinion piece in an October 2017 New York Times OPED, “The Myth of Spitting Anti War Protestors”, these exaggerated accounts by mostly returning white veterans “were not true. On the contrary, opponents of the war had actually tried to recruit returning veterans.” A 1971 Harris Poll survey found that 99 percent of veterans said their reception from friends and family had been friendly, and 94 percent said their reception from age-group peers, the population most likely to have included the spitters, was friendly. In fact, a follow-up poll, conducted in 1979 for the Department of Veterans Affairs, reported that former antiwar activists had warmer feelings toward Vietnam veterans than toward congressional leaders or even their fellow travelers in the anti-war movement.

The narrative that this myth perpetuates is that these poor American Boys were ostracized by the liberal war-protestors and we would have won if only they had been

supported. Since I returned from Vietnam and found my voice with music, I have always wanted to speak to my military service experiences and to my thoughts on what it means to serve. In 1990 I composed and produced a Jazz-rock CD called "War Stories" to cathartically address my service in Vietnam through music. During the recording of this CD, I utilized 30 musicians along with other recording personnel. Of those 30 only one person asked me anything about my experience in Vietnam the rest were evidently not connected or interested in the purpose of the music product. Their lack of inquisitiveness is indicative of societies disinterest in those who served in the military since the Vietnam War, other than those with personal connections to the War experience. This disinterest only began to change during the Persian Gulf War.

But what is it that changed? According to Daniel C. Hallin associate professor at the University of California, San Diego. "One of the most persistent myths about the Vietnam War is the idea that saturation coverage on television turned the public against the war and that by extension any televised war will lose public support." He goes on to say, "The truth is that television was very far from showing the "true horror of war" in Vietnam, although it wasn't military restrictions that limited what we saw. The limits were mainly imposed by television's relation to its audience, to its government and military sources, and to the soldiers who were the principal characters in the drama of "the living room war." These factors affected how we would see the Persian Gulf Conflict and subsequently the Iraq /Afghanistan conflicts.

According to a 1991 New York Times Article "After the War," The Gulf War was the first conflict in which reporters had to be escorted by military officials called the Department of Defense National Media Pool. Officials claimed national security and classified information from the enemy as the reason for these new policies. At the time Defense Secretary Dick Cheney was primarily responsible for the oversight of these press restrictions and modeled the limits after the press blackout during the invasion of Panama in 1989. What the television audiences wanted to see during Vietnam was their sons, their "American Boys," fighting for the moral high ground of the American idea of freedom against the great communist threat.

At the beginning of our involvement in Vietnam, the network executives manipulated coverage to appeal to this narrative by reporting stories and images of the brave soldier in assorted deprivation situations but holding the line as he waits for a letter from his high school sweetheart. There was a constant media barrage of visuals and news reports about America's Military Might and enemy containment stories, but never images or stories about dead or wounded American Boys. The lasting effect of this media approach sanitized the realities of war and kept the moral high for both the soldiers in Vietnam and the public at home. As the media began providing a more reality-based narrative about the Vietnam conflict, the audience was already starting to question why we were losing "American Boys" in this war.

In 1967 reporting on the war changed in a significant way. The press took a new direction to their journalistic approach to the war. Instead of relying on military press releases that were perceived more as propaganda or press conferences, journalists began researching and interviewing soldiers in the field. With the proliferation of more and more TVs in homes, this reality-based news coverage had a profound impact on the public perception that we were not, in fact, the good guys fighting the axis of evil.

The experiences of those who served in Vietnam are unique, and we are all individuals with individual stories. I am personally offended when we are all lumped into a category as described by the New York Times article in 1972 with the headline: " Postwar Shock Is Found to Beset Veterans Returning from the War in Vietnam," with the by-line, "half of all Vietnam veterans were psychiatric casualties of war in need of professional help to readjust." This article did more harm, by perpetuating the stigma that we all now face as it relates to our service in Vietnam. Even more profound, a 1980 Harris poll conducted for the House Committee on Veterans' Affairs revealed that 90 percent of Vietnam Veterans surveyed said that, "looking back," they were either "very glad" or "somewhat glad" to have "served their country." Eighty percent said that returning home was "about the same or better" than they had "anticipated." In short, said the pollster's report, "many respondents rejected "sensationalist exaggeration which bears little resemblance to the experiences and present realities of the emotional lives they live. According to the report, "veterans said they felt invisible, anonymous, and ignored by the public."

The stereotype of the mentally scarred vet that has been forged in our cultural imagination during the Vietnam conflict continues to this day; so much of this is due to the media's infatuation with the theme of Hero and Warrior. To be a hero or warrior you must return from battle with the scars to justify the hero-worshipping narrative. Films such as Taxi Driver, Rambo, Coming Home and The Deer Hunter and more recently, The Hurt Locker, American Sniper, Billy Lynns Long Halftime Walk and others portrayed the veteran as a "walking time bomb."

It is time to have a new and open discussion on what it meant to serve our country in Vietnam and in a broader sense what it means to serve, and not so much how we might have fought for our country. Many of us served our country (or met our contractual responsibilities) in a capacity that does not always fit into the Hero category. According to Meredith Lair in her book, *Armed with Abundance*, "When the children of the baby boom grew up and headed to Vietnam, they took with them expectations that the experience would be ugly and brutal, an understanding of war informed by collective memories of World War II and Korea."

As well they were exposed to the media representation of how heroes act in war. She goes on to state "But they also brought with them high standards for what constituted comfort and satiety, which had been cultivated by the ethos of abundance in which so

many of them were reared. Ultimately, these assumptions and the inform ideas about the American way of war—in particular, that Americans go to war reluctantly and that austerity and deprivation are standard components of a brutal but necessary process.’

After arriving in Vietnam, many of these idealistic young men (me included) found an entirely different paradigm than what they envisioned. They found relatively quickly, as Laird states, “that the Vietnam War would deliver relatively few opportunities for heroism and glory. American soldiers adjusted their John Wayne expectations to demand comfortable living conditions, time for leisure activities, abundant recreational facilities, and easy access to mass-produced consumerism.”

In 2003 I took on the responsibility of Executive Director of the National Vietnam Veterans Art Museum (NVM). Its mission was mainly to provide Vietnam veterans stories through the visual arts created by those veterans. Before my role as the Executive director, I was on the board and on the selection committee to determine which art pieces would be curator into our exhibits. One of the most insidious prerequisites that shadowed the works shown at the museum is whether or not the artwork created was from a combat-in-the-field veteran. There were factions within the museum staff and board that only wanted artwork from veterans who saw combat in the field and not from those who may have played a support role. I was taken aback at the pure hostility many of the combat veterans had for those who served in support. Many times it almost came to blows with name-calling and shouting.

This perceived social-order grew from the pejorative acronym REMF (rear echelon mother f—ker) used by Vietnam combat (in the field) personnel to describe the Vietnam personnel assigned to support units. This term was used to refer to those soldiers who were in the rear and not faced with direct enemy contact. In general, there was a de facto social order between the three areas associated with the Vietnam experience: “Combat”, those who had direct engagement with the enemy, “Combat Support”, those directly supporting the combat efforts such as artillery, air support, security, intelligence, engineering land clearing (which is what I was doing); and Combat Service Support: supply, maintenance, transportation, health services, and services that helped those in combat meet their mission.

According to Major Douglas R. Bey, a division psychiatrist with the 1st Infantry Division, “noncombat troops and those living and operating in the rear had one expectable downside—they were treated with total disdain by combat troops who faced greater risk and hardship. Not only were they resented for their life of safety and ease (relative), but they were also often suspected of unfairly appropriating the best of the equipment and benefits for themselves. Support and service troops were aware of how they were regarded by “real” combat troops and invariably felt varying degrees of guilt in their presence.”

The conflict in Iraq and Afghanistan had a slightly different emphasis as pointed out by General David Petraeus in the David Wood book, "What Have We Done.", "we are engaged in the counterinsurgency concept of protecting the civilian population and helping them build a better future rather than simply chasing down and killing the enemy." Based on this quote, the Vietnam early gung-ho lets-go-kill the bad guys' attitude, changed to let's liberate the poor unprotected and help them reap the benefits of democracy. In the Iraq/Afghanistan conflict, technology blurred the lines of the social order associated with the Vietnam REMF paradigm. However, Navy Lieutenant Stephen Howard, who served as a Marine battalion surgeon, provides the following portrayal of the initial shock experienced by all newly arrived American troops in Vietnam. I would venture to say his quote is appropriate when associated with those who served in the latest conflicts: According to Howard, alienation and depersonalization begin upon arrival in Vietnam. "He is torn from everything that is familiar and comforting to him: his family and friends, his country, even the familiar routine of stateside barracks life; his normal hopes and troubles and ways of relating. He finds himself in a strange Asian country, knowing nothing of its language, history, or meanings, surrounded by desolation and threatened with death; he is the alien, he is a non-person, a thing expected to function, while everything around him is strange and lacking in meaning. And the excruciating boredom which he frequently must endure in the hiatus between military operations, along with the deprivation of privacy, only reinforces his experience of himself as a thing which is expected to perform in a prescribed way."

Never in my wildest dreams did I think that this social REMF mentality between veterans would cross over into the concept of the expressive arts. Especially since it was understood as Howard wrote, alienation and depersonalization impacted on all of us regardless of how we served. Once I became executive director of the NVVAM, I proactively shut down the REMF mindset of many of the artists and began curating art that provided opportunities for all Vietnam veterans to have a platform for showing their art. Of course, this had a backlash in that some of the veterans (combat hardliners) took their art out of the museum and some wanted to but had already legally signed their work over to the museum. Many continued to argue that the mission of the museum should be about combat and combat-related themes. In fact, the argument was that our audience wanted to see the pains of war as opposed to the personal expression of those who served. In the hero-worshipping deprivation driven stereotyped warrior mentality, this argument was correct, that IS what the media and the culture in general perpetuated and wanted to see, which is why they came to our exhibits. But it also had an adverse effect on those who served away from the immediacy of battle who also needed to express themselves through their art.

This narrative of hero-worshipping perpetuated the "guilt-syndrome" for all those who did not have direct contact with the enemy. We are still living with this syndrome in so

many different applications as it relates to military service. I like to quote Veteran Carol Williams (my wife) she proclaims, "It is expected that the most extreme experiences are always assumed to be the most important." She examples this with Military Sexual Assault (MST) where she proposes "In the cases of sexual assault if you are not raped is it really sexual assault?"

Many Vietnam Veterans live with this guilt and feel that they need to apologize in social settings with comments like "I was just a supply clerk" or "I just served on a ship." This guilt is derived from the societal pressures that hold veterans to a higher standard, and they want and expect that these veterans took the moral high ground and fought for the great American way in the jungles of Vietnam. Our society continues to adhere to the narrative that "Vietnam veterans are "psychiatric casualties of war in need of professional help to readjust." This allows society to brand every veteran as a Hero, a Warrior or to "Thank Them for Their Service," in that if they are "psychiatric casualties of war," they need constant reinforcement from society. In some cases, this brings stereotypical attention, wanted or unwanted, too many Veterans and at the same time, because of this combat warrior mentality, many non-combat veterans feel a need to justify their Veteranship by exaggerating their role in the conflict. I call this the "Veteran One-upmanship Syndrome"

Generally, when a Vietnam Veteran meets another Vietnam veteran the four Ws are applied to determine who will best fit into the societal narrative of "Hero": WHERE were you? WHAT did you do? WHO were you with? WHEN were you there? Once this exchange is solidified, there is then a sub-conscious understanding between the two as to who is the real hero. Even when a Vietnam Veteran is not engaged with another veteran, he feels the need to exaggerate his role in the conflict either out of guilt, being ashamed for not fighting directly in combat, or just wanting the attention. This exaggeration is generally inserted when asked to speak at community gatherings or on Veterans Day event that he might attend. This sense of guilt and sometimes shame is capsulized in Pulitzer Prize winner David Woods book, *What Have We Done: The Moral Injury of Our Longest Wars*: He writes ", almost everyone who goes to war returns with some sense of unease about what we've seen and done and experienced, about how well we lived up to our own standards."

What is essential and what is needed is a breaking down of the REMF paradigm that drives the veteran psyche. I cannot say that I have an answer or that there is an answer to change or alleviate this Veteran One-upmanship scenario, as so much of it is just plain human nature. What has worked for me to cope with this sense of unease, was composing music. Through music, I have been able to highlight events that were personally relevant to me while serving in Vietnam, I did not and do not feel a need to engage in the "one-upmanship" with other veterans nor feel the guilt associated with not actually killing the enemy on the battlefield. With music, I can express my personal

experiences as a veteran, comment on veterans throughout history and at the same time communicate aspects of my life that impacts on my values. The syntax associated with the spoken language has never been enough to fully speak to the emotions that are reflected in my music.

In conclusion, I believe many veterans seek an avenue for communication beyond the spoken word. Through my time with NVVAM and the many response I have gotten from those who have heard my music, specifically my Symphony For The Sons of Nam, many family members of Vietnam Vets have shared with me their frustrations with the fact that their father, son or brother just won't talk about their experiences in the War. Usually, my response would be that words are fleeting and that usually, a Veteran needs more than a cursory interaction with a listener, he needs an unpretentious committed interpersonal connection to convey the emotional content of his experience. Sometimes the personal baggage associated with family dynamics (not always negative) does not lend itself to this connection. I always suggest that they give him time and try not to force a conversation. There will be a time and a place usually unexpected, where he will open up, and you must be ready.

I believe art, utilized expressively can be a nucleus that might bring about the beginnings of a dialog between a veteran, his experiences and his external world and in the long run impact on his well-being. It is well documented that the expressive arts therapies have had a positive effect on Veterans health. In fact, music therapy had its beginnings with the US Army back in 1945 where it was used to address the recuperation of military service members in Army hospitals. Once we begin to look at Veterans as individuals with individual experiences, we can get away from the hero-warrior syndrome and tear down the frame of reference as prescribed by society and the media.

USVAP seeks to do its part by providing art resources to Veteran Medical Facilities through our Artistic Tools initiative. The VA has been at the forefront of understanding the power of art and providing quality, expressive therapies as a tool for addressing a Veterans well-being.

I now ask that you begin to understand the military Veteran better and in particular the Vietnam Veterans as individuals with different experiences that may not always fit the "Hero," or "Warrior" brand. Every Veteran has a personal reason for serving this country, and each had a different experience than the other, and it may or may not fit the societal cliché' platitude of "Thank You For Your Service," though in most cases there is no harm intended with this utterance.

I have been asked what should be a response once someone indicates that they were in the military or are currently serving? If there is time for a conversation I suggest first

asking what branch the veteran might have served and then the next response should be nothing more than something like, " it must have been quite an experience" and let it develop from there.

My last thought

Know this; David Berkowitz, Gary Ridgway, Jeffrey Dahmer, Timothy McVeigh, John Allen Muhammad, Charles Whitman and many other serial killers have all served their country in uniform and suffice it to say, they would not be considered a Hero nor would we "thank them for their service."

Thank you.

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