Veterans of Vietnam: Then and Now
Emma Spencer ‘22 • Amherst College • Summer 2021 • United States of America
https://www.vvthenandnow.com/

Section I

A common misconception of the Vietnam War is that the veterans are to blame for what happened during the war, but how can our nation blame teenagers who were forced into one of our most brutal and costly wars by corrupt politicians? My main goal for this project has always been to give Vietnam Veterans the platform they deserved 50 years ago to share their incredibly traumatic experiences and be accepted and heard by our country.

I grew up listening to stories about the Vietnam War from my grandfather, Naval officer Scott Wilson, Sr. of the minesweeper USS Reaper. It was not until my junior year of high school when The Vietnam War (Ken Burns, 2017) was released that I understood my grandfather to be a veteran: a young soldier in an enigmatic and gruesome war. This realization shocked me, but what shocked me more was the realization that my generation has been unaware of the horrors and truths of the Vietnam War. My project, Veterans of Vietnam: Then and Now, aims to give Vietnam War veterans the opportunity and platform to share their wartime experiences with each other and American civilians, including civilians from their generation and my generation.

The lack of recognition by American society/culture experienced by Vietnam veterans is due in many ways to the American government not being able to accept responsibility for their actions and admit failure (both then, during Vietnam, and now, during Afghanistan.) Rather, the US government ignored and downplayed the men and women they sent into battle to “fight for our freedom,” leaving millions of veterans riddled with PTSD and long lasting complications. Furthermore, the American public’s opinion of the Vietnam War was hateful, for veterans were not welcomed back with open arms as soldiers who fought in previous wars had been. Many of the veterans I interviewed were so harassed by civilians and troubled by the war when they got home that the interview I conducted is the first time since leaving Vietnam that they have talked about their wartime experiences with anyone. A few of them told me that it took them decades to tell others that they are Vietnam veterans from fear of hatred and loss of respect. While these soldiers were experiencing public hatred, they had to simultaneously battle their own demons from the war. The majority of the veterans I interviewed were in their early 20’s when they returned home: imagine being a 20-year-old veteran who has survived near death, has witnessed their best friends be brutally killed, and have not only no support, but also be faced with hatred upon their arrival home.

In 1968, the Tet Offensive occurred, a North Vietnamese Army and Viet Cong attack on all American troops in Vietnam which killed 246 US Troops on the first day and displaced over 70,000 South Vietnamese. At the same time, the Civil Rights battle was raging in the United States, Martin Luther King, Jr. was assassinated, Bobby Kennedy was assassinated, all during what would be the most brutal year of the Vietnam war. Many of the veterans I interviewed survived the Tet Offensive - three of those veterans are African-American, and survived both the Vietnam War and racism during the war. The Vietnam veteran population is diverse, and as I wanted to accurately reflect this, I decided to travel to gain different perspectives from all around our country. While I interviewed veterans in California, New York, and Massachusetts to try and find as many diverse stories as I possibly could, I struggled to get connected with a diverse group of veterans. While I was able to speak with many veterans who had varied experiences, many of the connections I had and places I went to consisted of majority white, male veterans. As I continue this project in the future, I am going to work to ensure that I interview a more diversified range of veterans by reaching out to organizations that support veterans of color, women, and members of the LGBTQ+ community. Although I did reach out to a veteran who runs a similar organization, now that I have many connections and know of more organizations, it will be easier for me to interview a more diverse population.
This project was initially designed to take place during the summer of 2020; when COVID-19 hit, I was convinced I would never be able to do the work. However, as Vietnam veterans were within the first age group that received the new vaccines, I was able to carry out my project on a broader scale than I originally intended. Although I did not travel to as many places as I had originally proposed, I interviewed 41 veterans in 3 months, which was greater than I could have imagined. Before COVID-19, it was challenging for me to find veterans who could speak about their traumatic experiences, but after the pandemic started, when these veterans were faced with the possibility of death by disease, many of them were more than eager to share their stories so that they, and the Vietnam War, are not forgotten. In order to connect with veterans across the country, I worked with my community partners, which include Vietnam Veterans of America (VVA), Associates of Vietnam Veterans of America, Vietnam Veterans Against the War, US Vietnam War Commemoration, and Witness to War Foundation. The VVA was incredibly helpful with my project as they granted me access to every VVA chapter location in America. I was able to connect with most of the veterans I interviewed through the VVA chapters. In turn, those veterans would often connect me with other vets who were willing to talk about their experiences. I interviewed 20 veterans on the east coast from the Chicopee chapter, the Brooklyn chapter, and attended the Vietnam War Memorial Wall opening ceremony in Fall River, MA that consisted of many Massachusetts VVA chapters. Mark Franklin from the US Vietnam War Commemoration connected me to Bob Breglio, a USS Midway Museum Docent who connected me to the 21 veterans I interviewed aboard the USS Midway in San Diego. The support I received from the organizations and the veterans was immense.

I struggled this summer with my mental health as the subject matter for this project was incredibly heavy. I was told I was suffering from vicarious trauma, which happens when one is surrounded and impacted by other people’s trauma. In June, I interviewed 15 veterans over the course of two weeks. When I was on the USS Midway in San Diego, I interviewed 21 veterans in 5 days. Conducting this many interviews in such a short amount of time was difficult for me. Many of the veterans I spoke with encountered heavy combat while in Vietnam. As it was the first time sharing those experiences for many of them, it was a very emotional experience. Sitting across from a 70-year-old man crying about something that happened to him 50 years ago is an overwhelming experience. During one of my interviews in San Diego, Mike Musso, a veteran, was telling me about his experience as a medevac. Musso told me that he held a young marine in his arms while the marine was bleeding out and Musso kept telling him, “You will be home soon.” Musso was sobbing while telling me this story, and as I began crying, I thought I would not be able to finish the remaining 10 interviews I had to conduct. After this experience, I had to reassess my mental health in accordance with my project. I was allowing my project to overrun my life. I was completely subsumed by the project and did not allow myself any time to process the stories I was hearing or any time to not work, so much so that I had to take time away from the project to allow and force myself to process what I was going through. I suggest to any future Projects for Peace recipients that they build time into their schedule for themselves. When you are working for yourself on a project that you are so passionate about, it is difficult to pull away and simply stop. If I was to redo this summer, I would have spaced out my interviews much more. On a typical interview day, I would interview 3 or 4 veterans back to back. This was not healthy.

This project changed me in so many ways. First, this was the first large scale project I have ever done. Having the opportunity to build a website, travel, and photograph and interview 40 veterans in three months is something I will forever be grateful for. I learned how to manage a budget, how to manage my time, and how to create something impactful in so little time. Second, I improved as a photographer. Taking 41 portraits taught me how to adapt in many situations and how to effectively direct my subjects to get the best photograph I could. Interviewing the veterans before I photographed them also helped my photography process, for I was able to connect with them on a deep emotional level, allowing them to be comfortable and vulnerable in front of the camera. Third, I respect Vietnam veterans and people who serve our country so much more than before I did this project. A goal of this project is to give Vietnam
veterans a voice so civilians can understand why the US Government swept this war under the rug, and through the implementation of the project, I became one of the civilians I am targeting. I now understand the atrocities that ensued during the Vietnam War, and am so appreciative of the men and women who sacrificed their lives for their country. This project changed my perspective of the world because I view all veterans in a different light: they are young men and women asked by their nation to face the most brutal and horrifying situations a person could imagine, and they do it with valor and grace. I also view war differently. I have always viewed war in an American mindset, believing that soldiers are excited to fight for their nation, excited and proud to sacrifice themselves for something their government is telling them. Now, I view war as the ugliest part of human nature, for war is not romantic like we have been taught in school. War is blood, violence, hatred, and lives sacrificed for politicians that cannot reach agreements. Peace to me is the remedy of a conflict or struggle which a certain group of people face.

This project will foster peace on at least two levels: first, by helping veterans scarred by war (any war) feel less isolated by their experiences; second, by helping viewers grapple with the true costs of war in order to prevent future conflicts. My website, https://www.vvthenandnow.com/, will allow people to view both current and old photographs while listening to audio recordings of the veterans speaking about their experiences. The current photographs are portraits that I have taken of the veterans this summer, and the old photographs are ones provided by the veterans from their time during the war. By building the website on my own, I was able utilize the Projects for Peace funds for equipment, travel, and a website subscription for 12.5 years. As a result, I will be able to continue this project until the last Vietnam veteran passes away, and I hope to interview as many Vietnam veterans as possible. One day, I may possibly make the website about both Vietnam veterans and Afghanistan/Iraq veterans to bridge yet another gap between veterans from different wars, and American civilians and veterans.

“Veterans of Vietnam: Then and Now” gives Vietnam veterans the opportunity and platform to tell their stories 50 years after the war. The most important thing I learned during this project is that if you give people, especially veterans, the platform they deserve to tell their stories, regardless of how traumatic they are, people will share to both help themselves move past the trauma and to teach others how to prevent tragedy in the future.
Section II
Maryanna Hiester, Vietnam Veteran Memorial, Green Hill Park, Worcester, Massachusetts, 2021