

FAMILIES ON THE BRINK

STILL IN 'NAM—The author (center) counsels a Vietnam veteran and his wife. Wives are the forgotten victims of the war.

V IETNAM veterans' wives and children are the forgotten warriors of the Vietnam War. For them, the war never ended, it came home. Often they share their lives with veterans afflicted with Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), the name given to a devastating psychological problem that plagues thousands of Vietnam veterans.

Since 1969, about 600,000 Vietnam veterans have sought government help

Aphrodite Matsakis, Ph.D., a VA psychologist since 1975, works at the VA Medical Center in Washington, D.C. Her book, Vietnam Wives: Women and Children Surviving Life with Veterans Suffering Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, is published by Woodbine House, 10400 Connecticut Ave. #512, Kensington, MD 20895. Cost is \$16.95, plus \$2.50 for shipping.

By Aphrodite Matsakis

for readjustment difficulties. Nationwide, Vet Centers treat about 150,000 veterans a year and an additional 28,000 are in treatment for PTSD in 13 VA Medical Centers which have special PTSD units.

"The psychological casualties of Vietnam are increasing. We still haven't seen the peak," said Dr. Ben Jennings, clinical psychologist at the Vet Center in Silver Spring, Md. Many experts agree that between 500,000 and 1 million Vietnam veterans may suffer from PTSD. Some authorities estimate that the number of veterans in need of psychiatric help may reach 1.5 million. Based on this, 900,000 Vietnam wives and more than 1 million children may also be affected. Among the afflicted families is the wife and children of Vietnam veteran "Big Al."

Al and his family are real people.

Their names have been changed, to protect their privacy, but their problems are real.

"I have never set foot in Vietnam. Yet, I consider myself a veteran, too," said Al's wife, Lisa. "Most Vietnam veterans served for only 13 months. I've lived, breathed, slept and fought with that war for 13 years."

As the wife of a combat veteran with an untreated case of severe PTSD, Lisa has lived through many crises. Her husband has suffered from the usual symptoms — flashbacks, nightmares, emotional numbing and rage. Every Fourth of July, Veterans Day and Memorial Day, Lisa can expect smashed record albums or another hole in the wall. She can also expect to stay awake all night holding Al. For Al, and many combat veterans, anger and sorrow go hand in hand.

"Basically, Al has a good heart," said Lisa. "But he also has anger, which he sometimes directs at everything and

everybody, especially me." When Al falls to the floor with flashbacks, or commands her or the children to "walk the point" with him. Lisa and her children fear for their own safety and his.

How can they protect him? How can they protect themselves? How long will it take until he "comes back" this time? What if he never "comes back" or kills himself to end his anguish? At such times, Lisa caresses her husband's face and tells him, "It's me, Lisa, your wife. You're home, not in 'Nam. It's me, Lisa, your wife and I love you."

Lisa never makes rice, Oriental vegetables or any form of barbecue. Rice and burning meat remind Al of Vietnam. Popcorn is also forbidden because Al might react to the sound of popping kernels as if it were gunfire. Even today, most of the family is unaware of the unique stresses of the Vietnam war. Lisa fears that someone will discuss the Vietnam War or politics and send her husband into a rage or another period of emotional numbing.

Sometimes Al can stay behind his impenetrable wall for hours, days or weeks. Like many PTSD veterans, he has periods where he is normal, free of pain and anger. But when he withdraws into himself, Lisa feels as if she is married to a stranger.

"A part of Al is unknown to us," said Lisa. "His war medals sit in the middle of the living room, and pictures of Vietnam decorate every wall. But neither I nor the children can mention the word *Vietnam*. Newspapers, news magazines and war movies are forbidden, as are most feelings. Al just can't take anger or tears. They give him headaches and make his war injuries hurt.

"My biggest fear is that someday my husband's depression will engulf him, that I will lose him entirely."

THE blunting of emotions experienced by Al, is called psychic or emotional numbing, a core symptom of PTSD. It is not a sign of insanity, but a normal reaction to an abnormal amount of stress. Under traumatic conditions such as combat, the person tends to repress feelings of anger, grief, guilt or powerlessness. At the same time, however, he is shutting off his ability to feel positive emotions such as love, joy and tenderness. Psychic numbing has been found not only among Vietnam vets, but also among World War I, World War II and Korean War veterans, as well as among survivors of other traumas.

Psychic numbing was necessary for

many veterans to emotionally survive the trauma of war. Problems arose, however, when the numb state persisted after the war. While numbing may not necessarily create problems on the job where intimacy is usually not required, it creates havoc in marriage and other close relationships.

"I can tell the minute Al walks through the door whether his 'Vietnam Wall' is going to be up for the night," said Lisa. "If it is, there's no chance of sex or any other kind of communication.

"But he loves me," she said. "I know

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he loves me. And he's a good man, an honest man, who is hurting himself. But in hurting himself, he hurts us. The only reason he can't feel for me is because he can't feel for himself."

In an effort to better understand the pressures that PTSD can impose on marriage and children, counselors at each of 189 Vet Centers were asked to complete a questionnaire regarding their observations of the impact of PTSD on family life. The following summary is based on the responses of 102 of the 189 Vet Centers existing in 1988.

Ninety percent of the counselors agree that some of the most common problems reported by the wives and girlfriends seen at Vet Centers include:

- Coping with the veteran's emotional numbing;
- Coping with the veteran's hypersensitivity;

- Loneliness and social isolation;
- Coping with the veteran's verbal abuse;
- Fearing to speak to the veteran;
- Feeling confused about which problems are Vietnam related and which are not;
- Self-doubts created by the veteran's emotional instability or the family's financial problems;
- Feeling that she has lost her identity in constantly responding to the veteran's needs and many family crises; and
- Coping with the veteran's outbursts of anger, such as destruction of property.

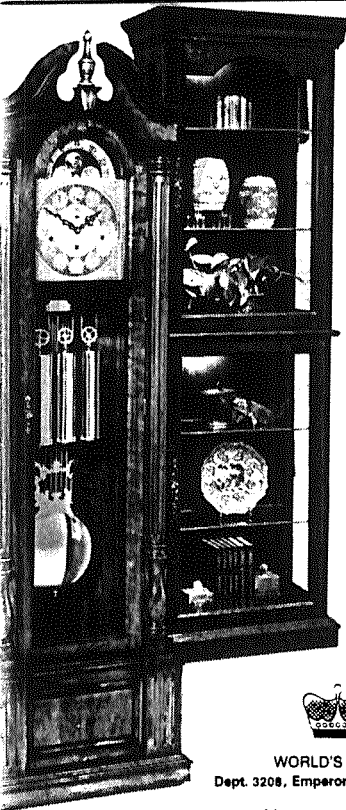
The patterns in the marriage of Lisa and Al typify some PTSD-afflicted households. However, their marriage cannot be considered representative of all marriages touched by the war.

In the first place, not all Vietnam veterans suffer from PTSD. As stated by Nat'l Cmdr. H.F. "Sparky" Gierke in "PTSD: A Lifetime of Nightmares," in the May 1989 issue of *THE AMERICAN LEGION MAGAZINE*, "The majority of Vietnam veterans came back from the war, went to school, found careers and started families. Yet there are many veterans from that war who cannot sleep at night or who suffer from other problems that can be traced to their combat experiences. Their lives and those of their families are held hostage by PTSD."

Secondly, when PTSD does exist, the ways in which it manifests in the veteran and affects his marriage vary considerably from one household to the next. For example, in some cases PTSD is an overpowering phenomenon that almost totally dominates the life or personality of the veteran, rendering him incapable of working full time for any significant period. In other cases the veteran has only a mild case of PTSD and rarely experiences symptoms, except when current stresses arise in his life or on the anniversary of the death of a buddy or an important battle. Otherwise, he may be minimally affected.

Sometimes the PTSD is hidden. For example, there are veterans with no outward signs of problems who are economically prosperous because of their workaholicism, which may represent a means of dealing with, or not dealing with, Vietnam experiences. Some of these successful veterans may be trying to escape their inner torment

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FAMILIES

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via achievement. Nevertheless, if they have psychic numbing and adopt a life-style devoid of emotion, they may be alienated from their families and, over time, their families may emotionally divorce them.

The people and problems discussed in this article are based on clinical experience and research on veteran families who have sought help at Vet Centers, not on the Vietnam veteran population as a whole. Thus, their concerns do not necessarily reflect those of Vietnam veterans and wives who have not sought help.

Help is available at VA Medical Centers and at 189 Vietnam Veteran's Outreach Centers. Yet, many suffering veterans and their wives fail to reach out for this help because of the stigma associated with being in emotional pain.

Many veterans suffer in silence rather than risk being identified as a "crybaby," "complainer" or "veteran with problems." Seeking help is an act of courage and honesty, not a sign of weakness and many who have sought help have benefited immensely.

COMRADES IN DISTRESS

Readers who can help these veterans are urged to do so. Usually an eyewitness statement is needed in support of a VA claim.

Notices are run only at the request of American Legion Service Officers representing claimants, using Search for Witness Forms available only from State Legion Service Officers. Please contact CID (number). The American Legion Magazine, P.O. Box 10555, Indianapolis, IN 46206

USS Tuttila ARG 4 Lawrence A. Tyrrell needs witnesses to verify a claim that while aboard ship in 1944, he suffered a head injury from a cable striking wooden beams. Contact CID 1210

Medical Supply Ptn., XII A.F. Service Cmd. Leonard B. Rishkolski needs witnesses to verify a claim that while stationed at Oran Air Base, North Africa in March 1943, he suffered a nervous breakdown and was hospitalized. Contact CID 1211

USS Maloy DE 791 Brian T. Lumsden needs witnesses to verify a claim that while aboard the USS Maloy DE 791 in June 1944, he suffered hearing loss and tinnitus. Contact CID 1212

7th Army HQ Daniel L. Bizzell needs witnesses to verify a claim that while stationed at Stuttgart, Germany in July/Aug. 1964, he injured his head and hand in an auto accident. Contact CID 1213

G Co., 2/5, 1st Mar. Div. Raymond J. Llewellyn needs witnesses to verify a claim that while stationed at Vietnam in 1969, he contracted a skin disease called tinea versicolor. Contact CID 1214

217th AAA Gun Bn., 90 M/M Everitt M. Soper needs witnesses to verify a claim that while stationed at St. Lo, France in August 1944, he was hit by flack when a 500 lb. bomb blew up about 20 feet from his foxhole. Contact CID 1215

20th & 40th Tac. Ftr. Wings James A. Kendzierski needs witnesses to verify a claim that while stationed at RAF Weathersfield in 1969-70, he suffered from high blood pressure. He injured his back and was hospitalized while stationed at RAF Lakenheath in 1974. Contact CID 1216

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