

*the papers are full of vietnam-vet-gone-mad stories, but none pinpoints the problem—if we want our soldiers to come home, we have to let them*

# THE UNRETURNING ARMY

*And through some mooned Valhalla there will pass  
Battalions and battalions, scarred from hell;  
The unreturning army that was youth;  
The legions who have suffered and are dust.*

—SIEGFRIED SASSOON, *Prelude: The Troops*

HE SITS IN THE CEMENT-BLOCK visitors' room wearing a brace on the leg that had been shattered by a policeman's shotgun, his hands plucking at his shirt or at his scraggly brown beard or at his denim trousers stamped with the initials CCI, which stand

article

By **PHILIP CAPUTO**

for Caddo Correctional Institute. The prison lies in the pine-and-cypress woods near Shreveport, Louisiana, and Wayne Robert Felde has been waiting behind its walls and barbed-wire fences—fences like the kind that surrounded the fire bases in Vietnam, double-apron and concertina with tin cans strung from the wire to warn the guards that someone is trying to get through—waiting to hear if this, his 33<sup>rd</sup> year, will be the last of his life. He's waited for death before. He's no stranger to it. He felt it seeping into his body the night three years ago when the cop's shotgun slammed a load of double-0 buckshot into his leg at point-blank range, and it felt real good, dying. Death is peace; death means the nightmare is

over. But if it comes his time, it will not be administered by an enemy AK-47, or a booby trap, or a policeman's 12-gauge; an executioner will throw the switch to the electric chair in the Louisiana State Penitentiary at Angola and Wayne Felde will be high-voltaged into the oblivion for which he longs.

In 1980, Felde was condemned to death for the 1979 killing of a Shreveport police officer, the second man he had murdered since his discharge from the Army in 1970. The jury said it was first degree, but there is some argument about that. Without indulging too deeply in poetic metaphor, you could say that Feld was not at »

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*"There is no Walter Cronkite to report the weekly body count from this psychological combat zone."*

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the scene of either crime. He was where he has been for nearly 14 years, at a place called Fire Base Polly Ann, a dusty, sand-bagged, wire-enclosed hill near the Cambodian border. It was bad bush, triple-tiered jungle canopy, wet and gloomy green except in the places where Agent Orange had brought those trees the only autumn they'll ever know, the trails sown with mines, N.V.A. soldiers waiting in the elephant grass, bad bad bush, "the jungle of the dead," Felde called it in a letter to a friend. He was there physically from March 1968 until March 1969. His body rotated home in a big silver plane, but the rest of him never came back. The rest of him is still *there*, so there that he cannot eat the rice served in the Caddo prison because its smell reminds him of Vietnam and transforms the faces of his cellmates into the faces of Viet Cong and makes Felde want to waste them right then and there. That's what the war was all about, wasn't it? Kill V.C. Body count. Felde cannot eat rice and doesn't sleep very well, because he has these dreams. He sees muzzle flashes, he hears grenades exploding, he smells bodies burned by napalm, he feels the intestines of a disemboweled soldier slipping through his fingers. Felde's nightmares have the terrifying clarity of hallucinations, but they are not the works of a demented imagination; they are documentaries, if you will, replays of the things he experienced as a 19-year-old machine gunner with the Fourth Infantry Division. And those experiences have dismembered his mind as thoroughly as a B-40 rocket dismembered one of his buddies, a black kid nicknamed D.J.

At his trials, several psychologists and a psychiatrist testified that he was not in touch with reality the night he shot Patrolman Thomas Tompkins in Shreveport, not in touch with reality the day he shot Butch Blackwell in Greenbelt, Maryland. But you don't need a wallful of degrees to know that this man, if not crazy, is about as close to the line as anyone would ever care to get. And you don't have to have had, as I've had, a lot of experience with jailhouse jive artists to know that he isn't faking madness to get off on an insanity plea. All you have to do is spend a few hours with him. His hands fidget constantly. He chain-smokes. Sometimes he talks compulsively; at other times, he falls into long silences, staring off with eyes in which rage and grief fuse to create a

tormented expression. He says things like "I hate everybody, I hate myself most of all." And he radiates a violent tension that makes you feel the way you imagine a demolitions expert must feel when he's trying to defuse a time bomb.

War was the card you dealt Wayne Felde, America the Beautiful, and now he's letting you know that as long as it isn't over for him, it won't be over for you, either.

"I don't feel society needs to welcome me back. Just give me help. I'm a sick man. The killings didn't happen because I'm a bad person. They happened because I couldn't help it. If society doesn't want to help me, I want to die, because death means the nightmare will be over. And if it doesn't kill me in the electric chair, I'll kill myself or someone else. There'll be another body."

As we used to say in 'Nam, there it is.

Felde's words could be dismissed as ravings if he were an aberration. But according to the Vietnam Veterans of America, a powerful lobbying organization, he isn't. He's in prison; so are 70,000 other Vietnam combat veterans. He's divorced; the divorce rate among this same group is twice that of the rest of their generation. Felde was unable to hold a job for longer than a few months after his discharge; depending on how you break out the sample, Vietnam combat veterans may top 20 percent in unemployment. Felde attempted suicide in prison; his fellow Vietnam combat veterans have a suicide rate estimated as 23 to 33 percent higher than that of nonveterans.

There are people who disagree with the V.V.A.'s numbers. But even the prestigious American Psychiatric Association agrees that *whatever* the figures, they point to a real problem; and in 1980, the A.P.A. recognized the condition Felde and other combat vets are suffering as a bona fide psychological malady. Its name: posttraumatic stress disorder.

Posttraumatic stress disorder. It seems fitting for a war that gave the world such arcana as "protective reaction air strike" to hand us a phrase like posttraumatic stress disorder to describe what was known in the World Wars and Korea as shell shock or battle fatigue. The symptoms are much the same, with this difference: Battle fatigue occurred most often in combat or soon afterward; the symptoms of P.T.S.D. are showing up five, ten and as many as 15 years after

the soldier has come home. Every now and then, we read about some French farmer, plowing the fields of Verdun, getting blown up by an unexploded mine or shell that has been buried for decades. Something like that is happening in the minds of Vietnam veterans: experiences and emotions long repressed are detonating unexpectedly, frequently with catastrophic results. There is no Walter Cronkite to report the weekly body count from this psychological combat zone, so here are a few dispatches:

Gerald Highman, a twice-wounded ex-Marine from Columbus, Ohio, returned from Vietnam in 1971, got a steady job and later married his childhood sweetheart. Though troubled by depressions and flashbacks resulting from his war experiences—he was only 17 when he went to Vietnam—he was seeing a counselor and appeared to have his life in order. He didn't. On April 21, 1981, he killed his wife with a shotgun, which he then turned on himself. He died in the hospital a few hours later.

In Philadelphia, Michael Mulchay, an Army veteran, had a reputation among his friends as a devoted father to his two children and as a reliable worker. He installed burglar alarms, a job that allowed him to carry a gun. Although he had no record of mental disturbances, friends noticed that his behavior changed whenever the subject of Vietnam came up. He slid over the edge one recent night in a bar. He and an ex-Marine had been drinking and reminiscing about the war. Mulchay went to play the pinball machine, then, without provocation, drew his revolver and shot a 19-year-old customer in the head.

On January 30, 1981, a Hammond, Indiana, man named Gary Cooper fought his last fire fight—with the police. Wounded twice when he was with the Marines in Vietnam, Cooper had just been laid off and had been unable to find another job. He barricaded himself in his apartment and, suffering from a severe flashback, yelled to his wife to look out for the things he was seeing on the wall—palm fronds, elephant grass, flares. He fired a couple of blasts with his shotgun. The police arrived and he opened up on them, and they fired back and heard him scream, "I'm hit!" He was. Gary Cooper was pronounced dead on arrival at the hospital.

It's a big army, this legion of men with hidden wounds. Dr. John P. Wilson, a Cleveland State University psychologist who recently completed a three-year study of the war's aftereffects, says that P.T.S.D. afflicts 500,000 of Vietnam's combat veterans. Other researchers put the number at 700,000, which would give a psychiatric casualty rate among

combatants of 50 to 70 percent. (Only 1,100,000 of the 2,800,000 men who served in the war zone saw action.)

"The combat veteran has a higher level of stress," Wilson tells me in an interview. "Most of these men have repressed the Vietnam experience for so long that it's become an integral part of their personalities. They are in a constant state of stress. Daily stresses they might have been able to cope with—a divorce, or losing a job, or not having enough money, or problems with the kids—may push them beyond their threshold. They become fully symptomatic. They revert back to the warrior."

"Fully symptomatic" means the veteran manifests several of the 25 major signs of posttraumatic stress disorder. Those include prolonged spells of depression or anxiety, outbursts of apparently senseless rage, chronic insomnia, war nightmares, emotional distancing from children, wife or other loved ones, intrusive, obsessive memories of a war experience and flashbacks—hallucinatory re-creations by the former soldier's subconscious of the sights, sounds and smells of the battlefield. Although P.T.S.D. can degenerate into actual psychosis, Wilson and clinical psychologist Dr. Charles Figley of Purdue University (a Marine enlisted man in Vietnam) emphasize that the condition is untraditional as psychological disorders go; for example, it doesn't relate back to the formative years of a person's personality but is, rather, a reaction to the extreme stress of combat. The key word is combat. Rear-echelon types do not suffer from P.T.S.D. at all. As a general rule, the more fighting a man sees, the more likely he is to be troubled afterward, depending on that mysterious, unmeasurable quality called tolerance.

"What was an ordeal for me might not have been one for you," says Frank Terry, a World War Two veteran and information director for the Veterans Administration in Los Angeles. "It's like the tolerance for alcohol. War affects different people in different ways."

But what made Vietnam so different that anywhere from half to three fourths of its combat veterans are, to varying degrees, going haywire? War is war, after all. Getting shot at wasn't any less unpleasant in Belleau Wood or at Normandy or on the Pusan perimeter than it was in Khé Sanh, Huế or the Iron Triangle. Nevertheless, Vietnam was like no other conflict Americans have fought.

You had to have been there to know what it was like, patrolling in those jungles, swamps and rice paddies, mud up to your ass, leeches doing their Dracula act on you, mosquitoes pumping you full of malaria, wet leaves caressing your face, and the trails winding off into nowhere, the point man looking for trip wires and ambushes, and the thick silence suddenly broken by an explosion,

the point man's on his way home, maybe in pieces, maybe with his legs or his testicles gone. You had to have spent a few nights on perimeter watch at some fire base, waiting for the mortars to start falling, waiting for silence, yes, silence, waiting for the frogs and crickets and other creepy crawlies out there in the malarial slime to stop croaking and chirping, because when they did, it meant an infiltrator was slithering toward you, and then—*crack-crack-crack*—the infiltrator lets off a few rounds, but you don't know if he's some lone, gung-ho Charley looking for the V.C. equivalent of a Congressional Medal of Honor or the point man for a whole battalion massing in the blood-black darkness for a rush at the wire. And if it wasn't a patrol or a perimeter watch, it was a C.A.—combat assault—and, sweet Jesus, that could be something, swooping down at 100 miles an hour, down, down, down, a roller coaster with no up to it, the door gunner's M-60 spitting brass cartridges 700 a minute, the antiaircraft fire going *pop-pop-pop* so that you thought you were trapped in some kind of huge, lethal popcorn machine, down and down, the green of the paddies rushing up at you, green flecked with the gray of bursting mortars, down into the crackling, thudding chaos of a hot LZ.

And if you were a grunt, you did this *all the time*. You stayed in the bush your whole tour except for a five-day clap-catching expedition to Bangkok or Hong Kong—R&R they called it. The rest of the time, you were in combat. Here's a comparison for you: The Sixth Marines, the regiment Leon Uris wrote about in *Battle Cry*, spent only six weeks of its four years in the South Pacific fighting the Japanese. Constant service at the front made Vietnam a very lethal war for combat outfits. The Marines suffered *more* casualties in Indochina than in World War Two, about 102,000 dead and wounded, as compared with 87,000.

This bloodshed would have been tolerable if it had accomplished something. In a conventional army, progress is measured by seizing hills or towns or road junctions. You take this place, move on and take the next place, and the more places you take, the closer you are to victory. MacArthur was right: There is no substitute for victory, because, to the combat soldier, the drive toward victory symbolizes commitment, tells him that the hell he's going through is for something. In Vietnam, the only measure of victory was one of the most hideous, morally corrupting ideas ever conceived by the military mind—the body count. You fought over the same ground again and again, month after month, your only object to kill more of them than they did of you. In 1972, I read an account of a patrol from the 28th Infantry, one of the last line outfits to fight in the war.

The patrol suffered two casualties in a fire fight outside a village where I had been in my first fire fight—in 1965. Put it this way: When I got into my scrap, the troopers in that patrol were in seventh grade. It was a long war.

It was also a young one, literally a case of sending boys to do a man's job. Most of the soldiers who went there probably carried Clearasil in their duffel bags. The average age of the World War Two soldier was 26; in Vietnam, it was 19, an age at which a youth is barely equipped to deal with the ups and downs of ordinary life, let alone the incredible stresses of the battlefield.

Finally, it was a guerrilla war, which meant you couldn't tell the good guys (and girls) from the bad guys (and girls), unless you were fighting North Vietnamese regulars. You could tell only when they shot at you, and then it was too late. That did two things to the American fighting man: It knocked his ideological pins out from under him; most went to war believing they were going to help save the Vietnamese and stop communism, but their experience made it impossible to maintain that conviction. The Vietnamese whom they thought they were saving turned out to be indifferent to salvation, American style; and if they weren't indifferent, they were hostile. Lacking a clear demarcation between who was enemy and who was friend, the fighting man became suspicious of all Vietnamese, women and children included. The war was totally unpredictable and treacherous; the soldier had no idea who was going to try to kill him, had no idea if an ambush or booby trap or sniper was waiting for him in that "friendly" village down the trail. This condition eventually induced a kind of paranoia and even a hatred for the very people he had initially wanted to save. All he wanted to do was save himself, to survive. And when you're faced with a choice between survival and death or maiming, you are apt to do some things the folks back home won't want to hear about. For the benefit of those who condemned the American soldier as a homicidal loony, I will tell two brief war stories that I did not include in my book *A Rumor of War*.

In 1965, a nine-year-old Vietnamese girl had befriended a Marine company near Chu Lai. She often came up to the perimeter selling odds and ends she kept in a wicker basket: razor blades, condoms, Cokes. She appeared one afternoon and eight Marines gathered around her, not knowing that under the razor blades and Cokes were a couple of pounds of plastic explosive with an electrical blasting cap and a battery. I don't know how the V.C.—excuse me, the glorious freedom fighters of the National Liberation Front—had duped her into a suicide mission, but they had. When she bent down to get something out of the



basket, she connected the blasting-cap wires to the poles of the battery. Score: one nine-year-old girl blown to fragments, two Marines killed, six wounded.

A few months later, a communications specialist in my battalion forgot to be paranoid. He was alone, stringing communications wire between two outposts in an area officially classified as secure. Nothing but friendly paddy farmers. Seeing he was by himself, a few of the friendly paddy farmers wounded him with carbine fire, took his rifle and equipment and captured him. One of the farmers was later captured himself and under, shall we say, persuasive questioning told what happened next: The Marine was dragged into a village, where he was beaten with rifle butts and clubs, then executed with a shot to the back of the head. The usual surgery was performed on his genitals, which were then stuffed into his mouth. The body was tossed into a river. Apparently, it wasn't weighted properly; it floated to the surface a few days later and was discovered by one of our patrols.

I would ask those who, from their safe editorial offices, their college campuses and suburban living rooms, condemned the American soldier in Vietnam these questions: How would you have behaved in such an environment? What kind of person would you have become?

Even primitive cultures recognize that war is not a natural condition, that evil spirits enter the warrior in battle. That is why these cultures, such as the Navaho Indians, perform elaborate purification rites for the returning warrior. His soul is cleansed, his feats of arms are passed into tribal lore, he is accepted back into the tribe and forgiven whatever taboos he may have broken in the crisis of combat. In modern society, these rites often take the form of welcoming ceremonies, patriotic speeches, ticker-tape parades with bands and flags and bunting. The veteran is given first choice in the job market, lavished with benefits such as the generous GI Bill afforded the men who fought in World War Two. In psychologist Wilson's words, "These are signs of a societal commitment, signs that your country was behind you."

The Vietnam veteran returned to find that the country was not only not behind him, it was at best indifferent to him, at worst against him. Flown in a jet plane that took him from the front line to his front porch in only 48 hours, leaving him no time to make sense out of what he'd been through, he was ignored by the mainstream of American society, stigmatized by the liberal left and by the media as a dope-crazed killer, an accomplice of a criminal foreign policy. And he lost whatever shreds of faith he had left, shrank into himself,

refused to talk about his feelings and experiences, repressed powerful, unresolved emotions. Johnny didn't come marching home from Vietnam; he crept back, furtive, secretive and alone, like a convict just released from prison.

"Vietnam veterans were stigmatized as villains, so they held everything in," Wilson says. "But carrying a problem around is a stress in itself. It must be talked out or acted out eventually."

If my own postwar experiences and those of other veterans I've talked to are typical, the main unresolved problem is guilt, a triple burden of guilt. There is the guilt all soldiers feel for having broken the taboo against killing, a guilt as old as war itself. In *The Aeneid*, Virgil ascribes these words to Aeneas:

*In me it is not fit, holy things to bear,*

*Red as I am with slaughter and new from war;*

*Till in some living stream I cleanse the guilt*

*Of dire debate and blood in battle spill.*

Add to this the soldier's sense of shame for having fought in actions that resulted, indirectly or directly, in the deaths of civilians. Then pile on top of that an attitude of social opprobrium, an attitude that made the fighting men feel personally morally responsible for the war, and you get your proverbial walking time bomb. Wilson has noted that some of the crimes committed by Vietnam veterans are violent, hideously violent. Because these men were never allowed to remove the taint in Virgil's "living stream," some are trying, through the commission of terrible acts, to call attention to the evil they perceive in themselves and force society to punish them.

That isn't all. The Yanks came home from World War Two to a generous GI Bill that went a long way toward helping them adjust to civilian life. Lyndon Johnson tried to veto the bill's educational benefits, then reintroduced it under pressure in 1966. In 1972, Richard Nixon successfully vetoed the Veterans Health Care Expansion Act; he said the act was fiscally irresponsible and inflationary, an interesting claim to make at a time when the U. S. was still spending billions to blow Vietnam to bits with B-52s and poison its forests with Agent Orange. And in his initial cost-cutting efforts, David Stockman, President Reagan's budget wizard, wanted to cut out the Veterans Administration Readjustment Counseling Program for Veterans of the Vietnam Era. He argued that it was inflationary, though spending more billions on a fleet of block-long carriers and squadrons of Buck Rogers bombers was not. Bowing to pressure from Viet-

nam veterans' organizations, the Administration finally decided to leave the program alone—for now.

And if there ever was a generation of American soldiers that needed adequate benefits, the Vietnam generation was it. America sent its most poorly educated sons to Indochina, dug them out of the basement levels of society and gave them rifles, while the privileged bought tickets to Toronto or hid in the bunkers of student deferments. With no marketable skills and a couple of years of high school, thousands of Vietnam veterans returned to an economy that combined inflation with a tight job market; they went from the firing line to the unemployment line, and the Government's tightwad attitude toward them was another sign that society regarded them as outcasts.

Treat a man like a pariah and he'll act like one. That's what Wayne Felde did. He was a postwar baby-boomer, the son of a man who'd been a medic in the South Pacific, of a woman who was a nurse. Born in Wisconsin on March 25, 1949, he and his two older sisters were raised by their mother in Glendale, Maryland, where he graduated from DuVal High School in 1967. His yearbook shows a smiling boy with medium-length hair, dark eyes, a broad nose and mouth, an old-fashioned-looking kid wearing a bow tie. His name appears under the photograph, and beneath his name, this false prophecy: "Wayne . . . go to college to become a veterinarian." But Felde's mother did not have the money to send him to college (his father, haunted by his experiences in the South Pacific, had committed suicide when Felde was 13). Anyway, his grades weren't good enough—a C average. So he joined the Army with the idea of attending college on the GI Bill. Following basic training, he volunteered for Vietnam, though, as an only son, he didn't have to. Why? The prince of Camelot had something to do with it.

"I grew up with Kennedy," Felde says, tapping his leg brace with his cane. "You know, 'Ask not what your country can do for you; ask what you can do for your country.'"

Undoubtedly, he had other, more personal motives for volunteering, but he won't say what they were. Perhaps he had inherited a dark legacy from his father. Whatever his reasons, he arrived in Vietnam on March 25, 1968, his 19th birthday. And for a present, he received an almost literal baptism of fire. He was assigned as a machine gunner to Company D, Second Battalion, 35th Infantry, Fourth Infantry Division, then operating off Fire Base Polly Ann near the Central Highlands city of Kontum. This is how he describes his initiation:



"We were flown out to Polly Ann, me and a few other replacements. Company D was running patrols off another fire base out in the bush, and they'd run into an N.V.A. ambush that day. The big guns on the fire base were firing like crazy, there were air strikes, and we heard the napalm was hitting both because the fighting was close up. The chopper couldn't fly us out to the company. The LZ was too hot. We waited around until it was getting close to dark. Another chopper came into Polly Ann. We had to drag four bodies off to get on. They were our own guys and they were all bloody and burned from our own napalm. The bodies smelled because they were burned, and the smell made me sick. I threw up. The guys with me threw up, too. There was blood all over the floor.

"We made a C.A. on the hill and joined the company. Officers just picked us at random and sent us out. I saw my first fire fight then. I was scared shitless. It lasted on and off all night. The woods were on fire from the napalm. The woods burned for days. You could smell the burned bodies. I was scared. The point man was out in the woods. The N.V.A. had let him through before they sprang the ambush. He was cut off from the rest of the company. He was screaming because he was burned by the napalm. Some guys said he was being tortured by the N.V.A. We couldn't get to him because of the N.V.A. and because the woods were on fire, so some other guys in the company opened up on him and shot him to put him out of his misery.

"Come daylight, the fighting was over. We had to pick up pieces of our guys to send home. Arms and legs and three quarters of a whole person. Me and some guys got to the point man, and when we went to pick him up, his arms came off because he was burned so bad. The smell was bad and we got sick again. We sent him and the other pieces back. I thought about their moms and about my mom, and someone offered me a little reefer. I'd never smoked it before, but I smoked it then and from then on."

For the next seven months, Felde humped his M-60 machine gun on patrols through the spooky mountains near the Cambodian border. It's all a blur to him, with a few incidents that stand out with the kind of clarity that makes a man leap awake in the middle of the night, screaming. The time a helicopter landed and a soldier jumped out right onto a mine that blew him to bloody tatters and knocked the chopper over. The time D.J., the black kid from New Jersey, took a direct hit from a B-40 rocket and Felde was in the landing zone when the medevac brought in what was left—a chunk of D.J.'s arm and a boot with half a leg stuck in it. Then there was the massacre, the horror

that gave Felde's psyche a mortal wound.

He was sent out with a makeshift squad on what was to be a routine security patrol in a supposedly safe rear area near battalion headquarters.

"We were crossing a rice paddy when V.C. mortar fire came in. The shrapnel cut one guy across the middle. His guts spilled out. I grabbed his insides and tried to shove them back. It looked like afterbirth, and it just slid through my hands, and the guy died. It didn't take long. Then we took some small-arms fire from a village. I don't remember if it was much, but we charged the village and started shooting. It was near dusk, and all I could see were muzzle flashes and grenades going off, just noises and flashes, like the Fourth of July. Everyone started shooting. There was total panic. You know how it is when something like that gets started. You can't stop it. There was nobody in charge and everyone was shouting and shooting, shouting, 'Shoot this, shoot that,' and I went into a hut that was filled with people and sprayed it. We wasted everyone and everything in that village. We wasted the women and the kids and the old men and the dogs. I swear to God, the dogs looked like V.C. to me, the dogs had slanted eyes. Then we burned the village to the ground. It was the most awful thing, and I still dream about it. Listen, man, *I dream this shit almost every night*. I see the flashes and hear the gunfire and the explosions, like the Fourth of July, and when I wake up, I don't know where the fuck I am. I don't talk to anyone for hours, days sometimes. I try to block it out of my mind, but I can't."

Serving out the remainder of his tour as a mortar crewman, Felde returned to the U. S. in March 1969. He received the standard homecoming for a Vietnam veteran. After spending his leave at his mother's home in Maryland, he hitchhiked to his new post at Fort Dix, New Jersey. A car stopped. Felde, in uniform, ran up and stuck his head in the window; the driver called him a killer and sprayed him in the face with a portable fire extinguisher.

"I heard that all the time. I couldn't wear my uniform on the street without being called a baby killer, a woman killer, but I'd shrink away, because I knew it was true. It was true, but you had to do it. It was a survival thing and you had to live with it."

He had to live with it, but he didn't know how. Honorably discharged in 1970, Felde returned to Maryland a stranger to his family, a stranger to himself. To see the change in him, all you had to do was look at the boyish graduate smiling at you from the pages of the high school yearbook and then at the driver's-license photo taken of him after he left the Army; the eyes are at

once terrifying and terrified, the face pinched and distorted and old. It's like looking at pictures of Jekyll and Hyde. The change in his personality matched his physical transformation. Despite the shock of his father's suicide, he had been a happy-go-lucky student in high school, gregarious and popular. After his discharge, he became withdrawn and angry, drank heavily, got into fights, had nightmares about the butchery in the village. He went to college on the GI Bill and quit. He went to technical school and quit. He held a series of construction jobs, never staying on longer than a few months. He married his high school sweetheart, a girl named Rita. The marriage fell apart very quickly, because Felde would explode in fits of senseless fury. Once, he splattered everything in the refrigerator against the wall because she had bought too many bottles of ketchup. Felde's mother, Ruby, was a registered nurse, and urged him to seek psychiatric help. He refused, afraid he would be judged insane and committed to an asylum.

On November 28, 1972, he was arrested for murdering William "Butch" Blackwell.

Blackwell was 27 and a bad actor, a tough ex-convict quick with his fists. He and Felde were working as carpenters on the same construction project. After work that day, the two men went drinking, then stopped off at Felde's apartment in Greenbelt, Maryland, to talk over a deer-hunting trip they planned to take. Rita was there and she remembers that her husband and Blackwell knocked down quite a few beers, then started arguing about the rifle Felde was going to use, a civilian version of an M-1 carbine. It was in the closet.

Felde recalls the argument, too, and he recalls Blackwell's punching him in the head. He doesn't remember much after that, just an exploding sound inside his skull when Blackwell hit him, and that inner detonation setting off a succession of others, *boom-boom-boom*, like grenades, just like grenades, and he was *there* again, in that village. He was "re-experiencing," a term the psychiatric manuals define as "sudden acting as though a traumatic event was actually occurring because of association with an environmental or ideational stimulus." When you drop the turgid jargon, that means that the tension of the argument and Blackwell's violence and the talk about guns made Felde snap. He heard the grenades and the gunfire, the Fourth of July, and then he and Blackwell struggled for the carbine. Felde got hold of it and sprayed the apartment, the way he had sprayed the hut in the village, shot the place up. Rita escaped somehow, but Blackwell lay dead on the floor, a bullet through one eye. Neighbors called the police. Felde barricaded himself in the apartment and fired sev-

eral shots over their heads when they arrived. Screaming, "Vietnam! Vietnam!" and making sounds his mother later described as "sounds like an animal would make," Felde held the police at bay for an hour, until his mother was able to talk him into dropping the weapon and coming out. Even then he dared, no, begged the police to kill him; but all they did was handcuff him; and when he felt the steel clamp around his wrists, he returned from the village and was back in Greenbelt. He put his head on his mother's shoulder and cried, "Ma, wipe my tears. Ma, wipe my tears."

Felde's conviction on a murder charge was eventually reversed. He was retried and, promised a light sentence, persuaded to plead guilty to one count of manslaughter for Blackwell's death and three counts of assault for firing over the heads of the police. He didn't get a light sentence. He got 12 years. In 1976, despite a spotless prison record, he was denied parole. He couldn't stand another day behind bars and escaped from the minimum-security prison in Hagerstown, Maryland. That was when Vietnam came in handy. He fled into the mountains, hid in the woods, slept in cornfields, hitchhiked, took to the woods and fields again, traveling only at night, creeping and crawling the way he had through the bush, and made it all the way to northern Louisiana, where Ruby Felde had moved to live with her aged father. For the next two years, the boy who had wanted to become a veterinarian lived the life of a fugitive, drifting from job to job as an oil-field roughneck, an auto mechanic and construction worker. But he always stayed in touch with his mother, toward whom he had drawn closer than he had ever been before.

On October 13, 1978, Ruby Felde died of cancer.

Felde was stunned by her death, but he took on a new job as a carpenter for a Shreveport construction firm. Less than a week after his mother's funeral, he learned that the police were looking for him. He made immediate plans to leave the state; he asked a co-worker, Larry Hall, to put together some camping equipment, then pick him up that evening at a pizza parlor and drive him out of town. Wayne Felde wasn't going back to prison, one way or another. Sometime that afternoon, with the help of one of his sisters, he bought a .357 Magnum revolver. "The grave next to mother's is mine," he told her, and she wanted to stop him, because she knew what he meant.

Downing beers, Felde waited at the pizza parlor for several hours. When Hall didn't show up, he checked out a bar next door, the Dragon Lounge, and had a few more beers. Still no Hall. It was all over as far as Felde was concerned. He went into the men's room,

drew the .357 and was bringing it up to his mouth when another customer entered. In reflex action, Felde jammed the gun back under his shirt, then returned to the bar and phoned for a taxi, though he had no idea of where he would go or what he would do. As he waited for the taxi, the customer phoned the police, reporting that he had seen a man with a gun. Two squad cars arrived, one driven by Patrolman Tompkins, a rookie. If Felde had bought the revolver with the intention of shooting it out with the police, this was his chance to do it; instead, he submitted to a search. Through policework so bad it's unbelievable, the two officers failed to find the big revolver on Felde. Arresting him on a simple drunk charge, they handcuffed him and put him in the rear of Tompkins' car.

His mother was gone. Butch Blackwell was dead. Rita was gone. He was a fugitive. His life had been a nightmare since Vietnam. He was on his way back to jail. He wanted to die. Working his manacled hands around to his side, Felde gripped the butt of the revolver and drew it from his waistband. Tompkins apparently saw the gun through the rearview mirror, because, as far as can be determined, he turned around and grabbed hold of Felde's wrist. The revolver went off twice, both bullets plowing through the roof of the car, and as soon as Felde heard the terrific blast, he was back in the village. Grenades going off. Machine guns. Muzzle flashes. Men shouting: "Shoot this, shoot that." The Fourth of July. The Magnum went off three more times, one through the floor board, two through the front seat, which, according to ballistics tests, ricocheted off a spring and struck Tompkins in the side. He bled to death within minutes.

Still handcuffed, Felde managed to escape from the squad car and took off running. By that time, half the Shreveport Police Department was hunting him. An hour later, he was cornered in a back yard and gunned down by a point-blank burst of double-0 buckshot. Hit in 27 places, he lay there, feeling his life leaking out of him and, for the first time in years, a sense of peace. The nightmare was ending.

But it didn't end. Felde recovered. He spent the next two years in hospitals or jail, and on August 11, 1980, went on trial for first-degree murder in Alexandria, Louisiana. His attorney, N. Graves Thomas, defended him on the grounds that he was temporarily insane at the time of the shooting. Three expert witnesses—psychologists Wilson and Figley and Dr. Joe Ben Hayes, a psychiatrist—testified that Felde was suffering from posttraumatic stress disorder and could not distinguish right from wrong. He was not, they said, in touch with reality.

But what does that mean? If Wayne

Robert Felde wasn't in touch with reality, what was he in touch with? You had to have been where he had been to fully understand. There are transcendent moments in battle, moments at once exhilarating and terrifying, when a man loses all sense of himself, all sense of control, all sense of limits. Nothing has a hold on him any longer; conventional standards of behavior, fear of death, fear of any consequences—all moorings slip and he soars into another dimension of experience. He becomes both God and Devil, capable of anything. Many acts of great heroism occur in this transcendent state; so do many acts of great brutality. If the village that Felde's squad attacked had been, say, a fortified German position in Normandy, the men would have done something worthy of a decoration; but it was a Vietnamese village, in which civilians and guerrilla snipers were intermingled and indistinguishable, and what the squad did there was probably worthy of a court-martial. Felde refuses to speak of his actions on that day in anything but the vaguest, most abstract terms. The most he says is that he went into a hut full of people and sprayed it with his weapon. You don't have to be a Figley or a Wilson to get a little more concrete picture of what Felde did and why: Having been in combat seven months, having just been under mortar and sniper fire, having just had a buddy's intestines slip through his hands, he went into a fury and butchered a hut full of women, children and old men. All bars were down, all taboos broken. The experience must have been both horrifying and thrilling, unbearably repulsive and irresistibly attractive; and the tension between those opposites must have been excruciating. Felde has felt an overmastering guilt, not only for what he did but for having enjoyed it; a guilt for which he was not allowed to atone, a guilt that was, in fact, reinforced by the man who sprayed the fire extinguisher in his face and by every person who ever called him a killer. Lacking forgiveness from others, unable to forgive himself, he is, under certain kinds of stress, compelled to re-enact the horror, partly to experience again the unholy pleasure of it, partly to attempt to master it by behaving differently, mostly to create circumstances that will force society to give him what he thinks he deserves: death.

On August 21, 1980, Felde's jury returned a verdict of guilty and recommended that he be sentenced to die in the electric chair. While awaiting confirmation of his sentence, Felde read about the glorious welcome given the Iranian hostages and tried to kill himself by slashing his wrists. Prison doctors saved him for state-sanctioned doom. On February 13, 1981, Rapides Parish Judge Guy Humphries formally con-

firmed the sentence. Walking out of the courtroom, Felde said he had a "good feeling" and raised two fingers in a V. The sign meant "victory" in World War Two, "peace" during Vietnam; for Wayne Felde, it symbolizes both.

Horror stories like his are making the headlines, but to put things in perspective, they represent only a fraction of afflicted veterans. Psychologist Arthur Egendorf, who co-authored the study *Legacies of Vietnam*, the most extensive yet done on the problem, says that ten to 15 percent fall into the psychiatric basket-case category—psychotics, drug addicts, incurable alcoholics. Another 15 to 20 percent are, like Felde, in very serious trouble but can be salvaged. Far more common are those men who, thinking they had put the war behind them, built successful careers and marriages only to have their battle experiences reappear like some huge, unpaid emotional bill and begin to unravel the carefully woven threads of their lives.

David Novak is 38 now. If, with his beard, his receding hairline and thickening waist, he looks considerably different from the trim, clean-shaven Marine lieutenant who went to Vietnam in 1967, his appearance is consonant with his station in life as a professor approaching middle age. He has a Ph.D. in mathematics and is coming up for tenure at Simmons College, an exclusive women's school in Boston; he has a contract to write three textbooks that will earn a modest but steady royalty income; he has an intelligent, attractive and loving wife to whom he's been married for 15 years, four bright daughters aged eight to 14 and a handsome Victorian home in Georgetown, Massachusetts, where he counts novelist John Updike among his neighbors.

This is the life Novak has built, but it isn't as pleasant as it appears. He no longer lives in the frame Victorian but in a cheap rooming house full of destitute pensioners. Inside, the Novaks' home looks like a construction project that ran out of money. A couple of rooms are fully renovated, but in the others, door moldings and window sills have been left stripped and unvarnished, paint jobs are unfinished. As for the marriage, his wife, Marian, a lively, articulate woman of 36, has this to say:

"I think it's over, but I want to see as whole a man go out of it as came into it."

It almost sounds like a line out of one of Updike's novels, but the Novaks' crumbling marriage is not a victim of boredom or of suburban adultery. One night two years ago, after a perfect record of sobriety and dependability, Novak failed to come home from work at his usual time. Rather drunk, he staggered into the house at two A.M. When Marian angrily demanded to know where he'd been, he answered, "I was looking for a Marine to talk to."

Although that sounds like a guilty husband's likely story, Novak, in fact, had been looking for nothing more than that. He wanted to talk about the war, really talk about it, not just spin yarns. His drunken late night was followed by a two-day disappearance: He went out shopping and ended up driving to Maine, where he called Marian from a pay phone. On another occasion, he was picked up for drunken driving, then for driving without a license. Once, the Boston police found him passed out in his car in a dangerous neighborhood. Finally, in December 1980, he left home altogether, moving into a five-dollar-a-night room in the rooming house. He'd left Marian a note telling her he loved her, needed someone to talk to but couldn't talk to her; he was mixed up, he wrote, and would come back when he'd straightened himself out.

"He seems to be searching for something," Marian says of him. "He wouldn't do this if he weren't crying for help. When he talks about the war, he's better. He's said nothing for so long."

He's said nothing because, in the academic world, his Vietnam service has often made him feel like Norman Mailer's white Negro. In 1976, when he applied for a teaching job at Simmons College, the chairwoman of the mathematics department phoned Novak's employer at the time and said, "But this person was a Marine."

Novak's boss answered reassuringly, "You can't tell; he doesn't look like one."

The Novaks felt this kind of insidious pressure almost from the day he left the Marines and returned to graduate school at Washington State University. Married to Novak the year before he went overseas, Marian had had a bad time of it, waiting for him to return. But in some ways, his homecoming was more painful. The couple sensed the hostility among students and professors toward the war and were afraid they'd be ostracized if they mentioned that Novak had fought in it. Though proud of his service and of his platoon, he never let on that he'd been to Vietnam, which made him feel like an ex-convict. The war, like prison, was a subject not to be discussed in polite company. What put the greatest strain on Novak, and on his marriage, was pretending that he was the same man he'd been before Vietnam. But when you have been shot through the arm by a sniper and gone rolling down an embankment thinking you were dying, when three of your four closest buddies have been killed in action, when you've been in Hué during the Tet offensive and put in charge of a burial detail for enemy dead and seen hundreds of corpses unceremoniously bulldozed into a mass grave; when, also in Hué, you've seen POWs shot to death because they were trapped inside a flaming hut and had to be spared burning to death;

when, after Hué, you're sent up to Khé Sanh and spend every night cowering under the screech and crash of artillery, you can never again be the same man.

The couple's parents saw how drastically he had changed. He had a recurrent nightmare of seeing himself inside a graves-registration tent filled with the corpses of his men. In Washington, the Novaks lived near a fire station, and whenever a siren sounded, David would hit the deck, hollering, "Incoming!" Meticulous about paying his bills before Vietnam, he became careless afterward, to the point that collectors began hounding the couple and Marian had to take over family finances.

"I felt they were unimportant," Novak said. "It was just money. After you've seen POWs shot to death so they won't burn to death, what is important?"

There were other changes, more subtle and more frightening.

"He was a stranger when he got back," Marian said. "Different in a way I cannot define. He got more and more distant, isolated. He would get this funny look in his eye, a look of bitterness and anger. I thought it was directed at me."

Nevertheless, David and Marian got on with their life, never breaking their unspoken agreement to avoid talking about the war. And the distance Marian had seen grew and grew until, it seemed to her, her husband was leading a secret life within himself. That's just what he was doing. He couldn't talk to her about his secret life or express to her his hidden feelings, partly because he wanted to protect her from the awful realities he lived with, mostly because he had spent all his emotional pennies in the war. That's why, finally, he had left home.

"I didn't know what to say to Marian, and I still don't," Novak told me in the living room of the house where he is now only a visitor. "I just got used up in the war. There isn't much left to give to other people, even her. She gives me emotional support, but I have this inability to give her the support she needs. When that happens, a sense of failure sets in, and I just don't want to try anymore, because I don't want to fail."

As for Marian, she waited 13 months for him to come home from Vietnam. In a way, she is still waiting.

They don't give Purple Hearts for war's psychic wounds, and the art of repairing warriors' minds is today as primitive as battlefield surgery was in the Civil War. Clinical psychologists such as Wilson, Egendorf and Figley, having identified the disease, are now searching for the cure. They are beginning by looking into the histories of those half million combat veterans who are not suffering serious mental and emotional aftereffects. The fundamental question to be answered is, Why were



some men able to cope and others not?

Insofar as Vietnam is concerned, everyone I've spoken to agrees on one thing: While counseling services such as those provided by the Veterans Administration's Operation Outreach have gone a long way toward helping veterans adjust, the ultimate cure will not be found by expanding a health-care bureaucracy that is already too big and complex to function well. American society as a whole needs to cure itself of the post-Vietnam syndrome by reconciling the schism created by the war, the schism between moral conviction, as represented by those who resisted the war, and service, as represented by those who fought it. That goal cannot be reached by reopening the tired old Vietnam debate between right and left, between unctuous moralizing on the one hand and chest-thumping chauvinism on the other. President Reagan's attempts to conceal the ugliness of the war under the cloak of a "noble cause" are as suspect as the left's attempts to present it as a crime on a par with the Nazi invasion of Poland.

"The only thing to do is go beyond the debate," Egendorf says. "We're looking at 1981 in terms of 1968. The idea of service is important. This country needs to believe in service. Moral ideals are important, too. There is no reason to keep them separate."

The attention the press is currently focusing on the problems of Vietnam veterans may look like an attempt by the nation to heal the wounds, but it is not. The one thing on which both

sides of the traditional debate can agree is that there are an awful lot of screwed-up veterans out there. Once reviled, as villains, the men who fought in Vietnam are now being looked upon as victims, often by the very sort of people who reviled them—liberal columnists, actors and actresses, academics, the usual crowd who need some oppressed group to pity and champion. Unfortunately, some veterans are falling into this sentimental trap. Having been denied the laurels due victorious heroes, they are clutching at the sprigs of sympathy offered the victim. Well, the idea of the warrior as victim just doesn't make it. A veterans' hunger strike in Los Angeles last spring offered the rather embarrassing spectacle of ex-Marines and paratroopers and gunship pilots, men who had once faced death without a whimper, sobbing in front of TV cameras.

Most veterans, though, reject this course. One put it this way to Figley:

"Doc, I don't want sympathy, because if you look in the dictionary, you'll see that sympathy falls between shit and syphilis, and I don't need any of it."

If America wants its Vietnam veterans to be cleansed, if it wants them to come home, it must give them genuine compassion, dignity and respect: compassion for having been misused, dignity for having answered the call to arms and doing their duty as they saw it, respect for having had the courage and tenacity to survive.

But if American society is to give its forgotten warriors the respect they de-

serve, those warriors have to learn to respect themselves first. They cannot, according to Figley and Egendorf, wallow in self-pity, carry on passionate love affairs with their own self-destructive guilt. They have to see themselves as survivors, not as victims, for the victim, in Figley's words, is the man who says "I can't," the survivor the man who says "I can."

Richard Ogden, who is now 34, is as typical a Vietnam vet as you're likely to find. Child of a broken home, raised in poverty in rural Washington, high school dropout at 15, combat veteran at 19, he has not sunk into drug addiction or alcoholism or madness. He has educated himself and written a fine memoir of his battle experiences titled *Green Knight, Red Mourning*. He has dedicated the book to his fellow vets, and tells them:

Be proud; it wasn't your mistake. With the social consciousness concerning humanity that was prevalent in the Sixties and Seventies, any war for any reason, justifiable or not, would have been unconscionable. . . . Our country is not proud of itself; therefore, it is unwilling, if not crippled, in showing us any pride or compassion. . . . Be proud you served and grateful you survived. You know more about life than anyone else around you.

