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AMERICA'S DISPLACED PERSONS:

VIETNAM VETERANS RETURN

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SAN FRANCISCO:

"They get back and they're like displaced persons," said an official of the California Department of Human Resources. He was speaking of the almost three million veterans of the Vietnam war who have been coming home to America, virtually unnoticed, for the better part of a decade. Without the fanfare accorded their father, they have returned to families and hometowns seeking to pick up the threads of the lives they left behind. Yet for many reasons, the transition back into the civilian mainstream has been fraught with disillusionment, bitterness, and all too often, failure.

In almost every negative statistical index, Vietnam veterans come out at or near the top of US society. They are unemployed at a rate that exceeds the national average by one and a half times. They get divorced, use drugs, and commit crimes at rates far out of proportion to their numbers. Ironically, the authorities charged to deal with the problem of the returning Vietnam veteran, particularly those in the Veterans Administration, are extremely out of touch

with the realities of the situation.

It is not that the officials at the VA are uninterested in the Vietnam veteran. In fact, there have even been charges that the VA is pampering Vietnam vets at the expense of Korean and World War II veterans. Rather, the problem lies in the approach the VA is taking to deal with the participants of what is now generally regarded as the most dubious war in American history. As one disaffected veteran put it, the VA "still think they're talking to some gung-ho trooper coming home from Iwo Jima to a grateful nation."

Against the backdrop of an impressive suite of offices in San Francisco's WPA-styled Veterans Administration Building, Martin J. May, Assistant Director of Veterans Administration for Northern California dismissed the idea that his agency lacks understanding of the Vietnam vet. "You see," he said, recalling almost thirty years with the VA, "these men are really not at all that different from Korean and World War II veterans. They're all human beings faced with the problem of readjusting to civilian society after fighting a war. This is not easy, but with our help and their own desire, most of these men, like their fathers before them, will succeed."

May went on to describe the efforts the VA makes to deal with unemployment, a problem which he feels is not even within the traditional province of the VA. "Everything we do for the returning veteran in this area," he says, "is really voluntary."

Nevertheless, May produced an almost endless stream of pamphlets detailing the commitment of the VA to a solution of the job problem, and noted with particular pride the job fair program, which he said, "originated right here, in this office." The job fair, he explained, seeks to bring veteran and employer together under one roof, in an attempt to match special skills with available jobs.

But for all of May's intentions, the job fair concept and, in a broader sense, the VA's battle against unemployment, has been something less than a smashing success. A recent job fair in Sacramento, California, attracted almost 1200 veterans to compete for fewer than 400 jobs. And last year at a Chicago job fair, a near riot ensued when veterans felt the jobs they were offered were both too few and too demeaning.

In a larger context, more than finding work, for the Vietnam veteran coming home to America means coming home to family, friends, and community, and it is here that the real problems for the Vietnam vet lie.

Bob is a tall, well-built ex-infantryman, from the 25th Division, who returned from Vietnam about 14 months ago. At first, he says, the most difficult part of his readjustment was getting used to the loud noises of urban life which reminded him of the sounds of war. Gradually Bob realized that a certain

distance had developed in relationships with people he had once been close to. Even his parents, Bob feels, acted differently towards him after he returned from 'Nam. "I began to feel that people looked at me as if I was some kind of criminal," he says, "like all I did in Nam was smoke dope and kill babies."

"Really the hardest part about coming home," another recent returnee said, "is trying to fit back in exactly where you left off. When I came home I could not wait to see my old buddies from school. But when we finally got together, there was something that just wasn't right in the way we acted with each other. Things weren't the same. I guess after Vietnam they never will be."

Wherever Vietnam veterans are found, this same feeling of somehow being out of kilter with the society to which they have come home almost invariably laces their conversation. And if there is one theme that is repeated over and over by the vets, it is a sense of betrayal they feel. It stems from the contrast between the sacrifices they have made in Vietnam and the indifference they face here at home. From the lines at the unemployment office to waiting rooms at inner city bus stations, from factory lunchrooms to university classrooms, Vietnam veterans, regardless of economic standing and political persuation, all sound this same bitter note.

A recently discharged Navy veteran whose gunboat forays in the Mekong Delta won him a Purple Heart said wistfully, "You go over there and put your life on the line and then you come back here and nobody cares about you. Knowing the war is stupid and useless is one thing, and most of us found that out when we got over there. But that's no reason for everyone to ignore us when we come home."

To some, the unconcern he meets upon his return lies at the core of the Vietnam veterans' readjustment problems. About a year after his return from Vietnam in 1967, Jack McCloskey became interested in the anti-war movement and eventually joined Vietnam Veterans Against the War, which in four years has grown from a scattering of ex-GI peace activists into a national organization which now has 60,000 members. Since his return McCloskey has become increasingly interested in the psychological ramifications of the Vietnam veterans' reintegration into American society.

"I've found in talking with hundreds of veterans," McCloskey says, "that almost all of them go through a very difficult period when they get back from Vietnam. Some feel guilt, many withdraw, and almost all of them feel cut off from the rest of society."

McCloskey's belief that the veterans' sense of being ignored lies behind these problems is shared by Dr. George Krieger, Chief of the Psychiatry Service

at the sprawling Veterans Administration Hospital in Palo Alto, California. Dr. Krieger contrasts the bands and parades that greeted the returning World War II veteran with the virtual cold shoulder that his Vietnam counterpart feels when he comes home. "You must understand," says Dr. Kreiger, "that most of the Vietnam veterans are well aware of the homecomings their fathers received after World War II. They feel all the sacrifices made in Vietnam were wasted. As a result of all of this, a tremendous amount of bitterness is created."

Dr. Krieger was unsure exactly how this bitterness would manifest itself in days to come, but some of his colleagues are plainly worried over what lies in store for the Vietnam vet. A doctor in the San Francisco Veterans Hospital who wished to remain anonymous put it this way: "Very few of the people here at the VA understand these kids. I don't think that many of their parents understand them. They end up talking to themselves. Whenever this happens, you've really got the potential for trouble."

And at the cluttered offices of the Vietnam Veterans Against the War in San Francisco's Mission district, Jack McCloskey sounded an even more direct warning. "Perhaps you recall the story of the crew of the Enola Gay, the airplane that dropped the first atomic bomb on Japan," he said. "Well, one of the crewmen killed himself, and two others were committed to mental institutions because after they realized the enormity of what they'd done, they could no longer cope with the demands of their society. The way Vietnam veterans are being made to feel, the way they're being shunted off by the people they supposedly fought for, I really couldn't say what's going to happen. But unless somebody starts listening, it won't be very pleasant."