

September 2019

## Were They Spat On? Understanding The Homecoming Experience of Vietnam Veterans

Heather Vlieg

Grand Valley State University, Allendale, [hvlieg@gmail.com](mailto:hvlieg@gmail.com)

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.gvsu.edu/gvjh>



Part of the [Military History Commons](#), [Oral History Commons](#), and the [United States History Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Vlieg, Heather (2019) "Were They Spat On? Understanding The Homecoming Experience of Vietnam Veterans," *Grand Valley Journal of History*. Vol. 7: Iss. 1, Article 3.

Available at: <https://scholarworks.gvsu.edu/gvjh/vol7/iss1/3>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by ScholarWorks@GVSU. It has been accepted for inclusion in Grand Valley Journal of History by an authorized editor of ScholarWorks@GVSU. For more information, please contact [scholarworks@gvsu.edu](mailto:scholarworks@gvsu.edu).

---

## Were They Spat On? Understanding The Homecoming Experience of Vietnam Veterans

### Cover Page Footnote

The author would like to thank Dr. James Smither for his guidance and mentorship in the research and writing of this paper. Thanks also to all veterans who continue to service by sharing their experiences.

## Were They Spat On?

### The Homecoming Experiences of Vietnam Veterans

In 1960 Kenneth Scott graduated from Central Michigan University's ROTC program with a bachelor's of science degree and a second lieutenant commission in the United States Army. The next five years for Scott consisted of active duty in both Korea and Germany before being deployed to Vietnam. Returning from his first tour of duty in Vietnam in 1967, Scott sought acceptance into a master's program at Central Michigan University (CMU). "I was told . . . by the gentlemen who was in charge of the graduate student program, this was 1967, I was told that I was not welcomed on campus because I was a killer of women and children."<sup>1</sup> Remaining calm, Scott sought advice from a military colonel he knew working on campus who suggested it was best he not enroll there. When less than two weeks later the university solicited him for money, Scott articulated his recent ordeal at CMU in a return letter which drew a response of shock from their vice president. In the end Scott did eventually earn a master's degree from CMU.

The range of reactions Scott experienced indicated there were indeed a variety of attitudes in American society towards Vietnam veterans as they returned from war. This topic has been the subject of a certain amount of published scholarship, but a survey of this scholarship reveals that the majority tend to be too narrow in their scope and focus and that they neglect to include or simply dismiss veteran testimony as adequate for explaining the full range of experiences of the Vietnam veterans. First-hand accounts of events are invaluable yet rarely

---

<sup>1</sup> Kenneth G. Scott interview, *Grand Valley State University Veterans History Project Digital Collection*, 2008, <http://www.gvsu.edu/vethistory/>.

basis free. Like most every source, oral history is subject to challenges that must be acknowledged. The passage of time can fade or sharpen memory causing details to be hazy or exaggerated. Individual perspective and emotion can change with additional life experience. Forgetting details and facts of an incident, or the reverse, gaining more knowledge of an event, can change how an individual perceives and interrupts their own personal experiences over time. Yet just as an eye-witness is essential in a court of law, the testimony of the Vietnam veteran should not be dismissed or ignored. To more fully comprehend what actually happened to those who served in the armed forces during the Vietnam War, we need to listen to those veterans and test their statements against available scholarship. This essay will do just that using the oral history interviews that are publically accessible through the Grand Valley State University (GVSU) Veterans History Project (VHP) database.

The GVSU Veterans History Project was established in 2006 and functions as a partner to the Library of Congress in collecting and preserving oral history interviews of veterans along with other participants in, or witnesses to, different American wartime experiences. Those who conduct these interviews range from students to professional historians in a variety of settings from the participant's home to professional recording studios. A search of this database for those involved in the Vietnam War yields numerous insightful interviews in which veterans share how they were received by their family, friends and society in general upon their return home from service. A study of these oral history interviews reveals that the attitudes and actions experienced by the returning Vietnam veterans documented in this database varied greatly and are characterized by a complexity that has not been adequately described or explained within much of the available scholarship.

One of the earliest studies that investigated the experiences of returning Vietnam veterans is Murray Polner's *No Victory Parades: The Return of the Vietnam Veteran* published in 1971. In 1967 Professor Polner was approached by a clean-cut student freshly returned home from deployment in Vietnam who strenuously objected to a derogatory comment he had made about the war during one of his classes. This young man pointed out that he had been there, Polner had not. Intrigued by this encounter, Polner spent that next year interviewing 204 veterans from different parts of the United States with varied backgrounds along with their family and friends. Concerned by what he learned, Polner published details on nine of his subjects in an attempt to offer some generalizations about Vietnam veterans at the time. He explores several questions like are these veterans different than their predecessors? Is it possible that those who responded to their country's call to arms might be transformed into a large, disillusioned, and estranged group? Ultimately Polner admits that given the insufficiency of study time and without substantial data, it was impossible to do more than speculate. But his findings indicated that already in the late 1960s his interviewees "have been ignored, as soldiers and veterans. . . there are no more victory parades. . . Regardless of their convictions about the war, practically every veteran I spoke with indicated in a variety of ways his suspected that he had been manipulated; the government was nothing but a faceless "them."<sup>2</sup> Although his focus was not exclusively on how Vietnam veterans were treated upon their return home, several did detailed that experience, reporting disturbing opinions regarding the activities of the anti-war movement as early as 1967.

A later publication that did specifically focus on what greeted returning Vietnam veterans is *Homecoming: When Soldiers Returned from Vietnam* by journalist Bob Greene, published in 1989. Having heard stories for several years of Vietnam veterans being spit on by war

---

<sup>2</sup> Murray Polner, *No Victory Parades: The Return of the Vietnam Veteran*, (San Francisco; Chicago, New York: Holt, Reinholt and Winston, 1971), xiv.

protesters and curious as to the truth of the claims, Greene published the following question in a July 20, 1987 *Chicago Tribune* article syndicated to two hundred newspapers nation-wide: “Were you spat on when you returned from Vietnam?” Because he believed he could not do justice to the tremendous response he received in a simple newspaper column, Greene compiled a number of them in this book. The text is excerpts from the written responses organized in thematic sections including those who were literally spat on, and those who were not, and many others who reported other types of either negative or positive receptions. Greene allows the words of the individual responders to speak for themselves and adds no analytical explanation to the broad range of experiences. However, Greene does include a short personal opinion, “To sum it up quickly . . . I now have no doubt that many returning veterans truly were spat upon - literally - as a part of their welcome home.”<sup>3</sup> Speaking strictly of veterans of the Vietnam War, Greene concludes that given the volume of responses to his question and the detail veterans shared about their experiences, it cannot be denied that at least some portion of Vietnam veterans were not warmly welcomed home, but in fact met with open hostility.

Several years after Greens’ book was published, Eric T. Dean Jr. also picked up the topic of the Vietnam veterans’ re-entry and re-adjustment to civilian life in an April 1992 *Journal of American Studies* article entitled “The Myth of the Troubled and Scorned Vietnam Veteran.” Dean, a practicing attorney who earned a doctorate in history from Yale University, offers what might be termed a revisionist view of Vietnam veterans in an attempt to debunk what he claims is a myth; that as a group they are the most scorned and mal-adjusted veterans compared to other American war veterans. He uses information from a number of professional journals, government documents, and newspaper and magazine articles, along with television broadcasts

---

<sup>3</sup> Bob Greene, *Homecoming: When the Soldiers Returned from Vietnam*, (New York: Putnam, 1989), 11.

to support his argument that the image of a troubled and scorned Vietnam veteran was created and used by both right-and left-wing parties to advance their political agendas. Unlike Greene's book, Dean does not include any individual testimony from Vietnam veterans in his sources. He examines such topics as unemployment rates, drug addictions, health issues due to Agent Orange exposure, and psychological problems, but does not include any discussion of the social anti-war movement and how returning soldiers were actually treated by American society. Dean does acknowledge that Vietnam veterans experienced a measure of rejection by society, but emphasizes it was no more than that experienced by other United States military veterans.

Wilbur Scott also acknowledges that the Vietnam veterans were treated badly in his 1993 book *Vietnam Veterans Since The War: The Politics of PTSD, Agent Orange, and the National Memoria*. Scott, now a professor of sociology, served as a platoon leader in Vietnam in 1968-69. In 1984, he began a journey of research that culminated in this published work on the chronological development of the social movement that championed Vietnam veterans' issues including post-traumatic stress disorder, the effects of exposure to Agent Orange, and the building of a national memorial in a public, government space. Incorporating information from numerous medical, scientific, and legal journals along with government documents and a host of personal interviews, Scott details several sociological models and explores how these three specific issues fit inside each model. The conclusion he reaches is that Vietnam veterans have had a particularly difficult time with readjustment to civilian life due to the fact that this war "was embroiled in controversy from beginning to end" and was, unlike other wars, eventually dubbed a "bad war."<sup>4</sup> Often in the public's eye, the blame for this "bad war" was assigned to the soldiers rather than the war itself. Although Scott provides a more complex study of the

---

<sup>4</sup> Wilbur Scott, *Vietnam Veterans Since The War: The Politics of PTSD, Agent Orange and the National Memoria*, (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1993), xvi.

treatment of Vietnam veterans than does Greene, his focus is not on their actual homecoming experiences.

Another publication touching on the homecoming reception of Vietnam veterans is “Who Supports The Troops? Vietnam, the Gulf War, and the Making of Collective Memory” which was published in the August 1995 issue of *Social Problems Journal*. Thomas D. Beamish, Harvey Molotch, and Richard Flacks, all professors of sociology in Santa Barbara, California, present media evidence from the 1960s to the 1990s as statistical proof to argue that the anti-war movement did not intentionally target Vietnam veterans with hostility or abuse. Through their research they uncovered virtually no press accounts of troop-targeting by the anti-war movement throughout the period of 1965 to 1971, but instead found a tendency to portray the movement as troop-supportive. Yet they argue a troop-abusing label was attached to Vietnam War protesters by “national elites” in an attempt to reconstruct collective memory to advance their own political agendas specifically seen in the rhetoric and Yellow Ribbon campaign of the Bush Administration during the Gulf War.<sup>5</sup> The authors do not necessarily deny that Vietnam veterans may have experienced negativity that was not reported in media accounts. But they do suggest that claims of general abuse and neglect such as those accounts published in Greene’s *Homecoming* book require further study. They make no effort to address the fact that the evidence in Greene’s book predate both the Bush Administration and the Gulf War. These authors focus on the activities of groups rather than individuals and base their conclusions on the lack of evidence, particularly their inability to locate media evidence, while ignoring the testimonies of individual veterans and dismissing those of peace activists.

---

<sup>5</sup> Thomas D. Beamish, Harvey Molotch, and Richard Flacks, “Who Supports The Troops? Vietnam, the Gulf War, and the Making of Collective Memory,” *Social Problems*, Vol. 42, No. 3, (August 1995): 354, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3096852>.



Jerry Lembcke also addresses the debate over whether the Vietnam era anti-war movement was anti-GI in his 1998 book *The Spitting Image: Myth, Memory, and the Legacy of Vietnam*. Like Wilbur Scott, Lembcke is both a Vietnam veteran and professor of sociology; however, he differs in that he took an active role in the anti-war movement as a member of the Vietnam Veterans Against the War (VVAW). In *Spitting Image* Lembcke examines the claim that Vietnam veterans were literally spat upon by members of the anti-war movement and tries to assess its accuracy through an attempt to locate any news-source documentation (such as photographs) as incidence of an anti-war activist spitting on a veteran. Similar to Beamish, Molotch, and Flacks' claim, Lembcke argues that the troop-abusing label was attached to anti-war protesters largely by the Bush Administration to gain popular support for the Gulf War.<sup>6</sup> Along with an impressive list of films, Lembcke scoured professional journals, newspaper and magazine articles, government documents and a host of other written sources including the previously mentioned "Who Supports The Troops?", *Vietnam Veterans Since the War*, and *Homecoming* in his research. He does not, however, use Vietnam veteran testimony as a source in this book. Although he freely admits to the possibility that individual activists may have broken ranks, acted of their own accord, and been hostile toward a veteran, Lembcke maintains that the organized anti-war movement supported Vietnam veterans.

Although the focus of *The Spitting Image* is restricted to the literal act of spitting, in a personal interview Lembcke noted that spitting has become the grounding imagery for people being hostile to veterans; a visual expression of a general attitude. He also noted that even though he drew his conclusions based on the activities of organized anti-Vietnam War groups such as the VVAW, "the words 'social movement' implies something boarder than organized

---

<sup>6</sup> Jerry Lembcke, *The Spitting Image: Myth, Memory, and the Legacy of Vietnam* (New York: New York University Press, 1998), 3.

entities. . . . The anti-war movement is defined within the book to mean anyone within society, whether member of an organized group or not.”<sup>7</sup> In effect Lembcke appears to suggest that his inability to locate media sources documenting anti-war protesters spitting on Vietnam veterans is evidence that the entire anti-war movement within American society was welcoming and supportive of the veterans. Although he lists it as a source, he does not engage in the homecoming question posed earlier by Greene, nor does Lembcke consider any veteran testimonies. Instead their allegations of mistreatment are assigned to “false memory syndrome” understood within the context of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) which Lembcke states is as much a politically created diagnosis as a medical one. And so the pattern of scholarship moves from exclusive interviews of veterans to excluding their testimony; from questioning any ill treatment at home to warning about it to a denial of it.

Any serious attempt to discover just how Vietnam veterans were received by their fellow citizens upon their return home from the war requires a serious look into the accounts of those homecomings by the individuals who experienced them. Research of the archived Vietnam veteran oral history interviews housed on the GVSU Veterans History Project database along with the personal opinions and comments of a few anti-war activists and one mental health care provider will be compared to the scholarship previously outlined. What was discovered through this research is these veteran experiences were varied enough that any number of them could easily be sorted into each of the different concepts put forward by the individual authors. Some veterans even experienced a combination of two or more of the different authors’ arguments. Ultimately the veterans demonstrate a far more varied and complex answer to the question of

---

<sup>7</sup> Jerry Lembcke, telephone interview, July 19, 2017.

how Vietnam veterans were treated upon their return home than these authors have fully developed in their writings.

That the organized anti-war movement sought to support Vietnam veterans is a firm belief maintained by Henry and Lois Hawver, former anti-Vietnam War activists. Between 1967 and 1971, Henry Hawver attended Capital University in Columbus, Ohio. There he met his future wife Lois, a registered nurse who had considered joining the Air Force before deciding instead to pursue an education degree. While a student, Henry joined the Young Socialist Alliance which he described as “anti-establishment anything,” and actively protested the Vietnam War.<sup>8</sup> He was the student newspaper’s “war correspondent” and participated in the May 9-10, 1970 march on Washington DC protesting the military’s Cambodian invasion and the Kent State shootings. Even though he received a 4-F classification on his draft card due to his status as a pre-seminary student which exempted him from the draft, he risked punishable legal charges when he returned his draft card to Selective Services along with a strongly worded message of his refusal to be drafted. His objection was grounded in the belief that, unlike World War II, the Vietnam War was unconstitutional. Although neither Lois nor Henry could necessarily be labeled as anti-military, they passionately disagreed with United States military involvement in Vietnam.

Looking back fifty years later, the Hawvers still maintain their original objections to the Vietnam War. Yet today Henry admits that the college campus anti-war movement was often made up of “spoiled brats with no sense of reality.”<sup>9</sup> Reminiscing on their demonstration involvement both Lois and Henry acknowledged the possibility of provoked or unprovoked

---

<sup>8</sup> Henry and Lois Hawver, personal interview, July 29, 2017.

<sup>9</sup> Henry and Lois Hawver, personal interview, July 29, 2017.

confrontations between individuals of the anti-war movement and Vietnam veterans, but it was certainly nothing they witnessed. As evident by one of their popular slogans “Politicians Lie; GIs Die”, both agreed that the general attitude throughout the anti-war movement was one of support and concern for the troops. Aside from the “spoiled brat” description, the pro-troop attitude within the anti-war movement as experienced and emulated by the Hawvers backs up Lembcke’s claim that news accounts and archival materials from leading anti-war organizations prove an empathetic and mutually supportive relationship existed between the peace movement and the veterans. Similar conclusions are reported by Beamish, Molotch, and Flacks in their article “Who Supports The Troops?” They state, “Our findings make clear that in the press accounts of protests between 1965 and 1971, stories in which the anti-war movement directly or purposely targeted troops are virtually non-existent.”<sup>10</sup> The pro-troop sympathies of the Hawvers as members of the anti-Vietnam War movement validates the research results regarding reported relations between the organized anti-war groups and Vietnam veterans given by these authors.

Other anti-war activists’ opinions are found in “Who Supports The Troops?” by Beamish, Molotch, and Flacks. The authors include a quote from a peace activist contrasting the Vietnam War era with the then-present Gulf War found in a November 1990 *Los Angeles Times* article, “Then we . . . wound up condemning our troops. Let’s not let that happen again.”<sup>11</sup> In a February 1990 article in the *Los Angeles Times*, journalist-novelist Clancy Sigal shared that the love-the-solider-hate-the-war party line his anti-war group took made amends for an injustice they had committed against Vietnam veterans. These quotes were used by the authors as evidence that “Gulf War discourse, even among protesters, presumed that Vietnam-era war

---

<sup>10</sup> Beamish, Molotch, and Flacks, “Who Supports The Troops?”, 354.

<sup>11</sup> Beamish, Molotch, and Flacks, “Who Supports The Troops?”, 346.

opponents had, in some way, targeted, blamed, or abused the troops.”<sup>12</sup> They continued by admitting to the possibility that troop-blaming attitudes could have been expressed by the peace movement that were unreported by the media, but that they believed such stories would have been prime and so unlikely missed. The article then goes on to expound on the absence of media evidence that such events actually happen, and therefore conclude, “the movement was rather frequently labeled by members of the national elite, if only indirectly, as ‘anti-troop.’ Such labeling provides one possible source of popular memory about the intentions and conduct of the anti-war protesters, a planting of seeds that sprouted in the post-war period and came to full flower during the Gulf War.”<sup>13</sup> In effect Beamish and his co-authors have chosen to not accept the quoted opinions of the activists at face-value, but call them products of a memory reconstructed by political agendas during the 1990s, an assessment based solely on their inability to locate large numbers of media accounts of anti-troop activity. This conclusion is quite a leap in that it assumes every account of anti-GI activity could be captured by media. It also gives no consideration to either Polner’s or Greene’s publications which pre-date the Gulf War by as much as twenty years and include a significant number of Vietnam veterans reporting highly negative treatment specifically by members of the anti-war movement, organized and unorganized. The arguments put forward in this article are very narrowly focused on strictly media sources and are based on the lack of evidence, or negative evidence, while dismissing or totally ignoring a portion of those who originally participated in the actual events.

There are confrontations reported by a number of Vietnam veterans which do validate the claim that the anti-war movement did not directly target the troops in their efforts to oppose the Vietnam War. Jeffrey Wilcox’s interview stored on the GVSU Veterans History Project

---

<sup>12</sup> Beamish, Molotch, and Flacks, “Who Supports The Troops?”, 347.

<sup>13</sup> Beamish, Molotch, and Flacks, “Who Supports The Troops?”, 354.

database provides an example of respect for differing opinions between soldiers and protesters. Jeffrey Wilcox entered the United States Military Academy, also known as West Point, directly out of high school. As a cadet, Wilcox found himself marching in the front row of the West Point unit leading the May 20, 1967 Armed Forces Day Parades in New York City. As their route along 5<sup>th</sup> Avenue took them past Central Park, protesters rushed out into the street with arms full of flowers and sat down, blocking the parade. The cadets kept time marching in place as the New York police removed the protesters who left their flowers on the road as they were hauled away one by one. With the path again clear, the parade continued, but Wilcox remembered, “Here we were marching across these flowers that the kids had dropped, and we felt badly about it . . . No one felt any animosity toward them . . . They were just on a different tract.”<sup>14</sup> Wilcox’s experience with and attitude toward the war protesters demonstrate an understanding and acceptance of differing opinions, something of a peaceful agreement to disagree.

Other veteran interviews in the GVSU Veterans History Project database give evidence of positive, even grateful, expressions by the American public toward Vietnam veterans returning home from service. Drafted in 1967, Benjamin Jerzyk was deployed to Vietnam from December 1967 to November 1968. He states of his return home, “I had no problems. . . When I wear my Vietnam uniform I never heard anyone say anything bad about me, about my service. In fact, they came over to me and said, ‘Thank you for your service.’ I think that is how most people feel. . . . Maybe I was more fortunate, I don’t know, but I would hope the other GI’s would have had the same experience that I had. I hope.”<sup>15</sup> Like Jerzyk, Edwin Franklyn Heiden Jr. also returned home in uniform from Vietnam without incident following the Tet Offensive.

---

<sup>14</sup> Jerry Wilcox, Grand Valley State University Veterans History Project database, 2008, <https://www.gvsu.edu/vethistory/>.

<sup>15</sup> Benjamin Jerzyk, Grand Valley State University Veterans History Project database, 2015, <https://www.gvsu.edu/vethistory/>.

He did admit that in airports of large towns like Chicago, people often looked the other way, or kept their distance, but were not hostile. Of his hometown in the St. Joseph/Benton Harbor region of Michigan though, Heiden used the phrase “so supportive.”<sup>16</sup> The experiences of Jerzyk and Heiden certainly demonstrate that a number of veterans were not subjected to anti-troop sentiment upon their return to the United States, but in fact enjoyed the support of grateful local communities.

Although the following interviews do not illustrate gratitude or support, they do lend credence to claims that troops were not targeted with hostility by the anti-war movement. In his interview, Mel Bajema shared that he enlisted in the Army in September 1964 and served in Vietnam in the late 1960s. Not really aware of the anti-war movement in the U.S. except for having heard the slogan “Make Love, Not War,” Bajema returned home to Grand Rapids, Michigan through the Los Angeles airport without any harassment by protesters. Army medic Dr. Richard Muir returned from his service in Vietnam in late 1967 without running into any anti-war protesters and never felt animosity from anyone regarding his military status. Marc Aronson as well never experienced harassment by war protestors when he returned to his Pennsylvania home in 1970. In fact, he felt welcomed by both friends and family. Army Captain John Smith and David Corradetti traveled to their respective homes in Kentucky and New Jersey in uniform in the early 1970’s without any contact by anti-war protesters. Both James Pittman and James Donnelly stated they never felt mistreated in any way because of their Vietnam veteran status. From returns early to late in the war and highlighting travel through a variety of states across the country in both big cities and small town, these men comprise a sampling of

---

<sup>16</sup> Edwin Franklyn Heiden Jr., Grand Valley State University Veterans History Project database, 2015, <https://www.gvsu.edu/vethistory/>.

veterans who never experienced any negative attitudes or actions by American society, family, or friends upon their return from active service in a largely unpopular war.

Although these interactions do not all necessarily portray a mutually supportive nature between the anti-war movement and military personnel, they do however provide clear evidence that a portion of veteran experiences fit very well within the arguments laid out by several authors. In his article “The Myth of the Troubled and Scorned Vietnam Veteran,” Dean argues that contrary to the idea that the Vietnam veteran has been “beset by a wide range of problems and betrayed by his fellow citizens and government . . . evidence indicates that the Vietnam veterans has not, in comparison with veterans of prior American wars or his civilian contemporaries, been unusually neglected, scorned, or disadvantaged.”<sup>17</sup> The experiences of Captain Smith, Corradetti, Pittman, and Donnelly all appear to support Dean’s conclusions. Lembcke takes Dean’s argument a step further when he argues that “relations between veterans and the anti-war activists were generally friendly . . . were empathetic and mutually supportive.”<sup>18</sup> Beamish, Molotch, and Flacks draw a similar conclusion when they report that their findings “make clear that in the press accounts of protest between 1965-1971 stories in which the anti-war movement directly or purposely targeted troops are virtually non-existent.”<sup>19</sup> Having occurred at a public event with media coverage, Jeffery Wilcox’s experience provides an ideal illustration of this lack of animosity and the existence of mutual respect between the anti-war movement and military personnel.

---

<sup>17</sup> Eric T. Dean Jr., “Myths of the Troubled and Scorned Vietnam Veteran,” *Journal of American Studies*, Vol. 26, No. 1 (April 1992), 60.

<sup>18</sup> Lembcke, *Spitting Image*, 3-4.

<sup>19</sup> Beamish, Molotch, and Flacks, “Who Supports The Troops?”, 354.



The next category of veteran interviews housed in the VHP archives demonstrates uneventful homecomings as well, but with a twist. These men remember being specifically warned of the potential of anti-war harassment and given suggestions on how to avoid it, indicating that trouble had occurred somewhere to some degree. This brings the troop-supporting nature of the peace movement into question. In late 1970, John Kuennen landed in Seattle, Washington wearing the jungle fatigues he had on in Vietnam because his departure was so last minute. He remembers being warned by military personnel during a processing out meeting to expect protest harassment in the States, yet he never encountered any. Jack Cole was also warned not to wear his uniform when traveling home to Grand Rapids, Michigan in November 1968 to avoid harassment by activists. Following the suggestion, he changed to civilian clothes as soon as he arrived at the Seattle, Washington airport and had no problems. These types of warnings being given about traveling in the United States were noted by several Vietnam veterans. Although not all who were warned experienced any problems, as early as 1965 there was enough concern over anti-war harassment of soldiers to motivate the military to suggest not wearing the uniform while traveling in the United States, even though the practice allowed military personnel to travel for free. This certainly lends a large measure of credibility to the popular image of the abused Vietnam veteran.

Dennis Ray Churchill was also warned by military personnel to wear civilian clothes on his return trip home to the United States from Vietnam in 1969. He recalls little, if any awareness of the anti-war movement until receiving a letter from his mother shortly before his departure from Vietnam stating that his younger sister was a member of it. Churchill remembers, "I didn't think too much about it . . . I never protested the war; never felt what we

were doing was wrong.”<sup>20</sup> During his travel home from Vietnam, he was warned on two separate occasions, once by military personnel and then by a stewardess on the flight from Washington to Chicago. They both warned him that wearing his uniform could attract ugly reactions by American protesters. Dismissing their advice, Churchill wore his uniform home and never met any protests within the airports, which then seem to refute the idea that Vietnam veterans were objects of anti-troop sentiment. However, he story does not end there.

When Churchill returned to his old job at Whirlpool, the anti-war sentiment within the general American public targeted him in particular. A certain co-worker continually harassed him as he walked by or when his back was turned, but he was still within ear shot. “He didn’t know me from Adam, but he would yell out ‘Baby Killer,’” shared Churchill.<sup>21</sup> Not wanting to risk losing his job by confronting the person, he just quietly endured the harassment. Although Dennis Churchill escaped unpleasantness from protesters at airports while traveling in uniform, he was still the target of anti-war and anti-troop sentiment when he returned to civilian life. The attitudes and actions displayed by his co-worker were not in association with any organized demonstration; he acted on his own. His comments cannot be construed as an expression of frustration at the government’s foreign policy, nor were they expressions of respect and support. They were directed at Churchill personally for his involvement in the Vietnam War by an average citizen within the larger anti-war sentiment that permeated American society at the time.

Similar to Kenneth Scott, Churchill’s homecoming from Vietnam drew varied responses on both sides of the spectrum. On one side, his experience dispels the popular idea that all soldiers were spit on at airports. On the other, it provides evidence there were people who

---

<sup>20</sup> Dennis Ray Churchill, Grand Valley State University Veterans History Project database, 2015, <https://www.gvsu.edu/vethistory/>.

<sup>21</sup> Dennis Ray Churchill, Grand Valley State University Veterans History Project database, 2015, <https://www.gvsu.edu/vethistory/>.

opposed the war and did beleaguer Vietnam veterans. There was no media coverage of these incidences. For different reasons, these veterans chose not to report such treatment at the time, leaving no official record of it except their personal testimony. However, the lack of an official record does not mean that the incident did not happen. Here then is an example of how relying on the absence of media coverage as proof that incidents never took place, coupled with dismissing veteran testimony as authors Beamish, Molotch, Flacks, and Lembcke have all done, severely limits the strength of an arguments. The experiences of Churchill and Scott also highlight a missing element in Dean's research that simply chose not to address the activity of the anti-Vietnam War movement in his article at all.

In his book *Vietnam Veterans Since The War*, Wilbur Scott does not completely overlook the impact of the anti-Vietnam War movement. Scott states that sentiment over the rightness or wrongness of the war colored all issues of Vietnam veterans' re-adjustment to civilian life, including how others reacted to them. He uses the experience of Sarah Haley to illustrate and prove his point. Sarah Haley grew up observing the psychological scars that combat left on her World War II veteran father. Upon completing graduate school, Haley accepted a position in social work at the Boston Veterans Administration Hospital in late 1969. One of her first patients was a highly agitated young veteran who confided that his company had killed women and children in the My Lai Massacre, which only days before was breaking news in America. In two separate interviews with Scott in 1988, Haley reflected over her career working there during and after the Vietnam War, stating, "There was a bias toward Vietnam veterans, especially after the My Lai Massacre broke. It was so much easier to blame the . . . [Vietnam] veteran. . . . They [clinicians] really weren't any different than the regular population. . . . [Also] we had antiwar clinicians in my agency who didn't want to talk with Vietnam veterans because they were baby

killers who should have known better and not have gone in the first place.”<sup>22</sup> Haley’s comment is very telling and demonstrates that anti-troop sentiment existed in many levels of society and took other forms than literal spitting. Given the purpose of his book, Scott only gives attention to the negative treatment received by the Vietnam veterans, but the complexities of homecoming receptions, like that of Churchill, simply are not addressed.

Diverse homecoming receptions were common place for many Vietnam veterans. The GVSU Veterans History Project archives provide numerous examples of soldiers who report experiencing contradicting reactions throughout America society, including the act of spitting. Stephen Nyenhuis was drafted and served in Vietnam from April 1969 through May 1970. Upon his return home to Grand Rapids, Michigan, his family met him at the airport to welcome him home. He also remembers his church celebrating his safe return. On the other hand, when Larry Rosencrans returned to his West Michigan home also in 1970 after deployment to Vietnam he recalls being “put down and called names” by members of his church.<sup>23</sup> Joseph James DiLorenzo had his first experience with the anti-war movement before he was technically a veteran. Flying into Chicago on the first leg of his journey to Vietnam in 1970, DiLorenzo was bought drinks in the airport by businessmen out of gratitude for his service. Yet when he landed in Seattle, Washington on the second leg of his trip, protesters threw eggs and animal feces at the soldiers as they entered the airport. Army Ranger Jimmy Jamieson had a similar offensive experience when he returned from the war in late 1968. On his flight to Grand Rapids, Michigan he was bought drinks by some men on the flight as well as in the airport once they landed; yet he was targeted with dog feces by anti-war protesters in Washington D.C. Tom Meyer also received

---

<sup>22</sup> Scott, *Vietnam Veterans Since the War*, 4-5.

<sup>23</sup> Larry Michael Rosencrans, Grand Valley State University Veterans History Project database, 2015, <https://www.gvsu.edu/vethistory/>.

both positive and negative reactions to his homecoming. He recalled people in Chicago's O'Hara Airport buying him drinks to thank him for his service; yet he was denied entrance into a bar on Long Island, New York, due to his veteran status while he was visiting extended family. Mike Borah was also refused service in more than one bar, called names, and even spat on when he returned from Vietnam in 1970. Unaware of all the negative feelings American citizens were harboring against the troops while gone to Vietnam, Borah was completely taken by surprised by his treatment upon coming home.

From Nyenhuis to Borah, these men's experiences reveal a weakness in the arguments put forth by several previously discussed authors. Lembcke has dismissed such stories as either false memories due to PTSD or the reconstruction of a collective memory promoted in the 1980s by political forces, as do Beamish, Molotch, and Flacks. And again, Dean simply ignores any such stories completely overlooking the anti-war movement in his article. Although Scott's writing touches on the disrespect and ill treatment of Vietnam veterans, that is not the focus of his book, so he does cover the issue. Greene does an excellent job of presenting the full spectrum of veteran experiences, yet he draws few if any conclusions from his sources allowing the reader to interpret the materials as he or she wishes. Overall, each of these authors has not fully explored just how widely varied and complex the treatment of the Vietnam veterans was by American society upon their return home from war before drawing their conclusions.

Although he does not draw many conclusions for his readers, Bob Greene does challenge them with questions about the probability of anti-troop activity in the United States. He writes, "So-called "hippies," no matter what else one may have felt about them, were not the most macho people in the world. Picture a burly member of the Green Berets, in full uniform, walking through an airport. Now think of a "hippie" crossing his path. Would the hippie have the nerve

to spit on the soldier? And if the hippie did, would the soldier – fresh from facing enemy troops in the jungles of Vietnam – just stand there and take it?”<sup>24</sup> One answer to this question comes from an entry in Greene’s book. About her husband who was killed while in Vietnam, Jeanne Colson of Byron, California writes, “Do you really think that “burly Green Berets” were the only ones that went to that hell hole? My husband was neither burly nor an infamous Green Beret. . . . Bradley was a grunt . . . a high school graduate who got drafted because he didn’t go to college. I can still see him . . . five feet ten, 140 pounds in his shorts.”<sup>25</sup> Colson touched on the reality regarding many American soldiers in the Vietnam War; a large number were barely in their twenties and not John Wayne Green Beret look-a-likes. The idea that the average returning Vietnam veteran, having suffered months of heat, fatigue, and any number of jungle related illnesses and diseases, as well as potentially recovering from wounds, would have presented such an imposing figure as to deter anyone from expressing anti-war or anti-troop sentiment, spitting or otherwise, is perhaps an unrealistic argument.

Another reason retaliation was not always reached for was shock. Confessions of confusion at the hostile treatment were shared by several veterans and served to impede retaliation. Floyd Alexander enlisted in the Army in early 1969 and was deployment to Vietnam in December of that same year. Returning home one year later he encountered protesters in Dallas, Texas who called him unpleasant names. Alexander chose to just walk away from them. Upon his return home from Vietnam, Freddie Gilbert, who had been drafted, reported back to his pre-service job at the Veterans Administration and was told by his boss, a retired Navy man, “I

---

<sup>24</sup> Greene, *Homecoming*, 10.

<sup>25</sup> Greene, *Homecoming*, 56.

wish you'd stay with your own kind . . . those killers you served with in the 101<sup>st</sup>.”<sup>26</sup> Gilbert shared that it broke his heart and angered him to think that this was how America felt when they were the ones to draft him into the job. He concluded “In those days we took it like everything else; we were just Vietnam soldiers. Nobody knows us.”<sup>27</sup> His wife, Carol, recalled that when Freddie arrived home, he was called names and even spit on, but was too stunned by the actions to react in retaliation of any kind and simply left the scene quickly. Tom Huis had a similar experience while passing through a Chicago airport on his way home in early 1971. In his interview with the Veterans History Project he recalled being called a lot of names and spat on. He shared, “That was a crumby thing to do. What bothered me the most was when they spit at me. . . . I always think about that. How can people do that? . . . I never really got over that.”<sup>28</sup> Huis just could not grasp the reason for such treatment, “Why is he spitting on me when I’m the one protecting him?”<sup>29</sup> The unexpectedness of such offensive attitudes and actions by their fellow citizens, whether part of an anti-war demonstration or just individuals in general, was a common reason why not every soldier retaliated or even reported incidents, leaving no evidence aside from veterans’ testimony during an oral history interview done much later in life.

Yet not all veterans reacted with meekness to the hostility and harassment they received. John Salistian Jr. played saxophone in the 74<sup>th</sup> Army Band which performed at ceremonies and parades during his deployment to Vietnam. Upon return he attended the University of Michigan where he stated he was “treated like shit. I don’t know how many times I got spit on at U of

---

<sup>26</sup> Freddie Gilbert, Grand Valley State University Veterans History Project database, 2013, <https://www.gvsu.edu/vethistory/>.

<sup>27</sup> Freddie Gilbert, Grand Valley State University Veterans History Project database, 2013, <https://www.gvsu.edu/vethistory/>.

<sup>28</sup> Tom Huis, Grand Valley State University Veterans History Project database, 2010, <http://www.gvsu.edu/vethistory/>.

<sup>29</sup> Tom Huis, Grand Valley State University Veterans History Project database, 2010, <http://www.gvsu.edu/vethistory/>.

M.”<sup>30</sup> On one such occasion, Salistian grabbed an eighteen-year-old spitter and pushed him up against a wall, demanding an explanation. The young man’s response was, “I just thought you were a baby killer.” To which Salistian replied, “Why would you think I was a baby killer? You think I killed women and children with a saxophone?” According to Salistian, the young man gave no response. This spitting incident falls well outside the pattern of the typical airport spitting story that some authors labeled a false or “borrowed” memory. Salistian made no comment as to whether this particular incident was reported in any formal manner and therefore would be lost to researchers who limit their conclusions to media accounts.

Other soldiers interviewed by the VHP also admitted to aggressively reacting to those who acted on anti-war and anti-troop sentiment. After enlisting in the Marine Corps right out of high school and being deployed to Vietnam, Edward Serafino shared vivid and unpleasant memories of his homecoming experience. While being processed out of service, he and other service men were told to stay in groups as they moved through the airports traveling home. This Serafino did until he had to wait alone through the night in an airport to catch his flight home. At 3:00 a.m., he entered a men’s bathroom and was followed by two guys who forced him up against a wall. However, it was not long before his two attackers were in turn attacked by two other men who told Serafino to leave immediately. A short time later, the two rescuers approached Serafino and explained that they were Navy personnel assigned to protect servicemen as they traveled through the airport. There were no news reporters to capture this early morning incident and document it. However, the fact that Serafino and the other veterans were warned to move in groups, coupled with Navy personally roaming the airport prepared to deal with such issues, indicates that harassment and even physical harm of veterans was a large

---

<sup>30</sup> John Salistian Jr, Grand Valley State University Veterans History Project database, 2007, <http://www.gvsu.edu/vethistory/>.



enough problem that the United States military developed an institutional response of warnings, advice, and “escorts.”

Other Vietnam veterans had more extreme clashes with members of the anti-war movement which they initiated themselves. David Christian from Muskegon, Michigan enlisted in the Marine Corps and completed two tours of duty in Vietnam, one from 1965 to 1966, and the second from 1969 to 1970. In his interview with the Veterans History Project, he shared he would get into physical fights with anti-war protesters at the bars he frequented. Barry McAlpine also had much to share on this subject during his interview with the VHP. He received his draft notice in 1965 and was deployed to Vietnam by 1966. While there he recalls the men had only a vague knowledge of an anti-war movement occurring in the United States. It was not until he returned home in 1967 and attended Palmer College, Illinois, that McAlpine came literally face-to-face with demonstrators, which he admits befuddled him. “At first I’d ask them really what was actually the problem, and they couldn’t come up with any facts or anything except bull shit. And so I would try to talk to them, and it wasn’t working. And so I’d have to grab them by the ponytail, and then I’d put them on the cement, and then the police would come, and I would go to jail. . . . My brother had to get me out a lot of times because I was disrupting, physically disrupting the demonstrations.”<sup>31</sup> McAlpine’s reaction to protesters was not limited to the college campus. He confessed that “after what I’d just been through . . . couldn’t live with myself . . . could not look at myself in the mirror if I didn’t go up and address” any demonstrators he came across. “First I tried to talk, but that never worked. I’d grab their placards, posters, poles and break them. Then I’d go after the biggest, baddest, ugliest one, and I’d just start it off. Police

---

<sup>31</sup> Barry McAlpine, Grand Valley State University Veterans History Project database, 2012, <http://www.gvsu.edu/vethistory/>.

would be there very shortly.”<sup>32</sup> Official police reports may or may not have been filed, and there was no mention of media coverage, but such confessions as these seemly unlikely to be totally made up or false memories especially since these men were the initiators of the physical confrontation and were dealt with by law enforcement. It is true that media documentation would have provided proof that such events took place; however, the absence of it in no way proves it did not happen. Without serious consideration of the testimonies of all involved and specific research into the matter, one can only speculate and assume both are both dangerous methods of forming conclusions.

Jim Southerland is another Vietnam veteran whose run in with a spitting protester should not be dismissed due to lack of media reporting. Southerland joined the army in 1965 and served out the majority of his enlistment in Germany. In 1967, he re-enlisted and was deployed to Vietnam as a replacement. Upon returning home from Vietnam in the spring of 1969, Southerland was hired by the United States Capitol Police Department in Washington DC and volunteered for the Virginia National Guard. In the fall of 1970, he also enrolled and took classes at American University. In his interview with GVSU Veterans History Project, he details a particularly nasty incident with a protester. According to Southerland, he was often on campus in either his National Guard or U.S. Capitol Police uniform, including his gun. In 1973, he was spat on by a protester. She forcefully resisted and spat on him a second time as he attempted to handcuff and arrest her. “I lost it, totally lost it. I bet her with a black jack . . . knocking out teeth. I’m holding off the crowd at gun point, and I’m dragging her by her ankles. . . .I got her handcuffed right out in the middle of Nebraska Avenue, two lanes going each way, and people are stopping and screeching on their brakes, swerving around us. . . . I’m holding a gun, ‘Come

---

<sup>32</sup> Barry McAlpine, Grand Valley State University Veterans History Project database, 2012, <http://www.gvsu.edu/vethistory/>.

over, any of you. Step off the curb I'm going to kill you.' Finally the police got there, dispersed the crowd."<sup>33</sup> The woman had significant damage to her face from the beating, and Southerland was sure he was in serious trouble. His case was investigated by the Metropolitan Police Department, and he was interviewed by the U.S. attorney general. In the end a judge convicted the woman of assault and resisting arrest. Southerland quickly ended his career with the U.S. Capital Police Department following this incident. There was no mention any media coverage of this event given in the interview.

Strict reliance on the discovery of media coverage as evidence of whether or not incidents occurred presents several problems. Using such a method, the stories of McAlpine and Southerland would likely not have been discovered. Yet their experiences are far too unique to be dismissed as simply products of strictly reconstructed or "borrowed" memory. Research into their claims should produce official police and court records documentation, but even if it did not, the truthfulness of the stories is not necessarily eliminated. Reporters cannot be omnipresent and media can be highly subjective and cover only what an editor deems worthy of publication. An excellent illustration of this is found in veteran Dennis Bassett's experience with reporters while in Vietnam. Bassett enlisted in 1960 when he graduated high school and served eighteen months in Korea after training. Upon his return home, he completed Ranger training while earning a degree and officer commission through the ROTC program at Western Michigan University. In 1968, Bassett was deployed to Vietnam just following the first wave of the Tet Offensive, and he served as a platoon leader with the 9<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division in the thick of fighting in Mekong Delta Region. His unit was one of the first selected to rotate home as part of President Nixon's de-escalation program. Before he left Vietnam, Bassett was interviewed by Dan

---

<sup>33</sup> Jim Southerland, Grand Valley State University Veterans History Project database, 2017, <http://www.gvsu.edu/vethistory/>.

Webster of CBS News and asked when he thought the South Vietnamese government would fall as they pulled out. Bassett responded, “That question’s predicated on the assumption that it is going to fall. . . . I’m not sure we know that.”<sup>34</sup> According to Bassett, Dan Webster abruptly ended the interview. On another occasion before heading back to the United States, Bassett was selected to be interviewed by *LIFE Magazine* for an article including a photo layout. During this interview, “They asked the same question in a different fashion . . . not what do you want to say to your wife and kids back home? How’s your mom doing? Do you miss apple pie? No. When’s everything going to go to hell in a hand basket? I said, “I’m not sure it is.” They don’t want to hear that. . . . I told them “you guys aren’t honest, or you’re honest to keep your job, but you’re going to write what your bureau chief wants you to write.”<sup>35</sup> Bassett’s interview with *LIFE* was never published. His point of view on the selectiveness of reporting was confirmed by another reporter visiting Vietnam on another occasion. “I have to write stories that my editor wants or I’m out of a job. . . . He said, “If you give me a story of GIs mutilating an enemy prisoner that goes. You give me a story about GIs helping a village, I’ll never get printed.”<sup>36</sup> Successful reporters submitted only those stories their editors wanted to publish. Should an event not interest editors for whatever reason, it was not published. This is a serious drawback when using negative evidence to build an argument.

Yet this is exactly what such authors as Beamish, Molotch, and Flacks as well as Lembcke do, resulting in incomplete and underdeveloped arguments and emphasizing the need to return to the original sources, the veterans. Interestingly, had he chosen to seriously consider

---

<sup>34</sup> Dennis Bassett, Dennis Bassett, Grand Valley State University Veterans History Project database, 2011, <http://www.gvsu.edu/vethistory/>.

<sup>35</sup> Dennis Bassett, Dennis Bassett, Grand Valley State University Veterans History Project database, 2011, <http://www.gvsu.edu/vethistory/>.

<sup>36</sup> Dennis Bassett, Dennis Bassett, Grand Valley State University Veterans History Project database, 2011, <http://www.gvsu.edu/vethistory/>.

the testimony of veterans, Lembcke would have found solid evidence in the confessions of both Southerland and McAlpine to further support one of his arguments. Listing a variety of incidences reported in newspapers, Lembcke states, “The violence and spit surrounding anti-war demonstrations was real, but the demonstrators were usually the victims, not the perpetrators of those acts.”<sup>37</sup> The activities of Barry McAlpine certainly prove that to be true. Ironically, that same point can be used to refute the claims that there was mutual respect, support, and friendliness between the two groups, which is also made by Lembcke and others.

Delving into the testimonies of Vietnam veterans not only adds another dimension to the incidents between the members of the anti-war movement and returning veterans; it also adds a perspective that has perhaps been overlooked regarding even the peaceful methods of protesting the war. Again, Dennis Bassett’s experience illustrates this well. Upon returning to the United States at the end of their tour in Vietnam in 1969, Bassett’s unit was assigned to march in a parade in Seattle, Washington. At the conclusion of the parade when the troops were loaded back onto a waiting bus, they were followed by anti-war protesters displaying slogans such as “Make Love Not War” and carrying the Viet Cong flag. According to Bassett, although the demonstration was peaceful, the “Hippies misjudged the tenor of the boys. Any SOB comes around me at this time with a VC flag is going to get a guttural reaction.”<sup>38</sup> That is exactly what happened. As one of the protesters carrying a VC flag attempted to board the bus, Bassett explained, “That man left that bus by the base of my toe.”<sup>39</sup> Bassett literally kicked him off the bus. When other protesters came alongside the bus shoving their literature and slogans through

---

<sup>37</sup> Lembcke, *The Spitting Image*, 33.

<sup>38</sup> Dennis Bassett, Grand Valley State University Veterans History Project database, 2011, <http://www.gvsu.edu/vethistory/>.

<sup>39</sup> Dennis Bassett, Grand Valley State University Veterans History Project database, 2011, <http://www.gvsu.edu/vethistory/>.

the windows, the soldiers grabbed their hands and arms until they were ordered to let go so that the demonstrators would not be dragged along as the bus pulled out. That was not the last time Bassett would see anti-war activists demonstrate by carrying Viet Cong flags, which created quite a conflict for him. Bassett described his feelings, “If I saw someone carrying a VC flag thirty days ago, I killed him. Now I see some American carrying a VC flag down my street; I can’t kill him. How does this work? He’s an enemy there; he’s a peaceful demonstrator here. . . . So that was always a conflict to me. Still is.”<sup>40</sup> Clearly for Bassett, recently returned from fighting the Viet Cong, this method of protest was confusing and offensive, leaving him feeling far from supported.

Seeing protesters waving a VC flag bothered more than just Bassett. Steve Harpers’ story can be found in *No Victory Parades*, published in 1971. Of an encounter with the anti-war movement, Harpers recalled, “Last week, I had to be in Chicago; I ran into a ‘Resist the Draft’ rally on the street. At first I smiled: kids at it again, just a fad. Then I started gettin’ sore about how I had to go and they could stay out. . . I just stood there and got sore at those spoiled rich kids telling people to ‘resist the draft.’ What about us poor people? For every guy who resists the draft one of us gotta go, and he gets sent out into the boonies to get his backside shot at. One of their signs read “‘We’ve Already Given Enough.’ And I thought, ‘What *have* they given?’”<sup>41</sup> His upset with the anti-war movement did not stop there. In Polner’s book, Harper describes several gruesome atrocities he witnessed committed by the Viet Cong against Vietnamese civilians and then explains, “When I see a hippie with a VC flag, right away I remember seein’

---

<sup>40</sup> Dennis Bassett, Grand Valley State University Veterans History Project database, 2011, <http://www.gvsu.edu/vethistory/>.

<sup>41</sup> Polner, *No Victory Parades*, 29.

those little girls, killed by the VC.”<sup>42</sup> As in the case of Bassett, the demonstrators’ chosen method of protest, even though technically peaceful, produced the exact opposite reaction within the veterans than the demonstrators perhaps had intended.

Vietnam veterans were not the only people who took offense at certain peaceful anti-war activities. Joyce Skinner Washburn is another example of how methods used by the peace movement were not perceived as supportive or GI-friendly. Washburn enlisted in the Navy Reserves in May of 1968. The following month, her Marine boyfriend was killed in Vietnam. Washburn attended Grand Valley State University after her own basic training, and she witnessed a number of anti-war protests on campus. She recalls at first avoiding any protests, making sure she just was not around them. But when the protesters wore the names of soldiers killed in Vietnam around their neck as they moved through classes and campus, she became angry. She explained, “Don’t use Dennis’ name (her boyfriend) to do that. Who are you to do that? It was hard, it was really hard. It was like they were traitors.”<sup>43</sup> So once again, the peaceful methods that anti-war activists used to bring attention to their objection to the Vietnam War were not necessarily viewed as supportive or pro-troop.

The experiences of Bassett, Harpers, and Washburn present serious questions to the claim put forward that the anti-war movement was respectful and supportive to the troops. Acts of respect and support are somewhat subjective by nature and can only really be labeled as such by the recipient. The idea of waving an enemy flag in the face of a veteran does not conjure up feelings of empathy or support, and so perhaps it is not surprising that Bassett and Harpers found these types of acts confusing and angering. An argument might be made that draft resistance

---

<sup>42</sup> Polner, *No Victory Parades*, 29.

<sup>43</sup> Joyce Skinner Washburn, Grand Valley State University Veterans History Project database, 2015, <http://www.gvsu.edu/vethistory/>.

campaigns were done out of concern for would-be soldiers' well-being, but the reality for veterans like Harpers was that they struck an emotional nerve and were taken as quite an offense. The same holds true in Washburn's case. Yes, wearing the name of a soldier killed in Vietnam as a silent statement against the war may have seemed a way to demonstrate both concern and support for the troops and their loved ones, but in actuality it stirred up hurt and anger in those like Washburn. The perspective of veterans like Bassett, Harpers, and Washburn as well as their friends and family were not seriously addressed by authors Lembcke or Dean or Beamish and his co-authors, illustrating that the limited focus of only "news accounts and archival materials from leading anti-war organizations . . . show that relations between veterans and the anti-war movement were empathetic and mutually supportive" is too narrow to draw absolute conclusion on such a multi-dimensional issue.<sup>44</sup>

In *No Victory Parades*, Murray Polner raises one of the first red flags regarding negative treatment of Vietnam veterans as early as 1971, several years before the Vietnam War ended and twenty years before the Gulf War started. Bob Greene's book *Homecoming* with his infamous spitting questions directly engages the question of how veterans were treated. The over one thousand responses received in 1987, again prior to the both the Bush Administration and Gulf War, record an extremely broad range of homecoming experiences that go well beyond the spitting question. They include incidents of welcome, gratitude, and respect as well as spitting, name calling, and offense. So detailed and precise were many of these stories that the author himself became convinced "that many returning veterans truly were spat upon – literally – as a

---

<sup>44</sup> Lembcke, *The Spitting Image*, 4.



part of their welcome home.”<sup>45</sup> Yet the survey of scholarship included in this paper reveals that question is never fully again engaged, nor are the testimonies of veterans.

In *Vietnam Veterans Since The War* Scott’s focus is not an argument of whether the veterans were treated poorly or not. His writing assumes that they were and supplies evidence to that fact specifically through the experience of Sarah Haley, the health care professional working for the Veterans Administration. Dean’s research in his article “The Myths of the Troubled and Scorned Vietnam Veteran” adds insightful information and statistics on topics of employment, drug use, and education of the veteran, but completely ignores both the anti-war movement and any testimony from the veterans, narrowing and limiting the usefulness of his conclusions. In their article “Who Supports The Troops?” Beamish, Molotch, and Flacks provides valuable, even provocative, statistical evidence from media coverage, or lack thereof, regarding anti-war protests between the years of 1965 and 1971. However, they have attributed even the anti-war activists’ quotes included in the article to reconstructed memory, and ignore veteran testimony altogether, specifically mentioning those published in Greene’s book as suspect. Their evidence is far too limited to sustain their arguments. Lembecke’s *The Spitting Image* follows this same vein. Solely relying on media coverage and archived materials of specific organized anti-war groups concerning exclusively the act of spitting to define the overall relationship between the American anti-war movement and Vietnam veterans is far too limited evidence from which to draw valid conclusions. The lack of pictorial evidence of an act does not eliminate the possibility it took place. Just as with Beamish and his co-authors, Lembecke’s arguments based on negative evidence are weak at best. To absolutely debunk the idea that any veteran was ever spat upon cannot be accomplished, and even if it could, that does not translate into an absolute debunking

---

<sup>45</sup> Greene, *Homecoming*, 11.

of any and all forms of ill treatment. The majority of veterans' testimonies listed within this paper alone are too detailed and unusual to have been totally falsified or be purely a symptom of post-traumatic stress disorder, and frankly, to suggest that is the case is insulting. In addition, the Bush Administration may well have capitalized on stories of poorly treated veteran soldiers to gain popular support for the Gulf War, but both Greene and Polner publicized records of Vietnam veterans' troubled relationships with the anti-war movement far predate it. Overall Lembcke's argument is too absolute given his reliance on negative evidence and his method of interpreting it.

How veterans were treated upon their return to the United States from serving in Vietnam War is far more varied and complex than available scholarship appears to have addressed thus far. Polner was one of the first to raise the question. Greene has come closest in demonstrating the complexity of the situation. But the challenge to further explore this issue was never fully taken up by the other more recent authors. Although each has made valuable contributions to specific aspects of the topic, the experiences described by veteran after veteran detailed in this paper progress further and further away from the conclusions of the surveyed scholarship. Ultimately, the GVSU Veterans History Project oral histories demonstrate a broad and complex spectrum of answers to the question of how Americans, especially those opposed to the war, reacted to the veterans for their role in the Vietnam War, and to fully grasp that spectrum requires a serious look into the testimonies of these veterans.

## Bibliography

Beamish, Thomas D., Harvey Molotch, and Richard Flacks. "Who Supports the Troops? Vietnam, the Gulf War, and the Making of Collective Memory." *Social Problems*, Vol. 42, No. 3, (August 1995). <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3096852>

Dean, Eric T., Jr. "The Myth of the Troubled and Scorned Vietnam Veteran." *Journal of American Studies*, Vol. 26, No. 1 (April, 1992). <https://www.jstor.org/stable/27555590>

Greene, Bob. *Homecoming: When the Soldiers Returned from Vietnam*. New York: Putnam, 1989.

Lembcke, Jerry. *The Spitting Image: Myth, Memory, and the Legacy of Vietnam*. New York: New York University Press. 1998.

Polner, Murray. *No Victory Parades: The Return of the Vietnam Veterans*. San Francisco; Chicago; New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston. 1971.

Scott, Wilbur. *Vietnam Veterans Since The War: The Politics of PTSD, Agent Orange and the National Memorial*. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press. 1993.

Vietnam Veterans, Grand Valley State University Veterans History Project Digital Collection, <http://www.gvsu.edu/vethistory/>.

Alexander, Floyd 2013  
Aronson, Marc 2014  
Bajema, Mel 2014  
Bassett, Dennis 2011  
Borah, Mike 2009  
Christian, David 2016  
Churchill, Dennis Ray 2015  
Cole, Jack 2008  
Corradetti, David 2014  
DiLorenzo, Joseph James 2015  
Donnelly, James 2013  
Gilbert, Carol 2013  
Gilbert, Freddie 2013  
Heiden, Edwin Franklyn Jr. 2015  
Huis, Tom 2010  
Jamieson, Jimmy 2017

Jerzyk, Benjamin 2015  
Kuennen, John 2014  
McApline, Barry 2012  
Meyer, Thomas 2013  
Muir, Dr. Richard 2015  
Nyenhuis, Stephen 2012  
Pittman, James 2014  
Rosencrans, Larry Michael 2015  
Salistian Jr., John 2007  
Scott, Kenneth 2008  
Serafino, Edward 2009  
Smith, John 2014  
Southerland, Jim 2017  
Washburn, Joyce Skinner 2015  
Wilcox, Jeffrey 2008

Phone Interviews:

Lembcke, Jerry. July 29, 2017

Personal Interviews:

Huizenga, Robert. July 20, 2017

Hawver, Henry. July 29 and August 4, 2017

Hawver, Lois. July 29 and August 4, 2017