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More Vietnam vets seeking PTSD help

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Forty-three years ago, Marine Corps infantryman Marcus Merwin was three weeks shy of escaping Vietnam unscathed.

On Sept. 13, 1966, Merwin was with a small ground patrol near Da Nang when the sergeant in charge spotted a narrow opening through jungle brush. Merwin was through the opening when a "bouncing betty" land mine planted by the Viet Cong exploded and killed the two Marines behind him.

One of the dead was a newcomer to the unit. After only three days in Vietnam, Jason Bruce of Boston, was sliced in half by the explosion. Charles Lenartowicz of Philadelphia was riddled with shrapnel. Both men died instantly.

Merwin, a military radio strapped to his back, called for an evacuation helicopter. It was then he noticed blood dripping from his arm. Treated at a field hospital for a minor wound, Merwin was quickly released back to duty. He lifted off from Vietnam for good on Oct. 2, 1966.

He escaped death but not a lifetime of guilt. For more than four decades, Merwin said, he was a victim of post-traumatic stress disorder, a diagnosis that was not officially adopted by the American Psychological Association until 1980. Before then, PTSD symptoms went by other names, including "shell shock."

For years, the Monroeville man said, he led a "double life," working for the Postal Service while struggling to suppress the dark memories of Vietnam.

It was a life lived in the shadow of war. It remained that way until a new conflict-- in Iraq -- pushed Merwin into treatment.

He's not alone. The number of Vietnam vets receiving PTSD treatment more than doubled between 1997 and 2005, swelling from 91,043 to 189,309, according to the latest figures available from the government.

The "sharp recent growth" in PTSD treatment among Vietnam veterans is "puzzling" to Robert A. Rosenheck and Alan F. Fontana of the VA New England Mental Illness Research, Education and Clinical Center.

"Combat ended in Vietnam 30 years ago, and a growing volume of veterans seeking help for PTSD would not have been expected so long after the traumatic events took place," they said in their article in the journal Health Affairs.

It doesn't puzzle Dave McPeak. A Vietnam veteran himself, McPeak has been counseling vets at the VA Vets Center in Greentree since its opening in 1980.

A licensed psychologist, McPeak attributes the increase to several factors, including retirement. The average Vietnam veteran now is 61.

"They have time on their hands," McPeak said.

Busy raising families and building careers, Vietnam veterans were either too preoccupied to be troubled by wartime memories or, like Merwin, managed to mask them, McPeak said.

"This is pure PTSD," said McPeak, comparing the Vietnam veterans now in counseling with earlier veterans, who frequently were ensnared by either drug or alcohol abuse. Most of those veterans now are dead, many living only to their 30s or 40s, McPeak said.

McPeak is confident the latest wars play a role in the surge of those seeking treatment.

Seeing the wars on television has exposed raw emotions for many Vietnam veterans, according to Ed Bialobok, a licensed therapist at the Vets Center in White Oak.

"The majority of veterans did remarkably well," Bialobok said. "They raised families, supported their families, went on with their lives. Now, with time to kill, many of them are re-thinking their experiences" in combat.

"Their dreams can be very disturbing," he said. "They have intrusive thoughts about the war. A helicopter flying overhead can be a powerful trigger for a Vietnam vet."

Merwin said the memory of his dead comrades -- and the feeling that he didn't do enough to save them -- have stayed with him all these years.

Discharged from the Marines when he was just 20, Merwin tore through 40 jobs in the first five years after Vietnam. He eventually landed a job with the Postal Service and stayed until his retirement 35 years later. He earned an undergraduate degree in criminology from Pitt, got married and had three children.

He preferred working nights, believing it gave him a degree of anonymity that daytime employment could not.

A self-described "rebel," he grew shoulder-length hair, which he tucked into a wig for his job.

"I was playing a part," he said. "It was my way of dealing with things."

Unnerved by news coverage of the fighting in Iraq, Merwin sought out counseling for the first time three years ago. He thinks it's helping, but doesn't expect to leave memories of Vietnam behind.

"I want them suppressed. It's gone on too long. I just want them suppressed," he said.