Culture, Ceremonialism, and Stress: American Indian Veterans and the Vietnam War
Tom Holm
Armed Forces & Society 1986 12: 237
DOI: 10.1177/0095327X8601200205

The online version of this article can be found at:
http://afs.sagepub.com/content/12/2/237

Published by:
SAGE
http://www.sagepublications.com

On behalf of:
Inter-University Seminar on Armed Forces and Society

Additional services and information for Armed Forces & Society can be found at:

Email Alerts: http://afs.sagepub.com/cgi/alerts
Subscriptions: http://afs.sagepub.com/subscriptions
Reprints: http://www.sagepub.com/journalsReprints.nav
Permissions: http://www.sagepub.com/journalsPermissions.nav
Culture, Ceremonialism, and Stress: American Indian Veterans and the Vietnam War

TOM HOLM
University of Arizona

Over the past 15 years, a large body of literature has developed on the subject of posttraumatic stress disorder in Vietnam veterans.¹ In large part the disorder is viewed as originating from the shock of combat and/or the feeling of being rejected by society for participating in the conflict. Generally, the symptoms of PTSD are frequent inexplicable headaches, flashbacks, depression, severe alienation, sleep intrusions, extreme nervousness, and a heightened startle response. The problems are often manifested in antisocial behavior, chemical abuse, chronic unemployment, or the inability to maintain close personal relationships with friends or family members.²

Despite the interest in this problem, only a few studies have focused on Hispanics, blacks, and women, and none on American Indians, except for a brief mention of an intertribal ceremony held in honor of Vietnam veterans (described by the author) in Four Winds magazine.³ The present study, based on extensive interviews with 35 American Indian Vietnam veterans and on direct observations in Indian communities, intends partially to correct this gap in the literature and place some of what we know about PTSD within a cultural context.

The sample is admittedly small. There were over 42,000 American Indians who served in Vietnam between 1964 and 1973.⁴ However,
the study group was extremely responsive and the interviews insightful. In terms of culture, it was a very diverse group, representing 25 tribes or combinations of tribes: Kiowas and Comanches from the southern plains; Caddoes, Cherokees, and Creeks, originally from the southern woodlands culture area; Sioux from the northern plains; Chippewas, Sac and Fox, and Menominees from the Great Lakes; Navajos from the Southwest; and Colville and Shoshone from the northwest plateau. Most were born between 1944 and 1952, and all entered the military between the ages of 17 and 21. Nearly half of the 35 now live in urban areas, but only 8 actually grew up in large population centers. In other words, they were fairly representative of the demographic trends of Indians of their age group.5 On the whole, their educational levels were quite high, but most admitted that these levels were attained after their military service.6

PTSD in American Indian Veterans

There are strong indications that minority veterans display stress symptoms to a greater degree than other veterans. According to a 1981 study commissioned by the Veterans Administration (VA),

Vietnam veterans as a group were three times as likely to be stressed as Vietnam era veterans [those who served in the military in the period but did not go to Vietnam] and the latter were twice as stressed as men who did not enter the military [during the war]. Blacks and Chicanos, at every point of stressful experience, evidenced somewhat higher levels than whites. Just being in Vietnam for black respondents was as stressful as being in heavy combat for white veterans.7

These higher levels of stress in minority veterans are usually seen in terms of class rather than race. Members of the lower economic strata were twice as likely to be assigned to nontechnical military occupations and see combat in Vietnam as members of the upper classes.8 Minority men, because of their generally lower economic and educational levels, were more apt to see duty in Vietnam and to participate in combat. Already alienated from mainstream, middle-class society, they returned from the war to find that their service gained them neither social nor economic status.9

Given the foregoing, it is reasonable to assume that American Indians should display a great many stress symptoms. Historically, In-
dians were crushed by U.S. military might, forced to abandon many of their religious ceremonies, stripped of numerous tribal institutions, and left as one of the poorest economic groups in the nation. Low economic and educational levels (some reservations have reported unemployment rates as high as 80 percent and education averaging at the eighth-grade level) virtually assured that most Indians would be assigned to nontechnical duties upon entering the military. Thus, they were very likely to become infantrymen and experience combat in Vietnam.

On another level, it seems that because of white-held stereotypes of Indians, native Americans tended to draw some very hazardous duties in Southeast Asia. That Indians are tenacious fighters, good scouts, and obedient and knowledgeable warriors has long been held. In 1799, Col. James Smith, who had been in the Revolutionary Army fighting the British and Indians, wrote,

> The business of the private [Indian] warriors is to be under command, or punctually to obey orders; to learn to march abreast in scattered order, so as to be in readiness to surround the enemy, or to prevent being surrounded; to be good marksmen, and active in the use of arms; to practise running; to learn to endure hunger or hardships with patience and fortitude; to tell the truth at all times to their officers, but more especially when sent out to spy the enemy.\(^\text{11}\)

Nearly 150 years later, high-ranking Washington officials were echoing Smith’s views. Harold Ickes, secretary of the Interior, wrote during World War II that the Indian was “uniquely valuable” to the war effort because he possessed endurance, rhythm, a feeling for timing, co-ordination, sense perception, an uncanny ability to get over any sort of terrain at night, and better than all else, an enthusiasm for fighting. He takes a rough job and makes a game of it. Rigors of combat hold no terrors for him; severe discipline and hard duties do not deter him.\(^\text{12}\)

These kinds of stereotypes followed Indian soldiers in Vietnam. Well over half of those interviewed mentioned they had endured some form of discrimination based on white stereotypes of Indians. A number reported they were typically referred to as “blanketasses” or “redskins,”
and almost all had been called "chief" at one time or another during their tours. Perhaps their most common complaint was that company and platoon commanders habitually assigned them to walk "point" on patrols and large-scale troop movements. (In Vietnam, because of booby traps, ambushes, and snipers, point was extremely perilous duty.) A Menominee from Wisconsin related that his platoon commander thought that since Indians "grew up in the woods," they should know how to track and generally "feel" when something in the immediate environment was disturbed or out of place. Therefore, the officer reasoned, Indians should make good point men or scouts. One Navajo veteran concurred about the false labeling. He said he was

stereotyped by the cowboys and Indian movies. Nicknamed "Chief" right away. Non-Indians claimed Indians could see through trees and hear the unhearable. Bullshit, they even believed Indians could walk on water.

Because of their assignments and apparently high rate of infantry service, American Indians garnered a number of awards and also suffered considerable casualties. Of the 35 veterans, 13 had been wounded in Vietnam. The most decorated Indian soldier of the war, Billy Walkabout, a Cherokee, won the Distinguished Service Cross, five Silver Stars, five Bronze Stars, and was wounded on six occasions.13

There can be no doubt both that Indians made sacrifices in the war and (apparent from the interviews) that they suffer from PTSD. For some the problem in Vietnam was severe:

I saw faces, you know, looking at me. Their hands up like they were telling secrets. I had a rage. . . . Sometimes I thought that the top of my head would just blow off.

Said another,

I couldn’t get the war out of my head. So, I stuck my head in a bottle. I hated everybody except when I was drunk. It took me five years, five years, man, to get straight, and now I’ve been sober for quite a while. Other guys still are drinking.

One veteran engaged in daredevil activities to relieve the pressure:

I rode bulls, I drove stock cars, I piled up my own cars and
a couple of motorcycles. I drank all the time. . . . Goddamn war put me in a world of shit. I think now that I had some sort of death wish.

For another, the trauma of combat was exacerbated because his own tribal conditions “forbade” what he saw and did in Vietnam:

We went into a ville [village] one day after an air strike. The first body I saw in Nam was a little kid. He was burnt up—napalm—and his arms were kind of curled up. He was on his back but his arms were curled but sticking up in the air, stiff. Made me sick. It turned me around. See, in our way we’re not supposed to kill women and children in battle. The old people say that it’s bad medicine and killing women and children doesn’t prove that you’re brave. It’s just the opposite.

Other Indian veterans had grave doubts about Indians participating in the war in the first place:

We went into their [the Vietnamese] country and killed them and took land that wasn’t ours. Just like what the whites did to us. I helped load up ville and ville and pack it off to a resettlement area. Just like when they moved us to the rez [reservation]. We shouldn’t have done that. Browns against browns. That screwed me up, you know.

For several veterans, the return to the United States was not exactly what they expected. It seemed as if American society, of which they were only a peripheral part, had sent them to war and then rejected them for actually serving. Several stated they were called “baby-killers” and “warmongers.” One man described his arrival back in the “world” with a great deal of bitterness:

We fought a white man’s war, you know, and the first thing that happens when I get back is that some white kid, a girl, at the L.A. airport, spits on me.

American society angered another Indian veteran in a different way:

The white dudes stayed in school, you know, and we fought
the war. They don’t know nothing about anything except what they get out of a book. But they get the jobs.....

The veterans’ stressful combat and readjustment experiences were also compounded by a more general dissatisfaction with U.S. Indian policies. A number of them joined Indian political organizations and participated in protests against federal policies and local racism directed at Indians. For the most part, they also agreed in principle with the ideas underlying the occupation by American Indians of Alcatraz Island in 1969; the Bureau of Indian Affairs building in Washington, D.C., in 1972; and the hamlet of Wounded Knee, S. Dak., in 1973. (Although several Indian Vietnam veterans were actually involved in the Wounded Knee takeover, none figured in this study.) A few men out of the 35 interviewed stated they had been active in the American Indian Movement and/or the National Indian Youth Council, the two principal Indian youth-activist groups of the period.

Tribal Cultures and Vietnam Veterans

A 1981 VA study pointed out that most Vietnam veterans still felt that their sacrifices, and those of their comrades, were meaningless within the context of the larger American society. In the words of the report,

Many combat veterans continue to dwell on the belief that they were sent to fight a war they were not intended to win. . . . They often emphasize public antipathy to the war and feel that their sacrifice was not appreciated. . . . More important, perhaps, is the fact that American society has created an environment in which men who were exposed to combat continue to define the experience in a negative way."

During the interviews it became increasingly clear, however, that despite their combat experiences, general dissatisfaction with American Indian policy, and society’s attitudes toward Vietnam veterans, some of the Indian veterans had relatively healthy feelings about their duty in Southeast Asia. According to one, “I wouldn’t trade that time for anything. Being in the war taught me how to survive.” A few others, including those who had seen heavy combat, felt their wartime experiences had given them knowledge and abilities over and above those of their nonveteran peers. In short, they seemed reasonably satisfied that their sacrifices had meaning—an attitude that appears to have eluded
most of the other veterans. One Cheyenne veteran summed it up in a revealing statement: "I'm proud of our warrior status."

The reasons underlying this positive outlook are somewhat complex but basically rooted in individual tribal cultures. Several respondents stated they had taken part in tribal ceremonies designed either to purify or honor returning warriors. Information gleaned from elders of various tribes suggests that in the past many Indian groups in this country engaged in distinct, separate rituals to celebrate the activities of war and peace. Some tribes lived under the constant threat of attack by enemies; basically, they felt that unless the military dimension of life were placed in a ritualistic context, it might well permanently dominate all other considerations. Other tribes viewed warfare as a severe disruption in the divinely created natural scheme of things. The Papagos, for example, defined war as a form of insanity. In either case, the line between war and peace was well circumscribed.

In fact, the line was so rigid that many tribes even categorized their leadership in those terms. Among the Sioux, the Comanches, the Sac and Fox, the Creeks, and numerous other tribes, there were "war chiefs" and "peace," or civil, leaders. Although the civil leaders usually had good war records in their tribes, their duties involved attempts to prevent younger men from rashly courting conflict. The Creeks and Cherokees determined clan identification along the lines of "white" (peace) and "red" (war) categories. Even the Pueblos, whose ancient traditions strongly opposed violence in any form, had war priests and warrior sodalities.

As a consequence of this rigid distinction between war and peace, most tribes developed special ceremonies to aid individuals—and, indeed, entire societies—in making the transition from peace to war and back again. Warriors were ritually prepared for war and offered protective medicine to assure their safe return to the community. In addition to the rituals for war, many tribes devised purification ceremonies to restore individual warriors, as well as the rest of the community, to a harmonious state. Unless the returning warriors were purged of the trauma of battle, it was felt they might bring back memories of conflict to the tribe and seek to perpetuate patterns of behavior unacceptable to the community in its ordinary functioning. All these ceremonies were thought necessary to maintain a tribe's continued harmonious existence with its environment.

Despite bureaucratic complaints and government prohibitions against war-related performances throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, many tribes maintained a wide variety of such
cereonies. In 1919, Commissioner of Indian Affairs Cato Sells expressed his irritation at the fact that dances and ceremonies were being conducted among a number of tribes for the Indian soldiers who had just returned from the trenches in France.19 Honoring and purification ceremonies for Indian veterans also followed the Second World War,20 despite the widespread (and erroneous) idea in the United States that Indian soldiers would refuse to take part in “yesterday’s culture.”21 The Sioux held victory ceremonies; Kiowas took part in soldier dances; Cherokees were ritually cleansed of the taint of battle by medicine men; and Navajos went through elaborate “‘Enemy Way’” ceremonies to restore returning veterans to a harmonious place in the community.22 It is significant to note that following World War II, several plains tribes, including the Kiowas, Cheyennes, and the Pawnees, rejuvenated some of their old warrior societies and corresponding ceremonials. The Kiowa Tiah-piah, or Gourd society, has become especially important. After going into a decline because of federal policies, it was rejuvenated after World War II.23 Since the 1950s, the society’s ceremonial dance has been instituted by members of other tribes. Gourd dances are now held regularly during intertribal gatherings in Arizona, New Mexico, Colorado, Kansas, and Nebraska, as well as in Oklahoma, home of the Kiowas. The society was originally a warrior’s group and, in many instances, a police force. The Gourd dance itself is now seen as a veterans’ ceremony.

A number (22) of the 35 Indian veterans interviewed said they had taken part in one or more honoring or purification ceremonies—either before they were inducted or assigned or upon their return from Southeast Asia. The ceremonies ranged from the relatively simple to the highly elaborate. A Cherokee informant said that on the last day of his leave prior to being sent overseas an elderly uncle awoke him before dawn in order to watch the sunrise and smoke a pipe of tobacco. His uncle said a few prayers and gave the informant some protective medicine. A Navajo veteran was given a “‘Blessing Way’” ceremony prior to his overseas tour. This ceremony, which lasts for several days, is a highly formalized narrative of the Navajo creation legend; it is also a curing ritual intended to make sure an individual is in harmony with his or her surroundings. It was utilized in this particular case as protective medicine.

Several veterans also mentioned carrying protective charms given to them by tribal elders and close relatives. For the most part, these Indians took part in honoring or cleansing ceremonies after their return. The Navajo veteran (mentioned above) was given a “‘squaw dance’”
upon his return from Vietnam. The squaw dance, or Enemy Way, is a four-day ritual in which the medicine man narrates the story of the Hero Twins who killed the monsters of the world in order to make it a safe place for human beings. As the story goes,

The Twins were successful in their attempts to kill all the Monsters. However, in the process of destroying the Monsters the Twins abused their special powers and weapons and disrupted the harmony in nature by killing some people. As a consequence the Twins became ill and misfortunes set in upon them. Another Holy Being recognized that the Twins had put themselves out of harmony with nature by killing, and thus needed a special ceremony to restore them to harmony. Thus was born the first "Enemy Way." 

In effect, the ritual removes the stigma of death and the disharmony caused by war. Other Indian Vietnam veterans were honored with special dances, peyote ceremonies, and prayer meetings. All of the individuals who took part in these ceremonies had the strong support of their extended family groups. In fact, few if any of these ceremonials could have been arranged without the intercession of certain family members.

There can be no doubt that at least some of the veterans were helped psychologically by the tribal events. According to one Navajo,

When I got back I had a lot of trouble. My mother even called in one of our medicine men. It cost them but my folks had an "Enemy Way" done for me. It's a pretty big thing.... It snapped me out of it.

In the same vein, a Kiowa veteran related,

My people honored me as a warrior. We had a feast and my parents and grandparents thanked everyone who prayed for my safe return. We had a "special" and I remembered as we circled the drum I got a feeling of pride. I felt good inside because that's the way the Kiowa people tell you that you've done well.

Several veterans no longer living in their home communities were honored or purified by ceremonies in other areas. One Cherokee veteran
living in Oklahoma City went—at his wife’s insistence—to see a Cherokee doctor over 100 miles away. The Cherokee medicine man purified him in a ceremony called “going to the water.” A Menominee veteran in Wisconsin told of how he presented an eagle feather to another veteran at an intertribal powwow. The recipient, a Sioux from South Dakota, in effect, was paid one of the highest honors a Menominee can bestow on a person. (According to Menominee tradition, eagle feathers are given away only by medicine people and warriors.)

Perhaps of equal psychological value is the fact that many of these men received a certain amount of prestige within their communities as a result of their wartime service. Although the idea of gaining status in an Indian tribe by entering the armed forces and “fighting a white man’s war” seems incongruous—after all, the tribes were subdued by the U.S. Army, and militarily enforced Indian policies prohibited tribal ceremonies in many cases—it is nevertheless understandable.

The veterans, simply by taking part in these time-honored ceremonials, essentially demonstrated a commitment to their cultural continuity. In addition, they created a rapprochement with the tribal elders who conduct and/or sponsor the rituals. Several tribes in the United States—the Kiowas and Comanches, the Cheyennes, and to a certain extent the Winnebagos, the Sioux, and the Chippewas—have syncretized service in the American armed forces with their own tribal customs. For these tribes there are certain functions that can only be performed by veterans. At powwows, for example, if a dancer drops an eagle feather, it can only be retrieved by a warrior who is accompanied by a chorus singing an appropriate honor song. At some tribal gatherings, veterans are still asked to “count coup,” or tell a war story, before any ceremonies can begin.

Tribes apparently recognize a psychological condition known as “age acceleration” and treat it in a positive light. In combat, a person is exposed to the deaths of others who are of a similar age. They are, in effect, experiencing the kinds of emotions that many individuals undergo toward the end of their lives. Seeing members of one’s peer group die forces an individual to think about, and in some cases focus on, mortality. In a tribal society, when a warrior has been placed in such a situation, he gains maturity, which, in turn, is equated with wisdom. As a Winnebago elder remarked before the performance of a veteran’s honor song during a powwow in Wisconsin, “We honor our veterans for their bravery and because by seeing death on the battlefield they truly know the greatness of life.”

In addition to being honored and perhaps purged of the taint of war,
some Indian veterans were aided by what can only be called a social absorption of combat-related trauma. A brief look at the way traditional Cherokee communities function perhaps could best illustrate this process. In these communities, mature men, those 40 and over, are usually the breadwinners and political leaders. Younger men, especially those under 25, have little—if anything—to do with the economy or the running of the community. As Albert L. Wahrhaftig writes,

Looking at Cherokee men in terms of different role expectations appropriate to different age groups of men, two things about the young are readily apparent. There is no niche for them within the institutional structure of a Cherokee settlement; and furthermore, the processes of Cherokee socialization operate to pull Cherokee men out of the settlement even as the absence of structural niche and social reward conspire to push them out.  

Younger men are almost expected to leave the community for a time; most often, they either find jobs in urban areas, become migrant laborers, or enter the military. When they eventually return (some never do), they are usually resocialized into the Cherokee pattern of behavior. The elders listen to the newly returned younger man’s adventures and relate them “to the ancient matrix of Cherokee knowledge conveyed through myth and Indian medicine.” A Cherokee veteran related the following:

After I got home, my uncles sat me down and had me tell them what it was all about. One of them had been in the service in World War II and knew what war was like. We talked about what went on over there, about the killing and the waste, and one of my uncles said that was why God’s laws are against war. They never really talked about those kind of things with me before.

This particular Cherokee was ritually cleansed and welcomed back in the community without reservation. Most important was that his experiences in Vietnam were eventually shared on an intellectual level by the community and tended to confirm the Cherokee belief that war was the ultimate evil. On a personal level, the veteran himself was never told his actions were disruptive or improper. His entrance into the service and his participation in the war were not viewed as political
statements. Entering the military is just one thing that young men have to do. The Cherokee’s personal bravery and service were cheered, but the war itself, simply because it was a war, was considered very bad.

Conclusion

It should not be concluded that all American Indian veterans of the Vietnam War have been automatically given status and ceremonies and, therefore, are purged of PTSD. Many Indian veterans now live in cities far away from their communities. Others are simply forgotten even within their own tribal groups. Some have not received ceremonies because their rituals of warfare have been lost or stripped away by government policies.

However, both ceremonialism and recognition have aided a number of Indian veterans in working through the problems associated with PTSD. In a broader context, it is possible that ceremonialism might be of benefit to non-Indian veterans. Although not seemingly viewed as such, non-Indians have several cultural features, including ceremonies, associated with warfare.

For example, Franklin Roosevelt’s famous speech requesting Congress to declare war on Japan in 1941 was more ceremonial than political. The United States was already in a shooting war in the North Atlantic in 1941; the beleaguered American troops in the Pacific were not awaiting a formal declaration of hostilities to fire on the attacking Japanese. Roosevelt’s speech and the subsequent declaration of war were the rituals by which American society as a whole crossed the line between war and peace. In a like manner, the formal surrenders and the homecoming parades ceremoniously brought World War II to an end. It must be remembered that one of the chief complaints of returning Vietnam veterans was that there were no ceremonies, either at the beginning or the end, to move American society into war and back to peace again.31

Another important part of veteran adjustment after a war such as Vietnam concerns the status a community gives its returning warriors. The recognition given to Indian Vietnam veterans in some Indian communities did not seem to involve political questions. Many Indians, in fact, thought the war was neither justified nor honorable. But political issues were not as important as the issue of service. Warriors were more important than the war. As one Sioux woman stated, “Most people here don’t like the war at all but they don’t like those Indian boys who are draft dodgers either.”32
Some Indian veterans were viewed in their communities as having gained wisdom in the war. Others were seen as heroes even though the war itself was not viewed as a heroic venture. Their sacrifices were, in that sense, given meaning. Thus, the war had some positive effects on their lives. *Legacies of Vietnam*, the VA’s exhaustive study of veterans, mentions this phenomenon in connection with veterans from small towns; the study notes that a minority of them felt the war was an “affirmative” experience. While it does not attempt to discover the reasons behind the positive outlooks of small-town veterans, *Legacies* does offer some theories:

The small town Vietnam veteran may have left and returned to a community where service to one’s country was considered worthy of respect, even during an unpopular war. Returning combat veterans may more frequently have been regarded as heroes in small towns. And, veteran doubts about their role may have been mitigated by the attitudes of the community and the welcome they received. Perhaps there is something about small city life that protects combat veterans from dwelling on the traumatic aspects of their combat experiences and encourages them to see military service as a part of life rather than as an inexplicable intrusion into the normal course of things.  

This kind of social absorption of war-related trauma apparently matches the experience of some Indian veterans. It can be concluded that culture is one of the keys to a better understanding of the problems of posttraumatic stress disorder in Vietnam veterans.

Notes


American Indian Veterans in Vietnam


6. The interviews and observations took place over approximately 18 months in several Indian communities. The informants (men) were initially contacted through my own friends and relatives living in Oklahoma, Arizona, California, New Mexico, and Wisconsin. Most of the sessions were relaxed, free discussions lasting at times for as long as four hours. The informants were asked general questions about their early lives, their problems, home communities, tribal cultures, their service in Vietnam, why they entered the military, and how they have adjusted since returning from Southeast Asia. In large part, the research was conducted much like ethnological field work and seemed to have served as a catharsis for many of those interviewed.


28. Statement made at an intertribal powwow in Waukesha, Wis., in March 1979, at which the author was present.


30. Ibid., p. 7.


TOM HOLM, assistant professor at the University of Arizona, received his B.A., M.A., and Ph.D. from the University of Oklahoma. He has published several articles on U.S. Indian policy and intratribal politics, as well as on American Indians and the U.S. armed forces.