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# DAILY NEWS

The family toll of unwon wars: From Vietnam to...

OPINION

## The family toll of unwon wars: From Vietnam to Afghanistan



**WAKIL KOHSAR/AFP via Getty Images** US soldiers sit on a wall as Afghans gather on a roadside near the military part of the airport in Kabul on August 20, 2021, hoping to flee from the country after the Taliban's military takeover of Afghanistan. (Photo by Wakil KOHSAR / AFP) (Photo by WAKIL KOHSAR/AFP via Getty Images)

By **ROBIN BOND**

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As troops return from Afghanistan, with chaos swirling in Kabul and military families mourning last week's attack, I recall my father returning home from Vietnam.

I was four years old, mom nudging me toward him in our tiny apartment in Charleston, S.C., a few miles from where dad had trained at The Citadel. "Daddy's home," she whispered excitedly. But he was a stranger to me, this missing man who'd been mythologized over the past year. I warmed up to him over time and aptly assumed the role of the eldest, approval-seeking daughter. I yearned for the mutual affection I saw exchanged between my friends and their fathers, but it would not come.

There would be moments when a connection between me and dad felt close at hand, quickly replaced by silence. When I misbehaved, dad would mete out verbal or physical punishment that felt more like revenge than discipline. His episodes of rage became more explosive in later years, fed by alcohol, poor lifestyle habits, and a too-easy retirement at age 50 from a prestigious government career.

Dad was an Army captain who flew Cobra helicopters, one of the "lucky ones" who never saw combat from the ground. He never spoke of the war, but I learned through research and chance about the fallen comrades whose remains he had dutifully collected. I also read a book by a soldier in my dad's platoon who described my father as a well-respected and compassionate leader who did his best to give his men space to mourn their fallen brothers when needed.

His pride in doing what he believed was the right thing must have suffered when he returned home in 1970 to anti-war protests. Much of the American public hadn't yet considered that you could "hate the game" without hating the player, which meant he was greeted by more of a public shaming than the hero's welcome his father had received upon returning from World War II.

I'll never know if the Vietnam War's inglorious ending was the nail in dad's emotional coffin, but I learned this month that there was more to the story than I knew. We sat in his apartment in the assisted living community where he lives, watching scenes of frightened Afghan citizens crowding onto an overfilled military plane in Kabul.

"Does this remind you of the scenes in the 70s when the last U.S. helicopters were leaving Saigon?"

Dad answered slowly and started talking about his South Vietnamese friend Vu. Vu was one of the allies dad had worked with side-by-side in Vietnam, and he was left behind by America's sudden exodus.

“We treated our allies worse than dog meat,” dad said. “These people became our friends, and we just left them,” he said, shaking his head. “We’re not very good friends to other nations.”

The war in Afghanistan has been far smaller in scale than Vietnam, with a small fraction of the casualties and troops deployed. But both conflicts stretched on for years, defining careers and family life for many who served. Both ended with a muddled, morally ambiguous announcement rather than a celebration, a force multiplier for service members already struggling with guilt, low morale and meaninglessness.

Now that we know how the war in Afghanistan is ending, will we heed the data on the impact of the Vietnam War on fighters and their families?

Thirty percent of Vietnam veterans were found to have PTSD; that’s 810,000 of the 2.7 million service members. Without proper tools, 74% of Vietnam veterans turned to substance abuse to help them cope. Negative homecoming experiences for Vietnam War soldiers predicted PTSD that lasted up to 40 years post-deployment.

Children and partners of traumatized service members experienced secondary trauma, triggering mental health issues, family violence and alcoholism. Grown children of veterans with warzone-related PTSD were diagnosed with or treated for PTSD three times more often than children of service members who were not deployed.

Of course, despite the surface similarities between the two conflicts, there are key differences that could alter the outcomes for families, for better and for worse. The American public that will receive our returning service members is more sympathetic and educated than the one Vietnam veterans encountered. However, many veterans will return home to children already reeling from the mental and emotional toll of the COVID-19 pandemic.

With scant mental health resources for families, it will be up to the community — teachers, neighbors, medical professionals, all of us — to recognize and help connect families to limited services for early intervention and treatment for war-related trauma. This is especially critical in low-income and rural areas, which typically have a higher military population.

We now know how the war in Afghanistan will end. But we can still write the way the *story* will end for the families of our returning soldiers.

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