

As world trade expanded and democracy spread, nationalism seemed less important and globe-trotting capitalists became more powerful than generals.

But the September 2001 terrorist attacks against America have provided a new, if shadowy, enemy. And a nation that once felt secure behind its nuclear shield turned with fear and gratitude to the warrior-heroes whom, until recently, it had taken for granted.

This essay was excerpted from A Call to Heroism © 2002 Peter Gibbon and reprinted with the permission of the publisher, Atlantic Monthly Press. Peter Gibbon is a research associate at Harvard University's Graduate School of Education.

His book is a comprehensive look at all aspects of genuine heroism as well as artificial hero worship in American society.

Vietnam Warriors: A Statistical Profile

Confusion reigns when it comes to numbers and the Vietnam War.

Listed below are some figures that may help sort out fact from fiction in many media reports concerning veterans.

IN UNIFORM AND IN COUNTRY

- Vietnam Vets: 9.7% of their generation.
- 9,087,000 military personnel served on active duty during the Vietnam era (Aug. 5, 1964—May 7, 1975).
- 8,744,000 personnel were on active duty during the war (Aug. 5, 1964—March 28, 1973).
- 3,403,100 (including 514,300 offshore) personnel served in the Southeast Asia Theater (Vietnam, Laos, Cambodia, Thailand and sailors in adjacent South China Sea waters).
- 2,594,000 personnel served within the borders of South Vietnam (Jan. 1, 1965—March 28, 1973).
- Of the 2.6 million, between 1 and 1.6 million (40-60%) either fought in combat, provided close combat support or were at least fairly regularly exposed to enemy attack. 15% were in combat units.
- Another 50,000 men served in Vietnam between 1960 and 1964.
- 7,484 women (6,250 or 83.5% were nurses) served in Vietnam.
- Peak troop strength in Vietnam: 543,482 (April 30, 1969).

CASUALTIES

- Hostile deaths: 47,418.
- Non-hostile deaths: 10,811.
- Total: 58,229 (includes men formerly classified as MIA and *Mayaguez* casualties). Men who have subsequently died of wounds account for the changing total.
- 8 nurses died—1 was KIA.
- Married men killed: 17,539.
- 61% of the men killed were 21 years old or younger.
- Highest state death rate: West Virginia—84.1 per 100,000 males (national average in 1970: 58.9).
- Wounded: 303,704—153,329

hospitalized + 150,375 injured who required no hospital care.

- Severely disabled: 75,000—23,214 100% disabled; 5,283 lost limbs; 1,081 sustained multiple amputations.
- Amputation or crippling wounds to the lower extremities were 300% higher than in WWII and 70% higher than in Korea. Multiple amputations occurred at the rate of 18.4% compared to 5.7% in WWII.
- Missing in Action: 2,338 (at war's end).
- Prisoners of War: 766 (114 died in captivity).

DRAFTEES VS. VOLUNTEERS

- 25% (648,500) of total forces in country were draftees. (66% of U.S. armed forces members in WWII were drafted.)
- Draftees accounted for 30.4% (17,725) of combat deaths in Vietnam.
- Reservists killed: 5,977.
- National Guard: 9,000 served; 22 KIA.

RACE AND ETHNIC BACKGROUND

- 88.4% of the men who actually served in Vietnam were Caucasian (includes Hispanics); 10.6% (275,000) were black; 1% belonged to other races.
- 86.3% of the men who died in Vietnam were Caucasian; 12.5% (7,241) were black; 1.2% belonged to other races.
- 170,000 Hispanics served in Vietnam; 3,070 (5.2% of total) died there.
- 86.8% of the men who were killed as a result of hostile action were Caucasian; 12.1% (5,711) were black; 1.1% belonged to other races.
- 14.6% (1,530) of non-combat deaths were among blacks.
- 34% of blacks who enlisted volunteered for the combat arms.
- Overall, blacks suffered 12.5% of the deaths in Vietnam at a time when the percentage of blacks of military age

was 13.5% of the total population.

- Religion of dead: Protestant—64.4%; Catholic—28.9%; other/none—6.7%.

SOCIO-ECONOMIC STATUS

- 76% of the men sent to Vietnam were from lower middle/working class backgrounds.
- Three-fourths had family incomes above the poverty level; 50% were from middle-income backgrounds.
- Some 23% of Vietnam vets had fathers with professional, managerial or technical occupations.
- 79% of the men who served in Vietnam had a high school education or better when they entered the military service. (63% of Korean War vets and only 45% of WWII vets had completed high school upon separation.)

WINNING & LOSING

- 82% of veterans who saw heavy combat strongly believe the war was lost because of lack of political will.
- Nearly 75% of the general public agrees that it was a failure of political will, not of arms.

AGE & HONORABLE SERVICE

- Average age of the Vietnam War GI: 19 (26 for WWII).
- 97% of Vietnam-era veterans were honorably discharged.

PRIDE IN SERVICE

- 91% of actual Vietnam War veterans and 90% of those who saw heavy combat are proud to have served their country.
- 66% of Vietnam vets say they would serve again if called upon (polled in the 1980s).
- 87% of the public now holds Vietnam veterans in high esteem.