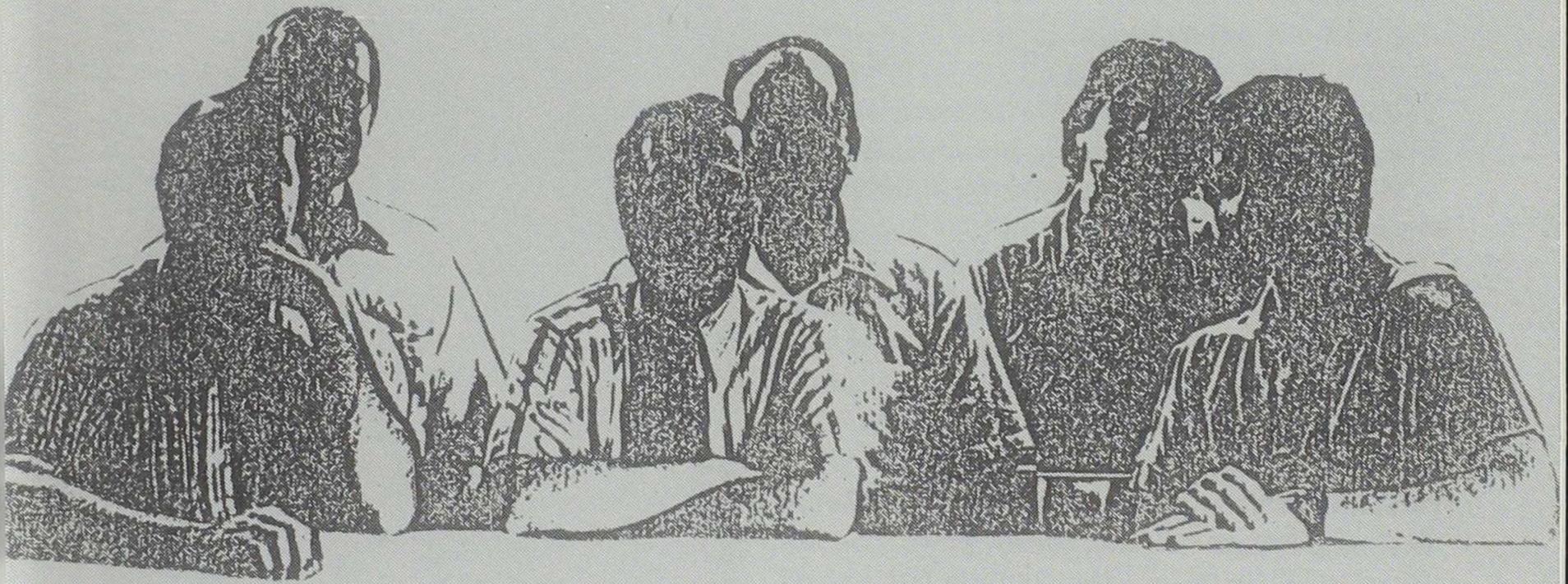


AND YOUNG MEN FIGHT THEM



BY KATHRYN HELENE

When Jerry Lembke left his hometown of Hinton, Iowa in 1967 for a tour of military service as assistant to the chaplain, he felt mixed emotions. He was leaving his family and familiar surroundings to serve his country in an undeclared war 12,000 miles away. But he looked forward to the adventure, and his first few weeks in Vietnam confirmed his interest in the lush, mountainous countryside. He wrote to his mother frequently, describing the beauty of the landscape and joking about the pervasiveness of the Army's black-top roads. His first several letters contained little of politics, but he did make a point of warning his mother of Viet Cong supporters in the States who faked telegrams announcing the deaths of American soldiers.

In an early letter Jerry poked fun at the bureaucracy of the Army:

The army gives you a job it takes ten minutes to do, but puts so many obstacles in your path that it takes a whole day.

He also devoted part of his letter to a description of the month-long Vietnamese celebration of Tet:

They dress in their finest clothes, and all the families seem to be on the road going to Grandma's house.

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Gradually, his Vietnam journey took twists and turns that Jerry found increasingly disturbing. His letters narrated a growing disillusionment with his superiors and with the Army in general, which gave rise to his budding sympathy for the anti-war protesters at home.

There is no justice in the military. The very principle that we are supposedly defending, democracy, we are forbidden to practice.

Jerry served out his term and returned home to Iowa. He enrolled in college almost immediately, seeking to put emotional distance between his life at home and his year in Vietnam.

Iowans who enlisted during the Vietnam era fall roughly into two categories: those who enlisted to follow the tradition of their fathers and grandfathers and those who enlisted to gain educational and economic benefits. Enlistees from the 1960s left their families to go off to war, basking in community approval and pride. Vietnam veterans from the 1970s received a different send-off. Although wars have always had their political detractors, Vietnam during the 1970s was synonymous with a sort of national schizophrenia. One Iowa veteran who enlisted near the end of the war recalls that:

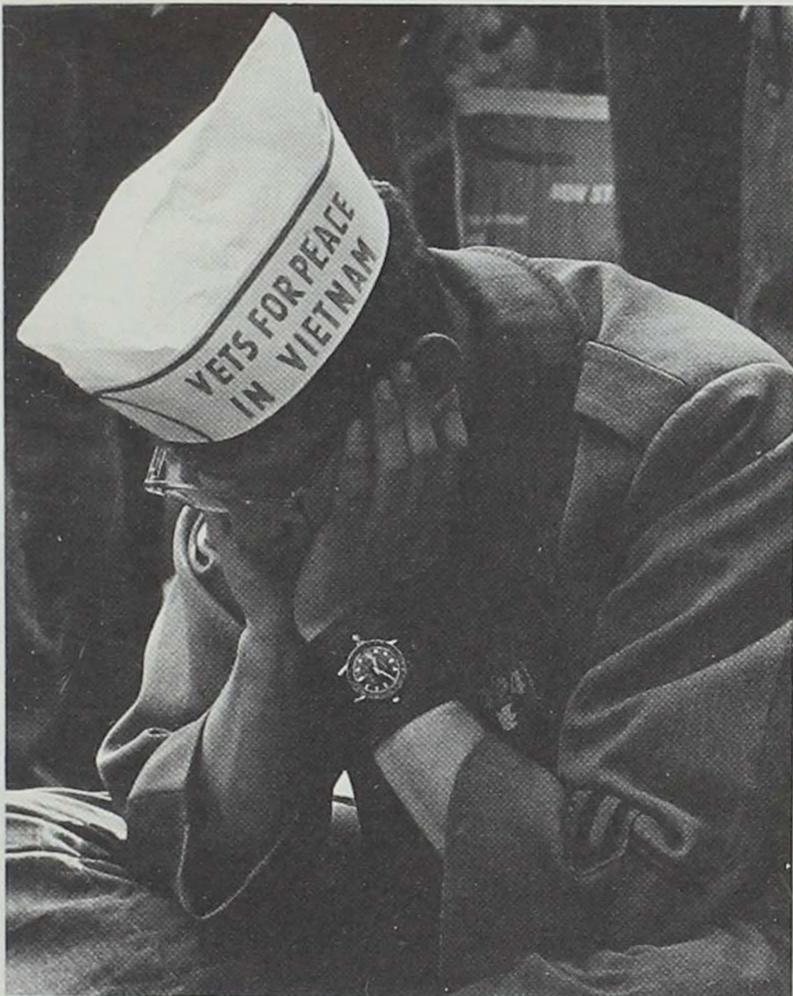
the split seemed to be among age groups. Older people in my hometown of Chariton were conservative, and more obviously in favor of an old-fashioned patriotism. To my friends, I was an oddball. They couldn't understand why I would want to enlist. But I wanted the college benefits.

Their benefits and homecomings proved to be mixed blessings for some veterans. One Iowa veteran discovered a curious dividing line when he returned to his parents' home in Creston:

The day I returned to Iowa from 'Nam my Dad asked me to put on my uniform and decorations and join him at his local VFW bar; that night we couldn't buy a single drink [because everyone in the bar was buying them for us]. A few weeks later, after I had enrolled in college [under the GI bill] and grown a neatly trimmed beard, these same VFWs were commiserating with my father about his "hippie son."

Other Iowa veterans confirm a marked difference in the attitudes of their communities. "There were no parades to welcome us," one said.

Furthermore, the state of the economy for returning veterans, especially toward the end of the war in 1973, was dismal. Newspapers proclaimed Governor Robert Ray's supervision of a six-state job search for veterans. The reception lines at employment offices sometimes paralleled the lack of response from their communities when they returned from Vietnam. The increasing unpopularity of the war — reflected in journalists' exclusives about drug abuse, wartime atrocities, and psychological problems — often made it difficult for returning veterans to find jobs. Choosing school over jobs eased the transition from Southeast Asia to American society, and this



(courtesy The Daily Iowan)

spite my sympathy for the anti-war protesters, I felt that I could understand the attitudes of each group.

The Veterans' Center at the University of Iowa, which was bustling in the early 1970s, provided an excellent forum in which returning veterans could express their conflicting feelings and emotions about the war. It also provided a network of practical contacts and sources of information to guide them through the continuing maze of military bureaucracy.

Eventually, the national conscience chose to condemn the Vietnam War and to exonerate most veterans as its victims, rather than its perpetrators. Indeed, the paraplegics, the men afflicted with the residual effects of Agent Orange, and those who still suffer from the form of shell-shock known as post-Vietnam psychiatric syndrome (PVNPS) are living testimony to the anti-war rhetoric that old men make wars and young men fight them. □

decision was greatly facilitated by the GI Bill. Nonetheless, Vietnam veterans were set apart from their fellow classmates by both age and experience. One veteran used this distance to advantage during the volatile spring of 1970 at the University of Iowa:

I organized an informal group called "The Monitors." We wore white arm bands and tried to keep people from being hurt. One night we found ourselves forming a human chain between angry students on the Pentacrest, paramilitary deputies on the sidewalk, and jocks throwing bottles from the roof of the Airliner [a local bar]. De-

Note on Sources

Sources used in this article include the Jerry Lembke Papers at the State Historical Society of Iowa, an editorial in *U.S. News and World Report*, April 9, 1973, p. 100, and personal interviews with Iowa Vietnam veterans.