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The Impacts of Wartime Experiences on Veterans

Katherine Schaeffer, Pew Research analyst, states that as of 2025, there are over 18 million living veterans in the United States, who account for approximately 6% of the population (Schaeffer 2023). Soldiers often struggle to transition from the military to their newly acquired veteran lives. Anna Zogas, assistant professor and research anthropologist at the Center for Healthcare Organization and Implementation Research at the University of Boston, claims that when veterans leave the military, they leave an institution that has taught them many skills not used in everyday life, such as those used for combat or leadership (Zogas 2017). This leads to the idea that their memories of their time in the war are somewhat skewed based on their experiences. Bringing up the concept of false nostalgia, defined by Johan Norberg, Senior Fellow at the Cato Institute in Washington D.C., is people longing for the past when, in reality, the past was not as great as remembered (Norberg 2022). This prompts the argument that overall, veterans' experiences while serving in the military negatively impact their lives through memory, Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), and injuries, causing false nostalgia.

What soldiers see and experience during war is engraved in their minds for years to follow. Many triggers cue memories that negatively affect veterans. Collin Powell, former United States Secretary of State, writes about his experiences on Memorial Day. He writes about his visit to the Vietnam War Memorial, commemorating a friend who fell in battle: "It was an emotional moment for

me" (Powell 2004). Clearly, the reminder of his late friend negatively impacted him, leaving him with a feeling of longing for someone whom he will never be able to see again (Powell 2004). Furthermore, the explicit memories soldiers see during war live on in their minds. Nancy Hill, who has a Master's degree in writing from Portland State University, interviews Vietnam War veteran Charles Battle. Battle explains, "I saw so many awful things I can't forget" (Hill 2020). In the same article, Hill interviews multiple American Vietnam War veterans. She explains that many veterans now protest against war for a peaceful world (Hill 2020). The veterans suffered through traumatic events induced by war, and they hope to prevent others from witnessing these horrors. This hope displays their longing for a time when they were unaffected by these traumatic events. However, the Vietnam War was fought to stop the spread of communism, and the veterans forget the cause as the memory of the war becomes skewed due to their negative experiences (Hill 2020). This causes veterans to experience false nostalgia as they only remember how it disrupted their lives (Hill 2020). Moreover, many veterans have regrets regarding wars. Jack Seale, a Freelance Journalist specializing in film for the Guardian, analyzes a film about Vietnam War veterans. He writes about the opinions of soldiers throughout the war and states that some veterans did not see the Vietnamese as humans, and saw the same ideas in anti-war protesters. Veterans perceived this due to the memory of other soldiers whom they saw get killed. However, they experienced a change in attitude and eventually joined the protesters' fight for peace (Seale 2025). The veterans' negative memories of the war caused their perspective on the problem to change due to their longing for pre-war life. This change in attitude shows that veterans experienced false nostalgia, focusing on

negative past experiences while overlooking the war's goal (Seale 2025).

To continue, Cleveland Clinic, a medical office, defines PTSD as “a common mental health condition that can develop after a traumatic event. It involves symptoms like flashbacks, anxiety, negative thoughts and beliefs, hypervigilance and more” (“Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)” 2023). Concerning this, the National Center for PTSD of the United States claims that 7% of all veterans suffer from PTSD in their lifetimes, comprising approximately 1.2 million veterans today (“How Common Is PTSD in Veterans?” 2023). Although many soldiers suffer from PTSD, they refrain from telling others about their suffering due to the fear of being considered weak. Carlos Huerta, a former Major in the United States Army, writes about his personal experience with PTSD. He indicates that he decided against getting help because he feared the military would see him as fragile: “I refused to talk to anyone about it even when Army health professionals told me I needed to” (Huerta 2012). This decision ultimately made his suffering worse and negatively impacted his life. He wishes he had told someone about his condition because it would have benefited his mental health tremendously (Huerta 2012). Huerta's belief that he should have done something to deal with his PTSD demonstrates the sense of false nostalgia, as his mental condition made him long for the past when, in reality, his past involved fighting during wars. Also, claiming that he wishes he had told someone earlier shows the same false nostalgia as at the time; he was afraid of potentially losing his job because he would be viewed as weak. Therefore, he only looks at the negative aspects of his past (Huerta 2012). Huerta states that he suffered from issues related to alcohol, similar to the story of a former Marine named Luke, whose last name is

undisclosed. Robert Rosenheck et al., Emeritus Professor of Psychiatry, writes about Luke's story in which he explains that Luke would often get drunk and pick fights to release all PTSD-related aggression (Rosenheck et al. 2005). Luke participated in many events that reminded him of his time in the military to try and end his suffering; however, it only made his problem worse (Rosenheck et al. 2005). Luke's post-war participation in violent and harmful behaviors reveals that his time at war impacted his behavior, making him more aggressive. Luke experiences false nostalgia as he behaves in a manner similar to when he was at war. Furthermore, PTSD is detrimental to mental health, which may also lead to a sense of false nostalgia. Dave Hanson, a former United States Air Force Sergeant who served during the Vietnam War, claims that his PTSD became intolerable. Similar to Huerta, Hansen also regrets not getting help beforehand: “I had a secret that I kept from everyone. As I aged, my PTSD turned into “flashbacks,” nightmares, and three suicide attempts” (Hanson 2019). Hansen demonstrates false nostalgia by arguing that he regrets not getting treatment previously. Although he may believe this now, he only looks back at the negative aspects of his suffering, excluding any positive memories that he may have experienced with family. These thoughts of a skewed memory as a result of PTSD and false nostalgia negatively impacted his well-being.

Veterans' injuries during war cause a feeling of false nostalgia as they long for the time before injury; however, at this time, they were deployed, at war, and away from their families. According to Rich Morin, Senior Editor for the Pew Research Center, one out of every 10 veterans as of 2011 was seriously injured in the military. He explains that these veterans are also more likely to suffer from PTSD and struggle with health

and maintaining a job (Morin 2011). As a result, veterans experience false nostalgia when they long for the past or a more stable time in their military careers; however, at these times, they are at war, without their families for extended periods. Injuries in the military also cause false nostalgia through impacts on loved ones. Terry Gildea, who has a Master's degree in Journalism from the University of Columbia, interviews Staff Sergeant Robert Henline, who was severely injured in Iraq, suffering third-degree burns all over his body. Henline states, "I can't play catch with my son, and I can't go shopping with the girls very easily, so there's a lot of changes the kids have gotten more used to now" (Gildea 2008). He also states, "But still they wish the old dad was here, which I understand. I wish he was here, too" (Gildea 2008). Henline's comments about wishing he was his old self demonstrate the essence of longing for an unrealistic past. Before his injury, he was deployed and was still not with his family, which has further issues (Gildea 2008). Viewing the issue from a veteran's perspective is also important. The Wounded Warrior Project, an organization dedicated to helping injured veterans adjust to civilian life, writes about Aaron Cornelius, a former sergeant in the United States Army. In the article, they state that he lost both of his eyes in an explosion in Iraq and misses being able to see ("Meet Warrior Aaron Cornelius" 2025). However, they previously state that a week before his injury, he had to pull deceased soldiers out of a burning car, which caused him to suffer from PTSD related to his visual memories ("Meet Warrior Aaron Cornelius" 2025). Aaron longs for a time in which he can see and serve. However, the memories of the time he could see during his service have a negative impact on him. This demonstrates false nostalgia as he misses the past, even though this past includes times that are detrimental to his well-being. Additionally,

injuries impact more than just physical health, they also impact mental health. According to the United States Department of Veterans Affairs, veterans who are injured at war may suffer mentally as a result of their self-view due to changes in their physical appearance. In some cases, soldiers become depressed and are more likely to suffer from PTSD as well ("The Psychological Impact of Physical Battle Scars" 2015). Throughout all of these examples, it is clear that injuries have impacts beyond just physical health. Injuries negatively impact mental health, and veterans may miss the time before injury, even though life may not have been as good as remembered. Overall, veterans' injuries have impacts beyond just what others may see.

Although some may agree that veteran's experiences during war negatively affect soldiers, others may argue that they benefit the veterans and their families. This is due to the social impact of joining the military. Suzanne Le Menestrel, who has a Doctorate in Human Development and Family Studies from Penn State University, and Kenneth W. Kizer, who has a Bachelor's degree from Stanford, state, "Military service can also provide a range of intangible benefits. Service members and families alike may greatly enjoy a sense of belonging, a sense of community, camaraderie and esprit de corps" (Menestrel and Kizer 2019). These are all different advantages of joining the military for veterans and their families, and these benefits can last lifetimes. Ryan Reed, a specialist in the United States Army, writes about the sense of brotherhood in the military by taking personal accounts from different soldiers. Among those interviewed is Dante Brunson, who is also a specialist in the military. Brunson states, "We're not just here to do a job, we're a family... We care about each other, we ask how life outside the

Army is going, we offer support to each other” (Reed 2024). In the same article, Reed interviews Brandon Lindsey, a captain in the US Army. Lindsey claims, “The experiences that you go through together out in an environment like this, [they make] you grow closer together” (Reed 2024). The perspective of both soldiers gives insight into how and why soldiers bond from being at war together. Although positive bonds may be created, they are outweighed by the negative risks. The U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs depicts the risks of war: “Service members are exposed to traumatic events during war. Combat creates life-threatening situations, injuries and accidents” (“War and Combat” 2014). Overall, one can comprehend that although there are social benefits of going to war, they are outweighed by the potential mental and physical health risks.

To conclude, veterans’ experiences while in the military negatively impact them through new attitudes due to unforgettable memories, suffering from PTSD, and numerous health issues as a result of injuries, causing false nostalgia. However, there may be solutions to these issues. Veterans must speak with therapists or join support groups for their needs. As mentioned previously, like Carlos Huerta, many veterans regret not speaking to professionals and feel they would not have suffered had they done so (Huerta 2012). A potential limitation to these solutions would be overcrowding. Emily Siner, a Nashville Journalist, writes about an overcrowded VA facility: “The facility is so overcrowded that unused wheelchairs are being stored in the hall, and nurses are stationed in what used to be a corridor” (Siner 2016). This issue could prevent veterans needing assistance from getting the help they need. It is essential to ensure that veterans’ well-being is kept in mind when going to war, as so many soldiers risk their lives and leave their

families to protect the country. They ensure the safety and freedom of all citizens across the United States, allowing people to live without fear of threats from other nations worldwide.

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