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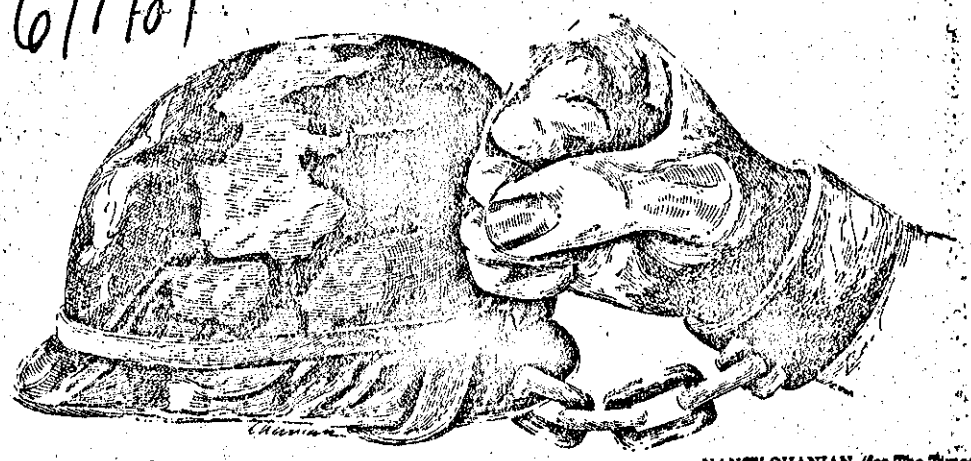

NANCY OHANIAN for The Times

'Crybabies' No More—Except in Mourning

By FRANK McADAMS

Before going to Vietnam, I used to have a recurring nightmare in which four Viet Cong soldiers, Russian AK-47 rifles held at high port, would chase me through my Chicago neighborhood. After I arrived in Vietnam, the nightmare stopped.

I'm lucky. I survived and have had no emotional problems. Other Vietnam vets can't say that. Many still have nightmares and often think about ending it all. Some do just that.

Today, Vietnam vets are the wake of a war with which this country still refuses to come to terms. It isn't only men who are suffering from delayed stress, but also some women who served. Their story has yet to be fully told.

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We went to war in a foreign nation divided by politics while our own nation was being ripped apart from within. We returned in pieces, literally and figuratively. Even those of us with no apparent scars have encountered insulting prejudice and insensitive bureaucracies, reinforced by epidemic World War II-vintage ignorance.

Ironically, some members of the 1960s "peace movement" have shown more sympathy, understanding and support for Vietnam veterans than the gung-ho politicians and generals who signed and supported the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution. How many of the politicians' sons received special draft-board consideration during the years when we were in 'Nam and the "peace people" were being clubbed by police in Chicago? Oh, the bloody hypocrisy of self-proclaimed

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Who the hell cares? Maybe Hopkins was some spaced-out 'Nam gyrene who went zappy because of too many patrols. Yeah, or just one of those 'Nam crybabies who couldn't get in there and get the job done like they did in WW II.

The prejudice is there, deep-set in hypocrisy. Most of us have experienced it in at least one form. I once applied for a job with a large company. When the interviewer saw that I had been an officer with the 1st Marine Division, he leaned across the desk and said, "If you come to work for us, you'll be with a top-notch organization, not leading a bunch of grammar-school dropouts against a machine-gun emplacement." I bit the inside of my mouth to keep from coming over the desk at him. Then I left.

A friend of mine, while changing jobs about four years ago, put on his resume that he had served with the Army in Vietnam. One of the interviewer's first questions was, "Were you taking drugs over there?" He knew then that the job was out of reach. He was right.

A few months ago I was a guest at an American Legion meeting in Hollywood where I overheard a relative of a member ask, "What do you Vietnam people want, everything?"

The word "crybabies" was voiced several times that evening. In part, it's accurate; I cried more than once in 'Nam—whenever I heard of a friend's death.

Between 1966 and 1969, seven men I knew joined the select group that ended its pain forever over there. They never had the chance to ask the Veterans Administration or their President for anything.

What is the matter with the U.S. government that it is so reluctant to help a group of people—Vietnam veterans—who fought the most unpopular and longest war in our history?

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Politically, push is coming to shove again. Ten years ago there were "closet" Vietnam vets. But no more.

We are accepting prejudice better. We'll always be looked at by some people as being spaced-out losers of a no-win war who probably never could have hacked it at home. But now Vietnam veterans are digging into the mountains of bureaucracy and getting down into the mud of politics.

We don't need to be reminded that in 1966, Gov. Ronald Reagan of California said, "Once you ask the men of this nation to go into combat, you owe an obligation to those men." That's a time-honored idea. In fact, the motto of the VA came from Abraham Lincoln's second inaugural address: ". . . with malice toward none and charity for all . . . and to care for him who has borne the battle and for his orphan and his widow."

The gathering of Vietnam vets and hunger strikers in front of Wadsworth Veterans Hospital in West Los Angeles is testimony to the disgusting, shameful rape of Lincoln's words.

What do you Vietnam people want? Only our due: that our sick brothers and sisters be treated for service-connected disabilities. Really, is that too much to ask?

As I write, my mind plays over and over a refrain from a Clancy Brothers song: "Look at the scattered crosses . . . the boys beneath them slumber on . . . ." If the past continues into the future, this select group of Vietnam vets will have lots of company.

God, I hope not.

Frank McAdams, who served as a Marine lieutenant in Vietnam in 1968-69, is a lecturer in the UCLA theater arts department.