Vietnam-era women veterans: The Unknown Trauma

Study shows women veterans from the Vietnam era are at increased risk of PTSD

There were approximately 265,000 women who served in the U.S. military during the Vietnam War, with nearly 11,000 serving in parts of Southeast Asia. A new study is showing the lingering psychological effects their service has caused.

According to “Prevalence of Posttraumatic Stress Disorder in Vietnam-Era Women Veterans: The Health of Vietnam-Era Women’s Study,” published in JAMA Psychiatry, a publication of the Journal of the American Medical Association, these women veterans suffer significant rates of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) decades after the war, partly because of the sexual harassment and discrimination they faced.

“At that time in the Women’s Army Corps, we were taught to be ladies first and soldiers second,” said Carmen Bennett, an Army soldier who served in a clerical position during the Vietnam War from 1967 to 1968. “It was different then. We didn’t know what was considered ‘rape,’ and so that caused a lot of guilt.”

Bennett was raped on Aug. 24, 1968. The assault resulted in a pregnancy, which forced her out of the service.

“That really killed me,” Bennett said. “My parents and my family were so disappointed in me. I carried around the guilt and shame for a very long time. I still carry it.”

The study, funded by the Department of Veterans Affairs, is based on surveys and phone interviews of more than 4,000 Vietnam-era female veterans.
“Vietnam service significantly increased the odds of PTSD relative to U.S. service; this effect appears to be related to wartime exposures, especially sexual discrimination or harassment and job performance pressures,” the study concludes.

According to the VA, women veterans who use VA health care and report a history of sexual trauma while in the military also report a range of negative outcomes, including poorer psychological and physical health, more readjustment problems following discharge and a greater incidence of unemployment due to mental health problems.

Though she lived with the symptoms of PTSD, it was a long time before Bennett was formally diagnosed.

“Every year on the anniversary [of my trauma], on Aug. 24 and 25, I was on the phone with my friend who went through it with me. Every year. It was like I was stuck,” said Bennett. “I went through a lot of emotional trauma and guilt and everything. I had a lot of tears. I did a lot of crazy things. It changed me drastically in a lot of ways that weren’t good.”

Bennett sought help through DAV. It was then, 40 years after her assault, that she started therapy for PTSD and military sexual trauma (MST). “It wasn’t until [my DAV Service Officer] told me he’d seen in some of my records that there were some things that made him concerned. And he thought that maybe I should be checked out for PTSD.

“I went through a lot [with my family]; they disowned me. It really hurt; it broke my heart,” she added. “But now, I’m thinking my PTSD played a huge part in the way they acted toward me. I think the PTSD played a big role in my life.”

In 2010, Bennett was awarded 100-percent service connection for PTSD based on the trauma she endured in 1968. It took 42 years of quietly suffering before someone finally recognized her disability. Stories like hers are why the VA is making a
huge push for additional research and studies into what Vietnam-era women veterans really endured.

“In this situation, the veteran has lived with the after effects of her trauma for more than four decades,” said DAV Assistant National Legislative Director Shurhonda Love. “Women veterans played a significant role in the Vietnam conflict, yet so many of them don’t know or understand what types of benefits and support systems are available.”

According to the National Center for PTSD, “Given the alarming prevalence rates of sexual harassment and sexual assault among military veterans, VA has responded actively to meet the health care needs of veterans impacted by these experiences.”

MST screening and related services are mandated to be available at every VA medical center for both women and men. Women Veterans: The Long Journey Home, DAV’s comprehensive study of the many challenges women face, reports that one in five women enrolled at the VA screen positive for MST.

The Vietnam-Era Women’s Study shines the light on what has been a little-examined part of the nation’s experience in Vietnam. The study examines not just what women veterans of the Vietnam era were faced with, from MST to life and death decisions made by nurses, but how those experiences shaped their lives.

“PTSD is with me,” said Bennett. “It’s never going to go away.

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