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We have a lot to thank Vietnam veterans for

We learned some important lessons from Vietnam about the kinds of human suffering that results from experiencing life threatening traumas, the role of effective treatment and the importance of social support from others to promote recovery.

Today, Vietnam veterans and their families gather with other Australians to commemorate the 40th anniversary of the battle of Long Tan. While this battle does not yet hold the same place in our nation's history as does Gallipoli, it shares the same tradition of bravery and courage in the face of suffering. Australians began commemorating Anzac Day on 25 April one year after the end of World War I. Because of our divided opinions it has taken longer for us to recognise the service and sacrifice of our servicemen and women in Vietnam.

Vietnam veterans and their families can now look back on these events 40 years ago with some perspective. Their experiences have contributed profoundly to our understanding of the mental health effects of combat and, in turn, the psychological effects of other life-threatening events which affect people.

The Vietnam War was the first televised war. It set the scene for a proper recognition of the mental health problems that may affect people exposed to physical threat and violence. Diggers suffered shell shock in World War I and the term changed to war neurosis in World War II. All too often, people with such conditions were seen as somehow weak or lacking in moral fibre.

Vietnam veterans, along with other groups, were central in achieving greater recognition of the mental health effects that may arise from experiencing life threatening events. This was marked in 1980 when the American Psychiatric Association recognised the diagnosis of posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD). In parallel, the feminist movement had long sought recognition of the psychological impact of assault, and refugee advocates for the long term effects upon displaced adults and children exposed to violence.

What we have learnt about the prevention and treatment of posttraumatic mental health problems resulting from the Vietnam War has helped mental health professionals better treat people who have survived car and workplace accidents, physical assault and natural disasters.

Our increased knowledge and understanding has also helped identify and effectively treat the mental health problems of older people who experienced trauma many years ago. World War II veterans, displaced persons from across Europe, and holocaust survivors now have opportunities for effective treatment for suffering that was neglected for decades. Left untreated, the detrimental effects on family life, capacity for friendships, and productive work are considerable.

While the majority of people recover well from the effects of military service without professional help, contemporary humanitarian, peacekeeping and combat missions continue to exact a toll. Recent studies in the US attest to the high levels of distress among American veterans returning from Iraq. We should continue to be prudent in decisions concerning our country's involvement in such conflicts and work to improve our treatments and support for those we ask to participate.

Recovery and rehabilitation need both effective treatment and widespread community support. We can all have a role in supporting our military personnel who may be affected by the traumatic nature of the jobs they perform. Our personal support for veterans should be unconditional, irrespective of our views of government decisions about participation in particular conflicts. Only then can we have more confidence about the men and women in the defence forces resuming fulfilling and happy lives with their families, friends and workmates.

Professor Mark Creamer, Director

For help or more information on posttraumatic mental health problems:

- Talk to your doctor or a mental health specialist, such as a psychiatrist, psychologist or social worker.
- Australian veterans, peacekeepers, and their families can contact the Vietnam Veterans Counselling Service on 1800 011 046
- Defence members can contact ADF's All Hours Support Line on
- 1800 628 036