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Letters Home: Change in Mental State of Soldiers During the American Civil and Vietnam Wars Seen Through Their Letters Home

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The University of Southern Mississippi

Letters Home:
Change in Mental State of Soldiers
During the American Civil and Vietnam Wars
Seen Through Their Letters Home

by

Austin Hill

A Thesis
Submitted to the Honors College of
The University of Southern Mississippi
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Abstract:

Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, or PTSD, has only been studied since its diagnosis after the Vietnam War. However, soldiers have always felt the affects of the wars they fought. These affects are physical, mental and emotional. Currently, PTSD is one of the most common affects of war on a soldier. While PTSD has only been studied since its discovery after the Vietnam War, symptoms almost exactly like PTSD have been present in soldiers for decades. This thesis uses letters from soldiers in the Vietnam War to create a basis of trauma that could create PTSD in soldiers. Using this base of research, the thesis uses letters from soldiers in the American Civil War to determine if PTSD was an affect they could have also suffered. The soldiers from the Vietnam War may or may not have been diagnosed with PTSD, as an official diagnosis is not the goal of this thesis. Instead, this thesis wants to determine if the circumstances that lead to the development of PTSD was present during the American Civil War.

Key Terms:

American Civil War – Commonly referred to as the “War Between the States;” Fought by Union soldiers of the United States of America and Confederate soldiers of the Confederate States of America; lasted from 1861 until 1865; one of the earliest wars to use some mechanization of warfare.

Combat Exhaustion – A World War II diagnosis of mental fatigue due to time in combat; often described as an early sign or form of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder.

Guerrilla Warfare – Warfare that focuses on ambushes, booby-traps, sabotage, hit-and-run firefights, and small unit tactics to avoid facing larger, more powerful enemies head on; commonly employed by smaller, lesser-armed militaries.

Nostalgia – An American Civil War diagnosis that is believed to be an early form of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder.

Post Traumatic Stress Disorder – A disorder that is commonly associated with combat veterans; first officially recognized in 1980; is an anxiety disorder that can cause flashbacks, insomnia, uncontrollable shaking or movements, hyper-reactive, or numbed emotions.

Shell Shock – A World War I diagnosis that is believed to be an early form of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder.

Soldier’s Heart – An American Civil War diagnosis that, like Nostalgia, is believed to be an early form of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder

Vietnam War – Time period of American involvement in democratic South Vietnam against communist North Vietnam and pro-communist Viet Cong.

Table of Contents

Chapter 1: Introduction.....	1
Chapter 2: Jim Dennison – Vietnam, 1967.....	10
Chapter 3: John Young – Vietnam, 1967.....	15
Chapter 4: Vincent Simonelli – Vietnam, 1966-1967.....	22
Chapter 5: Taylor Pierce – American Civil War, 1862-1865.....	34
Chapter 6: M. Ebenezer Wescott – American Civil War, 1861-1865.....	45
Chapter 7: William Bradbury – American Civil War, 1862-1865.....	53
Chapter 8: Conclusion.....	58
Bibliography.....	62

Chapter 1: Introduction

The Vietnam War and the American Civil War have many commonalities. Both wars were controversial and hotly debated during their tenure. Both wars cost the United States dearly. However, a commonality that is often ignored is the mental effect both wars had on the soldiers who fought in them. The Vietnam War is widely considered to be the first war to focus efforts on preventing, diagnosing and treating psychological disorders. The psychological effects caused by numerous problems of the war, including the one-year tour of duty, the drug use by soldiers, the terrible morale and discipline at the end of the war, and the lack of public support when soldiers returned home, was detrimental.¹ The mental effect the war had on soldiers became widely known and is now accepted as one of the most serious injuries a war can cause. Yet the Vietnam War was not the only war that caused devastating mental disorders in its veterans.

After the Vietnam War, the mental toll on soldiers became a major point of research. The “discovery” of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, or PTSD, became widely circulated and is now commonly known as a cost of war. In 1980, PTSD became an official disorder in *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders - III*.² However, this “discovery” is really just a rediscovery. Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder has been around much longer than the Vietnam War and the research that followed the war, simply hiding under a variety of aliases throughout history. Symptoms of PTSD have long been associated with diagnoses like “Combat Exhaustion” in World War II,

¹ Dean, Jr., Eric. *Shook Over Hell: Post-Traumatic Stress, Vietnam and the Civil War*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1997, 7.

² Dean, *Shook over Hell*, 27.

“Shell Shock” in World War I, and “Soldier’s Heart” or “Nostalgia” in the American Civil War.³

The definition of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder is a key to this thesis. In order for a soldier to have PTSD, the traumatic event must be life threatening and the reaction to the event must be “fear, helplessness and horror.”⁴ The DSM-IV, a newer version of the study that first listed PTSD as a disorder, says that the traumatic event must also become a repeating event through cues, emotional stressors, dreams, images in a soldier’s mind or even just the feeling that it was happening again.⁵ Obviously, a soldier who is frequently dealing with physical battles easily fits both of these requirements. The DSM-IV continues to state that someone with PTSD will begin to avoid a variety of topics, to push himself away from other people, to avoid feelings such as a love or joy, to avoid thoughts and activities that could bring the trauma back to them, and mentally block the memory entirely.⁶ The next section of DSM – IV focuses on “increased arousal” such as symptoms of insomnia, outbursts of emotions of anger or frustrations, trouble focusing, “hyper-vigilance” or high alertness and an “exaggerated startle response.”⁷ To finish off the requirements according to the DSM - IV, these symptoms must last longer than four weeks and cause difficulties with everyday functions of a veteran’s life such as work,

³ Dean, *Shook over Hell*, 26.

⁴ Wiest, Andrew; Root, Leslie; Scurfield, Raymond. “Post Traumatic Stress Disorder: The Legacy of War” Authors’ draft of article. Page 1 – 41. January 2000. Author’s Collection, The University of Southern Mississippi. 22

⁵ Wiest, Andrew; Root, Leslie; Scurfield, Raymond. “Post Traumatic Stress Disorder: The Legacy of War”. 22

⁶ Wiest, Andrew; Root, Leslie; Scurfield, Raymond. “Post Traumatic Stress Disorder: The Legacy of War”. 22

⁷ Wiest, Andrew; Root, Leslie; Scurfield, Raymond. “Post Traumatic Stress Disorder: The Legacy of War”. 23

social encounters or sleeping.⁸ Veterans with PTSD often isolate themselves to keep from getting too emotionally involved with others, to repress emotions and thoughts that could be triggers, and to suppress the urge to talk to others about their problems to avoid triggering their terrible memories.

During World War I, shell-shock symptoms were included in various diaries and records of soldiers including anxiety, depression, startled reactions, and inability to concentrate. Insomnia was another symptom; and when they were able to sleep, frequent nightmares were as well. Constant fear, panic attacks, shaking, hysteria, amnesia and loss of one or many senses were also known symptoms of shell shock.⁹ These symptoms are almost identical to symptoms of PTSD that were explained in the previous paragraph.

The military learned that soldiers had to be trained in order to become efficient at killing enemy soldiers.¹⁰ After training, soldiers became hardened towards killing, theoretically making them efficient at their duty on the battlefield. However, after remaining efficient in combat for a period of time, soldiers' efficiency began to decline until they reached the "Combat Exhaustion" phase. This phase includes a hyper-reactive phase and an emotional exhaustion phase. If the soldier was forced to continue fighting or failed to receive help, he could reach the final phase in Combat Exhaustion, the vegetative phase.¹¹

The American Civil War and the Vietnam War had many similarities that caused mental and emotional damage to soldiers, yet each war had many differences that made

⁸ Wiest, Andrew; Root, Leslie; Scurfield, Raymond. "Post Traumatic Stress Disorder: The Legacy of War". 23

⁹ Dean, *Shook Over Hell*, 30.

¹⁰ Grossman, Dave. *On Killing: The Psychological Cost of Learning to Kill in War and Society*. New York: Back Bay Books, 1995, 4.

¹¹ Grossman, *On Killing*, 44.

each war traumatic in its own way. The Vietnam War was often a guerrilla war, considered by many as the hardest war to fight.¹² Added to the difficult nature of the war, soldiers had only one year of duty in Vietnam, which created extra pressure to survive the few remaining weeks as their duty neared its end.¹³ Drug use, terrible morale and discipline, and lack of comradeship near the end of the war only made the situation worse for soldiers.¹⁴ The Vietnam War was the first war that troop transportation could be accomplished by air, including the return trip home. Soldiers often travelled home from war alone, and, instead of having almost a week to decompress on a boat, soldiers only had a day or so to decompress from a year of combat.¹⁵ When the veteran returned, he was not, as many veterans of previous wars were, greeted with a celebration.¹⁶ Instead, he was either ignored or, when he received attention, was spit on or verbally abused.¹⁷ Upon their return, many veterans were shocked to see how little the United States supported the Vietnam War effort.¹⁸

The American Civil War was different from the wars before it and the wars after it. It was the first American war to feature rifles instead of muskets, making battle deadlier than previous wars. Unlike the wars after it, though, sickness was a major problem. Deaths from sickness were frequent, as roughly 78% of Civil War soldiers suffered from a sickness each year, with most soldiers suffering 4-6 times a year.¹⁹ Marches between locations and battles were often long and dangerous, making the issue

¹² Grossman, *On Killing*, 196.

¹³ Dean, *Shook Over Hell*, 7.

¹⁴ Dean, *Shook Over Hell*, 7.

¹⁵ Dean, *Shook Over Hell*, 7.

¹⁶ Dean, *Shook Over Hell*, 8.

¹⁷ Dean, *Shook Over Hell*, 7.

¹⁸ Dean, *Shook Over Hell*, 10.

¹⁹ Dean, *Shook Over Hell*, 51.

even worse. In many cases, units went from marching long distances to fighting in battle almost immediately.²⁰ Leading up to battle, soldiers often felt sick, passed out, panicked or lost control of various body functions.²¹ During battle, everything changed; soldiers often became enraged, angered and fought hysterically. Many described the experience almost as being out-of-body. Some soldiers even failed to realize that they were injured²² Similar to the Vietnam War, there were aspects of the American Civil War similar to guerrilla warfare. Snipers always watching for a head to poke up, small scout units looking for enemy lines, and cannons bombarding everything imaginable were common occurrences. The American Civil War tends to be viewed as the last of the “gentlemanly” wars or a war between brothers, but in reality it was extremely gruesome and as deadly as the wars that followed it.²³

Throughout both the American Civil War and the Vietnam War, soldiers coped with battle and wartime stress by reading letters from their families and writing letters back. In Vietnam, the time between letters was often short, as the transportation of mail had long surpassed using slow delivery methods like horse delivery or steam engine transportation. No matter how it arrived or was sent, soldiers often looked forward to the arrival of the mail to see if they received any letters from home. Soldiers used letters to their families to communicate out of desire to keep a connection, as well as a need to share stories. In other words, these letters to families from soldiers opened a rare avenue to see into the hearts, the minds, and the feelings of the soldiers as they tried to decompress after intense days in the field.

²⁰ Dean, *Shook Over Hell*, 46-48.

²¹ Dean, *Shook Over Hell*, 54.

²² Dean, *Shook Over Hell*, 54-56.

²³ Dean, *Shook Over Hell*, 58.

This thesis uses letter collections of three Vietnam soldiers and three Civil War soldiers to access the rare avenue to a soldier's day after combat. Understandably, soldiers were not able to write each day they were active in the war. Therefore, at times there are multiple days, even sometimes multiple weeks, in between letters. Soldiers in the Vietnam War mostly served one-year tours of duty, but even the full year was not always spent active in the field. Soldiers in Vietnam also limited the amount of information that they disclosed in their letters due to fears of Viet Cong spies in and around their area. However, when soldiers needed to vent the most, they vented on paper for their families to read. At times, soldiers requested specific family members, usually anyone except for their mothers, to read the letters or sections so that the excluded family member would not be overcome with worry.

During the American Civil War, soldiers were not able to communicate with their families nearly as quickly as Vietnam soldiers could. Also, Civil War soldiers were not limited by a one-year tour of duty, allowing many soldiers to serve the duration of the war. Since they often served the duration, or at least a major portion of the war, soldiers in the American Civil War were able to return home during the winter due to poor weather conditions for fighting major battles. Even during some of the busier months of the war, soldiers could, at their commanding officers' discretion, receive a furlough. Their furlough, essentially a chance to go home to take care of family matters, was also a chance for soldiers to decompress with their families. There were dangers of giving out too many furloughs, such as a reduced fighting force and the possibility that some soldiers would use the chance to desert the unit in order to avoid more time in combat. During the Vietnam War, soldiers were able to receive an "R&R," or rest and relaxation

trip, to any number of military stations across the Southeast Pacific. Many soldiers went on weekend trips to bases in Vietnam, while others were able to go on week-long trips to places like Japan. Similar to the furloughs of the American Civil War, soldiers on “R&R” were able to decompress from the stress and trauma of war but were usually unable to decompress with family the way the American Civil War soldiers could enjoy.

These chances to break away from the war allowed soldiers a chance to grieve the friends they had lost during their duty. Letters immediately after breaks such as this often are completely different in the mood in which they are written. When soldiers were struggling and grieving, they tended to write without concern towards the feelings of their families, essentially blinded by their grief at the worry they might cause to their family. Grieving soldiers often wrote in depth about how an accident happened and begin to question when they would become a victim. They questioned their commanding officers, the new soldiers in the group, and the politicians in charge as an attempt to assign blame to something more than a lucky shot, a random mine, or a selective disease. At other times, soldiers writing to their families were almost completely drained from all emotion when they wrote their letters. Soldiers struggled to connect to their families at times, unable to express their emotions through their letters. Oppositely, soldiers who had a chance to grieve and attempted to move on frequently asked about their family and offered very little about their condition. This is seen as a soldier’s attempt to care for his family, as well as an attempt to distract him from the war going on outside his tent.

The letters written by soldiers to their families, as well as the breaks from the battlefield, are extremely important for soldiers. In a world that is constantly being attacked and disturbed, soldiers were able to grieve and come to grips with the reality

they faced in the field. They had a chance to let their guard down. When a friend died on the battlefield in Vietnam, soldiers often focused on trying to kill the enemy so they and the rest of their friends could survive. After the battle, the focus shifted to getting back to base or setting up camp, then to defending their base or camp. The nature of guerilla warfare, with constant ambushes and booby-traps, is considered the most difficult war mentally.²⁴ Attacks come at any time and in almost any format. During the Civil War, gruesome battles were not as constant as in Vietnam due to less guerilla warfare, but the diseases back at camp made death an ever-present reality no matter the location.

In combat, soldiers feel responsible and accountable for their comrades.²⁵ Soldiers have a bond with their fellow soldiers that many veterans describe as closer than husband and wife.²⁶ A soldier is placed in a difficult place, emotionally, because if he kills an enemy soldier then he believes he is always carrying the guilt of that kill. But if he does not kill the enemy, and the enemy instead kills his comrade, he is guilty for his comrades' deaths as well as shamed at his failure as a soldier.²⁷ The leader in a unit or company is under even more pressure. He, as a leader, must be close with all his men, but he must also give orders to them that may kill them.²⁸ In most cases, the guilt soldiers felt after killing was not caused by the killing but instead because they survived while a comrade died, also known as survivor's guilt.²⁹

²⁴ Grossman, *On Killing*, 196.

²⁵ Grossman, *On Killing*, 75.

²⁶ Grossman, *On Killing*, 90.

²⁷ Grossman, *On Killing*, 87.

²⁸ Grossman, *On Killing*, 90.

²⁹ Bourke, Joanna. *An Intimate History of Killing: Face to Face Killing in 20th Century Warfare*. Basic Books, 1999, 208.

Soldiers who were unable to grieve and were forced to bottle up their emotions suffered major consequences. Soldiers needed to be able to admit the guilt they felt because the aggression and anxiety caused by guilt damaged morale and mentally damaged the soldier.³⁰ Guilt caused many soldiers to suffer extreme loss of mental capability. They became so emotionally drained that they failed or refused to feel any emotions in an attempt to protect themselves. Distraught soldiers were driven from any close relationships they had with anyone. This was caused by the belief that if they removed themselves from relationships, they could not be hurt when the other person died or left them. Medically, soldiers began to suffer irritability, insomnia, frequent nightmares, flashbacks, near constant anxiety, and alertness.³¹ Distraught soldiers often became paranoid, startled at the slightest noises, and became uncontrollably angry when situations begin to go against them. Irritable bowels and temporary loss of one or many senses were also symptoms soldiers exhibited.³² These are all symptoms of PTSD. While many of these reactions cannot be seen in letters, especially as they are only developing, some symptoms can be seen soon after dramatic and terrible events that cause PTSD. After experiencing or witnessing the death of a friend nearby, soldiers mourn, and often told the story of their friend's death, possibly in great detail, as a way to cope with their grief. Over the course of an entire tour of duty, many soldiers began to focus their attention less on the stories and how their friends died, but instead on why the war was being fought when they believed it was a pointless war.

³⁰ Bourke, *An Intimate History of Killing*, 212.

³¹ Bourke, *An Intimate History of Killing*, 235.

³² Bourke, *An Intimate History of Killing*, 235.

Over the course of their letters, soldiers began to write less frequently and write shorter letters. While this might have been due to a lack of time, it is also possible that these soldiers were struggling to cope with their grief and were distancing themselves from their family in an effort to seclude them. When the floodgates of emotion finally did open in certain letters, the letters are multiple pages long and filled with emotion. The letters vary drastically, some ranging just a few sentences that never mention anything about the war while others are multiple pages long, and are extremely emotional and revealing.

Overall, these letters are extremely helpful and give incredible insight into one of the most vulnerable aspects of the soldiers' lives. Without this avenue, the ability for soldiers to cope with grief would be almost entirely wiped away during the constant stress, anxiety and fear of war. However, this avenue does not prevent, diagnose or cure PTSD. This simply gives the family and friends a chance to see where their soldier is mentally and emotionally while also giving the soldier a chance to vent some of his feelings.

Chapter 2: Jim Dennison– Vietnam, 1967

Jim Dennison was sent to Vietnam in 1967. Throughout his tour of duty in Vietnam, he experienced many traumatic experiences. In his letters to his parents, he had varying degrees of openness. At times he shared information, like casualty numbers, that broke protocol. At other times, he was distant and questioned the war. He was blunt about many incidents that happened; and, therefore, his letters are an excellent way to see the onset of PTSD during his tour of duty.

In a letter dated February 7th, Dennison and his battalion were on the transport boat headed to Vietnam. His letter said that everyone was on edge and fearful about entering the warzone.³³ In a partially dated letter, Dennison wrote after arriving in Vietnam that he received various injuries; the most major being a two-inch cut from his machete that required stitches and time off of duty.³⁴ By the end of February, less than a month since entering Vietnam, he was glad to have the time off due to his injury, although rarely saw any enemies while out in the field.³⁵

By early March, Dennison was already counting down the months until he could return home. He was also excited to “ride the boats in the Delta.”³⁶ This entailed riding small utility boats through the waterways in the Delta. Near the end of March, he changed his previous view on the boats, and instead hoped he would never again see that “overgrown aquarium.”³⁷ He never said why he suddenly changed his view on riding the boats. After running a few missions from boats in the South Vietnamese Delta, Dennison missed a few missions due to sickness.³⁸ Until this point, he had not yet mentioned any fight or skirmish with the enemy. He seemed to be almost oblivious to the danger he faced.

The first time anything very traumatic was recorded in Dennison’s letter collection occurred around April 14th. While on land trying to discover Viet Cong base camps, two men in his company were badly injured when a booby trap detonated. Later

³³ Dennison, Jim. *Jim Dennison Letter Collection*. Author’s Collection, The University of Southern Mississippi, 2/7/67

³⁴ Dennison, *Jim Dennison Letter Collection*, 2/67

³⁵ Dennison, *Jim Dennison Letter Collection*, 2/26/67

³⁶ Dennison, *Jim Dennison Letter Collection*, 3/4/67

³⁷ Dennison, *Jim Dennison Letter Collection*, 3/20/67

³⁸ Dennison, *Jim Dennison Letter Collection*, 4/5/67

on, one of his officers walked into the jungle and simply disappeared. Dennison wrote “Its fools like that who get killed in this war and get other guys killed.”³⁹ Seeing his comrades get injured and his leader, whom he had to trust with his life, just walk away was hard on Dennison. He undoubtedly was upset about the desertion and suicide of his officer. Dennison felt betrayed, causing anger, aggression and trust issues with the next officer in charge. Just a few days later, Dennison recorded an entry to his family that briefly mentioned one of his old friends committing suicide. Dennison’s reaction seems harsh about the idea of anyone committing suicide.⁴⁰ He rejected the idea that anyone would want to die. He, by this point, developed the notion that death is painful and violent because of the situation he faced. The fact that, within a few days, Dennison lost his officer, as well as a friend back in the United States, angered Dennison because he could not trust his officer to fight with him nor could he protect his friend back home.

In late May of 1967, action for Dennison and his battalion began to increase. In one particular battle, he counted the number of Viet Cong killed as at least 150. In a letter, Dennison said, “I’d be scared to death in a situation like that but you don’t have time. You don’t even think, you don’t have to, you react.”⁴¹ This moment shows how soldiers do not have any time to process the shock of battle and the level of killing a battle entails, both often a trigger for PTSD. Another instance in late June showed the same sign in a slightly different context. Dennison’s battalion took part in a major battle that Dennison was not able to attend. This battle caused heavy losses on both sides according to Dennison’s letter. However, the letter does not give any indication of how,

³⁹ Dennison, *Jim Dennison Letter Collection*, 4/14/67

⁴⁰ Dennison, *Jim Dennison Letter Collection*, 4/17/67

⁴¹ Dennison, *Jim Dennison Letter Collection* 5/20/67

or even if, Dennison was grieving.⁴² Dennison could have been doing two different things. He could have been trying to suppress his survivor's guilt. On the other hand, Dennison could have literally felt no guilt or grief because he was struggling emotionally with previous issues that happened to him in Vietnam.

Another example of the inability to process a traumatic experience happened in early July of 1967. Dennison and his platoon set up for an ambush. At one point in the night, seven Viet Cong walked past their ambush. Later that night, Dennison tackled a Viet Cong who turned out to be unarmed. In the letter that Dennison sent to his family, he briefly included this story and added that he was laughing about it rather than thinking how close he could have been to being killed.⁴³ Dennison failed to realize how close he was to being in a life-threatening situation. By this point of the collection, it appears that he became unaware of the deadly circumstances he faced.

While in Vietnam, a soldier could not let his guard down without the fear of being injured. As in the earlier example of Dennison's comrades stepping on mines shows, danger was everywhere in Vietnam. In early September, Dennison recorded in a letter that one of the hardest things for a soldier was to find empty base camps of the Viet Cong. While walking through a "secure area" on the way back from finding one or more empty base camps, soldiers often received sniper fire that usually resulted in casualties. Dennison said "that's the worst thing about this place, knowing that practically wherever you are, you can't really feel safe."⁴⁴ This created a constant need to be alert to any and all danger. This constant alertness is another trigger of PTSD as it wears on the soldier's

⁴² Dennison, *Jim Dennison Letter Collection* 6/20/67

⁴³ Dennison, *Jim Dennison Letter Collection*, 7/10/67

⁴⁴ Dennison, *Jim Dennison Letter Collection* 9/10/67

ability to relax, and therefore keeps the soldiers constantly on alert and jumpy. Soldiers returning from war, being trained to be on high alert at all times, struggle with relaxing, and therefore face major difficulties adjusting to every day life.

The pressure of knowing when he would return home was hard on Dennison as it was to most other soldiers. The idea of finally leaving the bloodshed of the battlefield and returning to a normal life seemed very satisfying and was heavily talked about throughout Dennison's letters to his family. At one point, he referred to his countdown of days as a countdown of "the days of punishment."⁴⁵ In late September, Dennison realized he was getting short on his time in Vietnam. He said in his letter that he knew the last 30 days were going to be the toughest in Vietnam.⁴⁶ Due to only having one year of duty in Vietnam, soldiers were able count down the days of their duty remaining, unlike the Civil War when their tour of duty dragged on for years. As the end of their duty approached, Vietnam soldiers began to struggle in battle because they became hesitant and indecisive due to the fear that they would be killed so close to going home. The stress of fighting while trying to survive a few more weeks to go home, compounded with the outcome of the battles and skirmishes they were in, only made the problem of PTSD even worse.

As his time in Vietnam began to draw to a close, Dennison began to write in widely varying moods. For example, in one letter he was extremely pushy about getting information about going to college. He seemed completely set on going to college somewhere once he returned to the United States.⁴⁷ He was hopeful, a rare emotion for soldiers in Vietnam. In a letter dated just four days later, he did not care about the

⁴⁵ Dennison, *Jim Dennison Letter Collection* 5/2/67

⁴⁶ Dennison, *Jim Dennison Letter Collection*, 9/21/67

⁴⁷ Dennison, *Jim Dennison Letter Collection*, 10/29/67

prospect of going to college. He blamed himself for miscommunication and ended the topic of going to college with “it doesn’t make that much of a difference anyways.”⁴⁸ He was mad and simply had little hope for the future. These mood swings are almost certainly not related to the prospect of going to college. Dennison was likely dealing with the issues of the battlefield. When battles went well, with few injuries to him or his comrades, Dennison was hopeful in letters because the prospect of the war was improving. When a battle or operation went wrong, he felt guilty about looking forward or being hopeful when his comrades were suffering injuries or dying on the battlefield.

Throughout the end of his stay, Dennison questioned the motives of the war, the motives of the leadership in Washington, D.C., and the point of assignments given to him and his comrades. Near the end of his time in Vietnam, Dennison was transferred to a different area and rarely saw the enemy after his transfer. This time with less combat gave him some down time before returning home and allowed him to begin working through the difficulties of his traumatic war experience. He joked in his last letter to his mother “See I did lose my mind over here mom.”⁴⁹

Chapter 3: John Young – Vietnam, 1967

In early 1967, John was sent to Vietnam for his tour of duty. Young’s experience in Vietnam was very traumatic. In many of his letters he was open about the casualties and incidents that occurred. Many of his stories are in depth while others are very vague. The experiences led him to question the war and why he was there much earlier than Dennison questioned the war. Unlike Dennison, Young’s letters include signs of grieving

⁴⁸ Dennison, *Jim Dennison Letter Collection*, 11/2/67

⁴⁹ Dennison, *Jim Dennison Letter Collection*, 12/12/67

and are often full of multiple emotions including grief, anger, and a thirst for vengeance. Other times, he grieved by writing solemnly. While expressing his emotions and beginning the grieving process can help deter PTSD, the constant traumatic experiences he had and the lack of a chance to continue the grieving process in peace help make PTSD even more difficult to tackle.

Young arrived to Vietnam in January of 1967.⁵⁰ He rarely mentioned any events in letters until March. In March Young wrote that the chance an incident or accident occurs created a constant pressure on him and the other men.⁵¹ This constant pressure, along with other pressures of the daily routine that he mentioned, is an early trigger of PTSD. Halfway through March, Young wrote about the first friend he lost, not only the first in Vietnam, but in his life as well.⁵² In less than three days, Young wrote another letter, this time from the field on a mission, meaning he had little time to mourn the first death of a friend he ever faced.⁵³ The lack of time to mourn can build up an emotional barrier that leads to PTSD. It is also likely that he felt survivor's guilt, which weighs heavily on a soldier and leads to PTSD.

One of the most traumatic events that Young wrote about occurred around April 11th. His commanding officer stepped on a booby trap, setting it off. When a soldier went to help him, he also set off a booby trap. Shrapnel from the booby-trapped mines wounded two additional soldiers. During the confusion, a friendly helicopter mistakenly fired on the soldiers causing one man to drown as he fled into a nearby river. They also

⁵⁰ Young, John. *John Young Letter Collection*. Author's Collection, The University of Southern Mississippi, 1/29/67

⁵¹ Young, John. *John Young Letter Collection*, 3/3/67

⁵² Young, John. *John Young Letter Collection*, 3/19/67

⁵³ Young, John. *John Young Letter Collection*, 3/22/67

encountered two enemy soldiers during the mission.⁵⁴ Just days later, Young wrote again from another mission that started the day after that traumatic event.⁵⁵ Once again, after an event that consisted of multiple catastrophic booby traps, enemy encounters and friendly fire, Young did not have a chance to recuperate or process what happened in the field. He undoubtedly began to feel survivor's guilt, anger, frustration and a thirst for vengeance, judging by the way he wrote.

Later in April, Young missed a mission due to a pulled tooth. On the mission, seven men were injured due to booby traps. He claimed that he would have been injured too if he had gone since it was his platoon that was leading the mission. When writing about the incident, Young became very aggressive about the actions taken against his men.⁵⁶ During this letter, Young definitely felt survivor's guilt. He felt guilty that he was not there when his comrades suffered and died. He believed that he could have stopped, or at least lessened, the damage and destruction that occurred on the operation. An increase in aggression is a common sign of PTSD.

Through May, Young continued to encounter traumatic struggles. On May 18th, Young wrote that he and his men spent numerous hours in a battle against "Charlie" that did not end until heavy gunships arrived for support.⁵⁷ Later, Young explained that during this battle he and a few other soldiers pulled at least four injured men out of the battlefield so they could be treated for their wounds.⁵⁸ This traumatic event is the first time that Young mentioned bring in heavier weapons, such as a heavy gunship, to take

⁵⁴ Young, *John Young Letter Collection*, 4/11/67

⁵⁵ Young, *John Young Letter Collection*, 4/16/67

⁵⁶ Young, *John Young Letter Collection*, 4/24/67

⁵⁷ Young, *John Young Letter Collection*, 5/18/67

⁵⁸ Young, *John Young Letter Collection*, 6/28/67

out the enemy. Prior to this, the only mention of heavier machinery was to evacuate injured men away from the battlefield or for transporting soldiers. While having heavy weapons as back up can be comforting, the heavy weapons at times were as vulnerable to damage and even more dangerous due to friendly fire and crashing into the soldiers in the field.

Another major battle occurred near the end of June. Two American battalions stumbled onto two enemy battalions at a base camp surrounded by numerous .50 caliber machine guns. In the end, the American battalions won. Young did not mention any American casualty numbers, which would be breaking protocol, although he already broke that protocol many times. He did, however, mention that over 250 enemy soldiers were confirmed dead. In reality, the true number of dead enemy soldiers should have been around 400. Young also wrote about a moment in the battle when an injured enemy waved to him as a signal to stop firing. Instead, Young emptied an entire clip into the enemy.⁵⁹ This is a display of rage and aggression, some of the more common symptoms of PTSD. He lacked the expected emotions, especially guilt, for killing the enemy in the way that he did. This also shows how he has become accustomed to killing in the battlefield, which harms the ability to cope with stress, especially as stress continues to mount.

In a letter dated months later, Young revisited the site of that traumatic battle of late June. He mentioned drastic casualty numbers that left one company; normally well over 100, at less than two dozen men. He wrote that he could still see where the dead

⁵⁹ Young, *John Young Letter Collection*, 6/25/67

soldiers had laid and remembered the incident vividly because of how horrifying it was.⁶⁰ While going back to the site without encountering any fire could have been helpful for processing the terrible memory, Young was unable to do so due to the closeness of the incident and the constant pressure that another traumatic event could happen soon, possibly even at the same location while they were visiting the site.

Luckily for Young, in July he was finally able to write to his family from an “R&R,” rest and relaxation, location. He penned that his battalion heavily suffered from the few major battles and small fights, and there was “never a chance to let oneself unwind a little.”⁶¹ In order to combat PTSD, a soldier must have time to process the events that unfolded. Young clearly stated here that he knew he was not getting the proper amount of time to process the traumatic events, to “unwind a little.” As mentioned in the Introduction, this “R&R” trip was aimed at giving the soldiers a chance to break free from the combat and the trauma.

In one of the letters following his “R&R” trip, Young wrote that two of his men died, one just eighteen inches away from Young. Young wrote “Men I have lived with for a year and a quarter are not easy to lose.”⁶² He continued that being the leader of the men was “enough to drive anybody crazy. The responsibility, the pressure, and the necessity to lead ten men, to make them get up and move when you yourself have trouble making your legs move because there are bullets flying all around you.”⁶³ Young not only struggled with survivor’s guilt due to the death of his comrades, but he also began to struggle with “leader’s guilt.” His decisions in the field led soldiers into battle where they

⁶⁰ Young, *John Young Letter Collection*, 11/7/67

⁶¹ Young, *John Young Letter Collection*, 7/27/67

⁶² Young, *John Young Letter Collection*, 8/21/67

⁶³ Young, *John Young Letter Collection*, 8/21/67

were injured, killed and put in harm's way; therefore he felt guilty as a consequence of his decisions and leadership position. There is little doubt that these two forms of guilt created PTSD.

On September 27th, Young wrote a letter to his family that was a chilling foreshadowing of PTSD symptoms. He wrote that for a long time when he returned, he would “jump at sharp noises, and watch for tripwires when I walk, and... the mention of certain names will take me back to this place.”⁶⁴ He said he would even answer the phone in the same manner as he did in Vietnam. He would not be able to watch war movies either. He continued that war was an everlasting combination of the worst sounds, sights and smells.⁶⁵ In this letter, Young described in detail many of the everyday signs of PTSD. He knew during his duty in Vietnam that he would suffer from these symptoms upon his return home. These symptoms of PTSD are the most noticeable and can cause difficulties during everyday tasks like jobs, driving, seeing movies, attending concerts, etc.

In a letter dated early November, Young displayed rage and aggression at the loss of a soldier he considered a friend. The main difference from this soldier's death compared to previous soldiers' deaths was that he attributed it not to the enemy but a “coward” in his platoon. In the letter, he wrote that he would “beat him insensible” if they ever saw each other again.⁶⁶ Again, his rage could also be attributed to his survivor's guilt that was constantly getting worse.

⁶⁴ Young, *John Young Letter Collection*, 9/27/67

⁶⁵ Young, *John Young Letter Collection*, 9/27/67

⁶⁶ Young, *John Young Letter Collection*, 11/11/67

Adding to Young's struggles in Vietnam, Young suffered the loss of a family member while he was away in Vietnam. After being informed, he replied, "Vietnam has given me rather an introduction to death." He later writes that although he has lost many friends, his relative's death is not any easier.⁶⁷ This event, while not being as violent as the other traumatic events, could be just as emotionally and psychologically painful due to his inability to be with his family and the realization that his family was vulnerable to death as well. He struggled to show himself mourning in this letter but had a chance to express some in another letter.

After that response letter to his family, he sent one to the spouse of the relative who died. In the letter, he told her that he sympathized with her. He wrote, "I appreciate the emptiness one feels at the loss of a loved one." He continued that he was deeply burdened and wordless at the loss of his relative.⁶⁸ This is what grief looks like in letters. A display of grief such as this must take place for every loss a soldier encounters in order to effectively combat PTSD. The graphic nature of deaths in Vietnam, in combination with constant assignments, did not allow Young to ever grieve effectively. The lack of a chance to grieve caused an emotional and a psychological build up that leads to PTSD.

The last major traumatic event Young wrote about to his family occurred in late November. Immediately after his platoon landed, a soldier stepped off onto a booby trap. When a medic rushed to help him, he also stepped on a booby trap that launched him into the water. After both men were evacuated to be cared for, a member of a returning scout

⁶⁷ Young, *John Young Letter Collection*, 11/17/67

⁶⁸ Young, *John Young Letter Collection*, 11/21/67

team stepped on another booby trap. In the blasts, multiple other men were wounded, causing the entire mission to be scrubbed.⁶⁹

Unlike many of his letters, Young was able to go back to base and begin to process the events that unfolded. Young wrote “where, I ask myself, is the moral behind this small episode in this great tragedy of Vietnam? I wish I knew. To doubt is to be without a foothold and I look now at Brookins’ empty bunk and doubt. I really don’t know what to think of this whole war.”⁷⁰ While he was given more time after this event than after normal traumatic events, Young still did not have ample time to process the event, mostly due to the high level of alertness required to maintain a safe base camp.

Throughout his tour in Vietnam, Young encountered a large number of traumatic events. These events, and the close timing of all of them most likely caused PTSD. Throughout his tour of duty, he rarely had a chance to grieve the loss of his fellow soldiers and friends or to process the events that unfolded. He was forced build up the emotional and physiological stress that causes PTSD. Due to this build up, it is very likely that Young returned to the United States with PTSD but, like many servicemen from Vietnam, did not get diagnosed until years, or decades, later.

Chapter 4: Vincent Simonelli – Vietnam 1966-1967

The third Vietnam veteran whose collection will be used in this research is Vincent Simonelli. Simonelli served in the Vietnam War from 1965-1967, but his collection of letters from Vietnam used in this thesis is dated from July 1966 through

⁶⁹ Young, *John Young Letter Collection*, 11/20/67

⁷⁰ Young, *John Young Letter Collection*, 11/20/67

April of 1967.⁷¹ Throughout his tour, Simonelli experienced many traumatic events. Some of the traumatic events are described in Simonelli's letter collection. While it is unknown if these events caused Simonelli to struggle with PTSD, the point of this thesis is not to diagnose PTSD but instead to demonstrate that the symptoms of PTSD can be seen in the letters of soldiers.

On July 14, 1966, Simonelli wrote a letter to his brother in order to shield his family from the traumatic events he recorded in his letters. In the letter he said his stay in Vietnam was getting hard to understand. A truck he rode in hit a mine, causing a slight injury and allowed him to receive a Purple Heart. Yet by his reaction in his letter, the mental damage was more debilitating than the physical damage as he was very shaken up by the event. He mentioned the constant anxiety from random and frequent sniper fire, mortar fire, rocket-propelled-grenades (RPGs) and mines. He also mentioned the frequent ambushes as another reason for being shaken up. According to his letter, his group of soldiers lost eight men and many more were injured through a variety of ways by that time in the war. However, he did not explain how any of the men were killed or injured. He was obviously distraught throughout this letter, clearly demonstrating a heightened alertness.⁷²

Later in July, Simonelli wrote to his family after a mortar attack on the base where he was located. The attack came from multiple sides and, judging by his tone throughout the letter, caused quite a panic around the base. He later clarified that none of

⁷¹ Simonelli, Vincent. "Vincent Simonelli: Digital Collection: Veterans History Project (Library of Congress)." American Memory from the Library of Congress - Home Page. <http://lcweb2.loc.gov/diglib/vhp/story/loc.natlib.afc2001001.25749/> (accessed October 12, 2013).

⁷² Simonelli, "Vincent Simonelli: Digital Collection: Veterans History Project (Library of Congress)," 7/14/66

his group was hit, but they were ordered to check the perimeter for the Viet Cong. He described the dangerous location of the base, which had a river running through it and forests on multiple sides. According to Simonelli, this made finding the nearby Viet Cong even harder because they often dug in to protect themselves during their attacks. He also mentioned a lesser known threat of Viet Cong women spies working in the base camp.⁷³

The constant pressure to be on guard created a very stressful environment that forced the soldiers to constantly be on high alert. Simonelli also mentioned another frustrating and demoralizing aspect of the Vietnam War that almost every Vietnam soldier had to deal with: constantly returning to previous operation sites. Simonelli wrote that most operations consisted of clearing out an area of Viet Cong then leaving the area. If anything looked suspicious, the group would stay for a while to keep the area clear. Yet, a few weeks after leaving an area, the group would have to return to empty the area of Viet Cong all over again.⁷⁴ This became very annoying and frustrating for soldiers and created a sense of failure in the soldiers by constantly returning to a previous operation zone. The feeling of failure also increased the sense of guilt that soldiers felt when their friends were injured or died during a return to a previous operation zone. Returning to a previous operation site where heavy casualties or traumatic events happened could also have been even more traumatic to soldiers when they encountered more enemy troops at the same location.

During an operation in August Simonelli witnessed a man in his group hit a mine while he was very close by. Soon after it detonated, Viet Cong from a nearby bunker

⁷³ Simonelli, "Vincent Simonelli: Digital Collection: Veterans History Project (Library of Congress)," 7/30/66

⁷⁴ Simonelli, "Vincent Simonelli: Digital Collection: Veterans History Project (Library of Congress)," 7/30/66

began to fire on the group. After using heavy weapons to hit the Viet Cong bunker, the group only found two submachine guns. Leaving the bunker, another soldier in Simonelli's group stepped on another mine. The next night, Viet Cong mortared the camp but only caused a shrapnel wound to another soldier. The following day, his squad found a Viet Cong base camp empty of any Viet Cong soldiers. While trying to search a Viet Cong tunnel, one of the soldiers received an injury. While searching a nearby area, a separate squad received fire that caused two men to be killed. The team, becoming frustrated with the Viet Cong, brought in helicopters to locate and follow the fleeing Viet Cong but the helicopters failed. The next morning, two more mines were detonated, causing more injuries and the loss of a helicopter.⁷⁵

The frequent and random mine detonations along with being firing upon by the Viet Cong forced soldiers to be at a high level of alertness. Unfortunately, there was never really a chance to lower their alertness level, and therefore the soldiers eventually were unable to relax fully. Undoubtedly, the inability to find the Viet Cong throughout the operation followed by the injuries and death of comrades created a sense of guilt, anger and frustration that only increased other symptoms of PTSD such as rage and aggression.

This letter was written solely to his brother, instead of the rest of his family.⁷⁶ Simonelli's reasoning for writing only to his brother could have been because of a close relationship between them. However, it is commonly seen in letters from soldiers to not include members of the family who struggle with worrying and stressing about their

⁷⁵ Simonelli, "Vincent Simonelli: Digital Collection: Veterans History Project (Library of Congress)," 8/7/66

⁷⁶ Simonelli, "Vincent Simonelli: Digital Collection: Veterans History Project (Library of Congress)," 8/7/66

soldier in a letter that contains very traumatic experiences. Simonelli did not have much of a reaction while writing this letter. That can possibly be related to three different reasons. First, Simonelli was likely becoming more hardened towards the aspect of the war. Second, Simonelli might not have known any of the men injured very well and might not have been as close to events as it seems. Third, Simonelli could have been trying to maintain as much composure as possible in order to not scare his brother who was apparently the only one he trusted at that time with information that would cause extreme worry and frustration for other members of the family.

The next letter by Simonelli, roughly two weeks later, was very short and did not mention any struggles. He wrote to his entire family to say that his squad did nothing but make water runs, sleep and write letters home.⁷⁷ The combination with the previous letter and this letter point to the idea that Simonelli is doing everything he can to keep his family from worrying about his situation while also venting to his brother when needed. While it is possible that his squad only did the activities he mentioned, it is much more likely that the squad fought off small mortar attacks or skirmishes with Viet Cong over this time period and Simonelli simply refused to mention them.

Over a month later, Simonelli wrote again to his family and stated that he had not felt like writing to them.⁷⁸ This is a clear sign of aloofness and obviously an effort to seclude himself. During this point of the war, he possibly could have slipped into a depression. Simonelli told his family, almost as if without emotion and without trying to shield his family from the trauma, that he and his leader became caught between friendly

⁷⁷ Simonelli, "Vincent Simonelli: Digital Collection: Veterans History Project (Library of Congress)," 8/20/66

⁷⁸ Simonelli, "Vincent Simonelli: Digital Collection: Veterans History Project (Library of Congress)," 9/15/66

fire from soldiers and Viet Cong so they laid down in order to wait helplessly for the battle to end. During the skirmish, one man was shot through the hand while one troop truck, fully loaded with troops, hit a mine. Also during the operation, a friendly mortar team fired on and killed a man in the unit while also injuring four more.⁷⁹

For such a short and somewhat emotionless letter, two events that could have had detrimental effects on Simonelli were recorded. First, Simonelli was caught between friendly units and enemy units as they battled. The helplessness of lying on the battlefield, unable to fight, unable to help his comrades or help his own cause must have made him feel defenseless and vulnerable. Secondly, the friendly fire incident could have been detrimental. This is only made worse by his realization that even his allies can cause harm to him and his comrades. These two realizations could increase the high alertness and verify its necessity in the battlefield, thereby leading to PTSD when he returned home.

In October, Simonelli wrote to his family about a twelve-day operation that was very costly to his unit. Soon after leaving their base camp, Simonelli's unit received sniper fire and later received mortar fire. During part of the operation, a truck carrying twelve men detonated a mine, killing eight men when the gas tank exploded. Two of the men killed were in Simonelli's platoon while many others were injured.⁸⁰ He had a genuine reaction of shock and bewilderment when discussing the explosion of the gas tank. He treated it like a freak accident but was also deeply disturbed by it. He continued to write that his unit received mortar fire every night for varying periods of time. After a

⁷⁹ Simonelli, "Vincent Simonelli: Digital Collection: Veterans History Project (Library of Congress)," 9/15/66

⁸⁰ Simonelli, "Vincent Simonelli: Digital Collection: Veterans History Project (Library of Congress)," 10/19/66

night of mortaring, the units choose to move locations. While moving, the truck Simonelli rode in hit a mine and became unusable. They were forced to stand guard until another truck came from base to tow the broken truck away. Later in the operation, every remaining truck became stuck, forcing the unit to camp in an undesirable location for the night.⁸¹ These incidents in the trucks, especially the one that shocked him, shook him up emotionally. Simonelli did not know, or believe, that a mine could do that much damage to a truck and the men inside. On top of the shocking news that their trucks were not as durable, reliable or protective as they might have thought, Simonelli had to deal with the loss of eight men along with care for all the wounded until help could arrive.

In the same letter, Simonelli also described an event that would have been hard for anyone to deal with. A friend of his in his unit chose to take a pistol and walk alone into the woods toward a suspected Viet Cong area. The Viet Cong killed Simonelli's friend that day.⁸² Simonelli displayed his frustration and anger at the nature of his friend's death. The manner in which he wrote his letter scolds his friend's action, but he did not point to any reason his friend mentioned for his decision to walk into the woods alone. He wrote, "A lot of guys get injured or killed because they're careless." A traumatic experience such as the death of a friend is hard for anyone to handle. Simonelli, however, depended on this man to fight with him during battle, but the soldier chose to walk away from it. Simonelli could have felt betrayed by this incident. This event increased the rage and aggression he felt not only because his friend died but also that the Vietnam War was possibly the reason he chose to walk into those woods.

⁸¹ Simonelli, "Vincent Simonelli: Digital Collection: Veterans History Project (Library of Congress)," 10/19/66

⁸² Simonelli, "Vincent Simonelli: Digital Collection: Veterans History Project (Library of Congress)," 10/19/66

The first time Simonelli mentioned that he shot at an enemy was in mid-November.⁸³ Simonelli undoubtedly shot at Viet Cong soldiers long before November, but this is the first time he mentioned it in a letter to his family. He chose not to go into detail about the firefight between his unit and the Viet Cong soldiers outside of stating that some Viet Cong soldiers were killed while many in his unit were injured. After the firefight, he went to recover the Viet Cong bodies. He recorded, “You should have seen the holes in some of them. It wasn’t a pretty thing to see. But that’s war I guess.” According to his letter, one Viet Cong soldier was missing most of its head while another had a major hole in the chest.⁸⁴ This was the first time that Simonelli mentioned seeing dead bodies. The sight of a dead body, along with the act of killing, can create major psychological trauma that is often associated with PTSD. It can also lead to an intense feeling of guilt or self-hatred for killing in such a dramatic and brutal way.

Throughout the same letter, Simonelli mentioned some of the dangers associated with the major operation his unit was ordered to complete. First, he wrote that mines were almost impossible to spot, and mine detectors could not cover the entire area. Second, Viet Cong often shot at them while walking or driving on the road. Thirdly, the area of operation was believed to be a central headquarters for the Viet Cong. The inability to find and disarm the mines created a high level of alertness, stress, and paranoia. It also created a sense of survivor’s guilt, rage and aggression when the mine detonated under a comrade, killing the soldier and injuring others. Similar to previous

⁸³ Simonelli, "Vincent Simonelli: Digital Collection: Veterans History Project (Library of Congress)," 11/19/66

⁸⁴ Simonelli, "Vincent Simonelli: Digital Collection: Veterans History Project (Library of Congress)," 11/19/66

incidents, receiving fire and being near suspected Viet Cong would create the same high level of alertness, stress, and paranoia that are symptoms of and lead to PTSD.

Simonelli wrote a letter in December of 1966 that contained brief information that instilled even more worry in his family. He briefly mentioned that his unit was attacked as it left base, resulting in killing and injuring a few men. He also mentioned that the Viet Cong were getting better weapons, making them tougher enemies.⁸⁵ Simonelli, in order to either comfort his family or make them more aware, could have expanded upon news like this. Yet, this letter seemed to be written almost as if Simonelli just did not care. None of the previous information is expanded upon at all. The letter is short and quite void of emotion from Simonelli. The withdrawing from relationships like this and distancing oneself from emotions are other signs of PTSD.

A letter dated February 4th, 1967 shows the same signs from Simonelli. Simonelli described the previous operation that his squad completed. During the operation it suffered three separate traumatic events. First, a platoon walked directly into a heavily booby-trapped area. It suffered seventeen casualties while it was only able to confirm one Viet Cong casualty. After the booby-trap incident, Simonelli was one of the men who helped load the helicopters with the dead and wounded. His only description was “It was pretty bad.”⁸⁶ The second event was a friendly fire incident that wounded a few men in Simonelli’s unit. During a later part of the operation, some of the troop carrying trucks drove into a minefield causing more casualties and destroying multiple trucks. In all, Simonelli says that operation cost almost 50 casualties. He then wrote that he wanted to

⁸⁵ Simonelli, "Vincent Simonelli: Digital Collection: Veterans History Project (Library of Congress)," 12/5/66

⁸⁶ Simonelli, "Vincent Simonelli: Digital Collection: Veterans History Project (Library of Congress)," 2/4/67

drop the subject. Simonelli then briefly wrote about his current operation that resulted in heavy mortar fire, causing a few more casualties.⁸⁷ After this information, the letter became almost void of emotion. Simonelli briefly let his family see his pain but then retreated to hide his feelings away. He struggled to show his emotion and explain his struggles to his family before fully retreating.

Less than a month later, Simonelli wrote another letter that had the same emotional shift. At the beginning of the letter, Simonelli wrote that there was too much that happened to be able to write it all down. He mentioned calling in an air strike, running across a Viet Cong company and said, "It was hell."⁸⁸ Yet he did not mention the battle anymore. He immediately shifted position, going instead to the casualty numbers of three U.S. soldiers killed, twenty-five Viet Cong killed and one truck destroyed.⁸⁹ The dramatic reversal of trying to write in detail about the operation to simply skipping over the battle entirely could be a sign of trying to forget about the incident or move past the incident because it still upsets him.

Another sign that this incident could have been a breaking point is in the second half of the letter. In the second half, Simonelli says, "don't tell mom or dad."⁹⁰ In a letter to Simonelli, his brother said that it seemed like Simonelli was "getting disgusted with

⁸⁷ Simonelli, "Vincent Simonelli: Digital Collection: Veterans History Project (Library of Congress)," 2/4/67

⁸⁸ Simonelli, "Vincent Simonelli: Digital Collection: Veterans History Project (Library of Congress)," 2/27/67

⁸⁹ Simonelli, "Vincent Simonelli: Digital Collection: Veterans History Project (Library of Congress)," 2/27/67

⁹⁰ Simonelli, "Vincent Simonelli: Digital Collection: Veterans History Project (Library of Congress)," 2/27/67

things over here.”⁹¹ Simonelli responded that he was indeed sick of seeing people getting “messed up and killed.”⁹² Simonelli also said it was humbling to see soldiers “getting blown up right in front of you and every time you go out you know somebody isn’t going to come back.”⁹³ He continued that he could not control anything that happened in the field except for counting down the days until he gets to leave.⁹⁴ This was the most emotionally charged and in depth section of Simonelli’s entire letter collection. He addressed many of the same feelings that other Vietnam soldiers felt too, such as seeing people violently killed in front of him, counting down days to go home, and feeling completely out of control and drained from seeing his comrades die. Simonelli obviously was quite concerned with his parents worrying but also needed to vent his emotions. The emotions bottled up inside Simonelli were capable of leading to PTSD. Bottling up emotions instead of dealing and confronting them breaks down the ability for a soldier to confront his emotions when he returns to his home and family. When a veteran returns without the ability to handle emotions appropriately, they often began suffering from even more symptoms such as night terrors and flashbacks, two of the most common symptoms of PTSD.

Roughly a week after writing the emotionally charged letter above, Simonelli wrote a letter to his family that was the most emotionally void letter yet. Nothing bad was written about during the letter. In fact, the war was barely written about at all. Instead,

⁹¹ Simonelli, "Vincent Simonelli: Digital Collection: Veterans History Project (Library of Congress)," 2/27/67

⁹² Simonelli, "Vincent Simonelli: Digital Collection: Veterans History Project (Library of Congress)," 2/27/67

⁹³ Simonelli, "Vincent Simonelli: Digital Collection: Veterans History Project (Library of Congress)," 2/27/67

⁹⁴ Simonelli, "Vincent Simonelli: Digital Collection: Veterans History Project (Library of Congress)," 2/27/67

Simonelli wrote a very brief, one-and-a-half page letter to his family making nothing more than small talk.⁹⁵ In another letter a week later, Simonelli only mentioned the war by saying the Viet Cong mortared their base, causing roughly twenty casualties. He also mentioned that he hated the terrible feeling of being able to do absolutely nothing except take cover during a mortar attack.⁹⁶ The next two letters dated March 24th and April 1st were both short and again mentioned nothing about war.⁹⁷ Simonelli might have felt some sort of guilt with sharing his emotions with his siblings due to causing them worry or that he was not a tough enough soldier, a misconception that haunted many soldiers. Simonelli might not have had anything of note happen during the last month and a half of his tour, although that is highly unlikely given the previous pace of operations and traumatic events. For some reason, Simonelli began to pull away from his family as his tour of duty continued.

Vincent Simonelli served in Vietnam heroically, as did the other soldiers in this thesis and not included in this thesis. His service in Vietnam cost him more than just a year away from family and friends. He, whether severe or mild, diagnosed or unrecognized, suffered somehow when he returned to the United States. His letters tell the story of his tour during the Vietnam War and how the war affected him at that time. The emotions in his letters are very similar to other Vietnam soldiers. It is obvious that his letters are excellent sources for seeing how traumatic events can affect a soldier psychologically.

⁹⁵ Simonelli, "Vincent Simonelli: Digital Collection: Veterans History Project (Library of Congress)," 3/7/67

⁹⁶ Simonelli, "Vincent Simonelli: Digital Collection: Veterans History Project (Library of Congress)," 3/15/67

⁹⁷ Simonelli, "Vincent Simonelli: Digital Collection: Veterans History Project (Library of Congress)," 3/24/67 and 4/1/67

Chapter 5: Taylor Pierce – American Civil War 1862-1865

Taylor Pierce, a member of the Iowa Volunteer Infantry, served in the American Civil War from late 1862 until 1865. Throughout his service, he and his wife frequently wrote letters to each other. Catherine, Taylor's wife, often asked how he was doing, informed him of things going on at home, with their children, and home finances. Taylor's letters often focused on the war around him and the constant hope that it would be coming to an end soon. His letters tell an interesting story about the war and give a perspective of the American Civil War that is often overlooked – the psychological effects of the war on soldiers.

At the start of his letter collection and wartime service, Taylor was quite excited about the prospect of going to war. He wrote that he did not think the war would last very long. He also said that he was excited for the war because he thought it would be fun.⁹⁸ This feeling did not fully dissipate by the time Taylor wrote his second letter, roughly a month later in November. In that letter, Taylor described the brotherhood and friendship that was building among the men in his group.⁹⁹ This brotherhood with his fellow soldiers was a good development, but it would make the loss of any of these men, whether by sickness or by battle wounds, much harder to understand and accept.

Less than a week later, Taylor informed his wife of his loneliness.¹⁰⁰ Using the next letter, written two weeks later to provide more context, Taylor appeared to be

⁹⁸ Pierce, Taylor. *Dear Catharine, Dear Taylor: The Civil War Letters of a Union soldier and his wife*, edited by Richard L. Kiper. Lawrence, Kansas: University Press of Kansas, 2002, 35.

⁹⁹ Pierce, *Dear Catharine, Dear Taylor*, 42-47.

¹⁰⁰ Pierce, *Dear Catharine, Dear Taylor*, 49.

extremely homesick and missing his family. He did not mean that he was completely alone with no one to be around. In the same letter, Taylor described himself as being paranoid when he failed to receive a timely letter from Catharine. He said “I fear there is something wrong and imagine all manner of bad things that keeps my mind so excited that I can not rest.”¹⁰¹ In this instance, Taylor did not mean excited as in elation, but instead meant excited as anxious and nervous.

The letter from November 26th was not solely focused on Taylor’s desire to receive more frequent letters from his wife. Taylor also mentioned two very interesting subjects. First, Taylor described his feelings towards the war as being anxious to crush the rebellion. Taylor was confident of joining the winning side and maintained the “excited” feeling towards the war from previous letters. Taylor quickly foreshadowed the trials he would face later when he wrote that many of the men were having fun and did not realize they could die when battles began.¹⁰² Judging by Taylor’s mood throughout all his letters until this section of this particular letter, Taylor also struggled to realize that his life could quickly end in battle as well. While he did tone down his excitement from previous letters, he still appeared to be forgetful, or flat out unaccepting, of his possibly pending death on the battlefield.

By January, Taylor had fought a few light Confederate forces but still had not changed his outlook on the war. He continued to describe the brief clashes as “glorious” and “happy.”¹⁰³ He even wrote his opinion that the Union had stopped the rebellion west

¹⁰¹ Pierce, *Dear Catharine, Dear Taylor*, 50.

¹⁰² Pierce, *Dear Catharine, Dear Taylor*, 50.

¹⁰³ Pierce, *Dear Catharine, Dear Taylor*, 63-66.

of the Mississippi River.¹⁰⁴ Taylor also added to the idea that his unit did not yet realize the severity of the situation when he described a snowball fight between his divided unit.¹⁰⁵ Having a stress-relieving moment can be very helpful in combating PTSD although this unit had not seen any real conflict yet.

By the middle of February, Taylor's mood shifted dramatically. He became very aggressive in his view towards the war. He called the rebels "gorillas" and said, "we go along and shoot them" similar to hunting for fun.¹⁰⁶ He even described the rebels as being unfit to live any longer. This is a much more dramatic and violent way of expressing his feelings toward the war. While this mood maintained the same "crush the rebellion" attitude he had in earlier letters, this description was much more aggressive, volatile and explicit.

His attitude again shifted dramatically by April when his unit attempted to march towards Vicksburg, Mississippi. The unit destroyed much of the land as they marched. Seeing the destroyed land, and looking at his previous skirmishes with Confederate forces, led Taylor to say that he now believed that war was wholly terrible.¹⁰⁷ His mood was even apologetic and sorrowful in regards to the actions of his unit as well as towards the new situation of the residents of the land.

The first in depth description of conflict, and the first mention of a major battle, was in May when Taylor described a bombardment and battle that lasted through the night and roughly eight hours the next day. During this letter, Taylor described an attempt to sneak close to enemy lines in order to attack closer than the enemy expected. The unit

¹⁰⁴ Pierce, *Dear Catharine, Dear Taylor*, 63-66.

¹⁰⁵ Pierce, *Dear Catharine, Dear Taylor*, 68-71.

¹⁰⁶ Pierce, *Dear Catharine, Dear Taylor*, 79-81.

¹⁰⁷ Pierce, *Dear Catharine, Dear Taylor*, 99-100.

was discovered and was forced to take cover in a ravine during the night as Union cannons bombarded the Confederates all night. When morning came, heavy fighting broke out and lasted for almost 8 hours. Taylor described the number of wounded, dead and captured in his unit, but did not seem emotional as he wrote the description.¹⁰⁸ He reacted as if they were livestock being counted and sold. He was emotionally numb and drained after such a long and drawn out fight.

In June, men in Taylor's unit began to die quite frequently. Taylor wrote that he felt they were constantly burying someone. He also mentioned that many of his friends were dying of sickness, a common problem during the American Civil War. One friend of Taylor's was forced to have one of his legs amputated. The process of the amputation in general mortified Taylor. Constant sickness and death surrounding the camp created a traumatic environment for a soldier during the Civil War. The soldier, in this case Taylor, felt helpless and hopeless, as he was unable to stop the sickness and death from spreading around the camp. If he became sick, it would be hard to maintain the hope of returning home, especially after seeing so many men die of similar sicknesses. In combination with all the sickness and dying that Taylor faced, his unit was close enough to the Confederate lines that his unit was able to try to bombard the Confederates with cannon fire every few minutes.¹⁰⁹ The frequent bombardment of enemy fortifications made the possibility of relieving stress, and thereby maybe avoiding PTSD, quite impossible. If a unit was close enough to bombard enemy fortifications, or even surprise attack, then bombarding or

¹⁰⁸ Pierce, *Dear Catharine, Dear Taylor*, 105-109.

¹⁰⁹ Pierce, *Dear Catharine, Dear Taylor*, 113.

attacking happened from both sides. For weeks this bombardment continued with cannon fire, ironclad fire and even rifle fire.¹¹⁰

Throughout this bombardment, Taylor began to see the effects of laying siege to a city. He described the sight of Confederate soldiers who were starved and in terrible condition.¹¹¹ He believed that they were being forced to hold onto the city of Vicksburg even though the soldiers knew they were going to lose and were ready to surrender the city.¹¹² His tone during this letter proved that he felt remorse for the soldiers and knew many were dying without reason since Vicksburg would fall in a matter of time. Not only were the Confederates at Vicksburg in bad shape, but so were the Union forces. Taylor described men who were struggling to function and said most men were in bad condition.¹¹³ He said that his unit was down to 25% of its original fighting force, from 1,500 soldiers to below 400.¹¹⁴ He also mentioned the high level of alertness required to protect the camp. This high level of alertness was needed to wake up at night and watch for Confederate soldiers attempting to leave Vicksburg.¹¹⁵ Even though Taylor's high level of alertness was for a slightly different reason than that of Vietnam soldiers, he was still forced to maintain a focused and hunter-like alertness over a long period of time. The high level of alertness was hard to "turn off" once the war was over due to requiring a high level of alertness for such a long period of time.

On July 4, 1863, Vicksburg fell to the Union forces and Taylor penned another letter to his wife. His reaction to the fall of Vicksburg was "to us who have been in

¹¹⁰ Pierce, *Dear Catharine, Dear Taylor*, 114-116.

¹¹¹ Pierce, *Dear Catharine, Dear Taylor*, 116.

¹¹² Pierce, *Dear Catharine, Dear Taylor*, 116.

¹¹³ Pierce, *Dear Catharine, Dear Taylor*, 116-120.

¹¹⁴ Pierce, *Dear Catharine, Dear Taylor*, 116-120.

¹¹⁵ Pierce, *Dear Catharine, Dear Taylor*, 116-120.

turmoil and strife of battle day and night for so long a time it seemed as though a weight was lifted from us that well nigh bore us down.”¹¹⁶ He said that the Union forces continued to march without any chance to rest and that the force was in bad condition.¹¹⁷ Taylor believed that the forces needed rest and, after a battle like the siege of Vicksburg, deserved it. Being pushed well beyond the point of exhaustion, like these soldiers were, led to symptoms of PTSD such as agitation, anger and increased aggression. Without a chance to rest, the unit also missed the chance to process and accept the sights, the sickness and the death they just witnessed during their siege of Vicksburg. Similar to Vietnam soldiers, these soldiers were unable to process what just happened because they were pushed to the next goal and the next conflict. Constantly building on difficult and traumatic experiences created a stress and emotional build-up that caused a mental and emotional breakdown, one of the most obvious signs of PTSD.

Almost a week after leaving Vicksburg, the unit began to face more heavy fighting. The fighting was expected to continue for a while longer. Taylor said the unit was also suffering from upset stomachs.¹¹⁸ His letter was the shortest letter yet, adding to the idea that he was rushed to write the letter. A few days later, Taylor got the chance to expand on his previous letter due to a lull in the fighting. He said the unit was still struggling with stomach issues and Confederate forces were constantly attacking them. He said the Confederates were sending in small units to attack the Union lines, forcing the Union units to be prepared for battle throughout the night.¹¹⁹ From his tone, the constant high level of alertness was wearing on him and his unit both mentally and

¹¹⁶ Pierce, *Dear Catharine, Dear Taylor*, 124-126.

¹¹⁷ Pierce, *Dear Catharine, Dear Taylor*, 124-126.

¹¹⁸ Pierce, *Dear Catharine, Dear Taylor*, 128.

¹¹⁹ Pierce, *Dear Catharine, Dear Taylor*, 129-132.

physically. To describe his situation, he said “We have to lay on the ground with our rigging on us ready to fall in at the least alarm and our living at such times is hard.”¹²⁰

A moment of clarity in the same letter brought more proof that PTSD was a problem among Civil War soldiers as well as Vietnam soldiers. In his letter to his wife, Taylor wrote, “Dear Catherine, if I ever live to get home, I fear you will find me sadly altered. I have become unsociable, determined and stubborn here and I fear hard hearted for I can see things here that used to arouse my sympathy that has no more effect on me than I can not tell...I hardly dare think how my nature is changed, or least what the war has brought to light so you may prepare yourselves for it and not be surprised.”¹²¹ This description of the change he saw in himself was nearly identical to the description many Vietnam soldiers received when they were told of their diagnosis of PTSD.

Following this letter, Taylor was transferred to a unit that fought in the western states. He criticized the unit because it rarely attacked when the Confederates were in bad condition and never chased them during a retreat.¹²² During this letter, he showed anger and aggression. Taylor had shown anger and aggression in letters only on a few previous occasions. This letter seemed to set him off, not because it was a “pet peeve,” but instead because he seems to be blood thirsty about killing Confederates. It is completely opposite of the letters he wrote prior to the fall of Vicksburg, when Taylor felt sorry for the Confederates who were starving and forced to stay in their position.

¹²⁰ Pierce, *Dear Catharine, Dear Taylor* 129-132.

¹²¹ Pierce, *Dear Catharine, Dear Taylor*, 129-132.

¹²² Pierce, *Dear Catharine, Dear Taylor*, 153-154.

Soon after his scolding letter about the Union forces, his unit fought a severe battle with the Confederates.¹²³ He failed to give any details regarding the battle and shifted his focus to what he and his unit did after returning to camp. However, he seemed to be in good spirits and quite excited throughout the short letter. At one point during his brief mention of the battle, he called the battle a “slaughter of the rebels,” with quite a lot of pleasure in his writing tone.¹²⁴

In another letter, Taylor told his wife about a few skirmishes his new unit had had with Confederate forces. Taylor told his wife during this letter that he did not worry about the fighting on most occasions but said now he desired to defeat all the Confederates.¹²⁵ This level of aggression towards the Confederates was not apparent in most of the earlier letters Taylor wrote to his wife. He had, since Vicksburg, become very aggressive and bloodthirsty towards the Confederate forces.

Taylor’s next two letters continued to display symptoms of PTSD. First, he complained to his wife about always being on alert. He said they were told to be prepared at a moment’s notice because a battle can happen at any point.¹²⁶ In the second letter, Taylor became unusually aggressive while discussing Confederate victories in the Eastern Theatre. He cast blame for the Union losses on the soldiers and leadership who he believed failed instead of giving credit to the Confederates.¹²⁷ The constant need to be on high alert and prepared for battle is a cause of PTSD. Soldiers who were forced to be on high alert then, after returning home, were unable to relax and lower their alertness

¹²³ Pierce, *Dear Catharine, Dear Taylor*, 156-159.

¹²⁴ Pierce, *Dear Catharine, Dear Taylor*, 156-159.

¹²⁵ Pierce, *Dear Catharine, Dear Taylor*, 169-172.

¹²⁶ Pierce, *Dear Catharine, Dear Taylor*, 176-180.

¹²⁷ Pierce, *Dear Catharine, Dear Taylor*, 180-182.

level. Taylor's aggression towards the losses by Union forces in the east was evidence of increased aggression towards something a soldier could not control, another symptom of PTSD. Soldiers could not control what happens in other theatres, just like they could not control what happened to their comrades on the battlefield. This lack of control, no matter how close or far away from the soldier, bothered soldiers because they wanted to believe they had some control over what happened on the battlefield. Soldiers struggled with accepting the idea that they had little or no control over what happened on the battlefield, or elsewhere in the war.

During April, Taylor wrote a letter to his wife that was another moment of clarity for him. He admitted a very painful and difficult truth to his wife that many soldiers struggle to admit – he was scared. He wrote that he had a fear of being killed or living but being called a coward. Taylor said he had never experienced something that created so much fear in him and did not know if he would be a coward or not. He continued to write that he was “deeply troubled to see my fellow beings suffer and I thought I could never bear to see the dead and wounded on the battlefield.”¹²⁸ This harrowing moment of clarity and honesty to his wife showed that Taylor was under a large amount of pressure and had trouble admitting his fears. This fear was common among soldiers and showed that, even though they tried to appear tough for their families, they did have breaking points.

Soon, Taylor's unit again faced off with Confederate forces. Over a series of days, Taylor's unit failed to breach the Confederate lines.¹²⁹ When he described the failure, Taylor became angry and very aggressive towards the leadership of his unit. A few weeks

¹²⁸ Pierce, *Dear Catharine, Dear Taylor*, 189-198.

¹²⁹ Pierce, *Dear Catharine, Dear Taylor*, 206-207.

later, Taylor abstractly cast the blame for terrible camp conditions on the same leadership.¹³⁰ The anger and aggression Taylor experienced during this time was likely related to the frustration mentioned in an earlier letter – failure to breach Confederate lines. Another possible starting point for his anger and aggression was the lack of ability to control any situation. Taylor wanted desperately to end the war and stop seeing his fellow men die violently. Yet, his unit could not break through the Confederate lines and the Eastern units, at the time he wrote his letter, struggled against the Confederates as well. Even the base camp, where they were meant to relax and regroup after battle, was attacked by sickness and death. Everywhere Taylor went he experienced pain and death that he was unable to stop. Being unable to help his fellow soldiers caused him to vent his frustration on his superiors.

Taylor vented his anger and aggression onto other people besides his superiors; he also vented them onto Confederate sympathizers. Taylor mentioned that Confederate sympathizers were known to kill Union soldiers who were out alone or in very small groups.¹³¹ As he wrote this, his tone and wording was quite angry and aggressive compared to earlier in the letter. In another letter, Taylor again vented towards the officers in charge of Union forces in the Eastern theatre. He vented towards the entirety of the Union's Eastern forces.¹³² Again, this frustration was attributed to more than just disdain for the Union's Eastern forces and their officers.

In one letter to his wife, Taylor again shifted back to an honest and vulnerable tone. He described his fear that more battles would ensue and that the innocent men

¹³⁰ Pierce, *Dear Catharine, Dear Taylor*, 210-212.

¹³¹ Pierce, *Dear Catharine, Dear Taylor*, 212.

¹³² Pierce, *Dear Catharine, Dear Taylor*, 247-249.

would be punished with the guilty men throughout the battles. He appeared remorseful that the war even had to happen. He even felt remorse for the slaves, who were still struggling for freedom. This remorse can be attributed to feeling guilty for killing as well the inability to help his injured or dying comrades in their dire situation.¹³³

The next few letters that Taylor wrote to his wife were filled with mentions of battle. In the first letter of this sequence, Taylor wrote that the battles with the Confederates were “back and forth” with both sides alternating advancing and retreating at various times.¹³⁴ The inability to hold any ground, as well as the constant fighting can be extremely demoralizing for a soldier and can cause some symptoms of PTSD like anger and aggression. During the second letter, Taylor reported on a battle that was a surprise to both the Union and Confederate forces. While his unit marched, it came across a marching Confederate force and fighting ensued. He said this was an example of why his force must always be on high alert.¹³⁵ As mentioned earlier, the need to always be on alert is detrimental to the mental and emotional stability of a soldier.

The final letter in this sequence is even more harrowing than the previous letters. Taylor recorded that they were now fighting the Confederate forces almost everyday. However, he continued to say that he no longer felt any remorse for killing Confederates, even though his unit killed thousands of Confederates. He saw them as a number and a statistic. Even when he mentioned the number of Union soldiers lost, he counted them as objects that no longer had any effect on him.¹³⁶ The lack of feeling towards the loss of life showed that the war hardened Taylor to the point that death of people nearby did not

¹³³ Pierce, *Dear Catharine, Dear Taylor*, 228-230.

¹³⁴ Pierce, *Dear Catharine, Dear Taylor*, 256-258.

¹³⁵ Pierce, *Dear Catharine, Dear Taylor*, 267-269.

¹³⁶ Pierce, *Dear Catharine, Dear Taylor*, 269-272.

affect him right away. He learned, at this point in his military career, to push the death of his comrades to the side in order to accomplish his mission.

Two of the last letters about his battlefield experience that Taylor wrote to his wife were two of his deepest and most solemn letters of the collection. In the first letter, he wrote a complete history of the regiment, a requirement for a promotion he received a few weeks prior. After he completed this history, he wrote that so many men who left “have their constitutions shattered so that their future will have but little enjoyment...After the excitement of conflict is over it sickens me to see the effects of war. While my blood is up I do not mind it and can see men torn to pieces by my sides without feeling for them. But when all is quiet, and the reaction takes place, a man must be made of stone if he can view the dead and mangled forms of his comrades without shuddering.”¹³⁷ Here, Taylor fully admitted that the violence and the destruction he saw would destroy soldiers’ minds and that it could disturb even the toughest soldiers. These images and experiences are a known cause of PTSD. Similar instances, albeit with newer and more violent methods, happened in Vietnam and caused soldiers in Vietnam to return home with PTSD. It is understandable that soldiers during the Civil War, even Taylor, struggled with PTSD after returning home.

In the final letter involving battlefield experience, Taylor wrote to his wife “I am sick of blood and slaughter. Sick of scenes of war and misery. Sick of the hardships, exposures and despotisms of a state of war...Truly this is destructive of human life.”¹³⁸ Taylor’s final letter during his battlefield experience proved that he struggled with the sights of war and was often bothered by them, even though he appeared not to be. He was

¹³⁷ Pierce, *Dear Catharine, Dear Taylor*, 314-319.

¹³⁸ Pierce, *Dear Catharine, Dear Taylor*, 345-347.

a valiant soldier who fought with bravery but also fought at a cost. It is possible that Taylor returned home with PTSD. While it is impossible to make a diagnosis based on letters he wrote over 150 years ago, it is evident that the symptoms of PTSD were present during the Civil War.

Chapter 6: M. Ebenezer Wescott – American Civil War 1861 - 1865

The Vietnam War is well known for being fought almost entirely by very young soldiers. The Civil War, while fought with a larger variety of age groups than the Vietnam War, also had many very young soldiers. Ebenezer Wescott was one of those very young soldiers at a mere eighteen years old.¹³⁹ Wescott wrote letters to his mother the entire duration of his war. The letters he wrote were an amazing window into the emotional and mental trauma that the war caused in him. Being so young, he rarely filtered his letters and put a lot of detail into them.

In the first letter, soon after leaving home, Wescott wrote to his mother with the typical start of the war attitude. He wrote that he and his cousins, who came with him to the war, were ready to “whip the whole Southern Army, if only we get the chance.”¹⁴⁰ Three months later, Wescott wrote again with little news on the war. His only mention relating to the war was their new position in Pittsburg Landing, Tennessee. Wescott also recorded that he did not like the captain in charge of his unit.¹⁴¹

¹³⁹ Wescott, M. Ebenezer. *Civil War Letters 1861 to 1865: Written by a Boy in Blue to his Mother*, edited by M. Ebenezer Wescott. 1909. Date Accessed: August 12, 2013. <http://archive.org/stream/civilwarletters100wesc#page/n3/mode/2up>, Introduction.

¹⁴⁰ Wescott, *Civil War Letters 1861 to 1865*, Letter I.

¹⁴¹ Wescott, *Civil War Letters 1861 to 1865*, Letter II.

Wescott wrote again just ten days later on April 13th. A few days earlier his Union force fought against the Confederate forces. The Confederates drove them back to the Mississippi River. After they retreated to the Mississippi River, the Union boats began firing artillery towards the advancing Confederate force, causing the Confederates to retreat. The next day, Union reinforcements took back the land that Wescott's unit had lost. Wescott then said "but Oh! Mother, the loss."¹⁴² Wescott's unit lost twenty-five men, some of them known to Wescott's family. Wescott seemed to be saddened and shocked that twenty-five men died during the battle. He then became mad as he described the captain mentioned in his previous letter. Wescott said that the captain was not seen during the battle and had not been seen since it started. Wescott again shifted tone as he complimented the other officers who he said are as brave as lions. He finished his letter with a harrowing realization. Wescott wrote "If I should happen to get a Rebel bullet some time I will bid you all farewell."¹⁴³ In his previous two letters, Wescott never realized that he was in real danger and could die. But in this letter, Wescott wrote a line that shows he obviously realized he could die on the battlefield. This realization and the pressure of doing everything possible to stay alive created stress and mental trauma for Wescott to handle.

In June, Wescott wrote to his mother that General Halleck refused to let the unit Wescott was in fight the Confederates because Wescott's unit was moving too slowly. Wescott also said that the older soldiers in the camp were battling sickness due to bad drinking water. He tried to comfort his mother by saying unlike she thought would happen, the boys in the unit were not sick and were doing well compared to the older

¹⁴² Wescott, *Civil War Letters 1861 to 1865*, Letter III.

¹⁴³ Wescott, *Civil War Letters 1861 to 1865*, Letter III.

soldiers in the camp. Some of the men, a few friends of the Wescott family, died of their sickness.¹⁴⁴ This incident bothered Wescott due to the fact that he still saw death even at a location where he was supposed to be safe and able to relax somewhat. This negated the possibility of Wescott getting a break from seeing death and sickness, creating a never-ending sight for him.

During October, Wescott's unit was engaged in a difficult back-and-forth battle with Confederates. Wescott's unit was pushed back the first two days until it was inside its defensive fortifications. The Confederates spent the next few days attempting to breach the fort walls, at one point successfully. In the end, the Confederates were pushed out of the fort and retreated. Wescott's unit then chased the Confederates for five days. Wescott's company suffered one dead and three missing while the rest of the Union force suffered sixteen dead, fifty-six wounded and twelve missing. Wescott stopped writing about the battle by saying to his mother that "you can imagine the rest, for about an hour or so, if you think you can."¹⁴⁵ The constant struggle against the Confederates, and near failure at the defensive fortifications, must have been demoralizing for Wescott and his fellow soldiers. Losing men who they were close to could have created quite a lot of stress and mental trauma, along with the near loss of the defensive fortifications.

A few months later, Wescott wrote from Tennessee again. They struggled with Confederates, even camped across the river from them. He mentioned the few skirmishes they fought against the Confederates as if they were nothing. He essentially mentioned them only in passing.¹⁴⁶ These skirmishes, even if they did not cost any lives, still created

¹⁴⁴ Wescott, *Civil War Letters 1861 to 1865*, Letter V.

¹⁴⁵ Wescott, *Civil War Letters 1861 to 1865*, Letter VI.

¹⁴⁶ Wescott, *Civil War Letters 1861 to 1865*, Letter VII.

emotional and mental trauma for a soldier to handle. This letter was the first sign of proof that Wescott attempted to suppress the trauma and keep it from his mother.

In February, Wescott became saddened and angry with two soldiers who went into the Civil War with him – his friend Sam and his uncle. They deserted the unit they served in with Wescott. Their desertion greatly saddened and angered Wescott. Wescott wrote, “If I knew I would be killed in the next battle we are in, I would not do that.”¹⁴⁷ During war, a soldier loses his comrades violently in battle. However, one of the most difficult ways to lose a comrade is by desertion, which a soldier often sees as betrayal. Wescott, while he did not write it must have felt betrayed that his close friend and his uncle both left the Union force. Wescott became sad that he was now alone without his friend and his uncle while also being angry with them for deserting him.

In late May, Wescott wrote his mother following the seizing of Jackson, Mississippi. He neglected to go into detail about the battle at Jackson, stating only that they went to Vicksburg, Mississippi. He briefly described that they were pushed away from Vicksburg a few times and were laying siege to the city when he penned his letter. He refused to feel remorse during any aspect of his letter, including when he wrote that they were laying siege to the city of Vicksburg. Almost immediately following that brief description, Wescott became defensive about his role in the battles. He pushed his mother to ask his captain, who returned home with an injury, if he fought to test his courage. Wescott wrote, “There is not a minute in the day or night but what we are in danger more or less. Where our regiment lies we are somewhat protected as we are in a ravine, but we

¹⁴⁷ Wescott, *Civil War Letters 1861 to 1865*, Letter VIII.

do not seem to think of the danger until it is passed.”¹⁴⁸ Wescott obviously addressed the issue of constant danger, which forced the soldiers to be on high alert at all times. The level of high alertness, when maintained constantly for survival, was difficult for soldiers to simply cut off when they return from their wartime service. He also mentioned the fact that they often did not realize they were in danger until after it passed. In many cases, they rarely got a chance to relax after experiencing danger because they remained in danger almost constantly.

The siege of Vicksburg lasted over a month. During that time, Wescott wrote another letter to his mother. Wescott recorded some of the normal occurrences that happened at the siege of Vicksburg. Wescott wrote that they remained in their bunkers almost the entire time, and if any soldier on either side raised their head, they would “get a salute,” meaning they would get shot at. According to Wescott, at night soldiers from both sides would get out of their bunkers and meet in the middle to talk and be friendly. As soon as both sides returned to their respective bunkers, both sides would fire at the other side. Wescott also described that two of his friends had close encounters: one bullet skinned his friend’s head while another skinned another friend’s chest. Wescott wrote in his letter that he was afraid of a bullet coming that close to him.¹⁴⁹ Fear is a major creator, as well as symptom, of PTSD. Wescott feared being shot at and therefore displayed a symptom and factor in PTSD. Interestingly enough, Wescott held the opposite view when he was able to do the shooting. Wescott felt no remorse shooting or killing Confederate soldiers he was just friendly with outside of the bunkers. The lack of remorse was a clear sign that some mental barriers were broken down in Wescott.

¹⁴⁸ Wescott, *Civil War Letters 1861 to 1865*, Letter XI.

¹⁴⁹ Wescott, *Civil War Letters 1861 to 1865*, Letter XII.

Wescott wrote a few more letters with more examples of PTSD symptoms. In one letter, Wescott recorded the statistics of a skirmish with Confederates.¹⁵⁰ When he recorded the men lost and wounded in battle he mentioned them as if he were talking about the death of farm animals with no remorse or sadness at all. Wescott wrote in a different letter that they often walked through the streets of the newly conquered Vicksburg. While they walked through, they had to be on high alert because the city used to house a large Confederate force.¹⁵¹ An interesting pressure on Wescott was demonstrated in another letter. Wescott was prepared to walk away from the war when his enlistment was up. However, peer pressure from other Union soldiers to re-enlist pushed Wescott to re-enlist. A benefit of re-enlisting, however, was that Wescott was allowed to take a furlough, or a break from the battlefields, and go home for a few months.¹⁵² This break from war allowed Wescott to relax, lower his level of alertness and relieve some of his emotional and mental trauma.

After returning to the battlefields, Wescott briefly wrote about an incident where his force was used as a distraction to take attention, and firepower, of the Confederates away from the main Union force. Wescott's unit failed to do any damage to the Confederates and failed at distracting the Confederates until Wescott's unit repositioned and tried again a few days later, leading to a victory. Wescott did not mention anything more about the battle or casualties at all.¹⁵³ He chose to repress the information or hide the information from his mother. He also seemed to write out of duty instead of writing out of the desire to communicate with his mother.

¹⁵⁰ Wescott, *Civil War Letters 1861 to 1865*, Letter XVI.

¹⁵¹ Wescott, *Civil War Letters 1861 to 1865*, Letter XVII.

¹⁵² Wescott, *Civil War Letters 1861 to 1865*, Letter XVIII.

¹⁵³ Wescott, *Civil War Letters 1861 to 1865*, Letter XXIII.

Wescott quickly changed after a series of battles surrounding Atlanta, Georgia. The first day, Confederates attacked a different company in the Union force, but Wescott and his comrades could hear the battle. The next day, the Union army attacked the Confederates for roughly fifteen minutes until they chased the retreating rebels. Wescott wrote, "We lost more men in those 15 minutes than we did at Shiloh."¹⁵⁴ Wescott then listed the soldiers who were killed, wounded or missing who his family knew and said there were many more the family did not know who suffered the same fate. Wescott then reported on a counter-attack from the Confederates to the Union's fortified and artillery-protected bunker. Wescott wrote, "I do not see how men could charge such a battery as we had there behind strong works and plenty of support. They [the Union artillery] treble shot those guns and just simply mowed them down....Mother, I will see those poor fellows lying dead and wounded as long as I live; it makes the tears come to my eyes while I am writing."¹⁵⁵ Wescott also stated that he was okay, but only God knew how long that would be the case. Wescott was obviously very shaken up by the destruction and violence he saw during the series of battles. The sight of the dead and mangled bodies of soldiers struck deep in Wescott and definitely pushed him towards problems with PTSD.

Wescott's next letter again told a story of seeing soldiers' lives violently ended. He was assigned to be part of a skirmish line that pushed the Confederate skirmish line back to their bunkers to entice the whole Confederate army to attack the fortified Union position. After the Confederates attacked the Union position, the Union chased them in retreat, forcing the Confederates to leave their dead on the battlefield. Wescott and others

¹⁵⁴ Wescott, *Civil War Letters 1861 to 1865*, Letter XXIV.

¹⁵⁵ Wescott, *Civil War Letters 1861 to 1865*, Letter XXIV.

in the Union returned to bury the dead. He wrote “I was over on the battlefield the next day, when our men were burying the rebel dead. Their loss in killed must have been heavy as the ground was literally covered with them. It makes me shudder to see so many brave men lying dead after the battle is over.”¹⁵⁶ Wescott was again bothered by the sight of the dead and mangled bodies lying in the field. He, unlike in many previous letters, showed remorse for the soldiers who died, even the enemy soldiers. Unlike other letters, he told his mother everything, including his role in luring the Confederates towards the Union lines.

A few weeks later, Wescott wrote that since he rejoined after his furlough, a day had not passed that they had not received enemy fire.¹⁵⁷ It is unlikely that this was the case, but it seemed constant to Wescott, so the mental damage of constantly being under fire could still happen. In a later letter, Wescott wrote that they were preparing to set siege to Savannah, Georgia. As they set up camp, Wescott said they were constantly in skirmishes and received cannon fire.¹⁵⁸ Wescott had to be on high alert in order to help set up a siege while receiving fire.

Near the end of his service, Wescott wrote about the physical exhaustion he faced. Just in the months since he returned from his furlough, he travelled over 2000 miles and never spent more than 2 weeks at a single camp.¹⁵⁹ He wrote in another letter that they often walked through nasty terrain. At the time he was writing this letter, they were forced to march through water that went up to waist high at times.¹⁶⁰ These physically

¹⁵⁶ Wescott, *Civil War Letters 1861 to 1865*, Letter XXV.

¹⁵⁷ Wescott, *Civil War Letters 1861 to 1865*, Letter XXVI.

¹⁵⁸ Wescott, *Civil War Letters 1861 to 1865* XXIX.

¹⁵⁹ Wescott, *Civil War Letters 1861 to 1865*, Letter XXX.

¹⁶⁰ Wescott, *Civil War Letters 1861 to 1865*, Letter XXXI.

demanding conditions can add to the mental and emotional trauma to make the effects of PTSD symptoms worse.

Ebenezer Wescott fought almost the entire duration of the Civil War. Over the entirety of his service, he periodically wrote letters to his mother about his situation. At times he was reserved or seemed to have his mind focused elsewhere. At other times the young soldier was extremely blunt and honest about his feelings, no matter what they were. He saw many sights that an older man would never forget, but, at such a young age, he easily could have been scarred for life due to them.

Chapter 7: William Bradbury – American Civil War 1862-1865

The last Civil War letter collection used in this thesis was written by William Bradbury to his wife and his children. Bradbury began writing letters in late 1862 and continued writing through the end of the Civil War. According to many of his letters, Bradbury's commanding officer chose Bradbury to write a history and account of his unit throughout the war. Bradbury believed it best to keep the history in the letters he sent home in order to avoid them being captured and used by enemy troops.¹⁶¹ This strategy created a collection that was almost too detailed and at times lacked all emotion. Yet Bradbury struggled with keeping an objective outlook on his letters due to the violent and gruesome sights he witnessed. Towards the end of his duty, Bradbury was able to skirt away from some of the fighting by remaining close to the generals. However, by that point, much of the damage that could have led to PTSD was done.

¹⁶¹ Bradbury, William. *While Father is away: The Civil War Letters of William H. Bradbury*, edited by Jennifer Bohrnstedt. Lexington, Kentucky: University Press of Kentucky. Introduction.

William Bradbury first wrote a letter to his family in late September of 1862. He recently had joined the Union force and received his arms fairly quickly. While he had not seen battle yet, he was getting very little sleep and was constantly being awakened in preparation for a battle with the Confederates.¹⁶² Bradbury wrote this letter in a scared tone. He complained about the situation but wrote about preparing for battle like he dreaded it more than anything. He already feared battle. Fear, even before being in a battle, can be crippling and can lead to PTSD. When Bradbury encountered battle, he became even more fearful.

The first mention of any battles with the Confederates happened less than a month after his first letter. A rebel force was burning bridges and picking off men from the Union force. Bradbury saw the Union troops retaliate against the Confederates. Bradbury described the Union troops' actions like they were criminals committing offenses and insults for no reason and that the troops were too excited.¹⁶³ Bradbury believed the Union troops were unfair towards the Confederate soldiers and that what he saw happen should not have happened. Bradbury did not expound on the offenses that he saw, but they undoubtedly left him upset at his fellow soldiers.

In December of 1862, Bradbury received word of a Union force surrendering near Nashville, Tennessee. Bradbury called the surrender “disgraceful” and believed the whole unit should have been punished.¹⁶⁴ Bradbury at this point had not been in a major battle, and he lacked the understanding of the sacrifice that occurred in big battles. He also failed to understand the circumstances surrounding the surrender. This letter was the first

¹⁶² Bradbury, *While Father is Away*, 20-21.

¹⁶³ Bradbury, *While Father is Away*, 22-23.

¹⁶⁴ Bradbury, *While Father is Away*, 42-45.

letter that did not have a remorseful tone. In every previous letter, he seemed to regret every aspect of the war. In this letter, he seemed bent on winning and that surrender was never an option.

Through the next month, Bradbury's unit began to struggle with Confederate troops burning bridges his Union force needed. His Union unit was trying to get to Nashville, but Confederate forces continued to make things difficult for him.¹⁶⁵ Bradbury wrote on January 1st, "Rebels have been destroying the railroad bridges and giving us fits all over."¹⁶⁶ Continuously being thwarted by the enemy was a very frustrating experience for any soldier, especially Bradbury. Yet, even though they knew a Confederate force was nearby, Bradbury's force could not find the enemy and stop them. This frustrating experience could have led to increased anger and aggression that had no way of being let out. During parts of the January 1st letter, Bradbury was quite vulgar and uninhibited when describing injuries and deaths of some soldiers and generals. He mentioned that one general had his "head shot off" almost as if it amused or amazed him.¹⁶⁷ He wrote as if he were mesmerized by, not disgusted at the violence. This fascination, and lack of shielding his family from the vulgarity, shows that some of the normal emotional and mental barriers have broken down.

In his letter from January 1st, Bradbury had a mood swing that was very odd. After venting some frustration about the Confederate force burning needed bridges, Bradbury said the Union cause was not going well. He did not go into any detail about why it was not going well, but he did have a depressed tone in his writing. Just a

¹⁶⁵ Bradbury, *While Father is Away*, 48.

¹⁶⁶ Bradbury, *While Father is Away*, 51-53.

¹⁶⁷ Bradbury, *While Father is Away*, 51-53.

paragraph later, he wrote that the Union cause was going quite well and the Southern theatre units were achieving significant victories.¹⁶⁸ A week later, he again said the war effort was going very well.¹⁶⁹ Throughout both of these letters, he seemed quite confused about his situation. Confusion is a sometimes a symptom of PTSD, meaning this could be another sign that he was beginning to struggle with PTSD.

Bradbury's next letter was an interesting part of the collection. For the first time in the collection, Bradbury truly questioned the desire for war. Bradbury wrote, "I do not see much glory, in civil war where men kill their friends and neighbors and relations."¹⁷⁰ Earlier in the collection, Bradbury wrote that all the soldiers appeared excited and at other times even committed offenses because they were too excited. In this letter, he finally said he did not see any point for the war. All he saw throughout the war was the bloodshed. Bradbury's questioning of the desire for war was similar to Vietnam soldiers who questioned the cause of their war. Questioning, while helpful, can lead to a wide variety of symptoms of PTSD. Bradbury's questioning used a depressed tone; his letter was short, and he questioned the desire for war. After admitting that he did not understand it, Bradbury probably was upset, depressed, or negative for quite a while. These are all symptoms of PTSD when a soldier begins to think the war is entirely pointless.

Similar to the other Civil War soldiers, Bradbury became aware that base camp was almost as dangerous as the battlefield. In April, one of Bradbury's officers was

¹⁶⁸ Bradbury, *While Father is Away*, 51-53.

¹⁶⁹ Bradbury, *While Father is Away*, 53-56.

¹⁷⁰ Bradbury, *While Father is Away*, 59-61.

thrown from his horse, cut open an artery, and bled out.¹⁷¹ Bradbury seemed sad and depressed while also confused at a freak accident. Bradbury had not mentioned sickness in the camp yet, but it was undoubtedly there. He did, in other letters, mention other aspects that made base camp a difficult environment. He mentioned they were commanded to stand alert in the cold while it snowed, yet no enemy came.¹⁷² Bradbury also recorded that his unit was forced to wake up at 3 am each morning to stand ready. He believed his unit was becoming sleep deprived.¹⁷³ These issues at camp show that the soldiers struggled to find any comfort at their base camp. The lack of comfort and relaxation at base camp kept soldiers from being able to unwind and process what they see on the battlefield. The inability to relax, unwind and process battles is a major component that can lead to PTSD.

Over the next few letters, Bradbury's unit had much more interaction with Confederate forces, albeit small forces. In one letter, Bradbury recorded that a scouting party killed almost forty rebels and captured almost as many.¹⁷⁴ Bradbury's unit then moved camp because Confederate forces were close to finding their location.¹⁷⁵ A false alarm put the entire camp on alert for a twenty-five man Confederate force that was easily captured. However, Bradbury's unit discovered a possible Confederate force with seven thousand men nearby.¹⁷⁶ In August, Bradbury's unit successfully captured the general in charge along with most of his men.¹⁷⁷ While there may not have been many

¹⁷¹ Bradbury, *While Father is Away*, 82-84.

¹⁷² Bradbury, *While Father is Away*, 64-66.

¹⁷³ Bradbury, *While Father is Away*, 85-86.

¹⁷⁴ Bradbury, *While Father is Away*, 93-95.

¹⁷⁵ Bradbury, *While Father is Away*, 95-96.

¹⁷⁶ Bradbury, *While Father is Away*, 100-102.

¹⁷⁷ Bradbury, *While Father is Away*, 104-106.

high profile or high-casualty battles, the constant interaction and alertness required with a large enemy force nearby was undoubtedly draining physically, emotionally, and mentally.

In September, Bradbury wrote from the captured city of Knoxville, Tennessee. Yet Bradbury never wrote anything regarding the battle they fought to take it. His only mention of conflict in the letter was a brief mention of raiding local produce and crops to keep the army fed and supplied.¹⁷⁸ This letter seemed cut short like Bradbury truly did not want to talk about the events that allowed them to capture Knoxville. It was possible that events in Knoxville were so hard for Bradbury to see that he did not want to bring those memories up again.

Over the next few letters, Bradbury struggled with feeling secure at their new base camp. In one letter, Bradbury said they heard Confederate cannons nearby. He became so panicked about an attack that he packed all of his gear up and prepared to leave. However, he said the cannons were only to scare them and it had happened a few other nights as well.¹⁷⁹ Bradbury's commanding officer ordered improvements to be made on the fortifications and defenses of the base camp. However, Bradbury was obviously still nervous that the rebels could still overrun their camp at anytime.¹⁸⁰ In the next letter, Bradbury said the rebels were getting close to camp and could attack from any and all sides.¹⁸¹ Bradbury obviously could not let his guard down at this particular base camp because he was so nervous and worried that his unit would get overrun. He remained

¹⁷⁸ Bradbury, *While Father is Away*, 115-117.

¹⁷⁹ Bradbury, *While Father is Away*, 117-119.

¹⁸⁰ Bradbury, *While Father is Away*, 126-127.

¹⁸¹ Bradbury, *While Father is Away*, 129-130.

tense, worried and preoccupied in every letter. Again, the inability to find comfort in the base camp is a major component that can lead to PTSD.

The next letter Bradbury wrote to his mother was full of action. It was the first letter in the collection in which he went into detail about a battle. In the battle recorded in this letter, Bradbury might have hit his breaking point. Bradbury wrote that they were attacked by rebels and successfully held them off. Bradbury wrote, “we made no impression on the enemy at the point....Yesterday a bullet passed between me and General Butterfield. The day before a large piece of shell came down near where I was.”¹⁸² Bradbury also recorded that he heard firing almost every second during the battle. He continued to write that he expected the battle to carry on.¹⁸³ A battle where a soldier truly comes close to getting injured or dying makes the battle even harder to come to terms with. Bradbury undoubtedly was extremely shaken after this battle. This battle, without a doubt, had enough traumatic experiences in it to cause Bradbury to have PTSD.

The next few letters, until the end of the Civil War, are less eventful but still interesting to see the change they present in Bradbury. In the first letter of the sequence Bradbury wrote that he believed the hard fighting was over because the war was almost won.¹⁸⁴ Yet in the very next letter, Bradbury wrote that there was no end in sight for the war. He regretfully wrote that Generals Grant and Sherman had many tough battles ahead of them.¹⁸⁵ In another letter, Bradbury again wrote about rumors of coming peace and an imminent capture of the Confederate capital of Richmond, Virginia.¹⁸⁶ In January he

¹⁸² Bradbury, *While Father is Away*, 161-163.

¹⁸³ Bradbury, *While Father is Away*, 161-163.

¹⁸⁴ Bradbury, *While Father is Away*, 167-168.

¹⁸⁵ Bradbury, *While Father is Away*, 171-173.

¹⁸⁶ Bradbury, *While Father is Away*, 192-193.

again wrote about the prospect of peace but seemed much less hopeful that such rumors were true.¹⁸⁷ In February Bradbury sadly wrote that the peace rumors were nothing, and the war must be brought to an end by fighting through the year.¹⁸⁸ His next letter in the sequence mourned the death of President Lincoln.¹⁸⁹ Bradbury continued to write as he was ordered to remain at his post to continue recording events of the Union occupation of the Southern states even after the war was over.¹⁹⁰ This series of letters, where peace seemed close only to be proven a mere rumor, must have really damaged Bradbury's outlook on the war. He began talking about the prospect of peace with genuine hope and gladness but in the end was depressed and sad because he appeared to only believe it as a rumor that would soon be proven false.

Bradbury, unlike many of the Civil War soldiers, did not record many gruesome battles. Yet even Bradbury suffered enough traumatic experiences throughout the war that could have easily caused PTSD. PTSD is not only for soldiers who experience constant, gruesome battle but also for the soldier who sees comrades die of the most random occurrences, struggles to rest in base camp, and constantly has his hopes dashed when they seemed so close. Soldiers in any situation can develop PTSD and therefore it is entirely possible, and highly likely, that soldiers during the Civil War developed and struggled with PTSD for the rest of their lives.

Chapter 8: Conclusion

¹⁸⁷ Bradbury, *While Father is Away*, 215-216.

¹⁸⁸ Bradbury, *While Father is Away*, 227-228.

¹⁸⁹ Bradbury, *While Father is Away*, 262-263.

¹⁹⁰ Bradbury, *While Father is Away*, 268-269.

Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, or PTSD, became an official diagnosis after the Vietnam War in 1980.¹⁹¹ Soldiers returning from the Vietnam War were supposedly the first victims of the new mental disorder. In reality, versions of PTSD have existed in previous wars such as World War I and World War II. Yet historians have neglected the fifty years prior to World War I to see if PTSD existed in the American Civil War.

Symptoms of PTSD are wide ranging and never follow the same pattern. One veteran might only suffer from flashbacks while another might become overly emotional. Some veterans become extremely aggressive while others struggle to remain calm as they jump at the slightest sound. Many veterans become overly aggressive while others become distant from anyone and everyone, including family. The wide range of symptoms makes PTSD quite hard to diagnose. In most cases veterans diagnosed with PTSD often suffer with multiple, if not all, of these symptoms. In some cases, veterans suffered with these symptoms but never had PTSD.

Interestingly, many of these symptoms could be seen in soldiers when they were still on the battlefield. Stories of soldiers who “went crazy” and attacked the enemy alone or soldiers who seemed to be losing their mind are fairly common in records of regiments in various wars. However, not all soldiers who suffered with PTSD showed their symptoms in such an outward way. Many tried to bottle up their own issues entirely while others wrote home.

In these letters home soldiers were able to be as candid as they desired. A soldier could tell anything to his family that he wanted, as long as he was willing to break a few protocols. The majority of the time letters in these collections contained more small talk

¹⁹¹ Dean, *Shook Over Hell*, 27.

to family members than anything else. A common theme during the Vietnam War was how things were looking with the family's favorite sports team. In many letters, however, sections, always varying in size, were dedicated to the soldier speaking his mind about a recent event. Due to the nature of war, these events were almost always violent enough to cause PTSD. The quick succession and fairly consistent violence the events caused only expounded on the possibility that the soldiers would develop and suffer from PTSD.

Veterans of the Vietnam War were the first veterans to be diagnosed with PTSD. While many veterans were diagnosed and received help, it is unknown how many soldiers suffered and died on the battlefield with mental problems and how many more veterans returned home with PTSD but never received a diagnosis. Obviously, Civil War soldiers and veterans could never be diagnosed with PTSD since PTSD is a 21st century diagnosis. Yet, using the letters the Civil War soldiers wrote to their family, it can be seen that Civil War soldiers suffered from many of the same symptoms as soldiers in the Vietnam War. While the wars were very different, the effect they had on soldiers and veterans who fought in them was unbelievably similar.

Jim Dennison, John Young, and Vincent Simonelli each had different experiences during their tours of duty in Vietnam. Yet all three soldiers suffered from symptoms that could cause PTSD. They might have been diagnosed with PTSD after returning home, but an official diagnosis is not needed for the point of this thesis to be made. Taylor Pierce, Ebenezer Wescott, and William Bradbury also had different experiences in the American Civil War. Their tours of duty lasted longer than the three men in Vietnam, but their collections were shorter and battles less frequent due to the distance they covered. Yet with their collections of letters, it is obvious that they also suffered from symptoms

that could cause PTSD. They were unable to receive any official diagnosis due to the time in which they lived. It would be unreasonable to claim that they, without a doubt, had PTSD. However, it is completely plausible, and likely, that they indeed had the same disorder as veterans from the Vietnam War, and every war that followed.

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