

## DEVASTATING EFFECTS

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[Assignment: Write an essay in which you examine the causes and/or effects of a complex problem. While this does not have to be a first-person narrative, it should be drawn from your own experience. Otherwise, the essay will never rise above generalities.]

( 1 ) Once again, I was awakened from my afternoon nap by the sounds of plates breaking amidst yells of frustration coming from the garage next door. As usual, I quickly threw on a pair of shoes and crossed the grass that separated my house from his, slipped through the side door of his garage, and watched him throw plates against the wall. Steve, my next-door neighbor, had been told by his therapist that breaking plates was a good way to release pent-up anger and frustration. Every few days, when he felt the need, Steve did that.

( 2 ) I felt like I'd known Steve forever. When I was very young I knew him only as "the soldier next door with all the problems." When I was older I learned that he was a veteran of the Vietnam War and was a victim of PTSD (Post Traumatic Stress Disorder). When I was ten years old he hired me as a "housekeeper." Every day after school it was my job to get the mail, water the plants, dust, run to the store for food, and basically to keep Steve company. When I asked about the war mementos scattered about the house, he refused to talk about them.

( 3 ) Currently, as Steve was demonstrating by throwing his plates, he needed to talk. When he ran out of plates and calmed down, he slowly turned towards me and I could see that he had another story to tell. I had sort of become numb to these stories which were virtually unbelievable and incredibly gruesome. Recounting the stories helped Steve to sort through and accept his guilt--one of the most immediate effects of the war.

( 4 ) Almost all of Steve's stories were bad memories--accounting for the feelings of guilt that have haunted him every day since his return home. Today's memory was just another example. Steve described the day when he and the rest of his squad were sent to secure the entrance of a tunnel while four other men went inside. Soon he heard grenades exploding inside and then the men came out dragging a bleeding Vietnamese nurse. Each of the four men raped the woman while Steve and the rest of the squad watched. Then the last man killed the woman with a knife. Steve was shocked at the act and equally surprised when the soldiers failed to report taking someone alive, but he buried the incident in the back of his mind along with all the other guilt-ridden memories.

( 5 ) After living through several such experiences, Steve experienced another direct result of the war--detachment. Dehumanization came quickly after daily combat. He recalls that he had no feelings or reactions when killing in self-defense. After a while, he also went numb when killing in surprise ambushes, or even when raiding "freefire" villages containing unarmed civilians. To him, Vietnamese bodies never seemed

real--they were like mannequins. The "macho" thing to do was to hold a "kill count." This took place after every shooting--it was important to find the bodies and keep your "count" up. Today, Steve still feels detached and uncaring in certain situations. Consequently, he has hurt the feelings of others, as friends and relatives will be quick to testify.

( 6 ) Sometimes, although not since recent therapy, Steve has had weird episodes that he doesn't remember afterwards. His ex-wife once came home and found him stalking in the woods behind their house with a gun. When she approached him, he took her to be his best buddy who was killed in combat. He pointed up ahead to the "hut" he thought he saw, informed her that he thought it was booby-trapped, and advised her to proceed with caution. Another time when visiting friends, he grabbed a hunting rifle and ran out to an open field, shooting and yelling at the Vietcong he thought he saw.

( 7 ) Guilt, detachment and "mentally unstable" episodes are only three of the things that Steve suffers from today as a direct result of the Vietnam war. His mourning for buddies lost in combat never ends. Sometimes the depression is unbearable and Steve turns to the drugs that have been prescribed as pain-killers for relief. His horrifying memories keep him up at night and he suffers from insomnia. The pressure and the stress of living with a sometimes "crazy" man were too much for Steve's wife, and she left him. Even the money that must be spent on therapy is an unwanted burden.

( 8 ) The effects of what Steve endured during his "tour" in Vietnam have, in one way or another, encompassed every aspect of his life. Little by little, he has been trying to deal with them, although it isn't easy. He can no longer totally control his life and is subject to guilt, crazy flashbacks, feelings of detachment, and a host of other traumas at any given time. Sometimes, the only way to deal with these effects is by using such techniques as breaking plates. Sometimes, when he feels the need, Steve does just that.