Veterans Don't Want PROBLEM CHILD TREATMENT

BY DON WHARTON

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THIS is urgent advice to the wives, sweethearts, parents, relatives and friends of the veterans who are coming back from war. The advice is: stop trying to practice amateur psychiatry on them, don't be misguided by the widely published attempts to tell you "how to handle" these "changed men." Instead, welcome the boys home naturally, as what they are—that is, mentally the same boys who went away.

This bit of advice is not the writer's idea, not an editor's idea, not the idea of the War or Navy Department. It is the idea of a bunch of combat veterans back from action overseas.

Vets Disgusted

They brought up the subject, and asked that something be written to prevent other homecoming soldiers from having to undergo the patrolling, over-sympathetic, kid glove treatment they had encountered on their own return. They were disgusted with the impression created among their home folks that most returned soldiers were strange neurotics who didn't want to talk about what they'd been through, who had to be handled with care.

They wanted everyone to know that returned soldiers asked only to be treated like normal human beings without any of the pampering advocated in most "When He Comes-Home" articles.

It began in a hotel room in Richmond, Va., where 10 returned soldiers were sitting around "shooting the breeze," mostly about how it seemed to be home. One of them mentioned the campaign in the American press telling people how to act when Joe comes home. That set them going.

"My wife had been reading a lot of that tripe," said one infantryman. "She wanted to know if Joe was going to be any different when he got home. I got mad and near spoiled my leave. Here I was, full of the war, wanting to tell her what I'd seen, and how I got nicked—all the things I couldn't put into letters. She'd just listen, never say a word, never ask a question. It seems she'd swallowed some article telling wives they mustn't talk about the war; mustn't show any interest, my God, in the thing which has completely absorbed their husbands—"I've for two years and more!"

"It's stupid," another boy said. "Crack down on it! We heard about it over there from replacements, heard they were treating us gus. Same bull they spread in magazine fiction, too. Do they think we can't read, too?"

One boy with a cast on his leg said his mother went through the most extraordinary performance, never even asking how he was hurt, never mentioning the cast, pretending not to see it—but all the time, he said, "treated me as if I were her pregnant daughter."

"You know, I said," said an ordnance sergeant. "Ma kept watching me all the time, trying 'not to do anything that would make me nervous.' Of course that just made me nervous as hell."

"Forget That Nonsense!"

A gunner chimed in: "I was visiting my brother, and everything was going fine until his wife piped up, 'Don't ask him any questions.' Why don't you write a piece telling people to forget all that nonsense and be natural?"

All this is in sharp contrast to the recent spate of articles and advertisements purporting to help "relatives" help veterans in their "painful readjustment to civilian life. A program book of the Office of War Information admitted, "Avoid questions of combat experience; similar warnings have appeared not only in books and magazines but even in advertisements. Writers of such nonsense should have been at St. Albans Naval Hospital and heard four sailors laughing at this one: "To ask him about the new buddy he has visited and the follies of the people is quite in order."

SPEAKING OF POSTWAR READJUSTMENT

No man likes to be prodded into talking about his combat experiences unless he is in the mood for it. Some men never want to. But, given a little time and sympathetic listeners, the normal service man wants to talk. Why not? They are the most exciting, the most terrible, the most important, the most interesting things that have ever happened to him in his life, or probably ever will. What else would he talk about? He has been writing home. He imagines you have read his letters over and over, as carefully as he read yours—that you tried to read between the lines, figure out things he tried to get across to you without violating the rules of secrecy. "Now what happened that made you break off quick and such a letter so suddenly?" "Whatever became of Sergeant Volf?" you mentioned once? Such questions show your genuine interest and understanding.

A local officer put it this way: "I was at a dinner party the other evening, and the hostess turned to me and said, 'You were an aircraft carrier, weren't you? Tell us some of your experiences.' Like everybody else in the service I resisted being put on the stage as a trained seal. But my little girl asked me, 'Daddy, what's it like when a bomb goes off on a ship?' Now, that started me talking! You see, she's only eight, and she never read any propaganda on how to treat papa."

Patronizing Tone

One piece of guidance which spread into millions of homes says: 'If he chooses to talk about these things, it will help him if you listen well.' This patronizing tone would insult his intelligence, not only the smart one still on the job, but an airman in a bomber who lost just one wing during a return trip in the South Pacific and his head when he found that the source was a mental hygiene organization.

"So we're all mental cases, huh?" he said.

Use Common Sense

My own friends have come back from overseas after plenty of rough experiences. They're the same men who went away. More mature, of course. But the convivial ones are still convivial, the reticent ones still shy. Common sense tells you that would be true—and common sense plus your natural tact would cause you instinctively to encourage one man to talk and let the other sit quietly and take it easy.

Yet some psychiatrists write didactic generalities. Say one magazine article: "Not only will your Joe some time change; he is changed already." Certainly combat has hit its effect on him, but it is not the same man. What he needs most is intelligent handling and time, and he needs it in civilian life. Throughout human history, every many men have gone through horrors, hardships and suffering without emerging as psychopathic changelings. They are matured by the experience, and when their personality is changed, it is often for the better. Hardship sometimes tempers a man.

The words of a Marine officer, back from South Pacific duty, New Guinea, Bismark Archipelago:

The whole thing is wrong, trying to set rules on how to treat men back from war. There are no set rules. The case is different. People draw up rules by saying 'they're going to act when Johnnie comes through the front door. The next man is a target."

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MOBILIZES

BRAYLEY TO VET OFFICE

Gen. Omar N. Bradley, known on the fighting front as G.I.'s general, has been appointed to head the Veterans Administration, succeeding Brig. Gen. Frank T. Hines. Three years ago the late Ernie Pyle, writing from North Africa, said of the new Veterans Administrator:

"I don't believe I have ever known a man so loved and respected by the men around and under him.

General Bradley endeared himself to his men while he was leading the Second Corps to victory in Tunisia, commanding the troops that invaded Sicily and leading them to the straits of Messina, and finally while commanding the million-stong 15th Army Group in Europe as it slashed from the beaches of Normandy into the heart of Germany.

Vets Obje

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"No, I think they're all upset."

"None of them have been trained to dealing with civilians, nor for that matter, for his strange new habits. Some of this advice is wise, some of it seems downright pretty. It would be just as sad to remind wives that, except in the front lines, he's used to very tidy housekeeping, and he's used to having his chair on the dot—and plenty of it. And he is not as likely to know how to get the mess sergeant regale with stories about the troubles he has on the job, or how tired he was standing over the stove. Maybe he has as many allowances to make as she."

The Good Old Formula

More serious is the letdown from tension and excitement. Civilian life, after the novelty has worn off, may seem pretty dull to the veteran. But there's no recipe for dealing with that, other than the good old formula of common sense. He has to be treated as any ordinary human by any treating him as a "case." However, as one of the boys said: "If I could adjust myself to the sudden hill of jungle fighting, why can't I easily adjust back to the simple and familiar ways of civilized life?"

Maj. Gen. Norman T. Kirk, Surgeon General of the Army, says: "The average soldier returning to civilian life is basically the same man he was when he went away. True, the rigid training, the disciplined life, the experiences far from home may have surprised him. But to feel that such returned soldier is a "problem child" is to underestimate the ability, the good sense, the common tongue. The large majority of these
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Vets Object to Problem Child Treatment by Civilians

maybe it’s we civilians who have been getting nervous about this; losing our perspec- tive. Certainly we ought to re- member that after the last war the great majority of veterans were simply their own normal selves when they came back, and often went on in matters of fast civilian life to achieve great success and distinction—which would hardly have been possible were it not for the very same trite, with strangely shattered personal- ities.

Maj. Gen. David N. W. Grant, head of the Army’s Medical Services, deals with men who are, by and large, the most highly strung bunch of youngsters ever assembled. If any veterans have to be regarded as “special” it would be they. But General Grant says flatly, “Most of the stuff that’s being printed is nonsense.” He adds:

Tell’s Our Challenge

“This is the challenge we face each time a war veteran returns home—to see that he has full opportunity to spring back to his original personality curve. Given a little time and a little help most of them will. Removal of abnormal stress and tension is cure enough in most cases. But the change from an environment of tension to one of relaxation is a radical one, and, in instances in which the fatigue of the personality has been great, special help must be given in mak- ing the adjustment.”

And for a calm bit of wisdom, hear Maj. Gen. William B. Arnold, Chief of Chaplains, U. S. Army: “Let’s not underestimate the courage and common sense of returned service men. Be natural, friendly, and normally glad to see them. Welcome them home. Encourage them to talk about their experi- ences. Genuinely respect and affection will do more than all studies efforts to heal the hurts of the human spirit.”

WELCOME HOME!

By Gregory D’Alessio

“Hmmm—I can make out four of my ties, two sport shirts, and a pair of pajamas...”