

THE NATIONAL SURVEY OF INDIAN VIETNAM VETERANS

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Abstract: Largely through the efforts of Harold Barse and Frank Montour, Readjustment Counseling Service, a division of the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, formed a working group to deal with the simple lack of information on Indian Vietnam veterans. Barse is founder of the Vietnam Era Veterans Inter-Tribal Association and a counselor for the Oklahoma City, Oklahoma, Vet Center. Montour is a Vet Center counselor in Lincoln Park, Michigan.

The working group initiated a study of 35 Indian veterans using a short questionnaire designed to gather information on posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Because response was excellent, it was decided to expand both the questionnaire and the study. The final result was an extensive collection of information on 170 American Indians representing 77 tribes or combinations of tribes from every section of the United States. Respondents were drawn from lists provided by Vet Centers nationwide and by the Vietnam Era Veterans Inter-Tribal Association. The majority of respondents came from the Vietnam Era Veterans Inter-Tribal Association. The study is demographic in nature and not inferential. While more a survey of convenience than a random sampling, the N in the survey did include well over 100 participants. In addition, the demographic information in the study matches closely with U.S. Census data on American Indians in general. In a comparative sense, then, the working group survey has a great deal of validity. Most veterans surveyed were born between 1946 and 1954 (Figure 1).

Their formative years thus were spent in an extremely disruptive period for all American Indians. It was the era of the federal government's termination policy and the relocation programs. These policies, in effect designed to assimilate American Indians into mainstream American society, attempted to dissolve tribal political institutions and disperse the Indian population into urban areas. These policies, along with the disruptive effect of World War II, created an unprecedented movement of American Indians from rural areas to urban centers. The migration tended to disrupt tribal kinship patterns and, in many cases, destroy family traditions. While the

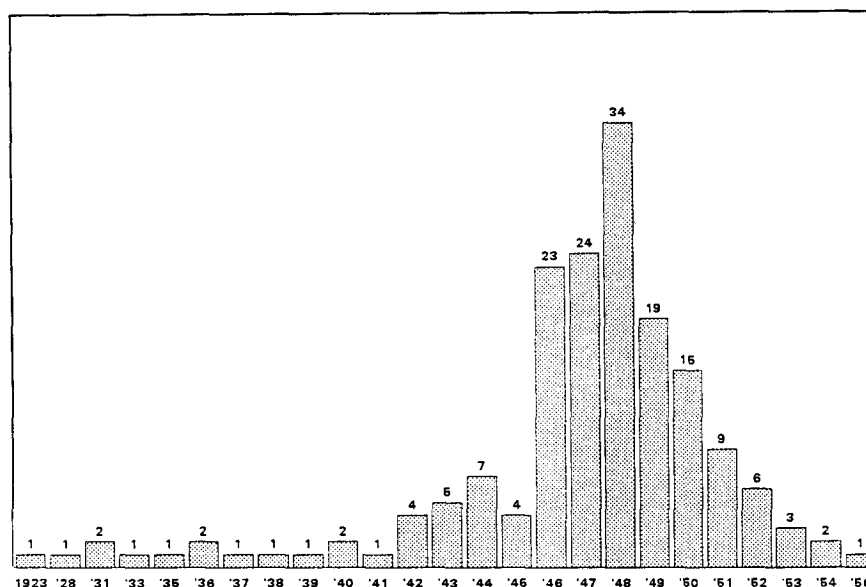


Figure 1
Age by year of birth and raw number

majority of respondents (57.1%) were brought up on reservations or in rural Indian communities, the rest spent their developmental years in an urban environment or moved back and forth between reservations, rural areas, and large population centers. Today, almost 42% live in urban areas and the rest reside on reservations or in rural Indian communities off reservations. Few move back and forth between the two areas and some of the respondents are incarcerated (Figure 2).

The respondents tended to have entered the military between the ages of 18 and 21. Fully 62% went into the U.S. Army while 22% joined the U.S. Marine Corps. The U.S. Navy attracted only 11% and the U.S. Air Force 4% (Figure 3).

Reasons for entering the service (20% were drafted) varied, but seemed to differ from those of other minority enlistees. According to recent studies, most members of minority groups in the U.S. enter military service for financial reasons or because they want to "better themselves" in the larger society. American Indian Vietnam War veterans, however, saw entering military service in a somewhat different light. While the majority (50%) did think financial reasons were somewhat or very important in the decision to enter the service, a larger number (61%) felt that respect gained from the non-Indian majority in the rest of society was not important to them. A large majority felt that such things as duty, honor, and family and tribal traditions were important reasons for joining the

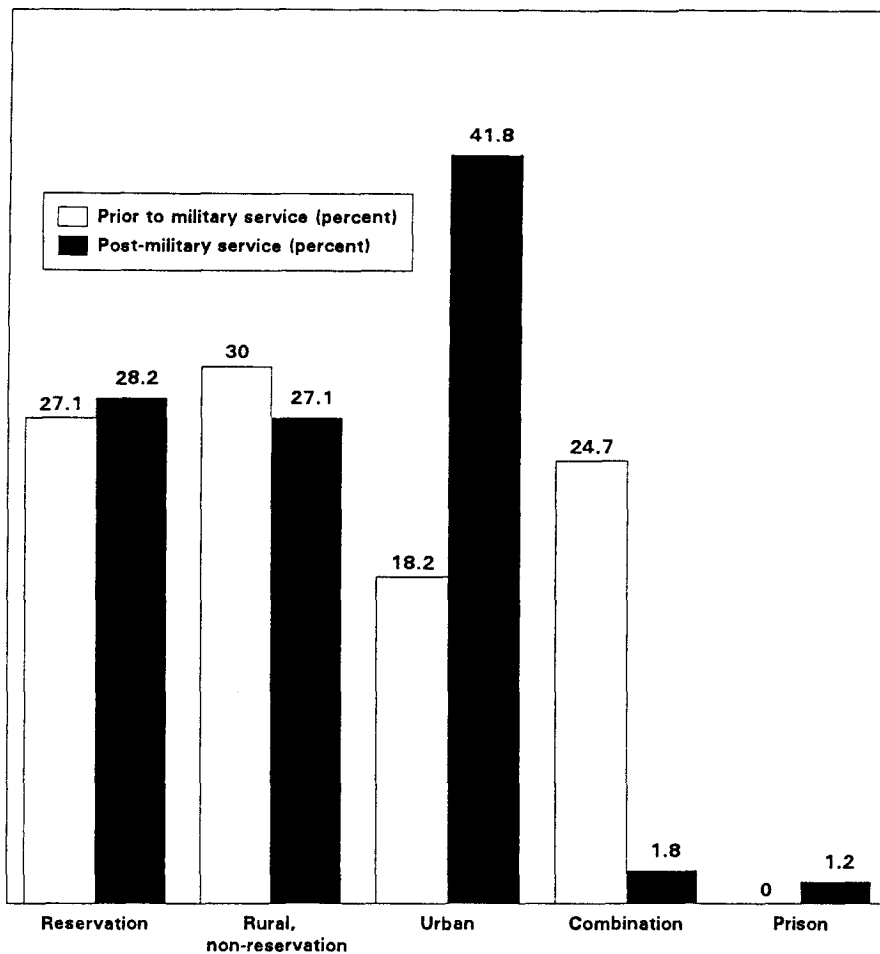


Figure 2
Residence

armed forces. A total of 62% thought that entering the service and fighting a war would gain them the respect of Indian people (Table 1).

In spite of having good feelings at least some of the time about their military service (93% expressed this opinion), their total experience during and since the Vietnam War has been somewhat negative. While in the military a number of them (41%) were subject to some form of discrimination. A few of them were referred to as "blanket asses" or "redskins" and nearly every one of them had been called "chief" at one time or another during their periods of military duty. By and large they served in nontechnical military occupations, which meant not only that they would

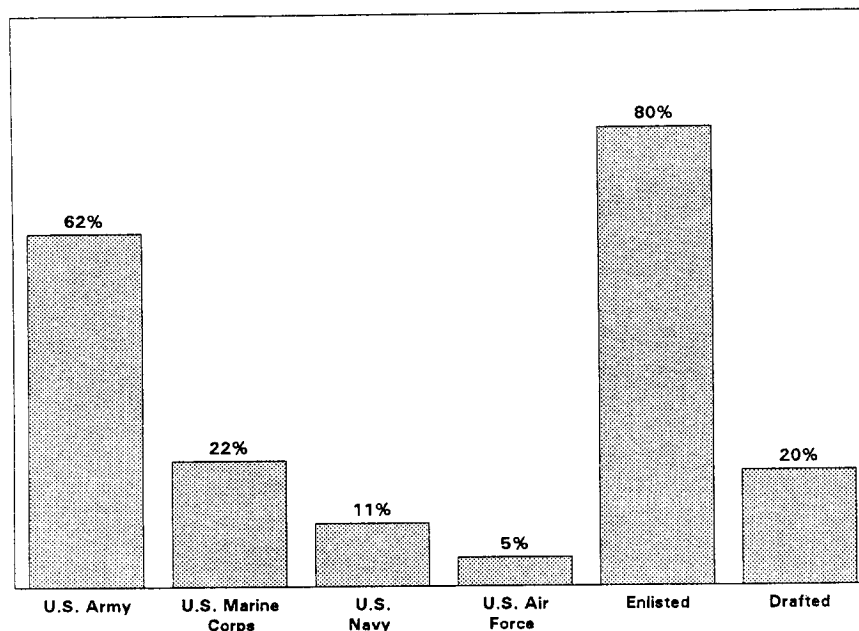


Figure 3
Branch of military

Table 1
Reason for Entering Service (%)

Reason	Very Important	Somewhat Important	Not Too Important	Not Important
Duty, country	44.1	31.2	13.5	11.2
Financial reasons	20.6	29.4	27.6	22.4
Respect from Indian people	35.3	27.1	17.6	20.0
Respect from non-Indians	15.3	23.5	25.3	35.9
Family tradition	51.2	24.1	11.8	12.9
Tribal tradition	43.5	31.8	12.9	11.8

be more likely to see combat, but that the military considered them less able to learn highly technical military skills. In addition, despite the fact that many of them achieved relatively high educational levels after their military service, 46% remain unemployed.

They also suffer numerous stress-related symptoms and suffer from problems associated with their wartime experience. Posttraumatic stress disorder symptoms are well studied and documented, occurring with some frequency among Vietnam War veterans. Symptom sufferers complain of feelings of rage, depression, spontaneous flashbacks of combat, sleep disturbance, intrusive recollection, survivor guilt, and heightened startle responses. PTSD symptoms also seem to compound problems of drug and alcohol abuse and often lead to an inability to maintain sound relationships with close friends and family members. Eighty percent of the respondents said they had feelings of depression, 76.5% had sleep disturbances, 63.5% experienced combat flashbacks, and 71.2% had experienced barely controllable periods of rage and anger. A large number (138 individuals or 81.2%) candidly stated they had mild to severe alcohol problems and almost 32% admitted to abusing drugs (Table 2).

Table 2
Problems Associated with PTSD in
American Indian Vietnam War Veterans

Type	Frequency		Resolved Problem		Resolved Problem; Attended Ceremonies	
	#	%	#	%	#	%
Alcohol	138	81.2	56	40	23	41
Drugs	54	31.8	18	33	15	83
Depression	136	80	34	25	24	70
Sleep Intrusion	130	76.5	35	27	23	65.7
Flashbacks	108	63.5	28	26	22	78.5
Anger/rage	121	71.2	26	21.4	22	84.6

Although it is apparent that most respondents to this questionnaire had depressive, PTSD and alcohol-related symptoms, it is impossible to project the prevalence of the symptoms in the Indian Vietnam veteran population at large because of sampling considerations mentioned previously.

Those who took part in the survey admitted to relatively unstable marital relationships; 47% of the respondents were either separated, divorced, or had been married more than once (Figure 4).

PTSD symptoms often are linked directly to the intensity and the amount of combat an individual experienced in Vietnam. There also is evidence to suggest that members of minority groups suffer from PTSD more frequently and to a greater degree than do other Vietnam veterans. *Legacies of Vietnam*, the 1981 Veterans Administration study of Vietnam veterans, supports this contention. According to the study,

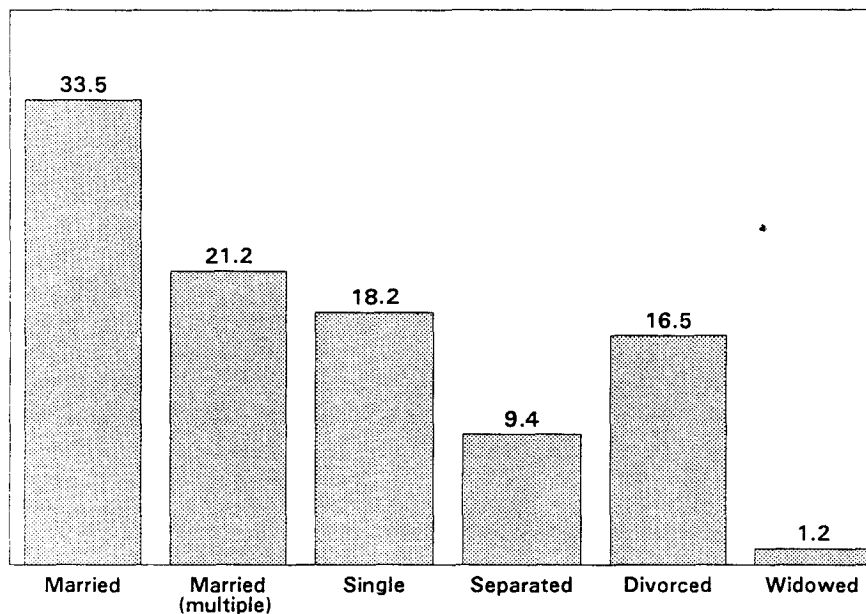


Figure 4
Marital status

Vietnam veterans as a group were three times as likely to be stressed as Vietnam era veterans and the latter were twice as stressed as men who did not enter the military. Blacks and Chicanos, at every point of stressful experience, evidenced somewhat higher levels than whites. For black respondents, just being in Vietnam was as stressful as being in heavy combat for white veterans.

The reasons underlying the high frequency of stress-related problems in American Indian Vietnam War veterans are many and somewhat complex. In the first place, there was a great deal of ambiguity for an American Indian even to enter the military. Indian tribes in the United States were crushed by American military might. The federal government implemented policies under which Indians were stripped of many of their tribal customs, ceremonies, and institutions.

Moreover, despite the original inhabitants of the land, Indians have been pushed aside and left as one of the poorest and least educated groups in the nation. Some reservations have reported unemployment rates as high as 80% and education at the eighth-grade level. Yet, as Table 1 indicates, Indians enter the service because they hope to carry on family traditions. Their fathers and grandfathers were warriors in the tribal and national sense of the word. The realization they were serving a government that historically betrayed their people while at the same time individually attempting to maintain family tradition creates a great deal of tension.

In Vietnam, Indians found themselves steeped in ambiguity. They were in the position of fighting what some considered to be a white man's war whereas the whites themselves, on average, seemed to suffer very little. Said one veteran, "The white dudes stayed in school, you know, and we (meaning Indians, blacks, and others) fought the war. They don't know nothing about anything except what they get out of a book. But they get the jobs." While in Vietnam several of the veterans realized that the federal government's wartime policies conflicted with their own cultural training and notions of justice. One man was made painfully aware of the difference between his own tribal culture and modern military tactics:

We went into a ville one day after an air strike. The first body I saw in 'Nam was a little kid. He was burnt up — napalm — and his arms were kind of curled up. He was on his back but his arms were curled and sticking up in the air, stiff. Made me sick. It turned me around. See, in our way we're not supposed to kill women and children in battle. The old people say it's bad medicine and killing women and children doesn't prove that you're brave. It's just the opposite.

Another veteran saw striking similarities in the condition of Vietnamese peasants and his own people "back in the world (U.S.):"

We went into their country and killed them and took land that wasn't ours. Just like the whites did to us. I helped load up ville after ville and pack it off to the resettlement area. Just like when they moved us to the rez' [reservation]. We shouldn't have done that. Browns against browns. That screwed me up, you know.

Still another veteran was forced to take a hard look at the racial aspects of the war. During a search-and-destroy mission this particular man was approached by one of the Vietnamese whose home had just been burned to the ground. The old farmer looked at the Indian soldier, compared their skin and hair color and said, as if confused, "You-me, same-same."

For a significant number of Indian veterans the return to the United States was not what they had expected either. If they sought acceptance by whites, they were disappointed. If they thought military service would bring them opportunity, they discovered that it had only lowered their status within the American mainstream. American veterans in general were looked upon as either pawns or victims. Some felt as if American society, of which American Indians were only a peripheral part anyway, had sent them to war and then rejected them for actually serving. They turned to their own people and sought solace and healing in their own traditions.

Alienated by whites and historical federal policies toward Indians in the first place, American Indian veterans frequently were involved in heavy combat. Among survey respondents, 75% served in infantry, ranger, airborne, special forces, tank and artillery units, or as door gunners in helicopters or aboard gunboats (Table 3).

Table 3
Military Specialty

	%
Infantry	38.5
Artillery	7.7
Special forces	2.8
Airborne	8.4
Armor	3.5
Aviation (rotary wing)	7.7
Aviation (fixed wing)	4.9
Ship	3.5
Gunboat	2.1
Medical	5.6
Combat engineer	4.2
Other	11.2

A significant number of respondents (42.2%) saw heavy combat, while 31% were wounded in action — 13% were wounded on two or more occasions (Figure 5).

The combat experience virtually assured that American Indians would suffer PTSD symptoms in relatively significant numbers and their alienation from mainstream America certainly compounded the stress.

There are, however, some Indian veterans who seemingly have worked through or resolved some problems associated with PTSD symptoms. As Table 2 indicates, some claim to have resolved their alcohol and drug problems and are working through the feelings of depression, flashbacks, nightmares, and symptomatic rages of the disorder. Even more significant is the fact that a large percentage of those who have worked through these problems also have turned to their own healers and have taken part in traditional tribal honoring or cleansing ceremonies. There is, then, a direct correlation between ceremonial participation and the resolution of problems with possible exception of alcoholism. The reason for this exception is not clear at this time. One can only speculate that Indians perhaps place the consumption of liquor in a different context than the other problems — the former might be seen as a social condition while the latter may be viewed as a spiritual problem. In any case, the connection should be explored further. It is clear that at least 64% of the respondents believe that tribal ceremonies can aid the healing process.

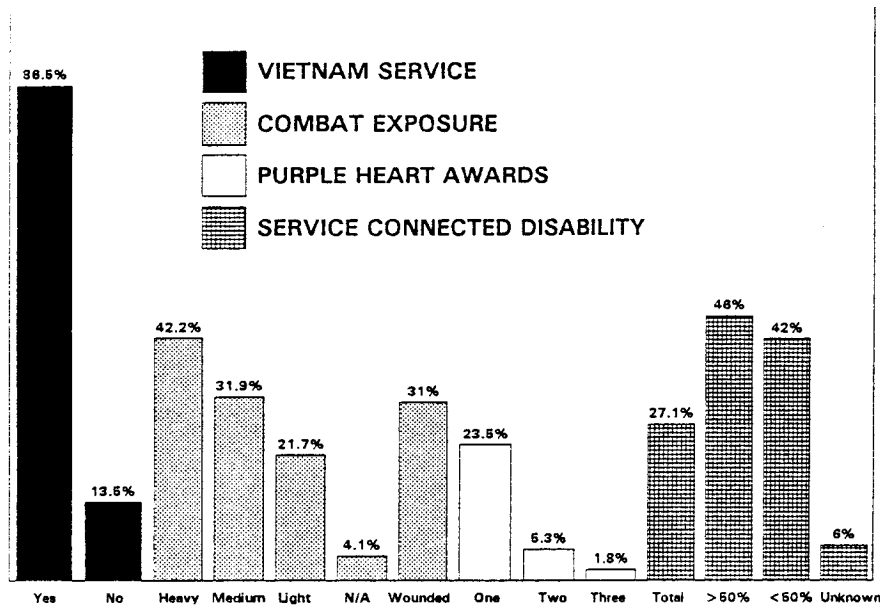


Figure 5
Vietnam service

Readjustment Counseling

Obviously there are a number of American Indian Vietnam War veterans in financial and emotional need. The greatest problem for Vet Centers nationwide is simply being able to get Indian veterans to come in for counseling. The problem lies not only in the fact that Vet Centers, normally located in urban areas, are inaccessible for many Indians on reservations, but also that Indian attitudes mitigate against seeking help from outsiders. It is clear that Indian veterans know about Vet Centers — 67% of respondents were aware that a number of services exist, but only 36% of that number actually have sought help from the centers. Of that number a clear majority were satisfied with Vet Center services (Figure 6). Vet Centers can be of help to American Indians. Interestingly enough, the foremost problem that these individuals were concerned with was PTSD (Table 4).

Judging from the respondents' answers to several questions, Indian veterans are highly unlikely to seek help from government agencies. In the first place, they display a marked distrust of the federal government and to a great extent feel that it, along with their own tribal governments, have not done enough to help Vietnam veterans. They feel that non-Indians do not have positive attitudes toward American Indians or toward Vietnam veterans as a whole. In short, American Indian veterans of the Vietnam War

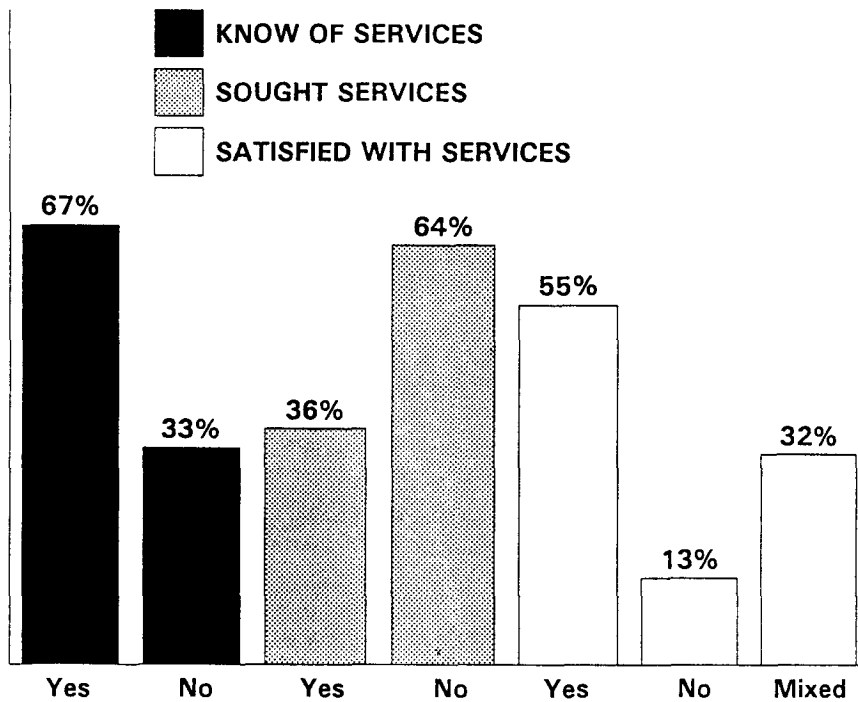


Figure 6
Vet center use

Table 4
Reasons for Seeking Vet Center Services

	%
PTSD	25.5
Substance abuse	10.6
Employment	21.3
Agent Orange	6.4
Education	12.8
Discharge upgrade	2.1
Violence	4.3
Combination of above	17.0

are extremely wary of non-Indian motives and federal programs. Their dissatisfaction with their own tribal government lies elsewhere.

Some Indian veterans are, however, very much concerned with the continuity of their own tribal customs, ceremonies, and kinship patterns. Despite their feelings that tribal governments are not doing enough

to help them, they actively participate in tribal politics. Twenty out of the 170 respondents, for example, held elected tribal office. Over 60% regularly vote in tribal elections. They remain tribal in their political orientation and, in fact, few of them belong to national or pan-Indian organizations.

Their identity as tribal Indians is extremely important. Ninety-eight percent of the respondents described themselves as either being culturally traditional or very much interested in keeping traditions alive. Their principal argument with present tribal governments probably rests in the notion that these political institutions tend to emphasize economic development over cultural preservation. A large majority (71%) indicated that tribal governments ignore the advice of tribal elders, who, by virtue of their knowledge of tradition, should keep the tribal identity and special interests in proper perspective. While the majority of the respondents felt that tribal elders were people of authority and were teachers, 81% felt that the elders had no political power. When asked if their tribal governments were representative of their people, 33% said no while another 33% were not entirely sure. Their ambivalence probably reflects their concern with preserving tribal traditions and wanting to remain tribal Indians while at the same time being critical of political institutions in general.

In conclusion, the readjustment counselor must keep in mind a few main points about the attitudes of American Indian Vietnam War veterans and about American Indian life in particular:

1. Indian veterans are tribal in outlook. Thus, personal relationships and kinship patterns are very important to them. Role relationships (i.e., student to teacher, boss to worker, physician to patient, etc.) have little meaning. Indian veterans will be found around other Indians.
2. Indian veterans are either wary of or apathetic toward federal programs, government institutions, and state and local politics. They follow tribal politics but remain critical of tribal governments. They rarely will come in for counseling unless they are contacted personally, and shown that the Vet Center is not just another federal program. Outreach is essential.
3. Indian veterans are proud of and very concerned with keeping traditions alive. They are respectful of tribal elders, customs, and ceremonies. They will also be critical of standard American therapeutic methods. A healthy majority of them (60%) feel that Indians have more positive views of Vietnam veterans than the rest of society.

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