

Youngest second lieutenant now adviser to vets

David Christian of Levittown was, at 18, the youngest second lieutenant in Vietnam during his tour in 1968-69. He spent an incredible year there, moving from unit to unit — amassing wounds and medals — until he was burned over 40 percent of his body by American napalm.

Today, Christian is a veteran adviser with the U.S. Department of Labor in southeastern Pennsylvania. And he is not happy with the way veterans of the Vietnam War have been treated on their return to their homeland.

"The issue of the war's rightness or wrongness is moot now," he said Friday. "It's a wound, a trauma. And what we do with traumatic things is block them out. But we don't learn from it that way. It will not heal by putting it in a closet to ignore it."

"(Americans) hoped the Vietnam War would go away during it; now they hope the results will go away. As with all wounds, what it needs is to be cared for and dressed properly."

Christian refers to Vietnam veterans as "kids," for like himself, a large proportion who served in the war were young men just out of high school. In light of the dearth of concern he sees being extended to these veterans after the war, he feels "their lives, their limbs and their trust" have not been repaid.

"I don't feel these kids were responsible for the war, yet they suffered the brunt of the damn thing," he said. "Looking back in retrospect, I can see why they send children to wars."

During his tour in Vietnam, Christian served with the Special Forces, commanded a long-range reconnaissance patrol unit working deep in enemy territory, commanded a 1st Division line company and did reconnaissance with the 1st Air Cavalry Division.

He was recommended for two con-

gressional medals of honor and received the Distinguished Service Cross, the second highest military decoration; two Silver Stars; two Bronze Stars; two Vietnamese Crosses of Gallantry; an Air Medal for 25 helicopter assaults; and seven Purple Hearts. He has been described as the most decorated soldier in the war.

His wounds include bullet wounds in the back and both legs; a knife wound in the arm; and the napalm burns, which put him in Valley Forge Veterans Hospital for two years as an in-patient, followed by six years at the Philadelphia Naval Hospital as an out-patient.

Ten years later Christian talks about veterans, not in terms of glory, but in terms of desolation and depression. As a job counselor, he sees some of the worst cases.

One man he described as "skrungy" came to see him, he said, with nothing, not even the money for a haircut, shirt and tie for a job interview. The man was going to sell his blood to cover these expenses.

Christian said the reaction among co-workers in the office at the time was: "How do you help those deadbeats?"

Christian did the best he could.

"We were taught to win everything in America," he said. "Then they took the nation's boys off and told them not to win (in Vietnam), just keep the status quo. And when they came back, they couldn't even talk about it. They came back to face this quagmire. They kept quiet and became introverted."

The quagmire Christian refers to is not the one in Vietnam. It is the division caused by the war at home. He describes it as "the worst cleavage since the Civil War."

He cited a study that found 48 percent of Americans had a relative, friend or acquaintance who served in Vietnam.

"That represents a large portion of this country's conscience," he said.

For Christian, as a veteran and as a job counselor, the bottom line for a veteran is a job.

"Without a job his ego as a man, as a father is destroyed."

And, he feels, politicians are using rhetoric where they should be acting on substantial issues. He said veterans did not object when President Carter gave qualified amnesty to draft evaders; but he feels there has not been enough concrete help given to the wounded of all types who served in the war.

"Vietnam veterans were used by the president of the United States," he said.

Christian is bitter. Besides the veterans he sees in his job, his two brothers — both disabled Vietnam veterans — had serious difficulties finding work once out of the hospitals and on the street. One brother is now a mail clerk with the Internal Revenue Service and the other works at the Philadelphia Naval Base.

Making waves is not new to Dave Christian. While in a VA hospital he gave an interview to the New York Times saying the United States should either fight to win or get out of Vietnam. He was muzzled.

He was later hired as an assistant to the Secretary of Labor. A year later, he was fired from the position.

And for this Memorial Day, he has declined an invitation from President Carter to visit the White House for Vietnam Veterans Week. Instead, he will be presented the Bucks County Citizen of the Year award by author James Michener Monday in Doylestown.

The jungle trails and the punji sticks are, for Christian, now in Washington and in the hearts and minds of Americans. He feels it's time to dress the wounds.

— By JOHN GRANT