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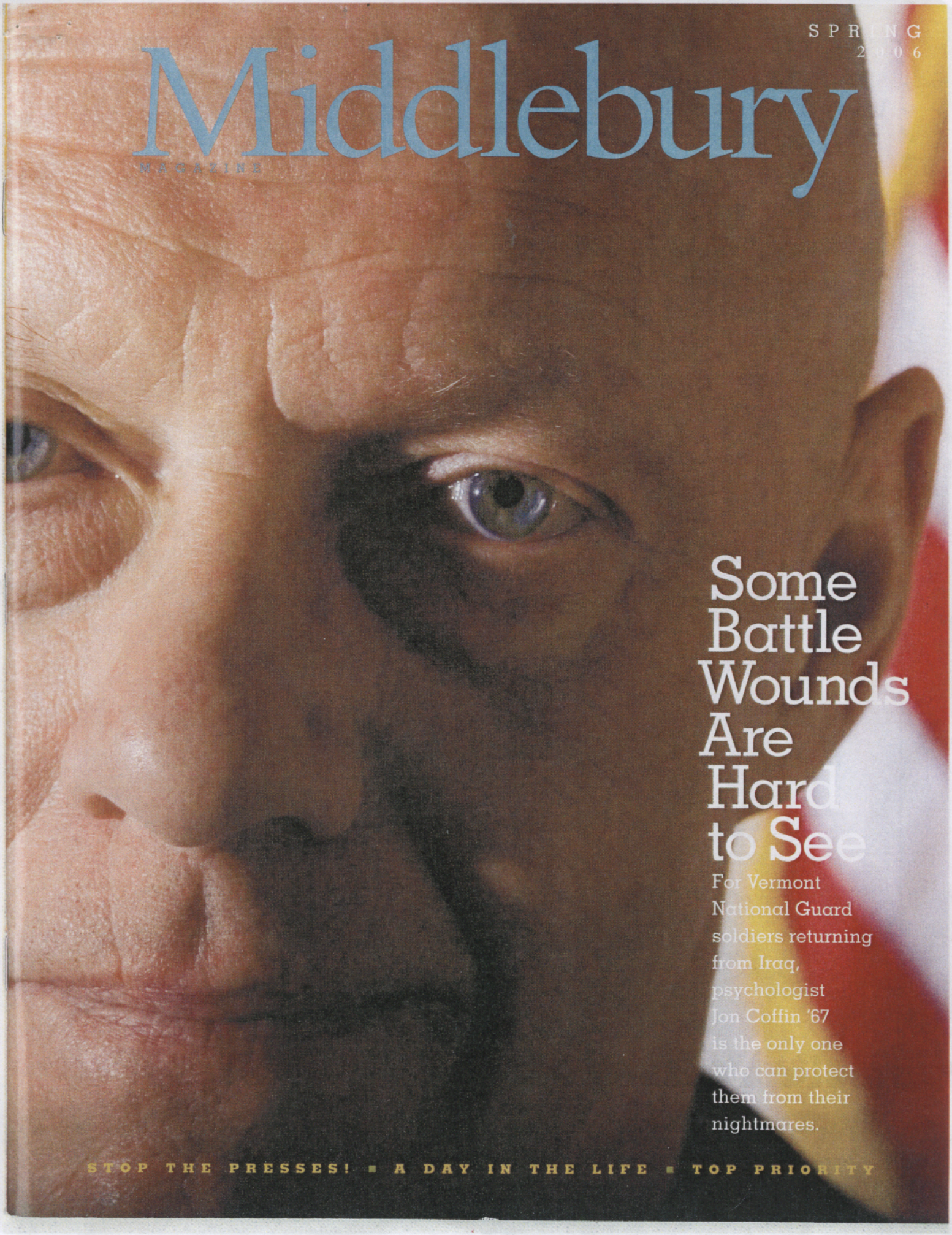


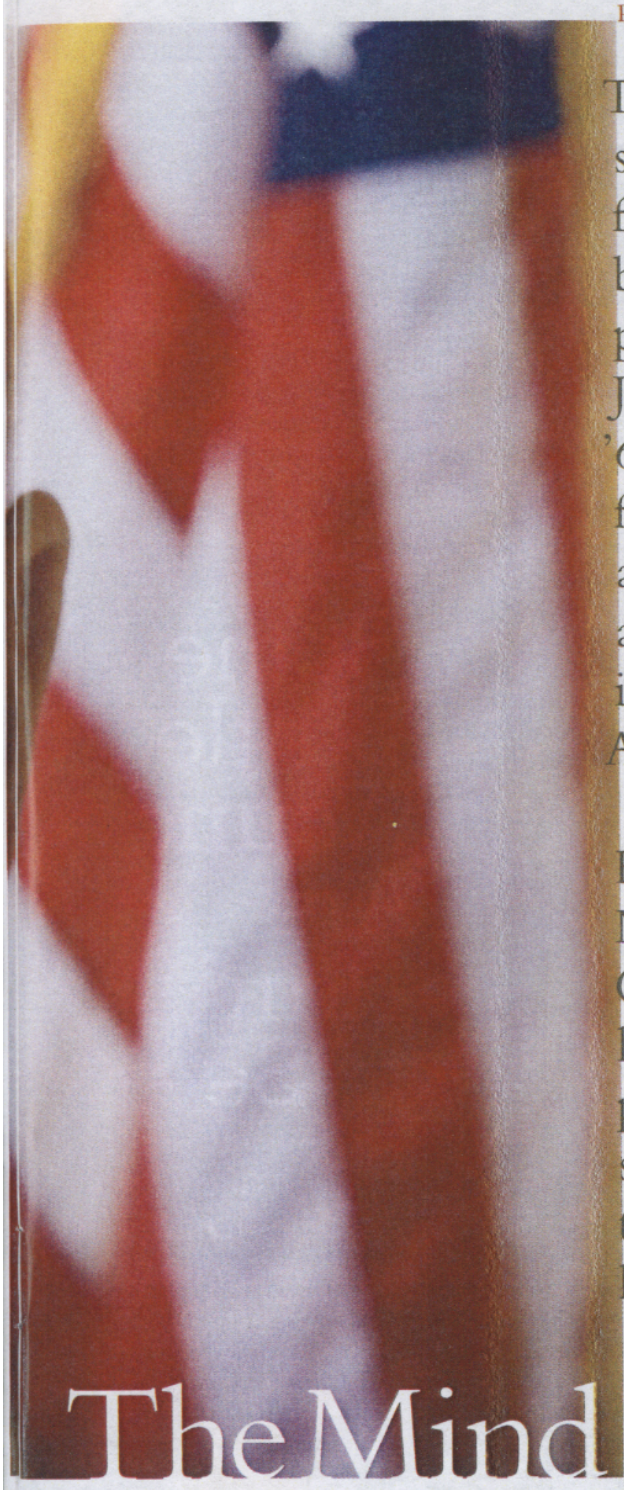
Some Battle Wounds Are Hard to See

For Vermont National Guard soldiers returning from Iraq, psychologist Jon Coffin '67 is the only one who can protect them from their nightmares.

STOP THE PRESSES! ▪ A DAY IN THE LIFE ▪ TOP PRIORITY

By Karl Lindholm '67

Photographs by Michael Riddell



The Mind of The Warrior

Though stationed far from the battlefield, psychologist Jon Coffin '67 mans a front line as perilous as any found in Iraq or Afghanistan.

For many National Guard soldiers, he's the first person they see when they return home.

"Before he went to Iraq, he lived in a trailer in Enosburg Falls and was driving a bread truck."

Jon Coffin '67 is talking about a soldier in the Vermont National Guard.

"In Iraq, he's a team leader, making decisions about a three-mile-long convoy. He's responsible for millions of dollars in equipment, with lives on the line.

"When he comes back to Vermont, the biggest decision he'll make is which Champlain Farms store gets their bread first. He's had no contact with his wife and kids for a year, used the f-word in every conversation. He feels like he's spent a year on the moon. Now you tell me if there are going to be 'readjustment issues.'"

The *New York Times* has called it "guarding the couch"—what occurs when National Guard soldiers return to the States from war zones in Iraq and Afghanistan—and Coffin, the staff psychologist for the Vermont National Guard, is often the first person these soldiers see when they arrive at what has become another front line, this one on domestic soil.

During the past 18 months, Coffin has conducted "critical incident stress debriefings," either by himself or with a small team he leads, for more than 1,100 Vermont National Guard soldiers.

Before returning home, most soldiers pass through army posts around the country, and Coffin has conducted these debriefings in Colorado, Georgia, New York, New Jersey, and Mississippi with soldiers returned from yearlong duty in the Middle East. Many of the soldiers in the Vermont Guard have been in areas of fierce fighting. In Iraq, Vermont guardsmen are largely stationed in Ramadi, the site of the Sunni insurgency's greatest strength. Some 1,200 Vermont National Guard members—42 percent of its total—have served in the Iraq war, with at least one person coming from 200 of the 255 towns in the state. Vermont is second only to Hawaii in the per capita number of guard and reserve units sent to the war, and the state has the highest per capita number of deaths. (There is a sense expressed by some in Vermont that the state's National Guard has been assigned a disproportionate share of dangerous duty.)

Six Vermont guardsmen have died in Iraq—including two killed during the same week in September. At present, the Vermont National Guard has about 400 soldiers on active duty in Iraq, 100 in Afghanistan, and 600 in Kuwait.

"What we try to do in our debriefings," Coffin explains, "is reframe the chaos, confusion, and ambivalence of their experience into a recognition and appreciation that they did a good job in an arena they never dreamed of. When we see them, they have just been on a plane for 20 hours with a lump in their throat, coming home, thinking, How am I going to do this?"

Some units come home intact; others come back in "dribs and drabs." Coffin has had as many as 35 returning guardsmen in the room with him and as few as three.

The soldiers that he meets are so-called "weekend warriors"—teachers, cops, salesmen, shopkeepers—from all corners of the state, from ages 19–47. Coffin is the first person they see when they step onto U.S. soil, and for three or four hours, reluctantly at first, these soldiers share what it has been like to live in a war zone—and why they are so anxious about their homecoming.

"I give a little speech at the outset about why this session is a good idea," he says. "I tell them, 'No cell phones, no one leaves, and what is said here stays here. We know there's a lot on your mind about your reunion.'"

Then he asks the guys in the back to move up. They do it. Not only is he a psychologist, he's also a colonel.

"Everybody wants to sit in the back." Coffin softly chuckles. "These are not guys who have been in group therapy. They haven't exactly plumbed the depths of their psychological inventory. There is so much energy in the room. They have had to be so vigilant in the past few months that they glow in the dark. They've drawn on every bit of reserve they have."

A typical session goes somewhat like this: Coffin will ask three sets of basic questions. The first set is obvious and introductory: Who are you, what was your specialty, and what did you end up doing?

"They're all 'justa' soldiers," he explains. "The tell me they were 'justa' gunner, 'justa' driver, 'justa' platoon leader. They all do it. It's basically a form of survivor guilt. I get them to drop the 'justa' right away. There's nothing 'justa' about what they're doing over there.

"One guy's finger was still on the trigger. Literally, his finger was twitching. He was 'justa' gunner. Another was 'justa' medic, and he had been in two major incidents. In one, he had his hand in a wounded soldier's chest, keeping him alive, massaging his heart."

Most of these soldiers were not doing what they were trained to do. They found themselves in urban house-to-house expeditionary close-quarter operations. It's very intense and dangerous work, and they are so far from their native landscape."

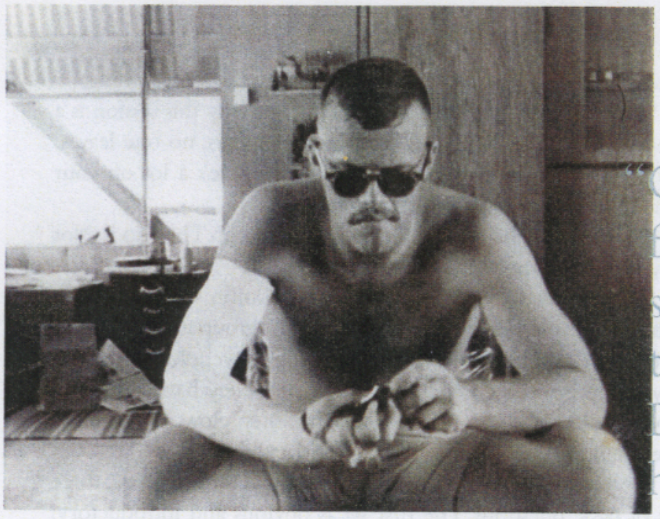
The second set of questions Coffin will ask is, What was your first thought, what were your feelings, when you got off the plane in the United States?

"After I ask this question, there's a lot of talk about the 'satisfaction of primitive urges,'" he explains. "They want to get drunk and get laid. Right or wrong, this is probably the first time in the history of warfare that soldiers are without these options. [Because Iraq's a Muslim country] they haven't had anything to drink for a year.

"Then they get into serious concerns about going back to work at home, anxiety about marriage and family. A soldier coming back to a job he hates or a troubled relationship has a lot on his mind."

Generally, Coffin finds that the returning soldiers are not aware of how wound up they are. "The challenge is for them to come down from that and descend to a more worldly level of functioning," he says. "Some express a sense of dread at going back to their other lives. They have a hard time slowing it up enough to return to their jobs and communicate with their loved ones. They are concerned about leaving their brothers- and sisters-in-arms. Many worry that they will be a guest in their own homes, that spouses and partners have taken over, found their own resources, and they wonder, Where do I fit in? *Do* I fit in?

"So we encourage them to take another look at their lives and relationships, to see this wartime experience as a jumping-off



"One guy's finger was still on the trigger. Literally, his finger was twitching. He was 'justa' gunner."

CITIZEN SOLDIER
Coffin (top and far left) was commissioned as a second lieutenant in the army in 1968. He commanded a listening post in Thailand during the Vietnam War.

point, maybe using some of the educational benefits they have accumulated, or getting marital counseling, or buying a home, or moving to a place they've always wanted to live."

The third set of questions is the most difficult: What was the hardest thing for you over there? If your tour were a series of photographs, are there any that you'd like to leave here and not take home, put in a separate pocket, or share one last time with others in your platoon?

"Our hope," Coffin says, "is that at least 20 percent of their experience overseas, they'll leave behind right here at glorious Camp Shelby (or Fort Benning or Fort Dix).

"One soldier said his hardest time was the night he used all of the rounds in his M79 (a grenade launcher) and wondered how many civilians he had killed. Another described people throwing their kids under the wheels of his vehicle in order to get compensation. Others mourned the loss of friends in battle. Anybody in charge talked about being afraid they would get someone killed . . . hating the sleeplessness, the waiting for everyone to get back from an operation.

"Some don't talk about the trauma of war at all, but lament the mere fact that they had no personal space. The heat is a huge factor. One guy talked about the time he forgot to hydrate, got caught short, became, as he put it, 'a little dehydrated,' and drank 17 liters of water in three hours."

Coffin explains that these are soldiers attracted to the "black-and-white view of duty, honor, service." Once overseas, on duty, they are confronted with a year of "in-your-face grayness," and the desert becomes an appropriate metaphor.

COFFIN IS A PLEASANT GUY. He maintains an inviting and reassuring demeanor, and he greets all comers warmly with large gestures—a smile and a hug or a firm handshake. He looks people in the eye. He speaks deliberately, choosing his words carefully with diction that is colorful, metaphoric. His descriptions of his work are punctuated with a cackle of a laugh. Yet while his manner is informal, it is also intimate and serious.

He's a big man, quite fit at 60, and with his bald head, he looks a lot like Mr. Clean. He stays in shape, he says, by doing push-ups, sit-ups, and running, and he's drawn to the martial arts, having achieved some years ago a second-level black belt in moo gong do. For the past ten years he has studied tai chi under master Bob Boyd in Burlington.

He is about 25 pounds *under* his playing weight when he was a football player at Middlebury in the 1960s, because, he says, "it's important to me to meet the army physical fitness standards, and that gets harder every year." He is worried now because his two-mile time is only 36 seconds above the minimum.

Past the age of retirement, he was recently encouraged to reenlist for two more years in the Guard. His boss, Colonel Jon Farnham, the deputy chief of staff for personnel in the Vermont Guard, explains that this extension necessitated special permission from Washington. "The timing was not right for him to retire," Farnham says. "He's having a tremendous impact."

Farnham believes that Coffin has a gift for the work. "He is very good in this macho military world at erasing the stigma of coming forward and sharing emotions. He's taking us to new places. He's mentored folks in the field. He's a good leader."

Conducting debriefings at army posts around the country is only part of what Coffin does as the Guard's staff psychologist. At home here in Vermont, he sees wives, mothers, children, friends, soldiers returning, soldiers leaving, anyone who is in need of support. "I get up to 40 e-mails a day about army business," he says.

When asked where these referrals come from, he responds drolly, "Friends, Romans, countrymen. All over. Everywhere. What I encourage, beg, beseech people to do is to stop by for a four-session interlude at the Vet Center in Burlington. Often I meet them for coffee at the Vet Center, itself. It's a great place, with a big Welcome Home sign up over the door."

In his debriefings and in conversations with the families and friends of soldiers, Coffin introduces the stumbling blocks that may be encountered as soldiers return home—the difficulty they have sleeping, the problems communicating their military experience, "the feelings of agitation and anomie. We tell them to expect these responses and come to us, and we'll help fix them."

At Middlebury, Coffin enrolled in ROTC for the required two years and then volunteered for two more, graduating in 1968 as a second lieutenant. His plan was to enter the infantry and command a platoon in Vietnam. Instead he was assigned to the Signal Corps, commanding a listening post in Thailand, and not to combat infantry duty in the jungles of Vietnam.

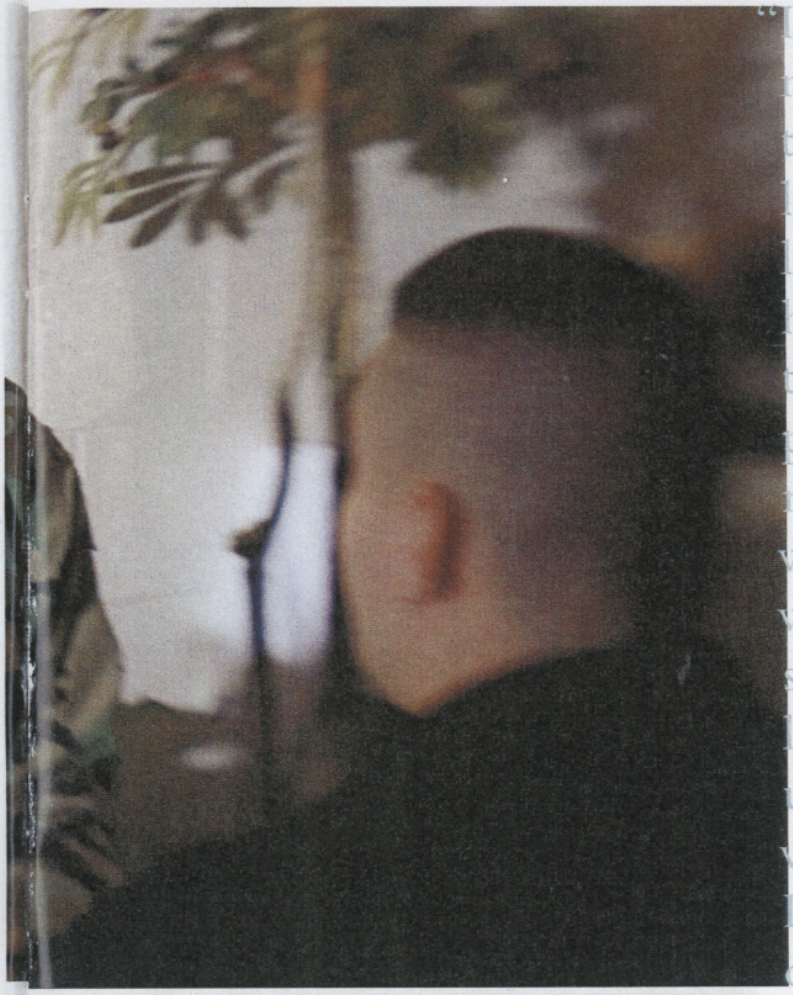
Yet the experience of Vietnam is never far from the consciousness of Coffin and others in the military. The image of the neglected Vietnam veteran, the Vietnam vet abused by an unappreciative public, the Vietnam veteran left entirely to his own devices after a traumatic wartime experience, is an unfortunate legacy of that war and informs the commitment to do things differently, better, this time.

GUARDING THE COUCH
Soldiers who had been involved in fierce firefights with Iraqi insurgents earlier in the month return to a world that has largely gone on without them.

During the Vietnam War, the National Guard and the reserves were havens from service overseas. The political volatility of the times, the scale of the opposition to the war, rendered a general call-up of the Guard and reserves unthinkable, politically impossible. By 1967, there were few Guard or reserve units with openings. The draft was a more reliable way to recruit soldiers. The average age of soldiers in Vietnam was 19.

In Iraq, nearly 40 percent of the American forces are reservists and Guard members. The average age is 27. Many of these soldiers enlisted in the National Guard to serve their states, never expecting to go to war.

When he was their age, Coffin recalls, "I came home to a bar stool. When I returned from Southeast Asia, I was sitting in a bar



"It has taken me down to the most basic level of my life. There have been times in our post-debriefing meetings when we have all wept," Coffin says. "I have felt like throwing up. I was worried that I was 'going over the falls.'"

by myself within 32 hours after a steak dinner with peas and potatoes at Oakland Air Force base, and a discharge. The only follow-up I had was a dental appointment. Not a great scenario.

"We have a number of 'follow-on' activities for people now. People come in for 'tune-ups.' We haven't had the nightmare situation we had in Vietnam, and a lot of that may have to do with what we're doing, which is to put an emotional container around people where they feel cared for and get a chance to air some things out. They know we're here for them."

Though his work with the guard has demanded much of Coffin's time, he somehow maintains a civilian job as an alcohol counselor and head of outpatient services at the Howard Center, the large public mental health agency in Burlington, where his civilian boss considers him an "unsung hero." ("Jon has a tenacious belief in the citizen-soldier," says Todd Centybear, the executive director of the Howard Center. "This work is a calling for Jon, and it's work that we need to be doing too, serving the community.")

Yet Coffin doesn't see himself as a hero. The heroes, he believes, are the citizen-soldiers he counsels.

"It has taken me down to the most basic level of my life. There have been times in our post-debriefing meetings when we have all wept," he says. "I have felt like throwing up. I was worried that I was 'going over the falls.' It's such an intense and intimate setting. Just in these three hours or so, we form a bond of our own."

After conducting debriefing sessions at army bases around the country, Coffin will find himself going to the airport, on his own volition, when he hears that soldiers are returning home. "I find now I can't stay away from the plane when soldiers come back to Vermont," he says. "They shake hands with the governor and the commanding officer of the Vermont Guard, and then some of them seek me out and say, 'thanks for coming.'

"I believe we're in the right place. I'm stunned by the amount of emotion we've encountered, not surprised, but the velocity of it is humbling. I love to watch the guys come through the door at the airport in Burlington, though some come home and there's no one there, and I worry about them.

"And I find I do sit in my office at work waiting for the next 'killed in action' phone call."

Karl Lindholm '67 is the dean of advising and assistant professor of American civilization at Middlebury. He served as a medic in the Army Reserves from 1967–73 and teaches a course at Middlebury on the literature of the Vietnam War. Jon Coffin is a frequent visitor to class.