

# Veteran Testimonies: Confronting Intergenerational Indifference to the War Memory

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## ABSTRACT

*The Korean War (6.25), which began on June 25th, 1950, was a devastating conflict that resulted in countless deaths. It caused widespread destruction across the Korean Peninsula and the permanent division of Korea, and the division still exists today. At the same time, the Korean War was an important historical turning point that set the stage for South Korea to pursue a democratic freedom and economic development. Later, Korea sent combat troops to Vietnam from 1964 to 1975, which was the biggest overseas deployment in Korean military history (1). Although the survivors of the war are still present in our society, both their numbers and their memories of war are gradually fading. To analyse and explore the characters of war memory, in-depth interviews were carried out with four veterans who served in either the Korean or Vietnam War. This research examines how war memories have been transformed into a form of collective memory, reflecting on the theory of Maurice Halbwachs. It also examines the emotional tensions of veterans when their war memories are forgotten or distorted within social and political narratives, through the theory of Friedrich Nietzsche's Ressentiment. After all, their testimonies were not only acts of resistance against forgetting or indifference. They were narratives of community—an effort to preserve the values they had risked their lives to uphold and to carry them forward into our society.*

**Keywords:** Korean War, Vietnam War, collective memory, Ressentiment, war narratives, oral history, politics of memory, war veterans

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Historian Lim Jie-Hyun states that forgetting the historical memory is like killing the victims of the war twice (2). War is the one of the most extreme experiences that humans can go through, and it leaves

irreversible marks on personal lives. The process of how personal trauma transforms into collective memory, however, is not simple or self-evident. In the book, *Victimhood Nationalism*, Lim Jie-Hyun reveals that memory is selective and that the selection process is never neutral since it necessarily involves power of politics (3). He also argues that memory is not just about reflecting the past experiences like a picture. Instead, he argues that “memory is also part of the epistemological politics that recreates the past to create history right now,” which underscores the role of perspective and interpretation of memories. According to him, memories of the Korean War can be viewed as a complex negotiation process between official social narratives and personal experiences.

In modern Korean history, war was more than just a military conflict; The Korean War is what caused the division of the Korean peninsula into separate nations and spread Cold War ideas (4). One historian even called the Korean War “a major turning point in the Cold War”, emphasizing the geopolitical importance of the conflict (5). The Korean War has often been regarded as an ideological victory, symbolizing the defense of democracy against communism (6).

The nation commemorates a war through symbolic gestures such as the designation of memorial days and national remembrance events, while also implementing support programs for low-income veterans through government funding. Pierre Nora, in his essay, *Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de Mémoire*, explains that national memory of war is largely shaped through symbols promoted by the state such as national holidays, memorial days, and museums (7).

While veterans may be praised as national heroes, many surviving veterans continue to face social indifference and economic hardship in their everyday lives (8). As Eustache notes in his study on shared

memory and social cognition, there is a considerable gap between these patriotic, nationalized memories and the personal experiences of war veterans (9). Maurice Halbwachs, in his book *Collective Memory*, argues that social memory is distinct from individual narratives within a community. Rather, it undergoes dynamic reformation shaped by societal expectations and, at times, a culture of silence (10).

This study aims to explore the historical significance of war in that the realities of surviving veterans differ from the public perception of war. By conducting in-depth interviews with living war veterans, this paper will analyze their personal dialogues of veteran interviews and compare them with existing research on war memory.

## 2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND RESEARCH RATIONALE

This study is based on three main theories. First, this study relies on the theory of Maurice Halbwachs's collective memory. Halbwachs emphasizes that what we remember comes from being part of a group rather than individual experiences. He demonstrates memory is actively shaped through social interaction, so that the collective memory provides frameworks through which individuals can understand and categorize their perceptions (11). A veteran's personal story about war does not convey a social message in itself. The narratives of war that are accepted and circulated in society are not merely the sum of individual experiences; rather, they are reconstructed into symbolic forms that integrate societal identity in ways that align with what society is willing to remember and acknowledge.

Walter Ong's oral culture theory is the second framework adopted by this research. In *Orality and Literacy*, Ong points out that in oral culture, knowledge is limited to what can be remembered, and therefore consists of rhythmic and balanced patterns (12). Ong's thesis shows that oral and written cultures are different. He describes oral culture as being immediate, contextual, emotionally involved, and communal (12). Oral histories from veterans deliver strong emotions, repeated patterns, and conversations with others—which are not just ways of passing information, but also ways of sharing experiences and making sense of them together.

Thirdly, this research applied for the concept of Friedrich Nietzsche, *Ressentiment*. This difference in public recognition and reality where they survived as veterans create complex emotional reactions. The pain and oppression of war veterans are often not

transmitted to society but instead remain confined within their own circles. Nietzsche argues that in this kind of imbalance, those who are forgotten may develop anger toward those who forget. This resentment becomes the foundation for forming a distinct identity among the forsaken (13).

Together, three main theories—*Ressentiment*, collective memory, oral culture and historical memory—offer a strong foundation for analyzing how veterans' personal stories are remembered, reshaped, and sometimes challenged within society.

## 3. RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND METHODOLOGY REVIEW

Oral history serves not only history based on fact—but it is the main method used in this study to understand how each veteran's experiences turn into collective memory over time. This study argues that the value of oral history is not based upon precise memory recall of veterans, but collective social interaction on historical events plays a role in collective memory. While the war memory often becomes formalized with themes of heroism and patriotism, the individual sacrifices and horrific realities experienced by veterans are easily forgotten.

This study seeks to examine how veterans, living within these fading memories, express their personal responses and emotions in the following interviews. To document and explore the complex nature of war memory, in-depth interviews were carried out with four veterans who served in either the Korean or Vietnam War. Through the dialogues in their interviews, this study analyzes how historical evaluations are perceived from the perspective of those who directly experienced the war. Their stories show that they are not only living testimonies of modern Korean history, but also unforgettable experiences for the individuals themselves—experiences that crossed the boundaries between life and death. Despite only four interviews, the results won't represent all veterans. However, their stories still matter since their statements reflect real experiences of the war, and can help us understand that could not be easily heard in the current social media dominant society. Therefore, interviews and testimonies can be useful when analysing oral memories especially for younger Koreans who have never experienced war themselves.

## VOICES OF TESTIMONY: ANALYSIS OF VETERANS' ORAL HISTORIES

Korea sent combat units to Vietnam from 1964 to 1975, which was the largest overseas deployment in

Korean military history. The total number of troops dispatched over that period was approximately 320,000 to 325,000 (14), citing national security and economic development as its justification. However, in contrast to the state's policies at the time, most of the veterans who served in the Vietnam War have now been largely forgotten (15). Also, it has become evident that many veterans now face significant difficulties in their lives (16). It seems that the South Korean public remains apathetic towards Korean veterans of the Vietnam War. They are ignored by the government and media despite governmental rhetoric about heroism. Settlements for damage caused by Agent Orange are not seriously considered, and veterans were excluded from the 1984 class-action lawsuit undertaken by other allied veterans (17). In addition to a literature-based review, this study seeks to explore the memories of the Vietnam War and South Korean veterans through direct interviews, aiming to reflect on how their personal recollections relate to and challenge the conventional collective memory of the war.

#### 4. CASE STUDY 1: KIM WON-SIK (PSEUDONYM) - COMBAT MEMORIES AND SOCIAL PERCEPTIONS OF A VIETNAM WAR VETERAN

Place Tables/Figures/Images in text as close to the Veteran Kim Won-sik went through military adaptation training in Gangwon Province in 1967 before being sent to Vietnam, where he mostly took part in mountain guerrilla missions.

“We would collect corpses of our enemies and bring them back to base, and when fellow comrades were

killed in action, we'd carry their bodies to the mountaintop for helicopter transport. Corpses with eyes out, the fishy smell of a dead body... They might say you forget everything when you die, but these are memories that can never be erased.”

He expresses that, although he holds a sense of pride as a hero who served his country, the ongoing struggle with PTSD following his participation in the Vietnam War continues to cause him significant emotional pain. The vivid experiences of Kim WonSik gradually faded over the course of more than fifty years, but what saddened him even more was the fact that the memory of the war was being forgotten across generations. He expresses concern that “the current generation lacks a strong sense of national identity and security awareness. I feel sorrow when seeing scenes like Memorial Day where people don't even raise the national flag.”

Through Kim Won-sik's interview, it becomes evident that, in contrast to the government's emphasis on the significance of participation in the war, many veterans have long felt a sense of being forgotten. The personal despair and resentment they experience after the war can also be seen as sacrifices made in the name of social responsibility. The fading sorrow of war veterans within collective memory is not merely a matter of individual choice, but rather a socially determined process shaped by the dynamics of society itself. As Halbwachs noted, rather than based on historical facts themselves, memories were being shaped into a collective memory through interpretations and evaluations of historical events (11).



Fig 1: Interview with Veteran, KimWonSik & Kim Young Hoon

## **5. CASE STUDY 2: KIM YOUNG-HOON (PSEUDONYM) - ANGER AT SOCIAL INDIFFERENCE**

Veteran Kim Young-hoon had the unique experience of volunteering for the military without telling his family. His story stands out for how he talks about the problems he saw in Vietnam's systemic contradictions.

“Even though the money we earned accounted for 50% of South Korea’s GDP at the time, there is neither compensation nor recognition now. That just shows how little this government cares about soldiers who risk their lives for the country—it's zero, absolutely zero out of ten—not even close. That’s why we always say. If things stay this way, who would ever step forward with a rifle in hand if another war breaks out?”

One of the most powerful parts of Kim Young-hoon’s memory is his deep frustration with how little society seems to care about veterans. His comment that “they are indifferent without even knowing what we did” shows a strong feeling of Ressentiment, combining the need for recognition for his sacrifice and feeling cut off from younger generations.

Many veterans take pride in having risked their lives for their country, but at the same time, they face social neglect and financial struggles when they return home from the battlefield. As these feelings develop into Ressentiment, veterans may develop their negative emotions against society. Nietzsche’s original idea of Ressentiment in *On the Genealogy of Morality* refers to the anger felt by someone who sees themselves as powerless against a stronger opponent. He describes the Ressentiment that it comes from “natures that are denied the true reaction, that of deeds, and compensate themselves with an imaginary revenge.” (13) After expressing frustration as surviving veteran, however, he suggests a solution how our society can do against forgetting historical war memory

“Stories must be told again and again for the roots to stay alive. If the roots die, the tree will fall.”

Veteran KimYoungHoon expects that the stories of the war veterans pass down to younger generations, since meaningful historical narratives can be remembered only when they are repeated and transmitted continuously. Memories can be changed or created, since it has a dynamic creation process. Ong suggested that memory is not a fixed form but a living, communal experience. As described in his book *Orality and Literacy* (12), Social memory is a constructed creation—constantly reproduced and

reinvented—based on the agreement of members within a society.

## **6. CASE STUDY 3: YOO BYUNG-CHUL (PSEUDONYM) - BETWEEN EARNING MONEY AND BECOMING A HERO**

Veteran Yoo Byung-chul was drafted by the government and sent to Vietnam in 1971. He returned home in 1973. His testimony is a mix of wanting to support his country economically and seeing himself as a brave soldier.

“It was a deployment for the purpose of earning foreign currency to support domestic economic development. However, going through horrific experiences like the Anke Pass operations, ambush operations, and Viet Cong attacks... When I saw my comrade lose both legs to a landmine, it was really...”

One important part of Yoo Byung-chul’s story is how he describes symptoms of PTSD. Even though he still deals with things like “being startled by loud noises, talking in his sleep, or waking up in fear,” he built a life he could be proud of. He went to night school, got his architecture license, and became a construction company director. His story shows how someone can turn the pain of war into motivation to succeed. Today, he continues to honor his fellow soldiers by helping identify remains and visiting the national cemetery. He says he wants to pass on “conscience and responsibility, and the importance of family” to future generations. These veterans refuse to have their stories framed merely as cries of victimhood. Instead, they see the younger generation as partners and seek to share the wisdom and sense of responsibility gained through their lived experiences. Their testimonies are vivid efforts to reproduce values—hoping to contribute to a more cohesive and healthy society.

## **7. CASE STUDY 4: KIM JU-CHAN (PSEUDONYM) - COMPLEX IDENTITY OF DUAL WAR PARTICIPATION**

Veteran Kim Ju-chan, born in Pyongyang in 1930, participated in both the Korean War and the Vietnam War. He volunteered to join the military at age 18 and took part in major operations like the Incheon Landing and the recapture of Pyongyang. One of his proudest memories is being “the first to plant the Korean flag at the Workers' Party headquarters.”

“I witnessed the outbreak of war directly from the frontlines on June 25, 1950. I saw Seoul fall in just three days as the under-equipped Korean forces were

pushed back by North Korean troops armed with Soviet tanks and aircraft. However, we fought desperately at the Nakdong River defense line, and

after the Incheon Landing Operation, we recaptured Pyongyang.”



**Figure.2. Interview with Veteran, YooByongChul**

A particularly emotional part of his story is when he talks about reuniting with his mother during the war. After entering Pyongyang, he was able to find her, but because of the Chinese army’s southward advance and subsequent retreat, they were separated again and he still carries the painful memory of that final goodbye. In the Vietnam War, he experienced a very different kind of fighting, including night battles and underground guerrilla warfare. He completed 23 years of military service and retired as a Major in the Army. Through his experiences in both wars, Kim Ju-chan feels a strong responsibility to talk about what he lived through. He often speaks about the importance of “democratic freedom” and the need to pass down war memories to future generations so that the past is not forgotten.

“The younger generation must understand why the war broke out—and why we had to fight. For these war veterans, life and the memory of war were not merely about moments of suffering. It was also about the sorrow of seeing the values they had sacrificed their lives to protect gradually being forgotten—and about their hope to pass on their wisdom to the next generation.”

As mentioned in Halbwachs’s theory, memory always connects to the present. Collective memory doesn’t keep the past exactly as it was, but is always being reshaped to fit present needs. This means memory isn’t something fixed, but something that keeps changing. The responsibility to remember historical events and to bring them back into focus lies not only with individuals but also with society and its members. home in 1973. His testimony is a mix of wanting to support his country economically and seeing himself as a brave soldier.

## **8. CONCLUSION**

The template will number citations consecutively. Philosopher Paul Ricoeur wrote about how forgetting isn’t always a bad thing. In his book *Memory, History, Forgetting*, he said, “There also exists a reserve of forgetting, which can be a resource for memory and for history.” (18) That is to say, that without forgetting, memory wouldn’t even be possible, so memory and forgetting go hand in hand.



**Figure.3. Interview with Veteran Kim JuChan**

The memories shared by Korean veterans were shaped by this back-and-forth between what they remember personally and what society remembers, between being seen as heroes and also as people who suffered, and between remembering and forgetting. While war is an unforgettable event for the individual, society tends to erase its past stories from collective memory far too quickly. From the perspective of veterans living in the aftermath, they inevitably experience feelings of alienation and helplessness—an existence that may be seen as a sacrifice to the forces of social forgetting.

As Maurice Halbwachs suggests in his theory of collective memory, when the state frames war as a means of defending freedom and democracy, the narrative becomes one of heroism, in which patriotism and sacrifice are treated as inevitable consequences. Collective memory created in a society where people recall, recognize, and localize their memories (11). In such a framework, the pain and lived realities of individual veterans are often overlooked.

Through the interviews, the veterans commonly expressed a sense of alienation as their patriotic sacrifices and historical experiences were gradually being forgotten. Living with a sense of alienation from the socially constructed collective memory, they can carry a form of Ressentiment. While social memory, as Halbwachs theorizes, operates through a selective framework—one that often erases pain and preserves only heroic narratives—we must not forget their brutal and painful stories. As Nietzsche defines that

Ressentiment is creative, and gives birth to values, which generates a dynamic and generative force in itself (13).

Secondly, recording real experiences of veterans' memories on war is clearly different from conducting a literature review. Storytelling itself delivers mutual emotional connection, back-and-forth interaction, and a shared sense of community. Through oral narration, emotions can be conveyed more vividly, allowing listeners to feel as though they are experiencing something they themselves have never lived through. These important features often disappear during the writing process, making the memories feel less alive and less powerful in society.

Thirdly, acknowledging that Korean veterans' memories are not just about the past but also about how they make sense of the present. So that they call for historical responsibility so that we can move forward for a better society by using oral narratives more responsibly. The feelings of Ressentiment can be painful, but they can also lead to new values. If their memories help teach younger people about peace, then their sacrifices will truly matter. War memories shouldn't just praise the past, but should remind us how much war hurts and why peace is worth protecting.

It seems clear the interviewees of the veterans showed clear sentiments of alienation and sorrow over a forgotten history. However, the true significance of

this study lies not only in those feelings of ignorance, but in the fact that the surviving veterans still possess a strong historical consciousness and a desire to share their memories with the next generation. They emphasized that their memory war must be continuously transmitted to the next generation—and they showed a strong interest in sharing their historical perspectives and experiences to contribute to societal development. While they did express disappointment toward present-day society, their attitude was also marked by respect and thoughtfulness. What's needed is an attitude of respect, by being willing to listen closely and accept their stories as complex and alive.

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