



# WAR!

## WHAT IS IT GOOD FOR?

By Jill Smith

Since Vladimir Putin launched an unprovoked attack on Ukraine, world leaders and citizens have wondered and worried that this is the prelude to a third world war. How do individuals cope with the tension and terror of this possibility? How has anyone survived previous conflicts that inflamed the world?

SOWN (Supportive Older Women's Network) serves older women who have lived through a number of world events, including a world war and conflicts that were never officially identified as war.

Present-day events in Ukraine have triggered memories in elders who endured other cataclysmic conflicts. For SOWN clients, their experiences include WWII, the Korean Conflict, Vietnam, and Desert Storm. WWII and Vietnam evoked the most memories.

We asked them about the immediate impact of previous wars and the long-term consequences they felt individually and collectively. What's the earliest conflict they were aware of? Did it affect them directly through a family member or friend? Did it mean rationing or higher gas prices?

For one telephone support group in Germantown, the earliest conflict they remember is WWII. The United States was forced into the war when Japanese pilots bombed Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1942. U.S. troops fought in Europe and the South Pacific until the surrender

of Japan on September 2, 1945.

The father and an uncle of one woman and 4 uncles of another served in WWII. None of the women had a "Rosie the Riveter" in their family but one aunt epitomized the economic effect the war had on civilian women. This member's aunt was a "college professor but left teaching because she could make more money sewing uniforms for the troops."

For another group, their experiences ranged from WWII to Vietnam to protests against that war. The war between Communist North Vietnam and South Vietnam was a war of proxies. China backed the north; the south was backed

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by the United States, but neither country wanted to risk a direct confrontation that could include nuclear weapons. The rationale for sending U.S. troops was to circumvent the "domino effect" of one country, i.e., North Vietnam, falling to communist control. Once the first domino was down, the chain reaction was feared to be unstoppable. The United

States deployed troops to serve in 1965. The final troops pulled out of South Vietnam in 1973.

The Vietnam War was the earliest conflict Lynn was aware of. Her father participated in WWII, but he never spoke of it.

For Ethy, an immediate impact of Vietnam was moving her marriage to an earlier date so her husband would not be drafted. (President Lyndon B. Johnson had signed an executive order changing the military conscription rules for the expanding war in Vietnam. One second after midnight on August 26, 1965, married men would no longer be exempt from the draft. Those married before midnight would be.) She remembers a classmate who died in the Vietnam war and still feels sad about that.

Ethy didn't participate in anti-war protests, but attended women's rights meetings of the newly-formed National Organization for Women. (The birth of the women's movement was a direct response to the treatment white women received as members of the anti-war movement, that is, a pervasive disregard for their contributions to and participation in all aspects of the movement. Women of color were rarely included in the beginning stages of organized feminist protests and writings.)

Flo remembers WWII when, as a 6-year-old, her family moved to her grandfather's farm to help with the farming. She remembers her mother repeatedly saying, "Eat your vegetables,

children are starving in Europe." She remembers food rationing, hiding under her desk in school, listening to the radio with her family each night to get news of the war, and their dinner-time conversations.

All of Flo's family were conscientious objectors and she, too, became a pacifist who marched on Washington and participated in campus protests during the Vietnam war. She describes herself as a "pacifist with a fighting attitude."

Linda said she did not feel a direct impact from wars, but her brother was a marine who went to Vietnam. He never talked about it upon his return, but Linda feels his drinking problem was related to his time in the service. In contrast, her reality at that time was about herself. Even though her brother was in Vietnam, she felt "fairly oblivious about the war and protests."

Lynn felt no direct consequences of the war in Vietnam. She had gotten married and had her first child during that era. Her husband was in the Air Force but did not go overseas.

Today, Lynn and others feel "horrible" about the war in Ukraine. Seeing everything now on the news; people behaving like savages; feeling helpless and wondering why nothing can be done to save lives. Flo, the pacifist with a fighting attitude, is "surprised and shocked" this [war in Ukraine] could happen again. Her heart is "torn out" for the people in Ukraine and the innocent people in Russia.

Ethy felt dazed by what she saw of Vietnam on television, but not the same as today's coverage of Ukraine, which is much worse for her. The war in Ukraine feels more "real." She is reminded of the Holocaust when she sees the carnage in Ukraine. She feels there's nothing we can do and she doesn't see our government doing enough. She's impressed with the bravery of the Ukraine leadership.

And Linda, who was oblivious to the war in Vietnam, had seen TV coverage of Vietnamese killed. But that war didn't affect her like the war in Ukraine has.

*This article has been edited for length. For the full article (with links), visit [revivelo-calpaper.com](http://revivelo-calpaper.com).*

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**SOWN**

*SOWN strengthens community support networks, reduces social isolation, and improves the well-being of older adults, especially women and their families. For more info - or to join or volunteer - visit [sown.org](http://sown.org) or contact them at 215-487-3000 or [info@sown.org](mailto:info@sown.org). You can follow them on Facebook (@sown50) or Instagram (@sownphilly)*