

Veteran comes to grips with the Vietnam legacy

In March 1975 I found a National Geographic map of Southeast Asia, covered with some pins of black, red and yellow with a red stripe.

On my bedroom wall in Kitsilano they became the objects of a daily ritual. The red-headed pins moved across the printed geography and swiftly engulfed, and in some cases bypassed, the yellow and black pins. A living geometry created by the death-throes of the Republic of Vietnam.

By mid-April, An Loc ceased to exist under the crush of B-52 carpet bombing. A last gasp tribute to the "we had to destroy it in order to save it" mentality.

Commentary

After that, as the noose around Saigon tightened, the evacuation reached a frenzied pitch in anticipation of the coming blood bath.

What is clear in my memory, amid the flotsam of Hueys, is the two tons of gold bullion left on the tarmac at Tan Son Nhut by former South Vietnamese President Nguyen Van Thieu's Swiss pilot.

It seems Thieu couldn't take it with him. The night Saigon fell I watched Walt Rostow try to explain it all away. And I laughed until I cried.

I was on a jag between the high that the light at the end of the tunnel was unplugged and deep sorrow of the waste of what was the best in America and of Vietnam. That night I became a member of the first generation of American soldiers to lose a war.

Vietnam: the black hole of American history. The average American doesn't have a clear chronology of the war. Most veterans are familiar only with their nitch in the decade of American involvement.

Vietnam is generally regarded as a mistake.

When I hear that statement I'm tempted to ask them if they ever lived in a house with a low hanging door jam that caught them mid-forehead. And is it a mistake to keep banging their head against that jam for 10 years?

By and large, Americans don't want to be brought down by the grim details, and God

knows there is a wealth of grim details. But we are an image-conscious people, and Vietnam damages our self-image.

The public has preferred that the veteran carry the emotional baggage of the war.

Yet, the word makes a daily appearance in the newspaper — any given periodical and scandal sheet. America has a morbid fascination with the one issue it cannot face head-on.

It appears that the American public has received most of its knowledge of the war and the participants through the vignettes of prime time.

In the early 70s there was the ever-popular "freaked-out mad-dog 'Nam vet'" plot.

The most twisted of these was a British production wherein a deranged lieutenant sets up a one-man base camp on a deserted RAF airfield and proceeds to imagine he's being over run by VC, charging through the green fields of England.

They had to kill the poor boy to make him happier.

More recently, the trend in pop culture is to portray the Vietnamese bouncing off any strong American presence. As though we can stroll through Yellow Peril's backyard any time we choose.

Now we have the added characterization of the POW/MIA being kept as a pet for the amusement of Yellow Peril and his chums.

Considering that the United States spent twice the amount of ordinance it did in W.W. II — including the atomic bombs — I'm sure the Vietnamese have nothing better to do than amuse themselves with a day at the zoo watching the antics of a stir-crazy, tattered pilot.

But it makes good ratings for the networks. Imagine what would have happened to Jeremiah Denton if he were Vietnamese and was captured by us.

His would be a short story indeed.

Vietnam is the lover of our dreams, with whom we can never live with, much less fathom.

What is odd, considering that the affair was torrid and brutal despite similar founding principles, she misses us. She will haunt our collective memory for decades to come.

By Julian Camp

Camp served in Vietnam with the First Infantry division during 1969-70.

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