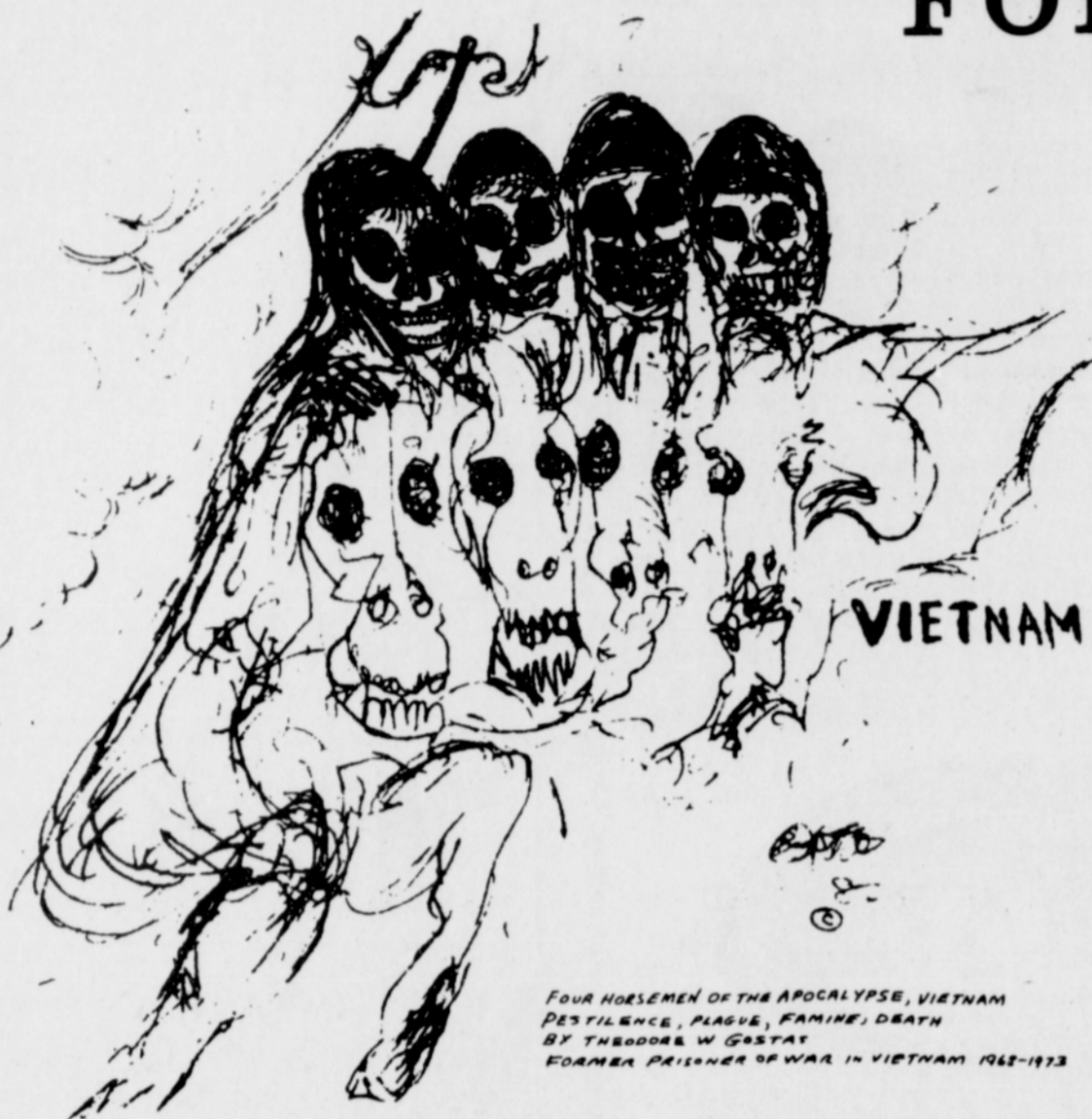




WAR & PEACE



FORGOTTEN NAMES



FOUR HORSEMEN OF THE APOCALYPSE, VIETNAM
PESTILENCE, PLAGUE, FAMINE, DEATH
BY THEODORE W. GUSTAF
FORMER PRISONER OF WAR IN VIETNAM 1962-1973

I spent the year of 1966 in Viet Nam as a U. S. Marine reporter-photographer, generally attached to infantry and reconnaissance units. My job was a simple one: go out into the paddies and the jungles and write stories and take pictures of marines in combat. I was very lucky. My stories and photographs suffered a dismemberment that I escaped. They were butchered or killed regularly to conform with the Marine Corps' image of itself and to the official purpose of an increasingly unpopular war. An invidious rule was that marines were not to be mentioned as killed. "Nobody dies," was a shibboleth of my questionable profession.

Finally back home I was tormented by what I had experienced in Viet Nam and by the miserable and murderously prejudiced treatment of Vietnamese by Americans. At some point I could no longer accept the brutal and callous attitude toward the Vietnamese. Much of it was from fear. But at its core was racial and cultural contempt. I felt differently. I had never seen a people so determined to survive with so little to recommend it. They fought relentlessly against foreign invaders, and no matter how well we deceived ourselves, the Vietnamese knew better. Though I never quite accepted their cause I learned to respect the terrible way in which they fought for it. The war we made against them was the instrument that made their success inevitable.

I became deeply involved in the American antiwar movement as a member of the Viet Nam Veterans Against the War and was often referred to as a traitor to my country and to the men who continued to fight in Viet Nam. Again my feelings were the reverse. I felt I had betrayed the ideals of my country when I fought in Viet Nam. As a seeing-eye dog for the Marine Corps I witnessed many of the dishonesties that characterized our war policy. At home I was compelled to unearth the rot the underlies history, the agreed upon fictions that create cultural and racial mythologies and sanction empire. I metamorphosed into a very skeptical and angry person. Also an impatient one. Every day hundreds of Americans and Vietnamese died or were critically injured. I wrote articles, made speeches and participated in antiwar demonstrations all over the country. In 1971 I threw my war medals at the Capitol building in Washington, D.C. with one thousand other Viet Nam veterans, and a week later was one of twenty veterans who dumped several pounds of fresh chickenshit on the front porch of the Pentagon. We were arrested for what one of us called "fowl defecation distribution." Of course we could have used explosives: our message was that Frankenstein was bringing the war home.

Eventually the war ended, the first the country had lost. By then I was burned out and living on the Oregon coast, separate and alienated from many of the causes I had espoused. I fished out at sea for albacore tuna, chopped wood and worked as a bartender. I started writing a book which remains unfinished. I drank heavily and smoked large amounts of marijuana. On the day the war ended, April 30, 1975, I telephoned a friend I had fought alongside in Viet Nam. More than years separated us. We thought differently about the war. He agreed with the government that dissident veterans were the worst sort of traitors and that we had betrayed our friends, in particular those who had been killed. I told him I was glad that the war was over. The Vietnamese could pick up their history and resolve their own problems without being caught in a perpetual vice between two mutually hostile superpowers, I said, not anticipating the boat people. My friend was bitter and harsh with me. We have not talked since.

The hope I might see him was a reason I rode across the country in a pickup truck to Washington, D. C. during Armistice Day, now named Veterans' Day — a shift from celebrating the end of a war to the celebration of war itself. Thousands of Viet Nam veterans crowded into the capitol hoping to be finally recognized after years of neglect and disparagement. Blame for the war had been successfully transferred to the men and women who were forced to serve as its instruments. Now the veterans were going to honor themselves and give themselves a party. After all these years of bearing the nation's guilt and sense of dishonor, they wanted America to acknowledge them for what they had endured in its name.

I had misgivings. I dislike ritual and pomp and politicians who talk about wars. In D. C. I felt smothered by flags and military bands. I sensed that we were about to be used again. Our sojourn to Washington had been played up as a healing of the country still divided from the Viet Nam war. I felt the government would take advantage of our ceremony of reconciliation and use it as a basis of support for its descent toward the final outcome of a military-industrial partnership. Yet for all of that our presence must have been an embarrassment, a tattered, crippled spectre of a lost war. Our image was to be used but we were to be got out of town as quickly as the ritual was finished.

I expected too much: honest evaluation of the war and our roles as soldiers; coming to terms with our feelings toward the Vietnamese and the manner in which we treated them; and refusal to be manipulated in support for another war. I had also hoped to see at least one of the few close friends of combat. None were there. My disappointment was almost complete. The exception was how deeply moved I was by the veterans' needs for each other. Common and everyday barriers were down, even, I hoped, those that resulted from the war. Yet I felt alien to them, much the same as I might feel at a reunion of my old boy scout troop or a former elementary school class. Though I had been sculpted by the war and continued to carry it around inside like a cancer, I discovered how removed from it I had become. Fifteen years have cushioned me from the more terrible memories of that single year. Details and events are hazy. I have forgotten names that I thought I would always remember. At the Viet Nam veterans monument, which is covered with names of the war dead, I could think of no more than half a dozen dead friends. I ran my fingers in the letters of their carved names. They had been dead a very long time and my tears had dried up. I was more saddened by a hand-lettered piece of white cardboard propped against a marble panel among flowers, photographs and medals. Written on it were the names of the four students who were killed at Kent State.

I left Washington with a sense that nothing had been resolved, nothing healed. Only empty ceremony, a facade to incorporate Viet Nam veterans back into a madness they had partially recovered from. We had not been pariahs simply because we were the nation's agents in an unpopular war but because we had learned an irreversible truth about ourselves as human beings and we could not change back. The demand that we reaccept our culture's illusions as reality had not lessened nor the exertion to conform us to a definition of history we had repudiated. That tension underlie the ceremony that Viet Nam veterans staged for themselves. The price of staying outside was probably too high for most of them. But I could not accept the offered terms. Viet Nam removed my trust in government, and I regard patriotism as a narrow and cynical appeal for prejudice, injustice and murder. Unlike many, perhaps most, I am not proud that I am a veteran of Viet Nam.

— Michael Paul McCusker

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