

WELCOME HOME

FROM PAGE ONE

I do remember vividly the end of the war. My family heard it one evening on the radio or the television. We were glad it was over. There was no excitement or joy. I do not think Nixon's "peace with honor" fooled any one of us. Our family went to church to pray for the men who were coming home and to thank God for the end of the war. No one else was in church. No one was in the streets, laughing or hugging each other. No one went to buy ice cream or whiskey to celebrate. The only reason I knew this was odd was that the entire time we drove and walked through deserted streets and prayed in an empty church, my mother gave us picture upon picture of the end of World War II. And I kept looking around for throngs of people crying and kissing, seeing only a street light on a corner, an empty store parking lot, an empty gas station, fluorescent lights in a small office building, empty sidewalks and streets, and darkened houses. It was late, everyone was in bed.

Those two memories are the only powerful ones I have about Viet Nam. When I studied the war, a college liberal, I learned most of the proper liberal, intellectual reactions (It was wrong; it was full of dishonesty; it was a scar on the country's foreign policy; an example of our corruption), and I learned the social, compassionate reactions (The men could not adjust. They were hated. They became junkies, committed suicide, were likely to freak out at any time. They were not accepted back into society.) None of that meant any more to me than that they were statements I could make. None of it touched me personally. If sometimes it briefly did, if I got to talking to someone and discovered that he was a Viet Nam veteran, I avoided asking questions. I did not know what to say nor what not to say so I did not say anything. Or I listened, tried to offer consolation —



Don McCullin

usually very benign, general and hopeful — and tried to change the subject. I reacted that way because the media kept portraying the veterans as people who fell apart at the seams whenever they thought about Viet Nam, and I did not want to make anyone fall apart in front of me. I would have no idea what to do and the thought was frightening.

I finally began to listen and to personally understand when I spent a few months in Arch Cape with my grandmother, Bridget Snow. I

met Lori Jane and Steven Carey and Michael Paul McCusker. I do not remember when I discovered that Steven and Michael were Viet Nam veterans, but I remember having the same reactions — listen politely, even intently, look like I understand, and do not ask questions. I asked questions of Michael first because he seemed willing to talk about anything. When I realized that he always talked vehemently and swore often, I did not worry about which questions I asked nor how I worded them.

In September I received a phone call from Lori Jane who said, come with us, it will only cost you one hundred and fifty dollars for the entire trip — and in early November I packed, cleaned up from work in a last mad hurry, and was off to Washington, D.C. for the dedication of the Viet Nam memorial.

Why was I going? Why was I careening across the country in a canopied pickup truck in a rush to spend two and a half days in D.C. and try to cram in learning everything about the Viet Nam war while also visiting two close friends from college? I suppose I wanted to be at the dedication to try and understand about something with which I have had no connection. I really knew nothing about war, and after I got to know Steven and Michael I was aware of how ignorant I was. Not many others of my age do, either. Those of us who were just young enough not to have any relatives or friends in Viet Nam have grown up in a world without war (although we have certainly lived in the shadowy fear of it; we have spent our entire lives threatened with nuclear holocaust). I know people who have been back and forth to the Middle East, to Latin America, to Northern Ireland, who grew up with street gangs and rising city crime rates, who somehow experienced violence like a war — but it is not the same. There is a vast group of middle class children who have grown up without any idea of what war is, personally, socially, politically, or economically. All through the weekend in D.C. I listened to stories, talked to my friends and other veterans, and searched my life for something comparable so that I would understand what they were saying. There was nothing

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'They were soul food for each other'

Shay Williams was one of five persons from the Oregon coast who crossed the United States in a covered pickup truck to attend the National Salute to Viet Nam Veterans in Washington, D.C. On the return trip from what she called "a forced march across the country," she was asked about her impressions of the almost three days she spent with Viet Nam veterans.

I was so overwhelmed with the love and caring shared by those men even though they did not know each other or what style of life they lived. They wore military clothing, which made it difficult to know if they were doctors, lawyers, carpenters or truck drivers. Even before they talked about what hills they were on or what battles they fought, just knowing they were in Viet Nam was an immediate bonding for them.

So many men talked all at once, yet they were all still listening. They wanted to say it all and hear it all at the same time. It was better than any family reunion I've been to. The intensity of the caring and depth between them was so impressive. There was no superficiality — if anyone had come with a mask it would have been alien. Every one of those men was hurting in some way. None of them had come home and really adjusted. The pain

was still there. You could really tell that it was by how they talked with each other and treated each other.

And the stories they told. Even when a friend had been killed they would tell their stories from beginning to end, and they would include the names of the men who had been killed.

For the first hours people milled around looking for people. Then they formed groups and after awhile split off and formed other groups, moving around talking to as many as they could. They were starving for each other. Most of them were not there for politics and they were not to be bothered with petty bullshit. They were there to share with each other what they should have been able to share with their families and neighbors who refused. They were hungry to fill up their souls; they were soul food for each other. And no matter who they talked with, their eyes always searched every passing face, looking for special friends, their buddies from the war.

There were so many emotions — except for hate. Or disgust. Nobody turned away from anybody.

I did not expect the same intensity to happen each day. I expected it to tone down, but instead it kept getting tighter. The second night was the same as the first. They were not finished talking to each other. They still aren't, but they had to go home finally.

The men did not exclude women, even though most of us had not been in Viet Nam. At no time was I made to feel an outsider. They told me their stories just as if I were one of them.

The memorial — it doesn't matter if you like it or hate it, it rips your guts out. All those names. It's not the memorial or the marble it's made out of, it's the names. It was impossible not to reach out and touch those names and feel the letters with your fingers. It felt like you were touching the person not a piece of stone.

When I first saw the monument I was blown away. I just couldn't believe it. It was so different, so powerful. Nothing about glory, just death, the real truth of war. I believe I could look at it fifty-seven thousand times and still be blown away by it each time.

I thought the parade was great even though I didn't much care for all those flags and military bands. Strip away all that crap and you have the men. They seemed to say to America, "no matter what you do to me or what you've done to me, I've beat you, I'm surviving. You can continue kicking me around, but I will not give up."

I feel the average person in Washington treated the veterans decently. They were very friendly and helpful and I was amazed how many of them had somebody involved in Viet Nam. I passed a man dressed up as a clown who was trying to collect money from people passing by for a children's organization. When I explained I couldn't give him any money because I was almost broke getting to D.C. from Oregon for the Viet Nam veterans gathering and still had to get back, he took off his nose and started talking about a buddy who was killed in the war. Then he put his nose back on and became a clown again.

I wish more men could have come, that the economy could have allowed them to leave their jobs or that they could have somehow raised enough money to come if they were out of work. I think the men who were there profited from it, from each other. If I were a millionaire, I would like to put on a big party for Viet Nam veterans. I would have a party every year until the men stopped coming because they no longer needed them.

I think what most amazed me was the gentleness they touched each other with. If the whole world could be like that it would be an incredible place. Something that was also really beautiful was that everyone was free to be the way they wanted to be — they could laugh or cry or talk or be quiet and stoic, and there was no one to say they couldn't be that way.



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