

WELCOME HOME

FROM PAGE SIX

ing. Nothing to understand the pain. Nothing to understand the warmth that surprised and overwhelmed everyone there. I could not know what they were thinking or feeling unless they told me; I could not know how they had gotten from there to here in life unless they tried to explain.

On Friday morning, the second day in D.C., I went to a panel discussion on Agent Orange, a chemical defoliant used widely over Viet Nam between 1965 and 1972. Birth defects, skin diseases and psychological disorders are attributed to a dioxin in a chemical called 2,4,5-T. Sixteen years later the Veterans Administration and the U. S. Government are finally beginning research on the effects of Agent Orange on humans. Results of tests are not expected for thirteen years and most of the veterans have yet to receive any medical compensation for problems they feel were caused by Agent Orange. Congressman Daschle, a South Dakota Democrat and evidently an active promoter of veterans interests, was at the panel and talked up a bill to provide benefits for veterans with soft tissue sarcoma, believed to be caused by exposure to Agent Orange. Joan Bernstein, a special counsel to the Viet Nam Veterans of America, was perceptive, encouraging, and minced no words about the VA's lack of action. John Hansen of the General Accounting Office, which had completed a study of the VA's Agent Orange examinations, blasted the organization for its ineptitude and its callous treatment of Viet Nam veterans. What knocked me flat were the testimonies of veteran after veteran, men and women, who had medical problems, whose children had medical problems and birth defects, whose family genetic histories indicated no such problems, and who had been consistently ignored or patronized. When the floor was open for questions the first man to talk choked back tears. When he said, "What do I tell my kids, what do I tell my wife? We don't trust you!" and pointed at a VA representative, he received standing applause, steady, clear, and supportive. He went on to say, "We want (an admission) that those guys over there (at the Pentagon) did this to us. We're here together, we'll work through the system, but you've got to answer for it!"

I was amazed. Later I commented to Lori Jane and Shay Williams, who had come with us from the Oregon coast, that there was so much pain but little evident hatred for those who caused it. I sensed the pain, the frustration and bitterness, but overwhelmingly just pain crying out for help. — And they were still willing to work with the people responsible for it. They have no choice, Shay said. What else can they do? Of course — I have a lot to learn, don't I? Of course: isn't that part of the pain? To have to work with the people who ripped you apart, who ripped your values to shreds and who then dismissed themselves from any responsibility. Steven said to me, "It hurts to have faith in something so strong you'd die for it, then come back and be slapped around. It hurts. But you can't let go of your values, that's when you could crack up. There

HOPEFUL JOURNEY

My personal pilgrimage to the Viet Nam Veterans Memorial in Washington, D.C. was a hopeful journey. The anticipation of bringing to reality twelve years of dream-like memories and feelings was of unreal proportions. While there I felt many of the men and women made the pilgrimage for much the same reasons as myself. We came to meet and touch, to share emotions and stand together as humans who shared such an extreme experience and remained silent for so long.

For me it was therapy. There was not so much the feeling of being war heroes, but we all shared the heroic feeling that comes out of surviving and enduring.

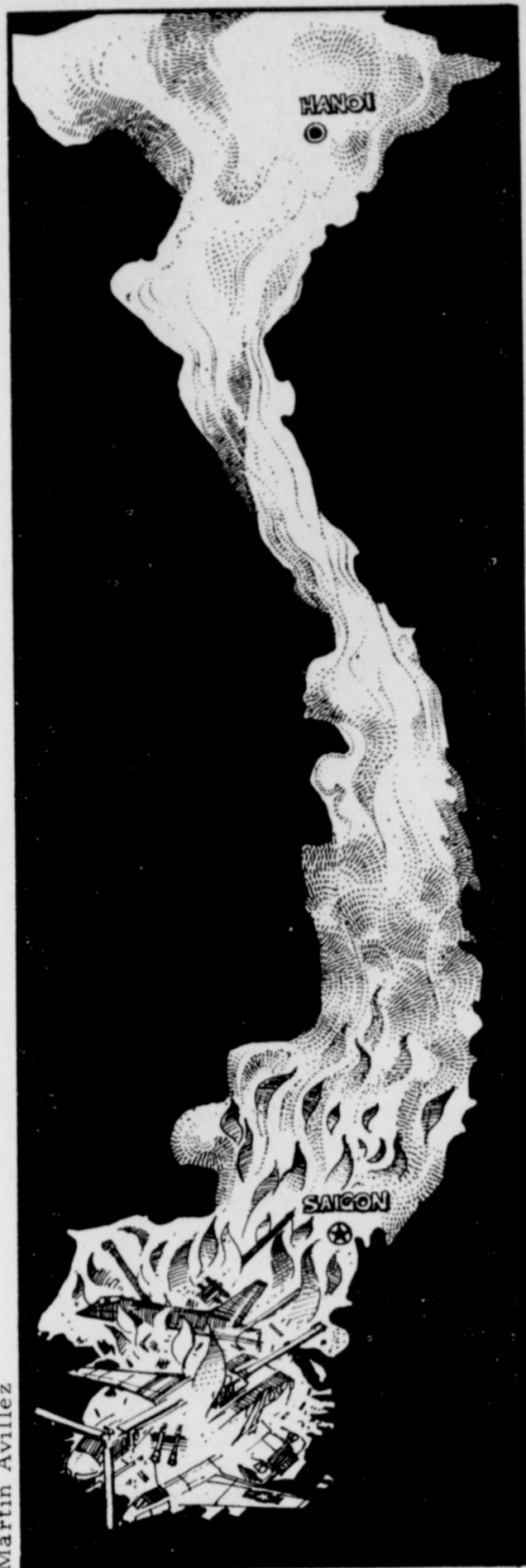
We stood and marched together as if to say, "Look, we're still here whether you want us or not. We survived and we possess a great amount of knowledge that might help prevent the next war which would be started at the whim of the privileged few."

Personally, I did not go to Washington for a pat on the back or even a welcome home. I've always known I was home.

We gathered in D. C. not for the final burial of our dead but for the revival of our living.

— Steven Carey

(Steven Carey was a member of the 173rd Airborne Brigade in Viet Nam in 1969.)



Martin Avillez

was no honor in dying in Viet Nam. There was honor in dying for the values we went over with, but those values didn't hold true."

It had been said before, Steven commented when I pulled out a notebook to write down his words. Yes, I thought, but never enough. Not when I had just seen several thousand men walking down Constitution Avenue with the scars of that breach of faith on their faces and bodies. Not when I had just seen several thousand people gathered around a memorial, listening to speeches about the gratitude of the American people and the present administration (Ronald Reagan had said it was an honorable war) and caring more about each other than about the inane statements being made.

That parade. When my friend from college and I got to it a half hour late, the first thing we saw was a local high school band and about twenty girls in skimpy costumes dancing in front. That's incredibly sexist, my friend Betsy said. Inappropriate, I thought. I wondered, when I saw the first group of veterans, how they felt about being in a parade with bands and military marching groups. By the time the second and third group had passed I noticed that lots of people applauded them, shook their hands,



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ROLL CALL

As in Flanders Fields, the names of the Viet Nam war dead are planted row upon row. They rise on seventy slabs of black marble, fifty-seven thousand, nine hundred and thirty-nine names, inscribed in the order of death — a perfect memorial to men who died, and not to the war in which they fought. Call the roll:

Jessie Alba, Titus Toussant, Hiawatha Hicks, Kim Parliament, Peter Cook, Patrick Derig, Daniel Ely. . . .

The memorial has the feel of a cemetery. It is sunk into the Mall, invisible from the street. Nearby are the Lincoln Memorial and the Washington Monument and the places where opponents of the war gathered to protest the very death of the men memorialized here.

It is cold in November and the night comes fast, but it is still not hard to summon up the heat of the war protests: the tear gas fired by the police, John Mitchell barricading the doors of the Justice Department, the medics going through the crowd to help the sick or hurt, the water wagons, the paddy wagons, the press wagons, the chants, the flags, the hard-hats, the buses drawn up around the White House, the singing, the folk songs, the vets flinging off their medals in protest, the vet who took me up to Walter Reed Army Hospital to talk to the amputees, a patient there — a kid — who asked if I wanted to see his wound. Yes, I said by reflex. He opened his bathrobe. His crotch had been blown away.

(. . . Gerald Aadland, James Aauland, Michael Abbott, Paul Abraham, Luther Bagnatt, Marlin Babson. . . .)

The monument starts like the war itself, small and unseen. It grows larger, as the war did, by degrees, until it is higher than a man's head, and then, also like the war, it slowly fades until it is gone. It has almost no beginning and no end. The war was like that.

There has been much argument about this memorial. Some say it is too understated. Some say it mirrors the country's ambivalence toward the war. Some say it is an insult to the men who died.

You can get what you want out of the monument the same as you could from the war. As for me, I am grateful there is no man-on-horseback statue, no paean to heroism, no attempt to make something wonderful out of something tragic. All over the city, iron men on iron horses prance in the parks — no mention of the dead. It is nice just for once to remember that wars kill kids. It is nice just for once that they have their own memorial.

(. . . Leroy Barnes, Wayne Bebo, Kenneth Bills, Paul Binder, George Binko, John Birch, George Bird, Donald Christy, Steven Ching. . . .)

During the Viet Nam War, Life Magazine once ran the pictures of those who died that week. The effect was stunning. Suddenly, we were no longer talking about stopping the Commies before they got to San Francisco, but looking into the faces of the dead and wondering why. The memorial asks the same question.

(. . . Vincent Capodanno, Charles Cohen, Roy Fryman, Victor Paine, Ronald Pierce, Robert Schatzman, Phil Tabb, Victor Waxman, Edgar Udell, Edward McCann, Larry Metcalf. . . .)

Visitors approach the monument slowly. Some of them ask guides where they can find a certain name. The guides have books in which the names are listed alphabetically. It is a thick book, about the size of the Yellow Pages for a big city. The slabs are numbered. Find the name. Find the number. Find the slab. And then, if you can, find the reason why.

(. . . Mark Ferguson, Lynn France, James Gainer Jr., Douglas Glover, Gary Higbee, Dorris Ivey, Edward Iwasko, Floyd Johnson, Walter Karas, Martin Lloyd, John Markillie, Ronald Meyer, Terry Redic. . . .)

All over Washington, the Viet Nam War has been remembered by speeches and wreath layings, parties and news conferences, press releases and ceremonies. The best memorial to any war, though, is the memory of the nations that fought it. After a while it fades and politicians supply a new one. They reshape the past to fit the present, and the gore of war gets converted into parades and flags and simple lesson for school kids. Viet Nam, though, now has a memorial to the reality of the war. It's the names of the dead. Call the roll:

Augusto Xavier, David Zywicke, Takeshi Yabiku, Santos Nunez, Jerry Petty, Cary Queen, Larry Libbee, Brian Highland, Kenneth Alfstad, Eddie. . . .

— Richard Cohen
from The Washington Post