



and shouted "Welcome home!" Welcome home? They came home ten or fifteen years ago. And I suddenly realized that the veterans walking past me had to keep fighting the war long after they came home. They walked in the parade dressed in jungle fatigues as if they had just stepped off a plane from Viet Nam. For a moment it was not 1982: the war had just ended and its veterans were marching arm in arm, holding up clasped hands together, laughing, crying. But it was 1982, the veterans had been home for years — all those statements about how the war had split a disillusioned America were vivid to me in that instant. I saw it in the men's eyes, and in the lines of their faces, the visible scars of the anger and hatred that a divided America had thrown at them. The middle class liberals, the political intellectuals, the government officials who made decisions they refused to be responsible for — those people who were part of the division did not carry the pain of it: the veterans did. Perhaps I am not being fair. Maybe lots of others also carried the pain, but at that parade I realized that it had been the veterans who been made scapegoats for the war and now, suddenly and finally, people were saying welcome home. I wonder if that might be why so many of them simply let the jingoistic speeches slide by. Maybe it had to do with being so happy that finally they were not aliens or a despised minority; that the feeling of warmth and welcome was all that mattered. Shay said that the love shared between the veterans overrode any petty politics. Perhaps that was why Secretary of Defense Weinberger received standing applause when he said on Veterans' Day, "We learned one thing, we learned never again to send our young men and women to a war we don't intend to win." As if we had not intended to win the war; as if a military ever fights a war intending upon a draw; as if in our nuclear age there is such a thing as a winnable war.

I wondered why Jan Scruggs, a Viet Nam veteran who was the main organizer of the memorial and the tribute, was able to say, "America thanks you," when it was really the veterans and themselves who chose the monument's design, raised the money to build it, and got themselves to D.C. to dedicate it. Perhaps it was happiness to have a country again that prompted veterans to carry American flags and sing God Bless America. It seemed to be a contradiction. This group so long accused of hating the government, the nation itself, was suddenly here singing its praises and waving its flags. They certainly got drunk, that part of the stereotype they upheld, as well as the one which pictures them in holey jeans and raggy jackets. There were a fair number in business suits, veterans from California and Boston most notably, but the rest were pretty much identifiable by how unlike Washington, D.C. they looked.

I asked Steven what he thought about all the testaments of gratitude and honor. He said, "We don't want their thanks. We don't trust their thanks. If they would have said 'Thank you for putting up with us fucking you over,' for being brave enough to bear up under it, that would mean something. But thank you for going over and fighting our war for us, welcome home boys, that's crap."

There was one group that protested the militarism, a small group called Viet Nam Veterans Against the War (Against Imperialism), which is not to be confused with the original VVAW. The (Against Imperialism) group is a split-off and proclaims itself more radical than its parent, which was also present at the affair. The (AI) group issued an emotional, intense statement about the injustice, dishonor and deceit of the Viet Nam war, and decried any attempt to glorify it. In the middle of the dedication of the monument, I think during a Gold Star Mother's speech, the (AI) veterans began shouting, "We won't be used again!" and with fists raised amid jeers and shouts to shut up, they left the dedication in a body of hardly more than ten and milled around in an open space until mounted policemen herded them out of the area. Later I talked with one of the (AI) leaders who said he felt good about what the group had done, it gave people a chance to

express discontent with the planned spectacle and that veterans were aware of the manipulation by the government, that they were not just beer-drinking John Wayne types. I was not so sure that anyone noticed. No one seemed to join them as they passed through the crowd. I saw that nearly everyone's head was bowed during the benediction. They all seemed to be taking the ceremony pretty seriously.

Then there were the individuals, like Butch in the bar at the Dupont Plaza Hotel. He told me about his uncle who had been with him in Viet Nam and who had committed suicide. "I told him I knew he was having marriage problems and shit, and I told him 'You got anything you want to talk about, you come to me. Anytime, okay?'" He was my uncle but he was a big brother too, and my friend. He didn't talk to no one but me after we were in 'Nam together. And two weeks later I heard he blew his brains out. He was so sane, man. He'd adjusted so well, but he held it all in."

There was Ron Bobish in the party for the 173rd Airborne, who said, "Man, I feel safe here. I felt safest in the field with these guys. They saved my fucking ass, man. We gotta lot of respect for each other." I said something about camaraderie and he exploded. "Camaraderie, that's it. That's it exactly. We were there and we didn't know what we were doing and everybody hated us. Camaraderie was the most important thing about that war." He also commented on the "herd's" (the 173rd) lack of racial discrimination, but I have to question that claim since Michael remarked, "What war was he in?" There was a man in an elevator who talked about a veteran whose name was not on the memorial. He had been sent home in a coma and died and was not acknowledged to have been killed in the service. I discovered that was the case for all the men who had come home wounded and died here. And there was a nurse who talked about being a woman in the war — don't forget about us, she said to cheers and applause from the men; and countless others who swapped stories, and asked the same question of each other over and over again — "Who were you with?"

I am leaving out a lot — stories that veterans told me about being in the war and about coming back, the difficulties they have faced, I am leaving out most of the speeches about those ancient and terrible paeans to honor, glory, loyalty and sacrifice. Mostly I am leaving out what the weekend in D.C. meant to the veterans and their families, and to people who seldom think about the war in Viet Nam. I cannot draw conclusions about them. There were too many contradictions, too many different and intensely personal reactions.

It was extremely important to me to be with Steven and Michael, the hours I spent listening to them. I strained to make connections between what they said and the world I knew. I went to D.C. to hear what Viet Nam veterans had to say because there is no one else to say it, and because I felt that whatever they learned, if we listen to them carefully we may never have to learn in the manner they did.

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STATEMENT FROM VIETNAM ERA VETERANS

They want to call us heroes for serving the country. They offer us recognition and honor, even a national monument. Heroes for serving a country that burned down villages and shot everything that moved. Recognition for being the pawns and agents of a ruthless death machine that systematically tortured and butchered civilians, that rained flaming jelly gasoline, toxic Agent Orange and other poison chemicals on everything from old people to children. Receiving a past due debt of honor for using the most advanced, blood curdling and flesh-tearing weapons of terror the world has ever known. A monument for being the tools of a modern imperialist army that vainly attempted for over ten years to crush, grind and pulverize the people and land of Viet Nam into the Stone Age, for being in an army that finally sank to a well-deserved defeat at the hands of a just and determined people's war and in the eyes of an outraged world. Should we pin medals on the chests of the guards at Auschwitz? Should there be a cheering ticker-tape parade for the flight crews that dropped atomic death on Hiroshima and Nagasaki or fire-bombed Dresden? Perhaps we should build a monument to the nun-murdering troops of the Salvadoran National Guard or to the National Guard at Kent State!

They want us to be proud of what we did for them. Never. We are proud, but not of these crimes, not of the things we were forced and suckered into by this barbaric monstrosity of a system called America. We are proud of our resistance. We are proud of our opposition to that war and its father, imperialism. We are proud of the tens of thousands of us who began to learn the truth and found the ways to resist and rebel: Those who wrote for, supported, read and distributed any of the over two hundred antiwar and revolutionary GI newspapers all over the world; those who circulated petitions and leaflets in the field and on the ships; those who refused to fight or deserted, some joining the other side; those whole companies and naval units who mutinied and disobeyed orders; those who taught gung ho officers profound and sometimes fatal lessons; and those who contributed in countless ways to the almost complete collapse of the fighting capacity of the U.S. ground forces. Those who returned home to join with the powerful antiwar and anti-imperialist movements, including revolutionary upsurges against national oppression, those who told the story of what we had seen and what we had done, and those who stunned and inspired the world in 1971 when we took off our medals for service to country, our "badges of honor," our "symbols or recognition," and hurled them clattering to the Capitol steps amid the epithets and speeches of fury and anger. These are the real heroics of the Viet Nam GIs and veterans and this is what we are proud to be recognized for.

They want us to forget the truth, to cease all opposition and rejoin the fold, to puff up our chests and play Deer Hunter. They are desperate to reverse the criminal verdict stamped in blood on the U.S. role in Viet Nam and they would honor us to honor the war, to prettify and rekindle patriotism, to buy us off and enlist our aid. And why? Why would they now call us unrecognized heroes rather than crazed dopers? Because they have another war coming, a war with their Soviet rivals which will make the last pitiful in comparison — a giant horror for the glory of profit and empire. They fear our resistance. They need us to cheer on and train the next generation of cannon fodder, to applaud and participate in the next round of flag waving parades and nationalistic speeches, to support their war moves from Central America to the Middle East, to help smoothe over the memory and bury the lessons of Viet Nam and pave the way into hell. But nothing will make us sink so low. Not dozens of books, movies and television shows. Not patriotic Viet Nam veterans begging for a parade or a pat on the back. Not a monumental obscenity in Washington, D.C.

No. We have other plans. We will not abandon lessons learned in blood. We will not be bought off and we will never betray the international struggle against any imperialist oppressor, either East or West. At the Capitol in 1971 we swore: "If we have to fight again, it will be to take these steps." Today in 1982, we swear: "The fight is on!"

— Viet Nam Veterans Against the War (Anti-Imperialist)