

VIET NAM VETS

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Once you were a strange, alien name
far across the seas somewhere.
Then you were a small, damp, green
hostile land
where for a lifetime lived in a year
I sweated, stank, drank, struggled
to survive, stumbled
and nearly died.

Now you are my foster, second home;
a place I've left forever
a part of me.

The best part: the part that cries
when your peoples cry,
that part that suffers when
you suffer.

And now, back in my native land
you give me courage and hope
in the face of governments gone mad
and teach me to cry when
my people cry,
when my own land cries,
and not suffer what is being
done to us in silence.

Best, you have taught me to love
those whom I fought
and was once taught to hate
and question that love
which I used to blindly obey,
and to serve no one or no thing
blindly ever again.

You have taught me, foster land,
to be not just a man
but a human being.

— Jan Barry

Jan Barry, an army veteran of Viet Nam, was a founder of The Viet Nam Veterans Against the War. He lives in New Jersey.

There are . . . elements that make the Viet Nam War different from and even worse than other wars. Even now most Americans do not realize the extent to which it was marked by arbitrary killing and the murder of civilians — out of either official policy or the casual, recreational or simply half-mad behavior of individual men apparently subject to neither internal or external constraint. It was a war in which innocents became fair game and in which our soldiers — who went to war convinced they were saviors and guardians of freedom — found themselves perceived by the civilian population as intruders, conquerors and even murderers. Their military leaders at several levels of command proved to be venal, dishonest or stupid, and everywhere around them flourished forms of American corruption and vice — black marketeering, profiteering, thievery — which most of them had never seen close up before. It was a bad war fought for all the wrong reasons and in all the wrong ways, and one could hardly avoid seeing that after being in it for a short while, all of the death, and all of the risk, and even all of the camaraderie and bravery that mark the lives of soldiers anywhere, even those engaged in wrong causes — all of that was rendered meaningless and unnecessary because the war itself was so obviously a bad one.

And there is, finally, one other reason for the Viet Nam vets' special pain: we have, as a people, and largely without knowing it, shifted our attitudes toward war, outgrowing the ease with which we may once have accepted violence. Cultures do grow up; just as certain moral attitudes atrophy, others can develop. Many Americans are no longer able to accept without question or horror the nature of war; indeed, it may well be that in future wars (save for the most obviously self-defensive) many combatants will feel, afterward, what the vets now feel about Viet Nam. In short, the vets may be experiencing, as their individual pain, the half-conscious tensions and confusions that Americans, as a society, now bring to violence and war.

Therefore, more than veterans of any other wars past, what these men have been forced to confront is their own capacity for error; they understand that whatever they experienced — the horror, the terror — has its roots and complements in their own weaknesses and mistakes. For them, all conversation about human error or evil is a conversation about themselves; they are pushed past smug ideology and the condemnation of others to an examination of the world that is an examination of self. They know there is no easy relation between one's self-image and the consequences of one's actions. They know too that whatever truths one holds at any given moment will turn out to be if not mistaken then at least incomplete, and that one's opponents or antagonists will turn out to have been more right than one thought and probably as serious in intention as oneself. Because they cannot easily divide the world into two camps, and because they cannot easily claim virtue while ascribing evil to others, they



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Murray Tinkelman

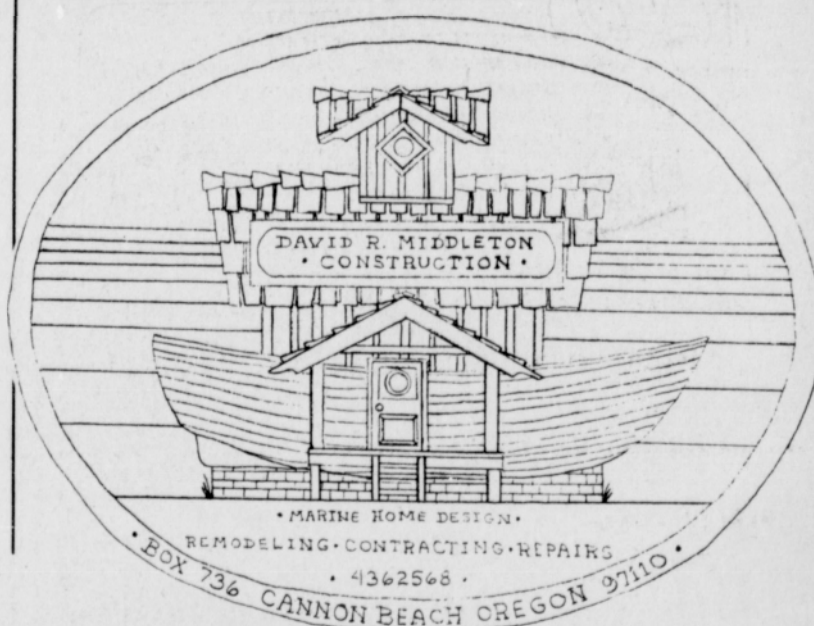
inhabit a moral realm more complex than the one in which most others live. They know that a moral life means an acknowledgement of guilt as well as a claim to virtue, and they have learned — oh, hardest lesson of all — to judge their own actions in terms of their irrevocable consequences to others.

— Peter Marin

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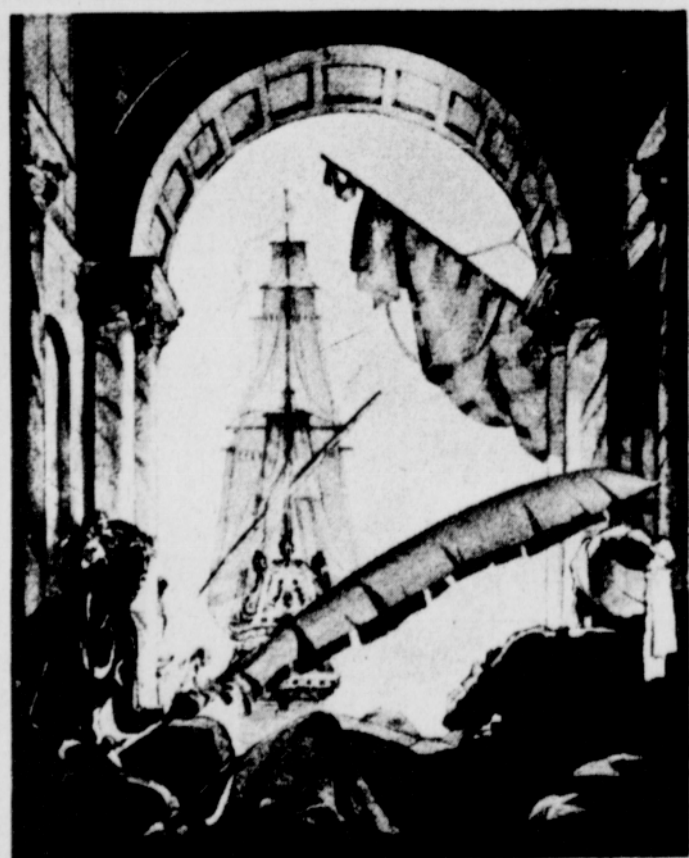


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