

usually flown to stateside hospitals near their homes if possible, but more likely they wound up in VA hospitals too poorly funded and understaffed to adequately care for them. The dead were also returned and invisibly crossed the country in the mail cars of trains or the baggage compartments of airplanes.

Five Presidents tried to keep the war from upsetting the citizenry. They promised guns and butter while sacrificing the nation's sons and money. Night after night the public was numbed to the war by the artifice of television news, yet few ever saw any of the American dead — the sight of dead or wounded GIs was considered bad for morale. Death was edited out of the war.

After the euphoria of the initial buildup of troops twenty-five years ago, after Operation Starlight and the Ia Drang Valley, after Tet 1968 and Khe Sanh, after Hue and My Lai, after Nixon sent the army into Cambodia and it returned with heroin, the American public became dismayed with its soldier sons. Something traditionally solid was expected of soldiers, but the Viet Nam generation was beginning to change — and into what? The soldiers wore peace medallions into combat, smoked marijuana, killed their superiors and sabotaged weapons and equipment, and they rebelled against the military by the thousands. No one but the soldiers understood that the rebellion was a desperate yet rational response to the war and to the inequities of the military system and its callous disregard for the lives of its lower ranks. The ratio of approximately fourteen noncombatants to one combat man, the racial tensions that threatened to engulf every military installation at home, in Europe and Asia; the draft that provided escape for the upper classes but none for the poor or the non-white were some of the factors that heightened dissatisfaction in the ranks. But it was the increasing doubts about the purpose and morality of the war itself that were the most unsettling. For many soldiers, perhaps most, there was no fight in the war other than self-preservation mixed with grim awareness that they were being badly used. They were brutal, murderous and insensitive. They were also terrified, anguished and in spiritual pain.

On April 30, 1975, the war finally ended, ten years after American Marines landed in Da Nang and three years after most American troops had been withdrawn. The United States spent a generation attempting to dominate Southeast Asia, but the war was lost long before it committed its armies. We cared little for the cultures and peoples that lived there and our genocidal contempt ultimately caused our defeat.

The loss in Viet Nam shattered the people of the United States. It might have been different if the war had been won. The people might not have been so ashamed or divided. Victory is its own therapeutic morality: if the war had been won the cause would naturally have been considered just.

The men who designed the war blamed its loss on the men who survived it. We were made its scapegoats and were shunned as lepers and losers. Our families and friends were ashamed of us. We had been the nation's agents in a dirty, unpopular and unsuccessful war and were as a result treated as if we were also dirt. We were expected to pick up our lives as if we had not been changed in the pitiless crucible of combat. War had pared us to the raw edge of perception but it was demanded that we reaccept our culture's illusions and vanities and conform to a perspective of history our experience repudiated. We were pariahs not entirely because we rankled the public memory: the war had left us with an irreversible knowledge about ourselves that people usually do not want to know.

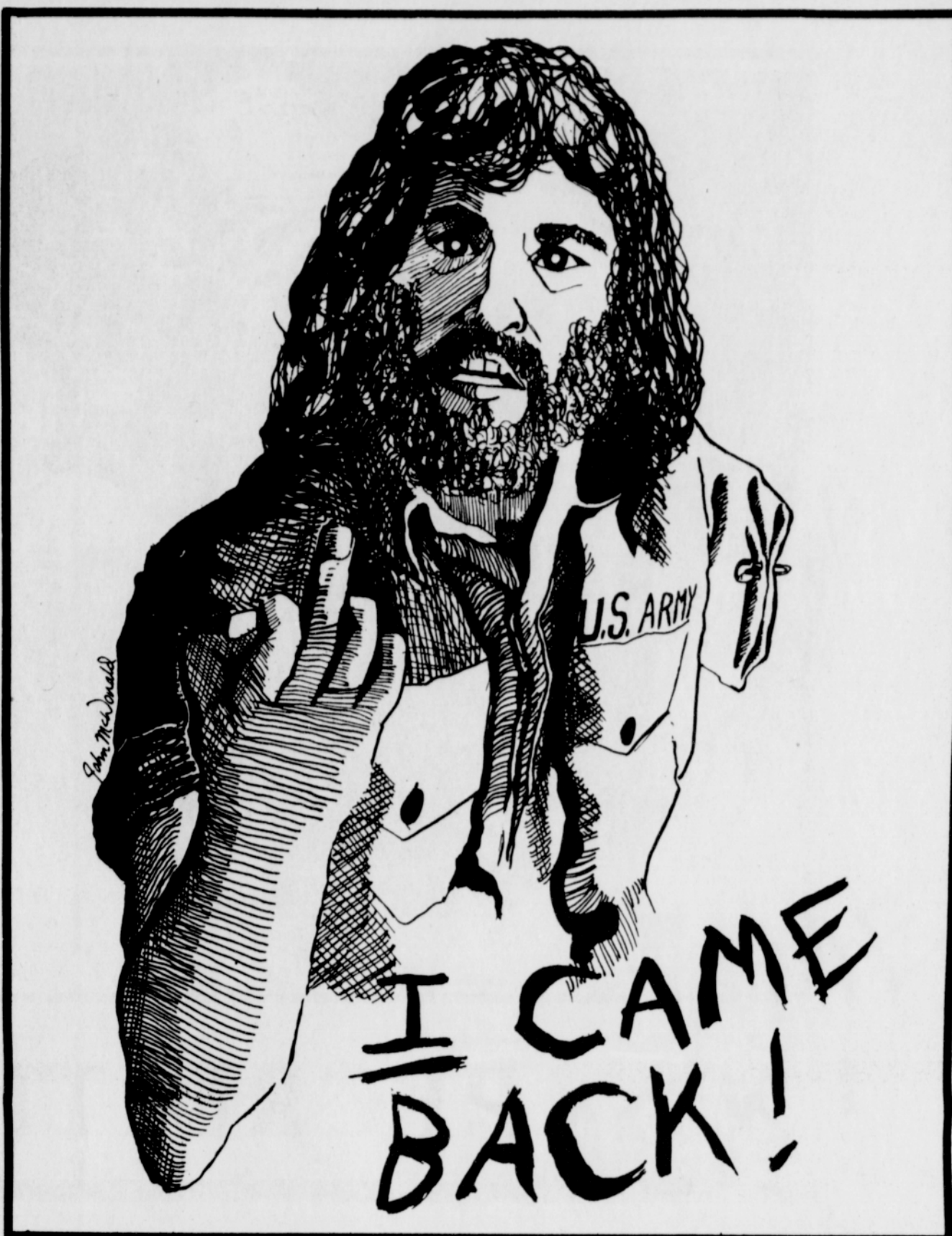
We had learned that only human beings commit inhuman acts and that the most cherished and humane values serve as warcries to commit horror. We learned that concepts about the worth of life are worthless as arguments to preserve it. We discovered that it is absurdly easy to kill and that it is common to feel relief and satisfaction at the anguish of someone else. We learned how to reduce flesh and blood to abstract contempt to facilitate our reduction of it to dust.

The price of survival has been high. Many of our disorders which are still evident years afterward had their origin in the terror that was directed at us and the terror we repaid it with. The saddest irony is that so many who fought like beasts to live through the war have killed themselves since returning home. The poisons that we sprayed upon the Vietnamese are killing us now, though the government continues to deny their toxic effects and refuses to accept the claims of hundreds of veterans that they are sick or dying from the chemicals. Jails are filled with Viet Nam veterans. We are alcoholics and heavy drug users. We are unpredictably violent. All sorts of syndromes have been attributed to us or invented to describe us. Studies are routinely commissioned to define or find solutions to our social depravity. We form rap groups to assist each other but these often serve to intensify our maladjustment or alienation. A number of veterans have retreated from civilization and live isolated in forests and deserts. The nightmares that seldom leave us have an incompleteness that reflects our fragmented experience in the war. For most of the decade of massive escalation

hundreds of thousands of us went to war and returned daily almost without notice. We passed each other going and coming from Viet Nam.

The war never quite dies out of my thoughts. Sometimes it lies quietly on the far side of my mind but eventually something triggers its loop to the closer circuit and almost everything I do, see or think about has its parallel and its substance rooted in Viet Nam. I spent only a year in combat but it shines through the murk of subsequent years with a clarity that is missing from the rest. To survive I cut off sensitivities that I believe are irrecoverably lost. I continue to feel that every day is extra time that I will never understand why I have or ever use adequately to justify. I believe that I killed or was measurably responsible for the deaths of Vietnamese whose lives were worth more than my own, and that friends who died would have been more useful than I am. I am haunted by the dead. Everyone who has spent time in combat is drawn ever afterward toward death, fully aware escape has only been temporary. Dead friends vex survivors with sorrow and guilt and beckon for us to rejoin their company.

I was at the Viet Nam War Memorial in Washington, D.C., when it was dedicated in 1982, looking for names of a few friends I last saw wrapped in bloody ponchos and tossed aboard outgoing helicopters. I felt smothered by flags and military bands and thought the ceremony had little to do with reconciliation but was staged instead to revive a war fever that Viet Nam had cooled. Yet our presence must have been an embarrassment, a tattered and crippled spectre of a lost war. I felt disconnected much the same as I might have felt at a class or scout troop reunion. I had forgotten names that I thought I would always remember and could think of only half a dozen. The names of the dead occupy the black marble wall of the memorial chronologically by the days of their deaths, arranged in daily sequence in alphabetical order. I ran my fingers in the carved grooves of the names I remembered. They had been dead for a long time and I felt slightly indifferent. I realized that names that should have been on the wall were missing, some of them our own who for some petty reasons had not been initially included; but also the names of dead allies and enemies, and especially the names of millions of ordinary people who were shot or bombed because it was their bad luck to be in the way. I thought there should be another wall with the names of the murdered dead of My Lai and Hue to serve as a warning that the only enemy is the malevolence we humans display toward each other. Almost unnoticed against the wall among flowers, war medals and photographs of dead soldiers, sailors, pilots and Marines was a handlettered square of cardboard with the names of four war dead who had not been included. They had been killed twenty years ago this month. The four students who were shot down by the Ohio National Guard at Kent State in May 1970.



JOHN McDONALD

I left Washington with friends from Oregon. We drove through Virginia, Pennsylvania, Ohio, Nebraska, Wyoming, Utah, Idaho and Oregon, reaching home in Cannon Beach five days later. We stopped every night at motels or the homes of friends or relatives, and each day we made several stops for food, gas and just to get out and stretch. On the back window of our small truck was a Viet Nam Veterans of America sticker, the group that had built and dedicated the Viet Nam War Memorial. Everywhere we stopped people noticed the sticker and almost everyone was related to or had known men who were killed in Viet Nam.

Everywhere we stopped I opened a book that I had purchased at the memorial. It was the size of the phone directory of a small city and contained the names of fifty-five thousand dead engraved on the wall and where each was located. I found the names people wished to see, and many of them touched the letters with sorrow. By the time we reached the Pacific Coast the American book of the dead was as well thumbed as a phone book in a public booth. Until then I had not really understood the personal impact of Viet Nam on America's heart. Each time I opened the book and looked for a name I felt I was performing a ritual of immense unrecognized grief.

Perhaps the most enduring lesson of the Viet Nam War and a major reason the government would wish to suppress it from public memory or attention is that a significant number of Americans were against it. When they were rebuffed by the government they went out into the streets and risked injury and arrest. Thousands of young men chose exile or prison over service in Viet Nam. Other thousands who were in the military rebelled against it. Although a reconstructed myth portrays dissenters as irresponsible students, antisocial hippies and various other types of misfits and malcontents, the largest number of antiwar activists were from the mainstream, and in the spring of 1971 the stream peaked when five hundred thousand of them — the official bodycount of U.S. forces in Viet Nam at the height of the escalation — marched through the streets of Washington, D.C., to demand an end to the war. Seldom mentioned and disparaged when it is, the American people ultimately forced its government to abandon its ambitions in Southeast Asia. It is that which disturbs our leaders most and which they would have us forget: that we can and must if necessary curb our government's misuse of power.

Underneath the spectacle of pageantry and the deceit of patriotism the jarring presence of Viet Nam veterans demonstrates with the subtlety of a clenched fist that war is death and horror, that it is murder and depravity, and that it sickens the souls and minds of its executioners. Viet Nam veterans give war a bad name.

— MICHAEL PAUL McCUSKER