



TALES OF THE CHICKENSHIT 20

BY MICHAEL McCUSKER

"No normal man who has smelled and associated with death ever wants to see any more of it... The surest way to become a pacifist is to join the infantry."

~BILL MAULDIN

"War feels to me an oblique place."

~EMILY DICKINSON

March 2001 is 35 years since I began a year long experience of a hopeless and morally reprehensible war in Vietnam as a U.S. Marine, a minor year in the decade long war the USA finally abandoned after almost 60,000 Americans were killed and perhaps 300,000 wounded and crippled, many more hundreds of thousands psychologically damaged as well.

Perhaps the only notable battle that year 1966 was against North Vietnamese Army regiments in the Demilitarized Zone that separated North from South Vietnam, named after the original battle of Hastings 900 years earlier in 1066.

On average an estimated 200 Americans were killed or wounded every week that year. The body count of dead Viet Cong guerrillas and North Vietnamese Army soldiers was wildly inflated while collateral casualties of noncombatant Vietnamese women, men and children was considerably downplayed and often denied although they were the overwhelming majority of victims of the war.

We razed Vietnamese culture and slaughtered its people as if it was our historical prerogative. We imposed a hated government and enforced its control with our bombers and battalions. We dropped more bombs on Vietnam than during all of World War 2 and poisoned its fields and population with herbicides sprayed from the sky. We invented the body count as an index and declared every peasant we killed an enemy which was proved by their deaths. We removed hundreds of thousands of Vietnamese from their ancestral farms and villages to prevent them from assisting the guerrillas we were never able to destroy and abandoned them to filthy over-crowded refugee camps or to beg and starve or whore in the cities. We hired death squads to liquidate political opposition and participated in the opium trade to pay mercenaries.

I survived my one-year assignment to war by embracing a thought that guilt was the provenance of only the living and quickly accepted the war's grim circumstances, but no amount of star spangled banner justified the horror of indiscriminate eco/genocide against Vietnamese, who mostly died because they were in the way.

Alive and back stateside I attempted to keep the promise of my accepted guilt. I was an early member of the Vietnam Veterans Against the War and organized chapters of disaffected Vietnam veterans all over the USA. I wrote articles, gave speeches and took part in demonstrations. I was gassed, maced, clubbed and arrested.

In societies that wish to quickly forget a war or obscure its purpose, surviving soldiers are more apparent in their grim invisibility. Returning soldiers are carriers of the disease of conscience and are more likely to be shunned rather than embraced. Many retreat into alcohol and drugs, react violently and bitterly to criticism; they are restless and are often unable to hold a job or maintain a romance. A few openly repudiate the war in which they fought.

Each opposition to the Vietnam War had its own logic and internal history. For most antiwar veterans it was sympathy for Vietnamese and guilt in assisting killing them, or that one American life lost was worth more than all of Vietnam which was the reason those who held that opinion felt the war should be ended. Regardless of their reasons for opposing the war

they fought in, the usual attitude toward dissenting veterans was as traitors (from the Right) and babykillers (from the Left), though both attitudes were to change. I estimated that for every vet who made public his or her protest, perhaps 10 or 100 were in quiet sympathy.

Most veterans who returned from Vietnam abandoned everything military, even a group formed against it. Very few joined the American Legion or the Veterans of Foreign Wars. Ironically the only veterans group to come out of the war opposed it. By any standards the VVAW was a Frankenstein to the Pentagon. Although the reverse side of the mirror — the antithesis to the American Legion and VFW — and although it understood the problems of Vietnam vets and gave something of a political definition to a shared negative experience, it was still part of the same thing.

The veterans who crossed political lines to oppose the war that seasoned and repelled them, became immersed in leftist ideology although many did not approve of it. Yet the political right had failed them, had inducted them into an unholy war cloaked in righteous deceit, made them prisoners of conscience. Whereas the early New Left had been inspired by the Civil Rights Movement and embraced liberation philosophies, the veterans came into the movement angry and embittered. Most of the veterans had a limited focus that ultimately was fatal to the antiwar veterans campaign far short of its goal to end the war. Like the majority of New Left organizations VVAW was at first stimulated by argument but eventually debate and disagreement degenerated into quarreling animosities that broke the group apart. All that survived were two mutually hostile splinter groups that orbited a far and exotic fringe.

The Vietnam Veterans Against the War started organizing in early 1968. Its first of many factional divisions resulted from the McCarthy for President campaign when more extreme vets devoted to urban warfare refused to reorganize into presidential politics. However, from the McCarthy campaign grew a national register of antiwar vets who later joined the VVAW, which, primarily fallow for a year of recruiting and organizing throughout the country, resurged into public notice in the Spring of 1970 on a hundred campuses during the national university strike against the war.

At Portland State University in Oregon we Vietnam vets acted as medics and inadvertently became focus of the strike when police charged to destroy our ersatz hospital and beat up several of us who attempted to protect it. That summer an amalgamation of Northwest antiwar groups that mirthfully called itself The People's Army Jamboree challenged the American Legion at its annual national convention in Portland, spearheaded by veterans of the VVAW.

A week later, an East Coast contingent of VVAW vets marched from Morristown, N.J., to Valley Forge, Pa., feigning search and destroy assaults in cities and towns along the way, which became famous as a form of unique guerrilla theater, the vets pretending to assault actors staged among each village's gawking citizens in the manner they earlier mishandled Vietnamese peasants.

Confronting the American Legion and theatrically raiding American cities as if they were Vietnamese villages culminated the following year, in the Spring of 1971, when the VVAW camped out for a week in Washington, D.C., hurling our war medals at Congress which never had the courage to challenge the President or the Pentagon during the entire decade long war, and nearly a hundred pounds of chickenshit at the Pentagon on May Day.

April 19 — the day the American Revolution began in 1775 — was the date we gathered from virtually every state in the Union in Washington, D.C. in 1971 to protest the war we had fought in and turned against. We likened ourselves to the 'Patriots' who fought for liberty and freedom in the American Revolution and called ourselves "Winter Soldiers." We were working off a bad war's bitter karma.

Perhaps our encampment on the Mall might have gone unnoticed if we had not been locked out of Arlington National Cemetery, but it was too much for the media to ignore: war veterans not allowed to visit their dead. Suddenly all over the country people began to pay attention to us — scruffy, bearded and longhaired stressed-out dope smoking renegades wearing tattered patchy assortments of uniforms, carrying plastic toy M-16 rifles, chests beaming with tarnished medals and ribbons. Our purpose at Arlington was challenged. "You can't come in here because political demonstrations are not allowed," the cops said — and we answered: These dead are manipulated to coerce others to die every time a politician comes here to lay a wreath and praise the dead for their "noble sacrifice." "We're here because these guys don't want you guys using the fact they are dead to get anybody else killed," one ex-soldier said. The gates to Arlington were opened to us the next day, but the government denied that most of us were veterans then denied making the charge when we proved our claim with personal military documents which we carried in anticipation that we would be accused of being frauds.

We went to Washington, D.C. in delegations from every state and for the week that we occupied the mall across from the Capitol we killers remained peaceful, spreading like fire through the city, assaulting neighborhoods with our guerrilla theater of mock search and destroy that was so realistic people screamed in fear and anger as uniformed men with toy M-16s pretended to beat and kill others dressed in pajamas and cone hats. Some of the actors were hurt because the soldiers sometimes forgot it was not for real but they had accepted the risk from the start.

We assaulted Congress, mostly in a rude manner — guerrilla theater on the Capitol steps ended with sheep's blood splattered on the porch — cutting through bureaucratic excuses and justifications, badgering even those reluctant to see us ("Open up Buckley, we know you're in there!" fifty New York vets shouted while pounding on the door of William F.'s brother the Senator), not so much in hopes of any meaningful response but more to give our elected representatives a good look at the monsters they helped create.



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