

MEMORIAL DAY

BY MICHAEL McCUSKER

There's only one reason for Memorial Day and that's to get more soldiers off to more wars and get them killed," a man argued with some of his friends.

"Bullshit!" one of them snorted. "You always got to put some political bullshit into everything you say. Memorial Day is just remembering people who got killed, that's all. There ain't nothing more to it."

Another shook his head and agreed with the first man. "When I was a kid my mother used to take us every year to see my father's grave and put flowers on it. American Legion guys were always there, making speeches and smiling at my mother and patting me and my brother on the head. They always told her what fine little soldiers we were."

"That's it exactly," the first man said. "More meat for the butcher. They got your old man, now they got you. If you make it out of here and ever have a kid, they'll get him too."

They were in Vietnam, part of a USMC infantry squad, and it was Memorial Day. Except for the usual patrols, there were no operations. The division commander had made a speech in his headquarters for the press about "The Marine Corps Mission." The men were relieved, as usual, that they were too far forward for the general to visit them. The people in headquarters were not so lucky. They were forced to stand at attention in the very hot sun while the general and a visiting senator preached duty, honor and patriotism.

For the grunts it was a day off, which was about the best any of them could say about Memorial Day. Some of them tried to get the sand and rust off their rifles, others played poker or snuck off into one of the off-limits villages to drink beer and pay for lovemaking. This particular group, at least for the time being, sat around and shot the shit, drinking warm beer one of them had bartered from a Vietnamese vendor on a bicycle. Later they would roll some dope, but they had to be careful, more careful than the years that followed when almost everybody smoked.

"I'm not even going to think about what we're doing here to these people. I'm just thinking about what's been done to us," the first man said. He was tall and bony, with thick glasses and a nose that hooked so prominently he was called Eagle Beak. His name was Victor Paine, and he was a 19 year old Lance Corporal in the USMC. He had been in the war several months. Death had become a preoccupation with him, essentially a doomed sense of his own. Friends were dead, their bodies torn apart. Sometimes they were picked off one by one by snipers, sometimes in startlingly sudden and terrible firefights that killed many on both sides: more often than not booby traps and landmines killed them.

What Paine didn't want to think about was the horror they visited upon the Vietnamese. The villages burned to the ground, the old women and children whose bodies were scattered like leaves, napalmed or shot, gushing blood and bringing flies. Like the others he felt trapped in a whirlwind and didn't know how to get out of it except do his job and hope he lived until rotation back to the world. There hadn't been a war when he enlisted, at least not like it was now. Hardly anybody ever heard of Vietnam until they were loaded aboard ships and told this was what they trained for.



Paine talked about it often, but he wasn't sure what to do about it. The lives of his friends had become his only meaning. "We've got no right to say we don't want to die," he said. "We have no choice or freedom to protest the way we're being used. When the honcho says go, we gotta go or he'll shoot us or maybe we'll end up in the brig the rest of our lives (I still don't have the guts to be called 'coward'). There isn't anybody here I know wants to die in this fuckin' place, but the way you hear the generals and politicians say it, we're as happy as pigs in shit for the chance to get killed for our country."

The first night ashore at Chu Lai, after a day of unloading LSTs, the sky rusty orange from flares shot off in the jungles and hills a few miles from the beach, Paine had said to his friends, "I can't believe there are people out in those bushes waiting to kill me." Less than two months after Memorial Day he was dead, his right arm and half his head blown off by a booby trap hanging in a tree. His mother in California requested what was left of him be buried at the Punchbowl National Cemetery in Hawaii.

"It makes me sick to my stomach thinking about flowers on my grave," Paine said to his friends. "If I get blown away some Goddamn politician's going to say I died for my country and he's going to look at some poor clown and tell him he should die for his country like me. If I could I'd come screaming out of my grave and break his stupid lying neck and tell that kid to get the fuck home."

"Nobody cares anyway," another man said. "Why should anybody living give a damn about the dead?"

"Just an extra day off work," another said.

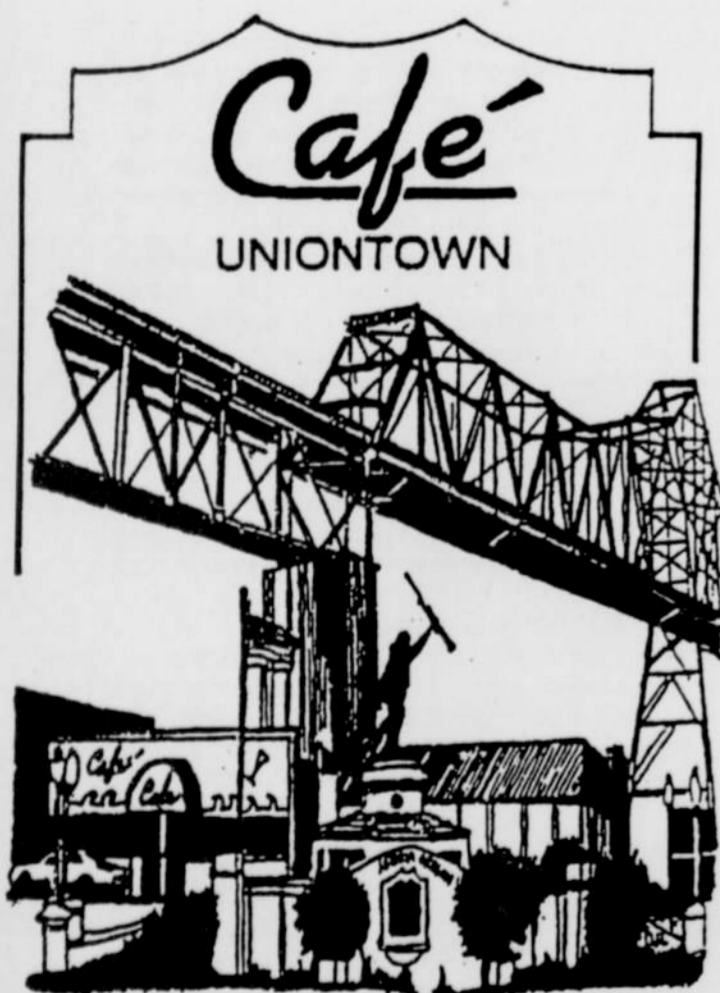
"When I get home," Paine said, "Every Memorial Day I'm going to piss on a military grave."

The subject of death was common, as was that of fear. They talked about the ways they preferred to die and were unashamed of being afraid. Like Paine, most of them didn't like to think about what they were doing to the Vietnamese, though they often got angry at what the Vietnamese did to them. Most of them simply wanted to do their time, stay alive and go back home. Some of them, those who got back, began to finally think about it. They were wracked by nightmares of horror and guilt. Alcohol and drugs briefly quieted the torment. A few went out into the streets in protest of the war. Enough of them got together and formed the Vietnam Veterans Against the War and threw their combat medals at Congress. But that crusade faded as most of the former soldiers drifted away from anything that had to do with the military, even an organization formed against it. Though it was the reverse side of the mirror, antithesis of the American Legion and VFW — and although it gave a positive political definition to a shared negative experience — it was still part of the same thing.

Of the other men who drank warm beer and talked the endless trivia of 'grunts' that Memorial Day (1966), one was later a blob in a VA hospital, the same kind of vegetable Dalton Trumbo wrote about in *Johnny Got His Gun*. Another was crippled and another missing an arm. Some were killed later on in the months that followed and a few more made it home in reasonable shape, physically at least.

Five of Paine's friends had a reunion of sorts in Chicago, summer of 1968. They were all members of the then fledgling VVAW. One of them was still on active duty, but he was AWOL. All of them, during that furious week of the Democratic National Convention, ran up against the clubs and gas of the Chicago Police and Illinois National Guard, and one was hurt. But they were happy to be together again and felt they were doing something right for a change. "Sure wish Paine was here," one of them said. "He'd want to do this."

A few years later one of those five ex-USMCs lived for awhile in Honolulu. The place he stayed was built on the bottom slope of the hill called Punchbowl. He knew thousands of other Marines, soldiers, sailors and flyers from Vietnam and earlier wars were buried up there, but he was conscious only of Paine. The memory and presence haunted him, though he never climbed the hill to visit his friend or put flowers on his grave, or to piss on it either.



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THE HIGHEST PATRIOTIC ACT

It is very hot and lonely in the world's deserts, the burnt scarred wastes ruled by sand, which moves, slowly over the millennia, to cover all living things except for a straggly few, covering even the bodies, how many were there? hundreds? thousands? in that desolate pass, left to the carrion after the jets fell upon them with tons and tons of napalm.

The cremated bodies looked like barbecued wood when Barry Spatz stumbled upon them in June 1967, two weeks after the Six Day War fought and won by Israel. Most of the Egyptian Army had been found and trapped in the three-mile Mitla Pass in the Sinai Desert and the Israelis filled it with napalm until the ground was black and smoking and tanks melted and fused and nothing was left alive.

Spatz saw the broken pyres of mangled, incinerated bodies and smelled their rot in that giant charred oven, something even the pilots who killed them could not do.

"I saw exactly and forever what war is — and thank God I saw it without being involved, trapped into it as one of the murderers...." he tried to explain, his voice quiet and devoid of irony.

The irony was his situation, a 23 year old college graduate with a bachelor's degree in political science, returned to this country apprehensive of the draft during the Vietnam War. The same day he registered as a conscientious objector he voluntarily applied for the two year civilian service program which is an alternative to military service.

"I knew I was obligated — I wasn't trying to duck it," Spatz said. "But I thought of doing some work of humane service, possibly as a teacher in the ghettos..."

The draft board said no.

Spatz did not know what sort of job he would be given. "It could be as a hospital orderly in Cleveland for all I know — they had suggested that I drive a Goodwill truck," Spatz said. "That's all well and good — but I've got a degree and I'm reasonably intelligent and I think the government should use that to good purpose. I want to do something to stop this madness of murder and slaughter — I guess you could say something that I could do and feel and know what is being done helps another person and more."

Why did he choose the hard road of conscientious objection? That ghostly corpse strewn pass in the Sinai Desert was not just the shocking realization of what he calls insanity, it was the reality and culmination of what he had been working up to for a long time.

"I was confronted with what I thought I am," he said. "I am by nature nonviolent. I cannot accept violence, it is to me insane. The whole idea of organized warfare is mass insanity — organized murder. I had been all for Israel — I have to admit that — but I can never justify or rationalize what had been done to those men, those hundreds, thousands; I don't know how many. I felt like I was every one of them, and I felt like I was the killers too and...I can't find the words....I felt...sick! Sick in my heart, my stomach, my head...."

He was afraid after that to return to the States. But he felt the draft was an obligation he had to face.

"I am entirely against war for so many reasons, and I imagine some would call me a communist," Spatz said. "I don't think people in this country can understand — even the soldiers are forced to conform and keep quiet about the slaughter and horror. We haven't had a war destroying our homes and our lives, and those who are killed die in some far off place and their families don't even see them until the mortician has painted them up and made them look nice. If they are too mangled, the families are advised to keep the coffin closed and most probably never see the dead if they're that bad."

"Television isn't the same as the gut level experience and it's just too late once you're in it — what can you do? I was lucky to have the insanity and butchery right before my eyes without having been corrupted by it."

"I'd rather live for my country," Spatz concluded. "That's the highest patriotic act. Dying is so useless and self-defeating, and really, so easy to do. It takes more guts to live for what you believe, to work every day through whatever hardship to help people understand and cherish brotherhood."

~MICHAEL McCUSKER
(slightly rewritten from 1 June 1969)