

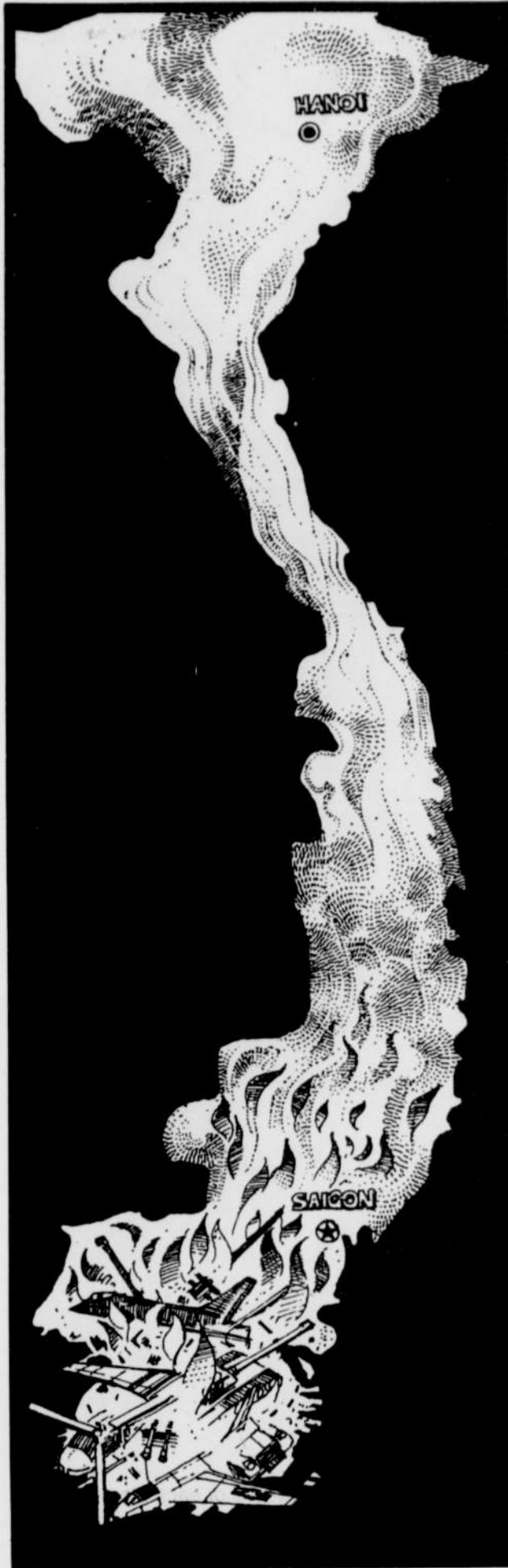
were down, even, I hoped, those that resulted from the war. Yet I felt alien to them, much the same as I might feel at a reunion of my old boy scout troop or a former elementary school class. Though I had been sculpted by the war and continued to carry it around inside like a cancer, I discovered how removed from it I had become. Fifteen years cushioned me from the more terrible memories of that single year. Details and events were hazy. I forgot names I thought I would always remember. At the Vietnam War Memorial, which is covered with the names of American war dead, I could think of no more than half a dozen dead friends. I ran my fingers in the letters of their carved names. They had been dead a long time and my tears had dried up. I was more saddened by a hand-lettered piece of white cardboard propped against a marble panel among flowers, photographs of dead soldiers and medals. Written on it were the names of the four students who were killed at Kent State.

There was one group that protested the militarism, a small group called Vietnam Veterans Against the War (Against Imperialism), which is not to be confused with the original VVAW. The (Against Imperialism) group was a split-off and proclaimed itself more radical than its parent. The (AI) group issued an emotional, intense statement about the injustice, dishonor and deceit of the Vietnam War, and decried any attempt to glorify it. In the middle of the dedication of the Memorial, 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 police 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 the 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 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.

Saturday morning the Vietnam Veterans parade marched down Constitution Avenue looking like any other parade: military bands with flashing braid and dancing girls in skimpy costumes, which my friend Betsy from college said was incredibly sexist and I thought at least inappropriate. Michael, looking grim, bore the weight of his struggle in solitude. I saw him pace across the grass, his firm measured steps taking him to a private observance. I waved at Shay and Lori Jane across the street. We waited for the Oregon veterans, and for Steven and the 173rd Brigade. The bands trailed off. So did the flashing colors and brass gaiety.

Veterans walked the avenue, row by row grouped according to state and unit. They carried signs reading: 'MIA: We Haven't Forgotten You' or 'Free POWs'. The Boston veterans all wore business suits, but nearly everyone else was in jungle fatigues; combat uniform. They clasped hands and lifted them high over their heads. Some cried. Some walked on crutches or rode in wheelchairs. Their faces were proud. They commanded respect.

Someone shouted, "Welcome home." A person next to me reached out and shook the hand of a passing veteran and said, "Welcome home." I began to hear it all around. People called "Welcome home" and reached their hands out to veterans who smiled, shook their heads and said, "Thank you." I stared in disbelief. *Welcome home?* These men and women had come home ten or fifteen years earlier. 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



MARTIN AVILLES (NEW YORK TIMES 1981)

Vietnam. For a moment it seemed as if the war had just ended and its veterans were marching home. But it was 1982, the veterans had been home for years — all those statements that 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 — these people who were part of the division did not carry the pain of it: the veterans bore not only the scars of war but the scars of their country's breach of faith. Who was coming out of this abyss, was it the veterans or ourselves?

After the parade we walked over to the Wall for the dedication ceremony. Construction had just finished and the sloping ground was torn up and soaked with rain. Thin, sturdy grasses streaked the mud. We sloped toward the Memorial, Michael and Steven stomping their feet and telling each other it was like slogging through a rice paddy. Slogging through a rice paddy to find the dead, their outlines etched in black marble as they are etched in memory against jungles and lowland swamps.

Like my childhood picture of war, the Wall was too crowded. Not because the names seemed bunched up together but because they ran on and on in an even stream of firmly cut letters, for every name a lost life. There is not enough room for the enormity of one life inside the hollow of those letters. I did know one name, Peter Merrill Shepherd. I do not remember him but his sister babysat us. I got to imagining the sisters of other men cut into Peter Shepherd's panel. I thought of the fathers and mothers, the kids and sweethearts and friends. I imagined the shoulders on a man, and whether he had a mustache and how he might have walked — all in the few seconds it took for my eyes to trace the letters and for the name to sound in my mind. The life, though only imagined, became vivid, and so did the loss. I turned my eyes to the ground and walked on a few panels. But it was the same. Each of those names was too small to hold a life and too big to fit inside the mind.

There was no place to hide from this loss, not even underneath my own skin; death whisks away the last refuge. The shining black surface of the Memorial reflected the image of the living flesh among the hollows of the dead. Steven and Lori Jane, Shay, Michael and I saw our faces floating in the realm of death, the dead immobile and solid in the land of the living. So we walked along beside the Memorial as though along an ocean shore, at the shifting, permeable boundary between ourselves and our own darkness.

The Vietnam War Memorial is a shadow we can touch; it binds death in rock. That weekend I touched my finger to the one name I knew. I don't remember if I cried. People all around me cried. They remembered the dead. More, they were healing their own and one another's wounds with tears and with the touch of flesh to marble, hand to hand.

The tenacious faith of survivors brought us together to this one plot of land, brought darkness into light and gave death a shape we can trace with a finger. This ritual in which so many Vietnam veterans participated embedded itself in me through the image of death touching life. The voices that still echo from November 1982 recall the moments when death and life touch, as by the Vietnam War Memorial, in a place of reverence and mourning, and of anguish — a place where birth begins.

Katrin Bridget Snow is a National Public Radio news editor in Salt Lake City. She was once program director of KMUN-FM in Astoria and also a freelance writer for various magazines and newspapers, which includes the NCTE.

'THEY WERE SOUL FOOD FOR EACH OTHER'

Shay Williams was one of five persons from the Oregon coast who crossed the USA in a covered pickup truck to attend the National Salute to Vietnam Veterans in Washington, D.C. in November 1982. On the return trip from what she called "a forced march across the country," she was asked about her impressions of the almost three days she spent with Vietnam veterans.

I was so overwhelmed with the love and caring shared by those men even though they did not know each other or what style of life they lived. They wore military clothing, which made it difficult to know if they were doctors, lawyers, carpenters or truck drivers. Even before they talked about what hills they were on or what battles they fought, just knowing they were in Vietnam was an immediate bonding for them.

So many men talked all at once, yet they were all still listening. They wanted to say it all and hear it all at the same time. It was better than any family reunion I've been to. The intensity of the caring and depth between them was so impressive. There was no superficiality — if anyone had come with a mask it would have been alien. Every one of those men was hurting in some way. None of them had come home and really adjusted. The pain was still there. You could really tell that it was by the way they talked with each other and treated each other.

And the stories they told. Even when a friend had been killed they would tell their stories from beginning to end, and they would include the names of the men who had been killed.

For the first hours people milled around looking for people. Then they formed groups and after awhile split off and formed other groups, moving around talking to as many as they could. They were starving for each other. Most of them were not there for politics and they were not to be bothered with petty bullshit. They were there to share with each other what they should have been able to share with their families and neighbors who refused. They were hungry to fill up their souls; they were soul food for each other. And no matter who they talked with, their eyes always searched every passing face, looking for special friends, their buddies from the war.

There were so many emotions — except for hate. Or disgust. Nobody turned away from anybody.

I did not expect the same intensity to happen each day. I expected it to tone down, but instead it kept getting tighter. The second night was the same as the first. They were not finished talking to each other. They still aren't, but they had to go home finally.

The men did not exclude women, even though most of us had not been in Vietnam. At no time was I made to feel an outsider. They told me their stories just as if I were one of them.

The memorial — it doesn't matter if you like it or hate it, it rips your guts out. All those names. It's not the memorial or the marble it's made out of, it's the names. It was impossible not to reach out and touch those names and feel the letters with your fingers. It felt like you were touching the person not a piece of stone.

When I first saw the monument I was blown away. I just couldn't believe it. It was so different, so powerful. Nothing about glory, just death, the real truth of war. I believe I could look at it 57,000 times and still be blown away by it each time.

I thought the parade was great even though I didn't much care for all those flags and military bands. Strip away all that crap and you have the men. They seemed to say to America "No matter what you do to me or what you've done to me, I've beat you, I'm surviving. You can continue kicking me around, but I will not give up!"

I feel the average person in Washington, D.C. treated the veterans decently. They were very friendly and helpful and I was amazed how many of them had somebody involved in Vietnam. I passed a man dressed up as a clown who was trying to collect money from people passing by for a children's organization. When I explained I couldn't give him any money because I was almost broke getting to D.C. from Oregon for the Vietnam veterans gathering and still had to get back, he took off his nose and started talking about a buddy who was killed in the war. Then he put his nose back on and became a clown again.

I wish more men could have come, that the economy could have allowed them to leave their jobs or that they could have somehow raised enough money to come if they were out of work. I think the men who were there profited from it, from each other. If I were a millionaire, I would like to put on a big party for Vietnam veterans. I would have a party every year until the men stopped coming because they no longer needed them.

I think what most amazed me was the gentleness they touched each other with. If the whole world could be like that it would be an incredible place. Something that was also really beautiful was that everyone was free to be the way they wanted to be — they could laugh or cry or talk or be quiet and stoic, and there was no one to say they couldn't be that way.

~SHAY WILLIAMS

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