

# BACK HOME IN THE USA

BY MICHAEL PAUL McCUSKER

A symposium for peace was held in Astoria in early November. Among the subjects was the effect of war upon veterans. The following is one Vietnam veteran's response to a year at war more than three decades afterward. A disclaimer might be in order: his remarks represent only his own opinion, perhaps in the entire cosmos. There are a million stories in a war; this is one of them.

All through his childhood he lived in fear he would be caught up in a war — and his sense of its inevitability resulted in a belief that he would most likely (most *certainly!*) be killed. He had much precedent to feed his certainty: World War 2 when he was a fat happy American baby unaware that hundreds of thousands of babies and children were being killed and crippled all over the world, as well as millions of older human beings; the Korean War, and the interminable years of the Cold War that threatened worldwide nuclear obliteration while he was growing up.

So when there was a war he inevitably volunteered for it though he did not have to — at least on the surface. But terrified as he was, consumed with the dread of self-prophecy of doom, he knew his short life had been rooted on its inevitability.

So he went to Vietnam — and he survived. And just as the conjecture of war preoccupied the early part of his life, its soul wracking reality structured everything afterward.

He would never understand why he had lived through his year at war, any more than he would understand why persons near him fell dead or were blown apart somewhat farther away. He had been so scared in Vietnam that he half wished to die so he would not be afraid any more.

Fresh from Vietnam he cherished every day as unexpected and undeserved. That sharp exhilaration of deliverance, coupled with sorrow for his dead friends and guilt for having survived when they had not, had dulled over the decades, yet he rarely took for granted he would be alive at the end of every day he awakened. He balanced somewhat paradoxically his appreciation that he continued to live with increased awareness of having used up most of his 3 score & 10. Each day was a rebirth but also a day closer to the crypt. His spool was running out faster the less time remaining to unravel. Now when he looked into the future his attention was concentrated on his corpse laying somewhere up the near timeline.

For him Vietnam was *the* war. Of all history's wars, it had been the war he was in. Only for a year, but it lased through his brain with stark clarity, surrounded by the rest of his years which were ambiguous. He found it difficult to see through the bloody prism of the war to his earlier life. He saw a separate person moving opaquely through a dimly remembered history he knew was his own yet was discontinuous with the person who emerged from the war. The war was his faultline, and the parts it bifurcated did not quite match up. He felt the portion of him on the opposite side of the fissure would not have much to say he would now be very interested in.

Vietnam was always immediate in his mind despite its disappearance into the shadows of collective memory. The war was as distant to the young generations born afterward as the myths of Troy. Vietnam veterans were grandparents and generally close-mouthed about the war with their families and friends who had not been in Vietnam. Among themselves they chattered like crows; even if they seldom mentioned the war it was their connective tissue against the rest of the world. He realized each carried his own war like a sheathed membrane; other wars appear and pass, generally displacing their predecessors in their rapid surge, sluicing away the immediacy of each. The veterans seemed like old ghosts unable to detach themselves from their vanished remote wars. He knew people were disappointed with Vietnam vets, not so much because the war was lost but because it had so completely undone so many of them.

Usually he quickly identified himself as a Vietnam veteran to new acquaintances, reasoning that if they didn't know that about him, they would not know him at all. He had been an agent in a dirty, unpopular and unsuccessful war and was as a result shunned as a leper and loser by friends and family who were ashamed, and he was expected to pick up his life as if he had not changed in the pitiless crucible of combat. He had been pared to the raw edge of perception but was urged to reaccept the illusions and vanities his experience repudiated. He had learned that only human beings commit inhuman acts and that the most cherished humane values served as warcries to commit horror; that concepts about the worth of life were worthless as arguments to preserve it.

He remembered his very small part of the war in fragments; flashbacks of incessant dread and helpless terror that in only moments with no chance of escape he would fight savagely and perhaps unsuccessfully for his life. His war reached no farther than the narrow daily routine of annihilation. Combat is confusion and disintegration. Surviving is every soldier's main interest. The war's political purposes are of no use to them. Combat soldiers live in the now; in the next instant they are dead, wounded or inexplicably unscathed until the next shot or explosion.

Vietnam was a series of contradictory sensations: Exhilaration, horror and a constant fear that not only penetrated every sense of his body and being, but which also became his accustomed companion to such a degree that he was virtually unconscious of it — only when he was out of country and its dangers did the anticlimactic letdown indicate how afraid he had been. The war taught him to live in the moment, which he still did though perhaps not as ardently as when he measured his life in seconds, at the most in minutes.

(A young girl once asked him if he was scared when he was in Vietnam. He said he was terrified in his first firefight and wanted to run away — and that it never changed; his first thought every time was to run away. His greater fear was that if he did run the Viet Cong or North Vietnamese Army would most likely be where he ran to.)

He was not a killer, but he had killed — maybe. Who really knew over there, except the wrong people always got killed, the people who lived in the villages; the children and their mothers, and the old people. The only death he was absolutely sure he was responsible for in Vietnam was a water buffalo who had attacked rampaging Marines in defense of her calf — and even then, after he shot the mother buffalo in the head, she charged at him and only dropped when another Marine opened up with an automatic burst. "Did you kill anybody?" was always the first question asked.



FREDRIKA SPILLMAN

He remembered the unfettered wildness being at war had released in him; above law and morality, or more truthfully, abstracted from either consideration. A legal rumble his friends had exulted underneath their terror, acting like berserker Vikings when they were most afraid and frustrated. Killing was its own law despite the rigid and myriad rules of combat designed to prevent or at least disguise the war's fervid, immutable and indiscriminate savagery.

He had formed his own pattern of his year in Vietnam, and his war in experience and expression was individually his own even though he shared his portion of the war with many still alive. The war gave his life a fracture point — the barely remembered himself before Vietnam, the still angry moratorium with himself on this side of the faultline. The war sculpted his life, taught him more about raw humanity's conduct with itself than he might learn any other way, and though he often wished he hadn't learned so well or dramatically, he never regretted knowing that he had been pared to the bone and refused the well meaning attempts by friends to forget the war because that would mean abandoning truth. The war made him a world class skeptic.

Some might have said he never recovered from the war, but the recovery they meant would have him stop thinking about the horrible massacres of Vietnamese that he participated in — and he refused to recover from that. He would spend the rest of his life never forgetting he had helped define genocide to Vietnamese. It was the shining icon of the remainder of his life and now it was more important than ever to shine that crippled beacon upon those who planned similar genocides — in particular the millennial insanity that seemed to be unraveling on a global scale.

Nothing else was close to the proximity of having experienced war. The paradox was that, obsessed by the war, he found it difficult to accept seriously the daily life he had lived since. More times than he could count he was asked how he was able to make the transition from war to "reality." The real question was how to make his postwar life real — that even after more than thirty years his life was still not real to him. The war was his real life, everything since felt counterfeit.

Back from the war he discovered his reflexes had outlasted their necessity as if everything afterward was an illusion. He flinched and nearly dropped on his belly when cars or trucks backfired or firecrackers erupted. Once he threw a woman down on a sidewalk when his foot brushed something he mistook for a boobytrap tripwire. He might walk on a spring day in an open field admiring budding trees and smelling flowers; a moment later a military helicopter might fly over and he would be back in the war, looking intently for armed enemies among the trees and bushes.

He was angry and anguished by his close experience for a year with death and horror, much shorter a period than his predecessors at their various wars (the World Wars of the 20th century especially), but very much more than enough for him. Others saw more combat, and he felt lucky the worst of it escaped him; yet the war was iridescently the most dramatic part of his life. It sculpted his attitude toward life and people. He knew the essential dividing wall between people; those who experienced war, however lightly, and those who hadn't; and though he had seen little of combat in comparison to many, he wished to see no more. Everyone in Vietnam had their own private, intensely personal war, and if they survived they won the war, even though the larger war was lost.

He thought his life after Vietnam had taken the quality of a bad dream he might have had while he was still there, a nightmare of what his life would be like if he managed to survive the war. Vietnam was the nucleus of his life, as if both his birth and death were outer rings of less consequence. A beam of memory sliced through him like a spear one sunset baroque with gaudy operatic clouds — a desperate pitched ball of hope sent into the future for him to catch by a very scared much younger him preparing for another long night in Viet Cong country 30 years earlier, projecting the fervent desire he would survive that night and all other nights he was in the war and be alive to receive the sharp ray of the past which at that moment transmuted time and momentarily connected the two of him.

He couldn't entirely blame the Vietnam War for his apparent comatosity, though it had much to do with his despair and sense of sorrow, as well as shame and guilt. He was determined to not forget about the war despite the advice from friends that he should; as the World War 1 German soldier Albert says in *All Quiet on the Western Front*, "We won't take this off as easily as a sock," which meant the war, of course.

The war was an open wound, not because his experiences were so terrible but what he helped inflict upon Vietnamese. While many veterans did what they could to ease their memories through drugs and drink, he used them as a means to remember the war without going too crazy. Yet this attitude had much to do with his lassitude and inability to think beyond a few minutes. He seemed frozen in a moment long past, a war of a previous century, but for him unresolved despite the acceleration past remorse and shame by the society that perpetrated it as a cold matter of policy. He wished to be a conscience because someone must, like a crazy American who lost his sanity at Hiroshima and wandered around its radioactive streets atoning for the bomb. He knew his feelings had no place in opulent frenzied America (except among a few), but he was unable to change because he wouldn't allow himself to change. He refused to allow the victims of the war, American, and Vietnamese (Laotian, Cambodian, etc.) to disappear into memory's dustbin.

He felt misplaced and with little imagination for a future. He chose a shortcut, a war that might kill or define him, and his part would at least be appreciated. As it turned out neither his part in an exceptionally unpopular and erroneous war nor his prominent role in dissent against it was much appreciated (except among a few).

Perhaps he clung to the war because he was insufficient at anything else. The war was his moment and it was gone. It might have been better if he had left with it, like so many vets, among them friends, who opted out rather than face a bitter desolate existence.

He thought of suicide but seldom seriously. His plan, if not killed in some turbulent manner, was to quietly check out as if leaving a party undetected — preferably, as he fantasized, with a large jug of red wine, a few pounds of marijuana and a compound of lethal chemicals when he determined his usefulness to himself was over; to leave the tribe without much noise or fuss as his ancient ancestors once did.

Sometimes he felt the substance of himself died in Vietnam, only the form continued. He often dreamed he was back in Vietnam, but in another realm, another tour. His actual experiences were in his waking thoughts, triggered by noises, smells, sudden movements. His dreams were delusional episodes of the horror, trapped at war over and over again.

He felt that a large crowd of dead young men waited for his return into their company. Even so many years later he knew he would not escape the war; it waited as if in ambush to finally boobytrap and kill him.

Yet he savored living despite his feelings that he was one of the walking dead. His definition of success was breathing. He lived one pointless day to the next, not at all worried that there was probably no real meaning to anything. He was satisfied that he was alive in the world and that he was brain and flesh to think and feel. He knew he was fortunate that he was not killed or crippled in Vietnam. He thought much of the time of friends who were killed and wondered what had become of the others who lived, what their middleaged lives had been, how many died in the intervening years.

He frequently rummaged through boxes of old photographs and scratchy color slides he took while in Vietnam of his friends on search and destroy, grabassing in villages, filling canteens at a palm shaded well; he remembered the intensity that was ever present of impending death incoming at any moment. Three decades later he felt incomplete, the war peculiarly unfinished even though for Americans it lasted a decade. At least he knew what he had not known then, that he would live. He was never wounded; his scars were internal.

He felt outside. He had experienced that which most people did not wish to speak about or be informed about. His life was of little interest and the profundity of what he had learned of no importance to those whose lives flowed daily around his own.

Ironically, he had been among the first counselors of Vietnam veterans, who, having no place to go or anyone to listen to them, initially sought help for their postwar trauma in rap groups set up by the Vietnam Veterans Against the War. (A young friend said, "I'm not sure which might be better, my uncle who returned from Vietnam with no memory and a pension, or you with your memory and no pension.")

He was an old man remembering a young man's horror, never glorifying it, knowing the bitter truths and deceptions behind the horror, and most importantly, knowing who its real victims were, innocents killed, raped, crippled for no greater reason than they were there — in itself grotesquely sinister.

He had made a personal motto for survival that guilt was a luxury of only the living — he would save his life anyway possible even if it required actions he knew would be unconscionable; and now he was alive decades later, the torment and problems of readjustment a small price to pay for life. A friend who had been wounded in Vietnam and died in a motorcycle accident afterward used to say that anyone who lives through a war should not have to die.

Underlying everything else, he knew with certainty that he should never have gone to Vietnam. He had no right to participate in the killing of other human beings. When he thought or talked about war he was not concerned with geopolitical aspects but with the persons directly involved as he had once been involved, the ciphers of little meaning or consequence to any but themselves and the few who knew them. For him the consequences were personal, the killers and the killed, the shattered lives destroying each other in the grip of forces they were unable to ignore or mediate, even between themselves.

He saw a shrink a few times. "You're scared," the shrink said. Of course he was afraid. He had been letting his life drain away toward death because fear of death consumed him. He felt that life wasn't worth getting interested in because everything leads to its end. He wished to be so dull and deadened that he wouldn't notice when he died. He usually joked when asked about the future: "I see my corpse on the timeline."

He felt he had succumbed to chronic depression, not taking care of business his friends would say. His favorite pastime was hanging out in bars drinking red wine or brandy, depending on season and time of day, which only fueled his cycle of numbed despair. The shrink was certain his depression was directly related to his year in Vietnam; and he knew that a deeper pain from the war grew rather than diminished. His sessions with the shrink were usually questions followed by questions. He wondered if the shrink's purpose was to soften reality for his patients or help them regain strength to struggle with it.

But he thought of being afraid. What was he afraid of? *Death!* But what else? Of living? He had no ambition or ability to achieve wealth. He wished to live quietly in an increasingly noisy