

marijuana (also opium and heroin), killed their superiors and sabotaged weapons and equipment, and 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 the inequities of the military system and its callous disregard for the lives of its lower ranks. The ratio of approximately 14 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 hardly any for the poor or nonwhite were some of the factors that heightened dissatisfaction in the ranks. But it was the intensifying doubts about the purpose and morality of the war itself that were the most unsettling. For many soldiers, perhaps most, there was no other fight in the war other than self-preservation mixed with grim awareness they were being badly used. They were brutal, murderous and insensitive. They were also terrified, anguished and spiritually desolate.

On April 30, 1975, the Vietnam War finally ended, ten years after American Marines landed in Da Nang and three years after most U.S. forces had been withdrawn. The United States spent a generation attempting to dominate Southeast Asia yet the war was lost long before it committed its armies. We knew little and cared less for the cultures and peoples that lived there and our genocidal hubris ultimately caused our defeat. We failed in our attempt to impose the rules of chess in the land of Go.

The loss of the war in Vietnam shocked 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 and women who survived it. We were made its scapegoats and shunned as lepers and losers. Our friends and families 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 pared us to the raw edge of perception but we were implored to 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 left us with irreversible knowledge about ourselves that people usually wish to avoid. We 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 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 disorders which are still evident years afterward had their origin in the terror 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 suicided since returning home. The poisons we sprayed upon the Vietnamese are killing us now although the government stonewalls the claims of veterans that they are sick or dying from the chemicals. Jails were for a long time filled with Vietnam 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 formed rap groups to assist each other but these often served to intensify our maladjustment or alienation. A number of veterans retreated from civilization and lived isolated in forests and deserts. The nightmares that seldom leave us even so many years later — exacerbated by more recent wars — retain 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 to and from Vietnam.

The war never entirely slides out of my thoughts. Sometimes it lies quietly on the far side of my mind like a sleeping dog 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 Vietnam. I spent only a year in combat but it shines through the murk of subsequent years with a clarity missing from the rest. To survive I cut off sensitivities I believe are irrecoverably lost. I continue to feel that every day is extra and I will never comprehend why or adequately use to justify. I believe I 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 alive than I am. I remain haunted by the dead. Everyone who has endured combat is drawn ever afterward toward death, grimly 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 Vietnam War Memorial in Washington, D.C., when it was dedicated in 1982, looking for names of a few dead 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 Vietnam had cooled. Yet our presence must have been an intense embarrassment, a tattered and crippled spectre of a lost war. I felt disconnected much the same as I might have felt at a school or scout troop reunion. I had forgotten names I thought I would always remember. Names of the dead occupy the black marble wall of the Vietnam Memorial chronologically by the days of their deaths, arranged in daily sequence in alphabetical order so that they will forever remain together, sculptor Maya Lin said. I ran my fingers in the carved grooves of names I remembered. They had been dead a long time by then and I felt slightly indifferent. I realized names that should have been on the Wall were missing, some of our own who had not been initially included for petty reasons, such as those who died of wounds later, and no women; but also the names of dead allies and enemies, and especially millions of ordinary people who were shot or bombed because it was their bad luck to be in the way. (They continue to die from landmines planted everywhere in Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia, from malaria caused by millions of bomb and shell holes that breed mosquitoes, and by the effects of biocides such



as Agent Orange.) I thought there should be a separate 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.

Nearly unnoticed against the Vietnam Wall among flowers, war medals and photographs of dead young soldiers, sailors, pilots and Marines was a handlettered square of cardboard with the names of four war dead who had not been nor are yet included. They were killed in early May 1970, just after American troops invaded Cambodia — the four students shot down by the Ohio National Guard at Kent State College.

WINTER SOLDIERS

The unequivocal purpose of Vietnam Veterans Against the War was to end the Vietnam War and bring U.S. troops home from overseas. To that end, VVAW held two war crimes inquiries to publicly make clear the war's deception, amorality and decimation of Vietnamese as a people and culture, but also the threat to American values the war was allegedly being fought to protect. The testimonies, named Winter Soldier Investigations (in contrast to "Sunshine Patriots") were in Washington, D.C. in December 1970 and Detroit, Michigan in February 1971.

Winter Soldier was a response to the slaughter of Vietnamese civilians at My Lai village in 1968 but only publicly revealed the previous year. The veterans hoped to show that although an Army platoon had killed more people in a single place, the attitude toward Vietnamese generated by fear, racism and revenge that led to My Lai was universal throughout Vietnam and the war.

By the mandate of Nuremberg, military men and women are required to speak out against war crimes and other forms of injustice and wrongdoing within the military. It is usually next to impossible to do so without isolation and punishment while in uniform, and the great majority of those in VVAW waited until they were free of the military; many in uniform were heartened by VVAW as a result and took a chance to speak out against Vietnam despite the risks.

For most of the veterans who testified it was the first time they had recounted their experiences in Vietnam, and for nearly all of them it was the first opportunity they had to listen to the experiences of others who had done virtually the same things over a decade of war — the most important factor was the redundancy, the same genocidal pattern linked by men whose service in Vietnam spanned the period of American involvement. It was the first time the whole puzzle pieced itself together for each one of them, most of whom had spent not much more than a single year in country.

They testified for three days, more than a hundred vets speaking as though possessed with devils bursting past their shaky voices. They told of genocide, psychological and physical, of forced urbanization of peasants from villages, of burning and pillaging hundreds upon hundreds of villages, of wholesale defoliation of jungles and fields, of indiscriminate bombing with napalm and high fragmentation bombs, of harassment and interdiction fire by artillery every night with no particular targets, just shooting up the countryside to instill fear and carnage; and they told of free-fire zones where everything that moved was fair game to be killed no questions asked.

Even as men broke down and cried while testifying or listening, Winter Soldier emerged as a terse elaboration of American policy in Vietnam through the combined narratives of the soldiers who carried it out.

But no one seemed to listen. The news media for the most part embargoed their testimony; what coverage they received was vicarious and quietly sensational, calling them "alleged" veterans, though all of them presented their documents of legitimacy. Detractors who attended the hearings called them phonies, cowards and traitors. The Pentagon denied their accusations and put the burden of proof as well as guilt as specific war criminals upon the vets.

Oregon Senator Mark Hatfield defied criticism and had the testimonies inserted into the Congressional Record.

~MICHAEL McCUSKER
(NCTE, May/June 2004)

I left D.C. with friends from Oregon. We drove through Virginia, Pennsylvania, Ohio, Nebraska, Wyoming, Utah, Idaho and Oregon, reaching home in Cannon Beach on the north Oregon coast 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 'Vietnam Veterans of America' sticker, the group that built and dedicated the Vietnam War Memorial. Everywhere we stopped people noticed the sticker and almost everyone was related to or knew someone killed in Vietnam.

Everywhere we stopped I opened a book I purchased at the Memorial. It was the size of a small city's phone directory and contained the names engraved on the Wall and where each was located. I looked up names people wished to see and many touched the letters in the book as so many have embraced the names on the Wall with their fingers. 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 Vietnam 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 Vietnam 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 jail over service in Vietnam. 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 mainstream peaked when 500,000 of them — the official body count of U.S. forces in Vietnam at the height of the war's 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 discredited 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 deceit of patriotism, the disturbing presence of Vietnam veterans demonstrates with the subtlety of a clenched fist that war is death and horror; it is murder and depravity and sickens the souls and minds of its executioners. Vietnam veterans give war a bad name.

Michael McCusker served in Vietnam in 1966-67 as a USMC Combat Correspondent attached to infantry and reconnaissance units and was a charter member of Vietnam Veterans Against the War.



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