

**NOTE:** The text below is a chapter from my 1997 book [\*Vietnam Shadows: The War, Its Ghosts, and Its Legacy\*](#). I am posting it here in August 2019 after attending a Moral Injury Symposium in Washington D.C. organized by the U.S. Special Operations Command to explore the troubled feelings many soldiers bring home from their wars. The term moral injury, as it is used now, had not entered the language when I wrote this chapter. But listening to the proceedings at the symposium, whose participants included numerous men and women of the new generation of veterans from the Iraq and Afghanistan wars, I heard many striking echoes of the experience and feelings of the Vietnam vets I wrote about more than two decades ago.

## Chapter 2

### THE VETERANS

*I want it to have been worth something, and I  
can't make myself believe that it was.*

-- Bill Ehrhart

*The strangest thing. I started thinking, 'Maybe I wasn't  
really there. Maybe I am imagining it.'*

-- Diane Carlson Evans

## I

"You don't go to war, come home, and not talk about it," Bobby Muller said from his wheelchair. But America's soldiers returning from Vietnam came back to a silence that, for years, silenced them as well.

"We lost the war in Vietnam, and that's why we don't talk about it," said a man in the audience the night Bobby Muller spoke. It was early 1979, nearly four years before the Vietnam Veterans Memorial dedication, almost ten years after Muller took a bullet in the spine near a place called Con Thien in the Republic of Vietnam.

He had wept with pride at the Marine Corps hymn after he enlisted, Muller recalled that night in Baltimore; had gone willingly to the war that crippled him, and then discovered that in his own country, nobody seemed to care. "Goddamn it, no one feels responsible," he said. "Everyone thinks, hey, it wasn't my war. I didn't do it. It all got delegated to a couple of

schmucks out there in that country, and when they come back -- hey, man, it's your bad luck."

In the discussion that evening, people tried, with evident difficulty, to grapple with the troubled silence that seemed to surround Vietnam and its veterans. One man, of an age to have been in World War II or maybe Korea, put his finger on one cause: no one knew what to say about this more recent war; not the people at home, and not the soldiers themselves. The national experience in Vietnam never rested on any foundation of understanding, and so the men who fought there "were not standing on anything," he said. "There was no solid ground under them. Those of us in previous wars had solid ground, we knew where we came from, knew who we were and why we were there."

A woman wanted to know "how does all this relate to the violence that sort of has come out of Vietnam?" She didn't mean the war itself; she meant riots and snipers and shootings and store holdups in Baltimore, and the other cities of America. Others pointed out that American society and moral codes changed for many more reasons than just the Vietnam war, but she shook her head, unconvinced. Somehow, it was clear, she knew the war did it, and nothing anyone said could change her mind.

People spoke of the My Lai massacre and Lt. William Calley, of the destruction of Dresden, the fire-bombing of Japan, the Germans. "The horrible thing is that we were the ones," said a young woman, in obvious confusion and with many long pauses. "Maybe we weren't exactly like Hitler, we can't compare ourselves to that -- but I don't think we can compare this war to World War II at all...." No one was suggesting -- quite -- that American soldiers in general were murderers or war criminals. But the words were spoken: "Calley," "Dresden," "Nazis," "body count." And they had an evil sound. It was painful to imagine how they might sound to Bobby Muller in his wheelchair on the stage, or to the other veterans sitting with him or in the audience. Yet in its very incoherence and fragmented quality, the discussion that evening in a way explained the moral fog Vietnam had left in American minds: a confusion so deep that for many years, Americans found no way to speak about it to themselves and, consequently, no way to speak to their own returning soldiers, either.

The folklore that grew up around that homecoming, telling of soldiers routinely being cursed or spit on, was almost certainly exaggerated. But the sense of being silenced, which felt a good deal like being shunned, was part of almost every soldier's experience. And the hurt was deep. "I want to go back to Vietnam and make it different," wrote a former Army nurse named Kathy Gunson some years after her return. "I want to come home to a marching band and a red carpet. I want to hear a 'thank you.' I want to hear 'I'm sorry.'" Another veteran, Jamie Bryant, remembered: "It was the spookiest thing.... In over ten years, there has really never been anybody who has asked me: 'What happened to you over there? What was it like?' It's like having a whole year of your life that didn't exist. When you first get back, you don't think about it much. Then you begin to wonder why no one asks the questions. Then you begin to feel like maybe it really isn't something you should talk about."

Many never did. Not infrequently, veterans reentered civilian life and told nobody, not even wives or girl friends, that they had served in Vietnam. The absence of words meant more than an absence of gratitude or sympathy or respect. Unable to speak about the war, many veterans also had no way to find a reason or purpose in what they had lived through, no way to complete their experience by telling about it and thus coming to understand it.

The great majority were able to find some pride in their own conduct. If you asked, they would tell you they went, did their job, conquered their fear, didn't let down their friends. Like soldiers in any war, they had learned something about endurance and comradeship and about their own inner resources. But if their discoveries gave some purely personal meaning to their experience, it was not the same as finding an explanation, a worthwhile reason. Thus the war remained "like a piece of buried shrapnel," as one of them wrote, in a hidden and tender place

within them. And like bearers of some terrible secret that could never be told, the returning soldiers felt themselves strangers in their own society. "When I returned home," the writer Larry Heinemann recalled years afterward, "... I had the distinct feeling (common among returning veterans, I think) that this was not my country, not my time."

It was that sense of alienation that separated the Vietnam veterans from those of earlier conflicts. The difference was not so much in the wars themselves, since the tension and boredom and petty restrictions and stupidities of military life and the terrors and exhaustion of combat don't vary much from one war to another. ("When somebody is shooting at you and you are shooting back," the veteran and novelist Jack Fuller once wrote, "all wars are pretty much the same.") What made Vietnam and America's other wars so different was how they were assimilated later into the veterans' and the nation's experience.

Men who fought in World War II or Korea might be just as haunted by what they had personally seen and done in combat. But they did not come home, as the Vietnam vets did, to a country torn and full of doubt about why those wars were fought and whether they had been worthwhile. Nor did they return as symbols of a great national failure. Whatever troubling private memories they brought back with them, those earlier veterans did not have to grope for an explanation of what their experience had meant and what its purpose was. Their country -- its political and intellectual leaders, its journalists and educators, its movies and popular novels -- gave them the answer. They been heroes in a necessary cause, they were told, and eventually most of them came to believe it was true. But those who fought in Vietnam were told ... nothing. Even several decades later, Americans reached no common understanding, no comforting myth that could give sense or logic to that war, or absolve soldiers who had trouble coming to terms with the violence they had participated in.

"In past wars," Jack Smith, a psychologist and Marine Corps veteran, told the author Myra MacPherson, "through cleansing acts, society shared the blame and responsibility" with those who had done the fighting. "... Victory banners, medals, and parades were ways of recognizing the tasks they did in the country's name." But the country refused to give its name to Vietnam, Smith went on. "The responsibility and blame was left on the heads of the guys who fought it. They were left to sort out who was responsible for what." Another psychologist, John Wilson, put it this way: "All cultures recognize that when we send someone to battle, it's difficult psychologically.... They are taught to kill in ritualistic ways. After the battle, most cultures also have a ritualized way of welcoming back the warrior and giving him a new identity and a new status in society. But we didn't do it for Vietnam veterans.... Many men felt isolated after Vietnam. They had to create meaning and make sense of what they did in Vietnam -- and they had to do it alone."

If parades and medals were rituals of reconciliation, perhaps it was inevitable that an unreconciled war like Vietnam sometimes turned those rituals inside out -- as on an April afternoon in Washington in 1971 when hundreds of veterans marched past the Capitol building and, instead of receiving medals from a grateful government, threw away their decorations to protest the war. The reverse imagery was complete, down to the eight-foot-high temporary security fence below the Capitol's west front physically keeping apart the veterans and the government whose uniform they had worn.

At the head of the procession were parents of three men who had died. Gail Olson, a high school band teacher from Russell, Pa., wore his son's fatigue jacket and carried a bugle. After blowing taps, he stepped to a microphone that had been set up next to the barricade so the demonstrators could stop, if they wanted to, and say something. Olson said into the mike: "My son's name was Sergeant William Olson. We're playing taps for all the dead -- Vietnamese,

Laotian, Cambodian, all our wonderful sons. Let us pray there will be no more, no more." Next was Evelyn Carrasquillo of Miami, who carried an American flag and her son's medals mounted in a frame. "I will not turn my back on this country," she said, "... but we've done our best for the Vietnamese. It's time to get out. Let's stop the war now." Unlike the veterans she kept the medals -- "all I have left of Alberto." The third Gold Star parent was Anna Pine, of Trenton, N.J., who carried her son's medals up to the microphone and then stepped away, weeping, with the medals still in her hand. Later she returned and threw them over the fence with the others.

Then, for two hours, the veterans filed by and tossed away their medals. Some simply dropped them over the fence. Others hurled them as hard as they could, as if aiming at the Capitol dome far overhead. Some men walked on crutches, a few were pushed in wheelchairs. Some of those who stopped to speak into the microphone sounded angry, some of them just sounded sad. "I'm turning in all the shit that wasn't issued and I had to buy it," one man said. Another said: "This is for all the dudes in 3rd Battalion, Charlie Company, 9th Marines, who didn't make it." Another said: "Here's a Vietnamese Cross of Gallantry, which God knows I didn't earn until just now."

One of the men who marched that day was a tall, lean ex-Air Cavalry trooper with lank black hair named Ron Ferrizzi, who threw away a Purple Heart and a Silver Star he'd been awarded for pulling another soldier out of a burning helicopter. "My wife wanted me to keep these medals so my son would be proud of me," Ferrizzi told me. "But I'm not proud of them. It's all garbage. It doesn't mean a thing." He turned and walked away into the crowd. I watched him go, thinking with a pang that if Ron Ferrizzi had joined the fire department, say, instead of the army, and if he'd been decorated for saving someone from a fire in his home town in Pennsylvania instead of in Vietnam, he'd have kept that decoration, no doubt, and his son would be proud of him when he got old enough to understand, and he would be right to be proud. I thought about going after Ferrizzi to tell him that, not to argue but just tell him. But I didn't.

The next time I saw Ron Ferrizzi, twenty-three years later in the framing shop he and his wife Kathy owned in North Philadelphia, I mentioned that long-ago impulse. Ferrizzi shook his head. Nobody could take away what he'd done to earn those medals, he said, and throwing away the actual decorations was a necessary part of rejecting a war he passionately believed was wrong. "I was so relieved. It was like the seas parted for me. It was like physically striking back," he said. And there was another powerful reason: his two sons. "I never wanted my kids to come up to me and say, when am I going to get a chance to get my medals?"

Kathy Ferrizzi didn't disagree. But she still sounded a little sad when she remembered her own feelings at the time: "I was brought up, if you had medals you were proud of them, your children were proud of them, and they were handed down. And here he was throwing them all over the wall. I wasn't that thrilled. I didn't think that was the right thing to do.

"I never thought he was wrong" about the war, she added. "I just asked him not to give back his medals."

The veterans' march in 1971, it turned out, was one of the last major antiwar protests. But it was not the last time Vietnam veterans would discard their medals. Nearly six years later, furious at President Jimmy Carter's amnesty for draft evaders, a former marine sergeant named Dale Wilson called on other outraged veterans to join him in turning in their decorations to protest Carter's action. Wilson, whose grievous wounds in Vietnam had cost him both legs and his right arm, had not been bitter when he returned home, he wrote in a letter to his local newspaper, the Statesville (North Carolina) Record & Landmark. He had enlisted in the Marine Corps "feeling that it was my patriotic duty to serve my country," he wrote, and even after being wounded, only days before he was due to rotate home, felt lucky that he had survived to see his country again.

But Carter's amnesty defiled his sacrifice, Wilson felt, and the service of every soldier

who had fought in the war. "Now I am faced with the fact that those who ran when our country called can come back and take the jobs and positions in the community of those who deserve them: the United States veteran." Like Ron Ferrizzi, Wilson had a young son, and like Ferrizzi he also felt his decorations were too tarnished to pass on. He'd have kept them for his son, he wrote, "but as the war has been recognized as a mistake, I feel there is no honor in medals obtained through dishonorable conflict."

A week after his letter was published, Wilson and other angry veterans, some from as far away as Pennsylvania and Ohio, gathered on a parking lot next to a Statesville grocery store. There, they nailed their decorations -- and for good measure, an artificial limb -- to the wall of an outhouse they had brought to the site: "a symbol," Wilson declared, "of the universal political platform which promises relief and ends up with \_\_\_\_." Before turning in his own Bronze Star, Purple Heart and other medals, Wilson handed the empty boxes to his three-year-old son, Joshua. "Are they empty, Daddy?" Joshua asked. "They are full of hope," Wilson replied, "hope for our nation." When all the decorations had been hung on the wall, Doris Miller, whose son had been killed in Vietnam, touched a match to the outhouse, which had been soaked in kerosene, and with Wilson and the others, watched it burn to ashes.

The fact that men with such different opinions on the war as Dale Wilson and Ron Ferrizzi both ended up making the identical gesture of rage spoke volumes about how deeply Vietnam had torn the national spirit. Whether they were flung away by antiwar veterans at the Capitol or by anti-amnesty veterans in North Carolina, those discarded medals represented personal courage and sacrifice that deserved to be honored whether the war was justified or not. Tainting that honor for so many veterans might not have been the worst thing Americans did to themselves in Vietnam. But it was no small crime, either.

Robert L. Young Sr. didn't throw away his Vietnam medals. He was proud of them, or wanted to be. But because no one else cared, it was hard to sustain his pride. During his year as radioman in a mortar squad in the 25th Infantry Division, Young earned a Bronze Star, Army Commendation Medal, and Combat Infantryman's Badge, among other decorations. But even while he was still in the army after coming back from Vietnam, he never wore his ribbons off base. "The medals were like -- how can I explain? -- like you were a killer. It just seemed no one cared about that war.... No one was interested in the Vietnam veteran at all."

More than twenty years later, Young, now a postal worker in Baltimore, still sounded wistful and a little bitter, or maybe more puzzled than bitter. The medals "didn't mean anything to me any more," he said. "Like I was proud to have them, but who wanted to see them? When I got the Bronze Star over there, I was really proud. But over here, who cared if I got the Bronze Star?" As a kid, he'd seen homes where veterans had their medals mounted in cabinets on the wall. He sometimes thought about mounting his, but hadn't done it. "Who cares?" he said again, sounding not at all like someone whose medals didn't mean anything any more. "You'd like to show your kids someday, but you just get that feeling that no one cared."

Like many other African-American veterans, Young came back from Vietnam to family, friends and neighbors who were, often, even more skeptical about the war than white Americans had become. People who didn't know he'd been in the service spoke disparagingly about black soldiers in Vietnam. "They would say... those dummies over there, most of them come back crazy. Black people would say," Young went on, "there was no reason for a black man to be there. It's not his war. His war is here at home."

Thinking about it long afterward, in the neatly kept living room of the house his veteran's benefits had helped him buy, Young still sounded troubled and hurt, unsure if he'd been right to go to Vietnam, or wrong. "You're supposed to be a United States citizen, but you still have your

people make you feel, why should you go over there and fight? I felt like, are they right?" Like many other black soldiers, he had originally thought of military service as a pathway to a better career than he might have found in civilian life. "I was proud to be in the service when I went in," he said. "I was proud. I went in thinking to make a career out of the service." But not after Vietnam, and the indifference or hostility he encountered when he came home. "After that, I was glad my time was up. I wasn't proud any longer. I lost all that pride of being a soldier. I just lost it."

To a listener, Young sounded like a man with such painfully mixed feelings that he wasn't sure exactly what they were. One could guess that his soldier's pride wasn't actually lost, but buried somewhere very deep within himself because he didn't know whether he should be proud or not.

It was hardly surprising if Vietnam left black soldiers -- and other black Americans -- even more troubled, disillusioned, angry and confused than the rest of the country. The war coincided, almost exactly, with events that transformed the American racial landscape. America's gradual march into Vietnam -- first with advisors, then with air power, then with ground combat forces -- occurred simultaneously with the great wave of sit-ins and freedom rides in the early 1960s and the toppling of legal segregation with the 1964 Civil Rights Act and the 1965 Voting Rights Act. In the years that followed, though, the war and the civil rights struggle moved with a kind of ironic symmetry, as if each became a metaphor for the other. While hopes for an easy military success faded away in the dense green jungles of Vietnam, hopes for a rapid, total victory over historic racial injustice foundered in the equally tangled terrain of race, class and economic relations at home.

In Vietnam, as the U.S. ground war began, African-Americans were over-represented in the enlisted ranks of the armed services, where many blacks felt they had more economic security and better career opportunities than in civilian society. Briefly, the war was seen as a positive event, in the context of American race relations. A number of commentators, both black and white, hailed it as America's first truly integrated war. Black soldiers fighting alongside whites on a genuinely equal basis, the story went, would send -- to their own country and the world -- an inspiring message of interracial patriotism, unity and common efforts in the nation's service.

Before the U.S. ground war was many months old, however, it became apparent that black soldiers were not just carrying their fair share but were suffering disproportionate casualties, compared with white troops. In 1965 and early 1966, nearly 25 percent of U.S. troops killed in action were black, more than twice the black percentage of the population as a whole. The Defense Department rather quickly acted to even out the racial balance in combat units, and the disparity in casualties dropped sharply -- though not before creating an enduring impression that African-Americans took unduly high losses throughout the conflict.

While the war bogged down in an increasingly frustrating stalemate, black rage at home broke out in fiery riots in Los Angeles, Newark, Detroit and other cities. The crusade that brought down traditional segregation in the American South was less unified and less effective against the social problems facing large numbers of black Americans: poverty, poor education, lack of jobs, high rates of illegitimacy and drug use, and a deep anger and alienation that was often transformed into domestic violence or street crime. From both the streets and black intellectuals came a chorus of new, angry voices, challenging the traditional civil rights agenda of racial integration and alliance and preaching separatism or revolution instead. Black support for the war eroded rapidly. Opinion polls showed a majority of blacks opposing the war by 1969; two years later, according to one survey, more than four-fifths of African-Americans felt the war was a mistake.

Support evaporated among prominent black leaders, too. For a time, some hesitated to

criticize the war publicly, not wanting to burn their bridges to President Lyndon Johnson, their ally on civil rights and social programs. By early 1967, though, the Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr., and others were arguing that the war had become the enemy of social and economic justice at home. The war, King declared, was not only killing young men in Vietnam but "devastating the hopes of the poor" in the United States. (Privately, Johnson agreed, at least afterward. Talking to his biographer Doris Kearns Goodwin after he retired, Johnson acknowledged that from the start, he knew that "that bitch of a war on the other side of the world" would destroy his vision of creating a Great Society in America. "I would lose everything.... All my programs. All my hopes to feed the hungry and shelter the homeless. All my dreams to provide education and medical care to the browns and the blacks and the lame and the poor." But LBJ felt he had no choice: letting the Communists take over South Vietnam would brand him as a coward and the United States as an appeaser, he told Goodwin, "and we would both find it impossible to accomplish anything for anybody anywhere on the entire globe.")

King's declarations against the war resonated among millions of African-Americans. So did the earthier words of boxing champion Muhammad Ali, who refused induction into the army and (at a time when many white athletes were easily getting draft deferments or reserve assignments) stood trial for draft evasion. "No Viet Cong," Ali declared, "ever called me nigger."

The country's divisions over the war and over race deepened in tandem, especially in 1968, the year of the Tet Offensive, King's murder, racial violence, and a presidential campaign that in many ways established the cultural and thinly coded racial politics that would mark American political life for the next three decades. Reflecting an increasingly angry and polarized society at home, racial tension simmered in the armed services, too. By most accounts, conflict was relatively rare among soldiers in the field, where men had to depend on each other for mutual survival in combat. But in rear areas, black and white soldiers in many units split into wary, hostile groups.

African-American soldiers returning from Vietnam could not escape the raw racial nerves and the social and economic problems affecting black society in general. And, even more than white veterans, they could not escape painful doubts about just what their service meant: had they gone to Vietnam as part of assuming full citizenship in a society that aspired, at least, to true racial democracy? Or had they gone as expendable cannon fodder for a government and society that still denied basic justice to black citizens at home?

Many black veterans, like Robert Young, were still torn by those questions long after the war. More than twenty years after he came home, Young still could not find a good reason for the war. But he sounded as if he wished it could have been different: "It was all unnecessary. It didn't make sense. You were supposed to be helping the Vietnamese people, but they didn't want you.... I thought we were fighting to help those people to have a democratic society, that's what I thought. Then you find out they really don't want you. And you've got a whole year over there, you think maybe you'll find someone who appreciates your being there. Nope....

"You say well, I did a good job. But you never accomplished anything. The only thing you accomplished was to go over to that country for a year and get shot at."

Young also sounded as if he had spent a very long time hoping for someone to tell him he wasn't dumb to go to Vietnam, or disloyal to the black struggle for justice at home. "If they would have recognized the Vietnam veterans the same way they recognized the guys that did Desert Storm, the Korean War, whatever, it would have made it a little different," he said wistfully. But he didn't sound very hopeful that anything would change. "After twenty years, people say, are you still thinking about that dumb stuff? It's dumb to them now, it was dumb to them then. What are you going to do?... You might have a lot of hurt and pain within yourself, but you just let it ride. Nobody wants to hear about that."

## II

It was certainly the moral and emotional confusion of remembering Vietnam, not just the confusion of being there, that produced the characteristic formlessness and the disillusioned, cynical tone of nearly all of the novels and memoirs written by returning soldiers -- a literature which in turn helped shape a national memory of the war as not just tragic, but empty of meaning. The typical Vietnam book, the writer C. D. B. Bryan once observed, "charts the gradual deterioration of order, the disintegration of idealism, the breakdown of character, the alienation from those at home, and, finally, the loss of all sensibility save the will to survive."

With rare exceptions, veterans who came home and tried to put their memories into books ended up recreating a war that had, as nearly all soldiers experienced it, no logical or narrative structure of its own. The "Generic Vietnam War Narrative," as Bryan called it, had instead a series of obligatory episodes: the hero's arrival (always by himself) at his unit, the first fire-fight, the first death of a friend. "There is the atrocity scene," Bryan continued, "... There are dope scenes: guys stoned at night lying out on the bunker roof, tripping on the light show of gunships and arc flares...." And so on: the helicopter assault, the R&R with its hurried, loveless sex, and at the end the scene where the hero "flies back to the World and at the airport a pretty young woman spits on him and calls him a baby-killer."

For the novels and memoirs that came out of World War II, the event itself provided a kind of structure. In that war's generic narratives, groups of soldiers meet in training, wait for combat together (instead of arriving at the war alone), have their baptism of fire, and then fight in campaigns that lead them across the map of Europe or the Pacific toward the eventual victory that will conclude both the war and, typically, the book. The Vietnam war had no such structure. It appears in virtually all the books -- and movies and television shows as well -- simply as a setting, an unchanging environment into which a soldier comes, spends his one-year tour, and leaves. At the end, the hero may have changed, but the war has not. There is no victory or defeat, not even any discernible progress toward one or the other. No battle is connected to any other battle; nothing happens to explain the war, which instead just is, like a jungle or a river. And thus nothing ever explains or vindicates the soldier's experience, either.

The Vietnam combat narratives which "wander through the war from day to day as aimlessly as the infantry soldiers whose travail they record" represent a kind of realism, wrote Jack Fuller -- but, he added, "it is a primitive realism. It does not do the work of fiction, which is to give experience a sense of coherence." Moreover, the "cynical landscape of Vietnam," as another critic called it, turned the conventional rite-of-passage into something darker than in the literature of earlier wars. In the Vietnam novels, a soldier's aimless wandering doesn't end when he leaves the war zone. Instead, the typical hero is no less lost and aimless after he comes home -- burned out and emotionally damaged, seeming to himself, as a fictional veteran in Susan Fromberg Shaeffer's *Buffalo Afternoon* put it, like "a pane of glass, still whole, but with a crack down the middle."

If the chief quality of Vietnam literature was its lack of coherence, clearly this mirrored the incoherence of the actual experience -- for the soldiers and for the country they came home to, too. "In war you lose your sense of the definite, hence your sense of the truth itself, and therefore it's safe to say that in a true war story nothing is ever absolutely true," wrote Tim O'Brien in "How To Tell a True War Story," and novelist Robert Stone remembered: "The war carried with it the most awful sense of absurdity and futility.... To realize that the whole thing was absolutely cockeyed, that it was an enormous, breathtaking mistake, was alarming to begin

with, and then you realized there was nothing much you could do about it -- except to try to exist within it. Everyone was passing the buck. Everyone was putting everybody else on -- kidding themselves and lying to one another. Generals were lying to Washington, and Washington was lying to the press. And for the guys on the line, the nature of the war didn't afford the satisfaction of taking enemy ground, so to keep morale up, the brass made the body count a measure of success. That really shocked the G.I.'s, and it reinforced that whole nightmare feeling.

"The moral slipperiness and double-crossing in Vietnam bent everybody's head out of shape. It gave you the sense that everything was scrambled. And this kind of stoned despair created its own idiom, its own language. There was a distinctly 'in-country' way of talking, an 'in-country' sense of humor -- like you were on another planet. It was a very spacey way of talking, a profoundly cynical attitude toward everything."

In this national and personal confusion, every veteran was left to try, alone, to find a reason for what had happened to him. Many could not. "I want it to have been worth something," the poet W. D. Ehrhart, who was badly wounded in the war, burst out to a friend after coming home, "and I can't make myself believe that it was."

Along with incoherence, another odd trait of the popular literature and movies of the Vietnam war was how commonly war crimes were presented as the typical -- and symbolic -- experience of American soldiers. Sometimes a war crime was a central element of the story, as in the climactic scene of the movie "Platoon." But atrocities also appeared in a kind of careless, routine way, as if they were simply taken for granted, an accepted feature of the historical landscape.

In the movie "In Country," for example, there's a snatch of dialogue between Sam, a teenage girl seeking to learn about her father's death in Vietnam, and her mother. In their conversation, the mother mentions another veteran who came home tormented because he once killed a peasant family. "Did my daddy do things like that?" Sam asks. The mother shrugs. She doesn't know, she answers, but it could be; "that's what they were sent over there to do." The subject of killing civilians had, in fact, nothing to do with the story and is not mentioned again in the movie; it's probably a safe bet that the exchange hardly registered at all in the minds of most viewers. Those who did notice, though, might have wondered how this came to be the stereotype of American soldiers, appearing again and again in the popular literature of the war -- that they were regularly involved in massacring civilians. Such crimes happened, of course, but the actual incidence of GIs murdering or accidentally killing civilians was certainly a small fraction of the murder rate reflected in novels and movies and television shows.

Showing atrocities as routine, or carelessly assuming that murdering peasants was "what they were sent to do," was not only a terrible injustice to all those Americans who served in Vietnam and were not murderers. It also obscured the real issue of American responsibility for civilian deaths and suffering in Vietnam, caused, in the overwhelming majority of cases, not by the moral confusion or deadly impulses of scared young soldiers in the field, but by basic U.S. tactics, doctrines and military technology.

The fact is that for every Vietnamese civilian killed by an American soldier with a rifle or grenade, thousands were killed by the profligate use of artillery and air power that characterized the American war. The policy on using firepower was not indiscriminate, by any means. Commanders operated under rules of engagement meant to prevent needless civilian casualties. Plenty of GIs risked their own lives to avoid endangering innocent villagers. Still, in spite of all precautions, it remains true that U.S. firepower, employed in tonnages "unparalleled in military history," as one Army study put it, devastated large areas of rural Vietnam, with an unknown but certainly heavy toll of civilian lives.

American government statistics on civilian casualties were so sketchy, inconsistent and confusing as to suggest that U.S. military and civilian officials were for the most part trying not to know the facts. Journalists and historians didn't show much interest in the subject, either. One Pentagon statistician did develop an estimate putting non-combatant deaths in South Vietnam at about 25,000 a year, with a high percentage attributable to U.S. bombs and shellfire. Whether those deaths represented a crime or a tragic but unavoidable effect of modern war is, surely, the central moral question arising from America's conduct of the war in Vietnam -- not the aberration represented by My Lai. Yet it is hard to recall a movie or novel showing villages shattered and peasants killed by shells or bombs as the result of standard U.S. tactics. Instead, the images that reached American audiences almost always were of young, low-ranking soldiers committing murder or accidentally killing villagers.

Why those images were so persistent is a matter of speculation. But they did help Americans duck some difficult questions -- about our character as a nation, the moral standards of our leaders, the dehumanizing qualities of technology, and the way we chose to make war among people racially and culturally distant from ourselves. Just as the burden of national failure was largely displaced from the national leadership onto the soldiers, so was the burden of guilt; unfairly showing them (to themselves as well as to everyone else) as murderers seemed a way of escaping a responsibility that properly belonged to America's leaders and to American society as a whole. The movies and novels that made a cliché of atrocities drove another wedge between the country and its soldiers. They offered another way for Americans to tell themselves, as Bobby Muller pointed out from his wheelchair, "Hey, it wasn't my war. I didn't do it."

If you asked what was the single worst day for Vietnam veterans, a lot of them might pick January 20, 1981 -- the day fifty-two Americans returned home after being held captive for 444 days in the U.S. embassy in Iran.

The heroes' welcome for the hostages, the ubiquitous yellow ribbons, the extravagant national outpouring of sympathy and concern; all represented a painful, even unbearable, contrast with the treatment Vietnam soldiers had yearned for but had not received when they came home. "It still rankles me, the homecoming they got," Ron Zaczek, a former marine, wrote many years later. "Not the hostages' fault, of course. There was no 'fault' to it at all, though I didn't think so at the time. Those poor bastards deserved their parade. Still, I've never forgotten how it was for us. Nothing seems to make up for that."

Lily Jean Lee Adams, a former army nurse, recalled: "I remember seeing them get into cars and seeing all the yellow ribbons and the wonderful reception they got, and I was really happy for them. Then, in the middle of all this, I said, 'Wait a minute. What the fuck did they do? They sat around for four hundred and some odd days reading magazines, and I worked my ass off three hundred and sixty-five days saving lives.... They are getting this homecoming, and I got beat up, psychologically beat up.'"

If it was a low point, though, the Iran hostages' homecoming may have also represented a turning. The day the hostages were welcomed with a ticker-tape parade in New York, Bobby Muller remembered, was also the day the phones finally began ringing in the Vietnam Veterans of America office:

The first time ever, ever, ever that, unsolicited, we got calls. People were saying, "Not to take it away from the hostages, but I want you to know I'm thinking about you." My mother called from Houston, Texas, and she was outraged. She said, "One of the hostages came from Houston. They gave him a Cadillac and free passes to the ball games. What did anybody ever give you? Nothing." And the contrast between America going gaga

over the hostages and they never did anything for the Vietnam Vets was so great that they were compelled finally to try and balance the scales.

Less than two years later, the dedication of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial seemed, finally, to force the country to see and acknowledge those who had fought the war. The memorial, and the public response to it, released many veterans from their silence and afforded them an expression of respect, however belated, for their sacrifice. It could not have been coincidental that Vietnam, for years virtually invisible on America's cultural landscape, suddenly began to appear in a steady stream of movies, novels, memoirs and television shows -- typically depicting the veterans in a favorable, even a heroic, light.

For most vets, this was a welcome change from the crazy or doped-up "psychotic killer" figure that had previously been the most familiar representation of the Vietnam vet in popular culture. But the veteran's new image, as a few shrewd critics commented, was not exactly in the tradition of earlier war heroes. "The stereotype has been shattered," Joseph Ferrandino of Columbia University pointed out. But instead of being transformed into a conventional patriotic hero, the "new" Vietnam veteran had become something quite different. "He is not a national hero in the traditional sense," Ferrandino wrote. "He is not a hero because he sacrificed himself for something 'larger.' He is a hero because he survived. He survived for no reasons other than he wanted to live, to raise a family, see the future, or just for the hell of it.... The Viet vet, as cultural hero, depends on no one but himself for survival. After having been fooled by his government and rejected by his peers, he holds everyone in equal distrust. The veteran, in other words, became an icon not of faith or selflessness or service to country or ideals, but of skepticism, alienation and individual survival as the supreme value. He still symbolized courage, perhaps, but a kind of courage divorced from any idealism, suited to a cynical, selfish era.

In no small measure, of course, this mirrored the soldiers' experience of the war itself, in which (especially for those who served after troop withdrawals began in 1969) it was hard to find any reason for fighting other than for survival -- their own and their friends'. "I didn't care who won," recalled William Frassanito, who went to Vietnam in 1970. "I just wanted to make sure I got home. . . . I was taking one guy over, and bringing one guy back." In this there was also a message about the war itself. If bringing one guy back was the only real goal, then the war, by definition, lacked any purpose or meaning that could justify the loss of those who didn't come back. And if 58,000 young Americans (and perhaps two million Asians) could be killed in such a war, then the world itself was similarly without meaning. It may not be too great an exaggeration to say that somewhere in the experience of nearly every Vietnam veteran, acknowledged or not, was the discovery that life is absurd.

Sometimes that discovery emerged from the literal circumstances of the soldier's experience -- though rarely, perhaps, with as much clarity as when one of the young marines in William Broyles Jr.'s platoon asked him one day, "Lieutenant, why are we here?"

It was, Broyles wrote, "the question none of us ever asked. We didn't want to know the answer. Harlan had broken the rules." The rest of the conversation, as Broyles recounted it in his memoir *Brothers in Arms*, went like this:

"Well, Harlan, we're here to help South Vietnam stay independent," I said.

"Sure, sure, Lieutenant. I know all that," Harlan replied impatiently. "But why are we here, right here?"

"Oh. Well, our mission is to protect the Da Nang vital area."

Harlan thought about that for a minute. "Okay, Lieutenant," he said, "but why is Da Nang a vital area?"

"I guess it's because of all the American support troops back there."

"Yeah, but why are they there?"

"Well, to support us," I said, closing the circle.

"That's what I thought. We're here to save the asses of those REMFs! Hell, they're supposed to be supporting us!" Harlan started to get mad. "They hog all the fucking socks! They hang the fucking nylon blankets from the ceilings of their hootches! They carry all the new fucking M-sixteens! They eat hot fucking chow! They eat cold fucking ice cream! They eat sweet pussy! They --"

"Hey, Harlan," Hiers said, poking his head out of the tent. "Nobody said life was going to be perfect."

Among all the veterans of Vietnam, those who waited longest for recognition and respect were the women.

Even long after the Memorial and the emergence of the "new," sympathetic Vietnam vet, the women were still virtually invisible. "Vietnam was on TV, and there were all the Vietnam movies, but it was all about the men," said Diane Carlson Evans, the former Army nurse who spent nearly ten years campaigning for a women's statue at the Memorial. "... I didn't see anything to remind me that women were in Vietnam.... And the strangest thing. I started thinking, 'Maybe I wasn't really there. Maybe I am imagining it.'"

Women veterans were so invisible, indeed, that even twenty years later, no one seemed sure how many there were. The most exhaustive postwar study of the veterans' experience reported 7,166 women served "in or around Vietnam" during the war, though other estimates ranged up to ten or eleven thousand. Red Cross workers and other civilians associated with the war effort added a few thousand to that total. The great majority of them were nurses, most of them recently out of nursing school and only a few years older than the teen-aged soldiers they treated. Eight women were killed in combat.

However many women there were, it became clear -- but only very gradually -- that in many ways, their memories of Vietnam may have been just as troubled as the men's. The combination of new medical techniques and quick helicopter evacuation from the battlefield meant that nurses regularly saw men so terribly wounded or burned that in any previous war, they would never have lived to reach a hospital. And the fact that the Vietnam GIs were younger than soldiers in earlier wars carried a special pain, too.\* "I thought of soldiers as grizzled John Wayne types," mourned Lynda Van Devanter many years after the war. "They weren't supposed to look like John-Boy. And they were supposed to get better."

Nurses went to war to heal, not to fight, and for many, that was justification enough. "You knew what you were doing was right," said Jane Hodge, a nurse at the 95th Evacuation Hospital in Da Nang in 1969-70. "The fact that we were in Vietnam might not have been right, but the guys who were being shot up weren't the ones that had that choice to make. That's why I think I was able to work and live under the conditions that we did for a year. It's because the kids -- not all of them were kids, but a lot of them were -- didn't have a choice about being there, and the least I could do was take care of them." Kathie Swazuk, who joined the army at twenty-one right out of nursing school and was sent to Vietnam eight months later, told an interviewer: "Whether I believed in why we should be there or not had nothing to do with it.... What I did

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\* The average age of an American infantryman in World War II was twenty-six; in Vietnam, it was nineteen. "I was 21 years old at the time. I was one of the oldest people around," Ronald Ridenhour, the Americal Division infantry veteran who brought the My Lai massacre to light, once told an interviewer.

there helped save lives and helped get some of these guys back in one piece. I feel like the medicine that I saw practiced over there was phenomenal for the conditions and for the flow of patients. I felt more needed, or more useful, there than I ever felt in my whole life. Really I did."

Like Swazuk, many nurses found their Vietnam service professionally rewarding. But the experience often carried a price. A high percentage showed symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder: anxiety, depression, insomnia, nightmares, flashbacks, numbness, thoughts of suicide. More than one-quarter of the former nurses surveyed in the National Vietnam Veterans Readjustment Study were reported to have had "full-blown PTSD at some time in their lives." But even those vet center counselors and other therapists who pioneered the diagnosis and treatment of PTSD for male vets were slow to recognize the same disorder in women. So, for that matter, were the women themselves. Technically, they weren't "in combat" -- so how could they have the same problems that were usually identified with combat experience?

Besides, these women were nurses; their training and instincts were to help others in need, not to look for help themselves. And their culture -- not just American culture but the religiously and politically conservative Middle American-Roman Catholic background that so many nurses shared -- led them to stifle many of the emotions that sprang from their experience. Doubts about American policy, for example. Or anger: "Girls don't get angry. When they do, they're called crazy, hysterical and out of control." The sight of teen-aged soldiers shredded by shrapnel or burned to blackened lumps left many nurses full of rage but with no place to let it out. Instead, typically, they buried that anger within themselves, in a place so deep and dark it could be seen only in the lurid light of their nightmares.

Even more than the men, women came home from Vietnam and found no way to speak about it, either about the things they were proud of or the things that haunted them. "I guess some people did ask me about Vietnam, and I would say things like 'It was okay.' Or 'Actually it was the pits.' That's all I said for ten years," a former army nurse named Anne Simon Auger told interviewer Keith Walker for his collection of women veterans' oral histories. (At the beginning of the interview, Walker noted, Auger "put one hand over her eyes, and it stayed there during the entire ninety minutes the tape recorder ran.") Kathie Swazuk remembered: "It was strange. There was no one to talk to. So basically I never talked to anyone about Vietnam for years and years and years.... It's something that you kind of locked up, at least that's what I did. I don't know if that's normal, but I didn't talk about it much.... I don't think I've ever not thought about Vietnam. I just know I never expressed it."

### III

When the U.S. Naval Academy's class of 1968 held its twenty-fifth reunion, one of the returning graduates was Bill Sullivan, who served during the war aboard the U.S.S. *Vancouver* and later became a psychiatrist. "I work in a veterans hospital," he told a reporter at the reunion. "We're still hearing about [Vietnam]. About half the people I see hated the war and are angry with the government. The other half hated the hippies."

A major opinion survey conducted for the Veterans Administration reported in 1979 that although the great majority were proud of their own service, "Vietnam era veterans are more alienated from and cynical about the nation's political institutions than is the public as a whole... much more alienated than a comparable cross section of the public of a similar age and level of education." A sizeable minority said they would refuse to serve again, and nearly 60 percent of

veterans agreed with the statement that the men who served in Vietnam "were made suckers, having to risk their own lives in the wrong war in the wrong place at the wrong time."

Anger gave a kind of strange unity to the veterans who disagreed most profoundly on everything else about the war. The poet W. D. Ehrhart and the novelist and former Navy Secretary James Webb, for example, both combat-wounded marine veterans, reached exactly the opposite conclusions about Vietnam. But their views sprang from virtually identical feelings of anger and betrayal. Not only that: Webb and Ehrhart were angry at exactly the same people, too -- the national leaders who had led the country into its Vietnam disaster. To Ehrhart, the betrayal was in sending him to fight (and narrowly escape death) in a war he had come to see as unjustified and immoral. To Webb, it was in letting him and millions of others fight without giving them the support and leadership necessary to win.

Webb's anger was unmistakable in his first novel, *Fields of Fire*. "Fuck 'em. Just fuck 'em. Fuck everybody who doesn't come out here and do this," says one of his characters -- a lieutenant commanding a rifle platoon, just as Webb did in real life. In his public life, Webb became a passionate spokesman for the soldiers whose service had been repaid with indifference or contempt -- by people like the Georgetown University law professor who baited Webb with a taunting exam question about a hypothetical marine sergeant named Webb, who uses the bodies of dead comrades to smuggle some pieces of jade out of Vietnam. (After seething for two days, Webb confronted the professor in his office. "I went over to Vietnam with sixty-seven lieutenants, twenty-two died, and it wasn't funny," Webb told him.) The same national leaders and institutions that had sent them to Vietnam, Webb once declared, "have now decided we should be ashamed of our scars. Well," he went on defiantly, "I'm not ashamed of mine." Webb's concern was demanding respect for the marines he'd served with and for the rest of the veterans. He was not interested in reconciling with those who he believed had dishonored them.

Bill Ehrhart wasn't interested in reconciliation either. He was fed up, I once heard him say, with people telling him to stop talking about the war and go on. "I keep getting my face rubbed in the Vietnam war every time I turn on the TV or open the newspaper.... When we wise up I'll let it go, and we all know how long that'll be. By healing, they mean stop disturbing us by talking about this," he went on, his voice rising. "By reconciliation, do they mean I should embrace Henry Kissinger and Robert McNamara? I don't want to reconcile with people like that.... I'm going to keep talking about this till I think we learned something from it -- and that means I'm going to keep talking until they're shoveling dirt in my mouth! Go on to what? Go on to Mogadishu? Go on to Baghdad? Not me!"

When the newspaper columnist Bob Greene asked veterans to write in to his nationally syndicated column about their experiences, the letters -- later collected and published as a book -- were shot through with the same anger. Often it was impossible to tell whether the writer opposed or supported the war, but the rage was unmistakable. "The American people can go to hell before I or my sons fight another war for them," said Alvin L. Long of Wimberley, Tex., and Sam Maggio of Wheaton, Ill., wrote: "Almost every male in my family has been in the military, but it ended with me. They'll have to kill me to get at my son."

Ron Ferrizzi said nearly the same thing when I visited him in Philadelphia, twenty-three years after watching him throw away his decorations in front of the Capitol in Washington. He wouldn't fight "even if they invade Atlantic City," he declared. "They can have it. They'll have to come across the Delaware River and come down my street before I pick up a weapon."

Men like Ehrhart and Webb and Ferrizzi and many of Greene's letter-writers, divided in their opinions about the war but united in their anger, were also united in being quite sure of their views. No doubt, plenty of veterans were equally certain of one partisan viewpoint or the other. But just as certainly, there were many others occupying the middle ground, left (like the country itself) with complicated, contradictory feelings about the war. Randy Russin, for one, who says

reflectively, "it was no fun being part of the first losing team," and thinks his government "fought that war not to lose" instead of fighting to win -- but also wondered, twenty-six years after coming home, if the war was winnable, and if it wasn't, why the United States persisted in it so long.

Nearly three decades after shipping out to Vietnam as a 19-year-old marine in the spring of 1966, Randy Russin -- now Captain Randall B. Russin of the Baltimore County Police Department -- remembers that when he went to Vietnam, he didn't doubt America's purposes in the war, or that it would win. In 1966, of course, U.S. ground forces had been only been in combat for a year. Most people still trusted the national leadership. And the national goal was still to win, not just to find a face-saving way out. Winning the war was his goal too, Russin said, but when he got to Vietnam he found it was hard to tell if we were winning or not. His combat engineer unit was constantly shifted from one area of operations to another, supporting different infantry units. But wherever they went, the fighting "didn't seem to have any relation to the overall picture." Instead, every battle seemed an isolated engagement, without any connection to the fighting anywhere else, or to anything that happened before or after it.

In his thirteen months in Vietnam, Russin also said, after a brief pause to reflect on the question, there was never a single moment when he felt that he, personally, was involved in a successful effort. Even when the marines captured a hill or some other terrain feature, they didn't stay there. Instead, after a few hours or days they would leave, so that sometime in the future they or some other marines would have to take the place all over again. "I had uncles in World War II, in the army in Europe and in the marines in the Pacific," Russin said, "and I remember from their stories that at times they didn't know whether they were winning or losing.... When you're that close to what's going on," he went on, now obviously speaking of his own war too, "you might not know whether you're winning or losing as far as the big picture is concerned. You just went out and did your job and hoped it was part of a plan to win the war." When he left Vietnam, Russin still hoped someone, somewhere, had an idea how to win. But that had become a matter of faith, not evidence -- sort of like belief in God. Nothing in his own experience suggested that anything had changed during his tour, or that the marines (or the country) were any closer to victory.

As I listened, I found myself thinking that perhaps the country's division over Vietnam wasn't the only reason so many veterans shut up about their experience. Maybe they also shut up because they didn't have a language that could describe or explain this war. Americans understand war as narrative and use narrative language to describe it. Like millions of others in his generation, Randy Russin would have absorbed from history classes, from movies and books, no doubt from his uncles' recollections, too, that war is linear, something that progresses through successive battles and campaigns toward a conclusion. But Vietnam had no story line, just fragments of violence; it was random, chaotic, without narrative logic. That meant, among many other things, that the war American soldiers found in Vietnam turned out to be something almost entirely different from the idea of war most of them brought with them. Perhaps it was not surprising that few could find words to explain it -- even to themselves.

The most surprising thing I learned from Randy Russin was that the silence began even before he left Vietnam.

We were sitting in the Double T Diner on U.S. Route 40 just west of the Baltimore city line. Russin grew up near here; his high school, Woodlawn High, is only a mile or so away. The diner was a local institution even then; he and his friends often came here for a late-night snack, or just to hang out. Over a quarter-century had passed since his homecoming from Vietnam, but when he spoke about it, he recalled the details with such clarity it might have been only a few

weeks. He had to turn in all his field gear when he left his battalion, he said, so he arrived at the Da Nang processing center with no rifle, no helmet -- and no unit, which for a marine was something like losing his identity altogether. Da Nang felt like "no-man's-land... we weren't part of any organized company or battalion. It was kind of unnerving." And everyone was a stranger. When he boarded his flight for Okinawa a couple of days later, Russin said, "I didn't know anybody on the plane. Everybody was coming from different units." When the men boarded, he remembered, there was an eerie hush.

"There was no sound on the plane except the shuffling of everybody getting on.... It was an unearthly silence, almost like everybody was holding their breath." Only after the plane -- a civilian jet airliner, chartered by the military -- actually left the runway did the men break into loud, boisterous cheers. On Okinawa he waited another ten days or so for his flight back to the States -- still surrounded by strangers. "It lent itself to isolation," he said. "There was almost a reluctance to talk. You didn't know where the other guy was coming from, he didn't know where you were coming from." The men bitched about the delay and swapped ribald fantasies about coming home, but as Russin remembered it, they hardly mentioned where they had just come from. "Everybody was reluctant to talk about their experiences."

Another thing Russin remembered about that homecoming was how quickly he came to feel reluctant to be identified with the war. In his memory, he said, it seemed he felt that way even before he got home and saw the "Welcome Home Randy" banner in front of his parents' house, while he was still standing in the Baltimore airport in his dress uniform with his lance-corporal's stripes on the sleeves, waiting for his wife and parents to come pick him up. "It was a hope that nobody would associate you with being a veteran. It was like you wanted to go home, take your uniform off, and hope nobody noticed how short your hair was...."

Why? I asked. And where did the feeling come from?

It was because the country seemed to be blaming the veterans for the war, Russin answered after a pause. He felt he had done nothing shameful in going to Vietnam, and neither had the other veterans. They went "for what they thought were the right reasons," he said, "doing your duty to your country." But now he thought they were being criticized, unfairly, for the policy. American soldiers "went over there with honorable intentions -- and came back almost as a scapegoat for the political decisions that were made to involve the country in the war to begin with." It was hard to identify when that feeling began, or what caused it, he added. But it was no doubt part of the reason he, like so many other veterans, tended to remain silent about the war. He said very little to his family -- "I have the feeling if someone wasn't there, you're never going to make them understand."

Every so often, something brings Vietnam back to mind -- a television show or movie, or perhaps a news event like the Persian Gulf war or the U.S. military disaster in Somalia. But Russin still doesn't find himself talking about his memories very often. "The consensus in the country was that nobody wanted to talk about it.... I don't know," he says. "I just suppressed it, kept it to myself, I guess...."

Twenty-four years after he came home from Vietnam, Randy Russin buried his oldest son.

Chris Russin died of leukemia at nineteen, the same age his father had been when he went off to war. In high school, Russin said, Chris's two main interests had been playing the drums and associating with a group of students who were interested in pacifist ideas and the peace movement. For a couple of years he usually wore a necklace with the peace symbol (although, in the contradictory way of teenagers, he also thought on and off about joining the Marine Corps). Chris also wore his hair long, to cover a slight deformity in one ear. The hair and

the peace sign both stirred uncomfortable memories for his father. When he looked back on the peace movement of the Vietnam era, Randy Russin could find no distinction between opposing the war and opposing the veterans. Critics of the war were blaming the soldiers "for something that wasn't our fault." And beyond that, beyond the specific issue of the war, there was something troubling at the antiwar movement's core -- something in conflict with Russin's character and most basic beliefs. Randy Russin was and is a man who deeply believes in duty and responsibility, and it seemed to him the movement believed in neither.

"I viewed the peace movement almost like a kind of drop-out-of-society kind of movement," he said. "Like, I'm not going to accept any responsibility for supporting the country's effort" -- meaning not just the war, but any effort for any national purposes. Yet even if the symbols made him uncomfortable, Russin also respected his son and his son's beliefs, and he believes his son respected him. And that is why, when Chris died and Russin's wife suggested putting the peace sign on his grave marker, he eventually swallowed hard and agreed. At first, he told her, "I don't know if I can go down and look at that every time I go to the cemetery." But after thinking about it for a few days he gave his assent. "We went ahead and did it, and to this day he's got the peace sign on his grave."

When I asked if it still bothered him, Russin shook his head. "No, because I knew my son." The peace symbol and the long hair "reminded me of something that was offensive to me from the '60s," he said. "But because of who he was and what I knew about him, they were never offensive." He paused and then added: "They kind of gave me a different perspective. Like maybe that's what the kids were like then, and it just didn't look that way to me."

After we parted that day I drove out and found Chris Russin's grave. The cemetery lies alongside a two-lane highway in Maryland's Carroll county, seventeen miles west of downtown Baltimore and just past the dividing line where suburban sprawl peters out and the landscape turns green and rural. It was a bright, warm September afternoon, with a caressing breeze that rippled the waters of Liberty reservoir nearby. I found the marker, with a vase of fresh white and pink flowers on it and, placed on each side of the vase, a pair of wooden drumsticks. Chris's name and birth and death dates -- April 15, 1972; May 20, 1991 -- were inscribed on a bronze tablet placed flat on the neatly clipped grass. Above the inscription to the right of the flowers was an image of a drum and drumsticks, and to the left, the peace sign.

I stood in front of the grave, grieving for Randy Russin and trying to imagine how any parent could bear such a loss. Somewhere, not in the foreground of my mind but floating at the edges, was a memory of the wall in Washington and all the dead sons whose names are inscribed there, and the parents who still grieve for them. Some birds chattered and there was a low hum of cars passing on the road outside the cemetery gates, but where I stood it was hushed, as if there were a bright little tent of silence over Chris's grave. Looking at the marker and the flowers and the peace sign, I remembered how Randy had linked this private tragedy to that other national tragedy he had been part of so many years ago. I had asked if he had felt anger about Vietnam. "Bitter," Randy replied, and when I asked if it had gone away, he said "No, just mellowed."

The country had more or less apologized for all those years of blaming the veterans for the war, he said, and he had finally more or less accepted the apology. But, he went on, "it's like losing a child. You're different because of it, you'll never be the way you were before. But you learn to live in spite of it."

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Veterans' attitudes about many aspects of the Vietnam war are explored in Ellen Frey-Wouters and Robert Laufer, *The Legacy of a War: The American Soldier in Vietnam* (Armonk, N.Y.: M. E. Sharpe, 1986). Postwar veterans' issues are examined in Wilbur J. Scott, *Politics of Readjustment: Vietnam Veterans Since the War* (New York: Aldine de Gruyter, 1993).

Poetry, fiction and memoirs reflecting the Vietnam veterans' experience fill a shelf far longer than can be adequately summarized here. Two collections edited by W. D. Ehrhart, *Carrying the Darkness: The Poetry of the Vietnam War* and *Unaccustomed Mercy: Soldier-Poets of the Vietnam War* (both from Lubbock, Tex.: Texas Tech University Press, 1989) offer a sampling of poems by both well-known and obscure veteran poets. Two memorable prose collections are Tim O'Brien, *The Things They Carried* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin/Seymour Lawrence, 1990) and William E. Merritt's short, sharp-edged sketches in *Where the Rivers Ran Backward* (Athens, Ga.: University of Georgia Press, 1989).

Among the many novels, Wayne Karlin, *Lost Armies* (New York: Henry Holt, 1988) and Allen Glick, *Winters Coming, Winters Gone* (New York: Pinnacle Books, 1985) both deserved more attention than they received.

Notable memoirs include Lewis B. Puller, *Fortunate Son* (New York: Grove Weidenfeld, 1991); Lynda Van Devanter, *Home Before Morning* (New York: Beaufort Books, 1983); Robert Mason, *Chickenhawk: Back in the World* (New York: Viking, 1993); and Frederick Downs, *Aftermath: A Soldier's Return from Vietnam* (New York: Norton, 1984).

Several prominent veteran authors are among the subjects in Eric James Schroeder, *Vietnam, We've All Been There: Interviews with American Writers* (Westport, Conn.: Praeger, 1992).

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