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Vietnam Remembrance



We are living the year of the 50th Anniversary of the beginning of the Vietnam War. And this week, we find ourselves at the 30th Anniversary of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial.

58,282 names engraved in dark granite. 58,282 individuals who engaged in a war largely maligned and unsupported by their own citizens back home...and yet these individuals lost their precious lives, many of them at heartbreakingly young ages.

For only the 5th time in these three decades, this year 2,000 volunteers read each of the names aloud. The reading took 65 hours. It was a poignant time for those whose memories linger strongest.

We could say that all wars are senseless. From the beginning of mankind's time on this Earth, all conquer wars based on religious and land and political differences have surely been insane, in terms of loss of lives and human suffering. Yet we have honored many of our war heroes because in many cases history has deemed those particular battles noble and for just causes. With Hitler as the grim enemy, our World War II vets will always be applauded. But the soldiers of the Vietnam War? They came home to people spitting on them in our airports. 58,282 people who served, but who were for the most part disparaged, rather than honored.

I will never pretend to understand what war is like. I am careful in sports commentary not to refer to football players as soldiers taking the field of battle. Understatement to say a ball game is not life and death.

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But I did get to spend three eye-opening weeks in Vietnam in January, 1998. The occasion was a documentary film called "Vietnam: Long Time Coming". The concept of the film was to invite 50 American vets and 50 Vietcong vets to ride bicycles the length of the country, from Hanoi to Saigon (Ho Chi Minh City). Somehow, individual reconciliations were the hope.

The idol of cycling, Greg Lemond, and I were invited to ride as ambassadors of sport. Several famous vets, such as John Kerry, joined us for a few days at a time.

The vets ranged widely from proud Marines who stood tall for having served their country to antiestablishment infantrymen who were ashamed and even bewildered by their actions some thirty years before. Two of the American team were women. One was Diane Carlson Evans, a nurse in the war, the force behind the Vietnam Women's Memorial which now graces National Mall, just south of The Wall.

None of the Americans had been back to Vietnam since their war days there.

Again, I won't pretend to understand any moment of the experience of war. But being with these 100 vets as they jumped with shell fire reactions whenever a bicycle tire would blow, as they wept through the Northern rice fields, as they stood frozen above the vista of the horseshoe South China Sea, I observed their fears. I listened to their horrific memories. I empathized with their lifelong inner pain.

In a sense, it was as if I entered the time machine and turned the clock back to 1968. That's how we road down the Ho Chi Minh Highway, hooked back to the past, almost oblivious to the present.



There were many disabled among the 100 soldiers. Double amputees. Hand-cyclists paralyzed by grenades. Part of the mission was to stop at the end of each day and make school and hospital outreach visits so that the people of today's Vietnam could hear our apologies....as well as see how modern technology can bring a full life to someone who has been gravely injured.

On one such visit to a school of 12-year-old girls after the day's ride, I heard a speech I will never forget.

One of our blind vets, Jerry Stadtmiller, was now a psychotherapist in San Diego. He was a good-natured, smart fellow and the kids loved Jerry at every school we visited. He had been to hell and back since the war. More than 50 major operations after a grenade to the face had taken out his eyes, much of his esophagus, etc, etc, etc.

Jerry wore around his neck a picture of his 19-year-old self in his dress blues, his war entry photo. Handsome as heck.

So this girl in her elegant traditional Ao Dai asks of Jerry:

"What was your worst moment in the war, Jerry?"

But she quickly rushes to him, holds his hands, and retracts her question: "Jerry, I'm sorry. Your worst moment is obvious. When you were hit with that grenade."

Jerry stood tall, leaning on his white cane. And he talked one-on-one to this girl.

"No. It wasn't the moment I was hit. That wasn't the worst."

And as he told the story, his crying grew from slight sniffles to grown man sobs.

"I was 19. We were sneaking into a village. I was sent in first, the point man, to see if there were locals or if the village was abandoned and we could take it over for a few days. My adrenaline took my pulse to 220. Crapping in my pants.

Just as I started to calm down, nobody in sight, empty winds blowing between the huts, a little boy...not as old as you, smaller, younger...jumped from behind a hut and pointed a bigger

weapon than mine at my face. His eyes were dead. I didn't think. There was no rational decision.
I blew him apart. I can't tell you what I saw in that moment. I've lived with the regrets, the vision of that innocent boy, every day of my life, all these years. I can't forgive myself. I'll never forgive myself."

[1 capture](#) Jerry sobbed inconsolable tears.
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This 12-year-old girl held Jerry close. She took a friendship bracelet she had made and circled it around his wrist.

Then she delivered this speech, directly to Jerry.

"We will never forgive President Kennedy, nor LBJ, nor Henry Kissinger for toying with our lives under the thin and false veil of fighting communism. We have lost our parents, our grandparents. Our people are maimed. Our birds have been debilitated by your Agent Orange and left our land.

We may never recover from the devastation your armies inflicted upon us. But you, Jerry, I forgive you. You were 19. You were doing what you were commanded to do, in the name of duty to your country. Forgive yourself at long last, Jerry, because I forgive you."

I assure you there wasn't a dry eye in the house.

Day by day, during that sojourn on bicycles through the beautiful Vietnam countryside, into the bustling chaos of Saigon, there were daily moments of anger and conflict...and forgiveness.

Soldiers throughout history rarely again find a way back to normal life. My dear friend Bonnie's father Herbert would never talk about his grim times at Normandy. He would silently watch war movies, tears streaming down his tender face. My soul mate Candace's father Floyd was sent to WW II at the moment he received his greatest career opportunity, a chance that never came his way again.

Despite the atrocities witnessed to the emotional tolls endured to the bonds forged to the never-to-recapture events missed at home, soldiers of war often say there is nothing that could ever again match the intensity they experienced in uniform.

And for the U.S. Vietnam vets, perhaps the added layers of fighting a war their own people didn't respect has brought complications for these good soldiers that vets of other wars have not suffered.

I am thinking of what a naïve, leftist, loud-mouth war protester I was back in 1968. The Vietnam war itself may have been all wrong, but I for one need to follow the lead of that 12-year old girl. No, I need to go further. I need to bestow more than forgiveness on those who served there. For the 58,282 named on The Wall, for the thousands more who made it back, I need in my mind to imbue each and every one with honor.

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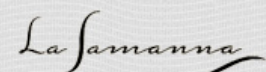
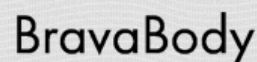
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