

Lessons from the Vietnam War: **What it means to be human**

by *Becky Luening*

“To know thine enemy may be to not have one. Both civilian propaganda and military training are focused on dehumanizing the ‘other’ so that our general aversion to killing is overridden.”

—Carol Wilder, *Crossing the Street in Hanoi*

In his memoir, *Blood on the Tracks*, S. Brian Willson recounts the gut reaction he had when ordered to plunge his bayonet into a dummy while yelling “*Kill!*” during a routine Air Force Ranger training exercise. Brian’s brother Dwight, a post-Korea, Cold War vet, says he went through that same bayonet training in the army, and while he didn’t balk like Brian did, he basically faked the exercise. It felt ridiculous, he said.

These accounts and others lead me to believe it’s not uncommon for soldiers-in-training to feel weird going through the motions of sticking it to a dummy, a weirdness that apparently stems from a deep discomfort with the whole notion of killing. Despite intense conditioning designed to get soldiers comfortable with the idea of killing and inure them to the general violence of war, many stories brought back from war zones tell us that the softer tendencies of the human heart are not so easily overridden.

The death or wounding of comrades, witnessing or being party to atrocities of war, injustice or abuse within the military establishment, and grinding, day-to-day, boots-on-the-ground experiences all can contribute to a creeping antiwar consciousness or just an awareness that the actual mission is something other than that stated in official propaganda. Face-to-face encounters with the enemy can have the same thought-provoking effect.

What follows are examples from the Vietnam War of soldiers recognizing common humanity in the “other,” collected in celebration of the December 1914 Christmas Truce, that moment during the Great War when soldiers from opposing sides spontaneously emerged from the trenches to fraternize in no man’s land in the spirit of the holidays. Rather than one large, spontaneous event experienced by many, the following are discrete, individual experiences, but they similarly illustrate a side of human nature that is persistent and common even in war, though rarely acknowledged due to its power to dissolve the construct of enemy that is necessary to justify all wars.

Key in these stories is the element of reflection, both in the sense of seeing one’s own reflection in the face of the bad guy, and in the subsequent thought process this provokes. If not squelched by internal or external forces, initial thoughts may lead to questioning of the rationale for the war at hand, illumination about the nature of war in general, and even, eventually, to actions leading away from war. It’s important to realize that this is not an entirely intellectual process, but one that involves the gut and the heart as well.

“What are they so afraid of?”

The 2014 German documentary, *Lighter Than Orange*, examines the impact of Agent Orange on Vietnamese veterans and their families. Early in the film, a man tells about being shot during the war. He describes his fear, as he lay wounded, of being discovered by the enemy, and his joy upon finally being rescued by a comrade. The emotional content of this man’s story prompted American veteran Mike Tork to reflect on his own wartime experience:

“When I arrived in Vietnam in 1967, I had been well indoctrinated. Everyone, from the top down, used derogatory terms that dehumanized the Vietnamese: Gook, Slope, Zipperhead, Charlie, Chuck, Chink, Dink, etc.... At one point, a new Marine told me that Vietnamese mothers didn’t love their children the way American mothers did, so it wasn’t that big a deal if they lost one. And he believed it! Even though I did believe the Vietnamese were my enemy, something just didn’t fit. Something, deep within my mind, kept telling me these people were human beings just like myself, and that very soft, nagging voice got stronger over time.

“One of the things that started my questioning happened while working upriver in the Mekong Delta with the Mobile Riverine Force. At the request of a group of Marines, we were transporting about a dozen Vietnamese prisoners (‘VC’) down river, and I was struck by two things: How unbelievably young they were (of course, I was only 19 myself!), and how frightened they looked. Very, very frightened. I kept thinking, *What are they afraid of? We’re Americans. We aren’t going to hurt them. We’re the good guys.* I thought about the very real fear I saw in their faces for a long while, and over time I learned that their fear was justified—that we were *not* the good guys.

“I never forgot the fear I saw that day, and in fact saw it in the faces of many Vietnamese I encountered while searching sampans and conducting other military operations. Although my realization that something wasn’t right was very slow in coming, it did come. What I saw in those faces opened my eyes ever so slightly, but at least it was a beginning.”

“I wonder if he had a girlfriend?”

David Cline, in the David Zeiger documentary, *Sir! No Sir!* tells a harrowing story of being wounded (in 1967; for the third time) when his unit is overrun by North Vietnamese regulars. In a hole with his M16 pointed up, he sees the muzzle of an AK47 and pulls his own trigger at the same moment he sees a flash and feels his knee hit, and then blacks out. After the fighting ends, at dawn, he gets to see the guy who shot him:

“He was sitting up against a tree stump and he was dead. He had three bullet holes across his chest and his AK across his lap. And the sergeant said, ‘Here’s this gook you killed. You did a good job. And I seen this guy, and he was about my age. And I started thinking, you know, *Why is he dead and I’m alive?* It was just a matter of pure luck. And I started thinking, *I wonder if he had a girlfriend? How’s his mother going to find out?* and things like that... I don’t consider he was the first guy I shot, but it was the first guy I shot where... I looked him in the face afterward. And I felt a certain amount of responsibility to him. To make his death not be in vain meant that I had to try and advocate for the justness he was fighting for,

because I believe he was fighting for his country.”

By this time, Cline had already gained awareness that the war was based on lies, but the way he tells it, it was this incident that cemented his commitment to the GI resistance movement.

Elements of Cline’s story are similar to Tork’s. He notices how young the guy is that he’s killed. Seeing “someone about my age,” his next thoughts are about a girlfriend, a mother. “*And I started thinking...*” he says twice, in telling his story for Zeiger’s camera.

“They’re people just like us.”

On my first trip to Vietnam in 2002, I happened to meet American vet Steve Sherlock hanging out at the R&R Bar in Hanoi. He had a nonprofit that arranged donations of medical supplies and equipment to Vietnamese hospitals. Sherlock is a great storyteller, and the story of his progressive transformation from super war supporter (1966) to member of Vietnam Veterans Against the War (1971) is included in Christian Appy’s excellent oral history of the war, *Patriots*.

Sherlock’s reflection begins while he’s still stateside, doing riot control duty in D.C. with the 82nd Airborne after Martin Luther King’s assassination. “About three-quarters of my platoon were black or Hispanic and they’d all just come back from Vietnam,” he recounts. “It was clear that I was already in the middle of a kind of war. It just didn’t feel right...and Vietnam was somehow connected to it.”

His state of mind by the time he got to Vietnam in 1968 was one of confused neutrality, and although he didn’t fully understand the politics of the war, his gut feeling was that the Vietnamese were “just people.” He describes having to collect the bodies killed during firefights (for the sake of the body count); finding one man decapitated and discovering that a woman they’d killed, though probably a local guide for the Viet Cong, was a village schoolteacher. Sherlock’s disgust with the killing part of his duty led him one day to admit to his captain, “I’d like it...if they didn’t run into us and we didn’t have any more fights.” Unable to relate anymore to the concept of “evil Communist enemy,” he insisted, “They’re people just like us.” Though seen as traitorous by his commanders, Sherlock was merely expressing his humanity.

A Lesson for Us All

In our society, indoctrination starts early. Toys, games, school curricula, and recruitment materials are just the beginning of an endless stream of media messaging designed to inculcate an unquestioning glorification of war and the “brave troops” who “fight for our freedom.” But there are other voices, perhaps very soft, nagging voices at first, inviting us to question these messages and encouraging us to find our own voices—to speak out against the immoral madness of forever war, and to point out the very clear meaning behind all the images and first-person accounts (and there are many) of the horrors of war. It is our right and our duty to share and to celebrate the stories, found in every generation, of soldiers who have discovered their own humanity by recognizing it in others, whether World War I vets who survived to tell of the

amazing 1914 Christmas Truce or the hardcore individuals of another generation who survived to form Vietnam Veterans Against the War.

Walter Dean Myers, a prolific African-American writer of juvenile fiction known for writing books that depict marginalized people as fully rounded human beings, collaborated with illustrator Ann Grifalconi to create a picture book titled *Patrol*, in which a Vietnam War grunt has a number of experiences while out on patrol. In spare, poetic style, he captures the experience of a soldier recognizing common humanity in the other: “*Crouched against a tree older than my grandfather, I imagine the enemy crouching against a tree older than his grandfather.*”

Brian Willson, when confronted with a Vietnamese mother and children killed by U.S. bombs, had a sudden unbidden thought that they were members of “my own family.” In trying to understand this reaction, he came to believe that empathy is a deep, archetypal human characteristic. This idea is certainly supported by the questions, thoughts of compassion, and recognition of shared humanity that spontaneously arose during the traumatic wartime experiences of Mike Tork, David Cline, and Steve Sherlock.

In telling his story to David Zeiger, David Cline remarked, “I had to kill a revolutionary to become a revolutionary.”

In an age when fear is used to wage a forever war against a nebulous enemy called Terror, when upside-down priorities continue to value profits over people while the war on the environment threatens the very survival of our species, it is more important than ever for us to get in touch with our humanity and to recognize our connectedness to every person on the planet. Let these stories serve as a rallying call to seek our reflection in those who would be our enemy and engage together in revolutionary acts of compassion and empathy.

Becky Luening grew up during, but far removed from, the Vietnam War. She later developed a deep interest in the history and politics of that war, fed by involvement with the Vietnam Friendship Village Project (vietnamfriendship.org), Vietnam travels, and friendships with veterans. She is an associate member of Veterans For Peace Chapter 72 in Portland, Oregon, where she lives with her partner, Vietnam veteran S. Brian Willson.

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