

WAR!

by Richard O. Woodward-Hetchler

The “experts” as far back as WWII established, in their minds, that a man could withstand some 200 days of combat service before going insane. That, considering only some of those days would be in actual combat fighting. I did nearly 1,000 days in Vietnam, most of it as a platoon leader of a CAP Unit in remote areas of Vietnam.

We were a group of 8 to 12 Marines living in remote villages with 10 to 30 Vietnamese soldiers. In the beginning we were living in compounds surrounded by concertina wire and protective perimeter defenses. This proved to be a mistake since the Vietcong could zero in their artillery and fire at will with great accuracy. We later went to a completely mobile status where we relocated every night after dark and would dig in at a different defensive location. We lived out of our backpacks. Every day I would plot two to five patrols that would go out at various times during the night. I picked who went out and where they would go. They would have various checkpoints and in most cases would not cross paths with the other patrols as it was too dangerous to liaison in the dark. I would spend all night, every night manning the radio keeping tabs on all the patrols. When they would run into trouble, I would gather a reactionary force and go out to aid them, sometimes using other patrols as well. Every time we saw action (most nights) and anyone was hurt or killed, it happened because I plotted the patrol and picked the participants. A charge I would never lay on anyone.

The things I saw, experienced and lived through in one day could justifiably send one to a mental netherworld from which they would likely never return. I have been there and still trying to return. Bloodshed, carnage and death became second nature. Murder, destruction and a bloody, muddy mix of the jungle floor were our forte. Death was, at best, offhand. It was a rare week we did not encounter mutilated or dismembered bodies. We often had to count up the hands, feet and other anatomy in order to calculate just how many there were dead as a result of our actions. During a time we were still in compounds, I remember having to collect Duwayne after he was blown up by an Rocket Propelled Grenade. The Vietcong had a penchant for launching an attack by waiting until they had an individual Marine they could hit with a RPG (a bomb large enough to disable a tank). (I have to admit, we picked up the same tactic in response to them). Duwayne was in some 200 parts. Some of his intestines were strung through the trees like Christmas garland. This happened to us, and them many

times where we had to reassemble the victims. Sometimes, two Marines in one attack were killed this way. At times pieces were raining down on us. The human tissue and pieces were always in the trees and on the huts, as well as on us. Images and experiences like that stay with you. Forever.

When I came back from Vietnam the last time, I really belonged in a rubber room for about 8 years. I remember almost nothing from those years. I was absolutely numb and had very little connection to reality, with no idea who I was, where I was or what was wrong. During that period I made many poor decisions and perpetrated much bad behavior. Previous to my service I was somewhat of a loner and my experiences in Vietnam sealed my fate. Most of the time I could not and can not feel anything, even to this day. I am resigned to the fact I will always be this way. I am mostly unable to relate to people personally. I have to consciously think things out to maintain civility. This has left me quite void of interpersonal relationships. I can not reach out to people, I can't get close because I have seen too many blown up in front of me. I have held too many in my arms while they died, without really knowing exactly when that moment of death was. I have picked up, stepped over, dealt with too many body parts to ever relate to an intact body, again, without some fear.

There was a time when I made some progress in dealing with the world and what to me will forever be the distorted values of culture. I have managed to survive, like many Vietnam veterans, while many, many others do not. With a suicide rate some 200 percent over the norm (if there is such a thing), many Vietnam Veterans continue to die. It didn't start in this country, though. I would hate to try and guess how



Anti-Vietnam War poster, 1967.

“Never think that war, no matter how necessary, nor how justified, is not a crime.”

Ernest Hemingway

many of the fifty-three thousand plus names on the wall in DC were guys that put themselves there. I know of way too many. One Marine, Gary, we managed to save

only because we tied him up with rope until we could send him back in a medevac helicopter. Gary was my assistant platoon leader. I can name some, but not all. That is another part of the haunting. I can only name some. While I can remember the faces of those that died working for me, faces that haunt me nightly, I cannot remember their names, and that is what gives the haunting its power. They were my friends, co-workers and companions. I see the fear, I see the pain, I see the death, but I can't remember their names. My insult remains with me. I love them and they are gone. It doesn't help that the majority of the dead from Vietnam were young, sometimes teenagers. Too young to die. Too young to kill themselves.

So here it is, some forty years later and I am still haunted by the memories, the visions. This war experience has altered every fiber of my existence and will till my end. I spend nights fighting the war and the days fighting the demons. While this is not a new battle to me, the current war has brought it home with a vengeance

with all its unjustified and worthless death and destruction. I have to say, I wasn't doing too bad for a while. Then, without realizing it, all my Post Traumatic Stress Disorder was back in full force like I just returned from Vietnam. It has snuck up on me over the last couple years. I don't know when it started. Maybe it never stopped. I really knew it would never be gone. All you have to do is talk to a WWII vet while he describes his experiences.. You will see the tears well up in his eyes like it was yesterday. Because, it was just yesterday. It will always be just yesterday.

After my return to America and my search for answers (and myself), mostly without even knowing I was searching, the Government and the VA were of little help. They hadn't even identified PTSD, or at least wouldn't admit it. It was in college that I learned most about Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, which like Restless Leg Syndrome, is now part of our vocabulary. "They" just haven't developed a pill for PTSD. At least, not just one. There is no simple answer to solving my life. There is no simple solution. Or, if there is, I don't know it and don't have access to it.

EVER QUESTION YOUR SANITY? I MEAN, REALLY QUESTION IT?

I remember many times under the stress of combat fighting, taking heavy fire, watching people being shot, blown up, wounded and killed, when I would question reality. How could anything this horrendous be real? How do you respond to those situations? It is too surreal to be real. The most poignant time was not in combat, though. It was the first time I went to Australia. My orders for the trip had been delayed/misplaced/SNAFU'd so that they came to get me from the field, at the last minute, just as we came in from a particularly nasty patrol. We had to go out as reactionary force to help rescue an Army unit in the middle of the night. The helicopter picked me up at daylight. I was rushed to the airbase for the flight to Danang. I was still wearing muddy, bloody (funky smelling) jungle fatigues when I arrived at the Qantas terminal and was immediately loaded onto the civilian plane. Once in the seat (and the air conditioning) I was out like a light, like many of the Marines and Soldiers onboard. We didn't awake until we arrived in Darwin some ten hours later for refueling. They made us offload to the terminal where we walked in to be welcomed by some hundred cases of cold Australian beer (compliments of the Aussies). In thirty minutes we were back on the plane for the three hour flight to Sydney (and out like lights, again). When we arrived in Sydney, we were loaded onto small busses for the ride to the orientation center. What an operation that was. We went in the front door of a converted strip mall type building. The first store was a classroom where we were instructed on the Australian culture/currency and told we would go to each storefront in sequence where we would shower, be given an entire wardrobe of clothing from sox, shoes to three piece suits and get our currency converted. We were issued handkerchiefs, wallets, everything. Each store had its specialty. We were instructed how to dress, and that the vests didn't come off until after 6pm (I still remember that part). Then, out the back door, where cabs were waiting. Since I was attached to and had been working with the Australian Army, they had a car/driver waiting for me. They also had a room booked for me at the fanciest hotel in Sydney, the Menzies (I still have the ashtray). I was whisked to the Menzies and placed in my room and told I would be picked up the next morning. It was still early in the day. After the driver left, I waited a bit in



“It never occurred to me, when I signed up for the U. S. Marine Corps, and a war, that I was signing myself to a distorted life sentence. -ROWH”

the room, then wandered out to the street. The Menzies is a large white stone building in the heart of town. I walked outside and stood with my back to this large, plain stone wall and just watched the city. I don't know how long I was there. I totally lost reality. I wasn't sure if I was there or in some heated battle, or dead. For a long time I questioned my existence with my

back to the wall. I had gone to sleep just hours out of combat and woke up in Sydney. I was afraid to move. I thought I had gone completely mad. I kept waiting to wake up in the jungle, in the mud. I just stood there and cried quietly. I wanted someone to touch me. I wanted it to rain on me. I wanted something. I wanted reality. I wanted to go home. I was afraid and I eventually went back to the room where I ordered a head of iceberg lettuce and a gallon of milk and slept. I remember very little of my time there. I was on television, I was in the papers, I met dignitaries and I got drunk. A lot. I don't remember when reality returned, or if it ever did.

AGENT ORANGE. A WHOLE OTHER STORY.

Along the lines of things the Government will not own up to or try to help. This is something else that has re-appeared in my life. Brought on most likely, by the stress of fighting a war at night, instead of sleeping. I just know it takes a neurological toll on me every day affecting my breathing, eating, stamina and nerves. It is hard to find the line between Agent Orange's affects and PTSD, and which is cause and which is effect. Just something else I deal with daily.

WHERE DOES THAT LEAVE ME?

Since I have no answers and since I have no peace, don't expect any capitulation on my part. I know I am done giving excuses. I am who I am. I am and will be withdrawn, a hermit, bitter, resentful, all in all, a Vietnam Veteran. I am living with heightened sensitivity, hyper alertness, defensiveness, a thorough dislike of crowds, a total disdain of shallow values, a complete alienation from culture here in the US and a desire to be somewhere, someone else.

MY MESSAGE

Almost daily the demons are there whenever I let down my guard. Relaxation is nigh on impossible. My existence is a muddled mess much of the time. All because of a war someone else started. On the personal level, war can never be justified.

War, in fact, before I was 21, made me who I am.

Disclaimer: I researched absolutely nothing in this. Statistics are as I remember them, maybe they are accurate, maybe not.

Sleeping Dog Ranch in New Berlin, Texas | 25 December 2007