

WHY IS WAR HELL?

A Veteran's Story



Are these dead Vietnamese women and children
"gooks" or "Communists"?

I was raised to believe in Freedom and Democracy, and joined the Army to fulfill my obligation of duty and honor in military service. I intended to make a career in the Army, and was proud of being airborne infantry. After being stationed in Germany during the Cold War, I was sent to Vietnam to fight the threat of Communism. On one operation, we were in a helicopter about 200 feet up over a free fire zone. I looked down and saw two Viet Cong... no doubt - they were carrying rifles and running for cover. I punched the pilot, who circled the other way, and when we came back around I had lost them. I looked down where they had disappeared, and saw a destroyed hamlet with bomb and shell craters everywhere, the rubble walls of houses pocked with bullet and shrapnel holes, the graves of ancestors that had been blown apart, and rice paddies that had been defoliated and cratered. I looked out and saw only death and destruction as far as I could see. I thought, "You know if I was a Vietnamese peasant I'd be out with the Viet Cong fighting the Americans." I was shocked... what the hell had I just thought? I started observing closely at what we were doing to people who were trying to live their daily lives, not involved with the ideology about why we said we were fighting the war. I decided that this war had nothing to do with Freedom and Democracy, and that we were killing people and destroying the homeland of people who were mainly defending their homeland from invaders... just like we would do. The rest of my tour in Vietnam was confusing and hard to get through each day.

But it took me years to recognize what fighting in a war had done to me. To me, "war is hell" is not about the threat of death... when a bullet clipped my ear and shrapnel bounced off my helmet, I could only keep going and focus on the task at hand. The hell is knowing the worst I could be as a human being... dehumanizing others, without feelings for creatures not worthy of living. I decided I wanted to be the best I could be the rest of my life, though I will have to live with things that can never be undone. Having been a part of a great injustice, I wanted to work for justice and the kind of America that lives up to our ideals. After Vietnam, I got out of the Army, and joined Vietnam Veterans Against the War... then later the Civil Rights Movement, the Farm Labor Movement, the Immigrant Rights Movement, and other causes for justice. When we were preparing to invade Iraq, I started sharing my Vietnam story. After one anti-war rally, I went over to talk with a small group who were protesting us for being "unpatriotic" and "unAmerican". I learned they were high school students who had just enlisted. I shared what had happened to me in Vietnam, and asked them to not let this happen to them. But afterwards I got very depressed, because I knew that there was nothing that could be done... that it would happen.

A few years ago, I went back to Vietnam, and back to the area where I had seen the two Viet Cong. I learned that where they had disappeared there was a tunnel system of hundreds of miles and multiple layers. As I traveled around Vietnam, sometimes men would come up to me and ask if I had been there before. It turned out that they were former Viet Cong or NVA. They shook my hand, said that we were friends now, and bought me a drink. Vietnam is now a thriving society, and I kept thinking that if we had just left them alone they would have reached this many years sooner. I also thought that we are doing the same damn thing all over again in Afghanistan and Iraq.

What kind of Americans will we be? We have the opportunity to not just oppose war but to work for an America that lives up to our own ideals, where we can truly promote peace and justice in the world. We can share with our fellow Americans that war is about killing other human beings and about suffering among both the innocent victims of war and among our own troops and families. If we can approach international differences with the understanding that others are also seeking fulfillment in life, then we can work together for solutions that benefit all human beings.

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