

Travis Burton

Time In-Country

Three years after the Fall of Saigon, I was born into a nation whose era of greatness had gradually been swallowed up in the dark jungles of Southeast Asia. An unwinnable war had been fought by idealistic men, and their mistakes had been paid for in chaos and human lives. The America I entered into was trying to put more and more distance between itself and the Vietnam War everyday. Despite this, the ripples left by the war continued to spread.

My experience has been to bob among these ripples as they worked their way across American society. The most terrible of the American wars in recent memory did not mark me, but its aftermath has in ways that the war itself never could. I can't tell you that I carry a deep rage from seeing the American myth disintegrate before me, or that watching nightly body counts and peace protests on TV haunts me still. I never encountered such things; and yet the war has seeped into my life.

Twenty-three years after the Vietnam War came to its conclusion, I offer a story of how the war has failed to become just an enigma. The war is over, but as the collection of experiences that follows gives evidence of, the ripples remain.

My first encounter with the war came in-between the morning cartoons that my brother and I watched so devoutly. Always preceded by a trumpet's wail, the commercials for the *Time-Life* "Vietnam War" book series brought us images of a splendid feat of humanity. Huge explosions, dirty men with big guns, and fast planes filled the TV screen while a grizzled voice promised "The Vietnam War experience for only \$19.98

in five monthly installments (plus shipping and handling).” The two of us were instantly taken by the commercial and the war it was selling. Vietnam soon entered into the mythical realm of our playtime, where we could escape to an exciting and dangerous land even our imaginations could not fully grasp. I remember the book series being on both of our Christmas lists that year, but neither of us got it.

As time passed, and my sense of reason gradually encroached on my imaginative abilities, I finally began to question what the war was really all about. My mother offered me a simple history as an explanation: the French were having troubles in Southeast Asia during the period



following World War II, and we (the U.S.) had gone in to bail them out. It all went back to the debt we owed to the French for helping us out in the American Revolution, she added. This put enough order into my thinking on the war for a time.

I recall a particular Halloween when I was ten or so and dressed up like I thought a U.S. soldier in Vietnam would. I wore my “A-Team” camouflage pajamas and a faded green plastic pot helmet. My brother was two years younger and went as a hippie, big Afro wig with the beads and all that. Maybe my parents noted the irony in that twenty Halloweens sooner we would have been making a political statement. However, to my brother and I the Vietnam War was still a novelty, and what we would remember most from that night is the royal haul of candy we made.

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Following the Tet offensive in 1968, the eldest of my father's four brothers died in the fighting to retake the city of Hue. I am unsure of the exact circumstances of his death, but I do know that what was left of him did not constitute much. My father was a pallbearer and said that from the feel of it, most of what was my uncle was left in Vietnam. The casket probably contained just some cartilage and a few bones he said, nothing really of the man they had once belonged to.

For a while my father had harbored the hope that the man who had gone to war as Corporal John Burton was still alive somewhere, and that the war's end would bring him home. Five more years of war effectively killed this hope, and my father was resigned to accept his death. Uncle John became simply the brother who "died, over there in Vietnam."

These days my father rarely speaks of John, if at all. Since I joined the service I have asked him about my uncle more frequently, but I have always received the same response. He offers facts only: *John Burton, Marine, died 2 February 1968, a good brother who is missed.*

When I was twelve we moved out to the country, and Vietnam followed us into the woods behind our new house. Almost every afternoon I could be found in my little piece of Vietnam, with a lethal plastic survival knife and crimson red headband. I was full of the guts and glory of combat; I was closest thing to Rambo that my part of the woods had ever seen. By day I hunted through the jungle for commies and defended the brave "American way," by night I slept in a warm bed inside a safe home.

In retrospect, it seems that there was little difference between me and the children of the early 1960s who stalked evil Japs, emulating John Wayne in *The Sands of Iwo Jima*. We were warriors of the Cold War, building on the myth left by the soldiers of the generation before us. We saw war as a context for adventure, and nothing more. We fought for the right side always, and that right side was always the U.S. Our motives and intentions were impossibly simple: liberty, freedom, and justice that had to and would prevail. We taught ourselves to be warriors who knew only right. Vietnam did not change all things.

In high school my education on the war took on a more formal approach. I learned that the Vietnam War was really the Vietnam "conflict," and that the whole episode from the Gulf of Tonkin resolution

to the Fall of Saigon had been a real political nightmare for LBJ and Nixon. I also learned that the antiwar movement was a bunch of pot-smoking hippies who shook up the “establishment” and changed a troubled nation.

My U.S. history class dealt with the war quickly and in broad strokes. We spent weeks going through the battles and events of WWII, but only a day on the Vietnam War. Come the end of the year I could point out Okinawa and Normandy on a map and tell you what happened there, but places like Da Nang and Quang Tri were both unknown and unremarkable. I knew over 58,000 Americans died fighting communism in Vietnam. I would have to learn that over 2 million Vietnamese civilians and military had also lost their lives in their fight for independence.

Only ten people from my small hometown went to fight in Vietnam, and of those ten eight came back. The other two were KIA and their names are listed in the local newspaper every Memorial Day next to my hometown’s other dead young men who died in uniform. One of the Vietnam dead was PFC Lawrence Brown, who graduated in 1966 from the same high school I did in 1996. For a Boy Scout project I wrote a report on who the guy had been and why he had gone to war.

Brown’s yearbook picture showed a girlish-looking boy with a goofy grin and a buzz cut. Next to his name in quotations it said, “voted most likely to fall out of bed and break neck.” I had to call his parents’ home to find out more about him, and ended up talking to his mother. She said she did not mind talking about her boy, but her voice always wavered a bit when she said his name. She told me that Lawrence had been in and out of trouble in high school, and that he was bright but they had lacked the financial resources to send him on to college. Both she and her husband had believed that the Army would straighten their son out, plus give him a way out of the small town that had trapped so many of his friends. Unfortunately Lawrence had to give his life for his country, she said, and that was that. I remember her telling me to stay safe for my parents’ sake if nothing else, the day that her boy’s hopes and dreams ended, hers had too. I can’t recall exactly how I replied to that, but I hope I promised her I would do my best to live a long life.

Lately when I ask my mother for her thoughts on the Vietnam War, she responds that she tries not to think about it. To her the war is something that is simply not pleasant to dwell on. It does not affect her day-to-day life; and it changes nothing whether she ponders the war or not.

Sometimes though, I can get through to her feelings on the war by asking her about her memories of life during the late 60s and early 70s. She was in junior high and high school for most of that time, and what she remembers are not facts about the war, but how it changed the society around her. To her, American society as a whole became cynical in the years of the Vietnam War. Although the nation has healed some, she says that much of the cynicism still remains.

One particular memory she has is of how her parents voiced strong support for the war in the early going of the effort, but as time went on and the losses increased, their support had become less and less apparent. By the spring of 1975, Vietnam had ceased to be mentioned in my mother's household. That was the way it was for a lot of people she said, the discussion of the war stopped and the pain it had caused was slowly covered up.

As I write this, I am twenty-years-old, and I know the Vietnam War better than I ever have before. I know it best through those who experienced it and those who wrote about it. Philip Caputo, Tim O'Brien, Tobias Wolff, and W.D. Ehrhart have told me about what happens to men when they go to war, and the toll that war takes on them. My second-hand knowledge of a war is enlightening and horrifying in ways only my innocence knows, but even the greatest knowledge of the Vietnam War changes nothing and certainly insures nothing.

The fact is that the Vietnam War still attracts me, and there is nothing I can do to change this. I keep praying for my uncle even though I know it makes no difference. I am sorry for Lawrence Brown's mother, but that does not mean I can tell mine I will always be coming home. I can't just bury Vietnam in the past, because regardless of everything I now understand, I remain a child of America. I know my past and maintain hope for my future.

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