

*Karl Lindholm*

## Dickie, Nick, Varsity Jim, and Bye-Bye: Teaching a True War Story

I didn't serve in Vietnam, but many of my friends did—and I would have, if circumstances had been different, by just a few degrees.

On my way to the Peace Corps in Africa, I was diverted. A friend of the family, who knew, said of Vietnam, "You don't want to go there." This observation coincided with my own thinking. It was 1967 and I was a senior at Middlebury College in Vermont. I would be drafted before I got to Syracuse University and Peace Corps training in the fall: we were building up to half a million soldiers in Vietnam. So I joined an Army Reserve unit, a medical unit, in my hometown. It still had openings. I joined the Army and got out of the war—an irony typical of that confused time. Two weeks after graduating from Middlebury, I was at Folk Polk, Louisiana for Basic Training—and Fort Sam Houston for training as a medic after that.

I'm not proud or ashamed of my choice, but I don't pretend it was something it wasn't. Like duty. I do feel some guilt when I read in books like *The Nightingale's Song* when the author, and some of his military academy subjects, suggest that others may have died in my place. There's certainly enough guilt to go around. One friend, a Vietnam vet, said if he could do one thing he would eliminate all the guilt from the Vietnam experience—the guilt that men at the front felt, for killing; the guilt those in the rear felt for not being at the front; the guilt those who didn't go to Vietnam felt for not going; the guilt of women for not being men and facing these awful choices. So many people carrying around so much guilt. He thought, what a waste of time and emotion.

Here's my favorite story about getting out of the war: After my six months of active duty, I returned to my home in Maine and hung around

Bates College, playing a lot of pick-up basketball. I made some friends. One was a likable guy named Storey Fish (his real name: his parents had a sense of humor). He joined the Coast Guard, a five-year hitch, upon his graduation in 1968. The Coast Guard didn't go to Vietnam.

He was an officer at the Coast Guard station in Cleveland, Ohio on Lake Erie. One night when he was in charge, he got a call from someone telling him that the Cuyahoga River was on fire and that the Coast Guard better get over there and put it out. "Right," he said, "the river's on fire. A drunk," he concluded. Some hours later, he got another call, this time from his superior officer: "Where the hell are you guys!?" The river *was* on fire. A few weeks later, Storey Fish was transferred to the Aleutian Islands.

I was born in 1945 at the end of World War II; I was 20 in 1965 when the Vietnam War was widened, and 30 in 1975, when Saigon was evacuated and the war truly ended for us. So the Vietnam War was my era, a powerful, formative experience. As a Reservist, a weekend warrior, I didn't really feel a part of the military. Also, as a Reservist, I really couldn't be a part of the antiwar movement at home, so I lived on its fringes.

I got a job teaching high school, first in Maine, and then in Ohio. In the summers from 1968-72, I lived in Cambridge, Massachusetts. Every weekend I could go to a big antiwar rally on the Boston Common—speeches, rock bands, seriousness and frivolity. One Sunday, there was the prospect of trouble and the downtown was crawling with police. I was just hanging around, watching. Two cops in a police car were listening to the Yankees-Red Sox game. I'm a life-long Red Sox fan, war or no war. Every once in a while, I inquired of them the score. It was a good, close game. Finally, the cops tired of my interruptions and one commanded, "Get in the car." So I sat in back and listened to the last two innings of the game with two of Boston's finest. My agitated contemporaries would walk by the cruiser, see me inside, shout encouragement and give me a salute of solidarity with upraised fist or peace sign. That was the closest I got to being busted in my antiwar career.

I was a witness to the time, an engaged spectator. Outwardly, my story was hardly dramatic. Inwardly, I felt like a taut wire: on the spectrum of Vietnam War experience, I vibrated right in the middle between combat soldier at one pole and antiwar radical at the other. My friend, Jon Coffin, who served in the war, talks about the inward journey Vietnam inspired, and argues, "It's a jungle in there."

My most intense identification was with the soldiers my age fighting in Vietnam. When my friends returned from Vietnam, I didn't ask them,

“What was it like?” nor did they volunteer information. So I read. I read the stories of soldiers in Vietnam. For a while I read little else. Finally, in the winter of 1989, back at Middlebury where I started, where Vietnam first held meaning for me and my friends, I got around to teaching a class on the literature of the Vietnam War. In this way, as Robert Frost recommended, I got to make my avocation my vocation.

By 1989, America had gone through its decade of neglect and denial. Students were ready to take on Vietnam. Vets were ready to talk—and they opened up and shared their war experience with us in class, offering powerful revelations. They talked about visiting the Wall, the Vietnam Veteran’s Memorial, and the healing they sought in its black granite reflections. That first class in 1989 was the most intense classroom experience I have ever had—or, I suspect, ever will. I have taught the course twice since then—and will teach it again next year.

Thank God for Tim O’Brien. I’m thankful he went to Vietnam as an enlisted man in an infantry platoon and I’m thankful he survived combat and made it back to write about it. I’m grateful for his gifts as a storyteller.

The title of my course at Middlebury, “Telling a True War Story: Vietnam,” is taken from O’Brien’s *The Things They Carried*. In this book, he tells stories of his year in Vietnam; at the same time, he offers a running commentary on which aspects of the stories he tells are true to the facts—and which are true to the experience, and maybe not to the facts. He explores that boundary in all of our stories between fact and fiction. He instructs in how we use “imagination” to get at “the essence of things,” the Truth. There is truth in this book.

Tim O’Brien was President of his class at Macalester College and graduated Phi Beta Kappa in 1968. He describes himself as vaguely antiwar during his college years. As soon as he got out of college, he was drafted. In his story, “On the Rainy River” (from *The Things They Carried*), he describes the conflict he feels after he gets his draft notice. His main character, also named Tim O’Brien, heads up to northern Minnesota with the intent of escaping to Canada and escaping the war. Elmer Berdahl, a gentle old soul, takes him fishing near the Canadian side of the river:

Twenty yards. I could’ve done it. I could’ve jumped and started swimming for my life. Inside me, in my chest, I felt a terrible squeezing pressure. Even now as I write this, I can still feel that tightness. And I want you to feel it—the wind coming off the river, the waves, the silence, the wooded frontier. You’re in the

bow of a boat on the Rainy River. You're twenty-one years old, you're scared, and there's a hard squeezing pressure in your chest. . . .

I did try. It just wasn't possible.

All those eyes on me—the town, the whole universe—and I couldn't risk the embarrassment. It was as if there were an audience to my life, that swirl of faces along the river, and in my head I could hear people screaming at me. Traitor! they yelled. Turncoat! Pussy! I felt myself blush. I couldn't tolerate it. I couldn't endure the mockery, or the disgrace, or the patriotic ridicule. Even in my imagination, the shore just twenty yards away. I couldn't make myself be brave. It had nothing to do with morality. Embarrassment. That's all it was.

And right then I submitted.

I would go to the war—I would kill and maybe die—because I was embarrassed not to.

The day was cloudy. I passed through towns with familiar names, through pine forests and down to the prairie, and then to Vietnam, where I was a soldier, and then home again. I survived but it was not a happy ending. I was a coward. I went to the war.

I don't know if that precise sequence of events actually happened in the life of Tim O'Brien, the soldier/writer, but the sequence rings true to me. I remember well that "hard squeezing pressure in (my) chest," and I didn't even go! Like O'Brien, my friends who went to Vietnam, most of them anyway, went because they couldn't tolerate the shame of the alternatives. Not to go would have been a violation of identity—impossible. As for me, I know I would not have been able to face my father, or my mentors who had fought the Nazi menace in WWII, had I chosen to go to jail or to Canada. Tim O'Brien, then, to me and many other college boys who avoided Vietnam, is our brother who served in Vietnam, our brother who lacked our luck or guile, and who came back to tell us about it.

My anger about the Vietnam War is great and it lingers. The only real fight I ever had with my father was over Vietnam. Many sons, of course, had fights over Vietnam with their dads. In my case, I was watching Nixon on the news in 1971, and I lost it, called him terrible names, used obscenities, said he was killing people, and that I hated him, hated him

for his cynicism—bringing American boys home and increasing the killing by dropping bombs, indiscriminately, on Vietnamese from B-52s. My dad, the son of Swedish immigrants, said I couldn't talk about the President of the United States that way. I cursed some more and left the house.

It was no big deal in the long run—we got over it. But my feelings are still raw even after all the years. I will always have contempt for Nixon for lying about having a plan to end the war. I can understand the thinking, the mistakes, that got us into the war, but I'll never understand the thinking that kept us there so long after the handwriting was on the wall. Peace with Honor. Some honor: hundreds of thousands of Vietnamese deaths later, desperate people hanging off helicopters as they lifted off the roof of the Saigon embassy.

I ask students in my class to identify across our generations with their brothers and sisters from the Vietnam Era. I understand that this is backwards, that the passage of time is supposed to remove the subjective and allow for a dispassionate examination of volatile circumstances. It made sense for me, however, to accept the emotion, embrace it, and organize my class around narrative treatments of the Vietnam War. Isn't the purpose of literature, narrative literature, to get us outside ourselves, to live vicariously, to stretch, to understand, to empathize? The writer's gift is to take us there.

In this class, we get into what it was like at Middlebury College, my alma mater, during the Vietnam War. The former Dean of Students, now in her 70s, who was just starting her career here in 1968, tells us about the teach-ins and the protests, and the pathetic joiner who took at face value the protest rhetoric and burned down the ROTC building in an individual act which horrified his antiwar mates. Middlebury, in Vermont, was hardly Berkeley or Columbia, but no school was exempt from the disruptions of the war in the 60s and early 70s.

We meet my Middlebury friends who went to war, and hear their stories. Between the years 1965 and 1969, 15-20% of the men who graduated from Middlebury served in Vietnam. This number violates the idea that no college boys ever had to fight. While it is true that the average age of soldiers in Vietnam was 19, college boys, like Tim O'Brien and my Middlebury friends, also served. Middlebury College boys served because of ROTC, which was *required* at Middlebury for a minimum of two years. In the mid-60s, about half of Middlebury men chose to finish the program and graduate as second lieutenants in the Army. That choice sent them to Vietnam.

Also, in the first week of class, I hand out this photograph of my friends and me at Middlebury in 1966. There are 41 young men in this picture taken in front of their fraternity house. Take away the white socks and loafers in the front row and these boys look very much like students here at Middlebury now. Students in the class are taken aback that the photo was taken 33 years ago and that these vibrant young men are now middle-aged and gray (if not bald). I too am transported by this picture and easily bring back across the years moments in time and the strong emotions that connect to the attachments of my youth.

If I were to write my Vietnam narrative, my true story, it would be titled *Dickie, Nick, Varsity Jim, and Bye-Bye* and would tell the stories of four of my Middlebury friends, whose lives represent for me the truth of the Vietnam War. These four friends (three of whom are pictured) were all great athletes. That conformed to my values . . . the athletic crowd was my set. We belonged to the “jock house.” I admired extravagantly those who were truly skilled and accomplished. I tell the following stories in my class on the first day.

“**Varsity Jim**” was a football player whose exuberance went beyond mere enthusiasm. His nickname was one of modest derision, earned in his freshman year and often shortened to “V.J.” or “Veej.” He was extremely bright and rambunctious—huge, physical, irreverent, and intellectually pretentious. He was born in Great Neck, New York, on Long Island and raised in relative comfort and security. That’s him, standing the fourth from the right, with the thick neck, curly hair, and wise-guy expression, giving the finger to the camera.

All V.J. cared about when he arrived in 1964 was football, but that changed. The war frustrated him enormously, angered him, and eventually made him crazy, sending him into the most radical elements of the antiwar movement. It’s unlikely that the absence of personal bravery was the source of his opposition to the war: he lay himself on the line like no others on Saturdays in football games. In his alienation, the drug scene also attracted him, and then enveloped him.

When he came to visit me, in the first year of my first teaching job in a boarding school in Maine in 1969, he was quite gone. His hair cascaded down to his shoulders, he wore leather from head to foot, and he drove a big motorcycle. He stayed a couple of days, visiting my classes and eating meals at my table in the dining hall. I had to wear a coat and tie. At night, we listened to Bob Dylan in my dorm room while I graded papers. He agreed not to smoke dope in my room, as that would get me fired, so periodically he would go for a ride on his bike and sit under a



pine tree somewhere and smoke. That this larger-than-life figure came to visit me made me a hero to my young mind-blown charges. When I asked Varsity Jim what he was doing with his life, he said darkly, "Blowing things up. You'll read about it."

We lost contact. People disappeared during the 60s and 70s, usually to resurface eventually. Not Jim: he stayed gone. None of his friends have seen or heard from him in years. I went to the cocktail party of his class at their 25th Reunion here at Middlebury a few years back. One of his old friends said, "He fried his brains." His best friend from college said he "evaporated." The only remotely direct answer to my questions about Varsity Jim's whereabouts was from another friend in the class of 1968: "I think he's in prison in Arizona." Nobody has seen him in decades.

**Bye-Bye** was the one who died in Vietnam. He is pictured second from the left in the front row in the white shirt with the sweet smile. Bye-Bye—a prophetic nickname. His real name was Bayard and he was from Peterborough, New Hampshire and had attended Phillips Andover Academy before coming to Middlebury.

He loved to work—hard, physical work delighted him. Tasks that we all worked to get out of, he embraced. My keenest memory is of him washing dishes and pots and pans in the frat house kitchen, white apron around his torso, tossing the dishes into the racks and loading them in the washer, steam all around, singing at the top of his voice. He loved training for athletics, but not so much reading books and writing papers. In sports, he was known for his "work ethic" and he was a terrific athlete and earnest teammate. He was an All-American soccer goalie, and when he tired of playing baseball in the rain in what passes for spring in Vermont (he was the starting shortstop), he transferred his interest to lacrosse and he became the starting goalie in that sport too. He was a good enough basketball player to play on that team, if he had chosen.

Army ROTC was too tame for Bye-Bye, so he enlisted in the Marine Corps Platoon Leader Program during his freshman year and spent two summers at Quantico in boot camp. He graduated in 1966 as a second lieutenant in the Marines and was ordered to the Defense Language Institute in Monterey to learn Vietnamese. In Vietnam, he was stationed in Da Nang, using his Vietnamese as a liaison officer. He hated it—he wanted action, a platoon to lead. He wrote to Coffin, "I won't sit in the rear and mind the gear." He got his wish, barely. On his way to his platoon, heading from Da Nang to Khe Sanh, he was killed in "hostile enemy action."

Dickie was the best of us. We all thought so, and when he went to Canada instead of the war, we knew it. He was not wild and exuberant like the others; he was calm and steady, sincere, strong, and apparently self-assured. He wore plaid flannel shirts, blue jeans, and hiking boots two decades before that became the fashion with some students. I thought he was Jesus. He's in the back row in the picture, in his plaid shirt, arms folded, smiling, two down from Varsity Jim. (That's me right behind him.) Dickie played three varsity sports: soccer, hockey, and lacrosse. He could run all day and skate like the wind. He was wiry, tough, and stoical. Every thing about him was deliberate: he spoke and walked slowly—and then on the playing field he exploded into action, continuous motion.

We admired him so. Amidst our own insecurities and daily identity crises, we found him rock solid. I think now that he was like the main character, Singer, the deaf-mute, in Carson McCullers' *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter*: all the other characters projected their own needs onto Singer and found what they wanted and needed.

At the end of his junior year, Dickie went into VISTA and was stationed in Texas working in community development. Once, while hitchhiking, he was picked up by two thugs, beaten and robbed, and left for dead on the side of the road. Miraculously, he was found, near death, and recovered fully. He finished his one-year VISTA term and then came back to Middlebury for his senior year, and graduated in 1968.

It was a quiet decision, typically enough, not going into the military. He applied to be a Conscientious Objector but was rejected; he appealed and was rejected again. In the spring of 1969 he was reclassified 1-A and he made the decision to go to Nova Scotia. Before he left, he and I took a road trip on my spring vacation for two weeks to visit our good friends in Buffalo and Cleveland.

He settled in Black Rock, a tiny village on North Mountain, and found work in the summer months as a carpenter's helper, building houses and barns. In the winter, he sat in front of his wood stove and read and smoked. It was an austere, solitary life. He met Claire, a schoolteacher from Halifax and they married. At the birth of his first son, Dickie lost it at the hospital, made a terrible scene, and was hospitalized himself. When his second son was born two years later, he again had a breakdown and his mental illness was confirmed.

Dickie has been diagnosed as paranoid schizophrenic. He left Nova Scotia in 1983. Claire divorced him and restricted his access to his sons because of her fears of his instability. He has lived for the past decade in

a supervised apartment in West Hartford, Connecticut, near his older brother. He has telephone contact with his sons. Most days, he goes for a long walk near his apartment.

Nick was little and fierce. He was a brilliant soccer player, an All-American like Bayard, a scorer who willed the ball into the net. He was also a talented basketball player, though in this sport he couldn't shoot a lick. I believe he invented the intentional offensive foul in basketball—that is, he “drew the charge” time after time in a game. He sacrificed his body (5'7", 140 pounds), getting knocked down by an offensive player in order to get his team the ball and a foul charged against the other team. It was a play that symbolized his combative nature. In one game against Tufts, he drew 16 charges.

Once against Norwich University, he drew a charge against their star player and the Norwich coach, a beefy ex-Boston Celtic named Bob Brannum, screamed at his player, “I told you the ‘little rat’ would do that every time!” Of course, we called Nick “the little rat” after that. In another game against Norwich, he attempted the same play against a large Cadet (Norwich was a military school) who knocked him down and then kicked him. This player was literally 10 inches taller and 100 pounds heavier. Nick got up, decked him with one punch, and a near riot ensued.

I was his teammate on the basketball team and his roommate on the road. Nick had trouble getting places on time; my job was to get him to the bus and the game on time (the blind leading the blind). Once, we both were late for the bus and the coach left us in Boston and we had to hitch a ride home. Discipline was not Nick's long suit. Sports were a release. Nick started in the class of 1965 and graduated eventually in February '68. He's not in the accompanying picture: it was taken during a hiatus. Sometimes he left school on his own; other times, he was asked to leave. Trouble found him. What I found out in quiet moments with Nick was that there was unhappiness in his life. He was the brother of three sisters and he came from affluence, but addiction ran in his family and affected its happiness and stability. By the time Nick left Middlebury, he realized later, he himself was addicted to alcohol and other drugs.

After graduation, he enlisted in the Army before he could get drafted. It was 1968: he went to Vietnam as a “grunt.” He said he liked to walk “point,” because “everybody depended on you.” He was stationed in Phuoc Vinh, about 80 miles north of Saigon and flown in and dropped off near



the Cambodian border to engage in “search and destroy” operations. His unit suffered many casualties. On March 8, 1970, his outfit was ambushed: a mortar fell within feet of him, killing his platoon leader and another soldier, and filling Nick with shrapnel in the neck and arm. He crawled away, and the bombers were called in: they dropped their napalm and destroyed the area.

Nick survived and came home. He managed to finish law school after Vietnam, despite living the bohemian life of the time. He met Dierdre, who later became his wife, came to Vermont, and hung out his shingle. He still practices law, by himself, defending clients the bigger firms with greater profit incentives tend to avoid. His life after Vietnam has not been an unbroken period of quiet contentment in Vermont. About 15 years ago, his life was unraveling, and he acknowledged his addiction to drugs. With the help of Dierdre and AA meetings, he has been successful in his recovery. At age 44, he had a son, Zack, now 9. He felt that he was finally mature enough to be a father.

*Dickie, Nick, Varsity Jim, and Bye-Bye*, this unwritten book of mine, tells the stories of four schoolmates and teammates who were forced to choose to go to war, or not. Two went to Vietnam and two didn't; all four were casualties in their own way. For me, their stories dramatize how slight the differences often were between those who went and those who avoided the military, one way or another. In college, these young men gravitated to one another, were friends, brothers in sports, yet they ended up taking profoundly different roads.

There are so many more stories. In our class, students read selections from the oral histories of the war (*Everything We Had; Bloods; In the Combat Zone; Hell No, We Won't Go; Nam; and To Bear Any Burden*) and get their own story, their own oral history. They interview, then edit and record on paper a first-person account of a Vietnam-era experience. They don't have to reveal a military life: they can interview anybody with a story to tell. These stories are then compiled into a booklet, which is an artifact of the course, a memento.

In this way, students get to know a veteran of the era and receive an eyewitness account of the material they are studying. Many students interview their fathers who served in Vietnam. Fathers open up to their children about their war experience as they never have before when this communication is required, part of a school assignment. Fathers tend to view their children differently, now that they are away from home, old enough for the truth.

Allison interviewed her dad, a platoon leader in 1969-70 with the 11th Armored Cavalry, cleaning out base camps in Cambodia in 1969, participating in search-and-destroy operations in war Zone C (near Cambodia), and working for the CIA and State Department in his last three months in Nam. Her father, who has gone on to a career in law and education, shared with his daughter his understanding of the politics of the war, his experience in combat, the tension of race relations in his unit, and his difficulty with “relevance” after he had returned home. “I had never talked to my dad before about Vietnam,” Allison said of her experience recounting her dad’s life as a soldier in war. “We were a little uncomfortable at the beginning, but once he started talking he had so much to say. One story led to another. He had thought so much about his experience. He told me stories he hadn’t shared with anybody, not even my mother. This was really the first adult conversation I had with my dad.”

Another student in the most recent Vietnam class, Matt, had a different experience. He did not interview his dad. He wasn’t ready: his ambivalence was too powerful. In his first essay in the class, Matt described the disintegration of his father, a combat Marine in Vietnam, and the resulting devastation of his family. He wrote that he saw his father “snap, numerous times, triggered by a Vietnam memory.” One night he was awakened by cries from his mother and went in the kitchen to see his father with a gun to his mother’s head. “My father turned to face my weeping face,” he wrote, “and he dropped to the floor holding his head in his hands.”

After that episode, his father “vanished,” and Matt grew up without him, “fatherless.” Last year, he discovered that his father had spent the previous five years in a VA hospital. So he went to visit him. He wrote about *that* encounter:

It had been 11 years since I had last seen him. Here I was, a man, the same size as him, and I was still afraid. A couple years earlier, I would have probably tried to hit him. I didn’t know what to call him, so I called him “Ray.” We started out with stupid conversation about what we both had been up to and ended with ways to become friends. “Friends,” I told him, was all we were ever going to be, the father-son relationship had passed. I made terms for how the process was to be dealt with and he handed me a phone card. I still haven’t called him.

For his oral history, Matt interviewed Phil, instead of his dad. Phil is Middlebury's public affairs officer, a father, husband—a man, unlike Matt's dad, who survived Vietnam with his faculties intact, or relatively so. He was a ROTC cadet from 1962-66 and worked for Armed Forces radio during his nine-month hitch in Vietnam. His main problem with Vietnam was that he *didn't* see combat. "I sort of feel I can't claim the title of Vietnam 'veteran' compared to those who went through combat in Vietnam," he said in his interview with Matt. "They're entitled to the honor of 'Vietnam veteran.' I should have been out there with them."

Matt discovered as he read narrative accounts of the Vietnam War, met Middlebury veterans, came to know Phil, and considered his relationship to his father, that the condensed language of poetry served him best. He had never written a poem before: he considered an appreciation for poetry a violation of his adolescent, masculine persona. Here's one of the poems he submitted at the end of the class:

### Purple Heart

Your Purple Heart  
pumps cold Blood  
through your veins.  
The same Blood  
you gave me.  
The same Blood  
I will give  
to my son.

Will it ever warm?

Jessie did her first-person profile on Nick, the same "Nick" introduced above. His account expresses the Vietnam veteran's ambivalence and confusion, his sense of duty and betrayal. It concludes thus:

A lot of people were raised in a patriotic manner because the United States had a "save the world" attitude left over from WWII. If your country wanted you to do something, then you did it. By the time I came back, I along with millions of others was fairly disillusioned about the power of our nation. I had never thought about leaving the country when I was drafted but

I have a lot of sympathy for those who did. I didn't want to go to war but I had no choice when I was drafted. I had accepted the fact that this was not a great war before I left but by the time I got back I felt as if my country had made me live a nightmare.

It seemed impossible at first to relate to anyone who had not been there. The feeling of hatred and betrayal I had developed about our country overtook me at times. So much happened there that I just wanted to displace in my mind. Time has passed since Vietnam but the memories haven't.

I often think of Bayard Russ, the most gung-ho guy in the world. He was the goalie on the soccer team. When the team had to run laps he would do them with two bricks in his hands just for the fun of it. He was enthusiastic about anything and everything, including the war. He went into the Marines and stepped on a mine. His death represents for me the tragedy of Vietnam.

So there are my stories about Vietnam, and the motive behind and approach of my class on the Vietnam War at Middlebury College. The students I teach this year were born in 1981. The shattering events of 1968—the Tet Offensive, the assassinations of Martin Luther King and Bobby Kennedy, My Lai, Lyndon Johnson's resignation, the riots in Chicago, the Paris Peace talks—occurred 30 years ago, long before they were born. The thought of being asked, or forced, to fight in a far-off place is near-fantasy to them, unreal. The young men who fought in Vietnam—and the young men and women who fought against the Vietnam War are young no more. We are these children's parents. Hard to believe.

Times change. People mellow. They must. The angriest vets who came to the class a decade ago are now more inclined to shrug and allow that it all happened a long time ago. They've dealt with the pain, or largely so: that's why they're still here. I've changed too. I can listen to their stories without weeping. I can watch the movies and not turn away. I can sit on the grass and look at the Wall in Washington and not be overwhelmed with grief and anger. I can walk the Middlebury campus on my daily round and not see the ghosts of my friends who made such hard, life-altering decisions.

History generalizes and popular culture oversimplifies. I find that students these days are inclined to view young people during the Vietnam



War as members of two opposed camps: on the one hand, brave, young, exploited soldier-heroes, cruelly unappreciated, answering their nation's call—and on the other rich, young, college-student cowards dancing in the nude at Woodstock while their peers died in Vietnam.

While there is of course some truth to the polarities of this popular view, would that it were that easy to understand the choices young people made—and the shifting contexts in which they were asked to make them. In fact, most soldiers who went to Vietnam were neither rabid patriots nor baby-killers; most young people who didn't go never called a cop a "pig," spit on a returning soldier, or lived in a commune smoking grass. Stories like those of my Middlebury friends reveal that those who went, and those who didn't go, were the same people, very much alike. I talk to my students about the VVAW—the Vietnam Veterans Against the War:

warriors and anti-warriors in one person, soldiers carrying the antiwar banner in the 70s after Nixon had outlasted college protests and disarmed the protesters by ending the draft.

In the midst of post-Cold War plenty and security, I do worry about becoming a old-timer, mono-metaphored, living in the past with his old-fart friends, listening to the same Bob Dylan songs, stuck in the 60s. Be that as it may, I guess I'll keep teaching my classes, trying to bring that difficult time alive for each new group of students who enlist in my class. I can't help it.

As you were.

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