

*Josh Sopiartz*

## Learning About War

Terror can be endured so long as a man simply ducks,—but it kills, if a man thinks about it.

Erich Maria Remarque, *All Quiet on the Western Front*

**W**e slept in combat fatigue pajamas, and at sleepovers we watched movies and played video games. We knew that if you, “Messed with the Best: You Died

Like the Rest” because a Marine Corps T-shirt told us so. We watched *Top Gun*, and then killed thousands of Communists in games like *Commando* and *Rush N Attack*. We knew that Americans never died and we understood that we would one day all be soldiers. We practiced setting trip wires across sidewalks and booby traps between trees. We dug trenches just big enough to catch a size 5 Nike and bring a boy down. Smoke bombs worked as hand grenades and Black Cats were artillery until my younger brother set the neighbor’s garage on fire. But even a small fire couldn’t stop us. We were soldiers and the garage was collateral damage. My best friend Rick trained to be a fighter pilot because his dad was in the Air Force. I practiced being in the Army. Just a regular grunt doing it for Uncle Sam, like my uncle did it in Vietnam.

The trip usually took fifteen hours by car, and then three by train to reach the remote fishing lodge we visited yearly in western Ontario. This year however we had to leave late. My father’s brother Bobby was coming with us and he worked nights. We wouldn’t make the train. We were going to have to drive seventeen hours and catch a plane in the small town of Savant Lake, Ontario. My siblings and I were excited about the twenty-minute plane ride instead of the nearly three hour trek by train. My father hates flying and was noticeably uneasy. Bobby seemed indifferent.

We had never been to Savant Lake. We had only passed through it while

riding the rails. It's a small Indian village, and the train seldom stops, and only shortly if it does. From the train the town looks like a war zone. Dilapidated buildings lean upon one another, and graffiti seems to be the only thing holding them together. The colorful glue spells out vulgarities and even some beautiful, desperate art. Surrounding the hollowed buildings, those lucky enough to not be staying can see the sun shining off of broken green bottles that once held the booze the Indian residents are slave to. The sparsely populated landscape is littered with weeds, overgrown hedges and native people with brown skin, black eyes and black hair.

The year Bobby came with us we drove straight to Savant Lake and through it to a dock, where we were to catch a plane. We were in two mini-vans which must have seemed like something of a convoy as we rolled our transport units through the seemingly bombed out village to the waiting plane. I didn't see it, but that's when it must have started for Bobby, but he never showed any weakness. He just threw on his shades and followed my father who was driving the first van with my older sister and older brother. Bobby is a Vietnam veteran.

It never occurred to me how everyday happenings could affect veterans. I've now read it depicted in Bao Ninh's novel, *The Sorrow of War*, how a North Vietnamese veteran was terror stricken when he heard the *whump-whump-whump* of a ceiling fan, and how he was immediately reminded of the seemingly endless helicopters and soldiers, sent to take his life, and the lives of his companions. And I've seen it in the movie *Apocalypse Now*, when Martin Sheen's character wakes up looking at the ceiling fan swirling innocently, and he remembers the dense canopy jungle he and so many thousand young men rode the choppers into from 1965 to 1975. War movies must be unbearable. Television dramas showing young people dying must make vets cringe. I was soon to learn that a short bi-plane ride into the Canadian wilderness would also trigger a veteran's vivid memories.

When we arrived in Savant Lake it was cold. Rainy. Very windy. Some of us used jokes to ease our fears of flying. Bobby played it cool. We would have to take two planes. The big one we were supposed to have was on the fritz, so we loaded into two very small, very shoddily constructed airplanes. My father and brothers in one. My sister, my uncle and myself in the other. I was excited to fly. I was nineteen years old, and had flown on commercial planes before, but this was different altogether. We were remarkably close to the slim fir trees and endless lakes. The view was amazing, nothing for miles in any direction. We were isolated, going into a remote spot in the middle of

nowhere. My sister was getting sick.

I remember feeling like a child once we got going. The noise, the excitement was very thrilling. I saw myself as a machine gunner, or a fighter pilot. I mentally played out the scenarios I had created as a child playing guns with the kids in my neighborhood. Of course we only had city warfare, here was the jungle, a real war. I felt like Stallone or Schwarzenegger. Special-Ops. I was a soldier, and still only a child. Fearless and ready to hit the landing zone with automatic rifle blazing. Taking no prisoners.

My first lesson on the realities of war came from that plane ride, not *Platoon*, or the classroom. I learned about war because my sister was getting increasingly more motion sick, and when I turned around to see her, tease her, and show my enthusiasm for the plane ride, I saw something that humbled me, and shamed my inner child.

She had gotten sick into sandwich baggy my uncle had in his raincoat. His hood was up and he was holding my sister, telling her that she would be all right as soon as we landed. He was a paler shade than she was. He had tears in his eyes as he held my sister, trying not to stare through the holes in the floor, unable to bear the view from the plane. The Canadian forest looked like a jungle to me, and obviously to my uncle too, only he had been a real soldier. Here I was pretending to be a soldier, while he was pretending that he was capable of comforting my sister. I realized that he had reassured wounded young boys that they would be all right when they landed. Sometimes they were. Sometimes they weren't. There was little light on the plane, but Bobby put his shades on, hugged my sister and soldiered on through the battlefield in his mind. The landing zone was near, and then a week of R and R.

Until that moment I had envisioned my uncle as an iron man. He was a veteran, and I knew little else about him. I knew he had received the Purple Heart, for being wounded multiple times, and that he seemed invincible. I knew that Bobby was a grown up, and I still felt like a kid. He was GI Joe. Childishly I thought: "If he lived through Vietnam, what could he fear?" I had always been proud that my uncle was a veteran. But here he was gently crying, cradling my sister as his own daughter, I felt removed from the world as the realization descended. War can bend an iron man.

I was thinking about shooting myself in the foot, like the "cowards" in an O'Brien story, but figured no, that would be obvious. My partner and I were hunching behind a partition, in a corner room with two doors, a window and no way out. Shots were hitting just above and beside our heads. The only

sounds I heard were myself breathing and automatic weapon's fire. Other men's screams came and went so fast it was hard to tell if they were real. My mask splashed red. A quick check, I wasn't dead, my partner was. Shot in the face. Enemy fire increased on our position. My heart beat in-sync with the machine guns and I could see murder in my enemy's eyes. No one was taking prisoners. The time to act had come. *"It is fitting and sweet to die for one's country."* I stood to charge and was shot three times. My torso reeled; I think I bel-lowed; I should have died. But, like my childhood fantasies of battle, this was make believe. A game of paintball is a mockery of war.

I realized this at the same time that I realized something even more com-pelling. My uncle spent years in Vietnam. He spent years being cornered with no way out. Being ambushed. Laying ambush. Killing men and...my God... maybe even women and children.

When Bobby wrote my mother and father from Nam it was to say that he was fine, to reassure himself or someone else that he would make it back alive. "So far so good. Nothing really happening. How's Pammy? Thanks for the cookies, and please send bug spray. Love you, and don't worry about me. Bobby." My mom and dad had gotten married in 1967, and my sister Pam was born in '68. My mom was just graduated from St. Xavier University in Chicago, though she hailed from a Pennsylvania farming community, and my dad was getting his Veterinary license from the University of Illinois. They married young, and my father did not have to go to war. He was destined to be a veterinarian, not a veteran. At one time I had wished he did fight, so as to be a hero like Bobby. On the plane that day I realized that that was the sil-liest thing I had ever wished for.

While Bobby was in Vietnam my parents were on their way to establishing a lifestyle in which they would work to give their daughter and their future children every advantage to keep them out of the military. Many of my peers have parents who did the same. A whole generation learned about war all at once during the late 60's and early 70's. And they have tried to teach us. But, overrun by Hollywood, those my age are often slow to see for themselves.

In High School they tried to teach us with letters to and from GI's in Nam. They also had us read literature written by Vietnam veterans, but what never sunk into our heads was that the grunts in Nam were our age, or only a few years older. We were assigned to dig up personal letters from GI's if possible. I asked my parents to share, and they did. I read of cookies and bug spray,

but the letters in class were different. Those letters mentioned ambush, boredom, terror, smoking pot, and homesickness. I thought Bobby was somewhat prudish. One night after my mom went to sleep my dad showed me other letters.

In the letters my father showed me that night, I discovered the real Vietnam Bobby lived. Once he wrote that he and his men had laid an ambush the day before he wrote the letter. It was a close range gun battle with casualties on both sides, and it was "typical." At the time he was writing, he and his "boys" were making camp, washing their socks. He could hear a firefight in the near distance, "real heavy" he called it. But they had spent days moving, and it was time to rest. He was wet. The "goddamned mosquitoes" were thick as smoke, and they had been spending nights sleeping in the mud. Lying on their backs so as to not drown in puddles. That, I thought was Vietnam. Not cookies and "I'm ok." He must have been terrified daily.

While I'm writing this the History Channel is playing quietly in the background. Part of my inspiration for this essay. A series on Vietnam. The Tet Offensive and the Battle for Hue City, capturing the Citadel and the infamous evacuation of the US embassy in Saigon. There are dead bodies everywhere. Soldiers, civilians, animals all lie dead together.

A Vietnamese civilian, a young man, is lying on his back in the grass near a stone wall. His black hair is full of grass and flies buzz around his face. The city lies in ruin around him, but he does not notice. He does not swat the flies, instead he stares into the great blue void above, and at the cirrus clouds that stretch like cotton across the sky. He gasps and grabs at the air for a taste of blue breath, but he cannot breathe it because he has been shot many times through the chest, and his lungs are punctured. No one helps him, and he dies with his prayers as the camera catches American GI's advancing past him to take cover behind the young man's stone wall. Someone remarks that he's pretty "cut up," and that they should get him out of there, but then the GI's come under fire. A sniper. They seek cover and the camera fades to black.

I know now that we lost the Vietnam War. I know now that the outcomes of wars are unknown to the soldiers fighting them, but as a History student in my undergraduate years, I studied wars in countless courses with the impression that the Americans always knew that they would win. But they

didn't always win. Soldiers live their lives on the battlefield never knowing how the war will end. They just go where they're told and kill whomever they find there. They don't know how the war will end, and I'm afraid the dead still don't know.

They used to show battlefield coverage from Vietnam, but now, now we are not allowed to see what happens in Iraq or Afghanistan, and we seldom see what those kids are shooting at. It just seems as if they are aimlessly firing into nothingness. Not so. Those soldiers are aiming to kill other human beings. Men and women as young as eighteen are fighting a war right now, and when we see Israeli tanks rolling through Ramallah, bodies are being left behind them. And when B-2 Bombers strike cave complexes, people die. The same lessons from Vietnam are being taught, only once again the students do not learn. We look at this war like it is already over. Like it has been written in our history books.

History tells us that the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor on December 7<sup>th</sup>, 1941, and that we declared war the next day. We then went to war with a specific enemy, in specific locations, and years later, with millions of dollars spent, and thousands of lives lost, we ended that conflict with two atomic bombs dropped on top of Nagasaki and Hiroshima.

Recent history, or more so, memory reminds us that on September 11<sup>th</sup>, 2001, a group of Islamic extremists crashed passenger jetliners into the World Trade Center towers in New York, the Pentagon in DC and a field in Pennsylvania. Since then, we have declared war on the Afghani and Iraqi governments, and are now preparing to expand the war against the *Axis of Evil*. We are gearing up for years of war with Iraq, Iran and North Korea. We have troops in the Philippines and right now Israel and Palestine are burning. The last time we were attacked, we dropped the atomic bombs, but now the news tells us of rogue operations, and factions vying for nuclear technology, or other weapons of mass destruction. A term fitting only for our life time. Weapons of mass destruction. As in, the end of the world.

That week in Canada I thought that Bobby was teaching me that war was about killing strangers. "Or is it?" He asked. He recalled times in the jungle when on night watch one or two Viet Cong would pass in front of him, often times less than a hundred yards away. Who knows? Those few VC could have been deserters. They could have been scouts, fathers, spies or maybe just children. Who knows? They may have even killed a friend of his. Sometimes he wouldn't fire. Sometimes he would. He never mentioned directly killing anyone. Unfortunately, he probably did. For no other reason than that he had to.

\* \* \*

Bobby feared flying, and for good reason, but he did it. He accepted that if he wanted to go fishing in Canada, he had to fly, and he knew that it would undoubtedly stir up old memories. He had never shared war stories with us before, but one night, while we all enjoyed a couple “brewskies” he called them, he sat and told us of his war time antics. Keeping it as light-hearted as possible, he told of pulling kitchen duty while on leave. We didn’t ask questions, just listened.

One time he and his buddies threw a bushel of potatoes into the automatic peeler and went for a beer. Well, turns out the automatic peeler wasn’t entirely automatic and when the skins were removed, human hands were required to lift the potatoes out of the machine. If the potatoes were not manually removed, they would continue to be peeled until they became so small they would fall out of the machine and be replaced automatically. A terrible waste of potatoes. When Bobby and friends came back from having a “brewsky” they discovered a bushel, “at least a hundred” potatoes the size of golf balls. Their punishment, more kitchen duty, or “KP” as he called it.

We enjoyed these stories. At first they sounded like any stories young men tell. Mischief was made with explosives, and practical jokes prevailed. Bobby is an expert story teller. We were all his and he didn’t disappoint. In between stories we would use the bathroom, get beers, stretch, or muster the courage to maybe ask a little question. “What was it like at night?” “Hell.” And as we drank, the stories took a different tone.

Once in the shit, men were often times divided into small groups of seven or eight. They would then wait to be airlifted out by the choppers when things got heavy. “There musta been about sixty of us.” He said. “All in groups of seven or eight.” Bobby was a Sergeant at this time. “The choppers come in like this.” He made the helicopter sound with his mouth. We were huddled around a dirty table, illuminated by a propane lantern, and he showed us with his hands how the hueys came in, in a diamond formation. The men split up to coordinate with the choppers. Bobby’s group made up the rear of the diamond. They were to load into the last chopper, but that was the tricky part. They were under fire. The choppers didn’t really land, so much as kind of slow down and hover a bit. Well the hueys came down and stopped too far ahead of the men in the clearing. All the groups made it into their choppers except for Bobby’s. It’s then he said they hunkered down. “We were in a goddamned clearing see. The men are screaming at me, ‘What do we do?’ We start return-

ing fire.” He makes a machine gun sound. “We can see the bastards they’re so close. They’re coming. I say, give me that goddamned radio. Jesus Chriiist, I says. I said get me who’s in charge, and send that goddamned chopper back in here! We’re getting our asses shot off!” Then he said they watched the chopper turn around. “Getting shot to shit. It came in and the VC were coming, the thing slowed down. We were hanging from the runners.”

His mood changed. His face looked like the young boy’s from the film *Apocalypse Now*. The kid who cried, “I’m not goin’! I’m not goin’! I’m not goin’!” before he got yanked out of the chopper and thrown into the life of landing zones, booby traps, fear and death.

Bobby then took a large swallow of his Labatt’s Blue, sighed and said it was time for bed. It was a good story, but real. Men he knew had died and were left behind. He had enough for that night. This was war. Not in black and white. Not even in color. Just real.

As an undergraduate History student I noticed that my professors were often lecturing young people who didn’t care. It appears as if the student’s lackluster attitude towards learning led to a lackluster approach to teaching. Wars were presented to us as overviews. For example: America entered World War I in 1918. The war started in Europe with the assassination of Austria’s Arch-Duke Ferdinand. Poison gas was first used in 1916. America stayed neutral in the conflict until German U-Boats interfered with American commercial interests. Germany fought England, France and Russia in a two-front war, and used U-Boats to keep American goods from reaching Germany’s enemies. Germans sunk the Lusitania. Trench warfare raged on. America declared war on Germany. 135,000 Americans died in one year of fighting. An average of almost two million men died each year of the war. Millions of civilians and soldiers died. And then, World War II began in... And so on. Cold statistics do not do war justice. For instance; many millions were killed in World War I. OK? Think. React. Shocked? “Yes.” Move on. Now read just one eyewitness account, or one veteran’s memoirs. Read Hemingway’s *A Farewell to Arms*, or Remarque’s *All Quiet on the Western Front*. Try to fathom that pain and then multiply by it by, let’s say 12 million. You’re close. This is how we learn about real war.

When my uncle got to the end of his story, I saw a realization in his eyes. He told an action story, but his buddies died in that story. I hid my tears from him. He hid his tears from me. I learned about war.

We all connected with Bobby differently that week. I especially admired his courage to share with us. And we had a new appreciation for him tossing and turning most nights because of bad leg cramps he says are a result of the war. No one else noticed Bobby's vulnerability on the plane, and I didn't share for some time. That was a personal lesson that I learned. I felt that merely talking about it didn't do it justice. It was an emotional thing, and after a week of fresh fish, sunsets, mayflies and campfires, we geared up to return to society. A little wiser perhaps. Bobby seemed content, like he had found a peace that he had been unconsciously seeking.

When it came time to "evacuate" the camp, my father made more of a fuss about flying than Bobby did. Then, on the flight out, I realized that the helicopters in Vietnam served two purposes. One, they brought you into hell, and dropped you off naked and scared. And two, they were angels. They lifted your weary body and soul from the Devil's hands and delivered you to safety. Bobby lived this dichotomy for years as an Army grunt in Vietnam, and he had come to accept the fact that that was how life worked. He didn't shed a tear on the way out. He only bragged about the fish he caught.

**Josh Sopiartz** recently received his Bachelor's Degree from Eastern Illinois University and he is now currently a graduate student in the English Department at EIU. This is his first publication.