

A Disquieted Mind

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I first heard of Vietnam in 1964. It was during my senior year in high school at a teacher in at Tougaloo College, a black college near Jackson, Mississippi. The civil rights advocates there were linking the war with the civil rights struggle in Mississippi. I was there to hear Joan Baez perform. The antiwar campaign seemed to me an esoteric radical cause.

Turmoil and tumult continued with the murder of three young men who worked as a part of Freedom Summer, a voter registration project. Their bodies were found within a Mississippi earthen dam. As I heard and learned more, I came to think that the Vietnam War was mis-guided. I pursued higher education during the peak years of the conflict. Of course, I was registered for the draft but deferred as an undergraduate.

I graduated with a BA in psychology and sociology from Baylor University and started my social work studies at the University of Chicago School of Social Service Administration where my field work was providing therapy with children at the Lawndale Daycare Center. When I received my draft notice, I knew that I did not want to kill to support what I saw as a ridiculous, self-serving, immoral war. In addition, I did not have an aggressive bone in my body and had never been in a fight. I was interested in social justice and helping children with psychiatric disorders.

I saw my options as: go into the military and be trained to kill, go to Canada to avoid the draft, or go to jail as a draft resister. I did not want to go to jail or Canada, since my parents would be too upset, so I looked for another option. With the help of a one-eyed Quaker draft counselor and draft resister, I chose to become a conscientious objector. That left two options, 1A (available for military service) and 1A0 (available for non-combatant service). I chose 1A, since I did not think I had the credentials for 1A0.

I was inducted into the Army 21 August 1969 and was sent to basic training and medic school with the rest of the CO's.

I was assigned to the 101st Airborne Division "Band of Brothers" battalion, 2/506th, Headquarters Company, and was assigned to Delta Company as a combat medic. I was sent to the field in January 1970. After I was in country, I found out that Delta Company

¹ Vietnam War Poetry of a Conscientious Objector Combat Medic.

had been on the slaughter of Hamburger Hill. Foreboding – but I put it out of my mind, like the rest of my fears.

The Ripcord Campaign

I only discovered thirty years later that the 101st was tasked with other units to set up artillery bases in the mountains near the DMZ (Demilitarized Zone) to support operations in the Ashau Valley to interrupt the flow of men and materiel along the Ho Chi Minh trail. The NVA (North Vietnamese Army), as was their pattern, developed a systematic plan to defeat this operation, involving thousands of NVA soldiers and a long-planned campaign. On April 1, 1970, they began their campaign. It was the last major confrontation between US ground forces and North Vietnam during the war.

The role of Delta Company was to provide security for the firebases in the region. The most important of these was Ripcord. Delta Company operated in the mountains around Ripcord. I served with Delta Company through the end of the Ripcord campaign. US forces withdrew from Ripcord in July 1970. 360 American soldiers died during the campaign.

Although I treated the wounds of my brothers, I also spent time dealing with dead bodies. The following poems describe my experience.

Grief is for Pussies

Grief? Grief? Tears? Weeping?

Screw that! That's giving in to the assholes that sent us here.

Grief is for fucking pussies.

Not thinking about it. That is much stronger. Indifference, yeah, that works.

It don't mean nothin'.

Or better yet, anger. Anger at the freaking sons of bitches that sent us here.

Or better yet, the delicious feeling of dope as my body begins to relax and float away.

Yes, hanging with the dopeheads in the bushes, laughing our asses off. It's a way to shoot the finger at the officers who hold us captive in this prison of war. And if an officer sees us, just drop the joint and the bastards can't touch you. Another way to fuck with their heads.

Or trying to do something good. Yes, that's ok too.

Making sure the guys get their malaria pills every day, or patching a sucking chest wound, or carrying Alpha Company body bags to the helicopter on litters made from ponchos and tree branches.

At least it's doing freaking something about this goddamn shit they have us in.

Or going with the squad to pick up the body of the medevac pilot who lay burned in his helicopter at the bottom of a ravine.

Or volunteering to carry his burnt body. Figuring out how to hang the body bag from a sapling cut from the jungle so two guys can carry it, like taking a deer carcass home for dinner.

And ignoring it when his burnt greasy bones pierced the body bag.

And just ignore the smell of a Sunday afternoon barbeque that drifted up from the body bag and floated across the bare clay ridge.

Jesus, did my mouth just water?

Yep. Anger works. Indifference works, doing something good to spite the stupidity of the Masters of War, but grief?

Grief is for pussies.

Honor This Warrior

Phoong's last day on earth was beautiful, sunny, springlike, gentle, and warm,

Though I am guessing that his heart was full of foreboding;

Perhaps the same foreboding on his face the day they snapped his ID picture.

When I saw him, he was walking slowing, quietly, purposefully, watchfully,

Picking his way across the hill.

He wore shorts and Ho Chi Minh sandals. He looked so young!

He held his AK at the ready, slanted downward slightly.

I was transfixed and don't remember any reflex to protect myself.

I guess he must have seen me, since Jim said he was raising his AK toward me.

Did he know he was done for?

Did he feel fear?

Maybe not, since the bullet from Jim's M-16 ripped through him within a second

And he lay dead, I guess.

Captain Rollison said, "Put three bullets in his head," and Jim complied.

That action joined Phoong and me forever, since a pink, fluffy piece of his brain flew across the clearing

And landed on my ruck strap.

Was he glad to be serving his country? I'm guessing he was.
 Was he courageous? I think so.
 Does he deserve a warrior's honor? Absolutely.



Phoong's ID card

The following is a poem about a rescue mission. Delta Company was sent to retrieve Alpha Company dead, wounded and survivors.

Soldiers File Silently

Soldiers file silently
 Past the arching green grace of the jungle viper.
 Alert as monks,
 Solemn as pall bearers,
 Grave digger sweat burning their eyes.
 They listen for the creak of the gallows floor,
 Hearts pounding with lust,
 For their lovers' bodies lying in wait.

After 48 years of stuffing and denying the effect of my war experience, I went to Vietnam with Dr. Ed Tick on a journey of healing and reconciliation with a group that included Vietnam vets and civilians, including Veterans Administration nurses. The emotional release was intense. Here are two poems that describe the healing and reconciliation that I felt.

Close Encounters in War Journal – Back to the light
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If you gave me diamonds as numerous as the ripples in the Mekong,
It would not match the gift of your listening to the outpouring of this soldier's heart.

During a journey to Vietnam, I became aware of the impact of my moral injury through the loving presence of Le Ky, a woman whose brother was killed in a napalm attack. I told her that felt bad about what we did in Vietnam. She said, "Don't feel guilty, you were just doing what you were told." For more on this story see my TEDx talk *Moral Injury in Combat: Holistic and Community Healing*.

I screamed: "My joy betrays the dead."
But oh, Madam Ky's smile!

In 2021, Jeff Mitchell wrote the song *Disquieted Mind* describing my moral injury. This was a part of a project by Jason Moon and Warriors Songs. Jeff interviewed me and these lyrics are the result of our talks.

Disquieted Mind

I don't know how to make this right but I'll try
And every morning when I wake I will try
I've been wrong so many times
And walked a crooked line
But I'll try
I will try...

My brothers said, "Keep driving.
This don't mean nothing to you."
Moving through our separate gravities
And the vertigo of the truth

I did not turn to see your face
And all that we were leaving behind
But I still see you
And I know what we've done

Close Encounters in War Journal – Back to the light
April 11, 2023

For I have a disquieted mind

I swear I tried
But I got nothing to brag about
Since I wrapped the wounds of my brothers
As we burned your reality down
And I would hold you blameless
If you'd only want me gone
But was cold
And you've been kind
And you have kept me warm

And I'm not home
And I'll never be home again
But I'll take off my shoes
And sleep on your floor if you'll let me in
And I could never blame you
If you want to send me back where I'm from
But if you let me stay here
I can build you something out of my love

Take it or leave it
It's a trivial gift
But there's a thing that I'm building from silence
And a hammer that cracks in the wind
It's a full-time occupation
To bring this wreck to amends
And when it's plumb and square
I will imagine you there
Though I may never see you again

I've been told, "Welcome Home"
But I don't remember where to go
I'll follow you down the road
If you know

My friend Glen Miller was in a different part of VN. He had different experiences but was in combat as an Army Ranger, LRRP. Glen and I often talk about the importance and power of truth telling. We both think and feel that the Vietnam War was a quagmire or mess of courage, adventure, shame, guilt, and moral dilemmas. Truth telling releases the messiness into the world. The truth needs to be told about war so that we all may hear reality and perhaps heal. It is my hope that these poems and narrative add some reality to our ways of thinking and feeling about war.