War Is a Thief

As I lay awake, I contemplated how I would approach the subject of Vietnam. As a veteran, I had been asked to share my story with a high school civics class, and I wanted to be clear. How could I make anyone clearly understand, anyone other than another veteran who had served his country in battle?

I started thinking of the many situations in which I had been placed and of their consequences, of how the war must have affected not only me but so many others. I started to think of the war as a thief, since it had stolen so much from so many—the soldiers, the mothers, fathers, siblings, relatives and friends of all those who were now robbed of their lives and limbs, not to mention the innocence of those so very young men, the average age of the Vietnam veteran being 18 years.

As I started to recall it all, I thought of my very first experience to initiate me into the ranks of hardened combatants. It was the first ten minutes of my arrival at Lima Company’s 3rd Battalion, 7th Marines outside Chu Lai, South Vietnam, on March 13, 1966. The platoon I was assigned to had just completed a mission called “Operation Texas” where they were set up around a village in order to protect the villagers while they were harvesting their rice crops. If not for this protection, the rice crops would have been destroyed by the Viet Cong who were trying to convince the villagers by force to join their ranks. Upon joining the platoon, I saw several men burying a helmet in the sand. It had belonged to a marine that had been killed in that operation and still carried blood and brain matter. He had been killed in an all-night mortar attack the night before. The marine would have gone home in six days. It stopped me in my tracks. I thought, My God, people are dying here.
Soon after that incident there came down an order whereby no marine with less than two weeks left in country would be sent out on the larger operations. That was my introduction to the war and, needless to say, it shook me up. The war had stolen a life, my first witnessing of a combat death.

From that day on there were many thefts. The theft of the life of Pfc. Conrad, who died on his 19th birthday, about which some how I still feel guilty. Conrad had fallen twice before on patrols when we were ambushed, thinking he was shot and clutching his right side and screaming for the corpsman, only to find out he was not even scratched. He was having a premonition! The day he was killed, I had selected him and another to go on a scouting patrol into a peaceful village but one that had had reports of Viet Cong sympathizers. We heard the shots being fired as the patrol apparently entered the village. A back-up team was sent out to help, but when they made contact, Conrad had been killed, shot in the same side he had clutched before on the patrols. I watched the team carry Conrad, wrapped in a poncho and slung on poles over the marines’ shoulders, looking very much like a butchered animal as they seemed to forever weave their way along the rice paddy dikes back to camp.

I can remember well the sun going down and the sight of a body bag that now held Conrad waiting till morning when transportation was to be sent for him. I sat just watching that bag in disbelief and shock. He had told me he didn’t want to go on that patrol, that he was afraid something was going to happen! Happy birthday, Conrad, you’re going home! Another theft of the war, another son dead, and more of my innocence stolen. Now add guilt! Later would come more theft. The theft of Acevedo’s legs, Frenchie’s right leg blown off by a 50 caliber round, another’s nose and part of his
face gone, the six men who thought they were in a safe area and decided they could all just relax, only to be slaughtered and mutilated as they snoozed. The only one whose identity we could know for sure was “Pappy,” a black marine whose nickname was earned, as he was older than all but the career marines. He was 25 and had been sentenced by a judge to rejoin the Marine Corps or go to jail for some crime he had committed. Little did he know he would select death over incarceration.

There was Witkowski, the draftee, who was wounded as point man on patrol; there was the lieutenant who was shot three times before we could drag him out of the landing zone; there was the corporal, whose name escapes me, who should have been state-side since he had already earned three Purple Hearts for wounds received but, because records were lost, he had to suffer his fourth wound when a crude booby-trap exploded nails and rocks and God knows what else into his face. There was Lance Corporal Hauck, killed on patrol by a sniper; and there was the boy from Alabama killed after volunteering to stay in Vietnam for an extra six months, who knows why. It couldn’t have been for the big bucks or the white sheets changed daily by the French maid.

There were others—it amazes me now how many I can bring to memory. I tried to forget them, and the mangled pieces of flesh and body parts that once belonged to them. These men are the casualties on our side. Then there were the Viet Cong, the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN), the innocent villagers whose hooches we torched, their animals we killed and the children we frightened. There were the prisoners we tortured, beaten for information, shot, thrown out of helicopters to convince others of our sincerity, kept in cages like dogs, and marched away from battle sites with detonation
cord wrapped around their necks to prevent them from thinking of escape. There were also the dead who tried to infiltrate our defenses, shot and caught up in the concertina, found in the morning after a firefight lasting all night. They were now prizes, shown off by posing them for pictures with cigarettes dangling from their lips, then with ears cut off, noses sliced. The ears were kept like scalps by some, hung on cartridge belts or sent home as souvenirs. No tears were shed for the enemy—marines can’t afford to have sympathy!

Then there were happier times! Times talking about home, girlfriends, times opening letters and packages from girlfriends or family, times spent on slack days around phonographs, listening to Motown records and singing along, thinking of the fun we would have when we got home--the places we would go, the motorcycle I would buy, the food, the beer, the girls, the girls, the girls!!!

Time passed slowly, and we got numbed to the daily dangers, learned to mix c-rations or add things to them to actually make them fairly palatable, learned who to trust in combat and who not to trust with our lives. Then the weeks turned into months and then came the last few weeks and the short-timer attitude. Up to this point, I had for some time finally gotten to the place where I could be almost comfortable with the fact that I might be shot or maybe even get malaria or the million dollar wound that would send me home. Then the fear returned as I began to realize I just might make it out, if only I could be lucky for a few more weeks. It was like starting over again. I began to duck when the sniper round went off, something that for a long time I had learned to almost ignore, simply firing back and getting into a position of safety and trying to gain control of the situation.
After all this time, I began to remember my first ten minutes in my unit and the helmet that was buried, the helmet of a short-timer. On April 22, 1967, eight days late, I said a few good-byes, getting no addresses or phone numbers from guys I once thought would be life-long friends. Subconsciously I probably preferred to forget them. I seemed to just disappear and someone else simply took my place—to witness more of war’s thievery.

Now out of country and back in the “real” world, I feel out of place, don’t sleep well, dream about shooting the enemy who, when shot, turns into small animals as though I am hunting game back on the farm. I wake up sweating, chest pounding as though my heart were bursting, scaring my mother as she tip-toes into my room to check up on my sounds, almost hitting her as I come up quickly to defend myself from the unknown. I could feel her in my room!

The good part is that I can now get my fill of steaks and salami sandwiches. Learning from the abuse I now received from the anti-warriors, I decided not to tell everyone I was an ex-marine who served in Vietnam, a war-mongering baby killer who profited from the war. I didn’t realize I had profited; maybe they were referring to the $160 a month I got through the G.I. Bill when I went on the college.

Over 35 years later, I am still confused with guilt but have learned to accept it as a very important part of my life. Without it, I could never know the implications or the complications of it all. I thank God for the knowledge, the experience, and the opportunity to share from my life in the trenches. It is all part of who I am.

From my experiences, I have learned about the alternatives to war, learned that here are alternatives—love and understanding, direct and honest discussions, and a
sincere desire to end war. As a Vietnam veteran, I had to convince those students whose innocence was still intact: War is a thief.