

Veterans' Day

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Every November we commemorate those who have served in the U.S. military. We also have a day in May that we call Memorial Day. The difference between the two is that Memorial Day is to remember those who have died, whereas Veterans' Day is to celebrate those who have come back alive. I am one of the survivors, and so Veterans' Day is special for me.

It was not easy for any of us to leave our homes and our families to be sent half a world away to face an uncertain fate. Would we even return? Would we be disabled? Would we ever see our families again? The steep descent of our airplane into Long Binh Air Force Base filled us with anxieties. Would we be attacked as soon as we landed? What would be required of us? Could we survive a year of this war without front lines and borders?

Fortunately, the scene at the air base was a lot more normal and tranquil than I had expected, and I survived that first day. One down, three hundred and change to go.

Before I served in Vietnam, I was generally in favor of our nation's actions there. I accepted, for the most part, the domino theory that if one more country fell to communism then all the rest of southeast Asia would also fall. A sizable number of people my age supported the war; contrarily, there were many who were vehemently against it, and our nation was in turmoil.

Once in Vietnam, however, I began to see the other side of war, the terrible toll it exacts. It wasn't just the killing and the maiming, and there certainly were those. After a while, each of us either went mad or developed a bit of fatalistic callous. We had to accept the realization that we were never going to be in control of our own fates; whatever was going to happen, would happen. That was the only attitude to get us through this.

Aside from this, the war ruined a lot of American (to say nothing of the South Vietnamese) lives, leading to drug addiction, alcoholism, sexually-transmitted diseases, depression, and apathy. I saw Vietnamese children in school, boy scouts playing games (in the midst of war!), and families trying to survive. The war negatively affected all of these. I gradually changed my mind about the war.

Today, I am troubled by our nation's wars. War may be necessary, but only as the very, very, very last resort. There are so many options to be exhausted before that last step is taken. My heroes today are no longer military greats; they are people like Mahatma Gandhi and Rosa Parks. I am saddened when soldiers have to leave their spouses and children, and I am truly joyous when they return.

The University of Maryland sponsors an annual celebration of Veterans' Day in the chapel on campus. Every student, staff member, and faculty member who has served is individually invited and honored on a day just for them. We can celebrate the sacrifices each of us has made, but, even better, we can celebrate that we are here to celebrate among those who understand because we all share the same general experiences. And, for me, it means a reaffirmation of the truth that it is much harder to make peace than it is to make war.