

Sometimes the herd is wrong

by Terry Garlock

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Well into the autumn of my life, I am occasionally reminded the end is not too far over the horizon. Mortality puts thoughts in my head, like “What have I done to leave this world a better place?”

There actually are a few things that I think made my existence worthwhile. I will tell you one of them because so many of you need to hear it.

No matter how much this rubs the wrong way, I am quite proud to have served my country in the Vietnam War. Yes, I know, most of you were taught there is shame attached to any role in the war that America lost, an unfortunate mistake, an immoral war, an unwise intrusion into a civil war, a racist war, a war in which American troops committed widespread atrocities, where America had no strategic interest, and that our North Vietnamese enemy was innocently striving to reunite Vietnam.

The problem is, none of those things are true. That didn't stop America over the last 50 years lapping up this Kool-Aid concocted by the anti-war machine, a loose confederation of protestors, the mainstream news media and academia. As the war matured they opposed it with loud noise, half-truths and fabrications, even denigrating our troops who served faithfully. Ken Burns and Lynn Novick recently revived this anti-war version in a 10-episode 18-hour very slick film they call a “documentary,” and most Americans don't know enough of the truth to recognize it as semi-factual propaganda.

These are the ones who still write their version in our schoolbooks, and their account of history conveniently excuses themselves for cowardly encouraging our enemy while we were at war. You see, having the right to protest does not necessarily make it the right thing to do.

Many war-weary Americans joined those protests without knowing anti-war leaders were coordinating with the enemy. Good citizens were horrified at the ugly pictures and videos brought

into their living room TV from Vietnam, a reasonable emotional reaction without thinking through that every war, even the “good war” we call WWII, is a foul, nasty, cruel, unforgiving business of killing. We should go to war only as a last resort, like the noble cause of keeping the South Vietnamese people free by stopping the spread of Communism in Southeast Asia.

So, yes, I am defiantly proud to have raised my right hand to swear to do my duty for our country while the hippie/anti-war crowd yelled and screamed and marched, burned their draft cards, declared, “Hell no! I won't go!” and some fled to Canada. In those years of controversy, even patriots tended to look the other way when activists heartily insulted American troops as they returned through California airports from doing the country's hardest work in Vietnam.

War correspondent Joe Galloway summed it up nicely at the end of his column about Vietnam vets in the Chicago Tribune long ago; “They were the best you had, America, and you turned your back on them.”

To be sure, there was much to legitimately criticize in the war. We were betrayed by our own leadership in the White House with their incompetent micromanagement and idiotic war-fighting limitations that prevented victory and prolonged the war, turning it into a meat-grinder that ate America's sons. And we were betrayed by fellow citizens encouraging our enemy and insulting our troops.

I was trained to be an Army Cobra helicopter pilot. I remember many times, with no regrets, shooting up the enemy to protect our ground troops, firing to cover fellow pilots, and firing to keep the brutal enemy away from South Vietnamese civilians. A high school student asked me last year how I deal with the guilt. I answered that I don't have any guilt, that I was doing my duty and would proudly do it again.

When John Lennon turned the Beatles into an anti-war protest band, his song "Give Peace a Chance" was hailed as genius. Look up the inane lyrics and judge for yourself. When Lennon played that song at protest rallies, crowds of tens of thousands would raise their arms to wave in unison while chanting in ecstasy, "All we are asking, is give peace a chance!" over and over. Luminaries like Tom Smothers, presidential candidate George McGovern, writer and self-acclaimed intellectual Gore Vidal and a host of others lauded Lennon's song and observed "Who wouldn't prefer peace to war?"

What self-indulgent, naive stupidity!

My friend Anh Nguyen was born in Vietnam, 12 years old in 1968, living in the city of Hue, the cultural center of the country. One spring morning when he opened the shutters to his bedroom window, a shot was fired over his head, the first he knew the enemy's Tet Offensive had begun. The Communists had negotiated a cease fire for Vietnam's New Year holiday of Tet, then in treachery attacked on that holiday in about 100 locations all over South Vietnam.

The enemy had prepared well and they quickly took the city of Hue. They had lists of names and addresses provided by spies, and they went from street to street, dragging from their homes political leaders, business owners, teachers, doctors, nurses and other "enemies of the people." The battle raged four weeks before our Marines retook the city. In the aftermath, many people were missing and, finally, mass graves with nearly 5,000 bodies were found, executed by the Communists, many tied together and buried alive.

Anh and his family had evacuated to an American compound for protection. Anh says when the battle was over and they walked Highway 1 back to their home, the most beautiful sight his family had ever seen was US Marines lining the road, standing guard over South Vietnamese civilians. To follow John Lennon's plea, Anh's family and countrymen could have applied "Give peace a chance" merely by surrendering to the Communist invaders, but even a mush-head like Lennon should know there are some things you don't give up without a fight. I doubt Lennon would have

understood the best way to ensure peace is to carry the biggest stick.

Want to know what causes me shame?

In 1973, when we basically had the war won, the US gave it away in a peace agreement when America was so desperate to escape from Vietnam that negotiated settlement with our enemy was the only politically acceptable option. In the peace agreement, the US pledged our ongoing financial support to South Vietnam's defense, and pledged US direct military intervention if the North Vietnamese ever broke their pledge not to attack South Vietnam. In the 1974 elections, in the aftermath of the Watergate scandal and President Nixon's resignation, a new Congress promptly cut off all funding to South Vietnam in violation of the US pledge.

Of course North Vietnam was watching.

In early 1975 when the North Vietnamese violated their pledge by attacking South Vietnam in massive force, President Ford literally begged Congress to fund the US pledge to intervene. Congress refused.

The same news media, protesters and academia who had screamed against the war, firmly turned their back in 1975 and refused to notice the slaughter and inhumanity as the Communists overwhelmed the ally America had thrown under the bus. Even today, few on the anti-war side know or care there were roughly 75,000 executions, that a panicked million fled in over-packed rickety boats and died at sea by the tens of thousands, that a million were sent to brutal re-education camps for decades and also died by the tens of thousands, or that South Vietnamese who fought to remain free - and their descendants - are still persecuted to this day.

They don't know or care that the Commie victors, knowing well the cultural reverence for ancestors, bulldozed South Vietnamese graveyards, that North Vietnamese poured into South Vietnam to take over the best farms, homes, jobs and businesses, making countless thousands of thriving families homeless. Abandoning our ally to that fate is America's everlasting shame, as is the willful blindness to the Commie murder of two million of their own citizens next door in Cambodia.

We could have won that war if our military had been allowed to take off the stupidly soft gloves, but it went on far too long with no end in sight, mismanaged to a fare-thee-well by the White House and became America's misery. Through it all, even the betrayals from home, we fought well and never lost one significant battle.

Anti-war activists think they know all about the war and the Americans who fought it. They don't know didley.

At the 334th Attack Helicopter Company in Bien Hoa, we Cobra pilots were 19 to 25 years old with very rough edges. We thought of ourselves as gunslingers and might have swaggered a bit. We drank too much at the end of a sweat-stained day, for fun or escape or both. We laughed off close calls with the bravado of gallows humor. We toasted our dead and hid the pain of personal loss deep inside. We swore a lot and told foul jokes. We pushed away the worry of how long our luck would hold, and the next day we would bet our life again to protect the South Vietnamese people and each other.

We didn't know then how important were the bonds that would tie us together for life. To faithfully characterize my fellow Vietnam vets, those I knew and others I didn't, I need to borrow a few words from the opening paragraph of John Steinbeck's book, *Cannery Row*. He described the disreputable inhabitants of the junkyards and abandoned factories of Cannery Row as society's castoffs with many flaws, but that if you looked through a different peephole you might get a glimpse of their heart and see, ". . . saints and angels, martyrs and holy men." That's how I think of my fellow vets, despite our flaws.

I am proud to be one of them because we faced evil together in a valiant effort to keep the South Vietnamese people free, doing God's work in an ugly business for a little while, even though it failed by the hand of our own countrymen, fools in the White House and fellow citizens working against us from safety at home.

I served only part of my 12 month tour in Vietnam since I was shot down in a firefight, badly injured and medevaced home. I had a broken back, legs paralyzed until after surgery then in a series of

hospitals I learned to walk again. My flying days were over. Most of my brother and sister Vietnam vets spent far more time doing their duty than I did, completing one, two, three or even more tours. I learned by watching them the true meaning of loyalty, courage and trust, and their true story deserves to be told.

The killing and narrow escapes in combat while struggling to bring one another home alive changes who you are. It can make you feel isolated around others who did not share that experience. I can feel alone surrounded by people, some I might have known for a long time. And yet, if I walk into a room full of Vietnam vets, even if I have never met any of them, it feels like coming home. We admire each other because we met the test of our mettle. We can communicate volumes in a few words of our own language that outsiders can never understand. More than any other class of people, I can let down my guard among them in the easy comfort of knowing they will watch my six.

As for the Americans who worked against us while we and our enemy were killing each other, well, it was 50 years ago and everyone deserves a second chance.

But for the naval-gazing flower children who remain unrepentant about encouraging the enemy we were fighting, who still smugly know all the wrong answers about us and the Vietnam War, who have never stood up to mortal danger, who felt no remorse when Saigon fell and the Commies made South Vietnamese streets run red with the blood of innocent people, to you I want to be sure to deliver this invitation before I get too old and feeble: kiss me where the sun don't shine.

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