

Winning Essay by Adonis Scalia for the University of Alaska Southeast student essay contest. the Waging Peace in Vietnam exhibit: "What it means for me and lessons for today."

Reflection

While looking into the solemn black and white portrait of a Vietnam veteran, I thought, *what do I know about the Vietnam war?* I scoured my brain for any kind of remnants from a high school history class, any type of information that I learned about the realities of Vietnam, the political climate at the time, or life at home. Standing under the sad, contemplative eyes of that portrait I felt ashamed—there was nothing. I took my seat as the snow outside slowed into a dull rain. Looking around, surrounded by older people, mostly veterans, the reality hit me. Not everyone can afford the luxury of simply not thinking about the atrocities of the Vietnam war.

During the reading, the poetry hit me especially hard. As a poet myself, I felt as if I understood what was being communicated. The tenderness of the medium is in juxtaposition with the harsh reality of the war. The combination was beautiful and quiet. Here in the silence, I reflected. Why don't I know about the Vietnam War? What can I learn?

The emphasis of this exhibit is the stories of veterans and their tireless opposition to the war. The reason for this opposition can be found in the accompanying exhibit, *My Lai: A Massacre Took 504 Souls, and Shook the World*. The story of My Lai can be described as nothing less than devastation. The imagery here is haunting. Ron Haberle's photographs realize the helplessness of the situation. He can do nothing to save the already dead non-combatants, only freeze the already still bodies in a photograph. Later these images do bring attention to the atrocities committed in Vietnam, but I can only imagine the hopelessness at their capture. Paul Cox in his essay, "Fifteen unarmed people were murdered that day" quotes "Fifteen unarmed people were murdered that day, but there were no repercussions for the perpetrators. No, not as big as My Lai, but it brought into focus the experiences of my entire tour." The experiences of veterans like Cox help citizens paint a picture of what the war was like for those on the front

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lines. We come to understand that atrocities like My Lai were likely committed on a smaller scale throughout the war. Innocent people, women children, and babies were murdered for what? An economic principle? Democracy?

There is no justification for what happened to the people at My Lai, or the people all over Vietnam. America seemed to turn a complete 180 from the uninvolved approach that so many citizens and policymakers took at the beginning of WW2. There was another reason to be in Vietnam. The blatant war crimes and foggy reasoning for the war created an anti-war sentiment from not only those on the front lines but also those at home. America's abandonment of principal contextualizes the dissent among soldiers.

With such an understanding of the atrocities committed during the war, it's easy to understand why the opposition was so ardent. I feel like it is important to pause and empathize with those

who served in the war. The draft stole them away from their families and life at home. They were deposited in a foreign country where they knew no one and had no reason to fight. They were forced to attack anyone who wasn't a part of the United States. After being removed from the war, they were brought home where they once again were abandoned by the government which promised them help upon their return. Many surviving veterans are left homeless and suffering from unmanageable trauma.

The reason the Vietnam War was such a tragedy is because nobody won. Saying the United States stopped the spread of communism is a shallow victory. American and Vietnamese citizens and soldiers all left changed if they left at all. It is easy to sum the war up as brutality of the United States government, but that stance eliminates so much nuance about the individual lives of the combatants. Not every soldier opposed the war. It's important to remember that everyone who fought was a person, affected in their own way.

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Those who did oppose the war, however, were instrumental in creating awareness of the war and the struggles of those involved. Susan Schnall during her discussion of rallying support for a peace march mentioned that they dropped fliers from planes onto army bases. The soldiers below were able to hear the news in a way that the higher-ups couldn't hide. They weren't alone in their opposition. Brave leaders like Schnall risked everything, their ranks, jobs, and livelihoods, to make it known that other GIs were in their corner. At the end of the day, it was about community.

Those who agreed with the anti-war sentiment formed a community. They fought the government that left them behind and fled to foreign countries away from everything they knew. In GI coffee shops, they talked to each other and shared ideas and desperation. They crafted underground newspapers and magazines, publicizing their opposition and risking themselves in the process. The bonds formed here and on the war front are genuinely unable to be replicated. It is this sense of community that held the anti-war movement together, especially when those involved received repercussions from the government.

Treatment of GIs who disobeyed orders was downright inhumane. The stockade at Fort Dix, for example, housed 800 soldiers accused of going AWOL. Conditions were cramped, with 450 prisoners over capacity. The only release came when freed by an anti-war march. They were rescued by their community rather than by their government. Some soldiers even felt as if they had to flee, Mike Wong, for example, fled to Canada rather than kill innocents in Vietnam. The kind of courage he had is so indescribable. Choosing to lose everything you know over losing your humanity. Thousands of soldiers like Wong made decisions like these, choosing to spare innocent lives over doing the easy thing and obeying.

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Learning these lessons about Vietnam is one of the most important things I've done. These people fought and died in foreign jungles, surrounded by strangers, killing strangers. Came home to fight their government, which swore to protect them. Continue to still fight to this day with their trauma, or with the government. We cannot afford to pretend that My Lai didn't happen. We must listen to these voices when they speak, and share stories of their struggle.

In this day and age, we have been given a beautiful time to reflect. Veterans are still here to act as guides, to say “this is what happened”. We must take the time to think about the sacrifice they made to be able to act as our touchstone. With silence and reflection, one day we can say this will not happen again.

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Works Cited

Short, William, and Willa Seidenberg. *Waging Peace in Vietnam: US Soldiers and Veterans Who Opposed the War*. Edited by Ron Carver et al., NYU Press, 2019. *JSTOR*, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctv12pnnzs>. Accessed 21 Nov. 2022.

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