

Due date: Saturday, 30 October 2010, 09:05 PM

Last edited: Saturday, 30 October 2010, 12:56 PM (1114 words)

"The Abduction of Innocence"

For this assignment I wanted to delve into the psyche of the American soldiers, more importantly the juxtaposition of living in the America they grew up in and the transition to soldier and combatant. Rather than write on first-hand accounts, I decided to rather write about some of the second-person accounts. This way it will be more of a collaborative thought and removed enough so that the topic is a little more cohesive. The three subjects in this paper, I feel, represent the transitions that many of the troops went through. As Don Mclean once sang, "Oh there we were all in one place, a generation lost in space, with no time left to start again".

Helen Tennant Hegelheimer Pg. 106

Helen, in 1966 and '67 was a flight attendant with World Airways. She had a unique role and it allowed her to see the emotions, worries and thoughts of the soldiers. She could relate to their concerns about coming back changed from the war. She says, "These boys grew up the same way I did in the fifties. We attended church, we understood right from wrong". She knew that it was not their choice to kill; it was instilled with their duty to country. She saw the differences in the men before and after conflict. "I clearly remember thinking, these guys are not going home to their girlfriend and that '55 Chevy they had been working on," recalls Helen. "Their youth was gone and it showed. You absolutely saw a different look in their eyes on the way home". The soldiers were torn between the two cultures, their lives of the past and the situation of the present. Some of their innocence shows when she speaks of how the soldiers wanted to "practice" talking before they got home in fear that they would slip up and cuss in front of their mothers. They were also fearful that their mothers would be able to tell everything they had done in Vietnam. It wasn't just the killing they were concerned with; it was also the morality tests they failed. The drugs, the booze the promiscuity with the ladies, these were all things they've been raised to avoid. Perhaps some of the psychosocial difficulties that the soldiers came home with are tied in directly with their perception of everyone's judgment upon them.

Nancy Smoyer Pg. 188

In 1967 Nancy went to Vietnam as a "Donut Dollie", the nickname for a member of a program within the Red Cross whose job was to

boost morale. She toured Vietnam and engaged troops in games intended to lift their morale. The games that she had the troops play were somewhat childish, but that was the point. To have these cute American girls there having the troops play kids games brought a great amount of levity to them. If even for a hour or two, the troops forgot where they were at and their mission. She mentions of the troops that, "Their dream was to go back to 'The World' and drive cars and date girls and have fun. None of us knew that we weren't going to be kids anymore". She says that they were so naïve and 'innocent', not fully grasping the darkness of the situations that they were attempting to enlighten. "It was strange to play sweetness and light in a war zone". She talks of the troops and herself collectively suggesting that she knew she played a big role in the quality of life for the troops. She knew that after the war she would be changed just as they have been. She said that, "somehow even then, I knew it would be the high point of my life. And it's sad to know that age twenty-four it's as good as it's going to get." She shows a great sense of pride when talking about her activities but she was against the war. In 1965 when she was a senior in high school she "thanked goodness" that her little brother was so young, she thought that the war would be over by the time that he would be old enough to go fight. This was somewhat a naïve thought in hindsight. Three months after her return stateside in 1968, her brother Billy went to Vietnam and three weeks later, died in an ambush. This shows how it was not just the troops who were affected psychologically, but it was everyone involved. As with every war, a generation is aged not by time alone, but through emotional stress and pain that adds on much more than just years.

Fred Branfman Pg.217

Fred's story is a little different than the stories of Helen and Nancy but the aftershock is very similar. Fred was a free-lance interpreter and journalist in Laos and he saw first-hand the misleading accounts supplied by the US State Department. He was one of the first Westerners to expose the fact that the United States had been secretly bombing northern Laos since 1964. Upon learning of the attacks he felt anger towards the US government. "I couldn't believe the executive branch has been bombing this country without telling anyone." He was shocked that his country could stoop to such a level. Upon learning of the bombings, he worked to stop the bombings. "Communism is obviously no better than capitalism," he says, "but I certainly have no regrets that I tried to stop the bombings". He had a solid base in wanting to help the Laotians and the Vietnamese but his experiences turned his soul dark. "The most disturbing legacy of the war is that we don't teach our children that our country is capable of conducting mass murder of civilians". In retrospect, he realizes that he was naïve and that if the North

Vietnamese won they would usher in a better world. Growing up in the fifties he really believed in America. "We had a coherent value system then along came Vietnam and every ideal was destroyed. I think that shock threw an entire generation into a moral abyss and I don't think we've crawled out yet". His views were shared by a lot of young Americans at the time. It just shows that when a government is deceitful and not completely truthful with its citizens, it leads to a foundation of anger and rebellion. I wish that the mass population of the United States could have known all the facts about what our government did, maybe they would have been more sincere and sympathetic towards own returning troops.

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