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Molly Graham

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HST195: Assignment 2

No Escape

Not every American felt the same way during the Vietnam War as the next did. In the same way, not every American felt differently during it than their enemy, the North Vietnamese and Viet Cong, did. Whether fighting for communism or democracy, there were similar feelings of pain, pride and commitment on both sides. Many people involved in the Vietnam War were simply trapped, torn by inner emotions or kept by physical circumstances but unable to change their situation or escape from what was surrounding them. The world was closing in on them and all that they could do was press onwards; force themselves to continue, though their torture seemed endless. What is common to this diverse group of people is that they were put through misery which was seemingly both unavoidable and unending.

As a flight attendant for World Ariways which transported American troops into Vietnam and sometimes brought them home as well, Helen Tennant Hegelheimer said "see you later" to thousands of boys that she knew would most likely not be coming home (Appy 106-111). Her account is one of deep pain, knowing that the planes would drop off many young men but would usually leave empty and knowing that she offered a false sense of security to them. It is true that Helen was not physically trapped, as she could have quit her job and removed herself from the situation at hand. However, this repetitive task in which she was sending boys off to be killed was emotionally taxing on her. She had no control over the situation. She could not turn the plane around and send the boys home. She did what she could to make the soldiers feel loved but it did not stop their fate beyond the airway. The situation would continue on whether she was there or not so she might as well do what little she felt that she could. She sounds at times almost haunted by this time in her life, one where she was continuously given a full plane to deceitfully comfort and send on their way.

Nguyen Quang Sang, an artist and member of the Viet Cong, describes running from American helicopters in an area of South Vietnam without the cover of jungle (Appy 215-217). There was no

escape from his situation. The helicopters were so low that the ones on the ground and the ones up above could see each other's faces and all that he and others could do was to jump into a canal, where bullets were repeatedly fired at them and many died. For Nguyen, he was entirely exposed and vulnerable. There were no trees in which to hide and there was nowhere to run. This went on all day long, trying to avoid the fire from helicopters right above. It was also unlawful for anyone outside of the military to shoot at the helicopters so he was left entirely defenseless. Trapped and at the mercy of the door gunner's aim, Nguyen found himself in a situation that was entirely beyond his control; one in which he imagined he would never be able to escape.

Communist Truong My Hoa was imprisoned for eleven years by the South Vietnamese government, two years of which she spent in a tiger cage with other women on Con Son Island (Appy 228-231). This is an obvious example of entrapment as she was physically kept locked up by her captors. Her tale of pain and sickness and physical brutality is heart wrenching. However, Truong's experience was almost the reverse of Helen's as she was actually physically trapped but was miraculously able to mentally stay intact. She and the other "tigresses" never cracked under torture and did not denounce Ho Chi Minh for anything. Powdered limestone was poured on her. She was nearly naked and had not showered all year. She was beaten with electric whips, pounded with nails, and had soapy water poured up her nose. Somehow, her entrapment did not destroy her, as this inability to escape did many others, but instead seemed to even have empowered her, making her stronger and more devoted to her cause than ever.

It is not at all to say that these three people had the same experience. Clearly, the stories become more devastating as one reads through that of Helen, Nguyen, and then on to Truong. What is important though, is to see the ways in which their varied experiences could all contribute to the individual feeling of being trapped. Whether physically or emotionally, this sense of no escape, of helplessness of one's own situation, devastated those on both sides of the war.

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