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Part 1: Phan Xuan Sinh

When studying the history of the Vietnam war, rarely as an American do you get a chance hear a first hand account of what happened there from the perspective of the Vietnamese. Phan Xuan Sinhs stories are particularly intriguing because he fought for the Army of the Republic of Vietnam. He fought alongside American soldiers against the North. Most Americans seem to forget that this was also a civil war and there were actually three sides fighting. It is always the Vietcong versus the U.S. in American movies and books. Sinh's feelings about the war were similar to what a lot of American soldiers felt as well. Many of them were drafted to fight and saw no potential to benefit personally from the fighting. They fought, killed and died because they had no choice but to participate. After the war, and American troops had pulled out, he and many others had to stay and live in a country that was now to be run by the very people they had been fighting. He talks about the hatred that they felt towards them and mentions the revenge that was enacted upon them after the war. While he does not go into what this was like, we can only imagine how terrible it must have been for so many people who were on the loosing side of this conflict and had to remain living there after the war. Sinh moved tho the U.S. in 1990 so it is possible that he is being overly critical of the communists simply because he is talking with an American and does not want to seem unsympathetic. However, there is little reason to doubt his credibility or the accuracy of his stories.

Part 2:

Malcolm Browne's reporting of his early days in Vietnam offer a glimpse into what he felt while living among South Vietnamese and American soldiers. Because he was a civilian, his experiences were somewhat different from other Americans who were in the country. He made friends with the people and spoke of his time with the Buddhist monks. His story about an elder monk who self immolates to protest their treatment by the oppressive Diem regime is particularly disturbing. This form of protest and self sacrifice is virtually unheard from other groups and while it was/is not common among Buddhists it did happen. Browne's account of the man remaining perfectly still while his body is destroyed by flames is hard to comprehend and difficult to imagine let alone witness firsthand. His telling of the "legend" John Wayne visiting an officers club and complaining that "pantywaist liberals" were preventing the war from going smoother is more amusing than atrocious. Here is a Hollywood big shot, dressed in fatigues as if it were another costume for a movie, visiting real soldiers and firing weapons in their club. He obviously did not fully understand what was happening in this country and it is doubtful that he made any effort to actually appreciate it. Browne remarks that Wayne was "one of the people who did much harm by misleading the public as to what the war in Vietnam was all about".

One particularly positive story that Browne talked about was the time he had spent Christmas Eve at a

Vietnamese Ranger camp. The camp was run by American Special forces advisers. This was before we officially entered the war so, almost all U.S. soldiers in the country were supposed to be only advisers. While celebrating the holiday, both South Vietnamese and Americans drank rice liquor and beer together and began firing mortars in the air like fireworks. When the Viet Cong soldiers nearby began shooting as well, the camp was surprised to realize that they were actually firing tracer rounds which leave behind a trail of fire to make it easier to determine where you are shooting. They were not being hostile but, joining in on the festivities from a distance. This story reminds us that both sides were human beings and while they may have hated each other, they both still enjoy the lighter side of humanity. It is easy to forget when reading about death tolls and bombing raids that killed indiscriminately, that all these people were also mothers, fathers, brothers and sisters to someone and while studying this war we need to keep that in mind.

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