

Due date: Sunday, 10 April 2011, 11:55 PM
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Once again, it seems as if I cannot limit my submission to just a few paragraphs. I sincerely hope the length of this is not inappropriate for this type of assignment. I understand you have many of these to read and I certainly don't want to have my submissions be the cause of sighs and eye-rolling. 😊 Thank you, Roxanne

The reasons for and against a war are never as simple as pundits would have you believe and the Vietnam War was no exception. As a young adult I often viewed our world in minimalist and unrealistic terms, believing complex, long-term problems could be solved easily if people just tried. The jokingly overused phrase *why can't everyone just get along?* summarized my feelings about political conflicts but time has a way of illuminating the naiveté of youth. As I've matured I increasingly believe that not every problem will have a solution and not every war can be completely understood or justified. I am taking this class again to learn more about the Vietnam War and delve deeper into the political and social aspects of the war.

Part One...

In two weeks I will have surgery to alleviate carpal tunnel syndrome. In the interest of saving \$400 (the 20% portion uncovered by my insurance) I am opting to be awake. I will experience thirty seconds of what I am told is "extreme" pain while getting a shot. This shot is the nerve blocker that prevents me from feeling pain during the surgery. I am terrified about the shot... **until I think about George Watkins.** No kidding

Courtesy of a pressure-detonated bomb in the Vietnam War, George Watkins lost his eyes and legs. Regarding the time immediately surrounding his injury, he remembers pain and the wait for medical care on the S.S. Sanctuary [sic], a hospital ship. As he relives this memory to Christian Appy, author of the book Patriots, Watkins states he was told he probably wasn't bleeding much because the "force of the explosion will seal the ends of the arteries and veins." I was dumfounded reading that. Is that possible? Could an explosion have such force, severing a leg and exposing bone, and leave a wound that is not spewing blood? I'm not inclined to submit that question to a Google search. Suddenly, my thirty seconds of pain during a shot seems akin to plucking an eyebrow.

I don't doubt for a moment the accuracy of the memories Watkins bears from Vietnam. He was unconscious at times after his horrific injury and parts of

what he does remember are drawn from information relayed to him from doctors and other soldiers. Explaining my belief and acceptance of Watkins's accuracy would be difficult, at best, in a debate. I am basing my opinion solely on my *feelings* – an admittance that feels odd to write in a college-level essay. Where are my verifiable facts? Have I set aside my ability to think critically in favor of a story that makes my heart ache?

What I do have to judge the account's credibility is George Watkins himself, a simple-worded man from whom the reader gets a flickering sense of humor. I'm drawn to him. If I met Watkins on the street, I'd reach out to hug him...if he'd allow it. During the interview with Appy, the grammar Watkins uses suggests a lack of formal education. He speaks simply, but directly. He describes a time that "we was" [sic] destroying everything in a valley. People were rounded up and moved to a camp somewhere else. The livestock were killed, villager's homes were destroyed and the empty valley became a free-fire zone and anything in it was a target. Two days later the villagers are back. [Paraphrased pg. 23] Watkins states "They had to be some good people to withstand all that. They come right back to nothing and start over." "They's some of the most determined people I've ever run into. I don't hate them. [sic]"

There is nothing in his words that suggests to me that he is exaggerating nor does he appear to have a reason to exaggerate his experience. His account was difficult to read and left me feeling pain and sorrow for what he's suffered yet Watkins did give me reason to smile when he referred to the person who caused his extreme life-altering experience. "...I would like to get ahold of that one that set the booby trap [laughs]." At the end of this interview, Appy notes that Watkins shared that he "...says things that don't look good in print." He wanted Appy to "Fancy it up". In recognizing his own shortcomings, George Watkins has bared himself and the sheer simplicity and honesty of his words make his account one of Patriots' most eloquent.

I agree... Probably the most honest in the entire book

Part Two...

From previous readings of Christian Appy's book Patriots, I know there are no shortage of interviews and none that I will find disappointing. Even if I do not agree with something shared with Appy during the interview, I will not be disappointed in the *person* doing the sharing. The courage I imagine it took to be interviewed, the painful memories it may have awakened and now fresh in their mind, commands my respect. I know this.... now. In my first read-through of Patriots, my mind was partially closed and holding preconceived opinions that were, sadly, without basis. One of favorites, Red and Kitty

Over the past year, I've collected the television series That 70's Show. While it was still a network primetime offering I thought it was an amazingly idiotic show and I couldn't fathom why anyone would waste time viewing it. One

afternoon last year, while recovering from an especially grueling history exam I did not do well on, I watched a re-run of the show. By the end, my sides ached from laughing and I happily spent the last of Roger's paycheck on the series. There is an episode in which I used knowledge already gained from my previous Vietnam class. Eric, a 16 year who'd been grounded by his dad, Red, comes into the kitchen dressed in black, head hanging. Red is marching behind him, having just caught Eric sneaking out of his 2nd floor window. Kitty, Eric's mom looks at Red and says "Oh, hell's bells". With this, Eric turns to Red and states, "What now, Ho Chi Minh?"

Ho Chi Minh is not necessarily a person widely remembered with fondness. Time Magazine's Stanley Karnow said this of Minh: "There was no flexibility in Ho's beliefs, no bending of his will. Even as the war increasingly destroyed the country, he remained committed to Vietnam's independence. And millions of Vietnamese fought and died to attain the same goal." What I find disappointing is the realization that when a person commits acts that are labeled atrocities, anything positive they may have done is forgotten...and almost immediately so. Henry Prunier reminds us (I am primarily referring to Americans) of the kind side that Minh did have. Prunier stated that, "It is not an exaggeration to say that Ho's troops loved him like a father. Their respect was obvious." Granted -- followers of Hitler and Mao may have felt the same way about them. Do the horrible acts committed against "humanity" outweigh the fact that these men were loved by *their own* while being hated and hunted? This may be a question with no answer. Winners write the histories, I've been told. 

Is there anything positive to be found in both the U.S. Embassy and the Saigon government allowing villagers literally to starve to death in order to "defeat" the communists? Ngo Vinh Long, a map-maker during the Vietnam War, recalls entering a village called Ka Rom where villagers had been put into a strategic hamlet (a relocation system). The villagers said two hundred people were dead as a result of starvation. [Paraphrased pg. 57] Long says to Appy, "Their hair was crinkled and brown, their skin was dark and flaky, and they smelled horrible." I struggle as I read this to find something good, a point at which I could cling and hold to my *happy* thought. Sadly, there was nothing.

I continue to search for something hopeful and compassionate and carefully read again the interview with Ngo Vinh Long. I completely missed the *something good*. Long refused to move on with his map-making team. They stayed in the strategic hamlet and fed starving people a broth of rice, water and sugar. When the map-making team left, most of the villagers had regained some strength and better health. I hear the words "I'm starving" often from the mouth of my bottomless pit, a.k.a., my teenage son, Matt. I myself have used this phrase. In fact, right now my stomach is growling and

I'm feeling the 'it's past dinner time' grumpiness settle in. The people I'm writing about fully understand what starvation is. Clearly, I do not.

The good in many of these interviews is difficult to find, but it's there even though it may be weighted down by deep sadness and indescribable loss. For me, I want the good within this book to take the form of a belief: education about *our* history holds the answers to prevent humanity from repeating our history. From his wheelchair in front of the Vietnam Wall in 1985, George Watkins summed the War succinctly. Unable to see, he could only feel the cold marble with his hands. "Why did all these people die? The majority were my age. Their lives and their families all messed up. What was gained from it?"

Works Cited

Appy, Christian G. Patriots. New York. Penguin. 2003

<http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,988162-2,00.html#ixzz1J5mYK9DC>

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Always a pleasure to read your work.

1-2

Apr 23, 2011 8:08 PM, Joe Escobar

Always enjoy your thoughtful introductions.

1-3

Apr 23, 2011 8:08 PM, Joe Escobar

Minus one for not initially seeing the brilliance in That 70s Show

3-1

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Yes, perhaps. But what about in Vietnam? Ever think of that?