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War. War brings us a snapshot of life that we like to think existed only in our ancestors. It shows us a darker side of humanity. A person can spend decades studying philosophy, or devote his entire life to science or religion. Man is taught to value human life above all else, to give his life for his friends when needed. Through the scope of war that same scholar is transformed into a primal man that stands gasping for breath, covered in mud and sweat, towering over the corpse of a man he just killed with his bare hands, adrenaline coursing through his veins, thankful to survive. This scene could be from any century in human existence, because war is our legacy. Boys are taught to fight in some form from their earliest interactions. When they become adults, we send them to war. In war, life boils down to its most basic essence: life and death. How can a person make this stark transition from preserver of life to destroyer of it?

The theme that stands out to me in these stories is the high emotional cost that war exacts on its survivors years after they come home. War compromises our most basic human principle, the preservation of human life. Of course this dichotomy of ideals is nothing new to war, for centuries nations have given their soldiers powerful reasons to kill. Without an ideal driving the soldiers, the soldiers will not fight effectively. The difference in the Vietnam war is that, when they got home there was no national recognition of valor. There was a lot of antiwar sentiment by the war's end, and many felt that it was not a war we could claim as a victory. In a time in American history where we were seen as the "Shining city on a hill," an example for all nations to emulate, we found ourselves bogged down in a war that did not have an international commitment and support. We fought on our own. We thought we were still fighting a monstrous global enemy bent on world domination, yet the Vietnam War was fought in small villages against a faceless, often unseen opponent. The disparity between the two realities is hard to reconcile and later in life it seems as if the subjects were looking back on a different person. They had to survive by any means necessary. The benefit of history and of these accounts, is that we see the event after it has happened as a whole and we know the outcomes.

The most basic thing that soldiers are taught in the military is chain of command. It is their commander that gets them through the day and dedicates himself to sending as many of his soldiers home alive

as possible. The strength of this bond and the chain of command is the most important under times of extreme stress. The fact is that if you wanted to survive, you followed orders. Jim Soular, Luu Huy Chao and Larry Heineman learned to follow orders to take part in a war that led to the devastation of countless lives.

Jim Soular was a flight engineer on a Chinook helicopter with the 1st Cavalry Division in Vietnam. Like most Americans, Jim was proud of his country and willing to defend it with his life. Our country was in war and it was his duty to protect it. Jim was a young patriot. He was no stranger to hard work and perseverance and his story began similarly to many of his generation. He joined the airborne cavalry and loved feeling the power of the machines. Like most young men, "...I loved war. I can't deny that. I loved it. I hate it now, but at the time, as a kid, I loved it"(Appy, 157). Jim was taught, as I was, that Americans fight for what we believe in, we fight for what is right. We are taught to fight for those principles at all costs.

Jim's exhilaration for flying was tarnished with experiences of seeing those principles trounced on by his superiors. During operations in which American soldiers relocated the Vietnamese from their homes for the impending free-fire zones, Jim began to realize that the Vietnamese had very strong principles and beliefs themselves. Time and time again the refugees would return to their homes, heedless of warnings, just to be close to the bones of their ancestors. Jim saw first-hand that the Vietnamese were second-class citizens in their own country when a refugee was thrown out of his helicopter from 60 feet up and there was never any investigation or follow-up. Things began to not add up in Jim's mind. The things Jim went there to fight for were not so evident anymore. Like a good soldier though, Jim pressed on and followed orders, with the hope that things would make sense later.

Unfortunately things only got worse for Jim and his best friend was murdered by a fellow soldier. During the trial, Jim was the only one to testify and to his disbelief the man was sentenced to only five years of hard labor. The man on trial before was sentenced to fifteen for moving a helicopter. In Jim's mind it was clear that for all of the military's rhetoric about principles, the potential loss of a helicopter was worth more than his friend's life. To his disbelief, the murdered man's parents were never told the true story of what happened or even that he was murdered. He felt that everything he thought he had known was false, "...the government had absolutely no compunction about lying to her (the man's mother), just as it had lied to us constantly during the war" (161).

The experience of the many North Vietnamese Army soldiers was

similar those of our soldiers. Like our soldiers, the NVA was convinced that they were in the right. They felt like they were fighting for their country and we were the aggressors. They felt it was their patriotic duty to defend their country, just as Jim did. Both sides felt like they were in the right, this is always true in war. Unfortunately, for our purposes, the Vietnamese are less vocal in the book about events that they regret. The general theme however, is the same: they follow orders , but ultimately regret the war itself and its countless deaths. Pilot, Luu Huy Chao is one such NVA soldier.

Luu originally wanted to be an infantryman. However, his country needed pilots so he did his patriotic duty and applied and was accepted. Luu became an ace pilot and personally met Ho Chi Minh on three occasions in appreciation for his valor and skills. Luu followed his orders and rose in the ranks, eventually shooting down six American planes. In air to air combat, every second counts and one second could be the difference between life and death. He was doing his duty to rid his country of foreign invaders and he was willing to kill for his country. Not everything that Luu saw in the war fit with his beliefs.

Luu repeatedly had to speak out against fellow soldiers doing things that he felt was not right. Often pilots would try to shoot down the American pilots after they ejected, Luu ordered them to stop. He said, "He won't attack us again. Let him alone." When a pilot argued that, "Why not? They do it to us?" Luu said, "Well, we're different" (215). Both sides felt they were right and killed each other under orders. Killing bred more killing and eventually both sides didn't need any moral excuse to fight each other.

Larry Heineman summed up how I imagine many soldiers in the Vietnam war felt in just one sentence, "You're driving around with your asshole puckered the whole fucking time" (245). It was a type of warfare that we had never seen before. The soldiers had awesome firepower, amazing technology and dedicated soldiers, however when these factors were combined with guerilla tactics, the casualties were horrendous. Larry points out that as an APC driver, he was sitting on ninety gallons of gasoline and any false move could kill him. All of the technology and innovation poured into that APC, was not enough to save the lives of the men inside against an RPG or landmine.

Although this is less of a combat role than Luu or Jim, Larry did his part in ensuring his friends and fellow soldiers lived. In his case, his fearless driving and willingness to give his life for his friends surely saved many lives. Larry had to fight his desire to preserve his own life, in order to help ensure the deaths of his enemies. This role is

clearly contradictory to what our bodies tell us, so Larry relied on orders and training to get through it. Despite his best efforts, Larry lost a lot of friends and has to live with that fact.

The mentality of Larry to bear down and get it done, is the natural one when faced with life and death. You do what you have to do, you get it done and hope for the best. Unfortunately each of these soldiers had to live with their choices for the rest of their lives. They can be proud of their valor and their ability to follow meticulous orders, but the fact that so many lives were lost weighs heavily on all of their minds.

When Jim Soular thought about the toll that was paid in Vietnam, he said, "'I've always considered myself a good soldier, whatever that means. I did what I was told to do. But everything I'd been raised to believe in was contrary to what I saw in Vietnam. All kinds of questions went through my head and there were no answers... All I have is this deep, deep sense of sorrow that this whole thing happened" (Appy, 161). In the moment, each moment of adversity, he had to rely on authority and courage to guide him. Regardless of the reason, taking life is inherently traumatic. Ideology can only get us so far, at some point the question of whether or not the right to take someone else's life for ideals must be addressed by each individual.

Pilot Luu Huy Chao articulated a very similar feeling of loss with his experience in the war. As Luu pointed out, the men he killed did not suffer alone, "The suffering caused by war is immeasurable. The dead are only a small part of the whole. A dead soldier causes suffering to so many other people...As a fighter pilot I'm not sorry to have shot down American jets, and American pilots shouldn't be sorry if they shot down Vietnamese aircraft. That's what we were supposed to do. Now my only wish is that there be no war" (Appy, 215). Luu followed his orders and followed them well, unfortunately there is so much pain and loss that comes from war.

Larry Heineman expressed an even deeper sorrow about the war, "The war was devastatingly brutal...After living in this wallow, how do you come out and reconnect with your own humanity? Is it possible to love someone knowing that you have done all these things, and are capable of all these things, and have seen all these things... It becomes like a bruise and turns dark. The dark places on my heart are not going away" (Appy, 247). Larry looked back on his experiences almost as if they cost him his humanity. The actions that he did for his country and its ideals went against all of the things that he held dear to his heart.

Regardless of the motivations, war takes us out of our natural state

and forces us to make decisions that go against our most basic tenets. Our ideology transforms such that preservation of life comes second to taking the life of our enemies. On the individual level however, it is clear that war most often boils down to kill or be killed. Although each of the people we have learned about have their own narrative, they all experienced the gambit of potential death. Whether they had to make decisions about who was saved or to save their own lives with deadly force, they have to ultimately take responsibility for those actions. Years later, the excuse of following orders seems to leave a bad taste in their mouths and the men in these stories only wish that the war never happened.

Who knows what fate could have held for these men. These men would have been allowed to pursue their economic, scholarly, or religious dreams, if their nations had not pressed them into service for god and country. Regardless of their uniform, these men share the same ties with humanity. They have wives, kids and parents. All of those who have fought in a war have experienced some level of detachment from these ties as a result of following orders. The solution to reconciling those two sides of mankind are still elusive. We are still carrying on our curious legacy of preserving life on the one hand, while taking it away with another.

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