

Nobody Was Dancing

"Would the Navy Cross winners stand up?"

Three veterans at our First Battalion Ninth Marine reunion stood, as the other 75 veterans and wives applauded. (Our Congressional Medal of Honor winner, Sgt. Walter Singleton, was killed in action.)

"Would the Silver Star winners stand?"

Three more ex-Marines stood to acknowledge the applause.

"Would the Bronze Star winners stand?"

Two stood.

"Would the Purple Heart winners stand?"

There was an audible gasp from the wives and guests at our San Diego Mission Valley Marriott banquet hall where we were celebrating the Marine Corps 219th birthday (1994). Virtually every vet in the hall stood up, then looked around at each other, slightly amazed. Smiles broke out. One of the few who didn't stand was a black ex-rifleman named Floyd who was in a wheelchair, a double amputee.

I looked over at the four young Marines who acted as the color guard for our celebration. Their ages probably ranged from eighteen to twenty-two. What went through their minds? After all, we represented the survivors.

The disc jockey said he wished he'd experienced this kind of camaraderie during his service in the Air Force. He played the song 'We Are Family' by Sister Sledge, but nobody was dancing. Slowly some wives moved onto the floor, dancing with each other. Had the wounds taken such a toll after almost thirty years that none of the vets could dance? Or was everybody just content to sit at the tables and talk?

Every Marine in Vietnam knew about the hard-luck First Battalion Ninth Marines, nicknamed the 'Walking Dead'. One-Nine had the highest casualty rate in the war among Marine units, with 620 killed in action from June 1965 to July 1969. I'll never forget the career NCO writing to his wife, "Honey, this is probably the last time you'll ever hear from me - I've just been transferred to One-Nine".

In a single seven-hour battle on July 2nd, 1967, our battalion ran up against an estimated two NVA regiments just south of the DMZ. We suffered 95 killed, yet the nature of the war was such that the battle was practically unknown to the American public, and was not even dignified by a name - it was simply called 'Two July' by the Marines who were there. In that single day we lost nearly half as many killed as did the Marines six months later at the much better known 77-day Siege of Khe Sanh. (One-Nine was also at Khe Sanh, and some of the survivors of Two July were there also.)

That scene of combat veterans standing to acknowledge their Purple Hearts represented for me the sacrifices Marine and Army infantrymen made in Vietnam. For 27 years I battled my own demons from the war. Now I felt two emotions - being at peace with myself and a tremendous sense of pride.

Unlike World War II, the Vietnam combatant was whisked away by helicopter minutes after being wounded, and in the field hospital minutes after that. Therefore, there were fewer problems with infection, and many shrapnel wounds healed in a relatively short period of time. Then the young grunt was sent back to the field to do it all over again.

Thus the multiple Heart winners standing there, some with as many as four.

Many Vietnam vets believe that World War II vets only grudgingly acknowledge that Vietnam was even much of a war. I know, because I was one who believed this. After all, WWII was the 'Big One'. (For many years Vietnam was called the Vietnam Conflict, not even dignified by the label 'war'.)

As we struggled through our adjustment problems in a generation in which only 10% served in Vietnam, many World War II vets called us whiners and complainers. 'We lost more than 1000 the first day at Tarawa', one ex-Marine said once. 'What the hell are you guys complaining about?' Tarawa, Iwo Jima, Normandy, the Battle of the Bulge - I knew all these battles as a six-year-old by reading the WWII comic books. My father was a Marine bomber pilot in the South Pacific, two of my uncles were Marine infantrymen, another uncle served in the Army.

Whenever a World War II vet in one of the veterans organizations I have joined (my MOPH post has 1 Vietnam vet, my VFW post has 3) asks me why Vietnam vets don't join their ranks, I simply ask them if they can name three battles in the Vietnam War. How about two? One? Now you know why.

Recently I spoke to a university writing class who wanted to profile a Vietnam vet. All the questions were about life before the war, about the reality of the Vietnam movies, and about life since the war. Out of the blue a young coed asked, "What was your most intense experience during the war, something you've thought about since then?"

Out of reflex, I responded with a short anecdote I had recently written about the Two July battle:

'We used up our mortar ammo quickly then moved wounded Marines to the back of the perimeter hoping to get medevac choppers in. The NVA then walked their mortars right through our wounded. I held a wounded Navy corpsman and took the battle dressing off his web gear. He was sliced by shrapnel so badly from head to foot I didn't recognize him, and couldn't figure out where to apply the bandage that would do any good. He began gurgling, I yelled "Breathe, you bastard! Breathe!", then he died. I'll never forget his eyes, pleading for help, but there was nothing I could do.'

Two coeds had tears rolling down their cheeks. People cannot relate to one thousand deaths, or ninety-five, but they can relate to one. After all, to the mother who received the telegram in World War II or Korea, or was visited by uniformed servicemen in the Vietnam War, there was no such thing as 'light losses'. To her, the number of losses in that battle was, and will always be, one - her son or daughter. Now this is the only war story I tell people who have never experienced war.

Earlier this year I marched in my first Memorial Day parade. Campaign ribbons pinned to my VFW cap, the local MOPH commander noticed my Purple Heart and asked me if I'd like to join their organization. They had no Vietnam vets yet, and he wondered why. I didn't say anything at the time. The time I'd spent with the WWII and Korean vets in my VFW post had been interesting. Their battles were history to me, and they showed an interest in what I'd been through.

As we passed by the cheering spectators an older woman yelled, "Thank you!". I realized this was the first time in 27 years anybody had said 'thank you' for what we did in Vietnam. Tears welled up in my eyes. I mentioned this to a WWII vet and he said it was the first time he'd ever heard it in the 50 years since World War II.

During the next three days I experienced almost total recall of events in Vietnam - firefights, conversations, equipment, geographic locations. While at work I jotted everything I could down on a notepad, then entered it into my home computer at night. After three days I had twenty pages of notes. Within the next few weeks I wrote an article about my job in Vietnam, a 60mm mortarman, and it was soon accepted for publication in a national magazine.

To any veterans organizations who are seeking younger members among the Vietnam veterans, I can only say - recognize that the Vietnam War was different, and can't be compared to either WWII or Korea. Some of the largest battles of the war were short, brutal firefights in the jungle, and were barely made known to the American public. Television defined the better known battles. But television crews were never out in the jungle. As the scene of my battalion comrades standing at our reunion to acknowledge our Purple Hearts attests, Vietnam vets payed every bit as high a price in combat as did veterans of every previous conflict this country has ever had. Just acknowledge that, and Vietnam vets will join your organizations.

And to all Vietnam vets let me say - join the veterans organizations and go to your unit's reunions. Although the overall nature of every war was different, you will be amazed how similar your experiences were to those of the WWII and Korean vets once you get to know them. And as citizen soldiers have done since the time of the Revolutionary War, it's well past time to return to our home communities and make our peacetime contributions to society. Joining veterans organizations is one way to do that.

And attending my reunion was, for me, a celebration of survival, as well as a remembrance of comrades who didn't make it back, but who are always in my thoughts.

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