

WAR SKETCHES

James Holbrook

“Every man has reminiscences which he would not tell to everyone but only his friends. He has other matters in his mind which he would not reveal even to his friends, but only to himself and that in secret. But there are things which a man is afraid to tell even to himself, and every decent man has a number of such things stored away in his mind.”

—Fyodor Dostoyevsky, *Notes from Underground*

Hear Our Intentions

*Vietnam Veterans Memorial
Washington, D.C.
November, 1996*

**You sacrificed our lives on an altar of hubris.
Dismantle the altar and scatter its stones.**

Lord, hear our prayer.

**Embrace those in agony who suffer and die.
Comfort their loved ones; heal all the wounded.**

Lord, hear our prayer.

**You are our salvation; grant us peace.
Remember our sacrifice and give us meaning.**

Lord, hear our prayer.

The Meadowlark Syndrome

*Wentzville, Missouri
December, 1959*

A high school friend took me rabbit hunting at his grandfather's farm. I had my father's shotgun and a box of shells. I walked around in the cold for hours but saw no rabbits. At the end of the day, I fired at a squirrel and missed. Then I heard a meadowlark singing. I crept up and killed it with one shot. I left the meadowlark lying in the snow and went home with nothing to show.

Second Thoughts about Joining the Army

*Army Induction Center, Indianapolis
June, 1968*

- Was I so helplessly married I had to slam the door on my own confusion?
- Was I so angry at my father I had to show him I could overcome comfort and fear?
- Was I so duty bound I had to serve America, “right or wrong?”
- Was I so curious to see “the Elephant” and how I would respond?

Going Berserk

*Fort Leonard Wood, Missouri
July, 1968*

“Berserk” refers to “an ancient Scandinavian warrior frenzied in battle and held to be invulnerable.” My training as a soldier included fighting with pugil-sticks (thick sticks heavily padded on each end). Pugil-stick fighters pair off in a dirt ring and slash and smash each other until one is knocked down or driven from the ring. I was a good pugil-stick fighter. I could go berserk on command.

Welcome to Vietnam

*Ton Son Nhat Airport
January, 1969*

One day after leaving California, I walked off an air-conditioned airplane and into a wall of heat and smell in Saigon. Waiting in line to board the airplane to leave Vietnam were hollow-eyed grunts who had survived 365 days in the meat grinder. One of them said, "*Hasta la vista, shitbird.*"

Heroism 101

*West of Fire Base Moore
January, 1969*

I had been in country only a few weeks when, early one evening, I was standing shirtless in a rice paddy washing myself. I heard a nearby “whump,” “whump” and kept standing while other half-naked soldiers yelled “Incoming!” and jumped into the muddy water. One reached up and pulled me down just before two mortars exploded nearby. I realized then why he called me a “stupid sonofabitch” and a “fuckin’ new guy.”

Heroism 102

In the Plain of Reeds
February, 1969

When the first mortar hit, I took cover in a bunker. An officer ordered me to the command tent to radio for fire support. Reluctantly I did what I was told. Five or six more rounds landed nearby. Months later, I received a medal for “heroism in connection with military operations against an armed hostile force in the Republic of Vietnam.”

Body Count

The Plain of Reeds
February, 1969

An infantry officer came into our fire direction tent early one morning and reported that an ambush patrol had surprised a column of enemy the night before. The ambush netted 17 bodies and three weapons. Of the 17 dead, 8 were women and children. There were no friendly casualties, he said.

Heroism 103

*Near the village of My Da
March, 1969*

The latrine was a wooden ammo crate a hundred yards from our firing position. In the middle of the night, dysentery forced me to make my way by flashlight to use it. Alone, I imagined I would be found in the morning, throat slit, trousers at my ankles, a roll of toilet paper on the ground nearby.

Fog of War

The Battle of Thanh Phu
March, 1969

Some grunts from our division walked into a huge ambush and were pinned down by automatic weapons fire. We were too far away to provide artillery support, so we listened on the radio. Smoke from grass fires engulfed the battlefield and no one in the air could see what was happening on the ground. Helicopter gunships firing into the smoke wounded five U.S. soldiers. After nightfall the enemy escaped; no bodies or weapons were found the next morning. Later, an official report said that 203 of the enemy had been killed in the Battle of Thanh Phu.

The Wagon Wheel

Mekong Delta, Vietnam
March, 1969

In the intersection of five canals in the Mekong Delta, seven people in three sampans disappeared under artillery fire. I was expert at directing high explosive projectiles to scream from the sky and burst among the living. Eight thousand meters and 30 seconds away, I plotted their execution on a sheet of plywood. Years later, I still wonder if we have souls. And if those souls survive our bodies. And if those souls can communicate, and embrace, and cry, and forgive.

Shrapnel in the Heart

*Dong Tam Base Camp
June, 1969*

One night our base camp got mortared. As I ran from my barracks to a bunker, a mortar exploded close by. Its blast hit the soldier in front of me and he went down hard. I stepped over him untouched. To this day, I don't know his name or whether he died taking my shrapnel in his heart.

My Vietnam Memorial

*Salt Lake City
April, 1994*

Twenty-five years after I got home, I pulled from a closet shelf the cigar box full of Vietnam stuff I have carried with me since the war. I had the medals and insignia framed. The frame hangs in my office. On my desk is a brass Buddha cast from artillery shell casings. Close by is a small replica of the “thousand-yard stare” statue at the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington, D.C. Missing are the names of millions of Vietnamese, Laotians, and Cambodians who don’t have a memorial.

McNamara Autograph Party

Salt Lake City

May, 1995

Shortly after Robert McNamara's book *In Retrospect: The Tragedy and Lessons of Vietnam* was published, a cartoon appeared in *The Salt Lake Tribune*. It shows a line of soldiers emerging from a dark, ghostly swamp. Each is carrying a copy of McNamara's book up to him to autograph. The first soldier tells McNamara, "Sign it right next to where it says, 'We were wrong, terribly wrong . . .'"

What I Learned from Vietnam

Salt Lake City

May, 1995

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The divorce hurt worse than any war wound I feared.

■

My father never said he was proud I served.

■

I killed people who only wanted me to go home.

■

I did see the Elephant. I brought him home. He is a constant companion.

On Good and Evil

Dong Tam
April, 1997

The 9th Infantry Division base camp was located at Dong Tam, a small town in the Mekong Delta. At Dong Tam then were helicopter gunships called Cobras used to produce fire for lethal purposes. Today at Dong Tam is a snake farm that raises cobras to produce venom for medicinal purposes.

Celebrating Liberation Day

*Ho Chi Minh City
April, 1997*

I was in Ho Chi Minh City on April 30, 1997, the 22nd anniversary of the fall of Saigon. That evening I watched as a huge crowd of young Vietnamese celebrated Liberation Day with a rock concert. After years of war, we had won their hearts and minds without firing a shot.

War and Peace

*Ho Chi Minh City
April, 1997*

When I went back to Vietnam in 1997, I met a waiter in a restaurant who had fought for the other side. When Binh told me that his father, mother, and sister had been killed by Americans, I took off my dog tags and gave them to him. When I said, “I wish your children and their children have long, happy lives—*with no war, forever*”—Binh wrote that in Vietnamese on a napkin and gave it to me.

