

“Adept Kung asked about governing, and the Master said: ‘Plenty of food, plenty of weapons and the trust of the people.’ If you couldn’t have all three, asked Kung, which would you give up first? ‘I’d give up weapons.’ And if you couldn’t have both the others, which would you give up first? ‘I’d give up food,’ replied the Master. ‘There’s always been death. But without trust, the people are lost.’”

Confucius
The Analects

“War is the school of fraternity and the bond of love; it is war that has brought peoples into touch with one another, by mutual aggression and collision, and has been the cause of their knowing and loving one another. Human love knows no purer embrace, or one more fruitful in its consequences, than that between victor and vanquished on the battlefield.”

Miguel de Unamuno
The Tragic Sense of Life

The path, now well worn and compacted by a steady flow of western tourists, leads through a forest of eucalyptus trees in which bomb craters now overgrown but still clearly recognizable flank the route. The heat is at a level of intensity where you feel almost at one with the air around you. I think fleetingly that this may be how it feels to be a fish. Cicadas drill like a billion miniature jackhammers in my ear adding to the sensation of total envelopment.

“Les cigales.” says Quoi, remembering my fledgling French.

It’s easy to picture myself here in ’66 or ’67 as an infantryman in the process of dropping 20 or 30 pounds like so many others reported doing during their 13-month tours. It wouldn’t be hard to do in this humidity, loaded up with equipment and ammunition and having to hump multiple kilometers a day in tough terrain on a military diet.

Under the palm-leaf roof of an open-sided hooch in a clearing, we receive a brief welcoming speech in Vietnamese from a young woman dressed in Viet Cong black pajamas and a grainy black and white film on the history of Cu Chi begins to roll.

My guess is that this is a North Vietnamese or even Chinese production. With tinny, wavering “patriotic” music and a high-pitched female Viet voice speaking badly translated English (it can best be described – stylistically – as “Marxist hysterical”) we are introduced to a number of “American-killer heroes” who fought at Cu Chi and are serially reminded of our own invidiousness. The term “American monsters” comes up a number of times. I surreptitiously check Paul for horns and a snout.

The Vietnamese staff and guides look as if they hope we’ll understand that this is just the Party line. Nothing personal. Meanwhile, I’m starting to get that old traveler’s intuition that says if all the functionaries suddenly disappeared - on all sides – all the tight-assed bureaucrats, party hacks, policy wonks and generals compensating for deep-seated feelings of sexual inadequacy –

the average Nguyen and Smith and Rodriguez might have a shot at happiness and the pursuit of liberty and long life.

You can understand the other side being just as committed to getting the job done, and to each other. You get that they're just as susceptible to that strong undertow of patriotic emotion that you recognize for what it is even as you give yourself over to it. But you also secretly hope – expect – that they too recognize the bullshit put out by their own politicians and that they privately chuckle at it like we would. In a slightly mystical way, the bonds between the people actually doing the *fighting* in a war - the ones who are literally *trying to kill each other* – can be stronger than those they have with their respective higher echelons. One is reminded of the Christmas Truce on the Western Front in 1914 when the British and German troops fraternized between the lines until the higher-ups got very, very nervous.

It is a complicated mixture. You sometimes wonder who has the most in common. It also has something to do with who you are and where you were. And maybe even *when* you were.

Quoi and one of the Cu Chi staff guides lead us down another path to a tunnel entrance. This one has been re-engineered for western physiques (e.g. fat people)...but just barely. The original entrances to these passages were roughly 12 by 18 inches and well camouflaged. The typical 20 year-old American would have a problem getting his thighs through the aperture.

Despite the recent re-engineering, I find myself duck walking through much of the tunnel like a profusely sweating Chuck Berry. If the temperature outside is approaching 100, inside the dirt walls, it's more like 120.

We come into a larger space, a room in which sits a table surrounded by life-sized manikins dressed as guerillas.

“Meeting Room.” says Quoi, an edge of disdain for a not-so-old enemy perceptible in his tone.

For Quoi, they are still the enemy. Time has not brought him a sense of identity with the National Liberation Front or with the old “North”. No Christmas Truces for him.

His father - a doctor - was murdered by the VC in 1964. Because he served with the 173rd Airborne Brigade as a translator for six years, he was a prime candidate for one of the regime's re-education camps after the Communist victory. He hid out in the jungle for five years instead. Today, it's not that easy for him to get work but his old connection with Americans is beginning to be helpful. As we will find out, Nguyen Van Quoi will not be our only guide with a story.

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Back during the war with the French there were already 48 kilometers of tunnels here.

They'd all been dug with hand tools. No bulldozers. No backhoes.

The Viet Cong started digging again in 1960 and, by 1965 when the Americans began to

arrive in force, there were 150 kilometers more. Over time, the separate sections were turned into a more integrated underground network. It gave the guerillas an edge and it had the added power of the connection with the traditional Viet respect for the earth. It reminds you of the line from an unidentified Marine about the Japanese positions on Iwo Jima: “The Japs weren’t *on* Iwo; they were *in* it.

It is also interesting to watch two very different metaphors at work.

For the Vietnamese, the tunnels connected the struggle against the outsiders – French and American both – to the very earth that stood so high in the traditional Vietnamese value system. The Viets were connected to the land – literally – in a way that Americans were not wired to understand. For Americans, land is an asset. It’s something you own. It might be something you rent. But it’s a thing. For the Vietnamese peasant, the land was part of what and who you *were*.

On the other hand, the metaphor of the tunnel was a particularly persistent and unfortunate one for the official U.S. posture regarding the war.

It was on December 12, 1962 that John F. Kennedy first uttered the line about seeing “light at the end of the tunnel” in relation to the counter-insurgency effort then underway with increased American support and commitment. The line was used over and over again by different spokesmen as the years peeled away. But the light never appeared.

As I emerge from underground, the glare of the Indochina sun triggers the comparison.

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The Cu Chi district is separated by the Saigon River from Ben Cat district and the so-called “Iron Triangle” which comprises the rough polygon bordered by the axes Ben Cat – Ben Suc and the confluence of the Saigon and Thi Tinh Rivers. The water table here is low – 12 meters down, sometimes deeper. And the ground is a mixture of clay and the red laterite soil you see so much of in Vietnam. In the dry season – like now – it’s hard as brick. In the wet season, it is able to hold its shape.

It’s perfect terrain for tunneling.

When the tunnels were in business, they were darker, smaller and filled with turns and trap doors and booby traps not to mention mosquitoes, centipedes, scorpions, occasional snakes and a chigger-like creature that drove the guerillas nuts. (We often tend to gloss over the daily irritations of our enemies). The Viet Cong used them with tenacity and with imagination.

The record for ingenuity apparently belongs to whatever VC group managed to hide a full-scale M-48 tank six feet under! The tank had been stolen in 1966. When a U.S. patrol found it in 1969, it’s batteries, lights and radio were all still in working order. Other items found over time in the tunnels: 105MM howitzers, a 1,500 pound printing press, stacks of gold bars and multiple weapons caches and factories.

Once we realized what we were dealing with in the Cu Chi area, we came up with a typical

American solution.

We called them the Tunnel Rats.

Originally an offshoot of the Intelligence and Reconnaissance section of the 1st Engineer Battalion of the First Infantry Division, the Tunnel Rats were specifically selected and trained GIs who had the guts to enter these passages with a pistol and a flashlight and the size to squeeze their way through openings designed for the smaller Viet frame. It was dangerous and dirty work... and scary. It involved one of those most basic of human fears: the darkness of the grave with the accompanying sense that the walls around you are threatening to produce a *real* grave any minute. This was a compounding of both logical and irrational fears, a true witch's brew. The men who did it deserve eternal respect. The men who did it well, awe.

But what ultimately destroyed the effectiveness of the tunnels in the end was not the amazing heroism of the tunnel rats but the combination of B-52 strikes, defoliation and depopulation of the region coupled with the virtual destruction of the Viet Cong as a fighting force in the 1968 Tet Offensive.

Less than half the Vietnamese who fought here survived.

One thought that takes shape here and builds the more you reflect upon it is how tenacious these people were in the face of our military technology. They had beaten the French, true. But we were something else. We had B-52's, napalm, tanks, helicopters...and lots of money to spend.

It took guts to take us on. And it took more guts to hang in there as the firepower disparity became increasingly obvious. Like a boxer who realizes he's in with a puncher he's not capable of hurting resolving to endure the punishment and box as well as possible rather than quit, our old enemy did things like dig these tunnels.

If you're honest with yourself, you can't help but respect both what they were able to accomplish and what they had to go through in the process. This, of course, requires that you put yourself in their place and try to imagine what squaring off against a 20th century superpower must have been like for an agrarian society just emerging from colonial subjugation. It may have been a "brushfire" war for America...but it was *total* war for this society.

America has not really known anything like this since our own Civil War. But, even in that struggle, despite the well-chronicled depredations of Generals Sherman and Sheridan, the carnage was not really comparable.

In the U.S. Civil War, 620,000 people were killed, virtually all of them formal combatants in blue and gray. In large swaths of the country, the war was largely invisible to they eye, unless you happened to be monitoring the frequent departures of young men for the army and the somewhat lesser frequency of their returns. The total American population then stood around 31 million, so the deaths incurred in our bloodiest war represented an approximate 2% of the nation.

By contrast, Vietnam went through the meat grinder.

Vietnam's population from 1963 to 1975 hovered around 38 million people north and

south. Estimates of death vary but range between 3 and 5 million people, 80% of them *civilians*. That's at least an 8% casualty rate and may have reached as high as 14%. Translated to the American population of the same time, it would have produced American war deaths of as many as *31 million people!* And the added impacts of the B-52s, napalm, Agent Orange and free-fire zones on the countryside put the 19th century devastations of Richmond, Columbia and the Shenandoah Valley in the shade.

Our Civil war is now 138 years in the past, and yet, is still with us in many ways. All you have to do is think back to the '60s and remember the level of tension between north and south during the Civil Rights struggle to get a feel for its cultural persistence. For the Vietnamese, the 30 year war for control of their own landscape is barely three decades removed. But an American does not feel a seething resentment percolating just below the surface here. It's quite the contrary. They - particularly the young people - actually seem to like us.

Relations in the aftermath of a war can be somewhat counter-intuitive. A new bond can sometimes appear between the former enemies, a connection that probably emerges from the consciousness of the mutual endurance of suffering. It doesn't always happen. But it can. It just has a tendency to require some distance. In Vietnam, it is helped by two key factors. First, the proportion of the population under the age of 35 - as noted above - is 45 %. These young people have no direct memories of the war. The trauma of those years is second-hand to them. Second, English has now replaced French as the second language taught in Vietnamese schools. Once you know a language, it is natural to want to practice it. The underlying physics of this situation produces a sort of attraction, a gravitational field between the two former enemies. In its own way - to quote Unamuno - there may be "no purer embrace".

We drive a short distance to the Ben Duoc War Memorial.

The building is actually quite beautiful, designed as a sort of pagoda with open-air loggias on all four sides.

There are at least six busloads of some kind of military cadets touring the place and, as they pass us in groups of two and three, they are quick to make eye contact and smile. Some say "Hello."

We walk around the open air corridor that wraps the central temple-like structure. It is well designed to channel the muggy air into something resembling a "breeze". At least the stingy movement of the air begins to evaporate some of the sweat and we decide to take a seat along the outer wall of the promenade and enjoy it while we can.

I'm approached by a young man in civilian clothes who silently emerges from the mass of uniformed cadets, smiling and nodding politely at me. It turns out that he wants the opportunity to practice his English and to make contact with a visiting American.

"Where are you from?" he asks deliberately with an uncertain smile on his face. He looks about 16 but maybe he's a few years older than that.

"California."

His eyes widen as if I'd replied "Oz."

“California.” He thinks for a minute and then, smiling, asks: “North? Or South?”

I reflect briefly on the cultural disparities between northern and southern California and wonder fleetingly where our own DMZ might be located.

“Southern California. Almost to Mexico.”

“I am studying English since...thirteen.”

I assume he means since he was thirteen years old. Time to try my Vietnamese.

“*Anh noi tieng angh kha lam.*”

I tell him he speaks English very well. His eyes widen in shock.

“You speak Vietnamese?”

“*Mot it.*” I tell him. Very little.

“I am at University now...in Saigon.” He says. “I study Banking and Finance.”

“Very good” I say, thinking that some day he’ll be a trader at a hot PC as Vietnam rockets – belatedly – into the global economy.

“My country is Dalat.” He continues. My parents’ country is Hue.”

“I hear Dalat is beautiful.”

“Yes. Very beautiful.”

“Someday” he says, hesitating as if reluctant to expose his naivete, “I want to come to California. But...I have no money.”

“You will.” I tell him. “Keep studying banking and you will.”

His girlfriend and several other friends – perhaps too shy to have joined us before – now come and sit to his left and peer around him at me with tentative smiles.

“Hello. How are you?” says one of the young women.

“*Toi khoe lam.*” I say and she laughs into her hand.

I begin to rise, thinking it’s time to rejoin Paul and Quoi who’ve been watching this for the last few minutes but are clearly anxious to get going. One of the girls hands me a long-stemmed flower with a large red blossom. I don’t know what kind it is but it is beautiful.

We walk to our right down the long breezeway, the seats on both sides of us filled with

laughing, kibitzing cadets. Up ahead on my left, almost at the end of the long bench against the inside wall of the memorial, I see a small group of young girls, perhaps in their early teens. As I pass, I hand the flower to a lovely young thing of about 14 and the surrounding military cadets begin to applaud and yell good-naturedly. She bows to me while seated and blushes deeply. I give a thumbs-up to the grinning cadets and we take our leave.

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Across the river we can see some of what was once the Iron Triangle and the Ho Bo Woods. Today, the area looks peaceful and bucolic. Wisps of smoke drift up from beyond a distant tree line but we know it is benign. To move into the same landscape thirty-five years ago would have required – as they used to advise us at Fort Benning’s Infantry School – “a scheme of maneuver and a plan for fire support”.

I stand on the patio of the memorial and lose myself in thought looking across the river.

The last time I can remember having the same feeling was sitting in the Peace Park that runs along the river in Hiroshima, not far from the ruin of the old Finance Ministry with its skeletal roof supports still showing like the rib cage of a beached and long dead whale. I’d gone there in late 1988 on a consulting assignment for a Japanese company and had taken advantage of a few free hours to see some of the town.

The thing I can remember thinking, sitting there on a bench in the middle of a fairly lush and well-planted park that was once literally ground zero was just how resilient the earth actually is. Only 43 years earlier, everything around me for some distance had been vaporized, leaving only a bad imitation of a poorly kept parking lot. Today it was in full summer bloom. In the distance, I could see the stadium where the Hiroshima Carp played some pretty good baseball. No one on the street seemed to harbor any resentment toward an American, even at the Museum that featured the results of our bombs.

Once exposed to this kind of experience, you find your mind reaching – unsuccessfully – for an explanation of our inability to avoid the miscalculations and misperceptions that produce warfare. The earth suffers and then repairs itself. People forgive and, given enough time, tend to forget. But the pattern repeats itself...over and over again.

Now, looking across at what was once a war zone, I have the same feeling. Someone out there is farming that land, living with his family, pursuing the same daily routine as his ancestors have for generation upon generation. No one – at least for now - is likely to show up to recruit his sons or to strafe him in his fields. Life goes on. The earth recovers. Hopefully, it will stay like this.

But even as you reflect upon the earth’s powers of recovery, you still find yourself wondering what it was about this particular chunk of the planet that was so compelling that two major western nations had to burn up so much in human life and treasure over it.

In the grand scale of world affairs, what clocks would have stopped if we’d all just left it alone for the past 200 years and let the Vietnamese follow their own inclinations? Would the Soviet Union have gone to seed at a different pace? Unlikely. Would China be very different today? Questionable. Other than diminished traces of residual guilt, what impacts on the U.S. and France? Just the empty rooms, bad memories and a list of engraved names on a long black

wall.

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On the road back to Saigon, we pass through Bien Hoa and Long Binh, both former US base areas.

Bien Hoa was where my old college roommate, Joe Pascale, was stationed in '68 and '69. In those days there was a big U.S. air base in Bien Hoa and it was one of the main staging areas for the deployment of Agent Orange since War Zone C was one of the prime target areas for the defoliant. Joe worked in Military Intelligence there.

Today, he's one of the thousands ex-GI's who served in Vietnam suffering from Multiple Myeloma, a form of cancer that attacks the blood and the immune system. It's cause is unknown but the incidence of the disease among veterans of the war is suggestive.

The name "Agent Orange" came from the orange band that was on the drums in which the chemical defoliant was usually stored. (There were also Agents "Blue", "Purple", "Green", etc.) The product in question was essentially a 50/50 mix of two chemicals with a kerosene or diesel fuel base. The unfortunate part was that – as an unintended by-product of the manufacturing process itself – Agent Orange was subject to contamination with dioxin, which is a carcinogen. It was manufactured by a number of companies – including Dow (those wonderful folks who brought us napalm), Monsanto, Diamond Shamrock, Uniroyal and others. During the mid- '60s, a Newark, New Jersey manufacturer of the defoliant, the Diamond Alkali Company, had a number of employees go down with skin disease. The warning was not taken very seriously. In fairness, it should be noted that, up until the middle of the 1960's, the core ingredients of the defoliant – 2,4-diphenoxycetic acid and 2,4,5-triphenoxycetic acid - were relatively common home and garden herbicides and considered essentially safe. By the end of the decade though, the Government knew Agent Orange was a serious problem and by 1971 its use had been prohibited.

Meanwhile, the American military not only found regular use for Agent Orange, but persisted in spraying it at up to 25 times the manufacturer's prescribed rate. In the Bien Hoa area, where Joe served most of his tour, planes regularly took off from the air base to spray War Zone D and the Iron Triangle. A pernicious combination of "mist drift" and periodic spills (including a big one in Bien Hoa) ensured that the foliage was not the only target. As it turned out, there were some loose ends. It was later discovered that U.S. soldiers as far as *six miles* from a mission could be directly exposed without knowing it. Nearby Vietnamese farmers and their crops were also likely to be negatively impacted. Colonel John Moran, chief of the Chemical Operations Division of MACV, wrote in October, 1968 that "the effect of defoliation on the enemy, in itself, is of little military value...the herbicide program carries with it the potential for causing serious adverse impacts in the economic, social and psychological fields". Think about it. There were negligible military benefits. There was also probably a very good chance of further alienation of the peasant farmers in the local countryside...even before the longer-term effects of the defoliant would become clear. Not to mention the self-inflicted wounds on our side.

Before we were done, the U.S. had sprayed an approximate total of 12 million gallons of Agent Orange over the Vietnamese countryside.

The Bien Hoa spill, which took place in 1970, most likely worked its way into the local water supply and thence into the fish much of the population uses as a staple. Even today – over three decades later - Viets from the vicinity still show elevated blood dioxin levels. The strength of the readings suggests that the area's contamination remains significant.

Both governments to this day have been reluctant to fully face the problem. For the Americans, it would mean opening itself up to massive potential litigation. A report by the House Government Operations Committee, released on August 9, 1990, charged that Reagan Administration officials “controlled and obstructed” a federal Agent Orange study in 1987 because of the fear of potential liability exposure. For the Viets, full admission of the size of the problem might create a decline in their emerging tourism industry and its agricultural exports. Finally, in the spring of 2002, the two nations began the process of working toward a joint amelioration of the problem.

“It takes time to develop a conscience”. Pham Ngoc Tien, a public health official from Thai Binh province in the Red River Delta in the old North Vietnam.

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As noted previously, Paul and I were members of a generation that believed most of what we were told. It just never entered into our calculus that the people we were trained to obey might someday screw us.

I've often told friends that my time in Catholic Grammar and High Schools was the perfect preparation for the military. It was all downhill after Sister Mary Naomi in sixth grade. I never met a drill sergeant or Tactical Officer that put more fear into their troops than this New York-raised Dominican nun did. All the acts I saw as a soldier I'd seen before, clothed in different terminology, aimed at different goals. But the routine was the same in essence. And its daily engine was *fear*.

But embedded in the fear was another element.

Trust.

No matter what they might do to create discomfort – or worse – we knew our tormentors ultimately meant us well. And when we “graduated” from the ranks of that little schoolyard army in which the NCOs were nuns into the one with the uniforms that were green instead of blue, we transferred that same trust to the men in the Smokey the Bear hats.

Today I believe the common tendency is to see government screw-ups as the product of some sinister conspiracy, a specifically malicious intent on the part of a small group of misguided people at the center of things. We Americans are particularly prone to conspiracy theories in everything from oil crises (“there are tankers waiting just off shore, full of oil”) to assassinations (“Lee Harvey Oswald was just a patsy for the *real* killers”). But I think the culprit is much more likely to be the bureaucratic oversight, the miscue, the unintended consequence, the dropped fly ball between outfielders. In time of war, this tends to get people killed.

But the deaths caused by mistake or myopia are just as final as the ones caused on purpose.

And there is also a funny sort of paradox inherent in military service itself.

On one side is the enormous pull of *belonging*. In this case, belonging – say – to an elite unit of highly trained soldiers within which burns a carefully nurtured sense of both regimental pride and an undying commitment to each other. (You can still sneak up behind me and yell “Airborne!” and watch me leap out of my chair even after 35 years). Anyone who’s been exposed to it will probably admit its power. This is the primal force that is at the root of military unit cohesion and individual courage under fire. Arthur Koestler, in his 1967 book *The Ghost In The Machine*, suggested that man has made a hash of his history – not because of selfishness or greed or some fundamental primate aggressiveness he cannot stifle – but precisely because of *his desire to belong*.... coupled with an extremely strong affinity for *self-delusion* which is essentially religious in nature even if garbed – as it often is – in the clothing of ideology or nationalism or race.

On the other side is the crude reality that squats at the core of combat in any war. Bad things happen. Young men – and now women – are exposed to things they could happily spend several lifetimes giving a miss. Lives are ended. Others are blighted. Somehow, a notion seemed to have been spawned during the first Gulf War that a conflict can be managed “cleanly” now that U.S. technology has reached its current stage of perfection. Perhaps by now, the TV images of the current war in Iraq have changed that faulty perception. General Sherman was right: “War is hell. It is cruelty. You cannot refine it.”

The horrors of war are the direct by-product of the equation that combines these two factors with an inherently volatile situation thick with modern firepower. The paradox part is that the very human tendencies that make us susceptible to parades, flags and orders to “Fix bayonets!” are the same ones that – under better circumstances – can qualify us for canonization.

My ultimate contention is this: we *owe* the nation our service. No question. There is too long and honored a tradition of commitment and sacrifice to deny its implications. Many will avoid it. Many will deny its validity. But I believe now – as I did then – that when the country calls, you go.

However, there is a reciprocal duty on the government’s part.

Young men – and now, women – should not be committed to combat without the full support and commitment of the government they serve. Their lives are too precious to be wasted. They will be willing to serve.... and willing to fight....and, as they’ve shown so many times, willing to die. They are highly susceptible to the nation’s call. The nation must recognize this – and appreciate it – and back them up to the extent of its capabilities. And, even more than giving its full support, the government must never allow their *trust* to be shaken. And that means trying its damndest to avoid picking the wrong fights.

In a very real way, that trust is the more fragile and precious of these two treasures. For upon it is built the continuing tradition of service that is the ultimate protection of the nation. And once that trust is breached, the country is at risk. In the words of Confucius: “...without trust, the people are lost.”