

COMMENTARY BY ALEX VERNON

Your War is My War Too

We lunch at two long tables, a roof over our heads, a slab concrete floor beneath our feet, and no walls, where we have gathered, my college students and me, our hosts, and a number of local officials and villagers, to celebrate the end of our two-week visit. There is much toasting with rice wine: “*Một, hai, ba, YO!*” The kitchen stands nearby, a dirt-floor hooch of fronds and leaves woven onto melaleuca supports with an open fire outside. For the last three days, we had split into teams to join four local families in their sustaining labors, which is to say in their lives. Among other tasks my team caught mollusks to feed the fish penned in the river, steps from the doorless front door; built up the earthworks between rice paddies; helped cook; replenished the firewood stores; resurrected a cow stall; started a compost site; and created a vegetable garden from scratch, fence and all.

“*Một, hai, ba, YO!*” The local communist party chief, a round and ruddy man, has taken a place at the far end of the table. Across from me sits the head of the local veterans’ association. He and I talk through a Vietnamese student. He finds me handsome, his openness in kind with nearly all Vietnamese I’ve met. I tell him he looks quite young for a veteran.

“He says he’s fifty.”

This can’t be right. I am forty, a veteran of the first U.S. war in the Persian Gulf. I have plenty of friends on either side of fifty, peers who belong to my generation. But the Vietnam War doesn’t. It belongs to the generation or two preceding ours. It belongs to us only by heritage. I spent over seven years in the U.S. Army beginning in the mid nineteen-eighties, those initial years imaginatively rent between the

apocalyptically feared war against the Soviet bloc communists on one side and the traumatically lost guerilla war against the Vietnamese communists on the other. And I've dedicated the past ten to becoming a scholar of American war literature, a field preoccupied by the war in Vietnam—the war of my old colonels, generals, and senior non-commissioned officers, men now in their seventies and eighties.

The man across from me entered the army at fourteen in 1971 and served four years. It's January 2008. The math works.

There is much toasting with rice win. In a few days I am back home, in Little Rock, but the shock of that moment—*He says he's fifty*—prickles me for months. I tell everyone. Now I'm telling you.

I have rarely if ever felt more useless in my adult life than at the end of those work days, when the farmer, a man roughly my age but looking considerably older, solicited my advice for improving the management of his household economy. A different mix of agriculture, livestock, fishing, and his own outsourced labor? Improved methods for any of his industries?

What could Nguyễn Văn Phúc do to make his family's life better?

Beside his house—a three-room version of that other kitchen—how had they gotten that bed and dresser way out here, well in the middle of the Mekong Delta, across the many waterways?—my students and I were sitting or standing, and the Vietnamese squatting or standing, as we shared fruit and tea. The farmer's two young sons were there, seven and eleven, neither of them appreciably larger than my five-year-old daughter a few hours from dawn half the world away. The boys hadn't stopped smiling for three days.

I had no answers. Raised in a suburb, trained first as a company grade armor officer and eventually as an English professor, I had nothing for them. Useless: utterly, uttermore. And angry at whatever led him to expect an answer from me. I couldn't even offer tangible guidance on how he might see his sons one day headed for college in America.

We had come to Vietnam to gain perspective on the country's education system. Those three days with the families provided crucial understanding about the conditions in which education struggles to function. Like all impoverished rural Vietnamese children, Phúc's sons faced the near-impossibility of completing high school, much less achieving a spot at the regional university in Cần Thơ. Only one in a hundred make it. The free primary-school public education levies a local fee equal to a full quarter of the family's annual income. The community's children lack not only books, paper, and classroom materials, but that most indispensable

of resources: educated (literate) elders. As they progress to the upper schools, they and a parent must walk greater and greater distances—ten kilometers one way is not uncommon—and such a family can ill-afford lost labor time even as the children need school in order to someday move away. The area simply can't support them and their future families.

My students and I had nothing for them, nothing except the joy of this rare encounter. When we weren't working in the sun or the kitchen, breaking for lunch, resting in the shade, or playing with the boys, we helped them with their English. Those precious minutes were barely a gesture. Yet as the gesture passed into the boys' memories, that memory mutated into possibility. Into the thrill of being able, someday, to talk with others like ourselves. The alchemy happened in plain sight.

The next day, on parting after the grand lunch, the younger brother gave me a tiny blue and purple castle made of miniature Lego-like plastic blocks. Today that castle overlooks my writing desk from its perch on the highest bookshelf, the token of tokens from the boys who called me "Teacher."

The trip had been two years in the making. Everyone I consulted steered us away from the war as the topic of our student trip. Over half the population of Vietnam was born after the war, and many of them were raised after the *Đổi mới* reforms and during the heady years of normalized relations with the United States. The war was ancient history to them. The country lives for the future. The people are determined to pull themselves, individual by individual, into a better life. They don't look back.

We went to study the education system's response to this seismic shifting, arriving around the one-year anniversary of Vietnam's admission into the World Trade Organization. But we went because of the war. Of course we did. In the United States, Vietnam piques us because the war draws us.

Travelers to Vietnam, whatever their purpose, can't escape the war. Despite itself the nation still tosses in the spewing part of the war's wake. One would perhaps need some study to know how much Vietnamese society has been organized and reorganized (and reorganized) following the war. No visitor, however, can miss the Soviet-style war monuments standing tall, broad-shouldered, and square-jawed, in parks and at intersections in cities and a few hundred meters off the major roads into the countryside. No visitor waiting for a ferry can miss the amputees and the otherwise mangled reduced to begging, or those propelling themselves on makeshift skateboards down the walkways of Ho Chi Minh City. Nobody can miss the tourist sites and souvenir stands carrying wares like the wooden Abrams

tanks, Stealth bombers, and nuclear-powered aircraft carriers carved to a sheen and too large for a coffee table, the generic tanks and planes crafted of flattened Coca-Cola cans, and the ersatz lost-and-found G.I. lighters likely fashioned a blocks away only days earlier sporting unit insignias and engravings like this peach: “KILLING FOR PEACE IS LIKE FUCKING FOR VIRGINITY.” I’ve heard that elsewhere in former Indochina one can find tourist industry entrepreneurs who offer water buffalos as targets for AKs and RPGs.

They know why we are here.

I’ve twice now seen the photographs of Vietnamese victims of napalm and other American cruelties that form the chief exhibit of the War Remnants Museum, a space that presents what one of my Vietnamese student guides called “the Truth about the war” even as she later, in a café, declined to discuss the war at all. Three times I’ve hunch-scuttled through the famously widened-for-western-tourists Cu Chi tunnels, though I declined paying to shoot an AK-47. And I’ve heard stories. One man, now a prominent environmental scientist, bused tables as a boy during the war. G.I.’s terrified him, with all that deadly gear hanging off their immense frames, until one night when he stumbled upon an American soldier in a back room, gear off, curled up, and sobbing. Men in their twenties and thirties have told me about the years—the *years*—their fathers spent in postwar reeducation camps. One of my southern Vietnamese friends and his family could not emigrate because his grandfather, a military officer, had destroyed the family papers to protect his beloveds from the North Vietnamese victors. Because the communist government does not bestow veteran benefits on its former enemy combatants, the lives of widows of ARVN soldiers and veterans are often bleak. With no money from the state and zero chance of remarriage, these women have no prospects for their provision.

The Vietnamese do in fact look back, even if the youth, especially the young women, are reticent. I wonder what they are taught or told about the war. I don’t wonder about the causes for their reluctance, as they are hardly equipped otherwise. Not when a historian asked to lecture on Vietnamese history delivers an avuncular homage to the Vietnamese soul, and refuses to answer mildly controversial questions about political dissent or the dispute with China over ownership of several islands; not when learning is still so rote that in casual conversation among new international friends Vietnamese youth sometimes cannot answer a question without resorting to a classroom script, squinching their eyes or touching fingers to temple to activate their recall; and not when teachers themselves obey a script,

and often leave the room during an exam so students can ensure they collectively succeed.

We found the generations that lived through the war, however, not at all shy. They spoke at ease. It perhaps helped in loosening their tongues that we did not come to study the war and make objects of them and their memories, but that we came in the spirit of friendly curiosity, letting conversations go where they would.

In the spring of 2001, many of the officers from my Persian Gulf War battalion assembled outside our old coastal Georgia army post to recognize the tenth anniversary of our war. A few weeks later I defended my dissertation on American war literature, ending with several chapters on the work of one of the Vietnam War's chief American veteran-writers. Five months after that, the Twin Towers fell.

My first student trip landed in Ho Chi Minh City on New Year's Eve, 2008, five years into the second U.S. war with Iraq. At first the new war's mad armored dash north through the desert looked a lot like my war felt, a similarity re-experienced when published and filmed narrative treatments began to appear. Indeed had the United States pressed on to Baghdad in 1991, my division, the closest mechanized division to Iraq's capital, would have spearheaded the assault, and in 2003, my old division (albeit renumbered) actually spearheaded the assault. Sadly, it did not take long for the new war to change course and for the Vietnam conflict to replace the Gulf war as the seeming historical correlative.

All wars are alike; no two wars are alike. Your war is my war too.

A friend and fellow writer has suggested that I write a war novel about the ongoing wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. There has yet to be such a book with real possibility for readers of later generations. I love the practice and craft of making books, and I have some experience at it, if none writing fiction. This would be my chance. I could bridge the insider's knowledge with the outsider's perspective and narrative desires. Embedded and disembedded all at once. I know the terrain and the weather, and the impression of the people one gets while speeding by on a tank. I know the army—the dialogue, the dynamics across and among the ranks, and much of the equipment. I'm in the unique position, so my friend contended, of combining deep familiarity with decided unfamiliarity such that I would not suffer from an inability to detach, from an inability to relinquish niggling self-witnessing to bring creativity to bear. It's the extremely rare veteran who can write

a great, creative war novel without the benefit of several years of emotional distance on the experience.

Not only have I not written or started writing that book, but other potential projects compel me instead. A friend's father commanded a cavalry unit in Vietnam, and has already collected rich material from both sides of one particular battle. I would love to write that story. I would love to walk the battlefield, old maps and a notebook in my hands, camera dangling on my hip, participants at my side. The war in Vietnam grips me as the current wars of Operation Enduring Freedom do not—not yet, at least.

This reaction I don't fully comprehend. Over the last eight years I have, after all, ranted and cried aplenty. Yet for all that turmoil, these wars have resisted my professional engagement. Perhaps it's a case of emotional distancing, if the current wars do indeed live too close to home. Studying war literature has proven a wonderfully salutary tool for indirect immersion in my own war experiences. Perhaps I'm not ready for these wars' more direct revisiting, and like today's newest veterans, I need a few years. In truth I chose in the peaceable late 1990s to write a dissertation on American war literature because I saw the generation of scholars raised on Vietnam preparing to retire, because I saw an opportunity; with a career predicated on the backward gaze, I have not readily shifted focus to an emergent literature.

Or is it that real engagement would demand the sort of political action I haven't been prepared to do?—as if one could do, could have done, anything to make a difference. Maybe these wars bore me as they bore a lot of us: Nearly a decade now (!), old news, and everyone's an expert. Maybe I am already overwhelmed with the literary material of the past wars. A scholar can only absorb so much. It's also the case that the very reality and presence of today's wars render them abstractions, whereas the abstract historicity of Vietnam, Korea, the world wars, the Spanish Civil War, and so on, render them real. They have body and texture for being relegated to documents. They live by nature of being dead; they can be contained and processed by head and heart. I deployed to the Persian Gulf War only fifteen years after the fall of Saigon—barely a wink's length of time—and the *twentieth* anniversary of that deployment is scant months away. My war belongs, with Vietnam, to history.

While I also sometimes suspect that I have avoided the current wars because they remind me of the paltry nature of my own, counterexamples come to my relief. I lived on an Abrams tank—I mean I slept on the behemoth, ate dehydrated food on it, read and wrote letters on it, and bathed beside it, all with three other men, and in a tank company with sixty other men, in the middle of desert nowhere, for eight

months. Then, for four furious days, I maneuvered and fought on it. Here's how one memoir describes the author's combat-free Iraq war service fifteen years later:

I put away the food in the OR break room cupboards; they're filled with supplies sent to us from dozens of soldier support groups across the U.S. I eat better in Iraq than I do at home. These people are sending us everything they have and most of us don't deserve. They aren't sending provisions to the heroes we think we are. It is going to [those of us doing the job] and others who can be criminals; people doing drugs, committing crimes, molesters, adulterers, people doing anything they can to only help themselves.

Granting the extremity and singularity of this soldier's perspective, the remoteness it suggests from my experiences remains rather vast.

For all that, as the ongoing wars in Iraq and Afghanistan wind down, as the memoirs move from the Current Events shelf to other bookstore shelves and the movies and novels begin to feel like historic fictions, they grow more comfortable. The current war has and has not always been my war, and it appears to be becoming my war anew.

And in a very profound way Vietnam is my war. On the day I was born, eighty-five U.S. military personnel, and god knows how many Vietnamese soldiers and civilians, lost their lives. Within a year the Tet offensive and My Lai would come to pass. From Vietnam developed the army that forged my military consciousness. Though I didn't know it, I grew up—I came to be—in a nation still tossing in the spewing part of the war's wake.

On my second student trip, eighteen months later, we spent our brief time constructing small homes for two families in a hamlet outside Rach Gia in Vietnam's southwest corner. Unlike the first trip, this one did not provide these mostly liberal youth a glimpse of the oppressive communist state which the United States fought for a decade to prevent (even if the fight itself drove the state toward a more entrenched ideology and thus a temperament capable of so many condemnable behaviors). Instead I brought home scenes to rival received ones. Rather than U.S. Marines pushing a flagpole overhead on a conquered wasteland of an island, Vietnamese and Americans pushing a beam overhead for a new home. Rather than automatic weapons and explosives tearing water buffalos to pieces, boys riding and swimming alongside water buffalos upriver during a wet season

downpour. Rather than a naked young girl and crying and fleeing down the road, a naked little girl laughing and running up a path chasing squeaking yellow chicks.

I've begun planning the next trip. On this one, I hope to create discussion space for American and Vietnamese students and educators with literature from both countries available in translation. In this way the English professor might actually prove useful. The army trained its junior officers to strive to create opportunities, shape the battle, and fight the fight on the scale one is assigned, and that's exactly what I hope to do now. A platoon, a company commander once told me, can win a battle, and a battle can turn a war. In twenty or thirty years other college or university cohorts, from the next generation, will make their way from the States to Iraq or Afghanistan, and I salute them: Your war is my war, too.



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