

**Veteran's Day Service
Kearsarge Unitarian
Universalist Fellowship**



*"Joe, yestiddy ya saved my life an' I swore I'd pay ya back.
Here's my last pair of dry socks."*

**Andover, New Hampshire
Sunday November 13, 2016**

* * *

Guest Speaker: Henry Howell

PRELUDE

When Johnny Comes Marching Home Again

When Johnny comes marching home again,
Hurrah! Hurrah!
We'll give him a hearty welcome then
Hurrah! Hurrah!
The men will cheer and the boys will shout
The ladies they will all turn out
And we'll all feel gay when Johnny comes
marching home.

The old church bell will peal with joy
Hurrah! Hurrah!
To welcome home our darling boy,
Hurrah! Hurrah!
The village lads and lassies say
With roses they will strew the way,
And we'll all feel gay when Johnny comes
marching home.

OPENING WORDS

*From a Speech by Abraham Lincoln to the
One Hundred Sixty-Fourth Ohio Regiment
August 18, 1864*

“Soldiers -- You are about to return to your homes and your friends, after having ...performed [your] term of duty in this great contest.... I am greatly obliged to you, and to all who have come forward at the call of their country. ...

When you return to your homes rise up to the height of a generation of men worthy of a free Government, and we will carry out the great work we have commenced. I return to you my sincere thanks, soldiers, for the honor you have done [for this great Republic and to] me this afternoon.”

WORDS FOR REFLECTION

[By Howard Thurman from our hymnal #498)]

“In the quietness of this place, surrounded by the all-pervasive presence of the Holy, my heart whispers:

Keep fresh before me the moments of my High Resolve, that in good times or in tempests,

I may not forget that to which my life is committed.

Keep fresh before me the moments of my high resolve.”

HYMN

LEAVING ON A JET PLANE

By John Denver.

Lib & my favorite performance was by Peter, Paul & Mary

All my bags are packed,
I'm ready to go
I'm standin' here outside your door
I hate to wake you up to say goodbye
But the dawn is breakin', it's early morn
The taxi's waitin', he's blowin' his horn
Already I'm so lonesome, I could die.

So kiss me and smile for me
Tell me that you'll wait for me
Hold me like you'll never let me go
'Cause I'm leavin' on a jet plane
Don't know when I'll be back again,
Oh babe, I hate to go.

* * *

MESSAGE

ONE SOLDIER'S STORY – A BRONZE STAR FOR VALOR

This is a message for Veteran's Day—

* * *

Fran asked me about giving this talk, “Is it going to make me cry?” ☹ Well, there is definitely room for crying in what I have to say, but because this is a religious service, the real focus will be on its significant philosophical aspects.

In preparing, I started what seemed to be a book because of all the military recollections and saved love letters written between Lib & me during my three years in the Army.

Instead, I will relate just several specific episodes that highlight thoughts which now form my life as a veteran.

This then, is the story of a Bronze Star for valor in combat.

Episode 1: Night Assault

The time was 11:00 PM, October 10th, 1970, and Company D of the 1st Battalion, 52nd Infantry Regiment, 198th Brigade, Americal Division was poised to assault a small Vietnamese village of about eight mud-walled, thatched roofed huts, or “hootches”, where Reconnaissance had detected a North Vietnamese Army (NVA) unit to be bivouacked.

“Pop” a flare burst high in the air over the ville, my radioman's phone crackled, “Go for it!” from the Battalion Commander and a broad line of Company D's GI's sprang up from hiding positions among rice paddy berms and began advancing on the village. “Pop, pop, pop” —more flares, then gun fire—the high-pitched rapid “tr-r-r-r-h” of the American M-16's and responsive low-pitched loud “bam-bam-bam” of the Russian-made NVA AK-47's. Artillery 109mm howitzer shells fired from our battalion firebase on remote LZ Stinson's hilltop 8 miles away blasted onto the ground 200 meters beyond the ville.

About 70 yards beyond me I saw several dark figures in long smock-like dresses scurrying from one hut toward the thickly mudded bunkers common to rural houses at the time.

Villagers in long dresses usually meant these dark figures were elderly women or “Mama-san’s” as we called them. Younger women typically wore the pajama-type leggings. I raised my M-16, took aim and fired off several bursts of bullets. The dark figures kept running and eventually disappeared into a bunker.

Did I miss? No I did not miss. I had deliberately lowered my aim to fire into the ground near them. I had no desire to kill these villagers who had little choice of whatever army decided to bivouac among their hootches. These were unarmed, probably grandmothers, left behind to care for the very young children of the village. They were no threat to me. During the remainder of the night assault I never did see any of the enemy soldiers. Most of them had long since managed to escape.

Two weeks later, on the hilltop at firebase LZ Stinson, I and four other officers of D

Company were awarded Bronze Stars for heroism in the combat we had apparently shown that night. To this day, I ask, “Does this award make me a hero? What did I really do to deserve it?”

* * *

My Sunday service ‘message’ is about a “Bronze Star”. It is about what “valor” may mean to the *public*, and what “valor” became to mean to *me* while serving as an Infantry officer in Vietnam. It is about morality, honor and personal self-respect, *or lack thereof*, in the face of war. The events I portray are ones that required not only fast action but carried fundamental issues of “right” or “wrong”, of “ying” or “yang”, of decency or immorality.

First some background-- Libby & I were recently married just prior to receiving my orders to ship out to Vietnam. During my entire three-year military service, we were constantly saying good-bye to each other as I would be sent to different Army training posts and, as an officer, to various supervisory posts. The words “Leaving on a jet plane, I don’t know when I’ll be back again” was our special theme song,

almost every word of it being truly appropriate to our life at the time. And I think being so in love with Lib was one of two factors that got me through my tour in Vietnam with a semblance of sanity. The other factor I'll mention shortly...

Bill Mauldin's famous WW II cartoons of Willie & Joe portray two regular GI's and the totally unglamorous life of the "grunt". We Infantry soldiers are called "grunts" because of the mud, heavy backpacks, strenuous physical work and, indeed, our existence being not much different from a herd of cattle. On this Sunday morning bulletin's cover, Willie is giving Joe his last pair of dry socks for saving Willie's life. In Vietnam, *anything* dry was highly prized and dry socks would have been a great gift for saving your buddie's life.

* * *

Episode 2: A Mental Suit of Armor

On arriving at my eventual military post in Vietnam, a mental change in me took place. I lowered an imaginary steel helmet over my personality --my mind-- and withdrew emotion from all my actions. My personal motto

became, "*Whatever it takes to survive.*" As though like Spock in Star Trek, I became robotic and devoid of human sensitivity. My personal actions and the orders I gave to others were based on an impersonal calculus of survival.

While pretending to be "gung-ho" to my superiors, I did what I could to take actions that would bring my platoon and myself back alive. All my intelligence and capacities became focused on this one cause. I was a mental android.

To this day, I believe one reason I haven't suffered --much-- from PTSD as a veteran is because of this mental armor, of this switching off of human emotion and sensitivity.

War is not a game, because there are no rules in war. Making one's way through its minefield, then, requires a person to guide his mind and body with a purpose that is only of his *own* making.

On what side of this chaos will each human being come out on?... History has shown *many* different outcomes among us humans resulting from war.

I ask you to look back into your own past to figure how you, your friends and relatives, your community, your nation and, ultimately, humanity emerges from the man-made conflicts you may have known throughout your lifetime.

I ask you to keep in mind the fundamental issue of “right” and “wrong”; of what ethical rules you might have followed if confronted with similar situations.

What was my moral compass? What guiding principle would I take in dealing with the fear, the hate, the misery, the excitement, the potential for glory, the potential for revenge, the pressures from authority above, from subordinates, from family & society?

Where would your moral compass be in the situations confronted by an average guy and average soldier like me during an eventful year from 1970 to 1971?

* * *

Episode 3: My First Day in the Field

A Huey HU-1 supply helicopter transported me from the huge northern sector Americal Division military base on the eastern shore of Vietnam to the 1st Battalion headquarters on a remote hilltop firebase called LZ (Landing Zone) Stinson located 30-50 kilometers(?) west among rural villages (“villes”) and rice paddies. There the Huey off-loaded 105mm howitzer shells for the large artillery guns at the LZ, re-loaded food, medical supplies, and small arms ammunition, and headed toward my final assigned destination, Company D, which was then bivouacked among hedgerows and nearby rice paddies somewhere southwest of LZ Stinson.

Captain Dooley greeted me, then introduced me to my platoon and my platoon sergeant, Sgt. Zak who had been running the platoon for a month or more since there had not been enough officers to replace the one no longer with the platoon. Sgt Zak was very experienced, smart and capable (he certainly could have been an officer himself). The men obviously respected him a great deal, as I also would soon do. BUT on this first day for me in the field, the platoon men were not thrilled to

have some new, un-battle tested officer take over their lives.

While I sat down on the grass to have lunch (C-rations) with Sgt. Zak, two men proceeded to start a fight right in front of us, perhaps due to the tension of this supervisory transition, but I think also to see if their new “boss” could handle the discipline & authority needed to fight in combat.

I might have let Sgt. Zak deal with the fight, and he even said to me he’d deal with it. I made a snap decision, however, based on my own previous officer’s training; a year of having already been an officer back in the states; and simply having been in the military for a couple of years. --In the education & teaching profession, it is said, “Don’t smile until Christmas”--. In the military, it is crucial to have obedience and, as a leader, it is better to be strict, if perhaps severe, when first taking over a command. And it is better to take action than indecisively to do nothing. Why? Because we humans need parameters; we need boundaries that we can rely on to keep the potential chaos of our minds and surroundings under control,

especially when faced with the turmoil of warfare.

I jumped up, yanked the two quarreling soldiers apart and angrily yelled at them (so the rest of the platoon would hear) that if they didn’t quit, I’d give them and Article 15 (a partial docking of pay for two months and a reduction in grade) and, if that wasn’t enough for them, I’d court-martial them!

To everyone’s relief they quit and, to both their and my relief, it seemed I had shown the entire group of staring men that I was a no-nonsense leader and, most importantly for the scary business of combat, that order would be strictly maintained in their platoon.

(D)Now you think to yourself-- Was this the right decision? –What would you have done?

After this incident and finishing lunch, I then gathered the platoon together, introduced myself more completely and told them my approach toward dealing with this Vietnam war of ours. Relating to them how I had been through all the same stateside Basic &

Advanced Infantry Training (AIT) they had, and knowing that most of them were drafted with little desire to be in this god-forsaken war, I told them that one of my primary goals was to bring them all back alive; that we would go after the enemy as we needed to, but I wanted to bring them back from ‘Nam in one piece and not in a body-bag.

(D) Was this the right thing to say? Was this being a cowardly commander who should have pushed to conquer the enemy at any cost like General Patton in W.W. II, or was it a recognition of the lack of meaning and purpose the Vietnam war had for these guys even before they were drafted into its midst.-- What would you have done?

* * *

Mama-sans & Papa-sans

While operating in the lowland rice-growing areas among the many small farming villages of 3 – 6 one-room huts, our troops would simply take over the residents’ houses for

our “night logger” positions. The huts were known as “hooches” –mudded bamboo walls with thatched roofs, earthen floors and no bigger than 15’X15’. The residents we encountered were typically a family of an old, sun-wrinkled, white-haired man we called “Papa-san” and a similar gray-haired old woman we called “Mama-san” --probably grandparents of the one or two young, skinny black-haired children living with them. Rarely were there ever teenagers or young adults male or female. They’d either been drafted into the South Vietnamese Army (the ARVN’s) or joined the local rebels, the Viet Cong, (who, quite frankly, were very little different from our own “Minutemen” of the Revolutionary War.)

Warfare had been going on for so long in Vietnam that the rural peasants had built attached bunkers to the hooches, and would move into these dome-like 2-foot thick mud-walled caves sunk low to the ground where they had to huddle almost on top of each other, but were protected, at least, from small arms fire.

We moved into their hooches because we figured the VC would not shoot at us there, since the VC were usually the missing middle-

aged and young adults, and either friends with, or part of, the village family where we had bivouacked.

How our troops treated these local villagers varied from company to company and platoon to platoon. This treatment, indeed, was a central issue to the legacy of our troops in Vietnam and, really, to every army occupying a foreign land throughout entire history.

* * *

The Platoon War

The Vietnam War was called the “Platoon War” because, unlike WWII, army units were dispersed into small groups to better fight what was essentially gorilla-style warfare. The North Vietnamese Army (NVA) and the Vietcong knew their forces were too small to take us on with large troop movements, so they, and we at least with our *ground* troops, adapted to small scale warfare. Thus, it became “the Platoon War” for our side, with US military command using the smallest group size (officially 25 men) to be led by an officer.

Therefore, someone of my rank, i.e. platoon leader, had an unusual amount of authority for the traditional military, both over his own men, the enemy, and the local inhabitants.

What kind of *moral compass* would we *platoon* leaders bring to the Vietnam field of combat?...

In answering this question my firm approach in dealing with this damnable war became to respect human life wherever possible. The natives, as long as they were not fighting us, were not to be taken advantage of in my opinion.

Throughout history invading armies with all their weapons and resources can so easily take advantage of the unarmed and defenseless. Warfare is rampant with examples of the sadism lurking in our human psyche’s. War offers the perfect environment to let this destructive desire to manifest itself. The advantage I had as officer of my platoon was that *I would have none of it(!)* and would have court-martialed any soldier who treated the villagers and captive enemy in this way.

I told my men that by treating the villagers well, even those who might otherwise be VC but now were helping their family get food or were taking care of children, we in turn were much less likely to be targeted by the enemy.

(D) How would you have handled dealing with the local peasants?

* * *

A Dinner Invitation

On one occasion, upon entering a small ville, an elderly papa-san approached me after talking with my Vietnamese translator and guide, ‘Qui’, a local young jovial ARVN soldier assigned to our platoon. Qui informed me that the elderly gentleman wished me, as “numba one”, (i.e. officer of our platoon) to join him and his family for dinner at their hooch. I was surprised, and questioning thoughts raced through my mind—Was this a set up for an ambush, a way to bump off a prized military target (i.e. an officer); or was this elderly man a chief of the local ville and wished to honor me as “chief” of my troop; or was he simply

offering a “peace pipe” gesture in hopes that we would not hurt his people and destroy his ville?

I chose the latter “peace pipe” offering to be his motive, and with some anxiety, said to Qui that I accepted this kind offer.

An hour later after the villagers had time to prepare a special meal, a young barefooted, smudge-faced little child came up to me and very seriously said, “Dên đây” – “Come here”. I was ushered into a very small earthen floor hooch with a small kindled fire burning on the ground at its center. Over the fire hung a blackened steel pot with fish and rice stewing in it. The papa-san had me “sit” opposite him, (actually, squat in the custom of Vietnamese peasants) while Qui, some mam-sans and young children stood nearby. Together, papa-san & I ate from small rough bowls with chop sticks, nodding every now-and-then to each other. I was still nervous, however, wondering how clean the utensils were and how well the body-guard I’d posted outside the hooch would hold up in an attack. Eventually, papa-san & I concluded that the meal was over, we both stood and bowed to each other, and I returned to my platoon.

(D) What would you have done in this situation? —It might have been a trap.

... Although definitely operating in enemy territory, our platoon was neither ambushed anywhere near that ville, nor were we subjected to “sniper hour” – a very common time at dusk in which the VC could hide their escape route and yet take some close-range shots at us.

* * *

A “Rotten Apple” Joins My Platoon

One day when operating back in the rice paddies & viles, several new soldiers were flown to my platoon as replacements for those rotating out. Apparently, one of them wasn’t so “new”, since he informed me that he used to be a sharp-shooter (i.e. sniper) for his previous company. He also informed me that he, therefore, wanted to be given free rein to go separately from our platoon and pick off whatever persons he deemed to be the enemy. I responded telling him I would decide when and where we would snipe at the enemy, and that he

was to otherwise stick with his assigned squad. —This was not taken well by him. When we eventually entered a village, he again wanted free rein to go from hooch to hooch to “roust out” those VC he said were undoubtedly hiding there. By then I knew what he really meant was to randomly kill, maim, rape, maybe torture any of the local inhabitants he came across. I ordered him again to stay with his squad and to leave the natives the hell alone, since I knew there would be no enemy in the ville by the time we got there—only elderly mama- & papa-sans, some mothers and young children (which is probably what he knew as well...)

(D) How would you have dealt with such a soldier?

* * *

Zippo Cigarette Lighters & the Lt. Caley Affair

...As summarized by Wikipedia:

“The Mỹ Lai Massacre was the Vietnam War mass killing of between 347 and 504 unarmed civilians in South Vietnam on March 16, 1968. It was

committed by U.S. Army soldiers from the Company C of the 1st Battalion, 20th Infantry Regiment, 11th Brigade of the 23rd Americal Infantry Division. Victims included men, women, children, and infants. Some of the women were gang-raped and their bodies mutilated. Twenty-six soldiers were charged with criminal offenses, but only Lieutenant William Calley Jr., a platoon leader in C Company, was convicted.”

...Well!-- *Both* Lt. Calley and I were platoon leaders; *both* Lt. Calley and I served in the same Americal Division; and *both* Lt. Calley I operated in the same general region. The big difference was that Lt. Calley was there 2 years before me.

While he served, upper levels of US military command needed to prove to the American public that we were really winning this war and that we were wiping out the enemy. They demanded officers in the field to produce a higher “body count” and more destruction of “enemy” villages (typically by Zippo cigarette lighters igniting thatch roofs of the hooches),

and to bring back to base physical proof of this “body count”. Lt. Calley was only one among nearly all platoon leaders in my division at the time who had this pressure put on them by higher command. The The Mỹ Lai Massacre may have been the worst of its kind, but every other platoon was undoubtedly scrambling to produce “body count” and, had I been there two years earlier, I would have been under the same pressure from battalion, brigade and division officers to bring back demonstrable bits of the enemy...

I am convinced that Lt. Calley was used as a scape-goat (albeit a war-crazed one) by the upper command to cover their “behinds” from an uproar of American popular opinion after this event became public. Because of Lt. Calley, however, the pressure on me to produce “body count” was greatly diminished and I did not have to face the terrible moral dilemma that so many of my predecessor platoon leaders must have struggled with.

(D) If you were a contemporary of this unfortunate officer, how would you have handled such heavy-handed coercion from superiors you were trained to obey?

* * *

Fear in My Last Day in the Field

The time came when I was due to rotate out of the field and become executive officer (XO) for our Company back at the giant seaside Division base at Chu Lai. This, truly, was a significant day in my life. It meant that I might actually survive this war in one piece and the stress of imminent attack would be considerably reduced...

...It was mid-morning and our entire company was spread out along a rough oxen path, hiking toward a rendezvous with helicopters that were to fly the company to LZ Stinson where they could protect the firebase and recuperate for a couple weeks while on its fortified hilltop. And I would then be flown to Chu Lai. The 2nd platoon was in the lead with, first my point man--Private First Class Steven(?), then me, then my radioman, then carefully strung out twenty feet apart, the rest of my platoon. Then came the next platoon in similar

order; the Captain with his supporting staff of two or three; and then the other two platoons.

“Bam-bam-bam” came the deafening blast from an AK-47 just in front and up to the left of me among trees and bushes. There was an opening in the trail my point man had entered and where now grass turf spat up in the air from where the AK-47 rounds were hitting. Steven dropped to the ground and started rolling as fast as he could toward the bushes and *toward* where the enemy was shooting! I watched *frozen* at the edge of the clearing as the bullets followed Steven closer and closer to the brush and nearer to the enemy.

Immediately, I should have returned fire at this invisible adversary and distracted him from aiming at Steven. My position was not well protected and I, instead, stood there immobilized in place, just watching. Steven, by his own unbelievable wits had taken evasive action in his rolling actually toward the rifle fire, because soon the enemy soldier could no longer get a bead on where Steven was since Steven had rolled under an embankment almost below the NVA sniper.

This event brought our entire Company to a halt and, while I was still riveted by inaction and unsure whether PFC Steven was alive or dead, the “thunk-thunk-thunk” of mortars sounded, apparently being fired from about 100 yards behind me and 50 yards off the trail in the jungle. Explosions tore up a small field next to the trail where our company was now stalled, with mortar shells raining down near the Captain and two middle platoons. A ‘spotter’ for the enemy guided the mortar rounds, “walking” them onto the trail and onto our platoons who had tried to take cover there. Many of our men started to return fire, but our light-weight M-16’s bullets could not penetrate the jungle to where these mortar guns were located. Shrapnel zinged through the air and screams from our soldiers as they got hit joined the pandemonium. Our M-60 machine gunners set up their weapons and began blasting thousands of rounds back toward the “thunk-thunk-thunking” sounds of mortars being fired from within the jungle. Men pulled pins from their hand grenades, counted desperately to 3 and hurled them through the trees toward the enemy.

As suddenly as it started, the mortar barrage stopped and, with that, eventually our return fire slowed to a halt. “Medic, medic, medic” became the calls among groans of wounded men, while our Captain called in medivac helicopters for our wounded and artillery fire on the retreating enemy, wherever(?) they might be.

My platoon was the lucky one since, apparently, we had been singled out to bring the entire Company to a standstill by simply shooting our point man and then leaving the rest of the Company vulnerable to a mortar attack.

PFC Steven had gotten up unscathed, and I awoke out of my fear-laden state to shoot, however belatedly, back at where that first AK-47 had sounded.

Could Steven have been killed? Yes, most certainly, and I had done *nothing* to save his life. Forever, to this day, I am spooked by my cowardice of that moment and, if there is a God, can only thank Him that Steven was so quick-witted and the NVA soldier such a lousy shot.

(D) How do you think you may have acted under those tumultuous circumstances?

* * *

CLOSING HYMN

Conclusion

My Bronze Star is tarnished when I remember the hollow, essentially undeserving reason for receiving such distinguished medal for that first night assault. And when I remember the ambush on my last day in the field in which my heroism truly failed and which, to this day, still haunts me.

Yet I would also like to think there is some glitter shining from that star. More than representing heroism in *physical* combat, there exists in this star a silent, personal symbol to me of one soldier's attempt to hold on to human dignity, decency and morality in the face of war.

* * *

May *your* own personal decisions on how you would have addressed those difficult, split-second moments I've described here become your own star of valor as you celebrate, perhaps yourself as a veteran, and/or the many other veterans whom you have known throughout your lifetime.

ETERNAL FATHER STRONG TO SAVE

Words adapted by Donald Sensing 2007

& Revised by Henry Howell 2016

Eternal Spirit, strong to save,
Whose arm hath bound the restless wave,
Who bidd'st the mighty ocean deep
Its own appointed limits keep;
Oh, hear us when we cry to Thee,
For those in peril on the sea!

O soul of life, to you we turn
To give us grace we cannot earn.
Our soldiers guard our way of life;
Be with them all in times of strife.
Let courage flow from your command;
For those who must fight to save our land.

Eternal spirit, whose arm is strong,
protect us e'er from doing wrong.
We pray to always do what's right,
for justice only be our fight.
Let peace now reign across our land,
brought to us by your gracious hand.

CLOSING WORDS

By Carl T. Solberg, Vietnam Veteran, given as part of a sermon at Madison Avenue Baptist Church in NYC.

“... When I came home in 1970 from my combat tour in Vietnam, we got off a transport plane at an air force base outside Seattle and walked under a big sign that read, “Welcome home, soldier! America is proud of you!”...

[But] America was not proud of me - America was ashamed of me. Definitely a Veteran's Day contradiction.

Like most American veterans, I consider myself a religious man (there's a famous saying in the military: there are no atheists in foxholes) -- and so I am conflicted about Veteran's Day. I'm conflicted about the Vietnam War, torn between pride in my service, shame at my country's reaction, regret that my country saw fit to spend my service in so poor a cause, guilt at surviving the war when so many did not...

Maybe I just ought to bask in the cheers and thanks of my countrymen [when years

later they *did* thank me], [cheers that were] however flawed, and to not worry about my equally flawed self. After all, we're only human. And maybe that's the answer: even God doesn't expect us to match Jesus's idealistic teachings -- just to do our best.

And that's what our veterans did, all of them, in every war: we did our best. So let's do our best for them, take care of our veterans, and maybe at long last, we can all believe in that sign: “Welcome home, soldier! America is proud of you!”