

USAFA Memories and Reflections

Preface: Reflections on fifty years of life can be both useful and dangerous. Individually, the strengths of personal experience can reveal understandings and truths within each individual; at the same time, those very strengths can fail as useful generalizations, erected on a foundation of memory shaped to fit the “truths” rather than creating them. And so one embarks on such a task with humility in the hope of contributing some insights for those who would study such matters and seek to learn from them. I welcome the idea of learning from composite histories. The risk of trying to learn too much, or too little from human experience is always present, but it is the only “stuff” with which we have to work.

I have decided not to use a video format for a few reasons. At the outset, I have been and remain wary of the use of “monologue” video communication on complex matters. The “lust of the eye” often creates distractions from substance and can turn viewers into passive spectators rather than engaged participants in communication. Moreover, while often a helpful supplement, amateur videos can be distracting and are rarely viewed twice; they are without nuance and always run the risk of being too self-preoccupied. Since my own reflections might be controversial or even offensive to some, I want to use my words precisely to fully convey what I might pass along for the interest of others, both within and outside my Class.

After the Academy, my military service was limited to completion of my minimal obligation which was extended somewhat by completion of intelligence training and my year of “active duty” in graduate school. My time on active duty was little longer than my time at the Academy itself, making my observations of a military career limited at best. Still, every reflection carries elements of truth, and the careful reader/viewer will respond from their own understandings of the world they inhabit.

Introduction: To look back over a half century involves a great deal of effort and editing, both consciously and unconsciously; but the fundamental organization of those thoughts is chronological. To begin, my choice of the Air Force Academy for college was pragmatic, and while it was a way to avoid the draft (really!), it was of greater significance that neither of my adopted parents had the opportunity for higher education, and there were no educational savings funds in hand. Thus I had neither the guidance nor financial backing for college. I applied to a number of good schools, but ultimately the notion of a free education, coupled with job security, was the ultimate persuader. (My father’s support was offered under the shadow of life in the depression.) None of my immediate family had served in the military, and thus I left for the Academy completely ignorant of the journey ahead. Still, I am not sure I was any more naïve than many of my classmates, nor very different from my high school peers at that time. I do think there was a sense of challenge in a life of action which attracted me --- I was not immersed in reflection or academics. Perhaps another element of this inclination was the “macho” imagery which pervaded and still pervades our society. While I cannot argue that patriotism and national service were strong factors, I was well immersed in such an ethos ---Eagle Scout, Order of the Arrow, Class President, DAR good citizenship award, etc.; the informal imagery of “duty, honor, country, “ + “God” was an embracing social construction. That said, I was, even at this point, more inclined toward a skepticism toward such matters; I found all dogmas a bit disconcerting and enjoyed the

stimulation of alternative ideas and values. (I spent Sundays my senior year in high school visiting different religious institutions.)

I am often asked why I went to the Academy, and my response has been relatively unchanged; it was both a personal pragmatism and a decision lodged in that era. It was a simpler time, and the difficult questions of the next decade were not yet posed. The late 1950's were, indeed, an era when good and bad had few shadings; further, those who lived in the "center" often did not see or understand those on the "periphery." For example, the issue of race was carefully tucked away by de facto housing patterns in suburban Philadelphia. I might run track with African American classmates, but we went home to other sides of town. With this sense of simplicity and not a little naivete I arrived at the Academy in June, 1959, on the first bus from Denver, thinking that arriving early would ensure a full orientation day. And so it began.

Academy Years: I have not returned to the Academy since graduation, even when a family trip West allowed us to spend a day in Colorado Springs. I did spend some time walking around the town, visiting Colorado College, and at my favorite place, the Chinook Bookstore. Yet for the Academy itself, there are, frankly, few good memories beyond the comradeship of classmates. If there is one place to which I would return, it is a notch in the front range above Arnold Hall – identified by a cluster of aspens – a lighter green against other foliage, and a splash of yellow in fall. I took a number of weekend hikes up there to gain distance and perspective, and I am still drawn to high places.

For the first summer and year, there was an apparent twofold process of stripping away the individual to be replaced with a sense of community – both physically and psychologically. That such a process was carried out primarily by upperclassmen seemed simply borderline harassment and bullying. The opportunities for excess were rampant, and the retreat into individual survival could sometimes outweigh class solidarity. In that first summer I can recall being assigned to a table along with an awkward classmate whose lack of basic aircraft knowledge provided extra time for me to eat while his harassment by upperclassmen raged on. On another note, I do remember morning roll call when there was a report of one cadet absent. I found it a wondrous and elevating notion – one of us had escaped! I can recall the day when we returned to "All present and accounted for" the escape had ended! I think the errant cadet had headed to the Antlers with the family credit card! I am not surprised at my later fascination with The Prisoner television series of the sixties, which still has a devoted following among many. (Patrick McGoochan, BBC, 17 parts). While I considered, or fantasized leaving the Academy and transferring to Georgetown or joining the newly created Peace Corps, there was little support or information to be found in the isolation of a first year "doolie's" life. To leave would be to branded a failure: unthinkable!

We survived the summer and first year with the slender threat that for all the harassment we were an elite in embryo, better than the civilians who watched our parades and whom we were destined to serve (featherbedders?). In retrospect, I find this one of the most chilling "lessons" which remains with me – the presented notion of a military elite which corrodes the basic notion of civilian supremacy in the government. I sense it has returned with more frequency through the years—Vietnam, Iraq, Afghanistan – all wars in which government was blamed for the failure to secure victory. It is an old

story which I retained from memorizing General MacArthur's message from the Far East – “. . . there is no substitute for victory.” I hear its echo in the now famous Rolling Stone article interviewing General McChrystal and his attitude toward President Obama.

As I have considered this “lesson” over the years, I have been increasingly persuaded that the very idea of individual military service academies may have outlived its usefulness. They provide a basis for a cult within an elite; an arrogance of “ringknockers.” It may be better to raise an officer corps which arises more directly out of the general population itself – a better guarantor of a democratic foreign policy. Further, the repertoire of skills which increasingly were central to military life in the 19th century – essentially engineering – were appropriately concentrated at West Point and Annapolis. Today, they can be developed at many universities and an officer corps generated out of ROTC programs. The civilian-military gap in our society has never been larger, and I think this poses a danger for the Republic – see James Wright, Those Who have Borne the Battle (2012). Drawing an officer corps more widely from the society would also allow a more grounded academic framework and diversity of intellectual life.

Understandably, given the nature of soldiering, there lurked at times a certain anti-intellectualism. Grades were important, but only as a means, not an end. I can remember the mantra of one of my first year table commandants, “Anything above 70.0 is wasted effort.” Indeed, while the curriculum was challenging (and a good one), the time for reflection and discussion was always minimal. Moreover, the discussions were always boundaried within the main current of thought. I still have my copy of The Iliad from first year, and I have used this epic in international relations courses, coupled with a showing of the complementary Rambo I. Ironically, I recall no discussion of what the warrior, Achilles, really was about or the nature of his conflict with Agamemnon; John Rambo was clearer if less profound in his response.

Another “lesson” which seemed to permeate much of Academy life was a preoccupation with appearance over substance. A mundane but telling concept was the folding of clothing and the decorum of materials storage. Using a new article on the top, folded appropriately, allowed one to simply stuff the other articles underneath. By silent co-conspiracy, inspecting officers did not go below the surface as long as the appearance of order was maintained. In another instance, I recall an upperclassman calling me to his room to berate me on my “unshined” shoes (I have kept a poignant letter home lamenting on my failure as a cadet for the lack of an appropriate shine.) As he directed me to look at my cloudy shoes, my eyes wandered to his, and the grass lodged in the soles; it was a telling moment, and I never again took him seriously. One of the attitudes which emerged from the accumulation of such experiences was a deep and abiding cynicism. There was a long but connecting thread from such small matters to fudged “after mission” reports in Vietnam, or flying missions with halved bomb loads in order to keep up sortie count, and thus the façade of “effectiveness.” When the first missions were to be flown over HaNoi, the operations message from Saigon indicated the historic nature of the mission and requested all briefings be taped for historic purposes. The Operations Briefer, and my superior, responded, “Bullshit, if we make a mistake we'll get nailed for it.” Accordingly, we reported the tape recorders as defective and proceeded on with a void of history.

Then there was the “Bring us Men” logo on the wall --- I’ll avoid the macho dimension which was also a motivational dimension of training – the fear of loss of masculinity was then an unspoken prompt. It was a running joke in some quarters that it should be changed to “Bring us men – and we’ll turn them into boys.” This emerged out of a rigid framework which offered few choices in daily life which were all externally regulated. While useful to a degree, did the uniform lights need to remind us to wear raincoats? In such an overregulated atmosphere, you had to study and be in your room, you had to be present in class; the mandates replaced self discipline. In preparation for leadership, one should be trained to make choices, yet there seemed scant opportunity for such decision-making; all was regulated in what took on the tones of a monastery near the mountains.

Such a cloistered life was total. Everything was imported from the “outside” – including women from Colorado Women’s College for ballroom dancing lessons or the Arnold Hall Social Director’s rolodex of “acceptable” cadet dates . . . and wives? I recall that my bookcase picture of Joan Baez was ruled inappropriate since she was not a bona fide girl friend. Perhaps I should have sent Joanie a request for an autograph. Even social meetings were powerfully shaped by external forces.

I have often commented to my own students that one of the real educational opportunities which they enjoy, and which I never had, was to drink too much the night before an examination and face the personal consequences of that decision. There were many “teachable moments” lost in Academy life --- and many had to be learned after graduation.

If there was a lesson I took with me from the totality of the Academy experience, it was that the individual could survive such an experience and still retain a modicum of self respect. In a Southeast Asian context, the Vietnamese would draw on the analogy of bamboo – it bends but never breaks.

Graduation was a surreal event. President Kennedy took the occasion to announce support for a supersonic transport – a tribute, it would seem, to the military-industrial complex. (Within the week he would give a memorable speech at the American University Commencement which charted a course of greater coexistence with the Soviet Union). Not being in the top 35 or last graduate(s), I received my degree from General Curtis LeMay --- perhaps the last of the “heroic” generals, in their own way. He commanded the fire bombings of Tokyo and admitted he would have been convicted as a war criminal had the United States lost the war. He was the most visible architect in the development of strategic bombardment and thus, perhaps, the birth of the U.S. Air Force. Five years later he would run for Vice President on a ticket with George Wallace.

The Class of 1963 was a “Kennedy Generation,” drawn to government service and inspired by the charisma of the new President. We marched in the Inaugural Parade (those that made it through the snows of January), and the Inauguration speech was the challenge to a new generation. And yet those listening closely paused at the open ended commitment to “pay any price, bear any burden, meet any hardship . . . “ on behalf of “liberty” This sweeping rhetoric would lay the groundwork for a disastrous war hammered into the template of superpower rivalry. But that was not apparent at the time; I even recall a visiting speaker to the Academy who touted the success of the strategic hamlet program in Vietnam with predictions of victory --- but it was a small war and far away in 1963.

By senior year, and notwithstanding continued listing on the Superintendent's List, I had found little promise in the life/career provided, beyond a capacity for hard work and gritty survival. Still, as a high performer in the class I was selected to compete for a national graduate fellowship, and with the appropriate grooming I managed to win a Woodrow Wilson Fellowship which would take me to Columbia University for a year of graduate study in international affairs. I can still recall my exhilaration driving my old MG-TD, top down, through the gate and leaving the Academy for the final time.

Active Duty: Columbia University. My first assignment, commencing three weeks after graduation, was to report in to military facilities at Governor's Island, New York, and with that act I entered Columbia's graduate school. I lived in a graduate dorm and enjoyed a fully academic life for the first time, with only monthly check-ins at the Island. It was an extraordinary experience, most importantly, for the vitality and breadth of intellectual life which surrounded me, not simply on campus but in the city itself. My studies were taken with an impressive array of faculty and a sometimes frighteningly well read group of peers. In addition to studies, I soaked in the entire undergraduate experience, the memories of which remain a treasured year in my life. (In my dorm, John Jay Hall, there is an unnamed quote over the fireplace: "Hold fast to the spirit of youth, let years to come do what they may.") After full time study in the first summer, I spent the year and part of the next summer completing my degree. After completing coursework, I was initially denied the degree because some of the courses I took were offered through a different administrative division of the University, even though they were the same courses with the same instructors and students. I wrote a letter of protest, along with a personal plea, and the institution relented. Large bureaucracies, military or civilian, can act similarly to anomalies. Perhaps the later student demonstrations against the Columbia administration were borne out of such a context.

The first demonstration I attended was after the Sunday bombings of a church in Alabama. I had some sense of racial issues and recall going to a small "black" church in Phoenix City, Alabama while in jump school at Fort Benning. I was taking a walk and simply walked in as I heard the service underway. The service was halted, and I was welcomed. As the service ended and I talked on the lawn with some churchgoers outside, a car with four white youths drove by and stared. I was told I'd best head back to the base, and I did so. The discontent within the society had many dimensions.

Protests against the Diem regime became more visible on college campuses beginning in the summer of 1963. The now famous self-immolation of monks was on the front page of the New York Times, and American critics of the regime were outspoken. The sister in law of President Diem spoke at Columbia in early fall; she had been christened the "Dragon Lady" when she characterized the Buddhist immolations as a "monk's barbecue." In a jammed lecture hall a moment of silence was negotiated for all those killed in the war, on both sides, and in that quiet inside one could hear the splat of eggs against windows from the protestors outside. By November, a military coup, with US acquiescence, had ousted the Diem brothers. Shortly thereafter the assassination of President Kennedy paralyzed policy, and we returned to our academic work stunned and saddened.

Intelligence School. My first duty assignment after Columbia was Intelligence School at Lowry AFB . While I had requested a more specialized training in electronic intelligence, this training was broader and prepared intelligence officers with general qualifications and as photo-interpreters. Once in the program, we lived in fear that we would be assigned to the “photo” side which meant most time would be spent in Strategic Air Command. While the time was uneventful, and with classes from 7-1 and no homework (classified materials), these were six relaxing months in Denver. I found the academic course work straightforward, if a bit simplistic --- presentations on strategic doctrine seemed oblivious to the post Cuban-missile crisis changes in understanding both threat and policy between the superpowers or the overwhelming superiority of the US missile forces. Our final exam was engaging – finding the missile complexes in Cuba based upon spy plane photography. At that point, my request was for an assignment in the East, wishing to be closer to family in Philadelphia, but the assignment came for the 9th Aerospace Defense Division at Ent AFB in Colorado Spring (prior to NORAD’s move in to the Cheyenne mountain complex).

Space Intelligence. My return to Colorado Springs was enjoyable; a small town setting with ample cultural events and easy access to the outdoors. At work, I gained significant responsibilities as my superior had lost his security clearance due to a drinking problem, so I attended the NORAD daily briefings and was the only lieutenant around the table at Division meetings. The “9th” was in charge of all of the radar sites which monitored space. It included the ballistic early warning system with sites in Greenland and England as well as radar facilities in Turkey, Diego Garcia, and the Aleutians. My only difficulty was that my superior used his lieutenant (me) for all the mundane work , both professional and personal, and it became increasingly difficult to rise above it. Beyond the push of minor job dissatisfaction was a pull toward new challenges; I became fascinated with the Vietnam War. It began with reading Graham Greene’s The Quiet American coupled with Bernard Fall’s Street Without Joy; the latter was banned in South Vietnam for its criticisms of the Diem Regime. Also, It is difficult to be in the military and not have a romantic notion of one’s first war. The corollary is that you cannot be sane if you feel the same way about wars thereafter. And finally, with the judgment I would not remain in the service past my obligation, I did feel I owed the government for my education. For these reasons, and after one year without a sense of professional growth, I volunteered for Vietnam. Due to my security clearances I was limited to assignments in Saigon. Upon getting my orders for DaNang and questioning the assignment my sergeant replied, “Don’t worry Lieutenant, I got you a waiver!” And so I was off to my first war.

Vietnam. I was assigned to the 6252nd fighter wing based in DaNang. It was Spring, 1965, the Marines had landed in April to secure most sides of the perimeter of the airbase (the gaps were filled by the Vietnamese army), and it anticipated the US conventional buildup in August. I recall clearly a photographic essay by Larry Burrows of Life magazine, who was later killed in the war on a stretch of road between DaNang and Hue which had been the title of Fall’s book, the Street Without joy. The story was of a Marine helicopter mission with heavy casualties, and the romance quickly faded in the presented graphic photography.

At DaNang airbase the intelligence shop provided pre-mission briefings and debriefings for Air Force and other air missions launched from the northernmost base in then South Vietnam. This included Vietnamese Air Force attacks, returning carrier flights with battle damage, and an array of US Air Force missions, both direct bombing missions and combat air patrols. We also provided general briefings, often for visiting Congressmen who stopped in DaNang late in the week before flying on to Hong Kong for shopping. For the first six months of my one year tour, one had a clear sense of “the mission.” Working in the back of a hanger we made do with scant resources and personnel; we worked long hours and without the puffery of protocol. I shared many tasks with an airman first class and we were on a first name basis for the year. We rose early (0300) and briefed missions with a time over target of dawn – debriefing them upon return, and set out a second wave in the afternoon. While F-4 squadrons came in later, the aircraft were B-57 squadrons on rotation (with San Miguel beer) from Clark AFB. (Ironically, my old boss with drinking problems ended up at Clark and always showed up in DaNang one day a month to put in his 24 hours and collect “combat pay.”)

As the year wore on, the buildup in troops gave a more “stateside” quality to the American presence. More new infrastructure and additional personnel arrived, along with RMK civilian contractors. There was time for meetings and lapses in activity. I can recall some aircrew members who flew night missions being “written up” by the Air Police being out of uniform (no hats) on their way to breakfast at the DaNang Officers Open Mess (DOOM Club).

And so some old themes returned and resonated with Academy life. There was petty inter-service rivalry: were the Marines flying all the sorties they reported? --- the Commander stationed our aircrews at the end of the runway to count missions. After mission reports were regularly fudged – not out of self interest to much as to tip the uncertainty of the fog of war into demonstrations of progress - ----- was this caused more by the generals or the civilian leadership? The view from the bottom only suggested an effort more based on self than national interest. In a war which core values are not at risk, the worst of bureaucratic behavior can emerge. On one occasion, our B-57 pilots debriefed that the attack dive angle listed in the Dash-One- basic aircraft manual was too shallow and indicated a steeper dive was more effective in delivering ordinance. They were immediately questioned critically and an explanation was demanded for such deviations. Not surprisingly, all later mission reports conformed to the Dash-1 document on dive angle – I have no idea what the dive angles really were, but I suspect and hope the aircrews were more committed to the mission than to the Headquarters staff in Saigon . The distance between SaiGon and DaNang was often helpful. When questioned by phone on such matters we often simply crinkled paper and announced the signal was breaking up and continued our work. At one point there was a lack of available ordinance due top logistics problems, but we still flew missions with half bomb loads to maintain sortie counts. This story got into the American press, and I worried I was the leak – too many gin and tonics at the American consulate. As it turned out – the story was widely sourced. More depressing was that the base commander flew missions on the weekends, landing at a number of safe landing strips in-country. Each one technically constituted a combat mission. He later put himself in for air medals for his number of combat missions. I could go on at the growing ineffectiveness of the mission which raised serious doubts in my mind about the American role in this war. The role paid little attention to the Vietnamese or the dynamics of their own society and its

conflicts. An example was the episode of a mutiny of Vietnamese forces in I Corps in the Spring of 1966 and the consequent sending of troops from Saigon to put down the rebellion but who were held at bay within the air base perimeter. The Air Force evaluated all aircraft from the base with ground staff left behind. As “hostages” we received incoming mortar fire from dissident Vietnamese forces, and with a gallows humor, speculated whether, if wounded, we would be eligible for purple hearts. To cap all of this, I also made the mistake of reading Joseph Heller’s Catch 22 while in-country. We even had a Yossarian in the wing who would refuse to fly North Vietnamese missions if there were any defects in equipment or planning while at the same time some pilots sought to speed their 100 mission return home by being vectored over Hainan Island from combat duty in the Gulf of Tonkin, thereby getting credit for a North Vietnamese mission. Also, as a matter of course, flight rosters were often changed to make sure unit commanders went north the day after MIGs were engaged; the MIGs and their pilots were outclassed and an easy mark for American pilots. It is of such stuff that sometimes heroes are made.

There was one element of the mission in Vietnam of which I take the most satisfaction, and carry the most guilt: Operation Ranch Hand. On a rotating basis, the 309th Air Command Squadron, based at Bien Hoa, conducted aerial spraying missions out of DaNang. As I write this, the US has finally begun decontamination of the agent orange fill stations at the end of both runway sites after long negotiations with the Vietnamese government. The mission from DaNang was to defoliate portions of the Ho Chi Minh trail (the main infiltration route from north to South and primarily through Laos) so that night missions of B-57’s (Doom Pussy) could locate and attack truck convoys and personnel at under C-130 flare drops. I worked intensively with this unit and flew on some missions – they were the most professional group I encountered in the war. They flew C-123’s loaded with defoliant at 150’ and were vulnerable to ground fire in their three necessary spray passes in order to open up the tree canopy. They were the only unit that put all aside in commitment to the mission and with the autonomy to directly carry it forward. Intelligence, planning and operations all coalesced in a shared effort, often in cooperation with Vietnamese Air Force.

The legacy of agent orange remains complex, and it has been used for political purpose which has complicated the scientific inquiry. I have visited a few of the Peace Villages in North Vietnam, now dedicated to the deformed children who are that legacy, at least in part; and there are few times I can think of Vietnam without that awareness of them. Among my most satisfying work was helping to map the Ho Chi Minh trail --- we flew at low levels, and when the trail was seen, threw out a smoke grenade. From greater altitude of a second plane the pattern of the road could be discerned – the navigator sketched in the maps, and the results were sent to Headquarters.

There are many personal challenges in war as life/death events regularly mix with sheer boredom. From my position, the most stressful aspect was to bear the responsibility to provide crucial target information, expectations of enemy defense, and escape and evasion tactics. After the briefing we saw the planes leave and anxiously awaited their return. (Of all the war films I have seen, Twelve O’Clock High (1949) was the most engaging in relevance to my personal experience.) (I remember those motivational films first summer) Some staff choose to stay aloof from aircrews, cushioning the anguish at loss of friends; others take the risk of involvement. My only solution was to fly missions with the

309th and accept directly the results of my briefing responsibilities. Ironically, the mission where we took the most hits was one of my initiatives. Photo intelligence and visuals suggested that the North Vietnamese were building thatched coverings for the Trail close to the border. We agreed a “spray” was feasible to keep the Trail open, and I found no evidence of ground fire in the area in my research. So – we launched the mission. Over the target area the subsequent automatic weapons fire was substantial, and we took some hits in the initial run, but we returned sadder but wiser and without losses. I was gratified to have been on the mission and with my comrades. The only memorabilia I have kept from the war is the certificate of membership in the “Order of the Punctured Provider” in honor of the number of hits the plane absorbed on the mission.

The demands of intelligence are exacting, and what they require most of all, is intellectual honesty and integrity --- intelligence failed in many ways in Vietnam. I even wrote an article on the gap between high level and on the ground intelligence. The American ignorance in terms of culture, history, and military tactics was problematic. Moreover, ignorance was often coupled with arrogance. Symbolic of this was my visit to the CuChi tunnels not that far from SaiGon and now a tourist site. As we stood around our guide he asked us to find the tunnel entry - we looked and shuffled around until he knocked some brush aside and lifted a trap door. We climbed down into the tunnels, now widened to accommodate Western tourists. Here the VietCong and whole villages lived. The saturation bombings of the area by US airpower eventually solved the problem of not knowing specific locations and forces, and yet the cost in civilian casualties is measured in the war memorial which sits at some distance from the tourist complex; it seems visited by few foreign visitors and by most Vietnamese.. Perhaps the politicians were too close; perhaps too many captains wanted to be majors, and major to colonels, and so on. We were “innocents abroad” to use Mark Twain’s phrase. The one year tour of duty guaranteed a certain military tourism which only magnified the horror for its participants. I will not go into all the dimensions of this but a required reading might be Achilles in Vietnam; Combat Trauma and the Undoing of Character by Jonathan Shay (remember the Iliad in the first year?). For me, the irrelevance of General McArthur’s quotation was writ large in the sands of DaNang.

My military life was kept sane by an opportunity to teach English through a program run at the American Consulate in DaNang. There I taught students English two nights a week. Here, I grew to know and appreciate the Vietnamese people in human terms and to engage the conflict in its reality: one which divided regions and families and social classes as well as ideas. After questioning the absence of one student for a few classes, a member responded that the woman was a VietCong. Was she really? Did she learn enough English? My ignorance of the country overwhelmed me almost daily. I will always remember a time when I opened our work to general questions from the class. There was a young woman who always spoke softly, and she asked quietly but insistently, “Why are you here?” It was a laser like question that moved to the heart of the matter. I can remember being taken aback and formulating some stumbling logic which got me through, and yet I will always remember her for the frankness of her question. When the course ended I gave her my English Dictionary, and in return she gave me a book of contemporary Vietnamese poetry --- I had no opportunity to have it translated until thirty years later –by a Vietnamese friend studying at Saint Michael’s. It was a long and powerful poem against war itself without pointing at sides or causes; and I still turn to it, remember her question

and my inability to provide an answer that satisfied either of us. The poem was by Pham Duy and written in 1965:

"I would sing louder than the gun's sound on the pads of rice.
Don't fear of my song, for it'd outdo the whistle of shells
And Strengthen the arms of ploughmen
And end those nightmares
And bring into the cradle tender songs."

I hope wherever she is, Thuy Chau has found the tender songs without waiting for my answer.

I also spent free time with monks of the DaNang Temple. My visits there were always as if to a sanctuary. We discussed their religion; they provided me some books in English, and we found mutual basis for our concerns for the war. This should not be too romanticized; they also appreciated the carton of Salem cigarettes I regularly provided (some wayward desires are more easily tamed than others)! The American war, at times, seemed not only against the Viet-Cong and North Vietnamese but against the climate and land itself. Fatigues and heavy boots dominated, and the air conditioners whirled in defiance of temperature. By contrast, the Temple's architecture responded to the climate itself featuring louvered doors and windows that let the breeze but not the sun pass through. And, with shoes removed, the cold tiles of the floor created an atmosphere to soothe and quiet both mind and body. It was safe haven from the war but disrupted by the military rebellion in early 1966 which resulted in a more constrained curfew in a city that heretofore had seen little conflict. (The word was that the VietCong used the city for Rest and Recreation and kept it an "open city.")

By the close of my tour, I was persuaded that American exceptionalism was more dream than reality in "our" century. Senator J. William Fulbright wrote a short book during this period entitled The Arrogance of Power in which he argued that power always tends to confuse itself with righteousness. To have power individually and nationally is always corrupting; no nation state has ever eluded this fundamental truth. The power of America and Americans was at its height, and in our innocence we pursued empire without being able to utter the word itself. But for the American participants who dealt directly with the Vietnamese, we knew the personal power we wielded, and in reflective moments, it was unsettling. For many, the best understanding of the Vietnam War emerges not from historians so much as Graham Greene's Quiet American. (The 1958 film with Audie Murphy ironically reverses the plot into a cold war format. Greene tried to stop the filming at the time but had signed away the rights. The 2002 version with Michael Caine honors Greene's work more fully. The more recent version suffered from coming out at the time of the Iraq war, and the parallels were unpalatable for the film-going audience. Because it was distributed for such a short period I had to drive to Montreal to see it; it met with a better audience reception outside the United States.

In August, 1966, I left a war undone, leaving behind both Vietnamese friends and comrades in arms. It was a long flight, but once in San Francisco it seemed I had re-entered the "world," and Vietnam quickly seemed very far away.

After a short break I began my final tour of active duty at the Pentagon in the early fall of 1966.

The Pentagon: My assignment began with my “involuntary” acceptance of the assignment which indicated my plan to leave the service as soon as my service commitment was fulfilled. Far from Vietnam in miles and subject, the National Military Command System Support Center, was located in the basement of the Pentagon and conducted studies for the Joint Chiefs and Office of the Secretary of Defense. It was a joint assignment, and my superior was a Lieutenant Colonel in the Marines and next higher was a Navy Captain. In conformance with policy which arose out of a post World War II effort to avoid a militaristic face to Washington, joint assignments meant that one could wear civilian clothes, and so I became an indistinguishable Washington bureaucrat in short order. Again, appearance over reality emerges as a theme. Would President Eisenhower’s concern with the military industrial complex have been more widely received if all the military wore uniforms? As a “targets” officer, I participated in an ongoing analysis of possible nuclear wars, using the computer and the Weapons Allocation Optimal Program software. We ran the wars off IBM cards in a computer that filled a room; today it probably could be handled on the average PC. We analyzed types of weapons, targeting strategies, level and kinds of tactics, and all manner of questions raised from higher levels. The mathematical models were rudimentary. The mathematics assumed that after the target was hit initially, the people would rush back in to Ground Zero and form a bell shaped curve to receive a subsequent bomb (!) Fallout analyses were complicated by reliance on average windspeed and direction. Those areas with a south wind half the year and north half the year ended up with a 0 wind for damage assessment. Later iterations featured a “most likely” wind.

There were intellectual challenges, but also an air of unreality, and I could not imagine remaining in such a position for an extended period. When you find yourself using the term “weapons buy” instead of “deaths,” it is time to move on. (Again – appearances over reality, and the cynicism of war in the abstract) While the work could be engaging in the abstract and my co-workers an interesting mix of colleagues, both civilian and military, the world outside pressed in, and Vietnam pressed on the consciousness of all Americans.

I applied for separation in 1967 and faced the possibility of rejection of my application since I held a regular commission; due to the war such applications were often rejected on the grounds of national need. I don’t know what happened along the way; I heard that my superiors recommended rejection, but it was never confirmed. Notwithstanding such reservations, my request was accepted, and I separated in late fall. Because of my commitment to some special unfinished projects, I was re-hired as a civilian Operations Research Analyst in the same position, with a significant increase in pay, and so I worked for a year to save money and apply to graduate schools for the coming fall. By this time I was fully committed to opposing the war and spent time volunteering with the Gene McCarthy campaign which was challenging the incumbent Lyndon Johnson. As an amusing anecdote, I went to the first Pentagon anti-Vietnam demonstration, and while in the crowd someone asked me for a light (I was then a pipe smoker). Without a thought I gave him my matchbook . . . with the embossed “Pentagon Drugstore” on it-- he shrank away calling me an undercover officer for “the enemy.”

In choosing a graduate school I was looking for an institution which retained its focus on policy and world affairs but at the same time was not swallowed up in current events. The ability to gain a larger perspective is rarely found in Washington offices or at demonstrations or even neighboring academic

institutions.. The Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy, jointly administered by Tufts and Harvard, is the oldest professional school of international affairs and had a lineage of providing leaders to government, business and academic life. It was also far enough away from Washington that I felt I could step back a bit with more time to think rather than act.

The Fletcher School- This “second round” of graduate school provided the opportunity to reflect on my military service as well as career goals. The high caliber of students and faculty, coupled with a small community spirit all provided for a unique educational experience. With a military background I was looked upon askance by some, although there were military academy graduates who regularly entered Fletcher for mid-career degrees. For my curriculum and research I regularly avoided Vietnam; it was still too close for the necessary dispassionate and balanced analysis. At the same time, I felt compelled to act on my judgments of the war. Over time since my return from Vietnam, my position changed. In 1966 I judged the war had been a terrible policy error --- this was largely developed from reading the Pentagon Papers which detailed how much thinking on Vietnam had been dominated by a Cold War mentality and only tangentially concerned with the plight of the Vietnamese themselves. Yet as the war continued it became evident to me that the war was not simply a “mistake.” The “right cause” rationale for a “just war” had worn thin, but beyond that, the fundamental principle of proportionality seemed routinely violated. Notwithstanding the restraints on bombing targets and rules of engagement, the ill defined “ends” had begun to justify the “means.” The oft quoted “we had to destroy the village in order to save it,” while of questionable veracity, gained resonance as a description of the larger conduct. It was only a small separation to the events at My Lai. I visited the hamlet in 2001 and remain shocked at both the event and subsequent actions to address it by the American military. The degree of my own complicity in this war demanded more than table conversation. While those who opposed the war took many paths, my personal hero through this travail was and remains Robert McNamara. The documentary film Fog of War resonates with his writings and commitment to learn and change from gained knowledge. He had commissioned the research resulting in the Pentagon Papers which provided deep understanding of the policy process through which we became involved in Vietnam. It was this impulse to learn from experience that caused me to set teaching as a career goal – drawing also upon my personal satisfaction from offering classes in Vietnam.

Part of the complexity of life is choosing a path that can serve both the personal and political. By political I mean the connection between one’s private life and the rest of society. Reconciling the two is sometimes difficult and often painful, and participation in war is often a tipping point. While not yet a pacifist, I was more drawn to the Society of Friends (Quakers) as a spiritual community, and I continue to struggle with the “peace testimony.” Yet my experience in Vietnam sensitized me to the dangers of trusting one’s identity to a larger entity. I could not work for a larger organization which might ask me to compromise my principles. Given my experience in Vietnam, I did not feel I could work for the U.S. government in any capacity. While that may have seemed a radical decision at the time, subsequent events have proven it was a wise decision for me. I recall when Robert White, a friend and graduate of Saint Michael’s College, resigned as Ambassador to El Salvador in opposition to US Government policies in the 1980’s. It ended his career and he turned to work in non-profits lobbying on foreign policy. The War had changed my approach not simply on military matters

but also on attempting to draw the political and personal into alignment. I drew much solace in these considerations from J. Glenn Gray's book, The Warriors: Reflections on Men in Battle (1959) in which he reflects upon his World War II diary with a greater sense of time and wisdom.

Having made this decision, and uninterested in a business career, teaching became a reasonable option. My one lingering concern at this time was that notwithstanding my departure from active duty, I remained in the inactive reserve. The possibility of recall was real, if distant, and I considered, at least in theory, moving to Canada, where I was doing much of my doctoral research. Fortunately, there was no recall, and I was saved some of the anguish of reconciling the personal and the political.

Still, the Tufts campus was in tumult; the Dean was an advocate of US policy and many in my class were drawn into opposition to the war both within the campus community and beyond. Fletcher students became known for our afternoon teas, when we invited in members of the surrounding community to talk about the war. I also worked with the Massachusetts Peace Organization (MASSPAX) and offered some teach-ins to high school students. They didn't ask me back after I gave what I thought was a balanced view of the situation to some high school students who preferred to make anti-war placards rather than think about the war.. (The excesses of zeal and self-righteousness were found on all sides.) These were difficult times, and the divisions of that era within our class were strong. I can remember trooping down to watch the CBS news with Walter Cronkite; administration supporters sat on one side of the room, opponents on the other, and traded comments throughout. The 1969 graduation from Fletcher was notable in that speaker at the usually sedate and formal banquet was shouted down and some of the attendees were ousted only after punches were thrown.

In the Spring of 1970, and after the invasion of Cambodia, I was privileged to be a part of Fletcher's leadership in forming a consortium of schools of international affairs jointly protesting the actions of the US government. It brought together in Washington a focused leadership group of graduate students. I can recall our meetings at John Hopkins and then trying to get the group to the National Press Club for a briefing. I was working out of a phone booth and tried to order twelve Yellow cabs to get us to the meeting on time. It was a pretty funny phone call, but they did all come, and we did make it to the press conference. Cambodia suffered terribly in this period, the result of "collateral damage" from US bombings as well as the reign of the Khmer Rouge and ultimately the invasion by Vietnam itself.

As a side note, the resilience of the Cambodians continues to amaze me. A former Saint Michael's student of mine, Luong Ung, has written a widely read book on this period, First, They Killed My Father. It was a dark time from which Cambodia continues to emerge. The notion of democracy too often is handled patronizingly in the West, and I will never forget being one of the international monitors for the Cambodian national elections in 2003. In the small town I monitored, almost all those eligible had voted within two hours of the polls opening. At the end of the day, we carried the ballot boxes through the town, and they were locked in the local school until public counting the next day. To ensure legitimacy, rival parties slept outside the school that night until the counting. Such participation is rarely witnessed in the West.

During this period at Fletcher I sought to make my statements as those of an individual in isolation from my Academy experience. For me, that background was not isolated from the War and my participation, but maintaining a distance avoided the kind of media coverage which might distort my own position for the want of a good headline. And so my larger identification simply remained that of a “Vietnam vet.” My only private action was to fund my bus ticket to a veterans’ demonstration in Washington by pawning my class ring – “toward new worlds” seemed ironic; it was valued at \$35.

The Vietnam Veterans Against the War had an active chapter in Cambridge, and through its organization I participated in Dewey Canyon III, a major veterans’ demonstration named for an invasion of Laos (1971). The event provided a different legitimacy to the anti-war movement and drew together a diverse group across the years of war. Clad in fatigues we camped on the Mall (defying a Supreme Court advisory that we were trespassing). As an interesting side note – former Attorney General Ramsey Clark offered his services in case we were arrested – we each had a dime taped to our armpits (for that one call) and wrote Clark’s phone number on our arms. Wheelchair veterans were posted at each entrance to the Mall assuring news coverage of the federal government removing wounded veterans, and so the administration chose to let the moment pass. The next day we lobbied in the Congress, and John Kerry addressed the Senate Foreign Relations Committee. Finally the demonstration ended as we left our medals on the steps of the Capitol. It was an act of cleansing and defiance – without hesitation and never regretted, directed at the seat of government for the betrayal of national purpose and violation of international human rights. At the same time I did and do hold those within the military chain of command for their individual responsibilities. The human rights movement moved forward at the close of World War II with the determination that “taking orders” was not a sufficient defense against war crimes. This widened ring of responsibility, even though often though difficult to apply in situations of stress, expands and strengthens the firewall between civilization and barbarism.

I recognize, here, that the divisions over the War and its conduct were painful; yet they continue to exist and will likely remain so. Wars only end when the veterans are dead – then the historians can sort through and render their judgments. One of my colleagues in the history department figures 100 years as a good time-frame for full analysis and understanding.

Saint Michael’s College. Finally, with all coursework and exams done, as well as exhaustion of GI Bill funding, I sought a teaching job. It was a difficult time for job searches, and I also looked at administrative positions and even a grant program to train male elementary school teachers; but with diligence, a good record, and some luck, I was invited to join the faculty at Saint Michael’s, a small liberal arts college in Burlington, Vermont. The opportunity was fortuitous in two ways.

First, the College was a supportive and engaged community. The commitment of the religious order to peace and justice issues provided an ethical framework within which to study international politics. The Edmundite Order maintained a robust Peace and Justice Center and coupled this with a commitment to academic freedom and increasing academic excellence. The student body was and continues to be active in engaging international issues. I taught international relations at Saint Michael’s for thirty-seven years before my retirement four years ago. With the passage of time I have offered a number of courses on Vietnam to include a team taught course on Politics and Literature of the Vietnam War. Over

that period I also assumed administrative roles to include the Vice President for Academic Affairs before formally retiring four years ago. I continue to offer a seminar on globalization and teach regularly at the Community College.

Second, rural Vermont provided a setting which supported a close relationship with nature and a livable scale in human relations supportive of family and civic life. We live in a narrow valley on the shoulder of Vermont's highest peak and have worked to secure a simple and meaningful life living close to the land. In 1972, I met Mary, when we both competed in the Stowe Derby – an annual citizen's race from the top of Mt. Mansfield to the Town Hall. She has been a speech therapist specializing in early education programs until her retirement five years ago, and we have two sons. Ben majored in East Asian Studies at Wesleyan University and spent two years teaching English in rural Japan. He returned to Vermont and now works in an employee-owned construction company building homes and doing historic restoration. Chris graduated with a degree in history from Earlham College (a Quaker school in Indiana) and now is the Director of Ticket Services for the Portland Timbers MLS "football team" in Oregon. We have been blessed with a granddaughter, Willa Scout Wilson, who brightens the darkest days and can coax anything from doting grandparents.

My life "outside" academe has been equally rewarding in these years. The commitment to active democratic participation through Town Meetings is a hallmark of Vermont life.. I have been privileged to serve as Underhill Town Moderator of the meeting for seventeen years, the longest tenure in the history of the Town, dating to 1786. This is not attributable to political skill as much as taking on a task few others would relish. I have also been active on the State Literacy Board, the Vermont Council on the Humanities, the Council on World Affairs, and Vermont Adult Learning, which provides statewide educational services to adults for high school completion, career preparation, and English for speakers of other languages.

During my time at Saint Michael's I began to work extensively with the refugee community (back to English tutoring for Vietnamese). My interest in the subject led me to get a degree in teaching English from Saint Michael's in 2001. For the practicum requirement I was accepted to teach for a semester at the National University in HaNoi. This was an extraordinary experience- living on campus and taking meals with students and interacting with a faculty of peers who, years before, had been the "enemy." Mary and I have continued to visit Vietnam periodically for teaching workshops and conferences. To bring full circle this aspect of my life and the healing it entails has been gratifying.

Much remains to tell and more to remain untold. I do think often of my senior year roommate, Lee Adams, who was shot down over Quang Binh province while I was in-country (1966). In 2004 fragments of a watch and pocket mirror were found and villagers questioned. At that time, a farmer who had been a member of the North Vietnamese militia disobeyed orders of his superior to bring the remains to the village to be displayed as a war trophy. After 39 years he admitted that he had presided over Buddhist last rites for Lee and then buried his body. Such can be the private compassion within the inhumanity of war.

I continue to teach, never having lost my commitment dating to those memorable evening classes in DaNang, which now seem so far away. I still hike and enjoy snowshoeing in winter, often climbing high enough to look down at my narrow valley in Vermont. Perhaps I am always searching for that patch of aspens which once gave me such comfort in a world I could never have anticipated or perhaps even accept. If I get back to the Reunion, I would like to hike up to that notch one more time and remember the long path over time and place.

I wish all the best to my classmates. I know our paths have diverged in many ways but remember all the threads of small kindnesses we shared in earlier times. For the many directions in which we have scattered, they still draw us together in a firm if tangled fabric.

For those who may read this, please note the cautions at the outset. It is not “the truth” so much as “my truth.” Over time, it has been shaped by my own experiences and listening to the voices of others – in word and person. That Vietnam has dominated my adult life is not surprising; it was the event of our generation. “We make history, but not in circumstances of our own choosing.” (paraphrase of Karl Marx- 18th Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte)

Perhaps the finest reflection on war from the Vietnamese side is in Bao Ninh’s novel, The Sorrow of War (1991) Bao Ninh served with the Glorious 27th youth Brigade; of the five hundred who went to war in 1969, he is one of ten who survived. He writes:

“Those were the days when all of us were young, very pure, and very sincere.”

Tim O’Brien wrote an article for Esquire magazine in 1987 entitled “How to tell a war story.” In it he talks about “factual” truth and Truth. He ends by writing:

“In the end, of course, a true war story is never about war. It’s about the special way that dawn spreads out on a river when you know you must cross the river and march into the mountains and do things you are afraid to do. It’s about love and memory. It’s about sorrow. It’s about sisters who never write back and people who never listen.”

I keep on my desk a small statue of a monkey with his hands over his eyes – drawn from the notion of “see no evil.” It was carved by a young man in one of the Peace Villages, established for children affected by agent orange. It is a constant reminder of the need to look as well as listen even when it is discomforting; that is the source of learning. And so these are my memories and reflections on USAFA and the subsequent path of my life. There are contradictions to be sure --- no recollections can or should be scrubbed so clean they do not reveal the complexity of our existence.

Thanks for “listening,”

Bill Wilson, USAFA Class of 1963
September 4, 2012

War Story - Photograph at Marble Mountain,

DaNang, February 2001

Bill Wilson

We stand beneath the great carved Buddha, frozen in time and space. I was here before--
thirty-five years ago - and visited this mountain of marble
in front of which artisans made marble nameplates for soldiers,
atop which American marine posts surveyed DaNang,
beneath which a VietCong hospital functioned continuously.

On this warm day in February with a sea breeze and view of China Beach, we have climbed
the carved stairs after visiting the pagodas, and I am lost amidst the changes which have
occurred since I rode my bicycle on the quiet streets of DaNang. Only with help do I find
Phan Chu Trinh high school where I taught English,
the Hotel Tourane where I drank my gin,
the Cham Museum, now clean and polished to welcome tourists. (The last
time I saw it the ARVN forces were encamped; hung their clothes to dry on
fourteenth century statuary, used the closets for bathrooms.)

I stand between two generations of Vietnamese:
one looks ahead, the other backward;
she is from the North, he from the South;
she is of winners, he of losers;
and I am between the two - more as a wall than a bridge.

Hunh is of my generation. He enlisted in the army, learned English, and became an advisor to
America. After woundings, time in the ARVN, and a year of "re-education," he found no
work except as a longshoreman in Ho Chi Minh City, the former SaiGon, the winners get to
name the streets and cities. Eight years of menial labor, separated from wife and family, he
returned home broken in spirit and in body. His wife suffered from factory work and holding
the family together, and his children find difficulty in finding employment because of his war
record. Yet he has a skill - he is an advisor to Americans. Now he takes American veterans
through VietNam, letting them reconcile their own times and places. In his aging memory
machine of a van he will take you back, but the rest is up to you.

Hue looks only ahead. No matter her parents are unhappy that she guides Americans through
VietNam, that her Uncle was killed in the war; she looks ahead to a new era. Cosmopolitan
and self-assured, she has completed her degree in English at National University. She causes
young men to swoon in the countryside as she sweeps through - a whirlwind of change. She
was born after the war ended and remembers none of it - nor does she wish to.

I wonder what they say to each other when I am absent:

what would he tell her of his life?

how would she respond?

he has paid a high price;

she has paid little.

she expects to be a "winner;"

he knows how fragile such a notion can be.

I have my own memories and hopes, but they are irrelevant to them - for I am, after all,
only a visitor now, and perhaps that is all I have ever been.

The Buddha promises enlightenment, and the joss sticks burning behind us express the hope of
such achievement, if not in this life then in the next. I light one and silently re-commit to
this path

and the three of us move on.

