

Lessons Learned in War

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Conscription—the draft—in the US ended in 1973, making Vietnam the last war in which civilian physicians were drafted for war service in the military. The changes from civilian to military life were not easy and, for foreign physicians coming with a green card for medical training to the US, the transition went from troublesome to traumatic. Most single physicians at the peak of the war were drafted, and with exception of the group of “yellow berets,” physicians who spent the war in places such as the National Institutes of Health, most were exposed to war.

Every day I see human reminders of the tragedies of war in our homeless soldiers begging on the streets of San Diego, CA. They are mostly men, bald or white-haired veterans of the Vietnam War and the younger ones from the Iraq and Afghanistan Wars who always look much older than their age.

I was drafted into the US Army in my mid-20s, soon after immigrating to the US for postgraduate medical training. Being the 1960s, this made me an ideal candidate for the draft as a young, single, and newly minted MD. Promptly after basic training I was sent to Vietnam to serve as a flight surgeon for an Army helicopter battalion. Even now after more than 40 years, when I see those poor and homeless veterans, I witness the enduring side effects that war leaves on all its participants. In my case, I still harbor not the physical but the emotional scars that I now know account for mild posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Fortunately, my PTSD is easily manageable, save for the sporadic nightmares that take me back to unwanted war memories and the exaggerated motor responses to sudden loud noises—always a surprise to those who witness those responses and an embarrassment to me.

I certainly can't forget the soldiers suffering or the Vietnamese civilians of all ages, wounded for no reason, who were simply in the wrong place at the wrong time. During the 30-plus years of medical practice after my war experiences, in a life dedicated to caring for children and their families, I have many times relived an episode that touched me deeply and contributed to my professional behavior as a pediatrician.

Being the only MD for an Army flight battalion stationed in the heart of the Mekong Delta put me in very close contact with all the pilots. My medical crew was first to take care of those wounded during battle, mainly stabilizing vital signs before evacuating them to facilities for more definitive treatment. Part of my responsibilities included listening to the pilots' private concerns because in their eyes, short of a minister, I had the capacity to understand and provide counseling. The rest of my time was dedicated to caring for the many Vietnamese civilians constantly hurt during combat operations, where they rarely knew who the aggressor was. While treating civilians, I saw horrible wounds like the burns inflicted by napalm bombs on women and their children during military operations. Wounds, almost impossible to describe, inflicted on every organ and extremity of the body, including the severe head trauma that, for Vietnamese civilians, almost always carried a fatal prognosis. Although a daily occurrence, I could not avoid sharing the emotional burden with patients confronting the face of death with a dignity and resignation that I profoundly respected but never understood.

I learned much from the suffering of so many; my bearing witness and participating in those moments profoundly imprinted on me forever. An especially painful episode involved a senior

helicopter pilot in his mid-40s with the rank of captain. Nick was at the age where he would not advance in rank any further. From the few words we exchanged during routine encounters in the evenings at the barracks, I learned that he came from a small town in the South and had risen through the ranks to become an officer through training at the Officers Candidate School.

Once back in the barracks, a building retrofitted into lodging in the only 5-story building in Can Tho, a city 60 miles south of Saigon, now Ho Chi Minh City, it was usual for the pilots to get together after each “workday” as battles are called in the daily parlance of war. The officers gathered on the top floor, which contained a bar that opened onto a balcony. From there one could see the multitudes of flares that were dropped to identify potential infiltrators into the surrounding plains. The talk was always war related, in efforts I suppose to relieve the stress of the day and the reality that the next day would bring another occasion to do or to experience harm.

One particular evening, Nick was, as usual, on his own just listening to his buddies talk when he approached me, asking to move a bit further away from the group of pilots. On the other side of the bar, we quietly sat in a corner protected by a wall and the privacy of a cloudy night. We sat there silently for a few minutes until Nick began to tell me about the search and destroy operation of the day, looking for Vietcong soldiers or sympathizers along the river traversing the Mekong Delta. A pilot in a helicopter flying near one of the hamlets reported incoming ammunition—that was all the provocation needed to call for a coordinated attack on the four or five huts comprising the hamlet. Three or four helicopters discharged their rockets into the village until only fire and

smoke remained. To end the operation, Nick was ordered to fly in a final circle around the hellish scene left from the decimated, burning huts. Suddenly he saw what looked like a small child crawling out of the burning huts and into a clearing near the thick surrounding jungle. Coolly, Nick felt instantly that the child wouldn't survive on its own and that a terrible death awaited the infant left alone in the jungle. Automatically, he pushed a button that fired his last rocket and, as the missile exploded, he flew away feeling that he had done something that would never leave his mind. When he finished telling me this experience, in a voice fractured by emotion, I looked at his tearing eyes

and instinctively I knew that the pain of this tragedy would involve me forever. No words came from my mouth. I just put a hand on his shoulder while I also cried. By the next day he was again flying another mission, carrying the hidden ghosts of his actions.

Nick and I both came out alive from the war knowing we would always be marked by the atrocities we had caused or witnessed. I don't know what happened to Nick after his discharge from the Army, I just know that my silent listening had allowed him to forever share the horror he had caused. In civilian life one does not encounter these kinds of experiences, but the pain of a family with an ill child

confronting a fatal prognosis is akin to a missile sent from an unknown source. As a physician, these painful experiences haunt me when all I can do is to be a silent participant while sharing the pain of unavoidable death. ❖

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World War IV

I know not with what weapons World War III will be fought,
but World War IV will be fought with sticks and stones.

— Albert Einstein, 1879-1955, German-born theoretical physicist