**Vietnam War – My View**

I graduated college in the class of 1966. When I was 10 years old, my dermatologist told me that my skin condition would preclude me from being drafted or serving in the military. I still spent three semesters in high school in the Reserve Officers’ Training Corps (ROTC). So, what was going on in my world with the Vietnam War? Many of the people that I knew avoided the war by going to Canada, becoming Defense workers, doing some medical service, finding some disqualifying medical condition, or just having a high draft lottery number. This generally meant that their goals in life had to be altered. For many of them, this change became a permanent career disability.

 At first, in 1965, I supported the war, after all, “My Government” would not lie to me about the need for the war. Then my dorm friend, Ron, who was well-informed, showed astonishment that an intelligent person could believe that. Why wasn’t I examining what was going on? Then, some people started returning from Vietnam and explained that this was a civil war between the North and the South. The South leaders were corrupt and the USA was supporting them because they were not Communist. However, most of the people in South Vietnam were trying to avoid the conflict to stay alive, many were South supporters during the day and North supporters at night. Later, it was found that the Gulf of Tonkin incident, which was used as an excuse for involvement in the war, was not a hostile enemy action. Our military in Vietnam was there to prop up the South Vietnam Government and not necessarily to defend the freedom of the United States and its Allies or even to protect the adjoining countries from Communist takeovers.

I finally understood what Ron was talking about. He had moved to Berkeley, where he still is, and joined the antiwar effort. I found myself in Chicago, marching down the street, chanting: “HO, HO, Ho Chi Minh, the Viet Cong (North supporters) is gonna win”. I noted the heavy presence of the FBI watching the march. They recognized and could identify all the leaders by name. I tried to campaign in the 1968 election for Eugene McCarthy, but that seemed to just help Richard Nixon get elected. The war continued on until 1975 before the military finally exited in a very disorganized way.

The eventual total over 2.6 million Americans who served in Vietnam. Unlike World War II, where military returnees found the celebration of victory and are still recognized as the “Greatest Generation”, Vietnam Veterans found the stigma of losing and the lack of economic opportunity. I wonder what the United States involvement did for the world. After all, the number civilian and military deaths in the Southeast Asia conflict on all sides during the war (1954-1975) is estimated as 2.5 million people (plus or minus the astounding number of 1 million people). There is also the recurring damage to the countries where the conflict occurred from war, explosive remnants, defoliants (like Agent Orange), and environmental damage. A large number of injured people remain in Southeast Asia, the United States and those allies that participated in the war.

Considering the number of people that I knew in the schools and colleges that I attended, I was expecting some of the people that I knew to be on the Vietnam Remembrance Wall in Washington, DC, or one of the smaller copies that travel around the country. I actually looked through all the ~60,000 names of the deceased carefully, and found NONE that I recognized at all among the hundreds of fellow students whose names I would have recognized. Perhaps the people that I knew did not represent a statistical cross-section of those who were in the war and at-risk.

The mental toll was a different and difficult to evaluate problem. When my friend was in a trench in Vietnam, a shell exploded in front of him; both the soldier to his left and the soldier to his right were instantly killed. Many soldiers came back from Vietnam with drug addiction issues; I did not know any of them. Everyone that I talked to after they had returned was definitely affected by their experiences in the conflict.

Interestingly, some of my family members have since visited the countries of Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia, where the conflict occurred, and have been welcomed by the occupants. Some of the wartime facilities have become tourist attractions. During the conflict, many Vietnamese fled and moved to the United States in search of the American way of life. Many Vietnam immigrants settled in California. In particular, I found that the most common surnames in some large Southern California Defense industry contractors are the Vietnamese names of Nguyen and Tran. Some communities have large Vietnamese populations.