

## Vietnam Portraits

*Martin Ray, photographer, writer, Vietnam veteran*



**Fig.1.** “Kids with hat.” Photo courtesy of author.

Since returning from Saigon in 1972 with a portfolio of portraits of its people in time of war I have sought a way to place my photographs in a larger context. Like *The Family of Man* exhibit in 1955, they resonate with a common humanity that transcends geopolitical divisions. I wanted to connect them also with my military experience and with that of other veterans transformed by our experience in Indochina. Trying to harmonize all these parts has been a life’s work.

I’m learning the language of memoir. Memoir helps our understanding of experience because it honors perspective as truth. It values an earnest though

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selective account of experience. It liberates the teller to explore ambiguities, and the listener to loosen the strictures of fiction and history.

A metaphor from nature illustrates my learning landscape. Take flowers. Initially we notice their pretty shapes and colors. A worker bee sees something different. In his world of ultraviolet light the 'nectar guide' stands out as the prominent pathway to reward. For us it's only a minor part of the design.

If we look at our personal stories as inflorescences, we're often attracted to patterns that gain significance with new illumination. Both the teller and the listener may have to reach inside a story for grains of nectar.

Is war an inflorescence? An explosion of innate forces that mesmerizes and consumes people? A renegade bloom of essential energy? A theater of both validation and horror?

Ultimately I found clarity for approaching the manuscript of *Vietnam Portraits* by intertwining my photographs with the stories of American veterans who had experienced transformations around the war. However they served - in combat, in support, or as conscientious objectors - their revelatory moments sanctioned the blending of Vietnamese and American perspectives within my book. Their stories had been articulated in life but not necessarily in word. They are evolutionary and ongoing. They are unfinished.

Originally I made requests of the veterans to supply their own text. In a few cases that was a productive channel, but often it led to frustrations. My collaborators didn't necessarily engage the intended topic with punctuality, precision, or ease of writing.

Through a chance encounter, I came to see the potential of oral history as a pathway for resolving those problems. I switched to an interview format for gathering material. The dialogs and the drafting of essays have more than repaid the additional work on my part. As the book nears completion it encompasses over a hundred black-and-white photographs and the poignant stories or poems of eighteen men and women.

More than forty years have passed since our days in Vietnam. Some details have dimmed in memory but the larger themes of war have become more luminous, instructive, and urgent. We have ripened. We live with strands of satisfaction, perplexity, grief, and compassion for ourselves as youngsters embarking on our destinies. Our fascination with Vietnam has shifted from 'news' to the deeper archives of the human curriculum.

As social creatures with a conscience, we like to know where we stand. We go forward in hope. Like it or not, we acknowledge that transformation comes at the cost of choosing between 'yes' and 'no.' Transformation both depends on and promotes personal growth.

I've navigated the post-Vietnam years with a fluctuating involvement in peace activism. To be most effective requires an embrace of what people have in common,

to deter aggressions of personal judgmentalism as well as that of empire. These temptations demand close vigilance. The search for commonality grants dividends of peace within and without. Peace succeeds politically when it grows from personal roots.

In retrospect, the war looks like a vast imposition on the voiceless people in the photographs. We now see them with tenderness and diversity, imagine their strength and suffering. We think of the soldiers as the imposers, a separate and menacing presence.

Placing the photographs together with the veterans' stories has helped me bridge a divide between two peoples who collided brutally in history. In the images of Vietnamese going about their daily lives we're aware of an exotic sweetness that parallels our familiar world. From the strange violence of war we're given accounts of in-breaking consciousness by the Americans that reveal an underlying element of humanity in their natures, too.

Combat requires the creation and dehumanization of an enemy, an attitude that saturates military training and, more insidiously, the sponsoring culture from which that manpower is gathered. The young men and women who are drawn into war, where the veil of responsibility for life and death is parted, are forever altered. They embrace their choices to varying degrees and may make discoveries about their own humanity. While recording that process with these participating veterans I have been able to attend to the intimate layers of my own life story as well.



Martin Ray at the White House gate, December 2010, petitioning the President to end the war in Afghanistan.

“Coming from a military family and ROTC, I was commissioned in the Regular Army. Training continued in the Airborne, Ranger, and Engineer Officer Schools, then on construction assignments in Thailand and Germany. In August 1971 I followed the logic of this journey to Vietnam.

I returned to civilian life in Gloucester Massachusetts, raised a family and founded our landscape gardening business that diversified to include granite sculpture. I became a member of the Religious Society of Friends (Quaker) and Veterans for Peace.”

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**Fig. 2.** “Woman weighing peppers.” Photo courtesy of artist.

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“In Quang Ngai during the war I had guessed that women were doing the organizing and support work for the Viet Cong. It was only logical. Now twenty-five years later I could hear their stories. One of the key characters in the South was a midwife. The Phoenix program had put a bounty on her head equal to a teacher's salary for 100 years. While she was assisting at a birth a couple of GIs walked in. They'd seen plenty of blood and gore themselves but they'd never seen this. They left in a hurry.

Another woman would carry messages in and out of the strategic hamlets. She would slip in using a code with lights. Once she was confronted by ARVN soldiers as she entered a house. A three-year-old grabbed her around the knees and called her ‘mother’. How did the child know to do that? The kid instinctively knew whom to trust, and whom not to. That was the fabric of the stories they told me. So much of it had been done by the women. The ones who were the most flirtatious, the most beautiful, were out to dupe you guys. The woman who was the Minister of Health for the revolutionary side, a very good French doctor, socialized in the home of each successive American ambassador at cocktail parties wearing her *ao dai*, overhearing all the conversations in French and English. They were in a kind of serious theater, and in combat.

Today they use an expression, “We bent with the war and we were bent by it.” They did whatever they could in each situation to make it work, to wiggle through. Like our veterans, they have been shaped by wartime burdens and camaraderie. The horror, the agony, the physical pain are still with them. But there was also something very special about those years. It's a lost youth, a lost generation, but not entirely negative.

A good friend of mine in Hanoi, a woman who'd been a medic at Dien Bien Phu, asked me to translate the memoir General Giap had written for the 50th anniversary of the battle. It was interesting, very interesting, to get that point of view. Her husband had been one of the division commanders. He was responsible for the battlefield at the end. To clarify the story I taped interviews with many of the top Vietnamese generals. Not one of those men set out to be in the military, from General Giap on down. He did study military science in the Soviet Union in the 1960s, but he'd already been the victor at Dien Bien Phu. They had all wanted to be teachers or lawyers.

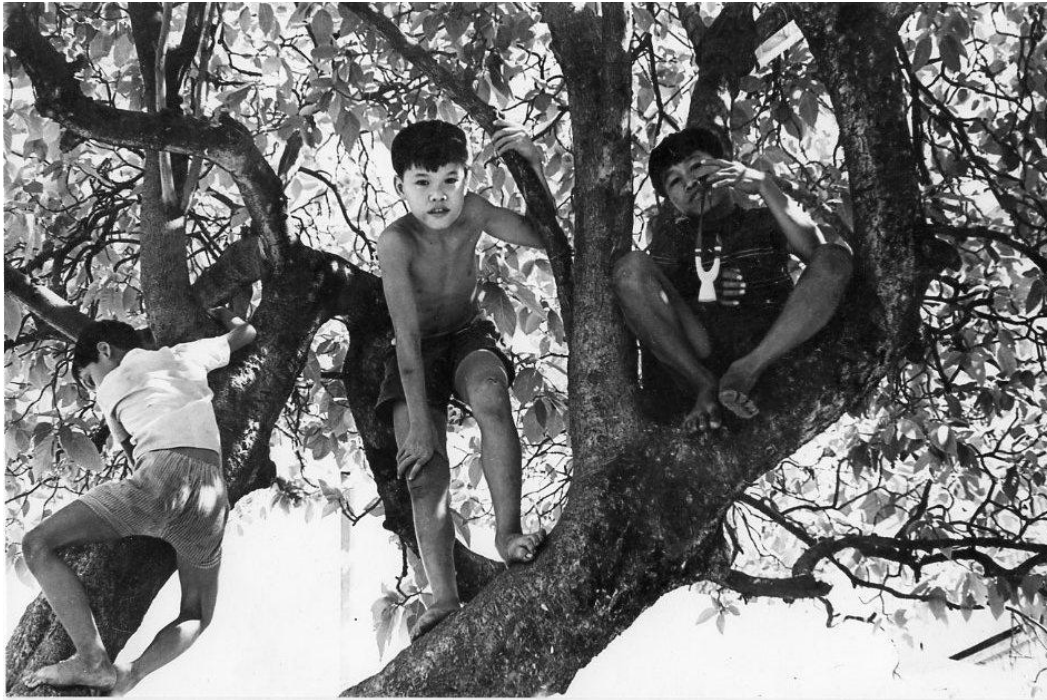
In writing the piece I wanted American veterans to see that their war was a replay of the French war. Many Vietnamese had the same roles, but they had a lot more experience the second time around. General Lê Trọng Tấn, commander of the entry into Saigon in 1975, led the assault into de Castries' bunker at Dien Bien Phu in 1954. I wanted veterans to understand, if they could take it in, that the United States could never have won that war, no matter how much stuff we dropped on them. The Vietnamese had the endurance. They had complete dedication. They had a history of uniting against invaders.” –Lady Borton.



Lady Borton divides her time between a farm in Appalachian, Ohio and her primary residence in Hanoi where she works as a translator. Her books include *After Sorrow: An American Among the Vietnamese* (1995) and *Sensing the Enemy* (1984) based on her work as a health administrator with Vietnamese Boat People on the Malaysian island of Pulau Bidong.

“Seeing the war on television in 1967, the refugees streaming across the screen, I got in my mind I should go over there and do something. The headquarters of the American Friends Service Committee (AFSC) was almost across the street from where I was teaching school in Philadelphia. I sat in on the personnel department to get them to take me. AFSC traditionally worked with people on all sides of a conflict. You are born here, you were born there, most people don't have choices. That resonated with me.

I spent two years as an administrator in a prosthetics clinic in Quang Ngai. We treated people regardless of what side they were on. Ninety percent of the province was loyal to the revolutionaries, including people wearing the ARVN uniform. I learned to tell who was who but never asked.”



**Fig. 3.** “Boys in tree” Photo courtesy of author.

“I had the honor of flying with the highest performing organization I have ever known, the Mustangs. But the Mustangs kept running out of crew chiefs. “High attrition,” the Army called it. My bosses apparently thought I was serious enough to be entrusted with an entire gunship. They made me a crew chief. Sandy Noyes, a wizened old man just turned 20, my own previous crew chief, taught me how to take care of a Bell UH-1C ‘Huey’ gunship. The Mustangs assigned me #667. She was more living creature than machine, part magic carpet, part dragon.

I flew 1,200 combat hours, shot down three times. Two of those events were really just forced landings because of disabling ground fire. Once, however, in the middle of the night, near the village of Phu Hoa Dong, we were just plain blown out of the sky. I’m still alive only because pilot Captain Harry Gawkowski had the stick.

Today I’m looking at a picture of a Vietnamese village incinerated by napalm before my eyes. Twenty minutes after the bombing U.S. troops were unable to enter the village. The ground was still so hot it melted the soles of their boots. I gasp at these memories because, even after all these years, they still hit me like a punch in the stomach.

Nothing I experienced in Vietnam was remotely comparable to the terror

of PTSD. Facing the enemy was nothing compared to carrying the knowledge that I helped bring suffering to an innocent people by a nation—my nation—unwilling to look itself in the mirror.

PTSD is always with you. It can flare up at any time, and you are all alone with it. I was *never* alone in Vietnam. I always had my buddies, and they had me.

When we came home – those of us who did – we had the rest of our lives to deal with our PTSD. If it's more than some of us can handle, as it was for my friend John Frasso, we take our lives. John Frasso was one of the toughest guys I've ever known. He was fearless in combat.

If our nation orders its soldiers to do things against which their souls recoil as wrong, it is essentially sentencing them to soul death. PTSD, in my view, is the symptom of that assault on the soul.” -Larry Shook.



Journalist Larry Shook lives in Spokane Washington where he edits and publishes the online *Camas Magazine*. As an investigative reporter he helped break the story of half-a-century of secret radiation releases at the Hanford Nuclear Reservation

“In 1967-68 I was a door gunner and then a crew chief on a helicopter gunship. In III Corps of South Vietnam — the Mekong Delta — every day and every night there was an OK Corral showdown happening somewhere. We were gunfighters. We went to the gunfights the infantry invited us to. That's how we could help keep them alive so they could come home to the American Dream.

During the Tet Offensive I flew 48 hours straight without sleep. In the end I couldn't keep my eyes open except when we were taking fire. After we stood down I was beyond sleep because of all the adrenaline in my system. That's what I know about bad drug trips.

Healing, at least for me, requires honoring the pain of the heart, saying I'm sorry, and then trying to make something good out of the rest of your life—post-traumatic service decision.”