

The Vietnam War: Does America still have heroes?

By Stephanie Wakeford, LOV Class 2010

(Written for UNC-Chapel Hill English class, 2011)

The grandiose length cannot begin to compare to the emotional depth that encompasses such a commemorative structure. The black, luminescent stone possesses a reflective quality, which enables the onlooker to view their own personal image, while also having the ability to identify directly with the names of those lost. It's a mirror, a reflection of the past, a vast shadow that radiates pain and suffering. It is the Vietnam Wall, a representation of tribute and a trademark for controversy.

The collective memory pertaining to the American citizen view of the war is incredibly controversial, much like the controversies associated with the Vietnam wall. The wall is a place where Veterans have the opportunity to be vulnerable, to relinquish any of the heavy weight burdening their ability to positively learn from the war, and make the most of their experiences. On the contrary, many view the wall to serve as a reminder of confliction and pain. James Webb shares his view on the war, "the Vietnam War, was a conflict which today's most conspicuous voices by and large opposed, and in which few of them served. The 'best and brightest' of the Vietnam age group once made headlines by castigating their parents for bringing about the war in which they would not fight, which has become the war they refuse to remember" (Webb, 2010).

Americans opposing our involvement in Vietnam was extremely common, and citizens were not hesitant in claiming that lives were being lost for a war that we didn't need to be fighting. Statistics adding to the controversy include: "the most accurate poll of Veterans showed that 91% were glad they'd served their country, 74% enjoyed their time in the service, and 89% agreed with the statement that 'our troops were asked to fight in a war which our political leaders in Washington would not let them win'" (Webb, 2010). Our country still remains in denial about the war, so it is our job as a society now to take action and educate.

Henry Kissinger wrote in his article titled *What Vietnam Teaches Us*, "For younger leaders, an understanding of the controversies of their fathers has proved elusive, obliging them to slide into the same dilemmas in their contemporary policies." The importance of studying this particular war is abundantly superior as it not only pays tribute and honors the deserving veterans that valiantly served for our country in such a controversial setting, but learning about our history's past mistakes and victories lays the foundation for a promising future. Studying the Vietnam era is immensely important as it marks a time in history when our country was suffering and great controversy was in play. We were suffering the negative effects of retaliation, rebuttal, and conflicting attitudes; and along the way we lost side of what it meant to appreciate those of our own whom were overseas fighting.

Through education, community in the classroom, and establishing relationships, we as a nation can remember the Vietnam Veterans as heroes and teach post-war generations about the realities of the controversial era. With focus on Millbrook High School in Raleigh, North Carolina's Lessons of Vietnam program, we then can shift efforts from localized vicinities and expand them to a national level.

The research process for obtaining responses to interview questions I created for this project was extremely informative, and benefited my overall goal for this Unit tremendously. WDTV news anchor, and Vietnam Veteran Larry Stogner had a thought-provoking response to my question "What actions can our nation take to remove the negative

undertones associated with the Vietnam Era?" He stated, "Personally I believe we'd be beating a dead horse. You'd be putting lipstick on a pig to portray the Vietnamese experience as anything other than what it was—a nasty ill-advised conflict involving an enemy and a terrain that was foreign to us...and not supported by the folks back home. Time will take care of it eventually, but I hope historians will be kinder than the media as politicians were."

A large factor of my research relies on whether or not America still has heroes and how we can remember the Veterans of the Vietnam War as the true heroes that they are. And the heroism does not stop there. Mrs. Poling, creator and teacher of the Lessons of Vietnam elective at Millbrook High embodies what it means to be a hero. Speaker Jim Zumwalt, who retired as Lt. Col to the Marine Corps in the Vietnam War, spoke of Mrs. Poling's heroism beautifully. "With her as a teacher, you too have been blessed by having a hero in your life—one who is opening doors to new horizons for you. As you go through those doors, it is important to remember two things: 1. Never forget the person who opened the door for you and 2. This is best done by always remembering to try to open a door for others!"

Mrs. Poling never tires in teaching her students the importance of the generation saying, "Since I was a child, I have loved the study of history, but as a young teacher I quickly discovered that not all of my students shared my passion. So I began experimenting with different methods to make the learning of history more inviting. One of the most successful methods has proven to be inviting guest speakers into the classroom. During the past twenty-seven semesters, I have been using this instructional approach that I call the Community-in-the-Classroom to teach a popular high school elective called the Lessons of Vietnam (LOV). I invite as many as twenty well-informed visitors into our classroom to help students investigate and better understand what was happening, both at home and abroad, during the Vietnam Era."

Lt. Col. Jim Zumwalt represents heroism to a tee, as his and his family's story is nothing short of impressive. His brother served as a Navy swift boat commander and his father as Admiral in the Navy. Their family story is riveting, heart wrenching, and inspirational. While in Vietnam, Jim's brother Elmo came into contact with the chemical Agent Orange, that later led to his two forms of cancer. The ironic twist to this, is that it was Admiral Zumwalt, Elmo's father, who approved the use of Agent Orange. Elmo's life was claimed due to the cancer, but he never once gave up. Upon his death, the Zumwalt family has used this experience in benefitting the lives of others with situations similar to Elmo's. Lt. Col. Zumwalt aids in the sustainment of the Bone Marrow Foundation in which his parents established.

Heroes cast shadows of reliability, strength, and courage. Heroes are life's precious gifts in which enable the flourishing of others. In spite of the dread, terror, and fear that blankets our earth, heroes are still lurking in the midst, awaiting an opportunity to strike their valiantly brave swords into the evil that emanates throughout our vindictive world. Larry Stogner said, "People have called me a hero for serving. That is not a hero. That is serving one's country and doing one's duty. A hero is one who exemplifies courage by doing something extraordinary. We throw that term around much too loosely. If I'm a hero, what word do we have for the guy who falls on a grenade to save his buddies or who charges an enemy machine gun emplacement to save his platoon? What word?"

In teaching and educating generations today about the implications of the war, we realize that steps are being taken in order to eliminate some of the negative tendencies associated with the war. Veteran Ric Vandett said, "Our nation has taken some steps with the efforts surrounding the creation of the Vietnam Veterans' Memorial (The Wall). Also, organized activities such as the class Mrs. Poling is teaching helps people to see the realities of that era and to show appreciation to all Vietnam vets. The fact that Vietnam vets rarely, if ever, get the support is something that sticks with most of us to this day. Some type of organized 'Thank you' or 'Welcome home' at state and national levels would be a nice gesture and would be appreciated."

This is exactly what embodies the purpose of this project. With focus on Mrs. Poling's LOV class and the Veterans partaking in her Community in the Classroom approach, I will try to help our state and nation not to fall ignorant to our country's past. One of Mrs. Poling's close friends and class speaker General George B. Price shared, "Thank you for helping our country get out of denial about this era. Much obliged to you, Mrs. Poling."

"We often hear, 'Those who don't learn from history are condemned to repeat it,' I'm a big believer in that adage. As fewer and fewer Americans serve in the military or even know people who serve/have served in the military, it will be important that the lessons of any conflict, and particularly Vietnam, are passed on to future generations" offers Vietnam vet Bill Mayall who enrolled in the Air Force Delayed Officer Enlistment Program during the war. Larry Hines, a hardworking "donut dolly" felt it extremely important to serve her country in whatever venue was most effective and useful.

"Throughout high school and college, I was thoroughly confused and upset about this faraway war that was taking the best years and many lives away from the young men in my generation. I knew that Vietnam was going to have a forever influence on my generation, and I wanted to get as close as possible to the front lines to find out for myself just why we were there." She was thrilled to hear that she was accepted into the Red Cross in Vietnam in their Supplemental Recreation Activities Overseas program.

All of these brilliantly brave, and beautifully courageous war heroes all have one thing in common: Mrs. Poling. Being the inspirational, heroic woman that she is, she brought all of these veterans together and made them feel appreciated, something well deserved and long overdue. In order to remove the negative undertones associated with the Vietnam War, Lt. Col. Zumwalt says "three things are required: education, education, education," and that is exactly the tactic that Mrs. Poling is employing.

By accentuating the importance of educating the generations to come on an era that produced endless controversy, we can influence the students of society today in the hopes that we can shape a future divulged completely from learning the mistakes of our past. "Our Nation's most valued asset is its young people. What they learn in the early years of their education is important in molding them as young adults. It is imperative that they understand the life we enjoy in a free society only came because those before us were willing to make great sacrifices and act selflessly in preserving our freedoms. A key reason I return to the LOV classes is to impart a sense of responsibility to students. They will soon be guardians of a sacred trust--they will become trustees of a way of life for which so many before them have fought and died. They must not take this trust lightly," Zumwalt stated. My proposal is simply to educate, and by utilizing the efforts and *lessons of Vietnam* that Mrs. Poling has worked so hard to establish, we can expand such activities to a broader level, and not only by teaching the lessons of Vietnam, but by instilling the strength, determination, and bravery necessary to discover a more peaceful way of life.

Bibliography:

Kissinger, Henry. "What Vietnam Teaches Us." *Newsweek* (2008): 1-3. Web. 24 Mar. 2011. <<http://www.newsweek.com/2008/10/24/what-vietnam-teaches-us.html>>.

Galloway, Joe. "Joe Galloway: Today, Vietnam Is Different from When the War Started and Ended." *Military.com* (2005): 1-5. Web. 24 Mar. 2011. <http://www.military.com/Opinions/0,,Galloway_050405,00.html>.

Webb, James. ""Heroes of the Vietnam Generation"." *American Enterprise* (2000): 1-5. Web. 24 Mar. 2011.