

Ding Dong

Ed McLaughlin

My hometown has a Vietnam memorial with 26 names of the soldiers who lost their lives in a conflict on the other side of the world, and I still don't know why. Some of us were lucky enough to come home alive, but it seemed like the country just wanted to wash its hands of us. There were not too many supports for Vietnam veterans. We were young men who had nothing to do with starting a conflict in a foreign land but were given the job of killing or being killed.

One minute you're at the pier eating clams with your girlfriend; a few months later you're in a rainstorm eating dirt, soaking wet, cold, hungry, scared to death, and trying not to get your ass shot up by Charlie or whoever is out there doing their best to kill you. Don't think we didn't get angry that our country threw its young men into harm's way. Some of us held deep anger for many years.

Towards the end of my second tour of duty, I stopped talking to others and slipped into my own head. I hid in my isolation and felt like I was going crazy. While on a convoy, I ran into a couple of guys from home. I knew from their expressions that I was a shock to them. They looked at me like I was from another world. Years later, we would laugh like hell about that day many years earlier, like we were referring to some patient in an asylum. This was a forecast of my returning to the world waiting for me, and it was always on my mind.

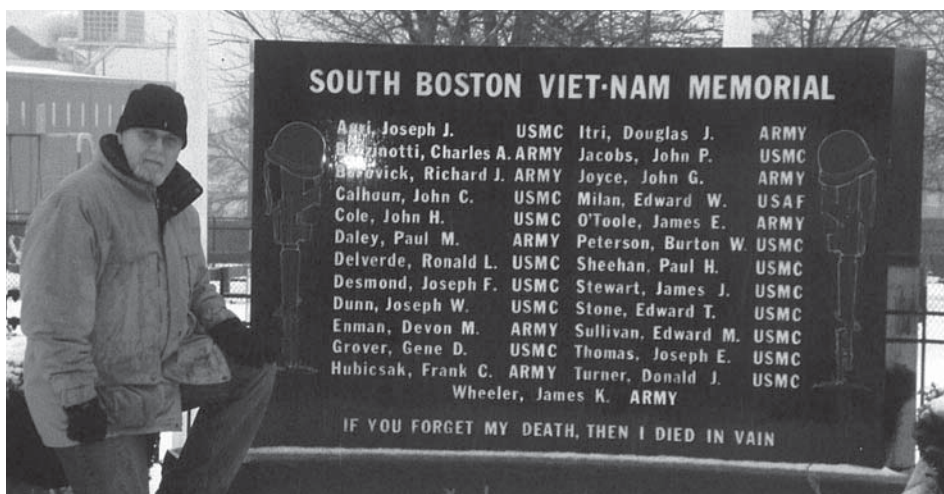
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and felt loved by. But that stopped when I made the decision that it would be easier not to care at all about anything.

I stopped writing home. The Red Cross contacted me with a request from my family that I let them know I was okay. I didn't want to communicate with people from my past. Deep inside I knew this was not the right way to feel.

Mentally, I was somewhere between a scared little boy and a monster, fearing both but mostly the monster. I never knew which I would be at any given moment. I didn't feel any positive emotions—love, affection, happiness. These were things of the past. I couldn't even fake it, and I'd

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Ed McLaughlin at the South Boston Vietnam Memorial. Photo by Leanne McLaughlin.

lost the ability to really care about life. All I really wanted was to be left alone. I had become emotionally numb, a shell of the man I wanted to be.

Upon discharge from the Army, I found myself standing in the middle of the Seattle airport, looking at the arrivals and departures – confused, angry, and wondering where I should go. I wanted to go back to Vietnam. Vietnam had become my home. Where I *should* have been was in a military base being evaluated for release into society. They could have at least fixed my two rotten front teeth. The military has a way of chewing up youth and spitting them out when they're done.

Then I thought about the safety of home. That's where I should go. If I fall, there would be people to pick me up. I knew my people would forgive me for not being in touch for the last six months of my second tour in Vietnam. I knew they would forget the way I had treated them on my last leave. And I knew my solid red, white, and blue town would be there to support me.

But coming home was a shock to everyone. My dad kind of understood me, but my mom was afraid of me. She wouldn't come near me. Most people in my community were busy with their own lives. They welcomed me home, but then we didn't have much to talk about.

I was a Vietnam veteran living in someone else's world, isolated from a society that didn't care how we were doing. I tried getting treatment

for my psychological problems at the Veterans' Administration (VA), but they ignored me. I was told I was no different from other veterans returning from war. "Time will heal the wounds," is what I remember hearing. I was also having a problem with my digestive and urinary systems.

I was told that I would have to learn to live with the pain. To this day, I have never returned to the VA, and yes, I have learned to live with the pain.

Over the years, I have become much more of the man I hoped

I would be, and I have many people to thank for that. The damage that I suffered from the war is still a part of who I am, but I've learned to be a full-blown lover of life and to accept the challenges that are sent my way. Vietnam was a long time ago, yet it's still a very big part of who I am.

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Ed McLaughlin served two tours of duty in Vietnam between 1968 and 1970. He worked for the Boston Water and Sewer Commission for 30 years and is the father of two wonderful grown ladies. He participates in a writing workshop offered by David Connolly (see p. 30).

Some Facts about the Vietnam War

The U.S. was involved in the Vietnam War from 1959-1975.

By 1967, the U.S. had dropped more bombs on North Vietnam than it dropped on all of its enemies during World War II (1939-1945).

By 1969, at the height of the war, the U.S. had about 543,000 troops in Vietnam. Many of them were teenagers. The average age of U.S. soldiers in Vietnam was 19.

Millions of Vietnamese were killed. Many of them were civilians. The war created about 10 million homeless Vietnamese refugees. It left hundreds of thousands of orphans.

Almost 60,000 U.S. troops died in Vietnam.