

Correcting the Record About Vietnam Veterans' Service

By R.W. Trewyn

Retiring from academia this year, it was a shock to realize that every major success I've had since 1970 was thanks to serving in the Army. Yes, the impact of my time in Vietnam looks amazingly different today than it did in 1969. Ordeals back then turned into surprising positives, although some longstanding negatives remain, still in need of correcting.

As a 24-year-old draftee who spent only 19 months on active duty, returning to civilian life should have been easy. It was not.

Granted, 1969 was not the optimal time to make that transition. The country was a chaotic mess, and going back to college three weeks after being discharged was probably not the wisest decision, as the focal point for most of the national madness was on college campuses.

Nonetheless, my early out from the Army was due to shrapnel embedded a couple inches from my heart, so I was confident nothing could be worse than what I had just experienced.

I was wrong.

The war in Vietnam was a walk in the park compared to the first few months back in the United States. Yes, the so-called welcome was that bad. Combat with my Delta Company brothers proved we were one. Coming home proved we were not.

How awful is that?

Five months after getting home I was ready to go back in the Army, and I would have volunteered to return to Vietnam.

I could trust my brothers there; I had no brothers to trust at home. Moreover, dying with brethren in a foreign land looked better than living with who I saw as traitorous enemies in America.

Change of Heart

Then, about five months after going back to college, arsonists deployed Molotov cocktails and kerosine in two different incidents on campus. A towering inferno convinced me not to take the easy way out and rejoin the Army.

To clarify why that about-face occurred, a little backtracking is required.

I was raised on a 102-acre dairy farm 2 miles north of

Whitewater, Wisconsin. There's a college in Whitewater, and we had a clear view from our farm of the tower on Old Main, the signature structure on campus. Not only that, it was a teachers' college and kindergarten through 10th grade of my education occurred inside Old Main.

In 1969, I only had a year left to complete my undergraduate degree there, at what is today the University of Wisconsin—Whitewater.

Standing on Main Street on Feb. 7, 1970, witnessing Old Main ablaze up the hill, a fire was lit in me as well. From where I stood, I could see the glowing windows of my kindergarten classroom on the first



Then-Staff Sgt. R.W. Trewyn at a fire support base in Vietnam in 1969. COURTESY PHOTO.

floor of the west wing. The longer I stared, the angrier I got. Anti-war protestors did it, I was sure of it, but no one was ever convicted.

By the end of the night, every classroom from my youth was incinerated, though the east wing survived. However, when the pinnacle of the Old Main tower started to fall, I turned and walked away. I couldn't watch the end, or the impact. More than 50 years later, I can still see the top of the flaming tower—frozen at a 45-degree angle—on its terminal plunge.

Inner Resolve

Before my bachelor's degree was awarded the following August, that late-night conflagration induced a couple substantial changes in me. First, my enthusiasm to reenlist turned to ashes along with Old Main. Second, my fatigue jackets were pulled out of the back-of-the-closet duffle bag and, contrary to Army regulations, the stripes and patches didn't get removed.

That outerwear, with my staff sergeant stripes and Combat Infantry Badge, became my preferred attire on campus.

Not only was I proud of my wartime service, I was proud of those I served with in Vietnam. The majority of them were as good as any troops, in any war, anywhere, anytime. I knew that was true, contrary to what was being conveyed on TV and in the newspapers.

How can I be sure of that?

By experiencing selfless service up close and personal; I lived it. Entrusting your life to your brothers around you while they're entrusting their lives to you is awe-inspiring. Brothers do that in war—any war, anywhere, anytime. Your back-

ground, your heritage, your differences mean nothing. You are brothers, and your brothers' lives are more important than your own.

So, why does any of this matter when I retired in 2022?

Army Strong

Only recently did I appreciate that every professional success I've enjoyed over the past 52 years was because of my time in the Army. Every achievement was aided significantly by it, but there's no way I would have held any of my university leadership positions had it not been for the NCO Candidate Course at Fort Benning, Georgia, and leading troops in combat.

Because of that experience, while at Kansas State University I served for 16 years as president of the research foundation, nine years as vice provost for research and dean of the graduate school, and seven years as vice president for research. It turns out that the Army infantry motto—"Follow Me"—works everywhere, not just in combat.

Before being drafted into the Army in January of 1968, I had led nothing. Leading soldiers in war clearly made the difference.

Regardless of how well one is trained, no one knows how they will react under fire until someone is, in fact, trying to kill them. Looking death in the eye will tell the tale, and from my experience in Vietnam, only about one in 50 troops failed the test.

The majority looked out for their brothers, for their allies, and for the civilian population, even knowing some of the latter might side with the Viet Cong. A minority looked out only for themselves.

Those failing the test under fire undoubtedly gravitated to the

antiwar movement when they returned home. And there were stories of war crimes, whether true or not.

Did such crimes occur in Vietnam?

Regrettably, yes, a few, just as they have in every war.

Were these crimes the norm in Vietnam?

Absolutely not.

The South Vietnamese boat people who risked their lives to come to the U.S. proved that. The exodus occurred after the war, when they were trying to escape communist postwar savagery. Many died at sea.

Nonetheless, back home, every person who served in Vietnam—drafted or volunteer, male or female—was painted with the same war criminal brush. My honorable brothers didn't deserve it. Neither did my Vietnam War sisters who served predominantly in lifesaving health care roles.

My post-retirement goal is to set the record straight. The small percentage who couldn't be proud of their service in Vietnam captured the national narrative a half-century ago. As the number of Vietnam vets remaining decreases daily, it's time for those of us who returned proud of our service to correct the record.

Yesterday's false legacy must be remedied today.

R.W. Trewyn retired in 2022 as vice president for research emeritus after 28 years at Kansas State University. He was wounded in action in Vietnam after serving for 3½ months as a staff sergeant in Company D, 2nd Battalion, 3rd Infantry Regiment (The Old Guard), 199th Light Infantry Brigade. He holds a doctorate in microbial physiology from Oregon State University.