

Remembrances of a Younger Sister
of The Vietnam War

for

The 50th Anniversary of the Vietnam War, 2020-2025

Our town was a small insignificant place in southern New England, home to many small farm families where Moms reigned over the home during the day, while Dads went to work. I was the youngest of five children, having two sisters and two brothers, one of each born in the 1930s and one of each close to my age born in the 1940s.

Life was simple in the post WWII days of my 1950s youth. My folks moved to the country from our suburban home close to Narragansett Bay because we had outgrown our home. Our new home was a huge twenty room, very old and historic house that Dad would eventually restore; but in the meantime, we all got to have our own bedrooms—except my sister “Pea” and me. We were only eleven months apart and were like two peas in a pod. We dressed alike, played together, learned together, and roomed together.

The little village of Potterville was close to the Connecticut line about twenty miles west of Providence, RI. and our farm consisted of Mom’s sheep, my brother’s chickens, and Dad’s Sawmill. Over time our farm would become a Tree Farm, thanks to the efforts of my Dad and my brother Bill. We did not know it at the time, but we would be transitioning from this uncomplicated life to a period of considerable political and social unrest.

The change was slow and subtle at first. A close friend of my brother Bill’s who graduated from High School in 1960 went into the Army. Connie J. was a tall handsome blonde, blue eyed fellow of Swedish descent who lived about a mile down the road from us on a Dairy Farm. In my naïveté I did not think a lot about it at the time. No one discussed war, WWII or any war that I can remember, children were protected from such realities. After about a year and a half, Connie came home on leave and arrived on our doorstep to see his best friend Bill, and to tell us all about his travels. We were all excited to hear his news. Connie had matured significantly in that short period of time and spoke in a suave tone of his training as a Paratrooper. He told about being flown over and dropped down into the jungles in South Vietnam. He was called an Advisor. He didn’t tell us what that meant, or maybe I don’t remember that part because it was so foreign to my understanding, but he did tell us about the far away beautiful land of Vietnam. That was 1961 and was my first awareness of American’s early involvement in Southeast Asia. The history books will tell us today that America first became involved in the Vietnam conflict in 1954.

My brother Bill graduated from High School in 1961 and he would end up in Vietnam also. After finishing college at the University of New Hampshire, and in his sixth year of National Guard Duty, he was called up. Sadly, it was one month after marrying my roommate from Nursing School and at the very end of his National Guard commitment. That was very

hard. He had a newly established business which was a refinement and outgrowth of his high school business—cutting pulpwood to earn money so he could go to college. I remember how proud he was to have a small business at such a young age. I remember him asking me to paint his name on his truck, he was so proud of that truck. However, in 1967 like many young men, his draft number was called and General Wm Westmoreland and the Army had other business plans for him to attend. He was a Signal Corpsman and served in Saigon, part of the 1967 buildup of troops called for by President Lyndon B. Johnson. Bill was not a drinker or a “juicer” as they were called in “Nam”, he drank a lot of water which was unfortunately and unknowingly impure. When he came home, he was very thin from the ingestion of parasites. He was more like a “Number-Ten GI”—one who did not spend a lot of money in contrast to a “Number-One GI”, one who did spend a lot of money in Vietnam. The songs we would hear on the radio at that time were “I’m leaving on a Jet Plane” by Peter, Paul and Mary, and “the Green Green Grass of Home” by Porter Wagoner (1965)

I had graduated from High School in 1964 and had already bid farewell to my boyfriend who was in the Air Force. This kind fellow ended up in Pleiku near the Pleiku Air Base about 180 miles south of the DMZ and 50 miles east of the Cambodian border. He would write to me from Vietnam when I was in Nursing School in Concord, NH telling me about his living conditions and what life was like there.

I know he didn’t tell me the whole story as it was war and it was ugly. Drugs were a problem among the troops, as was their language, and the use of black humor that helped to cover their fears. Words from WWII like “fubar” and “snafu” helped them to cope with the destructive acts they witnessed. It was hard for me to wrap my head around his descriptions as it was so foreign to life here at home, yet we were all too aware of the war’s atrocities.

One other remembrance was of my girlfriend’s misfortune. We graduated together and had been members of the Future Nurses of America Club in High School. She was engaged to Joseph N. right after High School graduation, and they planned to marry after she finished Nursing School and he finished his obligation of military service. Joey was in Vietnam for a very short time before being killed.

The War was pressing down hard on Americans, it was hard to understand. The draft would take our men off to this far away place, and then we would hear Walter Cronkite on CBS Evening News tell of city after city, village after village being destroyed and numbers of people losing limbs and life. The body counts came at the end of the news. The war was destroying people’s dreams, destroying people’s lives. Hearing the constant war news on the TV every night, experiencing the loss of our blood and treasure, and not knowing when it would end— these were just a few reasons why more and more people protested. What were we doing? The war had never been declared a real War, it was a conflict, so why were we there? One protest song I remember is “Everybody look what’s going down?” which came from a quote “for what it’s worth” by Buffalo Springfield in his 1967 song.

A few years after graduating from Nursing School and from a Specialty Course in Operating Room Nursing at the Mary Hitchcock Memorial Hospital in Hanover, NH, I met the man I was sure I would marry! However, I had been asked by the Army Recruiter to sign up—they

desperately needed OR nurses in Vietnam. My girlfriend did sign up, but I did not. I decided to give love a chance. Victor Y. and I were married in February of 1970. He and his Dad owned and operated a Real Estate business in White River Junction, VT. Victor was a graduate of UVM, and an ROTC officer who had served in Seoul, South Korea. He was considered “backfill” for an officer who was called to serve in the conflict in Southeast Asia. We have two daughters, the second born in 1973. In January of 1973 President Richard Nixon informed America that the U.S. had reached agreement with the North Vietnamese on the Paris Peace Accords. But the war was far from over. It wasn’t until April 29, 1975 that President Gerald Ford ordered the evacuation of all American personnel remaining in South Vietnam because Saigon was under constant rocket and artillery fire. Saigon was falling. An 18-hour evacuation of 1000 civilians and 7,000 refugees was quickly accomplished by air lift in a massive evacuation effort. The consequences of the war went on for years after its “end”. Many of our veterans spent months, even years in Veterans Administration Hospitals recovering from their wounds, and or being treated for Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder. The VAMC in White River Junction, VT played a significant role in the diagnosis and treatment of PTSD. Victor’s cousin Robert J. of Lebanon, NH died of another disease resulting from the war--Cancer caused by Agent Orange. He left a young wife and two young sons.

The war lasted approximately 19 years, but the aftereffects of the war still live on. 58,220 Americans died in Vietnam, 100 from Vermont, 226 from New Hampshire, 341 from Maine, 331 from Massachusetts, and 209 from Rhode Island. Years later when I was in London, England visiting my daughter, we saw the musical “Miss Saigon”. The loud pulsating sound of the incoming Huey Helicopters brought me to tears.

Rebecca H Y Book

Regent, Thomas Chittenden Chapter of the Daughters of the American Revolution, WRJ, VT Historian, Vermont State Society of DAR

Ms. Book lives in West Lebanon NH and serves on the Heritage Commission for the City of Lebanon

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