

Joseph Volpe

WE ARE VIET NAM VETERANS

Then, as a young man, and in the company of many young men, I saw the country for the first time. It appeared on the left side of the airplane peeking through the mists of the rising monsoon -- mountainous and menacing and incredibly green. I was sitting at a window seat and I remember looking down at this place I could not believe I was coming to and feeling hollow.

Now, as a not so young man, and in the company of mostly young women, I am returning to that place I first saw thirty-four years ago. I am not sitting at a window seat this time. I need the aisle now. And I am not feeling hollow, but instead deeply apprehensive and, more unexpectedly, strangely emotional.

Then, it was Cam Ranh Bay that was my entry to Viet Nam. Cam Ranh Bay was a sprawling military base and I remember being struck and surprised by its mass, but mostly by its look of permanence. I don't know what I was expecting, but it wasn't what I saw. This was my very first of many surprises about the war.

Now, I'm returning to Viet Nam by way of Hanoi. Then, this would have been unthinkable. But, here I am, in Hanoi, shuffling down one of those glass enclosed airport walkways musing about the distance between then and now. As I make my way, I look over my left shoulder and I am brought to a stop. Framing the conspicuously empty tarmac are two hangars that I remember from watching television coverage of the release of the POW's in 1973. For whatever strange reason, my angle of vision seems identical to the angle shot on that day of release so long ago. I stare at the hangars remembering. I feel odd. And it happens. Then becomes now and now, then. A flash of temporal dislocation, but just a flash. Gone as quickly as it comes. I hurry on in this eerily empty airport to claim my baggage and meet up with the students with whom I am traveling.

Then, I traveled often. On the road -- north to Bong Son and west to An Khe. By helicopter -- west to Pleiku and Kontum and south to Tuy Hoa and Nha Trang. But I did not know the country. My travels were narrow and limiting. I knew only my route and sometimes even that felt like knowing too much. Those with whom I traveled were often hard and talked often a hard talk.

Now, I'm traveling from Hanoi to Saigon. The route is still narrow but, at least, it's long and with many stops. Those with whom I am traveling, students, are anything but hard and they talk not a hard talk, but the talk of joy. Today we are on the central coast of a unified Viet Nam and we are traveling to My Lai, the site of the notorious massacre.

We arrive at the site. Our guide is a young woman, young enough to be one of my students. She begins her narration of the events of 16 March 1968. We are all familiar with the gruesome details of that day, having read a stomach turning, minute-by-minute account on our nineteen hour flight. That we are informed in this way allows us to receive the absolutely compelling and overwhelming emotion of her narration. She tells us that many members of her family were killed here. She becomes angry. She grieves. She implores us to explain how this could happen. She

cannot speak through her tears. She turns her back on us and stamps her foot. She will not look at us. We are overwhelmed with grief and shame. We want to be forgiven. But she will not forgive us. She finishes and walks away and leaves us to wander, with our grief and shame, alone.

This young Vietnamese woman has been too much for me. Her narration has let loose that unexpected emotion with which I began this trip. I find a palm. I sit in its shade. And I cry. I'm not crying for My Lai, not exactly. I'm not exactly sure what I'm crying about, just that it's about everything – then, now; now, then.

Sitting in the shade of the palm I watch my students. I watch them wander the site. I watch them take on the pain of this place. I watch them support and console one another. And in watching them I discover I have grown to love them. I love their courage in engaging the risk of this journey of return for me. I love their openness, their receptiveness, their depth. I love their willingness, a generation removed, to accept responsibility for what happened here. What a discovery to make in such a place as this.

We leave My Lai and ride on a bus for many hours each of us alone with our thoughts. We are traveling south on Highway 1 past the once enormous American base at Chu Lai, past Duc Pho where my close friend John Baky served as an MP and into Binh Dinh Province.

Binh Dinh Province. Then, this is where I served. I traveled on this highway armed and wary of danger. Now, I carefully watch the passing scenery and search for familiar sights. We pass Phu Cat. Then, I spent six months here counting the days until I could go home. Now, I am disappointed that I fail to recognize anything except the general familiarity of the land's topography. Then and now.

We continue traveling south. It has been a long and emotionally tumultuous day. It is dark now, very dark, and we are making our way over mountains just south of Qui Nhon. Then, I first joined my company in these mountains and I lived in one of these valleys for a time.

Now, we are traveling in the very dark down a switchback road. I swear I've been on this road before. Then, of course, it wouldn't have been paved but, now, this seems all too familiar.

We continue over another mountain and down its backside to a beautiful hotel that sits beautifully on the sea. But something is wrong, at least for me. I'm feeling odd again: then becoming now; now, then.

I try to orient myself spatially and I discover that we have arrived at the backside of the mountain from which, then, when I lived in the adjacent valley, we were sometimes mortared and shot at. It just can't be. But I'm convinced it is. My Lai to here. It is too much.

We meet in my room to try to bring words to a day that seems to have lasted a lifetime. But as much as we try, we fail. We find ourselves in the grip of an experience too large and too deep to be worded. We are moved by this recognition. And with all due apologies to all those others each of us loves -- at this moment, in this place, on this very dark night, bound together by our speechlessness, we are the only people who exist in the world.

Then, I came home tired, unsettled, vaguely despondent and feeling changed in ways I could neither give shape nor name. But I was fortunate. The need to give

shape and name has given me a career and that career has brought me back again to this place with people I have grown to love. What a gift.

There are lines from a poem by Bill Ehrhart, a poet, friend and combat veteran, that go, "I only know/you never know what's going to save you." I think I now *feel* the truth of these very wise lines.

Now, *they* come home tired, unsettled, vaguely despondent and feeling changed in ways they can neither give shape nor name. I am stunned by the symmetry of our comings home. Then and now. And I can only hope that they, too, will be fortunate, and that the need to give shape and name will yield to them, too, a gift.

I am, however, not sure of any of this. I am still too confused and unsettled by then and now. But be that as it may, there is one thing I am absolutely sure of: we *are* Viet Nam Veterans.