

The Wall

By Lawrence Markworth¹

My warrior self has been with me most of my life. There were hints in my childhood. As a kid, in a neighborhood full of kids, we'd play full-scale war games. Every soldier had a gun-plastic toy, a stick, or a baseball bat. We'd choose sides, the good guys and the bad guys, then run ramped up through the block, over front lawns, jumping back fences, killing each other. "Bang, you're dead." "No, I'm not. You missed." "Did not." "Did." These short skirmishes would end, and we'd start all over again.

When I was seven, my parents added two additional bedrooms to our meager two-bedroom track home in West Los Angeles. I was fortunate to get my own room. My parents asked me what colors I wanted in my bedroom. I requested red linoleum tile floor, a bright white ceiling and dark blue walls. My room was like a womb of the American flag. On the walls I mounted photos of old Navy and Air Force prop and jet fighters. I was proud to be an American.

During the Cuban Missile Crisis, fall '62, five months out of high school, in a patriotic act to save the world from Communism, I joined the Navy. Years later I figured out that I really joined the Navy because I had nothing else to do and I wasn't safe at home. A close friend pointed out to me recently the irony in that act; how insecure I must have felt at home to take such a drastic step by choosing the military in a time of war. The warrior arises.

The awareness that I was actually a warrior opened up to me in early 2016 at Pacifica Graduate Institute in Carpinteria, California. I attended an alumni event entitled "Warrior Returns". Dr. Ed Tick was the Director of the veteran healing nonprofit organization Soldiers Heart at the time ("Soldiers Heart" was the Civil War term for PTSD). Ed spoke on holistic healing methods for returning warriors. It opened my mind to the warrior archetype, something I had denied as soon as I was discharged from the Navy.

In the late '60s very few people were proud of what we were doing in Vietnam. I started college on the newly minted GI bill in 1966. Only my close friends knew I had served in Vietnam. In college I told no one, especially the young women who caught

¹ U.S. Navy, Electrician's Mate 3rd class, 1962-66.

my eye and interest. Denial at its finest or worst. Within six months I was deeply entrenched in the anti-war movement. I marched with Vietnam Veterans Against the War and dabbled in more radical organizations. While attending UCLA I went to a few meetings of ultra-radical group called Venceramos. At one particular meeting some idiot began preaching the violent overthrow of the United States government. In hindsight he could have easily been working undercover for a government organization. Agents of all kinds infiltrated the campus. This isn't just another conspiracy theory. This was the real deal. I know first hand, but that's another story. Venceramos was too far left for me. Although I hated the war and my participation in it, I was too much of a patriot to use violence to cast aside our Constitution.

After the war ended, I graduated with a Master's Degree in Library Science from UCLA, again funded by the GI Bill. I began my professional career and had a family. The war was behind me, or so I thought. However the war dreams and nightmares continued but I pushed them down and never considered that I fit into the warrior archetype.

The Thomas Fire destroyed 500 homes in my hometown of Ventura, California in December 2017. The run-to-the-danger mentality of military, veterans, and first responders, my Navy fire-fighting training, a courageous friend, and a brush fire unit of the Lompoc, California fire department saved our home.

The month before my wife and I traveled with a group of vets, therapists and fellow travelers to Vietnam. The group Soldiers Heart, led by Ed Tick, sponsored the trip. It was my first time back since 1965. There were five vets, I had never met any of these fine warriors until we all gathered for the first time in Ho Chi Minh City (Saigon). I was apprehensive about returning. In retrospect my fears were unfounded, but my imagination had Vietnamese jumping out in front of me on the sidewalks of Hanoi yelling, "Baby killer!" or "Yankee go home". Our reception was just the opposite. Wherever we were and whomever we met – ex Viet Cong, ex North Vietnamese Army, current army officers of the Republic of Vietnam or civilians – they all said the same thing. "We're all the same, warriors, fighting for what we thought was the right cause." "Don't feel bad or ashamed of what you did. Your leaders led you into a bad situation." "Don't have PTSD, it's not worth it." (My personal experience: easier said than done). Many of the warriors told us, "I had the American in my rifle sites, but I couldn't pull the trigger." I felt that one was a stretch, but it was just another way of expressing their humanness and forgiveness.

The highlight of the trip for me was when our group joined me on a beach in Da Nang. We put together a ceremony honoring those sailors, friends, and shipmates I served with who have passed on. These I honor: Craig Buchanan, David Nagai, Mark Graham, and Blade Underwood. All four have died in the last fifteen years from complications of exposure to Agent Orange, the carcinogenic herbicide the U.S. military sprayed in Vietnam. My ship, the *USS Castor* AKS-1 was exposed to Agent Orange while anchored in Da Nang Bay in 1965. I asked Ed Tick the big question, "Why am I here, alive and well and they are not." His answer has been the best response to my question that began haunting me since the time my friends and shipmates first started dying. "You're here to represent and honor your fallen brothers." And that's what I did on that trip to Vietnam.

It's difficult to explain the bond we travelers to Vietnam developed with one another. It's like we'd served together in the war over fifty years ago. Lots of laughs and tears, amazing bonding emotions. One of the vets from the trip offered to sponsor a one-year reunion of the group during Veterans Day weekend 2018 in Washington, D.C.

We all traveled together in D.C. in a ten-passenger van driven by our host, George, a U.S. Army combat veteran. We stopped at the Lincoln Memorial, then walked just a few hundred feet on to the Vietnam War Memorial. I knew the Wall would be overwhelming so I asked my wife Sue to hold on to me. As I walked the Wall and read the names, like a dark cloud the *why am I still here, alive* invaded my psyche. Honor and representation is the answer. Then I had the epiphany, all these vets here today at the Wall are thinking and feeling the same thing as me. We are not alone.

Then a strange thing happened. A group of young men appeared at ground level at the top of the Wall. They were dressed in all white with masks covering their faces. They carried a strange looking red, white, and blue flag. Their leader had a megaphone and began preaching, "White nationalism is the answer to our nation's problems." I was stunned, frozen in my tracks. Many of the vets not in our group began yelling at the young men, "Take those masks off, you cowards." "Get out of here." "We're coming up there to kick your ass." The anger and rage was palpable and quite frightening. I heard a middle-aged woman say to her vet, "I wish I had a permit to carry, I'd blow those guys away."

I believe racism should have no place in our nation, but of course, it does. The white nationalists have a constitutional right to protest. I remember thinking: *You're in the wrong place preaching to the wrong people*. Why here on this sacred ground, in front of those of us who served? It didn't make any sense to me.

Is this where the United States is as a nation? Is this what we fought for? To meet hate with hate? Bigotry with bigotry? Violence with violence? Vets, especially Vietnam Vets, should know this did not and will not work for our or any nation. Where is the rational discussion, the compassion, the forgiveness? Where are our negotiating skills? Why as a nation do we always resort to wars and proxy wars? Why do we have the hubris to think we can force nations through war into our form of democracy? Perhaps we have lessons to learn from the Vietnamese people.