

# War

As the plane descends through the puffy clouds of white, a hushed silence pervades the cabin as the horizon bursts open before us. The spectacular green majestic mountains, resplendent with streaming waterfalls, give way to long white sandy beaches and the shimmering blue ocean beyond. As the pilot banks the plane for our final approach to the runway, stark grey structures, blatantly incongruent with the lush surroundings, increasingly dominate the view. Large grey concrete semi circles – reminiscent of gigantic 44 gallon drums cut in half – line one side of the runway. It does not take a pilot to recognise these shelters as airplane hangars. But these are no ordinary hangars. Inside some of the dark foreboding semi-circular spaces, fighter jets can be seen looming out of the darkness, instantly evoking the bloodied history of a city that has born witness to carnage to its geography and people in the not to distant past. The city is Da Nang on the central south coast of Vietnam, now one of Indochina's five major cities.



In 1965, Da Nang was purported to be the busiest airport in the world. At its peak, this runway bore up to 2500 landings (plane and helicopter) in a single day – a mind-boggling air traffic control feat of 100 planes coming and going in any one hour. At that time, Da Nang was one of the epicentres of a nation at war with itself (and with many other countries including the USA and Australia).

What stands out so starkly as a Western visitor to Vietnam is how alien the environment must have been for the US and Allies soldiers stationed here to assist South Vietnam. It is not too difficult to stretch the imagination to forty or so years previous when other Americans and Australians descended into the jungles that surround Da Nang. The most instant reaction to such a scenario is: "What on earth were we thinking?". The heat and humidity alone are debilitating for those not conditioned to it. Combine this with the rigors and challenges of life in the depths of the jungle (while carrying 70 lbs of gear on their backs), and it seems like a recipe for disaster ... a long drawn out disaster that as a species, we repeat in its basic form, again and again and again. When Vietnam officially released the number of war dead, they revealed that some 2 million civilians died on both sides, along with 1.1 million North Vietnamese and Viet Cong (the guerrilla force who fought against South Vietnam) fighters. The US estimates that between 200,000-250,000 South Vietnamese soldiers also died along with 58,000 Americans. Hundreds of thousands more were injured. Of the 8,500 Australian soldiers who fought in those lush jungles, 521 died, and another 3,000 were physically wounded.

And these statistics of death and destruction are from just one war. Earlier in the twentieth century, the fledgling new democracy of Australia lost 50,000 men at the Battle of Gallipoli off the coast of Turkey during World War I – 50,000 men from a country whose population was only 5 million at the time. The bloody beaches of Gallipoli represent just one small chapter in one war in one century... Just a small dot in a world history littered with the dead, products of man's brutal aggression against fellow man.

Wars are initiated and justified for a whole host of reasons – dynastic, political, religious, economic. We have developed words and phrases to disguise the brutal gruesome horrors of war: “collateral damage,” “friendly fire,” “civilian casualties.” We see media coverage with program titles like: “Showdown with Iraq,” “Countdown to Iraq,” “Operation Shock and Awe” (echoing government terminology for was an invasion of a functioning city by armed forces), all masking the reality that people from opposing forces as well as innocent bystanders were killed, dismembered, eviscerated... many physically and emotionally scarred for life.

Renowned Texas television journalist and author, Bill Moyers, described his experience when stationed at the Kuwait border with the US Marine Corps during the first Gulf War. He notes: “There were waves of Vietnam-era B-52 bombers dropping hundreds of thousands of tons of iron fragmentation bombs all over Iraq. We watched these huge fireballs and could feel the concussions go through the air. ... Yet, the way the air campaign was portrayed was very different, because of the packaged video clips that were handed to the networks and then quite willingly disseminated... People had a vision of precision-guided weapons hitting specific targets, when in fact that was a tiny percentage, I think about four percent, of all the ordnance used on Iraq. We devastated Iraq. The Iraqi dead were nameless, faceless phantoms.”

The many internally and externally displaced Iraqis are equally nameless and faceless – at least 5 million spread across Syria, Jordan, Iraq and Lebanon. These millions of Iraqi refugees are hardly noticed by the rest of the world. They struggle with: the horrors of what they witnessed during the war, their loss of loved ones, of homes, of livelihoods. They suffer through an ongoing battle to make new normal lives after their savings have depleted. The goodwill of their hosts is stretched to capacity; their opportunities for meaningful employment virtually nonexistent – a plight made all the more painful by the fact that many of these refugees were educated middle-class Iraqis who had the resources to leave Iraq early. They once were contributing members of society, many of whom now feel destitute, both financially and spiritually. In his searing portrait, *War Is a Force That Gives Us Meaning*, New York Times journalist and author, Chris Hedges wrote: “The enduring attraction of war is this: Even with its destruction and carnage it gives us what we long for in life. It can give us purpose, meaning, a reason for living. Only when we are in the midst of conflict does shallowness and vapidness of much of our lives become apparent. Trivia dominates our conversations and increasingly our airwaves. And war is an enticing elixir. It gives us resolve, a cause. It allows us to be noble.” Like Bill Moyers, Hedges proposes that the meaningfulness of combat depends on the perpetuation of the myth that

portrays war as noble, the myth that disguises the bloody carnage to humans and infrastructure that war leaves in its wake. When war is examined in its harshest reality without the euphemisms, no matter what grand cause it is supposed to serve, war is ultimately the basest form of aggression of human against fellow human: "organized murder."

While writing this blog, I play in the background the haunting sound of The Green Fields of France (also known as Private William McBride and No Man's Land) written by Australian songwriter, Eric Bogle and sung by Davey Arther and the Fureys. The stirring ballad portrays the imaginings of a visitor to the grave of a dead soldier, Private Willie McBride, who was killed on a "green field of France" in 1916. Bogle's evocative words crash through the mythical narrative of war to the essence of one 19-year-old man's senseless death, relating his death to all senseless deaths in the name of war.

The song starts with a question to young Willie McBride:

"I hope you died well and I hope you died clean ... or Willie McBride was it slow and obscene?"

... and moves on to questions for humankind:

Well the sun's shining now on these green fields of France,  
 The warm wind blows gently and the red poppies dance.  
 The trenches are vanished long under the plough  
 No gas, and no barbed wire, no guns firing now.  
 But here in this graveyard it's still No Man's Land  
 The countless white crosses in mute witness stand.  
 To man's blind indifference to his fellow man  
 And a whole generation who were butchered and damned.  
 And I can't help but wonder now Willie McBride  
 Do all those who lie here know why they died?  
 Did you really believe them when they told you the cause?  
 You really believed that this war would end war?  
 But the suffering, the sorrow, the glory, the shame -  
 The killing and dying - it was all done in vain.  
 For Willie McBride, it's all happened again  
 And again, and again, and again, and again.

Source: <http://www.aftermathww1.com/stream/fmcbride.html>