

April 2011

My own story of war

I began writing this piece in summer 2009, at our home in France. I sent an early draft to my brother Alain – to get his corrections. But mostly to get his permission to share this someday with our family, in particular his son; and, maybe, to post on my website of writings.

It's spring 2011 now, two years later. I've added and edited in the intervening years. But now I'll finish it, back here at the house in France. How fitting since Alain is here, too.

World War II was my dad's war. Vietnam was mine.

My family was against the war before it was popular to be against the war. I remember family discussions in the early '60s.

"The French were in Vietnam for decades and never won," my dad would say. "Why does the U.S. think it can win?" But of course, the U.S. always thinks it can win. That damn U.S. exceptionalism and arrogance and self-righteousness.

By the late 60s and early 70s, blue lights gleamed from front porches. People protested.

We watched it all on television: bombs and soldiers humping through the jungle; dead bodies – old and young; protesters – students and faculty, mothers and fathers and children and teens; politicians – liars and truth tellers.

That's a big difference now. So little is on television. So much can be ignored. So much is forgotten. And Iraq and Afghanistan go on and on.

Today, war doesn't affect everyone. With a volunteer army, it's easy to forget what's going on. If you're not volunteering – and you don't know anyone who volunteered – caring is an intellectual exercise. An activity one brings out periodically, dusts it off – the concern, the questions, the guilt. And then away it goes.

These days, there are lots of articles about post-traumatic stress disorder. But there isn't enough help to help those soldiers and veterans. These days, more soldiers survive horrible wounds. But there isn't enough help to help them either.

More Iraq and Afghanistan vets commit suicide, too. I wonder if we have the suicide statistics for Nam vets and vets from WWII.

An investigative report says that the military now claims pre-existing conditions so it doesn't have to pay for the medical care of our veterans. Yes, military doctors are ordered to do that. Surely the U.S. Secretary of State knows that. Surely the Joint Chiefs of Staff know that. And the American people could know that, too, if we cared enough.

But lots of this stuff isn't in the headlines – or not very often. And Glenn Beck and Rush Limbaugh don't talk about it, I'll bet. Shit, Americans don't even go to movies about Iraq or Afghanistan. We watch *Avatar* and *Terminator*, *Star Trek* and *Lord of the Rings* – all about war and heroes and enemies and battle and death. I watch them all, over and over. But how many people watched *The Hurt Locker* before (or after) its Academy Award win?

War. Vietnam was mine.

I remember it this way: Bill enlisted in the Army because the military was drafting into the Marines. We all knew that the Army would be a better risk than the Marines.

I don't remember the year he signed up. I graduated with my B.A. in 1970. So Bill graduated in 1968. No more student deferment. Maybe he joined up in late 1968 or 1969.

I visited Bill when he was in basic training. Somewhere down south. What was the base name?

He was so subdued. Maybe cowed. Do they do that to you in the military? Kind of pasteurize you. Or make you the same. Or turn out some of the light so you carefully follow orders and stringently adhere to rules. Take away the individualism to make sure you stick to the priorities and stay within the lines. Keep you alive? Help you keep the others alive? Make it all work effectively and efficiently.

I watched him field-stripped his cigarettes, part of basic training. He smoked. Now, 41 years later, not many people I know smoke anymore.

Wearing those well-pressed army khakis. We stayed in a motel for a couple days and then I headed back to Michigan. Did I hope he wouldn't go to Nam? I don't think that ever crossed my mind, or his. I think we just knew that everyone went to Nam.

Did I always suspect the military? Or was that because of Vietnam?

I was a Brownie Scout only briefly. I didn't "fly up" to Girl Scouts. I've always joked that I didn't "fly up" to a Girl Scout because it was too... Too what? Too much group stuff? Too regulated? I don't know.

I was proud of my dad's war stories.

I liked watching World War II and cowboy movies with my dad. Sometimes we did this as a family, in the TV room.

Dad would make pizza. He made his own bread dough and tomato sauce from scratch. And real milk shakes. Did he make those with the eggbeater or in the mixing bowl with the electric mixer?

Cheese and pepperoni on top for dad and Alain. But dad cut up hot dogs for Nicole and me; we didn't like pepperoni. I like it now. Which pizza did mom eat?

Only the three big kids then: Simone, Alain, and Nicole. Was there Fappy's pizza with the three little kids? I don't remember. Paul, do you even remember why you called dad "fappy"? We asked you why when you were little. But I don't remember the answer.

My Tom interviewed dad for his war stories. It must have been 1989 because Tom and I already lived in Foster. I think it was a long interview. But the tape was destroyed.

How sad to lose all those stories that none of us kids ever heard. How sad to lose that last sound of dad's voice. He died in April 1990. Twenty years ago this month as I make final edits to this piece.

Andrée remembers that she and Paul introduced me to Bill.

He used to walk by the MSU laboratory pre-school on his way to class and the twins would say hi to him from inside the fence. But I met Bill through another guy I dated my freshman year at MSU. Then Bill and I got together. Together until 1975 when I left.

In 2009, I packed *The Things They Carried* in the suitcase for France. It was time.

A few France visits ago, I read some of Robert McNamara's Nam book. Right after Obama's inauguration, a *New York Times* op-ed reminded me that LBJ was more than Nam. LBJ was Civil Rights. I was sad that I – like popular history and the Democratic Party – had made LBJ about Nam only.

Thanks to Bob Herbert's op-ed piece of January 19, 2009, I see Lyndon Baines Johnson more clearly. Herbert imagined the big four civil rights leaders sitting next to each other at President Obama's inauguration: Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., Roy Wilkins, James Farmer, and Whitney Young.

All four died before the inauguration of America's first black president. But Herbert puts them there, in places of honor. "Imagine the stories and the mutual teasing and laughter, and the deep emotion that would accompany their attempts to rise above their collective disbelief at the astonishing changes they did so much to bring about," wrote Herbert.

"And imagine," continues Herbert, "a tall white man being ushered into their presence, and the warm smiles of recognition from the big four — and probably tears — for someone who has been shamefully neglected by his nation and his party, Lyndon Johnson."

When I read that paragraph, I remembered. I knew. I was ashamed.

For as Bob Herbert wrote on that day, "Johnson's contributions to the betterment of American life were nothing short of monumental. For blacks, he opened the door to the American mainstream with a herculean effort that resulted in the enactment of the Civil Rights Act of 1964. He followed up that bit of mastery with the Voting Rights Act of 1965.

"Once the black man's voice could be translated into ballots," Johnson would say, "many other breakthroughs would follow."

Now when I think of LBJ, I think of Dr. King and his colleagues welcoming this great president. I no longer think of Vietnam only. In fact, I mostly think of what Bob Herbert said... the tall white man being ushered into the presence of those four black men who so well recognized his role. For as Bob Herbert said, "[Johnson's] commitment to civil rights so publicly vindicated, his eyes no doubt misting as the oath of office is administered."

I should have remembered that LBJ was so much more than Nam.

I know that most people are not mostly one thing.

I remember going to the Lucon Theatre on Grand River Avenue in East Lansing. Daddy went with me. We watched a western, back in the day when the good guys were still wearing white hats and bad guys wore black hats. Racism? Probably as much to do with black and white photography.

The bad guy died at the end. I cried. You're not supposed to cry when the bad guy dies. But daddy told me that everyone isn't either good or bad. That people are both good and bad. And we do cry sometimes when the bad guy dies.

Is that the same day that daddy and I went Christmas shopping? And he started saying “Je suis le père Noël.” Of course, I was embarrassed. I was easily embarrassed as a child. I moved away from him and he ran after me, still chanting, “Je suis le père Noël.”

Did he say “ho ho ho”, too? Or was that me in the 6th grade when I recited a long poem in French, in front of the whole student body. “Ho ho ho, je suis le père Noël.” I was all dressed up like Santa Claus. Dad stood at the back of the school auditorium to raise his hand when I needed to talk more loudly. Where was Mrs. Collings? She and dad cooked up this idea. Did mom see me perform, too?

Back on Grand River Avenue, dad was still chasing me with his “Je suis le père Noël.” We stopped and had a coke at the Big Boy on the corner. I spilled mine in my lap. Dad could chase me these past 20 years saying “je suis le père Noël” and I wouldn’t spill my coke. I’d probably chase him back! Who would I be if he were le père Noël?

So LBJ played a hugely significant role in the Civil Rights movement. Alain calls him the best president of the 20th century.

But LBJ was lost in Vietnam. So many were lost there. John Kerry said, “How do you ask a man [or woman] to be the last to die for a mistake?” Why don’t we ask that more often?

“They carried all they could bear, and then some, including a silent awe for the terrible power of the things they carried.” Today I finished *The Things They Carried*, by Tim O’Brien. He has more books about Nam. Will I read those? I don’t know.

Surely we all know what they carried in Nam, just like in any war. The packs and the weapons and the food. And the fear and the hope and the anger and the panic and the despair. When do they stop carrying all those last things? Ever?

Who does one kill in war?

Soldiers kill soldiers. Men only, for so long. But in today’s wars, women, too.

Who are the soldiers? Adults. But not always. Some soldiers are not just young, they’re actually kids.

Bombs and soldiers kill civilians. Women and men. Boys and girls. Old and young. We kill civilians mostly by accident. Sometimes out of fear. And, rarely, with vicious, malicious intent.

My dad told a story once. Maybe he told it to Bill after Bill returned from Nam. There was a young German soldier in a foxhole. Dad kept telling him to get out of the foxhole. The soldier dropped his gun and held up his arms. Dad kept gesturing with his rifle and yelling, “get out or I’ll shoot” But the soldier didn’t. So my dad shot and killed him. And when dad got to the foxhole, he saw why the young German didn’t evacuate the foxhole: his legs were blown off.

Bill told a similar story. A young Vietnamese boy, maybe 12 years old, walked towards a platoon on patrol. In his hand: a Coca-Cola bottle. Bottles were often grenades. The boy wouldn’t drop the bottle. Shots rang out.

My brother Philippe was 12 years old that year, perhaps the age of that young Vietnamese boy. Did I ever tell you that story, Philippe, when you were older?

Dad and Bill and all the other scared soldiers facing scared soldiers and young boys. Acting to protect one’s self and one’s comrades – and killing.

Who does one kill in war? A little bit of oneself. It isn’t just soldiers that kill a bit of themselves; it’s our non-combatant citizens and our governments – our society itself.

Bill sent tapes and letters.

For years, I kept all Bill's letters, tied together with a pink velvet ribbon. Why pink? I don't like pink. I don't think I ever liked pink. Maybe the ribbon was rose. I kept the tapes, too.

I remember one tape. Bill was talking to me and in the background I could hear other guys eating and smoking. Smoking OJs, Bill said. Opium-dipped joints. And one guy was shooting speed.

I was worried when I wrote Bill. Or did I send him a tape? I don't remember if I sent tapes. But I was worried about shooting speed. Bill said he didn't and wouldn't. Just good dope.

I remember Bill telling me that I was the only girlfriend who lasted through the war. Many of his buddies received "Dear John" letters while in Nam. But I didn't last all the way to the future.

I've never written about Vietnam.

It never occurred to me. I'm not a writer. Tim O'Brien is. And so is Tom, my life partner now and for 25 years and forever.

I've written professional books so I'm an author. But that's not this kind of writing. What's this kind of writing? Commentary? Personal thoughts? Now I'm blogging, a three-part blog. And one part is social and political commentary and personal thoughts.

When I began reading *The Things They Carried*, I suddenly wanted to write about my war. I began writing in my mind while Tom and I were hiking. Then I finished O'Brien's book. Now I'm writing. It's the summer of 2009.

Vietnam was my war. And Bill's war. And Connie's dead husband Michael's war. And it became Michael Junior's war when he was only two years old and his chopper pilot father was shot down in Nam.

And Nam was Tim O'Brien's war. He's written it for us. So all those who don't or won't remember can remember.

"The thing about remembering is that you don't forget. You take your material where you find it, which is in your life, at the intersection of past and present. The memory-traffic feeds into a rotary up on your head, where it goes in circles for a while, then pretty soon imagination flows in and the traffic merges and shoots off down a thousand different streets. As a writer, all you can do is pick a street and go for the ride, putting things down as they come at you. That's the real obsession. All those stories."

I'm only a small writer. But I do honor stories. And in my work as a fundraiser and teacher – and in my life as a person – I capture stories and tell stories. Is telling stories part of what it takes to be human? Perhaps it's remembering stories that makes us human and – maybe if we're lucky – more humane?

O'Brien reminds us that remembering makes things now. "And sometimes remembering will lead to a story, which makes it forever. That's what stories are for. Stories are for joining the past to the future. Stories are for those late hours in the night when you can't remember how you got from where you were to where you are. Stories are for eternity, when memory is erased, when there is nothing to remember except the story."

I was still at MSU when Bill was in Nam. Still working at All Saints Episcopal Church, and living at home with my family that year.

I remember walking down Burcham Road and turning onto Lantern Hill Drive. I see myself approaching the curve where Knoll Road meets Lantern Hill. Walking around the curve. Now I can see the driveway of my family home, many houses away. Do I look quickly or slowly? Is there a car in the driveway? Is it Bill's mother's car? Because if it is, that means something bad has happened. She wouldn't call, she told me. She'd drive from her home an hour away to tell me personally.

I see myself, over and over, approaching the curve. Taking a deep breath. Looking down the road to the driveway.

Bill served in combat, then at a base camp.

The base camp is sort of safe, certainly safer than in the field. Choppers hover over the landing pad and Bill hauls out body bags. I see the dust churning and Bill pulling out the body bags. They must fall onto the ground, undignified in death or disrespected in this moment of transit.

Once, for weeks, I didn't receive any letters or tapes. Later Bill told me they were in Cambodia. But U.S. troops weren't in Cambodia. That's what our government told us. So no letters could arrive from Cambodia.

Sometimes I fantasized that I'd meet up with Bill for R&R somewhere. But there wasn't R&R. I guess that didn't happen if you were only in Nam for 12 months.

Twelve months later, Bill returned. It was June 1970. He had a few weeks of leave before reporting to his next duty station, Fort Riley, Kansas, home of the Big Red One. The Big Red One, the nickname for the first infantry division.

I had just graduated from MSU and would begin teaching French in McDonald Middle School in East Lansing in the fall. Too many teachers so I was lucky to get a job.

Bill flew into Detroit Metro Airport. I met him there, along with his father and mother and sister. Diane was her name. She didn't like me at first. But later we got along fine.

Bill and I spent all night up. After a few days at his home, we went to East Lansing so my family could see him. Bill spent all night up talking with Alain.

I don't know the details of that night. All Alain ever said was Bill made it perfectly clear: under no circumstances go into the military and don't go to Nam, no matter what.

Alain lost his student deferment unexpectedly in fall 1970. "My number was 64," Alain reminded me. "And after I lost my deferment, they had already drafted into the 200s." As Alain said, "low number = screwed."

My nephew Daniel, Alain's son, asked me about Bill and that night. Daniel, too, knew the story: the all-nighter and the advice to avoid the draft and Nam at all costs. Daniel and I were hanging out in the kitchen of my brother Paul's home in Saint Joe, Michigan.

I don't know that Paul and his twin sister Andrée know these stories. They were only 8 years old when Bill came back from Nam. I think I remember dad telling us to be careful about talking about Vietnam in front of the twins. They were too young to know how to keep secrets about leaving the country to evade the draft.

How to stay out of the draft? All those strategies. Like inhale from a vacuum bag and agitate your asthma before your physical. Talk about liking boys and wetting your bed and get a

letter from a psychologist or psychiatrist. Cut off the right amount of the right finger and you can't shoot a gun. Or leave the country. Escape.

Tim O'Brien talks about leaving in *The Things They Carried*. How leaving means giving up your family and your history and your connections. How embarrassing it would be to explain. How lonely it would be. And O'Brien says that he just didn't have the courage to leave. So he went to Nam instead.

What is the meaning of courage? We're always told it takes courage to go to war. Or is it courage to survive war, the daily stress and boredom and fear? What about the courage to refuse war, to deny its validity. Refusing to go. To leave family and history and connections must be a truly courageous act.

Another memory:

One weekend afternoon, I went to see the movie *Platoon* with Gene, a work mate from Trinity Rep. It was the '80s, more than a decade since the heart of Nam. Maybe even a decade since Bill and I divorced.

I wanted to see the movie: a moment of history, my own existential mea culpa for being a U.S. citizen, whatever. I figured I'd be subdued, perhaps choke up a bit.

How wrong I was, how ill prepared. Suddenly, without warning, I was sobbing uncontrollably. Poor Gene. We stayed through the movie. I apologized to Gene – or at least explained. I've never watched the movie again. Do I fear the war itself or the memory of watching the movie? Perhaps both.

Bill returned from Nam in June 1970.

He was so skinny. Vietnam did that, too.

We married on Bastille Day 1970 and drove immediately to Junction City, Kansas, home of the Big Red One. I gave up my teaching job because the military didn't let Bill out early.

There we were at a military post, against the war and against the military. Summer 1970. We went to Manhattan, Kansas on the weekends. Visited head shops. Saw the movie *Woodstock*. We tie dyed army undershirts in our trailer home.

In the fall, I substitute taught in town and on the military base. Only once on the military base. I remember telling the students that maybe the Chicago 7 were right – or certainly had some valid points. I suppose I was promoting questioning and challenging the status quo even then.

I wasn't invited back.

I like to think that the military children told their military parents that there was a radical in the room who was pro Chicago 7 and anti war. That's what I hope. That's part of my self-image...rejected because I spoke out.

Then it was 1971. Military service was over. Bill and I returned to East Lansing and MSU. And then the fall of Saigon. And the list of names on the shiny wall in Washington, D.C. And within a few decades, a reunited Vietnam. What did we gain? Only those 50,000+ dead bodies and so many more traumatized.

My cousin Fabienne and husband Jean-Claude visit Vietnam regularly. The French lost. The U.S. lost. Everyone lost, even the Vietnamese. But finally we colonists are gone and the Vietnamese have their own country.

Makes me wonder about Iraq and Afghanistan.

Alain cut off his trigger finger after Bill came back from Nam, after that night up talking.

Was it subconsciously on purpose? Who knows? It doesn't much matter because he was still called up for his physical – just enough finger was still there. For years, when he still smoked, we'd watch Alain try flicking off the cigarette ash with that absent section of finger.

At 4:45 p.m. in the afternoon, an accident in the basement art studio on campus. Alain was late leaving to pick up his soon-to-be first wife, Ruth. So he was sloppy. He saw bumps into a knot in the wood, jumps and slices off the index finger of his left hand, and shaves off his thumbprint on the same hand.

Alain picks up the lost finger and a classmate drives him to the hospital emergency room. That was before cell phones. Did you call Ruth, Alain, and tell her you wouldn't be picking her up?

Alain checked in with the nurse in the emergency room and explained that he had cut off his finger. She waved him aside and asked him to fill out some forms. Instead, he dropped the cut-off finger onto her desk. She immediately put him into a room so he could lie down. He says the morphine was great. But they couldn't sew the finger back on.

At our house, the draft was a big deal. The war was a big deal.

The Joyaux household was anti war long before it became fashionable. I remember my junior year in high school, living in Tucson, Arizona where dad was a visiting professor. 1965. Our family was talking anti-war talk then. I was getting strange looks in school.

I remember it this way:

Five years later, back in East Lansing, and Georges and Jane are figuring out what to do about Alain and the draft.

Declaring the French citizenship of all us kids...sending Alain to France to fulfill military duty there rather than here. I remember talk of moving the whole family out of the U.S. so Alain wouldn't be a draft dodger.

But Alain tells me it wasn't as I remembered. He says that as anti-war as Georges and Jane were, they weren't telling him what to do. From what Alain says, they weren't helping him with ideas, either. All dad said was, "I'll support you in whatever you decide, Alain."

Actually, that sounds like dad. He didn't give us permission (or lots of congratulatory support) when we told him of our intent to marry. He would say it was our choice. I don't imagine that he would have recommended following the Democratic Party like he and mom; it was up to us to decide. And so, no direction for the war.

Serving in the military after the Liberation of France was a seminal time in dad's life. Alain refers to it as dad's male bonding experience. Maybe a coming of age? Facing horror and surviving? I don't know.

Did the little kids hear any of this talk about avoiding the draft? We have the three big kids and the three little kids in the Joyaux family. I'm the oldest, fourteen years older than the youngest kids, twins. Same parents, big gap in ages between the big and little kids.

Did you know all this was going on, Philippe? You were 12 years old.

Do you remember any of this, Paul and Andrée? I don't remember what year you were born. But I was 22 years old in 1970 so you were 8 years old.

You went to McDonald Middle School, formerly a swamp where Alain got stranded in the middle on his homemade raft.

Did you know that Alain made Nicole and me a life-size stagecoach in the basement? But that was before you were born. I must have been 11 or 12 years old and Alain would have been 9 or 10.

Did mom and dad tell us big kids not to talk about this stuff in front of the little kids? So the little kids wouldn't say something at school?

In November 1970, Alain received notice to report for his U.S. physical. He knew if he passed the physical, he would immediately be drafted because of his low number.

"I figured it would be better to be drafted by the French than by the U.S.," said Alain. This is how he explained it to me: "You can't choose one country over another. But you don't have to serve in both." So if France drafted him first – Alain's hope – serving in France would be better than Nam.

Alain waited in vain for a French notice before his U.S. physical. But that didn't happen. Instead, he reported for his U.S. physical on January 21, 1971. In his pocket, a very small hope...the doctor's letter describing the malformation in his spine. Fairly small – yet it turns out, large enough to make him 4F.

How ironic: Two weeks later, Alain received the French notice to report for a physical. Yes, Papa Georges had filed French citizenship papers for all us kids.

So Alain drove to Detroit, reporting for his French physical. Happily the doctor decided that it wasn't worth the time or money to ship Alain to France. The doctor figured, "If the U.S. doesn't want you, France doesn't either."

I began writing these reflections in 2009.

Then I stopped for a while and started up again in 2010. I didn't stop writing because it was painful. I just didn't proceed because I was occupied with other things. And writing this needs mind and heart and soul space.

On March 23, 2010, I was driving somewhere for work. I listen to National Public Radio while driving. If I'm really angered by what I hear, I'm ranting and raving in my car. And then I call Tom – sometimes waking him up early in the morning – and share the news with him, still ranting.

Tom sometimes threatens to take away the radio and television and books and movies and journalism because I get so agitated. I read *The Nation* magazine weekly and rant and rave at the world and the U.S. government – especially the U.S. government. Sometimes I think I only survived the G.W. Bush administration because I could watch the television show *The West Wing*. I have all the seasons on DVD – and watch it still.

Twenty years ago, on March 23, 1990, Tim O'Brien's book *The Things They Carried* was published. An NPR show host was talking with O'Brien. Then I heard another interview with O'Brien on April 8, 2010.

The book has never been out of print. It's read in colleges and universities. It's read by people long out of college. Maybe it was read by some of the politicians sitting in the U.S. Congress or the bureaucrats in the Pentagon or the old soldiers leading the armed forces. Maybe some of the young soldiers – sent to current wars – read *The Things They Carried*.

What difference did it make, reading the book?

On March 23, 2010, O'Brien talked about how hard it is to talk about war, to talk about these very painful episodes in human life. "We don't know how to talk about these things – where to start and where to end."

Where to start and where to end... A challenge for any story? A test for those most painful and heartfelt moments in any life?

In the April 2010 interview, the journalist asked O'Brien how he felt that 20 years on, there are still wars – and wars as foolish as Vietnam...wars like Afghanistan and Iraq. The journalist asked about the power of art. And asked how O'Brien felt that art didn't make a difference because we keep going to war. And we'll keep going to war. And they'll keep going to war, too.

O'Brien responded with Kurt Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse-Five*, musings on war, reminding us that wars keep coming like glaciers, and even if they didn't, "there would still be plain old death."

Sure art matters, sometimes more, sometimes less – but still always, I think. And war comes forever. O'Brien observed that we just "don't give credibility to the humanity of our enemies." But I suspect that, even if we did, we humans would still wage wars, big and small.

And some 35 years after the end of the Nam war, new books just described in a recent *New York Times Book Review*. Will we know any better how to talk about this? Do we ever? Sometimes we just don't know how to talk about things...because we can't figure out how to start...or maybe it's worse because we cannot figure out how we'll end if we ever do start.

Maybe the Vietnam War was the "good old days" for war protest because there was the draft. And we saw the battles and the dying on television. Over and over. Dying. Dead bodies. Death and more death.

And the draft. You might be drafted. Or your son or your life partner or your friend or your neighbor or... Everyone knew someone who was drafted.

Maybe another draft and more televised horror could join with art and help stop war. But I suspect not all that much either. Look how long it took us to end the Vietnam War.

Simone P. Joyaux
April 2011, Valros, France