

Immeasurable Losses by Susan Sward
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On the edge of Veterans Park, the forest green Medevac helicopter hovers above Earth -- forever frozen atop an arched, metal base with its nose pointed toward the gas station on the corner. In front of this memorial to the Vietnam War, a group of kindergarten children tumble about, a blur of sun dresses, jeans and cotton shirts. Encouraged by their teacher, their small hands stroke the 40 names on the granite plaque in front of the monument.

"Stephen Austin, Roy Berry, Rudy Bijl, Phillip Bridges, Rodney Carter . . ." the teacher recites, her soft voice entwining with the children's murmurings and the chants of high school boys exercising on a playground across the street.

The selection of a Medevac helicopter for the monument -- rather than a statue of a soldier or a fighter jet -- was no accident. It has been said that Porterville, a Central Valley community of 12,000 during the 1960s, lost more young men per capita in the war than any other town in the United States.

The death tally varies depending on who is doing the counting. The 58,000 U.S. war dead include 16 young men who listed Porterville as their hometown, but the Pentagon apparently never made per capita comparisons of which towns lost the most soldiers in Vietnam. The Porterville Area Vietnam Memorial bears the names of 40 war dead.

Whatever the count, too many young men from Porterville gave their lives, and for many of their families, the fact that Saigon fell and the war ended 20 years ago this Sunday -- April 30, 1975 -- is just a footnote. They still live with the war every day.

Here, as in thousands of small, rural communities across the country, the war had a vivid face: The war's dead, their families, the veterans and their stories were known.

Many in Porterville knew someone who died. They went to school with the young man, knew his family, attended his church, partied with him. They also knew many of the veterans who came home.

There was the mother who kept her son's bedroom just the way it looked the day he went off to fight and die, leaving her childless. "They gave him 13 medals," the mother said, "but that didn't bring him home."

There was the veteran who lost an arm and spent two years in his bedroom before he'd agree to come out at all. There was the veteran who went to the Tulare County memorial most nights with his rosary, the veteran who one day stuck a .45-caliber pistol in his mouth and pulled the trigger.

In this town tucked up against the foothills of the Sierra, the loss was shattering.

"You will never know what Vietnam tore up in this town," said Estaline Higgins, 71, whose son, Pat, was 20 when he stepped on a land mine and died. "It wrecked people's lives."

And when Porterville came out the other side of the war, the town, like the country, was never the same.

"We lost part of our generation on this," said Richard Searcy, a Vietnam veteran and Porterville accountant. "It's not just Porterville's loss. I think it's a loss for the country, period. It's 58,000 guys." -- -- --

From her window, Eva Taylor can look across the valley to the oak-covered hills where her son, Albert, used to play soldier with other young boys. It is spring now, and the hills above Porterville are a lush, vibrant green.

"He always played like he was in the service," his 77-year-old mother said. "He got a bunch of boys and played in the hills like he was a bigshot. I look at those hills quite a bit and think, 'My kid used to play there.' "

After he graduated from Porterville High School, Albert Taylor enlisted in the Marines. He made a career out of it, had three children and another baby on the way when he went to Vietnam. "We all tried to get him not to sign up for Vietnam, but he said, 'Mom, I am already signed up.' He thought he would get it over with and come home."

When he first got there, the 29-year-old sergeant talked about what he fought for. "I am a Marine and an American," he wrote his parents. "If we stop (communism) here, it will someday be a help to our children."

Later, the darkness of the war crept into his accounts. He wrote of being under fire, living in foxholes, sweeping highways for mines, setting up ambushes, going on patrol.

On May 13, 1968, he wrote, "Mom, a couple of days ago, while I was up at hill 471, I took my platoon down to Khe Sanh village. Boy, it was really bombed out. There was bodies all over, cars, motor scooters, trucks, toys, etc. Well, I'm back up here on hill 689."

On June 18, about 2 1/2 months after he got to Vietnam, Albert Taylor was killed in fighting below the country's demilitarized zone. Eva Taylor said, "I think it was Hill 85 or something like that. I think he was blown up. I don't know. I don't think he knew what hit him. But sometimes I wonder if he laid there for hours hurting. That bothers me a lot." For weeks, she waited for his body to come home. "They said they didn't know exactly when Albert would arrive because they had stacks and stacks of bodies in San Francisco."

Taylor still has the yellow, tattered telegram dated July 9, 1968, from the commanding officer at Treasure Island announcing the body's arrival in San Francisco. The telegram informed her that her son's remains "are not viewable."

Today Taylor -- a big, white-haired widow whose husband died of tuberculosis complications in 1985 -- doesn't see a whole lot of sense in what happened with the war. In 1989 she attended the dedication of the Porterville memorial, and she was glad they built it in honor of the young men.

These days, Taylor has a lot of time to think. Having worked as a dishwasher, nanny and house cleaner, she gets by, but she knows she wouldn't have any money worries if her son were around to help out. He was a good Marine, and was always concerned about others in the family.

Taylor lives alone in a small senior citizen apartment facing the hills in the community of Springville. Her room is crammed with stuffed animals and pictures of grandchildren. She has three other children. One of her other sons, Kenny, was in Vietnam, too. The military sent him home with his brother's body.

"I wanted Albert to be identified. A friend of ours said he would identify Albert, but they wouldn't allow it. Kenny said it was pretty sure it was Albert," Taylor said, her voice trailing off. "I don't know who made our boys go to Vietnam. I really don't."

She said she understands that the young men went to keep America free, but, "I think it is awful to take our boys over there to be killed. What did they get out of it? I guess you have to kill them or they kill you. Why they sent our boys over there? They didn't gain anything." -- -- --

When Pat Higgins was a small boy, his father used to invite his former Marine Corps buddies over, and they would sit around recalling their World War II days and the battle for Iwo Jima. A snapshot captures the men in their war days: wide grins, uniforms, Hollywood handsome.

Today Albert Higgins, Pat's father, is 73 and ailing. He still has a painting of the famous flag raising by the Marines at Iwo Jima, where he drove a tank.

"My husband was a Marine," said Estaline Higgins, a tall, brown-haired woman with a quick, warm way of speaking. "The kids would hear him and his buddies. The boys emulated their father. Mike went in the Marine Corps, Pat in the Army, Chris in the Air Force."

As he grew up, Pat Higgins was full of life. The family snapshots show Pat, his two brothers and sister playing at the lake, building a snowman, swinging on a rope off a tree, frolicking in the backyard inflatable pool, licking ice cream cones on the porch.

As a teenager, Pat Higgins was tall, with blue, blue eyes. He took his girlfriend, Elaine, when he went to have his 1955 Chevy painted, and he told the man to do it honey blond like her hair. Against his mother's wishes, Pat Higgins enlisted at 18. "I said to Pat even then, 'This isn't our war. Why don't you stay home and go to school?' But these kids wanted to do what was right. Why do you think Porterville lost so many kids? It's a small town, and there's not really that many jobs here."

Three months after he went to Vietnam in 1968, Corporal Higgins was due for a rest and recovery break, but he stayed a while longer. He died on Mother's Day when he stepped on a land mine in the remote A Chau Valley. He was 20. Estaline Higgins, sobbing steadily, said, "The Army sent their man here on Mother's Day. When the man pulled up in his truck, I knew why he had come."

Afterward, people told her she had to be strong. She had to raise three other children, two of them younger than Pat. But she kept going over Pat's belongings in a trunk until her sister took the trunk home with her.

"It's your child," Higgins said. "It is something you carried, part of you, inside you. Do these people know what it means to be called on Mother's Day and told your son has just been blown up in a war we shouldn't have been in in the first place?"

Nowadays Higgins works as a nurse. Much of the time, she tries to handle Pat's death on her own, going out to the cemetery by herself.

When the Vietnam memorial was dedicated, she attended the ceremony with her family, even though that monument fuels her pain. As she puts it, "When I see that helicopter in the park, sometimes I want to run away." But she thinks it "did open the eyes of Porterville that war was hell, and you have to give up your sons."

As for herself, she said, "You don't really ever recover. It's just a shadow on your mind about your son being blown up. Did he suffer? Did he call out for me? Those things go through my mind, especially on Mother's Day or his birthday." -- -- --

One night almost two years after he was drafted, Hank Reyes and some buddies were playing with a Ouija board while Reyes was on leave. They sat still, placed their hands above the board, asked questions and watched the game's pointer to see what it indicated about their futures.

"It kept telling all his buddies they were coming back, but it told him he wasn't coming back," recalled Connie Delgadillo, Reyes' 69-year-old mother, as she described the boys gathered in her Porterville living room. "He tried to laugh it off. But I always had a feeling he wasn't coming back. And all the others are alive today, too."

In that same period, Hank Reyes spent a night at the apartment of his girlfriend, Sally Arcure. "He was tall. Gorgeous eyes," said Arcure, who is 45 and works in job development at the state center for developmentally disabled.

Looking back, Arcure said those days seem innocent. She was a junior college freshman when she dated Reyes. Her yellow stucco apartment house was nicknamed "Sin City" because so many junior college students lived there. The crowd that Arcure hung out with would go up to Lake Success and stay late -- drinking beer and making out on moonlit nights.

When Reyes returned with his stories of life as a sergeant in battle, his hurting overwhelmed her. "It bothered him to kill, it really did," she said. As they talked, Arcure said, "He begged me to take his class ring. I told him, 'No, Hank, this isn't the right time. I want you to give me the ring when you come back.' He left and never came back. And I lived with that for a long time."

In early July 1969, Reyes had been in Vietnam as an Army paratrooper for about five months. His mother flew to Mexico City, and on July 14 she visited the shrine of the Virgin of Guadalupe. She put on a black dress and crawled on her hands and knees at the shrine.

"I told her I wanted him safe. I wanted him complete," Delgadillo said. "I didn't want him missing an arm or blind, because I didn't think he could take it. He liked to have fun."

The following day Reyes stepped on a land mine in Vietnam and was killed at a place called An Khe, south of Da Nang. He was 22. Later, Delgadillo heard rumors that his death wasn't immediate. "I heard he cried in pain and said 'Mama.' But I didn't have the courage to find out," Delgadillo said, her eyes filling with tears.

Since then, Delgadillo has continued her work as a psychiatric technician at the state center for the developmentally disabled. She has five daughters, one other son and 16 grandchildren. But she has had to struggle to move on. Little things gnaw at her. At Christmas it is the drumstick he used to demand. And then there was the rose bush that Reyes drove over once when he was trying to park the car so he wouldn't get wet during a flood. Delgadillo worried about the bush, whether it was watered. Finally her husband, Reyes' stepfather, pulled it out.

Immediately after Reyes' death, her life revolved around the cemetery. But over time, she stopped going so much: "My mother told me it wasn't good for me. She told me, 'You don't rest, and you don't let him rest.' "

Six years ago, she attended the dedication of the Vietnam memorial in Porterville, and "it brought back memories that he had died," she said. "I saw some of the other boys' parents there, and I knew what they'd been through."

These days, she says she isn't as bitter as she was, but she still sees no reason for the war. "I felt he had died for nothing," she said. "If they had attacked here, but to go all the way over there . . ." -- -- -- In September 1967, Lorene Traphagan drove to Travis Air Force Base with her family to drop off her oldest son, Marine Corporal Stephen Austin, for what she thought would be a routine tour in Hawaii. Austin was due to fly out the next day, and the family had to return home. "As we were going to the car, he was standing there alone," the 69-year-old woman said. "I ran back to him and put my arms around him and kissed him. I told him, 'This is going to have to last me a

long time,' " she said, her voice breaking into sobs. "I didn't know it would have to last forever."

Later, Austin was sent to Vietnam for a second tour. He was there about five months when he was killed on June 8, 1968, south of Da Nang. It was less than a month after Vietnamese peace talks began in Paris.

The day before he died, Austin wrote his family he was sick of all the fighting. "I've seen and helped too many boys my age and younger that was wounded or dead," he wrote. "I thank the Lord each morning I get up."

The following day, at age 21, Austin was shot in the chest, head and abdomen during the Marine Corps' Operation Allen Brook in the southern Quang Nam Province. A buddy pulled the blood-stained letter out of his pocket and mailed it home.

When the military men came to the house with the news of Austin's death, his younger brother, Allen, was at home. "Within two days, Robert Kennedy was assassinated, I graduated from high school and Steve was killed," recalled Allen.

Later, Traphagan said she felt there had been signs all along that her son would be killed. On his last leave when he was home he had told her, "I don't want to go back there. I don't want to kill, and I don't want to be killed."

Then, about two months before he died, Austin sent a letter containing his driver's license and Social Security card. "I looked at his father and said, 'Now, why would he send them to us?' Yes, I think Steve knew." After he died, Traphagan said, "My husband -- he had been in two wars -- told me he had known Steve wouldn't come home. I guess he just had a feeling." Before Austin was sent to Vietnam, she didn't think much about the war. But later she thought a lot about it. Just lately she has been very angry about former Defense Secretary Robert McNamara's new book telling how he regrets the war. "He'll make thousands of dollars off that book, and they could have stopped that war earlier," Traphagan said bitterly. "My son would be alive. Now it's too late for the families and all their dead boys."

Years passed after Austin's death. Traphagan tried to paste her life together, raising her other two sons. Her husband, an Army veteran and former prison guard, died in 1980. She remarried in 1981, and her second husband soon died. Then, about 10 years ago on Mother's Day, Traphagan ran into the mother of her son's old girlfriend at a Springville restaurant and bar.

The woman told Traphagan that Austin was the father of a daughter born to the girlfriend after Austin went off to war. Austin had never known his girlfriend was pregnant.

"I cried all day, just to know that part of Steve was still living," Traphagan said.

The next Christmas, the woman brought Austin's daughter over to meet Traphagan. The girl, Neily, was 17, and she looked a lot like Austin. Traphagan never was told exactly why Neily's family didn't reveal her existence for so many years, but Traphagan doesn't complain about that. Over the years, she has seen Neily off and on, and Neily says she wants to go with Traphagan to the Vietnam Memorial in Washington so they can look at her father's name together.

Most days now, Lorene Traphagan fills her time supporting herself by caring for an elderly woman. When the Porterville memorial was dedicated, Traphagan attended the ceremony with her family.

At the ceremony she heard a speech by Army Colonel David Patton, the nephew of General George Patton and himself a three-tour veteran of Vietnam.

"Maybe the lucky ones were those brought home in an aluminum box," Patton said. "Many of us can see the faces of those who died in our arms. For some of us, the war still rages."

During the speeches, Traphagan cried a lot. "When I look at the helicopter and look at his name, I know he is gone," she said. "Years ago, I kept hoping they'd made a mistake about his death, and I guess I have tried to keep him alive. I've been so sick of hearing the numbers killed over there. This boy had a name and a family. They all had a name."