

Remembering the Vietnam War

Every year thousands of Americans visit the Vietnam Memorial in Washington, D. C. The Memorial consists of two long black slabs bearing the names of nearly 58,000 Americans who died in the war. In 1982, shortly after the monument was dedicated, journalist Ward Just wrote the following tribute to one of the soldiers whose name is inscribed on the Memorial.

As you read, think about:

1. According to Just, what will the Vietnam Memorial accomplish?
2. What event does Just remember?

Boston—I have not seen the Vietnam veterans' memorial with my own eyes, and I distrust pictures. Vietnam taught me to distrust pictures. . . . So it follows that I should distrust my first reaction to Maya Lin's creation, but I don't at all. It seems to me perfect, that long black slab, so austere [severe], abstract, and dignified. [It is] an unforgettably somber [gloomy] sculpture, carved with the names of those Americans who were killed or are missing—57,939 names. . . .

Whatever else the war was, and is to those who served in it, it must not be forgotten by the rest of us. The war exists in their memories and ought now to exist in ours. . . . And the memory of the dead and living [is] no longer an embarrassment, at least in this one location on the Mall in Washington, where the war began.

My memory is one thing I have learned to trust, and my memory is of one of the 57,939. . . . Name: Thurman Shockley. Unit: First Cavalry Division (Air Mobile). Age: 19. Religion: Methodist. Skin: Black.

This was January 1966, on Bong Son Plain, somewhere near the An Lao Valley in Binh Dinh Province. . . . Americans were in and out of the An Lao for years. It was at the end of the day, a routine day on reconnaissance [scouting]. Not many enemy sighted, though there was some sniper fire.

We had paused near a rice field while the company commander radioed battalion for instructions. I

Source: Ward Just. "Remembering Vietnam." © 1982 by *The Washington Post*. Reprinted by permission.

settled under a palm tree to make endless notes . . . and then dropped flat at the sound of shots, five of them in very rapid succession. In a moment, our own troopers began to return fire.

I raised my head then and saw a man down. He was down on his back. When I got to him, there were two troopers standing next to him, not knowing what to do because he was dead. A medic hustled over and listened to his heart. No sound.

The trooper's eyes were wide open and without life. And amid all that drab—the green of his fatigues, the black stock of his M-16, the sweaty gray of his T-shirt—a small red hole in his heart. This was what we looked at, the bright red of the blood beneath his dark face, which wore a look of the most open astonishment or insult, I could not know which.

. . . I talked to a few of Shockley's comrades. They didn't know him well. He'd joined the unit only a few days before. Someone said he came from somewhere in the Midwest. And someone else said he had been in the country six weeks, a draftee. I had no personal information of any kind, whether he was married or not, where he went to school, whether he played sports or read poets or both. Of course, I knew nothing of the sniper, but I wasn't concerned with him. I thought of Thurman Shockley, 19, dead in Vietnam. So should you. He's there somewhere, year 1966. Look for him. Say a prayer.

ANALYZING THE READING

1. Why did Shockley's death make such an impression on Just?

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Analyzing Primary Sources

Growing Up in Vietnam

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As devastating as the Vietnam War was to many Americans, it was at least as tragic for the Vietnamese, whose lives, homes, and country were torn apart by civil war. Growing up in the village of Ky La, Phung Thi Le Ly Hayslip heard many conflicting stories about the war. After becoming an American citizen, she returned to Vietnam to try to understand what had happened. This selection is from her memoir.

Everything I knew about the war I learned as a teenaged girl from the North Vietnamese cadre [core group] leaders in the swamps outside Ky La. During these midnight meetings, we peasants assumed everything we heard was true because what the Viet Cong said matched, in one way or another, the beliefs we already had.

The first lesson we learned about the new "American" war was why the Viet Cong was formed and why we should support it. Because this lesson came on the heels of our war with the French . . . , what the cadre leaders told us seemed to be self-evident.

First, we were taught that Vietnam was . . . a sovereign nation which had been held in thrall [slavery] by Western imperialists for over a century. That all nations had a right to determine their own destiny also seemed beyond dispute, since we farmers subsisted by our own hands and felt we owed nothing to anyone but god and our ancestors for the right to live as we saw fit.

Second, the cadres told us that the division of Vietnam into North and South in 1954 was nothing more than a ploy by the defeated French and their Western allies, mainly the United States, to preserve what influence they could in our country.

"*Chia doi dai nuoc?*" the Viet Cong asked, "Why should outsiders divide the land and tell some people to go north and others south? If Vietnam were truly for the Vietnamese, wouldn't we choose for ourselves what kind of government our people wanted? A nation cannot have two governments," they said, "anymore than a family can have two fathers."

Because those who favored America quickly occupied the seats of power formerly held by the French, and because the North remained pretty much on its own, the choice of which side best represented independence was, for us, a foregone conclusion. . . .

After these initial "lessons," the cadre leaders introduced us to the two Vietnamese leaders who personified each view—the opposite poles of our tiny world. On the South pole was President Ngo Dinh Diem, America's staunch ally, who was Catholic like the French. Although he was idolized by many who said he was a great humanitarian and patriot, his religion alone was enough to make him suspicious to Buddhists on the Central Coast. The loyalty we showed him, consequently, was more duty to a landlord than love for a founding father. . . .

In the North, on the other pole, was Ho Chi Minh, whom we were encouraged to call *Bac Ho*—Uncle Ho—the way we would refer to a trusted family friend. We knew nothing of his past beyond stories of his compassion and his love for our troubled country—the independence of which, we were told, he had made the mission of his life. . . .

But to achieve that independence, Ho said, we must wage total war. . . .

. . . Uncle Ho had urged the poor to take up arms so that everyone might be guaranteed a little land on which to cultivate some rice. Because nearly everyone in Central Vietnam was a farmer, and because farmers must have land, almost everyone went to war: with a rifle or a hoe; with vigilance to give the alarm; with food and shelter for our fighters. . . . Everything we knew commanded us to fight. . . . Our myths and legends called us to war. Our parents' teachings called us to war. Uncle Ho's cadre called us to war. Even President Diem had called us to fight for the very thing we now believed he was betraying—an independent Vietnam.

From Le Ly Hayslip with Jay Wurts, *When Heaven and Earth Changed Places: A Vietnamese Woman's Journey from War to Peace* (New York: Doubleday, 1989). ©1989 By Le Ly Hayslip and Charles Wurts. Used with permission of Doubleday, a division of Bantam, Doubleday, Dell.

1. How did the Viet Cong portray the conflict in Vietnam? Why did villagers accept their view?
2. Why did the villagers regard the Americans as part of the French occupation of Vietnam?
3. For the ordinary Vietnamese, what was the main goal of going to war?
4. **Analysis.** Contrast how the villagers regarded the two leaders of Vietnam.

Analyzing Primary Sources

Out in the Fields in Nam

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Unlike World War II, the war in Vietnam saw black and white soldiers fighting side by side. This account by Robert Sanders, an African American, tells how they lived and worked together. To American soldiers in Vietnam, the enemy was called "Charlie."

For the first time in my life, I saw total unity and harmony. In the states, even in the rear in Nam, blacks and whites fought each other. But in the Nam, man, out in the fields we were just a force of unity and harmony. We became just one person. When I first got to the Nam, I saw a lot of prejudice. . . . But Charlie had a tendency to make you unify in a hurry. . . . Your anger and your common sense told you that you needed everybody. I mean EVERYONE. That was because a few people could get the whole company killed in just a matter of seconds if they were not doing their job, if they were not sharing in trying to counter Charlie when he attacked. This was something you learned. The army couldn't make you understand. Naturally they told you, "You're a fighting team." You became a machine. You stuck together and you did everything together. You didn't have time for philosophizing. After a while, you saw it; you felt it; you became a part of it.

Sometimes it takes tragedy to bring people together. It really does. And I can't think of anything more tragic than that situation at that time. Little things happened. We ran out of food during the monsoon (seasonal rainstorms) up in the mountains. Whoever had any salt left or a little cocoa, maybe a package of coffee, shared it. That one little package of coffee went around to four or five guys. By the time it got to you, the coffee looked like tinted water, but it was something liquid. . . . It was a good feeling. That was the only thing that was good about Vietnam, as far as I'm concerned. For the first time in my life, I saw people as people. We was just us, you know, man, it was US.

Excerpted from Stanley Goff, Robert Sanders, and Clark Smith, *Brothers: Black Soldiers in the Nam* (Novato, Cal.: Presidio Press, 1982), pp. 130-131.
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1. Where did Sanders notice prejudice?
2. How did "Charlie" make the troops unify quickly?
3. Besides the dangers of battle, what common problems did all the soldiers face together?
4. **Application.** What lessons might Americans learn in peacetime from what Sanders says about soldiers in Vietnam?