

**“A Veteran’s Look at Memorial Day”**  
**Quimper Unitarian Universalist Fellowship**  
**May 28, 2023**  
**Larry Morrell**

**Reading** – “No Time to Cry – We Weren’t Considered Heroes” by Joseph Julian

The majority of the soldiers serving in Vietnam were draftees. Back then, a classification of 1A meant the chance of getting drafted was about 99%, and the chance you would end up in Vietnam was around 90%. Of the over 58,000 names etched on the Vietnam War Memorial, the majority were boys just out of high school, brothers who never had a chance to live out their lives, their dreams. Not to mention a forgotten list of wounded and dismembered to the tune of 304,000. Of the 2.7 million who served in Vietnam, one out of every 10 soldiers ended up a casualty. Amputations or crippling wounds were 300 times higher than World War II. Over 75,000 Vietnam veterans are severely disabled. And not a single thank you, or welcome home, we missed you.”

**Introduction**

Our speaker today is Larry Morrell. He has been a UU since the mid 1970s and a member of five different congregations over the years. He served in the military toward the end of the Vietnam war, spending three years on active duty in the Army and three more years on Active Reserves in both the Army and the Navy. A supporter of those in uniform, he also works to keep the military accountable to the communities in which they live and work. At QUUF he serves on our Board of Trustees as the Board President.

**Sermon**

When I innocently volunteered to do the service for memorial Day, I had no idea the journey I would take to this talk. I discovered some buried emotions and grieving that wasn’t buried very deeply. I explored my time in the service, late-night talks with a sniper and other combat troops – lubricated with PX beer and, later, conversations with veterans living with post-traumatic stress disorder – some who just hoped that they would never have to make the decision to kill or be killed (that’s the category I was in).

Revisiting these times in my life has reminded me of how lucky I have been – even privileged because I was able to make some choices not available to everyone. Had my circumstances been slightly different, my life could have taken a very different direction. I will refrain from graphic descriptions that many would find upsetting – but then talking about people who were violently killed is upsetting all by itself.

Warning – I will be describing events that happened during war. War is not civil – it is messy. And we are here today to talk about what Memorial Day is all about – omitting the messiness of war would be candy-coating war experiences.

[Memorial Day Background & History](#)

To begin with: a quick history of Memorial Day. Many of you are already familiar with the history – it has been described from this pulpit in past years. The rightful claim of the origin of the tradition is not exactly clear. The U.S. Army Airborne and Special Operations Museum says “Although it is unclear where exactly this tradition originated, some records indicate that one of the earliest Memorial Day commemorations was organized by a group of formerly enslaved people in Charleston, South Carolina less than a month after the Confederacy surrendered in 1865.” Slight correction to that quote – that is a reference to Lee’s surrender to Grant – the Civil War fighting continued for another 16 months. The event in Charleston is commemorated with a plaque that identifies May 1 as the date of the “Decoration” event. The plaque reads:

“On May 1, 1865 a parade to honor the Union war dead took place here. The event marked the earliest celebration of what became known as “Memorial Day.” The crowd numbered in the thousands, with African-American school children from newly formed Freedmen’s Schools leading the parade. They were followed by church leaders, Freedpeople, Unionists, and members of the 54th Massachusetts 34th and 104th U.S. Colored Infantries. The dead were later reinterred in Beaufort.”

When the first national celebration of the modern Memorial Day holiday took place at Arlington National Cemetery on May 30, 1868, the holiday was called Decoration Day. General John Logan, leader of an organization for Northern Civil War veterans, called for a nationwide day of remembrance. He chose May 30 because it wasn’t the anniversary of any Civil War battle.

Tributes to soldiers lost in the Civil War occurred throughout the country in the years before the 1868 observance. The U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs says approximately 25 places, many in the South where the bulk of the war dead were buried, have been linked to the origins of Memorial Day.

The holiday’s evolution from Decoration Day to Memorial Day was gradual. Congress recognized Decoration Day as a federal holiday in 1938. People began to refer to the holiday as Memorial Day following World War II, and the federal government adopted the Memorial Day name in 1967. Then in 1971, a federal law changed the observance of the holiday to the last Monday in May and extended the honor to all soldiers who died in American wars – moving it from May 30 to be sure we got a 3-day weekend out of it.

And how do we celebrate it? Bar-b-ques, camping (like our Quimper Camp happening this weekend), family visits, and Parades – and the Indianapolis 500 – which is currently underway as I am speaking these words. I was born in Indianapolis and grew up nearby. Memorial Day weekend was ALL about the Indy 500 – “The greatest Spectacle in Racing” – the Memorial Day tag line I grew up with.

Memorial day weekend marks the end of a long dry spell between official 3-day weekends – 98 days since “President’s Day” – the longest interval in 3-day weekends in the year – so our need for a “long weekend” has really been building up. So no wonder we all look forward to the long weekend – and the unofficial start of summer.

Here are a few Facts of “American Wars”:

- 1,300,000 war dead (military) – in all US wars with the Civil War accounting for about half that (620,000).
- That’s a lot of people – BUT just for comparison, in World War II, the world counted over 15 million military battle deaths and somewhere around 45 million civilians, according to the National World War II Museum in New Orleans – a total of 60 million.
- One of the most sobering experiences of my life was a visit to the American Cemetery in Normandy, France – over 10,000 dead and missing in action in over 170 acres of white crosses– commemorating the D-Day invasion of Normandy on June 6, 1944.

I have never had to face the kill or be killed decision. At 20 years old in 1972, I was in the draft lottery as the Vietnam war was supposed to be winding down – but it didn’t seem like it really was. My lottery number was 116 – meaning that I might be selected or might not – no one knew for sure. For those who don’t know – the draft lottery was supposed to make planning your life more predictable – you could prepare to “get drafted” with a low number OR “go on with your life” with a high number. Mine was uncomfortably in the middle. The previous year, they had taken up to about 200 in my county – but they thought there would be fewer now – but no promises.

So, inspired by a Robert Heinlein story – I decided to see if I could “hide from the Army – in the Army” – that is land a job that would put me far from looking through the sites of an M-16 fully automatic weapon with orders to kill “the enemy.” To this day, I’m not sure how I would have confronted that decision. After a series of unexpected twists, I ended up in West Germany after over a year and half of very specialized training – and NOT in Southeast Asia. I spent the next 18 months as a Radio Traffic Analyst feeding field analysis to the NSA – my reports went to the Russian Desk. My intelligence target was Russian Land Forces in East Germany, well out of harm’s way.

While there I spent many hours talking with others who had been to Vietnam – in combat. One conversation in particular sticks in my head. We’ll call him Frank. He had been a sniper – sitting – usually in a tree or hilltop – camouflaged – sometimes with a spotter – sometimes alone – and just wait for an enemy patrol to come into range. He would wait for the point man – usually a 100 yards or so in front of the main body – to pass by safely – so he could “take out” as many of the following squad as possible before being spotted himself – then take up a new position. He had many stories. Frank told these stories matter-of-fact-like – like someone giving a 3rd person account of an accident to a policeman. I will spare you the details of his more graphic descriptions of his tour of duty. After one of the stories, Frank looks off into the air as if seeing something we couldn’t see and said, “It messes with your head, though.” Well, no kidding, I thought, my head is being messed with right now and I’m just listening...trying to imagine what that was like.

Fast forward a few decades and I’m at a UU men’s retreat. One of our members tells his story of Vietnam – how HIS squad was ambushed and how HIS friend was “taken out”

and died in front of him. Howard served in Vietnam as a medic and has carried memories and dealt with trauma since. Via the Red Badge Project (co-founded by Tom Skerritt to help veterans deal with trauma – and address the suicide rate), as part of his healing, Howard wrote about his experience in the form of a letter to his fallen friend – Hal Mundie – Howard’s memorial to his friend:

Hello, Hal.

They told us not to make friends so it wouldn’t hurt when they died. I didn’t know you all that well – a dozen conversations. Most would say we were just acquaintances. We were medics in different platoons in E-Troop 17th Cavalry 173rd Airborne brigade in Bonson, Viet Nam. Our time in the cav only overlapped by a few months, but we connected somehow. Back in the world you were from Alabama. You were a southern boy that everyone liked and respected. I was living in New Orleans at the time. We planned on going to medical school together when we got out. We were 21, and we had a future.

On May 6th, 1968, your future stopped and mine was forever changed. The jeep you were in was blown up by an anti-tank mine. I worked on you to no avail. After working on other casualties as I was sitting by a stream bed, I tried to come up with a good reason for your death. I couldn’t. We both had agreed that the US involvement in the war was a mistake. At the time I had resolved that I would die in Viet Nam, too. Since you had died, there was no reason that I wouldn’t die also. It wasn’t until I was a short timer that the feeling that I might survive returned. And I had the will to live again.

Throughout my life, I have carried the memory of you, Hal. Your life was cut short. So it is up to me to live my life for you, too. I’m sure you would have made a fine doctor and maybe I would have, also. I did have a career in medicine for a time, as an orderly, a surgical technician, paramedic and paramedic manager, but fell short on going to medical school.

I always wanted to meet your parents and eventually did meet with your family and friends in Alabama. After sharing my memories of you and what happened, they told me that when you left for Vietnam, you told everyone that you would die there. I visited your grave in a beautiful country church yard. Every Memorial Day, I say, “I remember Hal Mundie.”

My friend Howard – who watched Hal take his last breath – then described the impacts of his now-diagnosed PTS he has been suffering for 50 years. As part of his healing, took a trip with other Vietnam vets back to Vietnam to connect with the Vietnamese – as people, not as an enemy. His group gifted a village family a water buffalo – which in some of the rural villages is an essential to help feed the family. One man there said (through an interpreter) that he was in the North Vietnamese Army and his job had been to lay landmines – in the same Bonson province where Hal died. This Vietnamese man could have been the very person who laid the land mine that killed Hal – HIS enemy. They both

recognized this possibility – no malice or blame – they knew each other as Brothers in Arms. I'd like to pause here, while we listen to Joan Baez sing "Brothers in Arms."

[https://drive.google.com/file/d/1iNV9A-Y6AHNGURndoKVRvn3xNYU\\_V7yL/view?usp=drive\\_link](https://drive.google.com/file/d/1iNV9A-Y6AHNGURndoKVRvn3xNYU_V7yL/view?usp=drive_link)

General Douglas MacArthur is quoted as saying: "The soldier above all prays for peace, for it is the soldier who must suffer and bear the deepest wounds and scars of war." What, exactly, are we celebrating? Memorials are in honor of the deceased, but for the benefit of the living. What are the lessons we should be paying attention to? What does our spiritual journey require of us on Memorial Day? We pause on our journey to remember – and what? To maybe try to change? Maybe practice the LOVE that we understand to be so important?

I recall after the attacks on the World Trade center on 9/11 some people daring to ask: "What have we done to anger someone to the point of committing this horrible act?" While I don't recall who, exactly, asked that question, I do recall the OUTRAGE of even suggesting that perhaps we didn't understand that – just possibly – something we (or our government) have done things to generate hate. OUTRAGEOUS! To even think that there is even a scintilla of a possibility that we may have contributed to the cycle of hate and revenge. Violence is NEVER the answer – it's a reaction. It's a cycle – perhaps we can change that?

Nations are made up of people – people who can either choose to try to understand or choose to hate and vilify and punish. And that applies at every level of interaction – down to our own congregation – we can choose to be in community – to act in LOVE and a desire for connection – or we can deliberately DIS-connect – and attempt to punish that which we do not understand or agree with.

Memorial Day was established to remember that we are all brothers and sisters – all siblings – that violent conflict at any level is senseless. Disagreement need not be nasty and divisive – IF we remember that we are all fallible humans. Remember that we are all connected and that if we really want LOVE in our lives – if we want human connection – then we simply make that choice. It's just a choice.

With enough people making that choice – maybe, just possibly – the spirit of connection will become more the rule than the exception everywhere and we can stop adding to the number of casualties of war.

My desire for all: Choose Connection. Choose Love.

May it be so.