

VIETNAM: A REFLECTION



USAF Technical Sergeant Richard B. Fitzgibbon, Jr is officially recognized as the first American serviceman killed in the Vietnam War on June 8, 1956. His son, Marine Lance Corporal Richard B. Fitzgibbon III, was killed in action on September 7, 1965. On the morning of April 29, 1975, 21 year old Marine Corporal Charles McMahan and 19 year

old Lance Corporal (and Eagle Scout) Darwin Judge were providing security at the Defense Attaché Office adjacent to Tan Son Nhut AFB in Saigon. Both died at the same moment in a rocket attack by the North Vietnamese. They are officially listed as the last two American servicemen killed in the Vietnam War; both Marines had been 'in country' less than two weeks.

The bodies of McMahan and Judge were taken to the Saigon Adventist Hospital near the airbase, one day before Operation Frequent Wind, the U.S. evacuation of Saigon, was completed. The few remaining staff at the hospital told inquiring calls that the two bodies had been evacuated. In fact, the bodies had been left behind. One year later, Senator Edward Kennedy secured the return of the bodies through diplomatic channels.



Corporal Charles McMahon Lance Corporal Darwin Lee Judge

Returned to his hometown of Woburn, Massachusetts, Marine Corporal Charles McMahon was given a proper military funeral and a memorial wall was erected in his honor by the Boys and Girls Club of Woburn. Lance Corporal Darwin Judge was buried in his hometown of Marshalltown, Iowa. A Marine Corps Honor Guard gave a rifle firing salute then presented the flag that draped his coffin to his parents. Otherwise, his funeral was ignored. No major or minor media attended the Marine's funeral, the lone exception was the *Daily Iowan* out of Iowa City, Iowa.

The last two to die; one honored by his hometown, the other ignored. As crass as this may sound, that pretty well sums up our return from Vietnam in the waning years of the war. The public was having trouble separating the war from the warrior, and the

government had already deserted us. In the aftermath of The Great War (WWI) silent films depicted the conflict in less than realistic footage. During WWII, government-made and/or a few war correspondent's films and newsreels informed the uninformed populace. When the Korean War broke out, less than 9% of the population owned a TV. Newspapers and radio were the only real source of 'war news', much of it censored. As the casualties mounted in Vietnam, over 85% of American families could turn on a TV and watch the war as if the conflict was a series on the yet-to-be History Channel. Ours, was the first televised war.

On January 01, 1973, President Richard Nixon signed the Paris Peace Accords. With a stroke of a pen, America's direct military involvement in Southeast Asia was officially over, with pledges to indirectly support our South Vietnamese ally. On April 21, 1975, President Gerald Ford announced in a speech at Tulane University that "...as far as America is concerned, this war is over." Eight days later, a North Vietnamese 122mm rocket ends the lives of two young Marines, the last Americans to die "boots on the ground" in Vietnam. **The very next day, April 30, 1975, North Vietnamese tanks roll onto the Presidential Palace grounds in Saigon.** Fending off the Chinese for centuries, then the French, then the Japanese, then the French again after WWII, and finally the American involvement, Vietnam's 1000 year struggle to be Vietnam, was finally over.

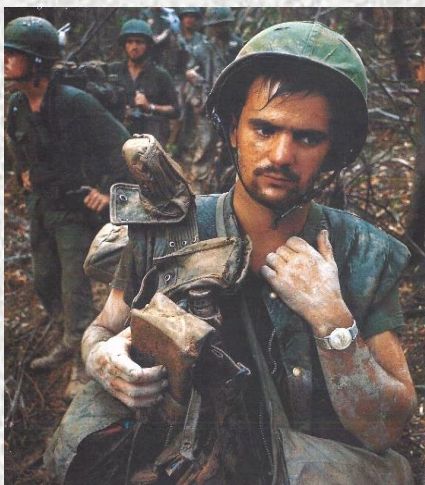


Thirty seven years after the guns fell silent in Southeast Asia, President Barack Obama proclaimed on March 29, 2012 that henceforth March 29 would be known as Vietnam Veterans Day. It still took another five years for March 29 to become an official day of recognition when President Donald Trump signed the *Vietnam War Veterans Recognition Act of 2017*.

So, there we were, 42 years after the war ended finally getting our day of recognition in 2017. March 29, 2021, this year, will be the fourth year of official recognition. Well, better late than never, I suppose, but in truth, I'm not too impressed.

I'll not bore the reader with all the mathematical calculations, but after deducting the ones who didn't return and deducting the ones still alive from the number who served, the number who have perished 'after' returning from Vietnam is more or less 1.8 million Nam veterans who never lived to see the day that officially recognized their service in Southeast Asia, be it on the ground, in the air, or at sea. No, I'm not impressed at all by the too-late gesture for final closure.

Ungrateful? No, heartbroken. A bottle of pills from the V.A. can sedate but not alleviate the memories. A national day of recognition may pacify but can't help us find the peace within our souls. We cannot forget the war. Can we forgive what was once a thankless nation; a deceitful government, asinine rules of engagement that maimed us mentally and physically? Yes, of course we can forgive, even if forgiveness is not deserved by some; yes, we can still forgive because we deserve peace. But we cannot forget.



Sit in a VA waiting room and observe, observe the old men on walkers, using a cane, or maneuvering their motorized scooter around people and chairs. Watch as they hobble around on artificial legs or scribble almost illegibly with their left hand because they no longer have a right hand, **and notice the ones walking out of 'mental health' with a permanent 1,000 yard- stare.** These are

the warriors who can forgive, but they will never be able to forget. Don't pity them; they don't want it and they sure as hell don't need it. A simple 'thank you' will suffice. Too, remember they were a bigger badass than you could ever imagine. I guess it's best explained by the title of the legendary war correspondent Joe Galloway's best-selling novel, *"We Were Soldiers Once....And Young."*

All wars, all branches, all ranks, my personal interviews with America's Best now number over 400. I hope I'm around long enough to interview another 400. They all have a story to tell; they all deserve to be heard, they all need their own personal closure. Personally, I'll never experience a closure, there's too much left to do, too many stories waiting to be told, too many memories to be shared. Not a day goes by without Vietnam



creeping into my psyche; it's my mistress with slanted eyes, the sounds, the smells, the noise, **the whump, whump, whump of a Huey rotor blade**, the disillusionment. I suppose that's my cross to bear, but bear it I will.

Allow me to close with the best observation regarding war that I've ever read, by Bruce H. Horton: *"Combat is fast, unfair, cruel and dirty. It is meant to be that way so that the terrible experience is branded into the memory of those who are*

fortunate enough to survive. It is up to those survivors to ensure that the experience is recorded and passed along to those who just might want to try it."



"Death, like a great eagle, flew over Vietnam and picked out its prey. What a waste."

- Jo Vabolis -