

SHARED WEIGHT

The Fall of Saigon, 30 Years Later

MASH 1969-Visions of War, Dreams of Peace

Billboard

I'm Marc Steiner, and welcome to Shared Weight, a documentary series about the Vietnam War 30 years after it ended. This hour, we hear the stories of poet George Evans, who served as an Air Force medic and who was the first soldier to defeat his court marshal, in a tale that could come straight out of the movie and TV series, MASH. And then we hear the story of Lynda Van Devanter, who was a surgical nurse in 1969 and 70, whose memoir and life story inspired the TV hit series, China Beach. We hear her gripping story in the only known recording of her before she died tragically in 2002. We'll be back with Shared Weight right after this NPR news break.

Segment 1

MARC: I'm Marc Steiner, and welcome to Shared Weight, to 1969 and the stories of army nurse and author Lynda Van Devanter, whose life inspired the TV series, China Beach, and Air Force sergeant George Evans, who was the first man during the Vietnam War to be tried and beat his court marshal. Please be advised that the following program has graphic depictions of the wounded and their medical treatment and language that some may find objectionable. George Evans is now a poet. He and his wife, Daisy Evans, also a poet and former Sandinista guerilla, were on our journey to Vietnam that created this series, Shared Weight. George Evans was an Air Force medic at the military hospital in Camrun Bay in Vietnam in 1969. He grew up a working class kid in Pittsburgh and went to war because he was expected to do so. His story didn't inspire the film, MASH, but could have been part of it. While there, he served honorably, but created his own non-violent resistance to the war by not acknowledging the authorities above him. They attempted to court marshal him, and this is his story.

GEORGE: I grew up in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. I was the son of an iceman and a large family and a working class family. And it was a post-war disintegration, urban sort of setting. Of course, my father was an iceman, and I was his helper, until I realized from listening to his union friends that I should get paid, which began a conflict and a spiral downward in our relationship that resulted in, at about the age of 12, my running away from home. We didn't get along well. My father was a World War II veteran, quite damaged, I would say, from his experience in the islands with the Japanese. I grew up around a lot of war veterans, and war was a constant subject in that world. There was no one I knew who did not have some experience with war, of the men around my father, but in my time, it was a very rough, heavy duty sort of working class situation, and I basically grew up from the age of 12 in street gangs, and in those days I just moved from group to group. I was very curious. It was a great adventure. It was always assumed in our world that the military was in our future. It was actually the reality of the poverty draft. It was the only way out. Eventually I dropped out of school, but I was determined from a very, very early age to educate myself, and I began as a visual artist, which was profoundly frowned upon. It was easier for me to read. I was also drawn to that. I started writing poems when I was quite young, I'd say somewhere around the age of 10, if not earlier, I'd begun writing things, also frowned upon. Somewhere down the line I knew that I'd have to go into the military, and one of my best friends somehow twigged the fact that something very, very bad was going on in Vietnam. I was oblivious to it. And he convinced me that we should, before we get drafted, we should join the military. And, I didn't care one way or the other. I knew I was going to have to go somewhere. He got rejected for a bad knee, supposedly. This young man whose bad knee disqualified him from joining the Air Force would later qualify him to be drafted and killed in Vietnam. I went off to the Air Force, and I became a corpsman, a medical corpsman, and my first assignment was in Tripoli, Libya, where I lived for a year and a half. As a trade, I think I was given a very desirable job next to Fort Dix at McGuire Air Force Base. In the process of that, my best friend died in Vietnam. I was bound and determined not to stay put in New Jersey. I wanted to go to the war. I wanted to see what was happening to my generation, so I volunteered to go to Vietnam. In the course of that waiting to leave, three friends from childhood were killed in Vietnam.

I started to get it about ten minutes after I landed in Vietnam that something was really wrong. I knew it before I left, but I was uncertain. Something didn't turn me towards understanding that this was a wrong thing to do, and I discovered, in fact,

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after I did arrive there that what I'd been told, from my point of view, was wrong, and that we were being lied to. And the Vietnamese, as you see, are tremendously endearing people, and it's impossible once you encounter them to know why anybody would want to hurt them. I would say I became completely against the war from the moment I set foot in the country. Then I had to stay for a year, and I had to figure out what will I do to psychologically survive this year because this was a crime. This is wrong. I learned something about our country, my country, the day I got to Vietnam, and that was that we were involved in a true and major crime, a war crime, against a country and a group of people that certainly didn't deserve our attention and that it was wrong. It could never be justified. Nothing could justify that sort of loss among the Vietnamese and among the Americans. So, I became slowly more radicalized, learning in my very limited way how to resist the military and to assist those that I could with what I knew how to do. I always paid attention to my job, but I slowly became a non-soldier. Let me say an anti-soldier.

MARC: So it wasn't one event that turned you?

GEORGE: No, it wasn't one event. It was exposure to the whole milieu at once. I felt that my job, at that point, became one of being a witness, of watching what was happening around me while being involved in it and understanding, somehow on a micro-level what the war meant, determined, almost immediately, I will go home, I will talk about this. I'll be able to tell people what's happening here. There was an event, in fact, not long after I arrived that—the event of Hamburger Hill happened, the Hamburger Hill battle that you've heard about. Well, one night, I came to work, and there were a half-dozen seriously brain damaged young Americans in the ward who'd come back from Hamburger Hill, and I can still see their faces. Their lives were over. Their brain damage was irreparable. That made a big impression on me.

MARC: And so, what led to this court martial?

GEORGE: My court martial, actually, was the eventual denouement of this process of paying attention and becoming less and less of, what I would say, a spit-shine military type. I always did my job, but there were forms of passive resistance that I could become involved in, quit shaving, quit cutting your hair, quit shining your shoes, quit ironing your uniform, quit saluting officers, quit saying 'yes, sir,' quit doing what you're told, quit supporting the war. And I was posting signs and little messages on bulletin boards, and we could say, resist the war, don't do what they tell you, see what's really going on, this is a crime, things of that sort, little things, but they counted, they mattered. It was known that we were doing that after a while. They left us alone. We were young. We were not predictable. People were afraid of the young. I was in Vietnam in 1969, which was the year in which the highest number of fragging events occurred. We may have gone in uneducated, but we're reading books, we're finding out. We're getting newspapers from the United States. We're being contacted by outside organizations with offers to desert. We're making friends among the Vietnamese. We're seeing that the Vietnamese were not our enemies. We were our enemies. I can't say the exact details, but there's a power structure, and the upper echelons of the power structure didn't touch the dirt, and that's why they grew to fear the troops because the troops lived on the ground, and they ran, in my case, they ran the hospital, and they ran the war. That's—at that point, I think you would say, the military, the U.S. military was out of control. It had gone spinning off in a direction that it didn't actually ever expect to happen, and there was a real and true genuine subculture of enlisted people—I was among them—who simply wouldn't cooperate, who simply wouldn't listen, who refused to take orders, who had essentially gone into the military initially in order to get an education. I would never have gotten out of the streets of Pittsburgh without somehow being drawn into a situation where I could go to the university or even finish high school.

MARC: Take us to the point where they came after you.

GEORGE: A new CO came to the hospital, and I think the first person he ran into was me, and this was a very bad experience for him. I hadn't shaved in a few days. My hair was about as long as you could legally get it, nothing really. I looked disheveled, and I wouldn't salute him. And he really threw a fit in front of me, and I wouldn't salute him. He said, 'I'm so and so from such and such,' and I said, 'Great.' 'Well, you'll stand to attention and nuh nuh nuh nuh nuh nuh,' and I just said, 'I'll see you later, man.' And I left. He made me into a project. He decided he was going to use me as an example because I was the youngest staff sergeant. I was twenty years old, and I, he said to me, had a responsibility to set an

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example for the other troops, and I said, 'I am setting an example for the other troops.' And he really didn't like that. One night, there'd been a jet crash out in the, on one of the runways, and we were told the day before that there was going to be a formal formation on the helicopter pad at six o'clock in the morning. Well, first of all, I wasn't going to do that. No one was going to get me to go out and stand in the open in a group of soldiers after I'd already been there nine months, and it wasn't going to happen, so this jet dinged in, in the middle of the night, and I just said, 'Well, I'm going to go,' and I went with another medic, and we went out there, and we—it wasn't a really severe crash; nobody was hurt, but we just checked it out. By the time we came back, it was time for the formation, and we were covered with mud and just filthy looking and I was my usual half-bearded

MARC: Disheveled self.

GEORGE: Disheveled self, and I pull up, and here's this magnificent military formation on the helicopter pad. I was really—I couldn't believe it. I say, 'Well, I'm just going to disappear into the woodwork here,' and I jump out. I get out of the ambulance, and I guess I didn't know this guy was watching me when I pulled the ambulance in. He was aware and standing right in front of the troops, and he saw me, and he shouted across for me to 'come, sergeant, get over here in this formation,' and I just waved him away. And he said, 'I order you to fall in!' and I just kept walking. By the time I got to this part of the perimeter, he was livid and red and spitting through his ears and screaming at me that I should come to the formation immediately or he was going to have me immediately arrested on the spot. And I thought, this guy's not going to stop, so I walked over to the formation, and I said, what do you want? He said, 'Fall in!' I said, 'I'm going to bed.' And he went nuts. He said, 'Are you telling me that you're not going to do this?!' I said, 'I'm going to bed.' And he was really jumping up and down, and now the whole hospital was standing there watching this theater go on, and I thought, okay, here's the turning point. This is a turning point in my life because now I'm out. They've outed me. I can either do this, which means nothing, or I can walk away, which also means nothing, except if I walk away, it's a more overt form of resistance for no reason, and so I walked away, and I went to bed. And so, I don't know, the few minutes I was asleep, I was—a huge MP came, or an AP, we called them. Air Police, Military, and said, 'Get up, man, you've got to go, you've got to go,' and I said, 'Aw man, I've got to sleep. I worked all night.' They said, get the f--k out of the bed. I said, 'Come on, man.' He said, 'Look,' he said, 'he wants you in the office. You've got to go to the CO's office.' So, I said okay.

MARC: We will return in a minute with the rest of George Evans' story, as he faces court marshal in Camranh Bay, Vietnam in 1969.

Act II

MARC: Welcome back to Shared Weight, to the story of George Evans. We rejoin him in the office of his CO, who's threatened him with court marshal if he doesn't cut his hair, shave his beard, and salute his officers.

GEORGE: So I was marched into his office, and then I was told that I would really be on my way to jail very shortly. He said, 'You're a disgrace to the uniform.' And I said that I knew that. And he said, 'What do you have to say for yourself?' And I said, 'I have nothing to say.' And he said, 'You're going to jail.' And I said, 'First I'm going to sleep, man. And then we'll talk about it.' 'Cause I had been up all night working, and he said, 'You, how dare you do this. And I said, 'Look, just get off my f***ing back. I've got three months left in this war, three months left in the military, and I'm going home, and that's it. I won't participate in this, and I want no trouble from you. I don't wish to disrespect you; I just wish to be left alone to do my job. And he said, 'You will go to jail for this.' And I said, 'Well, we'll see.' And he wanted me to salute him, and I wouldn't, and he became more and more and more livid, and the first sergeant talked him out of having me taken to the brig. I said, 'Look, I'm sorry, but I'm put in a position here where I'm of two minds, and one mind won't participate in this, and I won't do it.' And he said, 'Well, we have to do something. He said, you have to sign this punishment,' and it was an Article 15. And I knew about the ubiquitous Article 15 they were giving out like confetti. They're what you would call company punishment. I said, 'There's a military law—which, I knew all of the military laws—that says that I don't have to sign that. I have an alternative.' He said, 'What is that?' I said, 'I demand a trial.' He said, 'You want a trial?' I said, 'What am I being charged with here?' He said, 'Well, you know, you failed to show up at an assembly, you were rude to this guy, you're out of uniform,

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look at you. You're a disgrace.' But I said, 'Well, I'm not signing it.' I said, 'I want a trial.' And he said, 'You know, you're really going to wind up in jail.' And I said, 'No, I'm not.' I said, 'I don't believe I did anything wrong.' I felt if I get a trial, then if I make them take me to a trial, then I've just—that's a real form of resistance, and so I forced the trial. And I wasn't afraid. I really wasn't. Listen, after nine months in Vietnam in a hospital, what could they do? As we used to say, send me to Vietnam? No problem. I wasn't really worried. I wasn't really told the truth, however. I was led to believe I could be dishonorably discharged with the kind of trial I demanded. I said, 'I want a lawyer.' He said, 'You know, this is ridiculous.' I said, 'Yes, it is.' I get a lawyer; I go to see the lawyer. He dresses me down terribly. 'Look at you, you've got a beard, your hair's long, you're shaggy, you're going to jail.' And I said, 'Why are you talking to me this way?' I said, 'You're my lawyer.' I said, 'You're to defend me.' He said, 'You're indefensible.' I said, 'I'm indefensible?' He said, 'You're indefensible.' I said, 'Well, f--k you. You're not my lawyer.' He said, 'Well nuh nuh nuh.' I said, 'Listen, I don't want you as a lawyer.' 'You don't have the right. You have to take the lawyer you get.' I said, 'No. You're not my lawyer.' Well, it turned out he was roommate of the CO, who had me put in this position in the first place. Imagine that. I didn't find that out, of course, until I got rid of him. And then I found another lawyer who was an activist, and he was a different ball of wax altogether. He said, 'Listen buddy, you've gotta shave, you've gotta shine your shoes, you've gotta fight this. You've got to fight it with some strength.' And he told me the truth of what would happen. Okay, so the formal charges were brought, and I have to tell you that in the midst of this, it amused me tremendously because the charges were failure to obey a direct order, which was a serious charge; being out of uniform, which was unbelievable—I never saw anybody in uniform in Vietnam—and that was because I was wearing the wrong kind of hat. And one other charge, failure to appear at a lawful assembly, which was the first time I'd ever been given an order to appear at a lawful assembly. Those were the charges I had to defend myself against. So, I went to trial. I was allowed to have witnesses to my character, so I went out and got a bunch of witnesses from the whole echelon, you know, rank of the non-commissioned officers. I had great witnesses. And they marched them in, and they listened to them, and they listened to the captain, and he dressed me down, and he explained to them what a terrible person I was and nuh nuh nuh nuh nuh nuh nuh. I had no excuse for my shoes, my hair, my clothing, my attitude, but I felt pretty self-righteous as a young, American, working class person. I thought that my defense was the war was no good, that I did my job. My character witnesses would attest to that. They could call any doctor in the hospital, and they would attest to that. There was no question of my competence. My military record was spotless. So, we had the trial, completely convinced that I would win, and in fact I did. They said, 'Come back tomorrow; we'll tell you the results before the panel.' And then the judge announced that I was found guilty on one count.

MARC: What count was that?

GEORGE: Being out of uniform. And I almost burst into laughter because, like I said, uniform's like an inventive thing there. I was fined \$75 for wearing the wrong hat. All the other charges were dropped, honorable discharge, the whole nine yards. Everything was fine. I'd made my point. This guy was a total, total a--hole, and he had absolutely stepped over the line. He had to defend himself on these absurd charges, which I considered harassment and irrelevant. I think that what I've done is unimportant. What I accomplished in the war was unimportant. This is just—it's a small act of resistance. Who did it benefit? I'll tell you one thing. It benefited my sanity. When I got back to the United States, I didn't break down. When I got back to the United States, as small as the experience was, I felt sane. I felt at least I didn't take it. At least I tried something, and I did something, and I felt saner for it.

MARC: Lynda Van Devanter was an army nurse who served in Vietnam in 1969 and '70 at the 71st evacuation hospital in Pleiku. Her life and her highly acclaimed memoir, *Home Before Morning*, inspired the TV series *China Beach* starring Dana Delaney. Lynda Van Devanter began and led the Vietnam Veterans of America's Women's Writing Project and counseled many other veterans. What she wrote was cheered by many, but she was vilified by others, who thought she gave the nurses who served in Vietnam a bad name because of she wrote of the grit, the pain, drugs, the sex, and the madness of war. Lynda Van Devanter died on November 15 th, 2002 from a cancer as a result of exposure to Agent Orange, another soldier who left us as a result of the war in Vietnam whose name will never be on the wall.

LYNDA: The largest number of people I grew up with grew up with a sense that we had a mission. We had a purpose to our lives, and that we had a responsibility to give something back to this world, and I was part of a generation of Americans who

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were chosen to change the world. We were sure of that. It was only a matter of waiting until we all grew up. We were the kid next door, both men and women. What I saw in Vietnam was not men. What I saw in Viet Nam was boys. They were kids. They were generally 17, 18, and 19 years old. And for those of us who were women in Viet Nam, we were barely out of nursing school. We were basically these naïve, idealistic kids of the 50's and 60's who thought of Kennedy in the same breath with, "Ask not what your country can do for you, ask what you can do for your country." We thought of Kennedy in the same breath with, "This generation will pay any price, bear any burden, to save this world for democracy." I was a citizen of the greatest country in the world, and I was about to give part of my self to keep America great. We were carried along by the noble sentiments of John Fitzgerald Kennedy, and honest to God, I mean, it beat in my heart. It beat in all of our hearts. It really did. And so, nursing was the way that I was going to make my contribution to society. As we began our odyssey into Viet Nam, as we began our odyssey into the new people that we were eventually to become, it was a process that I think we had hoped we would be able to ease our way into, and it didn't quite turn out that way. The day that I arrived in Viet Nam, I arrived in [redacted] at the 90th replacement battalion, I learned that 2nd lieutenant Sharon Lane, who was a nurse on a ward at the 312th evacuation hospital at Cu Chi, had been killed that morning when a rocket had landed on her ward. I suddenly became very aware that women could in fact be in danger, and that this was no game anymore. Although the instructors back in basic had warned us what to expect, no amount of warning could ever have prepared me for the sheer numbers of mutilated young bodies that the helicopter kept bringing to the 71st. Dead bodies in glad bags were still being lined up outside the ER door, to be moved to the morgue as there was time. The moans and screams of so many wounded were mixed up with the shouted orders of doctors and nurses. So much for easing my way in.

What I came to realize was we developed a living, breathing relationship with Death as a human entity. Death became somebody who we had a relationship with, and Death became somebody to fight sometimes and welcome sometimes. And when we fought with Death, we fought tooth and nail. And we used every tool at hand, and a lot of times the only tool we had was cursing it out because we were so enraged at it. As each day passed, I found myself growing a harder and harder shell to protect my emotions. I started listening to the local discontents, who railed against Nixon, Congress, the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and the whole U.S. government. Every time another person died on my table, I came one step closer to agreeing with them. As each day passed, I found myself growing a harder and harder shell to protect my emotions. I started listening to the local discontents, who railed against Nixon, Congress, the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and the whole U.S. government. Every time another person died on my table, I came one step closer to agreeing with them. And one day I saw some dead American soldiers lying outside the morgue. They had been ambushed by an NVA unit. The butchers had cut off our soldiers penises and stuffed them into the GI's mouths. I was outraged by the scene, but not as outraged as I became when I later saw a similar scene, only this time with dead Viet Cong.

During those months, I lost my direction and found myself becoming a person I would never have been before Viet Nam. Maybe, you would have said I was merely getting tough. Like thousands of Americans, I began calling the Vietnamese, both friendly and enemy, gooks. I would have thought I was above that sort of racism. After all, hadn't I marched in the United States for civil rights like a good Catholic girl who believed all oppression was wrong? For each one of us, there was someone who seemed to personify what the war was, its futility, its desperation, and the worst of it, the parts of it that remained with us for the rest of our lives after returning, at least for every one of us, who I know of who was a woman who served in Viet Nam. Mine was a guy named Gene. It was a few days before my hump day, the exact middle of my tour when I would be over the hump. I was lost in a heavy sleep under my bed when the phone started ringing. Still half asleep, I listened to the worlds. More casualties, Van. We need you in surgery. There's a bad one in the neuro room, she said. I need you to pump blood in there. Leading to the operating table was the largest trail of blood I had ever seen. I tried to walk quickly through it but slipped. When I regained my balance, my eyes were drawn to the gurney, where several people were transferring the wounded soldier from the green litter to the table. The lower portion of his jaw, teeth exposed, dangled from what was left of his face. It dragged across the canvas litter and then swung in the air as he moved from the gurney to the table. His tongue hung hideously to the side with the rest of the bloody meat and exposed bone. When he was on the table, Mac Schafner, the facial surgeon, dropped the lower jaw back into place. I held my breath to keep from getting sick. For a moment, I was glued to the spot. I thought I had gotten used to it all, but they kept getting worse. I wasn't sure I could handle this one. But the shout of the anesthesiologist, Jim Castellano, snapped me out of my trance.

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'The son of a bitch is drowning in blood!' he screamed. 'Someone help me get a f---ing airway into him.' A gurgling came from the soldier's throat. Jim's hands were quick. 'Don't you dare die, you motherf---er.'

There was an ugly, metallic coughing sound as the soldier bucked for breath.

'Breathe, damn you!'

A barely audible sound escaped. 'That's it, soldier. Come on.'

In the middle of the confusion, the neurosurgeon came into the room. He looked at the soldier on the table and shook his head. His face was red. 'Who the f--k woke me up for this GORK?'

'The brain doesn't look too damaged,' Mac said. 'You're wasting your time.'

'We can fix him,' Mac insisted, 'just give me a chance.' 'Bulls--t,' the neuro guy said, 'that sucker's going to die and there's not a f---ing thing you can do.'

He stormed out of the room. It was all just another simple job where I could turn off my mind and try to forget that we were working on a person, but this one was different. The young soldier was not about to let me forget. During one of my circuits around the table, I accidentally kicked his clothes to the side. A snapshot fell from the torn pocket of his fatigue shirt. The picture was of a young couple, him and his girlfriend, I guessed, standing on the lawn in front of a two story house, perhaps belonging to her parents. On the back of the picture was writing, the ink partially blurred from sweat: 'Gene and Katie, May 1968.' I had to fight the tears as I looked from the picture to the helpless boy on the table. Now a mass of blood vessels and skin, so lacerated that nothing could hold them together. I had always held the notion that given enough time, anything could be stopped from bleeding I pumped 120 units of blood into that young man, yet as fast I pumped it in, he pumped it out. After hours of work, Mac realized it was futile. The boy had received so much banked blood that it would no longer clot. Now he was oozing from everywhere. Slowly, Mac wrapped the boy's head in layers of pressure dressings and sent him to post-op ICU to die. Gene and Katie, May 1968. While I cleaned up the room, I kept telling myself a miracle could happen. He could stop bleeding. Nothing was impossible. Please, God, help him. This wasn't merely another casualty, another piece of meat to throw on the table and try to sew back together again. He had been real, Gene. When I finished making the room ready for the next head injury, the next young boy, I walked to post-op to see Gene. I held his hand and asked him if he was in pain. In answer, he squeezed my hand weakly. I asked him if he wanted some pain medication, and he squeezed my hand again. All the ICU patients had morphine ordered for pain, and I asked one of the nurses to give Gene his morphine intravenously, knowing that while it would relieve his pain, it would also make him die faster. I didn't care at that point. I just wanted him to slip away painlessly, quickly, easily. I ran my finger over the edge of the picture before putting it into an envelope with his other possessions, then I walked outside, sat on the grassy hill next to post-op and put my head in my hands. I wouldn't cry, I told myself. I had to be tough. But I knew a profound change had already come over me. With the death of Gene and with the deaths of so many others, I had lost an important part of myself. The Lynda I had known before the war was gone forever.

MARC: We will return in a minute with the rest of Lynda Van Devanter's story as she continues her service in Vietnam and returns home.

Act III

MARC: Welcome back to Shared Weight, to the story of Lynda Van Devanter, as she writes to her parents at Christmas after having been through six months of a daily battle as a frontline surgical nurse.

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LYNDA: Dear Mom and Dad, I don't know where to start except to say I'm tired. It seems that's all I ever say anymore. The war disgusts me. I hate it. I'm beginning to feel like it's all a mistake. I cried myself to sleep. I'm starting to cry again. It's ridiculous. I seem to be crying all the time lately. I hate this place. This is now the seventh month of death, destruction, and misery. I'm tired of going to sleep listening to incoming rockets, mortars, and artillery. I'm sick of facing every day, a new bunch of children ripped to pieces. They're just kids. Eighteen, nineteen years old. It stinks. Whole lives ahead of them cut off. I'm sick to death of it. I've got to get out of here. I just heard another chopper come in. I better go. They need me in the OR.

Eventually, we came to the point where the only way that we could protect ourselves from the pain we were seeing everyday was to wall ourselves off from all of our feelings. The Coffee Room Soldiers is by Penny Kettlewell.

I walked into the coffee room for a cup of brew. The push was over, and I needed energy to regroup for the next assault on our forces and on my senses. I initially stepped casually over his shattered body laid out unbagged on the coffee room floor, out of the way, thinking where would I find them next, in my bed? I turned with cup in hand and ascertained the damage. Chest wall blown away, exposing his internal organs, an anatomical drawing. Dispassionately, I assessed his wounds and sipped from my cup. I then saw his face, that of a child in terror and only hours ago alive as I. Or maybe, I was as dead as he. Because with another a sip, a cigarette, and a detached analysis, I knew I could no longer even feel. I stepped out and grabbed a mop and pail so we would stop slipping on the blood on the R & E floor, bagged the extra body pieces and the coffee room soldier, restocked supplies, then went outside to watch the sun rise, alone and destitute of tears. As the jet took off, I was filled with the most exhilarating sensation of my life. It was a feeling of lightness like the weight of a million years had suddenly been lifted from my shoulders. And there wasn't anybody on that plane who didn't experience that rush, yet we were still silent. Later, when the pilot told us we were officially out of Vietnam airspace, there was a collective sigh of relief. 'Did we make it?' someone in the front yelled. 'Yes!' we all shouted in unison. 'Does it suck?' 'Hell yes!' 'Is it going to suck us back?' he screamed. 'Hell no!' we answered. 'Can you feel it?' 'No!' 'Can you hear it?' 'No!' 'What can't you hear?' 'Viet Nam!' 'What does Vietnam do?' 'Vietnam sucks!' Then everybody cheered at the top of their lungs. There was laughter and hugging and tears in spite of our lack of familiarity with each other. Colonels and sergeants and privates all joined in. We were the lucky ones. We had all made it out alive. But as soon as we realized we were safe, there was a vague uneasiness that came over us. We were all feeling guilty and sad. We had left friends in Viet Nam. Each person on that plane suspected in some part of his or her heart that we all should have stayed behind to help them survive. Now that we were gone, who would look out for our friends? We wondered what we would face back in the real world. Our return from Viet Nam was fairly similar to that of most men who returned from Viet Nam. It was not a pleasant place to come back to. It was not a socially acceptable subject, and the one event I remember was I was standing—unfortunately, the military made a number of very serious errors, one of which was that they returned us all to the west coast, which was the hotbed of antiwar sentiment, and though there was almost nobody who could have been any more antiwar than we were, we somehow personified that to the people who were back here. And I had the distinct pleasure of returning to the United States about six weeks after the so-called Invasion of Cambodia, and I say so-called because although the government lied about it, we had been taking casualties from Cambodia the entire time I had been in Viet Nam. And it was also six weeks after the killing of the students at Kent State. It also unfortunately happened that I came back at the time of a transit strike in San Francisco, so there was basically no way for us to get around once they brought us, the army bussed us from Travis Air Force Base to Oakland Army Terminal, and then said, see you later, it's been nice, thanks very much and find your way to the airport. When I returned to my country in June of 1970, I began to learn a very bitter lesson. The values with which I had been raised had been changed. In the eyes of most Americans, the military services had no more heroes, merely babykillers, misfits, and fools. I was certain that I was neither a babykiller nor a misfit, perhaps I was a fool. I ended up having to hitchhike, and a considerable number of cars went by screaming and cursing at me, and the one that I remember the most vividly, although there were others that were certainly memorable, was the one that stopped by and made a number of epithets and then finally shut the window, or shut the door. I mean, it looked like they were going to give me a ride, and they finally shut the door, screaming out at me, 'Welcome home, a--hole.' It took a lot of time, a lot of work, a lot of effort, a lot of pain, to work my way, and for all of us who served in Viet Nam, men and women alike, to work our way through the healing process of coming back. When we came back, Vietnam was not socially acceptable. You did not talk about it. And for anybody who was family or a loved one, they really sort of had this attitude that you're really better off putting that behind you. You really need to stop thinking about that now. And so as a consequence I followed all those directions, and they turned out to be the incorrect directions. But

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SHARED WEIGHT

The Fall of Saigon, 30 Years Later

nevertheless, it all stayed inside of me, and it stayed in there working its way on me, and in 1979, although I had avoided making any contact with anything that would even remotely remind me of Viet Nam for the preceding multiple years, I made the mistake of going to see *Coming Home*, which was not a particularly overtly war-like one of the many, actually the many eventually, but the few Viet Nam films that had come out at that point, but it was the first one that I had seen, and it hit me like a ton of bricks. I was in a theater that was no bigger than this in a small town in California, and when the film was over, everyone else had left the theater, and I was unable to move. And the lights were up, and they wanted to start the next movie, and they couldn't bring the next audience in until I left, and I simply could not get up and leave. By the time I did get up, I barely managed to get myself out, and that, that was the beginning for me of Viet Nam. That was the point at which Pandora's Box got opened, and I kept trying to shut that lid again and it wouldn't shut.

This one is by Norma Griffiths, which was an experience that she had back in the states, again, trying to come to some kind of terms with what she felt about the military and her experience. It's called *The General's Car*.

I first saw the dark tinted windows of the car, then the red license plate with only one star, hardly worth rearranging what I was carrying to give him the finger.

But some of that healing, I think in its most powerful way came true for us when we were able to finally reach out to each other. When I first stuck my neck out in the early 1980's, it was not a very safe thing to do, and a lot of people took pot shots at me. A lot of people did not like the things that I had written. A lot of people did not, particularly the army, did not like the things that I had written. One of the things I think that was the most important in that healing was the Vietnam memorial, the wall. In 1982, the wall was dedicated, and hundreds of thousands of Vietnam veterans came together for the first time, many of us women, and came together in a way in which we were able to share more powerfully than we had ever been able to in Vietnam because in Vietnam we were trying to deny it was happening, and began to share in a way that started our healing process. Part of the struggle and the frustration of the first ten years was that in my disease process, if you call it a disease, in my process of post traumatic stress, I could not deal with Vietnam, so I didn't want to have anything to do with it at all. I didn't want to think about it, I didn't want to talk about it because that was what I'd been told when I first came back. Don't think about it, don't talk about it, don't anything. So, I couldn't get to that part. Part of my healing, and part of the healing of most of us, and a lot of what the poems and visions are about, is about that healing, about the discovery of the strengths that we had gained and the realization, particularly at the dedication of the memorial in 1982 and the tremendous outpouring of love from the guys, that we really had done wonderful things. The most important lesson that I ever learned out my healing was as long as I shut myself away from the pain, I will shut myself away from the power and the strength and the positive things I gained out of it as well. And for that reason, I had to go through the pain of recovery. It was not something I was thrilled at doing, but for that reason—otherwise, I would have remained that empty soul that I had left.

MARC: Wayne Karlin, who[m] you've heard during this series, is a novelist and an essayist. He served during Vietnam helicopter gunner. He was one of Lynda Van Devanter's best friends. He wrote this close as a tribute to Lynda Van Devanter. "Many of us loved her. Many others hated her, but they didn't matter. She was a truth teller, and those who hated her were threatened by the truth she had to tell. Hemingway wrote of 'the strong that came back from the broken places of the earth.' Lynda was one of those. She had stuck her arms to the shoulders into the abattoir, and the broken and damaged kids she tried to heal broke and damaged something in her body and soul, something she tried to heal and did, with love for her husband and daughter, for her brother and sister veterans, but when she found her voice, her strong woman's voice, and forced us to listen, it was not to heal herself, but rather to give voice to the unheard and to change a world that would allow the carnage she had witnessed to wound it, so that it would stop wounding. In the end, it broke her heart. We dedicate this story and this episode to the life and work of Lynda Van Devanter. Thank you for listening. Lynda Van Devanter's voice segments courtesy of the Connections reading series from the College of Southern Maryland.

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a 360° view of the people and stories behind the issues

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