

Heroes to Baby Killers

As I said earlier that it was as an officer cadet I was confronted in the aftermath of the Vietnam War, with the question “What is it like to kill a baby?” To understand the origin of this question it is important to understand what the eighties was like. I was commissioned in nineteen eighty. The army was still coming to terms with what it saw as it’s failure in Vietnam. The army in my view had gone into its shell IE. into its barracks and started to process what had gone wrong. The election of the Witlam Government in 1972 had ended the Vietnam War and at the same time conscription and the army reserve had shrunk heavily at that point. One officer I served with, who served through this time said that on one parade one week there was some five hundred soldiers and by the next there was only some thirty eight all ranks including officers and sergeants on parade. Given most battalions normally would have in over twenty officers and slightly more than that at the sergeants rank there wouldn’t have been many privates or corporals on parade and even a fair portion of the officers and sergeants wouldn’t have been absent.

Another officer who was attending a camp with the 22nd Battalion the Royal Victoria Regiment when the Witlam government was elected said that when it became clear that Witlam who had promised to end conscription if elected had in fact been elected (Reserve service was an alternative form of conscription). Eighty percent of the soldiers in camp simply packed up their gear that evening, handed it back to the Quartermasters store and walked out the gate of the camp to hitch hike back to wherever they came from. With the election of the Witlam government many of the arguments of the anti-war movement were considered validated and those with a political orientation which leant left felt licensed to target and confront soldiers as representatives of conservative values. Somewhat unusually for soldiers at the time I politically leant a little left so although I sympathized with to an extent the views of my detractors I found their targeting of me personally as an avatar for such values with some vitriol, unjust.

I therefore had to process in my mind the two highly conflicted perspectives I found myself trying to deal with. I respected and admired most of the soldiers I was serving with admiring their commitment to their community, courage, dedication and self sacrifice and at the same time I recognized some of the logic, aspirations and validity of much of the arguments of the anti-war movement. I rationalized my position at the time with saying to myself “I am pro peace! But if I really want to create a peaceful world I need to understand what makes soldiers do what they do because in order to change things I believed at the time then it is not enough for me to change only myself. I believed that it was too dangerous to change unless I had grounds to believe that the other guy the one with a gun pointed at me was going to change also.

So my world of work and the company I kept in my non army social world was generally hostile to my military service. Long hair was the fashion and as I said earlier reserve soldiers would sometimes state they were policemen to avoid saying they were reservists.

I studied to be an officer. I learnt about but not yet how to apply Universal Human Rights and at this stage the army didn’t help me. Looking back I think the army just continued doing what it had always done and to an extent was in denial about Vietnam. How had this come about? Life was simpler for soldiers in World War I and II. In the old days we there were only the fairly rudimentary Geneva Conventions so generally we followed the advice of General Sir John Monash who on Galipoli had said:

“Give the men over to understand they are dealing with some form of human vermin that needs to be eradicated! Such displays of friendship that have occurred are to be discouraged as they destroy the

will to kill!”

Really the change in Warfare had occurred during the Korean War. In Korea we could have but didn't use nuclear weapons! Before Korea again it was a much simpler age to quote General Monash Again

“the true role of infantry was not to expend itself upon heroic physical effort, not to wither away under merciless machine-gun fire, not to impale itself on hostile bayonets, but on the contrary, to advance under the maximum possible protection of the maximum possible array of mechanical resources, in the form of guns, machine-guns, tanks, mortars and aeroplanes; to advance with as little impediment as possible; to be relieved as far as possible of the obligation to fight their way forward.”

But we didn't use “the maximum possible array of mechanical resources” in Korea. We didn't use Nukes. Instead we fought for a draw or negotiated political settlement to achieve a political outcomes and not the application of maximum possible destructive force.

I quote from “The Korean War” by Max Hastings Page 233 to discuss this transformation in warfare that occurred at this time,

“In one respect however, MacArthur correctly perceived an undeclared, radical change of policy by the (Truman) Administration. There was no longer any hope or expectation of achieving a unified non-communist Korea. Washington's hopes now centered upon exerting sufficient military leverage to cause Peking and Pyongyang to negotiate upon the basis of a return to the pre-war division of Korea. The United Nation's objectives from the spring of 1951 to the end in 1953 were plainly limited. At an acceptable cost in casualties to the Eighth Army, Ridgway's forces sought to kill sufficient communists and defend sufficient real estate to secure peace.

That was all, and for many soldiers it was not enough. In the two years that followed, it became progressively more difficult to define the war aims of the UN in terms comprehensible, far less acceptable, to men on the line. Even some higher commanders never entirely came to terms with the new, undeclared circumstances.”

Vietnam

War then became the police action approach adopted in Vietnam. In Vietnam this new approach became “Winning Hearts and Minds” it was unacceptable to win by “Genocide” a term coined to describe what happened to the Armenians in Turkey but recently bought to public conscientiousness by the Extermination Camps of World War II.

It is not a big jump to say that the Death Camps changed warfare.

There were the Nuremberg Trials which developed many of the concepts which found there way into the Humanitarian Law of War and which reflected “Universal Human Rights” which entered the public conscientiousness. Vietnam was a televised war so their was considerable public dissonance when the public exposed to the Nuremberg trails where then confronted with the My Lai Massacre where woman and children from a hostile village where killed. This is my view resulted from soldiers under pressure to get results by way of body counts and surrounded by villagers who resented them adopted a Vietnamese are “vermin” approach. Guilt by association meant that all soldiers were then dubbed “Baby Killers” after the My Lai Massacre in particular by the anti-war activists.

The anti-war movement characterized the army that served in Vietnam as below which was recounted to me by both soldiers and civilians.

Join the army and see the world!

Travel to interesting and exotic countries!

Meet interesting and exotic people!

And kill them!

This is the beaten and confused army I joined and the genesis of the hostile reception I received in my workplace. In my civilian world I became aware of songs that said I as a soldier really was to to blame. This is the song "The Universal Soldier". Which begins with the line "He's the universal soldier and he really is to blame!" But I defined myself with a line from another song "He's a walking contradiction, partly truth and partly fiction". I as a soldier I learnt to accept that I was a walking contradiction. I learnt to keep contradictory thoughts in my head, holding both to be true at the same time. In politics I learnt to use the tool of "balance" as the method to honor two conflicting but none the less right or true positions being argued from two different perspectives.