

# “Senseless”

Siena College, the small men’s college I attended on scholarship, had mandatory ROTC for freshmen and sophomores. ROTC wasn’t hard but I was uncomfortable with the idea of killing and very confused as to why our country was at war with Viet Nam. After two years I told ROTC in May 1971 that I would not be continuing. After 6 weeks of summer employment, I returned to my mother’s apartment in Connecticut to find a notice from the Selective Service of a required “pre-induction” physical exam scheduled for me. I called the number on the notice and was told that because I had declined to continue ROTC they assumed I was dropping out of school and no longer qualified for the college deferment from military service. The physical exam would be in August and I would be inducted into the Army in September. That I had a scholarship didn’t matter if I wanted to stop the process I had to provide copies of my registration for Fall semester courses. My college was so small course registration occurred the day before courses actually began in the Fall. Defeated, scared and young I caved and notified ROTC that I would continue. And the induction process stopped. They had achieved their goal.

Fast forward to college graduation and a continued deferment allowing me to complete a masters degree in social work at Syracuse University. My doubts about my entering the military persisted. At one point I learned about the Central Committee on Conscientious Objection and counseling that was available at Cornell University to learn about what other options existed. Since I had no religious beliefs in my life I couldn’t see how I could claim I had anything that prevented my being in the military. I entered the Army as a first lieutenant with a wife and child in tow. My father-in-law had served in the Marines and would not entertain any discussion other than completing “my obligation” to serve.

My basic officer training was in San Antonio, TX with the medical field services school since social workers were considered medical staff (along with psychologists and psychiatrists). One afternoon I was in a lecture about wounds that occur in the field. It felt surreal since I could see no connection to social work services and freshly wounded soldiers. During the lecture there was this persistent thumping sound that occurred every minute or so directly outside the lecture hall. I was relieved to be summoned to the administrative services unit to be briefed about my field assignment after completing training. While leaving the lecture hall I was aghast to find that the persistent sound I was hearing was the shooting of goats to create flesh wounds that the officers in the lecture would be required to practice suturing on. The non-commissioned officers performing this function showed no emotion, it just had to be done.

I was stationed at Fort McClellan in Anniston, Alabama, home of the Women's Army Corps Training Center and the Third Army Chemical Engineer Corp. My assignment was the administrator of the base's mental health clinic. While I still had doubts about being in the military, the reality was that I had a good paying job, I was stationed in the States and had good, inexpensive housing on base for me and my family. Additionally, I was running a mental health clinic and helping people. What was there to complain about?

At the clinic, I would see enlisted young men and woman that had entered the military not out of a desire to serve but more wanting to get away from their desperate lives in the community. Officers (non commissioned and regular) rarely used clinic services. Those that did come were from families with multiple generations of military service. One morning I had an intake session with a woman married to a Sergeant who was in Viet Nam. She informed me that she had three young children, lived on base and parenting the children alone was stressful. Prior to his current assignment, her husband had been in Korea and a third combat zone in the last 6 years. I responded with a question: why would you stay married to a man who wasn't staying around? She stared at me in utter silence, rose from her seat and left the clinic. The next morning I was summoned to the office of the Base Commandant. He made it clear to me that I needed to support the family of the soldiers who were fighting in combat zones so that they could do their jobs. What I got from this perspective was that while I wasn't pulling the trigger and killing anyone, I was participating in the process to make it possible for someone else to kill.

This realization that I was indeed participating in killing people lead me to a series of other awarenesses. If it was okay for me to kill someone, then it okay for them to kill me. In essence participation in war could be considered a suicidal act. In essence, this was the justification of why I couldn't be in the Army. At my O3 hearing, I was assured that I would not be sent outside the country and that completing my required minimum service time would mean I would be promoted to the rank of major by the time I left. They just didn't get it. But I got it and needed to leave. Five weeks later I was released from the military as a conscientious objector.

It's been very difficult to see the Viet Nam experience repeated in other wars that the United States has perpetrated. Young people still flock to the military with the hope of a better future as opposed to having the government take on social and economic disparities that drive their unhappiness. Now at the age of 70, I am at peace with the actions that I took during the Viet Nam war.

—Charles, Albany