1 Reconciliation, 1981–1994

"The memories would not go away. That is why we had to go back," wrote US Marine and Vietnam veteran Mike P. in his private journal in 1989.[1] Between 1980 and 1994, a trickle of Australian and American Vietnam veterans made the first journeys back to Việt Nam. I call this group "reconciliation" because their journeys were attempts to make contact, discover their enemy, engage in diplomacy – even find friendship. For some, the rise in Vietnam War commemoration provided an opening to explore their wartime pasts. For others, contemporary political issues set them on the path of a personal mission. Major economic changes within Việt Nam acted as a cue for many veterans, which indicated a longing to return. These changes, known as *Đổi Mới,* also lessened restrictions on foreign travel to Việt Nam, and from 1986 veterans returned to Việt Nam in increasing numbers. By the early 1990s, American and Australian travel agencies were organizing tours to Việt Nam. Some veterans described their return as a turning point that challenged them to atone for the war. Others found Việt Nam offered new opportunities and relationships. In their interviews, reconciliation returnees broadly agreed that returning to Việt Nam transformed their lives by releasing them from wartime memories and bringing them a measure of peace. Their focus on the challenge they had overcome and the relief they experienced by returning nearly obscured the historical reality that reconciliation was not initiated by the veterans themselves. It was Việt Nam that reached out and asked them to come back.

Following the end of the war in 1975, Prime Minister Phạm Văn Đồng invited the United States to normalize relations under the conditions of the 1973 Paris Peace Accords, including Nixon's secret promise of

[1] Mike P., "1989 VVRP Journal w Intro." Private journal shared with the author, May 14, 2016.

$3.2 billion in reconstruction aid.[2] The Ford administration refused, arguing that Việt Nam had violated the Accords' terms by failing to account for missing American servicemen.[3] These alleged Prisoners of War (POWs) and Missing in Action (MIA) became the basis of decades-long hostility between the US and the Socialist Republic of Việt Nam (SRV), with successive US administrations insisting on transparency and the SRV maintaining that they withheld no prisoners or soldiers' remains.[4] In 1981, the SRV invited representatives of Vietnam Veterans of America (VVA) to Hà Nội in order "to stir public opinion" in favor of reconciliation.[5] Four veteran members agreed to return, including the founder and director Bobby Muller.[6] News of the VVA tour rippled through veteran communities, attracting condemnation from the Veterans of Foreign Wars, the American Legion, and the National League of POW-MIA families.[7] Publicly, the Reagan administration maintained their focus on POWs/MIAs, with a public statement from the State Department supporting "efforts by private citizens to join Government efforts in achieving a full accounting for those missing in action." Privately, however, the returning veterans were warned that they would be "used for propaganda purposes."[8] Undeterred, Muller pushed forward with negotiations for the trip, which he described as a "soldier-to-soldier" discussion.[9] The VVA team focused on veteran advocacy issues, including accounting for POWs/MIAs and sharing research on the

[2] Steven Hunt, *The Carter Administration and Vietnam* (London: Macmillan, 1996), 19.
[3] Ibid.
[4] Historian H. Bruce Franklin documents how the Nixon administration "lumped together" the categories of POW and MIA into the acronym "POW/MIA" under the grouping "Unaccounted For" to galvanize support for the war and buy time and power in the peace negotiations. After the Peace Accords, the separate category of Killed in Action/Body Not Recovered was added to the grouping, leaving the United States with over 2,500 "Unaccounted For" Vietnam soldiers framed by the administration as potential prisoners of war. Bruce Franklin, *MIA, or, Mythmaking in America* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1993), 13. See also: Joseph Siracusa and Hang Nguyen, "Vietnam-US Relations: An Unparalleled History." *Orbis* 61:3 (2017): 404–22; Michael J. Allen, *Until the Last Man Comes Home: POWs, MIAs, and the Unending Vietnam War* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2009).
[5] Bernard Weinraub, "Hanoi, In Economic Straits, Seeks to Move Toward Ties with US." *New York Times*, December 28, 1981.
[6] Michael Kranish, "No Retreat, No Surrender." *Boston Globe*, March 9, 2003. www.boston.com/ae/music/articles/2003/09/03/no_retreat_no_surrender/
[7] Mary McGrory, "For a Moment at Christmas, Vietnam Evokes the Old Emotions." *Washington Post*, December 29, 1981.
[8] Bernard Weinrub, "Vietnam Invites 4 US Veterans to Visit Hanoi." *New York Times*, December 13, 1981. Despite accusations from the VFW of treachery, the VVA trip was entirely legal: the US embargo was established under the Trading with the Enemy Act (1917), so there was nothing to stop private citizens undertaking humanitarian and fact-finding missions in Việt Nam.
[9] Bobby Muller, quoted in Weinrub, "Vietnam Invites 4 US Veterans to Visit Hanoi."

consequences of Agent Orange. By returning to Việt Nam, Muller and the VVA showed faith in Việt Nam's declarations regarding POWs and demonstrated to Vietnamese and Americans alike that reconciliation was possible. Muller said he hoped that the trip would "start a process of healing" and "initiate a dialogue between our people, Americans and Vietnamese, after years of bloodshed and strain."[10]

Veterans in government were also engaged in the POW/MIA debate. In 1985, former POW and US Senator John McCain returned to Hà Nội with a CBS documentary team to "bring visibility to Americans still listed as missing in action."[11] McCain returned several times in the 1980s and 1990s in an official capacity, accounting for POWs/MIAs and promoting normalization efforts between the two countries.[12] Air Force colonel and former POW Douglas "Pete" Peterson returned in 1992 as a congressman, to "make sure that what we were saying about looking for MIA/POWs was an honest assessment." Pete remembered that the Bush administration claimed to be prioritizing the POW/MIA issue and blaming delays on the Vietnamese. He told me, "some of us in Congress took some angst about that, thinking that it might not be true."[13] While these veterans' personal experiences as POWs undoubtedly affected their determination to resolve the POW/MIA issue, Pete and McCain made it clear that they returned primarily in their capacity as politicians.

These first political returns to Việt Nam coincided with a shift in cultural representations about the Vietnam War and its veterans in American and Australia. During the war, Vietnam veterans had increasingly been depicted in popular culture as dangerous and unstable, with symptoms of their trauma represented as indicators of moral decay.[14] The United States, and to a lesser degree Australia, collectively diagnosed the Vietnam veteran in an effort to shrug off the responsibility and blame for the damage done to society, and consequently, "the 'Vietnam veteran' was taken to symbolize someone who was both physically and mentally

[10] Bobby Muller, quoted in Weinrub, "Vietnam Invites 4 US Veterans to Visit Hanoi."
[11] Michael Kilian, "The War Hero Is a Senator Now." *Chicago Tribune*, July 19, 1987.
[12] John McCain, "A Former POW on Vietnam, Four Decades Later." *Wall Street Journal*, March 13, 2013.
[13] Interview with Pete, Melbourne, May 12, 2016.
[14] For example, *Deathdream* (1974, also released as *The Veteran,* 1972 and *Dead of Night,* 1972), was a supernatural horror film in which a soldier dies in combat only to return to his hometown in zombie form, killing and syphoning the blood of his victims with a syringe. *Deathdream* invoked the fears emerging around Vietnam veterans abusing heroin: returning to the United States contaminated and threatening to spread the epidemic among Middle America. *Deathdream*, directed by Bob Clarke (Toronto: Quadrant Films, 1974). See also: *Motorpsycho!*, directed by Russ Meyer (Hollywood, CA: Eve Productions, 1965); *Nam's Angels*, directed by Jack Starrett (Hollywood, CA: Fanfare Films, 1970).

damaged."[15] Toward the late 1970s Vietnam veterans began to be represented as antiheroes rather than villains, reflecting a new social willingness to discuss the war.[16] Francis Ford Coppola's *Apocalypse Now* (1979), for instance, points to the betrayal of soldiers by the military, complicating the hero-villain narrative by giving Marlon Brando's Colonel Kurtz logical reasons for his insanity: "there's nothing I detest more than the stench of lies."[17] By the 1980s, Vietnam veterans were "remasculinized" and cast as protagonists, with their trauma and isolation portrayed sympathetically "to represent the United States as the primary victim of the war."[18] The defining image of the 1980's Vietnam veteran was John Rambo, who, in *First Blood: Part II* (1985), rescues POWs abandoned in Vietnam and insists that all veterans want is "for our country to love us as much as we love it."[19] Such sympathetic cultural representations opened up a new space for veterans to reflect on their personal war legacies.

For example, US Army infantry veteran Fredy Champagne recalled from a line in Oliver Stone's 1986 film *Platoon*: "those of us who did make it have an obligation to build again, to teach to others what we know and to try with what's left of our lives to find a goodness and meaning to this life."[20] Champagne was motivated by this: "we veterans had to return and rebuild in order to make some sense of it all. That line stuck with me subconsciously."[21] Champagne became one of many reconciliation veterans who returned to Việt Nam on humanitarian volunteering missions, inspired by Veterans Peace Actions Teams in Central America. Peace Action Teams were the brainchild of anti-war Vietnam veterans who saw US-sponsored wars in Central America as evidence that the United States

[15] Peter Edwards, "Fifty Years On: Half-Century Reflections on the Australian Commitment to the Vietnam War." In *New Perceptions of the Vietnam War: Essays on the War, the South Vietnamese, the Diaspora and the Continuing Impact*. Edited by Nathalie Huynh Chau Nguyen (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2015), 73.

[16] In the late 1970s, see: *Taxi Driver*, directed by Martin Scorsese (Los Angeles, CA: Columbia Pictures, 1976); *The Deer Hunter*, directed by Michael Cimino (Los Angeles, CA: Universal Pictures, 1978).

[17] *Apocalypse Now*, directed by Francis Ford Coppola (Beverly Hills, CA: United Artists, 1979).

[18] Susan Jeffords, *The Remasculinization of America* (Indianapolis, IN: Indiana University Press, 1989); Martini, *Invisible Enemies*, 8. In the 1980s, see: *First Blood*, directed by Ted Kotcheff (Los Angeles, CA: Orion Pictures, 1982); *Missing in Action*, directed by Joseph Zito (Beverly Hills, CA: The Cannon Group, 1984); *Vietnam*, directed by Chris Noonan and John Duigan (Sydney: Roadshow, February 23–April 27, 1987).

[19] *First Blood: Part II*, directed by George P. Cosmatos (Los Angeles, CA: Anabasis Investments and Estudios Churubusco, 1985).

[20] *Platoon*, directed by Oliver Stone (Los Angeles, CA: Orion Pictures, 1986).

[21] Fredy Champagne, "The Founding of the VVRP." Veterans Viet Nam Restoration Project. www.vvrp.org/?page_id=133

had failed to learn from the mistakes of Vietnam.[22] Champagne recalled hearing that a "team of vets, many of them Vietnam vets, had just rebuilt a medical clinic [in Nicaragua] . . . I thought that was a really cool idea."[23] In 1988, he initiated Veterans Viet Nam Restoration Project (VVRP), a nongovernmental organization (NGO) that took teams of veterans back to Việt Nam to help with postwar reconstruction.[24]

Reconciliation veterans on volunteering missions described a deep preoccupation with Vietnam that preceded their returns. Many had struggled to reintegrate in the United States, dwelling on their warzone home and wondering what had happened to Việt Nam. After the war, US Army infantry veteran Mike Boehm lived in solitude, filled with "blackness" and a "hatred for what I had been a part of."[25] In 1991, he volunteered to help rebuild hurricane-damaged houses in Puerto Rico, which led him to wonder "if we can do this in Vietnam."[26] This preoccupation echoes Boym's "reflective" nostalgia: these veterans "see everywhere the imperfect mirror images of home, and try to cohabit with doubles and ghosts."[27] Boym was describing here the nostalgia of "diasporic intimacy" among migrant communities, a connection to a lost home defined by "uprootedness and defamiliarization."[28] Veterans acted as another kind of diaspora, one linking those who shared a lost home at war. Among these reconciliation volunteers, diasporic longing was particularly apparent: after learning "to live with alienation" and reconciling with the "uncanniness of the world," "there comes a surprise, a pang of recognition."[29] They explained their returns as a gradual path from disillusionment to action. Mike P. remembered: "I was, as they say, in deep denial. But in the early 80s, I . . . saw the eloquent Bobby Muller as he was trying to start up the Vietnam Veterans of America." Mike P. began studying international relations and development practices at the University of California under Pentagon Papers coauthor Mel Gurtov, which "re-awakened [him], Big Time, back to Việt Nam." He read about a Vietnamese village where Combined Action Platoon Marines had served, which "triggered memories and feelings I had so studiously put down."[30] As a member of the VVA in the late 1980s, Mike P. spent time reviewing literature for "any number of causes," eventually coming across mail from the VVRP "and, I thought, 'oh wow, that's kinda

[22] S. Brian Wilson, "History of the Idea of the Veterans Peace Action Teams." February 1, 1987, republished on *brianwilson.com* in 2017. www.brianwillson.com/history-of-the-idea-of-the-veterans-peace-action-teams-vpat/
[23] Champagne, "The Founding of the VVRP." [24] Ibid.
[25] Dan Kaufman, "Reconciliation at My Lai." *New Yorker*, March 24, 2013. [26] Ibid.
[27] Boym, *Future of Nostalgia*, 251. [28] Ibid., 252. [29] Boym, *Future of Nostalgia*, 254.
[30] Mike P., "1989 VVRP Journal w Intro."

cool.'"[31] Champagne and Mike P. returned to Việt Nam with the VVRP on its first mission in 1989, and Boehm returned on a VVRP mission in 1992.

These veteran volunteers felt a moral obligation toward Việt Nam. VVRP members, for instance, were mostly anti-war veterans who felt they had a duty to right the wrong in which they had participated. Mike P. described VVRP members (including himself) as a "group of potheads ... [who] thought it would be groovy to wage peace."[32] Most were antiestablishment and critical of organized religion and its influences on US politics. However, there were political outliers. Maurice, a US Army draftee, first returned to Việt Nam in 1973 after his tour had ended to work as a medic in Sài Gòn, staying after the war "to encourage the Christian church and particularly pastors to stay and minister to their flock." Maurice felt he had a personal responsibility to shoulder the burden of protecting Christians and upholding Christianity in the newly communist state: "I can't ask somebody else to do it if I'm unwilling to stick around and have the consequences myself."[33] He continued working for the International Red Cross, and even applied for Vietnamese citizenship, but was turned down and returned to the United States on one of the last flights out organized by the United Nations in 1976.[34]

Throughout the 1980s, commemorative events, veteran memoirs, popular culture, and political dialogues reintroduced Vietnam into American society, indicating growing public interest in the war and its veterans. In 1980, President Ronald Reagan declared Vietnam "a noble cause" and equated Vietnam veterans with veterans of historic wars.[35] In his inaugural address, Reagan told the American people that the United States was not "doomed to an inevitable decline."[36] The fear of this decline had been termed "Vietnam Syndrome," and the promise that the syndrome could be cured through patriotism helped some veterans to feel proud of their service and engage in public commemoration.[37] The Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington DC, known as "The Wall," was dedicated in 1982, and the "Three Soldiers" statue was added to the

[31] Interview with Mike P., Skype, May 11, 2016. [32] Ibid.
[33] Interview with Maurice, Skype Interview, July 26, 2016.
[34] David A. Andelman, "49 US Citizens and Dependents Fly from Saigon." *New York Times*, August 2, 1976, 1.
[35] Ronald Reagan, "Peace: Restoring the Margin of Safety." *Veterans of Foreign Wars Convention*, Chicago, Illinois, August 18, 1980. www.reagan.utexas.edu/archives/reference/8.18.80.html
[36] Ronald Reagan, "Inaugural Address." *The American Presidency Project*, online by Gerhard Peters and John T. Woolley, January 20, 1981. www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=43130
[37] Andrew Bacevich, *The New American Militarism: How Americans Are Seduced by War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 107–08.

site of The Wall with another dedication in 1984. In the early 1980s, small, locally organized Welcome Home parades were held all over the United States.[38] The absence of parades after the war had ended disappointed many veterans who felt they were being stigmatized and neglected.[39] The small parades in the 1980s thus operated both as a belated recognition for war service and an apology for wartime non-recognition, culminating in a 200,000-veteran strong parade in Chicago in 1986 attended by about 300,000 civilians.[40] These cultural signals legitimized their war service and encouraged them to reflect on their experience, memories, and nostalgia. With public debates about Vietnam settling in their home countries, veterans began to consider the return as a way of addressing internal conflict over the war. US Marine veteran Bill E. attributed changing culture as a factor in his return in 1994: "probably for maybe four or five years before I came back, I was really starting to think about, 'it would be good to come back'. . .. It was a progression of things that would come up that would just kinda start to focus more and more on the past, and on the war."[41]

The role of commemorations in sparking thoughts of return reveal the interconnections between war memory, debates around the war, veteran identity, and nostalgia for Vietnam. Many veterans first contemplated returning when they visited war memorials. US Army veteran and writer Kevin Bowen wrote that at The Wall, "against the reflecting surface of black granite etched with the names of the 58,000 dead, we began a dialogue with Vietnam . . . for many veterans it seems the time has come for reengagement, for a new campaign of hearts and minds, a campaign that involves returning to the land where they fought."[42] The Wall is made of black, shining stone. Over seventy-five meters in

[38] Scholars agree that these parades were largely a response to the end of the Iranian hostage crisis in 1981. The "emotional welcoming" of released American hostages engendered a swell of support toward Vietnam veterans. John Hellman, *American Myth and the Legacy of Vietnam* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), 101. See also: David Fitzgerald, "Support the Troops: Gulf War Homecomings and a New Politics of Military Celebration." *Modern American History* 2 (2019): 6; Appy, *American Reckoning.*

[39] Historian Eric T. Dean Jr. found that "the lavish parades of which veterans of past wars supposedly received are often more a myth than reality," so the veterans' memories of "lavish parades" likely come from films and television that celebrated World War II veterans with montages of ticker-tape parades, as well as iconic photos from "V-Day." Dean Jr., "The Myth of the Troubled and Scorned Vietnam Veteran," 67.

[40] William Mullen, "At Peace, At Last: After 11 Years and an Emotional Parade, Vietnam Vets Finally Feel Welcome." *Chicago Tribune*, August 17, 1986. www.chicagotribune.com/news/tribnation/chi-1986-chicago-tribune-magazine-vietnam-parade-article-20110610-story.html

[41] Interview with Bill E.

[42] Kevin Bowen, "Seeking Reconciliation in Vietnam." *Christian Science Monitor*, November 10, 1988.

length, it lists the names of more than 58,000 US soldiers killed in action in Vietnam. The surface of The Wall acts as a mirror, so as visitors approach they are faced with their own image behind the names of the dead. Former US Marine and writer William Broyles Jr. described how visiting the memorial forced him to think of the Vietnamese. "As I stood mesmerized by all those names at The Wall, I saw something else. I saw my own reflection. It fell across the names like a ghost. 'Why me?'. . . 'Why them' . . .. And then I realized that other names weren't there – the names of the men and women we fought, our enemies. . .. Who knows their names?"[43] Thus the visual experience of The Wall could provoke self-reflection and contemplation about how many Vietnamese died, and how long a wall with their names might be. Debate surrounding The Wall and its construction emphasized national reconciliation and healing, but Broyles indicated that his experience reopened old wounds and made them raw, igniting new questions about the legacies of the war. In 1984, Broyles returned to Việt Nam "to find the pieces of myself I had left there, and to try and put the war behind me."[44]

Commemoration is a public acknowledgment of war that grants permission for grief to become visible and be felt collectively through shared mourning: a social act that supports and validates the emotions of the bereaved. Historian Daphne Berdahl describes The Wall as "healing a nation through breaking a silence," validating Vietnam veterans by refusing to accept "the American public's desire to forget the controversial war."[45] Early Australian veterans also cited public remembrance as a catalyst for their returns. Australian Army veteran Graham E. explained that commemorations allowed him to reflect on his service and consider returning to Việt Nam. Graham E. had lost both of his legs to a landmine, and he half-joked that he returned because "I left a fair portion of myself, both physically and mentally in the country, perhaps I wanted to go back and reclaim that." Like Broyles, Graham E. told me that he thought if he returned to Việt Nam, he would be able "to move on."[46]

Graham E.'s memory of commemorations sparking his return illustrates the malleability of memory and shows how, over time, different events can link together and become imbued with new significance in our memories. He recalled that "I think it was probably 1990, [or] 1989, we had the unveiling of the Vietnam Veterans War Memorial, in Canberra. And that's when I really determined that I'd just go back and chase down

[43] Broyles Jr., *Brothers in Arms*, 13. [44] Ibid., 226.
[45] Daphne Berdahl, "Voices at the Wall: Discourse of History and National Identity at the Vietnam Veterans Memorial." *History and Memory* 6:2 (1994): 91.
[46] Interview with Graham E., Perth, December 18, 2015.

a few ghosts, I guess."[47] In fact, however, the Australian Vietnam Forces National Memorial was unveiled in Canberra in 1992, two years after Graham E. returned.[48] His memory of this public, official recognition for Australian Vietnam veterans as the cue for his return suggests a deeper importance of the broader commemorative period.

Australian memory of Vietnam was saturated with and informed by American experiences, both with television coverage during the war and with cultural representations afterwards. As a result, Australian veterans themselves internalized and promoted American narratives about the war.[49] The American Welcome Home parades had inspired Australian veterans to organize their own Welcome Home parade in Sydney in 1987, despite the fact that each Australian battalion had received a Welcome Home parade during the war and that Australian Vietnam veterans already marched in national parades each year.[50] Yet this Americanized identity also led Australian Vietnam veterans to complain "that they were being written out of Anzac history – the poor cousin, even the black sheep, of the legend."[51] The Anzac legend originated in World War I when soldiers at Gallipoli were eulogized for their "fighting spirit," with the battle declared "the birth of the nation," producing a martial nationalism where Australian masculine identity was defined by the qualities of Anzac: "mateship, sacrifice, and noble manly endeavour."[52] Because the Anzac mythology hinges on martyrdom of the "diggers," claiming Anzac status requires "an ongoing creation of victimhood."[53] In the case of Vietnam, this resulted in the incorporation of American myths of public antipathy and anti-war hostility toward veterans into Australian memories.[54] Thus Vietnam War commemoration in Australia was not only about recognizing Vietnam veterans and their service; it was also

[47] Interview with Graham.
[48] *The Australian Vietnam Forces National Memorial*. Vietnam Veterans of Australia Association. www.vvaa.org.au/memorial.htm
[49] See: Jeffrey Grey, "In Every War but One? Myth, History and Vietnam." In *Zombie Myths of Australian Military History*. Edited by Craig Stockings (Sydney: NewSouth, 2010), 211.
[50] Historian Elizabeth Stewart points out that "veterans themselves have either forgotten or dismiss the fact that every returning battalion except one had a welcome home march." My interviews mirrored this finding. Elizabeth Stewart, "Vietnam: The Long Journey Home." In *New Perceptions of the Vietnam War: Essays on the War, the South Vietnamese Experience, the Diaspora and the Continuing Impact*. Edited by Nathalie Huynh Chau Nguyen (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2015), 110.
[51] Garton, *Cost of War*, 235.
[52] Stephen Garton, "War and Masculinity in Twentieth Century Australia." *Journal of Australian Studies* 22:56 (1998): 86.
[53] Mia Martin Hobbs, "'We Went and Did an Anzac Job': Memory, Myth, and the Anzac Digger in Vietnam." *Australian Journal of Politics and History* 64:3 (2018): 482.
[54] Ibid., 489–94.

about acknowledging a distinctly Australian Vietnam veteran identity and incorporating Vietnam veterans into the Anzac legacy.

The 1987 Sydney March provided veterans with this recognition. The march was followed by a concert at which members of the Australian folk band *Redgum* performed their iconic song "I Was Only Nineteen (A Walk in the Light Green)."[55] The song uses colloquial Australian vernacular and references Australian place names and army slang. Based on the stories of a veteran close to the songwriter, it was widely considered by Australian veterans to be an authentic representation of their Vietnam experience. The song's performance at the 1987 march was a public display of acceptance of Australian Vietnam veteran identity. Following the success of the 1987 parade, Prime Minister Bob Hawke announced an annual Vietnam Veterans Day to be commemorated on the anniversary of the Battle of Long Tan, and in 1988 the Hawke government gave its support to building a national Vietnam memorial, upon which *Redgum's* lyrics were inscribed.[56] Graham E.'s memory of the memorial dedication being the spark for his return to Việt Nam thus reflects the intense burst of commemoration from the broader Australian community in the late 1980s and early 1990s that centered on a distinctive idea of the Aussie digger in Vietnam.

Veterans also returned in reaction to Việt Nam's economic reforms in 1986, known as Đổi Mới ("renovation"). As soon as Greg, a former Marine read about Đổi Mới, he began organizing his 1988 trip back: "in 1987 I read a little blurb . . . that said Vietnam is changing its policy and it's going to issue visas to Westerners. So, I knew right then I had to get a visa and go." Greg "was always going to go back and see the country, I was always gonna return someday I just knew it . . . I knew all along. I didn't know why, exactly, I just knew that I was gonna go back."[57] Logistically, the Đổi Mới reforms did not make it much easier for US veterans to return to Việt Nam. The US embargo, effectively a "continuation of war by other means," isolated Việt Nam diplomatically and economically by denying them access to aid, capital, and membership in the United Nations, and prevented US citizens from engaging directly with Việt Nam through the US Trading with the Enemy Act.[58] Americans had to go through another country to get visas, could not access American bank accounts from within Việt Nam, and American travel agents were

[55] Redgum, "I Was Only Nineteen (A Walk in the Light Green)." *Caught in the Act* (Sydney: Epic Records, 1983).
[56] Long Tan saw the highest Australian casualties in a single battle in Vietnam and was consequently commemorated by veterans.
[57] Interview with Greg, Hồ Chí Minh City, March 25, 2016.
[58] Martini, *Invisible Enemies*, 14.

prohibited from providing economic assistance to a hostile nation by organizing tours, so the veterans had to organize trips themselves or find a travel agent willing to take the legal risk.[59] US Army veteran John Z. explained to me that he "had thought about it but I didn't really know that it was possible, you know we didn't have diplomatic relations and it was – it was kinda scary."[60] However, many veterans had been waiting for an opportunity to return, and for them, Đổi Mới was a signal. John C., a US Army draft volunteer, told me that returning "was always in my mind," and once he heard of Đổi Mới, he and his brothers immediately began shopping around for ways to return, finally locating a travel agency that could organize visas through Thailand in 1989.[61]

Several veterans identified Đổi Mới as one link in a chain of events that led them back to Việt Nam. Chuck, a US Army intelligence specialist, started thinking about returning when he flew out of the war in 1967. "I remember thinking, actually with some bitterness I think, that one day I'll have determined to come back here, and I hope it'll be in a time of peace." There was no question about whether to return or why, only when: "I just sort of assumed in the recesses of my mind that one day I'd come back." In the early 1990s, Chuck ran into "an old army buddy . . . [we] realized that both of us had thought over the years about one day returning to Vietnam." Chuck linked this chance meeting to Đổi Mới, which had taken hold in the early 1990s and made it "somewhat easier to come back to Việt Nam than even three years or five years earlier," along with fortuitous timing with his work.[62] Bill E. described a similar pattern: thinking about Việt Nam more and more over a few years, in 1994 he decided to go back. "I'd just sold my business. Had a little bit of time, little bit of money. And decided if I was gonna do it, it'd be a good time to do it."[63] The inevitability in returnees' narratives reflects the tendency for diasporas to see their homeland as "a destiny to which . . . [they] are now 'awakening.'"[64] Some veterans explicitly attributed their returns to destiny, or "fate – or as it's called in Vietnam, *dinh-menh.*"[65]

While some veterans were waiting for the right opportunity or following their fate, others presented their returns as prompted by simple curiosity. Ralph, a US Army draftee and the brother of John C., returned in 1989

[59] In 1990, the Connecticut-based Lindblad travel agency was fined $500,000 in fines and legal fees for organizing tours for US veterans and Vietnamese Americans to Việt Nam. They subsequently declared bankruptcy. James Fallows, "Shut Out." *The Atlantic Monthly* 267:3 (March 1991), 42–43.
[60] Interview with John Z., Skype, November 15, 2016.
[61] Interview with John C., Skype, June 23, 2016.
[62] Interview with Chuck, Hà Nội, April 21, 2016. [63] Interview with Bill E.
[64] Brubaker, "The 'Diaspora' Diaspora," 13.
[65] Rottmann, "A Hundred Happy Sparrows," 113.

with his brothers "just to see more of the country. It was always just a curiosity."[66] Bill E. "was curious about what happened over here. About what happened to me, what happened to the country."[67] The 1980's rhetoric around Vietnam, particularly in films, was often melodramatic and exploited veterans' trauma with distorted caricatures. In their interviews, Ralph and Bill E. indicated a weariness with cultural histrionics around Vietnam and veterans and showed a determination not to be caricatured themselves. Renewed media interest in Việt Nam as a country had also revived moral debates about the war, provoking veterans to return as a means to decide the truth for themselves. For example, McCain's 1985 return to Việt Nam was the focus of a heavily promoted CBS documentary, *Honor, Duty and a War Called Vietnam*, which opened with Walter Cronkite describing Vietnam as "the war America did not win."[68] Former Marine Joe Bangert said that he "was so sick and tired of these fucking dickhead fucking anchor-men. These media mogul guys going back and trying to – And I said, I'm going back. I'm not gonna listen to the networks anymore."[69] Bangert made his way back in 1985 through connections with Vietnamese staffers at the United Nations.

Yet far more common were stories of veterans who felt a deep, internal, psychological need to return. Former Marine W.D. wrote that "for years I have wanted to go back ... I felt certain that if I could only see the Vietnamese getting on with their lives, the war gone and the awful wreckage of the war grown over and forgotten, I too would be able to let go."[70] His longing to "let go" of the war by seeing Việt Nam at peace demonstrates reflective nostalgia, which, Boym writes, "dwells in *algia,* in longing and loss, the imperfect process of remembrance."[71] W.D., a 1984 returnee, explained that his purpose in returning was to replace his memories of Vietnam, all of which "were in black-and-white."[72] He "wanted to see the country" in full color, not shaded by the war. He thought that if he could see experience Việt Nam "without fear," he would achieve "emotional catharsis."[73] Similarly, Australian Army veteran Terry Burstall found himself weighed down by his war experience. Determined to "take an academic stance" as he studied the war at university, he discovered that "the more I looked, the murkier it

[66] Interview with Ralph, Skype, June 27, 2016.
[67] Interview with Bill E.
[68] *Honor, Duty and a War Called Vietnam*, produced by Burton Benjamin (New York: CBS, 1985).
[69] Joe Bangert, interview in *Going Back: Echoes of War* [US version], directed by Kaley Clements, 2016. Unreleased documentary shared with me by the filmmaker on Vimeo.
[70] Ehrhart, *Going Back*, 5. [71] Boym, *Future of Nostalgia*, 41.
[72] Interview with W.D., Email, January 12, 2016. [73] Ibid.

became . . . the monkey on my back was becoming a baboon."[74] Burstall returned in 1986. As Boym writes, reflective nostalgics are "aware of the gap between identity and resemblance."[75] Burstall and W.D. knew that their memories did not define Việt Nam. They returned to release their wartime memories, experiences, understanding or emotions by reframing, reexperiencing, and rediscovering Việt Nam in a different context.

Other veterans returned out of nostalgia for their past selves. US Army veteran Ted Heselton returned in 1990 "to mourn for myself, to mourn the death of the person I was before," invoking the idea of death and rebirth on the battlefield.[76] Australian and American gender norms linked masculinity with military service and combat, and for the Vietnam generation – whose fathers and uncles had served in World War II and Korea – the idea of baptism by fire as the rite of passage to manhood was powerful. Some veterans interpreted the displacement and isolation they experienced as a result of the forced maturing required by the war: turning teenagers into soldiers, cutting short their adolescence, returning from war not simply as veterans but as "men." These returnees felt the need to grieve the boys they were before they went to war, before their childhood was subsumed by violence, by returning to the site of that rite of passage. Bowen, for example, was drafted into the US Army and served in the First Air Cavalry Division. He returned to Việt Nam in 1987 and wrote in an article the following year that "Vietnam was where we spent our youth; some would say where we lost it . . .. Where we lost our innocence. At the very least, it was a place, real and symbolic, that still held us."[77]

Returnees' nostalgia for their warzone home, the place of their rebirth, demonstrated again the concept of diasporic intimacy. They were "haunted by the images of home and homeland," unable either to explore or forget their war memories.[78] Many drew on metaphors of walls, doors, glass, and gates to explain how returning to Việt Nam was a return to memories they had sealed away. Bowen drew on The Wall in Washington, DC to describe his memories: "to touch down again in Vietnam is to take the first wary step into the silent worlds locked in the reflecting granite of the memorial. To return again is to attempt to crack the wall of silence."[79] US Army veteran Rottmann described his memories as subterranean, threatening to emerge as he returned: "my apprehension is so powerful . . .. So terrible are these memories and truths that I've

[74] Burstall, *A Soldier Returns*, 14. [75] Boym, *Future of Nostalgia*, 50.
[76] Ted Heselton, "Ted Heselton's Yen Vien Journal: Team III." *VVRP.org*. http://033a4c3.netsolhost.com/?page_id=1123
[77] Bowen, "Seeking Reconciliation in Vietnam." [78] Boym, *Future of Nostalgia*, 253.
[79] Bowen, "Seeking Reconciliation in Vietnam."

never allowed them to come fully to the surface. These memories far darker than the worst nightmares."[80]

Veterans described how both nostalgia and apprehension built as their return approached, culminating in an emotionally fraught entry into Việt Nam. Many experienced a flood of visceral memories as their flights descended. Ted, a US Air Force veterans, described looking out the window at the landscape of Việt Nam during his "entrance to the evil city [Hà Nội]," experiencing "some sort of white noise situation … it seemed like all the years, from the time I was in Vietnam until that moment, all the stuff that's been going on in between in my life, it was just kinda rushing through like a film that is going real fast."[81] Heselton, likewise, found himself overwhelmed, "I can't stop the flood of strange thoughts."[82] Some struggled with the adrenaline rush and the distressing contrast between past and present. Broyles reflected that "it was peaceful, bucolic. But it brought back less peaceful memories …. I could smell all those odors of war – gunpowder, excrement, fear … I had to struggle with the impulse to flee. For a brief moment I wanted a weapon."[83] Many veterans described wanting to turn around and get back on the plane. US veteran Tom Bird, part of Muller's VVA team, actually did get back on the plane when he saw the Vietnamese soldiers "waiting to greet him. Mr. Bird swiftly returned to the plan, trembling. 'My first instinct was to call the whole thing off …. It's just too strange. I feel a little out of control.'"[84]

Surviving the airport memory flood was just the first step. Most veterans returned with a specific place or personal agenda in mind in their search for resolution: somewhere or something (sometimes themselves) to find or release. On these missions, war memories were profoundly challenged. On Burstall's second trip back in 1987, he sat down with Vietnamese veterans of the Battle of Long Tan to understand their perspective. Their memories of the battle confused and distressed him. Colonel Khánh presented Burstall with evidence that two of the Australians who had died in the battle were not killed by the National Liberation Front (NLF) but had been captured and killed alongside their captors by Australian artillery. "My head was spinning and there was bile in my throat as I sat looking at him and wanting to lash out all around me. I wanted to cry out bullshit … bullshit … bullshit. But I couldn't."[85]

[80] Rottmann, "A Hundred Happy Sparrows," 118. [81] Interview with Ted.
[82] Heselton, "Ted Heselton's Yen Vien Journal."
[83] Broyles Jr., "The Road to Hill 10: A Veteran's Return to Vietnam." *The Atlantic*, 225. April 1, 1985.
[84] Weinraub, "Vietnam Veterans Take Emotional Journey to Hanoi." *New York Times*, December 19, 1981.
[85] Burstall, *A Soldier Returns*, 72.

This loss was exacerbated by a disagreement between Burstall and his Vietnamese hosts over the NLF body count at the Battle of Long Tan. According to the Australian narrative, 250 NLF died. The Vietnamese insisted the body count was much lower. Colonel Bảo asked Burstall, "How did you count them?" Burstall wrote that this question "really put me back on my heels. The count was done in a slipshod fashion .... Would a shell-shocked digger count an arm, a trunk and a leg scattered over several meters as one body or three bodies?" Burstall was forced to reflect on the capacity and limits of his own memory: "One hundred and fifty dead bodies in a 2 square kilometer area is a mind-numbing sight. It is a great deal of death: and 250 dead bodies is the same. The mind cannot cope with the sight of destruction of that magnitude. The difference between 150 and 250 is not something that those who were there could even look back on with anything like an objective view."[86] This realization tempered Burstall's belief in the Australian narrative of the battle as a David and Goliath feat, which brought into question the value of commemorating battles as feats at all.

Not all return journeys were fraught with memory confrontations. Pete and McCain visited one of their "old lodgings," Hỏa Lò Prison, together in 1992 on an official US delegation.[87] At the time, Hỏa Lò – commonly known in the United States as the Hanoi Hilton – was still operating as a prison. McCain reflected: "no tidal wave of remembrance washed over me as I stared into the faces of the Vietnamese who were occupying my old cell. In fact, curiously, I felt little emotion at all beyond sympathy for the poor bastards who were living there now. It had been a long time. What's past is past."[88] It is possible that because these veterans experienced such graphic and prolonged wartime experiences, they were unable to avoid their memories and were forced to reckon with their trauma long before returning to Việt Nam.

For some returnees, memory confrontation was a cleansing experience, allowing a release of their grief. Ted, for example, still had many of his war photographs, including one of his old base camps in the village of Lai Khê. When he returned to Việt Nam he decided to rephotograph the "exact same place" and gave the old photograph to his Vietnamese guide. Returning to the vehicles, he felt something missing:

The only way I can explain this, it's like, having a pipe, like under your sink, your pipe that goes down for your garbage, your water drain. It's like having one of

[86] Burstall, *A Soldier Returns*, 78.
[87] John McCain and Mark Salter, *Worth the Fighting For: A Memoir* (New York: Random House, 2002), 262.
[88] Ibid., 261–62.

those inside, and over the years, it's filled up. And it just was filled with shit. It was the fear, the anger, all of the things, the memories, everything that was associated with the war. And after, even. And it wasn't there anymore. It felt like a physical object was not either on, or in my body . . .. Something was literally gone. And it's like that tube was clean. It was whistle clean . . . I gave away the old emotions. And by doing that I cleaned myself out.[89]

Others explained that simply by mourning at a personal site, they found peace. Rottmann returned to Việt Nam in 1987 and experienced a single, defining moment of catharsis at a place of great significance to him. He returned to My Khe beach in Đà Nẵng, a Rest and Relaxation (R&R) location for Americans in the war and allowed himself to mourn. "The waves on China Beach advance and retreat the way wartime memories ebb and eddy around the edges of my daily routine at home, repeating over and over the gentle whisper of Ho Chi Minh, 'The wheel of life turns without pause . . .. Men and animals rise up reborn.' The waves on China Beach advance and retreat, and I kneel on the sand and weep the grief I've hoarded for twenty years."[90]

These veterans indicate that their nostalgia for Vietnam had been resolved by returning to Việt Nam – not ended, but accepted. Ted described it as "an opening . . . there was not closure at all, not for a long time."[91] Boehm found peace after demonstrating grief and mourning for soldiers on all sides of the war at My Lai: "I finally realized that I would never understand it, but I had to mark it somehow. So, I went to the My Lai memorial . . .. And I played Taps on my fiddle, for all the pain and suffering of both the Americans and Vietnamese. And now having made that gesture, I think I can move on."[92] Coming to terms with the war in Việt Nam was a powerful and expressive experience. US Army draftee James likened it to "a twenty-four hour a day open heart massage."[93] Rottmann described a twenty-year, "repressed, constipated pain" becoming a "cathartic pain, a pain of release – almost as if I were giving birth to a new awareness. I haven't exorcised all my demons . . . but I know this trip is helping me reach an accommodation with them."[94] Despite this pain, many returnees found that revisiting their memories brought a degree of peace. Bowen described it as "an affirmation – reopens the heart to hope. It cannot change the past, but it can reconnect with the present, so allowing the silence to be broken."[95]

[89] Interview with Ted. [90] Rottmann, "A Hundred Happy Sparrows," 130.
[91] Interview with Ted.
[92] Mike Boehm, "A Union of Like Hearts – A Unique Collaboration." *Project Leaders, MQI Vietnam*. www.mqivietnam.org/project-leaders
[93] James, "Hoi An Epiphany." Private journal entry shared with the author, 1993.
[94] Rottmann, "A Hundred Happy Sparrows," 125.
[95] Bowen, "Seeking Reconciliation in Vietnam."

Some veterans explained that while returning in peacetime did not erase their wartime memories or emotions, it made it easier to deal with darker thoughts by adding new, positive ones. Bill E. remembered that before he returned, "I'd hear the word 'Vietnam' spoken in the background, and I'd start thinking of the war in Vietnam." However, after he had returned, "I'd hear somebody mention Vietnam and I'd try and think about the food, the kids, the neat experience of coming back. So, it just kinda changed the library of images that accompanied my mind."[96] Greg, who said the return experience "changed my life completely," explained:

> All of my memories from Vietnam were negative. Anything that came up in my mind was just horrible. Just the war part, all of the guys that I saw shot up, the Vietnamese that I saw shot up, my friends, all of that. It wasn't till I came back in '88 that I could replace those memories, those old bad memories, with now memories of smiling children, about people happy to see us, about people trying to pick up their lives and move on and go forward and stuff. So, I replaced all those bad memories with good memories.[97]

This changing of the "library of images" reflected an increasing focus on "image replacement" for the treatment of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).[98] Small numbers of veterans began returning specifically to confront their trauma in Việt Nam. Veteran and psychologist Raymond Scurfield led a team of veterans, all diagnosed with PTSD, to Việt Nam in 1989. In his analysis of the efficacy of returning as treatment, he observed: "where once there were memories only of war-time Vietnam, now I have essentially an equivalent number of *both* wartime *and* peacetime Vietnam."[99] As Chapter 2 explores, the psychological benefit of returning to Việt Nam reported by reconciliation veterans became a motivating factor in later veterans' returns.

Adding to the library of images sometimes had broader consequences. Most veterans were aware that the views they held of their former enemy were caricatures but were less conscious of how the war environment had shaped their attitudes toward Vietnamese civilians. Once they were physically back, some veterans recognized how they had dehumanized all Vietnamese. James explained that shortly after returning, he encountered some Vietnamese women: "and they saw me, and big smiles and laughter, and in a flash of a moment, I thought, 'prostitutes.' I assumed it. *M: Because they were smiling at you?* Yeah. I assumed that. And just that quickly again, I went, 'no.'" As a soldier living on a military base in

[96] Interview with Bill E. [97] Greg, interview in *Echoes of War*.
[98] Dr. Matthew J. Friedman, quoted in Alan C. Miller, "Veterans Find Peace in Vietnam." *Los Angeles Times*, July 5, 1990. http://articles.latimes.com/1990-07-05/news/mn-136_1_vietnam-veterans
[99] Scurfield, *Healing Journeys*, 206.

Cam Ranh Bay, James had frequented a local brothel and befriended the sex workers and owners. Because his wartime experiences with Vietnamese women were isolated to that bar and its context, James realized that for him, Vietnamese women smiling had always been associated with solicitation. "I thought, 'my God. The way our minds can change, to think.' And it's like our minds get stuck in time until we replace – well not replace, until we add some new information. So, I added a little bit of information, and that moment was an important one. And I never did that again."[100]

This challenge incited some to redress their wartime perceptions, which were imbued with orientalism and misogyny. Rottmann focused on meeting as many people as possible on his return trip: "I need more data . . . I need names and faces. I never got to learn who these people were the last time …. And these are real people. Not slant-eyed rifle range caricatures."[101] Returning to Việt Nam therefore had the effect of forcing veterans to actively confront their own biases proactively, often with profound and positive effects. John Z. said that "it's gone on to make me a fuller person. To make me realize that you know these, the people in Việt Nam, are real people. They're not cardboard cutouts that are trying to kill me. I've met them in their houses, I met them on the streets and there and everywhere, and … I think it's made me a more rounded person."[102]

Thus, returning to Việt Nam often resulted in reclaiming or reassessing what Vietnam meant in a peacetime context. For Bowen, "going back . . . is an attempt to reassert through our own action the probity of our purposes."[103] Flying into Việt Nam for the first time since the war, Mike P. felt "fulfilment; twenty years having come full circle. Contentment. Rightness. . . . Tears, then a quiet fullness." For Mike P., spending time in Việt Nam not only brought "contentment," he also reframed how he felt about the former enemy territory. Over time, as he worked on a VVRP project alongside Vietnamese people, "the little alleys and side streets lost their terrors."[104] Burstall considered how after his return, "Hanoi now meant people, laughing, crying, loving. It no longer symbolized alien ideologies or ideals that we in our arrogance thought we could not live beside in Asia."[105] The recognition of Vietnamese as people and not as the face of an enemy ideology had a lasting impact on many returnees' lives. John Z. noticed changes in his outlook. "The return visits have changed my attitudes. They've made me more friendly. I mean hey,

[100] Interview with James, Hà Nội, April 23, 2016.
[101] Rottmann, "A Hundred Happy Sparrows," 132. [102] Interview with John Z.
[103] Bowen, "Seeking Reconciliation in Vietnam."
[104] Mike P., "1989 VVRP Journal w Intro." [105] Burstall, *A Soldier Returns*, 32–33.

when I was there at war . . . I was at war! I wasn't making friends with anybody! And by going back, that's changed that attitude."[106]

Some returnees found that this change in perspective drew them back to Việt Nam time and again. Graham E. told me that returning "changed my life. It's given me a greater appreciation of life. It's given me a motivation to be involved in things. And while there's never a day that I don't lament the fact that I don't have legs, there's never a day that I don't appreciate the fact that I'm still alive when so many lost their lives." Graham E. returned to Việt Nam almost every year since 1990, becoming involved in the campaign to ban landmines. His return instilled in him "a strong sense of responsibility for the innocent kids particularly, who would come across landmines . . . it just made me appreciate how lucky I was."[107] Some veterans made the decision to relocate permanently. Greg moved to Hồ Chí Minh City in 1992 and became an English teacher. He explained: "coming back was probably the best thing I could have done, in my life. Because the direction I was headed in America was a dead end. And I don't think I coulda kept all that stuff inside of me much longer. So, I think coming back gave me that spin that I needed to go forward again. I was going backwards, for sure. Drinking, and other problems. So, coming back turned me around."[108]

Many returnees found personal worth in "healing-through-helping." Heselton explained this in his VVRP journal: "I've come because I'm an experience junkie . . .. An important part of the 'high' is experiencing the feeling of struggling for a cause you know to be right on both political and humanitarian grounds."[109] These veterans acknowledged the self-interest of their work. Greg described teaching in Hồ Chí Minh City: "the feeling of actually contributing and helping somebody to get a little bit farther along in their career or get into a program that's gonna help them out. . . . It's a good feeling! Much better than it was as a soldier. So, carrying a briefcase to class was much better than carrying a rifle." Greg especially enjoyed the relationships he built with his students: "they're all very grateful, they highly respect teachers."[110] Almost all of the veterans involved in healing-through-helping work labored to impress upon me how generous the Vietnamese were with their gratitude and respect for veterans' work. Chuck told me, "the Vietnamese give us all much more appreciation than we deserve for what we're actually doing here, it's very, very disproportionate. And I know that. And I also understand that part of what I'm doing here, I'm doing for myself. Cause I have to live with myself."[111]

[106] Interview with John Z. [107] Interview with Graham E. [108] Interview with Greg.
[109] Heselton, "Ted Heselton's Yen Vien Journal." [110] Interview with Greg.
[111] Interview with Chuck.

As Chuck suggests, atonement played an important role in veterans' return activities. Chuck returned to Việt Nam repeatedly in the early 1990s before relocating to Hà Nội in 1995 to work on a rehabilitation project. From there, he learned of the ongoing effects of unexploded ordnance and Agent Orange on the Vietnamese and became dedicated to those causes. Chuck's work gave him "some level of hope that I've been able to correct, in small ways, some of the damage that we did here, during the war. I know that . . . what we do is a drop in the ocean. But, you know, enough drops will eventually fill up the ocean." His actions in Việt Nam were redemptive. Chuck reflected that "in a small way, I'm trying to meet the expectations of my parents and my extended family and the country that I grew up in and the values that I was raised to believe. So it's, so that's why I have been here and it's not entirely satisfactory, it never will be, it's never enough. But it's the best that I can do, and it's something that I have to do."[112]

Other returnees atoned simply by bearing witness to the Vietnamese experience of war. Burstall had asked his Vietnamese guide, Dy, to show him some photographs of Hà Nội in the late stages of the war. Burstall's intention was to understand academically the scale of the "Christmas bombing" campaign, but viewing the images forced him to bear witness to the "horror, the terror, the futility of the exercise hit me from the first page. By the time I had been through one book I was sickened and emotionally distraught." Burstall tried to hand the books back to his guide Dy, who refused and told him, "Perhaps this is your penance, my friend, the way of loosening the monkey you told me you thought was on your back," Burstall reflected on this: "as I looked at him standing there like a schoolmaster gently chastising a student, I thought he just may have been right."[113] Others bore witness to survival, rather than devastation. Rottmann explained:

> I need to be reassured that we didn't kill or poison them all. Or destroy their individuality or their collective spirit . . .. I don't give a damn at this point in time (and perhaps I never did) about who won the war. But I need to know that the country is alive and viable. It feels very good to know that Vietnam lives.[114]

Heselton reflected that "my real goal was not a physical location but to be forgiven by the Vietnamese people. That has happened. I can go home now."[115]

[112] Ibid. [113] Burstall, *A Soldier Returns*, 32.
[114] Rottmann, "A Hundred Happy Sparrows," 132–33.
[115] Heselton, "Ted Heselton's Yen Vien Journal."

For anti-war veterans, returning in search of forgiveness was relatively straightforward in terms of internal logic. Veterans who maintained a sense of pride in their military service faced a more complex relationship between their war memories, their personal grief, and their return to Việt Nam. These returnees focused on reconciliation with the enemy. US Army veteran Harold Moore returned to Việt Nam three times in the 1990s to research the Vietnamese experience of the Battle of Ia Drang. In 1993, Moore returned to his battlefield site with his former enemy. He described a prayer at the Ia Đrăng valley among American and Vietnamese veterans:

> General An stood directly across from me in the circle, and when we broke he walked straight to me, his right hand extended. As we shook hands my old enemy pulled me to him and kissed me on both cheeks. Old enemies can become friends …. We had much in common as military men who had fought our country's wars, even though duty and orders pitted us against each other during one of those wars …. Each of us had a reservoir of respect for the man who commanded on the other side.[116]

Moore's experience parallels the pilgrimages of other veterans of US wars, notably the commemorative Civil War reconciliation events held at Gettysburg, where the 25th, 50th and 75th anniversaries of the battles were celebrated with reunions and "'rituals of reconciliation' in which Union veterans extended offers of friendship and forgiveness to the Southern veterans."[117] Like those Civil War reunions, which excluded black veterans and papered over the war's legacies with "unifying myths" and "values of manliness, valor, sacrifice, and a mutual sense of honor," Moore's reunion narrative excluded "the causes, transformations, and results of the war."[118] By framing his reconciliation as a traditional – and, importantly, a traditionally *masculine* – ritual of pilgrimage, Moore distanced the notion of anti-war atonement from his return.

In parallel to traditional reconciliations between former soldiers were veterans conducting diplomacy through political and volunteer missions. Muller and the VVA visited Việt Nam regularly in the early 1980s on invitation from the Vietnamese. "Our government will not talk to them. So, we do represent the only channel with which to exchange information."[119] Muller and the VVA's primary concern was proving

[116] Harold G. Moore and Joseph L. Galloway, *We Are Soldiers Still: A Journey Back to the Battlefields of Vietnam* (New York: HarperCollins, 2008), 1, 98.
[117] Gatewood and Cameron, "Battlefield Pilgrims at Gettysburg National Military Park," 196.
[118] David W. Blight, *Race and Reunion: The Civil War in American Memory* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001), 9, 199.
[119] Bobby Muller, quoted in Bernard Weinraub, "Hanoi Asks US Veterans for Talks." *New York Times*, April 22, 1984.

Việt Nam trustworthy to Americans, putting their safety in Vietnamese hands and lobbying for the recognition of Việt Nam upon their return. They saw themselves as "providing a bridge to Vietnam, a conduit to dialogue."[120] Other veterans' groups promoted similar goals: the VVRP wanted to "break down the embargo ... to do people-to-people diplomacy."[121] Pete and McCain were quickly convinced that there were no POWs in Việt Nam and that the Vietnamese were doing their best to assist the US government in finding US remains. They became the most prominent government advocates for normalization of relations, with Pete appointed the first US Ambassador to the SRV in 1997. Both veterans were very proud of the fruits of their efforts. Pete told me: "there's always a personal feeling of accomplishment if you do something you think has advanced a good cause. And I think that was a good cause."[122]

Finally, one universal component in veterans' returns was enjoying Việt Nam as a tourist or expatriate, and not focusing on the war. This was particularly true of veterans who returned to Việt Nam frequently or who had relocated there. Maurice said he "found that fascinating, to go to the north with my wife," after years of stopping through Hồ Chí Minh City en route to Cambodia, where he worked throughout the 1980s.[123] Cultural immersion was important for Bill E., who told me that a big part of his happiness is "Việt Nam itself, being married to a Vietnamese woman, I get involved in the family and the culture. And I enjoy seeing that side of it, I find it interesting and touching a lot of times. I don't get involved, you know, with both feet at all times, but you know, yeah I enjoy seeing that there's more than one way to do something, and how different belief systems can still be compatible."[124] Some veterans who had struggled with postwar readjustment in their home countries realized that Việt Nam offered them a more harmonious life. Greg found enjoyment and satisfaction in Việt Nam because of the contrast between Việt Nam and the United States. "I was able to come over here and fulfil the American dream. In America I couldn't. ... It was hollow. It was so meaningless. There was no substance to it at all. ... Over here, I got to do what I wanted to do. I got to make my life like I wanted it to be."[125]

Reconciliation veterans portrayed their return experiences as positive and profound. As Australian and American debates swirled and settled around "their" war, returnees were drawn back to Việt Nam to address lingering questions and satisfy nostalgic longing. While they found some answers and some peace, none reported that their return terminated their

[120] Ibid. [121] Champagne, "The Founding of the VVRP." [122] Interview with Pete. [123] Interview with Maurice. [124] Interview with Bill E. [125] Interview with Greg.

connection to Việt Nam. On the contrary, they demonstrated that by returning, they built emotional ties to and memories of Việt Nam that became as important to them as their wartime experiences. Differences between Australian and US veterans were not pronounced in this group because the numbers of Australian returnees were so few. The US veterans offer a clue for these demographics: most reconciliation veterans returned for political or humanitarian reasons, partly in response to the hostility of the United States toward Việt Nam surrounding the POW/MIA issue. Australia's diplomatic ties with the Democratic Republic of Việt Nam (DRV) were established in 1973, and the six Australian soldiers classified as MIA at the end of the war were all presumed Killed in Action.[126] Australian veterans did not experience a prolonged debate around the possibility of POWs/MIAs, or by proxy the debate around establishing relations with Việt Nam. US veterans had an imperative in returning to establish these truths and demonstrate their allegiances: Australian veterans had no such urgency. The following chapter includes a more balanced number of Australian and US veterans' accounts, as more veterans from both countries began to return to Việt Nam in the new political climate of "normalization."

[126] Ashley Ekins, "Australian MIAs of the Vietnam War – 'Missing in Action' or 'No Known Grave'?" *Wartime* 23 (2003). www.awm.gov.au/wartime/23/no-known-grave/