

For Prof. Capps

Thomas P. Tournat
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February 15, 1985

Dear Mr. Tournat:

my mom-pre post marked envelopes for me at work.
Thanks for your letter of 8 Feb 85 which arrived today, curiously postmarked on 7 Nov 84. You noted that you wanted to use some of my responses in your paper which is due on the 21st, so I'll try to get this to you asap, like tomorrow. At least I have access to the law lib tonight which means using this typer which means you can read it all fairly easily...some of my friends have suggested I give up the pen and find a typer before I cause them eye strain. It may not have as personal a touch but...First off I want to thank you for taking the time and for letting me have a glimpse of you and where you're coming from. I asked Dr. Capps to solicit questions as it helps me tie up my own loose ends by attempting to adequately answer; nonetheless, it may be a little easier given that you took the time to introduce yourself, and with some noticeable candor. I respect that.

Before I get on to your questions I should tell you that I reckon my answers may well be unclear, and fairly twitching with conflict...I've recently reread my combat journals and letters home from Viet Nam; a lot of their substance resolves around the issues of whether we ought to have been there at all and they still tear at me. I am reminded of a comment I made to my immediate commander my last day in-country; he was aware of my prior expression of doubt about our policy in Vietnam and he asked me what my views were now that I'd been there for a year. I told him that I still had my doubts but that if any enemy came up against an outfit I was in that they had better be damn good or they're dead. It boils down to this: that after some time in the field, the moral/political quandry became "balanced" and at times overshadowed by hard-core loyalty to the men I fought with.

There is not much I can tell you concerning the impressions about Larry Roach. He and I have never spoken at length about anything. With one exception, he has always been civil to me and I have shown him the respect due his position. I'm told his partial paralysis resulted from a vehicle accident which caused severe neck pain and that in the surgery for that, given a medical screw up, caused a loss of some enervation to his hands and arms. I hadn't heard from anyone the information you related to me but I'm not surprised. While I have no problem with your writing Mr. Roach I would ask that you consider doing so in a fashion that does not tend to put he and I into some sort of competition. To your questions:

1/ What is worth dying for in 1985? What is worth killing for in 1985?

I read Wheeler's book Touched With Fire and mean to read it again. He repeatedly made the case that there are things worth dying for and related it to Viet Nam. I don't recall him putting it in terms of the second of your questions, but that is obviously the other side of the same issue. It calls to mind a line out of Patton: "A soldier is not supposed to die for his country. He is supposed to make the other son-of-a-bitch die for his country."

I asked my people the same question in 1966. The best answer I got back was from my cousin: "A cause is worth dying for if that cause is more important than life." But that doesn't answer specifically then or now. One situation that could (with some imagination) happen is an invasion of our country. My answer then, and that of every vet I've spoken to, comes swiftly, without reservation: full scale combat to defeat the enemy including hot pursuit into his homeland, which means killing the

write a book Owan

enemy, maybe dying in the effort. That is a gut answer but I think it would stand the inevitable thinking through of the inane contradictions of nearly any war.

Let me put it another way. To me before a war or cause gains sufficient merit to minimally justify the risking and taking of life, it should be clearly obvious that a failure to take up arms will result in conditions so intolerable as to make life not worth living or result in greater loss of life than if you don't engage in combat. The bottom line in Vietnam to me was that there was no such justification. It was anything but clear that a failure of America to battle in Vietnam would result in greater loss of life at some later date. The leadership of the time, not to mention since, asserted "national security." More or less, that if we don't stop them in Vietnam, we'll have to do it at our shores. I am afraid that the national security argument more often than not translates into some sort of advantage for a vested interest. It struck me in Vietnam that our leadership, generals, ambassadors, cabinet officers, etc., had closer ties to their South Vietnamese counterparts than they did (either of those sets of leaders) to their own common people or soldiers. Our leaders talked with, ate with, partied with their leaders, not with common folk on either side. Moreover, I have yet to see a breakout of the money made by private interests during the war: certainly we know that many of the leaders in SVN became relatively wealthy from graft, corruption, etc., and I'm reasonably sure that our defense industries were not hurt by the war. Given your major you may know more about this than I do; if you do, please clue me in.

I basically don't like the questions: what's worth dying or killing for. They are another way of saying something perhaps a bit better sounding: when is combat OK, what is a just war? Check out the enclosure. The common sense justifications for risking or taking life often fall on arguments of defense: self-defense, defending family, friends, even strangers from criminal assault, and defending ones country from attack. But no more force than is minimally required to stop the assailant is justifiable and, in criminal matters generally, even that force can get you tried on assault charges (when you were first attacked) if you haven't made a good faith effort to just leave the scene, your tail twixt your legs. In Oregon, self defense is not a defense unless you were cornered in your home or on your job. To me, taking a life, or risking ones own, is justifiable when it is done in the effort to prevent someone from unjustifiably taking life. But to put the question as Wheeler does, that there are things worth dying for, strikes me as a backdoor attempt to grab at the traditional notions of soldiers nobly, gloriously dying in defense of their country - as if Viet Nam was an obvious defense of America.

3. Is death the worst thing that can happen?

Sounds like a version of the "better dead than red" theme. The answer depends on the context of the question. Death might well be the worst thing if we are talking nuclear war & nuclear winter, in which case death means mega-death, species death, maybe planet death, the end of the game. Consider Poland. The Polish people have been screwed by recent history, conquered by east and west, seldom in control of their own lives/country. Is it better for them to make basically unarmed human wave attacks against their oppressors and certainly be slaughtered en mass, or is it better for them to "oblige" their oppressors and work, plan & wait for the opportunity to kick them out? What takes more courage: to bare ones chest to the conquerors bullet or to temporarily accept his oppression while committing oneself to the long tough haul of beating him by the disciplined techniques of revolutionary warfare? Clearly one can get killed that way. No, death is not the worst thing, but dying in some vainglorious suicidal attack shows me neither sense nor courage. It would be worse to live like a coward with no beliefs worth living for, and if you have beliefs then you stand up for them or they are just hot air. The conflict occurs because one of

Tell Duane about Memorial in eagle nest New Mexico

the beliefs most folks hold (or ought to hold) is that life itself is terribly precious, sacred and is generally more important than most other values.

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This question suggests another: while death is not the worst that can happen, whose deaths are we talking about? I'm told that there are no names on the Viet Nam Memorial from the families of the congressmen and executive leadership that put and kept us in Vietnam. If Vietnam was worth dying for as Wheeler suggests, then where the hell were the sons and daughters of Congress and the rich when the bullets and bombs were going off? With David Stockman at Harvard Devinity?

4. What caused (my) actions that led to (my) imprisonment?

Without going into the miasma of psychiatric explanation, it was my failure to live as if my life had purpose and value. I lost faith with and in myself, my country, in j humankind. I let my reactions to Vietnam push me into a nihilistic, hedonistic drifting, goalless existence. It is true that I didn't see what was coming or that Viet Nam had any influence on it, but I should have known better. I utterly failed to hold myself to any course that affirmed a purpose for me to fulfill. Without my own family or career, I eventually collapsed into the darkness I reckon is within everyone and gave up to it. Suicidal ideation and attempts became a relief to the even ordinary problems of living. When one's own life has no value worth living for, worth working for, when one's own death sounds like a solution to problems, then it isn't far away that no one else's life has value either. I became, after years of erosive living, a powder keg waiting a spark.

5. Do (I) believe in Post Traumatic Stress? If so, what do (I) think will cure it?

I dunno. It's a weird question...PTSD, like the rest of the psychiatric labels, presumes the existence of an unseen condition that is inferrable from a symptom cluster. I've had/have a bunch of the symptoms. I guess I believe that PTSD exists as much as I believe other psychiatric disorders exist. There is some research going on to refine the diagnostic criteria; and some experts discount it as a passing fad. I reckon that political beliefs play some role: clinicians who believe we were wrong to be in Vietnam tend to push PTSD; clinicians who think we should have nuc'd Hanoi tend to discount PTSD. What I've read claims that PTSD is another name for the same "reactions" suffered by combatants through the ages, including victims of man made and natural disasters. They talk about oscillations between periods of numbness and periods of intrusive recollections, about present time triggering events that remind one of something back in Disneyland-East, or whatever. About irritability and anger and distrust of authority, esp. governmental authority. I resemble those remarks at times. What's it mean?

What's PTSD? A maladaptive psychic entity? A mental disease or disorder? Just a symptom cluster? Whatever, it differs from the heavy crazies - psychoses - by being reality based. VN vets are not angry, etc., because they are traumatized by repressed memories of childhood incest fantasies aka Freud et al. So-called PTSD victims were bumped or blasted by physical reality. It is supposedly similar to the relative minor reactions to ordinary adult losses: getting fired, divorced, a death in the family.

but now it can be cured because it is recognized
So, yes I believe PTSD exists (the same way I believe other so called mental diseases and disorders exist - as recognizable symptom clusters). And I believe that there is nothing unusual or new about it as it has been around since Cain slew Able: it is the variable & wrenching effect of deadly violence, natural or man made, in a persons life, a survivors life.

5. "Going into Vietnam (arriving on the scene) it was instant disillusionment. Soldiers arrive and leave from the same spot and they can anticipate what will happen through the eyes of the leaving soldiers. Fear, anxiety." Quote from vet. What are (my) feelings on this?

I remember arriving at Ton Son Nhut airport about 2 am, a steep, banking approach in a 707, a hostile fire approach, looking at the fuel dumps burning near the air strip from a recent VC attack. Then walking through the muggy thick hot air into the terminal. Those waiting to leave had the look of the living dead on their faces, their expressions foretold something ominous, bleak, unnerving. Yet it didn't translate (at that time for me) into "instant disillusionment." I wanted to find, to have a good reason to be there. By the time I'd exhausted that effort, some 4 months in, I was too self-concerned about hurting my career (...) chances to refuse to fight and too tight with the men I fought with to not feel personally humiliated at the idea of actually following my thoughts and refusing and leaving them early. Looking back, remembering...it was as if what those zombied expressions, those 10,000 yard stares could have told was this: they actually made us fight and die for damn near nothing.

6. What ill effect, caused by your experience in Vietnam, would you say is the worst? And what do you think caused it, i.e., a particular experience or just the over all experience?

who. The worst effect...was finding out that both the media and the politicians were lying. (Operations I was on got reported in rags like the Times Asian edition. Made me wonder if the reporters were on the same planet). Worse, politicians, U.S. elected leadership was lying to my people, to me, to us soldiers on the g.d. line and they were damn well willing that we soldiers should get killed, wasted, so they, the long promising, deceiving politicians, could get re-elected. One-half to one-third of the soldiers who were wasted, died after our "leadership" decided to get out of Viet Nam "with honor." Within that wretchedly immoral universe, the deaths of buddies and the maiming of a particular officer filled me with guilt and rage and... I don't have words to tell you. Then came the time I was ordered to order one of my forward observers to "find out" if a just killed VC woman was pregnant. My immediate superiors wanted to count her possible unborn baby as part of their g.d. f. body count. That was a g.d. disgusting outrage. Utterly dishonorable.

The worst effect...was that it gave me a superficial arrogance masking self disgust. I felt like I'd already seen the long and short of life, that I had no need of a career, that I knew things my college peers wouldn't find out for 30 years if ever, that I and every soldier there had been betrayed, used and forgotten like so many pit dogs. America, the America I thought I loved and existed died in Vietnam. We're just another empire in history, worse than some, better than others. Yet I come back to loving my country, but realistically, and would fight for her for the first time if we were ever invaded.

7. "Abstract philisophical generalities don't do shit for soldiers suffering inside. Even their family doesn't understand, so the VN vet keeps searching for their place (they are lost). Vets are being welcomed home for the first time every day." Dr. Capps. (My) feeling?

he must be allowed to cry out loud
A couple of years ago I heard of a small town back east that held a Welcome Home parade for their VN vets. I fucken cried. I cry now. Silently of course. The memorial in D.C., the pictures of it, the news clips, what I've heard from vets who've been to it...I absolutely have to go to the Wall and look for names...To look for myself, a piece of...To maybe put some grief to rest. To honor men I knew who gave their lives for nothing, for nothing more than the stupid, self-

centered old men who run our country, old men in America who fear the old men in Russia, China, etc. Maybe that is too mean. Those I knew who got wasted, most all of those thousands who died there, died for more than nothing by a long ways; but they didn't die for freedom, for country, and all the standard line of political pomp. They died by chance fighting for themselves and the guys on their right and left. They died in the horror and ecstasy of combat. They died as well, as gloriously, as miserably as soldiers have died century after century since civilization began. US soldiers didn't lose that war. Our arrogant establishment lost that war for us before the first battalion hit the beaches by utterly failing to face reality: we - as a people - a country - had nothing going in Viet Nam worth dying for. The NVA, the VC, they had a cause: to them, we were the invaders.

8. "Homecoming - expectations of happiness shot to Hell. The America they left was not the same America they came back to." Dr. Capps. (My) feelings?

but it can I w/ Teachings From you X
I don't know...I reckon Dr. Capps is both right and wrong on that one. Obviously, American public opinion changed from the Gulf of Tonkin days of naive support for the war to a late 60s attitude that we should get out. I'm afraid however that the country didn't change much if at all. I'm afraid that what happened was that - for a brief time- the war pulled the covers of the country. Viet Nam knocked the mythical America out of the soldier's eyes, my eyes. Soldiers who see much combat are affected, changed, forever a bit different than they were before. When I got back what did I see? SOS. Everyone zipping about as usual, working, getting degrees, getting married, buying homes, going on as if Viet Nam didn't exist. One week I'm in combat, men I knew were wasted; the next week I'm home and everyone is well, healthy, nicely dressed, well spoken - and they don't give a god damn about the men I just left who were still getting killed. They were too busy making sure they got on well career wise to be concerned about some poor slob who wasn't able to avoid the draft, no less have any concern with what our power was doing to the human beings of Vietnam. The American people were more concerned with their daily comforts and problems than with the mass deaths being caused for questionable reasons by the government they supported with their taxes. I don't think America changed: look at Biruit, Nicaragua, Grenada; look at the pissant dictatorships we support. We are not massively squandering our soldiers on foreign fields, and hopefully we have X changed at least enough that we won't soon do that again..., but why in god's name do we - as a nation - persist in proping up these twobit oppressors? Why didn't we get rid of Batista for the Cubans, why didn't we get Somoza for the Nicaraguans, why don't we get rid of Pinochett for the Chilians??? Instead, we give up the field of their oppressed people, of those aching for freedom and minimal economic progress, we give that up to the cadres of communism. We started this country with a violent revolution, we kept together the promise of democracy by the bloodist war of our history - our Civil War, yet we now seem only and always to side with the very sorts of powers we began by battling against. Why don't we solve the problems of domino theory communism in Central America by bringing their people help to form free - enterprise democracies? Is it only because of the relationships between the wealthy rulers in those and our countries makes them more concerned about their common rich interests than either of them is in the wellbeing of their respective people? Why?

- Exat I what I was hopping to use yet sure* 9. "I would personally like to beat the shit out of people who spit on returning soldiers and called them baby killers, etc." My view on this? Did it happen?

I agree with and respect your sentiments. Trouble is if you did whip them real bad you'd only set yourself up for a potential long prison term for assault, and you'd only harden them in their myopic view of blaming the veteran for shooting the bullets they bought with their taxes. Better to get them to sit down and spend a day with some vets, better to get them to see the other side of the coin and then let them

make up their own minds - with some instruction in manners and common decency. One of the fundamental values of our country is the right to hold unpopular opinions, to freely express them. I may detest someone's opinion, but I still must respect their right to have one...until they start spitting. Yuk. It happened alright. What I wonder about is given the pop popularity of demonstrators hasseling returning soldiers, where the hell were the patriots, the VFWs, the folks who knew war on their own, where were they? Why weren't they on hand to counter the demonstrators with traditional welcomes for the soldiers?

Enough of this. I hope it will help you. I wouldn't mind reading your paper when you get it back, so drop it to me if you will and I'll get it back to you promptly.

Guess I'm not quite through. I detested both hawks and doves when I got back. The doves for being gutless cowards (which wasn't always true), the hawks for being so safely eager to squander the lives of more soldiers so they could feel "proud." I'm probably more liberal than conservative, and hopefully more pragmatic than either of those two dogmas. I value this country now more than I did after Vietnam, more than I have for years. We probably are, in Churchill's words, the worst country in the world except for every other country. I am one hell of a long ways from being satisfied and still feel incredibly indignant at times over the way my "betters" use/misuse the heavy power this land and people provides those at the top. I am also aware as I never have been of the relatively incredible opportunity this land gives to each of us. I'd hope that you will not be dismayed by anything I've said, soured on your country. But I do hope you will keep the faith, holding up America's best image of herself as a guide in your own life and as a corrective to her sometimes fallible human behavior when she strays. You've got to be strong enough to exist independently of your country so that you can criticise her when needed ^{despise} w/o needing her praise to meet your own needs of self esteem.

What cures PTSD? I dunno. But talking it out untill it is dulled, untill some of the pain is pulled to the surface and vented, and then putting the experience into a perspective by talking with other vets who experienced much the same, and then, with the trauma of the past somewhat woven into the remembered fabric of ones past, to get on with living with a purpose. I think the best solution for any individual includes finding a way to both forgive himself and his country and in my book, that means Christianity, or some deep religious understanding that teaches one that there is - if only in a mystical sense - a fundamental power and being that transcends those of individual ego and nationstate.

Good luck in your studies, athletics and future career. Make it the best!

Sincerely,

Duane Samples

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*P.S. When you have time, I'd like some feedback
on the video tape.*