

Questions of Military Service

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Last week a man named William Calley offered his first public apology for his part in the My Lai massacre that took place some forty years ago. He maintains he was following orders from his superior. Lieutenant Calley was the only one convicted in the murder of some 500 civilian men, women and children. He served 3 years on house arrest before being pardoned by Richard Nixon.

Hugh Thompson was a helicopter pilot in the area and when he observed what was happening on the ground, landing his chopper between fleeing Vietnamese and American soldiers, he saved those people's lives, then wading through ditches filled with bodies, took still living Vietnamese for medical help. For many years after that he received harassment and death threats for coming to the aid of the Vietnamese and for his reporting of the murders.

Colin Powell was a Major and the Battalion Commander of the unit and was assigned to investigate and report on the letter that had been received detailing the massacre that happened at My Lai. His report whitewashed any wrong doing and he stated that "based on our good relations with the Vietnamese in the area something of this magnitude was very unlikely to have happened."

Three men, three officers, each standing on different moral ground but each has to look themselves in the mirror each day and face their own conscience. We all want to think that we would do the right thing, the moral thing, and the heroic thing in such circumstances. These were officers who one could say chose to be doing what they were doing, and yet they acted so differently.

Think of the men in Lt Calley's platoon, many of whom were drafted or joined in the valiant battle against the enemies of the "Land of the Free, Home of the Brave." It didn't turn out to be a John Wayne movie for them, they were acting and behaving as soldiers are sanctioned to act. A soldier's sole purpose and primary duty is to kill "the enemy." A soldier's duty has little to do with defending freedom. Some of the men that day obeyed orders, some refused, but all of them remembered it every day of their life for the rest of their life.

In a split second lives are gone and other lives are changed forever, not for the benefit of the American people, but to benefit the narrow class of elites and corporations who manage, administer and unduly profit from the American Empire.

Until we can move from the harmful impact of U.S. militarism and the militaristic culture and society that we have always had, young men and women will continue to go off to

places with names like My Lai, Abu Graib and Fallujah with thoughts of “Duty, Honor, Country” and then as they stand over the bodies, whether they pull the trigger, take part in covering it up, or try to stop it, each will spend the rest of their lives rationalizing their part in it. Over and over young men and now women are put in these situations. A further appalling phenomenon in the reality of service in Iraq and Afghanistan is the rampant misogyny and denigration of women members that leads to the high level of sexual assault and harassment that is generally overlooked or denied by higher ups.

If you know of someone thinking of joining the military ask them to consider other options and ways they can serve their country, community and loved ones. There are organizations such as Veterans for Peace, Iraq Veterans Against the War and VietNam Veterans Against the War whose members can speak from personal experience as to what the military really offers. There are resources and people that they should talk with first. Get different perspectives other than the military recruiter, get the truth. A good place to start is www.nnomy.org

“Stop thinking this is all there is.... Realize that for every ongoing war and religious outrage and environmental devastation and bogus Iraq attack plan, there are a thousand counter-balancing acts of staggering generosity and humanity and art and beauty happening all over the world, right now, on a breathtaking scale, from flowerbox to cathedral.... Resist the temptation to drown in fatalism, to shake your head and sigh and just throw in the karmic towel.... Realize that this is the perfect moment to change the energy of the world, to step right up and crank your personal volume; right when it all seems dark and bitter and offensive... there’s your opening. Remember magic. And finally, believe you are part of a groundswell, a resistance, a seemingly small but actually very, very large impending karmic overhaul, a great shift, the beginning of something important and potent and unstoppable.”

Michael Morford