

It was the last day of our 1988 spring vacation in Washington, D.C. We made our way across the National Mall through the crush of tourists following the signs for the Lincoln Memorial, when suddenly the Vietnam Veterans Memorial came into view. I had seen pictures and video clips of “The Wall,” but couldn’t imagine what it would be like in person. I hadn’t planned this visit, afraid it would stir memories, but there we were. My sons were curious. Jo could see I was reluctant. She reached gently for my hand and we followed the sloping path down to the polished black granite wall sunk into earth. The mood was somber, a public wake. People wandered trance-like, as if they were connecting with the spirits of loved-ones. Men in tattered jungle fatigues sobbed, perhaps trying to come to terms with what they had or had not done in Vietnam. I struggled to contain my emotions as I thought how fortunate I was, mourning and not being mourned.

My sons stood by me as I searched for names: Andy Stein from Syracuse. I met his mother at graduation from Basic. She had asked me to watch out for him. After that, we were split up. I touched Andy’s name, etched into the cold granite, and asked the boys to pray for his soul. They made the sign of the cross, and holding their hands together in prayer, stood there as if in church, waiting for the priest to say the Funeral Mass was over.

We spent an hour touching names, saying a prayer for a high school friend, a neighbor, and a few Special Forces buddies. The last one was Danny Keyes, a teammate killed in a firefight a month after I was medevaced. I told the boys that he had been shot in the head with a .50 caliber machine gun. We were praying for Danny, when Brendan, my inquisitive seven-year-old, looked up at me.

“Daddy, did you kill anybody in Vietnam?”

“Brendan!” Jo shushed him with a wave of her arm.

The boys stood aghast, their younger brother having shattered our prayerful silence. I never talked about my military service, but knew there'd come a day when I'd have to explain myself. I waved my hand and told Jo it was okay.

Memories become distorted over time, and the painful ones are buried in the subconscious. I don't recall firing my weapon during a firefight; there were three of them before I got wounded. I could say that I never knowingly took another person's life, but I didn't want to complicate my answer. There was more to it.

I could see relief in the smiles on my son's faces when I told them I didn't kill anyone.

"That's good," said Rory in his serious, eleven-year-old voice. "It would have been a mortal sin."

I was a medic, but also an infantryman, and the executive officer of a 125-member company of Cambodian "strikers," mercenaries. I carried an M-16 and a Browning 9mm sidearm and was expected to use them. My primary role in the field was tactical—leading our strikers into battle. Being a medic was only important if one of my teammates was hit. As testament, I was awarded the Combat Infantryman Badge rather than Combat Medic Badge.

Strikers under my command were brutal warriors and killed plenty of the enemy. Does that mean that I killed the enemy? Do I bear responsibility for the lives of prisoners who were tortured and beheaded by my men? They violated the Geneva Convention, the core of international humanitarian law. Does that mean that I broke the law? I knew it was wrong, and I turned my back, but who was I to object? I was the youngest and least experienced man on our team. My teammates said don't meddle; there's 200 years of bad blood between the Cambodes and the Vietnamese. Does that exonerate me? I had standing orders not to render lifesaving

medical care to the enemy. I watched them die. Am I not to blame? I struggle with these moral questions.

I also struggle with another question: Why didn't I shoot my weapon? Was it unwillingness or cowardice? Self-doubts and second-guessing festered for years, the same problem I had when a bully threatened me as an adolescent, afraid to take a swing at him. It wasn't that I feared defeat so much as I feared losing self-control. Special Forces taught me how to manage my inner animal and not let it take control of me. In five months of field duty, I went on close to a dozen operations, but never had to use my weapon. In Vietnam, the enemy was the jungle; Charlie and the NVA hid there. I never saw the enemy face to face. When the shooting started, who is it you are aiming at when you shoot in the direction of incoming fire into an opaque wall of green and brown vegetation? In zero visibility, I'd ask myself where are my strikers? They were undisciplined and barely competent in rudimentary military tactics. It was just as likely they were hidden in jungle growth in front of me as on my flank. I'd think about where to aim my M-16 and hesitate. In the chaos of a firefight, mistakes happen. Friendly fire accidents are a fact of life, especially with indigenous troops.

I never had the opportunity to prove to myself that I could pull the trigger in the heat of battle if I needed to. But I discovered that I had the courage under fire to save a teammate's life, and 15 of our strikers, despite having a sucking chest wound. Ironically, I didn't have to pull the trigger myself to see the enemy's face in my nightmares, to see him beg for his life. I read his love letters, stared at his photos of beautiful young women and children, wondered how his family would take the news of his death. I held a man's rosary beads in my fingers and wondered whether we prayed to the same god. I cried for his soul and prayed for my own. It could have been me lying on the jungle floor, life on fast-forward as I bled out, begging the enemy not to

thrust his bayonet through my heart.