

Jack Estes Essays

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Memorial Day: No sense to the sacrifice



Photo by Dale Archer

Jack Estes and his son Jake share a contemplative moment in 1990 at the site of the Oregon Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Portland's Washington Park.

It's almost Memorial Day and I'm in our backyard sitting on the patio, across from our pink dogwood tree, contemplating changing my way of thinking. I'm also watching my 18-month-old grandson totter across the grass, chasing the cat. He's trying to run, then stops at a flowerbed of pink tulips. He looks curiously at the flower, bends, plucks a petal and stuffs it in his mouth.

As we march through spring I find that along with this change in weather, there is a change in me. I'm 60 years old and the darkness of the jungle is fading. I can barely remember who I killed or what day Gurny died, or Jimmy. Did our dog handler perish in the rice paddy or close his eyes as we lifted him into the chopper? And what happened to his German shepherd, panting next to him?

This year I'm questioning the sanity of war. I'm getting old, and I feel my anger and grief are dead and buried, just as the boys are who I once carried out of the battlefield. I can barely remember why I thought fighting in Vietnam was just, or Iraq and Afghanistan. I am confused and wondering if these calls to battle are worth the human sacrifice. I suppose having a grandson inspires this way of thinking.

Grandma and I were baby-sitting so we took little Alex with us to the nursery to look for blueberry plants. In the aisle next to the strawberries, I noticed an older man moving slow, shoulders rolled, wearing a Korean veterans hat. We talked and shared a war, while Alex sat in the stroller and sucked on a binky.

The man told me about the horrible battle at the frozen Chosin Reservoir and how the enemy would attack at night in waves, diving into the perimeter's concertina wire, while their Chinese comrades ran across their backs, screaming, firing rifles, driving into a hell storm. "We killed them by the thousands," he said, hands shaking, eyes misting. My friend, Tom Paulus, also fought in the Korean cold, where rivers froze and tanks rolled across them. Where our weary soldiers would fall in the snow, exhausted or wounded, and quickly freeze solid, like the river. More than 33,000 Americans died in Korea, 600,000 North Korean and South Korean soldiers, maybe a million Chinese and millions of civilians. Yet who wonders why or knows what for?

Does going to war to solve conflict make sense anymore? Is the human cost worth what we achieve? We fight and die and pile up our youth like human debris, and does it make sense?

Karl Marlantes is from Seaside, graduated from Yale and was a Rhodes Scholar before he became a lieutenant in the Marine Corps and fought in Vietnam. He won a Navy Cross and twice was wounded. After 30 years of working on a book, he's written what critics agree is an epic novel about Vietnam, titled "Matterhorn." One night, he led an assault up a hill against fortified enemy bunkers and overran the North Vietnamese Army's position. "We killed them and kept firing on the NVA as they retreated. Why did I order that? I could have stopped the killing. Then the next day we abandoned the hill and nothing changed." By the end of the war, more than 58,000 American soldiers were dead.

I know I couldn't charge up a hill anymore. Or hump my machine gun and ammo across our backyard without blowing out my knee again. But Korea and Vietnam were nightmares from decades ago. What really matters is what our Marines and soldiers of today are fighting for. Is it democracy? Freedom? Will we be safer?

Jason Swofford is 26 and a sergeant in the Marine Corps. He's tall and strong, and from a distance you'd never know he was blown up by an IED a few months ago in Afghanistan. He has a long jagged scar running down his neck, a wrecked hand and an arm that looks, well, like it was torn apart by an explosion. Not too long ago his wife, Alissa, and their baby sat at his bedside praying for his survival. This is a guy who should be angry but isn't. Who didn't have to go to war but did. And why? "I wanted to go to do something amazing. I wanted to help my country and the Afghans. I'm not political. I fought for my buddies. And I'd go back in a heartbeat."

We planted the blueberry bushes and Alex played in the mud, quite happy. I want him to grow up clear-eyed and strong, play baseball maybe. I don't want him to end up wounded like Jason or damaged inside. It's almost Memorial Day, and I've changed my way of thinking. It's time to end our country's madness, now. I just wish I knew how.

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