

"Memorial Day 2000"

by Michael Finley
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Just the other side of the airport, on a bluff overlooking the Minnesota River, is Fort Snelling National Cemetery. It's a classic military cemetery, with thousands of identical markers laid out like poppies in Flanders fields.

The cemetery abuts the area where I walk my dog, so I walk through there frequently. Few people buried there were killed in battle. If you served in the armed forces, it's your right to be interred here, and your spouse's.

I always pause a moment, when I see on the marker a death date between 1965 and 1972. And think: there but for the grace of God is me.

It takes me back to my experiences with the draft. I'm a little hazy on it. It was 1969, the haziest year of them all.

I was a hippie wannabee, full of contempt for LBJ and General Hershey. I had a dozen plans for my life, and none of them involved rice paddies. I remember toying with the idea of filing as a conscientious objector, but it didn't work for me. They asked you whether you'd attack Ho Chi Minh with a tire iron if you came upon him raping your Aunt Sally, and I had to admit I wasn't too hot on that idea.

When the Selective Service form asked if I wanted to overthrow the United States Government by force or violence, I wrote, "force."

I was what you'd call a nominal draft resister. I attended a few rallies and read everything disrespectful I could get my hands on. I read in Paul Krassner's magazine *The Realist* that your draft board had to file everything you sent them. So I sent them a six-pound bonito, a handsome ocean fish I purchased at the Grand Central Market in downtown Los Angeles. The idea was that the draft board would be helpless except to live with the stench of a decaying fish in their file cabinet. Instead -- figure this -- they drafted me.

I was in the U.S. Army, technically, for a couple of weeks, classified as AWOL. I wasn't even aware I'd been drafted; I was hiking around in Alaska at the time, away without leave, without a thought in my head, and only found out about my induction later. Then I applied to the nearest college I could find -- Pepperdine University in Los Angeles, also known as Pat Boone University -- and hid there, cowering, under its ivied protection, until the lottery replaced the draft.

So I never went to Vietnam, and I never missed it. But the war was part of my life anyway. I took my childhood friend, Paul Plato, to his ship in San Pedro when he shipped out.

For a while I knew a couple of actual deserters in Los Angeles. They were a pair of goofy guys who claimed to have escaped from interment at The Presidio. I never believed their stories, but one night they were roused from their beds and led off my MPs.

At my first high school reunion, I learned that our one fatality was Skeeter Barnes, a sweet kid from the wrong side of the tracks, who stepped on a land mine somewhere and was no more. We played Little League together when we were nine.

It is hard to say who was the coward and who was the hero. Poor Skeeter was no one's idea of a hero; he was just a poor dope who couldn't work the system like I did. I thought I was an intellectual hero, full of higher ideals than flag and conscription, but I kept myself far from harm's way, didn't I? One more thing I have in common with George W. Bush.

When I think of 56,000 of my generation tossed out there to die defending our *Laugh-In* way of life, I get blue. Thirty years later, it still hurts.

But there is one thing I would like to set straight. When the war ended, an urban legend popped up, claiming that our returning soldiers were routinely spat on by those who didn't go, and called baby-killers. People who spread this awful story must have had an axe to grind: blame the defeat on the hippies and the liberals.

But I swear it never happened. Or if it happened on a couple of bizarre, sick occasions, they were anomalies. Vietnam vets suffered from a host of problems, from post-traumatic stress disorder and Agent Orange to unemployment in the stagflation of the 70s and early 80s. Many wondered where their reward was for the contribution they'd made. Where was their GI Bill?

What a terrible choice our country forced on a generation of boys: be good and die stupidly or be marked for life, or be smart and survive, but feel like a traitor to your own generation.

And I look at these graves at Fort Snelling, row on row on row on row, their gray faces from jet exhaust -- and I want to salute.

Mike Finley writes a weekly essay that he sends by e-mail to a list of friends.