

# MY VETERANS DAY

In the Summer of 1964 as I prepared to enter the University of Notre Dame as a freshman, the Army ROTC program sent me something about enrolling. I talked to my Dad, a deeply conservative man who served two years as an Army doctor and five years in the Public Health Service as a doctor in a rural Georgia town. He insisted that I sign up for the first two years, and then make a final choice for the last two years. The War in Viet Nam was nearly nothing, and it didn't seem like a big deal, so I did.

Then in the Spring of '66, I had to decide whether to commit to two more years of ROTC and a two-year enlistment, or quit. I talked to my Dad again. He thought it would be best to stay in. Besides the small monthly stipend, he pointed out that I was likely to be drafted, and that serving as an officer was better than being an enlisted man. Officers made more money and had a somewhat larger amount of control over their lives, he said, which was funny because he truly hated being bossed around when he was an Army pediatrician. So I stayed.

In the Spring of '68, we were all asked to select a branch and a location. I picked Signal Corps, because they had a significant computer-oriented section, and I was good at that; and Germany and Korea as a back-up. A couple of days later Major MacIntosh asked me to stay after class. He said he had noticed my concerns about the War, and wondered if I really wanted to serve. I didn't. I wanted to go to grad school. But I knew I was likely to be drafted, and I surely wasn't going to go in as an enlisted man when I had the chance to be an officer. So I made up some mealy-mouthed answer. I got into the Signal Corps, and was assigned to Germany. Frankfurt I think.

I entered in October '68. I immediately realized how much I didn't like it. And then I was told I'd have to re-up for two more years to keep the Germany assignment. Eventually I was sent to

Sinop Turkey by Betty Sammons of blessed memory.

I was reminded of this by an essay by David French in *The Atlantic*. I think it's fair to say that French and I are about as far apart on the political spectrum as it's possible for two people to be.

In his essay, French says he had been a vocal supporter of the Iraq invasion on the grounds that Saddam Hussein had to go. In 2005, French, then 36 and an out-of-shape activist lawyer, joined the Army as a JAG officer, and volunteered for service in Iraq. He served with a forward unit for a year and then in the Reserves. He explains his motivation:

One evening, at home in Philadelphia, I read the story of a Marine officer who had been wounded in Anbar province. He'd used the reporter's satellite phone to call his wife and two kids and tell them that he was hurt but he'd be okay. At that instant I was hit with a burning sense of conviction. How could I support a war I wasn't willing to fight?

French knew the Iraq War was a nightmare, but he volunteered to serve at the front. He thinks his service was worth the pain and grief he suffered.

It reminded me once again of my rationale for joining the Army, as best I can reconstruct it through the haze of the decades and many retellings. I know I was opposed to it on the grounds we discussed at Notre Dame, St. Augustine's Just War Theory. We all talked about it all the time, discussing morality, duty, and options. I was also opposed to getting hurt or killed. I don't clearly remember other considerations, but as I told the story to others over the years. I usually mentioned a couple of things. The alternative of going to Canada or trying to duck seemed cowardly. It's my duty to serve my country, even if I thought the War was immoral. And, I didn't want to make

some other person take my place. At least, that's how I remember it today.

French says his service was worthwhile not because of anything he did that was of benefit to Iraqis or the US, but because of the people he served with, and because of the experiences he had. In the same way, I think I learned a lot about being an adult, and being a leader, and figuring out how to use persuasion, technical skills, and bravado, to achieve decent results for members of my unit and myself.

French writes:

The decision to serve is a tangible declaration that you love your home—the place and its people—enough to bear profound burdens to sustain its existence and its way of life.

I was and am angry about the War in Viet Nam. I know dead and wounded men. I cried the first time I went to the Viet Nam Memorial in DC. and thinking about it chokes me up today. I've met men whose lives were wrecked by pain, drugs and alcohol as a result of their service. I knew other men who served, and who came out fine. Very rarely, we talked about our motivations.

But throughout the years I've felt two things above all: I was willing to take my turn. I didn't hide out in the Reserves like W. Bush and Dan Quayle, and I didn't duck out like Bill Clinton.

And slowly, slowly, I've come to agree with French about the decision to serve. I love our country and its people, and our way of life. Even when I when I am certain we need to change.

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Update: all of us faced terrible choices in the Viet Nam War era, because of the draft. Everyone has a story about their decisions. This is mine. I hope veterans of all eras will use this post to discuss their stories for the Emptywheel community.