

UNFINISHED BUSINESS

I think it's time for anti-Vietnam War Americans to recognize the pain they caused

BY ROBERT J. BRUDNO

TWENTY-FIVE YEARS AGO, OUR POW'S CAME HOME FROM North Vietnam. They looked better than anyone could have imagined, after what they had endured. Only months later, Air Force Capt. E. Alan Brudno committed suicide; he was the first to die. It was national news. How could anyone give up just when he had won his freedom after more than seven years of unspeakable torture? As his brother, one who feels the pain of his loss as deeply today as when it happened, perhaps I can provide some of the answers. Suicide never has simple causes, but his story reveals some unfinished business from the Vietnam War.

This young American flier had nothing to be ashamed about. Posthumously, he received the Silver Star, two Purple Hearts and other medals. He took the worst the North Vietnamese dished out. His fellow prisoners said he was "hard-core, tough ... he often mocked his captors and kept his honor ... he was one of us." He was one of the POWs who were paraded through Hanoi, called war criminals and subjected to incredible physical abuse. For his first 2½ years of captivity, he was allowed to send no letters. His family did not know whether he was even alive. Later, he courageously slipped into one of his letters (we received fewer than 20 in 7½ years) that the "problem with fags (burning cigarettes) on his skin" had cleared up a bit, thus providing the first evidence that our POWs were being tortured. That treatment was mild. On many occasions he was beaten senseless or hung from the ceiling by ropes tied to his arms, which were trussed together behind his back until his shoulder blades touched, leaving his arms paralyzed long thereafter. The pain is impossible for us to imagine, yet he held out hope for his return with honor.

He went to Vietnam in September 1965 because he was told to. He did not go bomb churches and hospitals, or because he hated the North Vietnamese, or because he was a killer. He went because his country asked him to, as it would have against a Hitler or a Saddam Hussein. He was not some hot-shot, macho Top Gun. He actually joined the Air Force to become an astronaut. Thirty days after he arrived in Southeast Asia, he was shot down. He survived until his release in 1973, because of his love of country, love of his wife and family and his belief that he sacrificed so much for something. But a warning of what awaited him came before he even set foot on U.S. soil. Someone close to him said to me, "He has to know that the war was wrong."

After the euphoria of his release wore off, he realized that a lot of the propaganda that had accompanied his torture sessions was true. His own countrymen went beyond being against the war; many supported those he understandably viewed to be the

"enemy." This was not some philosophical or political concept for him. The enemy were the people who had beaten some of his comrades to death. His idealized image of what would follow his return began to crumble. I begged the person who set out to tell him that he "needed" to know the "truth" about the war to not do so, or at least to give him some time. I said he had to believe what he endured was worth it somehow. Despair, then self-doubt, then a feeling of failure set in. Then disaster struck.

He became a victim not just of the North Vietnamese, but of the inability of so many in his own country, during that horrible war, to separate the war from the warriors. Many returning soldiers before him were spat upon and branded as murderers, often just after surviving their own harrowing experiences. No wonder there was a "Vietnam Syndrome." Like my brother, few wanted to go to war, yet Americans on the left did not respect their sacrifice, because it somehow conflicted with their passionate antiwar beliefs. Draped in the freedom of speech this country provides, self-righteous and designating themselves as true patriots, they waved the Viet Cong flag and justified their silence over the treatment of the POWs by saying that all



that has to be done to help the POWs is end the war. Unfortunately, that took a while. Today, many antiwar protesters proudly claim that they were right about the war, in part as a result of Robert McNamara's belated admission that he was wrong. Whether the war was right or wrong, these were our boys. They deserved our support whatever the cause, whatever the result.

The antiwar movement has yet to recognize the pain and heartache that it caused. My brother had no say in the politics that sent him to war. The lack of appreciation for what he had done, combined with the rationale of those who gave aid and comfort to the enemy, helped destroy the will to live that had kept him alive for all those years.

All that was needed then was for the most vocal American antiwar spokespersons, the ones Hanoi was clearly listening to, to say that while they believed the war was wrong, our POWs must be treated according to the Geneva Convention. History has now documented Hanoi's great sensitivity to the swings of American public opinion. For years, my family and I begged these leaders of the left to do this, but to no avail. To do so would have been "pro-war" somehow. As a result, the North Vietnamese had years of free rein to torture and kill our men. When the POWs' families were finally able to get attention in 1971 and 1972, the treatment dramatically improved. For many of the POWs, unfortunately, the damage was done. This is the unfinished business of that war. Few Americans who were silent then have acknowledged much responsibility for the consequences of their actions on the home front. Whether the war was right or wrong, then or now, is irrelevant.

Years ago, I tried to get my brother's name added to the Vietnam Memorial wall. I was told that I could not, because the wall was for servicemen who were killed in Vietnam or died later from wounds received there. Technically, I guess, Alan Brudno was mortally wounded back here.

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