

Dear america: letters home from vietnam essay sample

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In 1981, six years after the official end of the Vietnam War, Mayor Edward Koch of New York City appointed a task force of twenty-seven leading citizens of the city to develop a framework for a fitting memorial to Vietnam War veterans. The memorial was to be a glass-block structure etched with excerpts of letters sent to and from servicemen during the Vietnam War. Due to the overwhelming response to the commission's request for letters, *Dear America: Letters Home From Vietnam* came to be. Consisting of 208 letters, poems, and journal entries written by 125 people, this book is a heart wrenching, first hand account of the personal experiences of soldiers both on and behind the front lines in Vietnam, and of loved ones waiting in anguish for their return back to the United States.

The author notes "with the possible exception of his rifle, nothing was more important to an American in Vietnam than his mail." By compiling so many letters into one work, structured in a sequence that corresponds to a year's tour in Vietnam, *Dear America* does more than simply tell about the Vietnam War-it allows the reader to experience it through the words of those directly involved. The first chapter, "Cherries" contains optimistic letters from boys freshly arrived in Vietnam, eager to receive their assignments and reach their camps, and itching to get into the action after much training and traveling. "We Gotta Get Outta This Place,"-letters from men who were near the end of their tour-is much more bleak and disturbing. "The so-called heroes over here are the guys trying to do their jobs and get home from this useless war" wrote one soldier, and another, "I pray that none of you will ever have to put on a uniform for hostile reasons."

The author, himself a veteran of Vietnam, prefaces each chapter by describing facts of the war, and how many of the men may have felt at that stage of their tour, but it is the letters themselves that tell the true story of what actually happened during the war and allow the reader to empathize with and relate to these men and boys. The men wrote about everything, from homesickness to becoming accustomed to killing and the resulting shame, and from spending weeks in the field without a shower or a bed to seeing blood and death, many times of close friends, on a daily basis. These letters are as close to a real-life experience of Vietnam as one could ever get.

The letters also show intense variation among the opinions of those in Vietnam, and indeed a conflict of opinion within individuals themselves. One soldier wrote, " I often wonder if what we're fighting for is worth a human life," while another wrote, " I am fighting to protect and maintain what I believe in and what I want to live in-a democratic society. If I am killed while carrying out this mission, I want to one to cry or mourn for me . . . I want people to be proud of me for the job I did." Some wrote about the beauty of the country and the culture, and others wrote in disgust of its filth and the backwardness of its people. All the letters had one thing in common, though, and that was how they affected the writer. " I've seen some things happen here lately that have moved me so much that I've change my whole outlook on life," wrote one. " Some of the things you see here can really change a man or turn a boy into a man. Any combat GI that comes here doesn't leave the same." These letters are a testament to how intensely the Vietnam War

affected an entire generation, especially those who were in Vietnam and experienced its horrors.

Dear America also chronicles some of the historical events of the war from the vantage of the men actually involved in them. In most cases when this occurred, Edleman provided a brief explanation of the battle or conflict being described. Reading about these historical events in the letters, such as the Siege of Khe Sanh, was most interesting, since I have only read about them from textbooks. When these men write about them their words bring the conflict to life, making the battle and the war more authentic instead of just a historical account of facts and figures, casualties, winners and losers. This contrast, between reading textbook accounts of the war and reading letters from average soldiers, influenced my view of the Vietnam War simply by making it more real to me.

Since the war ended years before I was even born, it did not directly affect me, and as a result I always viewed it as just another historical event that shaped America. Reading these letters, though, made me realize that the war was not so long ago, and that I myself have a lot in common with many of the men who were involved, including my age. Most of the authors of the letters were not more than twenty-three or so years old, and reading their dramatic and life-altering experiences made me so much more appreciative of their sacrifice and of my good fortune in being born American.

Upon their return home to “The World”, as they called the United States, many veterans were received with hostility by those opposed to the war.

Many felt angry and unappreciated by this. " It bothers me to think of these so-called Americans who shirk their responsibility to our country," wrote one Marine. " If I even get close enough to a peace picket, he will see part of the Vietnam War in my eyes." The only agenda Edelman had in compiling this book was to rectify this fact by honoring the veterans of the Vietnam War informing and educating the American people of their courage and sacrifice. In this endeavor he succeeded greatly. While it may not change one's opinion of the morality of the war or America's place in it, Dear America is bound to exact respect for the veterans of Vietnam from even those who yelled " baby killers!" so many years ago.

The Vietnam War, in addition to affecting an entire generation of Americans, continues to affect America even today. America's experience in Vietnam influences American policy in regard to the Middle East, as no one wants the Iraq War to turn into " another Vietnam." The Vietnam War also marked the end of the draft, which is a great benefit to America and the American military. While the emotional scars of Vietnam are healing with time, there is much scar tissue that still remains. The flowers and letters left at the Vietnam Memorial in Washington D. C. is testament to the fact that there still live thousands of wives without husbands, mothers without sons, and children without fathers as a result of Vietnam, and no amount of time can change this fact. Dear America is invaluable as a source of remembrance so that sacrifices made were not in vain and that America can learn and grow from Vietnam. " Maybe the war will end soon," one Navy Lieutenant wrote to his wife. " Wishful thinking? Yes. The Vietnam War will never end."