



Reflections about War from Five Lutherans Who Served in the Military

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THERE ARE MANY WAYS NATIONS DEMONSTRATE THEIR RAGE AGAINST THEMSELVES and each other. None is more horrendous than war. By every measure, wars are economic, political, social, and religious disasters. Yet they persist. Why they persist is a question that has confounded, and confounds, humankind. The purpose of this article is to explore the nature and causes of war from the perspective of a limited number of those who served on active duty during the times the United States was engaged in war over the last fifty years. A key phrase in this purpose is "a limited number." Over the last five decades millions of men and women have served in the United States military. I have interviewed only five. I chose them because they are Lutheran lay persons who are, today, members of the same congregation. They represent a narrow response, a case study, in how Lutherans respond to the rage of nations.

When the five were asked to participate in this case study, all were more than pleased to do so. All had vivid memories of their life in the military. Two brought pictures or articles they had saved from that time in their lives. It was a good experience—one that could be replicated, I suspect, in most Lutheran congregations around the country. Structured around the following questions, each interview lasted about two hours:

1. How did you find yourself on active duty: enlisted/drafted whatever?
2. To the best of your knowledge, what did you think/know to be the cause of the conflict which was going on at that time?

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3. What were your own personal convictions about that conflict?
4. Have your convictions about the nature of war, and the causes of war, changed for you over the years? If yes, how do you account for those changes?
5. In what ways has your faith influenced how you saw the war you were engaged in and those that have followed?
6. Are you aware that Lutherans have a view of war, or have given any thought to it?
7. Did your congregation, or the larger church, have anything to say to you at the time this war was going on?
8. Do you think that it is appropriate for the church to speak on the issue/question of war?

I. MEL: A VETERAN OF THE WORLD WAR II ERA

Drafted in February, 1942, Mel served in the infantry for nearly four years, some of that time with the Fifth Armored Division as it moved across France, the Lowlands, and into Germany at the close of World War II. Though he got along well during those years, he admits that he “never really did adjust to a military point of view.”

Prior to the bombing of Pearl Harbor, Mel had been alerted to problems in the world by movies, radio, and newspapers. He knew the threat posed by nazism and communism and remembers thinking that Hitler was a madman. Hitler and Mussolini personified the problems in the world of 1940. Still, events in Europe and Asia seemed far away from the small town in North Dakota where he grew up, and thus he gave little thought at the time to the causes and threats of war. That changed as he listened to the radio broadcasts describing the attack at Pearl Harbor and to President Roosevelt’s speech to congress declaring war against Japan. He was apprehensive about going into the army, but realized that “being drafted was inevitable”; so he just allowed things to happen. They did. In two months he found himself boarding a bus in Grand Forks, North Dakota, headed for Ft. Snelling in St. Paul and four years of army life.

World War II, for Mel, was a just and necessary war. The goal was to “clean out this evil” that threatened the faith and values of the free world. His distaste for bearing arms, combined with his conviction that this was a war that had to be fought, led to his assignment as a combat medic. Waiting to go overseas in 1944, he remembers feeling a need to get on with it: “Let’s get it done and get home.”

Though his convictions about World War II and his participation in it have not changed, they have not transferred to conflicts since then. With regard to the Korean Conflict he said: “I didn’t want to get involved. I’d had enough. I put it out of my mind.” “Vietnam,” he said, “is a war that shouldn’t have happened. There was no major reason for us to get involved. We weren’t equipped for that war. We

followed leaders who were wrong. They should have looked for other ways to solve our differences.”

During the Vietnam War the seeds were sown that led to a change in Mel’s understanding of civil disobedience. He wouldn’t have then, and probably wouldn’t now, lead public demonstrations against government policies that he thinks are wrong, but he has growing admiration for those who do so out of a commitment to Christian faith and values. “These protests,” he said, “send messages that are beneficial, and have addressed our racial situations as well as war.” Conversations with members of his family have had a strong influence on Mel’s evolving views about civil disobedience and war.

His comments about Vietnam led Mel to talk about what he understands to be the causes for war. Most people, Mel thinks, want to live in peace, but “there are these few leaders who want to use their power to control—who create a climate of mistrust among and between peoples. Then there’s the continuous barrage from the media about the ugly enemy and what they are capable of doing. And, I guess, most of us are followers, so we follow along.”

When asked what it is that prompts leaders to create mistrust, Mel responded: “That’s a tough question. Some people, is it their egos, that thrive on control and power—and then they can’t resist the urge to conquer and enslave, to do whatever it takes to reach their objectives? Then these people gather others around them, and it becomes like a club, and keeps on spreading. The next thing there is war.”

Mel thinks that Iraq’s Saddam Hussein is similar to Hitler—a madman. It was his abuse of power in Kuwait that led to the Gulf War. The United States, he said, had to confront that abuse. Still, he continued, the war effort was overdone. The enormous display of power was, in his word, “ridiculous.” The name of Saddam Hussein brought Mel back to the role of leaders in making war. “I’m just amazed,” he said, “that a person like Hussein can operate in such a manner. Why do the people follow them, and treat them as though they are gods? But, I guess that’s where wars come from.”

Though his Christian faith points to the fact that war is wrong, and that war is “contradictory to what God has taught us,” such awareness did not undermine in any way Mel’s participation in World War II. On the contrary, “having a deep faith helped me to survive and keep a healthy outlook on life even when I was unhappy with military life.” Raised a Roman Catholic, and a Lutheran since 1972, Mel has never heard “either church say anything about what they think about war.” On the other hand, he thinks that both probably do have a point of view on the subject. As far as he can remember, his home congregation said nothing to him when he entered the service in 1942. “They just ignored the whole thing.”

Mel is ambivalent about the church taking a stand on the subject of war. “I think it should,” he said, “but it must be done with care.” The church should have said more about Vietnam—praying for the soldiers and for miracles that could influence the leaders in the war. It could have spoken on the Gulf War. “How

dismayed God must be," he concluded, "at all the war and carnage there is in the world."

II. PETER: A VETERAN OF THE WORLD WAR II AND KOREAN CONFLICT ERAS

Peter's views about wars, and his country's part in them, have changed since he enlisted in the navy in 1944 at the age of 17. Then he had no questions. Having a brother in the service, knowing about Pearl Harbor and the Bataan death march, listening to his immigrant parents talk about privations in Norway after 1940, and possessing a strong sense of patriotism, Peter had considerable anger against the enemy as he eagerly joined up as soon as he was old enough to do so.

The Korean Conflict found Peter still on active duty, now a member of the air force. As such, he had no problems fulfilling his responsibilities. He was aware of the havoc caused by the invasion of South Korea, and he knew persons engaged in the conflict. Based on that knowledge, he thought the cause in Korea was a just one. "It never entered my mind," he said, "as to what people back home thought about the war. I assumed they supported me and our engagement." In 1953, at the close of the Korean Conflict, Peter returned to civilian life.

When the war in Vietnam began he was disturbed by the seeming failure of the church to support "our soldiers." He recalls especially being angered by "some pastors who demonstrated against the war." As time went along, however, he began to change his mind. The questions that hadn't been there in 1944 now came, not only forcing him to re-evaluate his nation's involvement in Vietnam, but in the conflicts in which he had had a part.

Reports about our entrance into World War II, not least the questions about the "surprise" attack at Pearl Harbor, leave him wondering if it "all wasn't a terrible waste." He continued: "It now appears that the Tonkin Gulf incident was contrived to get us into that war. And then there is the CIA involvement in Central America and other places....It all shakes our faith in government....All of us were naive about things because we didn't know all the facts." When war came in Panama, Grenada, and the Persian Gulf, his question was: "Are we being suckered into another war? Our young men and women aren't expendable. Besides, no matter what happens, the United States seems to come out on the short end. No good ever comes of war. And now as I see the effects of war on population movements around the world, the more convinced I am that war does little, if any, good."

Asked why it is then that there are wars, he responded: "Politics represent interests rather than the people, and it's self-interest that is behind war." Another cause, he said, is miscalculation. "Some politicians think they can get away with something, but then they don't. Noriega in Panama is an example. Vagueness, too, is a cause for war. Leaders in some countries aren't aware of what people in other countries will do. Then, too, the Bible says that there always will be wars—so be prepared when they come. There's no evidence that we can escape war. They just keep coming." All of this leaves Peter in a self-described "quandary." He still has

his patriotism, and would have no difficulty supporting a military initiative in order to protect the country. At the same time, he has much less confidence today than he had in 1944 that leaders are able to make right decisions about war. "If they asked me," he said, "I'd tell young people to be careful about what they are getting into if they join the services. This is still the best country in the world, but we really do have our problems."

Throughout his time in the military Peter thought about the relationship between war and his faith. He knew the commandment "Thou shalt not kill," and at the same time he was being trained to do just that—to be the best "fighting man" he could possibly be. He never did resolve the tension between the two. "You're there, you get overwhelmed by it—and pretty soon you find yourself engaged in it."

Peter wasn't, and isn't, aware that the Lutheran church, as a church, has anything particular to say on the subject of war. He can't remember pastors saying much about it prior to his enlistment, and chaplains on active duty didn't talk much about it either. "All of us just understood that we were there and we wanted to get it done and go home." At the same time, he knew his home pastor and congregation were "praying for us—for me."

"The church should have a point of view on war," Peter commented. "Church is a place where people meet and are informed. The church is too nebulous on too many issues. Our faith does speak to the reality of war. War is immoral. We are commanded not to kill. The church should say so." When the church and the state disagree on the subject of war, Peter recognizes, it is most often the case that the state's view prevails. He added: "But the church needs to be the government's conscience. But it never has been. If it had, maybe some wouldn't have been so eager to serve." While it angered him at the time that some pastors in the 1970s protested against the war in Vietnam, he now holds admiration for them. He has changed.

III. BEN: A VETERAN OF THE WORLD WAR II, KOREAN CONFLICT, AND VIETNAM WAR ERAS

Enlisting in the navy at the age of 17, Ben retired from the air force after serving in three wars. Motivated by a patriotism that had its origins in his rural upbringing in western Wisconsin, and the stories he heard from relatives already serving in the military, he "couldn't wait to serve. I wanted to do my part." Ben left the navy in 1947 to continue his education under the G.I. Bill. Then, lured by the opportunity to learn to fly, he enlisted again in the air force. He commented that recruiters had an easy time of signing him up. "I was ready to go back on active duty," he said, "and that spirit of service was still there."

Ben's convictions today about his country's engagement in war are similar to those he had in 1944. "I had heard all the propaganda, the horror stories, about the Japanese and the Nazis tyrannizing the world then. We weren't the aggressors—we were saving the world from this tyranny. That's what I was taught, and I believed it." During the Korean Conflict he piloted planes bringing U.S. soldiers to

Korea, and on his return flights he carried the casualties of the fighting. Seeing those soldiers, he needed no convincing about the horrors of war. At the same time, he had no reservations “about the rightness of our cause there.” He remembered General George Patton’s comments, made in 1945, that communism was a threat to the peace of the world, and he saw that threat being realized in Korea. “We did what we were called to do – it was something we had to do. Communism had to be stopped.”

The cold war was part of Ben’s military experience, too. For ten years following the Korean Conflict he was assigned to the Strategic Air Command, flying missions that brought him to the borders of the Soviet Union. “Our motto in SAC was,” he said, “peace is our profession. The notion was that we carried a big stick that warned Russia against war. It kept Russia out of war – out of Cuba.” This again, was something that we as a nation had to do. Throughout this time the air force command kept him informed about the threat of communism and the need for our nation to resist it. He had no questions about what he, and the nation, had to do.

Still a pilot in SAC when the Vietnam War broke out, he was engaged in that conflict as a commander of a “spy plane outfit. I flew 92 missions over Vietnam. We carried cameras not guns. Our motto was ‘alone, unarmed, and unafraid.’ These were very dangerous missions. We carried poison capsules in case we were shot down. I never had to face the decision, but I probably would have taken my chances rather than my life if I had been.” Ben has no reservations about the presence of the United States in Vietnam. “We had commitments to SEATO – we were committed to defend Southeast Asia. We could have done no less. We were, and we are, freedom fighters for the world. If we aren’t, who will be? This was something we had to do. It was a matter of patriotic duty.” He remembers being very distressed by the anti-war demonstrations during that time – and by the stories told about the atrocities committed by our soldiers. “War is and always has been hell. Because of the media, now everyone knew what soldiers had always known.” Ben blames the media for the loss of the war in Vietnam. “If the media gave the same attention to deaths caused by drunken drivers in this country as they gave to the war, the world would be in a different place today.”

Communism, nazism, tyranny – threats to the peace of the world – these are the causes for war. Ben has a strong sense that nations do rage against each other. As with Mel and Peter, Ben holds political and military leaders responsible for war. Stationed in Japan during the Korean Conflict, he met many wonderful Japanese people. “Yet,” he remembers thinking, “these were the same people we had fought in the war. Eventually I came to understand that it wasn’t the Japanese people who had caused the war, but their leaders.” Reflecting on the term “the rage of nations,” Ben went on to say: “Much of that rage today is religious, isn’t it?” He went on to identify Islamic fundamentalism as a present threat to peace. “Interesting,” he continued, “religion has replaced communism as a threat, but then communism was sort of a religion, too. So, again, it’s one against another. Now it’s Christianity and Islam.” When asked to describe what was behind this religious rage, he re-

sponded: "There is a need for religious faith, and if all would hold to their basic convictions of faith, things would be okay. I think the ten commandments would be a basic place from which all of us could start." It is, in Ben's opinion, the insistence on exclusive truth claims that come in conflict with other truth claims that holds the greatest threat to the peace of the world today.

Ben described several connections between his Christian faith and his life as a soldier. "To begin with," he said, "I'm alive today because of my faith. I came through lots of scrapes and in them I always prayed 'God help me'...and after it was over, I gave a prayer of thanks." Further, Ben looks upon himself as having been a Christian soldier. "In all of these conflicts," he said, "I was responding to the need not only to protect democracy, but a Christian democracy." He believes the United States was founded on a Christian foundation. "The church," he said, "is a key to our self-understanding that we need to defend." He is convinced that if our government had failed, or does fail, the church will suffer. His travels in Russia in 1980 confirmed this point of view. He saw firsthand the privations of the people and how the church had been persecuted there under communism. "I found that what I had been told was true."

Ben sees himself as similar to many with whom he served in the military. "Many of our pilots were very religious people—a few were ordained. In fact, there were as many dedicated Christians flying missions in those days as there were people who couldn't care less about anything." He thinks that they, like him, found no contradiction between what they were doing as soldiers and their Christian faith.

Throughout his life in the Lutheran church, with two years at a Lutheran college, Ben has never been made aware that the church has any position with respect to war. He remembers announcements in church about persons going on active duty, and if one was killed, it was "viewed as an heroic act—that he died for his country." On active duty he sought out Lutheran chaplains and they never failed to support him—assuring him of their prayers. "Of course," said Ben, "all these pastors condemned the horrors of war," but he always felt that the church supported the efforts of the military "to guarantee our freedom as a nation." There was one exception to this. He vividly remembers "a very bad sermon urging mothers to bring their sons back from Vietnam." The pastor took advantage of the pulpit, he argues, to portray an unfair one-sided point of view on the war. He was not allowed the opportunity to present his. He hasn't forgotten that pastor or the sermon.

When asked if the church should express itself on the subject of war, Ben responded: "No—outside of expressing the need to defend democracy and the church. But, the church should not get involved in deciding what is a right war. Of course, I realize politics enters into all of this, and that isn't always positive, but when the state gets involved, it's up to the church to support it—asking God's blessing upon those who must serve."

IV. SAM: A VETERAN OF THE KOREAN CONFLICT AND VIETNAM WAR ERAS

When Sam enlisted in the navy in May, 1953, it seemed to him as though it was the next natural step for him to take. He had been a scout through his mid-teen years and had enlisted in a national guard unit at age 16. He had cousins who had served in World War II, and many of his friends were in the guard unit. Besides, his enlistment in the navy preceded by only a day his being drafted into the army.

After 20 years of service, Sam retired from the navy in 1973 when, as he describes it, “the Vietnam War ended for me.” Being a professional soldier shapes much of what Sam thinks about war and the conflicts in which he was engaged. When the involvement of the United States began to escalate in Vietnam, he remembers thinking: “We’re going, so let’s go and get it over with. I was ready. I felt we had the capabilities to win the war. We knew the country, the people, the terrain well enough to get the job done.” Today, Sam would not be so eager to go. At the same time, even if he had been drafted in 1964, he’s confident he would have served. He would not have demonstrated against the war. Serving three short terms aboard ships in the Vietnam area, mostly on an aircraft carrier, he acknowledges that there was excitement and a strong sense of accomplishment in working together with others to meet the challenges that the war set before them.

The Korean Conflict was just ending when Sam went on active duty. He didn’t agree with the war, but, “though I wouldn’t have been eager to go to Korea,” said Sam, “I would have gone had I been directed to go.” As for the cause of our engagement, said Sam, it was a response to McCarthyism. “We were anti-communist, and it looked as though the communists were trying to take over South Korea. We were sticking our nose into a civil war, and we really had no business being there. Still, since we were there, we should have finished it. It’s my opinion that General MacArthur was betrayed.”

“We shouldn’t have been in Vietnam, either. We were there because of a fake battle—the attack in the Gulf of Tonkin. I know people who were very close to that situation, and they say it never happened. We had been there, of course, since at least 1959 with advisors. We had the SEATO arrangement with nations in that area. That’s what got us involved.” Having said that, Sam went on to say: “It wasn’t wrong that we got involved in Vietnam. The tragedy was that we weren’t allowed to win the war. We could have wrapped it up by 1966. It didn’t take long, however, for us who were there to realize that we weren’t going to be allowed to win it. The rules of engagement were very sensitive. We were not allowed in the early years to go on the offensive—we could only be on the defensive. The longer we were there, the more political the war became. Then came the misinformation. There was so much accurate information available in Vietnam—it just wasn’t getting back to the leaders in Washington. What information there was was always filtered through the CIA and the Department of Defense so that what this country knew was their interpretation of the war. I don’t know why the politicians didn’t get the message in the early 1970s. They seemed determined to go on with the war, but not in a way that would end in victory.” For Sam, it finally came down to the

fact that there was no clear purpose for our forces in Vietnam. The situation only got foggier every month. He summarized his views by saying: "I thought we had come to win, but then we were not allowed to do so."

"When I was 19 or 20 I didn't know or think much about the causes of war. I guess I must have thought that there were these insurmountable differences between countries, and these finally led to war." Since then Sam has thought and read a good deal about war. "War happens," he said, "because people want it to happen. Ideologies, property, religion—they're all in there. There are people with power to move things, to move the politicians, to get things going. Behind it is the economic motive. There's money to be made in war." When asked why the United States, specifically, has gotten involved in conflicts in recent years, he replied: "The only thing I can come up with is economics—that's what triggers wars."

When Sam enlisted, his ties with the church had been rather minimal for some time. He had "been through confirmation and attended church once in a while," but the church wasn't at the center of his life at age 19, nor was it during the time he was in the navy. He is convinced that the teachings he had received stayed with him during those years, and probably protected him in some ways and provided him some stability, but his lifestyle was not what he would call Christian. For nine years after his retirement Sam thought neither about Vietnam nor the Christian faith. Then, in 1982, he had his first experience with the "traveling Vietnam wall." He and the wall were in Kansas City. It took four tries before he could actually go up and touch it. When he did, all that he had tried to repress about the war began to surface. He admitted then that he had carried tremendous guilt feelings about the war. He had made many decisions that affected pilots as they flew over Vietnam. When they didn't come back, he felt in some ways responsible. He knew many who were killed or captured, and wondered: "Could I have done more to serve these people?" After that initial experience, he again tried to repress the memories, but they surfaced again when he got involved with an organization of Vietnam veterans. He went to Washington and went to the wall again. There he shed tears of "expiation—a cleansing, that allowed me to bury my comrades from Vietnam." It was at this point that Sam came back into the life of the church. "I look on myself as a revitalized Christian—not born again. The faith was never gone."

It didn't occur to Sam to examine the Vietnam War in the context of his religious convictions. He went on to say: "It seems to me that there is a good deal of war in the Old Testament, though I realize it isn't part of Christ's teaching. Still, war is not necessarily in conflict with my Christian convictions. If we were threatened today, I would do it all over again. I would fight for a just cause."

When asked if the church, or Lutherans, had any position with regard to war, Sam responded: "I didn't think the church got involved with war. The hymn 'Onward Christian Soldiers' had nothing to do with war—it was a song to stir people up....I can't see the cross leading us into any armed conflict—but I can see it leading us in the war against sin and evil." As for his home congregation having

anything to say to him when he went on active duty, he said: "They probably had something to say, but I wasn't listening. At least I didn't hear it if they did."

Sam gives something of a yes-and-no response to the question as to whether or not the church should speak out on the subject of war. On the one hand he said: "Wars are generally political, and I don't agree with the church being involved in politics." On the other hand, he said: "If the church does have anything to say, it should examine the 'why' for the conflict before the conflict begins – what is just and unjust, what are the consequences of going to war? The church should urge its people to give serious thought to these things before the nation ever jumps into war. We can be strong without hurting people."

V. TOM: A VETERAN OF THE PANAMA AND PERSIAN GULF WARS ERA

Tom enlisted in the army during the last months of his senior year in high school. When asked why, he jokingly responded: "A pesky recruiter that wouldn't leave me alone." Then, more seriously, he added, "I didn't know what I really wanted to do then – so it seemed like a good thing to do." He also thinks that it was a good idea to separate from the military after six years of service. "I miss it some days, though," he said, "the excitement, not knowing where you are going to be, heading off to different parts of the world. It was fun." Tom spent nearly three years of his service time in Germany, and 14 months in Central America – nine in Panama and four in Honduras. During the conflicts in Panama and the Persian Gulf, Tom was assigned to a combat military police unit. He was in Panama when Iraq invaded Kuwait.

There are many and varied reasons why, according to Tom, the United States has gotten involved in conflicts in recent years. In Panama it was the canal. "That's why we have been there all along – to protect our interests represented in the canal. It's a very strategic place – and we need to have some control over it. War actually broke out there because of the craziness of Noriega. You just don't get any more corrupt than he was." Tom appreciated his tour in Panama: "The country is beautiful, and the people are friendly – very festive." When asked, then, why it was that war came, Tom responded: "The Panamanian government appealed to the patriotism of the people, kicking up anti-American feelings, trying to make the people think that they were politically strong. Most of the people didn't respond. They didn't want war."

Tom explains the presence of U. S. forces in Honduras as a "humanitarian mission." "We're there," he said, "to build roads and schools, to provide medical help, to develop their agriculture – to create some stability in the country." Tom's job was to provide security to those who each day went out in the countryside to do this humanitarian work. When asked why it was necessary to protect these people from the ones they were trying to help, he responded: "Well, no one really knew. It seems to me that every country has its own rebels, and then one country's rebels start fighting the rebels of another. All of them want the United States out of the picture so they can carry on their own power struggles. Occasionally some would drive by us waving their weapons at us, trying to intimidate us, but then

they didn't do anything." Tom concluded his comments about Central America by saying: "We're involved in all sorts of things in Panama and Honduras. Who knows what it's all about."

"Oil," said Tom, "was behind the Persian Gulf War—that and Saddam Hussein. He was insane and needed to be stopped." Tom volunteered to serve in the Gulf War. Explaining why, he said: "It was a televised war. It shot a lot of adrenaline into you—wanting to get involved. After all, that's your job. That's what you are trained for. You spend all that time preparing for something like that, and there aren't many chances to use that training. Then, of course, there was Iraq's invasion of Kuwait and the desire to do something about that." Tom acknowledges that the media helped to shape his attitudes about that war, and influenced his decision to volunteer to serve in it.

In a general way, Tom understands war as a "power struggle." "It's like kids. One has a toy truck and another wants it. Neither will give in so they start to fight. There's no need for the fighting—they just do. Wars start out from simple things, but then they get complicated. If you could go back to what started it all, you'd realize that it wasn't so bad, but then frustration and anger come in and grow, and then war comes."

The initial decisions that led to the involvement of the United States military in recent conflicts were good ones, according to Tom, but none were followed through to a good end. "In Panama, for example," Tom explained, "it was right to get rid of Noriega, but then the country was left directionless. Panama couldn't take care of itself. We were there. We could have done something to help the country, but we just withdrew to our bases and things went on as usual after the war. There just wasn't much improvement. Panama could be a much better country with some help, and we could have given it."

Tom can't remember having thought much about war before enlisting. Therefore, he can't say that he has changed his convictions about it. But, he has changed in how he sees the military and how it dealt with people like him. When he enlisted, Tom said, "I didn't have a clue about war. To think about the causes of war, and the rightness of war—that didn't enter my mind. In basic training they teach you how to fight a war—and they don't bother to tell you about the why, or the why not, or that it's right or wrong. If you are wearing the uniform, that's what you are supposed to do. They teach you that you are invincible, that you aren't supposed to worry about anything. Just go and do it. Then, when you see the reality, you know you aren't invincible. It was disillusioning for me. They hype you up for the involvement—and it does seem exciting, but afterwards it's different, and the military doesn't provide a bridge out of the conflict." Tom went on to talk about how it is with civilians, among them the police, who experience trauma in their work. "They're given a soft landing, with counseling or something, after being in difficult situations." The military didn't do that, said Tom, and he thinks it should. "It shouldn't make a difference," he concluded, "just because you're fighting for your country. Civilian or soldier, you're still a human being."

Tom is ambivalent about the relationship between his religious convictions

and his notions about war. "War is horrible," he agreed, "but sometimes it is something that needs to be done. My religious faith doesn't tell me that it's wrong. But, again, it is horrible—with so many lives lost. Still, there are good things that do come out of it—like the liberation of Kuwait." As far as Tom can remember, no one in his congregation while he was growing up discussed the subject of war with him. He does remember the churches in Seattle, near where he was stationed at the time, having prayer vigils on the night when the ground fighting broke out in Kuwait. The churches, he noted, were supporting those fighting in the war, and not the war itself.

"Certainly," Tom said, "the church has a right to give its opinion about war—just like anyone else." However, it would be wrong, he continued, "for the church to encourage some action that eventually would endanger more lives—such as a pacifism that opens the door to even greater crimes and dangers."

VI. SOME CONCLUDING COMMENTS

The purpose of these interviews and this article is not to offer a critique of what these veterans said or of the armed forces in which they served. There are, however, one or two observations that can be made. The most obvious, the most predictable, observation is that all these veterans were young, even very young, when they first went on active duty. Whoever it is that declares war, it is the young who experience the raging of the nations. Among those interviewed, none had given a great deal of thought, at the time, to the causes of war. World War II veterans tended to focus on a person, a demented personality, as a cause for war. The Persian Gulf War offered Saddam Hussein in that role and Panama had its Noriega. Communism was the perceived enemy in Korea and Vietnam. It seems that when a conflict can be focused on a personality, there is greater unanimity in joining it. To a large degree, all those interviewed were influenced in their views about war by the media, world events, relatives, a sense of patriotism, and—once in uniform—the military itself. All, to one degree or another, have a sense that their Christian faith was a source of strength for them while on active duty. While all acknowledge some disjuncture between the doing and the consequences of war, none were at the time of their service, or now, convinced that war was incompatible with Christian faith. Finally, none could recall the church having said anything to them, intentionally, on the subject of war—either when they first went on active duty, or now. Not all agree that the church should offer counsel to its members on the subject of war. Those who think it is appropriate for the church to do so, are not agreed as to what the church should do or say. Such were the views of but a few Lutherans who, at one or more points in their lives, were called upon to engage in the "raging of the nations." ⊕