

This excerpt from my 2026 memoir *Skirmishes with Patriotism* was first published in *Consequence Forum*, Flash Nonfiction Project vol. 1, July 2022.

Splinters

In a chilling passage of one Vietnam veteran's memoir, an American soldier approaches an old woman sitting near a pile of sticks and without saying a word shoots her in the face. "What the hell are you doing?" screams his lieutenant, and the soldier answers, "Those are punji sticks she was working on."

Punji sticks were slivers of bamboo, sharpened to a razor's edge, that the Viet Cong forced villagers to provide in volume. Smearred with excrement, they were placed in the underbrush as booby traps for American patrols. When Green Beret Barry Sadler bumped into one in 1965, he sustained an infection that almost took his life. In his memoir *I'm a Lucky One*, he marvels that an elite soldier, whose training had cost the government thousands of dollars, had been nearly done in by "the cheapest and most primitive of weapons."

Not long after Sadler's mishap, Pentagon engineers developed a splinter delivery system of their own. To create what antiwar activist David Harris calls "the most significant possible drag on the enemy's resources," the Army started to drop canisters of small fragmentation bombs. When these exploded, they sent a hailstorm of metal slivers into enemy bodies, requiring an estimated five people to care for each victim. Hence the desired "drag." "Then," writes Harris, "some bright young boy in the Pentagon added a last detail."

Why not manufacture the smaller bombs out of plastic? That way the wounds would not only be serious and plentiful but also relatively untreatable since the fragments that would lodge in the wounded could not be located with an X-ray machine. The unrelieved suffering thus induced would in turn yield an even greater drain on the enemy's resources.

Ignore the sadistic ingenuity of that solution and consider only how the punji stick and the frag bomb are similar. Technologically, there are centuries of sophistication between the two devices. Morally, not a nanosecond. Both are designed to further what Clausewitz called the purpose of warfare: to convince the enemy to submit to your will. Punji sticks do this by taking soldiers like Sadler out of commission. Frag bombs do the same thing on a massive scale. “Unrelieved suffering” isn’t the point. It’s that the suffering impairs the enemy’s ability to keep fighting. In a dispassionate war calculation, whatever furthers that end is permissible.

But there’s a cost in how we feel about people. The soldier who shoots the mama-san making punji sticks cannot see her as a person; he must eliminate her perhaps partly out of revenge (maybe he’s Sadler’s buddy) but mostly because she is resisting the required drag. Thus, war splinters more than wood and plastic. It shatters the hope of seeing in an enemy’s eyes any hint of a common humanity. This is the way war goes. Always has.

There are exceptions to this rule, perhaps more than those of us who didn’t go to war can ever know. In his sketch “The Man I Killed,” Tim O’Brien invents a biography for a Vietnamese soldier he has killed with a grenade. Before the war, O’Brien imagines, the young man “devoted himself to his studies. He spent his nights alone, wrote romantic poems in his journal, took pleasure in the grace and beauty of differential equations.” This being O’Brien, you cannot tell how “true” this story is, but that doesn’t matter. What matters is that he makes an attempt to “feel with” another person. That is the literal meaning of empathy and summoning it for someone you have killed is a small miracle.

Like all miracles, it encounters skepticism. O’Brien’s fellow soldiers don’t want to acknowledge it, don’t want him to dwell on something that debilitatingly human. It was a good kill, they tell him. Get over it.

He does get over it, sort of. Only sometimes, when he’s “reading a newspaper or just sitting alone in a room,” the young man he killed is there again. On that day in Vietnam, he stepped out of a morning fog. Twenty-five years later, he steps back in. Into the fog of dawn, the fog of remembering not remembering, the old shadow world. O’Brien sees him come and sees him go. Only when he goes this time, he’s not in fragments.

When I was a teenager, someone poked me with a pencil, or I poked myself, and a bit of graphite dug into my hand. It was a trivial wound and yet, sixty years later, my hand still shows a tiny spot where the pencil went in. It may be reminding me of something, but I don’t know what.

Maybe if I had more empathy I could remember. And maybe if I had more empathy, I'd have done my patriotic duty and gone to war. I would have tried to fight the good fight and not kill old women. I would have taken different slivers into my brain and had them sit there for decades, reminding me of something. I would have come home, no longer young, and talked to kids like me and told them about good kills and why they didn't matter.

This might have happened in that other world, that parallel world where the sunlight splinters beautifully and the grey rolls on.