

Before

Men who fabricate heroic tales and medals for valor are inherently weak, insecure and tragic figures. They crave recognition, thirst for acceptance. In Johnny's case the facts are clear: He never served a day in Vietnam. Never dodged a bullet, or shed a drop of blood. Never picked up a rifle, or patched up a casualty. Never said goodbye to the ashen dead. He is an outright fraud laying claim to things he has not done or seen in order to boost his frail ego, the better to feel that he is loved, respected, needed.

But in this fiftieth anniversary year of the American war in Vietnam, the thoughtful reader will ask: So what? Who cares about an old man and his fake medallions and dreams of glory? And that is exactly the point. Johnny Doe's legion of lies are the small story, the one that bitter vets, civilian cynics and public critics would happily pounce on, rip to shreds and feed to the flames of public outcry. To shame him, to tar and feather him, would ruin Johnny's life, and cast severe doubt on vets that allow him to speak in their name. Shaming Johnny would demoralize all who believe in him, believe that his mythical tales and chimerical medals are inextricably tied to his activist message. Calumny would descend on this writer too.

It is better to cast Johnny's unearned ribbons and tall tales aside. What he says about US warfare, its causes and consequences, is all that matters. I do not doubt for one second his firm but peaceful call to arms. His persistent struggle to slow or stop the next round of pox Americana. I do not doubt that more voices like his are needed. Before it's too late, I hope you are listening.

After

There will always be men who conjure up tales of glory and valor medals. They are tragic figures who crave recognition, thirst for acceptance. In Johnny's case, did he actually serve in Vietnam? Dodge bullets, shed blood, save GIs, kill the enemy, as he ardently claims? Or is he a hero in his own mind, as the tangled documents suggest?

In this fiftieth anniversary year of the American war in Vietnam, the thoughtful reader may ask: Who cares about an old man and his dubious medallions and dreams of glory? And that is exactly the point. Johnny Doe's apparent mis-truths are the small story that bitter vets, civilian cynics and public critics would happily pounce on, rip to shreds and feed to the flames of public outcry. To tar and feather him would ruin his life, demoralize his friends, and all who believe in him, believe that his tall tales and doubtful medals are inextricably tied to his activist message. Calumny would descend on this writer too.

It's better to cast aside the glaring uncertainties of Johnny's story. What he says about US warfare, its causes and consequences, is what matters. I do not doubt for one second his firm but peaceful call to arms. His persistent struggle to slow or stop the next round of pox Americana. I do not doubt that more voices like his are needed. I hope you are listening.