



Summer 2008

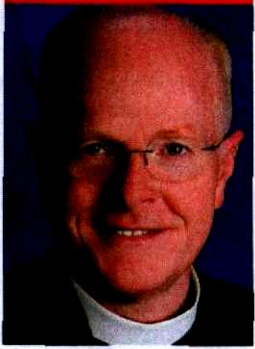
Pathways

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OUR CHURCH IN A TIME OF

WAR





Panning for gold in the muck of war

By Robert G. Certain

When combat troops come home from war, we have been profoundly changed. Some of that change is not so good; but some of it can actually lend us a greater understanding of who we are, what society is about and what God's work in the world is about.

Our wartime experience can bring a wealth of understanding, as I discovered in my journey from the prisons of Hanoi to full freedom nearly three decades later.

A few years ago, my wife and I went on a tour of Alaska, including the famous gold fields. I discovered that it takes a good technique and a lot of patience to pan for gold, to wash away copious amounts of mud to find the little flakes and nuggets of the precious metal hidden within. At the end of the day, it was not the technique, the water or the mud that we valued. It was the gold. Finding the "gold" in combat experience can be accomplished with similar diligence.

I came out of Hanoi, went into seminary and then straight into parish ministry. I had always equated what was going on inside of my soul from early December until Easter Day with the liturgical season. Each year, I was focused on making everything work right: extra education, fellowship, and liturgies as well as cultural parties and dinners. The amount of tension I felt, however, was more than these events could have caused.

In post-combat stress, the veteran is not stuck in the past, reliving the memory of combat. Rather, when the themes of warfare repeat in an entirely different set of circumstances, the resulting emo-

tions and decisions will likewise be thematically similar to the emotions felt and the decisions made in the initial event. For me, the mission that ended in my shoot-down and imprisonment was marked by disappointment, danger, shifting positions, *mechanical problems*, *flight planning errors* and the natural

events of the atmosphere. We overcame them all, but were shot down at the very moment of success.

Since that night, there have been several times in my life in the church when we entered major projects in church life (like *capital campaigns*) where all of these themes were repeated. Each time, as we approached probable success, my anxiety level would peak and I would be ready to leave, to eject. I came home from Vietnam in 1973 but did not find the key to unlocking the chains of prison until 28 years later as I finally learned to *pan for the gold in the muck of my wartime experience*.

Most of us come home, leave the service, return to our families and careers and make good livings and good contributions to society. Even so, the intense experience of warfare leaves us with important work to do if we are to fully utilize the positive aspects of those days in subsequent careers.

Bringing the troops "all the way home" is not just the responsibility of the government. Older veterans have a role to play in the full and complete return of those who come after us. As we share the experience, strength and hope of our *post-military careers*, other veterans may be able to gain insight into their own stories and find new ways of panning the value from the silt of their troubling times.

All of us – employers and family members, churches and synagogues, physicians and veterans themselves – have a vested interest in *converting combat liabilities into assets for societal leadership*. We all have a responsibility to pan for the gold.

The Rev. Dr. Robert Certain is interim rector at the Church of St. Peter and St. Paul, Marietta. Last year, he returned to Atlanta where in 1969 he earned a bachelor's degree in history at Emory. Commissioned in the U.S. Air Force, he flew 100 missions as a combat aviator in Vietnam and was held four months as a prisoner of war. He went on to earn a master of divinity from the School of Theology at Sewanee and served as an Air Force chaplain on active duty and in the reserves, reaching the rank of colonel. After serving parishes in Texas, Mississippi, Tennessee and Arizona, he became rector of St. Margaret's, Palm Desert, Calif., a 2,000-member parish that included President Gerald R. Ford. When President Ford died in 2006, Certain was chosen to lead all memorial services and to preside at his burial in Michigan. Certain currently serves as a member of the Defense Health Board and the Psychological Health Advisory Group regarding the health of combat veterans for the Secretary of Defense.