

# ADDISON COUNTY INDEPENDENT

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## "Bye-Bye" to a Two-Sport Athlete

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This spring, I'm teaching the Vietnam War course again and I'm apprehensive.

For my students, the Vietnam War era is an epoch in time. For me, it was a formative time, a complicated, bewildering time. Attempting to translate or interpret its ethos seems at times overwhelming. Who wants to go back there?

I didn't go to Vietnam but many of my Middlebury College friends did.

Middlebury required two years of Army ROTC when I attended in the 1960s. The final two years were voluntary and the majority of Middlebury men stayed in. It beat getting drafted, the thinking went: better to be an officer giving orders than taking them as a draftee enlisted man.

I wasn't sure about that, so I got out, a decision that may have been my salvation. Later, I joined the Army Reserves, like this President Bush, and thus avoided Vietnam. The Reserves didn't get called up then.

It's true that college boys often avoided service in Vietnam - the average age of soldiers in Vietnam was 19 (according to the Department of Defense). College boys, Vice-President Cheney, for example, were good at procuring educational deferments from military duty.

My friends who stayed in ROTC graduated as Second Lieutenants in the Army. Many were handed a ticket to Vietnam and then a platoon to lead. Middlebury sent between 150-200 boys to Vietnam. I will invite some of them to come to my class and tell their stories.

I won't be able to invite my teammate and fraternity brother, Bayard Russ '66, to class. He was killed in Vietnam, one of the more than 58,000 American boys who died there from 1961-75.

At Middlebury College, Bayard was a terrific athlete and an enthusiastic teammate. The next time you attend a College hockey game, pause by the trophy display in the lobby of the Field House, and you'll see a picture of Bayard in his soccer and lacrosse garb and his Marine uniform.

The Bayard Russ Award is presented every year to the top two-sport athlete at Middlebury College.

Bayard was the only contemporary I knew who actually wanted to go to Vietnam. The whole idea of the military excited him. My other friends who served in Vietnam went reluctantly, and were grateful to be alive when they came back, and came back much older than their years.

We called him "Bye-Bye," a prophetic nickname, as it turned out. Bye-Bye was an interesting fellow, a character, exuberant and spontaneous. He was from Peterborough, New Hampshire and had attended Phillips Andover Academy, though he had little prep school veneer.

He loved to work. Hard, physical work delighted him. Tasks that we all worked to avoid, he embraced. In the summers growing up, he did farm work and painted houses.

My keenest memory is of him washing dishes and pots and pans in the frat house kitchen, white apron around his torso, tossing dishes into the racks and loading them in the washer, steam all around, singing at the top of his voice, bellowing like a wounded animal.

He loved training for athletics too. In sports, he was known for his "work ethic." He was an outstanding soccer goalie (and captain of an undefeated team in his senior year), and, whenever he ran anywhere, on the practice field or on his own, he carried bricks in his hands to make them stronger. He signed letters to his friends, "Bayard 'What a Pair of Hands' Russ."

When he tired of playing baseball in the rain in what passes for spring in Vermont (he was our starting shortstop), he transferred his interest to lacrosse and became the starting goalie on very good teams in that sport. He was skilled enough in basketball to play on that team too, had he chosen.

He was the acknowledged star of our fraternity stickball game, played on the north side of the house with a tennis ball and a broom handle. Any ball hit off the adjacent DKE House was a homer. A broken DKE house window was a walk-off grand slam home run. Bye-Bye hit a few.

In sports, and in most things, Bye-Bye was fearless. Army ROTC was too tame for him, so he enlisted in the Marine Corps Platoon Leader Course during his freshman year and spent two summers at Quantico in boot camp.

A Spanish major, he graduated in 1966 as a Second Lieutenant in the Marines and was ordered to the Defense Language Institute in Monterey to learn the Vietnamese language. In Vietnam, he was stationed for six months near DaNang, using his Vietnamese as an MP.

He hated it - he wanted action, a platoon to lead. He wrote to a Middlebury friend, "I won't sit in the rear and mind the gear."

He got his wish. Barely. After only two weeks at the front, he was heading from DaNang to Khe Sanh when his unit was ambushed by North Vietnamese regulars (NVA). He was killed by a "hostile explosive device," according to the telegram his parents received from Marine Corps Commander, General Walt.

That was January 13, 1968. He had just turned 23.

So I'll tell my students about Bye-Bye, one of the names on the Wall, and ask them to read books about the Vietnam War, and hope that his death, and the deaths of so many others like him, over so many years of conflict, so far away, will not be to them just so much ancient history.

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