Veteran shares first-hand experience on war with 8th graders

Huntington – “What if I told you that today, at 1 p.m., something incredibly huge is going to happen to you. Imagine jumping ahead 50 years: what would have been so profound that you did not talk about it for 50 years?”

As part of a study on memorializing war, retired Episcopal priest and Viet Nam veteran Jim Monroe visited 8th graders at Gateway Regional Middle School on May 18. He asked students if they knew anyone who had been in combat and if that person ever spoke about the experience. For many students, the answers were yes (they knew someone who’d experience war) and no (they didn’t speak of it often, or at all).

He told the story of arriving at midnight at Paris Island, South Carolina for Marine Corps basic training. Training that typically took 13 weeks, but had been reduced to 7 weeks because so many soldiers were being killed in Viet Nam. And hoe in less than 30 seconds—after watching his drill sergeant break the nose of the first recruit off the bus that night—“the process had begun. Jim Monroe started to disappear, and recruit Monroe started to emerge.”

After basic training, he was assigned to a post in the California Dessert for 1 year, to watch for enemy aircraft invading U.S. airspace. This never happened, and he quickly became bored. So on December 29, 1968, he landed in Viet Nam. On his birthday.

For a while, much of his work was in an underground bunker, relaying coordinates from a forward line to a howitzer 10 miles away. He was 6 hours on, 12 hours off. And life became fairly routine until February 23, 1969. “I would say my entire life since has been affected by the events of that night.”

He described waking up to find his unit under attack. He reached a foxhole but had to move onto another one because the first one was full. How a grenade landing in that foxhole would end the life of the other soldier in it, and cause a ringing in his ears for the rest of his life.

“I don’t think I have words to convey to you about this,” he told the students.

Much of his talk involved the physical healing of ruptured eardrums that bled for two weeks, and the emotional healing that would take much of the rest of his life. For Viet Nam Veterans (and their families) the term Post Traumatic Stress Disorder had not yet been coined, and was not yet understood.

He spoke with students about the Viet Nam War Memorial, which now contains the names of 58,200 men and women. Names are still added, as veterans continue to take their own lives even today.
Students discussed war movies they had seen, and whether or not they were realistic. (Tip: if the war scenes have music playing in the background, they fail the realism test).

He also spoke about healing . . . the importance of talking with others who had similar stories. For Monroe, it was also about an incredible healing he felt when a woman in Africa greeted him with a strong embrace. “I hope you have those arms when you need them, or can be those arms for someone else,” he said.

Monroe is a speaker with the Veterans Education Project, which provides oral history opportunities for schools. His appearance was funded by the Gateway Education Foundation.

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*Photos: (left) Viet Nam Veteran Jim Monroe (USMC) speaks with students at Gateway Regional Middle School. (right) Students give full attention to Monroe’s talk (shown holding a picture of the Viet Nam Memorial Wall in Washington D.C.)*