

# Mother learns about war that took her son

EUGENE, Ore. (AP) — Emily Whitlock's reason for going back to college at age 58 lies in a desk drawer in her cramped University of Oregon dormitory room.

Tucked in the corner of the drawer are two time-worn photographs. One shows her teen-age son boarding an airplane for Vietnam 16 years ago. The other shows her son's name — Donald B. Whitlock III — engraved on the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington, D.C.

"This is why I'm here, to understand the background of the Vietnam War and what actually happened over there," Whitlock, a former resident of Dunkirk, N.Y., said in an interview with the Eugene Register-Guard.

"I'm sort of doing it as a memorial to my son," she said. "My thought is that he might have taken some pride in my doing this."

Whitlock, who expects to graduate this year, is working toward a degree in the university's American Studies program. She said the course of study has been "just perfect" for advancing her understanding of the period of American history when she lost her only son in a war in Southeast Asia.

Over the past two years, Whitlock has been steeped in movies, literature, historical accounts and classroom discussions about wars and conflicts of the 20th century.

She has watched Vietnam War-related movies, such as "The Deer Hunter" and "Coming Home." She has read many of the books on the subject, including "Rumor of War," "Dispatches," "If I Die in a Combat Zone Box Me Up & Ship Me Home," "On the Way Home," "Born on the Fourth of



Emily Whitlock  
"I feel enlightened."

July," "Going After Cacciato" and "Winners & Losers."

Through her university courses, Whitlock said, she has come to understand better the last letter she received from her son, then 19.

"He was stationed in the coastal city of Chu Lau and he had written to me that it was so boring," she said. "Never had I heard him say he was bored until that last letter."

"His letters were always cheerful," she said. "He was busy. But after that last letter, he put in to go out in the field and that's when he got it, with 23 days left to go."

"The telegram said it was a mortar attack. He was hit in the back. But I think it was boredom

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that killed him."

Boredom is a major theme that recurs in literature and accounts of the Vietnam War, she said.

Whitlock said she may never comprehend everything her son went through.

"When you get down to it, war is men killing men and how am I going to understand that?" she asked. "As far as I can tell, it doesn't solve problems, yet there always has been war."

"I sent my son over there to fight a war to check the spread of communism, and I've never felt remorse because I thought it was a noble cause. But I sure wish I'd read some of these books before he

enlisted — at least, I would have known more about what he was getting into."

Even if her understanding is incomplete, Whitlock said, her courses have enriched her and inspired her to keep reading and learning about the Vietnam War after she earns a degree.

"I was like a person sitting in darkness," she said. "I feel enlightened by taking these courses and that's worth something."

Whitlock said she believes her university experience has changed her outlook on life, too, and renewed some of the spirit that died with her son.

"Since Whit died, I'm not the same person," she said. "There are very few things I care about."

"This is one thing I care about — anything that has to do with the Vietnam War," she said. "I never tried to speak for Whit, but I think he would be proud of me."