In April of 1971, after a week of massive protests across the capitol in D.C. during Operation Dewey Canyon III, the Vietnam Veterans Against the War gathered at the steps of the Capitol Building. It was clear that they were not allowed to trespass the area because of the freshly built fences that blocked any advance on the capitol steps. This didn’t stop them, though. One by one these veterans who had fought thousands of miles overseas and were now back home, fighting a different war, stripped themselves of their military honors and threw them over the fence in an act of defiance, passion, and surrender. Gold stars, purple hearts, iron crosses, presidential awards, uniforms, memoirs, award letters and even helmets – all were thrown away because the veterans who had served bravely to earn them knew that they were earned from the wrong fight.

The United States’ level of involvement in Vietnam gradually grew in the early 1960’s, the main goal being to stop the spread of Communism from taking over the country of Vietnam. When Nixon became president in 1968, he initially promised to end the war in Vietnam and bring the troops home. However, he did not plan on acting on this and the war continued.

Back home in the United States, the country was in turmoil over the military’s involvement in the war in Vietnam. Protest groups were sprouting everywhere from college campuses to streets in large cities. Many even ended in violence. The message of the protesters was clear: the war is wrong. As veterans returned home from battle, the horror of what truly was going on in Vietnam came to light. The U.S. was not winning the war, which was contrary to the idea the government was trying to spread among the public. The Tet Offensive showed the United States military that the North Vietnamese forces were stronger and more unified than previous thought. There was no end in sight. Even more upsetting to the public was the number of civilians being killed in the crossfire and sometimes even in direct fire. Women, children, and innocent farmers were being slaughtered, sometimes on purpose. In the My Lai Massacre, almost 500 civilians were killed by U.S. soldiers. This news didn’t make headlines in the U.S. until 1969, almost a year after it occurred. Opposition to the war increased, with more and more veterans coming back and renouncing their actions in Vietnam.

Vietnam Veterans Against the War formed in 1967 and grew to a membership of nearly 25,000 veterans during the height of the war. Members protested all across the country, calling for the end of the war and the people of the United States to demand justice for the atrocities their government had committed in Vietnam. During April 19-23 of 1971, over 1,100 VVAW members occupied and protested in Washington D.C. as a part of Operation Dewey Canyon III, named after the two secret military “incursions” into Laos and Cambodia of the same name. This operation was described as an “incursion into the country of Congress.”

On the last day of the protests, the veterans signified their true resolve by their actions on the steps of the U.S. Capitol Building. Each veteran stood before the crowd and listed their name, rank and company and the awards they had earned. They would follow with some phrase in protest to the war and promptly hurl their medals and ribbons over the fence that had been put there to keep them out.

This act is so significant and powerful because it is a symbol of defiance, passion and surrender. Imagine being volunteering for an effort you thought was right and the “good fight.” Later on you realize maybe you are fighting on the wrong side. Soon after you know that what you are doing is wrong. You have to see terrible things and risk your life for others just to keep everyone alive so they can go home. Once you finally go home, you are commemorated for your actions with an award reserved only for the finest acts of bravery and courage. The one good thing that exemplifies your life’s purpose and significance in that fight is given to you. Then, in an effort to prove a valiant point, you throw that award away.

I have to imagine it was hard for some of these veterans to throw away the one good thing that they had been given as a result of such terrible actions. They were also defying their superiors and the very people who had given them those awards. Some soldiers were made very emotional by the action because of its weight. They knew they had fought hard for a lie – what could be worse?