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## Vietnam: A soldier's story

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# VIETNAM: A SOLDIER'S STORY

An Abstract of a Thesis  
Submitted  
in Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree  
Master of Arts

Ryan Charles Villarreal  
University of Northern Iowa  
May 2020

## ABSTRACT

The Vietnam era was highly turbulent. Both in the United States and around the world. It was called the turbulent 60s for a reason. This is a story not about politics, military tactics, or the history of American involvement in Southeast Asia. This is a narrative that talks about the American soldier who went to Vietnam. It is important to understand who they were, why they went there, and what happened to them in Vietnam. It is duly important to comprehend their returns home. Therefore, this is a blend of social and cultural history that tells a story about Vietnam, from the American soldier's perspective.

VIETNAM: A SOLDIER'S STORY

A Thesis

Submitted

in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts

Ryan Charles Villarreal

University of Northern Iowa

May 2020

This Study by: Ryan Villarreal

Entitled: Vietnam: A Soldier's Experience

has been approved as meeting the thesis requirement for the

Degree of Master of Arts

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Dr. Jennifer Waldron, Dean, Graduate College

*“Ask not what your country can do for you—ask what you can do for your country.”-*

*JFK.*

*Thank you to my family, colleagues, and friends. For my Nana and those who gave their  
lives in Vietnam.*



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## INTRODUCTION

For the baby-boomers, the generation born to those who had fought in World War II, war seemed romanticized. This generation was embroiled by the most triumphant war in their nation's history, and if the time came for them to prove they were capable, they would do it, too. As kids they would play war, running around pretending to storm the beaches at Normandy and Iwo Jima. They were captured by those John Wayne movies. Vietnam was their generation's war.

This work will first address political indoctrination and justifications. Next, we will explore the making of a soldier in boot camp, advanced individual training, and the nature of the fighting in Vietnam. Like the French before them, Americans learned the Vietcong and the North Vietnamese were a tough and determined enemy, fighting in their backyard. American soldiers in Vietnam experienced a reality at odds with the official justifications of the war. Most soldiers' came to see the war as meaningless, a war for nothing. Many infantrymen or "grunts" believed they were used as bait to bring the enemy into "contact," so American firepower can destroy the enemy. However, soldiers responded to the realities of Vietnam in a variety of ways.

The Vietnam War was a complex time in American history. Many scholars have debated policy creating, motives, political doctrine and their implementing during the Vietnam era, but the soldier's understandings of the conflict have gone adrift. Nonetheless, this work will follow the American soldiers' experiences throughout the Vietnam era. "Throughout American culture," said Christian Appy, "Vietnam veterans

have been presented in ways that remove them from their own history.”<sup>1</sup> The goal of this work is to improvise the importance of the Vietnam veteran and their contribution to American history. Rather than addressing policymakers and policy making, this is a bottom-up narrative of those who were sent to fight in the Vietnam endeavor.

For the common soldier, the country Vietnam was a mystery. Most of them had never heard of it. They sure had heard of communism and the threat it caused the world. Communism was the biggest political and social discussion. But how could such a country like Vietnam be a threat to the United States? The answer was a civil war in a country being tormented by democratic and communist doctrines. American soldiers were sent to protect South Vietnam, a country that would not have existed without the United States.

American military personnel served in Vietnam roughly thirty years. The goal was to prevent a communist takeover of South Vietnam by the Vietcong and North Vietnamese. What American policymakers failed to realize, Vietnam was embroiled in a political revolution. Ho Chi Minh was as determined as any to eliminate foreign domination of his motherland. Americans, on the other hand, were arrogant. “The principal actors in this history, the leading decision makers,” said Neil Sheehan, “emerged as confident men—confident of place, of education and accomplishment. They are problem-solvers, who seem rarely to doubt their ability to prevail.”<sup>2</sup> They believed western democracy and firepower could prevail. “Of the generals, like William C.

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<sup>1</sup> Christian Appy, *Working Class War*, 5.

<sup>2</sup> Neil Sheehan, *The Pentagon Papers: The Secret History of the Vietnam War*, xviii.

Westmoreland, the military commander in Vietnam, and Earle G. Wheeler, the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, the history remarks they were men accustomed to winning.”<sup>3</sup>

To accomplish their military goals in Vietnam, General Westmoreland at Military Advisory Command, Vietnam (MACV) decided on a policy of attrition. The policy was simple: kill as many as them as possible. In a war with no frontiers, attrition consisted of a body count. The body count was nothing but a systematic error. Any dead Vietnamese, combatant or not, could be added to the count.

### The Battleground: The Vietnamese Carrying Pole

Vietnamese often liken the shape of their country to a long carrying pole with rice baskets attached at each end—an apt simile. The carrying pole, placed across the shoulders, has been used for centuries by Vietnamese peasants to carry rice and other loads. And the two “baskets” of Vietnam—the Red River Delta in the far north and the Mekong Delta in the south—are quite literally filled with rice. Joining the two low-lying deltas is a long “pole”—the narrow, curving stretch of mountains and plateaus that extends for almost eight-hundred miles between north and south.<sup>4</sup> The simile of the carrying pole should remind us that the Vietnamese conceive of their nation as a whole, not divided.

This sense of national unity has been slow to develop and was much threatened along the way. Indeed, we might think of the length and thinness of the carrying pole as symbolic of the long and tenuous development of Vietnamese nationalism. A sense of

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<sup>3</sup>Neel Sheehan, *The Pentagon Papers: The Secret History of the Vietnam War*, xviii.

<sup>4</sup> Fall, *Two Viet-Nams*, 3.

nationhood grew out of centuries of struggle to win independence from foreign domination. China ruled Vietnam for a millennium, and France controlled Vietnam for a century. Geographically, the major thrusts of Vietnamese nationalism has emanated from central and northern Vietnam. These regions have the longest national history. Southern Vietnam was, until the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the kingdom of Champa, a Hindu state dominated by people of Indian descent. This southward expansion established roughly the same geographic boundaries as present-day Vietnam, and by the early nineteenth century, Vietnam had become, by the global standards of the time, a reasonable integrated nation-state.

Southern Vietnam did have a regional history significantly distinct from that of the north. It had never formed a coherent or separate political identity on its own. Its social and political histories were far more fragmented than those of the northern regions of Vietnam, a condition exacerbated by the French imperial policy of divide and conquer. The strongest force of unity in the south came not from groups calling for regional or sectarian separatism but from those struggling for national independence from French colonial rule, the Viet Minh.<sup>5</sup>

In 1945, when Vietnam achieved a short-lived independence, the Viet Minh had the potential to consolidate its leadership nationwide. It had widespread support in the northern two-thirds of the country and was the strongest, if contested, force in the south. This period also represented the best historical opportunity for the United States to avoid a disastrous thirty-year intervention. During World War II, American OSS officers (the

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<sup>5</sup> Stanley Karnow, *Vietnam: A History*. 89-127. Marvin Gettleman, *Vietnam and America*, 5-17.

predecessors to the CIA) supported the Viet Minh, under the leadership of Ho Chi Minh, in their fight against the Japanese occupiers. Ho Chi Minh looked to the United States as an ally in his bid for postwar independence, basing his declaration of independence on the American model and drawing hope from the Atlantic Charter's promise of self-determination for all nations. He made repeated appeals to the United States government to recognize Vietnamese independence. The American government did not respond.<sup>6</sup>

The United States, instead, supported the French re-conquest of Vietnam. Vietnam was a trivial concern of United States policymakers in the first postwar years. Had France accepted Vietnamese independence, in all likelihood the United States would have followed suit and regarded Ho Chi Minh's leadership as a *fait accompli*. France wanted Vietnam back as a mode to rebuild an anti-Soviet Europe, the United States did not want to offend the French. By 1950, with the recent communist victory in China and the outbreak of the Korean War, concern about communism in Vietnam became the driving force of United States policy toward Indochina. Aid to France was defended as essential element in the global effort to contain communism. United States support for the war against the Viet Minh escalated so dramatically that French forces could fairly be regarded as American-backed mercenaries. By 1953, the United States was bankrolling seventy-eight percent of the French war.<sup>7</sup>

In 1954 the Viet Minh defeated the French forces at Dienbienphu, and the two sides joined the major world powers at Geneva to formulate the terms of peace. Despite

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<sup>6</sup> Patti, *Why Viet Nam?* 220-280.

<sup>7</sup> George McT. Kahin, *Intervention*. Chapters 1 and 2.

their victory, the Viet Minh accepted a temporary partition of Vietnam at the seventeenth parallel. The country was divided into two “regroupment zones,” with military forces supportive of the Viet Minh to move north and those backing the French south. The “provisional military demarcation line” between north and south was intended to last two years, whereupon elections would be held to reunify Vietnam under a single, national government. The Viet Minh accepted these terms because they believed the provisions would allow them time to consolidate power in the north and still offer a chance to unify the nation under the promised elections of 1956. The Soviet Union and China pressured Ho Chi Minh to accept the compromise, fearing that a push for immediate unification would lead to the United States intervening militarily.<sup>8</sup>

Had nationwide elections been held in 1956, as stipulated at Geneva, Ho Chi Minh would have certainly won in a landslide victory. American intelligence officer’s estimated that Ho Chi Minh would have won eighty percent of the vote. For that reason alone, the United States never supported the provision for national elections, nor did it sign the Geneva Accords. It did, however, pledge to defend the honors of the agreement. Betraying that pledge, the United States launched a campaign to create a strong, stable, permanent, anti-communists and pro-American South Vietnam.

Shortly after the Geneva conference, American-backed Ngo Dinh Diem became prime minister of South Vietnam, and France withdrew. Diem, who had been in America during the French war, was promoted by an influential group of supporters including Cardinal Francis Spellman, Justice William O. Douglas, Senator John Kennedy, and CIA

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<sup>8</sup> Christian Appy, *Working-Class War*, 149.



agent Edward Lansdale. In Vietnam, Diem was hardly so popular. With enormous military and economic aid, he began to assert his power with a massive campaign of imprisonment, torture, and execution against his political opponents, especially the Viet Minh and Buddhists. Neither Diem nor his American supporters had any intention of honoring the 1956 reunification elections unless they were convinced that Diem would win. For nine years, the United States sought to build and bolster Diem's government, a regime founded on American aid, nepotism, corruption, and repression. The latter reached its highest expression in Law 10/59, under which the government claimed the right to execute anyone found guilty of 'infringing upon the security of the State.' The crime was interpreted loosely "whoever commits or attempts to commit," anyone suspected of political dissent might be arrested or executed. Under the provisions of Law 10/59 thousands of South Vietnamese lost their lives. That very repression backfired by stirring the embers of revolutionary nationalism throughout the south.<sup>9</sup>

In 1960 the Vietnamese Communist Party set up the National Liberation Front (NLF), through which it directed the guerilla movements being waged in the south. Some 10,000 rebels were inspired to fight by the promise of land reform, national unification and independence, and an end to the tyranny of Diem's corrupt regime. America's role in creating and sustaining a partitioned Vietnam, and its desire to consolidate the power of a pro-American, anti-communist regime, had the effect of snapping the carrying pole of Vietnam into two pieces. The Revolutionary Forces under Ho Chi Minh spent the next fifteen years and sacrificed hundreds of thousands of lives trying to piece it together.

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<sup>9</sup>Christian Appy, *Working-Class War*, 150.

Knowing how South Vietnam was created is crucial to our understanding of the most basic facts about the American war in Vietnam. It was there in the south, in the land below the seventeenth parallel that the war was fought. The war is best understood not as a civil war between North and South Vietnam but as a revolutionary war fought in the south over two different visions of Vietnam. The Americans fought for a divided nation, for a south that would serve as a noncommunist buffer against the communist north. On the other side were southern guerrillas and northern troops fighting together for national unification through the revolutionary overthrow of the American-backed regime in Saigon.

Though most of the fighting on the ground took place within South Vietnam, United States and South Vietnamese forces conducted hundreds of small, clandestine, across-the-border operations in Cambodia, Laos, and North Vietnam. Raids against the north were the provocation that led to the North Vietnamese patrol boats to fire at an American destroyer on 2 August 1964. President Johnson claimed this attack and another on 4 August, which did not, in fact, take place, were unprovoked acts of aggression. He soon ordered air strikes on North Vietnam in response. More importantly, he used the incident to win congressional approval of the Gulf of Tonkin resolution, a resolution drafted months earlier giving LBJ the power to “take all necessary measures to repel any armed attacks against the forces of the United States and to prevent further aggression.” Johnson viewed the resolution as sufficient congressional authorization for the enormous buildup that followed in 1965.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Willenson, *The Bad War*, 28-35.

South Vietnam was, then, the geopolitical background. Vietnamese revolutionaries viewed it as an artificial puppet state held in place by American imperialism. The American government characterized South Vietnam as a free and independent nation struggling for democracy. Never fully understanding—or at least never publicly acknowledged—the depth of indigenous hostility toward the South Vietnamese government and United States intervention, American policymakers always attributed communism in the south to northern aggression. The figurative maps they carried in their heads were full of red arrows slashing from north to south, an utter contrast to the Vietnamese image of their nation as a long, but unbroken, carrying pole.

#### Basic Training and Tearing Down

A bus full of Marine recruits pulls into boot camp. It could be well past midnight, but a team of drill instructors (DIs) stand ready to pounce on their prey. As the bus rolls to a stop, one of the DIs jumps on board and screams: “YOU GOT THREE SECONDS TO GET OFF THIS BUS AND TWO OF ‘EM ARE GONE.”<sup>11</sup> The men scramble and shove their way off, ordered to stand on yellow footprints painted on the concrete parade deck. As the men line up a second DI rolls out of a nearby shed. He marches up to one of the recruits and comes so close their faces nearly touch. He screams in the boy’s ear: “You no good civilian fucking maggot. . . . You’re worthless, do you understand? And I’m gonna kill you.” Several others may be singled out, too. Then the DI addresses the whole group: “There are eighty of you, eighty young warm bodies, eighty sweet little

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<sup>11</sup> Roth, *Sand in the Wind*, 95.

ladies, eighty sweet peas, and I want you maggots to know today that you belong to me and you will belong to me until I have made you into Marines.”<sup>12</sup>

The DI inherits his ownership of the recruits, his civilian maggots. Screaming and insulting, he asserts absolute control over their lives. The most menacing threats are meant to inspire terror, but they also express a literal intent to destroy everything civilian in the recruits. Nothing in their former lives is deemed worthy of preservation. Every civilian identity is worthless. New recruits are the lowest form of life, who do not deserve to live. If they are ever to become good soldiers, they must acknowledge their total inadequacy. They must be torn down in order to be rebuilt, killed in order to be reborn. Gustav Hasford, a combat journalist who served in Vietnam with the First Marine Division, writes about basic training in his novel *The Short-Timers* (the film *Full Metal Jacket* was based on this book). Hasford’s drill instructor spoke to recruits like: “If you ladies leave my island [Parris Island, South Carolina or San Diego, California], *if* you survive recruit training, you will be a weapon, you will be a minister of death, praying for war. And proud. Until that day you are pukes, you are scumbags, you are the lowest form on Earth. You are not even human. You people are nothing but a lot of little pieces of amphibian shit.”<sup>13</sup>

The first days of basic training are designed to reduce recruits to a psychological condition equivalent to early childhood. The drill instructors acted as parents, seeking in several intense weeks to replace seventeen or eighteen years of psychological and

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<sup>12</sup> Kovic, *Born on the Fourth of July*, 77.

<sup>13</sup> Hasford, *The Short-Timer*, 4.

physical development with wholly reconditioned minds and bodies. Every detail of life was prescribed, regulated, and enforced. Every moment was accounted for. There was a method and time for every action. The regimen was carried out in an environment of strict impersonality, collective isolation per se. Recruits could not be alone, nor could they engage their fellow recruits in unofficial activities or conversations. During the first week, conversation was forbidden altogether. In other words, much of boot camp was truly *basic* training. Recruits were told how to eat, how and when to speak, how to dress, when to go to the bathroom, how to walk, how to fold clothing and make beds, how to stand at attention and salute—how, in short, to perform the most elemental routine according to a rigid and standardized set of regulations. The DIs maintained this discipline with an iron hand. Though obedience was exacted by intimidation, the physical stress of basic training was induced by compliance.

Even well-trained athletes were taxed to the limit by physical demands. The day began between 4:00 and 5:00 in the morning, and between then and lights-out at 9:00 P.M., the recruits were continually subjected to exercise. Aside from the regular scheduled hours of physical training (PT), sergeants called for additional rounds of PT at any hour, for any reason. A speck of dust might send the entire platoon on a mile run or another hour scrubbing down the barracks. A sloppy salute could bring fifty push-ups. Simple exhaustion was a key factor in explaining the willingness of recruits to follow orders. They soon learned disobedience of any kind meant more pain—more harassment, more cleaning, and more fatigue. Given these circumstances, it is not surprising that most

men followed orders and worked as hard as possible to avoid the wrath of drill instructors.

### Building Aggression

Basic training was devoted to the tricky business of promoting two, not always compatible traits: discipline and aggression. Recruits were trained to be both compliant and violent. DIs tore down their recruits not only to generate the kind of fear that elicits obedience but also to inflame that sort of anger that could be channeled into aggressive soldiering. Uncontrolled aggression was not the final object. Unfocused, undisciplined rage is not an advantage in a fire fight. Instead, the military hoped to turn out soldiers who would be “cool” under fire, men able to return fire quickly, calmly, and mechanically. Therefore, basic training combined discipline and aggression, obedience and anger. The final goal was to instill in recruits a focused hostility aimed at a prescribed enemy.

Before DIs attempted to focus aggression on a specific enemy, they wanted to generate as much rage as possible, whatever its source or object. This was accomplished in part through the standard boot camp training drills in which men were pitted against each other in physical competitions. In bayonet training, for example, recruits fought each other with pugil sticks (five-foot poles with heavy padding on each end). These were tough battles in which DIs encouraged recruits to perceive their opponent as an enemy warranting no mercy. DI's were careful, however, to maintain control of the violence they provoked. They wanted to use the growing aggression of their recruits to help enforce the discipline and conformity of basic training. The goal was to make their

units essentially self-regulating and self-disciplining, enforcing among themselves the demands made by the DIs alone. The technique was simple. Whenever a trainee failed to perform according to standards, everyone in the unit was punished.

Aware that most recruits were from the bottom rungs of American society (as were some DIs), the DIs used class and racial descriptions to aggravate the pain many recruits associated with their civilian status. They called their men ‘bums,’ ‘losers,’ ‘morons,’ and others.<sup>14</sup> As soldier’s, societies losers were offered the prospect of professional standing. Men from middle and privileged statuses were ridiculed, too. They were told that their civilian status did not matter in the military, that in fact, their advantages were a disability. They were ‘pussies,’ ‘faggots,’ and ‘candy-asses.’<sup>15</sup> One of the functions of these epithets was not to divide the men but to unify them. So long as everyone was insulted, everyone was, in theory, equal. The insults created a sense of mutual degradation, a kind of solidarity of the despised. ‘There are no niggers in this platoon, there are no spics, there are no wops, there are no kikes, and there are no poor white whatever. . . . You are all fucking maggots and maggots you will remain until you’ve earned the right to call yourself United States Marines.’<sup>16</sup>

No doubt the experience of basic training did create a sense of unit solidarity across lines of race, class, and religion. That was the point. The goal, though, was not to eliminate racist thought entirely or promote tolerance of individual, ethnic, or national differences. The goal was to mold a rigid conformity to military discipline and to

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<sup>14</sup> Christian Appy, *Working-Class War*, 100.

<sup>15</sup> Christian Appy, *Working-Class War*, 100.

<sup>16</sup> Short and Seidenberg, ‘A Matter of Conscience,’ 83.

mobilize hostility against a foreign enemy. If the DIs' use of racist language served to diffuse internal hostilities among the trainees, it also served to legitimize racial stereotypes when projected on external groups such as the Vietnamese. In the first half of basic training, drill instructors fostered a general climate of aggression and anger. Much of it was focused internally. Trainees were encouraged to be angry at themselves, each other, and their DIs'. As training progressed, drill sergeants increasingly sought to direct aggression outward. As American recruits were turned from worthless and subhuman into professional killers, real men—soldiers, the foreign enemy became the central focus of animosity, the primary repository of all that was base and loathsome: “gooks.”<sup>17</sup>

### Building a Killer

Midway through basic training you might find yourself near the end of a two-mile run. Just a few weeks ago, the same run brought you to the point of collapse, drenched in sweat and gasping for air; but today your legs feel strong, and you are breathing easily. Glancing around, you know the other men are equally relaxed. You cannot remember ever feeling so good, full of energy. The thrill of your own strength expands in recognition the enormous collective power surging through the platoon. The once motley and uncoordinated collection of trainees has begun to think and act as an organized unit. Now, DIs begin to build relationships with these men, though the shouting and taunting never stops. These changes were crucial to the second stage of training, the effort to produce strong, confident fighters. Having been broken down to nothing—their identities stripped, their compliance won, and their aggression heightened—recruits were gradually

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<sup>17</sup> Christian Appy, *Working-Class War*, 103.



rebuilt into soldiers. The transition was gradual, but the key turning point, a moment of great significance, came when the trainees began weapon training.

On the rifle range, trainees were ordinarily taught by marksmanship instructors rather than their regular DI's. Even the hard drill instructors began to sound like potential allies—stubborn and tough but devoted to making everyone combat-ready. They began to talk about the importance of teamwork and unity, how in combat each man's life depended on everyone in the unit. Failure by one man can result in the death of all. The warning gained extra impact as the recruits began firing live ammunition. Suddenly the prospect of combat felt more tangible. After all, recruits began to listen to their DIs with new ears. Many of the sergeants were combat veterans, men who might possess lifesaving information. With these changes came an easing of restrictions. More conversation was allowed among the men. Recruits began to get to know one another, and DIs encouraged them to take pride in their platoon. Harassment of individuals was less frequent and brutal. Recruits were now addressed as a group. Competitions within the training units were gradually replaced by competition against other units. Recruits were still encouraged to enforce conformity within their own units, to put pressure on slackers, but the focus was on unit pride and solidarity.

As recruits began to feel more confident and less abused, they began to internalize the attitudes of their instructors. Just as rifle training gave recruits an outlet for the intense anxiety and rage that came to a boil in the initial weeks, instructors increasingly aimed their recruits' hostility at external enemies. The most obvious enemy was the Vietcong. Many DIs also instructed hostility at a variety of civilian targets. As training proceeded,

many recruits began to share those hostilities towards civilians. DIs especially denounced hippies, draft-dodgers, and demonstrators. These figures were portrayed as cowards who were trying to escape the danger of military service. They were not to be taken lightly. They were “traitors” who posed a threat to the nation and soldiers themselves. Recruits were encouraged to believe that all protestors supported the Vietcong and that the anti-war movement cheered when American troops got wiped out in Vietnam. DIs embellished the civilian threat by introducing the specter of the hometown “Jody.” A legendary figure in military culture, Jody is a civilian who steals girlfriends and wives while soldiers are away fighting wars.<sup>18</sup> Promoting animosity toward draft evaders and Jodie’s was a way to build support for the war in Vietnam. Somehow fighting in Vietnam would be a way to get back at those who had managed to escape the draft, those who did not share the abuse of basic training, and those who could sit home and criticize the war and steal girlfriends.

Being trained to suspect civilians has an even darker side in the context of the Vietnam War. The official mission was to save South Vietnam from Vietcong insurgents. Most civilians either supported the Vietcong, were themselves part of a local Vietcong self-defense cadre, or reluctant to act in opposition to the Vietcong. This dilemma posed a fundamental contradiction to American policy, military training ignored it. Trainees were often told that all Vietnamese were potential enemies, but they received no special training designed to reduce civilian casualties. Given the American military effort to destroy the Vietcong in heavily populated areas, perhaps no form of training could have

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<sup>18</sup>Christian Appy, *Working-Class War*, 106.

done much better to protect civilian lives. The foreign enemy was variously called VC, Victor Charlie, Charlie, and Charlie Cong, Communists, commies, dinks, slopes, zipper heads, zips, and gooks.<sup>19</sup> The variety of names was telling. After all, the point was not to know the enemy but to despise him. Beyond these portrayals of the enemy, trainees learned little more about the Vietnamese revolutionaries and why they were fighting so hard against American forces. As Charles Corwin points out, “the only thing they told us about the Vietcong was they were gooks. They were to be killed. Nobody sits around and gives you their historical and cultural background. They’re the enemy. Kill, kill, kill. That’s what we got in practice. Kill, kill, kill.”<sup>20</sup>

### Receiving Orders

At the end of basic training, recruits were assigned Military Occupational Specialties (MOS). A man’s MOS determined what sort of Advanced Individual Training (AIT) he would undergo for two months. It was not until the final weeks of AIT that men learned where they would be sent for their tour of duty. Most of the men who were sent to Vietnam in 1965—the first year of the major buildup of American ground forces—did not receive word of their orders until just before leaving the United States or their overseas bases. With the rapid escalation of 1965-67, when American forces rose from 20,000 to over 500,000, recruits entered basic training well aware that the prospect of service in Vietnam was a possibility.<sup>21</sup> In some units DIs invoked the war as a threat, as if they had personal control over who went to Vietnam. The DIs would tell disobedient

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<sup>19</sup>Christian Appy, *Working-Class War*, 107.

<sup>20</sup> Charles Cowin Interview, February 19, 2010, *Voices of Iowa*, Grout Museum, Waterloo, IA.

<sup>21</sup> Christian Appy, *Working-Class War*, 111.

recruits that if they did not shape up, they would go to Vietnam. (Beginning in 1965 most tour of duty assignments were made by the computer, and the DI's power to affect such orders was quite limited).<sup>22</sup>

Those entering AIT in combat specialties were often warned from the beginning that the chances for a non-Vietnam assignment were slim. As one AIT drill sergeant said in 1968, "I don't want you to mope around thinking about Germany or London. . . .Don't even think about it, 'cause there ain't no way. You're leg men now, and we don't need no infantry in Piccadilly and Southampton. . . .Every swingin' dick is going to Nam, every big fat swingin' dick."<sup>23</sup> As the war continued, the military began to downplay the likelihood of service in Vietnam. By 1969 and 1970 it was not unusual for trainees to be told there was only a remote chance of being sent to Vietnam. False assurances also reflected a desire to placate reluctant and increasingly anti-war trainees and to stem the growing tide of desertion. In 1965, the desertion rate was only fifteen men per thousand (a lower rate than Korea or World War II). By 1969, the rate had climbed to fifty per thousand, and by 1972 it was up to seventy—the highest rate of desertion in modern American military history. By the end of the war, more than 500,000 men had deserted.<sup>24</sup> The military has always been concerned about desertion, but in the late 1960's and early 1970's it was a major preoccupation. The effort to curb desertions was a factor in the moderation of training.

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<sup>22</sup>Christian Appy, *Working-Class War*, 111.

<sup>23</sup> Tim O'Brien, *If I Die in a Combat Zone*, 67.

<sup>24</sup> Christian Appy, *Working-Class War*, 112.

When soldiers did receive orders for Vietnam, many were struck with the realization that, for all their military training, they knew nothing about Vietnam. That nation's history, geography, culture, politics—such topics, covered at best with a few lectures and films at the end of AIT. It is not surprising that American soldiers were taught nothing about the Vietnamese overthrow of French colonialism. What is astonishing, is how little preparation most soldiers had of the actual conditions they would face in Vietnam. It is rare to find veterans who believed they were prepared for the specific challenges they would face: hostile civilians, the dangers, anxieties, and moral pressure of conducting counterrevolutionary war amidst a civilian population supportive of the Vietcong; the uncertainties of service in rear areas; and the nature of the battle once the enemy was engaged. The misrepresentation of the Vietnamese opposition is far from merely semantic. It utterly obfuscates one of the most crucial aspects of the war. The Vietcong were often indistinguishable from noncombatant civilians.

As we shall see, no military training program, however “realistic,” could have prepared American soldiers for the war they were to fight. The fundamental obstacles to fighting a counterrevolutionary war among the people so largely supportive of the anti-American cause would have remained no matter how many soldiers learned the Vietnamese language or confronted, from the outset of training, the difficulties of determining the political affiliations of the Vietnamese people. Had they confronted such complexities early on, their anxiety might have been even higher. As it was, when American troops landed in Vietnam, they stepped into a reality unlike anything they ever imagined.

### American Terms: War by Numbers

Even in the early 1960's, when civilian and military leaders talked of great length about counterinsurgency and "special warfare," implying that the United States would defeat communists at their own game, the actual tactics were most often conventional efforts to engage the enemy in open, set-piece battles. Neither the South Vietnamese nor the American forces proved capable of getting the enemy to fight on their terms. General Westmoreland argued in *A Soldier's Report*: "Pacification was the ultimate goal of both the Americans and the South Vietnamese government. A complex task involving military, psychological, political, and economic factors, its aim was to achieve an economically and politically viable society in which people could live without constant fear of death of physical harm."<sup>25</sup> Fundamental for pacification was security. In other words, the government forces spent most of their time guarding hamlets and villages, keeping the enemy out while American forces handled most of the combat. The results were endless, often fruitless patrols in search of the elusive guerillas. The Americans often attributed the South Vietnamese failures to engage the enemy to factors like poor leadership, low morale, high desertion rates, cowardice, corrupt officers, or bad training. But the Americans, even at their most aggressive, had a hard time initiating fights. The enemy could not be annihilated if it could not be found.

Attrition was the American strategy; search and destroy was the principle tactic; and the enemy body count was the primary measure of progress. "I elected to fight the so-called big-unit war not because of any Napoleonic impulse to maneuver units and hark to

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<sup>25</sup> General William Westmoreland, *A Soldier's Report*, 68.

the sound of cannon,” bestowed General Westmoreland, “but because of the basic fact that the enemy had committed big units and I ignored them at the peril.”<sup>26</sup> American soldiers were sent into villages, rice paddies, and jungles of South Vietnam as hunters. The object of the hunt was to kill the Vietnamese communists, as many as possible. That was the focus of the American mission. “The U.S. military strategy employed in Vietnam, dictated by political decisions, was essentially that of attrition.”<sup>27</sup>

Since the World War I battles of the Somme and Verdun, that has been the strategy in disrepute, one that many appeared particularly unsuited for a war in Asia with Asia’s legendary hordes of manpower. Yet the war in Vietnam, according to General Westmoreland was not against Asian hordes but against an enemy with limited manpower. “As the South Vietnamese government’s control embraced more and more of the countryside, the enemy’s recruiting base decreased and the VC had to depend on the North Vietnamese to make good their losses.”<sup>28</sup>

General Westmoreland developed three phases for the strategy. First, American combat troops were to be used to protect logistical bases. Although from time to time, they may have been committed as “fire brigades” whenever the enemy’s big-units posed a threat. In the second and most important phase, American troops were to “gain the initiative, penetrate, and whenever possible eliminate the enemy’s base camps and sanctuaries.”<sup>29</sup> Westmoreland believed so-long as the enemy was free to emerge from those

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<sup>26</sup>General William Westmoreland, *A Soldier’s Report*, 149.

<sup>27</sup>General William Westmoreland, *A Soldier’s Report*, 153.

<sup>28</sup>General William Westmoreland, *A Soldier’s Report*, 153.

<sup>29</sup> General William Westmoreland, *A Soldier’s Report*, 145.

hideouts to terrorize people, recruit and impress, levy taxes, and attack enemy troops, there was little hope to defeating the insurgency. In the final phase, troops were to move into sustained ground combat and mop up the last of the main forces and guerillas, or at least push them across the frontiers where they could be contained. Two additional tasks were pursued throughout the three phases: pacification and strengthening the ARVN. The goal in all these operations was to “open roads and waterways, which were essential for moving troops, people, and commerce.”<sup>30</sup>

The all-important operational index of the body count determined the success of any particular engagement, but there were usually problems in ascertaining how many of the enemy were actually killed. Many times, especially after small-scale engagements, both the Vietcong and the North Vietnamese tried to take their dead with them when they disappeared back into the bush. So there might not have been a body count in the first place. More often than not the body count was inflated.<sup>31</sup> Equally important, was heavy institutional pressure from above for results. Score sheets were often put up in command posts down to the platoon level for keeping score. Commanding officers often gave rewards, from cases of beer to three days R&R, for the unit with the highest body counts.

The term *search and destroy* was coined in 1965 to describe missions aimed at flushing the Vietcong out of hiding. However, such operations had been a staple of American advisers and South Vietnamese troops from 1959 to 1964. The only difference between the American military approach of 1954-64 and 1965-1970 were the identities of

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<sup>30</sup> General William Westmoreland, *A Soldier's Report*, 146.

<sup>31</sup> E. James Westheider, *Fighting in Vietnam: The Experience of the U.S. Soldier*, 129.



the soldiers and the intensity of the warfare. From 1965-1970, American troops carried the lion's share of the offensive combat. "It was unfortunate that American strategy in Vietnam came to be known as a "search-and destroy" strategy, for that misnomer fed a general American abhorrence for the destruction that warfare inevitably produces," said Westmoreland.<sup>32</sup> He argued that a few graphic photographs and a TV shot of American Marines setting fire to thatch-roof huts were enough to convince many that search-and-destroy was tantamount to a scorched earth. He continued to defend his case that the operations were aimed at finding the enemy and eliminating his military installations—bunkers, tunnels, rice and ammunition caches, training camps, the essentials if their base camps and sanctuaries were to continue to provide for which he terrorized the people. "Those surely are legitimate goals in any kind of war."<sup>33</sup>

This was a different war, fought miles away from home—without knowledge of the people and terrain. For Americans, the political upheaval meant nothing, "freedom" had to be defended at all costs. As Johnny Wright's famous song "Hello Vietnam" portrayed "America has trouble to be stopped. We must stop communism in that land, or freedom will start slipping through our hands. I hope and pray someday the world will learn, that fires we don't put out will bigger burn. We must save freedom now at any cost, or someday our own freedom will be lost."<sup>34</sup> Overall the conflict in Vietnam was approached as a practical matter that yielded to the unfettered application of well-trained

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<sup>32</sup>E. James Westheider, *Fighting in Vietnam: The Experience of the U.S. Soldier*, 152.

<sup>33</sup>E. James Westheider, *Fighting in Vietnam: The Experience of the U.S. Soldier*, 153.

<sup>34</sup> "Hello Vietnam" by Johnny Wright. #1 on the *Billboard* Hot Country Singles chart, October 23 – November 12, 1965.

minds, and of the bountiful resources in men, weapons and money that a great power can command. For this was a civil war, with a mix of revolution involved. They would storm hills and villages, not beaches, juts to leave them a few weeks later. “Was it worth it,” a common slogan of American GIs after such “invasion,” seems relevant. Was Vietnam worth the sacrifices, horror, and even triumphs? We can only know by investigating those who lived it.

## CHAPTER 1

## THE WORKING-CLASS WARRIOR

The average age of soldiers in Vietnam was nineteen to twenty-two. Most troops were not old enough to vote, as the voting age did not drop from twenty-one to eighteen until 1971. Nonetheless, most Americans who fought in Vietnam were powerless, teenagers sent to fight an “undeclared” war by presidents for whom they were not eligible to vote. The Selective Service System’s class-biased channeling, the military’s wartime slashing of the admissions standards, Project 100,000, medical exemptions that favored the well-informed and privileged, student deferments, the safe haven of the National Guard and the reserves were the key institution factors in the creation of the working-class warrior. “Some folks were born made to wave the flag, ooooooh that red, white and blue,” rang Credence Clearwater Revivals *Fortunate Son*, “and when the man plays *Hale to the Chief* oooh they point the cannon at you. It ain’t me, it aint me, I aint no fortunate one.”<sup>35</sup>

“In June of 68’, after college graduation, I was drafted to a war I hated,” said Tim O’Brien, author of *The Things They Carried*. “I was twenty-one years old. Young, yes, and politically naïve, but even so the American war in Vietnam seemed to me so wrong.”<sup>36</sup> During the Vietnam War, the mass media gave little attention to the relationship of the working-class to Vietnam. Rather than documenting the class inequalities of military service and the complex feelings of soldiers and their families about the war in Vietnam, the media contributed to the construction of an image of workers as the war’s strongest

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<sup>35</sup> Credence Clearwater Revival, “Fortunate Son,” 1969. National Registry, 2014.

<sup>36</sup> Tim O’Brien, *The Things They Carried*, 40.

supporters. The media portrayed the working-class as ultra-patriotic hawks whose political values could be understood simply by reading bumper stickers on some of their cars and pickups: “Love it or Leave it.”<sup>37</sup> These “hard hats” or “red necks” were portrayed as “Joe six-pack,” or a flag waving, blue collar, anti-intellectual, who, on top of everything, was assumed to be a bigot. The working-class were the primary components of the American combat forces in Vietnam. The media’s interpretation of the working-class is important, but it is not the context of this chapter. This chapter focuses on the circumstances working-class youth were dealt and how they were induced or sucked into the military by key institutional factors.

Christian Appy, author of *Working-Class War: American Combat Soldiers and Vietnam* argued that “Vietnam, more than any other American war in the twentieth century, perhaps in our history, was a working-class war.”<sup>38</sup> Poor and working-class soldiers, whether white or black, were more likely to be trained for combat than were soldiers economically and educationally more advantaged. The institutions most responsible for channeling men into the military—the draft, school, and the job market—directed working-class men to the armed forces and their wealthier peers towards college. Class was a crucial factor in determining who fought in Vietnam. In both cases, working-class laborers and soldiers did the nations “dirty work”—one abroad and the other at home—and each performed them under strict orders and with little compensation. Soldiers in Vietnam, like workers at home, believed the nation had little, if any, appreciation for their sacrifices.

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<sup>37</sup> Christian Appy, *Working-Class War: American Combat Soldiers and Vietnam*, 6.

<sup>38</sup> Christian Appy, *Working-Class War: American Combat Soldiers and Vietnam*, 38.

Though racial attitudes and discrimination persisted in the military, social standing more than race determined the overall composition of the armed forces in the Vietnam era.

### The Boundary of Choice

“It’s not just a job. It’s an adventure,” read many recruiting slogans. The economy in the 1960s did remarkably well, as it was the final decade of the postwar economic boom. “Between 1960 and 1972, median family income nearly doubled and the GNP even more.”<sup>39</sup> With such growth, the working-class youth would have done better in the civilian economy than in the military. However, the working-class did not equally share the postwar economic boom of the 1960’s. As Philip Caputo demonstrates:

I had spent my freshman year of college at Purdue, but a slump in the economy prevented me from finding a job that summer. Unable to afford the expense of living on campus (and almost flunking out anyway, having spent half of my first year drinking and the other half in fraternity antics, I had to transfer to Loyola, a commuter college in Chicago.<sup>40</sup>

Appy argued that during the height of the Vietnam War, 1965-1969, the real wages of working people remained constant and in some cases dropped.<sup>41</sup> More significantly, the unemployment rate among young men was far above the national level. In between 1965-1970, unemployment rates among males aged sixteen to nineteen averaged 12.5 percent (12 percent among whites and 27 percent among blacks).<sup>42</sup> Therefore, poor and working-class youth were less likely to secure stable, well-paying jobs.

Even when good blue-collar jobs were open, employers stood reluctant to hire draft-vulnerable men. Such jobs often required a period of training and employers hesitated

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<sup>39</sup> Christian Appy, *Working-Class War*, 45.

<sup>40</sup> Philip Caputo, *Rumor of War*, 6.

<sup>41</sup> Christian Appy, *Working-Class War*, 45.

<sup>42</sup> Hodgson, *American in Our Time*, 466, 482; Binkin and Eitelberg, *Blacks and the Military*, 68; Helmer, *Bringing the War Home*, 108.

to invest in young men who might be drafted. For working-class draft-bait in search of nonmilitary labor, everything but the most menial jobs were nearly impossible to land. In Glen Falls, New York, the *New York Times* found draft-age men unable to get decent jobs at the local lumber mills and manufacturing plants. “You try to get a job,” reported eighteen-year-old Jerry Reynolds, “and the first thing they ask is if you fulfilled your military service. The only jobs available were those paying \$50 to \$75 a week with no hope of advancement.”<sup>43</sup> John Picciano, a working-class high school graduate from Lodi, New Jersey, began looking for work in 1966. “He tried employer after employer, applying for jobs in stores, factories, offices. It was the same everywhere.” As soon as they found out he was ‘draft bait,’ the interview ended abruptly with the explanation that the company wanted someone on a permanent basis. Job seekers were typically told to “Come back and see us when you get this draft thing out of the way.”<sup>44</sup>

College was not a realistic option for most working-class men. Those who started college often interrupted their education to earn money to continue; others went to school part time. Regardless of choice, the working-class were draft vulnerable despite some education. Chris DeBeau was a student at the University of Hartford when his draft notice arrived: “I was in school. But I was carrying a course load of nine credits. You had to have 12 or 15 then [to receive a deferment]. But I was working two jobs so I didn’t have time for another three credits.”<sup>45</sup> In the face of these constraints, many men decided to enlist. With the prospect of a dead-end job, little if any chance for college, and the draft looming,

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<sup>43</sup> Ralph Blumenthal, “Glen Falls and the War,” *New York Times*, 12 July 1967, 4.

<sup>44</sup> Franks, *Waiting out a War*, 42-43.

<sup>45</sup> Chris DeBeau was another interviewee by Christian Appy, 12 May 1982.

many saw enlistment as unavoidable. Military recruiters often tailored their pitch to the draft; essentially meaning, to enlist before being drafted was a much better option. Sign up, and you can pick your branch of the service and the kind of training you want—so went a standard spiel. This Army recruiting slogan added a key component to how the military tailored to the draft: “make your choice now—join, or we’ll make the choice for you.”<sup>46</sup> Some recruits were won over with smiling assurances that, by volunteering, their odds of going to Vietnam (or at least fighting in combat) were almost nil, though rarely backed by guarantees.

### The Selective Service System

Because the generation that came to age in the 1960s was massive, the Selective Service exempted far more men than it drafted. From 1964-1973, the United States Armed Forces drafted 2.2 million men, 8.7 million enlisted, and 16 million did not serve.<sup>47</sup> The millions of exemptions was designed to produce a military machine that mirrored the social composition of society at large. At the heart of this effort to engineer society’s lower strata was the concept of “channeling” by the military and the government. The basic idea was to use the threat of the draft and lure educational and professional deferments to channel men into non-military occupations that the Selective Service believed vital to the national health, safety, and interests of the nation. Such deferments were for teachers, engineers, and other prominent working capacities that were at the heart of the so-called national

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<sup>46</sup> Baskir and Strauss, *Chance and Circumstance*, 55.

<sup>47</sup> Baskir and Strauss, *Chance and Circumstance*, 28.

interests. The draft determined the social character of the Armed Forces by whom it exempted from service as well by who it conscripted or induced to enlist.

The primary architect of this system Gen. Lewis B. Hershey, director of the Selective Service from 1941 to 1968, believed it was essential to protect intellectuals vital to the nation's interests and businesses'. Wars inherently boost economies and enhance business, intellectuals were prominent spokesmen and members of such businesses. In other words, the working-class youth were dispensable. Unlike scientist, engineers, and other intellectuals, workers can be replaced. Prominent intellectuals were protected to enhance a capitalist scheme. As the Vietnam War escalated, capitalist and the government alike sought to protect their interest, while exploiting those without the boundaries of such choice. The Selective Service System is a prime example of exploitation of the masses, while a select few were exempt to protect the nation's interest.

According to his biographer, George Flynn, Hershey was initially hesitant, if not hostile, toward student deferments, unsure of their value and fairness.<sup>48</sup> However, this master bureaucrat, determined to build a permanent draft. The six advisory committees he appointed in 1948, during the creation of the first peacetime draft, all supported student deferments. They argued that virtually every academic field had contributed to the victory during World War II and the draft should protect at least the most successful college and graduate students. As the nuclear age advanced, influential policy makers were persuaded that the outcome of future wars might be determined not by the masses of combat soldiers

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<sup>48</sup> Christian Appy, *Working-Class War*, 30.



but by teams of high-powered, white-jacketed scientists and engineers.<sup>49</sup> Hershey speedily encompassed student deferments, and by the mid-1950s he became their most important advocate.

Most of the class-biased draft policies of the 1960s were in place by the early 1950s. However, the Korean War was not quite as class skewed as the Vietnam War. First, while there were student deferments, college graduates enlisted in rough proportion to their numbers. Second, in the case of Korea, unlike Vietnam, the reserves were mobilized. Reserve units usually have a more balanced class composition than regular military units.<sup>50</sup> During the period between Korea and Vietnam, draft calls were so low the military “could afford to raise its admission standards and place more draftees in electronic and technical fields.”<sup>51</sup> Precisely, throughout the late 1950s and early 1960s, the Selective Service System was commonly criticized not because it offered too many deferments to the privileged but because “the under privileged were too often barred from the benefits of military service by unrealistically high mental and physical standards.”<sup>52</sup> Though the national headquarters of the Selective Service provided the general framework guidelines and regulations, the system was designed to be highly centralized, with authority largely delegated to the 4,000 local boards across the country.

In 1963 Daniel P. Moynihan, Assistant Secretary of Labor for Policy Planning, learned that one-half of the men called by their draft boards for physical and mental

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<sup>49</sup>Christian Appy, *Working-Class War*, 30.

<sup>50</sup> Christian Appy, *Working-Class War*, 30

<sup>51</sup>Christian Appy, *Working-Class War*, 30.

<sup>52</sup> Baskir and Strauss, *Chance and Circumstance*, 20-21.

examinations failed one or both of the tests and were less qualified for military service. Moynihan was particularly disturbed that working-class boys were most likely to be rejected. They were most commonly rejected for failing the intelligence test, the Armed Forces Qualification Test. In the early 1960's almost half of the men who failed this test came from families with six or more children and annual incomes of less than \$4,000.<sup>53</sup> Moynihan described this high rejection rate as job discrimination against the least able and educated young men. As a response, Moynihan organized a presidential task force to examine conscription policies to explore possibilities by which the military could take responsibility for training men who initially failed to meet its military standards.

The task force study *One Third of a Nation* (1964), called for the military to lower its entrance requirements and provide special training to those with mental and social handicaps. For Moynihan, the military seemed like an untapped agent of social uplift with the potential to train the unskilled, to put unemployed youth to work, and to instill confidence and pride in the psychologically defeated. More than that, "he believed the military could help solve the problem he claimed was at the heart of poverty and broken families."<sup>54</sup> In response to Moynihan's proposal, by 1964 the military began a series of pilot programs to admit a small number of draft rejects who agreed to voluntary rehabilitation as a part of their military training, but these programs had little impact on the social composition of the military. In 1965, as the draft calls grew to the fill the troop buildup in South Vietnam, the military began to lower its admission standards quite rapidly.

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<sup>53</sup> Christian Appy, *Working-Class War*, 31.

<sup>54</sup> Christian Appy, *Working-Class War*, 31.

As the case with all wars, the government and military induced more men to fill in gaps. Therefore, the project was simply useless because a conflict had broken out. The military needed bodies, yet at the same time the government wanted to protect those vital to their interests. So working-class boys took the brunt of the military buildup.

With no intention of engaging in any social uplift, the military accepted more and more men who scored low on the mental examination. During the 1950s and early 1960s, men who scored in the lowest categories (IV and V) were rarely accepted into the military. Beginning in 1965, hundreds of thousands of category IV men were drafted. “Most were from poor and broken families,” continued Appy. “80 percent were high school drop outs, and half had IQs of less than eight-five.”<sup>55</sup> Prior to the American escalation in Vietnam such men were rejected. With the war on, “new standards” were implemented and suddenly such men were declared fit to fight. Between 1965 and 1966 the overall rejection rate fell from 50 to 34 percent, and by 1967 mental rejections were cut in half.<sup>56</sup> These “new standards” men were offered no special training to raise their intellectual skills like Moynihan suggested. Most were trained for combat. Yet, in 1966 Moynihan was still calling for lower military standards.

That year, Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara instituted a program that promised to carry out many of Moynihan’s proposals. Called “Project 100,000” McNamara’s program was designed to admit 100,000 men into the military each year who failed the qualifying exam even at the lower standards of 1965. This program, McNamara

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<sup>55</sup> Christian Appy, *Working-Class War*, 31.

<sup>56</sup> Baskir and Strauss, *Chance and Circumstance*, 124, 129.

gloated, would offer valuable training and opportunity for America's 'subterranean poor.'

As McNamara put it:

The poor of America . . . have not had the opportunity to earn their fair share of this nation's abundance, but they can be given an opportunity to serve in their country's defense and they can be given the opportunity to return to civilian life with skills and aptitudes which for them and their families will reverse the downward spiral of decay.<sup>57</sup>

Not well known in the overall scheme of President Johnson's Great Society, Project 100,000 has virtually disappeared. However, this project was part of the "war on poverty," a liberal effort to uplift the poor, and it was instituted "with high-minded rhetoric about offering the poor an opportunity to serve."<sup>58</sup> The end result, was sending confused and woefully uneducated boys to risk their lives in Vietnam.

The effect of Project 100,000 was calamitous because the promised intellectual and career training was never carried out. Of the 240,000 men inducted by Project 100,000 from 1966 to 1968, only 6 percent received additional training, which amounted to a little more of an effort to raise reading skills to a fifth grade level. Forty percent were trained for combat, compared with only 25 percent for all enlisted men.<sup>59</sup> While African Americans comprised 10 percent of the entire military, they represented about 40 percent of the Project 100,000 soldiers. A 1970 Defense Department study estimated that half of the 400,000 men who entered the military under Project 100,000 were sent to Vietnam, and these men had a death rate twice as high as American forces as a whole. This was a Great Society program that was quite literally shot down on the battlefields of Vietnam."<sup>60</sup> Project 100,000 and

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<sup>57</sup> Helmer, *Bringing the War Home*, 9.

<sup>58</sup> Christian Appy, *Working-Class War*, 32.

<sup>59</sup> Christian Appy, *Working-Class War*, 32-33.

<sup>60</sup> Barnes, *Pawns*, 68; Baskir and Strauss, *Chance and Circumstances*, 47.

the abandonment of all but the most minimal mental requirements for military service were institutional mechanisms in lowering the class composition of the American military. Had the prewar mental standards continued, almost 3 million men would have been exempted from the military on the basis of intelligence. Under the lower standards, only 1.36 million were mentally disqualified.<sup>61</sup>

Almost three times as many men, 3.5 million, were exempted because of their physical conditions. That men from disadvantaged backgrounds, with poorer nutrition and less access to decent health care, would have received most of these exemptions if a war never broke out. In practice, most physical exemptions were assigned to men who had the knowledge or resources to claim an exemption. Educated and privileged men had more knowledge and social power to coerce physicians and psychiatrist. But, poor and working-class men ordinarily allowed military doctors to determine their physical well-being. Induction examination centers performed perfunctory exercises in which all but the most obvious disabilities were overlooked. Privileged men who arrived at their inductions centers with professional documentation of a disqualifying ailment had the best chances of receiving a medical exemption. Induction centers usually did not have the time nor the desire to challenge an outside opinion.

A case of an induction center in Seattle, Washington, was an extreme example, but it underlines the significance of this point. At the center, the men were divided into two groups: “Those who had letters from doctors or psychiatrists, and those who did not.

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<sup>61</sup> Christian Appy, *Working-Class War*, 33.

Everyone with a letter received an exemption, regardless of what the letter said.”<sup>62</sup> Even the slightest disabilities were granted medical exemptions. For instance, skin rashes, flat feet, asthma, and trick knees ailments were easily missed or ignored by military doctors. Because they were legal exemptions confirmed by a family physician they were not contested. Men who were knowledgeable of the system, the means to press such a claim had a 90 percent chance of receiving a physical or psychological exemption even if they were in good health.<sup>63</sup>

Draft lore such as Arlo Guthrie’s “Alice’s Restaurant” made famous some of the most bizarre effects of draft avoidance. Indeed, some men would load up on drugs before the physical, fasting or gorging to surpass the weight requirements, faking insanity and homosexuality, or aggravating an old knee injury. There is no specific evidence of how many men tried these, but the majority who received medical exemptions by their own efforts probably did so in a far less dramatic fashion by finding a professional to support their claim.<sup>64</sup> That men who were the most able and likely to seek professional help in avoiding the draft were white and middle-class is not surprising. On many college campuses students could find political or psychological support for draft resistance along with concrete advice on how to do it. In working-class neighborhoods, the innumerable ways to avoid the draft were not only less known, because they had little community support. In most of these neighborhoods, avoiding the draft was cowardice. Therefore, they did not seek a physician’s help, or they did not have the knowledgeable capabilities to do

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<sup>62</sup> Baskir and Strauss, *Chances and Circumstance*, 47.

<sup>63</sup> Christian Appy, *Working-Class War*, 34.

<sup>64</sup> Baskir and Strauss, *Chances and Circumstance*, 36-48.

so. Avoiding the draft would most likely have been seen as act of cowardice than as “a principled unwillingness to participate in an immoral war.”<sup>65</sup> The burden of responsibility for claiming an exemptions fell on the individual registrant.

Even exemptions that were aimed at the poor, such as those for “hardship,” were often ineffectual for men who were unaware of them or lacked the wherewithal to demonstrate their claim to the Selective Service. Much depended on the discretion of the local draft board. Draft boards included volunteers who typically met only once a month. With hundreds of cases to decide, board members could give careful attention to only the most difficult. The rest were reviewed by a full-time service clerk whose decisions were usually rubber-stamped by the board. One study found that the civil servant determined the outcome of 85 percent of the cases.<sup>66</sup> As a part of this system, the advantage went to those registrants abled enough to document their claims convincingly. What may be persuasive to one board, however, may not be to another. There were significant variations in the way different boards operated. Occupational deferments, for example, often depended on what local boards determined to be “in the national health, safety, or interests.”<sup>67</sup>

Local discretionary power produced a number of anomalies. Most local boards administered the system in ways that reinforced the class inequalities underlying the broad national system of manpower channeling. The decentralized system added an advantage to registrant’s with economic clout and social connections. A 1966 study of the 16,638 draft board members around the nation found that only 9 percent had blue-collar occupations,

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<sup>65</sup> Christian Appy, *Working-Class War*, 34.

<sup>66</sup>Christian Appy, *Working-Class War*, 34.

<sup>67</sup> Davis and Dolbeare, *Little Groups of Neighbors*, 78-83; Baskir and Strauss, *Chance and Circumstance*, 24-25.

while more than 70 percent were professionals, managers, proprietors, public officials, or white-collar workers over the age of 50. Only 1.3 percent were black.<sup>68</sup> Until 1967, when Congress revoked the prohibition, women were forbidden from serving on local draft boards because Gen. Hershey “feared they would be embarrassed when a physical question emerged.”<sup>69</sup>

The student deferment was the most class-biased feature of the Vietnam era draft system. Census records show that youth from families earning \$7,000 to \$10,000 were almost two and a half times more likely to attend college than those families earning under \$5,000.<sup>70</sup> Likewise, working-class boys who did go to college were far more likely to attend part-time while working. This was quite crucial because deferments were only issued to full-time students, excluding those trying to earn a degree by working their way through school part time. In addition, unsuccessful students with low class ranks could lose their deferments. The grades required to keep a student deferment varied according to the practice of local draft boards, but in 1966 and 1967 the Selective Service sought to weed out the poor students systematically by giving a million students the Selective Service Qualifying Test.<sup>71</sup> Many who scored poorly were reclassified and drafted. The irony is that the draft grabbed those students who were among the least qualified according to its own test.<sup>72</sup>

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<sup>68</sup> Davis and Dolbeare, *Little Groups of Neighbors*, 57-59, 82.

<sup>69</sup> George Flynn, *Lewis B. Hershey*, 254.

<sup>70</sup> Davis and Dolbeare, *Little Groups of Neighbors*, 50.

<sup>71</sup> Christian Appy, *Working-Class War: American Combat Soldiers and Vietnam*, 35.

<sup>72</sup> Baskir and Strauss, *Chance and Circumstance*, 23.



While unsuccessful and part-time students were draft-bait, successful full-time students could preserve their draft immunity by going to graduate school. Those who trained as engineers, scientists, or teachers could square occupational deferments. Though graduate students in every field received deferments, the primary intention of the inducement, according to Gen. Hershey, was to bolster the ranks of whom would serve defense-related industries. In 1965, Hershey wrote, “The process of channeling manpower by deferment is entitles too much credit for the large number of graduate students in technical fields and for the fact that there is not a greater shortage of teachers, engineers and scientists working in activities which are essential to the national interests.”<sup>73</sup>

The campus-based antiwar and draft resistance movements deserve much of the credit for exposing the class-biased system of channeling to public scrutiny. The antiwar critique of channeling is often neglected by those who accuse the movement participants as hiding behind their student deferments. As one draft resistance manifesto put it: “Most of us now have deferments. . . . But all these individual outs can have no effect on the draft, the war, or the consciousness of this country. . . . To cooperate with conscription is to perpetuate its existence. . . . We will renounce all deferments.”<sup>74</sup> Though most young men in the Movement kept their deferments or found other ways to avoid the draft, a small group did accept prison sentences for resisting the draft. The major thrust of the effort was to keep *all* Americans from fighting in Vietnam. By drawing attention to the inequalities of the system, they helped generate support for the draft reforms of 1967 and the draft

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<sup>73</sup> Helmer, *Bringing the War Home*, 6.

<sup>74</sup> Christian Appy, *Working-Class War*, 36.

lottery in 1969. The 1967 reforms included the elimination of deferments for graduate school. This reduction in deferments was a key factor in raising the portion of college graduates who served in Vietnam from about 6 percent in 1966 to 10 percent in 1970.<sup>75</sup>

Still, there were many ways to avoid Vietnam after graduating from college. In addition to medical and school exemptions, one of the most common was the National Guard or the reserves. In 1968, 80 percent of American reservists described themselves as draft-motivated enlistees.<sup>76</sup> The reserves required six years of part-time duty, but many men who joined believed correctly there was little chance they would be mobilized to fight in Vietnam. President Johnson rejected the military's frequent request for mobilization of the reserves and the National Guard. He feared activating these units would bolster unwanted attention from the antiwar sector. Since these men were drawn from specific towns and urban neighborhoods, their mobilization would have had a dramatic impact on concentrated populations. Johnsons also realized that reservists and guardsmen were generally older than the regular army troops and were, as a groups, socially and economically more prominent. By relying on the draft and the active-duty military to fight the war, Johnson hoped to diffuse the impact of casualties among widely scattered, young, and powerless individuals. He wanted, as David Halberstam described, a "silent, politically invisible war."<sup>77</sup>

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<sup>75</sup> Teodori, *The New Left*, 297.

<sup>76</sup> Christian Appy, *Working-Class War*, 36.

<sup>77</sup> David Halberstam, *The Best and The Brightest*, 593.

### Indoctrination of the Warrior: What Choice Did They Have

The Selective Service System and all the attributes that created the working-class warrior are not the only factors that encouraged working-class youths to serve so disproportionately. For these men their choices were determined by their social status, education, and family background. Yet, in many regards, American culture served to channel the working class towards the military and the middle and upper classes towards college.<sup>78</sup> We can better understand some of the more complex influences by exploring the consciousness of young men who fought in Vietnam—specifically, their prewar understanding of their place and purpose in American society. We can understand how they perceived the prospect of military service and war. First, we must understand the common assumptions about how working people thought about the war in Vietnam. Secondly, we must grasp the decision making process of these men, their motives, and their reactions to the draft.

“It was either go to jail, go to Canada, or go join the Army. What choice did I have?” might have said a drafted soldier. An enlisted or volunteer account would sound like this: “It was either go to college, get a job, or the military. College was out of the question. We couldn’t afford it. And I couldn’t get a good job, so I enlisted.”<sup>79</sup> These explanations hardly explain the range of attitudes among Americans who entered the military, but they do suggest the narrow boundaries of choice which these men faced the prospect of military service.

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<sup>78</sup> Christian Appy, *Working-Class War: American Combat Soldiers and Vietnam*, 36.

<sup>79</sup> Christian Appy, *Working-Class War: American Combat Soldiers and Vietnam*, 44.

“For Americans who did not come of age in the early sixties,” believed Philip Caputo: “it may be hard to grasp what those years were like—the pride and overpowering self-assurance that prevailed.”<sup>80</sup> Most of the men in Caputo’s brigade, the first American combat troops to land in Vietnam, were born immediately or soon after World War II. They were shaped by that era and the age of Kennedy’s Camelot. “We went overseas full of illusions, for which the intoxicating atmosphere of those years was as much to blame as our youth.”<sup>81</sup> Tim O’Brien addresses these notions in *If I Die in a Combat Zone*:

Among these people I learned about the Second World War, hearing it from men in front of the court house, from those who had fought it. The talk was tough. Nothing to do with causes or reason; the war was right, they muttered, and it had to be fought. The talk was about bellies filled with German lead, about the long hike from Normandy to Berlin, about close calls and about the origins of scars just visible on hair arms. Growing up, I learned about another war, a peninsular war in Korea, a gray war fought by the town’s Lutherans and Baptists. I learned about that war when the town hero came home, riding in a convertible, sitting straight-backed and quiet, an ex-POW.<sup>82</sup>

Military indoctrination and wartime imaginations during the 1950s and early 1960’s were vital. “If the patriotism and anticommunism of the 1950s and early 1960s were absorbed as unquestioned verities,” alleged Appy, “they were nevertheless deeply felt.”<sup>83</sup> “I was always fascinated by military traditions and such,” stated Mark Klenzman of Waterloo, Iowa.<sup>84</sup> He came from a service family. His father served in the Navy as a submariner in the Pacific theatre. His mother, born in Australia served in the Territorial Army in Berth. “War is always attractive to young men who know nothing about it,” thought Caputo, “but we had been seduced into uniform by Kennedy’s challenge to “ask what you

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<sup>80</sup>Philip Caputo, *Rumor of War*, xiv.

<sup>81</sup>Philip Caputo, *Rumor of War*, xiv.

<sup>82</sup>Tim O’Brien, *If I Die in a Combat Zone*, 12.

<sup>83</sup>Christian Appy, *Working-Class War: American Combat Soldiers and Vietnam*, 64.

<sup>84</sup>Mark Klenzman Interview, August 8, 2015, *Voices of Iowa*, Grout Museum, Waterloo, IA.

can do for your country” and by the missionary idealism he had awakened in us.”<sup>85</sup> For Caputo and many others, America seemed all-powerful then. The country could still claim it had not lost a war, and they believed they were ordained to “play cop to the Communists’ robber” and spread their political faith around the world.<sup>86</sup> Like the French soldiers of the eighteenth century, many saw themselves as the champions of a noble cause. “I grew up out of one war and into another,” believed Tim O’Brien. “My father came from leaden ships of the sea, from the Pacific theater; my mother was a WAVE. I was the offspring of the great campaign against the tyrants of the 1940’s, one explosion of the Baby Boom, one of the millions to replace those who had died. I was bred with the haste and dispatch and careless muscle-flexing of a nation giving bridle to its own fortune and success. I was fed the spoils of 1945 victory.”<sup>87</sup>

Adolescent war fantasies, dreams of battlefield glory, hopes for social advancement, and a world of greater racial equality—these were some decisive factors in moving men into the military. “I had no clear idea of how to fulfill this peculiar ambition,” Caputo said, “until the day a Marine recruiting team set up a stand in the student Union at Loyola University.”<sup>88</sup> They were on a talent hunt, looking for quality officer candidates. They displayed a poster of a fit lieutenant “who had one of those athletic, slightly cruel-looking faces considered handsome in the military. He looked like a cross between an All-American halfback and a Nazi tank commander. Clear and resolute, his blue eyes seemed to stare at me in a challenge. JOIN THE MARINES, read the slogan above his white cap.

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<sup>85</sup> Philip Caputo, *Rumor of War*, xiv.

<sup>86</sup> Philip Caputo, *Rumor of War*, xiv.

<sup>87</sup> Tim O’Brien, *If I Die in a Combat Zone*, 11.

<sup>88</sup> Philip Caputo, *Rumor of War*, 6.

BE A LEADER OF MEN.”<sup>89</sup> Many rummaged through propaganda material; reading about glorious battlefield records, watching John Wayne storm the beachhead in *Sands of Iwo Jima* and coming home a warrior with metals pinned on his chest. “I grew up watching war on television,” rang Mark Klenzman. “I was wanting to get involved in it and to find out what it was like more than anything else.”<sup>90</sup> Although America was in a peace-time during the early 1960s, these young boys dreamed of their shot at battlefield glory. Soon they would realize there is no glory on the battlefield.

#### Choices to be Made: Draft Pressure, Volunteerism, and The Draftee

“In 1964 I stood with a bunch of other kids, raised my right hand, and joined the United States Marine Corps,” stated Karl Marlantes:

I swore an oath to follow the orders of the commander in chief and defend the Constitution of the United States of America. I don’t remember the precise words. I do remember the solemnity and seriousness with which I swore that oath. I believed in God. I believed in the Constitution. Most important, I believed that a president of the United States would never give me an order that would cause any moral conflict.<sup>91</sup>

Whether a draftee or a volunteer, the great majority believed they had no real alternative. Many who eagerly enlisted were drawn to the military as much by pressure or constraints of their civilian lives as they were by the call of patriotism or the promised attractions of military life. Common to almost all who entered the military--draftees and volunteers, working and middle-class--was an effort to find a measure of affirmation and hopefulness upon entry into the establishment from family members and society as a whole.

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<sup>89</sup> Philip Caputo, *Rumor of War*, 6.

<sup>90</sup> Mark Klenzman Interview, August 8, 2015, *Voices of Iowa*, Grout Museum, Waterloo, IA.

<sup>91</sup> Karl Marlantes, *What it is like to go to War*, 134.

“I joined the Marines in 1960” said Caputo, “partly because I got swept up in the patriotic tide of the Kennedy era but mostly because I was sick of the safe, suburban existence I had known most of my life.”<sup>92</sup> Unlike most of his compatriots, Caputo grew up in the suburb town of Westchester, Illinois, a town that rose from the prairies around Chicago as a result of postwar affluence. “Having known nothing but security, comfort, and peace, I hungered for danger, challenges, and violence.”<sup>93</sup> But many others, primarily draftees, did not feel the same way as Caputo. For example, when Tim O’Brien’s draft notice came on 17 June 1968 “it was a million things all at once—I was too good for this war. Too smart, too compassionate, too everything.”<sup>94</sup> Tim O’Brien could speak for many draftees when he mentions that summer all he felt was moral confusion. “It was my view then, and still is, that you don’t make war without knowing why.”<sup>95</sup> Caught between political consciousness, matters of right and wrong, Malantes, Caputo, and O’Brien made a choice to fight. For working-class boys without affluence, education, and political consciousness, they were fed into a military machine destined to compel the Communist menace in Vietnam without questioning themselves and their duty.

“Draft pressure” became the most imperative cause of enlistments as the war lengthened. “Many enlisted because they had received their draft notice or because they feared it was coming.”<sup>96</sup> Bob Hartman of Cedar Rapids, Iowa, explained his experience as: “it was either time to get drafted or enlist, I elected the ladder to enlist.” He persisted to

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<sup>92</sup> Philip Caputo, *Rumor of War*, 4.

<sup>93</sup> Philip Caputo, *Rumor of War*, 4.

<sup>94</sup> Tim O’Brien, *The Things They Carried*, 41.

<sup>95</sup> Tim O’Brien, *The Things They Carried*, 40.

<sup>96</sup> Christian Appy, *Working-Class War*, 28.

explain that “in case my draft number came up, I didn’t really want to enlist, but it was better than getting drafted.”<sup>97</sup> He simply chose to enlist because he had the option of going to flight school and becoming a helicopter pilot. As for Donald Lentz, a former Navy Seabee, he enlisted because “my draft number was seven. I was gone.” His first choice was the reserves. He felt he could better receive more benefits and opportunities, such as a higher education. “Because at the same time my parents had no money,” said Lentz. “They didn’t have the stuff they do now, where you can apply for loans and stuff like that.” Ultimately, Lents figured he would get a square deal, “since I was going to get drafted anyway, and it worked out really well. I was really happy with the Navy Seabee’s until the Vietnam War started winding down.”<sup>98</sup> Many others, such as Brent Steere of Bremer County, Iowa, were drafted and had no choice in the matter. “I got my letter, the greetings from Uncle Sam in November 1968, and being drafted bothered my dad, because, he was in World War II and he knew what I was in for.”<sup>99</sup> Another example is Charles “Chuck” Taylor from Oelwein, Iowa. Taylor’s dad served in the Army as an MP in the Philippines. When Taylor was drafted in 1967, he explained his thoughts as “I didn’t think war was something I didn’t like. I figured the government knew more than we did. My dad was in the service, I felt it was my duty. We were still patriotic then.”<sup>100</sup> Phillip Boyenga, a native of Waterloo, Iowa, graduated from West High School, and went to what was then Mason City Community College. Boyenga’s father worked in a packing company and his mother

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<sup>97</sup> Bob Hartman Interview, November 12, 2015, *Voices of Iowa*, Grout Museum, Waterloo, IA.

<sup>98</sup> Donald Lentz Interview, March 11, 2010, *Voices of Iowa*, Grout Museum, Waterloo, IA.

<sup>99</sup> Brent Steere Interview, November 19, 2015, *Voices of Iowa*, Grout Museum, Waterloo, IA.

<sup>100</sup> Charles “Chuck” Taylor Interview, September 24, 2008, *Voices of Iowa*, Grout Museum, Waterloo, IA.



was a school secretary. After a semester of fooling around and partying, he went to work for Chamberlain Company, a munitions factory with a specialization in artillery shells. He later decided to go back to school, but received his draft notice from the Army on 12 September 1966. After another deferment for school, he chose to fulfill his duty. Men such as Phillip wrestled with the moral dilemma of whether or not to avoid the draft, but most working-class draftees did not see the matter as an open debate.

Even men who were deeply reluctant or who felt they had no choice in the matter struggled to believe they were doing the right thing. The military, even war itself, might prove to be a valuable experience. For men like Eugene Stewart, born in Illinois, with a family of twelve and parents who did “anything to survive,” the Marine Corps was a way to prove himself. While explaining his childhood, he and his brothers would pick corn out of the fields. They had “many, many hard days.” Constantly working to make a living for his family, Stewart skipped class and did not see college as an option. Moreover, on 27 March 1968, Stewart went off to the Marine Corps.<sup>101</sup> For African Americans, such as Anthony Tisdale, born in Mississippi and later migrated to Waterloo, Iowa, the draft likewise reached him. Tisdale graduated from East High School and went to Iowa State Teachers College for a year. “You had to carry sixteen credit hours for a deferment, and I couldn’t handle it all.”<sup>102</sup> When he received his draft notice, he choice to go without hesitation.

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<sup>101</sup> Eugene Stewart Interview, October 22, 2009, *Voices of Iowa*, Grout Museum, Waterloo, IA.

<sup>102</sup> Anthony Tisdale Interview, July 8, 2015, *Voices of Iowa*, Grout Museum, Waterloo, IA.

Having Something to Prove, Real Life Misery, and Innocence

For many soldiers who fought in Vietnam they affirmed the unavoidable. Ed Johnson and Todd Dasher for example, viewed military service as a natural and unquestioned part of life. “Military service was right primarily because it was normative,” Dasher said. “Because it was understood to be an integral part of growing up, a rite of passage to manhood, and the responsibility of each successive generation.”<sup>103</sup> For Frank Mathew’s of Holt, Alabama: “I thought I was going to college and I really wanted to be a pediatrician. I really had those thoughts.” But like many other Americans, Mathew’s felt he had something to prove. Mathew’s wanted to demonstrate his physical courage and toughness, to discover how much punishment he could take and how much he could give out. “I had another motive for volunteering, one that has pushed young men into armies ever since armies were invented” esteemed Caputo. “I needed to prove something—my courage, my toughness, my manhood, call it whatever you like.”<sup>104</sup> As we can see, proving one’s toughness and manhood held dear for many adolescents. Likewise, many felt the need to please their veteran fathers, uncles, and others who had freed Europe and Asia from tyranny. After having to return home after his first year of college, Caputo expressed that “In my adolescent mind, I felt that my parents regarded me as an irresponsible boy who still needed their guidance. I wanted to prove them wrong. I had to get away. It was not just a question of physical separation, although that was important; it was more a matter of

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<sup>103</sup> Ed Johnson, Todd Dasher, and Frank Holt are interviewees from Christian Appy’s *Working-Class War*. See pages 57-75.

<sup>104</sup> Philip Caputo, *Rumor of War*, 6.

doing something that would demonstrate to them, and to myself as well, that I was a man after all, like the steely-eyes figure in the recruiting poster.”<sup>105</sup>

Although many perceived the need to prove themselves, there is no evidence indicating World War II to the working-class. Most men of age during World War II served, regardless of status or class. The growing class divide among the ranks in Vietnam is apparent because it was not a total war. Needing to prove oneself stemmed from family orientation in the military and World War II itself, not because families of working-class origins participated more or less during World War II.

Many others believed real life misery could be foreshadowed by military service. Many working-class men did not regard military service as an opportunity so much as a necessity (nothing else to do, draft pressure, duty, job security) or an escape (to avoid trouble, get away, and leave school). Some who volunteered to “avoid trouble” were doing so because the only alternative was prison. Steven Bookout, born in Newton, Iowa, said while at boot camp at Fort Campbell, Kentucky, “I was in a diverse platoon with people from all over the United States. There was a tremendous amount of people out of prisons and jails, they were looking for can don fetter.”<sup>106</sup> It was not uncommon for judges to present young offenders with a Hobson’s choice between going to jail or enlisting in the service. Bruce Springsteen may have been alluding to this phenomenon in his popular song about Vietnam veterans, “Born in the U.S.A.”:

Got in a little hometown jam,  
So they put a rifle in my hand.  
Sent me off to a foreign land,  
To go and kill the yellow man.

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<sup>105</sup> Philip Caputo, *Rumor of War*, 7.

<sup>106</sup> Steven Bookout Interview, August 7, 2013, *Voices of Iowa*, Grout Museum, Waterloo, IA.

“Some superficial listeners (including the Reagan advisers who tried unsuccessfully to recruit Springsteen’s support for the 1984 election) heard the song as a sign of the rebirth of patriotism in the 1980’s.”<sup>107</sup> However, even casual attention to the lyrics suggest the song to be a sharp critique of American society, the war, and the pain and hardship suffered by Vietnam veterans. The “hometown jams” that resulted in a prison-or-military sentence have not been counted, but however small the portion of men who went to Vietnam under these circumstances, the judge’s choice provides an apt metaphor for the way many others regarded options before them. The draft was on their necks, school was a hassle, jobs all seemed dead-end, family life was becoming unbearable, conflicts with the authorities were turning serious and dangerous—in this context the military, for many men, seemed like the only option.

In the mid-1960’s Dwight Williams was a member of the Blackstone Rangers, a notorious Chicago Street gang. “I didn’t join them. They had what the government got—a draft. I was drafted.”<sup>108</sup> As Dwight’s plight continued on the streets of Chicago and violence continued to spread, in the spring of 1969 Dwight went to a Marine Corps recruiter and enlisted. Marines had been dying by the hundreds in Vietnam, but Dwight did not think much about the war; he did not consider the likelihood he would be sent there or that its dangers might be greater than on the streets of Chicago. ‘When you’re young you don’t really think ahead like that. You just figure, well, you don’t like what’s going on at home and now you finally get a chance to get away.’<sup>109</sup> Dwight had few

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<sup>107</sup> Christian Appy, *Working-Class War*, 48.

<sup>108</sup> Christian Appy, *Working-Class War*, 76.

<sup>109</sup> Christian Appy, *Working-Class War*, 77.

illusions about the military. He did not fantasize about exotic, foreign parts of call. He did not have much confidence the military would provide him with valuable job training, nor did he feel the need to prove himself. He actually believed the military was a form of incarceration. But he felt it would be better than imprisonment that would have been inevitable if he stayed on the streets. A young, innocent boy with fuzz on his face and patriotic fervor in his heart marches off to war, as excited and proud as a young colt. He returns a hardened man—tough, troubled, and disillusioned.

This story is a commonplace in the mythology of war. It is one of the major paradigms structuring the way we think about the experience and meaning of war. Nonetheless, judging by many Vietnam films, novels, and memoirs, it appears that the paradigm of innocence “savaged continues to have a powerful hold on America’s cultural response to war.”<sup>110</sup> However, the story of innocence savaged might be more persuasive as a literary convention than as a historical explanation. Some men were drafted. Some volunteered. Some went burning for battle. Others entered with great reluctance, feeling dragged down by pressures both obvious and obscure. Some were torn by conflicting emotions, feeling at one moment like a dove, at other times like a hawk. Most entered the military with little reflection, believing it a natural and unavoidable part of life. Even the most gung-ho volunteers had little specific desire to fight in Vietnam. Some really wanted to fight a war, it did not matter which one. Each wanted to fight Communism, but they imagined fighting Russians. It was not the Vietnamese or Vietnam that caught their imagination.

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<sup>110</sup>Christian Appy, *Working-Class War*, 81.

### Final Thoughts

Lost from historical, societal, and culture influence is the fact that most combat soldiers in Vietnam came from working-class origins. Most of them were sucked in by the draft, the systematic channeling designed to fend off the less desirable. Before the Americanization of the Vietnamese civil war, the military resisted most of the men who would later fight and die in Vietnam. The war in Southeast Asia was costly for those working-class boys without the knowledge of what they were getting themselves into. However, both the national and local draft boards sought to give these boys a new start. The new start was war. For a better understanding of the working-class warrior, society and scholars alike must be aware of the system that drove them into the military. The Selective Service System and Project 100,000 were prime examples. Though it is hard to measure how well these institutionalized methods affected society as a whole, working-class boys were hit the hardest. Without the knowledge, money, or resources, these boys could not fend off their upper echelons constituents. Therefore, the working-class warrior is a pawn of the system. Some adhered to their patriotic fervor, keen nationalism, and military indoctrination; reluctantly, most working-class warriors were sent to Vietnam not by choice, but by an institutionalized machine. Also important is addressing the consciousness of those men who fought in Vietnam. Likewise, we must understand the prewar understanding of their assumptions and place in American society. Following the post-World War II nostalgia like most of American society, many men felt compelled to serve their country. Moreover, countless of American boys wanted to prove their manliness, courage, and honor. Like their fathers before them, they wanted to stop

tyranny around the world and spread their way of life. Some felt the need to get off the streets, stay out of jail, or simply did not know any better.

## CHAPTER 2

## “GOODBYE MY SWEETHEART, HELLO VIETNAM”

As working-class men were the primary combat soldiers, this chapter does not specifically use the context of the working-class. Instead, this chapter examines initial reactions upon the arrival to Vietnam, combat experiences, humping the boonies, and how soldiers adapted to or disengaged from the war, based on their preconceptions as *American* warriors. It was the working-class warrior who did the dirty grunt work, and these experiences reflect such an image. Soldiers quickly learned they were unwanted by the people in which they were sent to save. They were likewise fearful of their own weaponry because without elite firepower, grunts felt vulnerable. Combat soldiers were patrolling and fighting in the enemies' backyard, and frequently they felt they were fighting a ghost who slipped in and out of sight when they pleased. More importantly, combat soldiers felt prey to their own game; being used as bait to locate and facilitate the enemy so greater firepower can be used. The realities of combat distorted the official justifications of the war; therefore, this chapter investigates such combat realities in Vietnam.

Looking back on their initial arrival in country, most veterans remember the heat and the smell. It is no surprise that Americans would be struck by the heat and smell of Vietnam. Southern Vietnam is a tropical environment, lying just ten to twenty degrees north of the equator, on about the same latitude as Central American and Central Africa. It is not uncommon for temperatures to soar well above 100 degrees, with high humidity. Stepping into this world, American soldiers felt defiled and unclean. Jim Cavanah of



Rock Island, Illinois, remembers: “I landed in Long Binh. There was extreme heat and an extreme smell. The smell was just rank. It was pretty bad.”<sup>111</sup> Brent Steere recalled when he landed at Cam Rahn Bay: “It didn’t feel like a war at all, but it was hotter than ba-Jesus.”<sup>112</sup> Grace Moore, born in Waterloo, who became an Army nurse aligned with the 25<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division stated: “my first impression was the heat and the smell. It was just the smell of Vietnam. You just didn’t know what to expect. We were all green.”<sup>113</sup>

The smell was like sweat, shit, jet fuel, and fish sauce all mixed together some thought. Philip Boyenga arrived at Cam Ranh Bay in February 1969. His first impression “wasn’t too bad, it was like an Army post in the U.S.” He was eventually shipped to Chu Lai along the coast, roughly forty miles south of Danang. “There was no training of in country life, we just waited to see what was going to happen.” He continued to explain that “We got rocketed a couple of times, but it was basically getting accumulated to being there—the jungle, the heat, everything like that. “Ask anyone, it was hot there.”<sup>114</sup> The emphasis many veterans give to these impressions reflects a retrospective view that the war as a whole was a contaminating experience.

For others such as Marine Gene Stewart, his arrival in Danang was not quiet. He did not have the time to recall the smell or the heat. He took incoming fire at the airport. “Again we did not know what we were getting into. We were just issued a helmet, flak jacket, and told to take cover.” He was then loaded into “cattle trucks.” Once they

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<sup>111</sup> Jim Cavanah Interview, January 19, 2015, *Voices of Iowa*, Grout Museum, Waterloo, IA.

<sup>112</sup> Brent Steere Interview, November 19, 2015, *Voices of Iowa*, Grout Museum, Waterloo, IA.

<sup>113</sup> Grace Miller Interview, July 16, 2010, *Voices of Iowa*, Grout Museum, Waterloo, IA.

<sup>114</sup> Philip Boyenga Interview, August 25, 2014, *Voices of Iowa*, Grout Museum, Waterloo, IA.

reached the compound they checked in and were issued rifles and ammunition. “We fought all night long the first day. Welcome to Vietnam I thought.”<sup>115</sup> In the very odors and heat, some brought from America and some from Vietnam, Americans confronted one of the most fundamental facts about the war: the conflict between the advanced technology of the wealthiest nation on earth and the largely preindustrial and agricultural world of the revolutionary Third World.

“Flying to Tan Son Nhut airport on the fringe of Saigon in a commercial airplane in late January 1964 was a strange experience,” wrote General Westmoreland. “A swift plunge from a comfortable, peaceful world into an alien environment, neither peace nor war but with the trappings of a war.”<sup>116</sup> In the beginning they arrived by ship. The First and Third Marine divisions, the 173d Airborne Brigade, the First Cavalry Division, the First Infantry Division, and 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne Division, the Twenty Fifth, Fourth, and Ninth Infantry divisions: most of the major American combat units made their initial arrival by sea, thousands of men carried by large transports. In August 1965, 13,500 men of the first Cavalry Division left on seventeen ships from Charleston, Savannah, Jacksonville, and Mobile.<sup>117</sup> These ocean crossings had a familiar look, like something out of World War II newsreels. Though some ships pulled at the dockside of Danang or Cam Ranh Bay and unloaded like ordinary passenger ships, many men (especially those infantry units) were transferred to landing craft to be unloaded on beaches. This, too, evoked images from

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<sup>115</sup> Eugene Stewart, October 22, 2009, *Voices of Iowa*, Grout Museum, Waterloo, IA.

<sup>116</sup> E. James Westheider, *Fighting in Vietnam: The Experience of the U.S. Soldier*, 41.

<sup>117</sup> Christian Appy, *Working-Class War*, 118.

World War II—American marines and soldiers, in full combat gear, charging onto the surf from their land craft. They stormed the beaches, expecting the worst.

As it turned out, the similarity to World War II newsreels evaporated. The beaches were almost always quiet. There was no enemy fire, and the enemy himself was nowhere to be seen. Most Americans were undoubtedly relieved. However, for those whose heads were full of romantic visions of the D-Day landing in Normandy or storming the Iwo Jima, the absence of resistance was disappointing. After all, the combat units that made the beach landings in 1965 and 1966 contained the largest portion of enthusiastic volunteers of any time of the war. Eager for battle or not, most found it a strangely “surreal beginning,” like falling asleep during the old war movie, only to wake up and find oneself flailing in the sand of a tropical beach resort.<sup>118</sup>

#### ARRIVING FOR COMBAT

The sense of incongruity was perhaps most acute in the arrival of the first major combat unit on 8 March 1965. The marines waded ashore the Red Beach, ready for bloody combat, and found, instead, a well-orchestrated welcoming committee set up by American and Vietnamese officials. Philip Caputo described that moment marines “charged up the beach and were met, not by machine guns and shells, but by the mayor of Danang and a crowd of schools girls. The mayor made a brief welcoming speech and the girls placed flowered wreaths around our marine necks.”<sup>119</sup> During the early stages of the big American buildup of 1965 few of the arriving soldiers anticipated that the war would

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<sup>118</sup>Christian Appy, *Working-Class War*, 118.

<sup>119</sup> Philip Caputo, *Rumor of War*, 50.

drag on for years. The most eager men worried they might get to Vietnam too late and that the war would be over before they had a chance to fight. They knew they were going to a war zone—they had seen it on TV—but they had no idea what was expected of them. Meanwhile, the authorities—the president and the Air Force commanders—were doing their best to disguise the escalation, acting as if there really was not an enormous movement of American troops into Vietnam.

“The happy warriors. They all sounded as if they were a little drunk. And they were, though it was on the excitement of the event rather than the alcohol,” said Philip Caputo. “Their battalion had accomplished no mean feat. Without warning or preparation, it had made itself ready for a major combat operation in less than eight hours.”<sup>120</sup> Now, they were free to enjoy the adventure, the sense of release from the petty rules and routines that had governed their lives until now. “It was intoxicating to be racing through the darkness toward the unknown, toward a war in a far-off, exotic country. They were done with drills, inspections, and training exercises. Something important and dramatic was about to happen to them.”<sup>121</sup> No one really knew what to expect. What they found was far more bizarre and unnerving than anything they had ever imagined.

From their first moments in country, American soldiers were confronted with the war’s most troubling questions: Where is the enemy? What are we doing here? Who can we trust? Where is it safe? What is our mission? The answers received provided little

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<sup>120</sup>Philip Caputo, *Rumor of War*, 48.

<sup>121</sup>Philip Caputo, *Rumor of War*, 48.

comfort or clarity. The green troops faced a series of confusing and incongruous experiences—ominous portents of a yearlong tour of duty against enemies they could not identify, among allies who did not welcome their presence, and on behalf of a policy that was neither meaningful nor realizable.

#### Other Arrival Experiences: Wire Mesh and “Bad Omens”

After landing by commercial jet, most soldiers were taken by a bus to large U.S. bases where they would wait for their assignment to specific units. One detail about the bus ride particularly captured the attention of new men: the wire mesh over the windows.

I arrived in-country at Cam Ranh Bay. It’s hot. The kind of hot that Texas is hot. It takes your breath away as you step out of the airplane. We were loaded on an olive-drab school bus for the short ride from the airstrip over to the compound. There was wire mesh over the windows. I said to somebody, “What the hell is the wire for?”

“It’s the gooks, man, the gooks. . . . The gooks will throw grenades through the windows. See those gooks out there?” I look out and I see shriveled, little old men squatting beside the road in the fashion of the Vietnamese, filling sandbags. They looked up at me with real contempt on their faces.

Here we are at one of the largest military installations in the world and we have to cover the windows to protect ourselves from little old men. I didn’t put it all together at the time, but intuitively I knew something was wrong.<sup>122</sup>

Such experiences provoked a range of questions and anxieties: Why did Americans require protection from Vietnamese civilians? After all, weren’t the Americans in Vietnam to help those people? Weren’t those people our allies? Why don’t they welcome our arrival? Why the expressions of contempt? One of the most troubling of these omens was found in the reactions of Vietnamese civilians to the newly arrived Americans. Sometimes the signs looked good—children running to the roadside, laughing and waving.

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<sup>122</sup> Baker, *Nam*, 51-52.

It was soon evident, these responses were not the warm welcomes of grateful civilians cheering their liberators. They were enthusiastic, sometimes desperate, expressions of people whose very existence depending on hustling the Americans. Some arrived in Vietnam convinced that no Vietnamese were to be trusted, that they were all potential enemies, and that all of them were “gooks.” This view had been hammered home in basic training by many DIs. But soldiers who had been told that America was in Vietnam to help our allies, to help the ordinary people of South Vietnam fight of communisms, develop democracy, and live a better life. The conflict between these attitudes were present from the beginning, and it did not take much prompting to draw out the contradiction.

The hostility between the American soldiers and the Vietnamese erupted quickly, it was as if both sides had anticipated the trouble; each had negative perceptions of the other that the conflict was inevitable. Even though these soldiers were new to Vietnam, the Vietnamese responded in a way that evolved in many prior encounters with Americans. If the Americans offered handouts, the children were all smiles and the GIs were “Number One,” if no treats were forthcoming, the children cursed the Americans and called them “Number Ten.”<sup>123</sup> The Americans, often seeing the Vietnamese for the first time, had their own preconceptions. Many arrived already convinced that they were gooks.

Anxiety about political loyalties of the Vietnamese people contributed to a flood of GI folklore, rumors, and horror stories about Americans victimized by civilians who

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<sup>123</sup> Christian Appy, *Working-Class War*, 135.

turned out to be agents of the Vietcong. Everyone heard stories about Vietnamese barbers who slit American throats, prostitutes who put razor blades in their vaginas to cut American soldiers, children who walked onto American bases with explosives strapped to their stomachs, and soft drinks and beer that the Vietcong adulterated with tiny pieces of glass. The point was always the same: no Vietnamese could be trusted. Some Americans believed that if no Vietnamese could be trusted, the safest response was for Americans to eliminate as many Vietnamese as possible, indiscriminately. By this logic, the more Vietnamese killed, the better odds of survival for Americans. This was the message heard by Gary Battles during his first week of in-country training. One of the instructors told the new American soldiers, “The only good gook is a dead gook, and the more gooks you can kill, the more slant-eyes you can kill in Vietnam that is the less you will have to worry about them killing you at night.”<sup>124</sup>

### The Myth of New Mobility

In 1965, when the First Cavalry Division entered the war, the American mass media was dazzled by the prospect of helicopter warfare. It was as if the foot soldier had become a military anachronism. With the new prized airmobile, theoretically, soldiers would mount the choppers and zip in and out of combat, apparently liberated from the ancient plight of the common soldier—the miles of sweated marching. *Time* magazine celebrated the First Cavalry’s new image with a purple encomium to the “First Team” and its vaunted mobility. “Freed by their choppers from the tyranny of terrain, the First Team can roam at will over blasted bridges, roadblocks, swollen rivers and Jungle

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<sup>124</sup> Citizens Commission of Inquiry, *Dellums Committee Hearings*, 161.

Mountains to hit the V.C. from the northern tip of the nation to the delta.”<sup>125</sup> The First Cav had the best new choppers. The latest birds were light, fast, versatile UH-series helicopters and/or Hueys. They were used as troop carriers and medical evacuation helicopters, and were outfitted with every combination of machine gun, rocket launcher, and minigun to serve as gunships.

For all the hype, the helicopters did not provide the great advantage American commanders claimed. For one thing, they made too much noise. Men could move quickly, but when they arrived at a potential battleground, the enemy was rarely caught off guard. The raspy buzz of distant helicopters, followed by the rhythmic whup-whup-whup as the choppers approached, signaled their location for miles around. It gave the opposition time to find cover, prepare ambushes, or time to flee the area. Furthermore, helicopters could not always penetrate the thick jungle terrain. Vertical envelopment might work well in an empty parking lot, but in the jungle it often required laborious clearing of landing zones, thereby eliminating the element of surprise. Nor did helicopters provide help with the military’s highest goal—locating the enemy. The enemy usually moved at night, underground, or in thick jungle terrain, invisible from the air.

So American ground troops were given the task of finding the enemy on their own. Most soldiers spent very little time in helicopters. Even the paratroopers of the First Cav spent most of their time doing what foot soldiers have always done; they walked, endlessly and heavily burdened.

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<sup>125</sup> *Time*, 24 September 1965, 34.



### Humping the Boonies

Operations often began by helicopter. Once inserted, though, soldiers typically patrolled on foot for a few days, weeks, or months. Perhaps the best single image which to synthesize the physical experience of the American combat soldier in Vietnam would be that of a column of men spaced about five yards apart; burdened with eighty-pound packs; wearing tick armored vests called flak jackets; carrying rifles, mortars, hundreds of rounds of ammunition, and three or four canteens; and patrolling on foot through jungles, mountains, or rice paddies. Among the infantry men, the “grunts,” this was known as humping the boonies.<sup>126</sup> ‘They found a way to kill me yet? Eyes burn with stinging sweat. Seems every path leads me to nowhere. . . . Wife and kids, household pets, Army green was no safe bet,” roared Alice in Chains rock hit “Rooster.”<sup>127</sup>

The first moments following the drop-off, or insertion, were among the worst. When men were flown in by helicopter, there was always the awful uncertainty about the landing zone (LZ). Would it be hot or cold? A hot LZ meant the enemy would be firing as soon as the Americans arrived. But as long as the men were on the helicopters, there was a sense of power and protection. The choppers shot over the hills and treetops like roller coasters, jolting, popping, and thundering. Approaching the LZ, the area was sometimes “prepped” with a barrage of firepower. Jets made low passes over the LZ, dropping napalm and two hundred and fifty pound bombs. Then fifty or sixty howitzer rounds from nearby fire bases might pour in. Flying ahead of the fleet of troop-carrying

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<sup>126</sup> *Life*, 28 October 1996, 30.

<sup>127</sup> Alice in Chains, “Rooster.” *Columbia Records*, 1992.

choppers was a Cobra gunship or two-sleek, fast helicopters outfitted with miniguns, firing thousands of rounds above the ground for a mere second or two while men jumped out. Then the choppers flew away. Whether the LZ was hot or cold, the departure of the birds was a profound moment. The grunts felt an awful sense of abandonment and vulnerability. The sense of power and security the choppers could provide was gone.

The movement from chopper to rice paddy or elephant grass represented the radical movement between two worlds, one dominated by technology and American power, and the other peasant agriculture and wilderness. When the LZs were cold, as they usually were, an eerie silence filled the vacuum left by the exploding bombs and thundering choppers. Though the land lay blasted and burnt, it seemed resilient, already pushing back in on the stranded Americans.<sup>128</sup> ‘When the helicopters flew off, a feeling of abandonment come over us. Charlie Company was now cut off from the outside world. . . .The helicopters had made it seem familiar. Being Americans, we were comfortable with machines, but with the aircraft gone we were struck by the utter strangeness of this rank and rotted wilderness.’<sup>129</sup>

From the outset American grunts humped their gear and weapons through, over, around, and under unimaginable obstacles. In the lowlands they faced mile after mile of rice paddy. Because the dikes were frequently booby trapped by local guerillas, Americans often avoided them, walking instead through the paddies. In the flooded paddies the grunts walked in water that was sometimes waist deep. Their boots sank into

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<sup>128</sup> Del Vecchio, *The 13<sup>th</sup> Valley*, 149-154.

<sup>129</sup> Philip Caputo, *Rumor of War*, 79.

the muck. Each step was labored, as feet and legs were pulled out of the sucking sludge and buried anew. The soldiers kept their pant legs not tucked into their boots so the water would run straight down their legs rather than collecting inside like heavy water balloons. The open pant legs, however, left openings for leeches. The bloodsucking leeches crawled up legs and burrowed into flesh. During rest periods soldiers examined themselves for leeches and burned them off with the tips of their cigarettes.<sup>130</sup> The lowlands were relatively flat and open. The highlands presented the additional burdens of exhausting climbs and dense, sometimes impassable foliage. Patrolling the hills and mountains of the highlands, the grunts had to endure endless changes of altitude. Patrols rarely set out to climb one hill and stop. Usually they moved along ridgelines. As soon as the peak was reached, the patrol would move back into the valley—up and down, up and down, all the while on the lookout for enemy movements.

Humping through the jungle, the point man had to use a machete to cut a path for the rest of the men. Sometimes it could get so bad, and movement was so slow, units had to call in supply choppers to drop chain saws to help clear trails. In cultivated fields throughout Vietnam grew tall, thick, elephant grass. It could reach a height of ten feet or more. Humping through these fields, grunts often lost sight of the man in front of them. Worse than that, the grass had razor sharp edges. Pushing aside the grass with their arms, they received dozens of tiny “paper” cuts. These cuts, like any wound received in the tropical heat of Vietnam and away from the possibility of thorough cleaning, were likely to get infected. Grunts were constantly developing oozing, infected sores. Foot problems

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<sup>130</sup> Roth, *Sand in the Wind*, 168.

were an epidemic. During the rainy season, feet stayed wet for days and weeks at a time. It was impossible to keep them dry for longer than a few minutes. The skin blistered, bubbled, and decayed. Those who developed “immersion foot” had it the worst. Their feet swelled terribly, and sometimes boots could only be removed by cutting them off. When socks were removed, hunks of skin often came off as well.<sup>131</sup>

### Drawing Fire

One of the central dilemmas of the Vietnam War was how to engage and bring the enemy to battle. It is not hard to understand the search part of *search-and-destroy* was for the Americans to find the enemy before they found them. But the Americans rarely initiated combat. By sending troops out into the bush on endless patrols, firefights did result. American commanders came to realize that American troops could engage the enemy by acting as bait. The “covert” patrols, nevertheless, were to expose the grunts to the enemy, hoping to lure them into combat. If the Americans, serving as bait, could draw fire from the enemy, the elusive goal of “contact” would be achieved.

Official descriptions of American military policy insisted that American units were carrying out aggressive tactics in an effort to go on the offensive. As Westmoreland explained, a commander “wins no battles by sitting back waiting for the enemy to come to him.”<sup>132</sup> American troops were aggressive indeed, and enormous operations were launched in hopes of doing battle. However, this aggression was not usually successful at

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<sup>131</sup> Christian Appy, *Working-Class War*, 178.

<sup>132</sup> Westmoreland, *A Soldier's Report*, 175.

driving the enemy into the open: hoping to be exposed to American firepower. In his novel, *Fields of Fire*, James Webb described the real function of American operations:

Back in the villes again. Somebody said it was an operation with a name, but it had its own name: Dangling the Bait. Drifting from village to village, every other night digging new fighting holes, everyday patrolling through other villes, along raw ridges. Inviting an enemy attack much as worm seeks to attract a fish: mindlessly, at someone else's urging, for someone else's reason.<sup>133</sup>

This view is echoed throughout the Vietnam literature, often in the bitter manner of a character in *Better Times Than These*: 'We ain't nothing but bait. . . worms dangling on a hook.'<sup>134</sup>

When Vietcong guerillas or NVA troops decided to attack the bait, American commanders pushed their field commanders to maintain contact. If the Vietnamese managed to flee after a short hit-and-run firefight, the Americans lost an opportunity to destroy the enemy. From the command's perspective, combat opportunities were rare and had to be taken advantage of. If contact was broken and the enemy disappeared, there would be no chance to hit them with the full weight of American firepower. Field commanders needed time not only to respond with ground fire but also to call in supporting fire. The exact location of the enemy had to be determined and coordinates called in, and even then it might take fifteen minutes or longer for the bombing to begin. Often after the enemy forces withdrew, the Americans were ordered to chase after them.

Bombs, napalm, and rockets were central to American military strategy. *Supporting fire*, however, was really a contradiction. Grunts were used to draw the enemy into a fixed and identifiable positions for the jets and gunships and artillery. The military

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<sup>133</sup> Webb, *Fields of Fire*, 155.

<sup>134</sup> Groom, *Better Times*, 200.

command celebrated the massive use of these expensive, sophisticated weapons as the best way to kill the enemy soldiers while keeping American casualties at a minimum. This “capital intensive technowar” has been brilliantly analyzed by James William Gibson. For the war managers, as Gibson has shown, the war was conceived as a kind of high-tech assembly line for the production of enemy bodies. The goal of attrition—the steady and systematic depletion of enemy forces—translated into a pressure on combat units to produce regular body counts that was not unlike that felt by factory workers and their supervisors to meet production quotas.<sup>135</sup>

To the working-class grunts, humping the boonies in Vietnam, did not feel especially high-tech. For them, most of the time their work was the most labor intensive they had ever experienced. They did not feel like workers attending highly automated, computer-operated machinery. Much of their labor was akin to outdoor labor. Nor did the killing resemble a regular production schedule. Periodically the routine schedule of patrolling was disrupted by a firefight, as if the routine work of soldiering were suddenly shifted inside the most dangerous factory or mine imaginable in the midst of some awful explosion; but the only thing systematic about grunt work in Vietnam was the humping. The killing came in brief spasms of violence. The production of bodies was routinized at the command level, but on the ground it was irregular and unexpected.

Grunts were often skeptical about the high command’s claim that supporting fire was used so extensively to reduce American casualties. If their lives were so important, why were they sent as bait? Grunts were convinced the main reason for all the air strikes

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<sup>135</sup> James Gibson, *The Perfect War*, 93-154.

was the most obvious: to raise the enemy body count. Stanley Goff, a machine gunner who received the Distinguished Service Cross (the second-highest military decoration), believed American soldiers were used primarily as bait on most of their missions. He was especially critical of nighttime patrols:

The purpose of [night movement] was for you to walk up on Charlie and for him to hit you, and then for our hardware to wipe them out. We were used as scapegoats to find out where they were. That was all we were—bait. They couldn't find Charlie any other way. They knew there was a regiment out there. They weren't looking for just a handful of VC. Actually, they'd love for us to run into a regiment which would just wipe us out. They could plaster the regiment [with air strikes and artillery] and they'd have a big body count. The general gets another damn medal. He gets promoted. "Oh, I lost two hundred men, but I killed two thousand."<sup>136</sup>

Something peculiar about Goff's statement is his separation from the command. "They" were the ones who wanted to find Charlie. "They" could only do it by using grunts as bait; then "they" could bring in the hardware, plaster the enemy, and get a big body count. The ultimate objective was personal advancement—another damn medal. Goff carried out his assignments with great skill and distinction, but his language conveys a powerful rejection of the aims and motives that commanded his participation. Goff and other grunts were primarily concerned about their survival. For example, Marine Gene Stewart said the only thing on his mind was survival. "Kill or be killed is what mode you're in. I don't want to say I got any enjoyment off of it, but it was him and not me. It was survival," said Stewart. The concern of survival, thus, shaped the grunts perception of bombs and artillery. Where the military command was preoccupied with plastering the enemy, the grunts looked to the skies for protection.

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<sup>136</sup> Goff and Sanders, *Brothers*, 32-33.

Among the grunts supporting fire was perceived with deep ambivalence. It was both protector and destroyer, welcome ally and terrible threat. This ambivalence grew out of a dependence. Grunts depended on bombs and artillery to save their lives. In countless fights, Americans were pinned down by enemy ambushes. The arrival of supporting fire commonly brought these firefights to an abrupt end. Even if the bombs and artillery were not successful in hitting enemy positions, their mere use often caused enemy units to withdraw. American soldiers looked to “air and arty” as their rescuer, their ace in the hole. But the grunts’ dependence on supporting fire reminded them of their expendable status, their role as bait. They resented being placed in such vulnerable situations while pilots and artillerymen could fire from a distance. Many grunts simply wished supporting fire could replace their own.

As a result American soldiers often succeeded in gaining control of firefights after the first harrowing minutes and experienced the exhilarating rush of power that came when the full weight of the American arsenal arrived on time and on target, overwhelming the enemy, most of the time American soldiers felt more like the hunted than the hunters, more like reactors than initiators, and more like defenders than aggressors.

### Psychological Burdens of Humping

The psychological burdens of humping were every bit as onerous as the physical. Among the worst were the nearly constant anxieties of walking into an ambush or stepping on a land mine. But there was an even more basic strain on the minds of American grunts: the lack of knowledge about where they were going, the kind of terrain



it encountered, and the length of time it would take. Grunts were generally not privy to even such fundamental information. “It was like running a race without knowing its length.”<sup>137</sup> Patrols were often extended or rerouted in response to changing intelligence reports. Even those field officers who tried to keep their men informed had to pass along changes in orders that meant hours of additional humping, reversal of directions, and further uncertainty. These “word changes” that “came down” from above could destroy morale. Grunts dreaded them. New orders always seemed to bring bad news. Anxiety about word changes was greatest at the end of patrols as units settled into their night positions.

“What do you mean we ain’t staying here—what are you passing that bum word for?”  
 “You heard it—they changed the word again.” Well, just how fucking far we gotta hump today, anyway?”<sup>138</sup>  
 “When are they gonna tell us where we are going?” Christ, I don’t know! They never tell us. Just shut up and get ready.”<sup>139</sup>

In all wars, perhaps, infantrymen are among the least informed, rarely consulted about the decisions and plans for which their lives are at stake. “But in Vietnam this exclusion was particularly demeaning because the grunts felt themselves to be the only ones left uninformed,” claimed Appy.<sup>140</sup> Even the Vietnamese civilians always seemed to know in advance where the Americans would be going. For example, in 1968 grunts from the First Infantry Division combat unit were told by the Vietnamese prostitutes in Lai Khe about a major operation Americans would soon begin. The grunts received this quite precise information before their officers even mentioned the upcoming mission.<sup>141</sup>

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<sup>137</sup> Christian Appy, *Working-Class War*, 178.

<sup>138</sup> Charles R. Anderson, *Grunts*, 49.

<sup>139</sup> Hugget, *Body Count*, 39.

<sup>140</sup> Christian Appy, *Working-Class War*, 179.

<sup>141</sup> Goldman and Fuller, *Charlie Company*, 126.

Minds and bodies so dulled by exhaustion no longer felt the sharp anxiety of potential combat, and when companies went for days or weeks without a firefight, the prospect of combat began to seem remote and unlikely. Many men began to believe nothing, not even a firefight, could be worse than humping. Some even hoped for a firefight to break the monotony of the hump and inject a shot of adrenalin into their sluggish bodies. It would take a real firefight to do that. When grunts were really exhausted, the random shots of sniper fire did not shaken their pulse. Often enough they kept humping and hoped the commander would not order them to chase after the sniper. From a grunts perspective, they had to be alert at all times. They could go days, weeks, even months without seeing any the enemy. Then one day, they could run into an ambush, someone may get hit by a booby trap or sniper fire; nonetheless, we can understand it was hard to stay alert when it took so long to run into the enemy.

#### How Could we Possibly Lose?

“An impatient people, we Americans seem to feel that once the first American troops arrive, the situation will quickly be set right and that once the President turns the faucet, the flow of troops will be swift and unrelenting,” echoed Westmorland.<sup>142</sup> In an “area war,” as the war in Vietnam was, there were not front lines to provide a gauge of progress. Reading everyday of American troops fighting and winning, hearing pronouncements by national leaders that we were making steady progress, people unaware of how “few troops were actually engaged” tended to see an early end that under

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<sup>142</sup>Westmoreland, *A Soldier's Report*, 153.

the circumstances could not be. “Even with large forces, a war of attrition can never be concluded swiftly.”<sup>143</sup>

“We’re fighting Charlie in his own backyard.” This was how most Americans summarized the difficulties of warring against Vietnamese revolutionaries. How can you defeat an enemy who knows the land indefinitely, who has every reason to regard it as their own backyard, and who has fought for decades, centuries even, to rid it of foreign invaders—the Chinese, the French, the Japanese, and finally the Americans? American troops were haunted by this question. Few were aware of the long history that shaped Vietnamese aspirations for a unified nation free of foreign domination, but the daily realities of warfare continually raised the nagging prospect that perhaps no military effort, could remove “Charlie” from the land, dampen the fervor of his struggle, or undermine the support he received throughout the country. “I couldn’t understand it then but now I do,” recalled Charles Corwin of Cedar Falls, Iowa. “I wouldn’t want another country coming here and you know: So I can kind of understand what the Vietnamese were going through.”

Yet a conflicting voice poised a different question: how could the United States possibly lose? It had never happened before. The War of 1812 ended in a draw, the South did lose the Civil War, and there was the stalemate in Korea, but never an outright defeat. The tradition of victory enshrined a military ethic that made it intolerable even to imagine that some wars might not be winnable. As George C. Scott proclaimed at the beginning of *Patton*, President Nixon’s favorite movie, “America loves a winner and will not

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<sup>143</sup>Westmoreland, *A Soldier’s Report*, 153.

tolerate a loser.”<sup>144</sup> Many Americans perceived the Vietnamese as little different from those colonial and nineteenth century foes who had resisted American forces—Native Americans, Mexicans, and Filipinos. They had been unable to block the road to continental and global preeminence when the United States was just rising to power. How, in the 1960s, at the zenith of American wealth and power, could a small Third World nation like Vietnam (a raggedy-ass little fourth-rate country,” Lyndon Johnson called it) defeat such a superpower? After all, the Vietnamese revolutionaries had no B-52 bombers, no Phantom jets, no Cobra gunships, no helicopters or flak jackets, napalm, or chemical defoliants. Sure, they had rockets, automatic weapons, mortars, land mines, and booby traps. But how could they compete with such an extraordinary technological sophistication, the devastating firepower, of the American military?

American soldiers were torn by the conflict between these two perspectives. On one hand they recognized the formidable skill and dedication of the opposition. They knew how hard it was to locate the enemy, much less to determine the time and place and form of battle. They also quickly realized that the Revolutionary Forces (Vietcong and North Vietnamese Army) had support through the country, from the South Vietnamese who had planted booby traps and gave the enemy vital information, to the southerners who joined the Vietcong to become active fighters, to the North Vietnamese soldiers who traveled hundreds of miles on foot down the Ho Chi Minh Trail to fight in the south. Yet, alongside these discouraging realities, American soldiers heard from their commanders what they had heard throughout their lives: American is the strongest nation in the world;

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<sup>144</sup> Christian Appy, *Working-Class War*, 146.

America has never lost a war, no one can prevail against the courage of our soldiers and power of our weapons. In Vietnam, American soldiers came face-to-face with the shocking fact that in spite of (and in some measures because of) the massive destructive force unleashed by the United States, the Vietnamese Revolutionary Forces maintained both tactical and strategic control of the war. They engaged the Americans at times and places of their own choosing. Whether they initiated combat or avoided it, almost always they controlled the terms of the battle.

## CHAPTER 3

### GETTING A DISTANCE ON THE WAR:

#### DRUGS, ALCOHOL, AND RACE RELATIONS

As the war in Vietnam lengthened, American GI's brought with them their ideological differences to Vietnam: anti-war sentiment, drug and alcohol problems, and racial bigotry. In the rear or behind the line of fire, the social tensions presented in the United States persisted in Vietnam. However, out on patrol or "humping" the combat soldier would put those issue aside and fight for the man next to him. Many soldiers tried to transmute the war into another kind of experience, or they found ways to deflect reality, to avoid a direct confrontation with the danger they faced and the damage that might already have been inflicted on their minds and bodies. They sought to gain some mental distance from the brutality that engulfed them. Some found a measure of pride and self-worth in their alternative perceptions of the war. Others found excitement and exhilaration. Most escaped from the real war, however, were either temporary, illusory, or dangerous. This chapter, in essence, will analyze Vietnam from the perspective of the rear. In other words, we will explore the nature of drug use, alcoholism, civilian influence and radicalism, as well as race relations.

#### Civilian Influence and Radicalism in the Military

Military officials were convinced that the drug, race, and radicalism within the armed services was the result of outside civilian influences. Echoing the belief among senior officers, General Westmoreland was convinced that "attitudes and beliefs developed before they enter the services" led to racial violence and dissention in the

armed services.<sup>145</sup> It was not just the white officers that believed this. Lieutenant Colonel Kenneth Berthoud, one of the highest-ranking African Americans in the army during the war, counseled, ‘Remember they feel they’ve got where they have only by solidarity. . . . They come in with the idea of brother-above all.’<sup>146</sup> Young whites in the military, especially draftees, were radicalized as well. Though college was correctly viewed as a haven from military service, many brought with them the radicalism permeated college campuses during the war. Some belonged to the so-called Old Left organizations, such as the Communist Party USA or the Socialist Workers Party, and they would help influence the movement. But most young white radicals ideologically belonged to what they termed the “New Left,” evoking socialist principles and idolizing young, dashing revolutionaries such as Che Guevara, while showing a disdain for dogmatic Stalinism and distrusting the Soviet Union as much as they distrusted their own government.

Along with their occasional allies, the Black Nationalists, white radicals were busy proselytizing and organizing within the ranks, and by 1971, there were at least fourteen dissident organizations operating within the armed forces, including the Black Nationalist Movement for a Democratic Military (MDM) and the socialist American Serviceman’s Union (ASU). Collectively, they were known as the GI movement to their supporters, or RITA, an acronym for “Resistance in the Army,” to the military officials. But there was a wide range of differences among the groups. Two of the organizations were made up of exclusively officers, and there were six or more various groups,

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<sup>145</sup> Lewis, “Rumble at Camp Lejeune,” 39; Westmoreland, *Report of the Chief of Staff of the United States Army, 1 July 1968-30 June 1972*, 62.

<sup>146</sup> Lewis, “Rumble at Camp Lejeune,” 39

including Vietnam Veterans against the War, Flower of the Dragon, and the Winter Soldier Organization. Several of the organizations existed at only one installation, and most for only a brief period of time. But a few, like the ASU, attracted a sizeable following. At its height in 1970, the ASU claimed over 10,000 members at over 100 stateside and 60 overseas bases as well as 50 naval vessels.<sup>147</sup> It was generally well funded by outside dissident groups and printed its own underground newspaper, the *Bond*.

At the beginning of the war, civilian influence in terms of radicalism seemed inexistent. Radicalism influenced by civilians at home was an excuse the military and political establishment used to justify their lack of military progress. It was not until many veterans returned home and/or the Tet Offensive in 1968 that altered civilian influences on the armed services. After the Tet Offensive in 1968, after which General Westmoreland had claimed the end was near, Americans at home and Vietnam learned the truth. Their government was lying and deceiving them. Thus, only after 1968 did civilian influence truly radicalize some soldiers at home and in Vietnam.

### Drug Use

The “myth of an addicted army,” alleged that drug use was so widespread in Vietnam that it contributed to a breakdown in the in the military’s fighting capacity. Adopting such hyperbole references such as “epidemic” and “plagues,” proponents of this myth equated all drug use was abuse and downplayed the differences among drugs. Depicting marijuana to be equally as powerful and addictive as heroin, the alleged myth

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<sup>147</sup> E James Westheider, *Fighting in Vietnam: The Experience of the U.S. Soldier*, 190.



of an addicted military neglected the social context in which soldiers got stoned, including the link to the anti-war protests and the confinement of drug use mainly in the rear. They blamed drugs for a host of military problems, including lack of discipline, sabotage, combat refusals, and civilian atrocities—which could more reasonably be attributed to the prolongation of the war that had lost any sense of purpose. It helped divert public attention from the policies that had produced and perpetuated the war, it intensified public fears of the growth of the 1960s drug culture, and thus created an opportune political climate for the expansion of such myths.

Drugs were central to the response of American soldiers to the war in Vietnam. Marijuana was the drug of choice. Jeremy Kuzmarov points out, the so-called drug crises in Vietnam—and its profound sociopolitical significance—has “generally been ignored in historical debates about the origins and evolution on the modern War on Drugs”<sup>148</sup> Grown throughout Indochina, it was widely available to soldiers at prices the Americans found absurdly and joyously low. Making a connection did not require much stealth or savvy. Drugs were openly hawked outside every American base, and as convoys moved along Vietnamese roads, dealers of all ages approached the trucks. To the amazement of soldiers, you could buy cartons of marijuana that were, apart from the contents, indistinguishable from cartons of American cigarettes. The Vietnamese emptied the tobacco from the cigarettes, refilled them with grass, and put them back in packs of Kool’s or Salem’s. They even resealed the plastic wrappers. A whole carton of filter-

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<sup>148</sup>Kuzmatov, *The Myth of the Addicted Army*, 4.

tipped marijuana cigarettes could be purchased for under \$5 or in exchange for a carton of American cigarettes.<sup>149</sup>

In the first years of full-scale escalation, 1965-1967, most American soldiers probably did not use drugs other than alcohol. Granted that surveys may underestimate usage, a 1967 study found that 29 percent of returning soldiers admitted to smoking marijuana in Vietnam, and 7 percent said they did it more than twenty times. By 1969, studies placed total users at 50 percent, with 30 percent in the “heavy use” category. By 1971, the total figure approached 60 percent.<sup>150</sup> These figures, nevertheless, reflect a growing incidence of marijuana use in the United States. Yet among men who were heavy users in Vietnam, only about one-half had been heavy users before the war. The marijuana commonly used in the United States was not nearly as potent as the drug found in Vietnam. Before 1975, grass available in the United States had a THC content of around 1 percent. In Indochina, marijuana had THC levels of at least 5 percent, and one researcher found readings as high as 20 percent.<sup>151</sup> Also, much of the marijuana available in Vietnam was treated with opium, usually by rubbing a liquid opiate on the paper of a cigarette.<sup>152</sup>

Drugs are too commonly equated in a simplistic way with the rise of dissent among American soldiers. Drug use parallels but does not explain the increase in combat refusals, fragging’s, and other acts of insubordination or dissent. In a general way, higher

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<sup>149</sup> United States Congress, Committee on the Judiciary, *Hearings*. 6263-6759; numerous personal interviews, e.g., Jackson Baylor interview, 10 September, 1981.

<sup>150</sup> Helmer, *Bringing the War Home*, 75.

<sup>151</sup> Christian Appy, *Working-Class War*, 283.

<sup>152</sup> Novak, *High Culture*, 174-197.

drug use reflected the growing alienation of American forces, but drug use did not make soldiers less willing to fight. Charles Taylor explained in one instance, a soldier won a Silver Star after he kept throwing satchel charges back at the NVA while high on marijuana. A subsequent survey found that the performance of 75 percent of soldiers who used drugs was rated as “good” or outstanding.<sup>153</sup> Another example was Peter Lemon, a Medal of Honor recipient, who was high on marijuana the night he fought off two waves of NVA soldiers. Drugs actually helped soldiers endure the doubt, fatigue, and confusion of the war. For many it was a form of self-medication that made the war more durable.

Nor was all drug use unofficial. Amphetamines were commonly available from medics to help grunts get through long patrols. Some soldiers think this speed made them more edgy, aggressive, and brutal. Nick D’Allesandro was a Green Beret squad leader who reported to sociologist Murray Polner that he had participated in killing at least 100 civilians in the Ia Drang Valley in 1964. “I’m not copping out [but] I was usually under the influence of dextrin diamphetamine sulphate, fifteen milligram pills. . . . You just can’t believe the incredible aggravation you feel when you come down from amphetamines. That time at Plei Me I was so pissed off at the world that I would’ve shot children in the streets and not even flinched. I know, because when I wasn’t on them, I once asked to be removed from an operation on which an unusually large number of civilians had been killed.”<sup>154</sup>

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<sup>153</sup>Kuzmatov, *The Myth of the Addicted Army*, 24.

<sup>154</sup> Murray Polner, *No Victory Parades*, 116.

The effect of marijuana on soldiers was varied, but it was most valued for its stability to provide a euphoric escape from the anxieties of combat. Most combat soldiers did not smoke out on field operations, but when the men returned to the base camps, the drug was often the center of small group parties. Think of *Platoon*, when they had a marijuana party in their hooch. Marijuana was a social drug, a form of collective release.

We'd get together in a hooch or sometimes we'd sneak out to this Buddhist temple near the base. It was very powerful stuff and everybody got real happy. At first we'd laugh and joke and talk about silly shit. But after a while it got real mellow and we might even talk about things that bothered us. Or we'd just lay back and get off on the designs of the temple. Most of the time I hated everything about Vietnam. But when I was stoned I could really appreciate the beauty of the country. You'd look out over the valley and everything seemed really peaceful. And even if there was a fire going on out in the jungle we wouldn't think "Hey, there are people getting blown away out there." It was more like, "Wow, man, take a look at those colors."<sup>155</sup>

Heroin, on the other hand, was not widely available in Vietnam before 1969, but in 1970 it appeared throughout the country. It was 95 percent pure, and small vials could be had for \$2 (the same quantity in the United States had a street value of \$100 to \$200). Usually it came in powder form and was snorted or mixed with tobacco and smoked. Many soldiers mistakenly believed that because they did not inject the heroin, they would not become addicted. By 1971, some studies suggest that at least 10 percent of American soldiers were hooked on heroin and 20 percent were occasional users. Several factors help explain the use of heroin. It was even more powerful than marijuana in suppressing anxiety, and unlike marijuana, which had the effect of slowing down time, heroin gave users the feeling that time was flying by. 'It makes time go away. The days go bip, bip bip.' For some men, heroin seemed to offer the perfect psychological solution to their preoccupation with getting through their 365-day tour as rapidly as possible. While grass

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<sup>155</sup> Christian Appy's interview with Peter Wright, 16 November 1984.

is very pungent and relatively bulky, heroin is odorless and comes in small doses, easily hidden. Therefore, some men switched from grass to heroin simply because it seemed safer. There was a common expression among those who smoked heroin: “I can solute an officer with one hand, and take a drag of heroin with the other.”<sup>156</sup>

In 1969 the military and the government began to crack down on marijuana. The crackdown did not make a dent in the supply and use of marijuana (indeed usage continued to rise), but enough soldiers were busted to make others more nervous and cautious about smoking it openly. In response to the dwindling public support for the war, President Nixon stepped up his rhetoric and doubled the budget for rehabilitation and enforcement programs as part of the newly ordered War on Drugs. He also ordered mandatory urinalysis testing in the military and a sustained interdiction campaign in Southeast Asia involving crop substitution aerial defoliation and the pressuring of government allies to crack down on drug related corruption. In South Vietnam, the United States conducted intensive training of counternarcotic operatives and employed Special Forces units to gather intelligence and destroy locally grown marijuana.<sup>157</sup> All of these measures were to root out the supply from reaching American troops, clean up the image of American allies, and bolster public confidence in the “Army of Anguish” as the *Washington Post* characterized it, thus, allowing President Nixon to perpetuate the war and restore the national international prestige.<sup>158</sup>

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<sup>156</sup> Helmer, *Bringing the War Home*. 79; Christian Appy’s interview with Ed Johnson, 15 October 1982.

<sup>157</sup> Kuzmatov, *The Myth of the Addicted Army*, 4.

<sup>158</sup> Kuzmatov, *The Myth of the Addicted Army*, 4.

Evidence that the drug “crisis” in Vietnam was overblown carried from top-ranked generals who had the most reason to fear the spread of a drug “epidemic.” Born in a generation that came of age drinking whiskey, rum and other hard alcohol, most believed that drug use was a sign of “individual character weakness,” and that most soldiers who participated were unfit for duty and should be thrown out of the service. Lewis Walt, assistant commander of the Marine Corps from 1968-1971 referred to drugs as “a contagious disease nearly as deadly as the bubonic plague. . . . The only explanation is that our enemy wants to hook as many G.I.’s as possible.” In spite of such views, unit commanders unanimously concluded in October 1968 that neither marijuana nor heroin had to that point “degraded the military’s combat effectiveness.”<sup>159</sup> Based on interviews with high ranking officers in General Westmoreland’s *Report* “all agree there has been no discernible impact on morale, health, welfare efficiency or combat effectiveness that can be attributed to drugs. The total scope of the problem is best described as minor.”<sup>160</sup> The report concluded that the impact regarding the public image was much greater and more serious.

Marvin Matthiak, an infantry man stationed with the Alpha First Battalion Cavalry Division from 1969-1971 had stated” “The press has done a tremendous disservice to this country in portraying grunts as being out there on drugs. We didn’t have a drug problem, and as far as I know and as far as everyone else I talk to about it, there was essentially no drug use whatsoever in the bush. Everybody knew what the dangers

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<sup>159</sup> Kuzmatov, *The Myth of the Addicted Army*, 20.

<sup>160</sup> Westmoreland, *A Soldier’s Report*, 279.

were and nobody was stupid enough to in capitate themselves.” As Anthony Tisdale said, “Yeah it was there, when I was with the 173<sup>rd</sup> we were out on patrol, we had a new troop and he had just gotten out of LBJ for drug use.”<sup>161</sup> Tisdale continued to explain this soldier was caught sniffing freshly laid tar over dirt roads and was caught smoking marijuana while on guard duty. “I had to send this man away, right away,” Tisdale said. “The Platoon Sergeant was going to kill him.” Tisdale explained that he was highly upset. “Number one, it impairs your senses, number two it is illegal, and number three it jeopardizes all members of the platoon. I was really concerned about that.”<sup>162</sup> Philip Boyenga recalled: “the only time I ever saw anything, you know, where we were at least, center, and west, we were on east, where we were on guard duty it was relaxation. Some guys were permanently stationed there and had pot and offered it to me, and I declined. I personally did not see it, but if I did I would not have put up with it.”<sup>163</sup>

Drug use was explicit, but it was not used in the field or during combat. It was used after those hard-fought battles, which provided the “antidote” to the hazards and stress of combat. The important psychological function of drug use in Vietnam was enhanced by the distinct social character of a war fought on behalf of a corrupt client regime against a popularly backed revolutionary movement, a point that was obscured in many media portrayals. Fighting at what one analyst termed the “butt end of a bad war,” 43 percent of soldiers who used drugs, according to a study by sociologist John Helmer, many cited “escape” as the key reason and 37 percent cited drug use as a way “to forget

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<sup>161</sup> Anthony Tisdale Interview, July 8, 2015, *Voices of Iowa*, Grout Museum, Waterloo, IA.

<sup>162</sup> Anthony Tisdale Interview, July 8, 2015, *Voices of Iowa*, Grout Museum, Waterloo, IA.

<sup>163</sup> Philip Boyenga Interview, August 24, 2014, *Voices of Iowa*, Grout Museum, Waterloo, IA.

the killing and relieve the pressure.”<sup>164</sup> Psychiatrist such as Dr. Stanton and Dr. Bourne best articulated that drugs helped mitigate the harshness of war, serving as a psychological outlet for soldiers living in nightmarish conditions.<sup>165</sup>

### Drugs as a “Symbol” of Revolt, Rebellion, and Fragging

Drugs served as a fundamental symbol—not cause—of the internecine conflict that plagued the armed forces.<sup>166</sup> During the course of the war, the military’s composition changed from ideological motivated volunteers to dispirited conscripts bent on challenging authority and resisting American policy. In a rare bout of reporting, the *Washington Post* captured the shift in its eight-part series of ‘Army in Anguish,’ editorializing, “With their long hair, black power wristbands and peace medallions, the rumpled, half-bearded GIs lining up at Long Binh for their pre-departure heroin detected tests bear little resemblance to the tough professionals who led the way into Vietnam eleven years ago.”<sup>167</sup>

In the interim years, seditious activity had increased as a result of the antiauthoritarian influence of the counterculture and growing perception that war was unwinnable and unjust (or a “criminal waste,” as one GI put it). In 1969, Country Joe and the Fish’s antiwar “I Feel like I’m Fixin to Die Rag” was the most popular song in-country. According to the best estimates, 37 percent of soldiers were involved in some sort of resistance to the military.<sup>168</sup> Many wore peace bands, grew their hair long, and

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<sup>164</sup> Kuzmatov, *The Myth of the Addicted Army*, 22.

<sup>165</sup> Talbott and Teague, “Marijuana Psychosis,” 300-301; Gibson, *The Perfect War*, 223.

<sup>166</sup> Kuzmatov, *The Myth of the Addicted Army*, 29.

<sup>167</sup> Johnson and Wilson, “Army in Anguish” *Washington Post*, April 10, 1972.

<sup>168</sup> Johnson and Wilson, “Army in Anguish”; Cortright, *Soldier’s in Revolt*, 19. Terry Anderson, *The Movement and the Sixties*, 245; Duncan, “I Quit.”



developed subversive underground newspapers that published radical critiques of American policy.<sup>169</sup> Court-martial rates skyrocketed, as did conscientious objection, combat refusal, and desertion. Several major prison riots and mutinies also materialized, though these were given little attention in the mass media.<sup>170</sup> By 1971, Colonel Robert Heinl reported in the *Armed Forces Journal* that the military had disintegrated to a ‘State approaching collapse,’ with “individual units drug ridden and dispirited when not near-mutinous,” avoiding or having refused combat and “murdering their officers and non-commissioned officer” through “fragging” (detonating a grenade in their barracks). The Army eventually admitted to some 700 such incidents.<sup>171</sup>

In his famous novel, the *Matterhorn*, Karl Marlantes’ character Mellas confronted a fragging of his good buddy Jay Hawke. Both had been drinking heavily one night, and Mellas had just put Hawke to bed in hated Sergeant Cassidy’s rack. Soon someone was waking Mellas: “What the fuck is it?” he whispered, his head aching badly from the alcohol. “It’s me, China, sir.” “Goddamn, China, what the fuck do you want?” replied Mellas. “Lieutenant Mellas, you got to help. They’s going to be trouble tonight,” said China. “What do you mean?” replied Mellas. “I mean I think they’s go’n be someone killed,” China whispered. Mellas heard scraping outside of his tent behind China. Then a match was struck and he saw Mole, another African American Marine. China’s own face

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<sup>169</sup> Stapp, *Up Against the Brass*; “CIA Ordered Nazi Style Massacre in My Lai,” *The Bond*, December 16, 1970; “GI’s United Against the War in Indochina,” *Bragg Briefs*, Special Spring Offensive, 1971; all in ANC.

<sup>170</sup> *Sir? No Sir!*, directed by Geiger; Gabriel and Savage, *Crisis in Command*, 45-46; Gioglio, *Days of Decision*; Waterhouse and Wizard, *Turning the Guns Around*; Moser, *The New Winter Soldiers*; “A Deserter Raps: Outasight in Saigon—How To Scram in the Nam,” *Berkley Barb*, February 11-17, 1972, 2.

<sup>171</sup> Heinl, “Collapse of the Armed Forces,” 30-31; Christian Appy, *Working-Class War*, 246; Franklin, *Vietnam and Other American Fantasies*, 64.

was tense and worried. Mellas had wondered what part Mole had had in getting China to where he was. Throughout the novel, Mole was aggravated by Staff Sergeant Cassidy, a racial bigot. Mole was full of black power motivation. Mole and China were after Cassidy.<sup>172</sup>

“Now what the fuck’s going on?” Mellas whispered. He was fully dressed, not having undressed when he collapsed on the floor after drinking with Hawke. ‘It’s Cassidy, sir,” said China. ‘Sergeant Cassidy. I Think they go’n frag him tonight. I wanted to just throw a fuckin’ fake in, you know, to make a statement, and they go’n waste him instead. They said a fuckin’ pop won’t get nothin’ done,” said China. “But Cassidy’s in fucking Quang-Tri. What the fuck can I do about that?” Mellas was pissed off about him waking him up for nothing, and sick to his stomach with the hangover. “No he’s not, sir. He’s come back. We saw the lights on in there tonight.” China’s words jerked Mellas’s spine straight. “Jesus Christ,” he whispered. “The Jay Hawkes in there.” Mellas began to run. He could only think of getting hawke out of Cassidy’s rack. Mole went sprinting past Mellas, with everything he had to reach hawke. China came behind. All three of them filled with a dread that pushed them like a giant hand on their backs. Dark shadows flitted away from the tent. Mellas rushed through the entrance just behind Mole. They could see nothing inside, but they could smell the sickening burning smell of the TNT.<sup>173</sup>

Mellas stumbled over to the rack where he had laid Hawke. The grenade had gone off directly beneath Hawke. Pieces of mattress hung in the air. What remained of the torn

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<sup>172</sup> Karl Marlantes, *Matterhorn*, 628-629.

<sup>173</sup> Karl Marlantes, *Matterhorn*, 629.

mattress was sticky with blood. He tried to feel where the blood was coming from, running his hands over the limp body. “Get a fucking light,” Mellas screamed. He located Hawke’s head and felt his neck for a pulse. There was nothing. There were men outside yelling for a corpsman, but Mellas knew it was too late. China was trembling, standing in the doorway of the tent. Mole was talking to him quietly. They both looked at Mellas, frightened. Mella’s body began to shake. He could not control it. He squatted on his haunches, steadying himself on Hawke’s rack, looking at Hawke’s open eyes, trying to control the trembling of his arms and hands. There was no Hawke behind those eyes. “Bye, Jay Hawke,” Mellas said, and closed his eyes.<sup>174</sup>

Following a fruitless offensive on the Dong Ap Bia Hill in the A Shau Valley, a group of veterans placed a \$10,000 bounty on the head of Lieutenant Colonel Weldon Honeycutt, who had ordered the attack. Many underground newspapers at the same time featured a “Lifer [career officer] of the month” to be targeted for assassination. This testified to the profound contempt held by many GIs for their senior commanding officers, which was due to a sense of betrayal surrounding their justifications for the war and their willingness to sacrifice lives for what their men perceived as trivial military gain.<sup>175</sup> The contempt was not drug induced.

Bearing the imprint of the 1960s counterculture, many soldiers did turn to drugs as an emblem of their collective defiance. Sociologist Paul Starr wrote that by the late 1960s, “acid rock, drugs and peace emblems were as common in I-Corps and they were

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<sup>174</sup> Karl Marlantes, *Matterhorn*, 630.

<sup>175</sup> *The Bond*, July 24, 1971, and “Lifer’s Dig War . . . It Makes Them Rich,” *The Ally*, November 1969, both in the ANC; Halstead, “The New Anti-War Army”; Linden, “Demoralization of an Army,” 13.

in California.” Leslie Whitfield, who served with the Third battalion, Tenth Infantry, commented, “The heads [potheads] were critical for the war, looked down on the lifers, condemned the military and wore peace symbols and beads with their uniforms.” Dave Cline, who served in the Ninth Infantry’s Delta Company near Cu Chi, added:

‘After six months, I came to the conclusion that we were the aggressors. I started to see the injustice of it all. Truck drivers would just run people down on the road and laugh about it. We’d be riding in helicopters and people would be working in the rice fields and the door gunners would just kill them right on the spot and laugh. Something just started to go awry inside of me. This isn’t right. This isn’t mom and apple pie. So I was involved with smoking marijuana. At the time this was the symbol of the anti-war movement in the service.’<sup>176</sup>

An interesting facet about the rebelliousness connotation of drug use in Vietnam was that it was not always ideological. Captain Larry H. Ingraham found that most “heads” who smoked “scag” in Vietnam embraced a conservative critique of the war. “In hostile zones, they expressed frustration at not being able to identify and engage the enemy and having to fight for limited objectives,” Ingraham wrote in *Psychiatry*. “They would call for greater escalation, so that ‘we can get in, do the job right, and get out.’ They were not pacifists and had no reserve about killing ‘gooks.’” Jerry Lembcke added, “Drug use was definitely tied to a culture of resistance in Vietnam, but I don’t know how much [of it] was antiwar. Most guys hated the Army and all the rules. They were naïve, though, politically. They rebelled against the military, first and foremost, and not necessarily against the war.”<sup>177</sup>

Because of the prevailing racial divide engulfing the military, African American GI’s were the most prone to use drugs as an expression of social dissent. Influenced by

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<sup>176</sup> Cortright, *Soldiers in Revolt*, 19; Rinaldi, “Olive Drab Rebels”; Starr, *Discarded Army*, 23, 36; Terry Anderson, “GI Movement,” 104; Cline quoted in Moser, *New Winter Soldiers*, 63.

<sup>177</sup> Ingraham, “‘The Nam’ and ‘The World,’” 123, Lembcke interview; Moskos, *American Enlisted Man*, 35, 148-52, 164.

the Black Power movement, many formed revolutionary movements—such as one titled De Mau Mau after the Kenyan anticolonial fighters—and instigated a series of racial riots, some at the Long Binh stockade, where they faced constant degradation and harassment from white guards.<sup>178</sup> The media, including *Playboy* magazine, tried to associate their actions with the intake of marijuana, though these claims were repudiated by a long military inquiry on the matter.<sup>179</sup> Many African Americans had come to identify by this time with the Vietnamese revolutionary struggle for political autonomy and independence. They overwhelmingly viewed American policy as being “racist and imperialistic in design.”<sup>180</sup> One black marine commented, “The black guys [in our unit] would say that as far as they were concerned, Ho Chi Minh was a soul brother. Along with a few college drop-outs, they formed a kind of coalition. They would listen to music all the time, get stoned and refuse to carry out assigned orders.” Although some black radicals also frowned on drug-use, which they felt diverted activist energies, these comments exemplify its importance as a symbol of nonconformity and resistance to military authority, which was marked during the later stages of the war. They also highlight the growing antiestablishment sentiments in GIs, which lay at the root of the

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<sup>178</sup> “How the Nazi Brass Run Long Binh Jail,” *The Bond*, October 21, 1970, ANC; Currey, *Long Binh Jail*, 50.

<sup>179</sup> Sherrill, “Justice, Military Style”; “Fresh Disclosures on Drugs and GIs” *U.S. News & Report*, April 6, 1970, 32-33; Willard W. Hawke, “Report of Inquiry concerning Allegations Made in *Playboy Magazine* about the USARV Installation Stockade,” February 24, 1970, Army Criminal Investigations Branch, CID, NA.

<sup>180</sup> Westheider, *Fighting on Two Fronts*; Terry, *Bloods*; Cortright, *Soldiers in Revolt*, 39; Gill, “Black Soldiers’ Perspectives,” 174.

crisis in military discipline and insubordination—a crisis for which drugs received the blame in the media but which itself created the drug problem.<sup>181</sup>

### The Alcoholic Army: A Beer Was Cheaper than a Soda

According to Jeremy Kuzmarov, the alcohol problem “puts the scope of the drug problem in perspective to recognize that alcohol abuse in Vietnam was far more pervasive.”<sup>182</sup> The Department of Defense (DOD) concluded that 88 percent of soldiers reported drinking alcohol during their tour of duty, often in “prodigious amounts.” Another study found that 73 percent of junior enlisted men fit into the definition of either “problem drinkers,” or “heavy or binge” drinkers. In secret memorandum addressed to all military chiefs of staff, General Westmoreland admitted that alcohol abuse was a “serious problem.” In 1970, the Criminal Investigation Division (CID) staff report concluded: “the emphasis placed in recent months on drug abuse in the services has all but obscured the plodding efforts to overcome an older, more nagging problem: alcoholism.”<sup>183</sup>

As in World War II, the high rate of alcohol abuse was shaped by the senior command. The senior command adopted a tolerant attitude toward alcoholism and in many cases, encouraged drinking. Before 1972, when it declared alcoholism to be a disease, before the Department of Defense had no official policy outlawing drinking. The DOD left major decisions and punishments up to the local platoon leaders, who themselves were often prone to drinking.<sup>184</sup> In 1966 the army opened an amusement

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<sup>181</sup> Sanders, ‘Doper’s Wonderland,’ 68; “Black Power Group in Vietnam Fights the Enemy Within: Heroin Addiction,” *New York Times*, August 12, 1971, A3; Graham, *Brothers’ Vietnam War*, 110.

<sup>182</sup> Kuzmarov, *The Myth of the Addicted Army*, 26.

<sup>183</sup> Kuzmarov, *The Myth of the Addicted Army*, 26-27.

<sup>184</sup> Fussel, *Wartime*, 99; Rose, *Myths and the Greatest Generation*, 38; Pike and Golstein, “History of Drug Use in the Military,” 1133.

center at An Khe with forty-eight bars in order to “Boost morale.” Many officers made sure that beer was free at base camps, and at times ordered it to be dropped via helicopter in combat areas. General Westmoreland approved drinking in the barracks. Some commanders utilized alcohol as a reward for proficiency in enemy kills. Private David Tuck of the Twenty-fifth Infantry Division testified before the 1967 Bertrand Russel War Crimes Tribunal, headed by ninety-four year old British philosopher, about a passing fad in his unit, where, “the person who had the most ears was considered the number one ‘Vietcong killer. When we’d get back to base camp, they would get all the free beer and whiskey they could drink.”<sup>185</sup> “Everybody in Vietnam drank like fish,” Gonzalo Balazar, a member of the 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne recalled. “And every chance you got, you drank yourself silly. Us infantry guys, we were a bunch of alcoholics.” Steven Bookout, a helicopter pilot recalled after the death of his friend and his long flying hours that: “There was a lot of times for me to overcome my grief, and at the time I didn’t realize it but I was becoming psycho in a way. I was flying a lot of hours. I was living off of adrenaline and booze. I started drinking beer at 6’oclock in the morning. It took me years to get over that.”

Dr. Roger Roffman, who worked at psychiatric treatment facilities in Long Binh and Saigon from 1967 and 1969, commented:

Legality made drinking a far more legitimate form of social release than drugs in Vietnam. Within the stressful setting of war, young men of that age naturally look to alter their state of consciousness. Because the military sanctioned alcohol, it is not surprising

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<sup>185</sup> R.W. “Johnny” Apple, Jr., “4 GI’S Held in Vietnam as Drug Inquiry Is Begun,” *New York Times*, January 26, 1966, A4; Maclear, *Ten Thousand Day War*, 144; “USARV Regulation 210-65,” November 6, 1970, Dp&P, box 34, folder 2; Terry Anderson, “GI Movement,” 114; “Testimony of Davis K. Tuck, Specialist Class with the U.S. 25<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division in Vietnam,” in Duffet, *Against the Crime of Silence*, 406.

that drinking, often to extremes, was common place. Not only was alcohol more prevalent than drugs in Vietnam . . . [but] alcohol related problems were also far worse.<sup>186</sup>

Backing up this point, the CID files are replete with cases of soldiers instigating fights while drunk. Intoxicated pilots had a ritual of racing their motorbikes at fast speeds around Bien Hoa airbase, causing various disturbances. Assistant Secretary of Defense Richard Wilbur, spoke before a congressional subcommittee about a hazing practice in which airborne officers drank alcohol out of the nose cap of an airplane propeller until they became unconscious. “Unfortunately,” stated Wilbur, “some of the social aspects of the military have tended to emphasize alcohol. The need for getting drunk when one is promoted or gets a medal or a change of assignment has an adverse effect on military preparedness.”<sup>187</sup>

Many soldiers publicly stated that they feared going into combat with soldiers who had been drinking the night before, because of the effects of being hungover. This was not the case with drugs. One Air Force officer proclaimed, “When I get up in the wee hours to fly a mission, I need the [person] I’m flying with to be fresh. He’s more likely to be so if he smoked grass the night before than if he got juiced [drunk].” Another added, “Alcohol makes people really weird, I mean you can’t depend on them to do anything, they’re virtually incapacitated. Marijuana is not quite as bad.”<sup>188</sup> Jay Pierson, of the Eighth Wing Tech Division based out of Ubon Thailand, spoke in an interview about a pilot who drank so much that he “[almost] literally turned into a grape,” jeopardizing the

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<sup>186</sup>Kuzmarov, *The Myth of the Addicted Army*, Roffman Interview, 28.

<sup>187</sup> E.g., “Drunk While on Duty,” Summary of Non-Judicial Punishment, October 18, 1971, CIB, NA, box 36, folder 2; Cecil, *Herbicide Warfare*, 87; House Committee on Government Operations, *Evaluating the Federal Effort to Control Drug Abuse* (1973), part 3, 774.

<sup>188</sup> Kuzmarov, *The Myth of the Addicted Army*, 28.



safety of his crew before he was sent to detoxification. Marc Levy detailed the case of a doctor who, under the influence following a firefight, was unable to treat wounded GI's near the Cambodian border. "The guy was completely drunk, risking lives," recalled Levy. "While there was rumors about soldiers fucking up because of drugs, the only cases I knew were alcohol; guys drunk or hung-over who couldn't do their jobs or [who] made mistakes like stepping on a land mine, which cost lives. Drinking was simply part of the culture in Vietnam and it was everywhere. A beer was cheaper to get than a soda."<sup>189</sup>

In "GIs against Themselves—Factors Resulting in Explosive Violence in Vietnam," Drs. Vincent Becchinelli and Douglas Bey cited the case of a drunken soldier who shot his sergeant four times in the head, killing him instantly. They concluded that alcohol enhanced deep-rooted frustrations with the war and the "loss of ideological purpose," causing a breakdown in military discipline.<sup>190</sup> Dr. John K. Imahara, a psychiatrist stationed at Long Binh, testified before Congress similarly that alcohol intoxication was more common than drugs in cases of intra-unit violence. He related how a soldier who had been drinking for "several hours" bayoneted and killed a fellow GI in a fit of rage.<sup>191</sup> James Pederson, an officer at Long Binh prison, recounted another case in which a highly decorated Air Force pilot fired his rifle indiscriminately at the end of an airfield while inebriated, killing five Vietnamese maintenance technicians. In March 1971, Sergeant First Class Prentice B. Smith was convicted of unpremeditated murder

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<sup>189</sup> Brush, "Higher and Higher"; Verrone and Calkins, *Voices from Vietnam*, 186; Kuzmarov, *The Myth of the Addicted Army*, Person Interview; Randle Interview; Levy Interview, 28.

<sup>190</sup> Bey and Zecchenelli, "GIs Against Themselves," 226.

<sup>191</sup> Senate Committee on the Judiciary, *Drug Abuse in the Armed Forces* (1968), 6415.

after he fired several rounds of his M-16 into a crowd of officers while drunk, killing one and wounding five others. A psychiatric report concluded that he had suffered from “paranoid thinking” and “auditory hallucinations” induced by alcohol.<sup>192</sup>

These cases exemplify the pernicious consequence of alcohol abuse during the war, which helped exacerbate internal dissension and violence, which tarnished America’s reputation more than drugs. Yet for deep-rooted cultural and political reasons, politicians and the media overlooked the alcohol “epidemic,” instead painting a one-dimensional portrait of a drug-addicted army.<sup>193</sup> In the end, this helped to inculcate support for the expanded drug-control measures, while ensuring that alcohol continued to be socially and legally acceptable—despite the fact that alcohol remains the most destructive of social intoxications. According to a 1994 Department of Justice report, alcohol manifest into causes of acts of “aggression and violence.”<sup>194</sup>

### Discontent and the Rise of Black Militancy

One of the most important issues affecting morale and discipline in the military in the later stages of the Vietnam War was the rise of black militancy in the ranks. Many African Americans like Colin Powell or Allen Thomas Jr. still believed that the military offered the best chance for advancement for African Americans and appreciated the opportunities a career in the military afforded them. But thousands of younger African

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<sup>192</sup> Currey, *Long Binh Jail*, 44; *U.S. v Smith*, 44 C.M.R. 292, 1971 CMR LEXIS 816 (A.C.M.R Mar. 26, 1971); Christian Appy, *Patriots*, 160-161.

<sup>193</sup> Kuzmarov, *The Myth of the Addicted Army*, 29.

<sup>194</sup> Roth, “Psychoactive Substances:” Kuzmarov, *The Myth of the Addicted Army*, Roffman Interview, 29.

Americans entering the service beginning in the mid-1960s were convinced that the military was just as racist as American society.

The civil rights movement had been successful in eliminating many evils of Jim Crow, most notably with the passage of the Civil rights act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965. However, there was still much to be done; institutional racism had dealt a death blow, but individual racism was a potent factor, and much of black America lived in poverty.

The movement raised hopes and expectations and galvanized African Americans to crusade for justice. Obviously it could not cure all the ills facing African Americans, leaving young African Americans angry and disillusioned. Once inducted into the armed services, they felt isolated and oppressed in an institution dominated by whites and believed they were being used as cannon fodder in Vietnam. The black response was a rise in racial solidarity and black power militancy.

African Americans called each other bloods, souls, soul brothers, or brothers. They usually greeted each other with a sign of racial solidarity, such as the black power salute (the raised clinched fist), or the ritualized handshake known as a dap.<sup>195</sup> The term *dap* is a corruption of Vietnamese slang for “beautiful” and originated among the brothers fighting in Vietnam. Each step during dapping had a specific meaning, and though there were some movements that were basic to dapping, there was no set procedure, and the individual dap could take but a few seconds or last upwards to several minutes. African Americans also wore or carried items proclaiming their racial pride that

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<sup>195</sup> E. James Westheider, *Fighting in Vietnam: The Experience of the U.S. Soldier*, 180.

black was beautiful. Many carried ebony walking sticks, usually adorned with a clenched fist for a knob, known as a black power cane.<sup>196</sup> So-called slave bracelets, woven out of bootlaces and worn on the wrist, were very common. Soldiers of all races chalked sayings and slogans on their helmet liners or flak jackets. Many of the sayings had an antiwar theme, such as “Fuck the War” or “Give Peace a chance,” and some could be sarcastic; more than a few grunts in Vietnam chalked “LBJ’s Hired Gun.” African Americans often chose racial themes, such as “Soul Brother” or “Black is Beautiful,” to adorn their equipment, reflecting their pride.

The majority of African Americans embracing racial solidarity and black power were not subversives or hostile to whites. Most blacks segregated themselves and sought to avoid trouble. Air force sergeant Jack Smedley just wanted “to relax, really relax” when he was off duty and did not “want to listen with half an ear to hear if some drunken whites are going to call him a nigger.”<sup>197</sup> “Chuck’s all right until he gets a beer under his belt, and then its Nigger this and Nigger that, added another black soldier in Vietnam.<sup>198</sup> But many had white friends. “We are not anti-white and don’t bar whites if they dig us,” remarked marine officer Dwight Rawls. “I got some white friends who are for real,” explained another African American veteran. “I know some chucks who I’d most likely punch in the mouth if they said good morning to me because I know they are some wrong

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<sup>196</sup>E. James Westheider, *Fighting in Vietnam: The Experience of the U.S. Soldier*, 180.

<sup>197</sup> Sol Stern, “When the Black GI Comes Back from Vietnam,” *New York Times Magazine*, March 24, 1968, 42; Thomas Johnson, “The U.S. Negro in Vietnam,” *New York Times*, April 29, 1968, 16; Thomas Johnson, “Negro Expatriates Finding Wide Opportunity in Asia,” *New York Times*, April 30, 1968, 18.

<sup>198</sup> Stokes, “Black Caucus Report,” 36, 589; Thomas Johnson, “Negroes in the Nam,” *Ebony*, August 1968, 38.

studs.”<sup>199</sup> Most of the self-segregation occurred during off duty hours, and few whites or blacks seemed to have a problem working together. “The black guys always hung around with the blacks and the whites hung out with the whites,” noted Captain Stewart H. Barnhoft, a white officer commanding an engineering company at Chu Lai. “But, on duty everybody tended to work fairly well together.”<sup>200</sup>

Black officers had no trouble worming with their fellow white officers and often socialized in integrated settings, but African Americans often socialized at all-black events. Korean and Vietnam War veteran Lt. Colonel Maurice L. Adams mixed freely with whites but noted that he and other black officers “often sit apart just to look at each other in our pride.”<sup>201</sup> “We had our own parties, put on soul food nights, and played Aretha Franklin records,” Colin Powell recalled. For black officers, it was the best of both worlds. “Blacks could hang out with the brothers in their free time, and no one gave it anymore thought than the fact West Pointers, tankers, or engineers went off by themselves. That was exactly the kind of integration we had been fighting for, to be permitted our blackness and also to be able to make it in a mostly white world.”<sup>202</sup>

### Racial Hostility, Cultural expression, and Tension

Much like 1968 was a pivotal year in the course of the war, it was also a turning point in racial violence in the military. The use of the draft to facilitate the expansion

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<sup>199</sup> Thomas Johnson, “Negro Expatriates Finding Wide Opportunities in Asia,” *New York Times*, April 30, 1969, 18; Thomas Johnson, “The U.S. Negro in Vietnam,” *New York Times*, April 29, 1968, 16.

<sup>200</sup> Major Stewart H. Barnhoft, *Company Officer Oral History Project*, U.S. History Institute, Carlisle Barracks, PA, 1982, 6.

<sup>201</sup> Garven Dalglish, “Black and Back from Vietnam,” *The Cincinnati Enquirer Magazine*, July 19, 1970, 11.

<sup>202</sup> Colin Powell, *My American Journey*, 124.

of the armed forces brought in thousands of disaffected and radicalized individuals straight from a civilian society bitterly divided by the war in Vietnam, the civil rights movement, and the rise of black militancy. The influx of tens of thousands of new recruits, coupled with the military's own rotation policies, worked against unit cohesion and ensured that many military installations were overcrowded with transients heading to new assignments. Most were strangers to each other, not comrades in arms they had trained and served with, and there was little familiarity or trust between officers, enlisted men, blacks, and whites. The erosion of morale, spotty leadership, and the weakening of discipline created an environment that allowed militancy, racism, and insubordination to flourish.

Though the majority of African Americans considered their solidarity and self-segregation as protection against racism, many whites increasingly saw such behavior as hateful and hostile. One white Green Beret stated that "blacks pretty much stuck to themselves and hated everybody else." Black militants told their white commanding general in Germany that he was a pig and that all whites were pigs. Most of the black prisoners at the Danang stockade were hard-core militants and "thoroughly full of hate for all whiteys," according to the brig's executive officer.<sup>203</sup> Gerald Kumpf considered two African Americans from an army supply unit that came over to play poker to be racist and troublemakers. "The blacks were definitely anti-white and it was over poker game and they came in doing all kinds of bad-mouthing on whitey and things like that . . .

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<sup>203</sup> Baskir and Strauss, *Chance and Circumstance*, 137; Lieutenant Charles Anderson file, letter dated November 15, 1968, 1, #7028, Box 1, File #1, Cornell University Archives, Ithaca, NY.

. They hated white guys . . . and they were out for blood.” Kumpf claimed that they caught the two blacks cheating, and a fight broke out. Kumpf did not get involved because he was a “pacifist.”<sup>204</sup> In 1972, the DOD’s Task force on the Administration of Military Justice saw “evidence of black separating themselves from their non-black comrades in hostile ways, going beyond affirming their racial and cultural solidarity.”<sup>205</sup>

Racial hostility and friction were increasing in the military, and there was enough racists and militants on both sides to provoke trouble. Gonzalo Baltazar recalled that “in Vietnam there was a lot of racism. I never knew...I came from a small town. I didn’t know what racism was as far as black. I knew what racism was as far as Mexicans because in school I ran into a lot of racism between Whites and Mexicans, but I never knew a black so I didn’t think much of it. But a lot of these guys came from Detroit or Chicago, blacks and whites, well there was a lot of racism between them.” In Vietnam, he thought to himself, “man, were fighting two wars over here right now” due to the name-calling and racial friction.<sup>206</sup>

Name-calling and stereotyping were common. Many blacks referred to whites using derogatory bits. Whites reciprocated with pejoratives such as coon, spear chucker, boy, spook, and the ever traditional nigger. “Niggers eat shit and “I’d prefer a gook to a nigger” and other expressions of racist graffiti decorated the walls of bars and latrines throughout Vietnam.<sup>207</sup> The problem was not limited to the bathrooms of Southeast Asia

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<sup>204</sup> Ballweg, *Oral History Project*, 30.

<sup>205</sup> Department of Defense, *Task Force*, vol. 1, 61-62.

<sup>206</sup> Baltazar, *Oral History Project*, 30.

<sup>207</sup> E. James Westheider, *Fighting in Vietnam: The Experience of the U.S. Soldier*, 181.

but occurred throughout the military establishment. Common suggestions in the Camp Lejeune suggestion box included “Keep those niggers off the [dance] floor” and “Coons please go back to Africa.”<sup>208</sup> Some whites mocked the black power salute, or reciprocated with invented white power salutes, while others enacted exaggerated daps.

Dapping proved to be the cause of a lot of racial tension. Some whites, like army captain John Ellis, were understanding and patient and realized that the dap “was a very meaningful thing to young blacks. It meant a lot to them and sometimes, like anything like that, what starts out to be meaningful sort of gets made into something sort of ridiculous.”<sup>209</sup> Most whites viewed it as provocative and believed that many blacks engaged in time-consuming daps simply to annoy them, particularly in the chow line. “Well, the favorite time for blacks to do that was in line in the mess hall, and sometimes they would go into a five or ten minute dapping period,” recalled Captain Vernon Connor. “The whites would not be real thrilled about waiting in line while a couple of bro’s went through their dapping procedures.”<sup>210</sup> The DOD’s Task Force on the Administration of Military Justice also found that “dapping has become a source of considerable friction both between the black serviceman and his white counterparts and between him and the military system. It seems to provoke a reaction of white anger out of proportion to its own importance.”<sup>211</sup>

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<sup>208</sup> “Lejeune Described as Worse than Mississippi,” *The Pittsburgh Courier*, August 30, 1969, 1.

<sup>209</sup> Department of Defense, *Task Force*, Vol. 1, 60-61; “GI’s Complain about Bias in Armed Services,” *The Pittsburgh Courier*, May 8, 1971, 9; Major John J. Ellis, *Senior Officer Oral History Project*, 1982, U.S. Army Military History Institute, Carlisle Barracks, PA, 5.

<sup>210</sup> Lieutenant Colonel Vernon L. Conner, *Company Officer Oral History Project*, U.S. Army Military History Institute, Carlisle Barracks, PA, 1982, 46.

<sup>211</sup> Department of Defense, *Task Force*, Vol. 1, 61.



Whites could also be provocative in their choices of cultural pride and expressions. If dapping angered whites, the use of the Confederate flags in Vietnam drove African Americans crazy. Most whites viewed the flag as a symbol of southern pride and not of a racial legacy, but few things infuriated blacks more than this symbol over hooches, fire bases, and even major installations. The flag of the former Confederacy was ubiquitous. On Christmas day in 1965, six whites carried a rebel flag and paraded in front of over 1,500 troops attending a Bob Hope USO show. Several officers and NCOs later posed for pictures under the flag. One black soldier present observed angrily that the display made him feel “like an outsider.”<sup>212</sup> The *Crisis*, the journal of the NCAAP, expressed how most black people felt about the Stars and Bars when it referred to the Confederate flag as “the tattered banner of that evil and misbegotten system,” a “despicable” symbol “of a dead and dishonorable past,” that “the Stars and Bars and the Swastika are equally the emblem of a false doctrine of racial supremacy.”<sup>213</sup>

There was some racial violence before 1968, but most of it was between just two or three individuals. That all changed after the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr. on April 4, 1968. The assassination of America’s foremost civil rights crusader and apostle for peace left black military personnel stunned and saddened. Twenty-one-year-old Specialist 4 Reginald Daniels said that King “was a man we believed in, we trusted in. If anybody was the liberator, he was the man.”<sup>214</sup> Sergeant James H. House was out in the

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<sup>212</sup> “No Dixie Flag in Armed Forces,” *The Baltimore Afro-American*, February 19, 1966, 3; “From a G.I.,” *The Black Panther*, July 26, 1969, 6.

<sup>213</sup> “Requiem for Dixie,” *The Crisis*, March 1969, 112.

<sup>214</sup> Bernard Weinraub, “Rioting Disquiets G.I.’s in Vietnam,” *The New York Times*, April 8, 1968, 8.

field on a sweep when news of Dr. King's assassination came over the radio. It left him shocked. "Often we pay no attention to the radio," he explained, "but this bulletin was the news of the death of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. . . .It was really a shock, not only to me but to everybody who stands for peace. It made us all realize that now is the time to unite for peace."<sup>215</sup>

Many whites were as shocked and saddened after Dr. King's death. "Speaking for myself, I'm appalled," said white airman first class Logan Hill to a *New York Times* reporter. Petty Officer Third class John Brackett, who served in Vietnam from 1968-1969, had a "couple of good friends who were white and not racist, and that helped."<sup>216</sup> Others were apathetic, even callous about King's murder. 'We feel sorry they got King,' explained an anonymous white military MP. 'He's a martyr now and his people will follow the Rap Browns and Stokely Carmichaels.' Another white explained, "We have 300 Americans dying here each week...King was one man. What about the people out here that are dying?" Other whites expressed satisfaction that King was dead. Airman Logan had "talked to some people who thought it was a pretty good thing," and John Brackett remembered the "overt joy expressed by some of my white colleagues that this 'trouble-maker' had been eliminated."<sup>217</sup> Some whites even celebrated King's assassination openly by donning makeshift white Ku Klux Klan robes or burning crosses. At Cam rahn Bay, they hoisted the Confederate flag over the naval headquarters building.

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<sup>215</sup> Sergeant James H. House, "From Viet Nam," letters to the editor, *Sepia*, August 1968, 6.

<sup>216</sup> E. James Westheider, *Fighting on Two Fronts*, 98.

<sup>217</sup> Bernard Weinraub, "Rioting," 35; James E. Westheider, "African Americans and the Vietnam War," in the *The Blackwell companion to the Vietnam War*, eds. Marilyn Young and Robert Buzzanco (Boston: Blackwell, 2002), 343.

King's death, and the manner in which some whites reacted to it, led to violence. There was rioting in over 100 cities and army troops were called out to assist the National Guard in quelling the disturbances. There was sporadic violence within the military as well, but it was confined to fights between individuals. King's death changed things for African Americans, as they became more disillusioned and angry. "Almost everywhere here you can see the unity which exists among the Negro soldiers," observed one black soldier. "After the assassination of Dr. M.L. King you could also feel the malcontent."<sup>218</sup>

Signs of the growing racial tensions became apparent when black inmates began rioting at the navy brig in Danang in August 1968, as did prisoners in later than month at the massive Long Binh Stockade outside of Saigon. Large military installations saw a rise in racial violence. At Camp Lejeune, in 1968, there were over 160 recorded racial assaults and "an explosive situation of major proportions has been created and continues to be aggravated," warned a committee investigating the violence. One white marine at Lejeune mused that "violence is our only meeting ground now."<sup>219</sup> The predictions of violence came true at Camp Lejeune the night of 20 July 1969, when a large interracial gang fight broke out at the send-off party for the First Battalion Sixth Marines, leaving to join the Sixth Fleet at Rota, Spain. Sporadic yelling between white and blacks climaxed around 11:00 P.M. when, yelling "white beasts" and "we are going to mess up some beasts tonight," around thirty African American and Latino marines engaged a slightly

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<sup>218</sup> Clinton H. Hunt in discussion with James Westheider, author of *Fighting in Vietnam*. Cincinnati, Ohio, September 21, 1991, and Pfc. Morocco Coleman, "The Prince of Peace," letters to the editor, *Ebony*, August 1968, 17.

<sup>219</sup> Shaw and Donnelly, *Blacks in the Marine Corps*, 72; Lewis, "The Rumble at Camp Lejeune," *The Atlantic*, January 1970, 26, 38; "White and Black Confrontations are Increasing," *The Pittsburgh Courier*, August 23, 1969, 14.

smaller group of whites in a brawl in front of the enlisted men's club.<sup>220</sup> Dozens of men were injured, and two white marines were hospitalized with stab wounds and another with a serious head injury. The one fatality was an innocent victim, a 20-year-old corporal from Mississippi named Edward Bankston, who apparently had taken no part in the fighting.<sup>221</sup>

The so-called rumble at Camp Lejeune was the first of several large-scale racial confrontations on military bases in 1968. Ten days later, there was a confrontation between whites and blacks at Millington Air Station near Memphis, Tennessee. The fight started when whites confronted a group of African Americans returning from a night out at the bar. One white yelled out, "Here come those drunken niggers now," which led to a 15-minute free-for-all that started at the barracks and ended at a nearby bar. No one was seriously hurt, but four black marines were arrested and charged with rioting and conspiracy.<sup>222</sup> In August, a fight erupted at Kaneohe Marine Corps Station in Hawaii after approximately 50 African American's gave a black power salute during the lowering of colors. For over five hours, an estimated 250 marines fought each other with sticks, pipes, and entrenching tools, leaving 16 injured, 3 whom were hospitalized. In Vietnam, two white colonels were injured that year during qa major race riot at the naval installation at Cam Ranh Bay.<sup>223</sup>

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<sup>220</sup>E. James Westheider, *Fighting in Vietnam: The Experience of the U.S. Soldier*, 183.

<sup>221</sup> E. James Westheider, *Fighting in Vietnam: The Experience of the U.S. Soldier*, 183.

<sup>222</sup> "Black G.I's," *The Black Liberator*, December 1969, 2; "4 Marines Convicted of Assault Not Rioting," *The Baltimore Afro-American*, February 14, 1970, 18; "Memphis," *The Crisis*, March 1970, 116.

<sup>223</sup> Thomas Cecil, *Senior Officer Oral History Project*, 2.

In the next few years, rioting and racial violence occurred at numerous bases including Fort Bragg, fort Hood, and fort McClellan in the United States, and overseas from South Korea and Okinawa to West Germany and Labrador, Canada. Despite varied locations, there was a pattern. Most of the racial warfare occurred on or near large installations and began in the enlisted men's clubs or nearby bars or places of entertainment. Alcohol was almost always involved. Sometimes it was over women, but often, it was over music and triggered by some racial slur or challenge. In addition to large-scale fighting, the brawl at fort Bragg, North Carolina involved over 200 whites and blacks, for example, and low-intensity warfare, in which individuals or small groups would seek out members of the opposite race was endemic. At Cam Rahn Bay in 1970-71, Major Thomas Cecil witnessed an endless secession of "small gang wars going back and forth between companies. Blacks against whites, whites would attack blacks, Hispanics would attack blacks, and it was a constant give and take which just went on."<sup>224</sup> In October 1972, the aircraft carriers *Kitty Hawk* and *Constellation* both experienced a wave of racial violence in which both groups of disgruntled black sailors waylaid and beat whites. Nonetheless, racial violence flourished behind the lines. Racial violence rarely occurred while humping the boonies or in combat.

#### Combat Units and the Lack of Racial Violence

Despite the intensity and widespread nature of racial violence, there was virtually no racial conflict within combat units in Vietnam. Marine Corps historians Henry Shaw and Ralph Donnelly wrote, "There were racial incidents and confrontations in rear areas

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<sup>224</sup> Thomas Cecil, *Senior Officer Oral History Project*, 2.

in Vietnam,” but “These disruptions did not extend to the sectors of fighting where the color of a person’s skin was of no import to his role as a combat Marine.”<sup>225</sup> An Army study conducted in 1969 reached similar conclusions, albeit stating it somewhat in reverse, which claimed “polarization of the races...[was] more obvious in those areas where groups were not in direct contact with an armed enemy.”

Experienced journalists also noted the distinction. “As it happens in any situation of great stress, racial differences between blacks and whites have disappeared on the fighting fronts,” wrote veteran Vietnam reporter Thomas Johnson in August 1968. “At the front, the main thing is to stay alive and you do this most often by depending on the man next to you.”<sup>226</sup> Writing in May 1969, reporter Wallace Terry could refer to race relations in Vietnam as “not as critical” as they were in the United States, where they were “immensely significant.”<sup>227</sup> Even in 1970, as the morale in the United States military was bottoming out and racial warfare was threatening to tear the cohesion apart, the *Baltimore Afro-American* confidently reported that there was a “total absence of racial unrest” at the front line firebases.<sup>228</sup>

There are several reasons why combat units were universally spared the racial tensions prevalent in sectors of the military establishment. One, the men in these units faced death together. To possibly get out alive, the men of a unit had to depend on each other and cover each other’s back. “When you got bullets flying...no one knows what

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<sup>225</sup> Shaw and Donnelly, *Blacks in the Marine Corps*, 73.

<sup>226</sup> Thomas Johnson, “Negroes in the Nam,” *New York Times*, August 1968, 36.

<sup>227</sup> Sulzberger, “Foreign Affairs,” 46.

<sup>228</sup> “Study Sees more Bloodshed,” *Baltimore Afro-American*, January 31, 1970, 3.

color you are,” recalled Leon Mizelle, an African American who fought with the 196<sup>th</sup> Infantry in 1965-1966.<sup>229</sup> “I never really felt there was any tension,” said Major William G. Riederer, who commanded two different companies in 1969. “We pretty much operated on everybody pull their own and everyone was liable to go out and get shot and everybody would go out and get shot at.”<sup>230</sup> Major Richard H. Torovsky had no racial problems in his unit in 1970-71 because after “sleeping together, fighting together, being dirty together, and them playing together,” the men were very close and had trouble “getting along” with each other.<sup>231</sup>

The feeling of being in combat together fostered deep feelings of camaraderie, concern, and friendship among the unit’s personnel. First Lieutenant Gasanove Stephens, an African American, leader of First Platoon “Evil Platoon” Second Squadron, 11<sup>th</sup> Armored Division from 1967-68 stated that his “platoon contained all races, yet during my time as platoon leader there was never any kind of prejudice in any way.” He continued to say that, “Every man seemed to be dedicated to the cause and always treated each other as brothers.” Stephens lost three men during his tour of duty, a “Texas Negro and...two Caucasians.” He was deeply hurt by their deaths and mourned them equally.<sup>232</sup> Eugene White became very good friends with his black platoon sergeant. “The rapport that we developed between us was tremendous. I think that I would go to the mat for him,

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<sup>229</sup> William H. McMichael, “A War on Two Fronts,” *Newport News-Hampton, Virginia Daily Press*, Williamsburg ed., July 27, 1998, 1, A-6.

<sup>230</sup> Major William G. Riederer, *Senior Officer Oral History Project*, U.S. Army Military History Institute, Carlisle Barracks, PA, 1982, 6.

<sup>231</sup> Major Richard H. Torovsky, *Senior Officer Oral History Project*, U.S. Army Military History Institute, Carlisle Barracks, PA, 1982, 5-6.

<sup>232</sup> First Lieutenant Gasanove Stephens, “Our Men in Vietnam,” *Sepia*, June 1968, 58.

and he would go to the mat for me.” White was transferred and took command of a company of his own, but the two men remained in contact. When they ran into each other in Vietnam, “it was just like two really old friends seeing each other and happy to see one another.”<sup>233</sup> Captain Tony Mavroudis, a close friend of Collin Powell’s, during an interview for an NBC documentary *Same Mud, Same Blood* on African Americans in Vietnam, told reporter Frank McGee that race did not matter out in the jungle. “It doesn’t exist. We’re soldiers. The only color we know is khaki and green, the color of mud and the color of blood is all the same.”<sup>234</sup> Five days after the interview aired, Mavroudis stepped on a land mine and was killed.

Though a large number of military personnel believed that race relations were better in Vietnam, these feelings were not universal. There were many who believed that racism and racial antagonism were just as prevalent in combat units as other formations. Among many of both races, there was still a lack of respect. Pfc. Donnel Jones recalled having “the honor of saving a life of a white man who later called me a black nigger.”<sup>235</sup> Charles Porter was convinced that it was the fighting prowess of African Americans that was keeping the whites from dying and losing the war. “But I must say this, the only thing keeping the white GI’s alive is us soul brothers. If I weren’t here. Charlie would have cleaned up just about everything long ago,” he mused.<sup>236</sup> Others doubted whether the bonds of comradeship forged in war were genuine and strong enough to survive

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<sup>233</sup> Major Eugene White Interview, *Senior Officer Oral History Project*, U.S. Army Military History Institute, Carlisle Barracks, PA, 1982, 12.

<sup>234</sup> Collin Powell, *My American Journey*, 125.

<sup>235</sup> Pfc. Donnel Jones, “Racism in Vietnam,” letter to the editor, *Sepia*, August 1968, 6.

<sup>236</sup> Charles Porter, letters to the editor, *Sepia*, March 1968, 6.



without the threat of death and the need to cooperate. One black army lieutenant colonel bitterly observed in 1969 that “the threat of death changes many things, but the comradeship doesn’t last that long after you get” back “to the village.”<sup>237</sup> Even those that failed to form friendships across racial lines realized that the key to survival in a combat zone depended on cooperation. If you wanted to survive your tour of duty, working together was crucial. This contributed to keeping racial antagonism from flaring up and threatening the entire unit. William Miller, a 30-year veteran with combat stints in Korea and Vietnam, claimed that there were still racial barriers out in the field. “When you reach the foxhole, it doesn’t go away,” but “it gets masked over because you have to cover your back.”<sup>238</sup>

Even trained and specialized units, airborne units in particular, reported virtually no racial strife or violence. Major Patrick Carder had a few problems because his outfit was “what could have been considered a rather elite company. All the personnel in the company were Airborne, and were all parachute riggers. Because the requirements for parachute rigger school required individuals to have a pretty high I.Q. just to get in, the people were fairly smart and didn’t get into racial problems. They tended to join together regardless of race, color, or creed.”<sup>239</sup> Max V. Terrien, serving in the First Air Cavalry, “didn’t have any racial strife problems” because “morale was good,” and everyone in the reconnaissance and surveillance company “was hand-picked, and they knew they were

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<sup>237</sup> Zalin B. Grant, “Whites against Blacks in Vietnam,” *The New Republic*, January 18, 1969, 16.

<sup>238</sup> William H. McMichael, “A War on Two Fronts,” A-6.

<sup>239</sup> Major Patrick Carder, *Senior Officer Oral History Project*, U.S. Army Military History Institute, Carlisle Barracks, PA, 1982, 4.

hand-picked.”<sup>240</sup> Captain Victor E. Miller also commanded a company of air cavalry in Vietnam, and while he had a bit of a drug problem, he had no racial strife to speak of in his unit. “I was in an airborne outfit, and most of us kids were pretty motivated anyway, and we didn’t really have too much of that.”<sup>241</sup> In an army interview conducted in 1982, Major Richard H. Torovsky wanted to “comment specifically on drug abuse and racial strife, mainly from the fact that I Don’t think they were in” his elite air assault company, which specialized in counter guerilla operations, adding that all of his men were excellent soldiers.<sup>242</sup>

### The Brass Responds

Faced with severe morale, racial, and drug problems and deteriorating discipline, the military authorities responded by imprisoning or discharging radicals and militants. The military’s internal apparatus for identifying subversives was the Military Personnel Security Program, established by the Department of Defense Directive 5210.9 on 19 June 1965. The armed forces authority to suppress subversive activity from within came from the Department of Defense Directive 1325.6, titled “Guidelines for Handling Dissident and Protest Activities among Members of the Armed Forces,” issued by Secretary of Defense Melvin Laird on 12 September 1969. Laird stressed that “the service member’s right of expression should be preserved to the maximum extent possible,” but this had to be “consistent with good order and discipline and the national security,” and since “no

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<sup>240</sup> Major Maxwell V. Terrien, *Senior Officer Oral History Project*, U.S. Army Military History Institute, Carlisle Barracks, PA, 1982, 3-4.

<sup>241</sup> Major Victor E. Miller, *Senior Officer Oral History Project*, U.S. Army Military History Institute, Carlisle Barracks, PA, 1982.

<sup>242</sup> Richard Torovsky, *Senior Officer Oral History Project*, U.S. Army Military History Institute, Carlisle Barracks, PA, 1982, 5-6.

Commander should be indifferent to conduct which, if allowed to proceed unchecked, would destroy the effectiveness of his unit,” commanding offices were given authority to curb militants and their activities.<sup>243</sup> These guidelines allowed commanding officers to ban underground publications and disciplined personnel engaged in activities detrimental to the armed forces, such as: peace and racial demonstrations. They could also declared establishments, such as coffeehouses, off-limits to military personnel.

Much of the military crackdown was focused on racial violence. Provocative gestures or actions, such as dapping, were banned from numerous base and unit commanders, and the navy prohibited it throughout the service. Service personnel, especially minorities were punished. At Camp Lejeune, the Marine Corps arrested and brought charges against 44 men in connection with a racial brawl that occurred July 20-21, 1969. Charges against 24 of the defendants were dropped, leaving 18 African Americans and two Puerto Ricans awaiting court-martial, where five won acquittal, and one deserted before going to trial, but 14 were found guilty of a range of charges, including involuntary manslaughter—which brought a sentence of nine years at hard labor—rioting, disobedience, and assault. One other casualty of the brawl was the battalion’s commander, who was relieved of duty, Lieutenant Colonel Hurdle L. Maxwell, the first African American to command a marine combat battalion.

Another focus was purging the armed forces of the radicals leading the peace movement from within. For example, in September 1969, antiwar activists’ Privates

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<sup>243</sup> Melvin Laird, “Guidelines for Handling Dissident and Protest Activities among Members of the Armed Forces,” Department of Defense Directive 1325.6, September 12, 1969.

Eugene Rudder and Joseph F. Coles were court-martialed for distributing the banned newspaper *Short-Times* at Fort Jackson and given undesirable discharges, as was Andrew Pulley of GIs United, who was dishonorably discharged for his radical activities.<sup>244</sup> The Navy opted for a comprehensive program for weeding out dissidents. Under NAVOP 231, issued in December 1972, the Navy officially opted for a program under which seamen “who are an administrative burden to their commands because of repeated disciplinary infractions” could request general discharges under honorable conditions in the best interests of both the individual and the Navy. The program proved so successful that the Navy extended it indefinitely past its original February 1973 cutoff date. Those the military could not kick out were sent where they could do little harm. Radical leader Joseph Miles, for example, found himself transferred to a small, remote radar station in Alaska.

As we can see, behind the lines of combat, Vietnam was a tiny America. Social and ideological differences were as rampant. Also apparent was alcohol and drug use. By 1968 a new generation of Americans were storming the jungles of Vietnam, not the gung-ho Americans sent there in 1964-1965. They brought with them the America they knew: a nation torn by anti-war and racial tension, radicalism, militancy, and most importantly, drug and alcohol abuse. These were all responses to the war being fought by the working-class grunt. By the late 1960s and into the early 70s the military began to crackdown on these problems, forcing many to be dishonorably discharged, arrested, or sent to

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<sup>244</sup> Ben A. Franklin, “War Resistance by GI’s Is Urged,” *The New York Times*, November 14, 1969, 11.

rehabilitation centers. But the brass never appeared to be willing to hear these men out and support their decisions to disengage themselves from the war.

Most important, these problems were not apparent in combat. When the bullets were flying, no man saw another man as black, yellow, brown, or as a brother or a chuck, they were all soldiers wearing green. They each had a stake in the death toll, and each was willing to put their before themselves. Drugs were also rarely used in combat, they knew it was a massive liability and could lead to a disaster. Thus, it was in the rear that Vietnam seemed to be like a tiny America, where the things persistent in “the world” were just as apparent in Vietnam. One of the biggest myths to be debunked is drug abuse. Alcohol was more ostensible. As in every war, alcohol was an escape from the reality and horror of combat. So was drug-use, but drug-use caused less violence, infractions, and conflict. As a result, the American soldier returning home was labeled a baby-killer, drug-addict, and many other labels. But that was not every case, for each soldier. Thus, we must understand the truest circumstances in which these soldiers escaped the reality of combat before we label them as addicts and killers.

## CONCLUSION

### THE RETURN HOME

For the returning soldier coming home from Vietnam, they did not receive the parades their dads, uncles, or older brothers received. Though fabricated to an extent, some were spat on. Others were called baby-killers. Many could not even wear their uniforms in public. Over the past three-four decades historians and society alike have tried to distinguish this phenomenon. Many have argued Vietnam veterans have fabricated such events to receive attention for the lost attention upon their return. Veterans of both World Wars came back and did not mention their lives in Europe or the Pacific. Why? Well they received pensions, grants, and substantial government support to re-boost and carry on with their lives. Vietnam veterans came home to an antiwar movement, politicians who did not support them, and others in society that rejected their service. Maybe over the years they have been crying out for the attention they rightfully deserve, but that in itself cannot explain the circumstances that perpetuated the return home. The world they had left changed, as did they.

The return home for soldiers who had been to Vietnam varied. Many carried on with their working-lives, others turned to the protest movement, and some even to drugs and alcohol. Some left the military only to return again. Vietnam was a sure life-changing experience; furthermore, to understand the whole Vietnam experience for those who fought there, we must understand their return home. The return home was often difficult because some could not adjust back to civilian life. For others it was easier. The point is, their experiences in Vietnam were often the same, but their lives after were totally

different. Was the American soldier right or wrong? For most cases, they simply did not have a choice. They could not blame themselves: they could only blame the politicians who had done the talking while they had fought and lived in such dangerous conditions. The returning soldier had come back to a society so split over Vietnam, that many treated them as invisible. They had to come to terms with their sacrifice and watch others protest in the streets against that sacrifice. What we can draw from such an experience, is that, the moral and practical integrity of Americans had shifted as the tactics and justifications for the war became obsolete. The conclusion of this work will look through the lens of soldiers' responses to the war, their reactions and involvement in the antiwar movement, and popular cultures interpretations of the war and the returning veteran. Though much more respect is due to the topic of the soldiers return home, these topics are undoubtedly important and must be discussed in some length.

### To Be Home Again: The Invisible World

The most common experiences of rejection were not explicit acts of hostility, though some were, but mostly they were quieter, sometimes more devastating forms of withdrawal, suspicion, and indifference. When veterans told new acquaintances that they had served in Vietnam, it was not uncommon for people to treat them wearily. Veterans could feel themselves making other people nervous and uneasy. They often wondered if they were just being paranoid or if others were in fact being remote and detached, keeping them at arm's length.

"I was walking in uniform down M Street in our nation's capital," said Karl Marlantes. "I had been back perhaps a month. A group of young people, my age, began to

follow me down the street on the opposite side, jeering, calling me names, chanting in unison. They were flying the flags of North Vietnam and the Viet Cong.”<sup>245</sup> Marlantes stood and looked at them, not knowing what to say or do. He tried to think of something that would allow him to make friends with them. He didn’t want to fight them too, he was sick of fighting. “I wanted to come back home, to be understood, to be welcomed.”<sup>246</sup> All in the nation’s capital, from the area where those who sent Marlantes to fight a war stayed:

I couldn’t get a date from any girl born north of the Mason-Dixon Line. There were signs at restaurants and bars saying ‘No military!’ Two of my fellow lieutenants were murdered, gunned down from a passing car in their dress whites outside a hamburger joint on M Street. All this in our nation’s capital.<sup>247</sup>

Like Marlantes, so many veterans were unwelcome. They returned home to an invisible world, where no one cared to notice them or even thank them for their service. And like so many others, they just wanted to be welcomed back, not necessarily because they did their nation’s duty, but because they had obliged themselves to a duty not many were willing to sacrifice. Most importantly, they just wanted to be understood.

Brent Steere’s, born in Waterloo, also adds validity to the invisible world upon his return. “When I came home, my doctor said ‘I wouldn’t wear that uniform,” said Steere’s. “We didn’t know about it while we were in Vietnam, you didn’t hear any news, and my wife never told me about how many people hated us for being over there.” As he landed in Chicago, he had sat down. “Everyone got up and left where I was sitting.

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<sup>245</sup> Karl Marlantes, *What it is like to go to War*, 176.

<sup>246</sup> Karl Marlantes, *What it is like to go to War*, 176.

<sup>247</sup> Karl Marlantes, *What it is like to go to War*, 177.



Nobody said anything to me, but nobody would sit by me.”<sup>248</sup> He concluded that most veterans just threw away their uniforms because they did not want people to know they were in Vietnam. “Us Vietnam vets, we got a bad rep,” continued Steere’s. “Everybody thought we were druggies and alcoholics. I see very little of that. Maybe one or two guys were getting a bad rap for nothing.”<sup>249</sup>

For returning nurse veteran Grace Moore, she did not talk about Vietnam until about 1986. She had moved from the service out to the East Coast and no one knew she had served or was a Vietnam veteran. “You just didn’t talk about it,” Moore recalled. “You have to remember the climate around the country. People didn’t want to know about Vietnam, and the people who had been there didn’t want to talk about it.”<sup>250</sup> She finally began to talk about Vietnam to other veterans. She felt like she could relate to veterans, “and as I talked about it, it became easier and easier.” Eventually, she became the state director of the Pennsylvania State Women’s Vietnam Memorial Project.<sup>251</sup> Grace Moore’s reflections bring us to another point: nobody, whether civilian or a veteran, wanted to talk about Vietnam. Faced with society’s indifference, uneasiness, and outright rejection and gripped by their own troubled memories, thousands lapsed into silence.

What that had done, in effect, kept Vietnam and its significance silent and invisible. For if one does not talk about it, it may seemingly have never existed. For years—a full decade, sometimes longer—a startling number of men and women who

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<sup>248</sup> Brent Steere’s Interview, November 19, 2015, *Voices of Iowa*, Grout Museum, Waterloo, IA.

<sup>249</sup> Brent Steere’s Interview, November 19, 2015, *Voices of Iowa*, Grout Museum, Waterloo, IA.

<sup>250</sup> Grace Moore Interview, July 16, 2010, *Voices of Iowa*, Grout Museum, Waterloo, IA.

<sup>251</sup> Grace Moore Interview, July 16, 2010, *Voices of Iowa*, Grout Museum, Waterloo, IA.

were in Vietnam—who knows how many—would not talk about their experiences with nonveterans, would not even volunteer that they had been in a war. If asked directly, they might reveal a piece of their experience, some stock anecdote they had practiced enough to feel comfortable telling: an amusing story about some crazy GI who booby trapped the shitter; the time on guard duty when they were attacked by rock apes; or how there were bizarre lizards that made this spooky cry in the night that sounded exactly like “fuck you” (“they were called geckos, but most of us just called them ‘fuck you lizards’”). Some veterans could go on at such length and with such enthusiasm telling these stories that even good friends might fail to realize that they were only hearing a sliver of experience, that underneath the easy stories was a profound silence, and that anything approaching the real pain and confusion of the war was packed away. Of course, there were some veterans for whom no war story was easy, men who simply would not talk.

The silence reflected the conviction that others simply did not care about the war, wanted to forget it, could not possibly understand what it was like, or would be so appalled by what they had heard they would condemn the story teller. It is also true that many veterans did not want to risk the pain of talking about the war, even with sympathetic listeners. Veterans, too, wanted to bury the war. After all, to discuss it seriously and honestly was to court emotional turmoil. In other words, the silence of veterans had as much to do with the nature of the war as it did with the lack of support for returning soldiers. For many, Vietnam was pointless, frustrating, and confusing, and so morally wrenching, they surely would have had postwar problems regardless of the

homecoming they received. Though more support, especially better benefits and psychological services would have made things much better for many.

Many veterans had trouble even establishing contact with other veterans. After World War II, such connections were virtually ready-made. Most men returned within a two-year period, and most of the generation had served. The men who returned from Vietnam drifted home in isolation, one at a time. Even meeting new friends who had served in Vietnam could be tough since the entire group represented only 10 percent of the generation.<sup>252</sup> Old friends from the neighborhood who had gone to Vietnam might well have moved or never returned. Nor did many veterans try to contact those they served with in Vietnam, though some certainly did. Like most Americans they, too, were trying to forget the war. As a result, most veterans had no idea what had happened to the men they left behind in Vietnam. Veterans often find the first visit to the Vietnam Memorial emotionally wrenching in large part because it is, in many cases, the first time they learn the fate of their wartime buddies.

When Todd Dasher returned from Vietnam, he recalled his father saying, “You guys ain’t really veterans, you didn’t win the war. You didn’t win your war.”<sup>253</sup> Worse, he made Tom feel personally responsible for the war’s outcome. The younger veterans believed the older men who fought in Korea and World War II looked upon them as losers, crybabies, dopers, and deadbeats who had not even fought in a real war but only a little skirmish, a “conflict.”

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<sup>252</sup> Christian Appy, *Working-Class War*, 308.

<sup>253</sup> Todd Dasher Interview, January 12, 1981. Christian Appy, *Working-Class War*, 314.

It seems the generational conflict was inevitable. Many conservative older veterans took great stock in America's military record, and the Vietnam War was, to them, a great blot. Vietnam veterans could not help but feel that the older men who railed at the government, the media, and the antiwar movement for undermining the American war effort were also casting aspersions on the competence of American troops. It is true that the traditional service organizations—the VFW and American Legion—were dominated in the 1960s and 1970s by World War II veterans who gave scant attention to those returning from Vietnam. Returning veterans themselves were not eager to conform to the traditional ways of the conservative organizations. While the older men were often content to sit around drinking beer and reminiscing, the younger men might want to smoke grass and listen to rock music or plan a community project. Nor were they always so red, white, and blue, so convinced that the war in Vietnam was worth winning, or a simple matter of more firepower, as many older men often argued.

Even David chambers, who returned from Vietnam to Fair Lawn, New Jersey, still committed to the American cause, found it difficult to abide the hawkish views of men down at the American Legion hall:

In the [American Legion] Hall I found myself listening to middle-aged men telling me how it was in a 'real war.' They didn't know or care about what we went through. Then one night a fat guy, an accountant from Passaic, who said he had been with Patton in Germany, came in with a letter from his nephew in Vietnam. The nephew had come on some GIs who had been cut up badly. So his outfit went into a neighboring village and searched for the VC. They also asked the people. Nobody would admit seeing them. Everybody knew they were lying so they ordered the M-48 tanks to destroy every hooch in the village. The nephew had written: 'If you don't think an M-48 doesn't scare somebody, it does!'

'That's the only way!' the accountant said. . . .And then another guy chipped in, angry: 'We should use the H-bomb if necessary to get it over with.' Everybody agreed, and he went on about communism and freedom . . . and again everyone seemed to approve. At that point I got up to leave. He was right, in some ways; I'd so it again if my country asked me to, but it wasn't quite that same as me or my buddies saying it; and this

guy, maybe forty-five or fifty, was parading around like a hotshot while he own kid was probably deferred. . . . [In a slightly different context he added,] Their arguments were so pat' they all seemed so damn sure. But I was *there*.<sup>254</sup>

Because he was there, he knew the war was not easy to win. He remembered him and his fellow Marines were still being shelled at Con Thien long after a magazine article claimed the shelling had stopped. He also knew that South Vietnam was a society torn up by internal conflict and corruption. So, convinced as he was that America was right in fighting the war, he could not be as sure as the older vets. Indeed, he concedes, 'I might one day conclude it was all for nothing. Who knows?'<sup>255</sup>

While most Americans were all too able to forget the war, many veterans could not. Try as they might to bury the war, its unresolved emotions and memories festered below the surface, sometimes coming out indirect, unpredictable, dangerous, and self-destructive ways: sudden flashes of anger, hard drinking or drug abuse, panic attacks, extreme distrust, inability to care about anyone or anything. Meanwhile, the sources of so much of this pain were largely unknown or unexpressed. "The silence of so many veterans, so profound during the 1960s and 1970s but, for some, lasting much longer," recalled Christian Appy, "is one of the most significant and psychologically destructive examples of group censorship in American social history."<sup>256</sup>

### The Legitimacy of the War for Veterans and Military Experiences

Philip Caputo, one of the most renowned Vietnam veterans, offers us a remarkable interpretation for the legitimacy of the war. He, like many others, wanted the

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<sup>254</sup> Murray Polner, *No Victory Parades*, 9-10, 7.

<sup>255</sup> Murray Polner, *No Victory Parades*, 9-10.

<sup>256</sup> Christian Appy, *Working-Class War*, 308.

war to end. He also did not want to see it end in a North Vietnamese victory. “I think these ambivalent feelings were typical of American veterans, who, like me,” said Caputo: “were both opposed to the war and yet emotionally tied to it.”<sup>257</sup> That is not to say every veteran was opposed to the war as a whole, but they most certainly were emotionally tied to it. Most of the opposition from veterans came against the architects of the war. They were frustrated as to why they were sent instead of the sons of the wealthy, privileged, and those with access to control their own destinies. These feelings often came out most explicitly in long interviews. Steve Harper, a veteran from Akron, Ohio, was one of nine subjects of Murray Polner’s book *No Victory Parades* (1971). Harper told Polner:

“The critics are picking on us, just ‘cause we had to fight this war. Where were their sons? In fancy colleges? Where were all the sons of all the big shots who supported the war? Not in my platoon. Our guys’ people were workers and things like that. . . . Still, we did things that made me sore. Like stopping the bombing—and maybe, even putting us in Vietnam in the first place. If the war was so important, why didn’t our leaders put everyone’s son in there, why only us?”<sup>258</sup>

The architects of the war, even the critics, did the talking while the sons of workers did the fighting. Surely, Harper concluded, whatever the privileged might say about the war, they must have been against grunts like him.

Harper’s own views of the war were confused. He denounced the limitations of bombing and the initial United States intervention in Vietnam. That is not necessarily a contradictory position. In effect he said, we should have won the war or stayed out. A simple argument to state, but one that evades the questions of whether the war could have been won or whether it was worth winning (that is, a just cause) and a further

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<sup>257</sup> Philip Caputo, *Rumor of War*, 342.

<sup>258</sup> Murray Polner, *No Victory Parades*, 27.

question of why it would have been right to continue trying to win the war in which the original intervention was wrong or misguided. When such questions are broached, Harper's conflicted feelings and those of many veterans are drawn to the surface.

A 1979 Harris survey found that the vast majority of veterans (89 percent) agreed with Harper's statement. "The trouble in Vietnam was that our troops were asked to fight in a war which our political leaders in Washington would not let them win." Yet a clear majority of veterans (59 percent) also agreed with a contrary viewpoint: "The trouble in Vietnam was that our troops were asked to fight a war we could never win."<sup>259</sup> The general public also shared this contradictory view (73 and 65 percent agreeing with each statement). Both formulations have common appeal: they put the onus of responsibility for the war and its outcome on American leaders, not on the ordinary soldiers and civilians. They also pose the same attractive alternatives suggested by Harper: win or stay out.<sup>260</sup>

As for the moral legitimacy of the war, Stave Harper struggled to defend United States intervention. The United States, he said, was helping the people of Vietnam, people who "wanted us there" and who "wanted their freedom." Hard as he tried to sustain that view, his memories of the war kept contradicting it. He could not forget how the Vietnamese seemed to always be helping the Viet Cong: "they take all the Americans have to offer and give us nothin' and give the VC all they have." Nor did he try to disguise his disdain for the Vietnamese military and government, which he saw as riddled

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<sup>259</sup> Veterans' Administration, *Myths and Realities*, 60.

<sup>260</sup> Christian Appy, *Working-Class War*, 300.

and corrupt and unable and unwilling to fight successfully against the Viet Cong.

“They’d turn and run, from their officers on down.” Finally, Harper could only resolve the contradictions between his faith in the American mission and the realities he experienced by arguing, “We are there to help but Vietnamese are so stupid they can’t understand that a great people want to help a weak people.”<sup>261</sup>

In the end, Harper’s defense of the war came down to the simple affirmation that American soldiers were right to go to Vietnam, that they were doing their duty. Because his testimony about the war punched gaping holes in official justifications of intervention, Harper returned repeatedly to a defense, not of United States policy, but of soldiers like himself. “We were soldiers, doing our jobs. We didn’t want to bring disgrace to ourselves and our folks. We were right in being there.”<sup>262</sup> So much self-worth and dignity depended on his belief that his own actions were right. That is the crucial point. Harper’s defense of American intervention was not insincere, but defending the war, he expressed his stronger need to defend himself. At times he entertained the possibility that the United States was wrong, yet, he could not fully embrace that position because for him that meant his duty may have been wrong. Concluding to the idea that he was right in being there, he felt he must also conclude that that nation was right to send him. For others, such as Iowa native Donald Lentz, the war was unjustified. Himself and his buddies should have never have been there. Mr. Lents criticized the war, politicians, and the military. Unlike Harper, Lentz does not justify his duty nor his nation.

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<sup>261</sup> Murray Polner, *No Victory Parades*, 27.

<sup>262</sup> Murray Polner, *No Victory Parades*, 27.



That whole late 60's and early 70's was bad all the way around, you know. I had friends who never came back. That saddens me, because there was no reason for them to give their lives. For, I felt was not a justified war, but a war that never have been fought in the first place. We got sucked into it I think, basically politically, and I understand how the government works. I learned a lot from how the government works. It doesn't really matter what you are. I never had a name in the military. I had a name on my uniform, our greens, and stuff like that, but when they called you off it was by your service number. That's all I was, just a number. That wasn't a war. They didn't allow us to have a war. We were police. That's what we were, because we would have never have sent guys to fix villages from bombs.<sup>263</sup>

During the interview, as Lents began to have tears, he explained that the military and/or the government, "didn't care, nobody cared. If you didn't do it they punished you. That's just the game they played." Furthermore, we can draw conclusions that many veterans had varied interpretations of their service in Vietnam and how the government treated them.

However, Donald Lents thoughts of the military were respective. He enjoyed it, he said. As a young man, "I saw things I knew I'd never see again in my life. I'd never be able to afford it or the opportunity. "I was from a working-class family and we lived paycheck to paycheck. All of us kids had jobs growing up to help support the family."<sup>264</sup> He continued to say that he had learned a lot. His biggest asset was people skills. "I learned real quickly how to trust. Who to trust and when to trust and not to trust." Although he explained he was pretty naïve, "the experience I had there [in the military and Vietnam], I would never change for a lifetime. The assets they taught me I could never thank them enough."<sup>265</sup>

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<sup>263</sup> Donald Lents Interview, March 11, 2010, *Voices of Iowa*, Grout Museum, Waterloo, IA.

<sup>264</sup> Donald Lents Interview, March 11, 2010, *Voices of Iowa*, Grout Museum, Waterloo, IA.

<sup>265</sup> Donald Lents Interview, March 11, 2010, *Voices of Iowa*, Grout Museum, Waterloo, IA.

Arnold Klammer of Westgate, Iowa, also reflected positively in an interview about his military experiences. He explained that at the time, it was not really considered an option it was just what you had to do. Looking back, he said: “now, a lot of my attitudes, the way I look and do things, I think it was a good experience. You don’t look for options, you do what is necessary, and that’s with anything.” He ended his interview by simply stating that it wasn’t a “bad time,” because he had some good things come out of it.<sup>266</sup> Mark Klenzman of Waterloo, Iowa, also expressed his time in the military as positive, disclosing what he had learned. However, he also expressed his dissent of younger generations, quite possibly from his reactions to the antiwar movement. “You learn discipline, honor, and creed.” What Mark Klenzman was trying to suggest is that the military gave him more control on the situations around him. Nonetheless, he continued saying: “You don’t learn walking around, ‘wondering what you are going to do in life. With an attitude.’ A lot of young people have attitudes, kids are all rude and disrespectful nowadays.”<sup>267</sup>

Charles Corwin, from Cedar Falls, Iowa, gave an interesting interpretation of the military. He served in the Army as an infantryman from 1966-1969, and he entered at the age of seventeen. Although when his parents signed for him he expressed that: “I always thought I’d do my career as a military man. After eighteen months in Vietnam, I decided I was not going to make that my career anymore.” Expressing that he was not a religious man in Vietnam, and suggesting that is what got him through he said, “I don’t know what

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<sup>266</sup> Arnold Klammer Interview, August 8, 2015, *Voices of Iowa*, Grout Museum, Waterloo, IA.

<sup>267</sup> Mark Klenzman Interview, August 20, 2015, *Voices of Iowa*, Grout Museum, Waterloo, IA.

I would have done if I knew him back then [Jesus]. It was like the Nam.” More importantly, Corwin suggested that the military like when you are young because “they can mold you. You are moldable.” For someone as young as Corwin, and many other soldiers sent to Vietnam, this can crack a code. It was easier for the military to draft those young, unskilled, working-class boys. Corwin also makes another important suggestion to the Vietnam War: “That is why I say it was a teenaged war, because they can take teenagers over there and they’ll do what they are told to do and you just do it.”<sup>268</sup>

Anthony Tisdale, another Waterloo, Iowa, native expressed his military experiences as good. As a Second Lieutenant he was wounded while serving with the 199 Light Infantry Brigade. He had put orders to go back to Vietnam because: “I felt I hadn’t served my full complement tour, which was twelve months. I wanted to go back, through my Iowa pride to finish the job.” For Tisdale, the best experience he got in the military was the “comradery” for the man walking next to him. “Most of my experience was good.” As an African American, when he was asked about racial issues, he recalled he did not really have any issues: “I let them know I was an officer.” As for the justifications of the war, he seems to attack the architects of the war. He had no distaste for Americans being there, but he felt they had their hands tied behind their back. “From my stand point, you don’t fight a war with a line you cannot cross [the Demilitarized Zone, located at the 17<sup>th</sup> parallel separated North and South Vietnam]. I didn’t like the way the war was fought, we could have won that bad boy.”<sup>269</sup>

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<sup>268</sup> Charles Corwin Interview, February 19, 2010, *Voices of Iowa*, Grout Museum, Waterloo, IA.

<sup>269</sup> Anthony Tisdale Interview, July 8, 2015, *Voices of Iowa*, Grout Museum, Waterloo, IA.

### Negative Reactions to the Antiwar Movement

In 1969, a Vietnam veteran “wearing paint-spattered overalls . . . with a pair of work gloves hanging from his back pocket” stood on the sidewalk of a Midwestern city. He watched a parade of several thousand antiwar demonstrators, most of them students. His face, “livid with rage,” he began screaming at the protestors. Among the peace marchers was a contingent of the Vietnam Veterans Against the War. One of them, a blue-collar vet from Milwaukee, approached the angry counterdemonstrator and managed to strike up a conversation. It turned out both had served in the First Cavalry Division. After a few minutes of conversation, the antiwar veteran said, “Look, we were over there—we know what was going on.”<sup>270</sup>

“Damn right, the other replied.

“Well, hell, you know we should have never gotten in there in the first place—you know we didn’t belong there.”

“Yeah,” said the other guy.

Well, that’s all we’re saying. . . .”

“Yeah, but I just can’t take them damn kids who don’t know what we went through, saying we’re all a bunch of killers, and that the Viet Cong are all saints.”

“I got six pounces of lead in my ass that shows that’s not true. But I don’t want anyone else killed in that mess.”

“I agree with you on that, but I just can’t stand these hippies.”<sup>271</sup>

The counterdemonstrator was mad at the students, yes, not so much because they opposed the war, but because he believed they opposed him. He seemed to have felt they were attacking his morality without sharing his sacrifices or understanding his experiences. He felt the students were labeling him as a killer while romanticizing the Viet Cong, but his dislike of the hippies did not constitute support for the war. Andrew Levison, the writer who witnessed this episode, offers an insightful suggestion that the

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<sup>270</sup> Christian Appy, *Working-Class War*, 298.

<sup>271</sup> Christian Appy, *Working-Class War*, 298.

real issue at work in the veteran's response to the demonstration was "class and class distinction." Looking at the rows of students passing by, the counterdemonstrator was hostile. With a guy whom he recognized as a peer, both as a veteran and worker, what appeared like inflexible reaction was converted into a viewpoint not so very different from that of the people marching by.<sup>272</sup>

One of the major complications for returning Vietnam veterans was the antiwar movement. Many even joined the movement. To many veterans, the protests of college students felt like moral and social putdowns, expressions not of principle and commitment but simply of class privilege and arrogance. As Steve Harper linked the moral integrity of the war to individual soldiers, the justice of the war was shaken by his knowledge of the class inequalities of military service. If the war was so important, truly just, he was sure the leaders would ask everyone to fight. While he insisted that he had done the right thing by going to Vietnam, he could not ignore the obvious presence of millions of Americans who thought it was their duty, not to fight in the war, but to actively resist it.

Last week, I had to be in Chicago: I ran into a 'Resist the Draft' rally on the street. At first I smile: kids at it again, just a fad. Then I start getting sore. About how I had to go and they could stay out. Cosco went in and he was the straightest guy I ever knew. My Negro buddy didn't like the war, but he went in too. I just stood there and got sore at those rich kids telling people to 'resist the draft.' What about us poor people? For every guy who resists the draft one of us gotta go and he gets sent out into the boonies to get his backside shot at. One of their signs read 'We've Already Given Enough.' And I thought, 'What *have* they given?'<sup>273</sup>

Because of the class gulf between most protestors and veterans, the specific political message of the antiwar demonstrators was mostly insignificant to veterans like Harper.

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<sup>272</sup> Andrew Levinson, *Working-Class Majority*, 157-158.

<sup>273</sup> Murray Polner, *No Victory Parades*, 29.

‘We’ve Already Given Enough’ or ‘Bring the Boys Home’ were slogans intended to support the lives of soldiers and surely offended him less than the waving of Viet Cong or the chant “Ho Ho Ho Chi Minh, the NLF is going to win.” But to many veterans, the protests seemed like just another class privilege enjoyed by wealthier peers, and even moderate objections to the war, if made by draft-immune college students, were often read as personal attacks. Student protest, then, put into bold belief the contrast between the experiences of the two groups.

Watching protest marches reminded some veterans of their own marches in Vietnam—endless, exhausting, and dangerous humps. While they were enduring the hardship and danger of war, college students were—in the eyes of many soldiers—frolicking on campus in a blissful round of sex, drugs, and rock ‘n roll. Not to mention they were getting the credentials necessary to gain high-paying jobs. Then, too, the physical appearance of protestors, their long and shaggy dress, could anger veterans. Indubitably, soldiers in Vietnam stretched conventional military rules related to dress and hair, so much so that by 1968 it was not uncommon to find men in the boonies wearing unofficial medallions, beads, and headgear displaying wild graffiti (“eat the apple, fuck the Corps”) for example, on their flak jackets and helmets.<sup>274</sup> Veterans had the perception that their own assertions had been harder won, that the kids on campus seemed to get away with everything. They were especially irritated by nonveterans who dressed up in military uniforms, a popular fashion of the time. It was not so much that the old uniforms mocked the military; few people were as scornful of the military as most vets, but they

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<sup>274</sup> Christian Appy, *Working-Class War*, 302.

felt you had to earn that right, and that nonveterans who had worn those uniforms were insulting those who had worn them in combat.

The resentment and jealousy veterans felt toward protestors were based on more than anger that those at home seemed to have such a wonderful, safe time while those in Vietnam faced danger. They also resented and envied the pride and conviction protestors took in their activism. For veterans torn by confusion about the war, and struggling to feel some pride in what they had done, the protestors' passion, self-assurance, and sense of purpose generated a nagging—if unspoken—envy. Faced with people so sure the war was wrong, veterans were convinced their own morality was under siege.

Victor Belloti, a captain in the Boston Fire Department, went to Vietnam in 1965 as a combat medic. He was the first of three generations to graduate from high school, and after the war he earned a college degree at the UMass in Boston. He was reminded of his strong feelings about college students while talking about the attitude of combat soldiers toward men who served in rear areas. He laughed about all the ribbing the grunts would give to men in the rear, how they called them office pogies and 'Remington Raiders,' and how he would say things to them like, "You ought to come out in the field with us sometimes and see the *real* war." When asked how deep the antagonism was between the two groups of soldiers, Belloti said that while there was some tension, most of his complaints were made in fun. By way of comparison he thought of his feelings for college students who demonstrated against the war.

I didn't go anywhere near the contempt or resentment for people in the rear that I had for the university students I met after the war. To me most of them were the arch-liberals from suburban communities, having never really worked in their lives. They were kids who had never had anything go wrong with them and they went on 'marches' and they protested the Vietnam War. They didn't have the slightest idea what was going on there.

Politically they were right, I'm not saying they weren't. But this shit about baby-killers. I know guys who sacrificed a lot for women and children in ambush situations and going through villages. The political rightness or wrongness of the situation? We weren't wanted there. We knew that when we were over there.<sup>275</sup>

Belloti's contempt for campus protestors draws a keenly felt sense of class inequality, but what was "this shit about baby-killers?" The line, so crucial to his claim that protestors did not understand the reality of Vietnam, however right they may have been about politics is tossed into the account with an offhandedness that assumes we know precisely what he means, that the point is beyond dispute, and that no further explanation is necessary. In fact, understanding its significance is a complicated but essential way of getting at one of the central moral legacies of military service in Vietnam.

Among most veterans, Belloti's reference to "baby-killers" would be accepted with a knowing nod of recognition. Many take it as axiomatic that the antiwar movement regarded them as immoral killers. Stories certifying that commonplace were passed around among veterans with frequency and resonance that imbued them with a mythic quality. David Chambers, interviewed in the late 1960s, reported: "At Travis Air Force Base an incident occurred which—true or not—spread like wildfire in Nam, and I think was believed by the guys. It seemed very possible to me, too. A vet, just back, was in the men's room when a hippie came up to him. He asked the vet if he had just returned from Nam and when he said yes he had, the guy shot him in the arm."<sup>276</sup> Chambers makes a key point. Though the story is dubious (how, for one thing, would a hippie even make it on to the base?). It seemed plausible to many veterans. Stories like this gained such currency

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<sup>275</sup> Victor Belloti Interview, August 8, 1981. Christian Appy, *Working-Class War*, 303.

<sup>276</sup> Murray Polner, *No Victory Parades*, 10.



that they were quickly generalized beyond individual anecdotes to statements such as “The Protestors are calling us baby-killers” or “Hippies are spitting at veterans.” By the 1980s, these images, such as soldiers being spat on, became widely accepted throughout American culture as literal representations of the homecoming received by most veterans. The archetypal story featured a returning veteran arriving at an airport (usually in California). He is wearing his dress uniform with campaign ribbons. As the veteran walks through the terminal, a hippie, often a girl, calls him a baby-killer and spits on him.

Two months before Karl Marlantes was discharged, he had boarded a train for New York at Union Station. Again, he was in his uniform. Although he had explicit instructions to avoid problems by not wearing his uniform around civilians. “This put us in a bit of a bind. You could get half price on train and air fares, going standby, but only if you were in uniform, and we weren’t paid like junior executives.”<sup>277</sup> He had passed a nice-looking woman who had looked up at him and quickly looked away. He sighed inwardly and continued down the aisle, too shy to sit next to her. He found a seat at the far end of the car and settled down to read but had wished he was talking to her instead.

About five minutes had passed and he saw her get up and come down the aisle. She was looking right at him, lips pressed tight. For the next few moments of Marlantes life must have been revoking:

She stood in front of me and spit on me. She walked back to her seat. I was trembling in shame and embarrassment. People hid behind newspapers. Some looked intently out dark windows that could only reflect their faces and the lighted interior of the car. I wiped off the spit as best as I could and pretended to go back to reading, trying to control the shaking. The woman moved to another car. Small victory. I eventually moved to a

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<sup>277</sup> Karl Marlantes, *What it is like to go to War*, 177.

different car in the opposite direction, embarrassed to stay where people had seen what had happened.<sup>278</sup>

Marlantes continued to explain that the frequency of spitting incidents is a raging controversy. Rightfully so. He even says the number was very small, that his friends never experienced it. But the image of being spit on has become a metaphor for what happened to returning veterans. “I think that this is what fuels the belief,” said Marlantes. “That spitting was more a common occurrence than it was, in reality.”<sup>279</sup> Were veterans really spit upon by hippies or protestors? “Rooster” by Alice in Chains, appeals to the popular fascination that veterans were spat upon: ‘Walking-tall, machine gun mad, they spit on me in my homeland.’<sup>280</sup> In reality, it was seemingly more of a metaphor than reality. That metaphor, so to speak, shows how invisible these men were to their society. Being spat on is embarrassing. Such a metaphor can reflect how some soldiers felt unimportant for their services. Maybe the metaphor was a representation of how little the architects of the war paid attention to the returning veteran. Most importantly, we can draw from such a metaphor how invisible the returning Vietnam veteran was and how little his duty mattered to society.

In the late 1980s journalist Bob Greene posed the question of spitting incidents in his syndicated column and received more than a thousand letters, some of which he collected in a book *Homecoming*. Greene was persuaded that spitting’s had indeed occurred and devoted the first third of his collection to letters from men claiming it had happened to them. However, Greene concedes that there is an “apparent sameness” to

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<sup>278</sup> Karl Marlantes, *What it is like to go to War*, 177-178.

<sup>279</sup> Karl Marlantes, *What it is like to go to War*, 178.

<sup>280</sup> Alice in Chains, “Rooster.” *Columbia Records*, 1992.

these letters, a sameness that should make one weary of their literal truthfulness. Here is a typical sample: ‘I arrived at Los Angeles International Airport. . . .On my way to the taxis, I passed two young women in the waiting area. One of these young women approached me and, in a low voice, called me a ‘baby-killer’ and spat on my ribbons. I was in uniform and wearing the Vietnamese Service Medal, the Vietnamese Campaign Medal, and Air force Commendation Medal, and the Purple Heart.”<sup>281</sup> The remainder of the letters in Greene’s book are from veterans who either express deep skepticism about the spitting allegations or who believe being spit at was an uncommon experience. Many even testify acts of great kindness from strangers upon returning home. The most commonplace letters were in many respects the most poignant. They came from men simply struggling to express the pain, confusion, and isolation they felt upon returning to the United States, how uncomfortable people seemed to be around them, or how little people seemed to want to know about their experience.

Alongside the stories of war protestors standing guard at airports to taunt returning veterans should be placed a surprising survey. In 1979 Harris pollsters used a “feeling thermometer” to measure public attitudes toward Vietnam veterans. On a scale of 1 to 10, with 10 being the warmest possible feeling and 1 the coolest, a sample of 237 “antiwar activists” rated Vietnam veterans 8.9, far above their rating of military leaders (4.7) and congressional representatives (5.0), and even higher than their ranking of “people who demonstrated against the war in Vietnam” (7.7—not all antiwar activists endorsed public demonstrations as a useful tactic to end the war). Though the attitudes of

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<sup>281</sup>Bob Greene, *Homecoming*, 62.

antiwar activists may have been cooler toward veterans during the war years (the poll came several years later), a total of reversal in feelings seem unlikely. While antiwar activists claimed warmer feelings toward Vietnam veterans than the “baby-killer” stories suggest, the Harris survey found that Vietnam veterans ranked protesters at 3.3, a response pollsters consider “very cool.” Veterans gave an even lower score (1.9) to people who left the country to avoid the draft. Antiwar activists had much more respect for draft evaders, ranking them at 7.1.<sup>282</sup>

Most people in the peace movement did not hate veterans and did not abuse them, but many veterans certainly perceived the antiwar movement as a personal rejection. The key reason was that Vietnam was a working-class war wealthier students had the best chance of avoiding. Protesters were not always careful to distinguish between the managers of the war and the workers who did the fighting. The antiwar movement openly attacked not only the political decision to intervene but the conduct of the war as well. Nonetheless, protestors simply did not make a clear distinction between the war and those who fought it, and they regraded American soldiers as ready and willing killers or ignorant dupes. While the antiwar movement has been branded with far too much blame for the mistreatment of Vietnam veterans, society as a whole was unable and unwilling to receive these men with the support and understanding they needed.

#### Veterans Joining the Antiwar Movement

For those the many who opposed the antiwar movement, many joined their ranks. Perhaps the veterans best able to find a voice during the latter years of the war and

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<sup>282</sup> Veterans' Administration, *Myths and Realities*, 89-90.

through much of the 1970s were those who actively opposed the war. Founded in 1967, Vietnam Veterans Against the War (VVAW) gradually grew by 1971 into the most significant veterans' movement in American history. Feeling the need to talk about the war collectively, in 1970, VVAW began organizing informal rap groups. Though the veterans sometimes asked psychiatrists, such as Robert Jay Lifton, to attend their meetings, they insisted on retaining primary control over the structure of the meetings and issues addressed, a radical departure from traditional group therapy. Drawing on his work with veterans, Lifton wrote *Home from the War* in 1973, in which he makes the case that political activism helped antiwar veterans recover from much of the emotional and psychological trauma of their wartime experience. These men, he argues, by developing a critique of the war and speaking out against it, found a renewed faith in their moral integrity. The antiwar movement, arguably, gained more attraction in the public psyche once returning veterans joined.

For antiwar veterans a crucial element of their political development was their speaking about their own experience of the war's immorality. To do so meant accepting some personal complicity for what they viewed as wrong. It also allowed them to place their own actions in a larger context of national policy and decision making that located primary responsibility at the highest level of political and military power. Their acts of confession and witness were not merely psychologically cathartic. By talking through the worst experience and attaching those experiences to a political condemnation of the war, antiwar veterans grew more hopeful about the prospects of shaping a new and positive postwar identity. Others were more focused on getting their fellow troops home. For

example, Charles ‘chuck’ Taylor of Oelwein, Iowa, returned home from Vietnam in 1969. He went back to Southern Illinois University, where he met his wife. He was real active on campus with the VVAW. “I didn’t mind the protesting,” he said. He was in attendance for a riot on campus, but he didn’t disclose whether he was fully participating. “I had an officer try and take off my field jacket. I didn’t believe in the war, but I took pride in it. It was interesting times, but very confusing. I worked really hard to get soldiers out of Vietnam.”<sup>283</sup> Furthermore, we can understand that antiwar veterans certainly opposed the war, but they also took pride in their duty.

There were two key public moments when this process was engaged collectively. In January 1971, 150 antiwar veterans gathered in Detroit for the Winter Soldier Investigation, where they testified to American atrocities they either committed or witnessed. A few months later, a group much larger—more than a thousand—rallied in Washington to lobby congressional representatives, testify before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, and stage antiwar demonstrations.<sup>284</sup> Prominent American figure and Democratic nominee in the 2004 Presidential election, John Kerry was the spokesman of the VVAW congregation in front of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee. Kerry’s speech was highly illuminating, as he addressed the nation’s mistakes, atrocities, and concern for fellow soldiers still in Vietnam.

Each day to facilitate the process by which the United States washes her hands of Vietnam someone has to give up his life so the United States doesn’t have to admit something the whole world already knows, so that we can’t say that we have made a mistake. Someone has to die so that President Nixon won’t be, and these are his words, ‘the first President to lose a war.’

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<sup>283</sup> Charles Taylor Interview, September 24, 2008, *Voices of Iowa*, Grout Museum, Waterloo, IA.

<sup>284</sup> Kerry, *The New Soldier*, Vietnam Veterans Against the War, *Winter Soldier Investigation*.

We are asking Americans to think about that because how do you ask a man to be the last man to die in Vietnam? How do you ask a man to be the last man to die for a mistake...We are here in Washington to say that the problem of this war is not just a question of war and diplomacy. It is part and parcel of everything that we are trying as human beings to communicate to people in this country - the question of racism which is rampant in the military, and so many other questions such as the use of weapons; the hypocrisy in our taking umbrage at the Geneva Conventions and using that as justification for a continuation of this war when we are more guilty than any other body of violations of those Geneva Conventions; in the use of free fire zones, harassment interdiction fire, search and destroy missions, the bombings, the torture of prisoners, all accepted policy by many units in South Vietnam. That is what we are trying to say. It is part and parcel of everything.<sup>285</sup>

As we can soon, Kerry's speech reveals what many veterans felt, that they were sent to Vietnam for the elite's war. Most importantly, Kerry questioned the legality, justifications, and the morals of American intervention. For many returning veterans who opposed the war, Kerry, perhaps took the words right out of their mouths.

In the 1970s antiwar veterans had a level of support within the larger culture that was reduced in the Raegan era. While antiwar veterans, like everyone in the peace movement, always had their motives and patriotism challenged by the right wing, they were looked upon as political mavericks, even heroes, by significant amounts of people who had turned against the war. When veterans themselves spoke out against the war, their testimony was prized as firsthand confirmation of what the movement had been arguing all along. Of course, Vietnam veterans had a healthy suspicion of their reception by the civilian antiwar movement; they were alert to the possibility that the warmth of their welcome was commensurate with their ideological purity and might evaporate with any sign of political backsliding. Many antiwar veterans, therefore, "preferred to remain a

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<sup>285</sup> John Kerry's Testimony before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, April 22, 1971. *Sixties Project*, Vietnam Generation Inc.

certain distance from other peace groups. Nonetheless, surely they found in the larger peace movement a measure of social respect and political legitimation.”<sup>286</sup>

Some lingered with the antiwar movement, but were not that avid members. “I had drifted into the antiwar movement,” said Caputo, “though I was never passionately involved in it.”<sup>287</sup> He eventually joined the VVAW, but his most explicit gesture of protest was made in 1970, when he mailed his campaign ribbons to Richard Nixon, with a long letter explaining why he was opposed to American policies in Vietnam. “I thought, naively, that such a personal, individual act would have more effect than mass marches. About a month later, I received in the mail an envelope bearing the returning address ‘The White House.’ It contained my medals and a curt note, written by some obscure functionary, which said that the Executive Branch of the United States government was not authorized to receive or hold military decorations.”<sup>288</sup> He simply had his medals returned to him. But the writer left a note that said his views were noted and brought to the attention of “proper authorities.”<sup>289</sup> We will never know if Richard Nixon read Philip Caputo’s letter. That episode summed up Caputo’s antiwar career, in which he states: “My grand gesture of personal protest had been futile, as futile as the war itself. I seemed to have a penchant for lot causes.”<sup>290</sup> The war itself may have been “futile” or a lost cause, but for many antiwar veterans, their participation in the movement was a moral. Besides regaining their moral, social, and political integrity, antiwar veterans were trying

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<sup>286</sup> Christian Appy, *Working-Class War*, 310.

<sup>287</sup> Philip Caputo, *Rumor of War*, 342.

<sup>288</sup> Philip Caputo, *Rumor of War*, 342.

<sup>289</sup> Philip Caputo, *Rumor of War*, 342.

<sup>290</sup> Philip Caputo, *Rumor of War*, 343.



to make ends meet. They had endured so much hardship for seemingly nothing, thus, they could turn that frustration and anger into something positive: getting America out of Vietnam once and for all.

#### Perceptions of Hollywood and Popular Culture: The Junkie and Misplaced Veteran

Throughout the 1960s, 70s, and 80s, Vietnam veterans rarely received respectful attention in mainstream culture. On the rare occasions when Vietnam veterans were portrayed in film and television, they were typically represented as psychopathic misfits. With some notable exceptions, such as Gloria Emerson's superb book *Winner and Losers* and works written by veterans themselves, there was little cultural effort to investigate the experiences of Vietnam veterans. When veterans gained brief moments in the spotlight it was political, more symbolic than substantive. For example, when American POWs were winned and dined at the Nixon White House in 1973 or when antiwar veteran Ron Kovic was invited to speak at the 1976 Democratic convention.

Popular culture representations can be seen to have contributed immeasurably to the institutionalization of a revisionist view and helped to sanitize the American record in the conflict. At the same time they helped promote nostalgia about the past and the misgivings about how the nation wielded its global power.<sup>291</sup> As a result of nationalist blinders and orientalist stereotypes, Hollywood and television were replete with misrepresentations and neglected any sort of Southeast Asian perspective. They focused instead on the psychological torment of American soldiers, often through the symbolic addiction of drugs, and on the cataclysmic domestic legacies of the war. This focus

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<sup>291</sup> Franklin, *Vietnam and Other American Fantasies*; Sturken, *Tangled Memories*.

helped to enhance the mystic belief in America's victimization and bred a rising intolerance of drugs, which were blamed for a host of social ills—including the misconduct of American soldiers during the war.

In 1973 Columbia Pictures film *The Stone Killer*, a black veteran named Gus Lipper appears to be out of control. Scarred by the brutality of the war and its apparent purposelessness, he was arrested for selling heroin and holds up a policeman at gunpoint. When taken into custody, he is gunned down by a team of assassins, who are also Vietnam veterans, competing for his share in the drug trade. During the investigation into the killing, a prison psychologist tells the detective, 'We tend to count the victims of the war among the dead, but after carrying out the burning children we have nothing left but psychopaths. Vietnam doesn't make heroes, it makes a generation of Lippers!'"<sup>292</sup>

Reflecting a fixation on the domestic cost of the war, *The Stone Killer* was characteristic for the in demonizing Vietnam veterans, who appear "mentally and spiritually infected by the senseless genocide," as one analyst put it, rather than being politically awakened. They are caricatured as psychopathic killers and junkies responsible for the spread of social degradation and crime in the United States. In 1977, President Jimmy Carter proclaimed that we "owe Hanoi no reparations" or "debt" because "the destruction from the war was "mutual." He continued: 'We went to Vietnam without any desire to capture territory or impose American will on other people. I don't feel we ought to apologize or castigate ourselves or assume the status of credibility.'" These remarks were met with outrage by Vietnamese; a professor of at the University of

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<sup>292</sup>Lemcke, *Spitting Image*, 157.

Hue likened them to a “rapist claiming his victims hurt him as much as he hurt them.” They were nonetheless part of a sustained political effort, later accentuated during the Raegan era, to conceal the devastation wrought by United States policies and to absolve Americans of responsibility for the violence inflicted.<sup>293</sup>

As Julian Smith noted in the aptly titled *Looking Away*, Hollywood largely avoided Vietnam throughout the duration of the war in order to avoid political controversy. John Wayne’s *The Green Berets* (1968) was an exception, although the film fit the paradigm of the World War II genre in its glorification of war and was animated, as one critic put it, by an “unashamed fascination with violence and themes of Anglo-Saxon racial superiority, leavened only by sentimentality.” Brian DePalma’s 1968 low-budget *Greetings* was the first film to criticize United States foreign policy and to portray drug use as a metaphor for the tainted character of the conflict.<sup>294</sup> Though set in Korea, M\*A\*S\*H followed suit with a similar theme in 1971, making subtle references to the wide prevalence of marijuana-smoking in Vietnam.

A majority of the films in the 1970s focused little on the war and more on its corrosive spiritual impact within the United States, often through crime and drug-addiction.<sup>295</sup> The 1972 20<sup>th</sup> Century Fox production *Welcome Home, Soldier Boys* traced the cross-country journey of four returned Green Berets who rape a woman passerby and lay siege to a tiny town in New Mexico with the use of bayonets and rifles. Pretending

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<sup>293</sup> Berg, “Losing Vietnam,” 136; Irwin, “U.S. Owes No Debt to Hanoi Carter Says,” *Los Angeles Times*, March 5, 1977, 1. Quote from professor Ngo Vinh Long, “The War and the Vietnamese,” 234; McMahon, “Contested Memory,” 166, 171; Chomsky, “United States and Indo-China,” 10.

<sup>294</sup> Smith, *Looking Away*; Shapiro, “Vietnam War,” 10; DePalma, *Greetings*; Devine, *Vietnam at 24 Frames a Second*, 47.

<sup>295</sup> Katzman, “From Outcasts to Cliché”; Dionisopoulos, “Images of the Warrior Returned.”

they are back in Vietnam, they assume platoon formation when confronted by the National Guard and wind up killing dozens of officers and blowing up a helicopter before either being arrested or killed. Prior to the final blowout scene, the men passed around a joint and get stoned together, replicating their experience in Vietnam and symbolically conveying a link between drug-use, aggression, and violence. In 1972, two University of Illinois sociologists completed a study, *Wasted Men*, concluding that in spite of comparatively low psychiatric casualty rates and overwhelming antiwar sentiments, veterans were thought of as “dehumanized killers and drug addicts, pitiful victims of a hated war to be avoided and shunned.”<sup>296</sup> Similar to the popular and radical press, *Welcome Home, Soldier Boys* helped shape such stereotypes, whole diverting public attention from the consequences of the war itself.

Francis Ford Coppola’s film, *Apocalypse Now*, was the most famous from the 1970s. Winning a top prize at the prestigious Cannes festival, this film was referred by the *New York Times* as a “cultural event,” most celebrated in portraying drugs, the tainted character of the fighting, and the limits of America’s global power. Coppola envisioned it as the definite Vietnam War film, remarking: “My film is not about Vietnam. It *is* Vietnam. It is what it was really like. It was crazy. We were in the jungle, there was too many of us. We had access to too much money and too much equipment and little by little we went insane.”<sup>297</sup>

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<sup>296</sup> Southern Illinois University Foundation, *Wasted Men*, 1; “Study Cites Bias against Veteran GIs,” *Washington Post*, April 6, 1972, A3.

<sup>297</sup> Canby, “The Screen: *Apocalypse Now*,” *New York Times*, August 15, 1979, C15; McInerney, “Apocalypse Then,” 22; Levin, “Francis Coppola,” 137-38.

*Apocalypse Now* centers on the secret mission of Captain Benjamin Willard (played by Martin Sheen), to kill Colonel Walter E. Kurtz (Marlon Brando) on behalf of military intelligence. Having been groomed for a top position in the CIA, Kurtz had been driven insane by the conditions in Vietnam and came to command a rogue group of indigenous Montagnards (natives of central and southern Vietnam highlands), who engage in sadistic rituals and torture. A previous assassin who had defected to this private army has been reported to his family as MIA, reinforcing the myth about a cover-up surrounding the fate of missing soldiers.<sup>298</sup>

Drugs symbolized the madness of the war and futility of missionary efforts to export Western-style democracy. At Kurtz's compound his followers smoke marijuana and other psychedelic intoxicants, as does a renegade photojournalist played by the countercultural icon Dennis Hopper. Willard's crewmate, Lance, undergoes a dramatic transformation from naïve and innocent all-American surfer to battle-weary soldier and junkie. At the beginning, he appears clean-shaven and participates reservedly in the assault on the Vietnamese village by a zealous lieutenant named Kilgore, who serves, in the words of one critic, as a "caricature of an unadulterated love of war and killing." By the end, lance has grown his hair long and gets high at every chance; he dons war paint and has lost all inhibitions towards killing. In the films penultimate scene, lance blends in with the Montagnards trained by Kurtz and participants in many of their tribal ceremonies, including the ritual intake of psychedelic mushrooms. He is depicted as

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<sup>298</sup>Kinder, "Power of Adaptation," 20; Lembcke, *CNN's Tailwind Tale*, 73-74.

having gone “native” so to speak, like Hopper’s character and Kurtz, and to have transmogrified into the very “backward” being he was attempting to civilize.<sup>299</sup>

Synonymous with these broader misrepresentations, Coppola overstates the scope of drugs use and the war for symbolic reasons—leaving viewers with the false impression that it helped shape the military’s unsavory conduct and collapse. Lance’s drug habit is shown to jeopardize the crew’s safety and provokes unnecessary violence and the reckless use of force. In one emblematic scene he is pictured waterskiing from a rope at the back of the boat while tripping on acid. He lights up a purple flare and, in reference to Jimi Hendrix song celebrating drug use, screams out, “Purple Haze, man!” The smoke triggers a sense of panic among the neighboring Montagnards, who fire at the boat with bows and arrows and killed a crew member named Clean.

In a previous scene, the crew gets high together and becomes paranoid and jittery. During a routine search and seizure of a commercial shipping boat, they overreact when one of the women refuses to open a basket carrying her puppy. A trigger-happy clean unloads a burst of gunfire, killing everybody on board; stoned, Lance and Chef contribute to the mini-My Lai-style massacre by emptying their own machine guns on the boat; and Willard later shoots a woman in the head in order to put her out of her misery. The insinuation is that drugs and their effect in clouding the soldiers’ judgement are as much responsible for the atrocity as in the institutionalized structure of the war and military policy. Through characterizations like these, this film fostered a shallow public

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<sup>299</sup> Chown, *Hollywood Amateur*, 138; Marcus, “Journey Up to the River,” 55; Nguyen Khac Vien, “*Apocalypse Now* Viewed.”

understanding of the war by exaggerating the impact of drugs to the neglect of deeper sociopolitical variables. In this respect, it was typical of the genre, though ultimately more influential because of its wide popular acclaim and Coppola's delineation of it as the "definite" Vietnam movie.<sup>300</sup>

During the 1980s, American popular culture became infatuated with Vietnam and echoed President Reagan in recasting the war in a more favorable light, promoting the theme of national recovery and healing from trauma. Many films, including *Rambo: First Blood Part II* (1985), put forward the stab-in-the-back myth that treasonous antiwar protestors and a weak-willed government were responsible for losing the war and betraying the troops. As the archetypal disturbed veteran, Rambo achieves symbolic redemption by rescuing POWs and defeating America's enemies after being sent back to Vietnam free from bureaucratic constraint.<sup>301</sup>

Fitting with the shifting national mood, American soldiers were generally depicted as tragic victims of misguided policies or an unreceptive homecoming, worthy of the recognition and compassion they purportedly never received.<sup>302</sup> Lawrence Kasdan's blockbuster 1983 hit *The Big Chill* was characteristic in this regard. The film features the reunion of a group of college friends from the 1960s, following the death of one of their classmates. William Hurt's character, Nick, the lone Vietnam veteran of the crowd, remains traumatized by the experience, sexually impotent, and addicted to hard

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<sup>300</sup> Kranz, "Apocalypse Now and the Deer Hunter."

<sup>301</sup> *Uncommon Valor*; *Missing in Action I and II*; Jeffords, *Remasculinization of America*; *Hamburger Hill*; *Gardens of Stone*; Franklin, *Vietnam and the Other American Fantasies*, 57; Studler and Dessler, "Never Having to say You're Sorry."

<sup>302</sup> Smith, "Clean Boys"; Hagopian, "Social Memory of the Vietnam War," 201-202; Early, *In-country*; *Jackknife*; *Cutter's Way*.

narcotics. Unlike real-life counterparts who engaged in solidarity work with the marginalized peasant communities in Central America who had been subjected to Vietnam-style pacification by United States backed forces at this time, he leads “an aimless, rootless life supported buy drugs.”<sup>303</sup> There are emblematic signs of hope at the end: with encouragement from his friends and the revival of an old love relationship, Nick appears ready to straighten up and integrate into the middle-class.

In *Lethal Weapon* (1987), edgy veterans are both the cops and the robbers. Mel Gibson’s loose-cannon character symbolically absolves himself of past sins by thwarting the plot of an ex-general to flood Los Angeles with heroin. The deranged man has gone so far as to introduce the suicide of his own daughter to protect himself from arrest. In Lover Stone’s Academy Award-winning *Platoon* (1986), drugs serve as a metaphor for the transformation of Chris Taylor, played by Charlie Sheen, from the jejune Ivy League conscript to hardened, battle-tested warrior. Taylor, who mirrors Stone himself, is first introduced to marijuana laced with opium by one of his fellow platoon members following a long day digging trenches. Taking a break from work, he sits back and gets high just as the sun is setting. Through initiation into the socialized ritual of drugs, Taylor officially became one of the working-class warriors stripped of both his youthful naiveté and his privileged class pedigree.

Stone portrays drug use as an emblem of American military divisiveness and failure. The platoon became divided between “juicers,” or alcoholics, loyal to

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<sup>303</sup> Canby, “The Big Chill: Reunion of the 1960s Activists,” *New York Times*, September 23, 1983, C4; Clements, *Witness to War*; Smith, *Resisting Reagan*, 39.



commanding officer Bob Barnes, played by Tom Berenger, and “Heads,” loyal to staff Sergeant Elias, played by Willem DaFoe. In one telling scene, the “heads” gather in the barracks for the “groovy” drug party where they pass around opium-laced joints, listen to black soul music and use the rifle butt as a bong. The “juicers” on the other hand, get drunk in separate quarters and display contempt for the “heads.” One black private, Junior, alludes to the influx of drugs as a “gook plot” to put chemicals in the grass and “make us pacifist.” He states that drugs helped to “keep the black man down” by having him “smoke that shit.” In a drunken state, Barnes orders an end to the party and physically abuses several of the men. He later kills Elias after threatening him with court-martial for massacring Vietnamese civilians. When most of the platoon is eventually wiped out in a brutal firefight, Taylor proclaims, “we did not fight the enemy, we fought ourselves. The enemy was within us.”

Although breathtaking in its visual imagery and poignant in chronicling the war from the grunt’s perspective, Stone’s film, as various critics have noted, was characteristic in its parochial neglect of the Vietnamese. His contention that America fought and defeated itself did a profound disservice to the ability of the huge sectors of the Vietnamese population to mobilize in defeating the most technologically advanced nation in history; it ignored the complex sociopolitical factor’s shaping the wars outcome.<sup>304</sup> Besides helping to skew public memory of the war, the film demonized drugs and could be seen to support a conservative antidrug agenda focused on ensuring

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<sup>304</sup> Taylor, “Colonialist Subtext”; Engelhardt, *End of Victory Culture*, 384; Oliver Stone, “Playboy Interview—Oliver Stone,” 51; *Tang, Vietcong Memoir*.

that they should never divide the nation again, whether in war or in peace—this, ironically, despite Stone’s own liberal politics and outspoken criticism of the War on Drugs and of Nancy Reagan in particular, whom he characterized in a 1988 *Playboy* interview as “phony.”<sup>305</sup>

As we can see from the time lapses, perceptions in the lens of popular culture and Hollywood changed. However, films and the like continued to address the symbolic nature of drug-use, violence, and crime to the returning Vietnam veteran. Through the 70s, films and television elected to perpetrate Vietnam in the domestic sense—how, for instance, Vietnam veterans came back as displaced maniacs and drug-addicts, simply a menace to society. But throughout the 80s, films covering the Vietnam War tried to restore America’s national credibility. More importantly, they symbolically tried to explain America’s effort in the war were strained by politicians and soldiers. In other words, the war effort was not lost due to an enemy on the battlefield, but an enemy within themselves. All in all, popular culture did not represent the American soldier in Vietnam accurately. In portraying all the negativity, no gratitude or respect was paid, adding to the popular interpretation of soldiers being baby-killers, addicts, and psychopaths.

### A Final Perspective

The American soldier who fought in Vietnam was unique. The war in Vietnam was unique. Not only was this a working-class war it was also a teenager’s war. Most soldiers there averaged the age of nineteen. And most of these boys were drawn from

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<sup>305</sup> ‘Playboy Interview—Oliver Stone,’ 51. Also in an interview with Christian Appy, Stone stated that the Vietnam War lacked “moral purpose and was fought without any moral integrity”; Christian Appy, *Patriots*, 256.

working-class origins. Most drawn to combat units were also from such a class. While their privileged counterparts enjoyed college campuses, protest, and the age of sex and rock 'n roll, the working-class boys were sent to a war in which the official justifications were erred. I have discussed class origins, fighting experiences, and ways American society reflected in Vietnam. In the end, we have looked at the return to the United States. All of these topics are significant for such a narrative investigating the soldier's experiences. Such understandings have been left out of the historiography of the Vietnam experience, and, furthermore, this is the premise of this work.

Scholarly works such as Christian Appy's *Working-Class War* or James Westheider's *Fighting in Vietnam: The Experience of the U.S. Soldier* have disclosed such topics, but further analyses must be drawn. Many have also divulged in the politics, tactics, and the origins of the Vietnam War, but often they have looked past those who fought in the conflict. Thus, we have a narrative of the soldier, a bottom's up approach. I have drawn my conclusions from many sources. But these are not the typical works done by the prominent veterans such as Tim O'Brien, Philip Caputo, and Karl Marlantes. Although their work is touched upon here. Many of my references came from those who simply came back and carried on with their lives. Most protrusive sources of this work was drawn from Iowa veterans. With a payment of respect, I must give gratefulness to Dr. Neymeyer at the University of Northern Iowa and Historian at the Grout Museum in Waterloo, Iowa. For without such sources, this work would never be complete. Therefore, this is a story about the American soldiers from all around the nation, but predominantly from Iowa.

Though this is not a war story, Tim O'Brien said: "A true war story is never moral. It does not instruct, nor encourage virtue, nor suggest models of proper human behavior, or restrain men from doing the things men have always done."<sup>306</sup> From such a suggestion, this work indulges in the experiences of war. For this war was different. Different from all others in American history. Not for the sense of killing or brutality, technology or global power; but, experiences such as humping the boonies, fighting an invisible enemy, using drugs, television and media exposure, and not to mention class origins. The Vietnam War could be understood in a multitude of ways, but there is no better way to understand it than from learning from those who fought in it.

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<sup>306</sup> Tim O'Brien, *The Things They Carried*, 68.

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