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US Combat Soldiers in Vietnam

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Most of the literature on the Vietnam War deals with decision-making in Washington, DC, Hanoi, or Saigon. This "top-down" approach often ignores what happened in the rice paddies and jungles of South Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos, even though films of the war have dealt with the violence associated with combat. Thus, members of the general public who have watched a television series on Vietnam, or have gone to the cinema to watch *Platoon*, *Apocalypse Now*, *Hamburger Hill*, or *We Were Soldiers*, have been exposed more to soldiers' experiences than have members of the academic community. This chapter will address the combat soldiers' and marines' experiences in the war, starting from selection and training, and turning to deployment and then returning home. Because most of the chapters in this volume deal with nonsoldier activities, this chapter will often use colloquial phrases and words which depict soldiers' combat experiences.

For purposes of full disclosure, the author is a combat veteran, having served as an infantry advisor to the Jarai, Behnar, and Radai tribes in the Central Highlands in 1970 and 1971, most of whom served in Regional Forces/Popular Forces (RF/PF) or People's Self Defense Forces (PSDF). This chapter, however, is not based primarily on my experiences in the war, but rather on my scholarship of the Vietnam War. My research is based principally on soldier behavior and how Americans fought in such a controversial war.

Those Who Served

Most of the soldiers who served in Vietnam from 1956 to 1965 were career officers and senior noncommissioned officers who performed duties as advisors to the Armed Forces of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN). These men were usually veterans of World War II or the Korean War, and were sent to Southeast Asia to assist in logistical support as the Republic of Vietnam (RVN) attempted to deal with the insurgency by the National

Liberation Front (NLF). When President Lyndon Johnson decided to send ground troops to Vietnam in March 1965, a different kind of soldier would be required, since a much greater number of soldiers and marines would be needed. The buildup meant hundreds of thousands of low-ranking men would need to be called up.

Conscription – "the draft" – had been in place since the start of the Cold War, but large numbers of troops had not been necessary for the perceived communist threat around the world. Vietnam would require the United States to recruit and/or force young men to go to war, so efforts were made to promote serving in the Vietnam War as fulfilling one's patriotic duty, just like their dads and uncles had volunteered to serve in World War II. This effort was effective to some degree in small towns, and many young men volunteered to join their preferred military branch. Statistics indicate that 70 percent of the soldiers and marines who served were volunteers, with only 30 percent having been drafted. However, many of those who volunteered did so in order to choose their military occupational specialty (MOS), thus avoiding being forced into the infantry. Draftees served two years, and volunteering added a third year to one's tour of duty. However, men believed that they could avoid combat even if ordered to go to Vietnam by choosing to become a clerk, cook, mechanic, or some other noncombat MOS, as only approximately 20 percent of the men who served in Vietnam were assigned to a combat arm. During the Vietnam War, the combat arms were Infantry, Artillery, Armor, and Combat Engineering.

Men could avoid being drafted in the early days of the war by being a student and having an approved college degree plan, maintaining a 2.0 grade point average (GPA), and notifying their local draft board that they were meeting all of their student requirements. This enabled them to be granted a "2-S" deferment. They could also take their military physical examination at an armed forces examining and entrance station (AFEES), and if they did not pass, they would be granted a "4-F" deferment or medical disqualification. In some cases, men were granted this deferment by supplying a letter from their own doctor. If a college student wanted to become an officer, he could do so by enrolling in the College Option Program which enabled him to delay entry until he completed his degree requirements. As the war progressed, students were required to take a Selective Service College Qualification Test if they wanted to attend graduate school, thus further delaying their entry into military service.

Whether draftees or volunteers, these recruits would report to AFEES after qualification, be sworn into the military, and begin a journey that would

take them to a basic combat training (BCT) facility such as Fort Dix, New Jersey, Fort Knox, Kentucky, Fort Ord, California, or Fort Benning, Georgia. There they would undergo training in military procedures, first aid, drill and ceremony, and weaponry. A major part of the training was physical fitness, which was designed to prepare soldiers for the stress of jungle warfare: those underweight were "beefed up" and those overweight were "slimmed down." This training took eight weeks.

Upon completion of BCT, soldiers were sent to advanced individual training (AIT) at sites that were determined by one's MOS. For those assigned to the infantry, they were sent to Fort Lewis, Washington, or Fort Polk, Louisiana. AIT was intensive both physically and mentally: this eight-week course was designed to prepare soldiers for combat in the jungles of Vietnam. They were introduced to the M-16A1 rifle and the M-60 machine gun and taught how to fire and maneuver in squad formations. At the end of the formal training they were sent to "Tigerland," where they were trained in escape and evasion, prisoner-of-war experiences, and survival techniques. This week-long course was the final preparation for Vietnam. After their personal situations were taken care of, soldiers were shipped off to Vietnam by either plane or ship. Thus, the typical man had been a soldier for only four months when he was sent to the jungles and rice paddies of Vietnam. This training program was much more accelerated than the training regimen in World War II.

Once "in country," soldiers were sent to a "repo-depot" where they would await their assignment to a unit. These facilities at Long Bình, Cam Ranh Bay, and Đà Nẵng were where the fate of thousands of soldiers would be decided by noncombat clerks.[1] These men could look at the bulletin boards where requests were being made by unit commanders for more troops, or they could read the daily edition of *Stars and Stripes* to see where big battles had taken place which resulted in high American casualties. While all MOSs were assigned to units at "repo-depots" it was those with 11B (infantrymen) and 11C (mortar-qualified) that were most concerned about exactly where in-country and to which unit they would be assigned. And the rumor mill was rampant in "repo-depots" as all of these "FNGs" (a slang term meaning "fucking new guys") were scared to death about going to units where they were replacing dead men. "And as you move mindlessly through the replacement system, the whim of an unseen clerk sends you to a unit in a quiet sector – or to a unit that will take its men like lambs to the slaughter," wrote

1 Ron Milam, *Not a Gentleman's War: An Inside View of Junior Officers in the Vietnam War* (Chapel Hill, NC, 2009), 80–1.

James McDonough in his memoir, *Platoon Leader: A Front-Line Personal Report of Vietnam Battle Action.*[2]

There is a saying among Vietnam veterans that your experience varied by where you were, when you were there, and what you did while there. This "where, when, what" criterion was first established at the "repo-depot." Some soldiers tried to negotiate their way to a better, safer situation by letting the administrative personnel know about their typing ability, their skills as a bartender that could be used at a division base camp officers' club, or their aptitude as a mechanic. "Anything but infantry" was the feeling of most of these scared soldiers.

Bell UH-1 ("Huey") helicopters or C-130 Hercules transport planes would pick up the FNGs and transport them to their units where they would be assigned to a squad in a platoon of a company. Most units had a one-week training program that allowed the men to "zero in" their M-16A1 rifle, practice throwing hand grenades, and get used to carrying a rucksack loaded with 75 pounds of C-rations, claymore mines, and peripheral equipment. Mostly, the time spent with their new unit was important because they had to prove themselves to the men who had already been in combat for many months. This would not happen in training: it would have to be in battle.

There were some instances where units conducted "live fire" training by taking new soldiers on patrols that were considered "safe" but where it was possible that they would encounter People's Army of Vietnam (PAVN) troops. The idea behind such training was that soldiers needed to experience killing in the most controlled situation possible before having to see their buddies being killed or wounded. Ambush patrols were particularly suited for this, as the enemy would be surprised and would not be in a position to offer much resistance.

In the Field

A typical day for an infantry soldier consisted of leaving a base camp at dawn for a routine patrol into the jungle or across rice paddies. If the area of operation (AO) was some distance from the base camp, transport helicopters would pick up squads of men and fly them to designated locations where they would deplane and begin patrolling. The typical operation was designated "search and destroy" and targeted villages where there was suspected enemy activity.

2 James R. McDonough, *Platoon Leader: A Front Line Personal Report of Vietnam Battle Action* (New York, 1985), 15.

Usually preplanned artillery fire would precede the insertion of troops. This "prepping the battlefield" with "harassment and interdiction" fire (H&I) was designed to eliminate any large, dug-in enemy troops that might interfere with the planned operation. Soldiers would then begin their patrol targeting a suspected NLF stronghold in a village or a bunker complex that had been spotted through aerial reconnaissance or through intelligence gained from captured enemy documents.

As soldiers proceeded on patrol, they were armed with M-16A1 rifles, which was unique to the Vietnam War. Firing a 5.56mm round (.223 caliber), the weapon was light and had very little recoil. It was designed for jungle warfare, and because of the light weight of the ammunition soldiers were able to carry a large quantity. It was fed through a magazine which held twenty rounds, but eighteen was the preferred capacity to avoid jamming. The weapon was accurate, but the bullets could easily be deflected by vines in the jungle. And the weapon tended to jam if not continuously and properly kept clean and lubricated. In the early days of war, soldiers asked parents to send WD-40, which performed better in the humidity of Vietnam than the government-issued Lubricant, Small Arms (LSA).

For the American soldiers, the M-16A1 was matched against the AK-47 of the PAVN and NLF. That weapon fired a 7.62mm round (.30 caliber) and was not as prone to malfunction in the humidity and heat of Vietnam. It was also heavier than the M-16A1, yet was carried by Vietnamese soldiers who tended to be much smaller than their American enemy. This controversy over which weapon was more suited to the jungle environment continued for the entire duration of the war, with many American soldiers deciding to use an AK-47 if they could find one after a battle.

There were also other weapons issues that leaders had to deal with in squad- or platoon-size operations, such as the need to assign good teams to crew served weapons, such as mortar or machine gun teams. The M-60 machine gun required a gunner and several ammo bearers who would assist the gunner in feeding the belt containing bullets into the weapon. Usually the lowest-ranking or newest soldiers assisted the gunner, but they also had to be ready to take over the gun if the enemy was successful in wounding the main gunner, which was often the case. In units where there was racial tension, platoon leaders had to be sensitive to situations where the crew was not amenable to strong teamwork, which was essential in combat situations. Not being ready to pick up the "pig" (M-60) would endanger the lives of all the men in the unit. "The M-60 is absolutely a superb infantry weapon, that thing will be around for 50 more years. There was almost nothing that could

be done to improve it. I mean, it'll fire when it's full of wet concrete, you almost can't break it," said Vietnam veteran Chad Spawr.[3]

Another weapons issue in combat was the assignment of "grenadier," who would carry the M-79 grenade launcher. This weapon was a single-shot, short breech-loaded gun that fired a 40mm high explosive grenade that could be used against entrenched enemy soldiers. Some have used the phrase "organic platoon artillery," meaning that the M-79 allowed small units to place indirect fire on the enemy, which could be useful in either offensive or defensive situations. The problem in assigning the weapon to a platoon member was that many soldiers refused to carry a weapon that took you out of the fight momentarily (until you could reload). Furthermore, since the one round that the grenadier fired was a "high explosive" round, it was not very effective in close-range or ambush situations. Later in the war, a "flechette" round was introduced, which allowed the grenadier to fire at an enemy soldier at close range and to incapacitate him with small razor blade–type particles. But the grenadier still had to carry another weapon, such as a .45 caliber pistol, which itself was difficult to use in situations other than extreme close range.

Also attached to each soldier's rucksack was an M-72 light anti-tank weapon (LAW) which was capable of busting open a bunker. It had a disposable launcher and replaced the World War II bazooka. This weapon was essential to effective search-and-destroy operations, but it was also dangerous if not handled carefully. "This particular fellow had been carrying this LAW sort of strapped over his shoulder. When he stepped on the mine, the mine engaged the LAW and the rocket fired and blew off part of his head. He was killed, obviously," said Vietnam veteran Paul Meringolo.[4]

Units patrolled along jungle trails, usually avoiding established areas of thoroughfare so as not to expose themselves to enemy booby traps or land mines, which were particularly common in areas where the enemy controlled local villages and hamlets. Often, local civilians were used to place these mines in areas Americans were expected to traverse. The two most frequently encountered and particularly injurious were the "toe-popper" and "Bouncing Betty" mines. Neither was designed to kill, but instead were used to maim – the former to blow half of the soldier's foot off, and the latter targeting the reproductive parts of a soldier's body. "Though small in explosive ordnance, the most feared of all booby traps was the Bouncing Betty. 'I think it was a

3 Interview of Chad Spawr by Stephen Maxner, March 16, 2000, Item #OH0006, Vietnam Archive, Texas Tech University, Lubbock, Texas [hereafter cited as TTUVA].

4 Paul Meringolo interview in James R. Ebert, *A Life in a Year: The American Infantryman in Vietnam, 1965–1972* (Novato, CA, 1993), 178.

Bouncing Betty they used to call it, but which was like a tomato can and had a thousand ball bearings in it.' It had a three-pronged firing device that could be seen by an alert point man when rains had washed away the covering dirt. Once the device was stepped on, 'The unlucky soldier will hear a muffled explosion; that's the initial charge sending the mine on its one yard leap into the sky. The fellow takes another step and begins the next and his backside is bleeding and he's dead. We call it 'ol step and a half,'" said Vietnam veteran Tim O'Brien in his autobiography *If I Die in a Combat Zone, Box Me Up and Ship Me Home*.[5] Such a wound would likely kill a soldier, but more dreaded than death was Betty's shrapnel hitting the groin area. "A wound to the genitals was the most feared injury in this war, as in any other conflict. A man's first question to the medic was not 'Am I going to make it?' but rather 'Do I still have my balls?'" said Vietnam veteran Michael Lee Lanning in his memoir, *The Only War We Had: A Platoon Leader's Journal of Vietnam*.[6] The fear of encountering one of these weapons caused many American soldiers to tread carefully on patrol, and many platoon leaders refused to patrol along established routes, choosing instead to hack their way through the jungle or elephant grass using machetes. The fear of death or being severely wounded permeated all soldiers: "It was actually just like to blow your foot off. The concussion would just blow parts … blow toes off or mess up a foot or something. The chances of it killing you weren't that good unless you fell face down on it or something. But, it would just disable you because one of the tactics later on that was very helpful and worked very well for the North Vietnamese especially was rather than trying to kill guys, they were trying to wound them because then you take at least three people out because you take the wounded plus the other two that are trying to come get him. Or you take a whole bunch of people and when they try to come get them, you just pick them off as they try to come rescue the guy," said Vietnam veteran James O'Kelley.[7]

After a day of patrolling, units were required to establish defensive night positions by setting up a cordon around a "command post" and sending out soldiers to listening posts where they could warn the main unit of any enemy activity. The soldiers would dig foxholes to protect themselves from enemy mortars and rockets, and would place M18A1 Claymore mines around the perimeter, which could be either command-detonated by individual soldiers

5 Tim O'Brien, *If I Die in a Combat Zone, Box Me Up and Ship Me Home* (New York, 1973), 122.
6 Michael Lee Lanning, *The Only War We Had: A Platoon Leader's Journal of Vietnam* (New York, 1987), 71.
7 Interview of James O'Kelley by Stephen Maxner, August 4, 2000, Item #OH0012, TTUVA.

or attached to trip wires which were set off by unsuspecting enemy soldiers. Once this happened, a firefight would ensue, and the calm night would be interrupted by massive gunfire from both sides. Often, in the limited visibility of the darkness, confusion would cause mistakes to be made, which could result in friendly fire wounding American soldiers. Calls for medevac helicopters would be made by platoon leaders, but sometimes help would not arrive until morning and first light. The wounded would be taken to the nearest evacuation hospitals for immediate surgery, then flown to Japan or back to the United States, depending on the severity of the wounds. If mortally wounded, the bodies would be handled by graves registration personnel who would perform identification and hygiene procedures before sending the bodies to Dover Air Force Base in Delaware in the United States.

These daily search-and-destroy operations took a heavy toll on the psyche of soldiers. The military had established "free fire" zones to help rid the jungle of villages that were sympathetic to the communist cause, whether in support of local NLF units or PAVN regular regiments. And with the American goal in a war of attrition being the largest "body count" possible, soldiers were expected to assault villages that had been identified as enemy territory. "A recon patrol spotted a thatched hut and a garden plot with a dozen banana trees. The company got on line, and we cautiously approached the humble rotting abode. As we got close, a feeble old man was spotted trying to escape up a knoll beyond his house. Dressed in nothing but a loin cloth, he pawed at the earth, making little headway. Several soldiers retrieved the man. He couldn't have hurt anyone. Skin hung from his bones, he weighed maybe sixty or seventy pounds. This was our enemy? The man was put on a bird bound for Pleiku, where he would receive medical attention. Rules were rules. We burnt his home, destroyed his garden. An hour or so later, word came that the Montagnard had died. His heart must have failed under all the stress," said Vietnam veteran Tom Lacombe in his memoir, *Light Ruck: Vietnam, 1969*.[8]

Creating even more discord for American soldiers was the military's incentivizing body count. Units that killed more enemy than their fellow units might be given a three-day pass to China Beach in Đà Nẵng or more standdown time. This led to body count inflation, meaning that blood trails or observing small body parts as enemy soldiers retreated would be counted as killed in action (KIA). As these casualty reports were transmitted through channels, each bureau tended to inflate the result to enhance their reputation for successful operations.

8 Tom Lacombe, *Light Ruck: Vietnam, 1969* (Fort Valley, VA, 2002), 159.

Figure 3.1 US troops stationed at the Camp Eagle Army Base, southeast of Huế, enjoy a Christmas show (December 24, 1971).
Source: Bettmann / Contributor / Bettmann / Getty Images.

The Life of a Soldier

While being in the field was hard, dangerous, and dirty, there were no comforts that could help the soldier deal with death and destruction except one: mail. No matter where his unit was operating, or how forcefully the enemy was advancing on his position, the US Army and Marines made sure that their men received the letters from home. Huey helicopters flew mail runs to the field every day, even when flying into hostile territory endangering the lives of pilots. But mail delivery was almost as critical as ammunition, water, and food. Being connected to home, and to mom, sister, wife, or girlfriend, was an absolute imperative to maintaining troop morale.

In the average unit, soldiers remained in the field for two weeks before returning to a more comfortable base camp area where they could shower, draw new clothes, and get some much-needed rest. These base camps were where the majority of American troops spent most of their tours of duty, having been assigned noncombat MOSs. This was also the location of the most turmoil within units, since the common element of unit cohesion to stay alive did not exist in the "rear." Combat soldiers even had a term for these rear-echelon personnel. They were known as REMFs (rear-echelon mother

fuckers). Being in the jungle on operations required everyone to be as alert as possible at all times; thus, officers and noncommissioned officers strictly enforced the no-drinking and no-drugs policy when in combat. But in the rear, without the constant threat of enemy contact existing, soldiers often drank alcohol in excessive quantities or used drugs such as marijuana, cocaine, and heroin, all of which were readily available through local merchants. The use of both alcohol and drugs, mostly with the choice being generational, was rampant in the rear, which caused much of the racial and rank turmoil.

There was an actual rear-echelon culture that existed in the large base camps, and it was difficult for combat soldiers to fit in with those who lived in relative comfort compared to living in foxholes. Jealousy certainly existed for those who had to return to the field after a few days of rest. And it was in the rear that the music of Motown conflicted with the music of the US South or country-and-western music. Since the blaring sounds of the regional favorites could be heard broadcast over speakers purchased through the government PACEX catalogues and played over reel-to-reel, cassette, or eight-track equipment, fights often occurred between those who had just come in from the "boonies" and those who were permanent REMFs. And with killing being the main part of the infantryman's culture, it was difficult to turn off the attitude from the previous day's operation.

The extent to which alcohol and drugs affected the violence that erupted in the rear is still debated by historians. With the 1960s drug culture having impacted all who entered the service, each soldier was aware of what drugs could do for him in terms of escape from the realities of combat. As a "head," a soldier was part of a group that experienced drugs in the rear, but infrequently in the field where being high could put the unit's security in extreme jeopardy. But when a soldier returned to base camp, he was able to release himself to the joys of his preferred drug. "Well, there was drug and alcohol use. I think that not in the field. On the firebase it existed and in the rear areas it existed. It kind of existed within groups … In the field, if there was somebody out in the field and they were using drugs or alcohol in the field, they'd probably be dealt with … They'd say, 'You need to get this guy out of here because he's dangerous.' Firebases were a little bit more relaxed than that, and the rear area was more relaxed than that but I never used any drugs. I will have to admit to being over the line on alcohol a few times but that was always in the rear area," said Vietnam veteran Gary Noller.[9]

9 Interview of Gary Noller by Richard Verrone, August 2005 to March 2006, Item #OH0440, TTUVA.

Then there were the "juicers," who drank heavily of beer and whiskey. Many of the older men were alcoholics who were able to purchase a quart of Jack Daniels for $1.75 and a case of beer for $2.00. Both of these beverages were familiar, having been consumed by many stateside before being deployed to Vietnam. "It's like you could drink until you passed out. I never passed out but I came pretty close … You could go to the EM Club and buy a shot of good whiskey, whatever the best whiskey was that they had, for a quarter. You could buy a triple, three shots in the same glass, for seventy-five cents and that's going to give you pure whiskey, whatever you're drinking. You could go to the main PX in Chu Lai and buy a fifth of whiskey or a quart of whiskey probably for a dollar and a half, a dollar seventy-five. So alcohol was cheap," explained Noller.[10] In the view of platoon leaders and company commanders, both drugs and alcohol were detrimental to the physical and mental health of the soldier, and could affect the mission. The "juicers" could be hungover if they drank too much before an operation, and the "heads" could still feel the effect of a night's drug party. Adding to the problem was how both groups dealt with each other and with generational and racial confrontations.

"Fragging" is a term that is usually associated only with Vietnam, but it has been part of combat culture throughout history. The term comes from enlisted soldiers using a fragmentation grenade to murder a higher-ranking noncommissioned or commissioned officer. The extent to which such events occurred is the subject of many books and articles, but it happened frequently, particularly in base camps. Between 1969 and 1972, there were 800 recorded incidents, with a peak of 1.8 assaults per 1,000 servicemen in Vietnam.[11] Soldiers returning from extensive time on operations did not tolerate "chickenshit" orders from people who did not have to go into the field after a few days of standing down. Thus rolling a grenade under the cot of an unsuspecting higher-ranking soldier left no fingerprints on the perpetrator but would either kill or wound the victim and send a strong message to other leaders.

Most of these fragging incidents were triggered by orders involving work details that would not seem particularly onerous, such as cleaning up living quarters, burning latrine waste, or motor pool duty. Often the orders involved personal hygiene or appearance, such as shaving improperly or letting hair grow beyond the length that the army or marines authorized. And to a soldier who had just returned from two weeks in the "bush," being told to get a

10 Ibid.
11 Thomas C. Bond, "Fragging: A Study," *Army* 27, 4 (April 1977), 45.

haircut or to shave more frequently seemed ridiculous. If repeated often by the same leader, and during enemy stand-down period, a soldier's patience might reach boiling point and ultimately result in a fragging incident. And if a white noncommissioned officer was ordering a Black soldier to cut his hair to a length that was within army regulations, but not considered fashionable by the soldier, then such an order might be deemed onerous by a soldier who had just returned from ambush patrols, assaulting bunkers, sleeping in foxholes, and killing. So fragging became a way to express discontent not only with the war itself, but with those who ordered work details that conflicted with what soldiers believed was their mission.

Most fragging incidents occurred in the base camps and not in the field, even though opportunities always existed during firefights to murder leaders without leaving much evidence. But executing someone who might be required to save a unit by calling in helicopter gunships or an air strike would not be wise under any circumstances. Also, unit cohesion of those who serve in combat together usually would preclude such activities. The most frequent victims were captains and first sergeants since the "chickenshit" details usually came from them. Vietnam veteran James Padgett told of being accused in a fragging incident: "He tried to frag our First Sergeant. He tried to kill him with a frag. He threw it up on top of a hooch [house]. It rolled off and went down and broke and blew up, and they with holded [*sic*] him for the inquiry and the first shirt [First Sergeant] comes in there and this is before I made corporal, he said, 'Padgett, are you trying kill my ass?' I said, 'No sir.' He said, 'I knew that.' He said, 'We just got to go through the strokes.' 'No sir, but we know who did.' 'Get your ass out of here!'"[12]

While the term "combat soldiers" as used in this chapter has been defined as those assigned to combat MOSs, any discussion of combat soldiers must include the 11,000 women who volunteered to serve as nurses in Vietnam. Often working for drafted doctors who outranked them – nurses were second lieutenants and doctors were captains, at least when first arriving in country – these women had enlisted to work with wounded American soldiers. Unlike their jobs at hospitals in the United States, they were often given life-and-death responsibilities in Vietnam. While in triage they had to decide who were the walking wounded, who needed immediate attention, and who were expectants (meaning they were expected to die). This triage procedure took place during mass casualty situations which was quite often during big battles,

12 Interview of James Padgett by Stephen Maxner, November 29, 1999, Item #OH0115, TTUVA.

and the nurses had to deal with these decisions so that the doctors could proceed with required surgeries. Because of these responsibilities, many nurses experienced the results of combat on a daily basis, exceeding that of combat medics. Many nurses returned to the United States after the war and gave up their medical careers because the challenges they had in Vietnam could not be replicated in stateside hospitals. And the extent to which many former nurses experienced post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), which will be discussed later in this chapter, is only now being recognized in veterans' organizations. Their contribution to the war effort and saving American, ARVN, and even enemy lives is immeasurable.

Mỹ Lai

With all of the challenges associated with combat against a formidable enemy like the People's Liberation Armed Forces (PLAF) and the PAVN, American soldiers generally performed their duties according to rules of engagement that were approved at the highest levels of both military and civilian leadership. Yet those rules were broken on March 16, 1968, at Song My village, Mỹ Lai (4) hamlet, when Charlie Company of the 11th Brigade of the 23rd Infantry Division – Americal – murdered between 175 and 400 Vietnamese civilians, mostly women, children, babies, and old men. All of these noncombatants were probably NLF sympathizers, who found themselves in a hamlet that had been targeted by Americal leadership in retaliation for several incidents of land mines and booby traps having killed or wounded American soldiers. This massacre at Mỹ Lai would become known as the worst atrocity of the entire war in Vietnam and arguably the worst in American history.

Were individual soldiers who did most of the killing responsible for this act, or does it fall on those in charge as a failure of leadership? The individual soldiers began the shooting when ordered to do so by the commanding officer of the 1st Platoon of Charlie Company, First Lieutenant William Calley. At his trial in 1971, Lieutenant Calley said he was following the orders of his company commander, Captain Ernest Medina, who in turn said he was following the orders of his battalion commander, Lieutenant Colonel Frank Barker, who had named the operation "Task Force Barker." Thus the soldiers and all of the junior officers claimed they were only following the orders from their superiors and, since some of them were no longer in the military when the trials began, they did not face punishment.

Were the soldiers at Mỹ Lai trained to do what they did, or was it a function of the killing culture that was rampant throughout Vietnam? The men

of the 1st Platoon followed the training that had been provided when they first came in country: the "5 Ss" of search, silence, segregate, speed, and safeguard. Calley appeared with his radio operator and asked why these civilians were being held. "We're watching over them," replied Sergeant Meadlo. "No, we want them killed," replied Lieutenant Calley. "We'll get on line and fire into them." Calley turned to Meadlo and said "Fire when I say 'Fire.'" Then standing side by side, they blazed away. Mothers had thrown themselves on top of the young ones in a last desperate bid to protect them from the bullets raining down on them. Calley fired at both the mothers and the children, killing them one by one. Then he calmly said, "OK, let's go."[13] It was only Lieutenant Calley and Captain Ernest Medina who were brought to trial – Lieutenant Colonel Barker had been killed in a helicopter crash a few weeks after the massacre. This killing culture, which had created the environment within which the soldiers felt relatively comfortable firing bullets into the bodies of prone women, children, and babies, must be recognized as part of the attitude toward the NLF. As recruits took basic training or advanced individual training, they were taught to respect the enemy as a fighter, but they were also fed racist terms about the NLF and PAVN soldiers that could easily be construed to mean that the women and children and elderly fathers were also the enemy. "Gook," "dink," "slope," and "slant eyes" were used by cadres in training, and often these terms became part of everyday vocabulary. And if the soldiers of Charlie Company were wanting revenge for watching their buddies die from land mines and booby-trap deaths in previous days, it is likely that the killing culture would allow a comfort level to set in regarding the killing of noncombatants.

Adding to this killing culture was the lack of leadership shown by Captain Ernest Medina, and particularly Lieutenant William Calley. Both of these men were commissioned through the Infantry Officer Candidate School (OCS) at Fort Benning, Georgia, and neither was a college graduate, which was unusual. But they both failed to lead properly, particularly Lieutenant Calley, who was the one man on the ground who could have stopped the killing. Instead, he was the one who initiated the shooting, and his men followed. This lack of leadership resulted in the deaths of many innocent civilians and brought shame on and severe criticism of soldiers, marines, and veterans returning from the war.

13 Milam, *Not a Gentleman's War*, 131. Some of the quotes are from Michael Bilton and Kevin Sim, *Four Hours in Mỹ Lai* (New York, 1992).

The issue of who was most responsible for the massacre at Mỹ Lai has been explored by numerous authors, most notably Howard Jones in *Mỹ Lai: Vietnam, 1968, and the Descent into Darkness*, plus Michael Bilton and Kevin Sim in *Four Hours in Mỹ Lai*.[14] Lieutenant Calley was convicted of many counts of murder and sentenced to life in prison. His punishment was reduced to "time served" by President Richard Nixon. More important was the stigma that was placed on returning American veterans, many of whom were already home and had been for five to seven years. The term "baby-killer" became synonymous with Vietnam veterans, notwithstanding that only 10–20 percent of those served were ever in combat.

Coming Home

The term "coming home" has been used by societies since men began waging war against each other. The extent to which veterans have been welcomed, ignored, or "spat upon" is the subject of many books and films, and is almost as controversial as the war itself. Since most men came home individually rather than with their unit, they were subjected to the vitriol of a society that did not understand, and therefore did not appreciate, the sacrifice that veterans of the war had made. Instead, with the Mỹ Lai massacre having been reported in 1969, then having been discussed throughout the trials, Lieutenant Calley and Captain Medina and everyone who had served became a target of, or at least susceptible to, ridicule for their service. Thus someone who served in 1965 might have been considered a perpetrator of atrocious behavior, even though they had been home for six years.

The controversy over how each man was treated by family, friends, and strangers continues even fifty years after the war ended. People who are critical of those who served deny that there was ever anyone spat upon, particularly by the members of the antiwar movement, as noted by author and Vietnam veteran Jerry Lembcke in his book *The Spitting Image: Myth, Memory and the Legacy of Vietnam*.[15] But it is evident that veterans were at least ignored upon their return, or were treated with some disdain by society. Even World War II veterans expressed disdain for Vietnam veterans' service: "Powerful Chairman of the House Committee on Veteran's Affairs Olin 'Tiger' Teague (D-TX) proved

14 Howard Jones, *Mỹ Lai: Vietnam, 1968, and the Descent into Darkness* (New York, 2017); Michael Bilton and Kevin Sim, *Four Hours in Mỹ Lai* (New York, 1993).

15 Jerry Lembcke, *The Spitting Image: Myth, Memory and the Legacy of Vietnam* (New York, 2000).

especially intransigent. Although a decorated World War II veteran, he joined others in expressing skepticism of the Vietnam veterans' claims. As one congressional staffer observed, Teague believed, 'Well you know this is tough, but we [World War II veterans] sucked it up and we didn't need to go into … counselling.' At one point, Teague opined, 'How can you little wimps be sick? A tour of duty lasted only twelve months. In World War II, soldiers fought in the war for years. How can you be traumatized?'"[16] In 1974, however, the United States Congress passed the Vietnam Era Veterans' Readjustment Assistance Act, which provided equal opportunity and affirmative action for veterans who had served and who believed they had been discriminated against because of their service. Furthermore, several states passed revenue bills that required bonuses to be paid to returning Vietnam veterans to compensate for monies lost by those who had been drafted into service while others were allowed to be employed in their selected careers. And regarding whether or not soldiers were spat upon, historian Marilyn Young, who herself was critical of the war, wrote: "It doesn't matter how often this happened or whether it happened at all. Veterans felt spat upon, stigmatized, contaminated."[17]

Returning soldiers suffered many physical and mental wounds, often beyond those they suffered on the battlefield. With mental conditions such as "soldier's heart" in the American Civil War, "shell-shock" in World War I, and "combat stress reaction" in World War II having been named during previous wars, a new term was added to our lexicon in Vietnam: post-traumatic stress disorder. Robert Lifton first used the phrase in *Home from the War: Learning from Vietnam Veterans*. Originally published in 1973 before all Vietnam veterans had returned home, his book dealt with issues that had not previously been addressed, such as the effect of coming home alone to a nation that was not supporting the war. After twenty years of recognizing how Vietnam veterans dealt with this societal indifference, psychiatrist Jonathan Shay wrote *Achilles in Vietnam: Combat Trauma and the Undoing of Character*, which focused on the way Vietnam veterans were treated upon their return. Both authors dealt with returning home as a major part of the soldier experience and urged both societies and citizens within those societies to be cognizant of how veterans are treated when they come home.[18]

16 Kyle Longley, *Grunts: The American Combat Soldier in Vietnam* (New York, 2008), 178; Robert D. Schulzinger, *A Time for Peace: The Legacy of the Vietnam War* (New York, 2006), 81.

17 Marilyn Young, *The Vietnam Wars, 1945–1990* (New York, 1991), 320.

18 Robert Jay Lifton, *Home from the War: Learning from Vietnam Veterans* (New York, 1973), and Jonathan Shay, *Achilles in Vietnam: Combat Trauma and the Undoing of Character* (New York, 1995).

Another recently diagnosed mental condition that has been common among Vietnam veterans is moral injury, which differs from post-traumatic stress disorder, in that it pertains not to what the war did to you, but what you did that violated your own deeply held moral beliefs.[19] Some psychologists believe that moral injury is the main cause of veteran suicides, which now number twenty per day.

Vietnam veterans are among these high numbers, even though most veterans have been home for nearly fifty years. Psychologists believe that since most of these soldiers are now retired and have nothing to think or worry about on a daily basis, they are focusing on the worst moments of their lives – their days in Vietnam. Hopefully, veteran organizations can help curb these terrible actions by men who served their country in a very unpopular war.

Conclusion

From induction to returning home, the Vietnam combat soldier experienced life, death, killing, and dying similar to the soldiers of previous American wars. However, they were the first US soldiers to experience fighting but losing a war. This loss does account for one of the reasons they have struggled with memories of their involvement. As thousands of books continue to be written about the war, the numbers that deal with battle on the ground, in the air, and on the water is still a small percentage as compared to those written about decision-making in Hanoi, Saigon, and Washington, DC. But, as the Vietnam veterans die off, there will be more interest in what they did and did not do. Perhaps some of the myths will begin to fade as more research is done on those who actually fought in the jungles and rice paddies of Vietnam.

19 Rita Nakashima Brock and Gabriella Lettini, *Soul Repair: Recovering from Moral Injury after War* (New York, 2013).