

STRADDLING THE THRESHOLD OF TWO WORLDS:
THE CULTURE OF AMERICAN SOLDIERS IN THE VIETNAM WAR,
1965-1973

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ABSTRACT

Joshua Kyle Akers: Straddling the Threshold of Two Worlds: The Culture of American Soldiers
in the Vietnam War, 1965-1973
(Under the direction of W. Fitzhugh Brundage)

The Vietnam War is often portrayed in postwar popular culture as a conflict fought primarily by reluctant draftees who, donning peace symbols, listening to Rock, and smoking marijuana, held values incompatible with achieving military success there. These generalizations point to the entanglement of societal and soldier culture during the Vietnam War. This dissertation argues that rapid communications and travel collapsed the timeframe for people, news, cultural trends, and popular culture to reach the war zone and penetrate the rank-and-file mass culture, thereby making possible the entanglement between American society and American soldiers in Vietnam. The “soldier culture” that evolved in Vietnam was shaped not only by soldiers’ immersion in mass culture, but also by the twin priorities of surviving a one-year tour of duty and returning to civilian life. The troubling behaviors that military commanders noticed in Vietnam’s final years—“fraggings,” combat refusals, and drug abuse—were logical conclusions of a rank-and-file whose intent on *surviving* merited an entirely different set of norms, values, and behaviors from those who were alternatively focused on securing *success*.

This dissertation is organized into two parts that emphasize an ethnographic approach to understanding soldiers’ culture. The first half of this dissertation traces how and why soldiers fashioned their own cultures during the war. The second half describes how soldier culture was not singularly determinative of what soldiers thought or how they acted. Two chapters focus on black soldiers, explaining that as they consumed mass culture and read letters from home, their

worldview was influenced by their constant negotiation and renegotiation of their liminal position between societal and soldier culture.

Vietnam-era soldier culture continues to have enduring power in American popular culture and was also emulated by future generations who fought in Iraq and Afghanistan during the twenty-first century. As veterans communicate elements of soldier culture to civilians in the postwar period, they become the connective tissue that allows the so-called reality of warfare to shape how societies subsequently create or modify discourses about war.

To Ashley, Oliver, and Emerson

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INTRODUCTION

In Tim O'Brien's novel of the Vietnam War, *Going After Cacciato*, Lieutenant Sidney Martin is a platoon leader who recently graduated from the United States Military Academy. He is overconfident and too draconian in his enforcement of orders that the soldiers in his platoon perceive as unnecessarily risky. Even worse, Martin replaces a well-liked lieutenant whom the men trust. While traversing rugged terrain, the platoon discovers the entrance to a Viet Cong tunnel complex. Martin, following orders from his battalion commander, orders two men to enter the tunnels and search for the enemy. However, the men had long before collectively decided that they would not undertake the supremely dangerous task of searching and clearing tunnels. Instead, they agreed to simply drop fragmentation grenades into the entrance, blow it shut, and move on. However, Martin insists and two soldiers obey his orders and shimmy into the tunnel. Within moments gunfire erupts and both Americans are killed. The following day, men in the platoon gathered and decide to murder Martin by tossing a hand grenade into his quarters at night.¹

In O'Brien's fictional account, Martin attempts to govern his platoon through a set of "Standard Operating Procedures" that establish officially prescribed actions for solving problems encountered in the field, including how to handle enemy tunnel and bunker complexes. While these "formal SOPs" were disseminated by higher commands, O'Brien's narrative reveals another set of rules, "informal SOPs," that became more important than the Army "Code of

¹ Tim O'Brien, *Going After Cacciato* (New York: Broadway Books, 1999), 233-235.

Conduct.” These “informal SOPs” were what this dissertation, drawing on the work of historian Wayne Lee, calls “soldiers’ culture,” an important contributor to the development of distinct unit cultures during the Vietnam War.² Created, maintained, and enforced by soldiers, such “informal SOPs” arose from the lessons soldiers learned from their collective experiences in combat, forming a set of shared unspoken assumptions, habitual practices, and “unreflected cognitive frames” that influenced soldiers’ behavior in the field.³

Martin’s fictional ordeal reflects the real tensions that existed between soldiers’ culture and military culture (i.e. “formal SOPs”) that shaped the decisions that infantrymen made when setting ambushes, patrolling, exploring enemy tunnel and bunker complexes, and cordoning and searching villages in Vietnam. Soldiers’ culture provided men with the common sense “way of doing things” in the unit. It also circumscribed “what to talk about and when, the times to rest and the times to march and the times to keep the guard, when to tell jokes and when not to,” O’Brien writes.⁴ The enlisted rank-and-file operated according to the “principle of trust,” holding that everyone in the platoon, including the commander, were first and foremost charged with

² Wayne Lee, “Warfare and Culture” in *Warfare and Culture in World History*, edited by Wayne Lee (New York: New York University Press, 2011), 1-2.

³ O’Brien, *Going After Cacciato*, 44; “Unspoken . . .” Isabel V. Hull, *Absolute Destruction: Military Culture and Practices of War in Imperial Germany* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2006), 2; In March 1946, the *American Journal of Sociology* dedicated an entire issue to “Human Behavior in Military Society,” which included an article entitled “Informal Social Organization in the Army,” by an anonymous author. The paper argued that “the informal social organization of the enlisted men actually controls many arm activities theoretically governed by the formal army organization” (365). Much like how O’Brien describes “informal SOPs” in *Going After Cacciato*, this sociologist argued that “informal social organizations” in the Army promulgated informal “regulations . . . to control many of the details of army life.” See, Anonymous, “Informal Social Organization in the Army,” *American Journal of Sociology* 51, no. 5 (March 1946): 365-370. Also see, Anonymous, “The Making of the Infantryman,” *American Journal of Sociology* 51, no 5 (March 1946): 376-379; Frederick Elkin, “The Soldier’s Language,” *American Journal of Sociology* 51, no. 5 (March 1946): 414-422.

⁴ O’Brien, *Going After Cacciato*, 44-45.

protecting the lives of members in the group. When a soldier, like Martin, transgressed the rules enshrined in soldiers' culture, "the men hated him."⁵

Even before the last American soldiers withdrew from Vietnam in March 1973, retired military officers began examining the supposed "rise and fall" of the U.S. Army in Vietnam, spilling plenty of ink blaming "Hippie" draftees (among other factors) for the Army's ineffectiveness late in the war.⁶ The pressing questions about why the United States "lost" in Vietnam or, conversely, how it could have "won" the war sparked debates about the mettle of the draftee soldiers who fought there. These discussions implied that soldiers possessed attitudes and behaviors (i.e. cultures) that were incompatible with achieving the Army's objectives in Vietnam. These arguments also tacitly admitted that soldiers' civilian attitudes persisted through Army training and had deleterious effects on unit morale in Vietnam. Only recently have military historians of the Vietnam War shown a keener interest in exploring how cultural factors affected the behaviors and choices soldiers made in Vietnam. In 2006, historian Wayne Lee issued a clarion call for military historians to further develop "culture" as a "category of analysis" for understanding the linkages between soldiers' values and their choices made on the battlefield, suggesting that scholars expand on Isabel Hull's work by questioning the "constellation of

⁵ Ibid., 45.

⁶ I borrow the phrase "rise and fall" from Shelby L. Stanton, *The Rise and Fall of an American Army: U.S. Ground Forces in Vietnam, 1965-1975* (San Rafael, CA: Presidio Press, 1985); The most pessimistic assessment of morale in the U.S. Army appeared in 1971, written by retired Marine colonel Robert D. Heinl, Jr., "The Collapse of the Armed Forces," *Armed Forces Journal* 108, no. 19 (June 1971): 31-46. Former war correspondents and retired military commanders played an outsized role in shaping early Vietnam War historiography until social historians of the late-1980s and early-1990s contributed to our understanding of the American soldiers who served in Vietnam. Since the "cultural turn" of the 1990s, some military historians have shown a greater inclination to interpret the Vietnam War through the lens of race, gender, sexuality, and culture. See, for example, Heather Marie Stur, *Beyond Combat: Women and Gender in the Vietnam Era* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011).

values” guiding the actions of not only generals and senior officers, but also junior officers and the enlisted rank-and-file.⁷ This dissertation heeds that call by tracing the values and culture created by the rank-and-file in Vietnam.

Because the examination of soldier culture involves uncovering the assumptions and values of the junior enlisted ranks (e.g. privates), it represents the lowest *subcultural* level at which historians can discern how “organizational learning” occurred in the U.S. Army. Soldiers were, by fashioning their own culture, contributing to a larger learning process that historian John A. Nagl describes as “a cyclical process through which [military] doctrine and standard operating procedures evolve [in response to] the recognition of shortcomings in organizational knowledge or performance” in war. Although Nagl focuses on how the Army learns as an organization, soldiers in Vietnam were clearly contributing to these broader processes of revising doctrine and standard operating procedures by creating their own cultures that were much more sensitive and adaptive to the deficiencies in official knowledge about warfare.⁸

Analyzing what Lee terms “soldiers’ culture” also proceeds naturally from Richard Kohn’s directive to military historians in 1981 that they should produce more textured descriptions of the uniformed men who served on the frontlines in all of America’s wars.⁹

⁷ Isabel Hull, *Absolute Destruction*; “Constellation . . .” Wayne E. Lee, “Mind and Matter—Cultural Analysis in American Military History: A Look at the State of the Field,” *The Journal of American History* 93, no. 4 (2007): 1117.

⁸ John A. Nagl, *Learning to Eat Soup with a Knife: Counterinsurgency Lessons from Malaya and Vietnam* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2002), 6; Also see, Keith B. Bickel, *Mars Learning: The Marine Corps’ Development of Small Wars Doctrine, 1915-1940* (New York: Routledge, 2000), 4-7. Bickel develops the concept of “informal” and “formal” doctrines. “Formal Doctrine” are “manuals, training circulars, and pamphlets” which are the most visible “manifestations of doctrine” in the Army and Marine Corps (4). On the other hand, “informal doctrine” consists of the ideas, lessons learned, and habitual practices disseminated by officers (and enlisted) primarily through service journals, war colleges, and other informal channels of communication (4-5).

⁹ Wayne Lee, *Barbarians and Brothers: Anglo-American Warfare, 1500-1865* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 5; Richard H. Kohn, “The Social History of the American Soldier: A Review and Prospectus for Research,”

Historians such as Myra MacPherson, Christian G. Appy, B.G. Burkett, and Kyle Longley took such advice seriously and have presented a complex portrait of the socioeconomic background of the men who served in Vietnam, while William J. Shkurti recently examined how the alleged soldier “mutinies” at Firebase Pace in 1971 stemmed from unique unit cultures where seasoned enlisted soldiers were recalibrating what Lee would call the “balance in the relationship of officer to soldier.”¹⁰ While these works have identified some of the manifestations of soldiers’ culture in Vietnam, historians have thus far not systematically addressed the relationship between soldiers’ values and their behaviors and beliefs during the war.

Although the texture of soldier culture(s) varied markedly at the small-unit level—the platoon, company, or battalion—there were characteristics common to all who served in the combat arms that makes visible general patterns and evolutions in soldiers’ culture across time in Vietnam. This dissertation traces the genesis and development of soldier culture during the American War in Vietnam between 1965 and 1973, focusing specifically on the cultural worlds of those who served in the combat arms.¹¹ The first half of this dissertation traces how and why

The American Historical Review 22, No. 3 (1981): 553-567. Also see, John Shy, “The Cultural Approach to the History of War,” *Journal of Military History* 57, no. 5 (1993): 13-26; In his review of Ken Burns’ recent PBS series, *The Vietnam War*, historian Gregory Daddis similarly implored historians to approach American soldiers through a lens of empathy, suggesting it would, among other things, help “us better grasp why soldiers . . . defined their manhood through service in combat units, or why [they] pined at the chance to become a star in [their] own John Wayne movie.” See, Daddis, “What Not to Learn from Vietnam,” *The New York Times*, September 29, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/09/29/opinion/ken-burns-vietnam-lessons.html>

¹⁰ “Balance . . .” Lee, “Mind and Matter,” 1118; Myra MacPherson, *Long Time Passing: Vietnam and the Haunted Generation* (New York: Doubleday and Company, Inc., 1984); Christian G. Appy, *Working-Class War: American Combat Soldiers & Vietnam* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1993); B. G. Burkett and Glenna Whitley, *Stolen Valor: How the Vietnam Generation was Robbed of Its Heroes and its History* (New York: Verity Press, 1998); Kyle Longley, *Grunts: The American Combat Soldier in Vietnam* (New York: M. E. Sharpe, 2008); William J. Shkurti, *Soldiering on in a Dying War: The True Story of the Firebase Pace Incidents and the Vietnam Drawdown* (Lawrence, KS: The University Press of Kansas, 2011).

¹¹ In this dissertation the term soldier refers to those who served in the combat arms—infantry, artillery, cavalry—and more specifically those with military occupation specialties (MOS), such as 11B (Infantry) that entailed direct or indirect engagement with the enemy. This clarification is meant to distinguish between those actively engaging in

soldiers fashioned their own cultures during the war and also explains why replacements, in particular, were eager to embrace extant soldiers' cultures soon after their arrival in Vietnam. The second half of this dissertation demonstrates that soldier culture was not all encompassing or singularly determinative of what soldiers thought or how they acted in Vietnam. Soldiers were straddling the threshold of two worlds, constantly negotiating and renegotiating between the strong connections they maintained between home and war, made possible by efficient communications during the Vietnam War. Mass culture became the gateway for contemporary civilian culture to become entangled with soldier culture in Vietnam. This entanglement meant that soldiers, during their one year tours, constantly maneuvered between values present in both civilian and soldier culture. Values, attitudes, and norms present within each cultural milieu would, in turn, affect a soldier's world-view and his perceived range of choices in Vietnam.

My exploration of the culture that American soldiers created in Vietnam depends on a variety of theories and methodologies emanating from the "cultural turn" in history and the "New Military History."¹² "Culture" is the most important concept guiding this dissertation. Rather than viewing "culture" as determinative of human behavior, cultural theorists since the

combat with the enemy and those who served in support capacities (e.g. clerks, typists, cooks) that worked within the confines of a battalion, brigade, or division. Drawing such a distinction also remains true to the sources, because soldiers who experienced combat (in whatever form) considered themselves different from those who served in the "rear." Hence, an analysis of "soldier culture" in this dissertation concerns first and foremost the common-sense worldview of those in combat, bringing in voices from those serving in the rear or in other branches of military service when appropriate.

¹² For an excellent survey of the cultural turn in academic history, see Victoria E. Bonnell and Lynn Hunt eds., *Beyond the Cultural Turn* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1999). For more on the "New Military History" see Edward M. Coffman, "The New American Military History," *Military Affairs* 48 (1984): 1-5; Peter Karsten, "The 'New' American Military History: A Map of the Territory, Explored and Unexplored," *American Quarterly* 36 (1984): 389-418; Robert M. Citino, "Military Histories Old and New: A Reintroduction," *American Historical Review* 112 (2007): 1070-90.

1980s have rightly conceptualized culture as consisting of a “toolkit” of “symbols, [practices] and worldviews” that bracket and channel human behavior, providing people with a range of “common sense” answers to everyday problems.¹³ Or, as John Storey defines culture, it is the “texts and practices of everyday life.”¹⁴ The ideas, beliefs, and values that inhere in any given culture are not static but subject to change and modification over time, an important component to how Wayne Lee defines culture as “the patterns of meanings and beliefs expressed in symbols and actions, by which people communicate, perpetuate, and develop their knowledge about and attitudes toward life.”¹⁵ Soldier culture, therefore, encompasses the collective ideas, beliefs, perceptions, attitudes, and patterns of behavior transmitted between soldiers that in turn provide them with answers to practical problems they encounter in the field, to civic and moral questions of the day, including their opinions about the war.

Soldiers developed unique subcultures and contributed to the overall evolution of soldiers’ culture in Vietnam as they collectively learned the values, skills, habits, and assumptions that helped them cope with their *occupational* and *organizational* environments. The soldiers’ occupational environment was defined generally by their constant exposure to danger, but also specifically by their ability to wield “coercive authority” over Vietnamese civilians and to use lethal force against Viet Cong operatives and North Vietnamese soldiers. Soldiers also worked within an organizational environment defined by their direct relationship to their platoon and company commanders and, indirectly, their battalion and brigade commanders

¹³ Ann Swidler, “Culture in Action: Symbols and Strategies,” *American Sociological Review* 51, No. 2 (1986): 273

¹⁴ John Storey, *Cultural Studies and the Study of Popular Culture: Theories and Methods* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2010), 2.

¹⁵ Lee, *Barbarians and Brothers*, 6. Lee’s definition of culture represents a “slight modification” of Clifford Geertz, “Religion as a Cultural System,” in *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), 89.

who all could, and often did, make excessive demands of company-level units to produce high “body counts” and other metrics crucial to helping Robert McNamara and General William Westmoreland determine when the United States had reached the “crossover point” in their war of attrition. Soldiers developed a shared set of habits that helped them cope with the stress caused by their position between the Vietnamese civilians they were charged with supporting and their potentially callous commanders who expected that the American units under their command produce results in combat.¹⁶

Soldiers also worked within a *strategic* environment, which influenced how they created or modified their values and behaviors to best suit what they perceived as the overall objective or purpose of their service in Vietnam. Soldiers developed patterns of behavior aimed toward one goal: survival. However, what soldiers found useful or necessary varied at different stages of the conflict—the earlier years defined by Westmoreland’s strategy of “attrition” and the final years under the auspices of “Vietnamization,” Nixon’s plan for gradual American withdrawal. Soldiers who served earlier in the conflict fashioned a pragmatic culture that prioritized learning the most efficient ways to find and kill the enemy, while distilling from their mistakes the most effective lessons to improve their odds of survival. However, soldiers who served during the “Vietnamization” period prioritized their survival, yet no longer perceived obedience to orders—specifically, orders to patrol or otherwise engage the enemy— as always necessary, or even preferable. As the American war ended, soldiers increasingly adopted a libertarian soldier culture

¹⁶ Eugene A. Paoline III, “Taking Stock: Toward a Richer Understanding of Police Culture,” *Journal of Criminal Justice* 31 (2003): 200-202.

whose common anti-authoritarian refrains were “Fuck the Army” or “What are they going to do, send me to Vietnam?”¹⁷

In modern wars, the organic growth and character of soldiers’ culture is inherently tied to the Army’s personnel management policies. The Vietnam War was no exception to this rule, and the character of soldier culture corresponded to the Pentagon’s policy of limiting soldiers to one-year combat tours in Vietnam, coupled with the decision to integrate individual replacements into existing units. The cumulative effect of these policies was that Vietnam-era units represented extreme “multi-generational organizations.” At any given moment, companies possessed men situated at all points across a spectrum that ranged from “newbies” with mere weeks of experience to “short-timers” who had less than 90 days left before returning home.¹⁸ Because units experienced a constant flow of veterans exiting and replacements entering, commanders necessarily had to improvise ways to cope with high turnover and the pressing need to provide “green” troops with on-the-job training. What emerged was a cyclical process in which the burden fell on seasoned noncommissioned officers and privates to pass along their knowledge to replacements who, in turn, taught subsequent replacements. Consequently, soldier culture in Vietnam reflected the soldier’s preoccupation with reaching his Date of Expected

¹⁷ “Fuck the Army,” or shortened to “FTA,” became a common expression used by soldiers to voice their frustration with the war and the Army during the final years of the Vietnam War. See Tom Dalzell, *Vietnam War Slang: A Dictionary on Historical Principles* (New York: Routledge, 2014), 62.

¹⁸ Eric Michael Burke, “The discordant elements which go to make up our armies’: Regimental Culture in Sherman’s Fifteenth Army Corps, 1862-1863,” unpublished conference paper, The Society for Military History Annual Conference, Louisville, KY, April 6, 2018, 2-3. Burke describes Civil War-era regiments as “single generation organizations,” defined by “the Lincoln Administration’s policy of organizing fresh recruits into brand new regiments instead of assigning them to existing commands.” Thus, Burke observes that the “majority of survivors still in the ranks at the end of the war had been with their respective regiments from the date of their original formation.” Much later, during World War II, the U.S. Army relied on a replacement policy similar to the Vietnam-era by funneling fresh recruits into existing commands. However, men served “for the duration” rather than one-year, meaning that in all likelihood most units contained a corps of “single generation” soldiers who served together from beginning to end, and other subgroups of replacements.

Return from Overseas (DEROS). Rather than encourage young men to adopt a professional identity as a soldier, the Army's personnel policies incentivized soldiers to think of their plight as merely a transitory state of existence.

Because few soldiers would fully embrace a professional identity as soldiers, instead opting to remain somewhere between their previous identity as civilians and their new vocation as soldiers, the culture they created and modified in Vietnam was focused wholly on preserving what veteran and literary scholar Samuel Hynes calls "their civilianness" and learning only "the defensive rules of war—how not to get killed—but not really trying to become soldiers."¹⁹ The emphasis on "survival" provided a tacit commitment to the war, primarily by encouraging soldiers to adopt the best practices to endure and survive operations in the field. However, the survival-oriented mechanisms of soldier culture, and the toolkits soldiers required, were inherently unstable and later changed dramatically after 1968 under the new guiding strategy of Vietnamization.²⁰ These subsequent generations of soldiers, who desired "more freedom," as performer Sammy Davis, Jr. observed in 1971, created soldier subcultures that were more apt to condone behaviors that ensured their survival by "searching-and-evading" the enemy or collectively refusing the orders of junior officers.²¹

¹⁹ Samuel Hynes, *The Soldiers' Tale: Bearing Witness to Modern War* (New York: Penguin Books, 1997), 184.

²⁰ I agree with historian Gregory Daddis' assessment in *Westmoreland's War: Reassessing American Strategy in Vietnam* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015) and *Withdrawal: Reassessing America's Final Years in Vietnam* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017) that the post-1968 strategic shift in Vietnam from "attrition" to "Vietnamization" was not sudden or dramatic. Daddis presents compelling evidence that Westmoreland and his successor at MACV, Creighton Abrams, both followed a similar strategy in Vietnam. However, soldiers' sense of their jobs within the context of "Vietnamization" did dramatically shift after 1968 because Nixon's rhetoric created the perception that the cessation of hostilities was eminent.

²¹ Sammy Davis, Jr., "Why I Went to the Troops," *Ebony*, June 1972, 141-148.

If specific behaviors varied across time, there were two consistent outcomes from soldiers' adherence to soldier culture. First, because soldiers were confronted with the constant possibility of death or maiming when going beyond "the wire," they developed a general suspicion of the Vietnamese, who they universally perceived as being enemy agents. These perceptions were channeled through rumors, many rooted in real incidents, like a fairly common tale of either a Vietnamese woman or child concealing a grenade in their clothing and blowing themselves up when close to American soldiers. The lesson was simple: assume the worst about Vietnamese motives and always watch your back.²² Soldiers also developed a fierce in-group loyalty to each other matched only by their equally intense wariness, or hatred, of outsiders that included untested replacements, rear-echelon personnel, career-minded "Lifers," Army commanders, and anti-war protestors back home.²³ Although soldiers' assimilation to soldier culture exacerbated what was otherwise an already isolating experience for most young men in Vietnam, it simultaneously provided them with a new sense of community and belonging that they lacked during their transitional phase between induction and their permanent assignment.

Soldiers expressed their profound sense of estrangement from home by referring to the United States as "the World," which implied that soldiers existed in an alternate reality while in

²² Stephen A. Moore to Albert Ettinger, September 8, 1967, Albert Ettinger Papers, Project Vietnam, MHI. Moore heard such a rumor during his tour. Thankful that he had not yet "encountered any of the children that are armed with grenades or mines given by the V.C.," he conceded that "a few have tried to stone us." He would subsequently write that "all G.I.'s suspect nearly every Vietnamese of being a V.C."

²³ Specialist William C. McCormick hated the "Saigon warriors (non combat punks)" who he caught fabricating war stories to impress Vietnamese women during his convalescence in a rear camp. He subsequently observed that infantrymen stuck together and "would go through hell for each other. If one of us got into more than he could handle [dealing with rear-echelon types], we would all take it on." McCormick to Albert Ettinger, August 9, 1968, Albert Ettinger Papers, Project Vietnam, MHI.

Vietnam. But, while soldiers felt physically isolated from home, the Army's personnel management policies, faster and more efficient communication between war and home, and the growth of a "Consumer's Republic" in Vietnam, meant that soldiers were not entirely separated from their former civilian identities while at war. Draftees who resisted "becoming soldiers," as Hynes contends, constantly negotiated between their former identities as civilians and their new identities being forged in Vietnam through their absorption of the values and norms of soldier culture.²⁴

What further exacerbated the tendency for cultural influences on the home front to influence soldiers' attitudes in Vietnam was the fact that the young men who comprised the junior enlisted and NCO ranks of the Army's combat arms during the Vietnam War, whether drafted or compelled to volunteer by the threat of being drafted, were cognizant that they were coming into the service for a short period of time, often two to three years. Few draftees expressed any intention of making a career in the military, and rather than seek ways to enhance their future prospects in the Army, soldiers were motivated, as one soldier observed, by looking forward to the day they left Vietnam, separated from the Army, and rejoined loved ones at home.²⁵

Soldiers retained their connections to home because the Army deployed to Vietnam in the context of an American economy and consumer experience that was starkly different from World War I or World War II. In those previous conflicts Americans had experienced rationing or were recovering from deprivation (e.g. the Great Depression) at the outset of the wars. The Vietnam

²⁴ Lizabeth Cohen, *A Consumer's Republic: The Politics of Mass Consumption in Postwar America* (New York: Vintage Books, 2003); Hynes, *The Soldiers' Tale*, 184.

²⁵ William C. McCormick to Albert Ettinger, October 13, 1966, Alfred Ettinger Papers, Project Vietnam, Military History Institute, Carlisle, PA.

War was fought at the pinnacle of American consumerism when the nation was wealthier than it had ever been. Lyndon Johnson and his administration decided to wage the war without constraining civilian consumption and thus the United States was simultaneously flush with heightened military spending as well as robust consumer spending. Therefore, Vietnam-era American soldiers experienced what it was like when the consumer republic went to war.

In such a context, soldiers exploited all possible avenues for staying tethered to home by asking parents to subscribe them to magazines, purchasing transistor radios and periodicals like *Ebony* or *Jet* from PXs scattered throughout South Vietnam, listening to rock music on official and underground Army stations, watching the evening news (if at a brigade or divisional camp for stand-down), and receiving hometown newspapers from family in the mail. For example, Ralph Bateman, early in his tour with the Americal Division in 1969, asked his father to “change the *Sports Illustrated* subscription over to here [and] then I’d like you to get a subscription to *Playboy* sent over here.” When he was not in the field, Bateman listened to the radio at Fire Base Debbie, bought magazines from the PX at Long Binh, and read hometown newspaper clippings sent by his mother.²⁶ With soldiers possessing ongoing and extensive access to mass culture, the potential for cultural shifts on the home front to shape soldiers’ culture in the war zone became not only possible but also far more common than ever before.²⁷

Soldiers were more susceptible to fundamental changes in their outlook because their service in the late 1960s and early 1970s was during what sociologist Ann Swidler described as

²⁶ Ralph Bateman (RB) to Father (F), August 12, 1969; RB to F, August 15, 1969; RB to F, August 31, 1969; RB to F, February 16, 1970; RB to F, July 11, 1970, Ralph Bateman Collection, Box 1, Folder 1, The Vietnam Center and Archive, Texas Tech University.

²⁷ Lizabeth Cohen, *A Consumer’s Republic*; Meredith H. Lair, *Armed with Abundance: Consumerism and Soldiering in the Vietnam War* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2011).

an “unsettled cultural period,” when soldiers found that their prior values, patterns of actions, and worldviews had inadequate explanatory power for their new environments. In her work, Swidler posited that there were both unsettled/settled “lives” and settled/unsettled historical “periods” that accounted for the ebb and flow of ideological and cultural change at both the individual and the societal level, respectively. The late-Sixties marked an “unsettled period” when ideological movements were vying with one another, and with “common sense [and] established” traditions and norms, to gain wide influence in American culture.²⁸ A broad ideological schism on the left during the late-Sixties meant that a broad swathe of social movements became fragmented, including the “Counterculture” with its emphasis on upending established, middle-class normative behaviors. For example, black soldiers who deployed to Vietnam were doing so coincidentally with the fracturing of the civil rights movement into vying ideological camps devoted to, among other things, the continuation of peaceful nonviolence, black separatism, and black liberation.

Young men were drafted and deployed to Vietnam precisely when they were navigating the ideological rifts of an “unsettled period” in American culture. Given that cultural texts (i.e. mass culture) are inherently malleable and mutable, those texts gained new meanings in Vietnam, as readers ascribed meanings in accordance with “their own lives, experiences, need and desires.” Lawrence Grossberg, a communications scholar, posits that texts “can only mean something in the context of the experiences and situation of its particular audience.” How soldiers used and interpreted mass culture was inseparable from their “constant struggle to make

²⁸ Swidler, “Culture in Action,” 277-280.

sense of [themselves] and [their] world” in Vietnam.²⁹ That infantrymen in Vietnam appropriated specific language from popular culture to describe various novelties in Vietnam is part and parcel of their larger struggle to “make sense” of their new surroundings.

Soldiers’ constant negotiation of civilian contemporary culture and soldier culture during an “unsettled period,” while having access to a variety of cultural texts, meant that soldiers experienced profound personal transformations in their ideological and social outlooks. Craig Aper’s admission to his mother in March 1969 that “I’m no longer the same person that came over here. I’ve changed a lot in [my] outlooks and beliefs” was representative of many soldiers whose letters, oral histories, and diaries appear on the following pages. Aper’s epiphany, what he called “his spirit being kindled,” occurred as he tried to understand his role in Vietnam amidst social tumult at home in the wake of Martin Luther King, Jr.’s assassination.³⁰

This dissertation addresses two prominent subfields within the broader historiography of the American War in Vietnam: the sociocultural history of soldiers and the relationship between the war in Vietnam and the American home front. Furthermore, as noted above, the broader argument and conclusion about soldier culture contributes to the growth of cultural analysis of military history.³¹

²⁹ Lawrence Grossberg, “Is There a Fan in the House?: The Affective Sensibility of Fandom,” in *The Adoring Audience: Fan Culture and Popular Media*, ed. Lisa Lewis (New York: Routledge, 1992), 52-3.

³⁰ Craig Aper to Mother, March 26, 1969, Author’s Personal Collection.

³¹ For excellent, if slightly outdated, historiographical assessments of Vietnam historiography see Philip E. Catton, “Refighting Vietnam in the History Books: The Historiography of the War,” *OAH Magazine of History* 18 (2004): 7-11; Kendrick Oliver, “Toward a New Moral History of the Vietnam War?” *The Historical Journal* 47 (2004): 757-774.

A growing body of scholarship investigates the motivations for individuals to enlist in the armed services during the Vietnam-era or, alternatively, illustrate the various ways young men learned about war. Kyle Longley's *Grunts: The American Combat Soldier in Vietnam* offers some impressionistic views on the various pressures that encouraged young men to enlist—or, at least to honor their draft notice. Longley notes that the “cult of true manhood” presented in fiction, television, modeled by the Boy Scouts, and transmitted through music and movies, convinced young men to define their manhood through military service. This dissertation complements the work of scholars like Longley by demonstrating that these “enlistment motivations” inspired by Hollywood popular culture invariably left soldiers with a shallow appreciation of real war and, ultimately, became part of the reason why soldiers developed their own cultures in Vietnam to assuage their ignorance about surviving and operating in the field.³²

Studies of the sociocultural background of soldiers continue to proliferate in the historiography of the Vietnam War, and this dissertation builds on the work of those scholars by analyzing how their collective backgrounds contributed to the unique characteristics of soldier culture during the conflict. Historian Christian G. Appy's *Working-Class War: American Combat Soldiers in Vietnam* (1993) remains as the most respected and oft-cited study of the socioeconomic background of Vietnam-era draftees. Appy sifted through draft records, held “rap sessions” with veterans, and drew on a wide range of correspondence, memoir, and oral histories

³² Kyle Longley, *Grunts*, 13-28; Several studies of initial and combat motivation inform this dissertation. For example, see John A. Lynn, *The Bayonets of the Republic: Motivation and Tactics in the Army of Revolutionary France, 1791-1794* (Boulder: University of Colorado Press, 1984); Fred Anderson, *A People's Army: Massachusetts Soldiers and Society in the Seven Years' War* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1984); James M. McPherson, *For Cause and Comrades: Why Men Fought in the Civil War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998); Gerald F. Linderman, *Embattled Courage: The Experience of Combat in the American Civil War* (New York: Free Press, 1989);

to argue that by-and-large the Selective Service disproportionately drafted working-class, uneducated men who could not hide behind educational deferments.³³

This dissertation also intersects with the writings of historians and former military commanders who have continued to debate the origins, severity, and pervasiveness of morale problems during America's final years in Vietnam. Some have argued that Defense Secretary Robert McNamara's "Project 100,000," which relaxed the intelligence standards for the Armed Forces Qualification Test (AFQT), filled the army with "morons" and "imbeciles," while others contend that the Army experienced an influx of draftees who possessed a cultural background, rooted in the counterculture, inherently incompatible with achieving the Army's objectives.³⁴ Other commentators have dismissed the "morale crisis" as nothing more than the invention of war correspondents, who, as General Creighton Abrams observed, demonstrated a "propensity

³³ Appy, *Working-Class War*; Burkett, *Stolen Valor*; Also see, Lawrence M. Baskir and William A. Strauss, *Chance and Circumstance: The Draft, the War, and the Vietnam Generation* (New York: Knopf, 1978); James Fallows, "What Did you Do in the Class War, Daddy?" *Washington Monthly* (October 1975): 5-19; Arnold Barnett, Timothy Stanley, and Michael Shore contested the working-class thesis in 1992, "America's Vietnam Casualties: Victims of a Class War?" *Operations Research* 40 (September-October 1992), 855-866, but their finding were later rebutted by James Fallows, "Low-Class Conclusions," *Atlantic Monthly* (April 1993): 38-42; Ronald Spector, "You Don't Know How Lucky We Are to Have Soldiers Like This," in *After Tet: The Bloodiest Year in Vietnam* (New York: The Free Press, 1992), 242-278

Burkett's polemical work, *Stolen Valor* (1998), challenged Appy's observations about both the overrepresentation of African-Americans in the Army and his insistence that soldiers were predominately "working-class." Burkett's conclusions, however, have not been widely embraced in the historiography.

³⁴ A recent account of "Project 100,000" perpetuates some of the worst stereotypes about "McNamara's Men" describing them as "misfits" who the Army fraudulently inducted under McNamara's Program. See, Hamilton Gregory, *McNamara's Project 100,000: The Worst of the Worst* (New York: Infinity Publishing, 2015); Kirklin J. Bateman provides a more balanced assessment of Project 100,000 in "Project 100,000: New Standards Men and the U.S. Military in Vietnam" (Ph.D. Dissertation, George Mason University 2014). Bateman argued that previous historians of the Vietnam War constructed a simplistic view of Project 100,000 by focusing on the potentially devastating effects for minorities and the poor and not considering that the program may have actually ameliorated the economic conditions of some men enrolled in the program. On "cultural background" of soldiers, see Heinl, "The Collapse of the Armed Forces," 31-35.

for getting young soldiers to express their gripes into a microphone” and ignored “the more positive aspects of our effort [in Vietnam].”³⁵ However, this dissertation does not follow these authors on their quest to seek answers to why the United States failed in Vietnam, but rather suggests how mass culture functioned as a gateway for civilian and societal attitudes to infiltrate the rank-and-file and create new values and mores among soldiers.³⁶

To date the historiography of mass culture and consumption in post-1945 American history rarely engages with military history.³⁷ Recently, though, Meredith H. Lair bridged the two fields in *Armed with Abundance: Consumerism & Soldiering in the Vietnam War*. Lair reframes the narrative of the Vietnam War around noncombatant war workers—those designated in clerical and support roles—to illustrate how American mass consumption flooded South Vietnam between 1963 and 1973, “making the project of war perhaps easier and certainly more palatable” for noncombat servicemen.³⁸ In her estimation, the flood of consumer goods produced

³⁵ Memorandum, Creighton W. Abrams to Albert M. Ettinger, September 29, 1971, Albert Ettinger Papers, Project Vietnam, MHI, Carlisle, PA; Also see Shelby L. Stanton, *The Rise and Fall of an American Army*, 290-292.

³⁶ Much of the historiography centers on the endless pursuit of explanations for why the United States “lost” in Vietnam. However, such critical observations began early with works by journalists, such as J. William Fulbright, *The Arrogance of Power* (New York: Viking, 1966); David Halberstam, *The Best and the Brightest* (New York: Random House, 1972). During the late-1970s and early-1980s, former military commanders penned their own post-mortems. See, for example, Harry G. Summers, Jr., *On Strategy: A Critical Analysis of the Vietnam War* (Novato, CA: Presidio Press, 1982); U. S. Grant Sharp, *Strategy for Defeat: Vietnam in Retrospect* (San Rafael, CA: Presidio Press, 1978); Mark Moyar, *Triumph Forsaken: The Vietnam War, 1954-1965* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006). More recently, two historians have traded blows about whether General Creighton Abrams achieved military victory prior to American withdrawal and to what extent Abrams’ strategy differed from Westmoreland’s. See, Lewis Sorley, *A Better War: The Unexamined Victories and Final Tragedy of America’s Last Years in Vietnam* (New York: Harvest, 2007); Sorley, *Westmoreland: The General who Lost Vietnam* (New York: Mariner Books, 2012); Gregory Daddis, *Westmoreland’s War: Reassessing American Strategy in Vietnam* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014); Daddis, *Withdrawal: Reassessing America’s Final Years in Vietnam* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017).

³⁷ The studies of consumerism and mass culture that will inform the theoretical and methodological approaches on my dissertation are Lizabeth Cohen, *A Consumers’ Republic: the Politics of Mass Consumption in Postwar America* (New York: Knopf, 2003); Nan Enstad, *Ladies of Labor, Girls of Adventure: Working Women, Popular Culture and Labor Politics at the Turn of the Twentieth Century* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999).

³⁸ Lair, *Armed with Abundance*, 8.

an environment in Vietnam akin to midcentury America with its advertisements and shopping.³⁹

Continuing in this vein, this dissertation complements Lair's work by arguing that combat soldiers' identities, attitudes, behaviors, and the cultures they created were also influenced by their consumption of mass culture.

The first half of the dissertation explores the reasons why soldiers created their own cultures in Vietnam, or embraced existing ones. Chapter One examines how young men were introduced to war through popular culture and then trained by the Army to be warriors. Neither adequately prepared men for the realities of war in Vietnam. Relying extensively on interviews with Vietnam veterans, the chapter argues that soldiers' acculturation to their unit helped them adjust to war by providing knowledge and skills crucial for performing their responsibilities.⁴⁰ Sociologist Eugene Paoline's observations about the development of "police culture," writ large, are applicable to soldier culture; soldiers were, like police, "confronted with a variety of tasks and problems" and through shared learning formed "attitudes, values, and norms for the resolution of such problems," and then transmitted those "tools" to others.⁴¹ The chapter concludes with a brief case study of "tunnel rats" in Vietnam, arguing that "tunnel rats" created a

³⁹ Lair, *Armed with Abundance*, 68-72, 246-249.

⁴⁰ Despite the inherent flaws of remembrance and the pernicious influence of post-war popular culture and discourses on memory, veteran interviews and memoir still provide the best source base for assessing how popular culture and Army training prepared, or failed to prepare, soldiers for the realities of Vietnam. Those writing during their time in basic training or advanced individual training did not yet have the benefit of hindsight to comprehend how well their instructors prepared them for combat.

⁴¹ Paoline III, "Taking Stock," 200. I lean heavily on Paoline's model for how "police culture" developed in the United States because many of the occupational and organizational environments that police officers inhabited were similar, in less extreme forms, to soldiers in Vietnam.

unique soldier culture that compensated for the Pentagon's inability to prepare men for tunnel work in training.⁴²

The creation of cultural "tools" represents only half the equation, as Chapter Two underscores. Replacements embraced soldier culture because it made possible the "routinization of war, which helped make it tolerable" by providing a sense of structure, albeit in constant flux, that assuaged the soldier's strange, liminal experience of being separated from "the World."⁴³ Soldier culture included elaborate rituals that helped replacements gradually transition from newbies to an accepted member of the unit. As Michael Herr captured in several metaphors about the war, soldiers serving in Vietnam experienced something akin to witnessing "psychotic vaudeville," being "doped to the eyeballs," or experiencing an otherwise strange unreality.⁴⁴ Soldier culture functioned in ways that helped soldiers tame, or make sense of the "strangeness" they perceived being in a country populated by peoples who possessed cultures, religious

⁴² At least since the World War II-era, Army infantry training promoted the idea that men could ensure their own survival in modern war through a rigid adherence to specific behaviors and practices. This was also true of Vietnam-era Army infantry training, and "soldier culture" simply represented variation on that theme by providing men with more nuanced information, rooted in the particularities of their environment in Vietnam. For more on the evolution of Army infantry training, see Christopher H. Hamner, *Enduring Battle: American Soldiers in Three Wars, 1776-1945* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 2011), 95-120.

⁴³ O'Brien, *Going After Cacciato*, 44.

⁴⁴ Michael Herr, *Dispatches* (New York: Random House, 2011), 120, 223, 229; There seems to exist a universal pattern of societal discourses about war presenting young men with an inadequate or flawed understanding of the realities of the wars they are sent to fight. See, for example, Lynn, *Battle*, mentioned above. Also, see Andrew Huebner, *The Warrior Image: Soldiers in American Culture from the Second World War to the Vietnam Era* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2008); Michael C. C. Adams, *Echoes of War: A Thousand Years of Military History in Popular Culture* (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 2002). Also, Adams, *The Great Adventure: Male Desire and the Coming of World War I* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990); Lawrence H. Suid, *Guts and Glory: The Making of American Military Image in Film* (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 2002); Gerald Linderman, *The World Within War: America's Combat Experience in World War II* (New York, NY: The Free Press, 1997); J. E. Lendon, *Soldiers & Ghosts: A History of Battle in Classical Antiquity*. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005), 161. Lendon argues that Homer and the early mythic history of Rome provided a "cultural vector, cultural model, cultural constraint, and cultural justification" for the way Greek hoplites and Roman soldiers, respectively, imagined war, how those military systems innovated tactics, how practices on the battlefield changed across time, and also how soldiers related to one another and to their commanders and officers.

practices, and social behaviors that were, to the average, uninformed American, completely foreign.⁴⁵

While the first two chapters focus on the creation of soldier culture in Vietnam, the next two chapters explore how African-Americans soldiers remained tethered to home and thus navigated both civilian and soldier culture during their tours. Chapter Three presents the story of Alfred Fowler, Jr., who served with an artillery unit in the 82nd Airborne Division from 1968 to 1969. The chapter adopts a wide angle on Fowler's life to include his prior civilian life in rural North Carolina, his induction into the Army, and his immediate post-war life after Vietnam. Adopting such a specific focus on one soldier's experiences builds on the work of other historians, such as Robert Bonner, who have argued persuasively that we must appreciate a soldier's unique socioeconomic background and civilian life to properly understand their values in war.⁴⁶ Through this framework one can understand why Fowler, who identified as a social conservative at the time of his induction, experienced a fundamental shift in his worldviews and values as he reacted to reports of racial violence engulfing his hometown, acculturated to the

⁴⁵ Eric J. Leed, *No Man's Land: Combat and Identity in World War I* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981). Leed borrowed Victor Turner's anthropological concept of "liminality" to explain how American soldiers in World War I perceived war as intensely "strange" and felt "estranged" from their prior civilian identities. This "estrangement" and liminal "in-between" existence provided the impetus for the creation of a new identity as soldiers; My observations about the disconnect between home front popular culture, military training, and the realities of war in Vietnam are indebted to John Lynn's *Battle: A History of Combat and Culture from Ancient Greece to Modern America* (Cambridge, MA: Westview Press, 2003). Lynn analyzed societal discourses about war and then compared those to the army's actual practice of war. He argued that the seemingly universal disconnect between how societies conceptualize war and the actual practice of war would, in turn, produce new discourses.

⁴⁶ Robert E. Bonner, *The Soldier's Pen: Firsthand Impressions of the Civil War* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2007). Also see Kyle Longley, who provides an excellent example of how scholars can understand soldiers within the context of their hometown in *The Morenci Marines: A Tale of Small Town America and the Vietnam War* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 2013). Other scholars often rely on anecdotal evidence to illustrate general themes and/or socioeconomic factors for "American soldiers" construed broadly. See, for example, Christian G. Appy, *Working-Class War*; Peter S. Kindsvatter, *American Soldiers: Ground Combat in the World Wars, Korea, and Vietnam*. (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2003); Kyle Longley, *Grunts: The American Combat Soldier in Vietnam*.

norms and values of soldiers in his unit, and navigated the tensions between civilian and soldier culture.

Moving from Alfred Fowler to a broader appreciation of how the cultural tensions between soldier and civilian culture affected the attitudes of African-American soldiers in Vietnam, Chapter Four analyzes the ways that military service shaped how soldiers thought about and interpreted the civil rights movement during their tours. African-American soldiers hungrily read copies of *Ebony* magazine throughout the war and wrote hundreds of letters to the magazine that were subsequently published. A close analysis of the letters, as well as, other contemporary sources, suggests that African-Americans weighed the value of integration, separation, and liberation ideologies differently depending on their cultural context in Vietnam; namely, whether they served with combat or with support units. The chapter demonstrates why racial tensions in Vietnam were far more acute in the rear, while also advancing an explanation for why, by 1968, most Americans believed that the Vietnam War was entirely a negative experience for African-Americans rather than an example of integration *par excellence*.

Finally, Chapter Five argues that during the final years of the Vietnam War, when President Richard Nixon implemented “Vietnamization,” his plan for the gradual withdrawal of American combat forces, soldier culture evolved a libertarian set of values and norms that prioritized survival and diminished soldiers’ motivation to achieve “victory.” American soldiers realized that the responsibility for fighting the war was shifting to rest squarely on the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) and thus found less and less incentive to be the last to die for a lost cause. In part, this chapter illustrates how cultural analysis can offer fresh perspectives on well-worn questions and topics in the historiography—in this case, by providing a new explanation for the “morale crisis” that plagued the U.S. Army in Vietnam between 1969 and

1973. The chapter argues that the “morale crisis” in Vietnam is better understood as symptomatic of the prioritization of survival in soldier culture. The preoccupation with survival required that soldiers use tools and behaviors different from those required to achieve military success in Vietnam. Thus, soldiers were more apt, during this period, to permit marijuana use (outside combat), ensure their survival through insubordination, and condone retributive action against obstinate junior officers or NCOs by “fragging” them, or practicing “cover-your-ass” behaviors that might include, among other things, reporting false coordinates during patrols to avoid unnecessary danger.

This dissertation adopts an ethnographic approach to studying the values, norms, and behaviors that comprised soldier culture during the Vietnam War, while seeking to foreground, first and foremost, the experiences of soldiers. The anecdotes and stories that appear on the pages of this dissertation are representative of general patterns found in some 300 soldiers’ letters, and other writings, that undergird the analysis. Where appropriate, though, what follows leans on the statistical work done by previous historians, like Appy or Burkett, to understand how the socioeconomic background of soldiers has important relevance for the evolution of soldier culture. Relevant contemporaneous studies completed by the Pentagon, Army-employed civilian researchers, or journalists are also used when appropriate. To be sure, there were multiple soldier *cultures* during the Vietnam War. Soldiers form a subcultural layer of Army units and their assumptions, expectations, behaviors, and values are deeply embedded in, and influenced by, unit and command cultures.

Therefore, this dissertation advances an analysis of soldier culture at the Army level to provide future historians with an organizing framework for conceptualizing what “the” soldier

culture during the Vietnam War included. One can observe how soldier culture functions either at the level of individual units or broadly across the combat arms in the Army. A unit-level analysis would rely primarily on the explication of culture within very discrete units across time (likely company- or battalion-sized) that also served together, while an Army level study explains the general contours and evolution in soldier culture common to all units during the war. Any unit-level study would bring into sharper focus how immediate unit history, its area of operations (AO), the nature of the enemy confronted, specific patterns of personnel turnover, racial and socioeconomic demographics, and leadership styles all contributed to the specific character of soldier culture in that unit. Presently, there is no such assessment of soldier culture, and it is hoped that from the general framework provided here that subsequent research done at the unit-level can modify, elaborate, or contest the observations made here.

Beginning with the Vietnam War, the distance between the war zone and home front shrunk dramatically and American soldiers' attitudes changed, more and more, in line with developments back home. Because soldiers' culture during the Vietnam War remained in constant tension with contemporary civilian culture through unending streams of replacements, and the availability of mass culture, it offers an important analytical lens by which historians can understand how major cultural movements in the United States, such as the anti-war or civil rights movements, were also articulated among the rank-and-file in Vietnam. Furthermore, to explore soldiers' culture is to also interpret and render poignant what soldiers found important about their own experiences. While Vietnam veterans were transformed or traumatized by their experiences there, their sudden separation from the cultures that they inhabited created an acute

vacuum in their lives when they returned home. What follows is an effort to render a portrait of the cultural worlds that soldiers occupied, without which any treatment of soldiers' experiences of war is incomplete.

CHAPTER ONE: “WAR IN THE HEAD”: SOLDIERS’ PRECONCEPTIONS OF VIETNAM AND THE GENESIS OF SOLDIER CULTURE

“When I was young, I played soldiers with a wooden rifle and army surplus helmet,” John Ketwig recalled in his memoir *And a Hard Rain Fell*. Ketwig “read about the Civil War; John Singleton Mosby, the Confederate guerilla major, was my favorite hero.” “I read,” he recalled, “about Gettysburg and Bull Run, Yorktown and Iwo Jima, and the French and Indian War.” “It never dawned on me that living human beings were hurt or killed,” Ketwig later reflected, identifying how his fascination with military culture and military history during his adolescence did not equip him for coping with the real experience of war. Once drafted and finished with basic training and advanced individual training (AIT) at Aberdeen Proving Grounds in Maryland, he flew to Vietnam and reported for his tour of duty. “We visited Gettysburg [as a child], saw the wax statues of dying men and the marble monuments, but it wasn’t realistic. Now [after Vietnam] I see the rolling fields of Gettysburg, and I imagine the stink and anguish of fifty thousand dying men.”¹

Like Ketwig, many Vietnam-era soldiers entertained an idealized mental image of what military service in Vietnam would entail, or what one scholar calls “wars-in-the-head.” “We all imagine war before we know it,” Samuel Hynes observes, “the idea of war is part of the fundamental furniture of our minds.”² Those, like Audie Murphy, who served in World War II

¹ John Ketwig, *And a Hard Rain Fell: A GI’s True Story of the War in Vietnam* (Naperville, IL: Sourcebooks, Inc., 2002), 28-29.

² Samuel Hynes, *The Soldiers’ Tale: Bearing Witness to Modern War* (New York: Penguin Books, 1997), 30.

developed their own “war-in-the-head” from reading literature or, in Murphy’s case, listening to war stories from First World War veterans whose tales transported him to “a faraway battlefield, where bugles blew, banners streamed, and men charged gallantly across flaming hills.”³ Like preceding generations of American soldiers, those who deployed to Vietnam did so with their own unique set of preconceptions about their future experience that was deeply intertwined with the collective memory of World War II—their father’s war.

What made the Vietnam-era generation unique was that much about their idealized preconceptions were gleaned from their exposure to the popular imagery of war depicted in films and television. Michael Herr, a war correspondent in Vietnam, summed it up as “we’d all seen too many movies, stayed too long in Television City.”⁴ While it is easy to exaggerate the influence that John Wayne possessed in Sixties America, he did play a large role in shaping how adolescents and teenagers thought about war and combat. Beginning in 1949 when Wayne portrayed a soldier in *Sands of Iwo Jima* up until his dramatization of Robin Moore’s book, *The Green Berets*, in 1968, Wayne consistently produced movies in the Western and military genres, the latter primarily using World War II as the backdrop. Television dramas like *Combat!* (1962-1967) reached wider audiences and similarly bracketed and guided how individuals imagined warfare.

While popular culture presented an ideal image of war, those who were inducted into the U.S. Army were provided with competing preconceptions from the lessons learned in basic training and advanced individual training (AIT). Many of the drill sergeants and instructors

³ Audie Murphy, *To Hell and Back* (New York: Henry Holt & Company, 1949), 6.

⁴ Michael Herr, *Dispatches* (New York: Random House, 2011), 223

charged with the physical and mental conditioning of recruits to prepare them for the rigors of war were veterans of World War II and Korea, while others were Vietnam veterans. Drill sergeants who served in all three conflicts—a seeming rarity—offered recruits the most realistic assessment of what to expect in Vietnam. From others, soldiers sometimes gleaned narrow, impressionistic, or inaccurate views about war. For example, one soldier recalled that his training platoon heard little about Vietnam other than when his drill sergeant showed off a picture showing him “holding two severed heads of Vietnamese” soldiers and bragged about torturing a Vietnamese woman. This particular sergeant designed his lecture about Vietnam with shock value in mind, intending to frighten recruits or whet their appetites for killing.⁵

Other sources were important, too. Conversations with kith and kin who had served in World War II or Korea, reading popular military histories, and perusing comic books that commonly used World War II or Korea as their setting all provided images of war. But what many of these various mediums each corroborated was that in war a soldier faced a distinguishable enemy who wore a recognizable uniform, that soldiers could discern between civilians and combatants, that war lacked any comforts and that the environs of war were remote wastelands (or alternatively, European regions culturally resonate with Americans), that one trained, deployed and fought beside a set of familiar faces, and that beach landings (or landings on the tarmac) were met with fierce enemy resistance. Most, if not all, of these lessons were untrue of the war in Vietnam.

Soldiers’ mental model about the proper ways to conduct oneself in combat came entirely from a mixture of lessons distilled from popular culture, advice received from instructors in

⁵ Interview Marvin Mathiak, conducted by Stephen Maxner, January 8, 2002, Virtual Vietnam Archive, The Vietnam Center and Archive (VCA), Texas Tech University (TTU), Record OH0011.

training, and reliance upon the squad-level ambush and reconnaissance tactics practiced in AIT. They knew next to nothing about Vietnam or its people. Soon, the gaps in their knowledge would be filled through the actual experience of combat in Vietnam, which required soldiers to replace many elements of their mental model with “common sense” practices and behaviors encouraged by soldiers already in service there. From the amalgamation of their pre-theater experiences and their “initiation” into the unit sprung the origins of a new and evolving soldier culture created to improve the collective odds of in combat. The genesis of and necessity for their improvised culture arose because both popular imaginations of war and Army training left soldiers unprepared for what they would encounter in Vietnam.⁶

Born in 1947, Michael Morris grew up during the 1950s when Americans were building the collective memory of World War II through cultural forms that celebrated the country’s victory and honored its “Greatest Generation” who fought amongst the hedgerows of France or endured the brutal rock-by-rock fighting on Iwo Jima.⁷ Morris’s father fought the Japanese on Okinawa, receiving serious wounds that resulted in the amputation of his left hand. Morris’ father “talked freely about his Army experiences” but focused solely on humorous anecdotes and “pretty much buried the rest of it.” Meanwhile, Morris “learned” more about war from films, comic books, and “playing war” with children in his neighborhood. “We were always buying crap from the Army-Navy stores in town,” Morris remembered before describing how all the neighborhood kids would wear surplus army gear—steel helmets, green fatigues, belts, and

⁶ John Lynn, *Battle: A History of Combat and Culture* (New York: Basic Books, 2009), 359-370.

⁷ Kenneth Rose, *Myth and the Greatest Generation: A Social History of Americans in World War II* (New York: Routledge, 2007).

combat boots—in their mock battles. When Morris later served with the 25th Infantry Division in 1967 as an infantryman patrolling the area around Cu Chi, he reflected, many years later, that popular culture, war stories, and pretend were not good substitutes for actual experience: “you can learn all this stuff, you can watch it, you can imagine it, you can play it, you can practice it in your backyard, but it’s just not the same as when you get out there and people are bleeding and things are exploding.” Many others in Morris’ generation would learn similar lessons in Vietnam.⁸

The baby-boomers who received draft notices and served with the U.S. Army in Vietnam during the late-Sixties spent their adolescence and early adulthood living through an American cultural moment saturated with images of war. Film scholars Steven Mintz and Randy Roberts argue that the “deepest images of war’s glory” were featured in World War II combat films produced between 1947 and 1965, including such classics as *Sands of Iwo Jima*, *Island in the Sky*, *From Here to Eternity*, *Tora! Tora! Tora!*, and *The Longest Day*. These films romanticized World War II while generally contributing to the construction of an “individualist male hero [and] the ideal of the just American war.” For example, John Wayne (Marion Mitchell Morrison) acted the part of a gung-ho, stoic noncommissioned officer who died while bravely fighting the Japanese on Iwo Jima in *Sands of Iwo Jima* (1950). These narratives reinforced an idea that going to war served as the litmus test for measuring a man’s mettle and resolve. Historian Ronald Spector opines that the corpus of World War II films during the 1950s taught young men that “boys became men in the armed services,” a point often juxtaposed with idols like Elvis

⁸ Interview with Michael Morris, conducted by Stephen Maxner, January 23, 2003, VCA, TTU, Record OH0263.

Presley honoring their draft notice and receiving publicity in “fan magazines [picturing his] maneuvers” in Germany.⁹

Because John Wayne had become the most prominent actor in the genre of war motion pictures and the icon of the idealized American soldier, the Army and Marine Corps co-opted his on-screen image in its recruitment drives during the Sixties. General Douglas MacArthur described Wayne as the “model of an American soldier,” although Wayne never actually served in the military. The military took advantage of “John Wayne’s America,” where “men were men” and more “John Wayne’s [were] needed to do what was necessary for winning,” one cultural historian concluded about the period. Wayne’s take on Davy Crockett in *The Alamo* (1960) earned him a spate of awards, including an award from the Daughters of the American Revolution. Wayne also used his persona during the late-Sixties to shore up support for the war in Vietnam. When Robin Moore published *The Green Berets* in 1965, a fictional rendering of the his actual experiences while embedded with advisory teams in Vietnam, Wayne became obsessed with adapting the book as the basis for a pro-war film that put a positive spin on the American effort. His efforts culminated with the release of the poorly received, yet financially successful, *The Green Berets* in 1968.¹⁰ The Marine Corps expressed its gratitude for Wayne’s efforts by awarding him the “Iron Mike Award” in 1970, and the Veterans of Foreign Wars later honored Wayne with the organization’s “National Americanism Gold Medal Award” in 1973.¹¹

⁹ Steven Mintz and Randy Roberts, *Hollywood’s America: United States History Through its Films*, 3rd Edition (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 2006), 155, 267; Allan Dwan, *Sands of Iwo Jima*. Motion Picture, 1949; Specter, *After Tet: The Bloodiest Year in Vietnam* (New York: Free Press, 1993), 29; David Halberstam, *The Fifties* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1994); Andrew Huebner, *The Warrior Image: Soldiers in American Culture from the Second World War to the Vietnam Era* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2008).

¹⁰ Garry Wills, *John Wayne’s America: The Politics of Celebrity* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1998), 12-14.

¹¹ “Awards,” John Wayne Enterprises, <https://johnwayne.com/awards>.

Wayne's complex and intertwined relationship with the American war in Vietnam corresponded with his ambiguous place in the imaginations of soldiers who served there. Philip Caputo, a platoon leader in Vietnam, remembered that John Wayne's war films had not prepared him for the reality that landing in Vietnam would seem uneventful and that his first days would be preoccupied with bureaucratic logjams and processing. By 1970, Captain George Samerjan, another platoon and subsequently a company commander, penned a poem that read, in part, "in command of / John Wayne's mystique, to them an amulet, to them a way home." Wayne certainly thought *The Green Berets* would stir patriotic support for the war; yet, the subjects of Samerjan's poem were the young draftees under his command, whom he described as "youth in delirious revolt," who now conceptualized "John Wayne" as a potent vehicle to convey their desires to return home unscathed and forget the war.¹²

Somewhat contradictorily, the term "John Wayne" also became, in the soldier's lexicon, a way of describing the actions of idiotic or "gung-ho" soldiers in Vietnam during the final years following Tet. Specialist Harold Bryant remembered one soldier in his squad trying to do "the John Wayne thing" by charging a machine gun position. The soldier was immediately shot down and killed. Some soldiers reported that clueless replacements would request an abundance of ammunition, weaponry, and in one case, eight grenades, in their effort to imitate the on-screen regalia of a John Wayne character. Enlisted men also applied the "John Wayne" label to ambitious junior officers, especially late in the war, who might order men "to charge without

¹² Philip Caputo, *A Rumor of War* (New York: Holt Paperbacks, 2014), 6; George Samerjan to Parents, circa 1970, in *Dear America: Letters Home From Vietnam*, edited by Bernard Edelman (New York: W. W. Norton & Co. 1985), 96-97.

thinking of who we were charging,” or who seemed to “get a real charge out of killing people.”¹³ Those serving in Vietnam deployed this language to describe the inapplicability of John Wayne’s on-screen actions to the behaviors and practices that best ensured survival in Vietnam. Soldiers astutely came to recognize that Wayne’s on-screen behaviors and the characters he portrayed in film, such as Davy Crockett and “Sergeant Stryker,” typically concluded in his death in battle. Wayne’s characters achieved their apotheosis in death, not by surviving combat.

Films and other cultural texts became an important reference point for soldiers to mentally picture combat before their experience in Vietnam exposed the many inaccuracies in popular depictions of war. The broader problem was that American films, comic books, and other cultural mediums were presenting young men with an image of conventional war during World War II or, in rarer instances, the Korean stalemate, none of which corresponded with a guerilla war in Vietnam. Soldiers discovered that patrolling jungles, rice paddies, and mountains in Vietnam was far different from storming beachheads in Normandy or surviving the Battle of the Bulge in the Ardennes. While World War II films often depicted one particular battle or series of battles and used action sequences to advance the plot, actual soldiering was often defined by tedium, with those in the U.S. Army often repeating the phrase “hurry up and wait” to describe the incredibly long periods between brief episodes of combat. A veteran interviewed by Mark Baker in *Nam* remarked that in Vietnam a soldier spent “the whole day walking around [and] most of the time nothing happened.” Lewis B. Puller, Jr., who admitted that his decision to

¹³ Wallace Terry, *Bloods: Black Veterans of the Vietnam War: An Oral History* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1984), 23, 35; Interview with Gonzalo Baltazar, Gonzalo Baltazar Collection, VCA, TTU; William Nelson to Parents, March 27, 1968, *Dear America*, 39. Although B. G. Burkett in his book *Stolen Valor*, 390-393, discovered that several of the interviewees in Terry’s *Bloods* were “faking” their military service in Vietnam by insisting they served in combat while, in fact, having held support jobs, it remains interesting how “John Wayne” became a common way for soldiers to express their contempt for “gung-ho” enlisted and commissioned personnel.

enlist in the USMC was influenced by war films and a poster that promised the “Marine Corps Builds Men,” mocked his platoon for the four confirmed kills achieved during a three week operation: “a pig and three bushes.”¹⁴

Popular culture also presented a simplistic view of international communism as an oppressive totalitarian ideology rather than an inspiration for anti-colonial liberation—an important distinction in the Vietnamese context. Even those who journalist David Halberstam described as the “best and the brightest” minds in American foreign policy misunderstood how North Vietnamese leaders, like Ho Chi Minh, were nationalists foremost and not dyed-in-the-wool communists. Many soldiers, like Sergeant Nathaniel O. Martin, understood the logic of Eisenhower’s “Domino Theory” and justified their presence in Vietnam by predicting “if we let the communists take over here . . . the next thing you know . . . they’ll be in right in our back yard.”¹⁵ The young men who came of age and would serve in Vietnam did so precisely when Cold War tensions peaked in the Sixties following the Cuban Missile Crisis. Therefore, men found little in popular culture or political discourse that helped them understand the complex motivations of the Viet Cong.¹⁶

Soldiers remarked in their wartime letters and post-war writings that their experiences in Vietnam caused them to discard romantic or imagined notions about combat or war that they gleaned from popular culture. Tim O’Brien captured the disconnect between imagined ideas

¹⁴ Mark Baker, *Nam: The Vietnam War in the Words of the Soldiers Who Fought There* (New York: Berkeley Books, 1981), 39; Louis B. Puller, Jr., *Fortunate Son: The Healing of a Vietnam Vet* (New York: Grove Press, 2000), 101.

¹⁵ Nathaniel O. Martin to Albert Ettinger, May 24, 1968, Albert Ettinger Papers, Project Vietnam, MHI.

¹⁶ David Halberstam, *The Best and the Brightest* (New York: Random House, 2002); Frederik Logevall, *Embers of War: The Fall of an Empire and the Making of America’s Vietnam* (New York: Random House, 2012), 92-122.

about war and reality, writing in *The Things They Carried* that “when we first got here—all of us—we were real young and innocent, full of romantic bullshit, but we learned . . . quick.”

Specialist George Olsen similarly observed in a letter home that “Hollywood theatrics” could not prepare him to see a “living, human being [turned into] just a red lump of clay.” Private George Robinson, a fan of war movies and television shows prior to being drafted, found that when he “started facing harsh realities” he forgot the “TV and movie interpretations” because “to shoot and kill somebody, turn your head and walk away isn’t hard, it’s watching him die that’s hard.” Corporal Dennis Lane insisted that in Vietnam there were “no heroes like on TV. Everybody is just trying to stay alive.”¹⁷

However, the prominent portrayal of communists as cruel and brutal automatons in popular culture proved a harder myth to dispel primarily because American soldiers’ interactions with the Vietnamese—friend or foe—were colored by numerous cultural misunderstandings that reinforced stereotypes.¹⁸ American soldiers interacted with the Vietnamese during patrols in villages and hamlets suspected of harboring Viet Cong insurgents. Soldiers began suspecting all Vietnamese of being communists, particularly when civilians balked at cooperating with Americans to thwart Viet Cong activity. What the Vietnamese understood as a practical means of their own survival—Viet Cong retribution was swift and brutal for those who cooperated—Americans interpreted as evidence of communist sympathy or Viet Cong affiliation. These cumulative experiences caused soldiers, like Stephen A. Moore, to “hate all Vietnamese or at

¹⁷ Tim O’Brien, *The Things They Carried* (New York: Mariner Books, 2009), 97; George Olsen to Parents, August 31, 1969, *Dear America*, 118; George Robinson to Mother, February 14, 1966, *Dear America*, 131; Dennis Lane to “Tom,” March 18, 1968, *Dear America*, 175.

¹⁸ Lee, *Barbarians and Brothers*, 3-6; John Dower, *War Without Mercy: Race and Power in the Pacific War* (New York: Pantheon, 1987).

least, [not] care a lick for them.”¹⁹ In other, more benign, situations like informal trade between American soldiers and Vietnamese civilians, Americans found the Vietnamese suspicious or contemptible, with many soldiers echoing Stephen Moore’s sentiment that “the Vietnamese always want you to grease their palm.”²⁰

American soldiers who witnessed VC/NVA cruelty and atrocities were further convinced about the rightness of American intervention and the inherent evil of communism as an ideology that directed and condoned such actions against innocents. The North Vietnamese and their southern allies committed many documented atrocities during the Tet Offensive, specifically in the imperial city of Hue. American Marines and Army GIs who either observed retributive killings or witnessed the aftermath of Viet Cong occupations found an abundance of evidence to confirm their worst suspicions about communists.²¹

The interactions that young men had with World War II veterans proved to be another important source of information about war and military service. Frank Gutierrez decided to volunteer with the Army when “some friends of mine decided that they’re going to volunteer.” Gutierrez talked his father into allowing him to enlist at the age of 17 and he was soon on his way to basic training at Fort Polk. More than anything, though, Gutierrez joined the Army to

¹⁹ Stephen A. Moore to Albert Ettinger, September 8, 1967, Albert Ettinger Papers, Project Vietnam, MHI.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Nha Ca, *Mourning Headband for Hue: An Account of the Battle for Hue, Vietnam 1968* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2014); Mark Bowden, *Hue 1968: A Turning Point of the American War in Vietnam* (New York: Atlantic Monthly Press, 2017); When Americans learned of My Lai in 1969, many soldiers and war correspondents began teasing out the distinctions between democracies and totalitarian communist regimes, the latter which most authors believed inevitably led to atrocities. For examples, see: “Atrocities and Policies,” *Wall Street Journal* (December 1, 1969), 22; “The My Lai Massacre and Kangaroo Court,” *The Helena (MT) Independent Record* (December 1, 1969), 4; “What About Hue?” *The Naugatuck (CT) Daily News* (December 29, 1969), 4; “More Facts Needed in Alleged Massacre,” *The Kalispell (MT) Daily Inter Lake* (January 2, 1970), 2.

emulate his uncle. “I have an uncle who was my role model, who if it were not for him I probably would not have even thought about joining the military. But, he had been in the Army . . . I wanted to follow his lead and be like him.”²² Similarly, James T. Gillam had “a father and several uncles who were veterans of World War II” and as an adolescent thought “soldiers, especially paratroopers, were pretty cool.”²³ Having grown up an “Army brat” and living on bases in Germany and in the United States, Glen Haynie “felt called to serve.”²⁴

Young men respected and admired those in their families and communities who had fought the Germans and Japanese in World War II. The twin influences of glamorous war films and family service meant that some men who volunteered did so because they thought the military would mold them into better, stronger men, and it also helped draftees conceptualize a potential benefit derived from their predicament. As other historians have observed, a soldier’s “initial motivation,” or “enlistment” motivation, stemmed from complex relationships between civilian culture and individual behavior.²⁵ For example, two veterans told Mark Baker that their motivation to fight in Vietnam was due to it being “billed on the marquee as a John Wayne shoot-‘em-up test of manhood” and that war service represented “a test I wanted to pass . . . a

²² Interview with Frank Gutierrez, conducted by Larry Burke, January 24, 2001, VCA, TTU, Record OH0177.

²³ James T. Gillam, *Life and Death in the Central Highlands: An American Sergeant in the Vietnam War, 1968-1970* (Denton, TX: University of North Texas Press, 2012), 16.

²⁴ Glyn Haynie, *When I Turned Nineteen: A Vietnam War Memoir* (Glyn Haynie, 2016), 9, 13.

²⁵ John A. Lynn, *The Bayonets of the Republic: Motivation and Tactics in the Army of Revolutionary France, 1791-1794* (Boulder: University of Colorado Press, 1984); Wayne E. Lee, “Mind and Matter—Cultural Analysis in American Military History: A Look at the State of the Field,” *The Journal of American History* 93, no. 4 (2007): 1130. Lee notes that initial motivation is “perhaps the most suitable for cultural analysis because the enlistment decision is made before entry into the service” and occurs when men are still immersed within the cultural milieu of civilian life.

manhood test, no question about it.”²⁶ Antoine Roy, whose father was a World War II veteran, volunteered for the Army in 1966 “to go off to war to prove all those things that an eighteen year old sometimes wants to prove.”²⁷ In a similar vein, Ron Ballweg enlisted because he wanted “to make something of myself, I figured the service would be the way to do it,” while Gonzalo Baltazar volunteered with the Army because he thought it was an opportunity to become more disciplined and straighten out his life.²⁸

Other Vietnam veterans had no immediate family who served in World War II or Korea, or alternatively, observed that their fathers, uncles, and older siblings avoided talking about the horrors they witnessed in those conflicts. For example, Gary Noller’s father had been born in 1905, and so was too young for military service during World War I and too old during World War II. Another soldier recalled that because his father received an educational deferment during World War II he felt “sort of” obligated to serve in Vietnam because he felt guilty that his father never contributed to the American victory in Europe or the Pacific.²⁹ Three of Marvin Mathiak’s uncles served in either World War II or Korea, but he never had an opportunity to learn about their experiences during his adolescence because his family moved. Stephen Dant’s family worked as farmers going back several generations and thus had received exemptions during World War I and World War II, but he knew something about war because a much older cousin had served in the Korean War. Dana Mansfield’s father served in the Army during World War II

²⁶ Baker, *Nam*, 31, 34.

²⁷ Interview with Antoine Roy, conducted by Richard Verrone, January 8, 2003, VCA, TTU, Record OH0255.

²⁸ Interview with Ron Ballweg, conducted by Richard Verrone, May 19, 2003, VCA, TTU, Record OH0296; Interview with Gonzalo Baltazar, conducted by Stephen Maxner, March 23, 2001, VCA, TTU, Record OH0152.

²⁹ Interview with Donald McBane, conducted by Julie Morgan, February 21, 1990, VCA, TTU, Record OH0043.

as a quartermaster, but when Dana received his draft notice in April 1968, his father could offer little advice to his son about what to expect in combat. Allan Suydam, who graduated high school in 1966 and soon after received his draft notice, remembered that while his father saw action in Italy during World War II he would never talk about those experiences. By and large, these men reported for induction with little idea about the psychological and physical challenges they would face in training and next to nothing about what their service in Vietnam would entail.

Whether or not Vietnam-era soldiers had extensive and meaningful contact with World War II veterans before their service, it is likely that the whatever elements of soldier culture that relatives could impart to young men bound for Vietnam was largely irrelevant given the circumstances that soldiers would confront in Vietnam. Charles H. Ridenlaugh, a career Army soldier and veteran of World War II, Korea, and Vietnam, discovered as much in 1966 during his first tour in Vietnam when his prior wartime experiences proved unhelpful. He observed that the “lack of conventionality is the outstanding characteristic” followed by “the tactics of the enemy . . . the lack of physically identifiable features of the enemy and finally . . . the ability of the enemy to literally melt into . . . the indigenous population.”³⁰ Despite his own extensive combat experience, Ridenlaugh found it difficult to adapt to “this new environment” of war. Furthermore, soldiers who served during World War II took part in a mobilization so comprehensive that their relationship to broader society was fundamentally different from those who would serve during Vietnam, in a far smaller mobilization that was not national.

³⁰ Charles H. Ridenlaugh to Wife, January 1, 1966, Viet Nam War Document Collection, Box 2, Folder 15, MHI.

Young men with few other options dutifully accepted their draft notices with mixed feelings of resignation, uncertainty, and apprehension. Those whose fathers served in World War II knew something about the induction process. But others, like John Mark Bland, had no male relatives with prior military service, and so much about their induction was mysterious or baffling. Regardless, men reported to induction centers across the United States and received a battery of physical and medical examinations that determined their classification (eligibility) for military service. For those who passed these screenings, they swiftly made their way to basic training. The U.S. Army conducted basic training at approximately a dozen army installations, including Fort Polk, LA; Fort Bragg, NC; Fort Dix, NJ; Fort Leonard Wood, MO; and Fort Ord, CA. At basic, recruits endured a rigorous physical training program, harassment from drill sergeants, qualified with the M-14 rifle, completed coursework, and learned to perform parade drill.

Most young men, like Allan Suydam, reported for their induction screenings in places like Chicago totally unaware of what to expect. He proceeded through a battery of questions and examinations, noticing the whole time that a few other men were receiving “a great big red ‘M’ on all” of their papers, while his were unstamped. “I thought shoot, well, I didn’t get one of those. The guy behind me didn’t. I thought, man, I don’t know if I should be getting one of those or not.” He soon discovered his concerns were unwarranted when, upon reaching the final station, a uniformed private informed the draftee with the “M” stamped on his papers that he was being sent to the Marines. Suydam also naively thought that when he finished the induction screenings he could return home and wait to hear word about his status. Much to his surprise,

within hours he was placed on a Trans World Airlines flight bound for Fort Benning, Georgia, where he began basic training.³¹

Basic training initiated what sociologists Arthur J. Vidich and Maurice R. Stein call the “process of self-dissolution and reconstruction” that transforms a “civilian-minded recruit” into a “reliable soldier.”³² Basic training was a world of “collective isolation” that actively discouraged self-expression.³³ Men could no longer refer to themselves with the first-person pronoun *I* but had to address the cadre NCO in the third-person. All men were pushed through a highly regimented schedule that began between 0430 and 0500 in the morning and ended sometime late in the evening with the call for “light’s out.” At no point in the day was an individual allowed privacy or solitude. The platoon dined together, slept together, exercised, drilled, and showered together. During the first weeks of basic training, each task and every epithet was specially calibrated to break down the recruit’s civilian identity and in its place build up an attitude of self-abnegation and obedience to authority. This process instilled within soldiers a communal mentality that would become central to the cultural world they would inhabit in Vietnam. This ethic stressed that the group shared all successes and failures—if one man failed, so too did the entire platoon.

Once in the confined world of basic training, recruits’ civilian backgrounds—prior occupation, athletic exploits, family wealth, and class—no longer mattered. This social leveling occurred soon after arrival when recruits received haircuts. “We get our haircuts so now

³¹ Interview with Allan Suydam, conducted by Laura Calkins, March 26, 2004, VCA, TTU, Record OH0354.

³² Arthur J. Vidich and Maurice R. Stein, “The Dissolved Identity in Military Life,” in *Identity and Anxiety: Survival of the Person in Mass Society*, ed. Maurice R. Stein, Arthur J. Vidich, and David Manning White, 496.

³³ Christian G. Appy, *Working-Class War: American Combat Soldiers and Vietnam* (Chapel Hill: The University of Chapel Hill Press, 1993), 88.

everybody looks exactly alike, everybody has a shaved head. They have taken away part of your personality where some guys had long hair or had curly hair or whatever . . . we all look exactly the same,” Arthur Wiknik remembered. This uniformity and blending-in, Wiknik soon learned, were valuable lessons for surviving basic training because “anybody who stands out they are the guy that has to clean the latrine, they are the ones that are always on KP (kitchen patrol) duty or always getting some crummy detail.” Stephen W. Dant who completed basic training at Fort Jackson, South Carolina, described his instructional team as being “in your face all the time. They were trying to, you know, like the book said: they were trying to get you to think like a soldier as opposed to a civilian.”³⁴ Others had immediate regrets about volunteering or obeying their draft notice. The drill sergeants commanding David Hammond’s platoon were especially harsh to recruits. “It’s one of those things,” Hammond later reflected, “when you get in there and it looks pretty glamorous when you’re looking at the posters. I can see the ads on TV . . . [today about] how exciting things are [in the Army], but when you get in there and realize . . . you [start to] think, what are my friends back home doing?”³⁵ Men who failed to observe the proper procedures for handling a firearm, who forgot to tuck in their shirt, or who fell behind during a platoon run were all inviting the noncommissioned officers to single them out for verbal abuse, punitive push-ups, or worse.³⁶

Drill sergeants established firm control over the lives of trainees in basic training by enforcing many unfamiliar and pedantic rules that governed numerous aspects of behavior and

³⁴ Interview with Stephen W. Dant, conducted by Richard Verrone, March 4 and March 9, 2005, VCA, TTU, Record OH0418-1.

³⁵ Interview with David Hammond, conducted by Richard Verrone, May 2, 2006, VCA, TTU, Record OH0517.

³⁶ Interview with Arthur Wiknik, conducted by Kelly Crager, November 11, 2008, VCA, TTU, Record OH0650.

conduct. Gary Noller realized by his second day of basic training that minor infractions invited a verbal berating and physical punishment. When his platoon returned to their barracks after eating morning chow, Noller and several others in his platoon sat down on their bunks to relax. A drill sergeant burst through the door moments later and walking down the aisle between the bunks began pointing at individuals for no particular reason: “You, you, you. And [then] he came down to me and he pointed and he said, ‘You.’” Noller and several other recruits followed the now fuming drill sergeant outside where they were informed that “one of the rules is that once you make your bed in the morning, you don’t touch that thing until you get ready to go to sleep that night.” The drill sergeant then ordered the rule-breakers into the “low-crawl” prone position and “he makes us crawl about half a block down and turn around and crawl half a block back up.” The men were shimmying over limestone gravel rock which “tore our clothes and gouged up our knees and elbows and the stuff and the whole time that we were doing that” the drill sergeant continued yelling and imploring the men to continue the crawl. For those who stopped, Noller remembered “he would stick a boot in your butt and make sure you crawled on your belly.” Noller took away a valuable lesson from that experience that stuck with him throughout basic training: “Even if you don’t know the rules, you better follow them and if you don’t follow the rules somebody’s going to point that out to you and there will be some price to pay.”³⁷

With recruits now obedient to various rules and regulations that, above all, stressed conformity, drill sergeants began introducing the rudiments of weapons training, usually with the M-14 automatic rifle. Soldiers loved the M-14 during basic training because of its reliability and relatively low-maintenance. Recruits, like Timothy Vail, became “a good shot” with the M-14

³⁷ Interview with Gary Noller, conducted by Richard Verrone, September 2005, VCA, TTU, Record OH0440.

during basic training, but they would later discover that “nobody in Vietnam, or hardly anybody” used the M-14 in combat.³⁸ Instead, recruits received training with the newer M-16 assault rifle during AIT. The M-16 weighed only 7.5lbs loaded with a full magazine and fired a 5.56mm round, comparable in size to a .22-caliber bullet.³⁹ What training often did not anticipate was how the dense foliage in Vietnam often deflected or modified the trajectory of the smaller 5.56mm rounds and the inhospitable climate necessitated a heavier amount of maintenance and cleaning to prevent to M-16 from jamming or malfunctioning in combat.

Other than weapons training, there were very few opportunities built into basic training curricula that allowed drill sergeants to teach recruits about specific tactics, behaviors, or practices for Vietnam—those more specialized lessons would often come later during advanced individual training (AIT). Drill sergeants in basic training were not supposed to prepare recruits for Vietnam per se. They were as equally responsible for preparing a recruit for duty at Ft. Knox in Kentucky as they were for ensuring a soldier could function in the jungles of Vietnam. Basic training was never intended to address the war experience in Vietnam and so recruits graduated from basic with little, if any, knowledge specific to their future experience of service in Vietnam.⁴⁰

³⁸ Interview with Timothy Vail, conducted by Richard Verrone, October 6, 2005, VCA, TTU, Record OH0445.

³⁹ Milam, *Not a Gentleman's War: An Inside View of Junior Officers in the Vietnam War* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2012), 84. Milam observes that junior officers trained with the M-14 in Officer Candidate School (OCS) and during the Infantry Officer's Basic Course (IOBC), leading him to conclude that such extensive training with the M-14 placed many future infantry platoon leaders in Vietnam at a disadvantage because they had little knowledge to teach their subordinates about cleaning and maintaining the newer M-16.

⁴⁰ Peter S. Kindsvatter, *American Soldiers: Ground Combat in the World Wars, Korea, and Vietnam* (Lawrence, KS: The University Press of Kansas, 2003), 21-29; Christian G. Appy, *Working-Class War*, 86-116; Christopher H. Hamner, *Enduring Battle: American Soldiers in Three Wars, 1776-1945* (Lawrence, KS: The University Press of Kansas, 2011), 95-120.

Without the benefit of extensive instruction about Vietnam in basic, recruits gleaned what information they could from their observation of, and conversations with, drill sergeants who were Vietnam veterans. David Hammond remembered that his cadre NCO was a “decent guy” who served a combat tour in Vietnam. “Once in a while, if you could get him and just a couple of people together, you could actually talk to him.” Similarly, Gary Noller respected one specific drill sergeant who sometimes stepped out of his official role and conversed with recruits about his experiences in Vietnam.⁴¹ John Mark Bland learned “pieces of information that really helped” in Vietnam from several drill sergeants with Vietnam combat experience at Fort Leonard Wood in Missouri. Many of the men who trained alongside Gonzalo Baltazar at Fort Bliss in Texas were in awe of the company commander, a captain, who had scars, a slightly burned face, and numerous medals from his tour in Vietnam but who, unfortunately, remained silent about his experiences and lessons learned from Vietnam.⁴²

When Frank Gutierrez arrived at Fort Polk for basic training, he remembered that all the drill sergeants were recent returnees from Vietnam and “knew what was going on” over there. Howard Scoville, the cadre NCO for Gutierrez’s basic platoon, was “very, very professional” and talked to the men about how to “kill Charlie” and “the way you’re going to do things in Vietnam.” Subsequently, Gutierrez found much from Scoville’s impromptu lessons that applied to his own combat tour in Vietnam, but he remembered that “they wouldn’t share any bloody details or any [information about] battles. They would just grill us on the physical training . . . but as far as actual war stories; I don’t remember them saying anything about that.” Because

⁴¹ Interview with David Hammond, VCA, TTU; Interview with Gary Noller, VCA, TTU.

⁴² Interview with John Mark Bland, conducted by Shawn Martin, October 10, 2005, VCA, TTU, Record OH0565; Interview with Gonzalo Baltazar, VCA, TTU.

some drill sergeants stayed close-lipped about their experiences in Vietnam, it left Gutierrez and others like him ignorant about the qualitative experiences a soldier might have in Vietnam, even if they were familiar, in theory, with ways to counter the guerilla tactics employed by the Viet Cong.⁴³

Soldiers who completed basic training without substantive discussion of Vietnam later reflected in their wartime and post-war writings that the absence of such instruction exacerbated their anxiety during their deployment to Vietnam. For example, Jerry Benson remarked in an interview that his drill sergeants rarely mentioned Vietnam and the war only became an occasional topic in the classroom, where “someone would talk about their experiences . . . but as I recall they were not combat type experiences in most cases.” Benson heard lectures from men who mostly served as officers or high-ranking noncommissioned officers in Vietnam and whose occupations were primarily in the rear camps. Indeed, Benson’s experiences in basic (and subsequently AIT) left him wholly in the dark about what to expect in Vietnam. His profound ignorance was borne out in the letters he wrote home to his mother between his graduation from AIT and his deployment to Vietnam. While at the air terminal in Oakland, Benson complained that all the “waiting around makes you start thinking and worrying too much.” Subsequently, he visited two “big base camps” during his first days in Vietnam, and was surprised to be assigned to a “shit burning detail” and to see Army “trucks driving along as if there were no war going on.” Surprised by apparent lack of conflict in Vietnam, he admitted his expectations were wholly inaccurate: “from what I see of the situation over here, things aren’t as near as bad as I pictured them.” Being unprepared from his training, Benson began accumulating knowledge about the

⁴³ Interview with Frank Gutierrez, January 24, 2001, VCA, TTU.

war in Vietnam from more experienced soldiers he met at Bien Hoa. “One of the guys had been over here about a month, and he was telling me about a lot of the things he had done and seen,” Benson wrote one night after standing guard duty in the rear. A week later he talked “to a boy who just came in from the field” and found out that “our company was a very good company. That made me feel good.” Like countless others, in the weeks and months that followed these initial exchanges, Benson learned the ins-and-outs of his company’s command culture, informal SOPs in the field, and a bevy of practices designed to ensure his survival in the field from noncommissioned officers and squad members.⁴⁴

Few veterans thought that basic training provided them with any sophisticated preparation for their ordeal in Vietnam. Conversations with drill sergeants were useful to the limited extent that those veterans would actually share their experiences in Vietnam. The subordination of the individual to the group certainly primed men for the communal environment in Vietnam where successes and failures were always shared by members of the infantry unit, and where there was only limited space for the individual to exercise his will outside the collective needs of the squad or platoon. Once recruits graduated from basic training, their next stop on the way to Vietnam was AIT, and it was during that phase of training that men recalled more opportunities to learn from instructors with experience in Vietnam, practice squad-level tactics, and learn to operate weapons that were commonly used in Vietnam.

⁴⁴ Interview with Jerry Benson, conducted by Stephen Maxner, September 15, 2000, VCA, TTU, Record OH0060; Letters dated: May 14, 1968; May 24, 1968; May 30, 1968; Jerry Benson Collection, Box 1, Folder 4, TTU; Also see Interview with Elmer Hale, conducted by Richard Verrone, October 3, 2002, VCA, TTU, Record OH0247; Interview with Donald McBane, VCA, TTU.

When soldiers neared the completion of basic training, they received a military occupational specialty (MOS) that designated their future job in the U.S. Army and their destination for advanced individual training (AIT). Those who were destined to become infantrymen in Vietnam received 11-B, colloquially referred to by soldiers as 11 “Bravo” or 11-“bang bang,” while others in their basic platoon might receive assignments to armor, artillery, or a range of other non-combat occupations. Soldiers would also receive orders to report for advanced individual training at one of several bases, depending on their MOS assignment. Fort Polk, Fort Leonard Wood, and Fort Jackson all contained infantry schools, while Fort Knox in Kentucky was home to the primary armor school, and Fort Sill in Oklahoma housed the artillery school. For the following eight weeks or longer, trainees would learn the intricacies of their profession before deploying to Vietnam.

Because AIT instructors assumed that most infantrymen would serve in Vietnam, particularly between 1966 and 1969, incoming trainees, like James T. Gillam who arrived for infantry AIT at Fort Polk in 1968, discovered that they would receive preparation specially tailored for Vietnam. There he was introduced to a range of weapons including the M-60 machine gun, M-79 grenade launcher, and a number of squad and platoon-level maneuvers in the Louisiana bayous and woods. He also conducted mock assaults on an improvised “Viet Cong village” and practiced tunnel warfare in hastily constructed corrugated steel tubes linked to the mock village. Many of the noncommissioned officers responsible for instructing Gillam’s platoon were Vietnam veterans. These NCOs were “specialists in one or more of the requisite skills for surviving Vietnam.” One had combat experience in World War II, Korea, and Vietnam, while another had recently returned to the United States from a one-year tour conducting long-range reconnaissance patrols (LRRPs) in Vietnam. Both cadre NCOs offered men advice “about

how we should handle” various situations that might arise in Vietnam, but remained reluctant to say “much directly about what [they] did in Vietnam.”⁴⁵

Consequently, trainees contemplated their own mortality in AIT while paying careful attention to advice and lessons that would help them survive in Vietnam. Arthur Wiknik completed AIT at Fort Polk and realized quickly that the attitude of other trainees “were a little different” compared to those in basic training. “It’s not like basic training where some guys will be going out to a fairly safe duty. Everybody there knew they were going to Vietnam.” Whereas recruits in basic training might hope for a “safe” assignment in Vietnam, those in infantry AIT knew they were destined to spend one year “humping the boonies.” Many were continually sad, depressed, or angry, Wiknik observed, but everyone adopted a more serious approach to learning the weapons, tactics, and lessons that would help them survive their tour. Gary Franklin also completed infantry AIT at Fort Polk, and remembered distinctly “a big gate there at Tigerland and a sign over it that said, ‘Training ground for the infantry soldier of Vietnam.’ It was very true, and everybody told us, ‘If you’re in Tigerland, your next destination is going to be Vietnam.’” That held Franklin’s attention and over the following weeks the men in his company “wanted to learn all you could because like they said, you were fixing to be in combat and it was going to be serious and anything you missed might get you killed.” Wiknik recalled learning three critical skills that would serve him well in Vietnam: map reading, learning to call in artillery support, and navigating by compass through Louisiana’s swamps.⁴⁶

⁴⁵ Gillam, *Life and Death in the Central Highlands*, 34-38.

⁴⁶ Interview with Arthur Wiknik, VCA, TTU; Interview with Gary Franklin, conducted by Jonathan Bernstein, November 1, 2001, VCA, TTU, Record OH0194.

As the war progressed, AIT instructors with combat experience in Vietnam designed new training courses that provided trainees with practical skills for their tour of duty. Gary Franklin remembered that the instructors at Fort Polk were all recent returnees from Vietnam and developed a new training program that involved BB guns. “We went out to little targets [in the forest] and they had small, outlined targets set up that probably wasn’t three or four inches large and they were about six feet away.” The instructors armed each man with an automatic BB gun and were told to “quick fire” on targets as they were revealed in the foliage. Franklin found that running through this exercise helped shave down his reaction time—a trait that later became helpful when he pulled point duty for his squad in the jungles of Vietnam.⁴⁷

Another factor allowing trainees to obtain more relevant information about Vietnam in AIT resulted from the relaxation of the tense relationship that previously existed between drill sergeants and recruits in basic training, but which now hewed to a mentor-student relationship. This new relationship allowed instructors with prior experience in Vietnam greater flexibility to either modify curricula in AIT or engage trainees in conversations about various aspects of the war. Marvin Mathiak felt relieved when he discovered that AIT “was a much more serious type of training in that it was not as much [about] mindless harassment. [Drill sergeants] were interested in training and took a much more serious approach to try to teach you” skills necessary for survival in Vietnam.⁴⁸ Gonzalo Baltazar remembered having two Vietnam veterans as instructors who cared for the men and often talked to them about their experiences—both combat and noncombat—and most importantly helped Baltazar and other men realize “that if you didn’t

⁴⁷ Interview with Gary Franklin, VCA.

⁴⁸ Interview with Marvin Mathiak, August 8, 2000, VCA, TTU.

listen, you're going to die." These warnings and talk of death began a process of what Historian Gerald Linderman called "the loss of volubility . . . [and] the soldier's sinking sense of control and thus of a heightening awareness of his own fragility."⁴⁹ Young men graduated basic training at their peak physical conditioning, often overconfident about their own abilities, and, as one soldier recalled, proud of being "in great shape. I was smokin'." Few were thinking about their own vulnerability until they arrived at places like Fort Polk where AIT instructors began sobering men up to their own mortality and the very real possibility of being killed or maimed in combat.

One lesson that most awakened men to the possibility of a gruesome death in Vietnam was classroom instruction in the detection and disarming of booby-traps and improvised explosives. Stephen Dant remembered such a course at Fort Jackson where an instructor set up a replica of punji-stakes, bouncing betty mines, trip-wired hand grenades, and other devices. Throughout the lesson emphasis was placed on the lethality of each device and the how various explosives could maim, amputate, and kill soldiers.⁵⁰

Soldiers also learned the fundamentals of small-unit maneuvers, such as practicing ambushing the enemy, which helped them understand how an infantry platoon would operate in Vietnam. Instructors with combat experience in Vietnam sometimes modified these standard exercises to better reflect real conditions. Jerry Benson remembered "a situation where we were doing night patrol training to [practice being] ambushed at night, patrolling a trail or whatever." Apparently the school solution involved the platoon getting "in a line," opening up with their M-

⁴⁹ Gerald Linderman, *The World Within War: America's Combat Experience in World War II* (New York: Free Press, 2013), 29.

⁵⁰ Interview with Stephen Dant, VCA.

16s, and charging the position. His instructors were wise enough to realize that such a scripted training exercise in AIT was ill-suited for Vietnam and modified it by removing the order to charge enemy positions, and instead looking for ways to extricate the platoon from the ambush in a tactical retreat.⁵¹ Such slight modifications probably paid dividends for soldiers once they were in Vietnam, but it also highlighted the necessity of having Vietnam veterans serve in instructional capacities to ensure such changes were made, even if informally. More importantly, by observing their instructors and paying attention to the subtle or overt distinctions between school solutions and instructor innovated exercises in AIT, trainees first gained some impression that they would need to fashion or learn a soldiers' culture if they were going to survive in Vietnam.

Although trainees received instruction better suited for the war, these men often desired for their AIT instructors to be candid about their personal experiences in Vietnam or feelings about the conflict—stories which most instructors kept concealed. Michael Morris went to Fort Benning for airborne training and remembered all the cadre NCOs were Vietnam veterans with extensive combat experience.⁵² However, instructors only talked about Vietnam indirectly—“In Vietnam we would never do anything like that. In Vietnam you don’t leave your buddy for a minute. They didn’t really sit down and talk to us about their [own] experiences.”⁵³ Morris later discovered that most of the training he received in AIT “was kind of misdirected” because he had to learn and adapt to the way his unit did things in the field. Allan Suydam similarly remembered

⁵¹ Interview with Jerry Benson, September 15, 2000, VCA, TTU.

⁵² From the fifty oral histories I examined, only two soldiers recalled in oral history interviews that their basic training or AIT instructors discussed specific details about their traumatic experiences in Vietnam.

⁵³ Interview with Michael Morris, January 31, 2003, VCA, TTU.

that his instructors at Fort Lewis would “in some of their talks . . . try to scare you into making a point. That worked. They got your attention and it did scare you so you listened,” but Suydam recalled that most of these scare tactics only emphasized rare situations like being captured by the enemy. He remembered one instructor demonstrated a “survival tactic” by grabbing a live rabbit and by ripping it apart with his hands seized its heart and ate it. Suydam’s instructors were intervening with words of wisdom and quick advice to “keep us from getting hurt or killed” in Vietnam.⁵⁴

Because instructors were unable or unwilling to talk about their experiences in Vietnam, most trainees missed potentially important discussions about Vietnamese culture and language, leaving them to rely upon problematic ideas from popular culture to understand an often hostile or suspicious Vietnamese population. In fact, veterans almost unanimously report finding the endurance, weapons training, and small unit tactics in mock villages the most helpful preparatory work. Mike MacCallum complained that neither basic or AIT prepared him to deal with the Vietnamese, and that his knowledge about Vietnam (its geography, languages, ethnicities, religious traditions) was hazy, and all the men with him were “kind of drifting toward this thing without much thought of what would happen when we got over there.”⁵⁵

Even if AIT provided men with substantial classroom instruction about Vietnam it seems unlikely such an effort could have substituted for soldiers’ prior ignorance about the conflict in their civilian lives. By and large, veterans reported being completely naïve about not only the military but also about the war in Vietnam. Mike MacCallum recalled that prior to receiving his

⁵⁴ Interview with Allan Suydam, VCA, TTU.

⁵⁵ Interview with Mike MacCallum, conducted by Jason Stewart, September 11, 2010, VCA, TTU, Record OH0799.

draft notice he paid no attention to the war because he was preoccupied with “beer drinking” and partying at college. David Hammond remembered seeing Vietnam mentioned on the evening newscasts, but thought it seemed more “like a movie.” Gonzalo Baltazar recalled that when he enlisted in the U.S. Army “I really didn’t think about going to Vietnam. I just thought I was going in the Army.”⁵⁶

The only real attempt by the Army to provide men with the basics about Vietnam occurred either during the flight to Vietnam or during processing, when soldiers received a generic “Welcome Packet” of information from a replacement depot. “I know they gave us handouts of the country. Yes, I remember now that we were guests in this country and their customs and traditions, their culture is different from ours so be respectful and mindful of the people,” Frank Gutierrez remembered of his time at the 90th Replacement Battalion in Long Binh. The actual packet provided a droll summation of Vietnamese gender relations, religious practices, and “age-old religious teachings” that were “deeply ingrained in the life of the people.” On women, the pamphlet asserted that “the traditional position of women is totally subordinate to men, and their social life is limited,” while explaining that in the Sixties *some* women were acquiring more freedom. Few other veterans recalled receiving such a packet when directly asked in interviews and it seems unlikely that 18 and 19-year-old replacements, anxious enough figuring out how they would survive a combat tour, would take the time to process such an uninformative and stock account of Vietnamese customs.⁵⁷

⁵⁶ Interview with Mike MacCallum, VCA, TTU; Interview with David Hammond, VCA, TTU; Interview with Gonzalo Baltazar, VCA, TTU.

⁵⁷ Interview with Frank Gutierrez, VCA, TTU; United States Army, Vietnam: Welcome Packet, Military History Institute, Carlisle, PA. 1 Folder, 14-15.

Having completed AIT, soldiers being assigned to Vietnam were typically given a thirty-day leave to return home and visit their families. Afterward, men reported to one of several bases along the west coast, including Travis Air Force Base outside San Francisco, or Fort Lewis in Washington, to prepare for their flight to Vietnam. Soldiers quickly discovered that deploying to Vietnam was entirely different from how their fathers had gone to Europe or the Pacific during World War II. Once in Vietnam soldiers quickly recognized that their survival depended on their adoption of new, common sense, practices and habits embedded in an existent and evolving soldier culture. The lore of “tunnel rats” in Vietnam—American soldiers tasked with exploring tunnels and combatting the enemies hidden there—exemplifies the emergence and dissemination of a soldiers’ culture to fill the gaps in soldiers’ knowledge caused by inadequate lessons conveyed in popular culture and Army training.

The “tunnel rat” detachments would evolve into a distinct and separate unofficial MOS in Vietnam with its own unique subculture precisely because the Pentagon and recruit training could not generate or effectively impart a body of knowledge that equipped men with the requisite skills necessary to confront such challenges in Vietnam. “Tunnel rats” faced the unenviable task of shimmying into and exploring the dank, dimly lit tunnel complexes used by the Viet Cong in South Vietnam. Few Americans would ever become a “tunnel rat,” but of those who did all shared similar characteristics. Vietnamese tunnel entrances and shafts were approximately 2’6” wide by 3’-4’ high and required that American tunnel rats be both short and of slight build. The average tunnel rat stood between 5’2” and 5’6” tall, and weighed between

120 and 150lbs.⁵⁸ These men were also intelligent, adaptive, and unconventional thinkers. Men were not assigned duty as “tunnel rats” in any formal sense, but were usually volunteers whose primary occupation was in various combat-oriented occupations such as combat engineers, chemical warfare, infantry, and cavalry.⁵⁹

Americans encountered the most extensive tunnel systems in Cu Chi, where the 25th Infantry Division established its basecamp in 1966, and it was there that the first “tunnel rats” began learning how to conduct underground warfare. The 1st Infantry Division also encountered tunnel complexes in the adjacent “Iron Triangle” area in the Binh Duong Province of Vietnam. All of the tunnel systems in these regions dated back to the First Indochina War (1946-1954), used by the Viet Minh as a conduit to traffic arms, move personnel, and stage ambushes on French patrols. Both the French and later the Americans discovered their armies possessed limited means of confronting and eradicating the systems. Typical was Colonel James B. Lincoln’s consternation in 1965 when Viet Cong fighters engaged his unit and melted back into the foliage. “Nobody could figure out how the VC slipped out of the area, all escape routes were covered with blocking positions.” A week later, his battalion uncovered a “fantastic underground network of caves” with entrances well concealed throughout his unit’s area of operations.⁶⁰ Troops in the 101st Airborne discovered a complex with rooms 15 feet wide and large enough to house two regiments in Tuy Hoa, while soldiers in the 25th Infantry Division discovered a

⁵⁸ G. Rottman, *Viet Cong and NVA Tunnels and Fortifications of the Vietnam War* (Oxford: Osprey Publishing, 2006), 37-42.

⁵⁹ G. Rottman, *Tunnel Rat in Vietnam* (Oxford: Osprey Publishing, 2012), 8-9; Tom Mangold and John Penycate, *The Tunnels of Cu Chi: A Harrowing Account of America’s Tunnel Rats in the Underground Battlefields of Vietnam* (New York: Pan Books, 1986).

⁶⁰ James B. Lincoln to Wife, August 14, 1965, in *Letters from Vietnam: Voices of War*, edited by Bill Adler (San Raphael, CA: Presidio Press, 2007), 198.

complex in the Ho Bo Woods large enough to accommodate the entire Viet Cong 4th Military Region Headquarters.⁶¹

Army training schools in the United States could not adequately prepare men to deal with tunnel warfare in Vietnam for several reasons. First, even late in the war, the U.S. Army made no official unit designation, standard operating procedure, or tactical manuals devoted strictly to tunnel warfare. Those who were “tunnel rats” served in an informally organized cadre who became “tunnel rats” on an ad hoc basis when units in the field discovered a tunnel complex warranting further exploration to gather intelligence. Secondly, the tunnel systems that Americans encountered around Cu Chi and in other regions of South Vietnam were extremely complex and not well understood. Attempts to construct replica tunnels at Fort Polk for the infantry AIT school failed to provide trainees with an accurate model in either size or complexity.⁶² Therefore the development of tactics and strategies for dealing with tunnels only arose by necessity. For example, the 25th Infantry Division became especially concerned with combatting tunnels underneath Cu Chi, but the 9th Infantry Division in the Mekong Delta became more focused on counterinsurgency programs to ameliorate the conditions of civilians in their AO. The total absence of knowledge about the appropriate ways to deal with tunnels meant that

⁶¹ Peter Arnett, “Cong Tunnels Costly to U.S.,” *The Atlanta Constitution* (November 20, 1966), 1C; John T. Wheeler, “Way-Out Devices Aid War on Viet Guerrillas,” *Los Angeles Times* (November 23, 1967), J9.

⁶² For example, at Fort Polk, mock tunnels were four-foot diameter corrugated steel piping, much larger than the tunnels in Vietnam that averaged two-and-a-half foot wide by three to four foot high. Fort Polk’s mock tunnel complexes were also fairly simplistic, leading one historian to remark that they “bore little resemblance to actual VC tunnel systems . . . It was about 5ft below ground and had no air vents, water or air locks, sharp angular turns, hidden passages, side rooms, or any of the facilities and amenities found in actual complexes.” Rottman, *Tunnel Rat in Vietnam*, 14-15.

the small number of soldiers assigned as “tunnel rats” had to develop their own skills, behaviors, and practices derived from first-hand experience.⁶³

For many American soldiers, like Arnold Gutierrez, their training background hardly prepared them for engaging with enemies in tunnels. Gutierrez was an NCO in A Company, attached to the 25th Infantry Division, who became one of the earliest tunnel rats. He trained with the 25th Infantry Division in Hawaii and received “special training” in Alaska, but both schools operated under the assumption “this was a war against only a handful of Communist terrorists” and did not envisage American soldiers contending with labyrinthine underground cities.⁶⁴ In Vietnam, Gutierrez learned from experience how to duel with enemies, avoid booby-traps, and handle caches of intelligence, arms, and foodstuffs in tunnels.

What basic training and AIT did prepare men for were the general psychological stresses that attended tunnel exploration. For example, new recruits underwent gas chamber drills in basic training. Men donned the M-17 “gas mask” and filed into a concrete, windowless bunker where mini-pellets of CS (Tear Gas) were burned to produce a haze of toxic smoke. Instructors ordered the men to remove their masks and expose themselves to CS, causing acute eye irritation, mucus production in the sinuses, and excessive salivation. This unpleasant introduction to the irritating effects of CS gas was important because those who served as tunnel rats in Vietnam would commonly encounter CS residue in tunnels after Americans tried to flush the enemy out by pushing gas into the tunnels with a “Mighty Mite” blower.⁶⁵

⁶³ Rottman, *Tunnel Rat in Vietnam*, 42-59.

⁶⁴ Mangold and Penycate, *Tunnels of Cu Chi*, 24.

⁶⁵ Rottman, *Tunnel Rat in Vietnam*, 5. The “Mighty Mite” was a commercial sprayer or duster for agricultural purposes marketed and sold by Sears Roebuck and Company. In Vietnam, combat engineers adapted the “Mighty Mite” for many purposes, such as combatting mosquitos on firebases. For tunnels, though, the Mighty Mite proved

MACV first recognized that it possessed inadequate intelligence about tunnels during the first serious attempt by Army units in Vietnam to find and destroy tunnel complexes around Cu Chi during Operation Crimp in January 1966. The operation began twenty kilometers north of Cu Chi in the “Ho Bo Woods,” with the objective to pinpoint and destroy a suspected underground Viet Cong headquarters that American commanders believed was responsible for a series of ambushes and sapper attacks against the 25th Infantry Division’s basecamp and American patrols. Elements of the American 25th Infantry Division and 173rd Airborne Brigade participated in the operation alongside their Australian counterparts from the 1st Battalion, Royal Australian Regiment (RAR) that contained the Third Field Troop. A company of combat engineers under the command of Captain Alexander MacGregor, an Australian officer serving in the Third Field Troop, encountered a number of tunnel entrances and discovered additional ventilation shafts and “spider hole” bunkers on the first day of the operation. MacGregor ordered photographs taken of “tunnel trapdoors and entrances, and of the booby traps found inside, and was busy making full notes of tunnel dimensions” during the operation. The Royal Australian Engineers released a report on the tunnels around Cu Chi that became “the most accurate and the most prescient” assessment of the appropriate tactics to neutralize tunnel complexes and their true size and extent. MacGregor was also among the first to understand that pumping CS gas into the tunnels might provide a safer way to kill or force hiding enemies aboveground—a tactic later adopted by American units.⁶⁶

convenient for pushing CS gas through tunnels in an attempt to suffocate its occupants. Alternatively, the Mighty Mite could pump fresh air into tunnels to aid Americans.

⁶⁶ Mangold and Penycate, *Tunnels of Cu Chi*, 54-57.

The difficult challenges presented by tunnels in Cu Chi during Operation Crimp prompted the 25th Infantry Division and MACV to subsequently release “lessons learned” reports that encouraged the growth of specialized knowledge about tunnel warfare. Both reports acknowledged that before Operation Crimp, Americans seriously underestimated the extent and potential threat of tunnel systems. The MACV reported, entitled “Operations Against Tunnel Complexes,” called on subordinate unit commands to create a new soldier with skills especially suited to tunnel exploration and intelligence collection belowground.⁶⁷ Like the Australians, the Americans, too, would rely on small cadres of tight-knit soldiers to develop their own approach to the tunnels, along with creating a vehicle, soldier culture, to communicate those lessons and tactics to future groups of replacements.

One “lessons learned” report published by the 2-35 Infantry (25th Infantry Division) provided further evidence that the growing body of knowledge about tunnel warfare developed organically from the bottom-up. The 2-35 report emphasized the potential body counts obtained by systematically exploring tunnels, stating that “ever since . . . the battalion has been digging out ‘Charlies’ at a fantastic rate . . . it soon became obvious that a need existed for a detailed study of the types of holes and techniques used in their reduction.” The information that followed provided readers with a summarized roadmap of soldiers’ collective knowledge about tunnels, including the variety of tunnel entrances, their potential locations, and instructing other units to allow their men the opportunity to learn by carefully locating and exploring tunnels. Only extensive experience would “tell you what indicators are within your area. Once the individual

⁶⁷ Report, MACV, 18 April 1966, Lessons Learned no. 56: “Operations Against Tunnel Complexes,” 1-8. Historians files, CMH; Also see, Operational Lessons Learned (ORLL), 1 February – 30 April 1966, 1st Infantry Division, “Operations Against Tunnel Complexes,” 9-13.

soldier achieves success at locating the enemy he will almost be able to ‘smell them.’” The report classified the soldier’s uncanny ability to “smell” the enemy as an important “sixth sense” that only developed through experience and learning.⁶⁸

It was not enough for individual soldiers to gain this indefinable “sixth sense,” but these seasoned “tunnel rats” needed opportunities to preserve their knowledge about a specific area of operations and pass it on to their replacements, teaching green soldiers “what to look for.”⁶⁹ The so-called “indicators” of a nearby tunnel complex were game trails, “worn and cut bamboo, and air holes, human feces, a [visible] depression [in the ground], fresh food” or the sighting of a lone individual enemy soldier.⁷⁰ Essentially what the report recognized was that the most invaluable resource at the unit’s disposal for learning about and continuing to conquer tunnel complexes was the collective knowledge of soldiers like Arnold Gutierrez with significant experience within tunnels. Despite the manual’s emphasis on developing and nurturing organic soldier knowledge, the authors adopted a more jocular and unserious approach with the title, “Hole Huntin’” and its insistence on “finding, fixing, and finishing” the enemy. MACV would subsequently adopt the 2-35 manual for distribution to units across South Vietnam.⁷¹

⁶⁸ U.S. Army, 2nd Battalion 35th Infantry – Hole Huntin’, May 1, 1968, Folder 7, Box 1, Ben G. Crosby Collection, The Vietnam Center and Archive, Texas Tech University, 2. Major Ben G. Crosby drafted the ‘Hole Huntin’ brochure in 1968. It was subsequently distributed by MACV to other units in the field. See, Hole Huntin’: Techniques to Detect, Neutralize, and Destroy Enemy Tunnels, Vietnam, MACJ3-053, December 20 1968, Folder 2, Box 1, Sandra Marie Wittman Collection, The Vietnam Center and Archive, TTU.

⁶⁹ 2-35, Hole Huntin’, 7-9.

⁷⁰ Ibid., 9.

⁷¹ Mangold and Penycate, *The Tunnels of Cu Chi*, 215. Short of further archival research at NARA, it remains unclear to what extent other commands paid attention to the 2-35’s insistence on developing an organic pool of soldier knowledge around tunnels, given this nuanced assessment was juxtaposed with an uncritical “find ‘em, fix ‘em” mentality with an emphasis on ratcheting up the body count.

While soldiers discovered that each tunnel presented its own unique challenges and potential findings, they also had to overcome the fear that attended the descent belowground into a dark chasm where booby-traps, punji stake pits, hidden enemies, and all other sorts of hazards awaited. Douglas M. Jones, a tunnel rat, “crawled through dozens of tunnels” around Cu Chi, telling one correspondent that “it’s like crawling through hell . . . You’re always scared.” Jones also described finding all manner of items in underground chambers, including “dishes, ammo, guitars, banjos, letters to American G.I.s, and even pictures from *Playboy*. You find mines and booby traps, too.” Specialist Walter Dula similarly admitted that “the first time I went in I was so scared I was shaking.” Walter D. Wilcox encountered “spiders, snakes, booby traps, or Charley himself.” Wilcox even discovered a dud hand grenade when attempting to move two booby-trapped bags of rice in an underground chamber.⁷²

The majority of “tunnel rats” volunteered for the duty, but usually expressed some difficulty articulating their particular motivation for doing so. Specialist Edison Adkins enjoyed the special status conveyed upon “tunnel rats” and remarked that “down there [in the tunnels] you’re your own boss . . . It’s the only place in the Army you don’t get orders.” Walter Dula thought that his decision to volunteer might spare his friends in the platoon, because “if it’s not you, it’s gonna be your brother or your friend.”⁷³ Although most units allowed men to volunteer for tunnel rat duty, Joseph Galloway, the UPI reporter present at the Battle of Ia Drang in 1965, described elements of the 1st Cavalry Division “drafting” men for the duty. Galloway wrote that

⁷² Bernard Weinraub, “U.S. Volunteer ‘Tunnel Rats’ Search Vietcong’s Underground Hide-Outs,” *New York Times* (November 9, 1967), 5.

⁷³ Weinraub, “U.S. Volunteer ‘Tunnel Rats,’” 5.

“it’s the littlest GIs in Vietnam who get stuck with the dirtiest, scariest job of the war . . . size is the only thing that counts when it comes to selecting a tunnel rat.”⁷⁴

Beginning with Operation Crimp in 1966 and proceeding through until most major American infantry divisions redeployed in 1970-1971, small bands of “tunnel rats” developed their own unique subculture within the army. The 1st Infantry Division in 1967 authorized “tunnel rats” to wear a unique shoulder patch and coin their own motto, thereby subtly fostering unit pride and elitism. The men decided on a patch that depicted a pistol and flashlight-wielding gray rat above the motto *Non Gratum Anus Rodentum*, translating as “Not Worth a Rat’s Ass.” Tom Mangold’s and John Penycate’s *The Tunnels of Cu Chi*, the best extant work on “tunnel rats” in Vietnam, described the men possessing a distinct attitude in Vietnam, marked by a peculiar abstention from drugs, sex, and gambling, and the habits of reading “copiously” and seeking “solitude rather than the entertainments of the NCOs’ or enlisted men’s clubs.” “Tunnel rats” developed a deep camaraderie and communal ethic given that their cadres were small (usually no more than five to eight men). They would only socialize amongst themselves and won concessions for themselves by exploiting the power dynamic that existed between themselves, who possessed intimate knowledge of tunnels, and officers who depended solely upon their teams for tunnel exploration.⁷⁵

“Tunnel rats” modified and tweaked their tactical approaches to tunnels based on past experiences and communal know-how. They quickly learned that a field knife, service pistol, and flashlight presented the best options for self-defense underground. Rats experimented with using

⁷⁴ Joseph L. Galloway, “Little Guys Get Dirtiest Job of War,” *The Washington Post* (April 3, 1966), E1.

⁷⁵ Mangold and Penycate, *The Tunnels of Cu Chi*, 259-261. Also see, Adrian G. Traas, *Engineers at War* (Government Printing Office, 2011), 190-193.

shotguns (too loud and ineffective), .22 rifles (often did not kill an enemy lying in ambush), M-16s (too large to wield underground), a .38 revolver with a silencer (too large and awkward to shoot one-handed), and a Smith & Wesson .44 magnum revolver that fired a 15-pellet bullet (discovered to have limited lethality). Most of the specialized revolvers were developed in the United States through research and development initiatives, and the “tunnel rat” became the de facto tester in the field, holding the power to adopt or reject such technologies. Other Rats rejected the standard-issue Colt .45 and acquired .38 caliber pistols from family back home or by purchasing them from helicopter pilots. Rats developed what Mangold and Penycate called an “ultraconservative” outlook that entailed soldiers’ skepticism of new technologies, their religious-like faith in the .38 or .45 pistol and flashlight, and the observance of various ritualistic practices thought to ensure their protection below ground.⁷⁶

The Australians exhibited a comparable pattern of inadequate training providing the space for soldiers to craft their own, shared culture that was designed to help them overcome the particular challenges of tunnels in Vietnam. Engineers in the Australian Third Field Group passed on their culture from one group to another that included tactics for dealing with tunnels. Rather than depending on the Royal Army to teach men about tunnel warfare in training, Australians, like their American counterparts, transmitted their “experiences and know-how” from “sapper to sapper, in the field, under combat conditions.”⁷⁷ Noncommissioned officers in the RAR became essential to transmitting these skills to green soldiers.

⁷⁶ Osprey, *The Tunnel Rat in Vietnam*; Mangold and Penycate, *The Tunnels of Cu Chi*, 110-120.

⁷⁷ Jimmy Thomson and Sandy MacGregor, *A Sapper's War: How the Legendary Aussie Tunnel Rats Fought the Vietcong* (New South Wales, AU: Allen & Unwin, 2012), 38-39; 214-215.

In the U.S. Army, a master-apprentice relationship developed between seasoned tunnel rats and their replacements. Those with prior experience would always descend into the tunnels alone, while their novice partner stayed above ground and communicated with them via field telephone or wireless radio. In what could become a three-to-six month initiation, the novice carefully studied “safe” tunnels, booby-traps, and absorbed the wise counsel of his mentor before eventually becoming the master in charge of yet another replacement. For example, new guys had to learn such elaborate and complex rules as never firing “more than three shots from your revolver in the darkness; fire off six and an enemy would know you were out of ammunition,” and whistling Dixie before surfacing from a tunnel entrance where unknowing American soldiers might mistake a “muddy figure” for the enemy. This master-apprentice system preserved a stable body of knowledge about tunnel complexes in Vietnam because it ensured that the tunnel explorer consistently had the most experience and therefore the highest chance of survival, while providing the new guy, who had a higher chance of killing himself through an accident or miscalculation borne of ignorance, the opportunity to survive and learn.⁷⁸

Because military training rarely prepares men to deal with all the exigencies of combat, soldiers always discover that they must “learn by doing” in war and fashion their own shared cultures to preserve and transmit such knowledge. One soldier indicated such a process at work while serving with the 101st Airborne Division in 1966, where he observed that Americans were “cutting down casualties by learning from experience.”⁷⁹ Most of this learning occurred when

⁷⁸ Osprey, *The Tunnel Rat in Vietnam*; Mangold and Penycate, *The Tunnels of Cu Chi*, 230-235.

⁷⁹ George Anderson to Albert Ettinger, May 15, 1966, Albert Ettinger Papers, Project Vietnam, MHI, Carlisle, PA.

soldiers encountered the peculiarities and intangibles of their war. The particularities of climate, topography, and human tenacity that produced the tunnel systems in Vietnam had their counterpart in Normandy during World War II, where a centuries-long history of maintaining hedges across an uneven landscape produced narrow, hemmed-in and sunken roads that frustrated American efforts to break out from the beachheads established on D-Day. Infantrymen trained in “fire and movement” during the 1940s soon realized that employing such tactics against Germans concealed behind hedgerows would “exact a bloody price.”⁸⁰ Similarly, Americans in Vietnam learned quickly that neutralizing tunnels required care and finesse, not brute force, as one war correspondent observed when interviewing Nguyen Toung Nghi, a Viet Cong captain, who boasted that tunnel complexes in his sector often withstood B-52 strikes—a fact that belied official rhetoric about the ability for superior American firepower to defeat a poorly-equipped enemy.⁸¹

Vietnam-era recruits came of age during a period unique for its patriotism and recent memory of war. At a moment when images of war became more prolific and varied than in any previous period, men still felt unprepared for the realities of war in Vietnam. Replacements would arrive in Vietnam with an eight-week background in infantry training and little other extensive knowledge about the country, making it imperative that they begin drawing on various cultural tools at their disposal to craft their own culture to make sense of their experiences and ensure their survival.

⁸⁰ Stephen Ambrose, *Citizen Soldiers: The U.S. Army from the Normandy Beaches to the Bulge to the Surrender of Germany, June 7, 1944 to May 7, 1945* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2013), 30.

⁸¹ Robert A. Erlandson, “Red Tells of Surviving B-52 Raids,” *The Baltimore Sun* (January 26, 1967), A2.

CHAPTER TWO: STRADDLING THE THRESHOLD: THE PROCESS FOR REPLACEMENTS TO EMBRACE SOLDIER CULTURE IN VIETNAM, 1965-1972

“[I] drink some beer, eat some pizza, listen to the band and watch some go-go girls,”

Ralph Bateman wrote to his parents on August 1, 1969, “then I stagger back to my private barracks and sleep as late as I want.” Temporarily assigned to the 90th Replacement Battalion in Long Binh, Bateman admitted that he had “been doing this for the last 3 days [and] I do whatever I want.” Being a replacement, he knew that such an idyllic situation in war would soon pass. He waited for orders “any day now” that would consign him to “the worst part of” his tour. Meanwhile, Bateman marveled at how Long Binh seemed like “a different country [where] nobody seems to know there’s a war going on.”¹

When Bateman arrived in Vietnam he remained aware that he was not yet a “soldier” until he received his assignment and joined an infantry platoon somewhere in the field. He eventually received orders to report to the 11th Light Infantry Brigade, which was part of the 23rd “Americal” Infantry Division based in Chu Lai. He arrived at Chu Lai precisely when the VC attempted several breakthroughs of the base’s perimeter by rocketing and mortaring American positions and sending sapper teams through the concertina wire. “My mind’s a little messed up,” Bateman conceded, reporting that “Chu Lai has been hit 5 times now in 2 days and nights.” Subsequently, after a brief stay at Duc Pho, Bateman joined 4th Squad, 1st Platoon, Company D at Fire Support Base Debbie, where he served as an assistant machine gunner. In that role, he

¹ Ralph Bateman [RB] to Keith and Judy, August 1, 1969, Ralph Bateman Collection, Box 1, Folder 1, Vietnam Center and Archive (VCA), Texas Tech University (TTU).

was responsible for carrying a spare barrel and 300 rounds of ammunition for the M60 machine gun, as well as his standard-issue M-16 rifle.²

Having experienced his fair share of combat at Chu Lai and during his first days with 1st Platoon, Bateman did not long endure the liminal status of being an untested replacement. He earned the trust of other men in his squad by proving competent under fire. “Everyone here calls me Batman,” he wrote his father three days after joining 1st Platoon, and “Indian because I wear a neckerchief around my head as a sweatband.” The affectionate nicknames symbolized his equal footing with the more seasoned soldiers in his platoon. Bateman also adopted the values, norms, and behaviors of soldier culture in his platoon. He fretted about his DEROs, requested that his father mail a “short-timer’s calendar,” signed off every letter home with the number of days he had remaining, and often reminded his family that “peace is the word.”³

Immersed in his unit’s soldier culture, Bateman learned important lessons, not covered in Army field manuals, from noncommissioned officers in his platoon concerning how to conduct patrols, listening posts, set ambushes, uncover and disarm booby-traps (the most common danger in his area of operations), and perform a whole range of tasks from personal hygiene to weapon maintenance. Within a month, Bateman felt confident enough in his abilities to begin walking point—that is, serving as the lead soldier in a patrol column—because he felt “safer and more secure up front.” He managed to read maps “better than anyone else in the platoon,” becoming “responsible for getting us where we are supposed to go.” And, he also “reevaluated” his morals

² RB to Father, August 12, 1969; August 15, 1969; August 18, 1969, Ralph Bateman Collection, Box 1, Folder 1, VCA, TTU.

³ RB to Father, August 21, 1969; August 24, 1969, Ralph Bateman Collection, Box 1, Folder 1, VCA, TTU.

from his prior civilian life that proscribed killing, admitting that “I think I really don’t appreciate life anymore, I just understand it better.”⁴

Bateman increasingly felt like an “old timer” in his platoon as he accrued ever more experience patrolling the jungles and waging war against the VC and NVA. When he learned that two friends were wounded by a booby-trapped 105mm round, he pondered “why do we have to have such incompetent leaders . . . the officers in charge don’t have any brains.” He subsequently deemed his new platoon leader a “bum [who] has never seen combat and goes around ordering us to do stupid things.” When, a month later, his platoon received yet another replacement platoon leader, Bateman complained that despite having performed exceptionally well for four months in the field, “this *new meat* thinks I don’t deserve a promotion [to Specialist Fourth Class].” By the time Bateman had completed almost eight months in the field, he observed that “now I’m one of the old timers that keeps the platoon going” and worried that “one of these dumb damn new guys” would put “my shit in the wind” if they made a mistake. No longer was he the anxious, untried replacement. Bateman now added to his many responsibilities the crucial task of communicating the norms, behaviors, and attitudes that helped him survive to newbies.⁵

Because platoons suffered from constant personnel turnover due to one-year tours and casualties, most units rarely contained stable long-term “primary groups” around which soldiers

⁴ RB to Father, September 20, 1969; September 27, 1969; November 1, 1969; Ralph Bateman Collection, Box 1, Folder 1, VCA, TTU.

⁵ RB to Father, October 21, 1969; October 24, 1969; November 29, 1969 [emphasis added]; April 8, 1970; April 21, 1970, Ralph Bateman Collection, Box 1, Folder 1, VVA, TTU.

cohered. Therefore, soldier culture functioned in ways that maintained “task cohesion,”⁶ Sociologists have defined “task cohesion” as the “shared commitment among members to achieving a goal that requires the collective efforts of the group.”⁷ Soldier culture, then, undergirds “task cohesion” by providing all replacements, like Bateman, with an evolving set of tools, behaviors, and practices that both integrates them into the platoon and ideally makes them successful participants in achieving defined goals. Bateman’s evolution from “replacement” to “soldier” in Vietnam, therefore, was facilitated by his absorption of soldier culture, or the “informal” standard operating procedures that guided his platoon’s actions in the field. He learned how to perform well in combat, yet also adopted behaviors that dramatically increased his odds of survival.⁸

⁶ Peter S. Kindsvatter rightly contends in *American Soldiers: Ground Combat in the World Wars, Korea, & Vietnam*, that “primary-group cohesion did not disintegrate” in Vietnam, “but hierarchal cohesion [to the Army] did,” 149. Kindsvatter suggests that soldiers were motivated by “latent ideology,” that he defines as soldiers’ belief that they fought on the “good” side against “evil,” 139-140. This “latent ideology” combined with comradeship proved essential motivators during the late stages of the war when mere survival became the soldier’s paramount goal.

⁷ Robert J. MacCoun and William M. Hix, *Unit Cohesion and Military Performance* (Santa Monica, California: RAND Corporation, 2010), 157.

⁸ After World War II, sociologists wrote often of “primary group cohesion” (or: “social cohesion”) to explain why soldiers continued to fight, even when the war seemed lost. These scholars posited that the social bonds that developed among soldiers and their desire to preserve the “primary group” continually rejuvenated their commitment to the fight. Edward A. Shils and Morris Janowitz, “Cohesion and Disintegration in the Wehrmacht in World War II,” *Public Opinions Quarterly* 12, no. 2 (1948): 280-315; Leon Festinger, “Informal Social Communication,” *Psychological Review* 57, no. 5 (1950): 271; Since the 1990s, however, sociologists and social psychologists have increasingly thought about the relationship between “social” and “task cohesion” in organizations. Admittedly, “task cohesion” offers a persuasive solution for the perennial question of why/how military units continue exceptional performance despite suffering casualties so severe as to destroy the “primary group.” For more on “task cohesion” see MacCoun and Hix, *Unit Cohesion and Military Performance*; Brian Mullen and Carolyn Copper, “The Relation Between Group Cohesiveness and Performance: An Integration,” *Psychological Bulletin* 115, no. 2 (1994): 210; Stephen J. Zaccaro and Charles A. Lowe, “Cohesiveness and Performance on an Additive Task: Evidence for Multidimensionality,” *Journal of Social Psychology* 128, no. 4 (1998): 547-558; Daniel J. Beal, Robin R. Cohen, Michael J. Burke, and Christy L. McLendon, “Cohesion and Performance in Groups: A Meta-Analytic Clarification of Construct Relations,” *Journal of Applied Psychology* 88, no. 6 (2003): 989-1004.

The concept of “liminality,” an analytical tool borrowed from anthropology, provides a framework for understanding why replacements, like Bateman, would eagerly adopt soldier culture once they joined their unit in the field. Like all “liminal” subjects, Vietnam-era replacements lacked community, social standing, and structure during the transitional, “in-between” period that occurred once trainees graduated from AIT and ended sometime after they joined the rank-and-file of an infantry platoon. From this angle, it becomes apparent that for replacements, like Bateman, the conditions of their deployment to Vietnam, specifically their overriding desire to discard their transitory status as “new guys,” motivated them to embrace soldier culture.

Anthropologists have been interested in describing the ritual processes that attend a person’s change in status in society since the late-nineteenth century. Victor Turner developed “liminality” as an analytical tool to interpret how humans navigate transitory, “in-between positions” in social status that occur precisely when a person discards a former identity, but has not yet accomplished all that is required to formally occupy their new societal position. A “liminal” person, therefore, exists “in an in-between position, spatially or temporally,” in life.⁹ Turner popularized the concept of “liminality” during the 1960s, often describing it as the “threshold” between two statuses. In other words, crossing the threshold meant existing “betwixt and between . . . not quite [belonging] to either where they left or where they are going.” Humans, Turner theorized, must develop new behaviors, attitudes, and norms to successfully cross the threshold. Those who navigate rites of passage enter what Turner called “communitas,”

⁹ Bjørn Thomassen, “Thinking with Liminality: To The Boundaries of an Anthropological Concept,” in *Breaking Boundaries: Varieties of Liminality*, Agnes Horvath, Bjorn Thomassen, and Harald Wydra, eds. (Berghahn: New York, New York, 2015), 40.

defined as a discrete community whose members have all undergone specific rites, are considered equals, and where those wielding authority have previously been made low through similar ritual processes.¹⁰

Replacements bound for Vietnam occupied an inherently unstable role in virtually every area of their life. They existed “betwixt and between” the statuses of civilian and soldier. The process of going to war was, as historian Eric Leed notes, “an experience of radical discontinuity on every level of consciousness.”¹¹ Leed, who was interested in why World War I veterans had trouble readjusting to civilian life, contended that while in uniform soldiers “inhabited two distinct worlds” and “seemed two distinct persons [being split between] incommensurable social worlds—that of peace and that of war.”¹² Likewise, during the Vietnam War, replacements occupied a liminal space in-between the civilian and military worlds, life and death, peace and war, and the statuses of newbie and veteran. “Liminality refers to moments or periods of transition,” anthropologist Bjørn Thomassen observes, “during which the normal limits to thought, self-understanding and behavior are relaxed, opening the way to novelty and imagination.”¹³ In other words, replacements’ feelings of disorientation and anxiety, prompted by their transitory existence during deployment and processing, contributed significantly to the urgency with which they fashioned and embraced soldier and unit cultures in Vietnam.

¹⁰ Victor Turner, *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1969), 128.

¹¹ Leed, *No Man’s Land: Combat and Identity in World War I* (1981), 3.

¹² *Ibid.*, 2-4.

¹³ Bjørn Thomassen, *Liminality and the Modern: Living Through the In-Between* (New York: Routledge, 2016), 89-90.

During the Vietnam War a “replacement” was literally a soldier who filled the place of another who was wounded, killed, or reached their DEROS. It also signified a GI’s liminal position between his previous identity as a civilian and his not yet earned title of “soldier.” Veteran soldiers interchangeably referred to replacements as “cherries,” “fucking new guys,” newbies, “newfers,” and “green” troops. These derogatory monikers underscored the fact that replacements lacked the behaviors, attitudes, and practices acquired only through extensive experience in the field. Replacements embraced (or created) soldier cultures because it offered the most efficient way to pool the knowledge necessary to help men learn and become proficient in executing their responsibilities during combat operations. Furthermore, replacements accelerated their transition from “replacement” to “soldier” by imbibing the values and norms of soldier culture.

Trainees lived under the specter of a future combat tour in Vietnam beginning when they graduated from advanced individual training and received their orders to report to the war. But, the Army first granted replacements up to thirty days of leave, allowing them to return home and spend precious, yet fleeting, time with their families before reporting to an air base on the West Coast for a flight to Vietnam where they would “process” through a replacement center, receive orders, and report to a combat unit in the field. At each of these stages, replacements lived in a surreal, liminal phase of their military service. “Each man was on his own,” Ches Schneider wrote. A schoolteacher turned infantry replacement, Schneider observed that although all replacements “felt exactly the same way” during their deployment, the process made “each man . . . an island [forced] to face the future using his own inner strengths.”¹⁴ Replacements reached

¹⁴ Ches Schneider, *From Classrooms to Claymores: A Teacher at War in Vietnam* (New York: Ballantine Books, 2010), 18.

their infantry units in the field as veritable sponges. They enthusiastically absorbed soldier culture to make sense of their experience, find belonging within established groups, and acquire the skills necessary to improve their odds of survival.

Having spent several emotional weeks with his family, on June 11, 1968, B.G. Burkett boarded a plane bound for Anchorage, the first leg of his flight to Vietnam. He sat with two hundred other men who were “all aware that this was the real thing. We were going to war.” “Each of us sat silently,” Burkett recalled, “as if in suspended animation, every man lost in his own thoughts.”¹⁵ Burkett was among the tens of thousands of young men whose Vietnam odyssey began aboard a commercial airliner. These men were primarily individual replacements destined for various units in Vietnam. The flights, which averaged approximately 20 hours, were bound for Cam Ranh Bay, Da Nang, and other American airbases in South Vietnam. The commercialization of air travel during the Sixties made it possible for the Army to contract private airlines to transport men to the battlefield. As one historian notes, sending replacements to Vietnam by air marked a “comparative first in the American experience in war.”¹⁶ The flights truncated the timeframe between replacements leaving the United States and arriving in a combat zone, very different from the relatively slow naval passage to the war zone that their fathers experienced during World War II.

At first, from 1965 to 1966, men deployed to Vietnam much as their fathers had in World War II, aboard ships with all the members of their stateside units. Independent brigades and

¹⁵ B. G. Burkett, *Stolen Valor*, 11.

¹⁶ Kyle Longley, *Grunts*, 73.

entire divisions deployed to Vietnam, including the First and Third Marine Divisions, as well as the Army's 173rd Airborne Brigade, 1st Cavalry Division, 1st Infantry Division, 101st Airborne Division, and later the 25th Infantry Division from Schofield Barracks in Hawaii.¹⁷ Subsequently in 1967 the 4th Infantry Division, 9th Infantry Division, and 23rd Infantry Division ("Americal") deployed to Vietnam.¹⁸ In addition to combat-oriented soldiers, these divisions also contained command, combat support, and combat service support components.¹⁹ The sheer number of men deployed to Vietnam from 1965 to 1967 necessitated the use of naval transports. In the Army, divisions mustered between 15,800 and 19,000 personnel while a separate brigade, like the 173rd Airborne, boasted between 3,000 and 4,000 men. While aircraft could transport hundreds of individual replacements, only naval vessels could carry the tens of thousands of men who were deployed at the beginning of the American buildup.²⁰ Once Johnson, the Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS), and others committed the United States militarily to Vietnam, the number of American troops stationed there increased dramatically from 27,300 in June 1965 to 239,400 by December 1966. By April 30, 1969, the Army reached its peak strength of 363,300, although these troop

¹⁷ Christian G. Appy, *Working-Class War*, 117-120.

¹⁸ The "Americal" 23rd Infantry Division, originally activated in New Caledonia on May 27, 1942, during World War II, would become well-known for the infamous My Lai massacre in Vietnam. The designation "Americal" was an abbreviation of the unit's original name: "American, New Caledonian Division." In Vietnam it provided command structure for several brigades, such as the 196th and 199th Light Infantry Brigades (LIBs).

¹⁹ During the Vietnam War combat soldiers roughly composed 58% of a light infantry division, organized under the Reorganization Objective Army Division (ROAD) protocol. Commonly referred to as the "tooth-to-tail" ratio, recent estimates have suggested a 1:2 or 1:3.5 ratio between combat soldiers and support personnel. For example, in 1968, the Army mustered approximately 113,030 combat soldiers, or about 34.8% of the total 324,030 Army personnel in Vietnam. See, John J. McGrath, *Other End of the Spear: The Tooth-to-Tail Ratio in Modern Military Operations* (Fort Leavenworth, KS: Combat Studies Institute Press, 2011), 29-34.

²⁰ Gordon L. Rottman, *The US Army in Vietnam, 1965-1973* (Westminster, MD: Osprey Publishing, 2008), 15.

numbers were not as high as what General Westmoreland requested in his appeals to the JCS and Congress.²¹

Once established in Vietnam and with the first cohort of men reaching their DEROs in 1966-1967, the Army relied increasingly on air travel to bring replacements to Vietnam. President Lyndon Johnson's decision not to activate reserves or deploy the National Guard to Vietnam exacerbated the manpower crisis caused by the war because it sidelined a significant portion of trained men.²² The rotation system, coupled with casualties incurred from combat and disease, only compounded the problem of unit personnel turnover, creating an urgent, and endless, demand for replacements that far outstripped the ability of naval craft to bring replacements to Southeast Asia rapidly.

The Army began chartering commercial airlines in late-1966 and by 1967 such flights were routine.²³ The Department of Defense struck contracts with various airlines, including Trans World Airlines (TWA), which soldiers derisively nicknamed "The Wrong Airline."²⁴ Between 1967 and 1970, TWA and other airlines transported approximately 1,000,000 men per year on flights, ensuring that depleted units in Vietnam could expect their replacements quicker than in any previous war. Whereas their fathers journeyed to the frontlines during World War II aboard ships, sometimes as part of Stateside combat units, young men during the Vietnam-era deployed in an intensely individualized fashion on aircraft. Vietnam replacements frequently

²¹ U.S. Department of Defense, OASD (Comptroller), Directorate for Information Operations, March 19, 1974. Quoted in George C. Herring, *America's Longest War* (2002), 182.

²² Christian G. Appy, *Working-Class War*, 36-37.

²³ *Ibid.*, 121.

²⁴ See, for example, interview with Willie Alvidrez in *Soldados: Chicanos in Viet Nam*, Charley Trujillo, editor (San Jose, CA: Chusma House Publishing 1990), 59.

wrote that they knew no one else on their flights and, in fact, found any attempt to forge such transient friendships unappealing. The confined space of ships, however, better facilitated socialization and camaraderie during long trans-Atlantic and trans-Pacific passages during World War II.

The Army's decision to rely on aircraft to bring replacements to Vietnam made a very efficient system for relaying small numbers of personnel back and forth across the Pacific. However, the dramatically shortened interval between when replacements left the United States and reached the war zone had significant consequences for how they perceived their mental, and even physical distance from home. While the majority of replacements enjoyed "leave" before heading to Vietnam, the Army reserved the right to shorten or cancel the accommodation. This meant that for replacements like James Scales the period between graduating AIT and reaching Vietnam could occur in as little as 48-hours. Scales remembered that a drill sergeant in AIT entered his barracks and curtly informed the men that they were "going to be loaded on [a] plane tomorrow." The next day, Scales arrived at Travis Air Force Base, departed on an aircraft, and subsequently arrived in Vietnam at night. He was perplexed, yet fascinated when he saw "little streams of red" arcing upward in the sky from tracer rounds that ricocheted into the atmosphere.²⁵

Generally, when replacements reported to bases in the United States, like Fort Lewis, they boarded the same flights that brought men back from Vietnam, many of whom had combat experience. If replacements had brief interactions with veterans it only served to heighten their own anxiety about being inexperienced. Many replacements, like Stephen W. Dant, who boarded

²⁵ Interview with James Scales, conducted by Harriet Langston, June 22, 2002, VCA, TTU, Record OH0221.

a flight at Fort Lewis, remembered distinctly that returning veterans were socially distant. The “guys who had been there [would not] really talk to you,” Dant recalled.²⁶ Because it looked as though veterans “had been there and done that,” replacements were afraid that engaging veterans in any meaningful conversation would expose their own ignorance and open them to ridicule and scorn.²⁷ For example, a seasoned sergeant approached B. G. Burkett in the terminal at Fort Lewis, pointing to his bag and exclaiming “Goddamn, lieutenant . . . what the hell is that?” Burkett explained the protrusion in his bag was “a wedge and three golf balls.” “Lieutenant, you’re going to a war, not a goddamn golf tournament,” the sergeant responded with incredulity. While Burkett clung dearly to the golf club because it symbolized home, his possession of it also spoke to his naïveté about what the future portended in Vietnam.

Although all replacements were cognizant that they were going to war, many, like Charles R. Anderson, were also acutely aware that the process of boarding flights to Vietnam strangely blended elements from their both the civilian and military worlds. Anderson remembered waiting eight hours in the terminal at Travis Air Force Base before hearing a woman’s voice come on the intercom system directing all passengers to board “contract flight Hotel Twenty-Nine for Da Nang, Vietnam.” The voice sounded familiar to boarding calls in civilian airports. The woman’s pleasant voice beckoned “all officers and civilians of equivalent rank” to board first, followed by noncommissioned officers, and then junior enlisted personnel, like Anderson, last.²⁸ He queued up with other men at gate four and eventually boarded the jet

²⁶ Interview with Stephen W. Dant, conducted by Richard Burks Verrone, March 2005, VCA, TTU, Record OH0418-1, 21.

²⁷ Ibid., 21.

²⁸ Charles R. Anderson, *The Grunts* (California: Presidio Press, 1976), 22.

where they found amenities typical of civilian flights, such as issues of *Time* magazine, hot coffee, snacks, music, and on-flight movies. When Anderson later recorded his experiences he made apparent how odd it seemed for military personnel bound for war to assemble for flights, experience layovers and flight delays, hear boarding announcements, and enjoy the same conveniences that civilians enjoyed when flying. Similarly, Bob Julian remembered “sitting around waiting for our names to come through on the manifest” at Fort Lewis, while he “watched on T.V. as Tennessee clobbered the Air Force in the Sugar Bowl on New Year’s Day.”²⁹ One historian rightly observes that the Army’s build-up in Vietnam was also the process of building “an Americanized world for its soldiers to inhabit.”³⁰ Anderson, and other replacements, entered such a world when they boarded the contract flights that carried them to Vietnam.

Because the flights often provided men with various comforts it primed them to approach their war experience through the prism of American abundance. Gerhard Grieb enjoyed his flight to Vietnam because it was “fairly comfortable” and “basically like a commercial flight.” “There were maybe two-hundred of us in combat fatigues on a civilian [Seaboard world Airline] flight,” Timothy Vail recalled, “I mean [in] every way [it was] just a normal civilian flight.” Vail also recalled that attractive stewardesses, who were friendly and helpful to the soldiers, caught the attention of young men pining for home, former girlfriends, and desperate for affection. “Some of the guys got a little [fresh] with the stewardesses because they’d been drinking [during a layover in Honolulu, until] a lifer got on the PA system and told everyone to knock it off,” Vail

²⁹ Robert Julian, “My Story,” unpublished memoir, Robert F. Julian Papers, Vietnam Veterans Survey, Box 3, Folder 114, Military History Institute, Carlisle, PA, 2.

³⁰ Meredith Lair, *Armed With Abundance: Consumerism & Soldiering in the Vietnam War* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2011), 4-5.

recalled.³¹ Most replacements, like Grieb, observed that the entire affair of flying to Vietnam seemed very “incongruous” in the context of deploying to war.³²

While airborne deployment gave replacements far less time to mentally prepare for war, and provided a wealth of comforts, it was nevertheless an intensely unsettling experience primarily because GIs deployed alongside a men whom they did not know, and who were all assigned to replacement platoons in the United States. While replacements occasionally had the good fortune to find friends from basic or advanced training, most, like Marvin Mathiak, were ushered onto flights “full of strangers.”³³ Similarly, Charles Bowman, Jr., who served two tours in Vietnam, described both deployments as alienating and intensely isolating. “Went over by myself, came home alone, went back alone, and came home [alone again],” he remembered bitterly. Other veterans remembered flying to Vietnam “on a plane with a bunch of other G.I.’s that [they] did not know” which made for a “long, lonely” trip.³⁴

While replacements complained that they felt alone their flights, their counterparts who sailed to Vietnam earlier in the war welcomed the opportunities they had to build camaraderie with their shipmates. The majority of men who sailed to Vietnam did so during the initial American buildup, meaning that they usually trained and deployed with familiar faces. Dennis G. Scott spoke for many soldiers when he wrote that the men on his ship were a “Band of Brothers”

³¹ Interview with Timothy Vail, conducted by Richard B. Verrone, October 2005, VCA, TTU, Record OH0445, 63-64.

³² Interview with Gerhard Grieb, conducted by Kelly Crager, October 2008, VCA, TTU, Record OH0644, 15.

³³ Marvin P. Mathiak, Vietnam Veterans Survey Collection (Hereafter: VVS), Box 2, Folder 51, MHI.

³⁴ Paul F. Hauke, VVS, Box 5, Folder 187; Charles Bowman, Jr., VVS, Box 4, Folder 140; Dennis W. Bowen, VVS, Box 1, Folder 35, MHI.

by the time they reached Vietnam.³⁵ Similarly, Gonzalo Baltazar thought that spirits were high aboard his ship because those who trained “together for eight months [had] become pretty good friends.”³⁶ Although soldiers often complained of the wretched and confining conditions on ships, the long voyage to Vietnam provided soldiers three to four weeks to bond with shipmates, prepare mentally for their tour, grow accustomed to the torrid climate of the South Pacific, and think about home.³⁷

Seated on the plane, however, men confronted, and tried to prepare for the reality that they were headed directly to war. While some men became introspective and remained aloof from others with whom they would share only a fleeting connection, other replacements assuaged their fears by sharing music, rumors, and conversing to pass the time. David Hammond, for example, remembered that he sat beside a passenger who brought along with him a cassette recorder, played Led Zeppelin’s first album, and “passed [it] back and forth” for the entire flight. But, Hammond noted his flight “was somber” with many reading books and magazines to stay distracted, while others were “mainly bored.”³⁸

Early in the war and possessing far longer to steel themselves, soldiers aboard ships described how camaraderie and soldiers’ shared enthusiasm for fighting in Vietnam often buoyed morale “Everything was Viet Nam,” Ediberto Rodriguez recalled, because “there were about

³⁵ Dennis G. Scott, VVS, Box 4, Folder 153, MHI.

³⁶ Interview with Gonzalo Baltazar, conducted by Stephen Maxner, March 23, 2001, VCA, TTU, Record OH0152.

³⁷ Kyle Longley, *Grunts*, 73; Peter L. Cullen, VVS, Box 1, Folder 7; Ralph L. Godwin, VVS, Box 1, Folder 24; David W. Hoptak, VVS, Box 3, Folder 108; George R. Atkins, VVS, Box 4, Folder 118, MHI.

³⁸ Interview with David Hammond, conducted by Richard B. Verrone, May 2006, VCA, TTU, Record OH0517, 19.

1,500 of us [and] since we went over as a unit, we were psyched-out.”³⁹ Peter Cullen served two tours in Vietnam. He found his experience deploying with a stateside unit much preferable to his subsequent experience as an individual replacement.⁴⁰ Moreover, those who sailed to Vietnam experienced were far less “liminal” because they were equal members in an established community that had no prior experience in Vietnam—everyone was a newbie, even if they had prior combat experience in Korea. Replacements, however, deployed to Vietnam without knowing their future assignment, isolated from any established community, assumed the role of a “fucking new guy” once they joined their unit, and faced the challenges of escaping their “in-between” status only by proving themselves competent in combat.

Moreover, even if replacements formed temporary bonds with men aboard their flights, once they arrived in Vietnam the passengers splintered in different directions. Eugene Grabill, who flew from Fort Lewis to Cam Ranh Bay, complained that he never again saw any of men from his flight because, once in Vietnam, their assignments sent them to units all across South Vietnam.⁴¹ While Gary Noller felt fortunate to fly to Vietnam with some men he knew from advanced individual training, he remembered that once in Long Binh “a bunch of the people that I’d been with [received orders] but they didn’t call my name.” “I said goodbye to a lot of the people I knew [and] as far as I knew, we were [going] the totally opposite direction.” He did rejoin some of those men in his infantry unit, but he never again saw some of the others.⁴²

³⁹ Interview with Ediberto Rodriguez, in *Soldados*, 52.

⁴⁰ Peter L. Cullen, VVS, Box 1, Folder 7, MHI.

⁴¹ Eugene Grabill, VVS, Box 5, Folder 203, MHI.

⁴² Interview with Gary Noller, conducted by Richard B. Verrone, September 2005, VCA, TTU, Record OH0440, 97-98.

The tantalizing views of beautiful vacation sites throughout the Pacific, where the middle-class and affluent vacationed, proved a useful distraction from the loneliness they felt on flights, and was yet another example of the surreal overlap of the civilian and military worlds. Replacements could purchase mementos in route to Vietnam. Robert B. Boulder, who flew to Vietnam in 1970, sent his family postcards from each place he visited. Raised in Carlisle, Pennsylvania, Boulder was excited to demonstrate to his family that he visited, among other cities, San Francisco and Honolulu. He also took the opportunity to compare San Francisco to his hometown, scribbling on the back of a San Francisco postcard that the town “was a real dump!”⁴³ Similarly, infantryman Jerry Benson’s flight stopped in a series of exotic, tropical destinations—Hawaii, Wake Island, and the Philippines— before arriving at Tan Son Nhut.⁴⁴ When a plane carrying Randy Eagleton to Vietnam suffered mechanical issues during a refueling stop in Honolulu, Army officials placed the men “in hotels on Waikiki Beach for 24 hours.” Eagleton complained that being forced to leave the resplendent beaches, filled to capacity with vacationers, the next day was extremely difficult.⁴⁵ “I’d never been to Hawaii before,” Gary Noller reflected, “and so I said, ‘Wow, I made it to Hawaii. I’m only going to be here for two hours but I’m in Hawaii.’”⁴⁶ The layover in Honolulu tempted Frank Delgado to desert the Army. A future infantryman in the 25th Infantry Division, Delgado lamented how unfair and

⁴³ Postcards, Robert B. Boulder Collection, June 1970-1972, Folder 1, Box 1, MHI, Carlisle, PA.

⁴⁴ Interview with Jerry Benson, conducted by Stephen Maxner, September 15, 2000, VCA, TTU, Record OH0060, 16.

⁴⁵ Randy P. Eagleton, VVS, Folder 198, Box 5, MHI.

⁴⁶ Interview with Gary Noller, September 2005, VCA, TTU, Record OH0440, 93.

surreal it was to glimpse the city, with all the jubilant American vacationers, on the eve of his personal hell in Vietnam.⁴⁷

But some flights also stopped at Okinawa, where soldiers bound for Vietnam recalled and contemplated the actions of their predecessors a quarter century earlier. When Charles Anderson's flight landed in Okinawa, GIs aboard his flight marveled at the landscape where one of the most brutal land campaigns had taken place in the Pacific Theater.⁴⁸ Similarly, a flight carrying Gerry Schooler to Vietnam in 1968 circled Iwo Jima and Mt. Surubachi. "We flew right over Iwo Jima," he recalled, observing that "it was just beautiful. It really struck me because every scene I had ever seen of Iwo Jima was of destruction . . . now it was totally docile and beautiful."⁴⁹

The memory of what happened at Okinawa and Iwo Jima reminded replacements that their forebears met staunch enemy resistance during their first, terrible moments of war. Because replacements lacked any weapons as their flights drew closer to Vietnam they increasingly worried about how they would defend themselves against enemy fire when their flight landed on the tarmac. Stephen Dant, for example, remembered that replacements aboard his flight did not "have a weapon anywhere [and] you have no expectations of what it's going to be like when you land." "As far as we knew," Dant recalled, "as soon as we get off the plane we're going to start

⁴⁷ Interview with Frank Delgado in *Soldados: Chicanos in Viet Nam* (San Jose, CA: Chusma House Publishing 1990), 16-17.

⁴⁸ Anderson, *The Grunts*, 22.

⁴⁹ Interview with Gerry Schooler by Eric M. Bergerud, in *Red Thunder, Tropic Lightning: The World of a Combat Division in Vietnam* (New York: Westview Press, 1993), 11.

getting shot.” Of course, Dant’s flight landed without incident, the men filed off the plane and headed toward waiting buses where they were shuttled to a replacement depot.⁵⁰

Rarely did American soldiers ever encounter enemy combatants upon arriving in Vietnam, but some did land coincidentally with a planned VC mortar or rocket attack. Miguel Leymus, an infantryman assigned to the 11th Cavalry, flew to Vietnam with his entire company in March of 1968, part of a rare group deployment late in the war. The men encountered the combat zone less than nineteen hours after leaving the United States. On their first night in Vietnam, Vietcong elements mortared Cam Ranh Bay. Frightened and disheveled, Leymus found that “all we [could] do was find a hole because we didn’t have no weapons.”⁵¹ Their perception of danger depended, too, on whether their planes landed during the day or at night. Donald McBane, an infantryman who arrived at Cam Ranh Bay in 1970, remembered that when his flight began its descent at 0430 the pilot turned off all the lights except for indicators on the wings. Darkness consumed the men and exacerbated their fears. When the pilot made a sudden banking turn to avoid an unidentified object it only compounded their apprehension. However, his departure from the plane proceeded normally. Like many others, McBane stepped down onto the tarmac, was directed to a waiting bus, and traveled to a replacement center to await orders.⁵²

Soldiers gleaned their first impressions of Vietnam during their flight’s descent—usually prompted by the captain to look out their windows—and the majority, who had an enviable view of Vietnam from above, found the natural beauty of Vietnam breathtaking. James Cipolla, an

⁵⁰ Interview with Stephen M. Dant, March 4, 2005, VCA, TTU, Record OH0418-1, 22.

⁵¹ Interview with Miguel Leymus, in *Soldados*, 32-33.

⁵² Interview with Donald McBane, conducted by Julie Morgan, February 21, 1990, VCA, TTU, Record OH0043, 11.

infantryman who served in the 25th Infantry Division, remembered “what a beautiful country [Vietnam was with] a white coastline, brilliant greens, [and] the rice paddies etched on the land.”⁵³ “The country was beautiful,” Russ Palm remembered upon landing at Tan Son Nhut in 1966, “it was serene getting off that plane [and it] gave me a false sense of security.”⁵⁴ “What a beautiful country,” one veteran remarked. Another remembered “how interesting and tropical the place looked when we circled and made ready to land.” Yet another soldier observed: “the country was amazing. I looked around, and I said, ‘My God: I have never in my life seen anything like this.’”⁵⁵ But, replacements’ wrenching transition from security and comfort to discomfort and danger also had its corollary in many GIs discovering that beautiful, resort-like scenic vistas in Vietnam, that perhaps in a different time could have been an ideal vacation destination, mixed seamlessly with putrid, urban environments.

Replacements also stole glimpses of the “Americanized world” that rear-echelon soldiers inhabited during their first days in Vietnam. As infantrymen, they would subsequently enjoy the luxuries of rear bases during in-country Rest & Recreation (R&R), usually awarded to men for accomplishments in the field, when units “stood-down” on a bi-weekly or monthly basis, and when soldiers prepared to return to the United States. In any case, soldiers found their initial experiences in Vietnam surreal precisely because it defied their preconceptions of war, which presumed that, as one historian observes, “austerity and deprivation [were] standard components

⁵³ James Cipolla interviewed in Bergerud, *Tropic Lighting*, 13.

⁵⁴ Interview with Russ Palm, conducted by Harriet Langston, June 22, 2002, VCA, TTU, Record OH0223.

⁵⁵ These three quotes derive from interviews with James Cipolla, R. F. Broyles, and Bob Connor in Bergerud, *Red Thunder*, *Tropic Lighting*, 12-13.

of a brutal but necessary process.”⁵⁶ Specialist George Anderson spent six months in the field on combat operations with the 101st Airborne Division in 1966 before receiving a well-earned support position in Nha Trang. He “realized that some guys—probably the majority in Viet Nam—have it so good in comparison to the infantry and those artillery, etc., who support it.” His new assignment felt “more like [living in] a resort area,” he wrote to a friend.⁵⁷ When Gerhard Grieb’s Pan Am flight landed at Tan Son Nhut in 1967, he noticed that men there had “slot machines [and airmen and soldiers] were putting in money.” The “incongruous” overlap of Las Vegas and Vietnam rattled Grieb’s assumptions about the war in Vietnam, where some personnel led apparently privileged lives in the rear.⁵⁸ For replacements, though, their impressions of these “resort” areas demarcated yet another threshold that defined their tour in Vietnam; the permeable boundaries that existed between the material comfort of rear bases and the dangerous, primitive conditions outside the “wire” where they fought the enemy.

Yet again replacements encountered veterans on the tarmac in Vietnam. Newly-arrived GIs suffered the jeers and taunts of veterans who found their naiveté and innocence humorous and tragic. Frederick Downs, in his memoir *The Killing Zone*, remembered that when he landed in Vietnam, several veterans shouted at him: “You’ll be sorrriyy!” and “New cannon fodder!”⁵⁹ Another veteran recalled that when he arrived at Bien Hoa, he heard veterans opposite a chain-link fence, some wearing ragged jungle fatigues, shouting: “Here’s our replacements! Have a

⁵⁶ Lair, *Armed with Abundance*, 4.

⁵⁷ George Anderson to Albert Ettinger, June 29, 1966, Albert Ettinger Papers, Project Vietnam, MHI, Carlisle, PA.

⁵⁸ Interview with Gerhard Grieb, 2008, VCA, TTU, Record OH0644, 15.

⁵⁹ Frederick Downs, *The Killing Zone: My Life in the Vietnam War* (New York: Norton, 1978), 4.

nice time boys.”⁶⁰ The verbal hazing that newbies suffered from departing veterans upon their arrival in Vietnam served as a reminder of their liminal status between civilian and soldier, resolved only once they demonstrated their skills in combat and earned the respect of those in their units.

Shrewd replacements took advantage of fleeting opportunities to speak with veterans and, having endured their initial gibes, learned what they could about the war. Sergeant William Nelson wrote his parents in 1969 from the 22nd Replacement Center. He emphasized to his parents how quiet it was in the rear where there was “no trouble whatsoever.” He talked with many infantrymen, apparently preparing to depart Vietnam, who gave him the rub on what the war was “really like” and, compared with the information Nelson received from those at the replacement center, he concluded that rear-echelon personnel “just don’t know” about the war.⁶¹ Jerry Benson decided to ask questions and find out what information he could about his assignment to the First Infantry Division while still at Bien Hoa. He “heard some good things about it at Fort Polk” during AIT, but found “some guys who are in their 2nd tour of duty here who [said they] requested to be put in the Big Red One as it is called.” Another soldier who was already in Vietnam a month before Benson arrived told him “about a lot of the things he had done and seen.”⁶² Although these conversations were brief and superficial, they helped replacements, now sufficiently aware of their own ignorance, assuage the anxiety they suffered largely from not knowing what their future in Vietnam held.

⁶⁰ Interview with James Scales, June 22, 2002, VCA, TTU, Record OH0221.

⁶¹ William Nelson to Parents, July 30, 1969, in *Dear America*, 38.

⁶² Jerry Benson to Parents, May 20, 1968 and May 24, 1968, Jerry Benson Papers, TTU, Box 1, Folder 4.

Nevertheless, the transitional status of “replacement” defined their entire experience during “processing,” which was the next stage of their journey upon landing in Vietnam. The Army made a token effort to educate soldiers about the conflict during processing by presenting soldiers with “Welcome Packets.” But these pamphlets eschewed direct remarks about combat and instead opted for euphemisms such as “rolling back” the Vietcong and calls for “devotion to long duty hours and hard work.” The Army further promised replacements that their “assignment to this embattled nation of Southeast Asia will be interesting and professionally profitable” and wished the men “a successful tour.”⁶³ Those who created the seventeen-page Welcome Packet in the Information Office of the U.S. Army (Republic of Vietnam) intended for it to introduce replacements to the basics of Vietnamese culture and customs, religious practices, Vietnamese phrases and idioms, and what to expect during “in-processing” at replacement centers.

“Welcome Packets” were insufficient substitutes for the vital information that soldiers learned only by absorbing lessons from their unit’s soldier culture. Although “Welcome Packets” provided replacements with knowledge about basic procedures and expectations in country, it did not answer nagging questions about survival, the enemy, and the reasons for their service in Vietnam. The answers to the first two questions were entirely dependent on their specific assignment and their unit’s area of operations. How soldiers answered the third question, about the purpose of their service, depended very much on the ever-changing strategic environment in Vietnam. Given that Vietnam contained diverse topographical, ecological, and demographic environments that included low-lying deltas, triple-canopy jungles, coastal plains, highlands, and mountains, only soldier culture—which comprised behaviors, values, and practices specifically

⁶³ United States Army, Vietnam: Welcome Packet, Military History Institute, Carlisle, PA. 1 Folder.

attuned to each occupational environment—could provide soldiers with robust and practical knowledge about each region.

Despite the Army's superficial attempt to acculturate soldiers to Vietnam, replacements nevertheless felt disoriented and isolated because of the yawning cultural gap that existed between them and the peoples they were supposed to help. As one historian rightly observes, American men had their "world [turned] upside down" when they landed in Vietnam. "What is normally considered good becomes bad and vice versa. In Vietnam, even in the absence of war, military life was nearly the exact opposite of civilian life in the United States."⁶⁴ Men were thrust into an environment that bore little resemblance to the lives they left behind in America. The tropical climate of Vietnam and the topography of the land, the relationships between American soldiers and Vietnamese women, and living conditions that fell well below the standard American poverty line, especially for men operating in the field, all came as a shock to many new arrivals to Vietnam.

Unable to envision from the air how the natural beauty of Vietnam coexisted with disturbing, even incomprehensible levels of poverty and human suffering, replacements who had never seen the conditions of a developing nation were absolutely shocked by the seemingly degrading circumstances in which many Vietnamese lived.⁶⁵ Few replacements had ever "been away from home before, let alone 12,000 miles, and [were] scared, homesick, and lost," as a sergeant observed.⁶⁶ Infantryman John Dabonka aptly summarized the contrasts between American and Vietnamese poverty: "We are more than millionaires to these people—they have

⁶⁴ Bergerud, *Red Thunder, Tropic Lightning*, 10-11.

⁶⁵ Longley, *Grunts*, 75.

⁶⁶ R. B. Glendinning, Jr. to Albert Ettinger, December 16, 1966, Albert Ettinger Papers, Project Vietnam, MHI.

nothing. I can't see how people can live like this." He subsequently chastised his mother for complaining about the family television acting up, when "these people don't even have the slightest idea what a TV is." He was also struck by the novelty of some Vietnamese practices, writing that people "live like pigs" because "they don't know how to use soap. When they go to the bathroom, they go wherever they're standing, they don't care who is looking."⁶⁷

As replacements processed through the Army's bureaucratic apparatus, they had only the limited tools acquired from prior training in the United States at their disposal to make sense of their new experiences in Vietnam. Like many replacements, Michael O. Durack remembered that when he landed in Vietnam, he felt "scared, confused, [and] in awe of [the] entire war effort."⁶⁸ Another replacement, who would subsequently serve with the 3-12 Infantry, remembered he was also "disoriented" when he arrived. Seeing "so many guys coming and going in 1969," he remained confused for several days because he lacked an assignment and purpose in Vietnam. "You were pretty much on your own," Dennis W. Bowen remembered, observing that replacements had to "ask questions or stay ignorant." Most replacements were simply "anxious to know what it was going to be like in an infantry [unit] and whether [they] were going to make it."⁶⁹ Their first days in Vietnam, filled with paperwork and processing, compounded many replacements' sense that they were utterly alone and unprepared for the war.

Replacements hardly expected their war would begin with days of bureaucratic paperwork. Based on their impressions from watching World War II films and undergoing Army

⁶⁷ John Dabonka to Parents, Circa 1967, *Dear America*, 54.

⁶⁸ Michael O. Durack, VVS, Box 4, Folder 135, MHI.

⁶⁹ J. Fred Waterman, VVS, Box 3, Folder 88; Dennis W. Bowen, VVS, Box 2, Folder 35; Gerald T. Lacombe, VVS, Box 2, Folder 40, MHI.

training, GIs naively believed that when they landed in Vietnam they would immediately be thrust into combat. Typical was how Bob Julian remembered his initial reaction when, upon landing in Vietnam, he discovered a quite serene atmosphere in Cam Ranh Bay. “Some actually wondered if we were going to have to fight our way off the aircraft,” Julian wrote, “but we were really in a very secure area.” Julian observed that the only subtle indication of danger was the “wire mesh” covering the windows of a bus that transported him to the replacement center, which was meant “to protect [replacements] against grenades” thrown by VC saboteurs.⁷⁰

The most pronounced enemy that replacements confronted was the taxing heat and humidity that became a constant irritant during their tours in Vietnam. Soldiers endured the hot, rainy seasons between May and mid-September and the warm, dry season from mid-October to mid-March.⁷¹ Soldiers often arrived at Tan Son Nhut or other airports and discovered upon crossing the threshold of the plane that “the heat [began] to flush your head [and] sweat start[ed] to flow,” drenching their clothes.⁷² “The first thing you notice going down the ramp is a heavy sweet smell that floods your nose, along with a somewhat dirty feeling all around,” Larry Heinemann wrote. Heinemann’s assessment of Vietnam was blunt, describing the country as “very hot” and generally a “shithole.”⁷³ Another soldier, buffeted with an array of sensory

⁷⁰ Julian, “My Story,” MHI, 2-3.

⁷¹ Harry G. Summers, Jr., *The Historical Atlas of the Vietnam War* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1995), 22.

⁷² Richard Loffler to Parents, December 5, 1966 in *Dear America*, 36; Also see, interview with Gonzalo Baltazar, VCA, TTU, Record OH0152.

⁷³ Larry Heinemann, VVS, Box 3, Folder 117, MHI.

information, simply wrote: “Hot hot hot. Bugs. The smell. The rain, mud. [It was a lot] to get used to.”⁷⁴

During processing on rear bases, replacements were invariably ensconced in relative safety and removed from the impoverishment that afflicted the Vietnamese. Louis Forrisi, who arrived in 1971 to serve with the 3-5 Cavalry, found startling the juxtaposition of Vietnamese poverty and American abundance in Cam Ranh Bay. When he first arrived he was confused about why the replacements in his cadre were not told what to do “in case of attack” or given weapons. He soon realized why, because “the view of the base was unbelievable. It looked as if we never left the States.” The air base possessed “barracks, workshops, motor pools and paved roads as far as we could see.” Replacements could shop at the base’s various Post Exchanges, play basketball on one of its several courts, and relax at its beach. Outside the base, however, Forrisi noticed that the Vietnamese tragically lived in filth and poverty.⁷⁵

Forrisi, like many replacements, arrived in Vietnam expecting to “do some real soldiering.” Instead, replacements might spend several days on “shit-burning details” and pulling Kitchen Police (KP) duty. Allan Suydam expected that his Infantry MOS exempted him from degrading duties in Vietnam. However, when he stood in formation after exiting his plane at Long Binh, a surly private approached him and ordered that he commence burning the contents of latrines for the next several days.⁷⁶ The absence of enemy fire and a general sense of urgency among military personnel who were supposedly serving in a warzone perplexed most new arrivals in Vietnam. Forrisi was “totally amazed that no one carried a rifle [at Cam Ranh Bay],

⁷⁴ Paul N. Yeckel, VVS, Box 4, Folder 160, MHI.

⁷⁵ Louis Forrisi, Unpublished Memoir, Viet Nam War Document Collection, Box 1, Folder 15, MHI, 1-2.

⁷⁶ Interview with Allan Suydam, conducted by Laura Calkins, February 26, 2004, VCA, TTU, Record OH0354.

[because] this was just not what I had expected to see [in Vietnam].”⁷⁷ Peter Faber, who served as an infantry platoon leader with the Marine 1st Infantry Division in 1965, was among the thousands who arrived in Vietnam during the first year of major combat operations. Like Philip Caputo, who wrote that he “saw himself charging up some distant beachhead, like John Wayne in *The Sands of Iwo Jima*, and then coming home a suntanned warrior with medals on my chest,” Faber similarly thought his landing in Vietnam would conform to the notions he held about war which mostly derived from drill instructor bravado and popular films. “I suppose we all expected that we were going to be shot at,” Faber recalled, but he saw instead “Air Force guys lying in their T-shirts in the weeds sleeping and drinking cokes, smoking and joking, laughing and telling lies and laughing at us.”⁷⁸

Replacements generally discovered an incredible difference existed between their expectations of the war and the safe, serene environment existing on rear bases. Although Faber received his commission through ROTC and described himself as well informed on political issues during the 1960s, he was nevertheless convinced that his experience landing in Vietnam would resonate with the old war films and television series he watched as a kid.⁷⁹ Similarly, Gonzalo Baltazar remembered wondering if the men were “going to get off the plane fighting [or would] have to run for cover.” Because Miguel Gastelo was assigned to the infantry, he believed that he would “start fighting” as soon as he landed in Vietnam. However, he too received a “shit detail” assignment, cleaning latrines around the replacement center for several days. While William R. Brown “expected to hear the rattle of mg [machine gun] fire and the thud of

⁷⁷ Forrisi, unpublished memoir, MHI, 1-2.

⁷⁸ Philip Caputo, *A Rumor of War*, 6.

⁷⁹ Interview with Peter Faber, conducted by Stephen Maxner, July 19, 2000, VCA, TTU, Record OH0024, 10-11.

incoming mortar rounds,” he instead discovered that “no such thing happened.” “I was expecting the wild, wild east,” he recalled, “but . . . everything proceeded in a quiet and orderly manner.”⁸⁰

Their first exposure to anything resembling combat during “processing” occurred on their bus ride from the airbase to a replacement center. Given that soldiers arrived in Vietnam with little or no knowledge about the Vietnamese, such an admission shocked those who, at this point, were forming their initial opinions about the people on whose behalf they were supposedly fighting. Of course, as Gutierrez humorously observed, he perceived that the screens were more apt “to keep [the] guys [inside] from jumping out of the bus.”⁸¹ Whether or not any Vietnamese tried to attack busses with grenades, replacements often countenanced harassing sniper fire from well-concealed VC. Dennis Lane, for example, worried about the constant sniper fire his bus took “all the way up” from Qui Nhon to Duc Pho.⁸² While airbases like Tan Son Nhut were relatively safe from attack, busses traversed contested terrain, giving replacements their first experience with the ubiquitous danger existing outside the “wire.”

Most replacements shared a common realization that, in these first days, their governing assumptions about the war were flawed, regardless of their prior education, socioeconomic standing, or regional background. Christian G. Appy, summarizing his findings from interviews with hundreds of veterans, argued that GIs found arrival “strangely surreal . . . like falling asleep during an old war movie, only to wake up and find oneself flailing in the sand of a tropical beach

⁸⁰ Interview with Gonzalo Baltazar, VCA, TTU, OH0152, 12; Interview with Miguel Gastelo, *Soldados*, 122; William. R Brown, VVS, Box 4, Folder 134, MHI.

⁸¹ Interview with Frank Gutierrez, conducted by Kim Sawyer, 2001, The Vietnam Archive, TTU, Record OH0078, 8-9.

⁸² Dennis W. Lane to Parents, December 1967, *Dear America*, 45.

resort.”⁸³ Jerry Benson, soon to be an infantryman in the First Infantry Division, wrote while still at Bien Hoa that “thing aren’t near as bad as I pictured them. They have most everything you need; showers, PX, trade shops, tailor shops, even ice for your drinks at meal time, and stands to buy Cokes.”⁸⁴ Because David Hammond had not previously encountered anyone with Vietnam military service in his rural community, he was naïve about what to expect in Vietnam.

‘All we can visualize is that we’re going to land in some kind of a thing like is on the news where bombs are going off, rockets and machine guns and we land and everybody’s afraid. When we get off the plane, you think you’re supposed to start running or they’ll hand you an M-16 or something,’ Hammond remembered. But, when he stepped off the plane he did not receive a weapon. Nor was the base receiving incoming fire. His worst enemy, at first, was the muggy atmosphere and offensive odors.⁸⁵

During their first week in Vietnam, replacements transferred from the airbase where their plane landed to a replacement center, where they apprehensively waited for their assignment to a unit in the field. They continued to experience profound isolation and disorientation, and their fellow arrivals found it seemingly useless to forge any lasting bonds or friendships, knowing that they would likely be dispersed to different units. Therefore, replacements, many of whom had never been separated from their families, intensely craved a sense of belonging and a framework through which they could make sense of their experiences. They also pined for home.

Fortunately, newer communication technologies during the Sixties reduced the lag that usually attended soldiers’ efforts to communicate, and receive news from, the home front. Replacements, during their first weeks in Vietnam, relied on radio, magazines, and national

⁸³ Appy, *Working-Class War*, 118.

⁸⁴ Jerry Benson to Parents, May 24, 1968, Jerry Benson Papers, VCA, TTU, Box 1, Folder 4.

⁸⁵ Interview with David Hammond, conducted by Richard B. Verrone, 2006, The Vietnam Archive, TTU, Record OH0517, 6, 19.

newspapers to cope with their displacement from home, and establish a foothold in Vietnam. For example, although lieutenant Robert Ransom read *Stars and Stripes* and listened to the Armed Forces Radio newscasts, he still wrote to his parents that he felt “very cut off from the world outside of Vietnam.” The remedy for his estrangement was asking his mother to subscribe him to *Newsweek* and forward the magazine to Vietnam.⁸⁶ Because replacements did not yet occupy a stable community in Vietnam, they often felt the most isolated during “processing” in the rear. Thus, replacements made sense of their new surroundings by also drawing parallels between seemingly familiar aspects of Vietnam and home. Long Binh reminded one soldier of “our Coney Island, ‘honky tonk,’ with dirt everywhere.”⁸⁷ Another soldier assuaged his loneliness by looking to the stars and realizing “that’s the same sky I know from home. “Immediately [gazing into the night sky] gave me kind of a feeling that this is a far different place but it’s the same place,” he recalled. He pooled money together with other homesick replacements in his temporary unit and had telescopes sent from the United States so that they could all stargaze at night.⁸⁸

While “processing” all replacements existed in a confusing space where they were at once part of the war and yet seemingly removed from it. As replacements awaited assignments to infantry units in the field, some opportunistic GIs escaped combat duty by persuading officials that they possessed desirable skills, such as typing, for support positions in the rear. But boredom and isolation taxed their patience during “processing.” It was “two hectic days,” one soldier remembered, best summarized as “hurry up and wait.” Throughout the ordeal replacements

⁸⁶ Robert Ransom to Parents, March 27, 1968 in *Dear America*, 39-40.

⁸⁷ Richard Loffler to Parents, December 5, 1966 in *Dear America*, 37.

⁸⁸ Interview with Donald McBane, VCA, TTU, Record OH0043, 11.

impatiently longed to “go to the field.”⁸⁹ “I had no idea what my future held [and] I was too stupid to be worried,” James Gephardt recalled, complaining that he also celebrated his nineteenth birthday “alone” in the rear.⁹⁰ While some men processed in as little as one day and were packed up and shipped to their unit, others remained in limbo for a week or longer due to missing paperwork, clerical errors, or poor weather preventing flights to distant bases.⁹¹ When they finally completed processing and held their orders for the field, the dangers that awaited them began to feel real.

Once soldiers received orders to report to a specific unit, they boarded military transports for a quick flight to another base in South Vietnam, and eventually reached their new home for the next year. From the time of induction until the completion of in-country processing, soldiers went through the system primarily as individuals, unable to form lasting connections with others who, after completion of training or after landing in Vietnam, would disperse throughout the country. Now, though, replacements joined units that, to varying degrees, possessed complex sets of behaviors, attitudes, and practices developed with the aim of enabling troops to survive their tours. More specifically, soldier culture in these units evolved within the context of one-year tours, channeling individual actions toward the collective need to survive only 365 days.

First, though, replacements completed guerilla warfare training at the brigade or divisional level (usually called “Jungle Warfare School”) before reaching their company

⁸⁹ Steve G. Lewis, VVS, Box 1, Folder 38; Thomas C. Davies, VVS, Box 1, Folder 12; Lee T. McCain, VVS, Box 1, Folder 3, MHI.

⁹⁰ James F. Gephardt, VVS, Box 3, Folder 97, MHI.

⁹¹ See, for example, Allen W. Sims, VVS, Box 3, Folder 107; Roger Borroel, Box 2, Folder 36; Ralph L. Godwin, Box 2, Folder 24.

headquarters in the field. The 25th Infantry Division, for example, required that all replacements undergo two weeks of jungle warfare training before joining their infantry company in the field. Given that their area of operations (AO) around Cu Chi contained more underground tunnels per square mile than any other region in Vietnam, the 25th Infantry Division established its Jungle Warfare School partly to provide replacements with the specialized knowledge and skills necessary to identify, uncover, and explore tunnels, disarm booby-traps, and ferret out the enemy; all of which were not robustly covered during their training in the United States.⁹² But, the depth and duration of these schools varied across units. For example, David Hammond completed “about a two-day, it might have been a one-day kind of crash course” where he crawled through “make-believe” mine fields and learned about various booby-traps.⁹³

Common to all schools was an emphasis on the character of the enemy in a specific AO, meant to shore up concepts taught in AIT but now incorporating the nuances learned from soldiers’ shared experiences in the field. Replacements received lessons about enemy field craft, such as bunker complexes, and advice designed to ensure they were not killed in an avoidable incident. One such tip involved teaching infantrymen how to wrap tape around the firing pins of their fragmentation grenades to prevent a jungle vine or other obstruction from pulling the pin loose, arming the device, and detonating with fatal effect. “We had some short briefings with some Special Forces and Green Beret guys,” Gonzalo Baltazar remembered, “they [told] us what to expect out in the jungle.” He learned the intricacies of “what kind of booby traps to look for, what kinds of booby traps [the enemy possessed], and how to disarm them.” Because Baltazar’s

⁹² Tom Mangold and John Penycate, *The Tunnels of Cu Chi: A Harrowing Account of America’s Tunnel Rats in the Underground Battlefields of Vietnam* (New York: Pan Books, 1986); Bergerud, *Red Thunder, Tropic Lightning*, 185-194.

⁹³ Interview with David Hammond, May 2006, VCA, TTU, Record OH0517, 22.

unit would operate in a densely populated AO, where booby-traps were extremely common, his training focused substantially on teaching replacements how to identify and avoid traps, conduct combat operations, and navigate interactions with villagers in VC-controlled hamlets. The instructors also briefed replacements “on the women, of course, [and] the [sexually transmitted] diseases” American soldiers commonly acquired in Vietnam.⁹⁴

When replacements finally joined their platoon in the field, seasoned noncommissioned officers became crucial to maintaining the continuity of unit memory by transmitting knowledge soldiers’ learned from experiences in a specific context, location, and environment. While replacements might have received extensive, generalized training in infantry tactics in AIT and more specialized lessons at the divisional or brigade schools in Vietnam, only through constant interaction with seasoned soldiers in the platoon could they learn about their platoon’s formal and informal procedures, lines of authority, and social cliques. NCOs first and foremost hardened soldiers against the fear of death. Louis Forrissi noted that when he first arrived with the 3-5 Cavalry, the Sergeant Major sat all the replacements down and “said something that would stick in my mind forever: [that] everyone out there is scared, and everyone is afraid to die, but when the shooting starts most men forget their fears and just react because there wasn’t time to be scared once the shit hit the fan.”⁹⁵ If replacements met their units in the field or at a remote firebase, they might witness the sobering sight of body bags being loaded onto the same helicopters they had just departed. One soldier remembered being treated poorly as a “cherry replacement” because he joined the platoon immediately after “eleven men had just been killed

⁹⁴ Interview with Gonzalo Baltazar, VCA, TTU, Record OH0152, 14-15.

⁹⁵ Forrissi, unpublished memoir, Vietnam War Document Collection, MHI.

in action.”⁹⁶ Such episodes underscored the fact that replacements were filling the spots often opened by those killed or wounded.

Naïve and untested, replacements joined platoons as liminal “fucking new guys” (FNGs) who, in the following weeks, had to prove their competence in the field.⁹⁷ Those who demonstrated incompetence faced constant, pointed harassment by seasoned NCOs. “No one wanted you around until about 90 days in country,” one veteran recalled.⁹⁸ Replacements entered an intensely skeptical community of seasoned soldiers, where there existed “no closeness at first,” as one soldier recalled.⁹⁹ Squad members informed one replacement that he was “a new guy who knew nothing” and his presence put “everyone’s life on the line” until he learned “the ropes.”¹⁰⁰ As Thomas Davies observed, replacements were outsiders until they proved themselves.¹⁰¹ If replacements held fast in combat they gradually earned the respect of their superiors and were invited to join the community of soldiers in their platoon.¹⁰²

The “seasoning” process involved replacements mastering infantry weapons, learning how to distinguish between civilians and Viet Cong, understanding how to set ambushes, establish listening posts, searching villages, spotting booby-traps, and maintaining personal

⁹⁶ Dennis W. Bowen, VVS, Box 1, Folder 35, MHI.

⁹⁷ Lee. T. McCain, VVS, Box 1, Folder 3, Box 1; Albert S. Brown, VVS, Box 1, Folder 8, MHI.

⁹⁸ Charles Bowman, Jr., VVS, Box 4, Folder 140, MHI.

⁹⁹ Joseph Herbert, VVS, Box 2, Folder 48, MHI.

¹⁰⁰ John W. Thomas, VVS, Box 2, Folder 77, MHI.

¹⁰¹ Thomas Davies, VVS, Box 1, Folder 12, MHI.

¹⁰² Also see Gerald T. Lacombe, VVS, Box 1, Folder 40; Randy Phillip, VVS, Box 5, Folder 198; Eugene Grabill, VVS, Box 5, Folder 203; Dennis K. Meschberger, VVS, Box 5, Folder 185; Robert (Bob) A. Morris, VVS, Box 4, Folder 156; Allen F. Wilson, VVS, Box 4, Folder 152, MHI.

hygiene. By preventing replacements from making novice mistakes, NCOs improved all soldiers' odds of survival by helping replacements learn all this, and more, through "on-the-job training." The ability to learn from experience explained why soldiers were more likely to die in the first three months of their tour and least likely to die in the final three months of their tour. Based on casualty statistics compiled by the Department of Defense, men were roughly five times more likely to die at the beginning of their tour than at the end. During the entire conflict, the U.S. Army reported 11,502 soldiers were killed within the first three months, while only 1,714 died in their "fourth three months" in Vietnam.¹⁰³

Until new replacements were competent enough in the basic routine of patrolling and able to discern signs of enemy activity, NCOs often held them back from duties that might endanger the squad. The FNGs were expected to "stay out of the way," observe everything that other soldiers did, listen intently, learn, and imitate the actions of more veteran men in the squad. Michael Morris remembered his squad leader doing just that because "they wouldn't put me up to the point because there'd be no real reason to do that. I wouldn't help them and I'd probably just get us all killed." Still, Morris insisted that even with NCOs holding his hand, "as a new guy, you had about twenty minutes to get acclimated. Then you were expected to pick up what everybody else was doing and pull your weight."¹⁰⁴ Morris's remembrances were similar to how Russ Palm recalled landing at Tan Son Nhut and wondering if "there [was] a war [even] going on in this country." But he discovered that his entire tour of duty was a learning experience. "I learned what to watch for. I learned who to trust. I learned the looks not to trust. I learned the

¹⁰³ "U.S. Combat Deaths by Months in Country, January 1967-December 1972," in Ron Milam, *Not a Gentleman's War: An Inside View of Junior Officers in the Vietnam War* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2010), 234.

¹⁰⁴ Interview with Michael Morris, conducted by Stephen Maxner, VCA, TTU, Record OH0263, 41-43.

kids not to trust [and] the women [not to trust],” he recalled.¹⁰⁵ These invaluable lessons were not contained inside any official pamphlet on the war or field manual. Instead, soldiers were accessing and pulling knowledge from soldier culture, which functioned as a veritable “cloud” of information that persisted long after those who initially contributed to its creation had departed Vietnam.¹⁰⁶

Replacements, like James T. Gillam, were placed in the care of “an experienced sergeant” who guided “green” troops on less demanding patrols that were designed to introduce them to the habits and practices necessary for survival in the field. When Gillam joined the 4th Infantry Division at Camp Enari in the central highlands, he took “point” on a mock patrol, walking at the head of the column. Startled by Montagnard women who passed through the jungle ahead of Gillam, he instinctively raised his M-16 to fire on who he presumed were Viet Cong. But, just before he could pull the trigger an experienced sergeant grabbed his rifle, using the nearly fatal incident to explain to all of the men how villagers often used various trails and paths through the jungle to sell their wares in local markets around Camp Enari. Gillam eventually made the transition from “FNG” to a bona fide soldier, and much later received a promotion to NCO with the 1-22 Infantry toward the end of his tour. He later recalled that his success and ultimate

¹⁰⁵ Interview with Russ Palm, June 22, 2002, VCA, TTU, OH0223.

¹⁰⁶ Christoph Kamissek and Jonas Kreienbaum, “An Imperial Cloud? Conceptualising Interimperial Connections and Transimperial Knowledge,” *Journal of Early Modern History* 14, no. 2 (2016): 164-182. Kamissek and Kreienbaum suggest that European empires shared an “imperial cloud” defined as “a shared imperial reservoir of knowledge, notions and narratives that is not located in a particular empire, but is—at least potentially—accessible by imperial actors in different metropolises and peripheries.” (182). The authors use “cloud computing” as their starting point for this conceptualization, which also has legs for understanding the creation and evolution of “soldier culture” in Vietnam. Soldiers “crowd source” data into a collective knowledge bank, much like how a Google Document is created by input from multiple users and thus reflects diverse input. Soldiers were subsequently able to “retrieve data” to bring replacements up to speed. Furthermore, just as a “cloud” persists indefinitely, soldier culture endured well past the time when its original creators were killed or departed Vietnam. Yet, at the same time, soldiers continually modified “soldier culture” by continuing to input new data into the shared “reservoir of knowledge.”

survival stemmed from his conscious observance of the practices instilled in him by his sergeant mentor during his first weeks in Vietnam.¹⁰⁷

Replacements also hardly knew how to distinguish between necessary and useless gear when they geared up for patrols and thus turned toward more experienced soldiers for advice. For example, Glyn Haynie reported to Company A, 3-1 Infantry, in the 11th Infantry Brigade, in 1968 and found the NCOs' knowledge in his platoon indispensable for his survival. Like all replacements, Haynie reported to a supply sergeant and received the infantryman's complement of gear—M-16, grenades, ammunition, and other items ranging from insect repellant to a poncho—which he promptly began packing up for his first patrol in the field. When the platoon sergeant observed Haynie trying to cram an inordinate amount of gear into his pack, he decided to help Haynie learn how to distinguish between items necessary for survival and those that were a frivolous waste of space and unnecessary burden. He advised Haynie to take “stationery and pen, toothbrush and paste, razor, soap, mosquito repellent, cigarettes, lighter with flint and fluid, Bible, and camera with film.” He also taught Haynie how to heat his C-rations by lighting a small clump of C-4 explosive, as well as, how to “get everything packed while distributing the weight in the rucksack.”¹⁰⁸ Well-timed advice from sergeants eased the “green” soldiers' burden in the field, and by preventing Americans from casually discarding useless items in the field it also served the practical purpose of denying the enemy food, weapons, or other comforts.

Replacements relied increasingly on the expertise of NCOs when they took part in real patrols, where the potential for death and maiming grew exponentially. Fred Waterman, who

¹⁰⁷ James T. Gillam, *Life and Death in the Central Highlands: An American Sergeant in the Vietnam War, 1968-1970* (Denton, TX: University of North Texas Press, 2006), 61-62.

¹⁰⁸ Glyn Haynie, *When I Turned Nineteen: A Vietnam War Memoir* (Published by Glyn Haynie, 2017), 24-25.

served with Charlie Company, 4-12 Infantry, from July 1969 to July 1970, credited Sergeant Kendall Morgan with helping him integrate into the unit by teaching him how to conduct combat patrols. Sergeant Morgan served as Waterman's squad leader and "went out of his way to teach us everything he knew." Among Morgan's various lessons were instructions on how to "lay down fire effectively and place a claymore mine so it will do the most damage . . . how to find signs of the enemy and 'to read' a trail and how to use all my senses including smell [to locate the enemy]." Sergeant Morgan helped Waterman transition "from 'newfer'" to an equal member of the platoon.¹⁰⁹

NCOs played an outsized role in helping replacements learn all the skills, habits, and behaviors that gradually helped them transition from "newbie" to soldier. Stephen M. Dant fondly recalled that an NCO "took me under his wing" during his initial operations. Serving beside the sergeant helped assuage Dant's anxiety because, as he says, "I had somebody watching out for me that I didn't do something stupid the first few days that I was there."¹¹⁰ Denny Watters stated that sergeants were the real leaders in Vietnam while John C. Williamson noted that a "Sergeant Rodriguez" in his platoon who had prior military experience in Korea "made [a] HUGE difference for me."¹¹¹ When John C. Basch reached B Troop of the 1-17 Armored Cavalry in 1968, an "old Sergeant 1st Class in my platoon [who] had well over 20 years in [the] service when I met him . . . was harder than nails on the surface but if he took a liking to you then he'd share his knowledge." Basch and the other men affectionately called him "Pappy"

¹⁰⁹ Fred Waterman, "My Story," Unpublished Memoir, J. Fred Waterman Papers, Vietnam War Survey, Box 3, Folder 88, MHI, Carlisle, PA.

¹¹⁰ Interview with Stephen M. Dant, March 2005, VCA, TTU, Record OH418-1, 25.

¹¹¹ Denny Watters, VVS, Box 3, Folder 89; John C. Williamson, VVS, Box 3, Folder 94, MHI

and were indebted to him by learning “how to treat people as well as what to do in various combat situations.”¹¹² Through these various processes and methods, repeated for every new arrival, corporals and sergeants in the platoon became crucial teachers of their unit’s culture, and they played a formative role in the junior enlisted experience.

If replacements survived long enough in Vietnam, they would accumulate knowledge from experience by patrolling and operating in the field, learning that “realistically you weren’t ready, [because] in actual combat, it was a totally different story [than training]. You just didn’t go by the book anymore. You learn as you went along in Vietnam.”¹¹³ What these men would learn as they “went along in Vietnam” was that combat was unpredictable and sporadic. Companies and battalions maneuvering in the field could patrol for weeks without making contact with the enemy—the only sign of enemy activity often being the well concealed booby-trap or a lone sniper taking pot shots at the platoon. Then, suddenly, companies might find themselves embroiled in intense combat with well-trained enemy units for hours or days. Casualties, both wounded and killed in action, could exceed the number of available replacements and cause battalion or company commanders to consolidate units to preserve fighting effectiveness. For example, Louis A. Forrisi joined a company of the 3rd Battalion, 5th Infantry Regiment near Khe Sanh days before a well-executed NVA ambush on a road convoy left First Platoon in his company “so short of men that the troop commander came up and told us

¹¹² John C. Basch, VVS, Box 4, Folder 120, MHI.

¹¹³ Interview with Gonzalo Baltazar, VCA, TTU, Record OH0152, 7.

we would all be assigned to first platoon.”¹¹⁴ Because platoons often experienced an incredible amount of attrition due to casualties, disease, and individual rotations, new guys soon became the “veterans” in their platoon.

It was common for men with three to six month’s experience in Vietnam to become the most seasoned soldiers in their platoons during times of acute attrition from combat operations. First Platoon of Alpha Company, 3rd Battalion, 1st Infantry Regiment of the Americal (23rd) Division suffered an incredibly high attrition rate from combat and individual rotations between June and September 1969—in the end, the platoon’s leadership was devastated from the top down. Glyn Haynie arrived with First Platoon in early-1969 when platoon had only 25 men of an authorized 44. By July 1969 the platoon still mustered only 26 men, and the company commander divided First Platoon into two larger squads to compensate for its depleted strength. In mid-August the First Platoon participated in search-and-clear operations in the Quang Ngai Valley, encountering withering fire that killed or wounded fourteen men. The engagements decimated First Platoon’s leadership, claiming the lives of the platoon sergeant, one squad leader, and five seasoned junior enlisted infantrymen. To further compound issues, Alpha Company’s commander and the First Platoon’s leader rotated for other assignments in the rear in September. So, too, did two other veteran infantrymen and a squad leader who reached their DEROs.¹¹⁵

These events placed First Platoon in the unenviable position of relying on men with limited experience in Vietnam to train replacements for future combat operations. Haynie

¹¹⁴ Forrisi, unpublished memoir, MHI, 7.

¹¹⁵ Haynie, *When I Turned Nineteen*, 115-130.

reflected that he “had been with the platoon only four months, in Vietnam for six months, but now, we were old-timers.” First Platoon received many replacements who “needed to be watched over and trained. And this included officers.” The vacant NCO positions—Platoon Sergeant, squad leaders—were filled with “shake-n-bake” NCOS—promising enlisted recruits identified during AIT for admission to an eight-week non-commissioned officer’s course (NCOCC)—and also had to receive on-the-job training to learn how to conduct operations in Quang Ngai. Haynie and the surviving platoon members from August 13-15 turned to the daunting task of training a motley assortment of replacements, under the command of novice NCOs and a fresh platoon leader.

Haynie, now ranking among those with the most combat experience in the platoon, took the lead in training. “I was hard on the new guys,” he remembered, “not wanting them to die or get injured.” Without any formal leadership training, he relied “only [on] my combat experiences and instincts [doing the best] to share and teach the FNGs how to survive.” Haynie’s most difficult task was discerning who among the “FNGs” would become a competent soldier and who should receive the least amount of responsibility. “You’d be surprised how many new guys came into the platoon with a swagger,” he observed, so he “concentrated on teaching [the fast learners] the fundamentals of survival in the field.”¹¹⁶

The “fast learners” received greater responsibility than their peers. For example, Haynie assigned one replacement to learn “how to walk point and how to enter and exit tunnels,” distilling from his own experiences the best practices for detecting and avoiding booby-traps, finding evidence of NVA/NLF activity, and determining whether jungle trails were safe or not.

¹¹⁶ Ibid., 130-131.

Because Haynie and his partner, Mike, became *de facto* instructors for replacements entering First Platoon, and given that both NCO and junior officer leadership in the platoon was in flux, these two men played an enormously influential role in transmitting a set of assumptions, values, and habits (i.e. the platoon's culture) necessary for survival in the specific environs of Quang Ngai in 1969.¹¹⁷ These common-sense ideas about combat and survival that formed soldier culture in First Platoon were, moving forward, a product of both immediate unit history (e.g. lessons learned from August 13 and 15) and Haynie's idiosyncratic "gut feelings" or intuition that helped him select the best men for key roles in the platoon.

The example of First Platoon illustrates how units in the field by necessity developed their own informal procedures for training replacements and rehabilitating platoons shattered during combat operations. In fact, the Americal Division (to which First Platoon belonged) made no official declarations on how individual units should re-train and reinforce platoons or companies that suffered mass casualties, thereby leaving it entirely up to battalion commanders to set expectations at the company and platoon level. The *Americal Division Combat SOP, 1968-1971* references casualties and replacements in two subheadings: "Maintenance of Strength" and "Replacements." It required that commanders reported immediately to the Division G-1 (Personnel) timely casualty reports with an eye to ensuring that families back home received *accurate* reports. It also ordered that unit commanders, chaplains, and "members of the unit" (likely friends of the deceased or wounded) draft "personal letters" to the families and friends of casualties. So far as replacements were concerned, the Combat SOP merely mandated that all

¹¹⁷ Ibid., 131.

replacements would “in-process” through the Americal Replacement Detachment (Personnel Services) before transferring to organic units in the division.¹¹⁸

The burden fell to noncommissioned officers—like Haynie—who faced the daunting task of preparing their charges for the dynamic and random nature of operations in Vietnam that, depending on the area of operations, might saddle soldiers with any number of responsibilities. Louis A. Forrasi, mentioned above as a member of the 3-5th Cavalry, recalled how unpredictable his duties were as a track operator around Khe Sanh. When his unit moved from Dong Ha to Fire Base Fuller in 1971, the fire base was under full scale assault from NVA regulars. On its way toward Fire Base Fuller, his unit detoured to provide perimeter security for a battery of 155mm howitzers. The Howitzers were providing fire support for the beleaguered FB Fuller. Forrasi remembered that all the men in his unit knew the ARVN at Fuller “could never hold it and we were about to be proved right.” From the artillery battery’s commanding position, Forrasi had a panoramic view of the unfolding battle. He gazed upon a nightmarish scene as the small fire base was “ringed by a wall of exploding shells and bombs” pouring in from the 155m Howitzers, sorties of Phantom F-4s and strafing runs by Cobra gunships. Still the NVA continued throwing its forces against the base and began scoring hits on American air support. A Chinook flying toward FB Fuller on a supply run was struck and attempted to make an emergency landing but crashed “on the road close to our position.” First tasked with providing security away from the battle, now Forrasi and his men had to mount up on two tracks and move out into the fray to rescue any survivors.¹¹⁹

¹¹⁸ *Americal Division Combat SOP, Vietnam 1968 – 1971*, Department of the Army, 143 – 147.

¹¹⁹ Forrasi, Unpublished Memoir, MHI, 28-29.

Forrisi rode shotgun on one of the tracks and soon saw that the Chinook had smacked into the ground and flipped over, “its crew lay all over the road.” The men dismounted and, illustrating the various duties sometimes thrust upon even the most junior enlisted personnel, began triaging the seriously wounded, radioing for a medevac, and searching the Chinook to recover code books and the black box.¹²⁰ Those in Forrisi’s unit performed well in all of these varied tasks because of a purposeful effort by NCOs in his platoon to cross-train men in all the essential duties that arose organically in the field. Throughout the war, NCOs passed on experiential knowledge that helped even the “greenest” replacement become competent soldiers in the field.

Once soldiers became thoroughly vetted and accepted within the platoon as a competent and trustworthy member, the “individual” replacement experience became wholly superseded by the collective experience fighting and surviving, with many consequences. Individuals were now more subjected to the “peer pressure” that accompanied acceptance into the group dynamics of a platoon, thus making it more likely for soldiers to experience an evolution in their own ideas, beliefs, and political persuasions by dint of conversations with trusted friends in their squad. Soldiers would also learn that social distinctions, which meant something in America, were now often subordinated to the overriding concern with survival. At its core was the formation of a new identity that emphasized the infantryman’s sacrifices and drew stark distinctions between “grunts” who were “humping the boonies” engaging the enemy and those “in the rear with the beer” who enjoyed the comforting, Americanized confines of rear camps.

¹²⁰ Ibid., 29.

Although soldiers became immersed in their unit's soldier culture, the home front—and civilian culture—remained a constant presence in their lives. Soldiers kept abreast of developments back home by having access to newspapers, magazines, viewing television broadcasts while standing-down in the rear, by reading letters, and by listening to music on the Armed Forces Radio-Vietnam. Soldier culture always remained in tension with civilian culture during Ralph Bateman's tour. While his father forwarded *Playboy* to him in Vietnam, his mother frequently enclosed clippings from the hometown newspaper in other letters, all of which helped him "know what's going on in the world."¹²¹

As the war progressed, the linkages between home and war played a decisive role in the evolution of soldiers' culture, and influenced soldiers' attitudes about the war. If Bateman's specific tactical behaviors in Vietnam were influenced predominantly by soldier culture, his sociopolitical attitudes were deeply enmeshed in both soldier and civilian culture. He first started writing of "peace" and questioning the legitimacy of the American project in Vietnam coterminous with his integration with First Platoon. But, his perspective on the war also soured as he learned more about the My Lai cover-up. The massacre was perpetrated by a sister unit in the "Americal" Division and, in fact, Bateman's unit had operated in My Lai from May to June 1970. His insights about My Lai came from *Newsweek*, *Sports Illustrated*, and *Playboy*; magazines that he received thanks to his father's diligence maintaining and forwarding his subscriptions to Vietnam. From these magazines, specifically *Playboy*, he learned the full story about what occurred in My Lai. Bateman once asked his dad to read "Anatomy of a Massacre," featured in the July 1970 issue of *Playboy*. He hoped that the article would dissuade his father

¹²¹ RB to Father, August 12, 1969; September 4, 1969; RB to Mother, September 8, 1969, Ralph Bateman Collection, Box 1, Folder 1, VCA, TTU.

from supporting “blowhards” like Vice President Spiro Agnew and, instead, support the anti-war movement.¹²²

Bateman arrived in Vietnam precisely when “soldier culture” started to reflect the libertarian (and libertine) elements of the counterculture and anti-war movement in the United States. While he adopted his comrades’ ambivalence about the war, he also turned completely against the war because he consistently read national magazines and newspapers. The complex attitudes that soldiers expressed in Vietnam stemmed from the entanglement of soldier and civilian popular culture, a combination that influenced how many soldiers, like Bateman, developed their values, perceptions, and beliefs about both the war and American society.

¹²² RB to Father, July 11 1970, Ralph Bateman Collection, Box 1, Folder 1, VVA, TTU.

CHAPTER THREE: THE BOUNDARIES OF SOLDIER CULTURE: INHERITED CULTURE AND THE TRANSFORMATION OF ALFRED FOWLER, JR. IN VIETNAM, 1968-1969

Alfred Fowler, Jr. arrived in Vietnam on May 8, 1968, as a replacement and would spend the following year serving as a crewman for a 105mm Howitzer in the 82nd Airborne Division. He served during a moment of acute cultural transformation in the United States. Identifying as a conservative who hewed to the “old time way” of doing things Alfred would, within a year, become far more liberal in his outlook due to tumult occurring in his hometown, in the United States nationally, and in Vietnam.

Like many other replacements sent to Vietnam, Alfred experienced the “liminal” existence that attended the transition from civilian to soldier during his tour in Vietnam; however, he was also in a “liminal” position because while immersed in fighting the war, his eye remained on the clock and his mind preoccupied with the minutia of life back home through his almost daily interaction with mass culture or letters from his wife. He remained tethered to his hometown to a remarkable degree because the military made communication relatively easy and quick. But, while he was serving in Vietnam his attitudes evolved, in part, because he absorbed soldier culture in his unit. In other words, Alfred’s tour was a process of negotiation between his hometown identity and the new identity that was being forged in Vietnam. His robust correspondence provides a rare contemporary glimpse of how this process of negotiation worked and how, in a broader context, it posed challenges for all soldiers and their families, but in particular ways for an African-American whose race and working-class background also shaped

his experiences. More importantly, his experiences demonstrate that unit and soldier culture were not total and all encompassing; soldiers also felt the powerful pull of home.

How black soldiers experienced the war varied depending largely on when they served, where they served in Vietnam, and the jobs they performed. White backlash against desegregation and civil rights in the Sixties, which affected Alfred's hometown, made it imperative for black soldiers to sustain connections to home while in service. These men served against the backdrop of changing opinions about the armed services, as black newspapers and magazines transitioned from touting the "integrated Army" during the early years of Vietnam to later considering the integrationist experiment a failure.

Failure or not, the armed forces offered young men the most approximate experience of an integrated society in Sixties America—men who hailed from racially segregated communities in the South or from urban enclaves in the North rarely had substantive conversations with people whose skin color differed from their own. Alfred's own hometown of Sanford, North Carolina, remained starkly segregated by race and class. Yet, despite some racial incidents that occurred during Alfred's tour of duty, he forged strong bonds within his unit and among men from different racial and cultural backgrounds precisely because soldier culture in combat units discouraged such attitudes. For many African-Americans, military service was also inherently political because it foregrounded contradictions in the United States' goals of promoting freedom and democracy abroad while simultaneously suppressing the rights of its own citizens at home.

This inconsistency between ideology and practice would shape and modify Alfred's opinions about the war, the American government, and produce considerable marital strain during his service. In African-American communities a history of faithful military service was a

source of continual pride, yet the failure of the United States to honor their sacrifices with corresponding social and political equality perennially stung. Alfred served during a time when African-Americans challenged the time-honored narrative that faithful military service was necessary to achieve social and political equality. That African-American opinion about military service fractured in 1968 was indicative of a broader split in the civil rights movement between those who preferred nationalist, separatist movements that promised expedient equality and those who carried the torch of Martin Luther King, Jr., and held to notions that patience, nonviolent protest, and respect for civic obligations would lead toward a brighter future.

Alfred Fowler was drafted and saw his two-year obligation in the military as a temporary diversion from his civilian pursuits—namely making a home in North Carolina with his new wife, establishing himself in a respectable career, and looking forward to the possibilities of having children in the near future.¹ Examining Alfred's experiences sheds light on how the home front remained important for black soldiers serving in Vietnam, as civil rights progress and racial unrest could and did affect their own communities. Alfred's hometown of Sanford, North Carolina, would erupt in racial unrest and violence concurrently with his time in Vietnam. The knowledge that friends, family, or acquaintances back home were being shot, beaten, or harassed on familiar roads made the linkages between the home front and the war zone tangible and real.

¹ Alfred Fowler Papers, VW 1, Military Collection, State Archives of North Carolina, Raleigh, NC. Few complete letter collections exist from African-Americans who served in Vietnam. Alfred's wife, Cynthia, preserved and then donated her late husband's wartime letters to the State Archives of North Carolina, providing researchers with an invaluable and relatively rare contemporary source to understand how African-Americans, and presumably many other soldiers, in the Army were negotiating between their civilian identity and a new identity forming in Vietnam. Fowler served in the Army from November 1967 to November 1969 and his letters span his entire two-year obligation beginning with his induction at Fort Bragg, North Carolina, and ending with his stint at Fort Carson, Colorado prior to his discharge.

Racial violence at home could play an outsize role in shaping an individual's perspective, especially when soldiers now had more rapid and varied access to news from home than their predecessors in World War II or Korea. Acquiring access to commercial goods, popular literature, televised newscasts, and hometown newspapers in Vietnam took on a new urgency for black soldiers within the context of ongoing racial violence and instability at home.

Disheartening news from North Carolina of violent protests, police brutality, and racially motivated shootings meant that Alfred increasingly suffered dissonance during the war as he attempted to reconcile his "old time way" values from home with new, contradictory experiences in Vietnam. He was confident that answering his draft call was his unquestioned obligation despite becoming receptive to the growing clamor among other segments of the American population that urged young men to disregard compulsory military service. He stayed committed to his unit's mission in Vietnam while simultaneously he grew skeptical of the overall war aims. He bonded with his fellow comrades although he remained constantly aware that race and class were fixtures of division in rear bases and at home. He experimented with marijuana to cope with the war, like other soldiers in his unit, while simultaneously deriding as drug abusers and menaces those who used heroin. For Alfred, these continual conflicts stemmed from a fundamental enigma that also affected thousands of his contemporaries: if military service historically meant deploying abroad to preserve a way of life at home then why was it that men serving in Vietnam saw the social and political fabric of their communities—their cherished way of life—coming apart at the seams? Alfred's rural upbringing, working-class roots, and adult life in a community that still held military service in high regard consistently pulled Alfred's leanings toward the right. However, Alfred's acculturation in his new unit and what he read about home pushed him toward the left.

Alfred Fowler, Jr., was born on September 26, 1942, in the White Hills Township of Bladen County, North Carolina—a rural area that in 1940 had a population of 16,004.² The livelihoods of many in and around White Hills depended on the cultivation of cotton, corn, and oats, which all thrived in the climate and soil of North Carolina’s coastal plain. Alfred was welcomed into a household that eventually experienced the financial stresses of nine children and the untimely death of their mother, Laney Fowler (*nee* Shaw). Her death left the children in the care of their father, John Edd. But Alfred had a poor relationship with his father and many of his siblings causing him to subsequently reserve his deepest affection for his youngest sister, Mabel.

Alfred was not content to remain in Bladen County where his prospects for employment and economic mobility as a young African-American man seemed dauntingly slim. The violent reactions by whites to the Civil Rights Movement and desegregation in North Carolina also may have influenced his decision to move to New York, where he eventually married his wife, Cynthia Bryant, on August 6, 1966. Cynthia was the daughter of middle-class parents in Sanford, North Carolina. Her father, James Hubert, worked as an auto mechanic and her mother, Wyomia Bryant, was a schoolteacher. Alfred and Cynthia moved back to Sanford in 1967 to live with Cynthia’s parents until the couple could establish themselves in their own home—a desire the couple described frequently in Alfred’s wartime letters. Alfred soon found a job working as a product tester for a local manufacturing plant owned by Cornell-Dubilier Electronics, a company that produced capacitors for radios and other electronics.

² Bladen County, 1940 Census Records, Censusrecords.com.

During the 1960s, Alfred also expressed interest in the armed services when he volunteered for service with the U.S. Army on three separate occasions, only to receive a rejection each time likely for having high blood pressure. Just as Alfred established himself in Sanford, earning a modest income and supporting his wife's efforts to return to school, his life was suddenly put on hold when he received at least two separate draft notices in the mail between July 1967 and October 1967 from Lee County and Bladen County, North Carolina. He also received a "Notice of Classification" and information concerning his rights to appeal his reclassification as 1-A, "Available for Military Service."³

Alfred shared some characteristics with the prototypical draftee so frequently alluded to in popular culture and postwar memory of Vietnam. He could not secure educational deferments available to many children of middle-class origins. Poor, working-class, and hailing from a rural community, he had limited options after high school. He had to either work full-time or enlist in the Army. Having nine siblings raised by a single parent meant that Alfred could expect little or no financial support from home. The Army appealed to Alfred for the very reason it attracted other young men in his straitened financial position—military service offered tangible benefits in the form of steady pay, opportunities for socio-economic advancement, empowering soldiers as consumers, and providing a postwar G.I. Bill to pursue education or purchase a home.

Such a financial motivation differed from, but was not mutually exclusive of the concept in African-American intellectual circles that military service afforded young black men an

³ "Order to Report for Armed Forces Physical Examination," Selective Service System, Form 223, Local Board No. 54, Lee County, Sanford, N.C., July 3, 1967; "Advice of Right to Personal Appearance and Appeal, Selective Service System, Form 217, Local Board No. 9, Bladen County, N.C., August 15, 1967; "Order to Report for Armed Forces Physical Examination," Selective Service System, Form 223, Elizabethtown, N.C., September 22, 1967. Alfred's draft notices are found in Box 2, Folder 9, Alfred Fowler Papers. Alfred received two separate draft notices because he was mistakenly attributed to living both in Bladen County (his childhood home) and Lee County (where he resided with his in-laws) simultaneously.

opportunity to demonstrate their worthiness for full citizenship. The similarities with common tropes about the “American soldier” in the Vietnam War fade, though, when considering that Alfred was a 25-year-old working adult who previously volunteered for service, evinced mild enthusiasm for serving the country, and held fast to his civic responsibility to answer his draft notice.⁴

That Alfred’s initial attempts to volunteer for the Army were rebuffed and that he later received a draft notice regardless of his history of high blood pressure indicates that he was likely caught in President Johnson’s and Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara’s “Project 100,000.” It began in October 1966 and relaxed both intellectual and medical standards for the armed services. Project 100,000 was an extremely controversial social-welfare program during the time that wedded the military to Johnson’s “War on Poverty.” McNamara and Johnson envisioned the program enlisting or inducting approximately 100,000 “New Standards Men” each year and believed the program would allow poor men with few options a chance to better themselves through technical training in the military. Of course, Project 100,000 also helped fulfill manpower requirements precisely at a time when the Vietnam War intensified after the Tet Offensive.

Historians of the Vietnam War provide a fairly standard interpretation of Project 100,000 by encapsulating it within the broader narrative of a “working-class war” that disproportionately affected minorities. These historians indict Project 100,000 for funneling greater numbers of uneducated and ill-prepared minorities into Vietnam while middle-class men used various

⁴ All biographical information about Alfred Fowler, Jr., retrieved from the finding aid, Alfred Fowler Papers, VW 1, Military Collection, State Archives of North Carolina, Raleigh, NC. All letters written by Alfred Fowler and quoted in this chapter come from the Alfred Fowler Papers, unless otherwise noted.

deferments to evade the draft.⁵ Recent research, while conceding that Project 100,000 by design affected the poor and disadvantaged, illustrates how the program actually achieved some modest successes—many New Standards Men fought honorably and proficiently and when the armed services transitioned to an All-Volunteer Force (AVF) in 1973, Project 100,000 constituted hard evidence for reconsidering baseline aptitude requirements for service. Further, Alfred’s perceptive and cogent writings demonstrate that New Standards Men were not strictly “uneducated” or of a “low mental caliber” but also included well-educated, articulate young men whose medical conditions previously kept them out of the service.⁶

By December 1971, when the program ended, some 346,000 New Standards Men served under its auspices in all branches of the armed service with at least two-thirds being in the Army. African-Americans represented a disproportionate amount of New Standards Men, accounting for 138,400, or forty percent, of all enlistees or inductees under the program.⁷ Had Project 100,000 began earlier in the 1960s, Alfred would have benefitted from the program’s reassessment of “minor medical problems” by securing a place in the Army. However, by 1967, Project 100,000 only severed Alfred from his family and replaced decent factory employment with service as an E-1 (Private) with a monthly pay allotment of \$95.00.⁸

⁵ Christian G. Appy, *Working-Class War*; Myra MacPherson, *Long Time Passing: Vietnam and the Haunted Generation* (New York: Doubleday and Company, Inc., 1984); Marilyn B. Young, *The Vietnam Wars: 1945-1990* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1991).

⁶ Kirklin J. Bateman, “Project 100,000: New Standards Men and the U.S. Military in Vietnam” (Ph.D. Dissertation, George Mason University 2014), 6; Also see, Thomas G. Sticht *et al.*, *Cast-off Youth: Policy and Training Methods from the Military Experience* (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1987), 43-46 for demographic statistics of New Standards Men; Hamilton Gregory, *McNamara’s Folly: The Use of Low-IQ Troops in the Vietnam War, plus the Induction of Unfit Men, Criminals, and Misfits* (New York: Infinity Publishing, 2015).

⁷ Bateman, “Project 100,000,” 6-7.

⁸ Selective Service System, State of North Carolina, “Information for Registrants Ordered for Induction,” NC Form 8, May 16, 1967, Box 2, Folder 9, Alfred Fowler Papers.

Alfred departed Sanford when recent protests, demonstrations, and racial violence in North Carolina garnered national attention and put blacks and whites on edge throughout the state. Alfred, now in the military, perceived any turmoil in North Carolina as too close to home. While Sanford residents witnessed few incidents in late-1967, they were aware of violence happening nearby in Raleigh and Durham.⁹ Race relations in these cities were volatile. During the Summer of 1967, Governor Dan K. Moore, fearing widespread violence akin to Newark or Watts, deployed the National Guard at the slightest indication that violence might occur, such as on July 20, 1967, when he ordered the 130th Signal Battalion of the N.C. National Guard (composed of soldiers from Durham, Burlington, and Siler City) to suppress rioting in Durham after 300 demonstrators overturned “garbage cans, smash[ed] plate glass windows and ston[ed] cars in the downtown [Durham] area.” The following day when black citizens peacefully demonstrated for open public housing it occurred under the threat of imminent violence. Black leaders and organizers remained anxious about the National Guard and police presence, instructing protestors to restrict themselves to singing hymns and clapping hands, warning that “if just one person picks up a brick and hits one of those white people there’s going to be

⁹ Sanford was and remains the county seat of rural Lee County (named in honor of General Robert E. Lee) that even in 2010 was home to only 28,000 residents. The population remains majority white (55.2% in 2010) but also contains a sizeable black minority (27.6% in 2010). Profile of General Population and Housing Characteristics, Sanford, North Carolina, 2010, United States Census Bureau, American FactFinder, <https://factfinder.census.gov/faces/tableservices/jsf/pages/productview.xhtml?src=CF>

shooting and somebody's going to be killed.”¹⁰ Similar incidents elsewhere in the state would become more common over the next two years.¹¹

While Alfred closely followed happenings in Sanford, prior to his departure for Vietnam he remained oblivious to how the landscape of the war in Vietnam was changing. On January 30, 1968, the Viet Cong's and North Vietnamese Army's Tet Offensive initiated the deadliest year of combat for Americans. But, he remained focused on the host of new experiences he encountered in the Army—both exciting and unpleasant—that began soon after he reported for basic training at Fort Bragg in December 1967. He received the rank of Private and was assigned to 2nd Platoon, Company E, 2nd Battalion, 1st Brigade, United States Army Training Center (USATC).

For starters, Alfred disliked the restrictive rules and regulations the military imposed on recruits, they were a far cry from the freedoms he enjoyed in the civilian world. Alfred described how “the government has got rules so strict it takes a life time to get use to them.” He also protested that during basic he had been “pushed, rushed so damn much I don't even feel like a human being.”¹² Alfred completed medical processing his first night at Fort Bragg going to bed at midnight and having “to get up at 3:30am, then fall into formation and walk and stand on our feet for 15 to 16 hours” with the only breaks occurring when the men were fed “dog food” in the

¹⁰ “Troops Deployed in Durham, N.C., 120 Guardsmen are Sent in After Racial Violence,” *The New York Times*, July 21, 1967, 28.

¹¹ See, “Police, Troops Try to Avert N.C. Rioting,” *The Chicago Tribune*, November 4, 1967, 12; “Rioting Resumes in Winston-Salem, Curfew and Guard Defied, but Trouble is Scattered,” *The New York Times*, November 4, 1967, 20; “Winston-Salem Quiet after Two Riot Nights,” *Afro-American*, November 11, 1967, 3. The violence in Winston-Salem occurred as Alfred neared induction into the U.S. Army.

¹² Alfred Fowler (AF) to Cynthia Fowler (CF), December 1967, Box 1, Folder 1. There are several letters in Box 1, Folder 1 left undated but written during the month of December. “Ibid.” notes quotations that derived from the same letter. However, letters noted as “December 1967” should be treated as separate letters.

commissary.¹³ His introduction to physical training proved trying, as well, with Alfred remarking that the men were “doing somethings [*sic*] now I never knew existed. I think they are actually trying to kill us.”¹⁴ Mentally, Alfred remained strong vowing to “hang in there like a champ and make you proud.”¹⁵ After finishing basic training at Fort Bragg, Alfred boarded an airplane for the first time in his life on February 9, 1968, and reported back to Cynthia in a letter that “we got here [Fort Sill] around 12:00 last night.” With substantial training in the immediate future and Vietnam remaining a distant afterthought, Alfred ruminated on his estrangement from his wife and family. He remained optimistic in a letter home on February 10, 1968, that he could survive the military so long as “a good woman and God [is] in [my] corner . . . I’m glad I got both.”¹⁶

Once Alfred settled into the routine of Advanced Individual Training (AIT) at Fort Sill’s artillery school, he added to his list of grievances the austere living conditions on base. “This is an old Fort. It’s even older than Fort Bragg,” Alfred wrote, reflecting further that although Fort Bragg was rugged, “this damn place is worse.”¹⁷ Barracks outhouses were chief among Alfred’s complaints. Thinking that Cynthia would not believe the troops used outhouses in the 1960s, Alfred reassured her that “I’m really telling you the truth,” before continuing to describe the ordeal of having “to take a piss . . . you have to get up put on all your clothing and boots just to take one ‘piss’ in the (outhouse). If you don’t [put on your clothes] your black-ass will freeze.”¹⁸

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ AF to CF, December 1967, Box 1, Folder 1.

¹⁵ AF to CF, December 1967, Box 1, Folder 1.

¹⁶ AF to CF, February 10, 1968, Box 1, Folder 3.

¹⁷ AF to CF, February 1968, Box 1, Folder 3.

¹⁸ Ibid.

Those who entered military service during the 1960s, from even rural working-class backgrounds, held certain expectations for basic living conditions—including plumbing and electricity. Fort Sill constituted a significant downgrade for Alfred, evidenced by his running commentary about the unacceptable accommodations.

During the Vietnam War, Fort Sill became a hub of artillery training for Vietnam-bound recruits. Alfred found life at Fort Sill to be a rugged ordeal. However, he absorbed and relished the beautiful landscape formed by the Great Plains and the “beautiful” hills of the Wichita Mountains. Alfred also found the potential for exposure to different cultures exciting. He invited Cynthia to visit him in Oklahoma so the couple could travel thirty minutes north on Interstate 44 to visit the small community of Apache, home to the Chiricahua Warm Springs Apache Indians that historically inhabited the lands upon which Fort Sill and Lawton lay and had been notable for their presence among Native American students at Carlisle Indian Industrial School in Pennsylvania during the nineteenth century.¹⁹

Whether Alfred and Cynthia ever made their journey to Apache, Oklahoma is unknown, but Alfred did frequent nearby Lawton with his comrades during weekend liberty. Alfred offered amusing commentary on the local culture, music, and customs of southwestern Oklahomans. He began one letter declaring, “this place is so out of date. The music they play here, we forgot it back home. The way they dress is terrible.” As Alfred perused clothing stores in Lawton and paid attention to how local residents dressed, he critically remarked that “all you see is Cowboy boots . . . really? I realize this is a western town but everything they wear looks like hand-me-

¹⁹ AF to CF, February 1968, Box 1, Folder 3.

downs.”²⁰ While these statements suggest that Alfred viewed the dress and culture of southwestern Americans through a strong class lens (“hand-me-downs”) they also demonstrate the culture shock that attended a southerner visiting the Southwest for the first time. Alfred likely encountered the “kicker” culture common to the American Southwest during the 1960s. As another historian has described, “kicker” subculture “identified strongly with the cowboy myths of the Southwest” and became a discrete subculture across the Southwest, ranging from Texas and Oklahoma to California in the Sixties.²¹

Cynthia’s writings to Alfred kept him tethered to Sanford where racial and social dynamics differed significantly from Oklahoma. Alfred used letters to Cynthia to protect his reputation back home. He ensured that Cynthia spread accurate information to the community about his service to-date and that she refuted any inaccuracies she saw in the local newspaper. Alfred devoted an entire letter in February 1968 to correct misleading statements in the *Sanford Herald* that claimed a white man, identified only as “Hickman,” had graduated fifth in a training class of 147, during basic training at Fort Bragg. Alfred told Cynthia that the article “was a damn lie . . . you were at graduation and you hear all the names called off who was the highest and he was not one of them.” Alfred stressed that during basic training at Fort Bragg, Hickman proved weak, incapable, and generally ran afoul of drill instructors. While Alfred acknowledged Hickman was “a good guy and all,” Alfred fumed “I was shocked when I read the clipping. Fifth highest my foot. I was afraid the poor guy [Hickman] was going to flunk basic and I tried to tell him as much as I could but the poor guy stayed on K.P. [Kitchen Patrol].” Alfred guessed that

²⁰ AF to CF, February 1968, Box 1, Folder 3.

²¹ Kyle Longley, *The Morenci Marines: A Tale of Small Town America and the Vietnam War* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 2013), 39.

Hickman's mother or girlfriend "put that in the paper." Alfred was not surprised, however, and dismissively observed, "you see [now] how white people lie."²²

Alfred relied on the *Sanford Herald* to keep him informed of local politics and the volatile racial situation while also expecting it to keep Cynthia and others at home abreast of military affairs in Vietnam. Newspaper reportage prompted anxieties in both Alfred and Cynthia that they often vented in impassioned letters.²³ For example, Cynthia attached a newspaper clipping from the *Herald* to a letter she sent near the end of February 1968 that prompted Alfred in his reply to address his commitment to monogamy and fidelity. While the specifics of the news article are unknown, Alfred's response was telling: "God made all kinds of people. Some very liberal minded and some maybe a little too liberal. Baby I'm one of those kind of people *who still believes in the old time way – you either do it right or no way at all.*" Alfred concluded that "I would never betray you my darling."²⁴

These writings underline important aspects of Alfred's mental inventory in early-1968 that he would take with him to Vietnam. First, Alfred defended the position of being "traditional" which in this sense equated to being socially conservative. He acknowledged that in his worldview "you either do it right or no way at all." This particular belief would prove

²² AF to CF, February 1968, Box 1, Folder 3.

²³ Alfred and Cynthia were both frequent readers of *The Sanford Herald*. The *Herald* began as the *Sanford Journal*, a daily, in the 1920s but then became the *Herald* on December 11, 1930. Through the 1930s and 1940s it varied between a semiweekly (1930-1937), a tri-weekly (1937-1952), and a daily beginning after 1952, but probably reverting back to a semiweekly at some point. As of 2017, there are no extant microfilm records of *The Sanford Herald* between circa 1955 (State of North Carolina Public Library) and 2008 (most university online digital collections). This substantial, 53 year gap in the record is inexplicable but is nevertheless unfortunate because knowledge of the granular events in Sanford during the period of 1968 to 1970 would add context to Alfred's experiences in Vietnam. One can somewhat remedy this lacuna by relying on papers published in nearby towns of Pittsboro, Aberdeen, Pinehurst, Siler City, and of course, state newspapers such as *The Raleigh News & Observer* that reported events in Sanford.

²⁴ AF to CF, March 4, 1968, Box 1, Folder 4. Emphasis added.

difficult to sustain in Vietnam and led Alfred to disillusionment and the perception that corruption was rampant in Vietnam—what was being done right? If it was not done right, why do it? Alfred’s social positioning and defensiveness also suggests that he felt his world was becoming unhinged or unanchored by March 1968. He was losing his footing in the military and the values he cherished at home were also under attack.

Alfred wrote during a period when African-American intellectuals, civil rights activists, and nationalists were complicating the traditional linkages between faithful military service during times of national emergency and the promises of greater freedom at home in the post-war period. Malcolm X, prior to his assassination in 1965, and then Stokely Carmichael, who assumed leadership of the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) in 1966, issued the most vocal justifications for young black men purposely avoiding military service in a “white man’s war” because no amount of service to the nation would convince white Americans to treat African-Americans as equal participants in society.²⁵ Within this political and ideological climate, Alfred remained socially conservative, or as he phrased it the “old time way,” whereby men conducted themselves with dignity and integrity (especially faithfulness in marriage). He continued to believe that temporary sacrifices in the Army would ensure a brighter material and economic future when he and Cynthia would own their first home. It is also important to note that Alfred articulated his conservative viewpoint prior to Martin Luther King, Jr. being assassinated, before Sanford erupted in unrest, and also months before deploying to Vietnam.

²⁵ Kimberley L. Phillips, “Machine Gun Blues: Black America and the Vietnam War,” in *War! What is it Good For? Black Freedom Struggles and the U.S. Military from World War II to Iraq* (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 2012), 188-228.

These momentous changes in the coming months would force Alfred to reconsider and revise his worldview.

In February and March 1968, neither Alfred nor Cynthia yet knew of his impending deployment to Vietnam. Alfred began hearing rumors of Vietnam circulating among the men in his training unit in March 1968. He confided to Cynthia that “some of [the] fellows in here said they saw some of the ‘special orders’ and of course we are going to ‘Vietnam.’ I don’t want you to start worrying now, please don’t . . . I didn’t get the orders yet.”²⁶ Alfred still remained optimistic about his future prospects in the Army and, in subsequent letters, turned his attention to news back home. Alfred learned that Cynthia went to a neighbor’s house and watched *Operation Entertainment* on a color television set. “Someone bought a color T.V.?” he inquired in a subsequent letter. A home boasting a color television was obviously a novelty in their Sanford community, but *Operation Entertainment* was likely intriguing because it resonated personally with Alfred and other men in his unit. Alfred was probably familiar with Chuck Berris’s new musical comedy and variety show that premiered January 5, 1968. Berris designed *Operation Entertainment* with veterans in mind and each week the show’s regular performers traveled to a different military base or installation in the United States. At Fort Sill, Alfred and his comrades had access to a “day room” equipped with televisions. Alfred remarked that “everyone wants to watch a different station, and there is much noise” and commotion about what the men wanted to see. Certainly given the ties between *Operation Entertainment* and the military, the men at Fort Sill probably watched or knew of the show during this period.²⁷

²⁶ AF to CF, March 1968, Box 1, Folder 4.

²⁷ AF to CF, February 1968, Box 1, Folder 3.

Alfred received a two-week leave to return home to Sanford to visit Cynthia and the family before he deployed to Vietnam. Flush with cash, Alfred took the family to a local electronics store in Sanford and purchased a color television set for Cynthia and her parents. This purchase reaffirmed Alfred's belief that the military empowered its soldiers and families as consumers. The act of coming home and treating the family to an expensive luxury also provided Alfred an opportunity to demonstrate his prowess as the "breadwinner" in the family. Now, Alfred assured Cynthia that she would no longer have to borrow time from the neighbor's color set when she wanted to watch *Operation Entertainment* on Sundays.

Alfred's subsequent journey to Vietnam matched many of the characteristics described by other veterans. It began aboard a commercial flight that visited exotic destinations, including Honolulu, Guam, and Okinawa. He wistfully wrote Cynthia that he "stopped off at Hawaii for a while and I made up my mind to take you there one day. You better believe it baby."²⁸ When he landed in Vietnam, Alfred was immediately overwhelmed by the heat, humidity, and stench the pervaded the air. "It's hot as hell here," Alfred observed, continuing that it was "80 degrees in the shade. I'll be glad when [this] is over." "There are some filthy looking people over here," Alfred wrote on May 8, 1968. "They [the Vietnamese] look so pitiful . . . [and] the whole place smells like shit," he exclaimed.²⁹ Alfred's sensorial experience upon reaching Vietnam mixed together with a general culture shock wrought by witnessing for the first time in his life the extreme poverty that characterized the developing world. Alfred landed in Vietnam with a set of

²⁸ AF to CF, May 8, 1968, Box 1, Folder 5.

²⁹ AF to CF, May 8, 1968, Box 1, Folder 5.

normative ideas about hygiene, sanitation, and culture that grounded his frame of reference for understanding and making sense of what he witnessed in Vietnam.

It is unclear from Alfred's writings whether he completed his initial in-country processing at Tan Son Nhut (near Saigon), Long Binh, Cam Ranh Bay, or at Da Nang. However, after a few days Alfred was transferred to an element of the 101st Airborne Division. The constituent battalions of the 101st Airborne were based in Cu Chi and Phu Bai in the south, outside Saigon, and also around Phan Rang and Hue in the northern sector of the country.³⁰ In a letter to Cynthia, Alfred wrote that "I'm with the 101st Airborne Division" and reassured her that he would not "have to jump" because "they don't jump here anyway."³¹ By May 20, 1968, Alfred transferred to Battery B, 2nd Battalion, 321st Artillery Regiment, 82nd Airborne Division—a regiment recently deployed from Fort Bragg. The 2-321 arrived in Vietnam on February 16, 1968, during the height of the Tet Offensive. With an authorized strength of 526 personnel, the 2-321 was assigned to the 3d Brigade Task Force of the 82nd Airborne Division. The 3d Brigade Task force operated from bases at Phu Bai and Phu Loi, in central Vietnam, including heavy fighting in the city of Hue. In fact, the 2-321 provided fire support during the Battle of Hue (January 30 – March 3, 1968), indicating that the men in Alfred's outfit became seasoned at their

³⁰ The 101st Airborne Division incorporated the 3rd Battalion, 187th Infantry Regiment (stationed at Phouc Vin/Cu Chi in May '68); 1st Battalion, 327th Infantry Regiment (stationed at Phan Rang/Hue in May '68); 2nd Battalion, 327th Infantry Regiment (stationed at Phan Rang/Hue in May '68); 1st Battalion, 501st Infantry Regiment (stationed at Cu Chi/Phu Bai in May '68); 2nd Battalion, 501st Infantry Regiment (stationed at Cu Chi/Phu Bai in May '68); 1st and 2nd Battalions, 502nd Infantry Regiment (stationed at Cu Chi/Phu Bai in May '68). Therefore, when Alfred Fowler arrived in May 1968, the greatest odds were that he transferred to either Cu Chi/Phu Bai with the 501st and 502nd Infantry Regiments or to Phan Rang/Hue where the 327th Infantry Regiment was based in May 1968. This may have also depended on where he processed (Da Nang, Tan Son Nhut, or Cam Ranh Bay). See *Vietnam Order of Battle*, Shelby Stanton, pp. 155-157.

³¹ AF to CF, May 1968, Box 1, Folder 5.

trade during those particularly trying months.³² Because the 2-321 deployed from Fort Bragg, Alfred probably found some comfort working beside men who previously served in North Carolina

On the home front, Alfred continued to assuage Cynthia's fears about his parachuting from airplanes, writing "just because I'm in the 82nd airborne division that don't mean I have to jump. O.k. I'm just with the support unit."³³ And unlike the crowded urban environments that smelled of human filth, Alfred relished the "beautiful" landscapes and vistas of the Central Highlands—home to densely forested mountain ranges and lush valleys as well as a variety of exotic fauna. Alfred only lamented that the country was "torn by war."³⁴

Alfred was overwhelmed by how Vietnam taxed his body. It took time for him to acclimate to its tropical climate. He had departed Oklahoma during the winter season, where temperatures ranged in the 50s and 60s and arrived in Vietnam where temperatures in May, during the region's rainy season, could average 40°C (approximately 104°F), with sweltering humidity increasing the heat index. Soldiers who deployed to Vietnam by ship at least had the advantage of acclimating to tropical temperatures while they crossed the Pacific Ocean. But, for Alfred it was "so hot you can't stand to work to [*sic*] hard." The heat proved so taxing that Alfred daydreamed of getting back to North Carolina, envisioning a moment when the couple

³² Stanton, *Vietnam Order of Battle*, 108. The 2-321 remained in Vietnam until December 11, 1969. Hue proved exceptional during the Tet Offensive in that it took American and ARVN forces nearly three weeks to liberate the city, and only then after considerable bombing, artillery fire, and blood was spent. Hue proved among the "bloodiest and most destructive battles of the war," according to historian George C. Herring, with the U.S. and ARVN suffering an estimated 500 killed, and the enemy losing as many as 5,000 killed. George C. Herring, *America's Longest War: The United States and the Vietnam War, 1950-1975*, 4th edition (New York: McGraw Hill, 2002), 231-232.

³³ AF to CF, May 1968, Box 1, Folder 5.

³⁴ AF to CF, May 20, 1968, Box 1, Folder 5.

purchased “our house” and he “put central air condition in it.”³⁵ Fortunately for Alfred, Battery B experienced a lull in activity from May to June when the Battery received fewer calls for fire missions. Indicating that heat remained the primary enemy, Alfred commented that he spent downtime in the shadow of a bunker, “trying to keep cool.”³⁶

Although Alfred was certainly not in direct contact with the enemy, Battery B was stationed close enough to the front that sporadic combat could occur when sappers infiltrated the perimeter. The men serving the Battery also shared the common privations endured by infantrymen. Sometimes weeks lapsed between Alfred’s opportunities to change clothes and bathe. Vietnam during the monsoon season also meant near-constant rainfall, an inability to keep dry, and the potential for infection or “trench foot” to develop in the extremities exposed to constant moisture. He would develop tropical ulcers on his inner thighs and groin later during his tour.³⁷ Like many others, Alfred griped about “stay[ing] dirty and half wet all the time, if not from rain you are wet from sweat, you get to smell so bad you can hardly stand yourself.” On personal hygiene, Alfred reflected that “you wash your body the best you can and if you don’t have any clean clothes you have to put back on the same clothing [and you] still stink.”³⁸ He humorously remarked to Cynthia that “you’ll never have to tell me to change clothes (socks, etc.) again when I get home.”³⁹

³⁵ AF to CF, May 23, 1968, Box 1, Folder 5.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ AF to CF, January 22, 1969, Box 2, Folder 1; AF to CF, February 6, 1969, Box 2, Folder 2.

³⁸ AF to CF, June 2, 1968, Box 1, Folder 6.

³⁹ Ibid.

When Alfred was not crewing the 105mm Howitzers with others in his unit, the men passed the time by writing letters home. The arrival of resupply helicopters carrying sundries packs (S.P.) caused general excitement. While general resupply brought the men ammunition, clothing, weapons, medical supplies, and other necessities, the sundries pack contained various creature comforts to help make life slightly more tolerable on firebases or in the field. As a veteran in the 173rd Airborne Brigade recalled, the sundries packs contained cigarettes, cigars, “different hot weather candies such as, Chuckles, Bull’s Eye, caramels,” bootlaces, writing tablets and paper, envelopes, and ballpoint pens.⁴⁰ Sundries packs also contained items for personal hygiene such as bar soap (usually Ivory brand), toothpaste, toothbrushes, combs, and buttons along with needles and thread to make uniform repairs in the field. Candy and cigarettes were favorites among Alfred’s unit, but the supply of writing materials contained in the average sundries pack could not meet demand in Battery B. Alfred usually asked Cynthia to bolster his reserve of writing stock by sending a package containing extra writing pads and ballpoint pens.⁴¹

Alfred’s optimism and confidence in his unit peaked during the summer months of 1968. During fire missions, Alfred and other junior enlisted personnel in Battery B took great pride in achieving results in the field. Unable to contain his excitement on June 26, 1968, Alfred wrote hastily that “my gun, shot at the V.C. we shot the house and blew it up” after units in the field called in a fire mission targeting a house from which Vietcong were harassing American units with sniper and machine-gun fire. Alfred experienced no qualms about killing the enemy, declaring “I like killing V.C. (Vietcong)” before walking back his brash comment with “I was

⁴⁰ Larry J. Musson, *Run Through the Jungle: Real Adventures in Vietnam with the 173rd Airborne Brigade* (Bloomington, IN: AuthorHouse, 2015), 124.

⁴¹ AF to CF, June 3, 1968, Box 1, Folder 6.

just kidding about liking to kill V.C. but I'd rather kill the V.C. before they kill me." He was not sadistic, but he was "really proud of my gun, we blew the hell out of that house and killed those jokers."⁴²

In July, Alfred witnessed a four-star general visit Battery B to commend the unit for its recent success providing support fire for an American operation. According to Alfred, all the men in his section (including him) were proud and awed by the spectacle. He also posed for newspaper reporters who took his picture for the *Stars and Stripes* and promised to send pictures back to his hometown for publication in *The Sanford Herald*.⁴³ As late as August 17, Alfred remained positive about the war effort and was committed to defeating "Charlie." He remarked that "Charlie" vowed to retake a nearby village called Hue (not to be confused with the City of Hue), but he was convinced enemy forces were no match for American technology. He boasted to Cynthia that the men collectively "said 'come on' we have lots of fine presents for him. Charlie got a lot of 'balls' but they aren't as big as a 105 Howitzer round and not near as tough."⁴⁴ On the other hand, Alfred already knew the resilience of the VC, commenting that "he is tough, though" and prayed that his men would not receive another volley of mortars that night.⁴⁵

During these first months in Vietnam, Alfred frequently compared and contrasted the political, social, and economic conditions in South Vietnam and the United States in ways that always confirmed the exceptionalism or inherent goodness of America. His belief that the United

⁴² AF to CF, June 26, 1968, Box 1, Folder 6.

⁴³ AF to CF, letters dated July 4-6, Box 1, Folder 7.

⁴⁴ AF to CF, August 17, 1968, Box 1, Folder 8.

⁴⁵ AF to CF, August 17, 1968, Box 1, Folder 8.

States offered its citizens unparalleled freedom and that the American way of life was worth preserving against enemies abroad were constantly reinforced. While he expressed dismay about racial violence back home and complained about his lot in the Army, his outlook remained optimistic. “America is a beautiful place and it’s a mighty good place to be,” Alfred asserted in one letter, before continuing that “I wouldn’t ever like for things happening in this country to happen [in the United States]. May God help this world.”⁴⁶ A week later Alfred was prompted to declare “When I get back home I will surely know how to appreciate it . . . now that I’ve seen [how] this part of the world lives you can see how ‘lucky’ you are to be living in a place like ‘America.’”⁴⁷ If life at Fort Sill stressed how primitive life could seem without indoor plumbing then service in war-torn Vietnam emphasized that poverty and violence were relative concepts. His expressions of patriotism suggest that he was not only socially conservative, but also conservative in the sense of his continued belief in American exceptionalism precisely at a time when that very belief was routinely being called into question.

Alfred was proud of his service in Battery B. Even so, Alfred remained cognizant that his time in uniform was transient. A seasoned soldier in Alfred’s unit, who was beginning his second tour in Vietnam, reassured Alfred that ““he didn’t know where his first year went . . . it seem[ed] to go by so fast.”⁴⁸ Alfred already anticipated leaving Vietnam the following year and certainly these assurances from a soldier who had been through the process only reinforced Alfred’s optimism for returning home. Alfred was excited about the prospect of having “only . . . six

⁴⁶ AF to CF, May 23, 1968, Box 1, Folder 5.

⁴⁷ AF to CF, May 28, 1968, Box 1, Folder 5.

⁴⁸ AF to CF, May 23, 1968, Box 1, Folder 5.

months left in the Army” after Vietnam before returning to Sanford. “That will go by like a breeze,” Alfred predicted.⁴⁹

Watershed moments in the African-American civil rights movement stimulated Alfred’s passion for hometown news. Indeed, 1968 would prove a tumultuous year for civil rights in the United States. When Alfred was at Fort Sill on April 4, Martin Luther King, Jr., walked onto the balcony of The Lorraine Motel in Memphis, where he was assassinated by James Earl Ray. King’s assassination prompted widespread rioting across the United States, with the most acute violence and rioting occurring in the nation’s capital. Nearly two months later Robert F. Kennedy, Jr., the leading candidate for the Democratic nomination for the presidency and a favorite among African-Americans was gunned down by Sirhan Sirhan during a campaign stop in Los Angeles, California. These two assassinations coincided with a shift in focus for many civil rights activists from the South to northern cities where open housing, poverty, and black consciousness became key issues. Those frustrated by the glacial pace of civil rights turned toward Black Nationalism. Militant organizations like the Black Panthers burgeoned during this period, as well, advocating self-defense and violent retaliation for perceived racial slights and injustices. Civil rights activists in the South, meanwhile, continued to come under attack by white and local authorities as they organized sit-ins and protests against continued *de facto* segregation.⁵⁰

⁴⁹ AF to CF, May 23, 1968, Box 1, Folder 5.

⁵⁰ Mass culture and popular played a well-documented role in radicalizing African-Americans during the 1960s, as well as, African-American military personnel and veterans. For some examples see, Timothy B. Tyson, *Radio Free Dixie: Robert F. Williams and the Roots of Black Power* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2001); Tyson, *Blood Done Sign My Name: A True Story* (New York: Broadway Books, 2007); Phillips, *War! What is it Good For?*, 188-272; Eldridge, *Chronicles of a Two-Front War*, 186-214; Robert S. Browne, “The Freedom

Tumult occurred in North Carolina as well during the spring and summer months of 1968. In July Cynthia sent Alfred a newspaper clipping that reported how a white man shot into a crowd of African-Americans. Alfred remarked that he “was so mad when I saw that news clipping about that whitey man shooting into the crowds of Negroes. I hate those ‘bastards.’” Foremost on Alfred’s mind was Cynthia’s safety during a period when it seemed that racial violence had escalated in America—“I want you to please stay near our home as much as possible, people will do almost anything now days.”⁵¹ The shooting remained on Alfred’s mind in a subsequent letter, when he inquired whether authorities ever apprehended the shooter and reminded Cynthia to “stay close [to] home” because he did not want her “driving way-out [from Sanford] by yourself.”⁵²

Alfred’s fears were well founded. North Carolina was experiencing a violent and uncertain time in the wake of Martin Luther King Jr.’s assassination. In Wilmington, Raleigh, and Greensboro, the governor called up the National Guard to quell rioting, looting, and violence in 1968. In the week following King’s assassination, at least sixteen North Carolina communities were racked by disorder—many cities familiar to Cynthia and Alfred.⁵³ National Guardsmen

Movement and the War in Vietnam,” in *Vietnam and Black America: An Anthology of Protest and Resistance*, edited by Clyde Taylor (New York: Anchor, 1973), 67-76; James Forman, “The Making of Black Revolutionaries” in *Brotherman: The Odyssey of Black Men in America*, edited by Herb Boyd and Robert L. Allen (New York: One World, 1995), 748-755; Elizabeth Glenda Gilmore, *Defying Dixie: The Radical Roots of Civil Rights, 1919-1950* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2008).

⁵¹ AF to CF, July 15, 1968, Box 1, Folder 7.

⁵² AF to CF, July 1968, Box 1, Folder 7.

⁵³ For example, see: “200 Anson Negroes Stage School Boycott,” *The Raleigh News & Observer*, April 10, 1968, 3; “Authorities Move to Curb Further Violence in N.C.,” *The Robesonian* (Lumberton, N.C.), April 5, 1968; “Violence Hits State Cities,” *The Raleigh News & Observer*, April 6, 1968, 6; “Rioting Brings N.C. Guard,” *The Raleigh News & Observer*, April 7, 1968, 1.

from Bladen County, Alfred's birthplace, deployed to Wilmington when rioting turned violent and snipers reportedly fired at police officials for two straight nights.⁵⁴

Alfred became extremely concerned by one event in particular that he saw on television and read about in newspapers in Vietnam. On November 12, 1968, the *New York Times* reported that, a day prior on November 11, twenty black high school students, some belonging to the Martin Luther King Nonviolent Crusade, stormed the courthouse in Swan Quarter, North Carolina, as part of the national, women-driven welfare rights movement, to protest a cut to welfare payments in the state. Sheriff Charlie Cahoon and three highway patrolmen followed the youth into the courthouse. The police donned gas masks before tossing smoke grenades into the room occupied by the protestors. Sheriff Cahoon then ordered the patrolmen to bar the doors, locking the protestors into the courthouse with no obvious means of escape from the smoke. It was not until 17-year-old Mamie Harris jumped from the second story courthouse window, and was taken away by ambulance, that the sheriff ordered the doors opened and allowed the coughing, choked youth to exit the building. Those who escaped the courthouse joined a larger body of protestors who began marching down the left side of a highway in the town, chanting, before being arrested for "impeding traffic."⁵⁵

The events at Swan Quarter prompted Alfred to write Cynthia on November 12: "I just heard on the news today about the police throwing smoke bombs on some Negro children in a room and closing the door. Was that near home? I thought they said something about Swan [Quarter, N.C.]." The news report bothered Alfred and made him fear for Cynthia's safety: "Cyn,

⁵⁴ "Greensboro, N.C.," *The Chicago Tribune*, April 7, 1968, 4; "N.C. Guard Sees Duty in 6 Cities," *The Raleigh News & Observer*, April 8, 1968, 1-2; "Violence in Wilmington," *The New York Times*, April 8, 1968, 31.

⁵⁵ "Police Throw Smoke Grenades Among Negro Pupils in Carolina," *New York Times*, November 12, 1968, 20.

I don't want you wondering around at night. It won't be long before I [am] home with you.”⁵⁶

Surely Alfred was cognizant of racial violence taking place in America—especially the many riots that occurred after MLK's assassination—but this story affected Alfred because the events occurred close to his own community and family. That Alfred learned of the Swan Quarter protest from the news in Vietnam suggests that when his unit had relocated closer to Saigon, it enabled him to learn of happenings back home within a day. Ironically, Alfred participated in artillery fire support missions against the Vietnamese when he learned that state troopers in North Carolina used smoke grenades against black youth in Swan Quarter. Alfred did not acknowledge the seeming incongruity between his concern about violence and destruction at home and his own participation in the destruction of Vietnam.

Alfred relied on letters from Cynthia to maintain a lifeline to his community. Alfred became both increasingly lonely and worried about Cynthia's safety between May and July of 1968. He confessed that “a man in a place like Vietnam will think anything, good or bad. If you don't have time to write, what should I do? Take no news for good news?”⁵⁷ In late-June, Alfred stated that he would “enjoy hearing the local news” and asked Cynthia to write him about “what's happening back there . . . what do you do through the week. I would like to hear about even the smallest thing back there. What are you doing at work?”⁵⁸ Again he wrote anxiously on July 3 that he “received only one letter in five days” from Cynthia. “What's happening back in

⁵⁶ AF to CF, November 12, 1968, Box 1, Folder 11.

⁵⁷ AF to CF, July 3, 1968, Box 1, Folder 7.

⁵⁸ AF to CF, June 27, 1968, Box 1 Folder 6.

Sanford?”⁵⁹ His letters hinted at a deeper anxiety about Cynthia’s wellbeing and the how home remained foremost on his mind while he persevered in Vietnam.⁶⁰

Alfred’s growing concern about events back home eventually spilled over into a physical altercation with a white soldier on the firebase. Alfred did not report the specific circumstances that instigated the fight, but he admitted to Cynthia that he “got into a fight the other night with one of the white boys here. I started to kill him but decided against it.”⁶¹ The fight was definitely unusual. Alfred rarely commented about racial tensions or racism in Battery B during his entire tour of duty. His reticence on matters of race in Vietnam does not necessarily indicate that racism did not surface in the unit. He only reported extraordinary events to Cynthia, thus leaving the possibility that he failed to report mundane racial incidents (e.g. the use of epithets, or verbal slights). Robert W. Mullen, a historian whose writings about African-American military service coincided with and were influenced by the Vietnam War, held ambivalent opinions about the “integrated” status of the American military in the Sixties. Mullen argued that “to say that something [like the military] is the most integrated institution in American society does not mean it is not a racist institution.” Rather, Mullen reflected, “it simply means [it is] less racist than the rest of society.”⁶² Mullen’s sentiment likely applied to conditions in Battery B. Alfred, already troubled by and simmering about racial unrest in Sanford probably reacted violently when the

⁵⁹ AF to CF, July 3, 1968, Box 1, Folder 7.

⁶⁰ Also see, AF to CF, letters dated May 20, 1968 and May 28, 1968, Box 1, Folder 5; AF to CF, June 3, 1968, Box 1, Folder 6.

⁶¹ AF to CF, August 6, 1968, Box 1, Folder 8. Emphasis in original.

⁶² Robert W. Mullen, *Black Americans/African Americans: Vietnam through the Gulf War* (Ginn Press, 1991), 63. Mullen’s work derives from several chapters from his 1971 Ph.D. Dissertation in the Communications Department at Northern Kentucky University, entitled *Issues Developed by Select Black Americans on the Vietnam War*, and other selected essays from his *oeuvre*.

white soldier used a racial slur or slighted Alfred in some way. The letter Alfred wrote immediately after the fight did not dwell on the incident before returning again to Cynthia's failure to write. He asked whether she gave "a damn" that he was promoted to corporal.⁶³ At first glance it seemed that Alfred's domineering and controlling expressions in his letters to Cynthia were emblematic of common growing pains in a young marriage strained by an unexpected military stint. The growing source of friction in the marriage, though, appeared to be Alfred's adoption of values, behaviors, and beliefs that inhered in his unit's soldier culture and that ran against Cynthia's cherished sociocultural viewpoints in Sanford.

While Alfred's tour in Vietnam physically separated him from Cynthia, his immersion in the soldiers' culture of his unit also widened the cultural gulf between husband and wife, particularly concerning recreational drug use. For the members of Battery B daily life stationed near Saigon was uneventful yet stressful—Alfred's letters attest to the collective boredom men experienced—and many started smoking marijuana as a means to cope. "The guys smoke that stuff over here about as often as they smoke 'cigi,'" he noted. Alfred did not admit to smoking marijuana with the others, but he did indicate that marijuana use was routine and widely accepted among the men.

Alfred's justifications for smoking marijuana indicated that he probably did so to relax and manage both the stresses associated with being in Vietnam and uncertainty back home. In Alfred's estimation, he believed smoking marijuana was no worse than smoking cigarettes. Cynthia, however, did not undergo a similar evolution in her values, and instead held a

⁶³ AF to CF, August 6, 1968, Box 1, Folder 8.

diametrically opposed view rooted in her conservative values. She chastised her friend Charlotte for staying with a husband that was “hung up on pot,” and argued that a husband’s drug use constituted grounds for divorce and warned Alfred that if he decided to take up smoking marijuana, she would leave him. Alfred in turn criticized what he believed was Cynthia’s draconian perspective on drugs. Charlotte “wasn’t stupid for staying with her husband because he smokes pot,” he responded. Charlotte was acting in the best interest of the couple’s two children. But, “maybe she thinks more of her marriage than you do yours,” Alfred quipped.⁶⁴

The couple’s argument was clearly not solely about marijuana. The disagreement alluded to a broader struggle between husband and wife to police behavior within the context of ongoing physical separation. Alfred chafed against Cynthia’s efforts to curb his *potential* behavior in Vietnam. With the onslaught of news in late-1968 and early 1969 about the baleful effects of the war on soldiers’ morale and behavior, Cynthia worried about any illicit practices Alfred might adopt in Vietnam—perhaps Alfred’s writings indicated some fundamental change in the man she knew before Vietnam and portended an uncertain future for the couple. Alfred, distraught with anxiety about his wife’s potential behavior in his absence and seeking to protect her from harm, also wondered about their future. Cynthia’s threats certainly did not soothe the situation: “That was a mighty threat you made about leaving me if I smoked ‘pot.’” He also pondered if her threats indicated that their marriage was not built on unconditional love, but perhaps on his refraining from “doing something you don’t approve of or don’t like.” “What if you did something I didn’t like or approve of,” Alfred asked. “What do you suggest I do?”⁶⁵

⁶⁴ AF to CF, December 21, 1968, Box 1, Folder 12.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

It was not long before Cynthia suggested something that Alfred vehemently disapproved of. On February 10, 1969, Cynthia asked if Alfred would mind her corresponding with another G.I. then serving in Vietnam—indicating that Cynthia was becoming more politically active and eager to help soldiers serving in Vietnam.⁶⁶ Alfred’s response dripped with sarcasm and irony. He began that he *did mind* but that he would make an exception from his usual jealousy because he understood, first-hand, how “a guy can get plenty lonely over here. It[‘s] better to get letters from girls than boys though.” Then, Alfred innocently asked Cynthia to give his address to women in Sanford so that he could “get some of the girls” to send him letters to raise his morale. One could interpret his “exception” indicating that his time in Vietnam heightened his awareness that soldiers’ receipt of letters was a significant motivation to persevere in Vietnam. He imagined that Cynthia’s writings would encourage a fellow soldier. He also knew that letters exchanged between women and soldiers held other potential implications. For example, it was common practice for men to boast of the women who wrote them by showing off pictures, perfumes, or other trinkets that women sent in their letters, whether these women were potential lovers or merely friends. He did not want his wife being “shown off” by another man in another unit. Alfred and Cynthia conveyed romantic sentiments and shared secrets, triumphs, and struggles through letters. Alfred believed that if Cynthia were to correspond with another soldier what could begin as an innocent friendship could easily become mistaken for something emotionally deeper because, as Alfred indicated, soldiers were starved of affection and craved attention from

⁶⁶ In fact, Cynthia around this time began donating money to “Operation Wiseman,” a U.S. Army initiative to distribute gifts and donations to orphanages, school children, and refugee centers in South Vietnam. See Lt. Colonel Asa E. Hunt to Cynthia Fowler, January 10, 1969, Box 2, Folder 19.

women.⁶⁷ Cynthia subsequently decided against writing the other GI. Alfred later asked why she “decide[d] not to write to [that] guy” and admitted that he was “looking forward to getting those new letters from those girls you were going to give my address to.” And, if Cynthia were too slow to disseminate his address, Alfred claimed that he would take it upon himself to write “a couple of addresses myself [that I know].”⁶⁸

Cynthia apparently disregarded at least some of Alfred’s proscriptions, much to his consternation. These tensions erupted in an emotional letter. “The way you talk,” Alfred began, “there is a lot of things you would do if [it] weren’t for my disapproval. You sound ‘bitter.’” he explained: “I want you to have fun, but I always wanted to be able to protect you from any harm.” From Cynthia’s perspective Alfred was excessively overbearing by wanting her to “just sit at home.” Alfred relented, stating that he understood Cynthia felt “trapped” by his demands in ways similar to how he felt trapped by service in Vietnam.⁶⁹ Alfred’s remoteness from the events playing out in North Carolina meant that any episode of racial violence, in his mind, became an exaggerated threat to Cynthia’s personal safety. Cynthia possessed more direct knowledge and experience and could more accurately comprehend the potential danger (or lack thereof) she might face when going out alone. Martial strains nevertheless added another dimension to understanding how the home front affected the ebb and flow of Alfred’s morale in Vietnam.

If depressing news from home shaped Alfred’s perspective then so too did the grinding, arbitrary existence in Vietnam. October 1968 marked an important anniversary for Alfred—six

⁶⁷ AF to CF, February 10, 1969, Box 2, Folder 2.

⁶⁸ AF to CF, February 18, 1969, Box 2, Folder 2.

⁶⁹ AF to CF, March 18, 1969, Box 2, Folder 3.

months until DEROs. He wrote Cynthia on the occasion expressing his excitement and angst: “I will have about completed six months in this dreadful place [and] I will have only six more to go. I will then be home in your sweet arms.”⁷⁰ His extended separation from Cynthia constantly gnawed at him and, to help pass the time and stay emotionally connected with Cynthia, she mailed Alfred a tape recorder along with recordings of her talking to him. Alfred loved the idea and immediately thought about the possibilities of playing music on the tape recorder, as well, asking Cynthia to record “Because” by Arthur Prysock—a song played at their wedding—and mail the tape to him.⁷¹

By taking advantage of the availability of cassette-players and headphones Alfred joined other soldiers in Vietnam who temporarily escaped into the rhythms and amplified sounds of Sixties music during lulls on firebases and landing zones, where the men were relatively secure from harassment by the enemy. Arthur Prysock and The Four Tops transported Alfred to a time of happiness and calm, far from the shores of Vietnam. For Alfred, music opened yet another gateway alongside *The Sanford Herald*, letters from Cynthia, and official Army publications, for him to remain connected with both American society and his family and friends back home.

By the midpoint of Alfred’s tour in Vietnam, around October – November 1968, soldiers stationed on or near major military installations such as Da Nang or Phu Cat could expect to find goods at the PXs or in Vietnamese markets that ranged from musical instruments and boom boxes to *Ebony* and *Playboy* magazines. As an artilleryman living on a firebase, Alfred possessed greater relative access to consumer markets than counterparts in the infantry who sometimes

⁷⁰ AF to CF, October 1, 1968, Box 1, Folder 10.

⁷¹ AF to CF, September 1968, Box 1, Folder 9.

spent thirty or more days actively patrolling the hinterland. Even so, Alfred's power as a soldier-consumer changed as his unit relocated numerous times during his one-year tour. Through the 1968 summer Alfred's primary channel of communication with "the world" came by way of Cynthia's letters. For six months Alfred sent most, if not all, of his military pay to Cynthia. Alfred had no capability of purchasing anything and had no need for money or military scrip. When Battery B relocated close to Saigon, the men in Alfred's unit suddenly became participants in Saigon's lively economy. Alfred now found money convenient for personal consumption and his letters burst with exciting news of cheap silk dresses, fancy suits, silk pajamas, and trips to the Post Exchange (PX).

Because soldiers bonded and commiserated through acquiring and sharing consumer goods, Alfred began to feel torn between sending Cynthia excess funds and retaining money for himself to take part in his unit's communal practices of purchasing and sharing beer and food. Alfred wrote Cynthia on November 6 requesting 35 dollars to shop at the PX. He noted that with more chances to "go to the PX" his friends agreed to each contribute money to purchasing items for the group's consumption. "It's my time to buy a case of soda and beer," Alfred acknowledged.⁷²

Alfred's newfound desire to emulate the consumption habits of other soldiers in his unit forced him and Cynthia to negotiate their finances, not always to his liking. Cheap prices at the PX could also indirectly empower Cynthia to purchase newer technologies. When Alfred learned that Cynthia was shopping around for a 35mm camera, he told her to wait on the purchase and encouraged her that with forbearance the couple could have a 35mm for \$40 at the PX in

⁷² AF to CF, November 6, 1968, Box 1, Folder 11.

Vietnam, rather than spending the \$89.00 to \$200.00 for cameras that Cynthia found in Sanford.⁷³ On November 22, Alfred's frustration with his acute poverty spilled over in a fuming letter to Cynthia—"I'm doing fine; but very damn broke. Darling, out of all the money I've sent home, I can't see why I can't get the \$50.00 I asked for."⁷⁴ "After (7) seven months of 'army chow' . . . I get a chance to get something to eat besides army food and I don't have the money," he complained.⁷⁵

Cynthia made a wise decision to send Alfred a cassette player because he increasingly needed both encouragement—whether through music or hearing Cynthia's voice—and ways to escape from the doldrums of war in Vietnam. His morale waned significantly in the winter of 1968, as he increasingly viewed the Vietnamese and American officials responsible for managing the war to be utterly corrupt and incompetent. Simultaneously, he concluded that his unit commanders lacked judgment and cared little about their men. His political outlook soured on the war, as well, because he could not see clear progress towards a conclusion of either its near or successful conclusion. "More power to you brother," Alfred sardonically commented when he learned that a family friend, Ray, reenlisted for another six months in Vietnam: "There is no way in hell I'll extend."⁷⁶

Battery B, Alfred's unit, received orders to move in October. "Got word a few min. ago that we may move in about 4 days, which will put us about 2 weeks ahead of schedule if we do,"

⁷³ AF to CF, November 1968, Box 1, Folder 11.

⁷⁴ AF to CF, November 22, 1968, Box 1, Folder 11. Emphasis in original.

⁷⁵ AF to CF, November 22, 1968, Box 1, Folder 11.

⁷⁶ AF to CF, October 9, 1968, Box 1, Folder 10.

Alfred noted, evidently surprised that the unit transfer was occurring earlier than previously communicated. His frustration with his unit's premature transfer boiled over in a seething diatribe against commanders for being "dumb as hell" and "unqualified" to lead, before setting his sights on "this damn army."⁷⁷

Alfred learned in early November that the United States, South Vietnam, and North Vietnam, had resumed peace talks after President Johnson ordered what historians call the "October Bombing Halt" in Vietnam.⁷⁸ President Johnson, largely responding to domestic pressures, used the bombing halt as a last-ditch effort to get negotiations off the ground before his term expired in January. For Alfred's part, he hoped the talks would bear fruit and allow him to return home. However, he confessed a growing skepticism of both American and Vietnamese intentions in the war. He conjectured that the South Vietnamese government probably had a vested interest in perpetuating the war because, he claimed, "they [the South Vietnamese] can trade American lives at will . . . they [are] all making more money off the war with us here than the people in the States." According to Alfred, the Vietnamese were exploiting American abundance, treating the United States as little more than a trust fund that provided seemingly endless manpower and consumer goods. The South Vietnamese imagined the United States as "the land of the Big PX," Alfred wrote.⁷⁹

Apparently Cynthia equated the bombing halt with a general cease-fire in Vietnam, prompting Alfred to correct her: "Just because the bombing halt was called, it doesn't mean that

⁷⁷ AF to CF, October 3, 1968, Box 1, Folder 10.

⁷⁸ Herring, *America's Longest War*, 262-268.

⁷⁹ AF to CF, November 6, 1968, Box 1, Folder 11.

the war isn't still going on . . . people are still getting killed over here.”⁸⁰ “I wish they would call a cease fire while they jive around the peace table,” Alfred stated.⁸¹ By describing their peace talks as “jive,” Alfred underscored their hollowness and futility. Clearly, his political outlook on the war in Vietnam was changing rapidly.

Alfred's perception that Americans were being hoodwinked by the Vietnamese derived from his general disgust with the Vietnamese as a racial and ethnic group, describing them as dishonest, corrupt, and hateful. He offered broader diatribes against “Asians” generally. His growing antipathy toward Asians factored into his decision-making calculus when he received an opportunity for rest-and-recreation (R&R) around the six month mark of his tour in Vietnam. Soldiers had several options for R&R that included Hong Kong, Tokyo, Sydney, Bangkok, Malaysia, and Hawaii. Married soldiers usually opted for Hawaii because the army would fly their wives there for the occasion. Alfred declined the option for Hawaii because others in his unit told him “so many bad things about it, experiences, and [racial] prejudice.” While Alfred elaborated no further on his comments about racism in Hawaii, a U.S. Army Major named Harold Bronson wrote *Ebony* magazine in August 1969 noting that if journalists wanted to “illustrate where the colored GI does meet blatant, obvious day-to-day hate and racial prejudice” Hawaii ranked second only to Japan.⁸² By November, Alfred eagerly anticipated R&R and expressed in his writings an overwhelming desire to leave Vietnam, and the Far East generally, because he tired of “looking at slant-eyed people. I want to see some ‘round-eyed’ people for a change.” Given Alfred's growing dislike of East Asians, he likely opted to visit Sydney.

⁸⁰ Ibid.

⁸¹ AF to CF, November 8, 1968, Box 1, Folder 11.

⁸² AF to CF, August 18, 1968, Box 1, Folder 8; Harold Bronson, “Letter to the Editor,” *Ebony*, (August 1969), 23.

However, Alfred was displeased to learn later that his R&R “was to a place called ‘Bangkok.’” Unfamiliar with the regional geography, Alfred bemoaned the fact that his R&R was not “even out of the damn country.”⁸³

Soldiers often experienced a transformation in their perception of the Vietnamese throughout their tour. Men arrived in Vietnam optimistic about the cause, perhaps feeling ambivalent about fighting on behalf of an unknown people or expressing pity for Vietnamese civilians upon arrival. However, soldiers were shocked to learn that most Vietnamese civilians were unappreciative of their presence or outright hostile to them. American allies in the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) seemed unreliable in battle and potential thieves outside combat. These trends cultivated outright hostility toward all Vietnamese by the midpoint or end of most GIs’ tours, compounded further by the fact that one could not distinguish easily whether a civilian by day was an insurgent fighter by night.⁸⁴

Alfred’s sentiments toward the Vietnamese moved along a similar trajectory. He admitted that frequent ambushes and his fear that behind every Vietnamese smile lurked a guerilla fighter fueled much of his hatred. In one letter to Cynthia, he described how an insurgent fighter lobbed a grenade that barely missed his truck and “exploded and hurt some civilians.” Alfred explained that the incident “[made] me want to sho[ot] every ‘damn’ thing over [here] as long as it has ‘slant’ eyes.” Alfred continued to rage that he “hate[d] these ‘damn bastards’ over here.”⁸⁵

Alfred had also entered a far more dangerous period of his tour in Vietnam as the 82nd Airborne and the 1st Cavalry Division (Airmobile) launched a significant operation around the

⁸³ AF to CF, November 24 and 25, 1968, Box 1, Folder 11.

⁸⁴ Appy, *Working-Class War*, 212-225; Kindsvatter, *American Soldiers*, 143-146; Longley, *Grunts*, 95-98.

⁸⁵ AF to CF, December 20, 1968, Box 1, Folder 12.

Mekong Delta in January 1969, close enough to Battery B that the men once again engaged in almost unending fire missions to support infantry units in the field.⁸⁶ Life on the firebase became increasingly precarious, as well, when enemy sappers started probing the perimeter on a consistent basis in January. On one occasion, Alfred wrote that his unit killed two “gooks” and wounded a third, when the trio were caught sneaking into the perimeter. Rumors circulated among the men in mid-January that a recent fire mission had killed as many as 40-50 Vietcong, with at least ten confirmed killed.⁸⁷ “We are still shooting a lot,” Alfred acknowledged, seeing no immediate end to his labors when infantry elements of the 82nd Airborne and 1st Cavalry continued to make “heavy contact” in the field.⁸⁸ Here Alfred confronted a continuous life-and-death situation where American soldiers could almost reach out and grab Vietcong by the belt during close fighting along the base’s perimeter. To relieve the moral and spiritual angst (Alfred professed a Christian faith prior to Vietnam) of killing the Vietcong, Alfred rationalized killing as part of the zero-sum game of war—kill or be killed—and by dehumanizing the enemy, the latter of which eventually influenced his racial caricatures and writing about the Vietnamese and Asians.

Finally, Alfred found that once in Vietnam he could not discover an accurate measure of progress in the war. Alfred, like other American soldiers, chiefly defined progress during the war either by DEROS—that is, by how much longer he had left in country—or by the number of enemy killed. He often wrote Cynthia that he was “X” number of days from being sent back to “the world.” In other letters, he measured the collective progress of his unit by the number of

⁸⁶ AF to CF, January 12, 1969, Box 2, Folder 1.

⁸⁷ AF to CF, January 19, 1969, Box 2, Folder 1.

⁸⁸ AF to CF, January 22, 1969, Box 2, Folder 1.

enemies killed. Alfred related to Cynthia that his unit had killed “X” number of Vietcong or NVA, implying that the enemy could not long endure the firepower brought to bear by his artillery battery. For example, Alfred wrote on January 24, 1969, that “Charlie” had “got to be hurt and disorganized, because we really put tons and tons of high explosives on him.” He continued that “we lost quit [*sic*] a few people, but we killed a lot more than we lost.”⁸⁹

Alfred’s conception of progress in the war was directly related to his experiences in an artillery unit. Working with one of the most powerful weapons of modern war, the 105mm Howitzer, directly shaped Alfred’s perception of how much damage was inflicted on the enemy. Alfred could not conceive that for all the artillery barrages his battery initiated the enemy still had the willpower and the personnel to continue to fight. But assessing numbers killed proved meaningless in Vietnam and gradually prompted Alfred’s nagging questions about the meaning and purpose of the war. By the end of his tour, he had little else to measure his progress in Vietnam by other than his DEROS.

Within Battery B, soldiers did not experience anything equivalent to a linear sense of progress because the unit continued to move around in an unpredictable fashion. In prior conflicts armies measured progress through land captured and held, in Vietnam ground was often captured and ceded within the same day. On January 25 Alfred told Cynthia that the Battery would move about “twenty miles south” because the “big brass think we’ve got ‘Charlie’ on the run.” Six days later, on January 31, Alfred was “disgusted as hell” because he learned his unit was moving yet again to another position that had “been getting ‘mortared’ during the past

⁸⁹ AF to CF, January 24, 1969, Box 2, Folder 1.

week.”⁹⁰ This latter position he subsequently described as heavily infested with flies and rats. In early February, Battery B was scheduled to move for the third time in a month because Battery C was “suppose[d] to come up here and take our place.” Battery B would rotate for training on newer artillery pieces.⁹¹ Alfred grew physically and mentally fatigued from “moving and building” and wondered whether the “big brass” was “trying to kill us.”⁹²

Alfred’s writings indicate that unit morale fluctuated during these moves because of the transition from working in a relatively safe area to one with more exposure to enemy fire, quality of life changes such as the sudden pervasiveness of annoying rodents and insects, climate changes, and that when the battery relocated it took an incredible physical toll on junior enlisted and non-commissioned officers tasked with fortifying the new position. These frequent relocations also meant that soldiers might temporarily receive no mail or fewer letters until army mail services caught up with the unit. The scarcity of mail infuriated Alfred at a time when he was extremely concerned about news from home and the safety of his family. “The mail box at the C.P. [Command Post] is full of letters that haven’t even gone out yet . . . this unit don’t give a damn about its men,” Alfred fumed, before continuing to describe how the men “don’t get enough food or water, but . . . are expected to work and fight like hell.” During March and April 1969 the 2-321 moved to Camp Red Ball where Battery B offered fire support for elements of the 2nd Battalion, 505th Infantry Regiment of the 1st Cavalry Division engaged in operations

⁹⁰ AF to CF, January 25, 1969 and January 31, 1969, Box 2, Folder 1. Alfred identified that the first move was from LZ June to LZ Jill.

⁹¹ AF to CF, February 6, 1969, Box 2, Folder 2.

⁹² AF to CF, January 31, 1969, Box 2, Folder 1.

against the enemy in triple-canopied jungles.⁹³ According to Alfred, what motivated the men to persevere in Battery B was not any particular loyalty to the unit, the army, or the country. Each soldier's mind was on survival—or, as Alfred aptly phrased it, the men continued to work “to save our own lives.”⁹⁴

Although Alfred joined fellow soldiers in his unit in grouching about the war and believing the army corrupt, he remained cognizant that back home his community still valued and respected military service. Thus, he was excited whenever he learned that his name appeared “in the papers” back home, such as in February 1969, because of the social capital he accrued.⁹⁵ When he received a Bronze Star and an Army Commendation Medal later that month, he wanted to ensure that all of Sanford heard the news.⁹⁶ He wrote Cynthia inquiring whether his Bronze Star had arrived, yet, or if the Army had published his citations in his hometown newspaper. Alfred took great pride in a personal award underwritten by an institution whose credibility and legitimacy he was then calling into question. He instructed Cynthia that if she did not see his name mentioned in the paper she could “put it in the paper if you like.”⁹⁷ The *Sanford Herald* published news of Alfred's Bronze Star on March 27, 1969, commenting that “Corporal Alfred

⁹³ “The Birth of a Fire Support Base,” *Pacific Paraglide* (82nd Airborne Newspaper), March, 1969, Vol. 1, No. 4, p. 1, 7, 8. Photocopy of the newspaper article in Box 2, Folder 16, Alfred Fowler Papers.

⁹⁴ AF to CF, January 30, 1969, Box 2, Folder 1.

⁹⁵ AF to CF, February 19, 1969, Box 2, Folder 2.

⁹⁶ General Orders Number 160, Headquarters, 3d Brigade, 82nd Airborne Division, 30 January 1969; General Orders Number 229, Headquarters, 3d Brigade, 82nd Airborne Division, 11 February 1969; Box 2, Folder 16, Alfred Fowler Papers.

⁹⁷ AF to CF, February 24, 1969, Box 2, Folder 2, Alfred Fowler Papers; AF to CF, March 4, 1969, Box 2, Folder 3, Alfred Fowler Papers.

Fowler of Sanford, N.C., has been awarded the Bronze Star for meritorious achievement in Vietnam” and subsequently published on April 11, 1969, that he received an Army Commendation Medal “during recent ceremonies at Fire Support Base Harrison.”⁹⁸ Cynthia dutifully cut the announcement from the paper and sent it to Alfred in Vietnam. He acknowledged receipt on April 1, when he had approximately a month left before returning to America.⁹⁹

Alfred was proud of his decorations, but he seethed about perceived racial bias in promotions within his unit, a common complaint of many black soldiers during the Vietnam War.¹⁰⁰ Labeling the U.S. Army a “white man’s army,” he fumed that “they are making turd ‘white boys (Sgt)’ and I out rank both of them on CPL. I have about 9 months’ time and grade on CPL, and they only have about 5 months as [corporal].” The culture of promotion in Alfred’s unit, he fumed, revolved around bootlicking, deference, and yes-man behavior. He refused to ingratiate himself with superiors who did not earn his respect, and wrote Cynthia as such: “It’s not fair Cyn. I don’t lick nobody’s ass for nothing,” not even a promotion that he coveted. Whereas promotions were supposedly earned by time in-grade and seniority, Alfred found that the white officers in his unit seemed to buck those rules for white corporals who made a habit of sucking up.¹⁰¹

⁹⁸ “Sanford GI is Awarded Bronze Star,” *Sanford Herald*, March 27, 1969; “Commendation Medal Given Cpl. Fowler,” *Sanford Herald*, April 11, 1969; Box 2, Folder 16, Alfred Fowler Papers.

⁹⁹ AF to CF, April 1, 1969, Box 2, Folder 4.

¹⁰⁰ Herman Graham III, *The Brothers’ Vietnam War: Black Power, Manhood, and the Military Experience* (Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida, 2003), 92-95; James E. Westheider, *The African-American Experience in Vietnam: Brothers in Arms* (New York: Rowan and Littlefield, 2008), 45-46.

¹⁰¹ AF to CF, March 17, 1969, Box 2, Folder 3.

As Alfred marked the months, weeks, and then days leading to his redeployment to the United States, he reflected that he was now one of the “veterans” when not long before he had been “green.” He admitted that being “short” caused him to have a volatile temperament. The Army “make[s] us work like hell but they can’t stop the clock,” he wrote in February.¹⁰² During the final seven-week stretch before returning home, Alfred became extremely ill-natured, lonesome, and bitter. “I’m so short-tempered. I get mad and blow up at almost everybody,” he confessed to Cynthia, before continuing that he knew “it’s wrong but I can’t seem to help myself. I need to come home bad.” He hoped that in his final weeks he could “keep his ‘Kool’ and get out of this place.”¹⁰³ With sixteen days remaining he became “so nervous and scared” that he developed “short-timer-blues” or what other soldier sometimes called “short-timer’s fever.”¹⁰⁴ The closer Alfred came to the end of his tour the more surreal the whole affair felt. While he was once a replacement for his artillery battery, he now found himself in the position of “old-timer” training a group of replacements who arrived in his unit and “look[ed] pitiful.” “Not so long ago . . . I must have looked like that,” Alfred mused.¹⁰⁵

Alfred reported to the 90th Replacement Battalion in Long Binh on May 5, 1969, his “Date Expected to Return from Overseas,” twelve hours before his flight departed for the United

¹⁰² AF to CF, February 18, 1969, Box 2, Folder 2.

¹⁰³ AF to CF, March 11, 1969, Box 2, Folder 3. That Alfred chose the particular phrase “get out of this place” over “get out of here” or some other similar phrasing may indicate the influence of the song, popular among GIs in 1968-1969, “We Gotta Get Out of This Place,” by Eric Burdon and *The Animals*.

¹⁰⁴ AF to CF, April 19, 1969, Box 2, Folder 4; “Short-Timer’s Fever,” in *Vietnam War Slang: A Dictionary on Historical Principles*, by Tom Dalzell, 138.

¹⁰⁵ AF to CF, February 22, 1969, Box 2, Folder 2.

States.¹⁰⁶ Alfred left Vietnam hoping that his change of station would land him at Fort Bragg, about an hour from his family. The Army instead assigned him to the 1st Battalion, 29th Field Artillery, based at Fort Carson, Colorado where he would spend the final months of his two-year draft obligation until his service expired on November 27, 1969. Alfred observed that “this joint is worse than Vietnam” and understood why his friend “re-enlisted to get away from” the rife morale and discipline problems on the base.¹⁰⁷ Alfred was aware that his two-year commitment would expire in November and he planned to make-do at Fort Carson until then, telling his wife that “I had rather be ‘dead’ than be in the army.”¹⁰⁸ He was particularly frustrated by insufficient paychecks that totaled roughly \$200.00 a month and, after allotments were disbursed to Cynthia, barely kept him afloat in Colorado—a grievance shared universally by privates and corporals during the period.¹⁰⁹ As Alfred’s frustration mounted he became another disciplinary problem at Fort Carson, admitting that he was served an “Article 15” (an informal, non-judicial form of punishment) for “telling Sgt. Harrell to go to hell and throwing him out of my room.”¹¹⁰

Alfred’s greatest fear during these months remained the specter of Vietnam. Would the army send him back? Rumors circulated among GIs at Fort Carson and within Alfred’s social circle that his new unit was destined for Vietnam again in the coming months. These rumors persisted despite the commanding officer trying to assuage fears by emphatically denying the

¹⁰⁶ Department of the Army, Headquarters 3rd Brigade, 82nd Airborne Division, Special Orders Number 120, Fowler, Alfred, April 30, 1969, Box 2, Folder 10, Alfred Fowler Papers.

¹⁰⁷ AF to CF, June 1969, Box 2, Folder 4, Alfred Fowler Papers.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid.

¹⁰⁹ Fowler, Alfred, Military Pay Voucher, Department of the Army, Form 2139, June 30, 1969, Box 2, Folder 11, Alfred Fowler Papers.

¹¹⁰ AF to CF, October 4, 1969, Box 2, Folder 7.

hearsay. Alfred became so concerned that he asked Cynthia to write their Congressman and ask whether the army could legally send him back to Vietnam given that he spent “a tour over there and having only been back in the states 2 or 3 months and having only 4 months left in the Army.”¹¹¹ Alfred’s unit was primarily composed of recent “Vietnam returnees” and he (and many others) would “go to jail before [going] back again” to Vietnam.¹¹² His fears were unfounded. He did not return to Vietnam and served at Fort Carson until being honorably discharged on November 26, 1969.

Alfred returned home to a much-changed Sanford after two years of mass protest and social change in North Carolina. Sanford became a center of racial unrest in 1969 characterized by the same violent protests and riots that afflicted other North Carolina cities in 1968—in October 1969, the governor dispatched scores of state troopers to Sanford when crowds of black and white youths rioted near a predominantly black section of the community and forced the closure of high schools for several days.¹¹³ One report described Sanford as “the scene of racial disturbances for several months” in October 1969.¹¹⁴ While Cynthia held fast to their shared conservative and “old way” values, service during the war dramatically changed Alfred’s social and political outlook. He now hated the army that during his teenage years had seemed so appealing. His absence in service had also affected Cynthia. Before Vietnam, she depended on

¹¹¹ AF to CF, July 20, 1969, Box 2, Folder 5.

¹¹² Ibid.

¹¹³ “Troops are Withdrawn,” *The Index-Journal* (Greenwood, South Carolina), July 28, 1969, 1; “Patrolmen are sent to Sanford,” *The High Point Enterprise*, October 13, 1969; “Sanford Schools Reopened,” *The High Point Enterprise*, October 14, 1969; “Sanford Schools are Reopened,” *The Danville Register*, October 15, 1969, 11.

¹¹⁴ “Patrolmen are sent to Sanford,” *The High Point Enterprise*, October 13, 1969.

Alfred's full-time income to attend college. Cynthia had tried to attend college and work simultaneously while Alfred served overseas, but eventually financial distress forced Cynthia to drop out of college and work full-time at the Carnes Company's facility in Sanford. The initial joy of Alfred's homecoming gave way to years of readjusting to life together and Alfred reconciling with his experiences in Vietnam.

Alfred lived in Sanford until his death on July 17, 2004. After the war, he took advantage of the GI Bill to earn an associate's degree before beginning a lifelong career at Branch Banking & Trust (BB&T). Veterans' Administration (VA) benefits also helped the couple purchase their first home. Among the treasured possessions that Alfred and Cynthia preserved from his Vietnam-era experiences are a VA document explaining the benefits of the GI Bill for obtaining an education and VA paperwork describing how veterans could qualify for their first mortgage. His initial optimism about the military providing its soldiers a gateway to socioeconomic advancement proved true in the end. Far from the bedraggled, drunken Vietnam veteran of popular culture and memory, Alfred became an immensely successful businessman, rising to an assistant vice president of BB&T prior to retirement.¹¹⁵ He remained married to Cynthia until his death, as well.

¹¹⁵ Vietnam-era American soldiers are typically described in fairly stereotypical ways through both historical writings and popular culture. Almost always, these men were naïve teenagers who hailed from poor or working-class backgrounds or who were racial minorities. Historians have challenged this generalization in recent years. Peter S. Kindsvatter, *American Soldiers: Ground Combat in the World Wars, Korea, & Vietnam*, argued that Vietnam-era soldiers, like their predecessors in Korea and World War II, were motivated by myriad and complex factors that included a tradition of family military service, the need for adventure, and most frequently the "coercive volunteerism" of the draft, 14-19; Kyle Longley in *Grunts: The American Combat Soldier in Vietnam*, similarly describes most American soldiers during the war as reluctant draftees or coerced volunteers but refrains from generalizing that all soldiers were either poor or working-class, 3-37; 69-114. Ronald Spector writes in *After Tet: The Bloodiest Year in Vietnam* that American soldiers who served in Vietnam before the Tet Offensive of 1968 were largely volunteers or highly motivated draftees. When the Tet Offensive exposed the futility of the war effort and the anti-war movement reached its fever pitch in the United States, however, the predominately draftee infantry were far more reluctant, plagued with racial tensions, and prone to insubordination, 26-45. B.G. Burkett, *Stolen Valor: How the Vietnam Generation was Robbed of its Heroes and its History* (Dallas: Verity Press, 1998). Burkett's polemical

During his tour in Vietnam, Alfred expressed grievances with the Vietnamese, army commanders, the government, and adopted an increasingly liberal perspective on certain social issues, such as marijuana consumption. His attitudes and behaviors were inextricably linked to the constant negotiation between his inherited culture from Sanford and soldier culture in his unit. Entering service as a conservative, Alfred drifted leftward while in Vietnam and Colorado, only to gradually move rightward upon reintegrating into his home community. Although the story of a single soldier, Alfred's experience indicates how soldiers' sociocultural and political attitudes could fluctuate and move in circular patterns throughout the Vietnam-era. Alfred never recanted the hostile views he expressed in his letters about the army or the war and, based on available knowledge, one cannot say that he naturally reassumed the same political outlook and "traditional" ways that he inhabited prior to his service.

The negotiations that Alfred made between soldier culture in his unit and his inherited culture from home happened on a broader scale during a critical moment when national discourses about African-American military service, race, race relations, and American society were changing in the United States. The varying degrees of perceived and real racial tolerance that existed in unit cultures across Vietnam contributed to the development of two competing discourses about the integrated Army; one insisted that black soldiers were breaking down racial barriers and the other contended that blacks were victims of an exploitative and racist system

work argues that Vietnam veterans by-and-large represented a cross-section of American youth and served honorably; however, their image and reputation were tarnished in the postwar years by "victim" narratives that posited Vietnam-era soldiers are hapless, exploited draftees who became maniacal, drunkards afflicted with PTSD and other maladies post-service.

during the Vietnam War. Alfred's shifting opinion about the war in Vietnam occurred within this broader context.

Like many other Vietnam veterans, Alfred reconciled the inadequacies and foibles of the Vietnam War by taking pride in his own personal service and those of his closest comrades for whom, as one soldier aptly observed, he "would go through hell" to protect.¹¹⁶ Alfred and his family remained supremely proud of his service in Vietnam for the rest of his life. His obituary noted first and foremost that "Mr. Fowler was an Army veteran of the Vietnam War and earned a Vietnam Service Medal and a Bronze Star."¹¹⁷ Alfred's requests in 1968 that Cynthia make known his accomplishments in Vietnam continued even after his death—Cynthia would continue to remind all who would read or listen about Alfred's "Bronze Star." He was interred with full military honors at Sandhills State Veterans Cemetery in Spring Lake, North Carolina on July 20, 2004, where his headstone inscription provides a lasting testament to his military service: "Alfred Fowler. CPL US Army. Vietnam. Sep 16 1942 to Jul 17 2004. BSM Arcom. Beloved Husband and Father."

¹¹⁶ William C. McCormick to Albert Ettinger, August 9, 1967, Albert Ettinger Papers, Project Vietnam, MHI.

¹¹⁷ "Obituary, Alfred Fowler," *The Fayetteville Observer*, July 20, 2004, 5B.

CHAPTER FOUR: EPHEMERAL BROTHERHOOD: SOLDIER CULTURE, THE INTEGRATED ARMY, AND THE EMERGENCE OF BLACK CONSCIOUSNESS IN VIETNAM, 1965-1973

In the September 1966 issue of *Ebony* an army sergeant serving in Vietnam wrote a letter concerning the shooting of James Meredith, a black civil rights activist who had embarked on the “March Against Fear” from Memphis to Jackson, Mississippi. The letter’s author, Sergeant Louis B. Whitehead, was disgusted that while he faced enemy fire in Vietnam, African-Americans in the United States were being gunned down in the streets. Whitehead admitted that since hearing of Meredith’s ordeal he and “many other Negroes wonder ‘why are we in Viet Nam?’” The official line, according to Whitehead, was that “we are here to ensure the right of the Vietnamese people to hold free elections and vote.” But “we are constantly making eye ball to eye ball contact with the Viet Cong while our people are being ambushed back in the ‘Land of the Free’ for a right which we . . . were supposed to have had more than 100 years ago.” Whitehead asked whether black men were “only handy to have around in case of war?”¹

Eight months earlier, the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) released its “Statement on Vietnam.” In it SNCC made explicit its opposition to the United States’ foreign policy in Vietnam. The United States had, first and foremost, failed to “preserve freedom” within its own borders where “numerous persons . . . have been murdered in the South because of their efforts to secure their civil and human rights, and whose murderers have been allowed to escape penalty for their crimes.” The murder of Samuel Young in Tuskegee, Alabama, prompted

¹ Louis B. Whitehead, Letter to the Editor, *Ebony*, September 1966, 16, 20.

SNCC's statement against Vietnam in an effort to persuade Americans that cruelty toward the "peasants in Vietnam" and the murder of civil rights activists in the South were both part of a system that encouraged violence against "colored people" and sought to thwart "liberation movements which are not bound, and refuse to be bound, by the expediencies of United States Cold War politics."²

SNCC released its statement at a formative time when many African-Americans had yet to withdraw their support for the war in Vietnam. Black self-defense organizations, such as the Deacons for Defense and the Revolutionary Action Movement, and emerging black power groups unanimously applauded SNCC's bold stance against the war and echoed its call for young black men to dodge the draft. But, moderate African-American organizations hewed closer to Martin Luther King, Jr., who remained "relatively mute about the war" until his Riverside Church address in April 1967. The Urban League and the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) rebuked SNCC's manifesto, perceived upstart radical organizations (particularly those predominated by college-aged activists) as potentially destructive to the cause of civil rights, and would subsequently criticize King for his anti-war politics.³

Both SNCC's "Statement" and Whitehead's letter identified the many contradictions apparent between official American rationales for the war and the treatment of minorities in the United States. Whitehead described black soldiers in his unit reading, sharing, and conversing

² "Statement on Vietnam," Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, January 6, 1966, www.crmvet.org/docs/snccviet.htm.

³ Lawrence Allen Eldridge, *Chronicles of a Two-Front War: Civil Rights and Vietnam in the African American Press* (Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press, 2012), 94-124; David J. Garrow, "When Martin Luther King Came Out Against Vietnam," *New York Times*, April 4, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/04/04/opinion/when-martin-luther-king-came-out-against-vietnam.html>.

about *Ebony*'s coverage of the civil rights movement each month. For black men questioning whether their overseas military service was worthwhile in light of racial injustice at home, *Ebony* became a forum for focusing such questions and sharpening their answers: a significant example of the entanglement of soldier and civilian culture during the Vietnam War not examined by other historians of the Vietnam War or African-American history.⁴

Ebony's coverage of the Vietnam War and its incorporation of hundreds of soldiers' letters between 1965 and 1973 highlights the intersection of mass culture, soldier culture, and a growing black consciousness within the army in Vietnam. Black soldiers coveted copies of *Ebony* in Vietnam because through its articles, editorials, advertisements, and suggested reading lists, they felt connected to the home front. The magazine offered thorough coverage of the rifts and dislocations attending the civil rights movement in the late Sixties, critical and insightful reporting of the Vietnam War, and pieces of cultural criticism that worked out the tenets of black pride and fostered an imagined black community abroad. The editors also ensured that soldiers had space in the magazine to vent about the war, engage with cultural and social debates, and offer corrections to inaccuracies in the magazine's war reportage.

How these soldiers interpreted and used the information they gleaned from *Ebony* (and other sources) were inherently tied to their individual experiences in army units whose unique cultures exhibited varying degrees of racial bigotry, opportunity, and camaraderie. In other

⁴ While other historians of African-American history and the Vietnam War have used articles and editorials from *Ebony* in their research, scholars have not systematically drawn on the letters to the editor from black soldiers to examine black radicalization during the 1960s, or the entanglement of soldier and civilian culture during the Vietnam War. For example, Herman Graham III draws primarily on *Sepia* and national newspapers in his discussions of black radicalization in Vietnam instead of *Ebony*. See, "Black Power GIs" in Herman Graham III, *The Brothers' Vietnam War*, 90-119 and Graham, "Combat and the Interracial Male Friendship" in *Soul Soldiers: African Americans and the Vietnam Era*, Samuel W. Black ed. (Pittsburgh: Senator John Heinz Pittsburgh Regional History Center, 2006), 1-23.

words, soldiers who contributed to *Ebony* during the Vietnam War were often more optimistic about the “integrated army” and the prospects for non-violent activism in the United States to achieve civil rights for blacks if those soldiers served in units where they perceived that integration had successfully diminished racism. Black soldiers were negotiating between their unit cultures and contemporary culture in the United States, broadly construed, to formulate their ideas about race, race relations, and American society.

Soldier culture and, in turn, unit culture in combat units evolved in the midst of omnipresent danger. Constant vigilance caused soldiers to grow skeptical of all Vietnamese and rear-echelon soldiers, while learning that survival depended on cooperation. Thus, black men in combat units absorbed an ethic of communality and rigid in-group loyalty to other infantrymen that superseded other sociocultural, racial, and ethnic divisions between men in the platoon.

As a consequence of inherent differences between combat “soldier culture” and culture in the rear, soldiers’ letters in *Ebony* reveal the growth of two distinct black subcultures in the U.S. Army in Vietnam (and the military more broadly speaking) from 1965 to 1973. One subculture blossomed within combat units, like Alfred Fowler’s artillery battery, where the specter of death demanded that men set aside their prejudices and cooperate to survive. Another subculture arose in support units (non-combat) where daily routines often mirrored those of civilian life; it was here that self-segregation and bigotry begat distrust and ignorance that erupted in riots, violence, and discord. Whether black soldiers served in combat or in the rear, the unit cultures they were immersed in prompted many to write *Ebony* to express often-contradictory views about the

relationship between the integrated U.S. Army, service in Vietnam, and race relations in the United States.⁵

Jet and *Ebony* were the two principal magazines consumed among African-Americans during the mid-1960s. *Jet* magazine appealed to working-class audiences, with its gossip features on black celebrities and other notables. It was found frequently in local barbershops, salons, and other public spaces where black men and women congregated. *Ebony* cultivated a bourgeois image by featuring articles and columns from literary and civil rights titans of the time such as Martin Luther King, Jr., Hamilton Bims, James Baldwin, and Coretta Scott King, who contributed essays on civil rights activism, black history, and the lives of movers-and-shakers in black culture. The magazine also included a monthly feature called “Speaking of People” that gave brief write-ups about black men and women serving in prestigious positions. One issue, for example, featured a foreign advisor with the National Education Association, a designer with the Smithsonian Institution, the owner of Nell’s Boot Shop (a regional retailer), an engineer with IBM, and a hospital public relations director. These upwardly mobile African-Americans

⁵ While the magazine always identified a soldier’s geographical location (i.e. Vietnam, Germany, the Philippines, or a military base), it did not reveal their specific duty station or military occupational specialty. Given that this chapter’s arguments and claims hinge on a distinction between combat soldiers and non-combat military personnel, I had to develop some logical way of discerning whether a letter-writer was combat or non-combat. There is also no apparent archive of letters from this era held by the magazine and, even if there were a repository for letters from the 1960s, it is likely that archivists would have discarded the letters that identified soldiers’ duty stations (envelope glue is corrosive). I tried to identify non-combat and combat personnel based on clues contained within the published letters, such as references to participating in combat or witnessing combat, being in the infantry, suffering wounds or witnessing the death or maiming of a friend. I likewise identified soldiers with “rear” assignments by their references to having served at a divisional base camp or in an MOS that entailed non-combat war work. Between 1965 and 1973, I discovered 120 published letters from military personnel in the U.S. Army. Of those, 80 were then serving or had served in Vietnam, while another 40 had served in Germany, Japan, the Philippines or elsewhere. Based on clues contained in the texts, I determined that 34 of the letters were written by combat veterans (or those then serving in the infantry), while the other 46 were likely rear-echelon personnel.

demonstrated to readers that blacks were doing meaningful work in crucial fields of American enterprise.⁶

Like other forms of American mass culture, *Jet* and *Ebony* were readily available to soldiers in Vietnam. Soldiers acquired magazines at Post Exchanges on many of the divisional and rear bases. Many also had a family member back home subscribe and mail the magazine to them. Later in the war, the Army opened libraries on bases in Vietnam that included a periodical section, where soldiers could peruse both magazines and national newspapers.⁷

Ebony resonated among African-American men who volunteered for military service during the early years of the conflict and who were motivated by the idea that they could attain a better quality of life through personal sacrifice and service. Surely Alfred Fowler, Jr., who during his time in uniform purchased his family a color television set, high-end camera, and a radio, scanned *Ebony*'s advertisements of brand-new pianos, household appliances, Parodi cigars, classy liquors, and automobiles. In 1965-1966, the majority of soldiers deployed to Vietnam were volunteers serving in prestigious units such as the Army's special forces and airborne—the 173rd Airborne Brigade was among the first combat units deployed to Vietnam.⁸ A November

⁶ "Speaking of People," *Ebony*, September 1965, 5-6.

⁷ "Watch Yourself Grow Thru Off Duty Education," *Roger That* (90th Replacement Battalion), Vol. 1, No. 5, July 29, 1969, 5, MHI, Carlisle, PA. *Roger That* reports about the construction and opening of a library at Long Binh that included a magazine section with *Ebony* and other titles. For examples of how soldiers acquired magazines in Vietnam, see Ernest L. Peacock, Letter to the Editor, *Ebony*, September 1967, 22; Ralph Bateman to Father, February 16, 1970, Ralph Bateman Collection, Box 1, Folder 1, Vietnam Center and Archive, Texas Tech University.

⁸ There were a total of 1,857,304 inductions during the Vietnam War (August 1964 – February 1973). In 1965, the Selective Service System inducted a total of 230,991 men in and 382,010 in 1966. The units that first arrived in Vietnam, however, would have relied predominantly on soldiers drafted in 1963-1964, meaning that their two-year obligations would expire at some point in 1965-1966. In 1963, 119,265 men were drafted, followed by 112,386 in 1964. See, "Induction Statistics," Selective Service System, <https://www.sss.gov/About/History-And-Records/Induction-Statistics>. An undetermined number of draftees splintered into all service branches (Navy, Air Force, Marine Corps, and Army) and many were assigned to duty in Western Europe, where the United States kept a

1965 article about black men in the 173rd Airborne Brigade included an interview with Calvin Bowers, an African-American soldier who volunteered for duty in Vietnam and hoped that with combat and jump pay, in addition to his base salary, his family of seven could purchase a home in Detroit and achieve the American dream.⁹

Black soldiers serving in Vietnam identified *Ebony* as a crucial resource for home front news that catered to their specific interests and concerns ranging from the civil rights movement and race relations to men's fashion. Evidence also suggests that the magazine reached a far larger audience than mere sales records would indicate.¹⁰ "Every time a soul brother over here gets an *Ebony* or *Jet* magazine," one private wrote, "there is a waiting line of at least 30 to 50 soul brothers throughout our troop waiting to read it." Stressing the special significance attached to *Ebony* he continued: "black people back in the U.S. don't know what it means to a black soldier to have magazines such as *Ebony* and *Jet* to *call their own*."¹¹ Another soldier claimed that the

sizeable force in the event of war with the Soviet Union. Even further, Army draftees were divided into support, combat support, and combat roles, meaning that, all factors accounted for, it is very likely a small percentage of the 231,651 men drafted between 1963-1964 saw combat in Vietnam during those early years. During the entire war, some 2,594,000 personnel served *within* the borders of Vietnam, and of those 648,500 were draftees. Of course, these statistics are undoubtedly complicated by the fact that many soldiers reported volunteering for the service after they received a draft notice in the mail.

⁹ Simeon Booker, "Negroes in Vietnam: 'We, too, are Americans,' Fully Integrated GIs Resist Viet Cong Claims of Brotherhood," *Ebony*, November 1965, 89-99.

¹⁰ In December 1965 the magazine reported a circulation of 900,000 issues read by approximately five million people. If one presumes that *Ebony* enjoyed a primarily black readership, then five million readers represented roughly one-fifth of the entire U.S. black population in 1965 of 20,504,000. "Estimated U.S. Population by Race and Hispanic Origin, 1965-2015," Pew Research Center, http://www.pewhispanic.org/2015/09/28/modern-immigration-wave-brings-59-million-to-u-s-driving-population-growth-and-change-through-2065/ph_2015-09-28_immigration-through-2065-a2-05/.

¹¹ Anonymous, Letter to the Editor, *Ebony*, August 1968, 15. Emphasis added.

mere presence of *Ebony* and *Jet* in Post Exchanges scattered throughout South Vietnam did “wonders for the old morale.”¹²

Photographs of women of color in negligee and swimsuits also attracted the interest of soldiers, with many often drawing comparisons between centerfolds in *Ebony* and those in *Playboy*. While *Playboy* introduced women of color in 1964 (China Lee) and 1965 (Jennifer Jackson), *Ebony* incorporated more women who were almost exclusively black.¹³ That Sergeant Jerry Mahone found it “rewarding to be able to sit down way over here [in Vietnam] and take a gander at our lovely women, *which wouldn’t be possible without Ebony*,” was typical of many positive responses the magazine received from soldiers during the war.¹⁴ Such an opinion was not universal, though. Another sergeant chided *Playboy* for its failure to include enough women of color in its magazine but nevertheless complained that *Ebony* also did not provide *enough* pin-up girls in its magazines. This same sergeant said that he spoke on behalf of his entire squadron, whose black members all read *Ebony* but complained that the “pin-up pickings” were “slim.”¹⁵ Whether these men sought *Ebony* for its pin-ups or its editorials and articles, all of them indicated that reading and viewing *Ebony* sustained important connections to the home front and the black community during a time of acute distress and alienation.

¹² Ernest L. Peacock, Letter to the Editor, *Ebony*, September 1967, 22; Also see Jerry L. Mahone, Letter to the Editor, *Ebony*, November 1968, 23. Also see these other letters to the editor: Charles Daniels, December 1968, 22; Sherion Hayden, Jr., June 1969, 25; Bill R. Williams, December 1969, 18; Frank Badgett, December 1969, 18; Carl A. Hicks, December 1969, 18.

¹³ Amber Batura, “How Playboy Explains Vietnam,” *The New York Times*, February 28, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/02/28/opinion/how-playboy-explains-vietnam.html>/¶6.

¹⁴ Jerry L. Mahone, Letter to the Editor, *Ebony*, November 1968, 23. Emphasis added. Some army unit newspapers incorporated women of color into its weekly, bi-weekly, and monthly publications by 1969. For example, see *Always First, Bronco Tribune* (3rd Battalion, 1st Infantry) 2, no. 23, November 28, 1969, 4; *Always First, Bronco Tribune* 3, no. 12, July 17, 1970, 5.

¹⁵ Burnett Ross, Jr., Letter to the Editor, *Ebony*, November 1968, 23-26.

During a time when both the political left and the civil rights movement seemed to fracture in the United States, *Ebony* acted as a guide for navigating complex and contradictory ideological waters. The August 1970 special issue, “Which Way Black America?” stressed what appeared to be a directionless and fraught civil rights movement, giving equal treatment to black social movements emphasizing “separation,” “integration,” and “liberation.” Throughout the war, *Ebony* included articles from prominent activists. Martin Luther King, Jr., Huey Newton (Black Panthers), Tom Mboyo (Kenyan minister for economic planning and a staunch opponent of back-to-Africa movements), Lerone Bennett Jr. (a well-known historian of African-American history), and Hamilton Bims (Deacons for Defense), among others. That *Ebony* provided equal representation in its magazines to different elements of the civil rights movement allowed soldiers in Vietnam an opportunity to judge and debate the merits of black power, black liberation, and non-violent, racially inclusive movements.

Black soldiers were given space in the magazine to sound off about problems in the military, their take on social issues (ranging from the use of the terms “African-American” versus “Black” or “Negro” to interracial dating and marriage), and the future direction of black America. Soldiers also had the reasonable expectation that those reading their missives the next month would have an understanding of their feelings and perspectives. The magazine’s reader-driven features, such as the letters to the editor section that sometimes stretched to ten pages, allowed soldiers to engage with a broader public back home and also with fellow black sailors, airmen, and Marines.

Black soldiers also appreciated that *Ebony* refrained from criticizing the soldiers fighting in Vietnam while simultaneously publishing articles critical of the war effort. Even after public opinion turned against the war and the anti-war movement gained traction after the Tet Offensive

in 1968, *Ebony* dedicated its 1968 special issue to the “Black Soldier” serving in Vietnam. On the cover were displayed eight black GIs from the Los Angeles U.S. Army Recruitment Service wearing the uniforms from all major American conflicts from the American Revolution through Vietnam. The editors hoped the cover would stir up feelings of how “despite the Negroes’ long history of slavery and second class citizenship, [he] is serving his country loyally—and has been doing so since this country began.”¹⁶ Indeed, the issue covered a wide range of topics including African-Americans historical participation in American wars, the draft, reports about black nurses in Vietnam, and descriptions of black artwork and comic strips produced in Vietnam.¹⁷

The August 1968 issue remains important for determining *Ebony*’s positioning on the war in Vietnam because John H. Johnson, the founder of Johnson Publishing Company and the owner of both *Ebony* and *Jet*, included a “Publisher’s Statement” that made explicit his, and by extension the magazine’s, politics. He denounced “war” but recognized that for African-Americans in the United States “war has been a part of our past and is a part of our present.” Johnson rejected the stance of SNCC and other anti-war activists that black men had no business in Vietnam and should evade the draft. Dismayed by “how little black people know of their own history” Johnson claimed the August 1968 issue would “set the record straight” about “black soldiers performing valiantly in Vietnam despite the racial tensions that beset all major American cities” and also “set the record straight on the black man’s participation in the military in both

¹⁶ “Backstage” Editor’s Note, *Ebony*, August 1968, 26.

¹⁷ Black soldiers serving in Vietnam appreciated *Ebony*’s issue dedicated to them. For examples, see Charles Daniels, Letter to the Editor, *Ebony*, December 1968, 22; Arthur K. Williams, Letter to the Editor, *Ebony*, December 1968, 22; A. N. Smith, Letter to the Editor, *Ebony*, December 1968, 24. Smith wrote that *Ebony* excelled in demonstrating “how it is over here” for the average soldier.

the past and present.”¹⁸ He perceived military service as both a right earned by past generations and a “patriotic duty” for citizens of the United States, reminding readers that during World War II “black men were being refused by their draft boards because of [racial] quotas [in a segregated army] while white men were doing everything in their power to evade the draft.” In Johnson’s estimation it was black men who served the nation—whether by helping “free black slaves during the Civil War” or proving competent working with “the most complicated of planes and missiles in use by the Armed Forces today”—while it was white men who historically evaded military service and shirked their responsibilities to country and family. Black soldiers in Vietnam could get behind Johnson’s outlook because while he denounced the war, as did many soldiers by 1968, he saluted with genuine compassion the patriotism, loyalty, valor, and strength of those serving in Vietnam.

The black press generally remained optimistic about black participation in Vietnam during the early years of the conflict because it represented the first “integrated war.” Although Truman had ordered the desegregation of the armed forces in 1948, integration proceeded glacially through the Korean War. Most combat units in Korea were integrated after the Army deactivated the all-black 24th Infantry Regiment in 1951, but non-combat units remained segregated.¹⁹ On October 30, 1954, Secretary of Defense Charles E. Wilson announced that the

¹⁸ John H. Johnson, “Publisher’s Statement,” *Ebony*, August 1968, 29.

¹⁹ By 1953, 95 percent of all combat units were integrated in Korea. The 24th Infantry Regiment was formed in 1869 and deactivated in 1951 during the Army’s integration phase. During the Korean War some historians have argued that those serving with the 24th were the target of harassment and unfair criticism by commanders who charged the unit with “poor performance.” Most historians agree that the 24th nevertheless had a competent record in combat and its weaknesses (in cohesion, effectiveness) were likely attributable to neglect and relegation prior to service in Korea. See, for example, Paul M. Edwards, *The Korean War* (New York: Greenwood Publishing, 2006), 50-51; Jonathan Sutherland, *African-Americans at War: An Encyclopedia*, Volume 1 (ABC-CLIO, 2003), 449.

Army had, at last, fulfilled Truman's executive order by de-activating the last segregated units. Hence, the Vietnam War marked a watershed moment because for the first time the United States deployed to war a completely integrated armed services.

Ebony's earliest reports about Vietnam focused on the successes of the "integrated army." Simeon Booker—an African-American war correspondent who covered Vietnam from the beginning of the American build-up in 1965 wrote an article entitled "Negroes in Vietnam: 'We, too, are Americans,' Fully Integrated GIs Resist Viet Cong Claims of Brotherhood."²⁰ In this article, Booker focused equally on the special role black men could play in winning the hearts and minds of the Vietnamese and the apparent success of integration. "Every military man in Vietnam wants to get home after his year of active duty," Booker wrote, contending that Americans soldiers found "the best insurance" for survival was to dismiss the "nonsense of racism" and cooperate with each other (93). Booker also interviewed a number of black and white soldiers who were equally optimistic about integration and hopeful that racial harmony in Vietnam would translate into greater tolerance at home. One anonymous black soldier commented that black and white soldiers slept together in a Catholic parish so close that the men's extremities touched. "This is the important ingredient for back home," he observed, before noting that "we've got men here from the Deep South." Booker's obvious message was that the culture in combat units in Vietnam allowed one-time racial antagonists to see eye-to-eye and treat each other with respect.²¹

²⁰ Simeon Booker, "Negroes in Vietnam," 89–99.

²¹ Booker, "Negroes in Vietnam," 93-94.

That soldiers in combat units developed a unique culture became apparent when Booker admitted that, while integration had become a way of life on the frontlines, social segregation persisted in Saigon and other rear areas. Nevertheless, military life was free of the “more obnoxious racial inequities that have characterized America’s past wars.” Citing that white officers no longer shouted racial epithets at black soldiers, that white and blacks did not brawl in the streets, and that support units were integrated unlike in the Korean War, Booker praised integration and congratulated those whose “years of protest and official orders are [now] paying off.”²² He presumably agreed with one newspaper editorial that praised the Army for eliminating “long-standing injustices” and giving “negroes in uniform . . . a new found dignity, and [making] this democracy’s defense system . . . stronger for it.”²³

Booker’s rosy assessments were colored by his experiences with elements of the 173rd Airborne Brigade, a unit that possessed both a sizeable black minority among its ranks and a culture of racial tolerance. Activated on March 26, 1963, at Okinawa, the 173rd Airborne Brigade arrived in Vietnam on May 7, 1965, making it the first major Army combat unit deployed to the country. One cannot stress enough the importance of the 173rd being based in Okinawa and not the United States because this meant that when Booker arrived with the unit in 1965 the black and white soldiers he interviewed had been removed from the racial tensions in America for two years. Black soldiers in the brigade did not endure the humiliation of persistent Jim Crow and white hostility in the South that circumscribed the off-base activities of their comrades around Fort Polk, Louisiana and Fort Benning, Georgia. Furthermore, the 173rd Airborne “Sky Soldiers”

²² Booker, “Negroes in Vietnam,” 90, 99.

²³ “Wiping out the Color Line in the U.S. Armed Forces,” *The Kansas City (MO) Times*, January 11, 1966, 30; See also: “Higher Negro Death Rate in Vietnam Termed Evidence of Valor not Bias,” *The Gazette and Daily*, York (PA), March 12, 1966, 2.

(a phrase translated directly from the Mandarin *Tien Bing*) had a special unit cohesion and pride characteristic of elite airborne and Special Forces units.

What Booker interpreted as racial cooperation and true integration among these elite paratroopers in Vietnam, American citizens and other soldiers serving in different units perceived as mere wishful thinking. “This article makes it sound as though it is a privilege to fight in this war because it is integrated and there is little or no discrimination,” one reader reflected, before countering that equality and tolerance might exist in Vietnam but would not endure when soldiers returned home.²⁴ Ironically, when one soldier asked if Booker’s article resonated with his unit where black men were “court martialed for offenses also committed by their white compatriots, who were only reprimanded,” he inadvertently confirmed some of Booker’s optimism when he described how the five guilty white men accompanied him to his own court-martial as “character witnesses” and made a “sincere attempt to stamp out . . . racial prejudice” in the army’s justice system.²⁵ Other soldiers agreed with Booker’s impressions and praised his work for bringing due attention to the black soldier’s contribution to the war effort in Vietnam. Henry J. Thomas, serving in the Army in Vietnam, enjoyed Booker’s article “because it focused attention on our contribution over here also.” Thomas worried that the “white news media” ignored the valuable contributions made by black men by writing articles about and interviewing mostly white soldiers.

These varied reactions reflected differences in soldiers’ perceptions based on experiences in their own units as much as a disingenuous or naïve understanding of race relations in the

²⁴ Bobbie Butler, Letter to the Editor, *Ebony*, March 1966, 18, 20.

²⁵ William Bean, Jr., Letter to the Editor, *Ebony*, March 1966, 18.

military by correspondents like Booker. For example, because Alfred R. Fowler, Jr. (not to be confused with Alfred Fowler, Jr. from the previous chapter) served in a unit in which white men universally occupied leadership positions, he believed that the Army functioned as a quasi-plantation system. He predicted that the Army would forever “remain the last sanctuary of Confederacy” if white officers could continue to “perpetuate the old plantation dream” of ordering around black men and barring them from promotion.²⁶

Booker’s article was one among many *Ebony* features that emphasized the bravery, resilience, and courage under fire of black combat soldiers in elite outfits in Vietnam, constantly implying that the significant presence of blacks in combat units was evidence of racial progress.²⁷ Blacks were indeed over-represented in combat outfits in the 101st Airborne Division and the 173rd Airborne Brigade in 1965-1966. Higher re-enlistment rates among blacks (relative to whites) and higher rates of volunteerism for hazardous duty and opportunities with higher pay contributed to this phenomenon. The editorial staff at *Ebony* published an article about the 101st Airborne Division’s crack 1st Brigade in 1966 where one-third of personnel were black. In an article entitled “Birdmen with Black Rifles” (Birdmen was the English translation of a Vietnamese nickname for paratroopers) the authors described them as “the fightingest, most travelled unit in the Viet Nam War [filled with] gut fighters of the jungle war.”²⁸ The high percentages of black troops in the 1st Brigade, the 502nd Battalion (50%), and the Recondo Squad

²⁶ Alfred R. Fowler, Jr., Letter to the Editor, *Ebony*, November 1965, 14.

²⁷ “The ‘Birdmen’ with Black Rifles: Paratroopers of 101st Bear Brunt of Viet Nam Action,” *Ebony*, October 1966, 37-42; Simeon Booker, “The ‘Black Tiger’ of Mang Buk,” *Ebony*, September 1966, 68 -73; “Sitting Ducks of Viet Aerial War: Slow Scout and Copter Pilots Play Dangerous Role at Front,” *Ebony*, November 1966, 58 - 63; “Guardians of the Viet Nam Coastline,” *Ebony*, December 1966, 129 - 134; Simeon Booker, “Death of a Navy Pilot,” *Ebony*, January 1967, 25 -32.

²⁸ “The ‘Birdmen’ with Black Rifles,” 37.

(90%) were presented as evidence that “a new day in military affairs” had dawned, disproving the prevalent “myth of the Negro’s alleged cowardice in battle” during World War II and Korea. *Ebony* acknowledged that some concern arose about “Negroes . . . being slaughtered on suicide missions in forward lines” but attributed high rates of black casualties to their biological dispensation for “adaptability to jungle guerilla fighting” and blamed the Pentagon’s fear of upsetting “equality-seeking Negroes at home” for denying black men the “credit that is due them for their daily heroic feats and sacrifices.”²⁹

Of the various units featured in *Ebony*, correspondents typically interpreted the 1st Brigade in the 101st Airborne Division as a model of integration. Interviews with “Birdmen” by correspondents from *Ebony* suggested that black and white soldiers were inseparable and that “many a Negro GI ponders the value of his sacrifices, wondering whether this short-lived experience is enough to change racial attitudes of his white comrades-in-arms.” One black GI remarked that “no segregation or discrimination [exists] when GIs hold live ammunition” leading correspondents to conclude that “teamwork among Negro and white paratroopers remains at maximum peak at the front.” “It’s only after the battle is over and the men get back to town” that racism divided men, one soldier conceded.³⁰ Even if blacks were not represented equally in the Brigade’s officer corps, correspondents could still credit the enormous strides the unit made in promoting black soldiers to the noncommissioned officer ranks and for fostering an atmosphere of racial tolerance in social interactions among troops.

²⁹ Ibid., 38.

³⁰ Ibid., 38.

Black soldiers, immersed in complex and contradictory unit and soldier cultures, felt compelled to comment on *Ebony*'s coverage of the war because its articles seemed to either downplay the prevalence of racism they perceived existing in the army or, conversely, overplayed racism in ways that overshadowed their wartime contributions. In a larger sense, when soldiers engaged in debates about the "integrated army" they were also entering into discourses about the potential for the war to improve the prospects for integration and equality at home. Soldiers navigating these debates, informed by their experiences working with white men in Vietnam, produced diverse writings about the practical and theoretical problems of the civil rights movement in the United States. Many of these ideas were expressed within the initially optimistic climate surrounding integration in Vietnam, which presupposed that if blacks and whites could cooperate, and even become close friends, in combat units they could get along back home, too.

Ebony's publication of an editorial entitled "The 'Acceptable Negro'" in April 1966 constituted one such flashpoint of the negotiation between unit and contemporary civilian culture because both the article, and the responses it provoked, focused on whether cooperation with or separation from whites would prove best for the black race. The editorial primarily argued that for black people to be "accepted by the majority of whites today" they had to conform to a set of unspoken and prescribed rules about dress, language, demeanor, and docility that hailed from the days of slavery. Thus, the "acceptable" black person did not "rock the boat" and certainly did not support inter-racial dating and marriage. Moreover, the author presumed that the "acceptable Negro" must be even-tempered, ultra-rational, and emotionally stoic. In this view, white liberals coupled with non-violent, "docile" blacks had stymied black equality by restricting the public space available for "radicals" who did not seek to conform to white preferences regarding black

men and women. In other words, “High Class Uncle Toms” who sacrificed their dignity and manhood for “comfort” and a job were responsible for the general regression of civil rights.³¹

Black soldiers disagreed with the editorial and instead complained, like Howard W. Taylor, a private in the Army, that unruly black activists had frustrated the civil rights movement by their childish behaviors and their proclivity for violence. “The reason that the Negro is still persecuted by the Caucasian is the Negro’s own fault,” Taylor wrote. He contended that Native Americans and Chinese Americans, who were both at one time considered inferior to whites, did not achieve equality by protesting in the streets and causing ruckus (certainly, a specious claim). He advocated for African-Americans to protest less and instead put their heads down, work hard, and press forward. Taylor’s views were influenced by his experience in Vietnam where he admitted that he now identified more as a soldier belonging to a community composed of people “both white and colored, who feel exactly the way I do.”³²

That a black soldier in the Army would express more sympathy for those who towed the official line than activists being assaulted and intimidated in American cities was anathema to other readers who were quick to condemn Private Taylor as an “Uncle Tom” in subsequent issues of *Ebony*. A reader from New York blasted Taylor’s delusions as symptomatic of his fraternizing with “white guys” who saw him as an “acceptable Negro” because he did not agree with the tactics used by civil rights activists. But, let Private Taylor flirt with a white woman or ask his white friends to stroll with him through any ghetto in the United States and he would see the hollowness of his arguments. According to his detractors, Taylor had misread the white

³¹ “The ‘Acceptable’ Negro,” *Ebony*, April 1966, 118-119.

³² Howard W. Taylor, Letter to the Editor, *Ebony*, July 1966, 10-12.

man's willingness to "let you string along with them—like people who walk their dogs" for genuine equality.³³

Private Taylor's criticism of the editorial and his disgust with mainstream black civil rights activists makes sense if understood from his perspective as a young infantryman in Vietnam where he worked face-to-face with white soldiers continuously and under extreme duress.³⁴ Taylor railed against those whose tactics (e.g. rioting) alienated whites so crucial to forming multiracial coalitions to pressure for change while he then resided in a unique social context that mandated cooperation between all races to best ensure survival. Taylor may have also been among black conservatives or moderates who thought it imprudent to espouse anti-war views or flout military service. Even when Martin Luther King, Jr., openly criticized the Vietnam War from the pulpit of Riverside Church in Manhattan he was assailed by radicals who believed he was not sincere in his anti-war politics and by conservatives, such as Roy Wilkins, who thought he struck a mortal blow to the black-white coalition that had been forged with the Johnson administration. Finally, Taylor might have worried that the very traits deplored in "The 'Acceptable' Negro"—humility, non-violence, rationality—were at that time being undermined

³³ John Alston, Letter to the Editor, *Ebony*, September 1966, 13; Ann Fields, Letter to the Editor, *Ebony*, September 1966, 13.

³⁴ Sociological research has suggested, since the 1950s, that prejudice, bias, and stereotypes are broken down through one-on-one interactions in integrated environments.

The path breaking work on this subject was completed by sociologist Gordon W. Allport in *The Nature of Prejudice* (Reading, Massachusetts: Addison-Wesley, 1954/1988). Allport argued that face-to-face contact between members of different groups could dismantle prejudices and stereotypes. His findings have largely been replicated in studies that consider racial, ethnic, religious, class, gender, sexual orientation, and other distinctions. See, for example, Irwin Katz, "Gordon Allport's 'The Nature of Prejudice,'" *Political Psychology* 12, no. 1 (March 1991): 125-157; Amy Chua, *Political Tribes: Group Instinct and the Fate of Nations* (New York: Penguin, 2018), 199-202. Chua suggests that the integrated Army during the Vietnam War broke down the racial prejudice of many soldiers who, for the first time in their lives, worked substantively and continuously with other racial groups.

by an insurgency of radical student activism and others calling for immediate social change through separatist programs undergirded by violent tactics.

Regardless of Taylor's specific background, his comments appeared during a cultural crisis in America as the civil rights movement—long championed and directed by King—experienced growing internal divisions. It is no coincidence that *Ebony* published a defense of nonviolent tactics by King in October 1966. In the article, King tried to assuage the growing feeling among African-Americans that they must fight back with violent means to see fulfilled the promises of liberty and equality in America.³⁵ Vietnam's early years represented a tentative and cautious moment when black activists, soldiers, journalists, and public intellectuals were deciding what the racially integrated army meant for social justice at home. As the war escalated year after year and black casualties mounted, all sides would abandon withholding judgment and adopt and form increasingly divisive and contradictory ideologies, outlooks, and cultures that sought to explain the war's meaning for black America. Black soldiers, immersed in their units' soldier cultures, would continue to play a key role in this process through their contributions to *Ebony*.

By late-1967, with King joining in the growing cacophony of opposition to the war in Vietnam, civil rights activists increasingly perceived the over-representation of black men in combat units in Vietnam as evidence of racial inequality in the draft. There were, of course, many reasons why black civil rights leaders turned against the war. For example, King was inspired to publicly denounce the war after seeing the effects of napalm on Vietnamese children

³⁵ Martin Luther King, Jr., "Nonviolence: The Only Road to Freedom," *Ebony*, October 1966, 27 – 34.

in *Life* magazine. King also lamented how the war had drained resources from public coffers and denied a more robust anti-poverty campaign during the Johnson administration. One historian rightly argues that the motif of a “two-front war”—one abroad and one at home—guided and directed African-American activism and journalism during the war. From 1965 to 1966, the “two-front” metaphor suggested that the United States was engaged in two wars that bore great importance for national wellbeing—the war against Communism and against poverty. By 1967, however, those who deployed the “two-front” metaphor were suggesting something different: that the Vietnam War was eviscerating Johnson’s “War on Poverty.”³⁶ While some soldiers certainly turned against the war and the “two-front” paradigm figured prominently in their writings, others remained committed to anti-Communist rationale for the conflict and disparaged anti-war protestors. *Ebony* also slowly transitioned its reportage of the war in 1967 from transparent optimism toward a more skeptical view.

The editors at *Ebony* in 1967 included articles that suggested (or at least allowed readers to intuit) the connections between racial injustice at home and institutionalized discrimination in the armed forces. In March 1967, the magazine’s cover highlighted an article by the eminent African-American historian Lerone Bennett, Jr., entitled “Reading, ‘Riting, Racism” that excoriated the glacial progress of desegregation in America’s public school systems thirteen years after *Brown v. Board of Education*. Bennett argued that racism “permeates the whole curriculum and provides the framework within which the learning process occurs,” and he pointed to “sins of commission and omission” in primary education textbooks as responsible for

³⁶ Eldridge, *Chronicles of a Two-Front War*, 23; Robert Dallek, *Flawed Giant: Lyndon Johnson and His Times, 1961-1973* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998); Adam Fairclough, “Martin Luther King, Jr., and the War in Vietnam,” *Phylon* 45, no. 1 (1984), 19-39; Eric F. Goldman, *The Tragedy of Lyndon Johnson* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1974); Lewis M. Killian, *The Impossible Revolution: Black Power and the American Dream* (New York: Random House, 1968).

continuing the cycle of impoverished education for black students.³⁷ Servicemen appreciated Bennett's take on education, finding that its contentions provided an explanation for why Vietnam, and not college, lay in their future. For example, Stanley Ferdinand, a soldier serving in Vietnam, observed that the growing popularity of Black Power and deadly riots in the United States were symptomatic of integration's failure, the stagnation of reform programs, and the perception (and belief) that African-Americans were being used as cannon fodder in Vietnam.³⁸

Five months later *Ebony* took on the Selective Service, questioning the extent to which African-Americans were treated fairly by it. The article, "Viet Nam: Every Youth Must Face the Fact of Involvement," noted that between 1965 and 1967 African-Americans represented twenty-three percent of combatants while representing only eleven percent of the American population. But how did this disparity occur? The author explained that on average black men were younger, experienced higher rates of unemployment, rarely could pursue college education, and re-enlisted with greater consistency than any other racial demographic. Moreover, few black men could afford to litigate their draft status or pay the \$10,000 fine and undergo five-year imprisonment to dodge the draft.³⁹

The article focused on Private First Class Ulysses C. Kendall, whom it argued was representative of black GIs in Vietnam. Kendall voluntarily enlisted in the Army and, once in Vietnam, volunteered for hazardous duty as a Radio-Telephone Operator (RTO) for a Forward Observer (FO) team with the 4-27, 25th Infantry Division. Raised in a Chicago slum by destitute parents, the U.S. Army represented for him a path to a better life. Kendall also fervently believed

³⁷ Lerone Bennett, Jr., "Reading, 'Riting, Racism," *Ebony*, March 1967, 130 – 138.

³⁸ Stanley Ferdinand, Letter to the Editor, *Ebony*, June 1967, 19.

³⁹ "Viet Nam: Every Youth Must Face the Fact of Involvement," *Ebony*, August 1967, 23 -28.

in the cause, telling reporters that Americans were “helping to rehabilitate the [Vietnamese] people.” Moreover, he remained confident that integration in the Army would produce subsequent benefits in the United States: “You can’t just live in a foxhole together, drink out of the same canteen, cover fire for each other and then go back [home] and say ‘go to hell.’” Certainly, the socioeconomic conditions that prompted African-Americans to volunteer, or that made conscription a more likely possibility for young black men, were symptomatic of institutionalized racism in America. However, *Ebony* omitted from its analysis any indication that African-Americans suffered unfair treatment within the Selective Service System. On the contrary, the military seemed beneficial to men like Kendall. “It boils down to the fact that for many Negro youth, military service with its regimentation and all its danger, is a better life with more promise than [black men] find outside,” the author concluded.⁴⁰

Not all readers were equally persuaded by *Ebony*’s mostly positive spin on military service in Vietnam. Grant B. Williams, Jr., who served in Vietnam from 1964 to 1965 read “Viet Nam” with “mixed emotions, regretting that it was so short and shallow.” In his estimation the article ignored how black men were “called upon to do for [the Vietnamese] what we are denied to do for ourselves.” Namely, “young men [are called] to fight and die for the “freedom of the South Vietnamese while the freedom of the American Negro goes wanting.”⁴¹ Another soldier disagreed with Kendall and argued that integration failed in Vietnam. “It appalls me to read ever-so-often the printed words uttered by some black soldier in the jungle who says there is complete integration in the fox-holes,” he wrote, before continuing to explain that these other soldiers’

⁴⁰ “Viet Nam,” *Ebony*, August 1967,, 25-28.

⁴¹ Grant B. Williams, Jr., Letter to the Editor, *Ebony*, October 1967, 21.

quips were mere “survival statements” that patched over the reality that blacks and whites remained indifferent (at best) or even openly hostile (at worst) to each other in Vietnam.⁴²

Other soldiers agreed with Kendall and argued that blacks were over-represented in combat units because those units provided opportunities for promotion and extra income. Technical Sergeant Albert Glenn, Jr. echoed Kendall’s sentiment that Americans were “fighting for a cause over here, both to protect the U.S. — in the long run —and to protect the rights of the South Vietnamese people.”⁴³ Jerome M. Brooks, a Vietnam veteran then stationed at Fort Benning, Georgia, explained that blacks volunteered for hazardous duty and elite units like the airborne because “promotional opportunities for the Negro are very exiguous” in non-combat units. Therefore, a volunteer would logically conclude that “if he survives . . . Viet Nam and makes a favorable impression among his superiors, it is possible for him to advance.” Whether blacks served in Vietnam with the infantry or with the airborne, Brooks claimed war service had the advantage of higher pay and, therefore, if a soldier could not receive the promotion “he longs for” his consolation was extra income.⁴⁴

There was truth to both arguments about why blacks were overrepresented in the Army in Vietnam. For those who cited underlying discrimination and racial bias in the draft, there were clear indicators that the public schools, which often had yet to be integrated, failed black teenagers. The grassroots movement, predominately in the South, that protested the uniformly white draft boards and their obvious racial bias in selecting blacks from rural communities

⁴² Noble Sissle, Jr., Letter to the Editor, *Ebony*, November 1967, 17.

⁴³ Albert Glenn, Jr., Letter to the Editor, *Ebony*, November 1967, 17.

⁴⁴ Jerome M. Brooks, Letter to the Editor, *Ebony*, March 1968, 16.

further vindicated such views.⁴⁵ Lacking either the preparation or the financial means to attend college, these men (and poor, working-class whites) could not benefit from deferments that middle-class and affluent teenagers leveraged to avoid service. On the other hand, many patriotic black men volunteered and reenlisted with combat units because those hazardous duties provided financial incentives such as combat or jump pay. But these two sides presented a false dichotomy because in all likelihood those who volunteered under threat of compulsion or who were drafted sought to make the best of their situation once in the service—combat pay, jump pay, and assignment to elite or renowned units all had practical benefits for those already facing a tour in Vietnam. The ongoing debate in *Ebony* suggests that the meaning of black combat service and casualty figures shifted dramatically as disillusionment with the war, broadly, and the integrated army, specifically, ballooned.⁴⁶ In one sense the reality of whether blacks were overrepresented

⁴⁵ Eldridge, *Chronicles of a Two-Front War*, 132; Graham III, *The Brothers' Vietnam War*, 135. Graham contends that Lyndon Johnson's decision to rely on the Selective Service to meet the manpower requirements of the Vietnam War, and the fact that middle-class and other privileged (and mostly white) constituencies could opt-out through deferments, meant that the draft system disproportionately affected the poor and especially poor black men. For example, only five percent of black men of draft age were eligible to claim a college deferment; Appy, *Working-Class War*, 17-38. While Appy focuses on socioeconomic status as the major determinant of who served in the infantry, other historians like Eldridge and Graham have argued that black men were not only socioeconomically disadvantaged but further victimized by "systemic racial discrimination, particularly at the hands of overwhelmingly white southern draft boards" (Eldridge, n225).

⁴⁶ Nearly all historians of the Vietnam War include claims that blacks were disproportionately represented in Vietnam because of inequities and institutionalized racism in the Selective Service. Unfortunately, one consequence of such dogged attachment to this argument has been to render black soldiers as victims during the war while minimizing or omitting evidence to the contrary. The most influential proponents of this argument are Myra MacPherson, *Long Time Passing: Vietnam & The Haunted Generation* (1984) and Christian G. Appy, *Working-Class War* (1993).

On the other hand, B. G. Burkett argues in *Stolen Valor* (1998) contests the idea of Vietnam being a "working-class war." On African-American participation, Burkett is unequivocal concluding that "for all the false rhetoric about the war taking the heaviest toll on African-Americans," it was in Vietnam that they demonstrated "the leadership skills that had been there all along." Burkett regrets that rather than the public acknowledging the valor, heroism, and sacrifice of black soldiers in Vietnam, who during the post-war years rose to positions of power and prestige, many instead turned to the malicious stereotypes of blacks presented by Hollywood movies such as *Dead Presidents*, *Forrest Gump*, and *Platoon*, 461-465.

in combat units is irrelevant, what mattered was what soldiers and their families at home *thought* was true, and how that effected the tensions between soldier culture and societal culture in Vietnam.

Those who served in the combat arms—infantry, artillery, and cavalry—in Vietnam experienced an entirely different tour of duty than those who served in the rear.⁴⁷ The manifold dangers soldiers faced while in the field meant that informal unit and soldier cultures worked against the insidious presence of racism and discrimination. Racial and ethnic differences between soldiers, among other things, were subordinated to the collective need for survival. For many, a combat tour in Vietnam led to the conclusion that, racial differences aside, men had much in common and could coexist in an integrated social context on equal terms. As Vietnam veteran and author Karl Marlantes observed, the combat experience in Vietnam “was a racial crucible that played an enormous, if often unappreciated, role in moving America toward real integration.”⁴⁸

Also see, Gimbel, Cynthia, and Alan Booth. “Who Fought in Vietnam?” *Social Forces* 74, no. 4 (1996): 1137–57. Gimbel and Booth argued that black draftees were far more likely to face “low skill service jobs, such as food service, general duty including laundry and graves registration, and general supply” than combat duty. The two researchers found nearly twice as many black draftees were in these positions during the war “than one would expect based on the marginal distribution.”

⁴⁷ The differences between the unit cultures of combat and support units in Vietnam offers another plausible framework for explaining the emergence of competing discourses about the specific meaning of black participation in Vietnam. To varying degrees combat units evolved cultures that discouraged racism because it undermined unit cohesion. When correspondents interviewed black soldiers in Vietnam, their impression of race relations varied dramatically depending on whether they were embedded in the rear or with units in the field.

⁴⁸ Karl Marlantes, “Vietnam: The War That Killed Trust,” *New York Times* (January 7, 2017), ¶5, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/01/07/opinion/sunday/vietnam-the-war-that-killed-trust.html>. Also see Ronald Specter, *After Tet*, 258-259. Specter felicitously opined that “it was one of the many ironies of the Vietnam War that the greater the degree of danger and discomfort for the combatants, the greater the racial harmony and solidarity.”

Some black soldiers' insistence upon the continuation of integrationist civil rights—as opposed to the tenets espoused by white and black separatist ideologies—derived from their experiences in multiracial combat units in Vietnam. Lieutenant David E. Rutledge claimed that the Army provided white men with an opportunity to truly know the black man in ways not possible in civilian society. He concluded from his own experiences in Vietnam that the integrated army “set the stage for an intimate association and an invaluable dialogue between blacks and whites that ultimately leads to a better understanding of the black man.” He was debating another soldier, Private Wendell Hill, whose letter in the February 1969 issue of *Ebony* claimed that black men in the military were isolated from and not contributing to the broader civil rights movement in the United States. To the contrary, Rutledge conceptualized black soldiers as the vanguard of civil rights fighting a “battle for minds” in the military where the success of integration allowed whites and blacks to disabuse themselves of invidious stereotypes, suspicions, and racial prejudices. He believed that, once aggregated, all of the small victories over racism in the military would help promote equality in American society.⁴⁹ Or, as Captain Wallace P. Brown wrote in the *Old Guard*, the battalion newspaper for the 4th Battalion, 3rd Infantry Regiment in Vietnam: “They learned that the color of a man’s skin does not affect his bravery or companionship. Who would question the color of hands carrying one to safety?”⁵⁰

Brown’s observation about the filial bonds forged between black and white men in combat was also foregrounded in a documentary entitled *The Anderson Platoon* by Pierre Schoendoerffer. The documentary focused on First Lieutenant Joseph Anderson, a black

⁴⁹ David E. Rutledge, Letter to the Editor, *Ebony*, June 1969, 25. Also see, Wendell Hill, Letter to the Editor, *Ebony*, February 1969, 19; Robert E. Brooks, Letter to the Editor, *Ebony*, December 1968, 24.

⁵⁰ Wallace P. Brown, “Youth are Dying,” *Old Guard* (4th Bn, 3rd Infantry Newspaper), Circa November 1969, MHI, 3.

graduate of West Point, who commanded a platoon in the 1st Cavalry Division. Schoendoerffer followed First Platoon during Operation Irving from January 28 to February 12, 1966 in Bong Son, where the platoon worked its way through swamps and dense foliage to find the Viet Cong. Composed of “minorities from lower-income families” and working-class whites, viewers glimpsed a convivial multiracial community where soldiers all shared letters from home, sang popular music, passed around copies of *Playboy*, and commiserated about their shared privations in the field. The men also respected Anderson, whom they all considered a superb platoon commander. The documentary concludes when Anderson, suffering wounds to his face and torso from shrapnel, awaits a medevac. Black, white and Puerto Rican soldiers sat by Anderson’s side, grasped his hands, sobbed, and expressed their well wishes.⁵¹

In the midst of racial tumult in the United States, *The Anderson Platoon* aired on CBS on July 4 and again on July 25, 1967, illustrating the success of integration in the Army. *Ebony* praised the documentary for informing Americans about “the Negro soldier, men like Lt. Anderson, who fight this war with courage, and face death every day in the constant sniping war with “Charlie.” Another reviewer considered the documentary excellent social commentary with “flashes of insight into some of the relationships in the integrated platoon” where a “cross-section of America in the composition of the fighting men” forged, through shared trials, “the common bond among all men who must depend on each other to survive.”⁵² Schoendoerffer’s documentary communicated to the American public several of the apparent successes of racial integration in the military. Black men could rise to positions of leadership and secure the respect

⁵¹ *The Anderson Platoon*. Directed by Pierre Schoendoerffer. CBS, July 4, 1967.

⁵² “The Anderson Platoon: Frenchman Films Viet War of Army Officer and His Men,” *Ebony*, October 1967, 69-74; Rick Du Brow, “‘Anderson Platoon’ A Triple Success,” *The Washington Post*, July 6, 1967, D20. Also see, Paul Jones, “‘Anderson Platoon’ Offers Vivid Closeup of Viet War,” *The Atlanta Constitution*, July 4, 1967, 9D.

and admiration of their subordinates, and proved more than competent in combat. As many civil rights activists also suspected, the hardships that infantrymen endured within multiracial platoon broke down social barriers and prejudices existing between blacks, whites, Latinos, and Native Americans. Of course, the prevalent racial attitude in infantry platoons like Anderson's was not uniform across the Army in Vietnam.

The racial egalitarianism that existed in the field came into conflict with prevailing attitudes in the rear when infantry and other combat units stood-down at brigade or divisional base camps. One anonymous soldier observed that “you couldn’t think just white or just black—you had to think for everybody” in the field. Sergeant Fred Waterman, who served with the 4th Battalion, 12th Infantry Regiment of the 199th Light Infantry Brigade from July 1969 to July 1970, similarly contended that “race was never an issue in the jungles” because “we were all brothers.” In the rear, black and white infantrymen often continued to stick together despite “some black REMFs put[ting] pressure on some of the blacks in the platoon to hang out with them” and disassociate from white soldiers. David Donovan, an advisor in the Mekong Delta from 1969 to 1970, similarly described racial tensions being especially fraught in base camps where “Black Power seemed to be the only theme of many black servicemen” who held an “almost monolithic prejudice against whites” unthinkable “out on the small teams I was familiar with” where “racism or prejudice [could not] show their faces without a sharp challenge.” One soldier thought soldiers were “safer on the outside of the wire than in the company area” where he and a friend witnessed two hundred black and white soldiers fighting until someone “threw a [live] grenade in the crowd.” James T. Gillam, a black infantryman in the Central Highlands assigned to the Fourth Infantry Division in May 1970, encountered frequent discrimination in

Leesville, Louisiana during AIT and also in divisional camps during stand-downs, but found an accepting atmosphere existing among men in the field.⁵³

For those serving on major installations in Vietnam, such as Cam Ranh Bay, Da Nang, Bien Hoa, or Cu Chi, day-to-day experience resembled that on any base in the continental United States. Post Exchanges (PXs), recreational centers, sports fields, movie theaters, and restaurants abounded. For instance, the Ninth Infantry Division noted in a self-congratulatory “Lessons Learned” for 1967 that at Camp Martin Cox a swimming pool, 11,500 sq. ft. service club, and 18-hole miniature golf course opened in August sustaining a “high state of morale within the division.”⁵⁴ Servicemen in a variety of occupational specialties worked schedules that mimicked the civilian workweek and had ample opportunity to socially self-segregate and avoid close interaction with others. The absence of the life-or-death situations that guided the behavior

⁵³ Fred Waterman, “My Story,” Unpublished Memoir, J. Fred Waterman Papers, Vietnam War Survey, Box 3, Folder 88, MHI, Carlisle Barracks, PA, 3.; David Donovan, *Once a Warrior King* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1986), 260; Robert Baider, Letter to Parents, January 11, 1971, Robert Baider Collection, Box 1, Folder 3, MHI, Carlisle, PA; Anonymous soldier quoted in James Wright, *Enduring Vietnam: An American Generation and its War* (New York: Thomas Dunne Books, 2017), 239; James T. Gillam, *Life and Death in the Central Highlands*, 45-46. Also see, “Vietnam War Veterans Survey Questionnaire,” William R. Brown Papers, Box 4, Folder 134, MHI, Carlisle, PA, 16.

Also see the exchange between “Keith,” Letter to the Editor, *Ebony*, May 1970, and Vivian Davis, Letter to the Editor, *Ebony*, July 1970, 21. “Keith” (pseudonym) who was immersed in a unit soldier culture that actively fought racism and bigotry, argued that being “black” or “white” were merely social constructions that kept mankind divided. He also railed against black activists (both civilian and military) who espoused “Black Power” and called for separation of the races. Vivian Davis responded in July calling “Keith” an “Uncle Tom” who was brainwashed by the American government, “Mr. Charlie,” and “Whitey” to hate his own skin color and his kin back home. In a scathing rebuke Davis called “Keith” a “white-washed Uncle Tom” and a puppet; Also, David D. Taylor, Letter to the Editor, *Ebony*, September 1970, 20. Taylor, a white NCO and Vietnam veteran, said he enjoyed reading *Ebony* to learn more about the “desires and heartaches, ambitions and frustrations of those people whose skin happens to be darker than my own.” He reported that his interest in learning more about African-American culture stemmed from his service in Vietnam, where many of his closest friends in his platoon were black soldiers.

⁵⁴ U.S. Army. 9th Division. Operational Report on Lessons Learned (1967), MHI, 9-10.

among those in the field prevented the type of social bonding between blacks and whites in the rear, and even in other service branches such as the U.S. Navy.⁵⁵

One disturbing trend was white soldiers displaying Confederate flags in rear camps in Vietnam. The sight of Confederate flags served as a constant source of irritation for black soldiers who believed that the flag was an affront to “the U.S. Army, the country, and the democratic system.” Specialist Frank Harvey argued that black soldiers had trouble articulating their rationale for fighting on behalf of a nation that allowed soldiers with impunity to display symbols that questioned the basic respect for “human dignity and our present form of government” and harkened back to the days of slavery.⁵⁶ Specialist Ronald Dixon saw Confederate flags on Army vehicles, drawn on latrine walls, and pasted on lockers in his base camp, leading him to conclude that the Army found “racial hate, black slavery, black murders and lynchings . . . all well and good.”⁵⁷ One historian notes that “Confederate flags hanging from barracks” continually motivated the Black Power movement in Vietnam that, by 1969,

⁵⁵ The United States Navy suffered from racial unrest due to perceptions among African-American sailors that implicit bias existed within the Captain’s Mast and the justice system aboard ship. African-American sailors also perceived discrimination in the assignment of duties on ships. “T. Miller,” a black sailor, wrote to *Ebony* in 1968 about his concerns that “the majority of brothers are working fire rooms, boilers, chipping paint or as ships servicemen” while whites received the choice assignments. Miller also indicated that self-segregation amplified racial tensions because “Negro Marines and sailors congregate [together with] a unity . . . second to none” and did not associate with white Marines or sailors. See, T. Miller, Letter to the Editor, *Ebony*, September 1968, 20. In October 1972, a race riot broke out on the aircraft carrier *Kitty Hawk*. The social conditions preceeding the *Kitty Hawk* riot were similar to race relations at rear camps in Vietnam where self-segregation and mutual distrust between blacks and whites became the norm. For more, see, John Sherwood, *Black Sailor, White Navy: Racial Unrest in the Fleet during the Vietnam War Era* (New York: New York University Press, 2007). See also letters from black sailors to *Ebony* attesting to growing tensions in the fleet: Johnny L. Gooden, Jr., Letter to the Editor, *Ebony*, October 1968, 16; Millus D. Bass, Letter to the Editor, *Ebony*, December 1968, 18-19.

⁵⁶ Frank H. Harvey, Letter to the Editor, *Ebony*, May 1969, 24.

⁵⁷ Ronald Dixon, Letter to the Editor, *Ebony*, December 1969, 18.

formed their own “solidarity factions” like the Black Liberation Front of the Armed Forces to fight discrimination in promotion boards, Article 15s, and courts-martial.⁵⁸

The liberal use of Article 15s (Non-Judicial Punishment) by commanders to punish black men for minor infractions such as sporting Afro-styled haircuts became another major source of frustration and tension in the rear. Sergeant Leroy Williams became frustrated by the racial double standard that existed in his unit because “numerous white soldiers in my unit whose hair is longer than mine . . . haven’t been” punished, while he might risk court-martial for refusing to cut his hair.⁵⁹ Specialist Dixon compared command indifference for white soldiers displaying the Confederate flag with informal and formal punishments and ostracism for “brothers [who] exchange the black power sign” or “shows black pride by wearing an ‘Afro.’”⁶⁰ The Army eventually loosened its restrictions on “long hair” and incorporated the Afro-hairstyle into its regulations. By 1970 the Army distributed hair care products for black men to 3,300 Army-Air Force Exchanges across the world, and trained 6,000 barbers and 1,1000 beauticians on how to “cut and style black people’s hair.” *Ebony*’s publication of the article “The Military Meets the Afro” came on the heels of numerous black soldiers and Marines writing the magazine about the discrimination they faced in the armed services for having so-called “long hair,” indicating its responsiveness to the rhythms of the black experience in the military.⁶¹

⁵⁸ Daddis, *Withdrawal: Reassessing America’s Final Years in Vietnam*, 151

⁵⁹ Leroy Williams, Letter to the Editor, *Ebony*, June 1969, 25.

⁶⁰ Dixon, Letter to the Editor, *Ebony*, December 1969, 18.

⁶¹ “The Military Meets the Afro: Exchange Barbers are Taught ‘Secrets’ of Black Hair,” *Ebony*, September 1970, 86-92; Also see “Military Exchanges Think Black: Special Items are Offered in U.S. Military Stores Around the World,” *Ebony*, July 1971, 54-58; Graham, *The Brothers’ Vietnam War*, 90-119, 109.

Similar trends existed in the United States Marine Corps, which was largely responsible for waging the war against the NLF/NVA in the I Corps Tactical Area of Operations, near the DMZ between North and South Vietnam. Journalist Steven Morris quoted black Marines in Vietnam who said they received reprimands and non-judicial punishments for placing “Black is Beautiful” stickers on their footlockers while commanders ignored white soldiers who displayed the Confederate flag on their vehicles and in the barracks. Blacks also resented restrictions on black cultural practices and hairstyles. The Commandant of the Marine Corps moved to strike down prohibitions against the “dap” handshake and Afro-styled haircuts in 1969 after race riots rocked the service in the United States.⁶² Despite these grievances, Morris’ interviews with black Marines revealed the interesting fact that, like in the Army, blacks felt they received “better treatment in the Marines than they did in civilian life.” Blacks also re-enlisted in the Marine Corps at higher rates than their white counterparts. In 1968, 21.5% of black Marines re-enlisted to 17.4% of whites, and in 1969 that gap widened to 22.9% for blacks to 14.8% for whites.⁶³

The countervailing perspectives on black soldiers’ experiences and attitudes in Vietnam reported by war correspondent Wallace Terry and performer Sammy Davis, Jr., further illustrate the contours of these divergent cultures between the units in field and rear. Terry visited Vietnam frequently (Today, Terry is better known for his problematic oral history of the war—*Bloods*—that became the basis for the 1995 Hollywood film *Dead Presidents*.) He surveyed black soldiers about their political and ideological views first in 1967 and again in 1970. During his second trip,

⁶² Steven Morris, “How Blacks Upset the Marine Corps: ‘New Breed’ Leathernecks are Tackling Racist Vestiges,” *Ebony*, December 1969, 55-58, 60, 62.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 60; Graham, *The Brothers’ Vietnam War*, 104-108, 137-138.

he observed that black soldiers were far more predisposed to violent radicalism and perceived America, not the Vietnamese, as the enemy. Terry was tapping into discourses already present in *Ebony* among soldiers who advocated violence when they returned home or ominously alluded, as Terry did, to their training “in the violent arts of guerilla war as have no generation of blacks [had before].”⁶⁴

Terry’s conclusions were far different from the patriotic optimism of Ulysses C. Kendall, interviewed in 1967, or Simeon Booker’s reporting about the 173rd Airborne Brigade, in 1965. Terry offered thoughtful and accurate commentary on why he thought this ideological shift occurred. He indicated that growing anti-war sentiment among the soldiery, the rotation of “black volunteers [from 1967]” and their replacement with conscripts, impatience with the peaceful civil rights movement, and the growth of “Black Pride” and “Black Power” movements in the military all contributed to racial tumult in Vietnam. Terry surveyed 833 *black and white* respondents, with the plurality (392) being black enlisted men. These men served in different occupations, units, and geographical regions of Vietnam so that Terry could claim to have achieved a somewhat representative sample. But of those whose opinions actually appeared in Terry’s article were a helicopter pilot, several anonymous Marines stationed in the rear, a truck driver, a personnel management officer, and a black sailor. Only two black infantrymen appeared by name: Wendell Sellers (1st Infantry Division) and Thomas Garrett (199th Light Infantry Brigade).

Thus, the majority of respondents in Terry’s survey expressed perceptions about the army that were entirely rooted in the racial dynamics existing in rear camps and not in combat units.

⁶⁴ Wallace Terry, “Bringing the War Home,” *The Black Scholar: Journal of Black Studies and Research* 2, no. 3 (1970): 6-18.

Terry's survey demonstrated that, among other things, black soldiers were politically aware, occupied various positions across the ideological and political spectrum, were becoming increasingly anti-war (but did not agree on a way to end the war), and thought that the civil rights movement had reached an important cross-roads in 1969. In other words, while Terry identified some noticeable "trends," very few of his prognostications reflected the views of the majority. By capturing a majority of participants at the lowest rungs of the military hierarchy (e.g. junior enlisted) it seems unremarkable that these men groused about duties, glacial promotions, unfair distribution of medals and awards, and the senselessness or incoherence of the war. On more specifically political questions black enlisted men remained polarized. One question asked if the respondent thought weapons were necessary in the struggle for civil rights. 38% of blacks disagreed, 13% would only use weapons in self-defense, and 49% found weapons "necessary."⁶⁵ Perhaps if Terry had made the term "weapons" less opaque he would have seen even more disparity between those who "agreed/disagreed" with the statement. Nevertheless his findings demonstrated that an ideological rift emerged between African-American soldiers on the basic philosophical premises of the civil rights movement, entirely rooted in the sociocultural context of their particular unit and environment.

Given that many or most of the dozens of racially motivated incidents cited by Terry that occurred in Vietnam also predominately occurred in the rear further indicated how specific unit cultures in the rear were shaping soldiers' ideas about race relations with sometimes frightening consequences. These incidents included the murder ("fragging") of a white officer at Da Nang, a white soldier shot by a black soldier at Tan Son Nhut, "roving gangs" of whites and blacks at

⁶⁵ Terry, "Bringing the War Home," 9.

Bien Hoa, racial epithets scrawled on latrine walls and in bars on various bases, self-segregation of blacks and whites in Saigon, Chu Lai, Da Nang, and Bien Hoa, and a prison riot at Long Binh Jail. All these symptoms further attested to the fact that racial incidents were rare or infrequent in the field but unfortunately far too common in the rear. Even Terry admitted “there may be one color . . . green” in the field but “there are two worlds when the races relax [in the rear].”⁶⁶

If the lessons that Terry distilled from his experiences in Vietnam came mostly from his interaction with rear units, then the conclusions about race relations that performer Sammy Davis, Jr. reached in 1972 were wholly shaped by his interaction with combat units on remote firebases. Davis visited Vietnam and completed eighteen shows during a 10-day period during the final year of American combat operations. He purposefully bypassed Saigon and major military installations to reach troops at remote outposts and fire support bases, where he performed for men who were returning from the field for a brief rest to see his show. At each stop, Davis wanted the men to know “somebody really gives a damn,” so he requested that a black NCO accompany him “to pull my coat to what was happening in that particular locale.”⁶⁷ Most of what Davis learned about the black experience there came from “rap sessions” he held with black soldiers and NCOs out of earshot from their white comrades or officers

Davis found remarkable the level of unity between blacks and whites in the field. “When you talk about the ‘Nam,” Davis wrote, “you’re talking about a society of people forced to live together, just like in certain areas of our civilian society.” The men who served in Vietnam were undergoing a “metamorphosis” because “black and white men have gone into the Army and

⁶⁶ Terry, “Bringing the War Home,” 14.

⁶⁷ Sammy Davis, Jr., “Why I Went to the Troops,” *Ebony*, June 1972, 141-148.

suddenly found themselves entrusted with the lives of others.” “Facing an enemy cat in the bush” required these men pull together and become brothers.⁶⁸ Davis also thought blacks were more “united” in Vietnam than back home. He found “the kind of black unity that I wish I could see at home” and believed that when these black soldiers eventually came home they could bring “with them an attitude of positiveness and of dealing from strength with numbers.” Through persistence and solidarity, he reflected, blacks in Vietnam had secured “soul records,” black magazines, and other products in the Post Exchange, won a concession from the military permitting the Afro-styled haircut, and received promotions in the field. “Up to now the Vietnam war has done something that only prison could do for the black man,” Davis ruminated, “and that’s called ‘a hardening of the arteries.’”⁶⁹

Terry’s and Davis’s assessments overlapped in pointing toward a general sentiment among black soldiers that returning back home would be a “hassle” and that although they “paid their due” by serving in Vietnam they fully expected to be refused opportunities in the United States. Members of Davis’s troupe discovered through rap sessions that the black man in Vietnam was “very conscious politically and economically” and “not as much concerned about the peace [and anti-war] movement as he is about the black movement.” Davis found no “super-patriotic zeal” but an attitude of indifference and an eagerness to return home to “another battlefield that I’ve got to fight on.” Similarly, some of those interviewed by Terry predicted a looming race war in the United States between the forces on the Ku Klux Klan arrayed on one

⁶⁸ Davis, “Why I went to the troops,” 144.

⁶⁹ Davis, “Why I went to the troops,” 142 – 146.

side and the Black Panthers on the other.⁷⁰ Both Davis and Terry omitted almost any serious discussion of how the morale problems they reported on were symptomatic of a waning war wherein all soldiers knew it was a matter of time before the United States exited South Vietnam.

Although Sammy Davis, Jr., left Vietnam with far more optimism about the potential contributions of black soldiers to the civil rights movement back home, it would be disingenuous to suggest that all combat units conformed to a pattern of racial tolerance and hospitable social climates for people of color. One can also cite examples of black soldiers who served in combat units where specific unit leaders were racist, even if the rank-and-file were not. Daniel Parks, an infantryman in Vietnam, kept a diary during the war in which he remarked that racist officers assigned only blacks and Puerto Ricans to hazardous duties and called blacks “you people” while treating them “like we are dirt.”⁷¹ Private Johnny Williams admitted that race played a larger role in the rear than in the field, but while his white comrades treated him with, at worst, indifference in the field, they returned to the norms of disrespect and bigotry during a stand-down.⁷² Three soldiers serving in the 3rd Battalion, 21st Infantry Regiment (3-21) of the 196th Light Infantry Brigade (attached to the Americal Division) complained in late-1971 that black men in their unit were being “deprived of our right[s], freedom of speech, and most of all freedom of togetherness.” The three junior enlisted authors claimed black men were prohibited from “congregating” and were subject to unfair harassment through Article 15s.⁷³ Nevertheless, these incidents were peculiar to specific command cultures and were not representative of the combat

⁷⁰ Davis, “Why I went to the troops,” 146-148; Terry, “Bring the War Home,” 8-9.

⁷¹ Daniel Parks, *GI Diary* (Harper & Row: New York, 1968), 86-87.

⁷² Johnny Williams, Letter to the Editor, *Ebony*, September 1970, 21.

⁷³ Ronald Robinson, Christopher Talford, Clarence Wright, Letter to the Editor, *Ebony*, October 1971, 26.

arms as a whole because, as David Donovan reflected, “war allows no room for racism” to jeopardize the lives of those in the field.⁷⁴

The different cultural worlds that black soldiers inhabited in Vietnam, largely depending upon whether they served in combat or not, also led to a divergence of their opinions on the civil rights movement and its competing ideological strands—integration, separation, and liberation. *Ebony*’s publisher, John H. Johnson, wrote in late-1970 accurately of the fraught political landscape for civil rights where “radical leaders with large followings and radical ‘leaders’ who speak for almost no one . . . can always find a platform. Even conservative and middle-of-the-road blacks find no difficulty in being heard.” On television, Johnson summarized, one could watch Back-to-Africa evangelists, separatists, integrationists “of various degrees” and liberationists “pitted against one another to spice the action.”

Like Alfred Fowler, examined in the previous chapter, many black soldiers kept informed about events back home through mass culture. While close connections to home allowed them to contribute to various discourses about the future of black America, it also shaped their attitudes and behaviors in Vietnam. Soldiers’ writings published in *Ebony* also demonstrate that black soldiers’ attitudes during the Vietnam War never conformed to any single outlook or ideology such as “Black Power.” The title of *Ebony*’s August 1970 special issue, in which Johnson published his statement concerning the then cacophony of ideologies, was as true for those in America as it was for those in Vietnam: “Which Way Black America?”⁷⁵

⁷⁴ David Donovan, *Once a Warrior King*, 260.

⁷⁵ John H. Johnson, “Publisher’s Statement,” *Ebony*, August 1970, 33.

Throughout the Vietnam War many black soldiers expressed solidarity with Martin Luther King, Jr.'s philosophy of non-violence, integration, and persistent protest. These soldiers were either moderates or center-left and found all forms of extremism morally repugnant and intellectually lazy. For example, Sergeant Robert Holefield questioned the efficacy of urban riots like Watts (1965) and Detroit (1967) that left women and children slain and worsened the plight of the poor—the specific group “supposed to [be] helped.” While Holefield empathized with the material privations and entrenched racism that motivated the rioters in Watts and Detroit, he believed that violent means could only be self-destructive in the long term.⁷⁶ Another soldier, G. F. Berry, Jr. believed that a conspiracy to “kill the ideas of brotherhood, dignity and love which had begun to entrench themselves in the hearts of both blacks and whites” was afoot in American and led chiefly by extremists on both sides who sought to “fan the flames of hatred anew” among the “indigent” and ignorant of both races. Berry criticized the Black Panthers’ efforts to “make a show of force with guns and other weapons” which would surely provoke a race war where blacks would “lose the game by default.” Berry implored African-Americans to “employ reason and emulate the greatest thinkers” such as King to “work for your goals within the framework of the institutions of society,”⁷⁷

In other words, men who witnessed firsthand the violence that attended warfare objected to their black GIs and civilians back home calling for armed rebellion and violence in the United States, both for practical and moral considerations. Sergeant Charley Lee criticized Stokely Carmichael in 1967 for promulgating inflammatory rhetoric that he believed would encourage

⁷⁶ Robert Holefield, Letter to the Editor, *Ebony*, March 1968, 22.

⁷⁷ G. F. Berry, Jr., Letter to the Editor, *Ebony*, August 1969, 19.

and increase the exercise of white supremacy on the far right: “If [Lester] Maddox is elected, Mr. Carmichael, remember that YOU helped to put him in a much more ‘powerful’ office than your own.” Captain Edward R. Carwise found “too many of our people are gullible enough to believe those who say that Dr. King’s murder leaves no alternative but to take to the streets. There are those among us who tell us to ‘get our guns, go out and shoot the first white man we see.’ I would simply laugh at such a suggestion were it not for the fact that many seem intent on doing just that.” Carwise believed any race war in the United States would favor whites in pure numbers and “can only result in the annihilation of the blacks.” He closed his letter with an appeal to African-Americans to rally behind a leader who could continue Martin Luther King, Jr.’s legacy.⁷⁸

The values and norms of soldier culture that shaped soldiers’ attitudes in Vietnam discouraged racism and prioritized cooperation, meaning that even if soldiers disagreed on sociocultural issues they learned to work together. These soldiers’ contentions that interracial solidarity would lead America to the Promised Land derived from such experiences immersed in soldier culture. Instead of “rebellion” and “violent uprisings,” soldiers who supported Martin Luther King, Jr.’s vision for American race relations applied lessons from their own experiences in Vietnam and called for greater unity between blacks and whites. Specialist Franklin J. Yurco, a white soldier in the U.S. Army who was to marry a “black West Indian girl,” worried that “the polarization of black and white in America” could only lead to chaos and national disaster.

Yurco implored readers to “remain open to contact with *all* people, let our hearts be free of color

⁷⁸ Charley Lee, Letter to the Editor, *Ebony*, February 1967, 18; Edward R. Carwise, Letter to the Editor, *Ebony*, August 1968, 20.

prejudice and perhaps a few of us will find, as have I, that black is indeed beautiful.”⁷⁹ Private Gordon Brigman, a black infantryman in Vietnam, criticized *Ebony* for disrespecting King and failing “to pay proper tribute” to his legacy by giving space in its issues to the Black Panthers, New Africa, and the Black Muslims.” He argued that “the greatest tribute *Ebony* could pay [King] would be to go against these groups and all for the unity of the American people to achieve Dr. Martin Luther King’s not so impossible dream.”⁸⁰

On the other hand, black soldiers acculturated to rear units found “Black Power” ideology and organizations like the Black Panthers attractive and absolutely necessary to achieving the promises of liberty in America, even if that meant resorting to violence.⁸¹ Contrary to Private Brigman’s call for *Ebony* to censor radical views, Larry Burton, an enlisted man in Vietnam, said that members of his company were offended by articles and letters they felt were hostile to or apprehensive of the Black Panthers and other self-defense, nationalist groups. “Although the Black Panthers are for violence in a sense of self-defense and the NAACP or SCLC non-violence,” Burton wrote, “you can’t denounce either, for they are all basically for the same thing and that’s to get for us blacks what we have coming to us.”⁸² Those who sympathized with or hewed to these viewpoints likely served in rear areas where symbols of racism and white supremacy persisted alongside, and encouraged, the flourishing of Black Power ideology.⁸³

⁷⁹ Franklin J. Yurco, Letter to the Editor, *Ebony*, December 1969, 16-17.

⁸⁰ Gordon Brigman, Letter to the Editor, *Ebony*, October 1969, 26.

⁸¹ For example, see: “Tensions of Black Power Reach Troops in Vietnam,” *New York Times*, April 13, 1969; John T. Wheeler, “Black Power Comes to Vietnam as Racial Tensions Increase,” *The Washington Post*, April 20, 1969; “Black Power in Viet Nam,” *Time*, September 19, 1969, 22-23.

⁸² Larry Burton, Letter to the Editor, *Ebony*, December 1970, 24.

⁸³ The basic claim that racial tensions between white and black soldiers became most pronounced in divisional base camps is well documented in the literature. For more on how racial tensions flared especially in rear encampments

Informal social clubs were the loci of Black Power on many rear encampments. These clubs functioned as segregated spaces where black men could grouse about problems in the military out of earshot from whites. James Webb's fictional *Fields of Fire* includes a poignant scene when two battle buddies, "Bagger" and "Homicide," are separated in a divisional basecamp when "Homicide," who was black, accepted an invitation to the "Black Shack" described as a "place to come and rap about the horrors of racism and prejudice." The scene vividly illustrated how whites and blacks who experienced brotherhood in the field were torn apart as black soldiers tried to negotiate between soldier culture and the norms prevalent in rear camps. The scene culminated in "Homicide" publically rebuking his white friend to save face in front of the Black Shack's radical leader, "Rap Jones."⁸⁴

Both in the "Black Shack" and in real social organizations like the Black Liberation Front, talk often turned to black separatism and violent revolution. In *Ebony* soldiers commonly wrote of an impending "revolution" led by "Negro veterans" who were trained killers. In August 1967, Specialist Jerald R. Cuff warned white Americans that the "long summers of rioting" would give way to armed revolt when "Negro veterans [returning from Vietnam] find themselves cast back into the ghetto and a social immobility equivalent to the triple-canopy of the Southeast Asia jungle!" Others felt that King's assassination proved nonviolence led nowhere, with Private

see: Spector, *After Tet*, 242-259; Daddis, *Withdrawal*, 135-161; Phillips, *War! What is it Good For?*, 188-227; Graham III, *The Brothers' Vietnam War*.

⁸⁴ James Webb, *Fields of Fire* (New York: Prentice-Hall, 1978), 197-200; Another work of fiction that deals extensively with racial tensions in frontline units is Karl Marlantes, *Matterhorn: A Novel of the Vietnam War* (New York: Atlantic Monthly Press, 2010). Marlantes, a Vietnam veteran, has written complex and often contradictory remarks about the relationship between the conflict and race in America. In *Matterhorn* Marlantes portrays infantry units split across racial lines. However, in his memoir of the war, *What it is Like to Go to War* (New York: Atlantic Monthly Press, 2011), Marlantes argues that the brotherly bonds that formed between men in combat transcended racial divisions. He further contended in his January 2017 *New York Times* opinion piece that Vietnam partly assuaged the problem of race in America (see note on page 191).

Herb Johnson stating “Black America has waited too damn long for their inheritance of equality” and the “next and only solution is rebellion; open and violent.” Sergeant Gary L. Phillips, frustrated that veterans were returning to the same “society of racism and discrimination” warned white Americans to “get your own house in order” because “blacks are willing to die at home for a cause that is easier to understand” than the principles guiding the war. Private Charles T. Jones compared Stokely Carmichael, H. Rap Brown, and Adam Clayton Powell to eighteenth-century revolutionaries such as George Washington for whom “being nonviolent did not gain . . . freedom” from tyranny and oppression. Sergeant Dennis C. McIntosh wrote “the greatest contribution that Uncle Sam is making to the Negro’s freedom” is “teaching him how to kill” in Vietnam.⁸⁵ Perhaps the greatest irony, symptomatic of soldier culture, was that those closest to the violence in Vietnam most frequently encouraged nonviolence at home, while those furthest removed from combat advanced the notion that black veterans would become the vanguard of a violent resistance in the United States.

During the final years of the American war in Vietnam (1971-1973), when historians write of the “fall of an American army,” and widespread morale, social, and drug problems, black attitudes about the war remained complex and intimately bound to ideas about soldier brotherhood, ideological conflict at home, and the meaning of war service.⁸⁶ A few soldiers still

⁸⁵ Jerald R. Cuff, Letter to the Editor, *Ebony*, August 1967, 12; Herb Johnson, Letter to the Editor, *Ebony*, June 1968, 16; Gary L. Phillips, Letter to the Editor, *Ebony*, August 1968, 14; Charles T. Jones, Letter to the Editor, *Ebony*, August 1968, 14; Dennis C. McIntosh, Letter to the Editor, *Ebony*, August 1968, 17-20. Also see: Claude R. Robinson, Letter to the Editor, *Ebony*, June 1968, 14; A. Tray Jones, Letter to the Editor, *Ebony*, June 1968, 16.

⁸⁶ See, for example, Shelby Stanton, *The Rise and Fall of an American Army: U.S. Ground Forces in Vietnam, 1965-1973* (Novato, CA: Presidio Press, 2003); Spector, *After Tet*; The number of combat troops significantly declined during Vietnamization from 334,600 in 1970 to 156,800 in 1971. By 1972, only 24,200 soldiers remained

wrote to *Ebony* during this period expressing beliefs that their wartime service would contribute to the advancement of civil rights at home, departing from broad historical trends identified by other scholars that by the late-Sixties the vast majority of African-Americans had abandoned such a notion.⁸⁷ Lieutenant Theodore M. Searight hoped that American “appreciation” for blacks’ wartime service should include “insuring that freedom and equality become a reality for all Americans,” while Corporal E. G. Spencer described how the army helped him obtain his GED and a “second chance in life.” From his experiences, Spencer surmised, “education is the only thing that will give our people true Black Power.”⁸⁸

Those who served in the armed forces in Vietnam did so during a period of profound cultural change in the United States. Physically separated from American communities for at least two years and connected to home by reading magazines such as *Ebony*, letters from home, and the occasional hometown newspaper clipping, these soldiers became increasingly estranged from and bewildered by the sudden emergence of a robust, widespread backlash against the Vietnam War. Many black soldiers, like fellow white GIs, expressed loathing for anti-war protesters, whom they characterized as cowards or blamed for waning morale in Vietnam. Others

by December. Of those, approximately 30-40% were combat-oriented, meaning that after 1971 there were well under 75,000 combat soldiers left within Vietnam.

⁸⁷ Kimberley Phillips, *War! What is it Good For? Black Freedom Struggles and the Military from World War II to Iraq* (2012), argues that protesting the Vietnam War had become an integral part of the civil rights movement by the late-Sixties as more African-Americans abandoned the idea that military service was an avenue socioeconomic advancement in the United States. Robert W. Mullen, *Black Americans/African-Americans: Vietnam through the Gulf War* (Ginn Press, 1991) and *Blacks in America's Wars: The Shift in Attitudes from the Revolutionary War to Vietnam* (New York: Pathfinder Press, 1974) contends that black resentment toward military service and Vietnam represented a sea change in the historical pattern of blacks linking military service to social advancement. Lawrence Allen Eldridge, *Chronicles of a Two-Front War*, describes how the constant influx of replacements hailing from an entirely different cultural world in 1969 than their predecessors had occupied in 1967 produced a ‘new breed of African-American GI’ that deplored the war and military service.

⁸⁸ Theodore M. Searight, Letter to the Editor, *Ebony*, September 1969, 22; E. G. Spencer, Letter to the Editor, *Ebony*, September 1970, 17.

simply wanted assurance that Americans at home were behind the troops. “I wish some of these demonstrators and protestors would think twice before carrying signs in the street,” William Harris wrote. Another soldier, Albert Glenn, Jr. felt that protestors did not realize how Americans were fighting Communism in Vietnam to preserve the right of free speech that allowed “Mr. Muhammad Ali along with Mr. Carmichael and Dr. King [to] be able to tell the Negro youth to refuse to fight.” Glenn abhorred shirkers at home and wanted leaders to tell “the ones at home [protesting] and the ones in the riots to get with us and see to it that we get . . . [what] we need to win this thing over here.”⁸⁹

Given the pro-war bias expressed by members of *Ebony*’s editorial board dating back to the beginning of the American escalation makes it no accident that, of the letters published, black soldiers seemed unanimous in their critique of the early peace and anti-war movement from 1966 to 1968. Soldiers’ perceptions that anti-war and peace demonstrators were far more critical of Americans for bombing campaigns than they were of documented NLF/NVA atrocities, such as the wanton murder of Vietnamese civilians and political dissidents during the Tet Offensive in 1968, fueled antipathy for activists back home. Infantryman Daniel Parks, who came from a respectable, affluent liberal family from Minneapolis, decried the general ignorance of war that pervaded the upper ranks of civil rights leadership—“you have Stokely Carmichael saying Negroes shouldn’t be fighting for this country . . . [and] some Negro leaders think just the opposite” but “most of them have [never] been to war.”⁹⁰ Parks simple point was that

⁸⁹ William Henry Harris, Letter to the Editor, *Ebony*, November 1967, 15-17; Albert Glenn, Jr., Letter to the Editor, *Ebony*, November 1967, 17; See also, Charles R. Davis, Letter to the Editor, *Ebony*, August 1967, 14; Richard H. Spicer, Letter to the Editor, *Ebony*, August 1967, 14; Pamela Ashley, Letter to the Editor, *Ebony*, February 1968, 15-18.

⁹⁰ Parks, *G.I. Diary*, 129.

Carmichael, far removed from the exigencies of combat in Vietnam, had no right to criticize or condemn the actions of Americans who daily experienced taxing patrols and deadly intermittent combat.

Although *Ebony* published fewer letters overtly critical of anti-war activists during the final years of the conflict, the missives that appeared in the “letters to the editor” increasingly focused on how Vietnam veterans, and specifically black veterans, were maligned, ignored, and abused upon their return home. It appeared that the growing anti-war fervor had the unintended consequence of pushing black veterans to the furthest margins of national conversations about the war. Soldiers were particularly concerned about the real possibility of receiving dishonorable or bad conduct discharges from the army (or other branches) for “chicken-shit” violations during the final months of their enlistment. Several black airmen in the Air Force claimed blacks were receiving “bad conduct” and “medical” discharges for wearing Afros, joining Black Power clubs, or “dapping.” In the Army and Marine Corps, soldiers noted individuals receiving “other than honorable (OTH)” discharges for such minor infractions as wearing an Afro or giving a Black Power salute.⁹¹

These discharges followed black veterans into their civilian lives, causing them to have far more difficulty securing veteran’s benefits and employment. An article by Hamilton Bims, “The Black Veteran: Battle on the Home Front,” explained that roughly one-quarter of black veterans were unemployed as of 1971, many due to OTH and bad conduct discharges resulting from specious courts-martial. Those serving in Vietnam could imagine themselves walking in

⁹¹ Michael E. Wilson, Letter to the Editor, *Ebony*, February 1969, 17; Edward Breeze Barrow, Letter to the Editor, *Ebony*, June 1971, 21-22; Calvin E. Vann, Letter to the Editor, *Ebony*, June 1971, 24; Maurice Williams, Letter to the Editor, *Ebony*, June 1972, 23; Joseph Carvajal, Letter to the Editor, *Ebony*, February 1973, 21; For more on “bad conduct” discharges given predominantly to African-American service personnel, see Graham, *The Brothers’ Vietnam War*, 96.

Roman Metcalf's shoes, the human focal point of Bims' report, who served a combat tour in Vietnam with the 3rd Battalion, 3rd Marine Division in Quang Tri. Metcalf was court-martialed for assaulting a non-commissioned officer and convicted despite extensive witness testimony arguing that Metcalf acted in self-defense. Like many other young black men, Metcalf volunteered for service to improve his economic fortunes, but he had earned "less than \$10,000" over the three years since he separated from the Marines and struggled to stay employed, mostly because his bad conduct discharge limited both his employment and educational opportunities.⁹²

As the American chapter in Vietnam came to a close, *Ebony* offered some reflections on the meaning of the war for African-Americans and portents of future African-American service in an All-Volunteer Force (AVF). Soon after Secretary of Defense Melvin Laird announced the AVF, *Ebony* published an editorial that pondered how the AVF might effect "the nation as a whole." Always keen to seek lessons from the past, the editors contended that before World War II, when the Army had last relied on volunteers, African-Americans were largely rejected by the armed forces and thus denied "three square meals a day, free clothing, free housing and a monthly salary." Implying that a selective AVF might discriminate against black men, particularly those who would benefit the most from military service, the editors argued that between World War II and the Vietnam War, the draft made the Army "more democratic" and "integrated."

Echoing the sentiments of combat soldiers whose writings, over the past seven years, frequently appeared in *Ebony*, the editors concluded that the draft accelerated integration by

⁹² Hamilton Bims, "The Black Veteran: Battle on the Home Front," *Ebony*, November 1971, 35-43.

bringing a representative cross-section of Americans into service and teaching them the merits of interracial cooperation and friendship. Instead of the AVF, the editors suggested the United States adopt a universal military obligation, beginning at age eighteen, which included an option for alternative service in the Peace Corps or an equivalent non-profit organization.⁹³ That *Ebony* reached such a conclusion precisely when others were applauding the Pentagon's decision to end the draft indicated how the magazine's editorial views fell closely in line with how black combat soldiers had interpreted the apparent successes of racial integration in the Army during their own tours in Vietnam.

Ebony acted on its anxiety about an all-white AVF by incorporating Army recruitment advertisements into its pages in 1972. The move angered some military veterans whose experiences during the Vietnam-era hardly matched *Ebony*'s claims of a "more democratic" Army. Specialist James Fundenberg questioned why *Ebony* advertised for the Army when "almost 50 per cent of the people in jail over here [in Germany] are black," serving jail sentences "for something whites over here get away with every day." Joseph Carvajal accused *Ebony* of luring "unsuspecting black men and women into various branches of the military" when those branches only "worsen the conditions of those men and women who join up in order to escape the problems of widespread unemployment." The editors defended their inclusion of recruitment

⁹³ "An All-Volunteer Army?" *Ebony*, December 1970, 174-175. This editorial's conclusions were prescient and resonate with the arguments of contemporary proponents of some form of universal obligation, such as Andrew Bacevich. See, for example, Bacevich, *Breach of Trust: How Americans Failed Their Soldiers and Their Country* (New York: Picador Press, 2014).

Senator Mark O. Hatfield (R-OR) subsequently wrote to *Ebony* to correct some misconceptions about the prospects for black men under an AVF. Hatfield cited the *Report of the President's Commission on an All Volunteer Armed Force* (March 1970) which claimed that 14.9 percent of personnel in an AVF were black, while 14.1 percent of personnel under a "mixed force of conscripts and volunteers" were black. Hatfield concluded that under the new AVF about 5,000 to 10,000 more blacks would have an opportunity to serve, *Ebony*, March 1971, 16.

advertisements by reiterating their concern about an AVF becoming too white. “If black publications turn down armed forces recruitment advertisements,” their note warned, “there is a good chance that the new Army will be made up largely, and disproportionately so, of whites.” Unsurprisingly, the same issue included a photo-editorial explaining how President Harry Truman’s executive order desegregated the armed forces. *Ebony* remained a supporter of some form of conscription because the editors believed that volunteerism would not produce a racially diverse, and by extension progressive army in the future.⁹⁴

Throughout the war, *Ebony*’s publisher John E. Johnson expressed support for soldiers in Vietnam while remaining politically ambiguous about the war itself. *Ebony*’s optimism about the integrated army, which was without a doubt a major milestone in civil rights history, had basis in the writings of black soldiers whose experiences confirmed some basic assumptions about race relations. These lessons included the fact that whites and blacks learned not only to coexist but to treat each other with mutual respect in combat units, that blacks originating from impoverished areas of American society also found socioeconomic mobility in the military, and how some veterans, enlightened by their service in racially diverse units, returned home with far more progressive ideas about race. These insights were all balanced against the opinions of soldiers whose experiences in Vietnam produced contrary conclusions. How these soldiers reached their various conclusions about the civil rights movement, race relations, and the possibilities attending integration, had much to do with their placement in combat units where an overarching soldier culture encouraged tolerance, respect, and cooperation. Racism persisted in Vietnam, but remained far more common in the rear where dangers were less significant, social self-

⁹⁴ James Fudenberg, Letter to the Editor, *Ebony*, February 1973, 20; Joseph Carvajal, Letter to the Editor, *Ebony*, February 1973, 21; “Editor’s Note,” *Ebony*, February 1973, 21; “Harry Truman,” *Ebony*, February 1973, 108-109.

segregation increasingly common, and where commanders adopted a hands-off approach to curating the public display of racially charged symbols.

Ebony reached soldiers in Vietnam during critical moments where their basic assumptions about race, civil rights, and military service were being challenged or complicated by their immersion in their unit's culture. Soldiers encountered information in *Ebony* about various sites of cultural contestation and ideological conflict that prompted the translation of their experiences into ideas that, in turn, subtly shaped *Ebony*'s coverage of the war and its responsiveness to the particular issues soldiers encountered. Teasing out the distinctions between soldier culture and culture in rear units offers a better lens for understanding how black soldiers navigated wartime service and the civil rights movement. Sensitivity to the cultural differences that existed between combat and rear units holds potential for helping historians interpret how fraught discourses in American culture—in this case, whether or not the integrated Army represented a watershed in civil rights progress—were interpreted, evaluated, and then promulgated in civilian culture by soldiers serving in Vietnam.

CHAPTER FIVE: SOLDIER CULTURE EVOLVES: VIETNAMIZATION AND THE RISE OF AN ANTI-AUTHORITARIAN ETHOS AMONG THE RANK-AND-FILE, 1969-1973

Beginning in 1965, American soldiers fashioned a practical culture centered on surviving combat and passed on their accumulated knowledge, learned from experience, to subsequent generations of replacements. Although soldiers in all wars and conflicts ultimately wish to survive combat, the Army's personnel management policies during the Vietnam War, namely restricting soldiers to a 365-day combat tour, made soldier culture distinct from previous wars. Whereas soldiers during World War II served for the duration and marked their progress by measuring their distance from Berlin or Tokyo, Vietnam-era soldiers, who rarely captured and held terrain, fetishized their magical "Date Estimated Return from Overseas" (DEROS) that indicated specifically when their personal hell would end. Through unit newspapers, the Army published "short-timer's calendars" and encouraged soldiers to track their progress toward DEROS. Soldiers also developed a host of idioms, behaviors, and attitudes associated with being "short," usually taken to mean that a soldier had 90 days or less left in Vietnam. But merely "surviving" the war, rather than actively pursuing victory, required that soldiers adopt a different set of attitudes and behaviors in the field that promoted self-preservation and discouraged taking risks.

The strategic mission of the Army also changed in the years following the Tet Offensive of 1968, under the auspices of "Vietnamization." Nixon's plan for gradual American withdrawal increasingly placed the onus on the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) to wage the war against both the Viet Cong and the North Vietnamese Army (NVA). Soldiers, consistently

preoccupied with their DEROS, now perceived that the entire combat arms operated in a “short” war. Soldiers reasonably entertained the expectation that the conflict could end at any moment, especially as they witnessed Army divisions exiting Vietnam between 1970 and 1972. Soldiers adopted new communal practices that fit the new strategic environment, ensuring they were not the “last man killed in Vietnam.” Soldiers might now be more likely to condone retributive action against noncommissioned and commissioned officers whom they perceived risked their lives needlessly, failed to incorporate their input into the conduct of operations, and balked at the reluctant infantryman’s favored practice of “searching-and-evading” the enemy in the field.

Young men, who at the beginning of the war, were inspired by John F. Kennedy, the on-screen combat montages of John Wayne, and World War II veterans, were now more predisposed to express skepticism of the American government, have an opinion about the legitimacy of the conflict, and share the frustrations of activists like Stokely Carmichael. Since 1965, soldiers accepted the legitimacy of their orders to conduct operations in the field, and thus reinforced behaviors and practices that increased their odds of survival. While soldiers continuously refined tactics throughout the war, at some point between the tragic loss of life at the Battle of Dong Ap Bia (“Hamburger Hill”) in 1969 and the height of Vietnamization in 1971, the component of soldiers’ culture focused on the DEROS became more pronounced and evolved into a pervasive anti-authoritarian ethos affecting the rank-and-file.

Soldier and unit culture evolved within this broader context of continuous peace talks and the drawdown of American forces, as GIs increasingly understood that their mission was to run out the clock rather than secure victory. In the rear, racial tensions that arose earlier in the war

erupted in brief and violent clashes, such as that at the Long Binh Jail on August 29, 1968.¹ The flourishing rock music scene in Vietnam, subsidized and promoted by the Army to raise soldiers' morale, inadvertently reinforced the language of anti-war resistance and allowed soldiers to articulate their despair and longing to return home.² The increasing use of marijuana and harder drugs by soldiers—especially in the rear—troubled commanders and politicians at home who believed America was then in the throes of a major crisis of juvenile delinquency and drug abuse. “It is a truism that national armies closely reflect [the] societies from which they have been raised,” Colonel Robert D. Heinl, Jr., wrote in 1971 in an influential article ominously entitled, “The Collapse of the Armed Forces.” He rightly observed that “it would be strange indeed if the Armed Forces did not today mirror the agonizing divisions and social traumas of American society.”³

These trends contributed to what contemporaries described as a morale crisis in Vietnam, but the origin of these attitudes and behaviors also stemmed from how American soldiers, as early as 1967, paradoxically felt isolated and alienated from American culture even while mass culture kept them tethered to the home front. In their absence from home and consistently

¹ For more on how American withdrawal during the Vietnam War affected the attitudes and behaviors of combat troops, see Daddis, *Withdrawal: Reassessing America's Final Years in Vietnam*; Spector, *After Tet*, 242-278; Kindsvatter, *American Soldiers*, 141-149; Longley, *Grunts*, 115-157; Appy, *Working-Class War*, 206-249. All of these historians trace a general declension narrative of the Vietnam War wherein soldiers (presumably draftees) became evermore reluctant to fight as the United States withdrew from Vietnam. Kindsvatters' unique contribution is to suggest that soldiers' motivation after Tet was dependent on a “latent ideology” of beliefs in American exceptionalism and righteousness, even if the war itself seemed pointless. This dissertation agrees with these other historians in that the Army suffered from a definite morale crisis during the final years of the war. However, it complements the work of Daddis, et. al. by illustrating how “soldier culture” evolved within the changing “strategic environment” of Vietnam to produce sets of normative behaviors that hinged on mere survival rather than achieving victory.

² Kramer, *Republic of Rock*.

³ Robert D. Heinl, Jr., “The Collapse of the Armed Forces,” *Armed Forces Journal* 108(19), June 1971, 31.

reading national periodicals, soldiers increasingly felt estranged from the rapidly changing and seemingly inscrutable American culture of the late-Sixties. “You know, when you get over here all you think about is getting back to the World. But when your time gets near, it sort of scares you because you know in your heart that you’re [no longer] like the people back home,” one soldier wrote while serving with the First Infantry Division in May 1967.⁴

Through their consumption of mass culture, Americans serving in Vietnam maintained closer ties to home than preceding generations of soldiers. Because soldiers serving on the frontlines of World War II and Korea seldom received national newspapers or magazines, although the Army did provide paperback books,⁵ they relied primarily on army publications (e.g., the *Army Times* or the *Stars and Stripes*), letters, and rumors for news of the outside world.⁶ By contrast, news moving into and out of Vietnam was almost entirely unfiltered with the exception of the censorship of sensitive information that could jeopardize American operations. Even the *Pacific Stars and Stripes* covered a broad array of news during Vietnam,

⁴ John Hagmann to Parents, May 24, 1967, in *Dear America: Letters Home from Vietnam*, edited by Bernard Edelman (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1985), 208.

⁵ During World War II the Army Library Service maintained 228 libraries at Army posts across the United States and, along with civilian support, shipped enormous quantities of Armed Services Edition paperbacks to the European and Pacific Theaters of Operation that included works by George Bernard Shaw, John Steinbeck, and classics like *The Iliad*. “No other war—before or since [World War II]—has approached the rate at which books were distributed to American forces,” writes Molly Guptill Manning in *When Books Went to War: The Stories That Helped Us Win World War II* (New York: Mariner, 2014), 24-25. The program organizers hoped that soldiers could briefly escape the horrors of war by immersing themselves in classics. In Vietnam, the Army went further by not only organizing and promoting Rock music, but also by facilitating the delivery of national magazines, newspapers, and creating lending libraries.

⁶ To be sure, national newspapers, magazines, and other elements of home front culture were not entirely absent during World War II or during the Korean War. But, those who served in line units were in the field for the duration and rarely did soldiers have opportunities to visit rear camps and relax, whereas in Vietnam even the most active line units typically served a month in the field and then stood down for rotation to a brigade or divisional basecamp for two to three days.

including front-page features about the assassinations of Martin Luther King, Jr. and Robert F. Kennedy, and other traumatic national events.

Given that soldiers craved news from home in previous wars, it would seem intuitive that when newer, more efficient communications closed the gap between war and home during the Vietnam War it would assuage soldiers' morale. However, from the beginning of the Vietnam War the opposite seemed to happen as soldiers gleaned information about domestic turmoil, the anti-war movement, and other events that called into question their entire purpose in Vietnam. The loathing many soldiers felt for the anti-war movement sprung from both their general sense of isolation and a pervasive feeling that they were uncared for by Americans. That Nixon called on the "Silent Majority" of conservative, anti-communist, and patriotic Americans to propel him into office in 1968 indicates that those constituencies most inclined to offer support and encouragement to soldiers were also the least publically visible elements of American society. Those who paid attention to Vietnam, and who also garnered robust media coverage, were activists on college campuses and in the streets of many American cities calling for an end to the war.

The anti-war movement and particularly its more provocative and radical fringe elements received the most attention both in the American press and in U.S. Army publications. Soldiers serving 12,000 miles away in Vietnam developed a distorted appreciation of how representative hundreds of protestors marching under the National Liberation Front (NLF) flag were of the anti-war movement as a whole.⁷ American soldiers logically heaped blame on anti-war protestors for

⁷ David Maraniss, *They Marched into Sunlight: War and Peace, Vietnam and America, October 1967* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2003), 463-465. What Maraniss describes as a "brigade of hundreds" marched under the NLF flag from the Lincoln Memorial to the Pentagon in October 1967.

hamstringing morale in Vietnam and constraining the military's range of action. In fact, soldiers and anti-war activists shared sentiments about the futility of the war in its final years. It remains deeply ironic and tragic that while soldiers' behaviors and attitudes increasingly overlapped with and derived from the counterculture after 1968, they simultaneously reported feeling more estranged from their peers back home. Thus, because soldiers perceived that Americans were either uncaring or overtly hostile, any potential broad coalition between active-duty GIs, veterans, and anti-war activists was stillborn.

Rather than seeing anti-war activists as allies, soldiers instead expressed their feelings of alienation from home by consistently using both the anti-war movement and "hippies" as a foil against which they defined themselves as patriotic and dutiful citizens. Of course, their opposition to the anti-war movement did not necessarily derive from their support of the conflict, but rather from, as one historian notes, their perception that college radicals and middle-class activists deplored the war "at a safe and privileged distance" while grunts in Vietnam steadily slogged on in constant danger. Working-class soldiers, who envisioned college as an unattainable luxury, further believed that anti-war activists were engaging in a form of intellectual snobbery and elitism.⁸ Captain Ronald R. Clark voiced such sentiments, complaining to his parents that anti-war activists were obstructing soldiers, whose mission it was to *actually* "stop the war." "Every day hundreds of guys get out of their foxholes, hundreds more take off in helicopters and airplanes," he observed, asserting that their collective sacrifices were made in an attempt to end conflict and restore peace to Vietnam. Clark questioned the courage of anti-war demonstrators

⁸ Christian G. Appy, *Working-Class War*, 220-223.

whose movement, from his perspective, faced none of the dangers experienced by soldiers on the frontlines.⁹

American GIs also complained about the anti-war movement in their letters to grassroots veterans' organizations during the war. One such recipient was "Project Vietnam," an organization with explicit goals to raise the morale of fighting men in Vietnam, and that eventually garnered the praise of both General William Westmoreland and General Creighton Abrams who thanked its founder, Albert Ettinger, for sending more than 8,000 care packages to over 4000 soldiers.¹⁰ Soldiers found the perfect confidant in Ettinger, a firebrand who lambasted antiwar activists as "poisonous to [soldiers'] morale." Ettinger also railed against newspapers and magazines that presented only "a picture of draft card burners, college students clinging to their draft exempt status and demonstrating in favor of the Viet Cong, [and writing] editorials [that] criticiz[ed] their Commander in Chief." To offset "the Cong sympathizers at home," Ettinger envisioned his organization sending care packages to men serving in Vietnam, who were from Sarasota County, Florida.¹¹ Echoing President Nixon's faith in the "Silent Majority" of Americans, Ettinger pledged that the organization would show that "the great majority of the

⁹Captain Ronald R. Clark, Letter to Parents, June 4, 1970, in *Letters from Vietnam*, edited by Bill Adler (New York: Ballantine Books, 2003), 217.

¹⁰ Memorandum, Creighton W. Abrams to Albert M. Ettinger, 15 August 1970, Albert Ettinger Papers (AEP), Project Vietnam (PV), Box 1, Folder 1, MHI, Carlisle, PA; Memorandum, Creighton W. Abrams to Albert M. Ettinger, 10 June 1971, AEP, PV, MHI.

¹¹ The project started in 1967 with the addresses of five soldiers from Sarasota County. The organization received a steady stream of donations—both financial and material—and local political endorsements. Soon churches, American Legion posts, the Veterans of Foreign Wars, local government agencies, and individuals were all contributing to the effort and initiating their own correspondences with soldiers. The recipient list grew as recipients nominated their friends to receive packages and publicized the plight of lonely, depressed soldiers who needed a helping hand. Most, if not all, of these soldiers wrote letters of appreciation to Ettinger. While most soldiers stuck to a concise thank you note, many others engaged in robust conversation and lengthy exchanges concerning many topics; See, Project Vietnam Statement of Purpose, AEP, PV, Box 1, Folder 1, MHI; *Congressional Record* (March 27, 1973), H2153.

American people at home were solidly behind [the American soldiers] in this war” and wanted to see the job finished and won.¹²

Soldiers’ narrow and impressionistic interpretations of the anti-war movement also perniciously made them feel utterly abandoned and relegated to the periphery of American thought. Thus, when soldiers received care packages from “Project Vietnam,” it prompted cathartic reactions. GIs discovered a friend in “Al” Ettinger, not only because he held anti-war activists in contempt, but also because he was a combat veteran of both World War I and World War II.¹³ “Al” could empathize with their privations, endure their grim war tales, and “knew from experience,” one soldier observed, that fighting men desired more than anything to feel supported and encouraged by those at home. First Lieutenant Bob Watson, serving with the 1-10 Cavalry in the 4th Infantry Division, wrote to a Sarasota newspaper praising Ettinger “for contributing “to the high morale of the soldiers here in Vietnam” by sending packages and writing correspondence that mitigated the “boredom, loneliness [sic], and moments of terror” that regularly visited soldiers.¹⁴ Another soldier confided in Ettinger that his mother was terminally ill

¹² “Project Vietnam,” *United States of America Congressional Record, Proceedings and Debates of the 93rd Congress, First Session 119*(47), March 27, 1973, H2153; Project Vietnam Statement of Purpose, Albert Ettinger, Undated, AEP, PV, Box 1, Folder 1, MHI; The Albert Ettinger Papers at the Military History Institute offer a valuable avenue for unpacking soldiers’ evolving thoughts about the anti-war movement. The collection spans five critical years of the war, 1967-1972, when the U.S. Army reached its peak strength and entered Vietnamization. Soldiers writing to the Ettingers served in different service branches, various AOs, and in numerous MOS assignments. Soldiers were far more candid about their experiences in Vietnam with Ettinger because he was a combat veteran. Soldiers often dialed back their descriptions of carnage, battle, or their own emotional and physical trauma in their letters to parents.

¹³ The Ettingers sent soldiers fruitcakes, chewing gum, raisins, Vienna sausage, beef jerky, ‘Slim Jims,’ canned fruit, nuts, candy, and appetizers, as well as, Kool-Aid packets. Other toiletries and conveniences included pens and paper (for writing correspondence), cigars, playing cards, toothpaste and toothbrushes, shaving cream, and razors; Bill Fritts, “Neighborhood Keeps in Mind Morale of Men in Viet Nam,” unspecified Sarasota newspaper in AEP, PV, Box 1, Folder 1, MHI; See, for example, Kenneth Strangel to Albert Ettinger, October 1966, AEP, Strangel describes dividing up the care package among the men in his platoon and everyone found “something” useful.

¹⁴ Wallace R. Watson, “Send Thanks From Vietnam,” Unspecified Sarasota Newspaper in AEP, PV, Box 1, Folder 1, MHI; Letter from Gerald Smith, Jr., to Albert Ettinger, August 8, 1971, AEP, PV, Box 1, Folder 1; See also,

with cancer as he wrestled between his obligations to family and his duty to return to Vietnam and fulfill his commitment to the nation. Others wrote about their operations in the field, describing in sometimes-graphic detail the maiming and death of friends and enemy alike. Ettinger understood “what is going on over here,” one infantryman remarked. The emotional bonds reached deeper for one soldier who admitted that “even though I have never met you I feel very close to you like you were my uncle and father.” The same soldier later wrote “I feel kind of ashamed of myself because I answer all your letters the same day I get them. And sometimes it’s a week before I answer my mother’s.”¹⁵

Those who wrote to Ettinger between 1965 and 1967 already worried about the rise of anti-war activism in the United States, and whether such protests were dishonoring the sacrifices of those killed or wounded-in-action. On May 15, 1966, SANE and Women Strike for Peace led roughly 10,000 protestors in a *March Against the Vietnam War* in Washington. During the following summer, Muhammad Ali (Cassius Clay), the famous African-American boxing champion, publically refused to fulfill his induction notice, bringing enormous attention to draft resistance. The Spring Mobilization Committee to End the War in Vietnam (Mobe) coordinated protests in New York City and San Francisco, the former bringing an unprecedented 300,000 Americans onto the streets of Manhattan to demand an immediate end to the war.¹⁶ Soldiers

Letter of Appreciation, First Lieutenant Scott Youngblood (5th Special Forces Group) to Project Vietnam, May 26 1968, AEP, PV, Box 1, Folder 1.

¹⁵“Edward” to Albert Ettinger, August 8, 1971; R.E. Cobb to Albert Ettinger, May 30, 1967; Allen Brown to Albert Ettinger, May 1, 1968 and May 18, 1968, AEP, PV, MHI.

¹⁶ Tom Wells, *The War Within: America’s Battle over Vietnam* (New York: Open Road Distribution, 2016).

primarily disagreed with the calls for an immediate withdrawal, contending that it disrespected those Americans who already made the ultimate sacrifice in Vietnam.¹⁷

In the wake of violent anti-war protests that occurred on the campus of the University of Wisconsin-Madison, and a subsequent anti-war march in Washington, D.C. in October 1967, Private Stephen Pickett argued that “an immediate pullout or anything of the sort is out of the question.” He contended that any such withdrawal would “degrade the heroic deaths of those who never returned.” This line of thought—that the United States needed to press ahead because it had already invested so much—fueled the contempt many soldiers displayed toward the anti-war movement.¹⁸

Their loathing for the anti-war movement also derived from the fact that, whether or not soldiers expressed enthusiasm for the United States’ purposes in Vietnam, they nevertheless tied the intrinsic value of their sacrifices there to making Americans back home proud. “The war is a frustrating experience,” one soldier admitted, “however, when we see that the general population is behind us, it seems worthwhile.” Another soldier in the 101st Airborne Division indicated that “my fighting over here is worth it” so long as “people [support us] back in the [United] States.” Lieutenant Lynda Van Devanter, a nurse attached to the 67th Evacuation Hospital in Qui Nhon, bitterly lamented that “it hurts so much sometimes to see the paper full of demonstrators,

¹⁷ For examples of soldiers pointing to anti-communism as their motivation, see Frank Bloom to Albert Ettinger, March 8, 1967; Richard Bill to Albert Ettinger, July 15, 1967, AEP, PV; Jack S. Swender to Parents, September 20, 1965, in *Dear America*, 220; Some soldiers were proud of being distinguished from “peaceniks” by their military service. See, for example, E. W. Suggs to Albert Ettinger, January 28, 1967, AEP, PV; Others wished to protect their unit’s reputation. See, John Lawrence to Albert Ettinger, Circa 1968; Stephen M. Morgan to Albert Ettinger, February 6, 1967, AEP, PV, MHI.

¹⁸ Stephen W. Pickett to Parents, November 14, 1967, in *Dear America*, 210. See also, Sergeant F. Lee Hudson III to Parents, October 23, 1967, in *Letters from Vietnam*, 232-233; John Lawrence to Albert Ettinger, January 27, 1968, AEP, Project Vietnam, MHI.

especially people burning the flag.” “It means so much to us,” she acknowledged, “to know we’re supported, to know not everyone feels [that] we’re making a mistake here.”¹⁹

Well before the anti-war movement reached its fever pitch after the Tet Offensive and revelations of the My Lai massacre, soldiers expressed profound feelings of isolation, estrangement, and abandonment in Vietnam. While Sergeant R. B. Glendinning Jr. thought that no one, excepting his “immediate family,” cared about his travails in Vietnam, Private Kenneth Siturek confided to Al Ettinger that care packages indicated “that someone back in the world, except our loved ones, know that we are over here.” Lieutenant John Lawrence observed that men in his platoon desperately wanted to know that “there are people back in ‘the world’ (as we call America) who know we are over here and care [about us].”²⁰

Feeling isolated and abandoned, soldiers were easily provoked, primarily by reading news from home, to write hateful screeds against anti-war activists, spewing vitriol against the “cowards,” “traitors,” and malefactors who only made the soldiers’ plight worse in Vietnam. Sometime in February 1967, Al Ettinger appeared on a local radio station in Sarasota to read a poem sent to him by Specialist William C. McCormick, a soldier in the 101st Airborne Division in Vietnam. The poem, McCormick declared, expressed how soldiers in Vietnam “really feel about the draft card burners and the clowns that protest the war.” He bitterly complained, in his ongoing correspondence with Ettinger from mid-1966 until late-1967, that “peaceniks” and anti-war protestors on the home front betrayed American values. Despite his overt hostility toward

¹⁹ Frank Bloom to Albert Ettinger, March 8, 1967, AEP; Piers Compton to Albert Ettinger, April 5, 1967, AEP; Lynda Van Devanter to Parents, July 24, 1969, in *Dear America*, 220-221. Also see, Rodney Baldra to Parents, June 1967, in *Dear America*, 208; Jack Bowman to Albert Ettinger, Circa 1966, Project Vietnam, “Unidentified or Undated Letters of Appreciation, 1966-1973,” AEP, PV, MHI.

²⁰ R. B. Glendinning, Jr. to Albert Ettinger, undated; Kenneth Siturek to Albert Ettinger, April 1967; John Lawrence to Albert Ettinger, Circa 1968; Also see, R. Johnson to Albert Ettinger, Circa 1967, AEP, PV, MHI.

anti-war activists, McCormick's opinion about the legitimacy of the United States' involvement in Vietnam was complex. Like so many other soldiers, he did not unquestioningly support the war. Yet he parroted the official reason that the United States was "fighting over here so that the South Vietnamese people can live in freedom." He also labeled fellow soldiers who "bitch because their [sic] over here" contemptuously as "boys that haven't got the sense to realize the people we are fighting with want their freedom and want it bad." However, he admitted that he, like many other soldiers, "only look[ed] to God and for the day [I] can go home to [my] loved ones" as his motivation to continue fighting.²¹

McCormick despised the anti-war movement precisely because he perceived that activists were not only cowards, shirking their civic obligations, but also actively undermined the American mission and dishonored those who died for the cause. "To some people in the States we're fighting a war and getting killed for nothing," he complained. To withdraw from Vietnam at the behest of "cowards" and "clowns" would be folly, McCormick observed, because "all the men who have died over here fighting for this people's country would be for nothing."²² When he read in newspapers about "these damn people" protesting and rioting, he described feeling "bound up inside." He hoped that when he returned home he could "personally straighten out a few of the Draft Card burners and some of the other people with NO GUTS!"²³ On February 1, 1967, he enclosed in a letter to Ettinger a poem entitled "March On!" written by his friend in the

²¹ Quotes in order of appearance, William C. McCormick to Albert Ettinger, February 1, 1967; October 13, 1966; February 21, 1967; February 1, 1967; October 13, 1966, AEP, PV, MHI.

²² William C. McCormick to Albert Ettinger, November 14, 1966, AEP, PV, MHI.

²³ William C. McCormick to Albert Ettinger, January 14, 1967, AEP, PV, MHI.

Air Force. McCormick asked Ettinger to publish and broadcast it. Ettinger obliged and subsequently, on air, he began reading:

March On! You Vietnik Clown
Burn your draft card and throw it down.
Show everyone, you'll do as you might
But show the Communists you're afraid to fight.

March ON, Vietnik, MARCH ON!
And do the reds a good turn.
Because, some day we'll all be free
And you in Hell will burn
For turning your back on your fellow man
And saying its wrong to lend a hand.
And no matter what you do or say
We're here for a purpose and here we'll stay.

The poet continued to launch explicit attacks against anti-war protestors by questioning their manhood, courage, or even common sense. McCormick indicated by sending the poem that soldiers were outraged at the more radical elements of the anti-war movement, particularly those who openly sympathized with their enemy and bore signs reading "Beat Army!" "What makes you think we like it here," the poem's narrator asks an anti-war protestor as an implicit rebuttal of the accusation of warmongering leveled against American soldiers. The poem captured the soldiers' sense of betrayal, alienation, and anger toward those back home who often did fail to make distinctions between the policies that sent Americans to Vietnam and soldiers who bore the brunt of prosecuting those directives.²⁴ But it also illustrated the feedback loop that existed between war and home during an era of efficient communications. National periodicals were distributed to PXs in Vietnam and purchased by soldiers who carried them into the field. Soldiers

²⁴ Anonymous, "March On!," AEP, PV, Box 1, Folder 1; A post-script suggested the poem was composed by an "anonymous Air Force Man," but was sent to Albert Ettinger by U.S. Army Sergeant Bill McCormick who, at that time, was serving with Company B, Support Battalion, 101st Airborne Division.

subsequently interpreted and assigned meaning to what they read about home primarily through the prism of their experiences in Vietnam. Hence, this poem was crafted as a visceral reaction to how soldiers perceived the anti-war movement from their vantage point in Vietnam, mailed to an organization in Florida, and ultimately publicized on the radio. Although soldiers frequently remarked that Vietnam was 12,000 miles from “the world,” the influx of American mass culture made the war and home front feel more adjacent.

While soldiers’ attitudes, behaviors, and norms evolved in dialogue with the anti-war movement back home before 1968, soldier culture also developed after 1968 within a strategic context where many soldiers found it difficult to understand precisely how their units’ operations contributed to the broader war effort. Unsurprisingly, soldiers developed cynical and anti-authoritarian outlooks when their taxing, dangerous labor in Vietnam seemed patently unnecessary. Having endured heavy contact with the enemy, Specialist David Hockett, could not understand the reason why his “buddies” died, given that it appeared few Americans agreed with their mission based on images of “protests and riots” he saw in newspapers after the battle.²⁵ Soldiers also lashed out against commanders in Vietnam. One conspicuous example of these trends converging occurred when elements of the 101st Airborne Division fought determined NVA battalions at Dong Ap Bia in 1969, more commonly known as “Hamburger Hill.” Americans launched twelve frontal assaults against an entrenched enemy over ten days, suffering 70 killed and 372 wounded. No sooner had the North Vietnamese faded away into the jungle and the Americans reached the mountain’s military crest than they received orders from division

²⁵ David Hockett to Parents, January 1968, in *Dear America*, 213.

headquarters to abandon the position. Soldiers were outraged. What was the point of expending men and material to capture the hill? Major General Zais, the 101st Airborne Division commander, tried to assuage such concerns to no avail when informing the press that his mission was to “destroy enemy forces and installations” and securing Hill 937 (the elevation identifier for Dong Ap Bia) was part of that effort. Zais’s reasoning rang hollow for the men who had just witnessed the loss of comrades yet could discern no evident benefit for having done so. In the following week, underground G.I. newspapers—the very same accused by Colonel Heinl of fostering dissent and disobedience in the military—offered a \$10,000 bounty for any soldier willing to “frag” (murder) an officer responsible for giving orders to assault Dong Ap Bia.²⁶

Although soldiers broadly questioned the justifications underpinning the war in Vietnam after Dong Ap Bia, they nevertheless seethed at anti-war activists whose rhetoric they perceived was injurious to the reputation of fighting men in Vietnam. One soldier argued that America needed more patriots who respected soldiers “doing what [they believe] is right” and would not consider GIs merely “paid killers.” While Thomas Pellaton agreed with most anti-war activists that “there is no reason to be here—and there is even less reason to see Americans dying here,” he became “limp with rage—overcome with sorrow” when reading in newspapers that protestors back home, “insensitive to this killing,” described the American soldier as an “animal.”²⁷

²⁶ William J. Shkurti, *Soldiering on in a Dying War: The True Story of the Firebase Pace Incident and the Vietnam Drawdown* (Lawrence, KS: The University Press of Kansas, 2011), 130-131; Stanton, *The Rise and fall of an American Army*, 297-299; Heinl, “The Collapse of the Armed Forces,” 32. Elements of the 3d Battalion, 187th Infantry, 1st Battalion, 506th Infantry, and the 2d Battalion, 501st Infantry, fought at Dong Ap Bia. All were part of the 101st Airborne Division in Vietnam.

²⁷ Paul Fish, Jr. to Albert Ettinger, March 22, 1970, AEP, PV; Thomas Pellaton to Parents, July 28, 1970, *Dear America*, 228-229

From their position in Vietnam, soldiers found the pace of cultural change at home rapid and unsettling.²⁸ Sergeant David Glading believed America grew more decadent during his deployment to Vietnam, becoming a “lazy country, self-centered, money-oriented” and, he complained, populated by those who “literally don’t give a shit about anything that doesn’t present an immediate or direct danger.”²⁹ Anti-war protests, police brutality, riots, and other tumult in the United States bothered soldiers who thought their country was coming apart. Sergeant James Gillam remembered that when his platoon stood down at LZ Meredith and LZ Oasis in 1970, the men picked up issues of *Newsweek*, *Time*, and *Life* and “rather than calming us” reading such material “escalated our pre-combat tension. Almost every letter had some mention of anti-war protests over the expansion of the war into Cambodia and the deaths of student protestors.”³⁰ Specialist Bill McCloud was disheartened when he read about the Chicago police brutalizing demonstrators at the Democratic National Convention in 1968, arguing that although he disagreed with those who “carry a Viet Cong flag,” he nevertheless believed that the police infringed on the basic rights to “demonstrate [and] show they are against the war.”³¹ Paul Cameron, an infantryman in the First Infantry Division, wondered if “Nixon lost the rest of his mind” after the “awful Kent State killings” happened. Learning about the deaths at Kent State,

²⁸ Soldiers were learning about events back home not only through national newspapers and magazines, but also from unit newspapers published by and for soldiers. The Third Battalion, First Infantry Regiment began a column in its weekly newsletter for January 1970, entitled “Did You Know,” that summarized news from home. On May 15, 1970, the paper acknowledged that 60,000 descended on the National Mall to protest the Cambodian incursion, and highlighted the shooting deaths of four Kent State students by members of the National Guard. See *Bronco Tribune* 3(9), May 15, 1970, MHI, 4.

²⁹ David L. Glading to Parents, September 22, 1969, *Letters from Vietnam*, 226-227.

³⁰ James Gillam, *Life and Death in the Central Highlands*, 187-188.

³¹ Bill McCloud to Parents, June 9, 1968, *Letters from Vietnam*, 201-202.

Cameron regretted not joining his friends back at Fort Ord who had fled to Canada.³² Sergeant Fred Waterman, serving with the 199th Light Infantry Brigade from 1969 to 1970, later recalled how visions of “rejoining our loved ones, going home, and buying that car you always wanted” motivated men to survive in Vietnam, but “the World we returned to was much different from the one we left. We had changed and the World had changed.”³³

Although soldiers gradually shared with anti-war activists an intense disillusionment with both the war and the American government, GIs continued to view protesters back home primarily as the enemy. Nevertheless, soldiers’ culture during “Vietnamization” reflected the anti-authoritarian ethos of the Counterculture, whether soldiers were aware of it or not. Soldiers questioned the fundamental principles guiding the war and defining their service. They also pushed back against overzealous officers, sometimes refused orders, and generally demanded that commanders address their concerns about operations, particularly those that endangered their lives. The attitudes, norms, and tools soldiers required earlier in the war to achieve success were modified or replaced during the American drawdown as the soldiers’ preoccupation with survival pushed out all other considerations.

On April 22, 1971, John Kerry, a decorated war veteran, sat down before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee to testify about injustices and problems in Vietnam. Of all that Kerry said during his testimony, what soldiers and others would remember most was his categorical denouncement of Vietnamization and the continuation of a pointless war. Kerry

³² Paul Cameron to Parents, May 1970, *Letters from Vietnam*, 209-210.

³³ Fred Waterman, “My Story,” Unpublished Memoir, J. Fred Waterman Papers, Vietnam War Survey, Box 3, Folder 88, MHI, Carlisle Barracks, PA, 4-5.

argued that “we are told that men who fought there [in Vietnam] must watch quietly while American lives are lost so that we can exercise the incredible arrogance of Vietnamizing the Vietnamese.” He concluded that Nixon lacked the courage to admit America made a mistake by intervening in Vietnam and thus “someone has to give up his life so that the United States doesn’t have to admit something . . . so that President Nixon won’t be . . . the first President to lose a war.” He ended with a poignant and difficult question, which succinctly captured the attitude of soldiers in Vietnam: “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?”³⁴

Kerry spoke after the American withdrawal from Vietnam reached its peak in 1970 and as major military divisions began redeploying. The First Infantry Division (“Big Red One”) left Vietnam and returned to Fort Riley, Kansas. Soon thereafter the “Ivy” Fourth Infantry Division exited Vietnam in December 1970, returning to Fort Carson in Colorado. Next was the 25th Infantry Division that had, along with the First Infantry, dealt with the infamous tunnel complexes around Cu Chi and the war torn “Iron Triangle” since 1966. The 199th Light Infantry Brigade and the last remaining brigade of the Ninth Infantry Division both left Vietnam that year. Those withdrawals represented a drastic drawdown of the army’s combat resources in Vietnam so that, by 1971, its mission transitioned from mobile, offensive operations to static defensive “security” details around fire support bases and other army installations.³⁵ The Nixon

³⁴ Proposals Relating to the War in Southeast Asia, Hearings before the Committee on Foreign Relations, United States Senate, Ninety-Second Congress, First Session (April-May 1971), Washington: Government Printing Office, 1971. Subject breaks in Kerry’s testimony were provided by the Senate staff in the form of subtitles, which in some cases are retained below. Additional editorial notes are provided by Professor Bolt. Excerpts from Kerry’s testimony are from pages 180, 181-183, 184, 185, 195, 204, and 208.

³⁵ For more on the drawdown of American forces under “Vietnamization” see Stanton, *The Rise and Fall of an American Army*, 344-350, and Stanton, *Vietnam Order of Battle*.

administration, meanwhile, “continuously downplayed the degree to which U.S. ground troops were at risk” of enemy attack for “domestic political reasons,” which undoubtedly confused the remaining infantrymen who were still going into the field, albeit around fire support bases, well into 1971.³⁶

If soldiers’ commitment to fighting in Vietnam during its early years derived partly or wholly from their perception of home front support, coupled with a belief that their sacrifices were in pursuit of a worthwhile cause, then “Vietnamization” and domestic tumult signaled that soldiers needed to fundamentally rework their guiding assumptions. In other words, how would soldiers respond when they no longer could justify dying in Vietnam? In January 1969, Lieutenant John Lawrence offered his prescient prediction that “we wouldn’t behave if we thought that our objective for being here weren’t for the good of mankind.”³⁷ The singer Sammy Davis Jr., who toured several firebases in 1972, also perceived a distinct attitude shift among the men since his visits earlier in the war. Davis found a “new Army” where commanders had to “deal with a new man, be he black or white, and you had better learn to deal with him, to try to find out what his needs are, because his needs are different than the needs of the World War II soldier and the earlier soldier [in Vietnam].” That specific need Davis identified—“more freedom”—ran contrary to the very DNA of an army.³⁸

“More freedom” defined the odyssey of Staff Sergeant Nathaniel A. Martin, whose experiences during a critical phase of Vietnamization in 1971-1972 illustrates how morale and discipline in the Army suffered by war’s end. Martin served in the 101st Airborne Division, 173rd

³⁶ William J. Shkurti, *Soldiering on in a Dying War*, 93.

³⁷ John Lawrence to Albert Ettinger, January 27, 1969, AEP, PV.

³⁸ Davis, “Why I Went to the Troops,” *Ebony* (June 1972), 142.

Airborne Brigade, and the 23rd Infantry Division (“Americal”) during his single tour of duty. As each of these units redeployed to the United States, Martin was transferred to another unit that remained in Vietnam. As a platoon sergeant, he was well positioned to observe and comment on both the culture of enlisted men below him and the behavior and leadership styles of commissioned officers above him.³⁹

While serving with the 173rd Airborne Brigade, Martin observed that rampant drug abuse, coupled with a generally lackadaisical attitude exhibited by both officers and enlisted men, had contributed to a profound morale crisis. He reported that junior and noncommissioned officers had to “beg” the junior enlisted ranks to “do a job.” However, the real menace in the 173rd was rampant drug abuse. “Kids are hooked on dope,” he lamented, complaining that “we have more casualties from dope than combat.” While most of the soldiers started with marijuana and had few problems, soon men in his battalion were “turning on with heroin [and] cocaine.” When one “white kid” had a bad trip on drugs “he went down in his bunker and shot himself in the head.” Martin talked with a black soldier for two hours, persuading him to quit using marijuana and other drugs. However, a few days after their heart-to-heart conversation, Martin found the kid “with the needle still in his arm . . . passed out while shooting himself [with heroin].” He’s lucky

³⁹ For USMC units, redeployment occurred through a series of Operation “Keystones.” Both the USMC and USA began redeployments in 1968. Many of these plans called for soldiers with greater than ten months of total service in Vietnam to be transferred to redeploying units, while men with less than ten months in Vietnam were sent to units redeploying later in the war. This had the adverse effect of siphoning all the most seasoned soldiers from units and replacing them with “greener” troops. Martin’s frequent transfers in 1970-1971 were due to Operation Keystone Eagle, as were the morale problems he witnessed where most soldiers remaining in units were fairly “green” and led by a few “old timers.” For example, in late-1969, war correspondents for *Newsweek* interviewed men in the 3rd Battalion (an unidentified unit belonging to the 9th Infantry Division) and discovered that, of 814 men leaving Vietnam, only 158 actually served in that battalion during their tours. See “Beginning of the End?” *Newsweek*, August 18, 1969, 42.

to still be around,” he commented. The drug problem that Martin witnessed in the 173rd Airborne was symptomatic, in his view, of a larger crisis of discipline in the Army.⁴⁰

Similarly, when Martin arrived with an element of the 101st Airborne Division in mid-1971, he again found a sad state of morale and discipline where soldiers refused to obey orders and officers abandoned their responsibilities. At the battalion headquarters in the rear, Martin saw “Old Timers” who were “fed up” with the Army, commanders who “will not back you up when you try to straighten out these men,” and junior enlisted men who “don’t give a damn about the army.” He subsequently transferred to the Americal Division, where the problems seemed even worse. “There is no organization, no morale, no discipline, and no leadership,” Martin complained. He discovered both officers and senior noncommissioned officers who were “afraid of the lower enlisted men,” probably because of the real threat “fragging” posed to their lives. During morning formation, Martin described seeing “fat, sloppy officers and NCOs” and “privates [who] look like hippies.” Officers and NCOs allowed the men to smoke marijuana, go without shaves and haircuts, and did not enforce cleanliness and hygiene. During his first night with the Americal Division, Martin discovered two men sleeping on guard duty. He took them before the First Sergeant for an informal disciplinary hearing but discovered that on that particular firebase, men were afforded the “luxury” of sleeping on guard, much to Martin’s chagrin.⁴¹

Further testifying to the deeply problematic culture in the Americal Division, some time in October 1971, just prior to Martin leaving Vietnam and returning to Fort Campbell, a soldier

⁴⁰Nathaniel A. Martin to Albert Ettinger, February 13, 1971 and March 28, 1971, AEP, PV.

⁴¹ Nathaniel A. Martin to Albert Ettinger, April 12, 1971 and July 24, 1971, AEP, PV.

in his outfit played Russian roulette and shot himself in the head. Weather was poor that night but a medevac helicopter dutifully approached the camp to collect the critically wounded soldier. On its way to an evacuation hospital the helicopter crashed in low-visibility fog, killing the pilot, co-pilot, two medics, and the wounded man. Martin angrily seethed that all were “lost because one asshole got a hair up his ass to do something stupid. He died and I swear I don’t feel sorry for him.” That soldier’s thoughtless decision to play Russian roulette became, for Martin, emblematic of how the morale crisis in Vietnam crippled the Army’s effectiveness. One hapless soldier, depressed and lonely, decided to play with his life and subsequently caused the death of four others.⁴²

That same year, Louis A. Forrisi arrived in Vietnam and discovered similar conditions in the Third Squadron, Fifth Cavalry (“Black Knights”), assigned to the First Brigade, 9th Infantry Division. Forrisi processed at Cam Ranh Bay and then flew to a basecamp to undergo “jungle warfare training” before joining his platoon. Two outer lines of defense surrounded the base camp where the replacement school was located.. Forrisi drew guard duty his first night and received an M-16, bayonet, and gas mask, but no ammunition for the rifle. He and others were puzzled by the fact that higher-ups felt the compound needed multiple defensive layers yet failed to provide guards with ammunition in the case of an attack. “While we walked our post we came across the truck driver who picked us up at the airstrip and he was quite drunk so I asked him the reason for all this and the answer I got really startled me.” The driver told Forrisi that “the so called cadre of the replacement company were all senior NCO’s and had an in somewhere so they never went to the field and none of them were [ever] even in combat.” This became a

⁴² Nathaniel A. Martin to Albert Ettinger, October 1971, AEP, PV.

popular and well-known rumor among soldiers in the brigade who, when standing-down from the field would occasionally throw (CS) tear gas or fire a few shots into the compound. Thus, Forrissi did not receive ammunition because the replacement cadre feared the guards would frag them in their sleep. These initial impressions of corruption within the Army fostered in Forrissi a “bitter dislike for . . . senior NCOs” and a skepticism about the war.⁴³

The morale problems that both Martin and Forrissi observed between 1970 and 1972 were symptomatic of the obvious and undeniable reality that America was withdrawing from Vietnam. The surging anti-war movement at home, now reacting to Nixon’s Cambodian and Laotian incursions, further compounded issues, exacerbating soldiers’ tendency to feel isolated, unsupported, and now (they perceived) openly ridiculed and hated in the wake of My Lai. Certainly, too, commanders’ tendencies to “waste” American lives on fruitless operations, such as the battle at Dong Ap Bia, taught junior enlisted and noncommissioned officers that those in positions of authority did not respect nor particularly care about the interests of those below. Infantrymen learned, at best, they should entertain a healthy skepticism of all officers. Through constant rotations and personnel turnover, aspects of the Counterculture bled into the Army through the draft, imbuing soldiers’ culture with skepticism of authority, a willingness to question orders, and the perception that Vietnam was a failed endeavor.

Further dissuading GIs from earnestly pursuing the enemy, by 1971, rumors circulated among the rank-and-file that combat operations in Vietnam would end at any moment. Historian Paul Fussell described the function of rumors in war as “virtual romances, rendering an optimistic and ideal vision of the future,” that shaped how soldiers behaved. In Vietnam, such

⁴³ Louis A. Forrissi, Unpublished Memoir, Viet Nam War Document Collection, Box 1, Folder 15, MHI, Carlisle, PA, 4-5.

rumors exacerbated the soldiers' fear of being the last killed in Vietnam and thereby incentivized avoiding danger.⁴⁴ Iver Peterson, a *New York Times* war correspondent, reported in June 1971 that "perhaps the most pronounced effect the pullouts have had so far is on American morale in the field . . . many [soldiers], for example, said they had believed that they would not have to go into the field after May 1, 1971." Another correspondent described how combat soldiers "find it hard to understand the purpose of their jobs if the war is virtually over." Few soldiers, he continued, "regarded his task as functional or useful." Marvin Mathiak, an infantryman during this period, remembered that morale was "about as good as could be" considering no soldier "wanted to be there" when the war seemed nearly over.⁴⁵

When Donald Kirk, another *New York Times* correspondent, visited the I Corps in late-1971, he found soldiers there incredibly frustrated by continual patrols and ongoing operations in a pointless war. Kirk was embedded with an infantry platoon that suffered eighteen casualties from booby-traps in a single month, followed by another three casualties incurred when soldiers triggered a booby-trapped foxhole. One soldier summarized the mood in his platoon, telling Kirk: "Sit here and watch a buddy get blown away. The whole thing's pointless. We'll never win." For those men, the war now consisted of a "daily hassle to avoid patrols, avoid the enemy, avoid contact—keep out of trouble and not be the last American killed in Vietnam." What men wanted instead was something akin to what Tim O'Brien captured in *The Things We Carried*, when describing "Rat's" assignment to a medical detachment where officers and noncommissioned officers enjoyed "pleasures [that] ran from dope to Darvon" and avoided any

⁴⁴ Fussell, *Wartime*, 43.

⁴⁵ Iver Peterson, "Pullout is Not Seen as Threat to G.I.'s in Field," *The New York Times* (June 1, 1971), 5; Norman E. Zinberg, "G.I.'s and O.J.'s in Vietnam," *The New York Times* (December 5, 1971), SM37; Interview with Marvin Mathiak, VCA, TTU, Record OH35588.

semblance of enforcing military discipline. Back in reality, though, Kirk reported that soldiers' frustrations with unnecessary exposure to danger provoked several "fraggings" of officers, sometimes two or three per month, per battalion.⁴⁶

Soldiers developed new idioms and phrases during this period to succinctly express their deep-seated frustrations with both the Army as a whole and their specific officers. The most common utterance after 1969 was "Fuck the Army," which soldiers used as a general expression of their disgust with the military; the acronym, "FTA," also adorned many soldiers' helmets and other personal affects.⁴⁷ Similarly, soldiers responded to the death of comrades, orders to operate in the field, or expressed their opinion about the war by stating: "Fuck it. It don't mean nothin'," or using a variation of the phrase.⁴⁸ The mantra, "it don't mean nothin'" also captured soldiers' misery fighting in a pointless war during Vietnamization. Their principal concern, however, was getting home, whether by suffering a "million dollar wound"—signifying a flesh wound that warranted the Army sending a soldier home, yet not severe enough to cause permanent impairment—or by getting "short" enough to return to a rear base, where they endured interactions with all the "rear echelon mother fuckers" and "lifers" to join fellow combat veterans on a "freedom bird" bound for the United States.⁴⁹

⁴⁶ Donald Kirk, "Who Wants to be the Last American Killed in Vietnam?" *The New York Times* (September 19, 1971), SM9; Tim O'Brien, *The Things We Carried* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1998), 91.

⁴⁷ Marvin P. Mathiak, Vietnam Veterans Survey Collection (VVS), Box 2, Folder 51; Joseph Herbert, VVS, Box 2, Folder 48; William R. Brown, Box 4, Folder 134, MHI.

⁴⁸ Joseph R. Prince, VVS, Box 2, Folder 76; Roger Borroel, VVS, Box 1, Folder 36; Michael Dyer, VVS, Box 1, Folder 37; Charles R. Bowman, Jr., VVS, Box 4, Folder 140; Allen F. Wilson, VVS, Box 4, Folder 152; Dennis K. Meschberger, Box 5, Folder 185, MHI.

⁴⁹ Peter F. Cullen, VVS, Box 1, Folder 7; Thomas L. Foor, VVS, Box 1, Folder 27; Dennis W. Bowen, Box 1, Folder 35; Gerald T. Lacombe, VVS, Box 1, Folder 40; Allen W. Sims, VVS, Box 3, Folder 107, MHI; Michael O. Durack, Box 4, Folder 135; George R. Atkins, VVS, Box 4, Folder 118, MHI.

The “fuck the Army” attitude of many soldiers, coupled with their impulse toward self-preservation in the final years and months of the conflict, sometimes provoked GIs to attempt the murder of their commanding officers and noncommissioned officers by “fragging” them with hand grenades. Although some “fraggings” occurred earlier in the war, the Pentagon admitted that the problem grew more pronounced during Vietnamization. Historian Ron Milam, who studied the experiences of junior officers during the war, described the “intentional destruction of a superior officer or an NCO” as paramount among an officer’s concerns. Between 1969 and 1972 there were 800 recorded incidents of fragging, with a peak of 1.8 assaults per 1,000 servicemen in Vietnam. The Pentagon noted a sharp increase in fraggings after 1971, adding that it was unknown how many attempted fraggings went unreported. The Pentagon released its findings in April 1971 at the behest of Senator Mike Mansfield, who was appalled by the murder of a young West Point graduate from his constituency. The report admitted that 96 incidents occurred in 1969, followed by 209 in 1970, and approximately 400 in 1971.⁵⁰ The rate of fraggings correlated positively with the pace of Vietnamization, suggesting that these murders and attempted murders were stemming from soldiers’ increasing reluctance to serve under officers who put them in harm’s way.

The experience of Captain Brian Utermahlen, reported by Jonathan Saar, indicated the extent to which relations between officers and enlisted men changed since the battle of Dong Ap Bia in 1969. Utermahlen graduated from West Point in 1968 and once in Vietnam discovered the biggest problem was reconciling his “own professional dedication” with “his draftees’ rank disinterest in anything that might cost an American life.” Saar believed that junior officers

⁵⁰ Milam, *Not a Gentleman’s War*, 157-158; “Pentagon Reveals Rise in ‘Fraggings,’” *The New York Times* (April 21, 1971), 9.

throughout Vietnam faced the same dilemma when ordering their men into danger. He decided to operate Alpha Company in a quasi-democratic fashion, granting subordinates “more freedom” to reach a collective decision about whether to carry out orders from above. Saar thought that Utermahlen’s fear of being murdered by his own men motivated his consideration of the wishes of his subordinates:

Utermahlen has not always had Alpha’s support. He relieved a very popular commanding officer. When he took over, he was half prepared for a vengeance grenade attack from his own men –a ‘fragging.’ ‘They told me horror stories about how bad the company was,’ Utermahlen remembers, ‘and there were signs around saying the colonel wasn’t welcome [in the field]. I thought, my God, I’m going to be fragged.’⁵¹

Fortunately, Utermahlen was not fragged during his tour, likely because he was careful not to incense his men. He belonged to a generation of junior officers that Saar claimed possessed the “flexibility to accommodate the changing generation of soldiers.” Utermahlen countenanced overt disobedience by his men who balked at orders to conduct patrols, ambushes, and establish listening posts.⁵² He responded by informing intransigent men about the possibility of court-martial while gently persuading them to obey orders.

The growing flexibility within the command relationship between junior officers and enlisted men encouraged the development of another survival tactic. Colloquially known as “search-and-evade” tactics by soldiers, or more officially as “combat avoidance” or “combat

⁵¹ Jonathan Saar, “An Army of Reluctant Draftees: October 1970, You Can’t Just Hand Out Orders,” in *Reporting Vietnam: American Journalism 1959-1975* (New York: The Library of America, 2000), 467-474.

⁵² Soldiers particularly loathed Listening Post (LP) detail. The detail usually included at least two junior enlisted men and one junior noncommissioned officer who were tasked with manning a position several hundred yards outside the perimeter of a firebase. Their task was to listen for enemy activity. In the event that an enemy mounted an attack on the firebase, those on the LP were placed in a precarious position, being caught between enemies in their front and friendlies in their rear.

refusal,” such incidents aroused mounting concern in MACV and the Pentagon after 1970.⁵³ For example, in 1968, official reports recorded a total of sixty-eight combat refusals across all seven divisions in Vietnam. By 1970, the First Cavalry Division (Airmobile) recorded 35 individual incidents of refusals, not including the many unknown “search and evade” incidents such as radioing false coordinates and practicing “CYA” or “cover your ass” tactics to mislead commanders not in the field.⁵⁴ For example, Sergeant James Gillam destroyed an enormous cache of enemy mortar shells, rather than reporting the discovery to battalion, because he knew “the Lifers would want them all hauled to a clearing and taken to base camp.” The famous “tunnel rats” assigned to the 25th and 1st Infantry Divisions also frequently underreported findings inside tunnels, not wanting to risk their lives or overexert themselves pulling rice, munitions, or bodies from tunnels to satisfy commanders.⁵⁵

CBS war correspondent John Laurence, assigned to Vietnam from 1965 to 1970, reflected in *The Cat from Hue* that “a certain sense of independence, a reluctance to behave according to the military’s insistence on obedience, like pawns or puppets,” characterized the attitudes of enlisted men in 1970. Whereas before men might risk life and limb to secure villages, traverse jungle trails, or assault an enemy bunker complex, they now “insisted on having something to say about the making of decisions that determined whether they might live or die.” These attitudes famously manifested in a near-mutiny in “Charlie Company,” a unit of the 2-7 Cavalry, which Laurence covered for CBS in 1970. The point squad sat down and refused orders

⁵³ Saar, “An Army of Reluctant Draftees,” 468-469.

⁵⁴ Heinl, “The Collapse of the Armed Forces,” 31.

⁵⁵ Gillam, *Life and Death in the Central Highlands*, 126; Tom Mangold and John Penycate, *The Tunnels of Cu Chi: A Harrowing Account of America’s Tunnel Rats in the Underground Battlefields of Vietnam* (San Rafael, CA: Presidio Press, 2013).

to move several hundred yards down a trail to clear a landing zone. The men thought that it was too risky to move down a well-established trail where historically the Viet Cong had staged ambushes and planted booby-traps.⁵⁶ Eventually the platoon leader persuaded some of the men to follow orders, but it remained a poignant episode of soldiers' potential willingness to refuse orders when they thought the risk too great.

It was not only reluctant, "hippie" draftees who refused orders, but it became apparent that seasoned veterans in the field balked at obeying commands that they knew, from prior experience, would cost American lives and achieve little gain. For example, on October 9, 1971, members of the First Air Cavalry Division stationed at Fire Support Base Pace refused to conduct a nighttime ambush. Another sixty-three soldiers, including thirteen NCOs, signed a petition supporting the original six who refused orders. Within twenty-four hours, the so-called "mutiny" as FSB Pace made national headlines, reached the White House, and spread across American bases in Vietnam. Various pundits distorted the narrative by labeling the men "hippies" who lacked the guts to fight. However, the original refusal on October 9 involved *seasoned* soldiers who in previous weeks and months had conducted numerous daytime and nighttime ambushes and patrols. They simply refused in that particular instance because they believed the weather conditions made it especially hazardous and fruitless to set a nighttime ambush. More generally, though, it once again underscored the intent of soldiers to band together

⁵⁶ Laurence, *The Cat from Hue: A Vietnam War Story* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2002), 798; *The World of Charlie Company*, Television Documentary, directed by James Clevenger (CBS: July 14, 1970).

in their efforts to maximize their survival as the United States concluded its presence in Vietnam.⁵⁷

During Vietnamization soldiers also developed a cultural preference for smoking marijuana, both as a natural extension of their desire to unwind in the rear with the aid of intoxicants, and a reflection of how elements from the counterculture in America inflected soldier culture in the Army. The extent to which American soldiers “abused” drugs captured national headlines during the withdrawal period and vexed politicians, veterans, and historians who sought to understand the relationship between drug “abuse” and combat effectiveness in Vietnam. Assessing the pervasiveness of marijuana use and drug addiction remains challenging because the source materials, that include Army-sponsored surveys, anecdotal reflections, and the reports of physicians, are incomplete or overtly polemical. Contemporary military commanders blamed American society for importing into the Army its social ills, contending that soldiers who used drugs in the Army were previously drug users as civilians. Colonel Heinl blamed draftees who “clobber[ed] the armed forces with ‘social turbulence’ and a host of other problems.” He implied that draftees came from a civilian culture that tolerated drug use and cherished dissent.⁵⁸

⁵⁷ American GIs were also motivated by what Peter Kindsvatter described as “latent ideology,” or a persistent belief in the righteousness of the United States, during the drawdown in Vietnam, *American Soldiers*, 139-140; Also see, Shkurti, *Soldiering on in a Dying War*; “Company Removed from Base after Soldiers Balk at Patrol,” *Chicago Tribune* (October 12, 1971), 2; Craig R. Whitney, “Army Says Some G.I.’s Balked Briefly at Patrol,” *New York Times* (October 12, 1971), 3; Peter A. Jay, “US Transfers Troops who Refused Order,” London *Guardian* (October 23, 1971), 3.

⁵⁸ Robert D. Heinl, Jr., “The Collapse of the Armed Forces,” 31-33; For more discussion of how drug culture came into the Army through the draft, see: Kyle Longley, *Grunts*, 133-135.

Because soldiers' culture in Vietnam emphasized collective identity and survival over individual racial, ethnic, or class differences, it follows that a culture, which esteemed communality, would demonstrate a preference for drugs and substances that promoted group solidarity. Soldiers used marijuana to "get high and get nice," while ridiculing others for using heroin without any apparent irony.⁵⁹ Ingesting "smack" was a solitary, selfish act that isolated the individual from the group, whereas marijuana contributed to a more sublime collective experience of passing "joints" or sharing "hits" from a bong. Soldiers also witnessed the deadly overdoses that accompanied heroin use, whereas they considered marijuana a safe recreational drug. Historian Paul Fussell persuasively argued that soldiers during World War II exhibited a pattern of alcohol abuse because "in wartime there's an understanding that, considering the violence and the risk to life and limb," intoxicants like alcohol seemed "largely harmless, very [much] like cigarettes [were considered] in the 1940s." American GIs in World War II thought alcohol a "natural and harmless" form of escapism and similarly, during the Vietnam War, soldiers steeped in the Sixties youth culture believed that marijuana was "natural and harmless."

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Soldiers found marijuana particularly appealing for its somatic and hallucinogenic effects, as well as, for the communal folkways that attended its use. Men passed joints around a small group while conversing and venting pent-up emotions. Place also held a special

⁵⁹ Gerald T. Lacombe, VVS, Box 1, Folder 40, MHI. "Get High – Get Nice" was a common idiom used by soldiers to express their preference for smoking marijuana while also indicating their belief that inhaling marijuana calmed the smoker.

⁶⁰ On heroin overdoses, see Specter, *After Tet*, 277; Perry A. Ulander, *Walking Point: From the Ashes of the Vietnam War, A Memoir* (Berkeley, CA: North Atlantic Books, 2016), 133-134; Paul Fussell, *Wartime: Understanding and Behavior in the Second World War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), 97. Emphasis added.

significance. To light up marijuana in the field was unconscionable for soldiers and thus infantrymen often “toked” in the relative safety of a firebase or other rear area where, in the confines of a bunker or barracks that encouraged shared intimacy, soldiers smoked marijuana and engaged in rap sessions. Heroin, in contrast, was unavailable in Vietnam in significant quantities until a few weeks after the Cambodian incursion in spring 1970. It remains unclear why a sudden influx of heroin hit Vietnam at that moment, but the heroin that became available was especially potent (92-96% pure) and cheap. A small amount inhaled through a heroin-laced cigarette or snorted through the nostrils could produce a substantial, mind-numbing high.⁶¹ But while “turn on, tune in, and drop out” might have been the mantra for psychedelic drug use among Hippies in the United States, and certainly heroin and LSD became popular with rear-echelon soldiers in Vietnam, infantrymen by contrast found such an ethic unappealing and preferred drugs conducive to a group dynamic.⁶²

The Vietnamese cultivated, refined and sold marijuana in bulk making it widely available for purchase outside most military installations and much cheaper than what was sold in the United States. “Any drug you wanted to buy in Vietnam—marijuana, heroin, opium—was cheap and available,” remarked B. G. Burkett: “Kids sold joints on the side of the road for fifty cents apiece.” American soldiers could purchase twenty marijuana cigarettes for approximately \$2.00 on the Vietnamese black market in 1970. In New York City, by comparison, a “nickel-bag” that yielded eight to twelve rolled cigarettes cost \$5.00. Some soldiers were using marijuana as early

⁶¹ Specter, *After Tet*, 276-278; Gloria Emerson, “G.I.’s in Vietnam Get Heroin Easily,” *New York Times* (February 25, 1971), 39.

⁶² Timothy Leary said “turn on, tune in, drop out” at the 1967 Human Be-In at Golden Gate Park in San Francisco. By that he meant “turn on” to LSD, “tune in” to your own body, and “drop out” of society. He first described this process in his book, *Turn on, Tune in, Drop out*, (Oakland, CA: Ronin Publishing, 1965).

as 1967 prompting 1,391 drug-related investigations and twenty-nine courts-martial. By 1970, that number had grown exponentially to 11,058 courts-martial with ninety-percent of prosecutions stemming from marijuana use.⁶³

Important differences existed between patterns of drug use in the combat arms and in rear or support units. Most statistics compiled during the war were invariably skewed toward the latter. Because Vietnamization emphasized the redeployment of combat soldiers, a larger proportion of support troops resided in most regions of South Vietnam by 1971. Those stationed in places like Da Nang or Bien Hoa had far greater access to marijuana and what the military considered “hard drugs”—barbiturates, opioids, LSD—than their counterparts operating in the field. An army physician, Captain Morris D. Stanton, surveyed personnel at Cam Ranh Bay and found, unsurprisingly, that “50 per cent of enlisted men” there smoked marijuana at least once and fifteen percent used it regularly. In an attempt to show the significance of his findings, though, Stanton generalized his “50 percent” and “15 percent” number to all active duty personnel in South Vietnam, including members of the combat arms. Around Cao Lanh, Americans lit “thousands of bonfires” of marijuana to stymie what they believed was a growing drug epidemic among American soldiers on nearby support bases. Wayne C. McCammon, a Senior Area Public Safety Advisor in Kienphong, thought that by destroying the marijuana crops

⁶³ Fred Farrar, “Marijuana ‘Fact of Life’ in Viet Nam, Veteran Says,” *Chicago Tribune*, March 26, 1970, E7; 173rd Airborne Study quoted in Ronald Specter, *After Tet*, 276; B. G. Burkett, *Stolen Valor*, 27; Gloria Emerson, “Allies in Vietnam Burn Marijuana: U.S. Officers Worried Over Widespread Use by G.I.’s,” *New York Times*, March 22, 1970, 19; Courts-martial statistics cited in Burkett, *Stolen Valor*, 60.

it would prevent “19-year-old kid[s] . . . out there on the perimeter” of a support base from getting high and jeopardizing the safety of everyone else inside the perimeter.⁶⁴

Infantrymen and others in the combat arms had relatively less access to marijuana and fewer opportunities to use it. Correspondent Gloria Emerson reported that many believed “most marijuana is smoked when soldiers have returned from operations or are on leave.” Despite what soldiers self-reported, “the military [and] concerned civilian advisors” were unconvinced. Ian Wright, a British war correspondent for the London *Guardian*, found that infantrymen “on patrol tend not to use pot,” and several junior officers corroborated his findings. One lieutenant claimed only three men in his platoon abstained from marijuana use, but regardless “the fellows wouldn’t allow anyone to smoke in the field” because it endangered the group. When one soldier transgressed informal rules against smoking in the field, he became “pretty unpopular” with fellow pot-smokers and was subsequently drummed out of the platoon. Wright conceded that a “self-imposed prohibition” against marijuana existed in the field, but soldiers would “light up” in the fire base where they congregated in “dugouts [to] listen to music, smoke grass and get pleasantly high.”⁶⁵ Both Wright’s and Emerson’s findings contained logic consistent with the operational patterns and behaviors encouraged within infantry units. Infantry platoons operated in the field for two to four weeks at a time, returning to FSBs or brigade and divisional camps for two or three nights in between. During these stand-downs infantrymen were exposed to the drug culture existing in a rear camp, and only there, in relative safety, would they risk partaking of drugs to alleviate their anxiety, boredom, and fear. The protocols governing when and where to

⁶⁴ Stuart Smith, “Half Viet GI’s Said to Try Marijuana,” *The Baltimore Sun*, December 3, 1970, A2; Gloria Emerson, “Allies in Vietnam Burn Marijuana: U.S. Officers Worried Over Widespread Use by G.I.’s,” *New York Times*, March 22, 1970, 19.

⁶⁵ Ian Wright, “Giggle-Smoke over the Base Camp,” *The London Guardian* (June 8, 1970), 15.

use marijuana emerged entirely through informal agreements between groups of infantrymen and others, regardless of the U.S. Army's official policies on the matter.

Because junior officers were forced into adopting a flexible and dynamic command relationship with their subordinates, as noted above, they allowed soldiers greater freedom to use marijuana in the rear. Ostensibly responsible for ensuring discipline in the ranks, including the enforcement of prohibitions against drug use, most junior officers conceded that permitting the men to smoke "grass" was a necessary evil to ensure their loyalty and cooperation in the field. Platoon leaders served only six months with a combat platoon before reassignment to the rear. Often inexperienced, officers relied on the platoon sergeant and squad leaders to become familiar with their command. Officers also had to earn the respect and trust of the junior enlisted ranks, placing them in an unenviable position when trying to curb drug use, particularly when alcohol consumption (and drunkenness) was all too common on rear bases. Therefore, as the war ended, officers found that good leadership required more leniency toward drug use. Ronald Ridenhour—who exposed the My Lai massacre—told the Senate Subcommittee in 1970 that in Vietnam "he made no attempt to stop marijuana smoking when the men were in their base camp . . . and I couldn't have stopped it if I tried." No junior officer wanted to engender the hatred of their men as one "gung-ho" platoon leader did in his pursuit of promotion and strict application of the "rulebook," prompting a soldier in his platoon to remark to a war correspondent: "if no one was looking, I'd frag that sonuvabitch."⁶⁶

⁶⁶Milam, *Not a Gentleman's War*, 146-147; "Made No Effort" . . . Fred Farrar, "Marijuana 'Fact of Life' in Viet Nam, Veteran Says," *Chicago Tribune*, March 26, 1970, E7; "Frag that sonuvabitch" . . . Donald Kirk, "Who Wants to be the Last American Killed in Vietnam?" in *Reporting Vietnam*, 526-529.

The public perception of a “drug problem” in Vietnam became sensationalized as the nation came to grips with the My Lai massacre, particularly when two Army physicians—Dr. John A. Talbott and Dr. James W. Teague—hinted at the potential for Vietnamese grown marijuana to provoke uncontrollable violence and paranoia in users. They published findings in the *Journal of the American Medical Association* in late-1969, arguing that Vietnamese *cannabis* caused psychosis and violent behavior in American soldiers. In *twelve* case studies, the physicians concluded that first-time marijuana users were prone to experiencing the “urge to cough” coupled with “impaired coordination and difficulty in line movements [and] aching muscles and arms and legs.” Ten patients exhibited paranoia, including delusions, suspicions, and hallucination that precipitated violent behavior. Finally, the duo concluded in deliberately provocative terms that smoking Vietnamese marijuana caused “schizophrenic-like psychoses” and unwarranted fears of “overt homosexual assault.”⁶⁷

From March 24 to October 30, 1970, the Senate Subcommittee on Juvenile Delinquency probed the extent of “Drug Abuse in the Armed Forces,” and drew further connections between marijuana use and violent behavior. The committee chair, Thomas J. Dodd of Connecticut, called witnesses from all the armed forces branches, but the Army figured prominently with former junior enlisted personnel and non-commissioned officers testifying.⁶⁸ Dodd portrayed an army in Vietnam in utter disarray, quoting estimates that sixty to eighty percent of American soldiers engaged in recreational drug use during their tours in Vietnam. If true, Dodd implied that of the

⁶⁷ “Marijuana Effects Noted in GI’s,” *The Baltimore Sun*, October 13, 1969, A3; Also see, Walter Alvarez, “GIs in War Go Berserk,” *The Atlanta Constitution*, December 14, 1969, 18D.

⁶⁸ U.S. Congress, Senate Committee on the Judiciary, Subcommittee to Investigate Juvenile Delinquency, *Juvenile Delinquency: Hearings before the Subcommittee to Investigate Juvenile Delinquency of the Committee of the Judiciary*, Part 21, “Drug Abuse in the Armed Services,” United States Senate, 91st Cong., 2nd sess., *S. Res. 48*. (Washington, D.C: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1971), 6258.

then 2,200,000 who served in Vietnam, approximately 1,300,000 to 1,760,000 tried marijuana “or some other drug or used them regularly.”⁶⁹ Testimony quickly turned to the physiological and psychological effects of marijuana. Dodd argued that in Vietnam marijuana was making men psychotic and too violent, while an Army psychiatrist indicated that “between 80 and 90 percent of the men in the [Long Binh] jail [in Vietnam] had smoked marihuana” prior to committing violent crimes. Another witness, Charles West, a former sergeant with Charlie Company, 1-20 Infantry, Americal, witnessed the events at My Lai in 1968. During his interview with Chairman Dodd, the dialogue quickly centered on whether Lieutenant William Calley and his men were high on marijuana the day they murdered unarmed women, children, and elderly in My Lai:

Chairman Dodd: Now, what about your own company, Charley Company. How many of them were smokers or users of marihuana?

Mr. West: Well, I would say out of the men that I was closely acquainted with, well, I would say about 60 percent that I knew smoked marihuana.⁷⁰

Having established the fact that the majority (60%) of men in Charlie Company were regular marijuana users, Dodd questioned West about whether marijuana users were present at My Lai. “Were any of the men whom you knew who were marihuana users involved in the My Lai incident?” Dodd asked. West responded that “yes . . . I would say out of the company, they were on that mission.” Dodd then inquired whether West knew of any platoon or company leaders,

⁶⁹ “Drug Abuse in the Armed Services,” 6258. Senator Dodd opened the investigation in a deliberately provocative and sensational manner designed to stoke American fears and anxiety about the “drug crisis” in the United States. Dodd indirectly asked what it meant for the home front if America’s traditionally “finest” men were drug-addicted in Vietnam. See, Jeremy Kuzamarov, “The Myth of the Addicted Army: Vietnam and the Modern War on Drugs,” (Ph.D. Dissertation, Brandeis University, 2006), 3-4.

⁷⁰ Charles West, “Drug Abuse in the Armed Services,” 6291-6292.

particularly officers (i.e. Calley) who smoked marijuana, but West claimed no remembrances of any officers, in his unit, smoking.⁷¹

Dodd implied that the soldiers who murdered civilians at My Lai were high on marijuana, providing a rationalization for the massacre.⁷² Later during West's testimony, Dodd concluded his questioning when West admitted that hours prior to Charlie Company leaving for the mission in My Lai the men were smoking marijuana and no efforts were made by officers to stop it. Far more interesting, though, was West's allusions to a culture of smoking marijuana in Charlie Company that often took place on Fire Bases *and not in the field*. When questioned about his personal marijuana use, West admitted he tried the drug twice—both times in the rear—and always in a bunker during guard duty. During one "Pot Party" at LZ Dottie, West remarked that a group of soldiers smoked, drank alcohol, and commiserated about their experiences, while watching for the Viet Cong. That night, stoned and buzzed from alcohol, the men mistook shadows for the Viet Cong and ordered a mortar barrage outside the wire. It was not "unusual" to smoke at LZ Dottie, West noted, because "when we go from bunker to bunker, and like any guys there may be four or five friends who are here . . . let's have a little smoke, or something."⁷³

Other witnesses also indicated that smoking marijuana became a staple of soldiers' culture in some units and that replacements often felt compelled to smoke or risk being ostracized. Dr. Joel H. Kaplan, a psychiatrist at Hillside Hospital in Glen Oaks, New York, and a former U.S. Army psychiatrist, was Commanding Officer of the 98th Medical Detachment in

⁷¹West, "Drug Abuse in the Armed Services," 6292.

⁷² Robert M. Smith, "Senators Told G.I.'s in Songmy Unit Smoked Marijuana Night Before Incident, *New York Times*, March 25, 1970, 14; Lawrence L. Knutson, "My Lai Sergeant Reports Pot use," *The Atlanta Constitution*, March 25, 1970, 10A.

⁷³ West, "Drug Abuse in the Armed Services," 6292, 6297-6298.

Vietnam when he discovered that a group dynamic drove marijuana consumption. In “certain units you would be sort of an outcast or an oddball if you did not go along and smoke.” He continued that with “90 percent of your friends . . . using, smoking pot . . . the pressure might be on the person to try it . . . otherwise, they would be isolated.”⁷⁴ Veteran Glen Haynie also recalled a particular group dynamic that made smoking marijuana appealing, because it included the practice of “ritual sharing” and facilitated “camaraderie, laughter, and [the] opening of doors.” By contrast, injecting or snorting purified heroin “was completely antithetical to smoking pot” because it was “a selfish, solo dance with death.”

Such a dynamic of introducing men to marijuana existed within the 173rd Airborne Brigade by 1969, and specifically at LZ Uplift and LZ English. Perry A. Ulander, in his memoir *Walking Point*, remembered during his time at LZ Uplift, replacements in his platoon were initiated with “Bong Son Bombers,” a marijuana cigarette “as big as a fountain pen” and packed with potent Vietnamese reefer.⁷⁵ Ulander’s bizarre introduction to drug culture within the 173rd Airborne Brigade occurred precisely when the unit suffered a drug epidemic, leading the unit newspaper, *Fire Base 173*, to publish full-page warnings about the potentially fatal consequences of drug abuse. One such admonition pictured a soldiers’ corpse lying in a morgue with a toe-tag reading: “Overdose, Heroin.”⁷⁶ That same year one study found a “clear majority of all E-1s and E-2s” in the 173rd were “regular or chronic marijuana users.”⁷⁷ Major John J. Treanor interviewed 1,094 personnel in the 173rd with the significant finding that among 158

⁷⁴ Joel H. Kaplan, “Drug Abuse in the Armed Services,” 6274

⁷⁵ Kaplan, “Drug Abuse in the Armed Services,” 6274; Ulander, *Walking Point*, 31-32.

⁷⁶ *Fire Base 173*, 3(13), January 4, 1971, 8, MHI.

⁷⁷ Ron Milam, *Not a Gentleman’s War*, 144-147.

administrative and support personnel he interviewed 22% admitted to smoking marijuana, while 35% of 494 “field soldiers” admitted to regular use. He argued that at least in the 173rd those with a combat MOS were more likely to use marijuana.⁷⁸ Part of the problem stemmed from the 173rd siting its major firebases (English and Uplift) near Phu Cat. According to one soldier, between LZ English (home to the 2nd and 4th battalions), LZ Uplift (home to the 1st and 3rd battalions), and Phu Cat was an infamous crossroads where Vietnamese pimps offered American soldiers prostitutes and peddlers sold cheap speed, marijuana, and opioids.⁷⁹

General Creighton Abrams directed his field commanders to develop a counter-drug program in January 1971, issuing a 64-page directive that included orders for commanders to allocate resources for the search and recovery of marijuana plants. While American units were tasked with finding marijuana farms and processing centers, it was left to the ARVN to destroy the crops, given that the drug remained a staple of the South Vietnamese economy. Abrams’ suspected that 65,000 GIs were drug abusers, noting that in 1970 there were 25 confirmed drug deaths, 64 suspected drug-induced fatalities, and more than 700 hospitalizations.⁸⁰ Individual units began taking prophylactic action earlier by issuing admonitions, informational materials, and the horror stories of addiction in their newspapers. Both the 3-1 Infantry and 4-3 Infantry in

⁷⁸ James P. Sterba, “Combat G.I.’s Tell of Using Marijuana,” *New York Times*, April 4, 1970, 3.

⁷⁹ Larry J. Musson, *Run Through the Jungle: Real Adventures in Vietnam with the 173rd Airborne Brigade* (Bloomington, IN: Authorhouse, 2015), 64.

⁸⁰ “Drive Against G.I. Drug Abuse in Vietnam Ordered by Abrams,” *New York Times*, January 7, 1971, 1. The number of American servicemen dying from overdoses, particularly of heroin, especially concerned Americans. See, in particular, Iver Peterson, “Deaths from Drug Abuse Rise Among Vietnam G.I.’s,” *New York Times*, October 31, 1970, 3; “GI Drug Deaths Rising in Vietnam, Army Says,” *Los Angeles Times*, October 31, 1970, 12; “Army is Gravely Concerned Over Drug Use in Vietnam,” *Baltimore Sun*, October 31, 1970, A4; “Army Says Drugs May Have Killed 89: Higher Than Last Year,” *The Washington Post*, October 31, 1970, A16.

the Americal Division began publishing such materials in 1969, warning that marijuana use produced hallucinogenic episodes that made walking point and patrolling rice paddies incredibly dangerous. These newspapers also warned that marijuana use could cause irreversible brain damage.⁸¹ A transcript of Nixon's January 1970 speech about anti-drug campaigns in America appeared in one battalion newspaper, with emphasis on Nixon's prediction that men who used drugs would become a "drag on his friends" back home.⁸²

The most consistent line of attack featured the now-common argument that marijuana constituted a "gateway" drug to harder and more addictive drug use. Nixon navigated between this argument and its opposite—that marijuana was no worse than alcohol—in his January speech. The "Old Guard" (4-3 Infantry) included warnings about THC, the active ingredient found in marijuana, suggesting "little is known about the long-term effects of marijuana use." The paper also argued that marijuana caused "erratic behavior, loss of memory, and distortion of time, space, color and sounds," while additionally leading soldiers to more severe abuse of narcotics.⁸³ Another suggested "it is possible that the 'pothead' will try to intensify his kicks by searching for more powerful stuff," but warned that "don't let drugs be your 'bag' or you may go home in one!"⁸⁴ Alongside articles that explained the addictive and destructive qualities of many

⁸¹ "Marijuana Marks You," *Always First, Bronco Tribune* 2(19), September 12, 1969, MHI, Carlisle, PA, 5.

⁸² "President Nixon Stresses Information and Education To Fight Drug Abuse," *Always First, Bronco Tribune* 3(1), January 2, 1970, MHI, Carlisle, PA, 2.

⁸³ *Ibid.*; "Grass, Tea, Pot," *Old Guard* 2(32), February 22, 1970, MHI, Carlisle, PA, 7-9.

⁸⁴ "Are Drugs Your Bag?" *Old Guard* 2(39), April 8, 1970, MHI, 4. Also see, "Marijuana and Soldier in War Makes Very Unhealthy Situation," *Tropic Lightning News* (25th Infantry Division), February 3, 1969, 2; "Pot: A Known Danger," *Tropic Lightning News*, April 7, 1969; "With marijuana Pot Luck Means Bad, Bad, Trouble," *Tropic Lightning News*, June 2, 1969, 2; "How Much Do You Know About Drugs?" *Tropic Lightning News*, October 13, 1969, 2.

drugs were offers of amnesty and rehabilitation for soldiers willing to come forward and seek therapy.⁸⁵

If warnings about potential self-harm from drug use went unheeded, unit newspapers tried the legal-financial argument that smoking marijuana could cost an individual his career, financial well being, and freedom. Several newspapers warned soldiers about a \$20,000 fine with ten years imprisonment for possession and distribution of marijuana and narcotics. Other articles advised soldiers not to bring their drugs with them to R&R destinations. In Sydney, two American GIs were arrested and sentenced to five years imprisonment for possessing marijuana, while in Hong Kong authorities were punishing American soldiers convicted of drug trafficking with a \$12,000 fine and three years' in the penitentiary. Soldiers hoping to bring marijuana with them to the United States (or Hawaii for R&R) could expect "five years imprisonment, total forfeitures, reduction in grade to E-1 and a dishonorable discharge." Those with "hard narcotics" would face ten years.⁸⁶

Units also counteracted waning morale and indiscipline by providing alternative forms of recreation and entertainment to soldiers who were stationed in the field or at firebases. These endeavors were meant to address boredom, isolation, anxiety, and the need for escape that commanders perceived as the root causes of drug abuse and insubordination. This broad project took sundry forms that included the 25th Infantry Division constructing an "underground theater" fashioned in the likes of "Greenwich Village or Haight-Ashbury" for men in the 1st Battalion, 5th

⁸⁵ The Third Brigade of the Ninth Infantry Division started a rehabilitation and amnesty program for drug offenders in 1970. See, "Counsel Offered to Drug Abusers," *Go Devils* 2(4), February 22, 1970, 2; "Amnesty Program for Drug Abusers," *Go Devils* 2(7), April 5, 1970, 2.

⁸⁶ "Is It Worth It," *Always First, Bronco Tribune* 2(10), February 7, 1969, 3, MHI, Carlisle, PA, p. 3; "Trafficking in Drugs Can Wreck Your Trip," *Old Guard* 2(28), January 27, 1970, MHI, Carlisle, PA, 1-2. Also see, "Narcotics Charge Recorded in Federal Files," *Go Devils* 2(3), February 8, 1970, 2.

Infantry, where men could watch *Casino Royale* and *Hang 'em High*.⁸⁷ The 173rd Airborne Brigade opened a library at LZ English, along with a new PX designed specifically for the “infantryman who spends a couple of weeks in the field before coming back to the LZ.”⁸⁸ The 3rd Battalion, 1st Infantry, created an “Other Sundry Fund” that included providing men in the field with daily beer and soda allotments. An advertisement for the program in the 1-3 newspaper reminded men to “notify your chain of command” if the deliveries “dried up.”⁸⁹

The effort to make rock music mainstream in Vietnam represented the largest undertaking by the U.S. Army on this front, and perhaps the most successful. The U.S. Army encouraged and developed a rock scene in Vietnam hoping to repurpose its meaning to make the Army more congenial to draftees— a process one scholar has called “hip militarism.” Between 1969 and 1972, improvised rock bands composed of American soldiers or, more commonly, Filipinos, Koreans, Japanese, Australian, or Vietnamese performers flocked to major bases and remote firebases across South Vietnam. For example, the 3rd Battalion, 1st Infantry, hosted six performances at LZ Bronco between November 28 and December 31, 1969, including bands with colorful names like “Burlesque 1970” and “Electric Flower.”⁹⁰ Another battalion announced

⁸⁷ Jan F. Anderson, “Bobcats Build Underground Theater at FSB Patton,” *Tropic Lightning News*, Circa 1969-1970, MHI.

⁸⁸ “New Improved PX Opens at English,” 3(4), February 16, 1970, 1. This “field PX” became a theater-wide project after 1970, indicated by writers in *Fire Base 173*. LZ English also opened a concession stand, ice cream parlor, steam bath, photography studio, tailor shop, and a mobile dairy bar. The PX at LZ English was sizeable, containing \$200,000 of product and employing eighteen. Two soldiers who served with the 173rd during this period both recalled visiting the PX at English in their memoir. See, Ulander, *Walking Point*, 79-81; Musson, *Run Through the Jungle*, 63-64.

⁸⁹ “Beer & Soda Anyone?” *Always First, Bronco Tribune* 2(7), January 17, 1969, MHI.

⁹⁰ *Always First, Bronco Tribune*, 2(22), November 21, 1969, 2, MHI.

a concert with “live music and cute girls” featuring a Singapore-based band called “The Different People” who would cover American hits.⁹¹

There is no indication that promoting a rock scene in Vietnam produced the desired effect of reducing drug use or insubordination in the Army, given that much of the music was being produced by psychedelic bands whose songs were both explicitly anti-war and lauded drug use as individually empowering. For example, Gary R. Young, who served with the 1-5 (Mechanized) Infantry in 1969, observed that men were fascinated with the music performed at firebases in Vietnam, particularly Country Joe & The Fish’s “I-Feel-Like-I’m-Fixin’-to-Die rag” which Young said had “a lot of meaning” for the men in his outfit. For Young, hearing Country Joe & The Fish reminded him of “pot, LSD, [and] protest against the war in V.N.”⁹² And, by far the most popular song for GIs in Vietnam was “We Gotta Get out of this Place” by Eric Burdon and The Animals. Soldiers remembered that nearly every performance would end with a cover of Burdon’s single because it reinforced their desire to return home.⁹³

Despite the proliferation of “recreational” programs sponsored by the Army, unit commanders could not stem the tide of drug use among the rank-and-file because, from their perspective, smoking marijuana seemed like a frivolous waste of time and energy—with many harmful psychological, physiological, and legal consequences—that could be easily substituted

⁹¹ *Old Guard* (Fourth Battalion, Third Infantry), Circa 1970, MHI.

⁹² Undated Letter, Circa December 1968, Gary R. Young, Viet Nam War Document Collection, Box 3, Folder 15, MHI, Carlisle, PA.

⁹³ Haynie, *When I Turned Nineteen*, 151; Mendell R. Schelin, Vietnam War Survey, Box 3, Folder 96, MHI; James Wright, *Enduring Vietnam: An American Generation and its War* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2017), 242-243; Doug Bradley and Craig Werner, *We Gotta Get Out of This Place: The Soundtrack of the Vietnam War* (Boston: University of Massachusetts Press, 2016), 91-144.

by reading, listening to music, or living in better conditions.⁹⁴ Considered from the soldiers' perspective, almost all of whom were baby boomers, smoking marijuana complemented and enhanced these other recreational activities, was conducive to expressing intimate, closely guarded feelings about prior combat experiences, and released stress before embarking on another operation. Only junior officers, who were, on average, only slightly older than enlisted personnel, intuitively understood soldiers' cultural predilection for marijuana use.

To be sure, not all soldiers in Vietnam smoked marijuana, abused heroin, fragged their commanding officers, refused orders in the field, or purposefully avoided the enemy during these final years of the American war effort. But, enough soldiers participated in such activities, across a number of units, that it warranted the attention of MACV, battalion and brigade commanders, war correspondents, and politicians at home. Phillip B. Davidson, an intelligence officer in MACV, provides the most accurate and succinct assessment of the Army's "morale crisis" in his book, *Vietnam at War*, when he argued it was very "easy to exaggerate this collapse of morale and discipline in Vietnam. The truth probably lay somewhere between [Colonel Robert] McCaffrey's judgment of 'serious but not critical' and [Colonel] Heinl's 'approaching collapse.'"⁹⁵ The norms and values associated with the counterculture certainly infiltrated the Army via the draft and contributed to the Army's morale problems during Vietnamization. However, it was also Nixon's decision to initiate the American withdrawal from Southeast Asia coupled with his public-relations blitz to assure American voters that their boys were coming home as soon as possible that fostered an overarching atmosphere in Vietnam with conditions

⁹⁴"Are Drugs Your Bag?" *Old Guard* 2(39), April 8, 1970, MHI, Carlisle, PA, 4.

⁹⁵ Phillip B. Davidson, *Vietnam at War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 663.

ripe for soldiers to ensure their collective survival through practices that forestalled or avoided potential danger, in the hopes of reaching the end unscathed.

When Charles R. Anderson returned home from Vietnam, he reflected that America seemed “full of hostility.” Generalizing from his experience, Anderson suggested that returnees during the latter years of the conflict “came back hating something or someone: the Vietnamese for being so unfathomable . . . American politicians for lying to them about why they had to go to Vietnam; hippies for ‘stabbing us in the back’; and the Joe Blows and their housewives who went about life as usual while the grunts had been counting off their hours and days in the paddies and hills.” Similarly, Philip Bienvenue, who served in the Fifth Infantry Division in 1969, recalled that during the war soldiers believed that military officers and American politicians concealed the truth about the war from grunts. Then, for decades after the war, he argued that those same officers and politicians deliberately hid how they had “fucked up” in Vietnam. Almost fifty years later, Bienvenue attended an oral history presentation sponsored by the Southern Oral History Program (SOHP) at the University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill. The performance focused on “veterans’ narratives” and included his remembrances of Vietnam. During the Q&A, Bienvenue stood and emotionally confessed to all in the room that since he returned home in 1970, no one cared about his service. Only the anti-war protestors paid attention to him, he lamented, and often disparaged his sacrifices.⁹⁶

Soldiers’ perceptions of the anti-war movement, hippies, and draft dodgers, were mediated by their experiences in Vietnam and influenced through the channels of communication

⁹⁶ Charles Anderson, *Grunts*, 157; Philip Bienvenue, interviewed by Sophie Rupp, Southern Oral History Program, Chapel Hill, NC, February 2017, author’s personal collection; Author’s correspondence with Bienvenue, June 2016.

they maintained with home. As early as 1967 soldiers expressed hatred for anti-war protestors and, much later, would turn that anger as well toward politicians, officers, and others who they perceived were responsible for their predicament in Vietnam. Some were itching for a confrontation with “cowards” and “peaceniks” on their return home, envisioning a time when they could “bust [them] in the nose.”⁹⁷ Jerry Lembcke, a Vietnam veteran and sociologist, argued in *The Spitting Image: Myth, Memory and the Legacy of Vietnam* that by-and-large the legend that veterans were spat upon and verbally assailed by anti-war protestors upon their return from Vietnam was historically inaccurate—a poignant component of collective memory formed, in part, by Nixon’s efforts to drive a wedge between the military and the anti-war movement.

That soldiers were consistently aware of events back home throughout the war, though, indicates that perhaps combat veterans were putting together the components of post-war collective memory much earlier than others have previously thought. Stephen A. Moore completed a tour of duty with the 25th Infantry Division in 1967-1968. On September 24, 1967, when he had 101 days remaining in Vietnam he stated that: “I don’t say ‘short’ but *close*, in Vietnam you’re not ‘short’ until you step off that plane in Oakland *and make it past the Berkeley students and the ‘hippies*.”⁹⁸ Moore envisioned that running the gauntlet of anti-war protestors would be his last action in hostile territory before returning to the comforts of home. In 1969, Specialist James Barrett, a medic in the 1st Infantry Division, similarly commented that “you are not short till you are home.” Another soldier remembered a rumor that circulated through his infantry company about a soldier receiving a package. “He unwrapped it, and it was a can of dog

⁹⁷ Piers Compton to Albert Ettinger, April 5, 1967, AEP.

⁹⁸ Stephen A. Moore to Albert Ettinger, September 24, 1967, AEP. Emphasis added.

food. And [it] said . . . something to the effect, ‘Here is what you deserve because of the animal that you are.’” Whether that package containing dog food arrived in Vietnam or was the creative result of rumor will remain unknown, but these rumors and ideas, circulating early in the war, certainly contributed to the soldiers’ image that not only were anti-war protestors unpatriotic but capable of incredibly hateful and vengeful acts against soldiers.⁹⁹

⁹⁹ James Barett to Albert Ettinger, September 2, 1969, AEP; James ‘Butch’ Morris interview in Richard Burks Verrone and Lauran M. Calkins, *Voices from Vietnam: Eye-Witness Accounts of the War, 1954-1975* (Cincinnati: F+W Publications, 2005), 233-234.

CONCLUSION: THE PERSISTENCE OF VIETNAM-ERA SOLDIER CULTURE, 1973-2011

The culture that American soldiers created during the Vietnam War did not cease to exist when American combat forces finally withdrew from the country in 1973, or with the cessation of hostilities in 1975. Although returning veterans dispersed far and wide in their civilian lives, they retained poignant remembrances of their experiences in Vietnam and the norms that governed the tight-knight communities they belonged to there. In the decades following the war, Vietnam veterans would play an outsized role in distilling elements of “soldier culture” into memoir, novels, comic books, music, and films. These popular representations certainly exaggerated and distorted components of that culture in artists’ efforts to portray the Vietnam experience through elaborate metaphors of drugs, sex, and unreality. These depictions were based on, but no longer true to, “the” soldier culture that existed during the war. And in the postwar period American audiences gleaned their impressions about soldiers’ norms, values, and behaviors during the Vietnam War predominately from these popular representations.

Two generations after the first American soldiers stormed the beaches in Vietnam, their grandchildren were deployed to Iraq in 2003. No longer draftees, the junior enlisted ranks serving in Iraq were volunteers motivated to serve in the wake of the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks in New York, Washington, D.C., and Pennsylvania. The millennial generation composing the rank-and-file in Iraq, and Afghanistan, were like their grandfathers steeped in the popular culture of war that, while still replete with depictions of World War II, now offered compelling portraits of the Vietnam experience. To a certain extent the enlisted ranks in Iraq

imitated the behaviors of Vietnam-era soldiers learned primarily by way of watching movies like *Platoon*, *Full Metal Jacket*, and *We Were Soldiers*. With the exception of *We Were Soldiers*, these films (and other cultural mediums) depicted the final years of the United States' involvement in Vietnam, presenting a widely scoped appreciation of the anti-authoritarian iteration of soldier culture.

The earliest popular depictions of soldier culture were written by journalists and veterans who, during the 1970s and 1980s, illustrated Vietnam as a surreal, psychedelic landscape where innocent American draftees were transformed into disturbed, pot smoking soldiers, traumatized and victimized by their service in Vietnam. According to these authors, Vietnam was a meaningless war, yet serving there meant everything. "In this world of shit you won't have time to understand [anything]," Joker informs Rafter Man in Gustav Hasford's novel of the Vietnam War, *The Short-Timers*. "What you do, you become. You better learn to flow with it. You owe it to yourself," Cowboy advises. Hasford served in Vietnam with the Marine Corps, and *The Short-Timers* loosely reflects his experiences there. Cowboy, Rafter Man, Joker, and the other characters in his novel struggle far more to define the meaning of their service in Vietnam than they do combatting the Viet Cong. Through their trials Hasford makes clear that in a pointless war like Vietnam the soldiers' only motivations were to survive and cling to their humanity.¹

The Short-Timers struck a chord with Americans eager to forget the conflict yet sympathetic to the plight of the American "boys" sent there to fight. Thus, Hasford subsequently adapted his novel as the basis for the film *Full Metal Jacket*, working with film director Stanley

¹ Gustav Hasford, *The Short-Timers* (New York: Harper and Row, 1979), 50-51; Also see, Michael Herr, *Dispatches* (New York: Alfred Knopf, 1977); James Webb, *Fields of Fire: A Novel* (New York: Bantam Fiction, 1978); *The Deer Hunter*, Motion Picture, directed by Michael Cimino (1978: EMI); *Apocalypse Now*, Motion Picture, directed by Francis Ford Coppola (1979: Omni Zoetrope).

Kubrick and former war correspondent Michael Herr, who was imbedded with American GIs and Marines in the years following the Tet Offensive. Like the novel, the film portrays Vietnam as a “world of shit,” accurately capturing soldiers’ inherent distrust of the Vietnamese, “lifers,” and rear-echelon personnel, and their obsession with reaching their DEROs. American soldiers are more boys than men, indicated by the film’s memorable ending, when American soldiers march through the burning ruins of Hue at night, the city having been ravaged during the Tet Offensive, calling cadence to the Mickey Mouse Clubhouse theme song. “Who’s the leader of the club that’s made for you and me?” the soldiers ask above the din of raging fires in the background. The others respond: “M-I-C - - K-E-Y - - M-O-U-S-E!” Superimposed on the playful call-and-response is Joker’s closing monologue, when he joyfully senses his imminent return home. “I am so happy that I am alive,” he ruminates, “in one piece and short . . . I am alive. And I am not afraid.”²

Almost simultaneous with the release of *Full Metal Jacket*, a remarkably accurate rendering of “soldier culture” during the Vietnam War arrived in December 1986 when Marvel Comics published *The ‘Nam*, a series that followed members of a mechanized infantry platoon during their one-year combat tour in Vietnam. “*The ‘Nam* is the real thing,” the publisher’s blurb promised, but admitted that by adhering to the Comics Code the artists and writers could only get readers “as close to the real thing as we can.” From the first issue, the writers envisioned it as ambitious project to show “in basic terms, what the war was really like for those who fought in it.” Because the comic book was a monthly publication, the editors decided that each issue would effectively track the platoon in “real time;” “When thirty days pass for the reader, thirty days

² *Full Metal Jacket*, Motion Picture, directed by Stanley Kubrick (1987: Natant).

also pass for the characters.” On the final page of each issue the writers included a list of sanitized soldiers’ jargon, familiarizing readers with how Vietnam-era soldiers spoke. The United States was “the world;” the Replacement Depot in Long Binh was the “Repo Depo;” soldiers preparing for a mission were “hatting up;” and the M-16 was so cheaply manufactured that “you can tell it’s Mattel,” a reference to the Mattel Toys marketing slogan of the Sixties.³

Without systematically addressing “soldier culture,” *The ‘Nam* nevertheless depicted in detail the learning process by which liminal replacements became integrated into their units as soldiers. Written by Doug Murray and illustrated by Larry Hama, both of whom were Vietnam veterans, the first issue, entitled “‘Nam: First Patrol,” introduced Private First Class Marks as he departs the United States for Vietnam from McChord Air Force Base in Tacoma, “processes” at Long Binh, and joins a mechanized infantry platoon in the field just prior to embarking on a routine “search and destroy” mission in 1966. “The perfect replacement,” a corporal tells Marks, gibing that he is “green as grass and just stupid enough to fit in.” PFC Marks is naive, untested, and ignorant about how to behave in the field, so he learns from others about where the VC frequently place booby-traps, how to fill his canteen and use iodine pills to purify the water, and the importance of keeping men spread out during a patrol so that an enemy ambush could not catch Americans bunched up in the kill zone. After sporadic firefights where Marks proves himself capable of returning fire and killing an enemy combatant, the platoon returns to the rear where soldiers invite Marks, now considered a “Vet,” to watch a movie with them called “Major Dundee.” Marks comments that he “just saw this a couple of weeks ago” back home. His mentor, indicating that Vietnam was a surreal, “unreality,” quips “maybe so, man, but that was in *the*

³ “‘Nam: First Patrol,” *The ‘Nam* (Marvel Comics Group, December 1986), Vol. 1, No. 1. Murray and Hama both served in the U.S. Army during the Vietnam War.

world. You're not in the world now—you're in *the Nam*. Things are different here.”⁴ Marks' deployment, the intense learning process that occurs in the field, and the acknowledgement that popular culture held different meanings in Vietnam, all resonated with the values, norms, and behaviors of actual soldiers during the Vietnam War.⁴

Despite the earnest attempts by Murray and Hama to make *The 'Nam* correspond to the actual experiences of American soldiers, it reached a far smaller audience than Hollywood films, like *Platoon* (1986), that painted more visceral and engaging pictures of the combat experience in Vietnam. Oliver Stone, who volunteered for combat service in Vietnam in 1967 and subsequently served with the 25th Infantry Division, decided, like many other veterans, to communicate his specific experiences to American audiences during the 1980s. His film *Platoon* featured Charlie Sheen as Private First Class Chris Taylor, a “green” replacement whose experience was mediated by the idealist Sergeant Gordon Elias (William Dafoe) and the cynical Sergeant Robert Barnes (Tom Berenger). While the film tragically portrays an infantry platoon being utterly decimated by repeated NVA ambushes in the jungle and frontal assaults against their firebase, it foregrounds Taylor's dynamic with Elias and Barnes to demonstrate that soldiers during the war were either brutalized by their experiences, becoming “hardcore” killers, or maintained their idealism through sheer effort and marijuana. According to Stone, the latter group possesses a strong moral compass that encourages sympathy for Vietnamese civilians and the moderation of violence, yet seems utterly incompatible to the attitudes, behaviors, and norms necessary to survive a guerilla war. *Platoon* effectively illustrates that combat units are constrained in their actions more by “informal SOPs” and soldiers' unspoken assumptions and

⁴ Ibid.; Marvel produced 84 issues of *The 'Nam* from December 1986 to September 1993.

habits than by direct orders from on high.⁵

Whether or not these mediums presented “accurate” portrayals of the Vietnam experience is fundamentally less important than realizing that Vietnam-era “soldier culture” has substantial staying power and resonance in American popular culture. When veterans contributed to the production of films, novels, and comic books about Vietnam they were distilling lessons learned from their own experiences that were intensely shaped by both soldier and unit culture. If Michael Herr and Oliver Stone exaggerated the extent to which American soldiers smoked marijuana, their depictions were nevertheless rooted in the real cultural preference soldiers demonstrated for smoking “weed” only in the safety of well-defended firebases and divisional bases. Murray and Hama effectively captured the replacement learning experience in Vietnam, despite the fact that their comic book, by necessity, caricatured the Vietnamese and American soldiers to a degree. Hasford’s novel and its adaptation to *Full Metal Jacket* presented powerlessness, futility, and anti-authoritarianism as powerful themes to explain how enlisted men, especially draftees, perceived their experience in Vietnam during the final months and years of the United States’ commitment there.

While soldiers approached Vietnam through the prism of World War II, the generation of young men deployed to Iraq in 2003 looked back to Vietnam, not the Persian Gulf War, for lessons about what it meant to fight on the distant periphery, in a war guided by questionable motivations. Those who fought in Iraq were, as journalist Evan Wright observes, “the first generation of young Americans since Vietnam to be sent into an open-ended conflict” and who were wholly steeped in a post-Vietnam predisposition “toward the idea that the Big Lie is as

⁵ *Platoon*, Motion Picture, directed by Oliver Stone (1986: Hemdale Film Corporation).

central to American governance as taxation.”⁶ Familiar with popular representations of the Vietnam War, soldiers in Iraq consciously emulated many of the attitudes, behaviors, and practices of Vietnam-era soldiers. Whether by listening to “Run Through the Jungle” by Credence Clearwater Revival, “All Along the Watchtower” by Jimi Hendrix, adorning their helmets with the “Ace of Spades,” or expressing their frustration with American citizens and politicians whom they perceived being aloof and uncaring, American soldiers in Iraq imbibed, and perpetuated, certain facets of Vietnam-era soldier culture that were most pronounced in postwar popular representations.⁷

While this dissertation has analyzed the contours of “soldier culture” during the Vietnam War, clearly the persistence of that culture into the twenty-first century indicates that the concept has broader applicability for the study of military history. John Lynn wrote *Battle: A History of Combat and Culture* in 2003, explaining that how societies imagine war very rarely corresponds with the reality of waging a war. Disconnect between societal discourses and reality, Lynn suggested, provoked the creation of new discourses to explain, or justify, the “new” style of war being fought.⁸ Therefore, as veterans communicate elements of “soldier culture” to civilians in the postwar period, they become the connective tissue that allows the “reality” of warfare to shape how societies subsequently create or modify discourses about war. Whereas the “soldier

⁶ Evan Wright, *Generation Kill: Devil Dogs, Iceman, Captain America, and the New Face of American War* (New York: Putnam and Sons, 2004), 6.

⁷ Author’s interview with Eric Michael Burke, April 2018; When I presented a paper on “soldier culture” at the Society of Military History’s annual conference in Louisville (April 5-8, 2018), a U.S. Army veteran in the audience told me that in Iraq members of his platoon often adorned their helmets with the “Ace of Spades,” read Vietnam-era memoir, and listened to Sixties music. In his estimation, soldiers in Iraq imitated Vietnam veterans because they felt that Iraq, like Vietnam, was an unpopular, protracted war on the periphery of American thought and waged against an elusive insurgency.

⁸ Lynn, *Battle: A History of Combat and Culture*.

culture” of World War II veterans offered few substantive lessons for the war soldiers fought in Vietnam, what Vietnam veterans gleaned from their experiences and then communicated to the American public in popular culture resonated deeply with disaffected youth fighting an eerily similar type of conflict in Iraq. Soldiers do not create their own cultures from a blank slate, therefore, but only in constant dialogue with lessons historically derived from the culture of their counterparts serving in past wars.

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