

Angela Stanford is a graduate student in the historical administration program at Eastern Illinois University. She was recently inducted into the Epsilon Mu Chapter of Phi Alpha Theta. This paper was written for Dr. Terry Barnhart's 20th Century US Cultural History Class in the fall of 2001.

“The Price Asked and the Price Paid By Soldiers in Vietnam”

By: Angela Stanford

“Seriously, though, Pete, please take care of yourself and don't be a hero. I don't need a Medal of Honor winner. I need a son. Love, Mom”^[1]

How many other mothers shared the same thoughts as First Lieutenant Peter Mahoney's mother as they wrote to their own sons stationed in Vietnam? How many nervously answered the telephone or read through the mail worried that it may bring news of their child's death overseas? Roughly 60,000 parents of American soldiers realized their worst fears during the Vietnam War; losing their children. Thousands more mothers and fathers received their sons back, if they were lucky, physically intact, while others, though alive, returned to their families with bodies full of holes and scars and perhaps missing extremities. Nearly all of these men carried psychological scars. Most civilians were ill-prepared to receive these men back into their homes, and into society as a whole, because of the emotional damage they had sustained as soldiers.

The men who came home were not the same men who had gone away. The vets knew they were different and each sought understanding, but found few who cared to listen. Vietnam had become a dirty war, something immoral and wrong, and those who participated in it were viewed by many at home as disgraceful and undeserving of respect. Throughout the next several pages, the reader will see the extent to which soldiers suffered during their tours of duty, and how that was compounded by their return to the States. These experiences helped create some of the anger, pain, and controversy that still surround the Vietnam War. One will also see how and why some soldiers became involved in antiwar protests themselves.

United States' involvement in affairs in the small Asian country of Vietnam began in the 1940s. By the end of Eisenhower's presidential term, roughly 5,000 men were stationed in the country. By 1968, a critical and controversial year in the war during which Lyndon Johnson was president, that number had skyrocketed to over 500,000.

Vietnam was a different kind of war in a number of ways. Perhaps most obviously, it was the first war fought under the watchful eye of the world via television news cameras and reporters. People at home could keep up on the

current happenings overseas, and some knew as much about military positions, strategies, and body counts as they did about the daily weather forecast and the hometown news. This war differed also in that the type of combat required differed completely from that of World War II. Soldiers fighting in the latter had had clearly defined combat lines, knew who the enemy was, and knew why they were involved in the war. The soldiers in Vietnam were fighting under unfamiliar conditions in a strange land that had different weather patterns and geographical features. Vietnamese civilians were sometimes as much the enemy as a soldier in uniform, and combat lines simply depended on the day. They saw “unrelieved combat,”^[2] and there were no fixed goals to work toward. Victories were measured by greatly distorted body counts—if a United States soldier found a dead Vietcong who had a gun, he was credited with six kills, one for the body, five for the gun.

One veteran described the overall situation well: “The nights were worst of all...there’s absolutely no lights; it’s kind of a very alone experience. It’s like tellin’ you to go out and fight Charley with a slingshot, and you know that the only friendly ground is the piece you’re standing on that very moment.”^[3] Although the majority of veterans returning home made proper adjustments and led productive lives after the war, some veterans did suffer from serious emotional distress as a result of the constant fear, uncertainty, and confusion they faced daily when in the bush. Coming back to the “world” proved difficult for them after having been so isolated and constantly under such stress, and society was unable to understand the behavior they witnessed. Support for veterans stood in lowly comparison to that which World War II veterans received upon their return home.

Many soldiers were proud to be serving their country in whatever way requested. In a letter home, Sp/4 Peter H. Roepcke, from Glendale, New York, explained, “Sure I want to be home with you and have all the things we dream about. But yet being here makes a man feel proud of himself—it shows him that he is a man. Do you understand?”^[4] Another man, PFC John Louis Brown, wrote to his sister shortly after missing her wedding due to his tour of duty in Vietnam. He, of course, would rather have been part of the event, in the presence of family and friends, and enjoying a time of celebration and joy, but instead he was fighting a war halfway around the world. In this particular letter, PFC Brown gives a rather noble reason for being in Vietnam.

I have a far greater task at hand that will ensure that not only my sister, but everybody’s sisters can get married in the church of her choice, have children, and instruct them in the religion of their parents, send them to the school of their choice. Until this is done for the whole world, brothers like me can’t possibly be at their sister’s wedding.^[5]

The Vietnam War, one can argue, was often misunderstood by those not stationed there. The confusion of the war, the blurred enemy lines, the constant uncertainty of enemy identity, and the always-present threat of death was enough to defeat even the strongest men, and many did succumb to the terrors of the Vietnamese jungle. The average

age of the Vietnam veteran was between 19 and 20.^[6] They were still children, not men prepared to fight a war such as this. They were “plucked from city streets, farms, and small towns, often possessing only a high school education and little experience of the world.”^[7] The government had told the public that the war was to help the people of Vietnam, to help them resist the communist forces, and to help educate them in better agricultural practices so they could sustain themselves. The young men joining the ranks of the U.S. military had no reason to question their superiors. “It’s nothing I can’t handle,”^[8] Sp/4 Robert Devlin said confidently in a letter home. Not long into soldiers’ tours, though, most realized they had become a part of something much bigger and more complicated than they had expected.

A lack of understanding about the purpose of the war and disagreement with those in authority over them was common among men stationed in Vietnam throughout the duration of the war, but especially during the last several years. Some men interviewed after Vietnam said that had they known what Vietnam was really all about, they never would have enlisted in the first place, or at the very least would have taken on a shorter term. Others noted that the South Vietnamese, whom United States soldiers were instructed to protect and help, did not want American troops there at all. Some soldiers felt that the Army’s intent was good and they were proud to be serving, despite having some reservations and questions. A Marine veteran, Paul Atwood, believed

There’s nothing wrong with love of country, but I get afraid of where that feeling leads....It was clear to me that the Vietnam veteran was being scapegoated for the war, that collectively the United States had called upon vets to go and do something and then had turned its back on them afterwards.^[9]

Feeling that their own country abandoned them devastated many soldiers.

The feeling of abandonment was very common and evident in the many letters sent home. Letters kept soldiers connected to the world back home, to their families, and to anything that resembled the reality that no longer existed for them in the jungle. Corporal John Houghton wrote to the mother of a fallen friend and said this:

We’re all in desperate need of love....Some nights I don’t sleep. I can’t stand being alone at night. The guns don’t bother me—I can’t hear them anymore. I want to hold my head between my hands and run screaming away from here.^[10]

Holidays and birthdays were especially difficult for the men, and certainly for the families left at home. No one felt the separation and hopelessness quite as acutely as the men in Southeast Asia.

In war, killing in the name of duty became almost as ritualistic for some as putting on a pair of boots, and Vietnam was certainly no different.

The frightening thing about it all is that it is so very easy to kill in war. There’s no remorse, no theatrical ‘washing of the hands’ to get rid of nonexistent blood, not even any regrets.^[11]

Seeing killing and destruction from both sides desensitized men to the loss of life that they caused. “Men who do not expect to receive mercy eventually lose their inclination to grant it,”^[12] remembered one veteran.

Some soldiers, of course, never developed a mind for killing. They had a difficult time accepting the brutality of it.

After a firefight I felt drained and empty, it seemed pointless. Our battles were never decisive and tomorrow always came with the welcome of surviving one day only to have to face another.^[13]

Another man spoke about the constant fear everyone felt.^[14]

The ever-present reality of death invaded men’s minds and went with them to the battle ground and did not leave them when they were lucky enough to get some sleep. Faces of fallen friends or mutilated bodies of the enemy were continuous images. Sp/5 Richard Cantale had to identify a man brought in from the field, and it was only after finding the man’s dog tags that Cantale was able to do so. It was the body of his friend Rankin.

After I left the place, I sat down and cried. I couldn’t stop it. I don’t think I ever cried so much in my life. I can still see his face now. I will never forget it.^[15]

Young men saw blood and fear everyday, but had no idea how to deal with it. Many had not yet lived themselves, and gained experiences needed to begin to understand these types of things. Most, as mentioned before, were young, in their late teens and freshly out of high school. War for them had only been glory stories from World War II veterans. Despite these horrendous conditions, young men formed friendships within their ranks, and it killed them each time one was lost to the enemy. The following quote from one veteran who stood over a dying man from his patrol is especially poignant.

It ran through my mind for a moment, “Did his mother feel something, did his father feel something, did anybody? Was she reaching for a can of peas in the supermarket and feel a tug or a jolt and not know what it was? Does anybody close to him know that he just died?”^[16]

The prospect of returning home excited and relieved men after having been away for so long, but it also terrified many of them. Most had read the accounts of antiwar protestors standing in airport terminals greeting returning veterans by spitting on them. They had heard stories about vets who had gone home before them and were called baby killers. Many had received letters from wives and other family members telling them they could not wait to have them home so all their lives could get back to normal. What was normal now, though? These men had fought invisible enemies and the elements for months, and had been basically isolated entirely from home, from “the world,” and now they were expected to just fall back into their place in society. “When your time gets near, it sort of scares

you because you know in your heart that you're not like the people back home. It's a funny feeling to be afraid to go home.”^[17] Some men worried about whether or not their own families would want to hear their war stories, and if they did have an opportunity to share them, would those at home understand? What would loved ones think of their sons after learning of some of the horrible things they had participated in? “I'm pretty proud of my last year...but they mean very little to anyone outside that group of Americans who have been over here and who have been through it.”^[18]

Most often, soldiers returning to the United States were flown here alone or in small numbers, and many of them were simply left at the airports with their families. There was no time to decompress, to unlearn the ways of living that had been normal for however long they had been gone. There were also no welcoming committees at airports, no big town parades celebrating their return, and no songs thanking all of those dedicated men who had given so much. The few who still had time to serve after being released from service in Vietnam went to bases in the States and finished their terms. There they had time to calm down, think out what had just happened, and come to terms with as much of it as possible. One can argue they readjusted to civilian life easier than did their counterparts who returned to their families directly after being discharged.

Stereotypes about the Vietnam veteran abounded throughout the Sixties and into the Seventies as men returned home. Many people viewed these new veterans as crazed killers who were on drugs, mentally unstable, and incapable of loving.^[19] Veterans were hard pressed to find sympathetic ears and often turned to each other and to psychiatrists in order to cope. Others turned to the world for comfort. “Nights I went to local bars, trying for a fast pickup and lay, dating every chance I could, and spending all my money...I had trouble sleeping.”^[20]

Veterans' families often found it too difficult to cope with stories of war in Vietnam and they chose to ignore that anything had happened. They asked sons and husbands not to discuss their time in the bush, and uniforms were quickly stuffed into closets to help everyone forget. Some of the men who came back opposed to the war also found their families turning against them. One veteran just home from the war tried to talk his younger brother out of signing up for service in Vietnam. He was asked to leave the home, and both the brother and the father refused to speak to him again. Only his mother seemed to understand.^[21] Unfortunately, this was not an uncommon thing for veterans.

Faced with society's indifference, uneasiness, and outright rejection and gripped by their own troubled memories of the war, thousands of veterans lapsed into silence.^[22]

Throughout Vietnam, the antiwar movement did not restrict itself to the general public at home. Just as it began losing ground at home about 1968, opposition to the war actually grew among the ranks of the soldiers

themselves. Certainly it seems unexpected that those who were fighting opposed the war. Were they not supposed to be the citizens most filled with national pride and a sense of loyalty and duty? Reading accounts from many of them, one sees that in fact most veterans did not agree with the war, that most did not feel it was just, but fought anyway because it was their duty, the American thing to do, or because they were unable to bring themselves to resist outwardly and join any form of protest. Sp/4 John Riggan wrote home saying, “The longer I am here, the more my hatred of war grows...the tragedy is the price that I see reclaimed daily, and my only hope is that someday it can be justified.”^[23] Disagreement with U.S. involvement did not confine itself to the lowest ranks of soldiers. Even those in higher positions agreed, as did one sergeant named Phillip Woodall, who wrote his father that he was there because “I’m a soldier and it’s my job and there are other people depending on me. That’s my excuse. That’s all I have, theories and excuses, no solutions.”^[24]

However, some men did become active participants in the protest against the war and voiced their opinions clearly. “ ‘It was every revolutionary’s dream: to get the soldiers to lay down their guns.’ ”^[25] The group Vietnam Veterans Against the War organized in 1967, and became a very active and visible antiwar vehicle. One of the common complaints men made was the lack of support they felt from Washington.

They put us in a war that was as unwinnable as it was immoral. They put us into a war that even they could not explain, and so young men died for old men’s pride.^[26]

They felt that if the war was so important, so justifiable, why did the politicians not send their own children? Why only send those from the classes below them that had no way to protect themselves?

These weren’t the educated kids, these weren’t the kids sitting around intellectually singing hootenanny songs. These were guys who were disenfranchised and oppressed and they were taking it up. That’s what made the GI movement such a threat.^[27]

As veterans returned home, the controversy continued.

Some men applied for conscientious objector (C.O.) status and were assigned to non-combat positions. Many hours were spent on KP duty and more spent in medic areas cleaning up after the wounded and dying that passed through everyday. Michael Senecal, who obtained C.O. status and was sent to Vietnam to assist in a medic area, remembered not receiving any serious mistreatment with the exception of a few minor instances in Vietnam, but still felt the pressures and disgust other men felt.

Some of my daily tasks consisted of scrubbing blood, intestines, brains, and human matter in general from the canvas litters outside of the emergency room...the entire ‘feeling’ that a war zone emits disturbed me so entirely that, even today, I at times feel psychologically disoriented.^[28]

One of the more organized military protests was in the United States among the ranks of men at Fort Jackson in Columbia, South Carolina. “The striking thing about Fort Jackson is its grotesque resemblance to a small American town.”^[29] Women could be seen carrying groceries down the sidewalks, and railroad tracks divided the place like any normal town, and yet one saw military men marching everyday, filing past them in formation. Fort Jackson had swimming pools, gymnasiums, theaters, libraries, and so on amongst the barracks and training fields. It was there that Private Joe Miles formed an antiwar group called GIs United Against the War in Vietnam. Miles had been an activist before being drafted into the war in 1968, and after beginning his term of service he continued to write to his political authorities about his views. Authorities transferred Miles to another base within a few weeks, but not before he had founded the group. After Miles’ departure, other men took over leadership positions and before long, the group had a large following.

The name of the group was intended to convey the group’s ideals. They wanted it to be clear that all races and nationalities were welcome, and that all of these men stood against the war. The name was to be respectable and recognizable enough so that simply mentioning it would cause someone to understand who was being referred to.^[30]

GIs United began as a group of black men gathering to discuss such things as racial equality, oppression of the working class, and certainly the oppression of GIs. They felt the ranks of soldiers being called on to fight in Vietnam were unfairly weighted toward the lower classes, also a complaint among civilian protestors. As more men became interested in the group and began attending meetings, the group became racially diverse and grew in strength. Private Jose Rudder, one of the men involved, said this about white men joining in:

We were first committed to instilling pride and integrity amongst the ranks of our brothers, and at the same time we were committing ourselves to the antiwar struggle and...as white GIs they would have to understand and accept this as white men, and they did.^[31]

Base officials, aware of the group’s presence and growing influence, tried to stifle its impact on base by passing a regulation that no more than eight men were to be gathered in any barracks at any given time because of the danger of URI, Upper Respiratory Infection. The men recognized the effort to disband the group, but continued to meet and educate people about the war and why it was wrong. Later, Private Joe Cole claimed:

The meetings were tremendously impressive. There was a profound respect. Although most of the people in the meetings, either white or black, had had no organizational experience, no one spoke out of turn.^[32]

On March 20, a group of men happened to be outside talking with each other and joking around, when the discussions turned toward more serious matters. More men gathered around to join and an impromptu GIs United meeting of about 200 or so men took place. Though the officials said nothing that night, four men were put in

stockade the next day. Five others were also taken into custody, but one man, Private John Huffman, one of those five, was soon released after officials revealed that he had been an informer sent in to spy on the organization and bring back to them useful information they could use to disband the group. The other eight, Privates Cole, Andrew Pulley, Jose Rudder, Delmar Thomas, Edilberto Chaparro, Tommie Woodfin, Dominick Duddiek, and Curtis Mays were labeled the Fort Jackson Eight and charged with “demonstrating in uniform, demonstrating without approval of the post commander, disrespect to an officer, and breach of the peace.”^[33] All initially faced courts martial and ten years of hard labor at Leavenworth if the courts found them guilty. Through the use of some of the best lawyers and legal council, charges against all eight men were dropped. Six of them received undesirable discharges.

The Fort Jackson Eight, like other groups both organized and otherwise, exercised their rights as citizens to protest the war. They held peaceful demonstrations, tried to circle petitions within their vicinity, and even called media attention to their cause, making it nationally known that the GIs United were soldiers against Vietnam. Part of the Students for a Democratic Society’s Port Huron Statement describes well what GIs United were trying to combat with their organization, and what other groups also hoped to accomplish through their efforts.

Although mankind desperately needs revolutionary leadership, America rests in national stalemate, its goals ambiguous and tradition-bound instead of informed and clear, its democratic system apathetic and manipulated.^[34]

Vietnam has never officially been called a war, but one would have a difficult time trying to convince many of the almost three million veterans who served there that it was not. The service performed there is worthy of respect, and veterans deserve and need understanding. Only in the last twenty or so years has the war really been looked into and seriously studied in order to better understand it and the men who fought. Many of those who were there still suffer from nightmares and flashbacks, and depression and feelings of guilt are still present. “I’ll never understand what I did in Vietnam and what happened and why. I’m now trying to forget.”^[35] Many have never really returned—for them the war is still going on. Others have made new lives, but will never forget what happened and what part they played. The men who came back missing extremities or handicapped in other ways have arguably had an even more difficult time adjusting and learning. Countless men who served lost someone close to them, and dealing with that alone is one of the toughest parts of healing. Just as the men who were killed or missing in action will not be forgotten, nor will the war or the land called Vietnam.

“Once you were a strange, alien name...
then you were a small, damp green hostile land
where...I...nearly died
Now you are...a part of me.”

–Jan Barry^[36]

-
- [1] Bernard Edelman, ed., *Dear America: Letters Home From Vietnam* (New York, 1985), 4.
- [2] Myra Mac Pherson, "A Different War," in *The American Experience in Vietnam: A Reader*, ed. Grace Sevy (Oklahoma, 1989), 60.
- [3] Murray Polner, *No Victory Parades: The Return of the Vietnam Veteran* (Chicago, 1971), 21-2.
- [4] Edelman, 121.
- [5] *Ibid.*, 230.
- [6] Fred Wilcox and Jerold M. Starr, "The Wounds of War and the Process of Healing," in *The Lessons of the Vietnam War*, ed. Jerold M. Starr (Pittsburgh, 1999), 261.
- [7] Paul Boyer, *Promises to Keep: The United States Since World War II* (Massachusetts, 1995), 312-3.
- [8] Edelman, 3.
- [9] Willa Seidenberg and William Short, ed., *A Matter of Conscience: GI Resistance During the Vietnam War* (Massachusetts, 1992), 4.
- [10] Edelman, 208.
- [11] *Ibid.*, 106.
- [12] Robert J. Mc Mahon, ed., *Major Problems in the History of the Vietnam War* (Massachusetts, 1995), 256.
- [13] Seidenberg and Short, 8.
- [14] Edelman, 118.
- [15] *Ibid.*, 207.
- [16] Boyer, 313.
- [17] Edelman, 301.
- [18] *Ibid.*, 286.
- [19] *Ibid.*, xxxv.
- [20] Polner, 12.
- [21] *Ibid.*, 80-1.
- [22] Christian G. Appy, "American Veterans and the Antiwar Movement," in *Major Problems in the History of the Vietnam War*, ed. Robert J. McMahon (Lexington, Massachusetts, 1995), 518.
- [23] Edelman, 228.
- [24] *Ibid.*, 225.
- [25] Todd Gitlin, *The Sixties: Years of Hope, Days of Rage* (New York, 1987), 236.
- [26] Boyer, 314.
- [27] Seidenberg and Short, 56.
- [28] Alice Lynd, ed., *We Won't Go: Personal Accounts of War Objectors* (Boston, 1968), 245.
- [29] Fred Halstead, *GIs Speak Out Against the War: The Case of the Ft. Jackson 8* (New York, 1970), 16.
- [30] *Ibid.*, 55.
- [31] *Ibid.*, 33.
- [32] *Ibid.*, 33.
- [33] *Ibid.*, 13-4.
- [34] Boyer, 293.
- [35] Polner, 128.
- [36] Robert Jay Lifton, *Home from the War: Vietnam Veterans, Neither Victims Nor Executioners* (New York, 1973), 265.