

**SOUNDING OFF: FOLKSONG, POETRY, AND OTHER COGNITIVE
DISSONANCE FROM THE AMERICAN WAR IN VIETNAM**

A Dissertation

by

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ABSTRACT

Among works treating Vietnam War history, few mention and none address extensively the folk culture that American and Vietnamese military forces produced. To bridge gaps between traditional and cultural primary sources, this study examines folk culture that the historiography has neglected: graffiti, folksongs, and poetry. Most were conceived and produced in-country, near in time to specific wartime experiences and their consequent emotions, thus lending them an emotional relevance and chronological proximity to Vietnam War history few other primary sources can boast.

Grffiti, songs, and poems derived from specific historical contexts, registering social commentary and chronicling the cognitive dissonance that arose among combatants when their coveted, long-held, patriotic mythologies collided with wartime realities. These sources document the Vietnam War's "inner-history" – the emotions, beliefs, concerns, and emotions of particular individuals, many of whom find voice virtually nowhere else in the historiographical canon.

What folk culture lacks in terms of scope and scale *vis-à-vis* traditional sources, it abounds with in physical description, emotional narration, honesty, and transparency. Its value to historical inquiry lies in its tendency to pull no punches – ever. It animates and humanizes the personal histories of specific individuals while conveying historical truths concerning millions of anonymous masses who made up the Vietnam War's cast of characters and who should always inhabit and animate its stories, giving voice to many who the bulk of the war's historical record has previously overlooked.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

More than seventy years after the first official United States involvement in Vietnam, America's longest war still captivates the consciousness of scholars and layfolk alike.¹ And as the U.S. continues to suffer the political, economic, diplomatic, and social consequences of its most recent quagmire wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, what can yet be learned about the American war in Vietnam will continue to hold significant relevance. In fact, even while America loses hundreds of World War II and Korean War veterans daily, and Vietnam vets come to predominate as the country's most senior former combatants, works concerning Vietnam continue to proliferate. As of July 2014, searching the Library of Congress online catalog produced 1,302 different subject headings involving the term "Vietnam War." Under the narrower yet still-broad subject heading "Vietnam War, 1961-1975," 1,258 titles. In short, thousands of works examining virtually every imaginable theme on American involvement in Vietnam sag the shelves of the world's largest active physical library. And yet, while audiences can find any number of perennially benchmark texts and specialized monographs as well as popular literature, fiction, poetry, music, and cinema treating the Vietnam War, scholars have scarcely approached anything remotely resembling a "last word." And well they shouldn't. Scholarly and popular works, regardless of

¹ While most Americans use the term "Vietnam War" to designate either the conflict in Southeast Asia or that period of American involvement from 1965 to 1973, the Vietnamese people call that same period the American War. Though some readers may take issue with my choice, for simple ease of usage, I will regularly use the terms "American War in Vietnam," "Vietnam War," or simply "Vietnam" interchangeably. Whether "Vietnam" refers in my text to the place, the war, or the time period of U.S. involvement there should appear clear from surrounding context.

subject, always remain open for debate and further investigation, and understanding Vietnam remains both vital and pertinent to understanding not only that war but its continuing effects on everything from U.S. foreign policy formulations and considerations to the state of the American psyche – corporate and individual.

Even with publication numbers mushrooming among the many historical subdisciplines (political, diplomatic, economic, military, and even social history), cultural history from inside the Vietnam War itself has received the least attention. In particular, cultural history concerning combatants remains historiographical territory into which few have ventured and fewer still have treated significantly or sufficiently. Consequently, examining a particular kind of historical primary sources to emerge from the war, what one might call *folk-artistic* texts or folk culture, is both timely and needed.² Both American and Vietnamese combat participants and witnesses produced folk culture in various media before, during, and after the war to articulate their deep-seated

² Although professional and academic folklorists may take issue with scholars outside the discipline appropriating their terminology (particularly terms so historically and perennially debated as “folk” and “folklore”), variations such as “folk-cultural,” and “folk-artistic” throughout this study should be understood as deriving from arguably the most straightforward definition of “folklore” ever articulated: “Folklore is artistic communication in small groups,” from Dan Ben Amos, “Toward a Definition of Folklore,” in Américo Paredes and Richard Bauman, eds. *Toward New Perspectives in Folklore*, (Austin: University of Texas Press for the American Folklore Society, 1972), cited from <https://afsnet.site-ym.com/?page=WhatsFolklore>, (accessed July 3, 2014). When the term “folk” appears, it should be understood, too, in its simplest sense: those “small groups” to which Ben Amos refers, or herein, American and Vietnamese combatants and witnesses to the war. “Folklore” or “folk culture” refers to those artistic expressions various American and Vietnamese cultural groups used to communicate any number of sentiments, attitudes, beliefs, and concerns, and should not be construed to denote socioeconomic or other class distinctions. Neither should terms be confused with more popular usages of the term “folk,” e.g., the popular commercial phenomenon of “folk music” of the 1960s and 1970s. Finally, usage of “folk” and its derivatives throughout this work also adheres to Benjamin Botkin’s more situationally specific definition of folklore: “Folklore is a body of traditional belief, custom, and expression, ... circulating chiefly outside of commercial and academic means of communication and instruction. Every group bound together by common interests and purposes [such as a nation’s armed forces], whether educated or uneducated, rural or urban, possesses a body of traditions which may be called its folklore. Into these traditions enter many elements, individual, popular, and even ‘literary,’ but all are absorbed and assimilated through repetition and variation into a pattern which has value and continuity for the group as a whole,” cited from <http://folklore.missouri.edu/whatis.html>, (accessed July 3, 2014).

sentiments about the war and their place in it. In short, they wrote, sang, drew, and scrawled their hearts out about it. Cigarette packs and C-ration crates, rifle stocks and canteens, tent flaps and foot lockers, artillery shell casings and whiskey flasks, even (or especially) human skin, all served as canvases for troops' literary and visual self-expression. Soldiers' graffiti popped up on troop transport ships, in barracks and latrines, on bombed out buildings, and on flak jackets and helmet liners—just about anywhere that would function as a *tabula rasa* for creativity or an outlet for emotional stress, boredom, or even dissent. Not surprisingly, a canon of lyrical and pictographic folk culture—specifically graffiti, folk songs, and poetry—arose from out of this wartime cultural outpouring, and it holds considerable richness, relevance, and promise for historical inquiry into Vietnam.

A few folklorists, literature scholars, and even archaeologists have examined some of these cultural sources to their own academic ends. Yet folklorists have concerned themselves largely with the function and meaning that producing, performing, or passing down folklore holds for its given cultural group. To many folklorists, performance and production nearly always trump product. Similarly, literature scholars treating Vietnam War poetry often limit themselves to ascertaining what larger meanings and messages the texts hold, both for and about the soldier-poets and for their audiences. Archaeologists, on the other hand, much like historians, do seek to “glimpse” and “interpret,” even “understand,” the whos, whats, whens, wheres,

whys, and hows of the human past.³ Yet while archaeologists' inquiries might cast broad, ambitious nets, they often narrowly confine their analysis solely to material remains and artifacts. All these avenues of inquiry have merits, but they also suffer inherent limitations. In order to maximize the former and limit the latter in seeking to expand *historical* understanding of the Vietnam War experience – what happened to whom and why – this study approaches its methodology broadly. On one hand, it will simply treat the sources narrowly, as eyewitness testimony (albeit with an artistic voice), usually written, sometimes drawn. On the other, it will analyze and investigate interdisciplinarily. Besides inquiring after the sources' origins, production, functions, performance, meanings, and messages so central to folklorists and literary scholars, it also examines them both in light of and in order to flesh out historical context; questions of historical causality and consequence; and evidence of change or continuity over time and experience so fundamental to historical and archaeological inquiry. Yet it also seeks simply to learn the stories these sources tell. By investigating the cadences, graffiti, songs, and poems interdisciplinarily and studying them in tandem with other more traditional accounts of the war, a fuller understanding not just of the Vietnam War experience, but also of the personal past of numerous individuals who fought the war and/or witnessed its history unfolding firsthand begins to emerge.

Key questions arise when using such sources to glean insight into the American War in Vietnam. For example, in what historical contexts did the folk culture originate? Similarly, *why* did it originate? No historical figure, event, issue, or primary source

³ From the official website of the Society for American Archaeology, <http://www.saa.org/ForthePublic/Resources/EducationalResources/ForEducators/ArchaeologyforEducators/WhatisArchaeology/tabid/1346/Default.aspx>

ever arises in a vacuum, so what function did scrawling graffiti serve for troops? Or penning folksongs? To what end did troops meticulously craft poems about watching comrades die horrifically? Why write about perpetrating human rights abuses on Vietnamese women and children? Ultimately, folk culture's contexts, origins, and functions all prove inextricably intertwined and will be much more fully developed below. Still, other questions remain. How does folk culture reinforce, supplement, or contradict traditional records? What does it convey – and how – that other sources miss about experiential realities from the war? The short answer is, rather a lot.

To be sure, folk culture, particularly songs and poems, reinforce and echo traditional sources. Much as students of history encounter in just about any service personnel memoir, lyrical texts demonstrate, for instance, how war experiences caused American troop convictions to shift or weaken, both over the course of the war and within the course of individuals' tours. Vietnamese songs and poetry, conversely, make plain that convictions deepened and steeled, often in the midst of physical circumstances barely distinguishable from those of the Americans. Folk culture reflects change everywhere. Cadences heard resounding across stateside boot camp parade grounds in the mid-1960s trumpeted American invincibility. Yet by 1967 and certainly following the 1968 Tet Offensive, costs and losses in human, political, and economic terms had compounded considerably. Songs that began the war (or one's tour) with heroic bravado began to darken and lyrics became tinged with hints of pessimism, fear, or dissident questioning. Similarly, after Tet, as political realities stateside and military realities in-country began to portend only the grimmest of outcomes for the U.S. war

effort, some of the darkest and most incisive folk culture of all emerged in the form of battlefield poetry. In sum, variation in folk culture parallels almost eerily the trajectory of the war itself.

Beyond chronicling the war's changing arc, folk culture constitutes among the most compact and airtight time capsules and sensitive barometers of combatants' emotional states in those wartime moments in which troops produced their art. For instance, cadences and songs frequently voice combatants' sense of self-awareness personal agency. Who soldiers were, what they became, what they felt they could or couldn't do, say, feel, or be speaks not always loudly but almost always clearly. In some cases, folk culture may even constitute the sole surviving publicly accessible documentation of troops' thoughts and feelings. Twice, this study found that soldiers had been killed in combat within a few short days of leaving behind self-attributed graffiti. Appearing in such close proximity to their deaths, it is reasonable to suppose that those artifacts stood among the last attributable recorded sentiments those troops ever uttered.

Over and above flash-freezing wartime sentiment in time and perfectly preserving it, folk culture produced during the war benefits historians because it boasts a chronological proximity to personal experience rivaled only by combat diaries, letters home to loved ones, and newsreel footage and audio recorded in-country. All these sources possess inherent value because they were produced at the time, essentially serving as eyewitness accounts to the war, and often offering far greater breadth, depth, and detail than artistic expression. Yet artistic sources are acutely personal, very often

disclosing individuals' emotions concerning wartime experiences far more intimately than other contemporary sources. For example, while frequently and often shamelessly confessing utter terror or paralyzing dread during one's first (or last) firefight, or heatedly spewing venom and vitriol over LBJ's foreign policy, only one letter home examined for this study revealed – hardly in confessional detail – how a trooper felt about inadvertently killing civilians. Larry Iwasko wrote his family about how he threw a hand grenade and accidentally killed an eleven month-old Vietnamese baby. They baby's nineteen year-old mother was firing an AK-47 at Iwasko's unit.⁴ Troop letters home tended toward "honest," but typically were "more likely to conceal than reveal, to downplay than dramatize the gore and the carnage they experienced."⁵ There are exceptions, of course. Occasionally troops would admit those more awful things they did or saw like Iwasko did, but as a rule, in letters home to family even confessions were usually veiled or abbreviated. And when troops questioned themselves, why they were there, or what they had done or witnessed and why, often they rationalized their misgivings about complete forthrightness in letters, "We did not often share those questions in our letters; only someone who was there, with us, would have understood."⁶

Countless troops, however, did choose to vocalize and process combat experience and trauma graphically and with utter emotional transparency through songs and poetry. Drafting verse served as a sort of intuitive art therapy. For some folk

⁴ James R. Ebert, *A Life in a Year: The American Infantryman in Vietnam, 1965-1972*, (Novato, CA: Presidio, 1993), 293.

⁵ *Dear America: Letters Home from Vietnam*, Bernard Edelman, ed., (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1985), 22.

⁶ William Broyles, Jr., Foreword, in *ibid.*, 12.

culture proved the *only* medium through which some of these soldiers could ever articulate how they felt at the time about their wartime experiences, at least for several years after, anyway. Tobias Wolff says of the therapeutic nature of the writing process, “Mostly I was glad to find out I could write at all. In writing you work toward a result you won’t see for years, and can’t be sure you’ll ever see. It takes stamina and self-mastery and faith. It demands those things of you, then gives them back with a little extra, a surprise to keep you coming. It toughens you and clears your head. I could feel it happening. I was saving my life with every word I wrote, and I knew it.”⁷ It’s not that combat diaries and correspondence home were dishonest and therefore historically unreliable or somehow less therapeutic; far from it. They are just often less emotionally and experientially forthcoming than artistic literary endeavors. Folk culture in many cases perfectly preserves what moved, shaped, motivated, compelled, and even scarred those who fought or witnessed the war, offering as raw and unfiltered an emotional history of their experiences as appear in print or portrayal anywhere.

Though the color, texture, feeling, and emotion so characteristic of folk culture often prove lacking in other traditional wartime records, save the odd memoir here and there (and those were typically penned years after the fact and thus can lose their sense of chronological proximity to the combat experience), folk culture produced during the war can serve historians very much like traditional sources. It answers myriad questions about the war’s participants and witnesses: who the combatants were; where they came from and where they went; who and what they encountered along the way;

⁷ Tobias Wolff, *In Pharaoh’s Army: Memories of the Lost War*, (New York: Vintage Books, 1994), 213.

what they did and didn't do; what they learned from it; the brief fleeting joys they glimpsed and the hardships they endured; and ultimately, primarily, *what they felt and believed in their very cores about it*. What wartime inner-histories do we discover and illuminate when we listen carefully to the candid voices of the frightened soldier in the foxhole; the machismo of the cavalier bombardier or gunner in the plane or helicopter; the quiet desperation of the P.O.W. captured behind enemy lines; or the bewilderment of new recruits enduring boot camp and fearing (or perhaps excitedly anticipating) the chaos of war ahead of him? This study contends that outside firsthand combat experience, few media have the power to capture, preserve, and convey the raw, candid emotion that combat conjures like folk culture does. The deeply personal nature of folk culture reveals an emotional tenor seldom observed in a nightly wartime newscast or textbook histories of the war. Examining the folk-artistic voice enables us to learn about real people, and some of their joys, concerns, and the harrowing ordeals they endured in a very ugly war. It enlivens, deepens, and makes more complete the voice of history.

With such a rich historical repository at hand, it's both ironic and unfortunate that historians scarcely mention folk culture of any kind, let alone recognize its value to Vietnam War history. In order to begin filling that void, this study mined archival collections, poetry anthologies, folksong songbooks, recordings housed in the Library of Congress's American Folklife Center, and collected oral histories from veterans, explored combat diaries, correspondence, and memoirs, and consulted literature and photographic collections. Literature and folklore scholars have long recognized folk

culture's potential, and indeed have led the way in bringing these sources before audiences. The historical community owes them a significant intellectual debt for providing it with so much rich material to expand our knowledge of the Vietnam War's cultural history. Lydia M. Fish deserves special mention for her many works dealing with folksongs of the Vietnam War, particularly her herculean efforts with Brigadier General Thomas Bowen to catalogue, index, annotate, and transcribe songs collected during the war and her work on the Lansdale Collection at the American Folklife Center at the Library of Congress. C.W. Getz, Martin Heuer, and Joseph Tusso also contribute here with their works on and collections of ground troop and aviators wartime songs. The soldier-poets whose works appear in the many fine collections of Vietnam War poetry capture the war in imagery graphic enough to conjure the battlefield itself. And to corroborate folk culture, this study will utilize numerous combat diaries and memoirs of combat participants and witnesses, all of whom lived the combat experience, and whose works enjoy only the most profound and abiding respect in the arena of Vietnam War history.⁸

Each chapter's methodology will be similarly straightforward. Typically they introduce the medium or genre of folk culture treated. As a matter of course in discussing any text or artifact, the troops who produced or performed the material (when known) will be introduced, followed by details of the historical contexts in which each text's creator found inspiration or motivation to create it. Where possible, texts appear in their entirety, followed by discussion and analysis of origin, function, content,

⁸Since the list of poetic and historical works is too expansive to enumerate within the very limited scope of this brief preface, see the bibliography for poetry anthology, combat memoir, and historical monograph references.

and meaning for their creators at the time, as well as what each can tell historians today about the war itself and its effects on those who participated in or witnessed it.

Chapter II will introduce an expressive and meaning-laden body of folk-artistic historical records. Graffiti appeared on bunk canvases and other makeshift writing surfaces inside seagoing troop transport vessels and in-country on helmet liners, flak jackets, tent flaps, barracks, and latrine walls. With the only very occasional outlying exception, Vietnam War graffiti usually speak in short bursts of sentiment, broadcasting humor, maxims, sayings, proverbs, and one-liners in typically quite terse literary form. Quite frequently in graffiti, the non-verbal and verbal coexist in the same text, usually with one medium surrendering primacy to the other or working together – sometimes deliberately, but often inadvertently – toward maximum meaning with minimal content. Graffiti inherently chronicles less than other evidence, narratively speaking, but like all other folk-artistic texts, they reveal much from the time, place, and people who birthed them. Even the meanest doodling speaks volumes if attended to carefully. These intriguing, funny, bizarre, often visceral, occasionally even violent texts and pictographs preserve and convey volumes about military culture, about young men at war, and most telling, about individual troops, most of whom the historical record at large has long forgotten, if it ever recorded much about them at all.

Chapter III will focus on the folksongs that soldiers, sailors, aviators, and civilian State and Defense Department personnel composed for starkly different reasons and with widely varying content. The folksongs from this cohort contain the greatest content diversity, the most historical specificity, and the greatest range of emotional

outpouring. With lyrical texts ranging from the wildly comedic to the most somber and tragic, these songs, too, offer readers a crystal clear lens into the hearts, minds, and souls of the war's participants. Furthermore, depending on where and when they were composed and for what reason, the folksongs demonstrate the greatest change in content and function over time throughout the war and even throughout the course of individuals' tours of duty. And since many of the songs take greater space to communicate their text's narrative and meaning and require being told in their entirety to communicate story and meaning effectively, they likewise reveal almost exponentially more in terms of inner-history than cadences or graffiti, so consequently, more space will be devoted to presenting, analyzing, and explicating them.

Chapters IV and V consider poetry by American personnel serving in military and civilian capacities in Vietnam. These works constitute the final large body of American texts to be examined and appears last because they appeared more prominently in later years and seem most clearly to chronicle the dark disillusionment that began to characterize and embody men and women's feelings about the war. More than any other folk culture, poetry's tone and content mirror the historical trajectory and eventual outcome of the war and troop sentiment about both. It is almost always bleak, graphic, and dark, much like public opinion had become as the bloody quagmire wore on and prospects for a successful outcome seemed ever more elusive, if not wholly illusory. Replete with some of the most outspoken, unabashed, unrestrained commentary on the war as well, American combatant poetry speaks unflinchingly about any number of issues, particularly those that stateside political

figures and war planners as well as in-country military establishment leaders seemed unwilling to admit privately, let alone utter publicly. At once intimately personal and often deliberately public, it was written to process through combat experiences, express emotion concerning the war, but also to “[grasp] readers emotionally and intellectually and [pull] them so close to the war that they could not escape what was being wrought in their names.”⁹ It remains to this day the most blatant, provocative, and overtly political military folk culture from the war.

Chapter VI turns toward Vietnamese perspectives, examining the first of two Vietnamese folk art types, chiefly the *ca khúc*, or Vietnamese popular song. Lyrical verse has for thousands of years been not just a pastime, but a passion of many of the Vietnamese people. Comparing Vietnamese songs with American ones reveals how the *ca khúc* became typically much more politicized in content and function, articulating political and social issues and influencing everyone from rural peasants to both North and South Vietnam’s highest policymakers. A comparison of songs from all sides will also illustrate both uncanny similarities among and striking differences between the American and Vietnamese combatants and their combat motivations and experiences. Chapter VII will deal with Vietnamese poetry, mostly culled from captured enemy documents that U.S. personnel discovered, uncovered, and recovered while on combat operations. Many of these compelling works have enjoyed translation into English and testify to the universality of wartime experience across political, national, ethnic, and cultural lines. Most of the same sentiments appearing in American verse and other

⁹ Basil T. Paquet, email message to author, 18 August 2012.

texts about combat and warfare find voice in the Vietnamese ones as well. Yet with all their commonalities, what also emerges is a highly political content predominantly absent, or at the very least, much more subdued in American folk culture, save its poetry. Certainly, with their respective nations' widely divergent political goals, such variance might be expected. Lastly, comparing Vietnamese and American verse demonstrates both the differing and shared humanity of the war's participants from all sides.

The dissertation concludes with a brief synopsis of what folk culture contributes to the history of the American War in Vietnam that both differs from and likens to more traditional sources that came out of the war. In the end, admittedly, folk culture clearly contributes less quantifiable data about Vietnam. But qualitatively, it deserves a far more prominent place in the historiographical canon. No historians have studied these sources. For no other reason than that, these sources merit attention. Still, numerous other reasons abound for historians to consider folk culture. Its various media offer veritable time capsules and highly sensitive barometers of inner-history. They served such important functions for their creators, functions that changed and adapted according to need. They document the changing arc of both the Vietnam War and public and private attitudes, beliefs, and sentiments of those who fought and witnessed it. Moreover, not only do some of these examples of folk culture chronicle human events documented nowhere else in the historical record, in some cases, they preserve the only surviving evidence available by which posterity can access what troops were thinking and feeling in certain given moments in time. They preserve an emotional

tenor to war that is compelling in its own right. They lay bare participants' hearts and minds like few other primary sources can. Significantly for scholars, they should prove relevant to any study of war but particularly to humanistic studies concerning the cultural history of war and the military during Vietnam. But perhaps most promising of all, however, these rich, dynamic, expressive, meaning-laden sources relate important, previously untold stories – the inner-histories – of real people contending with war in Vietnam.

CHAPTER II

AMERICAN GRAFFITI: THE KILROY TRADITION

"To tell a story is to take arms against the threat of time. . . The telling of a story preserves the teller from oblivion." – Alessandro Portelli¹

Graffiti has appeared throughout history since ancient times.² In Classical Greece and throughout the Roman Empire; in Elizabethan England, post-Revolutionary France, and 19th-century Puerto Rico, "inscriptive acts" materialized to herald the human condition, wherever and however its graffitist critics and commentators thought it required attention.³ The earliest record of distinctly Euro-American folk epigraphy dates back to Spanish conquistadors, who chronicled their journeys upon El Moro, an outcropping of rock in New Mexico. In doing so, they exemplified a folk tradition Americans have replicated ever since.⁴ American soldiers, sailors, airmen and Marines called to serve in Vietnam turned to graffiti for a variety of reasons, toward what seem some rather specific ends. These abridged autobiographical fragments provide glimpses into both individual and corporate sentiments, beliefs, attitudes, and concerns

¹ Alessandro Portelli, "The Time of My Life: Functions of Time in Oral History." *International Journal of Oral History*. Vol. 2., No. 3 (1981), 162.

² A note on terms: in sticking with scholarly tradition, this work will use the Italian term *graffiti*, meaning "little scratches," to refer collectively to any uncommissioned, uninvited, or otherwise unsolicited inscriptive acts (writing, drawing, carving) that appear in public and private places and which may or may not note authorship. *Graffito*, the singular form of *graffiti*, will appear when referencing a single example of an inscriptive act.

³ For discussion of graffiti in ancient Greece, see Mabel L. Lang, *The Athenian Agora: Graffiti and Dipinti*, Vol. XXI, (Princeton, NJ: The American School of Classical Studies, 1976); for Roman Empire graffiti, see Ray Laurence, *Roman Pompeii: Space and Society*, (London: Routledge, 1994), and Jack Lindsay, *The Writing on the Wall: An Account of the Last Days of Pompeii*, (London: Frederick Muller, 1960); for Elizabethan England's graffiti, see Juliet Fleming, *Graffiti and the Writing Arts of Early Modern England*, (London: Reaktion, 2001); for 19th-century Puerto Rican graffiti, see I.C. Rivera-Collazo, "Historical Ship Graffiti on the Walls of San Juan's Spanish Defense System," *The International Journal of Nautical Archaeology*, Vol. 35, No.1, 41-52 (2006).

⁴ Allen Walker Read, *Classic American Graffiti*, (Waukesha, WI: Maledicta Press, 1977), 22.

among the troops. They constitute emotional and psychological potsherds, archeological evidence of the solitude and camaraderie, the treasures and trash talk, the love and loss, the joy and misanthropy that inhabit human beings, particularly young men during wartime.

Vietnam War-era troops employed graffiti for rather specific and widely varied purposes. They used it existentially, to declare identity, whether personal, geographic, occupational, religious, or other cultural identifier. They used it to resist subjugation, claim some semblance of agency, some notion that they have a say in at least *something* to do with their lives. They reminded others (and perhaps most importantly, themselves) that they as individuals still, breathe, feel, and act. Graffiti proved a convenient and clandestine means to convey all manner of meaning.⁵ In order to investigate the ways in which troops sought to declare, resist, or remind, this chapter examines a very specific body of graffiti as primary sources: those found aboard the *USNS General John Pope*, a US Navy vessel that transported troops to and from Vietnam theaters of operations throughout the war's duration.⁶ Graffiti illuminate much about

⁵ "Clandestine" seems appropriate here, since most of the graffiti examined was discovered hidden on the underside of bunk canvases, well below deck in troops' cramped berthing spaces.

⁶ Limiting investigation to troop graffiti found aboard the *USNS General John Pope* resulted merely from expedience and cost-effectiveness. At the time of this project's research phase, only graffiti from the *Pope* had been archived, catalogued, and digitized in any systematic way to permit research online. For a more cursory treatment of Vietnam-era graffiti, see Art Beltrone, "Vietnam Messages from a Forgotten Troopship," in *Semper Fi: The Magazine of the Marine Corps League*, May/June 2009, 42-44. Visit also <http://www.vietnamgraffiti.com>. Beltrone's article and his subsequent website treat only very limited graffiti from the *USNS General Nelson M. Walker*, a troopship that saw abbreviated service, operating primarily in 1966 - 1967. A much vaster collection, and the one mined for this essay, is housed online within the Vietnam Center and Archives' Virtual Vietnam Archive as the Vietnam Graffiti Project (<http://www.vietnam.ttu.edu/graffiti/>). All graffiti referenced herein originated onboard the *Pope*, operating throughout the American War years, thus furnishing a wider cultural and chronological range of graffiti. Citations for all graffiti utilize the archives' Graffiti Project media cataloguing and classification system. All slides and canvas reference numbers appearing below can be accessed by copying and pasting canvas reference numbers (e.g., 1574c0003) into the Graffiti Project Search Page at:

who these men were and how they saw themselves and their lot.

Methodology

The Vietnam Center and Archives' Virtual Vietnam Archive at Texas Tech University houses over 3.2 million pages of scanned materials and photographs, among them, a massive archive of Vietnam-era troop graffiti recovered from bunk canvases aboard the *USNS General John Pope*. The Graffiti Project's artifact index lists 399 canvases by number. However, almost every single canvas reference number yielded typically three but occasionally as many as five images per canvas. In rough terms, the archive houses an estimated 1200 to 1400 digitized images of graffiti. In order to analyze a fair and representational cross-section of troop graffiti, 350 slides, just over 25 percent of the collection, were selected at random among archive category headings such as "Names" [male and female], "Geographic Locations," "Military Units," "Profanity," and "Sexuality," among others.

Inscribed over the *Pope's* several years of operation as a troop transport vessel, graffiti concentrations on canvases range anywhere from a solitary graffito to chaotic, seemingly indiscriminate amalgamations of literally dozens of entries on the same fabric. To make sense of these human remnants (dizzily jumbled but virtually pregnant with promise), devising a system to catalogue the individual graffiti types was required. In the end, twenty-nine separate but often closely related categories of graffiti emerged. After isolating the various categories, the frequencies in each individual slide were recorded and the categories ranked from greatest to fewest

<http://www.virtualarchive.vietnam.ttu.edu/starweb/virtual/graffiti/servlet.starweb?path=virtual/graffiti/graffiti.web>. Each canvas number citation links to multiple hi-res digital images of that particular graffiti canvas.

frequencies. The goal was to quantify and thus, situate along a pseudo-Maslowian hierarchy of needs the kinds of inscriptions the troops themselves felt most compelled to articulate.⁷

Categorical differentiation proved straightforward in most cases, such as instances of personal, geographical, or religious identification. Incidents of dissent or expressions of love for everything from women to personal pastimes proved equally simple to isolate. Delineating others, however, was more problematic. For example, one might argue that certain images objectify women (or in rare cases, men) and their body parts as impersonal objects of sexual desire without appearing overtly pornographic.⁸ Consequently, mere depictions of female forms, nude or otherwise, though typically meriting “Art” or even “Sexual Objectification” labels, did not necessarily warrant classifying them as “pornographic.” Many far less flattering depictions warranted a frequency tally in all three categories. Similarly, while all inscriptions of slander either implicitly or explicitly document adversarial relationships, such as “Sergeant So-and-So sucks VC ass,” not all adversarial graffiti involve character slander, e.g., “I hate my D.I. [drill instructor] with a passion.” Accordingly, both “Slander” and “Adversarial” emerged as distinct categories, even though frequencies tallied in each column may refer to the same graffito. Such nuanced categorization aided differentiation between *quantifying* the graffiti and *qualifying* it. It permits discussing subtle similarities and differences in function and meaning between discrete

⁷ The Vietnam Archive assigns reference numbers to each individual slide. Since slides’ fields of view only very occasionally overlap in multiple images [i.e., different ends or reverse sides] of the same canvas, any discrepancies between frequencies of graffiti type per canvas and frequencies per slide proved negligible and inconsequential to overall conclusions.

⁸ I categorized as “pornographic” any drawing or text that explicitly depicted a sexual act or acts.

category types and what those differences or similarities reveal about both the inscription and its inscriber's personal history. Ultimately, it facilitates a broader, deeper, and significantly more nuanced understanding of the histories these graffiti serendipitously preserve and relate.

Raw Quantitative Results

Analyzing numbers on a data set as immense as the graffiti from the *USNS General John Pope* proved challenging for several reasons. Analyzing handwriting and writing implement color, age, and ink saturation levels revealed some 7,212 distinctive graffiti distributed over some 2893 entries into the 29 categories of graffiti types isolated. Though ripe with possibilities for statistical analysis, inquiries were limited to calculating frequencies of each graffiti type and the percentages of the aggregate data each instance or type constituted. Drawing concrete conclusions from the final raw numbers in many cases proved elusive. Haphazard distribution of graffiti types from one canvas to the next; each type's particular frequency; unanswered questions and unknown contexts, all contribute to complicating results. Depending on how questions are framed, extrapolating from raw numbers could easily skew interpretations.

As a case in point, what does the fact that some sort of geographic identifier appears in 80 percent of the images (the highest percentage among all the graffiti categories) demonstrate? That 80 percent of all graffiti mention the often nebulous but nonetheless all-important "home," thus suggesting that 80 percent of the troops longed for all the comforts, companions, and familiarity that "home" represents? Does a "sense of place" strong enough to memorialize it in print indicate acute self-awareness

or merely local or regional pride? Or does it simply hint troops resurrected a “Kilroy was here” tradition of leaving behind their name and place of origin? Without interviewing each graffitist to learn motives, without troops confirming that, “Yeah, I missed home. Who didn’t?” or “I never thought about it. I only wrote where I was from because that’s what everyone else did,” it is impossible to know. What exactly compelled young men facing unknown destinies to exhibit some sense of place remains the stuff of supposition. Perhaps troops couched their sentiments in the language and symbolism of that context *most* known to them, in notions of “home.” In any case, graffiti of home, regardless of motivational origin, endure as one of the most salient of all graffiti types, statistically speaking.⁹

Despite uncertainties inherent in archeological remnants like graffiti, raw numbers and patterns still indicate what occupied troops’ thoughts in those long days and nights aboard the *Pope*. For example, self-identification graffiti appeared most frequently, some 1,526 instances overall. Put another way, troops self-identifying by name or nickname comprised more one-fifth of the entire body of graffiti from among the twenty-nine different categories and self-identifications appear in over 72 percent of the slides. Equally compelling, inscriptions of identification with a specific geographic locale, noted above as appearing in 80 percent of the slides, constituted 17 percent of the

⁹ Incidentally, while geographic identifiers appear in the greatest number of overall canvas images (287 out of 356 slides, or 80%), graffiti identifying someone by name or nickname comprise the greatest total frequency overall. Within my sampling, personal identification occurs some 1526 times and geography only 1199. However, these numbers, too, can mislead, since frequencies and percentages could just as arguably have resulted from the randomness of the overall sample selection as it did from any real or imagined hierarchy of troops’ perceived importance in self-identifying with name or place. Despite the possible imprecision that can occasion random sampling, the sampling constituted more than 25 percent of the total collection of graffiti canvas images contained in the Vietnam Center and Archives’ Vietnam Graffiti Project, making it a more-than-fair, statistically-representative sampling of the overall collection itself.

overall graffiti from among all categories.

Other categories, along with their graffiti's frequencies and percentages, merit mention. Proclamations of "E.T.S." – estimated time of separation, or that projected date when military service, and thus, time in Vietnam, would terminate – appear a total of 435 times throughout over 57 percent of the slides. On those canvases bearing text or artistic renderings (in the form of calendars) of the actual *passage* of time itself – whether in terms of days left or spent onboard the *Pope*, days left or spent in Vietnam or in military service, or even hours and dollars spent on prostitutes while on shore leave in Far Eastern ports of call – "time-lapse" graffiti occur on average 2.1 times per canvas and constitute over 5 percent of all the graffiti examples. Pictographic inscriptions (art, doodles) appear in 72 percent of the slides, comprise 13 percent of the collection's overall graffiti content, and not surprisingly given the cohort's average ages [19], 26 percent of the art could be considered pornographic and 28 percent as objectifying people sexually.

Frequencies and percentages in these and other categories as well as what the graffiti itself seems to communicate will receive considerably more treatment later, but given most troops' ultimate destination aboard the *Pope*, what is conspicuously absent, statistically speaking, are texts and images of death, represented in only 1 percent of the slides. Religious graffiti comprise only .4 percent of the total collection. Surprisingly, too, graffiti referencing or depicting the Vietnamese enemy appear in a scant .5 percent of the slides, while doodles or proclamations indicating adversarial relationships with other *Americans* turn up in a whopping 21 percent of the slides.

Initially, the raw quantitative data concerning graffiti collected onboard the *USNS General John Pope* both supports many basic historical assumptions while still defying other expectations. Yet taken alone, without verbal or other documented informant testimony, any conclusions the data suggest must remain in the purview of informed speculation, intelligent conjecture, or statistically-bolstered likelihoods. Knowing with greater certainty what all these quantitative results ultimately indicate or mean – and to what end they serve historians and further our understanding of the Vietnam War – will seem more clear, will become more plausible, when the quantitative and qualitative combine in more substantial analysis below.

Qualitative Analysis

Raw numbers quantify, but they divulge nothing of what troops inscribed or why. Canvases reveal soldiers evincing geographic origins or regional pride; lamenting their present circumstances; grieving separation from loved ones; or criticizing the military establishment. And while the various graffiti and their categories hold potential and interest each in their own right, examining some of the more telling ones will prove worthwhile toward furthering understanding of previously anonymous troops' personal histories. In short, what on the surface seem fragmentary records at best, are previously unknown but more importantly, *extant* records, and thus they merit historical consideration, if only for the reason that they constitute, in many cases, the sole surviving contemporary records of these troops written in their own hands.¹⁰

¹⁰ This reality proved even more haunting when, during the course of cataloguing the graffiti I would check the graffitiists' names against an online registry of Vietnam War casualties, <http://virtualwall.org>. As I would search the Wall Memorial for each succeeding name in the graffiti collection, each search began to invoke in me a heightened sense of dramatic tension. Would I find the *next*

No military unit, whether division, brigade, battalion, company, or platoon, can function properly if comprised of a messy conglomeration of free-willed civilians possessing widely varying belief systems, moral frameworks, and political paradigms. Consequently, the military has historically sought very quickly upon trainee induction to begin the process of separation, of detaching recruits entirely from their former identities, mindsets, and allegiances. More simply put, if they are to integrate to their greatest capacities, soldiers must resign any sense of personal agency or self-direction and become cogs in the United States military machine. They must willingly subjugate themselves first to drill instructors, then to their unit, corps, branch, and country to take their place among the fields and rows of other US government property.

Since the military sought to subjugate the individualism that they maintained would imperil objectives from the squad to the battalion level, then at the earliest unsupervised opportunity, troops reasserted their identity, their individuality, and their agency, inasmuch as was possible in an environment of subordination and submission. Numbers bear out that no Vietnam-era troop graffiti appeared more than those in which troops sought to reassert the individuality the military labored so strenuously to subordinate to the needs of the group. Troop names and nicknames

one on the Wall? Or did he make it out alive? Each new name became a new mystery, the solution to which I would not know until I saw it—or didn't see it—in virtual black granite on the virtual Wall Memorial. The relief I encountered each and every time I looked for a name and *didn't* find it on the Wall concretized for me the intensely personal connection that I had begun to develop with the men who were becoming less and less my historical evidence and more and more Americans who lived and breathed and whose wartime fate I truly cared about some forty-plus years after the fact. If this kind of emotional intensity doesn't argue for the ways in which historical artifacts can connect us personally to our past, then I can scarcely imagine what would. Over the course of two weeks I had looked at 139 slides and searched the Wall for some 375 names before I finally encountered my first graffitist casualty. It surprised me initially, mainly because I hadn't encountered a casualty until looking up the 376th name. But given that over 2 million Americans served in Vietnam and fewer than 60,000 died, a casualty rate of less than 3 percent, a similar casualty of just less than 2 percent from among the *General John Pope's* graffitists proves historically representational.

appear virtually everywhere, a fact neither accidental nor unusual. Folklorist Sylvia Ann Grider notes that personal names and nicknames harbor profound importance to all peoples, albeit to varying degrees, because “given names and nicknames represent a special device for individualizing and distinguishing persons within any given group.” Consequently, among graffiti cultures, inscribed names assume an almost sacrosanct status “because the graphic depiction of the name is regarded as a tangible extension of the person himself.” In effect, says Grider, the mere act of inscribing one’s name on some publicly visible surface, conjures and extends oneself, announces or reclaims identity, and concretizes me-ness, thus, reasserting one’s own agency, even if only symbolically speaking.¹¹ Said one graffitist, “Graffiti means ‘I’m here.’ ... They want to snub us, but they can’t.”¹² And naming oneself publicly, even if only through initials or nicknames, exemplifies “Kilroy was here,” a generations-old, traditional “I’m here” annunciation among military men. Onboard the *Pope*, however, graffiti were much more deliberately personalized than American history’s many Kilroy tags. Presumably, troops understood that in perhaps as little as a few weeks’ time, they could possibly and quite literally be wiped from the face of the earth. In their own often crude ways, then, thousands of these young men personally ensured that their names and record of their passing would be remembered.

Despite how tenaciously the military sought to convince them, the *Pope’s* passengers saw themselves as much more than military property. The sheer number of

¹¹ Sylvia Ann Grider, “Con Safos: Mexican-Americans, Names, and Graffiti,” *The Journal of American Folklore*, Vol. 88, No. 348 (Apr. – Jun., 1975), 133.

¹² Jeff Ferrell, “Urban Graffiti: Crime, Control, and Resistance,” *Youth & Society*, Vol. 27, No. 73 (1995), 81.

troops self-identifying suggests that, far from human cargo, troops saw themselves not just as real, but as worth remembering, as meriting commemoration, as deserving identity, to the point of violating social taboos by vandalizing and defacing government property. In short, every piece of graffiti identifies something or someone, usually its maker with something or other, whether it be his name, his hometown, his pastimes, his politics, or his favorite girl back home.

 Graffiti often function as “accurate indicator[s] of the social attitude of a community.”¹³ And sequestered deep within the bowels of a ship for what typically proved a nauseating, claustrophobic three-week voyage, troops had plenty of idle time to ruminate on all sorts of subject matter and manifest all manner of social attitudes in their graffiti. Not surprisingly, especially among a cohort of cooped-up 18 to 22 year-old males, graffitiists frequently displayed rather unambiguous sociocultural attitudes in their thoughts and depictions of women. Though mention or depiction of women appears on nearly half of all the canvases (constituting some 7 percent of the total graffiti cases, at a frequency of more than three cases per canvas appearance), the frequencies and categories surrounding these gender-specific graffiti require some fleshing out. Women identified by name, nickname, or initial some 514 times certainly indicate troops’ preoccupation with them. However, as in other cases, qualitative must join quantitative analysis for a clearer picture of troops’ contemporary attitudes, beliefs, and perceptions concerning women.

 Whether through explicitly pornographic doodles depicting female genitalia or

¹³ Terrance L. Stocker, Linda W. Dutcher, Stephen M. Hargrove, and Edwin A. Cook, “Social Analysis of Graffiti,” *The Journal of American Folklore*, Vol. 85, No. 338 (Oct - Dec., 1972), 364.

valentine-esque hearts proclaiming eternal monogamous love and devotion, troops preserved for posterity their contemporary perceptions of women, almost as a matter of course. A good proportion of graffiti identify women in terms of loving relationships. One man who identifies himself initially only as "Thomas" and later as "Blackie" cites an anniversary date of 1967, when he "hung up [his] heart" to his "Rose." He further seems to celebrate the impending birth of what he assumed would be a son, depicting his relationship formulaically: "Blackie + Rose = Blackie Jr."¹⁴ In fact, troops commemorated relationships with a relational math format more than any other way, such as "Jim + Linda," just written out plainly, or "Marina + Joe," written inside a heart shot through with an arrow.¹⁵ Another heart announces, "Nancy + Mike" with arrows indicating Nancy's in Chicago and Mike's in Vietnam, or at least on his way there. After indicating he's been "Married 2 years, Sept. 11, 1967," he laments their distance from one another, complaining of being at sea, separated from his wife on such an important date: "What a hell of a way to spend a wedding anniversary, huh?"¹⁶

Troops expressed their attitudes about separation from women in virtually every conceivable fashion. One troop vowed to take his relationship to the next level: "I, Jimmy, will come back to be with my girl, Mary and my be married her [*sic*] when I

¹⁴ See 1574c0254.

¹⁵ See 1574c0318. One particular arrow-impaled valentine heart proves rather cryptic. Inside it reads, "Chicago," and then below that, "John Wiesch + Raymond Golobski (are in love) but the Army won't let them out," 1574c0172. Does the phrase, "the Army won't let them out," refer to "out of the closet," perhaps a not-so-veiled reference to a "Don't ask, don't tell" policy the Army had long held? Does this graffiti preserve record of a genuine gay relationship among troops? Or is it merely an example of the domestic slander so common among adversarial military men? Knowing for certain proves difficult, but either way, it chronicles *some* manner of close relationship either held dear enough or demonstrated publicly enough to find mention among these historical artifacts.

¹⁶ See 1574c0216.

come back in one year from Viet Nam, 9/4/67, ETS 10 Jan 69, New York Queens.”¹⁷

Other graffiti indicate equal fondness, though perhaps in less noble terms. In a detailed graffito of a ship’s log, one “Abrams, proud Rebel” of Virginia, said of being separated from his “old lady Gwynne, proud civilian Rebel,” it’s been “3 days [at sea] and still no ass.” Two days later, Abrams wrote, “Do I miss my baby back home.”¹⁸ Others depicted their separation visually, like a “Joe + Alice” heart, shot through with an arrow and bleeding into a cup bearing a hometown name, “Yonkers, New York.”¹⁹ But more commonly, troops merely expressed their sentiments plainly in text, like some anonymous soul who wrote out in the middle of a nearly blank canvas, “I love Pam,” or the more self-reassuring, “Sharon loves me.”²⁰

Many refer to no women at all in expressing their sexual frustration. One nameless troop apparently felt no shame admitting it, either, commemorating his damnable circumstances almost like an official Minnesota state historical marker: “On this day of 30 Jan. in this very bunk I did get horny, and commenced to beat my meat. -Bjerk- Minn. ‘67’.”²¹ Such behavior was hardly isolated among hormonal, sex-deprived late-teenagers, even in the middle of hot combat zones with other troops nearby. Just two weeks in-country, Marine Jeff Kelly went to take his turn standing night watch during a rain squall. As soon as he’d relieved the sentry on duty, that grunt left immediately to relieve himself:

Within two minutes he was giving his hoped-for wet dream a helping hand. The

¹⁷ See 1574c0301; see also 1574c0092.

¹⁸ See 1574c0309.

¹⁹ See 1574c0369; see also 1574c0362.

²⁰ See 1574c0183 and 1574c0201.

²¹ See 1574c0312.

popping of his poncho liner was embarrassing, but his lack of self-consciousness was funny. I smiled and looked toward [a nearby Marine's foxhole]. I wanted to ask him who this pervert was I was teamed up with. I tried to watch my assigned area but found his moaning and dry humping of Hill 31 a distraction.²²

Onboard the ship, troops tried to offer their bunkmates rather different relief from the dearth of female companionship. More than one troop doodled pubic hair around various slit-shaped holes in the bunk canvases, encouraging lonely soldiers to "Fuck here when horny."²³ One clearly disgruntled, sex-starved troop echoed countless other troops' sentiments when he scrawled just two solitary graffiti onto an otherwise wide-open canvas, "F.T.A.," and "I want pussy."²⁴

Such graffiti typify how many of the *Pope's* captive passengers regularly objectified women sexually. In fact, some objectification occurs in either textual or artistic inscriptions in over one-third of the canvases. Drawings of naked female bodies without heads or faces or shown only from behind; doodles in varying degrees of artistic talent depict breasts or vaginal openings; others graphically illustrate faceless or headless men engaging in coitus with equally depersonalized, dehumanized faceless women. Almost as typically as in their doodles, troops objectified women in plain text, whether through treating them as sexual conquests, such as when an anonymous soldier bragged how he had "screwed Rachael Welch 10 times," or another who crowed, "I ATE ELIZABETH, Oct. 14, 1964," ironically, while still maintaining nearby that "I love Elizabeth."²⁵ Some troops depersonalized women as objects to be bought

²² Combat diary entry for 25 January 1968, Jeff Kelly, *DMZ Diary*, (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, Inc., 1991), 22-23.

²³ See 1574c0354.

²⁴ See 1574c0292.

²⁵ See 1574c0140.

and sold, for cheap, no less. Women weren't women. They were body parts to be commodified: "Go to the Tokyo club in Okinawa for Pussy, \$4.00."²⁶

On very rare occasion, troops chronicled some severely disturbed and none-too-camouflaged misogyny. Violently disfigured, faceless, even transsexualized women appear occasionally, though their depictees never seem brave enough to have signed their artwork, leaving these misogynists as anonymous as their subjects. Troops propositioned derogatorily their imaginary female sex objects – telling, not asking, as in: "Hi BITCH, Let's FUCK."²⁷ Others mingled macabre double entendre with violent suggestions of either rape or murder, depending on how one interprets the drawing. A disembodied pistol holds a naked woman at gunpoint asking her, "Do you want to BANG?" The same artist must have seen sex everywhere he looked, as he tries to conjecture "why more people bought Chevys in '59," depicting a nude woman spread-eagled on the trunk of the said car, ready presumably for penetration [see below, lower right of canvas.²⁸ One pictograph darkly christened the cavity of a woman's spread vagina as "Death Valley."²⁹

Such aggressively dehumanizing renderings of women, especially as actual impalement or potential rape or murder victims, constituted a miniscule minority among the *Pope's* average troop graffiti, but faceless objectification was quite common. For the most part, the graffiti suggest hormonal teenage boys' mostly benign yet still very juvenile preoccupation with women and sex – or frustration at the lack of both in

²⁶ See 1574c0302.

²⁷ See 1574c0192.

²⁸ See 1574c0071.

²⁹ See 1574c0166.

their present lives and circumstances at the time. Occasionally, however, troops would preserve how utterly obsessed they'd become about sex, whether as a result of recent deprivation resulting from military life or from some other understandably unspoken cause. One Ken Miklaucic wrote and drew about almost nothing else. On one solitary canvas he managed to objectify, commodify, and depersonalize women repeatedly. He proved one of the very few sex-themed graffitists to identify himself by name.³⁰

Repeated anonymity in pornographic or sexually objectifying graffiti suggests that deeply entrenched Puritanical cultural values warred with baser hormonal drives and changing social mores in the bodies and minds of these predominantly late-teen graffitists. The 1960s and 1970s sexual revolution saw social attitudes concerning sex relax considerably. Yet dissociation—deliberately *not* claiming agency or identity—seems to indicate shame. It could also suggest that troops feared punishment for defacing their quarters, government property, after all. But if that were the case, why would troops self-identify virtually every other graffiti save sexual graffiti? Most pornographic, sexually objectifying, or otherwise sexually deviant graffiti, whether textual or pictographic, remains anonymous. Conversely, graffitists always claim authorship of graffiti evincing more socially acceptable motives like undying love, devotion, faithfulness, and longing. On further examination, other associations quickly become apparent. For instance, hardly any graffiti emphasizing love and socially sanctioned relationships ever contain pornography, while graphically pornographic or objectifying graffiti hardly ever mention love or any tender commemoration of

³⁰ See 1574c0361.

relationships. In short, “true love” seems nearly always to have merited agent identification; prurient lust, not so much, though exceptions in the historical record like Ken Miklaucic’s above sometimes survived.

One graffiti type stands out for its consistent exception to this pattern. On several occasions, troops compiled lists of women’s names. They rarely elucidate the lists’ meanings or purposes. The lists simply appear, with little other information. Readers are left to wonder for what reason the graffitist catalogued those particular women. Were they family members, such as cousins or sister siblings? Sexual conquests? Past failed relationships? Few explain, but on one rare canvas a graffitist objectifies women while simultaneously, paradoxically even, revering women. Ralph J. Pack of Lake Charles, Louisiana, actually catalogued a list of women by name and measurements. He also seems to have ranked them along a hierarchy. Number One on his list, “Myrtle J. [last name illegible], 36-22-38,” appears to have merited almost holy adoration. Inside a heart borne up on wings and crowned by a cross – set right amid several faceless or headless naked or copulating couples (or body parts) is inscribed the familiar relational math equation, “Ralph + Myrtle.” Mr. Pack’s very detailed catalogue of the women in his life is the only one encountered in the record where the same person professing what he appears to depict as sacred love also happens clearly to objectify women. Perhaps Pack embodies a sexual revolutionary of the 1960s counterculture. He certainly exhibits no moral conflict between adoring women and craving sex, quantifying their worth by assigning them hierarchical rank, or depicting them as sexual playthings. Sexually revolutionary, morally inconsistent, or relationally

schizophrenic, Pack's canvas stands out as an intriguing cultural anomaly.³¹

Sexual or sexualized graffiti paints a stark, often startling picture of American troops' mindsets as they looked forward to or departed from combat experiences. It preserves a veritable time capsule of various attitudes held and perceptions harbored. It self-characterizes and self-identifies lovers and leches. It chronicles slivers of husbands' and fathers' lives. It publicizes notions of women as sexual playthings or as entities existing solely to abuse or mutilate. It documents men who revered and cherished women as well as juveniles who quantified and objectified them. Graffiti sheds light on inner-history, both collective and individual, and on more than just what sexual attitudes and value traits troops chose in a particular moment to identify.

Consider an atypical but nonetheless showcase example of multiple forms of self-identification from a single graffitist on a single canvas. Whether he felt silenced for far too long or whether he just possessed a remarkably gregarious personality, this *Pope* passenger left record, probably in 1967, of just about everything pertinent for personal identification.³² Private First Class, Glen Pannkuk of Forest City, Iowa, stands out for his remarkably varied inscription types, leaving behind his name, hometown, service dates, even his dog tag serial number and Army Post Office address in San Francisco. In one brief but stark entry, he lamented draftees' plights while criticizing his superiors and their petty agendas, characterizing G.I.s as "the unwilling/ told by

³¹ 1574c0369.

³² Canvas No. 1574c0250. I equivocate somewhat on the graffiti's dates because Private Pannkuk doesn't date his inscriptions. He does mention that his E.T.S. date falls in March of 1968. Since Army personnel typically served twelve-month tours of duty, it's reasonable to assume that he penned these inscriptions in March of 1967, but without him dating the graffiti or cross checking the inscriptions with passenger manifests, knowing for certain proves difficult (at the time of this writing, collection accession procedures at the national archives where Vietnam era naval records are housed prevented me from accessing the ship's logs).

the unable/ to do the unnecessary." He scorned "Lifers" or "R.A." ("Regular Army": volunteer or career servicemen), quipping in a rhyme that appears sporadically in troop graffiti, "Every night I kneel and pray,/ And thank the Lord I'm not R.A." ³³

More than just self-identification and slander characterize Pannkuk's graffiti, arguably the most cerebral in the sampling. He philosophized about feeling a prisoner to his circumstances, penning the platitude, "Stone walls do not a prison make,/ nor iron bars a cage,/ but they serve the same purpose." He articulated both artistically and textually – perhaps even fatalistically – multiple entries that indicate he had come to terms with possibly dying in Vietnam. In one entry next to a drawing of a freshly-dug grave, complete with inscribed headstone, Pannkuk rhymes, "Remember friends as you pass by,/ As you are now,/ So once was I./ As I am now, so you shall be,/ Prepare for death, / And follow me." In like vein, he scrawled on the canvas's opposite face the lines, "As life on earth/ is your hell,/ so death shall/ be your heaven. –Glen Pannkuk." A death imagery lurks nearby his more "literary" musings: a decapitated, skeletonized female head hanging from a noose appears beneath the words, "Voodoo Woman." Clearly, death inhabited Pannkuk's consciousness. Other entries hint that Pannkuk thought (or at least expressed himself) more profoundly than his average crewmates. Two cryptic entries, "LOVE vrs. HATE!" and a similar thesis/antithesis construction, "WHITE vrs. BLACK," with no other commentary nearby to elaborate, suggest that at the very least, Pannkuk was pondering social tensions very much in play in late-1960s America. Interestingly, these are the only two entries that he penned in all capital

³³ Ibid.

letters³⁴

Not all of Private Pannkuk's entries suggest he was wrapped up in deep or troubling thought. Some of his graffiti seem downright playful: "If the ocean were whiskey/ And I were a duck,/ I'd dive down to the bottom/ And suck it all up."

Another curious graffito illustrates Pannkuk's capacity for intelligent wordplay. He formed what appears to be an acrostic, vertically orienting a list of women's names out of a seemingly carefully chosen, horizontally-oriented word:

```
C.H.E.R.I.S.H.  
h a v h r a e  
e r e o i n l  
l r l n s d e  
a i y d r n  
e n a a a  
t
```

As is often the case, these graffiti raise as many questions as they answer. Pannkuk's acrostic artifact might conjure any number of reactions in viewers, depending on their own personal dispositions as well as on his arguably unknowable intention. Did he mean merely to chronicle women he "cherished," whether family, friends, or lovers? Or was this some crass catalog of sexual conquests he intended to boast (a not uncommon occurrence in this graffiti collection)? Without Mr. Pannkuk's clarification, the whole truth will remain a mystery. What we can know, though, is that during one graffiti scrawling session, as in countless others onboard the *Pope*, one soldier documented how certain women were very much on his mind, in whatever sense. It

³⁴ Ibid.

also attests that something more to live for than death occupied his thoughts.³⁵

One last Pannkuk entry illustrates the wide range of human expression, of personal identification – intentional or otherwise – that troops left behind. After all the relative benignity of his other entries, Pannkuk may have betrayed a bit of racism. Just beneath his death drawing and poem, what *appears* to be a racist riddle turns up unexpectedly in Pannkuk’s handwriting. It appears on the canvas much like so, except what looks like the word “negro” is almost entirely blacked out and replaced with the only slightly less offensive, “monkey”:

monkey
Q: How do you get a ~~negro~~ out of a tree?
A: Cut the rope!

At least two critics objected to Pannkuk’s riddle enough to vandalize his vandalism. One anonymous censor tried – unsuccessfully – to cover over the entire question (but not the answer) portion of the riddle with red pen. Judging by the ink’s darkness, a second critic simply crossed out “negro” and substituted “monkey,” rendering the riddle now absurd, but neither wholly obscuring the offensive material.

Was Pannkuk a racist? Among these sliverine fragments, circumstantial evidence remains inconclusive. On the one hand, Pannkuk plainly penned the original racist riddle. His own handwritten “g” protrudes from the bottom of the obliterated word’s middle. He may also have been the first censor who tried scrawl it out, but it seems unlikely, given that both the handwriting and the ink’s age strongly suggest a later critic. It’s possible, especially given that nothing in the rest of Pannkuk’s graffiti

³⁵ Ibid.

indicates anything remotely racist, that he's guilty only of ignorance; that this small-town Iowa kid merely overheard others telling the racist joke and he just wrote it down as a curiosity that documents racism among his fellow troops. Perhaps he even wrote out the word "Negro" because the thought of penning the much harsher "nigger" repulsed him. That doesn't acquit the riddle of its blatant racism, regardless of terminology, but neither does this one textual shard prove Pannkuk a racist.

Determining conclusively whether in 1967 PFC Glen Pannkuk adhered to any deep-seated racist paradigms or whether he merely took part in racist humor ultimately proves problematic. Graffiti constitute such abbreviated, fragmentary, context-lacking evidence that they survive only as expressive outbursts uttered in passing from the voices of transitory lives. Again, without Pannkuk to fill in the blanks, to elaborate the circumstance's contexts, such an offensive graffiti among all his much more benign ones will likely remain an inexplicable curiosity.

Equally compelling as the racism are those inscriptive acts vandalizing it. Unquestionably, multiple troops sought to obliterate Pannkuk's offensive train of thought. Yet the defacements themselves constitute their own historical record, not just of racist ideologies among troops traveling to and from Vietnam, but also of men actively expressing racial philosophies in tension with one another. In one sense, finding racist graffiti shouldn't surprise. Racism has plagued America for centuries, the Vietnam era saw more than most. The fact that racist graffiti proved remarkably rare tends to argue for a relatively race-blind military culture, at least among combat troops in-country. Veteran accounts corroborate. Robert Welsh, history professor, retired

Army Ranger, saw numerous Vietnam combat missions all over South Vietnam. He recounts that until very late in the war when draftees, primarily from lower socioeconomic orders of American society, began to comprise the bulk of the in-country fighting force, race and race issues hardly ever figured into troops' relationships in the military at all; significantly lesser still once men shared the experience of combat and its perils. African American combat paratrooper Arthur E. Woodley, Jr. concurred when speaking of one of his white brothers-in-arms, "I use the term 'brother' because in a war circumstance, we [are] all brothers."³⁶ In fact, of all the African American veteran informants Wallace Terry interviewed for his work of Vietnam War oral history, only a few spend even a few paragraphs describing racial tension in-country, and even he states categorically that "the Army treated me just as they did any other recruit."³⁷ Almost all the racism African Americans endured they experienced in the States before or after their service, not in Vietnam.³⁸ Race-blind relationships forged quickly as a result of the exigencies of survival and mutual dependence, much more so than "in the rear" or back home in the United States.³⁹

The hard graffiti numbers seem to bear that out. Of the 7212 discrete graffiti,

³⁶ Wallace Terry, *Bloods: An Oral History of the Vietnam War by Black Veterans*, (New York: Ballantine Books, 1984), 242.

³⁷ One Lt. Commander does say that some of his men "still had to put up with racism in the military," but confesses, "I did not experience the terrible, overt racism that older black officers did who went through before me. At least at the officer level, the Navy was priding itself on being ahead of what was happening in society," *ibid.*, 197, 190. The vast majority of the black troops Terry interviewed rarely mention racial tension at all, except for that which they saw back stateside. See Terry's interview with Specialist Robert E. Holcomb, in *ibid.*, 204, 212-213.

³⁸ Ironically, it seems that much of the racism blacks experienced in Vietnam, they themselves perpetrated, though rarely toward their white brothers-in-arms; rather toward their shared enemy, as when First Lieutenant Archie Biggers screamed for his platoon to "Charge. Kill the gooks. Kill the motherfuckers." *Ibid.*, 116.

³⁹ Herman Graham III, "Combat and Interracial Male Friendship," in *The Brothers' Vietnam War: Black Power, Manhood, and the Military Experience*, (Gainesville: The University Press of Florida, 2003), 45.

only 22 merit categorization as epigraphic “Racism,” a minuscule .3 percent of all the inscriptions.⁴⁰ Crude renderings of swastikas, Confederate flags, and even one violent depiction of a decapitated African American might seem typical of 1960s American race relations. So, too, might graffiti celebrating the Confederate States of America with claims that “The South shall rise again” a century after its fall. Yet it may also surprise how troops (like those who defaced Pannkuk’s riddle) quickly rejected racist jingoism by answering “The South shall rise again” with retorts like “yeah, only because shit floats!” or the retroactively qualified (with misplaced modifiers, no less), “the South SUCKS the North—except Virginia and Tennessee.”⁴¹ Certainly, a higher rate of *harbored* racism could have prevailed among troops, but *expressed* racism appearing only very occasionally among the *Pope’s* graffiti hints toward at least improving race relations. Woodley testifies that he became “best friends” with an Arkansas Klan member while in Vietnam. “Once you started to go in the field with an individual, no matter what his ethnic background is or what his ideals, you start to depend on that person to cover your ass.”⁴² Marine recorded precisely that sentiment in his combat diary:

⁴⁰ One noteworthy observation: as the cultural ignorance and cowardice that characterizes prejudice nearly always reflects, at least in this author’s experience, on every single canvas containing racist graffiti save one, the graffitiists who left behind record of their racism conspicuously neglected to identify themselves by name; arguably the textual or pictographic equivalent of hiding behind a Ku Klux Klan mask and robe. For examples of racist graffiti, see Canvas Nos. 1574c0027 (swastika and Confederate flag); 1574c0039 (“White Power” text and a decapitated African American body labeled “Bro”); [cont.] 1574c0221 (USMC acrostic disparaging “Mexicans” and “Chucks,” a dysphemism for Viet Cong, following a pictograph of a hand with extended middle finger, or “the Bird”); 1574c0250 (Pannkuk’s riddle); 1574c0302 (sexually graphic slander of Viet Cong enemy); 1574c0349 (“Fuck all niggers”).

⁴¹ While Confederate graffiti could certainly indicate merely regional pride and doesn’t necessarily mean anything racial whatsoever to their creators, the fact that Confederate flags and swastikas—both widely known symbols of racial and cultural oppression—appear alongside one another in the same canvas shortens significantly the distance between intuitive leap and reasonable supposition. See canvas 1574c0027.

⁴² Terry, *Bloods*, 239.

There were no black or white Marines forward [in frontline combat areas]: they were green and they all bled red. Race meant nothing to an artillery shell or a rocket. The NVA didn't care; they'd kill you, black or white, if you gave them half a chance. *Grunts were perhaps the only group of Americans ever to experience complete racial equality.* Equal opportunity death has a way of rendering racial differences insignificant.⁴³

The troop graffiti record reinforces other sources and helps to clarify the history of race relations in the Vietnam-era military.

Relatively few instances of racism among Vietnam's troops may indeed surprise. Still, in any self-contained, self-defined culture like the military, adversarial encounters and relationships will no doubt emerge. It seems part and parcel to the human condition. If the graffiti record suggests that troops' adversarial relationships rarely derived from racial tension, at least among combat units, then what can these sources tell us about those adversarial realities that doubtlessly arose and which consequently found voice in troop graffiti? One might suppose that since the military expended so much time and treasure indoctrinating troops to regard the Vietnamese as enemies, most adversarial graffiti would target them. On the contrary, the vast majority of adversarial graffiti targets other Americans. Vietnamese-centric graffiti – including those *not* adversarially depicted – constitute a miniscule .2 percent of all graffiti inscriptions. Uncovering why domestic and not foreign adversarial relationships prevail merits scrutiny.

Examples of troops articulating some kind of adversarial sentiment, usually in the form of personal slander against another American, appear some 165 times in the

⁴³ Jeff Kelly, *DMZ Diary*, (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, Inc., 1991), 192, [*emphasis mine*]. Kelly does distinguish between combat Marines and rear-echelon personnel, noting the latter exhibited more racial tension.

graffiti from the U.S.N.S. *General John Pope*. What compelled the slander – usually anonymously penned – also usually remains unspoken. For instance, on what arguably proved the *Pope's* slander showcase canvas, an unidentified troop demonstrates pure vitriolic hatred for another troop. Defamation ranges from the relatively tame “Pvt. Weiland sucks,” intensifies to attacking Weiland’s manhood with “Weilands [*sic*] a pussy,” and escalates further still (especially in an all-male fraternity) by labeling the adversary as a homosexual with “Weiland eats cock.” Finally, the slander climaxes as it impugns Private Weiland with perhaps the most disparaging slander of all – treacherous “love” for the enemy – with “Pvt E-1 Weiland eats V.C. pussy.” The trend seems clearly to have caught on, for this canvas alone boasts some thirteen examples of slanderous or adversarial graffiti, and though not all target Private Weiland, those slandering him account for nearly half.⁴⁴

While troop graffitists like Weiland’s detractor sought to consign their foes to infamy through textual slander alone, others memorialized domestic enemies through offensive artwork used in tandem with text. One particularly expressive anonymous slanderer repeatedly portrayed his enemy, one Bobby Davis – or “Peckerwood Davis,” “Dickeybird Davis,” or “I’ll suck a dick if I can Davis” – as male genitalia personified, in bright red ink, no less. Three separate renderings of an erect penis and testicles, cartoonishly dehumanized with bird wings and legs, accompany captions all disparaging Bobby Davis. Of note, the longest text includes grammatical and mechanical errors as well as malapropisms before it draws the reader’s attention

⁴⁴ For these and other examples of textual slander, see all three slides from Canvas No. 1574c0126.

toward the largest penis doodle of all: “If your filling tired and pettered out. See Bobby Davis make you fill young again like this >.”⁴⁵

Slanderous graffiti like these abound. One canvas is littered with accusations like “Parker sucks pricks” and a giant cartoon of the never-fully-identified “Parker,” not just performing fellatio but relishing it: “MMMMMMMM, good.” The canvas also informs passers-by that “Parker eats shit on rye,” that “Parker jerks off twice a night,” and that “Parker sucks dead donkey dicks.”⁴⁶ As these and other graffiti bear out, Weiland’s, Davis’s, and Parker’s detractors seem nearly obsessed with feminizing their targets as profanely as possible. Such sexualized vilification is a phenomenon graffiti scholars term “scapegoating.” Much as the word suggests, scapegoating occurs when graffitiists redirect enmity from actual targets to literarily or artistically depicted ones. For example, a troop may harbor any number of frustrations, sexual or otherwise or actual enmity or hatred for another individual or group. Yet circumstances, personal restraint, or established and prevailing mores – such as mandated expectations of military camaraderie – prevent venting against the frustrating agent personally. When actual verbal abuse or physical violence is thwarted, then individuals frequently displace frustrations into sexually aggressive graffiti slandering a scapegoat or scapegoats.⁴⁷ Scapegoating is so prevalent in the graffiti universe that it warranted its own technical term. And though scapegoating, scapegoaters, and their habitual

⁴⁵ To see these and other colorful examples of pictographic and textual slander, see Canvas Nos. 1574c0231, 1574c0008, 1574c0014, and 1574c015. Myriad others abound in the collection, all worth perusing.

⁴⁶ See 1574c0364.

⁴⁷ Ernest L. Abel and Barbara E. Buckley, *The Handwriting on the Wall: Toward a Sociology and Psychology of Graffiti*, part of the *Contributions in Sociology* series, No. 27, (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1977), 106.

anonymity and borderline illiteracy all invite examination and explanation, such exercises fall at present outside the purview of this study. What remains, however, is at least a cursory enquiry into what an almost exclusively “domestic” adversarial graffiti record suggests.

Though knowing precisely what or who inspired troops’ scapegoating is impossible without personal corroboration, trying to understand *why* most adversarial graffiti targeted domestic foes rather than Vietnamese may develop a more complete picture of troop mindset on the eve of combat operations. The simplest explanation might result from examining simple chronology, a case of “out of sight, out of mind.” Dates and other time indicators in the graffiti suggest, though it’s impossible to know for sure, that troops in transit *to* rather than from Vietnam seem to have authored most of the graffiti, adversarial or otherwise. The glaring absence of references to the Vietnamese themselves argues for an en-route-to-war verdict. Graffiti statistically didn’t target Vietnamese because troops statistically hadn’t encountered them yet. All their most recent interactions, those that would have most likely involved adversarial circumstances, involved superior officers, drill instructors, or fellow GIs. Since their most recent adversarial associations and circumstances derived from domestic contexts involving domestic relationships, vilifying domestic adversaries most frequently and prominently in their graffiti makes sense.

A more clinical lens may also explain whether psychology underlays the lopsided ratio of domestic to foreign adversarial graffiti. The disproportionately high numbers of inscriptions targeting other Americans versus those miniscule few targeting

a Vietnamese enemy might suggest denial or avoidance of contemplating potential impending death from combat causes. This doesn't imply cowardice, but rather no need or desire to contemplate the enemy before circumstances required them to. Why borrow trouble before it starts? In other words, *not* obsessing about the enemy prematurely, while simultaneously venting ire at an adversarial relationship already experienced, actually served as a psychological survival mechanism, a mental health outlet. The graffiti served as a coping mechanism.

In a similar "coping" or "venting" thesis, but one with a very different tension source, Allan Walker Read argues that troop graffiti employing taboo language—in this case, slandering comrades instead of the enemy—result from troops harboring unrecognized anger at a government violating their cultural and religious "Thou shalt not kill" upbringing by not just sanctioning but encouraging and training them to kill fellow human beings. Needing an outlet, then, for their pent-up rage, the troops projected or misdirected it onto targets most quickly and easily recognized in memory and thus most urgently characterized in self-expressive and therapeutic graffiti. In short, domestically adversarial graffiti functioned as a release valve for understandable and culturally appropriate rage—at the government ordering them to war—but a release that nonetheless targeted some rather culturally and emotionally inappropriate targets: one's fellow troops. The graffiti, then, functioned as the unconscious, artistic equivalent of a misguided and misdirected fragging.⁴⁸

Whatever evoked these sentiments, whether unrecognized angst, misdirected

⁴⁸ Read, 13.

ire, or consciously recognized anger at actual or perceived grievances, they found outlet in artistic or textual attack on the most recently manifested and easily recognized adversaries. Though an ultimate and concrete “why” will prove continually elusive without more evidence, at present what can be known with relative historical certainty is that troops traveling to and from Vietnam frequently characterized and expressed their contemporary personal relationships in adversarial terms. Moreover, when they did target particular enemies, they almost never targeted adversaries on the basis of race, class, or status as a Vietnamese enemy, but rather they focused on other Americans. And though troops hardly ever articulate whatever slight, infraction, or offensive personality trait that created their adversaries or adversarial contexts, we can reasonably deduce that they must have had their bases in historical reality, or else it arguably would never have materialized into graffiti that survived for scholars to study.

In one regard, adversarial tension and like graffiti aboard makes sense. These ships carried hundreds upon hundreds of troops in addition to the regular crew, and voyages on the *Pope* averaged about twenty-one long, sea-sickening days aboard, generally below deck where tropical heat and humidity made the passage almost unbearable. Terry Musser of the 1st Cavalry Division embarked from Savannah, Georgia, on the *USNS Geiger*, an ocean liner converted to troop transport by retrofitting tiny cabins so troops could berth like cordwood. His voyage took thirty-two days at sea, eleven longer than the *Pope* leaving the West Coast because the *Geiger* departed from the East Coast and had to pass thru the Panama Canal. The seemingly endless

voyage combined with overcrowded, confining conditions below deck caused Musser to marveled that the 753 officers and men in his battalion kept from killing each other.⁴⁹ John Lenihan, who as a young officer endured transport aboard a similar vessel during the Vietnam era, recalls that in stormy weather, conditions down below deck in berthing areas ran beyond inhumane. The fetid stench of many hundreds sweating, dozens vomiting daily, no one sleeping, and everyone on edge resulted in officers being posted below deck constantly to prevent – or break up, as often proved the case – fights among the men who after not very long began behaving like caged rats.⁵⁰ And little else says domestic adversary quite like fratricide. Willie Williams, whose 25th Infantry Division shipped over in January of 1966, recalls that one of his fellow grunts was killed aboard during a gambling dispute.⁵¹

While the *Pope's* graffiti doesn't document tension quite so deadly, conditions aboard these long deployment voyages certainly offer compelling contexts from whence domestically adversarial graffiti might have originated. What's more, these artifacts in tandem with other accounts demonstrate how young men facing potentially horrifying immediate futures at war had their plights compounded by being held captive for weeks with nothing to do but consider what loomed. The combination proved so horrible that Vernon Janick with the 4th Infantry Division deploying from Fort Lewis to Tuy Hoa in August of 1966 recalled that by voyage's end, "we didn't care if [the enemy] were sitting on the shore waiting for us with machine guns. You were

⁴⁹ James R. Ebert, *A Life in a Year: The American Infantryman in Vietnam, 1965-1972*, (Novato, CA: Presidio, 1993), 72.

⁵⁰ John Lenihan, oral history given to the author, June 2014.

⁵¹ Ebert, *A Life in a Year*, 72.

just glad to get off [the ship] and go at her.”⁵² If troops would rather face an enemy barrage than spend one more moment aboard, it’s reasonable to suppose life on the *Pope* and others like her would engender the severity of sentiments necessary for adversarial graffiti.

Less vitriolic, more innocuous, even amusing examples of adversarial graffiti also exist. Frequent claims of geographical superiority, for example, invariably compelled rival troops to dispute such claims and voice their own opinions of “proper” geographic hierarchy. A dialogue between and among troops resulted that, although in most cases prove undateable with regard to inscription sequence, nonetheless reveals strong and repeated sentiments of geographic pride. One such example depicts the claim, “CLEVELAND: ‘THE BEST LOCATION IN THE NATION,’” which prompted a rival’s subsequent qualifier, “...after Philly,” and drew scorn from still a third commentator, which read bluntly, “Ohio sucks dick.”⁵³

The absurdity of anthropomorphizing a geographic entity by accusing it of performing fellatio may amuse or disgust, but upon closer scrutiny, something more relationally complex had occurred. An initially mundane-looking bit of graffiti preserved, in essence, discourse. Three separate travelers argued with one another at three discrete junctures, ultimately transforming what initially conveyed civic pride into a dialogue and then into a disembodied three-way roundtable at which only one member was present at a time. It constitutes, on the one hand, a historical record of three separate monologues, since each entry was voiced in absence of the other parties.

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Canvas No. 1574c0271.

Yet on the other hand, it constitutes a three-way conversation between troops carried out over an undefined period of time in which each party expressed harmless but yet still adversarial and contradictory sentiments. It demonstrates the strength of troop convictions about fondness for and pride in wherever they called home. It preserves the competitive nature of young American males in their late teens and early twenties in the 1960s and early 1970s, as well as the means to which they would stoop – scapegoating, feminizing their adversary – in order to prevail, even in a contest as innocuous as whose home is best – or worst, as the case may be.

Other rivalries appear in the troop graffiti, most either abusing one another on the one hand or asserting some kind of superiority while impugning someone or something else with inferiority on the other. Mechanized infantrymen emasculate Airborne Rangers. Unit and branch rivalry was quite common, even after troops arrived in-country and had faced the same enemy for a time. During one sustained enemy artillery barrage, Marine Jeff Kelly had to seek shelter in a nearby bunker housing Army Dusters.⁵⁴ He wrote in his combat diary of the Marines' rivalry with Army troops:

We Marines thought the Army guys had pretty skating duty. Army and Marines generally avoided each other. Marines held them in low regard, considering them sloppy and lazy. They said that we were all gung-ho nut cases. Weeks after our bunker was sandbagged, the Army guys still had not completely finished theirs.⁵⁵

Graffiti aboard ship – and the lives it reflected – illustrate that largely benign rivalries among troops like Kelly's were everywhere already well under way. Short timers mock

⁵⁴ Dusters were abbreviated armored vehicles, sort of "sawed-off tanks" mounted with twin 40-mm antiaircraft guns. Kelly, *DMZ Diary*, 52.

⁵⁵ Entry for 25 March 1968, *Ibid.*

FNGs and then new recruits anemically retort with the functional equivalent of a juvenile “I know you are, but what am I?” Chevrolet devotees disparage Fords. And in another three-way argument, fans of various university members of the NCAA’s now-defunct Southwest Conference graffiti their smack talk back and forth across canvas. The inscriptions seem to indicate the following chronological sequence. A University of Texas fan first drew a Longhorn logo and wrote, “Texas No.1.” At some point a University of Arkansas fan defaced the original to read “Texas No.10,” either before or after adding a Razorback mascot doodle and an “Arkansas No. 1” entry of his own. Still later yet another fan defaced the Texas graffito further, while symbolically emasculating its creator by adding two words, transforming a formerly school-proud graffito to the now-slandering “Texas sucks Oklahoma.” Finally, as if not to be outdone by either graffitist, the Oklahoman rendered a near-perfect drawing of the Oklahoma Sooner logo, a horse-drawn covered wagon.⁵⁶ Such passionate rivalries communicate much about troops aboard the *Pope*, not the least of which testifies to the perennially competitive nature of American young men immersed in a military culture that encouraged both asserting and demonstrating dominance over a foe. Little else typifies institutionalized one-upsmanship than standing armies deployed to war zones. And more still could be said about one-on-one (or one-on-one-on-one) adversarial graffiti, but given their sheer numbers – and those numbers’ implications – it seems crucially important to discuss those graffiti disparaging the most prominent, the most monolithic, the most frequently abused and criticized adversary of all: the United States

⁵⁶ See Canvas Nos. respectively: 1574c0258; “FNG” is military shorthand for “fucking new guy,” 1574c0025; 1574c0271; 1574c0280.

Military.

One scholar writes that “graffiti, as an aspect of culture, can be used as an unobtrusive measure to reveal patterns of customs and attitudes of society.”⁵⁷ Indeed, graffiti aboard the *USNS General John Pope* clearly articulate “customs and attitudes” and troop sentiments about the military and their life and circumstances therein. Troops comment on seemingly everything military, from transportation accommodations specifically to the command structure generally. From decisionmakers’ wisdom (or lack thereof) to the particulars of the most banal daily duties, virtually anything imaginable to do with the military found voice or vision in troop graffiti. In fact, some form of critical commentary about the military is recognizable in nearly half the slides examined, at frequencies of nearly three per canvas appearance. And if indeed “observing graffiti will reveal changes in customs and attitudes” while enabling us to “reconstruct much about life” among cultures of the past, then examining troop criticism, resistance, and dissent, the most passionately expressed of all the graffiti types, should prove worthwhile.⁵⁸

The United States military – or any military – constitutes its very own subculture. It possesses its own values, its own class structure, or at the very least, social ranking system. It harbors a very particular sociology and psychology. It creates, follows, and preserves its own traditions, customs, attitudes, and beliefs. It constructs and honors its own types and archetypes. And one of the most archetypal characteristics of the military is that both in form and function, as a means to an end –

⁵⁷ Stocker, *et al*, 356.

⁵⁸ *Ibid*.

as well as often an end in itself – it is predicated on notions of hierarchy, the chain of command, an unquestioning adherence to order and following orders. It's a system depending significantly on human submission and subordination. People follow orders or people die. Consequently, from troops' perspectives, nothing less than a monolithic, life-and-death presence controlled nearly every aspect of their lives.⁵⁹ And for men raised in the U.S., largely in circumstances of personal liberty, autonomy, and freedom of expression, abiding every day in the shadow of military authority seems, at least from the graffiti, to have engendered nearly pandemic attitudes of resistance and protest against the military in general and some aspects of it quite specifically.

Why graffiti though? Why not other forms of civil and uncivil disobedience, such as mutiny, or even fragging, for that matter? Certainly both occurred, especially later in the war when it seemed to many men fighting on the ground both that Washington's credibility gap was widening and that the war seemed a lost cause. Yet earlier in the war, when circumstances didn't yet warrant such radical resistance measures, graffiti served very specific needs. By their very clandestinely-applied nature, they are at least countercultural and socially deviant, if not outrightly taboo. To be sure, much of it constitutes playful, harmless banter among comrades. Yet depending on their physical, emotional, or political contexts, they frequently constitute rebellious acts, albeit paradoxically, culturally acceptable ones.⁶⁰ In function if not form, then, they generally served as release valves for pressures that might otherwise

⁵⁹ Timothy J. Owens, "The Effect of Post-High School Social Context on Self-Esteem," *The Sociological Quarterly* Vol. 33, No. 4 (Winter, 1992), 555.

⁶⁰ The paradox results from graffiti being a countercultural taboo behavior in American society at large but an effectively culturally acceptable form of resistance and release within the military subculture.

manifest in much more damaging behavior and consequently, too, served a valuable purpose. Whatever its ultimate function for each individual creator, much of the *Pope's* graffiti content reinforces a resistance thesis, since resistance, criticism, and dissent indeed seem to show up at every turn.

If graffiti clearly functioned for many as “a form of resistance: to ‘anonymously’ yet publicly denounce social or political hegemony, or question dominant values,” then it merits historians’ attention.⁶¹ One epigraph in particular, “F.T.A.,” or “Fuck the Army,” and various derivatives of it and other expressions of dissent and denunciation appear some 362 times in this study’s graffiti sampling. While that number constitutes a modest 5 percent of the total sample, some manner of criticism or scrawled expletive targeting the military or one or more of its branches appears in nearly half of the sample’s images. And since “F.T.[insert target service branch here]” appears more frequently than any of the many other kinds of dissent graffiti, it suggests that at least at the time of inscription, the troops felt no love lost for the military and meant to express their sentiments in the most graphic, explosive expletive available in the English language.

History teaches that soldiers everywhere have perennially constituted a verbally obscene lot. The normally societally taboo “fuck” and its derivatives appear in the context of military life so commonly that it ceases even to register to the ears of that culture’s insiders.⁶² Yet “fuck” appearing so frequently among troop graffiti

⁶¹ Katherine Giles and Melanie Giles, “Signs of the Times: Nineteenth – Twentieth Century Graffiti in the Farms of the Yorkshire Wolds,” in *Wild Signs: Graffiti in Archaeology and History*, Jeff Oliver and Tim Neal, eds., (Oxford, England: Archeopress, 2010), 50.

⁶² Read, 14.

demonstrates much while raising several questions. On the one hand, it could just embody the sort of masculine, devil-may-care culture that the military both fostered and valued. On the other, such culturally taboo outbursts arguably also indicate the intensity of troops' opinions on the military. Not once do more culturally acceptable euphemisms like "Screw the Army," or "To hell with the Army" ever appear in the graffiti record. Only the much more visceral and socially taboo "Fuck the Army" turns up. The sheer frequency of such outbursts, too, documents the widespread vehemence of critical and dissident sentiments among troops at the time.

Whether erupting from habit, from biologically and/or culturally produced testosterone levels, or from intense feelings about military life, troops rarely communicate the event or circumstances that prompted each epigraphic eruption of "F.T.A." Why does "F.T.A.," specifically turn up so much? What about the Army life merits such expletive commentary? One reasonable assumption is deprivation. Deprivation of all kinds has historically desocialized groups and individuals and fostered criticism and the critics who utter it, and the military at this point in troops' lives had served as the agent of deprivation for almost everything they held dear, and thus they felt it merited their scorn. The military had almost completely deprived troops of even seeing women, let alone fraternizing with them. It had deprived them of ideal sleeping and working conditions. It stripped away any non-collective showering and toilet arrangements. It took them away indefinitely (potentially, permanently) from home-cooked meals or their favorite drinking and dining haunts. The military deprived troops of personal agency in almost every aspect of their lives. Consequently,

“F.T.A.,” in troops’ minds, was completely and utterly justified. “Fuck the Army” signified, communicated, and symbolized “values and feelings that [troops] regarded as legitimate or appropriate in a continuing process of subversion.”⁶³

Though the critically imprecise “F.T.A.” appears most frequently, troops did manage to record more specific criticisms. One graffiti trend in particular illustrates a common tension: between draftees, those unwillingly voyaging to the front, and volunteer servicemen, or “lifers,” insider slang for those who enlisted willfully. Not surprisingly then, given that the military “deserved” so much derision already, anyone who chose deliberately to become an agent of that hated entity invited upon themselves their fellow troops’ disdain, contempt, and ridicule. One graffiti illustrates the “R.A.” or “Regular Army” soldier as a rat.⁶⁴ Another more graphically creative image portrays the “Typical Lifer” as half rat, half spewing penis wearing sergeant’s stripes and combat boots. Yet another depicts a bespectacled human being but labels him “Sgt. Rat.”⁶⁵ A particularly unflattering graffiti feminizes and emasculates career military men by depicting a man performing fellatio on a giant penis and branding the generic fellator simply, “Lifer.”⁶⁶ A final pictographic example suggests without much text at all a troop’s critical opinion of a typical non-com: a potbellied gunnery sergeant looking like a cross between Fred Flintstone and comic strip slacker Beetle Bailey’s superior, Sergeant Snorkel. The cartoon graffiti sergeant sports dually insulting characteristics: a blank, stupid facial expression and an embarrassingly small penis, which he apparently

⁶³ Giles and Giles, 50.

⁶⁴ See 1574c0008.

⁶⁵ See 1574c0071.

⁶⁶ See 1574c0189.

doesn't realize is hanging out his pants. Clearly, this graffito's artist attacked both the intelligence and the masculinity of sergeants in his rendering of "regular army."⁶⁷ These pictographic graffiti document in no uncertain terms widespread attitudes of criticism, dissent, resistance, and scorn for the military and the men who willfully represented it.

The bulk of the scorn that draftees heap upon enlistees, however, typically appears as text, such as the self-answered rhetorical question, "WAHT MOTHERFUCKER LIKE THE DAM ARMY? R.A."⁶⁸ One particularly critical graffitist seems to have felt so violated by his "Asshole Sargents" that he accuses the American government of nothing less than certain, impending, sexual assault via sodomy, warning, "LOOK OUT: UNCLE SAM WILL FUCK YOU WHILE YOU SLEEP." Other sexualized emotional outbursts such as "ARMY SUCKS," elucidate troop feelings for the United States military. The same soldier also seems to have felt that the most commonly appearing acronym, "F.T.A.," insufficiently communicated his sentiments and thus chose to write them out in their full unabridged glory. Scrawling simply and plainly his critique of the military, with "Fuck the Army," he also scripted a more broad-based critique of the government that got America into war – and thus him, literally, into this boat, with the short and sweet, "FUCK UNCLE SAM."⁶⁹ The graffiti reveals intense emotions aboard the *Pope*, and troops found myriad colorful graffiti outlets through which to alleviate and chronicle it.

Acrostics turn up less frequently than most graffiti types, but when they do,

⁶⁷ See 1574c0145.

⁶⁸ See 1574c0136.

⁶⁹ See 1574c0146.

they provide further evidence of a tradition of dissent against the military that seems to have transcended the rank structure. For example, acrostic wordplay on “U.S. Army” could have been criticizing superiors, fellow enlisteds, or both. It neither clarifies nor distinguishes its authorship or any specific individual target. On the contrary, it seems to have intended blanket condemnation:

U.nlimited
S.upply of
A.ssholes
R.etards
M.isfits
Yo-yos⁷⁰

Acrostics like those appearing in *Pope* graffiti derived from a military tradition toward “convenience language,” specifically, “convenience abbreviations,” like “E.T.S.,” “C.O.,” and even “S.N.A.F.U.” whose primary functions were to eliminate cumbersome titles, phrases, procedures, and sentiments that pervade military life. Yet convenience language specific to military life also inadvertently served a secondary function. It gave soldiers “a unique universe of discourse” that helped to distinguish them from civilians while simultaneously binding them to the in-group, the military – that very military these critics intended to condemn.⁷¹ Thus, the *Pope*’s acrostics epitomize irony. Troops effectively appropriated military in-group convenience abbreviations to set themselves apart as critics of said military in-group-ness. Did they know they were manifesting irony or did it escape them, so steeped were they into military culture? In another example, it is difficult to tell whether a first graffitist intended to laud his

⁷⁰ See 1574c0370.

⁷¹ Frederick Elkin, “The Soldier’s Language,” *The American Journal of Sociology*, Vol. 51, No. 5, Human Behavior in Military Society (Mar., 1946), 415.

hallucinogenic pastime only to have it defaced by a subsequent passenger, or whether the graffito appeared in its original form as a dissident acrostic. Either way, the soldier who got the last [or first] word preserved perfectly his attitude and opinion at the time:

L.ifers
S.uck
D.ick.⁷²

Regardless of authorship or literary device awareness, these particular acrostics' irony remains pronounced: in their bids to dissent against and dissociate from the military, troops paradoxically employed a very military mechanism to communicate and preserve their contemporary anti-military sentiments.

The reasons why dissent and criticism arise so pervasively typically remains unclear. It could have derived from the military's own culture of criticism and thanklessness, as one graffitist lamented, "WHEN ONE DOES WRONG, NO ONE FORGETS. WHEN ONE DOES RIGHT, NO ONE REMEMBERS."⁷³ It could have been the accommodations, as communicated by nicknaming the boat the "*USNS General John Barf*" or by the frequent hand-journaled ships logs noting seasickness.⁷⁴ Troops regularly wrote rather simply and matter-of-factly, "This ship sucks," or "The FOOD in this place STINKS!" or "... Slowly sinking. If Charlie don't get us, this ship will."⁷⁵ Troops throughout history targeted military clumsiness or inefficiency in their commentary, and the *Pope's* troops maintained the tradition, occasionally with

⁷² See 1574c0313.

⁷³ See 1574c0158.

⁷⁴ See 1574c0008 and 1574c0030, respectively.

⁷⁵ See 1574c0074.

eloquence.⁷⁶ Michael J. Boughton of Coeur d' Alene, Idaho, satirized sarcastically the purposelessness he felt as a troop-in-transit: "Sure is fun sittin' on this pathetic flotilla engaging one's resources in such fascinating activities: 1) life preserver folding; 2) Bingo; 3) first-run première movies; 4) throw-up activities; 5) getting up for breakfast so you can wait for lunch so you'll be ready for dinner." On the very same canvas, Mr. Boughton's preceding or succeeding bunkmate, Dan Bates, also offered his blunt commentary: "U.S. Army: an institution created by genius – unfortunately given to the management of incompetent morons." Mr. Bates' choice of prepositions, "of," clouds whether the morons he disparaged were those doing the managing or those being managed. Either way, we know he held to a long tradition of critiquing "the Army way" and his feelings for at least some in the Vietnam-era military were none too fond.⁷⁷

While most of the dissent graffiti remains generic and non-specific, much of it indicates the same political polarization ongoing in the United States in the 1960s and 1970s. To be sure, both the antiwar movement and support given to troop dissent from outside the military system proved key factors affecting enlisted culture. Leading public and intellectual figures championed all manner of military personnel dissent, viewing protest favorably that would have in other times been regarded as seditious or treasonous.⁷⁸ Not surprisingly then, troops' protest graffiti conforms very typically to the counterculture tradition and proves consistent with the critical and dissident

⁷⁶ Arnold M. Rose, "Bases of American Military Morale in World War II," *The Public Opinion Quarterly*, Vol. 9, No. 4 (Winter, 1945-1946), 415.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 412-13.

⁷⁸ Charles C. Moskos, Jr., "The Military," *Annual Review of Sociology*, Vol.2, (1976), 61.

behavior very likely familiar to anyone who reached selective service age during the Vietnam era.⁷⁹ One canvas in particular sports several sentiments that would have seemed perfectly at home on picket signage outside the Johnson or Nixon White House. “WAR IS HELL,” and “PEACE IS LOVE” platitudes appear on the *Pope’s* canvases alongside labels of “FLOWER CHILD” and entreaties for troops to “BE A HIPPIY.”⁸⁰

Yet just as contradictory and paradoxical as some countercultural behavior stateside seemed, troop graffiti also occasionally indicates some striking political schizophrenia. Back home, Vietnam-era conservatives and liberals alike found themselves perplexed by acts like those of militant radical antiwar activists Dwight and Karl Armstrong who bombed and killed at the University of Wisconsin in order to secure peace.⁸¹ Historians may detect a similar contemporary tension and disconnect between a peace symbol graffito near the words “LOVE PEACE” whose very same author also criticized the military’s highest commander, the Commander-in-Chief, with “LBJ SUCKS.” It seems yet more severely antithetical when juxtaposed with an adjacent dark lament in the same handwriting: “WHERE IS LEE HARVEY OSWALD NOW THAT WE NEED HIM”?⁸² Just as they did concerning President Johnson’s and Nixon’s aerial bombing policies, stateside doves wondered how the “New Years Gang” could rationalize bombing for peace. And yet similar tensions clearly manifested in troop graffiti among military personnel when a self-proclaimed flower child nonetheless notes American society’s lack of an effective presidential assassin. It seems

⁷⁹ Ibid, 62.

⁸⁰ See 1574c0021.

⁸¹ Terry H. Anderson, *The Movement and the Sixties: Protest in America from Greensboro to Wounded Knee*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 367-8.

⁸² See 1574c0021.

political tensions respected neither party nor profession as troops struggled with the same issues as protesters back home.

Such paradoxically dark graffiti weren't solitary events, either. Another troop in fact committed a felony when he called for the president's death outright, writing, "Kill LBJ," though he seems to have tried to mask his murderous sentiment with his line's closing humor, "and stamp out ugly children."⁸³ Whether or not the troop merely meant to insult Lynda Bird and Luci Baines Johnson's physical appearance or whether he truly desired for someone to frag his Commander-in-Chief, the fact remains, he apparently so loathed his lot in life that, either inadvertently or knowingly, he risked federal imprisonment to express felonious dissent and criticism. Overall, imperative mood commands such as those exhorting readers to "Make Love, not War" proved far more common among troop graffiti than presidential death threats, but it proves nonetheless telling to discover how, not unlike the Armstrong brothers' "New Years Gang," who advocated violent resistance as a means to an end, a few of the allegedly peace-loving counterculture aboard the *Pope* protested military involvement in Vietnam, sometimes in violent terms.⁸⁴

Perhaps the darkest historical evidence among all the graffiti of potential acts of protest, dissent, and criticism are two references to losing a troop or troops at sea. The

⁸³ See 1574c0306. Threatening or advocating the death of the president became a felony in 1917, *The Federal Reporter: Cases Argued and Determined in the Circuit and District Courts of the United States*, Vol. 241, (St. Paul, MN: West Publishing Company, 1917), 152.

⁸⁴ See 1574c0266. It is also interesting to note that while threatening or advocating presidential assassination constituted a felony (whether the authors knew it or not), they still seem to have been savvy and careful enough to maintain anonymity. Yet like other anonymous graffitiists, they do reveal rather a lot of themselves. Ironically – and emblematic of how LBJ felt attacked from all political sides – the first graffitiist longing for LBJ's end seems an ultra-liberal, pot-smoking hippie flower child from New York, while the second calling for LBJ's death appears from all his various graffiti to be a staunch, religiously conservative, Goldwater-backing Marine from Virginia who enlisted willfully, both circa 1965-1968.

canvas that preserved what is most likely the first recorded entry is haunting for a number of reasons, not the least of which is the entry itself, which reads in the smallest font on the canvas only the brief statement, "1-26-67, ONE MAN LOST AT SEA." The entry, at first seems mainly tragic, perhaps appropriately so, given that even by early 1967 the war was intensifying, Johnson was quickly escalating troop numbers, and non-combat deaths, consequently, were simply an increasing statistical likelihood.

Although no way exists to tell if the entries are related chronologically, it is worthwhile to note that the lone entry appears alongside two "F.T.A." graffiti, one reading, "We ALL think the Army sucks," and the earlier-mentioned rhetorical question, "WAHT MOTHERFUCKER LIKE THE DAM ARMY?"⁸⁵ Where the entry takes on significantly more meaning is when we see a similar entry dated just two days after the first one.

Army Specialist Jerry M. Wells of Martinsville, Indiana, like many other troops traveling on the *General John Pope*, recorded his journey to Vietnam on the bunk canvas overhead like a sort of hybrid ship's log and travel narrative. He chronicled, among other things, a port of call and shore leave in Okinawa, as well as the quality of the booze and women he encountered there. His final entry, though, thrusts the earlier anonymous record of a man overboard into suddenly sharper prominence. Wells' entry reads, "Well, today is the 28 [January 1967]. We land [in Vietnam] tomorrow, the 29th Jan. A soldier *threw himself overboard*, we never found him."⁸⁶ The record shows that the *Pope* was inbound to Vietnam, not on a return journey to the States, so a suicide resulting perhaps from Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder and a troop's perceived or

⁸⁵ See 1574c0136.

⁸⁶ See 1574c0158, [*italic emphasis, mine*].

imagined inability to reenter civilian society after combat seems unlikely from the chronology. Yet without the ships logs and access to any formal investigation records, knowing the full story behind the troop's death proves elusive. It could have been a homicide that the perpetrator or perpetrators concealed by spreading misinformation about a suicide. It could have been an accident or negligence that the Pentagon sought to cover up. Whatever the case, this canvas proves so incredibly valuable because at present, Specialist Wells' graffito remains our sole accessible record of this anonymous troop's death.⁸⁷

Or does it? As many questions as answers arise. Does the first graffito on 26 January 1967 speak of a separate death? Its description is much more generic, "One man lost at sea." Does Wells' record indicate the same man mentioned on the 26th, a death he only learned of and recorded later on the 28th, or is Wells' recorded suicide a second record of a second death closely following on the heels of the first one? Whereas the first graffito indicates only a man lost at sea, Wells' entry specifically records the death as a suicide, though also indicating that this man, like the other, was never found. If indeed Wells' report is accurate, and if the man indeed killed himself on his way to Vietnam, why did he do it? It is plausible to suggest that the suicide constituted an ultimate act of nonverbal protest. Perhaps the troop couldn't face the prospect of fighting in Vietnam. Perhaps he could not stomach the idea of killing someone he'd never met and who had never earned his enmity. Or maybe he felt no deep,

⁸⁷ At the time of this writing, the National Archives in College Park, Maryland, that houses all Naval ships log records from 1940 - 1980, including the *USNS General John Pope's*, was in the process of accessioning all its logs, rendering them wholly inaccessible to the public. Until accessioning ends and records can be accessed and details ascertained, Wells' graffito seems to constitute the only known record, accurate or otherwise, of this suicide.

philosophical or political dilemma whatsoever. He may have merely been clinically depressed in an age before effective pharmaceutical antidepressants and saw suicide as his only way out of an unbearable circumstance in which he held absolutely no control over his own mortality. What is more troubling as well as telling, suicides like the ones *Pope* graffitiists record were not isolated events. Jerry Vetterkind recalls a member of his 198th Light Infantry Brigade throwing himself overboard a thousand miles outside of San Francisco on their voyage to Vietnam in October of 1967. Neither the crew's instant reaction nor a thorough search of the vicinity resulted in recovering the suicide's remains.⁸⁸

These and other suicides may well have been acts of protest: protest against the war; protest against killing; protest against loss of agency and self-determination; perhaps all the above. They might have been troops' final act to reclaim control. If, in the several preceding months of indoctrination and training and constant reiteration of combat realities, they fatalistically foresaw only impending death, then perhaps they reasoned that if they couldn't keep from dying, they might as well choose where and how they died and acted to do so in a way NOT determined by the Pentagon or some as-of-yet unencountered enemy. From one perspective, then, these suicides, as suicides often do, could conceivably have constituted the supreme act of protest and dissent. Only the discovery of further research and documentary evidence will shed new light on this tragic event. For now, these troops' suicidal motivations will have to remain in the shadowy realm of speculation and supposition.

⁸⁸ Ebert, *A Life in a Year*, 72.

Graffiti, whether written, carved, doodled, drawn, or painted, creates for historians material meanings that are socially relevant and historically consequential, while providing a “window upon the voices of the dispossessed.” It serves to “highlight and actively fix the identities” of those whose relationships with and within the military establishment (which by their very nature were subordinate) “were otherwise fleeting and insubstantial” to both people and circumstances of much larger strategic and geopolitical designs.⁸⁹ Graffiti prove so very valuable, first because they vary as much as their geographical contexts. Second, they present such rich repositories of historical information, because they serve[d] such varied functions for their creators:

They may mark territory in an attempt to exclude outsiders, or be invitations to dialogue. They can be subversive public statements, while others form a closed language for insiders. Depending on their context, wild signs [graffiti] can enshrine a challenge to law and order, while from certain perspectives they may constitute natural law itself. Frequently they operate as signifiers of memory and identity, acknowledging a wider range of actors, times, spaces, and concerns, which may not ordinarily be brought into dialogue other than through such materializations.⁹⁰

In addition to larger existential questions of identity; sentimental ones about regional affiliation and sense of place; or relational ones of agency, authority, power, love, and hate, graffiti can answer questions about the mundane, about the everyday lives of those often historically marginalized or overlooked, those heretofore previously anonymous masses of men and women who served, lived, and died in Vietnam. And

⁸⁹ Jeff Oliver and Tim Neal, “Wild Signs: An Introduction,” in *Wild Signs: Graffiti in Archaeology and History*, part of the series, *Studies in Contemporary and Historical Archaeology* 6, (Oxford, England: Archeopress, 2010), 2. Since I will be referring to multiple scholarly essays contained in *Wild Signs*, for brevity’s sake, subsequent citations will reference the essay title followed by an abbreviated citation “in *Wild Signs*.”

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 1-2.

although these often barely legible scrawlings render only the briefest of snapshots of sentiments expressed within a very narrow window of time as troops sailed to or from the war, the graffiti constitute concrete records of those sentiments nonetheless, about most of which the historical record holds few or no other accounts. As University of Virginia Institute for Public History director Phyllis K. Leffler said of the shipboard communication form:

...Vietnam graffiti offers an unusual window into the lives of troops in limbo between the shores of America and their landing in Vietnam. The messages and drawings of soldiers left on their cots while traveling on [troopships] reveal the inner feelings of human beings confronting potential death, separation from loved ones, unknown and alien territory. The graffiti, which constitutes new primary artifacts, provide identity markers for the soldiers. Their personalities, relationships, regional connections, and fears come alive through their drawings. This is a meaningful way to juxtapose the public and official face of war with the personal and private one.⁹¹

Studying troop graffiti, then, while certainly unorthodox in terms of primary source options, can render for posterity some rather stark (if necessarily abbreviated) insights into the life-worlds, perceptions – the inner-histories – as well as the external physical realities of American troops serving in Vietnam. Furthermore, and perhaps most importantly, graffiti, like other vernacular expressions, records for us an *emotional* history rarely so colorfully preserved and so pregnant with historical promise. Like cadences behind and the folksongs, poetry and other sources ahead, they constitute an undeniable historical treasure trove just awaiting additional laborers who would mine their truths and bring them out into the light.

⁹¹ <http://www.vietnamgraffiti.com/about-the-walker-graffiti>, accessed 13 August 2011.

CHAPTER III

AMERICAN SONGS: LYRICAL LENS INTO WAR

"The war in Southeast Asia has generated quite a number of songs, written and sung by the participants, and as much as anything else, they tell it like it is. This is history, and it deserves to be preserved." –Major John Roberts, 1970. ¹

"I do not delude myself that these are great songs, but they are truthful songs, they are historic songs, and they deserve to be preserved. By some people, they will even be cherished." –Major Joseph F. Tusso. ²

Every war births its own folk culture. Vietnam proved no different. Just as with the graffiti tradition, soldiers, sailors, airmen, and Marines throughout America's long history in Vietnam found ways, even within the constraints of military protocol and the exigencies of combat, to give themselves, their experiences, their emotions a voice. One popular and effective medium among troops for such endeavors was the folksong.³ Troops' folksongs varied as widely as the functions they served, and as collective and individual experiences multiplied, built upon themselves, providing backdrop and context for time in a war zone, thoughts and sentiments about everything they had endured came pouring forth. A historical treasure trove resulted.

Troops' inner-history survives in abundance within the texts of what folklorists term as occupational social songs, a common and time-honored phenomenon in military life dating back to Caesar's legions and beyond.⁴ Song, like graffiti, served

¹ Lydia M. Fish, "Songs of the Air Force in the Vietnam War," (1999), Electronic document. <http://faculty.buffalostate.edu/fishlm/folksongs/afsong.htm>, (accessed, February 12, 2014).

² Joseph F. Tusso, USAF, Ret., *Singing the Vietnam Blues: Songs of the Air Force in Southeast Asia*, (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 1990) 18.

³ For a review of the rationale into use of the term "folksong," refer to footnote 2 on page 2 of the preface.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 14. While folklorists use the technical term "occupational social songs" or just "occupational songs," for brevity's sake, I will use the terms "folksongs," "field songs," or just "songs" interchangeably.

valuable functions, yet what purpose it served for its authors and audiences is history every bit as much as what the texts reveal. In fact, function and history intertwined inextricably in the texts and as such are interdependent. Songs' functions cannot be separated from the historical events and experiences that birthed them. Combatants and witnesses to the war often penned their texts in response to very specific emotions that their personal experiences required them in a given moment to voice. When the men swelled and bellowed from all the bravado the military instilled in them, the songs communicated those states of mind. When troops suffered the constant creeping fear of dismemberment or death, the songs document that as well. When pilots lamented a fellow aviator shot down, they chronicled their impassioned, moving grief and tribute in lyrics, too. When gross ineptitude, whether in civilian or military leadership or even among comrades from other branches, merited the troops' criticism, scorn, or disparagement, songs served to communicate them efficiently and effectively. In other words, the function that troops required songs and their texts to serve at the time constitute part and parcel of the contexts that gave them voice. Function and history are inseparable.

The folksongs of Americans in the Vietnam War grew out of multiple historical contexts, from general to specific. Collectively speaking, these soldier songwriters came of age and underwent military training in the United States of America, with all its accompanying national mythologies, its post-World War II attitudes and convictions about life, and its beliefs about everything from masculine gender roles to time-honored acculturation and socialization within specific geographic and relational communities.

American acculturation – and of course, basic training – taught young males versions and expectations of patriotism, national duty, and personal honor. They learned from their fathers and uncles, the Greatest Generation, what “true” masculinity meant: to grow strong, live large, fight hard, and if needs be, die heroically. Parents, neighbors, friends, much of the Cold War popular culture, as well as civilian and military leaders, had told them that America’s interests in Vietnam – and by extension, its troops’ cause – was only right, good, proud, and noble. “The G.I. culture of the Vietnam War,” wrote Saigon bureau correspondent for the *New York Times* in 1966, “is what happens when young men of the Swinging Sixties (as the local Armed Forces radio station endlessly describes this decade), shaped by affluence, television and rock ‘n’ roll, are thrown into a mysterious country in pursuit of an elusive foe without really understanding why. As one weary G.I. said: ‘It ain’t funny, man. It just ain’t funny.’”⁵⁵

Indeed, Vietnam experienced firsthand typically proved anything but funny. With all its alien social complexities, its complicated, messy political realities, its largely Third-World cultural and economic milieu, but most importantly, its *very* different historical trajectories and contexts, Vietnam presented American troops with experiences starkly different than those long-held in mainstream American popular imagination. Hence, war in general and the Vietnam War in particular in many ways proved utterly alien and bewildering, particularly when juxtaposed with so much and such deeply embedded acculturation, socialization, American mythology, and U.S. military indoctrination. Not surprisingly then, the dramatic tension between those

⁵⁵ Joseph Treaster, “G.-Eye View of Vietnam,” *New York Times Magazine*, (October 30, 1966, 100-109), 109.

social forces and all the complex and painful realities involved in waging geopolitical war abroad created cognitive dissonance that ultimately found outlet in song.

For many, song empowered and healed. It became “the main outlet for the overt and uninhibited expression of fears, criticism of, and opposition to, the prevailing ideology of both the military command and the homeland.”⁶ The body of songs functioned, socially speaking, as “a collective field of versatile consciousness,” reassuring and integrating as it “improvised responses to alarming or inconvenient experiences” that mocked what the men could not alter or control. From the individual psychological perspective then, too, the songs offered ordinary soldiers “entry into a psychological terrain of limitless expanse and imaginative reconciliation between the shining world of patriotic assertion and the disturbing realities of the battlefield.” Song mediated tension between “God Bless America” and “The Body Bag Song,” and reconciled the stateside imperatives of “Nation and Flag” with the in-country suffering experienced as the men took to, and returned from, “the long, long trail.”⁷

Folksongs did more than just reconcile tensions between domestic acculturation and foreign combat realities. They served more purpose than just to entertain or provide diversion. Like graffiti, songs provided troops with a vehicle for reasserting claim to some semblance of personal identity and sense of agency. The war – and the government and military that sent them into it – essentially owned the troops. Songs enabled troops to reconcile with or “come to terms with their enforced tenure in institutions that by comparison with the freedom of democratic life are archaic and

⁶ Les Cleveland, *Dark Laughter: War in Song and Popular Culture*, (Westport, CT: Praeger), 20.

⁷ *Ibid.*

ultra-authoritative.”⁸ So even though military authority and combat circumstances may have traditionally proven virtually omnipotent, the songs that folklorist Les Cleveland called “the poetry of the powerless” emerged to provide troops in Vietnam with artistic, expressive liberty to “ridicule their leaders and assert their personal dignity” and arguably, their agency, all without engaging in any overt insubordination.⁹

Equally important, writing, singing, performing, and listening to songs served as in-country therapy sessions. Vietnam spanned a time in U.S. military history when research into Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, or PTSD, had progressed very little, and when the military still stood as one of the last, immovable bastions of the sociocultural conditioning that equated maleness, machismo, and bravado with strength and honor. The military also stigmatized and equated reluctance, trepidation, and fear with its culturally scorned attributes of cowardice, dishonor – even betrayal – of American characteristics and values. Consequently, the Pentagon would prove one of the last entities to admit PTSD’s existence, let alone, provide any help to prevent, dissipate, or treat it. In such anachronistic social and cultural contexts, few outlets remained for Vietnam warriors to alleviate or at least reconcile the cognitive dissonance so often arising when men learned the war they were fighting turned out starkly different than recruiting posters, basic training, and American mythology had promised.

In fact, combat realities in-country often mocked what troops had expected or been told they would encounter. First, they faced an enemy far more hardened, determined, and capable than was assumed or projected. They fought on behalf of

⁸ Ibid., 20.

⁹ Ibid., 59.

Americans and South Vietnamese who at best tolerated American military efforts, at worst, who resented or even sabotaged their efforts. They subsisted in constant deprivation, facing mentally, physically, and emotionally stressful circumstances and conditions that would tax even the soundest minds and bodies. They saw comrades and friends get wounded, maimed, or killed for long-term political causes and short-term military objectives that grew increasingly questionable or meaningful over the war's duration. Finally, they endured all that under civilian and military leadership that seemed to many of the troops as misguided and inept. All these realities so strained the men and women of the U.S. armed services that any therapy or escape hatch proved not just worthwhile but crucial to troop mental and emotional survival.

The songs, then, provide modern scholars with what Treaster called a "G.-Eye View" into troops' makeshift field therapy at the time. He wrote, "...the men crowd around, singing songs about their lives in a strange country and the war they are fighting. The songs are laced with cynicism and political innuendoes and they echo the frustrations of the 'dirty little war' which has become a dirty big one. Above all, the songs reflect the wartime Yank's ability to laugh at himself in a difficult situation."¹⁰ Songs helped troops manage personal crises and contained the very "psychological mechanisms of reassurance and integration" that enabled them express their emotions while they endured combat.¹¹ Scholars benefit because these texts fossilized emotions at the very moment the troops were feeling, preserving records of their states of consciousness in the combat zone. Lydia Fish, director of the Vietnam Veterans Oral

¹⁰ Treaster, "G.-Eye View of Vietnam," 109.

¹¹ Cleveland, 59.

History and Folklore Project at Buffalo State College, concurs with what might be called a “time-capsule” model. She notes, “All of the traditional themes of military folksong can be found in these songs: praise of the great leader, celebration of heroic deeds, laments for the death of comrades, disparagement of other units, and complaints about incompetent officers or other vainglorious rear-echelon military personnel.”¹²

The songs evince far more than mere themes. Genuine historical facts turn up everywhere, some nearly as accurate in detail and chronology as an average after-action report. A parody of “Ghost Riders in the Sky,” written in 1963 by Charlie Eberhardt, a United States Information Agency advisor, just prior to the coup that toppled and then assassinated South Vietnamese president Ngo Dinh Diem, illustrates this well.¹³ In “Ghost Advisors By and By,” audiences discover many of the same elements of South Vietnamese political, social, cultural, and military realities that one would find in history books:

Some Yanks went out advising,
Down there in South Vietnam,
But the people they advised
Didn't give a good Goddamn!
The president and his family,
Were sweating out a coup,
And they blamed the whole “schlammozzle,”
On the likes of me and you!

Chorus [sung after each verse]: Yippee aye yea! Yippee aye yea!
Ghost advisors by and by!

¹² Lydia M. Fish, “General Edward G. Lansdale and the Folksongs of Americans in the Vietnam War,” *Journal of American Folklore* V. 102, No. 406 (1989), 391.

¹³ Lydia M. Fish and Brig. Gen. Thomas Bowen, U.S. Army, Ret., *The Longest Year. A Collection of Songs by Advisors and Civilians in the Vietnam War*, Lisa Harmon, Ed. (Buffalo, NY: Vietnam Veterans Oral History and Folklore Project, 1990), 21-22, an index, transcription, and annotation of the Bowen Collection, Vietnam War subject file, American Folklife Center, Library of Congress.

The opening stanza references straightaway how American advisors begrudged those Vietnamese who neither wanted nor cared for American military intervention. It alludes to President Diem facing imminent deposition. It continues, citing, among other events, an internationally infamous incident where, in June of 1963, several Buddhist monks committed suicide by self-immolation to protest President Diem's oppressive religious policies:

Some Buddhists did a "slow burn,"
Up in Hue and in Saigon,
And you couldn't "watch the birdies,"
Without dodging plastic bombs.
The students, they got angry--
The government closed the schools,
And the *Times of Vietnam*,
Called the U.S. a bunch of fools!

These advisors were notorious,
For countering insurgency.
They collected "Lessons Learned,"
For the Chief of "Co Van My."¹⁴
They gathered tons of data,
From the field in Vietnam.
(But down in Venezuela,
It won't be worth a damn!)

Each stanza catalogues historical events with a compactness only verse can accomplish. Not only does specific history emerge, but also what participants felt about their role in making it. Eberhardt openly criticizes leaders directing the American mission in Vietnam at the time. Too, he refers to the now-notorious "Lessons Learned" reports, internal Defense and State Department documents compiled from information contained in military after-action reports [AARs], those detailed accounts of battles

¹⁴Co Van My is a Vietnamese term meaning "my American advisor."

recorded on the platoon level in the field. AARs reported various data such as enemy location and movements, enemy and U.S. tactics, supplies, casualties, and other intelligence. From these after-action reports, the Pentagon composed reams of records, or "Lessons Learned," which it ironically was unable to implement in field operations until long after troops had left Vietnam. Navy medical corpsman Doug Anderson confirmed. He saw the same anachronistic endeavors, noting how top brass are always the last war: "The battalion staff officers, major and up, with a few exceptions, see the *idea* of a war. They make decisions based on experience in World War II and Korea. Some, as younger officers, saw jungle fighting on Pacific islands, but many have no idea what goes on at the squad level in Vietnam."¹⁵ Anderson and Eberhardt betray how troops actually fighting the war felt about misguided directives like "Lessons Learned." They knew after even a short time in-country that those reports could never serve as some end-all, be-all primer for future counterinsurgency, simply because the war in South Vietnam and those entities fighting it were complex and politically and culturally unique to the Vietnamese people.

Eberhardt's administrative and political critique continues:

They worked for COMUSMACV,¹⁶
And for the Chief of MAAG,¹⁷
Who told Bob McNamara,
That the war was "in the bag,"
That the Viet Cong were beaten
In this brave "Diem-ocracy."
(They didn't tell the insurgents:
The omnipotent VC's!)

84. ¹⁵ Doug Anderson, *Keep Your Head Down: A Memoir*, (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2009),

¹⁶ Commander, U.S. Military Assistance Command, Vietnam.

¹⁷ Military Assistance Advisory Group.

Yes, in the steaming jungles,
And the plains of mud and rice,
Infested with mosquitoes,
Viet Cong and body lice,
There went the good advisors,
And some “Greenie Beanies” too,¹⁸
To save the little country,
For the likes of Madame Nhu!

In the fourth stanza, we see everything from Eberhardt lampooning long-winded bureaucratic acronyms to undisguised respect for a formidable enemy, both commentaries framing continued disgust with dishonest American officials and their increasingly problematic “credibility gap.” He highlights the numerous times that overly optimistic or ill-informed advisors assured Washington that the U.S. was winning and would ultimately prevail. Eberhardt succinctly treats topics as diverse as the combat environment, which specific American combat unit was fighting, and critically again, those dysfunctional dictators for whom they felt they essentially fought. President Diem’s sister-in-law, Ngo Dinh Nhu, or Madame Nhu as she was pejoratively christened, was known to American officials as an unruly “troublemaker” whose lavish living on American aid epitomized for the Vietnamese the corrupt and decaying governmental regime in the South. She continually rebuffed American attempts to censure her and vehemently reproached the U.S. for plotting to topple Diem.¹⁹

They advised the Civil Guard,
And the valiant SDC,²⁰
They advised the Vietnamese,

¹⁸ Reference to the Green Berets who carried out Special Operations in conjunction with the CIA.

¹⁹ Stanley Karnow, *Vietnam: A History*, (New York: Penguin Books, 1997), 283.

²⁰ Self Defense Corps, or, as it is sometimes termed, Village Defense Corps.

http://webdoc.sub.gwdg.de/ebook/p/2005/dep_of_state/www.state.gov/www/about_state/history/vol_ii_1961-63/abbreviations.html, (accessed 20 July 2014).

In the land, air, and sea,
And when the fights were over,
When the body count was in,
Our side had lost a hundred,
And the VC only ten!

They built strategic hamlets,
And they dispensed USOM aid,²¹
They convinced the Montagnards,
That they really had it made!
They defoliated jungles,
And herbicided rice,
As long as Mr. Ambassador,
Could afford the going price!²²

They headed for the airfield,
Out at good old Tan Son Nhut;
With boarding passes in their hands,
And CIB's to boot!²³
"Little Soldiers of misfortune,"
And, "Tools of CIA,"
They waited for jet planes,
To touch that broad runway!
Now buddy, listen to them,
And hear what they will say,
They're gonna board that aircraft,
So don't get in their way.
They'll zap you with their cross-bows,
And their home-made rifles too,
Cause no seats exist on that craft,
For the likes of me and you.

In this song alone, the audience can discern Vietnamese political and civil unrest; learn who some of the major players were; gain insight into how American leaders handled the war; and see criticism of misguided reports about American victory feasibility, field conditions, and personnel morale. References to American pacification

²¹ United States Operations Mission, Ibid.

²²A reference to U.S. Ambassador Henry Cabot Lodge, who used overly optimistic high-level MACV reports to secure continued funding for the strategic hamlet program. Karnow, 272-75.

²³Combat Infantry Badge.

programs, Agent Orange, and massive war expenditures all emerge. Though probably composed for humor, recreation, and no doubt a release valve for the pressures of the job, songs like “Ghost Advisors By and By” still preserve much political, administrative, bureaucratic, operational, social, and cultural history, as well as an outpouring of emotions that participants and witnesses felt at the time.

Few leaders in Vietnam during the earlier advisor period and later in the U.S. troop combat period comprehended the value and importance of soldiers’ songs. One prominent pioneer was General Edward G. Lansdale, former senior officer with the CIA’s Office of Policy Coordination, subsequent department supervisor, senior liaison officer, and counterinsurgency veteran of some renown in intelligence circles.²⁴ With a highly decorated career spanning from World War II, through extended work in counterinsurgency, psychological warfare, and nation-building efforts in Southeast Asia and Latin America, Lansdale understood almost immediately how rich a field reporting and intelligence gathering tool soldiers’ songs could prove to the war effort, and he set about compiling as many songs as could as soon as he encountered them. His compilation efforts constituted the first recorded, self-admitted “systematic use of tape recording in wartime to collect songs and use them for intelligence purposes.”²⁵

Lansdale possessed a profound understanding of the multi-faceted military and political value of folklore collected in the field. In his historically proven expert

²⁴ The Office of Policy Coordination was an organization created in 1948 by a “10/2” panel of select State and Defense Department officials to carry out “covert foreign policy in support of overt aims.” Though ostensibly under the CIA, during Vietnam it was “in but not of, the CIA,” and did not take orders from any Langley personnel, including its director, operating outside CIA command chains, and was guided instead by the “10/2” panel of State and Defense officials. Cecil B. Curry, *Edward Lansdale: The Unquiet American*, (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1988), 62.

²⁵ Cleveland, 136.

opinion, wars were won, nations were built and saved, changed and improved, strengthened and solidified, only by first understanding and relating deeply with human beings, with people on the ground. Crunching impersonal numbers, compiling mountains of statistics remotely, insistently imposing “the American way” onto other nations with—or too often *without*—much input from them only invited disaster.²⁶ Building relationships with and truly listening to the very people most involved in the day-to-day workings of short-term military goals and long-term policy objectives had proven successful over and over again for Lansdale and the United States’ long-term goals, most notably in the postwar Philippines and the advisory period in Vietnam.

Lansdale knew from personal experience, arguably more than anyone in Washington D.C. or Vietnam, that “in a revolutionary ‘people’s war,’ the people of the country actually constitute the true battleground of the war. Whoever wins them wins the war.”²⁷ He had seen in the Philippines how intimately understanding people, in his case, Hukbalahap, or Huk insurgents, and the cultural peculiarities that made them tick could work veritable tactical, strategic, even political magic among both allies and adversaries. As a result, he and his counterinsurgency teams realized several practical and concrete military and political goals by including, among other things, folklore, in counterinsurgency strategies. He understood that the ordinary, everyday voice of the soldiers could not only strike emotionally resonant responses in its hearers, but that folk expressions consistently proved among the most sensitive barometers of the shared concerns of given cultural groups. Most importantly, he had personally and repeatedly

²⁶ See Curry, particularly Chapter 12, subtitled, “A People’s War.”

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 279.

used such knowledge to affect positive military and democratic change, first locally and ultimately on a national scale.²⁸

With his extensive background using such unlikely resources as folklore for even the most ambitious military and political endeavors, General Lansdale began not long after arriving in Vietnam collecting and recording as many songs as he encountered. He hoped to document for his in-country superiors and policymakers back in Washington all manner of grassroots information and sensitive material that he found people routinely exchanged on the basis of something as simple as personal trust. He collected songs in the field, at bases, and Saigon bars. He regularly hosted troop composers, performers, musicians, and friends, including premier Ngo Dinh Diem and later, prime minister Nguyen Cao Ky and other Vietnamese at his personal home in Saigon, encouraging his guests sincerely to express themselves with an informal freedom hardly ever granted them in their daily lives in the military. Les Cleveland reports, "Lansdale's technique was to use the song sessions and hospitality as a confidence-building medium and as an instrument of political communication."

²⁸ One particularly noteworthy tale of Lansdale's use of folklore to wage psychological warfare involved his efforts in the Philippines. Having heard in passing in casual conversation with locals that Filipinos harbor crippling fears of vampires, Lansdale paid two local impoverished youth to circulate the rumor that vampires had been reported as preying in an area of operations where he had been fighting an increasingly problematic counterinsurgency effort against Huk insurgents. Lansdale patiently waited for a few weeks and allowed the vampire reports to penetrate insurgent strongholds and then his operatives staked out a high-traffic route enemy forces used as a staging point for missions into the countryside. When Lansdale's rumor and its accompanying jitters had ripened fully, his operatives silently snatched a lagging Huk rear dawdler, punctured his neck twice, drained him of all his blood, and then left him hanging, bat-like, by his feet for his comrades to find on return from patrol. When discovered their comrade's corpse, death-white, and drained of all blood, the Huk insurgents abandoned their campaign in the area the very next day without ever firing another shot. Knowing the psychological power of folk beliefs and expressions, Lansdale had exploited indigenous cultural vampire fears and saved countless lives and millions of dollars in aid to the Filipino counterinsurgency effort. Barre Toelken, personal interview, Utah State University, Logan, UT, 2003. See also, Lansdale, "Military Psychological Operations, Part II," lecture at Armed Forces Staff College, Norfolk, VA, 29 March 1960, 6-7. Transcript at Vietnam Veterans Oral History and Folklore Project archives at Buffalo State College, Buffalo, NY.

The jam sessions Lansdale recorded worked well, with soldiers, aviators, advisors, CIA operatives, even Vietnamese officials, pouring out their innermost thoughts and feelings about the war right there in his living room at 194 Cong Ly Street in Saigon, and the results of his efforts prove eye-opening. By the end of his service in Vietnam, he had collected several dozen songs, a hundred and sixty of which he ultimately deposited in the American Folklife Center at the Library of Congress on several audio tape reels, complete with personally hand-typed and signed accessioning, lending, and copyright stipulations and annotated index manuscripts.

Because people trusted him enough to share their songs with him, it paid dividends, though at the time, not the kind to which he ultimately aspired. He had hoped for the sake of America's long-term democratic objectives in Vietnam to provide his superiors with the ground-level reconnaissance and intelligence that would facilitate "efforts to consolidate stable forms of democratic government under leaders with whom the West, and the United States in particular, could cooperate."²⁹ To that end, Lansdale compiled a tape of fifty-one songs as a "report from the Senior Liaison Officer of the U.S. Mission in Vietnam to top U.S. officials." Lansdale feared more with each passing day that war decisions were being made outside the context of the needs and feelings of the American troops and the Vietnamese people the U.S. was allegedly trying to help.³⁰ He comprehended more than any of his fellow high-ranking Americans in-country that Vietnam was "a people's war," and thought that if Americans would only see people at the center of every objective, then "our military

²⁹ Cleveland, 136-7.

³⁰ Edward G. Lansdale, *In the Midst of Wars: An American's Mission to Southeast Asia* (New York: Harper & Row, 1972), 399.

and political leaders might awaken to how important a factor is their consideration of human behavior in the decisions they make.”³¹

Lansdale expected, too optimistically, it turned out, that after hearing the none-too-carefully camouflaged messages within the songs he collected and recorded the decision makers would listen to those Americans and her allies who personally had to go out and fight the war daily, and might then seriously consider employing the informants’ spoken and unspoken recommendations for short- and long-term mission successes. The general sent copies to Lyndon Johnson, Hubert Humphrey, Robert McNamara, Dean Rusk, Walt Rostow, Henry Cabot Lodge, Henry Kissinger, and General William Westmoreland, among others. After no reply beyond boilerplate memos, Lansdale grew more frustrated. He encountered one deaf ear after another, realizing very quickly that conventional thinking of the day did not include policymaking from the ground up. He admitted feeling frustrated with his superiors at the White House, State Department, and the Pentagon. “I had hoped,” he wrote later,

to catch some of the emotions of the Vietnam War in these folksongs and, with them, try to impart more understanding of the political and psychological nature of the struggle to those making decisions. . . I got form letters back from all those people. It was very disappointing to me, and I don’t know to this day

³¹ Curry, 268. Lansdale’s insights into “people’s wars” so compelled his cohorts that he seems to have helped bring together even the unlikeliest US foreign policy adherents. Novelist John Steinbeck, longtime liberal who wrote many literary classics typifying class struggle, met at Lansdale’s Saigon villa several Vietnamese anticommunist activists desperate for a free, united, constitutional democracy. Steinbeck attended Lansdale’s recording sessions in 1967 and developed “an instant rapport” with both the person and politics of one of Lansdale’s regular guests, Pham Duy, national folksinger and songwriter, called by Lansdale, Vietnam’s “Irving Berlin and Stephen Foster.” Steinbeck’s interaction with Lansdale, Pham Duy, and other South Vietnamese patriots who supported the US’s anticommunist policy in Vietnam seems evidence that he had already converted to a position of supporting the war. For more on Steinbeck in Vietnam and some of his last writings, see <http://www.npr.org/2012/04/21/150012711/steinbeck-in-vietnam-a-great-writers-last-reports>. For more on Pham Duy and an account of the Steinbeck visit, see General Edward G. Lansdale, *In the Midst of War: Folk Music, Viet Nam, 1965-1967, A Report by SLO* [Senior Liaison Office], *American Embassy, Viet Nam*, Lydia M. Fish, Ed., transcription manuscript, p.1-2, 15. Library of Congress catalogue designation for audio reels, AFS 17.483 and AFS 18.882, LWO 8281, R1,2.

whether they ever listened to them or not.³²

While Lansdale may have believed that the musical sentiments of common soldiers seemed unimportant to those in power at the time, there is no evidence beyond Lansdale's suspicions that American leaders did *not* listen to the songs. Perhaps policymakers just failed to recognize or apply the same immediate significance as Lansdale did. Given the enormous nature, scope, and apparent relative importance of war decisions needing to be made at the time, it is easy to see how a folksong collection, especially one from disgruntled troops, might have seemed to Lansdale's recipients as the proverbial forest that couldn't be seen for all the trees obscuring it.

A more likely explanation seems plausible, however, for decision makers ignoring Lansdale's collection. Virtually every other mission chief or agency head disagreed with Lansdale generally and the songs' inherent value to the mission specifically; at least those in-country did. They "refused to acknowledge that his companionability and unorthodox methods touched a chord of harmony in the minds of many Vietnamese who were tired of dealing with straight-laced American bureaucrats unable to hide their contempt for orientals."³³ They envied his closeness with the Vietnamese and sought to discredit and thwart him in the halls of power, stateside and in Saigon, including purposely "deep-sixing" his communiqués to Washington. He loathed and spoke out vehemently about the "bureaucratic political jockeying" perpetrated by those self-absorbed players who cared more about their own

³² Lansdale, *An American's Mission*, 399. Note: since Lansdale entitled this earlier field report and its song collection and recording transcripts *In the Midst of War* [singular], and his 1972 book as *In the Midst of Wars* [plural], for the sake of clarity all Lansdale citations will appear by the first phrase of their subtitles.

³³ Curry, 303.

career advancement and impressing their superiors than they did about the mission, which, for Lansdale was always the Vietnamese people and the future of their democratic freedom. At one meeting he uncharacteristically bellowed, "We've got young Americans getting killed out there and you guys are playing games and shafting each other and working behind each others' backs, and I think it's lousy." He further recommended that all those "desk pogues" pull duty out on the combat line "put[ting] some of our casualties in body sacks for shipment home" to remind them of the humanity and solemnity at the center of their mission in Vietnam. When his boss, the ambassador Henry Cabot Lodge told him to check his emotions, he fired back that war was, or at least should be, "an emotional goddamn business."³⁴

To Lansdale then and students of Vietnam now, such petty intrigues and agendas only amplified the tragedy that had come to characterize the "massive cancerous spread of US agencies, services, missions, institutes, and programs," the whole of which Lansdale fundamentally disagreed with. An ARVN interpreter assigned to W.D. Ehrhart's Marine Corps battalion, only ever identified as Staff Sergeant Trinh, eventually so tired of the very U.S. war mismanagement against which Lansdale raged that he chose an American stockade over helping the U.S. effort any longer. When Ehrhart went to visit Trinh in his cell to ask him why he was giving up the fight, Trinh unloaded years of frustration in one heartfelt rant:

You do not know what you are doing, goddamn you! You are ruining everything, and I am not going to help you do it anymore! You are hypocrites and fools, and you are giving my country to the communists and the buzzards! Leave my people alone, you goddamned mercenaries! Take your ignorance and

³⁴ Curry, 304-5.

go home! Just get the hell out! I fight for my country, but when you are finished, I will have no country left!... So many little things. You do not know. That store – the [Vietnamese] laundry and barbershop – you call it the ‘gook’ shop; where did you get that word?... What is so sad – none of you mean any harm; you just do not think.... This is not America, Corporal Ehrhart. Such simple things, yet none of you ever bother to ask. Every day, you are losing the war in a thousand little ways, and none of you see it. The gook shop.... You do not understand Vietnam. You have never bothered to understand us, and you never will bother because you think you have all the answers. Do you know what Uncle Ho says? ‘You Americans will tire of killing us before we tire of dying.’ Sometimes I think he is right – and then sometimes I think you Americans will never grow tired of killing.... Your President Johnson is too ignorant or too arrogant to understand such a simple truth. You help the whores and the pimps, and you take the people from the land where their ancestors are buried and put them in tin cages where they cannot fish or grow rice or do anything but hate and die – and if they do not want to leave the bones of their ancestors, you call them communists and beat them and put them in prison and kill them. You Americans are worse than the VC.... And you Americans praise Thieu, and tell yourself you are helping us. Sometimes I think you are the most evil nation on earth. My country is bleeding to death, Corporal Ehrhart. My beloved Vietnam is dying. I have fought hard. I am tired. Someday, perhaps, you will understand.³⁵

And this, from one who fought with a rifle in hand for the South Vietnamese government alongside Americans from the age of twelve. Trinh and Lansdale both understood that a people’s war could not be thwarted, let alone won, by a bullying, inept, culturally insensitive bureaucracy. Rather, it could only be won by using sincere, heartfelt emotions and any other tool available to build relationships and win the people’s hearts and minds over to the revolutionarily superior offerings of freedom and democratic self-rule.

Little wonder then, why Lansdale, who spent arguably more time and energy trying to know and understand the Vietnamese people than most of his contemporaries, believed that understanding the emotional conditions revealed and documented in his

³⁵ W.D. Ehrhart, *Vietnam-Perkasie: A Combat Marine Memoir*, (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, Inc., 1983), 145-146, 148-9.

song collection might just prove crucial to US efforts in Vietnam. As if to underscore Lansdale's argument, Dolf Droge, who served with the United States Agency for International Development both in Saigon and Washington D.C. under Presidents Johnson and Nixon, penned a parody of the Marine Corps hymn that warned policymakers of the perils of forgetting that Vietnam constituted a people's war:

From the shores of the Perdinales
We have come to fight VC,
But to win you must remember
Do not burn the banana tree,
For the farmer leads a wretched life,
Less than fifty bucks a year;
Your napalm bomb he does not like,
From his life you must remove fear;
But if you burn his huts and shoot buffalo,
Just remember what it means,
You are working then for Uncle Ho
Not the United States Marines.³⁶

Like Lansdale, Droge clearly intended his song both to target and to reach President Johnson, as right from the outset Droge insinuates the Vietnam War originated with Johnson, who hailed from the shores of the "Perdinales" (LBJ's notorious bastardizing mispronunciation of "Pedernales"), the river which butts up to the north end of the ranch in the Texas Hill Country. To drive home further who Droge's intended target and audience was, the Pedernales River also empties into Lake Travis, its own shores on the outskirts of Austin, the capital of Texas where LBJ rose to political prominence.

Though he served under the two commanders-in-chief who sat the Oval Office during the Vietnam War, as his song's opening line illustrates, Droge proved anything but a compliant, yes-man to the president. He began his career as a USAF combat

³⁶ Cleveland, 140.

correspondent reporting the Korean War for thirty-one unbroken months of military service in the Far East and thus was no stranger to the delicate social and cultural complexities involved in trying to win Asian hearts and minds.³⁷ As a trusted member of Johnson's National Security Counsel, when he witnessed bad policy unfolding, he voiced his concern, though as "From the Shores of the Perdinales" suggests, occasionally with unorthodoxy. In one short song verse Droge preemptively laid bare to all listening policymakers those fatal flaws in US counterinsurgency operations which would ultimately succeed only in destroying peasants' livelihoods along with any trust they might place in American forces' efforts while engendering sympathy for the Viet Cong cause. Droge's parody illustrates Lansdale's essential argument that the war would be won or lost in the hearts and minds of the South Vietnamese peasantry.³⁸

In the final analysis, though, it seems that few policymakers did listen, or at least they didn't hear. Neither Droge's parody nor any other songs today housed in the Lansdale Collection seemed to have persuaded their colleagues at the time. Lansdale's rivals continued to revile his faith in his in-country folklore, collected, no less, at those Saigon villa living room relationship building sessions of his that they scorned as "hootenannies." They were not about to let a bunch of guitar-strumming, draftee grunts and gook patriots presume to teach them the right way to fight an American war. Yet the songs constituted valid intelligence from participants on the ground that one, an "American" war could never succeed in this particular Southeast Asian political

³⁷ Dolf Droge biographical data in unpublished document, "War Songs and the Vietnam War Experience: Preliminary design for a program celebrating Veterans Day 1988," Peter Bartis, Ed., 1988, Vietnam War subject file, American Folklife Center, Library of Congress.

³⁸ Cleveland, 140.

and cultural milieu. Lansdale's rivals' tenuous position was compounded further, moreover, by the inconvenient truth that no matter how fiercely America's leaders and troops believed in their cause, strategies, and tactics, America's enemies meant to fight their own Vietnamese brand of military, cultural, and political war regardless. Yet instead of recognizing the value of Lansdale's unorthodox intelligence sources, they continued to ridicule his love and hope for the Vietnamese people, his "shirt sleeve diplomacy," his "relaxed and hospitable entertaining" of Americans and Vietnamese alike, disparaging his musical intelligence gathering as a "ridiculous waste of time."³⁹ Still, whether power players in Washington and Saigon either overlooked these songs because they felt other wartime exigencies more demanded their time, or whether they deliberately chose not to heed Lansdale's and his songs' insight into the US mission in Vietnam, history owes the origins of the study of the Vietnam field folksongs – not to mention the survival of the songs themselves – and the promise of all the history they reveal most of all to General Lansdale.

Valuable though these emotional records may have proven had America's leaders listened to them, heard their messages, and understood their implicit and explicit meanings like Lansdale and his associates did, modern-day students of the Vietnam War can still find them immensely telling and valuable. Examined closely, the most crucially utilitarian functions the Vietnam War folksongs served at the time will emerge. Among the earliest and most common of all the song forms were those that functioned variously to bond and define units and unit members, incorporating

³⁹ Curry, 303-4.

insiders and alienating outsiders. Yet American mythology had socialized and acculturated American troops to consider one another equals among men, so insider-outsider dichotomies tended to create division rather than unity in Vietnam, an unwitting yet also unwise choice among men in a war zone whose lives depended on one another for survival and support. While usually fairly innocent and innocuous in intent, purpose, and function, songs still often served as powerful forces for all manner of subcultural adhesives and repellants. Their power to both communicate and arouse everything from love and loyalty to hostility and loathing was conspicuous then and still surprises today.

Consider for example, how songs claiming an American soldier's or unit's superiority could result in any number of responses, ranging from fostering unit pride to eliciting derision. Perhaps the most acute example of this varied phenomenon involved former Special Forces trooper Barry Sadler's hit single "Ballad of the Green Berets." When it rapidly climbed the popular music charts after its release in 1966, other individuals and combat units almost immediately began composing what ultimately became a years-long wave of satirical parodies of the tune. This rapid creative outpouring no doubt arose because the chorus resounds repeatedly that America's best, bravest, and worthiest combatants operated in Special Forces units such as the Green Berets. Quite understandably, other regular military combat infantry groups disagreed, and consequently they appropriated Sadler's tune to document their own self-identity and set the record straight. First, consider a few excerpted stanzas from the original:

Fighting soldiers from the sky
Fearless men who jump and die
Men who mean just what they say
The brave men of the Green Beret.

Chorus: Silver wings upon their chest
These are men, America's best
One hundred men we'll test today
But only three win the Green Beret.

Trained to live, off nature's land
Trained in combat, hand to hand
Men who fight by night and day
Courage deep, from the Green Beret.

Chorus⁴⁰

Nowhere does Sadler explicitly claim that Green Berets owned a *monopoly* on courage and combat prowess or that other units or combat groups harbored cowards and underachievers by the dozens. So why such an outpouring of reactionary parodies? For starters, because his catchy tune soared up the charts, the Pentagon ordered Sadler out of the field altogether and into a much safer, cushier assignment of serenading troops on more remote rear firebases. As tragic irony would have it, Sadler, originally trained and deployed for unquestionably perilous combat duties for long durations and who performed them with acumen, had become one of the hated and reviled REMFs who rarely faced deprivation and combat at all, let alone of the hand-to-hand variety the song boasts.⁴¹

Perhaps it's not surprising that a US Marine became one of the first to

⁴⁰ Barry Sadler, "The Ballad of the Green Berets," 2 May 2012.

http://www.digitalhistory.uh.edu/learning_history/vietnam/music2.cfm

⁴¹ REMF denotes those "rear-echelon mother fuckers" such as support personnel and especially officers who served in "the rear with the gear." Kyle Longley, *Grunts: The American Combat Soldier in Vietnam*, (Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 2008), 91-3.

appropriate Sadler's tune for his beloved Corps' own P.R. campaign. To begin with, Marines are unapologetically well-known for branch pride and bravado and claim as a matter of fact that their official war hymn is the oldest anthem in the United States military. Its lyrics have for nearly 200 years claimed the very combat superiority that Sadler's ballad did:

From the Halls of Montezuma,
To the Shores of Tripoli;
We fight our country's battles
In the air, on land, and sea;
First to fight for right and freedom
And to keep our honor clean;
We are proud to claim the title
Of UNITED STATES MARINES.
Our flag's unfurled to every breeze,
From dawn to setting sun;
We have fought in every clime and place
Where we could take a gun;
In the snow of far off northern lands
And in sunny tropic scenes;
You will find us always on the job --
The UNITED STATES MARINES.
Here's health to you and to our Corps
Which we are proud to serve;
In many a strife we've fought for life
And never lost our nerve;
If the Army and the Navy
Ever look on Heaven's scenes;
They will find the streets are guarded
By UNITED STATES MARINES.⁴²

It is important to note, though, that the Marine who parodied Sadler's ballad did not initially belittle Sadler's Green Berets. Rather, he appears to have tried to garner what he felt was the Marine Corps' share of credit for combat glory, going so far as to boast a

⁴² Marion F. Sturkey, "History of the 'The Marines' Hymn,'" excerpted from *Warrior Culture of the United States Marines*, (Plum Branch, SC: Heritage Press International, 2001), accessed 5 May 2012 at http://www.usmcpres.com/heritage/marine_hymn.htm.

future hellish immortality in a dark bit of word play with the hymn's last phrase:

Glory, honor is their claim,
Fighting leathernecks their name.
And when you reach the gates of hell,
You'll find that Marines patrol it well.⁴³

Satirizing in tones most of Sadler's offended fellow combatants could appreciate, the parody's author upped the Green Beret's ante, enunciating with healthy disdain what Marines felt about his ideas of Special Forces' combat superiority. Navy medical corpsman Doug Anderson, who was attached to a Marine infantry division, later realized that Marine bluster like that in the Sadler parody owed to only one thing: naïveté; not having seen quite enough of one's buddies getting maimed, killed, and/or disintegrated yet. He recalls, "We [FNGs] don't know much at all about anything, and we are magnificently full of shit."⁴⁴

Captain Hershel Gober, a "traveling troubadour" in his own right, also appropriated Sadler's tune while stationed in 1967 in Rach Gia, in the far south of Vietnam on the Gulf of Siam, at the very west of the Mekong Delta region, IV Corps.⁴⁵ At the time he penned his parody, he was serving as sub-sector advisor, "one of the MACV infantrymen who worked with the Vietnamese fighting men on the battleground among the villages and people of the countryside."⁴⁶ As a widely respected veteran advisor to ARVN combat infantry and one who saw considerable ground fighting and regular contact with VC enemy, he found much to criticize in

⁴³ Lansdale, *Songs by Americans in the Vietnam War, 1977*, Library of Congress collection. Catalog classification, AFS 18, 977-18, 982 LWO 9518.

⁴⁴ Doug Anderson, *Keep Your Head Down*, 76.

⁴⁵ Curry, 311.

⁴⁶ Lansdale collection, *Folk Music, Viet Nam*, transcript to audio recording, 7.

Sadler's Special Forces anthem. In his bald-faced critique of what he no doubt saw as blatant and unseemly self-aggrandizement, Gober looked, too, to testify to other forces' combat capabilities while simultaneously taking the Green Berets, and by extension, Sadler, down a peg or two. First, rather than blustering soldierly bravado, he candidly admits the deathly fear most soldiers felt when they had to jump out of a plane into potential enemy fire. Second, he questions Sadler's assertion that the Green Berets constituted America's best fighting forces and then refuted it bluntly. As if to amplify the irony, Gober contradicts Sadler altogether, accusing the Green Berets of fearing the perils of airborne duty more than any others parachuting that day:

Frightened soldiers from the sky,
Screamin' "Hell, I don't wanna die!
You can have my jump pay!
I'm a chicken anyway."

Chorus: Silver wings upon my chest.
These are men, (America's Best?!!)
One hundred men will jump today,
And only three are the Green Berets⁴⁷

Sadler had become the unwitting victim of circumstances beyond his control. He left his Special Forces role to entertain troops in the field only after the Pentagon transferred him over his objections. Once they learned how quickly his tune had climbed the popular music charts, Defense Department officials sought to use him and

⁴⁷ Lansdale, *Songs by Americans*, audio, Tape One, AFS 18, 977-18, 982 LWO 9518. Note: Either General Lansdale or Hank Miller appears to have erred in his editing of this particular collection because in both audio format and in the transcripts "Frightened Soldiers" appears on Tape One, audio from the advisory period between 1962 and 1965. Sadler's original ballad released in 1966, and Gober penned his parody in 1967, during what Lansdale's introduction dates as the US combat period, 1965 - 1972. Miller notes in the transcript that Lansdale's song indexes don't always correspond correctly with the songs on the tape. He notes which songs are missing or mislabeled in the index, but his notes don't include "Frightened Soldiers" as one of the mislabeled songs, so I can only assume that either Miller or Lansdale mistakenly dated in the index or ordered on the tape at least this one song.

his song to glorify American fighting men and sell the virtues of a problematic war to those already increasing numbers of skeptics, both stateside and even within the in-country military. In a move that the Pentagon thought would raise troop morale, superiors changed his orders from one of frontline fighter to in-country rear-echelon entertainer, and as a result the “hits” – on Sadler – just kept on coming through one parody after another. The morale campaign backfired. Versions appropriating, parodying, always mocking, never praising his ballad cropped up from all theaters of the war, and for years on end.

One of the last and certainly the most acerbic adaptations of all the Sadler parodies came from a group of Army, Marine Corps, and Australian troops assigned to a MACV advisory group working with the Sixth Regiment of ARVN and based on Artillery Hill just west of the Chu Lai base of the Americal division. This rendering, recorded by Colonel David M. Watt in 1971 during his third multi-year tour, this time with the 23rd Division, pulled no punches at the Green Berets. It depicts perhaps most clearly the contexts, origins, and motivations of parodies like these. American fighting men understood well that combat required at least some measure of unit pride for group cohesion – and bravery, too, if troops meant to engage the enemy with enough confidence to face their combat fears and emerge with their lives even somewhat intact. However expected unit pride was among military men, as this scathing variant clearly demonstrates, airs of unit superiority such as those Sadler boasted incurred swift and unforgiving reprisals from fellow troops. The song’s authors asserted their own combat proficiency while disparaging the Green Berets as the combat equivalents of toilet paper

who regularly required rescue, who hid in their compounds avoiding the fight, and who the leaders back home would remove from the fight altogether if they only knew the truth of the Berets' cowardice and ineptitude:

Bird shit falling from the sky,
These are men who jump and cry.
One hundred men will jump today,
And wipe their ass with a green beret.

Sixth Regiment, you know the name,
Throughout Vietnam, you've heard our claim.
When it comes to pride and fame,
Who needs that silly green beret?

Chorus: Silver wings upon my chest?
I ride in choppers above the rest.
Although I get less dough this way,
Who needs that silly green beret?

At Ha Than or at Tra Bong,
I dare you, cunt, to say I'm wrong,
A dozen men we saved today,
And every one was a green beret.

In your compounds, there you sit.
The folks back home believe you, shit.
If they knew, they'd change their tone
And pack your bags and send you home.⁴⁸

As revealing as the parodies are, and though Sadler likely bore the brunt of criticism and ire from fellow troops, he was hardly alone in his bold, even ridicule-worthy assertions of combat prowess and courage. His ballad came from a centuries-long line of military songs from across the globe that boasted in all manner of bravery and invincibility, just as the Marines' Hymn did. For example, consider an

⁴⁸ Lydia M. Fish and Brig. Gen. Thomas Bowen, U.S. Army, Ret., *The Longest Year. A Collection of Songs by Advisors and Civilians in the Vietnam War*, Lisa Harmon, Ed. (Buffalo, NY: Vietnam Veterans Oral History and Folklore Project, 1990), 41, unpublished document indexing, transcribing, and annotating the Bowen Collection, Vietnam War subject file, American Folklife Center, Library of Congress.

autobiographical song from fighter pilot Dick Jonas. It was a song penned earlier on in his combat career, and it brims with all the bluster of one who hasn't yet seen too much tragedy for such lyrics. In it, obviously for dramatic effect and to conjure fear in the hearts of his listeners, he claimed he descended from Satan's supernatural dark angels and then boasts how no MiG pilot flying above the earth can thwart his skills as a jet jockey:

Chorus: [repeated after each verse]
I'm a son of Satan's Angels,
And I fly the F-4D,
All the way from Hanoi Railroad Bridge
To the DMZ;
I'm one of old Hoot Gibson's boys,
And mean as I can be,
I'm a son of Satan's Angels
And I fly the F-4D.

There ain't a triple-A gunner up there
That's anywhere near my class,
'Cause I'm as mad as I can be
And I'm in for one more pass;
He hosed me down one time too much,
And that last one is his last;
I look back at where he was,
Hey, man, ain't that a gas!

Hello, Hanoi Hanna, send your MiGs
To meet their doom;
Light 'em up and blast 'em off,
Hoot's boys'll be there soon;
I don't care if you are the gal with
A mouth full of silver spoon,
"Cause I got Sidewinders on board
That'll home in on an AB plume.⁴⁹

⁴⁹ Dick Jonas, "Son of Satan's Angels," Tusso, 179. Jonas flew with the 433rd Tactical Fighter Squadron, or "Satan's Angels," of the 8th Tactical Fighter Wing. Units from all the military branches often christened themselves with some collective call sign. F-4D as well as F-4C were the U.S. Air Force designations for types of McDonnell Phantoms, two-engine jet fighters employed heavily in Vietnam. *Ibid.*, 250. Jonas's chorus highlights his pride of membership as well as his loyalty to his squadron commander,

Such reckless bravado and wasn't limited to fighter pilots, but it was common among FNGs of every stripe, particularly those ground troops who had experienced the adrenalin rush of a first firefight and escaped unharmed. Marine Jeff Kelly, who exhibited surprising introspection by keeping a combat diary, recalls how brash and blustery he and his fellow grunts were early on their tours:

Without [the salts'] moderating influence, it wasn't long before Harris and I were feeding off each other's enthusiasm. I bought a lighter off a salt and the inscription on it became our motto. It read: 'War is hell, but combat is decent!' We craved combat and talked about little else. When the Tet Offensive went down, we were chomping at the bit to 'go north and kick fuckin' ass,' or at least go down to Hue where you didn't have to walk all day to find the little fuckers. It was a great disappointment to us that while the cities raged with action, the countryside was quiet.⁵⁰

More than once the old salts in Kelly's unit had to give him and others like him a wakeup call before he got himself or others killed: "Look, TJ, let me set you straight on something.... You ain't John Wayne and this ain't a fucking movie, okay? This is for keeps.... So forget the hero bullshit, all right? Otherwise you're going to die real soon."⁵¹ By a little more than a month in-country, for Kelly, war wasn't "decent" anymore. Rather, as a fellow Marine characterized war from experiences they shared following a particularly brutal and deadly operation, "Fuck, TJ, it was awful."⁵²

Jonas, Kelly, and countless others learned firsthand, some sooner than others, about the perils of combat, but in the meantime, Jonas played his cocksure "Satan's Angels" ballad at bases all over the Southeast Asian theater. Unlike in Sadler's case, the

Lt. Col. "Hoot" Gibson, an air-war ace in Korea and later leader of the U.S. Air Force aerial demonstration team, the Thunderbirds. *Ibid.*, 179.

⁵⁰ Entry for 25 January 1968, Kelly, *DMZ Diary*, 25.

⁵¹ Entry for 19 January 1968, *Ibid.*, 15.

⁵² Entry for 7 February, *Ibid.*, 34.

historical record never documents fellow aviators or servicemen heaping scorn on Jonas, nor did anyone parody his song. Others, too, escaped being “Sadlerized.” Bill Ellis of the First Cavalry Division began his Vietnam field songwriting career around Christmas of 1968 after three straight months of ground combat. Relaxing on leave in Qun Loi, he found a beat up guitar and began playing and writing. A couple of his most beloved numbers, “Grunts,” and “Firefight,” among many others, regularly drew nearby audiences of war-weary troops who, along with Ellis, “would all break down crying” when he played them at remote firebases where he was deployed along Vietnam’s ever-changing fronts.⁵³ In the chorus of his unit anthem, “First Cav,” Ellis broadcasts unit pride and boasts unit superiority:

First Team, First Cav,
Black and yellow patch,
It’s the greatest fighting team there is,
No other one can match.

First Team, First Cav,
Always Number One,
No matter what the job may be,
The Cav will get it done!⁵⁴

Interestingly, though Ellis trumpeted pride, though he bragged heavily in this number, claiming no other unit could match his First Cavalry Division in combat prowess, and even though his superiors also eventually reassigned him solely to the duty of entertaining troops at remote forward-area bases, he, like Jonas before him, never saw any fallout from fellow troops for his pride, claims, or reassignment. Sadler did,

⁵³ Bill Ellis biographical data, in unpublished document, "War Songs and the Vietnam War Experience: Preliminary design for a program celebrating Veterans Day 1988," Peter Bartis, Ed., 1988, Vietnam War subject file, American Folklife Center, Library of Congress.

⁵⁴ Bill Ellis, “First Cav,” *In-Country: Folksongs of American in the Vietnam War*, (Chicago: Flying Fish Records, 29 September 1992), Track 5.

however, and a few likely explanations for why troops reacted so differently to various songs and songwriters merit exploring.

First, while not presented in its entirety here, Ellis's number never explicitly disparaged other American units or branches. It only elevated his own. Likewise, the only combatants over whom Jonas claimed any superiority were those enemy North Vietnamese MiG pilots and "triple-A gunner[s]," or anti-aircraft artillery personnel. He never claimed the Satan's Angels under squadron commander Lt. Colonel "Hoot" Gibson were braver or better than any other American aviators or aviation group. And simple chronology may explain disparate troop reactions to similar musical behavior. In 1966 when Sadler's number climbed the US hit charts, drawing him international attention, including from the Pentagon – and thus inadvertently placing him on a pedestal above other troops – everyone from a majority of the American public and Congressional leaders to US military branches, divisions, units, and troops were much more unified in their mission and purpose in Vietnam. Consequently, Sadler violating American principles of equality and brotherhood arguably proved far more sacrilegious and offensive in 1966 than even two years later. He had become yet another overpaid REMF. By the time Ellis and Jonas were writing, singing, and performing their unit songs in-country, factors as varied as individual troop replacements, differing combat mission goals among commanders, even President Johnson's refusal to run for another term, not to mention the much more intensified antiwar movement back home, had all contributed considerably to turning individual troops' thoughts inward and eroding and disintegrating units' and troops' united sense of identity and purpose in Vietnam.

In short, by post-Tet 1968 when Ellis and Jonas's songs emerged, most troops were focusing their emotional energy far more on surviving their individual tours mentally and physically intact than they did on petty, largely imagined slights to unit pride.

Second, whereas Sadler's superiors pulled him off the line and stationed him "in the rear with the gear" because the Pentagon felt he could better serve America's mission in Vietnam as a performer entertaining and encouraging troops (anything but Sadler's fault), Ellis, on the other hand, when reassigned, continued serving in forward areas and carried his rifle along with his guitar. Jonas, in contrast to both Sadler and Ellis, never saw reassignment at all and remained piloting fighters in Vietnam's air war, yet like Ellis, he continued facing perilous duty every day, thus understandably warranting comrades' respect and admiration rather than ridicule and scorn. And though their songs also became widely known, at least among base audiences for whom they played across Southeast Asia, neither Ellis nor Jonas, unlike Sadler, ever earned any international fame, notoriety, or perhaps most importantly, *royalties* for their music, and thus could never be accused of enriching themselves on cushy rear reassignments while fellow troops fought and died in forward line combat. In light of these historical contexts and considerations, it's easy to understand how other artists escaped lyrical reprisals and remained respected and their songs beloved. Sadler on the other hand became a whipping boy, and his ballad grew to serve as a vehicle for scorning him, his unit, and any number of other things while simultaneously voicing alternative unit pride and trumpeting the attributes and worth of other units *besides* the

Special Forces' Green Berets.⁵⁵

From what these initial parody examples alone tell us, very early on in the war, troops' field songs had begun documenting and encapsulating a vivid array of attitudes, beliefs, and emotional states – the inner histories – among the men of the U.S. armed forces. These sources make plain that troops when they chose to could latch onto a villain, even one from among their own ranks, and scold him with energy ranging from playful to ruthless. As early as 1966 when Sadler's "Ballad of the Green Berets" hit and climbed the charts to number one, quickly prompting Captain Gober's parody, all throughout 1968 when Ellis and Jonas were singing, and as late as 1971 when Colonel Watt recorded the Sixth Regiment's parody of Sadler's ballad near Chu Lai, that American troops felt that Sadler, somehow more than Ellis and Jonas, had violated a sacred sense of *esprit de corps* and notions of equal worth among their brotherhood. Philosophically, the degree to which a postwar generation's-worth of American individual equality and exceptionalism mythology was inculcated so deeply and successfully emerges. How troops typically believed disparate units should view and value themselves as no greater and no lesser than other units also becomes obvious. And how widely and quickly they responded when someone they disliked, disrespected, or perhaps just envied contravened their sacrosanct myths is clearly evident. If American troops could muster such vitriol against a fellow grunt, it begs the

⁵⁵ Interestingly, Captain Gober, like Sadler, was also assigned his role as "traveling troubadour," but rather than the Pentagon reassigning him for propaganda purposes, Gober's duties came at Lansdale's request for General Westmoreland to assign Gober entertainer duties. Moreover, Gober, unlike Sadler, never traded his combat infantry advisory position with Vietnamese line soldiers for a safer, cushier one in the rear. He traveled around S. Vietnam singing, but he always returned home to combat duty. Plus, he helped to right Sadler's lyrical wrongs, which may explain why Gober never drew detractor scorn for his parody, boastful though it also was.

question of how they might deploy their songs as agents of dissent and disparagement about leaders and [mis]leadership.

A large percentage of Vietnam-era soldier songs relentlessly criticize how those politicking stateside or commanding from the rear understood very little about much of frontline combat. From grunts' perspectives, they were *in* the war; command personnel were *above* it. Forward troops *lived* the war; rear officers *played war games*. Frontline soldiers who might feel reluctant to complain openly in the ranks or back at the firebase about the resentment they feel toward REMFs (regardless of how dedicated and essential they were to the war effort), unabashedly vilified rear echelon personnel in their lyrics, especially when particular REMFs displayed staggeringly skewed priorities in the middle of a war. Consequently, the frustration, even rage, of those who had truly experienced and gravely understood the nature of frontline combat at those who merely wishfully imagined themselves combat soldiers brims over and across the pages of their songbooks.

Variants of the what became known to Vietnam troops as "The Saigon Warrior" can be traced all the way back to their first iteration as "The Lousy Lance Corporal" during World War I, but they demonstrate that similar sentiments still resonated clearly among combat units in Vietnam because no fewer than five different versions of this hypercritical ballad appeared during the combat period alone.⁵⁶ Folklorist Saul Broudy reports one version sung in 1967 at a gathering of Army aviators. The Library of

⁵⁶ It is important to note that many of the songs appearing in Vietnam were recycled from versions appearing in previous American wars. Each successive war's troops, however, appropriated the tunes and customized them, tweaking them to pertain to their present war's circumstances, sentiments, geography, issues, everything. So while a song's idea may not always be entirely new, its most recent extant iteration was almost always reworked for contemporaneous relevance and individual uniqueness.

Congress owns a manuscript version about an Army medic who submitted it for copyright in 1968. James P. "Bull" Durham recorded two separate Air Force versions in-country in 1969, and Colonel Watt collected his variant in 1971 during the "beat feet for the sea" campaign, the wind-up of American involvement in the I Corps region.⁵⁷ Broudy's 1967 version, "The Saigon Warrior II," complains of power-tripping REMFs who lived in relative comfort and safety of billeting at rear bases harassing combat troops just returned from the field. Such accounts litter oral history and music recordings and the pages of memoirs and songbooks alike:

A trooper came down on his fourteen day leave,
When up stepped a Provo saying, "Leave passes, please.
There's blood on your tunic and guts on your sleeve,
I think I'll just cancel your fourteen day leave."

Chorus: [repeated after each verse]

Dinki Die, Dinki Die,⁵⁸
I couldn't, I wouldn't tell you a lie.

The trooper then gave him a murderous look,
Said, "See here, you bastard, I'm fresh from Hiep Duc.
Where whiz-bangs are flying and comforts are few,
And brave men are dying for bastards like you."

Oh Quang Ngai, Oh Quang Ngai, a hell of a place,
The way things are done it's a fucking disgrace.
With Captains and Majors and Light Colonels, too,
With heads up their asses and nothing to do.

They stand in the compound, they scream and they shout,
Of a whole lot of shit they know nothing about.
For all they accomplish, they might as well be

⁵⁷ Fish and Bowen, 17-18. Sgt. Jeren Hanks, USMC, ret., personal interview, College Station, TX, March 2011. See also Cleveland, *Dark Laughter*, 130-134.

⁵⁸ An Americanized corruption of dien cai dau, Vietnamese for "crazy." More powerful still, the song's audiences likely never knew whether the "Dinki Die" referred to the soldier himself or the REMF who denied R&R to someone based on his disheveled appearance, especially since the dirty uniform drapes a soldier who just stood down from perilous line duty the MP back safely at base need not endure.

Shoveling shit in the South China Sea.

I've fought in Ha Than, I've fought up in Hue,
I've fought in this place for a year and some days.
And while you were down on the fat of your ass,
I was out at Kam Duc near the Ho Chi Minh Track.

Oh the rules of engagement are something else, too.
You can't shoot a dink unless he shoots at you.
For all of the murders we'd like to commit,
We end up with footprints all over our dicks.⁵⁹

"Saigon Warrior III" (1969), much like its earlier cousins, showed little remorse and spared even less ire as it critiqued rear-echelon, paper-pushing bureaucrats who fancied themselves heroes though they never saw combat. It proved one of the better known songs regularly performed in-country by The Merryman, a group of Army aviators assigned to the 173rd Assault Helicopter Company base at Lai Khe in 1966 and 1967. Broudy recorded it, also in 1967:

Saigon, oh Saigon's a wonderful place,
But the organization's a God-damned disgrace,
There are Captains and Majors and Light Colonels, too,
With their hands in their pockets and nothing to do.

Chorus: [repeated after each verse]

Singing dinky dau, dinky dau, dinky dau doo,
With their hands in their pockets and nothing to do.

Oh they sit at their desks and the scream and they shout,
And they talk of the war they know nothing about,
Against the VC they're not doing too well,
But if paper were cordite we'd be blown to hell.

Oh a Saigon Commando's an unusual sight,
He wears his fatigues though he's not in the fight;
A knife and a pistol his daily motif,
But you'll find him for lunch at the *Cercle Sportif*.

⁵⁹ Fish and Bowen, 18.

Well if you go to Saigon to visit this crew,
They'll be all upset 'cause your brass isn't new.
If you ask for more weapons, they'll think you're "in fun,"
They know that advisors should not need a gun.

Most Saigon Commandos now wear a Bronze Star,
They got it for writing reports on the war.
They've never been shot at nor seen a VC,
But they know they deserve it, they work for MACV!

Well, when this war is over and you all go home,
You'll meet Saigon Warriors wherever you roam,
You'll know them by sight and they're not in your class,
They don't have diarrhea, just a big chairborne ass!⁶⁰

Troops didn't reserve their scorn for REMFs or ranking officers alone. As the graffiti frequencies in the previous chapter demonstrated, anyone who could be identified as "R.A.," or "Regular Army," those professional "lifers," or career soldiers who willfully volunteered for military service – or anyone, volunteer or draftee, who acted gung ho enough to deserve the moniker "R.A.," for that matter – would nearly always become targets for ridicule and criticism. In one parody of "The Caissons Go Rolling Along," collected in-country in 1969, the group of soldiers singing it voiced what one called "the feelings of a majority of U.S. troops toward the army and the war in general":

Over hill, over dale, as we hit the dusty trail,
As the lifers go stumbling along,
Watch them drink, watch them stink,
Watch them even try to think,
As the lifers go stumbling along.

For it's heigh, heigh, hee! Truly fucked are we!

⁶⁰ Cleveland, 133. See also Saul Broudy, *G.I. Folklore in Vietnam*, M.A. thesis, University of Pennsylvania, 1969; and Saul Broudy et al., *In-Country: Folksongs of Americans in the Vietnam War*, (Chicago: Flying Fish Records, 1992), Track #4.

Shout out your numbers loud and strong. R!A!
For where'er you go, you will always know
That the lifers go stumbling along,
Stumble! Stumble! Stumble!⁶¹

In these troops' heartfelt opinions, gung ho lifers always touting Pentagon protocols proved in Vietnam to be little more than inept bumbler, redolent of the softness and alcoholism more commonly characteristic of non-combatant personnel. And if lifers didn't "stumble" and "smell" bad enough, they made sure to emphasize their sentiments with among the crassest of American expletives. They imply the R.A. stumble so much and so badly that they'll undoubtedly get line troops killed, maybe even lose the war, depending on how one interpreted their "Truly fucked are we!" exclamation. What these parodies lacked in musical originality, they made up for in unbridled candor.

Virtually none were exempt from lyrical vilification, especially if songwriters felt their actions invited commentary. Of all those social commentary in Lansdale's collection, the wartime repertoire of the Cosmos Tabernacle Choir stands as the most prolific. This self-named group comprised of CIA field agents in advisory positions (and thus, not frequently answerable to the regular military chain of command), would, as part of their daily unwinding ritual, frequent either the Cosmos Bar near the American Embassy in Saigon or retire to Lansdale's villa. There they spelled out in song their successes and failures, their joys and frustrations and field agent insight.⁶²

⁶¹ Penelope Brown, *Military Lore Collection*, 1969, Folklore Archives, University of California at Berkeley, in Les Cleveland, "Songs of the Vietnam War: An Occupational Folklore Tradition," online article from the Vietnam Veterans Oral History and Folklore Project at Buffalo State College, copyright 1988, accessed 17 April 2012, <http://faculty.buffalostate.edu/fishlm/folksongs/cleveland-occupational.htm>.

⁶² Edward Lansdale, *In the Midst of Wars*, 392.

The CIA deployed agents and advisors who were among the staunchest proponents of America's mission in Vietnam, so it is telling indeed that the Cosmos Tabernacle Choir composed some of the songs most critical of U.S. policy and leaders. For example, arguably very few Americans wanted to be fighting a war on the other side of the planet at Christmastime, so many Christmas carol parodies arose to give the men pressure valves by which to vent their frustrations, and the Choir employed theirs to criticize everything and everyone. Their cynicism over being in-country during the holidays as well as their displeasure with the ways they felt Westmoreland and his REMF strategists were mismanaging the war came boiling to the surface in this scathing, sarcastic parody of "God Rest Ye Merry Gentlemen" from the members of the Cosmos Command:

God rest ye, General Westmoreland,
Let nothing you dismay,
The First Air Cavalry
Was wiped out yesterday.

The Big Red One will get it next,⁶³
Out at Michelin.

Oh, tidings of comfort and joy,
Comfort and joy,
Oh, tidings of comfort and joy.⁶⁴

The verses themselves are pointed, and no doubt the sarcasm in the carol's chorus, "Oh, tidings of comfort and joy" targeted some of the many tragic and convoluted ironies the war generated. For example, the American combat units mentioned in the song experienced regular, heavy combat near Dau Tieng, a village situated in the middle of a

⁶³ "Big Red One" refers to the Army's 1st Infantry Division, a large ground combat group that saw protracted combat in the plantation region and sustained heavy casualties there.

⁶⁴ Fish and Bowen, 23.

French-owned Michelin rubber plantation, so consequently, it frustrated operatives advising in the area, not to mention troops defending the plant that, one, the American government was paying the French rent to operate a firebase at Dau Tieng; two, that the French were paying Viet Cong laborers to work the plantation; and finally, the local VC guerillas were subsequently funding many of their insurgency efforts with the money from their workers Michelin.⁶⁵ In short, US war coffers were indirectly financing the very Vietcong who were killing American GIs, so in the songwriter's minds, criticism as mild as a Christmas carol parody was the least General Westmoreland and leaders of his ineptitude deserved. This may explain why the general ended up starring in so many of the carols, like this "Away in a Manger" parody:

Away in a hamlet
No crib for his bed,
The little Westmoreland
Lay down his sweet head.⁶⁶

That the Choir members satirically equated Westmoreland with Christianity's savior figure only highlights these CIA operatives' perceptive grasp of the irony of both the Pentagon's and the State Department's refusal to listen to those on the ground such as themselves and Lansdale who were daily trying to accomplish the American mission of thwarting communism in Southeast Asia. Such an ironic metaphor, Westmoreland as a Christ-figure, no doubt stemmed more from what these agents saw as the patronizing messiah complex of America and its military figurehead, General Westmoreland.

⁶⁵ Vietnam Veterans Against the War, eds., *The Winter Soldier Investigation: An Inquiry into American War Crimes* (Toronto: Beacon Press, 1972), 23. For more on how everything from money to medicine to materiel for the war ended up furthering the *enemy* war effort, see James William Gibson, *The Perfect War: Technowar in Vietnam*, (New York: Atlantic Monthly Press, 2000), 192-3, and particularly Chs. 7 and 8.

⁶⁶ Fish and Bowen, 9.

Rather than coming to seek and save that which was lost, however, the general simply came and lost.

Emphasizing the futility of fighting the war the American way rather than as a people's counterrevolutionary war, the Choir seemed to presage how it all would end, again, through the irony of Christmas carols. Just brief excerpts from parodies of "Good King Wenceslas," "Here Comes Santa Claus," and "Santa Claus is Coming to Town," demonstrate, respectively, that these advisors possessed a keen awareness of Vietnam's military, political, and cultural realities:

Uncle Ho Chi Minh looked down,
Upon Saigon City...⁶⁷

The Choir referred to Ho Chi Minh in the affectionate informal for more than just comedic or satiric effect. Doing so demonstrates that the Choir's recognized that the Vietnamese people equated Ho Chi Minh to Uncle Sam, a powerful symbol of freedom, nationalism, even paternal protection. Uncles in Vietnam are elders, at least respected and obeyed if not always beloved and adored. Advisors working among the people for as long as Cosmos Tabernacle Choir members had doubtless caught that the comparison of Uncle Ho with Uncle Sam should remind decision makers that this was a people's war while at the same time irritating superiors in Saigon and Washington.

Another Choir parody excerpt reflects their resignation with some of the more frustrating recurring situations, like an enemy blatantly using a transportation route for men and materiel that ran through an adjacent sovereign nation whose borders the Choir's superiors had forbidden them to cross to engage that enemy:

⁶⁷ Ibid., 46.

Here comes PAVN,
Here comes PAVN,
Down the Ho Chi Minh Trail...⁶⁸

This last Christmas parody excerpt proved sagely prescient of how America's efforts in Vietnam would come to naught but retreat and defeat. Although its lyrics wax humorous, its subtext captures the later war's prevailing sense of resignation:

Chorus: Oh, you better bug out,
You better get high,
Draw your weapon,
I'm telling you why,
Ho Chi Minh is coming to town.

He knows when ARVN's sleeping,
MACV is never awake,
He knows your ammo is never good,
So bug out for goodness' sake...⁶⁹

Troops used more than Christmas carols to trash those in charge. In their estimation, much of how both civilian and military leadership prosecuted the war warranted social commentary, and soldier-songwriters proved both creative and ironic how they satirized leadership. A prime example is a parody of the traditional Protestant hymn, "Rock of Ages," by Brigadier General Thomas Bowen entitled, "We Are Winning." General Bowen, like Colonel Watt, served three different multi-year tours in Vietnam (his last as I Corps deputy senior advisor). Late in the advisor period he took three different, very specific American leaders to task for what would very soon become known as "the credibility gap." Bowen's "We Are Winning," demonstrates the clarity with which he had recognized early on the geopolitical quagmire that Vietnam had become. The general memorializes – or vilifies – each in order of proximity, an

⁶⁸ Ibid., 24.

⁶⁹ Ibid., 50.

REMF general, a Saigon-based State Department ambassador, and the Secretary of Defense himself:

We are winning, this we know,
General Harkins tells us so.
Though in the Delta, things are tough,
And in the Highlands, very rough,
But the VC soon will go,
Mr. Cabot tells them so.
If you doubt them, who are you?
McNamara says so too.⁷⁰

General Paul Harkins was a contemporary and colleague of General Bowen who preceded General Westmoreland from 1962 to 1964 as MACV commander. Like Lansdale, Harkins remained optimistic throughout his tenure that America's anticommunist mission in Vietnam could succeed (though for starkly different reasons than Lansdale).⁷¹ Yet while the "credibility gap" didn't join mainstream usage until the mid-1960s, when the press began more vocally to challenge discrepancies between the LBJ administration's declarations and in-country dissenters like Lt. Colonel John Paul Vann and the Saigon press corps, Bowen had already memorialized it in song. His lyrics presaged Neil Sheehan, who also ridiculed Harkin's credibility. Sheehan scoffed, this "American general with a swagger stick and cigarette holder ... who would not deign to soil his suntans and street shoes in a rice paddy to find out what was going on, was prattling about having trapped the Viet Cong."⁷² *New York Times* correspondent and member of the Saigon press corps David Halberstam positively loathed Harkins;

⁷⁰ Ibid., 46.

⁷¹ Harkin's optimism is perhaps more understandable than Westmoreland's. Harkin presided earlier in the advisory period, before enemy ingenuity, tenacity, and successes like Tet had begun to undermine American confidences – even in light of their marked advantages in manpower, firepower, technology, transportation, supply, and logistics.

⁷² Clarence R. Wyatt, *Paper Soldiers: The American Press and the Vietnam War*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 108.

not just his credibility gap but Harkins' active efforts to thwart journalistic freedom in Vietnam. Halberstam believed Harkins' repressive command so criminal that one night at a dinner when someone toasted the general, Halberstam adamantly refused to raise his glass and instead shouted to a room full of dinner guests that "Paul D. Harkins should be court martialed and shot!"⁷³

Henry Cabot Lodge, Jr., twice the US Ambassador to South Vietnam (1963-64 and 1965-67), who according to Lansdale and Senator Thomas Dodd, deserved the lion's share of the blame for the Diem coup in 1963 and the next several years of South Vietnamese political instability, was also known by many including Bowen, for his overly optimistic official statements despite military, political, and social evidence to the contrary.⁷⁴ Some doubtless thought that Secretary McNamara perhaps deserved less of Bowen's unwelcomed notoriety. The secretary was back stateside, after all. McNamara's critics, however, said he constituted his very own consummate archetype of walking, talking credibility gaps, saying one thing when truth said otherwise.⁷⁵ One critic synopsised McNamara's credibility issues quite clearly, claiming that McNamara's story on any given day varied with his audience. Depending on the situational context and who was listening, McNamara would voice his "public position, his classified position, his personal views expressed privately to the president, his

⁷³ Ibid., 104. For more on General Harkins' character and leadership, see David Halberstam, "'They Can Win a War If Someone Shows Them How': Profile of John Paul Vann, 1962-1964," in *Reporting Vietnam: American Journalism, 1959-1975*, (New York: The Library of America), 50-65. For more on Harkins' credibility gap, see Robert Schulzinger, *A Time for War: The United States and Vietnam, 1941-1975*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997). 117-118; see also Karnow, 274-275.

⁷⁴ Frederik Logevall, *Choosing War: The Lost Chance for Peace and the Escalation of War in Vietnam*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), 34-35, 115-116.

⁷⁵ For more on American optimism in the face of mounting evidence in-country, see George Herring, *America's Longest War: The United States and Vietnam, 1950-1975*, 3rd Ed., (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1996), 100-105.

views disclosed to friendly journalists, his positions with peers, his daytime views as war manager at the Pentagon, and his nighttime views with the Kennedys or Washington society.”⁷⁶ Consequently, Bowen lampooning McNamara’s credibility gap along with Harkin’s and Lodge’s should hardly surprise. In one short ditty, a general in charge of an entire Corps-worth of advisors and who trained and advised ARVN troops throughout the war, satirized and criticized his leaders while documenting, encapsulating, and memorializing his frustrations with both military and civilian leadership, capability, and credibility during the Vietnam War.

McNamara and his credibility gap, like Westmoreland and other popular targets of the day, suffered no shortage of detractors, from both in-country military and civilians alike. By the time he had seen just a year’s USAID duty in Vietnam, Dolf Droge, if his songs indicate anything, had already developed a healthy disgust with the defense secretary’s tendency to whitewash the real state of the war with inflated enemy KIA figures and distorted battle reports. As a former journalist dedicated to reporting the truth, watching McNamara’s credibility gap unfold before his very eyes must have proven instrumental in driving Droge to pen his supremely sarcastic parody of “McNamara’s Band,” a tune popularized in 1945 by Bing Crosby and whose title conveniently contained the very name he sought to ridicule in song and stanzas:

Oh, me name is McNamara, I’ve got a special band,
And every couple of weeks or so I fly to old Vietnam.
I assemble the troops, count communist groups, and while the choppers fall,
I hurry home to tell you, sure, it’s not so bad after all.

⁷⁶ Hughes, Thomas L. “Experiencing McNamara.” *Foreign Policy*, No. 100 (Fall 1995: 154–71), 171. See also, Edward J. Drea, *McNamara, Clifford, and the Burdens of Vietnam, 1965 – 1969, Secretaries of Defense Historical Series, Volume VI*, (Washington D.C.: Historical Office, Office of the Secretary of Defense, 2011), 18.

Chorus: La, la, la, la, we are winning!
La, la, la, la, yes, we are winning!

Computers roar, we tally the score, the Vietcong blaze away,
And hardly a government flag survives after the close of day.
But have no fear, victory's near, that is plain to see;
I don't believe the *New York Times*, just rely on me.

Chorus⁷⁷

Other troops who had survived in-country for very long and who paid attention to greater administrative goings-on around them regularly voiced almost precisely what "McNamara's Band" articulates. As he unwinded between patrols one day, Marine grunt Bill Ehrhart was informed that one of his favorite salty Marines, Frank Basinski, had just been killed. Basinski, a short-timer himself, Ehrhart recalled, had only two days prior pronounced his own verdict on civilian and military war leadership when he remarked, "Those guys in the Pentagon and the White House have all the answers in their silly little computers, and there's not much point in trying to reason with 'em, even if you ever got the chance. Reason isn't a requirement for national leadership, and in the case of senior military commanders, it's an absolute handicap."⁷⁸

As effectively as his contemporaries Baskinski and Bowen, Droge had captured the sentiments of those who called Vietnam "McNamara's War."⁷⁹ The defense secretary personified what for Droge proved an unholy union of the corporate mentality and Washington bureaucracy at their worst. And the cold, clinical ability to translate body counts on all sides into numbers he optimistically exaggerated in

⁷⁷ Dolf Droge, "McNamara's Band," in Fish and Bowen, 30. See also, Fish, *General Lansdale*, 407.

⁷⁸ W.D. Ehrhart, *Vietnam-Perkasie: A Combat Marine Memoir*, (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, Inc., 1983), 69.

⁷⁹ Stanley Karnow, *Vietnam: A History*, (New York: Penguin Books, 1997), 24.

Pentagon briefings was its bastard offspring. Little wonder, Droge's parody suggests, that the credibility gap worsened with conflicting reports regularly issuing from the Pentagon's most senior official.

Droge and Bowen composed many songs during the war, but the general also collected many more during his tours in-country. Like Lansdale, Bowen recognized the songs' historical and contemporary worth and sought to preserve as many as possible. One of his finds, a parody of "The Battle Hymn of the Republic," entitled, "Our Forces Are Advancing," he collected during his second tour in 1967 from its author, John E. Roberts, an American serviceman who fought in and around the ancient, historical imperial city of Hue. The parody echoes many of the same themes that Droge's "MacNamara's Band" and Bowen's "We Are Winning" emphasized but with subtler literary nuances, such as Roberts aiming his sights on new villains each round of the chorus. Roberts also devoted more energy to emphasizing the overall bureaucratic SNAFU that Vietnam seemed to embody for combatants, though he targeted fewer historical culprits. In fact, only one leading figure in Roberts' mind warranted the full measure of his satire:

Our forces are advancing and we've finished clearing Hue,
The RF and the FF are showing us the way.
Ambassadors are sending up inspectors everyday,
The reports keep marching on.

Chorus: Glory, glory, we are winning, with TFES, we are winning.
Glory, glory, we are winning, the reports keep marching on.

Say there's rockets in the cities and there's bombing in the hills.
There's shooting in the paddies and there's banging in the villes.
We fight a while--count a while, and write a while, too,
The reports keep marching on.

Glory, glory, we are winning, with H-E-S, we are winning.
Glory, glory, we are winning, the reports keep marching on.

The fighting's getting bloody and we Roman Plow the town,
A sniper shoots a buddy and we blow the hamlet down.
The refugees come streaming and we'll give them all some tin,
The reports keep marching on.

Glory, glory, we are winning, with a stencil we are winning,
Glory, glory, we are winning, the reports keep marching on.

A hamlet is regressing and we all leap to the fight,
Saigon sends out a shipment and we issue day and night.
Cement is hard, the tin is bent, but it will be all right,
The reports keep marching on.

Glory, glory, we are winning, with piastres we are winning,
Glory, glory, we are winning, the reports keep marching on.

Komer sends a message that our figures are a fright.
Komer sends a letter that we better see the light.
Komer comes to visit and we sit up all the night.
The reports keep rolling on.

Glory, glory, we are winning, with computers we are winning,
Glory, glory, we are winning, the reports keep marching on.⁸⁰

Roberts' choice of targets would have become immediately apparent for reasons obvious to many who served in either a military or civilian capacity in Vietnam at the time. In March 1966, President Johnson appointed by directive a "Special Assistant for Peaceful Construction in Vietnam," Robert Komer, to oversee the president's pacification efforts in South Vietnam. Johnson gave Komer sizable authority over seven different civilian agencies and their programs, most infamously the CIA's Phoenix Program and the State Department's Strategic Hamlet Program. Komer also enjoyed

⁸⁰ Fish and Bowen, 35-36.

“considerable say in the mobilization of military resources to support the President’s pacification commitment.”⁸¹

Notwithstanding the moral questionability of both the Phoenix Program and the Strategic Hamlet Program’s forced relocation, with all its accompanying woes for the villagers herded into American concentration camps, Komer’s pacification programs generated tidal waves of written reports in the wake of all their destruction and disruption to South Vietnamese lives. Strangely, Komer seems to have somehow equated the very act of documenting attempted program measures with strategic success, or “measurement equals successful measures.” In those contexts then, Roberts’ song, especially its conclusion, make his sentiments clearly known: only in Komer’s FUBAR’ed bureaucratic, even borderline-sociopathic worldview could rampant urban combat; sniped American KIAs; US troop reprisals that destroyed villages; angry, displaced, forcibly relocated and thus, homeless, politically-alienated refugees; and Komer’s concrete-hard-hearted, tin-thin token compensation – only in that would could such results be reported as program success. Roberts’ parody captured and chronicled his astute perceptions of the day: that Komer’s paper empire, which monitored, measured, verified, and reported *ad nauseum* pacification’s every phase, could never demonstrate, even from some convoluted, bureaucratic perspective, that those measures must be working simply because reports inundated Saigon and Washington inboxes – especially in light of all the tongue-in-cheek evidence of pacification’s failure that his satiric song provides.

⁸¹ Frank L. Jones, “Blowtorch: Robert Komer and the Making of Vietnam Pacification Policy,” *Parameters* (Autumn 2005: 103-118), 106.

As the songs above have shown, troops in Vietnam were particularly gifted at satirizing their leaders, and one frequent device they often used was sarcasm, and one of the most commonly popular bits of sarcasm that troops regularly employed was the phrase, "Sorry about that." Two letters from troops to *True* magazine in July of 1966 claim that the phrase actually originated among American troops in World War II Japan and Korea respectively, but the correspondents' sole evidence to support that claim was the fact that they knew the phrase's equivalent in those languages. US Army lore and a piece in the December 8, 1965 issue of *Army Times* credits the phrase to a particularly sarcastic general who allegedly wrote "Sorry about that" on the very first round fired by a 175 mm artillery piece in Vietnam. The 1960s television comedy "Get Smart" popularized the phrase when its lead character, Agent Maxwell Smart apologetically uttered it regularly, and many assumed the show's writers conceived of the humor. However, Joe Nikolas, combat correspondent for *Newsweek*, wrote in the January 3, 1966 issue that "Get Smart's" writers "took the phrase over from Vietnam G.I.s who apply it to everything from a short round [that fell on either US troops or Vietnamese civilians] to warm beer."⁸² Regardless of where the term originated, it saw enough usage in Vietnam to warrant memorializing and preserving it in song. In "Sorry About That," General Bowen, who harbored a down-to-earth sense of humor as well as a keenly critical eye, did not criticize any notoriously poor leaders. Rather, he employed the infamous sarcastic phrase to criticize numerous aspects of life in the military in Vietnam:

⁸² Carl Fleischhauer, "A Glossary of Army Slang, Part II," (1968), 17. Unpublished document, Vietnam War subject file, American Folklife Center, Library of Congress.

You're transferred into the Delta,
Hamlets to defend.
You reinforce your garrison,
For fight to the bitter end.
J2 has said VC will attack tonight the town,
Instead by day they Nha Trang,
And burn it to the ground.

Chorus [spoken after every verse]: Sorry about that!

Next day you're patrolling,
When a land mine lays you low.
A Huey takes you to Saigon,
Your leg wound up to sew.
They wheel you into surgery,
And of this there is no doubt,
The dirty carts mixed up the charts,
They took your appendix out.

And then your year is ended,
Your replacement's here and trained.
You're out at Tan Son Nhut,
With a suitcase finally to emplane.
You're headed up the stairway,
When the MPs come for you,
To say that your tour's just been extended,
From one year to two.⁸³

While the specific events Bowen, *et. al.* depicted in the song almost certainly never occurred as recited, musical depictions of these tragicomic archetypes of mistakes, misunderstandings, and mix-ups rang true for a vast majority of troops serving in Vietnam. They highlight for scholars how even humor-laden hyperbole contained a grain of truth or else it wouldn't have resonated so deeply with troops. Finally, hyperbolically critical humor songs served a priceless function for troops at the time:

⁸³ Bowen was known to be a humble man, an unfortunate fact for scholars because he doesn't indicate precisely when he and his colleagues wrote this song. However, notes on the Bowen manuscript for his collection, *Songs of Saigon*, fix the date to sometime during his first tour, which spanned from 1963 and his first departure in 1965. Fish and Bowen, 40-41.

they helped troops laugh at common frustrations – like military SNAFUs – and thereby achieve a sense of victory over those elements of Vietnam military life over which they had little or no control.

One last critical parody, appropriately titled, “Our Leaders,” deserves mention here, for the sheer fact that it criticizes everyone from promotion-minded, careerist commanding officers all the way up the military food chain to the Commander-in-Chief at the time, President Johnson. Written by an American fighter pilot and collected by Joseph Tusso sometime prior to Defense Secretary McNamara’s resignation on January 29, 1967, the parody of Peggy Lee and Dave Barbour’s 1948 hit, “Mañana” broadcasts unmistakably American pilots’ sentiments concerning higher echelon decision makers:

At Phillips range in Kansas
The jocks all had the knack,
But now that we’re in combat
We’ve got colonels on our back.
And every time we say, “Shit-hot!”
Or whistle in the bar,
We have to answer to somebody
Looking for a star!

Chorus: [repeated after each verse]

Our leaders, our leaders,
Our leaders, is what they always say,
But it’s bullshit, it’s bullshit,
It’s bullshit they feed us every day!

They send us out in bunches
To bomb a bridge and die,
These tactics are for bombers
That our leaders used to fly;
The bastards don’t trust our colonel
Up in the wing, and so I guess,
We’ll have to leave the thinking to
The wheels in JCS!

The JCS are generals,
But they're not always right,
Sometimes they have to think it over
Well into the night;
When they have a question
Or something they can't hack,
They have to leave the judgment to
That money-saving Mac!

Now Mac's job's in danger
For he's on a salary, too;
To have the final say-so
Is something he can't do;
Before we fly a mission
And everything's OK,
Mac has to get permission from
Flight leader LBJ!!⁸⁴

Major Joseph Tusso, USAF, Retired, contends that the songwriter's sentiments highlight, from lower ranks to upper, exactly the sorts of headaches with which American pilots constantly had to contend, all of which originated from one ever-present source: rank.⁸⁵ Rank has always had its privileges, and to the fighter pilot who penned this song, shit always ran down hill – or rather, its source could always be traced right back up the hill to the top. As the song expresses, in training, commanders encouraged and cultivated aviator brashness and bravado, understanding that unshakable confidence would prove a necessary character trait in order to survive the Vietnam air war. Yet when pilots arrived in-country, some nit-picking, micromanaging superior, nearly always with an inferiority complex was trying to dial the jocks back or take them down a few notches as to demonstrate who really commanded the outfit – and who deserved the promotion for the pilots' successes.

⁸⁴ Tusso, 153-54.

⁸⁵ Ibid.

As the song demonstrates then, military pilots as a whole were arguably all competent men who had to survive college, basic training, Officers' Candidate School, flight school, and extra aviation training, including aerial combat maneuvers, tactics, and strategies, before they were ever allowed in combat. It stood to reason that with all that training and after much combat experience these men knew much about their craft, of what they spoke, and how best to perform their duties in Vietnam's air war. Yet as the song expressed repeatedly in multiple stanzas, one conflict that regularly arose in Vietnam was disagreements over tactics. More serious, the song laments, combat flyers and commanders in the field increasingly had to deal with bureaucratic interference that sometimes proved fatal. They had to tolerate an air war run by authorities further and further removed from the action, from the Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS) through the Secretary of Defense, up to the ultimate authority, the commander-in-chief. In short, this song, especially the chorus, captures with crystal clarity the pilots' sentiments and reactions to decisionmakers at higher echelons usurping their authority to make split-second decisions in combat. Among the musical folk-culture canon, it is Vietnam War emotional history at its most naked.

No study of songs by Americans in the Vietnam War could be complete without examining a few of those dozens that chronicled not just inner-histories but the actual contexts, people, places, events, and circumstances of life in combat in Vietnam. Songs abound that recount death, deprivation, loss, pain, fear, rage, nihilistic resignation, even the weather and physical environment. A rare original number not parodying anything, "Six Clicks," is one of the many Lansdale recorded in-country. Captain

Herschel Gober penned it in 1966 after a particularly long, harrowing hump through the rice paddies, swamps, and jungle trails of the Mekong Delta. It differs from so many others in that it makes no pretense to any superhuman bravery, combat prowess, or overweening arrogance. Rather like numerous others in the Lansdale collection, Gober speaks in sincere, even vulnerable terms about the degree to which Vietnam combat operations taxed troops, physically, mentally, and emotionally:

Six clicks is a mighty short walk,
When you march behind a band--
But six clicks can seem like a hundred miles,
When you're walking in Charlie's land.

With a pack upon your back,
And a rifle in your hand,
Every step you take,
Death is holding your hand,
Walking in Charlie's land.

Up before the crack of dawn,
Out in the brush,
Every clump of trees
Can hide an ambush.

You must not relax,
Don't lay your rifle down,
Remember, buddy, you're trespassing,
On Charlie's ground.

There's mud and mosquitoes and snakes,
Mines and punji stakes.
Some of our boys learn too late,
Just who owns this real estate.
This is Charlie's land.

Six clicks is a mighty short walk,
When you march behind a band--
But six clicks can seem like a hundred miles,

When you're walking in Charlie's land.⁸⁶

Gober's frankly recounts everyday fears and challenges, mincing no words portraying what infantrymen felt and thought as they patrolled hostile territory. Too, he admits a healthy respect for the opponents grunts had to be ready to face but whom they rarely saw and even more rarely engaged for any real sustained contact. "Charlie" never actually appears in the song. Gober seems more concerned with conveying troops' ever-present awareness that they were the interlopers. He knew who owned the turf, even equating it with notions of property that Americans would understand, "Charlie's real estate."

Perhaps even more telling of how songs reflect combat realities, more humble, careful, vulnerable songs survive in the Lansdale and Bowen collections than do boastful, arrogant, macho ones. Lyrical evidence substantiates that most troops understood the horrors of war, the perils of their circumstances, the fierceness of their enemy's resolve, not to mention, on occasion, even his humanity:

I'll sing you a story of little brave men,
Who defend their outpost time and again.
Men not so different from you and from me.
Men who will fight to keep their country free.

Stationed in an outpost in the middle of a field,
To him this war is very, very real.
He'll fight for freedom until the end.
He fights for his family, fights for his friend.

Shower shoes upon his feet,
A rifle in his hand,
He knows that any night,
He may have to make his final stand.

⁸⁶ Gober, "Six Clicks," in Fish and Bowen, 39.

This is the picture of a man.

He has fought for many, many years.

He has seen more than his share of sorrow and tears.

He longs for the day when there is peace in his land.

This is the picture of a man.... This is the picture of a man.⁸⁷

Gober wrote "Picture of a Man" also in 1966, and it so compelled Lansdale that he included in the collection he had earlier sent to his superiors and would later donate to the Library of Congress. More compelling still is that though an American advisor to South Vietnamese infantry composed it, he never hinted whether the "man" of whom he spoke was his ARVN charges or Vietcong enemy. Whichever, Gober voices widely held sentiments: that American troops respected Vietnamese bravery, his politics, his resourcefulness, his tenacity, and most compelling, his often disquieting resemblance to themselves.

Not all the songs soldiers wrote in Vietnam brooded over possible or impending death. Many were just plain humorous, often downright hilarious. Consider this parody of "Strangers in the Night" by Colonel Watt and his multinational team of advisors to the ARVN Sixth Regiment:

Rangers in the night, exhausted people,
We were rangers in the night, until the morning,
When we saw that first LZ.
Little did we see food was just a click away,
A march and an asshole kick away.

And ever since that night,
We've wandered together,
Rangers in the night,
We're not too clever,
If you think this is the end, you're right.⁸⁸

⁸⁷ Gober, "Picture of a Man," in *ibid.*, 37.

⁸⁸ Watt, "Rangers in the Night," in *ibid.*, 37.

Watt communicates near-universal realities among infantry: exhaustion, hunger, and weariness of night patrols and “asshole” leaders who forced them to march. But he also expresses in a few brief lines how ever since their first night patrol, this particular Ranger outfit had fought together as a unit. Watt self-effaces – or self-incriminates – acknowledging a cleverness deficit, but his subtext also subtly indicts superiors who send units out on misguided patrols based on even less-guided, imperfect intelligence. Despite having to “wander” through missions, whether for lack of clever selves or leaders, Watt’s sense of *esprit de corps* shines through because his Ranger unit survived that night and every one since “together.” Troops may have lost personal agency when they entered the military and then the war, but as Watt’s parody clearly illustrates, they rarely lost their sense of humor – and of self.

Though troops often cloaked anxieties in humor, the Vietnam folksong canon still evinces plenty of both. Songs regularly anticipate ETS or DEROS dates, when servitude to combat perils ends and troops could begin the long road to redeeming shrapnel-scarred selves. This anonymous tune General Bowen collected from a pilot testifies:

Ever since I’ve started flying,
I had to work to keep from dying,
Specially since I came to Vietnam.

Seems on every combat sortie
That’s when Charlie tries to zort me,
When I’m shootin’ guns and droppin’ bombs.

Someday when my tour is over,
I’ll lay dreaming deep in clover,

'Bout you silly bastards droppin' bombs!⁸⁹

Throughout the war (less early on, but more so as the war worsened), songs mention duty hazards along with dreams of going home. But tellingly, this tune bespeaks two fatalistic truisms widely held among combatants. First, that the war would likely still rage long after some troops return home. Second, that even safely back stateside, memories—or nightmares—of the war would likely never relent. Combat correspondent Michael Herr offers a haunting account of the tenacious nature of combat memory. Almost universally, troops struggled, at least at first, to dissipate the images and memories from the forefront of their consciousness. Often they simply had to bury them in order to function and thus survive. Herr elaborates:

Before you could dissipate it [a traumatic image], you had to locate it... : transmitted by blood, maybe what they meant by "blood consciousness." And transmitted over and over without letup on increasingly powerful frequencies until you either received it or blocked it out one last time, informational Death of a Thousand Cuts, each cut so precise and subtle you don't even feel them accumulating, you just get up one morning and your ass falls off.⁹⁰

Understandably, the war's most resonant songs originated from combatants. Whether bared in naked outpourings of raw emotion on the one hand or cloaked in humor, sarcasm, or satire, the content's intensity changed little throughout the war. Content itself changed often over the course of the war, sometimes even over the course of a single troop's tour, as troop folksongs often mirror the war's ever-changing trajectory. Creative impulses that began the war touting invincibility and combat superiority turned to decry danger, frequent death, and perpetual uncertainty that hounded Vietnam combat participants. F-4 Phantom pilot Jonas penned this intensely

⁸⁹ "Shootin' Guns and Droppin' Bombs," in *Tuso*, 170.

⁹⁰ Michael Herr, *Dispatches*, (New York: Vintage, 1991), 251.

poignant lament much later on in his Vietnam experience. His year of witnessing agony, death, and loss has shifted his convictions dramatically:

Oh, Lord, I got tales that I can tell,
Oh, Lord, what it's like down in hell;
Oh, Lord, I got tales that I can tell,
I got tales that I can tell, oh, Lord.

I know what it's like to sit and wait,
I know the misery of unknown fate;
Don't know whether I'll come back today,
I got tales that I can tell, oh, Lord.

I feel loneliness and fear and pain,
I've see brave and daring deeds insane,
I've see blood flow, but not in vain,
I got tales that I can tell, oh, Lord.

I've felt pity deep within my heart,
I've seen mothers' sons blown apart.
I've seen Satan's wicked fiery darts,
I got tales that I can tell, oh, Lord.

I've seen fire and thunder in the sky,
I've known men who weren't afraid to die,
I've seen men take eagle's wings and fly,
I got tales that I can tell, oh, Lord.⁹¹

Jonas's personal power paradigm has fundamentally shifted. The man who once self-identified as a "Son of Satan's Angels" has changed his tune, so to speak, to one that condemns Satan's evil blowing mothers' sons apart. He equates his tour to having flown into hell with no certainty of return. His once-brash bravado has given way to grief, loss, and an unmistakable sense of mortality. Like countless Americans felt early on in the war and their tours, he believed himself an invincible agent of death. Now many missions into his tour, powerless, he invokes audience with his new supreme

⁹¹ Dick Jonas, "Tales That I Can Tell," in *Tuso*, 189-190.

agent, his “Lord,” cataloguing his litany of lamentations. Comparing this Jonas number with his earlier ones demonstrates how little else corrected youthful naïveté and overweening pride among green troops like personal experience. Jonas now embodies the maxim, “There are no atheists in foxholes” (or fighter jet cockpits, either, apparently), particularly since reality dispatched his delusions of grandeur.

Sometimes all it took was a little R&R away from the war amid civility and civilization to really remind troops how much their perspectives had changed during their tours. Of course R&R almost always juxtaposed harshly with combat, so the two impetuses were interdependent. Still, troops often experienced paradigm-shifting epiphanies on R&R:

Tokyo had taught me something. There was a world of things to do and see and feel, and they had nothing to do with dying or getting torn to pieces.” futility of war, “It all seemed so incredibly senseless to me now. The utter futility of war was obvious. Logic screamed that there had to be a better way to settle disputes. And not just this war but all wars.... This grind of fighting and humping and bad diets and being scared and maiming and dying and winning and losing was no good. We should be working and playing and eating and fucking.⁹²

Ultimately, however, combat and all its accompanying pain, suffering, and loss, during which troops watched themselves slowly turn into inescapably darker versions of themselves – and then the horror and shame that resulted once they recognized it – ultimately, these proved the greatest agent of transforming warriors into antiwarriors. When his unit chaplain asked Marine Bill Ehrhart why he hadn’t attended church services back at battalion lately, Ehrhart confessed candidly, “Father, when I enlisted, I thought I was doing the right thing. I thought I was doin’ right by my country – gonna

⁹² Entry for 26 June 1968, Kelly, *DMZ Diary*, 128.

help the Vietnamese, and all like that. I really believed it.... Well, I don't believe it anymore. I don't know what to believe, but I sure don't believe that. We're not doin' anybody any good around here, and any fool can see that."⁹³

Lieutenant Jim Simmen expressed a similar transformation and subsequent epiphany of self-loathing in two letters home to his brother, a parish priest. In the early letter he likened his experience on infantry patrols to hunting when he wrote, "I know I'm going after souls, but I get all excited when I see a VC, just like when I see a deer. I go ape firing at him.... Last night I killed and everyone has been patting me on the back.... It isn't all that horrifying." In just a few short months, however, Simmen had had a change of heart: "I feel kind of ashamed of the way I've thought and acted over here. I realize that I've actually enjoyed some of the things I've done which would be repulsive to a healthy mind.... When one starts to enjoy the sickness of war, he is sick."⁹⁴

Though the frequency, duration, and intensity of enemy contact increased almost exponentially from 1965 to 1969 before declining gradually, the effects of bullets, bombs, and booby traps on human bodies remained grimly constant. Consequently, for troops arriving, departing, or just passing by, little else symbolized combat's darkest possible outcome and concretized and magnified complete and utter agency loss that war and military service represented than seeing a body bag. In his essay, "Welcome to the War, Boys," David Ross, a medical aid for the First Infantry division, recalled loitering with some of his buddies in front of a hospital compound. About forty newly

⁹³ Ehrhart, *Vietnam-Perkasie*, 195.
William Broyles, Jr. Forward to *Dear America: Letters Home from Vietnam*, Bernard Edelman, ed., (New York, W.W. Norton & Company, 1985), 13.

landed grunts were generally in a joking and jovial mood, milling about smoking, horsing around. Then:

All of a sudden, four choppers came in and they didn't even touch down. They just dumped bags. One of the bags broke open and what came out was hardly recognizable as a human being. For those of us that were just standing there looking in the direction of the new guys... it's not the kind of thing you laugh at. Irony or satire... things get beyond words. All the guys stopped laughing. Nobody was saying anything. And some people were shaking and some people were throwing up, and one guy got down and started to pray. I said to myself, "Welcome to the war, boys."⁹⁵

In order to combat the emotional and psychological trauma of seeing such grim portents – this war might land them in a green rubber bag – troops often turned to what psychologists term “black” or “gallows” humor. When one of his more contemplative comrades asked Bill Ehrhart the ultimate proverbial question that troops asked themselves after any real time in combat and seeing more bodies than they cared to recount, “What the hell are we doing here, anyway?” Ehrhart replied in his typical black-humorous fashion, “Killin’ Commies for Christ,” he laughed. “Making the world safe for Democracy. Helpin’ the stockholders at Dow Chemical pay off their mortgages.”⁹⁶ Troops consistently intuited that if they could learn to laugh at horrific sights, then they might just survive the war with their psyches intact. One of Colonel Watts’ troops set out to do just that in a parody of “Camp Town Races,” which paradoxically, employs frivolous vocals to color his account of a comrade’s grisly fate:

Hit him in the chest with an RPG,
Do da, do da.
Hit him in the chest with an RPG,
Oh, do da day.

⁹⁵ David Ross, *Everything We Had: An Oral History of the Vietnam War by Thirty-three Americans Soldiers Who Fought It*, ed. Al Santoli. (New York: Ballantine Books, 1981), 3.

⁹⁶ W.D. Ehrhart, *Vietnam-Perkasie*, 97.

He ain't got but an arm and a leg,
Do da, do da.
He ain't got but an arm and a leg,
Oh, do da day.

Send him home in a body bag,
Do da, do da.
Send him home in a body bag,
Oh, do da day.

Oh, 'gwain to fight all night,
'Gwain to fight all day.
'Gwain to send him home in a body bag,
All the do da day.⁹⁷

Such black humor of this sort did not derive from cold, calloused men hardened to combat's pain and loss. Humor theorists contend that gallows humor works because its authors and audiences share in discrepancies of some sort. It may be something unexpectedly dark in the ending, or punch line, or perhaps the reversal of the expected, something the audience didn't see coming--such as thoracic explosions and traumatically amputated appendages juxtaposed with lighthearted jazzy scat vocals. Humor theorists also have long distinguished carefully between the humor's technique or vehicle (in this case a song parody), which constitutes the joke's envelope or façade, and the humor's substance, that is, the song's underlying sentiments. In other words, it was the discrepancy revealed in the subtext, not the content that evoked laughter.⁹⁸ By the time in their tours that combatants had witnessed enough death and dismemberment to promulgate such dark doggerel, they could do little else to salvage their sanity (if not their agency) but learn to laugh at the worst of it.

⁹⁷Fish and Bowen, *The Longest Year*, 13.

⁹⁸ Elliott Oring, *The Jokes of Sigmund Freud: A Study in Humor and Jewish Identity*, (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1984), 6.

Gallows humor often functioned for the troops to concretize, or to bring together, to enact, to dramatize something like sudden or traumatic death that aside from witnessing it otherwise remained conceptually very abstract. It also serves to vocalize in an acceptable format – humor – things which would otherwise remain altogether undiscussed. Troops reared in the military’s culture of bravado and heroism initially struggled to admit they feared being wounded or killed in action. Even if they managed to do so, isolating, defining, or articulating why they feared proved equally difficult. Employing the interactive, theatrical nature of gallows humor allowed troops – both singers and audiences, to act out or dramatize their feelings of fear, anxiety, or unknowing cathartically.⁹⁹

Laughing at what is too horrifying to take seriously proves a constant of war from Herodotus to Joseph Heller. General Westmoreland concurred. He justified the necessity for “gallows humor” in his response to a *New Yorker* article by Jonathan Schell:

Soldiers have employed gallows humor through the ages. What Paratrooper, for example, singing the drinking song, “Blood on the Risers,” really revels in the gory death of the man he is singing about? Gallows humor is, after all, merely a defense mechanism for men engaged in perilous and distasteful duties.¹⁰⁰

Since war embodies “perilous and distasteful duties,” Westmoreland at least understood why men used such songs to preserve sanity in insane situations. His commentary comes closest to official governmental sanction of folk-cultural practices like gallows humor. So while he didn’t seem ever to have heeded Lansdale’s

⁹⁹ Toelken interview.

¹⁰⁰ William Westmoreland, *A Soldier Reports* (New York: Dell, 1980), 377. See also Burke, “Marching to Vietnam,” *Journal of American Folklore* 102 no. 406 (1989): 424-441, p.433.

admonition to listen carefully to the songs' content in order to better understand the men and the state of America's mission in Vietnam, Westmoreland at least sympathized with his men using songs as emotional and psychological therapy in perilous times and places.

Though "Blood on the Risers" had been recycled through the Airborne units from World War II through Korea and on to Vietnam, this iteration appeared later in the war when realities on the ground had begun worsening and pointing to more horrific ends. Here are excerpts, ironically, sung to the tune of the quintessentially patriotic, "Battle Hymn of the Republic":

He hit the ground, the sound was "splat."
The blood, it spurted high.
His comrades, they were heard to say,
"What a pretty way to die."
He lay there rolling 'round
in the welter of his gore.
And he ain't gonna jump no more.

Chorus [sung after each verse]: Gory, Gory, what a helluva way to die!
Gory, Gory, what a helluva way to die!
Gory, Gory, what a helluva way to die!
And he ain't gonna jump no more.

There was blood upon the risers,
There were brains upon the chute.
Intestines were a-danglin'
from his paratrooper's suit;
They picked him up still in his chute
And poured him from his boots.
And he ain't gonna jump no more.¹⁰¹

Consciously or not, in such songs troops dramatized their apprehension over witnessing comrades die or potentially dying themselves. Moreover, using hymn

¹⁰¹ Burke, 434.

parodies to juxtapose the sacred with the profane – violent gory death – proved a therapeutic device troops used consistently to exorcise combat demons. In another variant of the “Battle Hymn of the Republic,” one of Lansdale’s guests encapsulates in a few short lines the dizzying array of people, places, and events that troops often experienced over the course of their tours:

Mine Eyes have seen the gory
Of a thousand claymore mines.
There were booby traps and punji stakes
Among the jungle vines.
We have battled the mosquitoes,
And every kind of bug,
And with the VC girlies,
I’ve exchanged a dozen hugs.

Chorus: Gory, gory, we were ambushed!
Gory, gory, we were ambushed!
Gory, gory, we were ambushed,
And we ain’t gonna fight no more!¹⁰²

These songs preserve the recurring tensions troops felt between physical agency loss (serving time in combat and risking death) and psychological agency gain through tapping creative release valves.

While many of the songs deal with death, pain, and questions of agency, some speak of other combat-specific issues. Marine and later author Philip Caputo wrote of *le cafard*, a French term denoting the spiritual malaise of depression and unconquerable fatigue that set in when the novelty of Southeast Asia’s tropical surroundings wore off.¹⁰³ Indeed, a common sentiment about the Vietnam War was that a soldier’s life was

¹⁰² Fish and Bowen, 31.

¹⁰³ Philip Caputo, *A Rumor of War*, (Ontario: Owl Books, 1996), 68.

filled with hours of monotony punctuated by moments of sheer terror.¹⁰⁴ This next song, another rare original, “Don’t Tell Me I’ve Nothing to Do,” illustrates those sentiments perfectly, outlining a soldier’s perspective of the whole gamut of emotions he could experience in a period of mere hours or days:

Counting geckos on the wall,
That don’t bother me at all.
Shooting VC until dawn,
Then my ammo’s almost gone.
Drinking Ba Muoi Ba¹⁰⁵
and watching hamlets overrun. . .
Now don’t tell me
I’ve nothing to do.¹⁰⁶

This soldier-songwriter packed his subtext with meaning: he clearly preferred the boredom of counting tropical jungle lizards to enduring the fatigue and fear of having to engage in all-night combat while low on supplies emerges. Though he made it out alive to temporarily imbibe local Vietnamese beer, he returned to his area of operations only to experience the frustration of seeing the enemy overtake the hamlet his unit was fighting to build, secure, and protect. Songs like this one, both in text and subtext, burst with imagery, with Cleveland’s “poetry of the powerless,” and encapsulate the power and intensity of combatant’s emotions. They also managed to capture the kind of dark humor born of frustrations boiling over into rage.

Several Vietnam field songs treat atrocities committed by combat personnel. By the early 1970s, Americans, both at home and in-country had gained a certain mind-numbing familiarity with tales of these atrocities. Proliferating media reports of

¹⁰⁴ Karnow, 445.

¹⁰⁵ A reference to a popular Vietnamese beer label.

¹⁰⁶ Fish and Bowen, 17.

misconduct, coupled with events such as the 1971 “Winter Soldier” Investigation-- wherein dozens of veterans testified about incidents of rape, torture, and murder of innocent civilians--rocked the nation as its citizenry grappled with questions about the frequency of and reasons for such episodes.¹⁰⁷ “During the summers of 1965 and 1968, I took part--as a press correspondent--in numerous military operation and patrols in Vietnam,” recalled Charles C. Moskos, Jr.:

Cruel acts occurred on both sides with nauseating frequency. As a day-to-day participant in the combat situation I was repeatedly struck by the brutal reactions of soldiers to their participation in the war. To understand the way in which combat soldiers’ attitudes and behavior are shaped, however, one must try to comprehend the conditions under which they must manage. The misery of these conditions is so extreme that conventional moral standards are eclipsed in a way difficult for the noncombatant to appreciate. . . . The ultimate standard rests on keeping alive--a harsh standard which can sanction atrocities.¹⁰⁸

While most American troops will testify that they served in Vietnam without ever witnessing any atrocities, let alone perpetrating any, Philip Caputo concurred with Moskos’s evaluation while also citing the prolificity with which atrocities occurred. “Whether committed in the name of principles or out of vengeance, atrocities were as common to the Vietnamese battlefields as shell craters and barbed wire.”¹⁰⁹

Explaining, if not justifying soldiers’ increasingly violent, aggressive behavioral tendencies in the field, other observers and participants pointed to military training protocols themselves for predisposing American boys to racism. Commanders conditioned troops to the military’s emphasis on “body counts” to gauge progress and never spoke of the uncertainty that soldiers felt about the sympathies of the Vietnamese

¹⁰⁷ *Winter Soldier Investigation*, xiii-xiv.

¹⁰⁸ Charles C. Moskos, Jr., in *War Crimes and the American Conscience*, eds. Erwin Knoll and Judith Nies McFadden (New York: Holt Rinehart, and Winston, 1970), xxiii.

¹⁰⁹ Caputo, xix.

they encountered. This latter factor gave rise to a particularly virulent brand of racism embodied in a grim joke that was popular among U.S. Marines: the “loyal” Vietnamese should be put out to sea on a ship. Everyone left in the country should then be killed and the nation bombed flat. Then the ship should be bombed.¹¹⁰ Commanders repeatedly warned troops that they should trust no one – not the bar girl, nor the sidewalk peddler, nor the farmer. They must be on guard against six-year-old children, for some of that age had been known to be armed and ready to kill. Said Cecil B. Curry, “When G.I.s couldn’t tell friend from foe, they came to hate and despise them all. All slopes are dirt. Viewing all Vietnamese as less than human released American boys from their own humanity.”

The song, “Mow the Little Bastards Down,” embodies the mistrustful and trauma-induced black humor quite commonly emerging from the psyches of battle-hardened soldiers:

Strafe the town and Kill the people,
Drop your napalm on the square.
Take off early Sunday morning;
Catch them while they’re still at prayer.

Drop some candy to the orphans;
And as the kiddies gather ‘round,
Use your twenty millimeters
To mow the little bastards down.

Strafe the town and kill the people,
Drop your high-drag on the school;
If you happen to see ground fire,
Don’t forget the Golden Rule.

Run your CBU down main street,

¹¹⁰ Herr, 59.

Watch it rip off arms and hair;
See them scurry for the clinic,
Put a pod of rockets there.

Find a field of running Charlies,
Drop a daisy cutter there;
Watch the chunks of bodies flying,
Arms and legs and blood and hair.

See the sweet old pregnant lady
Running 'cross the field in fear;
Run your twenty mike-mike through her,
Hope the film comes out real clear.

*Isn't that Sweet?*¹¹¹

Defense Department statistics report that American servicemen's attacks on villagers, including children, occurred only infrequently. Yet according to the testimony of combat engineer Sam Schorr, when village children would come out to the road and beg for American C-rations, soldiers with the best eyes and pitching arms would sometimes hurl the metal cans as hard as they could at the children's heads. Their faces often split open, and on a few occasions, the force of the blows knocked the children off their feet and under the path of American tanks and other vehicles.¹¹² Such incidents found voice in verse describing such pastimes:

Some guy in the miserable convoy
raised up in the back of our open truck
and threw a can of C rations at a child
who called into the rumble for food.
He didn't toss the can, he wound up and hung it
on the child's forehead and she was stunned
backwards into the dust of our trucks.

Across the sudden angle of the road's curving

¹¹¹ Pilots of the 8th Tactical Fighter Wing, "Mow the Little Bastards Down," in Lansdale, *Songs of Americans*, audio, tape 5, song 132, Vietnam War subject file, American Folklife Center, Library of Congress.

¹¹² *The Winter Soldier Investigations*, 22-3.

I could still see her when she rose,
waving one hand across her swollen, bleeding head,
wildly swinging her other hand
at the children who mobbed her,
who tried to take her food.

I grit my teeth to myself to remember that girl
smiling as she fought off her brothers and sisters

She laughed

as if she thought it were a joke
and the guy with me laughed
and fingered the edge of another can
like it was the seam of a baseball
until his rage ripped
again into the faces of children
who called to us for food.¹¹³

Well-documented xenophobia among American military personnel facilitated such cruelty. Tragically, the U.S. military machine itself fostered racism, dehumanization, even demonization toward the enemy. Daniel Notley of the notorious Americal Division of My Lai renown, learned in advanced infantry training,

the complete dehumanization of a person in preparation for the Vietnam war. Now in this training, they referred to the Vietnamese as dinks or gooks. The impression was that they were something less than human. I had a drill sergeant in AIT reply to a question, "What is it like over there?"; and he told us, he said, "It is like hunting rabbits and squirrels."¹¹⁴

Historian James William Gibson in his work *The Perfect War: Technowar in Vietnam* refers repeatedly to the military's unapologetic tendency ironically to see the Vietnamese as "the foreign *other*."¹¹⁵ He related how once in Vietnam, soldiers found themselves

¹¹³ Bruce Weigl, *Song of Napalm* (New York: Atlantic Monthly Press, 1988), 18-19.

¹¹⁴ Citizens Commission of Inquiry, ed., *The Dellums Committee Hearings on War Crimes in Vietnam: An Inquiry into Command Responsibility in Southeast Asia* (New York: Vintage Books, 1972), 239.

¹¹⁵ James William Gibson, *The Perfect War: Technowar in Vietnam* (New York: Atlantic Monthly Press, 2000).

everywhere immersed in racism, with great pressure from command to produce enemy kills, as epitomized in the “Mere Gook Rule”: “If it’s dead and it’s Vietnamese, it’s VC.”¹¹⁶

Lieutenant William Calley emerged as the most visible figure associated with dead Vietnamese in his testimony of American perpetrations in the My Lai massacre. He examines the effects of sentiments of twisted ideology turned temporarily insane in his memoir *Body Count*:

We weren’t in My Lai to kill human beings, really. We were there to kill an ideology that is carried by--I don’t know. Pawns. Blobs. Pieces of flesh.... I was there to destroy an intangible idea. To destroy communism.... I looked at communism as a southerner looks at a Negro, supposedly. It’s evil. It’s bad.¹¹⁷

Many veterans and other defenders of U.S. military conduct, while acknowledging that such atrocities did occur, resented the implication that all American soldiers were guilty of such activities. In fact, most of the millions of American soldiers who served in Vietnam conducted themselves honorably throughout their tours of duty, and they were terribly angered by insinuations that lumped all U.S. personnel into the same “war criminal” bag.¹¹⁸ Moreover, other analysts discount many of the atrocity stories as exaggerations of events or outright fabrications. Yet tales, testimony, and tunes proliferate to challenge the analysts’ arguments. While clearly satirical, this next dark tune validates that testimony. Moreover, its author[s] seem to have been familiar with “Mow the Little Bastards Down,” – or vice versa – because they share much of the same

¹¹⁶ Ibid., 182.

¹¹⁷ William Laws Calley, *Body Count: Lieutenant Calley’s Story as told to John Sack, with a Forward by Louis Heren* (London: Hutchinson and Co., 1971) 13.

¹¹⁸ Vietnam veteran and American history professor Robert Welsh, personal interview, 19 April 2000.

imagery:

Cobra skimmin' over the trees
Firin' rockets at the refugees.
We don't care 'cause the ammo's free
and Napalm sticks to kids.

See the family by the stream,
watch the parents run and scream.
Viet Cong will never learn,
push a button and watch 'em burn.

Nothing more than I'd rather see
than a three-year-old in misery.
We don't care 'cause the ammo's free
and Napalm sticks to kids.

See the orphanage on the hill
call an A-6 airstrike; we're gonna kill.
When the peckerheads start to run
grab an M-16 and have some fun.

A-4 flyin' into the sun
droppin' Napalm on everyone.
If she's pregnant it's two for one
and Napalm sticks to kids.

See the school kids walkin' home
drop some Napalm; they're all gone.
One little boy walks all alone
and Napalm sticks to kids.

See the grandpa on the porch
drop some Napalm; watch him scorch.
Grandpa can't run but he sure can torch,
and Napalm sticks to kids.¹¹⁹

Some observers made a distinction between atrocities committed by American troops and those committed by their adversaries. "It is important to note that for American forces such actions [committed by American troops] were aberrations in

¹¹⁹ Burke, 440-41.

direct violation of U.S. military law and specific MACV directives," wrote Col. Harry G. Summers, Jr. in his *Vietnam War Almanac*. "For the Viet Cong and the North Vietnamese Army, however, atrocities were a deliberate, sanctioned tactic."¹²⁰ Dolf Droge fought in Hue in the Tet Offensive and witnessed the atrocities his NVA and Viet Cong enemies perpetrated on their own people. His original tune, "Voices of the Dead," which he penned just after hostilities ceased, validates Summers' assertion:

In the City of Hue, in South Vietnam,
The men of Ho Chi Minh came to call.
They occupied that city for three long weeks that year,
And put 3,000 people against the wall.

Chorus: For the sake of the future,
Hear the voices of the dead:
Strangulation, live burial, or a bullet in the head.
And remember, dear neighbor,
If now you turn and run,
Then the future will be written by the executioner's gun.

They killed the school teachers, and the politicians, too,
They killed the editors and VIPs like you.
They killed those with whom in peace they might compete,
They killed from a list and the list it was complete.
Chorus.¹²¹

Though Colonel Summers contended that atrocities violated *American* military policies, still, memoirs, official governmental investigations, and field songs all concur with one another and testify to events, attitudes, and behaviors and document very clearly that the atrocities occurred with some frequency and ferocity. Moreover, ample evidence exists that though the Defense Department claimed it does not officially and explicitly

¹²⁰ Harry G. Summers, in Kevin and Laurie Collier Hillstrom, *The Vietnam Experience: A Concise Encyclopedia of American Literature, Songs, and Films*, (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1998), 67.

¹²¹ Dolf Droge, "Voices of the Dead," in Lansdale, *Songs of Americans*, audio, Tape 5, song 141, Vietnam War subject file, American Folklife Center, Library of Congress.

sanction atrocity, accounts from the official to the vernacular indicate a very apparent implicit and even official sanction of violence, dehumanization, and demonization. Atrocious behavior, the sources reveal, infected Americans serving in Vietnam from the highest ranks to the lowest files.¹²²

Ironically and paradoxically appropriating bright, happy, and playful tunes to express dark, woeful, and serious realities creates a response that arguably resonates more sharply in audiences than do traditional sources such as after-action reports, printed perpetrator testimonies, or other verbal or photographic evidence. Though they contrast in form and function with the official language of political and military bureaucracy, they contribute significantly to the historiographical canon and to the understanding of the Vietnam combatant's world and worldview.

¹²² Gibson, 181-88.

CHAPTER IV

AMERICAN POETRY: PART ONE

“Vietnam War poetry speaks for itself, often in brutal, explicit language. After all, to those of us who served in Vietnam, the war was the most explicit experience we have ever seen, and not to use the language of the war would be to lie about it – and to be dishonest, even for the sake of art, is the one thing an American Vietnam War veteran is never going to be able to do. He feels that he has been deceived enough, and he refuses to inflict another lie on others.”

–John Clark Pratt, Vietnam, Thailand, Laos – 1969 – 1970¹

Poetry stands apart among genres of American folk culture from the Vietnam War because more than any other, it conveys the unmistakable sense that the Vietnam War became deeply, intensely personal for those who fought it. While graffiti waxes whimsical, vulgar, or boastful; while songs lampoon, dissent, document, and heal, poetry leads audiences to intimately personal, profoundly vulnerable places of stark suffering, shame, anger, and incrimination – self and other-centric. It supplies compelling, experiential narrative and astonishing descriptive power, animating all the raw emotion that war can evoke. This chapter will make a case for poetry’s value as a historical primary source while demonstrating its ability to capture literary snapshots of the war’s people, places, and events. It will establish poetry as a remarkable vehicle for articulating the war’s human toll and show how of all the war’s folk culture, it serves as one of the most reliable time capsules for preserving troops’ emotions in a given moment.²

¹ John Clark Pratt, Preface, in *Unaccustomed Mercy: Soldier-Poets of the Vietnam War*, W.D. Ehrhart, ed., (Lubbock: Texas Tech University Press, 1989), viii.

² Brief portions of this chapter appeared first in Matthew K. Irwin, “I have learned by now where such thoughts lead’: W.D. Ehrhart’s Poetry and Rethinking How We Study and Teach History,” from *The Last Time I Dreamed About the War: Essays on the Life and Writing of W.D. Ehrhart* © 2014 Edited by Jean-Jacques Malo by permission of McFarland & Company, Inc., Box 611, Jefferson NC 28640. www.mcfarlandpub.com.

While historians have studied the Vietnam War from countless angles, none have seriously explored the historical importance, relevance, or value of the war's poetry as a primary source. Yet much of the verse that combatants and witnesses produced concerning the war touches on the very same subjects as traditional histories: people, places, and events of the war; causation and contextualization; and the social, cultural, political, physical, emotional, and psychological consequences of U.S. involvement in Vietnam for individuals and groups alike. Unfortunately, though, few outside English departments or literature and creative writing programs have deigned to consider poems or their merit for historical inquiry, let alone to harvest and partake in the rich bounty of human experience these war documents yield.

Worse than merely overlooking poems, some traditionalists dismiss them nearly altogether, arguing that poetry contributes little worthwhile to our knowledge of the past. Noted historian Arthur Marwick contends that:

the use of literature and art raises problems. . . . A novel or poem or painting, if it is a source at all, is a source for the period in which it was written or painted, not for the period *about* which it is written or what it is *purporting to represent*. . . . For the concrete facts of everyday existence. . . spurn the novelist, and turn instead to the government papers, statistical series, company records, . . . trade union archives. . . .³

Marwick suggests that real knowledge of the past derives from sources like the latter. His works tend to diminish the artistic voice's significance and value, suggesting that if historians want to know "concrete facts of everyday existence," they would be better served adhering to the methodology and pedagogy he outlines in his historiographical

³Arthur Marwick, *The Nature of History* (London: MacMillan Press, 1989), 228-9 [*Emphasis, mine*].

“catechism.”⁴

Distinguished military historian John Keegan disagrees. While Keegan allows that traditional archival sources do indeed answer certain questions, he also finds the “featureless prose” in such technical histories inherently insufficient to understand fully the humanity behind the history. Further, Keegan candidly disparages scholars who cling stubbornly to “highly traditional forms,” particularly those who devote themselves – and by extension, their own disciples – to considering and practicing only those methods, conventions, and traditions in which they already work:

The “rhetoric of history” – that inventory of assumptions and usages through which the historian makes his professional approach to the past – is not only, as it pertains to the writing of battle history, much more strong and inflexible than the rhetoric of almost all other sorts of history, but is so strong, so inflexible and all so time-hallowed that it exerts virtual powers of dictatorship over the military historian’s mind.⁵

And yet Marwick perseveres, resounding in subsequent works that historians must “never forget [artistic and literary sources] are *fiction*,” that we should spurn the artistic for the technical, the governmental, for the traditional.⁶

Those seeking to understand the Vietnam War combat experience – or any historical event, for that matter – should remain willing, at least initially, to consider *any* primary source media. Poetry is never wholly fiction. Even when certain elements in a poem might prove fictitious, its underlying essence frequently derives from truth. As Vietnam-era U.S. Marine combat veteran W.D. Ehrhart phrases it,

If one wants to know the essence of the Vietnam War, how it felt and smelled

⁴ Ibid. [*Emphasis mine*]. See also, Marwick, *The New Nature of History: Knowledge, Evidence, Language*, (Chicago: Lyceum Books, 2001), 179-185.

⁵ John Keegan, *The Face of Battle* (New York: Military Heritage Press, 1986), 31, 36.

⁶ Marwick, *The New Nature of History*, 170.

and tasted, what it did to those who fought it and why it will not go away . . . one is likely to find more truth in these poems than any history ever written.⁷

In case one deems it suspect to cite the soldier-poet Ehrhart himself to bear witness for poetry's historical value (despite his indisputable experience both in Vietnam War poetry and the combat realities that inhabit and inspired it), consider eminent folklorist and oral historian, Lydia Fish. She has written numerous works treating artistic primary sources, advocating tirelessly for the place in the historical canon they so richly deserve. Fish notes, "Some historians argue that the real scope of history has no place for the artistic voice. I contend that the scope of history could never be trusted as real without it."⁸

Piecing together the past is challenging, largely because in sheer numerical terms, most human experiences remain undocumented. Considering such a paucity of sources relative to the scope and scale of human history, one might wonder why some scholars advocate *prejudicial* source selectivity and exclusivity. Evidentiary problems hound historians. For example, government papers and ledger-laden statistical series remain predictably silent as to what our troops felt in their somersaulting guts upon witnessing, for example, a decomposing, sun-bloated, bullet-perforated corpse at that gruesome moment when:

Angelic hosts of flies caress His brow
And from His swollen body comes
The sweet-sick stench of rotting flesh—
Three days old.⁹

⁷ W.D. Ehrhart *Unaccustomed Mercy: The Soldier Poets of the Vietnam War* (Lubbock: Texas Tech University Press, 1989), 4-5.

⁸ Lydia M. Fish, interview with author, Salt Lake City, UT, Fall 1999.

⁹ Ehrhart, excerpted from "Christ," in *Winning Hearts and Minds: War Poems by Vietnam Veterans*, (New York: 1st Casualty Press, 1972), 38 [hereafter cited as *WHAM*].

In fact, when pressed, traditionalists will have to acknowledge that many of their traditional archival records offer little to help audience imaginations inhabit historical moments. Military battle orders, for instance, necessarily obfuscate, so as to prevent the enemy from decoding radio chatter or understanding captured documents. They also sterilize most of the humanity right out of the historical events they chronicle:

“Enemy sit. Aggressor forces in div strength holding MLR Hill 820 complex gc AT 940713-951716 w/fwd elements est. bn strength junction at gc AT 948715 (See Annex A, COMPHIBPAC intell. Summary period ending 25 June) . . . Mission: BLT 1/7 land LZ XRAY AT 946710 at H.Hour 310600 . . . A co. GSF estab. LZ security LZ XRAY H minus 10 . . . B co. advance axis BLUE H plus 5 estab. Blocking pos. vic gs AT 948710 . . . A, C, D cos. Maneuver element commence advance axis BROWN H plus 10 . . . Bn tacnet freq 52.9 . . . shackle code HAZTRCEGBD . . . div. tacair dir. Air spt callsign PLAYBOY . . . Mark friendly pos w/air panels or green smoke. Mart tgt. w/WP.”¹⁰

Such records never piqued Navy medical corpsman Doug Anderson, who understood that

You will not find certain things in military documents. Two men stark naked and bathing in a well when a sniper opens up on them and they start running, laughing. A new corpsman so frozen with fear his first day in the field that he could not move from where he sat and had to be sent back on the chopper with the casualties (in later life I would simply refer to him as sane).¹¹

Such records cannot possibly document those moments, say, when troops recognized that the Vietnam War had altered them irreparably, had stolen whatever purity remained of their youth. Even combat-centric after-action reports, equally renowned for all their mind-numbingly inclusive data, omit what some would call the war’s most pivotal, human, battlefield events, such as the violent death of a young Marine’s

¹⁰ Philip Caputo, *A Rumor of War*, (New York: Henry Hold and Company, Inc., 1996), 15.

¹¹ Doug Anderson, *Keep Your Head Down: A Memoir*, (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2009), 117.

idealistic optimism and the hemorrhagic, premature birth of a tragically disfigured and sarcastic cynicism:

We used to get intelligence reports
from the Vietnamese district offices.
Every night, I'd make a list
of targets for artillery to hit.

It used to give me quite a kick
to know that I, a corporal,
could command an entire battery
to fire anywhere I said.

One day, while on patrol,
we passed the ruins of a house;
beside it sat a woman
with her left hand torn away;
beside her lay a child, dead.

When I got back to base,
I told the fellows in the COC;
it gave us all a lift to know
all those shells we fired every night
were hitting something.¹²

Such horrific scenes and disillusioning epiphanies sear into troop consciousness during war, but their graphic nature survives time's ravages intact within poetry. As Ehrhart reasons, "when a poem is written, it becomes a singular entity with an inextinguishable and unalterable life of its own. It is a true reflection of the feelings and perceptions it records, and as such, it is as valuable a document as any history ever written."¹³

¹² Ehrhart, "Time on Target," in *Carrying the Darkness*, (Lubbock: Texas Tech University Press, 1985), 94-5. For more on the indiscriminate artillery fire this poem documents, see Ehrhart, *Vietnam-Perkasie: A Combat Marine Memoir*, (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, Inc., 1983), 105. For much more on indiscriminate artillery fire and aerial bombing and its effects on civilians lives and infrastructure, see Nick Turse, *Kill Anything That Moves: The Real American War in Vietnam*, (New York: Picador, 2013), particularly Ch.3, "Overkill," 76-107.

¹³ Ehrhart, "The Poetry of Bullets, or: How Does a War Mean?" Keynote address to the *Conference on War in Memory, Popular Culture & Folklore*, sponsored by the Center for the Study of the Korean War and the National Archives and Records Administration, Central Plains Region, Kansas City, Missouri, 25

Poetry strikes chords in its audiences because it resonates with all the sensory detail and personal emotion that combat summons but that many traditional sources often omit and seldom articulate. It serves as one of the most reliable time capsules for preserving human experiences and positively teems with historical truth. It not only chronicles some of the most resonant moments of real people's lives, it also voices their hearts and minds, meeting them in those very moments and contexts of their own Vietnam War history. More effectively than perhaps any other artistic media, poetry humanizes the war.

Historians study, write, and teach the Vietnam War from multiple perspectives and with often widely varying focuses. Sometimes they emphasize the political forces and figures that influenced so much of the war's history. Other times, they stress any number of topics from military engagements to the issues that arose when Vietnamese and American cultures and ideologies clashed with one another in Southeast Asia. Specific recurring themes range from simple sensory snapshots of the war, its people, and events, the horrors of war, and its human toll, including American and Vietnamese damage and losses – whether physical or emotional or both. While all the themes that Vietnam War poetry treats compel for one reason or another, this chapter will explore a few of the most recurrent and prominent. What should develop is a clear picture of poetry's ability to preserve human history, particularly emotional history, like few other sources can.

Vietnam War poetry can serve historians and educators because it so carefully

and perceptively preserves the troops' experiences in vivid text and word-images. From conditions in which troops fought, lived, and died to sights, sounds, smells, and sensations that various combat scenes imprinted on combatants' minds, the poetry captures freeze-frame after freeze-frame of the Vietnam War and evokes in readers' imaginations the war's sensory realities as powerfully as any source extant. A perfect example of "snapshot" verse, or what Deborah Holdstein termed "docupoetry," comes from Dale Ritterbusch, who served in the U.S. Army from 1966 to 1969. In Vietnam as a liaison officer with JUSMAG/MACTHAI, he coordinated shipments of aerial mines used for dispersal along the Ho Chi Minh Trail and other infiltration routes.¹⁴ Within this exemplary docupoem, narrated in first-person, Ritterbusch refers to no specific names or well-known historical events, yet every word bears witness to an average day spent "Humpin' through the Boonies":

Get down—a sniper's rd ricochets to the right,
where? anyone got it? off to the left, the
tree line, eleven o'clock, no, to the front,
rake the tree line, nothing, let's go,
spread out, keep your distance—
more harassment than anything, getting
down in the dirt, sucking dust all afternoon—
another rd, another hundred yards, heavy pack,
hot helmet, sweat pouring into the eyes,
and they watch, unaffected by everything,
dry dirt caking the sweat—fuck the army,
FTA on the helmet ahead of me, check out
the hedgerow—so thick a bangalore
wouldn't make a dent—stay away from the gate,
wring out the sweat, watch for tripwires, a spider's
thread in the sun, canteen half full, warm, not
worth the effort—another rd, 2, 3, AK by the sound
keep moving, keep awake up there, hold it, hold it!

¹⁴ JUSMAG/MACTHAI refers to Joint United States Military Advisory Group/Military Assistance Command Thailand.

movement, sleight of hand, what's up? get to the hamlet later afternoon, don't take no shit, not today, too many days (exactly) like this, hey! pump a 79 rd over there 150 m, edge of the dike, to the right 20 m – another rd zings in, the flash, the explosion – Wait, get up, nothing, they're gone, nobody's there except old women, kids, a few dogs fuck this shit, zippo diplomacy, they were here, dammit can smell it, all that rice for the women, bullshit, nothing, again nothing, check that hootch do it right this time, ain't no damn social call, no shit? burn it, two clicks and we're there, not the easy way, dumbshit, through the paddy – call it in, ETA LZ Red, 17:15, move it out, hear them damn birds, let's go, second squad mount up, the rotor wash cool, too tired even to sweat anyway.¹⁵

Any infantryman would likely recognize everything Ritterbusch encapsulates: barking officers or NCOs; the frantic, disorienting frenzy of a surprise ambush or sniper attack; being pinned down by an invisible enemy; the heat and other conditions. Charlie Dickey, writing to his wife in the summer of 1969, confirmed much in Ritterbusch's snapshot:

This is hell. Besides killing and maybe being killed there are many other things that make life almost unbearable. Leeches that suck our blood, insects of all kinds, snakes, spiders.... The heat, the rain and mud. The long marches with heavy pack, going two or three weeks without a bath, wearing the same clothes for weeks at a time, not having a place to sit down or even lie down except in six inches of mud.¹⁶

Anything could play the villain in Vietnam, even the terrain. Gustav Hasford served in the U.S. Marine Corps as a combat correspondent in 1967 and 1968, and in his semi-autobiographical novel *The Short-timers*, he describes a typically grueling march

¹⁵ Dale Ritterbusch, "Humpin' Through the Boonies," in *From Both Sides Now: The Poetry of the Vietnam War and Its Aftermath*, Phil Mahoney, ed., (New York: Scribner Poetry, 1998), 58.

¹⁶ Longley, *Grunts*, 104.

through Vietnam's jungle:

Humping in the rain forest is like climbing a stairway of shit in an enormous green room constructed by ogres for the confinement of monster plants.... Beneath mountains like the black teeth of dragons we hump. We hump up a woodcutter's trail, up slopes of peanut butter, over moss-blemished boulders, into God's green furnace, into the hostile terrain of Indian country.¹⁷

Weather in particular finds mention so often in Vietnam War literature that it practically functions as one of the chief characters – also usually villainous. For instance, Caputo echoes Ritterbusch's tirade against the Southeast Asian heat:

The mercury level might be 98 degrees one day, 110 the next, 105 the day after that; but these numbers can no more express the intensity of that heat than the reading on a barometer can express the destructive power of a typhoon. The only valid measurement was what the heat could do to a man, and what it could do to him was simple enough: it could kill him, bake his brains, or wring the sweat out of him until he dropped from exhaustion.¹⁸

And more than just the deadly heat and crushing humidity could reduce troops to huddling, distracted, even combat-ineffective sorts. Ranger Robert "Bob" Welsh, who served with the 173rd Airborne Brigade in Vietnam's Central Highlands variously as an M-60 ammo bearer, Huey helicopter door gunner, and LLRP sniper in 1965 and 1966, points out that Vietnam's mountain monsoon cold could distract and debilitate just as quickly as the oppressive summer heat:

[W]hen you're out in the field, you're never-- comfortable. And consequently, you do things sometimes that seem okay, but you would never ... when you thought about it later [you] think, "Man that was the dumbest thing I ever did." At night in the [Central] Highlands, it was cold. A lot of people don't associate cold with Vietnam. But it was cold and damp, and especially in the rainy season, it would be 40 degrees. Now we don't think 40 here is all that bad because we can put on an extra sweater or whatever. But over there, you can't. And all you have is a poncho. And when you're up on your watch for the night, and it's two o'clock in the morning, you're freezing. There is a way you can get

¹⁷ Gustav Hasford, *The Short-timers* (New York: Bantam Books, 1979), 149-150.

¹⁸ Caputo, *A Rumor of War*, 60.

warm. And that's by lighting a heat tab, and putting on your poncho, tightening it up as much as you can around your body, make a little place for your little heat tablet, which will burn for ten or fifteen minutes, and you make yourself almost like a little tent, seal everything off, and you light that heat tab. And it burns a very low blue flame ... that you *hope* can't be seen, but it keeps you toasty warm.... But you realize that you're just ... you're focusing too much on trying to be comfortable and not enough on what's going on around you and where you are.... [Y]ou'd do dumb things like that to keep warm.... [I]t was just always something to make you miserable.... over there, there was just very little you could do. And so consequently, we were always too cold, too hot, too tired, or too hungry, and you just-- were miserable *all the time*. It was a battle to kind of keep your guard up.¹⁹

Just as quickly as the enemy, the Vietnam itself could kill or injure troops outright. It made troops so uncomfortable that they risked their own lives or those of their comrades for just a few minutes respite. It eventually wore men down, often with fatal consequences. Correspondent Michael Herr noted the irony: "Every day people were dying there because of some small detail that they couldn't be bothered to observe," he wrote. "Imagine being too tired to snap a flak jacket closed, too tired to clean your rifle, too tired to guard a light, too tired to deal with the half-inch margins of safety that moving through the war often demanded, just too tired to give a fuck and then dying behind the exhaustion."²⁰ Imagine a hump so mentally and physically taxing that it left the troops "too tired even to sweat." Ritterbusch's poetry doesn't merely report a hump through Vietnam's boonies. It virtually conjures one. His verbal snapshots don't just enumerate events experienced on an operation. They reanimate wartime fear, rage, angst, exhaustion, and indifference. This is a time capsule, not just

¹⁹ Robert Welsh, interview by author, 29 December 2001, transcript in Matthew K. Irwin, "First-Person Vietnam: One American Veteran's Account of His Vietnam History," *Utah State University Graduate Student Fieldwork Collection*, Audio tape transcript index: 315-365 seconds, Box #37, Vol.# 2001-03, Fife Folklore Archives, Special Collections, Merrill-Cazier Library, Utah State University, Logan, UT.

²⁰ Michael Herr, *Dispatches*, (New York: Avon Books, 1978), 54.

of actual happenings, but of human emotions amid life and death experience.

Gerald McCarthy, another talented docupoet, served with the U.S. Marine Corps in Vietnam as the war began rapidly to escalate in 1966 and 1967.²¹ In excerpts from “War Story,” McCarthy documents image after scene after event after circumstance after emotion from his tour in Vietnam. At times he seems like a man at the confessional, seeking absolution (or resolution) through the mere act of confessing his most restless, long-sequestered personal secrets. At others, he seems an investigative reporter, muckraking his way across Vietnam, divulging in his seedy, episodic exposé some rather specific revelations of the war’s ugly underbelly that seldom, if ever, have found mention in other sources:

1 Med Building²²

They brought the dead
in helicopters and trucks
and tried to piece the bodies back together,
shoved them in plastic bags
to be sent home.
Sometimes there was an arm or leg
leftover,
it lay around until the next shipment;
they made it fit in somewhere.²³

It’s not unusual that McCarthy corroborates countless other accounts that treat what happens to human bodies when geopolitics and military technology collide. Almost every forthcoming soldier-turned-author who survived to tell about Vietnam at least mentions such horrors. For instance, Marine Philip Caputo echoes McCarthy’s

²¹ Deborah H. Holdstein, “Vietnam War Veteran-Poets: The Ideology of Horror,” *USA Today*, V. 112, N. 2460, (September 1983): 59-61.

²² Boldface heading does not constitute a first-level subheading; rather, it constitutes part of the poem’s official formatting, and poetic reprint traditions stipulate rendering exactly so.

²³ Gerald McCarthy, “War Story,” [excerpt], in Ehrhart, *Unaccustomed Mercy*, 89.

testimony regarding such regular bodily disintegration. One day while serving a term at Regimental Headquarters as an assistant adjutant in charge of reporting casualties, a driver dropped off for Caputo a trailer load of what was supposed to have been four bodies. For whatever reason, the bodies were unbagged:

A half-severed arm, with a piece of bone protruding whitely through the flesh, flopped over the side of the trailer and flopped back in again.... I checked to make sure there were four bodies. There appeared to be. It was difficult to tell. Tossed around in the trailer, they had become entangled, one barely distinguishable from another. Three of them were entangled, anyway. The fourth did not have arms below the elbow, and his legs had been shot or blown off completely.... One had been hit in the head, his brains and the white cartilage that had moored them to his skull spilling onto the bottom of the trailer. Another, hit in the midsection, had been turned inside out, the slick, blue and greenish brown mass of his intestines bulging out of him.²⁴

Caputo certainly offers a greater breadth of sickening detail than McCarthy. Yet in addition to testifying to dismembered remains, albeit more austere, McCarthy discloses a disturbing and apparently recurring oversight – that of corporeal leftovers mislaid in the chaos of wartime personnel logistics: “Sometimes there was an arm or leg leftover.” Bad enough that someone – or some series of medical responders or graves registration personnel – misplaced or mis-sorted his comrades’ blown-off limbs. The bombshell nature of McCarthy’s revelation intensifies when he mentions, almost casually in passing, the apparently lackadaisical disregard for troops’ remains: “it lay around until the next shipment.” McCarthy damns most convincingly the near-criminal bureaucratic solution to the mix-up: “they made it fit in somewhere.”

As seen in this excerpt, poetry can paradoxically clarify and complicate the historical record. McCarthy implicitly hints at the scope and scale of bodily destruction

²⁴ Caputo, *A Rumor of War*, 172.

in the Vietnam War, thus adding another record to the many. But he also makes the historical record a bit messier and uglier by matter-of-factly exposing the post-mortem logistical nightmare such epic numbers of American dead and disintegrated wrought on those personnel tasked with sorting, preserving, and shipping remains home to families. Moreover, he indicts with notable understatement those overwhelmed rear-echelon troops who could so callously dispose of the very human evidence of their confusion, ineptitude, or sociopathic indifference. But McCarthy doesn't stop there. His snapshots continue documenting the war's brutal sociopathies, this time recording an American soldier disfiguring enemy remains to claim a grisly trophy:

8
We found him
his chest torn open,
shirt sticky brown.
A corporal with a bayonet
cut off his ears,
and kicked the body in passing.²⁵

Writing with the same understated investigative reporting seen in the previous excerpt, McCarthy confirms the tragic yet iconic image of American grunts collecting enemy body parts, which, for a time, were "status symbols."²⁶ In doing so, he reminds posterity of the ugly truth that not all U.S. troops spent their whole tours in-country as heroic servants of the American people or as benevolent rescuers of the Vietnamese. In fact, between 1965 and 1973, 201 Army personnel and 77 Marines were convicted by courts-martial of serious offenses against Vietnamese, including murder, rape, assault with intent to murder or rape, mutilation of a corpse, and negligent homicide.

²⁵ McCarthy, "War Story," [excerpt], in Ehrhart, *Unaccustomed Mercy*, 90.

²⁶ Guenter Lewy, *America in Vietnam* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978), 329.

Interestingly, homicide cases comprised the largest single category of serious crimes.²⁷

More importantly for practitioners and students of Vietnam War history, McCarthy never shies away from speaking of it:

9

They shot the woman in the arm,
four of them
raped her
and killed an old man
who tried to interfere;
and later killed the woman too.
She was the enemy.²⁸

Military disciplinary records from 1967 and 1968 report that in early 1967, five First Air Cavalry Division soldiers abducted a Vietnamese girl to accompany them on roving patrol. While on patrol, they raped and killed her. One of the men reported the incident, and the other four were court-martialed on rape and murder charges.²⁹

McCarthy's names neither his narrator nor his perpetrators, but given the fact that his poem jives so closely with court martial records, its historicity rings true. So, too, does his account of troops availing themselves of the prostitution industry that exploded overnight to accommodate the Americans' insatiable sexual appetites:

11

Hot sun,
I walked into a whorehouse
pay the girl
unbuckle my pants
and screw her
sweat sticking to my fatigues
small legs grasping my back

²⁷ Ibid., 321-2.

²⁸ McCarthy, "War Story," [excerpt], in Ehrhart, *Unaccustomed Mercy*, 90.

²⁹ 38 Court Martial Report 625 (Army Board of Military Review 1967); *US v C. Garcia*, Court Martial 416159; *US v. J.C. Garcia*, Court Martial 416160; *US v. Gervase*, Court Martial 416161; *US v. Thomas*, Court Martial 416162; 38 Court Martial Report 655 (ABMR 1968).

her eyes look up at me
as I come.
Outside the tin-roofed hut
another GI waits his turn.³⁰

While Vietnam War poetry occasionally ventures into R&R exploits, more often than not it returns to chronicle death, destruction, and human loss. In the next excerpt, McCarthy makes death intensely personal, recounting first a quiet camaraderie and then abruptly juxtaposing that peaceful scene with sentiments raging all along his emotional spectrum: calm, surprise, sensory disruption, disorientation, and paralyzing, even incontinental fear. He closes the jarring tableau with a pure, disbelieving, furious expression of loss, the depths of which can be relayed in only the most vulgar of terms:

12
That night in the bunker,
we shared some smoke
and stared out at the stars.
Then,
the mortars blasted
choking sulfur
shoving the magazines in
round after round
deaf,
blinded,
hugging the dirt,
I pissed my pants.
Later,
confusion gone,
you all shot to shit,
you black bastard.
Fuck.³¹

Combat's aftermath appears so often in Vietnam War docupoetry as almost to constitute a regular character. To depict it, McCarthy's last excerpt transitions

³⁰ McCarthy, "War Story," [excerpt], in Ehrhart, *Unaccustomed Mercy*, 90.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 90-91.

unexpectedly to a narrative prose, suggesting structurally that there's nothing poetic about war – or about having to make sense or come to terms with its destruction. The war marches on, the death of his friends smoothed over and forgotten like the dirt under so many trampling boots. All that remains is the literal and figurative garbage reminding McCarthy of the “hollow, tinny” emptiness of his loss:

14

In the early morning the working party came and filled in the remains of the bunker with sand. The bodies had been removed the night before, but the stench lingered. Soon the earth was worn down smooth by the boots of the soldiers. They moved off to build another bunker along the line.

Clinging to a bush was a dirty piece of utility jacket. A breeze was blowing in off the ocean. It rattled the pop cans on the concertina wire and made hollow, tinny noises.³²

In one long poem excerpting his tour, McCarthy renders a textual slide-show of images and experiences that have become iconic to the Vietnam War: body bags and the disfigured, fragmented remains they contain; institutional ineptitude – in this case, losing track of KIA troops' body parts – that often characterized the gargantuan war machinery that Vietnam had become by 1966; troops desecrating enemy remains; troops sexually violating and murdering villagers; the prostitution industry that sprang up to meet American troop demand and the Vietnamese women that industry commodified for sale and service; the loss of comrades; and the surreality of loss in an engagement's aftermath. Poetry has been called “the lion of language,” and “War

³² Ibid.

Story” demonstrates why: poetry’s ability to chronicle and communicate so much history and human experience in so few words.

Whereas McCarthy captured his war scenes in blunt, abrupt imagery, in another snapshot poem, Doug Anderson documents his circumstances with similar aplomb, though with considerably more sensory detail. Anderson served in Vietnam as a corpsman with a Marine infantry battalion in 1967, and his poem “Night Ambush” catalogues in detail everything from the scenery around him to the condition of his dilapidated, derelict self that night in his area of operation. A few lines of intense internal monologue flare briefly before he returns to recreating the sights, sounds, even smells of the war. All the haunting scenery and vivid sensory detail aside, the poem compels more still as a primary source because it constitutes the only account anywhere of this troop’s state of mind, body, and spirit on this particular operation:

We are still, lips swollen with mosquito bites.
A treeline opens out onto paddies
quartered by dikes, a moon in each,
and in the center, the hedged island of a village
floats in its own time, ribboned with smoke.
Someone is cooking fish.
Whispers move across water.
Children and old people. Anyone between
is a target. It is so quiet
you can hear a safety clicked off
all the way on the other side.
Things live in my hair. I do not bathe.
I have thrown away my underwear.
I have forgotten the why of everything.
I sense an indifference larger than anything
I know. All that will remain of us
is rusting metal disappearing in vines.
Above the fog that clots the hill ahead
a red tracer arcs and dims.
A black snake slides off the paddy dike

into the water and makes the moon shiver.³³

Anderson admits with astonishing transparency that combat had obliterated all semblances of his former self, leaving behind in the rice paddy only a vermin-infested, nihilistic shadow: "All that will remain of us is rusting metal disappearing in vines." He may have been referring to his own literal demise; that he believed his steel weapon would rust into the vegetation long after his body had decomposed to nothingness. Fatalism proved a common syndrome for American troops in every war.³⁴ Or, he may in fact have been musing in that moment about the war's purposelessness ("I have forgotten the why of everything"). Such sentiments were common. When grunts' initial convictions about their country began to falter, the Vietnam War's reasons and rationalizations and the methods used to pursue and justify them also became increasingly questionable, to the point that many believed their sacrifices were in vain, that indeed, Vietnam was "a war for nothing."³⁵ Nonetheless, this sole-surviving record of one man's inner-monologue on one specific evening in the middle of the Vietnam War is compelling the author allows readers to witness his shattered, near-catatonic, and emotionally naked soul at a very personal, nihilistic, existential, self-aware moment in the midst of a disillusioning war.

In addition to its emotional honesty, Anderson's verse possesses among the purest historical narrative qualities of all the Vietnam War poets. For instance,

³³ "Night Ambush," originally published in *Bamboo Bridge*, (Amherst, MA: Amherst Writers & Artists Press, 1991), cited from Doug Anderson, *The Moon Reflected Fire*, (Cambridge, MA: Alice James Books, 1994), 3.

³⁴ Peter S. Kindsvatter, *American Soldiers: Ground Combat in the World Wars, Korea, and Vietnam*, (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 2003), 88-9.

³⁵ Christian G. Appy, "A War for Nothing," *Working-Class War: American Combat Soldiers and Vietnam*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1993), 206-249.

hundreds of thousands of Vietnam veterans unashamedly admit they profoundly respected their Vietnamese enemies' tenacity, ingenuity, and determination to endure against all odds. American units often answered Vietnamese enemy harassment or ambushes with virtually everything in the American military machine's arsenal, only to discover that they had somehow failed to eliminate their harassers. One trooper recalled an incident in which Viet Cong attacked his unit. The Americans responded by calling down helicopter gunships, jet-deployed napalm, and 105 mm and 175 mm artillery strikes on the last known VC position. With understandable incredulity, the trooper continued, "Then everything dies down. And you hear pop-pop-pop – they fire three more rounds at us. At that point I knew there was no way we could win that fucking war. . . . To stay there, take it, and then shoot back! Forget it. They got more than we've got."³⁶

Echoing this and other accounts, "Judgment" recounts the circumstances surrounding an incident wherein Anderson and his fellow troops were pinned down by enemy snipers in an engagement near Hoi Ahn in 1967. In addition to detailing the back-and-forth specifics of the engagement with his enemy, he testifies to their unflagging resolve, imagining a tireless refrain underscored by their maddeningly insistent and withering rifle fire:

Pinned down two hours in a Buddhist graveyard
by two barefoot snipers who will not die
no matter how many mortars we walk their way.
They keep moving, the one firing, the other
doubling back where the mortars have already been,
nor are they silenced by the gunship

³⁶ Kyle Longley, *Grunts: The American Combat Soldier in Vietnam*, (Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, Inc., 2008), 94.

now squandering rockets
at inkblots flickering between trees.
These wraiths sing with their crack and whine,
 We will die to hold you here
 while the others slip away toward the mountains.
 What will you die for?
Me hunkering behind a pitted tombstone
staring up at a skull from a grave churned up by tanks.³⁷

While composed in free-verse format on the page, to the ear “Judgment” reads almost like combat correspondence reporting specific wartime scenes. As Anderson and others testify, troops very often could point to those exact moments in which they recognized the cold hard truth, if not of enemy military superiority, then at least of the enemy’s laudable determination and belief in their own moral superiority. The Americans were invaders. The Vietnamese were patriots with the just cause of national reunification and independence to die for. Marine Jeff Kelly expressed it in almost precisely those terms: “We were killing guys who thought of themselves as patriots, like our George Washington or Nathan Hale. They even prayed to the same God. Our guys only had a vague idea of why we were fighting.”³⁸ No wonder Anderson felt judged and defied, not respected and feared, as he perhaps might have expected. Rather, as the one pinned down, hunkering behind tombstones, clearly it was he who feared and respected this seemingly indestructible, wraithlike enemy. As another trooper similarly expressed it, “I just kept getting a higher and higher degree of respect for who we were fighting – the North Vietnamese were good – and they at least knew what their purpose was, and we didn’t.”³⁹

³⁷ Anderson, *The Moon Reflected Fire*, 8.

³⁸ Kelly, *DMZ Diary*, 165.

³⁹ Telephone interview of Michael Cisco by Mark Taylor, 21 March 1990, Vietnam Archive Oral

Basil T. Paquet, spent virtually his entire tour in Vietnam in a post that reminded him daily, often hourly, of Vietnamese fighting capability, tenacity, and the horrific consequences of tangling with enemies who believed in the justness of their cause. Paquet served as a medic in Vietnam from September 1967 to September 1968, primarily at the 24th Evacuation Hospital at the giant Long Binh Post near Bien Hoa in Dong Nai Province northeast of Saigon. He also volunteered for duty traveling to surrounding civilian areas on “medcaps” (Medical Civil Action Patrols). Doing so gave himself some rare measure of respite from the 24th Evac, where his duties kept him in a *de facto* state of lockdown necessitated by the large and steady casualty flows of the escalation years and the Tet Offensive. Not surprisingly, Paquet’s duties tending to these wounded, dying, and dead inspired many of the most visceral poems of the Vietnam War.

Consider, “Night Dust-Off.” Casualties arrived at the 24th mostly by helicopter gunships, usually Huey UH-1B troopships called “slicks.” Field units would radio for “medevacs” or “dust-offs” to carry the medical posts such as his at the 24th.⁴⁰ Paquet typically worked a 12-hour night shift from dusk till dawn. If the post hospital Pre-Op and Recovery sections were especially clear and quiet, he would help unload any medevac helicopters that came at night and carry the wounded on litters to triage and emergency rooms for initial processing because those facilities had fewer personnel on duty at night. During one night dust-off, a confused yet ambulatory wounded trooper

History Project, 9, The Vietnam Center, Texas Tech University.

⁴⁰ One of the primary reasons there were fewer battlefield deaths in Vietnam versus previous wars was because the wounded were transported so quickly to sophisticated medical treatment at facilities like the 24th. Field medics did what life-saving procedures they could to buy time, and then called for “dust-offs” as quickly as possible.

walked in the wrong direction into a tail rotor while the medics were unloading litters bearing his badly wounded comrades. Paquet was there and helped treat him. That horrifying event and hundreds of others involving unloading the mangled dead and dying from medevacs inspired one of the more artistic and allegorical poems to come out of the war, a haunting, sensory snapshot:

A sound like hundreds of barbers
stopping furiously, increases;
suddenly the night lights,
flashing blades thin bodies
into red strips
hunched against the wind
of a settling slickship.

Litters clatter open,
hands reaching
into the dark belly of the ship
touch toward moans,
they are thrust into a privy,
feeling into wounds,
the dark belly all wound,
all wet screams riven limbs
moving in the beaten night.⁴¹

Paquet intended to capture “the surreal and nightmarish quality of these nonetheless routine events called ‘night dust-offs.’”⁴² As artistically as the poem reads, it’s also quite literal. Throughout his entire tour Paquet routinely hunched over against the wind and out of the way of chopper rotors, reaching into aircraft bellies to retrieve moaning, riven, wounded men, screaming above or along with the rotor-driven wind beating down on them in the nights. So while not documenting a specific incident *per se*, “Night Dust-Off” does capture and preserve a sensory record of some of his most

⁴¹ Basil T. Paquet, “Night Dust-off,” in *WHAM*, 18.

⁴² Paquet, email message to author, 26 August 2012.

distasteful duties in Vietnam: that initial contact with his war-torn fellow troops and human beings.

Soldiers almost universally recognized Vietnam as a land of contradictions that kept their feelings on a see-saw, and docupoets like Paquet and others who mastered poetic historical preservation through verbal snapshots often captured the war's pervasive sense of cognitive dissonance by juxtaposing imagery. On the one hand, Vietnam's plentiful beauty captivated the troops. Lieutenant Frederick Downs commented on the "terrific view" from his defensive post atop a mountain overlooking the South China Sea: "That night we were treated to the spectacle of hundreds of fishing boats up and down the shore as far as we could see. Each boat was allowed to fish if it hung a lantern from the mast at night. From our vantage point, they looked like a line of slowly undulating, illuminated pearls."⁴³ On the other hand, the land evinced the impact of the U.S. military's widespread and utter devastation and destruction. Jan Barry, who served as a radioman with the U.S. Army Support Group, Vietnam during the late advisory period, recognized in the war around him that ridiculous incongruity where lovely peace and ugly war intruded on one another:

See: here, the bougainvillea;
there, the cactus and palm —
 here: the lotus flower;
 there, the bomb-shattered bamboo

of viet-nam

severed flowers, sharded fronds:
 floating in shrapnel,

⁴³ Frederick Downs, *The Killing Zone: My Life in the Vietnam War* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1978), 33.

sealed in napalm.⁴⁴

Eric Leed termed juxtapositions like Barry's as, "radical discontinuity," that internal or external arena where troop's peacetime sensibilities collided violently with the merciless shock of battle. Paquet characterized it this way:

When I arrived at the 24th in September '67 Long Binh's outer berms, guard towers, and razor wire fences were still close to the hospital. When sappers with either satchel charges and/or RPGs attacked these lines on occasional night raids, the perimeter fire fights had a nice "up close and personal" feel that dissipated as the garrison grew over the next months like a giant fungus on the landscape. In those early days both choppers like the awesome Cobra gunships and fixed wing aircraft such as the C-47 "Spooky" gunships (with their rapid fire 7.62 mini guns mounted in side portals) would attack the VC sappers and lay down intense fields of fire from above. There were also usually lots of tracer rounds also flowing out from the guard towers as well as night flares floating slowly down on parachutes. It was a perversely beautiful and awesome fireworks display that resulted almost inevitably in death. And it was during these early days of my tour that I got my first taste of the emotions of a "red alert" that would sound when enemy rockets came in. Most landed harmlessly in empty spaces, but crowding into a crude bomb shelter made of sand bags and corrugated metal and smelling the fear that poured from everyone's sweat glands mixing with the smell of the urine left behind in these bunkers by men too lazy for the long walk to a piss tube or a latrine has never fully faded from my memory. I remember as clearly as yesterday the strange acrid taste of fear in my mouth, much like chewing on copper wire, as a rocket hit nearby. The only thing equal to watching those night fireworks was witnessing the breathtaking daytime mission of an F-4 Phantom jet dive bombing an enemy position during Tet and watching the napalm fires shoot up as it zoomed away - it was grotesque and beautiful at the same time and has always been strangely symbolic for me of the war's many contradictions.⁴⁵

Paquet preserved the cognitive dissonance and tension between these "perversely beautiful" moments and the "grotesque" in another of his many snapshot docupoems, "Christmas, '67":

Flares lit the night like a sky
full of Bethlehem stars.

⁴⁴ Jan Barry, "Floating Petals," in *WHAM*, 74.

⁴⁵ Paquet, email message to author, 26 August 2012.

Dark wings against a darker sky
Laid down red ribbons and bars
Of bright crashing metal
To warn of the on-coming
Assault of men, the long battle
Filled with cries of "in-coming,"
That sent them crawling about
Into the pocked earth, waiting for the promise
Of thudding hosannas, like a gathering of devout
Moths, aching for the flames, but frozen by the hiss
And whistle of mortars and rockets sliding
Down their air pews in a choir of the dying.⁴⁶

It seems from their works that radical discontinuity "posed the most severe psychic contradictions," for Barry and Paquet both.⁴⁷

Far more than depicting beauty, docupoets capture images, scenes, and sensory impressions from their time in Vietnam that stuck with them the most intensely, usually those scenes that happened to horrify them. As Ehrhart notes, "I have read ... thousands of poems from the Vietnam War, and ... almost to a poem, they have nothing good to say about the experience of war."⁴⁸ Many troops struggled with how to articulate their Vietnam experiences, if they could at all, admitting they could "never explain the sensations of war, they are strange, numerous, and various."⁴⁹ Larry Rottman, however, a lieutenant with the 25th Infantry Division who fought in and survived the January 1968 Tet Offensive, indeed found and produced the words to preserve and portray many of the war's scenes, even the most bizarre, random, or unlikely. His poem, "Tet Attack," remains one of the only primary sources to

⁴⁶ Paquet, "Christmas '67," in *WHAM*, 36.

⁴⁷ Eric J. Leed, *No Man's Land: Combat and Identity in World War I* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979), 3.

⁴⁸ Ehrhart, "The Poetry of Bullets," 11.

⁴⁹ Dominik Yezzo, *A G.I.'s Vietnam Diary, 1968 - 1969* (New York: Franklin Watts, 1974), December 6 entry.

document this particular series of rocket attacks. Moreover, and almost certainly, it remains the only source that manages to document the incidents with this level of blunt detail. Were it not for Rottman's colorful imagery and his none-too-subtly camouflaged closing opinions, it might read almost like a back-page incident blotter in the February 1, 1968 edition of *The Stars and Stripes*:

On the evening of the second day of Tet, 1968, at Bien Hoa, a 122mm rocket landed just outside the air base perimeter sending GI's and nurses and hootch maids scrambling for cover.

A few minutes later, the second rocket (with a time delay fuse) exploded deep inside a large cesspool splattering Kotex, pink toilet paper, rubbers, and sewage all over the place.

Within five days, the nine soldiers killed by the third and last rocket had been shipped home and buried and put out of mind. And their replacements were already working the flight line. But three weeks later you could still smell the shit.⁵⁰

Dale Ritterbusch, in an interview with Jackson Niday, II for *War, Literature, & the Arts*, points out that Wilfred Owen and Siegfried Sassoon "undercut [lyrical poetry's] entire tradition by using a lyrical form but containing within it sentiments that are anti-lyrical, anti-poetic."⁵¹ Arguably, the verse of Rottman above and many other soldier-poets writing in the "anti-poetic" tradition of World War I trench poets conforms to Ritterbusch's characterizations. The cases in point abound. When one reads Ehrhart or Paquet or Anderson or McCarthy, the "language, the imagery, the sentiments, the philosophy, the descriptions of the experience itself are counter to what people expect

⁵⁰ Larry Rottman, "Tet Attack," in *Voices from the Ho Chi Minh Trail: Poetry of American and Vietnam, 1965 - 1993*, (Desert Hot Springs, CA: Event Horizon Press, 1993), 35.

⁵¹ Dale Ritterbusch, "Democracy and Literature: A Conversation with Dale Ritterbusch," by Jackson A. Niday, II, in *War, Literature, & the Arts: An International Journal of the Humanities*, Vol.19, Nos. 1-2 (November 2007), 26.

in poetry.”⁵² Perhaps now we have finally ascertained what ultimately lies behind objections to historians using poetry to understand the past: cultural aesthetic expectations. Ritterbusch seems to be characterizing that very tendency:

In Western civilization, we separate poetry from other genres [like histories] by expecting an elevated language in our poetry. We expect it to deal with things that are, if you’ll forgive the expression, pretty, in effect, an aesthetic embellishment of life ... rather than a work of art that engages our fundamental life experiences. Trench poems don’t conform to that aesthetic....⁵³

T.S. Elliot’s “The Wasteland” and other works like it from Western poets dispute Ritterbusch’s generalization, but in one sense, he’s right. Vietnam War poems possess a grotesque aesthetic all their own and qualify as just about anything but pretty. Rottman’s catalogue of used feminine hygiene products, bathroom tissue, spent prophylactics, and fecal matter – not to mention the dead soldiers “put out of mind” – clearly constitutes “disturbing images, not the traditional images nor the traditional language of lyrical poetry.”⁵⁴ Rottman and other soldier-poets embody antipoetic impulses. They steer clear of the lyrical, the literary, and the pretty toward those frequently repugnant realities which we know and understand as historical and thus as real and true. Vietnam War docupoetry delivers detailed, sequential, chronological accounts, and sensory snapshot images of historical people, places, events, and issues.

In truth, much of the poetry to emerge from the Vietnam War to some degree preserves snapshots of the authors’ time and experiences there. Yet the unmistakable human toll that war exacts on its perpetrators, victims, and bystanders arises more tenaciously, more insistently, more regularly than any other thematic element. One

⁵² Ibid., 26.

⁵³ Ibid., 26-7.

⁵⁴ Ibid., 26.

need only turn to Basil Paquet's poetry to encounter both participant and eyewitness testimony to war's heavy costs. In his work as a medic he cared for patients with head wounds on a daily basis. He recalls being introduced at the start of his tour at the 24th Evac Hospital to the concept of the "expectant" corner. It was a military term borrowed from the concepts and practice of triage, However, what it meant in reality was that soldiers and civilians who were diagnosed as irreversibly comatose (and who were so badly wounded that they were deemed by the surgeons as not capable of being saved by neurosurgery) were placed in the expectant corner of Pre-Op, that is, the cot closest by the back door of the Quonset hut that led to the morgue. Some expectant patients would simply lie still till they died. Others would move around so actively that they would need to be strapped to their litters. Paquet considered the expectant practice "an odd contradiction of barbarism and mercy for obvious reasons."⁵⁵

In his poem "They Do Not Go Gentle" below, Paquet tried at the time to frame the deaths of the "expectant" soldiers within Dylan Thomas's exhortation to "Rage, rage, at the dying of the light":

The half-dead comatose
Paw the air like cats do when they dream,
They perform isometrics tirelessly.
They flail the air with a vengeance
You know they cannot have.
After all, their multiplication tables,
Memories of momma, and half of their id
Lies in some shell hole
Or plop! splatter! on your jungle boots.
It must be some atavistic angst
Of their muscle and bones,
Some ancient ritual of their sea water self,

⁵⁵ Paquet, email message to author, 26 August 2012.

Some blood stream monsoon,
Some sinew storm that makes
Their bodies rage on tastelessly
Without their shattered brains.⁵⁶

Paquet says that when he wrote this poem, he sought to capture the tragic irony of comatose young soldiers futilely “raging” at anything, especially in light of the fact that their blood and brains – and all the humanity they once contained – routinely spilled out onto his boots.⁵⁷ Of those macabre contexts from whence “They Do Not Go Gentle” poured forth, Paquet notes with tender, philosophical recollection the function he envisioned his poem should serve:

One of my first assignments as a “new guy” by the Major who was the head nurse involved the washing and prepping of “expectant” cases. She was particularly fanatical about how they needed to be washed and prepped for their 50 foot journey to a body bag in the morgue. I think she was in her own way protesting the practice of the “expectant” corner. The greater irony was that it was an assignment given to the lowest “newbie,” and oddly, it was a duty I came accept as an honor as the “boatman” who helped them cross the Styx. The poem was meant to violently pull its readers into the reality of the war’s “ultimate sacrifice” that our politicians so eagerly referred (and still refer) to in their speeches.⁵⁸

Paquet admits that when he wrote the poem he intended it to convey graphically how there’s nothing glorious about the manner in which “expectant” troops – or anyone else caught in the war’s path – died.⁵⁹ He sought to “de-mythologize or de-sanitize Thomas’ version of the struggle against death: it is not a metaphorical, gradual extinguishing of a

⁵⁶ Basil T. Paquet, “They do Not Go Gentle,” in *WHAM*, 3.

⁵⁷ Paquet, email message to author, 26 August 2012.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

⁵⁹ Even the placement of “They Do Not Go Gentle” in *Winning Hearts & Minds*, where Paquet published it publicly for the first time since leaving the war, was deliberate, embodying Leeds’ radical discontinuity while simultaneously highlighting the war’s many ironies. Its grotesque, unglamorous imagery opens the collection immediately following a marching cadence that concludes with some likely well-intentioned last requests: “But if I die in a combat zone/Box me up and ship me home/.../Place a bible in my hand/For my trip to the Promised Land,” *WHAM*, 1.

'light' that the soldiers must resist, it is the traumatic, *literal* explosion of their bodies."⁶⁰

Paquet chiefly confronted head wounds in his duties at the 24th Evac, but the contexts and circumstances in which his fellow troops sustained such wounds came into acute focus on one of his medcap missions to a village in Dong Nai Province. The Long Binh post had been built on the site of a former rubber plantation, and the remnants of these once vast production groves still dotted the landscape around Dong Nai. As his small convoy of jeeps and deuce-and-a-halves passed close by an abandoned Michelin rubber plantation, the unmistakable signs of a recent small arms firefight struck Paquet forcefully. He recalls, "The dark shade of the rubber trees in their perfect rows gave the whole landscape a particularly eerie and otherworldly look and feel in its current abandoned state," as a "sense of danger lingered and the whole scene froze into my memory."⁶¹ That surreality, heightened by the bullet and shrapnel scars gouged into the trees after warring human elements fought one another, planted deeply in Paquet's mind the seeds of one of his most powerful poems, "In A Plantation." While very short and impressionistic, Paquet hoped its language would capture the historical resonance of Vietnam's colonial history. More pointedly, it paints in vivid, gory, Technicolor the utter finality of the Vietnam War's human toll:

The bullet passed
Through his right temple,
His left side
Could not hold
Against the metal,
His last "I am" exploded

⁶⁰ Matthew B. Hill, *America, Vietnam, and the Poetics of Guilt*, unpublished Ph.D. dissertation manuscript, (College Park, MA: University of Maryland, 2004), 153.

⁶¹ Paquet, email message to author, 26 August 2012.

Red and grey on a rubber tree.⁶²

The bullet-riddled plantation testified to the existential peril characteristic of firefights. If *cogito ergo sum*, if one's existence, one's identity is predicated on the capacity for thought, then Paquet's allusion to Cartesian thought is appropriate. Just as they did to the trees, bullets disintegrated minds and erased the people inside. Paquet witnessed far too many selves simply ceasing to exist as their brain matter landed "plop! Splatter!" on his boots or as their epistemological certainties "exploded/Red and grey" on rubber trees. And while in this poem Paquet's artistry threatens to overpower the historicity of his narrative, the power of its simple descriptive clarity yet reverberates.

W.E. Ehrhart concurs, arguing that in fact, poetry far outstrips most archival sources' descriptive power, as when it forcefully recounts the horrifying moments that frequently imprinted on the consciousness of those who witnessed combat death. For example, during the 1968 Tet Offensive battles over the old Vietnamese imperial capital, Hue, Ehrhart witnessed several comrades killed by sniper fire. He recalls, "Sometimes, they would simply die. Sometimes they would thrash and struggle as if they were drowning. It was not pretty."⁶³ Such eyewitness testimony should silence any objection to acknowledging "The Sniper's Mark" as a disturbingly accurate account of a soldier suffering a fatal head shot:

He seemed in a curious hurry
To burn up what was left
Of the energy inside –

A brainless savage flurry

⁶²Paquet, "In a Plantation," in *WHAM*, 12.

⁶³ Ehrhart, email message to author, 25 August 2012.

Of arms and legs and chest.⁶⁴

Ehrhart's poem reads like the contemplative inner-monologue of someone simply making an observation, "This is how someone behaves when a sniper shoots him in the head: like a brainless, savage flurry of arms and legs and torso all hurrying to consume what remains of the energy inside."

Whereas Ehrhart's poem employed observation and narration, other poets communicate the graphic nature of the Vietnam War's human toll just as powerful utilizing different devices. Stan Platke, twice-decorated grunt who served with the U.S. Army's 4th Infantry Division in 1968 and 1969 poses and then answers his own rhetorical question:

Have you ever seen
A gut catcher?
Perhaps not
If you never had to use one

There is no patent on them
They're makeshift
Depending upon time
And place

I've seen ponchos used
And a pack
And a canteen cover
Or your hands

You catch the guts of your buddy
As they spill out of his body
And try to stuff them back in
But they keep sliding out

For a face blown in
For an eye blown out

⁶⁴ Ehrhart, "The Sniper's Mark," in *To Those Who Have Gone Home Tired*, (New York: Thunder's Mouth Press, 1984), 9.

For an arm blown off
For a body blown open
 . . . A gut catcher.⁶⁵

This poem animates rather simply the horrific nature of Platke's combat experiences as an infantryman in Vietnam. Over the course of his tour, he witnessed people using ponchos, packs, and canteen covers – and he personally used his own hands – to fight losing battles securing his buddies' insides. And while it also records the ingenuity and resourcefulness Platke and others mustered in the field under fire to save lives, it speaks more pointedly to the troops' frustration and sense of near-futility when they had to struggle fruitlessly to reverse the intestinal cascade enemy munitions unleashed.

Platke's "Gut Catcher" and other works illustrate how poetry's transparent and uncluttered language conjures the brutal nature of Vietnam combat. For example, where official military reports obscure, complicate, and dehumanize, poetry clarifies, simplifies, and humanizes – and with blunt candor. Philip Caputo commented on the detached, clinical, almost robotic nature of the officially-sanctioned language the military required him to use when cataloguing or describing the types of battle trauma suffered by American troops. Impersonality and euphemism trumped humanity and clarity every time. He recounts his experiences as the "Officer in Charge of the Dead," following his transfer off the front to a regimental headquarters unit in the rear:

All the reports had to be written in that clinical euphemistic language the military prefers to simple English. If, say, a marine had been shot through the guts, I could not write "shot through the guts" . . . No, I had to say "GSW (gunshot wound), through and through, abdomen." . . . The phrase for dismemberment. . . was "traumatic amputation."⁶⁶

⁶⁵ Stan Platke, "Gut Catcher," in *WHAM*, 21.

⁶⁶ Caputo, 166.

Caputo goes on to say that he believed that “traumatic” indeed described the nature of injuries sustained by combat troops in the war. However, he felt that “amputation” implied a rather sterile, surgical separation of members from their hosts. Instead, the human body “tends to shatter into irregular and unrecognizable pieces,” and that “traumatic fragmentation” would perhaps have more accurately assessed combat injuries without deviating from the near-obsessive strictures of military reporting protocols.⁶⁷ Washington’s need, it seemed, “was to sanitize reality and quarantine fact from the word – precisely what much poetry avoids.”⁶⁸

Fellow Marine agrees that troop terminology like Caputo’s always proved right on target, recalling how

It came to me that the term we used for a man’s getting killed, *wasted*, was truly precise. His life was gone, his flame put out, and never again would I share a meal or a joke or even a rush of fear with him. The organic matter that once contained the life energy we called Dyer was already beginning to stink.⁶⁹

Doug Anderson treated much waste and traumatic fragmentation, and he documented one episode with his usual combat correspondentlike aplomb. A personal tale, it injects plenty of reality and fact, along with humanity into its words, contrasting plainly from the impersonality of Caputo’s bureaucratic reports:

We make the paddy crossing fine,
but fifty meters into the trees,
the man two up in front of me steps on a mine,
loses both legs at the hip, and that’s not all.
He’s stunned, doesn’t know how bad it is.
Can’t give him morphine in that much shock.
He’ll die if he’s lucky.
I have less work than I thought:

⁶⁷ Ibid., 167.

⁶⁸ John Felstiner, “American Poetry and the War in Vietnam,” *Stand*, V.19 N.2 (1978), 4-11.

⁶⁹ Kelly, *DMZ Diary*, 136.

the blast's heat has cauterized his wounds.
Quickly I fill out the casualty tag.
I'm bleeding too, a rivulet
of my blood blends with one of his.
When he's gone, I wash my wound.
It's not shrapnel. A shard of his
shattered bone is sticking in my arm.⁷⁰

The ultimate negation of death with dignity occurred when a soldier's obliterated body splattered on his comrades, at times with enough force to cause injury or death. A sergeant in Captain Richard D. Camp's marine rifle company in Vietnam was struck in the head by a rocket-propelled grenade, blowing gore into the face of the man next to him. The man at first thought he had been blinded, but everything he "had been sprayed with could be washed off." ... [Other] injuries included a piece of one of his men's shinbones imbedded in his back – the man had been vaporized by the rocket's impact.⁷¹ The grisly seriousness of these kinds of wounds could simply not be lessened, no matter how Pentagon war salesmen sought to understate, soften, or euphemize. The aftermath of such wounds, particularly for those who survived them, the magnitude of the war's human toll is also unmistakable and nigh impossible to understate.

Basil Paquet, too, witnessed all too many of his fellow troops endure fragmentation – both outer and inner alike. As one of the main American neurological units in Vietnam, the 24th Evac saw most of the cases involving spinal injuries and traumatic amputations, and Paquet cared for many of these "basket cases." He didn't coin the term, but rather inherited the crude military medical slang that dated back to

⁷⁰ Doug Anderson, "Mine," originally published in *Bamboo Bridge*, (Amherst, MA: Amherst Writers & Artists Press, 1991), cited from Doug Anderson, *The Moon Reflected Fire*, (Cambridge, MA: Alice James Books, 1994), 12.

⁷¹ Richard D. Camp, qtd. in Kindsvatter, *American Soldiers*, 47.

World War I. It referred to soldiers who had lost both arms and legs and had to be carried everywhere in baskets. Paquet developed, enigmatically, he says, a unique talent for stanching the bleeding of these victims. He would be called upon to wrap the amputated limbs using a special technique that called for precisely the proper amount of pressure using stretch bandages. Too loose and the stumps would continue hemorrhaging. Too tight and he could constrict circulation and damage the very remaining tissue he was trying to save.

His close contact with so many of these tragic victims, almost universally disillusioned and embittered, if they were conscious at all, led him to pen a poem that gave one "Basket Case" a forum through which he might vent his bitter rage. In it he records almost the exact same kind of injury as Anderson did, only instead of narrating as the medic on-hand, he personifies the victim. It cuts a particularly painful and personal arc across the page, ironically, not because of the circumstances surrounding the wound the trooper so graphically describes, but rather because its narrator paradoxically voices a profound regret for ever having experienced a pleasure that most would likely cherish. Paquet captures the tragic and painful ironies of what arguably proved the most emotionally traumatic of amputations:

I waited eighteen years to become a man.
My first woman was a whore off Tu Do Street,
but I wish I never felt the first wild
Gliding lust, because the rage and thrust
Of a mine caught me hip high.
I felt the rip at the walls of my thighs,
A thousand metal scythes cut me open,
My little fish shot twenty yards
Into a swamp canal.
I fathered only this--the genderless bitterness

Of two stumps, and an unwanted pity
That births the faces of all
Who will see me die deliriously
From the spreading sepsis that was once my balls.⁷²

Matthew Hill observes, “Paquet places himself *inside* his subjects ... here ‘merging’ with his subjects, becoming in some way a coherent whole with them.”⁷³ Hill, a literary critic, believes that as a result of Paquet “involving himself in their experiences, and them in his,” he forces readers “to connect the two conceptually.” Hill, Paquet says, understood precisely what he was trying to express by “merging with his subjects”: that the experience of Viet Nam, or even of war in general, “cannot be divided into simple ‘sides’ – the experience is more than the sum of its (horrific) parts.”⁷⁴ Put another way, even though Paquet himself didn’t physically sustain and endure traumatic castration and the subsequent bitterness engendered by the knowledge that he would never again feel anything like the “first wild, gliding lust” of intercourse, his daily interaction with numerous such wounded men lent him a perspective and authority that arguably few others could boast. His connection with and personification of the “basket case” allow others to connect and involve themselves in both of their experiences and draw reasonable conclusions about at least some of what mine victims must have felt emotionally. Merging in poetry with the Vietnam War’s wounded personalizes, humanizes, and makes more real their own painful histories while wrestling – if not coming exactly coming to terms – with all of the historical issues these poems and other sources raise and confront concerning the Vietnam War.

⁷² Paquet, “Basket Case,” in *WHAM*, 20.

⁷³ Matthew B. Hill, *America, Vietnam, and the Poetics of Guilt*, 133.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*; Paquet, email message to author, 25 August 2012.

Just as the poetry of the Vietnam War can function to provide us with snapshots of various wartime and combat experiences, it also serves as a repository and time capsule to preserve many of the most powerful emotions combatants grappled with concerning those weighty experiences. As Ehrhart reasons, “when a poem is written, it becomes a singular entity with an inextinguishable and unalterable life of its own. It is a true reflection of the feelings and perceptions it records, and as such, it is as valuable a document as any history ever written.”⁷⁵

A feeling almost universal among troops fighting in Vietnam was the ever-present sense of fear, chief among them, fear of death or dismemberment. Although the emotional and physical environment of war proved to tax troops far more than anticipated, most soldiers had entered combat with at least a vague understanding, thanks to their training, that war was dangerous and physically demanding. Training had not prepared the soldier, however, for one aspect of war that proved especially to damage his psyche: he might die a senseless death simply because he was in the wrong place at the wrong time.

Vietnam grunts very quickly learned that death in combat could happen in astonishingly arbitrary ways, such as troops being killed or wounded by booby traps or mines their comrades tripped. The enemy’s skill at arbitrarily neutralizing American troops unsettled them greatly: Will Goodrich, a newly arrived replacement lamented, “The victims were selected so randomly. You could be 100 percent right and still be 100

⁷⁵ Ehrhart, “The Poetry of Bullets, or: How Does a War Mean?” Keynote address to the *Conference on War in Memory, Popular Culture & Folklore*, sponsored by the Center for the Study of the Korean War and the National Archives and Records Administration, Central Plains Region, Kansas City, Missouri, 25 February 2000, 16.

percent dead.... There's not a goddamn thing you can do about it, either."⁷⁶ For example, on Marine Bill Ehrhart's very first in-country maneuvers, Operation Stone [February 1967], Bravo Company commander Captain Bob Lain stepped on a mine that blew both his legs off. On another occasion ten months later, Ehrhart's unit was sweeping an area to the northwest of Con Thien when they came under enemy mortar fire. As the Marines sought cover in a tree line, several tripped booby traps with disastrous results.⁷⁷ After these and many similar incidents, Ehrhart put to paper his virtually inescapable inner-monologue, chronicling the dread that plagued him relentlessly on every hump, throughout every operation:

The next step you take
may lead you into an ambush.

The next step you take
may trigger a tripwire.

The next step you take
may detonate a mine.

The next step you take
may tear your leg off at the hip.

The next step you take
may split your belly open.

The next step you take
may send a sniper's bullet through your brain.

The next step you take.
The next step you take.

The next step.
The next step.

⁷⁶ Kindsvatter, *American Soldiers*, 59-60.

⁷⁷ Ehrhard, email message to author, 25 August 2012.

The next step.⁷⁸

Vietnam veteran and master of combat narrative history, Tim O'Brien, corroborates the paralyzing fear to which Ehrhart testifies, noting a sense of the absurd combination of perpetual certainty and uncertainty – certainty that indeed death lurked everywhere, the uncertainty of how to avoid it:

You look ahead a few paces and wonder what your legs will resemble if there is more to the earth than silicates and nitrogen. . . . You try to second-guess the mine. Should you put your foot to that flat rock or the clump of weed to its rear? Paddy dike or water? You wish you were Tarzan, able to swing with the vines. You try to trace the footprints of the man to your front. You give it up when he curses you for following too closely; better one man dead than two. . . . The moment-to-moment, step-by-step decision-making preys on your mind.⁷⁹

O'Brien's narrative prose lacks Ehrhart's degree of poetic artistry: his deliberate, trudging structure that itself conjures a weighty, plodding, nerve-wracking mission of trespassing through Charlie's turf. However, both Marines' works document the paralyzing fear they both felt with each "next step" through the bush. Charles Purcell, who served with the U.S. Army's 10th Combat Aviation Brigade in 1966 and 1967, expressed it this way:

Mines!
Mines!
Booby traps and mines
Everywhere you step
Like serpents they surround you.

Toe poppers
T.M.B.'s and claymores
Silently they await
My frightened trembling step.⁸⁰

⁷⁸ Ehrhart, "The Next Step," in *Unaccustomed Mercy*, 56-7.

⁷⁹ Tim O'Brien, *If I Die in a Combat Zone: Box Me Up and Ship Me Home* (New York: Dellacourt Press), 120-21.

⁸⁰ Charles M. Purcell, "Mines," in *WHAM*, 17.

Like so many poems from the war, "Mines" reads like a wartime diary, opened and baring its most intimate, personal revelations. Once again, Caputo seconds a poet's confessions of vulnerability, helplessness, and frustration: "It was not warfare. It was murder. We could not fight back against the Viet Cong mines or take cover from them or anticipate when they would go off. Walking down the trails, waiting for those things to explode, we had begun to feel more like victims than soldiers."⁸¹ While soldiers fearing death and dismemberment don't exactly constitute earth-shattering news for historians of the Vietnam War, Purcell's lament and confessions of fear like Ehrhart's and Caputo's weave one more human record into the tapestry of experiences that comprise our combined knowledge of the war.

Of course, more than just mines and booby traps and environment haunted troops in Vietnam. As the sources above demonstrate, American troops in Vietnam faced a tenacious, elusive, deadly enemy. Out in the boonies or in downtown Saigon, death lurked ever-present, and those were real men who rigged sniped, rigged those mines and traps, staged those ambushes, and wrought devastation on their American enemies. They could appear one minute and disappear into the background scenery the next, only to reemerge to kill comrades. Platoon leader Michael Lee Lanning elaborated concisely, "[My] number might be due up at any time."⁸² For example, American troops entering any village in Vietnam regularly imperiled their lives. Village loyalties shifted constantly and without warning from South Vietnamese political causes and military goals to those of the Vietcong or North Vietnamese Army and back

⁸¹ Caputo, *A Rumor of War*, 273.

⁸² Kindsvatter, *American Soldiers*, 81.

again, depending very often on which forces the villagers perceived presented the greatest threat – or which had earned the worst reputation – at the time.⁸³ This made for a perilous recipe for disaster when troops were ordered to sweep villages for VC combatants. Doug Anderson discovered in such settings that anything could happen – and sometimes did. Clever fighters, the Vietcong deployed any means or ruse or subterfuge in their power and imagination to accomplish their mission of depleting American force numbers – even transvestitism:

In the village we unsling our rifles,
drop our packs, light cigarettes, eat, piss,
sleep fly-covered in the heat.
A round comes by my ear, and angry wasp,
and crabwise I scuttle for a hole that isn't there.
There is shouting everywhere, someone is hit.
I see the lieutenant point his pistol with both hands;
a water buffalo is bearing down on him,
stampeded by the shooting. Beside a cistern,
a monk, saffron robed, squats and laughs.
There is a woman running past
tripping on her ao dai, but no, it's not.
Before I can shout a warning the garment comes unsashed,
instead of womanflesh, an automatic rifle
flashes in an arc, and firing from the hip,
the man runs for his life.
Someone trying to duck smashes my nose with his elbow.
It is now quiet. Seven bodies lie in the village road;
three are ours, more are wounded.
My cigarette not gone halfway I begin to treat them.⁸⁴

Villager hostility to the American interlopers, the troops could certainly understand.

The laughing monk, while infuriating, made sense, just as did the VC bullets seeking him out along with his men. That was life and death in a war zone. However, Peter

⁸³ Le Ly Hayslip, *When Heaven and Earth Change Places: A Vietnamese Woman's Journey from War to Peace* (New York: Penguin, 1989), 26-54.

⁸⁴ Doug Anderson, "Ambush," in *The Moon Reflected Fire*, 7.

Kindsvatter found that almost universally, American troops considered the VC's "[h]iding behind civilian clothes" to have violated all their notions of what constitutes "fighting fair." As one Marine reported, "I could respect the NVA. . . . They put on the uniform and they came at you head on. . . . I never believed that there was honor between warriors on opposite sides of a battle, but I see that there is. But dealing with the Viet Cong was real hard because they didn't stand up and fight like men." Consequently, he continued, "it was real easy for me to dehumanize the Viet Cong."⁸⁵

Such tactics, when combined with the tenacity and capability of the Vietnamese enemy, physical exhaustion and fading stamina, and the unrelenting, omnipresent specter of death incrementally, even exponentially exacerbated what psychiatrists Roy L. Swank and Walter E. Marchand referred to as troops' "hyper-reactive stage," which included symptoms like irritability, overcautiousness, and its offspring, increasing and hyper-sensitive fear reactions.⁸⁶ Dale Ritterbusch's poem "Search and Destroy," seems a case in point:

They came out of the hootch
with their hands up – surrendered –
and we found all that rice
and a couple of weapons. They
were tagged and it all seemed so easy –
too easy, and someone started to torch
the hootch and I stopped him – something
was funny. We checked the hootch
a couple times more; I had them probe it
like we were searching for mines and
a lucky poke with a knife
got us the entrance to a tunnel.
We didn't wait for any damn
tunnel clearers – we threw down

⁸⁵ Kindsvatter, *American Soldiers*, 209.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 85.

CS and smoke and maybe two hundred yards to our right two gooks popped up and we got 'em running across the field, nailed 'em before they hit the trees. We went to the other hole and popped more gas arid smoke and a fragmentation grenade and three gooks came out coughing, tears and red smoke pouring out of the their eyes and nose. We thought there were more so we threw in another grenade and one of the dinks brought down his arms, maybe he started to sneeze with all that crap running out of his face, maybe he had a weapon concealed, I didn't know, so I greased him. Wasn't much else I could do. A sudden move like that.⁸⁷

On one level, the poem's closing lines, "Wasn't much I could do. A sudden move like that," seem a hollow defense. Ritterbusch clearly realized in hindsight that his Vietcong captive likely had only flinched suddenly "to sneeze with all that crap running out of his face." Yet his ambivalence is palpable, too, when he reminds his audience that the man could have "had a weapon concealed," so "greasing" him seemed the prudent and justified response at the time.

Ritterbusch almost seems an apologist—or at least to be explaining his and his men's behavior. When ordered to operate in arguably impossible circumstances for who knows how many weeks on end, humping it out on search and destroy missions in the countryside and villages alike, troops' hyper-reactivity seems not only understandable, but a natural consequence, an occupational hazard. One Marine private explained it this way:

Their spooklike hit-and-run tactics left gaping holes in our morale. The frustration of not being able to react in time creates a condition of tired, angry

⁸⁷ Dale Ritterbusch, "Search and Destroy," in *Carrying the Darkness*, 233.

blood. . . . The Vietcong knew exactly what they were doing, and they were effective. Their continual harassment and evasion kept our anger, frustration, and jagged nerves at an optimum peak.⁸⁸

Worse, at least for the enemy, Vietcong tactics threatened to unleash pent-up American rage, especially if they resulted in dead Americans. Frank Cross's poem, "The Man in Black," clearly testifies:

The man in black
Ran from us
Into a hedgerow
And was gone.
Our small,
Spinning bullets followed,
But did not find him.

We walked
among the corn and cane
Wanting to run.

We walked
On line,
Urging one another
To move on
Against our visions
Of torn flesh and smashed bone.

We walked
Among hootches,
Smelling the greasy smoke
From fires cooking rice and fish;
Wondering, wildly,
Where the man in black
Was hiding.

On the other side of the village,
We found
The man in black,
As he rose
From his mud bunker

⁸⁸ Kindsvatter, *American Soldiers*, 211.

To send three
 quick
 bullets
Through Harry.

And then all our fear
 and hate
Poured from our rifles
Into
 the man in black;
As he lost his face
In the smoke
Of an exploding hand frag.⁸⁹

Cross doesn't get defensive and try to excuse or justify his and his men's vengeful reaction, but he certainly illustrates clearly how deadly Vietnamese hit-and-run tactics could be and renders his frustration and rage with such circumstances more understandable to audiences.

Some did grow defensive, however. Walter McDonald was an Air Force pilot from 1957 to 1971 who served briefly on ground assignment in Vietnam from 1969-1970. During that time, he seems to have become deeply sympathetic to the plight of ground troops engaging their wily Vietnamese enemies. Long before McDonald arrived in-country, public opinion stateside had begun souring on a massive scale in the Tet Offensive's aftermath. During McDonald's tenure in Vietnam, an ex-GI broke the silence about My Lai, and consequently, many soldiers returned home to condemnation rather than congratulation, as protesters called them "baby killers."⁹⁰ In his poem, "Interview with a Guy Named Fawkes, U.S. Army," McDonald recounts Fawkes' response to a reporter asking him how he feels about American public reaction to

⁸⁹ Frank A. Cross, Jr., "The Man in Black," in *WHAM*, 84-5.

⁹⁰ Carol Burke, *Camp All-American, Hanoi Jane, and the High and Tight: Gender, Folklore, and Changing Military Culture*, (Boston: Beacon Press, 2004), 183-4.

charges of soldiers committing atrocity in Vietnam:

— you tell them this —
tell them to shove it, they're
not here, tell them kiss
my rear when they piss about
women and kids in shacks
we fire on. damn.
they fire on us.
hell yes, it's war
they sent us for.
what do they know back where
not even in their granddam's days
did any damn rockets red glare.
don't tell me
how chips fall.
those are The Enemy:
waste them all.⁹¹

Fawkes' outrage at people thousands of miles away condemning him and his fellow troops for how they engage their enemies emphasizes and reinforces the point all these soldier-poets have been making. Native American soldier Leroy TeCune concurs. He and many other grunts lamented having to fight three enemies: the Vietcong, the NVA, and "the third type of enemy, at more times more deadly than the other two, . . . the South Vietnamese people themselves." He complained that "when among them, you had no way of knowing whether they were the enemy or not. The enemy could be a cleaning lady, a barber, a laundress, or even an innocent-looking child."⁹² chasing anonymous, chameleon enemies — VC hiding in plain sight as farmers or even children by day, roving as guerrillas by night — frustrated American troops endlessly, eventually darkening many hearts and justifying unconscionable actions, if not in posterity's eyes,

⁹¹ Walter McDonald, "Interview with a Guy Named Fawkes, U.S. Army," in *Unaccustomed Mercy*, 102.

⁹² Leroy TeCune, *Year in Nam: A Native American Soldier's Story*, (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1999), xii.

then at least in troops' own minds at the time. Soldiers in Vietnam constantly warred with themselves to survive without losing the last shred of their humanity. Private Richard E. Ogden struggled with both: "I was aware of the subtle changes in my mental state.... The fight to remain alive was one problem; the fight to remain human was quite another."⁹³

As numerous poems and other sources attest, fighting Vietnamese combatants of any affiliation proved immensely challenging, even when grunts could see their enemy. It proved even worse when they couldn't, or when they hid in plain sight. As Anderson's gender-camouflaging Vietcong demonstrated, discerning innocent Vietnamese civilians from enemy combatants constituted one of the most trying and potentially deadly ongoing ordeals of the entire war, even for those operating regularly in among the people. Very often, circumstances afforded mere milliseconds to make the proper determination. Bill Ehrhart confirmed such frustrations, penning "Guerrilla War" after a ten year-old boy tried to throw a grenade into his and his buddy's jeep as they drove through the small coastal village of Hoi An one day in the spring of 1967. It encapsulates his and countless other troops' frustrations with operating among and trying to fight a maddeningly elusive, essentially anonymous enemy:

It's practically impossible
to tell civilians
from the Vietcong.

Nobody wears uniforms.
They all talk
the same language,
(and you couldn't understand them

⁹³ Ogden, *Green Knight, Red Mourning*, 274-5.

even if they didn't).
They tape grenades
inside their clothes,
and carry satchel charges
in their market baskets.

Even the women fight;
and young boys,
and girls.

It's practically impossible
to tell civilians
from the Vietcong.

after a while,
you quit trying.⁹⁴

The surprise ending openly confesses an all-too-common in-country metamorphosis.

Vietnam poetry testifies to such internal discord giving way over time to the darker self.

What began as a fight like Ogden's ended in resignation. After so many brushes with death, survival trumped the magnetic pull of one's moral compass. Ehrhart elaborates,

"While I was shocked when I first got to Vietnam at the way Marines would toss civilians off the tops of amphibious tractors with their hands and feet bound, by the summer of 1967 during Operation Pike [after the adolescent grenadier and other disillusioning incidents], I was the one tossing the civilians off the tractor."⁹⁵

Immersion in war proved a process of discovering combat's dangers and hardships while struggling to survive and maintain a moral compass. This process, James R.

Ebert believes, "was inescapably 'regressive.' The average soldier emerged from the initial shock of combat a confident and effective veteran, but in time he became

⁹⁴ Ehrhart, email message to author, 25 August 2012. See also, Ehrhart, "Guerilla War," in *Carrying the Darkness: The Poetry of the Vietnam War*, W.D. Ehrhart, ed., (Lubbock: Texas Tech University Press, 1985), 93-4.

⁹⁵ Ehrhart, email message to author, 25 August 2012.

increasingly aware of the odds against him while suffering the debilitating effects of continuous combat.... He began to lose his nerve, eventually breaking down or becoming dangerously fatalistic.”⁹⁶ And while Ehrhart and most others never devolved into atrocity anywhere approaching My Lai scope and scale, “Guerrilla War” discloses some of the reasons why troops commonly surrendered to the dark indifference and fatalism that the war’s frustrating combat realities engendered.

Millions of people’s experiences comprise the totality of Vietnam War history, and we know little or nothing about almost all of them. The soldier-poetry of the Vietnam War illuminates the grunt’s war with a narrative honesty, descriptive power, and human voice seldom united in nightly wartime newscasts, textbook histories of the war, or even soldiers’ letters home. Thus, if historians truly hope to advance knowledge of the past, to knit more human accounts into the vibrant tapestry woven from individual and collective histories, then mining unorthodox resources as rich and enduring as soldiers’ poetry is as fertile ground as any in which to start.

⁹⁶ Kindsvatter, *American Soldiers*, 68.

CHAPTER V

AMERICAN POETRY: PART TWO*

“Many, many men have been just as troubled morally and spiritually as you are right now. Happily, some of them kept records of their troubles. You'll learn from them – if you want to. Just as someday, if you have something to offer, someone will learn something from you. It's a beautiful reciprocal arrangement. And it isn't education. It's history. It's poetry.”

–J.D. Salinger, *The Catcher in the Rye*¹

Vietnam War soldier-poets, in documenting their personal pasts, left behind records as diverse as any other source type. They approached their task from varying avenues and consequently, with different motives. Some sought to process events; others to confess; still others to engage in political acts. Medic Basil Paquet saw poetry serving multiple functions. It helped him express emotions like outrage, to grieve, to commemorate and honor people he knew there, but also to raise consciousness. He recalls,

I believed that my writing was both an artistic as well as a political act, and I saw no conflict between these twin functions. My intention was to create poetry that grasped my readers emotionally and intellectually and pulled them so close to the war that they could not escape the reality of what was being wrought in their names. The “Introduction” to *Winning Hearts & Minds* is an expression of this aesthetic and its urgency as a political act to help bring about an end to the war by mobilizing public opinion. I think my fellow editors shared this perspective, and I think most of the writers included in the three 1st Casualty anthologies came to share that perspective to some degree or another.²

Many more seem to have shared Paquet's perspective indeed, because expressions of conscience, particularly guilt and internal conflict about abusing, injuring, maiming,

¹ J.D. Salinger, *The Catcher in the Rye*, excerpted from http://www.goodreads.com/author/quotes/819789.J_D_Salinger (accessed 23 July 2014).

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² Basil T. Paquet, Email message to author, 18 August 2012.

and killing those they had begun to see as human beings are among the most common in the war's poetic canon. The war's many bitter ironies; fear; racial tensions; atrocity and abuse of the enemy; discord, dissent, and disillusionment; the inability to find or discern the enemy; and the physical, psychological, but particularly emotional and personal aftermath of the war – all find voice and speak up. This chapter listens and considers, first the poets as whistleblowers or voices of conscience; next the voices of irony and cultural commentary; further, the voices of confession and contrition; and finally it considers the frequent, logical extension of troops' new consciousness of self and others, the voice of dissent against America's mission in Vietnam.

The fact that so many poems address abuse and atrocity toward Vietnamese combatants and civilians illustrates that it was common enough to warrant documentation, at least from the poets themselves, if not from upper-level brass who occasionally tried to ignore or even bury proof of the incidents to avoid reprimand or removal from command in-country or public outrage stateside.³ While by no means chronic or even epidemic in nature, a once-secret archive a Pentagon task force assembled in the early 1970s now reveals that confirmed atrocities by U.S. forces in Vietnam proved far more extensive than previously disclosed. Declassified documents describe recurrent attacks on ordinary Vietnamese – families in their homes, farmers in rice paddies, teenagers out fishing. In interviews with investigators and letters to commanders, hundreds of soldiers reported a violent minority who murdered, raped

³ Seymour M. Hersh, "Hamlet Attack Called Point-blank Murder," *St. Louis Post Dispatch*, November 20, 1969, qtd. in *Reporting Vietnam: American Journalism 1959-1975*, Milton Bates, Lawrence Lichty, Paul L. Miles, Ronald H. Spector, Marilyn Young, eds., (New York: Literary Classics of the United States, 2000), 419-20.

and tortured with impunity. And contrary to popular opinion, more than just a few rogue units engaged in atrocity. Investigators uncovered virtual mountains of evidence that members of “*every* infantry, cavalry, and airborne division, and every separate brigade that deployed without the rest of its division – that is, every major army unit” operating in Vietnam perpetrated abuse and atrocity on Vietnamese civilians.⁴

Without doubt, operating constantly in a combat zone could warp or even deactivate troops’ moral compasses. Caputo observed, “Everything rotted and corroded quickly over there: bodies, boot leather, canvas, metal, morals. . . . It was . . . a war waged in a wilderness without rules; . . . in which each soldier fought . . . not caring who he killed . . . and feeling only contempt for those who sought to impose on his savage struggle the mincing distinctions of civilized warfare.”⁵ Another soldier summed it up aptly: “The longer you’re in a war, the more your moral attentiveness wears down. You become less scrupulous, or at least less assiduous. Well, all soldiers are expected to behave like butchers. Eventually, you become one.”⁶ Corpsman Doug Anderson put it as baldly as ever:

Meanwhile, here we are, a bunch of teenagers with high-tech weapons, swaggering through their village kicking over their family altars, diddling their daughters, kicking the shit out of Papa-san for fun, burning the thatch of their hooches out of the sheer meanness of hormonal excess. We’ve come to think Asians are the problem. We’d just as soon kill a villager as look at him. This must be Hell, the villagers think, and the Buddhists among them must wonder what the hell they did in a former life to deserve this.⁷

⁴ Nick Turse, *Kill Anything That Moves*, 21. See also, Nick Turse and Deborah Nelson, “Civilian Killings Went Unpunished: Declassified Papers Show U.S. Atrocities Went Far beyond My Lai,” *Los Angeles Times*, August 6, 2006, accessed at <http://www.latimes.com/news/la-na-vietnam6aug06,0,2056752.story>, 16 December 2012.

⁵ Caputo, *A Rumor of War*, 217-8.

⁶ Kindsvatter, *American Soldiers*, 219.

⁷ Anderson, *Keep Your Head Down*, 125.

Soldier-poets documented numerous occasions of the sadism and sociopathy that Anderson describes. Rarely relating accounts of mass murder on a My Lai scale, instead they simply detail the intermittent brutality troops witnessed. Sometimes they chronicle torture and murder, other times just sadistic abuse, but each divulges some of the more repulsive events tainting the war's already grotesque underbelly. In a particularly sickening docupoem, Doug Anderson lures readers in, portraying what appear to be all-American boys delighted at their new hardware:

They take the new machine gun out of its wrap
in pieces, the flat black barrel, the other
parts, delicate in their oil, plastic stock
like a toy until snapped onto the rest,
pressed against the shoulder of the corporal
with almost white blond hair. He looks around
for something to sight in on. With a grin
the other, darker one points to three
children dawdling to school along a paddy dike.
The first rounds are high and the gunner adjusts,
fires again, the children running now,
the rounds pluming in the wet paddies,
another click and all but one child has made
the safety of the treeline, the other splashing
into the new rice, and as the gunner sights in
on him, this eight year old, with wisdom perhaps
from the dead, yanks off his red shirt, becomes
the same color as the fields, the gunner lowering
the muzzle now, whispering a wistful, *damn*.⁸

As disturbing or even incredulous as soldiers targeting innocent adolescent victims might seem – not to mention their curses over having missed the children and the sociopathic state of mind it demonstrates – American troops used unarmed Vietnamese civilians for target practice. According to declassified Pentagon records, Private James

⁸ Doug Anderson, "Two Boys," in *The Moon Reflected Fire*, 17. For more on the events this poem documents, see Anderson, *Keep Your Head Down*, 87.

D. "Jamie" Henry, a medic with B Company of the 1st Battalion, 35th Infantry, 4th Infantry Division, witnessed and reported this and several other disturbing events. On October 15, 1967, while on break from a large-scale search and destroy mission near Chu Lai, Henry overheard a lieutenant on the radio request permission to "test-fire" his weapon, and went to observe. He found two Americans using a Vietnamese man for target practice. They had come discovered their victim sleeping in his hooch and decided to kill him for sport. "Everybody was taking potshots at him, seeing how accurate they were," Henry reported in his statement to Army superiors, each of which told him to keep quiet. To his credit, one at least forwarded Henry's statements on to Army investigators who spent three years tracking down corroboration from other unit members, though little ever became of it in the way of consequences for the perpetrators.⁹

Unlike the incident Private Henry reported, Doug Anderson reported an episode with at least some semblance of military objective, that of verifying a man's Vietcong affiliation and uncovering the weapon he used to engage American troops:

They drag the prisoner to the stream,
bend his back into a bow,
hold him under by the hair,
yank him up, repeat,
and all the time,
as if he were their lover,
whisper to him in Vietnamese,
till half drowned, he breaks,
points to a hooch.
His interrogators, grinning,
tear his carbine from the thatch.
They wire his wrists behind his back,

⁹ Turse and Nelson, "Civilian Killings Went Unpunished," <http://www.latimes.com/news/la-na-vietnam6aug06-story.html#page=1>, accessed 24 July 2014.

chain his ankles to the tank,
drag him over stubble and paddy dikes.
From the rear of the tank,
the interrogators, smoking,
contemplate the stripe of blood
that shoots an azimuth
from Tam Ky to Chu Lai.¹⁰

While the man's torturers didn't ultimately kill him, their abuse did give him painful cause to reflect on his fate and the consequences of a life spent as a revolutionary combatant:

The prisoner stands beside his shredded flesh and sings:
Next life I want to be a woman,
sit in autumn with my baby by the village well,
watch the sun's yolk,
mirrored in a thousand flooded paddies.¹¹

Military disciplinary proceedings records document precisely this very kind of prisoner torture to extract information. Some of the cases report American personnel present at or participating in prisoner abuse and torture alongside their South Vietnamese interrogator counterparts, including "dragging prisoners behind armored personnel carriers," events caught on film by American correspondents.¹²

More than just the Vietnamese could attract American troops' ire and its potentially deadly consequences. To be sure, in wartime, with so many different personality types, social classes, geographic origins, and combat experience levels operating day in and day out in such close proximity in nearly unimaginably intense situations, that soldiers *didn't* find themselves at odds more often with one another and their superiors on all manner of issue might surprise. In combat's stressful contexts,

¹⁰ Doug Anderson, "Prisoner's Song," in *The Moon Reflected Fire*, 14.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Lewy, *America in Vietnam*, 328.

one of the quickest ways for superior officers to draw their men's scorn was for them to behave like they indeed were superior – particularly if they weren't, or when, in fact, they were inept or at least lacked sufficient combat experience. Paul Fusell, while speaking of officer behavior from World War II, nonetheless defines perfectly the sort of petty treatment that troops have always resented and resisted:

Chickenshit refers ... to behavior that makes military life worse than it has to be: petty harassment of the weak by the strong; ... sadism thinly disguised as necessary discipline; ... and insistence on the letter rather than the spirit of ordinances. Chickenshit is so called – instead of horse- or bull- or elephant shit – because it is small-minded and ignoble and takes the trivial seriously. Chickenshit can be recognized instantly because it never has anything to do with winning the war.¹³

With the typical blunt candor of his combat correspondent style, Larry Rottman chronicled one widely despised, hubristic officer's seemingly inevitable progress from contemptible superior to victim of American war crime, the kind whose troops ended up fragging him. Rottmann enumerates the officer's flawed character attributes and catalogues his scorn-worthy deeds with each passing stanza:

Lieutenant Hatfield figured that he was a survivor.
One night, a mortar round shredded the mosquito netting over his hammock,
but he escaped completely unscathed.
A couple months later, a single 50cal round
went right through the top of his steel pot
without touching a hair on his head.
Another time, he stepped on a "Bouncing Betty"
but only the guys in front and back of him got hit.¹⁴

Many troops – usually green, but occasionally battle-hardened ones – ignored, denied, or even refused to believe that death or disfigurement could find them, despite its

¹³ Paul Fusell, *Wartime: Understanding Behavior in the Second World War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), 80.

¹⁴ Rottmann, "Lieutenant Hatfield," in *Voices*, 27.

pervasiveness around them at all times. Some, like Rottman's Lieutenant Hatfield, ascribed their imagined sense of immunity from death to luck. Frederick Downs attributed his to wishful thinking: "A small part of our mind tried to retain its sanity by reminding itself over and over that it would never happen to us. It can happen to anyone else, but it would not happen to me."¹⁵ Others ascribed it to skill. Peter G. Bourne, a psychiatrist who studied a Special Forces unit in Vietnam, observed that "their awareness of death was predicated on the belief that it was something that happened to someone else, and from which certain superior capabilities which they possessed kept them immune."¹⁶

Rottman's lieutenant, however, seems to have owed his to the "chickenshit" kind of misleadership that got the men around him killed. And while troops regarded that as the most egregious and deadly sort of officer, neither did they appreciate their his pettiness:

Lieutenant Hatfield figured that he was a survivor.
But once, he ordered a trooper from Alabama
to take down the Confederate flag flying over his bunker.
A few weeks later, he wrote up an Article 15
on a soldier he found sleeping on guard duty.¹⁷

Overly gung-ho officers who also placed troops unnecessarily in harm's way or who insisted that missions always took precedence over individual or group survival risked serious, sometimes fatal reprisals:

Lieutenant Hatfield figured that he was a survivor.
But he didn't survive
the high-explosive fragmentation grenade

¹⁵ Downs, *The Killing Zone*, 74.

¹⁶ Peter G. Bourne, *Men, Stress, & Vietnam* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1970), 121.

¹⁷ Rottmann, "Lieutenant Hatfield," in *Voices*, 27.

rolled under his cot late one night
by his own men.
“He was a survivor, a brave soldier,”
wrote the colonel to Lieutenant Hatfield’s parents,
“and he died in a manner you and the nation can be extremely proud of!”¹⁸

Rottman’s satirizing of the commander’s disingenuous missive notwithstanding (a common practice in accordance with Pentagon directive when notifying families of soldiers’ deaths), fraggings increased sharply from 1969 on, usually among enlisted ranks in response to officers or NCOs who, as the troops saw it, endangered them by ordering futile missions into enemy territory in an increasingly senseless war.¹⁹ Said one Marine squad leader of a still-unsolved, anonymous fragging in his outfit, “It was me and my men or him. We didn’t go up no shit hill and next week we had a new lieutenant.”²⁰

Far more commonly, however, soldier-poets report atrocity and abuse against the Vietnamese. Interestingly, some of the stories of abuse that enjoyed the most energetic life in the rumor mills of Vietnam’s battlefields and firebases swelled to urban legend proportions. Most deny such atrocities never happened, while others swear it happened all the time. One of the most popular tales was the practice of American interrogators conducting business during “Bell Telephone hours,” those interrogation sessions in which VC suspects or captives were administered electric shock to elicit enemy intelligence, which ended with a complementary set of “flying lessons.”²¹ These involved taking two suspects up in a Huey helicopter to dizzying heights and

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Lewy, *America in Vietnam*, 155-6.

²⁰ Sarah A. Haley, “When the Patient Reports Atrocities: Specific Treatment Considerations of the Vietnam Veteran,” *Archives of General Psychiatry* 30:2 (February 1974): 193.

²¹ Burke, *Camp All-American*, 110.

conducting airborne interrogation. The whole elaborate scene was allegedly staged for dramatic effect in the hopes that one or both would come clean. Interrogators told the VC captives that the first of them who gave up valuable information would save his own life. If neither talked, they'd push, kick, or even shoot one out the open Huey door to loosen the other's lips. Richard Mishler, who served with the U.S. Army in Vietnam from 1968 through 1970, detailed the "flying lesson" practice in his poem "Ceremony" with a witness's eye for detail:

The 'copter lays flat the rice stalks
as it first hovers and then rises over the water
with the pilot pulling back on the stick.
The abducted, a fulvous skinned farmer, watches
his hamlet shrink into a tear.

Another Vietnamese aboard, hands bound
behind his back, with the rope looped tight
around his neck, stares with suspicion.

Both wear black, worn shiny, silk pajamas.
The bound one has no shirt over his scarred,
emaciated chest, while the farmer wears a buttonless
US Army jungle shirt, with one sergeant strip hanging
on the left sleeve. It is permanently sweat-stained.

The 'copter flies lazily 2,000 feet above the paddies.
Through an interpreter, the American Lt.
asks the farmer three quick questions.
He replies with the same quickness. He doesn't know.
He is only a farmer, a poor man with half a crop
and half a family. A poor farmer who knows nothing,
nothing. Two more questions are asked of him,
knowing
he is only a farmer and cannot know. And nothing.
One more, with the threat of him being dropped
from the 'copter. Tears of fear and resignation fall.

Without ceremony, he is shoved over the side.
He seems to glide. His scream floats up to the ears

of the bound VC, whose muscles tighten against the ropes.

The water buffalo jumps at the splash, and the sucking mud swallows the crumpled body, buries him in the ground of his ancestors. The sun burns in the sky – incensed.

Even before the questions are asked of the VC, the Lt. knows he will talk. And the VC knows he will not, because he knows the sun also burns for him; his ancestors are also below. Already the cricket's chirp fills his marrow.²²

Whether or not Mishler was on-board the Huey and witnessed the “flying lessons,” the sheer number of troops reporting the practice to Army superiors warranted investigation, since even urban legends rarely arise in a complete factual and circumstantial vacuum. Moreover, only Mishler's account ever offered this level of detail, and it does somewhat corroborate the only officially confirmed case. Pentagon records detail at least one incident in which troops staged an execution for purposes of extorting intelligence from a VC suspect. An investigation by the Army Criminal Investigation Division found that two soldiers had enacted and photographed themselves interrogating an NVA soldier, but that the body they pushed out of the airborne helicopter to frighten their VC suspect was in fact the corpse of a dead NVA soldier. By the time the investigation concluded, however, the two soldiers in question had since been discharged and thus were beyond Army disciplinary jurisdiction.²³

By far the vast majority of American troops who fought in Vietnam typically conducted themselves more honorably than Mishler's “flight instructors.” Many admit,

²² Richard M. Mishler, “Ceremony,” in *Carrying the Darkness*, 199-200.

²³ U.S. Department of the Army, Office of the Judge Advocate General, International Affairs Division, atrocity allegation files.

however, to some instance or instances in which they behaved with a level of brutality and debasement far beneath the level of human dignity in their upbringing yet so common to wartime. Some admit attacking villagers, including children, with disturbing regularity. While usually not fatal like above accounts, they were nonetheless cruel and inhumane. When such training and directives combined with the stresses of combat, the grief and rage of losing comrades, and the frustrations fostered by an elusive or invisible enemy often hiding in plain sight, troops' baser natures emerged and even thrived. It proved the recipe for a perfect storm, and as a result, atrocities seared deeply and profoundly into soldier-poets' memories. Those events' graphic realities survived time's ravages intact, largely because they refused to loosen their hold on the soldiers' hearts and minds.

As any number of the poems above have demonstrated, the soldier-poets of the Vietnam War proved immensely gifted at documenting the people, places, and events around them in-country. They proved even more adept at preserving both their shared and individual attitudes, beliefs, concerns, and sentiments that developed, deepened, worsened, or intensified over the course of their tours. One of the more common motifs in the poetry of the Vietnam War was its rich cultural commentary. These observant men paid attention. A boon to later historians, they noted events and circumstances and the actors inhabiting them, chronicling scenes and vignettes containing scenarios sometimes peculiar, sometimes routine, but what's important is that they noticed. Among the more illuminating aspects of the war that they keyed in on was its many ironies, some painful, some almost humorous, others bewildering, still others

maddening, but to be sure, Vietnam suffered no shortage of irony. Larry Rottman, an acutely observant commentator the culture of war, depicted in a single sentence of a potent few lines one of the more ridiculous and ironic scenes of his tour:

The chaplain of the 25th Aviation Battalion
at Cu Chi
Prays for the souls of the enemy
On Sunday mornings
And earns flight pay as a helicopter door gunner
during the rest of the week.²⁴

Rottman captures not just the irony, but the absurdity, even the sickening hypocrisy of a man ignoring his noncombatant status and violating his sacred oaths of nonviolence for the sake a little extra combat pay mowing down the Vietnamese at a cyclic rate of 4,000 rounds per minute from the muzzle of his six-barreled M134 electric motorized Gatlin machine gun.

Because door gunners were preoccupied with particularly perilous duties, hovering in a massive, often slow-moving, comparatively large and potentially defenseless target like the UH-1 "Huey" helicopter, some contended that their jobs required of them a greater measure of either insane bravery, apathetic indifference, or both. Yet frequently what they displayed far worse. Sergeant Frank A. Cross, Jr., served from 1969 to 1970 as a radioman in the Americal Division. Aboard one chopper gunship he witnessed in a door gunner's appearance and actions a quirky bit of irony that he recorded poetically as "The Fifty-Gunner":

It came to his palms,
And to his thumbs

²⁴ Larry Rottmann, "Man of God," originally appearing in *WHAM*, cited from *Voices from the Ho Chi Minh Trail: Poetry of American and Vietnam, 1965 - 1993*, (Desert Hot Springs, CA: Event Horizon Press, 1993), 17.

Pressed hard
Against the trigger

It came through
His hands,
And up his arms,
And across his shoulders.

Then, the telegraphed recoils
Set bouncing
The peace medallion
Dangling on his chest.

From his muzzle,
The huge bullets
Ripped flesh
From the running targets.²⁵

Philip Caputo recognized such capacities for brutality in himself, those “dark, destructive emotions . . . urges to destroy that seemed to rise from the fear of being destroyed myself. I had enjoyed the killing of the Viet Cong who had run out of the treeline.”²⁶ Dark deeds happened all the time in wartime. The irony in Cross’s scene lay in the imagery of such wanton destruction coming at the hands of one wearing a peace symbol. Indeed, peace symbols were found all over Vietnam all throughout the war, adorning, everything from drab army-green canisters containing 155-millimeter artillery shells to the flak jackets and helmet liners and dog tag chains of the troops, but the revolting irony of the incongruous, barbaric imagery in this airborne scene didn’t escape Frank Cross’s perceptive eye.²⁷

Indeed, the war suffered no shortage of irony, and its seeming omnipresence

²⁵ Frank A. Cross, Jr., “The Fifty Gunner,” in *WHAM*, 24.

²⁶ Caputo, 289.

²⁷ Donald Kirk, “Who Wants To Be the Last American Killed in Vietnam?” *The New York Times Magazine*, September 19, 1971, qtd. in *Reporting Vietnam*, 526.

could infuriate the troops to no end, particularly when it amplified injustice on the part of a commanding officer toward his troops. In another of his single-sentence commentaries, Larry Rottman consigned his commanding general to infamy:

At the 25th Infantry Division base camp at Cu Chi
the commanding general rides around in an air-conditioned Ford
While the wounded and dying GIs make the trip from the
helipad to the hospital
Bouncing round in the back of a truck.²⁸

Sergeant Nat Frankel got right to the point about why this scene would so have inflamed men like Rottman:

What is the difference between an officer for whom we would die and another whom we would just as soon kill? It is, in the long run, the extent to which they share the common lot of the men. Are they distant, protected, scrubbed clean, sterile? . . . Or are they accessible, exposed to the gamut of danger and misfortune, with dirt in their fingernails and an instinctive understanding of and respect for our view of the world?²⁹

Little could upset troops in Vietnam like REMFs living comfortably apart from the plight of their men while the grunts suffered deprivation.³⁰ Rottman's account indicts his commanding general even more forcefully by juxtaposing the general's luxurious comfort with the wounded and dying men's lack and deprivation.

Such sentiments abounded in Vietnam. Marine Bill Ehrhart expressed just as forcefully his disgust in "Fragment: The General's War." Comprised of a grisly montage of images from Ehrhart's tour, it documents the bitterness he felt toward commanders who could somehow separate themselves and their orders from the human toll their orders exacted:

²⁸ Rottman, "Priorities," in *WHAM*, 25.

²⁹ Kindsvatter, *American Soldiers*, 238.

³⁰ REMF – military slang acronym for "Rear-Echelon Mother Fucker."

Paper orders passed down and executed;
Straggling back in plum-colored rags,
One-legged, in slings, on stretchers,
In green plastic bags,
With stubbled faces
And gaunt eyes hung in sockets;
Returned to paper
For some general to read about
And pin a medal to.³¹

By personalizing and personifying commanders' orders, Ehrhart forces audiences to consider the obscene human cost war incurs. As a historical source, the poem preserves a grunt's wartime images and sentiments while simultaneously animating his disdain. It succeeds pedagogically, too, teaching one of the Vietnam War's many unpalatable ironies as no set of statistics ever could. The ragamuffin characters, haggard images, and solemn circumstances that Ehrhart highlights hardly seem worth commemorating with the self-absorbed pomp and ritual of generals' medal ceremonies.

Along with ironies that disgusted or angered, soldier-poets recorded ironies that saddened immeasurably. Vietnam constituted America's very first truly *culturally* modern war, in the sense that the U.S. accomplished more wholesale importation of American culture than previous generations of troops would likely have dreamed possible. Opportunities for recreation often materialized right into the men's midst overnight. The general's air-conditioned Ford above illustrates just one of the many ways the U.S. military imported stateside culture to war along with its men and materiel. Many bases boasted swimming pool, exercise facilities, sporting arenas, even night clubs and movie theaters. Yet along with these imported cultural venues came

³¹ Ehrhart, "Fragment: The Generals' War," in *WHAM*, 25.

the potential for the Vietnam War's destruction to illustrate its tragic sense of poor timing. Larry Rottman put one such incident to words almost hemorrhaging their bitter irony:

A Sunday afternoon
pickup game,
just ten guys
taking a break from the war.

Nobody seemed to mind
the crooked, homemade net,
the thick dust,
or the heat.

Overtime! A tie game,
and in the excitement
of trying for another point,
killing was forgotten.

But before we could
finish the game,
a lone mortar round
wiped out half the players.

The final score
for the day:
The VC—5.
The U.S.—0.³²

Importing American cultural pastimes made sense, especially for the purposes of maintaining troop morale. It was clearly within American logistical capability to do so. Yet when such tragedies occurred in a setting as seemingly incongruous as that of recreational activities in the middle of a war zone, it only amplified their tragically ironic nature.

Doug Anderson relates with equal ironic aplomb how another completely

³² Larry Rottmann, "A Sunday Afternoon Pickup Game," in *Voices*, 29.

random and unexpected attack in an imported recreational setting changed one short-timer's life forever:

Twelve hours before his plane was to lift off for home
he was sitting in the EM club
slugging down Filipino beer.
A sniper round rang through the tin roof,
knocked him off his stool, a near complete flip
before he hit the floor.
Next thing I knew we were lugging him
through the sand toward the sick bay;
him bucking and screaming,
me trying to shield the spurting head,
the sniper bearing down on us,
the others scattering to the perimeter to return fire.
Inside we saw how bad it was.
I syringed the long gash in the parietal with sterile water,
the doctor with a flashlight looking close,
the man saying, *Oh God*, and already the slur,
the drool. He would live. Go home.
Sit the rest of his life in front of a television set.
Back in the EM club they had wiped up the blood
and we could see the stars
through the thirty caliber holes in the roof.
What was in the 20 cc's of brain he lost?
These are the things that can occupy a drunk about to black out.
Somewhere a family, a girlfriend, prepared for his return.
Somewhere a telegram raced toward them into Pacific Time
and the dark that rose like water in his room.³³

Events and circumstances like these proved tragically all too common. Casualty records from the war show that an astonishing 1,448 soldiers died on their very last day of service in Vietnam, and presumably, many more men than that were wounded.³⁴

The fact that this one happened in one of the Vietnam War's various and sundry American cultural venues only amplified how its death and destruction were no

³³ Doug Anderson, "Short Timer," originally published in *Bamboo Bridge*, (Amherst, MA: Amherst Writers & Artists Press, 1991), cited from Doug Anderson, *The Moon Reflected Fire*, (Cambridge, MA: Alice James Books, 1994), 21.

³⁴ Longley, *Grunts*, 112.

respecters of persons – or their short-timer status.

One of the more disheartening realities that occasionally dawned on the troops in-country was how detached or misinformed people back home who had never served in wartime seemed. Robert Rock, who served as a platoon leader and executive officer in the 101st Airborne Division, wrote in a letter home,

Too many people [stateside] are apathetic to the situation over here. Take for instance Dodgeville or any other hometown USA for the fighting troops over here. I'd be thrilled to death if once I could read in the Chronicle that Dodgeville took a stand on the war.... It wouldn't made a difference which stand – but be heard.... To the majority over here maybe it doesn't make that much difference, but to the "line doggies," the infantryman, it matters.... If they're dying in vain then do your best put an end to the war. If the cause is justified then let him know he's fighting for something worth dying for.³⁵

Consequently, despite how terribly they all longed to return home, troops often grew to feel more and more separation from their life and relationships "back in the world" and more and more an entity unto themselves, products of the war inextricably bonded to the men who fought and died beside themselves. Dave Connolly, who served with the 11th Armored Cavalry Regiment, mostly patrolling roads and their vicinity, captured the sense of this immense gulf of separation and his loved ones' out-of-touch-ness:

She wrote that the jungle looked just lovely,
was it as pretty as in the pictures?
And my friends had such funny nicknames.
And why were we all so thin and plae,
isn't Vietnam hot and sunny?
She hoped I was eating right
and taking care of my teeth.
And did we have to have so many guns?
Someone might get hurt.
My cousin got into the Marine Reserves
and his training was *very, very hard*.

³⁵ Robert Rock, in *Voices from Vietnam*, Michael Stevens, ed., 118-119.

And all her friends were asking her
why no one smiled in the pictures I sent?³⁶

Even more discouraging than Connolly's wholly detached and unaware mother was the mother in another Larry Rottman account who repeatedly pleads for her son to be more forthcoming, particularly when all he writes about are the weather and monkeys. Still, Rottman conveys troops' suspicions that were they to be as forthcoming as moms thought they should be, ultimately moms would not be able to reckon with the truth of what their sons had become or who they had become:

A young man once went off to war in a far country,
and when he had time, he wrote home and said,
"Dear Mom, sure rains a lot here."

But his mother – reading between the lines as mothers
always do – wrote back,
"We're quite concerned. Tell us what it's really like."

And the young man responded,
"Wow! You ought to see the funny monkeys."

To which the mother replied,
"Don't hold back. How is it there?"

And the young man wrote,
"The sunsets here are spectacular!"

In her next letter, the mother pleaded,
"Son, we want you to tell us everything. Everything!"

So the next time he wrote, the young man said,
"Today I killed a man. Yesterday, I helped drop napalm
on women and children."

And the father wrote right back,
"Please don't write such depressing letters. You're
upsetting your mother."

³⁶ Dave Connolly, "Letters From My Mom," in *Lost in America*, 22.

So, after a while,
the young man wrote,
“Dear Mom, sure rains here a lot.”³⁷

Rottman clearly indicts the apparent “fair-weather” interest of even those closest to the war’s combatants. To him, it was painfully apparent that the geographically removed stateside public in reality wanted to remain conceptually removed as well, ultimately unwilling to understand what really happened “over there.” When combined with all the horrors they faced in-country, what resulted was an increasing sense of sense of lonely isolation and disillusionment with a war from which they doubted they would ever return whole.

Almost without exception, soldiers who fought on the ground in Vietnam are haunted by events that they’d rather forget but know they never will. Sometimes troops regretted things they’d witnessed, at other times, things they’d done. Not surprisingly then, one of the most common elements to emerge repeatedly in all of Vietnam War literature is a sense of torment, conflict, or guilt. Those who embraced the process of confession, reluctantly or otherwise, left behind records not only of the events that haunt them but record of their own states of heart and mind concerning those events. For example, Vietnam War literature regularly cites troops lamenting the loss of their own, but occasionally, accounts also articulate the “survivor’s guilt” they felt over not being able to save comrades. Sometimes, they even expressed shame for behavior which few would likely fault them. Dave Connolly wrote about the shame he and his troopers felt for heeding their own survival imperatives under fire:

³⁷ Larry Rottmann, “APO 96225,” in *Voices from the Ho Chi Minh Trail*, 11.

Undercover of the darkness we all crept back,
the twelve of us, full of shame,
for having left him alone in the place
to die.
There had been too many of them
and too few of us, to have done ought else.
His death, all of our deaths,
we had all understood,
were always part of the mission.
His wounds were many.
His limbs had been cruelly pierced by the steel.
His side was slashed to a hand's breadth.
The wounds across his brow
filled us all with fear.³⁸

Yet Connolly continues, admitting that the shame also compelled him and his men to atone for their earlier instincts and to return to recover his remains, even though they understood that the true essence of the man who had been their beloved lieutenant was no longer there.

But he was one of us, our leader,
but also our Brother, our friend.
We had to take the chance
to recover his shell.
What he really was, had long since fled.

He was tagged and bagged and sent back
on the chopper, to his father.³⁹

Such troop confessions concerning other troops are rare by comparison. By far the lion's share of Vietnam War poetry treating the topic of shame, guilt, and conflict over human death deals with soldiers' feelings about the death they dealt other human beings, those people the American government had taught them to consider their enemy. Despite the tens of millions of U.S. tax dollars the Pentagon spent trying to

³⁸ David Connolly, "The LT," in *Lost in America*, 19.

³⁹ *Ibid.*

vilify or demonize the Viet Cong and North Vietnamese people, to many troops, aside from ethnicity the Vietnamese seemed scarcely different from themselves, either personally or historically. Both sides fielded tired, battered scared, hungry men who missed their families and wanted to go home and to be left alone to determine their own personal and national course. Consequently, troops recognized and respected the humanity of these alleged “enemies.” Such humanization – and the conflict surrounding it – surfaces in the records soldiers left behind, like Connolly’s eulogy to “Corporal Thach: First Confirmed NVA Kill”:

I see you still;
your shining, black hair,
your high cheekbones
and bared teeth,
your glowing, searching eyes,
testing each step
as if it were your last.

You flinched
as the angry hornets
I let fly
snapped you up
then let you drip,
a jumble of arms and legs
and black and white scarf.

Your last reflex
killed the man next to me
but it’s your death
I remember.

There’s no pride, no regret,
no way I’ll forget your death until mine.⁴⁰

Connolly admits he doesn’t regret killing the man who killed his friend, but when in

⁴⁰ David Connolly, “Corporal Thach: First Confirmed NVA Kill,” in *Lost in America*, 12.

the same breath he acknowledges he takes no pride in it either, his recognition of the man's humanity is unmistakable. Marine Bill Ehrhart wrestled with similar cognitive dissonance. While one of only two poems wrought from his imagination and no actual historical event, the thoughts that "Full Moon" communicates jive completely with those ambivalence he felt as he went about his orders to search and destroy Vietnamese people:

We were on patrol last night;
And as we moved along,
We came upon one of the enemy.

Strange, in the bright moon
He did not seem an enemy at all.
He had arms and legs, a head. . .

. . . and a rifle.
I shot him.⁴¹

Ehrhart admits that unlike almost all the other events chronicled in his poetry concerning the Vietnam War, the shooting of a Vietnamese soldier described in this event never physically happened. He does maintain, however, that a conflicted questioning of America's mission in Southeast Asia and the degree to which he should be seeing anyone anywhere as his enemy had begun periodically to creep into his mind very soon after his arrival in Vietnam. Even more telling, Ehrhart confesses to engaging in willful and deliberate – even necessary – denial about those doubts and questions. He states plainly that "Full Moon" and other poems articulated as best he could his growing suspicions, sobering realizations, and worsening ambivalence concerning the war that he had begun to confront in himself:

⁴¹W.D. Ehrhart, "Full Moon," in *WHAM*, 14.

I remember sending a tape to my then girlfriend in the spring of 1967 in which I went on at some length about how we were winning the war, however slowly and painfully progress was being made. What the fuck did I know about who was winning the war? In fact, I had already begun to realize that, as far as I and my battalion were concerned, we were getting nowhere fast. But how on earth could I admit that to myself? I'm 18 years old. I've got another ten or eleven months to serve before I can go home. And I'm supposed to admit to myself that I've made the biggest mistake of my life and might well die for it? That my country is at best terribly wrongheaded, at worst playing me for a sucker? So at first I kept trying to tell myself that we were the good guys, and when that would no longer wash, I just stopped telling myself anything but "March 5th, 1968" (my rotation date).⁴²

In short, Ehrhart and other infantry *had* to disengage their unsettling internal tensions over killing people and focus instead on much more innocuous and routine tasks.

Otherwise, they'd lose their minds, their military effectiveness, maybe even their lives.

Sergeant Frank A. Cross, Jr., a radioman with the Americal Division from 1969 to 1970, penned a poem following one exceptionally uncomfortable mission to investigate a Vietnamese village suspected of aiding and harboring Viet Cong insurgents who had ambushed his unit. It paints an unambiguous picture of not only the tension troops felt each time they entered a potentially hostile village but also of the obvious shame he felt about what he and his fellow troops had done to the people, their homes, and their lives:

The word was passed back
Through the file—"Dinks ahead."
Some in our file pulled a cordon
Around the two mud hootches,
While others broke off
And moved closer,
Stalking, wondering, watching
--left, right, forward, behind.

⁴² Ehrhart, email message to author, 16 July 2012.

The mud walls
Were blackened from napalm,
But the families had lived.
They stood before us,
Frightened, bewildered, hateful,
An old man, two women,
One young woman, five small children.

Big John demanded, "Can Cuoc!"
The old man reached in
The pocket of his black shirt
And pushed the ID card toward us.
I watched the youngest, a little girl,
Clutch the old man's leg
And her eyes grow big
When he pleaded for his card.

Big John looked at the card
And fingered the safety on his 16.
"Where's your son old man?
VC on the hill?"
I bent forward
To ease the pressure
Of rucksack straps from my shoulders,
And looked from
The frightened eyes of the old man,
To the hate-filled eyes of the young woman,
To the hard,
Smooth swept ground
In front of the hootches,
To the small pot of dried corn.⁴³

Cross didn't perpetrate the brusque interrogation. Yet his ignominious guilt-by-association is apparent even as only an ancillary party in the village sweep and subsequent tense dealings. At that awkward moment in that Vietnamese village, Cross clearly no longer wanted to associate himself with the interrogation scene playing out before his eyes – if indeed he ever did. Unable to maintain eye contact, he had to avert

⁴³ Frank A. Cross, "After the Ambush," in *WHAM*, 82.

his gaze to any object other than those who his unit frightened and threatened in that moment, and his shame is unmistakable.

Frank Cross was not the first, nor would he be the last American trooper to feel conflicted about his commander's objectives on any given day of the war, about his unit's mission in his particular area of operation, let alone America's mission in Southeast Asia, though guilt and conflicted feelings seem clearly to have dominated much of his wartime introspection. After one particularly convicting occasion in which he happened upon a decomposing body of his enemy while out on a jungle operation, Cross put to paper his observations, heavy with simile and metaphor, as well as his misgivings and suspicions:

I watched the convoy of ants,
As those coming
Crashed into those going.
It was you –
You were the terminal
For the ant convoy.
They entered you,
And left,
Each with a small bit of you.

You were lying there,
Under the sun,
Under the hill,
Under my eyes. . .
While the sun lit the jungle
Mountains and the new
Green leaves beside you,
With a warm, clear life.

There was a mangled hole,
Where the right side of
Your jaw had been.
And through the smashed
Bone and teeth,

Your life had drained out.
Now, the ants
Were carrying you away. . .

I stand here now,
With the sun,
With the hill,
With the new green leaves,
And with my life.
If we had not been here,
Would you still
See the sun,
The water,
The leaves?⁴⁴

“Thoughts of an Infantryman Observing the Body of an NVA Soldier” indicts all Americans in-country – and by implication, American policymakers – with its use of the first-person plural. The poem illustrates the same widespread sentiments toward the war that other sources document in which combatants felt they had “wasted their time” and felt “guilty for having taken human life in an unworthy cause.”⁴⁵

Some of the poems that relate historical events detailing the horrors of war and its human toll say nothing, either expressed or implied, about America’s mission in Vietnam. They simply depict terrible scenes, circumstances, and episodes that transpired during the authors’ tours. Doug Anderson documented one particularly heart-rending incident in which two Vietnamese parents confronted him seeking some unspoken something or other concerning the death of their son. In recording the scene, Anderson humanizes the issue of war’s so-called “collateral damage,” itself a term that reflects one of the Pentagon’s more nefarious and dehumanizing efforts toward

⁴⁴ Frank A Cross, Jr. “Thoughts of an Infantryman Observing the Body of an NVA Soldier,” in *WHAM*, 96.

⁴⁵ Lewy, *America in Vietnam*, 319.

euphemizing and sanitizing the truth out of wartime realities:

The man and woman, Vietnamese,
come up the hill,
carry something slung between them on a bamboo mat,
unroll it at my feet:
the child, iron gray, long dead,
flies have made him home.
His wounds are from artillery shrapnel.
The man and the woman look as if they are cast
from the same iron as their dead son,
so rooted are they in the mud.
There is nothing to say,
nothing in my medical bag, nothing in my mind.
A monsoon cloud hangs above,
its belly torn open on a mountain.⁴⁶

Anderson, like Cross, could find no words and had to avert his eyes to something besides the fly-covered corpse of the child and the parents who laid it both literally and figuratively at Anderson's feet. And he wasn't alone in his shame or unspeakable grief. Incidents like this one pepper the historical record of the Vietnam War. On one particular occasion, a special ops unit entered a hamlet at the moment when a Vietnamese man emerged from a small thatched hut holding an AK-47. The members of Tiger Force instinctively fired on him, "riddling the flimsy structure with M-16 bullets." Their platoon commander, Lieutenant Donald Wood, entered the hooch quickly, expecting further enemy threat, but finding instead only the dead man lying beside a woman and a baby who his and his comrade's gunfire barrage had torn to shreds. The lieutenant "retreated into silence," inconsolable and "unable to forget the dead child and asking how he would ever be able to talk about it." As the men

⁴⁶ Doug Anderson, "Xin Loi," originally published in *Bamboo Bridge*, (Amherst, MA: Amherst Writers & Artists Press, 1991), cited from Anderson, *The Moon Reflected Fire*, 10. For more on the events this poem documents, see Anderson, *Keep Your Head Down*, 119.

adjourned to read mail and forget the day's incidents, Wood "could not escape the scene" and its grisly images.⁴⁷

Woods story, Anderson's poem, and similar accounts testify to how such tragic incidents continued to haunt the troops who encountered or even inadvertently perpetrated them, and troops often struggled with how to reconcile the imperatives of their mission with the unmistakable humanity of their opponents. In one particularly brief but potent poem, Larry Rottman illustrates the difficulties of such a common conundrum:

What do you say
to an 11-year-old Vietnamese guerilla
who asks,
"What did I ever do to you?"⁴⁸

Like Rottman, David Connolly seems to have wrestled the most strenuously with his encounters with Vietnamese children. Here, in another short poem, he relates the circumstances of the most painful wound of all those he sustained in the war:

Having slapped a machete,
then a rock, from his hand,
I pushed the young boy
at gunpoint
toward the other villagers,
away from the still form
of his father.

Words were the only weapons
he had left.
"Someday, GI, mebbe *you* die!"

The B-40 shrapnel,
that weeks later
tore into me,

⁴⁷ Longley, *Grunts*, 82.

⁴⁸ Larry Rottmann, "Interrogation," in *Voices*, 31.

hit no harder.⁴⁹

One of the most heartrendingly haunting accounts of the war's toll on Vietnamese children – as well as its emotional repercussions for the troops – survives from the pen of Bryan Alec Floyd, a USMC chaplain's assistant from 1966-1968. Although he never experienced combat, Floyd was nonetheless uniquely situated in his professional capacity to provide to today's readers, researchers, and educators a deeply personal insight and perspective on how the Vietnam War affected troops emotionally at the time. During Floyd's tenure as an assistant, no chaplain was assigned to his base, and so Marines with spiritual needs or emotional wounds ended up turning to him for solace and to confide in him their particular war traumas.⁵⁰ Among all the various confessions he heard, Chaplain's Assistant Floyd regularly heard Marines lament the effects of US air power and the horrors and agony of its "indiscriminate violence, particularly that visited on children." His collection, *The Long War Dead: An Epiphany 1st Platoon, USMC*, contains poems titled after Marines whose names he changed so he could tell their stories without violating their confidences or the sanctity of the confessional. Poems like "Sergeant Brandon Just, USMC" are his men's stories translated and transcribed into poetry:⁵¹

He was alive with death:
Her name was Sung
and she was six years old.
By slightest mistake of degrees
on an artillery azimuth,
he had called for rockets and napalm.
Their wild wizardry of firepower

⁴⁹ David Connolly, "In His Father's Footsteps," in *Lost in America*, 48.

⁵⁰ Subarno Chattarji, *Memories of a Lost War: American Poetic Responses to the Vietnam War*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 123.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*

expired her mistake of a village,
killing everyone except her,
and napalm made her look
like she was dead among the dead,
she alone alive among their upturned corpses
burning toward the sky.
He and the platoon
got to them too late,
removing only her
to a hospital inside his base, Da Nang.
In the months that followed,
when he could make it back from the boonies,
he always went to visit Sung.
Finally he was ordered to a desk job at the base.
He visited her every day,
though he accused himself of being alive
and would stand in a slump,
breathing his despair,
before entering the children's ward.
But he would enter.
Sung, knowing it was him,
would turn toward the sound of his feet,
her own, seared beyond being feet,
crisply trying to stand on shadows,
cool but unseen.
Sung would hobble up to him
in her therapeutic cart,
smiling even when she did not smile, lipless,
her chin melted to her chest
that would never become breasts.
He would stand
and wait for her touch upon his hand
with her burn-splayed fingers
that came to lay a fire upon his flesh.
Sung was alive
and would live on despite life,
but even now her skull
seemed to be working its way through
the thin, fragile, solids of wasted, waxen skin.
Her head was as bald as a bomb
whose paint had peeled.
She had no nose
and her ears were gone.
Her eyes had been removed,

and because they were not there,
they were there
invisibly looking him through.
Sung was child-happy
that he came and cared,
and when he would start to leave,
she would agonize her words
out of the hollow that was her mouth.
Her tongue, bitten in two while she had burned,
strafing his ears,
saying, without mercy,
I love you.⁵²

Sergeant Just merely constitutes the persona or avatar for that sympathetic Marine who sought Floyd out, tortured first “by his act of calling for air support,” and tortured and pierced foremost by the unconditional love and grace that the innocent and napalm-scarred child extended him despite his role in her disfigurement.⁵³ And though Floyd speaks with deliberate pseudonymity, “Sergeant Brandon Just, USMC” testifies to the bitter toll the Vietnam War exacted on children and Marines alike.

Whereas Bryan Alec Floyd ministered to Marines’ emotional and spiritual wounds, Basil Paquet in his role as a medic treated their physical wounds, witnessing what seemed to him the Vietnam War’s incessant physical cruelty and unrelenting violence on soldier and civilian alike. In some recent correspondence, Paquet shared the actual historical backdrop and contexts for one of the reasons he wrote:

The village of Honai was directly north of Long Binh and directly east of Bien Hoa off route 1A. It was also known as “Widows Village” and was one of the key battle scenes that involved fierce fighting regarding Tet attacks by NVA and VC forces on Long Binh and Bien Hoa. Casualty estimates ran as high as 900 dead NVA and VC soldiers for the week running from the initial attack on Long Binh on January 30th through the first week in February that involved “mop up”

⁵² Bryan Alec Floyd, “Sergeant Brandon Just, U.S.M.C.,” in *Carrying the Darkness: The Poetry of the Vietnam War*, W.D. Ehrhart, ed., (Lubbock: Texas Tech University Press, 1985), 109-110.

⁵³ Chattarji, *Memories of a Lost War*, 123.

actions. One of the many casualties I treated from this battle was a young girl who had her small, thin arm partially amputated what appeared to have been an M-16 round. She bled out and died before we could save her.⁵⁴

In a work he wrote seemingly to both memorialize this girl and apologize for his complicity in her death, Paquet challenges head-on the presumptions of another Dylan Thomas poem, "A Refusal to Mourn the Death, By Fire, of a Child In London." Where Thomas refused to mourn, Paquet offers elegy; where Thomas paraded arguably righteous indignation, Paquet "caves," admitting American guilt as well as his own culpability, and indicting the war's senselessness, all within a narrative wrought from his own personal experience with tragic, premature death:⁵⁵

Always the children are included
In these battles for the body politic.
Prefaced with mortars and rockets
The Year of the Monkey was precluded
By the mephitic
Stench of blasted bodies sullenly drifting from the pocket

Of refugee hootches at Honai.
The enemy patriots knew the young
Would be glad to die for the revolution.
The allies were certain the vox populi
Called a mandate for flag-strung
Counter attack and awful retribution.

The majesty of the annihilation of the city
Could be heard clearly in the background,
I could only wonder what ideology
The child carried in her left arm – necessity
Must have dictated an M-16 round
Should cut if off, and her gaining the roll of martyrology.

Her dying in my arms, this daughter
Weaned on war, was for the greater
Glory of all concerned.

⁵⁴ Paquet, email message to author, 25 August 2012.

⁵⁵ Matthew B. Hill, *America, Vietnam, and the Poetics of Guilt*, 150-51.

There was no time to mourn your slaughter
Small, denuded, one-armed thing, I too was violator,
And after the first death, the many must go unmourned.⁵⁶

In addition to perfectly preserving the emotional state of an exhausted and embattled medic reeling from Tet's onslaught of casualties, Paquet argues that poetic rhetorical devices such as the scathing sarcasm of the last two stanzas capture "a 'higher truth' that a historical narrative simply could not distill for its audience" – his own personal rage, disgust, and feelings of culpability in the a young girl's senseless death by hemorrhage. For Paquet, straight narrative could not serve his needs to communicate all his emotion surrounding the event. He required "artistic processes to transform actual historical incidents, facts, and experiences" into works that spoke "elemental 'truths' about the war and its agents and victims."⁵⁷

After all the human loss, the unrelenting fear, the atrocity and abuse, the bitter ironies, and the haunting sense of misgivings, guilt, and shame that so many who fought in Vietnam endured within what seemed the interminable span of a one-year tour, it's not surprising that soldier-poets' verse would evolve into expressions of disillusionment or dissent. Sometimes they expressed a profound sadness at the monstrous insensitivity Americans could exhibit toward Vietnamese cultural treasures:

The old Cham temple of Thap Ba,
the locals say it's a thousand years
old,
older than this stilted Anglo-
Saxon language I use

Older they say than the use
of bullets, ballots, and the printing

⁵⁶ Paquet, "Mourning the Death, By Hemorrhage, of a Child from Honai," in *WHAM*, 77.

⁵⁷ Paquet, email message to author, 25 August 2012.

press
older than the airplane and the bomb
older than napalm

was hit yesterday by a twenty-year-old
helicopter pilot
fresh from the states
Who found it more ecstatic than
the firing range
for testing his guns⁵⁸

Others, like flight medic Sergeant Jack McLain who flew with the 37th Tactical Fighter Wing from 1969 to 1970, expressed his disillusionment after seeing the effects of an aerial bombing mission on a Vietnamese village. It struck him how quickly and coldly their leaders' target objectives could annihilate homes, families, and memories:

A crater, just a hole
where people lived
and all at once died

a home for some
a target for others

a blood stained doll, soiled by a child's hands,
the doll won't remember
the child is no longer able

All this in an instant of history
one flash of fire.⁵⁹

While less about one specific village and more speaking in blanket generalities, Chaplain's Assistant Bryan Alec Floyd put to verse one confessor's disillusioned, even nihilistic rant. In it, one can detect echoes of McLain's decimation theme, within which the narrator only slightly camouflages critiques of everything from U.S. foreign policy,

⁵⁸ Jan Barry, "Thap Ba," in *The Vietnam War: In American Stories, Songs, and Poems*, ed. H. Bruce Franklin. (Boston: Bedford Books, 1996), 238-9.

⁵⁹ Jack McLain, "Phu Cat, 3 Dec 69," in *WHAM*, 89.

prosecution of the war, to the meaninglessness of virtually everything the troops did and for which they and the Vietnamese had fought and died:

This is what the war ended up being about:
we would find a V.C. village,
and if we could not capture it
or clear it of Cong,
we called for jets.
The jets would come in, low and terrible,
sweeping down, and screaming,
in their first pass over the village.
Then they would return, dropping their first bombs
that flattened the huts to rubble and debris.
And then the jets would sweep back again
and drop more bombs
that blew the rubble and debris
to dust and ashes.
And then the jets would come back once again,
in a last pass, this time to drop napalm
that burned the dust and ashes to just nothing.
Then the village
that was not a village any more
was our village.⁶⁰

Some soldier-poets had begun consciously to suspect their disillusionment soon after arriving in-country and having to face up to the fact that war was anything like the romantic and exciting epic adventures American cinema and popular culture and American political mythology had long imagined and manufactured:

With the fervency of youth
and the pumping vigor of early manhood
we pledged allegiance,
and never questioned if it was due.

In classes, on teams,
in gangs, in platoons,
we were taught what we'd need to know
if ever honored to defend you.

⁶⁰ Bryan Alec Floyd, "Corporal Charles Chungtu, U.S.M.C.," in *Carrying the Darkness*, 110-11.

We left to battle a people
of stone, earth, water, and war,
who were far, far too hardened
to ever yield.

The first of the war I saw
was an officer in a jeep,
shooting gleefully
at a farmer in his field.⁶¹

The truth about why their fathers and grandfathers had always refused to talk about their own war experiences had begun to reveal itself. Like Ehrhart, however, they denied it at first. They had to, if they hoped to survive with their sanity intact. For others, disillusionment came more slowly, as horror after disappointment after deprivation after atrocity after loss had finally piled deep enough atop their consciousness to force its admission. What resulted, however, are some of the most graphic glimpses into, not just events of the war, but again, the emotions of its chroniclers, almost violent in some cases, crushed and overwrought in others. In some cases they demonize specific villains, as in Larry Fries's sarcastic indictment below of the America's military-industrial complex. His disgust with his own country's use of the defoliant Agent Orange to advance the blight of its cancerous consumerist culture is obvious:

Chemicals . . . Chemicals . . . Chemicals.

We've cleared the land. . .
It's safe now. . .
A mile on either side. . .
Safe is nothing growing. . .
Life . . . safe . . . for . . . mankind. . . .

⁶¹ David Connolly, "All The Stars Do Not Spangle," in *Lost in America*, 9.

Safe from agrarian communes.
Safe from peasant ways.
Safe for bourgeois highways.
One more step toward peace.
Peace is consumers . . . consuming.
It plots nicely on a graph.
Peace is tons of napalm falling,
A gamble where it lands.
These peace feelers from Washington
Are not opened hands.

Peasants in Viet Nam at night
Don't think about politics.
They fear Assyrian warlords, sowing salt
In their land.
The land that fed and sheltered them
Long before our time.
When we leave in shame and humility
Will they be our brothers?

Is humanity working together, to feed and clothe
Us all.
Or flying United Airlines, to a war-torn
Free fire zone.⁶²

Much like his fellow soldier-poets, Dave Connolly rarely feared making plain his feelings. After pondering his plight and voicing his fears, he adjusts his bearing from one of uncertainty and lamentation to one of strident alienation and condemnation. Few poems very likely express their author's rage as clearly as Connolly's "Thoughts on a Monsoon Morning":

Cold, despite my blanket.
Lonely amongst my friends.
Wondering, with the things I've done,
can I ever make amends?

Sickened by this needless waste.
Stoic to those around.

⁶² Larry Fries, "From Viet Nam 68 - 69," in *WHAM*, 66.

Wondering, what will break me:
the next fight, or death, or sound?

Missing those who love me.
Hoping for the next month or so.
Wondering, how will I ever fit in
with people who just don't know?

Terrified by the death grins.
Afraid I'll be one of the dead.
Wondering, why did I ever think
it wouldn't be as bad as they said?

Used by the rich of my country.
Duped by those I looked up to.
Wondering, how can I tell those
who blindly wave the red, white, and blue?

I hate every fucking one of you
who make dollars from our deaths.
I hate every fucking one of you
for my friends' dying breaths.

I hate every fucking one of you
banker or corporation head.
I hate every fucking one of you
for so many, so young and dead.

I hate every fucking one of you
with your pin-striped, dark blue suits.
I hate every fucking one of you
for all those empty boots.⁶³

Although he employs it sparingly, Connolly's gift for satire and sarcasm occasionally shine forth, particularly when he voices his disillusionment with the war along with his disparagement of its consequences for human relationships. Here, he waxes allegorical, explaining what apparently happened to the contents of all those empty boots; they had become the most horrific Christmas presents any next-of-kin

⁶³ David Connolly, "Thoughts on a Monsoon Morning," in *Lost in America*, 14-5.

could ever receive:

Christmas presents,
just in time for the holidays,
neatly wrapped and stacked,
a nightmare surprise
for some lucky Mom and Dad
from the place
where there are no
silent nights.⁶⁴

Christmas in Vietnam always proved an exceptionally difficult time emotionally for American troops, and apparently it proved doubly so for Connolly, both in the emotional sense and in a literal one. Below, he details the context and circumstances surrounding being arrested for holiday merry-making,

They brought us in for the truce
and we got drunk, on our ass drunk.

After shooting up the Christmas tree
sent by my girl,
and smoking a lot of Cambo dope,
we dipped the LT,
head first, into the piss,
blaming him, or rather, his uniform,
because we were there,
not home, opening presents,
cuddling and copping a feel
from our girl, under the tree.

We got a month's confinement each,
for assaulting the person
and the uniform of an officer,
got called animals for what we did,
and spent Christmas together,
the three of us, in Long Binh Jail.

LT, you were KIA in June, at twenty-one,
Trying to save one of us from death,

⁶⁴ David Connolly, "Graves Registration: 12 December 1968, Blackhorse Forward," in *Lost in America*, 13.

I'm sorry for what I did to you.
You didn't deserve that.
But your uniform, for killing you
and so many others, for nothing,
it deserved worse.⁶⁵

Not until the last stanza do readers discover that Connolly narrative arc was slowly working its way around to a farewell and apology he's extending to a dead former commanding officer. Yet he is informing the dead lieutenant that his apology does not extend to military leadership in general. In fact, Connolly believed that his leaders, embodied and implied by "your [officer's] uniform," had earned themselves a reckoning far more severe than assault for killing so many for nothing.

These soldier-poets' almost universal conviction that their fellow brothers-in-arms had died for no real worthwhile cause constitutes a heartrending sentiment perhaps more tragic than any other documented in the poetry of the Vietnam War. It sounds a tired refrain, and is encountered often, in all types of Vietnam War literature. One poet went so far as to speak on behalf of every serviceman in the Southeast Asian theater, daring to personify even his whole nation. Race and creed and region and class all unite in a last, desperate cry for rescue:

I am Whitey; they call me pimples;
eighteen and from Nebraska,
stalking the enemy
in the mud of the Delta. Eyes focused
on the back of my neck.
Flying ants in the food, mosquito sucking blood on my
wrist, chiggers between my toes, and,
the enemy behind the trees.
There are no wheat fields in the Delta.

⁶⁵ David Connolly, "Christmas Standdown," in *Lost in America*, 32.

They call me Chico because they do not know:
I am Jose Maria of the barrio.
The Texas Captain calls me greaser
and gives me ribbons and medals for killing VC,
little yellow men nobody can see.
I kill to live,
at home I am the only one they cannot see.

They call me Chopper Jockey:
Below in the jungle, carpeted
with blood of men I have killed, I see the
faces of men I have never seen.
Daily riding the clouds, appointed scythe-swinging of
the aluminum age,
silvery engines of slaughter: hellfire raining from
above.
Dead and dying are the same.

I am the Texas Captain, Korea's ribbons on my chest;
we burn a village and return--a week's ground gained
in a day, lost to the night.
They're still firing, call for the planes.
There's blood on my shirt; a medic. I'm
dying, save me.

I am America.
I am America dying in Asia.⁶⁶

Pleading on behalf of many if not most Vietnam combatants, William Simon, a US Army soldier and Bronze Star and Vietnamese Honor Medal recipient, enunciates a myriad of sentiments from the personal to the political, from the social to the situational. Simon unabashedly and categorically calls to the political and military leaders orchestrating and executing the war for rescue and respite from relentless discomfort, deprivation, and death. He speaks of the grueling, pest-infested combat environment. He speaks to the frightening foreignness of swamp combat--the soldier

⁶⁶William J. Simon, "My Country," in *WHAM*, 42.

can detect neither his enemies nor any homelike vistas. He speaks for those minorities who felt as invisible back home as the elusive enemy they stalked in-country, paradoxically receiving from fellow combatants pejorative racial epithets and praise in the form of combat citations. The poet becomes a pilot haunted by ghosts hovering over the gore of those Vietnamese whom he killed with cold, technological ease and efficiency from above. He laments hard-fought gains that were quickly and frustratingly fleeting.

In one poem Simon raises many issues relevant and important to both troops and folks back home at the time. Americans from every wholesome, rural Midwestern and Southwestern borderland barrio walk of life died muddy, bloody, untimely deaths in Vietnam for what ultimately amounted to tragically temporal, even trivial gains. Ground troops and aviators both sustained and wreaked immeasurable destruction. Americans forever altered countless square miles of Vietnamese geography and millions of Vietnamese lives. In sum, Simon cogently conveys how not only much of Vietnam, but also much of America was lost forever in Southeast Asia.

With all these accounts of the Vietnam War cast through the very personalized and interpretive lenses of these soldier-poets, questions may linger about poetry's usefulness to historians. In the end, perhaps the most compelling asset of this body of poetry is its bare, blunt honesty. Dr. Laurie Smith of St. Michael's College contends that Vietnam's soldier-poets muster more personal and historical truth because their marginal position in the literature canon frees them from the cultural hegemony of the academy and marketplace. Or as Ehrhart simplifies it, poets write for themselves, not

to woo, please, and placate audiences or win arguments. He posits that other writers, artists, and commentators constantly “hedge their vision of the truth against what they think their potential audiences will buy, both figuratively and literally.”⁶⁷ If not, then why, Ehrhart asks, did Ron Kovic in his memoir *Born on the Fourth of July* omit

that at the time he was wounded he had already served one full 13-month tour in Vietnam, come home to America, and then volunteered to go back for a second full 13-month tour? Does Kovic obscure this fact in order to present himself in a more sympathetic light, to make himself appear to be the naïve kid suddenly struck down in his innocence instead of an experienced veteran who knew what he and his country were doing, thus to make his book more appealing? If that is not the reason, how else does one explain Kovic’s disingenuousness? Did he just forget to mention it?⁶⁸

Poetry simply exhibits fewer agendas, biases, and truth gaps because, unlike Westmoreland’s inflated body counts and McNamara’s chronically dishonest “We are winning” refrain, poetry makes no pretense, requires no subterfuge to slant or sell its ugly truths. In fact, Ehrhart questions whether *any* historical primary sources prove more viable and honest than poetry. Certainly, given Westmoreland’s widely known tendency to lie, it’s reasonable to ask:

[How can historians possibly] give more credence to a press release from MACV HQ in 1967 than to a poem written about the same event by an honorably discharged combat-wounded Marine sergeant? Are they really going to give ANY credibility to ANYTHING Secretary of Defense Robert Strange McNamara said between 1962 and 1967 when in 1995 he turned around and finally admitted, “We were wrong. Terribly wrong?” What about Henry Kissinger when he looked straight at the camera in 1972 and pronounced, “We believe peace is at hand.” As usual, he was lying. So which sources do historians want us to trust, exactly? ⁶⁹

Of course, poetic accounts aren’t the most complete or comprehensive, but to

⁶⁷ Ehrhart, “The Poetry of Bullets,” 8.

⁶⁸ Ibid., 9-10.

⁶⁹ Email correspondence with Ehrhart, 25 August 2012.

equate poetry's historical incompleteness with historical inaccuracy is both unfair and unwise, and we should think twice before discarding sources simply because they don't contain all the facts or look and sound like the primary sources we hold dear. As Ehrhart puts it,

If [historians] won't accept what I've written in a poem like "A Relative Thing" unless I tell them the exact time, date, and location I saw an amphibious tractor driving through a newly sown rice field or Vietnamese refugees in a squalid refugee camp, then my task and yours [of understanding and animating the Vietnam War] is hopeless."⁷⁰

Poetry is honest because poets gain nothing by being dishonest, and war poetry is where one of the truest relationships between war and memory survives.⁷¹ Any sources that help both scholars and students begin to understand that and connect with and engage the Vietnam War's messy moral ambiguities, its painful paradoxes, and its innumerable historical complexities only reinforce the value of utilizing poetry in scholarship and classrooms alike.

⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹ "Ehrhart, "The Poetry of Bullets," 10.

CHAPTER VI

VIETNAMESE SONGS

[I]t is only through understanding the Vietnamese who fought on the other side that Americans will have anything like a complete portrait of a war upon which they have been reflecting so deeply.... –Truong Nhu Tang, a founder of the National Liberation Front and Minister of Justice for the Vietcong’s Provisional Revolutionary Government¹

Treating subjects as complex as the Vietnam War requires examining primary sources from as many perspectives as possible. To broaden this study’s perspective, this chapter turns now to folk culture that Vietnamese troops and witnesses to the war produced. Greater perspective also requires taking a much longer contextual view of Vietnam’s history. The conflict the Vietnamese call the “American War” or “the war of resistance against American aggression” was for the Vietnamese relatively short. It constituted but one phase of a “long-lasting, far-flung struggle” incorporating “elements of social revolution, national liberation, and civil war,” so consulting Vietnamese voices at least as often as American ones is paramount. Thus, this chapter looks at folksongs from Vietnamese troops fighting on both sides of an Americanized civil war and from civilians caught in the middle.

What emerges from these sources are records documenting people who both differ greatly from their American counterparts and share much in common with them. Vietnamese folksongs reveal combatants far more ideologically minded, far more purpose-driven by the bigger picture and longer view than American troops, and yet just as wounded, angered, and forever changed by the war as Americans found

¹ Truong Nhu Tang, *A Vietcong Memoir: An Inside Account of the Vietnam War and Its Aftermath*, with David Chanoff and Doan Van Toai, (New York: Vintage Books, 1985), xiv.

themselves. Such realities emerging from the songs could suggest that folk culture reveals little that other Vietnamese primary sources don't already relate. Yet Vietnamese songs also offer surprises about individuals and groups that run counter to American popular understanding about the Vietnamese. One notable is the rich tradition of dissent against mainstream Vietnamese opinion, at least in means if not ends. If North Vietnamese supreme military commander Vo Nguyen Giap boasted that his forces would fight a hundred years to the last man to achieve independence and reunification, South Vietnamese dissident Trinh Cong Son and others argued in their music that no political gains warranted Vietnamese killing Vietnamese in genocidal numbers, regardless the political payoff. Moreover, much like American sources do, Vietnamese songs preserve and present previously obscured inner-history concerning specific individuals that might otherwise have remained unknown or forgotten. In that light, as it does for American history, folk culture humanizes, accurizes, and substantiates Vietnamese history, presenting sometimes quite different people than those American popular culture often stereotypes or generalizes: "the gook, who sprung out of a dark hole at night to kill our boys, disemboweling and emasculating them."²

Making sense of any sources, particularly those as inherently fragmentary as songs first necessitates looking into the historical backgrounds and contexts that shaped them. For the Vietnamese, warring with foreign aggressors was hardly foreign. "A battlefield for 4,000 years, Vietnam is awash in stories of real or mythical warriors who

² Sherry Buchanan, *Mekong Diaries: Viet Cong Drawings & Stories, 1964 - 1975*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), 15.

resisted foreign invaders,” wrote Stanley Karnow in a *New York Times* piece on the supreme Vietnamese commanding general during the American War, Vo Nguyen Giap.³ During one 800-year stretch the Vietnamese defended themselves against the Chinese six times: against the Song in 1075; repelling the Mongols three times in the 13th century; and expelling the Ming in the 15th and Qing in the 18th century.⁴ Yet until the American war closed, hard-won periods of self-rule remained episodic and frustratingly temporary. When Western foreigners invaded close on the heels of recently expelled Eastern ones, early 19th-century Vietnamese – briefly unified, independent, and at peace under the Nguyen Dynasty – proved unable to repel the French encroaching into Vietnam’s southern provinces, nor could they ultimately halt the French from dominating their whole country by 1885. It seemed Vietnam’s destiny to repeatedly fend off larger, wealthier, geopolitical players intent on subjugating and exploiting their smaller, poorer, supposedly weaker inferiors.

In terms of ultimate political goals, however, such recurring setbacks meant little to Vietnamese nationalists, who spent the next seventy-odd years resisting and finally expelling the French in an internationally humiliating defeat at Dien Bien Phu in 1954. Now tragically ironic in retrospect, these consistent, highly publicized displays of Vietnamese tenacity and unswerving devotion to national self-determination – especially one so prominently and widely broadcast as Dien Bien Phu – should have taught American policymakers the prudence of understanding nations and their

³ Stanley Karnow lauded General Giap as “the peer of Grant, Lee, Rommel and MacArthur in the pantheon of military leaders.” See Stanley Karnow, “Giap Remembers,” *The New York Times*, June 24, 1990, <http://www.nytimes.com/1990/06/24/magazine/giap-remembers.html?pagewanted=all&src=pm> (accessed September 10, 2013).

⁴ *Ibid.*, 4.

peoples before invading. Setting aside judging the wisdom (or lack thereof) of America's political and military endeavors in Vietnam in hindsight, the fact remains that with such a long history of struggling against foreign occupiers interfering in Vietnamese internal affairs and trying to dictate their national trajectory, it follows that folk culture dealing with war and resistance would result.

Vietnamese songs from the American War owed more than their subject matter to the past. Even the songs' characters, tones, voices, theses, and audiences tapped roots deep within Vietnamese history. Impetuses for the American War and the songs that document it

. . . encompassed three generations going back to resistance to the French conquest. By the time the play reached the final act in the 1970s, virtually all segments of Vietnamese society had made an appearance—from nationalist intellectuals to political activists, to peasants pulled into the struggle, to ordinary soldiers, to those who hitched their fortunes to the French and then American causes. The Americans walked onto the stage relatively late—in the 1940s—and even then acted as only minor players, largely unaware of previous plot developments.⁵

The Vietnamese always viewed the American War and the Americans who wrought it as unfortunate but nonetheless ancillary factors imposing themselves into a more enduring, epic struggle: to realize the long-held goals of liberation, independence, national unity, democracy, self-determination, peace, and prosperity for which

⁵ Michael H. Hunt, *A Vietnam War Reader: A Documentary History from American and Vietnamese Perspectives*, (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2010), xx. Hunt never minimizes how greatly the U.S. military machine devastated the Vietnamese people and ways of life that had changed little over the centuries before Westerners arrived. American policies and practices disrupted, imperiled, and destroyed elements of Vietnamese culture, infrastructure, livestock and livelihoods, as well as urban and rural environments that had sustained communities and kinship networks for generations.

Vietnamese leaders from the Trung sisters to Ho Chi Minh always strove.⁶ As scholar of Vietnamese culture and history, Neil L. Jamieson put it, “All Vietnamese people are today still, as they were fifty years ago, interacting with the past in the process of shaping their future.”⁷

Most troops who landed and fought in Vietnam never learned the long-wrought cultural and historical contexts so utterly interwoven with larger Vietnamese objectives. Had they listened to Northern and Southern folk culture, they might have. Songs and poems both reveal that Northerners and many Southerners sought independence and national reunification. Yet Vietnamese verse also demonstrates that while many Southerners were sympathetic if not “Party” to Hanoi’s political endgame, many Northern and Southern Communist Party members also tired of the Party’s increasingly iron-handed interference in cultural matters, particularly literary arts like poetry.⁸ Too, songs evince that many Southerners always wanted to see the freedoms they enjoyed in the Republican South continue. For all these reasons, because the American War affected every Vietnamese; because it grew out of millennia of individual experiences; because Vietnamese communicate much about shared and differing cultures, politics, and human experiences, the verse the war inspired – often compelled – warrants attention.

⁶ Ho Chi Minh was nothing if not consistent. Within the nearly four hundred pages that comprise his life’s various manifestos, speeches, correspondence, and appropriately, his poems, one can scarcely read a document without encountering every single one of the above goals. See Ho Chi Minh, *On Revolution: Selected Writings*, Bernard B. Fall, ed., (New York: Frederick A. Praeger, 1967).

⁷ Neil L. Jamieson, *Understanding Vietnam*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 2.

⁸ Ibid, particularly Chapter 5, “*Yin and Yang in Modern Guise, 1955-1970.*” Jamieson argues the more independent, individualistic, emotively expressive *yin* characterized the cultural South, whereas the more communal, authoritative, militant *yang* characterized the North. Nevertheless, plenty of characters who constituted *yin* in the largely *yang* North and *yang* in the considerably *yin* South existed and manifest in Vietnam’s literary folk culture.

Given the great degree of shared subject matter – the war and all its messy causes and effects – it’s no surprise that Vietnamese trooper bards resound almost all of the same themes their American counterparts do. Everyday life and times in various Vietnamese physical environments; the perils, horrors, pains, and losses that modern warfare visits on people and their property; requiems for fallen comrades; expressions of homesickness, love, anger, and fear; even peacenik protest and dissent, all surface regularly. Too, Vietnamese songs, like American ones, exhibit as much personal intimacy, emotional candor, and human transparency concerning specific people, events, and beliefs as many other sources chronicling the war. Those attributes alone render them historically invaluable.

Yet with all their similarities, Vietnamese songs also exhibit elements conspicuously absent from or much less commonly conveyed in American war-born verse. Arguably the most common is an acute, almost palpable national, cultural, and geopolitical self-awareness. An utterly unmistakable sense of self and place (sometimes national, sometimes regional, sometimes local) among the Vietnamese, makes sense. Vietnam was their homeland, and just on the heels of the French expulsion, yet another foreign horde had invaded and sought to engineer or interfere with their internal affairs and thwart their national self-determination. American intervention in Vietnam disrupted life from the highest levels of government to the most mundane affairs of local village life. Not surprisingly, such realities found their way into the lyrical expressions of the day, especially among a culture that for millennia had kept verse in one form or other at the center of its literary self-expression:

Can Tho, country of my heart,
Country of the whitest rice, clearest water,
Most beautiful sunlight.
Country of the green banana,

The betel palm and coconut tree. . . .
Who could force me to leave this country?
I journey with a strong will,
Determined to cross every ocean,

To join the revolution at Ca Mau.
But fighting in another village,
Even hand in hand with my comrades,
Is like fighting in a strange country.

I cannot return home.
Step by step we march
To save our honor,
Already muddied by the enemy.

We promised ourselves
We would not let our country fall,
Using all of our strength
So that Ca Rang City and Phung Hiep

Will be remembered,
And the Hoa Vu forests
Will shine bright as fire.

With hope that you will keep your will,
I write this poem for you, my friends.⁹

Nguyen Lam Son reveals the hearts and minds, the deliberation, the self-awareness of a people who, like they had countless times before, fought to return and restore Vietnam unto themselves. Such commonality of cultural and national self-awareness and sense of place clearly distinguish Vietnamese works from American ones.

⁹ Nguyen Lam Son, "Can Tho, My Village," from his captured correspondence, noted "20 May 1967, Nguyen Lam Son, Born in 1940 at Long Thanh District, Phung-Hiep County, Can Tho Province," in Thanh T. Nguyen and Bruce Weigl, *Poems from Captured Documents*, (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1994), 51-53.

More than exhibiting an acute sense of self and place among natives, Vietnamese verse also speaks of political objectives often more seriously yet subtly and seamlessly than American works do. American songs and poems occasionally address political subjects, but do so often satirically or sarcastically. Vietnamese writers level political commentary more deliberately, usually interweaving it with other thematic elements. Exhortation or assurance of victory often couple with intimate expressions of unbidden pain and loss that moved them to agitate or fight. Like American works, Vietnamese political poetry originates from a deeply personal place inside. But most American troops who had seen very much actual combat weren't fighting and dying pursuing long-unrealized goals like personal and political autonomy like the Vietnamese North and South were. Most Americans fought for each other and to survive their tours alive and unmaimed. Cathleen Cordova, who worked as a club director in South Vietnam in 1968 and 1969 and daily heard troops speak their hearts and minds, wrote home, "The majority of the guys aren't concerned with issues, moral judgments, or politics. Most of them are young guys who didn't want to come here, and they just want to get out in one piece."¹⁰ Consequently, the fact that political and personal poetry often seem one and the same in Vietnamese more than American works should not surprise.

Vietnamese songs also differ from American ones in their extraordinary degree of unity of purpose and objectives among Vietnamese groups of varying political leanings, particularly among the Vietcong. Unity of purpose is most frequently

¹⁰ Cathleen Cordova, in *Dear America: Letters Home from Vietnam*, 203.

expressed, in the Vietcong's case, in almost universal certainty of victory, whether political or military victory, no matter how long or difficult the road.¹¹ Despite being nearly always outgunned and undersupplied and often outmanned (though rarely outfoxed), few Vietcong soldier-poets and songwriters ever express even a hint of doubt about the ultimate outcome of the American War. But Vietnamese peaceniks and antiwarriors were united, too. Their purposes unified around ending at all costs the war that pit Vietnamese against each other. Almost to a man – or woman – Vietnamese seemed to know in their hearts, minds, and guts that whatever their cause, it was just, and because of its justness, that their cause would prevail one way or another. Occasional expressions of doubt and despair emerge, but they seem notable more for their rarity than their commonality. Vietnamese verse simply demonstrates more certainty, exhortation, and self-assurance than its American counterpart.

Little in the lyrical canon distinguishes cultural differences between Vietnam and the U.S. quite like Vietnamese songs memorializing the battlefield exploits of “long-haired warriors.” Women combatants have been revered as national heroines throughout much of Vietnamese history. In 40 A.D. the Trung sisters, Trac and Nhi, raised a revolt against the Chinese and set up an independent court. In 248, Ba Trieu (Lady Trieu Thi Trinh) rallied still more Vietnamese rebels against the Chinese. Much later in 1802, a woman general, Bui Thi Xuan, commanded a unit of Tay-son rebels against the ruling Nguyen Dynasty. And before, during, and after both the French and the American War, highly capable and supremely dedicated female combatants earned

¹¹ This is perhaps not surprising since Hanoi issued formal expectations for art's purpose in socialist states and societies. Exploration of whether the unity of purpose in Vietcong folk culture resulted by choice or Party mandate will be addressed more fully in Chapter 7 following on Vietnamese poetry.

the respect of Vietnamese North and South.¹² The U.S. military, too, fielded female personnel in Vietnam, but America's more conservative Western cultural values dictated that the Pentagon had a solemn duty, a moral imperative to protect America's mothers, daughters, and sisters from dangers inherent in combat assignments. Consequently, the U.S. military continued to relegate women to medical, clerical, and other support roles. Vietnamese military commanders, on the other hand, had proven equal-opportunity deployers for centuries, and the NVA and NLF placed few restrictions—least of all, gender restrictions—on who could and could not serve in combat or among combat-related elements. It thus makes sense that the artistic historical record would show women both composing and appearing as chief protagonists in Vietnamese songs and poems.

While these themes distinguish Vietnamese sources from American ones, thematic elements that demonstrate the universality of human experience in warfare also stand out. For example, Vietnamese troops and civilian alike penned peacenik-esque, antiwar verse, the stanzas of which rival the artistic and pop culture expressions of the antiwar movement in America in terms of poignancy and urgency. To be sure, American and Vietnamese peacenik protest derived from different impetuses. American antiwar protestors sought to delegitimize U.S. military engagement in

¹² Extensive treatment in English on the Long-haired Warriors during the American War can be found in Karen Gottschang Turner and Phan Thanh Hao, *Even the Women Must Fight: Memories of the War from North Vietnam*, (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1998). For individual accounts from female combatants themselves, see David Chanoff and Doan Van Toai, *Vietnam: A Portrait of a People at War*, (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1996), and Thi Tu Mai and Le Thi Nham Tuyet, *Women in Vietnam*, (Hanoi: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1978). For an excellent collection of primary sources from and about women throughout all periods of Vietnamese history, see *Sources of Vietnamese Tradition*, George E. Dutton, Jayne S. Werner, and John K. Whitmore, eds., (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012) and K.W. Taylor, *A History of the Vietnamese*, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013).

Vietnam, whereas Vietnamese peaceniks, who also decried American intervention, more railed against the cultural fratricide American intervention engendered and perpetuated. Likewise, Vietnamese expressions of deep and abiding love for mates back home or comrades sharing their frontline plight abound and could have come from almost any soldier, anywhere, anytime. Vietnamese writers, just as their American counterparts, lamented grunt life in wartime, and waxed philosophically about cultural, geographic, and human costs and losses in war. Finally, Vietnamese record the war's aftermath just emotionally, just as eloquently as Americans. They documented and cemented human experience and emotion amid moments on the battlefield and in villages, cities, countrysides, and refugee boats. Far more numerous individual themes than these recur throughout the Vietnamese lyrical canon, but except for periodic examples, this study will focus on certain Vietnamese works that both vary from and liken to the American ones. Examining them form by form, theme by theme will reveal much about the American War from the Vietnamese perspective.

Songs figured prominently throughout Vietnamese history, ever depicting, chronicling, and lauding Vietnam and the Vietnamese. For centuries, folksongs abounded glorifying the Vietnamese nation, the heroes who led it, and the ordinary people who fought to preserve it. Yet Vietnamese popular songs such as people would recognize during the American War, known as *ca khúc*, developed relatively late in Vietnamese history, circa 1940s. In addition to their late arrival, only with the advent of modern 20th-century production, recording, and print technology did *ca khúc* begin to proliferate widely among popular culture, and even these media were subject to

censorship, both by Revolutionaries and the French.¹³ Poetry's longtime centrality to the Vietnamese literary tradition contributed to the ease with which *ca khúc* lyrics won widespread acceptance as a means of personal, historical, and artistic expression among the Vietnamese, but its relatively late arrival on modern Vietnam's cultural scene lends itself far less easily to historical analysis than poetry, simply because far fewer *ca khúc* exist in English translation. Still, a few songs and singers arising during this period merit attention.

Songs perform a wide variety of functions in every musical culture. They praise and lament. They perpetuate and communicate ideology and belief systems. They detail, chronicle, and preserve human events, and they initiate, motivate, and even alter human behavior. Song lyrics can be used as weapons or peace offerings, as boasts or confessions, even as forensic evidence of someone's personal passions, politics, or proclivities. As such multifunctional creatures, songs divulge much about those who create and perpetuate them. For example, around the time of the Franco-Vietnamese War's outbreak in 1945, nationalist and communist leaders grasped that the Vietnamese people lacked ready access to or even knowledge of patriotic revolutionary songs. Party leadership coming of age in a poetic culture under newly elected president Ho Chi Minh, himself a poet, recognized lyrical verse and other art forms as effective ideological weapons to bolster commitment to the Resistance against the returning

¹³ For Party restrictions on the arts, see Jamieson, particularly "The Supervillage of Insurgency," 254-271, and "The Ideological Foundations in the North," 271-284, in *Understanding Vietnam*. For colonial French restrictions on artistic freedom, see "New Poetry," 409-414 in *Sources of Vietnamese Tradition*.

French imperialists and toward Vietnam's goals for a new communist society.¹⁴ Pham Duy, a formally trained musician interested in Vietnamese folk music, proved one of the most important and prolific songwriters to emerge from within these national and political contexts, and his long, convoluted ride through Vietnamese history on both sides of the 17th parallel is an interesting one.

Duy came to prominence as a composer in the late-1940s writing Vietnamese *ca khúc* that satisfied Party needs for "edifying song lyrics with a clear, unambiguous meaning." He produced songs that would "convey messages about the inevitability of victory."¹⁵ Party policy officials saw and utilized music, not only as an art form to be enjoyed, but also as a mass revolutionary participation activity specifically orchestrated "to foster comradeship between troops, and between troops and the rest of the populace," so the timing of Duy's arrival on the revolutionary music scene proved fortuitous.¹⁶ Guerrillas, students, and villagers adopted such of his *ca khúc* as "Remembering the Wounded Soldier," (1947) and "Mother of Gio Linh," (1948), while fighting for the anti-French communist-led Resistance.¹⁷ PAVN and Viet Minh troops sang Duy's *ca khúc* as they lugged small arms, artillery, and munitions across the

¹⁴ Barley Norton, "Vietnamese Popular Song in '1968': War, Protest, and Sentimentalism," in *Music and Protest in 1968*, Beate Kutschke and Barley Norton, eds., (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 98, 100.

¹⁵ Ibid., 100.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Edward G. Lansdale, *In the Midst of War, Folk Music, Viet Nam, 1965 - 1967: A Report by SLO* [Senior Liaison Officer], *American Embassy, Viet Nam*, Lydia M. Fish, ed., audio transcription, p.1-2, General Edward G. Lansdale Collection, American Folklife Center, Library of Congress, AFS 17.483 and AFS 18.882, LWO 8281, R1,2, hereafter cited as "Lansdale, *In the Midst of War*." See also, John C. Shafer, "The Curious Memoirs of the Vietnamese Composer, Pham Duy," in *The Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, Vol. 43, No. 1, (February 2012, pp. 77-110), 77, hereafter cited as Shafer, "Pham Duy." Unfortunately for purposes of this study, almost none of Pham Duy's songs exist in English translation except for rare excerpts here and there in widely varying literary or Southeast Asian cultural scholarship and marginally reliable fan websites.

mountains to Dien Bien Phu.¹⁸

Yet as quickly as Duy's music won him celebrity, it just as swiftly precipitated his fall from grace. Even as Duy's Resistance songs both heralded and cemented his position among modern Vietnamese patriots, he began, too, to develop a following for his sentimental songs, much to the chagrin of Party heads. They perceived political peril in the sentimentality of such wildly popular numbers as "The Rain on the Leaves":

[...]
The rain on the leaves is the tears of joy
Of the girl whose boy returns from the war.
The rain on the leaves is the bitter tears
When the mother hears her son is no more.¹⁹

Lyrics like those in "The Rain on the Leaves" alarmed Party authorities because the Resistance needed hardened fighters focused on conducting guerrilla warfare. It did not need weak, distracted people shedding tears of joy at war's end or civilians weeping bitter tears of grief over losses the Party knew Resistance forces would likely sustain before victory materialized. Party zealots criticized Duy's works for being "too romantic" or worse and officially pronounced them excessively sentimental and pacifist. They ruled that they "lacked [Marxist] positivism," and thus, deemed them "inappropriate for revolutionary times." Initially, the *ca khúc* had cemented unity among Duy's fellow revolutionaries while propelling him to national celebrity. However, in the process the folksongs had also become an unwitting government tool,

¹⁸ "PAVN" stands for the People's Army of Vietnam, and is often used interchangeably with "NVA," or North Vietnamese Army. See also Lansdale, *In the Midst of War*, 2.

¹⁹ Edward G. Lansdale, *In the Midst of War, Folk Music, Viet Nam, 1965 - 1967: A Report by SLO* [Senior Liaison Officer], *American Embassy, Viet Nam*, audio recording, AFS 17.483, LWO 8281, R1, General Edward G. Lansdale Collection, American Folklife Center, Library of Congress.

singled out and exemplified to justify ideological and artistic repression.²⁰

In a relatively short timeframe, the purpose and function of Duy's music had metamorphosed, and not to welcome outcomes for either Duy or Communist Party officials. Party zealots categorically believed that sentimental *ca khúc* were ideologically antithetical to revolutionary songs. Instead they should ring out with the clear, unambiguous voice of "unity, conformity, and the power and satisfaction of collective action, the *communitas* of shared affliction":

Our unity is strength
Our unity is steel, iron,
But neither steel nor iron is as durable as we.
We swear to rout the enemy troops, colonialism, the wild
 beasts of imperialism, as well as reactionary elements.

We shall utterly destroy them!
Advance rapidly!
The bugle of freedom is sounding in the purple rays of battle.
Build a new life in a new democracy!²¹

Yet Duy believed Party zealots imagined and concocted any alleged ideological opposition between the genres, if it existed at all. He felt that common grassroots soldiers and citizens wholly dedicated to the revolution seem never to have requested, required, or even cared about very much at all for such distinctions. Duy had more faith in the Vietnamese people and believed his audiences intelligent, discerning, and dedicated enough to enjoy sentimental *ca khúc* while simultaneously maintaining their revolutionary fervor. Duy tired of Party meddling. He feared for his wife, six months pregnant. He wanted her birth to birth their first child safely away from the Viet Minh's military buildup. Deciding they could abide increasingly repressive Party

²⁰ Norton, 98.

²¹ *Ca khúc* personally collected in Vietnam by Neil Jamieson, in *Understanding Vietnam*, 255.

mandates and dangerous environs no longer, they abandoned their longtime mountain hideout in Resistance-controlled areas and migrated to Hanoi.²² Losing their most popular propagandist didn't phase Party zealots, however, and cadres all over Vietnam continued to preach sentimental *ca khúc's* supposed ideological incompatibility with Communist ideology long after the Franco-Vietnamese War ended in 1954. Diverging philosophically from Party ideologues came none too soon for Duy's tastes and for his prospects as Vietnam's heretofore most celebrated musician. Hanoi commandeered and then systematically codified the *ca khúc* for political and ideological ends, after which postwar repression only intensified. According to Barley Norton, "under a communist leadership, only revolutionary *ca khúc* whose lyrics accorded with socialist rhetoric were permitted, and sentimental song was pejoratively referred to as 'yellow music.'"²³

From the Party's perspective, advocating stricter oversight on cultural expression was arguably justified because, in fact, Duy was not the only potentially subversive social commentator in Vietnam. Moreover, others had begun dissenting against Hanoi's dictatorial stance. In 1955, Northern writer Le Dat, a Party member himself, decried critics of sentimental *ca khúc* with a lyrical indictment of his own as zealots driven by dogmatism and regimentation who were increasingly:

Placing police stations and machinery in the center of the
human heart,
Forcing feelings to be expressed according to a set of rules
promulgated by the government.²⁴

²² Ibid. See also, Shafer, "Pham Duy," 78.

²³ Norton, 98.

²⁴ Jamieson, 258-259.

Hanoi entrenched. Not only were Northern Party members “working through official channels to convince the party to adopt a more liberal policy toward literature and the arts.”²⁵ Southerners, too, were producing “yellow music” whose pessimism might undercut Party mandated conformity to the Fatherland:

Stop, write no more letters,
Lest each line be one more crime.
My parents have passed away.
Now I have new parents.

When can I be an orphan?²⁶

Vietnamese revolutionaries’ individual and collective will to fight through to victory were they not policed. And yet in an ironic turn, Le Ly Hayslip recalls first hearing such “yellow,” sentimental songs treating not censorship, not colonial abuses, but about the Vietnamese victory over the French:

In our village today
A big battle was fought,
French kill and arrest the people;
The fields and villages burn,
The people, they run to the winds:
To the north, to the south,
To Xam Ho, to Ky La.
When they run, they look back;
They see houses in flames.
They cry, Oh my God –
Our houses are gone –
Where will we lay our heads?
In our village today,
A big battle was fought.
Old ladies and children,
Were sent straight to hell.
Our eyes filled with tears
While we watch and ask God:
Why is the enemy so cruel?²⁷

²⁵ Ibid., 258.

²⁶ Ibid., 263.

Perhaps Party officials did not single the yellow song out like they had Pham Duy's because it referred to a war the Vietnamese ultimately won. Perhaps, too, it was a question of potential audiences. Whereas Duy was quickly becoming a national celebrity garnering countless followers or potential dissidents he could influence, the song Hayslip overheard would likely only reach local villagers and thus posed far less political risk either to Hanoi or to the post-revolutionary cause.

Whatever the case, in addition to focusing wholly on grievous loss instead of glorious victory, the lyrics seem a prophetic foreboding of the American presence to come, an unwelcomed presence which would yield its own particularly frustrating set of challenges to the individual and collective wills of Vietnamese on both sides of the 1954 Geneva agreement.

Despite increased cultural repression that was occurring in Communist-controlled areas postwar, in the RVN, "the tradition of writing sentimental *ca khúc* blossomed, especially among student populations in urban areas."²⁸ With greater artistic freedom in the South beckoning him, Pham Duy relocated in 1955 to Saigon, where he resumed composing without political oversight, penning some widely popular love songs that could be "heard almost every day on the radio and in the tea houses."²⁹ By the mid-1960s, Duy had become a nationally-known cultural figure in the South. The Americans in Saigon at the time, consumed with marketing the war both at home and in the South, courted Duy for his sheer political market value to US and RVN

²⁷Le Ly Hayslip, *When Heaven and Earth Change Places: A Vietnamese Woman's Journey from War to Peace* (New York: Penguin, 1989), 4.

²⁸ Norton, 98.

²⁹ Landsdale, *In the Midst of War*, 2; Shafer, "Pham Duy," 78.

counterinsurgency efforts. The Republicans and their American advisors vowed only greater freedoms yet to come, and Duy appears to have bought into the relationship with little reluctance. On many evenings from 1965 through 1967, he could be found singing his songs at 194 Cong Ly Street, the Saigon villa of Colonel Edward G. Lansdale, perhaps the CIA's most accomplished counterinsurgency and psychological warfare veteran.³⁰

Duy and his music seem to have enjoyed a charmed existence in their new environs, at least initially, because August of 1965 in the South was volatile, to say the least, and yet he managed to retain Lansdale's—and thus, the US's—patronage. Nguyen Cao Ky had just established himself in a coup with ARVN military backing as the new RVN president. American combat forces were landing in waves, and facing a widening military escalation that threatened to plunge the divided nation into even more long years of bloody civil war, US and RVN authorities solicited from Duy—who Lansdale called Vietnam's Irving Berlin or Stephen Foster—songs and personal appearances to rally the war-weary South to the Republican cause.³¹ More extravagant still, the US State Department courted him with trips to the US and arranged for him to give a concert performance at the Smithsonian.³² Radio Saigon broadcast him, live and recorded, on their government stations. On the surface, things appeared to be going well.

Average South Vietnamese citizens, however, no strangers to manipulation by foreign powers, saw through the American-RVN collaborative charade, and once again

³⁰ Lansdale, *In the Midst of War*, 2. For more on General Lansdale, see Chapter 3.

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² Shafer, "Pham Duy," 106;

Pham Duy began incrementally to fall out of favor, this time among his adopted Southerners. On one particularly pathetic occasion, Lansdale himself stood alongside Duy, a classically educated Northern urbanite, as he tried to relate to and connect with war-weary Southern village peasant farmers by donning their traditional black pajamas and singing his less-than-martial "The Rain on the Leaves."³³ When such overtly theatrical efforts to court the Southern rural populace fell flat, Republican authorities then tried a new tack, insisting that Duy rework and update his old Resistance-era anti-imperialist songs to trumpet instead the virtues of the US-backed regime and its ARVN troops.³⁴ Unfortunately for those like Lansdale working behind the scenes trying to engineer and realize US/RVN objectives, importing and repackaging cultural commodities, even those as beloved as Pham Duy and his music, could not mobilize popular support any more than it could alleviate rapidly rising tensions in South Vietnam.

Even less so did such blatant cultural commodification manage to conjure new ARVN recruits to fight in deadly armed combat alongside condescending and manipulative American interlopers in a war against their own fellow countrymen. And as colossal as America's military might seemed to them at the time, neither would neatly packaged songs persuade average Southerners to oppose the culturally monolithic Ho Chi Minh and his Soviet- and Chinese-backed PAVN and National Liberation Front forces. In fact, the opposite proved true. As the NLF's strong presence in the South indicated, many of the very Southerners Lansdale and his propaganda

³³ Lansdale, *In the Midst of War*, 3.

³⁴ Shafer, "Pham Duy," 106; see particularly, Note 101.

puppet Duy sought to mobilize to the Republican banner had long-agreed with or themselves even fought for Ho Chi Minh's nationalist political objectives. Many in Duy's audiences were likely already Vietcong, or at least nationalist Vietnamese who happened to reside in the South and desired only peace and freedom from foreign domination, manipulation, and exploitation. The geographic specifics of their residence in no way guaranteed that they endorsed or adhered to the Southern government's imported Western political ideology, so American social engineers like Lansdale trying to woo Southern rural political allegiance by parading a repackaged cultural commodity like Duy must have seemed to them at best wishful Western thinking, at worst, the condescending, insulting height of American presumption, especially given how badly they hated, if not the Americans themselves, then at least the idea of another foreign presence in Vietnam.

Pham Duy's task of convincing South Vietnamese to fight and kill their own people to keep Vietnam divided must have seemed nigh impossible at the time. By the time the Americans had arrived en masse, much of the nation had rallied behind Ho Chi Minh and his near-lifelong efforts to realize a reunified Vietnam. One of Ho's most effective and oft-chosen methods for molding public opinion and galvanizing collective will was equal parts American and Soviet Russian. Ho had already learned well from Joseph Stalin that "In order to defeat the enemy, one must build up hatred."³⁵ Yet ironically, Ho Chi Minh learned from American history and Thomas Jefferson's Declaration of Independence how best to articulate, incite, and maintain unfettered

³⁵ Huong Van Ba [NLF artillery captain], oral history of fighting, 1965-1968, "The View from the Ground, 1965-1971," in Hunt, 139.

outrage and hatred of political enemies: enumerate the people's grievances and their enemies' crimes – and then publicly repeat both at every opportunity. Ho mastered both tactics, developing an odd hybrid between impassioned Stalinist hatred and eloquent Jeffersonian persuasion. In literally hundreds of public speeches and interviews as well as his private correspondence, Ho Chi Minh repeatedly and categorically vilified the U.S. government as “imperialist,” and “piratical faced ... aggressors” who hoped that with “the force of weapons they can compel our 30 million compatriots to become their slaves.”³⁶ He accused the American troops of “launching large-scale terrorist operations” in which they “burn all, kill all, and destroy all.”³⁷

Ho Chi Minh was able to mount such an effective and sustained campaign to generate Vietnamese and international anti-American animosity because he knew to accuse the U.S. using more than just angry yet imprecise demagoguery. While the Vietnamese who suffered the US invasion and bombardment saw firsthand plenty of reasons to hate Americans, as a skilled politician Ho knew he needed to enumerate specific war crimes in order to muster and disseminate hatred for the Americans and their South Vietnamese “puppet army” within and beyond Vietnam. Consequently, he reminded the world that it was the US who “sabotaged the [1954] Geneva Agreements which guarantee the sovereignty, independence, unity, and territorial integrity of Vietnam.”³⁸ He regularly and publicly detailed in national and international popular media how the American “aggressors” had used “napalm bombs, poison gas, and toxic

³⁶ Ho Chi Minh, “U.S. Imperialists, Get Out of Viet-Nam!” Originally printed in Hanoi's *Vietnam Courier*, April 15, 1965, in *On Revolution*, 359.

³⁷ Ho Chi Minh, “Our Entire People, United As One Man, Are Resolved to Defeat the U.S. Aggressors,” speech to the National Assembly, printed in Hanoi's *Vietnam Courier*, April 28, 1966, *ibid.*, 375.

³⁸ Ho Chi Minh, “Fight Until Complete Victory,” speech over Radio Hanoi, July 17, 1966, *ibid.*, 379.

chemicals to massacre our compatriots and ravage our villages.” Ho’s repeated and specific pillory of American’s “savage crimes” worked in tandem with the physical evidence of his accusations that American forces wrought almost daily on Vietnamese combatants and villagers and which proved only to “exasperate further the hatred of our people throughout the country.”³⁹

Perhaps more importantly for the overall war effort, Ho’s followers and subordinates quickly adopted his systematic methods and habits of rousing public hatred against American “henchmen.”⁴⁰ In fact, among all directives the Vietnamese Communist Party charged its village-level cadres always to fulfill, arousing hatred of the “imperialists,” those “American bandits” and their South Vietnamese “puppet troops,” stood secondary only to giving fighters a “firm Communist ideological stand.”⁴¹ Captured Vietcong cadre documents reveal that deliberately inciting hatred for the enemy constituted such a central part of NLF philosophy the practice systematically received its own separate subject headings in Party literature.⁴² Demonstrating synchronicity with Party directives, one fairly blunt stanza from a Vietcong indoctrination song employed hatred incitement tactics by characteristically demonizing US troops. This song adds a twist, an additional motivational ingredient, however. By invoking a cultural imperative to choose between the proverbial “us” and

³⁹ Ho Chi Minh, “Our Entire People, United As One Man,” *ibid.*, 375.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

⁴¹ “Excerpts from the Notebook of the Deputy Secretary of the Party Chapter: ‘Political Indoctrination Program for the Military Training Phase,’” Document 4 in David W.P. Elliott and Mai Elliott, *Documents of an Elite Viet Cong Delta Unit: The Demolition Platoon of the 514th Battalion – Part Four: Political Indoctrination and Military Training*, Memorandum RM-5851-ISA/ARPA, May 1969, prepared for the Office of the Assistant Secretary of Defense/International Security Affairs and the Advanced Research Projects Agency, (Santa Monica, CA: The Rand Corporation, 1969), ix, 10, 28. Hereafter cited as Elliott & Elliot, RM-5851.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 69.

“them,” it threatens unending demonization of Vietnamese themselves should any choose unwisely and aid or collaborate with the hated enemy:

Americans come to kill our people,
Follow America and kill your relatives!
The smart bird flies before it is caught.
The smart person comes home before Tet.
Follow us, and you’ll always have a family.
Follow America, and you’ll always be alone!⁴³

Le Ly Hayslip, who as a youth and young adult fought for the Vietcong before eventually siding with the RVN, confirms that the song effectively articulated – and ingeniously played upon – the shared sentiments and sacred cultural traditions of many of the Vietnamese people. Americans had indeed come to kill Vietnamese. Couple that unshakable truth with promises of everlasting guilt, shame, and ostracism for all who violate ancient mores of Confucian filial piety by siding with the Americans, and the song became a tool as persuasive at the village level as Ho Chi Minh’s nationally broadcast diatribes and standard Communist Party political indoctrination practices. Apparently, little else animated Vietnamese survival instincts and cultural obligations quite like well-designed nationalist propaganda and the war it strove to justify.

Unfortunately for the average Vietnamese citizen (and for North and South Vietnamese war planners), political messages, musical and otherwise, were ever pulling the Vietnamese people in seemingly diametrically opposed, almost schizophrenic directions. At the same time Ho Chi Minh and Communist Party officials fought their propaganda campaign, another Vietnamese singer-songwriter – this one apparently far more authentic than Pham Duy, even refreshingly apolitical – had already begun to

⁴³ Hayslip, x.

capture Vietnamese attentions of Vietnamese leaders and followers on both sides of the 17th Parallel. His name was Trinh Cong Son, and he would ultimately influence people high and low, North and South – among all the very regions and social demographics that Pham Duy’s handlers had been trying to reach.

Born in 1939 into a Buddhist family and raised mostly in and around the former imperial city of Hue near Vietnam’s central coast, Son was schooled in the finest Western tradition. He studied at a French *lycée* in Hue, the Providence School, run by Hue’s Catholic diocese, and after earning his first-level baccalaureate degree, he relocated to Saigon, the geographic and social epicenter of South Vietnam’s urban intelligentsia in the early 1960s. A deeply sentimental free-thinker, Son found both his element and his voice in the vigorous cosmopolitan intellectual climate of South Vietnam’s late interwar period. He hung out in Saigon’s coffee houses with other highly educated friends, debating the same works of Camus, Faulkner, Gorki, and Heidegger that his contemporaries were digesting in the salon societies of 1960s Paris. Western philosophy, particularly existentialism, heavily influenced the youth of old imperial Hue and rapidly modernizing Saigon alike, and though early on Son was known to remain quiet during coffee house debates over existential “being and nothingness,” he would later surprise his friends by composing a song and then “singing philosophy.”⁴⁴

About the time the American war-making intentions had revealed themselves across North and South Vietnam, heightening the consciousness of death for every

⁴⁴ John C. Shafer, “The Trinh Cong Son Phenomenon,” *The Journal of Asian Studies*, Vol. 66, No. 3, (Aug., 2007, pp. 597 - 643), 605.

Vietnamese, Son began his studies in philosophy at the Lycée Chasseloup-Laubat before enrolling in the Qui Nhon School of Education specifically so he could avoid the draft. He graduated in 1964 and then took a teaching post in an ethnic minority school in a remote region of the highlands where he wrote many of his most celebrated songs.⁴⁵ Within this historical context, in which Vietnamese across all socioeconomic strata were embracing and yet also frequently dodging increasingly dangerous military service, Son released his first published song collection in 1965. Artists and intellectuals as well as high school and college students devoured it. His almost overnight national celebrity earned him an invitation to perform at the Faculty of Letters of the University of Saigon, to rave reviews and multiple encores.

Son's next collection, *Songs of Golden Skin* (1966-67), began what John C. Shafer has termed "the Trinh Cong Son phenomenon" and cemented his reputation as one of the most passionate, articulate, and notably, pacifist social commentators in all of modern Vietnamese history. Shafer argues that Son's pacifist songs, "antiwar in the sense that they express sadness at the death and destruction the war is causing," more than any of his other numbers created the Trinh Cong Son phenomenon. What started out as a relatively small community of mostly college students circulating his songs by mimeographed ditto sheets quickly became a popular music phenomenon, thanks to increasingly imported cassette players that enabled listeners to share his music more quickly, easily, and prolifically.⁴⁶

The content of *Songs of Golden Skin* arguably differed drastically from Son's well-

⁴⁵ Ibid., 600.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 615, 619-20.

known sentimental and largely metaphorical love songs. While still writing from a place of love for his country and people, now Son was writing starkly realistic, graphically descriptive, and situationally specific musical narratives about the war.⁴⁷ Deeply patriotic as well as sentimental about all Vietnamese people, Son preferred to use “positive rather than negative terms” to describe his songs, which he maintained articulated his “desire for peace and love for his homeland.” Contrary to his critics, Son disputed the fact that his songs had changed much at all, insisting instead that they were all “fundamentally about love, even those that were prompted by witnessing the human tragedy and suffering of war.” In *Songs of Golden Skin*, Son sang “love songs that asked listeners to cherish love between lovers, between mothers and children, between all people of golden skin.”⁴⁸ To that end, his medium, *ca khúc*, the popular song, proved “one of the most influential mediums for protest and for the expression of sentiments about the war.”⁴⁹

Whereas Pham Duy early on had used the *ca khúc* to boost military morale, foster troop unity, and convey or reinforce nationalist revolutionary ideology, Trinh Cong Son, through his progressive usage of the *ca khúc*, had almost unwittingly become his Vietnamese generation’s Bob Dylan, capturing the hearts of Vietnamese “like no other musician living in the late 1960s.” He challenged his government’s “headlong pursuit of war with songs about love and peace,” urging that his audiences realize the

⁴⁷ Critics and fans alike dubbed many of the songs Son wrote between 1965 and the war’s end in 1975 as “antiwar” because of their humanistic and pacifist content. Norton, 110.

⁴⁸ Shafer, “Trinh Cong Son,” 610.

⁴⁹ Norton, 97.

American cliché en vogue at the time to “make love, not war.”⁵⁰ In “Love Song of a Mad Person,” Son sang of a Vietnam once again thrusting itself into those tragic places where love and the often sudden, always violent vicissitudes of war intersect: “I love someone just killed last night/Killed by chance, killed with no appointment/killed without hate, dead as a dream.” With his Buddhist background and existentialist intellectual milieu colliding with another bloody war, such introspective lyrics seem quite understandable, even natural, and Vietnamese of all regions, classes, and most importantly, political persuasions, responded, much to the chagrin of leaders on both sides.⁵¹

Son’s popularity spread because his songs were timely and relevant to all Vietnamese, expressing emotions and ideas whose time had come. “Young men were being drafted and killed, artillery batteries boomed in the night, Russian-made rockets were landing in city streets, and American troops were everywhere. The events set the rhetorical tinder, and Son provided the spark.”⁵² He had, much like Bob Dylan or Joan, become “the spokesperson for an entire generation,” giving voice to “the private thoughts of many,” regardless of political or religious affiliation or geographic location.⁵³ More intriguing still (and likely infuriating for leaders North and South trying to rally political initiates and adherents), Son appealed to a broad spectrum of the Vietnamese population precisely because he remained politically *non-aligned*. He

⁵⁰ Ibid, 99; Shafer, “Trinh Cong Son,” 610.

⁵¹ Shafer, “Trinh Cong Son,” 608.

⁵² Ibid., 612. See also, Jamieson, “The Development of Urban *Yin* Subsystems,” 318-338, in *Understanding Vietnam*.

⁵³ Shafer., 613-14.

never wrote or sang “on behalf of any ‘-ism’ unless it was humanism.”⁵⁴ In South Vietnam’s politically volatile atmosphere of the 1960s and 1970s, people struggled to find a voice they could trust, and they felt like they could trust Son simply because of his emotional transparency and political neutrality, believing he harbored “no ulterior political motives.”⁵⁵ Vietnamese citizens and soldiers alike cared far less about partisan politics and its touchy, even dogmatic adherence to ideology than they did about more universal goals such as peace, first, and then independence, reunification, and national self-determination.

Just as Trinh Cong Son’s transparency and neutrality won him almost overnight respect and celebrity, especially among intellectuals and university students, at the same time they also earned him a significant number of detractors. While Son insisted his antiwar stance and songs derived from a fierce love of country, the Vietnamese people, and his desire to see them survive and thrive, Northern authorities denounced his music as antithetical to Vietnamese nationalism because it opposed war generally and neglected to distinguish “a war of invasion from a war to liberate the people.”⁵⁶ Much like they had done with Duy ten years previously, officials North and South worried that Son’s music, his pacifist message, and his rapidly growing almost cult following would all combine to sap their people’s will to fight for their respective governments’ objectives.

In 1967, an ARVN draft notice ended Son’s teaching career and threatened to derail his musical career, too, but he still managed to avoid military service by various

⁵⁴ Ibid., 615.

⁵⁵ Ibid., 614-15.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 624.

means, including ingesting purgatives to lower body weight and deliberately fail medical exams. After that, he mostly just lived a bohemian lifestyle, crashing at artist enclaves and bathing in coffee house restroom sinks. It was while moving about the country dodging the draft, however, that a peripatetic Son began witnessing firsthand so much more of the horrors that fighting concurrent wars – the American War and a Vietnamese civil war – inflicted on his fellow Vietnamese. A consummate artist, Son found himself unable to avoid reacting in song to the grotesque horrors unfolding all over Vietnam. His gift for using words unwittingly created the role for himself as an almost *de facto* combat correspondent. Though not precisely or specifically producing ballads of historical narrative, Son still had begun to infuse his lyrics with more journalistic realism, chronicling and reporting to his large and influential audiences many of the ugly truths with which so many Vietnamese could relate.

Perhaps more than any other force of personal growth and change, the widespread death and destruction that Son witnessed in Hue during the 1968 Tet Offensive seems to have solidified his transformation from love song writer to Vietnamese peacenik war chronicler. After seeing corpses “strewn in the streets and rivers, on the steps of empty houses, and in the famous berry field where so many bodies were found, many of them killed by National Liberation Front and North Vietnamese execution squads,” he penned among the most haunting and graphic of all his antiwar songs, “A Song Dedicated to All the Corpses,” which bluntly inventories Hue’s macabre post-Tet scenery.⁵⁷ In the third stanza particularly, Son struggles to

⁵⁷ Ibid., 613-14.

negotiate the incomprehensible plurality of unrecognizable remains, among them
somewhere, those of his own brother:

Corpses float on the water, dry in the fields
On the city rooftops, on the winding streets
Corpses lie abandoned under the eaves of the pagoda
On the road to the city churches, on the floors of deserted houses

Oh, Springtime, corpses will nourish the plowed soil
Oh, Viet Nam, corpses will lend themselves to the soil of tomorrow
The approaching roads, though thorny and winding
Already filled with corpses

Corpses lie around here, in the cold rain
Next to corpses of the old and weak
We have corpses of the young and innocent
Which one of these corpses is my brother,
In the bomb craters and the trenches ?
In each burnt area, by the corn and sweet potato fields?⁵⁸

If war has been said to age people decades almost overnight, then Son's artistic voice post-Tet had unmistakably matured from that of a sentimental, metaphorical love song writer to a much more candid, sobered, even awestruck combat correspondent submitting "reports on the war."⁵⁹ Atypical in their realism when compared to his earlier works, now Son's lyrics enumerated actual battles (Battle of Pleime, Dong Xoai) and real weapons and equipment (Claymores, grenades, illumination flares), the latter seen most clearly in "A Lullaby of Cannons for the Night":⁶⁰

The cannons wake up a mother
The cannons disturb a young child
At midnight a flare shines in the mountains
[. . .]

⁵⁸ Trinh Cong Son, "Bài ca dành cho những xác người," (1968). Translated by Tran Duy Tinh as "A Song Dedicated to All the Corpses," <http://www.tcs-home.org/songs-en/songs/a-song-dedicated-to-all-the-corpses> (accessed August 22, 2013).

⁵⁹ Shafer, "Trinh Cong Son," 613.

⁶⁰ Ibid., 612.

Son's listeners no doubt related to his description of everything from the war's unending din to its unwelcome and inevitable consequences:

Every night cannons resound in the town
A street cleaner stops sweeping and listens

Each flight of the planes frightens the child
Destroying the shelter, tearing golden skin
Each night the native land's eyes stay open wide

Thousands of bombs rain down on the village
Thousands of bombs rain down on the field
And Vietnamese homes burn bright in the hamlet

Thousands of trucks with Claymores and grenades
Thousands of trucks enter the cities
Carrying the remains of mothers, sisters, brothers

Every night cannons resound in the town
A street cleaner stops sweeping and listens
[. . .]

No politics. No finger pointing. Just a candid account of Vietnamese people hearing the sounds, seeing the sights, and feeling the pain and anxiety of children's future snuffed out:

Every night cannon shells create a future without life
Cannons like a chant without a prayer
Children forget to live and anxiously await

Every night cannons resound in the town
A street cleaner stops sweeping and listens

Every night cannons sing a lullaby for golden skin
The cannons sound like a prelude to a familiar sad song
And children are gone before they see their native land.⁶¹

In another chilling, Tet-inspired number, "Now I Sing the Dead," Son tried his

⁶¹ Shafer, "Trinh Cong Son," 636-7.

hand at a rather dark, almost satirical commentary on the war. Corpses contaminate his pastoral scenery as he relates how survivors seemed to have been driven almost fanatically insane by the sight:

Afternoon on the hills, singing on the corpses –
I have seen, I have seen by the garden –
A mother clutching her dead child.
A mother claps over her child's corpse,
A mother cheers for peace –
Some people clap for harmony,
Others cheer catastrophe ...;⁶²

Barley Norton's translation of the same number suggests a more quarrelsome interpretation. In his rendering, the Vietnamese clap for all sorts of personal, cultural, and even situational reasons other than to applaud or cheer events and circumstances, but the common thread is a mirror of Vietnam in 1968 – people and their motives and actions at odds with one another:

Afternoon by the mulberry groves,
Singing on the corpses.
I have seen, I have seen,
Trenches filled with corpses.

A mother claps to welcome war,
A sister cheers for peace.
Some people clap for more hatred,
Some clap to repent.⁶³

Whichever the case, whether indicating madness or that his people expressed widely variant emotions through clapping their hands, Son captured much of Hue's surreality during the Tet Offensive, and as succinctly and abruptly as any newsreel. In one last rendering, Patrick Gallagher's take on Trinh Cong Son's eyewitness account

⁶² Ibid., 614.

⁶³ Norton, 113.

emphasizes how death in Tet's urban combat environment proved indiscriminate, no respecter of race, age, or gender:

Noon, by berry groves
Now I sing the dead
By a road, I have seen, I have seen
Old man hugs his stone cold son

Noon, by berry groves
Now I sing the dead
I have seen, I have seen, ditches, shelters
Filled with bodies, his and hers.⁶⁴

Regardless of translation, what remains constant is Son juxtaposing Hue's physical beauty with a scale of devastation vast enough to fill buildings and ditches with human remains.

As much as the grotesqueness that Son witnessed strewn all around him during Tet consumed him, shaped his political paradigm, and thus inhabited his music, his graphic depictions of dead Vietnamese defiling the once picturesque streets and fruit orchards of imperial Hue changed little for those occupying the seats of power, at least initially.⁶⁵ They each, American and North and South Vietnamese leaders, merely resounded repeatedly and resolutely that the war would end only when they secured the military and political victories they sought. President Lyndon Johnson's January 10, 1967, State of the Union address before Congress, intending to vilify North Vietnamese and VC while reassuring the American people about the US course in Vietnam, stated

⁶⁴ Trinh Cong Son, "Hát trên những xác người," (1968). Translated by Patrick Gallagher as "Now I Sing the Dead," <http://www.tcs-home.org/songs-en/songs/now-i-sing-the-dead> (accessed August 22, 2013).

⁶⁵ Authorities in both North and South Vietnam would later react rather severely to both the singer and the rapid increase of his popularity, particularly among Vietnam's more vocally antiwar elements, but at this time Trinh Cong Son saw no evidence that his songs had influenced anyone among those wielding power and making war policy.

clearly the resolve of both the US and its Vietnamese opponents:

I think I reveal no secret when I tell you that we are dealing with a stubborn adversary who is *committed* to the use of force and terror to settle political questions.... [T]he end is not yet.... *Our adversary still believes*, I think, tonight, *that he can go on fighting longer than we can, and longer than we and our allies will be prepared to stand up and resist*.... [W]e, the American people and our allies, will and are going to see Vietnam through to an honorable peace.... Until such efforts succeed, or until the infiltration ceases, or until the conflict subsides,... we must firmly pursue our present course. We will stand firm in Vietnam.⁶⁶

General Vo Nguyen Giap, North Vietnam's supreme military commander and boyhood friend of Ho Chi Minh, embodied the same hawkish perspective. When asked how long he was prepared to fight, Giap replied instantly "Another twenty, even a hundred years, as long as it took to win, regardless of cost."⁶⁷ In his mind and the minds of millions of other nationalist patriots like Giap, the Vietnamese had been fighting for thousands of years for the right to rule themselves, and they would keep fighting until they realized their dreams of a unified, autonomous, sovereign Vietnam at peace and free from external influence. And while no records exist in English translation of Son claiming outright to have been trying to sicken the Vietnamese people into pressuring and petitioning their leaders to a quick peace, his lyrics suggest little else. The fact that his people were engaging each other in such a bloody, destructive, literally earthshattering endeavor appears only to have compounded Son's grief and frustration. Thus, his candor and grotesquery only intensified in these increasingly antiwar *ca khúc*

⁶⁶ Lyndon B. Johnson, "Annual Message to Congress on the State of the Union," (address, U.S. Capital Building, Washington, D.C., January 10, 1967); from *Public Papers of the President of the United States: Lyndon B. Johnson, 1967*, Vol. I, entry 3, (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1968), 2-14; <http://www.lbjlib.utexas.edu/johnson/archives.hom/speeches.hom/670110.asp>, (accessed August 25, 2013), [*Emphasis mine*].

⁶⁷ Karnow, "Giap Remembers."

—along with his apparent resolve to make war so distasteful as to bring about its none-too-premature end.

Though policymakers on both sides of the war certainly did not abandon their military means to political ends, clearly Son had drawn more of their close attention than he initially suspected. As his songs grew ever-increasingly more popular *because* of the antiwar sentiments they articulated, authorities on both sides of the 17th parallel grew proportionally more alarmed. RVN government officials objected to Son publicizing their failure, as he did in a damning account of the death of Luu Kim Cong, an air force officer of the Saigon regime, as well as in “For Someone Who Has Fallen,” his eulogy for a friend killed at Tan Son Nhat Airport during Tet.⁶⁸ In the North, Communist Party officials strenuously protested one song’s lyrics in particular, which impugned China, France, even Vietnam itself for its plight of unbroken decades of war, as if the United States hadn’t started this latest one:

A thousand years of Chinese reign
A hundred years of French domain
Twenty years fighting brothers each day
A mother's fate, bones left to dry
And graves that fill a mountain high

Teach your children to speak their minds
Don't let them forget their kind
Never forget their kind, from old Viet land
Mother wait for your kids to come home
Kids who now so far away roam
Children of one father, be reconciled

A thousand years of Chinese reign
A hundred years of French domain
Twenty years fighting brothers each day

⁶⁸ Shafer, “Trinh Cong Son,” 624.

A mother's fate, our fields so dead
And rows of homes in flames so red.⁶⁹

Son had become his country's most vocal and public peacenik, implicating war itself first and foremost—primarily civil war, Vietnamese killing Vietnamese. Worse still, according to DRV and NLF officials, Son indicted the Chinese and French while completely neglecting to indict the Americans, who in fact were even then occupying and devastating Vietnam. With such an outspoken and dangerously popular cultural figure and pop icon demonizing war while simultaneously encouraging any Vietnamese peaceniks in his audiences also to “speak their minds,” the Vietnamese Communist Party banned Son's rabble-rousing music. Officials in RVN President Nguyen Van Thieu's Ministry of Information also prohibited the circulation of Son's antiwar music in any format, audio or print. For their own manifold yet dubious reasons, they shared Northern authorities' fear of unfettered freedom of expression, but they also cited other difficulties with Son's pacifist messages: apparently his songs had persuaded “many Republican soldiers to desert.”⁷⁰

The RVN's new repressive censorship measures amounted to *de facto* government-issued gag orders, but to Son and his audiences it mattered little. First, by the time it occurred to Thieu to ban Son's antiwar music, it had already been circulating widely for a few years, particularly among Vietnam's pacifist-leaning university students and urban intelligentsia. Consequently, Thieu's latent, knee-jerk censorship could do little to reverse or further prevent its message circulating. If anything it

⁶⁹ Trinh Cong Son, “Gia tài của mẹ,” (1968). Translated by Richard Fuller as “A Mother's Heritage,” <http://www.tcs-home.org/songs-en/songs/a-mother-s-heritage>, (accessed August 22, 2013).

⁷⁰ Shafer, “Trinh Cong Son,” 620, 624.

confirmed in the minds of many Vietnamese that the South's allegedly democratic Republican executive was nothing more than another autocrat whose reactionary measures to squelch artistic expression only gave the lie to any claims that he and his American benefactors were fighting for Vietnamese freedoms. And with human nature being what it is and its tendency to rebel against prohibition, ironically for the Thieu administration, outlawing Son's music only increased both his popularity and notoriety. To worsen matters, among sympathetic Vietnamese and foreign journalists who only proliferated his renown, Son was elevated to almost heroic status. Among Republican government officials, however, he earned the status of criminal – particularly when he ignored the ban and began printing his song lyrics and producing cassettes illegally, essentially pirating his own music for any who dared to share his message of peace.⁷¹

Second, Trinh Con Song refused to silence himself and continued to resound his clarion call for peace and brotherhood among Vietnamese of every station and political persuasion. Through his music, he desperately petitioned leaders for audience while indicting both the respective Vietnamese governments for waging war and using their citizens as cannon fodder to realize divergent national political goals. "Speak for Me," which had been performed and circulated widely since 1967, typifies the song types Thieu sought to silence. In it, Son's narrator addresses unspecified policymakers who presumably had been ignoring the Vietnamese people, a body politic which Son believed possessed a national agenda quite at odds with Vietnamese war planners on

⁷¹ Ibid., 620.

both sides of the conflict. His narrator's petitions predictably fall on willfully deaf ears, and his lyrics would prove eerily historically prescient, especially considering how the RVN government consistently refused to alter its political and military objectives for anyone, even after political and military realities had demonstrated it was too late. Not surprisingly, the narrator's audience of obstinate national leaders never responds:

Can anybody hear?
Can anybody hear
The voices of the Vietnamese people?
Who yearn only for peace
Within the dismal night,
Who yearn for the day
Where warmth will embrace their souls?
[. . .]

Son's unanswered plea served as poetic indictment of the respective Vietnamese governmental power structures too stubborn, too driven, or too singularly-minded to consider any course but their own. Neither, though, did Son's indictment spare his fellow countrymen, Vietnam's very own Silent Majority, whose long-quiet voices and lack of effective political action Son seems to have equated with complicity in the war effort:

Live for me
Speak for me
Breathe for me
It's been so long, why are you still waiting?
Why are you still sitting,
Silently sleeping, my brothers?
[. . .]

Finally, Son disdains the dogma and demeanor of those Vietnamese, either warmakers or citizens, who had blindly convinced themselves that all the devastating destruction and destitution that the war had visited on the Vietnamese people equated

to—or could somehow constitute—a Vietnamese victory:

Live for me
Speak for me
Breathe for me
What else is there to see besides the ravaging flames of war?
My people,
How can you rejoice being nothing but beggars?⁷²

Clearly, Trinh Cong Son was unafraid to level the finger of accusation at any and everyone around him who either sat idly by or marched resolutely yet indiscriminately toward war and “victory” without regularly assessing or considering whether their ultimate value to the future of the Vietnamese people merited such costly human expenditures.

Son’s outspoken pacifism may not have been his only bane. Though no known official government records reveal as much, Trinh Cong Son may have taxed the patience of leadership on both sides of the 17th parallel for his fairly clear-cut progressive feminism as well. While both North and South Vietnamese as well as Vietcong forces fielded female combatants, having been heavily steeped in a strict Confucian social order for centuries, Vietnamese cultural norms as a whole in many ways relegated women to the bottom strata of its social hierarchy. Consequently, Vietnamese conservatives would have interpreted any challenge to the primacy of such social norms and cultural traditions as dangerous.⁷³ By the time of the American War, however, Son’s more modern, university-educated generation, heavily influenced by

⁷² Trinh Cong Son, “Hãy nói giúp tôi,” (1967). Translated by Gigi as “Speak for Me,” <http://www.tcs-home.org/songs-en/songs/speak-for-me>, (accessed August 26, 2013).

⁷³ One notable exception is female warriors, revered for centuries dating back to the Trung Sisters. The “Long-Haired Warriors,” as they came to be known during the American War, will be discussed at greater length below.

progressive Western philosophy, had begun to liberalize socially, much to the consternation of Vietnamese Communists and Republicans alike. They attributed such cultural and ideological corruption not to social enlightenment, but rather to decadent Western liberalism that valued women – the presumed social inferiors – as social equals. Yet Son exploited and advanced his generation’s more enlightened feminist positions, likely earning even more ire from his elders with another of his antiwar numbers.

While more a contemporaneous social commentary on the costs of war and the value of human life – even female human life – than an explicit account of actual events, “Girl with Yellow Skin” stands out as particularly progressive for its time and location because it humanized one “long-haired warrior” casualty while simultaneously decrying warfare once again:

[...]
You've never known our land in peace
You've never known olden Viet Nam
You've never sung our village songs
All you have is an angry heart

Passing by the village gate
In the night with guns booming low
Girl so young, you clutch your heart
On soft skin a bleeding wound grows

Girl so young, with skin like gold
Home you love like fields of grain
Girl so young, with skin like gold
You love home which is no more

O! Unfeeling and heartless death
Dark our land, thousands of years
Home, my sister, you've come alone

And I, alone, still search for you.⁷⁴

Son's songs constitute among the most compact, efficient, yet insightful commentaries on not just the history of the American War in Vietnam, but Vietnamese social history as well. In a few short stanzas, he chronicles much: Vietnam has been torn by war for at least the entire lifetime of his song's heroine. Vietcong field surgeon Dang Tuy Tram corroborates that such realities were commonplace. In her diary entry from 10 October 1968, she lamented that hundreds of thousands of her comrades were born, lived, and died knowing "only suffering and hardships," never knowing "a single day of happiness" because Vietnam had been at war with itself their entire lives.⁷⁵ Similarly, Son's "Girl with Yellow Skin" has never known a life of happiness, only anger, presumably at those foreign or even domestic powers who pushed her nation into war. Furthermore, contrary to what Vietnamese Confucian traditionalists might have believed, this girl, like so many Vietnamese daughters and sisters and mothers who died prematurely, was deeply loved, respected, and revered and would be just as deeply grieved and missed. The home she loved in the village she loved had been destroyed by war, and since the war still raged, her lifeless remains shipped home alone while others remained away fighting. More tragic, however, with no family members left alive to mourn her or receive her remains at the ancestral family burial plot, only her lover continued to look for her, a task at best complicated, at worst, made impossible, not only by the chaos of war but by the particular attitudes the Vietnamese

⁷⁴ Trinh Cong Son, "Người con gái Việt Nam," (1967). Translated by Rich Fuller as "Girl with Yellow Skin," <http://www.tcs-home.org/songs-en/songs/girl-with-yellow-skin>, (accessed August 26, 2013).

⁷⁵ Dang Tuy Tram, *Last Night I Dreamed of Peace: The Diary of Dang Thuy Tram*, (New York: Harmony Books, 2007), 58.

felt about death, particularly combat death.

Such was yet another way in which Son's "Girl with Yellow Skin" distinguished his paradigms from more traditional Vietnamese ones. Millions of Vietnamese fought in combat roles in the American War, including 1.5 million women. Nearly a million Vietnamese died fighting on both sides of the conflict. More than 300,000 civilians in and around the war-proper were killed, with another 65,000 dying in American bombardment of the North. And with more than 300,000 who remained missing, either in action or as civilian "collateral damage," tragically hopeful Vietnamese like the song's narrator often continued looking for disappeared loved ones for decades, never knowing even a hint of the missing's presumed last-known whereabouts, let alone the circumstances of their deaths.⁷⁶ Because they considered many other aspects of their war effort so much more deserving of their time, energy, and resources, neither Vietnamese government typically ever bothered even to locate troop remains, let alone return them to surviving family members – unless the casualty was a guerrilla killed near his home village. Sending any official notification at the time of the death of a loved one was just as rare. When David Chanoff asked a North Vietnamese Army infantry officer how he dealt with notifying surviving family members about combat deaths, the officer looked at Chanoff like he was crazy. "We never did it," he said. Rather, the officer emphasized his own soldiers' willingness to sacrifice themselves:

If you were dead, you were dead. You had watered the soil of the fatherland with your blood. Nobody could expect to do more than that with their lives. As far as the bodies went, if local guerrillas had been killed, there was an attempt to get them back to their families. If the dead were Northerners or main force

⁷⁶ Hunt, 123-4.

guerrillas from somewhere else, there was nothing to do, even if the bodies could be recovered. Notification of the families wasn't important.⁷⁷

Another NVA officer concurred. A doctor speaking of differing American and Vietnamese values concerning the dead and missing, he noted with almost disdainful incredulity, "You Americans even want to find their bones."⁷⁸ Within such cultural contexts and values systems, it is reasonable to suppose that Son's "Girl with Yellow Skin" secured Son the scorn of North and South Vietnamese leadership and traditionalists alike because it humanized the loss of a single person—a woman, no less—but an individual who Party authorities as well as Vietnamese Confucian traditionalists would have considered expendable to the greater good. Son considered no one expendable. And while no records have emerged that document the fact that either Ho's DRV or Thieu's Republican government banned Son's songs because of his liberal feminism along with his pacifism, in such a traditionally conservative Confucian culture, it is certainly reasonable to suppose that heroicizing a singular Vietnamese female and then tragicizing, memorializing, and publicizing her death earned him few points among North or South Vietnamese leadership.⁷⁹

Though Son's message pushed boundaries, its mode of doing so was nothing

⁷⁷ David Chanoff, "Afterword," in *Vietnam: A Portrait of Its People at War*, David Chanoff and Doan Van Toai, eds., (New York: I.B. Tauris Publishers, 1996), 204-5.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 205.

⁷⁹ The final irony in the whole Trinh Cong Song phenomenon was that, perhaps inevitably, even peaceniks so tired of war that they seemed willing to embrace almost any means to see it end, including, paradoxically, even war itself, as suggested by Son's late-1968 release, "Hue Saigon Hanoi." In one interpretation, its uncharacteristic, almost proto-Duyan, nationalist lyrics hint that Son finally chose a political side after all: "A million brothers and sisters in all regions rise up and revolt,/The time has come for young people to join together,/To take pioneering steps,/From the Center, the South, and the North/People wait to light torches hailing freedom." *Ibid.*, 624. Still, perhaps Son's peacenik fan base had needn't lose heart. In another interpretation, "pioneering steps" meant that the "brothers and sisters" "rise up" in peace and "revolt" against war. For Vietnamese everywhere at that time, rising up for peace instead of to fight one another would have been pioneering, indeed.

new. The same Party leaders who had once weaponized Pham Duy during the Franco-Vietnamese War had long understood music's power influence and motivate people. Just as they feared Son's pacifist and other messages – the “wrong” messages – could potentially shake the people's faith in the justness, wisdom, or even the sanity of war were they ever to reach the ears of current or future revolutionary combatants, the government also knew that the *right* kind of revolutionary music could just as effectively help guerrillas overcome fears of fighting to the death – even Vietnamese deaths – to secure peace and national reunification. In order to prevent “overt forms of musical protest against the war” from arising, authorities from the Revolution's inception had strictly controlled cultural expression, even before Son's popularity had swelled into a nationwide phenomenon.⁸⁰ Yet even while moving to silence artistic dissent, both Communist and Republican leadership also employed and deployed music in order to shape public sentiment and foster the will to continue fighting for each of their respective causes. Such realities illustrate how music proved a dynamic “forum of intense ideological struggle between those who wished to use music to incite armed combat” and those songwriters and their audience members who opposed war.⁸¹

North Vietnamese leaders utilizing music to “incite armed combat” and encourage PAVN and NLF forces proved increasingly necessary – and systematic – after 1965 when the US initiated aerial bombardment operations like “Flaming Dart” and “Rolling Thunder,” which struck into the heart of North Vietnam. High-altitude B-52 bombers launched from US air bases in Thailand and the island of Guam not only

⁸⁰ Norton, 117.

⁸¹ Ibid., 109.

wrought incalculable casualties while destroying North Vietnamese supply lines and infrastructure, the sheer scale and tonnage of the bombing proved an equally debilitating, destabilizing, and demoralizing psychological warfare weapon. In fact, by the American War's end, the US had deployed over 7 million tons of bombs on North and South Vietnam, more than twice the tonnage dropped on the entire European and Asian theaters combined throughout all of World War II.⁸² The North had long since standardized compulsory ideological training for its fighters, but the intensifying American War and its offspring destruction and widespread fear necessitated additional measures. With US bombs raining doom indiscriminately from the skies and Radio Saigon transmitting Son's potentially infectious pacifism (at least before Thieu's ban), Northern war planners felt that the people clearly needed something to shore up their resolve to see the war effort through to victory, its only acceptable end. The troops, too, needed a dose of courage. The North would never win a war, especially against the Americans, and Vietnam would never reunify if its troops feared and avoided the enemy instead of fighting or at least harassing them. In one particularly embarrassing and combat-ineffective episode, for example, when US planes attacked members of PAVN anti-aircraft unit Company 21, instead of manning anti-aircraft guns and fighting back against the imperialist invaders, the Vietnamese troops dove for cover.⁸³

In fact, Vietnamese combatants and civilians all across the country reacted similarly to B-52 raids and artillery barrages throughout the war. In order to combat

⁸² Howard Zinn, *A People's History of the United States*, excerpted from <http://libcom.org/history/1957-1975-the-vietnam-war>, (accessed December 20, 2013).

⁸³ Norton, 103.

such paralytic fear, misgivings, or a waning will to fight, Northern leaders systematized, instituted, and implemented revolutionary musical training in what became known as “Song Drowns Out the Sound of Bombs” movement. It prescribed such morale- and will-bolstering measures as mass participation in musical activities, learning songs like To Hai’s “Ready, Fire!” to sing while under attack. The strategy worked. The movement’s nearly immediate successes prompted military and political leaders to think even more broadly, and they began deploying other artists and art forms to vanquish fears and incite combat. The Vietnamese Communist Party, the North Vietnamese Army, and the National Liberation Front each assigned personnel to forward areas of operation to produce art exhibitions, present dance performances, plays, and poetry readings, all to reinforce ideology, lift morale, sustain the will to fight, and at times, even celebrate military success.⁸⁴

These units should never be confused with anything the American U.S.O. that performed for U.S. troops all over South Vietnam throughout the war. They were actual troops, issued arms and expected to fight and serve in whatever ways they were ordered to in order to achieve military and eventually, the ultimate political objectives. They shared all the same living conditions and combat circumstances as combat troops. For example, a female singer in the North Vietnamese Army, Thai Na, described living life underground at the battle of Khe Sanh: “One of my jobs was to look after the POWs. I brought food and fetched water for them. They had more food than we did! I was so

⁸⁴ Ibid. The Vietcong artists formally assigned throughout the war to such morale-building posts became particularly adept at exhibiting their art form while simultaneously fighting a guerrilla war in the rice paddies, jungles, and mountain highlands of South Vietnam. Vietcong visual artists in one NLF-controlled area got to where they could assemble, mount, view, and dissemble a painting exhibition of their collective works in minutes! See Buchanan, *Mekong Diaries*, 67.

thin, so sick, malaria. So many of my friends died. Many went crazy. Leeches sucked our blood. Leeches went into my ears.”⁸⁵ Nguyen Van Truc, a gentle and soft-spoken artist who did propaganda work for the revolutionary cause, lived underground in Long An without seeing daylight for *five years*, coming out only at night.⁸⁶ And unlike their U.S.O. counterparts who lived in a virtual lap of luxury, comparatively speaking, Vietnamese personnel operated at a stark material disadvantage to their American and ARVN counterparts. Their forces, whether NVA regulars or VC guerrillas, lacked virtually everything they needed to fight the war. War artist Nguyen Toan Thi recalled, “We had no anesthetic during surgery. We didn’t even have enough bandages. We boiled the bandages and used them over and over again.”⁸⁷ In spite of their difficult circumstances, their efforts bore fruit. So successful were various artists and media at facilitating, perpetuating, and cementing indoctrination and motivation that they were soon systematized as standard indoctrination and motivation protocols. One set of captured NLF documents show the “Deputy Secretary of the Party Chapter” himself prescribing “poems, songs, folk songs, bulletins, plays, shows” as “Forms under which the Political Indoctrination Task can be Implemented.”⁸⁸

The NVA and Vietcong implemented arts programs in the field for more than just raising morale. Often they employed artists for the same reasons American forces did. Visual artists in the Vietnamese forces, for instance, served in a similar capacity to American forces’ combat correspondents. Their job was simply to capture the war. Yet

⁸⁵ Ibid., 17.

⁸⁶ Ibid.

⁸⁷ Ibid., 23.

⁸⁸ “Excerpts from the Notebook of the Deputy Secretary of the Party Chapter: ‘Political Indoctrination Program for the Military Training Phase,’” Document No. 4, “Elliott & Elliot, RM-5851, 28.

because North Vietnam and revolutionaries in the South simply didn't have the same wartime resources as their enemies, combat artists carried art supplies instead of cameras and film. As troops themselves, they shared fighters' wandering and nomadic existence, and though circumstances frequently dictated that they, too, face and fight the enemy, most of the time they just drew or painted. Usually sketching on the move, they captured forces "moving camp or on the way to fight, crossing plains, rivers and mountains." Their array of subject matter was considerable. For instance, combat artists managed to preserve for posterity some remarkably accurate visual records of Vietnamese weaponry and ammunition, ranging from "U.S. ammunition boxes recycled for guerrillas' use, homemade grenades, Molotov cocktails – the IEDs (improvised explosive devices) of the time, to 'monster crossbows,' AK-47s and portable mortars vital to the Viet Cong, forever on the move."⁸⁹

Morale, however, did prove a consideration, even for combat visual artists. Unlike American combat correspondents and photographers, Vietnamese combat artists did not depict just anything or everything they saw – for what to them at the time were patently obvious reasons. Combat artists exercised deliberate subjectivity in their depictions. As historical resources, the highly subjective subject matter of combat art should not impair its worth, however. Rather, it should be understood as a byproduct of the circumstances and cultural values among revolutionary Vietnamese. For example, facing overwhelming manpower, firepower, and seemingly endless resources, the Vietnamese faced a daunting task if they were to maintain discipline and

⁸⁹ Buchanan, 28.

morale for as long as it took to expel the Americans and reunify their country. Functioning simultaneously as documentarians and propagandists, combat artists typically portrayed their Vietnamese subjects romantically, as might be seen in elegant portraits of female troops in the “long-haired army” or “heroic fighters living undercover in occupied territory.” However, they felt no misgivings about depicting the “despair and devastation of their land,” as seen in occasional renderings of “lone, mournful figures in bombed out landscapes” such as “the scorched slopes of Black Virgin Mountain.” Too, combat artists would often capture “their dismay at fighting other Vietnamese” by crafting “mournful portraits of South Vietnamese prisoners of war being treated for their wounds.”⁹⁰

Force morale considerations were not the only reasons combat artists depicted almost no graphic images of suffering. Sometimes it was a time issue. “A photographer can just go click,” suggests Nguyen Toan Thi. “I was drawing and I was fighting. I saw my friends dying. As an artist, I had to sit down and draw the gore. I couldn’t do that.” For others it was an intestinal fortitude issue. Hanoi-based artist, Van Da, recalls, “Bombs exploded in people’s stomachs. I just didn’t have the stomach to draw that.” For others, it simply came down to individual choice on what message they would communicate with their art. Le Lam notes, “A photographer documents atrocities, the artist must portray life.” Pham Thanh Tam agreed, and added, “There is an aesthetic in war. Because war is too hard, it is the artist’s duty to create beauty.” Regardless of self-imposed limitations on subject matter, combat art, like other troop-

⁹⁰ Ibid., 28, 31.

produced sources, documented a wide array of Vietnamese men, women, and children's experiences in the American war. And since they were almost always dated and inscribed as in a diary, the artists' factual inscriptions seem very clearly to reflect their desire to record events they were experiencing and suggest that these remarkable men and women understood quite clearly the "documentary aspect of the drawings." In the final analysis, however, these artists created their art as a means to retain their humanity in grossly inhumane settings and circumstances.⁹¹

Numerous sources testify to the effectiveness of music, song, and other arts for boosting or preserving morale and recognizing the humanity in Vietnamese combat units. One particular collection of witness testimony survives thanks to the efforts of an American soldier-poet, Larry Rottman, who served with the U.S. Army's 25th Infantry Division in 1967 and 1968. Rottman traveled back to Vietnam some nine times after the American War because of "the nagging – and eventually undeniable – conviction that I had overlooked and/or completely misunderstood the history, culture, and character of the Vietnamese people, for whom the war itself was supposedly being fought."⁹² Over the course of these many visits, Rottmann spoke at length with Vietnamese "politicians and peasants; businessmen and fishermen; soldiers and veterans; poets and prostitutes; musicians and physicians; teachers and students; monks and thieves; old folks and young children." The lengthy conversations, "some of which lasted for hours; others which have continued through visits over a period of several years; others which are still ongoing" ultimately put Rottmann in a unique position to collect, document, and

⁹¹ Ibid., 31, 35.

⁹² Larry Rottman, *Voices from the Ho Chi Minh Trail: Poetry of America and Vietnam, 1965 – 1993*, (Desert Hot Springs, CA: Event Horizon Press, 1993), 200.

preserve the oral histories of dozens of average, everyday Vietnamese combatants and war witnesses.⁹³ Without Rottmann's efforts, these native stories might never have been told in the West—a place where despite the “literally thousands of works of fiction, nonfiction, poetry, drama, history, photo-essays, comic books and works of indeterminate genres,” Americans have still “not yet managed to get [the Vietnamese perspective] right.”⁹⁴ One of Rottmann's informants in particular, incidentally, testified during their conversation to the power of song to boost morale even in the midst of seemingly overwhelming circumstances:

I was always very small,
even for a woman.
Yet I was trained as a nurse
to help our wounded fighters return North.

They never complained when rations were short,
Or when we ran out of morphine for their pain.
I sued to walk alongside the trucks and litters,
trying to cheer the soldiers by singing folk songs.

The stern cadres
reprimanded me constantly, saying,
“Don't violate security!”
“Maintain noise discipline!”

But the songs were good medicine,
and the injured comrades (when they could)
would often sing along.
It was better than listening for the bombs.⁹⁵

While the “Folk Song Nurse” had not been assigned officially to the various arts

⁹³ Ibid.

⁹⁴ Bruce Weigl, non-paginated “Forward,” in *ibid.*

⁹⁵ Rottmann, a Vietnam War poet himself, has chosen in *Voices from the Ho Chi Minh Trail* to render his informants' recollections and comments in poetry, arguably for the abundance of power, imagery, emotion, even facts it can convey in the briefest of literary space. His choice to do so seems perfectly fitting, both for such a poetic culture and for his informants' oral histories convey. Rottman, “Folk Song Nurse,” in *Voices from the Ho Chi Minh Trail*, 153.

programs that the Northern government, the Vietnamese Communist Party, and the NLF employed, her testimony embodies “Song Drowns Out the Sounds of Bombs.” Music proved a much-needed morale booster shot all over Vietnam, from downtown Hanoi through the mountain jungles of the Central Highlands to the rice paddies of the southernmost reaches of the Mekong Delta. Now instead of hiding, troops resolutely fought back against even the most terrorizing American attacks. They still hid at times and deployed hit-and-run tactics, but units previously rendered combat-ineffective during American aerial assaults now apparently used music before, during, and after engagements. On one occasion, after shooting down an American F4 and two F105s, the very same Company 21 whose self-preservation instincts once moved its members to dive for cover now celebrated their military successes musically with songs accompanied by a mandolin, a Vietnamese two-stringed fiddle, and a small drum.⁹⁶

The arts were everywhere in wartime Vietnam. Another of Rottmann’s informants, Nguyen Thi Kim, spoke with him at length of her life and times performing for troops during the American War:

My name is Madam Nguyen Thi Kim,
and I am a former member
of the Vietnam Song, Dance and Musical Ensemble
from Hanoi.

I was only just out of high school when I was asked to join,
and had lived in the comfortable city all my life.
But my singing and dancing skills were needed
to encourage our fighters in their patriotic resolve.

Our twelve-member troupe traveled along the trail
constantly for eight years,

⁹⁶ Norton, 103.

giving up to 28 shows per month.
We performed in jungle clearings and in caves,
on mountain tops and in tunnels.

We wore elegant gowns or black peasant ba-ba's,⁹⁷
recited verses from Bac Ho or "Kim Van Kieu,"
and sang popular resistance songs like
"Saigon Rising Up," and "Making Clothes for Our Soldiers."

My favorite number was one I created to recognize
the women who carried the heavy 81 mm mortar
ammunition on shoulder poles
from the depots in the North
to our comrades in the South.

Their endless task was a fugue of brutal toil,
but they carried it out with heroics, love, and grace.
And in their honor, I called the dance
"Ballet of the Mortar Rounds."⁹⁸

Madam Kim was only one among thousands of civilian partisan revolutionaries who ultimately bought into the artistic as well as Vietnam's nationalist revolution, and like countless others, she both benefited from and served her fellow compatriots through the act of weaving the two together.

A much more isolated yet widely publicized and heroicized case than Madam Kim's tireless, year-in and year-out service happened in December 1972 as President Nixon began his devastating Christmas bombing of Hanoi, hoping one more time to drive North Vietnamese leaders to the peace table. Pham Tuyền, then head of the music service at the Voice of Vietnam Radio, wrote two songs in the very midst of seeking shelter in an air-raid bunker at 58 Quan Su street in central Hanoi. The American Air Force's B-52 bombings were so intensely violent that Pham Tuyền never

⁹⁷ Ba-Ba's: traditional peasant work clothes.

⁹⁸ Rottmann, "Ballet of the Mortar Rounds," *ibid.*, 155.

expected to survive to hear the songs performed. Yet on the evening of December 29, in effect applying the “Song Drowns Out the Sounds of Bombs” movement philosophy, Tuyền sang “Hanoi Dien Bien Phu” live on the radio, accompanying on the piano with two other singers:

When a B52 is shattered and on fire, it lights up the sky.
The spirit of Thang Long shines brightly.
[. . .]
A Dien Bien Phu battle will bury the enemy’s dreams of invasion.
Oh, Hanoi, here is Thang Long, here is Dong Do, here is Hanoi, our Hanoi!
The new Dien Bien Phu battle shines a halo of victory.
Oh, Hanoi, although it is heart breaking that the enemy has destroyed the
streets, we will stamp on the heads of the enemy.
We are so proud of Vietnam.⁹⁹

Because army leaders had christened the Hanoi bombing raids “Dien Bien Phu battle in the air,” Tuyền had decided to equate his contemporary compatriots’ fighting spirit to that of those patriots who wrought Vietnam’s immortal 1954 victory over the French. Along with Tuyền’s inspirational lyrics, a curious case of happenstance during this event further sustained and testified to the power and effectiveness of the “Song Drowns Out the Sound of Bombs” movement. Tuyền’s song’s airdate happened to coincide with the last of twelve straight days of US bombing, after which time the Americans ceased their sorties and waited to see whether the bombings would yield any political fruit along with their expected military benefits. The North Vietnamese people, however, were convinced that broadcasting nationalistic songs with brave lyrics had actually been the very act of defiance that had frightened the Americans into halting the bombing. “Everybody said that they [the Americans] must have heard the

⁹⁹ Norton, 103-4.

song so they didn't bomb anymore," Tuyên recalled.¹⁰⁰ The Americans' bombs had yielded political fruit, indeed. Ironically, however, the fruit that it produced proved to be Communists North and South who the music emboldened to fight on to victory, with a soundtrack of Vietnamese patriotism blaring in their hearts.

Resistance songs or the movements that birthed them did not always originate from the upper-echelons of the Party leadership in Hanoi who conceived of the "Song Drowns Out the Sounds of Bombs" movement or from social engineers like Lansdale in Saigon. Often they proliferated at the local grassroots level and for a very particular purpose: survival. Little in life is more personal than an individual's instinct for survival, and while they might seem rather innocuous today, at the time these next songs were sung with very particular attention to lyrics, depending on which political faction happened to be within earshot of the singers.¹⁰¹ Out in a clearing beyond the village graveyard, Vietcong cadres taught Le Ly Hayslip and her fellow South Vietnamese villagers "revolutionary songs."¹⁰² One of the first she learned sang the praises of "Bac Ho," or "Uncle Ho":

The full moon shines on our land,
So that we can sing and dance
And make wishes for Uncle Ho.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., 104.

¹⁰¹ "The Personal Is Political," was a widely used expression during the women's movement of the 1960s and 1970s that Carol Hanisch's 1969 article by that same title popularized. The saying meant to refute political conservatives' question of whether liberal consciousness-raising about women's personal issues belonged in the public political sphere. The phrase seems appropriate here because the conflict that for many Vietnamese had become a civil war had politicized the most personal of all human rights: life. Indeed, for Vietnamese caught up in the war, many of them involuntarily, singing the "wrong" song lyrics could result in them being tortured, imprisoned, or even killed.

¹⁰²This does not refer to the same "revolutionary" songs of Pham Duy in the 1940s and 1950s. The revolution to which Hayslip's "revolution" refers to all those who fought to oppose what many Vietnamese perceived to be the nation-rending puppet government of Ngo Dinh Diem and his successors. Martha Hess, ed. *Then the Americans Came: Voices from Vietnam*, (New York: Four Walls Eight Windows, 1993), 77, 80.

Uncle Ho--we wish you a long life!
We wish you a long beard that we can stroke
While you hold us in your arms
And tell us how much you love us and our country!¹⁰³

According to Hayslip, more than just trumpeting the virtues of one leader or political path or the other, singing these peasant songs could frequently prove to save or cost lives. Underscoring how politically bipolar living in South Vietnam during civil wartime could be, Hayslip later tells how in the very same village where the Vietcong taught her revolutionary songs, Republican schoolteachers made the children learn musical numbers that glorified the South Vietnamese president of her youth:

In stormy seas, Vietnam's boat rolls and pitches.
Still we must row; our President's hand upon the helm.
The ship of state plows through heavy seas,
Holding fast its course to democracy.
Our President is celebrated from Europe to Asia,
He is the image of philanthropy and love.
He has sacrificed himself for our happiness.
He fights for liberty in the land of the Viet.
Everyone loves him earnestly, and behind him we will
march
Down the street of freedom, lined with fresh flowers,
The flag of liberty crackling above our heads!¹⁰⁴

The conflicting messages of the two songs above testify to a nation of divided hearts and minds rent by civil war and the mutually destructive forces waging them. While Hayslip's loyalties initially lay with the Vietcong, when captured, imprisoned, and tortured by American-supported South Vietnamese soldiers, she had to change her tune, literally and figuratively.¹⁰⁵ Suspected of being VC, the Republican interrogators asked her if she knew a familiar revolutionary song:

¹⁰³ Hayslip, 41.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., xi.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid., 75.

We are so cheerful and happy,
We act and sing and dance,
Vietnam's stage is in sunlight,
Because Uncle Ho fills us with joy.

Le Ly Hayslip, young in physical age at the time but a virtual lifelong veteran at guerrilla warfare – and a Vietcong heroine at the time of her [first] Republican interrogation, about whom herself revolutionary songs were once written – quickly and cleverly replied that the version she knew had a different ending:

Because Ngo Dinh Diem fills us with joy.¹⁰⁶

In effect, both parties were using the same song to different ends. Republican interrogators were using songs forensically to detect and ascertain prisoners' political affiliation, which, depending on the answers received, might indicate "criminal" acts and associations punishable by torture and death. Hayslip, no stranger to the schizophrenic political liminality through which she and her fellow villagers regularly had to tread, by recognizing her captors' interrogation means herself used song lyrics cleverly and selectively in those tense moments to stay alive.

Such tales were hardly unusual. All throughout the American War, Vietnamese villagers necessarily had to tailor their political statements, even musical ones, depending on which particular government's troops were interrogating them at the time about their respective enemy's activity.¹⁰⁷ North Vietnamese and Vietcong troops and political cadres on one side and Americans and South Vietnamese troops and their political cadres on the other effectively sandwiched helpless villagers in the middle of an epic struggle between the forces of Vietnamese Communism and Western

¹⁰⁶ Ibid., 52.

¹⁰⁷ For an extended treatment of see-sawing loyalty faces, see Ibid., 26-54.

republican democracy, with village loyalty the prize. Since all that interrogators occasionally required in order to determine villagers' political affiliation was to hear them sing the right or wrong song lyrics, music proved a valuable forensic investigative tool to ferret out wartime grassroots political loyalties. Likewise, if villagers only need transpose a few lyrics to verify their proper political allegiance and escape potentially painful or even fatal reprisals for collaboration, collusion, or outright treachery, it no doubt proved an easy choice.¹⁰⁸ Le Ly Hayslip's account illustrates how songs met at the village political grassroots level some very real political and personal needs.

Whether boosting morale or bolstering martial spirit; whether vilifying the enemy or glorifying one's cause; whether inciting armed combat or petitioning for peace, the people of North and South Vietnam deployed song for manifold purposes. Songs kept people alive, in more ways than one. In the case of Duy's revolutionary songs, they could boost morale—or in the case of Son's antiwar *ca khúc*, they could sap troops' will to fight on further. Songs signaled political allegiance and affiliation. They broadcast propaganda. They functioned to chronicle human events and preserve human emotion during a trying time in which Vietnam found itself torn asunder by civil war, compounded and complicated, no less, by yet another invading Goliath. But perhaps more important with regard to the cultural history of the American War in Vietnam, songs, their functions, and what they had to say each figured far more prominently than all but a few scholars of Vietnam history have previously realized or considered.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid.

CHAPTER VII

VIETNAMESE POETRY

Must I keep filling my small diary with pages of blood?... Let's record, record completely all the blood and bones, sweat and tears that our compatriots have shed.... And in the last days of this fatal struggle, each sacrifice is even more worthy of accounting, of remembering.

–Dang Thuy Tram, Vietcong field surgeon¹

While the case has already been made in previous chapters for poetic or lyrical verse constituting a valid, even irreplaceable source for certain types of historical knowledge and understanding, its sheer longevity within – and centrality to – a brief look at earlier periods of Vietnamese culture may explain why the Vietnamese chose song, and poetry in particular, to express the Vietnamese sentiments on the American War. Vietnamese poetry had existed for nearly two millennia before the United States as a political entity even existed, as far back as the founding of the kingdom of Nam-Viet in 208 B.C.² Poetry proved an integral part of everyday life in the Confucian mandarin bureaucratic system that the Vietnamese inherited from more than one thousand years spent under direct Chinese domination.³ Poetry further occupied a principal role in modes of expression among literate segments of society throughout the near millennium from 939, when the Vietnamese fought to win a sort of pseudo-independence under Chinese suzerainty, until 1883, when France solidified and consolidated its hold on the regions of Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia that would

¹ Dang Thuy Pham, *Last Night I Dreamed of Peace: The Diary of Dang Thuy Tram*, (New York: Harmony Books, 2007), 41.

² Roy Jumper and Marjorie Weiner Normand, "Vietnam: The Historical Background," in *Vietnam and America: A Document History*, Marvin E. Gettleman, Jane Franklin, Marilyn Young, and H. Bruce Franklin, eds., (New York: Grove Press, 1985), 5; hereafter cited as Gettleman, *et al.*

³ "To become a mandarin, ... study centered on rhetoric, ancient Vietnamese and Chinese history, poetry, and ethics, and *the ability to write poetry* and draft government regulations," [*emphasis mine*], *Ibid.*

ultimately comprise the political and colonial entity known as French Indochina. The Vietnamese employed poetry as a medium of correspondence, as a means to document and preserve thoughts and feelings in a given moment or circumstance, and as a particularly effective and highly transportable vehicle for communicating ideas. Even those who eked out their working-class peasant or jungle revolutionary existences in realms far removed from upper strata of Hanoi or Saigon's educated elite employed verse in the oral tradition to many of the same ends. Indeed, many Vietnamese today maintain that poetry has constituted Vietnam's central literary pastime from time immemorial. Consequently, because verse has figured so prominently and perennially in the Vietnamese record of self-expression, it merits considerable attention. Whereas song, aside from Duy, Son, and a few others seems to have been geared toward boosting

Perhaps even more than song, poetry both captured and spoke the hearts and minds of Vietnamese fighting on both sides of the American War. Rather than functioning as weapons or tools that various groups and individuals deployed for very specific wartime political and military or even forensic ends, poetry typically remained a private personal matter for individual Vietnamese troops. However, because poetry historically constituted a far more widespread and prevalent medium of artistic expression than song for Vietnamese of all regions and social stations, it serves today as among the most accurately preservative time capsules of individuals' emotions in specific moments or periods, as well as an acutely sensitive barometer of Vietnamese attitudes, beliefs, and concerns during the American War. As Bruce Weigl elaborates:

For anyone growing up in Vietnam, hearing, reading, singing, or writing poetry in either the written or oral tradition is as natural as breathing and practically as essential. This is true whether one comes from the north, the highlands, or the south, whether one is the child of teachers, farmers, soldiers, politicians, shopkeepers, or musicians. Making poetry in one form or another is an accepted, expected response to the universal experiences of love, loneliness, and separation.⁴

Interestingly, individual wartime poems often articulate the mutual thoughts and feelings of millions of like-minded Vietnamese. For example, Vietcong Xuan Vu recounted in an oral history how in the midst of difficulty on the Ho Chi Minh trail, he had begun to question whether he regretted joining the resistance and all its accompanying suffering. Ultimately, he says, it was the poet To Huu who best expressed why he eventually resigned himself to it: “What’s the use of regretting it; it’s enough now./I’ve been struggling in life for so many years.”⁵ Poetry mirrored the sentiments of many.

This chapter explores how Vietnamese poetry and other eyewitness accounts attest to the universality of both poetry and the combat experience in the everyday lives of Vietnamese and Americans. It also examines differences, showing how Vietnamese poetry testifies not only to a much more collective, communal society than that of individualistic America, but also to the remarkably unified sense of place and purpose that so many Vietnamese shared. In like vein, it will show how poems memorializing “long-haired warriors” further differentiates between American and Vietnamese military and poetic traditions. Much like the Americans, individual Vietnamese

⁴ Bruce Weigl, from his introduction to *Poems from Captured Documents: Selected & Translated from the Vietnamese by Thanh T. Nguyen and Bruce Weigl, A Bilingual Edition*, (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1994), ix.

⁵ David Chanoff and Doan Van Toai, *Vietnam: A Portrait of Its People at War*, 180-181.

soldiers and citizens each inhabited their own personal experiences and circumstances, so consequently, this chapter also finds that poetry preserves and articulates private thoughts and feelings about those as well. Whether indicating war's universality or opponents' stark differences, taken both individually and together, the poems of those Vietnamese fighting in or against the war bear witness across the years to how deeply the war moved, shaped, and marked the Vietnamese people.

Indeed, the war marked the Vietnamese people. Many of the poems below were recovered from among the belongings of Vietnamese soldier-poets killed, wounded, or captured by American and allied forces. They reveal deeply emotive, expressive people who wrote because they were moved to write, in spite of facing "enormous danger and incomparable loss."⁶ Yet comparative analysis of the poetry also reveals striking similarity between wartime experiences of Americans and Vietnamese. Despite cultural differences; despite their dissimilar senses of place, purpose, and unity; despite how each side tried to dehumanize, even demonize the other, their respective poems speak as much to their shared humanity as to their disparities. Indeed, without the periodic nomenclature and contextual clues Vietnamese poetry contains, many works and much of their subject matter would prove virtually indistinguishable from those of their American counterparts.

In a perfect case in point, Ông Giang, presumably a North Vietnamese Army infantryman or Vietcong guerrilla, voices some rather specific, evocative social and circumstantial commentary. Except for references to culturally specific dietary choices,

⁶ Ibid., xiv.

an American grunt easily might have penned it in some outspoken moment of self-awareness that emerged during course of his basic training:

I want to write, in my little book,
Many pages of what I long for, what I feel.
A wandering life is no life at all.
I'm sick and tired of this damned life.

Corrupt people look down on us here.
They teach us meaningless lessons
On how to shit, how to sleep.
They spy on who eats what and when.

They talk nonsense and wonder
Why those who eat so little shit so big.
If I had more teeth, I would eat a village of frogs.
I would eat a meal of rotten food
And see if they'd still want to watch.

"You're so rich, do something to me now," I'd say.
Until the victory, I'll try to believe in you.
Until my family can feast on fish, rice, and duck,
I will strike with my cane he who spies on me.

I have a life in this world.
Why stay quiet only to suffer loss?
Life in war is too short.⁷

So fed up with his superiors policing his every "movement," Ông Giang appears to have reached his proverbial rope's end. Class consciousness, or rather, class tension over economic and power disparities loom large, as he rails on those "so rich," who "talk nonsense." Ông pointedly illustrates the class tensions so endemic to most militaries. In the midst of breaking his "quiet" in a culture that brooks no dissent or protest, he vows insubordination and promises to strike the next superior who noses into his business, consequences be damned. While considerably more poetic than, for

⁷ Ông Giang, "My Thoughts," from his captured diary, entry 26 February 1967, in *ibid.*, 5.

instance, an American's "Fuck the Army" or "F.T.A." graffito, given what American troops' graffiti, songs, and poetry similarly reveal, this poet's litany of sentiments seems a rather natural, arguably near-universal human response to the tension arising from being forced to subjugate oneself to the irony of what one sees as inferior superiors.

In addition to illustrating the universality of tensions involved in the internal power relations of hierarchical organizations like military commands, Vietnamese soldier-poets chronicle their thoughts and feelings with an experiential specificity that proves paradoxically unique and universal at the same time. While constituting the specific experiences of only one Vietnamese soldier over one span of time during the war, "In the Forest at Night" also details environmental and circumstantial realities with which almost any ground trooper on either side of the American War would have been familiar. Again, excepting references to a "soldier of liberation" and a few other unmistakable clues to his Vietnamese identity, history, and geography—as well as the bold prediction at the end—it might have come from anyone who fought in Vietnam:

Many days and months have passed
And I still fight.
Living with difficulty and hardship
Is how the soldier of liberation is trained.
We must learn to live with bombs
Shaking the sky
And the heavy smell of gun powder.

My life is hard and miserable, my friends.
I am the son of the Vietnamese,
Under siege for a hundred years
By the French and the Americans.
I roll in the dust. I sleep in a bed of thorns
To bring peace to my country.
Long nights and days I don't eat or sleep.
My body turns to bones.

Bombs pour down on me.

Many nights of heavy rain
I stand in the storm, wet and hungry.
The later the night,
The heavier my eyes
Yet the more vigilant I must be.

Oh friends, my mother is old.
She waits for me in our village.
Every night she waits to see me return
So she can finally close her eyes.

Day and night our village is bombed.
I'm afraid she will die before seeing me again.
When I think of losing her,
I love her more, friends.

Tonight is the night we hold tight to our guns
And move to the front for battle.
Deep in the night I still dig our bunker.
I'm hungry and thirsty
And after so many troubled nights, I'm exhausted
Though I try to care for my body
So I can fight, my spirit burning,
Never doubtful or afraid.

Friends, we are the young men of a heroic nation.
Though we struggle with hardship and sacrifice,
We will win at last in the end.⁸

Numerous details in Duc Thành's poem speak to the commonality of the Vietnam combat experience. The seeming interminability of the fighting; the manifold sights, sounds, and sensations of exploding ordinance; sleep deprivation and malnutrition; suffering the elements; the difficulty of maintaining the vigil necessary while sleep-deprived; worrying about a mother who is worrying back home about whether she and her son will ever reunite this side of death; and the repetitive cycle of changing battle

⁸ Duc Thành, "In the Forest at Night," from his captured diary, entry noted "For memory," in Nguyen and Weigl, *Poems from Captured Documents*, 45-47.

fronts and digging in anew to fortify one's latest position – all characterized countless American and Vietnamese veterans' experiences fighting in Vietnam.

Duc Thành's poem also highlights aspects of the Vietnamese perspective that predictably remain absent in American poetry from Vietnam. First, Vietnamese were not on American soil bombing American villages, and while both VC and NVA forces did regularly harass American firebases with sporadic mortar fire, Americans in-country rarely sustained the sort of regular and sometimes near-complete destruction of their habitation as many Vietnamese did. Likewise, Vietnamese forces certainly weren't destroying ancient American cultural treasures as sacred as Vietnamese ancestral burial grounds or Buddhist temples. Yet despite all the discomfort, danger, deprivation, and familial separation, an unmistakable sense of Vietnamese personal and national identity maintains. Duc Thành in his poem owns a martial sense of purpose that one rarely sees in American poetry from the war, and yet it proves no imaginary, pie-in-the-sky perception. He acknowledges he will face "hardship and sacrifice," but unlike virtually any American poem, he trusts implicitly in his nation's ultimate destination: victory. Like much of the music in the Vietnams of his day, his poetry reflects unflagging commitment to a cause.

Duc's sentiments echo throughout the Vietnamese poetic canon. Such tempered yet tenacious optimism in spite of all that Vietnamese troops endured is almost conspicuous by its plentitude. In "Hope," a poem found among captured correspondence dated "23 February 1967" and addressed, "To Tran Manh Giang, a close friend met on the warring path," the anonymous Vietnamese infantryman – or

woman – speaks of sacrifices long-borne while yet stating categorically his or her positivity about victory and rebuilding the homeland:

Clouds shift above the stream.
Pink skies surround the mountains.
We crossed many hills, many valleys
And rested our heads on the Truong Son mountains,
The rocks worn by our many steps.

We shiver with fits of malaria
That come and go
Yet we move into our future.
We walk a thousand miles
And still the promised life stays in our eyes.

The burning and killing will pass.
The enemy will be driven from our country.
Although our legs are weary,
Our voices hoarse,
We sing the songs of rebuilding.

All of our lives we struggle to be happy in our work,
To build a bridge to tomorrow.
Vietnam is a country of great seas
And long rivers.
We struggle on the road to move forward.
In this hardship, we need the songs of hope.⁹

The poet's acute sense of identity, hopefulness, and the justice of his or her cause, as well as the acknowledgement of the costly sacrifices that, though painful, will pave the way toward certain victory ring with a bright, buoyant confidence that is almost universally lacking from American poetry. It is echoed and reinforced by countless other primary sources that document the North Vietnamese and Vietcong state of mind during the American War.

To be sure, sources from the war never liken waging warfare to a sunny wade

⁹ "Hope," anonymous, from captured correspondence, noted "23 February 1967, To Tran Manh Giang, a close friend met on the warring path." in Nguyen and Weigl, *Poems from Captured Documents*, 49.

through the rice paddies' water lilies. Recognizing the invaders' military and technological superiority, Ho Chi Minh himself regularly reminded his fellow patriots that "the fight would be a long and difficult one." He candidly admitted that "our only strength was in our own courage and willpower and love of our nation."¹⁰ Objectively speaking, in the face of such American military might, no one save the Vietnamese themselves believed they could win. Against such odds, it comes as no surprise that many if not most Vietnamese sources speak at one time or another of suffering and loss on an almost incalculable scale. Nevertheless, one unassailable truth continually fortified the spirit and will of Vietnamese troops: the justness of the Vietnamese cause and the criminality of their enemies. Of that, there was little doubt.

In the more than two years'-worth of near-daily diary entries she recorded while practicing field medicine in the National Liberation Front's various secret jungle hospitals deep within South Vietnamese and American-held territory, Vietcong surgeon Dang Tuy Tram spoke repeatedly of the justness of the war to liberate her Southern Vietnamese comrades from the corruption of the American puppet Republican government and their American puppet masters.¹¹ She wrote consistently of "sacrifice," sounding much like her Founding Father Ho Chi Minh, when he exhorted, "The hour for national salvation has struck! We must sacrifice to our last drop of blood to safeguard our country. Even if we have to endure hardship ... with the

¹⁰ Truong Nhu Tang, 15.

¹¹ In actuality, Dang Tuy Tram recorded over five years'-worth of diaries, but she lost several of them when fleeing a heavy firefight between her Vietcong guerrillas and American and South Vietnamese forces. In the ones that survived, the very acute reality of loss was not lost on this young, idealistic, and fiercely patriotic field surgeon, and many of her entries read like carefully detailed military after-action reports, though laden with passionate emotion. See Dang Tuy Tram, *Last Night I Dreamed of Peace*.

determination to make sacrifices, victory will surely be ours.”¹² Occasionally Tram spoke of sacrifice proudly, as in what she and others have given up or will give up for the cause. Yet more often, she almost spat the term in grief-stricken rage and bitterness – literally dozens of times – and nearly always referring to comrades killed either in action or in aerial or artillery bombardment by those she considered “bloodthirsty devils, stealthily sinking their fangs into our bodies.”¹³ For Vietnamese patriots like Duc Thành and Dang Tuy Tram who continuously used the term even in sources they never expected anyone else to read, speaking of “sacrifice” signified true belief in the justness of their cause, indeed.

In many ways much American and Vietnamese poetry mirrors almost perfectly Tram’s and countless other Vietnamese combatant diary accounts in everything from descriptions of the scenery; accounts of individual and unit activities; the author’s heartfelt emotion concerning all they have seen, experienced and endured; the heartrending human longing that results from loved ones separated in wartime. In other noticeable cases the similarities stop, usually at those points where the Vietnamese articulate the characteristic longsuffering and steadfast commitment to the cause and the frequent assurances of ultimate victory:

Tonight the wind is cold on bamboo trees.
The moon hides behind the mountain’s top.
In sadness the river ripples.

I received your letter and read it
Nervously through the night
And afterward
I knew you grieved for me like a mother and wept.

¹² Ho Chi Minh, “Appeal to the Entire People to Wage the Resistance War,” in Ho Chi Minh, 172.

¹³ Dang Tuy Tram, 47.

Nephews and nieces wait far away.
Sorrowfully, aunts and uncles wait too.
You beg me to come home, my love,
To the family of our village
Because my life is still full of sweet promise.

You do not understand the way of truth.
Life must be spent for the people's good.
I picked a violet to tuck into my book.
Tears mixed with the violet's ink
To weave into my writing
All the wishes I send, so you will understand.

I cannot return
While the enemy is in Vietnam.
I must fight until our country is unified.
All the people in the North and South
Will welcome the day when we can meet again.¹⁴

Perhaps the most striking thematic element that distinguishes not just the Vietnamese poetry from American works but also distinguishes the Vietnamese combat experience from the American one is the widespread presence of female combatants. Certainly, women served with distinction among American military branches and units, but except in extraordinary circumstances, as personnel typically assigned hospital or administrative posts, they were spared most of the perils of combat, save perhaps its destructive effects on the male comrades. Vietnamese women, on the other hand, served in most all the same military combat capacities as Vietnamese men, as well as in all manner of support roles. While still in many ways seen as having subordinate status in Vietnam's enduring Confucian culture, Vietnamese women combatants were far from marginalized. Indeed, in the American and every other war

¹⁴ Duc Thành, "One Moonlit Night," from his captured diary, entry noted "25 July 1966," in Nguyen and Weigl, *Poems from Captured Documents*, 29-31.

in which Vietnam fought, they were honored and revered. A perfect illustration of this major difference between the two opposing culture's militaries, Luu Trong Lu's "Women of the South" reads like a poetic honor roll of female military heroes to the Vietnamese people:

Tran thi Ly
Long hair, hair of a young mother,
Washed in the water of Thu Bon,
Adoring your body, wounded in a hundred places.
In life and death, always loyal.

Muoi Dong Thap
Just turned twenty,
Leader of three hundred struggles.
One leg left, you stand erect,
A beautiful flag wrapping your body!

Nguyen thi Ut
A guerrilla of the Delta
Carrying your only child on your hip,
Combing the river bank,
Striking the enemy as naturally as you go to market!

Ta thi Kieu
With a beautiful name from ancient times,
You're a faithful niece of Uncle Ho.
Striking the enemy, you're as a tiger.
Speaking of it, you smile like a flower.

Nguyen thi Dinh
In the assault you command a hundred squads.
Night returns, you sit mending fighters' clothes.
Women general of the South, descended from Trac and Nhi,¹⁵
You've shaken the brass and steel of the White House.

--1966¹⁶

¹⁵ Trung Trac and Trung Nhi, the famous Trung sisters who led the Vietnamese against the Chinese about A.D. 40.

¹⁶ Luu Trong Lu, "Women of the South," in *From Both Sides Now*, 162.

In "Women of the South," Lu highlights many of the attributes of the Vietnamese that surprised, impressed, and at times exasperated the all-male American forces arrayed against them. First, women combatants were not some reserve force rarely called upon as last resorts in times of diminished force strength. By her twentieth birthday, Muoi Dong Tháp was already a seasoned veteran. She had engaged the enemy hundreds of times and had led at least three hundred of those ventures, the last of which took her leg but not her revolutionary spirit. Second, women contributed mightily to U.S. forces' difficulty in recognizing their actual enemies. Was Nguyen thi Út, the rural peasant mother with a child on her hip, working the river bank a harmless civilian or an enemy guerrilla? Western cultural and gender biases prevented most Americans from imagining or discerning young mothers as the latter, and U.S. troops often paid for such biases with their lives. Likewise, not until long after many female warriors had done their damage to U.S. units did Americans begin to respect their combat competency.¹⁷ The lack of recognition resulting from gender bias constituted a powerful camouflage that Americans brought with them but which the Vietcong exploited with deadly regularity.

Women could serve at any age, in any capacity. They might use more of the American-imported cultural camouflage, such as this girl who began her weapon smuggling career in 1961 at the age of nine and fought all throughout the war:

I am from the fishing village of Bai Chay, near Haiphong.
My family has lived in the same house for 302 years.
In 1961, the Party asked my father to donate his boat

¹⁷ For more on U.S. troops' perceptions at the time of Vietnamese female combatants, see letters home from Jeffrey Fields (p.60-62), Tom McCabe (p.79-80), and James Pick (p.110-112), in *Vietnam's Voices*, Michael Stevens, ed.

to the liberation struggle,
and to begin smuggling supplies to our comrades fighting
in the South.

Instead of tending our nets and lines each day,
my father and I sailed our sampan up and down the coast.
We'd load guns and munitions at Do Son, hide them
under a false deck,
then sail South to deliver the cargo to our friends at night.

It was supposed to be a very dangerous job,
but although we saw American ships and planes nearly
every day,
we were never shot at or bombed.
I missed my playmates, but Father would make up
wonderful stories to tell me.

I was only a little girl of nine when we started,
and although my mother was worried,
the cadres said that having me along made us appear
less suspicious.
They were right, for sometimes the Americans stopped us
just to give me sweets.

In 1969, my father had a fit, and became too weak
to run the boat.
So I became the boss, while he smoked and slept.
By then, I had breasts,
and the GI's gave me even more sweets, and sometimes
money, too.

We continued the boat trips until The Liberation.
Twice we nearly sank in bad storms.
Once we got lost and nearly died of thirst.
In 1973, I had an American baby.

Now I am a waitress at the Bach Dang Hotel.
I have married a disabled soldier who cannot have children,
and we get by with my salary and his government stipend.
My son and younger brother now have the boat,
and they often bring us fresh fish.¹⁸

¹⁸ Larry Rottmann, "Floating Down the Ho Chi Minh Trail," in *Voices from the Ho Chi Minh Trail, Poetry of American and Vietnam, 1965 - 1993*, (Desert Hot Springs, CA: Event Horizon Press, 1993), 163.

More often female troops were anonymous, gone in one way or other but not forgotten. Giang Nam, at various times a cabdriver, rubber plantation worker, bookkeeper, former Vietcong guerrilla, and popular Vietnamese poet remembered one in particular, Revolutionary Youth member who fearlessly ferried troops across waterways and into unsecured locations inside enemy territory. In "Night Crossing," Nam memorializes fondly her character, bravery, and service to the cause:

The boat was coming in the dead of night,
Clusters of bamboo, rising tide.
The oars shook the starry sky,
A stray bird circled above,
Noiselessly the boat came in the dar,
As searchlights swept the tops of the palms.
Guns loaded, eyes wide open,
We waited.

The sampan girl had rolled up the legs of her trousers,
A cold wind blew in from the shore,
As she helped load our packs on board,
Bringing the scent of flowers and dry grass
From the forests and mountains.
As our hands touched we imaged her cheeks blushed red,
I felt her warm breath, sensed her quick gestures.

Heavily laden, the boat pulled.
"May we help you, Comrade?" I asked.
She shook her head and made the sampan turn fast.
Living in the midst of enemy posts and blockhouses,
She was used to containing joy and sorrow.

The boat went out into the darkness,
As the tide kept rising.
The oars again shook heaven and stars,
On the other bank, the palms beckoned us.
The sampan girl kept her eyes fixed
On the distant watchtower at the village entrance.
Her nimble hands worked the oars,
Her slender silhouette loomed over the river.
A few more strokes! The bank was now close,

Tender joy welled up in our hearts.
As burst of gunfire tore the night,
Sparks flew in the darkness.
"Sit still," she said, "don't move!"
The boat kept advancing toward the enemy.

It gave a lurch, bullets whizzed overhead,
Her silhouette towered over the waves.
"Sit down, sister; we will row," we pleaded.
"No, brothers, don't worry." Again the boat moved forward.

The whole dark sky was in turmoil,
Our hearts ached, our eyes shone with anger
Enemy slugs swept the river,
In our hands, our rifles burned with hatred.

The boat was now safely moored to a tree,
We were forced to leave quickly,
But slowly shook the girl's hand,
"Thank you," we whispered.
A smile lighted her face as she shook her head,
"I'm a member of the Revolutionary Youth," she said,
"I have only done my duty."
Her figure faded in the night.
As we marched across the village,
We heard her muffled steps.

Valiant girl, your memory
Is alive in our hearts
As we press on to other battles.¹⁹

Giang Nam's poem very likely constitutes the only extant account that posterity can access about this unnamed "Sister," and her valiant efforts that night to spirit her brothers into one among countless small battles in Vietnam's war for independence. It reads like an American after-action report, albeit rather more soulfully, and stands as yet another testament to the women fighters of Vietnam.

¹⁹ Giang Nam, "Night Crossing," in *From Both Sides Now*, 73.

Although one estimate counts the number of women who served at one time or another in Vietnamese militaries at 1.5 million (60,000 regular forces, nearly 1 million in local forces, and an indeterminate number in “professional teams assigned to special war-related tasks”), most others served in the American War outside purely combat roles. Many contributed economically, replacing on the farm or in the workplace men drafted into combat service, essentially Vietnam’s own corps of Rosie[s] the Riveter[s]. Others, like Madam Vu Thi Doan, while not primarily performing combat roles, still performed their duties in forward areas of operation given to frequent, if not daily, combat action, and, too, would occasionally engage in actual combat:

I am Madam Vu Thi Doan,
and for twelve years
I was the leader of the young women volunteers
Of the 609th Brigade.

From 1966 to the reunification of Vietnam,
we were an emergency repair crew
for roads, bridges, ferries, etc.,
along the Truong Son Strategic Supply Route.

Three blows of my whistle
and within 45 minutes all 300 of us would set out at once,
by train or truck or on foot,
for the site of severe damage caused by American aircraft.

Each of us had a knapsack,
a green plastic sheet for raincoat and camouflage,
sandals cut from old truck tires,
and a protective helmet of plaited straw.

In hot or cold, under blazing sun or drenching rain,
while bombs were falling or bullets were flying,
we labored mightily to keep the road open,
to repair broken structures and defuse unexploded bombs.

When U.S. planes attacked us,

we fought back with infantry weapons
and anti-aircraft guns
and songs:

*My mind won't be at peace until the traffic can start moving.
My dearest wish is that the road should be finished quickly.
Darling, let us put aside our personal feelings for now.
Once the war is over, we shall be reunited.*

Our brigade was a big family,
like the fingers of a hand.
When one was hurt,
all of us felt the pain.

We were subjected to 63 raids by the American air forces,
but successfully finished 108 major tasks.
A woman who worked diligently, fought courageously,
and showed good morals,
was likely to become a good wife and mother.²⁰

Still other women, although not assigned by any governmental body or authority to any specific role, took it upon themselves to help, usually for years on end, through creative ways of lending aid and comfort to their own service personnel. One group of elderly ladies eking out an existence amid all the bomb and defoliant damage to her home region near the Ho Chi Minh Trail took up an unusual but tellingly compassionate morale campaign:

I lived near the trail
but I was too old for construction or carrying.
I used to take the workers water and fruit
when my rheumatism wasn't too bad.
And sometimes I gave flowers to the soldiers

By 1965, the American chemicals
had killed all the flowers along the road.
So I had the old ladies in my village
begin growing
orchids.

²⁰ Larry Rottmann, "The Brigade of Lady Trieu," in *Voices from the Ho Chi Minh Trail*, 157.

We put the flowers in coconut shells
and tied them to trees along the footpaths.
The soldiers would stop to smell the blossoms,
would remark on their beauty,
and then march on, revitalized.²¹

Another woman voluntarily contributed to the war effort by turning her own artistic gifts toward support roles equal parts practical utility and morale-boosting:

Before the American War
I was an art teacher at Nam Dinh Middle School.
In 1962, I volunteered to work on the trail,
and they made me a sign painter.

The Party gave me patriotic slogans to write,
like:
“Let the road wait for vehicles;
Never the vehicles for the road.”

And: “Walk without footprint;
Cook without smoke;
Speak without sound;
Arrive without image and leave without silhouette.”

They were good sayings,
but I always added my own signature, too.
A small brightly-colored butterfly.
They couldn’t replace the real ones destroyed by the war, but I think they helped.²²

American women, too, volunteered, rationed goods, worked in jobs vacated by men, and performed countless other support duties for the war effort, both in-country and stateside, but only Vietnamese women could boast of fighting the enemy. One particularly perceptive woman combatant reveals, however, that Vietnamese militaries do not necessarily deserve any accolades for their progressive, feminist ideals. Fielding

²¹ Larry Rottmann, “The Orchid Lady,” in *ibid.*, 139.

²² Larry Rottmann, “The Butterfly Painter,” in *ibid.*, 135.

women combatants was a matter of need, of pure expediency, of using as many capable, warm bodies militarily to accomplish the political end of peace and freedom from foreign domination as they could muster. Women did not necessarily fight in combat because their male leaders were any more socially enlightened than any other leaders. As a case in point, “in Long-Haired Soldier,” notice what *other* domestic duties fell to women in equal-opportunity, yet still very Confucian wartime Vietnam:

By 1975, I had fought the Americans for half my life.
By the time of the reunification
I’d lived side-by-side with male comrades for fifteen years.

We had traveled together; eaten together;
studied together; prayed together;
fought together; bled together.

They called the men “fighters,”
because that’s mostly what they did.
And they fought bravely and well.

They called us women “long-haired soldiers,”
but in addition to battling the enemy,
we had many other duties also.

We carried food and ammunition and weapons.
We built roads and bridges and hospitals.
We sewed clothes and raised crops and cooked meals.

We sang and danced and recited poetry.
We gave birth and tended to the wounded.
We taught the children and buried the dead.

Many of us women expected all those years
of mutual struggle
would result in more gender equality after the war.
But we were wrong.²³

²³ Larry Rottmann, “Long-Haired Soldier,” in *ibid.*, 159.

Whatever their lot in the war – or after – the fact remains that millions of women served tirelessly in the American War to bring about Vietnam’s independence and reunification. Some led, some followed. Some raised rifles and dialed in antiaircraft artillery while others wielded surgeons’ scalpels, garden spades, and paint brushes. What is remarkable about them is that they constitute, for the most part, the first women that American troops ever faced in combat (knowingly or unknowingly), and their contribution no doubt proved crucial, even heroic. What is more, many of their stories, the accounts of their lives and service, military or otherwise, exist *only* in poems.²⁴ These accounts testify to how differently American and Vietnamese cultures regarded their female citizens and their potential contributory value to achieving their nations’ military and political goals. Vietnamese poetry from the American War, for better or worse, depending on one’s national origin, cements in timelessness everything from female heroism to male cultural gender bias, and for that alone, it warrants attention.

Excepting a relative few Vietnamese pacifists like Trinh Cong Son, virtually every Vietnamese nationalist source documents a near-absolute conviction in the cause’s righteousness. Of course, much of that conviction the American war machine helped harden as it devastated the Vietnamese people and its culture, society, and landscape. ARVN Sergeant Trinh confirmed in a conversation from the stockade with Bill Ehrhart where he said, “You are their best recruiters. You Americans come with

²⁴ While several poems appearing here come from Larry Rottmann, the poems derive from oral histories he took personally from Vietnamese women combatants. He merely translated them into English poetically. The important thing to remember is that these constitute the only accounts in English of these long-haired warriors.

your tanks and your jets and your helicopters, and everywhere you go, the VC grow like new rice in the fields.”²⁵ Ehrhart later agreed and told a fellow Marine as much, “There’s a hell of a lot more [VC] than there used to be. And the longer we stay, the more there are.”²⁶ However, a considerable portion of that conviction was inculcated deliberately. Some of it cemented from youth as Vietnamese children learned the folk legends of their ancient people. Some of it resulted from their cultural traditions, paramount among which was teaching the long and tortured history of Vietnam’s subjugation at the hands of foreign invaders. Yet the degree to which many individual troops and citizens possessed such conviction in the justness of their cause resulted in large part from how effectively Communist political cadres in the North and in the South’s NLF indoctrinated their troops.²⁷

Communist political education--or reeducation--proved remarkably sophisticated and quite involved. As previously discussed, cadres employed song and other arts to inculcate and indoctrinate troops and citizens alike. However, they also used more traditional and highly systematized political training programs instituted on the ground all over the country. In the jungles, Mekong Delta, or the mountainous Central Highlands, political cadres held multi-day or even multi-month training sessions, depending on the inductees’ experience level (or intransigence), all geared toward maximizing military commitment to achieving their political goals. Truong Nhu Tram reports that indoctrination and training for the ground-level Vietcong fighters consisted of

²⁵ Ehrhart, *Vietnam-Perkasie*, 148.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 155.

²⁷ Truong Nhu Tang, 164.

hefty doses of class time, featuring sessions on current news, political and military issues, and the history of the revolution – all intended to strengthen their determination. As a general rule there was no political indoctrination; Marxists subjects, for example, were never touched on. Instead, instructors would devote their attention to elaborating Uncle Ho's great nationalistic slogans: "Nothing Is More Precious Than Independence and Liberty"; "Unity, Unity, Great Unity! Victory, Victory, Great Victory!" and the others. These would be used as homiletic texts, around would be woven the themes of patriotism and the sacred duty of expelling the Americans.²⁸

The programs proved more effective in some cases than others. Success often depended on the mindset and malleability of the recruit as it did on the character attributes, expertise, and Communist zeal of the political officer. Said "K-11," a PAVN private in January 1969, after his assigned cadre "educated" him "about the political situation and about the American aggression in Vietnam, I am strongly determined to take the way the Party had planned in order to liberate the country from the American imperialist."²⁹ The Party's programs involved strict regulation, oversight, and efficacy assessment that rivaled the simultaneously macro- and micro-managerial reach of the world's most entrenched bureaucracies and corporations. They mandated generic protocols for entire regions entailing everything from the inculcating enemy hatred, to monitoring of troop and civilian behavior, to "motivating" Vietnamese families, to even engaging in "civilian proselyting activities."³⁰ Likewise, Communist education protocols stipulated specific roles for individual "comrades." For example, effectively indoctrinated recruits assigned to rural areas of operation were expected after

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Oral history of "K-11," Document 5.18 in "The View from the Ground," *A Vietnam War Reader*, Michael H. Hunt, ed., 154.

³⁰ Internal Vietcong document "Monthly News Report," detailing political cadre meeting held February 18, 1967, in "Excerpts from the Notebook of the Deputy Secretary of the Party Chapter: 'Political Indoctrination Program for the Military Training Phase,'" Document No. 4, Elliott & Elliot, RM-5851, 49.

completing their training programs to then in turn “propagandize the people while helping them,” cultivating amicable village-level relations through such menial yet meaningful activities as scooping mud from ditches, hauling water, rowing sampans, even cleaning family homes, all “for the people.”³¹

Much of the Vietcong indoctrination strategies bore fruit. Indeed, they helped foment widespread hatred for their enemies, both American and South Vietnamese. Yet despite all their mindnumbingly detailed and regimented protocols for winning troops’ and the people’s hearts and minds to the Communists’ political cause, primary sources indicate the Vietnamese Communist Party leadership saw little materialize in terms of increased Party affiliation or loyalty. In short, among those recruits fighting the Americans and their South Vietnamese ARVN allies, while willing to join the NLF and the efforts of the North because those entities seemed most fiercely resolved to achieving the group’s political namesake – National Liberation – most Vietnamese who joined the Vietcong and committed themselves to liberation and reunification did so least of all for party politics, Communist or otherwise. Said one thirty-three year-old South Vietnamese barber when asked whether natives from his village joined the Vietcong for political or ideological reasons, “Those who follow the VC out of faith in communism are extremely rare.”³² In fact, partisan politics almost never appears in the poetry, nor did it manifest in the populace at large, least of all to the degree dreamt of in the highest halls of the Comintern. Only revolutionary nationalism and that

³¹ Ibid., 50.

³² John C. Donnell, *Viet Cong Recruitment: Why and How Men Join*, Memorandum RM-5486-1-ISA/ARPA, Dec. 1967, prepared for the Office of the Assistant Secretary of Defense, International Security Affairs, and the Advanced Research Projects Agency, (Santa Monica, CA: The Rand Corporation, 1967), 26.

characteristic Vietnamese sense of the justness and surety of the cause ever really materializes:

Let us stand up, young people,
Let the blood in our hearts rise like the tide,
Our steps sound like a storm in the night,
Our voices reach from earth to the heavens.
Look, for haven't you seen
That it's time we break from our prison
End our years of misery;
Our food is still watered with sweat
As we remember our years in slavery,
Let us call to one another,
My suffering friends,
The road opens in front of our eyes,
The road is open and waits for our steps
To the festival of Independence.
Twenty-five years without raising our voices,
Twenty-five years of waiting;
The fire of hatred burns in our hearts
And our hands are dry and burnt,
Yet bamboo spears shall break the steel blades;
Each step, a new hope
Each song, a new glory.
Friends from North to South,
We are together, we are one,
The storm will be over;
The day of homecoming is near!
Fire will light our road,
Flags will fly on our way,
We will meet at the glorious day,
Lac Hong blood will make our land greener,³³
Rice and milk will become plenty.
Hear the proud lullaby of our white-haired mother:
"The day you left, you were fifteen;
Now your feet are covered with scars
And your dreams have become bright."
Let us rise while the blaze brightens our land,
Let us rise, my brothers and sisters,
Fulfill our dream – our glorious country

³³ In Vietnamese mythology, Lac Hong is the eldest son of Lac Long (Dragon Lord) and a fairy named Au Co. he was the founder of the first dynasty recognized in legend as truly Vietnamese. Thus, Lac Hong blood is the blood of those who are truly Vietnamese.

Our flag of independence!³⁴

The poetry repeatedly reflects an unmistakable political consciousness, just not any that ever clearly indicates any sort of partisan affiliation. Rather, it reflects an ardent nationalism, a desire for reunification, and that quintessential image of Ho Chi Minh's oft-repeated refrain: "Nothing is more precious than independence and liberty."³⁵ That mentions of Communism virtually never appear in Vietcong poetry makes sense.

According to Truong Nhu Tang,

the average guerrilla couldn't have told [Marxist] dialectical materialism from a rice bowl. By and large, this was true. As far as most Vietcong were concerned, they were fighting to achieve a better life for themselves and their families, and to rid the country of foreign domination – simple motives that were uncolored by ideological considerations.³⁶

The poetry from the Vietnamese combatant, NVA or VC, bears that out. Nowhere in all the works in English translation could any direct reference to Marxism or Communism ever be found. In terms of overall objectives, political or otherwise, only a fierce dedication to fulfilling individual desires and dreams, familial obligations, or nationalist objectives appears – and repeatedly so – in the poetic literature.

Rather Vietcong often articulate that the NLF was at its core antipartisan and antiwar. It did indeed seek to effect change in both Vietnams' political status quo (a divided Vietnam, but particularly a South headed by dictatorial regimes) by deploying a political – not partisan – front first and military action only as a last resort. But ultimately, "many of the guerrillas themselves were driven more by nationalism than

³⁴ Thai Nguyen, "Let Us Stand Up," in *From Both Sides Now*, 80-81.

³⁵ Truong Nhu Tang, *A Vietcong Memoir*, 15.

³⁶ Footnote, in Truong Nhu Tram, 165.

communist ideology.”³⁷ Larry Rottmann, in one of his many return trips to Vietnam to understand the culture in which he had fought as an American infantryman, interviewed one man who embodied perfectly this common antiwar, nonpartisan mentality. To be sure, Pham Tien Duat was dedicated to the cause. He spent twelve years in the jungle with the “Literature and Art Army” assembling words for the war effort. The last thing that this particular Vietcong wanted, however, was to wage armed warfare against other human beings:

I am Pham Tien Duat.
I am a college graduate and poet.
I was on the trail from 1963 to 1975.
I fired eleven shots, but never hit anybody.
I’m glad.
I fought best with words.³⁸

Ironically, American intervention indirectly and inadvertently expanded, strengthened, and intensified communism among the Vietcong and NLF, though it never shows up in the poetry. If not for U.S. intervening in Southeast Asia, anticommunist Vietnamese nationalists may never have had to ally with Communists against a common foe.

Of course, more than just U.S. intervention politicized the Vietcong. A December 1967 Rand Corporation study based on personal testimony from Vietcong who were either captured or defected from the Communist cause found that both Communist propaganda and the NLF’s indoctrination strategies and tactics were supremely effective largely because the cadres rarely had to fabricate evidence of American and South Vietnamese Republican forces’ alleged “crimes” against the

³⁷ Nick Turse, *Kill Anything That Moves*, 10.

³⁸ Larry Rottmann, “12 Years with the Literature and Art Army,” in *Voices from the Ho Chi Minh Trail*, 149.

Vietnamese people. Almost immediately upon new recruits' induction, their training cadres began enumerating abuses perpetrated by the government of South Vietnam, its troops, and of course, their supporters the Americans.³⁹ Indeed, the war itself, more specifically, the ways DRV and NLF enemies prosecuted the war, facilitated their indoctrination efforts. US and GVN "attacks on villages had aroused resentment and hatred" and "simplified [VC] recruiters' task of depicting the war as a patriotic defense against callous and inhumane outsiders."⁴⁰ Moreover, these same attacks on civilian targets helped "dramatize the war as an immediate concern, rather than a remote conflict," conveniently confirming VC propaganda.⁴¹

Even though hardship and deprivation drove a district-level VC cadre to defect to the GVN, he assured those debriefing him that VC indoctrination propaganda was "always realistic and based on facts." Undeniably American attacks on civilian villages worked in VC favor because "For every innocent villager killed," "ten [VC] would rise in his place."⁴² Arguably few primary sources could validate these VC captives' claims like Le Dan's poem "Child of My Lai." The poet first grieves with and for the village of My Lai but almost immediately begins detailing American war crimes. Le Dan virtually deposes, tries, and convicts American perpetrators and witnesses in its court of public outrage before exhorting his countrymen to assume his mantle and adamant vow to expel the American monsters of My Lai:

Dear My Lai, my heart aches
With the cry of my young brother

³⁹ John C. Donnell, *Viet Cong Recruitment*: RM-5486, 44-5.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 51.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 53.

⁴² *Ibid.*

Dying beside the corpses of his mother and grandmother,
Amid the sound of guns
And barbarous laughter.

Rice fields raise our children,
Why kill them, our people,
In so many places, so many times?
Why add hatred and violence?
Is it to achieve your rule
Upon this country
Of red blood and yellow skin?
Look at the heap of flesh and bones!
From thousands of years of struggle,
Each priceless person
Belongs to Viet Nam.
My young brother is like a bud
Growing on the tree of our nation.
The root, his father, he has never met;
The sap, his mother, he has never known,
And so it is with millions of brothers and sisters.
They have killed him, the bud of our tree;
They have killed his mother,
Killed his source of milk,
Yet can they kill his father
Who carries the gun against the invaders?
And can they kill the hatred
Within him as he dies?
His farewell is not his last word
For his brothers will be born and will grow,
Like the warriors of Phu Dong,
To repay the nation
Which has raised them,
The nation standing like a centennial tree.
And on its branches like the green buds
They will grow up,
Millions of hands to end this war
And drive from our country
These killers who cannot hide themselves.

Humanity will judge them
My Lai, I ache every second,
I cannot wait an hour
Or for evening to pass.
I must act now

To save old mothers
And young children.⁴³

Le Dan's poem mirrors both VC indoctrination and Ho Chi Minh's hatred-building strategies near perfectly. It, like VC cadres, cited "specific examples" of attacks on villages, and though it didn't go to their lengths and detail casualty figures, it did, like VC cadres, enumerate specific casualties and damages, including names of villages where the enemy dropped bombs or conducted operations.⁴⁴ Perhaps most damningly, it echoes almost exactly the testimony of captured VC recruits who lost family in US or GVN bombardment or operations and who "vowed they would fight for the Front to the last drop of blood, until the Front achieved final victory."⁴⁵ Doing so would save future innocent and helpless Vietnamese. It was one thing villages to lose civilians to reprisals for truly aiding, harboring, or abetting Vietcong guerrillas. Such were the fortunes of war resulting from deliberate Vietnamese choices, and so Vietcong frequently given to their own punitive acts of reprisal understood. It was quite another thing — one most ardent Vietcong deeply resented — to lose innocent loved ones because of bombs, shellings, faulty intelligence, or enemy brutality or atrocity.⁴⁶ As both captured Vietcong and the soldier-poet revolutionary Le Dan testify, the US and its South Vietnamese allies did more to damage their own war aims and swell the ranks and bolster the will of the Vietnamese to resist them as long as absolutely necessary than just about anything the Vietcong cadres likely ever needed to do.

Just as the revelation of Vietcong forces that were predominantly apolitical

⁴³ Le Dan, "Child of My Lai," in *From Both Sides Now*, 171-2.

⁴⁴ John C. Donnell, *Viet Cong Recruitment*: RM-5486, 54.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 55.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 56.

undercuts American hawks claiming Vietnamese Communist tyranny was imperiling all of Southeast Asia, the lesser-known reality of a vocal antiwar element in Vietnamese society undermines numerous Vietnamese hawks North and South who perennially vowed, like one devoted soldier,

I will use every breath
To raise the banner of independence.⁴⁷

Certainly, millions of Vietnamese such as Vietcong surgeon Dang Thuy Tram fought for their respective causes, insisting that “There is no other way than to fight until not one imperialist American remains in our country.”⁴⁸ Yet many also believed otherwise. If Trinh Cong Son’s massive following and record sales indicated anything it was that Vietnamese who cared little and less for politics or war constituted a far greater percentage of the population than has perhaps ever been realized or understood. And while the canon of Vietnamese war poetry suffers no shortage of poems that glorify fighting and promise victory, a surprising number also condemned fighting for *any* cause—especially between fellow Vietnamese—and sued, implored, even screamed for peace. Indeed, among the most impassioned, angry, desperate, imploring, even self-accusatory language of all the wartime poetry originated from Vietnam’s very own draft dodgers, conscientious objectors, and reluctant soldiers and antiwarriors like Pham Tien Duat. Furthermore, whereas the tide of American antiwar sentiment began more as something considered a hippie fringe movement before peaking in 1969 with a National Moratorium antiwar demonstration involving hundreds of thousands, the Vietnamese, on the other hand, at war off and on for centuries, could boast peaceniks

⁴⁷ Truong Quoc Khanh, “Devotion,” in *From Both Sides Now*, 30.

⁴⁸ Dang Thuy Tram, 114.

from all over Vietnam, all throughout the war, and the wartime poetry reflects their prevalence.

In 1964, the US fielded just over twenty thousand troops in Vietnam, deployed in “advisory” or “support” capacities. ARVN troops numbered at over half a million. By 1967 after General Westmoreland had convinced President Johnson to escalate the numbers of American personnel, US troop strength had mushroomed to nearly a half million with ARVN troops numbering almost three-quarters of a million. As clashes increased countrywide almost exponentially kill ratios heavily favoring American forces, Vietnamese antiwarriors became increasingly vocal – and resolute – in terms of how far they would go to advance their cause: peace.⁴⁹ On May 16, 1967, Nhat Chi Mai, a teacher and worker in the Buddhist School of Social Work in Saigon, committed suicide by self-immolation in protest of the American War, which pitted Vietnamese against fellow Vietnamese in addition to the American invaders. Her suicide note turned out to be the poem below, which conveys, in no uncertain terms, her feelings about the war:

Why do Americans burn themselves?⁵⁰
Why do non-Vietnamese demonstrate all over the world?
Why does Viet Nam remain silent
And not dare to utter the word Peace?

I feel helpless
And I suffer
If alive I cannot express myself.
I will offer my life to show my aspirations.

⁴⁹ Vietnam Task Force, “U.S. Ground Strategy and Force Deployments, 1965-1967, Vol.II,” in declassified document, “United States - Vietnam Relations, 1945 - 1967,” (Washington, D.C.: Office of the Secretary of Defense, 1967), 1.

⁵⁰ Norman Morrison, the American pacifist who burned himself in front of the Pentagon on November 2, 1965, is highly regarded in the former South Vietnam and a hero in the North.

Is appealing for Peace a crime?
Is acting for Peace communism?
I am appealing for Peace
In the name of Man

I join my hands and kneel down;
I accept this utmost pain in my body
In hope that the words of my heart be heard.
Please stop it, my fellowmen!

Please stop it, my fellowmen!
More than twenty years have elapsed.
More than twenty years of bloodshed;
Do not exterminate my people!
Do not exterminate my people!

I join my hands and kneel down to pray.

Signed: Nhat Chi Mai
The one who burns herself for peace.⁵¹

Like her contemporary Trinh Cong Son, Mai condemns Vietnam's Silent Majority for fearing to speak up or act out for peace, even while Americans self-immolated. She also indicts the GVN for its repressive measures to quiet protest, which included jailing more than 70,000 dissidents for criticizing the Republican government's prosecution of the war and its treatment of its citizens. Like Son also did, however, she neglects to condemn the Americans explicitly, for their complicity, instead leaving her supplication "Do not exterminate my people!" intentionally vague, implicitly condemning war and all who wage it.

Mai had plenty of cause to genuinely fear that war might indeed eventually exterminate her people, if one were to stop and consider the magnitude of the loss of

⁵¹ Nhat Chi Mai, "I Kneel Down and Pray," in *From Both Sides Now*, 55.

Vietnamese life catalogued in another death inventory, appropriately, a poetic tribute to her contemporary Vietnamese peacenik, the singer Trinh Cong Son:

For Trinh Cong Son, author of The Mad Woman

*Dark or Blue, all beloved, all beautiful.
Numberless eyes have seen the day.
They sleep in the grave,
and the sun still rises.*

--Sully Prudhomme

My beloved is
Dead in Diên Biên Phu
Dead in Lao Kay, dead in Cao Bang
Dead in Langson, dead in Mong Cai,
Dead in Thai Nguyên, dead in Hanoi
Dead in Hảiphong, dead in Phat Diêm
Dead in Ninh-Binh, dead in Thanh Hoa
Dead in Vinh, dead in Hatinh
Dead in He, dead in Danang, dead in Quang Tri
Dead in Quang Ngai, dead in Qui Nhon
Dead in Kontum, dead in Pleiku
Dead in Dalat, dead in Nha-Tranh
Dead in My Tho, dead in Tuy Hoa
Dead in Biên Hoa, dead in Ban Me Thuot
Dead in Tayninh, dead in Anloc
Dead in Saigon, dead in Biên Hoa
Dead in Can Tho, dead in Soc Trang

*Vietnam, how many times
I have wanted to call your name
I have forgotten
the human sound.⁵²*

Vuong-Riddick's morbid inventory enumerates no casualty figures. Their absence suggests that numbers mattered far less than the tragic reality of so many dead. The plodding but very quickly predictable repetition of "dead," as she paints a veritable verbal atlas of Vietnam, demonstrates a deep sensibility and understanding of how

⁵² Thuong Vuong-Riddick, "My Beloved Is Dead in Vietnam," in *From Both Sides Now*, 117.

broadly and deeply war has marked her country with an unalterable, inescapable, permanence that typically only death can replicate. Like Mai before her, who to blame for all the unnumbered, unnamed Vietnamese dead throughout the country seems noticeably less pertinent than doggedly drumming home the reality.

That inclination, to blame war and viler human attributes that promulgate it, proves common throughout the canon of Vietnamese antiwar poetry. Yet occasionally, a peacenik poet would find the courage to hold all parties accountable for giving into baser impulses. Consider “Condemnation,” by Thich Nhat Hanh, who after witnessing almost unspeakable brutality, advocated so tirelessly for peace that it eventually earned him the nomination and election as the chair of the Buddhist Peace Delegation to the Paris Peace Accords during the American War:

Listen to this:
yesterday six Vietcong came through my village,
and because of this, the village was bombed.
Every soul was killed.
When I returned to the village the next day,
there was nothing but clouds of dust —
the pagoda without roof or altar,
only the foundations of houses,
the bamboo thickets burned away.

Here in the presence of the undisturbed stars,
in the invisible presence of all people still alive on Earth,
let me raise my voice to denounce this dreadful war,
this murder of my brothers by brothers.

Whoever is listening, be my witness:
I cannot accept this war.
I never could, I never will.
I must say this a thousand times before I am killed.

I am like the bird who dies for the sake of its mate,
dripping blood from its broken beak and crying out,

“Beware! Turn around and face your real enemies –
Ambition, violence, hatred, and greed.”

Humans are not our enemies – even those called “Vietcong.”
If we kill our brothers and sisters, what will we have left?
With whom then shall we live?⁵³

When pleading and condemnation with war’s perpetrators and participants failed to bring about peace, Vietnam’s peacenik poets took other, blunter tacks. In the same rhetorical vein as Bob Dylan’s cynical “Blowin’ in the Wind,” Tran Da Tu angrily, sarcastically allegorizes the destructive capacities of military technology as the Vietnamese’s “gifts” to one another:

To you I’ll give a coil of wire, barbed wire,
the climbing vine of all this modern age –
it’s coiling tight around our soul today.
Take it as my love token – don’t ask why.

To you I’ll give a car of plastic bombs
that will explode amidst some crowded street –
they will explode and shatter flesh to shreds.
This is the way we live – you understand?

To you I’ll give the war that’s killing now,
killing our homeland, many mothers’ land,
where people dine on bullets and on bombs,
where cloth runs short for children’s mourning bands.

To you I’ll give the gift of twenty years
or seven thousand nights of cannon fire.
For seven thousand nights it’s sung to you –
have you dozed off or are you still awake?

I want to give you many other things.

⁵³ Thich Nhat Hanh, “Condemnation,” in *From Both Sides Now*, 63. Hanh’s antiwar advocacy through his poetry and other means was eventually heard and revered internationally; so much so that the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., before his death in 1968, nominated Hanh for the Nobel Peace Prize. When his fellow Vietnamese ultimately refused to heed his pleas for peace and continued killing one another in the hundreds of thousands for three more years after the Americans gave up and went home, he expatriated to France where he taught, wrote, and worked tirelessly to help Vietnamese war refugees worldwide. Mahony, 289.

Enough—just take one more: a tear gas bomb.
With neither grief nor joy, my own tear glands
are gushing as I just sit here and wait.⁵⁴

Clearly, there is little in Tu's inventory of that any sane person would consider a gift worth giving, and that seems to have been his point. He cleverly but unavoidably expresses that only insane people using insane technology to perpetrate insanely acts of violence on human beings would consider warfare and its consequences as a gift. Tu's rhetorical strategy was brilliant for his antiwar purposes, because even the most ardent, zealous nationalist Vietnamese patriot would have been hard-pressed to defend as anything other than crazy the graphic reality of dead children so numerous that the country ran out of fabric for armbands to mourn them. Such graphic, heart-rending, in-your-face imagery hearkens back to Trinh Cong Son and others and typifies the emotional gut-check of Vietnamese antiwar poetry.

Expressing emotions openly, much more so than in Western cultures, is considered a cardinal virtue among the Vietnamese. Couple that with the fact that poets are outwardly emotional people, the Vietnamese peacenik poets, arguably more so than most, and a recipe for heartfelt sentimentality over the war and its consequences emerges in their poetic commentaries on the war. Tugging at heartstrings, particularly by describing plainly or bluntly what was happening to Vietnam's young, proved a common resort of the peacenik poets. One need only consider another Thich Nhat Hanh work, "I Met You in an Orphanage Yard," to discern

⁵⁴ Tran Da Tu, "Gifts As Tokens of Love," in *From Both Sides Now*, 75.

that they felt the end – peace – justified the means – even sickening their audiences with sadness:

Your sad eyes
overflowed
with loneliness and pain.
You saw me.
You turned your face away.
Your hands drew circles
in the dusty ground.

I dared not ask you
where your father or mother was.
I dared not open up your wounds.
I only wished to sit with you a moment
and say a word or two.
O you small ones
of four or five –
your life buds already cut off,
already engulfed
by cruelty, hatred, and violence.

Why? Why?
My generation,
my cowardly age,
must shoulder the blame.

I'll go in a moment,
and you will remain
in the shabby yard.
Your eyes will return
to your familiar yard
and your fingers will draw again
those small circles
of pain
in the dusty ground.⁵⁵

Again, blaming specific sides, Americans or North or South Vietnamese, Vietcong or Republicans, Communists or American imperialist devils seems unimportant. Who

⁵⁵ Thich Nhat Hanh, "I Met You in the Orphanage Yard," in *From Both Sides Now*, 168-9.

specifically orphaned these parentless children matters little. Hanh does briefly accuse his age, his generation, which, refreshingly, includes even himself in the indictment, but soon returns to remind his audience of the subject of his focus: the orphaned children and how the whims of war scarred them both physically and emotionally.

Few Vietnamese sources to emerge from the American War document and preserve human emotion quite like folk culture. As the Vietnamese have long possessed a highly literate and literary culture, it should come as no surprise that many of their most interesting and culturally valuable primary sources documenting the war would take the form of songs and poetry. In many cases they recount events recorded nowhere else. In others, they demystify, animate, and humanize America's "enemies," who outside of these sources have been largely lost to the historical record. They showcase moving characters who each gave to the war for independence in their own peculiar but no less meaningful ways, such as "The Ho Chi Minh Bird":

They said I was too old for battle.
Too frail for heavy work.
But I could whistle bird calls,
so they sent me down the trail
to be a Ho Chi Minh bird.

The bombs and chemicals
Had killed or frightened off all the birds
whose notes cheered the soldiers.
So, I'd hide in the forest as convoys passed,
and sing all the happy songs I knew.

I started whistling in 1962,
and by Liberation
I was 257 different birds.
I got malaria, my hair fell out, and I was wounded four times.

But I was a Ho Chi Minh bird every day for thirteen years.⁵⁶

Or Nha Tho Cam, "The Soldier of Information":

I am Nha Tho Cam.
From 1968 to 1975, I was the maintenance officer
for the Truc Trong Son
(Ho Chi Minh Trail telegraph system).

We strung a rubber-coated copper cable through the trees
and bushes
down the entire trail through Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia,
all the way from Hanoi to Loc Ninh.
It took over 3,000 kilometers of wire.

There were one hundred information soldiers,
each of them responsible for thirty kilometers of wire.
They were on duty 24 hours a day,
to repair breaks caused by bombs, artillery, landslides,
floods and animals.

It was over this crucial wire
that the big generals talked to each other nearly every day.
Vo Nguyen Giap in the North,
and Tran Van Tra in the South.

They transmitted battle orders, agent information,
and logistical statistics.
Sometimes the Americans found the wire, but listened in
without understanding.
Because Giap and Tra communicated with each other
in a private code they'd invented as school chums.⁵⁷

The songs and poems chronicle largely unsung heroes whose creative ingenuity,
dogged tenacity, and undying love for their country fortified them over the course of
decades to outlast the largest, most powerful, most monolithic military in history up to
that point, men like Tran Minh Thien, "The Locomotive Driver on the Ho Chi Minh
Trail":

⁵⁶ Larry Rottmann, "The Ho Chi Minh Bird," in *Voices from the Ho Chi Minh Trail*, 141.

⁵⁷ Larry Rottmann, "Soldier of Information," in *ibid.*, 171.

I am Tran Minh Thien,
and I'm the Vice Director of the Saigon Locomotive Enterprise.
During the American War, I was an engine driver
on the Hanoi-Haiphong-Vinh run.

I'd pick up goods wagons
loaded with supplies for our soldiers fighting in the South,
and take them as far
as the Lam River near Vinh.

We couldn't take the trains any farther,
because U.S. bombs had destroyed the big bridge there.
So the wagons would be unloaded
and the materials transferred to boats, carts, bicycles and porters.

For fourteen years, I drove that route.
During the day, American planes attacked the railroad constantly.
But even before the bombs had stopped falling,
workers would begin repairing the roadbed and bridges.

In daytime, we hid the trains in tunnels and under leafy nets.
We parked them on spurs in the forests and in bamboo groves.
We camouflaged the wagons to look like carts or houses or pagodas.
In all the fighting, we never lost an engine.

We drove the trains only at night,
by the illumination of flashlights and kerosene lamps.
Because of the bombing damage to the tracks,
sometimes we could only go five or ten kilometers per hour.

But there was never a night
when our trains didn't move.
We knew our goods were desperately needed by our comrades,
so we railroaders fought the war kilometer-by-kilometer.⁵⁸

They feature soldiers like Cao Tien Le in terrible moments of travail that proved among
the most horrific of their lives:

I was a young officer in my first command,
leading a long column of brand new recruits who were moving South.
We'd only been on the trail for two days,

⁵⁸ Larry Rottmann, "The Locomotive Driver on the Ho Chi Minh Trail," in *ibid.*, 165.

when an American airplane attacked us.
The narrow path was cut into a mountainside,
so there was no place to hide.
A bomb fell right behind me, and knocked loose a huge boulder
which fell on top of three boys.

The rock squashed them so completely
that only their heads stuck out from under it.
Yet somehow, they hadn't been killed.
"Help, help!" they pleaded pitifully.
I knew that the pilot would report our position,
and that more planes would come soon.
We had to move on quickly,
but I couldn't decide what to do.

The boys were gagging and rolling their eyes.
I couldn't let them suffer,
and I knew what would happen to my untested troops' morale
if every one of them had to step over those horrible heads.
So I shot each boy twice between the eyes,
and I cut all three heads off at the neck.
I put the heads under some rocks next to the trail, covered the blood with dirt,
and we marched on.⁵⁹

These sources document a people who overcame almost incalculable odds to deliver
their own nation unto themselves, reporting stories from the front that few if any had
heard before, such as "The Monk's Story":

I was training to be a monk
but they drafted me anyway.
When I refused to be a soldier,
they put me in the special forces.

For over ten years
I took medicine South,
and brought the wounded back North.
It wasn't the Way of Buddha, but it wasn't fighting either.

Once, in the rainy season,
when the trucks couldn't go,

⁵⁹ Larry Rottmann, "Cao Tien Le's Most Terrible Memory," in *ibid.*, 131.

I carried a wounded comrade on my back
for nearly 700 kilometers.

I changed the battle dressing twice a day
and walked as gently as I could.
Yet for five weeks, the blood from the fighters' head wound
ran down my cheeks like tears of red rain.

I carried my fallen comrade
all the way to Hanoi,
even for the last six days
when she was dead.⁶⁰

Or the riveting account of "The Ben Hai Bridge":

Under orders from General Vo,
we built an elaborate bamboo bridge
in plain sight
over the Ben Hai River.

We placed the span
in a narrow, winding canyon
between two high mountains,
so it would be difficult to bomb.

Every day,
the American planes would attack it.
Every night,
we would repair it.

There were 12.7 mm, 23 mm, and 57 mm
anti-aircraft gun emplacements
all around the bridge.
In six years, we shot down seventeen planes.

And during all that time,
trucks, bicycles, porters, and fighters
crossed the river safely
on a camouflaged bridge one-half mile downstream.⁶¹

⁶⁰ Larry Rottmann, "The Monk's Story," in *ibid.*, 151.

⁶¹ Larry Rottmann, "The Ben Hai Bridge," in *ibid.*, 129.

Many sources from the war speak of the bravery, tenacity, fortitude, and longevity of the Vietnamese people during the American War, but it would be difficult to find genres of documents that relate as much cultural, military, political, or social history in so few words. Songs and poems and other artistic sources served to preserve the individual, collective, and shared attitudes, beliefs, concerns and sentiments of the Vietnamese people. Their voices convey who they were, how they lived, and what they experienced and endured. Few media are able to matter-of-factly relate and recount the history of the American War in Vietnam the way artistic expression can. Few sources can imprint human consciousness with as many of the physical, psychological, and emotional scars that the war inflicted as can its artistic vernacular sources. Even live-recorded newsreel footage would be hard-pressed to compete with the verbal paintbrush of accomplished combat poets swathing their strokes across the canvas of their audience's imaginations.

Vietnamese verse yields profoundly dynamic richness in historical depth and truth. Furthermore, the evidence for incorporating such sources into the historical canon of the American War in Vietnam is most arguably provided by the response it elicits in those who experience it. Art, Vietnamese or otherwise, is anything but simplistic, as are the complex and diverse cultural groups who perpetuate it. These texts are lenses that magnify and clarify instead of blurring and obscuring the war's history. By attending to them carefully, so much more of the nature of the Vietnam combat experience can be understood while cultivating a much greater understanding of – and deeper empathy with – the Vietnamese rarely evoked by other histories.

CHAPTER VIII

CONCLUSIONS

This study began by addressing a problem: that of all the thousands of scholarly works concerning the history of the American War in Vietnam, virtually none of them mention and none of them address extensively the surprising array of folk culture. It stipulated throughout that in terms of delving long after the fact into what combatants and witnesses experienced and felt, few traditional primary sources captured and preserve such raw emotions at those moments people experienced and felt them like folk culture can. Getting at inner-history requires primary sources born out of them, that channel them, that draw on them deliberately for inspiration, and that leave emotions lying naked on the page.

In order to bridge this gap between traditional and folk cultural sources, this study examined a collection never before undertaken by historians in hopes of utilizing the folk culture Vietnam War historiography has overlooked: graffiti, folksongs, and poetry from both Americans and Vietnamese. Most were conceived, recorded, or uttered in-country, near in time to specific moments and circumstances in which their creators – all combatants or firsthand eyewitnesses – experienced the war, thus lending them an emotional relevance and chronological proximity to history few other sources can boast.

Examining folk culture like graffiti, songs, and poetry from both sides led to many interesting conclusions about both the sources and the war and people they document. First, it concludes that all folk culture both derives from and communicates

historical contexts and truths. For example, graffiti resulted from military culture while simultaneously recording social commentary about it. So, too, did songs and poems from all sides of the war. Consequently, it found that inevitably, folk culture tends to mirror both the specific individual and general corporate realities it seeks to chronicle and communicate. When quarters aboard ships sickened and stressed troops, graffiti registered those events and circumstances. When American geopolitical aims faltered or faced defeat, poetry mirrored those realities.

Second, this study discovered that in many more cases than initially anticipated, all three types of folk culture, regardless of what side of the war they emanated from actually documented contexts and truths about people, events, attitudes, and emotions recorded virtually nowhere else in publicly accessible forms. Moreover, when speaking about those and other events, whatever folk culture lacks in terms of scope and scale compared to memoirs or monographs, it often makes up for in physical description and emotional narration as well as honesty and transparency. Its expressions range from the most infinitesimally acute detail of Vietnam's combat environments – such as bone splinters from through-and-through headshots – to the international, multigenerational, Machiavellian designs of geopolitics. This study determined that much of folk culture's value to historical inquiry lies in its tendency to pull no punches – ever. Nothing, no behavior, no human failing, nothing about the war or those prosecuting, protesting, or perpetrating it ever proved off-limits, too ugly or taboo for documentation or social commentary in graffiti, songs, or poems.

Where this study as a whole fits into the overall historiography of the American War in Vietnam is that it constitutes just about the only treatment of this body of documents ever engaged by any historian. Literary figures, folklorists, and even archaeologists have examined some of these records, but no historian has attempted to address either what they say, what they can mean to scholars and students of history, or how they make more complete our knowledge, understanding, and arguably, our experience with the Vietnam War. This study will constitute the first time any historian has treated of all this material in one work. It also, through its simple inclusion and cataloguing of a heretofore underexplored body of primary source texts, will contribute to Vietnam War historiography by making so many and so many different kinds of these texts available in the confines of a single volume. Though not so comprehensive as an anthology and annotated bibliography of folk-artistic texts would prove, between the individual and collective texts that appear in its chapters, the analysis thereof, and the work's final bibliography, it should have cultivated significant ground for future avenues of historical research into the lyrical aspects of Vietnam War cultural history.

Furthermore, this study promises to contribute to Vietnam War historiography by furnishing the historical profession with not only references to, but also accounts of real, actual people who fought and sometimes died in Vietnam. All sources suffer limitations, gaps in historical fact. No one source type offers an evidentiary panacea, whether traditional or folk culture. But it also concludes that while abbreviated, fragmentary, and often highly situationally specific, graffiti, songs, and poems help

animate the human element that drives the study of history and upon which compelling historical scholarship depends so heavily. In doing so, they possess the capacity to enhance understanding of the human combat experience in Vietnam. These sources are full of history concerning people about whom our audiences might never have learned a single thing, let alone heard any of their words, at least nothing beyond what they learned from anonymous, collective, nondescript statements about the Vietnam War and the millions upon millions of anonymous masses who made up its cast of characters and who should always inhabit and animate its stories. This study, consequently, gives voice to individuals in Vietnam War history that history likely never heard from before, and may never hear from again. If millions of individual human storylines thread and weave the tapestry that is Vietnam War history, then this study will have given them voice, or perhaps a memorial, while enlarging, varying, and strengthening that tapestry of human beings inner-histories. Folk culture, this study then concludes, ultimately promises to freshen, enliven, and invigorate the canon of Vietnam War historiography; the scholarship issuing from it concerning history and military cultures on both sides of the war; and perhaps most importantly, the arenas of learning and discourse such as classrooms and professional conferences where ideas play out in real time and real life.

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