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**“All gave some, some gave all”: Differences between the life of
American foot soldiers and the rear echelon during the Vietnam
War.**

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Streszczenie

“Każdy coś dał, niektórzy dali wszystko”: Różnice pomiędzy życiem żołnierzy Amerykańskiej piechoty a wojskowym zapleczem administracyjnym podczas Wojny w Wietnamie.

Praca przedstawia i analizuje różnice między dwoma rodzajami Amerykańskiej służby wojskowej – żołnierzy piechoty walczących w dżungli i tak zwany „rear echelon”, czyli zaplecze administracyjne na podstawie wojny w Wietnamie w latach 1963-1973. Nacisk kładziony jest na dysonans, który tworzy się patrząc na rodzaje zadań, styl życia, spędzanie wolnego czasu a nawet jedzenie które dostawała każda z tych grup. Poprzez przytaczanie fragmentów prywatnych zapisków byłych weteranów jak i czerpanie wprost z oficjalnych materiałów wojskowych, praca ta ma na celu pokazanie wojny Wietnamskiej od strony Amerykańskiej holistycznie – zarówno z pierwszych flank jak i z bezpieczeństwa obozu. Praca stara się w mniejszym zakresie rozliczyć się z mitem amerykańskiego weterana wojny w Wietnamie i przeciwstawić historyczne fakty otocze popkulturowej, która narosła od czasu wybuchu tej wojny. Analiza poniższego tekstu ma za zadanie również odpowiedzieć na pytanie, „co to znaczy być żołnierzem?” – czy kucharz i żołnierz piechoty powinni mieć takie same prawa nazywać się weteranami?

Słowa kluczowe

Wojna w Wietnamie, weterani, konflikty zbrojne, relacje wewnątrz armii

Dziedzina pracy (kody wg programu Sokrates-Erasmus)

08900, inne humanistyczne

“All gave some, some gave all”: Differences between the life of American foot soldiers and the rear echelon during the Vietnam War.

Perspective is everything when talking about the Vietnam War. The facts show us that almost 2,5 million American soldiers stationed in Vietnam between Aug 5, 1964 and March 28, 1973, but the actual percentage of soldiers who took active part on the battlefield throughout the war was only 10 to 15% of all stationing troops at any given time. These percentages declined even more post-1971. It might seem incredibly low to a layman's eye, but this uneven combat to support role ratio was caused by a multitude of political, social and economic reasons that divided Vietnam War veterans and confused the public. Hopefully this paper might shed some light on this disparity, as well as define the two types of a soldier – the rear echelon trooper and the infantryman.¹

As hard as it was for an American trooper to tell a peasant in Vietnam from a Viet Cong soldier, every American who stationed there could distinguish the infantryman from the rear echelon personnel. The infantrymen – or so called “grunts” were common foot soldiers who strapped M16 carbines to their heavy backpacks and made grueling trips through the jungle, often without rest and food and under heavy monsoon rains. These men are immortalized in countless Hollywood movies, such as; *The Deer Hunter*, *Full Metal Jacket* and *Apocalypse Now* – they seem to be larger than life heroes, rough and charismatic with hearts full of patriotic duty. Being a Vietnam War veteran or having someone from a family who served in it is a

¹ Associated Press. "U.S. Soldiers in Vietnam an Army of Noncombatants." New York Times, July 1, 1972.

great honor. Just looking at politics today, many influential congressman and senators wear that honor like a badge. But what does it really mean to be a “Vietnam veteran” if only a slim minority of G.I.’s stationed there actually fought in the war? And more importantly what did the majority of troops even do there if they were not fighting?

While being drafted the soldiers were asked questions about their education, service time and special skills that might be useful to the Army, before being fitted on an airplane and being flown 9000 miles into the unknown land of the “Nam”. These special skills like technical prowess, background in administrative duties or a simple diploma from college made the more skilled or educated soldiers take relatively safe clerk or maintenance type jobs in large, well-guarded bases, somewhere deeper on the mainland. The less fortunate G.I.’s without any formal education or any useful skills, that the Army could take interest in, were given the most dangerous jobs; artilleryman, combat support, and the most dreaded one for most fresh soldiers – being a carbine-wielding foot soldier – a “grunt”.²

This selective approach to personal skills made the choice between becoming a grunt or being in the rear echelon really jarring – similar to the disproportions we see today in modern life; the men from poorer families who could not afford education were sent to do the harder work and more risky jobs. Marines who fought on the frontlines got the worst job of all – they consequently did almost 50% of

² Heinl, Robert Debs, *Dictionary of Military and Naval Quotations*, Plautus in The Braggart Captain (3rd century CE), Naval Institute Press, Annapolis 1978, 78.

dying in Vietnam³ being only a fraction of the stationed American forces there.

This economic class divide in Vietnam started as soon as the Vietnam War itself, and was present as an underlying tone in this conflict – it pitted potential “brothers-in-arms” against each other as if they were fighting a different war. Shaking the core of what the Army represented in the minds of the soldiers – a classless structure where merit is based on valor of soldier and not on any pre-existing life circumstances.

Many young people joined the Army to start a new life after the war, but without any advantages such as higher class background, influence of their family or even higher education, the soldiers in Vietnam were often on the spot categorized by their superiors as expandable parts in the machine of war. This not only infuriated the infantryman but also created lasting conflict between the two groups. As a result of this politics high school dropouts were three times more likely to experience heavy combat than college graduates.

To make things even worse between the soldiers who fought seemingly on the same side of the same war, was that the only difference in the Army pay structure between the grunts and the rearward personnel - the grunts earned only \$30 more than their friends in safe bases. The additional \$30 was accounted on the infantryman’s paychecks as a bonus for the hazardous conditions that they were put into. But as it turned out, the same bonus went to rearward supply personnel such as US Army bakery truck drivers, despite them stationing near safest, most guarded bases near the ocean. Their job description stated that they were frequently working out of the base which was immediately regarded as danger and warranted a

³ Hirschman, Charles, *Casualties During the American War: A New Estimate*, Population and Development Review, December 1995, 2-11.

“hazardous conditions” paycheck which made the infantrymen confused and mad.⁴

What made things even worse than the monetary compensation inequality for frontward fighters was the living conditions that they experienced far away from civilized American bases. To quote David Westphall, one of those G.I.’s recalling his day in the field:

*We were all in sad shape now. I know that at one point, my guts about to crack open, my stomach knotted by hunger and diarrhea, my back feeling like a mirror made of nerves shattered in a million pieces by my flak jacket, backpack, and extra mortars and machine gun ammo, my hands a mass of hamburger from thorn cuts, and my face a mass of welts from mosquitoes, I desired greatly to throw down everything and slump into the water of the paddy and sob.*⁵

It is well known that there were many Vietnam War experiences, but after a year of marching through the jungle with a heavy backpack killing Viet Cong soldiers, David Westphall might be psychically scarred after returning home on US soil. Probably the physical scarring might have been inflicted much earlier if he read some passages from a memoir titled *Saigon Zoo* of his contemporary - a soldier who stationed in Vietnam, just like David, named Pete Whalon. In this book he described being chosen as a lifeguard and happily accepting it, as he found out it was the “ultimate Vietnam gig” where he could host “week-long, alcohol-fuelled parties”⁶ and his biggest problem was cooling off in the morning after such parties. He did just that

⁴ "Military Pay Chart 1968." 1968 Military Pay Chart. Accessed April 02, 2016. <https://www.navy.mil/navypubs/comsec/comp/1968-military-pay-chart.html>.

⁵ Westphall, Victor Walter. *David's Story: A Casualty of Vietnam*. Springer, N. Mex.: Center for the Advancement of Human Dignity, 1981, 173.

⁶ Whalen, Pete. *The Saigon Zoo: Vietnam's Other War: Sex, Drugs, Rock 'n Roll*. West Conshohocken, PA: Infinity Pub., 2004, 132-134.

by inhaling marijuana daily. The personnel that manned the rear area bases had access to facilities, hot food and a comfortable way of living while the frontline soldiers struggled with accepting the austere conditions of a rainforest jungle. The general dissatisfaction that G.I.'s felt with the service was growing steadily, both with the war and their rearward brothers-in-arms

Pete Whalon was just another lifeguard in Vietnam, but being a lifeguard in Vietnam is just bizarre in itself. One may ask just how many swimming pools were in American war bases in Vietnam, so that they needed lifeguards to guard grown men swimming there? As it turns out in Long Binh Post alone, which was the base where Whalon resided, there were twelve swimming pools⁷. Some 60,000 people stationed in that base, and to house them 3,500 buildings were erected. 180 miles of concrete was poured through jungles and hills of Vietnam to make roads for this city-sized base. As a matter of fact, the previously noted twelve swimming pools were just the tip of the iceberg of what the Defense Department funneled their war money into – the rearward personnel could choose from an incredibly diverse array of ways of spending their free time after work. The complete list of facilities from Long Binh Post was exactly quite robust: 81 basketball courts, 64 volleyball courts, 12 swimming pools, 8 softball fields, 8 multi-purpose courts, 6 tennis courts, 5 craft shops, 3 football fields, 3 weight rooms, 3 libraries, 2 miniature golf courses, 2 handball court complexes, one running track, one archery, one golf driving range, one party area, and an amphitheater in addition to BBQ pits all over the post⁷. And by 1972 Long Binh Post even had a go-kart track. The base was so large that some officers even joked that the Viet Cong would have to check the bus times to properly coordinate attack on the base.

Not only was the recreation program on bigger bases in Vietnam as elaborate

⁷ 1st Logistical Command Magazine "Nothing Is Too Good for the Troops." , April 20, 1968.

as the one mentioned above, soldiers enjoyed many different distractions in their off hours provided by their superiors. Legal alcohol consumption up to two boxes of sixteen beers and three liters of higher percentage alcohol, like wine or whiskey. To top that, even after purchasing their monthly supply, the G.I.'s could also drink any kind of alcohol to their hearts content in many bars and open air mess halls that were scattered throughout the bases. Also located on the terrain of many bases were brothels disguised as massage parlors and spas. The commanding officers frequently knew about these kinds of shady establishments, but unlike with illegal gambling clubs they kept their eyes shut on prostitution. They knew that sooner or later the soldiers will start to look for those kind of services – and it was much safer to allow some of those businesses inside the base, so the G.I.'s would not be targeted by any unnecessary attacks outside the camps. This arrangement was so functional that in many bases the hospital staff from American encampments routinely did check-ups on the working Vietnamese girls to make sure that the soldiers would not contract any diseases. In own words of a colonel who manned a base in Phu Bai – “It is understood that steam baths have been declared non-essential, however, the essentialness of a service depends upon the availability of other services for troop utilization. After a hot dirty day on the bunker line, the steam bath is a welcome retreat.”⁸

With their free time activity well taken care of there was another very important subject that connected all of American troopers in a way – food. No matter if they were resting under the evergreens in the Vietnam jungle or ate in air-conditioned mess halls. The food program set up by the Defense Department of the United States was a marvel in Vietnam. It was constructed with a specific premise that every soldier should enjoy at least one hot meal a day, irrelevant to where he stationed. Often the soldiers marching through the jungle had to rely on their C-

⁸ 1st Logistical Command Magazine "Nothing Is Too Good for the Troops." , April 20, 1968.

rations, which were individual canned, pre-cooked, and prepared wet ration that were intended to be issued to U.S. military land forces when fresh food (A-ration) or packaged unprepared food(B-ration) prepared in mess halls or field kitchens was not possible or not available. Although the C-rations must have sometimes been enough for the more frontward operating G.I.'s, it was quite common that the food stock of the company serving in the jungle was replenished by a supplies drop by a helicopter, just so the soldiers have better quality but perishable food.

As far as the more rear echelon soldier menu went, the sky was the limit. The universal calorie per day intake was maintained at 4,500 calories every day which meant three solid meals a day, and given by the eyewitness testimony of a soldier who stationed there named George Watson – it was very good:

Army chow in Vietnam was a surprise... Food was overly plentiful and, for me, always better than acceptable. Breakfast eggs came in standard American, scrambled, fried, and poached, with huge mounds of sausage or bacon. Hot cereals, grits, toast, juice, milk, and coffee accommodated every soldier's taste... In the evening, the Army cooks put out a proliferation of assorted meats, chicken, potatoes, vegetables and dessert day after day. The wholesome, planned diet never offset demands among the troops for junk food, hamburgers and pizza.⁹

Great care went into supplying the bases and mess halls with the food of the greatest quality. The biggest structure built in Vietnam by the Americans was in fact a giant food storage unit in Qui Nhon. It was the size of six football fields and was used to house freshly arrived fruit, meat and vegetables from Australia, Japan and the United States for the soldiers plates¹⁰. But not all products were delivered from

⁹ Watson, George M. *Voices from the Rear: Vietnam 1969-1970*. Place of Publication Not Identified: Xlibris, 2001, 130.

overseas into South Vietnam where the troops stationed. Many local Vietnam businesses were making deals with the administrators of the bases, providing gallons of fresh milk and cheese, trucks full of bread and many other items of shorter expiration date. As the rear-bound soldiers put it - War wasn't that bad – most of the time you did not know you were in one.

The living quarters of the rearward soldiers were also somewhat different from what the soldiers expected. Robert McNamara, who was the head of the Department of Defense at the time, knew in 1964 that the Vietnam conflict might escalate. He devised a plan he called “dollars for lives”¹¹ by which he wanted to funnel a lot of the taxpayers dollars into infrastructure and goods transport in Vietnam, and in return by building larger, safer and more elaborate bases and pouring cement into the jungle to build roads. He created a relatively safe and somewhat comfortable environment in South Vietnam for the troops to occupy. Because of this policy, right from the start of the escalation of the conflict in 1965, camps were built like fortresses and bases rather than tent encampments we remember from movies about the war. Bases that housed more than ten thousand troops often were reminiscent of transplanted American life into the Vietnam jungle, complete with bars, restaurants, barbeque grills and, in some cases, classic white picket-fence. The troopers themselves got plywood buildings with siding and ventilation on both sides. George Watson, a fresh recruit wrote this about his quarters on his first day of deployment:

To my initial surprise, we each had separate areas containing a bed, a footlocker, and a wall locker. Thin as they were, the walls gave a great illusion of privacy. Each

¹⁰ Lair, Meredith H. *Armed with Abundance: Consumerism & Soldiering in the Vietnam War*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2011. 77.

¹¹ Daggett, Stephen. *Costs of Major U.S. Wars*. Washington, D.C.: Library of Congress, Congressional Research Service, 2008. 2-5.

*cubicle door consisted of a curtain of beads. At the far end of the hooch was an open space the size of four cubicles with plywood bed, a couple of small tables, and some chairs. 'This is fuckin' Vietnam?' was my first impression.*¹²

Veteran George Watson also pointed to another interesting fact about the living quarters of the typical Army men. It quickly turned out that keeping your space neat and clean was required from every soldier. What was new was the fact that soldiers routinely paid poor Vietnamese women to tend their barracks. The women washed their clothes and sheets, cleaned the floors and took out the trash. The G.I.'s nicknamed them "mama-san's" as they did the duties of a typical 1960's mother.

The barracks also had one interesting amenity that in part started another craze in Vietnam – sockets for electronic appliances. As soldiers received their pay in Vietnam every month, the administrators wanted them to be able to spend some money to boost their morale by buying a wide selection of products offered by the Post Exchange service, frequently shortened to "P.X." by the Army men. These facilities were more like supermarkets than post offices, and very well stocked too. P.X. stores sold a multitude of items: refrigerators, fans, cameras, movie projectors, radios, record players, cassette recorders, tuners, amplifiers, televisions and even jewelry. But maybe the camp supervisors did not foresee that so much electrical appliances sold without taxation, as the P.X. system was not based on United States soil, and free availability of electricity could have a detrimental effect on the camps itself. The result of affordable electronic appliances in the bigger P.X.-es were frequent power surges and camp fires, caused by overusing the sockets and "upgrading" them by the soldiers. The problem was so prevalent that refrigerators were banned in many camps and were treated as potentially dangerous items that needed a permission slip.

The "Nam" experience was hugely influenced by America's 60's and 70's

¹²Watson, 106.

economic growth – and Vietnam War, being in the middle of the Cold War and also on the prime position in the US news, received enormous resource allocation from the United States National Security Council influenced by McNamara’s “dollars for lives” policy. The NSC was set up in 1947 to ensure optimal coordination and concurrence among the various branches of the US armed forces and the CIA. Base-building and warfare operation costs were unheard of in scale in the history of post-World War II United States, up to the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. The official complete budget for the war, made by the Defense Department, points a sum of \$173 billion dollars in 1973 which is an equivalent of \$950 billion in 2011 dollars. This seemingly infinite cash flow empowered the Department of Defense and the National Security Council to make their soldiers fighting the war abroad very comfortable, especially the more rearward based soldiers who never even glimpsed the frontline.¹³

But on the frontlines conditions were much worse for the soldiers, the amenities and luxuries brought from their homeland by the United States Army were much less visible. There was over time some finer tuning on how to properly operate in the jungles of Vietnam, for example by 1969, some five years after the initial escalation, the MED-VAC chopper could reach any combat zone almost always in under thirty minutes to rescue G.I.’s. Also the longer the American campaign lasted in Vietnam, the higher number of newer roads was constructed, resulting in precise resupply runs. Even mobile P.X. shops were introduced where soldiers who were on duty closest to the combat zones could spend their hard earned dollars on sodas and magazines. The culmination of the superiors care for the more frontward soldiers came in 1971 when operation “REINDEER” was introduced a month before Christmas. Special Christmas catalogs were distributed to over half a million United States troopers, in which soldiers could choose gifts for

¹³ Daggett. 4-6.

their families back at home, all they needed was choose an item and enclose a check in the provided letter and send it back to a bigger base with a Post Exchange carrying the requested item.

However most of the days in the common foot soldier's life was vastly different from the well fed, plywood house dwelling rear echelon service man. The frontline riflemen could march through jungles for weeks at a time, living off their backpacks, drenched in rain that could last for days without stopping once. They were also vulnerable to Viet Cong's guerilla tactics and ambushes. In one of the letters he sent home, a scout relayed his dissatisfaction with the conditions he found himself in:

Mud. I never knew how much I could hate mud. We live in mud and rain. I'm so sick of the rain that it is sometimes unbearable. At night the mosquitos plague me while I'm lying on the ground with my poncho wrapped around me. The rain drips on me until I go to sleep from exhaustion. There are absolutely no comfort in our job. I carry nothing but razor and a bar of soap for comfort, and we wear the only clothes we have and wash them in rivers and streams as we cross them.¹⁴

These frontline soldiers were an inspiration for all the grand tales of Vietnam war seen on the silver screen all around the world, romanticized to bits by the film industry. They were also revered and feared by their rear echelon counterparts. The grunts had a nickname for the people in the rear; they called them "REMF's", which stood short for "Rear Echelon Motherfuckers" which encapsulated their feelings towards their base-bound brothers-in-arms. The admiration for these lean and grizzled veterans of combat by the rear echelon was so enormous that some of them distressed their shiny boots and uniforms to fake the common wear and tear that the

¹⁴ Letter from 2nd Lt. Frederic Fowns Jr. to Linda Downs, 5 November 1967
<http://www.historybyzim.com/2013/05/letters-from-the-front-6-vietnam/>

jungle inflicted on clothes. They also bleached their green Army fatigues to mimic fading of the color caused by the boiling hot Vietnam sun. George Watson was a veteran, who stationed in many bases during his two years in Vietnam, he recalled one infantryman who after shifting his line of duty from a frontline soldier to the rear echelon after a year of service did not want to exchange his used up clothing because as he said “I had a reputation to uphold”¹⁵

Despite the tensions between the grunts and REMF's, some of the rear echelon soldiers openly and secretly were in awe of the frontline troopers. Most of the United States Army clerks knew that they will never receive a Medal of Honor or a Purple Heart for their efforts, nevertheless some sought the thrill of being a real soldier in other ways. For example the Army typists had their own award – a Silver Paperclip that was handed for exceeding valor in background combat with neverending stacks of paper to work through. They were usually given as a going away present for soldiers who were leaving soon, the little paperclip reminded them of how the real Vietnam looked for great number of troopers. Others took their Rest & Recuperation (R&R) break in a R&R facility near the combat zones and volunteered for the jungle scouting expedition of a nearby battalion or were helping with setting up mines near the camp perimeters. And for some the need for genuine war experiences was so big that when combat broke near bigger bases, working personnel rushed out to look at exploding bombs, napalm drops and gunfire exchange. After the fight Army clerks took photos with the dead VC bodies, posing for heroic shots with loaned M16 rifles.

¹⁵ Watson, 92.

Guys running down to the Military Police compound because they heard the bodies were out front. They all took their new Nikon cameras that they bought at the P.X. and ran down to take pictures of these poor bastards who had broken through a perimeter, thrown a couple of hand grenades on the flight line, and got mowed down. The REMF's climbed atop the pile of corpses to pose for photos.¹⁶

Some of them sent these photos to their families and girlfriends posing as macho Army men, when in reality they knew that the real war brushed just past them while they were writing reports or doing inventory checks in one of many buildings of well-equipped bases.

However for G.I.'s who did not want to spend their R&R near the combat zone and could not see the war up-close there was another option: Nature of the War Museum. Built by the Department of Defense in the backyard behind United States Vietnam Army Headquarters in Long Binh Post. This little building was the target of constant ridicule by the grunts passing through the base. Its couple little rooms showcased traps laid by the Viet Cong in the jungle, typical Vietnamese hut and even a small temple. The premise behind this building was to teach the more base-bound soldiers the harsh reality of the jungle and the war but in reality the laminated plaques on the walls and shoddy craftsmanship of the objects the museum contained made it a running joke among both the grunts and the rear echelon soldiers.

¹⁶ Dunn, Joe P. *Desk Warrior: Memoirs of a Combat Remf.* Needham Heights, MA: Pearson Custom 1999, 72.

Unable to capture the “Nam” experience of fighting a real war, many soldiers tried to somehow make their Vietnam stories feel more genuine by purchasing stolen Viet-Cong knives, banners and handguns from the frontline G.I.’s to somehow prove back home that they have “completed” their wild adventure that was their eleven month deployment in Vietnam. The more business-oriented frontline soldiers quickly realized that there is a lot of money to be made in the resale of war trophies so they employed Vietnamese peasants to craft fake Viet-Cong banners, urns and trinkets that the naïve base-bound G.I.’s would buy. The sales went smooth as grunts had frontline combat reputation that guaranteed the source of the goods. These items probably spawned many wild tales told back at home by the rear echelon soldiers. These tall tales, backed by their ingenuine Vietnam War trophies, were told to emulate the feeling and admiration of “real war” that they never fought.

Despite the “REMF’s” winning the war for comfort with all the recreational opportunities, shops, bars, rooms with refrigerators, the generals in the War Committee still could not overcome two big obstacles that gradually rose with the deployment time – boredom and apathy towards the War. Soldiers had many opportunities to relax like watching TV, listening to the radio or playing different kinds of sports on many fields, and having facilities to their disposal ranging from golf courses, through camera dark-rooms where photographs from G.I.’s freshly bought cameras could be developed. They had arts and crafts clubs that were funded with the United States government money to provide drawing materials and wood for more artistically-inclined soldiers. Moreover the rear echelon soldiers could take part in correspondence or normal courses set up by Army-employed professors. G.I.’s

could take their tests there and return home with education while the military funded 50% of the semester cost. To top things off, on larger bases the G.I.'s could even buy a new car in installments from their monthly pay and pick it up brand-new from the airport when they arrived stateside as an additional treat. Unfortunately all of the extra programs and temporary distractions could not stop soldiers from being bored which in consequence made many of them to turn to various drugs, which were extremely pure and cheap in Vietnam – like heroin, morphine and more commonly marihuana and hash.¹⁷

The basic treatment for being caught with narcotics of any kind was immediate expulsion from the Army and being put down on trial by the military courts. Consequently, that meant being put on the first plane to the United States, and often spend some time in a prison once you got there. The soldiers who lost their will for the war, and were sympathetic to the rising of the anti-war movement that was growing in the late 1960's America, openly smoked marihuana in bars and cantinas where officers and higher staff were generally unwelcome. It is known that nearly 20% of soldiers who were Vietnam War veterans suffered a moderate-to-heavy addiction to opiates like morphine after the war. Surprisingly the numbers were equally high between the rearward and frontward soldier-types. The soldiers on the front numbed their hurting backs and soaked bodies with morphine while rear echelon G.I.'s took it to escape the boredom of their encampments. It was common for grunts to smuggle provision boxes full of barbiturates, opium, marihuana and

¹⁷ Robins, Lee N. *The Vietnam Drug User Returns; Final Report*, September 1973. Washington: For Sale by the Supt. of Docs., U.S. Govt. Print. Off. 1974, 29-34.

home-made amphetamines to resell it for a profit inside the main camp. It proved a lucrative business – for \$5 a G.I. could buy a pack of 20 cigarettes rolled with marihuana outside the camp, to later resale them inside, for \$1 a joint, consequently making almost 15\$ profit on one, which was a hefty sum – as the lowest pay grade at the time was about \$105 (about \$730 in 2016 dollars)¹⁸. Based on these prices and the entertainment that the drugs offered to entertainment seeking G.I.'s drug trade was a big business in Vietnam both for the "REMF's" and the grunts, so it increased narcotics availability:

*The standard tour of duty for Vietnam soldiers was twelve months. Drug use typically began soon after arrival in Vietnam, showing that it was not at all difficult to find a supplier. Older men used less than younger soldiers, career soldiers less than those serving their first term. Drug experience before induction was a powerful predictor of use in Vietnam. Essentially all those with drug experience before enlistment used drugs in Vietnam.*¹⁹

To be precise when talking about the Vietnam War it is worth noting that during the later years in the war Americans did not have a ten year experience of fighting in Vietnam – they had ten one year experiences. It was so because only a fraction of the troops stayed longer than eleven months to a full year, these soldiers often called as "career soldier" or "lifers" and were a rare sight, usually maintaining a higher position in the Army. The usual infantryman got his month of training in the

¹⁸ "Military Pay Chart 1968." 1968 Military Pay Chart. Accessed April 02, 2016. <https://www.navy.mil/navydata/civilian/1968-military-pay-chart.html>.

¹⁹ Robins, Lee N, 21.

field before starting but for rear echelon soldiers it started right away. The training at the beginning of the service was also usually the only time that the rear echelon troops held a gun with ammunition in Vietnam. The career soldiers on the other hand could spend as much as ten years in Vietnam. Usually these type of soldiers were treated with pity by both the grunts, who wanted to get out as quickly as possible from Vietnam, hopefully in one piece, and “REMF’s” who could not understand the willingness to stay in unbearable heat in hostile land for so long. It only illustrates how Vietnam seemed different through many eyes of its American visitors from 1965 to 1975, from escalation to withdrawal.

Also shifting throughout the years was the morale of the soldiers. In the beginning of the escalation, in 1965, there were many young people who volunteered as the Cold War was in full swing and it was deemed as very noble and patriotic to preserve the American way of life by fighting the communists. The people of Vietnam were divided between North Vietnam and South Vietnam, a border that existed almost only on American maps as both North Vietnam and People’s Republic of China never formally recognized it. American soldiers during their stay there saw that not only their actions are not beneficent to the South Vietnamese people, but they are making it worse bringing hyperinflation and economic imbalance to the whole region. South Vietnamese people during the war usually occupied terrains near the American bases as it was easy to earn money that way. The bases also provided relative safety to the region. But this system had some problems also, for example a new base could mean that the prices of bread and rice might increase five-fold over a couple of days. Also the beformentioned treatment of Vietnamese women left a lot to be desired from the people who supposedly wanted

to liberate Vietnam. These reasons lead to unsavory look on the Army and the war itself by American public, and when the My Lai Massacre happened in March of 1968 the morale both back home and among the soldiers fighting the war plummeted.²⁰

After 1968, up to 1975 the Americans struggled to find willing recruits as the public opinion on the war was at a low, and demanded military drafts at random, based on a potential soldier's date of birth. Many people were thrown in uproar over this decision, and public cases like Muhammad Ali's decline to partake in the war which consequently meant being thrown to prison and banning from professional sport made the Army look overzealous. The strong opposition to the draft made the Army another antagonist of the American people, both to people stateside and in Vietnam. The growing Anti-War movement in the US in the late sixties also fuelled the claims of the people about the inefficiency and purposelessness of the War. Many soldiers were also in the Anti-War movement that bloomed in American bases in Vietnam, although for obvious reasons was looked down upon by the commanding officers. As tensions grew in these Vietnamese bases between the soldiers and their commanding officers, who represented "The Man" to the G.I.'s. Cases of so called "fragging" occurred, which meant murdering commanding officers by lower rank recruits on purpose, usually done with frag grenades, hence the term. As tensions brewed "fragging" was on an increase, and in 1968 came the Tet Offensive²¹, assassination of Martin Luther King in the US and the My Lai Massacre, the morale

²⁰ Hersh, Seymour M. *My Lai 4: A Report on the Massacre and Its Aftermath*. New York: Random House, 1970. 23-25.

²¹ Moran, Philip, and Tom Duffy. *The Tet Offensive: Vietnam* January 30, 1968, 11.

in the garrisons were in shambles. Fights between the black and white soldiers occurred as well as an overall increase in soldier-to-soldier assassinations which were the highest in any documented war, almost nine hundred incidents throughout the war. The situation turned so abysmal that Colonel in the United States Marine Corps Robert D. Heinl sent this memo to his supervisors in HQ:

“The morale, discipline, and battleworthiness of the U.S. Armed Forces are, with a few salient exceptions, lower and worse than at any time in this century and possibly in the history of the United States.”²²

As it appears today, the seemingly unending flow of money into recreation and cuisine, and a generally more mellow approach to alcohol and prostitution by the government did not help any of the soldiers forget about the flawed reasoning and unnecessary violence surrounding the war:

*The U.S. military reflected social problems and issues in the U.S. such as racism, drug use, and resentment toward the war. As the U.S. began to withdraw its military forces from Vietnam, some American enlisted men and young officers lost their sense of purpose for being in Vietnam, and the relationship between enlisted men and their officers deteriorated. The resentment for the War was exacerbated by generational gaps, as well as different perceptions of how the military should be conducted. Enforcement of military regulations, especially if done overzealously, led to troops' complaining and sometimes threats of physical violence.*²³

²² Heinl, Robert Debs. *The Collapse of the Armed Forces*. Philadelphia, PA: National Peace Literature Service, American Friends Service Committee, 1971, 3.

With the Army structure in disarray, fewer and fewer recruits wanting to fight and even work on the bases the Department of Defense saw that Vietnam War was nearing its close. The reasons that divided the rearward soldiers, and infantrymen suddenly became non-existent, and turned into hatred towards the upper commanding officers. Ineffectiveness of the troops due to the generally unfavorable outlook on the war and tactical impracticality of dealing with guerilla warfare killed the idea of free Vietnam that in 1965 seemed patriotic and valuable to defend.

To sum up, there might not be one dominant Vietnam experience that many of the soldiers seemed to pursue. Some men were fighting in the jungle with carbines, others fighting with paperwork in air-conditioned headquarters. One thing is certain – they all came back as one mass of Vietnam Veterans. And even if there was an experience that described “serving in ‘Nam” as best as possible it would certainly would not be the kind of heroics that the audiences see today on the big screen. It was not the famous running to the chopper while the machineguns rained fire on the Viet Cong. It was much more than that – more boring and monotonous, filled with football fields and five-star food for some, or moaning under the weight of your backpack in some damp jungle in the end of the world. One thing that still divides “REFN’s” and “grunts” to this day are probably the titles of the books that they penned after their service. It is easy to guess which type of soldier is portrayed just by looking at the title: *American Sniper in Vietnam – 93 confirmed kills* and its counterpoint - *Pizza and Mortars*.

²³ Heinl, 4.

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