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American Soldiers in Vietnam: A Physical and Mental Journey to Apocalypse

The Vietnam War to this day plays a large role in society, as it remains a very controversial and misunderstood subject. The millions of Americans who are Vietnam veterans returned to the US from the war as quite different people—whether in body bags, with PTSD, with drug addictions, or just with new ideas, experiences, and stories to tell. Evidently, many soldiers became increasingly cynical over time in Vietnam, feeling helpless and hopeless as adrenaline, excitement, and meaningful relationships faded into oblivion. Roland Barthes’s philosophy of imagination and mythologies relates fairly clearly to these soldiers—as soldiers (or correspondents) spent more and more time in Vietnam and demystified popular mythologies of war, they adopted apocalyptic attitudes not only about the war, but also about themselves.

When a soldier first arrived in Vietnam, he possessed certain conceptions about the life of a soldier and what it entails, and these war myths seemed like realities for some time. There undoubtedly was (and still is) something mystical associated with war, especially when that war took place in the foreign jungles of a faraway country. When a soldier was first introduced to his life in Vietnam, he had a sense of excitement in this newness. Staff Sergeant David Mangan, for example, remembers being “initiated” into the Airforce by being flown straight up into the sky to a dangerously high altitude, and subsequently being “baptized” by being pushed into a pool.¹

¹ Mangan, David. “Staff Sergeant David Mangan.” Vietnam: America's War at Home and Abroad. 9 Nov. 2018, Chestnut Hill, MA, Boston College.

Soldiers drank together and partied on the weekends in Saigon, and soldiers largely felt alive and full of adrenaline during the early stages of their deployment. As David Greenway writes of himself, “It was Vietnam that obsessed me then, and I acquired a certain reputation of being lucky... colleagues said they felt safer on military operations with me... I felt immune to the sickness I saw around me, and I just wasn’t going to be shot.”² Colonel Bill Kilgore in *Apocalypse Now: Redux* serves as this symbol of a wartime hero who embraced and loved the mythologies of war.³ Soldiers possessed a fairly high morale when first experiencing the war and accepted the mythologies of the Vietnam War. As soldiers began to experience the atrocities of war, however, the mythologies lost their charm, and soldiers started to question their collective imaginary.

Terrible things inevitably happen in war, and when these happen, soldiers react accordingly. The Tet Offensive of 1968 was a wake up call to the US soldiers, South Vietnamese soldiers, and the American public. Americans and the American press began to turn against the war and question the supposed progress of the war. Walter Cronkite, the most trusted man in America, famously questioned the Vietnam War after Tet on national television. Michael Herr details the intense and traumatic events of the Tet Offensive in Huế in “Hell Sucks”, writing that soldiers completely lost hope of living through Tet, especially after seeing bodies that were clinically alive being put into body bags. The smell of death and decaying bodies “held to the lining of [soldiers’] nostrils and worked itself into the weave of [their] fatigues, and weeks later, miles away, [they] would wake up from a dream in the middle of the night and it would be there in the room with [them].”⁴ Experiencing so much death in so little time

² Greenway, H.D.S. *Foreign Correspondent: A Memoir*. Simon & Schuster, 2018. 53.

³ Coppola, Francis Ford, et al. *Apocalypse Now: Redux*. A United Artists Release, 1979.

⁴ Herr, Michael. “Hell Sucks: A Defining Story of the Vietnam War.” *Esquire*, 24 June 2016.

introduced soldiers to the gruesomeness of battle. Also, Tet reminded the US that although the statistics may have indicated that US and South Vietnamese victory was imminent, North Vietnam and the Viet Cong would not back down any time soon. After horrific and overwhelmingly negative events inevitably occurred, soldiers examined their roles in the war, the war itself, and questioned the truth of their beliefs. Similarly, after a soldier lost friends and members of his team (like the deaths of Clean, Chief, and Chef in *Apocalypse Now*), found out by letter that his wife has left him and wants a divorce (Staff Sergeant Mangan), or was shot (David Greenway), the soldier (or correspondent) begins to reflect more seriously on the war, and ask previously buried questions that have depressing answers.

In answering questions, soldiers destroyed the mythological conceptions of war, and reality along with it. As Kearney writes, “The demythologizer can only affirm what the truth is *not*... having disabused [himself] of these ideological illusions, [he] has no choice but to enter the ‘dark knight of history’—an empty space of disorientation.”⁵ Soldiers no longer felt a sense of belonging, saw no ending to the war, and felt disillusioned in every facet of their lives. Staff Sergeant Mangan, for example, recalls caring about every single life in the war (both sides) when he first arrived in Vietnam. As he experienced more death and more horror, however, his range of care narrowed—from all lives to US lives to his unit’s lives to his best friends’ lives to only his own—to a point where he no longer believed that his own life mattered.⁶ Soldiers looked in every direction for some comfort and hope, but nothing provided them with this. As Barthes writes, “Utopia is an impossible luxury for him: he greatly doubts that tomorrow’s truths will be the exact reverse of today’s lies... he cannot see the promised land. For him tomorrow’s positive

⁵ Richard Kearney. *The Wake of Imagination*. Routledge, 1988. 273.

⁶ Mangan.

is entirely hidden by today's negativity. All the values of his undertaking seem to him as acts of destruction."⁷ Soldiers had no home and no faith, even back in the United States. Greenway suggests that reporters no longer believed the US military and their "Five O'Clock Follies", and he was disgusted by the US attitude, for "the peace demonstrators... cared nothing about Vietnam for Vietnam's sake... they weren't the least interested in the country in which the war was being fought... it was a disillusioning experience, and when it was over I was glad to be back in Saigon."⁸ Greenway and the soldiers of the war felt more comfortable not belonging to a group at all rather than supporting and believing a bad cause. Soldiers became cynical and hopeless, and they had no home in war.

During the Vietnam War, soldiers traversed a variety of experiences and beliefs. The soldiers went not only on a physical journey, but also a mental journey. *Apocalypse Now: Redux* exemplifies this quite well. As the main character Captain Willard worked his way deeper and deeper into Cambodia towards Kurtz, he experienced many trials and tribulations, forcing him to undergo a reflective experience. By the time Willard reached Kurtz, he realized that he and Kurtz shared many qualities, and he does not know whether Kurtz is mad or the US is mad. Willard managed to maintain his composure during his time fighting, but ultimately struggles with PTSD and turns to drinking after his mission.⁹ Soldiers who went through similar journeys also turned to drugs as coping mechanisms. Once soldiers saw darkness in all directions, they turned to drugs (such as Lance and the entire platoon that was high), threw cynical and sarcastic "Light at the End of the Tunnel" parties, and did anything they could to cope with the darkness. Soldiers became players on the stage of the war. Returning home to the US was difficult for

⁷ Barthes, Roland. *Mythologies*. Paladin, 1973. 157-158.

⁸ Greenway. 69.

⁹ Coppola, *Apocalypse Now: Redux*.

veterans, as many such as Staff Sergeant Mangan went straight to a rehabilitation facility.¹⁰

After the war, the American public and the Vietnam veterans went through a period of deliberately trying to forget about the Vietnam War. No movies were produced about the war until the late 1970s, after a period of allowing deep wounds to heal. The entire American public experienced a mental shift during the Vietnam War, but the soldiers obviously experienced even more of a shift.

The soldiers in Vietnam entered the war with mythological conceptions of war, and these conceptions were destroyed after soldiers experienced the atrocities of war. Soldiers were forced to ask themselves difficult questions, and the answers to these questions left them in total darkness, without hope and without a home. In order to cope with such apocalyptic realities, soldiers used drugs, tried to forget the war, and continue to struggle to this day.

¹⁰ Mangan.

Works

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