

# Detroit Marine Against War

## G.-Eye View of Vietnam

Fifth Estate Collective  
Carl Campbell

1966

Carl Campbell is 23 years old and a veteran of the Vietnam war, where he served in the United States Marine Corps. He is presently a student at Wayne State University. His interview with the Fifth Estate follows below.

FE: Carl, why did you join the Marines?

Carl Campbell: I was 19 years of age, a high school graduate, I didn't have enough money to go to college, I felt somewhat patriotic and soldiering is the logical action of anyone who is patriotic. I had also decided if you were going to be a soldier, you might as well be a good one. At that time I had no doubt that the Marines were good soldiers.

FE: How did you feel after your training when you knew you were going to Vietnam?

Carl Campbell: I had no idea I was ever going to go to Vietnam until about 6 months before my initial discharge date. On January 7, 1966, I was extended 6 months involuntarily because of the war in Vietnam. About 2 months before this I had dropped my attempt to be discharged as a conscientious objector. At the time I had made this request for discharge I knew nothing about the possibility of my being sent to Vietnam.

I had been in the military machine and had been watching what was going on around me. I began to wonder what I was doing in with anything as horrible as the organization seemed to be. I kept reading in the newspapers about the war in Vietnam and seeing what was going on there and the thought that this was what the armed forces of the United States does—I didn't want anything to do with that.

Eventually I ran into trouble with my family. They were against my being discharged as a conscientious objector and since one of my parents was ill at the time, I gave this up and I let them re-assign me and give me back my rifle. But this had all transpired prior to my being notified that I was going to Vietnam. I felt great shock at the idea of going there and from what I had read about it, I was not eager to go over there and take part in something as muddled and confused and immoral as it appeared to be.

So when I was notified to go to Vietnam I decided to abide by the decision I had made. I had already made compromise and I decided I would go there and do what I was told. Since there was so much controversy over this thing in Vietnam, at least it would provide me with a unique insight into What was going on and I would not have to rely on second hand sources as the American people have to.

FE: What was the general feeling of the other men you were with in Vietnam towards the war?

Carl Campbell: Practically every man in Vietnam that I knew of would rather have left. There was a small minority who enjoyed it. Very few of them would support U.S. withdrawal from Vietnam. They generally looked at the protest movement in the U.S. and the people in the U.S. who are critical of the Vietnam policy as being against them and wanting to do them harm.

Those of us who did disagree with the policy there of the U. S. military were a minority but there was actually a significant number of us who didnt agree. The company that I was in numbered about 150 men. I can't give you

an exact break down on the number of people who shared various opinions such as “I think the war is immoral,” “I think we should get out because it is not worth our trouble to sit over here and bother with these gooks.” “We should go home and kill the niggers.” Many people had various reasons for feeling as they did.

I think that the number of people who were against the war in Vietnam for various reasons was maybe 20 in an outfit of 150 and you have to keep in mind that these are for the most part, not illiterate men, but men who do not have the questioning minds that you would find on a college campus, and very few of them have even a high school education. In the platoon I was in of about 30 men (the number was quite a bit smaller by the time we left) there were 5 or possibly 6 men who did not agree with what was going on over there.

In outfits that were composed of draftees such as in the army or later outfits in the Marines which were sent there I imagine that this percentage is quite a bit greater. Once a man is in the military, regardless of whether he agrees with what’s going on or not, he has to obey orders and consequently, the fact that some of us disagreed, even if we were a majority, we would still have to do what we were told. So if there is any moral reform to be made in the actions of US military there, it can’t be made from within.

FE: What sort of military activity did you take part in in Vietnam?

Carl Campbell: The battalion I was in was stationed at Chulai airbase in South Vietnam and this is a couple of hundred miles north of Saigon and south of DaNang. Mine was an infantry battalion (foot soldiers). I was a rifleman and our unit had many duties. f

One of these was to take the security responsibility of part of the airbase perimeter. Other duties were to take part in operations that came up and to continually patrol friendly and unfriendly areas in the general airbase area to keep the VC on the move and to keep the VC from gaining control of the areas that they did not already have. I was shot at quite a few times, but there have been people shot at more than I was.

In the patrol area that was assigned to us we had a few VC villages and we received moderate to heavy fire practically every time we went through these villages. We lost a few men there—a few men were killed by mines, a few men were shot, and we got a couple of VC out of the village. We also burned a village a few times and had it shelled.

FE: Did you get any feeling of whether or not the Vietnamese supported the VC?

Carl Campbell: When we go into an area the people usually support the VC. They like the VC and the VC are their heroes. When the VC retreat, a great many of the people retreat with them in order to keep away from the American shells and troops that kill so many of them, and they seek refuge with the VC. Whenever we kill large numbers of the VC we killed large numbers of civilians who had sought refuge with them.

To make matters more disgusting, the American authorities go out and count the civilian dead along with the VC to jump up the casualty toll to make the “kill ratio” more acceptable. It was explained to us when we were being trained for the Vietnam assignment, and of course a great deal of the training we received in the 4-1/2 years that I was in the Marine Corps was training for this actual situation, that after we got the VC out of a village the people would hail us as heroes because we had liberated them from their oppressors.

The facts came to light after going to Vietnam. We would go into an operation in an area and kick out the VC but the people did not hail us as conquering heroes.

As soon as we would withdraw, the VC would be right back where they had started from and we would be right back where we had started from. The only ground we could effectively control is the ground inside our own perimeters and the only places where people were really friendly to us at all were the places where we could control the ground to a point where the VC would affect no influence at all.

FE: Did you see many civilian casualties?

Carl Campbell: It is impossible to separate the VC from the people and in order to kill off a large enough portion of the VC, or Communists, or VC sympathizers, we would have to wipe out about 1/2 or more of the entire country. When our pilots bomb an area they are not so discriminating that they would be able to notice whether the group of people they are dropping their bombs on at 600 miles an hour are armed with rifles or not—I don’t believe they even care.

I have walked into villages that were totally burned out. There wasn’t a foxhole or a fighting position dug any place in the area. Some villages which were totally burned out looked as if they had been filled with innocent civil-

ians who possibly didn't even have a political cadre. In some cases there were villages where the VC had been, where their military establishment had been operating and these were always heavily fortified.

I recall one village that was not fortified at all. The houses were all burned down to the ground. The shocked inhabitants were laying on the ground. The 'women were screaming and wailing, the children were crying. There were dying people hidden behind walls. We didn't encounter any VC going through the place. Perhaps the airforce that had gone through the place before us can account for the fact that there were not any American sympathizers in the area.

The military situation was a frustrating one because you never really would achieve anything. If you were to kick the VC out of an area, when you were through they came right back and you never seemed to really gain any advantage. It seemed if you killed 5 or 6 of them, in the same area, 5 or 6 came of age where they could carry a rifle so that they were always there and in the same numbers. This constant frustration shows up in what the troops do.

One time we had a man shot in the leg—a very serious wound and he almost died. The men of the platoon were very angry at this. The VC had retreated in the meantime and the men had no combatants to vent their hatred on, so we went through the village and we burned all the houses.

I saw one man keep a woman away from a well at gunpoint as he put a torch to her house and then made her stand there and watch her home burn, and there were many cases like this. In one of these situations the villagers were all running to other wells to get water to douse the flames with off their homes. Our men would form a line and knock the cans out of their hands and knock the people down.

This is not true of all the men who were there but it is true of a great enough portion so that you could say it is indicative of what does go on. A lot of us would not agree with what did go on—we did not agree with the way the troops were conducting themselves. We did not agree with the wholesale destruction that the Marine Corps was inflicting on this area and the high rate of civilian casualties to military, but we were a minority and more than that, we usually did not have a great deal of rank.

The officers were very permissive in regard to these things. More than that, they viewed this as a military necessity. The fact they made life unbearable for the Vietnamese people or in fact took it away from them, didn't bother them a great deal. They didn't seem to show any real concern over what happened to the people. In fact they couldn't care less what happened to the Vietnamese people.

FE: How do you feel about anti-war demonstrators and the demonstrations?

Carl Campbell: The feeling I have toward 'antiwar demonstrators and demonstrations has changed somewhat from what it was when I was in Vietnam. When I was over there I didn't know much about it except what I read in the newspapers and I didn't think that they actually comprised even a significant minority. I thought that their cause was actually a hopeless one.

Since I have come home and looked into this thing a little more, I see that there are a great many legitimate people who are against the war and that they do in fact comprise a significant minority in this country. I also think they can actually do something to help bring this thing to an end.

I am now a member of an anti-war organization. I often talked to my friends while in Vietnam about the possibility of my joining an anti-war demonstration when I came home. Many of these guys didn't agree with my views but it was always a joke among my friends that C.J. (that was my nickname) is going to be a big protestor when he goes home. This was always in humor and I don't think anyone who was in the outfit I was in has any real hatred for me. I was never a coward and they knew they could count on me under fire.

FE: Would you go back and fight in Vietnam again?

Carl Campbell: I would not go back to Vietnam and fight if ordered to. Having taken part in a war with American forces, I can honestly say that I will not take part in another war period!

Not because I would have to undergo the hardships and danger involved. These things are important certainly. But I will not EVER again put myself in a position where I have to take active part in something as inhuman as that war is. And I am afraid that this war is not a great deal different than any other war that might come up in the future.

NOTE: Realizing that there are many subjects not touched upon in his interview Carl Campbell has agreed to answer questions submitted from readers on a regular basis. Send your questions to the Fifth Estate, 923 Plum St., Detroit 48201.

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