

What's it Take to be a Man?

An open letter to our men in service

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It is hard to reach you guys. Once you go through the doors of that induction center it is almost impossible to get to you. Well, you are inside now. Maybe you are at some base in the U.S. getting your basic training. Maybe you are stationed in Germany. Maybe you've gotten your orders for Vietnam. Maybe you are already there.

Wherever you are I hope this letter reaches you. I'm sending copies to all the Underground Press papers in this country and Canada and England, and to friends in Japan. If you don't agree with this letter, drop me a line, just write to me at the War Resisters League, 5 Beekman Street, NYC 10038. Tell me where I'm wrong. Unless the government has closed us down I promise to answer. If you agree with this letter, pass it on. If you are stationed in the States and have a friend in Vietnam, mail it to him. If you aren't in the army but you have a friend who is, mail this to him.



The "patriots" who are so hot for the war are saying the peace movement is against you guys. That we don't support you. They say we should all be sent to Vietnam or shot or at least we should be ashamed because there you are fighting and we demonstrate against the war. You've heard about flag burning and draft card burning and about what a bunch of commies we are. That's a line of crap.

Think.

If you burn a draft card you ruin a piece of paper. If you burn a flag you burn a piece of cloth. But if you drop a napalm bomb you burn up a human being. Does the card hurt when you burn it? Does the flag hurt when you burn it? But the child hurts when you burn it. What is worse, burning a draft card or burning up a village?

The officers in charge of your "political education" tell you the peace movement is just a handful of people, most of them with long hair. (Jesus had long hair and George Washington wore a powdered wig.) They will tell you most Americans support the war. Bullshit. On April 15th of this year more than 300,000 citizens marched in New

York to protest the war. 80,000 marched in San Francisco to protest it. That is almost half a million Americans. We didn't beat anybody up. We just marched peacefully. Two weeks later, on April 29th, the "patriots" held their demonstration in support of the war. Cardinal Spellman, the John Birch Society and the New York Daily News gave their full support. The organizers said 250,000 "red-blooded American patriots" would show up. Less than 10,000 came. Three weeks later they tried again. On May 20th there was a demonstration in New York "to support our boys." Less than 75,000 showed up. 75,000 people is a lot—but it sure as hell isn't 400,000.

Your officers may tell you there were Communists in the big demonstrations. That's right. There were. What you didn't hear is that we had more Catholic priests and nuns than Communist leaders.

You want to know what kind of people came out to "support you" at those "patriotic rallies?" Pot-bellied American Legion drunks. They believed in freedom so much they beat up anyone who disagreed with them. A Negro woman held up a sign during the May 20th "Patriots demonstration" which said "No Vietnamese Ever Called Me Nigger." A man in the uniform of the American Legion punched her in the face and twenty other men—if you can call them that—joined in beating up that one black woman. The police didn't arrest them. A group of young people who believe in peace but who wanted to show they support you guys tried to march in the May 20th parade. They carried American flags. You know what happened to them? I quote from a newspaper report: "Grown men lustily punched and kicked girls no older than their daughters. American flags were ripped from their hands and torn to bits."

Is that the kind of support you want? Women and girls beaten up?

When Johnson came to Los Angeles on June 23rd there was no one there to support the war except a handful of Democratic politicians and big contributors to the Democratic Party. But more than 10,000 people were there to protest Johnson's war. The police split skulls, hit women and children, and sent people to the hospital because they had dared to march, peacefully, against the war. But on August 6 in that same city more than 20,000 people turned out for an even larger anti-war protest.

Look, we do not support the war. The people here, most of us, don't like this war. We think it is a rotten war. We don't support the president. We think Johnson is a damn liar. But we do support you. What kind of support do you want -the support of Nixon and Johnson or the support we offer? Nixon and Johnson want you to do the fighting and killing. And the dying. They sure as hell aren't going to do it themselves but they "support you" doing it. We don't want you to kill anyone or get killed. We want you home alive and in one piece, not in a wooden box. Which kind of support do you want?

Think. It's your life. The only one you will ever have. We aren't against you guys. I read in the papers that some men who were killed in Vietnam have had phone calls to their parents from people here saying they were glad the son got killed, he deserved it, etc. I can't believe anyone is that sick to call the parents of a man who got killed in Vietnam. I don't know if anyone really made those phone calls or if that is just a way of turning you guys against us. But our groups didn't make those calls. We aren't happy if one of you gets it. We don't applaud when one of our planes get shot down. You are not the enemy. The "VC" isn't the enemy. Not even old LBJ is really the enemy. It is killing and hurting which is the enemy. Let's put it this way—I hope every bullet you fire misses. And I hope every mortar shell the VC fires is a dud.

Some of you men in Vietnam say the Vietnamese want us there. Come off it! Do you expect them to say they hate you when you are carrying an automatic rifle? Come off it! I've been in Saigon and I've seen how every single government building is guarded by barbed wire and sand bags and sentries. That barbed wire is there because you guys aren't popular. You aren't liberating" Vietnam. You are occupying it. When you "liberate" a village do the people come out laughing, with flowers? Do the girls run up to kiss you? When was the last time you got laid without paying for it? When was the last time a girl said she liked you without wanting piastres? When did you pay an honest price for your drinks in the bars?

Let me ask you something else. Have you asked how come you got drafted and George Hamilton didn't? Do you wonder why Pat Nugent is safe in the reserves instead of in Vietnam? Is there a Congressman's son (or grandson) or a businessman's son in your platoon? How about your company?

How about your whole battalion?—can you name one rich man's son or one politicians son who got drafted? If the war is so damned important why aren't some of the rich kids helping out with the fighting? And dying?

If your officers see this letter they will tell you it is subversive. What does “subversive” mean? Is Brig. General Robert Hughes subversive? On May 30th he said: “We are prosecuting an immoral war in support of a government that is a dictatorship. It represents nothing but a ruling clique and is composed of morally corrupt leaders...This is one hell of a war to be fighting. We must disengage from this tragic war.” Or how about General David Shoup, former Marine Corps Commandant? On February 21 he said, “I believe that if we had and would keep our dirty, bloody, dollar-crooked fingers out of the business of these nations so full of depressed, exploited people, they will arrive at a solution of their own...I don’t think the whole of Southeast Asia, as related to the present and future safety and freedom of people in this country, is worth the life or limb of a single American.” General Shoup holds the Medal of Honor. General Hughes has the Silver Star, Bronze Star with Oak Leaf Cluster—and the Purple Heart. What combat medals does Johnson have?

A couple of times guys have phoned me or written me to say I don’t know how cruel the V.C. can be, that we talk about them like they are all heroes and our men are all some kind of criminals. Let’s get the record straight. I don’t think the V.C. are all heroes or saints. I know they slit throats and kill civilians. And I think killing civilians or slitting throats is lousy. But who does the most killing, Them or Us? In ten years the VC has killed about 10,000 civilians, most of them corrupt local officials. I condemn those killings. In that same period we have killed more than 500,000 people in Vietnam. Who should I condemn more, the VC or the US army? Who has killed the most people? The VC go into a village and cut the throat of one corrupt official. That is bad, because even a bastard is still a human being and human beings should not be killed. But we fly over a village and drop bombs on everyone. That is worse. Right?

Another thing, which is sort of touchy, but you ought to think about it. They say the army makes a man out of you. By now you know better. The army just tries to make a robot out of you. A killing machine. What is a man? Is there something “manly” about the drunken American Legion guy who slugged the Negro woman because she was carrying a sign he didn’t like? Is there something really “manly” about being able to stick a bayonet into a man’s belly? There isn’t a damn thing about killing that is “manly.” A man’s job is to make babies, not to kill them. If you are really “manly” you don’t have to hit women who march on peace demonstrations—you can be gentle. If you are afraid of being gentle then you aren’t ready yet to be a man. Your cock makes you a man, not your gun. And friend, if you confuse your cock with your gun you are really in trouble. Shooting off a gun kills people. Shooting off your cock brings children into this world. The guys who can’t make love are the ones who want you to make war. Making love, making babies, and taking care of your girl—that is a man’s job. Killing people is for the guys who are running away from their real job.

Let me get practical. Your officers may tell you the peace movement is against you. It is not. We are for you and against the war. We are supporting you by trying to get you the hell out of Vietnam and out of the army and back to your job or school or pool hall or girlfriend. We are not against you. Right now you are in the army. What can you do?

Get the facts. Killing anyone is pretty serious. Getting killed is just as serious. Before you shoot your gun you ought to have some facts about the war. You have a right to get pamphlets in the mail. Write us for a list of pamphlets with facts on the war. And don’t just read our side—write the State Department (just address your letter to: State Department, Washington, D.C.) and ask for their pamphlets. Look over both sides and decide for yourself who is telling the truth. If you think the State Department and Johnson are telling the truth, then fight.

If you think the State Department and Johnson are lying about the war and we are telling the truth, then don’t fight. Part of being a man is doing what you think is right and not just doing what the captain tells you to do. The real patriot is not the man who does what he is told his country thinks is best, but the man who does what he thinks is best for his country. If you think the war is wrong, don’t support it. Get out of the army if you can. There are three ways of getting out.

You can desert. If you desert in the U.S., you can be picked up at any time—as long as you live -and sent to prison. If you desert in Sweden or France you won’t go to jail but you have to stay there. You can never come back here without being arrested. If you have a girl in Germany or France or England or Sweden and if you want to spend your whole life in Europe, then deserting is one way out. The New York Times says about sixty guys every month desert in Europe alone.

You can ask to be released from the army as a conscientious objector. Write us (War Resisters League, 5 Beekman St., NYC 10038) to see if you qualify under the law. But don't expect much. Hundreds of guys have applied for release as C.O.s and they aren't getting discharged. The army is saying no to almost everyone who applies. Still, you have the right to ask for release. All they can do is say no.

Third, you can refuse to obey any further orders, accept a courts martial, serve-a prison term, and be dishonorably discharged. That sounds rough—and it is. But every man who is “dishonorably discharged” for refusing to fight in this war will be an American hero when history is written. The men who refused to serve in Hitler's army are heroes today and so will be the men who refuse service in the Vietnam war. We honor the Communist troops who refused to kill Hungarians in 1956, and eventually we will honor you as well.

But that won't make it easier for you now. You would still have to serve six months to five years in a military prison. And that is rough. But if you are man enough to face combat are you not also man enough to face prison? For those of you overseas, who would like to sit down and talk over the whole problem—the war, what you are doing in the army, etc.—write to: War Resisters International, 88 Park Avenue, Enfield, Middlesex, England. They will give you the address of the peace organization nearest to your base.

I think you should know that many of those in the peace movement are taking the same kind of risks you would take if you refused to obey orders. I am thinking of the young men who, on October 16th, will turn in their draft cards. These guys have student deferments or could easily skip to Canada. They are not running to Canada and they are not hiding behind their deferments—they are going to turn in their draft cards and risk almost certain arrest. Hundreds of them. They are going to resist openly. That takes a lot of guts. On October 16th those boys will become men. They will take that risk partly to save the peasants in Vietnam and partly to save you men from killing and being killed. They are taking a risk they don't have to take—because they have the courage, as men, to say No to Johnson.

The men on our side are risking prison. They aren't asking you to fight any battles for them. The men on the side of the war are risking nothing—they are too old to fight—but they are willing to risk you. Those of us in the peace movement aren't on the side of the VC. We are on the side of people. The side of life—including your life. Walk across the line and stand with us, on the side of life. You may go to prison but you won't be alone.

Finally, whatever you decide to do, let me be sentimental—go ahead and laugh if you want -and say we pray for you. We pray you hurt no one and are not hurt. We pray you kill no one and are not killed. If you go into battle, shoot high so you won't hit anyone, not even your officers. And always remember that even to the very end we are supporting you, we are trying to get you out of the army and away from the crime of this war. If you want to be counted a man you can help out by fucking things up gently. Talk about the war in your barracks. Hand out literature. Don't take the officers too seriously. Going to prison in a good cause is better than going to battle for an evil cause.

And paste this in your helmet, the words of a great American poet, Kenneth Patchen:

This is a man
he is a poor creature
you are not to kill him
this is a man
he has a hard time
upon the earth,
you are not to kill him.”

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