

Mutiny at the Outposts of Empire

How GI Resistance in the Vietnam Era Ended the War

Rob Blurton

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As America's involvement in Vietnam deepened in 1965, political and social turbulence at home reached proportions unimaginable at the beginning. Within two years, the army started falling apart.

Low morale and outright rebellion eroded its combat effectiveness, and the malaise began spreading beyond Southeast Asia to brigades garrisoning more vital imperial frontiers, especially Central Europe. The conscripted sons of the men who fought World War II came to see not Asian communists but the United States military machine as the real enemy.

Hundreds of thousands voted against the war with their feet by deserting before their hitches were up. Marines and soldiers murdered their officers. Sailors sabotaged powerful warships, and bomber pilots refused to fly missions. Mutinies broke out on isolated jungle trails all over Vietnam, forcing troop leaders to "work it out" with the men. Stockades and brigades were rocked by uprisings. GI antiwar organizations and newspapers spontaneously proliferated at U.S. military bases worldwide as soldiers finished with their one-year tour in Vietnam spread the contagion.

The evidence indicates that troop rebellions—contrary to most conventional histories of the war—were not merely background blare to the central drama of decisions by politicians and generals. They were instead a critical factor that hindered the army's fighting ability, and the snowballing process of decay hastened American withdrawal from the battlefield.

After the U.S. invasion of South Vietnam, draft resistance was the first activity directed against the war effort. Many of those successfully conscripted, though, also became a problem for the armed forces as they learned about the military and the war through experience. Desertion skyrocketed during peak years of the ground fighting, steadily rising from a rate of 15 incidents per thousand in the 1966 Army to a staggering 74 per thousand by 1971.

GI coffeehouses were set up by activists outside military posts in the U.S., providing a space where soldiers and civilians could congregate free of the repressive atmosphere that prevailed on-base. These establishments came under legal attack from both military and local city officials. Coffeehouse organizers responded with a "Summer of Support" project in 1968, successfully raising funds to keep the soldier meeting places open.

That year, one could realize the increasing magnitude of military dissent through the nascent GI underground press which eventually grew to include hundreds of papers. The most famous of these, FTA (short for "Free The Army," but usually translated as a more coarse comment on soldiering), was first published in 1968 at Fort Knox, Ky. The Bond, from New York City, became the voice of the influential American Servicemen's Union and during the big years of the ground war, and was distributed to tens of thousands of GIs worldwide.

Stories revealing on-base incidents that the army kept from the civilian press began to appear in these soldier newspapers. A 1967 Bond article, for example, described rioting that erupted at Fort Hood, Texas, when the 198th Infantry Brigade vented its unhappiness at receiving Vietnam orders.

Over There

It was in Southeast Asia, though, where military units really began to unravel. Fragging, the deliberate murder of unpopular officers and noncommissioned officers using fragmentation hand grenades became a popular form of resistance among infantry platoons. By 1967, soldiers in the Mekong Delta were offering bounties raised by the men for combat executions of dangerously gung-ho officers.

The murder of overzealous commanders during battle was hardly unknown in earlier American wars, but in Indochina, the practice—and even more, the hesitancy that this constantly implied threat induced in the entire officer corps—mushroomed out of control as the war stalemated. Such ruthless correctives to excessive officer ambition were restricted to life-and-death combat situations in previous conflicts, but by 1970, the phenomenon leapt from the front lines to rear areas and even to bases in Germany. Vietnam was beginning to have a corrosive effect on the U.S. Army far beyond the Asian battlefields.

Fighting the White Man's War

Mirroring turbulent civil society, militant activism among young African-American men was in the forefront of the GI movement. An early example occurred in July 1967, when two Camp Pendleton, Calif. marines called a meeting on the base to question whether “black men should fight white men's wars.” To air these concerns, they and twelve other marines requested a Captain's Mast with their commanding officer, which is naval parlance for the military judicial right given troops to redress grievances. Instead, the original two were arrested and charged with insubordination and promoting disloyalty. In November, both were found guilty and sentenced to several years in the brig.

On August 23, 1968, over 100 black soldiers from troubled Fort Hood met to discuss orders for duty in Chicago, where Army units would be used during the Democratic national convention to suppress civilian demonstrations. After allowing an all-night discussion, Army MPs arrested 43 “ringleaders” as the meeting broke up.

The April 1970 invasion of Cambodia provided further impetus to military resistance, paralleling the outrage it generated in the civilian peace movement. Expanded fighting in Asia assured the success of previously scheduled “Armed Farces Day” demonstrations held on May 16, the national Armed Forces Day holiday, which included over a dozen large rallies and marches at military posts across the country.

Other manifestations of civilian unrest were matched in the military, including prison rebellions and polarization among blacks and whites. In the summer of 1968, the two largest of many stockade uprisings in Vietnam occurred, both led by black GIs. During the weekend of August 16, marine inmates took over part of the brig outside Da Nang, the Marines' main in-country staging base. The prisoners held out for 20 hours against armed guards, resulting in several injuries.

Two weeks later, at the huge and overcrowded Army facility at Long Binh, the bloodiest revolt in a U.S. military prison in recent times took place. For hours, hundreds of inmates fought a running battle with MPs, and much of the stockade was destroyed by fire. Five guards and 58 prisoners were injured, 23 seriously. One GI inmate died.

Another unfortunate symptom of the general breakdown underway was the fracture of unit solidarity along color lines. Confrontations between blacks and whites were pandemic in Vietnam, and in some instances became a war within a war.

By the turn of the decade, the high volume of soldiers balking at orders in war zones had required an Army designation for the rot: “combat refusal.” U.S. military operations were hamstrung by both actual incidents and the generalized atmosphere of battle evasion that restricted military options for gung-ho unit commanders.

For every defiant refusal, dozens more would “search and avoid,” or fake their night patrols by stopping 100 meters beyond the perimeter wire to wait out the darkness, radioing in false reports of passing assigned checkpoints.

The Brink of Collapse

In April 1970, one veteran company of grunts refused outright a direct order from their inexperienced commanding officer to advance down a dangerous open road, all in front of a CBS television crew.

Media evidence of growing discontent also emerged back in the States that summer. A crippled marine sergeant told a Senate committee that his injuries had been caused by his own men throwing a hand grenade underneath his bunk after he clamped down on their marijuana use, and CBS broadcast a clip of troopers from the First Air Cavalry smoking pot through the barrel of a shotgun.

It is worth remembering that these reported incidents represent only the tip of the iceberg. How many rebellions by tired veterans in remote jungle gorges were “worked out” by the compromises of realistic officers and never made news? We can never know.

The military cancer of Vietnam came home with the returning vets. Disciplinary problems such as desertion and drug abuse increased substantially in Stateside garrisons with the influx of former occupiers of South Vietnam. Among ground forces back in the U.S., continued resistance to the Indochina war took its most ominous and intriguing turn during antiwar events held in Washington D.C, in April and May of 1971.

Thousands of protesters there were disillusioned Vietnam veterans, and when an ex-soldier encampment on the Mall was threatened with forcible removal, 82nd Airborne Division troopers dispatched to the capital on riot duty (with many combat returnees in their ranks) told demonstrators they would refuse any orders to interfere with their brother vets.

Their commanders wisely did not press the issue.

The Movement for a Democratic Military surfaced in Southern California in early 1970 and drew its greatest strength from the immense San Diego naval base, home port to the aircraft carriers of the Pacific fleet. Rebellion took many forms, but the most effective in curtailing the Navy’s war-making ability was sabotage. Four hundred eighty-eight “investigations on damage or attempted damage” were noted in fiscal 1971, and the widespread tactic of literally throwing a wrench into the gears of the war machine became the technology-intensive (and thus vulnerable) Navy’s nightmare.

Airmen Join the Rebellion

The Air Force, with its relaxed discipline and low ratio of actual involvement by members in direct fighting, had managed to avoid much of the discontent affecting other services before 1971. However, as the heaviest burdens of the war shifted towards bombing, this changed. Whereas only ten GI papers circulated among U.S. air bases at the beginning of 1971, by the spring of 1972 there were more than thirty. A Congressional panel, the House Internal Security Committee, recognized a clear pattern: “The trend towards organizing among Air Force personnel, in line with U.S. continued air activities in Indochina, is quite obvious.”

Intensified bombing in 1972 brought protests to Air Force installations around the world. The swell of resistance receded as bombing operations declined in the fall, but surged sharply again as a disgusted response to the Christmas B-52 attacks on central Hanoi. That December, two combat pilots from the U Tapao base in Thailand refused to fly bombing missions over Vietnam, beginning the last chapter of GI resistance to America’s Indochinese slaughter.

Morale in the Pacific air command deteriorated dramatically throughout 1972, but during the relentless bombing of inner Cambodia in 1973, it plunged to critical levels. Four B-52 pilots stationed in Guam joined with a congresswoman’s legal suit challenging the constitutionality of the Cambodian bombing; three were relieved from duty and the fourth refused to fly missions after this action against his comrades.

Though the Pentagon claimed its 40 percent reduction in B-52 missions over Cambodia in May 1973 was due to budget cuts, a Washington Post correspondent reported that “despite official assertions, there are indications that the Air Force is facing a deepening morale crisis among pilots and especially among crews of the B-52s...High ranking Defense Department sources say the morale situation at Guam has been poor for some time now...These sources say the morale problem at U Tapao in Thailand is also growing worse daily.”

Despite the highly professional and officer-heavy structure of the air service, resistance to the Cambodian raids certainly affected U.S. military options.

Today, mainstream analysis of these pivotal events in America's Vietnam adventure, other than mention of fragging, that word the war added to our vocabulary, is nearly nonexistent.

Why have so many historians ignored the significance of the GI movement? Perhaps because the implications of such a multi-class social movement in an army whose loyalty had been beyond question in the century since the Civil War are scarcely conceivable to scholars steeped in the assumptions of current ideology.

GI activism also contradicts dominant historical notions that interpret the antiwar movement among youth almost entirely as a middle-class student affair, eschewed by the sons of America's working class.

Marcus Raskin mentions this point in his introduction to David Cortright's definitive 1975 study, *Soldiers In Revolt*: "From time to time, incidents were noted in the media, but for the most part these incidents were seen by civilian society as sporadic...[however] the struggle against the war in Indochina moved from the campus and was continued within the military itself by the children of all classes—the poor, working, and middle classes.

This is an important political fact unrecorded among journalists, academics, and politicians. To be aware of this fact is to be relieved of the comfortable belief that the armed forces are a quiet, apolitical group."

Awareness of this socially broad movement of war resistance in the military inherently challenges a popular mythology that only lack of political will (the "one-hand-tied-behind-our-back" theory) kept the boys from taking Hanoi and turning Uncle Ho out.

In actuality, the risk of further civil disorder in America and complete collapse of the field army in Asia precluded large offensive operations, as the invasion of Cambodia indicated.

Eventually, there was even concern about the reliability of American troops in riot control operations at home. When the dependability of soldiers to follow orders can even be questioned, the situation is already intolerable for ruling elites.

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