

A Vietnam View

The Vietnam War was one of the longest and most controversial wars the United States was involved in. The result of this war was not only costly to the economy, but a multitude of soldiers lost their lives fighting in Vietnam. Just over two million seven hundred thousand American soldiers served and fought in this horrendous battle. The casualties mounted up to an astonishing 57,939 men. This number does not include the men who were wounded physically or emotionally and mentally tarnished. This warfare caused much bloodshed and tension in the American nation.

The Vietnamese had been fighting a war almost continuously since their nation was first founded. The war between Vietnam and France after World War II caught the eye of several different countries. The United States wanted to prevent France from restoring their colony. Roosevelt spoke in reference to this in one of his speeches, "Indochina has been liberated by American aid and American troops, and should never simply be handed back to the French, to be milked by their imperialists." He also went to China and offered to relinquish the country to them. In any case, Chiang Kai-shek brutally refuted the offer exclaiming, "Under no circumstances will I accept. They are not Chinese. They would not assimilate into the Chinese people." The Chinese had tried and failed for thousands of years to overcome and control Vietnam. They had learned that this method would not be successful. France and the United States had yet to learn this same lesson. After Roosevelt died, President Truman took over the oval office and changed things up a bit. The United States began to withdraw their troops by the end of that year from the country. They were able to stay pro French neutral in Vietnam for three years and then they became actively engaged. Soon after, the Korean War broke out and the

troops began to appear in Saigon. Here we can mark the start of the augmentation of American military forces in Vietnam, a striking number that would reach 550,000 military troops at the peak of the war in 1968. Eisenhower had almost been convinced to command air strikes in their aid to the French. Eventually the president discontinued this thought after he was unable to receive assent from major allies.

Then several nations held what is called the Geneva Convention and signed the agreement. The countries involved included the People's Republic of China, the State of Vietnam, the Democratic Republic of Vietnam, France, Cambodia, the United Kingdom and Laos. The United States determined not to sign, they were hesitant to do so, and they ended up only observing the process. The Geneva Convention Act split up Indochina in four different sections. Ho Chi Minh became the President or ruler of North Vietnam. The southern section was placed under Saigon Government rule. Then a rigged election put Ngo Dinh Diem as leader of the Republic of Vietnam. The main idea of the Geneva Convention Act was to request reunification in the year 1956. By this time France had extricated all of its armed forces from the Republic of Vietnam, leaving the United States as the sole foreign authority in the south. Ngo Dinh Diem refused to follow the Geneva Convention Act which caused a recommencement of the war. By this time, the United States had already sent a flood of money of the sum of one billion dollars to Southern Vietnam in assistance.

The world so feared that a communist Vietnam would cause endless problems. Dwight D. Eisenhower stated that surrounding countries to communist's nations would be affected; hence the domino theory was born. He stated that if the first domino topples over, then the rest would fall as well. His claim was that if the Republic of Vietnam became a communist nation, that it

would affect other countries in the surrounding areas including Malaysia, Cambodia, Burma, Laos, Indonesia as well as Thailand.

The United States remained inconspicuous for another three years. Only 300 U.S. military advisors were appointed with the MAAG in the Republic of Vietnam. They were assigned to train and strengthen the southern troops from an attempted invasion by the northern military. Fifteen miles north of Saigon sat an American mess hall in an old saw mill. In the middle of July late at night, six American advisors sat watching a movie when they were attacked. Suddenly bullets were flying through the air and gunshots were raging the area. Ten guerrilla attackers were looking in through the ripped up screen windows. Momentarily, silence filled the area and the Americans who had not been killed took off, the dark night being their refuge. The South Vietnamese troops came hurriedly to rescue the American advisors, but by that time the guerrillas had already taken off.

In 1961 Diem urgently requested the newly inaugurated President Kennedy for additional assistance. Diem explained that the attacks were stretching their forces thin. Kennedy replied quickly and said “We shall promptly increase our assistance to your defense effort.” He had not specified, however, the amount of assistance he was intending to send their way. Kennedy consorted with his Vice President Lyndon Johnson and his special military advisor Maxwell Taylor, and decided that they would send both equipment and men in aid.

The Special Forces, also known as the Green Berets, were intending on setting up a training program for the South Vietnamese troops. On September 21, 1961 they confirmed their perpetual stay. There were several working problems between the American troops and the Southern Vietnamese troops. If a man was suspected of being a Viet Cong guerrilla, it could not

be proven by an American soldier. This caused them to butt heads and most likely made hard working conditions and tension run high. Another big issue was that the American advisors struggling to train the Vietnamese army did not have authority over any of the Vietnamese troops. If any of the Vietnamese troops did not follow orders from the Americans, they could not be disciplined or punished. Incompetent or crooked Vietnamese officers could not be removed or replaced by the United States. Several of the Vietnamese troops saw the Americans just as extra material and air support, which caused them to tell Americans what they assumed they wanted to hear instead of being honest and truthful. Captain Ralph Thomas had walked into two ambushes in ten months time in Vietnam. Both times he had been fearful that he would be killed and would not make it home. Both times South Vietnam troops had discarded foundational military tactic rules, yet the U.S. army could do nothing in order to change their tactics.

At the beginning of the year 1963 Colonel Bui Dinh Dam commander of the ARVN 7th Division, utterly failed to defeat a considerably smaller guerrilla outfit. The ARVN lost over 100 men to death. Some Americans were killed and more were wounded along with the loss of five helicopters. Several ARVN men did a terrible job during battle and several men retreated and ran away from the battle. Somehow they were able to capture 32 prisoners in this defeated battle. This defeat was only one of many heavy losses.

On August 2nd, 1964 the U.S.S Maddox was floating lazily on the ocean, meanwhile North Vietnam had five torpedo boats which were visible at the horizon. Intelligence picked up the possibility of the Maddox being attacked. PT boats arrived close to the Maddox and radar men began monitoring the area. Lieutenant Raymond Connel began firing five inch shells as fast as he was able. The Maddox swung around and the torpedoes passed by without eliciting any

destruction. While the Maddox had quickly swung around it had directly hit a PT boat and disabled it. It was unable to move but it kept firing nonetheless. The Maddox tried once more to fire at the PT boats, by this time three PT boats had been struck down. When President Johnson was informed of the situation, he asked for more backup. The Tonkin Gulf Incident was the cause for more American troops in Vietnam.

The year 1965 had begun harmoniously. While they celebrated the lunar New Year, the war was essentially halted. The Viet Cong actually allowed the opposing side to march home to their families to celebrate the New Year. Then on the 6th of February, a little over a month later, a man named Jesse Pyle was guarding the military compound. He noticed small noises here and there and recognized a disturbance. He shot off a couple of rounds to alert surrounding Americans to the ambush. Suddenly the area was in pure chaos. Pyle died, unable to get away but saved his fellow soldiers. American soldiers leapt up to attack in earnest, only to find that they could not win. 100 Viet Cong troops struck simultaneously at an airstrip some miles away. Eight Americans were killed and over 100 were wounded. Several aircrafts were utterly destroyed or damaged almost beyond repair.

A young officer called Mel Menlove went to serve in Vietnam when he was 22 years old. I had the opportunity to interview him to learn more about Vietnam from a soldier's perspective. I spoke with him for several hours about the war, and it was very enlightening. I learned a great deal from our conversation.

Question: How long did you serve in the Vietnam War?

Answer: I was in the Air Force for about four years; I was a pilot and a darn good one! I had always wanted to be a pilot as a young chap, and I fulfilled my dream. Not exactly in the way I would have liked, my dream did not include killing other men who may have had the same dreams I did. But I did it, and I did it well. You asked me earlier if I received any medals or recognition. I failed to answer because I don't know if I consider them to really be a good thing. I didn't feel proud then of the things I was required to do then, so having the United States recognize it as heroic was not easy. But yes Lucia, I did.

Question: Can you tell me what it was like in Vietnam? What were the conditions like?

Answer: The ground soldiers were strong men. They lived in very rough conditions. The area was very muddy and cold, so they were always covered in mud. They had to constantly watch their backs for Viet Cong sympathizers who volunteered to help out the army. I don't know how they did it. I have a great respect for those fellow soldiers.

Question: What did you and other soldiers think about the war?

Answer: Now see, that is an interesting question. It's hard to say. A lot of my friends did not speak of it, because it only made it more difficult for us to continue on doing what we were doing. We didn't necessarily agree with the war itself, but we were serving our country, hoping to achieve honor and respect.

Question: I know that there was a lot of confusion going around; no one was listening to the military advisors. How did this affect the troops?

Answer: It was extremely frustrating at times when they forced us to sit back instead of taking action. For example, in designated friendly zones we would get shot at from the enemy, yet we were not allowed to shoot back because it was “friendly”. If things would have been done differently, we could have won the war. Also, we never knew who was on whose side. The Vietnamese did not have military uniforms, just civilian clothes. It made it more difficult to pinpoint who was friend or foe. We also had to keep an eye out for traitors within the Southern Vietnamese Civilians that we were around. They were easily bribed with a bag of rice; they’d turn on you, without a second thought. That is how desolate they were for food and supplies.

Question: What did you do when you weren’t fighting or flying a plane?

Answer: (Smiles) Actually I taught English to some of the local kids who wanted to learn. It benefited them, because then they could communicate with the soldiers and do odd jobs to gain a bit of money to help feed their families. I didn’t do it too often but it kept me going doing that.

Question: What can you tell me about the food supplies the troops received?

Answer: They were terrible most of the time. It was very rare to get anything fresh. I remember (chuckles) a couple of times, they wanted to send the troops fresh meat. They sent helicopters holding a live cow and they would drop the cow down to the troops. We had some fresh meat and some great meals! That is the most interesting way I have ever seen a cow killed or delivered!

Question: What were the battles like for you, since you were a pilot?

Answer: Well...it was not pretty. We pilots would fill up a helicopter full of men, transport them to the current area they were attacking and head back to get more men and drop them off. Once we left more men at the battle site, we picked up the wounded and took them back to base so they could be treated. Back and forth hauling healthy young bucks to injured men and dying men. I saw some young men go get fixed up by the nurses and head right back to battle until they were either seriously injured or dead. The terror of carrying my friends back and forth was almost torture sometimes when I had to watch them die and there was nothing I could do about it. When I wasn't flying a helicopter that was full of my fellow soldiers and friends, I was flying fighter airplanes shooting at the Vietnamese. I don't want to go into that much I don't like to think about it too much.

Question: I appreciate you allowing me to ask you these questions. I can only imagine how difficult it must have been even after the war was over. One more question, and I'll be done. What was it like for you when you returned home? How were you treated?

Answer: You know I was pretty lucky considering what some soldiers went through. A lot of my neighbors would not talk to me and the girls wouldn't date me. I never got called foul names such as baby killer, low life, or murderer. The people in my town resorted to ignoring instead of ridiculing. They preferred not to have anything to do with me, which suited me just fine. At first it seemed that the people were in favor of the soldiers, but after the My Lai incident, most American's lost their respect for the U.S. Army. Eventually they came around and started asking questions. Most of them were under the impression that we soldiers were in favor of the war, and that we all did horrible things during our stay in Vietnam. I consider it lucky none of those girls would date me back then, I met my wife and she had never doubted the soldier's loyalty for our

country. She is and was one of the best dames I have ever known, I believe that not being able to date other girls was just fine, it led me to her. I was and am proud that I fought for my country, but I am not proud of the actual war itself.

Mel Menlove's account of treatment was stated by various other soldiers but at worse degrees of disrespect. When they returned they were not honored or hailed or considered heroes. Our troops suffered a great deal when they fought in the war, and the war they had to fight when they came home to American.

By 1967 the U.S. troop level in Vietnam had escalated up to 400,000 men. South Vietnam was losing heavily, with almost one entire infantry wiped out once a week, the United States began to take on more of the war. This is what Westmoreland called "The big war." This is when they adapted the motto "Search and destroy." The first "search and destroy" mission began on the 8th of January in 1967. Military officers had been monitoring the specific areas but also trying to deceive the Viet Cong by creating routines for their troops to distract the VC. Phase one was initiated early morning at 7:45. Sixty troop carrying helicopters flew towards their destination. At 8:00am sharp the helicopters arrived and began their attack. The troops instructed the village to remain in their homes or they would be shot. Then the U.S. troops evacuated 6,000 people as well as their possessions, including any livestock. They found several tunnels throughout the village and captured eight Viet Cong soldiers. A total of 500 tunnels were discovered and annihilated. To their delight and surprise, they also found plenty of rice that could feed up to 13,000 troops for an entire year. Along with the weapons and an abundance of ammunition discovered 500,000 pages of documents. The documents included outlines of

attacks, diagrams and the VC's headquarters. This allowed the U.S. Army to "search and destroy" several bases.

The battles got more brutal as thousands of American and Vietnamese lives were lost or altered forever. Both sides had heavy casualties and suffered endlessly. When the year 1968 rolled around the United States and North Vietnam had begun talking about peace treaties, though at the same time war operations were being put into action. On April 3rd, peace talks were agreed to by the Hanoi government. President Johnson ceased fire on November first and gave a speech. "I have reached this decision...in the belief that this action can lead to progress toward a peaceful settlement of the Vietnam War. What we now expect-what we have a right to expect-are prompt, productive, serious and intense negotiations in an atmosphere that is conducive to progress." By this time, pilots had completed 100,000 different assignments and bombed the North Vietnamese over half a million times. Over 900 planes had been destroyed and 1,500 pilots had been said to be missing in action.

Even after the United States withdrew from this terrible but great war, Vietnam continued on fighting for several years. We sustained heavy losses in every aspect imaginable. Later on the Vietnam Veterans Memorial Wall was constructed to honor all those who died valiantly never giving up, never giving in, despite being against our purpose for the war. Several people may still oppose the war today, like they did several years ago, but no one can argue our soldiers bravery and valor. The terrible conditions, the low supply of food, the constant skullduggery from supposed allies, corrupt Vietnamese officers, confusion about the war, and little support from their country all made this a very difficult war for them to fight. Several people today believe if different tactics would have been used, we could have won the war. Although we may

never know, our country will always remember the lives that were lost or torn apart. We will never forget the Vietnam War.

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