

G.I.'s in Vietnam Express Grief and Bitterness

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LONGBINH, South Vietnam, June 6—In the barracks and mess halls of this sprawling, dusty camp, American soldiers listened in bitter quiet today to the news from Los Angeles.

The death of Senator Robert F. Kennedy stirred grief—and a surprising undertone of anger and confusion—among the infantrymen, the officers, the military policemen, the cooks, the signalmen and the wounded hospital patients in Longbinh, the largest Army base in South Vietnam.

"Everyone's asking what the hell we're here for when we can't even deal with things back home," said Pfc. Richard Ferling, a telephone lineman from Rockford, Illinois. "Even sergeants are saying it—Let's settle our own problems first."

American servicemen fighting in Vietnam have often criticized those at home—among them Senator Kennedy—who suggested that the United States' involvement in the Vietnam war was wrong. The comments today on the Senator's death did not necessarily reflect a dovish trend, but rather an awareness of the urgency of American problems.

A blond, curly-haired military

policeman from Pittsburgh, Specialist 4 David Tournay, commented:

"I got so mad I wrote a letter to my wife and told her that when I get discharged I just want to move out of the States."

'It Really Depressed Me'

Sitting on his bed in a stifling barracks lined with Playboy magazine photographs, the 21-year-old draftee stared at the palms of his hands. "It really depressed me," he said intensely. "Like we're over here fighting for this country and back home a man can't even run for office."

As the sun beat down on the wooden and tin barracks of the camp 15 miles northeast of Saigon, which houses 38,000 American soldiers, the afternoon silence was broken sporadically by the sound of Armed Forces Radio broadcasts from Los Angeles.

"Everyone's listening, everyone cares," said Specialist John Finley, a 21-year-old military policeman from Northport, L. I. "You wanted something done about this war and you wanted the right person to do it, and somehow you felt he would have done it."

Leaning forward on his footlocker, the shirtless soldier, who wants to be a New York City detective, shook his head. "Why, why is there this total lack of responsibility at home?" he asked. "First it was his brother, then Martin Luther King and then him."

A Sultry Day of Talk

Specialist Finley paused and clenched his fists. "What the hell kind of country is that?" he said in a voice strangled with rage.

Through the sultry day, the shooting of Senator Kennedy

was the prime source of conversation—at mess halls where soldiers chatted in curious stillness over a lunch of Southern fried chicken, in barracks where they lay in their underwear, staring at the ceiling and listening to the radio, at the hospital, in offices, in guard posts.

"He had the same dreams as us, you know," said Specialist 4 James Sorenson, a jeep driver from Los Angeles. "He was young."

"He was a hippie!" exclaimed Pfc. Bradford Smith, a frail, bespectacled soldier with a solemn smile. "Really, that's why most of us liked him."

Perhaps the soldiers who were affected most deeply were Negroes, who stood in small groups listening to transistors, shaking their heads, cursing and shaking their heads again.

"Just think what's back there for me," said one of them, Specialist 4 Russel Campbell, a 20-year-old radio operator from Latta, S. C. "You're over here in this heat and you try to run Charlie down and you count every God-damn day, in this hellhole, and then look, just look at what's back there waiting for me!"

'I'm Negro, You're White'

He tapped his finger on his chest. "Look, I'm Negro. You're white," he told a visitor. "If you people can't get together, if you people kill your best, how do you expect me and you to get together?"

"And if we can't get along," he added softly, "there's no way in hell that we can teach Vietnam anything."

Seated next to Specialist Campbell at an outdoor class, Specialist 4 Willie Couch of Tacoma, Wash., nodded grimly. "Myself, I wanted to see that man President," he said. "Now

I got doubts, doubts about everything. Like why should I be here. Look what's going on back home. They need me there, don't they?"

As dusk fell and a soft breeze whipped the sand over the camp, the news of the Senator's death had spread through the barracks.

"I don't know if it's because I'm over here or not, but I just seem to accept a violent solution to things," said 22-year-old John McGowan, a military policeman from Whitestone, Queens as he prepared to move out on patrol. "On almost take it for granted now—there's violence in diplomacy, in race relations, in politics." He shrugged and went out.

A Soldier and His Doubts

At the Twenty-fifth Evacuation Hospital, patients in blue pajamas listened to the radio and dozed. An announcement told of the relatives at Senator Kennedy's bedside when he died.

Specialist 4 William Farnum turned down the radio and shook his head.

"No matter how you feel about this war, you know that because the company needs you here you should take part in it," the soldier, a former salesman from Stony Brook, L. I., said. "When something like this happens, it devalues your opinion of the country and therefore your reason for being here."

Outside, Maj. William Kern, chief of ophthalmology, strolled past the corrugated wards and operating rooms.

"Everyone's so ashamed at what happened," he said as dust swirled onto the sidewalk. "We're not too emotional about it though, because over here we see so much."