

FOR FRONT-LINE SOLDIERS, WAR HAD BITTER FLAVOR

NY Times

MAY 1 1975

By JAMES P. STERBA

They were not understood or appreciated by many Americans and Vietnamese. They were always a small minority in America's Indochina establishment. The combat soldiers, the young Americans who for nearly a decade carried rifles, walked the jungles and slept in the mud, were closest to the Vietnam war, knew its terrors most intimately and paid its dearest price.

Other Americans were killed and maimed, and the Vietnamese surely had the monopoly on long-term agony. Other Americans felt fear and caught glimpses of the horrors of young men shooting at each other with old men, women and children caught between. Yet it was for a thin sliver of America, 60,000 or so combat soldiers in action on any given day from among the half a million American military men in Vietnam in the late nineteen-sixties, that the body bags and aluminum boxes were largely reserved.

Steaks and Drinks at Club

Their relations with Vietnamese were minimal compared with those of most American troops in the country, they were largely in the rural areas, maintaining a security screen behind which the majority of Americans, at relatively safe rear bases, and South Vietnamese, in relative safe cities, worked, played and related war stories.

It was from these rear areas, from bases in Thailand and carriers cruising in the South China sea, that pilots went aloft with their bomb-laden jets. They performed their missions quickly and efficiently, then flew back to safety and to steaks and drinks at the club. It was from these safe areas that the B-52 bombers and the planes loaded with herbicides operated. It was from artillery bases that the front-line soldiers protected that shell after shell flew into "free-fire zones."

Then the young men with rifles—grunts, they were called—would have to go out and see what, if anything, the B-52's and the howitzers had hit.

It was the young men at the front who had to go into the mistakenly bombed village, see what napalm had done to children and feel the hatred in the eyes of villagers.

Because American troops first had to push the Vietcong out of populated coastal and delta areas and then keep them from coming back, they fought many battles in or near contested villages where both combatants and innocents—sometimes women and children—became casualties, additions to the body counts some commanders used to indicate progress.

These front-line soldiers were told in basic training to trust no Vietnamese, to shoot first and ask questions later. And

their experiences during the first few months in combat amid mines and booby traps and next to smiling villagers usually reinforced that idea. Fear was also mutual and pervasive, except during those moments when both groups felt secure enough to do black-market business—money from soldiers for whatever the villagers would sell, including themselves.

A Year of Combat

For the majority of American troops—those in the rear—the war also lasted a year—a relatively comfortable one marked by one week of R and R and long bouts of boredom.

The troops at the front afforded the majority enough security to take drugs, get into barroom brawls, hustle Vietnamese girls, cause racial incidents and use grenades against fellow Americans they did not like. The Vietnamese who came to know this group around cities and bases catered to it, smiled and made money but were largely disgusted.

These Americans were always concocting projects, sending medical and dental teams to villages, building or rebuilding market places, churches and temples for which many Vietnamese seemed grateful.

By the early nineteen-seventies, the South Vietnamese Army had assumed the country's front-line defense and

the American forces were riddled with disciplinary problems. And with the countryside seemingly secure, many Vietnamese were glad to see the Americans go home.

In the early days of the war, when Americans units were pouring into the country and moving off into the jungle to do battle, the morale of front-line troops was generally high. In those days, their leaders—from captains all the way up through colonels and occasionally even generals—actually led. The command structure was tight. Ranking officers were in the field with the young men they commanded. But gradually the leadership pulled away from the fighting, leaving young, inexperienced captains and sergeants on the ground.

Higher-ranking officers preferred to oversee the battlefield from the comfort and security of helicopters hovering above the range of small-arms fire. Grunts spent the year in their line units. Officers were replaced every six months. Leadership became loose, with orders often given from a hilltop the base protected with barbed wire and machine guns—too far away for commanders to know what their troops on the ground were going through or even what they were doing.

Many commanders would later describe their isolation from the troops as a defense for incidents such as the massacre at My Lai.

This loose command structure also played a role in another relationship between Americans and South Vietnamese: Vietnamization. The South Vietnamese Army adopted the American model. And while American officers touted South Vietnamese fighting ability, the grunts in the field, scoffing at their South Vietnamese counterparts, said they had more respect for the fighting ability of the Vietcong and the North Vietnamese.

Side by Side, Untrusting

Although American units usually would not trust their South Vietnamese allies, they were required to fight side by side as Americans departed and the South Vietnamese took over front positions.

For Americans in the last few years of combat, it became largely a search-and-avoid operation—the result of the isolated command and instructions to avoid casualties. The South Vietnamese took over and gradually began avoiding the search altogether.

Perhaps the United States soldiers had a more telling impact on Americans than they did on the South Vietnamese. Through the casualties, dead and wounded, the meaning of the Vietnam war gradually touched every neighborhood in America in a way that countless dying of Vietnamese never could. They came home in silence, but their message was loud and clear.