

# War and G.I. Morale

## American Soldiers Rebelling On and Off the Battlefield

By FRED GARDNER

It was in April, 1968, that I first heard a Vietnam veteran describe a seek-and-destroy mission as "seek-and-avoid." He said that most of the men in his company, an infantry unit stationed near Danang, didn't think the war seemed "worth it" in terms of life, limb and disrupted youth. "On patrol," he explained "we were supposed to go a mile and engage Charlie, right? What we did was go a hundred yards, find us some heavy foliage, smoke, rap and sack out."

In the past two years, hundreds of thousands of American soldiers have used this tactic. Refusal to take part in combat has grown so widespread that it need no longer be surreptitious. G.I.'s leave their firebases with impunity; commanders fear that court-martialing them will undermine whatever remains of morale. Officers and NCO's who insist on ordering troops into the field are commonly "fragged"—hit by a grenade rolled under their tentflaps. Blatant racists are dealt with similarly. G.I.'s smoke marijuana freely, realizing that a round-up of potheads would deplete the infantry faster than you can say Hatfield-McGovern.

The meaning of the G.I.'s reluctance to fight has not been lost on the Pentagon, where the masterminds are expediting the volunteer Army and planning an ever greater role for the Air Force. But the American people have long been denied the information that it's their boys, not President Nixon, who are cancelling operations. In the Oct. 23 issue of *Life* there is an illuminating piece by John Saar: "You Can't Just Hand Out Orders," a portrait of a young company commander. We learn that Capt. Brian Utermahlen, West Point '68, enjoys a rapport with the men of his "exceptionally good company" because he hasn't court-martialed those who refuse to go to the field; hasn't persecuted the blacks (whose spokesman sympathizes with the N.L.F. and muses about fighting for liberation back home); hasn't busted the weed blowers; did dismiss a zealous sergeant who tried to en-

... certain "less urgent orders"; and charged to lead a 17-day mission in which no one, friend or foe, got seriously hurt. The piece might aptly have been called "You Just Can't Hand Out Orders" and played as the story of a company's refusal—however low-key and unorganized—to fight. The portrait of Capt. Utermahlen, after all, seemed insignificant against the "background" of an Army that will not go into combat.

Perhaps the current mood of the G.I.'s is just too subtle—being neither heroic nor craven—for journalism to

evoke, and we must hope this war produces a novelist who can give us the "American Schweik" so vividly that his name becomes a household word and his vague survival-politics come into focus. Or, maybe that mood could be conveyed through a collection of letters G.I.'s are sending back from Vietnam. The ones to parents tend to be perfunctory and reassuring; but those intended for sweethearts, kid brothers and buddies are very telling. This is what a soldier stationed at Cu Chi wrote to a friend on Oct. 26:

"They have set up separate companies for men who have refused to go out to the field. It is no big thing here anymore to refuse to go. If a man is ordered to go such and such place he no longer goes through the hassle of refusing; he just packs his shirt and goes visit some buddies at another base camp. Operations have become incredibly rag-tag; vehicles don't work for lack of maintenance; helicopters are just falling to the ground; airfields are falling apart. . . . Many guys don't even put on their uniforms anymore. I am almost always wearing a pair of keds, a blue tie-dye shirt and army pants I made into cut-offs. I put in an appearance at work sometimes to see if I've gotten any mail.

"It used to be they could get a couple of months of work out of new people but that is no longer the case. When new guys come into our company we rap how we've taken over and turn them on. Lately they have been segregating new guys, whom they call 'new meat.' 90th Replacement Battalion, the main processing station for newly arrived personnel is off-limits. They have barbed wire and guards all around it. You have to have a special pass to get in. It is also the outprocessing station for men returning to the states. They have been strictly segregated from the 'new meat.' When we have new men come in, the Sergeant Major personally escorts them from Long Binh. They rush them through processing, give big, lie-filled raps, and quickly send them to the field.

"The American garrisons on the larger bases are virtually unarmed. The lifers have taken our weapons from us and put them under lock and key. Theirs. One black locked and loaded on the battalion CO recently because they were trying to send him into the field. About 10 other blacks backed him up. They just gave the guy a 212 (discharge). They have also been quite a few frag incidents in the battalion. . . ."

President Nixon may claim credit for phasing down the war; Congress may debate a timetable for pulling out; but the fact is that rank-and-file G.I.'s are ending the fighting on their own.

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