

# Winter Soldier: a harrowing experience

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Has there ever been a war in history whose soldiers, during the course of that war, testified against themselves in order to accuse their country of war crimes? Already the hatred of GI's for the Vietnam War has made it impossible for the U.S. to continue the ground war; in Detroit on January 31-February 2 veterans of the war told the American people about the nature of the war in hopes that it will be ended altogether. As in the past, the people did not want to listen; in the midst of a news blackout on U.S. and South Vietnamese invasion of Laos and Cambodia, the Winter Soldier Investigation too suffered from a news blackout due to self censorship by all except the local press and Pacifica radio. Vietnam Veterans Against the War, the organization that collected 2000 signatures by veterans calling for an investigation, and planned and ran the three days, says its members have been trying to tell the people about the deeds they were ordered to commit for years, but until the news of My Lai broke, no one would listen. Now the press is ready to print news of a few individual incidents and the government is willing to prosecute a few scapegoats, but the VVAW wants to make clear that the policy resulting in My Lai is SOP (standard operating procedure) and this the press is less eager to print.

To prove war crimes are government policy and have been since as early as 1964, over 100 veterans testified to many hundreds of incidents, giving extensive documentary support and political breadth to the earlier, smaller investigations organized by the Citizens Commission of Inquiry during 1970. Unlike the CCI hearings, Winter Soldier planned format and time to include testimony on the reasons for policies. Thus it accuses the U.S. government of genocide not only abroad but also at home; of brainwashing not only its troops but

also its civilian population; of mistreating not only prisoners of war but also military and civilian prisoners at home; of manipulating not only the military but also the civilian press.

The veterans, who came from all over the country in response to appeals by VVAW and talks on community college campuses and radio talks by Jane Fonda and Mark Lane, were organized into panels by the division they served in, so they could corroborate each other's testimony and give a unified picture of the policies of each section of the service. Within divisions they testified in the order of their dates of service in Vietnam. The 1st and 3rd Marine divisions, 1st Air Cavalry, 5th Special Forces, 101st, 82nd, and 173 Airborne, and 25th, 1st, 4th, and 9th Infantry and Americal were all represented by many persons. In addition there were special panels on weapons outlawed by the Geneva conventions, prisoners of war, press censorship, and medical policy, as well as an unscheduled panel on racism demanded by Third World vets who felt the problem of racism was being treated as a side issue. And evening sessions were held with speeches and panel discussions on what we are doing to Vietnam and what we are doing to ourselves.

Three days of listening to what really happens in Vietnam (stories that in a more popular war might be considered heroic exploits) is a harrowing experience, and the audience of 5-800 people found itself gradually dulled to the impact of atrocity stories. As one man after another described torture methods he had participated in, violations of war rules, shooting of prisoners, burning of villages, a "we've heard all this before" attitude tended to develop in the audience, and it became easy to understand how the GI's themselves could have come to accept torture as routine while in Vietnam. This was, in fact, their

message: end the war so that the dehumanization that happened to us will end.

Testimony on torture of prisoners and killing of civilians was most extensive. Vets testified that they had seen and participated in a wide variety of practices outlawed by the Geneva accords, and that officers and military police either gave the orders or knowingly accepted the practices. Some of the men testifying had in fact themselves been officers and confessed to giving such orders.

Torture practices described by interrogation specialists and others to force information from "Vietcong" suspects or civilians include, among others:

1. The "Bell telephone hour" — wiring any part of a subject's body (usually genitals) to field telephone wires and shocking him or her — apparently the most widespread technique, especially in the field.
2. The same technique with the more vicious jeep battery — revving up the engine to produce shock.
3. Yanking a string around a suspect's testicles (demonstrated with pictures).
4. Beatings.
5. Dunking in water.
6. Burning the penis with a cigarette.
7. Applying leeches till a suspect faints.
8. Putting suspects in a room overnight with an 8-foot python.
9. Disembowelling a live prisoner in front of others.
10. Slicing bacon strips out of a Vietnamese (who then had to be executed since the wounds couldn't be camouflaged).
11. Throwing prisoners out of helicopters in front of others.
12. Letting dogs loose at Vietnamese tied to trees.
13. Pulling out fingernails.
14. Making a prisoner sit next to a pile of dead "VC" bodies in the hot sun for six hours (shown in slides).
15. Threatening rape, usually of a daughter when the parents were suspects.

When asked why they participated in torture, the vets answered that it was standard practice, that they had been taught by the military and by

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Complete transcripts of the Winter Soldier Investigation can be ordered at cost from Don Duncan, GI Office, P.O. Box 9746, Washington, D.C. 20016. Tapes were made by Radio Free People, 133 Mercer Street, New York City 10012.

# Standard procedure was to kill all prisoners

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American society to think of the Vietnamese as nonpersons, that they had been taught to fear all Vietnamese especially the women, that they were just sick at the time, they they would be killed for disobeying, that after killing a lot of people torturing them didn't seem like much, or that they just didn't know the answer. All were visibly shaken by what they had to say, and although they testified in very matter-of-fact, almost instructional tones, some could not help crying. Those who had security clearance or signed a release are liable for prosecution for telling what happens in Vietnam, but that wasn't what upset them; it was having to articulate things they would rather forget, facing their own guilt at the same time as they accuse their government of guilt. When challenged by skeptics in the audience as to why they came there, veterans answered, "I'm here because I have nightmares about things that happened to me and my friends," and "Even my parents didn't want to know — that told me they had to know."

There was more testimony on the general treatment of prisoners. In keeping with the policy of producing a high body count, they were usually killed. Some vets testified that it was standard procedure to kill all prisoners, and also to kill Vietnamese trying to surrender with Chieu Hoi passes. A great many vets testified that live prisoners are thrown out of helicopters. One said he watched a Tiger Scout who shot a prisoner through the elbow several times, then "put the muzzle to his head and blew him away"; another watched his sergeant slit the throat of a wounded man. A third watched the murder and mutilation of four North Vietnamese

crops.

When asked how they could have done these things to civilians, one vet answered, "It wasn't like they were humans. They were a gook or a commie and it was OK." Another elaborated: "We were Americans; we were the civilized people."

This kind of testimony ran through all divisions and all years of service in Vietnam. Airborne vets spoke more of burning villages from the air with napalm, of illegal weapons, and of the impersonality of an air war when bombs are dropped by computer.

Asked whether these incidents weren't hindered or reported by officers, vets repeatedly stated that on the contrary, officers either stood by and condoned, or actually gave the orders themselves. The only time they would order restraint was when the press was present. On occasions when GI's requested investigation of incidents they found abhorrent or knew to be illegal, they were frustrated by the officers.

Covering up of information was considered by the veterans to be such an important part of the war policy

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Army nurses. There were many, many such incidents described.

After prisoners were killed, their bodies were frequently disfigured. Many vets testified to cutting off ears as souvenirs or to prove their kill to get rewards; others mentioned cutting off heads and putting them on poles, slashing bodies, sticking penises in corpses' mouths, digging up graves.

Many of the prisoners so treated were never proven "Vietcong." But civilians who were not even suspected were treated the same way. There was hardly a vet who did not have several incidents to relate on mistreatment of civilians, from raping, killing, and even skinning women to killing 25 unarmed Vietnamese in an ambush. Indiscriminate harassment and interdiction fire was frequently referred to, as well as "mad minutes" during which people could shoot at anything they wished. Many vets also testified to burning entire villages without regard for the inhabitants, including revenge missions and contests to see who could destroy houses with the least fire. During these raids, GI's used their penises to "search" women, or raped and beat them. One Marine told of a woman being stabbed in both breasts and a weapon shoved up her vagina while she creid for water all the time; then she was killed. Others testified to running down old people on the roads with convoys, throwing cans of C-rations at children's heads, throwing rocks out of helicopters at sanpans and farmers, shooting at starving women and children who raided trash dumps, firing on villages while the dead were being buried, stealing anything they wanted from villagers. There was also extensive testimony on the use of CS gas and defoliants, and other deliberate attempts to destroy

# Three-day pass for each body

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that they organized a special panel on press censorship. Combat correspondents told of the kinds of stories and photographs that would be rejected or censored for both the military press and public relations. If the correspondents tried to get information about Vietnamese life, style, burning of villages, women guerrillas and prisoners, torture, and many other subjects out to the public, their stories would be red-penciled and they would be removed from the job. Their reports were edited by a press chief, a section chief, an information officer, and a battery of officers in the press center up to the colonel.

One man who had been an information officer listed the precise topics he had had orders to red-pencil:

1. Effectiveness of the ARVN.
2. Interrogation of prisoners.
3. Use of shotguns and flamethrowers.
4. Female and young "Vietcong."
5. Huey and Cobra helicopters.
6. M-16 rifle malfunctions.
7. The extent of damage from "VC" attacks.
8. Marriages between CI's and Vietnamese nationals.
9. Project Phoenix and Air America.
10. U.S. activities in Cambodia and Laos.

11. Troop morale.
12. The NLF.
13. Napalm.

14. Enemy armor or helicopters.

He read a directive that stated it was disloyal to argue discontent in the press: "It's just common sense to avoid getting into any matter that involves our country's foreign policy."

The reporters said the real job of the military papers and information policy was to cover up what was really going on, make it sound as though the U.S. was winning, and "build morale on the field." Inflation of body count figures by normally 100% was thoroughly described. Body count policy was that "VC" losses were not to fall below 2000 per week; to accomplish that, figures were manipulated, bodies dug up from graves, all dead prisoners and civilians dubbed "VC," and medals and rewards invented by officers as reward for individual kills. (One vet said he saw two officers fighting over who would kill a prisoner because a 3-day R&R pass had been promised for each "VC" body.)

One vet emphasized that although they were testifying on the crimes they did commit, many of them also had tried to prevent such crimes. The war reporters in particular tried to get their stories printed by civilian

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# Genocide . . . 'to teach pride in America'

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newsmen. But although a few were good, most had been bought off by the military, which offered them every privilege and luxury, as well as prepackaged information. Some reporters sat in their hotels and wrote vivid "I was there" stories; almost all got all their information from U.S. military and ARVN briefings. Those who bothered to search out the truth were edited at home. Self-censorship by the civilian press angered and frustrated the veterans testifying as much as the war policies themselves. Since they had been trying for years to get their story to the public and were experiencing the same syndrome in relation to the Winter Soldier Investigation itself. There were many reporters present, as well as CBS television crews, but almost nothing actually made it into broadcast or print, although the reporters on location thought the hearings extremely important.

The testimony the press was most interested in was that concerning illegal incursions into Laos, Cambodia, and North Vietnam. Several vets in Green Beret and intelligence units testified to such border violations around 1966. One showed a slide of a special unmarked CIA plane with a winch on the front for snapping agents out of North Vietnam; another showed pictures of unmarked helicopters used to support Vietnamese troops in Cambodia in 1967. The Green Berets took orders directly from the CIA; they went into neutral countries without uniforms and carrying special Stoner system weapons or wearing North Vietnamese uniforms and carrying AK-47's. If they were killed there, they were listed as deserters. These were reconnaissance missions of 6 men each, but they had also heard about "c and c teams" or "Earth Angels" (assassination teams) that worked in groups of two across the borders. One vet said there had been patrols into the DMZ and North Vietnam at least every two days in platoon or company size, and described an occasion when the entire 226 battalion entered the north. On the first day of hearings two ex-Marines described a major action in Laos in February-March 1969, called Operation Dewey Canyon. The *Detroit Free Press* verified this story with three other veterans involved in the action, which involved search and destroy operations and heavy fighting.

There were other reports of secret operations by Green Beret units, CIA use of multinational corporations as cover, and border violations routinely denied by the government. But it was Operation Dewey Canyon that prompted Senator George McGovern and Rep. John Conyers on February 1 to call for a full-scale investigation in Washington of charges arising out of the Winter Soldier Investigation. Immediately after the investigation ended, eight veterans drove to Washington to ensure that a Congressional investigation really takes place, and on February fifth they held a press conference supported by about two dozen Congressmen. The information may get out to Americans despite the press blackout through the efforts of liberal Congressmen and continued pressure from the veterans, who are also pressuring their hometown editors, organizing more local hearings, and planning mass presence in Washington with the spring antiwar program.

The irony of all this is that the legislative branch of the government has to go to the people, the soldiers who actually fight their war, to find out what the executive branch's policy is.

If Congress is willing to listen, it will also learn about the racism in the

U.S. that allows genocide abroad. One of the most remarkable aspects of the veterans' testimony was their deep realization that they had been victims of racist brainwashing in U.S. society, in basic training, and in Vietnam. Having been brought to the point of helping commit genocide they are extremely sensitive to racism now that they are home, and feel themselves the closest ally of the black struggle. Because of this consciousness, references to racist thought permeated not only the two panels on racism, but also all other testimony.

An Indian veteran told how he had been so brainwashed as a child that he rooted for the cavalry in cowboys-and-Indians movies. Basic training films also show the cavalry defeating the Indian savages, to teach pride in America's military tradition.

Medics testified that wounded Vietnamese were not taken to American hospitals, and that they were issued small bottles of serum albumen and told, "This bottle is worth \$25, never use it on a gook."

A white veteran who is married to an Asian woman told about being busted in the States by the police also Vietnam vets — who on seeing their two children asked, "What are you doing, fucking to make more gooks?" He talked about the U.S. system trying to honkify its own and the Vietnamese people. But, he said, "They won us over by loving us, loving us to the death of our honky culture."

A military reporter told of trying to get information on marrying a Vietnamese woman and being thwarted at every turn; it was unwritten policy to withhold such information. When he wrote an article on the procedure, it received the headline "Minimum of Three Months Required to Marry Alien." A chaplain explained the reason for the policy to another vet: God doesn't want you to marry an inferior being.

An interrogator said one method his unit used to elicit information was to threaten rape of a suspect's daughter by a black interrogator. Asked why the Vietnamese were particularly afraid of rape by a black GI, another vet answered that it was considered a good joke to spread the story among Vietnamese women that black men's sexual organs were so huge that they would tear any Vietnamese woman they made love to.

Nearly every veteran had an incident to relate that demonstrated how he or others had come to think of "gooks" as subhuman. But when it comes down to behaving like humane beings, it was clear that the North Vietnamese and NLF were far superior to the Americans. The treatment of prisoners by U.S. troops was contrasted with racist treatment of a black and Indian GI in the American military stockades, and with testimony by one veteran and one doctor who had been captured by the NLF, and the mother of a pilot being held in a POW camp in North Vietnam.

George Smith, who was held by the NLF for two years and finally released with another man in November 1965 as a gesture to replace two Americans who had immolated themselves, told of the consideration of his captors in matters of food, tobacco, health care, and his contrasting bad treatment by the U.S. military on his release. He was imprisoned incommunicado on Okinawa and charged with aid to the

enemy for signing statements against the war and stating that he wanted to get in touch with the peace movement. Dr. Marjorie Nelson, who was captured in Hue during the Tet offensive of 1967, corroborated his testimony on considerate treatment during her six weeks imprisonment, and then told of the evidence of torture she saw in a South Vietnamese jail where she worked as a doctor after her release.

Mrs. Virginia Warner, a coordinator of the (apparently Pentagon-sponsored) National League of Families of Prisoners of War, spoke of feeling used by the Administration; she said she felt embarrassed at having helped sponsor an anti-Hanoi campaign, she knew her son was safer in a North Vietnamese POW compound than in combat unless Nixon resumed bombing of the north; she believed her son was being treated well enough, and she wished the U.S. would set a date for withdrawal so the Vietnamese would exchange prisoners, as they have said they would. In a press release, she expressed a desire to meet with Vietnamese to hold their hands and say she was sorry her son had helped bomb their country. "I know the Vietnamese are human beings just like we are and I think they would understand."

Such a meeting between Vietnamese victims of the war and veterans had in fact been planned for the last evening in Windsor, Canada, across the border from Detroit. But for the first time the Canadian government refused visas to representatives of the PRC, saying they would be coming not to address a Canadian audience but as a ruse to circumvent U.S. laws. (Their testimony was to be broadcast to the Winter Soldier audience by closed-circuit television.) And so the PRC delegation was stuck in Moscow, and in their place three Vietnamese students in Montreal, members of the Association of Vietnamese Patriots in Canada, came to Windsor Tuesday evening.

There in a hall donated by the Windsor UAW 58 Vietnam veterans, two draft resisters, one active-duty GI, and 61 civilians signed the people-to-people Peace Treaty and gave it to the Vietnamese students, and promised their organization the first copy of the Winter Soldier transcript. After announcing his name and signing the treaty, each vet embraced the three Vietnamese brothers, "as it should have happened ten years ago." Many wept as they did so; some could not tear themselves away. One of the Vietnamese students, who is awaiting trial and possible deportation under the War Measures Act, spoke of the economic basis of the war, and then one of the veterans took the mike and exclaimed, "We've signed a peace treaty! This small group of people . . . we've declared peace! Right? And that's more than has happened in all the negotiations in Paris. They've got no place. They have signed — no shit, they have signed nothing! But look at

this, right here! We got it. It's a start . . . We've declared peace! And we're gonna make it."

As people drank tea and ate rice, several veterans who had in the last days testified to torturing and killing Vietnamese found themselves having to tell the Vietnamese students about it, and the Vietnamese, of course, understood, and it became clear that Vietnam has undertaken not only to liberate itself from America but also to liberate America from itself.

Which is what the Winter Soldiers of the Vietnam war are also trying to do, if America will listen. Tom Paine wrote, "There are the times that try man's souls. The summer soldier and the sunshine patriot will in this crisis shrink from the service of his country .