

The Brutality of the War

SECTION PREVIEW

Vietnam was the first war that Americans witnessed on their television screens. They were not prepared for the awful violence they saw, but neither were those who experienced the war firsthand.



Images of brutality and bloodshed, such as this one of a Vietnamese child wounded in the war, made American television viewers question United States involvement in Vietnam.

Key Concepts

- Many American soldiers went to Vietnam eager to do their patriotic duty, but they quickly learned that fighting the Viet Cong was a cruel and nerve-racking ordeal.
- Vietnamese civilians were under constant

attack from the air and the ground by United States troops, who could not distinguish them from Viet Cong or North Vietnamese soldiers.

- The massacre at My Lai brought the horrifying reality of the war home to many Americans.

Key Terms, People, and Places

My Lai massacre

The Vietnam War was a long, brutal struggle. American soldiers were fighting a guerrilla war against a hidden enemy, and so they were often unable to tell friendly South Vietnamese peasants from Viet Cong soldiers waiting for an opportunity to attack them. As buddies fell before sniper bullets, land mines, and booby traps, GIs grew increasingly frustrated by the demands of a war that seemed to be accomplishing few clear objectives. Meanwhile, Vietnamese civilians in both the north and the south suffered heavy casualties in the ferocious destruction of their land and way of life.

The American Soldiers' War

Many American soldiers went to war enthusiastic about the job they were being asked to do. Many, like Ron Kovic of Long Island, had dreamed of being heroes when they grew up. Television characters such as the Lone Ranger and the Cisco Kid—rugged heroes of the American West—shaped their ideas about what it meant to be an American. They learned patriotism by watching actor John Wayne perform daring deeds in his movie roles.

Kovic, like many Americans, worried about the communist threat and was afraid that communists “were infiltrating our schools, trying to take over our classes and control our minds.” After high school, he joined the marines to do his part to defend his country. He proudly served a tour in Vietnam and signed up for a second tour. This second tour of duty would take a terrible toll on Kovic’s body and mind.

He and other soldiers were finding the war confusing and disturbing. They were trying to defend the freedom of the South Vietnamese, but the population, reared in an altogether different political tradition, seemed indifferent to their effort. “We are the unwilling working for the unqualified to do the unnecessary for the ungrateful,” Kit Bowen of the First Infantry Division wrote to his father in Oregon.

Fighting conditions were also different from those they had seen in films. Carrying sixty-pound packs, they had to walk through jungles of ten-foot-tall elephant grass and across flooded rice paddies. Much of the time they fought leeches, fever, and jungle rot—a tropical fungus that infected the skin. Racial tensions within the American ranks destroyed morale. Death always lurked around the corner. American troops never knew what to expect next, and they never could be sure who was a friend and who was an enemy. The Vietnamese woman selling soft drinks by the roadside might be a Viet Cong ally, counting enemy soldiers as they

passed. A child peddling candy might be concealing a live grenade.

The Viet Cong lacked the sophisticated equipment of the United States troops, so they avoided head-on clashes. Instead they used guerrilla warfare tactics, working in small groups to launch sneak attacks and practice sabotage. They were skilled in setting clever traps. For example, they might bury a land mine in a path that they expected a platoon of marines to take. When a soldier stepped on the mine, platoon leaders and others would gather around the wounded man, and Viet Cong snipers would have their guns aimed at the spot, ready to kill them.

Angel Quintana, an American soldier, described life in Vietnam:

An infantryman almost never sleeps. Even if you have time to sleep, you can't because you have all these memories in your head. If you're near a fire-support base, then you sleep even less with the noise of the cannons—the 155s, the 105s, the 4.2s, all firing at the same time. It's like an earthquake. And when you're in the jungle, you're afraid. As macho as you may be, you feel it. You know that death is behind you. You don't know whose turn it is. There are times when you lose the fear because something happens, like they kill a friend of yours. For five or six days it goes away because you're so shook up from losing your friend that life means nothing to you. Then it passes, and you start to be interested in life again.

Ron Kovic confronted his fears by making an aggressive effort to be a good soldier. But the horrors of war came to haunt him after he accidentally killed a United States corporal. Later, he shot at shadowy figures in a village hut, only to learn that his unit had killed and wounded innocent children. The final blow came when a sniper's bullet entered his spine. As his spinal column was severed and he lost all sensation in his legs, all he could feel was "the worthlessness of dying right here in this place at this moment for nothing." He was paralyzed from the chest down, after which he felt, in his words, "like a big clumsy puppet with all his strings cut."

MAKING CONNECTIONS

In what ways were the experiences of American soldiers who served in Vietnam and in the Pacific theater during World War II similar? How were they different?

Vietnamese Civilians and the War

The war was even more devastating for Vietnamese civilians in both the north and the south. Because American soldiers were never sure who might be sympathetic to the Viet Cong, civilians suffered as much as soldiers. As the struggle intensified, the destruction worsened. Saturation bombing—air raids that dropped thousands of tons of explosives over large areas—tore North Vietnam apart. The fragmentation bombs used in these raids, which threw pieces of their thick metal casings in all directions when they exploded, were not confined to the north alone; they were also used in the south, where they killed and maimed countless civilians.

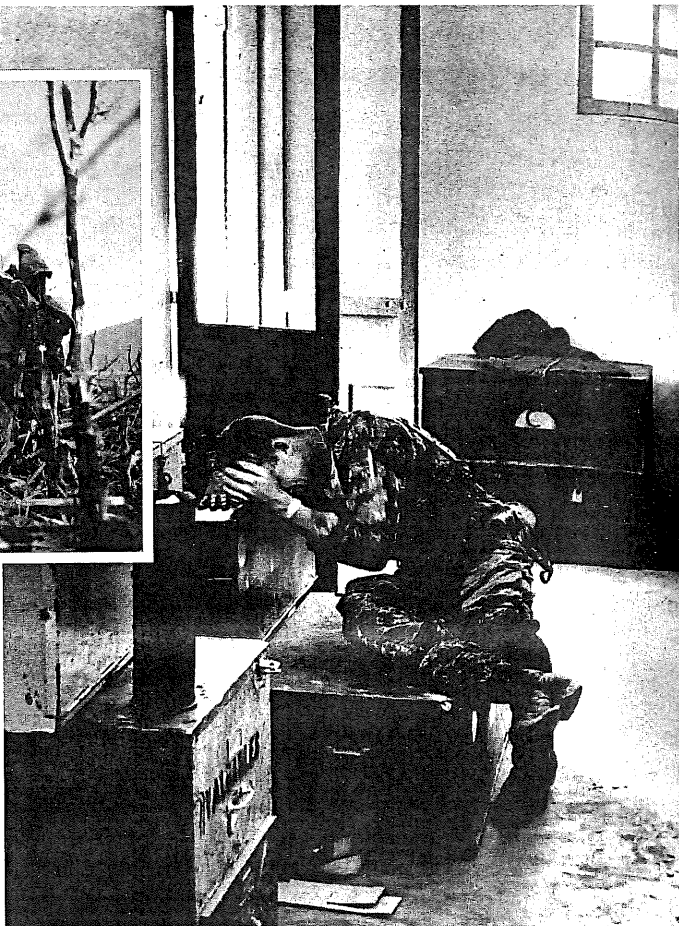
United States forces also used chemical weapons against the Vietnamese. In order to expose Viet Cong hiding places, an herbicide known as Agent Orange was dropped on jungle landscapes, causing the leaves to fall off trees. Agent Orange also killed crops, and later it was discovered to cause health problems in humans and livestock. (See "History Might Not Have Happened This Way," pages 928–929.) Another destructive chemical used in Vietnam was called napalm. This jellylike substance, dropped from planes, burned uncontrollably as it stuck to people's bodies and seared off their flesh.

The war touched everyone in Vietnam. As Le Thanh, a North Vietnamese child in the 1960s, recalled,

Nobody could get away from the war. It didn't matter if you were in the countryside or the city. While I was living in the country I saw terrible things. . . . I saw children who had been killed, pagodas and churches that had been destroyed, monks and priests dead in the ruins, schoolboys who were killed when schools were bombed.



Although death was a constant presence in the war, few could harden their hearts against it. From the medic trying in vain to save a dying comrade, to the marine finally giving in to anguished tears in a lonely barracks, the war left few untouched.



The situation was similar in the south. Near the village of My Thuy Phuong, one peasant remembered this incident:

One day I was walking back home from the ricefield, carrying tools on my shoulder. Then behind me I heard a large, loud noise. A very bad noise. I looked back and saw an American helicopter following me, shooting down the path toward me. I was very scared, so [I] jumped into the water by the side. Just one moment later, the bullets went right by. So scary.



AMERICAN PROFILES

Le Ly Hayslip

Born in a tiny village in the northern part of South Vietnam, Le Ly Hayslip now lives in the United States and is an American citizen. Like other Vietnamese, as a child she learned “to love God, my family, our traditions, and the people

we could not see: our ancestors.” Then, when she was twelve years old, American helicopters came to Ky La, and the war intruded on her life.

For the next three years Le Ly fought for the Viet Cong. She and others were taught to follow Uncle Ho—Ho Chi Minh—in the struggle against the South Vietnamese government. For them, “‘Western culture’ meant bars, brothels, black markets, and *xa hoi van minh*—bewildering machines—most of them destructive.”

Life for Le Ly was never safe. Because she had ties to the Viet Cong, she always had to be alert to the moves of South Vietnamese soldiers. They often “took out their frustration on us: arresting nearby farmers and beating or shooting them on the spot, or carting anyone who looked suspicious off to jail.” Captured by the South Vietnamese, she was questioned and then released. Later she was detained again, and this time tortured. Though she was fortunate enough to be freed once again, she now found herself suspected by the Viet Cong, since they could not understand why she had been released twice. She was caught in the middle. “If the [South



Le Ly Hayslip endured both physical and emotional pain during the Vietnam War.

Vietnamese] were like elephants trampling our village,” she observed, “the Viet Cong were like snakes who came at us in the night.”

After the Viet Cong sentenced her to death, Le Ly’s life was filled with the terror of being discovered. She realized she could not stay in Ky La. She also realized that her life had changed forever: “From now on, I promised myself, I would only flow with the strongest current and drift with the steadiest wind—and not resist.”

Determined to leave Vietnam, Le Ly began to spend time with American soldiers and civilians. Eventually she met Ed Hayslip, a civilian contractor, who wanted to marry her and take her and her son back to the United States.

Le Ly accepted his proposal and became an immigrant to the United States. Still a young woman, she had seen more than most people see in a lifetime. For her, the war would never go away, and she devoted her life to trying to break down the barriers between the old world

where she had been raised and the new world where she now lived.

The My Lai Massacre

In March 1968, the brutality of the war came into sharp focus in a massacre at My Lai, a small village in South Vietnam. In response to word that the community was sheltering 250 members of the Viet Cong, a United States infantry company moved in to clear out the village. Rather than enemy soldiers, the company found women, children, and old men. The American troops already had suffered heavy combat losses. They were worn down by the uncertainties and terrors of fighting a guerrilla war. Some lost control.

Lieutenant William L. Calley, Jr., was in charge. He first ordered, “Round everybody up,” and then gave the order for the prisoners to be killed. One soldier, Private Paul Meadlo, later described what happened:

*W*e huddled them up. We made them squat down. . . . I poured about four clips [about 68 shots] into the group. . . . The mothers kept hugging their children. . . . Well, we kept right on firing. . . . I still dream about it. About the women and children in my sleep. . . . Some nights, I can’t even sleep. I just lay there thinking about it.

Stories of the horrible **My Lai massacre**, in which more than a hundred Vietnamese were slaughtered, shocked Americans at home. This was more than the nation had bargained for when it went to war.

SECTION 2 REVIEW

Key Terms, People, and Places

1. Define My Lai massacre.

Key Concepts

2. Why was the war so hard on American troops?
3. How did the war affect Vietnamese civilians?
4. What happened at My Lai, and how did it affect Americans’ perception of the war?

Critical Thinking

5. **Making Comparisons** Le Ly Hayslip and her fellow Viet Cong were willing to fight and die to keep “Western culture” out of Vietnam. How did their perception of American values differ from that of the GIs who grew up watching the Lone Ranger on television?