

Vietnam War

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Heroes of Vietnam

Our fighting men were victimized by politicians

by Dr. Pham Kim Vinh

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Born in 1932, Dr. Pham Kim Vinh spent 22 years in North Vietnam and 21 years in South Vietnam before coming to the United States in 1975. In Vietnam, he was a lawyer and a professor of political science, journalism, language and literature. He served in two Vietnam wars (1945-1954 and 1954-1975) as a Brigade Commander, military instructor and national strategist. Now living in California, he continues writing, teaching and publishing, and is the founder and president of the non-profit Vietnamese-American Society. The accompanying text is excerpted from his *In Their Defense: U.S. Soldiers in the Vietnam War*.

The American servicemen who fought and died to prevent the disaster that befell the 35 million people in South Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia had nothing to apologize for in their noble sacrifice in Indochina.

In the Spring of 1985, I felt sorry for America and her people as I read the following statement included in historian Henry Steele Commager's introduction to author Loren Baritz's book *Backfire*: "It is the first full-length and scholarly account of why we got into Vietnam in the first place, why we fought it as barbarously as the Japanese in Manchuria or the Germans in Poland, and why we deserved to lose it — indeed why we did have to lose it if we were to find any kind of ultimate peace."

From October to December 1983, the American television audience was presented a thirteen-segment series entitled *Vietnam: A Television History*, purported to be an "educational" series presented by Public Television. Many viewers were deeply troubled as the series progressed. Veteran watchers of the Vietnam War cited historical inaccuracies, deliberate omissions, biased presentations and blatant distorted interpretations that "cropped" up throughout the production. The program seemed to be an irregular mixture of clichés and one-sided memories, causing consultant Douglas Pike to conclude: "Whatever this thing is, it is not history."

The American veterans are poorly treated in the series. Like the Vietnamese, the veterans are subjected to stereotyped themes, the worst of which is the "war crimes" theme. In his *Losers Are Pirates, A Close Look at the PBS Series "Vietnam: A Television History,"* author James Banerian condemned the hypocritical attitude of the series because "it concludes with an awards ceremony for meritorious service and for soldiers wounded in battle. Considering that at the same time the series depicts the GIs as 'stumblebums' and killers, this scene comes off as hypocritical and, consequently, rather insulting. This is especially true in light of the poor way in which the media treated the GIs during the war. Any honors come many years too late and from the wrong source Such is the attitude of the producers toward the American soldiers, an arrogance which presumes the right to honor or dishonor anyone at will."

In the same book, author James Banerian questions the patriotism and the intellectual honesty of Time/Life publications. He learned that for years the media had been presenting the Vietnam veterans as killers, drug addicts and psychotics. Now more than ten years after the Americans left Vietnam, Time/Life has brushed off old files and discovered pictures and stories that portray a different view of the veterans: caring, courageous, honorable. Banerian asks an interesting question: "Where have these pictures been for so many years and why have people waited until now to show them?"

Truth of the noble sacrifices and the admirable performance of U.S. soldiers in the Vietnam War has been concealed from the American public and from the world at large for too long, while other truths have not been revealed. For instance, Henry Steele Commager should not commit an elementary mistake of severely criticizing U.S. troops in battle in Vietnam because, unlike the American soldiers, he was not afforded the "opportunity" to be close to the matter of life and death. Human decency, therefore, requires that an honest man with a firsthand

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experience should bring the truth to the American, people and to the world as well.

In addition, there were many myths created and disseminated by the International Communist Movement that not only were docilely accepted by the free world during the Vietnam War, but continue to be accepted with pitiful complacency yet today. The most graphic example is the series Vietnam: A Television History. A few of these myths are: the invincible Viet Cong; the most powerful nation in the world was defeated by a tenth-rate power; Khe Sanh became an American Dien Bien Phu; Vo Nguyen Giap was "a great strategist of our times"; etc. It is time to destroy these stupid myths promulgated by the bluff industry of the Communists and relegate the facts to their proper places.

Before we go further into the performance of the American troops in Vietnam, and destroy the myths mentioned above, it is imperative for the reader to have a realistic and unbiased perspective of the American soldiers as they were when sent to Vietnam.

The American soldiers sent to Vietnam were young, sensitive and somewhat idealistic. Many were imbued with President Kennedy's spirit of the New Frontier. Generally speaking, they had a genuine trust in the U.S. government and a high sense of allegiance to their country.

Unfortunately, the policies of successive American administrations regarding the Vietnam War were extremely complicated. What was more deplorable were the realities the soldiers faced in Vietnam that did not reasonably match what their commanders told them. Soon, it was evident that the U.S. strategies were leading to a stalemate while more and more U.S. soldiers were wounded and/or killed daily with no end in sight.

These soldiers accepted the risk to their lives when they were called to serve, and it is understandable that the tactics by which the U.S. extricated itself from Indochina gave them a negative feeling. They felt they were badly betrayed. Many lost faith in the American system.

They were sent to a remote country where the climate was predominantly hot, humid and tropical. It profoundly affected the nature of the fighting and the soldiers' behavior, particularly the Caucasian troops.

They quickly learned that Vietnam was not a place to expect a relative level of mercy if they were taken prisoner.

The conflict in Vietnam was a war without a front. There were practically no frontlines, and the bloodiest combat burden was borne by U.S. infantrymen, no matter how massive the air support.

More disheartening factors were added to that strange and hostile environment. There were those who desperately wanted revenge when their friends were killed. There was a constant alertness imposed on every U.S. soldier. They were unnerved by the feeling that the enemy was everywhere, and then was nowhere. These soldiers were unable to distinguish civilians from combatants. There were some American soldiers who became really pitiless by an extreme sense of survival at any price.

No wonder then that in time almost the entire population in South Vietnam became "an object of fear and hatred." In John A. Parrish's *A Doctor's Year in Vietnam*, a Marine lieutenant told an American doctor: "You walk through the bush for three days and nights without sleep. Watch your men, your buddies, your kids get booby trapped, blown apart. Get thrown six feet in the air by a trap laid by an old lady and come down with no legs. Eventually you conclude that the only thing to do is to kill them all."

Another statement from Banerian's book will be helpful to Americans at home in understanding the frustration of their soldiers in the Vietnam War: "The frustrations compounded when the Americans entered a village and encountered icy silence from the peasants. Perhaps a helicopter had been fired at from the village or there had recently been a number of hit-and-run attacks in the area. The GIs knew that the villagers knew who was involved. But the peasants said nothing, no one would point out "Charlie" [the Viet Cong]. The GIs could not communicate and they failed to recognize what sort of reprisals were in store for the villager who fingered the local cadre. To many American soldiers, this apparent lack of cooperation meant only one thing: that the

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villagers supported Charlie and hated the Americans. And these were the people America was supposed to be protecting!"

While they were not psychologically and emotionally prepared for their tours in Vietnam, American soldiers were also not prepared for their homecoming. Within a few days they were thrown back into American society. Before they could adjust to a normal life again, they were out on the streets looking for jobs. Meanwhile, various segments of American society pointed accusing fingers at them and gave them such horrible labels as "baby killers" and "murderers."

I was painfully surprised to learn that the producers of Vietnam: A Television History were amazed by the heroism of North Vietnam's soldiers. In Part II of the series, the producers include the story of one North Vietnamese soldier at Dien Bien Phu who threw himself on a foxhole so that his comrades could charge.

Perhaps these producers did not want to believe that American soldiers were heroic too. I sincerely deplore that situation, since I, as a native, have discovered many heroic deeds performed by U.S. troops in Vietnam. I found that newspaper and television coverage from Vietnam did eagerly present film and pictures of an American torching a Vietnamese hootch, the execution of a Viet Cong prisoner, or a child victim of an American napalm attack, but had no space for Congressional ceremonies.

Each war has its heroes and its cowards. Vietnam had its brave men too. During World War II, 469 Congressional Medals of Honor were awarded for valor. For the Vietnam War, there were 238. Proportionately, that means that there were more awarded to Vietnam's two million-plus veterans than to WW II's twelve million.

Captain Paul Bucha, 101st Airborne Division, knocked out a bunker single-handedly as his company advanced to an enemy base area. As a human wave attack forced the Americans to retreat, Bucha covered the withdrawal, although wounded by a shell fragment.

Lance Corporal Joe C. Paul, 3rd Marine Division, diverted the enemy's attention so that five wounded Marines could be evacuated. He was killed in the fight.

Corporal Jerry Wickham, 11th Armored Cavalry Division, charged and knocked out three enemy bunkers before being killed.

Captain Robert Foley, 25th Infantry Division, though wounded, charged the enemy, destroyed three machine guns and saved several wounded comrades.

This is to name just a few of those American heroes that the producers of Vietnam: A Television History obviously chose not to glorify.

As a man who participated in two Vietnam Wars, I am sensitive to the word "defeat." I still remember an article in the Wall Street Journal in which Hanoi Prime Minister Pham Van Dong was quoted as saying: "Yes, we defeated the United States."

I can understand such a statement from the leader of the underdeveloped North Vietnam. Because the U.S. did lose its nerve in the Vietnam War and deliberately withdrew its troops from Indochina, Hanoi could take advantage of the situation to play the braggart at no cost.

But what really frustrated me was the media's attitude regarding the word defeat. I do know that I cannot accept journalists throwing around the word defeat with callous disregard for the facts.

Between 1965 and 1968, the war in Vietnam was fought as an American war with the expectation that overwhelming firepower and material wealth would be decisive. And these two factors were decisive, at least until 1968 and the Communist Tet offensive, when the U.S. no longer was willing to stay the course.

At the time the U.S. landed its first Marine Brigade on Da Nang in South Vietnam on March 8, 1965, Indochina was of interest to American leaders as a battlefield on which to defeat Communist aggression. From that interest, the U.S. set three tasks in Vietnam which, if accomplished, would lead to success:

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1. Repel the North Vietnamese invaders in 1965;
2. Keep the Communists out of South Vietnam thereafter;
3. Build such a strong nation in South Vietnam that Saigon's government, with only material support from America, could stand alone against both insurgents and invaders.

It was evident that the first two tasks were accomplished successfully, but the third was jeopardized when the U.S. lost its nerve because of the Communist general offensive in 1968.

There were some people who said that military victory for the U.S., in Vietnam was an "illusory goal" to pursue. These people could not understand that once the Communist threat became military fact, there was nothing but a military means to immediately blunt such a threat. And that was what happened to South Vietnam in early 1965.

The U.S. soldiers did not lose a major battle in the Vietnam War, and yet, those soldiers could not bring an end to the war. One thing was surely beyond controversy: Without the U.S. soldiers, South Vietnam would have been occupied by the North Vietnamese Army in 1965. No less equally sure was the fact that as long as the American soldiers stayed in Vietnam, Hanoi could not win, militarily or politically. South Vietnam fell two years after the last GIs left South Vietnam.

On November 1, 1961, General Maxwell Taylor had warned President Kennedy of the likelihood of escalating manpower requirements: "If the first contingent is not enough to accomplish the necessary results, it will be difficult to resist the pressure to reinforce. If the ultimate result sought is the closing of the frontiers and the clean-up of the insurgents within South Vietnam, there is no limit to our possible commitment, unless we attack the source in Hanoi." Taylor's words were prophetic!

Once the source of the Vietnam War was defined as North Vietnam, a strategic offensive against Hanoi would be a sure approach to victory. But President Johnson's visceral fear of war with Red China had barricaded such a route! North Vietnam, therefore, became a sanctuary. According to historian Dave Palmer, such fear "protected North Vietnam from invasion more surely than any instrument of war Hanoi could have fielded."

Moreover, Allied forces were even prohibited to fight beyond South Vietnam's borders with Laos and Cambodia. American military leaders wondered why their hands were tied.

For the same reason, the air war against North Vietnam was "constrained from striking for the jugular." In his book *Vietnam: The Valor and the Sorrow*, author Thomas D. Boettcher remembers a humiliating story that happened under the Johnson Administration. Operation Rolling Thunder (which lasted more than three years) did not intimidate Ho Chi Minh into ending North Vietnamese support of the Viet Cong in the South. The objective that quickly evolved was a weak substitute — to force Ho to the bargaining table, a mission that Ho, Giap and other Communist leaders themselves viewed with scorn: "Wars are not fought to have a cease-fire, but a victory," said one North Vietnamese emissary.

Later, Admiral U.S. Grant Sharp discovered that President Lyndon Johnson, buffeted from right and left, determinedly tried to pursue the temperate course, escalating gradually in the late spring but leveling off again in the summer. Admiral Sharp then concluded: "In any kind of endeavor, avoiding the difficult decision, treading the mushy ground of the middle road is guaranteed to produce something less than notable success. In war, it is guaranteed to produce a true strategy for defeat."

I was terribly shocked when I read the article "How Rules of Engagement Lost Vietnam War" written by J. Terry Emerson and publicized by the nationwide weekly newspaper *Human Events*, on May 18, 1985. Emerson has been a legal counsel to Senator Barry Goldwater since 1969, and this article was excerpted from his speech before the symposium on the Vietnam War sponsored by the Fund for an American Renaissance, the American Security Council, Veterans of Foreign Wars and the American Conservative Union in Washington DC on April 30, 1985.

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To begin, Emerson said that it was civilian managers of the Executive Branch who first denied U.S. our military forces victory by imposing a complex and lengthy set of restrictions on what the military could and could not do in South Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos. These restrictions were known as the "Rules of Engagement." These rules ran on page after page and were constantly changing. The rules were almost impossible to memorize or interpret, although our pilots had to do so.

For years, the contents of these rules were kept top secret. It is only in 1985, thanks to the initiative of Senator Barry Goldwater and the agreement of Secretary of Defense Caspar Weinberger, that the actual text of the rules was declassified. These newly released public documents reveal just how comprehensive the restrictions were that bound our military units in Vietnam. The following are just a few examples.

One rule told American pilots that they were not permitted to attack a North Vietnam MiG sitting on a runway. The only time it could be attacked was after it was in flight, was clearly identified, and showed "hostile intentions." Even then, its base could not be bombed.

The same "hostile intentions" rule applied to truck convoys driving on highways in Laos and North Vietnam. Can you imagine how a truck is to show hostile intent? In some regions, enemy trucks could evade attack under the rules by simply driving off the road. Even military parks located 200 yards from a road could not be destroyed.

Another rule ordered that SAM missile sites could not be struck while they were under construction but only after they became operational and dangerous!

In 1967, the Preparedness Investigating Subcommittee of the Senate Armed Services Committee conducted extensive hearings relative to the conduct of the air war against North Vietnam. The subcommittee found that Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara and the Johnson Administration had "discounted the professional judgment of our best military leaders and substituted civilian judgment in the details of target selection and the timing of the strikes." The subcommittee charged these civilian managers with having "shackled the true potential of air power and permitted the buildup of what has become the world's most formidable anti-aircraft defense system...."

Emerson went on to say that by granting North Vietnam's sanctuaries our blessing, the Rules of Engagement allowed the enemy to protect its forces and material, provided it with military training and staging areas free from attack, and permitted it to erect massed air defense weapons.

He later emphasized the fact that the Rules of Engagement had a heavy impact on American aircraft and pilot losses by giving North Vietnam time to build up its sophisticated air defense and disperse its stock of war supplies. These self-imposed restrictions greatly increased U.S. casualties.

Emerson concluded: "Without derogating the principle of civilian control of the military, it should be recognized that once civilian policymakers decide on war, the result of placing military strategy and tactical operations under the day-to-day direction of unskilled amateurs may be a greater sacrifice in blood and the denial of a military victory. Once American forces are committed, there is no logical goal except to prevail."

In a letter to the New York Times, an American citizen whose only son was killed during the fighting in Vietnam wrote: "Had the fathers of these young men known that this nation would countenance a sanctuary a scant fifty miles from Saigon, we would have counseled them against induction. That we did not is a burden we will always bear. A great percentage of our ground dead from 1965 to 1970 came from an enemy who with impunity was staged, trained and equipped in the Parrot's Beak of Cambodia The perfidy ... is anything but the U.S. bombing of the sanctuary itself. The perfidy lies in the fact that for more than four years the United States of America, without serious recorded concern, allowed her fighting men to be attacked, maimed and killed from a position which was itself privileged from either ground or air retaliation."

How did this strange no-win strategy and these absurd restrictions affect the fighting of the U.S. soldiers in the Vietnam War? While the North Vietnamese could move in and out of the country at will, General Westmoreland

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was allowed to fight only inside South Vietnam. He had to wait for his enemy to move: it was quite deplorable that the armed forces of the first superpower in the world had to remain on the strategic defensive. Later, Sir Robert Thompson, an expert on guerrilla warfare made this comment: "In a People's Revolutionary War, if you are not winning you are losing, because the enemy can always sit out a stalemate without making concessions. It was, therefore, a no-win strategy."

The only strategy left to General Westmoreland was to try to kill the enemy (i.e., North Vietnamese regulars and Viet Cong troops) faster than they could be replaced. Throughout 1966, the Americans made an enormous effort to disrupt Hanoi's plans. General Giap's troops were pushed away from populated areas into the border regions. And still the purpose of such operations remained merely for the U.S. soldiers to kill the enemy.

We now know, and the North Vietnamese freely admit, they were never able to prevail against American forces in the field. Unfortunately, such heroism and sacrifice from the U.S. soldiers could only bring the war to a stalemate because, in Admiral U.S. Grant Sharp's words. "our Vietnam policies, forged in Washington, forced our military men to the most asinine way to fight a war that could possibly be imagined."

One can say that the no-win strategy caused thousands of unnecessary American and South Vietnamese casualties on the ground in South Vietnam, prolonged the war indefinitely, and resulted ultimately in Hanoi's victory.

"Above and beyond the call of duty"

Two citations for the Congressional Medal of Honor

Lance Corporal Joe C. Paul

Rank and organization: Lance Corporal, U.S. Marine Corps; Company H, 2nd Battalion, 4th Marines (Rein.), 3rd Marine Division (Rein.). Place and date: near Chu Lai, Republic of Vietnam, 18 August 1965. Entered service at: Dayton, Ohio. Born: 23 April 1946, Williamsburg, Ky. Citation: For conspicuous gallantry and intrepidity at the risk of his life above and beyond the call of duty. In violent battle, L/Cpl. Paul's platoon sustained five casualties as it was temporarily pinned down by devastating mortar, recoilless rifle, automatic weapons, and rifle fire delivered by insurgent communist (Viet Cong) forces in well-entrenched positions. The wounded Marines were unable to move from their perilously exposed positions forward of the remainder of their platoon, and were suddenly subjected to a barrage of white phosphorous rifle grenades. L/Cpl Paul fully aware that his tactics would almost certainly result in serious injury or death to himself, chose to disregard his safety and boldly dashed across the fire-swept rice paddies, placed himself between his wounded comrades and the enemy, and delivered effective suppressive fire with his automatic weapon in order to divert the attack long enough to allow the casualties to be evacuated. Although critically wounded during the course of the battle, he resolutely remained in his exposed position and continued to fire his rifle until he collapsed and was evacuated. By his fortitude and gallant spirit of self-sacrifice in the face of almost certain death, he saved the lives of several of his fellow Marines. His heroic actions served to inspire all who observed him and reflect the highest credit upon himself, the Marine Corps, and the U.S. Naval Service. He gallantly gave his life in the cause of freedom.

Captain Paul W. Bucha

Rank and organization: Captain, U.S. Army; Company D, 3rd Battalion, 187th Infantry, 3rd Brigade, 101st Airborne Division. Place and date: Near Phuoc Vinh, Binh Duong Province, Republic of Vietnam, 16-19 March 1968. Entered service at: U.S. Military Academy, West Point, N.Y. Born: 1 August 1943, Washington, DC. Citation: For conspicuous gallantry and intrepidity in action at the risk of his life above and beyond the call of duty. Captain Bucha distinguished himself while serving as commanding officer, Company D, on a reconnaissance-in-force mission against enemy forces near Phuoc Vinh. The company was inserted by helicopter into the suspected enemy stronghold to locate and destroy the enemy. During this period, Captain Bucha aggressively and courageously led his men in the destruction of enemy fortifications and base areas, and eliminated scattered resistance impeding the advance of the company. On 18 March, while advancing to contact, the lead elements of

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the company became engaged by the heavy automatic weapon, heavy machinegun, rocket propelled grenade, claymore mine, and small-arms fire of an estimated battalion-size force. Captain Bucha, with complete disregard for his safety, moved to the threatened area to direct the defense and ordered reinforcements to the aid of the lead element. Seeing that his men were pinned down by heavy machinegun fire from a concealed bunker located some forty meters to the front of the positions, Captain Bucha crawled through the hail of fire to single-handedly destroy the Bunker with grenades. During the heroic action, Captain Bucha received a painful shrapnel wound. Returning to the perimeter, he observed that his unit could not hold its positions and repel the human wave assaults launched by the determined enemy. Captain Bucha ordered the withdrawal of the unit elements and covered the withdrawal to positions of a company perimeter from which he could direct fire upon the charging enemy. When one friendly element retrieving casualties was ambushed and cut off from the perimeter, Captain Bucha ordered them to feign death and he directed artillery fire around them. During the night, Captain Bucha moved throughout the position distributing ammunition, providing encouragement, and insuring the integrity of the defense. He directed artillery, helicopter gunship, and Air Force gunship fire on the enemy strong points and attacking forces, marking the positions with smoke grenades. Using flashlights in complete view of enemy snipers, he directed the medical evacuation of three air-ambulance loads of seriously wounded personnel and the helicopter supply of his company. At daybreak, Captain Bucha led a rescue party to recover the dead and wounded members of the ambushed element. During the period of intensive combat, Captain Bucha, by his extraordinary heroism, inspirational example, outstanding leadership and professional competence, led his company in the decimation of a superior enemy force which left 156 dead on the battlefield. His bravery and gallantry at the risk of his life are in the highest traditions of the military service. Captain Bucha has reflected great credit on himself, his unit, and the U.S. Army.