

THE WAR

How do you talk about a war that ran from the early 1960s to 1973 – some would say from the defeat of the French at Dien Bin Phu in 1954 to the fall of Saigon in 1975 and do so in only a matter of minutes?

The answer is you can't.

I can only summarize that it was both a long and hard war -- one that not only cost the lives of 58,281 Americans but when we include military and civilian deaths in both North and South Vietnam along with Laos and Cambodia most tallies from regardless of national source come to over 3 million dead from 1955 to 1975.

For America, it additionally cost us more than 300,000 wounded, 75,000 of whom were severely disabled and 23,000 of whom were 100 % disabled, a result of vastly improved medical care along with the miracle of evacuation of wounded personnel by helicopter saving many who in past wars almost surely would have died. None the less, the broken bodies of those that did survive went on to pay a price for the rest of their lives, both physically and psychologically.

At home, the consequences of the war tore the country apart. Not at first, but from 1965 on as the months that became years, continuing casualties, and ever higher numbers of soldiers, marines, sailors, and airmen led to the political acrimony that followed in their wake and left a divide among our citizenry that will yet take time to heal.

Over 9 million Americans served in uniform over the time officially defined as the Vietnam war. Not quite 3 million of them served in, over, or in adjacent waters of Vietnam. At our peak, over 500,000 American troops were in country. All were faced with a hostile environment. Surface to air missiles, anti-aircraft guns, mined sea-going vessels, jungle, mountains, rice-paddies, monsoons, heat, leeches, insects, exposure, jungle rot, merciless prisoner of war hellholes. There were many ways to suffer and die in-country.

It was both a conventional war and an insurgency of the most violent proportions. Trained assassins infiltrated the populated areas, Viet Cong treachery slew tens of thousands of their own countrymen and – when the opportunity arose – us as well. Booby traps were everywhere, designed to kill and to maim. They caused over 17% of US casualties and 11% of our killed in action. And the North

Vietnamese Army was present throughout, reinforcing the local Viet Cong and ready to strike at isolated American and allied units whenever the opportunity presented itself.

By 1967, as casualties began to climb to several hundred of us killed a week with no end in sight, the support of the American public waned. Domestic hostility toward the war, often fanned by both a sensationalized and critical press, heightened. Hostility turned against the war, and – most sadly, America’s fighting forces themselves.

THE SOLDIERS

They were young, younger than previous wars. Sixty-one percent were less than 21 years old. 11,500 were less than 19. The average age of those killed was 22.

And contrary to myth, the majority – two-thirds in fact – were volunteers, not draftees. Not surprising when you think about them. They were the sons of the ‘greatest generation’ come of age. Their fathers fought for their country in WW II; they would do the same in Vietnam.

After the initial deployment of units at the outset of the war, most arrived as individuals, without the benefit of known comrades alongside them. And they arrived quickly, departing the United States one day and arriving in the combat zone the next. They would serve for one year (13 months if you were a Marine), unlike their fathers who had served for the duration. But in that one year, they were likely to see a great deal of combat. It has been estimated that the average infantryman in Vietnam would experience 240 days of combat; the average for the Pacific Theater in WWII was 40 days, over the stretch of four years.

Many in this room no doubt experienced one or more of the big battles: Ia Drang, Dak To, Khe Sahn, Tet, Hue, Hamburger Hill, the Easter Offensive, Rolling Thunder, Lam Son 719 (the greatest helicopter meatgrinder of the entire war), Ripcord and many, many more. But for most it was the grueling routine of patrolling, ambushing, search and destroy mission, convoy running, defending firebases (such as Mary Ann), and supporting our Vietnamese allies that took the toll of misery and death. What were the chances of surviving unscathed in a line unit. In my own opinion, very low. Consider our NCO corps, the sergeants with multiple

tours under their belt. By the end of the war, we had to rebuild it, so many were gone.

But they did their job: stoically, endlessly, and with surprisingly good humor. They loved their country, our country, but they fought to stay alive, and they fought for each other. The objective was to make it home, for home was America, family, safety, and a future.

THE FAMILIES

As in all wars, the families suffered along with their loved ones as they went off to serve in the combat zone. The pain of separation, the fear of what might happen, and far too often the notification that something bad had happened, sometimes something very bad.

In regard to the latter, the Army at first had neglected to prepare itself for mass casualties. When the results of the Battle of the Ia Drang in 1965 became known, it was a sorry method of notifying the next of kin. In the Columbus, Georgia area where most of the troops had departed from, the notifications of the killed in action came in to Western Union in the middle of the night. Under a deadline to reach out to family members, Western Union used the local taxi company to go the individual houses and notify the next of kin. Many lived in the same neighborhoods as doorbells were rung drivers burdened with carrying the message. The shock of the delivery soon reverberated throughout the area and the sight of a yellow cab coming up led to sheer terror.

This was eventually fixed, but nothing could stop the continual drumbeat of bad news. At its peak, the war in Vietnam took over 500 hundred lives in a single week. The week I graduated from West Point in 1969, after 4 years of intense fighting, over 250 were reported killed in action. By that time, the families were no longer in one place; each one had become an individual island of worry as their loved one entered as a singular replacement. There were no family structured support systems to carry the wives, children, and parents through the strain.

But more than that, the family member could and did follow the nightly news with grave anticipation. They could also see the growing unrest at home, the demonstrations and then the riots in the streets, the rebellion of our young, their chants, their mocking, and their disparaging commentary, amplified by the press and sometimes reinforced by the same.

Worst of all, they began to see shows of support for our enemies and with it the denigration of those Americans who were engaged in direct combat with them or even held in brutal captivity by them. All of this made for great theater, except for the families already gripped with concerns who now not only felt abandoned but also betrayed by their countrymen.

It was a long, hard, and even bitter time for them, even for those whose soldier, marine, airman, or sailor who did make it back, sometimes whole, sometimes not.

THE ROAD BACK