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"So God-damned Far Away": Soldiers' Experiences in the Vietnam War

Tara M. Bell
tmbell@umich.edu

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THE CARL AND WINIFRED LEE HONORS COLLEGE

CERTIFICATE OF ORAL DEFENSE OF HONORS THESIS

Tara Bell, having been admitted to the Carl and Winifred Lee Honors College in the fall of 2008, successfully completed the Lee Honors College Thesis on May 09, 2012.

The title of the thesis is:

"So God-damned Far Away": Soldiers' Experiences in the Vietnam War

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Edwin Martini", written over a horizontal line.

Dr. Edwin Martini, History

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "Scott Friesner", written over a horizontal line.

Scott Friesner, Lee Honors College

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Nicholas Andreadis", written over a horizontal line.

Dr. Nicholas Andreadis, Lee Honors College

The story of the Vietnam War cannot be told solely from the perspective of the political and military leaders of the war. For a complete understanding of the war one must look at the experiences of the common person, the soldiers who fought in the war. This paper explores letters written by five soldiers stationed in different places during the Vietnam War who all wrote to one woman named Carol Maslanik. The collection only contains letters written to Carol, not from Carol, so unfortunately her perspective is not included. To help contextualize the letters, other published letters and secondary sources will be used. Despite the differences in duty and location, commonalities can be traced throughout the letters that link the five soldiers together with common experiences of other soldiers serving in Vietnam: the uncertainties of being isolated from home in a foreign land, the fear of being attacked, the worry of being forgotten, and the struggle to cope with and comprehend their inner turmoil.

The five soldiers who wrote to Carol were Mitchell VanKruiningen, Willis Parsons, Dennis Klahl, Ron L. Arsheene, and Kenneth Jager. Carol, daughter of Rudolph and Virginia Maslanik, was born on January 13, 1947, in Vicksburg, Michigan. She was the oldest of three and had a younger brother, Gary, and a younger sister, Mary Jo.¹ Carol and her family were very involved in their community. Rudolph was a car salesman at Simmons Ford and a member of the Vicksburg Lions Club and Masonic Lodge.² Virginia worked at the high school as a math teacher.³ Carol was a member of the Varsity Choir, Girls' Ensemble, Dramatics, Future Teachers of America, Girls Athletic Society, and the Century Club. In addition to that, she was the editor

¹ Life Story Funeral Homes, "Carol Ann Donovan," LifeStoryNet.com, <http://www.lifestorynet.com/memories/59787>. Accessed September 13, 2011.

² Life Story Funeral Homes, "Rudolph 'Rudy' Maslanik," LifeStoryNet.com, <http://www.lifestorynet.com/memories/63906>. Accessed September 13, 2011.

³ Life Story Funeral Homes, "Carol Ann Donovan."

of *Grruff* (her school newspaper) and wrote for the *Kalamazoo Gazette*.⁴ After high school, Carol attended Central Michigan University for a few years, and then went to work at Upjohn Pharmaceutical in Kalamazoo. While working at Upjohn, Carol attained her bachelor's and master's degree from Nazareth College in Kalamazoo.⁵

Carol was known for her enthusiastic support of those serving in the military. Her father had been a decorated 1st Lieutenant and supply officer in the Army during WWII. His history may have inspired her to write to these men. All of the men knew Carol in different ways. Mitch and Willis graduated from Vicksburg High School with Carol in 1965. Mitch and Carol may have known each other from Dramatics, which they were both involved in. Willis and Carol were both members of the *Grruff* Staff.⁶ Dennis, on the other hand, did not know Carol before the war but decided to write to her on the recommendation of one of his friends.

Kenneth and Ron both knew Carol before the war, but there is no clear indication as to how they knew her.⁷ However, from reading the letters one can make an educated guess. The following quote found in a letter from Ron indicates that Kenneth and Ron may have known each other before the war: “About the scrimmage Ken was in. I don’t know to [*sic*] much about it, but Charles knows better than to mess with ‘Good Old Arsh.’ [Ron’s last name is Arscheene] Please don’t ask about the things that go on over here. I’m sure you’ve got enough worries

⁴ Vicksburg High School yearbook, 1965.

⁵ Life Story Funeral Homes, “Carol Ann Donovan.”

⁶ Vicksburg High School yearbook, 1965.

⁷ On Ancestry.com, the search produced a Ron Arscheene who was born in Sterling Heights on March 7, 1947, which would be about the right birth date for him. A search through some Sterling Heights newspapers revealed that there is a Ron Arscheene who is a physics teacher at Utica Community Schools. There was also an article about a Jan Arscheene arranging a high school reunion for graduates of L’Anse Creuse High School. The high school website has a very helpful database that allows researchers to search through their graduates. Ron Arscheene showed up in the class of 1965. Whether or not this is the same Ron Arscheene who wrote the letters is at present unknown.

without my adding to them by telling you that we were in fire fights and being mortared. I know that you picture it much worse than it is.”⁸ Carol may have asked Ron about a scrimmage her friend Kenneth was in, but it is also possible that Ron knew Kenneth. Kenneth and Ron may have attended Central Michigan University with Carol. They both indicate in their letters that they went to college (or dropped out). For example, Ron references cafeteria food when he wrote “The food is also par to what they threw away at college!”⁹ Also, Ron mentions to Carol that he had met some of her “hometown fellows” in his platoon, indicating that Ron was not from Vicksburg. From these, and other, references in the letters there is a strong possibility that Carol met Ron and Kenneth at college.

Kenneth and Ron’s letters make up the bulk of the collection, and therefore most of the letters cited in this paper will be from Kenneth and Ron. The variety of experiences that these letters provide indicates how varied the soldier experience was in the Vietnam War. Kenneth, Dennis, and Mitch were located in rear areas; Willis was in Germany; and Ron was an infantryman. These letters all provide a contrast that is useful in understanding how location affected a soldier’s experience in the war. Although they were in different locations, the letters all contained similar sentiments about the war and being away from home that were expressed and experienced by other soldiers.

Mitch was stationed at Pleiku, in the central highlands of Vietnam. Battles in this area were especially dangerous because of the dense forest and mountainous terrain. Mitch worked with the Construction Support Company under the Quarry Works department. Quarry Works supplied crushed rocks for roads, concrete, and other supplies. Mitch ran a crane and a forty ton

⁸Ron Arscheene to Carol Maslanik, correspondence, October 18, 1968, Carol Maslanik Collection, Western Michigan University Archives and Regional History Collections. All letters cited are in the Carol Maslanik Collection unless otherwise noted.

⁹Ron Arscheene to Carol Maslanik, January 5, 1968.

Air Operator Shovel at the asphalt plant. Drills blasted the rock, a dozer would push the rock, and Mitch would load it on to twenty-two ton dump trucks. During the Vietnam War, usable roads were an essential part of the operation in order to move troops and supplies more effectively. Engineers were told that the bulk of their efforts should be focused on roadwork. Since the roads were not permanent, engineers had greater flexibility as to how they constructed the roads. Because of supply problems and attacks on supply lines, sometimes workers encountered problems.¹⁰ There were not enough letters to ascertain whether or not Mitch experienced a battle, but it is likely that he got attacked at least once due to the importance of his job and of the roads to the U.S. military effort.

Dennis was stationed in Qui Nhon, a coastal city that he described as middle sized with a small port and one runway. Qui Nhon was a large base within a relatively safe area. Because of that, the soldiers there could enjoy more modern conditions than their grunt counterparts. The base had electricity, shower facilities, and a variety of stores. Men's clubs allowed soldiers to play basketball and watch television.¹¹ Therefore, Dennis probably did not have to suffer from lack of modern comforts like soldiers out in the field. Unlike the other men who wrote Carol, Dennis was not from Michigan. He was from Sibley, Iowa. During the war he worked as a truck mechanic, or "grease monkey," as he called himself.¹²

Willis was the only soldier who did not go to Vietnam. Stationed in Heilbronn, Germany, Willis took classes and went from being a combat engineer to a qualified atomic demolitions and

¹⁰Ancestry.com, *U.S. Military Manuals, 1863-1973*, United States Army, Army Heritage Collection Online, <http://www.ahco.army.mil/site/index.jsp>. Accessed September 20, 2011.

¹¹Christian G. Appy, *Working-Class War: American Combat Soldiers and Vietnam* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1993), 239.

¹²Dennis Klahl to Carol Maslanik, March 27, 1966 and April 24, 1966.

munitions technician. Life in Heilbronn differed considerably from Vietnam. According to Willis, Heilbronn was about the same size as Kalamazoo, with a lot of bars. Willis attended school in Garmish, which he described as the “playground of Europe” where one could ski and swim. Outside of work, Willis was as a waiter at the NCO club. At work, Germans did the menial tasks soldiers usually shared, such as kitchen patrol. Once every two weeks Willis had guard duty in a NATO storage area within a heated building.¹³ Obviously, his experience during the war differed greatly from the grunts who trudged through swampy paddy fields all day. His position in Heilbronn allowed him to earn extra money by waiting tables and to get away from military life. Most soldiers during the war did not have that luxury.

Kenneth was stationed at Long Binh, about fifteen miles from Saigon, where he worked as a switchboard operator. For twelve hours a day, seven days a week, Kenneth sat in a bunker and listened to the radio. Life in the bunker was not pleasant. Kenneth wrote, “This place is driving me crazy. I was just about ready to climb walls. I think you would to [*sic*] if you were couped [*sic*] up in a bunker for 12 hrs. a day, 7 days a week, for a month at a time.”¹⁴ He worked from 6 a.m. until 6 p.m.; if Long Binh was attacked, he would be awake until 2 or 3 a.m.¹⁵ Because Kenneth performed his job well, the colonel wanted him to remain in the bunker throughout his entire time in Vietnam.¹⁶ However, Kenneth would still work on outside projects, such as digging holes for telephone poles. Although being on base separated support troops from the dangers of the field, the boredom on base could be unbearable. Being away from the action

¹³Willis Parsons to Carol Maslanik, September 24, 1967.

¹⁴Kenneth Jager to Carol Maslanik, November 7, 1968.

¹⁵Kenneth Jager to Carol Maslanik, October 23, 1968.

¹⁶Kenneth Jager to Carol Maslanik, November 7, 1968.

made the men feel as if they were spectators not fully involved in the war.¹⁷ Kenneth was so desperate for some excitement that he volunteered for a dangerous job. He wrote,

As of the first of January we will be a landclearing unit...Landclearing is one of the most dangerous jobs in Vietnam to date. I even volunteered to go out in the field so I could get away from here for awhile, but the colonel and my Sgt. had a powwow and decided that they need me more back in the battalion so it looks like I won't go. I was pissed off for about two days and wouldn't do any work, but it didn't do me any good so I'm back on my old schedule.¹⁸

However, like Dennis, living on a base gave Kenneth access to amenities that soldiers in the field would not have had. For example, in one letter he mentions that he went to see a movie.¹⁹

Ron, on the other hand, did not enjoy those luxuries. As an infantryman, Ron led a more transient experience. Beginning outside of Saigon, he moved from the jungle to a rubber plantation, then to Binh Chan. His official job was ammo bearer, but in his squad he was permitted to do any task, such as gunner. The gunner set the mortar on target, and according to Ron, it was the best job in the infantry.²⁰ He enjoyed being out in the field on the gun because "No one says boo to you out there" where it was "one big game to see who can bring the most harassment."²¹ During preparations for an anticipated attack on Saigon, one of his duties was to fire "H and I's" every other night. This job entailed firing into suspected enemy buildup areas to "harass and interrupt" the enemy's movement and organization.²²

¹⁷Christian G. Appy, *Working-Class War: American Combat Soldiers and Vietnam* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1993), 240.

¹⁸Kenneth Jager to Carol Maslanik, December 30, 1968.

¹⁹Kenneth Jager to Carol Maslanik, June 28, 1968.

²⁰Ron Arscheene to Carol Maslanik, May 15, 1968.

²¹Ron Arscheene to Carol Maslanik, July 22, 1968.

²²Ron Arscheene to Carol Maslanik, August 6, 1968.

One of the benefits of being in the field was that unlike support troops, grunts were directly involved in the action and they experienced the rush of battle. Philip Caputo, a marine, wrote "...there was a magnetism about combat. You seemed to live more intensely under fire. Every sense was sharper, the mind worked clearer and faster. Perhaps it was the tension of opposites that made it so, an attraction balanced by revulsion, hope that warred with dread. You found yourself on a precarious emotional edge, experiencing a headiness that no drink or drug could match."²³ The rush of battle may have been what appealed to Ron about the field. Compared to base life, "humping the bush" was anything but pleasant. However, grunts did have combat experience that made time pass more quickly.

This is not to say, however, that they did not have their share of boredom. Ron wrote,

My days have settled into a dull routine. I arise at six play cards and write most of the morning. The afternoon consists of reading and playing more cards. Among this hectic day I make five comms [communication] checks. This is just to call Headquarter [*sic*] to make sure that my radio is working. The reason for this lack of activity is my FO. He only has 38 days left in-country and therefore the C.O. doesn't make him go out and if he doesn't go, neither do I.²⁴

A grunt's experience consisted of moments of extreme boredom to ones of sheer terror.

In late 1968 Ron moved from being a combat soldier to a computer technician. Because of his mathematics background, Ron spent his last few months in Vietnam computing data.

Although the men were assigned to different locations and jobs, each of their individual stories illustrates experiences most soldiers shared. The Americans were at once horrified and fascinated by the Vietnamese people. Their clothes were considered "some of the wildest" and

²³ Philip Caputo, *A Rumour of War*, in *The Vietnam Reader*, ed. Stewart O'Nan (New York: Anchor Books, 1998), 161.

²⁴ Ron Arscheene to Carol Maslanik, July 1, 1968.

Kenneth was amazed at the amount of colors and silks that the Vietnamese had.²⁵ He bought Carol a Vietnamese dress that was gold yellow silk with white silk pants. For himself, he sent home smoking pants, jackets, silk shirts, and other miscellaneous items.²⁶ The exotic nature of Vietnamese products made them appealing. Soldiers were fascinated by the beautiful, foreign objects they found amidst the contrasting primitive environment.

Exoticism could only go so far. A soldier remarked, “We soon found ourselves caught up... ‘in a war of contrasts in a land of contrasts,’ where few things were as they seemed. The Vietnamese were at once friendly and deceptive, alluring and treacherous. The weather was broiling and chilling, dusty and muddy...”²⁷ When soldiers arrived in Vietnamese villages, they were greeted with smiling children running alongside their vehicles and people waving. They soon learned, however, that these people were not looking to be liberated—they were looking for business. The Vietnamese saw the soldiers as a new market, whether it be for pimping, drugs, or clothes. Intermingled among these seemingly joyous people, however, were others that yelled “Fuck you, GI” to the soldiers as they passed. The children who were flashing them a V for victory (or so the GIs thought) were actually pimping.²⁸ American GIs quickly learned that the Vietnamese were not as they seemed. This is not to say that all of the Vietnamese looked to take advantage of the Americans. When looking through the eyes of a soldier, however, these distinctions were not always clear.

²⁵Kenneth Jager to Carol Maslanik, June 28, 1968.

²⁶Kenneth Jager to Carol Maslanik, August 2, 1968.

²⁷Bernard Edelman, ed., *Dear America: Letters Home from Vietnam* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1985), 33.

²⁸Appy, *Working-Class War*, 132.

Vietnam was also unlike any environment most of them had encountered. At ten to twenty degrees north of the equator, Vietnam was a tropical environment with temperatures that commonly rose well above 100 degrees.²⁹ Many soldiers were not used to the extreme conditions of Vietnam. Kenneth complained, “Its [*sic*] hotter than – here today. At 4:30 this morning it was already 80 degrees. It should get up to around 105 today without any trouble at all.”³⁰ Typical temperatures in Vietnam rose above 100 degrees with high humidity. During the rainy season it rained once a day and turned clay into ankle deep, “gum like mud.”³¹ By the time the mud dried out, rain would once again soak the ground, continuing the endless wet-dry cycle.

The conditions of life in, as Kenneth dubbed it, the “Land of the black pajamas” shocked soldiers.³² Kenneth observed, “I’ve seen some pretty bad slums in the states, but the slums over here make the slums in the states like luxury. There’s just as much garbage as people in the streets. The streets look like Michigan Ave. when the factories get out. The traffic is terrible.”³³ Sources indicate that soldiers found the Vietnamese repulsive in their daily habits, such as shamelessly defecating in the streets. The primitive ways of the Vietnamese made them seem animal-like to the soldiers.³⁴ A soldier wrote, “The people live like pigs. They don’t know how to use soap. When they have to go to the bathroom, they go wherever they’re standing, they don’t care who is looking...The houses they live in are like rundown shacks. You can see

²⁹Appy, *Working-Class War*, 128.

³⁰Kenneth Jager to Carol Maslanik, June 28, 1968.

³¹Ron Arscheene to Carol Maslanik, July 9, 1968.

³²Kenneth Jager to Carol Maslanik, August 28, 1968. The Vietnamese people wore clothes that to the soldiers looked like black pajamas.

³³Kenneth Jager to Carol Maslanik, September 23, 1968. Kenneth is probably referring to Michigan Avenue in Kalamazoo, Michigan, a street known for its businesses and factories.

³⁴Appy, *Working- Class War*, 129.

everything—they have no doors, curtains...”³⁵ The Vietnamese lived in very different conditions than what the soldiers were used to in their first world country. Most Vietnamese lived in poverty, especially compared to people in the United States. Large numbers of people lived in primitive dwellings with no electricity, plumbing, or running water.³⁶ The slums that Kenneth referred to in the above quote were especially appalling. People built with whatever material they could find. As Kenneth described, there was an abundance of garbage. Scraps of metal and flattened pop cans became building blocks for the people living in the slums. The Vietnamese utilized what they had. Ammunition brass shell casings became ashtrays, garbage the GIs threw away became their treasure, soap served as a gift for a girlfriend—the Vietnamese used everything.³⁷ The poverty of the Vietnamese only served to highlight, as historian Christian Appy writes, “one of the most fundamental facts about the war: the conflict between the advanced technology of the wealthiest nation on earth and the largely preindustrial and agricultural world of the revolutionary Third World.”³⁸ As a first world country, America depended on wealth and technological superiority to win the war. The Vietnamese, however, had learned how to survive with very little and had developed into resourceful fighters, which made them formidable enemies.

Although the conflict between a first and third world country emphasized economic differences between the *countries*, it also served to unify the *people* who were in the universal lower class. Lower class held a different definition for Americans than the Vietnamese, but this

³⁵ John Dabonka to parents, December 23, 1966, in Bernard Edelman, ed., *Dear America: Letters Home from Vietnam*, 54.

³⁶ Appy, *Working-Class War*, 288.

³⁷ Appy, *Working-Class War*, 288-289.

³⁸ Appy, *Working-Class War*, 129.

did not stop some soldiers from identifying with the plight of the poor in Vietnam. For the lower class Americans, their interactions with the Vietnamese made them more aware of their “identity as a working-class American” and their “subordinate status in the United States.”³⁹ Although they were rich compared to the Vietnamese, back in the United States they were on the bottom rungs of society. Some soldiers began to realize that there were few members of the upper class fighting alongside them. Their fellow combat men generally came from working class backgrounds. For example, two of the men who wrote to Carol were from Vicksburg, which is a largely rural, working and middle class community. This caused them to question why their class was fighting, and the upper class was not. Outcast out of their own society, in Vietnam the lower class Americans became rich. As they watched the plight of the Vietnamese people, it was like looking in a mirror. American soldiers felt guilty because they knew what it was like to be oppressed by the wealthy. In a class war sense, they felt that they were engaging in a fight against their own kind. Bob, an American soldier who came from a poor family, stated ““In Vietnam I was a rich Yankee, dropping shell casings all over the ground. But back home I was just a poor southern kid.””⁴⁰ Bob’s feeling illustrate the conflicting emotions poor soldiers felt. In Vietnam, they were considered rich. Back at home, however, they were not wealthy and this made them identify with the poverty of the Vietnamese.

The Vietnamese did not allow their poverty to prevent them from winning battles. In fact, their lack of supplies and primitive fighting techniques actually benefitted the Vietnamese. Having centuries of experience warding off powerful foreign invaders, the Vietnamese knew how to channel their capabilities into an effective strategy. Given their limited ammunition

³⁹Appy, *Working-Class War*, 288.

⁴⁰Quoted in Appy, *Working-Class War*, 288.

supply, Revolutionary Forces made each shot count; they excelled at close range fire and specialized in close combat. Their ability to conceal themselves from the enemy made them a dangerous force against the GI's who were unaccustomed to the dense Vietnamese forests. Fifty percent of all the firefights in Vietnam were caused by ambushes sprung by Revolutionary Forces, who would dig holes, trenches, and bunkers to hide and wait for American forces.⁴¹ As the unsuspecting Americans marched by, they would wait until the Americans were close, and then spring an ambush on them.

Besides the ambushes, the Vietnamese would set up booby traps throughout the forest that with one faulty step could blow a soldier to pieces. Soldiers had to be on constant watch for the Bouncing Betty, which were pressure-released land mines that would burst into the air if stepped on; the booby trapped mortar and artillery rounds, which could hang from trees or be buried in shrubbery and could be triggered by trip wire, pressure release, or command detonation; and the booby-trapped grenade that was triggered by a trip wire.⁴² Even without explosives, the Vietnamese could create dangerous traps such as punji pits. These pits were holes in the ground that contained punji sticks, which were sticks sharpened to a lethal point. Although primitive, these pits had potential to severely wound, infect, or even kill a soldier. Concealed in the underbrush, these traps could end the life of a soldier in an instant.

If Americans called for air support, the Vietnamese had the ability to retreat as quickly as they had attacked.⁴³ In Michael Herr's *Dispatches*, he describes who controlled which parts of the battle field. According to Herr, "The ground was always in play, always being swept. Under the ground was his, above it ours. We had the air, we could get up in it but not disappear in *to* it,

⁴¹Appy, *Working-Class War*, 171.

⁴²Appy, *Working-Class War*, 333n54.

⁴³Appy, *Working-Class War*, 171-172.

we could run but we couldn't hide, and he [revolutionary forces] could do each so well that sometimes it looked like he was doing them both at once..."⁴⁴ The Americans had the aerial advantage, but for the majority of the time the Vietnamese held the ground. The fact that the Vietnamese seemed to appear and disappear, along with their expert sniping skills, intimidated soldiers and created a sense of paranoia among troops. "He," the elusive revolutionary forces, had the magical ability to seemingly be in two places at once. It was as if he was an inescapable, omniscient being who knew exactly where the soldiers were at any moment. Even with their advanced technology, the Americans did not possess these skills, which made GIs feel extremely vulnerable. The overwhelming number of ways in which the Vietnamese could hide a trap, combined with the knowledge that they were endangered with every move they made, put troops in a constant state of alertness. Kenneth effectively describes this state of alert tension:

This place is slowly driving me crazy. I'm getting jumpy and can't sleep when I do get a chance to go to bed. The other night a guy came up behind me real quiet like with the intention of scaring me. I heard him just before he was ready to grab me and he came so close to getting a bayonet in the ribs that I don't like to think about it. Since I can't afford to go on R&R about the only thing that keeps me from cracking up is the fact that I'm getting short and won't have to put up with all this bullshit for much longer.⁴⁵

Every day, soldiers realized the fragility of life and were plagued with the thought that they may not survive their next trek through the jungle. Kenneth wrote, "Its [*sic*] pretty ironic I think, because when you're a civilian you never even think about death, but when your [*sic*] in the army and in Vietnam; [*sic*] you spend each waking moment wondering which of your buddies just got his, and if you will be next. It makes everyone in a pretty grim state of mind most of the time."⁴⁶

⁴⁴Michael Herr, "Dispatches," in ed. Stewart O'Nan, *The Vietnam Reader*, 209.

⁴⁵Kenneth to Carol Maslanik, December 30, 1968.

Soldiers had other people to worry about besides their invisible enemy. In some cases, soldiers could not trust their own officers to lead them safely through the jungle. According to Kenneth and Ron, their officers were incompetent and disconnected from the realities of war. For example, when Kenneth's squad got mortared and took ten casualties, the officers were anything but composed. He wrote:

When the lifers came out of hiding they were shook up something bad. They were nothing but a bundle of nerves...If they are a sample of what our leaders in the modern army [are like] then they are pretty sorry...I was about 150' from where all the mortars were going off and I'll admit I was scared, but at least I could still talk. Some of these officers were so scared they were speechless.⁴⁷

Unlike squad leaders, who had five to six months of combat experience and remained in the field, officers only fought in the field for six months before being sent to a rear area. By the time officers became knowledgeable about combat, they were sent to the rear and replaced by another inexperienced officer. Tim O'Brien, a prolific writer and soldier of the Vietnam War, suffered successions of incompetent officers. After the reliable Captain Johansen left, his position was replaced by Captain Smith. When Smith refused to take O'Brien's advice he ended up leading the company into a mine field. When the incident ended, Smith was less concerned with the casualty list than with the fate of his career. He miserably complained, "What's my commander to think? He's gonna see a damn casualty list a mile long, and it's only my first operation. My career is in real jeopardy now."⁴⁸

"Lifers," those who planned to make a career of the army, were especially untrustworthy because they seemed to be more concerned with their advancement than with the safety of their

⁴⁶Kenneth Jager to Carol Maslanik, August 28, 1968.

⁴⁷Kenneth Jager to Carol Maslanik, October 3, 1968.

⁴⁸Quoted in Tim O'Brien, *If I Die in a Combat Zone Box Me Up and Ship Me Home* (New York: Broadway Books, 1975), 156.

men.⁴⁹ Field soldiers often felt like sitting ducks that were used to attract enemy fire while their superiors waited for a promotion. In some cases, this seems to be true. Near the end of 1967, 6,000 marines were stationed in Khe Sanh in order to attract NVA soldiers. Once the NVA soldiers gathered, the Americans would decimate them using their airpower. By the winter of 1968 the Americans were outnumbered; there were 20,000 NVA troops against their 6,000. Although the NVA placed a siege on Khe Sanh, the officers were hopeful that the NVA would attack so that their enemy would suffer casualties (even though they outnumbered the U.S. by about 3 to 1).⁵⁰ If there were more enemy than friendly casualties, it would be considered a victory. Soldiers resented the officers who, according to former marine infantry officer Charles R. Anderson, “would want to carry out all kinds of crazy John Wayne tactics, who would use their lives in an effort to win the war single-handedly, win the big medal, and get his picture in the hometown paper.”⁵¹ Instances such as this made soldiers feel that they were only pawns in the larger game of the Vietnam War, to be used as expendable pieces in the quest for the checkmate.

If officers did not respect the knowledge of the men who had been in the field, it became difficult for them to command the soldiers. Sometimes officers became the laughingstock of their company. For example, Ron commented, “...and this [getting ready to move] is always pretty funny. All of the top brass is going crazy trying to organize things. The[y] all act like this is the most secret mission of the war and that they have to make sure that every man, shovel, and tent

⁴⁹Appy, *Working-Class War*, 140.

⁵⁰Appy, *Working-Class War*, 188.

⁵¹Quoted in George Lepre, *Fragging: Why U.S. Soldiers Assaulted Their Officers in Vietnam* (Lubbock, Texas: Texas Tech University Press, 2011), 84.

peg are in the proper place personally. Oh well, that's the army!"⁵² New officers, who lacked the common sense gained from experience, had a difficult time earning respect from their combatants. Sometimes soldiers would refuse to obey orders or simply ignore their officers. In Tim O'Brien's memoir, he describes his first day with Alpha Company. During an attack in the morning, the first sergeant could not persuade his men to act. The company continued to sleep in their barracks, and the few who emerged simply sat on sandbags in their underwear and laughed.⁵³

Other times, companies planned darker forms of rebellion against their commanders. For example, after the dangers Captain Smith put his troops through, they began to half-joke that Smith was a "marked man" and that "it was only a matter of time before someone chucked a grenade into his foxhole..."⁵⁴ "Fragging," (named after the weapon of choice for the action, the fragmentation grenade) most commonly the attempt to murder a superior officer by his own troops, became more common by 1969-1970. In 1969, the Army reported 126 fraggings, 271 in 1970, and 333 in 1971.⁵⁵ Eighty percent of these fraggings were directed towards officers and NCOs. Out of a total of 730 fraggings, there were only 363 court-martials for them.⁵⁶ Most of the time fraggings resulted in injury, not death, and prosecuting the attacker could mean more violence later on. Of course, the benefit of using a fragmentation grenade was that the attacker's identity could remain anonymous. The grenade could be thrown from a distance, and there would be no fingerprints. In addition, attacks usually occurred at night. Therefore, even if the

⁵²Ron Arsheene to Carol Maslanik, December 4, 1968.

⁵³O'Brien, 75.

⁵⁴O'Brien, 158.

⁵⁵Appy, *Working-Class War*, 246.

⁵⁶Jonathan Neale, *A People's History of the Vietnam War* (New York: New Press, 2004), 169.

commander wanted to press charges, identifying the culprit would have presented a great challenge.

Most fraggings occurred on bases where extreme boredom combined with frustrations about the war caused soldiers to seek out mischief. In 1969, less than one-third of fraggings occurred in the field.⁵⁷ Kenneth may have witnessed an attempted fragging in his unit, indicated by the following passage:

The other night the colonel [*sic*] got shot at while he was checking the bunkers and ate quite a little dirt when he hit the ground. He happened to be standing in about three inches of very sloppy mud at the time. He was pretty mad, but he became furious when he found out that the V.C. that shot at him got away. He was so mad that he couldn't even get his swear words in the right order. I think he would have liked to courtmartial [*sic*] some body, but he can't help it if these guys happened to be bad shots.⁵⁸

Although the V.C. were supposedly the ones that shot him, the soldiers who “happened to be” bad shots may not have made much of an effort to shoot the VC who attacked the colonel. Nevertheless, the colonel's reaction indicates how officials felt targeted by their troops. Standing in three inches of mud put him in a vulnerable position, and the fact that he thought the men who did not defend him should be tried indicates that he felt threatened by them.

That the amount of fraggings increased after the Tet Offensive of 1968 is a telling indication about soldiers' changing attitudes concerning the war. A great rift exists between letters written pre and post Tet Offensive in that the later ones express a growing bitterness about the pointlessness of the war.⁵⁹ Kenneth and Ron's letters, which were written between 1968-1969, exhibit that hopelessness about being able to win the war. On August 28th, 1968, nearly 8 months after the Tet Offensive, Kenneth wrote, “It's getting worse every day. I think Old Charlie

⁵⁷Lepre, 31.

⁵⁸Kenneth Jager to Carol Maslanik, September 4, 1968.

⁵⁹Appy, *Working-Class War*, 208.

is getting ready for another big offensive, so I may not be to [sic] much longer for this world. I guess only time will tell.”⁶⁰ Kenneth’s concerns that things are “getting worse” mirror the fears felt by many soldiers—the United States was losing. Confidence waned in the United States and citizens began to put pressure on the government to bring the soldiers home. A year later, in 1969, the U.S. began the process of “Vietnamization,” which aimed to gradually draw U.S. forces out of Vietnam while increasing responsibilities for the South Vietnamese forces.⁶¹ As more responsibilities transferred to the ARVN and the workload of U.S. troops lessened, the soldiers’ amount of free time increased. Soldiers felt that they were wasting their time and there seemed to be no clear objective to remain in Vietnam anymore.⁶² Therefore, fraggings expressed soldiers’ frustrations towards their superiors for decisions that did not lead to withdrawal.

Faced with boredom and the knowledge that they may not see the next day, the men would reminisce about the people they left behind and wonder if their country remembered them as well. While the troops fought for the supposed goal of protecting their country from the threat of communism, life proceeded as usual back home. On August 24, 1967, Mitch wrote, “It sounds like everyone [at home] is either getting married or out partying.”⁶³ Soldiers’ lives felt stagnant. They were stuck in Vietnam while at home people were moving forward. For example, Ron’s ex-girlfriend, Cathy, got married and had a child, illustrating how she continued to move on while he remained abroad against his will.⁶⁴ Unlike World War II, the Vietnam War was not

⁶⁰Kenneth Jager to Carol Maslanik, August 28, 1968.

⁶¹Lepre, 20.

⁶²William Thomas Allison, *Military Justice in Vietnam: The Rule of Law in an American War* (Lawrence, Kansas: University Press of Kansas, 2007), 79.

⁶³Mitchell VanKruiningen to Carol Maslanik, August 24, 1967.

⁶⁴Ron indicated that he had been drafted when he wrote that he wishes he had burnt his draft card.

fueled by the homefront; there was no ““common sacrifice.””⁶⁵ The war lacked the popular support that characterized World War II as the whole country did not participate in the war. Instead of feeling like they were participating in a joint effort between soldier and country, Vietnam War soldiers felt isolated and that the weight of the war was forced onto their shoulders. This fear of being forgotten was manifested in the form of “Jody.”⁶⁶ Jody, who had either avoided or evaded the draft, stole girlfriends and wives while soldiers were at war. For example, in the first letter he wrote to her, Dennis asked Carol if she had “a steady” because “a person likes to find that out right away. I had one but they didn’t draft Jody in time.”⁶⁷ While he was out fighting, Jody was attending college, dating girls, and living the seemingly carefree life that the soldiers missed at home.

Willis also held concerns about his ex-girlfriend, Carol Sue Crago. Carol and Willis had announced their engagement on October 14, 1966 in the *Kalamazoo Gazette*. At the time, Willis was stationed in Kentucky. Between that date and when Willis deployed, they broke up. In his September 1967 letter to Carol Maslanik, he inquired if his ex-fiancé Carol still had feelings for him. He wrote, “Carol I’d like to ask you a question. Do you think Carol has any feeling towards me...I don’t have my hopes to Hi [*sic*] but I think the world of her even now and I always will. She taught me a lot just not soon enough. I didn’t always treat her write [*sic*].”⁶⁸ Willis’s statement represents the loneliness and vulnerability soldiers felt. They wanted to know if someone cared about them and if they had a chance with American girls after Vietnam.

⁶⁵Breecher and Costello, *Common Sense*, 196-197, quoted in Appy, *Working-Class War*, 220.

⁶⁶Appy, *Working-Class War*, 106.

⁶⁷Dennis Klahl to Carol Maslanik, March 27, 1966.

⁶⁸Willis Parsons to Carol Maslanik, September 24, 1967.

No other time of year brought a greater feeling of isolation than the holidays. On November 3, 1968, Ron morosely wrote that the approach of Thanksgiving and Christmas brought about a “vague sense of non existence.” Not only would he have to experience Christmas away from his family, he would not be able to share in the experience by sending presents. For Ron, “Christmas without giving is a hollow thing...”⁶⁹ In Kenneth’s unit, there was a song passed around that seemed to express his sentiments about the holidays. Entitled “Christmas in Vietnam”⁷⁰ and sung to the tune of “Jingle Bells,” the song reads:

Dashing though the mud, in a jeep that should be junk,
Over the roads we go, half of us are drunk.
Wheels on dirt roads bounce, making asses sore.
Lord, I’d sooner go to Hell than finish out this tour.

Chorus: Jingle bells, mortar shells, VC in the grass.
We’ll get no Merry Christmas cheer until this year has passed.
Jingle bells, mortar shells, VC in the grass,
Take your Merry Christmas cheer and shove it up your ass.

Christmas time is here, as everyone knows,
People think it’s dear, GI’s think it blows.
All at home are gay, children are at play,
While we are stuck out here, so God—damned far away.

Chorus: same, same

The moral of our song, it’s plain as it can be,
Please, no more midnight chorals sung and screw your Christmas tree.
There’s one thing left to say, before we have to leave,
Vietnam is not a place to be on Christmas Eve!!!!⁷¹

⁶⁹Ron Arscheene to Carol Maslanik, November 3, 1968.

⁷⁰“Christmas in Vietnam” also happens to be the title of a *Time* magazine that features Bob Hope. The magazine contained an article on Hope and covered the military’s Rest and Recuperation program. These two topics were meant to show the civilians at home that the soldiers were enjoying the holidays in Vietnam. This song may have been a satiric play on that goal. Appy, *Working-Class War*, 237.

⁷¹Kenneth Jager to Carol Maslanik, November 12, 1968.

This carol exemplifies the bitter, lonely, exiled feelings that GIs held during the holidays (and probably throughout their entire time in Vietnam). While people were at home drinking hot chocolate, singing carols, visiting with family, and building snow-men, soldiers continued to dodge mortars. The military made efforts to bring the holidays to base camps. A Thanksgiving dinner menu from 1967 offered delectable items such as shrimp cocktail, roast turkey, mashed potatoes, hot rolls, and pumpkin pie with whipped topping.⁷² Some soldiers had the opportunity to watch Bob Hope perform on Christmas and sing Christmas carols.⁷³ However, not all soldiers shared this experience and often the reality of war would strike during the celebrations. Kenneth had to work on Christmas. Another soldier, in a letter to his parents, describes how his camp got gassed during the Christmas party: “We were all standing around singing when all these explosions started going off. Balls of fire were shooting through the tent...we had been hit by gas. I don’t think I was so scared in all my life...we all waited for Charlie. But I guess all he wanted to do was ruin our Christmas.”⁷⁴ In the midst of a Christmas mortar attack, the holidays further heightened the sentiment among soldiers that they were the sole fighters in the war.

Letters and packages from home helped combat that feeling of disconnection. Willis gratefully wrote, “I’m real happy to hear from you [Carol]. It makes me feel that at least not everyone has forgotten we exist over here.”⁷⁵ According to another soldier, ““You wouldn’t believe how much a letter will help when a guy is over [here]. In fact, that’s the only thing a

⁷²“Thanksgiving Day Dinner Menu,” included in Colonel Chester B. McCoid II to his wife Dorothy, Vietnam, 1967, in Bill Adler, ed., *Letters from Vietnam* (New York: Ballantine Books, 2003), 97.

⁷³James Schubert to his parents, Vietnam, December 26, 1970, in Edelman, ed., *Dear America*, 252.

⁷⁴Kenneth Jager to Carol Maslanik, December 30, 1968. William R. Stocks to his parents, Vietnam, December 26, 1968, in Edelman, ed., *Dear America*, 253.

⁷⁵Willis Parsons to Carol Maslanik, September 24, 1967.

soldier has to look forward to is mail call.”⁷⁶ Carol acted as their link to “the World” (their name for the United States), providing them with stories of home and the people they cared about. Soldiers especially enjoyed personal visits, such as from the Donut Dollies. The “Donut Dollies,” a nickname that originated in World War II, served in a Red Cross program entitled Supplemental Recreational Activities Overseas.⁷⁷ Donut Dollies spent time with soldiers playing games and giving them “straight American girl talk.” They were supposed to act as if nothing was wrong.⁷⁸ The women tried to look their best and provide soldiers with fun activities that could remind them of a world outside of Vietnam. According to Nancy Smoyer, a Donut Dollie, the games they played with the soldiers were a “cross between a TV quiz show and a board game like Monopoly” with themes such as sports, movies, and music. The men divided up into teams and “they really got into it.”⁷⁹ The men truly seemed to enjoy their company. When the Donut Dollies visited Ron’s base, he wrote that “Yesterday we were visited by Donut Dollies. These are young ladies from the Red Cross that volunteer to go afield and visit to GI’s. They come out and spend an afternoon just talking to the guys. They are very pleasant and warmhearted. I could just see you [Carol] doing it. You’d be a terrific Donut Dolly.”⁸⁰ Donut Dollies, along with the other men and women who visited, provided the men with entertainment and a reminder that there was a world outside of Vietnam.

⁷⁶Leonard Dutcher to his parents, Vietnam, December 5, 1967, in James R. Ebert, *A Life in a Year: The American Infantryman in Vietnam, 1965-1972* (Presido Press: Novato, CA, 1993), 151.

⁷⁷Christian G. Appy, *Patriots: The Vietnam War Remembered from All Sides* (New York: Penguin Books, 2003), 188.

⁷⁸Jeanne Bokina Christie to Daryl, Vietnam, 1967, in Edelman, ed., *Dear America*, 189.

⁷⁹Nancy Smoyer, in Appy, *Patriots*, 188.

⁸⁰Ron Arscheene to Carol Maslanik, July 1, 1968.

However, letters and visits could only go so far in combating the range of emotions soldiers felt. Soldiers had varied ways of dealing with their boredom, bitterness, and loneliness. For some, it came in the form of drugs, alcohol, and sex.

Their chosen method of coping often depended on location. Kenneth, stationed in a rear area, was able to get alcohol easier than those out in the field who, for obvious reasons, did not have easy access.⁸¹ Ron remarked in one of his letters that alcohol was scarce. “I haven’t had a drink since I left the states. The part about all the G.I.’s over here being drunk. Well I don’t believe it. Liquor is impossible to get, beer is pretty scarce [*sic*], and so whats [*sic*] left to get drunk on. Pot and stuff like this is available but I don’t think I’m ready for that yet. I may try it some day but not just yet.”⁸² Kenneth, being on a base, had access to basically whichever drug he chose. In a couple instances he even offered to send some to Carol. He wrote, “If your [*sic*] so bored I could always send you some marijuana. I doubt if it would cheer you up much, but you could be high 24 hrs. a day. I can’t stand the stuff myself, but I have to keep up my stakes; so I keep a patch like everyone else, but it never gets used unless someone steals some.”⁸³ Other soldiers took advantage of the readily available cannabis. For a mere \$5 or for a carton of American cigarettes, soldiers could buy a package of filter-tipped marijuana cigarettes. Vietnamese people sold marijuana outside the base in cigarette packages that were easily disguised.⁸⁴ Corpsman John Meyer stated, “All you had to do was wave some money at the Vietnamese and say *tuc fin* and they would be back with the marijuana in no time.”⁸⁵ Widely

⁸¹Ebert, *Life in a Year*, 230.

⁸²Ron Arscheene to Carol Maslanik, May 15, 1968.

⁸³Kenneth Jager to Carol Maslanik, April 5, 1969.

⁸⁴Appy, *Working-Class War*, 283.

available, cheap, and effective, marijuana use increased throughout the war. A study found that in 1967 twenty-nine percent of returning soldiers reported that they smoked marijuana in Vietnam. By 1969, the percentage had increased to fifty, and in 1971 the percentage rose to sixty percent.⁸⁶ A soldier explained, ““It [marijuana] really worked as an anesthetic and helped me escape. There were none of the terrible side effects that came from alcohol: no throwing up, no dizziness, no stomach pains...And I got the same escape that I had from alcohol.””⁸⁷

The soothing effect of marijuana also helped improved soldiers’ performance during combat because it calmed their nerves. Instead of being terrified during battle the cannabis helped soldiers think coolly and clearly. According to a Private, ““When you get high...it calms you down and makes you more alert. You don’t miss snake eyes (hidden Vietnamese signs for mined trails) or miss an enemy ambush. You can’t do that when you’re straight, because you are overcome with fear.””⁸⁸ If moderated correctly, drugs could keep a soldier calm during a skirmish, which improved their overall performance. Oftentimes the best soldiers in a unit were the ones who used drugs. Colonel Douglas Lindsey claimed ““Many pot smokers are among the most intelligent members of the regiment and soldiers who smoke pot are more likely to be found among the better soldiers in the unit.”” Furthermore, a survey found that 75 percent of soldiers who used drugs were rated as ““Good”” or ““Outstanding.””⁸⁹ If a soldier knew how to control their intake of drugs, he could both use the drug as an escape mechanism and as a way to help them survive battle.

⁸⁵Quoted in Ebert, *Life in a Year*, 229.

⁸⁶Appy, *Working-Class War*, 283.

⁸⁷Quoted in Ebert, *Life in a Year*, 229.

⁸⁸Quoted in Jeremy Kuzmarov, *The Myth of the Addicted Army: Vietnam and the Modern War on Drugs* (Boston, Massachusetts: University of Massachusetts Press, 2009), 70.

⁸⁹Kuzmarov, 24.

For other soldiers, like Kenneth, alcohol was the preferable escape. After a long twelve hour work day, Kenneth would usually go to the club “and proceed to get bombed out of my mind” because it seemed “to be the only way to get the best of this man made hell.”⁹⁰ According to Kenneth, it seems that there were not many options for things to do besides going to the bar. He writes, “The only thing to do when I’m off duty is to either walk two miles to go swimming or walk one block to the club and get drunk. Since I’m inclined to be rather lazy I don’t go swimming very often and get drunk quite often. In fact I haven’t been stone cold sober for the last three weeks...”⁹¹ Many soldiers seemed to share Kenneth’s preference for alcohol. According to the Department of Defense, 88 percent of soldiers stated that they consumed ““prodigious amounts”” of alcohol during their tour.⁹² The fact that alcohol was legal, combined with its ready availability, may be why alcohol became so popular. Officers condoned the use of alcohol and even encouraged it in some instances. The military delivered free beer to the troops and used it as an incentive for winning battles. As soldier Mark Levy recalled, ““A beer was cheaper to get than a soda.””⁹³ In 1966, the Army founded an amusement center in An Khe meant to ““boost morale”” by providing 48 bars and numerous other venues for soldiers.⁹⁴ This continual reinforcement that associated beer with victory and fun made alcohol extremely popular among soldiers.

Ironically, the military’s methods of boosting morale did nothing to improve their performance in battle. Kenneth attested to this fact when describing his condition after drinking.

⁹⁰Kenneth Jager to Carol Maslanik, November 7, 1968.

⁹¹Kenneth Jager to Carol Maslanik, July 18, 1968.

⁹²Kuzmarov, 26.

⁹³Kuzmarov, 28.

⁹⁴Kuzmarov, 27.

He wrote, “You would never guess what I do with my spare time. Most of the time I sleep, but once in a while I just get a notion to get drunk and wew! do I get drunk...Usually after a night of plenty I end up on the sandbag detail; not feeling very well.”⁹⁵ A hung over soldier often rendered himself to be quite useless the next morning. Comparatively, a soldier who had smoked weed the night before would have been ready for combat the next day. An Air Force officer reported that, ““When I get up in the wee hours to fly a mission, I need the [person] I’m with to be fresh. He’s more likely to be so if he smoked grass the night before than if he got juiced [drunk].””⁹⁶ As Kenneth wrote, after drinking the night before he was not in any condition to fight the next day. According to Dr. Peter Bourne, chief of the neuropsychiatry section of the U.S. Army Medical Research Team, claimed that alcohol caused most cases of mental collapse, whereas marijuana and other drugs contributed to very little psychiatric problems.⁹⁷

Despite the fact that alcohol clearly caused as many, or more, problems than drugs the military continued to aggressively pursue a war against drugs. The Military Assistance Command, Vietnam (MACV) developed educational programs that aimed to deter soldiers from using drugs. Newly arrived soldiers were required to take an orientation course that introduced them to the negative consequences of drugs.⁹⁸ In a 1972 article for *Military Review* Lt. Col. John Hodge encouraged commanders to cultivate open discussions about drug use with troops. Hodge attributed the drug problem in the military to lack of communication between soldiers and their superiors. He believed that if commanders and their soldiers openly discussed drug abuse and

⁹⁵Kenneth Jager to Carol Maslanik, September 4, 1968.

⁹⁶Quoted in Kuzmarov, 28.

⁹⁷Kuzmarov, 28.

⁹⁸Allison, 122.

how to solve it, then it would ultimately result in effective drug control because both parties would be involved in the decision-making process.⁹⁹ Hodge's approach is an innovative one. Instead of simply telling soldiers that "drugs are bad" he encouraged a more egalitarian approach where both soldier and superior could find a solution to the "drug problem." However, his solution also ignored the root cause of why the soldiers used drugs in the first place. He attributed drug use to be a form of rebellion against authority and a lack of education about drugs. While drugs were definitely a symbol of the anti-war movement, the primary motive behind drug use in Vietnam was to help soldiers escape from the horrors of war. It was a type of self-medication that helped soldiers cope with the feeling of being a pawn in a war with no clear goal or endpoint.

The military's standpoint, however, was highly influenced by the drug war at home, which was sharply divided between the "Old Guards" and "Antipsychiatry." Old Guards saw drug users as antisocial people who were depressed and paranoid. They did not see the war experience as causing drug use and blamed it on the mental state of the individual. Old Guards believed that drugs inhibited fighting ability and that the Communists used marijuana as a new form of chemical warfare against the Americans.¹⁰⁰ On the other hand, the Antipsychiatrists believed that environment should be taken into consideration. War zones constitute a different world for many soldiers and they do things in that world that they may not have considered in their former environment. In that new place, soldiers who did not use drugs before may use them to help survive their new surroundings.¹⁰¹ While Old Guards designated drugs as the cause of

⁹⁹Lt. Col. John J. Hodge, "Drug Knowledge and Attitudes in the Army," *Military Review*, June 1972, 85-93.

¹⁰⁰Kuzmarov, 59.

¹⁰¹Kuzmarov, 68.

military crimes, such as My Lai, Antipsychiatrists claimed that drugs did not cause a reaction that the user would not normally have had. It simply acted as a catalyst that brought out inner fears and actions.¹⁰² The military seemed to side mostly with the Old Guard approach. They blamed drugs as one of the primary causes of their failure in Vietnam (although some would say that there was not really a “drug problem” in Vietnam and that the military invented the war on drugs to distract the public from their losses in Vietnam) and they vowed to find a solution to it.

In addition to drugs and alcohol, another vice soldiers supported to combat their anxiety was prostitution. The sex industry thrived in Vietnam during the war. Sex, or the lack of it, seemed “to be a big hangup” among the young soldiers.¹⁰³ Throughout their letters the soldiers complained about how “horny” they were and how sexually deprived they felt. Because the American dollar was worth more in Vietnam than in America, soldiers were more liberal with spending their money than they would be at home. Kenneth displayed this trend when he wrote, “I went to Siagon yesterday and blew \$50. These Vietnamese women sure can take a guy for all he’s got. It’s a good thing that I left some money in my locker, or I would probably be flat broke today. My Sgt. spent \$120 and right now hasn’t got enough money to buy a pack of cigarettes.”¹⁰⁴ For the Vietnamese women, the rich, sex-hungry Americans presented an opportunity for them to earn decent money. After all, in their war-torn country, economic opportunities were few. A frustrated Vietnamese woman named Nguyen Thi Khao ranted, “American soldiers have much money and it seems that they are all sexually hungry all the time.

¹⁰²Kuzmarov, 66.

¹⁰³Ron Arscheene to Carol Maslanik, April 4, 1969.

¹⁰⁴Kenneth Jager to Carol Maslanik, November 7, 1968.

Our poor girls. with money and a little patience, the Americans can get them very easily.”¹⁰⁵ Vietnamese women flocked from the countryside to the cities and became “bar girls.” They attached themselves to one GI, and when that soldier left or died, they would find another one. Nguyen Ngoc Luong, a Vietnamese interpreter, observed that “They [bar girls] liked the GIs very much. Most American soldiers were very good with girls...The girls behaved very warmly with the GIs and the GIs were like children with them. Like babies. The girls took care of them.”¹⁰⁶ The relationship between the soldiers and bar girls was mutually beneficial: the soldiers felt that there was someone to care for them and the women had means to earn a living. Some of the bar girls became more like mistresses in that the GIs would take care of them. For example, Luong described how one GI rented a small house and allowed the bar girl’s entire family to move in. He bought everything that the family needed from food to school supplies.¹⁰⁷ In the camps, some women became “hootch girls.” These women were hired to wash clothes, make beds, iron, and clean. They were paid \$5 a month per man, but if they were also prostitutes they could earn more.¹⁰⁸

The government sanctioned prostitution by building establishments where prostitution ran rampant. For example, in Saigon the American State Department ran a hotel that provided girls for every room. When officer Frank Maguire went to Saigon on an assignment for the Joint United States Public Affairs Office, which was part of the State Department, he raved “they put me up in their hotel and the same girl would hop into my bed. It was sanctioned by the State

¹⁰⁵Quoted in Appy, *Working-Class War*, 290.

¹⁰⁶Nguyen Ngoc Luong, in Christian G. Appy, *Patriots*, 375.

¹⁰⁷Luong, in Appy, *Patriots*, 375.

¹⁰⁸Appy, *Working-Class War*, 290.

Department!”¹⁰⁹ Another such place was “Sin City,” which was located in An Khe (mentioned in the previous section) next to division headquarters. Surrounded by barbed wire and secured by a checkpoint gate, once a soldier entered he had three acres worth of bars and souvenir shops for his enjoyment. Bars had rooms in the back where soldiers could go with prostitutes. Jim Soular, an American who visited there, believed that these prostitutes were checked for venereal disease once a week by doctors.¹¹⁰ Because the government sanctioned the city, prostitution could be more readily regulated. However, in other places where prostitution could not be regulated, venereal disease spread. Kenneth wrote:

I’m staying as far away from these gooks as possible. There are two guys in our hooch...right now with V.D. [Venereal Disease] One has the clapps [*sic*] and is wondering if he will be able to go home. He’s only got 43 days left. The other guy is worse off. The medics don’t even know what he’s got. He’s in pretty bad shape. There’s another guy that was sent to Japan for treatment he had syphilis of the mouth. I won’t even explain how he got it.¹¹¹

Venereal disease became enough of a problem in Vietnam that the government decided to produce an educational video for soldiers going to Vietnam. Entitled “Where the Girls Are: VD in Southeast Asia,” the video aimed to educate soldiers about the types of sexually transmitted diseases in Southeast Asia and advocated for prevention over cure. Theoretically, if soldiers knew what sort of diseases faced them in Southeast Asia, they would take measures to prevent themselves from contracting the diseases.¹¹² Despite those efforts, venereal diseases continued to be a problem among troops.

¹⁰⁹Frank Maguire, in Appy, *Patriots*, 443.

¹¹⁰Jim Soular, in Appy, *Patriots*, 159.

¹¹¹Kenneth Jager to Carol Maslanik, June 23, 1968.

¹¹²Sue Sun, “Where the Girls Are: The Management of Venereal Disease by United States Military Forces in Vietnam,” *Literature and Medicine* 23, no. 1 (Spring 2004): 66, <http://search.proquest.com.libproxy.library.wmich.edu/docview/221218282?accountid=15099>. Accessed October 27, 2011.

The military had their own ways of helping soldiers cope. They believed that keeping morale high among soldiers would ensure a smoother tour. One such morale booster was their Rest and Recuperation (R&R) program. The R&R program broke up a soldier's one year tour by sending him for a week to places like Hong Kong, Bangkok, Sydney, Tokyo, Manila, Singapore, Taipei, Kuala Lumpur, Penang, and Honolulu.¹¹³ In 1968 Ron went on R&R to Hawaii where he went on a date with a girl, slept in a real bed, ate decent food, and went to a Vanilla Fudge concert. For him, it was nice to feel "like a human again."¹¹⁴ R&R stations offered a wide array of amenities and activities to keep soldiers busy. A brochure for a camp in Japan advertised, for \$11.30, the following amenities at their camp: room, board, hot meals; ten "ice cold beers" daily; one shave and haircut; Japanese hot bath and massage; and free bus tours. Additionally, the camp contained various stores and clubs for entertainment.¹¹⁵ For most soldiers their week away from Vietnam was saturated with alcohol, women, and sightseeing. While looking ahead to his next R&R, Ron excitedly wrote to Carol, "Hey! Guess what! I'm going back to Hawaii. Jan 18th to the 24th! It sure will be good to get out of here again. I really enjoyed it there. Girls, Girls, Booze, Girls, food, Girls, Beds, Girls. And maybe I'll meet some nice girls."¹¹⁶

While Ron seemed to enjoy his time away, R&R made other soldiers feel more isolated. Mingling with foreigners in urban areas who had no connection to the conflict made them aware of how unaware outsiders were about the war. Outside of Vietnam, the war ceased to exist. It was a surreal experience for soldiers because while they lounged drinking martinis, they knew

¹¹³William C. Westmoreland, *A Soldier Reports* (New York: Dell Publishing Co., Inc., 1976), 387.

¹¹⁴Ron Arscheene to Carol Maslanik, August 15, 1968.

¹¹⁵Camp Zama brochure. The Vietnam Virtual Archive. <http://www.vietnam.ttu.edu/virtualarchive>. Accessed April 12, 2012.

¹¹⁶Ron Arscheene to Carol Maslanik, January 1, 1969.

that a war was going on—and that soon they would have to return. In a letter to his parents, Lieutenant Robert Santos wrote that “Right now I’m sitting on a veranda overlooking the ocean, watching the waves break on the shore beneath me, and in 24 hours I’ll be back out fighting the NVA...”¹¹⁷ The severe contrast between a soldier’s life in the field and R&R was startling.

Soldiers often felt disoriented by their new tourist identity. One day, they were fighting and the next they were trying to remember how to flirt with women. When Tim O’Brien went on R&R to Australia, he attempted to ask a woman on a date but he found it awkward to do so because he was out of practice.¹¹⁸ Although going on a date was supposed to help O’Brien forget the war, it also heightened his awareness of it. The war left him unable to engage in activities that used to be natural, such as flirting. As he struggled to maintain a façade of being a normal twenty-something young man, the fact that it took effort to be “normal” highlighted his inability to shake off his soldier identity. The war lived on within him.

Once their week in paradise ended, soldiers were placed back into battle as abruptly as they had left it. In his memoir, *A Rumor of War*, Philip Caputo vividly depicts that experience. The mood was light as he and his fellow soldiers waited on the tarmac and listened to a veteran tell jokes. Then:

The jokes and laughter stopped when the hatch of the C-130 opened and they brought the bodies off. The corpses were in green rubber body-bags...The mood changed. No one spoke. Silently we watched the crewmen carry the dead down the ramp and into an ambulance parked near the aircraft. And I felt it come back again, that old, familiar, cold, cramping fear...¹¹⁹

¹¹⁷Robert Santos to parents, March 20, 1968 , in Edelman,ed. *Dear America*, 87.

¹¹⁸O’Brien, 184.

¹¹⁹Philip Caputo, *A Rumor of War*, in O’Nan, ed., *The Vietnam Reader*, 176-177.

R&R did not help soldiers forget the war. If anything, R&R highlighted the absurdity of it. R&R was similar to a gladiator being taken out of the arena to temporarily heal his wounds, then after a week returning him to the arena to fight for his life. The men were given a taste of “freedom” that could only be temporary. Although Caputo contemplated desertion while he was away, he knew that “it was impossible” and that he could not desert his friends because “The only way out of Vietnam, besides death or wounds, was to fight your way out. We fought to live. But it was pleasant to toy with the idea of desertion, to pretend I had a choice.”¹²⁰ Like a gladiator, the only way out of the arena was to fight. No other choice existed.

Getting out of Vietnam possessed the thoughts of soldiers and their countdown to departure began the moment they stepped into Vietnam. As far as sources indicate, Carol’s correspondents survived Vietnam and their story continued after the war. Carol continued to work at Upjohn in the regulatory office for thirty-seven years. In November 1990, she married Patrick Donovan of Converse, Texas.¹²¹ When she retired, she spent her time cooking, reading, crafting, painting ceramics, and traveling. She was known for her good sense of humor and intelligence. On June 17, 2010 she died at the age of sixty-three.¹²²

Less is known about the men who wrote to her. According to the marriage licenses listed in the *Kalamazoo Gazette*, Mitchell VanKruiningen III married Susan E. Heller of Vicksburg on

¹²⁰Caputo, *Rumor of War*, 176.

¹²¹It is unknown whether or not her marriage with Patrick lasted. In Carol’s obituary there is no mention of her being survived or preceded in death by her husband. In fact, there is no mention of her even getting married. Evidently, according to reading Ron’s letters, Carol was engaged to a man named David in 1968. The engagement was broken, but later Carol and David become engaged again in 1969. However, there were no engagement or marriage announcements in the *Kalamazoo Gazette* for Carol until 1990.

¹²²Obituary, Carol Ann Donovan, *Kalamazoo Gazette* (June 21, 2010), http://infoweb.newsbank.com.libproxy.library.wmich.edu/iw-search/we/InfoWeb?p_product=AWNB&p_theme=aggregated5&p_action=doc&p_docid=1307EC41F052BE28&p_docnum=2&p_queryname=1.

March 12, 1974.¹²³ Willis married Marilyn Anderson of Vicksburg on November 25, 1970.¹²⁴

No definitive information on Kenneth or Dennis has been found. As for Ron, he seemed to have found peace with himself. When he wrote to Carol on July 4, 1969, his motorcycle had travelled over 1,000 miles and he had found his “love in life and that is being free to chase the wind acrossed [*sic*] the country.”¹²⁵

If there is one telling theme to be drawn from these letters to Carol, it would be that the men hardly ever discussed the war itself. There are a few instances where the men describe a skirmish; they mainly discuss their longing to return home from a place that was “so God-damned far away.” This gives one a perspective on another side of the war that cannot be gained from reading a report written by the commanders of the war. Those reports fail to encompass what was actually going on in the jungle and in the minds of the soldiers fighting the war. Vietnam constituted as a place that was not only “far away” geographically, but also as place that contained cultural and climatic environments far removed from the one soldiers knew before. They went from dating girls to dodging mortars. When soldiers arrived in Vietnam, they found that they were not going to be the liberators; the Vietnamese did not want to be “freed”. If anything, the Vietnamese wanted to be freed from the people who were trying to free them. Troops realized that they were the “redcoats” this time, and they were taking part in suppressing people much like themselves. Additionally, combatants were “far away” from the luxuries they had by living in a first world country. The people of Vietnam lived in conditions that shocked soldiers. They quickly learned, however, not to underestimate the resourcefulness of the

¹²³Marriage License, *Kalamazoo Gazette*, text-fiche, March 12, 1974.

¹²⁴Marriage License, *Kalamazoo Gazette*, text-fiche, November 25, 1970.

¹²⁵Ron Arscheene to Carol Maslanik, July 4, 1969.

Vietnamese. Soldiers were not prepared for the guerrilla warfare that they encountered and the primitive—yet effective—methods of the VC. The continual vulnerability the men felt while trekking through the jungle made them aware of the fragility of life and how “expendable” they were for the U.S. military. They felt that they were fighting a pointless war without the support of the politicians and citizens back home. Although they found ways of coping with the loneliness, these methods could not shield them from the realities of war. The soldiers who wrote the letters to Carol, like most of their fellow combatants, were a few years out of high school fighting an unseen enemy. Their frustration, combined with the feeling that they were the sole fighters of the war, resulted in a deep bitterness that made Vietnam a living hell for them. By writing letters home, soldiers could hold on to the fleeting vision of a world that was utterly incongruous to their current reality. If they could survive their service in Vietnam, hopefully they could return home and live as if Vietnam did not even exist. By reading their letters, we gain a valuable perspective on these emotions and learn about the war from the bottom up.

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