THE ROAD TO MY LAI

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By

George F. Shaw

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By

George F. Shaw

Approved by the Master's Thesis Committee

Elizabeth Watson, PhD, Major Professor

Mary Virnoche, PhD, Committee Member

Janice Little, Committee Member

Joshua Mossel, PhD, Graduate Coordinator

Jena Burges, PhD, Vice Provost

Academic Programs
ABSTRACT

The U.S. military of the Vietnam era was a total institution of the Goffman school, set apart from larger American society, whose often forcibly inducted personnel underwent a transformative process from citizen to soldier. Comprised of a large group of individuals, with a common purpose, with a clear distinction between officers and enlisted, and regulated by a single authority, Goffman’s formulation as presented in the 1950’s has become a basic tenet of military sociology. The overwhelming evidence is clear: perhaps the best equipped army in history faced a debacle on the battlefield and cracked under minimal stress due to the internal rotation structure which was not resolved until the withdrawal of U.S. forces: the “fixed length tour”. Throughout the Vietnam War the duration of the tour in the combat theater was set at 12 months for Army enlisted, 13 months for Marine enlisted - officer ranks in both branches served six months in combat, six months on staff duty.

The personnel turbulence generated by the “fixed length” combat tour and the finite Date of Estimated Return from Overseas (DEROS) created huge demands for replacement manpower among both enlisted and junior grade officers at the company and platoon level. It has been argued that just as a man was learning the ropes of combat in the jungles of Vietnam he was rotated out of the theater of operations. The logistical and training cycle implications aside, the loss of combat experience through the individual replacement system had an effect on morale, cohesion, and discipline of units at every echelon. The stress of losing so many key personnel to rotation was most devastating to the primary combat groups at rifle platoon and infantry company level, which shouldered the majority of combat.
The basic hypotheses I wish to state are as follows:

1. The U.S. Army in Vietnam underwent a rapid disintegration separate from social forces at work on the home front, and not due to traditional stresses of combat such as heavy casualties.

2. The U.S. Army in Vietnam disintegrated because of internal personnel “turbulence” created by far reaching complications caused by loss of experienced soldiers due to rotation on completion of the “fixed length tour” of duty. The manpower requirements created by the DEROS and “fixed length tour” system were the key structural element undermining the cohesion of US forces in the field.

3. Crimes against civilians, and mass killings such as My Lai, are a symptom of this systemic disintegration just as drugs, race riots, fragging, and mutiny: produced by the loss of military normative order due the “fixed length tour” and DEROS.

This policy had far reaching consequences across the entire institution:

1. First and foremost, units deploying to Vietnam had a lifespan of exactly one calendar year. After the initial deployment and rotation cycle units lost their experienced cadre, and virtually all institutional memory - most critically at the primary group level within Infantry companies in combat. Units deploying to Vietnam also lost many key senior enlisted men who had served prior tours with other units due to the fact that they were no longer eligible for compulsory Vietnam service.

2. Second, and perhaps most critically officer ranks rotating at twice the rate of enlisted men created an upside down power dynamic in which inexperienced commanders were often
placed in command of units already in combat. This often led to a crisis of legitimacy as those with the power of rank at every level led and issued orders to units comprised of alienated subordinates, who, though compelled to serve often had more field experience.

3. Third, the cascading eligible manpower shortage forced shortened training cycles, which were diluted in quality and increasingly brutalizing in nature. The realities of the war bore very little resemblance to what soldiers had been trained for or led to expect prior to Vietnam where it was difficult to distinguish friend from foe. The most vicious of institutional memories were retained, culminating in the universality of the racist “gook syndrome” and the liberalization of unofficial field Rules of Engagement (ROE) as the “Mere Gook Rule.”

4. Fourth the individual replacement system guaranteed that the most inexperienced soldiers were often placed in combat units - as they were the largest body of troops eligible for deployment to replace personnel losses due to rotation or combat. Soldiers trained and worked with a known primary group stateside - building cohesion - yet were assigned individually to deployed combat units, on which they were then dependent for orientation, integration, and hopefully, survival.

The far reaching anomie created by this unresolved structural cycle brought about an eventual system-wide failure, as the loss of normative order and cognitive dissonance it engendered among era servicemen increasingly resulted in the disintegration of the U.S. military units in Vietnam. The historical identity image of the hallowed military institutions involved were no longer consonant with those of the average soldier serving in the jungles and rice paddies of South East Asia. As a result, the U.S. military as an organization became anomic and
mutable, resulting in adaptive instability at every level. Many professionally trained, would-be career soldiers became disillusioned and left the service - becoming a mechanism for institutional change that is still traceable today. Never has such a massive institution changed so much in such a short period of time - largely from symptoms arising from self imposed internal structures - a fatal flaw which compounded all other dependent factors. In this respect the U.S. military in Vietnam offers a unique opportunity to study sweeping and sudden social change in a total institution.
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I’d like to dedicate this to my family, faculty, and friends - who never gave up on me.

Thank you for all of the years of tolerance and head scratching.

Also to the Vietnam-era Veterans of the U.S. Armed Forces

“All gave some, some gave all”.

My Mom and Dad and Adele - for all of the love, tolerance, forgiveness and proofreading

and for my cousin, Sergeant Calvin T. Shaw

3/319th Field Artillery, 173rd ABN BDE (Separate)

thanks for all of the war stories!

This is for you: I was too scared to let you down!
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PREFACE

“The difference between a fairy tale and a war story is that a fairy tale starts out “Once upon a time,” and a war story starts out “This is no shit . . .””

-James Morris, War Story
On a quiet Sunday morning in March of 1968, two Companies of the U.S. 23rd Infantry Division swept through a cluster of small seaside hamlets in central Vietnam. The area known collectively as My Lai, had long been known as an enemy enclave where the inhabitants were unsympathetic to the government of the Republic of South Vietnam. By early 1968 the political situation in My Lai village and the surrounding districts was such that the civil authorities had given up on pacifying the region and declared it a “free fire” zone – whose inhabitants were to be considered the enemy.

The war had finally come to My Lai, and it had come with a vengeance. Some four hours later when the shooting stopped, the bodies of between four and six hundred villagers lay along the route of advance. The people had been tortured, raped, systematically rounded up and shot down into irrigation ditches. In what became known as the My Lai massacre, the soldiers of “Task Force Barker” had employed all of the firepower at their disposal and committed what remains the worst acknowledged U.S. war crime in history.

The rape and killing were later portrayed as an aberration - that these troops had misinterpreted murky orders and misunderstood the mission. But, the events of that day
were Standard Operating Procedure (SOP) - business as usual - for some U.S. units in the Theater of Operations. The killing of Vietnamese had become so common that it was justified with the reasoning of “The Mere Gook Rule”, which meant that any Vietnamese person was a legitimate target.

By early 1968 the edifice of the U.S. military had began to show evidence of disintegration. The lack of concern over the welfare of noncombatants can only be viewed as a symptom of a decline in morale and cohesion as serious as fragging, race riots and drug abuse:

“‘fragging,’” the slang word for killing officers and non-commissioned officers, usually with a hand grenade, a reaction based on grudges or done when a man was under the influence of alcohol or drugs. Fragging in one form or another has occurred in all wars but increases when a sense of unit purpose breaks down and esprit de corps fails and when explosives and weapons are loosely controlled” (Westmoreland 1976:296).

The General’s assessment fails to note any pressures from “enemy action”, or operations in rugged terrain, which were considerable. Under what must be considered minimal traditional combat stress when compared with past conflicts, the fabric of U.S. units were beginning to show signs of self destruction. It was no longer a question of winning the war or “winning hearts and minds”, for the average U.S. soldier in the field the war had ceased to be about anything other than surviving a 12 or 13 month tour of duty. For those relatively few soldiers actually in line companies on operations combat could a be a concentrated, almost daily occurance. All of the branches of service began to suffer serious breaches of discipline – even those that were in supporting roles -
that negatively impacted the execution of the mission in Vietnam. U.S. troops increasingly began to turn their weapons on noncombatants, their allies, and even each other.
BACKGROUND

From 1962 to 1972 U.S. ground forces were engaged in counterinsurgency operations in the jungles and villages of the Republic of Vietnam. This conflict pitted large numbers of U.S. Army and U.S. Marine Corps soldiers against those of the North Vietnamese Army and their Viet Cong allies in a war of attrition that eventually cost just over 58,000 U.S. dead (Dunnigan and Nofi 1999:242). The massive U.S. commitment ultimately rotated over 2.6 million individual soldiers into the country until the final withdrawal of combat forces in 1972 (Dunnigan and Nofi 1999: 240). The Vietnam War was different from any other in previous U.S. experience because of both its open ended and politically unpopular nature; the national debate that it engendered became the catalyst for the sweeping social change of both our country and its military institutions that came to define a generation. The American War, as it is called in Vietnam today, also marked a watershed moment for our collective national identity, U.S. foreign policy, and the limits of military intervention abroad.

During the Vietnam War, U.S. efforts unraveled under minimal combat stress when compared with past conflicts. What had caused the overwhelming and precipitous decline in morale and subsequent combat cohesion of the U.S. military? Lack of political will does not alone explain the debacle. Many troubling breaches of discipline cropped up in 1965 and 1966 during the expansion of U.S. forces in the conflict. Crises of unit morale, and military discipline, must be viewed as parallel symptoms of this systemic
decay because they increasingly occurred theater wide, and in every unit at every echelon long before commonly accepted today. In this thesis I will explore the structural elements that contributed to the loss of cohesion in U.S. military units and its related psychological impacts on American soldiers.

Official records and data on these topics are rare for a variety of reasons, but there are examples of these hallmarks of military disintegration in the public record that are, in retrospect, glaring early indicators of an overall pattern. Benchmark events of this nature include TV correspondent Morley Safer’s August 1965 CBS Evening News segment on the shooting of civilians and destruction of a village by elements of 1/9 Marines now known as “the burning of Cam Ne” (Kinnard 1985:129), and the far less publicized prosecution of four members of a 1st Cavalry Division patrol for the rape, torture, and murder of Phan Thi Mao in November of 1966 (Lang 1989: 12). The first U.S. Army task force on illicit drug use by soldiers serving in Vietnam was founded in 1967 to combat what it’s chair described to the U.S. House of Representatives as what was perceived even then as “a growing problem” (Special Subcommittee of the Committee on Armed Services 1971:1276 ). Incidents of “fragging” of officers, and perhaps more importantly the use of this expression were known even to the men in rifle companies of the historically reliable Marines (Nolan, 1991:245) and the Army’s elite 173rd Airborne Brigade by 1967 (Murphy 1993:178).

Post war, senior officers showed little interest in soul searching, instead blaming eventual defeat on the political “stab in the back” scenario; however:
“A high desertion rate might be explainable, perhaps even a mutiny or two. But when desertion, fragging, mutiny, and drug addiction converge toward something of a sociopathological riptide effect in a period as short as four or five years, explanations based on references to permissive societies and national “fragmentation” due to unpopular wars simply are not credible” (Gabriel and Savage 1978:59).

The undeniable disintegration of the U.S. military during the Vietnam era is shocking in its totality. If anything, free world forces were theoretically operating at maximum efficiency and full strength: more and more U.S. troops and materiel were pouring into the theater of operations by the hour. The decline in combat cohesion thus occurred during a build up when the opposite should have been true - when according to General William Westmoreland, then Commander, U.S., Military Assistance Command, Vietnam (COMUSMACV), his Free-World Forces were numerically winning the war (Sheehan 1988:724). The U.S. Army and Marine Corps were expanding troop levels: the U.S. Army alone fielded 536,000 personnel deployed to Vietnam in May of 1968, and peaked at 543,000 in April of 1969 (Sheehan 1988:724).

Sometimes known as “the Green Machine” by soldiers, the U.S. military of the Vietnam War was indeed similar to a large machine constructed out of interchangeable sub-assemblies of human parts. “The Green Machine” was built as if to purposely preclude normative order for one functional task - and in those capacities it worked exceptionally well:

“The Green Machine,” geared to attritional slaughter in order to satisfy statistical requirements of those who sought ever greater “indicators of military progress” could indeed lash out in frenzy when provoked.
American boys from cities and farms found themselves halfway around the world, living in an alien culture, fighting and dying in a cause they at best only half-understood. They saw their buddies “blown away” or “wasted” or maimed. They were repeatedly told they could trust no one - not the bar girl, not the sidewalk peddler, nor the farmer. They must be on guard against six-year-old children, for some of that age had been known to be armed and ready to kill (Cincinnatus 1981:90).

The eventual defeat of U.S. forces was a case of stunning reversal:

The riflemen who had fought with Hal Moore in the valley of the Ia Drang and Bong Son [two early major campaigns conducted by the 1st Cavalry Division in 1965 and 1966] would not have recognized the U.S. Army of 1969. It was an Army in which men escaped into marijuana and heroin and other men died because their comrades were “stoned” on these drugs that profited the Chinese traffickers and the Saigon generals. It was an Army whose units in the field were on the edge of mutiny, whose soldiers rebelled against the senselessness of their sacrifice by assassinating officers and noncoms in “accidental” shootings and “fragging” with grenades. The signs of demoralization were evident by the time of Westmoreland’s departure in mid-1968. They worsened under Creighton Abrams because, while he attempted new tactics, he continued Westmoreland’s attrition strategy and kept pushing American soldiers into the bunker - complex killing grounds the NVA prepared (Sheehan 1988:741).

The degenerative trend continued unchecked to the point where “By every historical measure of military cohesiveness, the American Army in Vietnam was in a state of advancing disintegration at the time of disengagement” (Gabriel and Savage 1978:50). The second U.S. Army investigation of illicit drug use among soldiers in-country in 1969, known as Task Force Mack, claimed one in ten of all ranks “could be [regularly] using hard narcotics” (Special Subcommittee of the Committee on Armed Services 1971:2162).

Despite eventually achieving “Peace with Honor” through phased withdrawals of U.S. forces in the theater, the undeniable collapse led one Pentagon staffer to exclaim:
“My God, man, in the latter years of the Vietnamese experience the army was unusable. You had a fantastic breakdown in cohesion. Discipline was shot, absolutely shot. There were internal doubts, self-doubts, about those working and fighting beside you. Things like this had developed to the point where we didn’t have a unit in the U.S. Army by late 1972 or early 1973 that really was at all usable, except perhaps for some in technical activities” (Cincinnatus 1981: 58).

The situation was so dire in the 173rd Airborne Brigade alone by the end of 1970 that Commander Brigadier General Elmer Ochs confirmed before congress that his unit was suffering two or three fragging incidents per month - and his soldiers were no longer allowed access to weapons in their base camps (Special Subcommittee of the Committee on Armed Services 1971: 1928). This fact is remarkable in that the Brigade continued to serve in combat in Vietnam until August of 1971 (Stanton 1986: 87) - eight more months - with its weapons locked up and its rear areas seemingly at war with themselves.

The basic hypotheses I wish to state are as follows:

1. The US Army in Vietnam underwent a rapid disintegration separate from social forces at work on the home front, and not due traditional stresses of combat such as heavy casualties.

2. The U.S. Army in Vietnam disintegrated because of internal personnel “turbulence” created by far reaching complications caused by loss of experienced soldiers due to rotation on completion of the “fixed length tour” of duty. The manpower requirements created by the DEROS and “fixed length tour” system were the key structural element undermining the cohesion of US forces in the field.
3. Atrocities committed against civilians and mass killings such as My Lai are a symptom of this systemic decay just as much as drugs, race riots, fragging, and mutiny - just perhaps earlier in the continuum of secondary adjustments to the ambiguity of the war. Inability of U.S. forces to even identify their enemies caused cognitive dissonance as troops tried to reconcile murky war aims and Rules of Engagement (ROE) with battlefield reality.

We find the following: The army in Vietnam was destroyed by loss of institutional memory and lack of unit cohesion: low morale and the subsequent breakdown of normative military mission, values, and discipline were manifestations of the demands and complications created by the rapid personnel rotation structure.

Key structural effects of DEROS included:

1. Loss of experienced combat personnel rotating out on DEROS due to the year long “fixed length” tour of duty. “Many argued that just as a soldier was becoming a skilled tropical warrior he was yanked out, to be replaced by a green soldier who had to learn it all from the beginning” (Stanton 1985:27). This was especially devastating to the cohesion of units that deployed en masse, as they had to be virtually replaced in the field to after the completion of a year in theater.

2. Officers served six months in combat and six months on staff duties, often in that order. Leadership elements rotated through Vietnam at twice the rate of enlisted creating a demand for highly skilled leaders for combat commands at the
company and platoon level. This rotation policy combined with casualties created an accelerated turnover of junior officers and an experience gap between officers and enlisted ranks.

3. A shortened, brutalized training cycle to make up for personnel shortfalls as the war effort expanded. Training programs in stateside induction centers and in-theater orientation classes remained abbreviated throughout the U.S. involvement. A key component of a military institution, a mechanism for transmission of the tacitly approved yet “unofficial” “Mere Gook Rule”.

4. Replacements arrived in-country individually for assignment to units on which they were dependent for integration and survival. This created a dynamic where the newest men often replaced veterans, and key combat experience and leadership were replaced by an inexperienced recruit “Fucking New Guy”.

The consequences of this were:

1. Low morale and lack of cohesion in platoon and company level primary groups.
2. Brutalization of civilians.
3. Manifestations of grave breaches of military discipline such as drug abuse, “fragging” of superiors, and “combat avoidance”.
4. Cognitive dissonance and disillusion for the individual soldier, resulting in a crisis of legitimacy and resultant secondary change of the greater military institution.

Upon examination of the evidence it is clear that the DEROS/ fixed length tour
personnel rotation policy in the Vietnam era impacted unit integrity through loss of experienced veterans and clipped training of replacement soldiers of all ranks. “The one universal troop factor throughout the Vietnam War was the fixed “hostile fire area” tour, the combat zone service requirement of one year” (Stanton 1985:27). Rapid rotation had the unintended consequence of widening the very real gap in cohesiveness between officers and enlisted. This structural element was the fundamental flaw in U.S. efforts because unit institutional memory was not retained in a degenerative process to which there was no logistical solution.
THEORY

Central to this thesis are Durkheim’s definition of Anomie as it correlates to military cohesion, Goffman’s concept of the Total Institution, George Herbert Mead’s theory of Socialization, and Leon Festinger’s theory of Cognitive Dissonance. These Sociological concepts will be used to illustrate loss of unit cohesion produced by DEROS “fixed length tour” policy for U.S. troops of the Vietnam War. This had a dramatic, measurable effect on the liberalization of the ROE and eroded institutional standards through tacit approval and reinforcement of “The Mere Gook Rule”.

High morale and unit cohesion are both interrelated military synonyms for the sociological concept of normative order in a military institution. Both concepts are used as an indicator of military reliability in combat as defined by Gabriel and Savage in their singular work *Crisis in Command*:

“Unit cohesion is the presence of a set of a set of conditions which create the expectation that a military unit will attempt to perform its assigned orders and mission irrespective of the situation and its inevitable attendant risks. Victory or defeat is *not* a condition of measurement, since, clearly, even defeated armies can maintain high rates of unit cohesion, as a multiplicity of examples from British, French, and German history attest. Cohesion is revealed in levels of performance in battle and, like disintegration, is measurable only in relative terms. Disintegration of a military organization can be seen in the prevalence of internal conditions which make effective military operations very difficult if not, in some cases, impossible. These conditions are mutiny, assassination of leaders, and other factors, such as drug usage, which destroy discipline and combat effectiveness” (Gabriel and Savage, 31).

If Durkheim’s Anomie is defined as without norms, or the “consequent
sufferings” (Durkheim 1966: 258) resulting from “De-regulation” (Durkheim 1966:253) of the normative social order it serves as an accurate, sociological description of military disintegration. “A regulative force must play the same role for moral needs which the organism plays for physical needs. This means that the force can only be moral” (Durkheim 1966:248). Military cohesion is thus directly related to the social order controls of military discipline and regimentation, for “Those who have only empty space above them are almost inevitably lost in it, if no force restrains them” (Durkheim 1966:257). It follows, then, that the social quality of strong normative order correlates exactly with the military ideals of high morale, discipline, motivation and strong unit cohesion in combat.

If one applies this rationale to the primary group at the company level in Vietnam it becomes apparent that cohesion can also be quantified as military normative order. Known simply as “good morale” or esprit de corps, this military concept can be described sociologically as the strength of personal identification of soldiers with the collective goals, values, and ethics of their particular military organization. Unclear goals and little identification with the greater institution would by definition create and low morale, the DEROS tour of duty was without doubt a key structural element with far reaching systemic implications that precluded normative order for the individual soldier in combat.

Westmoreland’s assistant at Military Assistance Command, Vietnam (MACV)
headquarters described morale when he wrote:

“It is true that fighting men in reality fight for their own small units - squads and platoons - and their buddies, or their homes and families, rather than some abstract concept of love of country. And it can be demonstrated that the esteem of his peers, what his squadmates [sic] think of him, mean a great deal to the soldier and act in effect like another sanction shoring up his conduct on the battlefield” (Palmer 1984:84).

A Marine rifleman who served in heavy combat in 1967 described the morale of his Platoon:

“It was a bit of patriotism. It was a great deal of gung ho. It was some ‘Payback is a motherfucker’. But mostly it was just that every man knew what he had to do, and every man knew that he had to do that thing for the group, and that if he didn’t, everybody in the group was in jeopardy. And every man owed every other man in the group the loyalty of doing his job and doing it the best he could. And that crossed all lines. It crossed wealth, it crossed education, it crossed race. It bound men together. If you didn’t do your job you weren’t people- you weren’t part of the unit” (Nolan 1991:10).

A platoon leader with the Army’s 4th Infantry in September of 1967 echoed this same sentiment when he described the bonds of primary group cohesion in his unit:

“The platoon makeup was whites, blacks, Puerto Ricans, Mexican - Americans, and Indian, and a Japanese - American, all of them from eighteen to twenty-one years old. In a combat platoon we were evaluated by our peers on our ability to help the platoon survive and not on our racial backgrounds. A combat platoon “pulled” together and was “tight” with each other, with no room for the soldier that wouldn’t do his share” (Downs 1983:29).

A Marine rifleman described this socialization process in harsh terms:

“You never even learned a man’s name until the man had stayed alive for a month. Nobody counted, nobody was part of reality unless they’d
stayed alive that long. Then, if they had, they’d learned the tough lessons, and they’d proven themselves, and you could count on them to do their job. If they were just fucking new guys you didn’t know what the hell they would do, because they didn’t know what the hell to do, and you couldn’t explain it to them. They just had to know. It was really tough when you were a fucking new guy, of course, and when I was new I thought that was the shits at the time, but I began doing it myself later. I wouldn’t learn a Marine’s name until he stayed alive long enough to be worth it” (Nolan 1991:14).

These normative symptoms of low morale and the decline of discipline must be placed within the structure of DEROS - for they hardly could have existed without it - and indeed, originated from it. Service in Vietnam was very far away from the prior life experience of the average American, and with its temporary aspect entailed “a disruption of the usual relationship between the individual actor and his acts” (Goffman 1961:350). In the words of a Marine platoon leader: “The evil was inherent not in the men - except in the sense that a devil dwells in us all - but in the circumstances under which they had to live and fight” (Caputo 1996: xviii).

The U.S. Military misadventure in Vietnam and its signature year long combat tour fits well with the model of a total institution as outlined in Asylums: because it certainly amounted to “an enclosed, formally administered round of life” (Goffman 1961:xiii); a finite span of time to be served. The recruit was first removed from civil society physically by the confines of his garrison, then systematically removed from humanity by acetic indoctrination, and finally disparity of culture: “Their encompassing or total character is symbolized by the barrier to social intercourse with the outside world
and to departure that is often built right into the physical plant” (Goffman 1961:4). The soldier is separated from society at large through induction into the service, granted selective membership into its ranks, and finally removed a step further when he is deployed to war overseas.

The war in Vietnam was essentially a product of its expeditionary field command structure. In this way the U.S. military effort can be likened to a total institution of the Goffman school: being a functional entity, in this case a military force. The prosecution of the war was wholly run out of the Military Assistance Command, Vietnam (MACV) headquarters in Saigon - enacted and maintained by that institution. The members of the Vietnam era military were inducted and sequestered for a “formally administered round of life” and thus subject to these larger institutional structures.

An Army by definition is a purpose driven, functional institution: a group formed to perform a “work like task” (Goffman 1961:5), and created with the “rational plan to fulfill aims” (Goffman 1961:5) of waging war. The rationality of all “war plans” which are essentially destructive in nature can be debated, but this functional element of “mission” applies to military institutions at every command level, from a specific Army barracks whose task was to produce soldiers for Vietnam, for example, or to an individual military unit which is created for a specialized task or mission, or it can even resonate at the larger structures of an expeditionary force waging war in a particular theater of operations.
The Vietnam experience fits within Goffman’s characteristics for separation:

“A total institution may be defined as a place of residence and work where a large number of like-situated individuals, cut off from the wider society for an appreciable period of time, together lead an enclosed, formally administered round of life” (Goffman 1961: xiii).

Goffman described the primary social group bond within the total institution when he observed the formation of cohesion and collective dissent in prisons that correlate with similar military examples:

“More important as a reorganizing influence is the fraternalization [sic] process, through which socially distant persons find themselves developing mutual support and common counter-mores in opposition to a system that has forced them into intimacy and into a single, equalitarian community of fate” (Goffman 1961:56).

Application of Goffman’s model of the total institution to modern Western Military Sociology has been portrayed as being dated to an era of conscription (Caforio 2003:20). To be sure, the modern professional military organization bears little resemblance to the draconian, mass mobilization armies raised in the past. Goffman is still relevant for historical analysis of compulsory military systems and is very useful to describe Vietnam dynamics in terms of the dominant social theory paradigm of the 1960’s. As soldiers tried to rationalize their surroundings and were confronted with the war - with its inherent lack of clear institutional goals and purpose - they found themselves morally adrift in overwhelming normative disorder and anomie. When faced with such conditions, contradictions, and cognitive dissonance, troops in combat were
forced to adapt through “secondary adjustments”: soldiers took it on themselves to improve their odds of their survival by every means at their disposal.

The Vietnam War is different from any in our national history. Politically unpopular, drawn out, and ugly in its demise, it has become to signify perhaps the best and the worst that we as a people have to offer. Vietnam is remembered today as a surreal crazy quilt of selfless heroism and senseless horror. It is this dichotomous aspect of the Vietnam experience on the soldier and larger institution that have the most indelible impressions on our national consciousness. The value and role dissonance created by Vietnam has at its root the All-American, post World War II legacy of that preceding generation. There was no great crusade in Vietnam for soldiers as there had been during the World War II years. The Vietnam War just didn’t fit into the parameters of prior American experience, and this was to have a profound effect on morale and public perception throughout the conflict.

George Herbert Mead developed his theory of socialization to explain how social experience combined with biological development develops an individual’s “self”. Mead’s concept of self is brought about by self-awareness and self-image (Mead 1962: 23). Socialization is a dynamic lifelong process where social experience and cultural values guide human actions and potential. It is where we all learn to be human. Primary socialization takes place in childhood and results in the social construction of the self. The difference in individual’s social location and social experience shape this social
construction of the self (Berger and Luckmann 1969: 123).

Mead’s theory tells us that the self is developed over time in interaction with others. We are not born with a self, nor is it governed by mere biological drives as espoused by Freud. He agrees with Piaget, that with children it is accompanied by biological maturation in interaction with the social environment (Mead 1962:63). Significant others, in the roles of family, teachers, local community, and media exposure are drivers in primary socialization or enculturation - this means that individuals are products of the society that rears them. Mead was adamant that without social interaction there could be no self-image which is gained through the feedback provided by others. This means that the soldiers who were sent to Vietnam were typical American youth in that they all shared the common cultural foundation, the roles and values system of the rest of the nation. When U.S. public opinion shifted on the war in Vietnam it took the soldiers along with it.

America defined the role that U.S. soldiers were to play in the jungles of South Vietnam. America gave soldier the thoughts and feelings he was to have about the war as well, because a society also provides the individual with ideas and language, the ability to connect through the use and exchange of symbols (Mead 1962: 101). The culture which forms an individual also dictates how we interact with others make conclusions about other people from their actions and act accordingly towards them (Mead 1962:163). In short, our primary enculturation grants us membership into out national
identity and consciousness. Finally, and most critically with regards to Vietnam, Mead points out that understanding intention requires imagining the situation from other people’s point of view. Taking-the-role-of the other, or role taking, develops by 7 years in young humans, and is the precursor to empathy (Mead 1962: 191). American primary socialization teaches its citizens that “All men are created equal” above all - which is a value concept that grants humanity even to Communist sympathizers.

Induction into the Vietnam era military, however, provided a recruit with a new kind of enculturation. Through a secondary socialization process he also received the new normative order of the institution on sanctioned killing “The Mere Gook Rule”. Secondary socialization occurs most easily when there is congruence between what is learned in primary socialization and the new role acquired through the secondary socialization process (Berger and Luckmann 1969: 141). There are other ways to socialize military recruits, notably the process of desensitization to killing outlined by Herbert Kelman in his seminal work Violence without Moral Restraint (1973):

“Through processes of authorization, the situation becomes so defined that standard moral principles do not apply and the individual is absolved of responsibility to make personal moral choices. Through processes of routinization, the action becomes so organized that there is no opportunity for raising moral questions and making moral decisions. Through processes of dehumanization, the actor’s attitudes towards the target and towards himself become so structured that it is neither necessary nor possible for him to view the relationship in moral terms”(Kelman 1973:38).

The “Mere Gook Rule” performing these functions remained quite clear
throughout the war: the Vietnamese people were to receive no quarter. The effects of these facets of the Vietnam experience on the individual soldier is best described in terms of Leon Festinger’s theory of Cognitive Dissonance advanced in 1957. Very little of the reality of the Vietnam War was consonant with the way it was understood by soldiers serving in country. Military goals, values, and ethics in regards to the war in Vietnam were no longer consonant with U.S. society at large, hence no longer consonant with the goals, values, ethics of individual soldiers being ordered into the ambushes and minefields of Vietnam. Festinger maintained that cognitive dissonance is felt as “pressures” caused by “the reality which impinges on a person will exert pressures in the direction of bringing the appropriate cognitive elements into correspondence with that reality” (Festinger 1957:11).

Festinger also theorized that “The more these elements are important to, or valued by, the person, the greater will be the magnitude of a dissonant relation between them” (Festinger 1957:16). One can hardly imagine the tension, or pressures created by weighing complying with orders against loss of life and limb in combat - or fathom the need to achieve consonance with the primal “fight or flight” urge to survive. Festinger’s theoretical framework helps us to quantify the magnitude of the daily pressures of self preservation, and thus the daily evaluative processes of individual versus group survival in Vietnam combat.

A Japanese historian described cognitive dissonance relative to troops who come
to grips with the fact that they are expendable - cannon fodder:

“Often, a soldier tried to rationalize his actions with fanatical nationalism, but he could not erase the unconscious fear that his life was about to be terminated. Because the soldier was forced to eliminate his own life by a violent organization of military forces that he could not resist, a natural and easy psychological “rationalization” would have been for him to regard the lives of other people as dispensable also. Therefore, for the soldier, the most important question was how to make his own death a meaningful consequence – that is, how to achieve immortality. This became his obsession, so the lives of prisoners, detainees, and the like meant nothing to him” (Tanaka 1996:195).

A tour in combat with an infantry or aviation unit in Vietnam mirrored this sentiment exactly. For U.S. soldiers in the field in South East Asia, there was no glory or immortality involved - there was no convenient myth with which a soldier could rationalize his death. The “violent organization of military forces that he could not resist” was increasingly his own unit and chain of command. Understandably troops found it very easy to obsess about insuring their own survival until the all important DEROS date, because

“The assignment of individual as opposed to unit DEROS dates, plus the frequent rotation of officers, made it clear that the policy was virtually every man for himself” (Gabriel and Savage 1978:13).

It is clear that Vietnam-era soldiers in combat were forced to operate within a system that precluded all of the traditional mechanisms for discipline, morale, cohesion at every echelon from induction until DEROS. Most replacements were ill-prepared for the combat environment- many compelled to serve against their will in an institution in
crisis and undergoing transformative upheaval. Soldiers were left with very little useful military institutional memory during the Vietnam War beyond the transmission and reinforcement of what came to be known as the “Mere Gook Rule.”
Over the course of my research I concentrated on three key facets of the U.S. military experience in Vietnam: flagging morale, faltering discipline, and the “The Mere Gook Rule”. All of these topics represent the dark undercurrent of the conflict and were chronically under reported at the time for various political reasons, or perhaps just susceptible to revisionism and reinterpretation through the passage of time. It is because of their subject matter alone that the incidences of normative collapse in combat units in Vietnam are under documented, in defeat very few from the Army to academia were interested in much beyond reconstruction.

Being primarily interested in published works relating to demoralization and Vietnam there are many resources to choose from but of varying qualities. One of the best works on the general subject of military disintegration during the war is David Cortright’s “Soldiers in Revolt”(1975), which offers a broad overview of the GI resistance movement during the war. This book offers a thorough overview and a place to begin research with an excellent bibliography. Though a work of the era it is fortunately still in print and relevant, so it provides textbook opportunities that others on the subject cannot. I found that this book furnished some of my best leads on incidences of fragging and combat refusal, though the occasional unit numerical designation was in error. Like the few other great books on the darker aspects of military discipline and morale in Vietnam I found that my better sources boiled down to the same primary
materials.

I was looking to document the specific disintegration and loss of normative order in U.S. combat units usually only referred to generally in larger history volumes such as Stanley Karnow’s “Vietnam: A History” (1985). I began with a systematic study of events and personalities involved in the My Lai Massacre armed with a copy of the Peers Report. I read the excellent Bilton and Sim “Four Hours at My Lai” (1992), and also the books by both William Calley and Hugh Thompson. I was struck by the uniformity of the language used by soldiers in the Peers Report testimony and the more candid post trial accounts that suggested an institutionalized yet unofficial ROE and rule of thumb. Both of these works offer the most in depth investigation of a prosecuted war crime during the Vietnam era.

I read everything I could get on known war crimes and civil murder cases involving U.S. troops during the war. Among the best is Gary Solis’ well documented “Son Thang” (1997) was B/1/7th Marine’s killing of civilians in February of 1970. The key defendant in that case also wrote a memoir which is interesting because it illustrates the glaring difference between official and unofficial SOP but not very useful for corroboration of the case against him. I read the sensational book on the 1/327th during 1967’s Operation Wheeler, “Tiger Force” (2006), based on a series of well documented articles which won the 2004 Pulitzer Prize for investigative journalism. In this particular work a company sized element of the 101st Division allegedly cut a swath through Quang
Tin Province in October and November of 1967, killing some 120 civilians.

Daniel Lang’s “Casualties of War” (1989) is an easily obtainable overview of the lesser known murder of Ms. Phan Thi Mao in 1966. It is a smaller, well documented book that is reprinted from a 1969 series in New Yorker Magazine. The film version of the story is less useful, and is only interesting in contains some glaring omissions that purposefully or otherwise obscure the year of the events and unit involved. All of the cases that went to trial from the era offer a great opportunity for further research because they were so thoroughly investigated and documented. There is always hope that some of the surviving principles will continue to shed light on the subject.

Two extremely professional, highly decorated, and high profile officers retired from the Army during Vietnam and wrote critical memoirs that I found to be essential reading. Col. David Hackworth is the author of two excellent books on Vietnam detailing his multiple combat tours and exploits with the 9th ID, “About Face” (1989) and “Steel my Soldier’s Hearts” (2002). Colonel Anthony Herbert was the chief provost of the 173rd Airborne Brigade in 1969. His official investigations and charges of murder of civilians and cover ups effectively ended his career. He eventually cleared his record and wrote “Soldier” (1973), a true candid expose that differs markedly from other work in its conclusions. Both Hackworth and Herbert had impeccable military credentials and the moral high ground - their causes also received considerable TV exposure on era programs such as Dick Cavett and Sixty Minutes.
Gabriel and Savage published the excellent critique of Vietnam era leadership “Crisis and Command” (1978), which along with the work of an anonymous Pentagon staffer “Self Destruction” (1981) are seminal works on the strains of DEROS personnel rotation and their effect on morale. These two works are key primary sources on the subject and were among the hardest literature to find. Similarly, Douglas Kinnard’s “The War Managers” (1985) is the data and quotes from the solitary era survey of General Officers who served in the Army in Vietnam. It is full of surprising off the record observations and anecdotes from senior leadership.

Army historian Shelby Stanton’s “Vietnam Order of Battle” (1981) was the single most useful text I found on the subject. Any serious student of the Vietnam War should have a copy - it is a single volume that lists every free world military unit deployed to Vietnam. Despite its heavy and large format it is a singular and simple resource that lists important dates, locations, names of operations, and changes in command. This is an essential book that keeps both numerical unit designations and the Vietnam duty stations accessible. Stanton’s other key work is “Rise and Fall of an American Army” (1985), which remains in my opinion the best overall short history of the Vietnam War and is a great textbook in itself.

There are a half dozen important post war battle histories written by military historian Keith William Nolan that were important. Extremely well researched and
compellingly written, they are each a very good source of “mud and blood” material on U.S. forces in Vietnam. Mr. Nolan’s books are testaments to the qualitative powers of personal interviews and offer many unofficial insights and anecdotes from various different units and engagements. These works are among the primary sources repeatedly found cited in later books because of their documentation through exhaustive interviews. His works on late war firebases Mary Ann and Ripcord offer two excellent contrasting case studies on combat cohesion.

I read through what materials relating to Free World Forces in Vietnam that I could find, there are several excellent works on the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN). The ARVN in particular is interesting because of the widely held opinions of their lack of motivation in battle affected U.S. morale. There was institutionalized misunderstanding and distrust of friendly Vietnamese forces by U.S. troops throughout the war and at least one case of ARVN fratricide casualties being claimed as enemy body count (Hackworth and England (2002: 129). This relationship between allies cannot be overstated, however “Vietnam’s forgotten Army” (2008) by Wiest contains interesting Vietnamese viewpoints of U.S. troops in combat in both 1968 and 1969 that confirm at least the existence of a version of events. This book is one of the best to illustrate the problems with using official battle histories and the veracity of conflicting after action reports. Another great work from the South Vietnamese perspective is former ARVN Chief of Staff Cao Van Vien’s “The Final Collapse” (1983), which highlights the unsustainable efforts to mold the ARVN into the U.S. Army image.
There are few works from the North Vietnamese in English beyond the political or revolutionary documents by Mao, Giap, and statesmen like Le Duan. Bao Ninh’s “The Sorrow of War” (1996) is an enlightening record of the typical North Vietnamese Soldier and his atypical survival. Lanning and Cragg’s “Inside the VC and the NVA” (1992) is an essential source for information on North Vietnamese soldiers, and contains some insightful first person accounts from Communist soldiers captured by U.S. troops during the war. Perhaps in time better work will be done in this field as relationships and trust between the United States and the Democratic Republic of Vietnam improve.

There exists a bewildering array of after action and quarterly reports that were written in the field during the war. Today they exist as a variety of Operational, Command Debriefing, and “Lessons Learned” reports from every single unit headquarters. They are interesting reading laden with statistics, many of these documents are complete with excellent graphs. These types of field reports are a record of an era when accuracy in military reporting techniques were open to interpretation and egotiation. Produced by headquarters staffs and signed by the commanders of the units in question, these reports were submitted to MACV with minimal oversight or scrutiny. In many cases they became instant official military history and were submitted as such. It is exactly these kinds of reports that are the examples made notorious as the initial “covering up” of the very incidents I was seeking to examine.
Facsimiles of many of these official documents are available online and through academic search engines - as technology and archiving advances, perhaps it will be possible to analyze the totality of the official reports digitally. As a rule this class of document must be viewed carefully because of the “Can Do” implications represented: good reports were good for promotions. These reports try to be glowing and thus inherently lack in standardization, scope, and are not comprehensive. I personally have found these reports guilty of not learning the “hard” lessons: they tend to maximize military progress by reporting positives while minimizing setbacks through omission. It is important to note that there was an institution wide failure of objective reporting that often contributed to the structural breakdown of command responsibility and accountability.

One of the most interesting post war “lessons learned” histories is a large Department of the Army historical monograph by the command of the 9th Division called “Sharpening the Combat Edge”. General Ewell and his assistant Ira Hunt have left a master work of the military report genre that has become the primary citation for the defence the concept of body count as a statistical indicator of success. Sometimes known as derisively as “the butcher of the Delta”, General Ewell and his division are widely credited with depopulating the northern Mekong Delta in 1969. This is a large, wordy paperback that is of interest when used to corroborate other accounts of service in the 9th ID such as Hackworth and Joseph Callaway’s “Mekong First Light” (2004).
Official civilian studies are rare and of varying quality: for example, the single era study on fragging was based solely on a sample size of only “28 men convicted and confined for use of explosives in assaults on superior officers during the Vietnam War.” (Bond 1976:1328). It is a masterwork of brevity, being a very narrow study that mainly consists of speculation as to the motive and choice of weapon. Most published Sociology from journals is thin:

“It escapes understanding why the Army, possessing almost unlimited social science and behavioral research resources failed to address so critical a problem as military disintegration among its combat units. Even more to the point, being aware of an increasing rate of unit disintegration, why was this phenomenon not studied” (Gabriel and Savage 1978:57)?

Published material from wartime U.S Military sources varied from glossy era unit magazine publications to Field and Technical Manuals. Original issue manuals of this type are plentiful and easily acquired but are of much use now as then: there is little useful Civil Affairs content. They often do list the basic U.S. conduct guidelines for the conflict known as the “Nine Rules for personnel of U.S. Military Assistance Command, Vietnam”:

1. Remember we are special guests here; we make no demands and seek no special treatment.
2. Join with the people! Understand their life, use phrases from their language, and honor their customs and laws.
3. Treat women with politeness and respect.
4. Make personal friends among the soldiers and common people.
5. Always give Vietnamese the right of way.
6. Be alert to security and ready to react with your military skill.
7. Don’t attract attention by loud, rude, or unusual behavior.
8. Avoid separating yourself from the people by a display of wealth or privilege.
9. Above all else you are members of the U.S. Military forces on a difficult mission, responsible for all your official and personal actions. Reflect honor upon yourself and the United States of America.

The “Nine Rules” listed above were taken from “A Pocket Guide to Vietnam” DoD PG-21A, dated 5 April 1966. It only takes minimal knowledge of the combat conditions in Vietnam to dismiss the nine rules as worthless - yet they remained the letter of the law for U.S. forces until the final increments of troop withdrawal in 1972.

Pocket Guides and official manuals such as “Handbook for Forces in Vietnam” (1965) are little more than introductory tourist guidebooks. I read everything from Ranger Handbook to Airmobile and Combined Arms Operations that I could find from the era - I found them all laden with Command and Control but thin in regards to ROE, prisoners and civilians. Occasionally one finds a gem: FM 31-73 “Advisor Handbook for Counterinsurgency” (1965). This manual does make clear that advisors should take care to not become involved in atrocities against prisoners, and that torture is not an effective method of interrogation on page 67. These types of publications were widely distributed
and are quite common.

For comparison of historical U.S. ROE I also studied the accounts of WWII combat killing and war crimes by Imperial Japanese and U.S. forces. The Pacific Theater of WWII shares many similarities with later conflicts regarding treatment of Prisoners of War. Excellent and visceral descriptions of man’s brutality and fratricidal zeal in combat can be found in Tanaka’s “Japan’s Hidden Horrors” (1996). I also read Clay Blair’s comprehensive work “The Forgotten War” (1987) and SLA Marshall’s gut wrenching account of the retreat from the Yalu “The River and the Gauntlet” (1982). Both works well describe the Korean War era combat environment and ROE. These two works in particular illustrate post World War II cohesion in combat and the strain of combat against infiltrators and irregular forces. I also read what I could on the No Gun Ri and Pusan Perimeter massacre allegations where I could find them - incidents in particular seeming to result from battlefield confusion more than retaliation.

The problem with the subject remains the same as it was during the time of the Peers Investigation on My Lai: How do you track down the unofficial history that is so easily discountable as idle soldiers gossip? Unfortunately for the researcher, era sources on the disintegration of military order in Vietnam boil down to the few sources listed in the above paragraphs. Noting that murder of civilians and the “cracking” (Stanton 1985:107) of an entire Army brigade had occurred by the end of 1966, the adoption of the verb “frag” to describe killing leaders by 1967, or the advent of “combat refusal” by early
1968 the scale of the matter appears to be very large indeed.

In short, to understand the breakdown of mission and military order in Vietnam I read everything I could on every major breach of discipline I could document: I studied rape, people being thrown out of helicopters, violence against children, the killing of prisoners, and the cutting of ears. I tried to track down and corroborate every known instance of mass killing, fragging, and mutiny I found. The worst of lapses of military normative order and excessive violence imaginable are hard to document and would at first seem few and far between. The truth is that these outrages must have happened much more than was recorded and were in some units quite common. As scarce as the hard evidence is, the military culture that produced them is well documented and corroborated by multiple sources.
METHODOLOGY

For the purpose of this paper I employ a content analysis of published sources to examine common themes (Adler 2010:335) of first person accounts of the Vietnam combat experience. I was interested the manifest content of these sources in regards to the personal morale, discipline, and lack of normative order of the U.S. combat soldier in the field compared with similar values of the greater Vietnam - era military institution. It is clear that the internal conflict produced by these often divergent positions transformed both soldier and service alike over the course of the conflict. As much as official reports could be manipulated, news reports could also be sensationalized. With that in mind, I found perhaps the eyewitness account is the most valid avenue of approach to research and explain the transformative processes of Vietnam on both the individual cog and larger machine.

I primarily studied sworn testimony and firsthand accounts by veterans and leadership of the U.S. Army and Marine Corps. The soldiers who served in combat formations, Aviation, Armor, and Infantry - were those most likely to come into contact with their enemies at the “eyeball to eyeball” level. These units would be under the most combat stress and personnel turbulence by the nature of their forward deployment and direct exposure to enemy fire. It is here that the essence of war boils down to its purest form of kill or be killed. I was interested in the spectrum of the difference between official policies and their eventual field level application.
Through systematic study of sworn testimony and first person accounts it is possible to trace the changes in both the moral career of the soldier and the larger institution through the “Mere Gook Rule” during the Vietnam War. In attempting to examine what amounts to the normative effects on individuals within a structurally flawed institution one can trace the scope and the longevity of the “Mere Gook Rule” across the U.S. military commitment from 1965 to 1972. The temporary revolving nature of a tour in Vietnam thus both liberalized ROE and contributed to the eventual institution-wide collapse of morale and military cohesion.

My sampling frame was drawn from eyewitness accounts contained in sources of the immediate post war era because I wanted the recollections and emotions to still be “fresh” and visceral and not softened or colored by the passage of following decades. There exist several well researched and documented books supported by personal interviews of the veterans of the particular actions to corroborate policy and practice. Where possible I acquired credible journalistic sources as well, for the most part first person witnesses to acts of murder or mutiny. The sources spanned the length of the entire involvement from early Special Forces and Advisory Command efforts before 1965 until final disengagement and withdrawal of U.S. forces in 1972.

For the purposes of this paper I found most useful the recollections of the squad leaders and junior officers who led often unwilling men on patrols and ambushes under
orders - the point of greatest sociological stress in combat. These leaders at the primary group level of company, platoon, and squad who were in combat units had a unique perspective on attitudes and values of both the institution and their soldiers. The memoirs by senior commanders at Theatre and Corps level and primarily rear echelon or advisory branches were extremely important as well - but only as peripheral works for official policy - again in relation to DEROS rotation, morale, discipline, and the “Mere Gook Rule”.

The sources I chose were the most credible first person accounts available to illustrate the effects of the degenerative DEROS process that degraded morale and military normative order. My data analysis is of the common themes “The Mere Gook Rule”, Fragging, and Combat Refusal among individual soldiers as used within the total institution of the Vietnam era military. These subjects represent in many ways the differences between unofficial and official history and correlate closely with the eventual disintegration of normative order, military mission and unit cohesion in Vietnam.

I rely heavily on the Winter Soldier testimony entered into the congressional record, and the satellite Dellums committee hearings of the Vietnam Veterans Against the War. They are unique in their candor and stand alone as sworn eyewitness testimony of the era that is not politically charged, or from criminal proceedings. There is no statute of limitation on murder, but Vietnam era soldiers could not be prosecuted for war crimes after they had left military service. In many cases answering questions of this type of
could have led to self incrimination for capital offenses, and even after a soldier returned to civilian life many veterans observed a code of silence.

It is for the sake of honesty in this regard that I tried unsuccessfully to avoid the Son Thang and My Lai legal proceedings, as well as other prosecuted military discipline cases, as the defendants in these cases had an interest in an amended version of events. I avoided most of the official U.S. military battle histories because they produce value freedom issues due to intended or accidental propagandistic or revisionist qualities. There is always a combination of personal, political, and propagandistic considerations taken whenever official postwar versions are compiled and published.

A Structural study of the causes for the collapse, qualitative data such as sworn testimony and interviews may seem an interesting avenue of study. First hand accounts from combat units show the real normative order, values, and policies, not in the abstract in an office but at the level of the individual actor out in the real world. This is where the Sociology happens. War is structure and order, until one meets the enemy and then at once it becomes the chaotic and unpredictable struggle for personal survival. These “war stories” capture this for us - not in a polished history or period field manual but how these roles and values were actually applied by U.S. combat units in engagements over the course of the conflict. There are many opportunities for further research on this and other similar subjects because many of these veterans are still with us for further interviews.
Disparate cultures, or language and ethnic barriers engender this psychological distancing - as one cannot possibly take the role of the other if little commonality exists. This distancing commenced from the outset of Basic Training by reducing the Vietnamese to a subhuman status through overtly racist terminology, notably by using the expression “gook”. It is here that the foundation of “Mere Gook Rule” first becomes a social fact and measurable as training doctrine that is not recorded in era Field Manuals or regulations - yet is repeated verbatim in many testimonies and interviews by Vietnam-era veterans.

Multiple anecdotes from different branches of service betray a larger institutional mechanism at work: they correlate too closely, sometimes verbatim. These verbal expressions used in first person accounts run like parallel threads throughout the successive Vietnam War years. They are important in that these threads betray the larger underlying decay of normative order and values of the institution in theory and practice; and they are striking if only for their similarity. They allow the researcher to understand how a dissonant and therefore dynamic values system interweaves the individual, institution and the larger society into the fabric of the Vietnam experience in three dimensions.

Individual and Institution alike underwent a complex, interrelated transformative process during the Vietnam War. The moral change of the individual cannot be separated
from that of the military, or the DEROS policy that was instrumental in reinforcing of the unofficial “Mere Gook Rule” throughout the institution. For the sake of narrative I have attempted to illustrate this interrelated, and reinforced dehumanizing process by transposing the year long tour of the individual with the chronology of the U.S. military commitment itself - and let the reader come to their own conclusions. Regardless, the soldiers of the rank and file have spoken for themselves.
INSTITUTIONAL EFFECTS OF DEROS ROTATION

As the seemingly interminable Vietnam War ground its way through the 1960’s, the loss of veteran personnel grew in proportion to the number of soldiers required to sustain deployed units without a general mobilization. “Personnel turbulence,” as it came to be known, became the official expression used to describe the loss of experienced soldiers due to DEROS rotation. The problem for the Pentagon was that soldiers could not be compelled to serve more than a single year, and most understandably were not inclined to extend a tour in an increasingly dangerous conflict. As the professional prewar soldiers who deployed to Vietnam with these units began to rotate home at the expiration of their tours the problems began, they were replaced with levees of green troops that arrived fresh from the states:

“The best-trained units would be the first ones into Vietnam. However, the combat- experienced personnel of these initial units were lost after their first year in country. From then on units were filled over and over again by new replacements fresh from the states” (Stanton 1985:25).

The year-long “fixed length” tour that came to symbolize the war was itself a carryover from the thirteen month tour of the Korean War a decade before and stems from an attempt to redress the disproportionate mobilization of Reserve officers in that conflict (Dunnigan and Nofi 1999:13). Originally intended to insure that a small percentage of U.S. troops did not see the overwhelming majority of combat in that conflict, this policy was intended to generalize rather than dilute combat experience by rotating more soldiers through line units (Dunnigan and Nofi 1999:79).
“This was called a “tour of duty,” and it was originally implemented because many World War II reservists had been mobilized for Korean War service. These troops, their families, and neighbors, voters all, did not consider it fair that should be stuck in Korea “for the duration” (the “normal” tour of duty) in a limited war that was not mobilizing America’s full strength. So the more politically acceptable thirteen-month tour was introduced. That spread the pain a bit, as more people had to go, and the combat troops knew they had a much better chance of surviving thirteen months, rather than several years, at the front. Initially, the Vietnam War was about as popular as the Korean one (“What, more Communist aggression?”). So the thirteen month tour was immediately used in Vietnam” (Dunnigan and Nofi 1999:13).

Westmoreland himself remembered the reasoning for DEROS policy:

“The harsh conditions provided one of the strongest arguments for a one-year tour of duty, a policy that was in effect when I arrived, and I saw no reason to change it. With the commitment of American combat troops, I decided on the same policy. Although it posed problems of continuity, the worst of those could be overcome by men voluntarily staying on and by my retaining some key personnel for longer periods and providing such incentives as government quarters for their dependents in the Philippines. All general officers served eighteen months or longer. A big problem developed when the year expired for many men in a particular unit at about the same time, posing a challenge to personnel managers. Voluntary extensions helped, plus transfers of experienced men to newly arrived units, but additional training was essential after a large turnover. In keeping with my belief that it was going to be a long war, the one-year tour gave a man a goal. That was good for morale. It was also good from the standpoint of health, and it spread the burden of a long war over a broader spectrum of both Army regulars and American draftees. I hoped it would extend the nation’s staying power by forestalling public pressure to “bring the boys back home”” (Westmoreland 1976: 294).

What this means in the very real world of “foxhole strength,” is that units in Vietnam lost the overwhelming majority of their most experienced soldiers within one calendar year to DEROS rotation. This scheduled loss of experience through DEROS combined with losses from casualties had devastating results on institutional memory in these formations which resulted in poor cohesion, morale, and eventually discipline. The
personnel problem caused by this “Rotation hump” was so acute that the U.S. Army and Marines were desperate to find soldiers who were eligible for deployment to the line units already operating in the country. These two branches of service were bearing the vast burden of combat operations and thus had the greatest requirements for manpower. The U.S. Army and Marine units in Vietnam literally began to cannibalize their respective branches of service for eligible soldiers like snakes eating their own tails.

Without mobilizing the strategic reserve, the National Guard units: “The Army found it increasingly difficult to sustain this fixed tour length as the war dragged on” (Stanton 1985: 27). With personnel retention rates in the Armed Forces plunging: “The lack of mobilization was soon taking its toll on the continued efficiency of the regular armed forces” (Stanton 1985: 27). Units became shadows of their former selves: “Stateside units, already skeletonized by the war’s incessant replacement demands, were undermined by further demands from Continental Army Command’s training establishments. Units in Europe, Alaska, Hawaii, and Panama were ruthlessly stripped” (Stanton 1985:26).

Indeed, due to the rapidly expanding war effort the United States Marine Corps (U.S.M.C.) ceased to be an all volunteer branch of service when they started accepting draftee recruits in January of 1966 (Stanton 1985: 26).

“The Marines and the Army shared a common dilemma: there wasn’t enough manpower. In addition to new units being raised or brought up to strength and shoved into the combat zone, individual replacements still
had to be provided for those already there. Due to shortages of critical skilled personnel, certain scheduled aviation and logistical units could not be formed or deployed on time. Combat units were forced to operate in the field with far fewer riflemen than they were authorized. For example, 1966 saw many Marine infantry companies, with a normal strength of six officers and two hundred ten enlisted men, down to one officer and only one hundred ten men” (Stanton 1985 :65).

A general wrote a postwar analysis in fluent Pentagonese:

“In Vietnam the Army simply wasn’t getting enough men through the replacement system; where to pinpoint the responsibility and place the blame was difficult, if not impossible” (Palmer 1984:69). “With respect to manpower, our basic problem was to stay within a tight troop ceiling imposed by the secretary of defense and to see that the highest priority missions had similar priority for their manpower needs. This was not easy because of the natural tendency in any organization to let overstrengths [sic] accumulate at higher echelons, with chronic under strengths [sic] at the cutting edge of the field, especially in the infantry outfits that absorb over 90 percent of the battle casualties” (Palmer 1984:68).

The personnel crisis spread to U.S. military bases around the world:

“Already the ability of the United States to respond on a global basis was being largely negated, and in Vietnam combat response was being hampered. Furthermore, the continued dizzy deployment of divisions and brigades into Vietnam was absorbing the cadre needed to sustain the training base in America. This vicious cycle threatened future military posture - as well as any Vietnam replacements or reinforcements” (Stanton 1985:65).

In 1965 the U.S. Army chopped weeks from training courses in order to speed up graduating classes of recruits to meet growing replacement demands (Stanton 1985:25).

“The Marine Corps also reduced recruit training from twelve to eight weeks beginning September 1 1965, in an effort to process 30,000 additional men newly authorized without an increase in instructors or existing facilities” (Stanton 1985:26).

Quality and quantity of soldiers quickly became part of the same dynamic:
“Compressed and accelerated training programs became the order of the day, a situation further aggravated by the declining quality of incoming recruits as the war progressed” (Stanton 1985:26).

With the rotation and DEROS system already operating in units which were “old hands” in the theater, personnel arrived in an individual and piecemeal fashion devoid of any of the familiar unit structure for social reinforcement. Instead of relying on the bonds and social reinforcements gained in training and deploying with other soldiers they had served with - troops arrived in country as replacement “fillers”. They were assigned to units that were suffering daily losses of qualitatively irreplaceable, veteran soldiers through combat or rotation. In this situation, with the constant chaotic shuffling of personnel, only the strongest or easiest traditions to grasp would survive and live on as esprit de corps - cohesion - of a unit.

As units were deployed into the country it was almost as if they had a life span. They first needed to take control of an Area of Operations (AO), and learn the geography of the sector they took responsibility for. Most importantly, they needed to learn how to find and fight the enemy before losing the bulk of their experienced soldiers:

“Another major handicap was the large “hump” in rotation of personnel caused by the one year tour. If nothing was done about it, a fighting division could find itself very unready, with the mass departure of experienced men and the mass infusion of green replacements”. (Palmer 1984:69).
All within the about ten calendar months, when because of the DEROS rotation schedule: “Rifle Companies suddenly lost all of their most experienced men, with only green replacements available to bring units up to strength” (Palmer 1984:204).

“We paired off like units but with different dates of arrival in Vietnam, and simply swapped large numbers of officers, noncommissioned officers, and junior enlisted men. In this way we were able to achieve an acceptable rate of attrition of experienced people, but at significant cost in unit cohesion and troop morale, which were hurt by such arbitrary personnel transfers” (Palmer 1984:69).

The general describes this solution of DEROS date shuffling as “better than doing nothing” (Palmer 1984:69).
DEROS EFFECTS ON LEADERSHIP

Whereas enlisted ranks spent their entire tours in line units, officers served six months in combat followed by six months on staff duty. The rotation of officers into the combat units, fresh from the States, at twice the rate of other ranks created an upside down dynamic in which enlisted men often had been in country far longer than their commanders. This meant that there was an inherent, structurally produced experience gap in many regards between the enlisted men of combat formations and their leadership. The gap in combat experience created a credibility crisis for senior leadership throughout the conflict which was never remedied. Increasingly, desperate soldiers were turning their weapons on anyone perceived as a threat to their survival until the magic DEROS date.

“Its effect on units and men was disastrous, for it hurt morale, eroded discipline, and gave officers little opportunity to develop the qualities of leadership so desperately needed in Vietnam. Personnel “turbulence,” that is, the turnover in units caused by such rotation, became so great that General Westmoreland and the Department of the Army had to disguise the original reason for adopting the six-month [command combat tour] policy if it was to be continued in the face of criticism both within and without the military. Now it was defended on the basis of the tension in which a commander constantly worked, which caused him to “burn out” after a short time, about six months, in his assignment” (Cincinnatus 1981:157).

The problem with DEROS and leadership was that:

“Combined with MACV’s policy of rotating [enlisted] personnel back to the United States after just twelve months’ service in South Vietnam (assuming, of course, that the individual was not evacuated earlier due to
serious wounds or injuries), the six month command policy meant that a given unit rarely had an officer with any more than six months’ field command time. By the time an officer had spent enough time in command to be experienced and effective, he rotated out. Then a new officer arrived, bringing with him inexperience and his own philosophy of command. Changes would be implemented that many times upset what the enlisted men had practiced for the previous six months. These same problems plagued the staffs of units in South Vietnam. By the time a staff officer was truly doing a good job, he was gone. At every level of command, from rifle team leader to brigade commander, valuable combat lessons would have to be learned over and over, unnecessarily spilling American blood in the process” (Murphy 1993:16).

The six month command tour had many unforeseen consequences:

“Not only did the rotation policy foreclose the possibility of developing a sense of unit integrity and responsibility, but it also ensured a continuing supply of low-quality inexperienced officers at the point of greatest stress in any army, its combat units. To be sure, some officers tried very hard to identify with their men, but such a course was almost impossible when half of a platoon might be individually scheduled to “rotate out” within, say, a three-week period, when many of the replacements were inexperienced and confused, and when the “old timers” - those who had been there six months - had already seen officers change more than once and felt, not without justification, that they knew more about staying alive than their officers” (Gabriel and Savage 1978:13).

A former field grade officer observed post war:

“As it worked out, commanders often held their positions for far less than six months. Such factors as relief, promotion, death, or injury regularly occasioned command replacement more frequently than every six months. Units saw officers come through almost as if they were riding a merry-go-round, and the policy came to be known as the “revolving door” approach to command”(Cincinnatus 1981:157).

The six month command tour for officers, though well intentioned, often had devastating results:
“The rationale for this policy was based on the notion that rapid rotation of officers would provide a large number of officers with command experience and would have the added advantage of “blooding” the officer, so that a large proportion of the officer corps which stayed on after the conflict would have combat experience. This rationale notwithstanding, the rotation policies operative in Vietnam virtually foreclosed the possibility of establishing fighting units with a sense of identity, morale, and strong cohesiveness” (Gabriel and Savage 1978:13).

The leadership and experience gap created by six months in the field cause a crisis in legitimacy: “It was the cause of much destruction in unit cohesion and brought about a lack of trust up and down the ladder of command” (Cincinnatus 1981:157). Ordered back into a 1966 kill zone from which he had narrowly escaped moments before, an Army NCO spoke of this disparity in the language of the era: “The people back there somewhere who can’t see the field are really hip” (Marshall 1971:90).

The effect of the DEROS rotation hump was compounded with the coming and goings of every cycle: “The 4/39th had probably turned over thirty or forty times in four years” (Hackworth 2002:60). There was just no institutional memory:

“In Vietnam, just as the soldiers were replaced individually, so were the officers - in a mad martial version of musical chairs. If a grunt was lucky enough to make it through 365 days in a rifle platoon, he’d have had six to ten different platoon leaders, four to six company commanders and two or three battalion or brigade COs”(Hackworth and England 2002:61).

An Army veteran of 1969 remembered:

“The NCOs in my outfit had their heads together and knew what they were doing. Yet we suffered from a series of inexperienced officers being assigned to us. During my year in-country I had five second-lieutenant platoon leaders and four company commanders. One CO was pretty good.
He had been in ‘Nam once before. All the rest were stupid, knew absolutely nothing about what they were supposed to do. We were more experienced than any of them. Yet they acted like little gods. Wanted to do things differently than the guys they replaced no matter whether their ideas were any good or not. And, of course, if you argued with them they’d threaten to write you up on an Article 15, and if you tried to refuse to do what they ordered you’d find yourself in LBJ [Long Binh Jail stockade] ”(Cincinnatus 1981:159).

Officers rotating into line units often ignored the advice of their experienced veterans:

“Even though there were always a few younger officers upon whom the grunts could rely, they tended to distrust and detest most of the officers they encountered. The difference between the life of the combat soldier and the safe, pleasant lives of many officers they saw made an unfortunate contrast. And there always seemed to be many officers everywhere. There were” (Cincinnatus 1981:155).

The problem with rapid officer rotation was one of credibility in that he had to learn fast and look good in a short amount of command time:

“Another effect of the short tour and the race for short-term demonstrable results was a lack of consideration for and indeed an insensitivity towards subordinates, especially enlisted men. Late in the war, this type of superficial leadership was well covered by the press in the form of stories about desertion rates, drug addiction, minor mutinies, and the assassination of junior officers and non-commissioned officers. It is easy to blame the quality of the enlisted men or the lack of support on the home front for all of this. But let’s state it straight - the problem, where it existed, was one of ineffective leadership, in large part because many leaders made a career out of their own careers rather than by leading their own units” (Kinnard 1985:111).

A career Army officer who retired early in 1969 agreed: “It was strictly a matter of leadership. It always was” (Herbert and Wooten 1973:135). He went on to describe
the leadership capabilities of a company commander of the 173rd ABN in 1969:

“It didn’t take long to figure out what kind of commander he was. His troops were shoddy, which is the kind of criticism traditionally uttered by some rear-area commando who insists on spit-shined shoes in the middle of the jungle monsoon. But it isn’t, not necessarily. “Field standards,” which apply to combat conditions, are important, and those were the criteria I applied as I walked through B Company’s area. A good soldier wears the most ragged gear well. Even in the field, he is trim, neat and tight, with pockets buttoned and no loose or hanging straps or webbing. He does not wear sunglasses. He keeps a clean face and a clean weapon and clean ammunition. These kids didn’t cut it. The reason? I could only conclude it was poor leadership. It expressed itself in many ways. The captain had picked a miserable site for defense that night. It was buried deep in the grass, much too far from any crest, and there were no fields of fire and no overlapping coverage. The automatic weapons were placed in positions that made them nearly useless. “(Herbert and Wooten 1973:134).

He noted that “The captain seemed essentially uninterested. Two of his men looked like survivors of the Bataan Death March. Their clothing was torn to shreds and both were shoeless.” (Herbert and Wooten 1973:135). Leadership of this caliber was a battlefield reality in Vietnam because officer quality had slipped to the point where one battalion commander wrote:

“The average infantry lieutenant who joined the Hardcore in 1969 was simply not prepared to lead a rifle platoon. Because the Army’s approach to training had failed to ready him for the reality of combat in Vietnam, he was extremely weak in troop leading, practical knowledge and small-unit operations-and was almost without field experience” (Hackworth and England 2002:419).

Senior officers seemed to be omnipresent, stacked up above U.S. units in their personal helicopters directing maneuvers. “Senior captains, majors, and above were more likely to be career-oriented “lifers,” doing their fighting from their “eye in the sky”
“Brigadier General John W. Donaldson, commander of the Americal Division’s 11th Brigade, was accused (and cleared) of hunting down civilians from his command and control chopper” (Cincinnatus 1981:152).

A postwar critique of officer professionalism charged that:

“The resentment that resulted from the ability of a unit commander to direct his troops from the relative safety of a helicopter “observation and command platform” without either showing himself to the fighting force or, more importantly, sharing the risks of combat produced anger among the troops. At the other extreme, one often encountered the young career-minded officer who felt that he had to “make his command time pay” in terms of personal career advancement. In these instances the troops were often led by an officer who sought to use them as means to his own advancement rather than to care for their welfare. Accordingly, the troops were likely to perceive him as an officer who didn’t care about them or their welfare - a man likely to risk their lives to improve his combat record. Obviously this problem was particularly acute when the officer was a young “shave tail,” and it was not uncommon openly to warn such officers that they had more than the enemy’s fire to fear in an engagement” (Gabriel and Savage 1978:12).

In a battle known as Hill 830 on 10 July 1967, the companies of 4/503d, 173rd Airborne Brigade suffered twenty-four killed and sixty-two wounded (Murphy 1993:107). Overhead throughout the battle in his helicopter, the commander of 4/503, a Col. Jackley, could be heard but not seen through the thick jungle canopy. He seemed to not appreciate the tenacity of the thick brush his B Company elements were struggling with, incessantly pressing them by radio to move faster. Cutting a trail forward on the tangled slope below and harassed by sniper fire, one of Bravo Company’s veteran troopers told his Lieutenant “If I get a clear shot at that motherfucker, I’ll blow him out of the sky” (Murphy 1993:100).
The commander of 1/503d, 173rd Airborne Brigade in the last half of 1967, Colonel David Schumacher also earned a reputation as an especially “Career oriented officer” (Murphy 1993: 176) with little regard for those under his command. The Colonel had alienated many of his subordinates early in his tour by ordering his staff to write a fabricated recommendation that he be awarded the Silver Star (Murphy 1993:177) - his staff refused. During the height of bitter fighting in the Dak To campaign that November, Col. Schumacher was seemingly always overhead in his Command and Control chopper. He was certainly always on the radio to his C Company commander, once breaking in on a routine request for water resupply with “Water doesn’t win wars, Charlie Six” (Murphy 1993:178).

With a reinforced Charlie Company in a close quarters battle after being ambushed by elements of an NVA battalion on 11 November 1967, Colonel Schumacher seemed to underestimate the gravity of the situation. When C Company Commander McElwain reported that he was pinned down under heavy fire and had lost contact with his lead platoon, Schumacher led from above in safety:

“ ‘Charlie Six, you don’t know what you are facing. First you report a squad, then a platoon, then a company. Now it’s a battalion. Get up and go after those people.’ [C Co. commander] McElwain exploded in rage. ‘Goddammit [sic], Six, if you don’t get us some fucking help down here you won’t have a Charlie Company left. Listen to me, get us some help.’ Schumacher yelled back at McElwain, ‘Don’t you swear at me, Captain. I will not tolerate that. Now get hold of yourself’” (Murphy 1993:191).

When the battle ended at dawn on November 12, Colonel Schumacher’s Charlie Company had suffered 20 dead, 154 wounded and 2 missing in action.
“At the end of the grisly day McElwain called the enemy body count into Schumacher at the TOC. By his estimates the bodies and body parts indicated that between seventy and eighty NVA had died in the fight. Schumacher exploded with rage when he heard that figure. ‘Goddammit [sic], Captain, you lose twenty people and you expect me to accept a body count of seventy! You go back out there and find me some bodies’ (Murphy 1993: 205).

“When McElwain reported to Schumacher that night that he’d found another forty bodies the colonel was still not pleased. After listening to him rage for a while McElwain finally spoke out: ‘Jesus Christ, Colonel, what the hell do you want? My men are out there digging up fucking graves. Tell me what you want. What figure do you want? I’ll tell you whatever you want to hear.’ The two argued for a while longer, then finally settled on an enemy body count of 175” (Murphy 1993:205).

The Colonel in command the Army’s 4/39th Infantry Battalion in early 1968 had likewise shown repeatedly a lack of understanding of the tactical situation and was always moving his troops “on the double” headlong into mined and booby trapped sectors. His combat command tour came to a sudden, spectacular end after urging a company of his troops to move faster on the radio from his helicopter at 3,000 feet. The colonel landed next to his forward elements and left the safety of his command helicopter to set an example:

“In a high lather, the Colonel landed. Jumping out of his bird he sprinted to a paddy dike and leapt on top of it to make his point. And when the almost instantaneous explosion blew him twenty feet into the air [killing him] I was told the troops cheered” (Hackworth and England 2002:26).

The Marine Corps was also beginning to suffer from low quality leadership by 1967: “3/9 had no confidence in its leaders” (Nolan 1991:165). “They were abrasive, demeaning, and demoralizing, and in combat they were dangerous” (Nolan 1991:165).
“Their battalion commander was a career obsessed and image oriented lieutenant colonel who, concerned only with making no errors that might deny him his eagles [the rank of full Colonel], tended to hesitate into inaction. He was known in some quarters as Fertilizer 6” (Nolan 1991:165).

K/3/9 got rough duty on 20 May, 1967 in a sixteen hour battle:

“[K Company commander] Giles’s position was littered with dead NVA and dead Marines - twenty - five dead Marines - and there were more than fifty wounded Marines” (Nolan 1991:166).

“Coming up the blasted, burned, body-strewn slope of Hill 70, Fertilizer 6 was muttering” “Oh my God, this is awful, this is awful - this may really screw up my career!” For once Fertilizer 6 was right” (Nolan 1991:166).

The commander of 3rd Battalion, 9th Marine Regiment was relieved of command on May 29 after the subsequent virtual destruction of a second company, I/3/9 (Nolan 1991:166). Fertilizer 6 at least lived to regret his failures, for it is during this period of 1966 and 1967 that Marines began to lose even more officers to “snipers” and “booby traps”.

A platoon leader with the 2/60 Infantry described other officers who “charged too hard”:

“There was a final retribution for the self-aggrandizing, high-risk taking line combat officers. They were usually bagged and zipped quickly. They made themselves to easy to recognize in the field, and the VC were good at picking out a hot dog officer. I learned after my first firefight to become invisible” (Callaway 2004:138).

This particular officer was a very effective combat leader: in six months of beating the
brush in the swamps of the Mekong Delta his platoon of 42 men lost only one man KIA and 13 wounded. This Lieutenant methodically ordered his men off of trails and into the thick brush to avoid booby traps - a practice that was rewarded with the lowest casualty rate in the battalion by far. While not overly aggressive - he did not obsessively count “bodies”, he counted only his own casualties - this platoon leader was considered by his superiors to be good enough to be awarded the Bronze Star (Callaway 2004:141).
Vietnam era soldiers were being pressed into the service at a headlong rush by 1966 in order to meet expanding troop requirements overseas. In this chapter we will examine the inherent racism built into the training process used by the stateside training command to produce an ever increasing flow of recruits to units in the field. The Boot Camp experience was important because it was here that the soldier was assimilated into the branch of armed service, instilled with its values, and given its mission. It is in accounts of the barracks, depots, and parade grounds that we begin to identify the institutional racism of the 1960’s as “The Mere Gook Rule”.

American boys had been socialized in a system of cultural values that reflected the idealism of the 1950’s and the post World War II era. The self starting qualities of the American Way and the promise of the American Dream to the huddled masses were the cornerstones of this value system that had its genesis in the commonly held Judeo-Christian concepts of “fair” and “right and wrong.” The U.S. legend had always been that of the Arsenal of Democracy which had produced the guns and butter required to stop the Axis armies on their quest for world domination a generation before. The United States was the reigning champion of freedom - and soldiers had grown up socialized by this ideal. American boys were being sent to fight in a revolutionary war, however, where the greater values of American society were not always consonant with the mission and values of the U.S. Military apparatus tasked with prosecution of the Vietnam
War. The “Mere Gook Rule” became the tacitly accepted mechanism for U.S. soldiers to kill old men, women and children in the villages and rice paddies of Vietnam by resolving the inherent conflict created by these two exclusive sets of civilian and military values.

A U.S. soldier began a transformative process in Boot Camp at induction - which was crafted to remove him from his former civilian life and discourage individuality. “The recruit comes into the establishment with a conception of himself made possible by certain stable social arrangements in his home world” (Goffman 1961:14). Prior to military service, for example, a soldier benefitted from the self affirming support of home, or school, or friends. He possessed much more personal freedom, both of action and self determination. In his prior civilian life a soldier had been able to think of himself as having certain rights within greater American and had been well socialized in a value system that prized the individual.

The soldier then undergoes a series of debasements in which the established concept of the self is transformed: “Upon entrance, he is immediately stripped of the support provided by these arrangements” (Goffman 1961:14). This socialization process is a basic tenet of military culture is constantly reinforced by ritual on every level, which integrates the soldier into the total institution and also facilitates bonding with the primary group. This restructuring of the soldier in relation to his new world stresses groupthink and personal regulation, and is achieved by “mortification of the self”
(Goffman 1961:43). Goffman described this as

“In the accurate language of some of our oldest total institutions, he begins a series of abasements, degradations, humiliations, and profanations of self. His self is systematically, if often unintentionally, mortified. He begins some radical shifts in his moral career, a career composed of the progressive changes that occur in the beliefs that he has concerning himself and significant others” (Goffman 1961:14).

Military training can thus be described as a secondary socialization process in which the previously constructed sense of self and it’s previously ingrained civilian system of values are both modified and subjugated in order to integrate a soldier into the new “martial” values system. When these two values systems are divergent the soldier will experience “dissonance” of a magnitude in relation to that of the psychological chasm between these two often mutually exclusive values systems.

Training centers were purposely Spartan and designed for maximum psychological effect: “It looks like you’re in jail.” A black veteran recalled, “It’s like you woke up in a prison camp somewhere in the south. And the whole process was not to allow you to be yourself” (Terry 1984:4). Immersion into the military is now as it was then abrupt and total in order to divorce the recruit from civilian life as soon as he arrived by bus. “As soon as I hit boot camp in Fort Jackson South Carolina, they tried to change your total personality. Transform you out of that civilian mentality to a military mind” (Terry 1984:4).

This transformative process of basic training and its sudden loss if personal identity mortify the individual self, and also has the function of placing the recruit in
social space through “rank”. This mechanism maintains the social order of the institution
through an ascribed privilege system complete with rules and regulations of expected
conduct, enforced by punishment and reward. Privilege is the “chief framework”
(Goffman 1961:48) of personal reorganization - the social status of rank and one’s place
within the privilege system (Goffman 1961:56). The hierarchy created thus becomes
simultaneously the legitimacy and enforcement mechanisms of the echelon,
regimentation, and command leadership that are the foundations of “Chain of
Command”. Other than leaps in communications technologies through the millennia,
obedience to orders issued by superiors within the military institution has changed very
little since the days of Rome.

Goffman writes:

“The admission procedure can be characterized as a leaving off and taking
on, with the midpoint marked by physical nakedness. Leaving off of
course entails a dispossession of property, important because persons
invest self feelings in their possessions. Perhaps the most significant of
these possessions is not physical at all, one’s full name; whatever one is
thereafter called, loss of one’s name can be a great curtailment of the self.
Once the inmate is stripped of his possessions, at least the establishment
must make some replacements, but these take the form of standard issue,
uniform in character and uniformly distributed. These substitute
possessions are clearly marked as really belonging to the institution and in
some cases are recalled at regular intervals to be, as it were, disinfected of
identifications” (Goffman 1961:18).

This concept is the basis of the all encompassing expression “GI”, or Government Issue,
to describe almost anything equated with the U.S. military: objects, qualities, or
individuals.
After the conclusion of World War II, the training of U.S. soldiers was overhauled to correct perceived deficiencies in the motivation of combat units in that conflict. Most important was data reported by Army historian S.L.A. Marshall in a 1947 article first published in the Army’s *Infantry* Journal, and later that same year as a book titled “*Men Against Fire - The Problem of Battle Command*”. In this very influential work, Marshall maintained that at most only one quarter of U.S. troops in World War II actively fired their weapons at the enemy in combat. This failure to join in battle, even in the face of imminent death at the hands of the enemy, was essentially attributed by Marshall to the failure of the U.S. training establishment to overcome pre-war morality instilled in recruits that killing is wrong (Marshall, 1947:78). Marshall’s “research” on the ratio of fire by U.S. soldiers set forth in this book was eventually debunked after his death in 1977 - when it was reported that he based his data and conclusions on his own personal estimates rather than actual statistics (Glenn 2000:135).

The overlooked end result of draconian training endured by soldiers of the Imperial Japanese Army of World War II was described by historian Saburo Ienaga:

“The inevitable side effects of training to “breed vicious fighters” was a penchant for brutality against enemy prisoners and civilian noncombatants. Men under constant pressure would explode in irrational, destructive behavior” (Ienaga 1978: 53).

These qualities exhibited by enemy troops were products of brutal training that were seemingly forgotten in subsequent decades by the very U.S. military thinkers who had faced them in combat.
Anti-Vietnamese racism became integral to both Boot Camp and Advanced Individual Training from the outset of hostilities. First and foremost it must be recognized that this “unofficial” element is in nearly every account present in all of basic training and war time experience. This back channel transference of SOPs and ROE can be persuasive to new recruits: surviving prior combat service has its own legitimacy. It is for this reason that the personal experiences of training Officers and NCOs have been an essential tenet of military training from time immemorial.

Drill Instructors after 1964 were often combat veterans of Vietnam themselves and thus had intimate knowledge of the war and the way it was being waged in the field - and one can understand their desire to increase the survivability of their charges. Most succeeded in this regard despite the fact that later recruits were often drafted and not enthusiastic or motivated - what Goffman called “Involuntary membership” (Goffman xiv). It was hard to maintain quality training personnel in the face of replacement requirements:

“Sergeants and officers needed for training purposes were in even more demand for leading soldiers through the rice paddies and jungles of Southeast Asia. Training standards slipped due to rapid turnover. Many career soldiers even avoided training duty as not the choicest of assignments.” (Stanton 1985:26).

Dr. John Bjornson, a clinical psychologist who was commissioned as a Major in the Army and served with the 8th Field Hospital Nha Trang beginning in May of 1964, testified to the physiological processes used to “engrave” - in the
words of the above Marine veteran:

“When you become an automaton, you begin to follow orders – the idea of killing and sticking bayonets into the model soldiers, the whole business of the Gooks, the Vietnamese are inferior, which is constantly drummed into your heads. It’s a kind of programming” (Congressional Record. 1971:S9979).

A Marine who served early in Vietnam in 1965 into 1966 recalled: “The only thing they told us about the Viet Cong was they were gooks. They were to be killed. Nobody sits around and gives you their historical and cultural background. They’re the enemy. Kill, kill, kill. That’s what we got in practice. Kill, kill, kill” (Terry 1984:6).

Another Marine corroborates this experience:

“When you’re told something to do, whether to go to the bathroom or have a cigarette, or whether you go to bed or you get some free time to write a letter, you preface it or you end it with V.C., or Gook or Slope, kill, kill, kill. That’s all you’re told to do. Everything is done on a threat basis; if you don’t do things the way you’re supposed to do, this is what’s going to happen to you. If you go to Vietnam, and you don’t kill the Gooks, this is what’s going to happen to you. If you don’t defend freedom in Vietnam, the Gooks are going to be here. They’re going to be in California. They’re going to be in Detroit. They’re going to be in Windsor. They are going to be all over you. You’ve gotta go to Vietnam, you’ve gotta kill the Gooks. They’re no good. In Com [Communications] school I was in the Hospital. Even in the Hospitals, they’re passing out pictures of mutilated bodies, showing this is what we do to the Gooks, this is what’s fun to do to the Gooks. When somebody asks, ‘Why do you do it to a Gook, why do you do this to people?’ your answer is, ‘so what, they’re just Gooks, they’re not people. It doesn’t make any difference what you do to them; they’re not human.’ And this thing is built into you, it’s thrust into your head from the moment you wake up in Boot Camp to the moment you wake up when you’re a civilian. And it’s a very hard thing to try and forget about it” (Congressional Record. 1971:S9979).

A Noncommissioned Officer (NCO) who served with the Army’s 4th Infantry
Division’s testimony for the Winter Soldier Investigation is similar:

“It’s institutionalized; it’s policy; it’s SOP; you are trained to be a racist. When you go into basic training you are taught that the Vietnamese are not people. You are taught that they are gooks and all you hear is ‘gook, gook, gook, gook’. And once you take the Vietnamese people or any of the Asian people, because the Asian serviceman in Vietnam is the brunt of the same racism, because the GIs over there do not distinguish one Asian from another. They are trained so thoroughly that all Asians become the brunt of this racism. You are trained ‘gook, gook, gook’ and once the military has got the idea implanted in your mind that these people are not humans, they are sub-human, it makes it a little bit easier to kill ‘em . . . the military doesn’t distinguish between North Vietnamese, South Vietnamese, Viet Cong, civilian – all of them are gooks, all of them are considered sub-human. None of them are any good, etc. And all of them can be killed and all of them are killed” (Congressional Record. 1971:S9973).

One soldier who was trained for and experienced the Attrition strategy first hand - long after Vietnamization [sic] was the official policy in effect for U.S. forces - was Daniel Barnes who served with the 1/20th Infantry of the 11th Brigade beginning in March 1969. Testifying before the Dellums committee on war crimes in April of 1971, he recalled: “Everything you said - even before you sat down to eat your meals, you had to stand up and scream, “Kill,” before you could sit down and eat” (The Citizens Commission of Inquiry 1972: 215). Describing his in-country orientation class conducted by a veteran NCO: “I can recall some things about how there was no dink like a dead dink. All the things they were talking about, and still the constant push for, “Kill. Kill. Kill”, all the time” (The Citizens Commission of Inquiry 1972: 215). This later war Boot Camp experience, is important because it is evidence these training procedures were still in use long after senior commanders knew that the problem of closing with and
destroying communist forces had nothing to do with the training of U.S. personnel.

The sheer repetition of this type of indoctrination seems to have had a lasting, conditioning effect on Vietnam era inductees:

“About the only way I can put it, it’s - they make you want to kill. Their whole thing is killing. You’re not to question; you’re not to ask why. If you’re told to kill, you’re to kill. You’re not supposed to say why, or who says so? Or why should I kill this person? For what reason? How is it benefitting to me? How are they hurting me? It’s just to be a machine. When you’re wound up and when your button is pushed, you’ve gotta react. If you don’t react the way they want you to, you’re in trouble with them” (Congressional Record. 1971:S9979).

The lieutenant who led C/1/20th in the combat assault on My Lai remembered:

“One thing, at OCS was nobody said, “‘Now, there will be civilians there.”’ . . . It was drummed into us, “‘Be sharp! On guard! As soon as you think these people won’t kill you, ZAP! In combat you haven’t friends! You have enemies!’” Over and over at OCS we heard this, and I told myself, I’ll act as if I’m never secure. As if everyone in Vietnam would do me in. As if everyone’s bad. I went from OCS to Hawaii: to Charlie Company, First battalion, Twentieth Infantry, and I still didn’t hear of innocent civilians” (Calley 1971:29).

He continued:

“We were taught how to assault them, how to take base camps, how to kill enemy: for Charlie [Company] was really made for war! We were mean! We were ugly! We never conceived of old people, men, women, children, babies: of Vietnamese being near us.” Lt. William Calley continued: “Never did anyone tell us – Oh no, I’m wrong. The day before we went to Vietnam, we were given an orientation talk, Vietnam Our Host. I should know: I had to give it (I also gave Chemical, Biological, and Radiological Warfare). The company made a horseshoe around me. I kept telling it, “Wake up! We’re going to Vietnam! Wake up! Because it’s our host . . . .” Oh god, what a farce that was. I read off an SOP of “Do”s and “Don’t”s that the Pentagon sent us. Items like - I don’t remember. Do not
insult the women. Do not *assault* the women. And – I’m too foggy about it. Items like “Be polite”. I had only three minutes for *Vietnam Our Host*” (Calley 1971:29).

In retrospect the evidence is clear that in at least the case of this particular unit, C/1/20th Infantry, that three minutes dedicated to SOP training was woefully inadequate when compared institutional efforts to reinforce “The Mere Gook Rule”.

As the war progressed and the combat in Vietnam became more intensive, correspondingly, the training for U.S. soldiers also became more and more realistic and abusive. For example, three soldiers were killed in the 3rd brigade of the 9th Infantry Division in that unit’s final field training exercise before embarkation for Vietnam (Callaway 2004:35). Perhaps even more brutal than their U.S. Army counterparts, Marine Corps Drill Instructors (DI) also ratcheted up the violence level during the Vietnam era. In the immediate prewar and earlier stages of the war, between 1964 and 1966, fully 73 U.S.M.C. Boot Camp DIs were relieved duty for abusing or maltreatment of recruits (Jeffers and Levitan 1971:11). Training did not get softer in the Marine Corps as the War started to decline: in the ten month period between January and October of 1969 Marine DIs at Camp Pendleton “trained” ten would be Marine recruits to death (Jeffers and Levitan 1971:81). Vietnam Era training was brutal and effective: One seventeen year old Vietnam - era Marine interviewed after his graduation from Basic Training at Parris Island, SC said:

“You have to be tough. Got to learn to take the punishment. I’m a better man for it. I learned not to be afraid of my Drill Instructor, and now I’m
not afraid of anybody in the whole damned world” (Jeffers and Levitan 1971:81).

The results of such training on troops subsequently committed to combat are perhaps predictable. A Japanese scholar who studied the savagery of the Japanese Imperial Army war crimes during WW II described the brutalization and desensitization this way:

“Once both sides become trapped in this vicious circle of dehumanization, even those who pose no real threat, such as POWs, are a target for hatred because they are identifiable as the enemy and thus a “psychological” threat. Dehumanization involves a psychological distancing process whereby it becomes possible to act aggressively toward a weaker person without feeling the remorse that would occur in more normal circumstances. Unless soldiers have a real commitment to a moral code that demands respect for ones opponents, such as bushido or chivalry, or have strong religious beliefs that make the same demand, they are all too easily trapped into dehumanizing their enemies and acting brutally toward them” (Tanaka 1996:76).

We have seen that stateside training cycles became shorter and more vicious as the war escalated in order to produce an increasing volume of replacement personnel to units in Vietnam. These eyewitness accounts attest to the pervasive power of seemingly selective institutional memory of “The Mere Gook Rule” in both individual field units and the training command. Increased viciousness and racism in training and field units undoubtedly were field expedient in that they removed the psychological moral restraint of killing from what were to be often unmotivated conscripts. These accounts of basic training and combat unit service span the length of all strategic phases of the conflict for U.S. forces: The early Advisory effort, through Attrition, Pacification, and
Vietnamezation, until the final withdrawal of U.S. troops - “The Mere Gook Rule” and DEROS were the universal constants.

The Basic Training experience was the pivotal process by which young Americans were transformed from a civilian mind into an indoctrinated, state sanctioned instrument of war. The secondary socialization provided by Vietnam era Basic Training created fundamentally dissonant values systems which were bridged through desensitization and authorization. It was here that he was instilled with these new “values” of the U.S. military institution - “The Mere Gook Rule” that was to be of such importance in the jungles and rice paddies of South Vietnam.
THE MERE GOOK RULE

The strategy of Attrition, and its attendant liberalized Rules of Engagement, was to be the way of war for American forces in Vietnam; and success was to be measured by killing Vietnamese. The was applied to South Vietnam through the systematic process of authorization, routinization, and dehumanization called “The Mere Gook Rule”. This constantly reinforced element was a practical and unofficial tenet of the training process, an ethos that ascribed something less than full humanity on the Vietnamese people. An Army Medic who served his tour with the 1st Cavalry in 1966 explained it simply as: “You know, Vietnamese aren’t humans, they’re targets” (Congressional Record 1971:S9958).

Sgt. Scott Camille, who served with 1/11th Marines testified:

“The Vietnamese were gooks. We didn’t just call the VC or the NVA gooks. All Vietnamese were gooks and they were slant eyes. They were zips. They were Orientals and they were inferior to us. We were Americans. We were the civilized people. We didn’t give a (deleted) about those people” (Congressional Record 1971:S9950).

Another rifleman who served with the same regiment a year later continued:

“It wasn’t like they were humans. We were conditioned to believe that this was for the good of the nation, the good of our country, and anything we did was okay. And when you shot someone you didn’t think you were shooting at a human. They were a gook or a commie and it was okay. And anything you did to them was okay because, like, they would tell you they would do it to you if they had the chance” (Congressional Record 1971:S9950).
A 1968 Marine veteran also echoed this sentiment: “You don’t even think of them as human beings, they’re ‘Gooks’. And they’re objects” (*Congressional Record* 1971:S9953).

To paraphrase the great third Reich linguist Victor Klemperer, the language does not lie: A U.S.M.C. veteran of 1965-66 remembered,

“Right away they told us not to call them Vietnamese. Call everybody gooks, dinks. Then they told us when you go over in Vietnam, you going to be face to face with Charlie, the Viet Cong. They were like animals, or something other than human. They ain’t have no regard for life. They’d blow up little babies to just kill one GI. They wouldn’t allow you to talk about them as if they were people. They told us they’re not to be treated with any type of mercy or apprehension. That’s what they engraved into you. That killer instinct is real. Just go away and do destruction” (Terry 1984:90).

The by-product of this combat experience is of course the transference of racial and ethnic attitudes to newer recruits who thus enter combat imbued with this unofficial knowledge “pre-installed”:

“War is inevitably accompanied by ideologies that thoroughly dehumanize the enemy. Those on the battlefield are usually in situations where they must kill or be killed. The enemy is seen as brutal in order to be capable of posing such a threat. For those on both sides, it is all but impossible to see the enemy as anything other than brutal and inhuman. This explains how brutality on both sides usually escalates rapidly after war breaks out” (Tanaka 1996:76).

A retired field grade officer described the motivations of constant fear among soldiers and the application of the “Mere Gook Rule”:

“Facing them all was the threat of imminent extinction. They knew the stories of “human wave” attacks by shrieking, indestructible enemies
lusting to slice off testicles, ears, and noses, or to disembowel with the
curving thrust of a knife. Only subhumans [sic] would attack with such
goals in mind - only gooks. When GIs couldn’t tell friend from foe, they
came to hate and despise them all. All slopes are dirt. Viewing all
Vietnamese as less than human released American boys from their own
humanity. Now, suddenly, it became possible to squeeze off M-16
rounds at a boy herding two water buffalo, not really with the intention of
hitting him, just of frightening him and making him run. It wasn’t really
anybody’s fault that one shot was a little high and the kid fell and lay
kicking in the dust. He was, after all, only a dink” (Cincinnatus 1981: 90).

One former 9th Infantry Division platoon commander eloquently described this
hardening process from combat exposure:

“The American troops grew to hate the Vietnamese and began to see them
all as the enemy. They learned not to trust any Vietnamese and resented
the sacrifices they had to make for these strange and alien people whom
they began to see as something less than human. Contempt toward them
soon became as strong as our distaste for the climate and countryside.
Unfortunately, it made it easier for us to prosecute a war that became
increasingly more confusing and brutal” (Callaway 2004:76).

The “Mere Gook Rule” became SOP:

“The soldier and the junior officer observed the lack of regard his
superiors had for the Vietnamese. The value of Vietnamese life was
systematically cheapened in his mind. Further brutalized by the cycle of
meaningless violence that was Westmoreland’s war of attrition, and full of
hatred because his comrades were so often killed and wounded by mines
and booby traps set by the local guerrillas and the peasants who helped
them, he naturally came to see all Vietnamese of the countryside as
vermin to be exterminated” (Sheehan 1988:689).

According to one Marine:

“There was an aura of hate in my outfit. I mean, a Vietnamese… there
was no such thing to my unit as a friendly Vietnamese. Every Vietnamese
was a gook. I’ve hardly ever heard the term Vietnamese. They were
always gooks. There was no difference between a good one and a bad one
except that the good one at the time is carrying no weapon but he’s still fair game.” (Congressional Record 1971:S9952).

Fair game in this case alludes to flexible ROE:

“See, it wasn’t supposed to be nobody out at night but the Marines. Any Vietnamese out at night was the enemy . . . So a lot of times they ain’t tell us shit about who was who. People get out of line and you could basically kill them. And Marines, man, was like, always looking for shit to go wrong. Shit went wrong. That gave us the opportunity” (Terry 1984:8).

Another soldier described his tour in almost identical terms: “This was common policy. Kill anything you want to kill, any time you want to kill it, just don’t get caught” (Congressional Record. 1971:S9958).

One former helicopter door gunner who served with the First Cavalry Division from February of 1967 until April of 1968 described how it felt to shoot at any Vietnamese he saw on the ground below: “My mind was so psyched out into killing gooks that I never even paid attention to look around and see where I was. I just saw gooks and I wanted to kill them” (Congressional Record. 1971:S9957). An Army Platoon leader explains:

“Why did we want to kill dinks? After all, we had been mostly law-abiding citizens back in the world and we were taught that to take a man’s life was wrong. Somehow the perspective got twisted in a war. If the government told us it was alright and, in fact, a must to kill the members of another government’s people, then we had the law on our side. It turned out that most of us liked to kill other men. Some of the guys would shoot at a dink as much as they would a target. Some of the men didn’t like to kill a dink up close. The closer the killing, the more personal it became. Others in the platoon liked to kill close in. A few even liked to torture the dinks if they had a prisoner or cut the dead bodies with knives in a frenzy of aggression. A few didn’t like to kill at all and wouldn’t fire their
A squad leader with the Army’s 25th Division remembered: “Now I’m really afraid. I’m walking around constantly in fear. And I’m thinking about survival first” (Terry 1984: 178). Another described becoming increasingly brutalized:

“Now the feeling at the time was that it was just a way of relieving yourself, where you had no way of relieving yourself and with all of the pressures and everything in the military and the pressures of the war itself, and being scared twenty-four hours a day, and not sleeping, and being bitten by mosquitoes twenty-four hours a day and getting cold and so on, you are so aggravated and so fed up that it was just unbelievable. Now you had to take it out, you had to take your aggravations out on something” (The Citizens Commission of Inquiry 1972: 216).

A rifleman who served in 1967 in the 9th Marine Regiment still described his unit’s attitudes toward the Vietnamese with emotion years later:

“I probably hated them as a way to fight my fear. You’d get real scared, then you’d get real angry, and you couldn’t wait to get your hands on one of those slimy bastards. We didn’t take prisoners. Anybody that came to us was just a sorry fucker” (Nolan 1991: 33).
DEROS ROTATION AND COMBAT UNITS

American troops in combat naturally found it easy to obsess about the end of their tour and returning to the world they had left behind. “Barring death or serious injury, every soldier knew his exact departure date as soon as he stepped on Vietnamese soil” (Stanton 1985: 27). The DEROS date itself became a talisman for the soldier, like a finish line in his personal war:

“For the individual American soldier, the overriding concern was how much time he had remaining in Vietnam. Daily short calendars were meticulously ticked off on everything from helmet covers to pin-up posters” (Stanton 1985: 27). “His primary purpose became simply to reach his personal DEROS (date expected to return from overseas) intact. The fixed length of the hostile fire tour, for all its drawbacks, had undeniably overwhelming morale value” (Stanton 1985: 27).

Hanging above a soldier’s head was the constant fear that they might be killed or “fucked up” before they reached DEROS. “Fucked up” became the euphemism for being severely wounded, crippled, or disfigured, and was often perceived to young soldiers as a fate worse than death. The fixation with DEROS manifested itself in many ways, from comedy to deadly serious unit superstitions. Consider this description of a hard luck outfit in the 3/9 Marines known as “Fucked Over Bravo (FOB)” in 1967:

“FOB Company, undermanned and under experienced, had many a replacement wounded or killed before his greenness had been weathered off. There was a superstition in Bravo Company that if you got new boots, you also got dead; so there were helmeted, flak-jacketed, sweat slick, and pack humping grunts in this downhill file whose jungle boots were frayed and flopping but who had refused replacements. They kept their old ones together with white tape from the corpsmen, which they
then camouflaged by rubbing with dirt” (Nolan 1991:7).

The GI emerged from stateside training to find that the reality of Vietnam was often not consonant with any of his preconceived notions of what “war” would be like. Devoid of all familiar normative order, such as the prior self and societal values of the home world, the support of his fellows from training, and being among an unfamiliar culture, an inexperienced soldier suddenly found himself patrolling the Vietnamese countryside. Rotated into the theater of operations as an individual to learn on the job, he had to adapt to the combat environment and learn how to survive his year in country.

For the soldier arriving in country as an individual replacement the loss of normative order was total with only his service membership as a familiar touchstone. Devoid of his primary group until he was assigned to a company, his deployment was a bewildering array of replacement depots, shouted orders and modes of transport until he reached his new unit. The odds of survival often depended on the morale and cohesion of the line unit a soldier was eventually assigned to:

“When I went into the platoon the guys were bragging that we had more kills in our platoon than any other platoon in the area. People were happy about it. It was a big thing to be - big thing to the guys in the recon platoon that they were proud of and it was because we were hard core. Just like being a Green Beret or something. I was at this point very wide-eyed and naïve” (The Citizens Commission of Inquiry 1972:181).

A Mortar man with the Army’s 1/20th beginning in 1967 described his excitement when firing the crew served weapon for the first time in combat:
“We got confirmed kills back about three minutes later after we fired the mission. We confirmed our kills. Everybody was very elated and celebrating. ‘Oh, we got seven VC’, and all that. The next morning they came down and told us that they had killed seven civilians. Everyone was still very elated, however, to have killed somebody”(The Citizens Commission of Inquiry 1972: 238).

It was a case of learning on the job:

“This is the way things were and they told me that when you were new in the country - I was still new meat, they say, ‘Man, you haven’t seen anything yet. Just keep your eyes and ears open and your mouth shut. You will be alright.’ Well, that’s true. If a guy has been in the country eleven months and is still alive, I am thinking he must know what he is doing” (The Citizens Commission of Inquiry 1972:185).

Veteran, “short timer” soldiers became the only steady leadership element in most units:

“You say, who here is the most nastiest, the raunchiest. Somebody who is going to go for it. And if you got any sense, you do what he says. He would be a grunt. The officers, you try and stay away from them, ‘cause they’re dangerous. They’ll get you killed. ‘Cause they don’t know. He would probably be a redneck. White boy. Probably small, but he had just about everything he needed to cover his behind. He would have an M-79 Grenade Launcher strapped to his M-16. He knows what it’s all about to tie your clips together. Because he’s not going to be divin’ to the ground with the clips flying around. He knows to take care of his weapon, ‘cause that’s the only thing that’s gonna mean that he’s gonna survive” (Terry1984:123).

A soldier who served with the Army’s 11th Light Infantry Brigade in 1969 described adapting to the combat environment:

“You don’t think. You don’t do anything but act. From there on it goes. You are in it. If you are smart you go along with it because it’s the only way out, so you go along with it. Right away you hit Vietnam and the rockets start coming in and you find out it’s the
real thing, you know? And then you’ve got to make a decision. You have to go along with it over there, to live, or else you can’t make it. Any moral questions in your mind about the whole thing, you just have to put those out of your mind. For instance, as soon as I got in the field I was scared stiff. I didn’t know what I was going to do or what was going on. All I could think of was that I had to learn what they were doing, which I couldn’t question if it was good or bad. The more dinks you kill, goes the motto, the more safer it is for you, and the sooner you get to going home. So you went along with it. You couldn’t question it. The first time I went into a ville these guys had been out there ten months, but it was my first day there. But the first thing that happened was we walked into a ville. Now they told me about the dinks and the gooks and what you had to do, and how you take over the ville. Well, they took over the whole ville and took anything they wanted” (The Citizens Commission of Inquiry 1972:246).

Vietnam service was usually long periods of sweltering heat and boredom punctuated with moments of sheer terror. Almost all soldiers entering combat for the first time found it wasn’t as they expected, as one radio operator related:

“He was so scared he could not function. It had never dawned on him that combat could be this frightening. Finally the FO [Artillery Forward Observer], a cool veteran, grabbed the radio and called in his own corrections. Duffy lay there and wondered how he could possibly survive ten more months of this” (Murphy 1993:92).

When a new recruit named Henderson arrived at his 1/9 Marines platoon in the summer of 1967, he was told he would be “on point” - the first man in the column - on the next day’s patrol:

“Henderson found himself in the absolutely insane position of walking point on his very first jaunt into Indian Country. When they stopped to set up an ambush near the Strip, Henderson, a stocky, muscular, squared away kid, set down the radio battery they had him carry and laid out his grenades and magazines before him. Shortly there was a rustle of bushes, and Henderson was stunned to see an NVA - a real live gook - coming into
view, a perfect target except that the safety on Henderson’s M16 would not budge. As he struggled with his uncooperative rifle, a short timer let out a panicked scream, *My God, there’s thousands of ’em*, then simply got up and ran away” (Nolan 1991:14).

A Marine scout sniper in who served with G Company, 2/4 Marine Regiment in 1967 and 1968 described his baptism of fire on an ambush on his second day in country:

“We wiped them out. I thought, if this is what war is like, its okay! That was my first impression but later, after it was light, we found this one guy, whose leg had been blown off, trying to drag his dead buddy out of the kill zone. Now that scared me. My overall impression of the VC is that they were sneaky little fuckers, ill-disciplined, but that guy with no leg, dragging his dead buddy away from the ambush, that was scary” (Lanning and Cragg 1992:219).

Imagine the shock suffered by this Platoon Leader sent ordered to secure and relieve an overrun unit:

“It was immediately clear to Lieutenant Harrison that many of Alpha’s men had been executed; a large number of the bodies bore ghastly exit wounds in their faces. Other corpses had been mutilated, their features destroyed, ring fingers cut off, and ears removed. The scene was almost too much for Harrison to handle. He’d never expected to encounter something like this on his third day in the field. He couldn’t deal with it on a human scale” (Murphy 1993:76).

One Marine was so affected by witnessing atrocities committed by soldiers of North Vietnamese Army he extended his tour for six months:

“We wanted to fight. We wanted to even the score. We wanted to prove to the NVA that you just can’t do this and fucking walk away. I cannot believe that human beings would do that to other human beings, and I can’t believe - though I did it - how much of an animal you can become once you’ve seen something like that, once you’ve seen what they’ve done to your brothers. That anger becomes the determination to become the best combat Marine there was, and when you get the chance you do the same fucking thing to them that they did to you. Fuck Vietnam and their
Democracy. Fuck Vietnam and their civil war. There were no more rules. Now it got to be revenge. The new guys became vets, the vets became hard - there was just a brand new meaning to the war” (Nolan 1991:252).

Invariably U.S. units coming into villages after being harassed by Viet Cong became increasingly brutal in their dealings with the locals in the middle:

“When people first got there they were pretty idealistic about what you’re supposed to do and what you’re not supposed to do. The first time you see your buddies get killed, then that changes your mind and the group pressure, like, if people wouldn’t do things, people would beat up other people and say ‘You either do it the way we do it or you are going to be shot’” (Congressional Record. 1971:S9952).

Many soldiers recall being compelled to comply with illegal orders or to commit war crimes under threat to their own safety: one described his very first patrol as an order to enter a village and get some “kills” (The Citizens Commission of Inquiry 1972: 186). In the village itself he was pressed, perhaps ordered, to fire a 40mm grenade into a group of ten women and children detainees herded together in a clearing:

“My squad leader, well, he looked at me and he told me that there comes a time when people have to commit themselves or get involved and become one of them, and to become one of them he told me ‘Well, this is a good time for you to try out your canister [anti- personnel] rounds. It was like it seemed as though he was saying, “All right, the rest of us have committed ourselves. Now it’s time for you to commit yourself and if you don’t you are not one of us and if you are not one of us you are one of them. Well, I was actually scared for my life. Because this is not an unusual thing. I was really scared for my life. From my own people.” (The Citizens Commission of Inquiry 1972: 113).

A soldier with the 5th Special Forces Group described the intensity of combat:

“Automatically in a combat-like situation you feel that your life is threatened, so you open fire on anything and everything that moves. It was like instantaneous. You couldn’t stop it. That’s how you are trained.
We killed everything that moved. Dogs. Chickens. Approximately 20 some people, mostly women and children. No young men at all. Couple old men. We checked the huts, the bodies. Two was wounded, and we killed them. We was told not to leave anybody alive that would be able to tell” (Terry 1984: 249).

Some replacements walked into units that were so broken they were greeted with scenes that almost defy description. On May 11, 1969 C Company, 2/39th had been savaged for a full day after being pinned down in front of a Viet Cong bunker line. When the smoke cleared the company had taken 60% casualties and been rendered combat ineffective. Meeting unexpectedly stiff resistance and being poorly maneuvered, C Company soldiers could be seen from the air milling around in the open as they were raked by heavy machine guns and mortars, “It looked as though the C company commander had lost control of the unit” (Hackworth and England 2003:158). The primary social group, or cadre, of C/2/39 had been virtually destroyed by the end of May, 1969; the demoralized and adrift survivors were left to rebuild their unit with levees of inexperienced strangers who arrived fresh from the States. One cannot fathom the anomie felt by this replacement as he arrived at C/2/39 after the battle:

“The first time I walked into my unit, I walked in and a brother was laying on a bed, stoned out of his mind. Another brother came down with a bat on his leg, broke it right in front of me, and like, you know, I asked what was happening, and he says, ‘Why don’t you go out and hump bush for a while and you’ll find out’” (Congressional Record. 1971:S10008)!

When asked about committing atrocities, the same soldier testified before congress:

“I think it’s an atrocity on the part of the United States Army to allow
eight weeks of basic training, nine weeks of advanced infantry training, and then to send you against an enemy that’s fighting in his own backyard for twenty five years . . . . When I got to Nam, it was like black had turned into white because I was totally unprepared. I was put into a recon unit operating in the Mekong Delta. I hadn’t been taught anything about the weather, the terrain. I had been taught a little bit about booby traps, but that’s really up to the guy that lays them; they can just be a hit and miss thing. You go over there with that limited amount of training and knowledge of the culture you’re up against and you’re scared. You’re so scared that you’ll shoot anything, that you’ll look at your enemy and these people that you’re sort of a visitor to. You’ll look at them as animals and at the same time you’re just turning yourself into an animal, too. The only purpose I had was surviving and getting the hell out” (Congressional Record. 1971:S10008).

A Specialist serving with 1/96th of the 23rd (Americal) Division from July 1969 until July of 1970 remembered:

“You are an animal. You’d be out there so long until you like to kill. You know, I even started doing that. I walked over a body of a North Vietnamese, and said, ‘that’s one motherfucker I don’t have to worry about.’ It made me feel good to see him layin’ there dead. It made me feel good to see a human life layin’ there dead ” (Terry 1984: 54).

A 2nd Lieutenant who echoed this sentiment noticed the transformation in himself:

“Every day we spent in the jungle eroded a little more of our humanity away. Prisoners could escape to become our enemy once again. Hence, no prisoners. The philosophical arguments in favor of man’s ability to resist the slide into barbarism sound noble and rational in a classroom or at a cocktail party. But when the enemy is bearing down, bent on taking your life away from you, it’s not his country against your country, not his army against your army, not his philosophy against your philosophy, it’s the fact that that son-of-a –bitch is trying to kill you and you better kill him first” (Downs 1983: 162).

A hardened and veteran Sergeant described his war almost in terms of Goffman’s “work like” task for CBS:
“‘Well, you know, I feel like the man goin to kill me. I gotta kill him. So, there ain’t any need of me bein scared. I’m over here for a reason. To kill. That’s the only way I can see it. So, just do the best I can. Get back home, you know. I got a son back in the world waitin for me. If I do my job, I get back there. That’s the only way I can feel about it’’’ (Laurence 2002: 717).”

“. . . you have to take it serious when you got your life and somebody else’s to worry about, you know. If you have an attitude where you just don’t care, you might not go back, you know. So you have to do your job. And I’ve got people to worry about besides myself. I make sure all of them get back, I get back myself, I’ll be satisfied’’’ (Laurence 2002:680).

He continued the interview:

“‘Your nickname is Killer. What’s your feeling about killing?’ ‘I don’t have any. Don’t mean nothing. Just, I guess you could say it was a job to do, that’s all. Either you get killed or you kill him. So, better him than me, any day. You really don’t have no feelings about it, you know. You see a dead gook, it don’t mean anything. The only time you really feel anything is when you see a GI messed up. Then it sort of hurts you, you know? But the gooks, it doesn’t bother you none. Don’t mean anything’’’ (Laurence 2002:680).

Another soldier testified:

“You don’t shock anymore so you are tempted to just numb yourself and it gets to the point that it doesn’t bother you until your buddy gets killed. But Vietnamese getting killed doesn’t seem to bother you. You become so dehumanized, you become a stone. You do your job because if you don’t you get in trouble and nobody wants to go to Long Binh Jail ” (The Citizens Commission of Inquiry 1972: 199).

Some soldiers signed tour extensions in order to secure a safer posting in the rear.

A 1st Cavalry trooper told a reporter nervously:

“‘Yeah, I got to re-up. I can’t go back out to the field. I got six more months and I can’t hike them bushes. Too rough’’’ (Laurence 2002: 717). He continued: ‘‘I figure six months in the field should be enough for any
man. But when you have to stay out there ten, eleven months, that ain’t no good. You’d never be all to yourself afterwards”” (Laurence 2002:718). One Marine who finished his tour in 1968 said simply: “You’re just getting your (deleted) shot off and all you want to do is go home” (Congressional Record. 1971:S9973).

The U.S. soldier in Vietnam was increasingly hardened by the strains of his combat tour as his time in country became “short”. Often led by officers with far less combat experience, it was a high stakes gamble in which soldiers sought only to survive intact. The goal was to reach your DEROS date by any means necessary. As the traditional normative bonds of the U.S. military continued to fray, the institution itself - and its values - became unstable and began to be transformed by the war in Vietnam. Increasingly, the military effort was being undermined to the point of collapse by the crises in morale and leadership due the inequities of the fixed length tour system. As the soldier served the majority of his combat tour he became a “short timer”- close enough to his DEROS date to have a reasonable chance of survival. He became more skilled and adept at staying alive on the battlefield in Vietnam, and the veterans and were increasingly hesitant to risk their lives on orders from above that often made little tactical sense.

As soldiers became “short timers”, with a dwindling number of days left on their deployments they became noticeably less eager for combat - almost paranoid. A soldier named Rivera with the Army’s 1st Cavalry Division with 10 ½ months in the field described the fear of being “short” for a CBS News reporter:
“Yeah, when you get short like that, you kind of get to worrying. You worry when you go walking down the bush. You worry about getting hit. For me, I worry about getting hit again. I don’t intend for that to happen. But, you never can tell.” He paused. His voice was weary. “You feel that there is somebody after you. Specifically. Just you. Because you’re short. They don’t want anybody else. Just you. And it gets pretty scary. It’s very dangerous to do that, to be like that, in that position. Very dangerous.” Rivera shook his head. “Usually, when you’re not worried about going home, you just hear a shot and you hit the ground immediately. But when you start thinking and looking around, you’re not thinking of getting down. And, wow, it’s pretty dangerous. Spooky. It’s really something” (Laurence 2002:637).

A “short” 1st Cavalry trooper told a reporter in 1971:

“‘I don’t even enjoy shooting dinks anymore. I just try to stay alive one more day. I don’t care, just as long as I make it home. They say we are fighting for a great cause. Bullshit; we’re just fighting to stay alive’” (Boyle 1972: 101).

A Marine Rifle Platoon leader described the general mood in 1968:

“Some men could not withstand the stress of guerrilla fighting: the hair trigger alertness constantly demanded of them, the feeling that the enemy was everywhere, the inability to distinguish civilians from combatants created emotional pressures which built to such a point that a trivial provocation could make these men explode with the blind destructiveness of a mortar shell. Others were made pitiless by an overpowering greed for survival. Self-preservation, that most basic and tyrannical of all instincts, can turn a man into a coward or, as was more common in Vietnam, into a creature who destroys without hesitation or remorse whatever poses even a potential threat to his life. A sergeant in my platoon, ordinarily a pleasant young man, told me once; “‘Lieutenant, I’ve got a wife and two kids at home and I’m going to see ‘em again and I don’t care who I’ve got to kill or how many of ‘em to do it’” (Caputo 1996: xix).

In this chapter we have examined the structural implications of the DEROS rotation system on the cohesion of combat units. DEROS created a dynamic in which the U.S. soldier of the Vietnam War was introduced to a combat environment that was often
“every man for himself”. A green soldier lived to become a veteran, and with luck, he survived to be “Short” - adept at survival and trusted under fire. Increasingly desensitized to the horrors of combat, the soldier’s moral career has been transformed by fear, the brutal nature of the conflict, and the application of “The Mere Gook Rule.”
FRAGGING AND MILITARY DISINTEGRATION

As the war progressed and the morale situation deteriorated, the U.S. soldier increasingly became disenchanted with the war and discipline suffered. After years of repetitive sacrifice for inconclusive war aims the combat arms had been reduced to the breaking point and units were literally “combat ineffective”. In a waning war with no hope for victory, the individual only sought to survive his tour in an increasingly disintegrating and anomic institution. The last years of the U.S. presence placed enormous pressures on those who still remained engaged in combat in what were obviously the final days of a rapidly unraveling and unpopular war. The U.S. Army and Marine units in the field degenerated to the point where they were largely at war with themselves and reduced to a static, defensive role. Commanders could no longer conduct offensive operations, for fear of casualties or retribution. In the end there were no more true believers: “Lifer and draftee alike became fixated on their own DEROS” (Cincinnatus 1981:156).

One U.S. Company Commander noted after his second tour:

“The gung ho attitude that made our soldiers so effective in 1966, ‘67, was replaced by the will to survive. They became more security conscious. They would take more defensive measures so they wouldn’t get hurt. They were more scared. They wanted to get home” (Terry 1984:226).

By the end of 1968 the combat capacity of U.S. forces was increasingly in doubt:

“The battle-ready Army of 1965, its spit shined shoes gleaming and full-
color insignia neatly stitched on starched fatigues had been replaced by a war-weary Army by 1969, with dull boots and peace beads draped under rumpled tunics” (Stanton 1985:26).

The “Green Machine” was malfunctioning:

“At the time, officers gravely wondered what would happen to their units if the chips were down. Would their outfits still be able to fight, to function? Too often they came to negative conclusions. The reason was plain. For a military unit to be able to function effectively it has to have excellent discipline and capable leadership. By the late 1960’s, the U.S. Army in Vietnam had neither” (Cincinattus 1981:57).

A soldier who served the 101st Airborne described the dissonance at the foxhole level in 1969:

“The morale was low. The fact is that we were to beat the enemy. We knew that we were superior to the enemy because we had been told this, and it was relatively hard at this time to believe it, seeing that our entire battalion was almost wiped out” (Congressional Record. 1971:S10035).

The hardships of an infantry combat tour in Vietnam were enough to cause a morale crisis:

“Those assigned to combat positions, officers and enlisted, saw the bulk of their fellows working at safe jobs in secure locations under relatively comfortable circumstances. Swarming base camps were filled with officers functioning in staff jobs or service-supports activities who were never in danger of being sent into combat despite they the fact that they served in a ‘War Zone’” (Cincinatus 1981:150).

“After spending a week in on an area sweep, sodden from rain, filthy from the muck through which they had straggled, constantly alert to a point far beyond exhaustion from fear of ambush, continually exposed to the danger of injury or death, a unit would limp back into base camp. Returning, they encountered soldiers of all ranks - enlisted men, non commissioned officers, warrants, and officers - wearing clean clothes and smelling of aftershave lotion, men who were secure in mind and body from the dangers of war” (Cincinatus 1981:150).
Many units in the field began circumventing orders for offensive patrols through “search and avoid”:

“More and more American troops, and even their junior-level officers, when sent out on a patrol or sweep or search-and-destroy or clearing mission, came to turn their duties into the sort of thing for which they had laughed at ARVN soldiers on earlier occasions. They developed their own search-and-avoid tactics. They would leave a base camp, strike off into the jungle, find a secure area, and hole up for the duration of the time allotted for their mission. After establishing their own perimeter - defense security, the rest of the men would sleep, write letters, smoke (some even used cigarettes), eat their rations, and wait for the hours to tick away. At the appropriate point, they would pack up and return to base. Some groups even took enemy weapons with them when they went out on such search and avoid missions so that upon their return they could report a firefight and demonstrate evidence of enemy casualties for the body count figures required by higher headquarters” (Cincinnatus 1981:154).

The precipitous drop in military cohesion in the field was startling in its rapidity and totality:

“Low morale among American soldiers in Vietnam quickly expressed in several ways. Drug usage rose to epidemic proportions. The AWOL and desertion rate skyrocketed. Race riots became an army-wide scandal. The word “fragging” had to be coined to describe attacks by GIs on their own officers and noncommissioned officers. The air force and the navy had to contend with “fodding,” that is, foreign-object damage, to highly technical and complicated machinery. Mutiny became so common that the army was forced to disguise its frequency by talking instead of “combat refusals” (Cincinnatus 1981:156).

A reporter who covered the Vietnam War from the front lines remembered: “All over Vietnam, GIs were fragging their officers and their lifer noncoms. On some patrols, if a lifer was too “gung ho” he was shot in the back by his men, who would then report he
was killed in combat” (Boyle 1972:85).

The singular antidote for this downward spiral in morale was competent and compassionate leadership, because:

“In a word, a good officer realizes that his men will follow his judgment if they are convinced that he too is willing to risk his life in their defense. In Vietnam, too often the troops perceived their officers as unwilling to assume the burdens of combat that they them themselves carried and reacted in a most violent manner - they tried to kill them” (Gabriel and Savage 1978:171).

One soldier described this for the Winter Soldier panel as if he were almost quoting from a 1968 field manual on fragging procedure:

“Certain career-motivated personnel have to be disciplined by the EM [Enlisted Men]. Standard procedure is the first time to put a CS [a military riot control agent - Tear Gas] grenade in his lodging. You know, he sleeps on a cot, most other people sleep in the mud. If he still doesn’t straighten up, hand grenade or claymore” (Congressional Record. 1971:S9959).

An assault on an inexperienced or incompetent officer can be seen as a direct manifestation of the will to live pitted against the inequality of the DEROS structure. A soldier, like all who are downtrodden can lash out on his tormenters in perhaps the most spectacular symptom of an anomic military institution. “If he recognizes himself as to blame for the catastrophe, he takes it out on himself; otherwise, on someone else” (Durkheim 1966:285).

Officers were often rumored to have been killed on operations in the field by their
own troops. This could be accomplished in many ways but was usually reported as a combat incident, or accidental friendly fire incident. One Marine remembered his summer of 1967 platoon leader:

“2nd Lieutenant [name deleted] was immature, inexperienced, and very aloof. He wasn’t listening to anybody that had been in country [sic], and he liked volunteering his troops without going out with them. He had no common sense about how to survive, and he was killing people with his stupidity. Marines were not noted for fragging officers, but this guy (and it was an unspoken feeling) would have probably been shot by his troops eventually” (Nolan 1991:10).

In this case the Lieutenant didn’t make it that far - the NVA shot him first.

By 1968 a Marine of the 3rd Division related a more extreme case:

“The troops considered Captain Mastrion to be a gung-ho cowboy with a foolhardy disregard for the company’s safety. We were worn out, but here’s this prick who wanted to “get some.” Well, we weren’t ready to hear that at that point in time. It was that zeal. The sixty mike-mike mortar section had Mastrion’s CP [Command Post] at Lam Xuan West bracketed. I was pretty close to some of those guys and they said, “If we get hit he’s going to be the first to go. We were too tired to be angry. Being angry took energy, and we were out of energy. We were just trying to survive, and we were going to take him out. It was real” (Nolan 1994:10).

Untold numbers of men in Vietnam were killed and wounded in this way:

“Before I went home, the company commanders in Bravo and Echo companies got killed. And rumor said their own men did it. Those companies were pressed because the captains do everything by the book. And the book didn’t work for Vietnam. They had this West Point thing about you dug a foxhole at night. Put sandbags around it. You couldn’t expect a man to cut through that jungle all day, then dig a hole, fill up the sandbags, then in the morning time dump the sandbags out, fill your foxhole back up, then cut down another mountain. Guys said ‘The hell with some foxhole. And every time you get in a firefight, you looking for someone to cover your back, and he looking around to see where the
captain is ‘cause he gon’ fire a couple of rounds at him. See, the thing about Vietnam your own men could shoot you and no one could tell, because we always left weapons around and the Viet Congs could get them” (Terry 1984:48).

While combat stress began to disrupt the functioning of line units in the field, the situation in the rear echelon base areas also began unraveling as the morale crisis deepened:

“Use of marijuana and harder drugs became so common that NCOs and officers simply turned their backs, officially ignoring what their men were doing. In many units, tension and even hatred, between conscripts and “lifers” grew so strong that they fought not only with the enemy but among themselves. The term fragging came into the language, describing assaults, sometimes ending in death or mutilation, in NCOs and company-grade officers, initiated by the men they led” (Cincinnatus 1981:51).

In Vietnam often:

“If a lifer pushed too hard, he died. Otherwise, there was a truce. I was sure there would have been open revolt by the troops in Vietnam if not for one thing: each grunt knew he had only one year to do. He had to weigh a sure five years in prison against trying to get by for one year in Vietnam. For support troops the decision was easier: Vietnam wasn’t such a bad place. But a grunt stood a good chance of getting killed or screwed up for life. A very good chance. The grunt counted off days on the calendar until he reached the magic 365. If a combat zone was quiet, the grunt could just wait it out and hope to do his time. Some began to go crazy at the end” (Boyle 1972:102).

A soldier described the climate at his late war Marine base camp like this:

“There was open warfare between what we called the heads, the people who smoked dope, and what we called the juice freaks, the people who drank. There were frequent stabbings and as a result of this mutual paranoia, we put prices on, I’d say, fully the heads of at least 40% of our staff and officers had prices on them. The highest prices going on the heads of the CID [Army Criminal Investigation Division]. One Lt. (deleted), a CID, had a price of $2000 on his head. Of course, the person
who collected the head also had to kick back a $1000 for a celebration we were going to have. And the same thing with Staff Sergeant (deleted). He was more clumsy so we didn’t have the heart to wipe him out but he still had a $500 price on his head. It was payable. Once you were familiar with the people in you unit, you knew whom to apply for the money” (Congressional Record. 1971:S9972).

Friction among Army 25th Infantry Division base camp personnel at Cu Chi was so severe by 1971 that different factions were arming themselves - one soldier who identified himself as a “head” said in regards to “lifers” in this unit “If they fuck with us they are going to die” (Boyle 1972:84).

One Army 9th Division soldier testified that in 1969:

“The CID, which is over there, they tried busting a unit of grunts who had just come out of the field for a rest period; four of them were killed, this is before I got there, and they went to bust my unit when we got out of the field, too. Five of them walked in with my Captain, my Lieutenant, and a Lieutenant from Bravo Company and the first one in line says, ‘You gentlemen are smoking the wrong cigarettes, I suggest you put them out.’ His eyes lit up, he turned out and walked off with everybody. I turned around and every (deleted) guy in my platoon had his gun raised and I guess he sort of got the message. I guess the idea behind that was that if we were going to be alive, from day to day, I didn’t want a man with spit shine jungle boots and starched fatigues coming in and tell me he’s going to put me away in LBJ for smoking a harmless weed” (Congressional Record. 1971:S10008).

Much of reported fragging was in the rear echelon base camps. It was here, behind the wire, so to speak that an act could not be reported as an accidental or combat death:

“A lifer was in charge of the mail. He stopped the mail for about three days because he wanted his troops to shine their shoes or something or
clean up or shave or get a haircut and he stopped the mail. So someone told him that if we don’t get the mail by noon on a specific day, before midnight that night you’re going to be offered. But since he was hard and he was in the Korean War, he thought that what happened in the old Marine Corps is happening in Vietnam, he persisted and the mail wasn’t gotten out and before midnight he was fragged. And the mail did come through the next day” (Congressional Record. 1971:S9953).

A 3rd Marine Division veteran recalled that in late 1968:

“I heard that the First Sergeant in Communications Company, 5th Com in Dong Ha, they had a whole unit there locked on a legal hold. In other words, they couldn’t rotate from Vietnam because someone had attempted to frag grenade their First Sergeant. They had wired it to his desk and a Pfc. was sweeping out his hootch, pulled out the chair, and it blew his legs off. That wasn’t the end of the attempts. An attempt to get Staff Sgt. (deleted) netted another Gunnery Sergeant who thought he’d use his rack and we lost two Gunnery Sergeants who bedded down with Willy Peter grenades one night” (Congressional Record. 1971:S9972).

The threat of “fragging” could be effective in itself:

“There were often enough warnings to “hard chargers” before an actual fragging took place and, even then, some of the fraggings were intended to warn rather than kill. Sometimes the warnings took on an ominous forms as when one group of soldiers actually took up a collection to raise a “bounty” and then openly offered it to anyone who was willing to “waste” a particularly disliked officer.” (Gabriel and Savage 1978:12).

A Marine swore under oath: “Bounties were quite common, undoubtedly” (Congressional Record. 1971:S9970). One 2/5 combat Marine said of his tour:

“Bounties were placed on our own men in our own companies if they were inadequate in the field. And they were either disposed of, or wounded, or something to this effect just to make sure they were taken away” (Congressional Record. 1971:S9947).

Elements of the 11th Armored Cavalry fighting in Cambodia in 1971 disciplined
themselves:

“Occasionally, several GIs would approach their troop commander to request that a chronic abuser be sent back to the rear: ‘Joes a head. We gotta get him out of here before he hurts someone.’ If that did not work, there were metal doors or crates that could easily jiggle loose on an APC and fall heavily. After evacuating his third or fourth man from Cambodia with broken arms or legs in what seemed like completely careless accidents, Lieutenant Colonel Knotts would come down hard on his troop commanders until “... the living, breathing organization known as 3d Squadron, 4th Cavalry, somehow let it be known to me that all non-battle casualties were completely bad. The ‘it’ was that any trooper found under the influence his squad during daytime operations or nighttime guard simply did not stay with the maneuver element of the squadron”” (Nolan 1990:338).

Another Marine veteran of 1967 recalled:

“What I was basically familiar with was newer personnel coming in-country and taking the place of somebody who was more experienced in the field and maybe causing unnecessary deaths in the field or something like this and the men felt that if they put a little money together somebody would have the guts to wound them or something so they’d be drawn out of the outfit” (Congressional Record. 1971:S9953).

Spectacular bounties were also placed on senior commanders of larger units:

“In a notorious example in May 1969, fifty five men of the 101st Airborne Division died to seize a fortified ridgeline on the edge of the wild A Shau valley in the mountains west of Hue. The troops named the ridge “Hamburger Hill”” (Sheehan 1988:742).

The Battle of Ap Bia Mountain, or Hill 937 as it is officially known, raged for ten straight days - when the smoke cleared, the Commander of the 101st Major General Melvin Zais claimed victory:

“Soon after the battle, disgruntled soldiers placed a $10,000 reward offer in an underground division newspaper for the assassination (or fragging)
One Marine described an NCO who was hated by the men of his platoon:

“This sergeant used to be the biggest pig in the world and he just used to take everything - first man to be on the chow line; first man to grab the best C rations and leave us with the ham and lima beans . . . and so for this reason and for driving us to the point of not knowing where your mind is - not knowing where the (deleted) to go or what to do - we just hated that guy and we wanted to see him go. As far as the bounty is concerned, the first man with a witness in a firefight who blew his (deleted) away with a round across his eyeballs would get $1,000. And we had a pool going within the platoon. This was around Quang Tri area and I personally offered approximately $25 for his head” (Congressional Record. 1971:S9970).

A soldier described combat avoidance through wounding yourself:

“I think one of the biggest ways the guys fought the Army, or any policy, was through malingering or shamming. We had a lot of guys who would use a P38, which was something that you open a C-rations can with, a can opener. They would cut their legs, take a cotton ball and soak it with lighter fluid, tape it to these cuts, walk around in it, and some beautiful sores would appear. Any way you could damage yourself” (Congressional Record. 1971:S10008). He added, “That was about the only way you could do it unless you fragged any of the Officers or NCOs or got them out in the field or else beat the (deleted) out of them. But a lot of times we found that we were such strangers to this game, and you had a Lieutenant who knew how to call in really good artillery; who could get your (deleted) out of a tight bind. You’d sort of, you wouldn’t want to frag him” (Congressional Record. 1971:S10008).

A Captain named Cooper in command of a 23rd Division company, for example, earned his unit’s loyalty through competency in much the same way:

“They were about to be wiped out when Cooper called in an airstrike almost over their heads. It was a gamble but it worked, and the company, though badly mauled, was saved. The men trusted Cooper to do whatever was necessary to get them out of a jam. They hated lifers, but they didn’t
look on Cooper as a lifer - he was one of them. If the unit moved at all it was because of Cooper, not because of the lifers on the hills with their binoculars” (Boyle 1972:97).

The company followed this officer because he walked the trails with them and shared the risks. “He didn’t care about “body count” or “making major.” All he wanted was to get as many people out alive as he could” (Boyle 1972:95).

The final stages of the conflict for U.S. line units were marked by incidents of fratricide, malingering and finally mutiny - a rapid collapse of morale, discipline and combat cohesion. The reliability of the larger formations became suspect when men were killing their martinets in the rear areas for drug hassles and assassinating the unpopular in the field. The threat of fragging an officer alone was now enough to dictate what kind of orders could be issued and ultimately what kind of operations could be conducted. Increasingly, American soldiers in many units were unwilling to follow orders from superiors, or to serve under arms at all except for self preservation. Many battalions and a few Brigades were able to maintain higher standards until the end, but eventually the symptoms of disintegration were everywhere. Mutiny became so common the Army came up with the new euphemism “Combat Refusal” to describe the phenomena.
Two famous examples of combat refusal in Vietnam by elements of the 1st Cavalry Division were well documented in the press. By 1970 the 1st Cavalry was still the Army’s premier combat formation, yet even the operations of this storied unit were grinding to a halt due to internal pressures. These “combat refusals” bear striking similarities to each other: both events took place in units perceived as steady, both took place in units that were suffering leadership crises, both insurrections were led by senior NCOs that were respected in the primary group, both occurred on the Cambodian border. Both cases are interesting because they highlight all of the glaring problems with legitimacy of command inherent DEROS rotation structure. Perhaps most important of all for history both were recorded.

The mutiny of C/2/7 Cavalry took place on April 6, 1970 before CBS news cameras and was subsequently broadcast by Walter Cronkite on the CBS Evening News on April 9 1970. When ordered to take point and follow an NVA trail towards the Cambodian frontier,

[Sgt.] “Dunnuck bristled: “That’s a fuckin road,” he said. I ain’t goin to walk down there. My whole squad ain’t walking down there.” He turned and moved away from the road. The squad followed. The lieutenant said nothing. At that moment an artillery shell screamed over and exploded on the other side of the road. The men in the column dropped to the ground. ‘Friendly,’ someone said, cursing. ‘What the fuck is going on?’ another said. Dunnuck and his squad walked away from the road and the rest of 2d Platoon turned and followed. I started my tape recorder and walked along the line of men. Apprehension showed in their faces. Some of the
newer GIs turned their heads from side to side in fear. Others, like John Schultz, were more in control. “What’s the problem?” I said. “We just don’t want to walk on the road,” he said in a steady voice. “This is one of the things that I told you about, when we were wondering what the new C/O was going to be like. And these are the kind of things which you don’t want him to be like.” The squad stopped for a moment. “Someone gave an order,” Schultz said, “so we have to follow it.” “What do you do?” “You you follow it. And you work it out the best way you can. You fudge on it to protect yourself. Just like everybody else here. Nobody wants to walk it. So we’ll fudge on it as much as you can. These guys have been here too long to want to play around.” “You guys really don’t want to go.” “You’re not kidding.” His face made a grim half smile and turned away. Gordy Lee was next in line. “After eight and a half months in the country,” he said, “I haven’t walked down a fucking trail. Yet they want me to walk down a road.” “First time we’ll be walking down a road,” another GI said. “Like a duck in a shooting gallery.” Schultz said” (Laurence 2002:644).

CBS reporter John Laurence approached the Company Commander, a Captain named Rice. ““What’s going on?” I said. “I don’t know what to do,” he said, “I’ve got a mutiny on my hands”. He looked around. “I hope I’m doing the right thing”” (Laurence 2002:646).

The Captain was almost reduced to pleading with his platoon leaders:

““Now, either move out, or else I move out and they sit on their butt right here. It’s that simple. All right. Now let’s move out. Tell ‘em to either make up their mind - they’ll sit here and then I’ll send some people back for them, which won’t go over too big at all. Okay. We can’t have this. This is extremely safe. This is the safest thing we’ve done.” Rice assembled his command staff of six men, including the first sergeant and radio operator and two platoon leaders, and walked to the edge of the road. He stopped and looked back at the waiting troops. “If an old man like me can walk point,” he called to 2d Platoon, “You guys can follow”. Then he waited. No one moved to follow. Rice turned led his command group out onto the road. Slowly. Alone” (Laurence 2002:646).

When the orders are suddenly changed by higher headquarters to prepare for
“Rice walked back to the rest of the company and explained the new orders. Go three hundred meters the other way and get out as fast as possible. The men nodded their heads. “Okay. We’ll move out and they’ll be okay,” Rice said. “No good sitting here,” one of the lieutenants said. “That’s right,” Rice said, “the longer we sit here the worse it gets.” He looked around at the men. “Everybody going? Okay. Let’s go.” First Squad, 2d Platoon, took the point and moved down the road in two columns, widely separated. Second Squad followed. Dunnuck clicked the fire switch on his M-16 to automatic and held it ready. The men walked slowly. Their eyes scanned the dense brush on both sides of the road. They could see only jungle in the wild tangle. The soft road was full of footprints. Just to the side of the road the soldiers passed a deep slit trench which had been dug recently. “It’s flaky today,” a soldier said in a low voice. “What does flaky mean?” I asked. “Flaky means everybody’s scared and they don’t know what they’re going to do. Just like you’re walking down this trail, could be gooks on both sides of it. Gooks always stay on the big trails like this. They always watch it.” “There’s tracks all up and down this morning,” another soldier said. “We got to stay spread out this morning.” “Bad”, one said. The faces of the men were intense, their eyes angry. They kept their M-16s close to their hips and held them with both hands. Their right hands held the pistol grips of the rifles and their index fingers rested against the trigger guards. Their expressions were flat, muscles tense, skin drawn tightly along the bones. They cursed the C/O in whispers” (Laurence 2002:647).

One of the mutineers explained later after returning to base camp:

““In my opinion, if he were a little more cautious, he wouldn’t take us down the trail. The slit trench is a day or two old. The trail is used quite often. You can see the tracks all over it.” Lee shook his head. “He doesn’t know his stuff,” Lee said. “He ain’t been a captain but maybe two weeks, three weeks. And he’s got a lot of stuff to learn before he can command a company like Captain Jackson did.” Lee paused for a moment. “That is about the flakiest thing that I have ever done since I’ve been in the army. And I won’t do it again. Come hell or high water, I won’t do it again.” “Was there a rebellion today?” ”You might call it that. Back in the world we call it a rebellion. Here, it’s just downright refusal. We, the whole company, the C/O says, ‘Okay, we’re going to walk through it,’ the whole company says, ‘No, negative.’ We’ve heard of too many companies, too many battalions want to walk the road, and
that’s why they aren’t what they are now. They just got blown away”” (Laurence 2002:649).

The second “combat refusal” to become widely publicized occurred at a position dubbed FSB Pace. Established to provide on-call heavy artillery support for South Vietnamese units operating in Cambodia in October of 1971:

“Firebase Pace looked like an ugly square brown scar carved out of the thick green forest. It sat astride Route 22, a muddy unpaved road, and was surrounded by several sections of barbed wire, rocket screens, and an outer trench system three sandbags deep. Even with this protection, the one hundred artillerymen manning the two 8 inch and two 175mm guns had suffered nearly 35 percent casualties in the first two weeks of the North Vietnamese offensive” (Boyle 1972:216).

When ordered to lead a patrol into Cambodia an NCO of the fire base security detachment balked: ““Go fuck yourself; I ain’t going”” (Boyle 1972: 228). ““Then five of the other guys said pretty much the same thing”” (Boyle 1972:228). It took guts to refuse a direct order even in 1971, because:

“From the day a GI takes the oath until he is discharged, he is a cog in the green machine. The lifers run his life, and they keep power by letting the GI know that no matter what he does the Army will have the last word. He is the Army’s prisoner, GI- government issue. The lifers knew they couldn’t have an army in which the men decided when and if they wanted to fight. The only way they could keep discipline - and the six men knew it- was to come down hard and make an example of offenders. In the Army’s book of crimes, refusing to go into combat is one of the worst. If the brass let the grunts get away with refusing to fight, the entire system would collapse. As soon as other units learned that grunts had told their lieutenant to go fuck himself, they too would refuse orders. The grunts were afraid of dying short, and now most of them were beginning to suspect that the war was short. No one wanted to be the last man to die in the war” (Boyle 1972:229).
When Lt. Colonel McAffee, the officer commanding FSB Pace arrived to plead with his troops it was duly recorded by a reporter: “McAffee didn’t stay in Pace at night; he commuted daily in his own chopper” (Boyle 1972: 218). His efforts did not go well:

“None of them jumped up and saluted; in fact they ignored him. They didn’t really hate him, it seemed he was just an intruder. McAffee seemed to feel uncomfortable. He looked at me and said it was very dangerous for me to be in the bunker. “You know, they have rocket positions in the treeline over there,” he said. “A direct hit would blow this place up”. Nobody said anything. Then one of the grunts said to me, “You don’t have to go, man.” Another cleared the bolt of his M-16 with a loud clank. “I’d better move along,” said McAffee. Then he walked outside. The men watched sullenly as he pretended to inspect one of the bunkers, lifting a tarp canopy. “It looks okay,” he said to his aide, who stuck out his chest. “What a fucking idiot,” said one of the grunts audibly. “No wonder we’re in such a mess, with shitheads like that running this place”. (Boyle 1972:233).

B/1/12 Cavalry was no longer willing to engage in offensive operations:

“Now there were no longer two sides at Pace, there were four- the lifers; the South Vietnamese, who seemed almost to be spectators; the North Vietnamese, possibly massing for a final attack; and the grunts, who, like the ARVN were opting out. To the grunts, it wasn’t the North Vietnamese who were the enemy, it was the lifers. McAffee knew, when he heard that grunt’s bolt click, that the grunts had power. They had the machine guns, the light assault weapons. The grunts outgunned the lifers by about 30 to 1. After taking 30 percent casualties, even the artillerymen who manned the big guns had low morale. If it came down to it, most of them might join the Bravo Company rebellion rather than side with the lifers” (Boyle 1972:236).

One of the mutineers later gave the reason for his refusal:

“ ‘I just been in the country three weeks. They try to say the old guys influenced me. When I been here for three days I saw what’s goin’ on for myself. It’s suicide going out there. ARVN comes back all messed up, no arms no legs. And they want us to go out there’” (Boyle 1972:238).
The some two hundred U.S. troops at FSB Pace declared an unauthorized, de
facto cease-fire described as: “If we lay off them, maybe they’ll lay off us” (Boyle

“The men agreed, and word was passed to the other platoons: nobody fires
unless fired upon. As of about 1100 hours on October 10, 1971, the men
of Bravo Company, 1/12, First Cav Division, declared their own private ceasefire with the North Vietnamese”(Boyle 1972:235).

It did not last, however, according to the disgruntled cavalrymen:

“They shot at us first”(Boyle 1972:254). Within hours of refusing to go
on patrol the B Company was rotated out of FSB Pace. It’s replacement,
D/ 1/12, also “quit”( Boyle 1972: 272) and the Division “were forced to
pull all U.S. troops out of Pace completely” (Boyle 1972:27).

The combat refusal of elements of the 1st Cav at FSB Pace had dictated not only which
positions could be defended, but also what orders could be issued:

“The disintegration of unit cohesion had proceeded to such an extent that
by 1972 accommodation with the North Vietnamese was the only realistic
alternative to an eventual military debacle in the field. Indicators of
system and subsystem decay were varied, but in most cases unmistakable”
(Gabriel and Savage 1978:9).

U.S. forces of the Vietnam War had to be maintained in the field within a
structural replacement system that precluded any chance of unit identity, high morale or
cohesion by using individual soldiers as so many replacement parts. By the rapid
rotation of these replacement soldiers into the Vietnam jungles, the DEROS system
guaranteed loss of critical combat experience in combat units. This crisis resulted in an
experience and credibility gap between officer and enlisted men that undermined
cohesion and morale across the entire U.S. military institution. The net effects of the loss of experienced personnel eroded the morale and discipline of whole formations and eventually severely limited combat capability.
A Pulitzer Prize winner described Vietnam better than any other author when she wrote:

“Young men from the small towns of America, the GIs who came to Vietnam found themselves in a place halfway around the earth among people with whom they could make no human contact. Like an Orwellian army, they knew everything about military tactics, but nothing about where they were or who the enemy was. And they found themselves not attacking fixed positions but walking through the jungle or through villages among small yellow people, as strange and exposed among them as if they were Martians” (Fitzgerald 1972:494).

She continued:

“Their buddies were killed by land mines, sniper fire, and mortar attacks, but the enemy remained invisible, not only the jungle but among the people of the villages - an almost metaphysical enemy who inflicted upon them heat, boredom, terror, and death, and gave them nothing to show for it - no territory taken, no visible sign of progress except the bodies of small yellow men” (Fitzgerald 1972:494).

We have seen that the rapid personnel rotation due to DEROS policy severely impacted institutional memory in the U.S. armed forces during the Vietnam War. In its wake DEROS left only faltering morale, the destruction of normative order, and a disturbing lack of mission awareness. The Army in Vietnam disintegrated because of internal personnel “turbulence” created by far reaching complications caused by loss of experienced soldiers due to rotation on completion of the “fixed length tour” of duty. The manpower requirements created by the DEROS and “fixed length tour” system were the key structural element undermining the cohesion of US forces in the field. Crimes
against civilians, and mass killings such as My Lai, are a symptom of this systemic
disintegration just as drugs, race riots, fragging, and mutiny: produced by the loss of
military normative order due the “fixed length tour” and DEROS.

Key structural effects of DEROS included:

• Loss of experienced combat personnel rotating out on DEROS due to the year
  long “fixed length” tour of duty. This was especially devastating to the cohesion
  of units that deployed en masse, as they had to be virtually replaced in the field to
  after the completion of a year in theater.

• Officers served six months in combat and six months on staff duties, often in that
  order. Leadership elements rotated through Vietnam at twice the rate of enlisted
  creating a demand for highly skilled leaders for combat commands at the
  company and platoon level. This rotation policy combined with casualties created
  an accelerated turnover of junior officers and an experience gap between officers
  and enlisted ranks.

• A shortened, brutalized training cycle to make up for personnel shortfalls as the
  war effort expanded. Training programs in stateside induction centers and in-
  theater orientation classes remained abbreviated throughout the U.S. involvement.
  A key component of a military institution, a mechanism for transmission of the
  tacitly approved yet “unofficial” “Mere Gook Rule”.

• Replacements arrived in-country individually for assignment to units on which
they were dependent for integration and survival. This created a dynamic where
the newest men often replaced veterans, and key combat experience and
leadership were replaced by an inexperienced recruit “Fucking New Guy”.

The consequences of this were:

- Low morale and lack of cohesion in platoon and company level primary groups.
- Brutalization of civilians. Manifestations of grave breaches of military discipline
  such as drug abuse, “fragging” of superiors, and “combat avoidance”.
- Cognitive dissonance and disillusion for the individual soldier, resulting in a
  crisis of legitimacy and resultant secondary change of the greater military
  institution.
- The temporary quality of a year-long DEROS tour rapidly changed the soldier,
  the war, and standards: virtually prohibiting command responsibility and personal
  accountability.

Soldiers were thoroughly indoctrinated with the “Mere Gook Rule”, which
provided them a catch all authorization, routinization, and dehumanization mechanism to
kill the enemy. These troops were then deployed into a heavily populated combat
environment thick with civilians and irregular and often invisible insurgents - creating an
irreconcilable moral ambiguity that was not consonant with any previously held all
American values. The resulting normative disorder on a systemic level made the
eventual collapse of the military institution within the bunkered perimeters of Vietnam perhaps predictable.

A commendable Army historian described the morale crisis and the subsequent decline in combat capability in the best light possible:

“The American soldier tried to adapt to the climate and terrain of Vietnam and to fight courageously against a tough and battle-wise adversary. For the most part, he continued to exhibit good morale despite an inequitable draft system, training problems, high personnel turnover rates, occasional inadequate leadership, racial and drug problems, and a growing lack of support at home. These took a larger toll of the American Army as the years exacerbated the effects, dulling the Army’s fighting edge and ultimately reducing the combat potential of entire divisions and brigades” (Stanton, 1985:27).

A former platoon leader remembered it a little differently:

“Vietnam was a place of endless death and murder. Death came so quickly that there was little time to deal with it. We had to do whatever came next. We just stepped over the bodies and kept going. We had to make the next move right, the next decision right. It was like playing chess with human lives; there were no laws, no rules, no standards. There was only you, the individual, struggling to survive and trying to help others along the way” (Callaway 2004:66).

The daily slog of search and destroy operations broke down weapons, equipment, and even the earth itself; only men endured:

“It was an exercise in frustration, an ultimate test of combat morale when soldiers know they are wearing out their jungle boots and their bodies while risking malaria, the bite of a bamboo viper, attack by a man eating Tiger, and the rancor of their leaders - which perhaps the sorriest of all- to do nothing that common sense says is truly worthwhile” (Marshall 1971:5).
Perhaps it is the pointless aspect of the Vietnam War that resonates even today:

“Weariness alone, moreover, is enough to bring disillusionment, for he cannot in the end escape the futility of an endless pursuit” (Durkheim 1966:256). The true tragedy of Vietnam is that “The sad idiom of the American soldier in Vietnam reflected the futility of his war. A man was not killed there. He was “wasted”. He was “blown away” (Sheehan 1988:742).

Eventually, the soldiers succumb to overwhelming anomie when tasked with such a mission because:

“All man’s pleasure in acting, moving and exerting himself implies the sense that his efforts are not in vain and that by walking he has advanced. However, one does not advance when one walks toward no goal, or - which is the same thing - when his goal is infinity. Since the distance between us and it is always the same, whatever road we take, we might as well have made the motions without progress from the spot. Even our glances behind and our feeling of pride at the distance covered can only cause deceptive satisfaction, since the remaining distance is not proportionately reduced. To pursue a goal which is by definition unattainable is to condemn oneself to a state of perpetual unhappiness. Of course, man may hope contrary to all reason, and hope has its pleasures even when unreasonable. It may sustain him for a time; but it cannot survive the repeated disappointments of experience indefinitely” (Durkheim 1966:248).

A combat tour in Vietnam increasingly became a matter of every man for himself.

By the end of the U.S. involvement American soldiers were either refusing combat wholesale or turning their weapons on anyone perceived as a threat to their personal survival. Brutalized and disillusioned, they eventually sought to shoot their way out:

“GIs became infected by the “gook syndrome.” The people within whose country they operated, and for whom they supposedly were fighting, were seldom thought of a Vietnamese. All of them- north or south, NVA or VC, ARVN or villager, Saigon bar girl or Hue businessman - were “slopes,” or “dinks,” or “slants,” or “zips,” or “gooks,” and not fellow
human beings” (Cincinnattus 1981:83).

A 1966 Marine remembered:

“We were not insane. We were not ignorant. We knew what we were doing. I mean we were crazy, but it’s built into the culture. It’s like institutionalized insanity. When you’re in combat you can basically do what you want as long as you don’t get caught. You can get away with murder” (Terry 1984:14).

It was hard to resist the slide into barbarism:

“Some individual officers resisted the practice. Yet the army’s attitude toward the VC and of the NVA- and thus ultimately toward all Vietnamese - brought about a brutalization of the war and a lessening of the careful distinctions that should have been made meticulously between combatants and noncombatants, soldiers and civilians” (Cincinnattus 1981:85).

These dynamics of military disintegration were not studied because studying faltering morale, discipline, and cohesion would have confirmed these problems as widespread and claimed a certain amount of responsibility:

“Without official data, we can only infer that the progressive and symptomatic military disintegration evidenced by desertions and assassinations of leaders is also reflected in mutinous outbreaks, the number of mutinies was probably quite large. Moreover, unlike the mutinies of the past and in other armies, which were usually sporadic short-lived events, the progressive unwillingness of American soldiers to fight to the point of open disobedience took place over a four year period between 1968 and 1971, thus paralleling the data on fragging and desertion to a remarkably high degree”(Gabriel and Savage 1978:45).

In the final analysis, the failures of the DEROS fixed length tour system could only have been solved by full mobilization to retain key combat leadership. The training
and deployment structure was never adequate to support a 500,000 strong expeditionary
commitment in what was destined to be “only” a limited war. A prematurely retired
officer wrote of the consequences postwar:

“When an army is forced to fight a war without the support of society it is
forced to commission its Calleys. It is required to make officers of stupid,
immature boys - who will speak of the murder of seven or eight hundred
civilians as “. . . no big deal, sir”” (Walton 1973:117).

Civilian casualties and the problems of finding the guerillas in Vietnam were
never solved. Given carte blanche by tacit official approval of the “Mere Gook Rule,”
U.S. forces increasingly disregarded the ROE and official directives meant to reduce
collateral damage. A Marine veteran - undoubtedly like many others - remembered
fearing postwar prosecution for acts his unit committed:

“Before I got out of the service, the My Lai stuff came out in the papers. Some of who had been in similar incidents in combat units felt that we
were next. We were afraid that we were gonna be the next ones that was
gonna be court-martialed or called upon to testify against someone or
against ourselves. A lot of us wiped out whole villages. We didn’t put
‘em in a ditch per se, but when you dead, you dead. If you kill 30 people
and somebody else kills 29, and they happen to be in a ditch and the other
30 happen to be on top, who’s guilty of the biggest atrocity? So all of us
were scared. I was scared for a long time” (Terry 1984: 14).

D. J. Goodspeed, a military historian who documented his fair share of pointless
slaughter, was not describing the free fire zones of SE Asia but rather the Western Front
of 1917 when he wrote fittingly in 1969:

“More pertinent than any purely tactical question, however, is the
speculation as to whether there was not something radically wrong with
the entire system of military command and control which could allow
commanders so recklessly to waste human life. Discipline, which should
be the formative, structural principle that shapes and quickens any body of fighting men - and which, in fact, was exactly this, and most splendidly, at the battalion level - was all too often at higher levels an obscurant that prevented the exposure of folly and the just punishment of stupidity” (Goodspeed 1969:48).

He continued:

“But what are we to say of the military - and, ultimately, of the political system that allowed an army commander to act thus with impunity? To lay blame only on the incompetence of individuals is far too shallow an explanation. Nations, it is said, get the kind of government they deserve, but the dictum is even more immediately applicable to military command in war. Nothing exposes quite as ruthlessly as battle the respectable fictions, the polite lies, and the comfortable compromises of an unhealthy society” (Goodspeed 1969:48).

As of this writing, another dubious long term U.S. military effort winds down and we would do well to remember any lessons to be learned from Vietnam. The two main far flung theatres in the war on terror are winding down and we will now hopefully provide new answers to questions from this next generation of military veterans. In the era of asymmetrical warfare, “stop loss”, and multiple combat tours this last conflict has now eclipsed Vietnam as our countries longest armed conflict. It has produced it’s own host of new structural implications and adaptation for our military institutions. The overall few numbers of casualties hides the true social cost of this latest and perhaps most tragic chapter in the history of American arms.
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