

**The Việt Nam War: An Overview For Those Who Want To Know
and for
The 58,178 American Military Men and Women Who Cannot Get Older**

BACKGROUND¹: _____

It is sometimes called the 10,000-day war² as it started April 30, 1945 and lasted until April 30, 1975. Amazing that approximately 2.8 Million United States military personnel would serve in Việt Nam during that period. The real start of the “long war” was in September 1945 when Hồ Chí Minh asked for United States assistance in establishing a free Việt Nam. Việt Nam had been a country since 208 B.C. unlike other Southeast Asia countries. But Hồ Chí Minh, a devout communist in addition to being a fervent nationalist, wanted the country to be independent without the French who had held it as a colony since 1908. The conquest of Việt Nam by France began in 1858 and was completed by 1884. It became part of French Indochina in 1887. Hồ Chí Minh had lived in the United States and had used the United States Declaration of Independence as a model for his Việt Nam Declaration of Independence from France in 1945³.

It was formerly, in the fourteenth century (1300 –1400), a semi-unified nation of *ANNAM* (in the North), *KHMER* (in what we call Cambodia now), and *CHAMPA* (what we called South Việt Nam). This area was occupied by the Việt ethnic group that encompasses approximately 87% of the Vietnamese population. From the first residential area in Hồng (Red River), Cả and Mã basin, they gradually advanced southwards together with other ethnic groups. The society was tightly organized in form of hamlets, villages, communes and townlets. Each village was a factor maintaining the traditional social structure of the Việt ethnic group and where small trade, agricultural and handicraft production took place. Its familiar landscapes resided in rice-fields, gardens, ponds, breeding and handicraft occupations. It was given the European name of French Indochina in 1908, and consisted of the countries of *TONKIN* (North Việt Nam), *ANNAM* (Northern part of South Việt Nam), *COCHINCHINA* (southern part of South Việt Nam), and *CAMBODIA*.

1 N.B. The abbreviations NVA (North Vietnamese Army) and PAVN (Peoples Army Viet Nam) are used interchangeably in this paper.

2 MacLear, Michael (1981). *The Ten Thousand Day War: Vietnam: 1945-1975*. St Martins Press, New York

3 Various multiple sources.

But the United States, in deference to the French, because of the European side of World War II, rejected Hồ Chí Minh's request even though **Hồ Chí Minh and his followers in the "Việt Minh"⁴ had fought with the United States (with U.S. soldiers as advisors in the Viet Minh) against the Japanese during World War II.** The French were no friends of the United States in Indochina as the French, since 1940, had collaborated with the Japanese during World War II by running the Japanese government activities under Japanese control in Indochina and actively fighting against the American / British / Chinese forces in the "China Burma India" theater. Needless to say, Vietnamese nationalists were ready to get rid of the French and any other colonial rulers.

THE REPUBLIC OF Việt Nam (RVN):

The Republic of Việt Nam⁵ officially came into being as a result of the 1954 Geneva Accords. The first president of the RVN was Ngo Dinh Diem, who was overthrown and murdered in November of 1963. The next 19 months saw a series of leadership changes but the government of RVN stabilized in June 1965 with Nguyen Cao Ky⁶ as prime minister. Elections were held in 1967. Nguyen Van Thieu became president with Nguyen Cao Ky as his vice president. Thieu was elected in a democratic election where nine political parties fielded candidates. Thieu won the election with only 35% of the vote and was then immediately and loudly criticized by the majority of the US media for "rigging" the election. For the record there have been many rigged elections staged by Asian dictators and the idea of rigging a 35% win is just plain ridiculous.

THE UNITED STATES IN THE WAR:

4 Việt Minh (abbreviated from Việt Nam Độc Lập Đồng Minh Hội, or, in English, the "League for the Independence of Vietnam") was an organization formed in August 1935 when the non-communist Vietnamese Nationalist Party (Việt Nam Quốc Dân Đảng, or Việt Quốc), led by Nguyễn Thái Học, merged with the Indochinese Communist Party (ICP), led by Nguyễn Sinh Cung (or Hồ Chí Minh), and a number of other Vietnamese nationalist parties. The Việt Minh initially formed to seek independence for Vietnam from France and later to oppose the Japanese occupation. By the end of 1935, as the ICP members and corruption grew within the organization, the Việt Quốc withdrew.

5 The word "Việt" roughly means "people" in Vietnamese; the Việt are the major ethnic group that comprises 87% of the Vietnamese population — "dân tộc Việt Nam" means the Vietnamese race. The word "nam" means "southern" and the word "bac" means "northern" ... people. Despite American attempts to collapse these two words into one, it is Việt Nam (Southern People) not "Vietnam" some uses of "Vietnam" in this paper are justified as they came from the original sources.

6 Ky is not only originally from North Vietnam, but a Buddhist as well. Author's Note: So much for the myth about the South Vietnamese government being completely dominated by Catholics.

Without going deeply into the French Indochina War (1945-1954) in which the French were finally defeated and driven out of Việt Nam at the battle of Dien Bien Phu in May 1954, I will discuss American participation. General Bruce Palmer⁷ called it “The 25 Year War” and praised American operational performance.

Some, in America, think the soldiers in Việt Nam had it easier than their fathers in WWII or Korea. During a one-year tour as an Infantryman in Việt Nam, they trekked/walked (humped”) in the “bush” (jungle) in combat almost continually carrying rucksacks (packs) weighing 80 to 100 pounds filled with rations, ammunition, grenades, claymore mines, at least 200 rounds of M60 machine gun ammunition, smoke grenades, and water⁸.

The Việt Nam Infantryman’s life, in the “bush”, was ordinarily difficult. In our day-to-day existence, we were harassed by enemy mines, booby traps, and snipers when not engaged in direct combat engagements or “fire fights” with the NVA enemy. We engaged in direct fire fights with the NVA approximately two to three times a week. Our psyche was permanently altered by the ever-present knowledge that we could very well be dead or seriously wounded/injured within the next few minutes. We lived with this knowledge/situation, stressful to say the least, 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, and for continuous weeks at a time on a single mission. Hence the term “**Back in the World**” which meant anywhere but where we were—including the safe (in our opinion) rear areas in Viet Nam.

THE INFANTRYMAN’S LIFE and COMPARISON WITH OTHER AMERICAN WARS:

The Việt Nam Infantryman also fought the elements--the monsoon, fire ants, scorpions, snakes, “rock apes”, tigers, “wait-a-minute” thorn vines, fatigue, leaches, centipedes, rats, spiders of all sorts, and an occasional very angry water buffalo. They endured the constant monsoon rain wherein they were rained on 24 hours a day and were never dry—they were “trapped” and could not get away from this relentless substantial rain⁹. They operated in totally defoliated “Agent Orange” areas. They did all of this with

⁷ Palmer, Bruce, Jr. (1984). *The 25-Year War: America’s Role in Vietnam*. Simon & Schuster, Inc. New York.

⁸ SEE BOOK: O’Brien, Tim O. (1990). *The Things They Carried*. Houghton Mifflin Publishing Company, New York, New York

⁹ The monsoon lasts from May until September starts up again in November until April. The weather of Viet Nam is rather sultry and oppressive during the rainy season and the humidity is high at this time

one five (5) day period of recuperation, rest and relaxation (R&R) leave out of country and, sometimes, a three (3) day in-country R&R. We took “baths” in streams or during the monsoon, where one could lather up completely (with soap) and be rinsed off in minutes! Their “real rest” usually came only in the various EVAC, Surgical “MUST”, Combat Support, FIELD, or Convalescent hospitals and/or their Intensive Care Units (ICU) and post-surgical wards.¹⁰

Việt Nam was a ground war fought primarily by light Infantry but with great accomplishments by Armor and Armored Cavalry units. This small unit combat—platoon and company/troop size--was often under very difficult conditions by the soldiers in the “bush” who stayed “out” (off of a Fire Base) for four to six weeks at a time, resulted in young officers and non-commissioned officers (NCO’s—Sergeants) making decisions without the direct counsel and/or direction of their more experienced leadership. Thus the small American Infantry units could move more swiftly and easily through the challenging terrain and often “got the drop” on NVA main force units who did not expect to find American soldiers in their area. Many platoon size American Infantry units inflicted massive casualties upon NVA units many times their size without incurring large American casualties—the ratio of American Wounded/KIA to NVA KIA¹¹ was well below 1.0—we were not trading American lives for NVA lives! This was done through a superb artillery fire support system, close air support, and strategic bombing on tactical targets. We cannot overlook mentioning the surprise and ease of movement by helicopters—we often would drop-in on a NVA unit, catching them completely by surprise and engaging them before they had a chance to formulate a tactical battle plan. The American Infantry companies were in constant combat throughout the individual soldier’s one year tour—you joined your Infantry unit in the field and left for home (DEROS¹²) from the field.

By comparison, U.S. combat Infantry units in WWII fought for an average of no longer than six or eight weeks during all of WWII¹³. Compare 8 weeks

¹⁰ For example: 45th Surgical “MUST” in Tây Ninh; the 12th EVAC in Chu Chi; the 93rd EVAC in Long Binh; the 24th EVAC in Long Binh; the 36th EVAC in Vũng Tàu; the 3rd FIELD in Saigon (Ton Son Nhut) and the 6th Convalescent at Cam Rahn bay.

¹¹ KIA = Killed In Action

¹² DEROS: *Date Estimated Rotation (from) OverSeas—your scheduled (actually estimated) departure date*

¹³ For Example: *The average infantryman in the South Pacific during World War II saw about 40 days of combat in four years. The average infantryman in Vietnam saw about 300 or more days of combat in one year thanks to the*

with 50 weeks and one gets the impact of sustained combat operations upon the American Infantryman. Plus only one of every six soldiers who served during WWII ever saw any combat. Additionally, the average age of the American Infantryman in Việt Nam was 19 (at age 24, I was one of the oldest members of my Infantry company – there were 6 people older than me in this 150 man company). At 19, this is 7 years younger than our father’s generation in WWII which made us, as Việt Nam veterans, more vulnerable to the psychological strains of the daily struggle—strains that were aggravated by the special tension of Việt Nam where a peasant or a “civilian” local Vietnamese might be a Việt Cong terrorist.

The American military that served in Việt Nam was not over represented by minorities, nor made up of uneducated, incompetent, drug addicted, bumbling draftees with low morale and led by officers who were unqualified, selfish dunderheads that were consistently being outsmarted by their enemy. For some other comparisons that contradict the rumors about American soldier performance in Việt Nam let’s look at a few facts¹⁴:

- ➔ **Draftee War:** Only 25% of the US Military who served in Việt Nam were draftees; during WWII, 66% of the US Military who served were draftees...volunteers (not draftees) for military service and for Việt Nam combat duty suffered 77% of the casualties and 73% of the deaths
- ➔ **Education:** The U.S. Việt Nam military force contained three times as many college graduates as did the WWII forces
- ➔ **Minorities Over-represented:** Black soldiers accounted for 11.2% of the combat deaths in Việt Nam ; U.S. black males of military age constituted 13.5% of the American population
- ➔ **Poor over-represented:** An MIT study of Việt Nam death rates revealed that U.S. military service personnel from the richest 10% of the American society had the same distribution of deaths as the rest of the United States¹⁵

mobility of the helicopter.

14 Source is Southeast Asia Statistical Summary, Office of the Assistant Secretary of Defense.

<http://www.archives.gov/research/guide-fed-records/groups/330.html>

15 Death rates in the upper income communities of Beverly Hills, Belmont, Chevy Chase, and Great Neck exceeded the U.S. National average for three of the four, and, when the four areas were added together and averaged, that

- ➔ **Deserters:** only about 5000 soldiers that had received military orders to be assigned to Việt Nam deserted and just 249 of those deserted while in Việt Nam. Comparably, during WWII, in the European Theater alone, over 250,000 US military men were convicted of desertion. The United States executed nearly 300 of its own soldiers during WWII—No soldier was executed during the Việt Nam experience.

- ➔ **Battle Failures: WWII:** Two American Generals surrendered their U.S. forces in the Philippines; in February 1943, German General Rommel killed 3,100 US soldiers and captured an additional 3,700 at Kasserine Pass in North Africa; in the Battle of the Bulge two regiments of the Army's 106th Infantry Division surrendered to the Germans. **KOREA:** the US Army was forced into the longest retreat in its history with the 275-mile catastrophic withdrawal from the Yalu River all the way to Pyontaek; and 1st US Marine Division along with elements of the US Army's 7th Infantry Division was driven out of the Chosin Reservoir, which resulted in a mass evacuation of 105,000 US troops. **Việt Nam :** No U.S. General officers captured; no major retreat by U.S. Forces in Việt Nam ; no mass evacuation of U.S. forces in Việt Nam ; no U.S. unit in Việt Nam ever surrendered.

The United States military in Việt Nam was the best educated, best trained, best disciplined and most successful force ever fielded in the history of the American military. Not that it was perfect, but it was better than in any other previous American conflict/war. The US Military was not “driven” from Việt Nam--**the US Congress voted them out!** As Colonel Bui Tin, a former NVA/PAVN officer said: *"We don't need to win military victories; we only need to hit them until they give up and get out."*¹⁶

number also exceeded the U.S. National average.

¹⁶ Grunt.com (April 26, 2004). *How North Vietnam Won the War*. The Wall Street Journal, 3 August 1995 interview with Colonel Bui Tin. When asked: “What did the North Vietnamese leadership think of the American antiwar movement? What was the purpose of the Tet Offensive? How could the U.S. have been more successful in fighting the Vietnam War” Bui Tin answered these questions in the following excerpts from an interview conducted by Stephen Young, a Minnesota attorney and human-rights activist [in The Wall Street Journal, 3 August 1995]. Bui Tin, who served on the general staff of North Vietnam's army, received the unconditional surrender of South Vietnam on April 30, 1975. He later became editor of the People's Daily, the official newspaper of Vietnam. He now lives in Paris, where he immigrated after becoming disillusioned with the fruits of Vietnamese communism.

This same Congress then turned around and abandoned America's former ally, South Việt Nam. Should America feel shame? **Yes!** Why? For submitting to the wishes of those craven hoards draft-dodgers and ante-war protesters, and for bugging out and abandoning an ally America had promised to protect. So, Contradictory to popular belief and a whole lot of wishful thinking by a solid corps of some 16,000,000+ American draft dodgers their families/ supporters, it was not a military defeat that brought misfortune to the American effort in Việt Nam. Actually the United States military had the war won in early 1972.

United States direct military (soldiers and units) participation in the Việt Nam war ended on March 29, 1973 as a result of the Paris Peace Accords. The remaining period of the war was fought by the Army of the Republic of Việt Nam (ARVN) against the PAVN (NVA).

WHEN THE WAR WAS WON BY THE AMERICAN MILITARY:

There came a time when the NVA was defeated by the American military. As Harry Summers reported on his conversation with a NVA officer in Hanoi, April 1975, when he said: "You know you never defeated us on the battlefield" upon which the NVA (PAVN) Colonel responded, "*That may be so but it is also irrelevant.*" (Summers 1981)¹⁷.

¹⁷ Summers, Harry G. (1981). *ON STRATEGY: The Vietnam War in Context*. Strategic Studies Institute, US Army War College, Carlisle Pennsylvania. Conversation on April 25, 1975 in Hanoi between Colonel Harry Summers, Jr., then Chief Negotiations Division, US Delegation, Four Party Joint Military Team and Colonel Tu, Chief, North Vietnamese (DRV) Delegation.

Also, as Lewis Sorley¹⁸ noted:

“There came a time when the war was won. The fighting wasn’t over, but the war was won. This achievement can probably best be dated in late 1970, after the Cambodian incursion in the spring (*May 1st – June 30th*) of that year. By then the South Vietnamese countryside had been widely pacified, so much so that the term “pacification” was no longer even used. Four million members of the People’s Self-Defense Force, armed with some 600,000 weapons, represented no threat to the government (*of South Vietnam*) that had armed them; instead they constituted an overt commitment to that government in opposition to the enemy.

South Vietnam’s armed forces, generally expanded and impressively equipped, were substantially more capable than even a couple of years earlier. Their most impressive gains were in the ranks of the territorial forces—the Regional Forces and the Popular Forces (*RFPF—pronounced ruff-puff*)—providing close-in security for the people in the countryside. The successful pacification program, one repeatedly cited in enemy (*NVA*) communications as a threat that had to be countered, was extending not only security but also elected government, trained hamlet and village officials, and economic gains to most of the population.

Not only was the internal war against subversion and the guerrilla threat won, so was that against the external conventional threat (*North Vietnam and the NVA*)—in the terms specified by the United States. Those terms were that South Vietnam should, without help from U.S. ground forces, be capable of resisting aggression so long as America continued to provide logistical and financial support, and—of critical importance later, once a cease-fire agreement had been negotiated—renewed application of U.S. air and naval power should North Vietnam violate the terms of that (*cease-fire*) agreement.

The viability of such arrangement would be demonstrated in 1972, when the enemy’s Easter Offensive was met and turned back after heavy fighting by just that combination of South Vietnamese and American forces and resources. **So severely were the invading (*NVA*) forces punished that it was three years before they could mount another major offensive and that despite the complete withdrawal of all U.S. troops in the meantime.**”

¹⁸ Sorley, Lewis S. III (1999) USMA 1956. *A BETTER WAR: The Unexamined Victories and Final Tragedy of America’s Last Years in Vietnam*. Harcourt Brace & Company, New York. pp 217-218

APRIL 1975—The North Việt Nam Victory¹⁹:

The war was lost in April 1975 when the NVA entered Saigon. However, this was not an overthrow by revolutionary guerrillas running around in sandals, wearing black pajamas and carrying homemade weapons. It was lost when Việt Nam and Saigon was overrun by a very good conventional (NVA) army made up of seventeen (17) conventional divisions, organized into four army Corps (this was the entire North Vietnamese army²⁰) which launched a cross border, frontal attack on South Việt Nam and conquered it, in the same manner as many allied European military leaders conquered Europe--using the age-old tactics of mass and maneuver, the NVA defeated the South Vietnamese Army in detail.²¹

“We Were Soldiers Once and Young”

Thus American Việt Nam veterans have nothing to be ashamed of. They did a very difficult and challenging job under extraordinary conditions. Despite lack of support in America and their own personal concerns about fighting a war in which their Nation’s strategy could not win, they did a magnificent job. Draftee, Regular Army, Army National Guard, Army Reserve, Regular Air Force, Air National Guard, USAF Reserve, Regular Marines (USMC), USMCR, Navy, USNR, USCG, and USCGR all performed in a professional and commendable manner.

Finally, we must remember the nature of battle:

“What battles have in common is human: The behaviour

19 Sears, K.G. (November 2002). *Vietnam: Looking Back - At the Facts*

20 Because the US Congress had unconditionally guaranteed no military action against North Vietnam, there was no need for them to keep forces in reserve to protect their home bases, flanks or supply lines in North Viet Nam.

21 The complete description of this 1975 North Vietnamese Army (PAVN) classical military victory is best expressed in the words of the NVA general who commanded it. Recommended reading: *Great Spring Victory* by General Van Tien Dung, NVA Foreign Broadcast Information Service, Volume I, 7 Jun 76 and Volume II, 7 Jul 76. General Dung’s account of the final battle for South Việt Nam reads like it was taken right out of a US Army manual on offensive military operations. His descriptions of the mass and maneuver were exquisite. His selection of South Vietnam’s army as the “Center of gravity” could have been written by General Carl von Clausewitz¹ himself. General Dung’s account goes into graphic detail on his battle moves aimed at destroying South Vietnam’s armed forces and their war materials. He never once, not even once, ever mentions a single word about revolutionary warfare or guerilla tactics contributing in any way to his *Great Spring Victory*. General Van Tien Dung, NVA Foreign Broadcast Information Service, Volume I, 7 Jun 76 and Volume II, 7 Jul 76.

of men struggling to reconcile their instinct for self-preservation, their sense of honour and the achievement of some aim over which other men are ready to kill them. The study of battle is therefore always a study of fear and usually of courage; always of leadership, usually of obedience; always of compulsion, sometimes of insubordination; always of anxiety, sometimes of elation or catharsis; always of uncertainty and doubt, misinformation and misapprehension, usually also of faith and sometimes of vision; always of violence, sometimes also of cruelty, self-sacrifice, compassion; above all, it is always a study of solidarity and usually also of disintegration – for it is towards the disintegration of human groups that battle is directed.²²

POST SCRIPT:

This paper was prepared by a United States Army Infantry officer who served in Việt Nam as an Infantry Platoon Leader and Company Commander in an American unit in combat in Việt Nam.

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22 Keegan, John (1976). *The Face of Battle*. The Viking Press, New York. pp 297-298

- O'Brien, Tim O. (1990). *The Things They Carried*. Houghton Mifflin Publishing Company, New York, New York
 - ▶ **Nota Bene:** A review of O'Brien's book by the Wall Street Journal:

“Powerful....Composed in the same lean vigorous style as his earlier books, *The Things They Carried* adds up to a captivating account of experiences of an infantry company in Vietnam...Evocative and haunting, the raw force of confession.” *Wall Street Journal*
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