

# Myths about the Vietnam War



"No event in American history is more misunderstood than the Vietnam War. It was misreported then, and it is misremembered now. Rarely have so many people been so wrong about so much. Never have the consequences of their misunderstanding been so tragic." [Nixon]

The Vietnam War has been the subject of thousands of newspaper and magazine articles, hundreds of books, and scores of movies and television documentaries. The great majority of these efforts have erroneously portrayed many myths about the Vietnam War as being facts. [Nixon]

*Myth: Most American soldiers were addicted to drugs, guilt-ridden about their role in the war, and deliberately used cruel and inhuman tactics.*

## The facts are:

91% of Vietnam Veterans say they are glad they served [Westmoreland]

74% said they would serve again even knowing the outcome [Westmoreland]

There is no difference in drug usage between Vietnam Veterans and non-Veterans of the same age group (from a Veterans Administration study) [Westmoreland]

Isolated atrocities committed by American soldiers produced torrents of outrage from anti-war critics and the news media while Communist atrocities were so common that they received hardly any attention at all. The United States ought to minimize and prevent attacks on civilians while North Vietnam made attacks on civilians a centerpiece of its strategy. Americans who deliberately killed civilians received prison sentences while Communists who did so received commendations. From 1957 to 1973, the National Liberation Front assassinated 36,725 South Vietnamese and abducted another 58,499. The death squads focused on leaders at the village level and on anyone who improved the lives of the peasants such as medical personnel, social workers, and school teachers. Atrocities - every war has atrocities. War is brutal and not fair. Innocent people get killed. [Nixon]

Vietnam Veterans are less likely to be in prison - only 1/2 of one percent of Vietnam Veterans have been jailed for crimes. [Westmoreland]

97% were discharged under honorable conditions; the same percentage of honorable discharges ten years prior to Vietnam [Westmoreland]

85% of Vietnam Veterans made a successful transition to civilian life. [McCaffrey]

Vietnam veterans' personal income exceeds that of non-veteran age group by more than 18 percent. [McCaffrey]

Vietnam veterans have a lower unemployment rate than non-veteran age group. [McCaffrey]

87% of the American people hold Vietnam Vets in high esteem. [McCaffrey]

*Myth: Most Vietnam veterans were drafted.*

2/3 of the men who served in Vietnam were volunteers. 2/3 of the men who served in World War II were drafted. [Westmoreland]

Approximately 70% of those killed were volunteers. [McCaffrey]

*Myth: The media have reported that suicides among Vietnam veterans range from 50,000 to 100,000 - 6 to 11 times the non-Vietnam veteran population.*

Mortality studies show that 9,000 is a better estimate. "The CDC Vietnam Experience Study Mortality Assessment showed that during the first 5 years after discharge, deaths from suicide were 1.7 times more likely among Vietnam veterans than non-Vietnam veterans. After that initial post-service period, Vietnam veterans were no more likely to die from suicide than non-Vietnam veterans. In fact, after the 5-year post-service period, the rate of suicide is less in the Vietnam veterans' group." [Houk]

*Myth: A disproportionate number of blacks were killed in the Vietnam War.*

86% of the men who died in Vietnam were Caucasians, 12.5% were black, 1.2% were other races. (CACF and Westmoreland)

Sociologists Charles C. Moskos and John Sibley Butler, in their recently published book "All That We Can Be," said they analyzed the claim that blacks were used like cannon fodder during Vietnam and can report definitively that this charge is untrue. Black fatalities amounted to 12 percent of all Americans killed in Southeast Asia - a figure proportional to the number of blacks in the U.S. population at the time and slightly lower than the proportion of blacks in the Army at the close of the war." [\[All That We Can Be\]](#)

*Myth: The war was fought largely by the poor and uneducated.*

Servicemen who went to Vietnam from well-to-do areas had a slightly elevated risk of dying because they were more likely to be pilots or infantry officers.

Vietnam Veterans were the best-educated forces our nation has ever sent into combat. 79% had a high school education or better. [McCaffrey]

**Here are statistics from the Combat Area Casualty File (CACF) as of November 1993. The CACF is the basis for the Vietnam Veterans Memorial (The Wall):**

Average age of 58,148 killed in Vietnam was 23.11 years. (Although 58,169 names are in the Nov. 93 database, only 58,148 have both the event date and birth date. Event date is used instead of declared death date for some of those who were listed as missing in action) [CACF]

<b>Deaths</b>		<b>Average Age</b>
Total	58,148	23.11 years
Enlisted	50,274	22.37 years
Officers	6,598	28.43 years
Warrantes	1,276	24.73 years
E1	525	20.34 years
11B MOS	18,465	22.55 years

Five men killed in Vietnam were only 16 years old. [CACF]

The oldest man killed was 62 years old. [CACF]

11,465 KIA's were less than 20 years old. [CACF]

*Myth: The average age of an infantryman fighting in Vietnam was 19.*

Assuming KIA's accurately represented age groups serving in Vietnam, the average age of an infantryman (MOS 11B) serving in Vietnam to be 19 years old is a myth, it is actually 22. None of the enlisted grades have an average age of less than 20. [CACF] The average man who fought in World War II was 26 years of age. [Westmoreland]

*Myth: The domino theory was proved false.*

The domino theory was accurate. The ASEAN (Association of Southeast Asian Nations) countries, Philippines, Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore and Thailand stayed free of Communism because of the U.S. commitment to Vietnam. The Indonesian threw the Soviets out in 1966 because of America's commitment in Vietnam. Without that commitment, Communism would have swept all the way to the Malacca Straits that is south of Singapore and of great strategic importance to the free world. If you ask people who live in these countries that won the war in Vietnam, they have a different opinion from the American news media. The Vietnam War was the turning point for Communism. [Westmoreland]

**Democracy Catching On** - In the wake of the Cold War, democracies are flourishing, with 179 of the world's 192 sovereign states (93%) now electing their legislators, according to the Geneva-based Inter-Parliamentary Union. In the last decade, 69 nations have held multi-party elections for the first time in their histories. Three of the five newest democracies are former Soviet republics: Belarus (where elections were first held

in November 1995), Armenia (July 1995) and Kyrgyzstan (February 1995). And two are in Africa: Tanzania (October 1995) and Guinea (June 1995). [Parade Magazine]

*Myth: The fighting in Vietnam was not as intense as in World War II.*

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 240 days of combat in one year thanks to the mobility of the helicopter.

One out of every 10 Americans who served in Vietnam was a casualty. 58,169 were killed and 304,000 wounded out of 2.59 million who served. Although the percent that died is similar to other wars, amputations or crippling wounds were 300 percent higher than in World War II. 75,000 Vietnam veterans are severely disabled. [McCaffrey]

MEDEVAC helicopters flew nearly 500,000 missions. Over 900,000 patients were airlifted (nearly half were American). The average time lapse between wounding to hospitalization was less than one hour. As a result, less than one percent of all Americans wounded who survived the first 24 hours died. [VHPA 1993]

The helicopter provided unprecedented mobility. Without the helicopter it would have taken three times as many troops to secure the 800-mile border with Cambodia and Laos (the politicians thought the Geneva Conventions of 1954 and the Geneva Accords of 1962 would secure the border) [Westmoreland]

### More helicopter facts:

Approximately 12,000 helicopters saw action in Vietnam (all services). [VHPA databases]

Army UH-1's totaled 7,531,955 flight hours in Vietnam between October 1966 and the end of 1975. [VHPA databases]

Army AH-1G's totaled 1,038,969 flight hours in Vietnam. [VHPA databases]

*Myth: Air America, the airline operated by the CIA in Southeast Asia, and its pilots were involved in drug trafficking.*

The 1990 unsuccessful movie "Air America" helped to establish the myth of a connection between Air America, the CIA, and the Laotian drug trade. The movie and a book the movie was based on contend that the CIA condoned a drug trade conducted by a Laotian client; both agree that Air America provided the essential transportation for the trade; and both view the pilots with sympathetic understanding. American-owned airlines never knowingly transported opium in or out of Laos, nor did their American pilots ever profit from its transport. Yet undoubtedly every plane in Laos carried opium at some time, unknown to the pilot and his superiors. For more information see <http://www.air-america.org>

*Myth: The American military was running for their lives during the fall of Saigon in April 1975. The picture of a Huey helicopter - evacuating people from the top of what was billed as being the U.S. Embassy in Saigon during the last week of April 1975 during the fall of Saigon helped to establish this myth.*



This famous picture is the property of Corbis - Bettman Archives. It was originally a UPI photograph that was taken by an Englishman, Mr. Hugh Van Ess.

Here are some facts to clear up that poor job of reporting by the news media.

### **Facts about the fall of Saigon**

It was a "civilian" (Air America) Huey, not Army or Marines.

It was NOT the U.S. Embassy. The building is the Pittman Apartments. The U.S. Embassy and its helipad were much larger.

The evacuees were Vietnamese, not American military.

The person that can be seen aiding the refugees is Mr. O.B. Harnage. He was a CIA case officer and now retired in Arizona.

### **Another famous picture.**



*Myth: Kim Phuc, the little nine-year-old Vietnamese girl running naked from the napalm strike near Trang Bang on 8 June 1972, was burned by Americans bombing Trang Bang.*

No American had involvement in this incident near Trang Bang that burned Phan Thi Kim Phuc. The planes doing the bombing near the village were VNAF (Vietnam Air Force) and were being flown by Vietnamese pilots in support of South Vietnamese troops.

on the ground. The Vietnamese pilot who dropped the napalm in error is currently living in the United States. Even the AP photographer, Nick Ut, who took the picture, was Vietnamese. The incident in the photo took place on the second day of a three-day battle between the North Vietnamese Army (NVA) who occupied the village of Trang Bang and the ARVN (Army of the Republic of Vietnam) who were trying to force the NVA out of the village. Recent reports in the news media that an American commander ordered the airstrike that burned Kim Phuc are incorrect. There were no Americans involved in any capacity. "We (Americans) had nothing to do with controlling VNAF," according to Lieutenant General (Ret) James F. Hollingsworth, the Commanding General of TRAC at that time. Also, it has been incorrectly reported that two of Kim Phuc's brothers were killed in this incident. They were Kim's cousins, not her brothers.

*Myth: The United States lost the war in Vietnam.*

The American military was not defeated in Vietnam. The American military did not lose a battle of any consequence. From a military standpoint, it was almost an unprecedented performance. (Westmoreland quoting Douglas Pike, a professor at the University of California, Berkeley, a renowned expert on the Vietnam War) [Westmoreland] This included Tet 68, which was a major military defeat for the VC and NVA.

## **THE UNITED STATES DID NOT LOSE THE WAR IN VIETNAM, THE SOUTH VIETNAMESE DID!**

### **Facts about the end of the war:**

The fall of Saigon happened 30 April 1975, two years AFTER the American military left Vietnam. The last American troops departed in their entirety 29 March 1973. How could we lose a war we had already stopped fighting? We fought to an agreed stalemate. The peace settlement was signed in Paris on 27 January 1973. It called for release of all U.S. prisoners, withdrawal of U.S. forces, limitation of both sides' forces inside South Vietnam and a commitment to peaceful reunification. [1996 Information Please Almanac]

The 140,000 evacuees in April 1975 during the fall of Saigon consisted almost entirely of civilians and Vietnamese military, NOT American military running for their lives. [1996 Information Please Almanac]

There were almost twice as many casualties in Southeast Asia (primarily Cambodia) the first two years after the fall of Saigon in 1975 than there were during the ten years the U.S. was involved in Vietnam. [1996 Information Please Almanac]

### **POW-MIA Issue (unaccounted -for versus missing in action)**

*Politics & People*, On Vietnam, Clinton Should Follow a Hero's Advice, Sen. John Kerrey is quoted, as saying about Vietnam, there has been "the most extensive accounting in the history of human warfare" of those missing in action. While there are still officially more than 2,200 cases, there now are only 55 incidents of American servicemen who were last seen alive but aren't accounted for. By contrast, there still are 78,000

unaccounted-for Americans from World War II and 8,100 from the Korean conflict. "The problem is that those who think the Vietnamese haven't cooperated sufficiently think there is some central repository with answers to all the lingering questions," notes Gen. John Vessey, the former chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff and the Reagan and Bush administration's designated representative in MIA negotiations. "In all the years we've been working on this we have found that's not the case." [The Wall Street Journal]

**More realities about war:** Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) - it was not invented or unique to Vietnam Veterans. It was called "shell shock", "Battle Fatigue" and other names in previous wars. An automobile accident or other traumatic event also can cause it. It does not have to be war related. The Vietnam War helped medical progress in this area.

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Restraining the military in Vietnam in hindsight probably prevented a nuclear war with China or Russia. The Vietnam War was shortly after China got involved in the Korean War, the time of the Cuban missile crisis, Soviet aggression in Eastern Europe and the proliferation of nuclear bombs. In all, a very scary time for our country.

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## SOURCES

[Nixon] *No More Vietnams* by Richard Nixon

[Parade Magazine] August 18, 1996 page 10.

[CACF] (Combat Area Casualty File) November 1993. (The CACF is the basis for the Vietnam Veterans Memorial, i.e. *The Wall*), Center for Electronic Records, National Archives, Washington, DC

[All That We Can Be] *All That We Can Be* by Charles C. Moskos and John Sibley Butler

[Westmoreland] *Speech by General William C. Westmoreland* before the Third Annual Reunion of the Vietnam Helicopter Pilots Association (VHPA) at the Washington, DC Hilton Hotel on July 5th, 1986 (reproduced in a Vietnam Helicopter Pilots Association *Historical Reference Directory Volume 2A*)

[McCaffrey] *Speech by Lt. Gen. Barry R. McCaffrey*, (reproduced in the *Pentagram*, June 4, 1993) assistant to the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, to Vietnam veterans and visitors gathered at "The Wall", Memorial Day 1993.

[Houk] *Testimony by Dr. Houk*, Oversight on Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, 14 July 1988 page 17, Hearing before the Committee on Veterans' Affairs United States Senate one hundredth Congress second session. Also "Estimating the Number of Suicides Among Vietnam Veterans" (Am J Psychiatry 147, 6 June 1990 pages 772-776)

**[TheWallStreetJournal]** *TheWallStreetJournal* ,1June1996pageA15.

**[VHPA1993]** VietnamHelicopterPilotsAssociation *1993MembershipDirectory* page 130.

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**[1996InformationPleaseAlmanac]** *1995InformationPleaseAlmanacAtlas& Yearbook* 49thedition,HoughtonMifflinCompany,Boston&NewYork1996,pages 117,161and292.

**[Burkett]** *StolenValor:HowtheVietnamGenerationwasRobbedofitsHeroesandits History*byB.G.BurkettandGlennaWhitley,VerityPress,Inc.,Dallas,TX,1998.Book review.

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