

**VIETNAM "THE LOST CRUSADE"**  
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On November 11, 1969 (which also happened to be Veterans Day) I was inducted into the US Army as a very reluctant draftee. This happened six months after my graduation from college and involved swapping a lucrative job as a public accountant for that of a buck private and a 90% pay cut. Later on I will give you some personal reminiscences and observations but first let's review the history of Vietnam and the American involvement.

### **Vietnam from Earliest Times to the end of World War Two**

By about 1,000 BC the development of wet-rice cultivation and bronze casting led to the flourishing of the Don Son culture, forerunners of the Vietnamese civilization. The Hong Bang Dynasty is considered the first Vietnamese state but it was overthrown in 257 BC by a native uprising. Then in 111 BC the Chinese Han Dynasty conquered the area and China remained in nominal control for over a thousand years. There were periods of autonomy but it wasn't until 938 AD that true independence was achieved. Given this long period of foreign rule, the Vietnamese have always looked upon the Chinese as a threat, a circumstance that was forgotten by the Americans in the mid 20th century.

The French began to infiltrate the country in 1859 and finally achieved full control in 1885. They were aided by Vietnamese elites who had converted to Catholicism and were more than happy to oppress their ethnic kin in order to get rich. The French and their Vietnamese allies exploited the country, establishing a plantation economy that was far more interested in material gain than the well being of the inhabitants. Although a Western style education system was established it mostly benefited the native Catholic elites. A movie from 1992 entitled *Indochine* and starring Catherine Deneuve graphically portrayed French colonial rule from the 1930's to the Geneva Accords of 1954. I watched this movie again a few months ago and it was great; gives you a deep understanding as to why the Vietnamese hated the French and their local collaborators, a hatred transferred later to the Americans. Various nationalist uprisings occurred all throughout the colonial period and were brutally suppressed. A Vietnamese contingent, led by an obscure waiter named Ho Chi Mien, arrived in Paris during the Peace Talks at the end of World War One but their plea for independence was rejected and this was one element in Ho's decision to join the French Communist Party.

After mainland France fell in the summer of 1940 during World War Two, the Japanese moved into all of French Indochina (today the countries of Vietnam, Cambodia & Laos) although they allowed the Vichy French to retain a facade of control. The Japanese utilized the resources of the country but did not take full control until March 1945 and their rapacious exploitation caused the Vietnamese Famine of 1945 leading to two million deaths. Ho and his allies formed a resistance movement in 1941 called the Viet Minh and they fought both the Japanese and the returning French colonialists. It has been speculated that Franklin Roosevelt was opposed to returning all the former colonies to their European masters but his death and the onset of the Cold War, caused the Truman administration to side with France as a bulwark against Communism. Whether Roosevelt would have been able to do anything different is unknown.

### **From World War Two to 1963**

After the Japanese surrender in August 1945, the Viet Minh occupied Hanoi and proclaimed a provisional government which asserted national independence on September 2nd. The French government then sent the Far East Expeditionary Corps to restore colonial rule. The French were hard pressed to hold their own but got a big boost after the outbreak of the Korean War in 1950 which refocused American attention on the perceived Communist threat. Since Nikita Khrushchev had declared Communist solidarity with "wars of national liberation", all insurgencies were looked at through the prism of Cold War ideology. As a result the US began funding the bulk of the French war effort. When the Viet Minh cornered a large French force at Dien Bien Phu in early 1954, certain elements in the US government, especially Vice President Richard Nixon, advocated the use of nuclear weapons but were overruled by President Eisenhower. Dien Bien Phu fell and support for the war in mainland France collapsed; the Geneva Accords, signed in July 1954, temporarily partitioned the country at the 17th parallel with a call for a country-wide free election in 1956. Given the Viet Minh's one party rule in the north it is unlikely the elections would have been truly free but in any event they were never held.

The US did not sign the Accords and worked behind the scenes to back an independent Republic of Vietnam in the South, led by Ngo Din Diem. An internal insurgency known as the Viet Cong quickly surfaced; a significant amount of their manpower came from Northern refugees but at no time prior to 1965 were regular North Vietnamese Army units (NVA) involved. Diem was a strange character; personally incorruptible, he was in effect a lay monk. Deeply religious, his family had converted to Catholicism in the colonial period but he took his faith very seriously and did not properly respect the feelings of the vast majority of the population who were Buddhist. Diem and his Christian mindset were very popular with influential people in the US such as John Foster Dulles, Eisenhower's Secretary of State and Henry Luce, the publisher of Time magazine who were both the product of Chinese missionary families and were members of the so-called China Lobby which advocated a hard line against all Communists and Communist sympathizers. The two most influential Catholic prelates in the US, Cardinal Spellman of New York and Cardinal Cushing of Boston, also strongly supported Diem and were part of the same group. The authoritarianism and religious intolerance of the Diem regime was ignored or downplayed. The China Lobby, though diminished over time, remained influential all the way up to 1972 when Nixon's opening to China signaled a new chapter in US foreign relations. In fact Nixon's 1972 handshake with Chinese premier Chou En Lai was very symbolic as John Foster Dulles has pointedly refused to shake Chou's hand in 1954 which the Chinese looked upon as an insult.

Unfortunately the "power behind the throne" in South Vietnam was Diem's corrupt brother Ngo Din Nhu and his infamous wife Madame Nhu. When protests broke out in the early 1960's and featured the self immolation of Buddhist monks, Madame Nhu made comments about a "barbecue". The Catholic elites had always been distrusted by the average Vietnamese and were seen by many as the lackeys of first the French and then the Americans. These protests created such a distraction from the war that the American Ambassador, Henry Cabot Lodge, conspired with disgruntled elements in the South Vietnamese Army to organize a coup which took place on November 3, 1963. The coup

was not supposed to result in the death of the Diem brothers but they were both killed and President Kennedy was aghast but what was done was done. Kennedy had steadily increased the number of US advisors but had not yet committed any ground combat troops.

The aftermath of the coup was a major disappointment as a succession of counter coups took place before General Nguyen Van Thieu and Air Marshall Nguyen Cao Ky took control and solidified their position via a fraudulent election in 1965. During this time, the insurgency gained strength although still lacking any direct involvement of the North Vietnamese Army.

Much has been written about how the assassination of John Kennedy less than three weeks after the initial coup was a major turning point as Kennedy apologists insist that he was committed to ending the war. Per this analysis, the accession of Vice President Lyndon Johnson changed everything and led to all the later problems. As a 13-year old Catholic school kid, no one was more excited at Kennedy's victory in 1960 than myself. He was young, handsome, charismatic and had a glamorous wife but on reflection I think his reputation as a liberal icon is somewhat misplaced. John Kennedy was elected in 1960 in part by trumpeting a non-existent "missile gap" with the Soviet Union and due to his national security briefings was probably aware of his own duplicity. This phony issue was quickly forgotten shortly after the election. JFK was far more concerned with international affairs and a reluctant convert to civil rights. In fact what turned out to be a significant factor in the 1960 campaign, the call to Martin Luther King's wife after he had been arrested in Alabama, was bitterly opposed at the time by almost all of his advisors, especially his brother Bobby. Both John and Bobby were staunch supporters of Senator Joe McCarthy; in fact JFK was the only Democratic Senator who did not publically criticize McCarthy. He was conveniently absent when the Senate voted to censure McCarthy in 1955 and Bobby actually attended his funeral which was held in 1957, two years after his disgrace at the Senate hearings. The elder Joe Kennedy had always been a big fan of McCarthy and until his debilitating stroke in 1962 he served as one of JFK's most influential advisors.

John Kennedy was a classic Cold Warrior and no after the fact mythologizing can change that fact. True, his assassination was a terrible tragedy and Johnson's life-long insecurity, especially when faced with the "Harvards" (Johnson's phrase) of Kennedy's staff was a serious problem but when you get right down to the brass tacks I find it hard to believe that Kennedy would have "abandoned" (my word) Vietnam to an inevitable Communist takeover and been willing to face the criticism that would have entailed given the Cold War hysteria of the time.

### **American Involvement through 1975**

Much has been written about the Gulf of Tonkin incident in August 1964. Many anti-war activists claim the Johnson administration faked the evidence and then used it as a convenient excuse to begin bombing North Vietnam, up to that time off limits. I think something actually did happen but it was confused and rather than a conspiracy it was a useful rationale for something (i.e. bombing) that the hawkish members of the

administration wanted to do anyway. I think Johnson was so fearful of losing his cherished domestic agenda if he was seen as the one who "lost Vietnam" just as the Truman administration was blamed for losing China (was it ours to lose?) that he reluctantly went along. It's possible Kennedy, since he wasn't so committed to a domestic agenda, might have stood up to the hawks but his basic Cold War mentality might also have won out. The real problem was that America was fixated on a perceived world- wide Communist conspiracy and could not (and would not) see any differences in the various insurgencies then breaking out all over the world. If you were a revolutionary trying to overthrow a right-wing (i.e. pro Western) government and you got any aid or support from the Soviet Union or China you were ipso facto a Communist and had to be opposed. The reality that Vietnam and China were historic foes was discounted or ignored. The purging of all experienced Asian experts during the McCarthy Era certainly didn't help.

Johnson played up the hawkish rhetoric of his 1964 Republican opponent Barry Goldwater and famously stated that "we won't ask US boys to do the job that Asian boys should be doing" but he secretly was in agreement with the hard-line members of his administration, though reluctantly so. Goldwater's theory that the war must be prosecuted to victory was also a bit disingenuous as no real definition of victory was ever advanced. Clearly only a full scale invasion of North Vietnam, which risked a nuclear war or at least appeared at the time to do so, and a years or decades long occupation of the country would have qualified as a true "victory" but that wasn't in the cards as we have seen from the aftermath of the Iraq war. Americans or any other democratic government for that matter will not support open ended commitments which involve a persistent death count. The example of Korea is always brought up by the hawks as an example of a continuing US troop commitment which has "preserved the peace". What is left out of this scenario is the fact that absent a few accidents or isolated incidents, no US troops have died in Korea in over 60 years.

In 1965 Johnson was faced with a Hobson's Choice of either "cutting and running" or dramatically escalating the US involvement and he chose the latter. The South Vietnamese government had never recovered from the chaos after the Diem coup and despite overwhelming firepower and numerical superiority was clearly losing the war. Up to this point the NVA was still not directly involved so Saigon was losing the war to their own insurgents, even though many were refugees from the North. Not escalating would have opened the floodgates to charges of weakness and "appeasement" and Johnson wasn't willing to take that gamble. Plus his military advisors assured him that just a few hundred thousand American troops would wrap things up in short order. Where have we heard that argument in more recent times? Therefore US troop levels were dramatically increased and for a time the insurgency was held in place but it was always the Americans who supplied the firepower and combat troops with minimal help from the ARVN (Army of South Vietnam). Another key factor was that the ARVN were trained as American troops who relied on unlimited airpower and drastic amounts of mobility and ground firepower. Without that level of support, the ARVN with all their other problems was overmatched as the NVA began to play a major role after the US escalation. In fact some of the President's major advisors, especially McGeorge Bundy

and John McNaughton accepted, that given the weakness of the South Vietnamese regime, a real "victory" was not possible but it was important for the US to commit itself and suffer a "bloody nose" in order to demonstrate to the world that we were committed to the anti-Communist crusade. These comments are repulsive to us today and certainly immoral but they must be understood in the context of the hysterical Cold War mentality of the day and the firm belief in a monolithic Communist conspiracy dedicated to taking over the world. Johnson's advisors, especially Defense Secretary Robert McNamara were fixated on the strategy employed during the Cuban missile of 1962 where a measured escalation of force eventually led to the Russians backing down and this gradualism was adopted as official policy, despite the strong opposition of the American military who wanted quick decisive military action. The context of Cuba and Vietnam were vastly different but these nuances were lost on McNamara.

In February 1968 the VC and NVA launched the so-called Tet offensive. This was a complete surprise and at first very successful with VC troops actually penetrating the compound of the US Embassy in Saigon. Eventually massive US firepower beat back the enemy and by any measure of military effectiveness the campaign was a disastrous failure. It is even said by some hard line hawks that General Giap, the NVA commander, was so disheartened by the losses that he was ready to throw in the towel but I have never been able to verify that contention. However, coming after repeated assurances by General Westmoreland and the other top brass that there was "light at the end of the tunnel", Tet was a massive public relations fiasco for the Johnson administration. When Walter Cronkite, the most respected US journalist, questioned the viability of the war effort, Johnson knew that it had to be ended.

Johnson, already facing a primary challenge from Senator Eugene McCarthy of Minnesota, withdrew from the presidential race in March 1968 and this quickly drew Robert Kennedy into the lists. Some McCarthy supporters felt that Kennedy was a Johnny come lately and refused to support him. It's also more than possible that had Kennedy not been killed in June 1968 he might still have lost the nomination to Hubert Humphrey who declared after Johnson's withdrawal, since at that time the support of big city bosses was much more important than primary wins. If Kennedy had buried the hatchet during the convention and especially if Humphrey had named him as his running mate, not a totally outrageous scenario, Hubert would have had more leeway to deviate from the administration line on the war and could very well have defeated Richard Nixon that November. It also must be remembered that Humphrey was a far more consistent liberal on domestic affairs than either of the Kennedy brothers. He had been a staunch opponent of Joe McCarthy from the beginning while the Kennedy brothers, particularly Bobby, had been rabid supporters right up to the end and Humphrey had in effect launched the political aspect of the civil rights movement twenty years earlier with his stirring speech at the 1948 Democratic Convention. It's also a fact that one of JFK's most cherished legacies, the Peace Corps, was initially proposed by Humphrey in 1957.

As it turned out Richard Nixon, the personification of a Cold Warrior, suddenly became the "peace candidate" as Humphrey was hamstrung by his association with Lyndon Johnson. Since quite a few Kennedy and Eugene McCarthy loyalists more or less sat out the election, Nixon won a narrow victory. The idea of Nixon stating that he had a "secret plan to end the war" is often bandied about as proof of his perfidy but I have not been able to verify that he ever actually used that phrase although he clearly let on that only he would be able to end the war honorably. There is no doubt that Nixon supporters, including Anna Chennault, who we will discuss later, sabotaged what looked to be a peace breakthrough in mid-October and convinced the South Vietnamese regime that they would get a better deal under Nixon. Of course this can also be looked at as a ploy by Johnson to help out Humphrey; a so-called October Surprise. In any event the peace feeler collapsed, Nixon won the election and took over the task of dealing with the war.

Nixon and his foreign policy guru, Henry Kissinger, knew in their heart of hearts that the war could not be won but felt that at least the fig leaf of an honorable settlement must be achieved to placate the right wing and in any event the US prisoners in Hanoi had to be freed. Nixon announced a policy of Vietnamization, gradually turning the war over to the ARVN, but for the reasons mentioned above this was not a viable solution. His ending of the draft in 1973 also helped to diffuse anti-war sentiment. It might be argued that his Christmas bombing in December 1972 finally forced the North Vietnamese to agree to a peace accord. However in retrospect the accords were a joke as the NVA was not forced to move their troops then in South Vietnam and Nixon's contention that if the North violated the accords, he would be able to restart the war was not realistic and completely impossible after revelations of his Watergate transgressions severely weakened his hand. In fact Nixon's opening to China and his rapprochement with the Soviet Union in effect invalidated the whole basis for continuing the war (i.e. to stop the spread of monolithic Communism). At that point the only remaining legitimate issue was the release of US prisoners.

Nixon resigned in August 1974 and Gerald Ford took over. Any residual support for involving the US in Vietnam if the North violated the Peace Accords evaporated rapidly especially after the American prisoners were released. In December 1974 the NVA launched a full scale offensive and Saigon fell on April 30. The scenes of the chaos during this period are seared into the minds of all Americans old enough to remember. Some hawks have said that the US "starved" the ARVN of supplies and it is no wonder they did so poorly but their motivation had always been suspect and since they had been trained as US troops to rely on massive ground and air firepower it is no wonder they made such a dismal showing.

### **Post War Vietnam**

One of the rationales for continuing the war was that it's end would result in a "bloodbath" as any Vietnamese who had supported the old regime or collaborated with the Americans would be purged. In fact up to 200,000 were summarily executed with many thousands of others sent to reeducation camps or perishing attempting to flee. However in all fairness this is not unknown in almost any situation of a bitterly contested war after the victory of one side. There exist many heart rending stories of refugees

sacrificing all to escape, often to the United States. My wife's Catholic parish sponsored a Vietnamese refugee family who eventually prospered and for at least five years afterwards, sent all the parishioners a friendly Christmas card thanking them for their support.

Early efforts to impose Communist ideology, especially collectivization, were disastrous, resulting in economic chaos and triple digit inflation. This caused another exodus of refugees, many of whom drowned at sea.

In 1978 the Vietnamese military invaded Cambodia which had installed the murderous Khmer Rouge regime after the US invasion of the early 1970's. This was another demonstration of the fallacy of the so-called domino theory in which all of Southeast Asia, including Indonesia, would fall to monolithic Communism if the war in Vietnam wasn't pursued to "victory". The Khmer Rouge were notorious for their "killing fields" where an estimated quarter of the population perished. The West, while condemning these atrocities, did nothing while the Vietnamese essentially solved the problem, although not for humanitarian reasons. In fact the US and its' allies continued to support the ousted Cambodian government in international forums such as the UN for years even though they had previously denounced it as perpetuating genocide.

Communist China, a supporter of the old Cambodian regime, launched a border war in 1979 to "punish" the Vietnamese but suffered a sharp check. Another example of the centuries long animosity between these two states which clearly over rode any sense of Communist solidarity. This persistent mid set of the American government to ignore any historical anomalies in unique situations and focus only on the short term still exists today, as shown in the Middle East.

Finally in 1986, the Sixth National Congress of the Communist Party of Vietnam ousted the old guard and put in place economic changes modeled on those recently adopted by China. They instituted a series of free market reforms which carefully managed the transition from a planned economy to a so-called socialist-oriented market economy.

Vietnam today is still a one party state with limited political freedoms but the economy has achieved strong growth in agricultural and industrial production, construction, exports and foreign investment at the cost of an increase in income inequality and gender disparities. The US has reconciled itself to the regime and now has normal diplomatic ties and Vietnam even welcomes tourism, especially veterans of the war. However, my personal desire to return is not very strong.

### **Now for my personal story**

Ten guys from my hometown in Ohio were all drafted on the same day and first sent to Cleveland for initial paperwork and the induction ceremony and then shipped to Fort Campbell, Kentucky for basic training which lasted eight weeks.



Our basic training company was the last ever of the pre-lottery draft. Before that time technically everyone was subject to induction but after the lottery a good "number" meant that you were home free. The first lottery actually took place while we were at Fort Campbell and one of the guys in my unit had a number of 323 which meant that had things been delayed a week he never would have been called up. Our unit was made up of three distinct groups. First were a contingent of mostly young National Guardsmen from Oklahoma who were by far the most enthusiastic of all the participants; I think many of them looked upon it as similar to Boy Scout Camp. The second were the draftees and it appeared that many were just like me, college graduates who ran out of deferment options and none of us were very happy to be there. The last were enlistees who had signed up for at least three years and were technically "guaranteed" a slot in a military occupational specialty (MOS) of their choice. Everything in the military is reduced to an acronym so I'll be using them a lot. Most of the enlistees were young; quite a few high school dropouts from working class and largely poor backgrounds. Several whose stories I picked up actually were given a "choice" by a judge to either serve prison time for some petty offense or enlist in the service. Of course one thing the recruiter didn't tell them about the "guaranteed" MOS was that it also involved getting a minimum score on an aptitude test and since many were barely literate, they failed badly and the MOS guarantee became 21-Bravo or infantry.

My patience for the tender ministrations of our drill sergeants was strained as it was difficult for me to adjust to the fact of taking orders from someone who in the real world would probably be emptying the trash but I sucked it up and got through. It was a real education to see how others, particularly the enlistees, handled this as it was probably the first time many had ever experienced any discipline and they couldn't handle it. At the conclusion of basic training the Army in their infinite wisdom decided that I had a Civilian Acquired Skill (CAS); i.e. I knew how to type, and assigned me directly to Fort Lewis Washington as a clerk-typist and therefore bypass Advanced Individual Training (AIT). Fort Lewis was a processing center for GI's coming back from Asia (Vietnam and Korea) to be mustered out of the service. Seeing all these people leaving the Army while I still had the better part of two years left wasn't too good for my morale. I did have many interesting conversations with some of my colleagues who were combat veterans which I'll get into later.

I was at Fort Lewis from January to May 1970 and during that time my girlfriend/fiancée Judi graduated from college and decided to move to Washington so we could be together. Even though it was illegal to move off base, I told a local landlord who specialized in renting to military couples that we were married and no one asked any more questions. I was ecstatic when I picked up Judi at the airport and drove to our new home. That joy was severely diminished the same day as one of the other renters in the unit told me confidentially that he had seen orders that assigned both of us to Vietnam, effective in June. I waited a day to tell Judi but afterwards we reconciled ourselves to reality and enjoyed the one month we had together in Washington and then the month's leave I was granted and I returned home to Ohio. Leaving was very sad and most of my family went to the airport to wish me off; that day was probably the most emotional I had ever seen my father, except maybe the day his hunting dog died.

I boarded the plane and flew back to Fort Lewis and then got on a Flying Tiger airplane which took us to Vietnam with a stopover in Tokyo. Flying Tiger was the outgrowth of Claire Chennault's American Volunteer Group of pilots who assisted the Chinese government in fighting the Japanese before and after Pearl Harbor. These contacts enabled Chennault's followers, especially his Chinese widow Anna, to set up the company after the war and they made millions as the exclusive charter service for the US military. We landed at Cam Rahn Bay and one memorable exchange came as we were touching down and a guy next to me asked "are you scared?". My reply was that anyone who isn't scared had to be crazy. After landing we were sent to a barracks to await orders; at that point none of us knew where we were going to end up. After two days I got orders for the 284th MP Company which was the cadre for the Long Binh Jail (known as LBJ) which housed US prisoners who had been convicted or were awaiting trial for any variety of offenses from murder to assaulting other GI's or Vietnamese girlfriends to embezzlement, to long term AWOL, often amounting to 3-5 years! At the jail I served as a clerk and not a regular military policeman. Long Binh was located about 20 miles from Saigon.

Similar to 75 plus percent of people in the military, I never fired a weapon in anger or experienced any combat. Often we would hear artillery in the distance but the jail was in the center of the base and far enough away from the perimeter that it would be impossible for an enemy shell to even reach us. The fact that a half mile up the road was the headquarters of MACV (Military Assistance Command Vietnam) which housed the big boys such as General Abrams also helped. In the twelve months I was in country I only ventured 3-4 times more than a mile from my barracks and had minimal contact with Vietnamese civilians other than the so-called hootch maids who cleaned our barracks. However at both Fort Lewis and Long Binh I did have many conversations with combat veterans ranging from sergeants to captains. One of the consistent comments was the way they spoke of the VC and NVA in almost reverential tones; these guys are tough and definitely motivated was a common refrain. On the other hand they spoke of the South Vietnamese Army and Vietnamese civilians in general with contempt; they run away and can't operate without heavy US fire support was a common complaint. There was also an implicit racist tone as all Vietnamese were referred to derisively as "Gooks". This didn't make me feel good about the prospects of Nixon's Vietnamization policy; (i.e. gradually turning the war over to the locals) similar to the comments of some Iraq war hawks who assured us that with the right training the Iraqi army would be fine.

Another observation was the complete disruption of traditional Vietnamese society caused by the influx of thousands of relatively free spending Americans. The so-called strategic hamlet program which called for peasants to be uprooted from their traditional villages and placed in "safe havens" was a disaster as it deprived the people of their traditional sources of income and forced the local families to engage in illegal activity such as playing the black market, dealing drugs or turning their daughters into prostitutes. The American GI's were all issued ration cards which limited how much tobacco and liquor you could buy at the PX each month. The Hootch Maids would quickly determine if you weren't a smoker and then offer you money to buy them cigarettes which I assume they then sold on the black market. I think this phenomenon is present in any situation

where Western troops unfamiliar with the local customs are introduced en masse; the same as we had during the height of the Iraq war.

Another interesting development was your clothes. At the beginning of your tour you were issued five complete sets of clothes from shirts, pants, underwear, socks, etc. Within 2-3 weeks all but two of these would disappear and for the rest of your tour you would wear one set and the other would be washed by the Hootch Maids; I can't tell you what happened to the others. You could always tell when someone was "short" (a euphemism for guys whose twelve-month tour was almost up) because their uniforms would be in tatters; the result of wearing one set every other day for a year.

In an attempt to beat the black market all GI's were paid in Military Payment Certificates (MPC) or play money and it was illegal to possess US dollars. A separate conversion rate was used for MPC and the Vietnamese currency, the piaster, and non-GI's were forbidden to have MPC. Periodically the MPC was changed without notice and you had to cash in all your old money and get new money; if you had a significant amount of MPC (which you could obtain by dealing in the black market or selling drugs) you'd have a problem exchanging it. That was the theory but in practice anyone who wanted could find out about the change ahead of time and do what they had to do to shelter illegal cash. The Hootch Maids always had MPC which they weren't allowed to have and some GI's would have greenbacks sent to them from home which they would then trade on the black market or use to buy drugs. Clearly all of this activity led to massive corruption and disregard for the rule of law.

A few other observations I picked up from service at the jail. Every week we would have a new prisoner who would come in after 3, 4 or even 5 years AWOL (away without official leave). These guys would leave their units, then hook up with a Vietnamese woman and either play the black market or deal drugs until they were caught. Sunday was visiting day and we would always see women who would come to visit a prisoner and have with them a kid who might be 3-5 years old; obviously the son or daughter of the prisoner, which meant he had been on the lamb for at least that long. I have to believe that some of these guys were never caught, they may have died of a drug overdose or something else and I'm sure the Vietnamese "wife" would just quietly bury them without notifying the US authorities. I'm certain that some GI's who are still listed as missing actually fell into one of these situations. Another factor was drug use; during my first week at the jail we had a guy die of a drug overdose and we would constantly get prisoners who would come in with serious hard drug issues. Drugs such as heroin cost a fraction of what you would have to pay in the US and it was relatively easy to fall into a drug habit that would cost you hundreds of dollars or more a day back in what we called "the world".

I'm sure many of the GI's who made it back had big time drug habits they had to either kick or maintain via illegal activity. Such things as marijuana were so pervasive that almost no one paid any attention to it. Some of the prison guards would actually get high while they were in the guard towers.

Another observation involved the attitude you would develop toward the prisoners after working at the jail for an extended period. My twelve months was nothing compared to what a policeman in a major US city has to endure his entire career but I can see where you get jaded after seeing these low life prisoners day after day. Almost all of our prisoners were guys who would have been in jail back in the world if they hadn't been in the service. In all my time there I only met one prisoner who was guilty; all you had to do was ask them and you'd get a story about how they were framed or set up. Although police brutality should never be condoned I can see how your attitude would be warped by dealing with such people day after day and it's easy to transfer that feeling to others who "look" like the bad guys; i.e. all black, brown or low income people.

During my tour, Lt. William Calley was convicted of participating in the Mai Lai massacre, although all of his superior officers were let off. This created a firestorm on our base; I recall seeing a large "Free Calley" banner hung outside a barracks. I had heated discussions with several of my fellow soldiers who were almost unanimous in defending Calley as "just doing his job" since you never knew who the real enemy was you need to "kill them all". This was clearly racist and I even recall my bunkmate (who left shortly after I arrived) having a hat with the inscription "kill them all, God will sort them out". I never agreed much with William F. Buckley but greatly admired him for coming out forcefully in support of the Calley verdict. He stated that America has certain standards of conduct and this was well beyond the pale.

On a lighter note, there was the support I received from back in the world. Judi and I wrote to each other 3-4 times a week; the mail delivery was erratic and several times she wrote frantically to me as to why I hadn't written apparently fearing that I had lost interest or had some terrible accident but then would apologize in the next letter when five letters from me came the same day. Like a fool I did not keep any of her letters but she did save many of mine. Many other people wrote to me and I responded to all of them; the boredom and enormous amount of idle time enabled me to carry on a correspondence with quite a few people. The local newspaper printed the addresses of all servicemen from the area and I received quite a few care packages from strangers. They ranged from love-sick teenage girls who wanted me to look them up when I got back, to local VFW and American Legion posts to certain companies who encouraged their employees to participate. However the best came when my second grade niece, Tina, told her teacher that her Uncle John was in Vietnam. The teacher then organized a class project where they all sent me hand written Christmas cards. The messages were hilarious: I hope you don't get kilt, Does Santa Claus come to Vietnam, I hope you are having fun in the Army, I hope you aren't ded, when you go to bed don't let the bed bugs bite and many others. These were all a real morale booster.

One last story. As the plane touched down in San Francisco (i.e. the world) on the way home and with absolutely no prior arrangement or coordination between the troops, we all spontaneously broke out in cheering. To my daughter's ongoing regret, I repeat this story every time we land in an airplane. Thank you.