

Myths and Misrepresentations of Vietnam

1. The average age of an infantryman fighting in Vietnam was 19.

Assuming the number of KIAs also accurately represented the age groups serving in Vietnam, the average age of an infantryman serving in Vietnam was actually 22.8. None of the enlisted grades had an average age of less than 20. The average man who fought in World War II was 26 years of age.

2. 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. Approximately 70% of those killed in Vietnam were volunteers.

3. The media have reported that suicides among Vietnam veterans range from 50,000 to 100,000; that is 6 to 11 times more than 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 suicides is less in the Vietnam veterans' group."

4. Blacks Served In Disproportionate Numbers.

Of all the men and women who served in Vietnam, 275,000, or 10.6%, were black. The bulk of the remainder were Caucasian. At the time of the Vietnam War, Blacks represented approximately 12.5% of the total U.S. population. There is also a persistent myth that Blacks were used as "cannon fodder", being assigned to infantry units where they were forced to "walk point." This is not supported by the casualty data which indicates that 86.8% of those killed in action were Caucasian, while 12.1%, or 5,711, were Black. Again, this number is approximately the same as the percentage of Blacks in the general population during the war.

5. Drug Use Was Rampant In Vietnam.

Much has been made of drug use among personnel in Vietnam. The number of drug-related arrests by Military Police officers and CID agents during the war actually represents a much smaller percentage of drug use among the military than in the overall civilian population during the Vietnam War.

6. Fraggings Were Common In Vietnam.

The term "fragging" was coined for the intentional murder of a superior officer or noncommissioned officer, because a fragmentation hand grenade, or "frag", was the weapon used in some of these incidents. The total number of these incidents (238) over the 10-plus years of American involvement (totaling 2,594,000 troops), which is a percentage of .00917%; and from a percentage standpoint you were far less likely to be a homicide victim in Vietnam than on the streets of Berkeley, California. Statistics on the killing of superiors in earlier US wars are sketchy, but one account puts the percentage for WWI US forces at .00787% (and the vast majority of US soldiers were in combat for less than 5 months).

7. American Atrocities Were Widespread.

If they were, they were covered up with extraordinary skill and precision. Only two documented cases of War Crimes can be attributed to American Military personnel. One was the senseless slaughter of civilians in March 1968 at the village of My Lai by the 1st platoon of Charlie Company, 1st Battalion 20th Infantry, 11th Light Infantry Brigade, 23rd Infantry Division (Americal). The other was the murder of 16 noncombatant women and

children by five U.S. Marines of Bravo Company, 1st Battalion, 7th Marines, 1st Marine Division, at a village named Son Thang-4, southwest of Da Nang, on 19 February 1970. In both cases there was a court martial, and in both cases the accused were found guilty.

8. 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 was involved 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 who took the picture, Nick Ut, 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 air strike 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. Finally, Kim Phuc refused to allow herself to be used for propaganda by the North Vietnamese after they took over the south. She fled and now lives in Toronto.

9. Body Counts Were Falsified.

Certainly, there were individual cases of American soldiers and commanders overestimating their enemy's losses, but it was not a systematic Army and Government attempt to pump up numbers to mislead the public. In fact, on 3 April 1995 (the 20th anniversary of the end of the Second Indochina War) the North Vietnamese Communists finally admitted their true casualties. While the U.S. Command had officially stated that the U.S. forces killed about 750,000 NVA and VC, the Communists declared, in an official press release to *Agence France*, that we had actually killed 1.1 million NVA soldiers.

10. The quotation "We had to DESTROY the village in order to save it" was accurate and reflected an insane, out-of-control logic that the Army believed.

This is by far the most familiar quotation to emerge from The Vietnam War. These few words seemed to capture perfectly the absurd futility of America's presence in Vietnam. They were originally reported by Peter Arnett of the Associated Press, who quoted an unidentified American officer on why the village of Ben Tre was leveled during the Tet Offensive in early 1968: "It became necessary to destroy the town in order save it" was in a two-paragraph version of the AP dispatch that was buried on page 14 of the *New York Times*, with no byline. Other newspapers substituted the word "village" for "town." Due to Peter Arnett's solid reputation as a reporter, this quotation was not questioned at the time. Eventually, however, doubts were expressed about its authenticity. For one thing, Ben Tre was not a town but a provincial capital of fifty thousand. For another, although heavily damaged by fighting, Ben Tre was not leveled. Only a handful of American soldiers took part in combat there in a supporting role (e.g., forward observers). The town/city was being defended by the south Vietnamese against a North Vietnamese attack that was already causing indiscriminant civilian casualties and damage. The mayor of Ben Tre gathered most of civilians into the town center and begged for the South Vietnamese officers to call in American airpower to stop the North Vietnamese attack, which was finally done. The senior American officer, Army major Phil Cannella, later recalled telling Arnett that it was unfortunate that some of Ben Tre was destroyed in the course of its defense. Cannella thought he might have said at most: "It was a shame the town was destroyed." Cannella, who later turned against the war, believes Arnett may have embellished this comment by him. Arnett himself has steadfastly refused to identify the source of this famous quotation. He did tell writer, Peter Braestrup it was one of four officers he had interviewed on that day in 1968. As Braestrup pointed out in his book, *Big Story*, the day before Arnett's story ran, columnist James Reston wrote in his New York Times column, "How do we win by military force without destroying what we are trying to save?" Reston's column concluded "How will we save Vietnam if we destroy it in battle?"