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Some Attitudes of the American Soldiers towards the Civilians in the Vietnam War

The Vietnam War was all about preserving freedom and democracy in South Vietnam, but at the same time it brought death and destruction to the country's people. In that war, a significant number of the casualties were Vietnamese civilians killed during the military's search-and-destroy missions and "scorched-earth" tactics. How did their knowledge of these casualties affect the U.S. soldiers? It's impossible to know this fully, but a long-time war correspondent named Charles Collingwood once said that the Vietnam War was "as much political as military" and the American presence "introduced a dangerous element into the political situation."^[1] American soldiers may have found it difficult to rationalize the complexity created by the combination of moral issues and military obligations. They could have also been confused as to whether they should feel sympathy for the civilians, or anger towards these strangers for being the very reason why the United States was sending troops over to these dangerous jungles. Contrary to popular belief, some American soldiers developed very close relationships with Vietnamese civilians.

An oral history interview archived at the New York State Veterans Museum reveals that the impact of a close relationship with Vietnamese civilians did have a profound effect on one soldier's life. These civilians were like family to the soldier, Gary B. Beikirch. He never stopped fighting to protect them. His will to fight was so extraordinary that he received the Congressional

Medal of Honor. Ultimately, witnessing the deaths of these civilians affected him deeply. This story differs greatly from one popular perception of American soldiers as being violent towards the Vietnamese civilians.

First, the number of Vietnamese civilians killed owing to U.S. involvement is controversial. Accurate death tolls were subject to propaganda and denial of the military. As Neil Sheehan of the *United Press* was quoted in Phillip Knightley's book, *The First Casualty*, "We couldn't get anything out of official sources." A joke between military advisors was that "after counting a chicken here, a child or grandmother there, and every blood droplet leading to the jungle, you doubled the number and sent it to Saigon."^[2]

R.J. Rummel has done extensive research on the "democide" of civilians during the Vietnam War. He claims that U.S. forces were responsible for the indiscriminate bombing and shelling that killed many civilians, and may have sometimes violated internationally accepted rules of warfare and commands of military officials. Also, Americans did commit small-level atrocities, including the killing of Viet Cong trying to surrender, innocent peasants who ran away, and inhabitants of villages where a sniper was firing. There are extant confessions from soldiers that prove that the killing of POWs, or those trying to surrender, actually happened.^[3] American forces have been found to have massacred civilians. The most convincing example was the mass murder conducted by a unit of the U.S. Army on March 16, 1968 at My Lai. More than 500 civilians were killed- a majority being women, children (including babies) and elderly people. Many of the victims were sexually abused or tortured, and some of the bodies were found mutilated. For more than a year, the Army acted as if nothing had happened. Then photos were published, testimonies from some outraged villagers came forth, and anger exploded. Only

Lt. William Calley was held accountable, and served four months in prison. This massacre may have happened because, after a time, every face became an enemy.^[4] Furthermore, war crimes could have often been unreported, adding to the difficulty in finding accurate numbers of civilian deaths.

It is important not to generalize from some statistics and sources to claim that all American soldiers brutally murdered civilians. President Richard Nixon once said, “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.”^[5] Scenes from a movie, such as *Platoon*, can cause people to believe that everyone in the U.S. army was addicted to drugs and deliberately cruel to civilians. In one scene where the men of the platoon invade a village, a soldier bludgeons a one-legged villager to death and the sergeant shoots the village chief’s wife in the head. The soldiers are also found raping a village woman. In actuality, a large portion of the U.S. military strictly followed orders, and attempted to minimize civilian deaths. However, they weren’t necessarily concerned about the civilians. The cost of civilian life didn’t take away from an operation that was completed successfully.

Daniel C. Hallin discusses in his book *The “Uncensored War”: The Media and Vietnam* the media’s portrayal of the attitude of U.S. soldiers during the war. There was a good deal of coverage of the Air Force. Overall, that coverage avoided political issues of whether American involvement was effective, and moral issues pertaining to the lives of civilians. Reporters focused exclusively on the pilots’ personal experience and technology. The hundreds of feet that separated the pilots from the ground, distanced them from knowing the civilians who may have

been killed by their operations. Pilots were more concerned about the success of missions or the fancy new gadgets on the control panel. In an ABC report from 1972 the pilot was asked if it didn't bother him that his bombs might kill innocent civilians whom he could not see. His reply was that it did bother him and he tried his best to avoid killing civilians, but the priority is to get the job done. Commanders in the army were more concerned with prizes of war, measures of performance, and operation success. When a reporter interviewed a commander in the army, he would go into detail the accomplishments of the operations and treat destroying a village as a minor event.^[1] The obligation to military duty in a way takes away the responsibility of the damage from the soldier. Civilians weren't considered people, only objects that had to be eliminated in order to execute the operation. Without knowledge of the traumatic effect an attack can have on the civilians, there is no means of feeling guilty. This wasn't the case for every soldier. Soldiers developed psychological disorders—i.e., PTSD--after the war, suggesting that the events during the war overwhelmed their minds. Images of brutalities often couldn't be ignored and haunted soldiers for years.

A New Yorker named Gary B. Beikirch would have his life changed forever because of his experience with Vietnamese civilians. A newspaper clipping archived at the New York State Military Museum confirms that he grew up in Rochester, New York and at the “naive” age of twenty, decided to embark on the 18 weeks of training to become a U.S. Army Green Beret Sergeant. Next to the picture of Beikirch receiving the Congressional Medal of Honor from President Richard Nixon, it is described how on April 1, 1970 “as a medic he repeatedly exposed himself to enemy fire to rescue fallen men, until he himself, severely wounded and unable to move.” The newspaper article focuses on Beikirch for his “extraordinary heroism” but misses the important part of this man's story. This part's impact on his life is shown by his phone call to his

parents following his receipt of the medal. He said, “It’s in memory of all those who didn’t make it...this is for all of them...not just me.” During what Beikirch describes as “the most meaningful year I had ever spent,” he lived at a Montagnard jungle camp with only 12 Americans and 2300 Montagnard villagers.

The New York State Military Museum’s videotaped oral history interview of Beikirch covers his experience in Vietnam in some depth. The village, which consisted of mostly women and children, was surrounded by three North Vietnamese regiments. On a typical day at the camp Beikirch would take the kids to the swimming pool, watch a movie (John Wayne was the kids’ favorite), and eat with the Montagnards. He would even eat dog, so that he’d make the kids happy. Daio was a fifteen-year-old Montagnard, who followed him all the time, making him soup, setting up a hammock for him, and helping him to adjust to life in the jungle. One of the best memories Beikirch can recall with the “Yards” was a time when Chen, another youngster, ran around so that the water buffalo they tied to a post would chase after him, allowing them to control it in order to attend to its infected horn.

Beikirch said in his interview how he never felt he had a home since he left Vietnam. He planned on marrying and staying there forever. Having responsibility for the health of over two thousand people as a twenty-four-year-old was sometimes overwhelming and challenging for Beikirch. His most haunting memory of Vietnam was an incident when Chen brought a sick infant to him, suffering from malaria. After he gave the infant a shot of medicine, he watched the baby die, as no attempts of CPR could revive him. Another situation involved a Montagnard who became mysteriously ill. Supposedly he was cursed by the village witch doctor, and no treatment could alleviate the mysterious symptoms. Beikirch never understood the cause of his death. It

was at that cursed man's funeral when the village suddenly came under the deathly siege that would change Beikirch's life forever.

At around three o'clock in the morning of April 1, 1970 artillery and rockets began pounding the camp and continued for hours. At that hour, the only people up were women and children. Beikirch said the screams and images of lifeless bodies have never left his mind. He describes it as "surreal," to see body parts lying around. In a trench he found a Montagnard holding the headless body of his wife. He couldn't respond because he was overcome with anger. There was no time to grieve, and Beikirch continued to hand out medical supplies as he was being constantly knocked down by the violent explosions. His best friend Daio remained to help him for the entire duration of the siege. Beikirch spotted a Montagnard lying on the ground in an open area, so he and Daio ran across to bandage the civilian's wounds. Out of nowhere, there was a huge explosion, so Beikirch threw himself over the wounded man to shield him. The blast threw Beikirch about 25 feet into a wall.

By this time, every building was leveled. The North Vietnamese Army had tunnels and cleared under wire, so they successfully broke through the camp rising up from underground. Beikirch tried to get up, but couldn't move his legs, owing to a severe concussion. The body of the Montagnard he had just been shielding was now broken into bloody pieces from the explosion. The memory of this trauma has haunted Beikirch for years.

As Beikirch lay helpless, the two of the "Yards" picked him up, urging that he be taken to the medical bunker, but Beikirch refused. For hours the "Yards" carried him to treat the wounded, drag bodies, distribute ammo, direct fire, and fight for life. None of this could have been accomplished without the strong bond of love between Beikirch and his "Yard" friends.

Although Beikirch was continuously getting knocked out, he helped those in need until finally he lost consciousness. He woke up in an underground medical bunker. The new medic advised that Beikirch be sent home, but he says that he thought, “Leave the people and home I had grown to love? No way!” Immediately Beikirch called for his “Yards” to get him out of the medical bunker. It was the bond of trust that made them pick him up and carry him back out into battle. The two “Yards” carried Beikirch for hours as the battle raged on, taking him where directed, caring for the wounded, shielding him, protecting him, and holding him up as they continued to fight. Later Beikirch would wonder, “What made their love for me so strong that they were willing to risk their lives for me?” During one ground-breaking explosion, the two “Yards” covered Beikirch with their bodies. As the body of Daio rolled off him, he realized that his back had been completely ripped off. His best friend had died saving him. The righteous anger that rose within him gave him the strength to continue fighting. Beikirch finally woke in a hospital. A chaplain was standing beside the next bed, praying for a dying soldier. The chaplain asked Beikirch if he wanted to pray, but he was reluctant. He felt so guilty, helpless, and angry as he remembered the deaths of so many of his friends. He says he asked God, “I don’t know if you’re real. I don’t know if you’re here, but I’m scared and I need you.” Right then, he says, something miraculous happened, and he was overcome with a peace and “knowing” that “someone who heard my prayer and wanted me to know that I was loved as I never been loved before.” This presence would lead to years of searching for God. He found enlightenment after discovering the New Testament.

Memories from Vietnam became nightmares, and Beikirch believed no one, except God, could understand what he was going through. In September of 1973 Beikirch entered a seminary in New Hampshire dedicating his life to serving God. Not soon after he received the phone call

from Washington, D.C. asking him to come to Washington and be presented with the Congressional Medal of Honor by President Richard Nixon. Beikirch was confused about why he deserved such a prestigious award. However, he saw the medal as an opportunity to allow him to share what God taught him in the jungles of Vietnam. He had almost died, but instead learned a valuable lesson about life and about God. In Vietnam they had a saying which became a reality to Beikirch, "To really live you must die. To those who fight for it, life has meaning the protected will never know." The Montagnards who saved his life had helped him find trust in God. Today, when there are times he has trouble completely trusting God, he says he remembers his two "Yard" friends whom he trusted with his life. They loved him, protected him, and carried him when he couldn't walk. Beikirch wears the medal "For His Honor" and for his two "Yard" friends.

The treatment of Vietnamese civilians during the war was not always the same. Popular belief suggests that all American soldiers hated them, which wasn't always the case. Although it was found that some American forces massacred innocent Vietnamese, these actions cannot be generalized to all of the U.S. soldiers. Ways of coping with the brutalities that the soldiers had witnessed varied among the Americans. Some troops did not distinguish the difference between innocent civilians and North Vietnamese regiments. When survival depended on instinct, everyone became an enemy. Sometimes the distance that existed between the Americans and the civilians was welcomed, as a way to avoid feelings of guilt for the death of innocent people. Many military men didn't even care about the effect that their operations had on the civilians. Their attitudes were strictly military, in a conflict where there were also inevitable political and moral issues.

The attitudes of the soldiers who developed close relationships with civilians were vastly different. A soldier who was emotionally invested in their experiences could find his views of life vastly changed, as did Gary Beikirch. His oral history interview provides a fascinating case study of this process.

Notes

1. Geneva Overholser and Kathleen Hall Jamieson, eds., *The Press*, Oxford University Press, 2005.
Also see: Daniel C. Hallin, *The "Uncensored War": The Media and Vietnam*, Oxford University Press, 1986.
2. STATISTICS OF DEMOCIDE Chapter 6: Statistics Of Vietnamese Democide Estimates, Calculations, And Sources By R.J. Rummel
<http://www.hawaii.edu/powerkills/SOD.CHAP6.HTM>
3. "Documentary 'American Experience' puts horrific My Lai massacre into context" By: David Hinckley
http://www.nydailynews.com/entertainment/tv/2010/04/26/2010-04-26_soldiering_through_the_my_lai_massacre.html
4. "Statistics about the Vietnam War" By: Gary Roush
<http://www.vhfcn.org/stat.html>