ABSTRACT

HENDERSON, ALEXI JAI. No Fortunate Son: Marginalized Women Veterans of the U.S. War in Vietnam. (Under the direction of Dr. Nancy Mitchell).

On March 8, 1965, two U.S. Marine battalions landed on the shores of Da Nang in the Republic of Vietnam. The last U.S. personnel would not leave the Republic of Vietnam until April of 1975. In the ten intervening years before invasion and evacuation, the United States waged one of its most controversial wars in the nation's history. In the years following the American war in Vietnam a specific narrative about the war's goals, consequences, and veterans developed in American popular memory and scholarship. This specific and deeply entrenched narrative fixates on the white male veteran, who stands in history as a wrongfully disrespected, and now venerated, hero. Inspired by Viet Thanh Nguyen's concept of just memory, this thesis uses oral histories and interviews from black American and South Vietnamese women veterans to make space for them in American memory and scholarship.

No Fortunate Son: Marginalized Women Veterans of the U.S. War in Vietnam

by
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DEDICATION

For PopPop.

BIOGRAPHY

Alexi Henderson is an MA student at North Carolina State University. In the spring of 2020 she received her BA in Foreign Languages at Virginia Tech, where she majored in Classical Studies with a minor in War & Society. A native Virginian, she moved to Raleigh in the fall of 2020 to complete a master's degree in history.

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A Case of Misremembering

More than a dozen people stand on a rooftop in Saigon, soon to be renamed Ho Chi Minh City, on April 29, 1975. A helicopter is at the highest point of the roof, with an individual standing beside it reaching out to the line of people climbing up the roof's steep staircase in an effort to get a spot in what they hope will be a vehicle for their escape. The photo (figure 1), taken by Dutch photographer Hugh Van Es, is one of the lasting images of the U.S. war in Vietnam. For all its salience in American memory, it is often mislabeled. The people on the roof are not Americans, they are Vietnamese; the helicopter is not military, it is a civilian chopper from Air America; the building is not the United States Embassy, it is an apartment building on Gia Long Street.[1] The misremembering of Hugh Van Es' photograph is an example of a common phenomenon in American memory of the Vietnam War from an American perspective – the war was visual, tragic, and embarrassing. The people on the rooftop become scared Americans, the helicopter a military machine, and the Vietnamese people who are actually attempting to flee are erased from their place in the story of the American evacuation.

The U.S.' war in Vietnam was one of the most controversial military actions undertaken by the nation, and up until the invasions of Iraq and Afghanistan, the longest war in American history. In the two decades that American military personnel were stationed in Vietnam, from advisors to nurses to enlisted, men and women, the United States saw political and social upheaval. The anti-war movement, mid-century feminist movements, and the struggle for black

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[1] Andrew V. Pestano, "Last day in Saigon: Iconic UPI photo heralded end of Vietnam War," *United Press International*, April 28, 2015.

liberation affected Americans at home and abroad. In terms of the conflict itself, the Vietnam War represents for some Americans a "bad war, a syndrome, a quagmire, a stinging loss in need of healing and recuperation."[2] For others, like President Ronald Reagan, it was "a noble cause," during which U.S. armed forces "were never defeated in battle."[3] In popular memory the Vietnam War is defined for many Americans by returning veterans facing a raging anti-war movement, the 1968 Democratic National Convention in Chicago, a photograph of a young Phan Thi Kim Phuc running down a road in South Vietnam, her skin burning with the sting of napalm. Americans see the Vietnam War simultaneously as an ill-fated attempt at defending freedom and democracy for a people that some deemed ungrateful and corrupt, and/or an example of the worst of U.S. imperialism.

Many of these popular American memories focus on the white men who served in the Vietnam War. Movies like *Full Metal Jacket*, *We Were Soldiers*, and even *Rambo: First Blood Part II* center around the plight of the white male soldier, with no concern for their nonwhite counterparts or for women, let alone for the people of Vietnam whose country was racked by war. More recent documentaries like Ken Burns' 10-part, 18 hour long *The Vietnam War* incorporate the voices of some nonwhite soldiers who are, however, still vastly outnumbered by white men. The quintessential Vietnam War veteran is white, male, mentally and/or physically

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[2] Viet Thanh Nguyen, *Nothing Ever Dies: Vietnam and the Memory of War* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2016), 5.

[3] "Remarks at Memorial Day Ceremonies Honoring an Unknown Serviceman of the Vietnam Conflict. Ronald Reagan Presidential Library." May 28, 1984, https://www.reaganlibrary.gov/archives/speech/remarks-memorial-day-ceremonies-honoring-unknown-serviceman-vietnam-conflict.

weakened or disabled, and the war's ultimate victim. This image of the suffering white male veteran leaves no room for women, people of color, or the Vietnamese people.

A Solution: Just Memory

This thesis is inspired by Vietnamese-American author Viet Thanh Nguyen, whose 2016 book *Nothing Ever Dies: Vietnam and the Memory of War* calls for what Nguyen terms "just memory," which "recall[s] the weak, the subjugated, the different, the enemy, and the forgotten."[4] The backdrop of *Nothing Ever Dies* is Nguyen's twenty-first century journey through the Socialist Republic of Vietnam, the unified and nominally communist nation that replaced North and South Vietnam. A self-described "man with two countries," Nguyen was born in 1971 in what was then the Republic of Vietnam (South Vietnam), four years before the country ceased to exist. His return to Vietnam and subsequent book are attempts to "know how we make memories and how we forget them so that we can beat their hearts back to life."[5] Nguyen journeyed through Vietnam, stopping at roadside cemeteries, museums, and monuments. He examines memory in the minds of Vietnam's victors – the North Vietnamese and pro-revolutionary elements in the South – as well as the defeated, the South Vietnamese who imagine(d) a horrific life under a communist regime. While focusing on Vietnam, Nguyen also comments on memory in the United States. Nguyen argues that the United States "is still a superpower in the globalization of its own memories," therefore "[h]ow America remembers this

[4] Nguyen, *Nothing Ever Dies*, 17.
[5] Ibid., 1, 3.

war is to some extent how the world remembers it."[6] This thesis addresses two groups omitted from American popular memory: black American and South Vietnamese women veterans.

Methodology

Through oral histories, government publications, popular media, and secondary sources, I weave a picture of the Vietnam War that includes marginalized women veterans – black American and South Vietnamese. I focus on the time period when the United States was most involved in Vietnam militarily – from the landing of Marines at Danang in 1965 to the Paris Peace Accords in 1973. This thesis is not meant to lionize Americans and their allies in a war that left millions dead, displaced, and forever changed; rather, it is an effort to make visible those who have been left out of the narrative of the war, for reasons both purposeful and not. Some scholarship has been written on both black American and South Vietnamese women veterans; however, there is still more work to be done. This thesis aims to expand the conventional image of the Vietnam veteran, creating space for women of color to inhabit where they have been displaced, forgotten, and misremembered. Though they are the most important primary source utilized in this thesis, finding relevant oral histories and women who were willing to be interviewed was a daunting task.

My paternal grandfather, Edward James Henderson III (PopPop, as I call him), is a retired Air Force colonel. He deployed to a communications base in Pleiku in III Corps of South Vietnam in July 1970, where he was stationed for the duration of his thirteen month tour. He was in command of thirty-six men monitoring radar equipment used to communicate with pilots

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[6] Nguyen, *Nothing Ever Dies*, 106.

flying missions into North Vietnam, and was the first black officer many of his men had encountered in the Air Force. PopPop has never been shy about his experiences in Vietnam and in the Air Force more generally, and as I grew older I inquired into his service more and more. In the fall of 2020, I conducted a formal interview with him to use as a primary source for a final paper project. Inspired by PopPop's openness, I originally set out to make black women veterans who served in Vietnam the focus of my thesis. As a black woman, this research felt especially personal to me. I was disappointed to find that black women veterans were not nearly as prominent in scholarship as their male counterparts. I scoured the Library of Congress American Folklife Center Veterans History Project, navigating a frankly unpleasant database interface in hopes of tapping into an as yet undiscovered gold mine of oral histories. I spent hours of my days Googling "black women Vietnam War" and "black women veterans" to no avail. My Google Chrome history contained endless links to the Texas Tech Vietnam Center and Sam Johnson Vietnam Archive, an expansive and daunting archive with a search engine that would return hundreds of pages of results, most of which were not relevant to my search terms. Months of searching brought me six oral histories. I was disappointed and considering switching to another thesis topic, when I realized that my lack of luck was probably less a "me" problem and more of a problem of lack of material. This seemingly obvious epiphany then lit a fire under me to bring black women into the conversation of media, memory, and scholarship on the Vietnam War. I decided to utilize my sample of oral histories to present a window into the stories of black women, making their stories the most crucial primary source in this thesis.

Returning to *Nothing Ever Dies*, I was struck by Nguyen's description of a cemetery outside of Ho Chi Minh City, "[p]ast the industrial zone…where the sky is always a sheet of smog, one will see, on the border of the highway, a grand martyrs' cemetery." This cemetery, on

the edges of the city and the nation's memory, was once called the National Cemetery of the Army of the Republic of Vietnam. Tombs containing the bodies of Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) soldiers lay "unloved, unpainted, and untended…neglected slabs of headstones" featuring photographs of the men whose bodies lay beneath the concrete. Nguyen noted that many of these photos had been vandalized, their eyes and faces scratched out.[7] It was this damaged, unkempt, and nearly hidden cemetery that forced me to consider the place (or lack thereof) that people of the former South Vietnam hold in American memory. I decided that if I was to write about the Vietnam War, it would be a disservice to its history and my research not to include the people of Vietnam in some capacity. After some consideration, I decided to focus on South Vietnamese women veterans in particular, as they are absent from memory [making] in both the United States and the Socialist Republic of Vietnam. I began to search for oral histories again, this time for South Vietnamese women veterans. Once again, I encountered roadblocks. In desperation, I emailed Dr. Nathalie Huynh Chau Nguyen at Monash University in Melbourne, Australia. Her work, discussed in the following section on historiography, is centered on oral histories of South Vietnamese immigrants living in Australia. She suggested I reach out to local Vietnamese organizations to inquire if anyone would be willing to sit for an interview with me. This led me to contact the Vietnamese American Association of Raleigh (VAAR). Less than a week after I sent an email to the VAAR, I received a response from one of its members, Thi Phan. Thi is a Vietnamese-American who came to the United States as a teenager, years after the reunification of Vietnam. He offered to put me in contact with the handful of Vietnamese-

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[7] Nguyen, *Nothing Ever Dies*, 35-39.

American women veterans he knew, including his mother-in-law, and to translate all of our interviews. Through Thi, I interviewed five women, one of whom lives in Raleigh. These interviews were conducted in both Vietnamese and English, with me asking questions in English, Thi translating them into Vietnamese, and translating the responses into English. All five women speak English, and would sometimes respond to my questions in English, but expressed that they felt more comfortable answering more complicated questions in Vietnamese. Due to the fact that these women spoke mostly in Vietnamese during their interviews, there will be few direct quotes attributed to them.

A just memory of the Vietnam War requires acknowledgement of all aspects of the war and the people who participated in and were affected by it. Black American women served in-country as military nurses, clerks, instructors and intelligence officers, though their stories have hardly been told. Part of this is due to the much smaller number of black women serving in Vietnam compared to their white counterparts; it also reflects racism and sexism as tools of oppression and silencing black women, as well the trepidation of some black women veterans to share their experiences.[8] Similarly, South Vietnamese have almost no place in American collective memory and scholarship on the Vietnam War, despite being, as historian Marita Surken writes, "the people on whose land and over whom (supposedly) this was fought."[9]

Historiography

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[8] The latter was explained to me by Lieutenant Martha Cothorn of the Army Nurse Corps during an interview I conducted with her on May 10th, 2021. The reluctance of black women veterans to share their stories will be discussed in the second chapter of the thesis. Martha Cothorn, interview by author, May 10, 2021.

[9] Marita Sturken, *Tangled Memories: The Vietnam War, the Aids Epidemic, and the Politics of Remembering* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 62-63.

Until recently, women, both American and Vietnamese, were not at the center of histories about the Vietnam War for English-speaking scholars. Dr. Kara Dixon Vuic, a professor at Texas Christian University, is a trailblazer in the study of women and the Vietnam War. In her first book, *Officer, Nurse, Woman: The Army Nurse Corps in the Vietnam War* (2010), Vuic studied women in the Army Nurse Corps (ANC) stationed in Vietnam beginning in 1956. *Officer, Nurse, Woman* is "a history of the army in the Vietnam War and a history of the process of gender change in the 1960s and early 1970s,"[10] in which Vuic interweaves oral histories, interviews, government documents and publications, and secondary sources to paint a picture of the development of the ANC and the experiences of its nurses, stationed in Vietnam and elsewhere. Vuic intertwines the military with civilian society, arguing "the army's use of nurses in Vietnam suggests the extent to which the gender changes of the era permeated state institutions and highlights the struggles of such institutions to respond to the sweeping changes envisioned by many."[11] Vuic's work is groundbreaking in its examination of Cold War ideas of gender and the role of women in American civilian and military society; however, the majority of the women Vuic focuses on are white. Vuic takes care to highlight race as an aspect of gender and ideas about nursing; for instance, she does not shy away from the fact that the caretaking role of a professional nurse was associated with whiteness.[12] Even so, a total of only seven pages in *Officer, Nurse, Woman* explicitly mention African Americans or blackness.

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[10] Kara Dixon Vuic, *Officer, Nurse, Woman: The Army Nurse Corps in the Vietnam War* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 2010), 9.
[11] Ibid., 9-10.
[12] Ibid., 151.

Another major American scholar in the field of women and the Vietnam War is Heather Marie Stur, whose 2011 book *Beyond Combat: Women and Gender in the Vietnam War Era* "investigates how the Vietnam War both reinforced and challenged the gender roles that were key components of American Cold War ideology."[13] Stur's examination of gender and war is not specific to the ANC, or even women in the U.S. military. Her scope includes Red Cross Supplemental Recreational Activities Overseas (SRAO) women, the Women's Army Corps (WAC), the ANC, American men, and almost shockingly, Vietnamese civilian women. Stur uses these groups to explore American ideas about gender and war, such as the notion that Vietnamese women were simultaneously sexually available and dangerous, and the (white) American soldier was "strong and gentle, a lover and a fighter."[14] Stur moves towards a just memory through the variety of groups she analyses, yet there is no place in *Beyond Combat* for South Vietnamese military women.

The importance of Wallace Terry's 1984 *Bloods: Black Veterans of the Vietnam War: An Oral History* cannot be overstated. *Bloods* is the first major collection of oral histories from African American men who served in the Vietnam War. Terry, who worked as a *Time* magazine reporter during the height of the U.S. military's involvement in Vietnam (1965-1973), embarked on the *Bloods* project after learning about a sixteen year-old black Marine who had lied about his age in order to enlist. This sixteen year-old was the youngest U.S. soldier to die in combat in Vietnam. "I vowed then that day," Terry writes in his introduction, "I would see between the

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[13] Heather Marie Stur, *Beyond Combat: Women and Gender in the Vietnam War Era* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), i.
[14] Ibid., 18, 142-143.

covers of a book the story of the sacrifice of such young black men and others in the rice paddies of Vietnam."[15] The twenty oral histories in *Bloods* are from both officers and enlisted men, whose service spans 1965-1973, and recollections of the war both differ and concur with each other. *Bloods* is a fascinating and important work, though its subjects are all men. These "Bloods" were united in race and a commitment to resisting anti-blackness, as well as in their gender.

Nathalie Huynh Chau Nguyen, a professor at Melbourne's Monash University and scholar of the Vietnamese diaspora and refugees, provides American scholars with a blueprint for including South Vietnamese women in scholarship with her two books *South Vietnamese Soldiers: Memories of the Vietnam War and After* (2016) and *Memory is Another Country: Women of the Vietnamese Diaspora* (2009). Chapter three of *Memory is Another Country* is dedicated to women veterans of the RVNAF. Nguyen argues that the four oral histories upon which the chapter is based "reveal the disjuncture between public and private memories of the war," as South Vietnamese women veterans maintain connections with women they served with and make an effort to remember within their own communities, while in the public sphere (i.e. scholarship), their service is largely absent. Nguyen explains this absence as partially due to the fact that South Vietnam no longer exists – "their service is denied in a postwar socialist Vietnam."[16] As with *Memory is Another Country*, Nguyen included a full chapter on South Vietnamese women veterans in *South Vietnamese Soldiers*. She employs the same four oral

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[15] Wallace Terry, *Bloods: Black Veterans in the Vietnam War: And Oral History* (New York: Presidio Press, 1984), xvi.
[16] Nathalie Huynh Chau Nguyen, *Memory is Another Country: Women of the Vietnamese Diaspora* (Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO, LLC, 2009), 57-58.

histories in both books, allowing for the stories to be told in two books, one centered on women and memory, the other on the RNVAF. Nguyen takes great care to make space for South Vietnamese women veterans in her scholarship, an immeasurable contribution to the vast number of works on the Vietnam War written in English. The four oral histories Nguyen makes use of are unfortunately not accessible in the United States, and Nguyen was unable to send me transcripts of them due to copyright and privacy issues. I did not want to simply repeat Nguyen's translations in my own work, which is why I do not make use of them in this thesis. In addition, the women Nguyen interviewed are Vietnamese-Australian, and since U.S. memory and scholarship are the focus of my work, these interviews would not fit in my research. However, Nguyen herself helped to make this thesis possible by suggesting I reach out to Vietnamese organizations and inquire about conducting interviews myself. In this way, both Nguyen's scholarship and her generosity as a scholar shaped my work. Nguyen's monographs stand as an example for American scholars to follow in an effort to make space for South Vietnamese women.

Conclusion

This thesis expands on and fills gaps in existing American scholarship and memory in an effort to move toward a more just memory of the Vietnam War. I start by examining popular memory in the United States, with an emphasis on Stanley Kubrick's *Full Metal Jacket* (1987), Philip Caputo's *A Rumor of War* (1977) and Ken Burns and Lynn Novick's *The Vietnam War* (2017). I argue that these three depictions of the Vietnam War lack the components of a just memory, as ultimately their focus is on the white male veteran. From there I shift focus to black American women veterans, using oral histories and two interviews I conducted myself to explore

their experiences during and after the war, including their decisions to join the military, perceptions of Vietnamese people, and feelings about the war in general. In my third chapter, I highlight six Vietnamese-American women veterans of the RVNAF, five of whom I interviewed. Like the preceding chapter on black American women, this chapter focuses on these women's experiences, including their journeys to the United States.

The three chapters work towards a more just memory of the United States' Vietnam War by highlighting the war's actors who have previously been given negligible or no space in the dominant narratives of the war promogulated through media, memorialization, and scholarship. The women who are the subject of my thesis take up a particular space in history and society. As women of color, African American and (South) Vietnamese women veterans have both gendered and racialized experiences, and in the case of (South) Vietnamese veterans, experience related to their status as immigrants. They are actors in history, but relegated to the sidelines in favor of the more popular image of white male veterans. Their inclusion is fundamental to the history of America's war in Vietnam, and its continued legacy in the United States.

Figure 1.1: The evacuation of the Gia Long Street apartment building rooftop. Courtesy of the Smithsonian Magazine.

Figure 2: A divided Vietnam, ca. 1965. Photo courtesy of PBS.

CHAPTER 1: "A Soldier's Coming Home": Media, Memorialization, and the Dominant Narrative of the Vietnam War Veteran in the United States

A Vietnamese woman in a red tank top and black mini skirt approaches two white U.S. soldiers sitting outside of a shopping center in Da-Nang, South Vietnam while Nancy Sinatra's "These Boots Are Made for Walkin'" plays in the background. It becomes obvious that this woman is a sex worker, and she attempts to entice these men to pay fifteen dollars each to have sex with her. She struts back and forth in front of them, swaying her hips and repeating "Me so horny, me love you long time!" This is halfway through Stanley Kubricks' 1987 film *Full Metal Jacket*, and the first scene of the movie that takes place in South Vietnam. It's the first impression the audience gets of Vietnam and Vietnamese women – a sex worker speaking in broken English, whose purpose is to sexually satisfy (white) American soldiers.

Since 1987, "Me so horny, me love you long time" has taken on a life of its own. "In 1989, 2 Live Crew released the song "Me So Horny," where the phrase is repeated over and over again. Its use in music continued into the 2000s and 2010s, with Fergie singing it in her 2006 song "London Bridge," and Beyoncé in "Partition," released in 2013. Hye Seung Chung examined "sonic," or auditory, methods of stereotyping Asian and Asian American speech patterns in her contribution to the 2013 book *Film Dialogue*. Chung writes that "Me so horny" is no longer directly tied directly to *Full Metal Jacket* through the "obscuration of [its] original context of racially-coded sex labor," which has "effectively neutralized any negative connotations it might otherwise have."[1] Despite no longer being directly associated with *Full*

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[1] Hye Seung Chung, "From 'Me So Horny' to 'I'm So Ronery': Asian Images and Yellow Voices in American Cinema," in *Film Dialogue*, ed. Jeff Jaeckle (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013), 174-175.

Metal Jacket, "Me so horny" is still a marker of the foreign. In particular, the grammar suggests that English is not the speaker's first language. The incorrect use of "me" instead of "I'm," what Elaine W. Chun refers to as the "neutralization of nominative-accusative case distinction for first-person singular pronoun," is an example of "mock Asian," a type of linguistic style meant to "index a stereotypical Asian identity." A native English speaker would immediately recognize this grammatical error, but since it is divorced from its context, "many English-speaking Americans unconsciously recite [it] without stopping to consider its inflammatory nature as a racial slur."[2] *Full Metal Jacket* introduced a "mock Asian" phrase into the English-speaking lexicon, allowing for the perpetuation of sexualized stereotypes about Asian women to seep into the larger culture.

The image of a subservient, sexualized Vietnamese woman is revived about thirty minutes before *Full Metal Jacket*'s end. This time, a male Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) officer arrives in front of a group of American soldiers, both white and black, and proclaims that the woman he has on the back of his motorcycle will perform sex acts on the soldiers for a "long time." The soldiers show excitement at her youth, calling her a school girl and "baby-san." After initially refusing to be involved with the two black soldiers in the group, the nameless sex worker is taken into a bombed-out building by one of the soldiers, who calls the black men in his squad the N-word for good measure, and claims he "won't be long." In the span of minutes, this scene reinforces the notion that Vietnamese women were (and are) sexual objects, one that a Vietnamese man in particular helps to perpetuate by going out of his way to

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[2] Elaine W. Chun, "Ideologies of Legitimate Mockery: Margaret Cho's Revoicings of Mock Asian," *Pragmatics* 14, no. 2 & 3 (2004): 169.

bring the sex worker to the American soldiers. Additionally, it presents an image of an anti-black Vietnamese woman, who won't engage in sex acts with black men unless convinced for money. This anti-blackness greatly amuses the white soldiers, who throw slurs and insults at their black comrade with ease and without consequence. It also demonizes the Vietnamese, and makes anti-blackness from a person of color somehow more appalling than the blatant racism the white characters in *Full Metal Jacket* engage in.

The last Vietnamese woman audiences see in *Full Metal Jacket* is better described as a girl – a sniper who the main character, Joker, kills at the end of the film. The sniper, whose affiliation with either a regular military or an insurgent group is never made explicit, attacks Joker's squad as they patrol a bombed-out Hue. Joker and his squad watch helplessly as the sniper shoots Eightball, a man sent to scout a group of buildings, and their corpsman Doc Jay, who had attempted to drag Eightball to safety. Following an argument with the squad leader, machine gunner Animal Mother runs to where Eightball and Doc Jay lie, asking Doc to point out where the sniper is hiding, before both are killed. Joker and his comrades call the sniper a "son of a bitch," assuming that the individual shooting at them is a man. The ultimate horror is revealed after sunset, when the squad enters the flaming building in which the sniper is hiding – the figure standing by a window with a gun is actually a Vietnamese girl who looks no older than high school age. After hearing Joker's gun jam, the girl turns around in slow-motion, shock written across her features as she begins to fire. A member of the squad unleashes a rain of bullets that mortally wound the girl, who asks to be killed quickly. As she lies on the ground slowly dying a member of the squad quips, "No more boom-boom for this baby-san," emphasizing the fact that the characters in *Full Metal Jacket* view all Vietnamese women and girls as sexual objects. The girl begins to emphatically ask the soldiers to shoot her, and Animal Mother agrees to the mercy

killing only if Joker is the one to pull the trigger. The music swells and Joker steels himself before a gunshot rings out. This killing marks Joker's transformation into a true soldier, complete with the thousand-yard stare his fellow Marines teased him for not possessing earlier in the film. The scene plays out like a horror movie, complete with a jump scare when the girl comes into the audience's view. This is the last impression audiences get of Vietnamese women – threatening, deadly, deserving of punishment, and a tool for the furthering of the white American man's "growth" as a Marine.

Adapted from Marine Corps veteran Gustav Hasford's novel *The Short-Timers, Full Metal Jacket* is heralded as a more "realistic" Vietnam War movie. Meant to be viewed as an anti-war film, *Full Metal Jacket*'s "critique" of the U.S. military regime begins and ends with basic training. *Jacket* reinforces gendered and racialized ideas about Asia and Asians, some of which were weaponized by the United States government and military to justify the invasion of Vietnam. The U.S. soldier, according to *Full Metal Jacket*, is white and male; however, in reality, people of color and women served in the military and in-country in a variety of roles throughout the war. Similarly, *Full Metal Jacket* posits that Vietnamese women were either subservient to (white) American soldiers, (the sex workers), the enemy (the NLF sniper) or ungrateful and suspect, as is demonstrated by a scene where both white and black soldiers call South Vietnamese people "g****s" and claim they are only "supposedly on our side." These images erase not only the U.S.' justification to invade Vietnam to save its "godchild,"[3] but also

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[3] As a Massachusetts senator, John F. Kennedy asserted "[i]f we are not the parents of little Vietnam, then surely we are the godparents." Cited in the Papers of John F. Kennedy. Pre-Presidential Papers. Senate Files, Box 895, "America's Stake in Vietnam, American Friends of Vietnam, Washington, D.C., 1 June 1956." John F. Kennedy Presidential Library, Boston, MA.

the number of Vietnamese people who supported and fought alongside U.S. soldiers in-country. *Full Metal Jacket's* status as a "realistic" Vietnam War movie overlooks its inaccuracies and harmful depictions. *Full Metal Jacket* is supposed to present the right way to remember the Vietnam War. Yet, this "right way" erases entire groups of actors involved in the war, both allies and enemies of the United States, and the people caught in between them.

The three depictions of Vietnamese women in *Full Metal Jacket* are dangerous in different ways. As Heather Marie Stur writes in Beyond Combat, "[a] common image in G.I. folklore was that of the sexually alluring yet dangerous Vietnamese woman, whose danger was precisely her sexuality." U.S. soldiers spoke amongst themselves, "warning that Vietnamese [sex worker] women sympathetic to the Viet Cong put razor blades, broken glass, sand, and other materials in their vaginas to injure unsuspecting male customers." In addition, Vietnamese sex workers were seen as carriers of uncurable and debilitating sexually transmitted infections (STIs). The sniper, a woman directly involved in combat, exemplifies the particularly threatening "Dragon Lady." Artist Milton Cardiff formally introduced the Dragon Lady to the United States as a Chinese pirate named Lao Chai San, who "had the double weapon of beauty and ruthlessness." The Dragon Lady was transformed from a pirate to a guerrilla fighter in the minds of Americans by the time the first Marines officially landed on Vietnam's shores.[4] Vietnamese women are sexualized and dehumanized, becoming simultaneously alluring and terrifying, making their eradication at the hands of U.S. soldiers necessary to keep America's boys safe.

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[4] Stur, *Beyond Combat*, 40-41.

The sexualized and threatening Vietnamese (and more broadly, Asian) woman is not a depiction of the past, and it has real world consequences. One of the reasons I decided to highlight Vietnamese women in this thesis was the murder of six Asian women in the Atlanta area in March of 2021. The white gunman targeted spas run by Asian women. According to Captain Jay Baker of the Cherokee County Georgia Sheriff's Department, the suspect had a sex addiction and considered the spas to be "a temptation…that he wanted to eliminate." Though the suspect targeted Asian women and admitted that Asian-run spas were directly tied to sex in his mind, law enforcement on the federal, state, and county level downplayed the role of race in the deaths of the eight victims, six of them Asian women.[5]

The anti-Asian violence in Atlanta was not an isolated incident. The Stop Asian American Pacific Islander Hate group received 6,603 reports of anti-Asian incidents in the United States from March 19, 2020 to March 31, 2021. Over half (64.8%) of the incidents were reported by women.[6] The ideas that Asian women are "so horny," will "love you long time," and pose a danger to (white) American men endure. *Full Metal Jacket* cannot take all of the blame for this, but it certainly perpetuates stereotypes about Asian women that cannot be understated. The ubiquitous use of "Me so horny" in movies, songs, and television suggests the power *Full Metal Jacket* has exerted over the American consciousness.

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[5] Amanda Arnold, "6 Women Killed in Horrific Shooting Rampage," *The Cut*, March 19, 2021, https://www.thecut.com/2021/03/8-people-killed-in-atlanta-rampage-6-of-them-asian-women.html.
[6] Charlene Cayanan, Russell Jeung, PhD., Aggie J. Yellow Horse, PhD., "Stop AAPI Hate National Report (3/19/2020-3/31/2021)," Stop Asian American Pacific Islander Hate, May 6, 2021, https://stopaapihate.org/national-report-through-march-2021/.

There are no black women characters in *Full Metal Jacket*, yet Eightball, the black man with the most screen time, gives the audience a particular portrait of African Americans. Eightball is lewd and full of hate for the Vietnamese, whom he calls "g****s," though he is perfectly willing to have sex with a young Vietnamese sex worker. The white men he fights alongside are freely and unabashedly anti-black. Animal Mother calls him the N-word and Cowboy proudly displays a Confederate flag on his helmet, yet they are not the subject of Eightball's ire. Eightball is more upset that a sex worker initially refuses to have anything to do with him, but does not react to his white fellow soldiers cracking sexual jokes at his expense, and that of black men as a whole. He is angry at the Vietnamese, whom he deems ungrateful, and upset at being slighted by a sex worker, yet expresses no anger for his white fellow soldiers. The message audiences receive from Eightball's character is that African American soldiers stationed in Vietnam were docile in response to anti-black racism and did not question the war in any meaningful way beyond chastising the Vietnamese people. In reality, some African American soldiers engaged in militant resistance to both racism and the war, and formed bonds with and respect for Vietnamese people.[7]

Full Metal Jacket's influence in American culture and its standing as an accurate depiction of the war – an anti-war depiction at that – demonstrates the primacy of the white male veteran, as well as the white male gaze of Kubrick as the director. The film makes no serious

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[7] For an overview of black GI resistance see David Cortwright, "Black GI Resistance During the Vietnam War," *Vietnam Generation* 2, no. 1 (1990). African American Army Nurse Elizabeth Allen expressed a great deal of admiration for the Vietnamese people she encountered during her tour in Cu Chi in a 2007 interview for the Library of Congress Veterans History Project. Her interview is recounted in the second chapter of this thesis. Elizabeth A. Allen, interview by Vincent Manta, October 18, 2007. Elizabeth A. Allen Collection (AFC/2001/001/55266), Veterans History Project, American Folklife Center, Library of Congress.

anti-war claims, other than its implications that war ruins good American boys like Joker. Kubrick's characters do not question the war outside of their frustration at Vietnamese people whom they deem ungrateful. They never once consider that they, as the American invaders, could be anything other than the saviors of backwards "third world" people. While the lack of explicit criticism of the war from its characters could point to *Full Metal Jacket*'s message of hopelessness, that war is inevitable and unstoppable, this message takes a backseat to the overarching theme of American victimhood. Joker and his fellow Marines are vindicated, even in their sexual exploitation of Vietnamese women, profuse use of racial slurs, and excitement over the killing of a Vietnamese girl. *Full Metal Jacket*, as a popular depiction of the Vietnam War, perpetuates narratives of white veteran victimhood, racism, and the oversexualization of Vietnamese women.

"The Things Men Do in War and the Things War Does to Them: Philip Caputo's *A Rumor of War*

"No one has recounted so well the combination of fear, pain, irrational euphoria, ferocity and boredom which filled the lives of combat soldiers," wrote Yale historian Gaddis Smith in a 1978 review of *A Rumor of War* for *Foreign Affairs*. "Any list of essential books on the American experience in Vietnam should include this memoir."[8] And an essential book *A Rumor of War* has become. Listed on college syllabi and adorning bookshelves in homes and offices

[8] Gaddis Smith, review of *A Rumor of War*, by Philip Caputo, *Foreign Affairs*, January 1978.

across the United States, Philip Caputo's 1977 memoir has been adopted as one of the premier books written on the Vietnam War from the perspective of an American veteran.

Caputo, working as a war correspondent at the time of *Rumor*'s publishing, arrived at Da Nang on March 8, 1965 with the 9th Marine Expeditionary Brigade. He opens the book with a prologue, in which he writes:

> This book does not pretend to be history. It has nothing to do with politics, power, strategy, influence, national interests, or foreign policy; nor is it an indictment of the great mean who led us into Indochina and whose mistakes were paid for with the blood of some quite ordinary men. In a general sense, [this book] is simply a story about war, about the things men do in war and the things war does to them.[9]

Despite Caputo's insistence that *A Rumor of War* is no more than "a soldier's account of our longest conflict," there is no way to divorce the book from all of the things Caputo claims "[i]t has nothing to do with."[10] The very existence of the book speaks to power and influence – Caputo is a white man; therefore, his story privileges white men over women and non-white people. Caputo may think *A Rumor of War* is apolitical, but politics cannot be separated from Caputo's central claim in the book, namely, that the U.S. Marine Corps creates hardened killers like Caputo himself.

In the years following the end of the Vietnam War "a major new American story" emerged – "a story of American victimhood." This assertion that the United States was also a victim of the Vietnam War is front and center in *A Rumor of War*. Caputo joined the Marines in

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[9] Philip Caputo, *A Rumor of War* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1977), xi.
[10] Ibid. xi.

1960, inspired by President Kennedy's exhortation that Americans ask what they can do for their country, but also frustrated with the "dullness" of suburban Illinois. He "hungered for danger, challenges and violence," three things he believed the Marines could give him. After spending four years in ROTC and earning a bachelor's at Loyola University Chicago, Caputo was sent to Officer Candidate School in Quantico, VA. Caputo and his fellow officers-in-training went through six weeks of boot camp, an experience Caputo recounts as "an ordeal, physically and psychologically."[11] Bootcamp ingrained a "relentless, compelling obedience" into Caputo, which sets the stage for his later argument that the U.S. Marines turned him, and young men like him, into ruthless killers. In addition, the grueling physical and mental aspects of basic training victimize Caputo before he even lands at Da Nang – he is a victim of the jingoistic U.S. military.

The climax of *A Rumor of War* comes near its end. After nearly a year in-country, punctuated with patrols, manning outposts, and witnessing casualties, Caputo and five of the men in his platoon gathered on one night outside of the village of Giao-Tri, where according to a Vietnamese informant named Le Dung, two "VC" had found refuge. Outside of the village, Caputo commanded his band of five to lie in wait for an ambush, and "if nobody [from the village] comes by, you go into the ville and you kill them." Before the night is over, Caputo's five loyal men have killed two Vietnamese men. Caputo asks the men to show him one of their bodies, and after the initial elation of killing two "enemies," Caputo and his comrades come to the harrowing realization that the two dead men are civilians, one of them the company's

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[11] Caputo, *A Rumor of War*, 4-9.

informant. “There were no documents in the boy’s pockets, no cartridge belt around his waist. There was nothing that would have proved him to be a Viet Cong,” Caputo recalls.

Before the reader can fully process that Caputo and his band have committed a war crime, Caputo begins to enumerate his excuses. Le Dung was dead because of “darkness and confusion, out of fear, exhaustion, and the brutal instincts acquired in the war.”[12] His men were overwhelmed, confused, responding to months of violence and deprivation. Their “mistake” was not truly theirs, but that of the Marine Corps and the war itself – what *war* had done *to them*.

On June 30, 1966, Caputo was called as a witness for the prosecution in the trial of Lance Corporal Crowe, one of the five men who had entered Giao-Tri on Caputo’s command, who had been charged with two counts of premeditated murder to be tried outside of military court. Caputo himself was to stand trial the following day. Immediately, Caputo launches into his defense, namely, that the nature of the Vietnam War, the Marine Corps, and Caputo’s superior officers were truly responsible for the deaths of two Vietnamese civilians. “The fact that we had been charged in the first place was absurd,” Caputo argued. “They had taught us to kill and had told us to kill, and now they were going to court-martial us for killing.” Caputo continues, “[t]he thing we had done was a result of *what the war had done to us*.”[13] The war, Caputo argued, had turned good-hearted and honest American boys into killers. Never mind the millions of Vietnamese whose own lives were irreparably altered, even taken, at the hands of the U.S. military – Caputo and his men were the real victims of the conflict. Caputo continues to wallow in his own misery following Crowe’s trial, considering the possibility that he will be found guilty

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[12] Ibid., 315-319.
[13] Caputo, 326.

the following day. Caputo paints himself as a sort of martyr, betrayed by the nation he so graciously defended. The possibility of incarceration is incomprehensible to him, because in his core he believes he is only tangentially responsible for the deaths of Le Dung and Le Du; it is the system that is corrupt.

A *Rumor of War* is a classic work in the annals of the victimized white male veteran. Two Vietnamese men are dead, but the book evokes sympathy for Caputo and his comrades, not the dead Vietnamese. Caputo and his men are broken by violence, unappreciated by the country they volunteered to serve. As with Joker in *Full Metal Jacket*, the killing of Vietnamese people is a turning point for the white male killers. Le Dung, Le Du, and the Vietnamese girl in *Full Metal Jacket* serve as props to further the stories of Caputo and Joker. They exist only in the moment that they are threatening, and eventually dead. This is a microcosm for the war as a whole – the damaged, traumatized American combat veteran is the focus of pity and admiration, while the millions of non-white combatants and civilians are just collateral damage whose deaths and suffering were necessary for the greater good of the United States.

Eighteen Hours in Vietnam: Ken Burns and Lynn Novick's *The Vietnam War*

On September 17, 2017, PBS released the first episode of Ken Burns and Lynn Novick's newest project – a ten-part, eighteen-hour documentary series on the Vietnam War. Concluding on September 28, *The Vietnam War* featured footage of battles, newscasts, protests, and "revelatory testimony of nearly 80 witnesses from all sides—Americans who fought in the war and others who opposed it, as well as combatants and civilians from North and South Vietnam,"

with a timeline moving from 1858 to "March 1973-Onward."[14] Unlike fictionalized movies and television shows, documentaries are presented as more scholarly and fact-based forms of visual media. Burns and Novick directed *The Vietnam War* with assistance from historical consultants and scholars, and examined primary and secondary material, from declassified government documents to works by, among others, Viet Thanh Nguyen. Ken Burns and Lynn Novick's film is the most recent documentary undertaking about the Vietnam War, and had a viewership of 39 million over the course of its ten-day premier, including two million viewers in the Socialist Republic of Vietnam. According to PBS, the series' first episode was the most-watched television program on the channel since the 2016 series finale of *Downton Abbey*.[15] *The Vietnam War* was widely watched and generally well-received, with overall positive ratings by critics and viewers on Rotten Tomatoes, IMDb, Amazon, and Metacritic. A positive reception, however, does not make the series impossible to critique.

The Vietnam War differentiates itself from *Full Metal Jacket* and *A Rumor of War* as a result of its inclusion of Vietnamese people from both the North and the South, civilian and military. Unlike in these two classics, where Vietnamese people, and women in particular, are regulated to roles as victims, adversaries, and/or minor characters in a white male soldier's story, in *The Vietnam War*, Vietnamese people speak with their own voice, and are agents in historical events. In the accompanying book, Burns and Novick cite Viet Thanh Nguyen – "[w]hen

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[14] "About the Film," The Vietnam War: A Film by Ken Burns and Lynn Novick, PBS, accessed March 25, 2022, https://www.pbs.org/kenburns/the-vietnam-war/about/.

[15] "Ken Burns and Lynn Novick's THE VIETNAM WAR Seen by 39 Million Viewers," About PBS, last modified August 17, 2020. https://www.pbs.org/about/about-pbs/blogs/news/ken-burns-and-lynn-novicks-the-vietnam-war-seen-by-39-million-viewers/#:~:text=According%20to%20Nielsen%20Live%20%2B7,average%20household%20rating%20of%204.4).

Americans talk about the Vietnam War, the scholar and novelist Viet Thanh Nguyen wrote, too often we are just talk-ing about ourselves. We were determined not to make that mistake."[16] Despite their knowledge of Viet Thanh Nguyen and obeisance to just memory, Burns and Novick do not fully embrace it in *The Vietnam War*. Yes, more voices are heard, namely those of Vietnamese people, but there is more Burns and Novick could have highlighted in their acclaimed series.

The Vietnam War features one black American woman, Eva Jefferson Peterson, who led a student antiwar movement while enrolled at Northwestern University. There are no other black women civilians, and no black women veterans. While Peterson's perspective is enlightening and not to be trivialized, it is telling that she is the sole black woman features in the series. This begs the question, were Burns, Novick, and their colleagues uninterested in finding black women to interview, unable to find them, or unwilling to put it the work to try? Peterson is one of just four black people out of a total of seventy-nine individuals interviewed in the series at all, the other three being male veterans James Gillam, Roger Harris, and Wayne Smith. Vietnamese women number five of that same seventy-nine, four of them veterans. Of the four veterans, Nguyen Nguyet Anh and Le Minh Ke served in the North Vietnamese military, and Nguyen Thi Hoa and Nguyen Thanh Tung were in the National Liberation front (NLF). No women veterans of the RVNAF appear in *The Vietnam War*.

The filmmakers did not, however, leave out one of the most influential veterans of the war – Philip Caputo. Caputo calmly recalls stories from his service, which are interspersed with

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[16] Ken Burns and Lynn Novick, "Introduction," in *The Vietnam War: An Intimate History* (New York: Vintage Books, 2017), 5.

other interviews and footage of the war. He makes no mention of the role he played in the deaths of two Vietnamese men at the hands of his own soldiers. The epitome of the rehabilitated veteran, Philip Caputo is given screen time, admittedly not as much as others, but the message is clear. He is not so controversial a figure that he could not appear in a widely dispersed documentary directed by one of the most prolific documentary makers of our time.

The absence of black American and South Vietnamese women veterans in *The Vietnam War* comes across as almost negligent when considering Burns and Lynn's access to half a century of scholarship and primary sources, including the people whose testimonies make up much of the documentary series. It is almost inconceivable that Burns, Novick, and their team were unaware of the role women of color played in the war effort in both the United States and South Vietnam. Burns and Novick have access to abundant resources, much more than I do as a graduate student writing a thesis, yet they still fall short of a fully just memory.

Memorialization of the Vietnam War and Its Veterans

The Vietnam Veterans Memorial is essentially hidden to the human eye. It is cut into a hill, a reflective black "V" shape with the names of 58,318 U.S. soldiers etched into its surface. The memorial was designed by Maya Lin, a then-21 year old Yale architecture student.[17] In 2015, Jan Scruggs, a Vietnam War veteran credited with the idea to build a memorial in Washington, D.C., told NPR that he worried the monument would not be built due to criticisms of Lin's design. Civilians, politicians, and veterans alike asked "Why is it that every monument

[17] "Vietnam Veterans Memorial," National Park Service, last modified April 20, 2020. https://www.nps.gov/vive/learn/historyculture/vvmoverview.htm.

in Washington is white but this one's black?" and "Why is it that every monument in Washington is rising into the air and this one is buried beneath the ground?"[18] Interestingly, the National Park Service's (NPS) official website for the memorial makes no mention of this controversy. It states that Lin's design was chosen, and the memorial was dedicated on November 11, 1982. According to the NPS, the design and construction of the memorial was as simple as "one, two." An entire chapter of the memorial's history is erased on its own website. The NPS relegates Lin to the memorial's designer, erasing the ways in which her original vision was changed to create the memorial as it is today, as well as her efforts to explain and defend her intentions as its designer as well as a citizen of the United States.[19] The name of the memorial itself is also a form of erasure – the Vietnam War becomes simply "Vietnam." The deletion of the word "war" may seem minor, but it reduces the country of Vietnam to the war, ignoring its continued existence and the millions who live there. This deletion is not the fault of the memorial itself, as "Vietnam" on its own is used often used colloquially when one really means the Vietnam *War*. Yet "Vietnam" as a synonym for the war erases the people of Vietnam, as well as the nation's history and culture, asserting that Vietnam is important only because the U.S. military invaded it and U.S. soldiers died on its soil. Christian Appy laments that "[f]or a growing number, 'Vietnam' was a wall of American names rather than a distant Asian country struggling to rebuild after decades of devastating war."[20]

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[18] Jan Scruggs, "Vietnam Veterans' Memorial Founder: Monument Almost Never Got Built," interview by Steve Inskeep, *Morning Edition*, NPR, April 30, 2015. https://www.npr.org/2015/04/30/403034599/vietnam-veterans-memorial-founder-monument-almost-never-got-built.
[19] Christian Appy, *American Reckoning: The Vietnam War and Our National Identity,* 240; Nguyen, *Nothing Ever Dies*, 52-53.
[20] Appy, *American Reckoning*, 242.

Historian Drew Gilpin Faust points to the American Civil War as a turning point in the United States, during which the government authorized the building of the first national cemeteries "for the soldiers who shall die in the service of their country." At this point, Faust argues, the United States government and people recognized a "new conception of citizenship, of the importance of the individual and his place in American democracy" wherein "the citizen had a claim on the state; the state had a claim on the individual." The claim the individual had on the state included memorialization of those who had fought on its behalf – an explicit goal of Civil War national cemeteries.[21] For the first time in the history of the country, the United States government inserted itself in remembering military dead on a large scale. Monuments and memorials to the World Wars, the U.S. wars in Korea and Vietnam, and other conflicts are ubiquitous in the twenty-first century. Part of the appeal of visiting Washington, D.C. is to see monuments and memorials to the dead, to the living, to the idea of the nation.

The Vietnam Veterans Memorial is not a gravesite, but as Thomas W. Laqueur demonstrates in his article on British memorialization of World War I, the names of dead soldiers have memorial value. Laqueur focuses on the British government and military, but his analysis of memorialization is applicable to the United States as well. During and after World War I, the British government "poured enormous human, financial, administrative, artistic, and diplomatic resources into preserving and remembering the names of individual common soldiers." In a war where entire bodies could be lost in the oblivion of twentieth century warfare, cemeteries and memorials dotting the western front in Europe proclaim that "[t]heir name liveth

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[21] Drew Gilpin Faust, "'The Dread Void of Uncertainty': Naming the Dead in the American Civil War," *Southern Cultures* 11, no. 2 (Summer 2005): 22-23.

for evermore." The *individual* loss becomes an important aspect of war, deserving of its own space on a national memorial. A memorial of names, Laqueur posits, also helps its visitors to conceive of the scale of a loss – "[t]he human imagination is forced to see, as concretely as possible, what a million dead men look like."[22] The Vietnam Veterans Memorial is 493 feet and six inches long, with its highest point at a peak in the center rising ten feet and three inches from the ground. Two large slabs of black granite impose in a physical space, making over 58,000 names visible and three dimensional. The scale of loss is no longer unimaginable in numerical terms.

The wall's dedication in 1982, seven years after the last U.S. personnel fled Saigon, reinforces the dominant narrative that Vietnam War veterans were ignored by the United States government and citizens. The lack of a national effort to recognize and remember the war dead is seen as the ultimate disrespect, an obvious affront. The fact that Ronald Reagan was president in 1982 is worthy of note. Before he was even inaugurated Reagan began his own campaign of rehabilitating the Vietnam War. Four weeks after accepting the Republican Party's nomination for president, Reagan gave a speech at the Veterans of Foreign Wars convention in Chicago. "For too long," he lamented, "we have lived with the Vietnam Syndrome." "It is time we recognized that ours was, in truth, a noble cause." He doubled down on the apparent tragedy of "Vietnam Syndrome," claiming "[w]e dishonor the memory of 50,000 young Americans who died in that cause when we give way to feelings of guilt as if we were doing something shameful,

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[22] Thomas W. Laqueur, "Memory and Naming in the Great War," in *Commemorations: The Politics of National Identity*, ed. John R. Gillis (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2018), 153, 155, 161.

and we have been shabby in our treatment of those who returned."[23] Reagan asserted that the mere suggestion of wrongdoing on the part of the United States during the Vietnam insults not just the living veteran, but the dead. As Appy notes, "Reagan invoked Vietnam not to invite a reckoning with the war's troubling history, but to cleanse it of its most toxic associations."[24] Reagan's message is clear – the U.S. war in Vietnam should be characterized and remembered as a just cause, lest the nation continue to insult the dead; the Vietnam War holds the same importance and righteousness as previous American wars. The memorial wall and Reagan's speech exist in the same rhetorical space. Both make claims on American memory – who should be remembered and why. The names of the dead remind Americans of the sacrifice their countrymen paid in service of a cause that Reagan asserted was noble.

Two years after the dedication of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial Wall, in an effort to halt ongoing criticisms of Lin's shining black wall, the living male veteran received his own place in the memorialization of the war in the Three Soldiers statue. Sitting feet from the wall, the Three Soldiers "represent the diversity of the U.S. military by including a Caucasian, African American, and Latino American whose service branch is intentionally ambiguous. Together, they face the Wall of the fallen."[25] The Three Soldiers are meant to represent the "diversity" of the military personnel involved in the war, yet two key demographics absent amongst the larger-

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[23] Ronald Reagan, "Peace: Restoring the Margin of Safety" (speech, Chicago, August 18, 1980), Ronald Reagan Presidential Library, https://www.reaganlibrary.gov/archives/speech/peace-restoring-margin-safety.
[24] Appy, 255.
[25] "Vietnam Veterans Memorial, Three Soldiers," Histories of the National Mall, accessed April 1, 2022, http://mallhistory.org/items/show/64.

than-life size bronze men are women and Asians. The Three Soldiers represent more than the white veteran, but still present veterans as solely male, and of merely three racial/ethnic groups.

About 200 feet south of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial wall, shaded by trees, is a statue depicting four figures – three women, and one man. The man is strewn across the lap of one woman with a cloth wrapped around his head shielding his eyes. Behind the pair, a second woman stands looking expectantly to the sky, while a third sits with her eyes on the ground with a soldier's helmet in her hands. This is the Vietnam Women's Memorial, dedicated in 1993. Its creation more than a decade after the Vietnam Veterans Memorial wall points to the erasure of women veterans even within an effort to commemorate the supposedly disrespected veteran. While the Three Servicemen statue served as a monument to the living male veteran, the only space women occupied at the memorial before the creation of the Women's Memorial was amongst the dead – eight women whose names and memory were and are deemed important because they are no longer living. The living woman veteran had to wait eleven years for her time on the national stage.

Monuments have meaning beyond memorialization. Take for instance the grave of an unknown soldier at Westminster Abbey in London. The unidentified British soldier, a casualty of WWI, was buried in 1920, a tumultuous time for the British government and monarchy. More than a gravesite, the grave of the Unknown Warrior is a site for national mourning. His unidentified remains become a stand-in for all of Britain's war dead, "a cipher in bones as *the* site of national memory."[26] The same can be said of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial Wall.

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[26] Laqueur, "Memory and Naming in the Great War," 156-157.

Though not the grave of an unknown war casualty, just as the Unknown Warrior's burial site in London created a space for national, united mourning and memorialization during times of political strife, the Wall unites Americans in a common understanding of the Vietnam War. Fundamental to this understanding is the primacy of the white male veteran and the belief in widespread disregard faced by the living and dead participants of the Vietnam War.

Conclusion

All four popular depictions and understandings of the Vietnam War – *Full Metal Jacket*, *A Rumor of War*, *The Vietnam War*, and the Vietnam Veterans Memorial Wall – contribute to the perpetuation of the dominant narrative of the Vietnam War in the United States, which hinges on its focus of white male veterans in histories of the war. But what responsibility do popular depictions and memorialization have to present a just memory? Should historians expect full scope and accuracy from Ken Burns and Lynn Novick? From Stanley Kubrick? To some extent, yes.

Full Metal Jacket, *A Rumor of War*, *The Vietnam War*, and the Vietnam Veterans Memorial Wall have a responsibility to aspire to a just memory because all four claim to be representative of the war. In the case of *Full Metal Jacket*, director Stanley Kubrick claimed the film was "just going for the way it was," "it" being the war. "The way it was" implies an adherence to truth in *Full Metal Jacket*, or that the film will show audiences an accurate depiction of the Vietnam War and Marines who fought in it. "I think it tries to give a sense of the war and the people," Kubrick told *Washington Post* writer Lloyd Rose in 1987, before the

movie was released.[27] Though *Full Metal Jacket* is a work of fiction, and Kubrick never claimed it to be otherwise, he imbued in it an element of fact through his descriptions of it as a demonstration of *the way it was*. *A Rumor of War* automatically has credibility in its authorship by a veteran. Readers consume the memoir with an understanding that Caputo would know how to write about and describe the Vietnam War. After all, he was there! It is doubtful that Caputo would not have considered his credibility and standing as a veteran when he wrote his memoir. As a documentary, by the lionized Ken Burns, *The Vietnam War* is automatically associated with historical accuracy. Burns and Novick consulted scholars and veterans, signifying the series' dedication to truth, and aired on PBS, a channel associated with learning. Finally, the Vietnam Veterans Memorial Wall is an official national statement – this is how America remembers our war in Vietnam, and this is the narrative to which we, as Americans, adhere to when memorializing it.

Fiction, memoirs, documentaries, and monuments do not exist in a vacuum. They tell a story, and in the case of the four discussed in this chapter, the story they tell matters. If they are to claim primacy in the narrative of the history of the Vietnam War, they can be criticized for their contribution to erasure and the perpetuation of a dominant narrative. *Full Metal Jacket*, *A Rumor of War*, *The Vietnam War*, and the Vietnam Veterans Memorial Wall actively reproduce the narrative of the Vietnam War as a well-intended yet unsuccessful attempt by the United States to ensure the survival of the Republic of Vietnam, an attempt that Americans at home did

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[27] Lloyd Rose, "Stanley Kubrick, at a Distance," *Washington Post*, June 28, 1987, https://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/style/movies/features/kubrick1987.htm.

not want to honor or think about, leading them to hold contempt for the war's veterans, who are mainly white and male.

Figure 3: The Vietnam Women's Memorial. Photo taken by author.

CHAPTER 2: "Goodbye My Darling, Hello Vietnam": Black American Women Stationed In-Country

According to the National Vietnam Veterans Readjustment Study (NVVRS), 3,150,811 Americans served in and around Vietnam, and 7,166 of those 3 million plus were women. Two percent of the more than 7,000 women serving in Vietnam were black, and 97 percent were white. 87 percent of these women were nurses, 700 hundred served in the Women's Army Corps (WAC), five hundred in the Air Force, and 36 were Marines.[1] Women were not drafted into the war, but as oral histories demonstrate, not all volunteered for their assignments in Vietnam.

This chapter will examine the roles and experiences of black military women stationed in Vietnam during the war. Black women in particular are victims of erasure from narratives about the Vietnam War. As Viet Thanh Nguyen posits, "[t]o think of war solely as combat, as its main protagonist as the soldiers, who is primarily imagined as male, stunts the understanding of war's identity."[2] In other words, one cannot fully understand a war unless one looks at all aspects of it. This chapter does not argue that women in the military are inherently empowered, as simply placing women into the story does not equal empowerment, and the negative impact of the war on those who fought in and lived through it, especially the people of Vietnam, cannot be ignored in favor of exalting women in the military. One of the challenges of this research has been locating source material – primary and secondary – about black women veterans. As a result, this research relies heavily on the oral histories of six black women, collected through the Library of

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[1] Richard A. Kukla et al., *The National Vietnam Veterans Readjustment Study* (New York: Brunner/Mazel, 1990), II-2 - II-3; Ron Steinman, *Women in Vietnam* (New York: TV Books, 2000), 20. The National Vietnam Veterans Readjustment Study (NVVRS) defined service in the Vietnam theatre as being "stationed in Vietnam, Laos, or Cambodia, stationed in the waters in or around these countries, or flew air missions over these areas."
[2] Nguyen, *Nothing Ever Dies*, 9.

Congress Veterans Historical Project and the UNC Greensboro Betty H. Carter Women Veterans Historical Project, and through two interviews I conducted myself in the spring of 2021. The lack of primary and secondary sources related to black American women who served in the Vietnam War demonstrates the necessity to locate these women and add their experiences to the history of the war. Of course, seven oral histories cannot encompass the experiences of all black women veterans of the Vietnam War, but they provide a window into what it meant to be black, a woman, and involved in one of America's most controversial military actions.

You're In the Army Now: The Women's Army Corps

The first WACs arrived in Saigon on January 15, 1965, two months before Marines landed at Da Nang. Major Kathleen I. Wilkes and Sergeant First Class Betty L. Adams, two white women, had been selected by Col. Emily C. Gordon, then director of WAC, to be stationed in Vietnam in an advisory capacity, as the ARVN was creating its own WAC - the Women's Armed Forces Corps (WAFC). Upon their arrival in Saigon, Maj. Wilkes and SFC Adams met WAFC director Maj. Tram Cam Huong and her assistant Maj. Ho Thi Ve. Neither Wilkes nor Adams had any knowledge of the Vietnamese language, though the WACs that followed would take twelve-week courses in Vietnamese before their tours. Wilkes and Adams "advised the WAFC director and her staff on methods of organization, inspection, and management in recruiting, training, administering, and assigning enlisted women and officer candidates," and from 1964-1971 the WAC school in the United States produced fifty-one Vietnamese women officers. As 1965 continued, General William Westmoreland requested more WACs for

Vietnam.[3] The women whose oral histories are the basis for this chapter arrived in Vietnam after 1965, when the WACs were a well-established group in the country.

Chief Warrant Officer (CW3) Doris "Lucki" Allen enlisted in the Women's Army Corps in 1950. On May 1, 2014, Lucki Allen was interviewed for the Library of Congress Veterans History Project. She sits in front of a black backdrop wearing a baseball hat that says "WOMEN VETERANS ARE NOT STEP VETERANS." A smile almost never leaves her face for the entirety of the hour-long interview. Born in El Paso in 1928, Allen, a black American, was a teacher in Jackson, Mississippi with no plans to join the military. Her brother had served in World War II and came home "shell-shocked," something for which she never quite forgave the Army. In her words, when the opportunity to enlist came up, she joined to "get 'em [the Army] for that." She recalled the incident that caused her to quit her teaching job with a smile on her face: "my principal told my students, you can chew gum in class. I said 'no' to them. 'Yes you can, [said the principal].' So I resigned my job as a teacher. That's it." And that was it. On Friday, October 13, 1950, Allen found an Army recruitment office in Jackson and signed up. After going through basic training at Fort Lee, Virginia, Allen went into advanced training as an entertainment specialist. Hoping to join a band along with three other black women, Allen's dream was cut short when she and the other women were informed that there could be "no

[3] Bettie J. Morden, *The Women's Army Corps, 1945-1978* (Washington, D.C.: Center of Military History, 1990), 241-244, 254.

negroes in the band." From that moment on, Allen did not receive any assignments that she requested until she was sent to Vietnam.[4]

Allen arrived at Tan Son Nhut Air Base not far from Saigon in late 1967 on assignment as an interrogator for Military Assistance Command Vietnam (MACV), and the racism and sexism she experienced at home followed her. Allen was excited to get an assignment in Vietnam - she recalled her frustration at not being stationed in-country sooner. By the time she was stationed at Tan Son Nhut, the WAC was in Vietnam in more than an advisory capacity, as demonstrated by Allen's job assignment. The Department of Defense established MACV in 1962 as a "joint service headquarters that coordinated all American military activities in the Republic of Vietnam (RVN)." At the time of Allen's tour, General Westmoreland was the commander of MACV, and during his tenure American forces in Vietnam increased to 550,000.[5] Allen was moved from interrogation to intelligence, and expressed irritation at being ignored as a "black WAC intelligence specialist and enlisted." Allen insisted in her interview that thirty days before the 1968 Tet Offensive she provided her superiors with intelligence suggesting an attack on South Vietnam's cities was imminent, but her tip was ignored by her superior officers. Decades later Allen remembered the Tet Offensive and believed that had her intelligence been taken

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[4] Doris I. Allen, interview by Debora Cox, May 1, 2014. Doris I. Allen Collection, Doris I. Allen Collection (AFC/2001/001/109035), Veterans History Project, American Folklife Center, Library of Congress. Hereafter, D. Allen, interview.

[5] Spencer Tucker, *Encyclopedia of the Vietnam War: a political, social, and military history* (Santa Barbara, ABC-CLIO, 1998), 435-436. It is worth noting that Tucker specifically refers to the 550,000 American personnel in Vietnam as "men" only. "Men" is oftentimes used to reference a mixed-gender group, but the use of men in this context implies that women were not present in Vietnam.

seriously, "maybe 20,000 people [whose names are] on the wall in Washington, D.C." could have been saved.[6]

Whether or not Allen's intelligence would have saved 20,000 lives, the Tet Offensive remains one of the most well-known engagements of the Vietnam War. A "massive, coordinated assault against the major urban areas of South Vietnam," the Tet Offensive commenced on January 30, 1968, when National Liberation Front (NLF)[7] soldiers launched simultaneous attacks on South Vietnamese cities, including on the U.S. Embassy in Saigon. Tet corresponded with the Vietnamese Lunar New Year at a time when South Vietnamese and American forces were expecting a general slowing of fighting. The government of North Vietnam and NLF leadership were hoping that Tet would inspire a "general uprising" amongst the South Vietnamese people, who would help overthrow the South Vietnamese government and push the United States out of Vietnam.[8]

There was no general uprising, and Tet was a military defeat for the North Vietnamese Army (NVA) and NLF. However, the impact of the surprise offensive shocked the U.S. military and civilians who watched on their televisions at home. Allen's intelligence was dismissed, but so were reports from others. The officials at MACV had interpreted any intelligence reports about an impending attack on South Vietnamese cities as a deliberate attempt by North Vietnam to divert attention from the "main battlefield." This intelligence failure, and the shocking images

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[6] D. Allen, interview.
[7] The NLF is mostly known in American circles as the Viet Cong, or Vietnamese Communists. I will refer to this group as the NLF, as it is the name they gave themselves.
[8] George Herring, *America's Longest War: The United States and Vietnam, 1950-1975* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, Inc, 1979) 225-227. The Tet Offensive is discussed in more detail in the next chapter.

on US television of North Vietnamese soldiers scaling the walls of the US embassy added fuel to the antiwar movement at home.[9]

Another black WAC, Susie Stephens McArthur, also had long-lasting memories of the Tet Offensive. McArthur joined the WAC in March 1965 and trained as a typist. Unlike Allen, McArthur was not thrilled when she received special orders for Than Son Nhut in 1967. In her oral history, McArthur made it a point to dispel the oversimplification that all women who served in Vietnam volunteered for their assignments – "that was a lie." McArthur was not drafted into the military, but considered herself to have been "drafted" into service in Vietnam.[10]

McArthur, like Allen, was from the Jim Crow South. Born and raised in Crawfordville, Georgia, she was the ninth of eleven children. Her family owned and lived on a farm, and the children "grew up doing whatever was necessary to survive on a farm." After graduating from high school at age sixteen in 1962, McArthur took night classes at a college in Atlanta to train as a stenographer but she was only able to find employment "babysitting and scrubbing floors or being a waitress." She attempted to enlist in the Army in August 1964, but had to wait until March 1965 to join because she was over the Army's weight limit. Her family "thought it was a joke, that I would do it for a couple years, and I would be back home," but McArthur ended up staying in for twenty-six more years and retiring, the first woman from her county to have done so. McArthur recalled her mother's trepidation at her decision to enlist, since it was a popular conception at the time that "if a woman goes into the military, she's either going to be there to

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[9] Herring, *America's Longest War*, 229, 232.
[10] Susie Stephens McArthur, interview by Hermann J. Trojanowski, February 8, 2002. Women Veterans Historical Project, The University of North Carolina at Greensboro. Hereafter, McArthur, interview.

serve the guys sexually, or she is going to be a lesbian." These sexist and lesbophobic notions did not deter McArthur, and her mother eventually came around to the idea of her daughter being in the Army. The military was, in McArthur's words, her first "real job." She completed basic training at Fort McClellan, Alabama, and her previous training as a stenographer made her an obvious candidate for Advanced Individual Training (AIT) in clerical and stenographer work. Her first assignment was to remain at Fort McClellan in the WAC Center and School as a secretary, where she stayed until she received her orders to the WAC detachment at Tan Son Nhut in 1967. McArthur was hesitant to go to Vietnam as she was engaged to be married at the time, but the only way out, other than to quit, was to get either married or pregnant immediately, and she "didn't think either of those was an option."[11]

McArthur's first memory of the war was arriving at Tan Son Nhut just outside of Saigon: "The most notable, I guess, was when the flight touched down, and we got off the plane, and there was this heat and this odor that just almost knocked you back into the plane." Assigned to a clerk position with the Communications Electronic Branch, McArthur "typ[ed] messages to send out to the field for ammo and signal equipment and whatnot that was needed on the front lines." Prior to her assignment in Vietnam, McArthur had not worked with male soldiers, and she found this new work "very, very rewarding." It was toward the end of her tour when the Tet Offensive erupted. Tan Son Nhut's proximity to Saigon made it a target of attack. McArthur and her fellow WACs could feel the ammo dump being shelled from their location in the barracks, with the

[11] McArthur, interview.

concussion from the blasts strong enough to blow the door of the barracks off its hinges. When the shelling started, McArthur recalled her training:

> Every time things like this would happen, we'd hear about something [that] was going to happen that night, and we'd hear all these mortar rounds going off and whatnot. Our cadre, they would call on the intercom or send someone over there and say, "Okay. Get your gear and get downstairs." We all would pile downstairs on this first floor. I'm thinking if they hit, we all were going at one time. But that's the way we were trained. We'd have to get down there. Thank God nothing happened, but you never knew when something was going to happen or not, so you really had to get your butt up and get out of there.[12]

McArthur was one of few black women in her platoon upon her enlistment, and she went into basic training with the mindset that she would "have to really fight." McArthur was surprised she and the "two or three" other black women in the platoon did not have any conflict with their white colleagues.[13] For McArthur, race was not seen as a hindrance, opposed to Allen's recollections of her blackness resulting in barriers to her career and ability to do her job.

Born in Autaugaville, Alabama, Pinkie Houser enlisted in the Army in 1964 following her graduation from high school at age seventeen. She had been raised on a cotton farm, though being the youngest child, she was not made to pick cotton with her brothers and sisters. The Houser family lived on a property with three other black families and one white family, remembering that "[w]e all grew up together, got along just like we were one family." Houser's

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[12] McArthur, interview.
[13] Ibid.

family, including a sister and brother living in Chicago, wanted her to go to the University of Illinois, but she felt she "wasn't ready to handle college," so she went to the West Madison Army recruitment office while her siblings were at work. Houser's decision to join the Army was a reaction to her family's overprotectiveness and a desire to "leave home." Unlike McArthur, Houser volunteered to be stationed in Vietnam. At the start of 1965, she was a Private First Class and a WAC company clerk at Fort Knox in Kentucky, and after finishing her four year contract, reenlisted in order to be sent to Vietnam. "I felt like I wasn't serving my country enough," she later explained.[14]

Reenlisted as a staff sergeant, Houser arrived at Long Binh Air Base north of Saigon in September 1969, months after Richard Nixon entered the White House promising "peace with honor." An immediate and complete withdrawal of the U.S. military was out of the question, but Nixon and his National Security Advisor, Henry Kissinger, believed the United States could gradually leave Vietnam after reaching a negotiated settlement between the North and the South. In June of 1969 25,000 U.S. soldiers were withdrawn from South Vietnam on Nixon's orders. The next month the president announced one of the most (in)famous projects of the war – Vietnamization. Nixon's policy "called for substantial increases in training and equipment for South Vietnamese forces to enable them to assume full responsibility for the security of their own people and government… aimed to offset the consequences of the departure of American troops from the South." In other words, Vietnamization was supposed to give the major responsibilities of waging war for a non-communist Vietnam to the Republic of Vietnam – "a

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[14] Kathryn Marshall, interview with Pinkie Houser in *In the Combat Zone: An Oral History of American Women in Vietnam, 1966-1975* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1987), 35, 37.

gradual return to the pre-1965 situation, when Saigon held primary responsibility for the military effort against communist forces below the 17th parallel, and the United States played a supporting role."[15] Houser arrived in Vietnam in the context of this transition.

Houser was placed in the United States Army Engineers, Vietnam (USAEV) with one other black woman named Jackie. Their mission was top secret. Houser and her unit worked twelve hour days, with Houser spending much of her time typing then burning the "ribbons and carbons" containing sensitive information at the end of the day. Occasionally, she drove a colonel around the base in a Jeep and visited GIs at the 24th Evacuation Hospital. Some of Houser's strongest memories from Vietnam involved the injured, sick, and dying.[16]

"The worst thing I encountered in Vietnam," Houser said, "was the smell of human flesh burning." The 24th Evac was directly behind the building in which Houser worked, and every day the amputated limbs of soldiers were incinerated at the hospital. Houser lost people to whom she had grown close, including a general and an aide she knew very well whose plane was shot down during a routine nighttime check of bridges and the power grid in the area. Houser recalled "that being such a small command, the general personally would come in and talk to me." At one point during Houser's tour a female colonel was killed in her hooch by a rocket. Houser and several others found her pinned to the wall with the rocket holding her up - "I threw up because I had never seen that before."[17]

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[15] Pierre Asselin, *Vietnam's American War: A History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 172-173.
[16] Marshall, *In the Combat Zone*, 37-39.
[17] Ibid., 40, 42-43, 46-47.

Though she worked directly with only one other black woman, Jackie, Houser encountered black men and women at Long Binh Air Base, and did not remember those experiences fondly. By 1969 "a new black soldier had appeared" in Vietnam. As described by historian Wallace Terry, these new blacks soldier were "draftees...filled with a new sense of black pride and purpose" compared to the career military professionals Terry had met in 1967 who supported the war effort and generally believed military service was a path to receiving all the benefits of citizenship guaranteed to black Americans by the Constitution.[18] In August 1968, a year before Houser arrived in Vietnam, black soldiers had staged a rebellion at the Long Binh jail.[19] By the time Houser arrived at Long Binh black servicemen and women were boldly voicing pro-black and anti-war sentiments. Houser's fellow black servicemen and servicewomen wore black shoelaces around their wrists to denote their loyalty to one another - not wearing one meant being labelled an Uncle Tom. Houser was constantly questioned about her "hanging around honkies," to which she responded, "[t]hey may be a honky to you, but they're my friends."[20] Houser remembered racialized experiences quite differently from Allen and McArthur. Her reluctance to participate in and outright rejection of shows of black solidarity demonstrate the extent to which black women's experiences differed from person to person.

Doris Allen, Susie McArthur, and Pinkie Houser's experiences overlap at the same time that they differ. Allen and McArthur were both at Tan Son Nhut in 1967 and witnessed the shock of the Tet Offensive. Conceivably, they could have crossed paths, though they make no mention

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[18] Terry, Bloods, xiv.
[19] David Cortwright, "Black GI Resistance During the Vietnam War," *Vietnam Generation* 2, no. 1 (1990): 56.
[20] Marshall, *In the Combat Zone*, 45.

of each other. Arriving in 1969, when the WAC detachment had been moved to Long Binh with all of the U.S. Army Command, Houser was in a different place than the previous women, physically and within the timeline of war. Even so, she described the dangers still present for Americans over a year after the Tet Offensive, and detailed the fact that women were not safe from the violence of war even though they were not technically in combat. The stories of these three women also highlight the variety of duties that women stationed in Vietnam had.

While a handful of oral histories cannot paint a full picture of black women in Vietnam, the WAC women discussed in this section demonstrate that three black women, had different backgrounds, reasons for joining the Army, desires (or lack thereof) to be stationed in Vietnam, jobs, and experiences. Each woman thought of her own race differently. Allen believed with conviction that her blackness resulted in her being overlooked, McArthur said she did not personally experience any racism, and Houser criticized her black colleagues for their distrust of white people.

"Angels" in Vietnam: Military Nurses

Major Elizabeth Allen (no relation to CW3 Allen) joined the Army Nurse Corps (ANC) in 1965 after receiving a master's degree from Ohio State University and was determined to get an assignment in Vietnam. Originally wanting to join the Air Force, Maj. Allen ended up in the Army because it could offer her a post in Vietnam faster than the other branches. She was sent to Fort Sam Houston for officer candidate school, where she was asked to remain stateside to train incoming nurses. Her master's degree made her a valuable candidate for a teaching position, but Allen was determined to be sent to Vietnam. She would "battle" with her superiors and in April

1966 she received an assignment to Cu Chi, a rural district outside of Saigon.[21] Later that year *Ebony* reported that thirteen black nurses were stationed in Vietnam with the Army Nurse Corps, ten of whom were women - they were sometimes called "angels."[22]

Following World War II the Army struggled to recruit nurses. The ANC was only 2,981 strong in 1963, compared to an authorized strength of 5,000. Civilian nurses were not joining the Army at sufficient rates for the ANC's to reach its target staffing. Low recruitment was due to several factors, including nursing schools barring recruiters from visiting campuses and low wages compared to civilian nursing jobs. The Army also failed to effectively recruit nonwhite women. When it was established as "Nurse Corps (female)" in 1901, the ANC was segregated by race and gender, admitting only eighteen black nurses in 1918 purely out of desperation due to the demands of World War I and the influenza pandemic.[23] In the early twentieth century black Americans were increasingly concerned with receiving adequate healthcare, and by the decade before WWII, equal access to healthcare was an important component of the struggle for civil rights. Nationwide, African American leaders began to push for an increase of black people in medical professions. In 1937, only an estimated six thousand of the twelve million nurses in the United States were black.[24]

This disparity continued in the postwar years. In 1963, black people comprised only 3.1% of nursing students, and 7.2% from 1971 to 1972. Recruitment did not specifically target

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[21] Elizabeth A. Allen, interview by Vincent Manta, October 18, 2007. Elizabeth A. Allen Collection (AFC/2001/001/55266), Veterans History Project, American Folklife Center, Library of Congress. Hereafter, E. Allen, interview.
[22] "The Angels of Saigon," *Ebony*, August 1966, 44-46.
[23] Vuic, *Officer, Nurse, Woman*, 15; Charissa J. Threat, *Nursing Civil Rights: Gender and Race in the Army Nurse Corps* (Urbana-Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2015), 28.
[24] Threat, *Nursing Civil Rights*, 29-30.

black women. The low number of black women in nursing correlated to a low number serving in the ANC during the Vietnam War. Anna Mae Hayes, the white chief of the ANC from 1967-1971, argued that the Corps did not discriminate against black women; rather, black women were not sufficiently qualified to join,[25] a false statement meant to turn attention away from a lack of diverse recruitment. Major Allen was an anomaly in Vietnam, and she was aware of it.

Arriving first at Tan Son Nhut, Maj. Allen noted that her blackness was an asset at the same time that it was a disadvantage. Through a network of black soldiers who enthusiastically shared information and conversed with her, Maj. Allen was able to keep up with happenings elsewhere in Vietnam. At the time of her arrival in April 1966, for example, one of her brothers, a Marine, was in the Mekong Delta. Black women were an uncommon sight in Vietnam, making her a likely friend and ally for her black male counterparts. "Not often in America has being black counted for you," she remembered with a laugh, "but it counted for me at that point."[26]

On the other hand, Maj. Allen asserted that being a black woman put her in an undesirable position in Cu Chi. She wanted to care for enlisted men, not officers, and along with another nurse named Frankie, she was sent to the 12 Evacuation Hospital for the 25th Infantry Unit. She was assigned to the Vietnamese unit in the hospital, and she noted that her race was most likely the reason for her assignment, as the only other nurses in that unit were disliked and most of her white colleagues had no desire to treat Vietnamese patients.[27]

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[25] Vuic, *Officer, Nurse, Woman*, 15.
[26] E. Allen, interview.
[27] E. Allen, interview.

Air Force nurse Captain Joan Arrington Craigwell, another black American, also spent time taking care of Vietnamese patients at the 12th Air Force Evacuation Hospital at Cam Ranh Bay. Craigwell was born in 1937 in Demopolis, Alabama, outside of Selma, to a teacher and a butcher. She stayed in Demopolis until she enrolled in Hampton University's Bachelor of Science in Nursing program. When asked why she wanted to become a nurse, Craigwell responded that nursing was one of two options for "colored girls" desiring a college degree, the other being teaching. While at Hampton, she came across a poster depicting an Air Force nurse standing next to a civilian nurse. What caught her attention was the caption at the bottom of the poster - "Join the Air Force, See the World." Craigwell found an Air Force recruiter and when she graduated from Hampton in 1961 she was commissioned in the service. Her first assignment was in Waco, Texas, though she refused on the basis that she was "done with the South" and had no interest in dealing with the southern brand of racism she had grown up with. Craigwell could have been court-martialed for refusing the assignment, but her commanding officer was gracious enough to send her to Sacramento. It was not until 1967 that she was assigned to Cam Ranh Air Base on the coast of Vietnam. Craigwell was the only woman on the commercial flight to the base, and recalled the flight being dead silent for the whole time it was in the air. At that time she had her first misgivings about going to Vietnam. She was, however, comforted by her prior assignment to the Philippines, which helped to make the climate of Vietnam less shocking to her.[28] That comfort would not last long.

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[28] Joan Toriano Craigwell, interview by Joe Galloway, September 13, 2017. Joan Toriano Arrington Craigwell Collection (AFC/2001/001/117569), Veterans History Project, American Folklife Center, Library of Congress. Hereafter, Craigwell, interview.

Unlike Maj. Allen, Craigwell's Vietnamese patients were local civilians who had been visited in their villages by nurses, and had injuries or illnesses that were serious enough to require they be brought into the hospital. Her biggest difficulty in dealing with Vietnamese patients was her inability to communicate extensively with them, especially when trying to assess their pain levels. "Everything was always 'yes,'" she told her interviewer, "if you said 'pain,' [they'd say] 'yes.'"[29]

Like Doris Allen and Susie McArthur, Craigwell was in-country during the Tet Offensive, and while the hospital itself was not attacked, she experienced the 1968 Tet Offensive through the wounded she cared for. She was put in charge of setting up a casualty staging unit at the hospital and in the early months of 1968 she and other nurses worked "until they dropped." The staging unit was flooded with wounded soldiers, staff were spread thin, and supplies ran low. Craigwell remembered that some of the younger nurses on staff were so overwhelmed by the number of patients and severity of injuries that they had to be replaced by nurses who had been in-country longer. As casualties resulting from the Tet Offensive mounted, the Air Force moved Craigwell from the staging unit to flight nursing due to the volume of soldiers needing evacuation out of the country. She had already done the required aerospace medicine training, which concerned the effects of flight on injuries and treatment. On average, Craigwell and other flight nurses would each have sixty-five wounded to take care of on each flight. One of Craigwell's strongest memories from her stint as a flight nurse was seeing wounded soldiers salute her when they were taken off the plane at Travis Air Force Base in California. Craigwell

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[29] Craigwell, interview.

was awarded the Bronze Star partly for her work at the casualty staging unit and as a flight nurse.[30]

When asked if she had experienced any racism, Craigwell stated "nobody had time for prejudice." Stateside, 1968 was rocked by the assassinations of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and Robert Kennedy, the chaos at the Democratic National Convention, and rising concerns about the Vietnam War. Craigwell knew about Dr. King's assassination, but barely had any time to process it while attending to her duties; aside from that, she "didn't really know about...what was going on." Particularly during the Tet Offensive, the sheer number of patients Craigwell and her colleagues were taking care of meant that "if you had time to get involved in some racial issues...you had more time than anybody else had." A similar sentiment was expressed by black and white flight nurses interviewed by *Ebony* magazine in 1970 - they "[didn't] have time for that."[31] Craigwell speculated that had she been in Vietnam before the chaos of the Tet Offensive she might have been subject to racism, but in 1968 the war had escalated to the point that it was enough to at least quell racial tensions on the surface.[32]

Though she had originally planned to stay in the Air Force until retirement, the war left Craigwell too traumatized to stay in the service. She and other flight nurses had to "function efficiently, even cheerfully, in the face of indescribable human suffering and tragedy."[33] After visiting the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington, D.C., she was struck by the fact that she had almost certainly cared for some of the people whose names appear on the wall, but she had

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[30] Craigwell, interview.
[31] "Samaritans on Wings," *Ebony*, May 1970, 67.
[32] Craigwell, interview.
[33] "Samaritans on Wings," 64.

been too busy to take the time to get to know them personally, let alone to focus on their names. A major difference between civilian and military nursing, Craigwell noted, was that civilian nurses "got to know [patients] by doing an assessment on them, you do the history on them, you usually follow through," but in a war, military nurses are not afforded the same time. "It weighs heavily on me," she admitted, "to know...I touched some of these people's lives...and I don't know who they are."[34] Craigwell's struggle to come to terms with witnessing war and returning to civilian life forever changed is echoed by Lieutenant Colonel Martha Flowers Cothorn.

A year after Craigwell was at Cam Ranh, Cothorn was assigned to Qui Nhon, about 158 miles north of Cam Ranh Bay. Born in West Virginia, her family moved to Highland Park, Michigan after the coal mine her father worked at was shut down when she was eleven. In 1964, Cothorn enrolled at Dillard University, a historically black university in New Orleans, after her mother had run into a Dillard graduate at the local post office. "I don't know how my parents got the money to pay for my first year," she told me, "and I never asked them," but Cothorn had to find alternatives for paying tuition. After she paid for tuition her sophomore year using student loans, the dean of Dillard's nursing school informed her that the Army was coming to campus to recruit through the Army Student Nurse program, the branch's effort to recruit more nurses to meet escalating demands. Cothorn knew of other nurses in the program and decided to sign up. The Army paid for Cothorn's tuition and medical expenses, and provided a stipend for room and

[34] Craigwell, interview.

board in exchange for a three-year commitment. Six months before her graduation from Dillard in 1968 Cothorn was commissioned as a Second Lieutenant.[35]

Cothorn did basic training at Fort Sam Houston along with fourteen other black women nurses. Her first duty station was at Fort Leonard Wood in Missouri, and she recalled being "encouraged not to go alone into the local town" out of concern for her safety as a black woman. Nine months into her assignment at Fort Leonard Wood, Cothorn received a "letter in the mail" with "a whole lot of numbers [on it]," and was unaware that the letter contained her orders to Vietnam. It wasn't until a conversation with a man at the Fort's finance office that she realized the numbers and San Francisco stamp on the letter was her summons to the war. She flew out of Travis Air Force Base to Tan Son Nhut with six other women, two of whom were black, and "hundreds of men." Upon arrival, an officer listed the hospitals Cothorn and her fellow nurses could be assigned to. Hearing that the 67th Evacuation Hospital in Qui Nhon was in need of nurses, Cothorn volunteered to be stationed there because she had friends already stationed there. She told me about her chaotic journey to the 67th in her white nurses uniform with "too much luggage," laughing good-naturedly as she recalled being forced to find her own way to her duty station. She managed to arrange a ride on a plane, but her flight ended as the sun set and the plane's pilot informed her that he would not fly at night. She was shocked by this revelation, but the pilot was undeterred, telling her to "call the hospital and they'll take care of you. You're a nurse aren't you?" Cothorn's luck turned, however, when she secured a ride to the field hospital

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[35] Martha Ann Flowers Cothorn, interview by William Vollano, December 21, 2012. Martha Ann Flowers Cothorn Collection (AFC/2001/001/88361), Veterans History Project, American Folklife Center, Library of Congress; Martha Flowers Cothorn, "LTC Martha Flowers Cothorn, Ret. USAR: Life Story," Vietnam Veterans of America Michigan Chapter 310 *Newsletter*, May 2018; Martha Flowers Cothorn, interview by author, May 10, 2021.

to find several of her friends from basic training were stationed there. “We had a party that night,” she told me gleefully.[36]

The next morning Cothorn boarded the same plane to be flown north to Qui Nhon. The 67th Evac housed soldiers who had been injured in the field and required more medical attention than could be done off-base. She replaced another black nurse at the hospital whose tour was ending, and was made head nurse of both the medical and psych wards. She would be the only black nurse at Qui Nhon until one of her classmates from Dillard, Bertha Gray Scott, requested an assignment there, a sort of isolation that began with the chief nurse eyeing Cothorn’s afro with distaste upon her arrival. For all but one month of her thirteen-month tour, she was without a roommate, as none of the white nurses wanted to share a room with her. The month she spent with a roommate in the last three months of her assignment was nearly worse than living alone. Cothorn had befriended black soldiers at Qui Nhon, and one night after getting off work she was in her room with a friend, sharing pictures of family and listening to records. Cothorn’s roommate came in around 7:30 pm, and demanded Cothorn kick the man out of their room and “turn off that soul music.” From Cothorn’s tone as she recalled the story, the word “soul” might as well have been thrown at her like a slur. The following day her roommate moved out.[37]

Working in two wards put Cothorn in direct contact with both the physical and mental effects of the war on the soldiers fighting it. She recalled having patients who needed to be strapped down to prevent them from hurting themselves or others, and others who “did not react to anything” and were simply in shock. Her patients were not the only ones suffering from the

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[36] Cothorn, interview by author.
[37] Cothorn, interview by author.

physical and mental strain of the war – during her tour a Colonel who lived a few doors down from her killed himself. Cothorn did not elaborate on whether or not taking care of patients took a toll on her mentally, but, she had a miscarriage, was diagnosed with diabetes, and suffered from heart problems after her return home as a result of her exposure to Agent Orange, a chemical agent used as a defoliant to destroy the Vietnamese jungle and thus expose the NLF guerillas and NVA regulars hiding under the dense overstory.[38]

Nurses stationed in and around Vietnam were not just medical professionals, Stur explains in *Beyond Combat*. They also "straddled a line between the girl next door, providing an image of home to wounded men, and a combat soldier, who came face to face with the fear and death that accompanied the war."[39] Nurses were both "feminine" and "domestic" while at the same time coming face to face with the violence of war and having to react to violence quickly, efficiently, and since they were usually the first medical professionals outside of the field handling the wounded, on their own. As Craigwell mentioned, there was no time to get a doctor's approval when a patient was bleeding out on a table or needed a chest tube inserted.

"We Were on Their Land": Interactions with and Perceptions of Vietnamese People

The story of the Vietnam War cannot and should not ignore the people of Vietnam. Vietnamese people are too often left out of the American histories of the war or relegated to flat, and sometimes racist, stereotypes. The people whose country was invaded were enemies, sexually available and exotic women, clueless allies, or corrupt manipulators of the United

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[38] Cothorn, interview; Cothorn, "Life Story."
[39] Stur, *Beyond Combat*, 106.

States. It was not uncommon for black Americans to feel solidarity with the Vietnamese as fellow people of color seeking self-determination and freedom from white supremacy. In 1966, the Black Panther Party argued black Americans should not be made to "defend a racist government…[and] fight and kill other people of color who, like Black people, are being victimized by the White racist government of America."[40] The more radical Panthers were not alone in their anti-war sentiment. On April 4, 1967, exactly one year before his assassination, Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. delivered a speech condemning the Vietnam War at Riverside Church in New York City. King lamented the "cruel irony of watching Negro and white boys on TV screens as they kill and die together for a nation that has been unable to seat them together in the same schools." Like the Panthers, King did not shy away from criticizing the Vietnam War as unjust beyond the deployment of black soldiers. In King's words, the United States made "a tragic decision" to attempt to quell "a revolutionary government seeking self-determination and a government that had been established...by clearly indigenous forces that included some communists." King called for an immediate end to bombing both North and South Vietnam and a set date for U.S. troop withdrawal six years before the Paris Peace Accords ended the fighting on paper.[41]

Anti-war attitudes were shared by some black soldiers stationed in Vietnam as well. Black GIs motivated by their experiences with racism in the military as well as opposition to the Vietnam War organized resistance and direct action on military installations at home and abroad.

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[40] "The Black Panther Ten-Point Program," *The North American Review* 253, no. 4 (1968): 16-17.
[41] Martin Luther King Jr., "Beyond Vietnam - A Time to Break Silence" (speech, New York, New York, April 4, 1967), American Rhetoric, https://www.americanrhetoric.com/speeches/mlkatimetobreaksilence.htm.

A popular sentiment at the time took its name from a 1968 documentary - *No Vietnamese Ever Called Me Nigger*.[42] Maj. Allen felt a sense of solidarity with the people of Vietnam, regardless of their status in the eyes of many in the U.S. military. Maj. Allen was not anti-war, but she expressed her admiration and respect for the Vietnamese people, particularly their medicinal practices, in her interview.

During her time caring for Vietnamese patients at the 12th Army Evacuation Hospital Maj. Allen cared for soldiers and civilians alike, whether they were classified as enemies or not. She recalled her colleagues occasionally expressing their desire to harm Vietnamese patients and priority being given to American soldiers. "That wasn't my thing," Maj. Allen said. She saw the patients as patients regardless of their status in the eyes of her colleagues or the U.S. military. Race was also on Maj. Allen's mind when caring for Vietnamese people. As an African American, Maj. Allen identified with Vietnamese who were not given proper care at the hands of Americans. "African Americans [were] given care after whites, they were given old blood...and I'd be damned if I'm going to go there and do the same thing to somebody else."[43] Maj. Allen saw parallels between black Americans and the Vietnamese as people of color under the thumb of global white supremacy - and at the time of the Vietnam War, the United States in particular.

Maj. Allen does not shy away from the fact that U.S. forces invaded Vietnam. "We were on their land," she told her interviewer, "we had come to kill them."[44] Histories of the Vietnam War written from an American perspective seldom use the word "invasion," opting instead for

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[42] David Cortwright, "Black GI Resistance During the Vietnam War," 52-53.
[43] E. Allen, interview.
[44] E. Allen, interview.

words such as “landing” and “arrival.” These seemingly inconsequential replacement words mask the violent reality of the U.S. military presence in Vietnam and ignore the fact that many Vietnamese people, North and South, opposed U.S. intervention in a civil war. Additionally, creating a narrative of “arrival” on Vietnamese soil lays the foundation that Vietnamese people were ungrateful and incapable of understanding their own situation, leading to their opposition to U.S. presence. This opposition is then seen as shocking and nearly immoral. The question then becomes “why would the Vietnamese respond to the U.S. presence with violence and not relief or joy?” When not classified accurately, the local response to the U.S. invasion can be vilified.

Like Maj. Allen, Joan Craigwell generally had positive feelings about the people of Vietnam. As had Maj. Allen, Craigwell came into contact with Vietnamese patients on a regular basis. She admitted that even while stationed in Vietnam she could not fully understand why the U.S. was involved in the country. Before and during her service, Craigwell did not “think about Vietnam in a global sense,” and she was unaware of the country’s tumultuous history. She expressed sympathy for the Vietnamese, acknowledging the war’s negative impact on the people. One of the most striking examples of sufferung in war-torn South Vietnam was the sheer number of people Craigwell described as “wandering” through the countryside, unable to safely settle anywhere. “They hurt just like we do,” she said with conviction. Craigwell returned to the subject of the Vietnamese people later in her interview when she was asked about racial dynamics at Cam Ranh, recalling that “we as Americans were quick to learn some of the derogatory terms used toward the Vietnamese.”[45]

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[45] Craigwell, interview.

Susie McArthur, in contrast to Allen and Craigwell, was not interested in the Vietnamese people she encountered. There were few Vietnamese people on base, and the people McArthur interacted with cleaned the barracks and did the soldiers' laundry. McArthur did not express particular dislike for the Vietnamese, though she did admit that she was "one of the ones that believed, 'They all look alike,' so you don't know who to trust."[46] This belief that it was impossible to identify the enemy was used to justify violence against Vietnamese citizens. McArthur does not share anything else about the people of Vietnam. This may be explained by her interviewer not pushing her further; however, McArthur is not alone in her indifference and suspicion toward the Vietnamese people. In Ken Burns and Lynn Novick's *The Vietnam War*, several of the American veterans interviewed mention Vietnamese people only when talking about fighting and/or killing them, being afraid of them, or to complain about their Vietnamese counterparts in the ARVN.[47] For a war that was justified as a rescue mission on behalf of the South Vietnamese, it is striking that many Americans had little knowledge of, concern for, or curiosity about the people living in the country the United States had invaded.

Pinkie Houser had stronger, and more negative, feelings about the Vietnamese people than had Maj. Allen and McArthur. When referring to Vietnamese people she almost exclusively called them Viet Cong or "Charlie," the nickname for the NLF. "I did not like them at all," Houser said, the "them" in question being, in her own words, Vietnamese people as a whole. A Vietnamese woman named Miss Lynn worked as a clerk in the same building as Houser, and Houser constantly accused Miss Lynn of working for the NLF. Recalling these interactions,

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[46] McArthur, interview.
[47] *The Vietnam War*, directed by Ken Burns and Lynn Novick (2017; Arlington, Virginia: PBS).

Houser said Miss Lynn would always respond that she was "not VC," to which Houser would reply, "Oh, yes you are." Houser felt her suspicion of Miss Lynn was justified because the latter would not show up for work on the days that the NLF attacked Long Binh. Houser's explanation that Miss Lynn was working for the NLF could have been correct, but it is also true that Miss Lynn might have known of possible attacks through information networks in and around Saigon. Houser was even suspicious of the children she would see on the streets of Saigon – "If you saw a little three- or four- year-old kid...the little kid could have a satchel on him full of live grenades...if they were big enough – five or six years old – they would take it and pull the pin and they would throw it so it was always in a crowd where [there were] only Americans…I shouldn't hate them," Houser admitted, "but again I think I have a reason to because of the war." She spoke angrily about Vietnamese POWs "cussing us out" from behind chain link fences and recalled throwing rocks at the fence in retaliation.[48] Houser defends her own contempt for Vietnamese people by pointing to the dangerous and chaotic nature of war, but she expected respect (possibly even kindness) from incarcerated Vietnamese soldiers, from people on whose land the war was being fought. In Houser's mind, the good intentions of the U.S. intervention made any negative response from Vietnamese people nearly incomprehensible. Houser condemned Vietnamese for hating Americans, but she justified accusing Miss Lynn of being a guerrilla, and eyeing children with suspicion and POWs with contempt.

Houser used the war to justify her hatred of Vietnamese people, a hatred that was shared by other Americans and in many cases encouraged by the military itself. Private First Class

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[48] Marshall, *In the Combat Zone*, 41.

Reginald "Malik" Edwards, a black Marine from Phoenix, Louisiana stationed at Da Nang from 1965 to 1966, recalled what he was told about the NLF during basic training: "the only thing [the military] told us about the Viet Cong was they were g--ks. They were to be killed. Nobody sits around and gives you their historical and cultural background. They're the enemy. Kill, kill, kill." Disturbingly, the Asian-American soldiers Edwards did basic training with were often forced to act as stand-ins for the Vietnamese during training exercises.[49] What Edwards described was a classic example of dehumanizing an enemy in order to make them easier to kill. Additionally, forcing Asian-Americans to portray an Asian enemy demonstrates just how ingrained anti-Asian racism was in the military before American soldiers even set foot in Vietnam.

How individuals such as Allen, McArthur, Craigwell, and Houser interacted with the people of Vietnam is an important, and often overlooked, piece of the story of the Vietnam War. These stories demonstrate the variety of judgements black, female American military personnel made about Vietnamese people, from care and admiration in Maj. Allen's case and understanding in Craigwell's, to indifference in McArthur's, and animosity in Houser's. For four black women to have a range of feelings about Vietnamese people also shows that black women serving in Vietnam were not a monolith. At the time of the Vietnam War many black Americans at home loudly proclaimed solidarity with the Vietnamese people, but in the country itself imagined solidarity could be racked by actual wartime experiences.

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[49] Terry, *Bloods*, 5-6.

One Afternoon in May: My Conversation with LTC Martha Cothorn

On May 10, 2021, I sat down at my laptop and opened up a scheduled Zoom meeting. In the window next to the one showing me, I can see Martha Cothorn sitting in her living room. This interview is the culmination of a Facebook message, phone calls and emails. In my search for more black women to consent to be interviewed, I began to type the names of the black women veterans whose oral histories I had found in Google and Facebook. It seemed to be by a stroke of luck that I came across Martha Cothorn's Facebook page. A few days after I sent her a Facebook message explaining my thesis and desire to interview her, Cothorn called me to set up a time. LTC Cothorn was the first person I interviewed for this thesis, and my heart was racing as I pulled up the Notes app on my laptop to see the questions I had prepared.

We ended up talking for over two hours. I laughed and smiled along with her, feeling incredibly lucky to be having a conversation with one of the women whose video oral history I had first encountered. After ending our Zoom call, I sat at my desk contemplating what Cothorn had told me about arriving back to the United States after her tour. She flew to Seattle on a private flight from Cam Ranh Bay, one woman with 219 men. "One of the guys" on Cothorn's flight gave her a piece of advice: when they landed, she should immediately go to a restroom and change out of her uniform. Cothorn's fellow passenger was concerned that the returning personnel would be met with a hostile anti-war crowd of protestors, and felt that Cothorn would be able to safely leave the airport in civilian clothes. The flight landed in Seattle, and Cothorn made a beeline for the restroom, where she changed out of her fatigues and combat boots before throwing them into a trashcan. It was an action Cothorn expressed regret for years later as we spoke via Zoom. She made no mention of any protest at the Seattle airport, but the discarded uniform can be seen as a metaphor for more than fear of backlash from any anti-war activist(s). It

is almost a form of erasure itself, though done out of an instinct for self-preservation. Cothorn's discarded uniform and emergence from the airport bathroom in civilian clothes is, to me, an allegory for the reluctance of black women veterans of the Vietnam War to share their experiences with others, a phenomenon I believe is related to the wider issue of silence. Cothorn informed me that upon her return to the United States she "start[ed] hearing from other military nurses, 'don't tell anybody that you've been in Vietnam [because] they won't hire [veterans]'…so for the next ten years or so I never told anyone about Vietnam."[50] Cothorn's silence was her choice, but it cannot be separated from the broader context of the man on the plane who told her to remove her uniform, the nurses who suggested she not talk about her service, and a nation steeped in white supremacy and misogynoir that actively silences black women.

During our first phone conversation I asked Cothorn if she knew of any other black women veterans who would be willing to sit for an interview. Immediately, I became aware of a road block in my research. Cothorn explained that years of reservation about even mentioning service in the Vietnam War, as well as uncertainty about the intentions of interviewers, would make it very difficult for her to convince any women to speak with me. I decided to respect these boundaries. As a black woman myself, I know what it is like to be silenced, and the difference between that and choosing to be silent. I was surprised when, during a vacation with my family, I received a voicemail from Bertha Gray Scott, one of Cothorn's classmates at Dillard. To my shock, Cothorn had convinced her to contact me to set up an interview. I was honored and

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[50] Cothorn, interview by author.

overjoyed. Our conversation lasted less than half an hour, and Scott's voice was soft where it filtered through my phone speakers. Her answers were shorter than Cothorn's, but the thirty minutes we spent on the phone meant the world to me as a historian and a young black woman.

Scott, like Cothorn, joined the Army Student Nurse program in her second year at Dillard after learning about the program's tuition assistance. Scott received orders for Vietnam in 1969, "more curious than nervous" about what she would encounter in a war. "I wasn't really afraid," she told me, "I figured if I don't go now I will go eventually." Scott's first assignment ended soon after her arrival with the closing of the base at which she was stationed, and when asked where she wanted to go next she chose Qui Nhon, knowing that Cothorn was there. Like Cothorn, Scott kept her stories about her service to herself. Despite serving six more years in the Army as a nurse on bases in the United States, "a lot of people did not know I was a Vietnam [War] veteran."[51]

My conversations with Cothorn and Scott opened my eyes to the problems of writing what Viet Thanh Nguyen calls just memory. How do you work toward a just memory if the subjects do not wish to share their experiences? How can we write a just history when external forces cultivate an environment where marginalized people feel too uncomfortable to share their thoughts, feelings, and memories with strangers? Black American women veterans of the Vietnam War occupy a significant space in United States history as well as the nation's present. They served their country, and in the case of the six women discussed in this chapter, served tours in Vietnam caring for the wounded, gathering intelligence, handling top secret information,

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[51] Bertha Gray Scott, interview by author, July 14, 2021.

and helping keep bases and command centers running. Yet they are almost entirely erased from prominent media portrayals of the war, memorialization, and scholarship. Their absence in the widely retold and accepted American narrative of the Vietnam War is the result of both choice and marginalization, though one must interrogate if the choice is made solely for personal reasons or results from lack of concern or interest from people outside of these women's circles.

Halfway through my phone interview with Scott, I asked her if she could recall any specific instances of racism and sexism during her time in the military. Her response deserves more than a cursory retelling – "in any situation you [as a black woman] experience racism and sexism." In other words, there is neither a place nor time where being black and a woman does not have an impact on one's perceptions and treatment by others. Black women are racialized and gendered in all contexts, and in unique ways. The term "misogynoir," increasingly popular in activist spaces, refers to the specific oppression of black women, a combination of misogyny and racism. Scott and other black American military women stationed in Vietnam were seen by others through the lenses of race and gender as they contributed to the war effort and when they returned to the United States.

Conclusion

Though it is a work of fiction, *Forrest Gump* provides one of the most enduring depictions of a Vietnam War veteran in American popular memory – Lieutenant Dan. Lieutenant Dan is the archetypal Vietnam War veteran. He is disabled, suffering from PTSD, white, and a man. In addition to having a stereotypical image of Vietnam War veterans, most Americans seem to agree about what these veterans experienced when they returned home. The common conception is that Vietnam War veterans were mistreated and disrespected upon their return

home, left to deal with the physical and mental scars of the war on their own. This narrative, however, was usually applied only to white men.

Black women veterans, on the other hand, were largely ignored. Joan Craigwell and Martha Cothorn remembered that upon their return home, no one was interested in talking to them about what they had experienced during the war. Elizabeth Allen was appalled by the lack of help Veterans Affairs (VA) was willing to give women veterans regarding medical issues outside of reproductive health. She leaned forward, watching her interviewer intently as she said that in the eyes of the VA, "women veterans are only made up of breasts and uteruses."[52] The distinction made between those who saw and did not see combat helped to further erase women from conversations about the war, as they did not receive combat training and technically were not in combat. However, it is clear that the Vietnam War blurred the lines between what was and was not combat, as the unconventional warfare utilized by the NVA and NLF meant that there were no distinguishable front lines. Despite these realities, women veterans are almost never central to narratives about the Vietnam War, if they are even present at all.

The lack of primary and secondary material on black women veterans of the Vietnam War demonstrates the need for greater research. Every scholar I reached out to for guidance (Professors Bolger, Mitchell, and Dr. Blazich, the curator of military history at the Museum of American History – who also reached out to his colleagues – in addition to archivists at the Army Nurse Corps Archive at Fort Sam Houston) would tell me that this was a great topic, but they did not know anything about it. It is impossible to come up with sweeping analyses and

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[52] E. Allen, interview.

conclusions about black women in Vietnam, as I can only extrapolate from the experiences of six women. This work is preliminary, and I hope to expand this research to include more women. The combination of a small number of black women who served in Vietnam, their hesitancy to talk about their experiences, and the lack of interest in their experiences perceived by black women veterans upon their return to the United States point to the variety of factors that have resulted in the dearth of scholarship about black women veterans of the Vietnam War. However, the experiences of those like Maj. Allen, who highlighted the difficulties women veterans have in getting the same recognition and services as their male counterparts, suggests that at an institutional level, the United States military and some military scholars are simply not interested in women as a whole.

Figure 4: LTC Martha Cothorn at the 67th Evac Hospital. Photo courtesy of Martha Cothorn.

Figure 5: LTC Cothorn and football player Floyd Little, who was touring Vietnam visiting U.S. troops. Photo courtesy of Martha Cothorn.

CHAPTER 3: "Ties of Hope and Love": Women in the Republic of Vietnam Armed Forces

Hue Le (hereafter, Hue) sits across from me on a small wooden chair in her living room in her home in Raleigh, North Carolina. Flags of the Republic of South Vietnam hang from shelves, the crown molding on the ceiling, and small vases and glasses around the room, occasionally swaying when air from the AC vents brush them. She has two glasses of water, one for me and one for Thi Phan, a member of the Vietnamese American Association of Raleigh, who put me in contact with Hue and offered to translate. It is August 28, 2021, and I am conducting the first of five interviews with South Vietnamese women veterans, all of whom I was introduced to via Thi.

All five women – Hue Le, Dien Phan, Trinh Le, Sarah Huong Nguyen, and Be Bay – are RVNAF veterans now living in the United States. In addition to them, I will be referencing a 2010 interview with Hanh Nhan Thi Nguyen conducted by Nancy Bui and translated by Trieu Giang for the UC Irvine Vietnamese American Oral History Project. This is a small sample, but it offers a window into a group of women generally left out of U.S. scholarship on the Vietnam War. This chapter follows the lives of these women from their childhood in Vietnam to their journeys to the United States after South Vietnam ceased to exist. In addition, all six women speak on memory of the Vietnam War in the United States.

Early Life and Joining the RVNAF

Hue was born in Kien Hoa (now called Ben Tre) in the Mekong Delta on March 25, 1944, a little more than a year before the end of World War II. She is a short woman, sitting tall in her living room, with a stack of booklets in Vietnamese at her feet. At the time of her birth, the Japanese empire was still occupying what was then still a French colony, separated into three

districts – Tonkin, Annam, and Cochin China. The Japanese "seized control of Vietnam's economic resources while leaving daily administration in the hands of the French," specifically the collaborationist Vichy regime. The Vietnam Doc Lop Dong Minh Hoi (League for the Independence of Vietnam), or Viet Minh for short, was the most prominent nationalist group in Vietnam during World War II, making them a natural ally for the United States in the war against the Axis powers. Founded in 1941, it was in the Viet Minh that Ho Chi Minh, affectionately called Uncle Ho by his Vietnamese allies and supporters, made a name for himself.[1] Following Japanese surrender in 1945, the French once again assumed legal control of their colonies in Southeast Asia, but the Viet Minh challenged them. On September 2, 1945, Ho invoked the United States Declaration of Independence and proclaimed Vietnam unified and independent. As the Cold War hardened, the State Department grew increasingly concerned with Ho Chi Minh's communist connections, but recognized that he had gained a significant amount of support among the people of Vietnam. Even so, the United States preferred a French colony to a communist-allied independent Vietnam. In 1946 the United States sent France $160 million "expressly for use in Vietnam," as the French began to wage war against Ho and the Viet Minh.[2]

The French, with U.S. support, fought to keep their southeast Asian colony for nearly a decade. It was not until the historic battle at Dien Bien Phu that the French would finally have to release control of Indochina. On March 13, 1954 Viet Minh commander Vo Nguyen Giap's forces launched an attack on the French position in the Murong Thanh Valley, which General Henri Navarre had assumed was easily defensible. Called "one of the greatest logistical feats in

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[1] Marilyn Young, *The Vietnam Wars 1945-1990* (New York: HarperCollins, 1991), 2-4.
[2] Young, *The Vietnam Wars*, 22.

military history" in Ken Burns and Lynn Novick's documentary *The Vietnam War*, 200,000 Vietnamese men and women made roads and moved troops and equipment into the hills around Dien Bien Phu, unbeknownst to the French forces.[3] Viet Thanh Nguyen asserts that "[i]n the annals of decolonization and national self-determination, this legendary battle was matched only by the myth of David and Goliath, the original example of asymmetric warfare."[4] The military arm of the French Empire, Goliath, was laid low by the underestimated David, the Viet Minh. The Battle of Dien Bien Phu shocked France and marked the end of their direct war against Vietnamese nationalists, but "it was only the beginning of negotiations over what [other powers] would allow [Vietnamese] independence to mean."[5]

The 1954 Geneva Accords split Vietnam into two at the 17th parallel – the State of Vietnam (South), the name given to the independent-in-name Vietnamese government under the French, and the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (North). Bao Dai, the French puppet emperor, was still the nominal head of state in the South, though the United States soon replaced him with Ngo Dinh Diem. Ho Chi Minh and the newly rebranded Lao Dong (Worker's Party) governed the North.[6] The partition was to be temporary, with plans to hold an election to decide the fate of a united Vietnam in 1956. In the meantime, the Eisenhower administration hoped to build up a non-communist challenger to Ho Chi Minh and the Lao Dong.[7] This would not be as easy as Eisenhower had hoped.

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[3] *The Vietnam War*, directed by Ken Burns and Lynn Novick (PBS, 2017), episode one.
[4] Viet Thanh Nguyen, *Nothing Ever Dies: Vietnam and the Memory of War* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2016), 170.
[5] Young, *The Vietnam Wars*, 31-33, 36.
[6] Young, *The Vietnam War*, 42, 43-53.
[7] Herring, *America's Longest War*, 40-41.

For the first ten years of her life (1944-1954), Hue lived in a Vietnam that was simultaneously country and colony, independent in the minds of nationalists like the Viet Minh but still a French possession in the eyes of the Western world. Hue received a French-dominated education fit for a colonial subject. At the beginning of our interview, Thi explained that Hue's French education made her Vietnamese unusual, a lasting example of colonialism's ability to affect all aspects of life, even language. Hue does not remember much from the time of partition. For Hue and her mother in the countryside of Kien Hoa outside of Saigon, violence was common both before and after the Geneva Accords. Hue Le witnessed the assassinations of local officials and their families. She recalled headless bodies floating in the Mekong River, their loved ones crying on its banks, mourning their loss. Along with violence in the general community, when Hue was in high school her own mother was kidnapped. In Hue's words, "communists" were responsible for the kidnappings and killings.

An elision of communist, insurgent, leftist individuals is common amongst those in the United States as well as former citizens of the Republic of Vietnam. One of the most common examples of this elision is in the casual use of "Viet Cong" to refer to all insurgents in the South. Most of the time "Viet Cong" is used in place of National Liberation Front. Established in South Vietnam in 1960 and described by NLF member Truong Nhu Tang as "the formal organization of the South Vietnamese revolution" against the regime of Ngo Dinh Diem and U.S. meddling in Vietnamese affairs, the NLF's opposition broadly referred to the organization as the "Viet Cong or Vietcong," a shortened version of a phrase meaning "Vietnamese communist," despite the fact

that the NLF had many non-communist members.[8] Hue and the other women in this chapter do not differentiate between "communists" and other groups; therefore, references to "communists" will be in quotation marks to denote that the word is being used by an interviewee. Regardless of the identity of those causing chaos in Kien Hoa, Hue saw the RVNAF as an opposition force to the elements in the countryside terrorizing her family and community, and joined in 1964.[9]

The second woman I interviewed, Dien Phan (hereafter, Phan), Thi's mother-in-law, was the born in 1949 to a large, landowning family living southwest of Saigon, the penultimate of six daughters. The interview is being conducted over FaceTime, and Phan is answering my questions as she walks around her home in Massachusetts. I listen and watch as she enters her kitchen and seemingly puts dishes away into cabinets, her relaxed demeanor easing my nerves. Like Hue, Phan's family was affected by conflict. They relocated to Saigon when Phan was a child out of concern for their safety as relatively wealthy people in the countryside, but eventually Saigon would not be without its own dangers. In 1968, Phan was enrolled in university and studying social work when she took a break for the Tet holiday to spend time with her family. Her holiday was interrupted by the joint NLF and North Vietnamese attack on Saigon. General Tran Van Tra of the Central Committee Directorate for the South (called COSVN by the U.S. military) explained the purpose of the 1968 offensive "to create conditions for millions of people…to rise up and coordinate with our military forces to…overthrow the

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[8] Truong Nhu Tang, *A Vietcong Memoir* (New York: Vintage Books, 1986), xi. In general, the South Vietnamese women I interviewed did not distinguish between communist and non-communist insurgent fighters in the South; therefore, when I refer to "communists" I am using the interviewees' words. Insurgent movements had been ongoing in South Vietnam before the official establishment of the NLF, and there is no way to guarantee that every insurgent these women encountered were even in the NLF.

[9] Hue Le, interview by author, August 28, 2021. Hereafter, Hue, interview by author.

nerve center of the Southern puppet government, frustrate and fundamentally paralyze the war machine of the United States and its allies…and win a decisive victory."[10] The Tet Offensive did not result in a decisive victory for the NLF and North Vietnamese forces, but it had a profound impact on the South Vietnamese and U.S. war effort. As General Tra summarizes, "we failed militarily but won politically…the U.S.-puppet forces won militarily but were defeated psychologically."[11] Scholars in the United States tend to focus on the Tet Offensive from an (understandably) American perspective. It was a "watershed" in which "[d]oubts [amongst Americans] became contagious…within the administration and foreign-policy establishment" and "[t]he public…began to shift from predominantly hawkish to predominantly dovish."[12] Phan, however, highlighted the impact on the South Vietnamese on the ground at the time. Phan lost family in the Tet Offensive, and came face to face with refugees who had fled to Saigon from the surrounding areas. According to the government of the Republic of Vietnam, 6,300 civilians died and 206,000 lost their homes in the Tet Offensive.[13] In the aftermath of a shocking attack on South Vietnam's cities, Phan was deeply changed. Since she was already enrolled in university for social work, Phan decided to pivot those skills to the war effort. She joined the RVNAF the same year as the Tet Offensive, and graduated in the second officer class in the WAFC, which was the first officer class of newer recruits.[14]

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[10] Tran Van Tra, "Tet: The 1968 General Offensive and General Uprising," trans. Ngo Vinh Hai, Do Le Chau, and Jayne Werner, in *The Vietnam War: Vietnamese and American Perspectives*, ed. Luu Doan Huynh and Jayne S. Werner (Armonk: M.E. Sharpe, Inc., 1993), 40.
[11] Tra, "Tet," 57.
[12] Michael H. Hunt, *Lyndon Johnson's War: America's Cold War Crusade in Vietnam, 1945-1968* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1996), 115.
[13] Young, *The Vietnam Wars*, 220.
[14] Phan, interview by author. Hereafter, Phan, interview by author.

The third woman I interviewed, Trinh Le (hereafter, Trinh) was born in 1948 to a wealthy family living southwest of Saigon, on the banks of the Mekong River. Thi calls her Mrs. Trinh, implying a level or respect and reverence for her. He also takes the time to ask me if I am familiar with Vietnamese naming conventions to ensure that I know that Trinh is her given name, and that Vietnamese people are usually referred to as their given name even after a title like "Mrs." or "General". While she was just a child, Trinh's paternal grandmother was arrested and killed by "communists," and her family's property was seized. French military personnel were sent to evacuate Trinh and her family to My Tho, where the family spent about three or four years on a French military base. Trinh's father joined the Vietnamese military, which was at that point still under French control, motivated by his mother's murder. Trinh and her three siblings spent much of their time with both Vietnamese and French military social workers, who acted as de facto babysitters for children on base. It was her encounters with social workers as a child that inspired Trinh to become one herself. Of the five Vietnamese women I interviewed, Trinh had some of the most neutral memories of the division of Vietnam. Of course, she was not happy that her homeland was being divided, but she recalled a time of general peace in the 1950s while the North and South regrouped. Neither was permitted to "remilitarize" – "[t]here were to be no troops reinforcements, no augmentation of weapons, no military bases, and no foreign military alliances on the part of the administrations of either zone." Canada, Poland, and India, which were to monitor the 1956 elections, "would supervise the terms of the armistice and investigate any complaints" as well.[15] At the time of the initial partition, Trinh recalled North and South

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[15] Young, *The Vietnam Wars*, 41.

Vietnam generally being on their best behavior. Her father remained in the military, which became the Republic of Vietnam Armed Forces (RVNAF). As the 1950s ended and the 1960s began, Trinh's memories of chaos and violence were punctuated with fond recollections of military women. Trinh would later join the WAFC, but her grandmother's death was not the only factor contributing to this decision. While she was of course shaped by the tragedies she experienced, Trinh never forgot the kindness of Vietnamese and French social workers in My Tho. These women acted as caregivers and teachers for children on base while many of their mothers traveled into Saigon to work and sell goods at markets for income. Trinh internalized the dedication they had to caring for her and her brothers, inspiring her to follow in these women's footsteps. Like Dien Phan, she was commissioned as an officer in the second class of graduates in 1968.[16]

My fourth interviewee, Sarah Huong Nguyen (hereafter, Sarah Huong), was born in 1940 in the province of Vinh Long in the Mekong Delta. She and her sister and mother moved closer to Saigon when she was a child following the death of her father in a car accident. Like Trinh, Sarah Huong recalls the division of Vietnam as relatively peaceful. Her family's proximity to Saigon was a factor in this period being uneventful, as Huong stated most of the people living in and around the city were anti-communist. Saigon also became home for many moving from the North to the South out of fear of a communist regime in the North, as the free movement of civilians across the 17th parallel was permitted for three hundred days after the cease-fire officially began on July 20, 1954.[17] Sarah Huong was enrolled in university in Saigon for two

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[16] Trinh, interview by author.
[17] Young, *The Vietnam Wars*, 42.

years before she decided to join the RVNAF in 1963 at the age of 23. Unlike Hue, Phan, and Trinh, Sarah Huong joined, at least in part, out of financial need. When she joined the RVNAF, women served in the Women's Auxiliary Corps, later to be transformed into the Women's Armed Forces Corps (WAFC) modeled after the U.S. Women's Army Corps (WAC).[18] The WAFC had not been formed when Sarah Huong began her six months of training to become a social worker. For two years, she was stationed as a non-commissioned officer (NCO) with an Army unit in Kien Giang, as formal officer training for women was not established until 1965. When the WAFC was established in 1965, Sarah Huong was sent back to Saigon to undergo officer training. She graduated in the first class of women officers in the WAFC, which catered to already enlisted women with high school degrees.[19]

Be Bay (hereafter, Be), the last woman I interviewed, was born in Long An Province in 1946, the seventh of eleven children. Like every interview aside from Hue Le's, we are speaking over FaceTime. Be is wearing a blazer and blouse, and sits just off-center on my screen, a large picture of the U.S. Capitol building in Washington. D.C. Be currently lives in northern Virginia, less than a half-hour from my home town. As with Hue, my conversation with Be is a reminder of why I decided to undertake a difficult research topic. I had spent eighteen years of my life in the same county as a Vietnam War veteran *from* Vietnam and did not even know it. I think of all of the other women RNVAF veterans who are located around the country, whose stories are known only to those in their families and communities. I want to share the experiences of these women, even if only a handful of people read this thesis, to make others think of the Be Bays

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[18] Phung Thi Hanh, "South Vietnam's Women in Uniform," The Vietnam Council on Foreign Relations (1970): 7.
[19] Sarah Huong Nguyen, interview by author, October 10, 2021. Hereafter, Sarah Huong, interview by author.

who could be their own neighbors. A self-described "country girl," Be went to high school in Saigon, as there were no high schools in rural areas at the time. She joined the WAFC immediately after graduating from high school in 1965 and became a sergeant the following year. Be did not mention a specific event or events that led her to the RVNAF. She joined out of a sense of duty to her country. In March 1968, she graduated at the top of the first class of women officers in the WAFC.[20]

While not the only woman discussed in this thesis, born into wealth Hanh Nhan Thi Nguyen (hereafter, Hanh Nhan) had an especially privileged childhood. The only Vietnamese woman I did not interview, an English transcript of her interview for the UC Irvine Vietnamese Oral History Project is housed online. Born in 1927 in the imperial city of Hue, her father was a Field Marshal in what she called the Central Army Corps. The Central Army Corps operated under the command of Emperor Bao Dai, the last emperor of the Nguyen dynasty and last monarch of Vietnam. Her father's first wife was Princess Ngoc Son, the daughter of Emperor Dong Khanh. Princess Ngoc Son died not long after her marriage to Hanh Nhan's father, but even after he had remarried and had children with his new wife the royal family remained close to the Nguyens. Hanh Nhan enjoyed a privileged childhood, attending high school in Hue and living with her family in a house Bao Dai gave her father where she interacted with the Queen and "imperial maids." Hanh Nhan recalled "enjoy[ing] the love from my parents" and "poetic memories on beautiful moonlit nights" at Thuan An beach. Her sheltered upbringing in a palace

[20] Be Bay, interview by author, October 24, 2021. Hereafter, Be, interview by author.

shielded her from the worst of French colonialism and Japanese occupation during WWII, as Emperor Bao Dai had colluded with both imperial forces.

On August 30, 1945, after the Allied defeat of the Japanese, the emperor voluntarily abdicated and left Hue for France, a moment that historian Marilyn Young describes as "perhaps his first and last act of genuine nationalism."[21] Bao Dai's abdication thrust Hanh Nhan and her family into uncertainty. The emperor was gone and Uncle Ho had declared Vietnam independent, but France was determined not to relinquish their prized colony to the Viet Minh. On November 23, 1946 the French shelled the port city Haiphong, an event that some historians note as the beginning of the war between France and the Viet Minh. The fighting in Haiphong ended on November 28, but its effects were widespread – the Viet Minh and France were at war throughout Vietnam.[22] Hahn Nhan said she was eighteen or nineteen when "the war broke out between the Viet Minh and the French… [and] [t]he city was damaged under their mortar attacks," making it likely that 1946 was the time in which she and her family had to evacuate Hue. While outside of the comfort and protection of a palace in Hue, the Nguyen family "had to depend on others for housing. Sometimes we only had porridge or pumpkins for meals. We had to sell sugar canes or sweet potatoes for living during those days." When the French recaptured Hue and Nguyen's family returned to the city, probably in 1947, they were without income and

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[21] Young, *The Vietnam Wars*, 10.

[22] Disagreements about who controlled customs in the port city led to increasing tensions between the French and Vietnamese authorities in Haiphong. The conflict had mostly been resolved when French commander Jean Valluy ordered French forces in Haiphong to "give a severe lesson" to the Vietnamese. Herring, *America's Longest War*, 5; Young, *The Vietnam Wars*, 18; Spencer Tucker, *Encyclopedia of the Vietnam War: a political, social, and military history* (Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO, 1998), 260-261.

housing.[23] With the return of the French, Hanh Nhan was hired as a French translator for a business owner. The 1949 Elysee Agreement, negotiated between the French government and Bao Dai, gave Vietnam more independence while remaining a French colony. Bao Dai returned to Vietnam as the nominal head of a united country under French domination, in opposition to the Viet Minh in order to ensure a non-communist Vietnam.[24] It was in the context of the 1949 Elysee Agreement that Hanh Nhan began her military service at age 23 after the business she worked for went bankrupt. Hanh Nhan worked in the Viet Binh Doan an "assimilated employee," until the French created a "corps of female assistants" in 1950. This corps was made up of "office secretaries, nurses and social workers, doing assignments appropriate to women."[25]

In 1952, these women were organized into the Women's Auxiliary Corps. In 1965, when the United States deployed Marines to Danang, the Auxiliary Corps was reorganized into the Women's Armed Forces Corps, modeled after the Women's Army Corps (WAC) in the United States. Two years after its founding, the WAFC numbered 2,700. In 1969 the director of the WAFC, Lieutenant Colonel Tran Cam Huong described the WAFC's purpose, which was similar to the corps of female assistants Nguyen joined – "to provide 'woman power' to release men for assignment in combat areas." This woman power consisted of women working as "typists, supply clerks, switchboard and teletype operators, social workers, nurses, and medics." A survey

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[23] Hanh Nhan Thi Nguyen, interview by Nancy Bui, trans. Trieu Giang, Vietnamese Oral History Project, UC Irvine, November 9, 2010. Hereafter, Hanh Nhan Nguyen, interview.
[24] Ronald H. Spector, *United States Army in Vietnam: Advice and Support: The Early Years, 1941-1960* (Washington, D.C.: United States Army Center of Military History, 1985), 94.
[25] Hanh Nhan Nguyen, interview.

conducted in 1969 revealed that approximately half of the women in WAFC joined due to financial need, with most of the other half citing patriotic duty as a motivator.[26]

While only Be Bay explicitly stated her patriotism as a reason for joining the RVNAF, all six women demonstrated a dedication to the Republic of Vietnam through their decision to join the armed forces. They felt they had something to contribute to the RVNAF, whether out of a desire to be a source of hospitality and humanity or to help the opposition to insurgent activity in the countryside. As social workers and trainers, these six women are unsung contributors to the Republic of Vietnam's war effort.

"Equal to the Male Soldiers": Women's Roles in the WAFC

All of the enlisted Vietnamese women worked under the umbrella of social work. Hanh Nhan described it as "office work" and "social activities," and said the purpose of women in the RVNAF as "to substitute for the male soldiers who went to the battlefields."[27] The women I interviewed discussed doing everything from helping families dependent on RVNAF soldiers file for benefits to running schools for children and caring for the wounded. Women in the RVNAF were not separated into branches; rather as Dien Phan explained, they could be sent to any of the military branches depending on need. Women often had multiple assignments during their tenure in the RVNAF, being shifted around South Vietnam and even between service branches.

After being commissioned as a Second Lieutenant in 1969, Dien Phan spent one year with the 25th Army Division in Cu Chi, near Saigon, where she met her future husband. Thi

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[26] Phung Thi Hanh, "South Vietnam's Women in Uniform," 7.
[27] Hahn Nhan, interview.

described Cu Chi as a "hotbed of communist guerrilla activity," a statement Phan agreed with. Phan was then reassigned to a Marine division base ten miles south of Saigon. Phan oversaw the care and assistance of all families on base, and worked with U.S. military advisors to get supplies such as food and medicine. She stayed in the Marines until her honorable discharge in 1973, following her marriage in 1972. It was common for WAFC women to be honorably discharged following marriage, as the RVNAF encouraged them to leave behind military life in favor of supporting their families and eventually having and raising children. It was this honorable discharge before 1975 that helped Phan escape arrest and incarceration following North Vietnam's victory.[28]

Trinh Le was also honorably discharged after getting married to an RVNAF captain in 1971, two years into her assignment with the 9th Army Division in the Mekong Delta. Most RVNAF soldiers were sent to bases and stations not far from their homes, meaning most of the soldiers and families Trinh interacted with were from the countryside. Most of these soldiers and their families were illiterate, as they did not have easy access to education so far outside of Vietnam's cities. For this reason, Trinh spent a large amount of her time working to get documentation, like marriage and birth certificates, for those on base who were unable to get them without assistance. In the same vein, Trinh helped families navigate the government assistance apparatus to receive benefits as dependents. She cared for wounded soldiers, spent time with grieving families, and like the social workers she knew as a child, she taught children

[28]Phan, interview by author.

how to read and write.[29] Trinh remembered women she had met at age three, and hoped she would have the same positive impact on children with the 9th Division.

Hue Le was also discharged before 1975, suffering an injury in 1970. Before her honorable discharge, Hue was the officer in charge of the social work office in the 23rd Army Division located in the Central Highlands. Along with overseeing all social workers with the 23rd, Hue was involved with the logistics of getting families of soldiers in the division to the base, arranging meetings between soldiers and their families, and transporting the bodies of deceased soldiers to their homes. Hue described the social work office as a family unit – the women in her office called her "Big Sister."[30] While working to (re)unite and comfort families, Hue Le had found a family of her own in the WAFC. She continues to see these women to this day.

Sarah Huong, Hanh Nhan, and Be all ended their military careers as trainers, and remained in the RVNAF until the Republic of Vietnam surrendered in April of 1975. Sarah Huong worked in Saigon training incoming WAFC social workers in logistics, documentation, child care, and education.[31] Hanh Nhan was stationed at Tan Son Nhut Airbase south of Saigon. She described herself and her fellow women as "equal to the male soldiers" and "proud of our contributions to serve in the armed forces in serving the country."[32] Be was the chief of the social work training department in Saigon from her graduation in 1968 to 1975. She was excited to be

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[29] Trinh, interview by author.
[30] Hue, interview by author.
[31] Sarah Huong, interview by author.
[32] Hahn Nhan Nguyen, interview.

close to her family and joyfully shared stories with them about her day-to-day life and things she learned as a trainer.[33]

Whether they stayed in the RVNAF until 1975 or were honorably discharged before that, these women described their work with pride. They had a variety of responsibilities at different leadership levels, all aimed at improving lives on the ground and assisting the RVNAF's war effort as a whole. These duties brought many of these women into contact with U.S. soldiers and advisors through interactions on bases.

Perceptions of the United States and Its Military

All five women I interviewed spoke at length about the anti-war movement in the United States. Even if not interested in U.S. politics in a broad sense, Hue, Phan, Trinh, Sarah Huong, and Be were very aware of growing sentiment against the war amongst the American people. Phan believed people in the United States simply did not understand the situation in South Vietnam, which left them susceptible to anti-war rhetoric. Similarly, Sarah Huong and Be charged U.S. media outlets with spreading unnuanced and biased information. In Trinh's opinion, it was the anti-war movement that forced the United States to pull out of Vietnam. Be specifically remembered Jane Fonda's 1972 visit to North Vietnam and the disappointment she felt that a famous American would go to such lengths to discredit the American and South Vietnamese war effort.[34] Despite these negative perceptions of anti-war protestors, the women

[33] Be Bay, interview by author.
[34] Phan, interview by author; Sarah Nguyen, interview by author; Trinh Le, interview by author; Bay, interview by author.

had generally positive views of the U.S. military and the personnel with whom they interacted; only Hue expressed any explicit criticisms of U.S. policy in Vietnam.

All five women interacted with U.S. personnel while in the WAFC. These interactions usually took place as a result of logistical matters, in particular the movement of supplies and resources. The *New York Times* reported that from 1961 to April 1975 the United States government had spent $141 billion in South Vietnam.[35] Some of that $141 billion went to supplies for the military and Vietnamese civilians, which social workers were tasked with securing and distributing. Trinh remembers receiving notebooks for students from U.S. personnel, and interacting with U.S. nurses and doctors with the 7th Fleet when RVNAF soldiers needed more medical care than the RVNAF could offer. One of Phan's main responsibilities with the 25th Division was working with U.S. advisors to get supplies. Both Trinh and Phan expressed that the advisors they worked with were generally helpful and willing to get them whatever they needed, be it medicine, food, or office supplies. Every U.S. advisor stationed with the 25th Army Division attended Phan's wedding in 1972, demonstrating a comradery that went beyond simple duty. Be Bay fondly remembered an African American Sergeant named River with whom she worked more than any other U.S. personnel. This was the only instance in which any of the women I interviewed mentioned interacting with a non-white U.S. soldier.[36]

Along with specific positive interactions, these women held generally favorable views of the U.S. military and its intervention in Vietnam. Hue was the only woman who explicitly criticized U.S. involvement and actions in Vietnam. While she expressed gratitude for the U.S.

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[35] "U.S. Spent $141-Billion In Vietnam in 14 Years," *New York Times*, May 1, 1975.
[36] Trinh Le, interview by author; Phan, interview by author; Bay, interview by author.

presence in South Vietnam, she felt that the U.S. military had impeded the RVNAF. Hue mentioned tensions over the possibility of invading North Vietnam – she recalled that the RVNAF felt a ground invasion across the 17th parallel was the key to victory, while U.S. advisors wanted to focus on carpet bombing as an avenue to weaken the North Vietnamese military and the morale of the North Vietnamese people. In Thi's words, "we were fighting a war we could never win." This differs from Phan, who said the RVNAF and U.S. military were basically on the same page in all aspects of waging war on North Vietnam and insurgents in the South. Trinh Le said she did not like to criticize the United States, but this noncommittal answer implied that there were things she *could* criticize. In addition to differences in opinions on waging war, Hue Le pointed to cultural differences as a source of tension. Hue Le felt that U.S. advisors and personnel in general did not understand Vietnamese people and their culture, and did not attempt to. Despite her criticisms, Hue Le was adamant that she was appreciative of U.S. involvement in Vietnam.[37]

It is possible that these women did not want to share their qualms with the United States in an interview conducted by an American outside of the Vietnamese community. This is merely conjecture on my part, but it was on my mind throughout the process of interviewing them. In contrast to the overall positive feelings expressed by the five women I interviewed, Hanh Nhan offered a more scathing assessment of the United States. Hanh Nhan was confused by the U.S. withdrawal of support in 1973, saying, "[w]e only knew our allies abandoned us just for the interest of the United States." Because of this abandonment, "the Communists claimed the honor

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[37] Hue Le, interview by author; Dien Phan, interview by author; Trinh Le, interview by author.

of national reunification."[38] Once again, I can only speculate, but it is possible that Hanh Nhan's bluntness was partly due to the fact that her interviewer, Nancy Bui, was born in Vietnam. This is not to say that the women I interviewed were lying to me or were uncomfortable with me, or that people like Nancy Bui have an advantage in collecting the oral histories of immigrants from South Vietnam; rather, it is an observation and assumption I am making from my own experience as a black American woman. Lieutenant Colonel Martha Cothorn, discussed in the previous chapter, confided with me over the phone that some black women Vietnam War veterans were wary of giving interviews to people outside of their community.[39] As a marginalized people, it can be difficult to candidly share thoughts and feelings with people with whom we do not have communal ties. When I first spoke to Thi about conducting interviews with women RVNAF veterans, he cautioned me that some South Vietnamese veterans were wary of their words being twisted and misunderstood, a concern I respect and understand. It is possible that the women I interviewed were concerned that I would take critiques of the United States to heart, and wished to reassure me that the U.S. intervention was not in vain or unappreciated. Along with praising the U.S. military intervention in Vietnam, these women emphasized their love of the United States as immigrants and citizens, and their desire to give back to the nation they assert welcomed them in their exodus from a war-torn Vietnam.

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[38] Hanh Nhan, interview.
[39] Cothorn, interview by author.

Post-War Experiences and Coming to the United States

Hue Le, Dien Phan, Trinh Le, Sarah Nguyen, Be Bay, and Hanh Nhan Nguyen represent a variety of paths to the United States following the surrender of the Republic of Vietnam. Hue and Be were able to leave Vietnam in the nick of time – one week and one day prior to the April 30, 1975 fall (or liberation, depending on how one sees it) of Saigon, respectively. Both Phan and Trinh had to remain in Vietnam while their husbands were incarcerated in so-called re-education camps run by the new regime. Sarah Huong and Hanh Nhan were incarcerated themselves. Their stories differ, but all six women persevered through the unimaginable circumstances of incarceration, scarcity, and having to leave behind the place they called home.

Hue left Vietnam on April 23, 1975. Since her honorable discharge in 1970 Hue Le had been working for an American adoption agency, helping pair orphaned Vietnamese children with American foster parents and eventually adoptive parents. Her departure from what was then still the Republic of Vietnam was aided by her sister, who had married an American GI and was living in Manhattan. As the situation in the Republic worsened, Hue's sister and husband applied for funds to have Hue and her mother evacuated from South Vietnam. Hue Le and her mother stayed in Manhattan for five months but were unable to find work. In late 1975, they moved to a small town in Louisiana (so small Hue could not recall what its name), where a friend who would eventually be Hue's husband said jobs were available. Hue was able to get a sponsor from a local church and began working as a housekeeper at a motel. Soon after relocating to Louisiana, Hue Le realized that her sponsor was more interested in collecting government benefits than assisting her, so she began looking for work elsewhere. After a stint in Lumberton, North Carolina, Hue moved to Raleigh to work for a telecommunications company. Hue established a new life for herself and her family in the United States, but always thought about

her home country. In 2012, she returned to Vietnam for the first time since her departure to attend the funeral for her older brother, whom she had not seen since 1975.[40]

Like Hue, Be left Vietnam in the nick of time. On the night of April 29, Be, her husband, their two toddlers, and Be's sister-in-law and father-in-law boarded South Vietnamese naval vessel HQ-3 docked on the Saigon River.[41] Be's father-in-law worked at the Defense Attaché Office, Saigon (DAO) and saw the writing on the wall for South Vietnam, and encouraged the family to begin preparations to leave the country. Be's father-in-law had hoped his job at the DAO would make him a priority for evacuation by the United States, but in Be's words "we must take care [of] ourselves." And take care of themselves Be's family did. Her husband and uncle walked from their house in Saigon to the naval yard on the river, passing the U.S. Embassy on the way. They could see South Vietnamese citizens clamoring to get inside of the embassy in the hopes of being evacuated, but turned their attention back to their own mission. Be's husband and uncle could see people loading onto navy ships and decided that would be their best option for evacuation since Be's sister-in-law was married to the captain of the HQ-3. After returning to their home that afternoon, Be's husband and uncle coordinated twenty-three individuals into cars to drive back to the shipyard. The group made their way to the dock that same evening. Be's sister-in-law had a picture of her husband to present to officers guarding the naval yard in the hopes that they would recognize a captain and let the family get on a ship, but it was not until an officer from her husband's graduating class recognized Be's sister-in-law that they were allowed to proceed into the shipyard. Be recalled "a lot of people" waiting on the dock to board one of

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[40] Hue, interview by author.
[41] The South Vietnamese Navy used a numbering system for their ships.

five ships available for evacuation to the South China Sea, where they would be met by the 7th Fleet of the U.S. Navy to be escorted to Subic Bay in the Philippines. Be and her family boarded HQ-3 and started their journey away from their home country. HQ-3 stopped at Con Son Island south of the Vietnamese mainland, and its passengers moved to HQ-14, a smaller vessel. When HQ-14 sailed towards Subic Bay, the ship's crew had to lower the yellow and red striped flag of the Republic of Vietnam and replace it with the U.S. flag, as the Philippine government no longer recognized South Vietnam. The lowering of the South Vietnamese flag on HQ-14 was the moment Be truly realized that she was leaving everything she had ever known behind, and heading towards uncertainty. As Thi explained, "for many of us Vietnamese…when they left Vietnam, there was no going back. The flag on that ship was the last thing that represented Vietnam to them." That very flag is now in the possession of Be's sister-in-law.

After coming under the U.S. military's jurisdiction, Be and her family spent four weeks in Guam before they were sent to a refugee camp at Fort Indiantown Gap in southeastern Pennsylvania. On October 12, 1975, Be and the twenty-two family members with whom she had fled Saigon moved to the Trenton, New Jersey area after being sponsored by a Catholic parish. Her husband eventually enrolled in an architecture program at Temple University, employing his experience as a drafter in Vietnam. In 1981 Be, her husband, and their two children moved to Virginia, where they still resided as of October 24, 2021. Be's daughter served twenty years in the U.S. Air Force, and her son works as a police officer. Be's pride in her children was palpable. Thi tells me, "you see how we pay back," invoking historian Phuong Nguyen's concept of "refugee nationalism," in which "a refugee feels bound to America in both resentment for being

betrayed and gratitude for being saved."[42] Thi's assertion that Be's children are "paying back" the United States suggests his view that Vietnamese American refugees and immigrants are in debt to the country, and are actively working to repay it. In this same vein, Viet Thanh Nguyen mentions "the overseas Vietnamese" who "embody American possibility, a successful model minority."[43] Arriving to this country with nearly nothing, Be and her family worked hard, and assert their worth as Americans through their service *to* America.

Similarly, Dien Phan expressed gratitude as a refugee for the United States. Unable to leave Vietnam before April 30, Phan and her family remained in their home ten miles outside of Saigon. Two months after the North Vietnamese took control of Saigon, Phan's husband was arrested and sent to a "reeducation camp" in northern Vietnam, where he remained incarcerated until 1988. Phan was spared arrest because she had been discharged by the RVNAF, but her husband, a battalion commander, was deemed a threat to the burgeoning regime of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam. Those who had been involved in the Republic of Vietnam's government and military "would have to 'remould themselves' before being released and they were being reasonably treated, although they could not expect a 'better life than most of the ordinary working people in Vietnam'." Amnesty International reported in 1977 that

> According to the British newspaper *The Guardian* of 11 April 1977, quoting a broadcast by Hanoi Radio, those who would have to undergo prolonged 're-education' included 'members of the green berets, the rangers, the paratroops, marines, policemen, prison

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[42] Nguyen, *Nothing Ever Dies*, 204.
[43] Ibid., 205.

guards, district officials, village chiefs and secret agents who were trained by the United States'.

Those not targeted for "prolonged 're-education'" could expect to be incarcerated for three years.[44] Upon her husband's arrest, the "communists" evicted Phan and her two children, including Thi's wife, from their home, forcing them to move in with Phan's mother in Saigon. For thirteen years, Phan awaited her husband's return while raising two children.[45]

In the immediate aftermath of the Vietnam War, reeducation camp prisoners were not a subject of international attention. Very little was known about the camps, and the government of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam refused to release information about the incarcerated. The government in Hanoi authorized reeducation camp visits by some Western journalists and churches, who "suggested that while not desirable, reeducation was the lesser of two evils" compared to the anticipated violent reprisals against those with ties to the Republic of Vietnam's government and military. In 1981, Holocaust survivor and activist Ginetta Sagan founded the Aurora Foundation for the "improvement throughout the world in the observance of human rights." Through the Foundation, Sagan conducted interviews with former reeducation camp prisoners, and on April 30, 1982, the Foundation released a statement on the "inhumane conditions" in reeducation camps.[46]

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[44] Amnesty International Report 1977 (London: Amnesty International Publications, 1977), 227-228.
[45] Phan did not go into detail about the thirteen years between her husband's incarceration and release. I did not feel comfortable pressing her for more information as it was a sensitive subject that she did not seem keen to relive, and I wanted to respect her boundaries.
[46] Amanda Demmer, *After Saigon's Fall: Refugees and U.S.-Vietnamese Relations, 1975-2000* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021), 105, 115.

Thi pointed to the Reagan administration as the driving force behind Phan and her family resettling in the United States. In his words, "from what I heard," the Socialist Republic of Vietnam "got the Reagan administration an undisclosed amount of money per…the former officers [and their] family to…settle in the U.S….basically selling these families." On July 29, 1989, the year after Phan's husband was released, the United States and the Socialist Republic of Vietnam signed the Humanitarian Operation agreement. The agreement "offered a special path to resettlement" for "current or released reeducation center detainee[s] who had spent at least three years in a reeducation camp." The spouses and children of former detainees were also included in the agreement.[47] Thi and Phan's fondness for Ronald Reagan surprised me, as Reagan was certainly not a champion of people of color, among other marginalized groups. In addition, Reagan's presidency had ended months before the Humanitarian Operation agreement. This fondness, however, does make sense in the context of anti-communism. Reagan was an unapologetic anti-communist, and Viet Thanh Nguyen asserts that many Vietnamese Americans' politics "might best be described as anticommunist liberalism." Nguyen goes further, quoting sociologist Yen Le Espiritu, who says, "Vietnamese refugees become most visible and intelligent to Americans as anticommunist witnesses, testifying to the communist Vietnamese government's atrocities and failings."[48] It is possible that Reagan stands out to Phan and Thi as a staunch anti-communist, thus they equate the resettlement of refugees in the United States with a man who

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[47] Demmer, *After Saigon's Fall,* 175-176.
[48]Nguyen, *Nothing Ever Dies*, 205-106; Yen Le Espiritu, *Body Counts: The Vietnam War and Militarized Refuge(es)* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2016), 101.

they imagine fought tooth and nail against the Socialist Republic of Vietnam and its human rights abuses.

The Humanitarian Operation agreement paved the way for Phan and her family's immigration to the United States, but it was not until 1993, five years after her husband's release, that they were able to leave Vietnam. In those five intervening years, Phan and her husband had one more child, a daughter. The family of five resettled in Fitchburg, Massachusetts, where they were on government assistance for three months. Phan, her husband, and their two eldest children eventually found a job at a local plasticware factory, and later her husband worked as a dishwasher at a restaurant. Thi was obviously proud of his wife's parents, who were able to put their children through school. Thi's wife, their eldest, is now a doctor of pharmacy, her younger brother is an engineer, and her younger sister just received a Master's in Public Health from Boston University.[49] As with Be Bay's children, Phan's children embody the "American Dream," working themselves up from a blue collar job in a small Massachusetts town to advanced college degrees and white collar jobs.

Trinh Le's husband was also incarcerated for several years following the fall of South Vietnam. Though he had been wounded in combat and subsequently honorably discharged from the RVNAF, Trinh's husband was working in a local propaganda office in what Thi called the "Red Flag District," where "he did not see active combat and [the] family was very safe." The false sense of security Trinh Le's husband felt in a quiet local government office led him to believe that the South could not and would not fall, thus Trinh's family never discussed options

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[49] Phan, interview by author.

for evacuation. Trinh's husband's bargain resulted in his arrest and incarceration. He spent seven years in a reeducation camp, and Trinh was left to take care of their five children, the youngest of whom was merely months old at the time of her husband's incarceration. The government seized the family's home, and Trinh struggled to find a place for her and her children to stay. Friends, family, and acquittances would not help Trinh out of fear that they would be targeted due to Trinh's ties to the former government. Desperate, Trinh considered buying rat poison to end her and her children's lives. Having traveled 150 miles away from Saigon, Trinh and her children came across a family she had helped as a social worker during the war. The family of twelve opened their home (Thi described it as a hut) to Trinh. Though this family had very little, Trinh had less, and they remembered her assistance years prior. While her children stayed with the family, Trinh would visit a butcher shop in the countryside and purchase approximately ten to fifteen pounds of meat, hide it on her person, board a bus to Saigon, then sell the meat to Saigon residents. For five years Trinh made this perilous journey several times a week, until her father was employed as a farmer and could support Trinh and her children. Trinh did not tell me what became of the family of twelve who had graciously housed six people despite their own economic struggles.

In 1982, two years after Trinh moved in with her parents her husband was released from the reeducation camp. Following his release, Trinh's husband borrowed money from his twin brother to buy the family a small canoe so that he and Trinh could take on a new opportunity – traversing Vietnam's many rivers to sell small goods to people along its banks. As the pair rowed their canoe throughout southern Vietnam they would occasionally stop for Trinh to provide basic medical assistance to people living on the riverbanks. Able to purchase what many Americans would consider basics, such as aspirin and ibuprofen, Trinh and her husband used their slightly

more fortunate circumstances to assist others in need. By 1985, Trinh and her husband had $120 (USD) to their name. The family needed more money, and their proximity to the Cambodian border presented an enticing, yet dangerous avenue to greater financial gain. Trinh and her two eldest daughters built a small hut just inside the Cambodian border, and collected mussels and clams to sell to Cambodians. Eventually, Trinh's family had enough money to purchase a small boat with an engine, which they would use to leave Vietnam. In 1986, Trinh and her husband roused their children in the middle of the night, and the family of seven crossed over the border into Cambodia, where the boat was hidden. Overnight they sailed through the Gulf of Thailand to the Thai mainland, where they began the painstaking process of applying for refugee status and resettlement in the United States. Just as Hue Le's family had been helped by a former acquaintance, Trinh's time in the RVNAF benefitted her and her family. A woman who had graduated with Trinh from WAFC officer training in 1968 recognized her former classmate, and through her job working as a translator for an American non-governmental organization (NGO) helped to fast-track Trinh's family to a visa. They arrived in San Jose, California in 1988.

As Thi explained "everything start[ed] over" for Trinh and her family in a new country, and "the beginning was difficult" especially since "they did not have [a lot] of education, let alone [could they] speak English." Nevertheless, Trinh enrolled her five children in public school, and she and her husband found work at an electronics factory in San Jose. Trinh's children contribute to Vietnamese American immigrant success stories – the eldest two are

doctors and the other three are engineers. Once again, Thi's words summarize the model minority motif: "give us an opportunity, and we'll make something."[50]

Sarah Huong Nguyen is the only woman I interviewed who was herself incarcerated in a reeducation camp. As she was in Saigon and still an officer in the RVNAF when North Vietnamese troops arrived in the city, she was immediately targeted for arrest. Sarah Huong explained that women were usually incarcerated for shorter periods than their male counterparts, and she and most women social workers were released after three years. Though a shorter sentence than Phan and Trinh's husbands, Sarah Huong's time in a reeducation camp was still grueling. She recalled inmates being separated by gender, though they could see each other through the wire fences that surrounded the camp and cut them off from the men. "We [didn't] have food or medicine, we [didn't] have anything," Sarah Huong told me. The inmates were fed grains usually reserved for cattle and a leafy vegetable. Women were usually fed slightly more than men, which Sarah Huong explained as a result of fears amongst the camp staff that male prisoners would revolt if they had sufficient strength. Women, however, were not deemed to be as likely to resort to violence against their captors. Even in reeducation camps, perceptions of gendered differences dictated how prisoners were treated. Every six months Sarah Huong was allowed to send a letter to her family, and most of the letters she sent contained pleas for them to send her food and money, which they did when they were able. During the day she and her fellow prisoners were forced to work the fields that produced their meager food supply as well as crops for the government, and at night they attended required classes to "study political

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[50] Trinh, interview by author.

doctrine." Sarah Huong was released in 1978, and subsequently made money selling small meals, usually bowls of rice and soy sauce, door to door in Saigon. She never married, but adopted a daughter in Vietnam before emigrating to the United States in 1992. While previous women expressed giving back to the United States through their hard work and successful children, Sarah Huong had a more literal understanding of giving back. She told me that she goes out of her way to give financially to those in need, through organizations as well as directly to people she encounters in her day-to-day life. Sarah Huong's participation in direct aid, though casual, is her way of thanking the United States, which she described as "a perfect country." By contrast, "in Vietnam, they live [under] communism. They have [a] very poor life over there."[51] This is an example of Viet Thanh Nguyen's "anticommunist liberalism." Sarah Huong, the victim of incarceration and abuse at the hands of the "communist" Socialist Republic of Vietnam, is a living testament to what many Americans assume are common horrors in a communist nation.

Hanh Nhan Thi Nguyen corroborated much of Sarah Huong's descriptions of life in a reeducation camp. As Sarah Huong had explained, "many women officers were jailed for three years." In the immediate aftermath of the war, Hanh Nhan and 1,500 other officers had willingly come to a school in the Go Vap district of Saigon for what she and others assumed would be a thirty-day "reeducation" period. That same night, she and the others were made to get on the buses and driven into a forest. It was in this forest, forced to clear trees for the building of her own prison, that Hanh Nhan began five years of incarceration. Unlike Sarah Huong, who

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[51] Sarah Huong, interview by author.

remained at the same location throughout her detainment, Hanh Nhan was moved approximately every six to seven months. Wherever they were, the detainees were, like Sarah Huong, forced to tend to fields where their food and also food to be sold was grown. The prisoners had little access to water, and relied on nearby streams to bathe and quench their thirst. Hanh Nhan described an instance when "there was one bowl of soup for six people with maggots floating on top." Hahn Nhan was released in 1980, finally able to reunite with her husband and their "very many" children. In the reverse of Dien Phan and Trinh Le's post-war situations, Hanh Nhan had been incarcerated while her husband, a civilian pharmaceutical salesman, was not. Upon her release, Hanh Nhan sold ice cream out of a converted refrigerator, and later medicine.

Hanh Nhan's journey to the United States differed from the journeys of the five women I interviewed. Her son, a telecommunications officer in the South Vietnamese Air Force, was stationed at Tan Son Nhut Airbase on April 29, 1975, when he called his family to inform them that he could get them out of the country. That night, the North Vietnamese military shelled Tan Son Nhut, and after not hearing from her son the next day Hanh Nhan assumed he was dead. In fact, her son had narrowly escaped the country on the night of the shelling and escaped to the United States. In 1990, Hanh Nhan's son sponsored her, five of his brothers, and one of their wives. All seven arrived in California that same year. The remaining three of Hanh Nhan's sons and their wives were "sponsored over later." A year after she arrived in the United States, Hanh Nhan became the vice president of the Mutual Society of Political Prisoners, which sponsored former detainees who immigrated to the United States through the Humanitarian Operation agreement but had no connections in the country. She later became president of the

Humanitarian Operation Mutual Society for Vietnamese Wounded Veterans, and at the time of her interview in 2011 she was still working at the organization.[52]

Conclusion

One of the first things Thi said to me was that the women I would be interviewing had never had the chance to share their stories outside of their families. In every interview, after I thanked the women for their time, they thanked me for *my* time and effort to share their stories with others. The purpose of this thesis is to make space for women of color who are veterans of the Vietnam War.

At the end of every interview, I asked each woman if they thought people in the United States, as a whole, remembered the Vietnam War accurately. All five expressed that memory of the war in the United States was incomplete. In particular, they pointed to Americans who had no involvement in the war as source of misinformation. Dien Phan criticized academics and textbook writers who had never set foot in her country for propagating ideas that South Vietnam and the United States were aggressors in what Thi called a "defensive war." Additionally, there were interesting differences in recollections between the five women. While Phan spoke of a bond between Americans and South Vietnamese, Hue Le accused the United States military of hampering the South Vietnamese war effort. In addition, while Hue dismissed the idea that the South Vietnamese military were incapable and corrupt, Trinh Le lamented seeing high-ranking RVNAF officers hiding food and other supplies to sell on the black market.

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[52] Hanh Nhan, interview.

Oral histories present challenges to researchers. For me specifically, language barriers were the biggest obstacle I had to overcome in writing this chapter of my thesis. Since I mostly relied on Thi's translations, though I believe them to be accurate, I am unable to directly quote many of these women. In the same vein, it is possible that aspects of these women's stories are harder to explain to someone who does not know Vietnamese. Even in the case of oral histories collected by individuals speaking the same language, details can become a bit blurry. As I conducted interviews, I found that exact dates and locations were not always attainable, as time has elided memories.

A perfectly just memory of the Vietnam War may not be possible, but the effort must be made. My hope for this thesis is that it presents a more just history of the Vietnam War through the eyes of women who were there, and whose memories are largely untapped for historical scholarship. These interviews and oral histories add to and complicate existing histories, and present largely unheard perspectives. The six women in this chapter participate in the dissemination of memory in their communities and families, and it is an honor to get to share their stories with a larger audience. Through the teaching of the Vietnamese language and culture to new generations, and the sharing of memories, these women create a space for themselves even though they have not held one in mainstream American memory of the war. For these women, memory is important outside of the Vietnamese community as well as within it. Hanh Nhan called on the children and grand-children of Vietnamese immigrants to "maintain the culture of Vietnam" in the United States. At the end of her interview, Hanh Nhan espoused an almost righteous reasoning behind giving an interview. She lamented the "memoirs written by the Vietcong…introduced to the schools" which resulted in students learning "history distortions." Hanh Nhan heralded her experiences as "correct" and in line with "the true history

of Vietnam," implying that Vietnamese people who were not loyal to South Vietnam are incapable of sharing historically accurate memories of the war.[53] Hanh Nhan's claim to historical truth is an example of what Viet Thanh Nguyen calls "remembering one's own and forgetting others."[54] In this way, any group is capable of perpetuating erasure.

The women described in this chapter were responsible for the wellbeing of soldiers and their families through medical care, the logistics of government assistance, education, child care, and simply being an ally and friend, a shoulder to cry on when someone felt alone. They occupied roles traditionally associated with their gender while serving the military during a war, an institution and circumstance that is strongly associated with men. They demonstrate both the utility of "women's roles" in all aspects of life, as well as the devaluing of these roles.

As Sarah Huong and Hanh Nhan explained, women were usually incarcerated in reeducation camps for less time and received better treatment. This benefitted women, but at the same time it highlights how women RVNAF veterans were not considered as important or threatening as their male counterparts. Women could eat more food, because women would not stage a revolt in a reeducation camp. Women could be released sooner than men, because although they did serve the Republic of Vietnam, they did not have the same importance as men.

Just as these women were shaped by their experiences in Vietnam, they are and continue to be shaped by their lives in the United States. Five women repeatedly expressed their love and gratitude for the United States, citing new opportunities and their children's success as proof that it is, as Sarah Huong put it "the best country" in the world. Though far from their home country,

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[53] Hanh Nhan, interview.
[54] Nguyen, *Nothing Ever Dies*, 11.

they have fostered communities and connections, and remember the Republic of Vietnam, though it can no longer be found on a map. The country lives on in with these women and their memories. In 1975, Be Bay watched the flag of South Vietnam as it was lowered on HQ-14 in the South China Sea. Decades later, Hue Le sits in her living room with her chihuahua, yellow and red stripes waving high above her head.

Figure 6: Be Bay (third from left) stands with her officer training class at Vo Bi Quoc Gia Viet Nam Academy in 1968. Photo courtesy of Be Bay.

Figure 7: The flag of the Republic of Vietnam lowered on HQ 14. Photo courtesy of Be Bay.

Figure 8:The U.S. flag raised on the HQ 14. Photo courtesy of Be Bay.

CONCLUSION

When I began writing this thesis one of my biggest concerns was how to connect two chapters about two different demographics in a meaningful way. I dreaded the "compare and contrast" model I was forced to adhere to in AP U.S. History. Fortunately, seven years past dreaded AP exams and after a great deal of thought, I hope to move beyond pedantically comparing every aspect of the experiences of marginalized women veterans to present a more nuanced analysis of the manifold ways that the dominant narrative of the Vietnam War has stifled the memory of the war in the United States.

Black American and South Vietnamese women veterans occupy a particular space in the history of the war. They are veterans, yet not in the same way that their male counterparts are. This is seen prominently in their treatment in the post-war years. Some black American women veterans spoke of a lack of concern for their physical and mental health. As Elizabeth Allen stated, they were important to the Department of Veterans Affairs only if they were suffering from complications directly related to their reproductive health, and in particular their ability to have children. They were relegated to the "traditional" women's role of childrearing despite their untraditional presence in warzones. Similarly, though manifesting in a more positive way, South Vietnamese women veterans were deemed less threatening than their male counterparts to the new government of Vietnam, leading to better treatment and shorter sentences in re-education camps. Though, like black American women, they had been directly involved in the war effort, their level and type of service was not seen as on par with the service of men. Institutions in the United States and Vietnam undervalued the service of women, as does the dominant narrative of the war in the United States. The majority of men in the military during the Vietnam War, even those stationed in South Vietnam, did not directly see any combat. Despite this, they are,

generally speaking, viewed as veterans just as much as those who partook in combat. Women veterans, however, take a backseat regardless of their proximity to fighting.

This thesis has been a story of silence and silencing. Black American and South Vietnamese women are victims of silencing, but also make personal decisions to remain silent. I was genuinely surprised that it was easier for me to get interviews with South Vietnamese women than it was for me to find black women willing to speak with me. It may have been my own ignorance and sense of almost entitlement to women of the same race as me, but I truly expected that once I spoke to Martha Cothorn and she told her fellow veterans who I was and what I was doing, I would be booked and busy with interviews. I was struck by the reluctance of the women Cothorn knew, especially since Cothorn herself could vouch for me. It made me ask if black women veterans simply did and do not feel that they can speak up about their experiences, even within their own communities. Take for example Cothorn's decision to keep the details of her service to herself, and Bertha Gray Scott's admission that for years her own friends and colleagues did not know she had even gone to Vietnam. In comparison, the South Vietnamese women I spoke to told me that they had circulated stories of their service within their families and the wider community.

A just memory is difficult to create. The subjects of this thesis are not included in America's dominant narrative of the war, and the difficulty of finding even this small sampling of oral histories and interviews is a testament to how entrenched the dominant narrative is. The difficulty, however, is not an excuse for the continued marginalization of these women, or any others forgotten in the collective and popular memory of any historical event.

"It's Time to End America's Longest War"

On August 30, 2021, the last U.S. soldiers stationed in Afghanistan departed the country in C-17 cargo jets taking off from Kabul, ending one of America's longest foreign occupations since the Vietnam War. President Joe Biden announced the timeline for U.S. withdrawal earlier in the same month, nearly a year and a half after his predecessor, Donald Trump, signed the Doha Agreement with Taliban leaders in February of 2020. There were four main provisions of the agreement:

> 1) guarantees to prevent the use of Afghan soil by any international terrorist groups or individuals against the security of the United States and its allies, 2) a timeline for the withdrawal of all U.S. and Coalition forces from Afghanistan, 3) a political settlement resulting from intra-Afghan dialogue and negotiations between the Taliban and an inclusive negotiating team of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, and 4) a permanent and comprehensive ceasefire.[1]

Originally scheduled for completion by May 1, 2021, President Biden pushed the evacuation deadline to before the twentieth anniversary of the 9/11 attacks. As Afghan civilians and military rushed to Hamid Karzai International Airport, historians, journalists, and others compared the unfolding situation in Afghanistan to the events of spring 1975, as the North Vietnamese military advanced through South Vietnam. In an opinion piece for the *New York Times*, Viet Thanh Nguyen boldly stated "I can't forget the lessons of Vietnam. Neither should you," exploring

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[1] U.S. Department of State, *Joint Declaration between the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan and the United States of America for Bringing Peace to Afghanistan*, February 29, 2020, https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/02.29.20-US-Afghanistan-Joint-Declaration.pdf (accessed March 25, 2022).

similarities between the two American evacuations. Nguyen recognized that Afghanistan in 2021 and South Vietnam in 1975 are not the same. History was not repeating itself, but at the same time, comparisons of the two are apt. Nguyen writes,

> True, the Taliban are not the People's Army of Vietnam, and the American evacuation of Saigon, chaotic as it was, was better planned than the American endgame for Kabul. But the Saigon analogy is important because the urgency and the human disaster are similar as is the role that the United States and other nations must play to shape those fates of Afghans. It was therefore disappointing to hear President Biden on Monday defend his Afghanistan policy by focusing on two alternatives — stay and fight or withdraw — while laying the blame primarily at the feet of the Afghan government and army. Blaming Afghans obscures a history of American miscalculation starting with President George W. Bush, and allows Mr. Biden to treat the evacuation of Afghan allies as an afterthought rather than a priority.[2]

It is the last point Nguyen makes that is most pertinent to this thesis – the obscuring of history. As in Vietnam, U.S. policy makers have shifted the blame for America's failure to achieve its objectives to the people they once championed. Nguyen does not explicitly use the term in his op-ed, but he is describing the beginning of the creation of an unjust memory of the U.S. war in Afghanistan. An unjust memory erases reality, allowing a false, incomplete narrative to take hold. It is too early to tell how the world, and the United States, will remember the U.S. invasion,

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[2] Viet Thanh Nguyen, "I Can't Forget the Lessons of Vietnam. Neither Should You.," *New York Times*, August 19, 2021.

occupation, and evacuation of Afghanistan, but as Nguyen reminds us, the present can be informed by history.

The goal of this thesis is to make space for specific people – black American and South Vietnamese women veterans – who have previously been left out of the story of the Vietnam War. As I have shown, working toward a just memory of the Vietnam War is not easy. The reluctance of the participants in the war to share their experiences can hinder the process of writing a just memory as much as can scholars' disinterest in their stories. That being said, as my experiences with Martha Cothorn and Bert Gray have shown, participants' trepidation with sharing their stories can sometimes be the result of deliberate actions to make one feel that they it would be easier for them to remain silent, as was the case with Cothorn being discouraged from sharing information about her time in the Army Nurse Corps (ANC) out of concern that it would jeopardize her civilian nursing career.

But why does a just memory even matter? Why is it important to make space for these women? The simplest answer is that the individuals present at historical events matter because they were there. Black American and South Vietnamese women need to be included in histories of the Vietnam War because they were actors in it. They matter because they exist, and emphasizing their existence completes the story of the Vietnam War.

In a more abstract sense, just memory is important in history because it challenges existing narratives. The Vietnam War is the subject of textbooks, memoirs, books, movies, television shows, etc., and the narrative in the United States is almost set in stone. While there is disagreement as to why the U.S. intervention failed to achieve its goals, there is broad agreement that the United States intervened in Vietnam to prevent the spread of communism and support non-communist South Vietnamese; that the United States had good intentions even though the

intervention ultimately failed but not for a lack of good intentions on the part of the United States; that the war's veterans suffered years of mistreatment from their fellow Americans on top of physical and mental concerns, but are now heroes. The quintessential American veteran of the Vietnam War is a white man, whose time in-country left him with deep mental and/or physical scars, and whose service must be unconditionally honored.

A just memory paints a picture that challenges the dominant narrative. In the case of this thesis, an attempt to create a more just memory includes the struggles of black American women, who dealt with both personal grief following their service, as well with as a nation deeply entrenched in white supremacy. Black American women veterans have not been brought into the folds of national reconciliation with the Vietnam War veteran, despite their service to a country that did and does not see them as fully human. Their experiences challenge the image of Vietnam War veterans as white and male, and may cause some Americans to examine why the white male veteran is so omnipresent.

South Vietnamese women veterans also challenge the notion that the South Vietnamese military and civilian population were not motivated to fight for their country and uncommitted to a non-communist Vietnam, what many Americans did and continue to deem to be a better option for the Vietnamese people. The six South Vietnamese women whose experiences I recount in chapter three reveal some cases of mismanagement and corruption within the Republic of Vietnam Armed Forces (RVNAF), but also a strong commitment amongst them and their fellow men and women in the military. In addition, the South Vietnamese women shed light on what some Americans would like to forget – the evacuation of South Vietnam in April of 1975. These women recount the chaos of leaving their home country, the impact of connections and sheer luck in being able to find a way out of South Vietnam, and the horrors of post-war incarceration

for themselves and their loved ones. This might make some Americans uncomfortable, as they learn what became of the people the United States claimed it wanted to protect.

Discomfort is part of just memory. Working on this thesis brought me moments of confusion, as I tried to grapple with my own feelings about the Vietnam War while interviewing those who lived through it. As someone who believes the U.S. intervention in Vietnam was wrong and did more harm than good, I spoke with and read oral histories from black women who volunteered to partake in the war effort, not necessarily for ideological reasons, but because they felt it was their duty to assist their fellow Americans on the other side of the world. I interviewed South Vietnamese women who admired the U.S. commitment to anti-communism, and very seriously told me to be wary of leftists after recounting stories about atrocities they attributed to communists. Throughout the process of writing this thesis, I had to evaluate my own thoughts and feelings about the Vietnam War, and though it did not fundamentally change my convictions about American intervention and militarism in Vietnam and worldwide, I nevertheless looked beyond myself to see things through the eyes of the women whose stories I wanted to bring into the history of the Vietnam War.

Just memory – the remembering of the other, the forgotten, the allies, of ourselves – provides a more complete history. Through just memory, historians and others complicate and challenge existing ideas about historical events, which can sometimes cause discomfort. A just memory of the Vietnam War matters because it illuminates history. It asks us to rethink what we assumed we knew about the war and the people who participated in it, and through that we might be able to better inform ourselves about the present. History does not live in a vacuum, and the consequences of what happened "back then," whether it be war, enslavement, subjugation, liberation, impact our current world. In order to understand ourselves now, we must fully

understand and investigate the past. It is my hope that this thesis inspires its readers to be mindful of historical narratives, and to ask themselves if something or someone might have been left out.

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