

# 1961-1973: GI resistance in the Vietnam War



History of the widespread mutiny of US troops in Vietnam that brought the world's most powerful military machine to its knees.

**The GI anti-war movement within the army was one of the decisive factors in ending the war.**

*An American soldier in a hospital explained how he was wounded: He said "I was told that the way to tell a hostile Vietnamese from a friendly Vietnamese was to shout 'To hell with Ho Chi Minh!' If he shoots, he's unfriendly. So I saw this dude and yelled 'To hell with Ho Chi Minh!' and he yelled back, 'To hell with President Johnson!' We were shaking hands when a truck hit us."*

*- from 1,001 Ways to Beat the Draft, by Tuli Kupferberg.*

The U.S. government would be happy to see the history of the Vietnam War buried and forgotten. Not least because it saw the world's greatest superpower defeated by a peasant army, but mainly because of what defeated the war effort – the collective resistance of the enlisted men and women in the U.S. armed forces, who mutinied, sabotaged, shirked, fragged and smoked their way to a full withdrawal and an end to the conflict.

## **Before the war**

Military morale was considered high before the war began. In fact, the pre-Vietnam Army was considered the best the United States had ever put into the field. Consequently, the military high command was taken quite by surprise by the rapid disintegration of the very foundations of their power.

As American presence reached major proportions in 1964 and 1965, people joining the military were predominantly poor working class whites or from ethnic minorities. University attendance and draft resistance saved many better-off young white people from the draft, and many other less privileged workers signed up in order to avoid a prison term, or simply due to the promises of a secure job and specialist training.

The image these young people had of life in the military was shattered quite rapidly by the harsh reality they faced.

Those who had enlisted found that the promises made by recruiters vanished into thin air once they were in boot camp. Guarantees of special training and choice assignments were simply swept away. This is a fairly standard procedure used to snare enlistees. In fact, the military regulations state that only the enlistee, not the military, is bound by the specifics of the recruiting contract. In addition, both enlistees and draftees faced the daily harassment, the brutal de-personalisation, and ultimately the dangers and meaninglessness of the endless ground war in Vietnam. These pressures were particularly intense for non-white GIs, most of whom were affected by the rising black consciousness and a heightened awareness of their oppression.

These forces combined to produce the disintegration of the Vietnam era military. This disintegration developed slowly, but once it reached a general level it became epidemic in its proportions. In its midst developed a conscious and organised resistance, which both furthered the disintegration and attempted to channel it in a political direction.



### **1966 - The resistance begins**

The years 1966 and 1967 saw the first acts of resistance among GIs. Given the general passivity within the ranks and the tight control exercised by the brass, these first acts required a clear willingness for self-sacrifice. For the most part they were initiated by men who had had some concrete link with the left prior to their entrance into the military.

The first major public act of resistance was the refusal, in June of 1966, of three privates from Fort Hood, Texas to ship out to Vietnam. The three men, David Samas, James Johnson, and Dennis Mora, had just completed training and were on leave before their scheduled departure for the war zone. The case received wide publicity, but the men were each eventually sentenced to three years at hard labour.

There followed a series of other individual acts of resistance. Ronald Lockman, a black GI refused orders to Vietnam with the slogan, "I follow the Fort Hood Three. Who will follow

me?" Capt. Howard Levy refused to teach medicine to the Green Berets, and Capt. Dale Noyd refused to give flying instructions to prospective bombing pilots. These acts were mostly carried out by existing left-wingers, and were consciously geared toward political resistance. However there was also in this period the beginning of an ethical and/or religious resistance. The first clear incident occurred at Fort Jackson, South Carolina, where in April of 1967 five GIs staged a pray-in for peace on base. Two of these GIs refused a direct order to cease praying and were subsequently court-martialed.

The majority of these early instances of resistance were actually simply acts of refusal; refusal to go to Vietnam, to carry out training, to obey orders. They were important in that they helped to directly confront the intense fear which all GIs feel; they helped to shake up the general milieu of passivity. But the military was quite willing to deal with the small number of GIs who might put their heads on the chopping block; to really affect the military machine would require a more general rebellion.

### **1968 – Collapse of morale**

Up until 1968 the desertion rate for U.S. troops in Vietnam was still lower than in previous wars. But by 1969 the desertion rate had increased fourfold. This wasn't limited to Southeast Asia; desertion rates among GIs were on the increase worldwide. For soldiers in the combat zone, insubordination became an important part of avoiding horrible injury or death. As early as mid-1969, an entire company of the 196th Light Infantry Brigade sat down on the battlefield. Later that year, a rifle company from the famed 1st Air Cavalry Division flatly refused - on CBS TV - to advance down a dangerous trail. In the following 12 months the 1st Air Cavalry notched up 35 combat refusals.

The period from 1968 to 1970 was a period of rapid disintegration of morale and widespread rebelliousness within the U.S. military. There were a variety of causes contributing to this development. By this time the war had become vastly unpopular in the general society, anti-war demonstrations were large and to some degree respectable, and prominent politicians were speaking out against the continuation of the war. For a youth entering the military in these years the war was already a questionable proposition, and with the ground war raging and coffins coming home every day very few new recruits were enthusiastic about their situation. In addition, the rising level of black consciousness and the rapidly spreading dope culture both served to alienate new recruits from military authority. Thus, GIs came into uniform in this period with a fairly negative predisposition.

Their experience in the military and in the war transformed this negative pre-disposition into outright hostility. The nature of the war certainly accelerated this disaffection; a seemingly endless ground war against an often invisible enemy, with the mass of people often openly hostile, in support of a government both unpopular and corrupt. The Vietnamese revolutionaries also made attempts to reach out to American GIs, with some impact.

From mild forms of political protest and disobedience of war orders, the resistance among the ground troops grew into a massive and widespread "quasi-mutiny" by 1970 and 1971. Soldiers went on "search and avoid" missions, intentionally skirting clashes with the Vietnamese, and often holding three-day-long pot parties instead of fighting.



### **Clampdown and repercussions**

Initially response to mutinous behaviour was swift and harsh. Two black marines, William Harvey and George Daniels, were sentenced to six and ten years at hard labour for speaking against the war in their barracks. Privates Dam Amick and Ken Stolte were sentenced to four years for distributing a leaflet. Ford Ord. Pvt. Theoda Lester was sentenced to three years for refusing to cut his Afro. And Pvt. Wade Carson was sentenced to six months for "intention" to distribute underground newspaper FED-UP on Fort Lewis. The pattern was widespread and the message was clear: the brass was not about to tolerate political dissent in its ranks.

However, as the war progressed the stockades (military prisons) became over-crowded with AWOLs and laced with political organisers. In July of 1968 prisoners seized control of the stockade at Fort Bragg and held it for three days, and in June of 1969 prisoners rebelled in the Fort Dix stockade and inflicted extensive damage before being brought under control.

Probably the most famous incident of stockade resistance occurred at the Presidio, where 27 prisoners staged a sit-down during morning formation to protest the shot-gun slaying of a fellow prisoner by a stockade guard. The men were charged with mutiny and initially received very heavy sentences, but their sacrifice had considerable impact around the country. After a year their sentences were reduced to time served.

A number of factors eventually helped to weaken the brass's repressive power. Media coverage, public protest, and the general growth of GI resistance all played a part. The key factor though was that political GIs continued to be dangerous in the stockades, and eventually the military often chose to discharge dissidents and get rid of them all together.

### **1970 - The rebellion grows**

By 1970, the U.S. Army had 65,643 deserters, roughly the equivalent of four infantry divisions. In an article published in the Armed Forces Journal (June 7, 1971), Marine Colonel Robert D. Heintz Jr., a veteran combat commander with over 27 years experience in the Marines, and the author of *Soldiers Of The Sea*, a definitive history of the Marine Corps, wrote:

“By every conceivable indicator, our army that remains in Vietnam is in a state approaching collapse, with individual units avoiding or having refused combat, murdering their officers and non-commissioned officers, drug-ridden, and dispirited where not near mutinous.

Elsewhere than Vietnam, the situation is nearly as serious... Sedition, coupled with disaffection from within the ranks, and externally fomented with an audacity and intensity previously inconceivable, infest the Armed Services..."

Heinl cited a New York Times article which quoted an enlisted man saying, "The American garrisons on the larger bases are virtually disarmed. The lifers have taken our weapons away...there have also been quite a few frag incidents in the battalion."

"Frag incidents" or "fragging" was soldier slang in Vietnam for the killing of strict, unpopular and aggressive officers and NCO's (Non-Commissioned Officers, or "non-coms"). The word apparently originated from enlisted men using fragmentation grenades to off commanders. Heinl wrote, "Bounties, raised by common subscription in amounts running anywhere from \$50 to \$1,000, have been widely reported put on the heads of leaders who the privates and SP4s want to rub out." Shortly after the costly assault on Hamburger Hill in mid-1969, one of the GI underground newspapers in Vietnam, GI Says, publicly offered a \$10,000 bounty on Lieutenant Colonel Weldon Hunnicutt, the officer who ordered and led the attack.

"The Pentagon has now disclosed that fraggings in 1970 (209 killings) have more than doubled those of the previous year (96 killings). Word of the deaths of officers will bring cheers at troop movies or in bivouacs of certain units." Congressional hearings on fraggings held in 1973 estimated that roughly 3% of officer and non-com deaths in Vietnam between 1961 and 1972 were a result of fraggings. But these figures were only for killings committed with grenades, and didn't include officer deaths from automatic weapons fire, handguns and knifings. The Army's Judge Advocate General's Corps estimated that only 10% of fragging attempts resulted in anyone going to trial. In the America I Division, plagued by poor morale, fraggings during 1971 were estimated to be running around one a week. War equipment was frequently sabotaged and destroyed.



Drug use was epidemic, with an estimated 80% of the troops in Vietnam using some form of drug. Sometime in mid-1970 huge quantities of heroin were dumped on the black market, and GIs were receptive to its enveloping high. By the end of 1971 over 30% of the combat troops were on smack.

By 1972 roughly 300 anti-war and anti-military newspapers, with names like Harass the Brass, All Hands Abandon Ship and Star Spangled Bummer had been put out by enlisted people. Many hundreds of GIs created these papers, but their influence was far wider, with thousands more who helped distribute them, and tens of thousands of readers. Riots and anti-war demonstrations took place on bases in Asia, Europe and in the United States.

The situation stateside was less intense but no less disturbing to the military brass. Desertion and AWOL became absolutely epidemic. In 1966 the desertion rate was 14.7 per thousand, in 1968 it was 26.2 per thousand, and by 1970 it had risen to 52.3 per thousand; AWOL was so common that by the height of the war one GI went AWOL every three minutes. From

January of '67 to January of '72 a total of 354,112 GIs left their posts without permission, and at the time of the signing of the peace accords 98,324 were still missing.

### **The new air war, and the new resistance**

By the early 1970s the government had to begin pulling out of the ground war and switching to an "air war," in part because many of the ground troops who were supposed to do the fighting were hamstringing the world's mightiest military force by their sabotage and resistance.

With this shift, the Navy became an important centre of resistance to the war, primarily among crews on Navy attack carriers directly involved in the bombing. While there was dissidence and some political organising among Air Force personnel and in other parts of the Navy, it was where the support crews most directly touched the war that resistance flared. Probably the most dramatic incident occurred aboard the Navy attack carrier USS Coral Sea in the fall of 1971. The Coral Sea was docked in California while it prepared for a tour of bombing duty off the coast of Vietnam. On board was a crew of 4,500 men, a few hundred of whom were pilots, the rest being support crew. A handful of men on the ship began circulating a petition which read in part, "We the people must guide the government and not allow the government to guide us! The Coral Sea is scheduled for Vietnam in November. This does not have to be a fact. The ship can be prevented from taking an active part in the conflict if we the majority voice our opinion that we do not believe in the Vietnam war. If you feel that the Coral Sea should not go to Vietnam, voice your opinion by signing this petition."

Though the petition had to be circulated secretly, and though men took a calculated risk putting their name down on something which the brass might eventually see, within a few weeks over 1,000 men had signed it. Out of this grew an on-ship organisation called "Stop Our Ship" (SOS). The men engaged in a series of demonstrations to halt their sailing date, and on November 6 over 300 men from the ship led the autumn anti-war march in San Francisco. Their effort to stop the ship failed, and a number of men jumped ship as the Coral Sea left for Vietnam. But the SOS movement spread to other attack carriers, including the USS Hancock and the USS Ranger.

The Navy continued to be racked by political organising and severe racial unrest. Sometimes, black and white sailors would rebel together. The most significant of these took place on board the USS Constellation off Southern California, in November 1972. In response to a threat of less-than-honourable discharges against several black sailors, a group of over 100 black and white sailors staged a day-and-a-half long sit-in. Fearful of losing control of his ship at sea to full-scale mutiny, the ship's commander brought the Constellation back to San Diego.\* One hundred and thirty-two sailors were allowed to go ashore. They refused orders to re-board the ship several days later, staging a defiant dockside strike on the morning of November 9. In spite of the seriousness of the rebellion, not one of the sailors involved was arrested.

Sabotage was an extremely useful tactic. On May 26, 1970, the USS Anderson was preparing to steam from San Diego to Vietnam. But someone had dropped nuts, bolts and chains down the main gear shaft. A major breakdown occurred, resulting in thousands of dollars worth of damage and a delay of several weeks. Several sailors were charged, but because of a lack of evidence the case was dismissed. With the escalation of naval involvement in the war the level of sabotage grew.

In June of 1972 the USS Ranger was disabled by sabotage, and in October both the USS Kittyhawk and the USS Hassayampa were swept by fighting. In July, within the space of three weeks, two of the Navy's aircraft carriers were put out of commission by sabotage. On

July 10, a massive fire swept through the Admiral's quarters and radar centre of the USS Forrestal, causing over \$7 million in damage. This delayed the ship's deployment for over two months. In late July, the USS Ranger was docked at Alameda, California. Just days before the ship's scheduled departure for Vietnam, a paint-scraper and two 12-inch bolts were inserted into the number-four-engine reduction gears causing nearly \$1 million in damage and forcing a three-and-a-half month delay in operations for extensive repairs. The sailor charged in the case was acquitted. In other cases, sailors tossed equipment over the sides of ships while at sea.

Though the impact of these actions only slightly impeded the war effort, they helped to maintain a constant pressure on the Administration to withdraw the military from the disaster of the Indochina war.

The House Armed Services Committee summed up the crisis of rebellion in the Navy: "The U.S. Navy is now confronted with pressures...which, if not controlled, will surely destroy its enviable tradition of discipline. Recent instances of sabotage, riot, wilful disobedience of orders, and contempt for authority...are clear-cut symptoms of a dangerous deterioration of discipline."



### **The makeup of resistance**

There is a common misconception that it was draftees who were the most disaffected elements in the military. In fact, it was often enlistees who were most likely to engage in open rebellion. Draftees were only in for two years, went in expecting the worst, and generally kept their heads down until they got out of uniform. While of course many draftees went AWOL and engaged in group resistance when it developed, it was enlistees who were most angry and most likely to act on that anger. For one thing, enlistees were in for three or four years; even after a tour of duty in 'Nam they still had a long stretch left in the service. For another thing, they went in with some expectations, generally with a recruiter's promise

of training and a good job classification, often with an assurance that they wouldn't be sent to Vietnam. When these promises weren't kept, enlistees were very pissed off. A study commissioned by the Pentagon found that 64% of chronic AWOLs during the war years were enlistees, and that a high percentage were Vietnam vets. The following incident at a GI movement organising conference illustrates this point:

"A quick poll of the GIs and vets in the room showed that the vast majority of them had come from Regular Army, three or four year enlistments. Many of them expressed the notion that, in fact, it was the enlistees and not discontented draftees who had formed the core of the GI movement. A number of reasons were offered for this, including the fact many enlistees do enlist out of the hope of training, and a better job, or other material reasons. When the Army turns out to be a repressive and bankrupt institution, they are the most disillusioned and the most ready to fight back."

The official political Left attempted to involve itself in GI organising. Civilian counter-cultural coffee-shops were set up outside garrisons in the US to try to reach out to rank-and-file soldiers, with some limited success. Most left-wing parties proved themselves to be merely interested in recruitment or media-grabbing antics rather than sustained, long-term organising efforts which saw groups like the attempted American Servicemen's Union disintegrate. Subsequently it was the troops themselves who organised their own resistance, driven by their own experiences of life in the Army.

However, the rebellion in the ranks didn't emerge simply in response to battlefield conditions. A civilian anti-war movement in the U.S. had emerged on the coat tails of the civil rights movement, at a time when the pacifism-at-any-price tactics of civil rights leaders had reached their effective limit, and were being questioned by a younger, combative generation. Working class blacks and Latinos served in combat units out of all proportion to their numbers in American society, and groups such as the Black Panther Party, and major urban riots in Watts, Detroit and Newark had an explosive effect on the consciousness of these men. After the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr. major riots erupted in 181 U.S. cities; at that point the rulers of the United States were facing the gravest national crisis since the Civil War. And the radical movement of the late 1960s wasn't limited to the United States. Large-scale rebellion was breaking out all over the world, in Latin American and Europe and Africa, and even against the Maoists in China. Its high points were the wildcat general strike that shut down France in May, 1968, and the near-state of insurrection in the 60s and 70s in Italy - the last time major industrialised democracies came close to social revolution.

### **Conclusion**

The history of these olive-drab rebels is largely hidden from us, by rulers who would rather its lessons were forgotten. That the might of the most powerful military on Earth is worth naught if workers refuse to kill or oppress their fellow workers, and that the only allegiance which benefits us is not to our countries, our Generals, or to our flags, but to our class.

*Edited and altered by libcom from two articles, [Harass the Brass: Some notes toward the subversion of the US armed forces](#) and [The Olive-Drab Rebels: Military Organising During The Vietnam Era](#) by [Matthew Rinaldi](#), both taken from [prole.info](#).*

\* One source claimed that the USS Constellation was damaged by sabotage and brought to shore. If someone has any more information on this please let us know. All sources agreed on the dockside strike.