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PROCESSING THE UNFAMILIAR: AMERICAN SOLDIERS PROCESSING VIETNAM
THROUGH PHOTOGRAPHY

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My great-uncle Bill's time as a soldier in Vietnam has shaped and defined his entire adulthood. Bill grew up on a farm on the outskirts of a small town in northern Indiana. He graduated from high school in 1966, and in that same year, he was drafted by the United States Army. Bill was inducted into the Headquarters Company, 2nd Battalion of 206th Infantry of the 101st Airborne. He trained through 1967 and deployed in January of 1968. He worked as a truck driver, which involved picking up dead bodies from battlefields, during the bloodiest year of the war. When he returned home, Bill kept to himself and exhibited signs of posttraumatic stress. Within several years, Bill was diagnosed with schizophrenia, believed to be induced from the trauma experienced as a soldier. Bill found it difficult to keep a job for several years and was evicted from several apartments, and one of his older brothers, Don, became his legal guardian.

The Bill from before Vietnam does not exist today. All I know of that Bill comes from short anecdotes from reluctant family members and photographs of Bill from before his tour. One of these photographs is Bill's high school senior portrait (Figure 1). His smile is soft and content, and through its relaxed hold I see the same boyhood invincibility that I see in my younger brother today. Bill's eyes too exude that confidence; they are the eyes of a person understanding that this photograph captures a routine step in a young person's transformation. These eyes look toward a predictable future of farm work and family, a future that his eyes will watch and remember with ease. Another photograph capture Bill at the same age, but with an entirely different future ahead of him. This photograph is a portrait of Bill as a soldier before deployment (Figure 2). The confidence he emulated in his senior portrait has transformed into a nervous energy. His mouth, while perhaps aiming to smile, is uncertain of the emotion it really feels. His cheek muscles are completely relaxed, as though he cannot bear to grin for even a moment. His eyes, too, have transformed from his high school moment; they look at the camera

but lack his earlier confidence. His facial expression coupled with his tense pose reveal how quickly his future changed. He can only imagine what he will face while in Vietnam and hope that he returns home to his family.

The nervous energy in the second portrait foreshadowed the change Bill experienced. Bill took no photographs himself while he was in Vietnam, so I do not know how his daily experiences manifested on his visage. The Bill I know is confident only in his desire to be left alone; he reeks of cigarettes, swears without regard, and sits in the corner of all the family gatherings. His actions--which would be transgressive for anyone else in the family—do not phase anybody. From my observations, my family's tolerance is born out of love and guilt that they can understand neither the events that transformed him, nor how he perceives the world around him. We never talk about what Bill experienced while he was in Vietnam: on the one hand, Bill refuses to discuss it, but on the other, I have a feeling my family does not want to know the extent to which their brother suffered.

It is from this environment that I have become deeply curious about what Bill's time in Vietnam and how it affects him today. I have done several research projects on schizophrenia, PTSD, and Vietnam-era veterans in an attempt to get to know Bill and his past from afar, and this project is the next in that series. This time my personal question is, what was life like for Bill and other American soldiers in Vietnam, and how did they want to remember their time? While there is no single source that can perfectly explain or express soldiers' experiences, the photographs they took while in Vietnam capture some of the moments they wanted to remember. I have used photographs from the Library of Congress' Veterans History Project's online database, which includes thousands of photographs and other documents such as memoirs

and oral histories submitted by veterans of every modern American conflict.¹ While another soldier's experience is not a perfect substitute for Bill's missing narrative, it can provide insights on how other young men processed the Southeast Asia warzone, so I sifted through thousands of photographs submitted by Vietnam-era veterans, and selected images that were representative of Bill's experience in some way. I only selected photographs that were taken in Vietnam, rather than pictures of the veterans later in life, as Bill's experience as a soldier abroad is what most remains a mystery to me. I also limited my query to photographs from veterans who toured around 1968, the same as Bill, and I excluded those who had fought in earlier wars or later wars: I wanted to know what it was like for young men like Bill, whose careers lied not in the military, but in civilian life.

There were approximately 1400 veterans (each with different amounts of photographs) whose profiles matched my query, and this project includes 17 images from eight different veterans. I looked both for pictures that were representative of the general trends—such as the Vietnamese jungle, interactions with Vietnamese people (especially children), weapons and destruction, and snippets of daily life. I also prioritized some photographs based on the soldier's unit or hometown. Many brave men served in the 101st Airborne, and Bill feels a special pride having served in that unit; while he will not wear anything referencing Vietnam, he frequently wears his 101st Airborne baseball cap. In order to find soldiers with similar backgrounds, I made sure to select some veterans from the Midwest, as somebody from Indiana or Ohio likely has a different background than someone from California or Connecticut. I sought to reduce the overall number of veterans represented so that I could focus more intently on a close reading of individuals, so I favored sets of photographs from one veteran over a handful of photographs

¹ Thank you to Dr. Katherine Mintie, a member of my committee, for directing me to this source. This project would not have materialized without these photographs or her help.

each from a different veteran. At this point, the selection process inevitably became more subjective. I looked for photographs that I had a reaction to, whether they were visually or emotionally striking or I felt that they had a story behind them. I had 27 photographs from ten veterans left, and I began to select photographs more on themes they portrayed, such as American soldiers' relationships with Vietnamese people—children, civilians, or prisoners—or personality of individual soldiers that came through in the photographs. This was not a strictly empirical process, but due to the personal side to my project and my limited scope, the photographs included in this paper construct a narrative of the adjustment process for individual soldiers.

In addition to my personal goals, through this project I will explore the holistic experiences of ordinary veterans who fought in Vietnam. The narrative of American soldiers in Vietnam has been so controlled by media representations and popular films, but these tend to focus on the horrors of war and the mental repercussions. These are, by no means, insignificant aspects of a soldiers' experience, but daily routines and small moments are largely absent. When soldiers documented their experiences through photography, they captured what they believed was significant, what they wanted to remember, and what they wanted to share. These photographs reveal glimpses of the soldiers' personal transformation and the distances between Americans and Vietnamese and between the soldier and his civilian self. I am under no misconception that I can generalize or speak for all the soldiers, but instead I argue for the interpretive value and potential for social and cultural scholarship that lies in these veterans' photographs. Of course, the very nature of photographic reflection is subjective, which lends itself to my personal question far better than my broader academic ones. Additionally, I do not have the full context of the personal photographs in this project. I can guess at the soldiers'

emotions, but I cannot know their thoughts and reactions to war. While I can only provide limited personal context for the veterans' photographs, I can provide historical context more thoroughly. I will also provide an overview of the relevant photographic theory theory that I will apply throughout my analysis of the photographs.

Part I

There had been a war in Vietnam long before the United States introduced ground forces in 1965. After a long struggle for independence from invading and colonial powers, Vietnam finally was split at the seventeenth parallel at the Geneva Accords in 1954. The United States took over as the dominating power as they sought to reduce the spread of communism.² The war was thus publicized to the American public as a Cold War fight for containment so that the South Vietnamese could lead free, democratic lives. The United States, however, was inhibited by their misunderstanding of Vietnamese culture and the enemy, and military strategy became largely ineffective against the communists.³ As early as 1965, the Johnson administration was largely engaged in Vietnam to avoid a humiliating defeat.⁴

Most of the combat in Vietnam was fought on the communists' terms because of the guerrilla nature of the war. Search-and-destroy missions were the operation of choice when soldiers in the field were not sweeping roads or plantations for mines. During these missions soldiers would essentially trek through the bush until they provoked attack, and a firefight ensued. The Viet Cong did not exclusively hide in the jungles and their tunnels; they hid in plain sight as Vietnamese peasants in villages. When soldiers came to a village, they were often unable to discern if the Vietnamese people were civilians or Viet Cong, on occasion resulting in the killing of innocent civilians, the most infamous example being the My Lai Massacre. The My Lai Massacre occurred on March 16, 1968, when American troops killed 504 unarmed

² Mark Atwood Lawrence, *The Vietnam War: A Concise International History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 53.

³ John Prados, "American Strategy in the Vietnam War," in *The Columbia History of the Vietnam War*, ed. David L. Anderson (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), 247-254.

⁴ *Ibid*, 249.

Vietnamese Civilians.⁵ This was not an incident of confusion; it was a result that marked an extreme consequence of the military's often antagonistic attitude toward the Vietnamese people. Veteran Larry Hughes remarked on the conflicting messages soldiers received about the Vietnamese upon his arrival in Vietnam in 1966. One colonel told him to take time to "understand the Vietnamese and their way of life," while a sergeant told him to "be alert from this moment and don't trust nobody with slanted eyes."⁶ As soldiers' tours went on, many became increasingly frustrated with an uncertain enemy, and many resented all Vietnamese through their understanding of the Viet Cong.⁷

Nineteen sixty-eight was a chaotic year in Vietnam. It began with the surprise Tet Offensive on January 31, a Vietnamese holiday celebrating the lunar new year. In the past, there had been an understood cease-fire on the holiday, but North Vietnam launched a massive surprise attack. The attack ultimately decimated their forces, but forced the United States to reevaluate how long the North Vietnamese were really willing to fight.⁸

Around 1968, public opinion began to turn against the war, and the Tet Offensive was the tipping point for many Americans, as the North Vietnamese did not appear anywhere near surrendering to the war of attrition. As casualties increased and the public became increasingly weary of the body count as a measure for progress, media attention skyrocketed. Early in the war, the majority of the soldiers had enlisted, but draftees made up more and more of the military, especially the army, as the war progressed.⁹ Initially, the media described the army as

⁵ David L. Anderson, *The Columbia Guide to the Vietnam War*. (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002): 186.

⁶ Christian G. Appy, *Working Class War* (Chapel Hill, North Carolina: University of North Carolina Press, 1993): 132-33.

⁷ Al Santoli, *Everything We Had: An Oral History of the Vietnam War by Thirty-Three American Soldiers Who Fought It* (New York: Random House, 1981): 43.

⁸ Anderson, *Columbia Guide to the Vietnam War*, 167.

⁹ Appy, *Working Class War*: 29.

organized and respectable, but increasingly fixated on GI drug use, attributing the breakdown of the army and the war to marijuana, acid, and heroin abuse. To be sure, drug use is a common feature in veterans' personal accounts, and drug use likely increased over the course of the war, but the media sensationalized the story, in part equating the youth in Vietnam with the counterculture at home.¹⁰

As the media stereotyped returning American soldiers in Vietnam as drug addicts, they skimmed over the productivity of veterans in organizations like Vietnam Veterans Against the War (VVAW).¹¹ They did pick up on the message of the VVAW: the government was brainwashing soldiers to commit atrocious acts. The idea that even soldiers were victims of war has permeated the popular portrayal of Vietnam era veterans since the war itself. Hollywood canonized the American soldiers as indoctrinated cogs in the government's machine, unwilling to be there but, at the end of the day, unwilling to die. Popular literature by Vietnam-era veterans has also contributed to the traumatization of soldiers because of the constant horror they faced in war.¹² Fear and combat dominated many soldiers' minds, but these depictions detract from the daily relationships and struggle to adjust not just to a warzone, but a place completely unlike home.

The photographs in the Veterans' History Project are instrumental in understanding this side of American soldiers' experiences. Historical scholarship and oral histories supplement and ground the personal photographs. Unlike many of the iconic photographs of the war in Vietnam, the private photographs do not focus on examples of combat operational stress (COS) (i.e.

¹⁰ Jeremy Kuzmarov. *The Myth of the Addicted Army: Vietnam and the War on Drugs* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2009): 47.

¹¹ *Ibid*, 45.

¹² Andrew J. Huebner, *Warrior Image: Soldiers in American Culture from the Second World War to the Vietnam Era* (Chapel Hill, North Carolina: University of North Carolina Press, 2008), 276-278.

combat, violence) as the single major adjustment soldiers had to endure; the soldiers' photographs address general culture shock in addition to COS. Cultural stress is a new term to military psychology, a combination of COS and the more civilian culture shock. Culture shock is a psychological process that many people experience as they adjust to living in an unfamiliar culture for an extended period of time. American officials knew about the difficulties of culture shock, and the topic was addressed in the United States' foil to the war in Vietnam: the Peace Corps.

Even though both institutions sent young Americans abroad to interact with foreign countries, only the Peace Corps included culture shock was a part of the training curriculum; in contrast, military training focused on physical preparation. This difference is particularly striking, given that many American soldiers regularly interacted with Vietnamese soldiers, civilians, nature, and culture. American soldiers, however, dealt with more issues than different culture; they experienced war. Researcher Jaz Azari has presented a new concept combining the culture shock and COS: cultural stress. Soldier experiences lack culture shock's more gradual onset and eventual acceptance; there is neither a honeymoon phase nor a cultural adjustment and adaptation.¹³ Cultural stress applies to those directly interacting with locals and experiencing combat. "Cultural fatigue" wears down soldiers' hope and confidence to disbelief in the mission and resentment toward the local culture.¹⁴

The soldiers in Vietnam had diverse and complex feelings toward the war, but their personal photographs shed light on moments of processing the unfamiliar. These photographs do not map out the trajectory of cultural stress; rather, the snapshot captures the soldiers' fascination

¹³ Jaz Azari and Christopher Dandeker, et al., "Cultural Stress: How Interactions with and Among Foreign Populations Affect Military Personnel," *Armed Forces & Society* 36, no. 4 (2010): 590.

¹⁴ *Ibid*: 598.

with the “Other” emphatically representing a barrier of superiority—or fear and their desensitization to violence—between them.

Photojournalists do not capture the soldiers’ experience or perspective; rather, they try to capture the essence of the war. The famous public photographs of the Vietnam War depict blood and pain, but the images from the soldiers only had implicit traces of violence, if any at all. The soldiers’ photographs settle on day-to-day interactions with Vietnam revealing cultural stress.

Photojournalism reached its zenith in the 1950s when television news had not yet overtaken photojournalistic magazines like *LIFE*. In more recent years, the use of Photoshop and the public’s increased sensitivity to staging has made viewers more skeptical of the ‘truth’ of photojournalism, but photojournalism used to be seen as irrefutable, objective evidence.¹⁵ The first photojournalist covering war was Roger Fenton during the Crimean War (1853-56), but because he worked through the British government, his photographs glorified war. It was not until the American Civil War when the photographers of Matthew Brady’s studio horrified audiences with mounds of corpses that war photography began to turn away from glorifying conflict.¹⁶

Exposing suffering and the concept of encouraging sympathy gradually evolved into humanist photography, which became popular amongst photojournalists: “The common denominator many of these photographers shared was an optimistic belief in a human universalism that celebrated the existence of an eternal human essence, dignified the individuals they photographed, saw the suffering of one as the suffering of all, and viewed photography as a

¹⁵ Steve Edwards, “Apocalyptic Sublime: On the Brighton Photo-Biennial,” *Historical Materialism* 17 (2009): 93.

¹⁶ Robert Hirsch, *Seizing the Light: A History of Photography* (Boston: McGraw-Hill, 2000), 103.

universal language.” The humanist angle was not necessarily anti-war; rather it was an attempt to connect American citizens to far away and exotic people. In the case of Vietnam, humanist photography was king amongst photojournalists, but according to a renowned photojournalist of the time, Philip Jones Griffiths, most journalists were pro-war.¹⁷ This did not mean that photojournalists did not have a complicated relationship to the violence and suffering they witnessed.¹⁸

Especially early on, most television crews and photojournalists saw themselves as an extension of the White House, in addition to believing in America’s mission in Vietnam.¹⁹ The photographer Larry Burrows explained that he did not doubt America’s war in Vietnam, but rather he began to realize the effect it was having on the Vietnamese people. He formed a close relationship with a young Vietnamese girl, Tron, who had lost her leg as a result of the war. When he did a profile on her for a cover story of *LIFE*, he did so in order to tell her story, not to convince the American people to turn against the war. The majority of photojournalists were not specifically against America’s intervention in Vietnam; rather, they saw suffering, and as journalists felt a need to inform the public.

Photojournalism was in transition during the Vietnam years; for the first time journalists had basically unlimited access to the warzones, and with the rise of color photography, their images became more real to everyday Americans.²⁰ In addition, photojournalism became increasingly subjective throughout the 1960s as it competed with television news.²¹ Few photographs after the Vietnam era have attained the same level of notoriety as their predecessors.

¹⁷ Ibid, 334.

¹⁸ Liam Kennedy, “Framing Compassion,” *History of Photography* 36, no. 3 (2012): 308-310.

¹⁹ Huebner, *Warrior Image*, 173.

²⁰ Hirsch, *Seizing the Light*, 333.

²¹ Ibid, 337.

Some in the field attribute this to the fact that the public got tired of the horrific war photographs as the war dragged on, and later, as the internet facilitated the quick spread of images, most photographs do not have the shelf-life to become iconic, as viewers are constantly seeking out the next photograph.²²

No analysis of photography during the war in Vietnam would be complete without considering the role of the media, specifically photojournalism. Photojournalists in Vietnam produced an extensive body of memorable photographs throughout the war. Between the 1965 and 1973, combat photography taken in Vietnam made up a significant portion of photojournalists' efforts. Of the 15 Pulitzer Prizes in photography awarded over the course of this decade (the Photography category split into two separate categories after 1967), combat photographers in Vietnam won six. Two other winners were also related to the War in Vietnam, from the perspective of the homefront: John Filo's 1970 image from the Kent State shooting and Sal Veder's 1973 "Burst of Joy," capturing the return of a prisoner of war. The second most frequent theme of Pulitzer Prize winning work was race, which won four times over the decade. The most famous photographs are distributed relatively evenly over the course of the war.

Photography has been a subject of fascination and criticism because of its irrefutable evidence that a moment took place and its unknowable manipulation of the truth. In his book *Camera Lucida*, French philosopher Roland Barthes reflects explores the nature of photography and his relationship to photographs, in part what I have done here.

Barthes outlines the different roles involved in every photograph. First, no photograph is possible without the photographer, who Barthes calls the operator, in reference to his or her

²² Strallabross and Gilbertson, "In Conversation," 356.

control over the camera. Second, the subject of the photograph, the operator's "target", is the spectrum. The third participant in a photograph, unlike the operator and the spectrum, is temporary. Any audience viewing a photograph at any particular moment becomes a spectator. Because of the multitude of parties involved, in every photograph, a major ethical issue is ownership of the photograph. The operator, who took the photograph for his or her own public or private purposes believes he or she has should have claim to his or her creation, but what of the spectrum? This issue is less pressing than in photographs of landscapes or animals or inanimate objects, but a human spectrum might want a say in the proliferation of his or her image. Then of course there is the third party, the spectator. Once a spectator has possession of a photograph, it is no longer the property of the operator or the spectrum; even if it is still legally their property they no longer have control of the audience, interpretation, and dissemination of the photograph. The human spectrum has an additional stake in the photograph once created; he or she is a subject-turned-object for every future spectator. Objects have no agency; they are seen, wielded, and manipulated in whatever way the spectator desires; the objectification of photography dehumanizes and takes away every person's right to be a subject.²³

In the soldiers' photographs, sometimes the veteran who submitted the image is the operator, and sometimes he is the spectrum. The images are at their most problematic when the spectrum has little choice in participating in the photograph; this issue arises every time a Vietnamese person occupies the image. Other images have become problematic now that they have been submitted to the Veterans' History Project, as individuals who agreed to pose for a private photograph have now had their image made public, possibly without their knowledge or consent.

²³ Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, translated by Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1981): 9; 15.

Another issue of importance is the difference between the public and the private photograph. The famous photographs of the Vietnam War are, obviously, public; they have become a part of our memory even though we have no personal memory of the actual moment the photograph captures. The soldiers' photographs, on the other hand, began as private photographs and later became public ones. Private photographs can be appreciated and read by the owners of the photograph in context because it is not severed from its original meaning. The soldiers' photographs, however, are now in the public domain, now a part of our collective non-memory memory.²⁴ This means that we have little to no context about the space physically and temporally outside of the frame, and what is absent from the photograph (but not from the operator's and spectrum's world around the photograph) may be just as important as what is present, and this detail ceases to be significant amongst its new audience.²⁵

For the most part, we as a public audience can only speculate about a fact of each photograph that is central to interpreting the operator's intended meaning: why was that particular photograph taken. Every single photograph communicates the same message from its photographer: "I have decided that seeing this is worth recording" in one way or another.²⁶ Understanding why a particular photograph was taken helps place the image back into its continuum, although only for a moment, because especially in the case of public photographs, once the snapshot is captured, the moment is forever removed from its original context.

The aspect of the photograph that immediately become permanent is the subject's pose. In every photograph that the subject is aware of the camera, he or she is consciously or subconsciously poses. The knowledge that the moment will be immortalized is enough to strike

²⁴ John Berger, *Understanding a Photograph* (New York: Aperture, 2013): 48-49.

²⁵ *Ibid*, 26.

²⁶ *Ibid*, 25.

fear into the heart of the subject, whose only desire in that moment is to become a version of self that he or she can be proud of. Despite this instinct, however, Barthes regrets that the image of his person never fully represents his actual sense of self; the tragedy of the pose is lies in the instability of 'truth' in photography. However truthful the pose, the pose is the spectrum's last whisper of agency, the pose of the spectrum wrestles with the pose that the operator envisions in his or her mind's eye. The pose, however successfully completed, is what spectator after spectator will see and accept as truth.²⁷

Around the pose, the layers and worlds of existence in a photograph are prolific. On one level, the photographs exist for us as objects in our world, but the people and things in the photograph exist in a different world from ours. Even within a single photograph, however, different people and things can be a part of different worlds. Barthes uses the example of a photograph of soldiers and nuns walking through a war-destroyed street in Nicaragua. These two groups obviously lead entirely different and separate lives; it is likely that this photograph was the only time these individuals crossed paths.²⁸

Both the pose and the worlds within a photograph pertain to what is inside the frame of the image, and I will explore these in my reflections of many of the soldiers' photographs. I will also explore my relationship to the photograph, largely through one of Barthes's most provocative ideas, *studium* and *punctum* as a way to articulate personal reaction to photographs. One of Barthes's most provocative ideas is how he describes reaction to a photograph. The first element, *studium* is what interests the spectator, a 'cultural participation'. The studium is what allows an individual to connect to a photograph on the basis of shared past, humanity, or anything. The second element, *punctum*, interrupts the flow of the studium, pinching the

²⁷ Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, 10, 12, 78.

²⁸ *Ibid*, 22.

spectator into a deeper engagement, another reality. No operator can create a punctum except by accident, and most photographs do not have a punctum. Furthermore, the punctum is not necessarily that which shocks the viewer, but it is a small detail that contains a “power of expansion”. There is no punctum in pornographic images or journalistic photographs, the former of which is too simple, and the latter of which aims to shock rather than prick the spectator with a tangential and minute detail.²⁹

Each of the veterans’ photographs is of cultural value to me; they speak about a war in which my great-uncle fought, they are documents of a controversial conflict in recent American history, and they capture young people navigating the transition to adulthood. As I selected photographs, I stuck to images with extraordinarily powerful stadium and/or images that made me pause, not out of shock or horror, but from a punctum, a fascination with a small detail that immediately connected me to the image. As I go through the various photographs, I hope to explain my connection to the photograph, and explore the relationships of the operator, spectrum, and spectators to the photograph.

²⁹ Ibid, 26-27, 32, 45, 41.

Part II

As I began to search for motifs across the submissions of photographs, I started creating categories in order to organize my approach to the mountain of material: Vietnamese people, American presence, and youth. Many of the photographs overlap, but at the heart of each photograph, both here and throughout the Veterans' History Project, there is a distance between the Americans and the Vietnamese, and each of these categories captured what I felt were three central themes: (1) the soldiers' exoticizing, or fetishizing the otherness, of Vietnam and its people, (2) American soldiers as an unnatural and at times invasive presence on Vietnam, and (3) American soldiers taking Vietnam day by day.

Vietnamese People

Vietnamese people were a very popular subject amongst soldier photographers. Sometimes soldiers photographed groups of Vietnamese people, and sometimes they took pictures with them; sometimes the pictures were posed, and sometimes they were candid. Often the Vietnamese in the photographs are children, who had a different relationship with American soldiers than did adults. Regardless of the specifics, these photographs reveal power dynamics and Americans' amusement, ambivalence, and antagonism toward the Vietnamese people. Walter James Dexter's photographs of water buffalo (Figures 3 and 4) show a zoo-like fascination and curiosity with Vietnam that had yet to be tempered by time and combat. Dexter had an interesting relationship with the Vietnam War; a high school dropout, Dexter enlisted at the age of seventeen because he needed a job. When he first arrived, he was scared, but he was desperate to prove himself: other soldiers called him "cherry," a nickname for soldiers who had

yet to see combat. Dexter remembered, “After a while you get brainwashed, you might end up saying, wow, I’m getting tired of getting called ‘cherry’, I can’t wait to—I hate to say it—can’t wait to kill somebody or to wait until I get into a firefight so I can not become a cherry anymore. It’s funny how you become a product of your environment.” His perspective soon changed, at one point stopping taking his malaria pills so that he could go to the hospital in Cameron Bay for a month, which he also did. At the end of his tour in Vietnam, he refused to go on a search-and-destroy mission because he had less than thirty days left, and he was told he would be court marshalled, although the paperwork was lost and he did not receive consequences.³⁰ I have included several of Dexter’s photographs, but the juxtaposition of “Vietnamese riding a buffalo” (Figure 3) and “Dexter in jungle” (Figure 4) symbolically represent the space between American and Vietnamese. Buffalo candidly roam both images, although the human presence differs. In the first image, a Vietnamese person sits on a water buffalo, one leg bent into his body and the other casually draped over the buffalo’s neck. He sits as comfortably as though he were sitting in a chair, resting his hands on his leg rather than holding onto the animal. Looking at this photograph, I am not entirely certain whether the person is an adult or a child; at first glance, I assumed he was a man because, from my American perspective, it seemed more natural for an adult to be riding a water buffalo by himself than a child, but upon further inspection, I realized he is a boy because of the size of his body in comparison to the buffalo. The boy is clearly aware of the camera because he looks directly at it, and his left arm propped up on his knee suggests that he is posing for Dexter. Like Barthes, the boy clearly has the inclination to portray his best self for the photograph, but unlike Barthes, he will not see the photograph and reflect on his image versus his sense of self. Interestingly, the buffalo also looks at the camera. As an animal,

³⁰ William James Dexter, interview by David Brusseau, *Veterans History Project*, Library of Congress, 10 January 2011.

it does not recognize cameras and photographs, but it is aware that this moment is a disruption from his normal routine. After this moment, however, Dexter probably left, the buffalo forgot about the brief interruption, and the boy and Dexter may have never seen each other again.

In the second image, there is a small herd of water buffalo rather than a single one, and they are in the background rather than interacting with the human subject. Dexter poses for the camera in the foreground. He looks at the camera, but doesn't quite smile; his furrowed brow suggests that he may be squinting because of the bright sun. He stands in his heavy uniform, and has something draped over his left shoulder. He appears to rest his hands in his pockets, although his right hand is visible up to the knuckle, so it almost looks like his hand is lightly clenched just above his pocket. The buffalo in the background play or bathe or drink freely, unaware of Dexter's interest in them.

The first photograph is altogether more natural than the second, from the context to the content. The first picture of the boy riding the buffalo is an ordinary moment that Dexter happened to witness, take out his camera, and photograph. The second picture on the other hand, would have required more setup: Dexter must have seen the water buffalo, asked a companion to take the photograph, and walk out to position himself for the camera. As for subject matter and composition, the Vietnamese boy looks wholly more adapted in his moment in time. The boy's clothing looks comfortable and appropriate for the environment, while Dexter's uniform looks overwhelming; his own clothes are another obstacle to overcome in his daily life in Vietnam. The boy exists on the same plan and lives in the same world as the buffalo, while Dexter there is a tangible distance between Dexter and the buffalo.

Both of these images feel like tourist mementos: to Dexter, the Vietnamese man is a part of the exhibit. It is possible that Dexter became accustomed to seeing water buffalo, as they are

not uncommon in soldiers' recollections of the jungle. Water buffalo symbolized American lack of aptitude for the Vietnamese environment. David Eugene Tazzara, one of the veterans from the Veterans' History Project, recalled that his gun jammed the first time he tried to fire it, as a water buffalo charged him. He was saved because a Vietnamese child ran up to the buffalo and sent it the other way.³¹ On a darker note, water buffalo also symbolized how pervasively the Vietnamese were dehumanized by American soldiers. One soldier, Lee Childress, claimed that soldiers got in more trouble for shooting water buffalo than Vietnamese people.³² Kit Lavell, a pilot, recalled how the idea of hunting water buffalo made him realize how negatively he viewed the Vietnamese when he thought, "'Gee, I don't want to kill any animals.' It was okay to kill people, but it wasn't okay to kill animals. But I didn't consider them people, so..."³³ In "Vietnamese riding a buffalo" and "Dexter in jungle," Dexter shows no intention to kill the Vietnamese boy, and there is no evidence that he values the water buffalo's life over the boy's. Rather, these images and these stories tell the microaggressive Western gaze and the more harmful racism and dehumanization that the racism and othering spawned.

Like Dexter, I have drawn several photographs from David Eugene Tazzara's collection. In some of Tazzara's photographs, he looks young and innocent, and in others he exudes an almost cruel bravado. Tazzara's time in Vietnam was emotional roller coaster, forcing him to grow up quickly. Tazzara volunteered for the draft early in 1968 with his two best friends; they all felt that they were going to be drafted regardless, so by volunteering they could at least go through basic training together. After arriving in Vietnam, everything "got more intense." Tazzara cried for the first three days he was in Vietnam. He was placed in a recon unit and

³¹ David Eugene Tazzara, interview by Eileen Hurst, *Veterans History Project*, Library of Congress, 10 July 2011.

³² Santoli, *Everything We Had*, 63.

³³ *Ibid*, 143.

worked as a basic rifleman; about his M-16 he said, “It was basically my friend, you know. I loved it.”³⁴

The setting of “Waiting for his clothes” (Figure 5) is entirely different from Dexter’s, taking place in an American camp rather than the jungle. The different setting and subject matter designate this photograph not as a tourist memento, but a picture of Tazzara’s routine. This is not a particularly exciting moment captured here, but Tazzara wanted the picture enough that he asked someone else to take it. Perhaps he was bored while he was waiting for his laundry; regardless, the photograph is casual. The frame is slightly slanted, and Tazzara slouches against a pole, legs crossed, hands in pockets. The woman, in contrast, is not in repose, and her straight but composed posture suggests that she has become used to young Americans impatiently waiting for their laundry.

In many photographs with Americans and Vietnamese people, the Vietnamese are either subordinate or an afterthought. In this image it could be either: the typed title states that he waits for the woman, but the scrawl on the bottom of the picture places greater importance on the clothes. The Vietnamese woman is either subordinate--she works for the soldiers, or she is an afterthought--a mechanism to clean clothes. “Waiting for his clothes” unwittingly comments on the how the Vietnamese economy adapted to American presence.³⁵ Taking this photograph does not truly interrupt the woman’s day, but the conditions that allowed the moment of this photograph to happen disrupted the woman’s life. The fact that this act is so routine for Tazzara dramatizes the woman’s situation; whereas Dexter interrupted the Vietnamese man for a moment, the war has entirely disrupted the Vietnamese woman’s life.

³⁴ Tazzara, interview by Hurst.

³⁵ Appy, *Working Class War*, 132-133.

Without the personal background of these veterans to contextualize images like these, it is easy to harshly judge the American soldiers. The racism directed toward the Vietnamese people, both enemy and ally, is well-documented, but do the soldiers deserve the blame? Tazzara hated his time in Vietnam and was merely trying to get to the day when he could go home. I especially sympathize with the young soldiers when I replace Tazzara with my uncle Bill. If Bill were in this picture, I would have immediately seen a 19 year-old boy, trying his best to make himself comfortable in a place he never wanted to be in the first place. When I imagine Bill there, I begin to consider reasons—or perhaps they are excuses—for the barrier between him and the woman. He had a long day. The language barrier is not worth trying to overcome. If nobody else is talking with the launderers, why should Bill be expected to? My rationalizing thoughts then spill into Dexter’s water buffalo photographs. Why shouldn’t he be fascinated by animals he has never seen before? Is it condemnable that he wanted to remember a boy riding a buffalo? These scenes are harmless in isolation, but taking into account some of the alarming attitudes and actions toward the Vietnamese, it is impossible for these photographs to remain isolated; they exist on a scale.

If Tazzara waiting for his laundry captures the casual subordination of the Vietnamese, “Tazzara with arm on shoulder” (Figure 6) represents the political relationship between the United States and Vietnam. Tazzara domineers over an “unknown” Vietnamese man, physically his superior as well as politically. Tazzara stands up straight, shirtless, resting his right hand on the Vietnamese man’s shoulder and his left hand on his hip. Even though Tazzara holds a cigarette with his teeth, he still manages a slight smile in his eyes. In contrast, the Vietnamese man wears a shirt, his hands are not visible, and neither his eyes nor his mouth smile. Just to the

righthand side of the picture behind Tazzara a canopy of some sort breaks into the frame, and dirt, shoddy buildings, telephones, and ambiguous materials fill the background.

When I first saw this photograph, I felt as though I had a thousand reactions at once. I do not know if Barthes's theory allows for multiple studium or punctum, but I am overwhelmed by several of the former and no less than two of the latter. My first studium is a motif through many of the soldiers' images that I discovered by accident: poles. These telephone poles feel like an unnatural presence. The telephone poles stand against the large dirt mound, probably a side effect of building the camp. I have no way of knowing what kind of ecosystem existed here before the Americans arrived, but the telephone poles look like fake trees, inherently mocking what they might have replaced.

My second studium is the difference in clothing; similar to the contrast between Dexter and the Vietnamese boy riding the water buffalo, the Vietnamese man appears far more suited to the environment than Tazzara. The Vietnamese man's shirt is not dissimilar to the boy on the buffalo; it is loose, casual, and protects him from the sun. Tazzara, on the other hand, must stick to his military uniform, although he tries to adapt the American uniform to the Vietnamese heat by removing his shirt. I cannot help but laugh at Tazzara's shirtlessness—even though the photograph is in black and white, I can only wonder how sunburned he must have become on this day or any other day during his tour. Even the shadows on Tazzara's body look like a tank top and seem to outline a sunburn.

My third studium is Tazzara's hand on the unknown man's shoulder. It carries a level of condescension, as Tazzara uses his superior height to challenge the unknown man's superior age. Tazzara's hand is like the United States' intervention in the Vietnam conflict: the unknown man does not appear to want the hand on his shoulder, yet he tolerates it. Could he have

declined posing for the photograph? The unknown man is at Tazzara's mercy, and he will be free to go only when the photograph is over. Tazzara's different attitudes toward the Vietnamese woman in "Waiting for his clothes" and the man in "Tazzara with arm on shoulder" reflects some soldiers' different attitudes toward the Vietnamese men and women. Thomas Bird remarked, "I was really angry with Vietnamese men [because they all reminded me of the Vietn Cong]. I started hating ARVNs because they were so unreliable and a couple of times in ambushes the ARVNs disappeared. I hated Vietnamese men. I never had any trouble with the women. I was always flirting with them. I never suspected the women."³⁶

My first and second punctum for "Tazzara with arm on shoulder" are far less culturally symbolic. I have already briefly alluded to the first: the shadows on Tazzara's and the Vietnamese man's face and body. Aside from the tank top shadow, Tazzara's eyes are actually shaded by his skeletal structure of his deep set eyes. The Vietnamese man's eyes are not so deeply set, and they are not shaded as Tazzara's. In my above description of the photograph, I interpreted Tazzara's eyes as smiling and the Vietnamese man's eyes as squinting; this is because the Vietnamese man's forehead is furrowed while Tazzara's is entirely relaxed; Tazzara's eye sockets seem to literally protect his eyes from the sun. The most interesting shadow in the image, however, is the shadow of Tazzara's face and cigarette on his own chest. To me, it looks like an upside down image of the Empire State building. Tazzara's head casts the majority of the building, the shadow of his nose creates the narrowing top, and the cigarette constructs the spire. The shadow's likeness both amuses me and frustrates me. On the one hand, I find that a cigarette makes up the spire is quite funny on a personal level; both Bill and my grandfather who fought in the Korean War became addicted to cigarettes after the military

³⁶ Santoli, *Everything We Had*, 43.

provided them for soldiers during their tour. On the other hand, I am supremely frustrated that every time I look at this image, I have to pull my attention away from the cigarette and its shadow. The shadow just stands out so perfectly against Tazzara's white chest, and I feel like there has to be almost a literary significance to it; however, the only real significance to the shadow is that it existed the moment the photograph was taken and that it stands out to me. The deeper meaning is my own construction.

My second punctum, perhaps in reality an extension of the first, is Tazzara's pure white cigarette, sticking out of the shadow on his face and from the entire scene. The cigarette sticks awkwardly out of Tazzara's mouth, which is tightly pursed to keep a hold of it. It hangs directly center and down, almost like a child's drawing of a dog's tongue. The cigarette is an accessory to the photograph, just like the old man is, and it seems to symbolize Tazzara's whiteness, especially in comparison to the Vietnamese man's darker skin and dark shirt. One is a familiar, American accessory, and the other is an exotic prop. The blazing white stands out against the shadows that surround it and the shadow it creates. The clean white contrasts with the dirt-filled background, although it undoubtedly will be thrown on the ground with the rest of the dirt as soon as Tazzara finishes it; Vietnam will envelop it in time.

The difference between Americans' relationships with Vietnamese adults and children appear in a comparison between "Tazzara with arm on shoulder" and "Dexter Posing" (Figure 7). "Dexter posing" shows a wide range of children's emotions that appearing many of the other veterans' photographs. Dexter holds one child in each arm, although he seems to be struggling to hold his grip, as the shirt of the child on the left has been pushed up and the child on the right seems to be squirming out. These children look happy, but the young boy standing in front of them appears to be distressed in some way with his creased eyebrows. He looks uncomfortable;

he does not know where to put his hands, his brow is wrinkled, and he is not quite smiling. He looks like many of the children in other photographs, who stand with a soldier but do not smile at the camera or stand by themselves and stare into the camera. The girl on the left edge of the frame has a shy eagerness; she is wide-eyed and smiling at the camera, but she stands off from Dexter and the others. The pole holding up the tin roof almost makes her feel as though she is in a separate room or even a separate photograph.

According to many Americans' account, children were always shyly curious about the soldiers, although they were almost certainly attracted by the food.³⁷ David Ross, a medic, recalled cutting open a pineapple, and one by one the Vietnamese children would sit around him in order to get a bite.³⁸ Ross claimed that "almost everybody liked the kids," a sharp contrast to Thomas Bird's harsh comments.

There is a fifth child hiding in the sepia tones and the glaring washout of the white wall. Like the girl, this child does not appear to be among the children chosen by Dexter for the photograph, although he is not on the side due to shyness. The boy appears to have stumbled upon the scene, and his face oddly seems to echo the many modern critics of photographing foreign children. It seems that he wonders who this man is, why he is here, and why he is important. The children are fun to pose with for Dexter, who were in a village that he and his unit only passed through once.³⁹

Some of the most famous photojournalist images from the war depicted children, from Larry Burrow's *LIFE* cover story on the one-legged Vietnamese girl, Tron, to possibly the most infamous image of the whole war, Nick Ut's Pulitzer-winning "Terror of War" (Figure 8), a

³⁷ Appy, *Working Class War*, 135.

³⁸ Santoli, *Everything We Had*, 48.

³⁹ Dexter, interview by Brusseau.

photograph of a young girl sprayed by Napalm, ripping off her clothes in an attempt to escape the agony. Ut's photograph captures a slew of children running in pain after being sprayed with napalm, including a small girl who stripped out of her clothes in an attempt to get the napalm off of her body.

Dexter's and Tazzara's images get close to the Vietnamese spectrums, but George Mikey Mabe's photograph of Vietnamese prisoners looks at them from afar. Mabe submitted a brief memoir covering his time to the Veterans' History Project. He detailed how the weather in Vietnam was unbearable and how interesting he found the Vietnamese people. Mabe also recounts that, before Vietnam, he enjoyed hunting recreationally, but he was not able to hunt after he returned to the United States, because he himself knew what it was like to feel hunted.⁴⁰ Mabe's photographs "group of prisoners" (Figure 9) and "cattle walking around" (Figure 10) similarly blur the line between Vietnamese people and animals. "Cattle walking around" pictures cattle grazing near a destroyed building. The building does not look like it has been destroyed recently; the piles of rubble appear too settled. The area around the building also appears to have moved on: grass has regrown, and cattle feel comfortable enough to walk near it. The building is surrounded by decaying fence posts, which obviously do nothing to keep the cattle in or out. The bottom left corner of the frame is occupied by a strange presence, a detail similar to the tip of one's nose that is easy to forget about. It is probably a box of supplies, belonging to the soldiers, and while the object itself is innocuous, it still adds an ominous feeling to the photograph. Even in pictures of landscape or wildlife, the soldiers still find a way to make their arrival known.

⁴⁰ G. Mikey Mabe "Memoirs of Vietnam" (digital upload, Library of Congress, 2001), 20.

“Group of prisoners” has no corner details; in fact, the energy of the photograph is squeezed into the middle. On the side of the dirt road, there is a fence, far better kept than the one in “cattle walking around,” filled with people. Hordes of bikes rest on the outside of the fence. The caption informs the reader that that these are Vietnamese prisoners. The majority of the prisoners on the left half of the group stand, while the majority on the right half of the group sit. On the side closest to the camera of the standing group, there appear to be two children, which suggests that there could be more dispersed throughout the crowd. Almost all of the prisoners are turned away from the camera except possibly two. One of these individuals is directly to the left of the children, and the other is to the left of the bikes, apparently facing a girl whose ponytail faces the camera.

They appear to be herding the prisoners like they would cattle as they travel across the rural countryside. The composition of these two images is remarkably similar: light sky, dark middleground with huddled beings, bland foreground. Interestingly, the photograph of the prisoners fences the people up like animals, and the photograph of the cattle allows the animals to roam freely.

One soldier, Douglas Anderson, recounted that the closest relationship he ever had with a Vietnamese person was with a VC prisoner. The man only had one hand, so they had to tie him up by his ankles. The soldier realized, however, that the man knew how to use a gun with only one hand. The soldier said he guarded the VC prisoner alone, training his own gun at the prisoner’s head and eying the gun laying ten feet away. The soldier said he made eye contact with the VC and they both knew that the prisoner would take any chance he could to take the gun, kill the soldier, and escape.⁴¹ This intimate relationship likely did not exist between the

⁴¹ Santoli, *Everything We Had*, 68-70.

herd of prisoners in Mabe's image because there would not have been forced one-on-one interaction, but Anderson's story speaks to the omnipresent tension between soldiers and prisoners.

Different soldiers have described a wide array of relationships with the Vietnamese. Some described liking the Vietnamese children, flirting with the Vietnamese women, and hating the Vietnamese men. Others described them as hardworking, if not peculiar, people.⁴² The estranged relationship between American soldiers and the Vietnamese was a result of the cultural divide and the Americans' othering attitudes.

American Presence

The photographs depicting American presence are devoid of Vietnamese people, although the cultural divide is still striking as the Americans try to impose control over a land they know little about. Rather than creating order the Americans appear as artificial implants, either looking entirely out of place in the environment, or altering the environment completely. Edwin Mark Trawczynski's "Soldiers in the Field" (Figure 11) depicts soldiers scattered throughout a field, and James Cortea's "bunkers/hooches" (Figure 12) captures the military completely occupying a field. "Soldiers in the Field" intrigues me because it confuses me. The greenish tint to the image makes the picture more difficult to read than if it were plain grayscale. There is no single focal point in this image, largely because the image lacks variety. From a brief glance, a viewer could even miss the fact that soldiers are in this photograph at all. But upon closer inspection, there appear to be four soldiers. One soldier lays back on his backpack in the bottom left quadrant, and the other three walk in a very spread out line. In the two

⁴² Mabe, "Memoirs of Vietnam," 18.

dimensional planes photograph, the first walking soldier is left and slightly above the sitting soldier, the second is to the right and slightly above, and the third is to the right again. Taking into account depth, however, the first walking soldier appears to be far in the distance, and the other two walking soldiers are slightly closer, although still relatively far from the sitting soldier.

One of the many fascinating aspects of this photograph is that it does not feel like a photograph. In almost all of the other soldiers' photographs, I am acutely aware of the operator's existence, but when I look at this image, I forget. To me it looks like there are only four soldiers in the field, when in reality, there has to be at least a fifth, the one taking the picture.

Photography critic Susan Sontag has suggested that oftentimes in photographs of violent events such as war, the rougher and less professional photographs, feels more real.⁴³ Perhaps that is why I am so drawn into this image; when I squint into the hills in the hazy background, I do not feel like I am trying to make out something in a photograph; I honestly feel as though I am trying to make something out in the distance.

The biggest barrier to fully entering the world of Trawczynski's image is the ambiguity. They could be on a search-and-destroy mission, or they could be doing a routine sweep for mines; either way, they do not know if they will find anything, and we are held in eternal suspense. It could be a moment amidst action, it could be a scouting trip, or they could be standing watch. The image could depict any number of things, but that which draws me to this photograph more than anything does not lie within its frame. Trawczynski served in the Headquarters Company, 2nd Battalion of the 502nd Infantry of the 101st Airborne, the same as Bill. Trawczynski arrived in Vietnam shortly after Bill left, but he is one of two veterans in the online Veterans History Project from Bill's company (the other veteran's file is not digitally

⁴³ Susan Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2003,) 78.

available). Trawczynski was a medic, so it is unlikely that he would have had regular interactions with Bill even if they had been deployed simultaneously, but there is a unique sense of intimacy that I feel with this photograph regardless.

“Bunkers/hooches” has the same greenish tint. From a glance, tents appear to completely cover all of the ground in the photograph, but actually, one tent covers the entire foreground, another tent is right behind it, and the rest of the ground is mostly dirt with scattered buildings and more tents in the background. This campsite seems much more temporary than some of the photographs above, perhaps because these soldiers are deeper in the field.

I have no personal connection to Cortéal’s image like I do Trawczynski’s, but the comparison grounds the latter for me. They pair together in my mind because of how the war interrupts the Vietnamese landscape. Both images present a sea of land. In Trawczynski’s photograph, the grass blends together smoothly only interrupted by black figures: American soldiers. In Cortéal’s photograph, the sea is the tents, which cover the ground. Trees line the distant background, making the tents feel like an unnatural invasion. They are green, but the wrong kind of green. If the Americans were absent from both of these scenes, the images would be serene landscapes. The photographs have the same type of motion that Trawczynski’s has. Both photographs could be tessellations, extending across the entire horizon. Neither is an intimate moment, rather, they are war-painted sunsets.

Upon further inspection, however, “bunkers/hooches” hides an intimate moment. There appears to be one man in this entire photograph, standing just behind the first tent and smoking a cigarette. Unlike “Tazzara with arm on shoulder” where Tazzara holds a cigarette with his teeth, this soldier interacts with his cigarette, holding it to his mouth with his arms folded tightly

against his chest. The juxtaposition of the cigarette in these two images reminds me of a poem by Xandria Phillips, entitled “Reasons for Smoking”:

i.
to preoccupy the mouth
in the presence of men

ii.
a burning tip
is a weapon

iii.
to still the anxiety
in my chest

iv.
a pallet
for my lips to stain

v.
a way to be discreet
in kissing my fingers

vi.
an excuse
to leave

vii.
my own bones
burning

watch their smoke
pour from my
mouth⁴⁴

Admittedly, my association between the sentiment of this poem and the cigarette in these pictures is my own projection, but it feels relevant all the same. Phillips describes cigarettes as a safety blanket, a release from stress, a comfort. Of course, the poem presents protection against male sexual aggression as a significant reason for smoking, but the way Phillips symbolizes

⁴⁴ Xandria Phillips, “Reasons for Smoking,” *Reasons for Smoking* (Seattle: Seattle Review 2017).

cigarettes as a shield or object of power translates almost perfectly to Tazzara's and Cortea's photographs. In Phillips's poem, when she explains "a burning tip / is a weapon", it feels like self-defense. When Tazzara holds the cigarette with his teeth, the cigarette feels like a weapon, but it is used for intimidation. Tazzara wields his cigarette practiced nonchalance. The soldier in Cortea's photograph, however, holds his cigarette tightly to his chest. Just as Phillips uses the cigarette to protect herself from sexual aggression, the soldier appears to smoke to protect himself as well; the cigarette is a release that momentarily protects him from the horrors of war and shield his youth and sense of identity as best he can. With each inhale of a cigarette, the soldier can forget about being in Vietnam. He can "still the anxiety / in [his] chest," and it is a way, rather than "an excuse / to leave" reality behind for a moment. After the cigarette, however, he returns, forced to reconcile with his "own bones / burning".

While the previous two photographs capture complete 'seas,' "101st Airborne soldiers" (Figure 13) captures an environment breaking down. The tents smoothly covered up the field in "bunkers/hooches," and in "Soldiers in the Field," the soldiers only briefly interrupt the field. In "101st Airborne soldiers," however, the Americans have completely destroyed the continuity of nature, with the bones of the forest revealing how destructive their presence actually is. The motif of poles returns to in this image in several forms. The first is the remaining trees in the background. They stand in defiance to the devastation of war, although as the marching soldiers grow nearer, their fate seems sealed, foreshadowed by the dead stalks of trees, the second kind of poles. There seems to be a perfect line separating the living and dead trees, and it appears in the photograph as a diagonal line from the top left of the frame to the bottom right. The bare tree stalks range from perfectly upright to completely twisted. The plant in the middle of the photograph has been violently ripped from the ground; this tree was not killed, it was

mutilated. Although this tree was certainly damaged by the artillery just like all the other trees, its grotesque form still makes it feel like a crime of passion. Significantly, the soldiers only occupy the destroyed part of the forest; destruction is their domain. The American military is not compatible with Vietnam as it is, so they must alter the land to allow for their own existence.

The third kind of pole is the soldiers themselves, and they are an invasive species changing the landscape. Visually, they bridge the living trees and the dead trees: their line spans from the foreground to the background, and while their skin matches the dead plantlife, their clothing matches the living. They are also the force that divides the living and the dead; if they were not in Vietnam, there would be no division.

Wiknik's photographs is deeply reminiscent of this David Kennerly's photograph from a portfolio that won a Pulitzer (Figure 14), or Kennerly's photograph is reminiscent of Wiknik's. Interestingly, the Pulitzer jury saw this photograph as a representation of the loneliness of war, victimizing the soldier as separate from the villainy of his actions.⁴⁵ They saw the soldier as the sympathetic figure in this photograph rather than a force that destroyed the forest. Each bares the skeletal structure of a jungle, the only remnants of an ecosystem. Whereas these soldiers can hike through the wreckage, the wreckage will continue to exist after they leave. For all the similarities, Kennerly's photograph depicts what Wiknik's does not: a pensive moment. In Wiknik's image the soldiers march on, as this is probably neither the first nor the last forest they have destroyed. In Kennerly's photograph, the soldier has nobody to march with. He is perched atop a hill, between dead trees, looking down. His head could be bowed in sadness, regret, or simply exhaustion; regardless, this image has a stillness that Wiknik's does not. Wiknik, as a

⁴⁵ Huebner, *Warrior Image*, 276-278.

soldier, was capturing a moment from his memory, while Kennerly, a photojournalist, was trying to make a statement for a large audience.

The destruction of “101st Airborne soldiers” is dwarfed by George Konig’s “laying down in the sand” (Figure 15). For having possibly the most shocking photograph of my selection, Konig has one of the most unique backgrounds. Konig was born in Budapest, and he lived under the Communist regime until he was 14, when he and his family escaped to Austria during a revolution. His family stayed there until they were able to find a sponsor for them to immigrate to the United States. He said that his family worked hard to fit in the United States and learn English, but they had little difficulty getting used to their new country because, he explained, “It is not hard to get used to good things.” Konig was drafted but as a foreign-born and the last surviving son of his parents, he was never supposed to see combat. However, because people were dying so quickly in Vietnam, he was transferred there. Initially, Konig was assigned to be a photographer for a high-ranking officer in Saigon, but that did not last long, and he was shipped out to the field after three weeks. Of his experience in the field, Konig had three main remarks. First, he said, “When you’re out in the field, there’s no such thing as downtime,” commenting on the fact that they could be mortared or ambushed at any moment. Second, he said that he has never been able to get over his animosity toward the Vietnamese people, particularly communist supporters, because of the stories of the Viet Cong’s terrorist activities and his own experiences of communism. He harbored an anger for the communists, who he believed were only trying to oppress the masses. Third, despite this, the hardest thing for Konig to come to terms with through his struggles with PTSD was the fact that he had killed someone, even if in the moment he had to kill or be killed. On the war as a whole, Konig said that he supported the war but not how it was fought; the United States should have done everything they could to demolish town

by town until the communists gave up.⁴⁶ In “laying down in the sand,” Konig casually leans back on a sky blue towel with his left leg bent, and his right heel resting on his leftfoot toes. His feet appear to extend slightly beyond the towel. To his right, there is a white shoe, presumably his, and a white towel, possibly belonging to a woman whose heels lie next to it. There is a pile of more things, possibly more shoes, possibly miscellaneous beach supplies, to Konig’s right. Konig himself is completely calm, sporting a thin mustache and black sunglasses. If this were the extent of the photograph, I would have moved on without much thought.

That is not the extent of the photograph. The entire top half of the image tells a completely different story from an entirely different world. There is a proliferating plume of black smoke so opaque it seems to be completely solid. At first glance, the building directly left of Konig’s head appears to be the source of the smoke, but there is not fire. The smoke is probably coming from farther back within the treeline, possibly the result of bombing. Regardless, purely for its visual aesthetic, the sky could by its own phototgraph. The sky blue is the backdrop for a war—a war between natural clouds and black smoke. The black smoke is much stronger, and wins easily. The smoke again reminds me of Phillip’s poem, this time the last stanza: “watch their smoke / pour from my / mouth”. While there is no cigarette in this image, this is the smoke from the military’s exhale, leaving behind a smoky aftermath. The soldier watches the smoke of the military’s agenda pour from his own body.

This image is striking because of its intentionality. Trawczynski’s “Soldiers in the Field” and Cortea’s “bunkers/hooches” documented Americans in Vietnamese landscapes, The photographs of the field and tents were probably documentary landscapes, and Wiknik’s “101st Airborne soldiers” captures an exhausting moment in which American soldiers routinely carry

⁴⁶ George Konig, interview by Eliseo Rodriguez, *Veterans History Project*, Library of Congress, 2005.

out destructive orders. Konig's photograph, on the other hand, is actively violent and disrespectful. Perhaps there is a more complex story behind it, but to me it appears that Konig has no regard for the destruction in the background. The caption even neglects to mention the column of black smoke, meaning this was either too common, or Konig didn't care about it, or both.

In light of Konig's backstory, one can understand Konig's anger toward communism, but it is still difficult to disregard his disregard for the destruction behind him. Similarly, one can understand Dexter's fascination with the Vietnamese people and animals in "Vietnamese riding a buffalo" and "Dexter in jungle"—even if they are objectifying—or even American soldiers' distrust of the Vietnamese in light of the challenges identifying the enemy, but one cannot excuse atrocities and massacres committed by American soldiers.

Many soldiers, like Bill, had no say in whether or not they would go to Vietnam, so it is unfair to categorically blame all soldiers for the destructive military presence. Even those who enlisted were only following orders, so is it the soldiers' fault that the military used them to attempt to dominate the Vietnamese people and jungle? Each photograph in this section (save Konig's "laying in the sand") beach picture has an element of routine, either marching through a jungle or moving through the field or setting up camp. The Americans were like an invasive species, poorly suited to the Southeast Asian culture and climate, and realistically they had no business there. However, the majority of the soldiers were barely beyond boyhood, forced to take in the exotic land as they saw it and moved across it.

Youth

The final category, youth, was difficult to articulate. I originally called these photographs “hyperpersonal” based on an immediate personal relationship I developed with these photographs, but I renamed it in the interest of clarity. These images opened a uniquely private window into the moment captured; I soon realized that they revealed not only the humanity of each of these soldiers, but they revealed the remnants of boyhood innocence. These images provide a unique lens into the humanity of the soldiers. Yes, they were destructive and lacked regard as other images have shown, but they were young. Many, like Bill, were forced to be there.

Jungle almost fills the entirety of “Tazzara reclining” (Figure 16). There are two empty plastic bags in the bottom right of the frame, and their careless placement gives off the same recklessness for Vietnam’s future after the war as do Wiknik’s forest scene. Tazzara lays on a hammock, and it appears as though he is trying to stretch out, but there is not enough space for him to do so, so his legs are slightly bent. The position of his arms project a confident man resting, but his face gives him away; he has the same nervous almost-smile that Bill has in his military portrait. He shows his teeth, but it is not a genuine smile. His face’s boyish chub reveals what he truly is: an American boy in the Vietnamese jungle. Suddenly his arms appear tense, and he does not look comfortable. He is clearly posing for the camera, projecting a feeling that he in fact reaches for: confidence and comfort. Here Tazzara is swallowed up by the surrounding jungle as only his face and arms stand out against the overwhelming green. The image both captures the beauty of the landscape and reveals Tazzara as an unnatural presence. Everything blends in with the green jungle except for his white face and arms.

I imagine this photograph was taken early on during Tazzara's tour. As Tazzara poses as though he is at home in the jungle and he is conquering it, but he is not convincing, and he is left wrestling with his nerves. His body is not fully stretched out, and it appears that he is keeping comfort in the closeness to the fetal position. His pack, the dark mass just behind him, looks heavier than he, calling to mind Tim O'Brien's memorable description of the weight of the bags while "humping." It feels as though the pack, even though it is next to Tazzara, is still pulling at him, as though he is not resting on top of the hammock because of gravity, but because the weight of the bag and Vietnam itself are dragging him toward the ground. With this thought, the tension in his face intensifies, and for a moment I see Bill transposed over Tazzara, as Vietnam pulls at him and takes parts of him away that he will never get back.

"Tazzara reclining," "Playing around the tank" (Figure 17), and "Playing cards" (Figure 18) are striking because they highlight a loss of innocence. The soldiers' attitude toward the tanks, is oddly casual to a civilian spectator. Earl served in a technology-heavy unit in charge of sweeping roads and fields for land mines. Even downtime activities, the soldiers were frequently bored, because there was very little to do except listen to the military radio and play cards. The soldiers were pretty serious most of the time, but Earl remembered finding a Buddhist temple as one of the only times he felt like he could act "goofy" while he was in Vietnam. About halfway through his tour, Earl's Armed Personnel Carrier was hit by a rocket propeller grenade, and he was the only survivor. Reflecting on the war years later, he choked back tears commenting, "War is just senseless as far as I'm concerned." When people asked him whether or not he had changed while in Vietnam, he would tell them that the war did not change him, rather it took his innocence away from him.⁴⁷ In "Playing around the tank," they have clearly driven the tank all

⁴⁷ Larry B. Earl, interview by Angela McLaughlin, *Veterans History Project*, Library of Congress 15 November 2005.

around the area, as tire tracks cover the entire ground. The ground is brown, the tank is dark green, the trees on the hill in the background is dark green, and the soldiers' skin is light brown. The soldier to the left of the tank seems to blend in with the dirt, and he flexes his arms. The other men are stationary, but they do not look awkward or uncomfortable; this image looks like a movie still.

“Playing cards” is entirely humanizing, which is odd given that a tank constitutes the majority of the background. Four soldiers are in the midst of a card game, only one of them, hidden behind the soldier with his sleeves rolled up, fits in the shade of the tank, indicating that it is the middle of the day. The man in the shade smiles looking at his cards, and the man to the left with glasses stares intently at the cards on the ground. The shirtless man is in an awkward sitting position indicating that he is probably in the process of adjusting or putting a card down. The man with his sleeves rolled up has pit stains. Behind them, there is another large tank and two shirtless soldiers talking. There are clearly enough people with them that they have formed a variety of relationships and have split into smaller groups.

The concept of Earl and his friends were “playing” around a tank is odd. Violence and weapons have become so normalized to them that the tank is not even the focal point of “Playing cards”—the card game is. While the violent connotations of a tank are absent in Earl's images, Horst Faas' Pulitzer winning photograph (Figure 19) reminds the viewer that war is not casual. A father holds his dead child as South Vietnamese Army Rangers look down at him; the child had died as the soldiers pursued guerrillas. No one here is “playing” around the tank because war is not a game. There is no card game; there is a man holding a dead child while soldiers look on. The soldiers are the same shade of gray as the tank, and it almost looks as though they are a part of the machine; they are visually as they are actually an extension of the weapon.

I compare these images not to paint Earl as a villain, but to reflect on the soldiers' desensitization. Earl's photographs represent not only war's monotony between fighting, but also the ways in which war forced soldiers to grow up. The boys are still young enough to "play", and yet, they have witnessed death.

In "Playing around at a Buddhist Temple" (Figure 20), Earl and some of his fellow soldiers pose on top of an abandoned Buddhist temple. The man on the left straddles two roofs while posing his arms like Egyptian art, and the man on the right similarly straddles two roofs, although his right leg appears to be taking a step up, and his arms seem to be mimicking a surfer. The soldier in the middle is elevated higher than the other two, and he seems to be attempting the yoga tree pose.

There are two sides to this image. The first is three young men blowing off steam and enjoying the moments between violence (Earl recalled this day as one of the only times he was able to feel "goofy.") They are playing just as they did next to the tank, but this time they have found shade and things to climb on; this photograph captures an oasis. Earl and his fellow soldiers continue to play in this photograph, although the idea of "playing" in war feels ridiculous. So many accounts of the war in Vietnam are filled with violence and death that this photograph hardly feels as though it could come from the same place. Similarly to the image of Tazzara casually waiting for his laundry, these images suggest a common monotony, enough that soldiers wanted to break it. On the other side, this image feels unintentionally disrespectful. Imagine looking at an old Buddhist temple and instead seeing a jungle gym. They may have been disrespecting the eastern religion, or they may have been so removed from the Vietnamese people and culture at that point that it did not seem like a transgressive act. I doubt they would

have jumped around an old Christian church, or maybe war brought out the child in them, craving to climb and play on whatever they could find.

Earl's casual attitude toward weapons contrasts with Tazzara's boyish excitement for them in "Holding M-79 grenade launcher" (Figure 21). Tazzara stands in what looks like a trench and aims the grenade launcher up toward the camera. The trench has been dug recently, as the roots still stick out from the sides. Rocks lay scattered behind Tazzara's head. Tazzara's hair is unkempt, as his bangs hang shaggily over his forehead and he has a thin beard lining the edge of his face. He looks young here, shortened by the pit he stands in, holding his arms in close, his ears sticking out and too large for his head, and his two front teeth protruding from his mouth. The top of his shirt is darker than the rest of it, probably wet with sweat.

The tension in this photograph is the nervousness Tazzara hides in this pose. I am saddened by the tension in this photograph. On the one hand, Tazzara appears to be showing off his gun, playing tough for his friends. On the other hand, the grenade launcher dwarfs him, as he appears too young to be holding the weapon. It is impossible to believe that this is the same person as in "Tazzara with arm on shoulder." In that photo, Tazzara dominates the unknown man, but in this one, the weapon dominates him. The hole in the middle of the weapon is a deep, unnatural black, just like Tazzara's cigarette is an unnatural white. That darkness is my punctum for this image. I imagine it swallowing up Tazzara's youth and innocence and spitting out the man with the cigarette, the inner struggle between these two identities plaguing Tazzara upon his return to civilian life. I know that Bill was a truck driver, but I wonder if he had to kill anybody. I am sure he did based on the episodes of posttraumatic stress when he returned; I wonder if he lost his innocence before or after he killed someone else. At what point was the enemy dehumanized?

Nobody is putting on a show in Tazzara's "Three men" (Figure 22), as four soldiers (curiously not three) make their way through thick foliage. At first glance the fauna seems to be dead or dying, but in reality the color has faded with the age of the photograph. The dense green at the bottom of the image indicates that the foliage is probably as thick as it is in the photograph of Tazzara on the hammock. One soldier walks away from the camera, disappearing into the leaves. Another squats down and pulls his helmet down by the rim; neither of these men's faces is visible to the camera. The soldier on the far left seems to be looking toward the soldier walking into the bush, and only the side of his cheek is visible. The only facial expression visible to the camera is the man looking down, eyes closed, holding a clenched fist near his mouth. The scene does not feel posed, and the emotions feel authentic. The strands of grass drape over the soldiers, visually swallowing them up.

For me, the punctum of this image is the soldier whose hand is clenched in a fist. The tension of the image exists in the sinews on the back of his hand, just barely visible through the grainy resolution. His eyes are closed like his hand, sealing himself off from the viewer. It almost looks as though he is praying with one hand, while the other holds something that is difficult to make out. What does this moment mean to him? Is he frustrated, is he scared, or is this a more lighthearted gesture? Regardless, because his is the only one visible to the camera, his facial expression speaks for the entire group. This snapshot feels so connected to the continuum of time around it: when the soldier on the ground stands up, when the soldier with the clenched fist relaxes his hand and opens his eyes (perhaps it was only a blink), when the rest of the men catch up to the soldier walking forward. As the photograph's color fades, however, so does this moment return to that continuum.

The photographs from the American soldiers are telling of their unfamiliarity with Vietnam and reveal the nervous boy that hid under their masculine uniform. They highlight the more mundane moments of Vietnam, which serves to humanize war to a degree. The mundane, however, was not what sold magazines as television news coverage was beginning to dominate print.

In no way is this another project to define soldiers for them, rather, I hope I have achieved several aims. Firstly, I hope I have given a mouthpiece to at least a handful of soldiers whose stories have not been closely considered as pieces of America's war in Vietnam until now. Secondly, I have tried to demonstrate the seemingly innocuous othering and fetishizing of the exotic Vietnamese people and places that was at the root of Americans' racial attitudes toward the Vietnamese people and feelings of superiority and overconfidence throughout the war. Thirdly, this project serves as another piece to my family history puzzle, and I have found it a comforting experience. I have only heard the horrors of Bill's experience in Vietnam, and assumed as much from photojournalism at the time. The photographs submitted by the veterans, however, remind me that there were breaks in in the terror. I do not necessarily think that these breaks relieved anything for Bill or anyone else in the grand scheme of their respective tours, but I hope that Bill was able to get lost in the strategy of a card game for a moment, or slouch impatiently while waiting for his laundry. These moments were like blinks—barely conscious, barely remembered—but they should play a role when we remember the war. There were real individuals on both sides, all changed forever by a yearlong tour or a decades-long fight for independence.

List of Photographs:

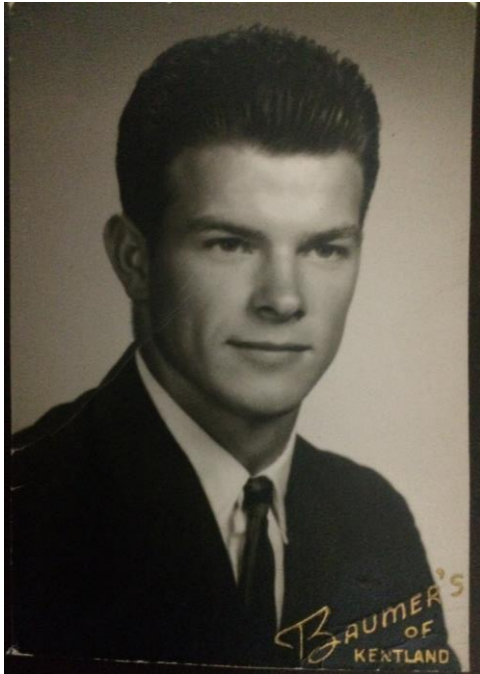


Figure 1: Unknown Photographer, *Bill's Senior Portrait*, c. 1966.



Figure 2: Unknown Photographer, *Bill's Soldier Portrait*, c. 1967.



Figure 3: Walter James Dexter, *Vietnamese riding a water buffalo somewhere in Vietnam, c. 1968*. Library of Congress.



Figure 4: Walter James Dexter, *Dexter in jungle with water buffaloes in the background, Vietnam, c. 1968*. Library of Congress.



Figure 5: David Eugene Tazzara, *Color digital print, Tazzara leaning on pole while waiting for woman laundering his clothes, Duc Pho Village, Vietnam, c. 1969.* Library of Congress.



Figure 6: David Eugene Tazzara, *B&W digital print, Tazzara with arm on shoulder of unknown man, Vietnam, c. 1969.* Library of Congress.



Figure 7: Walter James Dexter, *Dexter posing with Vietnamese kids, Vietnam, c. 1968-69.* Library of Congress.



Figure 8: Nick Ut, *Terror of War, 1972.* Associated Press.



Figure 9: George Mikey Mabe, *A black and white print of group of prisoners in a barbed wire fenced area, Vietnam, c. 1966.* Library of Congress.



Figure 10: George Mikey Mabe, *A black and white print of cattle walking around a demolished building, Vietnam, c. 1966.* Library of Congress.



Figure 11: Edwin Mark Trawczynski, *B&W, Soldiers in the field, Vietnam, c. 1969*. Library of Congress.



Figure 12: James Carl Cortea, *FSB Apollo, Binh Duong Province, South Vietnam, bunkers/hoovhes at FSB Apollo/pictured is one of our Cambodian Scouts who worked with C Company, Mike Platoon, 1st Battalion, 28th Infantry "Black Lions," 1st Infantry Division, c. 1969*. Library of Congress.



Figure 13: Arthur B. Wiknik, Jr., *101st Airborne soldier working their way across an area blasted by artillery, Vietnam, c. 1969.* Library of Congress.



Figure 14: David Hume Kennerly, 1971. United Press International.



Figure 15: George Konig, *Veteran laying down on the sand, Saigon, Vietnam, c. 1967*. Library of Congress.



Figure 16: David Eugene Tazzara, *Color digital print, Tazzara reclining on ground while on break, Landing Zone Bronco, Vietnam, c. 1969*. Library of Congress.



Figure 17: Larry B. Earl, *Playing around the tank, Vietnam, c. 1970*. Library of Congress.



Figure 18: Larry B. Earl, *Playing cards, Vietnam, c. 1970*. Library of Congress.



Figure 19: Horst Faas, 1964. Associated Press.



Figure 20: Larry B. Earl, *Playing around at a Buddhist Temple*, c. 1970. Library of Congress.



Figure 21: David Eugene Tazzara, *B&W digital print, Tazzara holding M-79 grenade launcher, Vietnam, c. 1969.* Library of Congress.



Figure 22: David Eugene Tazzara, *Color digital print, three men in uniform walking in tall brush, Vietnam. Text on photograph: "In the bush with recon", c. 1969.* Library of Congress.

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