

WINTER SOLDIERS

BY MICHAEL PAUL McCUSKER

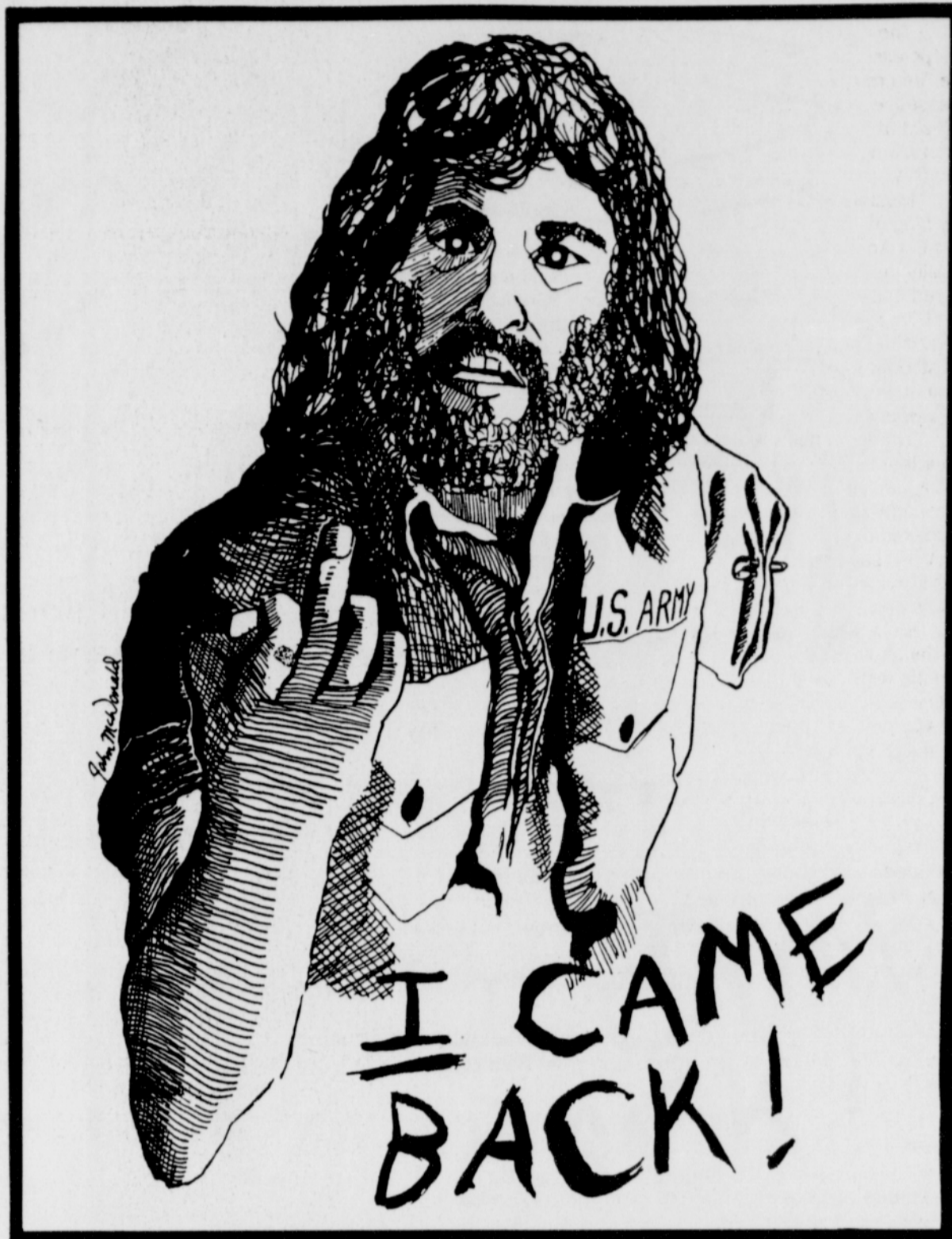
"I am sick and tired of war. Its glory is all moonshine. It is only those who have never fired a shot nor heard the shrieks and groans of the wounded who cry aloud for blood, more vengeance, more desolation, and destruction. War is cruel and you cannot refine it. War is hell."

~U.S. ARMY GENERAL WILLIAM TECUMSEH SHERMAN

"I think most of the antiwar sentiment in this country is becoming anti-military sentiment and I think this is a very dangerous state of mind."

~U.S. ARMY GENERAL WILLIAM C. WESTMORELAND

"If you were defeated, you were defeated by yourselves," General Vo Nguyen Giap said to the French after he accepted their surrender at Dien Bien Phu fifty years ago in May 1954. He might have said the same of the Americans 21 years later when they retreated from Vietnam in 1975. He would not have meant the antiwar movement that is often blamed for the loss of the war but the arrogant, stupid and ultimately disastrous political and military policies and strategies that the antiwar movement was originated to counteract. Veterans of the war joined the movement — they were, as Thomas Paine would probably have said of them, "winter soldiers" bitterly in contrast to "sunshine patriots."



JOHN McDONALD

At some point in time, although the killing did not stop, the war in Vietnam was declared over. The last American soldiers came home. One of them wrote on a wall at Saigon's Tan Son Nhut airport: "Will the last American please turn out the light at the end of the tunnel."

There never was a light, only a long tunnel into which millions disappeared, among them nearly 60,000 Americans. Another 300,000 were wounded, thousands of them returning without legs, arms or genitals; thousands more were paralyzed, physically and psychologically.

They came back singly at first, random leaves scattered by military winds throughout the country. For the greater part of the decade of massive escalation that swallowed American troops into the Southeast Asia war, hundreds of thousands of young men went to war and returned daily almost without notice.

The dead and wounded returned unseen. The wounded overflowed U.S. military hospitals in Asia and Europe, the most critically injured eventually flown to stateside hospitals near their homes where possible, but more likely they wound up in VA hospitals too poorly funded and understaffed to adequately care for them. The dead came back and invisibly crossed the country in the mail cars of trains or baggage compartments of airplanes.

Rarely have the soldiers of an American army slunk as quietly back home from a war, desiring for the most part to be left in obscurity. In previous wars they came back to parades and exultant crowds — even the defeated Confederate army, broken and tattered, maintained a bitter-noble pride that hardly gave ground to Northern carpetbaggers. Veterans of wars similar to Vietnam — the so-called Philippine Insurrection, the Caribbean 'Banana Wars' — never felt a need to justify their participation in unpopular wars as did many Vietnam veterans. Although the vets were probably never spit upon, the continuing popularity of the myth that they were is a template of Vietnam's unpopularity as well as open scorn for its soldiers.

Five Presidents tried to keep the Vietnam War from upsetting the citizenry. They promised guns and butter while taking the country's sons and money. They lied about the war from the beginning, when the French fell at Dien Bien Phu in May 1954 until the fall of Saigon on the last day of April 1975.

Night after night the American public was numbed to the war by the artifice of television news. Yet few ever saw any of their war dead — the sight of dead or wounded Americans was considered bad for morale. Death was edited out, at least

for U.S. dead: the war was computed on body counts of dead Vietnamese.

People who should have known better often asked, "Why are so many young guys in wheelchairs?"

The families knew, but they could never quite relate to exactly what happened to their healthy sons who were suddenly dead or crippled. They knew that one cross among the hundreds of thousands of identical white crosses at national military cemeteries such as Arlington or Punchbowl covered the corpse of their kin; they knew one of the inert bodies among the hundreds of thousands lying in row upon row of hospital beds was one of theirs. But that was all they knew. Even the older veterans from other wars could never quite understand what happened to these young men who had returned addicted to heroin, who grew beards and longhair and often took to the streets in opposition to the war they had fought in.

When Richard Nixon countered the growing dissent against the war with his Vietnamization program, diffusing the protest by pulling out Americans and leaving Vietnamese to die for U.S. foreign policy, the troops came back in greater numbers.

At first ceremonies were held for public consumption. Starved military units stood at attention with their banners in front of television cameras, visible proof that America's young men were on the way home. There was a brief flurry of interest, which settled down until the spectacle of the freed POWs was celebrated to justify the entire policy of 20 years at war — taking into account America's involvement since the capitulation of the French in 1954.

Only once in all those years did the veterans become visible enough to be heard, and it was in dissent against the war when a thousand combat survivors gathered in Washington, D.C. in the spring of 1971 and hurled their war medals at Congress.

Vietnam veterans have been pitied more as pliant fools or for pathological tendencies than they are honored in the old traditional manner. Raised voices insist Vietnam veterans are either heroes and patriots or butchers and babykillers. They returned to a country that did not understand them — a society that was embarrassed and disturbed by them. They were comparable in that sense to the draft resisters who chose prison or exile rather than fight in the war, and to the deserters who either refused to be shipped overseas or chose exile after they returned.

Ironically it was the veterans, not the five Presidential administrations which created and continued the war for almost two decades, who were held responsible for the tragic debacle in Southeast Asia. They were shunned as the nation's scapegoats as if they were personally responsible for the disastrous policies and failed strategies that lost the war.

The reality of Vietnam's consequences goes beyond the suffering of its soldiers or the Vietnamese with whom they are so intimately linked in terror, shame and death. Vietnam veterans do not represent a lost war so much as they are the nation's conscience in an affair in which the nation refused for too long to act morally against a pervasive and systematic destruction of a people and a culture considered inferior and of merely strategic consideration, and as a result eroded much of its own integrity.

The Vietnam War was ambiguous and off-center. Like Korea it was a low-stake war, more bluff than real cards in a worldwide Cold War that threatened nuclear oblivion, though hundreds of thousands of real persons perished and anonymous millions were handicapped for life, psychologically as well as physically. The U.S. lost the war long before it ever committed its armies. It was the wrong Rubicon, the wrong dream of empire in a world weary of empires. The war unearthed a deadly rot at the core of the nation's history, and its corrupt and defeated consequences continue to haunt an America once again falsely drawn into a war by its leaders.

In societies that wish to quickly forget a war or obscure its purpose, surviving soldiers are more apparent in their grim invisibility. Returning soldiers are carriers of the disease of conscience and are more likely to be shunned rather than embraced. Many retreat into alcohol and drugs, react violently and bitterly to criticism; they are restless and are often unable to hold a job or maintain a romance. A few openly repudiate the war in which they fought.

Vietnam veterans were discouraged from revealing themselves if they wished to reintegrate into the hostile yet continually oblivious society they attempted to defend in a far off part of the world that was claimed to be of strategic as well as ideological necessity to the United States. Soon enough the propaganda was revealed as sham, yet few actively reflected the slowly growing public disaffection with the war. The larger population preferred to distance itself through self-hypnotic (also drug induced) numbness as well as repudiate an antiwar movement that defied authority to protest the continued murder and (as a number of people began to believe) the eco/genocide of Vietnamese life and culture.

A small but significant number of Vietnam veterans organized to stop the war, which immediately triggered a pro-war military and political jihad. Neither pro-war or antiwar initially accepted or acknowledged the Vietnam Veterans Against the War. The antiwar accused the veterans of indiscriminate murder and of being pro-fascist personalities; they originally condemned the veterans as 'baby killers', an unforgiving phrase the veterans have not forgiven. The rightwing, particularly such established veterans groups as the American Legion and the Veterans of Foreign Wars, assailed the VVAW as traitors and/or as veteran impersonators.

Each opposition to the Vietnam War had its own logic and internal history. For most antiwar veterans it was sympathy for Vietnamese and guilt in assisting killing them — yet some felt the war should be ended because they believed that all of Vietnam was not worth the lost life of one American. Regardless of their reasons for opposing the war they fought in, the general opinion of dissenting veterans was as turncoats or at the very least as communist dupes who jeopardized American troops in Vietnam (from the pro-war Right), and genociders (from the antiwar Left), though both attitudes were to change. For every veteran who made known his or her protest against the war, perhaps 10 or 100 were in quiet sympathy.

