

# JAVA & GI JOE

## A NEW COFFEEHOUSE MOVEMENT?

BY TOD ENSIGN



GARY MARTIN

## HOW GI RESISTANCE CHANGED HISTORY

BY PAUL ROCKWELL

When actors Jane Fonda and Donald Sutherland organized an antiwar review, touring U.S. military bases and towns around the world, the GI rebellion against the war in Vietnam was already in full force. In one theatrical episode, evoking laughter and applause from thousands of soldiers and Marines, Fonda played the part of an aide to President Richard Nixon.

"Richard," she exclaims, "There's a terrible demonstration going on outside."

Nixon replies, "Oh, there's always a demonstration going on outside."

Fonda: "But Richard. This one is completely out of control. They're storming the White House."

"Oh. I think I better call out the 3rd Marines," Nixon cried.

"You can't, Richard," says Fonda.

"Why not?" says Nixon.

She answers, "because they ARE the 3rd Marines!"

Archival footage of the Fonda tour appears in David Zeiger's new film, *Sir, No Sir*.

*Sir, No Sir*, the untold story of the GI movement to end the war in Vietnam, is a documentary. It's not a work of nostalgia. It's an activist film, and it comes at a time when GI resistance to current war is spreading throughout the United States. There are more than 100 films — fiction and nonfiction — about the war in Vietnam. Not one deals seriously with the most pivotal events of the time — the antiwar actions of GIs within the military.

The three-decade blackout of GI resistance is not due to any lack of evidence. Information about the resistance has always been available. According to the Pentagon, more than 500,000 incidents of desertion took place between 1966 and 1977. Officers were fragged. Entire units refused to enter battle.

Large social movements create their own "committees of correspondence" — communication systems beyond the control of power-holders and police authority. Despite prison sentences, police spies, agent provocateurs, vigilante bombing of their offices, coffeehouses and underground papers sprung up in the dusty, often remote towns that surrounded U.S. military bases throughout the world. "Just about every base in the world had an underground paper," Director Zeiger tells us in *Mother Jones*.

When the first coffeehouse opened in Columbia, South Carolina, near Fort Jackson, an average of 600 GIs visited each week. Moved by the courage and audacity of soldiers for peace, civilians raised funds to help operate the coffeehouses and to provide legal defense.

When local proprietors, like Tyrell Jewelers near Fort Hood, fleeced GIs, GI boycotts were common. At one point, the Department of Defense tripled its purchase of non-union products in order to break the United Farm Workers (UFW) boycott. American GIs, many from the fields and barrios of California, immediately joined the UFW pickets. Mocking signs appeared on military bases saying, "Officers Buy Lettuce."

A counterculture blossomed inside the military. Affinity groups, like "The Buddies" and "The Freaks" were formed. Afros, rock and soul music, bracelets and beads, the use of peace signs and clenched fists — a culture antithetical to the totalitarian culture of military life — proliferated. Prison riots in stockades, from Fort Dix to the Marine brig in Da Nang, were common by 1970.

In response to a detested recruitment slogan — "Fun, Travel, Adventure" — GIs named one periodical "FTA," which meant, "Fuck the Army." When GIs ceased to cooperate with superiors, the military lost control of culture and communication. Military attacks on GI rights — the right to hold meetings, to read papers, to think for themselves, to resist illegal orders — did not subdue the growing anti-military movement. Repression actually widened the resistance.

Like Pablo Paredes, Kevin Benderman, Kelly Dougherty, Camilo Mejia — to name a few war resisters of our time — the GI resisters of the 1960s and 1970s showed incredible courage. Pvt. David Samas, one of the Fort Hood 3, who refused to serve in Vietnam, said in one impassioned speech: "We have not been scared. We have not been in the least shaken from our paths. Even if physical violence is used against us, we will fight back. The GI should be reached somehow. He doesn't want to fight. He has no reason to risk his life. And the peace movement is dedicated to his safety."

In July 1970, forty combat officers sent a letter to the commander-in-chief. If the war continues, they wrote, "Young Americans in the military will simply refuse en masse to cooperate." That's exactly what happened. Nothing is so fearful to power-holders as non-cooperation. In 1971, even the *Armed Forces Journal* published an article by a former Marine Colonel, entitled, "The Collapse of the Armed Forces."

A point was reached when the resistance became infectious, almost unstoppable. It spread from barracks to aircraft carriers, from Army stockades and Navy brigades into the conservative military towns where GIs were stationed. Even elite colleges like West Point were affected by revolt. Thousands of defiant soldiers went to prison. Thousands went into exile in Canada and Sweden.

In the end the GI antiwar movement — enlisted youth, draftees, poor kids from ghettos, farms and barrios — paralyzed the biggest death machine of modern times. In short, people power altered the course of history. (The book *Soldiers in Revolt* by David Cortright makes an excellent companion to *Sir, No Sir*.)

*Sir, No Sir* is organized around the testimony of prominent war resisters. Yes, there are a lot of talking heads in *Sir, No Sir*. But their revelations, backed with images and footage of rebellion, are unforgettable. We meet Donald Duncan, the decorated member of the Green Berets, who resigned in defiance in 1963 after 15 months of service in Vietnam. His article in *Ramparts*, "I Quit," generated great excitement in the student movement.

We also meet Howard Levy, the Green Beret doctor who refused to use medical practice as a political tactic in war. His court martial caused a huge impact on GI and civilian consciousness. The troops supported him.

"When the court martial began on base," he tells us on film, "it was the most remarkable thing when hundreds and hundreds would hang out of the windows of the barracks and give me the V-sign, or give me the clenched fist. Something had changed here, something very important was happening."

That something was GI revolt. Thousands of separate, individual acts or moral defiance eventually merged into a collective movement with a specific goal: end the war.

*Sir, No Sir* is not a preachy film. Zeiger does not lecture; he tells a story. Yet we cannot afford to miss the built-in lesson from the eventual triumph of the GI resistance, a lesson that goes against media ideology and conventional wisdom. In the words of George Lakey, "People power is simply more powerful than military power. Nothing is more important for today's activists to know than this: the foundation of political rule is the compliance of the people, not violence. People power is more powerful than violence. The sooner we act on that knowledge, the sooner the U.S. empire can be brought down."

Of course, times have changed. The 1960s are over. And while every generation determines its own destiny in its own way, while history itself is but "a light on the stern" — it is still true that "The spirit of the people is greater than man's technology."

*Sir, No Sir* is a work of hope.

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One of the greatest achievements of the Vietnam antiwar movement was its creation of a GI coffeehouse and counseling network. The first coffeehouse was opened outside Fort Jackson, South Carolina, in late 1967, two-and-a-half years after American troops invaded Vietnam. Within weeks, hundreds of GIs had visited during their off-duty hours. Over the next year, similar projects sprang up outside 20 other major U.S. bases.

These projects embodied the "countercultural" spirit of the times. Sex, psychedelic drugs, and rock&roll coexisted with a strong antiwar message. Civilian activists, mostly recruited from the antiwar movement, worked in tandem with active-duty GIs, some of whom had just returned from Vietnam. At some projects, the soldiers played a leading role in setting political goals, providing counseling and putting out the antiwar newspaper that was a staple of every coffeehouse project.

Today, antiwar organizers are again discussing how active-duty GIs can be recruited to play a more active part in the struggle against the war. A Le Moyne College/Zogby International survey of soldiers fighting in Iraq, released in February, found that 72% of them wanted to be withdrawn within a year, while 29% favored immediate withdrawal.

Organizers from Citizen Soldier, a GI/veterans rights advocacy group, recently met with antiwar veterans and GIs in Fayetteville, North Carolina, home to Fort Bragg, where 40,000 combat troops are stationed. They discussed the prospects for establishing a coffeehouse and counseling project near the base — the largest in the Eastern United States. Their hope is that a successful pilot project at Bragg could stimulate the creation of similar efforts at other key posts.

Both the U.S. military and American society have experienced enormous change since the Vietnam era. Foremost is the transformation of a conscript-driven military to one that is entirely composed of "volunteers." This has made the armed forces much less representative of America as a whole.

One of the primary reasons why advocates of an "all-volunteer" military wanted to junk the draft was their belief that it fueled much of the antiwar opposition — especially among young people. When one compares the size and intensity of today's movement against the war in Iraq with that of the Vietnam War, this analysis appears to be accurate.

The transition to a volunteer force has had two other significant consequences. One, women were integrated into most military jobs, except for the infantry and armor. Today, every sixth soldier is female, except in the Marine Corps. Second, the shrinkage of active-duty force levels, which became necessary once competitive wages were being paid, has meant that reservists and Guard troops must shoulder a much greater combat burden when the military deploys into combat. Today, one out of three GIs serving in Iraq is a reservist. These soldiers are older, have family obligations and are less accustomed to the rigors of military life.

These demographic changes are central to any discussion of how a coffeehouse project could attract the participation of GIs today. During Vietnam, the average low-ranking soldier was paid less than \$300 a month. They lived in austere barracks and ate their meals in dingy chowhalls. These conditions made an off-base coffeehouse seem attractive as an off-duty refuge from the tedium of the "green machine" and its grinding routines.

Today, half of all soldiers are married and many have children. Their relatively good pay and benefits allow them to buy expensive cars and vans and many choose Applebee's and Mickey D's over the chowhall.

To counter serious problems with recruitment and retention, the Pentagon now offers a series of robust bonuses that range from \$10,000 to \$40,000, payable over the life of an enlistment hitch. Elite "Delta Force" troops can get up to \$100,000 if they'll sign for another tour. (A note to those who believe that recruiting shortfalls may force a reinstatement of the draft: the Pentagon has shown that it will spend whatever it takes to induce [bribe?] low-income youth to fill its combat slots.)

One of the main attractions of the Vietnam-era coffeehouses was that GIs identified them with the "countercultural" changes that were sweeping America at the time. Psychedelic paraphernalia and drugs fanned the latent anti-authoritarianism of soldiers. This, in turn, sparked challenges to all forms of authority — sexual mores, gender roles, social conventions and the military's vaunted chain of command. One key demand of the American Servicemen's (sic) Union was "an end to sir-ing and saluting." Explicit antiwar organizing, while important, was only one item on the project's agenda.

Popular culture today is much more diffuse, blending many different strands: rap, punk, heavy metal, Goth, hippie, traditional rock&roll, and country-western. In lifestyle, openly gay couples (not on a military base, however!) co-exist with super-straight engaged couples who flaunt their pre-marital chastity.

Organizers concluded that a coffeehouse/counseling project could succeed in attracting significant numbers of soldiers assuming that it provided internet access, good java, and plenty of free parking. Many young soldiers today quest for intellectual, cultural and political fulfillment, as they always have. A coffeehouse that combines an alternative bookstore with a lively mix of free musical performances, stand-up comedy and poetry (with some political speechifying thrown in) could become highly popular with many GIs.

A number of important questions remain. Who will finance the cost of one, not to mention a dozen such coffeehouse projects today? Certainly GIs can be expected to provide more than a small portion of the budget. During Vietnam, the United Servicemen's (sic) Support Fund (ISSF), raised substantial sums, which it then parceled out to the local projects to help them pay the rent and staff salaries. Nothing like the ISSF exists today, but something along these lines will be needed if these projects are to thrive. Important first steps have been taken, but much more needs to be done.

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