



Unidentified servicemember, Battle of Hue, February 1968. Stars and Stripes

Key battles in the war

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tars and Stripes asked three experts on Vietnam to each compile a list of the 10 key battles in the war. Seems straightforward? Not so much. Like the war itself, the lists are complex. They include ground actions; politically significant efforts and battles that represent the experience of the men and women who were there. The battles are listed in order of significance, from the most important to the least important.

1. Ap Bac – Jan. 2, 1963.

After years of training by U.S. military advisers, the young Army of the Republic of Vietnam attempted its first large-scale operation against forces of the North Vietnamese-supported National Liberation Front, also known as the Viet Cong, near the village of Ap Bac in Dinh Tuong province, South Vietnam. The operation required intricate ground maneuver and coordination of air mobility to trap a Viet Cong force that would be outnumbered five to one by ARVN forces and their American advisers. The ARVN failed on all counts, leading U.S. Army Lt. Col. John Paul Vann, the chief American military adviser on the operation, to conclude that the ARVN were not capable of conducting military operations required to defeat the NLF. While the leadership of Vann and other U.S. advisers — some of whom were killed in the battle — can be questioned, American military and political leadership began to doubt the effectiveness of the Diem government and the ARVN, leading some to conclude that to maintain South Vietnamese independence, the United States might have to “Americanize” the war. For the NLF, Ap Bac proved that Viet Cong forces could go toe-to-toe with — and defeat — the American trained and equipped ARVN.



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A U.S. helicopter crew chief watches ground movements of Vietnamese troops during a strike against Viet Cong guerrillas in the Mekong Delta on Jan. 2, 1963.

The rest, in order of importance:

2. Tet Offensive – Jan. 30, 1968.
3. Operation Linebacker I – May 9-Oct. 23, 1972; and Operation Linebacker II – Dec. 18-29, 1972.
4. Battle of Ia Drang – Nov. 14-18, 1965.
5. Gulf of Tonkin Incident – Aug. 2 and 4, 1964.
6. Dien Bien Phu – March 13-May 7, 1954.
7. Invasion of Cambodia – April 29-July 22, 1970.
8. Operation Ranch Hand – 1965-1971.
9. Lam Son 719 – Feb. 8-March 29, 1971.
10. Operation Rolling Thunder – March 2, 1965-Nov. 2, 1968.



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1. Tet Offensive – Jan. 30, 1968.

More Americans were killed in action in Vietnam in 1968 than any other year, and the high level of ground combat began with the Communist forces’ Tet Offensive. At the end of January, People’s Liberation Armed Forces and People’s Army of Vietnam units suddenly attacked military installations and population centers throughout South Vietnam. Among the primary targets in Saigon were the Republic of Vietnam (RVN) offices and major U.S. installations, including the embassy, the American bases at Long Binh and Bien Hoa, and Gen. William Westmoreland’s Military Advisory Command Vietnam (MACV) headquarters at Tan Son Nhut Air Base. On Jan. 30, Viet Cong sappers gained entrance to the embassy grounds, but not the building; all were killed in several hours by U.S. military police and other hastily assembled personnel. Units of the U.S. 9th Infantry Division, 25th Infantry Division, 101st Airborne Division, and 199th Light Infantry Brigade fought Viet Cong forces throughout the city and surrounding towns for several days. Enemy forces were not cleared from the Cholon neighborhood in Saigon until the end of March. U.S. and Army of the Republic of Vietnam ground forces defeated the assault and inflicted heavy losses on the attackers, but U.S. leaders had been surprised by the timing and magnitude of the offensive. The ability of the Viet Cong and PAVN to mount the attacks (including the one on the U.S. Embassy) had a negative psychological and political impact on the U.S. war effort, and histories of the American war in Vietnam often characterize the Tet Offensive as a turning point leading to U.S. de-escalation of its military intervention.



Soldiers of the 5th Battalion, 7th Cavalry, fire on Thon La Chu during the Tet Offensive.

The rest, in order of importance:

2. Cambodian incursion – April 30, 1970.
3. Battle of Ia Drang – Nov. 14-17, 1965.
4. Operation Cedar Falls – Jan. 8, 1967; and Operation Junction City – Feb. 22, 1967.
5. Hamburger Hill (Ap Bia Mountain) – May 10-20, 1969.
6. Con Thien – September-October 1967.
7. Battle of Khe San – Jan. 21, 1968.
8. Operation Dewey Canyon I – Jan. 22-March 18, 1969.
9. Battle of Hue – Jan. 31, 1968-Feb. 25, 1968.
10. My Lai Massacre – March 16, 1968.



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1. The Battle of Ia Drang – November 1965.

The first “major battle” of the American portion of the Vietnam War and the first time that U.S. and North Vietnamese Army forces squared off toe-to-toe. As the first of its kind, Ia Drang set so many important forces in motion: air mobility, body count as a measure of victory, the presence of the media on the battlefield, the tactical decision of the enemy to fight close to U.S. forces in an effort to reduce the American firepower advantage. The tenor of the “big unit” American phase of the war was set here.



Troops on the ground at Ia Drang.

The rest, in order of importance:

2. Tet Offensive 68 – Jan. 30, 1968.
3. Hamburger Hill – May 10-20, 1969.
4. Battle of Ban Me Thuot – March 13, 1975.
5. Burning of Cam Ne – August 1965.
6. Can Giouc – June 1967.
7. Battle for the Citadel/Tet 68 – January-February 1968.
8. Operation Lam Son 719 – February-March 1971.
9. Battle of An Loc – April-June 1972.
10. Hamlet Evacuation System – February 1969.

The Vietnam experience

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A sergeant and rifleman engage the enemy with M16 rifles.

U.S. Army

Weapons adapted to fight an unconventional war

BY HEATH DRUZIN
Stars and Stripes

The final iconic image of the Vietnam War was fitting: dozens of people lined up on a rooftop ladder in Saigon, desperately trying to get aboard a Bell Huey helicopter that would take them to safety as the North Vietnamese moved on the city.

Among the many notable changes in weaponry and tactics for the U.S. military during the war, one of the most enduring was the reliance on helicopters as both a transport tool and an offensive weapon in a fight where the biggest challenge was often finding the enemy.

"When it came to how to make contact with the enemy, the helicopter was said of a panacea to U.S. commanders," said John Prados, author of "Vietnam: The History of an Unwinnable War." "It could drop in troops — a lot of those air assault tactics were based on the idea of trying to make contact with the enemy."

But the American military didn't go into the war planning to rely so heavily on the helicopter as a weapon. Its adaptation was part of a grudging realization that conventional warfare against an army using guerilla tactics was not working.

"The United States had a certain amount of hubris going into Vietnam that we had superior military technology and that this would virtually guar-

antee success," said Alex Roland, a military historian and professor emeritus at Duke University. "There was enthusiasm from the Pentagon for this type of war to demonstrate America's military capability and, of course, this didn't work out at all."

An American military that was steeped in training for a conventional war head-to-head with the Soviet Union ran into a completely different kind of war when they got to the mountainous jungles of Vietnam. Basing their strategy on the successful guerilla tactics Mao Zedong used to prevail in neighboring China, Vietnamese communists melted back into the jungle as the U.S. established air bases and headquarters, instead concentrating on owning the countryside from which they could harass and frustrate their foes, often with local help.

"We had just never had an enemy that behaved the way the Viet Cong and North Vietnamese did," Roland said.

Not everything was different — like in WWII, bombers played a big role in the war, with U.S. forces dropping millions of tons of munitions on Vietnam, though the inaccuracy of the bombing led to more research into precision, or "smart," bombs that have become a mainstay of American airpower.

But, facing enemy forces who shied away from direct confrontation, U.S. forces had to look for ways to draw them out to fight and helicopters proved a

useful way to do that. Able to land in tight, mountainous terrain, helicopter like the CH-47 (Chinook) and the Huey allowed the military to insert troops behind enemy lines. This tactic, which came to be known as "air assault," has been a major tactic in Afghanistan, a similarly mountainous country where the U.S. is also fighting insurgents who often melt into the population and find shelter in remote hideouts.

The development of the helicopter gunship was pure happenstance, according to Roland. As helicopters increasingly came under fire, crew members started carrying rifles to defend themselves and eventually mounted heavy weaponry on the choppers. Eventually, many helicopters were mounted with gatling guns (commonly known as mini-guns), which were refined during the Vietnam War and able to fire thousands of rounds per minute.

Nowadays, attack helicopters are a staple in the U.S. military, with Apache gunships regularly plying the skies of Afghanistan, providing close air support to NATO and Afghan troops.

Military leaders became so enamored of helicopters as both workhorses and close air support in Vietnam that they were even written into the script of a theoretical war with the Soviet Union during the Cold War.

Another weapon system that endured past the Vietnam war was the M16

assault rifle, which had problems with jamming early on in the Vietnam war but became a mainstay. Lighter, less sensitive to heat and constructed with a shorter barrel than previous rifles, the M16 was designed to perform better in the kind of close-quarters combat and tropical heat troops experienced in Vietnam.

Most American troops today carry the M4 rifle, which is the next generation M16. Today, the M16 and its offshoots are not only still in use by U.S. forces, but have also been introduced to other militaries that the U.S. trains, notably the Afghan security forces.

"That weapon is still, in its descended form, the main infantry weapon of the United States military," Prados said.

Vietnam was the first war where night vision was widely used, with troops using the technology to combat guerilla tactics that often relied on night-time movements. The technology has proven vital in subsequent wars and in Afghanistan today, U.S. soldiers don't head out on patrol without their "NODs" (night optical devices), which looks like a single binocular lens attached to a helmet. The technology has become key to night raids, a common and controversial tactic throughout the war in Afghanistan, whereby troops would raid Afghan homes in the middle of the night to snatch suspected insurgents.

Chemical agents, too, were infamously used throughout the war. A lasting image of the conflict is of a little girl, badly burned by napalm, running naked and terrified down a rural road. Developed in a Harvard University lab in 1942, napalm is an incendiary gel that sticks to the skin and can cause severe burns. It was first used in WWII and has been used by U.S. forces as recently as the Iraq War but is most often associated with Vietnam, where U.S. forces dropped nearly 400,000 tons of it over the course of the war.

Another chemical agent that was not intended to be used against people, but ended up as one of the deadliest legacies of the war, was Agent Orange. Intended to denude the jungle and farmland to deny both cover and food to the Viet Cong, American forces sprayed millions of gallons of the defoliant across Vietnam. While it effectively stripped away vegetation, it had dire health effects on those exposed to it, causing cancer, birth defects, and an array of other maladies in generations of Americans and Vietnamese.

Even before the war was over, it became apparent that Agent Orange was extremely harmful to people, and it has devastated hundreds of thousands of Americans and Vietnamese families.

"The health and collateral effects of the chemicals started to become apparent even as the war continued and before the war ended we came to the realization that we couldn't use these types of weapons and they were taken out of service and never used again," Prados said.

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VIETNAM

50



Maj. Roger Donlon, the first Medal of Honor recipient in the Vietnam War.

Stars and Stripes

Valor for a lost cause?

By MATT MILLHAM
Stars and Stripes

Not a day passes that Roger Donlon isn't reminded of that bloody morning in Vietnam. Even if he wanted to forget, the world won't let him.

As commander of a Special Forces A-Team, Donlon led the defense of his remote outpost in Nam Dong from a swarm of Viet Cong who attacked in the dead of night. Wounded four times, he streaked through a hurricane of gunfire, mortars and grenades to rally his troops and tend to their injuries through five hours of pitched fighting.

His heroics are encapsulated in the citation accompanying his Medal of Honor — the first awarded to a servicemember in Vietnam and the first ever conferred to a Green Beret. The ordeal is boiled down to 613 words read at ceremonies and events that Donlon gladly attends all over the country.

But while the audience's attention is rapt by the narrative of Donlon's bravery, his thoughts are often elsewhere.

"I'm focusing in my mind and in my heart on what the rest of the team was doing the moments that are captured in the citation," Donlon, now 80, said. "The three guys that were killed. Other people being wounded. What the other men were doing throughout the battle."

For Donlon, receiving the Medal of Honor is not a personal achievement. Every man who was there that day contributed, some with their lives, to pull off the victory for which he's been lauded. The same can be said for almost every other servicemember who has ever earned the award, he said.

"The actions of any individual are certainly motivated by not only survival but for survival of the team."

For those who earned the Medal of Honor in Vietnam, their valor was for what some called a lost cause. So many men fought bravely, as part of a military with a clear advantage, and yet they were fighting a war that the United States failed to win.

Many more were deserving

Congress has awarded 258 Medals of Honor for actions in Vietnam, according to the Congressional Medal of Honor Society. The latest came Sept. 15, when President Barack Obama presented medals to retired Command Sgt. Maj. Bennie Adkins, a living Green Beret, and to the brother of Spc. Donald P. Sloat, who died covering a grenade to shield his comrades.

Donlon believes "there are many, many more" deserving of the medal, though many will never receive the award.

"There are many that there were no witnesses to their actions," Donlon said. "And that's been the case throughout history."

In 2014 alone, Congress awarded 10 Medals of Honor for actions in Vietnam.

According to "Vietnam Medal of Honor Heroes" by Edward F. Murphy,

founder of the Medal of Honor Historical Society, Donlon's was one of two conferred for actions in 1964, when the U.S. had about 23,000 troops in the country advising South Vietnamese forces.

The number of Medal of Honor awards rose steadily as the U.S. became more deeply involved and deployed more soldiers, sailors, airmen and Marines.

By the middle of 1967, the U.S. had more than 448,000 military personnel in Vietnam, according to the Army's Center of Military History. That year, 58 servicemembers earned the Medal of Honor.

At least 59 medals were conferred for actions the following year. The U.S. presence peaked in 1969 at 543,400, according to the Army's history center, and the number of Medals of Honor actions peaked as well at 60, according to the center's data. Among those medals are six presented this year — 45 years after the fact — by Obama.

The most decorated division of the Vietnam War was the Army's 1st Cavalry Division, which counts 30 Vietnam Medal of Honor recipients among its ranks, according to the 1st Cavalry Division Association.

A very bitter taste

Robert Modrzejewski thought the war would be over before he ever got a chance to participate.

He enlisted in the Marine Corps Reserves in 1955, was commissioned as a second lieutenant in the Marine Corps in 1957 and was in amphibious warfare school as a captain when the war began.

In June 1966, then-Maj. Modrzejewski was commander of Company K, 3rd Battalion, 4th Marines, and participated in Operation Hastings, to stop the North Vietnamese from entering the south through the demilitarized zone at Laos.

The operation was a helicopter assault, and when his company's four helicopters went to land, they began to take fire, he said in an oral history video. Two of them crashed and started to burn, and some of the Marines were killed. Once his unit landed and started to move to its position, it encountered the entrenched enemy. The unit defeated them, seizing ammunition and supplies.

Later that night, the group fought off a counterattack, but it was just the beginning of a fight that lasted four more days. The enemy was getting stronger while Modrzejewski was getting weaker with casualties and wasn't able to get reinforcements or evacuate the dead

and wounded, he said.

On the second night, the enemy attacked with a battalion-sized force, outnumbering Modrzejewski's Marines by a margin he likened to "500 to 1."

Still, the Marines were able to repel the enemy, but Modrzejewski was injured. Despite his wounds, he crawled 200 meters to take ammunition to his men in an exposed position and directed artillery fire within just meters of the company's position.

The next day, Modrzejewski was told to move back to the landing zone where the helicopters had crashed to be a rear guard for the battalion. As soon as they got there, about 1000 North Vietnamese troops charged down from the hills toward them.

Modrzejewski said they were only able to survive because they called in air strikes — air strikes so near their position that some of the Marines were singed by the napalm. It came down to about four hours of mostly hand-to-hand combat, he said, but the North Vietnamese retreated.

Modrzejewski was the commanding officer of the Marine Barracks at the Naval Academy when he learned he would get the Medal of Honor. He and fellow Marine Staff Sgt. John McGinty received it at the same time, for the same battle. (McGinty died this year of bone cancer.)

Modrzejewski said his feelings about the war didn't change when he returned; he already planned to stay in the Marine Corps as an officer. But he said he felt terrible for the young troops came home to "a less-than-enthusiastic population."

He said he could see how that would leave a very bitter taste.

"We really didn't lose the war. If you want to blame someone for losing

the war, you have to blame the national command authorities," he said, the people in the government who conducted the war in a "piecemeal" fashion.

"Nobody wants to lose a war, and you can't blame the military... the government just didn't have any staying power."

A survivor's task

Today, there are 79 living Medal of Honor recipients — veterans of World War II, Korea, Vietnam and Afghanistan. The largest number of these are Vietnam vets, who account for 54 of the living recipients.

"Only God knows the sacrifice that was made by so many," Donlon said. "That makes it even more important that we who are surviving recipients of the Medal of Honor" and other valor awards "live our lives in an honorable way so that it does reflect, not on us necessarily, but on those who served and those who made the ultimate sacrifice in service."

This task keeps Donlon, 80, extremely busy.

He's met every U.S. president since Lyndon Johnson, and been to the White House about a dozen times — most recently for the Sept. 15 Medal of Honor ceremony with Obama.

Outside of these official engagements, he dedicates a significant amount of time to the Congressional Medal of Honor Foundation's character development program, which uses the personal stories of medal recipients to teach middle and high school students about courage and sacrifice.

Since retiring from the Army as a colonel in 1988, he's also maintained close ties with the military, his fellow Medal of Honor recipients and the men he fought alongside in Vietnam. He has even reached out to his former enemy, leading the first delegation to Vietnam in 1993 — two years before the U.S. government formally normalized diplomatic relations with its old foe.

That first trip was strange, he said, but he continued going back because "the only course of action in my mind was reconciliation."

Last year, he hosted and sponsored the first Vietnamese officer to come to the U.S. Army's Command and General Staff College at Fort Leavenworth, Kansas. Donlon, who lives near the Army post, said he's stayed in touch with the officer ever since.

"We all heal at different rates," Donlon said. He encourages all veterans to consider reconciling their feelings about their time in Vietnam and, if they're able, with the people. "It's one of the most beautiful places on Earth."

Stars and Stripes reporter Jennifer Hlad contributed to this article.
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CHARLIE CLEMENTS

FROM PAGE 28

"It was really quite interesting that no one except me in this business fraternity had any intention of serving or going to Southeast Asia," he said. "These were young men in business school, who like Vice President [Dick] Cheney, supported the war but were content to let others go to fight it."

Deep cultural differences divided Clements, the son of an Air Force officer, from his new classmates in California.

"My family was from Alabama, and I had lived on military bases throughout my childhood," he said. "The culture I grew up in was profoundly oriented toward service to country."

Clements requested to be sent to pilot training and left UCLA with intention of going to Vietnam as soon as he could. While he wanted to serve, he says he didn't want to kill anyone and was glad to be trained as a C-130 transport pilot rather than a fighter or bomber pilot.

Within months of his arrival in mid-1969, things didn't quite seem right to Clements. One of his primary missions was to fly plane-loads of soldiers around Vietnam. One group, a company of paratroopers, struck up a conversation with him after they noticed his parachutist wings.

"They joked with me that when they landed in Saigon it was only the second time they'd actually landed in a plane," he said. "There was no one like me in that company of paratroopers. None of them had graduated from college. It was a lot of kids who really had no other options. I started gaining an awareness of who was actually fighting this war."

His doubts began to build after a conversation with a CIA agent in a bar, who smugly informed him some "diplomats" that Clements had flown into Cambodia weren't diplomats at all.

"He told me I was incredibly naïve if I believed that," he said. "He said he had a crew on that plane, and that in six weeks there would be a coup."

Clements thought back to President Richard Nixon's televised assertion that there were no U.S. combat troops in Laos, which the young pilot knew was false. As the war metastasized and officials lied, everything he believed about the value of what the United States was doing in Vietnam was



Charlie Clements during pilot training at Reese Air Force Base, Texas, in early 1969.

Courtesy of Charlie Clements

crumbling.

"It was such a shock — and this takes me back to how innocent I was at that time — to think the president of the United States would look the camera in the eye and lie to the American public," he said.

As the CIA man promised, the Cambodian coup went off as planned, and the new leader, Lon Nol, signaled his willingness to accept an incursion of U.S. forces into the country.

"Six weeks later I was flying 10 missions a day carrying heavily armed American troops into the Parrot's Beak" — a part of South Vietnam that jutted into Cambodia, Clements said — "in preparation for the invasion of Cambodia."

Secretly, Clements was in moral crisis over his participation in the expansion of the Vietnam War. He'd been ignoring a head cold as he flew, and now he used that as an excuse to avoid flying missions. He applied for and received a week of stateside leave, and when he returned, "I told my commander I'd be willing to serve anywhere else in the Air Force, but I would not fly any more missions in Vietnam."

The reaction from his commanders was muted, and they advised him to quietly drop his objections. He declined and was sent to an Air Force medical facility for psychological test-

ing. Clements was treated professionally — never feeling he was being singled out for retaliation — but during his time in the hospital his opposition to the war hardened. After eight months he was given medical disability and left the Air Force.

Clements' rebellion against a war he had earlier supported had forced him out of his planned military career, but his ideals of service were unscathed. Seeking a new outlet, he went to medical school and became a doctor.

For the next decade, Clements focused on humanitarian issues and ending the war in El Salvador, where he led a number of Congressional delegations. He was a founding board member of Physicians for Human Rights and represented that group at the presentation of the Nobel Peace Prize to the International Campaign to Ban Landmines in 1997, and continued on to work in other aid organizations. Today he teaches human rights policy at Harvard University's Kennedy School of Government.

The Vietnam War and the choices he made about it helped make him who he is today, he said.

"The decision I made in Vietnam changed the course of my life entirely," he said. "It just seemed like a disaster at the time."

in society I'd even been able to get that appointment in the first place," he said.

His discomfort eventually drove him to collect dozens of stories of Vietnam veterans and resisters for a 2011 book, "Called to Serve." The stories delve into why people chose to serve or refused, and what the effects of their decisions were.

"To be 18 or 19 and asked to make a life or death decision — concerning your own life and the lives of many others — it's just an incredible thing," he said.

Weary: Some officials still fight to have draft reinstated

FROM PAGE 22

Advocates for the draft emerge from time to time.

During the height of the Iraq War, some began to question whether a military of volunteers resulted in a population disconnected from the wars that were being waged. There also were serious concerns about the burden being carried by a fighting force of volunteers, many of whom carried out multiple deployments.

Some politicians, such as Rep. Charles Rangel, D-N.Y., have made attempts in recent years to bring back the draft, but those efforts have gone nowhere. Even some military leaders, concerned about the American public's disconnect from the military that fights its wars, have flirted with the idea of a return to the draft.

Service System from 1979-1980, says there would be little to be gained in returning to some form of the draft.

With roughly 4 million Americans each year reaching draft age, supply far exceeds demand, he said. The Army, for example, only takes in about 50,000 soldiers each year, which means few would ever see boot camp let alone generate a cultural reconnection with the military.

"The problem is, the conditions that caused the initial problems with the draft have not changed and they are the Army's need for manpower is very small compared to the U.S. population," Rostker said. "The question is, who serves when not all can serve?"

Even the early implementers of the volunteer service never

imagined that long ground wars could be fought without a return to the draft, something today's servicemembers have just now achieved after more than a decade of fighting in Iraq and Afghanistan.

"The big shock of the all-volunteer force was that we could go to war and not return to the draft. We knew we could deploy once, but not two, three four, five times. We've created a warrior class of which going to war, going to deployment, is the norm."

Yet the all-volunteer service comes with a cost, in terms of dollars — a 15-year soldier costs considerably more than a two-year draftee — and in the physical toll on those who repeatedly deploy.

"It's cost us socially," Rostker said. "It's cost us in terms of families. It's cost us in PTSD because the research suggests the psychiatric effects of war are cumulative effect. It's expensive. Having said all of that, it is a remarkable, remarkable force. And we've paid for it."

"The big shock of the all-volunteer force was that we could go to war and not return to the draft. We knew we could deploy once, but not two, three four, five times. We've created a warrior class of which going to war, going to deployment, is the norm."

Bernard Rostker

former top Pentagon manpower official and author of "I Want You! The Evolution of the All-Volunteer Force"

Retired Gen. Stanley McChrystal favors the idea.

"I now believe we need a draft. America's defense should be performed by a representative cross section of the population," the retired general said in 2013 interview with Foreign Affairs magazine.

But Rostker, who also served as director of the U.S. Selective

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TOM WEINER

FROM PAGE 28

Concerned about the effects a drug abuse designation could have on his future employment, he discussed it with his draft counselor, who assured him, "Don't worry, you'll be a hero because of this."

He didn't feel like a hero as he moved on with his life, becoming a teacher. He continued to be haunted, knowing that he had avoided what men from lower economic strata could not.

"It was purely a result of my privileged position



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THE CIVIL RIGHTS MOVEMENT

A casualty of war

By NANCY MONTGOMERY
Stars and Stripes

Sammy Younge Jr. was legally entitled to use the restroom. It was January 1966, nearly two years after President Lyndon Johnson had signed into law the landmark Civil Rights Act outlawing discrimination and racial segregation at facilities that served the public.

But when the African-American former Navy sailor attempted to use an Alabama gas station "whites only" restroom, the station attendant shot him dead.

Younge, 21, had been on a voter registration drive with the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee when he was killed. Days later, as a result, the committee became the first civil rights organization to oppose the war in Vietnam.

The group, led by John Lewis, now a Georgia congressman, said that Younge's murder illustrated how wrong it was for black men to fight an "imperialist" war in Vietnam — supposedly for freedom's sake — when they themselves were denied basic rights and freedoms in the U.S.

It was not a popular message.

The group was derided as unpatriotic and communist-infested by the white establishment and by other civil rights groups. Likewise, the African-American press, which saw military service as a stepping stone to equality, condemned the group.

The next year, Martin Luther King Jr.'s anguished decision to break with Johnson and oppose the war met with the same censure.

"The promises of the Great Society have been shot down on the battlefields of Vietnam," King said in his famous speech, "making the poor, white and Negro bear the heaviest burden both at the front and at home."

The civil rights movement itself was a casualty of war, historians have subsequently agreed. By creating dissension within the civil rights coalition, diverting attention and siphoning money that would have been spent on Johnson's domestic programs — the War on Poverty and the Great Society — it killed the movement and ushered in a conservative era historically hostile to civil rights, some say.

"The Vietnam War divided the civil rights movement and African-Americans more than any other event in

American history, exacerbating pre-existing rifts in the civil rights coalition, and it diverted attention away from the struggle for racial justice and toward opposition to the war," argues Daniel Lucks, author of "Selma to Saigon: The Civil Rights Movement and the Vietnam War," published in March. "All these factors had profound and tragic consequences for the civil rights movement and for black America."

A ticket out

Civil rights groups had been "loosely united and working towards a set of goals" in the 1950s and early 1960s, when the movement was the preeminent issue in the U.S., said historian and author James Westheider. "That fell apart, with few exceptions," he said.

The war was especially destructive to the black community, he said. "The draft had a weird effect of taking the best and the brightest — the ones that could have stayed and made a difference."

Vietnam was the nation's first racially integrated war since the American Revolution, following President Harry Truman's 1948 executive order desegregating the services which, while obstructed for years by the Army

and Marine Corps, had been largely accomplished by the early 1950s as the Korean War ended.

That didn't mean that black troops were accepted or treated as equal to whites, but it was a start; in the American South, by contrast, Jim Crow prevailed.

"For all of its faults, the military was still the most integrated and probably the most fair institution in the country," said Westheider, professor of American history and chairman of the Social Science and Humanities Department at Clermont College.

In fact, black soldiers were usually relegated to career fields like cook or truck driver, said former Sgt. 1st Class Allen Thomas. When he enlisted in the Army in 1957 on his 18th birthday, he said he was one of the first blacks allowed to train in electronics and communication.

He was reduced in rank for fighting — over a racial slur, he said — and, disillusioned, got out after three years. "The only job I could get was janitor or security guard," he said.

He re-enlisted within two weeks and

made the Army a career, serving for 18 more years.

Many others were drafted: Most blacks didn't have the connections to get guard or reserve assignments; student deferments were only for those in college; and draft boards, which had largely undisputed discretionary powers, were nearly 100 percent white.

All that contributed to a disproportionate number of black troops being sent to and dying in combat. In 1965, according to Westheider, one of every four U.S. soldiers killed or wounded was black. By July 1966, he said, African-Americans accounted for 22 percent of all American casualties, and the next year, more than 14 percent.

The casualty rate was one of the factors that persuaded King, in his famous "Beyond Vietnam" speech, to condemn the war after years of agonizing about it. But it wasn't the only factor.

King, like other civil rights leaders, was grateful to Johnson, who'd secured passage of the 1964 Civil Rights Act, pushed through the Voting Rights Act a year later, and, until becoming embroiled in the war, had made civil rights a domestic policy priority.

Black leaders were loath to lose their presidential ally, and, in some cases, their friend.

But King, who'd been awarded the Nobel Peace Prize, finally felt he had to speak out. "A time comes when silence is betrayal, and that time has come for us in relation to Vietnam," he said.

According to the Washington Post, King's speech on April 4, 1967, at Riverside Church in New York City "diminished his usefulness to his cause, to his country, and to his people."

By then, the movement was also riven by generational issues. Younger, more militant, sometimes separatist leaders such as Stokely Carmichael, who coined the term "Black Power," spoke about the war in colonialist terms.

"The war is the white man sending the black man to make war on the yellow man to defend the red man," he said in 1968.

Black troops influenced by the younger leaders, by ideas of black pride and solidarity, became increasingly unwilling to accommodate themselves to rampant racism, Westheider said, including in the military.

"In Mississippi, we had to fight in the street. We had to fight on base. We had two wars going, Vietnam and America. It wasn't just the Army," said

Thomas, who fought in Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos from 1965-68.

Racial violence

By 1968, all of the elements needed to trigger racial violence in the armed forces were present, Westheider said. The racial violence was widespread, on U.S. and overseas bases, at stockades and on at least two aircraft carriers.

"Only the combat units out in the field were spared," Westheider said. Racial animosities gave way as the men relied on each other to survive. One of the men who told his story in "Bloods" experienced how military culture changed — and how it did not — from the 1940s when racism was institutional and acceptable, to the 1970s when DOD reforms began. Edgar Huff joined the Marines in 1942, from Gadsden, Ala., and so poor he had to borrow the \$1.80 bus fare to Birmingham to get to his pre-enlistment physical exam.

He was one of the first 50 blacks to be accepted into the Negro Marine Corps. It was segregated, except for the white officers; black Marines were not allowed on Camp Lejeune without a white escort. They trained nearby.

He rose through the ranks, becoming the corps' first black sergeant major and serving 19 generals.

"But over the years I was so unhappy sometimes in the Marine Corps, I didn't know what to do. If there's ever a man who should be prejudiced as far as the white man is concerned, I should be," he said. "I never let any of these things make me prejudiced right back.

"Especially in Vietnam. I am the sergeant major. I take care of all my men, black and white." Huff was awarded the Bronze Star for the under-fire rescue of a white Marine in Da Nang in 1968.

When he retired in 1972, President Nixon sent greetings, as did most of the generals on active duty, he says in the book.

Still, one evening after he retired and was sitting on his patio at his home near Camp Lejeune, four white Marines drove up and threw four white phosphorus grenades before speeding off.

"The Marine Corps never did nothing to them at all," Huff said.

The Vietnam experience

Read more on the civil rights movement and the military at stripes.com/vietnam50

"The promises of the Great Society have been shot down on the battlefields of Vietnam making the poor, white and Negro bear the heaviest burden both at the front and at home."

— Martin Luther King Jr.



VIETNAM

AT 50



Etched into the wedge-shaped wall are the names of 58,300 U.S. troops killed in the Vietnam War. People standing before the wall can see their own reflection, a cue to remember living veterans while honoring the fallen.

Photo by **Jac Gromelski**
Stars and Stripes

STARS AND STRIPES. The Vietnam experience

Veterans: Troops of an unpopular war felt stigmatized by their service.

Photo gallery: The Vietnam Veterans Memorial has become one of the most popular tourist attractions in Washington, D.C.

Photo gallery: Artifacts left at the memorial.

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