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GI Revolts: The Breakdown of the U.S. Army in Vietnam

Richard Boyle

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1973

GI Revolts: The Breakdown of the U.S. Army in Vietnam
by Richard Boyle
Published by United Front Press
P.O. Box 40099,
San Francisco, CA 94140
May, 1973.

Note added October, 2010: An image version of this pamphlet
is available in PDF from ZineLibrary at zinelibrary.info.
Sections of the book *Flower of the Dragon* reprinted here
with the permission of the author and Ramparts Press.
Cover Photo: After five days of heavy fighting in the Ak
Valley, the 49 remaining men of Alpha Company (Americal
Division) refused to move back into combat. Here they listen
to a “pep talk” from a colonel (September 1969).

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Contents

Introduction	5
Doc Hampton	6
Firebase Pace	14
Mutiny	23
The Grunts	32
Sen. Kennedy Goes All Out	40
Conclusion <i>by the United Front Press staff</i>	43
Stateside	46
Navy Rebellions	48

Photo caption: San Diego: 132 sailors, mostly Black, refuse to reboard the USS Constellation because of racist practices on the ship — November 9, 1972. (Picture shows rally of uniformed sailors, many giving clenched-fist salutes.) End caption.

The importance of GI resistance in both the Army and Navy in forcing the U.S. to withdraw from Vietnam has not been lost on the government. They will certainly hesitate to send massive numbers of U.S. troops into the next conflict. That's why they are now trying to build a professional, "volunteer" army they can use to police the world. (However, both enlisted men and draftees took part in the GI resistance in Vietnam.)

It is certain that Vietnam won't be the last war that the American people and people all over the world will have to fight against. As Eisenhower's speech explained, as long as U.S. business has world-wide interests, there will be a danger of new Vietnams.

The thousands of GI's and veterans who resisted and helped bring an end to the war are now in a position to alert the American people to future Vietnams. The direct experience of these foot soldiers and sailors is worth much more than the pre-rehearsed war tales of high-ranking POW bomber pilots.

Amidst all the patriotic hoopla over the P.O.W.'s return and the talk of "peace with honor," the people who run this country have one cold lesson from Vietnam staring them in the face: You can't fight a war without an army.

Navy Rebellions

Shock waves were sent through the Pentagon when full-scale rebellions broke out on board the ships of the Asia-based U.S. 7th Fleet. In 1971, sailors on the attack carrier U.S.S. Coral Sea collected over 1200 signatures demanding that their ship not sail to the war zone. Soon afterwards, 300 Coral Sea sailors led an anti-war march of 25,000 people in San Francisco.

This SOS (Stop Our Ship) movement quickly spread to other carriers. Thousands of SOS stickers were plastered all over the carriers. Acts of sabotage became more frequent and more damaging. (The U.S.S. Ranger was put out of commission for 4 months, and almost \$1 million in damage was done when some bolts and a paint scraper were dropped into the ship's reduction gears.)

The opposition of Black sailors to the Navy's racism boiled over in open revolt in November of 1972 on board the carrier U.S.S. Constellation. One reason was the routine assignment of skilled Black sailors to cleaning bulkheads, machinery, and other menial jobs. Another was in the practice of giving Blacks less-than-honorable discharges for minor infractions. One Black sailor described the "Connie" as "a ship as racist as the war it's fighting in."

After months of ignored petitions, over 300 sailors (most of them Black) staged a sit-down strike in the Constellation's main mess hall. The Captain had to cut sea trials short and put 132 sailors ashore in San Diego to maintain control of his ship. These Black sailors refused to be divided and ignored orders to reboard the ship, because the Navy brass would not correct the racist practices on the carrier.

Photo caption: 500 GI's from Fort Hood march down the streets of Killeen, Texas — October 25, 1971. (Picture shows soldiers holding a huge banner reading "We want out Now — Active Duty GIs.") End caption.

Introduction

The Vietnam War was one of the least popular in American history. It was also the least "popular" with the GI's who were sent to fight it. By the late 1960's, news of GI unrest was being carried on TV and in newspapers around the country and Vietnam vets were speaking at anti-war demonstrations.

But word of the GI resistance in Vietnam itself trickled back more slowly — the soldiers flashing peace signs and Black Power salutes, the group refusals to fight, anti-war petitions and demonstrations, and even the fragging of officers. What we've read in the newspapers, however, has just been bits and pieces. Seldom have we had a chance to hear the whole story from the GI's themselves.

This pamphlet tells in vivid terms two stories of GI revolts — the shooting of a top sergeant and the mutiny of Bravo Company at Firebase Pace near Cambodia. They are taken from Richard Boyle's book *Flower of the Dragon — The Breakdown of the U.S. Army in Vietnam* (Ramparts Press, 1972). Boyle spent three tours in Vietnam from 1965 through 1971 as a war correspondent, and was on hand personally to record many of these events as they happened.

Not all of the stories of GI resistance told in Boyle's book are as dramatic as the story of Doc Hampton or the mutiny at Firebase Pace. Boyle could only cover a few of the thousands of GI revolts in Vietnam.

Many of these revolts were private affairs by GI's who were strung out on dope, or scared, or angry at being ordered to risk their lives to capture a useless piece of real estate. But as the war dragged on, an increasing number of GI's — like the men at Firebase Pace — felt they shouldn't be in Vietnam in the first place, and turned to organized resistance.

Resentment was especially high among Black and other minority GI's, who were concentrated in combat units all out of

proportion to their numbers in the population and were faced with continual racial harassment.

The result, for the military, was devastating. By 1969 the morale and discipline of the U.S. ground forces in Indochina had so broken down that it was no longer a reliable fighting force. This fact was one of the major causes for the change in U.S. strategy. The U.S. government had no choice but to withdraw American troops. Nixon may call the Vietnam settlement “peace with honor.” But his alternative was war without an army.

Here then is the GI’s eye-view of the Vietnam War.

Doc Hampton

Although many of us in the Saigon press corps had heard rumors of fraggings attacks by enlisted men on officers with a fragmentation grenade, usually slipped under the floor of the officer’s hootch — it wasn’t being reported to the people back home.

Then-President Lyndon Johnson, in response to the growing antiwar movement, once said, “You don’t hear the boys in Vietnam protesting.” Hawks consistently called for escalation “to support our boys.” To be against the war, they claimed, is to stab GIs in the back. The Army brass was particularly worried about stories of GI unrest leaking out. They did everything they could to cover up, and until 1969 they were successful.

They covered up the story of the revolt in 1968 of black GIs at Long Binh Jail, the notorious Army prison outside Saigon. Fed up with abuse and beatings at the hands of the guards, black troops seized the prison, repelling successive attempts by hundreds of MPs backed up by armored cars to retake the prison. In the end, of course, the troops lost out.

The easiest way for the Army to cover up news of GI unrest was simply not to report it at the five o’clock follies. (Note: this

touched off brig revolts — from Ft. Dix in New Jersey to the famous Presidio 27 sit-down strike in California.

Photo caption. ARVN draftees flee and surrender to National Liberation Front forces during 1971 invasion of Laos. End caption.

Before long GI’s began to link their struggle with the anti-war movement in the U.S. Vietnam veterans (returning home to find a 25% unemployment rate) and active duty GI’s spoke at anti-war rallies all over the country. One of the strongest demonstrations of GI unity with the anti-war movement was the refusal of 150 Black GI’s at Fort Hood, Texas, to leave base for “riot control” duty during anti-war demonstrations at the 1968 Democratic convention in Chicago.

And in Vietnam the GI’s resistance stiffened. While a nationwide student strike erupted during Nixon’s 1970 invasion of Cambodia, newsmen reported that scores of GI’s had to be ordered “at gunpoint” to board trucks headed across the Vietnam-Cambodia border.

By 1970, major sections of the U.S. Army in Vietnam were falling apart. Since the NLF Tet Offensive of 1968 the ground war had been going badly for the U.S., but now the troops could not even be relied on to carry out orders.

Nixon’s secret plan for ending the war, “Vietnamization,” had to take all this into account: The U.S. military could not defeat the popularly-based NLF; the American people were totally against keeping the war going; the war was putting an enormous strain on the U.S. economy; and the U.S. Army could no longer be relied on in Vietnam. He had only one real choice — pull out the ground troops, and rely all the more heavily on the Air Force and Navy.

This plan, however, had fatal flaws: 1) It had to rely on the conscript Saigon army which had no will to fight, and 2) it assumed the Navy and Air Force would remain relatively free of the dissent and rebellion that plagued the Army.

lieved that Blacks shouldn't be fighting there "because they have problems at home." (49.2% of the same men even said that they "would use weapons to secure their rights back home," with an additional 13% saying "maybe.") (S.F. Chronicle, June 29, 1970.)

For years people active in the anti-war movement have been quoting a 1953 speech by President Eisenhower to explain what the war in Vietnam was really about:

"You don't know really why we are so concerned with the far-off Southeast corner of Asia? Why is it? Now let us assume that we lose Indochina. If Indochina goes, several things happen right away...the tin and tungsten we so greatly value from that area (the Malay peninsula) would cease coming...All of the position around there is very ominous to the United States, because finally if we lost all that, how would the Free World hold the rich empire of Indonesia?"

Increasingly, the GI's saw from their own experience that maintaining democracy for the people of Vietnam was definitely not what the war was about. What it was accomplishing was propping up the dictatorial, one-man rule of Thieu and his dope dealing Generals. Few grunts were willing to fight to keep open the Bank of America branch in Saigon.

Stateside

In June 1966 the "Fort Hood 3" became the first GI's to publicly refuse orders for Vietnam. More and more GI's refused combat training and went AWOL for months at a time. Estimates are that over 1/4 of the Vietnam-era army went AWOL or deserted at one time or another.

As in Vietnam, rebellious GI's rapidly filled up the base stockades where the military's kangaroo trials (which resulted in a 95% conviction rate) and atrocious living conditions

refers to newsmen's skeptical name for the Army's news briefings.) The Army's massive PR machine daily cranked out press releases about how the GIs supported the war, how high their morale was and how we were gloriously winning the hearts and minds of the Vietnamese people.

So the press simply never heard of the fraggings, of officers shot in the back by their own men, of near-revolts of whole units. Most of the newsmen, when they did go out in the field, spent their time in the officers' mess and in officers' clubs drinking with the brass. It seemed most newsmen didn't really like or understand the grunts; they felt more comfortable with the lifers.

Besides, most of the grunts didn't trust the Saigon press corps. They knew the Army's Central Intelligence Division (CID) often sent agents onto bases disguised as newsmen to get information and evidence about fraggings or possible mutinies. El Cid, as the grunts called the spies, was everywhere.

But there was another, even greater, obstacle to uncovering stories of fraggings. If a reporter wanted to go on base, he had to sign up for a military flight, giving the reason for his trip. If he told the truth and said he wanted to do a story about fraggings, the brass would try to block him every way they could-say he couldn't get to the base because of bad weather or, if they did let him go, send along a public information officer to follow him around and make sure no damaging information got out. If he lied about why he wanted to go, they would still make sure he saw and heard only what the PIO wanted.

The Overseas Weekly was the first paper to report on fraggings, probably because most of our stories came from the GIs themselves. On stories the Army didn't want us to know about-and there were many -we usually had to sneak on base to get the story at all.

One day in August 1969, Ann Bryan, our editor, got a call from some troops at Cu Chi, headquarters of the 25th Division,

who said they had a story for us. She made an arrangement for me to meet them secretly on the base.

The streets at Cu Chi had beautiful names-Maui Street and Oahu Street-but they were very drab. Behind a pizza parlor two GIs were waiting. I identified myself and we drove down the street, past the massage parlor where GIs got a five-dollar hand job.

"I think we got a safe place to meet," said one of the GIs. It was very risky for them to talk with me, because if they were caught they would probably be shipped to Firebase Jackson the next day. Jackson, they said, was a place they didn't want to be.

Photo caption: "I'm over here fighting a war for a cause that means nothing to me. It means nothin' but my life, and life's a very dear thing to me..." — GI in First Cavalry Division (picture shows exhausted GIs at a campsite). End caption.

They took me to a small hootch. About eight GIs, half of them black and half of them white, were sitting on the floor when we entered. While they took turns watching for lifers outside. the GIs slowly began to tell me the story of two men.

"I guess I'll start by telling you about Doc Sp4 Enoch 'Doc' Hampton," said a sandy-haired soldier, Sp4 W. C. Benn. "Doc was our friend, everybody liked Doc. He was a real good medic."

"Yeah. he never bothered nobody," said another soldier. "He treated people like you would want to be treated."

They talked about Doc for a while, then they told me about the other man. Sfc. Clarence Lowder, whom they called "Top." Things started to get bad, they said, when Top came into the unit as the new "first-shirt," or top sergeant. Top didn't think much of the new "Action Army." It was too soft. "He wished he was back in the old army," said Pfc. Rich Hanusey, a clerk in the orderly room. In the old days, Top would tell his men, he could straighten out a soldier "without going through a bunch of legal mumbo-jumbo." Top was a big, powerful man and many

nameless villagers and working people supported the National Liberation Front, in which their own sons were fighting.

As the war dragged on and casualties mounted, in spite of Pentagon predictions that the war would be won "in a few months", more and more GI's refused to fight a war they didn't believe in.

For Black and other minority GI's, Vietnam was a special hell. Soon after their return home from Vietnam in 1971, a group of 236 GI's from the 173rd Airborne Brigade made the following statement:

"Throughout our time in the service we've seen minority group GI's discriminated against. In Vietnam that's been evidenced by higher casualty rates. Other times it takes the form of slower promotions, higher penalties for rules violations, and the worst job assignments. We feel that the Army fosters racism and has purposely avoided dealing with the day-to-day problems of minority groups."

Widespread racism, especially coming from privileged officers, was not calculated to make Black GI's an enthusiastic part of the Army in Vietnam. Doc Hampton's reaction to Top may not have been typical. But his action, and the efforts of his fellow GI's to protect him, make a lot more sense when seen in the context of the Army's entrenched racism.

Many white officers and NCO's made a practice of harassing Black GI's about their Afros which didn't conform to "military regulations." While right wing soldiers were allowed to fly confederate flags on Martin Luther King's birthday and could generally count on getting away with making open racial slurs, Black GI's were given sentences of up to 6 months for giving the clenched fist salute and "dapping" (a brotherly greeting).

At the same time, Black and Latin GI's particularly were following the struggles for civil rights and the rebellions in the ghettos and barrios at home.

According to a study by Time magazine correspondent Wallace Terry, 63.8% of the Black enlisted men in Vietnam be-

“Shortly after the costly assault on Hamburger Hill in mid-1969, the GI underground newspaper in Vietnam, GI Says, publicly offered a \$10,000 bounty on Lt. Col. Weldon Honeycutt, the officer who ordered and led the attack. Despite several attempts, however, Honeycutt managed to live out his tour and return stateside. ‘Another Hamburger Hill’ (toughly contested assault), conceded a veteran major, ‘is definitely out.’”

Another sign of the breakdown of the Army in Indochina was the drug epidemic. Well over half the troops in Vietnam smoked the easily available (and potent) marijuana. And in 1971, according to official estimates, 10–15% of the American troops were addicted to heroin.

Photo caption: Fort Campbell, Kentucky. Members of the 173rd Airborne Division, just back from Vietnam, protest the war on Veterans Day, October 25, 1971. End caption.

Photo caption: Black and Brown GI’s march at Munster Army Base in West Germany to protest burning of Ku Klux Klan cross by racist lifers, September 17, 1971. End caption.

Most GI’s, whether they picked up the deadly heroin addiction or not, were aware that the biggest traffickers in hard drugs were the generals and political leaders of south Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia that they were supposed to risk their lives to keep in power. (Note: For complete documentation of the role of U.S. supported politicians and military officers in the dope trade, see *The Politics of Heroin in Southeast Asia* by Alfred McCoy. End note.)

Yes, the stories of Doc Hampton and the mutiny at Firebase Pace are typical. Not in the sense of shooting an officer or a mutiny, although these things happened often enough. They are typical of the breakdown of the morale and discipline of the U.S. Army in Vietnam.

This pamphlet only touched on the reasons for this breakdown. One of the most important was that GI’s found they had been thrown into a civil war in Vietnam — a war in which they often couldn’t find the “other side” because most south Viet-

GI’s were afraid of him. “Top would threaten to hit people or send them to Jackson,” said Hanusey.

Firebase Jackson was like a death sentence. Some of the GI’s doubted Top had enough power to send a man there, but nobody wanted to test him.

“He treated us like machines,” said one GI. “I’m not a robot, I’m a human being.” Instead of loading supplies on a truck, Top would make the men walk and carry the stuff all the way. He liked to belittle men in front of others. “He had no respect for people,” Benn said.

“He was disappointed being here,” said Hanusey, who had worked with Top and knew him better than most of the enlisted men. “He would have been a great first sergeant in training, the kind they use to scare trainees. But over here he was creating a fiasco.”

Top once ordered a private to dig a six-foot ditch. The soldier dug a six-foot peace symbol in the ground. “That really blew Top’s mind,” said Hanusey. After that Top worked on the Pfc almost constantly for six weeks. The Pfc got stoned every night and dreamed about killing Top. “That man isn’t going to live through the day,” he would shout. Finally, the Pfc cracked and was shipped out.

One non-commissioned officer in the unit used to shake and drink heavily after his encounters with Top. “One night Top almost made him cry,” said one of the GI’s. Another time the NCO threatened to kill Top and had to be restrained.

After his second week in the unit, Top got a warning from his men — a CS gas grenade under his hootch. “When they put gas on you, yeah, you know they mean you no good,” said one of the men with a smile.

Benn, the Sp4 who had started the story, began to be afraid that someone might kill Top. “He didn’t deserve to die. We just wanted him out.” So Benn went to the battery commander, but the commander refused to believe any soldier would go that far. Then Benn went to the inspector general. “I just got a patroniz-

ing look,” he said. “Lifers are still battering down drawbridges. They haven’t entered the twentieth century.”

Benn even went to the chaplain, who told him things weren’t “as bad as all that” and advised him to go back through the chain of command.

A few weeks later one non-com urged Top to go to the enlisted men’s club and have a few beers with the men. Top refused. When the NCO warned Top he was pushing his men too hard and might get zapped, Top reportedly fired back, “Not one of them would have the guts.”

They didn’t hate Top, the men in the hootch told me; they thought he was a victim of the system, just like them. He just didn’t know what was going on in Vietnam, or he wouldn’t have said, “Not one of them would have the guts.” He hadn’t been in Vietnam long enough, he didn’t know that in some parts of Vietnam war existed between the grunts and the lifers.

It was just about this time that the black GIs in Top’s units were beginning to think about the war, beginning to tell themselves that if they had to die they wanted to die for a cause of their own choice. To many of them the lifer sergeant was more of an enemy than the Asian peasant soldier outside the wire. There was also a different kind of white soldier in the unit, like the private who dug the six-foot peace symbol. Young white soldiers smoked grass, wore beads, and flashed the peace sign as a standard greeting. In the evenings, black and white troops would get together, blow grass, and rap. The heads and the blacks, the men in the hootch told me, were beginning to get it together. I remembered what one of the doper GIs had told me at Nha Trang: “The lifers are more afraid of what’s in this camp than what’s outside it.”

After about two months with the unit, Top started harassing Doc Hampton about his Afro haircut, telling him to get it cut. Doc’s hair was no longer than an inch and a half — within Army regulations — but Top kept pushing him to trim it.

refused to move out. The reason this could happen was that so many of the grunts in Vietnam felt the same as the men of Bravo Company (Delta Company proved it). The Army could not just court-martial a few “trouble-makers” and ship in new troops without facing an event larger scale revolt.

Conclusion by the United Front Press staff

Killing a sergeant or joining a mutiny are not things done lightly. Just how typical were these incidents? Military records and first hand accounts by GI’s record many thousand of revolts in Indochina, big and small.

In June 1971, Col. Robert D. Heintz, Jr., a military analyst, wrote an article in the Armed Forces Journal titled “The Collapse of the Armed Forces.” Heintz, who obviously had access to restricted information, catalogued many dozens of GI revolts of all kinds. His summary of the situation:

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

Col. Heintz quotes an American soldier in Cu Chi as saying: “They have set up separate companies for men who refuse to go out into the field. It is no big thing to refuse to go. If a man is ordered to go to such and such a place, he no longer goes through the hassle of refusing; he just packs his shirt and goes to visit some buddies at another base camp.”

Heintz reported that in some units news of the death of an officer would bring cheers from large groups of soldiers. He noted an “authoritative” estimate that fraggings were running about one a week in the America! Division alone. The effect on the Army is brought out in this example:

I didn't say anything.

Then he continued, saying it was he who had raised hell about the charge on Hamburger Hill. "I can't stop the patrolling or the killing," he said. "I know how you must feel, seeing your buddies blown away, but what do you want me to do?"

"I don't know, Senator," I said. "Look, I don't want to pressure you. You've got to look into your own head, into your own conscience, and ask yourself if you are doing everything you can. I can't answer that."

He looked at me for a long time.

"Senator, I'd like you to see this," I said.

It was a photograph I took from the helicopter over Pace, when I tried to land the first time. A South Vietnamese soldier had been shot through the neck. With each heartbeat, a huge purple glob of blood would ooze out of his mouth, falling on his shirt. Within a few minutes his shirt was soaked with blood. He knew he was dying. When the chopper blades started spinning, his blood whipped all over the cockpit, all over the medics, the other wounded, the crew, all over me.

Kennedy looked at the photograph and then handed it back. As he started to leave, I said one last thing to him. "We all know this country is in a bad way. Most of those guys at Pace really didn't think their petition would do any good; like the rest of us, they have nearly given up hope. They've been fucked over too many times. They still tried, they still had hope, but I don't think they'll take it much longer. Time is running out."

He stopped but didn't speak, and then he left.

Kennedy had thus done no more than call for an "investigation." He refused to attend a press conference so that Boyle could publicly present him with the petition. He refused to make even a statement in support of the GI's at Pace. When push came to shove, this is what Teddy's "concern" for the Vietnam soldier amounted to.

The men at Pace waged the struggle themselves and they won. The whole company rallied to the support of the six who

At the mess hall one evening, Doc said that Top had "his thing," the book and the law, and that he, Doc, had his-an M-16 rifle. Doc said he was going to the orderly room to see the first sergeant, "Either I'll come out alone," he said, "or neither of us is coming out."

Hanusey, the clerk, was working in the orderly room when Doc came through the doorway. "His face was cold, stone cold," Hanusey said. "He looked like a man in the movies who was about to kill."

The barrel of Doc's M-16 was pointed downward, his feet planted firmly apart. Slowly he raised the barrel and fired a full clip into Top. The sergeant's back exploded as pieces of flesh and blood spattered all over the orderly room. Then Doc walked out.

Photo caption: Pointing to his wound, a veteran member of Alpha Co. and his buddies celebrate his getting out of combat. End caption.

Hanusey couldn't believe it, almost thinking Doc was firing blanks until he heard the empty shell casings hit the floor. It just didn't seem real. Then the captain screamed, "Stop him." Hanusey just looked down at Top, heard him groan and saw him move his head slightly, and then Top was dead.

Benn was outside when he saw Doc running for a bunker, "like a deer being chased." Suddenly there were about forty MPs and other men with shotguns and submachine guns running after Doc, shouting, "Get him, kill him."

"The chase after Doc was like a hunt, he didn't have a chance," said another GI.

The lifers cornered Doc in an empty bunker. But Doc was armed; nobody wanted to go in after him. It was a standoff. Taking up positions around the bunker, the lifers ordered him to surrender.

"I wasn't going to let it happen," said Ben Denson, a black soldier who hadn't spoken before. "If they shot Doc, there was going to be a slaughter, a bloodletting. There would have been

a war.” When black troops in the unit started going for their weapons, they saw that there were many whites with them.

As white and black troops started running out of their huts and bunkers towards Doc, they were blocked by armed MPs. “They wanted to gun him down and didn’t want anyone to stop it,” said Denson. Both sides were lining up for a confrontation and when the black and white troops trying to save Doc looked around, there were more of them than there were lifers.

Then a single shot sounded in Doc’s bunker. One lifer started to make a move for the bunker, but was stopped by black troops. Two black soldiers went in. Doc Hampton was dead.

Denson had a theory about why Doc Hampton shot himself. “It was his last protest. He didn’t want to be killed by his oppressors.”

Hampton and Lowder became statistics in the new war, but to the GIs in his unit, Doc was a hero, a martyr to the cause of freedom. “I will remember Doc all my life and I will dedicate myself to keeping his memory,” said Benn.

In the days following the shooting, the battery area was tense. “The lifers ran around,” said Benn, “with their private arsenal of shotguns to use against us.” “There was a scrimmage line, us and them,” Denson added. The battery commander gave a “eulogy” for Doc which infuriated the men. He called Doc “this boy,” and implied Doc was crazy. “Some eulogy,” stormed Denson. “They attacked his character.”

“Hampton didn’t kill the sergeant,” said Denson. “There was a crime, but these two men were killed by the hierarchy.” Top, he said, was just a poor guy doing the establishment’s dirty work.

“I blame the IG [Inspector General] and the commander,” added Benn. “Top had a lot of good in him but they pushed him too far.”

“There was nothing wrong with Doc,” said Denson, still angry about the commander’s statement that Doc was crazy; “he just got pushed too far.” Doc, Denson said, was no different

Although the main objectives of Boyle’s escape with the news story, petition and tape had already been accomplished, Boyle kept on with his attempts to present the petition to Sen. Kennedy as he had promised the men of Bravo Company he would. The object was to press Kennedy to go all out for the grunts at Pace, since it was not yet clear that the Army would not file charges. At first Boyle was told that Kennedy was “to3o9 busy.” Finally the Senator agreed to a meeting. Here, in Boyle’s words from a letter to the men of Bravo Company, is how the meeting went:

I met Kennedy the next morning. I was with Ed Martin, a Boston newsman, when Kennedy came in.

“I’ve come a long way to bring this and the men who signed it wanted me to tell you something,” I said as he sat down. “You know, there were times when I didn’t think I’d make it. I was scared.”

“Yes, I know what it must have been like,” he said.

I guess I told him everything you wanted me to say. That you men were told you were going to Vietnam to fight for democracy, only to discover that you were fighting to make Vietnamese and American profiteers rich and to suppress a people seeking freedom. That you were left to rot in Vietnam; now, nobody gives a shit any more. People back in the world say, there were only eight killed in Vietnam last week. But what is it like, Senator, if you’re one of the eight? Would you have gone on that patrol, would you have given up your life for Thieu and Nixon? Would Nixon himself, would he walk point? Senator, I said, none of these men want to be the last to die. They love life, just as much as you, Senator, or Nixon, or the head of General Motors. They have just as much right to live as anyone else. Why throw away their lives any more? Haven’t we killed enough?

I think I made Kennedy feel uneasy, because he stood up very quickly. “What do you want me to do?” he said. “I’ve done everything I can.”

Photo caption: Sixty-five grunts at Firebase Pace — two-thirds of Bravo Company — sign the petition in less than two hours. End caption.

Sen. Kennedy Goes All Out

With the petition and tape on him, Richard Boyle grabbed a ride on a Medevac helicopter and made his way to Saigon. He turned his story over to a reporter for Agence France Presse rather than to an American news agency so that it would not be suppressed. Soon the mutiny was world-wide news, although many U.S. newspapers refused to mention it.

Once the story broke, Boyle was in danger of being arrested by Tieu's secret police (the "Hoat Vu"). Fortunately other newsmen were able to quickly pull some strings and get him on a plane for the U.S. When he got to San Francisco, Boyle learned that the story had gotten bigger than ever. As he summarized it:

"Senator Kennedy had publicly called for an investigation of the incident at Pace. The Army then pulled out all the men of Bravo Company, sending in Delta Company to replace them. The men of Bravo were sent to Firebase Timbuktu, to the rear, and were now out of danger. None of the men would be court-martialed. The Army had backed down.

"A few days later, the men of Delta Company heard about the refusal of Bravo Company. When a Delta patrol was ordered out, twenty men refused to go.

"Then the Army pulled out Delta Company, along with the entire company of artillery supporting the South Vietnamese in Cambodia. The monster guns which fired shells as big as tree trunks over a distance of thirty miles were left at Firebase Pace, spiked so that they would be of no use to the NVA.

"The U.S. Army was in retreat. The grunts had won."

from thousands of other black GIs who had taken a hard look at what they saw in Vietnam and didn't like it. "We're not winning the war in the glorious way we are hearing about — it's the biggest farce I've ever seen."

Just before we broke up, Benn told me about seeing an American intelligence officer, an "average Joe," question two Vietnamese, husband and wife. When the man refused to talk, said Benn, the officer threw the wife out of the chopper while in flight. "That's what the war does to people's minds," he said.

Next morning I walked into the orderly room and asked to see the battery commander, Capt. Robert Haney. The men stopped talking and the clerks stopped typing as I walked in.

"I think your newspaper is a rag and I'm not going to write your stories for you," Haney told me over a cup of coffee at the officers' mess.

"Captain," I said, "I've got statements of thirteen men who saw what happened to Lowder and Hampton. I would like your side of the story."

Haney was startled to learn that I had sneaked on base, interviewed his men and slept in his battery area without his knowing it. He became more cordial and agreed to answer my questions.

"It was a great surprise when I found out who had done it," he said, adding that Doc was the last man in the unit he would have expected to gun down Lowder. He admitted that the men had talked to him about Top, but added, "It never occurred to me something like this would happen. It is a trend, a part of a worldwide rebellion against authority." The Army, he said, had the same problems, generated by the rebellious attitudes of young people, as people had back home — "but we are going to take care of our problems."

"I didn't care for the way the battery had been run," Haney commented. "Individuals were not meeting Army standards in dress and in the way they looked." Doc's haircut, he said,

“didn’t conform.” He said Doc “appeared to be intelligent,” but must have had “a lapse of reasoning.”

Haney thought for a moment, then asked me, “Do you think a haircut should cost a man’s life?”

I tried to tell him some of the things his men had told me -that some of the GIs wanted to decide what it was they were going to die for. I told him I thought Doc Hampton had made his decision: the lifers were more his enemy than the Vietcong.

Haney recoiled at the word “lifer.” “I don’t like to be called a lifer,” he said. “We are career soldiers; it is a patriotic calling.”

Doc Hampton was not alone. All over Vietnam, GIs were fragging their officers and their lifer noncoms. On some patrols, if a lifer was too “gung ho,” he was shot in the back by his men, who would report he was killed in combat. More often, a unit ordered to go on patrol would simply go a few hundred yards beyond the wire and then sit down and smoke dope. I had been on one such patrol but for obvious reasons hadn’t reported it.

In many units, the men had virtual control, either by intimidation or by having non-lifers in command. In some places it was more like open warfare, with the heads and black troops on one side and the lifers on the other.

Of everything that was said to me by Doc’s friends at Cu Chi, something one of them said at the end of the evening stuck in my mind. He said it in a very matter-of-fact way, not as a boast or a threat but almost calmly:

“If they fuck with us they are going to die.”

Photo caption: Chu Lai, Vietnam: Marines on patrol wear black armbands to show solidarity with stateside anti-war demonstrations in November 1969. End caption.

Firebase Pace

From the air, Firebase Pace looked like an ugly square brown scar carved out of the thick green forest.

because of your influence on public opinion and on decisions made in the Senate.

“We’re in the peculiar position of being the last remaining ground troops that the U.S. has in a combat role and we suffer from problems that are peculiar only to us. We are ground troops who are supposedly in a defensive role (according to the Nixon administration) but who constantly find ourselves faced with the same combat role we were in ten months ago. At this writing we are under siege on Firebase Pace near the city of Tay Ninh. We are surrounded on three sides by Cambodia and on all sides by NVA. We are faced daily with the decision of whether to take a court-martial or participate in an offensive role. We have already had six persons refuse to go on a night ambush (which is suicidal as well as offensive), and may be court-martialed. With morale as low as it is there probably will be more before this siege of Pace is over.

“Our concern in writing you is not only to bring your full weight of influence in the Senate, but also to enlighten public opinion on the fact that we ground troops still exist. In the event of mass prosecution of our unit, our only hope would be public opinion and your voice.

[Signed by Sp4 Albert Grana and 64 other men — listed in Boyle’s book.]

Richard Boyle: After we finished the tape, Al Grana handed me the petition with the sixty-five signatures. It was two-thirds of the company, more than anyone had expected. Time was running out. If I was ever to get out of Pace, it had to be now.

Grana shook my hand the way grunts shake hands, clasping the thumb.

“I hope you can make them listen,” he said.

“I’ll try.”

“Good luck.”

I shook hands with each of the other men in the bunker the same way.

Richard Boyle: So they haven't fired at this bunker all day, and you haven't fired at them.

GI: That's right.

We're not going to do it, either.

You get the feeling sometimes that they don't really want to fool around with us that much, unless we fire back. They want us out of here, that's for sure.

Let's go. [laughter]

Couldn't take these guns out. I don't think they want these big eight-inchers out of here. VC want them out and the lifers wants them in, so we gotta stay here.

Richard Boyle: Didn't the petition start after they tried to single out six guys for court-martial?

GI: That's right.

Richard Boyle: How do you feel about that, picking out six guys for court-martial?

GI: It's rotten. They're trying to separate us, trying to keep it from being unified. They know if we're unified they can't do anything. They can't court-martial the whole company.

Just isn't six people that don't want to go out there, they're just trying to blame it on six people.

There's no way you can court-martial the whole company and keep it out of the papers and out of national attention. You can do it with six guys, and no one'll ever hear of it 'cept the Stars and Stripes. But if you court-martial the whole company it's bound to get out.

Now we got the petition.

Somebody want to read that, man?

Here, John, read it.

Read it for the tape.

"Okay, this is the letter we're sending to Senator [Edward] Kennedy:

"We the undersigned of Bravo Company, First Battalion, Twelfth Cav, First Cav Division, feel compelled to write you

It sat astride Route 22, a muddy unpaved road, and was surrounded by several sections of barbed wire, rocket screens, and an outer trench system three sandbags deep. Even with this protection, the one hundred artillerymen manning the two eight-inch and two 175-mm guns had suffered nearly 35 percent casualties in the first two weeks of the North Vietnamese offensive. Already enemy fire had knocked out one of the big guns, and was gradually whittling down the artillery battery. Something had to be done to protect them, and it was obvious the South Vietnamese weren't doing the job. The fifteen South Vietnamese armored personnel carriers three kilometers down the road could possibly have knocked out the NVA mortar rocket positions, but they didn't move or fire.

There were also indications that relations between South Vietnamese and Americans at Pace were none too friendly. A heavy layer of barbed wire plus sandbagged defenses separated the two compounds.

When I arrived at the base I introduced myself at the tactical operations center to the first sergeant. Then I met Capt. Robert Cronin, who commanded the company of ground troops sent to protect the artillery at Pace (although, according to MACV, there weren't any American ground troops there). (Note: MACV is pronounced MacVee: Military Assistance Command-Vietnam, i.e., the U.S. Army.)

We had a friendly discussion and he briefed me on the military situation at the base.

His company, Bravo, had been sent in three days earlier when another company of the First Cav Division was pulled out — which Cronin told me was "normal rotation policy."

Cronin had a heavy, neatly trimmed mustache, horn-rimmed glasses, and a pipe. If it weren't for his helmet and flak jacket he would have looked like a stateside insurance salesman or stockbroker.

Cronin was facing a tactical, possibly a political, dilemma. The North Vietnamese had built an extensive underground

bunker complex inside the treeline along the Cambodian border, on Pace's northeastern side. From these bunkers, NVA gunners would quickly set up a mortar tube or rocket launcher, fire, and duck back into their tunnels. Within seconds the Americans would pour out machine-gun fire, followed by artillery and even air strikes; but by then the gunner would have jumped into his gopher hole and scurried through an underground tunnel, emerging about fifty meters away.

All the artillery and air fire the Americans poured on the North Vietnamese seemed useless. The battlefield technology developed by the Americans, representing billions of dollars — electronically controlled B-52s, Spooky gunships which pour out enough machine-gun bullets in a few seconds to fill up a football field, and all the other gadgets — seemed useless against a few men with a mortar who could pop up at will, drop in a few rounds, and duck back into the safety of their tunnel with virtual impunity. The electronic battlefield, the pride of the American military establishment, was being thwarted by troops using the same kinds of mortars used in the First World War. Cronin knew it, his superiors knew it, and his troops knew it.

Cronin was very candid: the artillery commander wanted more protection, he told me, and somebody had to go out and get those North Vietnamese rocket and mortar tubes. I had seen at Ben Het and Bu Prang that it's suicide to sit back and let the enemy pound your positions until there is nothing left but shattered flesh and mud. Dien Bien Phu proved this to the French.

Somebody had to go out and get those North Vietnamese bunkers, or within a day, maybe two, the enemy mortar and rocket positions would multiply faster than the rats who were also fighting the Americans for domination of Firebase Pace. When the North Vietnamese had enough fire-power to knock out the camp's big guns, they would rain a deadly barrage of fire on the Americans, covering a sapper attack. And that would be it.

Photo caption: After weeks of constant mortar and rocket attacks, GI's read reports in Stars and Stripes saying that shelling at Pace has been "light." (Picture shows GIs in a bunker looking at a newspaper and discussing.) End caption.

Richard Boyle: Do you think you're fighting for democracy here?

GI: How can it be a democracy with a one-man election? Yeah, what kind of democracy is that?

Everybody knew what it was about. Everybody knew that election was phony.

Election — it was no election.

You didn't have anybody else to vote for.

It's always the higher highs, man, they don't have to go out there. They just send us out there. They get to sit back here and talk.

It's easy to tell someone to do somethin', but it's a different story when you have to go out there yourself. Just playing games out there.

Playing with human lives.

Another thing, man. I brought some peace shirts back to the guys, and the NCO won't even let us wear them just 'cause he's against peace.

He calls us hypocrites 'cause we wear peace signs. Like we wanted to come over here and fight. Like we can't believe in peace 'cause we're carrying an 6; that's utterly ridiculous.

I always did believe in protecting my own country if it came to that.

Yeah, if it came down to that, but...

But see, I'm over here fighting a war for a cause that means nothing to me. It means nothin' but my life, and life's a very dear thing to me, man. I have a hell of a lot to go back to.

Richard Boyle: Have you guys fired today?

GI: No.

Richard Boyle: Why?

GI: Won't mess with them if they don't mess with us.

He [Cronin] was talking about the reputation of the company. He said that if we talked to the news media and told what was going on, the news media would distort it and twist it up, and would destroy our company reputation.

Our company reputation don't mean shit.

They told me last night they were bringing in a battalion of ARVN some time today. They was supposed to be operating in this area. Okay, if we refuse our mission last night, then why can't the ARVN go out on that patrol today? Why is it necessary to send the platoon out there?

'Cause the lifers want to get the body count. They don't give a damn if it's GI bodies.

They want some brownie points, that's all they want. Get their cards punched.

They ain't gettin' them punched with my carcass. Or my carcass either.

Richard Boyle: Well, look here. Why are you over here?

GI: 'Cause I didn't want to go to prison.

This stinking, fucking war.

Everybody over here don't know why they're over here. It's not accomplishing anything. I mean, you see what you do. Have you ever accomplished anything out in the bush? You go out there and you make contact, but do you accomplish anything really? Every time you go out, the same...

We captured the black-market flour that the VC bought off the black market in Saigon.

Yeah, tell them about that.

Made in Seattle, Washington.

Richard Boyle: I heard the ARVN are stealing your food.

GI: They always steal our food. The ARVNs go out and get it and we can't get it back from them.

We aren't rebelling just against going out on night ambush. We're rebelling against the whole situation, being stuck out here.

While we were discussing the tactical situation at Pace, a mortar round landed about twenty yards from Cronin. "See what I mean?" he said after we ducked into the TOC. "Somebody has got to get those mortars."

Photo caption: ARVN troops across the border in Cambodia (3 miles from Pace) coming under mortar fire. End caption.

Lt. Col. Robert J. McAfee was the operations officer for Fire-base Pace, the honcho. He was very military. He stood proud and erect. McAfee didn't stay in Pace at night; he commuted daily in his own chopper.

"Hi, Colonel," I said. "Can you give me your appraisal of the situation here?"

He said we were "clobbering them, and clobbering them good. We got fifteen hundred bodies."

"That's interesting, Colonel," I said. "How do you know?" He said patrols were sent out to count the bodies. I didn't tell him that during the three days I spent with the ARVN in Cambodia I didn't see anybody going out to count bodies. "Thank you, Colonel," I said.

McAfee was an artillery officer and he wanted Cronin to do something about the mortars and rockets pounding his troops. The obvious solution would be to send those fifteen South Vietnamese armored personnel carriers against the North Vietnamese. But the South Vietnamese APCs weren't moving, and Cronin knew it. Even if Pace were attacked, they wouldn't move. I knew-1 had just been there.

When I saw Cronin later that afternoon, he told me he was requesting permission to send out a platoon and a couple of squads, about thirty men, that night.

The men at Pace were trapped. The North Vietnamese had cut the road to the north and had massed men along the southern portion of Route 22. I had talked a few days earlier with a U.S. helicopter pilot in Tay Ninh who had been shot down over Route 22 a few miles south of Pace. An AK round split his

co-pilot's helmet but missed his skull as the North Vietnamese opened up with everything they had. "It was bad shit," he said.

From Pace we could see the endless parade of ARVN wounded limping back up Route 22. There was a relief convoy trying to fight its way north on 22, but it was still a long way away. The North Vietnamese had the base surrounded.

None of this was ever reported at the five o'clock follies, and the press was telling the American people that the battle was over, a victory for the Allies.

MACV didn't even admit that Cronin and his men existed, at least not at Pace. To knock out the North Vietnamese positions which were blasting the base from the Cambodian side of the border, Cronin would have needed at least four companies. But politically America couldn't afford another Hamburger Hill. If four companies that didn't even exist were suddenly wiped out, the flak raised in Congress would be horrendous. The brass would also be hard pressed to explain how four companies got zapped in a battle that had already been won. Once again the military had to compromise between political and military necessities.

The American brass back in Saigon had few options. They could reinforce Pace with more U.S. battalions and push the North Vietnamese back. From a strictly military point of view, this was their soundest move. But politically the pitfalls were too great. They could pull out the two hundred American troops, abandoning the big guns supporting the South Vietnamese in Cambodia. But the military perils of this option were even greater. Pace was the cornerstone of the defense of northern Tay Ninh province. The South Vietnamese didn't have any trained troops to take over the big guns at Pace, and if they were abandoned, the elite ARVN paratroopers and Rangers in Cambodia would be left without long-range fire support. They would still have air power, but they would lack the instant reaction of artillery, and with their morale already low, the loss of that fire support might be all that was needed to create a

Richard Boyle: You think the people don't know the truth of what's going on here.⁹

GI: People that go home on leave [say] everybody says, How's things back in the barracks over in Vietnam? What barracks?

We sleep out on the ground.

No one in the rear believes it. Even the MPs won't believe that we're out here.

We're not supposed to be fighting this war anyway. We're supposed to be turning it over to them.

You can tell they don't have their hearts in it, man. They're being pushed out there and they come running right back.

Do any of the people back in the world know that [Defense Secretary] Melvin Laird said something to the effect that our combat role had ended? And the fact was we were still in the bush, man, when he said that.

Seven people got hurt one day in an ambush and that was the day it [Laird's statement] was in the newspaper.

Yesterday when Hooker got it in this very same bunker it didn't seem like combat was over.

See that hole up there in that screen? That's where the shrapnel came through here.

Man's got twenty-one days left in the country and they got him out here.

You know, the biggest thing about it is most guys go home next month.

The thing is, we're all getting short.

Look at it this way, man. If you went out there and something happened to you, like I was saying, you think people back there in the world would ever hear about it?

That's freakin' me out, man.

And they always say the grunt or the enlisted man is always the one who screws it up. It's never the leader. We're always the one, we always screw up, not them.

He said not to talk to the press. He said the strike wasn't called off 'cause we refused to go; he said it was because ARVN was out there. He said we was goin' out today.

Richard Boyle: Are you going out today?

GI: That's what he said.

I'm not going out today.

Richard Boyle: I know they told you not to talk to the press, but did they tell you they were going to court-martial you?

GI: He told me he'd give me time to think about it. I told him, man, I've thought about it all the way over here. I wasn't goin' to jeopardize my life. Nine times out of ten I got a good chance of not coming back.

I just been in the country three weeks. They try to say the old guys influenced me. When I been here for three days I saw what's goin' on for myself. It's suicide going out there. ARVN comes back all messed up, no arms, no legs. And they want us to go out there.

Sixteen men go out there at night. We don't know what's out there, could be booby traps, could be anything. We don't know.

Let's face it: if B-52 bombers can't knock 'em out, and napalm can't knock 'em out, what are we going to do? What can fifteen men do?

We know they got 51 cal's out there.

They got choppers down.

Not only that, we're not even supposed to be out there.

They could see us, but we can't see them. They could see us leave and just wait. Once we get outside they can come in behind us, cut us off, then get us from the front and back. You can't call for air support, 'cause it won't come in here.

We're not mad just because of this, though; we're generally mad.

Back home the people don't know what the hell's going on, either. They're just deceiving the people.

re-enactment of the rout in Laos and the debacle at Snoul. If the crack paratroopers and Rangers deserted, there would be little chance that the poorly disciplined men of the ARVN 25th Division could stand up to Giap's shock troops. Without Pace, Tay Ninh would be vulnerable; if Tay Ninh fell, Saigon could be next.

The brass had a third option: do nothing. But to do nothing would be to invite military and political disaster. Unhindered, the North Vietnamese could obliterate Pace, and America in the fall of 1971 could not stand a Dien Bien Phu, no matter how small.

That afternoon Cronin got the word from McAfee. Fifteen men were to go out. Fifteen men against the North Vietnamese 208th Regiment.

Inside Pace, rats and men battled for control. The rats were winning.

There are probably no bigger or meaner rats than Vietnamese rats. They have to be big and mean just to survive, and war-zone rats are even meaner than their city cousins. They are afraid of nothing. At Ben Het I saw rats eat the dead. Kick them in the head and they'd leap for your leg, biting at your boots, scores of them scurrying all around, furry and black.

"Keep the door shut," said the cook, "so the rats won't get in."

Each day it seemed there were more and more rats. They thrived on war. The grunts tried to kill the rats, setting peanut butter booby traps, but for every rat K1A, ten more came to take its place.

From the cook's hootch I could see some of the troops of Bravo Company passing a pipe. They were sitting on a pile of sandbags, and as I watched them I wondered if they were any different from the men I had seen at the battle of Queson, when Alpha Company refused to go back into AK Valley.

Photo caption: Inside a bunker at Pace, during mortar and rocket attack. End caption.

Then the entire division was close to revolt, but that was 1969, and it was the Americal, not the First Cav, the pride of the U.S. Army.

I walked over to the grunts sitting on the sandbags, and one of them quickly hid the bowl behind his back.

“Can I have a hit?”

He hesitated for a minute, then broke into a grin and handed me the bowl.

“What are you, man — CID?”

“No, I’m a reporter.”

“No shit.”

We sat on the sandbags, looking out across no-man’s land, toward that ominous treeline, passing the bowl. We knew the NVA were watching us too, but you can’t spend all the time in the bunkers with the rats, you’ve got to come up for air sometimes.

The first round hit about thirty feet away.

“Incoming!” one of them shouted as we scrambled for machine-gun bunker five.

“Shit, man, that was close.”

“Too close.”

We felt safe in bunker five; at least we were protected from shrapnel.

“Asshole tryin’ to do us when we’re doin’ a bowl,” grunted one of the men as he grabbed a LAW (light assault weapon, which fires a 4 mm projectile) and fired two rounds at the North Vietnamese rocket gunner in the treeline about three hundred meters away.

“Sit down, man,” said another grunt. “You wanna draw fire?”

It was a very personal war there at hunker five. Only a short distance separated us from them; after awhile we felt we knew each other.

“Incoming!”

We dropped to the floor, crouching next to the safety of the bunker wall. That round hit closer than the last.

Right in this bunker.

A lot of the people are kind of wondering if anyone back in the world knows that we’re out here, you know. Like they say that only two batteries artillery are supposed to be here but no grunts are here. We don’t even exist. We’re just meat.

Richard Boyle: Do you think they’re trying to hide the fact that you’re here?

GI: Yes.

No mail, no support, no nothin’.

Richard Boyle: I heard that your platoon may go out tonight.

GI: Right. The Second Platoon is supposed to go on night ambush.

Richard Boyle: Are you going?

GI: No.

The Second Platoon is not moving from their bunker.

Fact is, they might lay off, they haven’t shot any today. If they lay off, once they know [we’re not firing] — they got FOs [Forward Observers] out there. Soon as we start going out there, we’re sitting ducks, man.

Richard Boyle: Do you think you’d be alive if you went out last night?

GI: No, man.

If you go out there at night, say you take thirty or forty men, they’ll never find you no more. That’ll be the last they see of you, once you walk off this firebase. ‘Cause if they can’t go out there to get those dudes out of that chopper that crashed about four days ago, they ain’t going to go out there looking for you in the jungle, man.

Photo caption: “They say...no grunts are here. We don’t even exist. We’re just meat.” (Picture shows two tense-looking GIs in a bunker.) End caption.

Richard Boyle: What’d they tell you this morning, the captain and the lieutenant?

GI: Well, he says not to talk to the press.

He called us in one at a time, man, trying to...

Photo caption: "People that go home on leave say everybody says, 'How's things in the barracks over in Vietnam?' What barracks. We sleep out on the ground." — from tape made at Pace. End caption.

The Grunts

This is Richard Boyle on October 10, 1971, at Firebase Pace, about two kilometers from the Cambodian border sitting in a bunker with about a dozen grunts of the First Cav Division.

Richard Boyle: Last night they were ordered...the Third Platoon was ordered to go on night...

GI: Let's kill that and go back.

Oh man, keep it just like it is.

Richard Boyle: All right...ordered to go into night combat assault...night ambush...several of the men refused to go and none of the fifteen in the patrol wanted to go. This morning several of the men were told they would be court-martialed for...what is that for, Chris? What did they tell you you'd be court-martialed for?

GI: For refusing a direct order.

Richard Boyle: For refusing a direct order. The other platoons, the Second and First, were angered at the fact that the Army picked out a few men to punish. And now several of the men from the Second and Third platoons are in this bunker. What happened?

GI: When we first came here they told us our mission and that was to be on a defensive; but night ambush is an offensive role. And it's plain suicide going out there in the middle of the night.

It's plain fact that the NVA have been mortaring us every fucking...you know, every day. And they hit us with...one guy got...in John's squad there, one guy got wounded in the shoulder and in the head yesterday by a rocket.

Nobody saw Hooker get it. He didn't say anything. The blood pumped out of his temple in quick spurts and then flowed down his face, dripping on his shirt. It's amazing how much blood a man has in him.

Hooker slowly touched his temple with a jerky movement and looked at the blood on his fingers. Then he looked at us. "I'm only twenty-one days short. I don't want to die."

At first no one moved. We just watched the blood squirting out of Hooker's temple. It was like a bad dream in which something is happening but you can't move.

"You're not going to die, Hook," one of them said as he gently laid Hooker down. Then some medics carried him to the medical bunker.

We dove into a safer underground bunker as more shells hit around us. A candle flickered as about eight of us stretched out on air mattresses, hoping the bunker wouldn't take a direct hit from a rocket. Three sandbags may stop a mortar round, but a rocket can cut through a bunker with ease.

Al Grana was Hooker's buddy. Everybody liked Hooker, he always made everyone feel good. "It's the shits, man, Hook getting it," said Al.

We all hoped Hooker would live, but nobody talked about it. We didn't even know how badly he was wounded. Hooker had talked about going home. "Whooooee, I'm just twenty-one days short today," he had said. Hooker, like all the other grunts, counted off each day left in Nam. Some carved notches on the bunker, others wrote it on their helmets; every man knew how many days short he was. The grunts are scared most when they first arrive and when they're short. The shorter they get the worse it is. They see too many of their buddies get it just before going home. "Charley ain't lettin' you go, man," they'd say.

After about an hour they got bad news: they couldn't get a Medevac for Hooker because the ceiling was too low for a chopper to land.

“They’ve picked up mass movements of dinks on the radar,” said the sergeant. “Maybe up to four thousand, who knows.”

“Whaddya think they’re goin’ to do?” one of the grunts asked.

“Who knows, but it don’t look good.”

Then they got the worst news. “Cronin’s sending fifteen men from the Third out at 2100 on a night ambush.”

“You gotta be shittin’ me, man,” said one of the men to the sergeant.

Photo caption: Replacements for wounded landing at Pace. At right (with head bandaged) is Hooker, hit by mortar shrapnel. End caption.

“No shit, they’re getting ready now.”

After the sergeant left, the men talked about the mission.

“They gotta be insane to send fifteen guys out beyond the burr [perimeter]. Fifteen guys against a whole regiment of dinks.”

“If they get hit there’ll be no Medevac.”

“Sure as fuck the ARVN won’t try to help them.”

“Most of them guys are newbies, man, they won’t know what in the fuck to do if they’re hit.”

At first Al Grana didn’t speak. He just listened. Then he turned to me.

“Do you really think anybody gives a shit about us?”

“I don’t know,” I said. “The politicians say they do, but I don’t know.”

Grana looked at me again. “This is insanity. The whole thing is just insane.”

None of the others spoke. Grana continued, speaking softly. “Do you think, if anyone back in the world really knew what was going on here, they’d let this madness continue?”

“I don’t know, Al,” I said. “I don’t think they want to know, not really. It’s better for their conscience.”

“There must be somebody who’ll listen. They can’t cover it up forever.”

Now there were no longer two sides at Pace, there were four – the lifers; the South Vietnamese, who seemed almost to be spectators; the North Vietnamese, possibly massing for a final attack; and the grunts, who, like the ARVN, were opting out. To the grunts, it wasn’t the North Vietnamese who were the enemy, it was the lifers. McAfee knew, when he heard that grunt’s bolt click, that the grunts had power. They had the machine guns, the light assault weapons. The grunts outgunned the lifers by about 30 to 1. After taking 30 percent casualties, even the artillerymen who manned the big guns had low morale. If it came down to it, most of them might join the Bravo Company rebellion rather than side with the lifers.

Grana came back from the meeting with the other platoons and reported that they now had over 50 percent of the company. They were bordering on open mutiny. The only thing that could save them now was public opinion.

“What if they try to cover this up, say it never happened?” Grana asked me.

“It’s very likely.” I had seen them do it before. The world of the Saigon follies was like 1984. When the South Vietnamese were routed in Laos it was a “victory.” Thieu and his cohorts were the “democracy” slate.

“They’ll simply say it never happened. How can you have a revolt in a unit that doesn’t exist? They’ll say I’m crazy, or that I made the whole story up. When it comes down to it, who do you think they’ll believe,” I asked, “ – me, or the U.S. Army?”

“But we’ve gone too far. There must be a way to let the people back in the world know the truth about what’s really happening here.”

“Hey, man, wait a minute,” said one of Al’s buddies. He came back with a portable tape recorder. “It doesn’t have any batteries, but maybe some of the other guys can scrounge some up.”

“That’s it.”

“Now they can’t say it didn’t happen,” said Al.

They had to regain that control, and soon. McAfee sent Cronin to bunker five. When Cronin entered the bunker, the men turned away, ignoring him. "I want you all to get shaves and clean up," he demanded in a military voice. Still the men ignored him. Then he grabbed a rifle and opened the bolt. "This thing is filthy," he said.

"Oh shit, who needs this," said one of the grunts, and walked out. The rest gradually left, one by one, until Cronin was alone with one man, trying to inspect his rifle.

After Cronin left, the men returned. "We ought to do something about that asshole," one said.

"He's not worth it," said another. "We've got more important things to worry about."

"Yeah — like what about the dinks?"

From bunker five we could see out over the tops of the bunkers across the several hundred meters of no-man's-land to the forbidding treeline where they were waiting. They hadn't fired all morning, but every man knew they were watching.

"I wish we could let them know we have nothing against them," one of the grunts remarked, looking out over his M-60 machine gun. "We just want to get out of here."

"Hey, maybe they know what's going on. They haven't fired today."

"Bullshit," said another grunt. "How could they know?"

"I don't know. But they can see us and they can see we ain't doing anything to them. Maybe they'll lay off."

"Yeah," said another. "If we lay off them, maybe they'll lay off us."

The men agreed, and passed the word to the other platoons: nobody fires unless fired upon. As of about 1100 hours on October 10, 1971, the men of Bravo Company, 1/12, First Cav Division, declared their own private ceasefire with the North Vietnamese. For the first time since they got to Pace, it was all quiet on the Cambodian front.

"They've done very well so far," I said.

We talked for about an hour. I told Grana and the others that I had become too cynical to believe anything could be done.

"I'm sorry, Al," I said. "I just don't know what it'll take to end this war. I hear the vote is coming up in Congress and it'll be close, but I don't know. I don't have much faith left."

Somebody asked the time. The patrol would be going out in a few hours.

"First Hook got it. Next it'll be those fifteen guys from the Third Platoon. Tomorrow it'll probably be us. How many more will it take?" Grana asked me. I couldn't answer.

He looked at me again. "Somebody's got to do something to stop this shit."

Mutiny

Later in the evening when the shelling stopped we crawled out of the bunker and walked over to machine-gun bunker five. One grunt's mother had sent him a jar of pickled pigs' feet and he was passing them around.

"Fucking asshole Cronin," snorted one of the grunts as he speared a pig's foot with his knife.

"Somebody oughta give Cronin a pickled pig's foot."

Everybody laughed. In the American Division Cronin probably would have gotten a grunt's calling card that night — a CS grenade, maybe even a frag.

The sergeant who had spoken to us before came over to our bunker in a hurry.

"They ain't goin'," he said.

"What?" asked Al.

"When Schuler was giving instructions, Chris said, 'Go fuck yourself; I ain't going.'"

"No shit," said another grunt. "That crazy Greek fucker — he's got balls."

“What did Schuler do?” asked another.

“What could he do?” said the sergeant. “Then five of the other guys said pretty much the same thing.”

“Wh000eee!” shouted one of the grunts, giving the clenched-fist salute. Some of them slapped skin palm to palm.

“What do you think they’re going to do to them?” one of the men asked the sergeant.

“I dunno. Probably a court-martial.”

That night the men of Hooker’s platoon decided to hold a meeting in the morning and keep in contact with the other platoons. “We got to stick together,” one of them said. “They can’t fuck with us all.”

Next morning we heard in the chow line that Cronin was drawing up court-martial papers for each of the six men who had refused to go on the night ambush. Refusal of a direct order usually got a grunt five years at Leavenworth, and the men of Hooker’s platoon were talking about it.

Hooker still hadn’t been evacuated, although everybody now knew he would be all right. He came over to say good-bye after breakfast — the traditional Army standby: eggs, bacon, and the mushy brown porridge the grunts call “shit on the shingles.”

“Hey, man, you’re goin’ home. Fucking bastard,” said one of Hooker’s buddies, glad he was okay.

“I couldn’t sleep, it hurt too much,” he said. “But I feel all right now.”

After breakfast Al Grana came over and asked me whether I’d worked for Robert Kennedy in the ’68 election; I told him I’d helped put out campaign newspapers in the Irish sections of San Francisco. He then asked if I knew Ted Kennedy. (I had met Ted Kennedy several times in the campaign, and was with him when Robert was killed, but I doubted he’d remember.)

“Why?” I asked.

“I’ve got an idea,” he replied.

Nobody said anything. Then one of the grunts said to me, “You don’t have to go, man.” Another cleared the bolt of his M-16 with a loud clank.

Photo caption: Petition moves from bunker to bunker at Pace. Here, men in bunker five signing, in spite of threats from brass. End caption.

“I’d better move along,” said McAfee. Then he walked outside. The men watched sullenly as he pretended to inspect one of the bunkers, lifting a tarp canopy. “It looks okay,” he said to his aide, who stuck out his chest.

“What a fucking idiot,” said one grunt audibly. “No wonder we’re in such a mess, with shitheads like that running this place.”

After McAfee left, one of the grunts from the First Platoon came over to bunker five and said there were already forty-six signatures on the petition. He also told us the lifers were warning the men not to sign it. “A lot of the grunts are scared,” he said.

They had to get a majority of the one hundred men in the company to sign the petition if they wanted to save Chris and the others from court-martial.

“We’ll get the signatures,” Grana said; “I know we will.”

There was now a sense of camaraderie in Bravo Company. They were all in it together and felt a growing solidarity. Maybe two years before they would have fragged McAfee; now they didn’t have to. They didn’t even hate him. “I just feel sorry for the lifers,” one of the grunts said. “They just don’t know where it’s at.”

They had only contempt for McAfee and the other lifers. McAfee was playing the movie colonel, but nobody wanted to play his spear carrier, and McAfee knew it. As the hours passed and the men got more signatures on their petition, McAfee and the other lifers were losing more control of the unit.

what to do. They had all the helicopters; it would be a long walk to Tay Ninh. Even if I did get through; I could be picked up on the way to Saigon. My press card had run out and I was now in the country illegally. They could arrest me and there was nothing anybody could do about it. I also knew the Army might try to trump something up, maybe say I engineered the refusal. Maybe, I thought, that was why that "L.A. Times photographer" kept snapping my picture talking with Grana and the others.

"The chances of you guys pulling this off aren't very good," I finally said.

"I know. But somebody's got to try," he said, looking at me.

"Anyway, my chances of ever getting your petition to Kennedy are slim. The Army may try to cover up the story, the press will call me an ego-tripper, and I doubt if I'll ever get past Kennedy's palace guards."

Grana said nothing.

"Okay," I said, "I'll try it."

I'll never forget their look of hope when the men of Grana's platoon started passing the petition. It passed quickly to other platoons.

"I wonder when the lifers'll find out," said one of the men in machine-gun bunker five.

"I think they already know -here conies that arty colonel, McAfee or whatever it is."

There were about seven men in the hunker, stretched out. McAfee stuck his head in the bunker, and one of the grunts said, "Here comes the scumba-a-ag." McAfee pretended not to hear.

None of them jumped up and saluted; in fact they ignored him. They didn't really hate him, it seemed he was just an intruder.

McAfee seemed to feel uncomfortable. He looked at me and said it was very dangerous for me in the bunker. "You know, they have rocket positions in the treeline over there," he said. "A direct hit would blow this place up."

Later in the morning Grana and I walked over to the Third Platoon's bunkers and talked with the platoon leader. "What happened last night?" I asked.

"Oh, not much."

"I know about it, Lieutenant. Did you want to go yourself?"

He didn't say anything, but it appeared he had not been too eager to go on the mission. It was obvious he didn't want to talk about it, so I spoke with the other men of the platoon.

The six that had refused were scared. From the day a GI takes the oath until he is discharged, he is a cog in the green machine. The lifers run his life, and they keep power by letting the GI know that no matter what he does the Army will always have the last word. He is the Army's prisoner, GI — government issue.

The lifers knew they couldn't have an army in which the men decided when and if they wanted to fight. The only way they could keep discipline — and the six men knew it — was to come down hard and make an example of offenders. In the Army's book of crimes, refusing to go into combat is one of the worst. If the brass let the grunts get away with refusing to fight, the entire system would face collapse. As soon as other units learned that grunts had told their lieutenant to go fuck himself, they too would refuse orders. The grunts were afraid of dying short, and now most of them were beginning to suspect that the war was short. No one wanted to be the last man to die in the war.

Photo caption: Sp4 Chris Panoutreleos (one of the original six who refused to move out) being questioned by company commander and artillery major. Chris has back to camera. End caption.

Chris was scared the most.

"Cronin said he wants to see me," he said.

"Good luck," I told him.

Cronin and the artillery major took Chris aside. Chris scratched his neck nervously as they took turns firing ques-

tions at him. I wanted to get a shot of them threatening the court-martial, since I knew from experience how the Army could change the facts around, but I didn't want them to see me. I pretended to shoot an airstrike, then suddenly swung my camera.

About thirty grunts were standing around talking when I got back to bunker five. Something about them was different. They were the same men I had seen the day before, but somehow they were different.

"Hi, Al, what's up?"

"We just had a meeting with some of the guys in other platoons. We ain't goin' to let the lifers do it to Chris and the others."

"What are you going to do?"

"First of all, we ain't going to go out beyond the burr. We were ordered to go out on a patrol by Cronin, but nobody's going. And we had a vote. We ain't lettin' the lifers fuck over those guys."

"Right on," said a couple of other grunts.

"Remember when we talked last night?" Grana said. "Do you think we could get just one senator back in the world to really listen to us?"

"Ah man, they don't give a shit about us," said one of his buddies.

What, he said, if the men of Bravo wrote a petition to a top U.S. senator telling him what was really happening at Pace? Would it do any good? Would anybody listen?

There was a lot I didn't have the heart to tell them. Every senator has a huge staff of aides, as many as forty, some of whom do nothing but screen mail. The odds of a powerful senator ever even seeing their petition would be one in a thousand. If reports of My Lai could sit on liberal senators' desks for weeks, what chance would their petition have of ever getting any attention?

The men of Bravo had another problem. Officially they didn't exist. They weren't even allowed to send out mail: if the American people knew U.S. troops were being ordered into the Cambodian border area, the brass could face a storm of protest both from Congress and the people. So the grunts could be overrun by the North Vietnamese or court-martialed before their petition even got out.

"Who are you going to write it to?" I asked Grana.

"We talked about that, too. Do you think Ted Kennedy would listen to us? Do you think he'd care?"

"Yeah, I think so." I couldn't say no. "You know, man"-1 hesitated for a second, because I knew Grana was thinking the same thing — "the lifers will never let that petition out of here. Rebellin' grunts, facing death, sending a petition to Ted Kennedy — that's a scenario the Army brass wouldn't like to see. They're going to come down on you real hard."

"I know," he said. "It was just an idea."

Grana knew the Army would try to make examples of the six who refused to go, and if the other men in the company joined their revolt the Army would be faced with a growing mutiny. If they couldn't stop it at the platoon level, they would have to crush the rebellion at company level. If whole companies refused to fight, the U.S. military could face open mutiny in the ranks. He also knew the Army would do everything it could to try to keep the story covered up so they could deal with the men of Bravo without anyone in the outside world knowing about it. A petition to Kennedy — if it ever got to him — might save them. But time was running out. They were facing two enemies — the lifers inside and Giap's 208th Regiment outside. There was only one way to be sure Kennedy would get the grunts' petition, and that was for someone to take it to him in person. I was the only one at Pace who could do it, and we both knew it.

But I didn't want to. Once the lifers knew I had the petition, they would probably try to keep me at Pace until they decided