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Validation in Vietnam: Motivations and Experiences of Vietnam Veterans who Returned to Vietnam as Tourists

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VALIDATION IN VIETNAM: MOTIVATIONS AND EXPERIENCES OF VIETNAM VETERANS WHO RETURNED TO VIETNAM AS TOURISTS

by

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ABSTRACT

The current historiography on the memory of the Vietnam War has primarily looked at how the collective memory of the war has been constructed through various factors. Scholars such as Jerry Lembcke, Patrick Hagopian, and Marita Sturken tend to examine monuments, film, and oral histories to establish a basis for how the memory of the Vietnam War was constructed and how these legacies from the war shaped the U.S. as a society going forward. Recently, scholars have begun looking more at the return trips of veterans to Vietnam as a source for understanding how veterans remembered their service.

By engaging with these scholars, this thesis argues that some veterans who returned to Vietnam as tourists found validation for their military service. To prove this argument, this thesis examines a variety of veteran narratives ranging from memoirs, news articles, and interviews of veterans who have returned to Vietnam. By encountering a modernizing Vietnam and experiencing the friendliness of the Vietnamese people, these veterans received validation for their service that they remember not receiving from the American public when they returned from the war. By finding validation, these veterans construct a narrative that promotes the country as a welcoming place for veterans where they can find closure and healing and encourages other veterans to return to Vietnam. Those veterans who have returned to Vietnam and found validation for their military service reinterpret their place within the collective memory of the war.

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DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to my parents, Brian and Lisa Washam. Their unwavering support throughout the completion of this project have been invaluable. Without their love and support, I would not be where I am today. Thank you both.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

CHAPTER I - INTRODUCTION

A few years after returning from his tour of duty in Vietnam, Steve Hopper attended a 4th of July parade. In the parade were veterans of World War II, the Korean War, and the Vietnam War. As the parade marched by, Hopper noticed that the WWII and Korean War veterans were out in front marching with their heads held high. The veterans felt proud of their military service and the crowd enjoyed watching them in the parade. Later, the Vietnam veterans' float came into view. It consisted of a veteran in a cage portraying a prisoner of war. The Vietnam veterans marching alongside the float, all dressed in shabby clothes, had their heads hanging in shame. After the parade was over, one of the Vietnam veterans participating in the parade came up to Hopper and asked him if he was a veteran. Hopper told him that he was, and the veteran asked him if he would like to join their group. Hopper declined the offer and told him that "when you can walk down a parade route and hold your head up, and be proud of the fact that you served your country, I will join your group."[1]

Many soldiers returning from the Vietnam War remembered being greeted with animosity by protesters at the airports. As shown from the story of Steve Hopper attending the 4th of July parade, some Vietnam veterans saw themselves as looked down upon by the American public, especially when compared with veterans of WWII and the Korean War. They felt that their service in Vietnam was not appreciated by the American people, and as such, they felt no pride in their service. Hopper himself remembered returning from Vietnam and being jeered at and called baby killer by protesters at the airport. Veterans like Hopper believed that the way the American people welcomed them

[1] Steve Hopper, interview by author, Hattiesburg, MS, September 5, 2021.

home contributed to some veterans having a hard time readjusting to civilian life.[2] Stories of being harassed and spat upon by protestors at the airport has been shared among Vietnam veterans and has become one of the enduring images remembered of the Vietnam War. These negative memories of veterans returning home from Vietnam have contributed to the creation of a narrative that veterans were mistreated and largely blamed for the loss of the war and the atrocities carried out upon the Vietnamese people. Vietnam soldiers were identified as victims of the war, an identity that many veterans claimed in order to rehabilitate their image within the collective memory of the war.[3] By rehabilitating their image, some veterans have been able to validate their military service.

Vietnam veterans who have returned to Vietnam as tourists and their experiences on their trips are the focus of this thesis. A veteran can be motivated to return for a variety of reasons, but their experiences while back in Vietnam is what impacts them the most. By returning to Vietnam, a veteran sees that the country has modernized and has moved on from the war. They come into contact with an economy that is largely capitalist, and people who are friendly and welcoming towards returning veterans. Seeing the transformation of Vietnam can put the image of Vietnam as a war-torn country out of the minds of some veterans and replace it with the image of a country at peace. Some veterans have found that the changes in Vietnam represent positive legacies left over from the war. They question if the United States lost the war as they perceived Vietnam to be more capitalist than communist and friendly to returning to veterans. For these

[2] Hopper, interview, September 5, 2021.

[3] Joseph Darda, *How White Men Won the Culture Wars: A History of Veteran America* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2021), 33.

veterans, returning to Vietnam and seeing its transformation validates their military service and can rewrite the outcome of the conflict.

Oral histories are the primary source of evidence used to prove this thesis's argument. Ten Vietnam veterans who have returned to Vietnam as tourists were interviewed in order to understand what motivates a veteran to return and what they experience while back. How they entered the military, their perceptions of the war before their military service, and their memories returning home from Vietnam are also examined as they revealed how these factors may have influenced their decisions to return and what they expected to experience while back.[4] Oral interviews are a great source to utilize in order to understand how the subject matter felt or thought when they made decisions or interpreted their position in life. Andrew Hunt does this well in *The Turning: A History of Vietnam Veterans Against the War.* Through the use of oral interviews, Hunt is able to show how Vietnam veterans were compelled into a political awakening and became involved in some of the most radical movements of American history.[5] The oral interviews were important in telling the history of the Vietnam Veterans Against the War (VVAW) as they revealed how the members felt towards the continuing war and other protests groups during the 1960s and 1970s. The emotional states of the leaders explained how the organization transitioned into a more militant

[4] Interviews from The Vietnam Center & Sam Johnson Vietnam Archive at Texas Tech University were used as well.

[5] Andrew E. Hunt, *The Turning: A History of Vietnam Veterans Against the War* (New York: New York University Press, 1999), 4.

direction in terms of their protesting and rhetoric, and how their goals shifted from bringing an end to the war to highlighting the difficulties facing returning soldiers.[6]

Other works on the memory of the Vietnam War that extensively utilizes oral interviews as their primary sources are Christian G. Appy's *Patriots: The Vietnam War Remembered from All Sides*, and Mia Martin Hobbs *Return to Vietnam: An Oral History of American and Australian Veterans' Journeys.* In his work, Appy lets the narrators from the interviews tell their stories without interruption or analysis from the author. The reader receives a history of the Vietnam War from the memories of those who had firsthand experiences on all sides of the conflict.[7] Hobbs uses interviews of veterans who have returned to Vietnam in order to understand what motivated them to do so. What she found is that Vietnam veterans see themselves as part of a diasporic community whose home was made on the battlefield. Vietnam veterans shared a collective persecution from their memories of being mistreated upon returning home from the war, and this narrative of persecution is what their diasporic consciousness is founded upon. Hobbs contends that veterans return to Vietnam in an attempt to find their truth, heal trauma, commemorate friends, reclaim pride, and redeem their role in the war.[8]

These works show the benefits of using oral interviews in works of historical analysis, but these sources can have disadvantages. Interviews rely solely on the

[6] The broader issues that the organization began to focus on were the drug situation in Vietnam during the late 1960s, negative attitudes towards Vietnam veterans, and those suffering from PTSD, see Hunt, *The Turning,* 37-39.

[7] Christian G. Appy, *Patriots: The Vietnam War Remembered from all sides* (New York: Viking, 2003), xv.

[8] Mia Martin Hobbs, *Return to Vietnam: An Oral History of American and Australian Veterans' Journeys* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021), 3.

memories of the narrators, and memory is fallible. Rarely does a person's memory of an event line up with what factually happened, and this is why other sources are used in conjunction with oral interviews to strengthen the source. Newspaper articles, government documents, and public records are often used to provide historical context to a narrator's memory and to make the source more credible. However, what is remembered is often more important than what actually happened. In the case of veterans and the Vietnam War, their memories of returning home to a neglectful nation and harassment from protestors created a narrative of mistreatment towards Vietnam veterans within the collective memory of the war. The interviews utilized in this project not only showed the memories of the narrators returning home from the war and the reception they received, but what they felt towards these events. Some identified with the image of the mistreated Vietnam veteran and became antisocial and withdrawn as a result. Through the mistreated Vietnam veteran narrative, veterans became identified as victims of the war. Many veterans accepted the victim identity and this image has persisted in the collective memory of the war.[9]

Though oral interviews served as the main primary source for this study, veteran narratives and news articles that covered veterans' return trips to Vietnam were used as well. Books about the Vietnam War written by veterans usually dealt with their service during the war and their return home with few of these offering accounts of return trips to Vietnam. Authors such as William Broyles Jr., W.D. Ehrhart and Lieutenant General Harold G. Moore, who do offer an account of their return trips to Vietnam, wrote about this for a reason. These trips meant a great deal to those who participated in them, and in

[9] Darda, *Culture Wars,* 9-10.

their memoirs, these veterans offered their motivations for returning, expectations from the trip, their experiences while back in Vietnam, and what impact the return trip had on them. All these themes offered by the veterans in their memoirs provided invaluable insight into why they, and others like them, decided to return to Vietnam as tourists.

By utilizing veteran narratives, this study interacts with works in the historiography of Vietnam War memory studies that examines veteran memoires. In *Veteran Narratives and the Collective Memory of the Vietnam War,* Wood examined numerous veteran narratives written by Vietnam veterans and contended that they should be used more in the field of history, not as a historical source, but for what they said about the war and how these sources helped shape the collective memory of the conflict.[10] Veteran memoires helped shape how Americans remembered the war as they were read by a wide audience during the "Vietnam-Book Boom" of the 1980s. Due to their popularity, veteran memoires served for many people as a historically accurate account of what happened during the Vietnam War as it was written by someone who was there. In this instance, veteran memoires are similar to oral interviews as what the veteran wrote down are recollections and not historically accurate facts.[11] Veteran memoires helped shape the collective memory of the war for the American public as the readers equated the authors military experience to what a typical tour of Vietnam was like.

[10] John A. Wood, *Veteran Narratives and the Collective Memory of the Vietnam War* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2016), 5.

[11] Wood, *Veteran Narratives,* 5.

Memoires also helped construct a narrative among veterans that Vietnam was welcoming place for returning veterans where they could find closure and healing. Some veterans wrote about their return trips to Vietnam and offered a glimpse of what motivated them to return as well as what they experienced while back. These memoirs promote returning to Vietnam to other veterans and can influence what they would expect to experience upon their return trip. For some veterans, reading about the experiences of those who returned to Vietnam before them can transform the image of the country in their mind.[12] A place that held dark memories for some veterans may change in their minds into a country that travelling back to provides beneficial and therapeutic effects. In much the same way that veteran memoires helped shape the collective memory of the war, these works also helped construct a narrative that rehabilitated the country of Vietnam for some veterans. In some cases, this can lead a veteran to return to Vietnam as a tourist where they encounter a country that has modernized and is welcoming, which for some, can validate their military service.

The rehabilitation of identities and the construction of narratives are important aspects of this thesis, and as such, it engages with studies that have examined how the Vietnam War has been remembered in the United States, and how the image of Vietnam veterans has been rehabilitated. The study of the memory of the Vietnam War in the U.S. has largely been looked at from an American perspective.[13] Though there have been more

[12] Hobbs argues that Vietnam veterans were influenced to Vietnam as tourists through the stories and testimonies of other veterans who had returned before them, see Hobbs, *Return to Vietnam,* 5.

[13] Christian G Appy, "The Muffling of Public Memory in Post-Vietnam America," *Chronicle of Higher Education* 45, no. 23 (February 1999): B4, https://usm.primo.exlibrisgroup.com/permalink/01USM_INST/15rsktm/cdi_proquest_reports_214717123. Appy focuses on works from the 1990s here.

studies recently to place the memory of the war within an international frame, the majority of historians who wrote on this subject has looked at the construction of the collective memory of the war through various cultural technologies such as film, novels, memoirs, and memorials.[14] Starting in the 1980s, scholars began looking at how films and novels attempted to come to terms with America's loss in Vietnam and explain how the war challenged the American myth.[15] Moving forward, studies on the memory of the Vietnam War began to focus more on how narratives were constructed that attempted rehabilitate the image of veterans and the perception of the war through memorials, commemoration ceremonies, and the image of the mistreated Vietnam veteran.

During the build-up to the Persian Gulf War, President George H. W. Bush and his administration fueled support for the upcoming war by evoking memories of the mistreated Vietnam veteran as they returned home from service.[16] Discussions on the legacies of the Vietnam War and their relations to the Persian Gulf War brought forth

[14] Works on the collective memory of the Vietnam War build off Maurice Halbwachs' foundational work and his definition of collective memory: "While the collective memory endures and draws strength from its base in a coherent body of people, it is individuals as group members who remember," see Maurice Halbwachs, *On Collective Memory,* ed. and trans. Lewis A. Cosner (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 22.

[15] The American myth according to Richard Slotkin is the Myth of the Frontier: "The conception of America as a wide-open land of unlimited opportunity for the strong, ambitious, self-reliant individual to thrust his way to the top." The Myth of the Frontier is best personified by the stories of Daniel Boone. See Richard Slotkin, *Regeneration Through Violence: The Mythology of the American Frontier, 1600-1860* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1973). John Hellman argued that the American myth was challenged by the Vietnam War as the Myth of the Frontier expanded to include Asia and specifically Indochina. See John Hellman, *American Myth and the Legacy of Vietnam* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), 8, 35. For other works that examined how the Vietnam War affected American culture during the 1980s, see Myra MacPherson, *Long Time Passing: Vietnam and the Haunted Generation (*Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1984); and Thomas Myers, *Walking Point: American Narratives of Vietnam* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988).

[16] Jerry Lembcke, *The Spitting Image: Myth, Memory, and the Legacy of Vietnam* (New York: New York University Press, 1998), 2.

more research on the memory of the war and its place in the collective memory of American society from authors in the 1990s such as Kristin Ann Hass, and Jerry Lembcke, among others.[17] In, *The Spitting Image: Myth, Memory, and the Legacy of Vietnam*, Lembcke looked at the American myth and the Vietnam War, but he focused on myths that were formed from the accounts of mistreated soldiers returning from the war. Focusing primarily on the image of the spat upon soldier, Lembcke asserted that to understand this perception of the soldier, a focus of study must be placed on the creation and consequences of this cultural myth.[18] Debunking the myth of the mistreated Vietnam veteran is also a central theme in Lembcke's work. Lembcke posited that the reason why veterans remembered being spat upon is that their memories of coming home were altered by the media and cultural products of the time which promoted this myth.[19]

In *Carried to the Wall: American Memory and the Vietnam War*, Hass looked at the ritual of leaving mementos and objects by mourners at the Vietnam Veterans Memorial and other memorials of the Vietnam War in the U.S. Similarly to writers in the 1980s, Hass examined how the Vietnam War challenged aspects of American culture, but expanded the discussion to include how mourners commemorated the dead.[20] Hass

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[17] In addition to the authors listed above, see Andrew Martin, *Perceptions of War: Vietnam in American Culture* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1993); Fred Turner, *Echoes of Combat: The Vietnam War in American Memory* (New York: Anchor Books, 1996); Marita Sturken, *Tangled Memories: The Vietnam War, The AIDS Epidemic, and the Politics of Remembering* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997); and Keith Beattie, *The Scar that Binds: American Culture and the Vietnam War* (New York: New York University Press, 1998).

[18] Lembcke, *Spitting Image,* 3.

[19] Lembcke, *Spitting Image,* 7.

[20] Kristin Ann Hass, *Carried to the Wall: American Memory and the Vietnam Veterans Memorial* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 3.

argued that the Vietnam War disrupted American memorial practices and that the process of bringing mementos to these memorials created a new mode of public commemoration which suggested that Americans deeply craved a memory which spoke to the way the Vietnam War challenged their sense of American culture and their place in it.[21] Hass brought commemoration to the forefront in studies on the memory of the war as an important factor in understanding where the conflict sat in the collective memory of the U.S.

Patrick Hagopian furthered the study of commemoration and Vietnam veteran memorials in *The Vietnam War in American Memory: Veterans, Memorials, and the Politics of Healing.* In his study, Hagopian examines a plethora of memorials to Vietnam veterans across the nation in order to show their political significance and how they attempted to unify a nation divided by the Vietnam war.[22] However, the focus of Hagopian's study is centered on the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington D.C. and the controversy that arose over its design. Ultimately, the design promoted "healing" and "reconciliation" and rehabilitating the image of the Vietnam veteran. During commemoration ceremonies and parades during the dedication of the memorial, Vietnam veterans were thanked and given a "welcome home" that many remembered not receiving when returning home from the war. Once Vietnam veterans had their image rehabilitated,

[21] Hass, *Carried,* 3.

[22] Patrick Hagopian, *The Vietnam War in American Memory: Veterans, Memorials, and the Politics of Healing* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2009), 15.

memorials going forward avoided making explicit statements about the war and instead focused on valorizing military service as worthy of honor.[23]

Authors such as Hagopian, Hass, and Lembcke to the important role memorials and commemoration had in remembering the Vietnam War, and how these events helped rehabilitated the image of the Vietnam veteran. By being honored at parades and commemoration ceremonies, many veterans felt that their military service had been validated. However, other veterans needed to return to Vietnam in order to have their military service validated. By examining the return trips of veterans to Vietnam, this project is influenced by works that have explored tourism in Vietnam and have brought a transnational approach to the study of the memory of the Vietnam War.

In, *Tours of Vietnam: War, Travel Guides, and Memory,* Scott Laderman looks at tourism in Vietnam, before, during, and after the Vietnam War, to show that tourism itself could be an interpretive lens to examine larger issues of ideology and the construction of history.[24] While Laderman looks at tourism in general is his study, authors such as Paulette G. Curtis, and Mia Martin Hobbs have focused on veterans returning and touring Vietnam. In, *Locating History: Vietnam Veterans and Their Returns to the Battlefield, 1998-1999,* Curtis argues that by returning to Vietnam through organized tours with other veterans is the means through which veterans understand, locate and reify their places within Vietnam War history.[25] As mentioned earlier, Hobbs

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[23] Hagopian, *Politics of Healing,* 17.

[24] Scott Laderman, *Tours of Vietnam: War, Travel Guides, and Memory* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2009), 11.

[25] Paulette Gueno Curtis, "Locating History: Vietnam Veterans and Their Returns to the Battlefield, 1998-1999" (PhD diss., Harvard University, 2003), iv, ProQuest Dissertations & Theses Global.

argues that veterans return to Vietnam because they are part of a diasporic community returning home. Returning enables veterans to reclaim pride in their military service, heal trauma, and redeem their role in the war.[26]

By building off of the works of Curtis and Hobbs, this project shows that by returning to Vietnam, some veterans have constructed a narrative that validates their military service. Some veterans could not find validation for their military service from the way their image had been rehabilitated through parades and commemoration ceremonies. They needed to return to Vietnam and see that it is no longer a country at war but a country at peace. Doing so allowed them to find closure and form of healing that came from reconciling with their former enemy, experiencing the friendliness of the Vietnamese people, and seeing that Vietnam was not left devastated from the war. By returning to Vietnam and accomplishing these goals, some veterans found that their military service had been validated as a transformed Vietnam signified positive legacies left behind from the war.

In the next chapter, brief biographies are given of the interviewed returnees. By examining the backgrounds of these veterans, insights may be offered into why some veterans choose to return to Vietnam over others. As will be shown, enlisted veterans have an easier time deciding to return to Vietnam over drafted veterans. The reason for this may be that enlisted veterans chose to be in Vietnam while drafted veterans were

[26] Hobbs, *Return to Vietnam,* 5. For other works that have examined tourism in Vietnam and veterans returning as tourists, see Julia Bleakney, *Revisiting Vietnam: Memoirs, Memorials, Museums* (New York: Routledge, 2006); and Christina Schwenkel, "Recombinant History: Transnational Practices of Memory and Knowledge Production in Contemporary Vietnam," *Cultural Anthropology* 21 no. 1 (February 2006): 3-30, https://usm.primo.exlibrisgroup.com/permalink/01USM_INST/15rsktm/cdi_gale_infotracacademiconefile_A145503489.

forced to be there. The enlisted veterans felt that they belonged in Vietnam during the war, with many studying the war after their military service. They established a connection to Vietnam and developed a curiosity over the current state of the country over time, enabling them to make the decision to return to Vietnam easier. The drafted veterans did not form a connection with Vietnam and described their military service as a dark time in their lives. The decision to return as tourists was harder for these veterans to make, and only did so because they returned with a group of fellow veterans or avoided any areas associated with the war. When the veterans returned to Vietnam and the groups that they traveled back with are also examined as these factors may explain why a veteran decided to return to Vietnam.

Chapter three examines the return trips of the interviewed returnees to understand what their motivations were for returning to Vietnam and what they experienced while back. Veterans who have returned to Vietnam had different motivations to do so, but what they experienced on their return trips impacted them the most. Some of these veterans have returned and shared their experiences with others, creating a narrative in which returning to Vietnam provides beneficial effects. In this narrative, Vietnam is seen as a welcoming place for veterans where they can find closure and healing. How this narrative influences veterans to return to Vietnam is explored as what they expect to experience upon return can be reinforced by these stories. Several of the interviewed veterans returned to Vietnam in order to see how the country has changed since their time there during the war. All were surprised by the modernization of Vietnam and the friendliness of the Vietnamese people. For some of these veterans, the change in Vietnam

and the welcome they received convinced them that positive legacies were left over from the war and validated their military service.

In the conclusion, the way Vietnam veterans rehabilitated their image in the collective memory of the war is explored. Through commemoration ceremonies and parades, the image of the Vietnam veteran was rehabilitated, and with it, the narrative of the Vietnam war shifted. The returns home from Vietnam and honoring veterans' military service became the main focus of what is remembered of the Vietnam War, rather than the morality of the conflict. Many veterans felt that their military service was validated as they were thanked and honored by the American public. However, other veterans needed to return to Vietnam in order to find validation for their military service. Veterans can rehabilitate their image by returning to Vietnam, and in doing so, changes the narrative of the Vietnam War for them. Veterans who validate their military service by seeing that Vietnam has modernized and has become more capitalistic contributes to the construction of a narrative that justifies America's involvement in Vietnam.

CHAPTER II – WHO THEY ARE: A LOOK AT THE VETERANS WHO WENT BACK TO VIETNAM AS TOURISTS

For this project, ten Vietnam veterans who returned to Vietnam as tourists were interviewed to understand their motivations for doing so and how their experiences from their trips impacted them. These veterans are John Gambino, Michael Triner, Doug and Cindy Young, Bob Hesselbein, Georg Hambach, James Willbanks, Steve Hopper, Larrey Lilley, and Gary Stell. The backgrounds of these veterans are examined in this chapter to see if any distinguishing factors may lead some veterans to return to Vietnam over others. Exploring questions such as how these veterans entered the military, their perception of the war before their military service, and their life after the war can reveal why veterans may choose to return to Vietnam. With seven enlisted returnees and three drafted, the interviews showed that those who enlisted and chose to go to Vietnam had an easier time deciding to return as a tourist. The explanation may be that those who enlisted felt that they belonged in Vietnam during the war and, for the most part, believed in the fight against communism when they began their military career. The enlisted veterans formed a connection with Vietnam as they believed they had a purpose for being there, which could make it easier for them to decide and return as a tourist years later. Drafted soldiers were forced to be in Vietnam, and because of the trauma they suffered during the war, their memories of the country represented a dark period in their lives. Enlisted veterans also suffered trauma from their time in Vietnam during the war. However, because they chose to be there, they created a vested interest in the country, which developed a curiosity to return and see how the country had progressed. Because drafted veterans were forced to be in Vietnam during the war, some have tried to leave the memory of

their military service behind, making it harder for them to decide and return as tourists. Examining other factors, such as when a veteran decided to return to Vietnam, may reveal why a veteran was motivated to return when they did.

Historian Mia Martin Hobbs places veterans' return trips to Vietnam within three periods; Reconciliation, Normalization, and Commemoration. The Reconciliation period took place from 1981 to 1995, Normalization from 1995 to 2006, and Commemoration from 2006 to 2016.[27] For Hobbs, specific events and changes in policies between the United States and Vietnam defined the return periods and influenced the motivations of returning veterans. During the Reconciliation period, veterans returned to learn more about the country of Vietnam and reconcile with their former enemy. Veterans returning during this period described the healing effects that can come from reconciliation and finding closure. Their experiences influenced the language used by veterans to describe their motivations to return during Normalization. Using a language of healing to describe their motivations, many veterans returning during the Normalization period sought therapeutic effects for their PTSD. For the Commemoration period, Hobbs indicates that veterans were motivated to return to commemorate significant anniversaries of the war in Vietnam. Veterans returning to commemorate anniversaries of the war can reinforce in their minds their sense of ownership of Vietnam they had developed from their military service. [28] Returning to commemorate the war can enable veterans who did not develop a

[27] Hobbs, *Return to Vietnam,* 3-4.

[28] Hobbs, *Return to Vietnam,* 3-5.

sense of ownership of Vietnam to form a connection with the country and the Vietnamese that they previously did not have.

The veterans who returned during Reconciliation influenced other veterans to return during Normalization and Commemoration. Of the ten returnees, four returned during the Commemoration period, five during Normalization, and one during Reconciliation. Some of the interviewed returnees' motivations to return to Vietnam matched why veterans returned during the different periods. However, the other returnees were motivated to return out of curiosity and nostalgia and had their trips defined by their experiences back in Vietnam. What follows are the biographies of each veteran interviewed. Dividing the interviews between the enlisted and drafted veterans allows for the similarities and differences between the two groups to be better analyzed. To start are the biographies of the seven enlisted veterans: John Gambino, Michael Triner, Doug and Cindy Young, James Willbanks, Bob Hesselbein, and Georg Hambach.

John Gambino was born in 1947 in Austin, Texas, with four brothers and sisters, all raised by a single mother after their father left the family. Even though Gambino described his family as poor and working-class, he remembered that "it was a great life, we had everything we needed and a mom who was a wonderful and godly woman."[29] Before entering the military, Gambino stayed up to date with everything going on with America's involvement in Vietnam. Gambino's older brother was in the Air Force and served in Vietnam from 1964 to 1965, and because of this, Gambino kept up with the news of the war, watching the CBS evening news with Walter Cronkite every night. He

[29] John Gambino, interview by author, Hattiesburg, MS, November 5, 2021.

also learned of the evils of communism while in school and learned to hate it. "When I was in school, they taught us about communism. So I learned about the evils of communism, and from a very early age, I think I understood what it was about, and I didn't like it; I hated it." [30] With his views on communism and his brother serving in Vietnam, Gambino believed he also belonged there.

In 1966, Gambino had a low draft number of 28, so he decided to enlist. The recruiter told Gambino that if he enlisted in the Army, he would get to choose what he did. When given the choice of what to do, Gambino reasoned that "my brother went to Vietnam and I wanted to go to Vietnam, so when I got in the Army, I told them I wanted to go."[31] When he enlisted, Gambino found that he was qualified for radio training. The Army sent him to learn Morse code, after which he went to Fort Gordon, Georgia, where he learned radio teletype and cryptography. After training, Gambino received his orders for Vietnam and went over in 1967. When Gambino arrived in Vietnam, he discovered he was assigned to a Military Assistance Command Vietnam (MACV) advisory team for an Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) infantry unit. "I didn't have a clue what MACV was. I found out I was being assigned to a Vietnamese infantry unit, and literally, I was scared to death."[32] As part of the advisory team, Gambino carried a PRC-25 radio on his back and worked with three other American soldiers. Being part of a MACV advisory team meant that Gambino worked more with ARVN soldiers than Americans

[30] Gambino, interview, November 5, 2021.

[31] Gambino, interview, November 5, 2021.

[32] Gambino, interview, November 5, 2021.

and, as a result, formed connections with those he worked with, connections he tried to keep alive after his tour of duty by writing letters.

After his tour of duty concluded in 1968, Gambino returned home and kept in touch with the Vietnamese he worked with to keep his camaraderie with them alive, which deepened his love of the Vietnamese people after working with them during the war. One of the connections he made during his military career was with a Vietnamese translator named Lao. Gambino kept in touch with Lao after the war, and their interactions led to Gambino adopting his sons and ultimately the reason for his return to Vietnam in 1993. Gambino and Lao exchanged letters and Christmas cards every year after Gambino returned home in 1968, but the letters from Lao began to take longer to reach him after Saigon fell in 1975. “When the country fell in April of 1975, I really thought he was going to be one of those people who were executed or put in a re-education camp because of his involvement with the American.”[33] In 1977, Gambino sent a wedding invitation to Lao after two years of not hearing from him, hoping he was still alive somewhere in Vietnam. It was not until 1980 when he finally received a reply from Lao, who explained that it was very tough to write and send a letter in Vietnam. In response to this, Gambino wanted to help Lao in any way he could. "At that time, there were tens of thousands of people that were getting out of Vietnam on boats. So I asked him in very clear language in a letter I wrote to him, 'do you want to get out of Vietnam? If you do, what can I do to help?'"[34]

[33] Gambino, interview, November 5, 2021.

[34] Gambino, interview, November 5, 2021.

After a year of waiting, Gambino received a response from Lao indicating that he would appreciate any help getting out of Vietnam. Lao told Gambino that it would cost twenty-seven ounces of gold to escape from Vietnam and whom to send the money to for Lao to get the gold. Gambino was able to raise the money and sent it to Lao in 1982, enabling him to attempt an escape with his wife and six children that same year. Unfortunately, someone had informed upon Lao, and he was arrested after reaching the rendezvous point for the boat that would have taken them out of Vietnam.

> They put Lao in jail for six weeks, and he spent six weeks in a Conex container… They released him fortunately in time for him to return to his hometown because he was a school teacher, and the local authorities did not know that he was arrested. If the local authorities had found out he was arrested, things could have been worse than they were.[35]

After his imprisonment, Lao wrote to Gambino and told him what had happened, but he was still determined to escape Vietnam. Gambino tried to keep in touch with Lao after this, but the letters between them were arriving slower than ever. However, in 1983 Gambino was surprised to receive a telegram from the captain of the USS Elliot, who explained that Lao's sons had been picked up at sea and were now in a refugee camp in the Philippines.[36] Gambino began working to relocate the boys to Texas to live with him, a process that took six months.

While working on getting the boys out of the Philippines, Gambino sent letters to Lao, hoping he and the rest of his family were still alive. In the summer of 1984, Gambino received a telegram from Lao, who wrote that they were still attempting to

[35] Gambino, interview, November 5, 2021.

[36] Gambino, interview, November 5, 2021.

escape Vietnam in June of that year. For the entire month of June, Gambino did not receive any correspondence from Lao, which greatly worried him, and he explained the situation to Lao's oldest son, who was now living with him.

> I talked to the eldest boy, and I expressed my concern. It has been nearly a month since we got this telegram saying they were leaving… I'm really starting to get worried about this. The oldest boy said, "Ah, they're okay; they're probably in a refugee camp and don't have the money to send a letter."[37]

Gambino knew, however, that if Lao and his family had made it to a refugee camp, they provided postage to send letters. On August 1st, 1984, Gambino received a phone call from Vietnam with a person speaking Vietnamese on the other end. He gave the phone to the eldest boy, who learned that his family had died trying to make it out of Vietnam in the South China Sea.[38]

Gambino adopted Lao's sons, who have all been very successful in life. Being able to save and adopt Lao's sons convinced Gambino that his military service had a purpose and was part of a grand design from a higher power.[39] In 1993, Gambino returned as a missionary and specifically chose to return to Vietnam so that he might reconnect with the family of his adopted sons and those whom he worked with as part of the MACV advisory team.[40] Though Gambino had a forced enlistment as he had a low draft number, he still felt that his place was in Vietnam during the war, a feeling that was validated after saving Lao's sons. Gambino felt that he belonged in Vietnam during the

[37] Gambino, interview, November 5, 2021.

[38] Gambino, interview, November 5, 2021.

[39] Gambino, interview, November 5, 2021.

[40] Gambino, interview, November 5, 2021.

war. Through his military service, Gambino created a connection to the country and the Vietnamese whom he served with, a connection that made his decision to return easier. Michael Triner learned about Vietnam from an early age and, like Gambino, enlisted to go to Vietnam to fight against communism.

Michael Triner was born in 1949 to a middle-class family, with his father being a UPS driver and his mother being a housekeeper. However, when Triner turned eleven, his family became poor because his mother divorced his father and became a single mother raising two children. [41] Growing up in the 1950s and 1960s, Triner learned about the French and Vietnamese conflict. He was also a product of his generation as he felt challenged to do whatever he could for his country. "I was the product of the Kennedy generation. I believed in the whole thing about doing for your country… When I was about six years old, Dien Bien Phu happened, and I remember hearing about Indochina, and I was totally intrigued by Indochina."[42] Triner developed an interest in Vietnam at an early age, and as America became more involved with Vietnam, Triner paid more attention to the country and the impending conflict.

> I knew that the French were defeated, and for some reason, I tried to figure it out for years. Vietnam stuck in my head… My perception was that Vietnam was a divided country and that the people in the North wanted communism and the people in the South wanted democracy… I believed in the Domino Theory fed to us at the time.[43]

[41] Michael Triner, interview by author, Hattiesburg, MS, November 6, 2021.

[42] Triner, interview, November 6, 2021.

[43] Triner, interview, November 6, 2021.

Triner entirely bought into the cause of the Vietnam War as an effort to stop the spread of communism before other countries fell to it. His beliefs and the interest he developed in Vietnam at an early age enabled him to form a connection with the country before he ever stepped foot there. Triner's beliefs prompted him to enlist in the Marines in 1967, and after training, he arrived in Vietnam in 1968. Triner was a door gunner for the Marine Medium Helicopter Squadron 364 (HMM-364) and was shot down on August 26th, 1968.[44]

After being medically evacuated to Japan, Triner recovered for two months, after which he returned to Vietnam and was transferred to HMM-164 and flew with them until 1970.[45] When Triner returned home from the war, he flew presidential helicopters for President Richard Nixon.[46] Upon coming home, Triner felt that the American public neglected him and that his family and friends did not want to hear about his military service. Triner became anti-social and withdrew into himself, hiding that he was a Vietnam veteran. He became distanced from the American people and found that he preferred the company of the Vietnamese over Americans.[47] Though Triner enlisted into the Marines to stop the spread of communism, he became fascinated with Vietnam and its people. After returning home, Triner started working with a group of Vietnamese in Chicago.

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[44] For a history of the HMM-364, see "VMM-364 History," Marines.mil, accessed April 14, 2022, https://www.3rdmaw.marines.mil/Units/MAG-39/VMM-364/History/.

[45] For a history of the HMM-164, see "VMM-164 History," Marines.mil, accessed April 14, 2022, https://www.3rdmaw.marines.mil/Units/MAG-39/VMM-164/History/.

[46] Triner, interview, November 6, 2021.

[47] Triner, interview, November 6, 2021.

> In 1985, I discovered that there were Vietnamese people living in Chicago. So I went to the Vietnamese association and volunteered to work with them. I taught children English and worked in a Vietnamese restaurant as a waiter for a couple of years, where I met a lady who taught me how to cook Vietnamese food.[48]

After four years of working in a Vietnamese restaurant, Triner moved to California, where he met and married a Vietnamese woman. Triner had wanted to return to Vietnam, and his opportunity to do so came in 2006 when he attended his father-in-law's funeral.[49] Triner developed a connection with Vietnam at an early age, a connection that strengthened when he returned home from the war. He felt ostracized from society and found that he belonged more with the Vietnamese in Chicago than with Americans. When he married his wife after moving to California, Triner gained a Vietnamese family, fully establishing a sense of belonging to Vietnam in his mind. Triner enlisted and went to fight in Vietnam because he believed in the cause of the war and felt that he belonged there, a feeling that persisted with him after the war and made it easier to return in 2006.

James Willbanks was born in Hot Springs, Arkansas, in 1947 and enlisted into the Army in 1969 after graduating from the University of Texas A&M. He was commissioned as a Lieutenant in the infantry and served in Germany, where he kept up with the news on the Vietnam war.[50] As the conflict escalated, Willbanks felt he should be in Vietnam. "I was an infantry officer in the Regular Army, so I didn't spend a lot of time thinking about it (the Vietnam War), except that's probably where I need to be. So I

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[48] Triner, interview, November 6, 2021.

[49] Triner, interview, November 6, 2021.

[50] "Dr. Jim Willbanks retires after 26 years' service at CGSC," CGSCfoundation.org, May 2, 2018, accessed April 15, 2022, https://www.cgscfoundation.org/dr-jim-willbanks-retires-after-26-years-service-at-cgsc/.

volunteered to go from Germany, and that's how I ended up there."[51] When he arrived in Vietnam, he worked as a military advisor for the Royal Thai Army Expeditionary Division at the Army Base Bear Cat in Military Region III (south-central South Vietnam) until 1972. Shortly after, Willbanks was transferred to serve as an advisory to an ARVN unit and primarily worked out of the base camp Black Horse in Xuan Loc. For eleven months, Willbanks spent his time between An Loc and Xuan Loc, being wounded twice during the Easter Offensive of 1972.[52]

When Willbanks returned home, he entered the academic world and received a Ph.D. in history from the University of Kansas. After retiring from the Army in 1992 with the rank of Lieutenant Colonel, he joined the United States Army Command and General Staff College (CGSC) faculty at Fort Leavenworth, Kansas. There he held the position of General of the Army George C. Marshall Chair of Military History before retiring in April of 2018 and being named Professor Emeritus of Military History.[53] Though Willbanks enlisted into the Army through college and was stationed in Germany during the war, he volunteered to go to Vietnam. Though he admitted that he did not pay much attention to the war before going to Vietnam, Willbanks felt he belonged there. After returning home, Willbanks began to study the war in the academic world, becoming an authority on the subject. Curiosity over the current state of Vietnam developed from Willbanks's study of the war, which prompted his first return trip in 2005. Willbanks

[51] James Willbanks, interview by author, Vinita, Oklahoma, December 28, 2021.

[52] Willbanks, interview, December 28, 2021.

[53] Willbanks, interview, December 28, 2021; CGSCfoundation, “Willbanks Retires.”

wanted to visit the areas of Vietnam he could not see during his military service, and he wanted to know if the country had rebuilt since the end of the war. Veterans Doug and Cindy Young also felt that they belonged in Vietnam during the war and developed a connection with the country and its people through this sense of belonging.

Doug Young was born in Florida and attended university at Florida Southern College, where he was part of the Reserve Officers' Training Corps (ROTC). Young enjoyed the marching and drilling that came with the military lifestyle and held what he considered conservative views during his time in college.

> At that time, I believed that our country should be in Vietnam; we were doing the right thing. I should do my patriotic chore to stop communism. What we were told in 1965 and 1966 is that we were stopping communism before we had to stop them on the beaches of southern California. [54]

With these ideas in mind, Young felt he belonged in Vietnam during the war. After college, Young went into the Army through the ROTC program and asked to be in the infantry. He trained at Fort Benning, Georgia, in 1966, and the entire class he went in with was placed into the new 199th Light Infantry Division. Young landed in Vietnam in 1966 as a platoon leader of Bravo Company of the 3rd Battalion, 7th Infantry Brigade of the 199th. While in Vietnam, Young served south of Saigon, where he and his platoon fought against the Viet Cong (VC). After nine months as a platoon leader, he became the company's executive officer and went home in 1967 for a month's leave.[55]

After Young's month leave, he went to Fort Campbell, Kentucky, and sought to extend his service as he wanted to make a career out of the military, which upset his wife.

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[54] Doug and Cindy Young, interview by author, Vinita, Okay, December 29, 2021.

[55] Doug and Cindy Young, interview, December 29, 2021.

"My first wife absolutely hated the Army; she detested it thoroughly and completely, whereas I was seriously considering making it a career."[56] As Young's friends whom he entered active duty with were returning from Vietnam and leaving the military, Young was extending his stay. He requested to go on extended active duty as a reserve officer and was attached to the new 6th Infantry Division at the rank of Captain at Ft. Campbell. While there, Young happened to get on the wrong side of his battalion commander, and his executive officer told him that he should get out of this situation as soon as possible before it ruined his military career. After this, he volunteered for another tour of Vietnam.[57]

When Young volunteered to return to Vietnam, he requested assignment to the 1st Cavalry Division. Young got his request, and when he arrived back in Vietnam, he was in charge of Charlie Company of the 2nd Battalion, 5th Cavalry of the 1st Airmobile Division. Young quickly found that his second tour was vastly different from his first.

> This was almost like a totally different war from the first tour that I had. This was out and out conventional warfare. If they had helicopters, it would have been an even fight. These were all troops from the North, well trained and well equipped, and we were in very heavy jungle while the first tour was in open rice paddies… We saw heavy combat and no booby traps; all the wounded were a result of firefights.[58]

In July 1969, Young was wounded, not bad enough to be airlifted out but enough to receive a purple heart. When his company exited the jungle, he became an S-1 adjutant, and his new duties consisted of finding replacement men for his company. Young had to

[56] Doug and Cindy Young, interview, December 29, 2021.

[57] Doug and Cindy Young, interview, December 29, 2021.

[58] Doug and Cindy Young, interview, December 29, 2021.

make a trip to the 1st Cavalry's rear area, Bien Hoa, every two weeks to find these replacements. On one of these trips, Young and his Jeep driver decided to get a beer at an officer's club, and while there, Young told his driver, "I know where to find round-eyed women."[59] Young's driver pulled his beer away as he thought Young was drunk, but Young insisted that he knew where to find them, and they drove to the 24th Evacuation Hospital at Long Binh, where he met Cindy Mason.[60]

Cindy Young was born in Ohio, and after graduating from high school, she began attending nursing school. Cindy was interested in travel and reasoned that if she stayed and completed her three years of nursing school, she would be ready to get out of Ohio. In her second year, Cindy signed up for enlistment into the Army Nursing Corps and was paid a stipend for her last year of nursing school, which obligated her to two years of active duty. She went to basic training for nurses and doctors at Fort Sam Houston in San Antonio, Texas, in 1968, and after finishing training, the Army sent her to San Francisco. While there, Cindy received her orders for Vietnam in November of 1968, and by this time, she felt ready to travel.

> They had told us in basic training that we were lied to if we had believed the recruiter and would not be sent to Vietnam because they had enough nurses. But it didn't matter because that was the reason why I joined. I figured any one of those soldiers over there who were wounded could have been my neighbors, my classmates, my brothers, so I wanted to go; I was ready. I didn't know what the heck I was getting into, but I wanted to go.[61]

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[59] Doug and Cindy Young, interview, December 29, 2021.

[60] Cindy's maiden name at the time was Mason. After this instance, she is referred to as Cindy Young.

[61] Doug and Cindy Young, interview, December 29, 2021.

Cindy arrived in Vietnam on March 5th, 1969, and was assigned to the 24th Evacuation Hospital's neurosurgery ward, where she primarily dealt with soldiers who had head wounds. Cindy held the rank of second Lieutenant while in Vietnam, and when she met Doug Young in 1969, they soon started up a friendly relationship that evolved into a romantic one. In 1970, Doug and Cindy Young's dates of estimated return from overseas (DEROS) were approaching, and they began to talk about their future.[62] Though they had developed a relationship in Vietnam, they went their separate ways when they returned home. Young was determined to fix his marriage, but unfortunately, he found out that his wife had moved on while he was in Vietnam and was with another man. He proceeded to end his marriage and moved to Atlanta, where he began a relationship with Cindy. They married in 1971 in Cindy's hometown in Ohio and moved into a new apartment in Atlanta.[63] Though now, back in civilian life, they both felt a need to be active in the military. Cindy was promoted to the rank of captain and was put in charge of a hospital ward at Fort McPherson outside of Atlanta, and Young became a police officer.

> I knew I had a promising career ahead of me in law enforcement, but I missed the Army. Besides, with Cindy back on active duty, perhaps we could both get another tour of Vietnam. I could be the Assistant Officer in Charge of Paperclips as some headquarters, and she could be a head nurse. We'd both be safe. Be able to live together, and both be able to draw combat pay. [64]

However, by 1971 the Army was reducing its number of soldiers in Vietnam and cutting down on active-duty officers. Young tried to go back as a warrant officer helicopter pilot,

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[62] Douglas A. Young, *Over There and Back Again: Viet Nam and My, A Story of War, Peace, Love, and Family* (Middletown, DE: Self Published, 2021), 204.

[63] Young, *Over There,* 214.

[64] Young, *Over There,* 215.

but after passing all of his tests, he found that he was three months past the age limit, and the Army would not waive it.[65]

Many years after the end of the war, Doug and Cindy Young were able to go on another tour of Vietnam, this time as tourists. They went back for their first return visit in 2002 and wanted to see what Vietnam was like after all these years. Their return trips eventually led them to become English instructors in Vietnam for a time, and they lived there from 2005 to 2006.[66] Both Doug and Cindy Young volunteered to go to Vietnam out of a sense of duty and adventure. Young felt that the war had a just cause when he enlisted and that there was a legitimate threat that communism would spread across the world if they did not stop it in Vietnam. However, as the years passed, his attitude changed, and Young became much less conservative in his views. He and Cindy formed a connection with Vietnam through their military service that developed as they felt pulled to the country and the war. Their connection and need to be in Vietnam stayed with them after returning home and motivated them to return in 2002. Bob Hesselbein, another enlisted volunteer, had similar beliefs in the Domino Theory and the fight against communism, and he wanted to and what was actually happening in Vietnam.

Hesselbein was born in 1952 and grew up with his brother and sister in a working-class family in Cleveland, Ohio. Hesselbein described his family as conservative in values, with his uncles serving during WWII. He looked up to his uncles, and with his familial association with the military, he considered himself a student of the Vietnam War. While in high school, he did not know what he wanted to do with his life, and when

[65] Young, *Over There,* 215.

[66] Doug and Cindy Young, interview, December 29, 2021.

it came time for college, his parents told him that he would have to pay for it on his own. With no clear plan for how to pay for college, Hesselbein decided to enlist in the Army, a decision he had already considered as he wanted to find out what was happening in Vietnam. “It can’t be what the antiwar protestors are saying. The President, who our whole family supported, said we were winning, and so I went in (enlisted) out of a sense of adventure." [67] Hesselbein wanted to know who was telling the truth about the war, the anti-war protestors, or the politicians.

Hesselbein also believed in the Domino Theory and felt that if America did not stop the spread of communism in Vietnam, it would soon spread to Hawaii.

> I rejected any voices that said things like 'the war is a civil war in Vietnam and were sticking our noses into a country where we had no right to be…' I was greatly impressed at that time in my youth in the belief that the Domino Theory held true, that if we didn't stop the commies in Vietnam, they would be attacking Hawaii in ten years. I had a crusaders mentality that we had to stop them before they came to America. [68]

With these beliefs, Hesselbein enlisted into the Army right out of high school in 1970 to enter the Warrant Officer Rotary Wing Aviation Course. In August of 1970, he went to basic training at Fort Polk, Louisiana, and after basic, he went on to warrant officer training at Fort Wolters, Texas, in November of that year. At Ft. Wolters, he completed primary flight training, and in June of 1971 went on to Fort Rucker, Alabama, where he completed his training in October. Before being deployed to Vietnam, Hesselbein spent a month training to fly Cobra gunships, and in January of 1972, he landed in Vietnam.[69]

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[67] Bob Hesselbein, Interview by author, Hattiesburg, MS, November 5, 2021.

[68] Hesselbein, interview, November 5, 2021.

[69] Hesselbein, interview, November 5, 2021.

For the first half of Hesselbein's tour of duty, he served in the Mekong Delta, and for the second half, he worked in the central highlands. As his tour dragged on, Hesselbein's outlook on the war and his opinion of the ARVN forces soured.

> It became clear that the majority of Vietnamese did not view the Saigon government the same way that we were told they did, where it was a freedom-loving democracy versus an evil communist monolith taking their orders from Moscow. In the South Vietnamese Army, I saw a few good units operating… But it became obvious that the South Vietnamese Army was not aggressive, and they were often times cowardly, for lack of a better word. By the time I had spent my year there, and after having seen the South Vietnamese Army fall apart during the Easter Offensive, some of us felt that the war would be lost in 1972 while we were there.[70]

When Hesselbein returned home in December of 1972, he felt that it would not be long before the war was lost, and when he watched on television as Saigon fell, he was not surprised. He felt upset watching Saigon fall and was angry over the tremendous waste of lives and resources devoted to the war effort.[71]

Upon returning home, Hesselbein attended college at Kent State in 1974 and graduated in 1977. After graduation, he enlisted in the Air Force and flew active-duty fighter jets, such as the F-16, until 1986. When Hesselbein left the Air Force, he started working for the Wisconsin Air Guard and would often fly planes for North West Airlines. On some occasions, he would fly a route between Tokyo, Japan, and Bangkok, Thailand, which would take him over Vietnam. When he flew over Vietnam, he would always tilt his head to look out the cockpit window at the country below, wondering what the country was like after the war.[72] Though he left Vietnam with a negative outlook on the

[70] Hesselbein, interview, November 5, 2021.

[71] Hesselbein, interview, November 5, 2021.

[72] Hesselbein, interview, November 5, 2021.

war, he felt angry over the way the war ended and feared what might have happened to those living in South Vietnam. Hesselbein returned to Vietnam as a tourist in 2013 and found that the country had achieved peace, had moved on from the war, and felt that perhaps some positive legacies from U.S. involvement in Vietnam might have been left over.[73]

The last Interviewed returnee who enlisted is Georg Hambach, who was born in 1947 in Bridgeport, Connecticut. Hambach described his family as middle class, and because his father was a military man, whatever money they did not have from his father's salary was made up for by benefits from the military.[74] Knowing he was susceptible to the draft, Hambach decided to enlist in a delayed enlistment into the Air Force, enabling him to pick when he went into the Air Force. Hambach trained as a medic and went to Vietnam in 1970, serving from January to November. When he arrived in Vietnam, Hesselbein served in a dust-off unit where he helped pull wounded soldiers off of helicopters and worked to save their lives. He was never put into a position where he had to fight against the enemy or take someone's life, but his unit was under mortar attacks a few times while in Vietnam.[75]

After returning home, Hambach used his G.I. bill to attend Ohio State University, where he graduated with a bachelor's degree in science. Hambach entered the workforce after graduation and worked in the medical field, but he felt that he was missing

[73] Hesselbein, interview, November 5, 2021.

[74] Georg Hambach, interview by author, Hattiesburg, MS, October 11, 2021.

[75] Hambach, interview, October 11, 2021.

something in his life. He enlisted into the Air National Guard in 1987 as he missed the military lifestyle.

> Being a military brat, I grew up on military bases, so it was a little nostalgic. The incentive at the time was acceptable. They had a one-year program in 1987 because they weren't getting a lot of experienced people in, and they were trying to get prior-enlisted people back in. so it was only a one-year commitment, one weekend a month, so that was pretty easy to do. [76]

As the war ended, Hambach watched North Vietnam overtake South Vietnam and developed a negative outlook of the communist government taking control. He felt the communist government would oppress the Vietnamese who had helped Americans during the war and those living in the South. He held this position against the country and the Vietnamese government until he decided to return in 2017 to see if the people of Vietnam were still oppressed. For Hambach, curiosity over the state of Vietnam and a chance to change his perception of the Vietnamese government motivated him to return.[77]

The final three returnees interviewed for this project are Gary Stell, Steve Hopper, and Larry Lilley, all of whom were drafted into the military. The enlisted veterans felt drawn to Vietnam, either through duty or curiosity over the country and the war. The drafted men had no option in the matter and had to serve in the war. Being forced to go to Vietnam affected how they remembered the war and the country after returning home. Some of the enlisted veterans suffered trauma and PTSD from their military service, but they all felt a draw to return to the country they chose to be in during the war. The drafted

[76] Hambach, interview, October 11, 2021.

[77] Hambach, interview, October 11, 2021.

veterans expressed that Vietnam represented a dark time in their lives and when asked if they ever thought about returning, Stell and Lilley had while Hopper had not.

Gary Stell was born in 1948 in New York and raised on an apple farm outside Syracuse, New York. His parents were farmers, and when Stell was 16, his father died, leaving him to care for the farm by himself for several months. Stell's work on the farm infringed on his time at school, so his mother applied for a hardship discharge for his brother, who was working as military police at Fort Hood, Texas, when their father died. Stell's brother returned to run the farm, which allowed him to finish high school, but the hardship discharge also made him more susceptible to the draft.[78] After graduating from high school, he attended a two-year agricultural tech school though he was unsure what he wanted to do with his life. He could have continued his education in agricultural studies and considered attending Cornell University, but Stell hesitated and began working at a greenhouse for a year. He made a good amount of money at this time, but because he was not in college, he was drafted into the Army in 1969.[79]

Before being drafted, Stell did not think much about the war or Vietnam and hoped it would not affect him. "When I was in high school and that whole thing started, I said, 'man, this war won't last long; it's not going to affect me.' I can remember having that attitude."[80] Unfortunately for Stell, his hopes did not pan out as he was drafted into the 199th Infantry Brigade and sent to Fort Dix in New Jersey for his basic and advanced infantry training. In June of 1970, Stell arrived in Vietnam, and for the first week there,

[78] Gary Stell, interview by author, Hattiesburg, MS, January 9, 2022.

[79] Stell, interview, January 9, 2022.

[80] Stell, interview, January 9, 2022.

Stell and his fellow soldiers had to go through retraining in the rear area headquarters of the 199th. While there, he stumbled upon the recreational photo lab and asked how to get a position working in the lab.

> At that time, I wandered around the base and saw a recreational photo lab and wondered, 'what's that?' So I went in there, and it was a recreational only photo lab, and I said, 'holy cow, how do you get a job like this?' I told them I was a photographer, and they were desperate for people who knew how to use the dark room. The senior person there told me, 'I'm going home the first of January and sometime in December, apply for an R&R; they'll have to send you back here. When you get back here, we'll see if we can get your orders changed.[81]

For six months, Stell patrolled around the jungle carrying an M-60 machine gun, and when December came, he received his R&R. After his time off, Stell was able to have his orders changed and taught photography for the next six months. Working in the photo lab turned out to be a safe job, and Stell enjoyed it so much that he extended his stay in Vietnam at the end of his tour of duty.

After returning home, Stell found that he had trouble expressing his feelings or how his military service impacted him. "I couldn't describe my feelings. I had no vocabulary to talk about the way I felt. So I very quickly learned not to say anything… I came home, and I was really angry, and that anger finally went away after twenty-five years."[82] Stell did not know why this anger faded, but he still felt a wound inside him leftover from his time in Vietnam. After retiring, he began to think about Vietnam and his military service. Stell became curious about the country's current state and realized he wanted to return. He wanted to see Vietnam at peace and hoped that by seeing how the

[81] Stell, interview, January 9, 2022.

[82] Stell, interview, January 9, 2022.

country had changed, he might also find peace.[83] Stell first returned to Vietnam in 2004 and used a language of healing to express his motivations for returning. He returned during Hobbs' Normalization period, and his motivation to do so is similar to other veterans who returned during this period. Stell wanted to find closure and peace in Vietnam as he felt wounded inside from his military service. Stell's return trip is discussed in more detail in chapter three, but he did not want to return and visit the areas where he served or was associated with the war. Reliving his military service was the last thing on his mind when he decided to return, showing that Stell's time in Vietnam during the war represented a dark period in his memories. Stell sought healing from his return trip, a motivation similar to other drafted veterans who held terrible memories of their time in Vietnam during the war. Steve Hopper and Larry Lilley are the other drafted returnees interviewed for this project, and they both returned to Vietnam together in 2016 and found closure on their return trip.

Steve Hopper was born in Illinois and raised in a small farming community named Roodhouse. Hopper had seven other brothers and sisters and described growing up as having what they needed but no extras. After high school, he went to work at Caterpillar Inc. in Peoria, Illinois, instead of going to college, which led to him being drafted into the Army in 1966.[84] Larry Lilley was born and raised in Lancaster, California, into a family that struggled to get by during his childhood. After graduating from high school, Lilley went to college and started studying pre-law, but in 1966 he was

[83] Stell, interview, January 9, 2022.

[84] Hopper, interview, September 5, 2021.

drafted into the Army. He was drafted with two of his friends from his hometown, and all three served in the same company. [85] Hopper and Lilley were drafted into the 4th of the 47th Battalion, 9th Infantry Division, and served in Charlie Company. They were part of one of the last infantry divisions to be drafted, trained, and shipped off to Vietnam together during the war, which fostered a comradery among the soldiers, unlike other combat divisions typical of the Vietnam War.[86]

Both Hopper and Lilley were shipped off to Vietnam in 1967 and spent a year humping it through rice paddies. Both faced hardship in Vietnam, losing many fellow soldiers to booby traps and firefights. One particular engagement with the enemy stands out. On June 19th, 1967, they became locked in a battle that took many lives in Charlie, Bravo, and Alpha company of the 4th of the 47th. The VC 5th Nha Be Battalion ambushed them while patrolling through a rice paddy. The June 19th battle, often called the Battle of Can Giouc or Ap Bac II, is seen as a victory for the American forces as it destroyed the VC battalion, but it cost the 4th of the 47th dearly as they suffered thirty-eight dead, and one hundred and one wounded. Charlie Company lost ten men and suffered more than forty additional casualties.[87]

Both Hopper and Lilley were deeply affected by the June 19th battle and their tour of Vietnam. They lost friends they had made through training together, including Lilley's two friends from his hometown. After returning home, Hopper returned to work for

[85] Larry Lilley, interview by author, Hattiesburg, MS, October 17, 2021

[86] Andrew Wiest, *The Boys of '67: Charlie Company's War in Vietnam* (Oxford: Osprey, 2012), 15.

[87] Wiest, *'67,* 237-238.

Caterpillar and received an associate's degree in accounting to further his career in the company.[88] Lilley returned to California and worked as a clerk in a law office. He quickly found that he did not like the people he worked with or working in law. He went to work for his father, who owned a motorcycle store, and after some time, he bought his father's store and made a successful life as a Honda dealer. Lilley went on to open four more Honda dealerships, two motorcycle insurance dealerships, a motorcycle salvage yard, and a car dealership.[89] While both men adjusted to civilian life, their memories of Vietnam and their military service represented a dark time in their lives. Lilley felt guilty for surviving Vietnam while good friends died.

> When we were first drafted, my mom took myself, Kenny Frakes, and Timmy Johnson down to the recruitment center to start the journey. We were about ten miles from home, and Kenny said, 'Larry, I'm not coming home.' I tore into him, and I said, 'dammit, I'm coming home, and I'll drag your ass home. Don't worry about it; we are all coming home.' I thought that was the end of it, but twenty more miles down the road, Tim said, 'Larry, I'm not coming home either.' I said, 'what the hell is a matter with you guys? We're coming home.' Well, they didn't, and I did, and you end up with survivor's guilt asking, 'why did I come home and they didn't?'[90]

When Hopper left Vietnam, he was proud that he served his country but had no pleasant memories of his military service.

> I remembered when I came back from Vietnam in January of 1968; I had just been through twelve months of combat, I was wounded twice, and I lost a lot of good friends forever. When I left that place, it was a very dark spot in my life, a dark moment. There weren't very many pleasant memories of Vietnam if any. That's what I remembered for the next fifty years. [91]

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[88] Hopper, interview, September 5, 2021.

[89] Lilley, interview, October 17, 2021.

[90] Lilley, interview, October 17, 2021.

[91] Hopper, interview, September 5, 2021.

For both Hopper and Lilley, Vietnam remained the country they left in 1968. However, their negative emotions began to change when they started to attend reunions for the 9th Infantry Division and Charlie Company which allowed them to process and discuss their military service with other veterans. All three drafted men only thought about returning after many years of separation from Vietnam, and after they began to have their attitudes towards the country change through interactions with other veterans. Lilley had thought about the possibility of returning before 2016, but Hopper had not until presented with the opportunity. Hopper did not want to drag up the bad memories of Vietnam by returning, and he figured that he had nothing to gain from the trip as he had a good life.[92] Hopper did not establish a connection with Vietnam like veterans who enlisted had and did not want to return to a country that represented a dark time in his life. Both Lilley and Hopper returned in 2016, and on their trip, they found closure and healing through their interactions with the Vietnamese and their former enemy, allowing them to change their perspective of Vietnam and its people.

The characteristics shared by the interviewed veterans were that they went to college before or after their service in Vietnam. All were raised in working-class families, with exceptions for one who described his childhood as middle class, and all were Caucasian men except for Cindy Young, a Caucasian woman. Because these veterans sought out higher education and had success later in life, opportunities to return may have come more easily for them than for other veterans who did not have a good transition back into civilian life. By the time they returned to Vietnam as tourists, the returnees

[92] Hopper, interview, September 5, 2021.

were middle-class, granting them more opportunities to return than veterans considered to be working-class or lower. Returning to Vietnam can be expensive, which may pose a barrier for some veterans who want to return to Vietnam but cannot afford the trip. However, the most distinguishing characteristic between the veterans who returned was the manner of their entry into the military. The enlisted returnees all chose to go to Vietnam out of a sense of duty and adventure. They wanted to see what was happening in Vietnam and to do their part to stop the spread of communism. They became connected to the country in a way that those forced to be there through the draft could not. Establishing a connection with Vietnam and believing they belonged there during the war made it easier for the enlisted veterans to return to Vietnam. The drafted veterans were forced to be in Vietnam during the war, and as a result, their military service represented a dark moment in their lives. They had a more challenging time deciding to return to Vietnam, and when they returned, it was to find closure and healing.

For Paulette Gueno Curtis, the most critical factor related to veterans who chose to return to Vietnam is the details of their military service. On the return trips that she accompanied, the majority of veterans were enlisted volunteers, and she argues that enlisted soldiers were more likely to establish a connection with Vietnam than drafted soldiers. [93] Volunteers of World War I and World War II created the myth of the war experience where the constructed narrative replaced the realities and horrors of war and made it into a meaningful and even sacred event.[94] Enlisted Vietnam veterans may do this

[93] Curtis, "Locating History," 25.

[94]George Mosse, *Fallen Soldiers: Reshaping the Memory of the World Wars* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990, 7.

as well. The enlisted interviewed returnees did not express living with the negative memories of the war in the same way that the draftees had. Vietnam represented a dark time in the memories of the draftees who expressed motivations to return to Vietnam for therapeutic and healing effects. The enlisted returnees felt a nostalgic pull to return to Vietnam, which developed through the connection they felt to the country.

How a veteran will return to Vietnam can affect their decision to make the trip back. Of the ten interviewed returnees, six returned with a group of other veterans organized by unit reunions or online groups that specialized in sending veterans back to their places of service. These veterans were Doug and Cindy Young, Steve Hopper, Larry Lilley, Georg Hambach, and Bob Hesselbein. The other four veterans, Gary Stell, James Willbanks, Michael Triner, and John Gambino, all returned with a small group of family and friends. Returning with a group of fellow veterans can be the deciding factor for some to make the trip back to Vietnam. Steve Hopper had reservations about returning but felt that returning with fellow veterans created the best opportunity for him to do so. "There is a bond between veterans who served with each other. When you are going back with guys who you served with, who you trained with, there is a bond there that causes you to want to go back with them."[95] Dennis Williams, a veteran who returned with a group of fifty-one other veterans on a trip organized by Old Glory Honor Flight, felt that returning to Vietnam with a group like this was beneficial for him. "As veterans do, you all stand behind each other and help each other, so guys that had a few rough moments, when you've got your brothers there with you, it helps. I don't know if I would have gone

[95] Hopper, interview, September 5, 2021.

back on my own, but going with fifty-one other veterans was very, very rewarding."[96] Returning to Vietnam with fellow veterans can provide some returnees with a support network when they return to areas that hold much emotion. Groups such as Old Glory Honor Flight and The Greatest Generation Foundation have provided opportunities for veterans to return in groups of their peers, which for some, makes deciding to return to Vietnam easier.

As mentioned earlier, what motivated a veteran to return to Vietnam can be tied to when they made their trip back. John Gambino first returned in 1993, near the end of Hobbs' Reconciliation period. Gambino returned to meet the family of his adopted sons, reconnect with the Vietnamese soldiers he worked with during the war, and help the Vietnamese in any way he could. [97] His motivations for returning to Vietnam are similar to other veterans who returned during this period. The first veterans to return to Vietnam were from the Vietnam Veterans of America (VVA), headed by Bobby Muller. Invited to return by the Socialist Republic of Vietnam (SRV), the group's mission focused on veteran advocacy issues, which included accounting for POWs and MIAs and sharing research on the effects of Agent Orange. [98] Other veterans began to return to Vietnam after this initial visit, and their motivations involved reconciling with their former enemy and helping those exposed to Agent Orange. Gambino wanted to help the Vietnamese

[96] Jim Hoehn, "Honor Flight Veterans Cherish Return to Vietnam," *Vantage Point,* March 27, 2019, https://blogs.va.gov/VAntage/58042/honor-flight-veterans-cherish-return-vietnam/.

[97] Gambino, interview, November 5, 2021.

[98] Hobbs, *Return to Vietnam,* 28.

people and knew that he could do so on his return trip from accounts of other veterans at this time, making it easier for him to return.

Five of the interviewed returnees made their first trips back to Vietnam during the Normalization period. These veterans were Doug and Cindy Young, who returned in 2002; Gary Stell, who returned in 2004; James Willbanks, who returned in 2005; and Michael Triner, who returned in 2006. From 1995 to 2006, the number of veterans returning to Vietnam increased as relations between the U.S. and Vietnam began normalizing.[99] Veterans returning during this period were motivated to do so because they believed they could gain therapeutic effects for their PTSD and find healing through closure. Their motivations were influenced by veterans who had returned during the Reconciliation period and found peace and healing through reconciling with their former enemy.[100] Three of the interviewed returnees who returned during Normalization were motivated to do so out of curiosity and nostalgia. Doug and Cindy Young and James Willbanks wanted to see how the country had progressed since the end of the war and was not specifically looking for therapy or healing. However, they did find that the change that had taken place in Vietnam was refreshing and that seeing the country at peace allowed them to stop associating Vietnam with the war.[101] Michael Triner returned because his father-in-law had died, and he needed to attend his funeral. Triner had wanted to return before to pray for those whom he killed during the battle of Hue in 1968, but the

[99] Laderman, *Tours of Vietnam,* 125.

[100] Hobbs, *Return to Vietnam,* 3.

[101] Doug and Cindy Young, interview, December 29, 2021; Willbanks, interview, December 28, 2021.

opportunity never presented itself. When he returned in 2006, he too found the transformation of Vietnam refreshing and was thanked by his new family for his military service.[102] Gary Stell was the only returnee who said he was motivated to return to find healing. He wanted to find peace within himself and reasoned that the only way he could was by seeing Vietnam as a country at peace.[103] Though they did not specifically use a language of healing to describe their motivations for returning to Vietnam, Doug and Cindy Young, James Willbanks, and Michael Triner all experienced some therapy from their experiences on their return trips.

Bob Hesselbein, Steve Hopper, Larry Lilley, and Georg Hambach returned to Vietnam during the Commemoration period. For Hambach and Hesselbein, they did not return to commemorate the war or any significant anniversaries at specific sites. They wanted to see how Vietnam had progressed since the end of the war, and Hambach wanted to change his perception of the Vietnamese people. Hopper and Lilley returned to visit Vietnam with veterans they served with and pay tribute to their fallen friends at various sites. As will be discussed in chapter three, Hopper made wooden crosses before the trip with the 9th Infantry logo on them and placed them at all the sites they visited where American soldiers saw combat or were killed. They also did this at the June 19th battle site, where they lost many friends. Hopper and Lilley returned again in 2017 through TGGF, this time as guides for other members of the 4th of the 47th, and they made another trip back to the battle site. 2017 marked the fiftieth anniversary of the battle, and TGGF wanted more soldiers to come on this trip to commemorate the battle

[102] Triner, interview, November 6, 2021.

[103] Stell, interview, January 9, 2022.

and memorialize the lost soldiers.[104] For Hopper and Lilley, memorialization was a goal they wanted to accomplish on their trips, which allowed them to find closure and healing. Their motivations to return are similar to other veterans who had returned during Commemoration. Knowing that they would be able to memorialize their fallen friends made the decision to return easier for them.

There are a variety of factors that veterans consider when deciding to return to Vietnam. A veteran has to decide if the trip back is feasible, whether they are healthy enough to make the taxing journey, and whether they have the monetary means to return. Above all, are the motivations that a veteran has for returning stronger than the negative emotions that may emerge back in Vietnam? As the biographies of the ten interviewed veterans have shown, facets of their life and military background can make it easier for some veterans to return over others. Chief among these is how they entered the military. Enlisted veterans had an easier time deciding to return to Vietnam than those drafted, the reason for which is tied to the connection they made to the country during their military service. Though some of the enlisted veterans were cases of forced enlistment, all interviewed veterans who volunteered felt that they belonged in Vietnam during the war.

Many believed in the Domino Theory and the fight against communism when they enlisted and felt duty-bound to do their part for their country. Others wanted to travel and see what was happening in Vietnam and go on an adventure. Because they chose to go to Vietnam, the enlisted veterans felt they had a vested interest in how the country fared after the war. The image of Vietnam as a war-torn country is common among many veterans and can hold them back from returning. However, enlisted veterans

[104] Hopper, interview, September 5, 2021; Lilley, interview, October 17, 2021.

who had established a connection to Vietnam through their military service developed a curiosity to see if the country had rebuilt after the war and if Vietnam was a communist police state, making the decision to return easier. Drafted veterans were forced to be in Vietnam, and of the three interviewed who were drafted, their memories of the war represented a dark time in their lives. They wanted to leave Vietnam in Vietnam, and their motivation to return was tied to finding closure and healing, not reliving the war, or seeing if the country had progressed. Their decisions to return to Vietnam were harder to make. They only agreed to go back if they traveled with a group of fellow veterans or avoided any areas associated with the war. Though the enlisted interviewed returnees had an easier time deciding to return to Vietnam than the drafted veterans, they all found that their experiences on their return trips impacted them greatly. By seeing a modernizing Vietnam and experiencing the friendliness of the Vietnamese, many found a feeling of peace and relief. Some veterans also found that their military service and America's involvement in Vietnam had been validated due to the legacies left over from the war. In chapter three, the return trips of the interviewed veterans are examined as they reveal how a narrative of validation is constructed by those who returned to Vietnam. When veterans who have returned to Vietnam talk about their experiences to others, they participate in the construction of a collective memory in which Vietnam is a welcoming place for veterans where they can find closure and healing. Passing on this narrative can convince some veterans that they will find validation for their military service.

CHAPTER III - IN COUNTRY: VIETNAM VETERANS' MOTIVATIONS AND EXPEREINCES OF RETURNING TO VIETNAM

Upon returning to Vietnam, some veterans have found validation for their military service through encountering a modernizing Vietnam, the friendliness of the Vietnamese people, and seeing that Vietnam has become a country at peace. This chapter explores what motivated veterans to return and the experiences they had in Vietnam as these factors reveal the construction of a narrative based on validation. The narrative of validation is passed along to other veterans by those who have returned through memoirs, news articles, travel websites, and testimonials given at reunions, which may have encouraged some veterans to return to Vietnam. As this chapter will show, what veterans experienced while back in Vietnam is a major factor that contributed to some veterans finding validation for their military service. Some found that the country they believed was devastated by the war had progressed to a country at peace and was very welcoming towards them, fitting in with the narrative constructed by other veterans who had returned. By seeing that Vietnam has modernized and transitioned to a capitalist economy and through encounters with friendly Vietnamese people, some veterans found validation for their military service. These veterans reasoned that these positive changes were a legacy left behind by the United States from their involvement in Vietnam.

Currently in the scholarship, there are three return periods in which veterans have returned to Vietnam. As discussed in chapter two, Mia Martin Hobbs has outlined three distinct periods of return, and argues that veterans who have returned to Vietnam had their expectations of what to gain from their trips influenced by other veterans who have already made the journey. Reconciliation is the term used to describe the first return

period for Vietnam veterans. Hobbs described this period as taking place from 1981 to 1995 and is defined by veterans returning to reconcile with their former enemy and learn more about the country of Vietnam.[105] From these first returns by veterans came memoirs about their experiences back in Vietnam. One of the most prominent is William Broyles Jr.'s *Brothers in Arms: A Journey from War to Peace.* Broyles was motivated to return in 1984 out of a desire to understand who his former enemy was. "I had to reach farther. I had to reach out in that tunnel and try and touch that other man. To know myself, I had to know my enemy. I had to go back."[106] In his memoir, Broyles met former Viet Cong (VC) soldiers and described them as harboring no animosity or ill will against him for his part in the Vietnam War. Broyles found a connection with his former enemy that transcended most other connections he had with American citizens:

> I discovered that I had more in common with my old enemies than with anyone except the men who had fought at my side. My enemies and I had shared something almost beyond words. We had been through war, and by accepting our memories of it honestly, we were able to greet each other in trust and friendship, hoping that we would never see war again.[107]

Memoirs such as Broyles helped construct a collective memory of Vietnam as a place where veterans could find reconciliation, forgiveness, and closure on return trips.[108]

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[105] Hobbs, *Return to Vietnam,* 5.

[106] Broyles, *Brothers,* 13.

[107] Broyles, *Brothers,* 263.

[108] For other veteran memoirs that detail their return trips to Vietnam, see Lynda Van Devanter, *Home Before Morning: The Story of an Army Nurse in Vietnam* (New York: Beaufort Books, 1983); W.D. Ehrhart, Going *Back: A Poet who was Once a Marine Returns to Vietnam* (Lancaster, PA: Wickersham Printing, 1987); and Robert Mason, *Chickenhawk: Back in the World* (New York: Viking, 1993).

These themes inspired veterans to return going into the late 1990s and 2000s and expected to find healing and closure on their return trips.

Normalization is the second return period and took place from 1995 to 2006. Veterans returning during this period were influenced by those who returned during reconciliation and sought healing effects from their trips through reconciling with their former enemy and visiting areas where they served.[109] Return trips for veterans began to normalize during this period as Vietnam began to embrace economic reforms in the 1990s (Doi Moi), which relied heavily on the tourism industry, and as relations between Vietnam and the United States began to normalize. The combination of the economic reforms and the normalization between the two countries saw the number of foreign visitors to Vietnam rise, many of whom were influenced to return by the veterans writing about their experiences in the reconciliation period.[110]

The last period of return was from 2006 to 2016 and involved veterans returning to Vietnam to commemorate significant anniversaries of the war. As with the normalization period, veterans returning during this time were influenced to do so from the experiences of veterans who had returned before them, but they also wanted to place their own stamp through commemoration ceremonies. [111] Hobbs argued that Vietnam veterans were part of a diasporic community who made their home on the battlefield. What formed their diasporic consciousness is that these veterans shared a collective

[109] Hobbs, *Return to Vietnam,* 3.

[110] Laderman, *Tours of Vietnam,* 125.

[111] Hobbs, *Return to Vietnam,* 5.

persecution rooted in their memories of being treated with neglect and disrespect upon returning home from the war. In returning to Vietnam, they hoped to find their truth, heal trauma, commemorate friends, reclaim pride, and redeem their role in the war. [112]

Joseph Darda developed a similar argument in which Vietnam veterans saw themselves as refugees from Vietnam living in exile in the United States. Darda argued that Vietnam veterans, and to a more significant extent, all white men were able to create their identity as victims by claiming that the Vietnam war was a white man's wound.[113] Darda argued that white veterans claimed ownership of the refugee title by stating that they were misidentified upon returning home from the war because they were treated as un-American.[114] As more veterans returned to Vietnam since the 1980s, some have described the experience as returning to a home they believed was lost**.**

For Hobbs, what motivated a veteran to return is tied to the period when they made their trip. However, the reasons why a veteran may return to Vietnam vary from person to person no matter the period in which they return. Some returned for therapeutic effects for their PTSD and to find closure for their military service, while others have returned out of nostalgia to see their old bases and the sites where they saw battle. Out of the ten returnees interviewed for this project, all had different reasons for wanting to return, with many stating that curiosity about the country's current state was their primary motivation. Curiosity, much like nostalgia, can be a substantial factor in pulling veterans

[112] Hobbs, *Return to Vietnam,* 3.

[113] Darda, *Culture Wars,* 10.

[114] Darda, *Culture Wars,* 165.

back to Vietnam years after the end of the war and is often tied to a need to return to a place that shaped them in some of the most formative years of their lives. For many veterans, Vietnam represented a dark time in their lives, and returning to a place with so many dark memories may seem counterintuitive. However, for these veterans, returning to Vietnam provided an opportunity to triumph over the negative emotions.[115] Some veterans who returned out of curiosity developed this motivation by studying the war and talking about their military service with other veterans they know. Doug and Cindy Young decided to return in 2002 out of curiosity developed through their conversations with other veterans who had returned.

In 2000, Doug Young began having conversations about the current state of Vietnam with his boss, who also served in Vietnam as an Army infantry colonel. Young asked his boss, "do you ever wonder what Vietnam is like today? We both remembered that Vietnam was a beautiful place if it was not for all the B-52 strike craters dotting the landscape."[116] By simply asking a fellow veteran if he too thought about Vietnam, Young sparked an interest to return. As Young began having conversations with his boss, he had also been researching the country, which further deepened his interest in returning. He found a group on the internet called Vets with a Mission. Vets is "dedicated to reconciliation in helping Vietnam veterans and all veterans – even those of the former South Vietnam, North Vietnam, and the Viet Cong – to honor the past and embrace the

[115] Halbwachs, *Collective Memory,* 49.

[116] Doug and Cindy Young, interview, December 29, 2021.

future." [117] Young was intrigued by the idea of reconciliation and felt that returning with other veterans was the safest way to do so. He shared his interest in returning with his wife, a fellow Vietnam veteran. Cindy Young, who spent her time in Vietnam as a nurse caring for the wounded, answered, "not only no, but hell no!"[118] For Cindy, Vietnam was still a country at war, and she imagined having to sleep in tents and boiling their water. To assuage her fear, Doug Young got in touch with Charles Ward, who was the executive director of Vets with a Mission and had Cindy talk with his wife, who had traveled to Vietnam many times. Ward's wife told Cindy that if they returned "no one would be shooting at them and that they would not be sleeping in hammocks. Instead, they would be staying in five-star hotels and that the food and water were safe to eat and drink."[119] By talking with Ward's wife, Cindy put some of her apprehensions about returning aside and decided that the trip might be a positive experience.

Doug Young was motivated to return out of a sense of nostalgia that developed through talking with another Vietnam veteran, and Cindy was motivated to return by discussing the trip with her veteran husband and others who had made the trip back. For both of them, discussing Vietnam with others and listening to the experiences of those who had returned to Vietnam were crucial for them when they decided to make their return trip. Charles Ward and his wife established what to expect upon returning to Vietnam, told them that Vietnam had turned into a modern country with many amenities,

[117] "About Us," Vets with a Mission, accessed February 10, 2022, https://www.vetswithamission.org/about-us.

[118] Doug and Cindy Young, interview, December 29, 2021.

[119] Doug and Cindy Young, interview, December 29, 2021.

and promised it was welcoming for American veterans. Doug and Cindy Young had their expectations reinforced by stories from other veterans who had returned, establishing in their minds a narrative of veterans being welcomed to Vietnam and finding closure constructed by other veterans who had returned before them. Some veterans may find validation for their military service on their return trips through experiencing a modernizing Vietnam and the friendliness of the Vietnamese people, as this expectation has already been set up for them by the collective memory of veterans returning to Vietnam.

Reunions also sparked curiosity and nostalgia when veterans retell stories of returning back to Vietnam. Don Blackburn, who returned to Vietnam and decided to live there in 2004, has returned to the U.S. many times to speak at reunions and conventions about the therapeutic effects gained by visiting Vietnam as a tourist. Blackburn, who suffered heavily from PTSD after his military service, returned to Vietnam for the therapeutic effects and in hopes of finding healing through reconciliation. [120] When he returned to Vietnam, he was amazed by the friendliness of the Vietnamese people and the forgiveness they showed him. He was also astonished by the transformation that had taken place in Vietnam, turning a war-torn country into a country at peace. Blackburn met with former North Vietnamese Army (NVA) veterans who told him that "Americans and Vietnamese veterans had a shared bond of suffering that few non-veterans understood."[121] Blackburn has written several poems and books about the country of

[120] Nissa Rhee, "The Soldier Who Needed 'Nam," *Narratively,* January 7, 2014, https://narratively.com/the-soldier-who-needed-nam/.

[121] Don Blackburn, *All You Have Given: Meditations on War, Peace and Reconciliation* (Self Published: CreateSpace, 2010), vii.

Vietnam and his experiences from his return trips to convince other veterans to take a trip back. By talking about these experiences at reunions with other veterans, Blackburn contributed to the narrative of Vietnam being a welcoming place for veterans where reconciliation with their former enemy is possible and veterans can find closure. In the environment of reunions, a collective memory is created among veterans that, for some, framed how they thought about Vietnam. The collective memory that developed among veterans reinforced the curiosity and nostalgia fostered by veterans reminiscing about their military service with each other at reunions. These reunions created an opportunity for some veterans to return to Vietnam.

Military reunions are often organized according to unit affiliation and are typically composed of veterans who served together, were stationed at the same bases, or saw similar amounts of combat. The purpose of reunions is to foster a community among veterans but also to serve as a forum where veterans can discuss and dissect their war experiences and events that are common among them.[122] The discussions at these reunions created new memories of a shared war and post-war experience, enabling some to reinterpret their military service and the aftermath of the war as a positive experience. [123] When these new memories of their military service and returning home are combined with the narrative that Vietnam is a welcoming place for veterans, some develop a curiosity to return to Vietnam. In cases where enough veterans expressed an interest in returning, reunion organizers may organize a trip back to Vietnam for anyone who wishes

[122] Curtis, "Locating History," 12-13.

[123] Bleakney, *Revisiting Vietnam*, 9.

to return. Returning with fellow veterans or with groups organized through reunions can make it easier for some veterans to go back to Vietnam. Some of the returnees interviewed for this project returned through trips organized through reunions or with others they served with, and these veterans are Steve Hopper, Larry Lilley, and Georg Hambach.

As discussed in chapter two, both Larry Lilley and Steve Hopper served together in Charlie Company of the 9th Infantry division from 1967 to 1968. Theirs and the rest of the soldiers of Charlie Company's story were the focus of *The Boys of '67: Charlie Company's War in Vietnam* by Andrew Wiest and the documentary film *Brothers in War*. Timothy Davis, the founder, and CEO of The Greatest Generations Foundation (TGGF), saw *Brothers in War* and offered Hopper and Lilley the chance to return to Vietnam through his organization. Before talking with Davis, Lilley "had an idea in the back of his mind to take a trip back to Vietnam with his son and show him where they were stationed and what they did."[124] Unfortunately, Lilley could not make this journey back with his son as Davis only wanted to take back four veterans from Charlie Company and no family members. Lilley was disappointed that he could not take his son on the trip but felt that the opportunity to return with other veterans he served with was one he could not pass up.[125]

When Hopper was asked if he wanted to return to Vietnam, he struggled over the decision. Hopper's military service represented a dark time that he was not sure he

[124] Lilley, interview, October 17, 2021.

[125] Lilley, interview, October 17, 2021.

wanted to relive. In his mind, Vietnam was still "dark, bloody, muddy, infested with mosquitos, hot and humid, and had people that were unfriendly and untrustworthy."[126] When he was asked to return by Davis, Hopper had retired from Caterpillar Inc. after forty-one years and had a wonderful life. He felt that returning might upset this peace and dredge up old, painful memories of his time in Vietnam. Hopper decided, however, returning with TGGF would be the best way to do it. He was reassured by the idea of traveling with a group of fellow veterans and friends that he had kept in touch with since he returned home from the war through correspondences and reunions.[127] Hopper and Lilley's experiences on their return trips will be discussed later in the chapter, but both viewed Vietnam as a "war" instead of a "country" before their first return trip. Returning with fellow veterans provided an opportunity to return in a way they felt was safe. They would come back into contact with a place that held dark memories for them and create new memories of Vietnam as a country at peace that is welcoming to veterans.

Georg Hambach's opportunity to return to Vietnam came through a trip organized by the 12th Tactical Fighter Wing Association and the online group that put veterans in touch with one another who served in this unit. Hambach returned in 2017 with a group organized through the online association composed of friends and fellow veterans who were members of the association. The trip back included scheduled visits to places where they served.[128] Hambach saw the trip as similar to a reunion where veterans could

[126] Hopper, interview, September 5, 2021.

[127] Hopper, interview, September 5, 2021.

[128] Hambach, interview, October 11, 2021.

reconnect with one another and discuss aspects of their military service. Hambach was also motivated to return so that he might change his perception of Vietnam and the Vietnamese people. Hambach remembered that after he returned home from the war that "there were good people living there, but Vietnam had become a communist country."[129] The NVA was still the enemy, and the image of Vietnam being a communist police state stuck with Hambach after his military service. He needed to return to see if that image still prevailed; he needed to see that Vietnam had moved on from the war and that the people living there were now happy.[130]

Like Hopper and Lilley, Hambach returned with veterans who served in the same unit as him. Returning in units composed of veterans they had served with enabled them to create new memories of the war by encountering a Vietnam that has transformed into a country at peace and is modernizing. For some veterans who have returned in groups organized through reunions, their expectations of what they would experience in Vietnam may have been influenced by discussions with veterans who have already returned. These veterans returned to Vietnam expecting a welcoming and modernized place, and experiencing this for themselves can lead some to find validation of their military service. Other veterans who have returned to Vietnam out of curiosity and nostalgia have had their motivations sparked by studying the war since its end, which was the case for James Willbanks and Bob Hesselbein.

[129] Hambach, interview, October 11, 2021.

[130] Hambach, interview, October 11, 2021.

After the war, Willbanks received a Ph.D. in history from the University of Kansas and became an academic authority on the conflict. Willbanks' interest in the war stemmed from his participation in the conflict. Out of this interest, he developed a curiosity over the current state of the country and the areas that he had not seen while stationed in Military region III. [131] Willbanks returned in 2005 with his brother, and they visited areas in Military Region III, such as An Loc and Xuan Loc. However, they also visited northern Vietnam and other areas that he could not see during his military service, achieving the goals that he had for returning to Vietnam.[132] Bob Hesselbein returned out of a similar curiosity to see how Vietnam had faired since the end of the war. When Hesselbein returned in 2013, he did so with a travel group called Military Historical Tours, which caters to veterans returning to battlefields and places where they served. Like Willbanks, Hesselbein had studied the war since its end and felt that returning through this group offered him the best opportunity to return and "see what Vietnam was like today after thirty-plus years of peace."[133] The experiences of these two veterans while back in Vietnam will be discussed later on in the chapter, but their trips back changed the way they remembered Vietnam and the legacies left by U.S. involvement. They both wanted to see how Vietnam had developed since the end of the war as, in their minds, the country was still a communist police state and devastated as a result of the

[131] "Office of Civil Operations and Rural Development Support, Military Region 3," Archives.gov, accessed February 22, 2022, https://www.archives.gov/research/military/vietnam-war/cords-region3.html#:~:text=Military%20Region%20III%2C%20located%20in,Gia%20Dinh%2C%20and%20Long%20An.

[132] Willbanks, interview, December 28, 2021.

[133] Hesselbein, interview, November 5, 2021.

war. Going back was a positive experience for them both and they have been back several times since their first return trip and have encouraged other veterans to return.

For the interviewed returnees discussed so far, their motivations to return have primarily been a curiosity to see the country today, a nostalgia to return to areas where they served, and an opportunity to return with veterans with whom they served. John Gambino, Michael Triner, and Gary Stell, had different motives. They sought therapeutic effects and healing by obtaining closure, reconciliation, and reconnection with the Vietnamese soldiers they served with during the war.

John Gambino returned to Vietnam three different times in the 1990s as a missionary, with his first return trip taking place in 1993. Gambino was able to pick which country he went to as a missionary, and he purposefully chose to return to Vietnam, stating, "I wanted to go to Vietnam… I love the culture; I love the people; I love the food. I wanted to go back there and meet people, but I mainly wanted to return to meet the family of my Vietnamese sons."[134] In the 1980s, Gambino adopted two boys who were the sons of a Vietnamese translator he worked closely with as a member of the Military Assistance Command Vietnam advisory team (MACV).[135] As an advisor, Gambino spent more time with the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) than American soldiers and developed relationships with them. The translator, whose name was Lao, had tried to get his whole family out of Vietnam in the 1980s, but his sons were

[134] Gambino, interview, November 5, 2021.

[135] "Guide to the Military Assistance Command, Vietnam Team 58 Photograph Collection, 1964-1965," George Mason University Libraries, accessed March 27, 2022, https://scrc.gmu.edu/finding_aids/macv58.html.

the only ones to escape, as Lao, and the rest of his family died in the South China Sea as they tried to escape Vietnam by boat. When Gambino reflected on his military service and what resulted from it, he felt "thankful that I got sent to Vietnam and sent to the place where I got sent, because now I have all these blessings that have come my way."[136] Gambino loved the Vietnamese people and their culture, and because of the relationships he made during the war, he was able to expand his family.

For some veterans, rescuing refugees fleeing Vietnam can validate their military service and their part in the war. [137] For Gambino, rescuing Lao's sons convinced him that his military service had been worth it and that he was in the right place at the right time. When looking back on this moment, Gambino reflected that his service in Vietnam was "the best of times and the worst of times, but I would not trade it for anything in the world."[138] Veterans like Gambino felt validation for their military service through the rescue of refugees who fled to the United States. For some veterans, seeing refugees flee from a communist government to a free America proved that U.S. involvement in Vietnam had a noble purpose and that perhaps the war was good all along. Returning to Vietnam for some veterans can further validate their military service in their minds as they experience the friendliness of the Vietnamese and see that the country has adopted a capitalist economy and is modernizing.

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[136] Gambino, interview, November 5, 2021.

[137] Refugees coming to America from Vietnam were seen as fleeing a communist government and rescued by Vietnam veterans, enabling the creation of a narrative that promoted victory in the war through their rescue. Darda, *Culture Wars,* 155.

[138] Gambino, interview, November 5, 2021.

Michael Triner, a veteran who returned to Vietnam in 2006, was given the opportunity to do so because he became part of a Vietnamese family. Before returning in 2006, Triner had wanted to return to Vietnam and visit the city of Hue. His dream was to return to Hue because he promised himself that "one day I would return and I would go to the Catholic church and Buddhist temple there and pray for the people I had killed."[139] Unfortunately, Triner could not accomplish this dream, but he did receive an opportunity to return with his new Vietnamese family. After returning from the war, Triner felt more comfortable around Vietnamese people than Americans, and this stemmed from the neglect that he felt he received upon coming home from the war. "I became very antisocial, I felt like I was marked, and I decided to not tell anyone that I was a Vietnam veteran."[140] As a result of feeling this way, Triner began working with a Vietnamese association in Chicago and taught children English. In 1989, Triner moved to California, and ten years later, he met his future wife, a Vietnamese woman who, like John Gambino's adopted sons, escaped by boat from Vietnam in 1982. Triner's opportunity to return to Vietnam came when his father-in-law died, and they needed to attend his funeral in his village. Triner returned to Vietnam and met his new family, whom he said: "thanked him for what he did during the war."[141] When he returned to Vietnam, Triner felt that he was never treated better in his life. Triner's new family was able to give him a "welcome home" that he felt he did not receive when he returned to the U.S. after the war. He felt that his return trip provided healing effects for him and helped him find

[139] Triner, interview, November 6, 2021.

[140] Triner, interview, November 6, 2021.

[141] Triner, interview, November 6, 2021.

closure for his military service, a sentiment shared by the last interviewed returnee, Gary Stell, who returned to Vietnam in 2004 and chose to live there.

Upon retiring at fifty-five, Stell started to think about his military service. Like other veterans motivated to return to Vietnam through curiosity and nostalgia, Stell wanted to see how the country had changed since the end of the war. However, Stell had another reason why he wanted to return to Vietnam, which stemmed from feelings of anger and guilt. As he thought about the possibility of returning, Stell reasoned that he "would never be at peace until he saw that country at peace."[142] Stell had friends who had returned to Vietnam and visited their former bases and where they saw battle, but reliving the war was the last thing on his mind. Stell wanted to see the countryside, experience the culture, and meet the people living in Vietnam. When he returned in 2004, Stell went with a Vietnamese exchange student living with a friend of his in New York whom he had formed a connection with. By the end of the student's first year in college, Stell bought them both tickets to Vietnam, where they visited the student's family.[143] Stell was motivated to return to Vietnam to find closure and healing, something that many veterans have expressed as their reason to return. The expectation of finding closure and healing by returning to Vietnam has become part of a narrative constructed by veterans who have returned to Vietnam and described how welcoming the Vietnamese people are and how their former enemies seem to have no animosity towards American veterans.

[142] Stell, interview, January 9, 2022.

[143] Stell, interview, January 9, 2022.

The ten interviewed returnees all expressed that they were nervous about returning to Vietnam because they did not know how the Vietnamese government or people would treat them. For example, as Doug and Cindy Young were flying into Saigon on their first return trip, they did not know what to expect when landing. As they made their connecting flight from Hong Kong to Saigon, Doug Young remembered:

> Flying in there, my imagination went crazy… And I can remember thinking 'Oh, they got some big, old, NVA colonel standing there at a computer database, and they are looking for all the guys that served over in Vietnam. I am going to be pulled to the side and interrogated'… Those were real thoughts going through my mind.[144]

The nervousness that Doug and Cindy Young felt upon flying into Saigon is an emotion that other veterans expressed on their return trips. As mentioned earlier, memories and stories of past veterans who have returned to Vietnam and experienced friendliness and forgiveness from the Vietnamese can influence veterans' motivations to return to seek closure and reconciliation. They expected the Vietnamese to be friendly and welcoming to returning veterans. However, the interviewed returnees felt uneasy about how they would be treated and received by the Vietnamese upon landing. They are nervous, despite reassurances, because how they are viewed by Vietnamese matter to them. Nervousness is the initial emotional response for these veterans upon returning to Vietnam, which may stem from how they remembered the country and its people from their military service.

Steve Hopper remembered Vietnam as a dark place full of people working against him and could not be trusted, and Georg Hambach saw Vietnam as a communist police state with oppressed people.[145] James Willbanks, a historical authority on Vietnam and

[144] Doug and Cindy Young, interview, December 29, 2021.

[145] Hopper, interview, September 5, 2021; Hambach, interview, October 11, 2021.

the war, would have known before his return trip what the current state of Vietnam was like, yet before he made his first trip back, he believed "he would find a police state ran by the communists."[146] Even John Gambino, who loved the Vietnamese and wanted to return to make new connections with them and his adopted sons' family, hated the communist government and felt that Vietnam was still a police state before his return.[147] Nervousness, anxiousness, and uncertainty over how they will be treated by the Vietnamese were the initial thoughts of these veterans before returning to Vietnam. They overshadowed what they expected to experience through the narrative of Vietnam as a welcoming place. As a veteran, the dark memories of their military service can grow more prominent in their minds as they come closer to Vietnam, and many of the expectations they had upon returning to a friendly and welcoming country shrank into the background. Because of this, some veterans are surprised when they return to Vietnam and find that most of the Vietnamese they encounter are friendly and welcoming. By seeing that Vietnam is not a police state and that the Vietnamese are welcoming to returning veterans, some may form new memories of the friendly and forgiving Vietnamese, which can replace the old, painful memories of a country full of angry and distrustful people. [148] Experiencing this friendliness and forgiveness may signal to some veterans that their military service and the war are valued. By validating their military

[146] Willbanks, interview, December 28, 2021.

[147] Gambino, interview, November 5, 2021.

[148] Hobbs, *Return to Vietnam,* 7.

service, they contribute to the narrative that veterans can find closure and healing by returning to Vietnam.

When the ten returnees were asked why they believed the Vietnamese were so friendly toward returning veterans, they answered with two different explanations. Some veterans believed that the Vietnamese had less trouble moving on from the war than American veterans. As discussed earlier, some veterans began studying Vietnam and the war upon returning home from their military service and learned that the conflict with Americans was only one war in Vietnam's long history of pushing out aggressors and occupiers. [149] Some veterans reasoned that to go from one conflict to another, the Vietnamese have the ability to not linger in the past and move on mentally and physically from conflicts. Michael Triner believed that the Vietnamese could move on from the American War because of their long history of conflicts. "For a thousand years they have been at war, and finally they are at peace, there is no more war after all these years… The Vietnamese are a happy people, and they are finally free."[150] Larry Lilley held a similar view as Triner in that the Vietnamese could more easily move on from the war because of their long history of being in conflict with other countries. "They had endured the French fighting, and then we are (U.S.) fighting, and once we left, they could let out their breath,

[149] For an in-depth analysis of the wars that Vietnam has fought before and after the Vietnam War and how they developed their sense of tenacity for pushing out aggressors, see Stanley Karnow, "The Heritage of Vietnamese Nationalism," in *Vietnam: A History,* by Stanley Karnow, 89-128. (New York: The Viking Press, 1983); Neil L. Jamieson, *Understanding Vietnam* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993); Mark Atwood Lawrence and Fredrik Logevall, edited, *The First Vietnam War: Colonial Conflict and Cold War Crisis* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007); and K.W. Taylor, *A History of the Vietnamese* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013).

[150] Triner, interview, November 6, 2021.

they're done."[151] Veterans such as Triner and Lilley saw the Vietnamese as a people finally at peace after centuries of warfare, which enabled them to move on more easily from the Vietnam War than American veterans could.

For the second explanation, other veterans have contended that the Vietnamese can move on from the war more quickly because the majority of the population of Vietnam is young. With the population of Vietnam in 2020 estimated to be 97, 338, 579 million people with a median age of thirty-two and a half years, most Vietnamese people were born after the end of the Vietnam War. [152] The young population would have no personal memories of American involvement in their country, and because of this, they may not hold any animosity towards American veterans. For a counter explanation, authors Laurel B. Kennedy and Mary Rose Williams explained why the Vietnamese appeared to be friendly and hold no animosity towards American veterans. The authors explained that to attract more international visitors to Vietnam during the period of Doi Moi in the 1990s, the tourism industry of Vietnam presented a narrative to foreign visitors that emphasized the colonial pleasures present before the conflicts with the U.S. and the French. Vietnam presents a narrative to visitors in which the country holds no animosity towards foreign enemies and no hostile resistance towards external control. Vietnam offers visitors its Asian mystique and a muted and angerless history.[153]

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[151] Lilley, interview, October 17, 2021.

[152] "Vietnam Population," Worldometer, accessed March 31, 2022, https://www.worldometers.info/world-population/vietnam-population/.

[153] Hue-Tam Ho Tai, ed. *The Country of Memory: Remaking The Past in Late Socialist Vietnam* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), 136.

Regardless of why some returning veterans have found the Vietnamese friendly and welcoming to them on their return trips, the initial surprise of encountering this friendliness and forgiveness impacted them deeply.

Bob Hesselbein encountered the friendliness of the Vietnamese on his return trip when he visited Dien Bien Phu. While visiting the site, Hesselbein and the group he was with caught the attention of some older Vietnamese men and he asked his translator if he and his group were French. The translator told the Vietnamese men that they were American, and at this news, they became animated and invited Hesselbein's group to have drinks.[154] The two groups quickly became friends, and the Vietnamese men invited them to travel to other cultural sites in Dien Bien Phu together. Before getting on the bus to go to these cultural sites with the Vietnamese men, Hesselbein had to excuse himself for a moment. He became overwhelmed by the friendliness of the men. As a gunship pilot during the war, Hesselbein knew what would have happened if they had come across these men. "If we caught these men in the open, it was often a one-way fight… They were being too nice, and I had to catch my breath."[155] The interactions with the Vietnamese men emotionally impacted Hesselbein to the point where he questioned why they were so welcoming. For Hesselbein, returning to Vietnam and encountering the friendliness of the Vietnamese people evaporated any guilt he may have had from his military service and, as will be discussed later, made him question if the U.S. had really lost the war.

[154] Hesselbein, interview, November 5, 2021.

[155] Hesselbein, interview, November 5, 2021.

Georg Hambach was pleasantly surprised by the friendliness of the Vietnamese upon his return to Vietnam which contributed to his change in perception of them. When Hambach returned to Vietnam, he landed in Hanoi, which he described as "a rather shocking exposure immediately because they (soldiers) were in their North Vietnamese uniforms as they checked our passports and health records."[156] Landing in Hanoi at first seemed to confirm in Hambach's mind that Vietnam was a police state, but as they left the airport, the tension lessened. Hambach's group started their trip in the north, and as they traveled south, they noticed that the rigidity relaxed. He recognized that the government was still communist but that the economy had become more capitalistic, a system that seemed to be working for the Vietnamese.[157] The people he encountered were all friendly toward him and his group, and they seemed to be happy living in Vietnam. Hambach achieved his goal of changing his perception of the Vietnamese on his return trip. However, he did not believe that veterans could find validation for their military service by visiting Vietnam. "I don't believe that you can validate your service in a war. World War II may be, the greatest generation had a reason, a noble reason for being there, we didn't. Our reason was not noble, and to validate that, I don't know if that is possible."[158] For Hambach, the only way a veteran can gain any benefits from returning to Vietnam is if they approach it from a cathartic perspective, which he did, allowing him to become a proponent of veterans to return to Vietnam for a cathartic experience.

[156] Hambach, interview, October 11, 2021.

[157] Hambach, interview, October 11, 2021.

[158] Hambach, interview, October 11, 2021.

For Gary Stell, the friendliness of the Vietnamese and the connections that he made with them on his first return trip convinced him to live in Vietnam. After his first return trip, Stell returned in 2012 to celebrate Tet with his Vietnamese friends. While back, he hired a driver to take him to the highlands of Vietnam, where he was astounded by the number of butterflies in the area. Stell had always been fascinated by butterflies and studied them as a hobby and decided to move to Vietnam to study them and be closer to his Vietnamese friends. For Stell, "moving to Vietnam was the best decision I have ever made."[159] By moving to Vietnam, Stell gained a new community that he felt a part of, and when he made trips back to the U.S. and attended reunions, he talked about living there to other veterans. Stell remembered a reunion he attended the last time he was back in the U.S. "They would grab me by the arm and say 'sit down, I want to go to Vietnam, you tell me what it takes to travel there.' The reception I got was overwhelming."[160] Stell felt that he made the right decision in returning to Vietnam and passed on his experience to other veterans at reunions, contributing to the narrative that Vietnam is a welcoming place for veterans where they can find closure and healing.

For some veterans, the effects produced by experiencing the friendliness of the Vietnamese can also come from meeting former NVA and VC soldiers. Some veterans have attempted to reconcile with their former enemy and found that they had much in common. The veterans who have reconciled with their former enemy described a bond shared between them similar to the bond they shared with fellow American veterans. By

[159] Stell, interview, January 9, 2022.

[160] Stell, interview, January 9, 2022.

forming this bond, some veterans have reasoned that there is no animosity towards them from their former enemy and that they had forgiven American veterans for their part in the Vietnam War. For veterans Steve Hopper and Larry Lilley, meeting their former enemy had therapeutic effects for them, and for Hopper, it changed his perception of the Vietnamese people.

When Hopper and Lilley returned to Vietnam in 2016, they did so with two other veterans whom they served with in Charlie Company, Gary Maibach and Bill Reynolds. On this trip arranged by TGGF, they participated in a grand tour of Vietnam hitting many of the cultural sites and places associated with the Vietnam War.[161] The places they visited were new to them as they had primarily served and fought south of Saigon, though they did visit their old base camp, Dong Tam, in the Mekong River Delta and the June 19th, 1967 battle site. At each site they visited, the veterans wanted to leave something behind. Before returning, Hopper made several wooden crosses with the 9th Infantry Division logo in the middle, which they planted at the different sites associated with the war. When they left a cross, the four veterans knelt and said a prayer, and they did this as well at the June 19th battle site. As discussed in chapter two, the June 19th battle was a day-long firefight between the 4th of the 47th and the VC's 5th Nha Be Battalion. Hopper and Lilley lost friends that day as their company suffered many casualties, with ten dead and more than forty wounded. [162]

[161] Lilley, interview, October 17, 2021.

[162] Wiest, *'67,* 237-238.

As the veterans returned to the site, Lilley remembered what he saw, and it was a shock. "When we went to the June 19th battle site, I hardly recognized it at all. I found out from one of the locals who lived there that they had taken out some of the rice paddy dikes, and now they were farming fish."[163] Once the veterans got their bearings, they performed a memorial ceremony for those who died there in 1967. The veterans placed a cross, said prayers for their fallen comrades and read the names of the forty-three men they lost that day. After their ceremony, the veterans' interpreter pointed out a man following them around the battle site and told them that he was a former VC soldier who fought against them at this battle. Upon hearing this, the veterans immediately felt anxious about meeting the man as they did not know what he would do. As the former VC soldier approached, however, he smiled at the four veterans, a moment which Hopper remembered having a profound effect upon him. "The power of a smile is incredible. All of a sudden, if there was any tension or uncertainty between us and him about shaking hands or getting close to one another, that smile he gave us took it all away."[164] After meeting the former VC soldier, the veterans noticed that he had a scar on his chest and asked the interpreter how he received it. The interpreter told them that he had suffered a wound during the June 19th battle, and upon hearing this, Bill Reynolds took a miniature purple heart pin out of his hat and presented it to their former enemy. They explained what the purple heart meant in the U.S. military, and the four veterans watched as he

[163] Lilley, interview, October 17, 2021.

[164] Hopper, interview, September 5, 2021.

admired the pin.[165] After presenting the pin, the four veterans extended the bond they shared with their former enemy and recognized him as a fellow soldier.

After their interaction with the former VC soldier, Hopper realized that he had harbored resentment towards the Vietnamese, stemming from the friends he lost and being wounded twice during the war. Hopper's attitude changed during this interaction as he realized that they were both doing their duty for their country.

> We were serving our country, we were doing what our country had asked us to do, and that was all this man was doing too… We may be on different political fronts, we may look a little different than one another, but at that moment on the June 19th battlefield, a calmness came over each one of us. To this day, I am so grateful for having experienced that.[166]

Lilley found a similar realization as after that moment, he no longer harbored any ill will towards the Vietnamese and understood that, like him, they were doing their job for their country.[167]

Hopper and Lilley made a second return trip to Vietnam in 2017, accompanied by a larger group of veterans, and this time the tour catered to their military service. The second return trip was organized again by TGGF, and they planned to make another trip to the June 19th battle site, but this time it was during the 50th anniversary of the battle. When the veterans returned to the site, they found the cross they placed there in 2016 was now in a garden and taken care of by the local villagers.[168] After seeing this, the veterans

[165] Hopper, interview, September 5, 2021.

[166] Hopper, interview, September 5, 2021.

[167] Lilley, interview, October 17, 2021.

[168] Hopper, interview, September 5, 2021.

performed another memorial ceremony for those they lost that day, placing three more crosses for Alpha, Bravo, and Charlie Company. They were joined this time by more people from the local village and memorialized everyone who was lost that day on both sides. When Hopper and Lilley returned this time, they did so as ambassadors for TGGF and led their fellow veterans around Vietnam. When they returned to the June 19th battle site, Hopper could see the anxiousness on the faces of his fellow veterans. "I knew some of these guys like brothers, we served together, and I could see the anxiety they were experiencing. They doubted whether or not they should be there, but all I wanted for every guy who was in our group was to experience what we had experienced in April of 2016."[169] From the memorial ceremony, Hopper could see that many of the veterans in attendance began to let go of what was weighing them down. Some were able to forgive and begin to reconcile their military service and let go of some of the guilt that had been inside them since they returned home from the war. By reconciling with their former enemy, some veterans have reasoned that the Vietnamese harbored no animosity towards American veterans and had forgiven them for their part in the Vietnam War, which can validate their military service in their minds. Experiencing a modernizing Vietnam and seeing that the country is now at peace can have similar effects on some returning veterans. They may reason that Vietnam has progressed because of the legacies left behind by the U.S. during the war.

For all ten interviewed returnees, the change that had taken place in Vietnam shocked them. Many veterans still associated Vietnam with the war. Some found

[169] Hopper, interview, September 5, 2021.

validation for their military service upon seeing how Vietnam had modernized and had a capitalist economy. Bob Hesselbein felt this way when he returned in 2013 and saw how the economy had changed.

> When you go there, they have McDonalds, they have Kentucky Fried Chicken, they have Burger King, and Starbucks, Starbucks everywhere… Throughout Vietnam, they use U.S. greenback dollars interchangeably with their own currency. They use dollars everywhere, even in the countryside, and all the signs are in English. The television stations, most of them have U.S., English movies, and U.S. news with English/Vietnamese subtitles. You sit there, and you wonder, 'did we actually lose this war?'[170]

When Hesselbein saw that Vietnam had modernized, transitioned into a capitalist economy, and became a country at peace, any guilt he may have had from his military service evaporated away. Vietnam represented a dark time in Hesselbein's life, but seeing how it had changed convinced him that positive legacies may have been leftover from the war. Likewise, Rick Blackburn, a veteran who returned to Vietnam in 2019, was interviewed on his trip and asked what his impressions were of Vietnam today. "My question is, did we do the right thing coming here in '68? Losing all those lives, and you see it now. The first ten years was bad for the people (Vietnamese). After that, I mean you look at it, would this still have happened if we never came over? No one knows, but it's doing good."[171] Dale Ljunggren, another veteran interviewed on his return trip to Vietnam, saw his service and the war had meaning because of the progress made in the country. Ljunggren experienced the friendliness of the Vietnamese and saw that Vietnam had a capitalist economy which enforced in his mind that the war had a positive legacy.

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[170] Hesselbein, interview, November 5, 2021.

[171] Interview with Rick Blackburn, Vietnam Center and Sam Johnson Vietnam Archive, No Date, https://www.vietnam.ttu.edu/virtualarchive/items.php?item=OH1042.

"It was a real blessing to me to see the progress made in the country as it gave my year of service over there meaning."[172]

For Doug and Cindy Young, encountering a Vietnam that had modernized deeply impacted their perception of the country and allowed them to find some closure for their military service. Doug Young realized this as he watched the Vietnamese go about their daily lives in Saigon: "I watched a street cleaning lady sweeping up, and I realized she's sweeping leaves, not raw sewage or anything like that, just plain leaves. That's when I realized that the war really is over."[173] The smell of the city also surprised them as they were expecting the city to stink. They remembered Saigon being crammed full of refugees during the war, and with this many people came a bad smell. However, when they landed, the smell was no longer there, and they realized that this was because Vietnam had transformed.[174] Other veterans developed a similar sentiment as they encountered a modernizing Vietnam on their return trips. Steve Hopper remembered how he felt after seeing a modernizing Vietnam and what effect that can have on returning veterans.

> Going back and seeing how the country has moved on, it's not what you remembered. They've got interstates there now; they've got on the Mekong River where our base camp was shipping ports. There's all of these things now that changes your picture of Vietnam, what you remembered when you were nineteen, and that's worth something.[175]

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[172] Interview with Dale Ljunggren, Vietnam Center and Sam Johnson Vietnam Archive, No Date, https://www.vietnam.ttu.edu/virtualarchive/items.php?item=OH1041.

[173] Doug and Cindy Young, interview, December 29, 2021.

[174] Doug and Cindy Young, interview, December 29, 2021.

[175] Hopper, interview, September 5, 2021.

Hopper felt that seeing a transformed Vietnam was refreshing and helped him bridge the gap in his mind of Vietnam as a war to a country at peace. Larry Lilley remembered flying into Saigon and being astounded by the city's skyline: "When we flew into Saigon, I thought we were flying into New York City."[176] One of the first places Lilley and his group went to on their return trip was to a hotel, and there they sat on a roof-top bar overlooking the city. As they looked out, Lilley and the other veterans wondered "what it took to screw this place back together."[177] For James Willbanks, every time he has been back to Vietnam, the country has been vastly different. Like many other veterans who have returned to Vietnam, he pictured the country as a communist police state before returning but found this not to be the case and was pleasantly surprised to see Vietnam progressing in a positive direction.[178]

For some veterans, encountering a modern and friendly Vietnam can replace the painful memories of their military service. New memories are made on their return trips of friendly Vietnamese people and a country that is not devastated by the war and helps them bridge the gap in their minds from Vietnam as the war to Vietnam as a country at peace.[179] For these veterans, a changed Vietnam has allowed them to find closure and, for some, validation for their military service. Some veterans, however, have had a more challenging time adjusting to a changed Vietnam as they returned to visit sites where they

[176] Lilley, interview, October 17, 2021.

[177] Lilley, interview, October 17, 2021.

[178] Willbanks, interview, December 28, 2021.

[179] Hobbs, *Return to Vietnam,* 7.

were stationed or saw combat. These sites may have been reused by the Vietnamese in the aftermath of the American War. Seeing a place that held memories for them transformed into something unrecognizable can upset some veterans.

Doug Young has seen how other veterans have reacted to seeing a changed Vietnam and has recognized that, at times, it overwhelms them. Young had a veteran friend who returned after reading one of his blog posts about their time in Vietnam. Doug and Cindy Young were living in Hue and hosted this veteran and his wife on their return trip. Khe Sanh was an important place for the returning veteran, and the day after they arrived, he and his wife visited the site. They all had dinner together that evening, and Doug Young could tell that the returning veteran was angry. He recognized what was going on with the veteran as he had seen it before in others. Young reasoned that "what produces that anger is that it really takes the mind some time to adjust to what you see today to what you remember from fifty years ago. It is really one hell of a transition, and we used to call it Returning Vet Syndrome."[180] While living in Vietnam, Doug and Cindy Young saw this phenomenon play out in many returning veterans. They were usually angry for one or two days before realizing that Vietnam had changed and was no longer a country at war. In some cases, veterans' return trips to Vietnam are documented in news articles and documentaries, and in these recordings, some veterans have expressed this frustration.

In a news documentary produced for WBIR Channel 10, an NBC news affiliate out of Knoxville, Tennessee, John Becker traveled with veterans returning to Vietnam

[180] Doug and Cindy Young, interview, December 29, 2021.

and documented their experiences. Some of the veterans experienced anger and frustration upon seeing a changed Vietnam but accepted the change after reflecting upon the country's transformation. Gary Koontz was interested in returning to Vietnam because he wanted to see what the places he served at during the war were like now and became frustrated on the trip as he could not find his old base. The area that the base used to be in was unfamiliar to Koontz, but after some time, he realized that it was for the best. For Koontz, the changed landscape signaled that the war was in the past and that if Vietnam could move on, then so should he.[181] For Koontz, he found closure by seeing that Vietnam had transformed into a country at peace, even though he felt frustrated over its transformation at first.

Veterans who have returned to Vietnam were motivated to do so through various factors. These motivations could have been a curiosity to see the country years after the end of the war, a nostalgia to return to their former bases or where they saw combat, or a need to find closure and healing through reconciliation. Many veterans returned to Vietnam expecting to gain something beneficial from their trips, and these expectations have been enforced by stories of other veterans who have returned before them. Veterans such as William Broyles Jr., W.D. Ehrhart and Don Blackburn have written about their return trips and the benefits that can come from returning to Vietnam, which has contributed to creating a collective memory among veterans that Vietnam is a welcoming place where they can find closure and healing. Veterans such as Doug Young, Steve Hopper, Larry Lilley, and Bob Hesselbein have also contributed to constructing this

[181] John Becker, "Facing Ghosts: Return to Vietnam," September 10, 2017, produced by WBIR Channel 10, Video, 45:32, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ONYdu0VK-ao.

collective memory as they have written about or led groups of other veterans back to Vietnam themselves. Hopper and Lilley became ambassadors for the TGGF and have led groups of other veterans back to Vietnam, where they hoped they would have similar experiences. Hesselbein has led several groups back through Military Historical Tours as a historical authority for veterans and has seen many receive closure on their trips. Doug Young wrote a memoir about his military service during the war and his return trips. Young described the benefits of returning to Vietnam and encouraged other veterans to return if they believed it was the right decision for them. For some veterans, returning enabled them to find validation for their military service through the modernization of Vietnam and the friendliness of the Vietnamese people. For veterans who have found validation in Vietnam, they have contributed to constructing a narrative that has attempted to rehabilitate the image of the Vietnam veteran and the memory of the war itself. In the next chapter, the efforts to reinvent the identity of the Vietnam veteran and the perception of the war in America are looked at, and how this effort relates to other groups who have attempted something similar.

CHAPTER IV – CONCLUSION

The Vietnam War is seen as one of the most divisive periods in American history, a moment in time when Americans were so divided that it draws comparisons to the Civil War. Some Vietnam veterans felt that they were the ones who suffered the most from a divided nation and believed that the blame for the war and atrocities carried out in Vietnam were unjustly placed on their shoulders. The mistreated and victimized American soldier is one of the more prominent images within the memory of the Vietnam War, as movies, news articles, and veteran memoirs have reinforced the narrative of soldiers returning home to a neglectful nation and angry protestors. In this chapter, the way Vietnam veterans have reconstructed their identity and the perception of the Vietnam War from victimization and defeat to courage and bravery is examined. Vietnam veterans were not alone in their efforts to reconstruct their image and the narrative of the Vietnam War; politicians and memorials to the war have also played their part in the reinvention of the war in American memory.[182] Commemoration ceremonies and memorials to the war have been instrumental for veterans to reinvent their identity within the collective memory of the war and, as will be shown, have been used by interested parties to shift the perception of the Vietnam War from a "lost cause" to a "just cause." For some veterans, rehabilitating their identity and re-writing the narrative of the Vietnam War validated their military service. For veterans who have returned to Vietnam, some can find validation by experiencing the friendliness of the Vietnamese people and seeing how the

[182] Erika Doss, *Memorial Mania: Public Feeling in America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010), 242-243.

country has modernized, further enforcing the narrative that the Vietnam War may have had a noble purpose.

The image of the mistreated Vietnam soldier has its roots in the antiwar protests led by students and veterans in 1965 and 1966 during President Lyndon Johnson's time in office. As dissent against the war rose within the U.S. military, the media gave more attention to protests, especially those carried out by veterans.[183] With the rise in protests against the war by soldiers and veterans, the military and the Johnson administration unleashed a campaign aimed at discrediting and harassing them.[184] When President Richard Nixon took office in 1969, he intensified the campaign against antiwar Vietnam veterans and protestors by attempting to label their actions as un-American and turn the American public against them.[185] Soon, soldiers coming home from Vietnam were viewed as troubled veterans returning to a divided nation.

In the 1970s, news reporters began running stories of soldiers returning home from Vietnam who had a hard time readjusting back to civilian life. One of the most prominently reported stories was that of Dwight Johnson, a highly decorated Vietnam veteran who returned home with severe psychological problems. He was killed in 1971

[183] The most publicized incident of soldiers dissenting against the Vietnam War was the case of the Fort Hood Three, who refused to serve in the war after basic training and were jailed for two years, see Hunt, *The Turning,* 7.

[184] Hunt, *The Turning,* 7-8.

[185] The Nixon administration attempted to discredit veteran protestors by creating the image of the "good" veteran and the "bad veteran. The "good" veteran embraced the ideals of American foreign policy and emulated the patriotic and heroic image of a soldier, while the "bad" veteran was the soldier who came home and publically denounced America's involvement in Vietnam, see Lembcke, *Spitting Image,* 55.

while holding up a grocery store in Detroit. [186] Johnson's experience was rare for soldiers returning from Vietnam, however, similar stories began to circulate in the news media, which reinforced the image of Vietnam veterans returning from the war as troubled and having a hard time readjusting back to civilian life. The film industry strengthened this image further as they began using the image of the traumatized and troubled Vietnam veteran in.[187] In the late 1970s, the film industry helped shift the perception of the conflict from a controversial war fought overseas to a veteran home-coming story.[188] As the image of the mistreated Vietnam veteran entered the memory of the war for many Americans, veterans took on the identity of victims. This identity defined many veterans' lives when they returned home from the war.

Some Vietnam veterans remembered being greeted by protestors at the airport, neglected by friends and family members, and being ostracized by the American public, all of which pushed them to identify with the image of the mistreated Vietnam veteran. When Larry Lilley returned home from the war, he remembered being greeted with jeers and insults, leading him to get into an altercation with a protestor.

> As we were trying to exit San Francisco (airport), we were walking down a hallway that would lead us to public transportation, and these protestors are behind a rope along the wall, and they are screaming that we are baby killers and every name in the book. This one guy was being particularly mouthy, and I stopped in front of the guy and said, "what did you call me?" and he said, "you're a baby killer!" I broke his nose immediately.[189]

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[186] Turner, *Echoes of Combat*, 50.

[187] Examples of these movies are *The Visitors, The Stone Killer,* and *Black Sunday,* see Turner, *Echoes of Combat,* 46.

[188] Two of the most important movies to shift this perception was *The Deer Hunter,* and *Coming Home,* see Lembcke, *Spitting Image,* 162.

[189] Lilley, interview, October 17, 2021.

Lilley did not like how the antiwar protestors were protesting the war and felt that they were doing a disservice to the soldiers in Vietnam. "I thought they were ill-informed, and it made the morale of the guys in Vietnam come down; we didn't like it."[190] Lilley and other soldiers learned about the efforts of the antiwar protestors from the radio and through the Stars and Stripes publication. For soldiers like Lilley, they felt that the antiwar protestors unfairly placed the blame of the war on their shoulders. Some felt that the blame should go to those in Washington prolonging the war and felt that protesting was the best way to bring the war to an end.

When Georg Hambach returned from Vietnam, he decided to join in the protests against the war at Ohio State University.

> When I got my student I.D., I immediately crossed the line and started protesting the war. I had seen it first hand and knew how unjust it was… Most of the students and people at that time did not understand the war, so they blamed all of the issues on the soldiers that were over there (Vietnam).[191]

Hambach felt that he could not openly identify as a veteran while at Ohio State due to the negative perception of the military at that time. He felt resentful toward the way veterans were treated by the American public during and after the end of the war, a feeling that other veterans could relate to as they remembered returning home to a neglectful nation. When Michael Triner returned home from Vietnam, he remembered being met with protestors and animosity from the American people. “It was terrible. I landed at Travis Air Force Base, and the hippies were outside the base throwing rocks and dog poo at our

[190] Lilley, interview, October 17, 2021.

[191] Hambach, interview, October 11, 2021.

bus. When I got to San Francisco International Airport, people were calling us baby killers. All of that stuff is real; it is not made up."[192] When he arrived home, his friends who had also served in Vietnam saw that he was wearing his uniform and told him to "take that shit off; nobody cares."[193] When Triner returned home, the reception he remembered receiving affected him deeply as he became anti-social and withdrew into himself. As discussed in the previous chapter, Triner did not feel comfortable around other Americans and felt more at home with Vietnamese people. For these veterans, their return home and the reception they received from the American public stuck with them and affected them deeply. Their memories and views towards the antiwar protestor were not uncommon among other veterans who felt neglected upon their return home from Vietnam and disagreed with how people were protesting the war.

In *Patriots: The Vietnam War Remembered from All Sides*, Tom Corey remembered how he felt towards protestors upon returning home from the war.

> My anger toward the Vietnamese was mostly in the heat of battle. My anger has been more in dealing with my disability, confined to a wheelchair, and about what our government did to us. I also had a lot of anger towards protestors…I remember lying in a hospital bed watching the protestors on T.V. – even the Vietnam Veterans Against the War…I think they had the right to protest, but I don't think they knew what they were doing to the morale of our soldiers.[194]

Like Lilley and Hambach, Corey did not like how the antiwar demonstrators were protesting the war. They, and other like-minded veterans, saw the antiwar protestors as blaming the atrocities and failures of the war on their shoulders and lowering the morale

[192] Triner, interview, November 6, 2021.

[193] Triner, interview, November 6, 2021.

[194] Appy, *Patriots,* 519.

of soldiers in Vietnam. For veteran Antoine Roy, blaming soldiers for the war became more commonplace after news of the My Lai massacre broke in the U.S.

> Like I said at the time the My Lai affair had broken. Generally, not everybody, but the loud minority's view of this is what American soldiers were like. I can remember being confronted on it and trying to explain no, that was not standard operating procedure in any way, shape, or form… The reaction was generally, "Well, the military makes a robot out of you." You know they don't. Not unless you're part of a Nazi kind of government or something like that. But there was no listening. There was a lot of shouting down.[195]

Instances such as these are the encounters that some veterans remembered upon returning home from Vietnam and pushed them to identify themselves as victims of the war. By identifying themselves as victims of the war, Vietnam veterans claimed they were entitled to benefits they had not received upon returning home. Joseph Darda argued that this perceived discrimination was born out of the attempts of white Vietnam veterans and, to a more significant extent, white men to reclaim what they believed was their rightful place as leaders in American society.

In his book, *How White Men Won the Culture Wars: A History of Veteran America*, Darda showed how white American men felt threatened by the Civil Rights and feminist movements of the 1960s and used the image of the American veteran to refashion their identity into a white ethnic minority which facilitated the rollback of affirmative action.[196] White Americans proclaimed themselves as an ethnically diverse minority by claiming the suffering that Vietnam veterans experienced during the war and after returning home. In essence, the Vietnam War became a white man's wound and

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[195] Interview with Antoine Roy, Vietnam Center and Sam Johnson Vietnam Archive, January 8, 2003, https://www.vietnam.ttu.edu/virtualarchive/items.php?item=OH0255, 315.

[196] Darda, *Culture Wars,* 3.

their claim to affirmative action.[197] White Vietnam veterans and white American men could claim entitlement as victims of the war and as a traumatized white minority. When returning home from the war, John Wheeler III, the Vietnam Veterans Memorial Fund (VVMF) chairman, claimed that veterans lost benefits to Black people, women, and poor people.

> We soldiers were prepared for the war zone. We were locked out of her heart. It was a tragic abandonment… The country's cultural energy poured instead into the needs of blacks, of women, of less developed counties and countries, and into defining and fulfilling the terms for ending the Vietnam War.[198]

Vietnam veterans felt that they did not receive a proper welcome home or benefits that befitted a soldier who had served their country because others, Black people and women, received too much attention. By claiming their victimhood, Vietnam veterans were able to rehabilitate their image from troubled veterans to mistreated victims of the war who returned to a neglectful nation. A re-write in the narrative of the Vietnam War had occurred for Vietnam veterans, a re-write which was pushed further with the dedication of the Vietnam Veterans' Memorial (the Wall) in 1982, where many veterans felt they received the welcome home they deserved when the war ended.

After watching *The Deer Hunter* in 1977, Jan Scruggs remembered a mortar attack that killed twelve of his comrades in Vietnam. Memories of this incident spurred Scruggs' obsession with a veterans memorial, the efforts of which culminated with the dedication of the Vietnam Veterans' Memorial in 1982.[199] Together with other veterans

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[197] Darda, *Culture Wars,* 10.

[198] Darda, *Culture Wars,* 19.

[199] Jerry Law, "Dream Realized for Fund-raiser," *Democrat and Chronicle* (Rochester, NY), November 14, 1982.

from the Washington D.C. area, Scruggs began planning the construction of a memorial that properly honored the soldiers of the Vietnam War and those who gave their lives in service for their country. Moved by the stories and memories of veterans who returned home to neglect and indifference, Scruggs wanted to remove the stigma attached to Vietnam veterans and reinterpret their role in the war. [200] As work on the Wall progressed, newspapers around the country commented on the need to properly pay tribute to those who served and died in the Vietnam War.

In a December 1981 issue of the *Rapid City Journal*, Bernard F. Hillenbrand described the need for a memorial to "all Americans who served in the thankless war called Vietnam as Vietnam veterans returned to a neglectful country" and as "an appropriate honor for all who served in Southeast Asia."[201] In the *Herald Sun* from Durham, North Carolina, Milton Copulos described the importance of the Wall for Vietnam veterans and how they were treated upon coming home from the war.

> For the Vietnam veteran, authorization of a memorial was of special importance. In contrast to his World War II predecessors, the Vietnam returnee came home to no triumphal welcome… At worst, his contemporaries viewed him as some sort of wanton destroyer who supported a corrupt and repressive regime. At best, he simply was ignored.[202]

In an article for the *San Pedro News-Pilot*, Richard Floyd wrote, “The debt Americans owe to the men and women who served on behalf of their government finally was

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[200] Bodnar, *Remaking America*, 3.

[201] Bernard F. Hillenbrand, “Pro: Memorial has Meaning for Veterans,” *Rapid City Journal,* December 26, 1981.

[202] Milton Copulos, “Vietnam ‘Memorial’ Offends Veterans,” *The Herald Sun* (Durham, NC), December 18, 1981.

memorialized in the National Vietnam Veterans' Memorial in Washington D.C."[203] The image of a mistreated and victimized Vietnam veteran was reinforced by newspapers writing about the need for a memorial that would adequately thank veterans for their service, honor those who died in Vietnam, and reinterpret their role in the war. Though many veterans wanted a memorial that honored their service and those who died during the war, there was controversy over the Wall's design.

Veteran Tom Carhart called the design "a black gash of shame and sorrow, hacked into the national visage that is the Mall."[204] Carhart's description was quoted throughout the country in newspapers. It was a sentiment shared by many other veterans who felt that the Wall's design did not properly honor the veterans' service or the war. One such paper stated:

> many veterans, however, seriously question how the memorial is supposed to pay them tribute. Not only does it lack the traditional symbols normally found on monuments erected to veterans, but nowhere on the Vietnam Veterans' Memorial is there any indication that the nation is grateful or appreciative to those who fought.[205]

Those who criticized the Wall's design wanted a place where the dead could be memorialized, and the living were honored. Many of the Wall's design critics came from the conservative right, who wanted a memorial that would vindicate the war effort itself so that it would remove the taint of dishonor from its veterans.[206] To placate the demands

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[203] Richard Floyd, letter to the editor, *News-Pilot* (San Pedro, CA), November 11, 1983.

[204] "Vietnam Veterans Still Ask to be Heard, *The Chapel Hill News,* October 29, 1981.

[205] Copulos, "Offends Veterans."

[206] Hagopian, *Politics of Healing,* 110.

of these critics, the VVMF added an American flag and the Hart Statue to the memorial, which they hoped expressed the pride of veterans and their service.[207] However, the Wall is minimalist in design and encourages different interpretations and feelings from the audience. The Wall's purpose is toward national reconciliation, evidenced by text inscribed at the vertex where the two walls meet: "Our nation remembers the courage, sacrifice, and devotion to duty and country of its Vietnam veterans."[208] By being minimalist in design and directed towards honoring Vietnam veterans and not the war itself, the Wall acknowledged the trauma of a despised and publicly protested war but avoided any assessment of the war and how it so profoundly disturbed and divided the nation.[209] Though the Wall faced controversy and pushback when the design was announced, many veterans felt that the Wall accomplished its goal of honoring those who died in the Vietnam War and providing an opportunity for the American public to thank them properly.

Before the dedication ceremony for the Wall on November 13, 1982, a parade through Washington D.C. to the National Mall provided an opportunity for veterans to be honored by the American public. Many Vietnam veterans participated in this parade which they felt was an opportunity to receive a long-overdue welcome home. Don Tiberio felt that the parade was "the biggest day of my life since my wife had two kids.

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[207] The Hart Statue, or *Three Infantrymen,* is a seven-foot tall sculpture of three soldiers located near the entrance to the Wall. It was dedicated on November 11, 1984 in response to critics who felt that the ambiguous nature of the Wall did not properly thank the veterans who returned to Vietnam. Some veterans felt that the Wall honored only those who died in Vietnam and found that the Hart Statue was for those who came back. Hagopian, *Politics of Healing,* 191.

[208] Doss, *Memorial Mania,* 129-130.

[209] Doss, *Memorial Mania,* 129-130.

I've been waiting since 1966 for this."[210] By marching in the parade, Tom Leckinger stated that he had broken a vow. “I swore when I got out of the Army that I’d never put on another uniform or march in anybody’s parade, but this is different. This is important for all of us.”[211] Charlotte Conable met with veterans before the parade began at their formation site and thanked them for their service. "This welcome home is wonderful, and it's long overdue. We're grateful to you people for what you did."[212] Similar parades and ceremonies were held after the Wall’s dedication parade in different cities to celebrate and honor Vietnam veterans across the city. For some, being thanked by the American public enabled them to be proud of their identity as Vietnam veterans.

After years of feeling disconnected from society, Michaels Triner’s friends and family members convinced him to march in a welcome home parade for Vietnam veterans in Chicago in 1985. When Triner marched in the parade, he received a revelation about his military service. "All of a sudden, it came back to me that what I did was not bad. What I did was for my country and the people that demonstrated against me. They can have their own opinion; I'll have my own opinion."[213] Larry Lilley visited the Vietnam Veterans’ Memorial and presented a wreath with fellow veterans when Charlie Company had a reunion in Washington D.C.

> There was probably a half dozen of us who had gathered at that time. Doc (Gary Maibach) is a very religious guy, and he said a prayer. When the prayer was over,

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[210] “Vietnam Veterans Cheered by Crowds at Capital Parade,” *Democrat and Chronicle* (Rochester, NY), November 14, 1982.

[211] “Vietnam Veterans Cheered,” *Democrat and Chronicle.*

[212] Vietnam Veterans Cheered,” *Democrat and Chronicle.*

[213] Triner, interview, November 6, 2021.

> I had my head down, and I heard somebody clap. I look up, and there's probably forty people surrounding us, observing us, and they're all clapping. When they all started clapping, I cried like a baby.[214]

Veterans like Triner and Lilley felt appreciated and thanked for their military service at parades that honored veterans and memorial ceremonies held at the Wall. Parades and memorial ceremonies allowed veterans to feel proud of their military service and unafraid to identify as Vietnam veterans. Their image in the collective memory of the war shifted to courageous heroes who did their part for their country. The image of the Vietnam veterans had been rehabilitated, and with it came efforts to reconstruct the narrative of the Vietnam War.

For many people, the memory of the Vietnam War was of a divided nation, antiwar protests, and the unpopular draft. The U.S. was afflicted with the "Vietnam syndrome" as the American public feared getting involved in any other foreign conflict because it might turn into another Vietnam.[215] President Ronald Reagan and the conservative right felt that if the U.S. was to ever get over the "Vietnam syndrome," then the history of the Vietnam War needed to be revised to revive the nation's pride and a sense of purpose. In a speech while on the campaign trail at a Veteran of Foreign Wars convention, Reagan described the Vietnam War as a "noble cause" to validate a particular understanding of the nation's involvement in the conflict. Reagan's attempt to revise the narrative of the war worked for the veterans in attendance but threatened to alienate those who felt that the war was morally wrong. To fix this, Reagan lauded the soldiers who

[214] Lilley, interview, October 17, 2021.

[215] Hagopian, *Politics of Healing,* 20.

fought in the war, switching from “noble cause” to “noble soldiers.” By shifting his rhetoric, Reagan appealed to a broader nation as the American public was ready to give the veterans their due.[216]

As discussed earlier, the dedication of the Vietnam Veterans’ Memorial and the commemoration ceremonies and parades that followed showed that the American public was ready to thank Vietnam veterans for their service on a national stage. The Reagan administration and the conservative right saw the Wall as the instrument through which the nation could unify and get over the "Vietnam syndrome" by focusing on the sacrifices of the veterans who fought in the war and giving them their due. Reagan saw the Wall as a symbol of American patriotism and military sacrifice, a sentiment which is reflected in his speech at the memorial given on Veterans Day in 1988: “We remember the devotion and gallantry with which all of them ennobled their nation as they became champions of a noble cause.”[217] Reagan and his administration have not been alone in their efforts to revise the narrative of the Vietnam War. The Wall became the destination for Memorial Day pilgrimage for thousands of Vietnam veterans who were intent on reconstructing the memories of the Vietnam War by shifting perceptions of "lost cause" to "just cause."[218]

Vietnam veterans have participated in and organized memorial services at The Wall since its dedication honoring their friends and comrades who died and in an attempt

[216] Hagopian, *Politics of Healing,* 15.

[217] Doss, *Memorial Mania,* 131.

[218] Doss, *Memorial Mania,* 131.

to alter public feelings about the war. On Memorial Day, an event known as Rolling Thunder holds a motorcycle rally at the Wall. Their goal at these rallies is to:

> educate, facilitate, and never forget by means of a demonstration for service members that were abandoned after the Vietnam War. The Rolling Thunder Washington, DC First Amendment Demonstration Run has also evolved into a display of patriotism and respect for all who defended our country.[219]

A similar event known as Run for the Wall is a ten-day pilgrimage to the memorial that starts in Los Angeles, California. Their mission is similar to the Rolling Thunder rallies, as their website states:

> To promote healing among ALL veterans and their families and friends, to call for an accounting of all Prisoners of War and those Missing in Action (POW/MIA), to honor the memory of those Killed in Action (KIA) from all wars, and to support our military personnel all over the world.[220]

Events such as Run for the Wall and Rolling Thunder Rallies have attempted to bring attention to the plight of the Vietnam veteran and issues that are important to them, such as the myth of American POWs left in Vietnam after the war.[221] At the Wall, veterans participating in these memorializing events have spread their message through their commemoration ceremonies and sales that commodify the war and its memory. Booths set up near the Wall sell memorabilia that promotes America and its soldiers as innocent victims of the Vietnam War, such as T-Shirts and board games.[222] The veterans who

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[219] "Mission Statement," Rolling Thunder Washington, DC, Inc. accessed May 31, 2022, https://rollingthunderrun.com/.

[220] "Mission and History," Run for the Wall, accessed October 31, 2021, https://rftw.us/mission-and-history/.

[221] Doss, *Memorial Mania,* 242.

[222] Doss, *Memorial Mania,* 156; Attempts to commodify the Vietnam War began as the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington, D.C. was being dedicated, see "Limited Edition of Memorial Mementos," advertisement, *The Times Argus* (Barre, Vermont), November 18, 1982.

operated these booths wanted to change the popular perceptions of the Vietnam War in American memory from defeat and victimization to courage and bravery.

The reinvention of the Vietnam War in American memory has in some ways been accomplished through the rehabilitation of Vietnam veterans. Though the war is still seen as a "lost cause" and a mistake by many in the American public, Vietnam veterans are now seen as the victimized heroes of that war who came home to neglect and indifference, a welcome home that many Americans have vowed never to let happen again. The change in the way Americans treat returning veterans started with the Reagan administration, as they labeled Vietnam veterans "noble soldiers" in an attempt to shift the perception of the war from a "lost cause" to a "noble cause" fought by our soldiers. The Reagan administration needed to reinvent the history of the Vietnam War to convince the American public to get involved in foreign conflicts again. Frequently, the collective memory of an event is reconstructed by groups and societies to meet their needs in the present.[223] The Reagan administration attempted this in the 1980s and it was tried again with President George H.W. Bush in the build-up to the Persian Gulf War. Bush tied the purpose of the war to American soldiers and the promise never to treat them the same as Vietnam veterans when they returned home. [224] The group that was able to rehabilitate their image in the collective memory of the war were the Vietnam veterans themselves. Vietnam veterans' efforts and their success are similar to other groups who

[223] Michael Kammen, *Mystic Chords of Memory: The Transformation of Tradition in American Culture* (New York: Vintage Books, 1993), 3.

[224] Lembcke, *Spitting Image*, 6-7.

have attempted to change their image and identity, such as the Japanese Americans who were placed in internment camps during World War II.

After the attacks on Pearl Harbor, Japanese Americans saw themselves cast as the racialized representatives of infamy. In the continental U.S., Japanese Americans were placed into internment camps after the attacks, and they began to struggle with how to fit into American nationalism while so often being targeted as its opponents. From this struggle emerged two narrative structures among Japanese Americans over how to be remembered after Pearl Harbor: compliance (model minority) and resistance.[225] The compliance narrative focused on efforts of reintegrating back into American life through acts of patriotism and less on anger over being interned in camps. For those who decided to comply in hopes that their efforts might end internment, some peacefully relocated to camps and volunteered to fight in the two segregated battalions for Japanese Americans. Volunteering for the segregated units came from the "Application for Leave Clearance Questionnaire, which every man in the internment camps over the age of seventeen had to complete.[226]

The questionnaires contained yes/no questions, with two questions determining who would serve and who was sent to prison for draft evasion. Question number twenty-seven asked if the applicant was willing to serve in the armed forces of the U.S., and question twenty-eight asked if they would swear allegiance to the U.S. and foreswear any allegiance to the Japanese emperor and government. If an applicant answered yes to both

[225] Rosenberg, *Pearl Harbor,* 141-142.

[226] Rosenberg, *Pearl Harbor,* 143-144.

questions, they were drafted into the armed forces and known as "Yes-Yes Boys," while those who answered no to both were arrested for draft evasion and known as "No-No Boys." The "Yes-Yes Boys" were seen within the Japanese community as doing their part to ending internment and reintegration back into American life. At the same time, "No-No Boys" were ostracized by the community once they left prison.[227] The dominant narrative of Japanese Americans during and after the war was that of compliance and assimilation into American society. The compliance narrative stressed the ability of Japanese Americans to return to life as usual and fostered a forgetting by everyone in the American public of past racism and internment in favor of a brighter future.[228] However, the compliance narrative was challenged in the 1970s as second and third-generation Japanese Americans began to speak out over the racial injustices of internment.

Resistance against internment was highlighted in the novel *No-No Boys* written by John Okada but received little attention until after his death in 1970. According to Okada, because Japanese Americans were made to feel un-American, some resisted internment and the military draft. Novels and stories such as Okada's, which highlighted resistance among Japanese Americans, began to gain more attention as the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965 increased the number of Asians coming to the United States. With the increase of Asians arriving in America came movements to form an ethnic identity called "Asian American," with many of them identifying with the painful experiences of Japanese Americans during internment.[229] The resistance narrative began

[227] Rosenberg, *Pearl Harbor,* 144-145.

[228] Rosenberg, *Pearl Harbor,* 147.

[229] Rosenberg, *Pearl Harbor,* 148.

to replace compliance as works such as Okada's became standard reference points in academic and popular writing about Japanese American identity. Works like *No-No Boys* shattered the image of the docile and complying Japanese American and encouraged the new, ethnically grounded critiques of American life. Counter to the generation who complied and stayed silent into the 1970s over the racial injustices of internment, the new Japanese American generation of activists organized a national movement that ended the silence and gradually built support for redress.[230]

In 1983 the commission on the Wartime Relocation and Internment of Civilians recommended an official apology to the Japanese American community from the American government and compensation for all living victims of internment. President Reagan signed the Civil Liberties Act in 1988, which issued the apology and granted twenty thousand dollars to each survivor of the internment camps.[231] The narrative of Japanese Americans after the attack on Pearl Harbor was shifted by the efforts of Asian Americans in the 1970s and 1980s from compliance to resistance. The new narrative stressed racial injustice towards Japanese Americans during WWII and praised those that resisted compliance and the draft. Vietnam veterans were able to accomplish something similar to what the Japanese Americans had done as they rehabilitated their image and changed how the American public perceived them.

By rehabilitating their image in the collective memory of the Vietnam war, veterans have established an identity as courageous soldiers who were victimized and

[230] Rosenberg, *Pearl Harbor,* 149-150.

[231] Rosenberg, *Pearl Harbor,* 150.

mistreated upon returning home. They felt entitled to a welcome home through their mistreatment and victimization similar to the ones they believed were given to WWII and Korean War veterans. With the dedication of the Vietnam Veterans' Memorial and the commemoration ceremonies that honored those who died in the war, many veterans felt they had received the "thank you" and welcome home that they deserved and that their image had been rehabilitated. The narrative of the war also received a reinvention, as evidenced by the rise in Vietnam memorials across the U.S. and the appreciation given to veterans. Though still seen as a mistake by many, the narrative of the Vietnam war has shifted to focus on the bravery and courage of the veterans rather than the defeat and morality of the conflict.[232] By having their identity rehabilitated, some Vietnam veterans have had their military service validated as the narrative of the war primarily focuses on their experiences in the war. However, not all veterans found validation by rehabilitating their image. Some needed to return to Vietnam to find validation.

As discussed in chapter three, veterans return to Vietnam for various reasons, but what they experience on their trips is what impacts them the most. They find a country that is no longer at war and people that are friendly toward returning veterans. When veterans share their experiences with others by writing memoirs or talking at reunions, they participate in the construction of a narrative that transforms Vietnam into a place where veterans are welcomed and find closure and healing. Some veterans are influenced to return by listening to this narrative, and when they return to Vietnam, they may expect to be welcomed by the Vietnamese and see that the country has modernized. By seeing a transformed Vietnam and experiencing the friendliness of the Vietnamese people, some

[232] Doss, *Memorial Mania,* 242.

veterans find validation for their military service. The memorials honoring veterans and their sacrifice during the Vietnam War may not have been enough for some veterans to validate their military service. These veterans needed to return to Vietnam and see that it had been rebuilt and was no longer devastated by the war. They find a country that has modernized, an economy that resembles capitalism rather than communism, and a sense that the Vietnamese hold no animosity towards them for their part in the Vietnam War. For some veterans, these factors represent positive legacies left over from America's involvement in Vietnam and suggest in their minds that the war may have had a noble purpose after all.

The narrative of the Vietnam War received a reinvention as the memory of the conflict shifted its focus onto honoring veterans rather than the morality of the conflict. In much the same way, some veterans have rewritten the narrative of the war by returning to Vietnam as tourists. Returning to Vietnam can be a therapeutic experience for many veterans, but it can also be a lens through which they reinterpret their role in the war and its outcome. By discussing the transformation of Vietnam with other veterans and suggesting that these changes may be due to positive legacies left over from the war, some veterans have created a narrative of validation. The narrative of validation creates an image of Vietnam as a place where veterans can have their military service validated. Returning to Vietnam allows some veterans to rehabilitate their image and rewrite the narrative of the war. The narrative of validation has created a new way in which some veterans remember the Vietnam war and their military service. In this way, returning to Vietnam becomes a place where veterans can find healing, relive the war through nostalgia, and find validation for their military service.

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