

Through the Hollywood Lens: The Vietnam War




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25th Division
Tay Ninh, Vietnam (1969-70)



How I plan to do Zoom sessions

- This (classroom) course normally includes very active feedback from participants, but may be somewhat constrained by Zoom (normally, your audio/video is “off”)
- Please use the chat box to ask questions or make comments during the presentation
- I will try to answer as we go along, or pause occasionally
- Depending on class size and time, I may also try “recognize” you to do some video and audio comments/questions
- I would like to take a moment and have you practice with some Zoom tools before we get started



Some Zoom information


- Move cursor to bottom (or top) of screen to make “menu bar” appear with various icons on bar
- Click on “Chat” icon to open chat box function – type in questions/comments at the bottom of the chat box and hit “enter” key
- Click on “Participants” icon to see a list of students
- Both chat box and participants list can be “grabbed” by locating cursor at the top of the box, holding down the mouse key, and moving the box around anywhere
- Participant list also includes “gestures” icons at the bottom, to help with feedback – shows next to name



← Combat Infantry Badge

Welcome !

- Thanks for attending!
- Vietnam veterans in class? (when? where?)
 - Other military veterans?
- Others in class --- where were you in 1969-70?



← Vietnam Service Ribbon/Medal



Course Objectives

- To engage students in an examination and critique of selected Vietnam movies
- To provide students with a first-hand commentary about the Vietnam experience
- To have students reflect on their experiences and perceptions of the Vietnam era
- To build and share a class consensus about the “most authentic” Vietnam movie



Course Resources

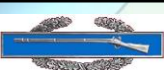
- Internet Movie Database (IMDb)
<http://www.imdb.com/>
- YouTube (Fandango) “Movie Clips”
<https://www.youtube.com/user/movieclips>
- “The Things They Carried” by Tim O’Brien
Broadway Books, 1998
(Vietnam veteran with 5/46 Infantry Battalion,
23rd “Americal” Div., 1969-70)
- “Vietnam at 24 Frames A Second” by Jeremy M.
Devine University of Texas Press, 1999 (available at Swem Library)






Course Calendar

- Three 2-hour Zoom sessions: June 3, June 10, and June 17
 - 1:30 PM to 2:20 PM
 - Break at about 2:20 PM
 - Resume 2:30 PM to 3:30 PM
- Session #1 = Vietnam Overview, “Deer Hunter”
- Session #2 = ““Apocalypse Now” “Platoon,” “Hamburger Hill”
- Session #3 = “Forrest Gump” “We Were Soldiers”
Course Summary



Some course modifications

- Original version of this course included three more films: “Born on the Fourth of July,” “Full Metal Jacket,” and “Good Morning Vietnam”
- Because of uncertainty about time required to obtain student feedback using Zoom, and some potential time delays caused by switching film clips, this course version has been shortened
- Still have the extra slides and film clips, *if we have any extra time...*





Course caveats...

- *Movies are a form of entertainment, not necessarily reality*
- Movie reviews are inherently subjective
- Lots of *other* movies & documentaries (150+) about Vietnam
- My *personal* Vietnam observations and reflections from 1969-70; not necessarily the same for others
- Will attempt to minimize political and moral judgements
- Encourage class interaction, but must be mindful of the technology and our time
- *Some movie clips used in this course contain graphic language and violence*



Some Vietnam war statistics

- 2,594,000 personnel served within the borders of South Vietnam Jan. 1, 1965 - Mar. 28, 1973
- Hostile deaths: 47,378
Non-hostile deaths: 10,800 Total = 58,202
- Vietnam Vets = 9.7% of their generation
- 25% (648,500) of total forces in country were draftees
- 97% of Vietnam-era veterans were honorably discharged





Some Vietnam war statistics

- There is no difference in drug usage between Vietnam Veterans and non-Vietnam Veterans of the same age group (V.A. study)
- 85% of Vietnam Veterans made a successful transition to civilian life
- 1,713,823 who served in Vietnam were still alive as of August, 1995 (U.S. Census)
- During that same census count, the number of Americans falsely claiming to have served in Vietnam was: 9,492,958



Elements of a unique war

- Most American troops were not professional soldiers, i.e., Vietnam war preceded “all volunteer” Army era
- “Unit” versus “individual” replacement rotations
(and the effect of *individual replacements* on unit morale and esprit de corps, e.g., “FNG” syndrome)
- Base Camp → Fire Support Base operations →
(= primarily *small-unit* operations)
- Air mobility, free fire zones, rainy season/dry season, search and destroy, “mad minutes”





Elements of a unique war

- Non-combatants typically indistinguishable from enemy troops (...and sometimes they were both)
- Jungle environment (mostly, II Corps, III Corps and IV Corps)
- Lack of public support for the war and American troops (i.e., anti-war movement)



Terminology – Army organization & size

- **Squad** – 4 to 10 soldiers (Staff Sgt.)
- **Platoon** – 3 to 4 squads: 16 to 40 soldiers (Lieutenant)
- **Company** – 3 to 4 platoons: 100 to 200 soldiers (Captain)
- **Battalion** – 3 to 5 companies: 500 to 600 soldiers (Lt. Col.)
- **Brigade** – 3 or more Battalions: 3,000 to 5,000 soldiers (Colonel)
- **Division** – 3 Brigades: 10,000 to 18,000 soldiers (Maj. General)
- **Corps** – 2 to 5 divisions: 20,000 – 40,000 soldiers (Lt. General)
- (other Army “unit” terms: regiment, squadron, battery, etc.)

Source: <https://www.army.mil/info/organization/unitsandcommands/oud/>

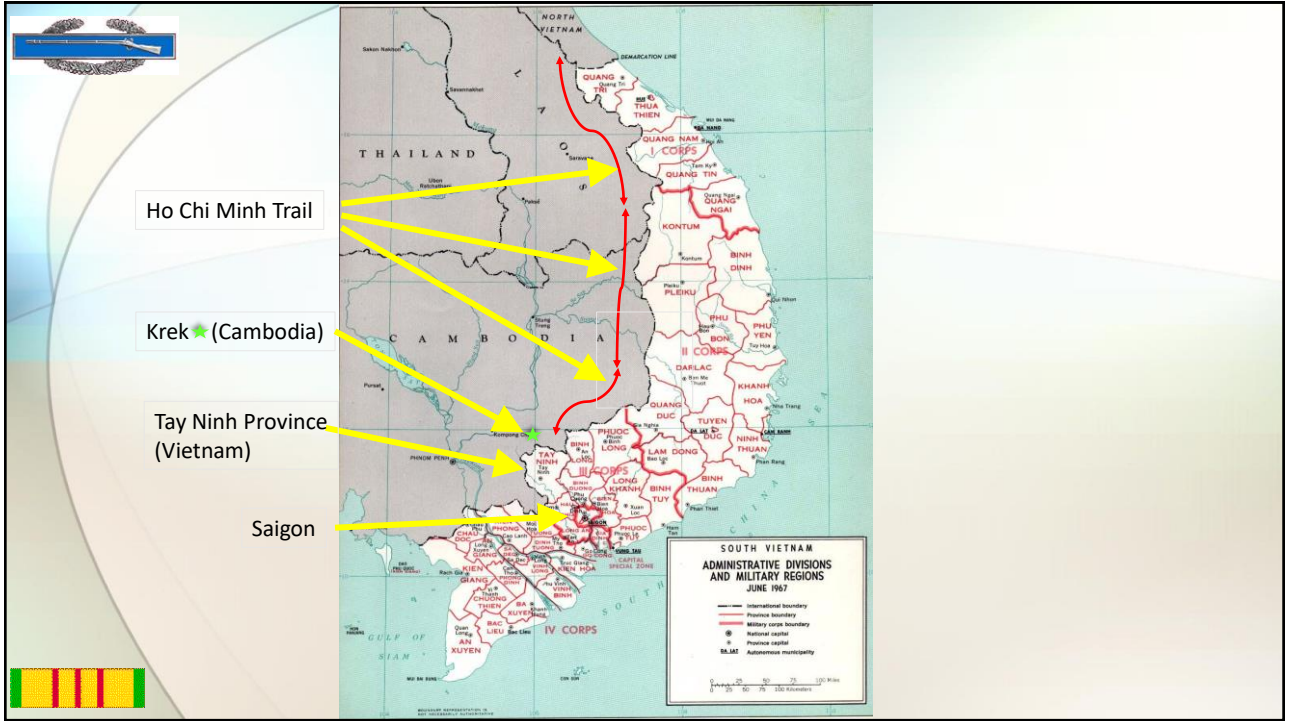
My Army Background

- Graduated as 2nd Lieutenant from ROTC program at William & Mary in 1968
- Trained as an Armor Officer at Ft. Knox
- First duty assignment as Military Police Officer at Ft. Dix (759th M.P. Battalion)
- Assigned to RVN in June 1969 as an infantry platoon leader with 4/9 Inf. "Manchus" in Tay Ninh Province
- Served as an infantry platoon leader, support platoon leader, Battalion S4
- Returned home at end of June 1970, continued in Army reserves for 3+ years



Where in Vietnam?

- (...mostly in) Tay Ninh Province (map on next slide)
- III Corps, War Zone C
- End of Ho Chi Minh Trail (and re-enter South Vietnam)
- Tay Ninh Base Camp shared by 25th Division and 1st Cav (Cu Chi was home base for 25th Div.)
- Also known as "Rocket City"
- Home of "Cao Dai" religion
- Nui Ba Den (Black Virgin Mountain)
- 25th Div. in Cambodia, May-June 1970, near Krek





(Sidebar: Ken Burns PBS “The Vietnam War”)

- Good, balanced historical overview of the war, from 1950’s French colonialism to U.S. troop departure in 1975
- **Many** perspectives – U.S. soldier, Viet Cong soldier, North Vietnamese soldier, U.S. government, South Vietnam government, North Vietnam government, American citizens, war protestors, world citizens
- Depicts instances of U.S. government dishonesty, complicity, and misconduct during the war years
- ...but, not actually too much about the day-to-day experiences of an American “grunt”



Vietnam Movies (...in this course)

- The Deer Hunter (1978) (Oscar for Best Picture)
- Apocalypse Now (1979) (Nominated for Best Picture)
- Platoon (1986) (Oscar for Best Picture)
- Hamburger Hill (1987)
- Forrest Gump (1994) (Oscar for Best Picture)
- We Were Soldiers (2002)





Consensus about “...most authentic”?

- For me, the most important criterion is:
Which film most accurately and faithfully portrays the day-to-day life of a “grunt” in Vietnam?
- e.g., “The Things They Carried” is an excellent semi-fictional, literary account of what it was like to be a grunt in Vietnam
- Other criteria (for you) might include:
 - Historical accuracy
 - Most authentic battle scenes
 - Character specific authenticity (e.g., LTC Hal Moore)
- All the films contain some significant aspects of the Vietnam experience



The Deer Hunter (1978)

- Directed by Michael Cimino
- Won 5 Oscars, including Best Picture, Best Director, Best Supporting Actor (Christopher Walken), Best Film Editing, Best Sound
- Nominated for 4 other Oscars
- Vietnam sequences filmed in Thailand
- Storyline: Steelworker buddies from a small town find that life is not the same when 3 of them (Michael, Stephen, Nicky) experience the violence of the Vietnam war. Michael and Stephen return home as changed individuals who find great difficulty in readjusting to small town life. Nicky does not return home.





What the movie got right

- Spot on depiction of Pennsylvania “steel town,” eastern European ethnic influences, and working class lives
- Strong camaraderie between steel mill friends, and then, brothers in war (i.e., male bonding and friendship)
- The “...thousand-yard stare”
- How the Vietnam war changed the lives of participants (the soldiers)
- How the Vietnam war **did not** change the lives of those who stayed at home (e.g., the steelworkers)
- Brought attention to Vietnam veterans before it was fashionable (preceded the “Wall” by 4 years – Jan Scruggs influenced by the movie)



What the movie got wrong

- NO 14,000 ft., snow-capped mountains in Pennsylvania? (actually filmed in the northern Cascade Range in Washington state)
- Many criticisms about the use of “Russian roulette” theme (a metaphor [?] for the likelihood of death during your tour of duty, and also a metaphor for the “big business” interests of the Vietnam war)
- Portrayed (too many) Vietnam veterans as emotionally disabled, stressed by an intense war experience (...a continuing theme in other Vietnam movies)
- Not much about actual Vietnam events (no specific battles or locations) --- more about universal aspects of “war” on soldiers
- Stereotype of cruel and brutal Vietnamese ethnicity
- Questions? Observations? Comments?





Comments ? Questions?

- You can send text questions through the chat box, OR,
- You can “raise you hand” and we will try an audio/video interaction



Next Week

- Session #2
- “Apocalypse Now,” “Platoon,” “Hamburger Hill,”



Contact Information

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Thanks for attending!