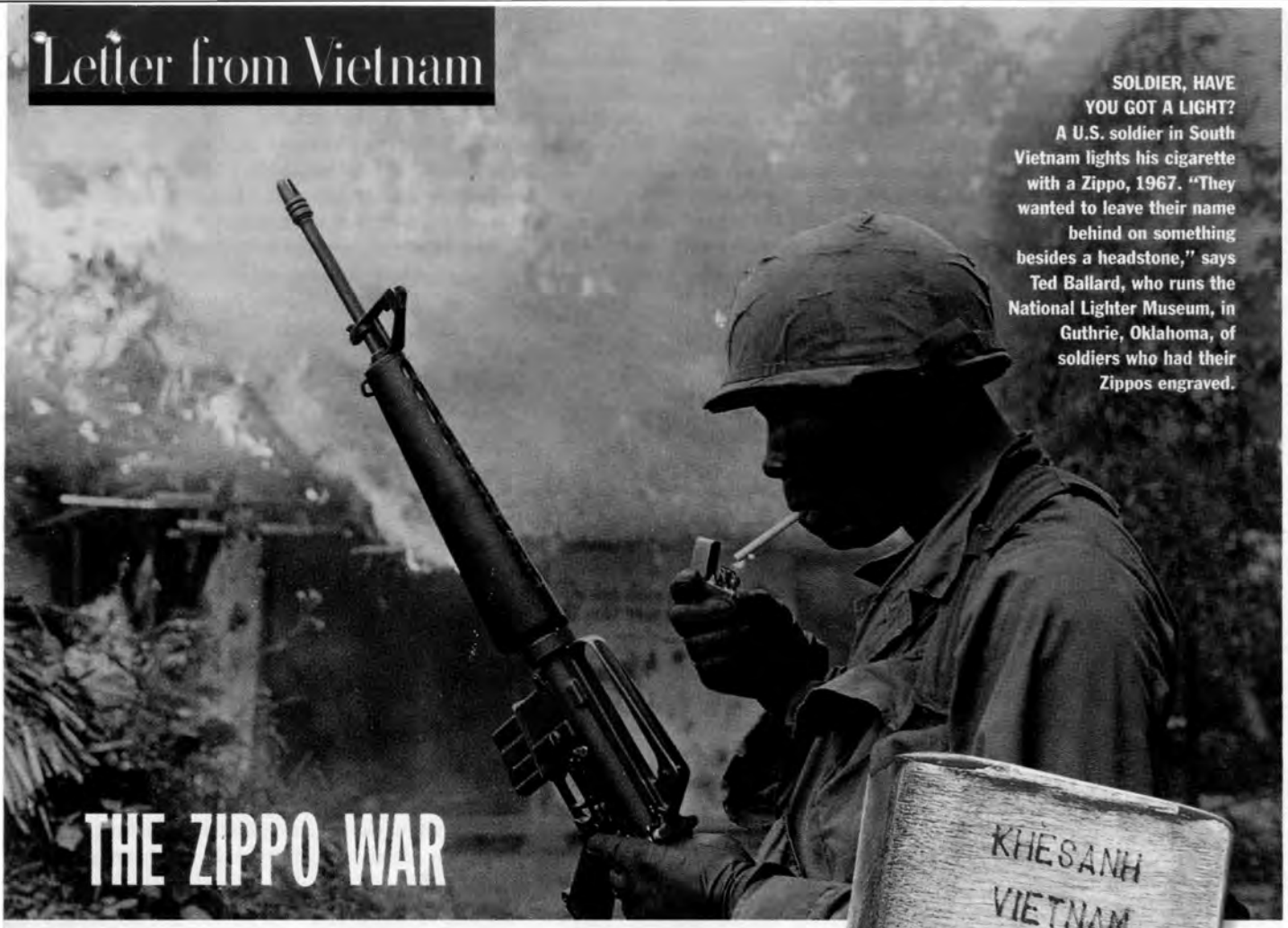


SOLDIER, HAVE YOU GOT A LIGHT? A U.S. soldier in South Vietnam lights his cigarette with a Zippo, 1967. "They wanted to leave their name behind on something besides a headstone," says Ted Ballard, who runs the National Lighter Museum, in Guthrie, Oklahoma, of soldiers who had their Zippos engraved.

THE ZIPPO WAR

His engraved Zippo was often the Vietnam G.I.'s proudest possession, used to torch huts, remove leeches, or ignite hash pipes. Now prized above their medals by many veterans, these metal lighters bear inscriptions that echo the horror of that war's special hell

BY DAVID MARGOLICK

The G.I.'s are long gone from Dong Khoi, formerly Tu Do, formerly Rue Catinat, the street that runs through the heart of Ho Chi Minh City, formerly Saigon. Gone, too, are the bars and brothels they patronized, leaving an odd assortment of junk stores, faded patisseries from the French colonial era, and souvenir joints catering to tourists from Japan, Europe, and, less frequently, America. The Vietnam War seems surprisingly remote in this city sizzling with the commerce and hedonism of a new, post-Communist economy. But in the shabby trinket shops, at least, the war lives on.

WE CAME BECAUSE
WE BELIEVE
WE LEAVE BECAUSE
WE ARE DISALLUSIONED [sic]
WE COME BACK BECAUSE
WE ARE LOST
WE DIE BECAUSE
WE ARE COMMITTED

The war endures in clusters of compact metal rectangles whose hinged tops open and shut with a famously decisive snap. These boxes are dented and tarnished, with bronze peeking through the chrome. Perhaps this is from years of use in combat and in camp, from bouncing around fatigue pockets and being hooked to helmets, from being cherished too much; perhaps they have just been seasoned to look that way by ingenious entrepreneurs seeking to exploit the lucrative nostalgia market. In any case, because of what is inscribed on them, none will ever make the Smithsonian Institution, at least its public exhibits. And yet they really belong there, for they encapsulate an epoch in American history. That epoch is marked by the one war America lost, and these relics are the Zippo lighters its soldiers carried. CONTINUED ON PAGE 207

TOP BY GILLES CARON; INSET BY MICHAEL S. McLAUGHLIN

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 204

WE ARE THE UNWILLING
LED BY THE UNQUALIFIED
DOING THE UNNECESSARY
FOR THE UNGRATEFUL

The folks at the Zippo Manufacturing Co. of Bradford, Pennsylvania, a small town that lost nine boys in Vietnam, say they shipped 200,000 lighters there. That number seems low, for more than two and a half million Americans served in Vietnam, and most will tell you they owned at least one. "There is nothing the average soldier would rather have," the legendary war correspondent Ernie Pyle wrote of Zippos during World War II, the first conflict in which they became as much a part of the uniform as dog tags and boots. In Vietnam they were even more prized—portable pieces of home in a godforsaken place, the linchpin of macho and comradely military culture. John Wayne had one in *The Green Berets;* so did Martin Sheen in *Apocalypse Now.*

In Vietnam, Zippos were one of few things that worked as they were supposed to, in the rain and damp and muck of the place, and not just to light Marlboros. Once soldiers had enlarged the holes in the metal casing for the wick, to draw the flame to the side, Zippos were perfect for igniting hashish and opium in spoons and pipes.

ALWAYS RIPPED
OR ALWAYS STONED
I MADE IT A YEAR
I'M GOING HOME

Zippos also doubled and tripled as hammers and mirrors and signals. They were the best way to remove leeches. They provided light for reading and heat for cooking. Soldiers went to great lengths to keep them working—improvising wicks from materials at hand, and filling them with insect repellent or whiskey, or dipping them into gas tanks, when lighter fluid ran low. So attached were the G.I.'s to Zippos that the Vietcong learned to booby-trap them with explosives, then leave them in bars and other places frequented by American troops. Sooner or later, a curious, covetous soldier was sure to pick one up.

So attached were the G.I.'s to Zippos that the Vietcong learned to booby-trap them with explosives.

Zippos could be tools of destruction, which may be one of the reasons the company seems to soft-pedal their importance in Vietnam. In the famous footage of a G.I. lighting a thatched hut in the hamlet of Cam Ney, his weapon is a lighter, probably a Zippo. "Zippo" became a verb, as in "to Zippo" a village. As a noun it acquired new, subsidiary definitions, for portable flamethrowers and flame-spewing tanks. And it was an adjective too. Riverboats employed to burn away the dense jungle foliage that grew down to the water's edge were called Zippo boats. Search-and-destroy operations became "Zippo missions." ("We have seen Democracy on Zippo raids, / Burning hooches to the ground," the Vietnam veteran and poet W. D. Ehrhart wrote in *A Relative Thing.*)

Zippos were considered good-luck pieces, to be passed down from homeward-bound soldiers to buddies left behind. A

ON THE LIGHTER SIDE
"Send guys to war, they come home talking dirty," wrote Tim O'Brien in his Vietnam memoir *The Things They Carried.* The explicit nature of the "trench art" on many of the lighters makes them too ribald for display at the National Lighter Museum.

soldier named Andres Martinez said that, by stopping a bullet headed for his heart, a Zippo in his left shirt pocket saved his life. A similarly situated Zippo prevented some shrapnel from piercing Boyd Gates of Fort Worth, Texas; instead, the lighter was dented right below the spot where Gates had carved his name. "I don't know if it kept me from getting killed, but it sure kept me from getting a Purple Heart," he said.

World War II Zippos, made of a porous steel painted with a black crackle finish, had been hard to inscribe; those that were crudely engraved generally featured names or optimistic, patriotic themes. By the time of the Korean War, the chrome of the 30s had been reintroduced and the engravings grew more elaborate—pagodas, maps—but only slightly less upbeat. In Vietnam, the sentiments were far more varied and complicated. They were bitter or bemused, witty or world-weary, peaceful or violent, angry or despondent, naïve or jaded, poignant or pornographic. Mostly, they were raw, with any sense of delicacy stripped away as surely as wartime wear and tear eroded the shiny metal covering.

I LOVE THE
FUCKING ARMY AND
THE ARMY LOVES
FUCKING ME

The actual engraving was usually done by entrepreneurial Vietnamese who set up makeshift shops in towns and near American military bases. Like tattoos, the engravings came in certain stock models, maybe 40 or 50 of them. But they could always be customized with names, serial numbers, firebases, years of service. "They wanted to leave their name behind on something besides a headstone," said Ted Ballard, who runs the National Lighter Museum, in Guthrie, Oklahoma.

Some put in their hometowns: "Meanest son of a bitch in Burns, Tenn." Others took favorite sayings. Michael Norman, then a Marine, now a writer, picked the famous line from *Cool Hand Luke,* which for him so captured the spirit of the war that he had it translated into Vietnamese on his lighter: "What we have here is a failure to communicate." Others, like a Marine named Reyes, surely fearful that he would never see them again, listed the names of his "beloved wife and family."

A few Zippo lighters, probably from early in the war, bear can-do, patriotic themes. As time passed and the anti-war movement at home intensified, that patriotism could become belligerent:

IF I HAD BEEN AT
KENT STATE THERE
WOULD HAVE BEEN
ONE HELL OF A BODY
COUNT

Some engravings, surely of later vintage, are pacifist, bearing peace signs like those carried by protesters stateside. Others depict G.I.'s in a fatherly, benevolent role: one popular design shows an American soldier holding a rifle with one hand and a little Vietnamese boy with the other. Still more sound wistful and weary.

But for the most part, the messages are sexual, explicit, and nihilistic. "Send guys to war, they come home talking dirty," Tim O'Brien declared in his Vietnam memoir *The Things They Carried.*

The drawings are often similarly X-rated. There are plenty of naked women. American cartoon characters appear frequently, but either in sexual poses or expressing uncharacteristic sentiments: a pregnant Lucy cursing Charlie Brown, Snoopy or Donald Duck spewing obscenities, Mickey Mouse drinking at a bar.

To the normally straitlaced ladies at the Zippo-company repair shop in Bradford (Zippos come with a lifetime guarantee), even the most profane or pornographic inscriptions aren't offensive; they've become accustomed to them. "It was just a bad era," said Nancy Copeland, who has worked at Zippo for 33 years. She's accustomed, too, to the tender loving care the veterans demand. "A lot of them request that you don't pound the dents out, because each one means something."

Some Vietnam veterans have bestowed upon their Zippos the same places of honor in their homes that they reserve for their medals. In perhaps the most fervent acknowledgment of their importance, dozens have been left, along with medals and other precious mementos, at the base of the Vietnam Memorial in Washington, D.C. One day, a bartender from Georgetown deposited a bag containing about 10 of them there; he had been given them by a guilt-stricken functionary at the military coroner's office, who had removed them from the uniforms of dead soldiers.

IF YOU GOT
THIS OFF
MY DEAD ASS
I HOPE
IT BRINGS YOU
THE SAME LUCK
IT BROUGHT ME

Once the United States left Vietnam in 1975, a brisk market in American Vietnamabilia quickly sprang up, particularly

MICHAEL S. McLAUGHLIN

KEEP THE HOME FIRES BURNING
An American soldier sets fire to a hut in a Vietcong training camp, Lai Khe, 1965. The lighter entered Vietnam argot as a tool of destruction, as in "to Zippo" a village.

among the Japanese. Whole chapters of Japanese Zippo catalogues are now devoted to Vietnam-era models. At the end of the war, engraved Zippos could sell for as much as $150. So valuable did they become that a former North Vietnamese army officer who had confiscated dozens of them from American prisoners of war gave them to his daughter as her dowry.

Realizing a good thing when they saw it, enterprising Vietnamese rushed in, flooding the market with fakes. Souvenir dealers in Ho Chi Minh City readily admit that the cheapest knockoffs, shiny and cheesy-looking things selling for a few dollars, are "photocopies," made in China or Thailand. They pull them apart to show their crudeness. But others, they insist, are genuine, and they look it.

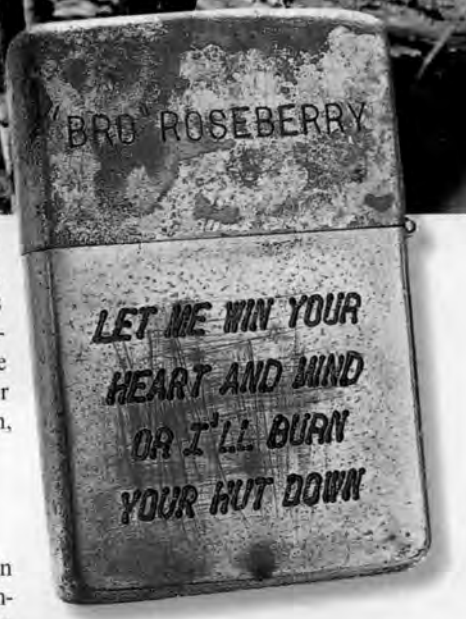
They cannot all be. How could the Americans have left so many Zippos behind? How many could have been given to Vietnamese colleagues or girlfriends, or taken from dead soldiers, or dug up from long-forgotten battlefields? And how is the supply magically, constantly being replenished?

More likely, what one finds in Vietnam now—apart from obvious fakes—are Zippos made during the Vietnam War era but which remained in America. (Zippos are dated by the manufacturer on the bottom.) They are shipped to Vietnam, where they are engraved, often by the same people—perhaps using the same machinery—who'd inscribed the real ones, and with the same sentiments. They sell for $15 or $20 to tourists eager to have their own, safe piece of the Vietnam War.

IF YOU HAVEN'T BEEN THERE SHUT THE FUCK UP

Few of the Zippos now being sold in Vietnam have names or other personal details on them, perhaps the surest sign they have been newly produced. And they may be more nasty on average than the originals, because nastiness sells. Some people say (though others vehemently disagree) that without forensic analysis it is impossible to distinguish between real, "in theater" Zippos and ex post facto ones, even for aficionados. And so, for serious Zippo collectors, it is safer not to buy Vietnam-era lighters at all.

But this has not dampened sales at RRL, the "vintage product and vintage inspired" arm of Ralph Lauren. Over the past four years they've sold hundreds of Vietnam Zippos on Madison Avenue in New York, and while they concede a few fakes may have infiltrated the mix, they insist the rest are genuine. The going rate? $145, up from the initial price of $95. The steep price didn't discourage Demi Moore, who bought 40 of them for the crew of her 1997 movie *G.I. Jane.*



Most of the Lauren Zippos appear to have come from Nihat Ulusoy of Worn Out West, a boutique off Melrose Avenue in Los Angeles. Ulusoy once owned 2,500 of them. Who, I asked him, were his principal suppliers? "They're not even around any more," he said. "Australian or New Zealand kids."

There is one inscription, however, that is never found in the schlock shops of Ho Chi Minh City. "I dare them to reproduce that," said Ray Weiner, a Vietnam veteran and Zippo collector who lives in Roselle, Illinois.

HO CHI MINH IS A COMMUNIST MOTHER FUCKER □

INSET, BY MICHAEL S. McLAUGHLIN