



THE VIETNAM EXPERIENCE

THE BIG LIES

BY MAJ. RICHARD A GREEN (RET.)

Here's Vietnam from another viewpoint. The one that is seldom heard, rarely publicized, and not as sensational as the big lies that are told and retold. True veterans will instantly recognize the big lies. The movie *Platoon* was full of them. For the sake of those veterans who remember Vietnam for what it really was, here is a quick recap of the bigger of those lies.

• "Fragging" of American officers and NCOs: I have never met anyone who actually saw this happen. I am sure it happened somewhere, sometime, since the Army did "acquire" a few psychopaths from the civilian world.

• All the drug addicts that were created in Vietnam: Drugs were being used widely by most of the younger generation all over the United States, and they continued to use drugs when they got to 'Nam.

• The unfair ratio of minority groups to whites in Vietnam: The fact is that

the larger percentage of non-white soldiers were assigned to rear-echelon support outfits. However, I can say without fear of contradiction that those blacks who were assigned to combat duties were fantastic soldiers and I knew quite a few of them.

• And the biggest of the big lies, about all those under 18 who were in combat in Vietnam. I never met any soldier in Vietnam who was under 18, and I am pretty sure that few of you can remember ever meeting one either.

The American fighting man in Vietnam was one of the best equipped, best trained, best informed, and most capable of all the soldiers in all the wars that the United States ever fought. While there, they were the most dedicated and deadly efficient fighting men of any in our history. That they came back to the States and "denied" their true feelings about Vietnam is understandable, due to the pressures brought

to bear by employers, families, and society in general. Of course, bad-mouthing the war also helped you get laid. I have met several veterans over the years who admit that their biggest "shame" over Vietnam is that they never have felt free to stand up and say, "I am proud of my contributions in Vietnam!"

Well, now is the time to do it! I am proud of my contributions in Vietnam! I did what I was trained to do and I did it to the best of my ability. I fought beside some of the bravest, baddest soldiers that the world has ever known. As a helicopter pilot, I flew them into the hottest LZs one can imagine and brought them out after they had kicked ass. I know that they were ready to go in and get Charlie, and I know they were bursting with pride when they came out victorious. And they always came out victorious. When they were in combat and needed supplies, my platoon, the Black Widows out of Phu Bai, readily

flew ash and trash for them. When they were wounded, we got them out and to the medical facilities in time to save their lives. When I was shot down in the Ashau Valley, they came to my rescue. The combat soldiers in Vietnam, the grunts, did a fantastic job over there and they knew it! It is time they let others know that, despite the big lies, the combat troops did not lose the war in Vietnam—and neither did the brass. The politicians gave victory to the North Vietnamese and the protesters here in the United States aided our enemy and shamed us before our allies. The only shame we should feel is that our people betrayed us.

But let's get down to some specifics about a specific and very real unit that served admirably in Vietnam, from the platoon leaders all the way to the lowest-ranking door gunner. I was assigned to Charlie Company, 101st Aviation Battalion/Group, 101st Airborne Division, formerly of Phu Bai and Camp Eagle. As soon as I met the guys in the unit, I knew there was something very special about them. Crow, Moak, Bartels, Bartels, Cunningham, Nero, DeFranco, May, Cormack, Carmack, and many others. The unit was made up entirely of heroes waiting for the chance to prove how good they really were. And prove it they did, on an almost-daily basis. How can one evaluate the value of the gunners who stood there in the open door of the helicopter, providing covering fire when the fighting was hot and heavy and the people on the ground needed us to go into a hot LZ? Also immeasurable is the intestinal fortitude of the pilots who laid it on the line every day they went out, never knowing when a simple resupply mission would turn into a life-and-death situation.

The Black Widows flew not only in support of the combat mission of the 101st Airborne Division, but were often called upon to fly in support of the 5th Special Forces out of Qhang Tri, the 3rd Marines at Dong Ha, and the 2nd ARVN Regiment of the I Corps area. Like the 101st Airborne, these units were out to kick Charlie's butt whenever he could be found, and they found him often. To call one of these units better than the others would be a difficult endeavor, because all were gung-ho, totally professional, and highly efficient organizations with one goal in

common: victory. Let no one ever bad-mouth the South Vietnamese soldier in our presence, because the Black Widows flew in combat with them and we know they were gutsy fighting men who stood their ground and ran Charlie's butt into the ground. The 2nd ARVN regiment included a helicopter company called the "King Bees," whose unorthodox approach to flying in combat could fill a book, often doing the impossible with helicopters that most Americans would have preferred not to be flying.

"Hamburger Hill" was nothing like the movie. Those of us who were there know it. Damn the writer who gave the movie the scene in which an American door gunner opened fire on American troops. Those kinds of lies have given all veterans a black eye for too long.

States who were sucking up to special-interest groups for whatever reasons.

But the Black Widows, like all units in Vietnam, continued to do their best under these circumstances. Perhaps former members of the "A" team who were pulled out of a position west of the Ashau Valley while under withering NVA fire and taken to firebase Currahee will read this and remember. Others, like the four-man crew that we pulled out of the Ashau after its helicopter was shot down amid a mass of hard-core NVA troops, will remember the brush with death and the elation of getting the hell out of there. I hope there are civilians still alive in Vietnam or, even better, living in some other country where they are safe, who will remember when the train they were on was blown off the track

Every time American military forces were made to give territory back to the VC, more American lives were put in jeopardy. This was due not to the actions of American brass; the generals in Vietnam were brilliant strategists under orders from the civilian leaders back in the States who were sucking up to special-interest groups for whatever reasons.

The taking of Hamburger Hill was an act of military genius—until some politician, who is known for having problems with cars and bodies of water, raised so much hell that the 101st was forced to pull out and give the stronghold back to the North Vietnamese Army. The Ashau Valley in mid-1969 was secured, Charlie couldn't get a bag of rice through there and soldiers could and did go out and sunbathe during the little bit of time off. Again, U.S. Forces were made to pull back and let Charlie take over. Every time American military forces were made to give territory back to the VC, more American lives were put in jeopardy. This was due not to the actions of American brass; the generals in Vietnam were brilliant strategists under orders from the civilian leaders back in the

States who were sucking up to special-interest groups for whatever reasons.

To all veterans of Vietnam, I would like to send this message: I'm proud that I was there! I am proud to have served with you, whether it was daily or by association. We did our part, we won the battles, and we can be proud of our accomplishments in that war. We did our share; it was our civilian leaders and the protesters who lost the war. When all is said and done, we can always hold our heads high and say, "Hell, yes, I was there!"

"Heroes: The Vietnam Experience" is a monthly series written by Vietnam veterans about their experiences during, or as a result of, their service in the Vietnam War. Submissions must be: approximately 2,000 words in length, typed and double-spaced; nonfiction; and include a photocopy of the author's DD-214. Submissions will not be returned unless accompanied by a self-addressed stamped envelope. The author of each published submission shall be paid \$500. Submissions should be sent to: Heroes Editor, Gallery Magazine, 401 Park Avenue South, New York, NY 10016-8802.