

*“The morale, discipline and battleworthiness of the U.S. Armed Forces are, with a few salient exceptions, lower and worse than at any time in this century and possibly in the history of the United States. By every conceivable indicator, our army that remains in Vietnam is in a state approaching collapse, with individual units avoiding or having refused combat, murdering their officers and non-commissioned officers, drug-ridden and dispirited where not near mutinous. Elsewhere than Vietnam the situation is nearly as serious.”*

Colonel Robert D.Heinl, June 1971

# Olive-Drab Rebels

*Subversion of the US  
Armed Forces in the  
Vietnam War*

**Revised Edition**

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Antagonism Press  
c/o BM Makhno  
London WC1 3XX  
Britain

antagonism1@yahoo.com  
www.geocities.com/antagonism1

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his humvee") was quoted as saying, "We liberated Iraq. Now the people here don't want us here, and guess what? We don't want to be here either! So why are we still here? Why don't they bring us home?" Another soldier was quoted as writing in an e-mail, "We have been told twice that we were going home and twice we have been ordered to stay in Iraq. Our morale is not high or low. It is non-existent."

Such dissent brought a quick rebuke from the White House. Division officers on the ground were given strict orders to silence the troops; some found their careers threatened. General John Abizaid starkly announced, "None of us that wear this uniform are free to say anything disparaging about the secretary of defence or the president of the United States."

But the troops on the ground retain their ability to think. The current crisis in Iraq has revealed that recruiting working class youth into the armed forces with the lure of economic advancement, essentially an "economic" draft of the most disadvantaged members of the working class, rather than a society-wide draft, still does not produce a military ready to fight extensively and with great suffering for the advancement of an empire. This developing schism can be nurtured not only by continued education and agitation among military personnel, but also work among those working class youth who are still civilians and may yet find themselves recruited to become the replacement troops for the war-weary still in Iraq.

As these words are being written, the Third Infantry Division has taken the 148th admitted combat fatality of the current war as a young soldier was blown from his humvee by a land mine. The U.S. press has noted his death as the fatality which marks the 2003 war as more fatal to U.S. soldiers than the 1991 war against Iraq. His fellow soldiers may see a deeper meaning.

Mathew Rinaldi  
July, 2003

training which would allow recruits to re-enter the civilian world with marketable skills.

As the collective memory of the debacle in Vietnam partially faded, many have enlisted and the increasing number of enlistees have indeed opted for combat training, though most doubted such training would actually involve them personally in a large-scale war. At the same time, the U.S. military leadership continued to be wary of the fortitude of its own troops and remained significantly worried about the willingness of U.S. civilians to accept high casualty rates. Hence, the drive toward "mechanised warfare" accelerated from 1975 through 2003. Boosted by an unrealistic view of the precision reliability of "sophisticated" missiles and bomb delivery systems, the ruling class spent hundreds of billions to develop weapons which could pulverise a country from the air, leaving the ground troops with the lower risks of "simply" mopping up the mess left behind.

This was clearly the strategy of the Bush administration in the current war against Iraq. "Shock and awe" was presented to the U.S. population as an air assault of such overwhelming magnitude that resistance on the ground would crumble. Troops were implicitly promised that they would be greeted by jubilant Iraqis waving American flags and cheering as the tanks and humvees rolled by, almost a "re-dux" of U.S. troops entering Paris after the second World War to the cheers of those now oh-so-ungrateful French.

But this Bush-Rumsfeld-Ashcroft fantasy was not to be. While the ruling political system of Saddam Hussein could be blown to bits from the sky, the notion that the new U.S. empire could roll in as an unimpeded occupation force was wrong. Consequently, while Bush declared "major combat" operation over on May 1, 2003, as this postscript is being written the Iraqi resistance to the new empire has caught the U.S. ruling class dramatically off guard. And the working class foot soldiers, as always, are paying the price. It is significant that even the "new" volunteer army is reacting to this reality with a jolt. Having been sold an entire set of fabrications to justify the war, including the lie that Iraq could be tied to Al Qaeda and the 9/11 attacks, the troops on the ground are beginning to feel deceived.

Troops of the Third Infantry Division, representing 12,000 of the 148,000 U.S. troops currently in Iraq, and certainly representing one of the groups most directly involved in ground fighting, aired their grievances in interviews this month with ABC news. Most of those interviewed felt betrayed by the triple extension of their stay in Iraq, one called for the resignation of Donald Rumsfeld, and Private Jason Ring ("standing next to

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without being impeded by left resistance. The role of the military in class society is of crucial importance to the revolutionary movement, as was tragically demonstrated by the Chilean coup, yet there has been precious little attention given to developing the theory and practice of military organizing.

Consequently, the experience of organizing in the U. S. armed forces during the Vietnam War was fairly unique. It represented an attempt to radicalize the working class in uniform while it was subjected to particular pressures, in a period when the working class in civilian life was relatively dormant. Given this situation, it was not realistic to conceive of this organizing as an attempt to win armed contingents for the left. Rather, the goals were two-fold: first, to incapacitate as much as possible the ability of the U.S. military to carry out its intervention in the Vietnamese revolution; and second, to stimulate struggle and militancy in a generation of working class youth.

Some success was achieved in both goals. The disintegration of the ground forces in Vietnam was a major factor in causing U. S. withdrawal. A complexity of factors caused this disintegration, ranging from the upsurges in civilian society to the impact of the Vietnamese revolution, and much of the breakdown in morale and fighting capacity developed spontaneously. Nevertheless, the conscious organizing of radicals both in service and out helped play a catalytic role in this disintegration. The long term effects of this organizing are still to be determined. The veterans movement, and the political development of Vietnam Vets Against the War, certainly illustrate that a durable change of consciousness occurred among thousands of GIs. At the very least, the military tradition in the U. S. working class suffered a major setback. More significantly, millions of working class youth who went through the war years have now returned to civilian jobs and life situations. To what degree the militancy and consciousness which was created during this period will be carried on to the civilian class struggle can only be determined in the years ahead.

## **Postscript**

The U.S. Armed Forces suffered a severe setback in Vietnam. The rebuilding efforts after 1975 followed the thinking discussed in Olive Drab Rebels: create an "all-volunteer" army based on pay hikes, college tuition in exchange for subsequent military enrolment and promises of high quality

among new enlistees. At Fort Lewis, the model VOLAR unit on base is called the "New Reliabels". A study done in the first five months of 1973 showed the New Reliabels to have an AWOL rate averaging 47.2 per thousand, while the AWOL rate for other units on the base averaged 21.9 per thousand. At the same time, the Correctional Training Facility at Fort Riley, which was established during the war years to deal with chronic AWOLs, is continuing to process 150 GIs a week. Clearly, the new enlistee is often dissatisfied with his situation.

But this dissatisfaction is not sufficient to generate massive resistance. The end of the ground war removed the primary motivation for GIs to risk punishment; while there may be discontent now, it is generally overshadowed by fear of the UCMJ. As the organizers at Fort Bragg wrote in early 1973, "We began to grasp what we had been refusing to understand - the overwhelming majority of GIs at Fort Bragg had not been to Vietnam and probably would never be sent. The vets who swelled the ranks of the GI movement, as well as giving leadership, were all getting out, and guys just coming into the Army now were not facing a year of humping the boonies of Nam."

The organizational forms of the GI movement began to fade away. Storefronts and coffeehouses folded, newspapers became infrequent or ceased publication entirely, GI groups disappeared as their last members were discharged. While some scattered organizing continued, and some successful work was done at some forts around class based issues, these efforts were unable to generate new growth. The era of massive GI resistance was over.

## Conclusion

Historically, the attempts of the left to do military organizing have taken only limited forms. In the Bolshevik revolution military organizing occurred in a period of intense revolutionary upsurge, and consequently had as its goals the neutralization of the armed power of the state and the winning of armed contingents to the revolution. In the peasant based revolutions in China, Cuba, and Vietnam, this organizing occurred during periods of direct military confrontation between state armies and the armies of the revolution, and the organizing was consequently a continuation of this war in a different form. While there was some agitation within European armies during the two world wars, the lefts in the respective European countries generally supported the war effort and consequently did not focus on military organizing, while the colonial wars of the European powers were fought

## Introduction

The American invasion of South Vietnam is regularly used as an example of the dangers inherent in occupying territory and then fighting a protracted and domestically unpopular war against an essentially hostile population. The potential for this or that war to turn into someone's 'Vietnam' is repeated ad nauseam. The fact that by the early 1970s the US military "where not near mutinous" was "in a state approaching collapse" (1) is less widely advertised as a reason for their eventual humiliating withdrawal.

The two texts reprinted here attempt to understand the effect that the Vietnam war had on the American military, and its ongoing consequences. The first, 'Harass the Brass' is the latest version of a leaflet handed out on various occasions at San Francisco's 'Fleet Week' - a large naval show attended by thousands of enlistees who come into the city from the ships. It provides less specific detail about Vietnam than 'The Olive-Drab Rebels' but has a better analysis of the potential relationship between mutiny in the military and revolution in society as a whole.

'The Olive-Drab Rebels: Military Organising During The Vietnam Era', written by Matthew Rinaldi and published in 1974, offers a detailed account of attempts by soldiers, civilians and the left to organise within the US armed forces. It provides a lot of interesting and useful information which is not widely available elsewhere, and is analysed from a leftist perspective. It does make some mild criticisms of the practices adopted by the groups and parties that tried to parasitise rebellion in the military, but mainly on the level of their lack of success and failure to build a proper revolutionary organisation or instil the correct ideology.

Its characterisation of the ultimate goal of military organising as being the winning of "armed contingents for the left" which would then be part of the "armies of the revolution" is simply wrong. The point of organising within and against the military should be to subvert existing structures, hierarchies and roles - not to win over groups of soldiers who then continue to function as an army. A conventional war of fronts between opposing armies (which the Spanish civil war decomposed into) is the type of combat that states engage in and, requiring the replication of statist organisational forms, does not co-exist well with revolutionary struggle. The success of which is not dependant on a conquering proletarian army seizing the terrain and power of the bourgeoisie but upon the level of social transformation: "The question is not whether the proles finally decide to break into the armouries, but whether they unleash what they are:

commodified beings who no longer can and no longer want to exist as commodities and whose revolt explodes capitalist logic. Barricades and machine guns flow from this 'weapon'." (2)

The question of the way that wider contemporary events related to revolt within the army is also not adequately considered. Its somewhat curious that the author regards it as a period when "the working class in civilian life was relatively dormant". That may have been true in the early years of the war when the major unions such as the AFL-CIO were able to maintain their dominant position in controlling the sale of labour power and social unrest was just beginning to stir, but by the end of the 1960s wildcat strikes, workplace sabotage, rioting and other forms of proletarian resistance which largely existed beyond the control of social democratic mediators and the left were widespread. As with some aspects of the anti-war movement they are often forgotten about in historical accounts.

The extent to which both warfare and the world in general has changed in the years since 'The Olive Drab Rebels' was written raises the question of its relevance to the present situation. Downsizing and mechanisation to minimise reliance on a mass of potentially troublesome human beings has occurred on a massive scale both in the military and industry in general, coupled with the defeat and reversal of the social surge of the 1960s and '70s which had contributed to the scale and sustained nature of the anti-war movement. The change from conscription to volunteer based armies in almost all advanced capitalist states has often been touted as guaranteeing loyalty, but in fact does not necessarily mean that soldiers will always be willing to die pointlessly, as Rinaldi points out - "There is a common misconception that it was draftees who were the most disaffected elements in the military. In fact, it was often enlistees who were most likely to engage in open rebellion."

One of the most obvious effects of the war for the U.S. has been its deep reluctance to commit large numbers of troops to any one place for prolonged periods. Although it has military bases in around sixty countries (and 'advisors' etc. in many more) troops are rotated through these fairly rapidly and are not present in huge numbers. The general emphasis is on 'low intensity operations' - or in plain English the use of American special forces alongside local regular or paramilitary forces who are able to carry out savage repression against civilian populations without the US appearing to be directly responsible. Prime examples include Columbia (through the supposed aid package 'Plan Columbia') and the Philippines and to a lesser extent Afghanistan; the number and scope of these conflicts is likely to increase as the 'War on Terror' legitimises all states' attacks on their own

## **The Modern Volunteer Army**

The signing of the Vietnam Peace Accords in January of 1973 marked the formal end of over a decade of U. S. military involvement. While the war itself still lingered on, and renewed U. S. involvement remained a problematic possibility, the accords did signal the beginning of a new era. Ground troops were gone from Indochina, the bombing was ended, and GIs found themselves to be peacetime soldiers. Coupled with the end of the draft, these changes marked an opportunity for the armed services to rebuild themselves.

There are two primary elements to this current reconstruction. First, the Army and ground forces in general are being de-emphasized. Instead, there is an increased focus on mechanized warfare and the power of the Navy and Air Force. The advantage of these services is high mobility, tremendous striking power, and reliance on a smaller number of men. The second element is the transformation of the Army into a force composed of economically motivated volunteers. The belief is that military pay hikes, coming in period of rising unemployment and general economic instability, will motivate working class youth to enlist in larger numbers.

To some degree this effort has succeeded. The military has spent millions of dollars on advertising, greatly enlarged its corps of recruiters, and managed to come close to meeting its recruitment quotas. The Air Force and Navy have had no problems, the number of women enlisting has increased by 50%, and a significant number of men have enlisted for the Army and the Marines. But there has been one glaring failure. They can't find enough men to enlist for Combat Arms, the very heart of the Army. In fiscal year 1973 only 34,000 men, 57% of their stated goal, enlisted for the infantry, despite a \$2,500 bonus for a four year Combat Arms enlistment. In order to increase these enlistments they lowered the educational requirements, but in the first months of fiscal year 1974 the percentage of black enlistees rose to 31%, and given the continuing specter of black rebelliousness, that scares them. In a new effort to deal with the shortage of combat troops the Army announced in February of 1974 that it was creating a new combat division by shifting men from headquarters and support jobs. So much for unit of choice enlistment!

It is important to stress that an economically motivated enlistee is not necessarily a gung-ho soldier. Recruiters still spin tales of an unreal world in order to meet their own enlistment quotas, and GIs are still finding that the military is not what they had been led to expect. The indicators for morale and discipline used by the Army are showing that discontent is high



meager military salaries. The lives of these families were often financially very tight; in fact, a study done by the government in 1970 found that the families of 50,000 servicemen were existing below the "poverty line". These women were consequently often receptive to anti-military actions, were mobilized in a number of tenant's rights campaigns, and were frequently open to a developing women's consciousness. But there was also a high level of fear. Under Army regulations a GI is held to be responsible for the actions of his wife, and a number of GIs were punitively transferred when their wives became politically active. This and other factors, such as transience and the absence of stable GI organizations, tended to greatly hamper the development of a large movement of dependents.

For the military authorities, this period was one of cautious retreat. The services were in a state of disarray, many career officers were leaving in disgust, and the brass wanted to extricate themselves from the mess as easily as possible. The repressive apparatus was geared down, and the policy of early outs and discharges for Nam vets and political dissidents became widespread. Even in the Navy, which was experiencing heightened resistance, the brass chose moderation and conciliation.

The major response was a concentration on the development of an all-volunteer service. Though the war was still on and the draft was still functioning, the military experimented in this period with a number of programs which it hoped would cool out stateside bases and provide a model for the new volunteer army (VOLAR). These included race relations councils, some loosening of barracks regulations, and at some forts the development of ersatz coffeehouses on base, complete with black light posters and peace signs. (The one at Fort Carson was appropriately called The Inescape.) These early programs often led to disaster for the brass. Militant black GIs often disrupted the placid race relations councils, and an early VOLAR rock concert at Fort Ord turned into a battle between GIs and MPs. But these early programs were only the sketchy beginnings of the VOLAR effort. As the military gradually withdrew from the war in Indochina, the plans for a fundamental change in the services were put into full operation.

populations.

The invasion and occupation of Iraq by several hundred thousand troops with its risks of mass casualties and becoming sucked into a long-term conflict, breaks the recent pattern of reliance on bombing victims into submission rather than fighting on the ground. It seems somewhat ironic that the events of September 11th made martyrdom in defence of the 'American Way' politically acceptable - the British weren't, in general, so eager despite Blair's insistence on the necessity of a "blood price" for the continuation of the 'special relationship' - not one that would be paid by him or his friends and family.

The relatively easy initial victory has convinced some that America's military power is now unstoppable. The facts both historical and contemporary suggest otherwise. Global opposition to the war was on a scale unseen in recent times even though some of it was the result of the politically expedient support of some sectors of the ruling class. The open support of some sections of the mass media for anti-war protests was in part an expression of the divisions that the war provoked amongst their masters. The opposition of states such as France and Germany which elicited a certain amount of praise was more the result of fears about being sidelined in international politics and being cut out the plunder of Iraq's resources rather than concern for the well-being of the Iraqi population. In the anti-war movement there were just as many conflicting interests and positions resulting in absurdities which ranged from those emphasising the 'illegality' of the invasion, to Ms Dynamite's asinine plea at the million-plus strong demonstration in London on 15th February 2003 for everybody to just love each other. The massive unpopularity (for whatever reason) of their mission can't have gone unnoticed by the troops on the ground but the extent of dissatisfaction remains an unknown quantity at present due to the tight control over an already loyal press. At least one 'fraggings' (3) occurred in Kuwait before the fighting had even begun, which was put down to an 'unstable' individual rather than an expression of more generalised dissatisfaction.

At the time of writing it looks like the US will have to do exactly what it has tried to avoid since Vietnam and keep a very large presence in Iraq for an indefinite period if it wants to ensure a steady flow of oil out, US company contracts in and keep the Islamists out of power. Hundreds of millions of dollars of reconstruction contracts have already been handed out to corporations such as Halliburton which are intimately linked to the Bush administration; according to some reports bidding commenced before the fighting had even started. Iraq is awash with arms which are being turned on

the invaders in a situation somewhat similar to the Soviet invasion/occupation of Afghanistan; they won all the set piece battles as well but were unable to win the guerilla war that followed. It seems somewhat implausible for the Americans to blame Saddam loyalists for their troubles when they are busy re-employing the very people they claimed to be removing. No doubt the former Bathists' expertise in repression and terror will come in very handy in the months and years ahead. Despite their talk of introducing/imposing freedom, democracy and by implication consumerism, the US forces haven't managed to adopt the strategy that was so successful for Saddam in previous years - he didn't survive for so long simply on the basis of fear, but also maintained social peace through economic means. The US occupation administration's general incompetence, brutality and failure to restore even the impoverished conditions that most Iraqis endured in the later stages of Saddam's rule can only lead to trouble. The pressing question now is what kind of trouble? The almost total destruction of Iraqi society has led to proletarians fighting a three-cornered battle against the occupation forces, the ex-Bathists and, unfortunately, each other. Passive and active resistance to the occupation is endemic, but it is difficult to discern either its composition or its trajectory, to what extent it is integrated into a nationalist or Islamic movement and to what extent it expresses an autonomous proletarian activity. The most visible sign of resistance; the random killing of soldiers who are likely to have joined up because the military is their sole source of waged work, as opposed to having a burning desire to defend the 'heimat', is hardly to be celebrated, but information about any more potentially revolutionary activity is going to be difficult to get - unless its so widespread that it becomes impossible to ignore or suppress.

The experience of trying to control a hostile Iraqi population is already sapping the morale of troops suffering from the psychological after-effects of the slaughter that they have just participated in. Soldiers are now openly begging to be sent home and asking why they are in Iraq at all. If they are forced to stay it may only be a matter of time before they'll start to refuse to risk their lives and shoot other proletarians in preference for shooting up heroin and/or their officers - a possibility which may well have occurred to Colin Powell who was a junior officer in Vietnam.

Possibly the US's present program of colonial military adventurism is already running into serious difficulties and in the longer term can't rely on domestic support, especially if the body bags really begin to pile up. One military strategist has written that "It is a mistake to think that America's quick defeat of the demoralised, corrupt Iraqi regime reflects its new

those dealing with the attack carriers faced an explosive situation, the remainder of the Navy and Air Force exhibited only scattered resistance in this period. There was some positive work. Papers were begun and continued at many bases, and at Newport Naval Station on-board organizing occurred on a ship about to make a "goodwill" tour of Portuguese colonies in Africa. But this work rarely resulted in either mass actions or direct impact on the war. When a major offensive was launched by the North Vietnamese and the NLF in the spring of 1972 and the collapse of the Saigon forces seemed a realistic possibility, the U.S. was able to carry through a tremendous mobilization of air and sea power without any significant difficulties from the ranks, a task which would have been unthinkable in the Army.

In the early years of the seventies the organizing collectives at most bases also felt the dramatic impact of the women's movement. The most immediate effect was intense internal struggle over male domination on both the personal and organizational levels. The more long term effect was the re-evaluation by many women of the work they had been doing in previous years, and this frequently led to a decision to begin to orient toward organizing other women. In the military situation this meant organizing women in uniform and women who were dependents.

Most of the initial work focused on women in uniform. Women enlist for many of the same economic reasons which motivate men; the military seems to offer a secure job with "travel" opportunities and a certain level of respect. As well, many working class women find that upon leaving high school they have a choice of either remaining at home or getting married, and the military seems like a convenient escape from that trap. Consequently, enlistments are high. Organizing efforts by collectives of women occurred at both Fort McClellan and Fort Bragg, but in both situations it was found to be very difficult to organize WACs. The level of discontent was not high; in fact, 70% of first term recruits re-enlist. In addition, gay WACs were found to feel that the infantry offered them a fairly secure community of gay women, free from the general harassment in civilian society consequently they were reluctant to risk discharge for political activity. While individual WACs did relate strongly to developing women's consciousness, their acts of resistance remained individual and isolated. The women at Fort Bragg concluded, "It is our feeling that there will not be a mass movement among WACs." There was more success in organizing women who were dependents of men in the military, particularly wives of GIs. They were in the position of following their husbands around from base to base, living in poor housing, and being forced to exist on

The changing nature of the war forced the existing elements of the GI movement to re-evaluate their work. Most of the projects dealing with ground forces, the Army and Marine Corps, found that stateside bases were filled with disaffected, angry GIs. Yet the ground war was “officially” over, and the sense of urgency had left the movement. The result was contradictory impulses among rank and file soldiers; a feeling of anger tempered by the sense that it was no longer worth the risk to fight back, that the easiest road was waiting for discharge. The military authorities in their turn sped up discharges, offered a series of early outs, and moved to clear stateside bases of Vietnam vets. The anger continued to lead to sporadic acts of resistance, but it was rarely channeled into sustained organizing work.

Organizers at Fort Hood, attempting to analyze this situation, wrote, “The three main elements of the GI movement, as we see it, are 1) a high degree of militancy 2) a high degree of apathy and 3) almost a complete lack of organization. The first two may seem contradictory, but in reality they aren’t. One can be ultra-militant in your hatred of the brass while being completely apathetic to the prospect of change.” Dealing with the question of organization they wrote, “The transitory nature of the military and the deep fear of the UCMJ play a part in the lack of organization. On Fort Hood, which is mostly Vietnam returnees, the majority of GIs hate the Army with a passion, but won’t move against it for those reasons. So, the GI movement today consists basically of fragging, shaming, individual defiance, and sporadic mutinies and demonstrations. Anything and everything short of ongoing organization.”

The Fort Hood account fairly accurately describes the situation at most Army and Marine Corps bases in this period. It was understood that the war was evaporating as an issue, and most organizers were shifting to issues that related directly to class oppression at home. A GI group at Fort Hood called the GI Summer Offensive Committee chose to concentrate on a boycott of Tyrell’s Jewelers, a national chain of rip-off jewelry stores which specialized in selling cheap jewelry to GIs for the “wife, sweetheart, or mother” back home. The chain featured a “Vietnam Honor Role” listing all the GIs who had been killed while still owing Tyrell’s money; the chain magnanimously absolved their debts. The boycott effort found a responsive note on Fort Hood and mobilized large picket lines and demonstrations. The boycott then spread to other bases and forced a number of local Tyrell’s to alter their business practices. But while this action did succeed in helping to create an organization at Fort Hood, at the conclusion of the boycott the old contradictions re-surfaced and the organization slowly disappeared. Some of the same problems faced organizers at Navy and Air Force bases. While

technological military prowess rather than Hussein’s political weakness. Rumsfeld wishes to trumpet to strength of the Pentagon’s arms but this conclusion is scarcely justified by the facts.’ (4)

In spite of the changed social and political landscape the experience of Vietnam has had ongoing repercussions for the way that the American military operates; and the movements against it, both inside and outside of the armed forces, can still point to ways in which we can resist and undermine capitalist war.

Harass The Brass is also available at [www.infoshop.org/myep/love3.html](http://www.infoshop.org/myep/love3.html)  
The Olive-Drab Rebels is also available at [www.geocities.com/cordobakaf](http://www.geocities.com/cordobakaf).  
Other texts and information on opposition to war can be found at [www.geocities.com/howar\\_buttheclawar](http://www.geocities.com/howar_buttheclawar).

- (1) Colonel Robert D. Heintz, *The Collapse of the Armed Forces*, North American Newspaper Alliance, Armed Forces Journal, 7 June, 1971.
- (2) Gilles Dauvé, *When Insurrections Die*, Antagonism Press, 2000, p.25.
- (3) Vietnam-era term for the killing of officers by their men, often with grenades.
- (4) Gabriel Kolko. *Iraq, the United States and the end of the European Coalition*.

## **Harass the Brass; Some notes toward the subversion of the US armed forces.**

A friend who was in the U.S. military during the 1990-91 Persian Gulf War told me that before President G.H.W. Bush visited the troops in Saudi Arabia, enlisted men and women who would be in Bush's immediate vicinity had their rifle and pistol ammunition taken away from them. This was supposedly done to avoid "accidents." But it was also clear to people on the scene that Bush and his corporate handlers were somewhat afraid of the enlisted people who Bush would soon be killing in his unsuccessful re-election campaign.

The suppressed history of the last big U.S. war before 'Operation Desert Storm' shows that the Commander-in-Chief had good reason to fear and distrust his troops. Our rulers want us to forget what happened during the Vietnam war - especially what happened inside the U.S. armed forces during the war. Our rulers remember it all too well. They want us to forget what defeated their war effort, and the importance of resistance to the war by enlisted men and women.

Until 1968 the desertion rate for U.S. troops in Vietnam was lower than in previous wars. But by 1969 the desertion rate had increased fourfold. This wasn't limited to Southeast Asia; desertion rates among GI's were on the increase worldwide. For soldiers in the combat zone, insubordination became an important part of avoiding horrible injury or death. As early as mid-1969, an entire company of the 196th Light Infantry Brigade sat down on the battlefield. Later that year, a rifle company from the famed 1st Air Cavalry Division flatly refused - on CBS TV - to advance down a dangerous trail. In the following 12 months the 1st Air Cav. notched up 35 combat refusals.

From mild forms of political protest and disobedience of war orders, the resistance among the ground troops grew into a massive and widespread "quasi-mutiny" by 1970 and 1971. Soldiers went on "search and avoid" missions, intentionally skirting clashes with the Vietnamese, and often holding three-day-long pot parties instead of fighting.

By 1970, the U.S. Army had 65,643 deserters, roughly the equivalent of four infantry divisions. In an article published in the *Armed Forces Journal* (June 7, 1971), Marine Colonel Robert D. Heini Jr., a veteran combat commander with over 27 years experience in the Marines, and the author of *Soldiers Of The Sea*, a definitive history of the Marine Corps,

less motivation to rebel than did ground troops. The killing and the dying was done by the pilots, who were all officers and who tended to see themselves as "professionals". Second, because the support crews were not involved directly with combat, their resistance did not affect the war in an immediate way. But they were far from powerless.

The primary resistance which developed in this period was among crews on Navy attack carriers directly involved in the bombing. While there was dissidence and some political organizing among Air Force personnel and in other sections of the Navy, it was where the support crews most directly touched the war that resistance flared. Probably the most dramatic incident occurred aboard the Navy attack carrier USS Coral Sea in the fall of 1971. The Coral Sea was docked in California while it prepared for a tour of bombing duty off the coast of Vietnam. On board was a crew of 4,500 men, a few hundred of whom were pilots, the rest being support crews. A handful of men on the ship began circulating a petition which read in part: "We the people must guide the government and not allow the government to guide us! The Coral Sea is scheduled for Vietnam in November. This does not have to be a fact. The ship can be prevented from taking an active part in the conflict if we the majority voice our opinion that we do not believe in the Vietnam war. If you feel that the Coral Sea should not go to Vietnam, voice your opinion by signing this petition."

Though the petition had to be circulated secretly, and though men took a calculated risk putting their name down on something which the brass might eventually see, within a few weeks over 1,000 men had signed it.

Out of this grew an on-ship organization called "Stop Our Ship" (SOS). The men engaged in a series of demonstrations to halt their sailing date, and on November 6 over 300 men from the ship led the fall anti-war march in San Francisco. Their effort to stop the ship failed, and a number of men jumped ship as the Coral Sea left for Vietnam. The SOS movement spread to other attack carriers, including the USS Constellation, the USS Hancock, and the USS Ranger.

The Navy continued to be racked by political organizing and severe racial unrest. In June of 1972 the USS Ranger was disabled by sabotage, and in October both the USS Kittyhawk and the USS Hassayampa were swept by fighting. In November of that same year the USS Constellation was damaged by sabotage, docked to repair the damage, and was confronted with 130 crewmen refusing direct orders to return aboard. Though the impact of these actions only slightly impeded the war effort, they helped to maintain a constant pressure on the Administration to withdraw the military from the disaster of the Indochina war.

## A Changing War, A Changing Movement

The years from 1970 to 1972 marked the almost total collapse of the U.S. Army in Vietnam. Drug use became virtually epidemic, with an estimated 80% of the troops in Vietnam using some form of drug. Sometime in mid-1970 huge quantities of heroin were dumped on the black market, and GIs were receptive to its enveloping high. By the end of 1971 over 30% of the combat troops were on smack. Fraggings continued to rise, from 271 in 1970 to 425 in 1971; one division alone, the "elite" America I Division, averaged one fragging a week. Search-and-avoid and combat refusals were widespread. In a sense, the Army virtually ground to a halt. One newsman wrote in early '71, "Since the end of the Cambodian operation last June, the United States Army in Vietnam has fought no major actions, launched no significant operations, captured no territory and added no battle honors to its regimental flags. In this same period, the army has abandoned at least one base under enemy fire and suffered most of its losses from accidents and booby traps." One top ranking officer was moved to lament, "Vietnam has become a poison in the veins of the U.S. Army."

Troops sent to Vietnam in the early seventies had good reason to avoid combat. Not only were they in a war almost no one believed in any more, but they were shipped over long after the Administration claimed to be withdrawing. There didn't seem to be any reason to risk being killed. At the same time, the States were being flooded with Nam vets back from the fiercest years of fighting, and their disillusionment was plainly evident at every stateside base. Dope and disrespect were everywhere, and the desertion rate was still climbing, reaching 62.6 per thousand in 1971. Many of these vets connected with the ongoing organizing projects; within a week after the 173rd Airborne was shipped back to Fort Campbell over 300 GIs from its ranks participated in a local anti-war march.

Though the ground troops were gradually coming home, for some elements of the U. S. military the war was escalating. The increased use of air power meant not only that more pilots were flying through anti-aircraft fire to bomb the Vietnamese, it also meant that tens of thousands of low ranking GIs were needed as back-up troops to service and maintain the squadrons of fighter-bombers. These men were predominantly third world and white working class youth who had enlisted in the Air Force or the Navy mostly because they wanted to escape being in the Army. There was widespread anti-war feeling among these crews, but their resistance differed from the resistance of Army GIs in some critical ways. First, they were not in the direct line of fire, they neither killed nor risked being killed, and consequently they had

wrote: "By every conceivable indicator, our army that remains in Vietnam is in a state approaching collapse, with individual units avoiding or having refused combat, murdering their officers and non-commissioned officers...Sedition, coupled with disaffection from within the ranks, and externally fomented with an audacity and intensity previously inconceivable, infest the Armed Services..." Heintz cited a New York Times article which quoted an enlisted man saying, "The American garrisons on the larger bases are virtually disarmed. The lifers have taken our weapons away...there have also been quite a few frag incidents in the battalion."

"Frag incidents" or "fraggings" was soldier slang in Vietnam for the killing of strict, unpopular and aggressive officers and NCO's. The word apparently originated from enlisted men using fragmentation grenades to off commanders. Heintz wrote, "Bounties, raised by common subscription in amounts running anywhere from \$50 to \$1,000, have been widely reported put on the heads of leaders who the privates and SP4s want to rub out."

"Shortly after the costly assault on Hamburger Hill in mid-1969, the GI underground newspaper in Vietnam, GI Says, publicly offered a \$10,000 bounty on Lieutenant Colonel Weldon Hunnicutt, the officer who ordered and led the attack."

"The Pentagon has now disclosed that fraggings in 1970 (209 killings) have more than doubled those of the previous year (96 killings). Word of the deaths of officers will bring cheers at troop movies or in bivouacs of certain units." Congressional hearings on fraggings held in 1973 estimated that roughly 3% of officer and non-com deaths in Vietnam between 1961 and 1972 were a result of fraggings. But these figures were only for killings committed with grenades, and didn't include officer deaths from automatic weapons fire, handguns and knives. The Army's Judge Advocate General's Corps estimated that only 10% of fragging attempts resulted in anyone going to trial. In the America I Division, plagued by poor morale, fraggings during 1971 were estimated to be running around one a week. War equipment was frequently sabotaged and destroyed.

By 1972 roughly 300 anti-war and anti-military newspapers, with names like Harass the Brass, All Hands Abandon Ship and Star Spangled Bummers had been put out by enlisted people. "In Vietnam," wrote the Ft. Lewis-McCord Free Press, "The Lifers, the Brass, are the true enemy..." Riots and anti-war demonstrations took place on bases in Asia, Europe and in the United States. By the early 1970s the government had to begin pulling out of the ground war and switching to an "air war," in part because many of the ground troops who were supposed to do the fighting were hamstringing the world's mightiest military force by their sabotage and resistance.

With the shifting over to an "air war" strategy, the Navy became an important centre of resistance to the war. In response to the racism that prevailed inside the Navy, black and white sailors occasionally rebelled together. The most significant of these rebellions took place on board the USS Constellation off Southern California, in November 1972. In response to a threat of less-than-honourable discharges against several black sailors, a group of over 100 black and white sailors staged a day-and-a-half long sit-in. Fearful of losing control of his ship at sea to full-scale mutiny, the ship's commander brought the Constellation back to San Diego. One hundred thirty-two sailors were allowed to go ashore. They refused orders to reboard the ship several days later, staging a defiant dockside strike on the morning of November 9. In spite of the seriousness of the rebellion, not one of the sailors involved was arrested.

Sabotage was an extremely useful tactic. On May 26, 1970, the USS Anderson was preparing to steam from San Diego to Vietnam. But someone had dropped nuts, bolts and chains down the main gear shaft. A major breakdown occurred, resulting in thousands of dollars worth of damage and a delay of several weeks. Several sailors were charged, but because of a lack of evidence the case was dismissed. With the escalation of naval involvement in the war the level of sabotage grew. In July of 1972, within the space of three weeks, two of the Navy's aircraft carriers were put out of commission by sabotage. On July 10, a massive fire swept through the admiral's quarters and radar centre of the USS Forrestal, causing over \$7 million in damage. This delayed the ship's deployment for over two months. In late July, the USS Ranger was docked at Alameda, California. Just days before the ship's scheduled departure for Vietnam, a paint-scraper and two 12-inch bolts were inserted into the number-four-engine reduction gears causing nearly \$1 million in damage and forcing a three-and-a-half month delay in operations for extensive repairs. The sailor charged in the case was acquitted. In other cases, sailors tossed equipment over the sides of ships while at sea.

The House Armed Services Committee summed up the crisis of rebellion in the Navy: "The U.S. Navy is now confronted with pressures...which, if not controlled, will surely destroy its enviable tradition of discipline. Recent instances of sabotage, riot, willful disobedience of orders, and contempt for authority...are clear-cut symptoms of a dangerous deterioration of discipline." The rebellion in the ranks didn't emerge simply in response to battlefield conditions. A civilian anti-war movement in the U.S. had emerged on the coat tails of the civil rights movement, at a time when the pacifism-at-any-price tactics of civil rights leaders had reached

growth of GI resistance all played a part. The key factor was that political GIs continued to be dangerous in the stockades, and after numerous stockade rebellions the military often chose to discharge dissidents and get rid of them all together.

The repression on civilians was not as severe. One of the first moves against the coffeehouses was the effort to place the Shelter Half at Fort Lewis off-limits to GIs, but this required a legal hearing. When GI protest and media coverage were mobilized, the military backed down and simply cancelled the hearing. The campaign against the coffeehouses then took a less direct form, usually carried out by local civilian authorities. The UFO at Fort Jackson was busted for being a "public nuisance", and the coffeehouse at Fort Knox was simply driven out of town. But though this harassment was costly, it never effectively disrupted the functioning of the organizing projects. What is significant is that the federal authorities never moved against the civilians involved. There is a federal statute, 18 USC 2387, which prohibits "all manner of activities (incitements, counseling, distribution or preparation of literature) intended to subvert the loyalty, morale, or discipline of the Armed Services", and carries a penalty of ten years in prison. But while hundreds of civilians openly violated this law, none were ever arrested. The unpopularity of the war, the spontaneous nature of GI resistance, and the general desire on the part of the Pentagon to avoid publicizing this resistance probably all contributed to the decision by federal authorities to withdraw from direct confrontation with the civilian organizers.

The new strategy developed by the Pentagon involved a strategic change in the nature of the war and a cosmetic change in the nature of the military. The ground war was going badly, the American public was distressed over high casualties, and the Administration reasoned that it could fight just as effectively from the air. The ground troops would be replaced through the program of "Vietnamization". So, the central cause of the military's decay was to be gradually relieved as ground troops were withdrawn from the fighting and the new phase of air war was initiated. In addition, a new image was developed for the Army, de-emphasizing discipline and attempting to relate to black pride and the new youth consciousness. This was seen as the first step toward the development of a volunteer service. Through these transformations the military leadership hoped to back off from its disaster.

period, it was useful as a method of describing a possible transition to power. Throughout this period, the GIs who related most directly to the organized forms of the GI movement tended to be white working class Vietnam vets. Racism clearly played a role in preventing solidarity between white and third world GIs. But the primary reason it tended to be overwhelmingly white had to do with the nature of the organizing. While black GIs were frequently in the forefront of spontaneous confrontations, such as combat refusals, stockade rebellions, and resistance to riot control, they did not relate in large numbers to putting out newspapers and doing agitational work. The consciousness of the mass of black GIs was generally higher than the consciousness of white GIs, which meant that the need for sustained agitational work was higher among whites. Consequently, black GIs participated heavily in group actions, while it was white GIs who developed agitational forms to reach their less politicized brothers.

The organized GI movement was primarily a stateside phenomenon, but there was also a strong pocket of resistance among U.S. troops stationed in Germany. Dope use was staggeringly high here, black consciousness was very developed, and spontaneous rebellions erupted periodically. Germany was often a transit point for GIs going to or coming back from Vietnam, and this added a direct consciousness of the war to the turmoil. Various papers were published in Germany, including a widely circulated GI paper with avowedly socialist politics, THE NEXT STEP. And at times mass actions were organized, one of the strongest being an anti-racism rally in Heidelberg in 1970, which drew over 1,000 GIs. The military leadership was thus faced with the widespread breakdown of its authority, a deteriorating fighting force in Vietnam, and political dissidence throughout its ranks. Its response was twofold; more repression, and the development of a strategic approach to the problem. The repression was most intense on individual GIs. Pvt., Gypsey Peterson, who had helped create the FATIGUE PRESS at Fort Hood, was sentenced to eight years at hard labor for possession of an amount of grass so small it "disappeared" during analysis. Two black marines, William Harvey and George Daniels, were sentenced to six and ten years at hard labor for rapping against the war in their barracks. Privates Dam Amick and Ken Stolte were sentenced to four years for distributing a leaflet on Ford Ord. Pvt. Theoda Lester was sentenced to three years for refusing to cut his Afro. And Pvt. Wade Carson was sentenced to six months for "intention" to distribute FED-UP on Fort Lewis. The pattern was widespread and the message was clear-the brass was not about to tolerate political dissent in its ranks. But a number of factors helped to weaken this repressive power. Media coverage, public protest, and the

their effective limit, and were being questioned by a younger, combative generation. Working class blacks and Latinos served in combat units out of all proportion to their numbers in American society, and major urban riots in Watts, Detroit and Newark had an explosive effect on the consciousness of these men. After the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr. major riots erupted in 181 U.S. cities; at that point the rulers of the United States were facing the gravest national crisis since the Civil War. And the radical movement of the late 1960's wasn't limited to the United States. Large-scale rebellion was breaking out all over the world, in Latin American and Europe and Africa, and even against the Maoists in China; its high point was the wildcat general strike that shut down France in May, 1968, the last time a major industrialised democracy came close to social revolution.

The crisis that racked American society during the Vietnam war was a grave development in the life of what had been a very stable and conservative society, but it wasn't profound enough to create an irreparable rupture between the rulers and the ruled. In the early 1970's, the U.S. was still coasting on the relative prosperity of the post-World War Two economic boom. Social conditions faced by working people in the U.S. weren't anywhere near as overwhelming and unbearable as they are now. U.S. involvement in a protracted ground war in Iraq today or Columbia tomorrow could have a much more rapid explosive impact on American society.

A number of years ago, in a deceitful article in Mother Jones magazine, corporate liberal historian Todd Gitlin claimed that the peaceful and legal aspects of the 1960's U.S. anti-war movement had been the most successful opposition to a war in history. Gitlin was dead wrong; as a bourgeois historian, Gitlin is paid to render service unto capital by getting it wrong, and get it wrong he does, again and again. The most effective "anti-war" movement in history was at the end of World War One, when proletarian revolutions broke out in Russia, Germany and throughout Central Europe in 1917 and 1918. A crucial factor in the revolutionary movement of that time was the collapse of the armies and navies of Russian and Germany in full-scale armed mutiny. After several years of war and millions of casualties the soldiers and sailors of opposing nations began to fraternise with each other, turned their guns against their commanding officers and went home to fight against the ruling classes that had sent them off to war. The war ended with a global cycle of mutinies mirroring the social unrest spreading across the capitalist world; some of the most powerful regimes on Earth were quickly toppled and destroyed.

Soldiers and sailors played a leading role in the revolutionary movement. The naval bases Kronstadt in Russia and Kiel and

Wilhelmshaven in Germany became important centres of revolutionary self-organisation and action, and the passing of vast numbers of armed soldiers and sailors to the side of the Soviets allowed the working class to briefly take power in Russia. The French invasion of Revolutionary Russia in 1919 and 1920 was crippled by the mutiny of the French fleet in the Black Sea, centred around the battleships France and the Jean Bart. Mutinies broke out among sailors in the British Navy and in the armies of the British Empire in Asia, and even among American troops sent to aid the counter-revolutionary White Army in the Russian Civil War. Revolutionary unrest doesn't happen every day, but when it does break out, it can overcome the most powerful states with a surprising and improbable speed, and the collapse of the repressive forces of the state is a key moment in the beginning of a new way of life.

It's an ugly fact that war and revolution were intimately linked in the most far-going social movements of the 20th century. With the U.S. governments' self-appointed role as the cop for global capitalist law and order, it's likely that the crisis that will cause an irreparable break between the rulers and the ruled in the United States will be the result of an unsuccessful war. That day may soon be upon us. At that point, widespread fraternisation between anti-capitalist radicals and enlisted people will be crucial in expanding an anti-war movement into a larger opposition to the system of wage labour and commodity production that generates wars, exploitation, poverty, inequality and ecological devastation. A n examination of what happened to the U.S. military during the Vietnam War can help us see the central role "the military question" is going to play in a revolutionary mass movement in the 21st century. It isn't a question of how a chaotic and rebellious civilian populace can out-gun the well-organised, disciplined armies of the capitalist state in pitched battle, but of how a mass movement can cripple the effective fighting capacity of the military from within, and bring about the collapse and dispersal of the state's armed forces. What set of circumstances can compel the inchoate discontentment endemic in any wartime army or navy to advance to the level of conscious, organised resistance? How fast and how deeply can a subversive consciousness spread among enlisted people? How can rebels in uniform take effective, large-scale action against the military machine? This effort will involve the sabotage and destruction of sophisticated military technologies, an irreversible breakdown in the chain-of-command, and a terminal demoralisation of the officer corps. The "quasi-mutiny" that helped defeat the U.S. in Vietnam offers a significant precedent for the kind of subversive action working people will have to foment against 21st century global capitalism and its high-tech military machine.

after it began it was raided by the MPs. Thirty-five GIs were picked up and placed on restriction. Though formal charges were never brought against these men, in the following months almost all of them were either transferred, shipped to Vietnam, discharged, or simply busted on other charges.

Since it seemed that on-base activities were too risky, attempts were made to mobilize massive numbers of GIs for off-base actions. These were at times successful. Frequently, efforts were made to mobilize GI participation in civilian peace demonstrations. A series of marches outside Fort Hood and Fort Bragg and in cities like San Francisco were participated in by hundreds of GIs, and in December of 1969 almost 1,000 marines participated in an anti-war march in Oceanside, California. But the military was able to stifle this expression of resistance, largely by placing whole units or entire bases on restriction. Thus, when national demonstrations were called for Armed Forces Day, a radical GI at Fort Ord had to relate, "May 16, 1970 was a Saturday, and there was a huge gathering outside the gates of Fort Ord, but neither I nor any other GIs could participate, because the commanding general had ordered everyone to work all day Saturday, until the demonstration was over." While scattered GIs often went AWOL to participate, it was not possible to sustain mass GI participation in these marches. The power of the military authorities was simply too limitless.

This often led to a reconsideration of attempts to organize on base, and a new strategy was developed. Rather than concentrating on large base-wide actions, an effort was made to concentrate on localized, unit organizing. This meant that radical GIs, who were working on a base-wide paper and relating to an off-base storefront, would also attempt to create an organized group in their barracks. These groups would put out small, mimeographed unit newspapers, like SPD NEWS or FIRST OF THE WORST, struggle against immediate forms of harassment, and occasionally submit group Article 138 complaints against a particularly oppressive officer. Because they dealt with immediate local issues, these unit organizations were frequently able to effect some genuine changes. In addition, these unit groups could raise conceptually the issue of power in the military. For example, the FTA program written at Fort Knox, which first described the class nature of society and pointed toward the goal of socialism, went on to state, "We know that to achieve these goals will take a long fight. To begin to implement this program we intend to build our own democratic organizations within our units which serve our own interests, to protect us now from our present leaders, and later to replace the existing organization of the military." While this goal was far beyond what was realistic in this



unity. A large degree of the conflict occurred because of civilian proficiency at certain tasks, which at times led to their domination. As one organizer expressed it, "People assume power depending on how priorities are defined and what skills are valued. If skills that only educated people have, such as speaking eloquently, laying out newspapers, gathering literature for a bookstore, legal assistance, etc. are rewarded, then people who don't have those skills become intimidated, feel useless, and do basically what they do in society at large—they withdraw and fuck up."

The problem was not simply a civilian-GI dichotomy. One organizer at Fort Lewis wrote, "Often, the problem was much more blatantly one of classism, that is that the middle-upper class people would dominate the meetings and directions, with the lower class people doing most of the work. The way the problem looks is that the civilians dominated no more and no less, on the whole, than middle class educated GIs." But there were few middle class educated GIs in the movement; the general situation was that the bulk of the GI dissidents were blue collar working class youth, while most of the civilian organizers were middle class. A positive situation, in that it was a meeting between the middle class left and the working class, but it was a constant struggle to overcome the inherent roles established in relations between the classes. Similar dilemmas have confronted the left whenever it has attempted to change its class base.

Despite these internal struggles, the high degree of transience among GIs, and the pervasive power of the brass, the overriding intensity of the war ensured that the work continued. Since the high level of risk limited what actions could be undertaken, newspapers were the most realistic form of political expression. Attempts were made, however, to find forms for a higher level of struggle. At first this involved attempts to find a way to achieve base-wide actions. Sick call strikes were organized at Fort Knox early in the war and later at Fort Lewis. Soldiers cannot legally go on strike, but military regulations supposedly guarantee them the right to go on sick call, so if masses of GIs went on sick call on the same day it would in effect create a strike situation. But such efforts had to be publicized well in advance, and the brass resorted to intimidation, harassment, and outright refusal of the sick call privilege to crush these strikes. The attempt at Fort Knox resulted in failure, though at Fort Lewis it had a moderate impact, with up to 30% of the base trying to go on sick call. Attempts were also made to hold meetings on base, partly due to the example of the GIs United meeting at Fort Jackson, but these meetings were extremely vulnerable. In October of 1969 an effort was made to hold a meeting at a service club at Fort Lewis, but an agent had infiltrated the group which called the meeting, and soon

As rampaging market forces trash living conditions for the majority of the world's people, working class troops will do the fighting in counter-insurgency actions against other working class people. War games several years ago by the Marines in a defunct housing project in Oakland, California, dubbed 'Operation Urban Warrior,' highlight the fact that America's rulers want their military to be prepared to suppress the domestic fallout from their actions, and be ready to do it soon. But as previous waves of global unrest have shown, the forces that give rise to mass rebellion in one area of the globe will simultaneously give rise to rebellion in other parts of the world. The armed forces are vulnerable to social forces at work in the larger society that spawns them. Revolt in civilian society bleeds through the fabric of the military into the ranks of enlisted people. The relationship between officers and enlisted people mirrors the relationship between bosses and employees, and similar dynamics of class conflict emerge in the military and civilian versions of the workplace. The military is never a hermetically sealed organisation. Our rulers know all this. Our rulers know that they are vulnerable to mass resistance, and they know that their wealth and power can be collapsed from within by the working class women and men whom they depend on. We need to know it, too.

Much of the information for this article has been taken from the book *Soldiers in Revolt: The American Military Today*, by David Cortright, published by Anchor/Doubleday in 1975. Readers should please send copies of this article to any enlisted people they know.

**INTERNATIONALISM IN PRACTICE:** - An American soldier in a hospital explained how he was wounded: He said, "I was told that the way to tell a hostile Vietnamese from a friendly Vietnamese was to shout 'To hell with Ho Chi Minh!' If he shoots, he's unfriendly. So I saw this dude and yelled 'To hell with Ho Chi Minh!' and he yelled back, 'To hell with President Johnson!' We were shaking hands when a truck hit us." (from 1,001 Ways to Beat the Draft, by Tuli Kupferberg).

1. A few far-sighted individuals among the U.S. political elite apparently fear that U.S. involvement in a ground war could trigger large-scale domestic unrest. According to the U.S. magazine *Newsweek*, at a meeting in the White House during President Clinton's intervention in the Balkans, a heated exchange took place between Madeleine Albright, then ambassador to the United Nations, and then National Security Adviser Colin Powell.

*Newsweek* gives the following confusing and semi-coherent account; "...Powell steadfastly resisted American involvement. He initially

opposed even air drops of food, fearing that these would fail and that U.S. Army ground troops would inevitably be sucked in. His civilian bosses, who suspected him of padding the numbers when asked how many U.S. troops would be required, grew impatient. At one meeting, Madeleine Albright, then ambassador to the United Nations, famously confronted Powell. "What's the point of having this superb military that you're always talking about if we can't use it?" she demanded. In his memoirs, Powell recalled that he told Albright that GIs were "not toy soldiers to be moved around on some sort of global game board." An official who witnessed the exchange told NEWSWEEK that Powell also said something quite revealing that has not been reported. "You would see this wonderful society destroyed," the general angrily told Albright. It was clear, said this official, that Powell was referring to his beloved Army. ("Colin Powell: Behind the Myth," by Ewan Thomas and John Berry, Newsweek, March 5th, 2001)

Colin Powell was a junior officer in the fragging-plagued America I Division during the Vietnam War. On numerous occasions, Powell has said that the US defeat in Vietnam was the main influence on the way he sees the world. Powell clearly understands that the armed forces are a function of the larger civilian society that spawns them. Was Colin Powell speaking about the US Army -- or about US society itself with his comment about seeing "this wonderful society destroyed"? You be the judge!

political work, and they plugged into various activities. The most common form was the creation of a GI newspaper. While some of these papers developed spontaneously at certain bases, the overwhelming majority were begun through joint work by GIs and civilians. These papers were the most visible and consistent aspect of the GI movement. Starting with early papers like FTA at Fort Knox and FATIGUE PRESS at Fort Hood, local papers mushroomed around the country: SHAKEDOWN at Fort Dix, ATTITUDE CHECK at Camp Pendleton, FED-UP at Fort Lewis, ALL HANDS ABANDON SHIP at Newport Naval Station, THE LAST HARASS at Fort Gordon, LEFT FACE at Fort McClellan, RAGE at Camp Lejeune, THE STAR-SPANGLED BUMMER at Wright-Patterson Air Force Base... the list could stretch to over a hundred different papers. Their contents varied, from paper to paper and at times from issue to issue, from local gripes and a basic anti-brass, anti-war, anti-racist consciousness to an understanding of the nature of imperialism and attempts to move toward revolutionary socialism. Some lasted for only a few issues, folding when the guys putting it out were transferred or discharged. But most of those connected with organizing projects came out consistently, if sporadically, through the war years.

Generally, the papers were produced by small groups of GIs who then received help from other guys in circulating them. It was illegal to distribute on base, but nonetheless countless copies were smuggled on and placed around the barracks, stuck in bathrooms, casually left in lounge areas. A few found their way into the stockades, often through sympathetic guards. A large number were simply distributed in off-base towns, and were well received. As one marine organizer put it, "Guys ask if the paper is underground. If we reply yes, they take it. Guys identify with a rebellion if not with the revolution." It was generally through these papers that the mass of discontented GIs were exposed to a sense of solidarity with other GIs and some level of political analysis of their situation. While the number of GIs who created these papers might total in the hundreds, the number who helped distribute them numbered in the thousands and the number who read them and related to them numbered in the tens of thousands.

Relations between GIs and civilians on the projects took many forms. On the one hand, civilians provided some essential functions, could keep the places running and do legal and organizational work while guys were on base, and generally provide contacts and resources from the world of the movement. These contributions were valued by GIs. But civilians clearly didn't share the same experiences or the same risks, and this at times led to conflict. Most projects experienced an ebb and flow of conflict and

when things start happening, carrying lots of posters, banners, etc., and attempt to assume the leadership. Hopefully, a number of things will happen - the bourgeois media will give them credit for what happened, and the 'most advanced' of the participants will join the vanguard. This hope is based on a combination of an early Abbie Hoffman approach to the media and an extremely mechanistic concept of Leninist party building."

Thus the ASU, which was most promising in its conception, was unable to fulfil its potential. Yet because it had a clear political line and a national image, it was able to remain a consistent force. A large reason for this was the lack of cohesive politics on the part of many of the groups developing around the country. As the same AFB organizer wrote, "One of the reasons the ASU has been so frequently able to pose as something it is not is the failure of those of us engaged in military organizing, and of the movement in general, to come up with a consistent analysis of our own, rather than a patchwork creation which passes for an analysis. This shortcoming was specifically the reason AFB fell apart."

The most consistent, and certainly the most heterogeneous, of the attempts of the left to relate to GIs in this period centered around the coffeehouse projects. By the height of the war there were over twenty such projects, located at most major Army bases, the two key Marine Corps bases, and scattered Navy and Air Force installations. Staffed at first primarily by civilians, with vets soon joining the staffs in increasing numbers, the coffeehouses and storefronts reflected all the various forces which existed within the movement. There was never a cohesive, national ideology guiding this work; rather, different project staffs struggled out their orientation toward military organizing, some projects achieving a unified direction, some projects remaining scattered in their approach. As the war escalated, though, and as discontent and anger swept the ranks of GIs, the majority of coffeehouses abandoned the old orientation toward cultural alienation and consciously set out to do direct political organizing.

The primary function of these projects was to provide off-base meeting places for GIs. The majority of guys who came to these storefronts were attracted by their anti-brass atmosphere, stuck around to rap with some people and perhaps read an anti-war paper, and generally got exposed to left-wing politics. The service was permeated with an FTA ("Fuck The Army") consciousness, and many GIs felt so mind-blown by their recent experiences that they were actively seeking a new way to understand the world around them. Consequently, they were open to heavy raps about the war, imperialism, and the class nature of society. A certain number of GIs who came around reached a point where they wanted to participate in direct

# The Olive-Drab Rebels: Military Organizing During The Vietnam Era

by Matthew Rinaldi

## Introduction

*"The morale, discipline, and battleworthiness of the U. S. Armed Forces are, with a few salient exceptions, lower and worse than at any time in this century and possibly in the history of the United States. By every conceivable indicator, our army that now remains in Vietnam is in a state approaching collapse, with individual units avoiding or having refused combat, murdering their officers and non-commissioned officers, drug-ridden, and dispirited where not near mutinous. Elsewhere than Vietnam, the situation is nearly as serious."*

So wrote Col. Robert D. Heinl in June of 1971. In an article entitled "The Collapse of the Armed Forces", written for the eyes of the military leadership and published in the Armed Forces Journal, Heinl also stated, "Sedition, coupled with disaffection within the ranks, and externally fomented with an audacity and intensity previously inconceivable, infests the Armed Services." This frank statement accurately reflects the tremendous upheaval which occurred among rank and file GIs during the era of the Vietnam war. Covered up whenever possible and frequently denied by the military brass, this upheaval was nevertheless a significant factor in the termination of the ground war, and helped to imbue a generation of working class youth with a deep-rooted contempt for America's authority structure. Military morale was considered high before the war began. In fact, the pre-Vietnam Army was considered the best the United States had ever put into the field. Consequently, the military high command was taken quite by surprise by the rapid disintegration of the very foundations of their power. But the brass were not alone in their surprise; the American left was equally unprepared for the sudden appearance of rebelliousness among GIs. The left had only recently emerged from the highly polarized years of the civil rights movement, and was still permeated with a consciousness that distrusted whites in general and working class whites in particular. As a consequence,

in the early years of the war the general attitude of the left was that whites were rednecks and were somehow personally implicated in the continuation of the war.

The class composition of the American left, particularly of its ruling segments, played a significant role in separating it from the realities of the GI experience. When the war in Vietnam first became an issue, early in 1963, the primary base for organized anti-war sentiment was the intellectual community and the middle class. As American presence reached major proportions in 1964 and 1965, the anti-war movement solidified its strength in the middle class but had little impact on the blue-collar working class. As a consequence, the movement developed primarily middle class forms of resistance, which meant that there was heavy emphasis on draft resistance and draft counseling. While actual resistance only reached minor proportions, draft counseling and effective methods of draft evasion saved the majority of white middle class youth from the U.S. military.

Simultaneously, there were economic factors molding the composition of the armed forces. Middle class youth could afford college and looked toward professional careers, while working class youth were systematically channeled into the military. Though the draft claimed a high number, a large percentage also enlisted, since job opportunities were limited and the military seemed to be inevitable after high school. In addition, the court system continued to offer "voluntary enlistment" as an alternative to a couple of years in jail, and many guys thought at the time that it was a good offer. As a result of these factors, the Armed Forces were quite efficiently filling their ranks with third world and white working class youth.

The image these youth had of life in the military was shattered quite rapidly by the harsh reality they faced.

Those who had enlisted found that the promises made by recruiters vanished into thin air once they were in boot camp. Guarantees of special training and choice assignments were simply swept away. This is a fairly standard procedure used to snare enlistees. In fact, the military regulations state that only the enlistee, not the military, is bound by the specifics of the recruiting contract. In addition, both enlistees and draftees faced the daily harassment, the brutal de-personalization, and ultimately the dangers and meaninglessness of the endless ground war in Vietnam. These pressures were particularly intense for third world GIs, most of whom were affected by the rising black consciousness and a heightened awareness of their oppression.

These forces combined to produce the disintegration of the Vietnam-era military. This disintegration developed slowly, but once it

A significant amount of resistance also occurred around riot control. While there were individual white GIs who refused riot control training, such as Pvt. Richard Chase at Fort Hood and Pvt. Leonard Watham at Fort Lewis, it was black GIs who spontaneously reacted in a mass way against being put in the position of being riot troops. During the summer of 1968 troops were put on alert for possible use at the Democratic convention in Chicago, and 43 Black GIs at Fort Hood held an all-night demonstration declaring their intention to refuse any such orders. This was a harbinger of continued discontent among black soldiers. During the summer of 1969 black GIs in the 3rd Cavalry Division at Fort Lewis walked out of riot control classes en masse, and the brass were so anxious to avoid an incident that they let it pass.

In this milieu of widespread restlessness within the ranks, the left worked to generate conscious political action. The attempts made were varied. Groups like the Progressive Labor Party and the Spartacist League sent in individual members to organize, but they generally isolated themselves and were unsuccessful. The Socialist Workers Party continued to send in members, and at Fort Jackson in 1969 was able to create an organization called GIs United. This group contained a number of very capable organizers, and in March they succeeded in holding a large open meeting on base to rap about the war and racism. Over 100 GIs participated in this free-floating rap session, and the brass moved swiftly to bring the organizers up on charges. But media coverage and public support resulted in the Army taking a different tack; they simply discharged most of the men and scattered the others around the world. Once this incident was over the SWP continued to focus on GI rights, and was never again a significant force in the GI movement.

The ASU continued to be a highly visible force in this period, but it suffered from the limitations of Workers World politics and rarely advanced outside of its New York office. When it did, the results were often disastrous. A clear example of this occurred at Chanute Air Force base. Here a number of airmen and radical civilians created a paper called A FOUR YEAR BUMMER (AFB) and began organizing on base. They recognized the need for national connections, and without an understanding of Workers World Party influence decided to affiliate with the ASU. National office people then came to Chanute, and within a short time created an intense split in the group over WWP politics, siphoned off a few members, and left the rest of the group in disarray. Most of the newly-active airmen were stunned by the political in-fighting, and several decided to think it over in Canada. As one AFB organizer wrote later, "In practice, the WWP, YAWF, and ASU put very little emphasis on ongoing, day-to-day organizing. Instead, they rush in

their uniforms behind.

There is a common misconception that it was draftees who were the most disaffected elements in the military. In fact, it was often enlistees who were most likely to engage in open rebellion. Draftees were only in for two years, went in expecting the worst, and generally kept their heads down until they got out of uniform. While of course many draftees went AWOL and engaged in group resistance when it developed, it was enlistees who were most angry and most likely to act on that anger. For one thing, enlistees were in for three or four years; even after a tour of duty in Nam they still had a long stretch left in the service. For another thing, they went in with some expectations, generally with a recruiter's promise of training and a good job classification, often with an assurance that they wouldn't be sent to Vietnam. When these promises weren't kept, enlistees were really pissed off. A study commissioned by the Pentagon found that 64% of chronic AWOLs during the war years were enlistees, and that a high percentage were Vietnam vets. The following incident at a GI movement organizing conference illustrates this point:

"A quick poll of the GIs and vets in the room showed that the vast majority of them had come from Regular Army, three or four year enlistments. Many of them expressed the notion that, in fact, it was the enlistees and not discontented draftees who had formed the core of the GI movement. A number of reasons were offered for this, including the fact many enlistees do enlist out of the hope of training, & better job, or other material reasons. When the Army turns out to be a repressive and bankrupt institution, they are the most disillusioned and the most ready to fight back."

Resistance in this period took a variety of forms. Spontaneous and often creative individual acts were widespread, from subtle expressions of disrespect to sabotage on the job. More significantly, the general mood of anger and alienation led to a number of instances of spontaneous group acts of rebellion. These were likely to explode at any time. Often they occurred in the stockades, which were over-crowded with AWOLs and laced with political organizers. In July of 1968 prisoners seized control of the stockade at Fort Bragg and held it for three days, and in June of 1969 prisoners rebelled in the Fort Dix stockade and inflicted extensive damage before being brought under control. Probably the most famous incident of stockade resistance occurred at the Presidio, where 27 prisoners staged a sit-down during morning formation to protest the shot-gun slaying of a fellow prisoner by a stockade guard. The men were charged with mutiny and initially received very heavy sentences, but their sacrifice had considerable impact around the country. After a year their sentences were reduced to time served.

reached a general level it became epidemic in its proportions. In its midst developed a conscious and organized resistance, which both furthered the disintegration and attempted to channel it in a political direction. The following will be an attempt to chronicle the growth of GI resistance and to study the attempts by the left to organize and intensify that resistance.

## Early Resistance

In understanding the development of resistance within the military it is important to focus on the organic connection between the civilian political situation and the level of struggle within the military. The fact that people pass through the military, that it is clearly defined as a transitory situation, and that there are extreme dangers involved in resisting leads to the fact that greater pressure is required to bring about an upsurge among soldiers than is required to bring about an upsurge among civilians. Consequently, if pressures are developing within the society as a whole, they will find expression first within the civilian world. New recruits will then bring this outlook of developing upsurge with them into the military.

This phenomenon developed during the Vietnam era. The early years of the Vietnam war, up until 1966, were fairly quiet. While there was protest against the war, this protest was still quite isolated, and to the majority of Americans the war could still be justified on the grounds of classical anti-communism. In addition, the black liberation struggle had not yet reached the point where it was affecting the consciousness of the mass of black youth, while similarly the anti-authoritarian dope culture had not yet reached widespread proportions among white youth. Consequently, soldiers entered the military in this period with a passive acceptance of the war and a predisposition to submit to military authority.

At the same time, the mechanisms of internal control were functioning at maximum efficiency within the armed forces. Military personnel are deprived of the rights and protections of the civilian constitutional legal system; instead they are subject to the feudalistic laws of the Uniform Code of Military Justice (UCMJ). Under the UCMJ there is no trial by your peers. Rather, rank and file GIs are tried by boards composed largely of officers and NCOs. The attitude of these trial boards was accurately reflected by an Admiral serving on the Twelfth Naval District Court who commented, "Anyone sent up here for trial must be guilty of something." Under the circumstances it's hardly surprising that the military achieves convictions in 94% of its court martials.

The ever-present fear which is used to control GIs is quite

consciously cultivated by the military. This is done partly by creating a state in which you never know what the reaction will be if you break a particular rule. Thus, at times minor infractions are treated with very harsh punishment, while at other times they are treated lightly. Major offenses are more likely to receive harsh punishment, yet they can also result in simple discharge. It's totally unpredictable. The result is to keep GIs constantly off balance, afraid to take the slightest move toward resistance because there is no accurate way to judge the response of the authorities. In a world where an authority has total control over your life and seems to exercise this control in a completely arbitrary manner, the safest course is to remain anonymous.

The years 1966 and 1967 saw the first acts of resistance among GIs. Given the general passivity within the ranks and the tight control exercised by the brass, these first acts required a clear willingness for self-sacrifice. For the most part they were initiated by men who had had some concrete link with the left prior to their entrance into the military.

The first major public act of resistance was the refusal, in June of 1966, of three privates from Fort Hood, Texas to ship out to Vietnam. The three men, David Samas, James Johnson, and Dennis Mora, had just completed training and were on leave before their scheduled departure for the war zone. Mora had been affiliated with the W.E.B. Du Bois Clubs in New York prior to being drafted, and is generally considered to have been the prime mover behind the refusal. The three announced a press conference, but federal agents arrested them before they could make their statement. Nevertheless, the fledgling New York peace movement succeeded in giving the case wide publicity. The men were each eventually sentenced to three years at hard labor.

There followed a series of individual acts of resistance. Ronald Lockman, a black GI who had also had previous connections with the Du Bois Clubs, refused orders to Vietnam with the slogan, "I follow the Fort Hood Three. Who will follow me?" Capt. Howard Levy, who had been around the left in New York, refused to teach medicine to the Green Berets, and Capt. Dale Noyd refused to give flying instructions to prospective bombing pilots. These acts were consciously geared toward political resistance. Since the GI movement was a heterogeneous phenomenon reflecting many different trends in the civilian world, there was also in this period the beginning of a kind of moral witness resistance. The first clear incident occurred at Fort Jackson, South Carolina, where in April of 1967 five GIs staged a pray-in for peace on base. Two of these GIs refused a direct order to cease praying and were subsequently court-martialed. While this act was never duplicated pro-forma, it was the forerunner of numerous acts of

be as dangerous as the NLF. The ARVN troops would often fade away at the height of a battle, and it was not uncommon for them to turn their fire on the Americans if the NLF was making headway. The feeling spread among U, S, troops that they were fighting this war all alone. These experiences created a mood of despair, disgust, and anger, as GIs turned increasingly to dope and played out their time with the simple hope of survival. As one GI put it, "Our morale, man? Its so low you can't even see it."

This situation led to the rapid decay of the U. S. military's fighting ability in Vietnam. The catchword was CYA ("cover your ass"); as one GI expressed it, "You owe it to your body to get out of here alive." Low morale, hatred for the Army, and huge quantities of dope all contributed to the general desire to avoid combat. One platoon sergeant stated, "Almost to a man, the members of my platoon oppose the war ... The result is a general malaise which pervades the entire company. There is a great deal of pressure on leaders at the small unit level, such as myself, to conduct what are popularly referred to as 'search and avoid' missions, and to do so as safely and cautiously as possible." The brass watched these developments with general helplessness. As a brigade commander in the 25th Division put it, "Back in 1967, officers gave orders and didn't have to worry about the sensitivities of the men. Today, we have to explain things to the men and find new ways of doing the job. Otherwise, you can send the men on a search mission, but they won't search."

While this malaise seriously affected the war effort, the specter of open mutiny was even more startling. In 1968 there were 68 recorded incidents of combat refusal in Vietnam. By 1969 entire units were refusing orders. Company A of the 21st Infantry Division and units of the 1st Air Cavalry Division refused to move into battle. By 1970 there were 35 separate combat refusals in the Air Cavalry Division alone. At the same time, physical attacks on officers, known as "fraggings", became widespread, 126 incidents in 1969 and 271 in 1970. Clearly, this army did not want to fight.

The situation stateside was less intense but no less disturbing to the military brass. Desertion and AWOL became absolutely epidemic. In 1966 the desertion rate was 14.7 per thousand, in 1968 it was 26.2 per thousand, and by 1970 it had risen to 52.3 per thousand; AWOL was so common that by the height of the war one GI went AWOL every three minutes. From January of '67 to January of '72 a total of 354,112 GIs left their posts without permission, and at the time of the signing of the peace accords 98,324 were still missing. Yet these figures represent only the most disaffected; had the risks not been so great, the vast majority of Vietnam era GIs would have left

The reaction of the military brass to these first attempts at organizing were in keeping with traditional military practice. Individual GIs court martialed for political activities received stiff penalties, and any groupings which developed were broken and scattered. But the brass were still dealing with a situation in which their forces were still fairly intact. Though the early rumblings of discontent were spreading, the troops were still fighting in Vietnam, orders were still being obeyed, and the chain of command still functioned smoothly, so there was not yet an apparent need for the brass to develop an overall strategic approach to political activity in its ranks. The next few years would create such a need.

### **The Ground War Expands, The Movement Grows**

The period from 1968 to 1970 was a period of rapid disintegration of morale and widespread rebelliousness within the U.S. military. There were a variety of causes contributing to this development. By this time the war had become vastly unpopular in the general society, demonstrations were large and to some degree respectable, and prominent politicians were speaking out against the continuation of the war. For a youth entering the military in these years the war was already a questionable proposition, and with the ground war raging and coffins coming home every day very few new recruits were enthusiastic about their situation. In addition, the rising level of black consciousness and the rapidly spreading dope culture both served to alienate new recruits from military authority. Thus, GIs came into uniform in this period with a fairly negative predisposition.

Their experience in the military and in the war transformed this negative pre-disposition into outright hostility. The nature of the war certainly accelerated this disaffection; a seemingly endless ground war against an often invisible enemy, with the mass of people often openly hostile, in support of a government both unpopular and corrupt. The Vietnamese revolutionaries also made attempts to reach out to American GIs. A medic stationed at Chu Lai told how he made friends with a local Vietnamese boy who took him on walks around nearby villages and talked to him about the war. One day, after there was a trust developed between them, the boy pointed out a man casually walking from shop to shop and explained that he was the local NLF tax-collector. "It really blew my mind", the GI later said, "to realize that the people right around our base were willingly supporting the Viet Cong."

Many GIs also learned through bitter experience that the ARVN troops were not only unreliable allies, but that in a tight situation they could

resistance based on religious and moral grounds.

The majority of these early instances of resistance were actually simply acts of refusal; refusal to go to Vietnam, to carry out training, to obey orders. They were important in that they helped to directly confront the intense fear which all GIs feel; they helped to shake up the general milieu of passivity. But they still focused on individual responsibility. In a sense they were a continuation of civilian resistance politics transferred to the military setting, the notion that individual refusal would shake the system. But the military was quite willing to deal with the small number of GIs who might put their heads on the chopping block; to really affect the military machine would require a more general rebellion.

In 1967 the left was still suspicious of, and at times hostile to, GIs, but there was an increasing minority, particularly within the Marxist left, which was beginning to come to grips with the possibility and necessity of doing political work within the military. This growing awareness led to four different efforts to do such organizing. The first attempt was the creation of a newspaper called VIETNAM GI. The paper was created by Jeff Sharlet, a vet who had served in Vietnam in the early years of the war. He came back to the States fairly disillusioned, returned to school and found himself alienated by the student movement, particularly by its hostility to GIs. In early 1967 he set out to create some form of communication and agitation within the military. That vehicle was VIETNAM GI, which was very effective at this time. It carried a lot of very grisly news about the war, but it also carried lots of letters from GIs and consistently ran an interview with a GI either just back from Nam or recently involved in an act of resistance. The paper was widely circulated and well received.

Unfortunately, VIETNAM GI never advanced beyond the purely agitational stage. Vets on the staff occasionally visited bases around the country, but these visits were primarily to aid distribution of the paper. There was never an attempt to link various contacts together and create some form of organization. With Sharlet's early death from cancer, the paper never advanced beyond this point. The paper continued, but GI resistance advanced to the point where there was on-base organizing going on and local papers coming out, and those local papers were for the most part more interesting to GIs than a national paper put out by vets. So VIETNAM GI faded in importance. Nevertheless, it represented a significant breakthrough when it first appeared, and helped play a catalytic role throughout the service.

Another approach was an early attempt at colonization by the Socialist Workers Party. Pfc. Howard Petrick, a full member of the SWP,

was stationed at Fort Hood and began to distribute literature within his barracks. The authorities reacted swiftly and Petrick found himself threatened with a court martial. The SWP focused on this as a violation of “GI rights”, and decided on a campaign for GI rights as their strategic approach to military organizing. This had two flaws. First, while Petrick had in fact been attempting to organize his barracks, the effect of the SWP campaign was to focus on the case as another act of individual resistance. Secondly, while GIs certainly understood that they had no “rights”, they also understood that this was not the basis of their oppression. The war, the class system in the military, the general oppression of their lives was far more potent to them. Consequently, when GIs did become politically involved, the issue of “GI rights” became quite minor. The Socialist Workers Party, however never advanced beyond this conception, and while their early work helped to stimulate GI resistance, they became increasingly irrelevant when GI resistance became widespread.

The most dramatic of these early organizing efforts, and the first to really focus on the need for collective resistance, was the work done by Andy Stapp at Fort Sill, Oklahoma. Stapp entered the Army independently, experienced with the civilian left but unconnected to any organization. He began rapping with the guys in his barracks, giving out literature, and gathering a small group around him. The brass soon moved against him, demanded that he surrender his literature, and busted him when he refused to hand it over. At this point his efforts at organizing could have ended. But he appealed to a variety of left groups for support, and the Workers World Party in New York came forward to help. Their influence transformed the nature and future of his work. Their immediate impact, the result of their determined presence at Fort Sill and the media coverage they were able to generate, was to save Stapp from heavy repression. He served 45 days at hard labor in 1967, was busted again and acquitted, and was finally discharged for “subversion and disloyalty” in April of 1968.

The political impact of the Workers World Party on Stapp was profound. His work had at first been courageous but unfocused. The party provided a focus. They emphasized the need for organization, and convinced Stapp of the viability of calling for a union within the military. Consequently, a few months before his discharge Stapp helped to found the American Servicemen’s Union, and as a civilian he assumed its leadership. Through the ASU and its paper, THE BOND, GIs around the world were exposed to the concept of organization, and this influence helped to stimulate spontaneous organizing efforts at many bases.

Unfortunately, the long term effects of the intimate link between the

ASU and the Workers World Party were largely detrimental. The WWP focused its attention largely on the media and on spectacular acts of confrontation, but rarely undertook any consistent day-to-day organizing. Ironically, they contributed the concept of organization but were unable to implement it. As a result the ASU collected paper memberships, circulated THE BOND around the world, but was never able to sustain an organization. Its attempts in the next few years to connect with local organizing groups consistently led to sectarian battles, leaving the local efforts in a shambles.

The fourth attempt in this period was the creation, by leftwing civilians, of the off-base coffeehouses. The coffeehouses represented the first significant step by the civilian movement to reach GIs. The first coffeehouse was set up at Fort Jackson in 1967, and soon afterwards coffeehouses were established at Fort Leonard Wood and Fort Hood. These eventually developed into a network of coffeehouses, storefronts, and bookstores which covered most major bases in all four branches of the service.

The original conception behind the coffeehouses, while fundamentally valid, was faulty in two regards. First, the initial coffeehouses were located at major basic training bases, the idea being to struggle with the brass for the mind of the GI during his basic training. If the brass won, this thinking ran, they would have an effective killer in Vietnam; if the coffeehouse won, there would be refusals and disaffection. Basic trainees, however, are completely isolated. Not only are they restricted to base and supervised around the clock but their training areas are even off-limits to other GIs. Consequently, there was never a real opportunity for organizers to relate to basic trainees. In a sense, though, it didn’t matter, for it wasn’t the arguments of the brass versus the arguments of the coffeehouse which were going to alter the thinking of these GIs. It was their concrete experience in the military and in the war which was going to transform them into dissidents.

The second error concerned the nature and style of the coffeehouses. The original conception was that by creating a semi-bohemian counter-culture setting, it would be possible to reach the “most easily organized” GIs. This emphasis on culture did in fact attract in the early days those GIs who were just getting into the dope scene, but it didn’t necessarily lead them toward political action. Consequently, the political work often floundered. The advantage, though, of the coffeehouses and storefronts was that while their original strategic conceptions were faulty, the form in which they existed was quite malleable, and thus most of the projects were able to transform themselves to meet the developing needs of the GI resistance.