

**TOTRUE TALES**

# VIETNAM WAR HEROES

**By Allan Zullo**

SCHOLASTIC INC.

To all the brave men and women who served in the  
Vietnam War, especially those who gave their lives  
for our country.

—A.Z.

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# THE VIETNAM WAR

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**T**he Vietnam War was an armed conflict involving communist North Vietnam and local guerrilla fighters known as the Viet Cong who fought against South Vietnam and its main ally, the United States, in the 1960s and 1970s.

This war in Southeast Asia started long before the U.S. sent troops into battle. In the 1950s, the country was split between North Vietnam — headed by President and Prime Minister Ho Chi Minh of the communist Viet Minh party — and South Vietnam, ruled by American-backed Ngo Dinh Diem. When Diem refused to hold elections to unify the country, the Viet Cong (called the VC for short) launched a guerrilla war against the South with major combat help from the North Vietnam Army (NVA).

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Many in the United States feared that if South Vietnam fell to communism, other nearby Southeast Asian countries such as Laos, Cambodia, and Thailand would also end up communist. This theory was called the “domino effect.” As a result, in the early 1960s, President John F. Kennedy sent money and American military advisers to help the South Vietnamese forces, known as the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN).

In February 1965, after the Viet Cong attacked American air bases and killed American soldiers, President Lyndon Johnson retaliated by ordering regular bombing raids (code-named Operation Rolling Thunder) and sending the first U.S. ground troops into battle. Johnson said his goal was to help the ARVN defeat the Viet Cong and the NVA, who were supported by communist countries China and the Soviet Union.

While American planes bombed North Vietnam — including its capital, Hanoi — U.S. troops fought a jungle war in South Vietnam. Infantrymen slogged across flooded rice paddies, hacked their way through dense jungle, and trekked along booby-trapped paths. They fought in stifling heat, monsoon rains, and gooey mud against an enemy that fired from “spider holes” and hidden bunkers and escaped through a complex network of underground tunnels.

Among the local peasants and villagers, American ground troops had a hard time determining friend from foe. Many of the Vietnamese — including children and old

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women — acted as spies, laid booby traps, conducted sabotage, and fed and housed the VC.

Those Americans who served in-country also had to deal with scorpions, snakes, mosquitoes, and leeches as well as malaria, dysentery, dehydration, and “jungle rot” — various skin conditions caused by the tropical climate.

In the majority of battles, helicopter crews braved rocket-propelled grenades, machine guns, and automatic-weapons fire to drop off soldiers, pick up the wounded and dead, and lay down covering fire for the ground troops. Crews on Navy gunboats and patrol boats on Vietnam’s narrow, twisting rivers faced much the same dangers. Air Force pilots were dogged by surface-to-air missiles, anti-aircraft weapons, and Russian-built fighter jets known as MiGs.

Because the VC often hid in the dense jungles, U.S. planes tried to destroy their cover by spraying Agent Orange, a toxic chemical that killed vegetation, and by dropping napalm, a fiery bomb that burned and cleared any targeted area.

Millions of refugees poured into camps near the South Vietnam capital of Saigon and other cities because their homes were in areas that had been declared “free-fire zones.” These zones were created to isolate the VC and NVA soldiers and were cleared by the military of innocent civilians, so that anyone left behind was considered an enemy combatant.

By April 1969 American combat troop strength topped out at 543,000. About 25 percent of the troops were draftees —

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able-bodied young men who were required to join the military whether they wanted to or not.

Back home, public opinion began turning against the war after appalling images of maimed soldiers and civilians were broadcast on the nightly news. Antiwar protests, marches, and gatherings spread across the United States. On November 15, 1969, in the largest antiwar demonstration in our country's history, more than 250,000 Americans descended on Washington, D.C., demanding the withdrawal of U.S. troops in Vietnam. The antiwar movement, which flourished on college campuses, bitterly divided the United States. Many Americans felt the war was a pointless, unwinnable political conflict that was costing the U.S. too much in casualties and money, not to mention the suffering endured by innocent Vietnamese civilians. However, many other Americans — what President Richard Nixon termed “the silent majority” — had a different view. They thought the war was necessary to stop the spread of communism, believed in their country “right or wrong,” strongly supported the troops, and accused protestors of being unpatriotic traitors whose actions gave comfort to the enemy.

By 1970, the United States began slowly withdrawing American troops while increasing aerial and artillery bombardment. The military also started turning control of ground operations over to the South Vietnamese.

In January 1973, the United States and North Vietnam finally reached a peace agreement, ending open hostilities

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between the two nations. However, war between North and South Vietnam continued until April 30, 1975, when NVA forces captured Saigon and renamed it Ho Chi Minh City. The following year, North and South became one communist country — the Socialist Republic of Vietnam.

People in the country who helped the American military or were connected to the South Vietnamese government were severely punished by the new communist regime. Many had their homes and businesses taken away; tens of thousands were shipped to camps for “reeducation” or sent to work on farms; others were imprisoned or executed. Persecution and poverty spurred an estimated two million “boat people” to flee from Vietnam in fishing vessels.

Despite the communist takeover of Vietnam, no other country in Southeast Asia fell to communism other than its neighbor Laos. Supporters of the war contend that it was precisely because of America’s involvement that the domino effect was prevented. After a series of economic and political reforms that began in 1986, Vietnam and the United States resumed diplomatic and trade relations in 1995. Today, the country has a growing economy and tourism industry.

The war was a costly one for America in terms of human suffering: Of the 1.6 million men and women who fought or were exposed to combat in Vietnam at some point during the war, more than 58,200 were killed, 61 percent of whom were 21 years or younger. More than 150,000 of the 304,000

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who were wounded required hospitalization; half these patients were severely disabled. An estimated 700 to 800 were held as prisoners of war and tortured; more than 100 were killed or died during captivity. Today more than 1,600 Americans are still missing in action in Southeast Asia, including nearly 1,300 in Vietnam.

The government of Vietnam claims as many as 2 million civilians on both sides and 1.1 million North Vietnamese and Viet Cong fighters were killed. The U.S. military estimates that as many as 250,000 South Vietnamese soldiers died in the war.

Even though American troops fought with just as much tenacity, determination, and valor as those in previous conflicts, many returning Vietnam War vets didn't get the recognition they deserved back home because of the controversial nature of the conflict. Critics on both sides of the political spectrum blamed the politicians in Washington for interfering with military operations and setting bad U.S. policy. Unfortunately and unfairly, the returning vets caught much of the flak for the unpopular war. But, over time, the vast majority of Americans came to recognize the incredible sacrifices and valiant deeds of these brave vets. Ever since its dedication in 1982, the Vietnam Veterans Memorial and its signature monument — The Wall, which displays the names of every known serviceman and servicewoman who gave his or her life — stands as a somber testament to duty

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for our country. It is the most visited site in our nation's capital.

Regardless of the differing views of the Vietnam War, there's one thing that everyone can agree on: The men and women of the United States military served there with guts and grit.