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A Soldier's Tale

Abstract
This article is an annotated interview with a Vietnam War veteran in which the author attempts to highlight the role that technology played in the war. In particular, the paper explores the question of why the United States was forced to abandon the cause despite having significant technological advantages over the Vietcong and their allies.

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A Soldier's Tale

During the 1960s, America found itself becoming more and more committed to a conflict that was taking place several thousand miles from its shores. In an effort to contain Communism and prevent the panning out of the Domino Effect, America insisted on giving support to the struggling South Vietnamese "democracy" in its attempts to fend off an invasion of the North Vietnamese Communists. Political and economic aid turned into military aid as shady circumstances surrounding a conflict in the Gulf of Tonkin allowed for the passing of a resolution which gave President Lyndon B. Johnson unrestricted control over military operations in Vietnam. Soon hundreds of thousands of young Americans were being shipped halfway across the world to fight in a war whose purpose was not entirely clear to them. Joining these troops on their journey was the full might of the American industrial complex in the form of jeeps, planes, and the newly perfected helicopters. American troops were also outfitted with some of the best weapons and gear available. With all of these technologies on their side, it seemed as if the Americans could easily dispatch the North Vietnamese forces and bring an end to the war. In 1967, a young man by the name of Richard Wood was drafted into the Signal Corps branch of the American Army and was given the rank of Specialist Fifth Class. For over a year, Mr. Wood served his country by fighting against the Communist threat in Vietnam. His recollections and ideas offer insight into the complexities of the Vietnam War and the role that technology played in determining its outcome.

Interview with Richard Wood

How did you end up in Vietnam? Were you drafted?

Yeah, it was such a quick ordeal. I graduated high school in '66 and chose not to go to college and took a job at one of the piers in New Jersey. And then the way it was working was you had to take your physical. They would call you for a physical. So they would call after your 18th birthday, which mine was June 2nd of 1966. So my first physical was September of 1966, my second physical was December of 1966, and my notice came in March of 1967. Then they took us to Fort Jackson, South Carolina, where they put you in training. Eight weeks of basic training and then they gave you leave and then they sent you back for eight weeks of AIT, Advanced Individual Training, where they put you where they thought you would work.

What was the basic supply kit you were given as a soldier?

You were given a flak jacket, a helmet, M16. Some of the guys got M14s. You trained with the M14. If you went into the infantry, if you went from basic training and you were just relegated immediately to an infantryman, then you were issued the M16 in AIT. I went into the Signal Corps and therefore I wasn't issued that weapon. I was given an M14.[1]

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[1]The M14 was a semi-automatic rifle that was based on the concept that marksmanship still had use on a modern battlefield. The M16, originally know as the AR15, on the other hand, was a spray-like automatic weapon. Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara was the first to suggest to the Army that the M16 was a worthwhile weapon. However, the army, having just invested money into the development of its own M14, was unenthusiastic. A

And how many extra magazines were you given?

Well, I was in the Signal Corps, so what we would always have is a… I would get a weapon once we got over there. They gave us the M16 with one magazine because my job was, the infantry would clear the fields and then we would build antennae fields or communication vans[2] or we would… yeah that's basically what we did.

How did you end being placed in the Signal Corps?

Well, in the scheme of things when you are placed into the Army no one really knows how they choose what type of job you will be given. I could only imagine that on my paperwork that they received when you first started the process of going into the Army they saw that in high school I took typing classes and basically an academic program. So when they assigned us to the Signal Corps one of the things that we set up were Teletype vans, in order to get them up and running you certainly had to be able to type. All vans had to checked out that they would be

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compromise was reached in 1962 when the Army purchased a small number of M16s in order to appease McNamara. However, due to its popularity in Vietnam, and some new analyses decreeing it to be the better weapon, the army ultimately adopted the M16 as the standard army issue weapon in 1967. Mr. Wood would have entered the War on the cusp of this change (McNaugher 1979:2-3).

[2] Mr. Wood's actions were most likely part of the Army's attempt to create an Integrated Wideband Communications System, the largest communications network the Army had ever attempted to build. By the time of Mr. Wood's service, the system was nearing completion. (Rienzi 1971: 34, 42)

operational when they went on-line. Other than the Teletype vans we also set up antenna fields, telephone repeater equipment.[3]

How long did it take you to set the equipment up?

It varied. A communication van without any problems could be completed in roughly 7 to 10 days. Antenna fields were a much longer process. You could be in the field for a month at a time to get one or two antennas operational. All this equipment was used for one thing: to let the powers that be know exactly what was happening out in the bush. Your reports would help them know where to send extra troops, where the enemy was spotted.

And how did you guys get to Vietnam from the states?

We all went out of California. Some flew and some went by boat. See I originally was sent to Okinawa. I got to Okinawa and I was assigned to this unit and from that unit, when I got there, I got assigned to the Pacific field office. They said, well, we really don't have a lot of work here on the islands, so well send you to different places. And those places were Taiwan, Thailand, Vietnam, Japan, and naturally the vast majority of your time was in Vietnam. The job was interesting because I was not assigned to a company or a unit in that when I would leave Okinawa I was given orders that would assign me to countries and they would list

[3] Starting in 1964, US Signalmen used a single satellite to communicate from Saigon to Hawaii. By 1968, as Mr. Wood's term of service was coming to an end, US Signalmen had begun to use digital messages and data switches. Both of these years marked the first use of such technology in a war. (Reinzi 1971: 2)

every country in Southeast Asia.[4] Because at any time, they may want to move me. So if you were assigned to a unit it was a whole different thing in the military. You had to show transfers and everything else. But they gave me these orders, which gave me the ability to go to the nearest airport, hand the guy my orders and book a flight. Like I went to Taiwan once, did what I had to do, and I was with a civilian. There were quite a few civilians there. They claimed they were engineers or whatever. I don't know. To be quite honest I don't know if that's what they really were. And we went from Taipei, Taiwan and we took a train down south to board an airplane, not out of a military base but out of a civilian base and we had equipment with us in a van, like it was yesterday, and the military in Taiwan wanted to know what was in the boxes and I had no clue and the gentleman I was with refused to tell him and I thought we were gonna be arrested or something and somehow we managed to just go ahead. Oh yeah, the war, like Okinawa. Unbeknownst to anyone in this country, there were B-52 bombers there[5] and the only way they got caught being there was they took off one night and unfortunately, the pilot didn't get the

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[4] In 1966, the 1st Signal Brigade was tasked with maintaining area communications systems. Under this system, a Signal Unit, such as the one Mr. Wood was in, was assigned a geographical area of responsibility. They would then supply any other branch of the military with the communications equipment necessary to supplement their operations. (Reinzi 1971: 26)

[5] In 1968, for the first time, the US Air Force stationed B-52 Bombers at Kadena air base in Okinawa instead of in Guam. Most residents of Okinawa weren't happy about this development. (Mendel 1969: 632-3)

plane up fast enough and it rattled houses that shook and just fell to the ground. With this, the people of Okinawa started wanting to know what happened and the government wouldn't tell them. But we knew.

Were you with like at least some small group of people all the time?

Oh yeah, there was a group of us. About six or seven of us. We would rotate throughout the countries. If you rotated, most of your time was spent in Vietnam somewhere.

When you were in Vietnam, how did you get around Vietnam itself?

Jeeps, helicopters, yeah jeeps and helicopters.

And how was it flying on a helicopter? Were there always machine guns on the helicopter?

Yeah they all had door gunners.

So how useful were the helicopters in getting around? Were they the primary mode of transport?

For us… yeah they moved us around. They would move other people around. Special units. Get them into the landing zone, drop them off or pick them up. Vice versa. You know, go in pick up wounded. Get them out. Get the units that were out there doing things in a small group. Like four guys, five guys. They would pull them out.[6] They were used basically to back up the infantry. If the infantry got bogged down somewhere, they would call in these helicopters and they would, yeah.

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[6] One of the major benefits of helicopters was this ability to move troops great distances relatively rapidly. Often, troops could be flown over an enemy encampment in order to attack it on a less defended side. However, the corollary effect was that American troops

On that note, did they have bombing support? Could people call in bombing raids?

Yeah, yeah.[7]

And, you said you were there into '68. So were you in Vietnam at all during the Tet Offensive?

We got there after the Tet Offensive.[8] You know, that's the one thing I wanted to remember and I can't… we got there after the fact and we were told all the stories about what happened. There was a racetrack in Saigon and what the North Vietnamese did, unbeknownst to anyone, is they were putting artillery equipment inside the racetrack, which was on Plantation Road in Saigon, and when the Tet started, that's how they initially started it. They started launching from there. We got stuck once. We were there and we had to go into a hotel and we were stuck in a hotel for a couple of days. We couldn't get out of the hotel.

Because of the bombings?

Yeah, the bombings and the North Vietnamese troops who were walking around the streets. Again, we were only a handful, there was about 6 of us that time, one being a civilian. So we all took different hours where we would stand guard and watch. Like, visualize New York City and you have a hotel here [*gestures left*] and

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often found themselves surrounded by potentially hostile territory with no possibility of retreating back to an entrenched front.

[7] During the war, bomber planes were not solely under the control of the government. Officers of a certain rank within the army could call in bombing support if they needed it.

[8] The Tet Offensive was a succession of coordinated and open attacks by the Vietcong on established American holdings that began on January 31st, 1968. (Schulzinger 1997: 259)

you have a hotel down the block [*gestures right*]. Well we had a hotel that was right down the block from us that housed probably a couple hundred US troops. The hotel that we were in, that we chose to take cause people just left, so we went into it and boarded it up and we just stayed there. That hotel down the block had guys firing at everything, all over the place, while us, we weren't looking to bring any attention to ourselves cause we were just a handful and the only thing that would have happened to us is we would have been goners.

So you went completely unnoticed for those couple of days.

Yeah, for three days we went unnoticed. Just nice and easy.

And you had enough supplies to last you three days?

No, no. We cleaned out the hotel and that was after the second day and that was it.

So you just barely made it then?

Yeah, well we weren't… we were ok.

And then what happened after three days?

They came and got us out. The MPs came along and they got us out.

How much of a role did small explosives play in the war? Did you guys have grenades?

Yeah well the infantry had them. They had grenades, they had mortars. Everyone also… the North Vietnamese were getting supplied by the Russians and we were getting supplied by naturally our own country and you know, we were not given those, the infantry men were given those.

And what was the terrain like?

Oh it was very wet. Extremely wet. I wound up with planters warts on both feet. And that was one of my trips on the helicopter to the hospital[9] where they cut them and then they burnt them off with liquid nitrogen and then they gave you a brand-new pair of boots, socks and such and sent you back on your way.

So how did that whole thing happen? How quick was the helicopter ride? What was it like?

Well, I just told them I couldn't walk anymore and said I don't know what you want me to do and then the medic took a look at it and he said, yeah you need to go to the hospital. And it took about an hour. The guys picked me up and put me down. Spent about an hour in the hospital. Then they just sent me back.[10] It was very quick. They didn't give you too much rest. Bed rest? Yeah that wasn't happening.

Were American Allies, such as the Koreans and the Australians, issued the same gear as the Americans?

The Koreans had their own stuff. The Australians that I met because we worked together in the Signal Corps, they basically had what we had. Flak jacket,

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[9] The other major benefit offered by helicopters was the ability to quickly transport a wounded soldier to a nearby hospital with great ease. This undoubtedly saved many lives that would have otherwise been lost in Vietnam.

[10] With more modern medicine, wounds that would normally have been debilitating could be quickly taken care of and, through the use of helicopters, the cured soldier could then be returned to the battlefield within a few hours.

helmet, M16 and they had a terrible disdain for President Johnson.[11] They despised him. They felt that it was his fault that we were in this war. We had one who we were working with and he was, like it was yesterday, he turned around and was like "If I was in America, I'd go back home and I'd kill that bastard Johnson." Because it was a nonsense war. It wasn't real. You had a guy William Westmoreland who when I got there was in charge and Westmoreland wanted to end this[12] which could have been done in… in… a week, we could have been done with this, but they just wouldn't allow it.

How would it have been done in a week? What do you mean?

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[11] Johnson himself was actually an avid supporter of the war effort even as his advisors told him it was hopeless. His disillusionment with his advisors on this issue and the fact that he felt forced by them to begin troop withdrawals partially led to his decision not to rerun for the presidency in 1968. (Schulzinger 1997: 265-67)

[12] General Westmoreland continually requested troop increases during the years in which Mr. Wood served. To support his request, he insisted that the war was going better than ever and that the North Vietnamese were on the brink of defeat. However, he was forced to deal with an administration that was increasingly skeptical of the likelihood of success in Southeast Asia. In 1967, McNamara lost all hope that Americans could have success in the war and suggested the beginnings of a plan that would ultimately come to be known in the Nixon years as Vietnamization. Westmoreland returned after Tet in 1968 to request an additional 206,000 troops, but Johnson's new Secretary of Defense, Clark Clifford, after consulting civilian advisors, determined that Westmoreland could not win the war no matter how many troops he was given. (Schulzinger 1997: 256-58, 263-65)

He would have just cleaned them out. Put as many aircraft in the air, put the troops where you had to put them. Everyone knew where the North Vietnamese were. You knew where they were.

And where was that?

You just, you just knew. You knew where. Intelligence just told you where they were. That's why I think, why there was a lot of soldiers who when they came back were like what was that about? And what were those guys, these civilians doing? What were they there for? A lot of things going on there and at some point Westmoreland was relieved and he was replaced by a guy Abrams.[13] He took over. And Westmoreland would be out. He would come out and about. You would see him. Abrams never left Saigon. Never. He never came out to look and see what was going on. Never. What was that about? Here's this guy, this guy's supposed to be in charge, why isn't he out there looking around. Like somebody told him, just sit at this desk and we'll tell you exactly what you have to do. No, it was… The North Vietnamese had troops that actually would attack with sticks and they would run at the… what you would do if you were in an area is set up your perimeter and Constantine wire and then you would have a couple of guys here, a couple guys over there and you'd build sheds so they could see and these guys would come running in

[13] Creighton W. Abrams, formerly the Vice Chief of Staff of the Army, replaced Westmoreland as General in 1968. This shift in leadership also marked a shift in tactics, from a search-and-destroy strategy to an attempt to win the hearts and minds of the Vietnamese people. Whether or not Abram's strategy would have been successful if given more time is still a topic of debate in today's counterinsurgency wars. (Bacevich 2008)

the middle of the night with sticks and hurling rocks and stuff. They didn't have any weapons and the guys behind the… It's like they would fall and the other guys would try to climb over them and that's what the infantrymen… and the air force. My friend was in the air force so I got to go see him in Saigon and what you could do is you could get a ride on a helicopter. You had that ability. What you would do is you'd go and the helicopters would land and you'd go up and tell the guy, look I'm trying to get to Saigon, so the door gunner would, as long as the Warrant Officer said no problem, you, being the guy looking for the ride, would have to ride the door so the gunner would get inside out of harms way.

So you rode on the door. What was that like?

Yeah just the once. It was alright. You'd go up. Not that high. I didn't see any fighting from there, since I only did it the once. We did have one guy, we were on, and a bullet came through the bottom and… well yeah. Subsequently thereafter, whenever I got onto a helicopter I would take my flak jacket off and sit on it. You know, don't want to lose my balls.[14]

So you mentioned earlier that Westmoreland knew how to end the war, but the administration was holding him back?

Oh yeah, there was no doubt that the generals knew how to… there was too much money. For every infantryman in that country, it took eight people to supply

[14] For machines of war, helicopters were unusually fragile. Aiming a rifle a distance of approximately five helicopters ahead could easily kill the pilot and bring down the Bell UH-1 helicopters used in Vietnam.

him.[15] That was eight individuals. And if you look in history, you'll see that the economy, except for what's going on now, when there's a war, the economy is in great shape because you have all this stuff going on and that's what everybody felt was happening here. And that's why.

That they were prolonging the war to keep the economy going?

Yeah sure, to keep all these people working. Keep them yeah. It was… it didn't make any sense at all. Cause you heard it from too many people. And once you were there you saw. And they would allow them to get so close to you and then they would push them back. Like they would come in at night and they would start sending mortars and things and you would have to leave and run for these bunkers. And you'd say, what happened here? And they would tell you, they got within about 10 miles and we knew they were there. You knew they were there? Well, why didn't you catch them before they got to them? But we were told just to hold back.

So you think the war could have been ended if they just sent out planes and bombed where they were?

Absolutely, it would have been done. Done.

So did you and your troops ever go into a village and have to deal with the local population? Were they ever hostile to you?

Hostile? No. They just, they knew you were there, there to do something. You know most of the time it was, you had to just pay attention to where you were and your surroundings so… there were kids, 6 years old, 10 year old kids who were

[15] The approximate cost per soldier per year during the Vietnam War was $25,000. (Campagna 1991:5)

given things to throw into a jeep, like a bomb, so these were the things you were told before you got there so you knew that and you would watch or you would… there would be these cyclos with the guy peddling in the back, like a bike with the seats in front. So we were, one time, we were going somewhere and they would use these cyclos to pull out. Now you were coming this way and the intent was to slow you down so the guys over there could take the shots at you, so that was one occurrence that we had and I was driving a jeep and the thing came out and I just kept going. I hit it and sent the people flying and just kept going.

Were the jeeps armored?

The guys in the jeep were. You had the MPs. They had the… It would be two MPs and a gunner. 50-caliber machine gun, 30-caliber machine guns. Those guys, they had a tough job.

And your service term ended in '69 you said?

Yeah. I came home and I was sent to Alabama to a training center[16] where they trained the troops who were headed back over there. I did that for five months and then I was finished. They gave us an early discharge.

[16] This strategy whereby veterans returned home to aid in the education of the next generation of soldiers was also adopted by the US in WWII and it gave them a distinct advantage over the Japanese. While the best Japanese pilots died in the skies, the best American pilots returned home to make sure that their successors were even better soldiers than they were.

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Conclusion

As Mr. Wood observes, the disparity in technology between the American forces and the North Vietnamese forces was almost comical. American forces dominated the air with helicopters and bombers and American ground troops were equipped with the newest and most powerful rifles and the best armor. As a member of the Signal Corps, Mr. Wood helped to construct the most technologically advanced system of communications ever used in a war. On the other hand, many North Vietnamese troops were forced to use sticks and rocks as weapons and they communicated by using couriers, whistles, and bugles (Raines 1996: 384). Despite this great technological advantage, America was forced to retreat from Vietnam, allowing the poorly supported South Vietnamese government to fall a few years later. Thus, technology alone did not determine the outcome of the war. In fact, Mr. Wood alluded to a few of the other factors that contributed to American defeat in Vietnam, such as politics and the economy. As American support for the war fell, government officials, including Johnson, felt increasing pressure to begin troop withdrawals. Additionally, strategy may have played a role. Perhaps Abram's strategy of winning the hearts and minds of the Vietnamese people would have had more success if implemented earlier. Many historians discuss the interplay between technology and history and debate the truth of technological determinism, the social construction of technology, and technological momentum. However, it becomes almost too easy to get caught up in this debate and lose sight of the fact that everything influences and is influenced by history. In this sense, technology has no more impact on the flow of history than politics, economics, or even war itself.

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