

Virginia's Participation in Vietnam¹

Virginians have a long and distinguished history of answering the call to arms, whether in the defense of their state, nation or in behalf of distant countries fighting for the ideal of a free society.

Virginia's role in the Vietnam War lasted the length of the war. Officially, Congress declared the dates of the war as December 22, 1961 to May 7, 1975. But North and South Vietnam were just two countries in the Indochina region of Southeast Asia, which also included Laos, Cambodia and Thailand. Communist-inspired unrest and insurgencies throughout the region were major concerns of American policy makers and military leaders in 1961, and it was in Laos, not Vietnam, that the first Virginian died from hostile gunfire in Southeast Asia-Air Force Captain Oscar B. Weston Jr. of Norfolk. He was killed in March 1961.

Unrest and fighting in the region preceded Captain Weston's death by nearly 16 years, tracing back to 1945 and the end of World War II. In fact, the first American victim of communist bullets in Southeast Asia was Major Peter A. Dewey, who studied law at the University of Virginia. Dewey, a Chicago native, was assigned to the Office of Strategic Services (OSS), the World War II-forerunner of the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA). Dewey was in Saigon in September 1945 to arrange the release of American prisoners of war held by the Japanese Army occupying Vietnam, known then as French Indochina. On September 26, Dewey was shot when he was mistaken for a French officer by communist sympathizers. His body was never recovered.

From 1945 until the 1960s, United States involvement in Vietnam and the rest of Southeast Asia focused on economic and military aid, not combat troops. In Vietnam itself, the U.S. aided France's fight against the Viet Minh, who were Vietnamese-

nationalists as well as communists-fighting for independence. Virginia-built warships steamed near Saigon in 1950 in a show-the-flag cruise and gathered intelligence on the Viet Minh in 1954, when they defeated French soldiers in the battle of Dien Bien Phu in the remote western mountains of North Vietnam. Soon after, U.S. aid was transferred directly to South Vietnamese leaders in Saigon. From then on, the U.S. assumed an ever-growing role in Vietnam and the entire region of Southeast Asia. The clouds of war darkened.

During the Vietnam War, Virginia's participation included:

- At least 230,800 men and women in uniform—more than served in the Korean War and nearly as many as served in World War II.
- Three U.S. Army Reserve medical units from Richmond: 304th Medical Detachment (Equipment Maintenance), 313th Medical Detachment (Surgical), 889th Medical Detachment (Surgical). The 313th and 889th deployed for Vietnam in late 1968 and returned to Virginia in 1969. The 304th was assigned to Fort Belvoir near Washington. The units were the only reserve units from Virginia called up during the war.
- At least two senior combat commanders in the Army and the Air Force medical chief in Vietnam, all graduates of Virginia Military Institute (VMI). They were:
 - General Samuel S. Walker, who served in Vietnam as a colonel, first as executive officer of 3rd Brigade, 2nd Infantry Division, and then as commander of the 2nd Brigade, 1st Infantry Division, 1966-1967;
 - Lieutenant General Richard L. Irby, who served 1967-1969 as a brigadier general and assistant division commander of the 1st Cavalry Division (Airmobile);
 - Major General James W. Humphreys, U.S. Air Force, who headed all aspects of U.S. medical assistance in South Vietnam.

In November 1965, he removed a live grenade imbedded in the back of a 52-year-old Vietnamese farmer, a feat publicized worldwide. VMI lost 43 alumni in the war.

- Several thousand second-lieutenants, graduates of officer candidate schools at Quantico for the Marine Corps and forts Lee, Belvoir and Eustis for the Army. Several thousand more were graduates of the Reserve Officer Training Corps from at least nine other Virginia colleges and universities.
- Most all of the Army's transportation, supply and engineering specialists.
- The basic foundation for the national Prisoner of War-Missing in Action (POW-MIA) movement, which was started by Phyllis Galanti of Richmond. Her husband Paul was a Navy pilot shot down and held captive by the North Vietnamese from 1966 to 1973. Mrs. Galanti was decorated by the American Legion, Department of Virginia, for her determined efforts to keep the POW-MIA issue before the public.
- Three units of Navy commandos-the SEALs (Sea, Air, Land). They were with the Atlantic Fleet's SEAL Team 2.
- Hundreds of individual Army, Navy, Air Force and Marine reservists and Army and Air National Guard members who volunteered for active duty, including Vietnam combat tours.
- Secretary of the Navy John Warner, 1972-1974. Warner, of Middleburg, served under President Richard Nixon. Elected to the U.S. Senate in 1978, Warner was the senior Republican member of the Senate Armed Services Committee by 1988.
- At least 15 warships built by Newport News Shipbuilding Company. Ten were aircraft carriers—53 percent of the carriers that rotated for combat patrols in the South China Sea off the

coasts of North and South Vietnam. They were: America, Coral Sea, Enterprise, Forrestal, Hornet, Intrepid, Midway, Ranger, Ticonderoga and Yorktown. The other five included the cruiser Newport News, which deployed for a combat patrol, mostly bombardment of North Vietnamese targets; the amphibious assault ships Cabildo, Comstock and Mount McKinley, and the White Falcon, better-known in 1975 as the USS Mayaquez.

- Turbines and other components for nuclear-powered submarines and other warships from Babcock & Wilcox in Lynchburg.
- Gasoline anti-knock compounds for propeller-driven aircraft from Ethyl Corporation in Richmond.
- Aluminum parts for armored cargo and troop carriers, high-speed patrol boats, tanks, rockets, jets, signal equipment and other military items, made by Reynolds Metals Company, headquartered in Richmond.
- Powder and chemicals for small-arms ammunition and high-explosive rockets and artillery shells from Radford Army Ammunition Plant in Radford.
- New \$46 million Central Intelligence Agency headquarters in Langley, just outside Washington near the fashionable Northern Virginia suburb of McLean. Construction on the headquarters began in 1955 and the first CIA employees moved in 1961.

Virginia, like the rest of the nation, paid a high price during the Vietnam War. The Department of Defense lists 1,305 Virginians who died in battle, as prisoners or from other causes during the war. By service, they were:

- ◆ Army, 871 (66 percent);
- ◆ Marine Corps, 314 (24 percent);
- ◆ Air Force, 73 (6 percent);

◆ Navy, 47 (4 percent).

Most of them died in South Vietnam. But 68 (about 5 percent) were casualties in other places: 29 in North Vietnam, 18 in Laos, 11 in Cambodia and 10 in Thailand.

Ten Virginians received Medals of Honor, the nation's highest decoration for combat heroism:

- ◆ Army, 5;
- ◆ Marine Corps, 4;
- ◆ Air Force, 1.

Only three of these men lived through their actions.

Nationwide, Virginia ranks 15th in casualties, 14th in missing and unaccounted for. Among Southern states, Virginia ranks 5th in casualties, 4th in missing and unaccounted for. (Virginia's population rank in 1980 was 14th among all states, 4th in the south.)

Regionally, the Midwest had 31 percent of Vietnam's casualties; the South, 26 percent; the West, 18 percent; Northeast and Mid-Atlantic states, 12 percent each; outside the U.S. mainland, 1 percent.

In 1988, the Vietnam War still continued for some Virginians. At the start of the year, 59 Virginians still were missing and unaccounted for, one since 1963—Army, 22; Air Force, 22; Navy, 10; Marine Corps, 5. By the end of 1988, the bodies of three Virginians on the list had been returned home at last. They were:

- Air Force Colonel Charles E. Blair, Chatham. Missing in South Vietnam (no location available) since March 19, 1968. Returned April 6, 1988.
- Air Force Major Robert C. Edmunds Jr., Richmond. Shot down near Dong Hoi, North Vietnam, October 27, 1968. Returned

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October 20, 1988.

- Marine Major Roger E. Wilson, Norfolk. Shot down near Nam Dinh, North Vietnam, June 11, 1972. Returned October 21, 1988.

The Vietnam War ended, more or less, in 1975. But it's not really over yet. The families and friends of 56 Virginia soldiers, sailors, airmen, marines and pilots still wait, still wonder, still hope.

¹Source: Harrison, Donald C. *Virginia and the Vietnam War*, Korean-Vietnam War History Council, 1989.