"FRAGGING" IN VIETNAM

SOME OFFICERS AND NCO'S CLAIMED TO HAVE FEARED BEING DELIBERATELY KILLED BY THEIR OWN MEN

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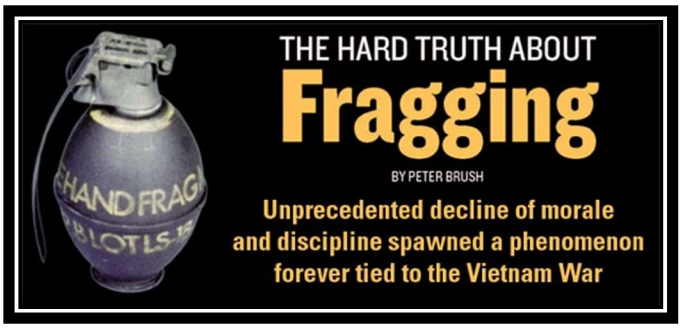

Four-star General Colin Powell(left), here speaking with General Schwarzkopf, remarked that he feared his own men during his time as a Major in Vietnam and moved his cot everynight.

WAR HISTORY ONLINE

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MORE INCIDENTS OF "FRAGGING" OCCURRED IN THE VIETNAM WAR THAN EITHER WORLD WAR

On the evening of October 22, 1970, Company L of the 3rd Battalion, 1st Marine Regiment was engaged in anti-infiltration operations in the "Rocket Belt," an area of more than 500 square kilometers ringing the Da Nang Airbase. The company was set up in bunkers at an outpost on Hill 190, to the west of Da Nang. Assigned to guard duty that night, Private Gary A. Hendricks settled into his position on the perimeter and made himself comfortable. Too comfortable, it turned out. A bit later, when Sergeant Richard L. Tate, the sergeant of the guard, discovered Hendricks sleeping on post, *he gave the private a tongue lashing, but took no further action. Shortly after midnight the next day, Hendricks tossed a fragmentation grenade into the air vent of Sergeant Tate's bunker*. The grenade landed on Tate's stomach and the subsequent blast blew his legs off, killing the father of three from Asheville, North Carolina, who had only three weeks left on his tour of duty. The explosion injured two other sergeants who were in the bunker.

Hendricks was charged with murder. He confessed and was convicted by general court-martial. His death sentence was reduced to life in prison.

The manner in which Hendricks murdered Tate, using a fragmentation grenade in the dark of night, *will be forever linked to Vietnam as an iconic symbolization of an unpopular war gone horribly awry*.

TheJanuary 1971 *Washington Post* opinion piece about troop withdrawals and the winding down of the war by columnist Chalmers Roberts. “U.S. forces, now knowing they are on the way out but not knowing just when, have developed an enclave mentality and a philosophy of ‘Why take the risks in a war that’s winding down?*’ Recent reports from Vietnam talk of demoralization and of draftees ‘fragging’ gung-ho officers; that is tossing hand grenades at them to put a stop to aggressiveness.”*

IN 1970, IN ADDITION TO TATE’S MURDER THE US ARMY REPORTED 209 CASES OF FRAGGING !!

Although grenades in various forms have been used in warfare for more than 1,000 years, modern-style small-percussion hand grenades were first employed on a large scale by European armies at the beginning of the 20th century. While the term “fragging” may have been coined during the Vietnam War, there were reported instances of American soldiers assaulting their superiors’ using grenades in World War I, World War II, and the Korean War*, although the number of occurrences were miniscule when compared to the Vietnam War.*

The practice in Vietnam was named after the weapon of choice: the M26, M61 or M67 fragmentation hand grenade, standard issue to U.S. forces. Aside from the effectiveness of these weapons to kill and maim, unlike rifles and pistols*, grenades were not assigned to individuals by serial number. Once exploded, they leave no traceable ballistic evidence that may be used to identify a perpetrator.*

In America’s earlier 20th-century wars, fragging’s and homicides by other means typically occurred during combat situations when officers who were deemed incompetent, overly aggressive or otherwise considered a danger, would be killed by enlisted men under their command. Fragging of this sort also occurred in Vietnam.

Journalist Eugene Linden, in a 1972 *Saturday Review* article, described the practice of *“bounty hunting”* whereby enlisted men pooled their money to be paid out to a soldier who killed an officer or sergeant they considered dangerous. One well-known example of bounty hunting came out of the infamous Battle of Dong Ap Bai, *aka Hamburger Hill, in May 1969.* After suffering more than 400 casualties over 10 merciless days of attacks to take the hill, the 101st Airborne Division soldiers were ordered to withdraw about a week later. Shortly thereafter, the army underground newspaper in Vietnam, *GI Says, reportedly offered a $10,000 bounty on the very aggressive officer who led the attacks, Lt. Col. Weldon Honeycutt. Several unsuccessful attempts were reported to have been made on the colonel’s life*. After Hamburger Hill, an Army major was quoted as saying another hard-fought, high-casualty infantry assault like Hamburger Hill, “is definitely out.”

There are no official Pentagon fragging statistics before 1969, the year U.S. troop strength in Vietnam both hit its peak and significant combat troop pullouts began. When it became widely evident that the United States was no longer pursuing a military victory in Vietnam, many soldiers became less aggressive, not wanting to be the last to die in a war that would not be won. With this heightened sense of fruitlessness, fragging and the threat of fragging were seen by many enlisted men as the most effective way to discourage their superiors from showing enthusiasm for combat.

Marine Colonel Robert D. Heinl Jr., in his seminal article “The Collapse of the Armed Forces” published in the June 1971 *Armed Forces Journal, claimed the morale, discipline and battle worthiness of the U.S. Armed Forces in Vietnam were probably worse during this period than at any time in the 20th century—possibly in the history of the United States*. An unnamed officer was quoted in a January 1971 *Newsweek* article as saying, “Vietnam has become a poison in the veins of the U.S. Army.”

While the Pentagon showed great reluctance to publicly discuss the problem, fragging entered the political arena when, in April 1971*, Democratic leader Mike Mansfield of Montana emotionally spoke to the issue on the floor of the Senate.* Mansfield related details of the death of 1st Lt. Thomas A. Dellwo, of

Choteau, Mont. “He was not a victim of combat. He was not a casualty of a helicopter crash or a jeep accident. In the early morning hours of March 15, the first lieutenant from Montana was ‘fragged’ to death as he lay sleeping in his billet at Bien Hoa.

He was murdered by a fellow serviceman, an American GI. ‘Fragging’ so I have been advised by the Secretary of the Army, refers to the use of a fragmentation grenade in other than a combat situation by one person against another to kill or do bodily harm.” The death of Dellwo, a 24-year-old West Point graduate who wanted to be a career soldier, was especially senseless as he was not even the intended victim.

Mansfield asked what failure of order and discipline within the armed forces produced an atmosphere that resulted in 209 cases of fragging in 1970. Answering his own question, the longtime critic of U.S. involvement in Vietnam, proclaimed that fragging was yet “*another outgrowth of this mistaken and tragic conflict.”* Responding in the Senate chamber, Republican Charles Mathias of Maryland noted Mansfield had made history because for the first time “he has surfaced the word ‘fragging’ on the Senate floor. In every war a new vocabulary springs up. In all the lexicon of war there is not a more tragic word than ‘fragging’ with all that it implies *of total failure of discipline and the depression of morale, the complete sense of frustration and confusion, and the loss of goals and hope itself.”*

Mathias vowed, “To see this evil, and all the other evils that blight the spirit of man that have sprung from the miasmic swamps and bogs of Vietnam, be terminated with an end to this tragic war.”

Despite more troop withdrawals, the number of fragging’s grew, and more were taking place in secure rear areas. *Of the 209 fragging’s in 1970, 34 resulted in deaths. This was more than double the 96 incidents reported in 1969, which killed 37 officers*.

In the first 11 months of 1971, some 215 incidents resulted in 12 more deaths. As of July 1972, when the last American soldiers were leaving Vietnam, ***there had been 551 reported fragging incidents, killing 86 and injuring more than 700.***

The Defense Department’s fragging figures *only included the incidents that involved explosive devices.* Given the greater availability of firearms, the total number of assaults on commanders by enlisted men likely reached into the thousands, according to David Cortright in his 1975 book *Soldiers in Revolt*. *Furthermore, military lawyers estimated that only about 10 percent of all fragging incidents actually ended up being adjudicated.*

Senator Mansfield’s attempt to inject the fragging into the American political discourse about the war was successful. In September 1971, during House of Representatives hearings on Defense Department appropriations for 1972, Chairman of the Committee on Appropriations Congressman George Mahon of Texas *called upon Army generals to testify about the problems of the deteriorating morale and discipline in the Army*.

Vice Chief of Staff General Bruce Palmer Jr. acknowledged that the Army’s problems, including fragging, could no longer be minimized. Palmer noted some of the Army’s then current problems had also occurred in previous wars, but that fragging and widespread drug use were new phenomena. When asked if fragging’s followed any noticeable patterns, Palmer told the committee that since the number of incidents was rising while the number of deaths and injuries were decreasing, many incidents might be explained in terms of intimidation or “just plain horseplay” rather than cases of deliberate murder. He also testified that the attacks did not seem to be racially motivated but rather were attacks against “the man in authority, black or white.” When a congressman asked General Palmer about incidents of officers being shot by their own men, another congressman ended the discussion by noting, “They have been shooting second lieutenants in the back for a thousand years.”

A description of the typical fragging incident during the Vietnam War is straightforward: It was an assault by explosive devices (which excludes rifles, pistols and knives); victims were officers and noncommissioned officers who were of superior rank to their attackers and who were discharging their command responsibilities at the time of the attack; and the attack was not a face-to-face assault but rather was made at a distance.

Since most fragging incidents did not end up in the court system, it is more difficult to establish a profile of the perpetrators themselves.

However, a 1976 study conducted at the U.S. Disciplinary Barracks (USDB) at Fort Leavenworth gleaned some general characteristics of likely individuals who committed fragging. Of 850 inmates in the USDB population at the time, 28 were identified whose actions, based on their courts-martial transcripts, matched the fragging incident profile. On average, they were 20 years old and had 28 months on active duty. About 20 percent were African American, and about 7 percent were draftees. Most had enlisted in the service and supported the war. They had attained only a low level of education and were considered "loners." Most were in support units, given jobs for which they had not been trained, and reported little job satisfaction. They felt "scapegoated" and showed little or no remorse for their crimes. *Almost 90 percent of these men were intoxicated on a wide assortment of substances at the time of the fragging, which mostly occurred at night.* They admitted to little planning beyond talking to others, and most did nothing to avoid capture. Consistent with the command structure at the company and battery level, captains and first sergeants were their most common targets, and 75 percent of the perpetrators had been at some time involved in a verbal or physical altercation with their victims.

In terms of motive, the victims were viewed as having somehow denied the offenders of something they desired, such as promotions or transfers. The victims were perceived as a threat to the offenders. Only two of the 28 offenders studied claimed race was a factor. According to the authors of the study, *the easy access and use of drugs was an essential factor in the assaults*. That conclusion was further buttressed in a 1976 article in the *American Journal of Psychiatry* by Thomas Bond, which claimed that illicit drug use, so much more common in Vietnam than in other wars, tended to reduce any inhibitions the offenders may have had about assaulting superiors.

Fragging had serious consequences for the U.S. military in Vietnam far beyond the number of actual victims. The most likely targets of fragging found themselves caught in a hard place between the hostility and frustration of the men they commanded and the expectations of their superior officers. Officers and noncommissioned officers were expected to inspire their men, to be aggressive and to initiate and succeed in combat. *Yet to do so in Vietnam, especially in 1969 and later, was to assume the risk of being killed by their own men*.

For every actual fragging incident, there was an untold number of threats of fragging. These threats were made in various forms, such as the surreptitious placement of a grenade or grenade pin, or perhaps the detonation of a nonlethal gas or smoke grenade, in the potential victim's quarters or work areas. According to Captain Barry Steinberg, an Army judge who presided over a number of fragging courts-martial, once an officer had been threatened with fragging, he was intimidated to the point of being "useless to the military because he can no longer carry out orders essential to the functioning of the Army." *Officers who survived fragging attempts often did not discover the identity of their attackers, and as a consequence they lived in constant fear the attacks would be repeated.*

In his 1972 *Saturday Review* article, Eugene Linden described a lieutenant who refused to obey an order from a superior officer to assault an enemy position in the Mekong Delta. The lieutenant subsequently learned his men had actually been considering killing him for being overly aggressive and hence dangerous to them, but decided to abandon their plan upon learning of the lieutenant's refusal to attack

the enemy. While this particular lieutenant was spared a possible fragging at the hands of the men under his command, he had to face the consequences of disobeying an order from his superior officer. Linden's reporting concluded that fragging, both actual and threatened, was such a powerful influence that virtually all officers and NCOs had to take the possibility into account before giving orders to men in their command.

By May 1971, overall U.S. troop strength in Vietnam had been halved. Combat troops had been reduced by 70 percent, leaving a greater portion of the remaining forces in rear areas.

Nonetheless, even as the combat role declined, fragging's, along with serious drug and heroin use, continued to climb.

However, in a *Washington Post* report the same month on the pace of combat troop withdrawals, Army Secretary Stanley Resor said more soldiers were coming forward with evidence of fragging's, and more prospective victims were being tipped off.

He added that there was also an active effort by military authorities to get away from using the word "fragging" and use "attempted murder" instead, so as not to minimize the crime.

The Army attempted to deal with the problem of fragging in other ways as well. Since, by 1971, large-scale offensive operations were being avoided, American forces were largely limited to small unit patrols protecting U.S. bases. In many of those units, personal weapons were taken from everyone except those on patrol or guard duty*, and fragmentation grenades were taken from everyone.*

In his 1971 comments in the Senate chambers, Sen. Mansfield had said about the problem of fragging, "I feel deeply…that the only solution is the total dissolution of our involvement in Indochina." Mansfield proved to be essentially correct; the Army solved its fragging problem only by leaving Vietnam. On August 12, 1972, the last U.S. combat battalion in Vietnam stood down.

America's war in Afghanistan has now "officially" exceeded the Vietnam War in duration, and the war in Iraq is approaching that milestone as well. In Vietnam, fragging was both a cause and a consequence of the breakdown in morale and discipline that plagued U.S. forces in the latter part of the war. In spite of facing formidable challenges, today's professional, all-volunteer Army has almost completely avoided these problems. In 2003 Sergeant Hasan Akbar of the 101st Airborne Division killed two officers when he threw grenades in their tents in Kuwait. In 2005 Staff Sgt. Alberto Martinez killed two officers by setting off grenades and a Claymore mine in their room at one of Saddam Hussein's former palaces in Iraq.

While fragmentation grenades were the common method inside the camp, soldiers found another method while away from camp. Frequently, an undesirable officer would find himself in the line of fire during a firefight and would "accidentally" be struck by *friendly fire.*

With but two reported fragging incidents in two wars, it appears the practice as a serious military problem has been relegated to history—the history of the Vietnam War—from whence it came.

About the Author

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