More Than a Conservative, Pro-War Narrative: Savannah, Georgia and the Vietnam War

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MORE THAN A CONSERVATIVE, PRO-WAR NARRATIVE: SAVANNAH, GEORGIA
AND THE VIETNAM WAR

by

JESSICA DIRKSON

(Under the Direction of Dr. William Thomas Allison)

ABSTRACT:
The Vietnam era was a time of great social unrest in Savannah. The Vietnam War and the Civil Rights Movement made Savannahians question Southern traditions and values including patriotism, honor, and deeply rooted racism. Through the interviews of over fifty Savannah civilians and Vietnam veterans, this thesis argues that Savannah is more complex and diversified in opinion than what the narrow scope the Southern narrative allows. Savannah’s history with the military and service members since the Civil War gives agency to the importance of its inhabitants’ opinions on the Vietnam War. Over the course of the Vietnam War, many Savannahians became disenchanted with American foreign policy in Vietnam. Nevertheless, the community remained supportive of those who served overseas and those who returned to Savannah after their tours of duty.

INDEX WORDS: Savannah, Georgia, Vietnam War, War & society, Vietnam veterans, Military history, History
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AND THE VIETNAM WAR

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MORE THAN A CONSERVATIVE, PRO-WAR NARRATIVE: SAVANNAH, GEORGIA AND THE VIETNAM WAR

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INTRODUCTION

He didn’t know who was right, or what was right; he didn’t know if it was a war of self-determination or self-destruction, outright aggression or national liberation; he didn’t know which speeches to believe, which books, which politicians; he didn’t know if nations would topple like dominoes or stand separately like trees; he didn’t know who started the war, or why, or when, or with what motives; he didn’t know if it mattered. He went to the war because it was expected. Because not to go was to risk censure, and to bring embarrassment on his father and his town. Because, not knowing, he saw no reason to distrust those with more experience. Because he loved his country and, more than that, he trusted it.¹

Tim O’Brien

This passage written by Tim O’Brien, a Vietnam veteran and one of the most accomplished and acclaimed novelists of the Vietnam War, pinpoints the abject confusion that military servicemen and civilians alike felt about the conflict.² The Vietnam War fueled the turmoil that raged in the United States during the 1960s and 1970s. American civilians continuously questioned United States foreign and domestic policy, and those supporting or opposing the war were subject to scrutiny by their counterparts.

Throughout the war, the American South was seen as a stronghold for foreign policy and American intervention in Vietnam. Media coverage of anti-war support and skepticism of government foreign policy was extensive across the United States.³ While the media tended to reflect majority sentiment, individuals throughout the United States had more varied opinions. Savannah provides a unique lens through which to view both support and opposition to the Vietnam War.

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² Appy, Working Class War, 64.
There are several reasons why a study of Savannah during the Vietnam War is warranted. Savannah’s development as a military town before the Vietnam War is crucial to understanding Savannahians supporting the American military. World War II brought Savannah economic prowess. The construction of Hunter Air Field in Savannah began in 1940, employing thousands of civilians before the base even opened. Additionally, the Southeastern Shipbuilding Corporation’s construction of 36 Liberty ships at a site in Savannah gave jobs to 15,000 people over three years. The economic boom that the war effort brought Savannah allowed the town – as well as much of Georgia – to rise out of the Great Depression. The military effort and installations in Savannah bolstered the town's economy. Additionally, the high percentage of locals who served in WWII had a lasting impact on Savannah’s relationship with the military.

Hunter Army Air Field became an Air Force installation in 1950. This brought in a slew of military personnel and economic opportunity for Savannah. But by 1964, the base was no longer needed and the Air Force was allotted three years to shut down operations at Hunter. By 1966, however, the Vietnam War had intensified and Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara approved an increase in Army helicopter crews. Because of this, on April 1, 1967 Hunter was transferred to the U.S. Army and reopened again as Hunter Army Air Field, to be operated in conjunction with nearby Fort Stewart in Hinesville. Savannahians applauded this development because they knew it would again bring in both an influx of military personnel and money to the town. Soldiers who found their way to Savannah saw that the locals welcomed both their

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6 Ibid.
7 Ibid.
spending and their presence. Rather than viewing Savannah as a pro-war town, Savannah should be considered “pro-soldier.” War sentiment in Savannah varied just as it did elsewhere in the country. No matter their war sentiment, Savannahians remained supportive of the soldiers and their service overseas.

The Korean War and the Vietnam War were the first wars that were fought by desegregated American forces following President Harry Truman’s Executive Order 9981 in 1948 integrating the Armed Forces. African American and white men fought and died side by side in Vietnam while their hometowns were still largely segregated and full of racism. While segregation became illegal at the state and local level by 1964, many Savannah workplaces, schools, places of worship, and other institutions remained informally segregated. Savannahian support or opposition to the Vietnam War and the Civil Rights Movement are assumed to be mutually exclusive. Especially for Savannah African Americans, the relationship between the Vietnam War and the Civil Rights Movement is more complex. During and immediately after the Vietnam War, Savannah was more divided on race than on the return of soldiers.

**Thesis Organization**

Chapter One discusses Savannah during the Vietnam War. The first section describes the relationships Savannahians and Hunter Air Field / Hunter Army Airfield personnel had with one another and their views on the Vietnam War. While Savannahian support for the war effort declined by the late 1960s as it did nationally, locals continuous support of soldiers provided a haven for military personnel in a time of backlash. Support of the soldiers and the military

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8 “I had no issues. I mean, they accepted my checks,” in Neill McDonald, Interview by Jessica Dirkson, Recorded Interview, Savannah, GA, October 6, 2017. Dan Rollf “All of the officers had all this money, and they blew it all in the town.” Dan Rollf, Interview by Jessica Dirkson, Recorded Interview, Savannah, GA, October 18, 2017.

establishment is discussed in the context of Southern honor. The second half describes the Civil Rights Movement in Savannah, the transition from segregation to desegregation, and the impact that these had on the town in relation to Vietnam. The Vietnam War and the Civil Rights Movement were intertwined for many African Americans.

Chapter Two explores the draft and Vietnam experiences of Savannahians, including motivation for service, views on the war, and the experiences they had overseas. This chapter explores soldiers’ motivation for service in relation to Southern honor. The veterans interviewed served in the Army, Air Force, and Marines, with Military Occupational Specialties (MOS) ranging from infantrymen, MACV advisors, cooks, pilots, typists, and so on. This chapter also explores soldiers’ relationships within their units, with the South Vietnamese soldiers, and with the South Vietnamese civilians. Scholarship on the soldier’s experience in Vietnam tends to focus on combat and manhood. These experiences give context to understand the opinions that soldiers had on the war and their relationships with fellow soldiers and the Vietnamese. This chapter discusses the combat motivation of those interviewed, as it is crucial to understanding the viewpoints soldiers had during their tour. Additionally, this chapter discusses the impact that moving away from Savannah had on race relations within units and between American soldiers and the South Vietnamese. Many deployed Savannahians confronted and questioned their preconceived notions of the conflict and of those with whom they served.

Chapter Three examines soldiers returning stateside. Due to the geographical location of Vietnam, the majority of those returning arrived in California or Washington before heading to the East Coast. This chapter also compares the experiences that soldiers received on the West Coast to their reception in Savannah after their tour overseas.
The fourth chapter discusses Savannah after the Vietnam War. For many Savannahians, the Vietnam War simply "faded out." Savannahians welcomed soldiers home with appreciation and empathy rather than hostility and contempt. Additionally, this chapter discusses Vietnam veterans’ reflections on their service, the impact the war had on their lives, and their relationships with Savannahians. Lastly, the chapter explores veterans' reasons for joining or avoiding veterans’ organizations and why this changed overtime. After their tour and military service, veterans in Savannah largely moved on to the next chapters of their lives with the support they found among their fellow veterans, family, and the people of Savannah.

The conclusion revisits the above topics and explores how the Vietnam War experience in Savannah is more than a conservative, pro-war narrative. Savannah civilians and servicemembers had varied emotions towards American foreign policy in Vietnam. A town in the Deep South, Savannah experienced significant upheaval and changes in the 1960s and 1970s. The social unrest and loss of the war, in combination with the Civil Rights Movement, left no Savannahian unaffected. Savannahian patriotism, deeply rooted racism, staunch capitalism, and Southern honor were all challenged. The microhistory of Savannah during and after the Vietnam War shows the impact that the military and Savannah community had on one another.

**Methodology and Limitations**

This thesis bases its argument on interviews of 50-plus individuals who were in Savannah during and immediately after the Vietnam War. Those interviewed include veterans, wives, widows, doctors, students, civil rights activists, and other Savannahian civilians. Due to the location of Hunter Air Field/ Hunter Army Air Field, many of the people interviewed for this...
thesis came and stayed in Savannah because of their association with Hunter. Primary sources such as newspapers and photography provide additional context.

While these interviews provide valuable insight into Savannahian perspective during the Vietnam War, they do have limitations. Feelings and perspectives can change over the course of the fifty years that have elapsed since the Vietnam War. Memories and emotions solicited by past experiences are possibly misconstrued because of inner turmoil, discussion with others, media broadcasts and film showings, and the development of new understandings over time. In his book *Communities of Memory: On Witness, Identity, and Justice*, W. James Booth focuses on memory and the identity of both an individual and the community that they belong. Booth argues that due to one’s identity and connection to a persisting and accountable community, “we seek to ensure through acts of memory a certain persistence of the crime, the victim, and the perpetrator.” Booth’s argument could not be more fitting, as Vietnam veterans and American civilians alike had to grapple with the loss of the war. Extensive media reports on anti-war protests and too much political interference in the war have become common excuses for the demoralization of troops and the loss of the war at large. The last chapter discusses these misconceptions and why they are so detrimental to the understanding of the Vietnam War.

Memory morphs over time to allow the persistence of these excuses. These perpetuated misconceptions give many justification for America’s defeat and rational for the bitterness they still hold onto. Using Booth’s examples of “crime,” “victim,” and “perpetrator,” in relation to Savannah during the Vietnam War, the “crime” could be numerous things: the Vietnam War,

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accosting veterans, racism towards minorities. In turn, the “victim” and the “perpetrator” will change with each different scenario: veterans, protestors, African Americans, whites, the list goes on. This thesis does not discredit the memories and the feelings that they invoke, but examines the importance of these memories and puts their story in the greater context of other available primary and secondary sources.

The Ken Burns and Liz Novick Vietnam War series, released during the time span when these interviews took place, is another limitation. The series has been acclaimed by many veterans interviewed for its portrayal of events and the directors’ abilities to discuss all viewpoints of the conflict. The veterans interviewed for this thesis have varying opinions on the series, from skepticism and distaste to fascination and appreciation. Personal opinions aside, the viewing of the series has resulted in multiple references by those who watched it. For example, when asked “what were your thoughts on the Vietnam War when you were deployed?” several replied “well, now that I’ve watched the Ken Burns series I know we [the American people] were lied to and I think it was a poor decision to go to war.” Keeping the distinction between current and past views and feelings and portraying their recollections with accuracy have been of the utmost importance when conducting and analyzing these interviews.

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LITERATURE REVIEW

The American South during the Vietnam War Era

During the Vietnam Era, the American South is commonly understood by many Americans as a bastion of conservative democrats who supported the war. Multiple scholars examine the belief that Southern conservative communities supported the military and American foreign policy during the Vietnam War.¹ George Herring, for example, argues in his book *America's Longest War: The United States and Vietnam, 1950-1975*, that staunch political opinion and policy particularly backed by the South greatly affected the war and its outcome.²

According to scholar Stephen Wheeler, “In the South, serving one’s country in war became the highest obligation of honor that one could hope to realize; by such an act, one paid clear and unambiguous respect to the family of one’s birth, to the community, and to the past.”³ Many Southerners saw military service to their county as a patriotic obligation and had little tolerance for those who did not feel the same. Such was the case in Savannah. Taking this into consideration, in addition to the fact that both patriotism and the desire to serve in part define Southern culture, the largely absent anti-war movement in Savannah is apparent.⁴

One of the most influential books on the South and Vietnam is Joseph A. Fry’s *The American South and the Vietnam War: Belligerence, Protest, and Agony in Dixie*. Fry shows the diversity of the American South throughout the Vietnam War (mostly through political

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leadership) and the South’s role “at the center of decisions leading to US intervention in Vietnam.” Fry argues that the attitudes of Southerners were firmly rooted in regional history, values, and perceived interests, no matter their religion, race, or war sentiment. He states that “the South’s preferences for staunch anticommunism, unilateral interventions, and the decisive use of force led Southerners to support the Vietnam War more stridently than did other Americans.” He recognizes that although there may be a prevailing conservative opinion, those of specific minority groups may differ widely. Fry emphasizes the diversity of Southern attitudes and the anxieties that ensued as dominant Southern perspectives collided with the war’s realities. Students and professionals alike in the South confronted the truth about the Vietnam War, and Fry discusses how these anxieties and feelings of opposition culminated in multiple ways. It is important to note, however, that while Fry discusses both anti-war and pro-war support in his book, his central thesis remains strong in its argument that the South was largely conservative and supportive of the Vietnam War.

Most useful is Fry’s justification of choosing the South as an area of study. During the 1960s and 1970s, much of the literature on the South examined the Civil Rights Movement in large urban areas such as Montgomery and Atlanta. Focusing on the South and the Vietnam War sets Fry apart. Fry agrees with Edward L. Ayers and Peter S. Onuf that regionalism embodies a sense of common interest and identity across an extended if at times indeterminate space. Fry also suggests that “regions exist only within the context of the whole and have developed at least in part as a “reaction” to other parts of the nation.” Fry bases his argument on the Civil War

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6 Ibid., 6.
7 Ibid., 46.
9 Ibid., 130, 229.
and the “otherness” created by Lost Cause mythology. However, to attempt to create an all-encompassing argument for the entire Southern region of the United States is a daunting task.

For example, consider the state of Georgia. Atlanta, Savannah, and Macon are all in Georgia, yet have little in common besides being major Georgia cities. Therefore, to create even a state-wide encompassing argument would inadvertently lead to an ill-defined statement. This makes the study of a single town significant because it allows for the intricacies of the people and the events that occurred to have center stage. The South and the Vietnam War provides this thesis with an overarching theme for the South during the Vietnam War and shows how complicated the region is. Fry’s scholarship gives the context necessary to understand Savannah in relation to its Southern region.

It would be imprudent to ignore the Civil Rights Movement’s impact on the South during the Vietnam War due to its parallel in timing and importance for Savannah. College and university students in the South, in addition to some Civil Rights activists, became main supporters of the anti-war movement. Why, then, are Southerners not represented nearly as frequently in the anti-war discussion as their Northern and Western counterparts? Some scholars attribute this lack of inclusion to the close association between the Civil Rights Movement and the anti-war movement.11 For example, Wheeler argues that Southern anti-war sentiment arose from three major sources: “the Civil Rights Movement, splinter groups that grew out of the Civil Rights Movement, and campus protest, be it collectively or individually.”12 In Northern states, it was much easier to speak out against the Vietnam War and support the Civil Rights Movement. In the South, white anti-war sympathizers experienced more difficulty doing this, as mentioning the plight of African Americans or other marginalized groups risked losing white support. Many

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11 Wheeler, “Hell No, We Won’t Go Ya’ll,” 155.
12 Ibid., 151.
in Savannah, therefore, looked at anti-war sympathizers as protesting more than just the war. They protested family tradition, Southern values, and racial segregation. Therefore, the fact that Savannahians expressed anti-war sentiment at all is significant.

In his book *Georgia Democrats, the Civil Rights Movement, and the Shaping of the New South*, Tim Boyd explores the relationship between Southern Democrats and the Civil Rights Movement. Boyd argues that the relationship between the two was more complex than commonly thought. “The white backlash narrative (the idea that all Southern whites expressed hostility toward civil rights advances),” states Boyd, has been accepted as the only narrative for the South during this period. This narrative fails to address the ambiguous relationship between Southern Democrats and the Civil Rights Movement. Boyd’s alternative narrative argues:

The Civil Rights Movement did not destroy the democratic party in the South; rather, the ability of New South democrats to adjust to it at the regional level allowed them to take the lead in shaping a more progressive political culture for the South. This process of accommodation with the Civil Rights Movement was primarily driven by Democrats at the local and state levels. Furthermore, it as a long-term process born in the 1940s, not a sudden change in response to the 1960s, and it was critical to enabling Southern democrats first to rejoin, and subsequently to reshape the identity of the national party.

A crucial point to highlight is Boyd’s contention that the process began in the 1940s and was not a sudden uprising in the 1960s. Not only does this give more context to the Civil Rights Movement, but it also sheds light on the lack of surprise many Savannahians expressed in the 1960s when the movement reached its height.

Boyd regards Savannah as a hotbed of political activism for African-Americans from World War II through the Vietnam era. In 1942, the Reverend Mark Gilbert renewed the charter of the NAACP in Savannah, setting in motion a revitalization of the statewide organization and

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14 Ibid.
creating a structure through which to pressure white political leadership. Gilbert preferred non-violent means while his counterpart A.T. Walden, who headed the NAACP chapter in Atlanta, was much more willing to use violence and the threat of violence for advancement. In the 1940s, Gilbert and local African American students led sit-ins on Savannah public busses. Many NAACP members during the 1940s and following decades argue that Gilbert was indeed the one who “led Blacks into the future” in Georgia.

Rather than race, however, Boyd regards the Vietnam War as the most divisive force among Georgia Democrats. For Southerners, “Vietnam was about more than just … whether the United States should be fighting a war in Southeast Asia and on what terms it should try to withdraw; Vietnam was also a proxy for the tension between the counterculture and the silent majority over what might loosely be termed ‘American values.’” Southern identity, like Fry, Boyd, and other scholars note, is steeped in American values. Confusion between support for the war, support for military personnel, partiality with anti-war advocates yet disdain for their demonstrations rocked Southern society. Boyd’s depiction of the complex nature of Georgia in the 1960s make Savannah a compelling case study.

In his book *The South and America since World War II*, James Cobb argues that the region and the United States can only be understood in the context of one another. Most useful in

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15 Ibid., 49. The national NAACP pulled the branch’s charter in 1935 due to inactivity. Dr. Joseph Jenkins and Clark A. Tyree attempted to revive the branch but to no avail. In 1938, the Rev. Dr. Ralph Mark Gilbert came to Savannah to stage a play as a fundraiser for the Colored P.T.A., and conducted a revival at First African Baptist Church. Both events turned out to be very successful and, lacking a pastor, the church called Rev. Gilbert as their pastor. Dr. Gilbert soon reorganized the moribund NAACP branch and got involved with the West Broad Street YMCA, a USO headquarters for colored troops, and the establishment of the Greenbriar home. In February 1942, Dr. Gilbert, serving as temporary chair, called an organizational mass meeting at his church. On March 13, over one hundred persons attended, more than twice the number required by the national office, and elected Arthur J. Clement president. Charles Lwanga Hoskins, “The Hard Road to Freedom: The NAACP in Savannah,” http://www.savnaacp.com/NAACP_SAVANNAH/savhistory.html. (last accessed March 20, 2018).

16 Ibid., 146. For example, Wesley law, head of the NAACP youth council under Gilbert and later statewide director of the NAACP stated this.

17 Ibid., 147.
Cobb’s work is his discussion of African Americans and their experiences from WWII to the present. American intervention in WWII brought unprecedented opportunities for Black Americans. While many took advantage to serve overseas and fight for the United States, their second-class status as citizens and soldiers, especially at home, could not be ignored. African Americans fought and died for their country overseas while many of their family and friends were subject to racism, segregation, even lynching. Additionally, German POWs held in the United States could eat with their white military guards in restaurants, but the Black soldiers remained segregated. This double standard made the African American population increasingly restless overtime.\textsuperscript{18} African Americans felt the same hypocrisy in the Vietnam Era, save formal segregation in the military.

Cobb’s book does an excellent job of portraying the progression of African American rights in the South since World War II. His use of race as a lens to view the South and America at large is not new, but bringing together the African American military struggle and the struggle for civil rights is noteworthy. Situating Savannah in the South and the nation at large through the works of Fry, Boyd, and Cobb will give context for the experiences of Savannahians during the Vietnam War.

Similar to the above works, Owen Gilman, Jr.’s book \textit{Vietnam and the Southern Imagination} argues that Southern honor was a major factor in Southerners’ response to the Vietnam War.\textsuperscript{19} Gilman states that “in the South, serving one’s country in war became the highest obligation of honor that one could hope to realize.”\textsuperscript{20} By doing this, the individual “paid

\textsuperscript{20} Ibid., 4.
clear and unambiguous respect to the family of one’s birth, to the community, and to the past.”

Gilman’s book discusses the work of numerous Southern authors and poets to prove his argument. Southern authors’ understanding of the past and its relationship to the present regarding the Vietnam War is unique. The South’s defeat in the Civil War no doubt effects the way in which Southerners contextualize their Vietnam experience. On the contrary, other US regions look at the Vietnam War as an exception from normalcy, and therefore situate it by itself, as both a starting and ending point of something in America’s past.

Gilman’s work provides further context for Savannah during the Vietnam War. To understand the reasons for people’s reaction to the war it is imperative to understand what factors contribute to those tendencies. Southern honor, race, socioeconomic status, family history, and relationship with the military all play a part in developing one’s views.

**The Vietnam War and the Makeup of Its Soldiers**


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21 Ibid., 25.
22 Ibid., 16.
23 Ibid., 4.
one, PTSD effected, depressed group. Appy departs from this narrative by interviewing individuals who served. He learned what they did overseas and their reception upon their return stateside. Moving away from the above narrative is not to glorify the veterans and remove all negative aspects of their service. Appy states that “while it is important to acknowledge and recognize the sacrifices these men make, it is also vital that they are not viewed only through the lens of a victim or hero, but also understood for what they did overseas and why they were fighting in the first place.”

In addition to giving soldiers their individuality, Appy makes a sweeping statement about their socioeconomic background: roughly 80% of those who served in Vietnam were of working class and poor background. Appy points out that the Selective Service Commission’s bureaucratic efficiency proved unavoidable for adolescents who had little choice in their future. Those who were drafted were school dropouts, amid failing school, or not holding an important, trade-specific job in society. Those that had the money to avoid the draft or emigrate generally did so. This left a disproportionate number of the lower, uneducated class to serve in the jungles of Vietnam.

While many individuals interviewed here were pilots and other crew members connected to Hunter Army Air Field, the drafted Savannahians interviewed for this thesis parallel Appy’s argument. Many of those drafted from Savannah were poor, working menial jobs, and without a college degree. Knowing if one was subject to the draft or decided to enlist is crucial to analyzing their thoughts on the war and the military.

In The African American Experience in Vietnam: Brothers in Arms, James Westheider looks to disprove the idea that military service was a professional opportunity for African

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25 Ibid., 16.
26 Ibid., 19.
Americans. Westheider’s book is decidedly one-sided and only briefly touches on the comradery between whites and African Americans while serving overseas. Nevertheless, it provides useful statistics and insights into the African American experience during the Vietnam War. He argues that racism was as prevalent in the military as it was in American civilian society. Westheider discusses the disparity between draftee numbers and total American population. African Americans made up 14% of draftees, but only 12% of the American population.27 Throughout their service, African Americans were subjected to informal racism on and off-duty, and they did not agree in the slightest with General William C. Westmoreland declaration that the “Vietnam War was the first war in which the military did not condone racial inequality.”28

African American servicemen and their Caucasian comrades recall racism in the armed forces during the Vietnam War differently. Many African Americans interviewed have vivid memories of racist encounters, while most white soldiers say there was little to no racism in the service. Interviews conducted for this thesis differ from Westheider’s statements. African American and Caucasian servicemen have memories varying from a sense of brotherhood to rampant racism. The difference between race relations while overseas in the military compared to race relations on a military base state-side is not mentioned by Westheider. Through interviews with Savannahian veterans, there were clear differences between in-country and state-side relations between races. This thesis discusses both the importance that race relations played for those serving in the Vietnam War and their perception of race upon their return home.

Lawrence M. Baskir and William A. Strauss’ book Chance and Circumstance: The Draft, the War, and the Vietnam Generation was the first comprehensive study of the Vietnam

28 Ibid.
generation. The authors analyze the 27 million American men that came of draft age during the Vietnam era.\textsuperscript{29} Rather than focusing on those who fought in-country, Baskir and Strauss focus on those who avoided the draft by chance or circumstance.\textsuperscript{30} While they may have avoided military service, the authors argue that Vietnam was a generation-wide catastrophe. Understanding the reasons behind one’s ability to maintain civilian status throughout the war, and their thoughts of those who served are crucial to understanding their relationship with soldiers and veterans.

Baskir and Strauss state that the majority of those not called to serve and those that avoided service saw those drafted as “suckers, having to risk their lives in the wrong war, in the wrong place, at the wrong time.”\textsuperscript{31} Men of draft age questioned the importance of service and why they should need to serve: “Vietnam veterans were held in no esteem, and the fate of the nation lay hardly in the balance.”\textsuperscript{32} This statement of indifference rather than anger towards those who served and the common idea that the war was unnecessary gives context to the acceptance of the veterans back into society and their relationship with civilians after the war and their military service ended. Why some Savannahians decided to serve or avoid the military is discussed in Chapter Two.

**Vietnam Veterans in American Society**

The most controversial scholarship on Vietnam veterans deals with their reception by American society after their tour of duty. Anti-war protests, the indifference to the Vietnam War, and the lack of formal reception of veterans all attribute to the complexity of their return. Most scholarship on Vietnam veterans focuses on harrowing accounts of veterans’ return home: being

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{30} Ibid., 7.
  \item \textsuperscript{31} Ibid., 6. Statistics found in the 1971 Harris survey.
  \item \textsuperscript{32} Ibid., 7.
\end{itemize}
spat upon, accosted, ignored, and ostracized. Few scholars look to dispel this possible myth and discuss veterans who were treated well and welcomed back into their communities.\(^{33}\)

In his book *Home from the War: Vietnam Veterans – Neither Victims nor Executioners*, Robert Jay Lifton explores the reintegration process of Vietnam veterans, and how they differ from other generations of United States veterans.\(^{34}\) Veterans, according to Lifton, felt alienated from the population, unable to express their feelings of the war, the inability to comprehend the conflict itself, and anger for the actions that they committed for “no point.”\(^{35}\)

The Vietnam War was the first defeat for the United States as a whole. Rather than facing this head-on, Americans quietly accepted the loss and little was done to understand why the United States was defeated.\(^{36}\) As a result, those who served in Vietnam had a lackluster homecoming compared to their fathers’ return to Fort Worth. Lifton claims that it was due to this indifference and the media's portrayal of anti-war activists actively searching for veterans to spit on, that many veterans felt it necessary to “sneak back into the United States” just as they had “sneaked into Vietnam.”\(^{37}\) The alienation veterans felt lasted for decades after their service ended. Many never mentioned that they served in the Vietnam War, for fear of social resentment. Chapter Three explores this notion of alienation in the context of Savannah.

In his book, *The Spitting Image: Myth, Memory, and the Legacy of Vietnam*, Jerry Lembcke takes the issue of the “spat upon veteran” head-on and argues incidents of anti-war protesters accosting Vietnam veterans were few and far between. Lembcke argues that the idea of abuse towards Vietnam veterans conceptualized when the United States entered the Gulf

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\(^{33}\) This was a big criticism of the Ken Burns and Liz Novick Vietnam War Series. 
\(^{35}\) Ibid., 37. 
President George H.W. Bush suggested that opposition to the Gulf War by the American community was reminiscent of the treatment of Vietnam War veterans. By discrediting opposition to the war and demoralizing those who “spat on veterans,” the Bush administration galvanized support for the war and those fighting overseas.\(^{39}\)

Lembcke’s argument differs significantly from Lifton’s regarding the media’s role in the depiction and subsequent reception of Vietnam veterans. While Lifton sees the media as the main instigator, Lembcke argues against this stating that it was the United States government that initiated the myth of the spat-upon veteran. Only after the government put forth its motion to spur support for soldiers in other conflicts through the fabrication of ill-treated Vietnam veterans did the media take hold of the story and perpetuate the myth.\(^{40}\)

Lembcke deconstructs stories of Vietnam veterans and their run-ins with anti-war protestors. Each recollection is strangely similar: a long-haired hippie or group of them in tattered clothes meets the soldier after they get off the plane at the San Francisco International Airport, spits on them, and calls them “baby killers.”\(^{41}\) The constant restatement of these exact words, in combination with the highly unlikely experience that they landed at the San Francisco International Airport (Travis Air Force Base is where flights landed in the Bay Area, not SFO), make the accuracy of these statements debatable. Lembcke examines Vietnam veteran surveys and interviews in which soldiers were asked “how were you received,” rather than “were you spat on?” Lembcke does not state that there were never any terse words or actions made by anti-

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\(^{39}\) Ibid., 14.

\(^{40}\) Ibid., 5.

\(^{41}\) Ibid., 72.
war activists to veterans but does argue that they were much less prevalent in society than the media and current scholarship imply.

Due to Lembcke’s claim that the image of the spat-upon veteran is a myth, one must ask what exactly was the response to veterans coming home from the Vietnam War. As a military town with mostly conservative ties, the reception of veterans was generally amicable in Savannah. There were no parades or celebrations welcoming home soldiers from Vietnam, but it was generally absent of confrontations. The general reception seemed indifference, due to the complexity of American society upon the soldiers’ return from Vietnam. Americans had conflicting emotions towards the war. Additionally, society did not know how to welcome home veterans who returned from a lost war and individually more often than in units.

Lembcke’s book is no doubt controversial. Footage of anti-war protests during the 1960s and 1970s have people holding signs that read “burn draft cards, not children,” giving veracity to veterans’ statements that they were called baby killers. On the other hand, anti-war protestors are equally seen holding signs that say, “Not my boys, not your boys, not their boys” and “bring our GIs home.” Chapter Three also discusses the complexity of veteran reception.

In his article, “Contested Memory: The Vietnam War and American Society, 1975-2001,” Robert J. McMahon echoes Lembcke’s argument of the significance media played on developing a cultural myth of the Vietnam War and its veterans. McMahon argues that the media during and after the war played a major role in shaping society’s opinions on the war and its veterans. He states that prime-time television routinely displayed the Vietnam veteran as a

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43 Ibid.
“junkie, emotional cripple, or a ticking time bomb.” Media’s depiction of Vietnam veterans added to the veterans’ alienation and society’s ill-conceived perceptions of them. When John Kerry returned from Vietnam and reporters pressed him for details about his service, he testily stated:

There’s a part of me that wants to say to you all the memories that I’ve got are my memories, and I’m not going to talk about them. ... We thought we were going over there to fight for the American people. We come back, we find out that the American people didn’t want us to do it. And ever since that time we’ve been poked, prodded, bent, spindled, mutilated, and I don’t like it. Part of living with the memory, some of those memories, is to forget them. I’ve got a right to say to you it’s none of your damned business.

Kerry’s bitter response to the reporter can speak for the Vietnam veteran community at large. The rhetoric of Kerry’s response stems from not only being asked to remember painful memories but also in his (presumably) correct assumption that the media and society’s perception of his actions and service overall will be negative. This thesis looks to demystify the stigma of the Vietnam Veteran by discussing the men who returned to Savannah from Vietnam, who cared for their families, built relationships, and worked with dedication and respect — and in most cases, did not let their service in Vietnam affect their reintroduction into civilian society.

Overall, the scholarship listed above provides a well-rounded understanding of the South during the 1960s, the makeup of Vietnam soldiers, and the reception of veterans upon their return to society. These works, in addition to others, give context to the Vietnam War’s impact on Savannah military and civilians. Focusing on a single town whose experiences during the 1960s and 1970s gives an awareness of what military personnel experienced in a Southern, conservative town during the height of the Vietnam War and Civil Rights Movement.

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CHAPTER 1:
SAVANNAH, GEORGIA DURING THE VIETNAM WAR: THE CONFLICT IN INDOCHINA AND THE BATTLE FOR CIVIL RIGHTS AT HOME.

Patriotism, staunch anticommunism, and service to the country are all deeply rooted in Savannahian southern tradition. Consequently, the South at large mostly agreed with the necessity to contain communism following the outbreak of the Cold War. Many in Savannah believed that the Red Scare was imminent, and it was obligatory to do whatever necessary to stop the Soviet Union and China’s influence from spreading.

President Eisenhower compounded this concern with his speech in 1954 discussing the Domino Theory - how if one country fell to communism, the rest would soon follow. The metaphor of a set of dominoes falling was easily understood and quickly taken as truth, as Robert Clark put it: “I think people now don’t realize we were operating on the Domino Theory. We were afraid of communism spreading because of the Cold War.” Clark, who moved to Savannah in 1966, remembered how he thought they “were going to get bombed in Cleveland in 1949. I still believe Russia did influence it.” Savannahians and many Americans genuinely feared not only an imminent attack from Russia on the United States but also the great possibility of communism’s spread into other countries – namely Vietnam.

When the United States sent its first ground troops to Vietnam in 1965, Savannahian support for the war to stop the spread of communism was steadfast. This support is evident on March 2, 1965, six days before the United States sent ground troops to South Vietnam. The

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2 Ibid.
3 Robert Clark, Interview by Jessica Dirkson, Recorded Interview, Savannah, GA, October 16, 2017.
4 The United States sent 3500 Marines to Da Nang in South Vietnam. At this time, there were already more than 25,000 US military advisors already in Vietnam.
Savannah Morning News reprinted a story from Washington titled, “Russia Gets By, US Cannot.” The author discusses the aid and resources the Russian government was willing to give to the North Vietnamese while the United States and its allies laid dormant and how “American help is indispensable in war, but our influence is limited in peacetime.” The insinuation for escalated assistance and sending of ground troops is clear. The United States’ involvement in WWII was proof that America “seeks no territory or selfish goals,” but to only “achieve its main purpose: to help all peoples govern themselves.” Support for securing democracy was abundant in the United States, especially in Southern towns such as Savannah.

When he was five in 1950, Joseph Carter moved to Savannah from Statesboro with his mother after his father died. Carter remembered growing up in Savannah during the early years of the Vietnam War, and the steadfast support of American intervention in Vietnam. He recollected:

We didn’t know about the politics of the war, from the White House or the Senate, you know. I didn’t know the policy, so all we got was freedom for somebody. Go fight and die for America. I didn’t see no reason to object to the war. Because at that young tender age, we thought that everything coming out of the White House was truth.

Carter, who was drafted, served in the Army as a cook in Long Binh from July 1966-July 1967. Carter’s recollection of American intervention was not unique. At that time, the media and the Johnson Administration were telling the story that the South Vietnamese needed saving, and the United States was the only country that could do it. After securing the allied victory in WWII, Americans saw their assistance as the most useful in other countries’ times of distress.

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6 Ibid.
7 Joseph Carter, Interview by Jessica Dirkson, Recorded Interview, Savannah, GA, November 22, 2017.
The *Savannah Morning News* article reprinted from UPI, “LBJ Blind to Threat from Reds,” published on Wednesday, March 2, 1966 also depicts the immediate communist threat. Barry Goldwater sarcastically asks, “how blind can you get?” when he outwardly protests President Johnson’s request to increase trade with the “mellowed out Soviet Union.” He poses: “is it a mellowed regime with whom we should expand our trade that only supplied the Vietcong with materials to bolster the war effort against us? … Those technicians probably man the missiles in North Viet Nam.” There was a consistent flow of articles with arguments centered around anticommunism and the preservation of democracy printed in the *Savannah Morning News* throughout the war.

Articles written by Savannahians mirror those reprinted from the UPI and AP. On March 2, 1966, the editor of the *Savannah Morning News* wrote an opinion piece titled “Politics at the Expense of Lives.” The article was written in response to Senator Robert F. Kennedy’s statement that communists should “be guaranteed a seat in any government formulated in South Vietnam if peace negotiations could be achieved.” Rather than focusing on Kennedy’s desire for the war to end and for peace to ensue, the editor refers to Kennedy as “New York’s wonder boy senator” and that “the communists have found great comfort in Bobby’s activities and pronouncements.” The editor argues that “Bobby’s” statements give “the reds reason to believe they may win out in Vietnam.” By giving the North Vietnamese hope, “more American lives will be lost.” The editor tells Kennedy to “climb all over the citizens of New York… but don’t climb over the graves of American soldiers in Vietnam!” This article shows that any sort of

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9 Ibid.
11 Ibid.
12 Ibid.
13 Ibid.
14 Ibid.
negotiation with communists is absurd to “true Americans” and a complete disregard for all of those who have fought and lost their lives to free South Vietnam from communist rule.

Skeptics could dismiss the author’s viewpoint as a hawkish Savannahian’s approach to Kennedy’s words and the possibility of negotiation. Three days later, however, Savannahian citizens voiced their own opinions that mirrored his words. In the Savannah Morning News’ “Ask Savannah” section, ten individuals were asked if they favored Kennedy’s coalition government plan in Vietnam.15 All ten Savannahians responded negatively to Kennedy’s suggestion. Their explanations include:

- We would be defeating our purpose in Vietnam it would give the communists the opportunity to gain complete control of the country; that would be contrary to democratic ideals, and would say that all the men who died in South Vietnam were fighting for a lost cause; my friends and neighbors are fighting and dying to free South Vietnam from communist rule and this proposal would merely let the communists into the government; Americans are being killed to defeat communism, why let the people we are trying to defeat help run the government?16

All but one of those interviewed connected negotiation with communists to the pointlessness of American lives lost overseas. This shows that many Savannahians were vehemently against both communist rule and the idea of American soldiers dying in vain. Many Savannahians saw peace negotiations and defeat as nearly synonymous. The reference to a lost cause insinuated a connection of Vietnam to the Civil War. This shows their desire to avoid a defeat nationwide as the South did during the Civil War. Losing the war was not fathomable.17

The media’s consistent portrayal of military success in Indochina bolstered Savannahian support for the Vietnam War and the soldiers abroad. “GIs Push Reds into the Sea,” “It was like

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16 Ibid. Responses from Charles Houston, Albert Liabastre, Albert Wilson, Henry Cottle Jr. are included in the above excerpt. It is interesting to note that no women were asked of their opinion, only men.
17 Ibid.
Shooting Fish in a Barrel,” and “Senate to Deliver War Victories to LBJ”\textsuperscript{18} are just a few of the titles one comes across when briefly scanning the Savannah Morning News. Along with printed articles, radio and television stations broadcasted nightly news on the Vietnam War. Savannahians received daily updates on the “victories” of the war, the number of US casualties versus the number of Viet Cong or NVA casualties.

Lyndon B. Johnson, who was president from 1963 - 1969, saw the importance in continuing to portray the Vietnam War as an impending victory.\textsuperscript{19} There was little understanding of what victory in Vietnam would look like because the conflict was different from WWII, which was fought largely by conventional warfare. Therefore, articles focused on presenting operational successes and more VC than American deaths. Savannahians and Americans at large did not understand that these statistics meant little, if anything, in the war abroad. There were no front lines and no apparent decrease of communist support in Vietnam. Miriam Center, now 92 years-old, owned her own real estate company in Savannah during the Vietnam War. She begrudgingly recalled that she did not “remember anything [about the war] except Johnson’s lies that we were winning.”\textsuperscript{20} Miriam’s hindsight is one example of how people readily and willingly believed the Johnson Administration’s portrayal of success in Vietnam.

However, as the war continued, Savannahians, like many of their Southern counterparts became wary of the conflict. Julia Carter, who lived in Savannah for her entire life, remembered that the news transitioned from tactical victories to a greater focus on the draft, the devastation of the war, and the protests by 1968 or 1969.\textsuperscript{21} Carter attributed this to the return of soldiers after

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{18} “GIs Push Reds into the Sea!” “It was like Shooting Fish in a Barrel,” “Senate to Deliver War Victories to LBJ in Savannah Morning News, March 5, 1966.
\item \textsuperscript{19} Fry, The American South and the Vietnam War, 62.
\item \textsuperscript{20} Miriam Center, Interview by Jessica Dirkson, Recorded Interview, Savannah, GA, October 16, 2017.
\item \textsuperscript{21} Julia Carter, Interview by Jessica Dirkson, Recorded Interview, Savannah, GA, November 22, 2017.
\end{itemize}
their tour in Vietnam. Upon their return stateside, the soldiers could give more information about the reality of the situation in Vietnam. Rather depicting it as a conflict nearing its end with a victory for the United States, the soldiers talked about the confusion and complexity of the war.

Students at Armstrong University in Savannah voiced their opinions against the draft and the reasons for American intervention in Vietnam. Armstrong mirrored Savannahian conservatism at the time, but by 1968, the students began to question the war. News of anti-war riots and protests began to tempt Armstrong students to join in. On November 14, 1968, a political cartoon titled “The Real Reason” was printed in *The Inkwell.*

![](image)


The cartoon depicts a university faculty member binding a student’s mouth, hands, feet, and eyes with tape labeled “conduct code.” A miniature person labeled “riot fears” is clinging to the back of the faculty member, anxiously looking at the restrained student. The faculty member has his thumb pointed to the riot fears on his back, stating, “Maybe this will get rid of him.” This cartoon illustrates the university administration’s awareness of growing student exasperation with the war and fear of the draft. In the hopes of dissipating the potential for anti-war protesting, the school made its code of conduct stricter.

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23 Numerous other articles in *The Inkwell* from months spanning August – December of 1968 discuss the reasons behind increasing the conduct code.
While intense protesting against the war or draft did not break out in Savannah, curiosity and attempts at discussing the war in a civil matter arose. On April 5, 1968, an advertisement for a “hippie discussion” was posted in the Savannah Morning News by Savannah State College professor Dennis A. Berthold. While calling the hippies “dropouts who have rejected affluent society and its morals,” he stated that “perhaps by trying to better understand the hippies, we can better understand ourselves in a world of great change.” The distaste for anti-war sentiment and the “hippies” who displayed it is clear in Berthold’s statements.

Anti-war activists maintained their position even though they were subject to oppression and isolation in Savannah. Miriam Center stated that she has always been against war, always a pacifist: “I lived through WWII and I saw a lot of people that died. I felt that that war was necessary, but I don’t think that this war was. People need to learn how to talk and not fight,” she said. While Savannah did not experience a major anti-war protest, Savannahians were aware of extensive protesting elsewhere. When asked what she thought of them, Center stated, “I wish I could have been a part of them.”

The media in Savannah consistently gave locals updates during the later years of the war. The trend in published material, however, changed from focusing on tactical victories to war crimes that were becoming public, the mass amounts of American lives lost, and the ongoing political decisions about how to achieve victory or peace of some sort. Rather than faith in the government and American military strength, Savannahians wondered when the Vietnam War would finally end.

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25 Ibid.
26 Miriam Center, Interview by Jessica Dirkson, Recorded Interview, Savannah, GA, October 16, 2017.
27 Ibid.
Savannahians were largely aware of the Vietnam War due to the town’s location in the Deep South and the establishment of a military installment in the town. On January 30, 1968, J. Elders, a Savannahian, wrote these foreshadowing words to the editor of the *Savannah Morning News*:

As a citizen of the US and a retired army officer, I will strive for peace with all means at my disposal. … the moral right to take a stand is being questioned by some people. They seem to forget that the blessings of liberty must be paid for, paid again and again, with money and blood. … They seem to forget leaders of communism have proven by word and deed that they intend to bury us. … Gen. MacArthur was right when he said there was no substitute for victory in war. Our failure to win in Korea is why we are now presently fighting the same enemy which was, and still is, communism.28

Elders’ words proved ominous, for on the following evening the North Vietnamese Army and Viet Cong insurgents launched the Tet Offensive – a disjointed but massive attack on nearly one hundred South Vietnamese towns and cities. The Tet Offensive became the critical turning point of the war for the Johnson administration and the United States.

The *Savannah Morning News* portrayed the Tet Offensive as an American military success, as shown in the article “Troops Wipe Out Reds Holding the US Embassy.”29 Operationally, US and ARVN (Army of the Republic of Vietnam) forces eventually regained the besieged areas from communist forces. The offensive, however, revealed to the American public that neither the number of Vietnamese communist supporters nor their determination had declined, as claimed by the Johnson Administration and American military leaders in the fall of 1967. Tet proved to be the crossroads for President Lyndon Johnson’s Vietnam policy.30

If Tet made the American public question the whether the United States was winning the war, revelations in September 1969 of American killings at the village of My Lai made them

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question the morality of the conflict.\textsuperscript{31} Shortly after the Tet Offensive, on March 16, 1968, members of Task Force Barker killed over 500 civilians, including the elderly, women, and children. News of the My Lai Massacre did not reach the United States until over a year after it happened when one soldier who heard about the killings alerted members of Congress and officials in the Nixon administration.\textsuperscript{32} Media outlets soon revealed the cover-up and the horror of the tragedy. Gone were the stereotypes of American soldiers saving the Vietnamese from evil communists. The media no longer depicted Vietnam veterans’ as valiant, like those who fought in WWII.\textsuperscript{33}

A political cartoon in the \textit{InkWell}, showed the impact that the My Lai Massacre had on local war sentiment.\textsuperscript{34} On January 6, 1970, the cartoon titled “Flag Desecrators” by Robert Pudim showed a Vietnamese woman and her child crumpled on the floor, dead, after being shot. Behind them is an American flag riddled with bullet holes, insinuating that American soldiers destroyed American honor and values by killing innocent civilians. To the left of this scene is a torn poster with the words, “Song My,” the provincial district where the My Lai massacre took place.

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{flag_desecrators.png}
\caption{Robert Pudim, “Flag Desecrators,” \textit{The Inkwell}, January 6, 1970.}
\end{figure}

\textsuperscript{32} Ibid., 1, 77.
\textsuperscript{33} See Mary Louise Roberts, \textit{What Soldiers Do: Sex and the American GI in WWII} France (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013), for a realistic depiction of WWII soldiers. Roberts deconstructs the idealized portrayal of American soldiers during WWII, and gives a more realistic, accurate depiction of those fighting in France.
\textsuperscript{34} Robert Pudim, “Flag Desecrators,” in \textit{The Inkwell}, January 6, 1970.
This editorial cartoon depicts Pudim’s view of the irony of what happened at My Lai: American soldiers carried out this massacre on innocents under the guise of protecting the South Vietnamese from the Viet Cong insurgents. Tet and My Lai challenged many assumptions long-held by traditionally conservative Savannahians about American involvement in Vietnam. While these events made Savannahians question the reasons for the Vietnam War and America’s role in South Vietnam, the Savannah community remained supportive of military servicemen throughout the conflict.

**Savannahian Relationships with the Military**

The military presence was prevalent in Savannah. Additionally, the establishment by the Air Force of Hunter Air Field in 1950 and the transfer to the Army in 1967, with the name change to Hunter Army Airfield, brought thousands of soldiers to the Savannah area. The hiring of civilians to work on the base also added to the integration of the military and civilian communities. The economic impact as well as the relationships and marriages that formed between civilians and military members further connected the two communities. Economic growth, these relationships, and the Southern mentality of honor with service to the country helped create and maintain an atmosphere supportive of the military in Savannah – even when their support for the Vietnam War waned.

Savannahians became aware of the vacillating nature of the war and the ambiguity of its progress. The majority of Savannahians interviewed, when asked what their thoughts on the Vietnam War were during that time, responded not with the pro-war or anti-war sentiment, but rather with the declaration of their support for the military and the servicemen and women that

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made up this community. Savannahian civilian relationships and respect of military personnel greatly outweighed their support or opposition to the war itself.

“Savannah has always been very supportive of the military community,” said Fae McDonald, who was born and raised in the Savannah area. “I don’t remember any demonstrations or anything negative towards the military.” McDonald went to college at Armstrong and remembered very few students who spoke out against the war or the military. “Just because it was printed in the school newspaper,” she quipped, “does not mean that students read it or felt the same way.” The Inkwell did in fact openly state that it was a liberal-leaning newspaper. In a town that was mostly conservative, McDonald’s statement holds true. Other Armstrong graduates interviewed had similar reactions to the paper and to those who demonstrated against the war or the military.

Catherine Wexler was in nursing school when her boyfriend was drafted and sent to basic training. Wexler remembered that while he was in training, the Savannah Morning News printed about “200 people who had died that week. It was so bad.” She was not questioning the war itself or the need to defend the South Vietnamese. She was worried about her boyfriend’s safety. When he received his orders for Thailand, she “was so glad he was not going to Vietnam. That’s all I thought about – the safety of him and the other soldiers.”

In 1967, Ray Gastor came to Savannah before his tour in Vietnam from 1968-1969 with the First Cavalry as a first lieutenant and helicopter pilot. After his tour, Gastor returned to Savannah. He did not recall “one bad experience. I was always treated well in restaurants or

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36 Fae McDonald, Interview by Jessica Dirkson, Recorded Interview, Savannah, GA, October 6, 2017.
37 Ibid.
38 The Inkwell, October 31, 1968.
40 Ibid.
Many soldiers stationed at Hunter lived off base. They mingled with the locals, spent time at the beach, and ventured out to explore the area. Not once, in all the interviews conducted for this thesis, did a veteran recall being treated negatively in Savannah by civilians because of his service.

From 1967 to 1972, 11,000 rotary wing (helicopter) pilots and 4,328 fixed wing (airplane) pilots trained at Hunter Army Airfield and Fort Stewart. Out of these, 1,400 were South Vietnamese.\textsuperscript{42} Each of the South Vietnamese was assigned a host family in Savannah, with each family usually hosting two to six pilots at a time. The host experience allowed Savannahians and South Vietnamese to establish connections with one another and help the pilots in training with the transition to American life (for the short time that they lived in the United States). The relationships that the Vietnamese fostered with the American soldiers on base seems minimal, but the relationships between host families and Vietnamese soldiers appear to be lasting. Southern Vietnamese never stayed overnight in the home of their Savannahian host family (they stayed in on-base housing), but the relationships created were memorable and lasting, nonetheless.

Robert Clark and his wife, Alice, and Miriam Center and her husband, Leo, hosted South Vietnamese pilots during the late 1960s. The Centers hosted two pilots, the Clarks hosted twice: two pilots initially, and then six pilots later. Both the Clarks and Centers remember the experiences they had with the pilots and were open about discussing their memories.

“We had a lot of fun with them,” Robert Clark remembered. “They spent time with our kids, as well. I have one daughter that is very blonde and smiley. And this Vietnamese wrote

\textsuperscript{41} Ray Gastor, Interview by Jessica Dirkson, Recorded Interview, Savannah, GA, October 12, 2017.
down a description of her in Vietnamese. And I asked, ‘what does that mean?’ And he said, ‘sunshine girl.’”\(^{43}\) The connection that the Clarks had with the Vietnamese they hosted is clear to see. Welcoming the pilots into their home and having them spend time with their children made them view the war and those who fought it in a way which was unknown to other Americans. The Clarks also opened their home to the pilots on Christmas and Thanksgiving together. Alice Clark remembered one particularly telling event: “They helped us decorate the Christmas tree here. They were so creative and it was beautifully done.”\(^{44}\) Reminiscing about the tree decoration, Alice laughed and said:

I had some old lights, with the big multicolored bulbs. And I wasn’t going to use those. But they took’ em out of all the decorations and they strung’ em on the tree. Afterwards, after Christmas and everything, I went to take it all down and I was thinking gosh I don’t know how they got these old bulbs to work. Oh dear, it’s a wonder the house is still standing. They had put tissue paper stuffed down in the plug to conduct the electricity through the paper. And it scared the daylights outta me. I guess they were used to making do with whatever.\(^{45}\)

Many Americans relate to decorating a Christmas tree. For the South Vietnamese pilots that the Clarks hosted, this was the first time they could experience the tradition. Alice’s recollection of their tree decoration is almost bittersweet. The Clarks were introduced to the beauty and creativity of the pilots they were hosting, but they also became aware of the casual nature in which they made do with what they could find. Host families described the South Vietnamese pilots as “friendly,” “helpful,” and “appreciative.”

The Centers were asked to host two Vietnamese pilots by their friend, a general at Hunter. Before they hosted, the Centers were not aware of the war besides the fact that it was going on, and “Johnson’s lies that we were winning,” Miriam scoffed.\(^{46}\) More so than just the

\(^{43}\) Robert Clark, Interview by Jessica Dirkson, Recorded Interview, Savannah, GA, October 16, 2017.
\(^{44}\) Alice Clark, Interview by Jessica Dirkson, Recorded Interview, Savannah, GA, October 16, 2017.
\(^{45}\) Ibid.
\(^{46}\) Miriam Center, Interview by Jessica Dirkson, Recorded Interview, Savannah, GA, October 16, 2017.
war itself, what upset her most is when she “saw these boys – they left their families to come here to train and to go back and kill strangers. I thought that was horrible.” Miriam would also see to it that her children would not serve in the war. She matter-of-factly stated, “my son was at the University of Florida and I said if he was going to get called up I would yank him out and take him to Canada immediately.”

A pacifist and supporter of draft dodgers does not immediately come to mind, if at all, when one thinks of a host family for combat pilots. Rather than looking at the host opportunity as support for the conflict itself, Miriam saw it as supporting the soldiers and helping them assimilate into American life. When they agreed to host, Miriam said: “that’s when I really got involved with all of that and became aware of what was happening.” Miriam felt very protective and very motherly towards the two pilots she hosted. “They were ours,” she said.

On graduation day, the host families could go onto the Hunter Army Airfield base and pin the wings on the South Vietnamese, just as the parents of the American pilots were able to do. “They were very proud,” recollected Miriam center, “They wanted to go home and to serve their country.” American instructor pilots also acknowledged the pride and dedication the South Vietnamese pilots had to serve their country. Bill Cox served in Vietnam from 1966-1967 in the Army. He was a second lieutenant and helicopter pilot for the 1st Engineer Battalion, 1st Infantry Division. When at Hunter, Cox remembered,

I met some Vietnamese pilot students. I asked them, why go back? Why not just stay here? And they said, could you do that if your country was being taken over by Russians or Chinese? Our families have been there for years and years and years. How could we just leave them? They were going back knowing they would end up in a re-education camp or dead.

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47 Ibid.
48 Ibid.
49 Ibid.
50 Ibid.
51 Bill Cox, Interview by Jessica Dirkson, Recorded Interview, Savannah, GA, October 15, 2017.
The South Vietnamese pilots knew that the United States was pulling out of their country and that this would most likely result in defeat. Nevertheless, they went back to fight for their country.

Roland Ferland arrived in Savannah in May 1968 as an instructor pilot, or IP, at Hunter. After serving from May 1967-May 1968 in Vietnam as a helicopter pilot for the 175th Aviation Company (nicknamed the “Outlaws”), 13th Aviation Battalion, Ferland recalled: “I could hover better than the captain that was teaching me [to become an IP].”52 During his years as an IP at Hunter, Ferland had no experiences with the South Vietnamese pilots that came to Hunter for training. Ferland’s recollection of the South Vietnamese pilots was different from that of the Centers, Clarks, and Bill Cox. This difference in viewpoint can almost certainly be attributed to his first-hand experience working with the ARVN while deployed in Vietnam. When asked about his thoughts on their training, he stated rather matter-of-factly: “I didn’t think it was right because of the money we were pumping in there (Vietnam). Might as well have burned it. After flying with them for a whole year over there, I could tell their heart just wasn’t in it.”53 After reflecting for a minute, however, he stated quickly, “not to say the pilots were like the infantry. I’m sure the pilots did a fine job. But the infantry? it just wasn’t there.” The variety of feelings toward the South Vietnamese pilots and the war at large is evident in through the recollections of Ferland, Cox, Center, and the Clarks.

In addition to hosting South Vietnamese pilots, Miriam had friends whom she grew up with in Savannah that went to serve in the Vietnam War. One friend of hers, upon his return home, received no recognition from his family. “He came home and nobody in his family paid a

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52 Roland Ferland, Interview by Jessica Dirkson, Recorded Interview, Savannah, GA, October 27, 2016.
53 Ibid.
bit of attention to him. We all went over there one night, he had a lot of sisters and brothers, and I had gone out to buy him a wonderful present to welcome him home and they didn’t pay a bit of attention to him or acknowledge him.”54 The complacency that he returned to, in addition to the difficulties of serving in the war greatly affected him. Miriam recalled that he was always anxious after he returned. The example of Miriam’s friend shows how important a warm welcome for those returning from their service was. Given the details of Miriam’s involvement with both American and South Vietnamese soldiers, she is an excellent example of those in Savannah who remained staunchly pro-soldier and anti-war throughout the Vietnam War.

Dan Rollf moved to Savannah in May of 1969 to be an IP after his tour in Vietnam. Rollf, originally from Washington, served in Vietnam from April 1968 -1969 as a Warrant Officer I scout pilot in the 1st Cavalry Division. He started his time with the 1st Cavalry at LZ (landing zone) Sharon, near Quang Tri. When asked about the treatment of soldiers in Savannah, Rollf recalled, “I remember protesting and all of that everywhere else. Not here. Not in Savannah.”55 When asked why he thought this was, he stated, “just too many soldiers, just too many military families. [Savannah] has always been a strong military community. Even back then.” Many Savannah veterans and locals mirror Rollf’s recollection of local support for soldiers. Supporting the war itself was often a secondary issue for Savannahians and other Southerners.56 Protesting against the war, even if one did not agree with it, was protesting American values and the deployed soldiers. Saying the war was a mistake was one thing, but many Savannahians were close not to align themselves with anti-war protestors, as they associated this with protesting

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54 Miriam Center, Interview by Jessica Dirkson, Recorded Interview, Savannah, GA, October 16, 2017.
55 Dan Rollf, Interview by Jessica Dirkson, Recorded Interview, Savannah, GA, October 18, 2017.
those fighting overseas. As far as many were concerned, anti-war protestors were attacking American patriotism and those who answered the call for service.\textsuperscript{57}

The accuracy of the media’s projection of anti-war demonstrators is debatable. News agencies focused on crowd size and composition, the most shocking examples of countercultural styles and behaviors, and the potential for and actual existence of violence.\textsuperscript{58} Pictures and videos of VC flags, drugs, chants, and stereotypical hippie clothing made the demonstrations appear much more vulgar and dangerous than what they were. The media also conveyed to the public the notion that demonstrations and violence were virtually synonymous. Rarely did the public hear the political arguments or policy alternatives formulated by anti-war activists.\textsuperscript{59} This presentation of anti-war demonstrators was a double-edged sword to those who watched and believed the media for what it portrayed. On one end, Savannahians saw the protestors as vulgar and going against American values and disrespecting the military service of their loved ones. This resulted in bolstering support for the Vietnam War effort and those overseas. On the other, the skewed portrayal of anti-war protestors misguided Savannahians and their discontent with the current social atmosphere in the United States.

The reality of the situation was that many anti-war protestors pushed for GIs to come home. If this were understood and covered as equally as the other facets of the anti-war demonstrations, one could argue that the divide between Americans may not have been as great. Robert Clark showed his skepticism of the reception of veterans after their tours: “Well I guess, do you remember they were called baby killers? I think once again that I don’t like the media in general. And I think they twisted that all around. … I’m against the media. The mainstream

\textsuperscript{57} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{58} Mitchell K. Hall, review of Covering Dissent: The Media and the Anti-Vietnam War Movement by Melvin Small, Michigan Historical Review, Vol. 21, No. 2 (Fall, 1995), 165.
\textsuperscript{59} Ibid.
media. But I think it was that way in the Civil War with the cartoons and everything. It’s always been the media. Anything to sell a story.”

On Veterans Day, 1969, Savannah held a parade and celebration dedicated to those who had served in all American wars. On the next day, the Savannah Morning News published two articles, “Savannah Honors its Veterans” and “Citizens turn out for Veterans Day.” While most of the veterans who attended were from WWII, “thousands of Savannahians – in numbers larger than last year – turned out yesterday for the city’s tribute to America’s troops.” The theme for the 1969 Veteran’s Day celebration was “Stand Up for America,” and veterans groups asked locals to “attend as a sign of support for American policies in Vietnam.” The annual Veterans’ Day celebration was used to garner support for those currently fighting in Vietnam and foreign policy at large. Using the celebration as a platform reminded Savannahians of the ongoing conflict and that “standing up for America” meant standing up for American policy and military personnel.

On November 18, 1970, an article on the trial of Lieutenant William Calley for his part in the My Lai Massacre appeared in the Savannah Morning News. The Massacre’s “grisly account” was outlined rather than giving details about Lieutenant Calley and his reasons behind committing mass murder. The decision to focus on the event itself and not the assumed perpetrator allude to the paper’s interest more so in the terror of the war than of blaming and sentencing one man who was a part of it. Georgia’s governor, Jimmy Carter, declared “America Fighting Man’s Day” in support of Calley and “urged Georgians to drive with their headlights on

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60 Robert Clark, Interview by Jessica Dirkson, Recorded Interview, Savannah, GA, October 16, 2017.
in support of him.”65 Calley was not only a victim himself caught in the snares of the war, but he represented all soldiers who fought in Vietnam. To blame Calley for the Mai Lai Massacre for many Savannahians seemed to blame soldiers for the failings of the war. To sentence Calley sentenced all soldiers who were fighting in Vietnam.

**Civil Rights: The War at Home**

Discussing the Vietnam War in a town situated in the Deep South without acknowledging the Civil Rights Movement would present an incomplete picture. The Civil Rights Movement and the Vietnam War were inseparable in Savannah. The segregation and racism towards African Americans was part of everyday life – as was the possibility of being drafted to serve in the Vietnam War. The community felt the complexity of this situation and the bitterness that it created.

Supporting the Civil Rights Movement was synonymous with opposing the Vietnam War and American values. While many civil rights activists in Savannah did not support the war, many white supporters of rights for minorities, and many minorities themselves supported America’s foreign policy abroad. Through the opinions and memories of Vietnam veterans and Savannahian civilians, the military is credited with much of the effort to remove racism and segregation from the community.

Edward Myer Williams, an African American, was born and raised in Savannah, Georgia. Williams enlisted in the Army in 1963 and served two tours in Vietnam. During his first tour from November 1963-1964, he served as a door gunner on a Huey helicopter in the 119th Aviation Company in Pleiku, and during his second tour from 1966-1967 as an NCO in the 196th division. Williams remembered growing up in segregated Savannah. “Growing up here was

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tough,” he said. Mitchell Lester chimed in: “Racism back then was so bad it was like you had no rights.” Lester also grew up in Savannah and served two tours in Vietnam. For both tours he was with the same company, Bravo Troop, 1st Squadron of the 11th Armored Cavalry Regiment – one tour from 1967-1968 and the next from 1971-1972. Lester remembered the segregation in Savannah and racism he and other African Americans experienced. “Separate but equal was all but equal,” Lester recalled. “The books we had were substandard. We would get books with pages missing and marks and stuff in them. Our books were inadequate, but the teachers were great. … It wasn’t as bad as other places, but it was bad enough. Made me feel like I really didn’t belong here,” he said.

The majority of Savannahians interviewed state that the Civil Rights Movement had a greater impact than the Vietnam War did on life in Savannah during the 1960s and 1970s. Judy Muthersbaugh stated: “The Civil Rights Movement was more prevalent. Because, you know, the Vietnam War was somewhere else. Americans are only concerned about what happens here.” Joseph Carter stated that the “Civil Rights Movement was – and is – more prevalent. It had been with me all my life. The Vietnam War was only with me for a few years.”

“Savannah was an interesting community back in the sixties,” Ed Wexler recalled. Wexler grew up in Savannah and was stationed in Taiwan with the Air Force from 1968-1972. His parents were Jewish and very involved in the Civil Rights Movement in Savannah. He distinctly remembered the protests that would happen on Broughton Street, with a lot of Black

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66 Edward Williams, Interview by Jessica Dirkson, Recorded Interview, Savannah, GA, November 17, 2017.
67 Mitchell Lester, Interview by Jessica Dirkson, Recorded Interview, Savannah, GA, November 17, 2017.
68 Ibid.
69 Judy Muthersbaugh, Interview by Jessica Dirkson, Recorded Interview, Savannah, GA, November 29, 2017.
70 Joseph Carter, Interview by Jessica Dirkson, Recorded Interview, Savannah, GA, November 22, 2017.
students and whites who supported the movement. “One day,” Wexler recalled, “on one side of the street were these civil rights workers, on the opposite side of the street were KKK members in white robes, and between them was a line of law enforcement. To kind of separate them.” It is clear that protesting in the South was of a different nature than in other parts of the United States.

Savannah, like the rest of the United States, was in shock when Martin Luther King Jr. was assassinated on April 4, 1968. The Savannah Morning News headline stated, “Martin Luther King is Assassinated by Unknown Sniper at Memphis Motel.” The article warned of the possible outbreak of more violence because of his assassination. Another article on the front page discusses “sporadic outbursts in Savannah,” consisting of scattered rock throwing and attempted arson. These two articles show the outrage and sadness that was felt by the murder of a civil rights leader who professed nonviolence to reach goals. If one were just to see these two articles, it would seem like Savannah was grieving with the rest of the nation. Two other articles in the same newspaper publication, though, show otherwise.

The article directly below those noting Dr. King’s assassination was titled, “New Political Party Opens Drive for Wallace in Georgia.” A crowd of Georgians cheered when Wallace moved to put the “viewpoint of the Southern white man in the White House.” Savannahian spokespeople and guest writers made statements such as “violence isn’t the answer to any problem,” and that “by helping his own people, King drove a wedge between the negro and white man by opening the way for Stokely Carmichael and the Rap Browns to bring into the

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72 Ibid.
73 “Martin Luther King is Assassinated by Unknown Sniper at Memphis Motel,” in Savannah Morning News, April 5, 1968
Civil Rights Movement methods drastically different than Kings.” These articles show less empathy and sadness to the assassination of Dr. King and more animosity towards African Americans and their journey for rights and recognition.

Ray Gastor and other Savannahians remember that the assassination of Dr. King brought about the most overt turmoil in Savannah and Hunter Army Air Field. Gastor recalled that there were a few instances of minor violence, but people agreed that rioting and “destruction isn’t going to happen in Savannah. We aren’t going to burn down Savannah.” Carl Muthersbaugh arrived in Savannah in 1967 after his tour in Vietnam from March 1966-1967. While in Vietnam, he was stationed at Lane Army as a crew chief for the 174th Aviation Company. When Dr. King was assassinated, Muthersbaugh remembered: “We were locked down [at Hunter] for a few days, maybe two weeks. We could not leave the base.” Bill Cox was also stationed at Hunter during the lockdown. Cox had to ask his wife to go home to her parents because he was unable to be with her during the lockdown. He recalled: “we were speculating if there is a mass riot and they ask us to fly, what’s going to happen. I might shoot people in another country, but I’m not going to do gun runs on Americans.” Savanah servicemen did not expect mass rioting in Savannah, but the servicemen at Hunter were waiting for an order to deploy to major cities in the United States where rioting was particularly bad. The conflicting emotions Cox and other servicemen had, especially African American servicemen, were intense.

Tension was also increasing off base. In the Savannah Morning News, a civil rights leader expressed fear that King’s assassination and the rioting by African Americans that broke

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76 Ray Gastor, Interview by Jessica Dirkson, Recorded Interview, Savannah, GA, October 12, 2017.
77 Carl Muthersbaugh, Interview by Jessica Dirkson, Recorded Interview, Savannah, GA, November 29, 2017.
78 Bill Cox, Interview by Jessica Dirkson, Recorded Interview, Savannah, GA, October 15, 2017.
out would bring about “an open season on negroes.” Lester Maddox, who was governor of Georgia in 1968, suggested that creating a volunteer force of 10,000 to assist in calming civil orders would help dissipate the riots. Sherman L Robertson, field director for the NAACP, stated: “this preposterous proposal of so-called third force law enforcement purposes would be as effective as hiring George Wallace to enforce school desegregation guidelines.”

Due to the location of Hunter, soldiers came from all around the United States to train in Savannah. This brought about an influx of people from states where racism and segregation were largely absent. Dan Rollf, originally from Washington, arrived in 1969 after his tour in Vietnam. His first wife was a Southerner:

She had a different attitude than I did about race. I also didn’t live near in the areas that they lived. Her dad would tell me stories and use the n-word. It was just his culture. He didn’t think they were human. We had a daughter and he was taking care of her and they were watching TV and there was a Black person on there and he was trying to teach her to say the n-word when that person came on. I picked her up and said we were never coming back. He apologized and promised to never do that again. But it was built in. He was never going to change because he was pretty old.

Rollf and many other servicemen in Savannah during the 1960s and 1970s saw racism as ingrained in the culture of the city. Rollf’s desire to stop passing down racist tendencies to subsequent generations shows progress in the Savannahian community because of relationships between servicemen and civilians.

When Carl Muthersbaugh first came to Savannah in 1967, he never thought about segregation in Savannah. He drove African American soldiers around in his car to go and eat fast food, and he didn’t realize the danger of doing that until his wife (who was born and raised in

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80 Ibid.
81 Dan Rollf, Interview by Jessica Dirkson, Recorded Interview, Savannah, GA, October 18, 2017.
Savanah) told him later, “You were awfully brave to carry Black guys around in your car.”

Other servicemen, such as Doug Andrews, rented housing off base with African American soldiers. Andrews served in Vietnam from 1969-1970 in the Army as a captain. Assigned to the 199th Infantry Brigade, Andrews began as a field artillery officer and ended up as the commander of an artillery battery. Unaware of the racism is town, Andrews and other servicemen had no idea that they were taking such a risk. Those stationed at Hunter and who chose to stay in Savannah after their service brought with them their tolerance and acceptance of other races. This supports Fry’s argument that African Americans viewed the military as less racist and more integrated.

When President Richard Nixon came to Savannah to parade down Broad Street (the main street in Savannah), Miriam Center’s youngest son, Scott, wanted to go and protest Nixon’s Vietnam foreign policy. Scott, 10 or 12 years old at the time, and made a sign that read: “Get out of Vietnam now.” One of his closest friends in school was African American, and the two of them decided they were going to go and protest. Miriam recalled:

His mother was very active in NAACP – Mercedes Wright. And she wouldn’t let him go. And I said, ‘why? I’m gonna let Scott go.’ And she said, ‘yes but he’s white. They won’t kill him. They will kill my child.’ There was a difference between a white protestor and a Black protestor. There still is.

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82 Carl Muthersbaugh, Interview by Jessica Dirkson, Recorded Interview, Savannah, GA, November 29, 2017.
83 The reason for Andrews’ control over Charlie Battery is worth mentioning. He recalled: “I was there for about three weeks when Charlie Battery was overrun by NVA. And the Battery Commander, Howie Pomelli, was seriously wounded. He was medevac’d out. And they put somebody into replace him from HQ. This guy had a Ph.D. in English or something, but he must not have been the commanding type because after about 5 days the battalion commander, Bill Grayson- great guy, says, ‘Doug they’re gonna kill that guy if I don’t get him out of there. They are going to frag him. He was having troops go outside the burn protected area. Can you go down and straighten that out?’ I said, ‘I’ll do my best.’ So, I went down to Charlie Battery and spent the rest of about 7 months in command of that battalion.” Doug Andrews, Interview by Jessica Dirkson, Recorded Interview, Savannah, GA, October 27, 2017.
84 Ibid.
85 Miriam Center, Interview by Jessica Dirkson, Recorded Interview, Savannah, GA, October 16, 2017.
86 Ibid.
Scott was protesting the Vietnam War, not advocating for civil rights. The fact that Mercedes was concerned for her son’s safety protesting anything at all, even as a young child, says a lot about the climate of Savannah during that time. When Scott went to protest on his own, Miriam recalled: “They stepped on his toes, pushed him, called him a nigger lover.”

Scott’s protesting of the war was not just as a demonstration against current American foreign policy, but also a demonstration against all Southern values. If he was against fighting communism, he must have against all things American and Southern.

The Civil Rights Movement and the Vietnam War were both prevalent in Savannahian life. News media available to Savannahians reported daily on both topics constantly reminded the locals of the turmoil both caused across the United States and Savannah. The tradition of American values, patriotism, and historical roots became apparent throughout the Vietnam War and the Civil Rights Movement. For many Savannahians, support for the Vietnam War or the Civil Rights Movement were mutually exclusive. Supporting the Civil Rights Movement went against American values and therefore against American interests and foreign policy. The reality, however, is much more complex. Many African Americans and whites found ways to support the war and Civil Rights Movement or support the soldiers while showing distaste toward the war effort.

The Savannahian experience during the Vietnam War did not simply end at the city limit signs. Those who resided in Savannah before their tour of duty brought their history and beliefs with them when sent to Vietnam. When they returned to Savannah, their experiences overseas affected their view of the town and the way in which they moved on with their lives.

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87 Ibid.
88 Fry, The American South and the Vietnam War, 6.
CHAPTER II:
SAVANNAHIANS IN VIETNAM

These soldiers were a product of a turbulent, disorienting, conflict-ridden period. Whether or not they themselves were socially or politically conscious, they were deeply affected by the unrest in the society from which they came. It was a society in trauma – racial conflict, riots, drugs, crime, political assassination, a ‘new morality,’ and above all, a growing disenchantment with the war. ‘I think you’d be naïve if you didn’t say yes, the army does have these problems. It has serious problems because society has these problems. And there is no way for the army to avoid the problems of society.’

Secretary of the Army Robert Froehlke

The Vietnam War was planned by college-educated, affluent Americans in Washington and fought in the field largely by the less-educated, the economically disadvantaged, and the poor. In no other war in American history can it be said that the army was a poor man’s army and that this was so by design. For the Vietnam War, class rather than race is more important in determining the social composition of American military forces. The reasons for joining the military varied for servicemen: family history, proof of manhood, getting off the street, patriotism, avoiding the draft, and other factors. No matter a Savannahian’s reason for service, each served with pride for their country.

Savannahians experienced heightened demoralization during their tours. This was due to the contradictions between American policy and military strategic/tactical disadvantages. While overseas, Savannahians were faced to confront and question their preconceived notions of the conflict as well as their racial stigmatization. While soldiers’ views of the war and their belief

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4 Helmer, Bringing the War Home, 34.
that victory was a possibility dissipated, comradery amongst soldiers and the relationships they fostered helped them persevere. This comradery created a sense of understanding and tolerance for Americans with other ethnicities.

**Duty, Draft, Adventure? Savannahians’ Reason for Service**

The Selective Service System directly inducted over two million men into the military.\(^5\) It also ushered in millions because of draft-induced enlistment. In *Working-Class War*, Christian Appy presents a table that shows nationally the most prominent reasons for enlisting in the military in 1964 and 1968 respectively: draft motivated (37.6; 47.8), personal (28.8, 20.1), self-advancement (22.3, 20.1), patriotism (11.2, 6.1), and none of the above (--, 6.6).\(^6\) This breakdown shows that those who enlisted did not necessarily see patriotism as their main reason for enlisting. In fact, patriotism shows to be nationally one of the least likely reasons for one’s military service. Draft motivation increased roughly over 10% in two years – more than any other selected response. Those who enlisted because of draft motivation did so to have a say in the branch, location, and nature of their service.\(^7\)

Savannahians’ reasons for joining the military during the Vietnam War varied. The general assumption that Southerners enlisted due to patriotism, and that they either simply enlisted or were drafted presents an incomplete depiction of those who ended up serving. Scholar Bertram Wyatt-Brown attributes Southerners’ military service to Southern honor rather than general patriotism or ideology.\(^8\) In his book *Southern Honor: Ethics and Behavior in the Old South*, Brown traces the origins of Southern honor and its impact on Southern society during the

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\(^5\) Appy, *Working Class War*, 60.
\(^6\) Ibid.
\(^7\) Ibid., 41.
\(^8\) Bertram Wyatt-Brown, *Southern Honor: Ethics and Behavior in the Old South* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982).
Civil War. Brown argues that there are three main components of honor, each connected to one another. “Honor is first the inner conviction of self-worth. The second aspect of honor is the claim of that self-assessment before the public. The third element is the assessment of the claim by the public, a judgment based upon the behavior of the claimant.” In other words, honor is reputation and it lies in the evaluation of the community that the individual is a part of. Brown goes on to describe five elements crucial in the formulation of Southern evaluations of conduct: (1) honor as immortalizing valor, particularly in the character of revenge against familial and community enemies; (2) opinion of others as an indispensable part of personal identity and gauge of self-worth; (3) physical appearance and ferocity of will as signs of inner merit; (4) defense of male integrity and mingled fear and love of woman; (5) reliance upon oath-taking as a bond in lieu of family obligations and allegiances. While his study focuses on the Civil War and not Vietnam, the similarities between the make-up of Southern honor and the reasons for why Savannahians joined the military service are clear. Desire to protect Southern and American values through an orderly fashion, display machismo, and take an oath to prove one’s allegiance are all possible reasons for why Savannahians enlisted.

Before discussing the reasons behind service for those interviewed here, it is worth noting that those who served before the Tet Offensive versus those who served after it vary greatly in their reasons for joining. Those who served before Tet, such as Jerry Emsweller and Joseph Mitchler, greatly supported the said cause for American intervention in Vietnam. Those who enlisted after Tet were more likely to join because of draft motivation or economic appeal. Most

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9 Ibid., 14.
10 Ibid., 34.
interviewees enlisted after Tet, and for many their service had little to do with stopping communism.

Most servicemen interviewed for this thesis were draft-motivated enlistees. The rest enlisted due to other reasons or were drafted. Whatever the reason for their service, these Savannahian veterans view their service and time in the military with pride. Some who were drafted could dodge or defer their service, and most who received deferments or exemptions held prestigious occupations or could pay to present proof that they were unqualified to serve. Ed Wexler, a Savannahian, recalled that “The Vietnam War wasn’t a universal war. It became very much a poor person’s war, how the draft was concerned.” Ed Wexler chose to enlist in the Air Force because he wanted to serve and the Air Force as a solid career path. His family, mostly doctors, was wary of his decision to serve in the military. When his family or those around him questioned his service and stated that they did not like war, he told them: “Well I don’t think I like war either but I’ve got a lot more to lose than you do. This is what I want to do. This is my life.”

Wexler, who entered the Air Force in 1969 after schooling at the Citadel, saw the need to serve the United States and fight communism. When asked about draft dodgers, he recalled: “I knew some people in high school (in Savannah) who went to extraordinary lengths to avoid being drafted and to avoid service to their country.” Due to his patriotism, he says he “Never saw eye to eye with that. They did some things I thought didn’t reflect much good credit on them.”

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13 Ibid.
14 Ibid.
15 Ibid.
Jeremy Edward Meyer Williams, an African American, enlisted in the Army in 1963. There was little opportunity in Savannah during the early 1960s for African Americans. The majority of those who enlisted did so with the hopes of gaining full rights as citizens. Other reasons for enlistment ranged from economic incentives to patriotism, just like many poor and working-class whites. Williams’ service in the Army did not fully remove him from the racism that was rampant in Savannah during his childhood, but it did give him more freedom than what he had previously known.

Mitchell Lester received his draft notice two months after he graduated from Savannah’s all-Black Alfred E. Beach High School in 1967. When asked what he thought of the war, Lester did not respond with a political answer regarding the conflict itself. Rather, he replied, “for the most part, everybody had a commitment to serve this country. Well, you had people that got exempt – rich folks.” Lester saw being drafted as part of being American and did not question or attempt to defer.

Like Lester, Joseph Carter did not try to dodge the draft. Carter was 19 when he received his draft notice in 1966. He had other plans for his future that did not involve military service. Growing up in Savannah as an African American and an only child, Carter's priority was to remain close to his widowed mother and ensure that she was taken care of and safe. When he got his draft notice, Carter recalled: “Everybody was afraid and so was I.” At the time, Carter did not have a strong view on the war. Like other Americans, he believed that “everything coming out of the White House was true.” Although he did not want to leave, and should not have had

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17 Mitchell Lester, Interview by Jessica Dirkson, Recorded Interview, Savannah, GA, November 17, 2017.
19 Ibid.
to given his familial situation, he remembered with conviction: “I did whatever they wanted done, I did my best for whatever they wanted me in.”

Joseph Carter and Mitchell Lester are just two examples of the many men from Savannah who were drafted for the Vietnam War. The commitment to serve their country and support their fellow Americans outweighed any personal doubt about the draft.

**Tours of Duty**

**In-Country: Veteran’s Experiences and Relationships with Each Other**

When he enlisted in 1963, Edward Myers Williams’ father told him: “you’re going into the Army, pay attention to those buck (slang term for white folk).” Williams said his “father didn’t believe in [him] getting in trouble.” One would expect that words of caution about combat would be the first advice a family member would give their loved one when their military service begins. For a young African American from Savannah going into the military before he had experienced any desegregation in his life, those words were just that: caution for the presumed conflict that would be between races in the armed forces. As the Vietnam War was the second war the United States fought with an integrated military, the African American community knew they would have an uphill battle with their fellow soldiers in addition to the tension that comes with combat.

In July of 1963, Jerry Emsweller landed in Da Nang, South Vietnam. Emsweller was sent to Vietnam as a commander and parachute rigger in the Air Force Special Forces and

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20 Ibid.
21 Edward Williams, Interview by Jessica Dirkson, Recorded Interview, Savannah, GA, November 17, 2017.
22 Jerry Emsweller’s entrance into the military is worth mentioning: “I was up for draft when I lived in Rising Sun, Indiana. Was coming up for draft. So, I enlisted. Three of us from the same high school. Went to the Army recruiter, signed the papers there, and that following Saturday they were supposed to take us to the base. The recruiter never showed up. So, we all went down the street and enlisted in the Air Force. I was 21. Went in in ’62. We told the Air Force we were supposed to go in the army and they never showed, and the recruiter goes, well you’re mine now.” Jerry Emsweller, Interview by Jessica Dirkson, Recorded Interview, Savannah, GA, November 27, 2017.
remained in-country for two years as part of the 405th Air Expeditionary Force. When asked about what he thought of the war in its early years, when he found himself in the jungles between Da Nang and Saigon, he recalled, “we were going over there to do what we had to do.” While considered a military advisor to the South Vietnamese government, Emsweller did what many ground troops took part in after the United States’ official entrance into the war in 1965:

   We would go into the jungles, bring out the Vietcong and interrogate, dispose of... I’m not going to go into detail. Every time we would go out we went in two groups of ten. We had ‘scouting planes,’ I called them puddle jumpers. To go and kind of map out the area. If there were enemies on the ground, we would go and take them out.

Emsweller attributes the comradery in his unit to the severity of their situation. There was no racial animosity, he said, adding, “I was like brothers with the men I served with. We had each other’s backs. You had to. You had to trust each other. Had to know what the other person was doing. It was a close-knit group.”

The comradery between the troops was apparent in battle and while the soldiers had downtime during their tour. Everyone had to count on each other to ensure their survival. The racism that existed amongst soldiers in Vietnam was still apparent, but there are numerous examples of Southern whites and African Americans overcoming racial boundaries. Veterans’ recollection of race relations varies. While many African Americans matter-of-factly stated that racism was apparent in general day-to-day activities, each person interviewed stated that when “bullets started flying,” race did not exist. Jim Vejar served two tours in Vietnam. For his first tour, Vejar was a captain in MACV, serving as an advisor to Vietnamese troops and government

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23 405th Air Expeditionary Force: From mid-1962 until the end of the conflict in Southeast Asia, the 405th was frequently deployed, assigned, and attached components to bases in Southeast Asia for air defense and combat operations under operational control of other organizations.

24 Jerry Emsweller, Interview by Jessica Dirkson, Recorded Interview, Savannah, GA, November 27, 2017.

25 Ibid.

26 Ibid.
in I Corps and II Corps from 1967-1968. During his second tour, Vejar was a major serving as a provincial operations officer in Saigon. When asked about the racial relations in his unit, Vejar recalled: “In combat, everybody is green. They are your team. If you don’t work as a team and you don’t accept them it creates issues. Everyone supports each other. Almost blood brothers.”

The North Vietnamese knew that African Americans were treated with contempt stateside and used this to their advantage. Mitchell Lester recalled: “The North Vietnamese used to drop leaflets, they used to say ‘Black men why are you here? Go home. Get out. You fighting a white man’s war. They treat you like animals at home, yet they still send you abroad to go fight for them. And when you go back…” In addition to the propaganda by the North Vietnamese, African American troops recalled racial slurs. “They would tell the Vietnamese soldiers that at night we grew tails,” stated Lester. Not only did African Americans have a constant reminder of the racial cruelty by the South Vietnamese grabbing their backsides looking for a tail, but they also had to maintain morale and honor while the North Vietnamese told them of the irony of their service. While racist tendencies still existed, many memories shared by whites and African Americans alike were of comradery.

Growing up in Savannah, Lester developed a strong dislike for all white people. He saw them as oppressors and racists and carried this belief with him to Vietnam. Being out in the field and a more integrated atmosphere, Lester became best friends with a Caucasian named Jesse Fry from California. Lester recalled:

He and I became best friends. And unfortunately, he didn’t make it. You know, because we had talked about plans. He and I had plans, you know, my family was gonna meet his family and we were going to visit one another, but unfortunate he didn’t make it. So that affected me for the rest of my life. And then my outlook on

27 Jim Vejar, Interview by Jessica Dirkson, Recorded Interview, Savannah, GA, September 27, 2017.
28 Mitchell Lester, Interview by Jessica Dirkson, Recorded Interview, Savannah, GA, November 17, 2017.
29 Ibid.
“people” began to change because I kept telling myself I am from the Deep South and this guy is from California and this guy is white and when I said if I was home this never would have happened. You know the relationship. Never would have happened. But me and him were just that close. And that affected me.\textsuperscript{31}

Lester’s reflection on his relationship with Fry shows the complex nature of military service for many African American soldiers. In Savannah, he was never able to forge relationships with white people because of segregation and racism. Being in a war zone would seem like the last place for positive change to take place in one’s belief system. Lester disproves this by fostering a relationship with Fry and therefore starting a new understanding of whites.

Another example of comradery between races is the friendship that blossomed between Edward Myers Williams and Billy Register, a white soldier. Williams stated:

He was older than I was. Was a good fella. He really respected me. He was in my squad. I used to call him ‘Cash Register.’ He was born in 42. I was the point man. Lieutenant Howard tells me to hold up. And he calls me over there. They (VC) shot the bunker. So I got back half the distance between me and Register. I tell Register to take my position as point man. 11:00 am I’ll never forget it. He took point and stepped on a mine. 11:00 am I’ll never forget it. He was ripped up and we gave him morphine. I said, “I was supposed to step on that mine.” But he took my position. They didn’t get him out of there until 4:00 in the afternoon. The next morning Lt. Howard told me he died on the way back in.\textsuperscript{32}

The guilt that William’s feels for Register’s death is apparent in his recollection of the events that happened on March 22, 1967.\textsuperscript{33} The first close relationship that Williams had ever fostered with a white man ended abruptly with Register’s death by a mine – the mine that Williams believes was for him.

Both Williams and Lester show memories of the comradery between African American and white soldiers. Joseph Carter remembered that the relationships with white servicemen

\textsuperscript{31} Mitchell Lester, Interview by Jessica Dirkson, Recorded Interview, Savannah, GA, November 17, 2017.
\textsuperscript{32} Edward Williams, Interview by Jessica Dirkson, Recorded Interview, Savannah, GA, November 17, 2017.
during his tour were friendly, save for one moment. One night, Carter recalled, “this guy pulled his weapon on me one night and said he was going to shoot me, just told me he couldn’t stand me (because I was Black). I don’t know where he come from or whatever, but I did have an altercation with him, cause he was fixing to get me.” Other than this one instance, Carter sees his tour in Vietnam as “doing all of them good.” He recalled:

Other than that one instance, everyone got along perfect because we understood where we was and what we had to go through with and I really think that some of the guys that might have been a little racist, really gained by us sitting there talking to each other. We used to wear each other’s underwear. If you smoking, you know, hand each other cigarettes, you know, you pull off each other’s cigarettes, you eating a candy bar, hey save me some of that candy bar, you know didn’t matter what color you was. That part done all of us good.

Williams, Lester, and Carter all grew up in Savannah and were subjected to segregation, racism, and oppression throughout their lives. Vietnam was their first taste of a more desegregated atmosphere and freedom. “In fact,” Joseph Carter stated, “I felt more free in Vietnam than I did in my hometown and country. I really did.”

Aside from interracial comradery, close relationships among a unit kept many soldiers motivated to continue fighting and maintain some sort of morale. As the war continued, African American and white soldiers alike knew that they were fighting and risking their lives for a war that was increasingly seen as unnecessary and immoral stateside. Through the confusion, lack of meaning, and lack of support, soldiers developed a “buddy system.” One veteran put it this way: “we realized collectively we had nothing to fight for, that nobody cared about us, and we

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34 Joseph Carter, Interview by Jessica Dirkson, Recorded Interview, Savannah, GA, November 22, 2017.
35 Ibid.
36 Ibid.
didn’t give a shit about them. Our sense of motivation was a buddy system: ‘we are in this and nobody cares, but at least we can care about each other.’”

Numerous works have been written on the comradery between troops in war zones. Scholars such as Charles Moskos, Anthony Kellet, John van der Dennen, David K. Vaughan and William A. Schum have published works on the study of combat motivation regarding the Vietnam War. Charles Moskos argues that in Vietnam soldiers were motivated more-so by primal group theory and individual safety than ideology. To deal with the dangers and deprivations of combat, soldiers relied on those closest to them (usually around five or six other individuals) to make it out alive. “Under the extreme conditions of ground warfare, an individual’s survival is directly related to the support—moral, physical, and technical—he can expect from his fellow soldiers. He gets such support largely because he reciprocates to the others in his group, and to his buddy, in particular.” For many soldiers fighting in Vietnam, especially after Tet and President Richard Nixon’s decision to begin bringing troops home without a victory, there was little motivation to fight regarding ideology or support for the American cause in Vietnam. What kept many fighting, like Joseph Carter and Jim Vejar, was their loyalty to their primal group. By fleeing their post and rescuing themselves, they would expose their comrades to greater danger. Loyalty to the primal group was, in many ways, the essence of fighting morale.

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38 Appy, Working Class War, 255.
39 “Primary group theory explains the soldier’s willingness to engage in combat in terms of his involvement with a few immediate comrades. The theory posits that comradeship stimulated by shared deprivation, stress, the need for psychological comfort, and constant personal interaction and communication, allows the soldier to endure combat.” Johan van der Dennen, “Combat Motivation,” in Peace Review 17, no. 1 (March 2005) Sociological Collection, 81. EBSCOhost (accessed April 1, 2018).
40 van der Dennen, “Combat Motivation,” 84.
41 Ibid., 82.
In their article "Motivation in U.S. Narrative Accounts of the Ground War in Vietnam," David K. Vaughan and William A. Schum took eighteen memoirs by Vietnam veterans and attempted to decipher what their combat motivation was. As Charles Moskos’ work focuses on combat motivation in Vietnam before 1968, when the war become increasingly unpopular, Vaughan and Schum add to his work by including data after the turning point of the war. Vaughan and Schum list ten reasons for motivation to engage in combat during one’s service. Through their research, they found that “the four that were mentioned most often (primary group, leadership, duty, and combat survival), four factors were mentioned least often (religion, expectations, coercion, and training, and the remaining two (ideology and vindictiveness) fell between the two others.”  

Vaughan and Schum’s study demonstrates that before the Tet Offensive, duty was a primary motivational factor. After Tet, the emphasis and reason for engaging in combat shifted to the primary group. The authors argue that duty was an acceptable concept to fight only before Tet. After Tet, fighting the war rapidly lost any ideological value it might have had, and fighting in Vietnam as a demonstration of performing one's duty provided less meaningful motivation. Once fighting for a greater cause became nullified, soldiers were faced with the need to find other motivation, which was often found in their primary group.

The transition of combat motivation during the war from ideological purposes to other factors adds to the complexity of those fighting from the South during the Vietnam War. Bertram Wyatt-Brown argues that defense of Southern and American values are some of the main components of Southern honor. A Southerner’s service in the military is strongly tied to this,

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43 Ibid., 28.
and the removal of ideology from combat motivation challenges the case of Southern honor and its role during the Vietnam War. If ideology and defense of Southern values were the only factors of Southern honor, one could argue that soldiers’ Southern honor dissipated when defeat was seen as inevitable. However, Southern honor was directly tied to the community’s perception of the individual. Removed from Savannah, those that they fought alongside became their community. Seeing the opinion of others as the way to gauge self-worth in combination with the need to be valiant and masculine drove many Savannahian military members to continue to fight and enlist. This, in combination with combat motivation itself driving men from all regions ensured that many would not refuse to engage in battle.

A consistent motivational factor for men serving tours and any point during the Vietnam War was combat survival. Within his first few weeks in-country, Dan Rollf realized that rather than be a hero, he just “wanted to do the job in survival mode and get out.” Rollf was a scout pilot for the 1st Cavalry Division from 1968-1969. During the year that Rollf spent in Vietnam, twenty-three pilots in his unit were either killed or returned stateside because of their wounds. Rollf remembered the comradery that he had with those he served with - especially the support they gave one another. When Rollf arrived in Vietnam during Tet, his previous orders became nullified. “HQ asked me where I wanted to go. I said, ‘1st Cav.’ They said, ‘OK.’” Rollf admitted that volunteering for the 1st Cavalry, especially as a Scout Pilot, was a brash decision. The only reason he volunteered for the 1st Cavalry, though, was because his friend Jody from flight school was there. The friendship they shared was important enough to Rollf that he blindly volunteered to go into arguably the most active division deployed in Vietnam. While the 1st Cav

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45 Dan Rollf, Interview by Jessica Dirkson, Recorded Interview, Savannah, GA, October 18, 2017. Also see Lifton, *Home from the War* and his description of combat being course in survival rather than victory. “Vietnam combat veterans tend to see their experience as an exercise in survival rather than a defense of national values.” (41).
46 Dan Rollf, Interview by Jessica Dirkson, Recorded Interview, Savannah, GA, October 18, 2017.
was dangerous, Rollf said that the comradery between troops only grew because of it. “You know,” he said, “We had a speaker and if you heard ‘bird down, bird down’ Everybody hit it. People would go out in their underwear. We ran to the ground to get our guys.”\textsuperscript{47} The experiences that Rollf and his fellow soldiers had in fire zones was tragic. Death was all too common. Many times after flying a mission, Rollf recalled, “my hands would be shaking so bad, I couldn’t even light a cigarette.”\textsuperscript{48} The support troops shared with one another helped them make it through their service and return home.

Clark Namias served two tours in Vietnam in the Army. For his first tour, Namias was in-country from 1968-1969 and was a private first class in the 9th Infantry Division. His first tour only lasted nine months and ten days because they received the order that President Nixon was sending the troops home. During his first tour, Namias’ thoughts on the war were simply “I’m here. I’ve got a job to do.”\textsuperscript{49} Namias was awarded the Army Commendation Medal with V device for his actions in Tet of 1969. Namias recalled:

\begin{quote}
We got hit with a ground assault, and my rifle jammed and I couldn’t shoot it and you heard probably that rifles jam a lot over there. Got out of my bunker, foxhole, ran to my gun, weighed 7 ton, smoked it out of the ground, turned it around, loaded it with powder in the back and shot it off and got a whole bunch of people in the wire. And uh, so we were all there but mine was the rifle that jammed, you know. I wanted to do something. Being stupid. You don’t realize what you’re doing.\textsuperscript{50}
\end{quote}

When asked how he felt about the ordeal, Namias responded: “I felt happy because we didn’t lose nobody. Nobody got really ‘shot shot.’”\textsuperscript{51} Namias risked his own life for his comrades. The comradery that they felt with one another and the desire to make sure everybody made it home –

\begin{footnotes}
\footnotetext{47}{Ibid.}
\footnotetext{48}{Ibid.}
\footnotetext{49}{Clark Namias, Interview by Jessica Dirkson, Recorded Interview, Savannah, GA, November 20, 2017.}
\footnotetext{50}{Ibid.}
\footnotetext{51}{Ibid.}
\end{footnotes}
alive and whole – is what kept them going. “We was like family,” Namias recalled, “Vietnam vets are still like family. What you see in some of those movies, a lot of it is made up.”\footnote{Ibid.}

Namias served his second tour from August 1970 to August 1971 in the 2\textsuperscript{nd} Battalion of the 319\textsuperscript{th} Field Artillery in the 105\textsuperscript{th} Airborne Division. Namias stated that the main difference between his tours was the moral of the troops. He recalled: “It was like we already knew. It was winding down. Everyone said, ‘who gives a damn?’”\footnote{Ibid.} With the stateside support of the conflict evaporating, many soldiers felt like their time in Vietnam was pointless. Namias’ morale worsened due to his friend Steve committing suicide on guard duty. “What happened to Steve, um, I had to try and think of what I was doing here,” Namias recalled.\footnote{Ibid.} Steve’s suicide impacted the way Namias thought about the war. American troops were sent to fight for the South Vietnamese but were losing their men to noncombative tragedies. While this lowered soldiers’ morale, they did not let it affect their determination while on missions. Namias recalled, “When someone calls in for a fire mission, you’ve got your comrades. And you go.”\footnote{Ibid.} Support and protection of the primal group became the ultimate goal in combat – not winning the war.

\textbf{Blurred Lines: Relationships with the South Vietnamese}

From the onset of the war, Americans and Vietnamese had different goals. Americans were there to fight for an independent South Vietnam. The North Vietnamese fought for unification and no US intervention.\footnote{Appy, \textit{Working Class War}, 163.} The absence of consistent rules or punishments regarding the warfare and interaction with the locals gave way to atrocities, mutilations, and massacres. With many of the American troops demoralized, frustrated, and angered over their “pointless and
“plotless” service, some took advantage of the situation and oppressed and victimized the South and North Vietnamese people.  

During their training and service overseas, American soldiers learned next to nothing about Vietnamese culture, history, or politics. Without an understanding of those whose country they were occupying, Americans at large remained distant and removed from South Vietnamese civilians and soldiers.

Savannahian soldiers’ relationships with the local Vietnamese population varied. The viewpoint that Savannahian soldiers had towards the South Vietnamese is largely attributed to their experiences with them during their tour. Serving with the ARVN or Montagnards, having hooch maids, going downtown, or interrogating VC sympathizers are all interactions that created a soldier’s understanding of the South Vietnamese.

Many interactions Savannahians had with the Vietnamese resulted in demoralization and frustration of their overseas tour. In some situations when American soldiers worked in tandem with the ARVN and Montagnards, exasperation rather than comradery was created between forces. Jim Vejar was a special forces advisor for both of his tours, spending his tours in I Corps and II Corps with ARVN and the Montagnards. Vejar recalled that although it was a protocol for at least two Americans to be on each mission that went out, he usually went alone because no other Americans would go on the missions because of the reliance on Vietnamese and the danger of the task at hand. Vejar remembered how American soldiers’ little understanding of the South Vietnamese and Montagnard lifestyle impacted the local’s distaste for American intervention.

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57 Ibid., 175.
58 In her book What Soldiers Do: Sex and the American GI in WWII France, Mary Louise Roberts discusses how American GIs in France victimized the French, as well. Many soldiers realized that their money and presence dictated the economy and interactions with the locals, resulting in the mistreatment of French civilians.
59 Appy, Working Class War, 125-126.
60 Jim Vejar, Interview by Jessica Dirkson, Recorded Interview, Savannah, GA, September 27, 2017.
Due to the American soldiers’ lack of understanding how the Montagnards lived, when the 4th Infantry Division attempted to move the Montagnards out of their homes, it was an absolute disaster. The American soldiers burned down the Montagnard village and built the newly displaced group huts as the Vietnamese had rather than the stilted homes Montagnards were accustomed to living in. The Montagnards had to adapt to a new lifestyle of living without being near their water buffalo and farming. Vejar remembered: “It was a complete disaster. If they just realized you are not going to do things like that. That you just need to let these people back in their homes.”

Vejar realized through his close relationship working with the Vietnamese and Montagnards that if soldiers did not respect them and work to instill relationships, American intervention was futile. Without support from the locals, the United States could not win the war.

Veterans interviewed state that work-ethic rather than race created hostility between American and ARVN soldiers. Of course, there was the use of slang terms such as “gooks, slant eyes.” Roland Ferland and other interviewed veterans state that use of derogatory terms was out of frustration due to their perception that the ARVN did not want to fight rather than their race. “We only had them to humor us,” Roland Ferland, a helicopter pilot remembered. For his entire tour, Ferland worked on an outpost unit flying helicopters for the ARVN. He stated: “One of the disappointing things for me is I never got to fly any Americans the whole year. 1300 flight hours and it was all working with the ARVN.” Ferland remembered, “We would always get more fire taking them out of the tree line - that they were supposed to have reconed and cleaned up - then we did putting em in.” Exaggerated or not, the pointlessness of sending in soldiers who could not or would not complete the task was frustrating.

61 Ibid.
62 Roland Ferland, Interview by Jessica Dirkson, Recorded Interview, Savannah, GA, October 27, 2016.
63 Ibid.
64 Ibid.
Carl Muthersbaugh worked with the ARVN as well. Like Ferland, his memories of working with them elicit feelings of frustration and distrust. He recalled: “We were in a combat situation. When we came in with our second wave of ARVN soldiers, the first ones we left out were getting ready, they had their rice and chicken and they were going to sit down and eat. And we were in a combat situation. That was my experience with the ARVN.”65 Risking one’s life in a country where the people themselves seemingly don’t want to fight seemed incredulous. On top of this, Muthersbaugh remembered the necessity to always “keep watching them, because you never knew if one of them was going to throw a grenade back. Even though they were fighting for the South Vietnamese, you didn’t know if there was an infiltrated traitor in there. Not only did we have to get them off, a lot of them didn’t even want to get off the aircraft. You had to push em’ out.”66 Some American soldiers disrespected the ARVN because some of them seemingly did not want to fight for their country. American soldiers saw the Vietnamese as only wanting the Americans and Koreans to fight. Muthersbaugh recalled: “It was a feeling that the Koreans were doing a job. The Americans were doing a job. But the ARVN’s…. Now there were some elite groups of ARVN’s, too. But, uh, the majority of them didn’t want to fight for their country. Didn’t want to get involved.”67

Mistrust of the South Vietnamese civilian population was rampant. American soldiers were aware of the support some South Vietnamese felt towards Viet Cong. Because of this, American soldiers were constantly on guard. Muthersbaugh remembered that while the South Vietnamese civilians were working on base, “they would count off how far it was to the fence

65 Carl Muthersbaugh, Interview by Jessica Dirkson, Recorded Interview, Savannah, GA, November 29, 2017.
66 Ibid.
67 Ibid. For a contrasting and scholarly account on ARVN soldiers see Andrew Wiest’s Vietnam’s Forgotten Army: Heroism and Betrayal in the ARVN (New York: New York University Press, 2009).
around the base. Well, you know what they were doing. They were counting so they could tell the enemy to set up their mortars to hit certain areas. And that happened a lot.\textsuperscript{68} The distrust that Americans felt towards the South Vietnamese population inhibited them from establishing relationships and bolstering the civilian support for American intervention.

The senselessness and futility of certain situations between the South Vietnamese and American soldiers were substantially more apparent than the desire to understand and collaborate. Vejar recalled a time when they found a Vietnamese deserter and his girlfriend in the middle of a field. The deserter had a hand grenade on his chest and threatened to blow he and his girlfriend up. Vejar recalled:

I remember sitting there talking to them and to my Vietnamese counterpart about what I thought he should try and do to diffuse the problem. And he just sat there and said, ‘if he wants to do it that’s fine well just wait him out.’ And he did. He blew up he and his girlfriend all over everybody. And so that was kind of an experience. It hangs in your mind because it was senseless.\textsuperscript{69}

The senselessness of this act and the possibility that lives could have been saved is clear. With all the killing, Vejar did not see the reason why another two should die without reason. If the Vietnamese were not willing to save the lives of their people, what were the Americans doing there?

Americans saw the Koreans and Montagnards who worked them as having much more grit and desire to fight than the ARVN. The Koreans had a different kind of pacification than the Americans or the ARVN did (which caused all sorts of problems). Rather than fighting a war within certain rules of engagement, the Koreans had a “scorched earth” policy. Rich Noel served two tours of duty in Vietnam with the Army. For his first tour, Noel was with the 1\textsuperscript{st} Squadron in the 9\textsuperscript{th} Cavalry in the 1\textsuperscript{st} Air Cavalry Division from December 1967-December 1968. For his

\textsuperscript{68} Ibid
\textsuperscript{69} Jim Vejar, Interview by Jessica Dirkson, Recorded Interview, Savannah, GA, September 27, 2017.
second tour, Noel was the Army Aviation Liaison Officer for the Korean Tiger Rock Division. Additionally, Noel supported the Department of State function by providing John Paul Vann helicopter support to fly around II Corps. Noel recalled that if the VC attacked the Koreans, the Korean forces would go in and “just take everything and everyone out.”

Carl Muthersbaugh also worked in close relation with the Korean Tiger Division and Korean White Horse Division. Muthersbaugh recalled how the Koreans were elite fighters. “NV regulars or anyone else would go miles out of their way so they didn’t have to be around the Koreans. Koreans would go into the villages and demonstrate and show their strength and how to fight a war.”

Muthersbaugh praised the Montagnards: “They were fierce fighters just like the Koreans.”

Sexual relations between Savannahian soldiers and the South Vietnamese women were commonplace. Meeting women in bars or going to brothels was a way to pass the time, to remove oneself from combat, and to feel another person’s comforting touch.

Dan Rollf remarked: “Well, you know were guys over there. Thinking that you’re not going to live through it, I mean you’re getting shot at all the time. You want to make the most of the short time you think you have left.” Similarly, Roland Ferland remembered: “Yeah. It was fun. You go to the bar and for 50c you buy a shot of tea for the young lady sitting next to you. And you go from there.”

Sexual encounters between soldiers and civilians were not always consensual or welcomed. The way that American soldiers treated women and children resulted in many South Vietnamese viewing the soldiers with contempt. Before the United States had officially entered

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71 Carl Muthersbaugh, Interview by Jessica Dirkson, Recorded Interview, Savannah, GA, November 29, 2017.
72 Ibid.
73 Dan Rollf, Interview by Jessica Dirkson, Recorded Interview, Savannah, GA, October 18, 2017.
74 Roland Ferland, Interview by Jessica Dirkson, Recorded Interview, Savannah, GA, October 27, 2016.
the war in 1965, Jerry Emsweller could already see the damage being done to the South Vietnamese population when he arrived in-country in 1964. Emsweller supported the war effort and did not question his service. “But the children, the women,” he said while looking down, “the way they were treated. There are casualties. We didn’t want to kill them.”

Americans were supposed to be there to help and protect the South Vietnamese but many committed sexual assault against women and abused children. Bill Cox remembered being downtown in Saigon one night walking through a crowd. A Vietnamese man came up to him and asked, “why do you burn our homes and make our wives and daughters into prostitutes?” “You know war is not a pretty thing for anyone involved,” Cox added. “The Vietnamese were wondering where their next meal was coming from. He was mad with good reason I think.”

This confrontation and others like it made Cox reconsider his view on the war. He saw the contradiction of what Americans were claiming to be doing overseas compared to what was truly happening to the South Vietnamese.

Craig Johnson served in Vietnam from 1968-1969 in Charlie Company, 3rd Battalion of the 17th Air Cavalry as a helicopter pilot. Johnson witnessed a harrowing atrocity on his base every pay day:

Mama son would come waddling in. She would be carrying this little girl, pulling this little girl, looks like a 7-year-old. She just came from A company and B company. I’m C company. And a bunch of guys gathering up around one of the hooches. About fifteen I’ve seen as many as twenty. They knew who the biggest buck is. Have him pay more money so he could go first and ‘break her in.’ Here’s this little girl. She was so small. And all she’s got with her, mama son, is the dirty old rag. The sergeant has the closed in area in the hooch. They’d go in there and the girl would be crying. He’d pay 15 or 20 piastres which would be dollars, and he would go first. And some of them were married, some of them had children. Why? The girl must have died. Where did she leave when she left us? D company. And it wasn’t just our company. Our battalion. It was all over the

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75 Jerry Emsweller, Interview by Jessica Dirkson, Recorded Interview, Savannah, GA, November 27, 2017.
76 Bill Cox, Interview by Jessica Dirkson, Recorded Interview, Savannah, GA, October 15, 2017.
Morals during war become skewed. Demoralization and the growing hate that some Americans felt for the Vietnamese led to atrocities such as the one that Johnson remembered. Looking back, Johnson wishes that he complained or said something about it. If he did, though, he assumes he probably would have died: “The only guy that was standing around that didn’t get in line was me. And then all of a sudden, they get caught? I woke up with guns to my head because I wasn’t part of that group.”78 The mistreatment of South Vietnamese women and children further separated the American military and Vietnamese civilians. Many South Vietnamese civilians saw the Americans, not the VC, as the real enemy.

Combat: Frustration and Demoralization

Most veterans interviewed blamed Vietnam or American policy leaders who placed restrictions of engagement to keep the war limited. The United States and North Vietnam measured victory and success in completely different terms. Most previous wars the United States engaged in were wars of annihilation: destroy enemy forces to win the war. The North Vietnamese measured their success by the support they received from the South Vietnamese population and the will of the North Vietnamese to continue.79 From this standpoint, the United States had lost the war long before the settlement in 1973.

In the later years of the war when American troops began to realize the futility of their tours in-country, demoralization heightened. This resulted in many trying to take out their frustration through killing as many of the enemy as possible.80 Additionally, troops began to view their tour as a lesson in survival rather than fighting for a cause. It became clear that the

77 Craig Johnson, Interview by Jessica Dirkson, Recorded Interview, Savannah, GA, November 29, 2017.
78 Ibid.
79 Appy, Working Class War, 175-176.
80 Ibid., 20.
causes for the war were doubtful. The mutual dislike between the American soldiers and the South Vietnamese civilians compounded the soldiers’ demoralization. As the war dragged on, many American soldiers found themselves asking, why die for no reason?

Dick May served in Vietnam from August 1966-August 1967. May was a 1st lieutenant and then made captain in the US Marine Corps while completing his tour in Vietnam. May was initially an assistant aircraft operations officer and then an infantry officer. One evening when May was stationed at Chu Lai, the base began taking mortar rounds that were fired from Anton, a small village outside the base. May saw the VC, “sitting right there, looking at me.” He could not get permission to fire, though, because the VC were in the middle of the village. May and his unit had to run the VC off. May stated that the townspeople “claimed that the VC had captured a young girl and they threatened to kill her unless the townspeople didn’t say anything and allowed them to set up mortars. We told them, you know, that’s once. If it happens again we will wipe you off the face of the earth.”

May’s recollection of events that night typifies many soldiers’ experiences in the war. American soldiers’ depiction of the South Vietnamese as Viet Cong sympathizers was another reason why they could not win the war. Threatening to “wipe them off the face of the earth” is no way to foster comradery, nor was the village’s agreeance to allow the VC to infiltrate the town. From this standpoint, the skepticism both the Americans and South Vietnamese felt towards one another is understandable.

Because it was a limited war, Muthersbaugh said there were more rules and regulations. Muthersbaugh recalled that his unit was not allowed to fire until they could identify that the fire

81 Dick May, Interview by Jessica Dirkson, Recorded Interview, Savannah, GA, October 16, 2017.
was unfriendly: “If its friendly I didn’t think they’d be shooting at us in helicopters.”\(^{82}\) “A lot of times, though,” he stated, “we didn’t go by the rules or we wouldn’t be around.”\(^{83}\) In addition to waiting for the enemy to make contact first, Craig Johnson recalled how it would take hours “for Washington to tell us we could finally [fire our weapons].”\(^{84}\) Johnson recounted an instance when their spotter plane was following 1,500 North Vietnamese troops, coming cross the Saigon River heading towards Saigon. “He picked them up at daylight. He ran out of fuel at 9 o’clock. We didn’t get approval until 11 o’clock. You can imagine 1,500 in uniform, North Vietnamese Regulars. We thought we were coming into 1,500 bad guys that all get bullets. We didn’t find them.”\(^{85}\)

The restrictions imposed on soldiers made it impossible for them to do what they viewed as necessary to win the war. “You know,” Dick May said, “war is not a nice thing. We ought not to go to war unless we go to war to win. In my opinion, politically, we never went to war to win in Vietnam. But it was a political battle. Too many rules of engagement, too many restrictions, too many this and that. And that was very hard on the troops.”\(^{86}\)

By the end of one’s tour, some soldiers had witnessed and committed atrocities, became aware of the contradictions of the war and succumbed to heightened demoralization. For many, the only thing that got them through their tour in Vietnam and gave them the will to continue fighting was the comradery they felt amongst one another, race aside. Many soldiers realized that the war they were fighting had no clear objective. Bill Cox remembered how his thoughts

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\(^{82}\) Carl Muthersbaugh, Interview by Jessica Dirkson, Recorded Interview, Savannah, GA, November 29, 2017.

\(^{83}\) Carl Muthersbaugh, Interview by Jessica Dirkson, Recorded Interview, Savannah, GA, November 29, 2017.

\(^{84}\) Johnson refers to Washington D.C. as being the reason for delayed action towards VC, but this is doubtful. Most likely the delay came from Corps HQ or possibly MACV. Craig Johnson, Interview by Jessica Dirkson, Recorded Interview, Savannah, GA, November 29, 2017.

\(^{85}\) Ibid.

\(^{86}\) Dick May, Interview by Jessica Dirkson, Recorded Interview, Savannah, GA, October 16, 2017.
changed in the war from wanting to win to wanting to survive. “I just remember thinking,” he said, “But why die? A lot of really good people are dying for nothing. And I think war is like that. And a lot of those guys that went didn’t want to go, and I remember thinking to myself ‘what have you gotten into now?’”

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87 Bill Cox, Interview by Jessica Dirkson, Recorded Interview, Savannah, GA, October 15, 2017.
CHAPTER III:
RETURNING STATESIDE

Vietnam veterans’ reception stateside remains a subject of contention. Media during and movies produced after the war depicted the deplorable way that American civilians treated Vietnam veterans. Actual accounts of reception vary. Some veterans vehemently attest to being accosted, spat upon, and jeered when they returned to the United States. Others describe their homecoming as a “non-event” – quietly “sneaking back” into society without any recognition, just as they had “snuck into” Vietnam.¹

In The Spitting Image, Jerry Lembcke sees the homecoming experience of Vietnam veterans as “grist for mythmaking.”² The actual reception of Vietnam veterans is debatable, but the unfortunate truth is that soldiers on the whole returning from Vietnam were not the most welcomed home in American history.³ During the 1960s and early 1970s, troops returned to a nation divided on the war in which they had served.⁴ Because American society was so divided on the war it was simply not capable of giving returning soldiers their due welcome home.

If society was not capable of giving soldiers their due, how exactly were they to be welcomed? As the United States had never lost a war, society wondered, how do we welcome home soldiers who served in a losing, controversial war? How do we welcome soldiers who return home as individuals, rarely as units? The complex nature of these

questions became apparent when soldiers returned from Vietnam. Some Americans felt guilty for sending them overseas, ashamed of the atrocities soldiers committed that were coming to light, and unsure of how to welcome back soldiers that the media portrayed so negatively.

Since the 1970s, American memory of the Vietnam War revolves around the reception of Vietnam veterans rather than the conflict itself. However, the details of who was doing what to whom, how and why, fade with time. Those of the so-called New Left of the 1960s maintained that they were friendly to returning soldiers. Many Vietnam veterans argue against this, recalling hatred and name-calling from anti-war protestors. Many veterans, when interviewed, telling their story in veterans’ groups, therapy, and other venues overwhelmingly claim that they returned to society feeling “unappreciated and alone.”

In 1972, the United States Senate conducted a study gauging veterans’ opinion about their reception. Of those polled, 99% of the veterans described their reception by loved ones as “friendly,” while 94% said their reception by non-military peers people was “friendly.” Only 3% of returning veterans described their reception as “not at all friendly.” Of the estimated 2.5 million men who served in Vietnam, this would leave roughly 75,000 veterans describing their reception as unfriendly. Most veterans returning from Vietnam saw their reception as satisfactory immediately after their return. Why, then, has it become such a topic of contention, with the number of negative recollections steadily increasing over time? Moreover, how does

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5 Veterans Administration, Myths and Realities, 36.
6 Lembcke, The Spitting Image, 77-78.
8 (US senate 1972, 13, 19).
9 (US senate 1972, 13, 19) and Lembcke, The Spitting Image, 75.
10 Lembcke, The Spitting Image, 77.
one explain the conditioning of Vietnam veterans to believe that they were accosted when they returned stateside?

Lembcke argues that the prevalence of the image of the spat-upon veteran altered Vietnam veterans’ memories. 11 The media and health professional’s creation and understanding of PTSD (Post Traumatic Stress Disorder) compounded the “false memory syndrome” that occurred initially after the Gulf War. The experience the Vietnam veterans had while in-country became as much of a political utilization tool as it is a medical condition. 12 Nixon’s belief that anti-war protestors were causing the defeat of the war morphed into an idea that the protestors were disloyal to the United States and military servicemen. 13 The myth of the spat-upon veteran has its origins with the Nixon administration.

Lembcke argues that the image of the spat-upon veteran originated with the Nixon administration and was expanded upon and solidified by the George H.W. Bush administration to garner support for the Gulf War and those being sent to fight in the Middle East. 14 By using the Vietnam veteran as a symbol of support for or against American foreign policy in the latter years of the Cold War, the media and US government made support for soldiers and support for foreign intervention synonymous. Lembcke’s argument suggests that the image of the spat-upon veteran is largely mythical, a by-product of post-war guilt over Vietnam and overcompensation of superficial patriotism towards those serving in the new All Volunteer Force in the 1990s. If such treatment happened, to Vietnam veterans returning home, he argues, it happened with much less frequency than what is popularly thought. 15

14 Lembcke, The Spitting Image, 2, 8.
15 Veterans Administration, Myths and Realities, 40.
Additionally, by focusing on the soldiers’ return from Vietnam, the topic of the war itself goes unacknowledged. From the creation of the myth of the spat-upon veteran and the blame given to the so-called New Left for the demoralization of troops and the loss of the war, a scapegoat emerged. Fabricating the myth of the spat-upon veteran left the real source of society’s troubles unacknowledged. The Vietnam War, not the soldiers, was the source of contention in American society. Due to society’s attention on Vietnam veterans rather than the war, the war itself went unexamined, and those spearheading American intervention were never held accountable. The myth of the spat-upon veteran gives an alibi to how “the most powerful and righteous nation on earth (as America perceives itself to be),” lost the war to Vietnam, an underdeveloped nation. Essentially, the myth states that the United States lost the war because of American leftists and journalists, rather than defeat by the North Vietnamese.

Given the passion of the times and the wide range of personalities attracted to the anti-war movement, it would be surprising if some activists did not direct their political emotions toward the men who fought the war. During the war and during the soldiers’ overseas tour Savannahians remained steadfast in their support of soldiers serving in Vietnam. Upon return to Savannah after their tour, veterans received a warm welcome. In addition to their immediate reception in Savannah, veterans assimilated back into civilian society, with many discovering that the easiest way to adjust to being back home in Savannah was to leave their service behind them.

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18 Ibid., 184.
19 This is ironic, because while they may have done this initially and for a few decades after returning home, now it’s all about their service and remembering their service – they have brought it back to the forefront of their existence today.
From Vietnam to the West Coast

When Joseph Carter, an African American, boarded the plane in Vietnam to leave after his tour of duty in 1967, he already sensed the racial divide resurfacing:

For a year we seen no white women. No Black women. So, when we crossed that tarmac and that door swung open on that airplane there were two nice looking young white women welcoming the troops. And some of those same guys that were maybe wearing your underwear, sharing their candy bars with you, their skin not the same color as mine, you could feel the division coming before we got on the plane. You could feel it coming. Everybody started getting really quiet when those two stewardesses came out. When I walked on that plane, everybody that looked like me was sitting in the back. Everybody that looked like you (white) was sitting in the front.20

After spending a whole year in an atmosphere more desegregated than anything he had known before, Carter returned to the stark racism and segregation he had left behind in Savannah. The return to racism for Carter held more of an impact than any other event that took place on his return to Savannah. Very quickly, he realized that the comradery amongst African Americans and whites he knew in-country had disappeared when he returned stateside. Carter began to question, “What was all of that for?”21

When Carl Muthersbaugh left Vietnam in 1967, he arrived in Seattle before heading home to Pennsylvania for a few weeks before going to Savannah to be stationed at Hunter Army Air Field. When Muthersbaugh arrived at the Seattle Tacoma International Airport after his flight to McCord Air Force Base, he was on military standby with other returning servicemen. When they were about to board the plane, a group of men returning from Korea took their place. As a result, Muthersbaugh recalled, “I bought a first-class ticket on that flight.”22 The woman at the counter tried to assure him that they would be on the next plane, but he would not hear it. He told

21 Ibid.
22 Carl Muthersbaugh, Interview by Jessica Dirkson, Recorded Interview, Savannah, GA, November 29, 2017.
his family he would arrive at a certain time and wanted to return home as soon as possible. Additionally, he voiced skepticism on the actuality of being given on the next flight. Buying the first-class ticket ensured he would be returning home, no matter the airline personnel’s qualms about his Vietnam veteran status.

All soldiers interviewed confirm that they were instructed to take off their uniforms and put their civilian clothes on before they reached the West Coast. Ed Wexler remembered that the explanation they received was something along the lines of, “there will be people at the airports and other places who might not welcome you back with open arms.” Wexler did not wear his uniform when returning in 1972, but said that the protestors could figure “you were military by your haircut, anyway.” Wexler, unlike many of his veteran counterparts, stated that “nobody ever accosted me or tried to spit on me.” He quickly added, “that’s not to say those things didn’t happen, we were just told we want you to get home safe and sound, put your uniform away, don’t wear it.” After serving their country and risking their lives, Wexler and other soldiers were understandably upset by being advised not to wear their uniform.

Many returning veterans were not aware of the extensive protesting that occurred during the war, thus being asked to change out of their uniforms did not make any sense. When returning soldiers were told “people don’t like the uniform around here anymore,” they felt unappreciated. Additionally, returning soldiers saw this as a way that civilians could easily turn a blind eye to the reality of the war. Paul Lyons argues that American society’s unwillingness to acknowledge the Vietnam veterans and their service was not out of hostility or contempt but rather out of a mixture of discomfort, guilt, and fear. “They didn't want to know what the

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21 Jerry Emsweller, Interview by Jessica Dirksen, Recorded Interview, Savannah, GA, November 27, 2017.
22 Ibid.
23 Ibid.
24 Ibid.
25 Roland Ferland, Interview by Jessica Dirksen, Recorded Interview, Savannah, GA, October 27, 2016.
war was really like; that would force them to come to terms with the illusion of their own insularity, their responsibilities as citizens in a democracy for the tasks assigned to those who served in their stead.”27 One of the easiest ways to remain ignorant about the war and those fighting it, it would seem, is to remove the military uniform, and thus the military community, from their sight.28

Most soldiers when returning to Savannah flew to Japan or Taiwan, then to bases in Hawaii, California, or Washington, and then finally to the East Coast. Decades of popular culture and public misperception have produced the common understanding that Vietnam Veterans returned to jeering crowds and assaults at airports, especially in San Francisco.29 The Savannahians interviewed here have varying memories of their reception. Those who remember experiences of hostility claim that they only occurred on the West Coast— not upon their return to Savannah. Those who had negative experiences claimed these occurred at airports. Due to the heavy number of soldiers discharged during the Vietnam War, Travis Airbase was at times full. This resulted in flights being diverted to the San Francisco International Airport and soldiers staying in San Francisco for a number of nights. Additionally, many soldiers who arrived on the West Coast were ending their military service altogether. As a result, many soldiers returning from Vietnam took commercial flights and other modes of transportation. These circumstances made it nearly impossible for returning soldiers to avoid interacting with the civilian population.

The negative experiences that veterans recalled on the West Coast occurred at the San Francisco International Airport and outside the gate of Travis Airforce Base. The presence of

28 Lembcke, on the other hand, argues that society was all too aware of the war. Soldiers were leaving for their tour while others were coming home, creating a constant circle of returns and departures. Emotions were heightened because of the sadness and anxiety surrounding departures, the pride and elation of safe returns, and the grief for the 58,300 who died and 300,000 that were wounded. Soldiers, therefore, returned to a society of divided emotions, unable to welcome them back wholeheartedly.
29 Lembcke, The Spitting Image, 36.
anti-war protestors outside Travis Air Field gates and around the San Francisco Airport compounded the confusion that soldiers had when superiors told them to change into civilian clothes. Joseph Carter remembered: “As a matter of fact, I didn’t even know anybody was objecting the war until I came back to the states. I didn’t even know there was protesting, you know.” Carter’s lack of awareness about the anti-war protesting stateside is not unique – others returning to Savannah including Roland Ferland and Doug Andrews were also unaware of the protesting.

While seemingly implausible, it is possible that they really did not know the extent of the anti-war protests from 1968 to the end of the war in January 1973. Besides letters from home, soldiers relied on hearsay and the *Stars and Stripes* for their news. Savannah did not experience any significant anti-war protests and it is possible that even if Savannahian families were aware of the protesting elsewhere, they would not include this in letters to avoid distressing their loved ones. As an official Department of Defense publication, *Stars and Stripes* is conservative and censored by the military. Those who had access to the newspaper recall reading articles on operations, soldiers who were KIA, and a few “fluffy” articles. The publishing of anti-war protests might only demoralize the troops.

Below are three accounts of Savannahian soldiers who claim that they returned to hostile interactions upon their return:

When returning from his second tour in 1972, Jim Vejar’s plane was diverted from Travis Air Force Base to the San Francisco International Airport. The airport staff had the returning soldiers wait in a separate lobby and Vejar, a major at that time, decided to let those who were discharged leave. Three hours later when the buses finally arrived, a sergeant came in asking

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where everybody had gone. When superiors arrived and told Vejar he was not allowed to make that decision and send them home, he responded with: “I’m not going to have these people sitting here with those people chanting out their Hare Krishnas and all that crap and people throwing stuff at you and spitting on you, I’m not going to have that when they come back from combat. So, I let them go.”31 By the time Vejar and the rest of the soldiers left on busses, “there was jeering and all that because we had drawn a crowd.”32

Dick May remembered coming back to San Francisco by himself on a commercial flight in June of 1967. He recalled: “I was greeted at the airport by a line of war protesters who spit on me and you know shouted baby killer and all the rest of this stuff. It was a degrading experience.”33

After landing at McCord Air Force Base, Rich Noel transferred to Seattle Tacoma International Airport and then to San Francisco before heading back to Savannah in 1972. With a couple of weeks before he was expected to report at Hunter Army Air Field, Noel wanted to go to San Francisco and see what was going on. He recalled:

After walking down the concourse three gentlemen accosted me. One of them tore the sleeve off my uniform and there was a policeman standing right there and he said something about, “you better go in that restroom and change clothes.” And I go, “well I'm not staying here.” So, I rebooked and I never even left the airport.34

Noel’s experience with adverse reception only occurred at the San Francisco Airport. “I didn't run into any of that in Kansas City, didn't run into it when I visited friends in Illinois. I didn't run into that in Savannah when I arrived.”35

31 Jim Vejar, Interview by Jessica Dirkson, Recorded Interview, Savannah, GA, September 27, 2017.
32 Ibid.
33 Dick May, Interview by Jessica Dirkson, Recorded Interview, Savannah, GA, October 16, 2017.
These three instances of harassment occurred at the San Francisco International Airport. Those who could or decided to leave the airport and go into the city itself, recall completely different interactions. Jerry Em sweller, for example, stated that the tension he felt at the airport was nonexistent once he was in downtown San Francisco. Em sweller recalled it was just like “any other city.” Em sweller and the three others who were staying with him frequented bars, walked around the city and conversed with locals without having any confrontation. Dan Rollf, who spent the evening of April 24, 1968, in San Francisco before his flight to Vietnam, recalled nothing but hospitality and warmth from those he encountered. The night that Rollf stayed in San Francisco was his 21st birthday, which he stated is the reason why he was given a pass from Travis to go into town. Rollf was in his military khakis and did not pay for one drink the entire night. He recalled: “They were very, very kind. And they knew I was going to Vietnam the next day. These older guys sat with me we played these old dice games and it was it was amazing. I got treated very, very well.”

Before Bill Cox came to Savannah in 1967, he spent time in San Francisco. He had friends who were “hippies and stuff” who knew that he had served in Vietnam. Cox stated that even before returning stateside, he became disillusioned with the war. After sitting and debating with his friends upon his return stateside in 1967, he recalled “I had come around to the point. I was still pro-military, but I could see that apparently what had happened. I became somebody that didn’t believe in the war.” While Cox’s view on the war changed, he did not participate in anti-war protests or marches. Even when surrounded by people against the war, he stated, “Even

36 Jerry Em sweller, Interview by Jessica Dirkson, Recorded Interview, Savannah, GA, November 27, 2017.  
37 Dan Rollf, Interview by Jessica Dirkson, Recorded Interview, Savannah, GA, October 18, 2017.  
38 Bill Cox, Interview by Jessica Dirkson, Recorded Interview, Savannah, GA, October 15, 2017.
in SF during all that stuff, I never really saw a big problem of people coming up and spitting on me. I guess if you got in the middle of it.”

The difference in attitude between the airport itself and the city of San Francisco could not be greater. One argument, although lacking in evidence, can be made that those who wanted to harass and spit at soldiers knew that those returning from Vietnam would pass through the airport, and hence would gather there. One can also argue that perhaps Emsweller, Rollf, Cox, and others who had pleasant encounters with San Franciscans were exceptionally lucky. Lembcke’s argument, in which the West Coast airports are so central to the myth of the spat-upon veteran, that that is where most recollections of hostility arise, is most sound. Hostile encounters between Vietnam veterans and American civilians was bound to happen due to divisive opinions American society had towards the war. Passionate feelings, anger, and lashing out would be no doubt misdirected at times, with returning soldiers being at the receiving end.

The accounts veterans give about their homecoming reception, however, must be contextualized to understand the reality of the social climate and where hostility was indeed most commonly directed.

Returning and Reintegrating in Savannah, Georgia

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39 Ibid.
40 While Bud Hunt did not arrive in Savannah until a couple of decades after the war ended, his time in Colorado shows how different his reception was than those returning to Savannah. After Bud Hunt returned from Vietnam in 1968, he returned to Colorado in 1969 to complete his masters’ degree in architecture at UC Boulder. “UC Boulder could not be more left leaning than any community you could imagine. What I found there were people who, who spoke as though they knew and accused me and others of atrocities that never occurred. That we never took part in.” The animosity by anti-war protestors at UC Boulder culminated in the spring semester when the university shut down because of the issues students had with the Vietnam War. “I was called upon because there was very few of us, four or five of us, that were called to sit in a group to answer questions from the students. And when they accused me of being a baby killer I couldn’t take it and I got up and I left. I never, never killed a child and I would not do that. But that’s what they believed, but I don’t know where they got that and I don’t care, but it was something that I could not stand and I left.” Other than the animosity and questions posed to him from fellow students, Hunt had “no reception. None.” Bud Hunt, Interview by Jessica Dirkson, Recorded Interview, Savannah, GA, November 22, 2017.
Vietnam veterans experienced a drastically different reception in Savannah than on the West Coast. As around the United States, Vietnam veterans were not given welcome home or victory parades in Savannah but did experience a much more appreciative community. Once in Savannah, soldiers reunited with family and friends, all of whom recall a positive experience.

The close-knit relationships that soldiers had in Savannah before their tours in Vietnam remained strong upon their return. When Ed Wexler returned to Savannah, he recalled: “it was a joyous day. There were no issues.”⁴¹ When asked if the Savannah community acknowledged his military service, he responded with “Yes, absolutely.” Doug Andrews returned to Savannah in 1967 to his wife Pam and their children. Andrews experienced no kind of adverse reaction when he returned stateside.⁴² He stated matter-of-factly: “even if the whole country was protesting the war, I wouldn’t have cared because my whole world was Pam and the kids.”⁴³

The presence of Fort Stewart and Hunter Army Airfield also contributed to the warm welcome soldiers experienced when returning from Vietnam. Roland Ferland recalled: “This is a good area to come back to because of Hunter and Fort Stewart. All the civilians here supported the military and the Vietnam effort. So, I didn’t have a conflict like a lot of other GIs coming back, encountering hatred.”⁴⁴ It is interesting to note that Ferland assumes that other soldiers encountered hatred upon their return home from Vietnam. Ferland’s assumption shows that the myth of the spat-upon veteran makes those who remember a warm welcome home the exception, rather than the usual – when, in fact, it was the opposite. Neill McDonald came to Savannah in 1968 after his service as a Warrant Officer I in the Army as a helicopter pilot for the 92nd Assault Helicopter Company. Neill was injured during his tour and came to Savannah after his

⁴³ Ibid.
⁴⁴ Roland Ferland, Interview by Jessica Dirkson, Recorded Interview, Savannah, GA, October 27, 2016.
rehabilitation at Fort Bragg. Neill recalled his first years here in Savannah: “I was treated no differently. Never ever, ever, felt that I was being treated any different than anybody else was being treated. I could feel no rejection because I was in the military.”45 McDonald’s sentiment of Savannah is echoed by both Jerry Emsweller and Rich Noel, who recalled that “Savannah has always supported the military and soldiers.”46

“Hunter was a godsend,” Doug Andrews said. “The pilots that came, they were flush with money.”47 In addition to soldiers’ service to the country, relationships between military and civilians grew due to the economic support that Hunter provided Savannah through civilian jobs and pilot spending. When Dan Rollf came to Savannah in 1969 he was an instructor pilot at Hunter. While his work at Hunter kept him busy for several hours a day, he remembered that “Savannah was one big party town. You had all these guys back from Vietnam that were pilots and officers were getting paid relatively decently. So, we all bought nice cars, that kind of stuff. I mean it was unbelievable. Girls could come in the gate and there was a party somewhere every single night.”48 Not only the spending of the soldiers was welcomed, but their company as well.

After the initial warm welcome by family and close friends, soldiers found themselves trying to reintegrate back into Savannah society. For many, this meant disassociating with the military and forgetting their tour in Vietnam altogether. When Jerry Emsweller returned to Savannah, he married his fiancé Lynda and put the war behind him. “I didn’t even talk to Lynda about it,” he stated.49 Emsweller remembered that the Savannah newspapers continued to reference the war, but his life went on. Similarly, Roland Ferland recalled: “The war ended in

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45 Neill McDonald, Interview by Jessica Dirkson, Recorded Interview, Savannah, GA, October 6, 2017.
46 Jerry Emsweller, Interview by Jessica Dirkson, Recorded Interview, Savannah, GA, November 27, 2017.
47 Doug Andrews, Interview by Jessica Dirkson, Recorded Interview, Savannah, GA, October 27, 2017.
48 Dan Rollf, Interview by Jessica Dirkson, Recorded Interview, Savannah, GA, October 18, 2017.
49 Jerry Emsweller, Interview by Jessica Dirkson, Recorded Interview, Savannah, GA, November 27, 2017.
May of 1968 when I DEROsd.” Like Emsweller, Ferland was aware of the news reports on the Vietnam War, but he thought to himself, “sos. Same old shit. Every day.” By the end of 1969, Ferland was off active duty. The army gave him the option to be a First Lieutenant or a W3 and he said he was not interested. Ferland enlisted in the military to fly helicopters, and he achieved that goal. The idea of spending more time in the military was not appealing, nor the possibility of going back to Vietnam. “Life just went on,” he said.

Many Vietnam veterans did not seek veterans’ organizations immediately after their return to Savannah. “It wasn’t the thing to do,” recalled Ed Wexler, “it was kind of like, let’s put this behind me.” For newly separated men from the military, entering veterans’ groups were not high on their list of priorities. Doug Andrews reported to the district attorney’s office for work the day after he left active duty. “I just put the Army behind me,” he recalled. Organizations like the American Legion and Veterans of Foreign Wars were something for World War II and Korean veterans to join, not those who participated in the Vietnam War. In addition to wanting to move on in life, those who did try to join organizations found themselves looked down upon by the other group members. Ray Gastor recalled that Vietnam veterans were considered “ragtag,” and not welcomed initially into the Savannah veteran community. The Savannah chapters of the American Legion and Veterans of America were wary of opening their doors to Vietnam veterans due to their unruly appearance and the media’s portrayal of them. The initial distance that veterans’ organizations made between themselves and those who fought

50 DEROsd is the acronym for “Date Estimated Return Over Seas.” Roland Ferland, Interview by Jessica Dirkson, Recorded Interview, Savannah, GA, October 27, 2016.
51 Ibid.
52 Ibid.
54 Doug Andrews, Interview by Jessica Dirkson, Recorded Interview, Savannah, GA, October 27, 2017.
55 Lifton, Home from the War, 35. Ray Gastor, Interview by Jessica Dirkson, Recorded Interview, Savannah, GA, October 12, 2017.
56 Lembcke, The Spitting Image, 78.
in Vietnam furthered their desire to move on with their lives in a direction other than the military.

One way veterans ensured that their lives after service moved in a positive direction was enrolling in college. Two veterans interviewed, Ed Wexler and Ray Gastor, took advantage of the GI Bill and took courses at Savannah’s Armstrong College. Ray Gastor completed his degree in 1971, and Ed Wexler completed his courses in 1972.\(^{57}\) While racial integration was well underway at Armstrong by the 1970s, Gastor recalled not having too many African Americans in his courses. Otis Johnson, one of the first African Americans to attend Armstrong was one of Wexler’s professors. Wexler recalled that Johnson “spent some time in the Navy so he was a Navy veteran. Interesting guy. [Johnson] provoked a lot of discussion because of certain viewpoints that he would espouse.”\(^{58}\) As a Navy veteran, Johnson had legitimacy with both veterans and civilian students when discussing America’s military history.

Although veterans were taking courses with civilians at Armstrong, strong relationships apparently did not develop. Gastor attributes this to his age rather than his status as a veteran. Gastor was twenty-nine when he finished his degree, seven or so years older than his fellow students. Wexler’s recollection mirrors that of Gastor, recalling a large number of veterans taking courses and that they “were just another student. Just a little older and a lot more mature.”\(^{59}\) Some found it difficult to establish relationships with other students because of their experiences in the military.

While a student at Armstrong, Gastor recalled many students constantly complaining about the difficulty of courses and the work they had to do. Gastor recalled, “I thought, well you

\(^{57}\) Ray Gastor, Interview by Jessica Dirkson, Recorded Interview, Savannah, GA, October 12, 2017.

\(^{58}\) Ed Wexler, Interview by Jessica Dirkson, Recorded Interview, Savannah, GA, September 20, 2017.

\(^{59}\) Ibid.
guys have no idea. Even today when problems happen, alright, no one was killed today, we
didn’t have to dive into a hole. It’s a shame it happened, but we go on. You learn to develop not
a survival mode, but a recovery mode. [Service overseas] put things into perspective.”

Motioning around his office at Gastor Lumber in Savannah, he said, “Here in my office I’ve got
a lot of plaques. That one there is the only one from Vietnam. The rest of them are for everything
after, for work. You just move on.”

The experiences that soldiers like Gastor encountered in Vietnam made most civilian
complaints and desires seem superficial. Bill Cox echoed Gastor’s perspective. Upon his return
to Savannah, he recalled: “I’d only been gone a year, but everybody was just so immersed in
things like getting a television or new car, stuff that meant absolutely nothing. When the question
was if you’re going to stay alive or be killed the next day, all you want is a full belly and to
finish your year [in Vietnam] and come home.”

Serving in the Vietnam War put things into a survival and recovery perspective for Cox, Gastor, and other Vietnam veterans. They viewed
many civilian problems or desires as trivial, and could not relate to many of Savannahian
civilians’ complaints.

African American veterans returning to Savannah were subject to additional issues. They
had to adjust to the racism that remained across Savannah society after experiencing
desegregation in the military. Many still had issues finding an occupation after their military
service. In a national poll, the unemployment rate for returning white veterans between the ages
of 20 and 24 was 5.4%, but for the comparable Black population, it was a whopping 33%. Both

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60 Ray Gastor, Interview by Jessica Dirkson, Recorded Interview, Savannah, GA, October 12, 2017.
61 Ibid.
62 Bill Cox, Interview by Jessica Dirkson, Recorded Interview, Savannah, GA, October 15, 2017.
Joseph Carter and Mitchell Lester remember the difficulties of finding a job, often denied work while a white applicant with less experience was hired. For example, Lester recalled:

I remember when I was trying to get a teaching job. They interviewed myself and another guy that was white. My qualifications and experience far exceeded his because he had just a college degree. I had experience and a degree. But I didn’t get the job. And that kind of frustrated me. Being Black and being a veteran didn’t mean much here in Savannah.

When Joseph Carter returned stateside, he recalled: “I was so angry when I got back here when I started finding out what was going on, the protests, you know. We started calling our uniforms monkey suits. I hung mine out there on the back fence till it disappeared, that’s the way I felt, and that’s the way I’ve been treated.” Carter realized upon his return to Savannah that racism was still rampant. Exasperated, he stated, “So what did I gain? You know? What did I gain? That’s what bothers me. Then you get back here and you’re still not welcome.” When Carter returned to the racism endemic across the South and no appreciation for his service, he could not help but think:

A lot of things changed for us that went over there. A lot of us had to leave home, a lot of us died, I got friends that are dead for those people. And for this country that is supposed to be ours. But nothing changed for me. I come back here I tried to get some things done, everywhere we went, doors closed in our face. Everywhere. I done what they asked me to do. But it’s still not better. I’m better than I was when I come back. I think I would have done better if I hadn’t had even went. That way I wouldn’t have known what a little taste of freedom was like.

Mitchell Lester echoes Carter’s frustration with the still-prevalent racism in Savannah. Lester recalled: “I just risked my life for this country,” he said. “I got wounded twice. But when I came back...
back it was just like I still didn’t matter.”\textsuperscript{69} Sage Brown, an African American who served two tours in Vietnam, remembered the anger he felt when he came back to Savannah: "Because I watched my blood run in the mud in the Republic of Vietnam, I have a right to full citizenship," Brown said. "After paying the cost to the country that's second only to dying for it, I'm not willing to tolerate any form of disparaging treatment."\textsuperscript{70} Returning to Savannah after experiencing interracial comradery overseas was difficult for many African Americans. This was compounded by their rightful frustration over risking their lives for a country that still treated them as second-class citizens. These factors affected the way that African Americans view and reflect upon the war.

The soldiers who returned to Savannah civilian life and those who chose to remain stationed at Hunter after their service in Vietnam all reflect on the war differently. After their initial return and adjustment period in Savannah, the directions their lives took varied. As many returned from their tour before the war itself ended, they found themselves learning about the ending of the war and the fall of Saigon alongside their civilian counterparts. The way in which Savannahian civilians, veterans, and soldiers took to the news was a result of how they perceived the war and the relationships they had with the military during the Vietnam War. Savannahian civilians and veterans alike found themselves grappling with “peace with honor,” and searching for ways in which to move on from the Vietnam War. The bitterness that the Vietnam War left in the minds of American civilians, in addition to the social unrest which soldiers returned, made society unwilling and unable to give veterans an extravagant welcome home. Most veterans saw

\textsuperscript{69} Mitchell Lester, Interview by Jessica Dirkson, Recorded Interview, Savannah, GA, November 17, 2017.
that the easiest way to assimilate back into Savannah society was to remain silent about the intricacies of their service in Vietnam.
CHAPTER IV:
SAVANNAH AFTER THE VIETNAM WAR

On January 23, 1973, President Richard Nixon announced “Peace with Honor” and the complete withdrawal of American troops from South Vietnam, including that all American POWs would return home.¹ The agreement on the return of American soldiers, some who were held captive for as long as seven years, gave hope to their families. In the Savannah Morning News, two articles were printed side-by-side: “POW Wives Suddenly Know Hope” and “Little Cheering Marks Signing.”² The placement of these two articles depicts Savannahians’ conflicting viewpoints towards the end of the American War in Vietnam. The ending, even though a defeat, meant that families and friends of those who were still in Vietnam would soon be reunited.

After the cease-fire agreement, rather than outward exclamations of joy, “doves and hawks, men and women, veterans and families of prisoners of war voiced an almost universal ‘Thank God it’s finally over.’”³ Wounded veteran Duffy Detweiler voiced the skepticism that many already felt immediately after President Nixon’s announcement: “I don’t know how it can be an honorable peace. I don’t think the war had any honor in it and there won’t be any peace. The whole country lost.”⁴ Civilian Jill Anderson said, “I’ll believe it when I see it.”⁵ Even President Nixon knew that the cease-fire was precarious, at best. “We got our prisoners coming back,” he told congressional leaders, and “a peace, however fragile. Which we have hopes will endure.”⁶

⁴ Ibid.
⁵ Ibid.
In March of 1975, the North Vietnamese launched the Spring Offensive against South Vietnam, rapidly capturing cities as they made their way South. By the beginning of April, it had become clear that it was only a matter of time before South Vietnam fell to the North. On April 6, 1975, the Savannah Morning News printed an article by local reporter Kent Ashworth. Titled, “The Quiet Side of War. Viet Vets Look Back,” the article focused on four local Vietnam veterans reflecting on their service and the recent events taking place in South Vietnam. Jesse Bailey, a sniper during his tour in Vietnam, stated: “South Vietnam would have been better off if what’s happening today had happened ten years ago. There would have been less heartaches on all sides.” Ron Fargason, who was stationed at Bin Hoa Air Force Base, lamented that he “had mixed feelings the whole time (he) was there. Still [does].” Echoing Fargason’s thoughts on the war, Wayne McReady reflected, “I thought at the time that it was right. But then I realized that the people were against us. We had South Vietnamese soldiers fighting with us in the day and fighting with the VC at night. The war is a total loss. It was all a waste of time and money. All the vets can look back and say, what the hell did we fight for?” Through the reflections of McReady, Lattore, Fargason, and Bailey, it is clear to see that Vietnam veterans were already questioning the legitimacy of the war and their service – even before the fall of Saigon.

On April 29th, with the defeat of South Vietnam imminent, the United States initiated Operation Frequent Wind, which airlifted the last Americans and many South Vietnamese refugees – roughly 7,000 people – to the safety of the 7th Fleet in the South China Sea. The mass exodus from Saigon and other South Vietnamese cities with heliports was chaotic. The

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8 Ibid.
9 Ibid.
10 Ibid.
scramble to leave South Vietnam and the ensuing terror was on TV news nightly. Newscasts in the United States showed panicked people scrambling onto roofs, pushing to get on board helicopters and desperately trying to keep their families together amidst the chaos. Many South Vietnamese civilians and ARVN who were sympathetic to the American cause in Vietnam knew their future was grim if they remained behind. Many Savannahian civilians and military members were particularly interested in the event due to the training of Southern Vietnamese pilots at Hunter Army Air Field and their sponsorships by Savannah families.

Les Wilkes served as an orthopedic surgeon for the Navy during the war on an aircraft carrier in the Atlantic and a Naval hospital in Charleston from 1967-1969 before moving to Savannah in 1971. Wilkes remembered the nightly news in images of the frantic departure of American nationals and South Vietnamese seeking refuge in the United States. He recalled: “It was a bad way to end it. I watched the videos so many times of those poor people trying to get out of Hanoi and climbing on those helicopters. It was awful. A lot of them got left behind. I don’t know what happened to them, but it wasn’t good.”

On April 29, 1975, President Gerald Ford announced that the fall of Saigon “closes a chapter in the American experience” after congress refused his request to send aid to South Vietnam. For many Americans, the Vietnam War was a distant conflict vaguely understood by civilian and military personnel alike. The relationship between the United States and the South Vietnamese was never close – in comradery or understanding. The headline on the front page of the Savannah Morning News on April 30, 1975, read: “South Vietnam Exodus: Hopes of

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Decade Vanish in Frantic Flight from Saigon.” The article stated, “The whole, frantic dash from Saigon by the Americans – and the bitter resentment of the thousands of Vietnamese who couldn’t go – seemed a sad but accurate reflection of what relations between Americans and Vietnamese had come to in the ten years.” Americans largely seemed to quietly accept the loss of the war and South Vietnam’s fall to communist forces. Joseph Carter did not remember any change when the war ended. He recalled: “I don’t think there was a whole lot of hoopla, I don’t think that happened. Of course, as far as I can remember, I think most people didn’t realize it was over.” Even though there was no great celebration or acknowledgment of the ending of the war, Carter was thankful it had finally ended. He said, “I was just glad that nobody else would die. No other home would be getting bad news. That was my thing. Thank God. I was hoping that everybody over there would have a safe journey home and that the last bullet had been fired.”

The conflict had grown distant, confusing, and separate from American everyday life, as shown in the “lack of hoopla,” as described by Carter. It is no surprise then, that William Ehrhart, a Vietnam veteran, wrote in 1977:

Eight years after I went to Vietnam to prevent the Domino Theory from tumbling into San Diego, the fall of South Vietnam to the communists was reported on the six o’clock news with hardly more impact than the story of a bad fire in Cleveland. The lives of Americans were not altered in any way. Kids continued to play ball in the park, mothers and fathers went to work, and all America geared up feverishly for the bicentennial celebration.

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16 Ibid.
18 Ibid.
Past American wars appeared more clear-cut, usually victorious, and fought for a clear purpose. Having a war or conflict end not in victory but with “Peace with Honor,” as President Richard Nixon stated, brought little closure or celebration. Ehrhart remarked in his essay, “My grandfather’s generation fought in the war to end all wars. My father’s generation fought in the war to rid the world of fascists. My generation fought in Vietnam to – to what?” The confusion and frustration evident in Ehrhart’s comments were commonplace in many (but not all) Vietnam veterans.

Soldiers’ relief to return stateside was countered by the absence of a formal welcome home. Savannahians found themselves grappling with Nixon’s “peace with honor,” questioning just how America lost the war, and how to move on with their lives.

“Peace with Honor:” Savannahian Veterans and Civilians Reflect

Rarely did American veterans question the ‘rightness’ of what they had been asked to do. American soldiers and civilians blamed the defeat on numerous outlets: politicians, the Vietnamese, and the lack of home front support. The most popular strategic criticism focuses on upon the flaws of limited war, which left soldiers with “one hand tied behind their backs.” According to the 1980 Myths and Realities Survey by the Veterans Administration, 47% of the public and 72% of Vietnam era veterans agree that “our troops were asked to fight in a war which our political leaders…would not let them win.” Among those who experienced combat duty in Vietnam, 82% agreed that had been the case. When interviewed, Savannah veterans seem to agree that the United States suffered defeat because of politicians and the unwillingness

20 Ehrhart, In the Shadow of Vietnam, 119.
21 Appy, Working Class War, 262.
22 DeGroot, A Noble Cause, 255.
23 DeGroot, A Noble Cause, 255.
of the South Vietnamese. Joe Mitchler recalled “Congress stopped us from winning the war. People did want to fight the war, and we pulled out. Some people think we abandoned the South Vietnamese, but it was all congress.” Clark Namias stated, “I think a dollar to a donut would tell you if they let the military handle it instead of politics we could have done it. And not all these people got hurt.” When Jerry Emsweller remembered seeing war protests on television during the late sixties and early seventies. He said, “the protestors made us all (military servicemen) mad. They didn’t know what they were talking about and they thought they did. Newspapers were just political build out, why we went over there and how we came back and won the war. We didn’t win the war. It would have been over in two months or so if politics hadn’t been involved in it.” This argument is popular among conservative veterans and civilians alike, as it allows imagining a scenario in which the United States’ victory was possible.

While popular, this argument is flawed. Central to the argument of Congress’ blame is that inability for the military to wage complete warfare. Andrew Krepinevich, a defense policy analyst and retired Army lieutenant colonel, argues that the United States lost the war because it tried to fight the war in the parameters of the contemporary strategy of annihilation rather than adopting an effective counterinsurgency strategy. The strategy that the United States assumed to be acting upon was fighting with big unit engagements.

Gregory Daddis, in his groundbreaking work *Westmoreland’s War*, counters Krepinevich and others who view the war as simply another implementation of annihilation strategy. Daddis discusses how General William Westmoreland, commander of the United States Military Assistance Command (MACV) from 1964-1968, attempted to instill a strategy that was more

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26 Jerry Emsweller, Interview by Jessica Dirkson, Recorded Interview, Savannah, GA, November 27, 2017.
applicable to the Vietnam War than previous conventional conflicts.\textsuperscript{29} MACV incorporated new ideas on countering local insurgencies, on the potential of civic rather than military action, and on the importance of gaining some semblance of political support from the population, but all with only modest results.\textsuperscript{30} Factors outside of the Army’s purview often smothered attempts that Westmoreland made to construct a viable strategy.\textsuperscript{31} Westmoreland failed not because of his own accord, or “because of some blind faith in attrition but rather because of incongruities within the widely held conviction that US military power could remedy social and political ills abroad.”\textsuperscript{32} 

Given the constraints by politicians and the temptation of waging all-out warfare in Vietnam, it is no surprise that soldiers recount events under the assumption that they were operating under the strategy of annihilation without the ability to destroy the enemy and win the war. Dan Rollf, when deployed from 1968-1969, realized the futility of conventional warfare. He recollected:

> When I was there, it didn't make any sense to me. And everybody else with me. I mean we could have won that war. But that's not what we were doing. And we flew in a free fire zone. So, we would clear out a huge area and then we would move over this huge area to clear that area and then we move back over this huge area we cleared that area and we moved back over this huge area. So that's all we did. It was like we had no goal to end anything.\textsuperscript{33}

Instead of using big unit warfare and massive American firepower against the VC and NVA, which had little bearing on the eventual outcome, the United States could have concentrated more on bringing security to the peasantry, thus allowing the South Vietnamese army and government to stabilize. To fight an insurgency required subtlety, stealth, and patience. Americans instead applied raw power. They had some success, but “it was a success similar to

\textsuperscript{30} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{31} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{32} Ibid., 90.
\textsuperscript{33} Dan Rollf, Interview by Jessica Dirkson, Recorded Interview, Savannah, GA, October 18, 2017.
that of the man who burns down his house in order to rid it of termites.”

Complete destruction by aerial assault resulted in countless Vietnamese casualties. Death and razing of homes by friendly fire “is an event that will always be remembered and practically never forgiven by those members of the population who lost their homes.”

Gerard DeGroot argues that “defeat was inevitable not because of strategic failures, but because America backed an ally which had no future in Vietnam.” Bill Cox recalled how ironic the said mission was in Vietnam versus the destruction that was inflicted upon the civilians. This dichotomy is what lead Cox and other soldiers to become veterans against the war. Dan Rollf, like many other Americans during their tour realized that the South Vietnamese people were less concerned with communism or capitalism and more concerned with having a unified country under Vietnamese rule. “The average person lived with a dirt floor,” Dan Rollf recalled. “In Vietnam, they didn't care who was running the country. They just wanted it to be over.”

Bill Cox, as well, recalled: “South Vietnamese would have been happy if we weren’t there. When I got there (Vietnam) I didn’t meet a lot of people that wanted to fight. They were drafted into their army as well. We pull out and the people we left that were friends to us were left for the vultures to pick them up.”

In addition to searching for an explanation for why America lost, Savannah veterans and civilians found themselves questioning American intentions in South Vietnam and their support or opposition to the war. Savannah civilians’ sentiment towards the war changed when more information became available to the public and through veterans’ accounts of their tours in

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37 Dan Rollf, Interview by Jessica Dirkson, Recorded Interview, Savannah, GA, October 18, 2017.
38 Bill Cox, Interview by Jessica Dirkson, Recorded Interview, Savannah, GA, October 15, 2017.
Vietnam. As support for the war dissipated, Savannah civilians still supported the soldiers overseas and those who returned stateside.

Dick May never questioned his service, but upon his return to Savannah his thoughts on the war effort changed. He recalled: “after I came back and listened to all the politics that were involved in it I started questioning the service. … I felt very proud about what we had done and we I came back and listened to the stories of the politics that were going on and everything else then you get disillusioned.” 39 After his service as an Army Military Policemen in Benwai Province in 1968, Bud Hunt believed that even during the war, soldiers who were fighting in Vietnam were not there to uphold American prestige, or even create a democracy for the South Vietnamese people. Hunt said, “Did we go there to win a war? No. We went there to save our brothers and sisters that were next to us. We did everything we could.” 40

The safety of their comrades, their primal group, was the main goal of many soldiers who fought in Vietnam. Upholding the prestige of the United States and winning the war was an afterthought for those interviewed. The notion of comradery between soldiers has always been steadfast throughout all wars, but the idea that troops did not fight for their country, however, was not. Individual and primal group safety for many Savannahians outweighed aspects of Southern honor such as ideology and fighting for the American cause. As soldiers realized that the war cause was unjust, and their service was questionable, many reverted to the narrative of fighting for one another. Even if the war was lost, their honor remained in-tact because they supported their community, maintained their masculinity, and continued to fight in adverse conditions. This narrative allows the reasons for the war and defeat to go unacknowledged.

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40 Bud Hunt, Interview by Jessica Dirkson, Recorded Interview, Savannah, GA, November 22, 2017.
How the Savannah community welcomed both veterans and South Vietnamese refugees point to the acceptance of defeat and the desire to move on. Miriam Center and her husband Leo, who hosted two Vietnamese pilots training at Hunter during the war, found themselves sponsoring Huong once again, this time with his wife and daughter. After fleeing South Vietnam, the Nguyen family came back to Savannah to start their new life.\footnote{Debby Luster, “Refugees Face Dilemma,” in \textit{Savannah Morning News}, July 18, 1975. “Nguyen Ngoc Huong, a Vietnamese refugee living in Savannah with his wife Teh.” The second person Center hosted was a POW for a number of years and now lives in Texas. She does not remember his name. Miriam Center, Interview by Jessica Dirkson, Recorded Interview, Savannah, GA, October 16, 2017.} Once the family was on their feet, Miriam and her husband found the Nguyens an apartment of their own. Miriam recalled, “all my friends and real estate agents came. We all brought sheets and pots and pans and set them up.”\footnote{Miriam Center, Interview by Jessica Dirkson, Recorded Interview, Savannah, GA, October 16, 2017.} Miriam is now the godmother of Huong and Teh’s daughter, Barbara. “Leo got Huong a job at the police department and he became head of an inspection unit.”\footnote{Bob and Alice Clark attempted to maintain contact with the South Vietnamese pilots they hosted, but with much less success. The Clark’s attempted to send all six of those they hosted Christmas gifts, one was returned to sender, and the rest they received no response for. Robert Clark, Interview by Jessica Dirkson, Recorded Interview, Savannah, GA, October 16, 2017.} The relationship between the Centers, the Savannah community, and Huong, a former pilot trained at Hunter, was fostered during the Vietnam War and continued after its end.

Ray Gastor remembered that many people in Savannah empathized with both American soldiers and South Vietnamese. “Most people thought, it's just terrible what you are all going through,” he stated. “Hate the war but love the people that served.”\footnote{Miriam Center, Interview by Jessica Dirkson, Recorded Interview, Savannah, GA, October 16, 2017.} Both Vietnam veterans and South Vietnamese – be they pilots like Huong or civilians like his wife Teh, all suffered through the war.
Miriam Center stated that other than the understanding that the war was over, “I don’t remember any big recognition or welcoming. It just faded in and faded out.” Although most Savannahians swept the war under the rug, the sympathy for veterans and South Vietnamese returning to Savannah remained. “I guess we all just felt sympathy for them and their situation,” said Robert Clark. Rather than seeing the Vietnam War as simply defeat, it became an individualized loss for the soldiers and those caught in the crosshairs of combat. Savannahians were more upset by the loss of life and the turmoil that their loved ones encountered overseas than by America’s defeat. A Vietnam veteran declared Vietnam was much “like the Confederacy, . . . a lost cause.” Savannah civilians and veterans alike were not entirely free of doubt about the nature of the war and the American role in it. As a group, they retained the gnawing suspicion that it was all for nothing.

**The Lasting Effects of the Vietnam War**

Over the past fifty years, the Vietnam War and its aftermath have been one of the most studied topics among scholars, journalists, and even veterans. It is remarkable how soldiers adapted to post-war life given physical, psychological, and moral difficulties of the war in addition to the climate of American society when they returned. For many Savannah veterans and civilians, the Vietnam War is still a topic and event that elicits acute emotions. When asked about the lasting impact of the Vietnam War on veterans, Savannahian Julia Carter stated:

> The minds and hearts of the men and women that gave their all for this country, not knowing what they were going to do and they had a great impact on their life, that they’ll take to the grave. Some people will never ever be able to sit down and talk about the experience. You have some people that are still in Vietnam.

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45 Miriam Center, Interview by Jessica Dirkson, Recorded Interview, Savannah, GA, October 16, 2017.
46 Robert Clark, Interview by Jessica Dirkson, Recorded Interview, Savannah, GA, October 16, 2017.
48 Ibid., 36.
Because their minds wouldn’t bring them back here. When you’re around people and you get to talking and they drop their head, that lets you know there is something there that hurts inside of them that they will never get over. A scar that will never be healed that they didn’t inflict themselves. They were giving of themselves but they were left with something that they can’t get rid of.  

Carter’s reflection on the war’s impact could not be more fitting for those who returned to Savannah. Veterans returned stateside with deep psychological wounds that also affected those around them. When Jim Vejar returned home after his first tour in Vietnam, he could immediately tell his familial relationships had changed. Vejar recalled: “My daughter turned to her mother, my wife, and said, ‘do you think he would mind if I sat in his lap?’ Think about that for a minute. That’s your own kid. You think he – not dad. It just set the whole thing.”

Strains on familial ties did not end with reintroductions. Many veterans found themselves unable to foster or maintain relationships with loved ones: “Falling in love, or feeling oneself close to that state, could be especially excruciating – and exciting glimpse of a world beyond withdrawal and numbing, but also a terrifying prospect.” Veterans saw the possibility of a grounded relationship as something doomed to end. Many veterans chose to remain numb and simply block out all emotions to avoid the risk of pain and suffering. Numerous Savannah veterans interviewed have gone through divorces and the inability to feel close or intimate with their partner. The number of veterans who attribute their divorce to their military service is minimal, but those such as Dan Rollf and Bill Cox see how they are easily connected. Rollf and Cox both saw how PTSD and their desire to smother all emotions – for fear of showing any “bad” emotion – effected their relationships. Alcohol abuse, lack of intimacy, fits of anger, and severe depression are just a few symptoms exhibited by Savannah veterans.

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50 Julia Carter, Interview by Jessica Dirkson, Recorded Interview, Savannah, GA, November 22, 2017.
51 Jim Vejar, Interview by Jessica Dirkson, Recorded Interview, Savannah, GA, September 27, 2017.
52 Lifton, *Home from the War*, 271.
Many Savannah veterans found comfort in the bonds that they formed with fellow veterans. Dan Rollf recalled that when he returned to the states, his friendships with non-servicemen changed drastically. He stated: “there were a lot that never went to Vietnam, never served in the military, they had no clue what you were talking about. To me, some of their problems and issues were so juvenile, why would I want to get involved in that? I have my own issues.” In stark contrast to this, the relationship he fostered with three other pilots while in Vietnam continued to thrive. “Thank God all three of us made it. We were, and are, very, very close.” Soldiers returning from Vietnam tended to remain close to those whom they served with or others who were on base with them after their tour. They found comfort in the idea that they all fought in the war together, came home together, and had to readjust to society together. “We were all in the same boat,” recalled Joseph Carter.

Due to the fear that speaking openly and honestly about their experiences would cause discomfort, many veterans tried to forget the war. During his interview after telling a particularly harrowing combat mission, Dan Rollf stated, “I mean, I can’t talk to anybody about this. About my experiences.” The inability to talk about war experiences resulted in many veterans feeling alienated and alone. By attempting to bury the unresolved emotions and memories from the war, many times this would come out in indirect, unpredictable, dangerous, and self-destructive ways: sudden flashes of anger, hard-drinking or drug use, panic attacks, extreme distrust, inability to care about anything or anybody. In fact, the Veterans’ Affairs refused to acknowledge or put forth data on the psychological effects the Vietnam War had on soldiers. Ten years after the war

53 Dan Rollf, Interview by Jessica Dirkson, Recorded Interview, Savannah, GA, October 18, 2017.
54 Dan Rollf, Interview by Jessica Dirkson, Recorded Interview, Savannah, GA, October 18, 2017.
56 Dan Rollf, Interview by Jessica Dirkson, Recorded Interview, Savannah, GA, October 18, 2017.
57 Appy, Working Class War, 320.
ended, the VA eventually conceded that around 500,000 veterans (specialists who work with struggling veterans estimate that this number could be two or three times higher) suffered from Vietnam Delayed Stress Syndrome, now referred to as PTSD.\(^{58}\)

Robert J Lifton stated that many veterans initially avoided the VA because “they associated it with the war-military-government establishment, with the forces responsible for a hated ordeal, or with their suspicion that VA doctors are likely to interpret their rage at everything connected with the war as no more than their own individual problem.”\(^{59}\) Lifton published his work in 1973 – before the Vietnam War was over, and before the VA formally recognized PTSD. Vietnam veterans were unwilling to come forward due to the fear of being another “crazy Vietnam veteran.”

Many Savannah veterans who suppressed their emotions, outbursts, and thoughts about the war generally attribute this to keeping a busy mind. Employment became a common focal point in their lives. Now, fifty years later, many find themselves retired with nothing but time on their hands to think about Vietnam. For many, such as Carl Muthersbaugh, retirement has resurfaced emotions and memories he suppressed for so long. He remembered, “In 2005 when my mind wasn’t busy. That’s when I started having flashbacks and going and getting counseling.”\(^{60}\) During his interview, Carl recounted one of his flashbacks:

I won’t go into detail, but I had dreams, and I could see em just like a video and I was right there. The rice paddy was green, I had a buddy, he was a crew chief that got killed. We were the first ones, picking up a general. Flying with another crew chief because my aircraft was in maintenance and I was flying as his gunner and we got the call there were three of us came in. We all had lunch together and my good friend I went on R&R with, Dennis Yates from Philadelphia, I was the last one to leave. Yates aircraft went and they had something to do, and Seestrom, his

\(^{60}\) Carl Muthersbaugh, Interview by Jessica Dirkson, Recorded Interview, Savannah, GA, November 29, 2017.
The aircraft was doing touch and goes because they were training a Korean pilot how to fly the aircraft. Which I don’t think was legal but our pilots were doing it. He was the crew chief but he didn’t have to go on the aircraft. And he went on the aircraft. He had five children and a wife. Well, they took off, and just got out to come back to Lane and the pitch changed and went up through the rotor. And they crashed and burned. And the aircraft went in a well right close to our base. And we were at the Korean compound and pick up the general. We were hovering, and I see my buddy cut in half, laying in the rice paddy. I found one part of him. The rest I couldn’t find. He didn’t get burned up, the pilot and the Korean were burned up. And uh, then they had to go to search for the rest of Seestrom’s body. I never forget about it. He was married with 5 kids and didn’t have to fly. He was from LA, CA. The pilot that crashed, he was getting ready to leave for his last days before he ETS’d back to the States. And he was doing this to have something to do, and he got killed. But then I started visualizing stuff again when I was not working or doing anything. But there was so many things I seen when I was first there that come up. Two aircraft come together midair, and they blew up, and crashed and went all over. When I got to that site, that was my first one. That’s when I started learning about death and how to deal with it. No crew chief or gunner because the fuel tanks were under where we were sitting. Just the front of the helicopter and the two guys were charged and bent over, and the pilot had a wedding band on.61
Carl and his wife say that the cure or at least treatment of his flashbacks is the counseling and the move to a smaller-knit community in Savannah. His wife recalled: “The move here was wonderful with Carl because we have a great neighbor. They do things, and the military community is great. They know what he went through. They feel what he feels.”62

Ray Gastor, who was an initial member of the Savannah Vietnam Veterans of America (VVA) chapter, remembered trying to get Vietnam veterans to join in the mid-1980s. Many who fought in Vietnam were not ready to associate with the military or the government, for a variety of reasons. The beginning of Savannah’s Vietnam veterans’ marches in 1987 can be attributed to the completion of Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington D.C. in 1982. The memorial brought about national recognition for the conflict and those who fought in Southeast Asia.

61 Ibid.
Additionally, the support for troops deployed in the Middle East made many remember the lack of outward support for Vietnam veterans returning stateside. American cities and towns held parades and ceremonies upon the return of those held in the US embassy in Tehran. The extravagant welcome home for the hostages posed a question to many Americans: why do hostages receive accolades when Vietnam veterans did not?63

The return of the hostages, the garnering of support for the troops deployed for the Gulf War in 1990, and the myth of the spat upon Vietnam veteran created an atmosphere for the emergence of support and acknowledgement for Vietnam veterans. By 1991 when the Gulf War had ended and the veterans were returning home to formal recognition, the number of Vietnam veterans looking for recognition in Savannah increased. “The whole dynamic changed,” Gastor recalled. “People realized we need to be doing something for these Vietnam vets.”64

During their marches, there were never catcalls or shouts of “baby killer.” “Savannah has always been supportive of its vets,” Gastor said.65 Interestingly, Gastor was the only veteran interviewed here that remembered an account of Savannah’s adverse reaction to Vietnam veterans. Additionally, it came from a pro-war veteran who was a member of the American Legion or the VFW (Veterans of Foreign Wars). Gastor recalled during the first or second year the Vietnam veterans marched: “We were getting ready and lined up and I think he was a lawyer or business man, he said ‘Ray, you need to be with us, not with them. You know, you look over there and they kind of looked like a rag tag outfit.’” Ray responded with, ‘Yeah, but those are the guys that covered my ass when I was in Vietnam. But thanks, I’ll consider it.’ Which means no.

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64 Ray Gastor, Interview by Jessica Dirkson, Recorded Interview, Savannah, GA, October 12, 2017.
65 Ibid.
was trying to be nice, Savannah style." Lembcke argues that through the support of national veteran surveys and interviews, that much of the hostility narrative derived from pro-war associations and veterans’ groups in addition to radical counterculture groups. Most documented antagonism was aimed at Vietnam veterans who no longer supported the war or who had taken on the outward appearance of a stereotypical hippie. Gastor’s singular recollection supports this statement.

After a couple of years, the Vietnam Veterans of America (VVA) chapter in Savannah began marching in matching khakis and t-shirts. Later, they added matching jackets with various patches pertaining to their service and the chapter. The uniformity of the chapter brought about more acceptance by the other veterans’ groups in Savannah.

Paul Sines, who helped found the Savannah chapter of the VVA, was concerned about that immediate lack of interest from Vietnam vets. Gastor told him: “Don’t worry, later on, as these guys get older, they are going through a time in their lives and they’ll realize that their service to their country in Vietnam was one of the more important things that happened in their life. They came home and hopefully, they are whole, not many were, and we will have more of them join us.”

In 1979, the Council of Vietnam Veterans changed its name to the Vietnam Veterans of America. By the mid-1980s, the VVA was establishing programs and services that appealed to Vietnam veterans and their families: legal counsel, psychological support groups, substance abuse reform programs, and many others. The VVA’s legislative victories include the

66 Ibid.
68 Ray Gastor, Interview by Jessica Dirkson, Recorded Interview, Savannah, GA, October 12, 2017.
establishment and extension of the Vet Center system, passage of laws providing for increased job-training and job-placement assistance for unemployed and underemployed Vietnam-era veterans, the first laws assisting veterans suffering from Agent Orange exposure, and landmark legislation permitting veterans to challenge adverse VA decisions in court.\textsuperscript{70} The increase in the desire to talk about their service and receive recognition, and the progress that the VVA has made over the years has brought about an increase in the number of Vietnam veterans joining the VVA chapter in Savannah. The benefits and legislative success of the VVA drew in more members, donations, and interest from the community.

Many veterans, years after their service, found solace in veteran organizations such as the VVA and other outlets to ease their qualms about the past, in addition to the benefits stated above. Being surrounded by other veterans and a community that respects and appreciates the military has been helpful for numerous Savannah veterans. Edward Myers Williams had panic attacks when he returned stateside. “I never knew what it was,” he said, “I always kept it a secret. I thought, ‘man I’m crazy. I’m losing my mind.’”\textsuperscript{71} What helps Williams the most is when he is surrounded by other Vietnam veterans here in Savannah. “I feel better around a vet. ‘Cause we can share and relate to one another.”\textsuperscript{72} Williams met Mitchell Lester in the group meeting at VVA Savannah Chapter 671. The bond that they have together, along with the other veterans in their group, allows them to feel comfortable and at ease. Even though they may not speak about the war or their experiences often, there is an understanding of one another. Veterans such as Roland Ferland, who mostly keep to themselves regarding civilian society, maintain contact with other servicemen because of their similar background and experiences.

\textsuperscript{70} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{71} Edward Williams, Interview by Jessica Dirkson, Recorded Interview, Savannah, GA, November 17, 2017.
\textsuperscript{72} Ibid.
Joseph Mitchler, the president of Savannah’s VVA Chapter 761 who served in Thailand from 1966-1967 with the Air Force, firmly believes that the group is beneficial to the veterans. “As far as color? Color doesn’t matter to these guys. As far as politics, we don’t have politics here. Now we have had some small instances where, you know, as white people we all have our upbringing to deal with.” Even with small rifts, the VVA is a source of comradery like what many had during their service.

Jerry Emsweller joined veterans’ groups after his wife passed away in 2009. “Two days after she died I got into Vietnam Vets [VVA],” he recalled. Emsweller was drawn to the organization because it is “a different kind of family” and he desired to be a part of the comradery amongst vets once again. Clark Namias joined veterans’ organizations for the comradery, as well. Being with veterans who have experienced similar circumstances in Vietnam with the loss of friends has helped him come to terms with the events more than speaking with a social worker. “We all just sit around there and yak about our problems,” Namias said about his CPT therapy. Speaking with the veterans has helped him realize that maybe Steve’s suicide in Vietnam was not his fault. Through conversation, Namias now sees it as a 50-50 fault, whereas before he felt fully at blame. The importance of comradery and being around those who understand one another has helped some veterans finally accept and move on from their past.

Other veterans, such as Ed Wexler, joined organizations in Savannah for different reasons. Wexler recalled. “I felt an obligation almost to try to help veterans who had a whole lot rougher time in the military than I had.” Wexler was stationed in Thailand during the Vietnam

74 Jerry Emsweller, Interview by Jessica Dirkson, Recorded Interview, Savannah, GA, November 27, 2017.
75 Ibid.
76 Clark Namias, Interview by Jessica Dirkson, Recorded Interview, Savannah, GA, November 20, 2017.
War and had no negative reception when he returned stateside. He understands that those who fought in the Vietnam War and who had a negative reception upon their return to the States were affected differently by their service. These differences, in general, do not subtract from the feeling of comradery in veterans’ groups.

Veterans organizations allow veterans to feel understood and accepted for who they are. The sheer number of veterans and veteran organizations in Savannah alone show the significance and large role that each play in shaping and maintaining veterans’ communities. Roughly 9.5% of the population in Chatham County are veterans.78 Within the Chatham county, there are 33 veteran organizations – including five American Legion posts.79 The number of veterans and organizations show the interest and support of the military and those who have served. Savannah’s hospitable and accepting nature towards veterans has helped heal the psychological wounds that so many received during the Vietnam War. The relationships forged between Savannah veterans and civilians allowed the Savannah community to begin to understand the complexity of the war and move forward with their lives.80

80 In addition to psychological wounds, many deployed to Vietnam and the surrounding countries returned to the United States with physical injuries. Most notably besides combative wounds were the reactions to Agent Orange. Agent Orange was an herbicide and defoliant chemical used during the Vietnam War to clear away foliage obstructing the operations of the United States military. Numerous Savannah veterans have health issues because of this. Issues include but are not limited to: kidney failure, diabetes, respiratory issues, cancer. As this is not unique to Savannah, the implications of this have been left out.
CONCLUSION

By focusing on Savannah, its citizens, and its Vietnam veterans, an understanding of how the city’s population felt during the Vietnam era emerged. This thesis has argued that the contemporary assumption of the South as a stronghold for American foreign policy is flawed. Savannahians, like their national counterparts, became aware of the war’s ambiguous nature and questioned its necessity. While Savannahian support for the conflict dissipated, their support for soldiers did not falter. The support that the Savannah community gave the military is seen in the confident way Savannah veterans are proud of their service to the country, even though they, too, saw the war as a “lost cause.”

The positive way Vietnam veterans view their service correlates with the acceptance and support they received in Savannah. Savannah civilians and military servicemembers alike were subject to Southern honor. Over the course of the war, one’s motivation to engage in combat was linked to ideology, upholding American and Southern values, primal group connections, and individual survival. These factors are also prevalent in Southern honor, and the complexity of the war challenged Savannah soldiers’ honor and understanding of what they fought for. Primal group connections and individual survival were the most apparent combat motivating factors for many who fought in the latter years of the war. For many, comradery and the support of one another were the most important reasons to continue fighting.

The Savannah community was an ideal place for soldiers not only because of the South's recognition of military service as honorable employment, but also because of the relationships fostered and economic support the military brought to the city. Due to the presence of Hunter Army Airfield in Savannah, locals were in constant contact with military servicemen. Additionally, the economic support through pilot spending and the hiring of civilians on the base bolstered the Savannah economy, thus fostering a strong appreciation for the military’s presence. By returning to Savannah, a city that appreciated them for their military service and their presence, soldiers were given support and respect.

African American and Caucasian soldiers alike view their service with intense emotions of pride and loss. African American Savannahians see their tour in Vietnam as a time where they were complete citizens. For all African American Vietnam veterans interviewed, their tour was the first time in their lives they experienced reduced racism and equality with whites. Returning to Savannah was frustrating due to the atmosphere of racism. However, the veterans remain steadfast in their belief that if there was animosity toward them, it was because of race – not because of their military service.

Although the Vietnam War ended in 1975, it is not merely a memory. The war is a fundamental part of our history and, therefore a fundamental part of who and what we are. Christian Appy argues that lost knowledge must resurface and be interpreted and established myths disassembled to move forward as individuals and as a country. Two of the main myths that this thesis looked to disprove are the myth of the spat-upon veteran and the myth that the lack of support for the war caused the United States’ defeat. By using sources such as Jerry Lembcke’s *The Spitting Image*, it becomes clear that those returning to Savannah who recalled a

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warm welcome home were indeed in tandem with the majority of returning American soldiers. The myth of the spat-upon veteran has removed American society’s focus on the war and placed it on Vietnam Veterans. By disproving this myth, the necessity to revisit the complexities of the war itself arises.

Gregory Daddis’ work *Westmoreland’s War* faces head-on the myth of losing the war due to the lack of home front support. By perpetuating this myth, American society has put forth the understanding that America lost to itself, not an underdeveloped, Asian nation. Passing the blame to the so-called New Left gave politicians and American intervention a way to save face. Through the interviews of Savannah civilians and soldiers, it becomes clear that the myth of losing the war because of the American people and because of political intervention is still prevalent in society. By debunking this myth, American society will have to give credit and blame where it is due.

The Vietnam era was a time of great turmoil in Savannah. The Vietnam War and the Civil Rights Movement made Savannahians question their Southern traditions and values. Due to Savannah’s location in the Deep South, it has become a part of the Southern conservative narrative and stereotype. This thesis shows that Savannah is more complex and diversified in opinion than what the narrow scope of the narrative allows. Savannah’s deep-rooted history with the American military establishment and service members gives agency to the importance of its inhabitants’ opinions on the Vietnam War and those who fought in-country. Over the course of the war, many Savannahians became disenchanted with American foreign policy in Vietnam. Nevertheless, the community remained supportive of those who served overseas and those who returned to Savannah after their tours of duty.

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**APPENDIX I: LIST OF INTERVIEWEES AND IMPORTANT DATES**

** Listed are only those mentioned in the thesis, not all interviewed

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APPENDIX II: LIST OF QUESTIONS ASKED TO VIETNAM VETERANS

For the Record:
Date and place of the interview
Name of the person being interviewed
Interviewee's birth date
Names of the people attending the interview
War and branch of service
What his rank was
Where he served

Jogging Memory:
Were you drafted or did you enlist?
Where were you living at the time?
When did you come to Savannah?
Why did you join?
Why did you pick the service branch you joined?
How did the community react when you joined?
How did your family react when you joined?
Was there a difference between the reaction of your peers and the rest of the community?
Different generations?
Do you recall your first days in service?
What did it feel like?
Tell me about your boot camp/training experience(s).
Do you remember your instructors?
How did you get through it?

Experiences:
Which war(s) did you serve in (Korea, Vietnam, the Persian Gulf)?
Where exactly did you go?
Do you remember arriving and what it was like?
What was your job/assignment?
Did you see combat?
Were there many casualties in your unit?
Tell me about a couple of your most memorable experiences.
Were you a prisoner of war?
Tell me about your experiences in captivity and when freed.
Were you awarded any medals or citations?
How did you get them?

Life:
Ask questions about life in the service and/or at the front or under fire.
How did you stay in touch with your family?
Did your relationship with your family/friends in Savannah change while you were overseas?
Did it fluctuate?
Did you have other people in your unit from your community? Did you notice and racial, political, or social tension while overseas?
What was the food like?
Did you have plenty of supplies?
Did you feel pressure or stress?
Did you ever question your service or the reasons for the war? Did other people?
Was there something special you did for "good luck"?
How did people entertain themselves?
Were there entertainers?
What did you do when on leave?
Where did you travel while in the service?
Do you recall any particularly humorous or unusual event?
What were some of the pranks that you or others would pull?
Do you have photographs? Who are the people in them?
What did you think of officers or fellow soldiers?
Did you keep a personal diary?
After Service:
Do you recall the day your service ended?
Where were you?
What did you do in the days and weeks afterward?
Did you work or go back to school?
Was your education supported by the G.I. Bill?
Did you make any close friendships while in the service?
Did you continue any of those relationships?
For how long?
How were you welcomed home from the war? By family? Friends? Strangers? (should I be more specific?)
Do you know if others had the same experience?
Did the Savannah community welcome you back? How?
What was Savannah like during the war?
How did people react to the end of the war?
Was the CRM or the VW more prolific in Savannah life?
Did your service during the Vietnam War Era effect the way people treated you? How?
Did you join veteran organizations? Why or why not?
Later Years and Closing:
What did you go on to do as a career after the war?
Did your military experience influence your thinking about war or about the military in general?
If in veteran organizations, what kinds of activities does your post or association have?
Do you attend reunions?
How did your service and experiences affect your life?
Would you do it all again?
Is there anything you would like to add that we have not covered in this interview?
APPENDIX III: QUESTIONS ASKED TO SAVANNAH CIVILIANS

Date/ Place of interview?
Number of people interviewed?
Name? Birthdate, Birthplace

General Savannah and Vietnam War questions:
When/why did you come to Savannah?
What was your occupation at the start of the war? At the end of the war?
Do you remember the start of the war?
What was the sentiment in Savannah? What were your thoughts on it at the beginning?
Did you witness or hear of any pro-war or antiwar marches, movements, in Savannah?
Examples?
What did the media say about these things?
How did the community treat American soldiers?
Did your family members enlist or were they drafted? Who? How many? Did they discuss their tour and reception?
What did you think of their service?
Did you keep in contact with them? How? Did you update them on Savannah affairs? Like what?

General Savannah and Civil Rights questions:
How did Savannahians react to the rise of the Civil Rights movement?
What were race relations like at the beginning of the war?
War the Civil Rights Movement or the Vietnam War more prolific in conversation or daily life?
Why do you think this was? Did they intersect at all?
Did you witness or hear of any civil rights marches or movements in Savannah? Provide some examples.
What did the newspapers and other media say about these things? Did you find what was being printed to hold the opinion of the community, or no? For example?
Were minority race soldiers treated differently than white soldiers were?
Were black soldiers treated different than the Vietnamese soldiers?
Did race sentiments change as the war progressed? How so? Or why not?

South Vietnamese Soldier Questions:
How were you chosen to host Vietnamese soldiers? Was this common?
How many south Vietnamese came over total? (estimate OK)
How many soldiers did you have stay with you? At the same time? When did they arrive? How long did they stay?
Names? Birthdays?
Did they speak English? Did they teach you Vietnamese? Did they need a translator?
What was your relationship like with them?
Tell me about some of your memories with the soldiers.
How did your family react to you hosting them? How did they treat the Vietnamese soldiers?
What was their relationship like with them?
How did the community react? How did they treat the Vietnamese soldiers? What was their relationship like with them?
Tell me about some of the instances of family or community reaction when they found out you were hosting them, or when they met them.
Did they tell you about their experience at Hunter Army Air Field? What was it like? Did they have the same experiences, or different?
What did they think of American life? Did they assimilate?
Did they pass flight school? Were they given multiple tries?
Did having the south Vietnamese stay with you impact or change your view on the war? On their race?
Did you try to relay this opinion to family? Friends? Why or why not?
How did you feel when they left to go back to South Vietnam?
Did you have a different experience with “your soldiers” than other hosts did? Why or why not?
Did you ever regret hosting them? If so, why? If not, why not?
Savannah and your relations after the war:
Did you keep in contact with the Vietnamese you hosted? How? Why not?
Did they move state side? Do you know what happened to them?
Why do you think so few people know about the south Vietnamese pilots who came to train at Hunter? Was this common knowledge at the time, or kept hushed?
Was there any specific moment that changed war or race sentiment in Savannah? What was it?
What was Savannah like after the war?
How were veterans treated? Were they welcomed? Ignored? Respected? Pitied?
Was the war something that was talked about? During or after it ended? Why not (if not)?
Tell me about some of your memories during the Vietnam War Era in Savannah.
Do you have pictures? Letters? Can I see them?
Is there anything else you would like to add?
Do you know of any Savannah civilians or veterans that would be willing to speak with me about their experiences?
APPENDIX IV: COMBAT MOTIVATION BREAKDOWN

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**Primary Motivational Factors By Time of Service:**

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<tr>
<td>PERCENTAGE</td>
<td>21%</td>
<td>4%</td>
<td>6%</td>
<td>17%</td>
<td>3%</td>
<td>7%</td>
<td>4%</td>
<td>16%</td>
<td>19%</td>
<td>3%</td>
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</tbody>
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