

# THE WAR

on the Evening News



*Vietnam was not more  
horrible than other wars,  
but it was different.*

*Writing! looks back at the  
war through the eyes of  
writers who were there.*

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**T**he Vietnam War has been called “the war on the evening news.” Night after night on televisions across the country, people saw rocket attacks and firefights and their aftermaths—villages burning, children screaming, wounded American soldiers being dragged out of the jungle by their buddies.

It was a war fought by teenagers. The average age of American soldiers sent to Vietnam was 19.

It was a foreign war fought in a climate and culture totally unknown to most Americans. Soldiers boarded a plane in California and, hours later, stepped into a world of rice paddies and 12-foot-high elephant grass, monsoon



rains and suffocating humidity, muddy rivers alive with leeches and snakes, air clouded with mosquitoes and swarms of other insects that no one could quite identify.

It was a war that drew journalists into the jungle along with the soldiers. Like the soldiers, the writers wore combat boots and helmets. Like the soldiers, too, they were wounded in action. Some died. Some were taken prisoner by the Vietcong.

The goal of the journalists was to inform the public about the American involvement in the war between democratic South Vietnam and Communist-controlled North Vietnam. In the early years, reports in such news magazines as *Life* ranged from patriotic stories of war heroes like Marine Captain Pete Dawkins, ("It is a tough, punishing, and often dangerous assignment, but Pete Dawkins asked for it.") to somber accounts of combat ("There was no warning when the shells came; there never is when they come in on top of you.").

As the war continued year after year, as the number of American troops in Vietnam escalated into hundreds of thousands, and especially, as the number of American casualties also mounted, the types of stories and the language of the reports changed significantly. Ultimately, the war on the evening news would forever change the American people and their government.

### Search and Destroy

Philip Caputo was not a writer when he landed on the shores of Da Nang, South Vietnam, on March 8, 1965. He was a Marine, one of the first sent into ground combat. "As we marched into the rice paddies on that damp March afternoon," Caputo recalled, "we carried, along with our packs and rifles, the implicit conviction that the Vietcong would be quickly beaten."

**Above left, former CBS anchor Walter Cronkite; right, current ABC anchor Peter Jennings as a Vietnam War correspondent in 1967.**

Years later, in the book that would win him a Pulitzer Prize for literature, Caputo described himself at the age of 24 as being more prepared for death than life.

*I knew how to face death and how to cause it, with everything on the evolutionary scale of weapons from the knife to the 3.5-inch rocket launcher. The simplest repairs on an automobile engine were beyond me, but I was able to field-strip and assemble an M-14 rifle blindfolded. I could call in artillery, set up an ambush, rig a booby trap, lead a night raid.*

*Simply by speaking a few words into a two-way radio, I had performed magical feats of destruction. Summoned by my voice, jet fighters appeared in the sky to loose their lethal droppings on villages and men. High-explosive* ➔

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bombs blasted houses to fragments, napalm sucked air from lungs and turned human flesh to ashes. All this just by saying a few words into a radio transmitter. Like magic.

—Philip Caputo, *A Rumor of War*

It was a guerrilla war with no front lines and no safe havens. The Americans pursued a search-and-destroy strategy of hunting the enemy forces until found, then wiping them out. But finding the enemy in the thick jungles wasn't easy. The North Vietnamese had built a network of tunnels a few feet below the ground through which they could silently advance and retreat, appear and disappear. American soldiers drew straws to decide who would be the tunnel rat, the person armed only with a pistol and a flashlight who crawled into



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a tunnel to see if it was clear of Vietcong.

It was a war of booby traps intended to maim and mutilate—a punji pit lined with bamboo spikes to impale an American soldier or a “bouncing Betty” that shot an explosive charge up to waist level before exploding.

It was a war in which friend and foe were often hard to distinguish. The Vietnamese boy who smiled at you by day might also be the Vietcong who set the trip wire on your grenade at night. Yet despite that grim

reality, the American press ran this story in August 1967:

*The Marines get on well with Vietnamese villagers, and have developed some personal friendships in the community. Louie's real name is Ngo Cuoc, and he is a boy of 13 who lives in the village. Louie is crippled, his legs hopelessly deformed... but he is bright, tough, and high-spirited... Louie runs little errands for the Marines, dickers for them in the market, and serves as a casual interpreter when the Americans visit villagers. In return he gets a free hand when it comes to cadging [begging] cigarettes and Cokes, and the Marines look out for his welfare—they just got him a new pair of crutches—but more*

*important, Louie derives social status from his association. Among the other, healthy youngsters in the village, Louie is the man.*

—Don Moser, *Life*



According to Stanley Karnow, who was a correspondent in Vietnam for *The Washington Post*, magazine editors in the States frequently “distorted the dispatches of their reporters and relied instead on guidance from White House, State Department, and Pentagon officials....” Said Karnow, “True to their tradition, *Time* and *Life* stood up for America.”

So while feel-good stories about Marines helping a crippled Vietnamese child eased the concerns of an American public sending its sons and daughters to war, in Vietnam the search-and-destroy patrols continued.

It was a war of Cobras and Hueys, helicopters that attacked or served as flying ambulances. Chopper pilots could touch down in fire zones, pick up the wounded, and get them to a field hospital within 30 minutes:

It was a war that created its own dictionary: *Grunts* were infantry soldiers; *crispy critters* were burn patients; *train wrecks* were mass casualties with multiple traumatic injuries; *KIAs* were soldiers killed in action; *dustoffs* were choppers coming to pick up the KIAs and return them to the base morgue.

It was a war where victory was determined by a daily body count, a kill ratio. If the number of North Vietnamese and Vietcong dead was higher than the number of South Vietnamese and American dead, then that was a victorious day.

### Tet—The Turning Point

By January 1968, American involvement in the war was stretching into its fourth year. The images on the evening news had become, for many Americans, familiar. At the briefing:





held each afternoon in Saigon, sarcastically called "the 5 o'clock follies" by the media, U.S. military officials reported the daily kill ratio, assuring journalists that the Americans, with their superior firepower and weaponry, were winning the war. Peace would soon be negotiated.

Then, on January 31, 1968, the Tet offensive changed everything.

On the eve of the Vietnamese New Year, or *Tet*, when fighting typically stopped for the holiday, the North Vietnamese army orchestrated surprise, simultaneous attacks on more than 100 cities and hamlets throughout South Vietnam, north to south and east to west. Suddenly, the war in Vietnam was no longer a search-and-destroy guerrilla war. The images that filled the television screens now showed American soldiers pinned down behind a tree on a city street, the American embassy in Saigon under siege, and street-to-street, house-to-house combat.

*Two hundred and thirty-two GIs killed and 900 wounded makes this one of the heaviest weeks of the Vietnam War. And it is not a week. It is just over two days—the past two days. Two of the worst we have known in Vietnam.*

—Jack Perkins, NBC News

At the time of the Tet offensive, Walter Cronkite was a respected television news anchor for CBS. Upon learning of the bold attacks and the American casualties, he said (off the air), "What the hell is going on here? I thought we were winning the war!"

*On the air, I tried to maintain objectivity in keeping with the CBS credo and my own conviction that those delivering the news should not comment or editorialize upon it.... With the Tet offensive that upset so many claims and predictions of our military and political leaders, I suffered a nauseous wave of doubt, uncertainty, and confusion. I felt certain that this was the feeling of a majority of my fellow Americans. What could we believe? What was the truth?*

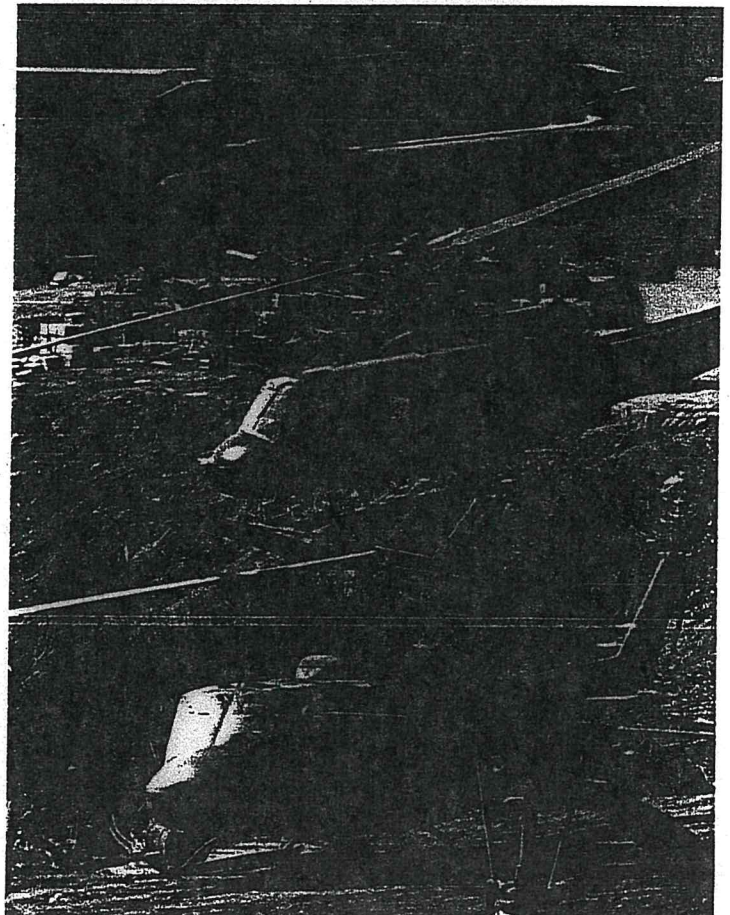
—Walter Cronkite, CBS News  
*The American Vietnam Experience*

Cronkite met with the president of CBS News to discuss a bold venture. If Cronkite abandoned his objectivity as a news anchor and admitted his doubt to the American people, would that jeopardize his reputation? Would it jeopardize the reputation of CBS, as well? They decided to risk it. But first, Cronkite traveled to Vietnam to see for himself just what was going on.

Meanwhile, equally stunned by the sudden turn of events, reporters and editors of newspapers and magazines began writing about the war with a changed tone and language. They questioned the official reports prepared by the Pentagon. They questioned also the leadership in the White House.

*In the first hours of the recent Vietcong and North Vietnamese offensive, Lyndon Johnson faced the crisis with a confidence and coolness that has been characteristic of him for four years. Ten days of fighting since have*

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*not only revealed a new and horrifying dimension in the whole war but may have totally altered the atmosphere in Washington, in the White House, and in Johnson's own outlook...*

*The shattering pictures of GI bodies stacked like cordwood which have been televised relentlessly have taken a fierce toll. News of North Vietnamese tanks of the latest Soviet model turning up to take part in an attack near the tortured terrain of the DMZ\* came as a shock...*

*Through most of last week there was a singular silence in the capital. It was almost as if the nation was holding its breath. What happens next and what Lyndon Johnson does and says about it could decide who the next President will be and maybe a lot more than that.*

—Hugh Sidey, "Shaken Assumptions About the War"

The Tet offensive was a turning point in the war and in particular in how the war was reported. On February 27, 1968, an estimated 9 million Americans tuned in to CBS News to view Cronkite's special report on the war. "Who won and who lost in the great Tet offensive... I'm not sure.... It seems now more certain than ever that the bloody experience of Vietnam is to end in a stalemate," reported Cronkite.

Cronkite concluded his special report by

firmly stating his opinion that the only way out of Vietnam was "to negotiate, not as victors but as honorable people who lived up to the pledge to defend democracy and did the best they could."

Cronkite had taken an editorial stand on the war. Afterward, President Lyndon Johnson was rumored to have commented, "If I lose Cronkite, I lose the American people."

The news from Vietnam reported on television and in newspapers and magazines grew increasingly pessimistic. There was no light at the end of the tunnel, as General William Westmoreland had claimed during one of the afternoon briefings in Saigon.

This change in how the war was perceived and reported on was most obvious in the pages of *Life*, the very magazine that Karnow had said traditionally stood up for America. In 1966, the magazine's editor in chief had written an editorial stating that "the war was worth winning." But two years later, in the weeks following Tet, *Life* published a very different editorial. Writer Shana Alexander referred to a famous photograph from that time—one in which a South Vietnamese police chief is executing a Vietcong officer at point-blank range:

*In our newest image of war, one man fires a bullet into the brains of another man in Saigon street.*

*His face is square to the camera, squinched in its instant of death.... Inches from his eye the instrument of that death is gripped by the bare hand and arm of a taller man with a turtle head. The killer is national Police Chief General Loan. The victim is identified as a officer of the Vietcong....*

*The new bad news from Vietnam has shaken us all. The entire tree of American opinion about the war... now shudders in the lash of the new firestorm. To understand and evaluate what is happening, we are told, we will have to wait for the smoke of battle to clear. While we wait, the execution picture lies on my desk, metaphor of the larger war, nagging me with numberless small riddles of its own.*

—Shana Alexander, *Life*

The media's shift from informing to editorializing helped to influence public opinion. In truth, American support for the continuation



of the war had been steadily declining over the previous year as more and more American boys were sent home in body bags.

Following Tet, however, the war's conflict and controversy sparked anew angry debates and increasingly violent demonstrations at home. Suddenly the war on the evening news was not happening just in the jungles of Vietnam.

*I was in Vietnam when I first heard about the thousands of people protesting the war in the streets of America. I didn't want to believe it at first—people protesting against us when we were putting our lives on the line for our country. The men in my outfit used to talk about it a lot. How could they do this to us? Many of us would not be coming back and many others would be wounded or maimed. We swore they would pay, the hippies and the draft-card burners. They would pay if we ever ran into them.*

*But the hospital had changed all that. It was the end of whatever belief I'd still had in what I'd done in Vietnam. Now I wanted to know what I had lost my legs for, why I and the others had gone at all. But it was still very hard for me to think of speaking out against the war, to think of joining those I'd once called traitors.*

—Ron Kovic, *Born on the Fourth of July*

### After the War

It was the longest war Americans had ever fought, and the first they had lost. It was a war that, by 1975, when the last fighting soldier came home, Americans just wanted to forget. But they could not, and still can't, forget.

Today, the American soldiers and the journalists are gone from Vietnam. But voices continue to emerge from the war. Vietnam has spawned a body of literature written by those who lived through the experience. Some are journalists still. Some, like Philip Caputo, are soldiers turned novelists. They write now not to inform but to persuade or express what they cannot forget.

Michael Uhl, also a Vietnam veter-

an and a writer, has said that the literature of the Vietnam War can be grouped into two categories: first, stories that glorify the soldiers as warrior kings, the Rambo's; second, stories that probe the darker side of the war and the warrior's conscience. The first category fictionalizes the war; the second personalizes it.

From news reports and editorials written during the war to novels, screenplays, and poetry written after the war—the voices from Vietnam tell a complicated but compelling story of a unique period of American history. The war in Vietnam was not more horrible than other wars, but it was different. It was the first war that nightly broadcast its battles and body counts into American living rooms half a world away. That immediacy, that you-are-there confrontation, changed the way journalists worked and ultimately changed how Americans viewed their government.

As Caputo has written, Vietnam is a story about the things men and women do in war and the things war does to them.

—Catherine Gourley

### Write Now



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