

Reflections on the Oral History Project

I had two initial reactions directly after we completed the interview. First and foremost, I was generally happy with how it played out. Our interviewee, James Monaghan (“Jim”), was more than happy to share his story with us, and seemed eager to answer any and all questions we had for him. Not only that, but his storytelling ability was also top-notch, and his answers to our questions were detailed, elegant, poignant, and even sometimes funny. I think Jack and I were very lucky to interview him. Several times, he apologized to us that he didn’t have the gory, crazy stories that you might hear in a documentary like Ken Burns’ *Vietnam*, but of course that wasn’t an issue. We weren’t looking for the craziest stories; we just wanted to hear about the experiences of an American soldier. In that regard, Jim was great.

My second initial reaction was that the interview was a lot shorter than I expected it to be. All told, our recording is almost exactly one hour long. Going in, I think I expected it to be closer to two hours, and I got very nervous in the middle of the interview when we were getting close to the end of the questions and it had only been 45 minutes or so. Still, everything worked out fine, Jim was a great interviewee, and I definitely came away from the interview thinking it was a success.

One thing I think Jack and I could have done better is to spend more time on every question and subject. Several times, I think we jumped forward to the next question or next topic after Jim gave us a general answer to our general question, while we should have stayed on the topic and delved deeper. Clearly he had a lot of stuff to say, but just asking someone to access memories from 50 years ago without any specific prompt is difficult. When we asked him very

specific questions, his answers were always great. So I think that's something I would do differently, if I were to do this whole project over again: be as specific as possible, and don't jump from topic to topic until we really think we've exhausted all we can say about anything. General questions are important, but the specific stories are what makes the interview shine.

One thing I think Jack and I did a good job of was asking unplanned follow-up questions. A bunch of the questions we ended up asking in the moment in the interview were not ones that we had written down. They came up because Jim would say something that interested us, and we wanted to know more. I think we did a pretty good job of thinking on the spot and asking these questions, even though (as I mentioned before), more specifics would have definitely been better.

Overall, I feel like I've learned a lot about the interview process from this project. It's very difficult to come up with in-depth and thorough interview questions, especially when you don't know that much about your interviewee beforehand. And things don't always go according to plan. You might think that your interviewee will have a ton to say about Topic A, and nothing to say about Topic B, but in the interview they'll talk for fifteen minutes about Topic B and two minutes about Topic A. You have to think quickly and stay in the moment, and respond to what your interviewee is giving you. Otherwise you'll be asking a lot of questions about something they don't have a lot to say about, and very few questions about something very important to them. At the end of the day, everyone has a compelling narrative to tell. It just takes the right questions to get them to tell it.

James Barker
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“Rampant”: The Extent and Effects of Drug use by American Soldiers during the Viet Nam War

James Barker
HIST211
Professor Nguyen Diu Huong
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During the Viet Nam War, drug use among American soldiers became remarkably common. The drugs of choice were typically marijuana and heroin, the latter presenting a legitimate threat of serious addiction and overdose. The reasons behind this unusually common drug use vary, but regardless of this reasoning, the drug problem among soldiers was significant enough that it became a popular topic in the media, and the United States government fought to curtail it. The testimony of James Monaghan (“Jim”), an American soldier who served in Viet Nam, corroborates this outbreak of drug use and addiction. Using both historical research and individual testimony—particularly that of Monaghan, whom the author of this paper personally interviewed—this paper explores both the extent of and reasons behind American soldiers’ drug use during the war, as well as its ramifications in Viet Nam and on the home front.

Before discussing the outcomes and ramifications of drug use and addiction by soldiers, we must first establish that the American troops in Viet Nam did, in fact, use drugs at a significantly higher rate than normal. According to the testimony of Jim Monaghan, drug use posed a serious problem to the American military in his time in Viet Nam. Monaghan was an officer in the US Army, and was stationed in Viet Nam from 1969 to 1970: “I got my orders in July, I shipped out for Viet Nam, and I arrived in country October 11th of 1969.”¹ While stationed at a base in Chu Lai, Monaghan became a company commander:

I got assigned as the executive officer of this company. Their main role was to make sure that all the weapons and all the equipment that the infantry brigade needed was operational. We had teams going out in the field all the time, plus we had an encampment where they would bring heavy equipment in, and we’d take care of it for them. I had 120 men in the unit. I was there four months when I

¹ James Monaghan, interview by James Barker and Jack Hunter, November 19, 2018, audio, 1:00:16.

became the company commander. So now at 24 years old, I'm responsible for 120 lives and two and a half million dollars worth of equipment... in a combat zone.²

As he notes, Monaghan was responsible for the lives of over 100 men. Naturally, then, if his soldiers were heavily using drugs, it affected Monaghan's ability to do his job. Drug use was a legitimate problem for his men. In his words, "The other big problem was drugs. Rampant."³ He points out that, as an officer, he was aware that his soldiers were using drugs. And they were using enough that, in his words, it became "rampant."

Historical research backs up Monaghan's personal experience. Drug use did, in fact, become "rampant" among American soldiers, especially around the time that Monaghan was in Viet Nam. A 1974 study by the White House Special Action Office for Drug Abuse Prevention claims that drug use among American soldiers got out of hand, especially in the later stages of the war: "During the summer and fall of 1971, drug use by United States servicemen in Vietnam had, by all estimates, reached epidemic proportions."⁴ Later in this article, the authors cite specific results from their study: "Among returnees in the general sample, 43 percent reported having used narcotics in Vietnam (Table 1). Not quite one-half (46 percent) of the men who said they used narcotics in Vietnam reported becoming addicted to them while there."⁵ In some cases, drug use began to present more of a threat to American soldiers than the actual fighting: "Drug use was so severe among American troops in the later stages of the Vietnam War that more

² Monaghan, interview.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Lee N. Robins, Darlene H. David, and David N. Nurco, "How Permanent Was Vietnam Drug Addiction?," *AJPH Supplement* 64 (December 1974): 38.

⁵ Ibid, 39.

soldiers were evacuated for drug problems than for battlefield wounds.”⁶ As Monaghan indicates in his interview, drug use among soldiers was indeed a serious threat to the American armed forces in Viet Nam. One author points out the writings of a Marine Colonel that illustrate this problem:

By June 1971 Marine Colonel Robert Heintz was writing in the *Armed Forces Journal* that ‘by every conceivable indicator, our Army that now remains in Vietnam is in a state approaching collapse, with individual units avoiding or having refused combat, murdering their officers and non-commissioned officer, drug-ridden and dispirited where not near mutinous.’ This was an official journal of the armed forces.⁷

Though Heintz’s account paints the situation in a somewhat apocalyptic light, other data and accounts do confirm that the drug problem was certainly real.

Among the troops, the two most popular drugs were marijuana and heroin. Because of its dangerous addictive nature, heroin became a more significant problem for those trying to fight addiction. In the previously mentioned 1974 SAODAP study, the authors note that, “Heroin was commonly used both in and after Vietnam, if any narcotic was used. Of all who tried any narcotic in Vietnam, 79 percent used heroin.”⁸ Another author notes that an armed forces ban on marijuana prompted increased heroin use: “U.S. troops in Vietnam preferred marijuana, but when subject to a sudden marijuana ban, they turned to heroin.”⁹

⁶ Paul Rexton Kan, *Drug Intoxicated Irregular Fighters: Complications, Dangers, and Responses* (Carlisle, PA: Strategic Studies Institute, US Army War College, 2008), 25.

⁷ Jonathan Neale, “People Change: American Soldiers and Marines in Vietnam 1965-1973,” in *Arms and the People: Popular Movements and the Military from the Paris Commune to the Arab Spring*, ed. Mike Gonzalez and Houman Barekat (London: Pluto Press, 2013), 191.

⁸ Robins, David, and Nurco, “How Permanent Was Vietnam Drug Addiction?,” 39.

⁹ Kan, *Drug Intoxicated Irregular Fighters*, 2.

This problem did not go unacknowledged by the US government. In fact, the government put in place several processes to fight addiction, or at the very least to prevent it from following soldiers home when their tours were finished. In the Army, some soldiers were treated for addiction before leaving Viet Nam: “By the end of the war, however, the drug problem—especially heroin use—was so acute that the Army decided to treat soldiers before they ever left the field by setting up detoxification, rehabilitation, and treatment centers across South Vietnam... Beginning in 1971, all service members had to pass a urinalysis test before they could rotate home.”¹⁰ Jim Monaghan also notes a different tactic of the armed forces: trying to discourage soldiers from using drugs before they ever stepped foot in Viet Nam. Monaghan notes that, during his training at Officer Candidate School, he was shown films that detailed the negative effects of drugs. He remembers one in particular: “They showed, um, one soldier who was high on something, and pulled the pin of a hand grenade and slept on it. And they showed what was left of his body after that.”¹¹ Clearly, by at least the later stages of the war, the drug problem among American soldiers was significant enough that the government was trying to combat it.

With the knowledge that drug use was common, we will now attempt to understand both how American soldiers gained access to these drugs during deployment, as well as why they turned to drugs. According to Monaghan’s testimony, drugs reached American troops from at least one major source: the local Vietnamese people. He describes his “Sunday entertainment”:

¹⁰ Jacqueline E. Whitt, *Bringing God to Men: American Military Chaplains and the Vietnam War* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2014), 89.

¹¹ Monaghan, interview.

I often tell the story about my entertainment on a Sunday night. I'd go up into a tower along the perimeter, which--a tower is about 25 feet, 30 feet high. It's where we had guards. Up in the tower at night, with a grenade launcher, and tear gas grenades. We'd shoot the tear gas grenades at the Vietnamese locals coming up with acme bags full of marijuana to throw over the fence for five bucks from the GIs. So we'd shoot the tear gas to chase them away.¹²

Other sources back up this claim; locals did supply soldiers with drugs, particularly marijuana.

As one historian writes, "Lax Vietnamese drug laws, and the prevalence of marijuana, which was illegal in the United States but legal in Vietnam, and the difficulties of enforcement presented special challenges to commanders."¹³ This same author specifically notes that local children sold drugs to soldiers.¹⁴ Another author adds that "the popular drugs of that era—including marijuana, LSD (lysergic acid diethylamide), and heroin—were readily available to soldiers."¹⁵ Despite their illegality on the home front, American soldiers had relatively easy access to drugs.

This easy access, however, does not explain why exactly an American soldier might turn to drugs during his time in Viet Nam. Several researchers offer their own explanations, and though there is no general consensus, common themes emerge. In a chapter of a book that focuses on drug abuse in general (not just among soldiers), the author mentions research conducted by Norman Zinberg on American soldiers in Vietnam: "His research showed that the soldiers' heroin use was in part attributable to their social setting in a 'destructive war environment.'"¹⁶ Another study mentions several related reasons: "Soldiers reported that

¹² Monaghan, interview.

¹³ Whitt, *Bringing God to Men*, 88.

¹⁴ *Ibid*, 90.

¹⁵ Laurie Calhoun, "The Silencing of Soldiers," *The Independent Review* 16, no. 2 (Fall 2011): 250.

¹⁶ Leon Anderson, *Deviance: Social Constructions and Blurred Boundaries* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2017), 293.

boredom, peer pressure, institutional culture, curiosity, and a desire to escape reality were among the top reasons for their drug use.”¹⁷ Finally, another study mentions “boredom, fear, peer group loyalty, ease of access, and the low cost of purchase.”¹⁸ Though these reasons vary—and no specific consensus exists—it seems that the aforementioned reasons all worked together to create an environment in which American soldiers were willing and able to experiment with drugs, some of which were dangerously addictive.

This “rampant” drug use, of course, was not without significant consequences both in Viet Nam and on the home front. While soldiers were still in Viet Nam, drug addiction heavily affected soldiers’ ability and morale. Officers like Jim Monaghan clearly took this issue seriously, and worked to address it. One officer specifically bemoans the high rate of heroin usage after marijuana had been banned: “If it would get them to give up the hard stuff, I would buy all the marijuana and hashish in the Delta as a present.”¹⁹ High rates of drug use did affect the effectiveness of American troops. An account that follows a National Guard battalion in Viet Nam in 1969 mentions that, “By early summer, Battery C, a highly skilled and efficient unit, had been weakened as some of its original members were transferred and sometimes replaced by troops with drug problems... the daily regime of ‘fire your missions, drink a little beer, watch movies, sleep,’ and fill sandbags became ‘routine.’”²⁰ In his interview, Monaghan notes that he heavily disciplined his soldiers, for fear of losing ability and morale at the hand of drugs:

¹⁷ Whitt, *Bringing God to Men*, 88.

¹⁸ *Ibid*, 90.

¹⁹ Kan, *Drug Intoxicated Irregular Fighters*, 2.

²⁰ Joseph A. Fry, *The American South and the Vietnam War: Belligerence, Protest, and Agony in Dixie* (Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky, 2015), 177.

I was doing what I was supposed to do. Just, um, very very intense on making sure my troops were taken care of. I put up with no bullshit. You screw up, you're paying. I can't tell you how many Article 15s I gave for screw-ups. Most of them were just, they take money away from you. It's like [slaps wrist] in a lot of cases. Put some in prison though. Some of the, um, drug problems we had. They had their own prison in country and that was not a fun place.²¹

Again, the facts line up with Monaghan's personal experience. Drug-related arrests of soldiers in Viet Nam increased rapidly in the early 1970s, during and after Monaghan's deployment: "One report claimed that 'in 1970 there were 1,146 arrests for hard drugs. The following year arrests in this category increased to 7,026.'"²² These problems on the front were legitimately dangerous to the effectiveness of the American armed forces in Viet Nam.

If the ramifications in Viet Nam of American soldiers' drug use were serious to the soldiers themselves, then the ramifications on the home front were just as dangerous to veterans, but in a much different way. After soldiers returned home, the problems created by drug addiction did not simply disappear. As one author points out, "kicking the drug habit was difficult, especially given the emotional stress of returning home."²³ Testimony from one soldier who went to Viet Nam with his brothers mentions this specifically: "Well, when my brothers and I got home there were many problems. All four of us were alcoholics. We were all drug addicts."²⁴ Fighting drug addiction was an added measure of difficulty to the already traumatic return to civilian life.

²¹ Monaghan, interview.

²² Whitt, *Bringing God to Men*, 88.

²³ *Ibid*, 90.

²⁴ Steve Estes, *Ask and Tell: Gay and Lesbian Veterans Speak Out* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2007), 83.

Perhaps surprisingly, though, drug use among veterans actually plummeted after their return from Viet Nam. Veterans did not continue to use at nearly the same rate as they did when they were on active duty. The 1974 study of returning soldiers notes this:

After return from Vietnam, not only did the number of users drop dramatically, from 43 percent of the general sample to 10 percent, but the proportion who became addicted among those who used also dropped... There have been no studies of addict populations in this country that show anything like the 95 percent remission rate after ten months, which is what a drop from 20 percent addicted while in Vietnam to 1 percent after Vietnam suggest.²⁵

Thus, though fighting addiction was surely a difficult process for returning veterans, the data suggests that by-and-large American veterans were able to overcome it.

Despite this fact, however, problems for veterans on the home front concerning drug use did not stop. The American media latched onto use of drugs in Viet Nam by soldiers, and unfair portrayals of American veterans as drug-addicted criminals and murderers emerged and persisted. Many feared that soldiers would bring their addictions back to the US, and cause a crisis in their home country: “Heroin use among Vietnam veterans created societal fears of rising crime and disorder.”²⁶ Prominent newspapers and magazines ran stories that propagated this image. *Time*, for example, wrote, “the specter of weapons-trained, addicted combat veterans joining the deadly struggle for drugs [in the streets of America] is ominous.... [T]he Capone era of the ‘20s may look like a Sunday school picnic by comparison.”²⁷ It was not just news sources that created this unfair image. Popular media—such as television and film—also created the image that veterans were drug-ridden criminals: “Robert Brewin, a Vietnam veteran, observed in

²⁵ Robins, Davis, and Nurco, “How Permanent Was Vietnam Drug Addiction?”, 39.

²⁶ Kan, *Drug Intoxicated Irregular Fighters*, 25.

²⁷ *Ibid.*

1975 that the Vietnam veteran was the ‘bad guy of the moment’ in cop shows, which always needed villains. Such representations... suggested that veterans were ‘walking time bombs,’ ‘depraved fiends,’ and ‘psychopathic killers.’”²⁸ Even politicians propagated this new view of the American veteran. One specifically, Congressman Seymour Halpern, said in 1972, “The American GI is as liable to die from the needle, as the bullet... What is so scary is that soldiers are bringing back the festering of their contagion to the United States. Society has a terrifying scourge and walking time bomb on its hands.”²⁹ Despite the fact that veterans were generally defeating their drug addictions upon homecoming, they could not shake the image that their initial drug use created. In reality, veterans were not committing crime at a notable rate: “less than one-half of 1 percent of veterans returning to the United States committed any crimes.”³⁰ According to American public perception, though, the Viet Nam veteran was still a dangerous individual because of his drug use. In 1971, two US Congressmen—Morgan Murphy and Robert Steele—perhaps best summed up this cultural moment when they said, “The Vietnam War is truly coming home to haunt us. The first wave of heroin is already on its way to our children in high school... The problem is also affecting U.S. industry.”³¹ Despite the lack of data to suggest that veterans were, in fact, the dangerous addicts that they were presented as, these images persisted.

²⁸ Patrick Hagopian, *The Vietnam War in American Memory: Veterans, Memorials, and the Politics of Healing* (Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 2009), 66.

²⁹ Jeremy Kuzmarov, *The Myth of the Addicted Army: Vietnam and the Modern War on Drugs* (Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 2009), 53.

³⁰ *Ibid*, 45.

³¹ *Ibid*, 52.

American soldiers did use drugs at an abnormally high rate during Viet Nam. And as Jim Monaghan's testimony suggests, this was not simply a statistic presented after the war's end, but instead a phenomenon that was felt by soldiers on the ground during the war. To use Monaghan's term, it even became "rampant." Naturally, this affected the American military's effectiveness during the war. Monaghan notes that several of his men were sent to prison "in country" because of hard drug usage, and that he worked hard to eliminate discipline issues as a result of drug usage. The problem was significant enough that the US government ultimately prevented soldiers from returning home until they passed a urinalysis test. The reasons for this unusual drug use are not fully concrete, but the stressful and destructive war environment, coupled with easy and inexpensive access, seem to have played a part. Regardless, the fact is that American soldiers used drugs at a much higher rate than normal while stationed in Viet Nam. After returning from Viet Nam, the problems created by this drug use did not disappear. The American media took hold of the drug problem, and used it to create images of dangerous, drug-addicted veterans ready to commit a crime at a moment's notice. Despite the factual inaccuracies of this stereotype, it persisted throughout the later stages of the war. In fact, it may even have been a significant factor in the escalation of the war on drugs in the 1970s.³² Though the drug problem did exist, as Monaghan's testimony indicates, its consequences for soldiers and veterans extended far beyond the field of battle.

³² Ibid, 55.

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