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HIST 211 OHP Analysis

# War and Remembrance: An Examination of Viet Nam War Through the Oral History Of Col. Gabriel Zinni

The Viet Nam War was a conflict that shaped an entire generation of young Americans and threw the country of Viet Nam into a more than decade long conflict heavy with civilian loss of life. Many young American soldiers sent to fight thousands of miles from home never returned alive. Of those that did, many are willing to share their stories, reflections, and viewpoints on what they saw, felt, did, and thought during the war. Philadelphia, and its citizens, was not immune to the loss felt by Viet Nam war. In fact, Thomas A. Edison High School in North Philadelphia lost the most students in combat in Viet Nam of any other high school in the United States; 54 students in total (Finkel 1). Hearing and recording the stories of Viet Nam veterans, from both the United States and Viet Nam, as well as the refugees and civilians who faced death, starvation, and untold hardship is critical to the process of understanding, healing, and documenting the legacy and history of the conflict.

Colonel Gabriel Zinni was born on June 22, 1941 in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, just before the era of the post-World War II "baby boomers". Zinni is a first generation American, the son of two Italian immigrants. His mother, Lucy Zinni, came to the United States in 1920 and his father, John Zinni immigrated from Italy in 1922. His mother had a son and a daughter from a previous husband. After her first husband's untimely death in 1931, Lucy Zinni married John Zinni in 1939. Gabriel Zinni became very close with his half-siblings, despite their large age difference.

Zinni attended Catholic elementary and middle school and went on to attend both North Catholic High School and Bishop Daugherty High School in Philadelphia. After graduation from high school, Zinni matriculated to the Reserve Officer Training Corps (ROTC) program at LaSalle University in North Philadelphia in September 1959. After graduating from LaSalle, Zinni accepted his commission as a 1st Lieutenant in the US Army and was stationed in Fort Sill, Oklahoma for artillery training. He would be deployed to Viet Nam just two years later. Service to country was a prominent theme of Col. Zinni's reflections on his entire military career and his deployment to Viet Nam. Indeed, the notion of national service, especially through the military, was a significant aspect of the era in which Col. Zinni was born and brought up. He came of age in the immediate years after the second World War, when many American families were beginning to embark on their new lives after years of wartime. The large segment of the United States' population that served in the military in some capacity during World War II meant that veterans were encountered frequently. In 1945, over 12 million Americans were on active duty with the US military, within a population of 140 million ("US Military by the Numbers" 1). Today, there are fewer than 1.2 million active duty members for a population more than double the size of 1945 ("Military Service" 1). Col. Zinni shared that all his first cousins and his half-brother had served in World War II and his father had served in World War I. As a child, he observed his older familial role models enter the service, go to war, and return home as veterans.

This deep, and personal familiarity with the nature of wartime military service and the sense of obligation to serve can assuredly be traced to Zinni's family military roots. In fact, Zinni shared that his enlistment in ROTC in college and commission into the Army after graduation was not a decision he pondered at length saying, "it was just not even a second consideration, it was just part of that continuum of service and the involvement with a war" (Zinni 2). His mention of a "continuum of service" is especially important and elucidates his view that he was,

in some ways, carrying on a family legacy and duty to commit part of one's life to serving the greater cause of the country. As first-generation immigrants, Zinni's family may have felt a stronger sense of obligation to the United States, although he seldom discussed the influence of his Italian heritage during the interview.

World War II veterans and former servicemembers were a large part of Col. Zinni's educational experience at LaSalle. Col. Zinni shared that many of his professors during college were World War II veterans. This included the head of the Industrial Relations department, which he would major in, who was a World War II veteran of the 82nd Airborne Division, the same division Zinni would later join. Zinni commented that World War II service was so commonplace it was hardly remarkable, "It just wasn't like, 'Oh, wow. He was a World War II veteran'" (Zinni 4). The widespread and normalized nature of military service at LaSalle aligned with the acceptance and encouragement of the ROTC program for students. Zinni said he wore his uniform once a week, every week, on the drill field with the rest of the LaSalle ROTC members and, "the whole program was seen as a positive thing," (Zinni 3).

The acceptance of ROTC was certainly aided by the large number of ROTC programs at Philadelphia-area college and universities at the time. Zinni himself mentioned the programs at the University of Pennsylvania, Villanova, Saint Joseph's, and Temple University being active while he was in ROTC. The ROTC program began to take serious criticism and opposition on college campuses as the Viet Nam war grew to be more unpopular among the American public, especially college students. In 1964, just one year after Zinni had graduated from LaSalle and exited the ROTC, the US Congress passed the ROTC Vitalization Act of 1964 which sought to increase interest in the program as a means for young people to enter into the military on a path they could dictate, rather than through the draft (Lindeman 48). However, this effort proved to be futile in the face of heavy American losses during the Tet Offensive in 1969 and the shooting of

Kent State student protestors by National Guardsmen in 1970. The active and visible military presence of ROTC sparked notable protests at prominent universities, including Harvard and Yale (Lindeman 49). Due to student and faculty opposition, many universities halted their ROTC contracts with the Department of Defense and ROTC overall enrollment dropped 75 percent between 1967 and 1973 (Lindeman 49). This figure suggests Zinni was perhaps among the last classes of ROTC graduates early in the Viet Nam war era spared from the peak of campus protests in opposition of US involvement in Viet Nam.

The military rigor and atmosphere of the ROTC program during his four years of college brought Zinni into the military lifestyle and made his transition into active duty, and eventually combat, somewhat of a natural progression in his career path as an Army officer. Before he was deployed to Viet Nam, Zinni already had spent more than five years enlisted in the military. This fact almost certainly shaped his attitude towards his eventual deployment to Viet Nam and his view of anti-war and anti-veteran sentiment. This stands in stark contrast to the narrative of draft dodgers and those who sought complicated deferments for military service to avoid the possibility of deployment to Viet Nam. In short, Col. Zinni seemed to approach his deployment to Viet Nam as a culmination of his time in the military rather than an avoided outcome. Interestingly, despite growing US involvement in Viet Nam between 1959 and 1963, when Zinni was enrolled at LaSalle, he maintained, “Vietnam wasn't in any of our minds as seniors” (Zinni 5).

After completing artillery training at Fort Sill Oklahoma in 1963, Zinni completed Airborne training at Fort Benning Georgia and returned to his artillery unit now stationed in Fort Knox, Kentucky. Zinni spent two years in an artillery unit at Fort Knox supporting an armor battalion and received his order for deployment to Viet Nam over Christmas leave 1965. Zinni

joked that he was hoping for a deployment to Verona, Italy and instead was sent to another, less-preferable “V” named place for his tour of duty.

Zinni would be “retread” from an artillery based role to advise Vietnamese infantry units fighting in Can Tho, South Viet Nam. He was sent to Fort Bragg, North Carolina for intense Vietnamese language and advisory training by Vietnamese and US Special Forces instructors. The advisory role was a complete reorientation of his previous military career as an artillery officer. Now, Zinni, just 24 years old, was expected to attach to an infantry unit, provide operational advice, and conduct search and destroy operations in Viet Nam. The abrupt and drastic change, he said, “was an experience. It was an experience, to say the least” (Zinni 6). His role as an advisor, attached to Regional Force Popular Force (RFPF) unit of South Vietnamese soldiers, rather than a more conventional deployment in a solely American unit, gave him an atypical experience in the Viet Nam war setting. Col. Zinni’s social integration and active collaboration with Republic of Viet Nam RFPF units altered his perception of the Vietnamese and their motivations to fight, in notable contrast to other Americans who were stationed in Viet Nam.

The shift in Col Zinni’s military career influenced his mentality going into his deployment with mostly Vietnamese fighting counterparts. He felt comfortable with his military training but was more unsure of his position as a 24-year old foreigner seeking to advise a force that was already actively operating. Zinni made the following comparison of his role to college students graduating, “and all of a sudden, you're going to go out and advise somebody that's already in business” (Zinni 6). Despite his initial discomfort with the advisory role, he found his personal relationships with his RFPF comrades to be “wonderful” and eventually, “you just end up integrating into it” (Zinni 7). Zinni’s statements reflect the manner in which relationship building and cooperation with local fighters positively shaped his remembrance of the war and

his view of the people of Viet Nam as a complex group fighting along ideological lines rather than a more racially-charged perception of all Vietnamese locals as the enemy.

Zinni repeatedly mentioned that colleagues in the military who served with American units had different attitudes than his towards the Vietnamese. He attributes this discrepancy in view, in part, to the lack of integration with RVN and RFPF forces in conventional American units. But he also points out the importance of social ties among national compatriots that makes the loss and violence of war more personal and directly adversarial with the enemy. Unity and solidarity as a fighting group came easily to all American infantry units who trained together, were stationed together, and, eventually, fought alongside each other in combat in Viet Nam. For Zinni and his fellow advisors he said, “we didn't go over as units, we went over as individuals and you had to integrate. And so when it was time to come home, it wasn't the unit coming home, you were just saying hey man I'm out of here and all this and you got within 30 days ... 29 days, 28 days, and so forth” (Zinni 14).

The relative isolation of American advisors exists in contrast to what Zinni called the “traditional conflict battle” mindset of fellow Viet Nam veterans he has encountered who fought in American units. This attitude was based on the notion that, "this is our side; theirs is that side over there. We're going to go get them” (Zinni 15). He went as far to say that the views of certain American servicemembers towards their Vietnamese adversaries were “nasty” and promoted the ideology that, "they were the enemy, and our whole purpose for being here is to engage them” (Zinni 15). To Zinni, the conflict he saw did not exist on such binary, black and white terms. He fought alongside South Vietnamese fighters against Viet Cong allied South and North Vietnamese fighters in South Vietnam. The complexity and politics of the conflict were evident from his perspective and within the operations he was conducting. In Zinni’s mind, “communism is what we are fighting” (Zinni 8).

Prominent among Zinni's experience with the RFPF forces was his relationship with the officers of the Vietnamese force. His direct RFPF counterpart, Captain Thanh, was 10 years senior to Col. Zinni and commanded an entire battalion of RFPF fighters. Captain Thanh, an experienced career infantry officer, had even fought the French at Dien Bien Phu in 1954, just 11 years earlier. Zinni remarked that he was, "a very competent guy. You don't want to get into a fight with him, he'd beat the hell out of you" (Zinni 8). As a career US army officer commissioned at the same rank as his Vietnamese counterpart, Zinni could have adopted a more condescending, diminutive view of Captain Thanh. That he did not hold these views displays the mutual respect present between individuals who fight next to each other in combat, and the bond that can form across national, political, and ethnic boundaries in conflict. His close relationship with RFPF soldiers provided Col. Zinni with a more humanized view of the Vietnamese fighters and the people of Viet Nam.

However, Zinni mentions the loss of Vietnamese life as having less of an emotional impact on him, compared to the death of an American servicemember. This revelation complicates his otherwise egalitarian and favorable views towards the Vietnamese he fought alongside with. It also is telling of the ways in which cultural differences, race, status, and neo-colonial views inform perceptions of both allies and adversaries in conflict. Perhaps most reflective of this viewpoint is the story of two fallen Americans who Zinni personally identified.

Late in Zinni's deployment, Sergeant Henry Donoe and Captain Paul Johnson, both from Texas, were flying a reconnaissance mission in support of an operation Zinni was involved in. Zinni himself had flown many of these air reconnaissance missions in the same aircraft. Donoe and Johnson's plane was shot down by enemy fire and Zinni was tasked with finding, recovering, and identifying their bodies. The moment he zipped up their body bags on the helicopter in Viet Nam changed his mind set for the last six weeks of his deployment, "you know

... all of a sudden they were Americans and now it got personal" (Zinni 14). This was Zinni's most prominent, and personal experience with the direct loss of fellow American soldiers during his deployment. The loss was especially emotional as Sergeant Henry Donoe, an intelligence specialist, had served with Col. Zinni for his entire deployment prior to the plane crash. This story clearly still held an important place in Zinni's personal memory of the Viet Nam war. It additionally reflects the complex dynamics of loss and retribution amidst a bloody, prolonged conflict and how the war shifted, from Zinni's perspective, from the realm of duty and service to a personally charged battle against an enemy that had taken the lives of his friends. It is interesting to consider what it meant for his involvement in the conflict to be "impersonal", and how death and grief can completely alter the moral calculus and motivations of soldiers at war.

When Zinni returned home to the United States in 1966, he faced little backlash or celebration of his service in Viet Nam. He remained on active duty for two years and retired from the US Army Reserve as a Colonel after thirty years of military service. In his civilian life, Col. Zinni earned his MBA from Temple University and founded Richard Gabriel Associates, an employee benefits consulting and actuarial firm. After a long business and military career, Col. Zinni felt the calling to go back to Viet Nam and retrace his formative experiences and see how the country has changed in the five decades since he left.

In 2016, Col. Zinni and his son, also a retired officer in the US Army, traveled to the same rice paddies he fought in as a 24-year old soldier. In a photo book of the trip his son made for him, the two fallen Americans Zinni zipped into body bags are pictured prominently. His return to Viet Nam and desire to revisit the same fields where he once engaged Viet Cong fighters illuminates the complexity of his experiences with the Vietnamese people and an interest in how the country has fared since the conflict. Zinni made clear that his trip was not a search for "closure" but rather, "more just reflection" (Zinni 17). A personal opportunity to stand, ponder,

and question the nature and legacy of his role and actions as part of a larger war effort that became extremely fraught and unpopular in the American realm.

Years later, still, Zinni remains committed to the notion of service and feels immense pride for the individuals who served with him throughout his entire military career. His Viet Nam experience is not repressed, but rather, "a part of my life, a significant part of my life" (Zinni 20). Other Viet Nam veterans who do not seek remembrance in the same way should not be faulted, Zinni argues, "Their experience was very negative, and they did what was expected of them, and they're just happy they're back and safe, and God bless them, too" (Zinni 20). Col. Zinni's family history of military service and close collaboration with RFPF forces in Viet Nam allow him to approach the topic of the war from a decidedly unconventional perspective. At just 24 years old, he was asked to travel across the world and risk his life at the request of his country. Like so many other young Americans from his generation, he did. His sharing of the scars and memories of the one-year he spent in Viet Nam shed light on the human dimension of international conflict, and as a reminder of the life-long, human costs of war.

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OHP Reflection

Completing the oral history project brought a new, more personal dimension to this course and an opportunity to directly engage with a person who found their life and perspective permanently altered by the events I have studied over the past semester. Having the ability to still interview living veterans and individuals affected by the Viet Nam War is an immense privilege. Moreover, sitting down with Colonel Gabriel Zinni, hearing his stories and experiences, and recognizing the human cost and gravity of the conflict was invaluable and moving. I am incredibly grateful to Col. Zinni for volunteering his time to speak with us and share honest, personal, and reflective accounts of his time in Viet Nam and in his subsequent military career.

During the interview preparation process, Brendan and I had some idea of what perspectives and narratives Col. Zinni might share with us based on his military record. As the interview progressed, my loose expectation of Col. Zinni's answers to our questions was constantly challenged, shifted, and evolved. The unknown and unscripted nature of the interview process required us to adapt and parse out critical and significant events and lines of questioning during the interview and push and refocus Col. Zinni when we thought the interview might be going slightly off topic. Starting with his early life, and moving chronologically into his deployment in Viet Nam, a strategy suggested by Dr. Crager in our workshop, was an effective way to both provide biographical context to Col. Zinni's wartime experience and build a rapport and flow in the interview that allowed us to more readily discuss more difficult topics.

It was also interesting to speak with a Viet Nam veteran with strong roots in the Philadelphia area. As Col. Zinni described his upbringing, his time at LaSalle, and his experiences coming home to Philadelphia, I was more able to envision what he might have seen and what the social and political climate was at the time. I was also struck by the wall of military memorabilia adorning Col. Zinni's office and seeing the physical legacy of his many decades of military service. More than anything, it was an immediate reminder of the pride Col. Zinni feels for his career in the Army and reflects his broader sentiments towards duty and service to country.

It is additionally telling that Col. Zinni wants to share his stories of Viet Nam, what he saw, and how he has grappled with his role and the role of the United States in the conflict. During the interview, I was reminded that Col. Zinni spent just one year in Viet Nam. One year that came to define the many decades of life after his deployment and called him back to Viet Nam almost five decades later. In this context, I think of the impact loss, hardship, and violence had on the many servicemembers who found a tumultuous, radically life-defining experience in

Viet Nam and the civilians who lived out many years of the horrors of the war. Col. Zinni's generosity of spirit adds to the historical record of a conflict with a fraught and complicated legacy. It was refreshing and exciting to engage with and individual that lived the events and experiences discussed in class and in the readings. Often, it is easy to separate critical academic discourse from the people and lives affected by pivotal, especially violent, historical events. I am grateful to have had this opportunity and am now encouraged to incorporate first-person perspectives into my future academic work.