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Capt. Scott Edward Schneider, the 25-year-old commander of a U.S. Army artillery battery in Vietnam's Quang Ngai province in 1970, was described by subordinates as a "good guy"—competent in his leadership and fair in his discipline. But at 1:40 in the morning on Aug. 17, 1970, while he was sleeping, a fellow American threw a fragmentation grenade into his quarters. The explosion killed Schneider instantly. The Army charged one of the captain's own men, Pvt. David K. Locklin, with his murder.

Enlisted men who had worked alongside Locklin described him as a "druggie." The 19-year-old private had been a heavy user of hashish, LSD and methamphetamines before arriving Vietnam. His drug use had since expanded to include the daily consumption of an entire 6-ounce bottle of the liquid amphetamine Obesitol.

Locklin was often absent from duty, preferring to spend his days in a nearby village under the protection of Marines, where he would "smoke opium with the old men," recalled one of his platoon mates. Due to his drug use and chronic absences, he'd been assigned menial chores and prohibited from operating complex artillery. His absences ultimately prompted Schneider to demote him three grades from Specialist (E-4) to Private (E-1). "The few times Locklin showed up to work, he complained about the captain hassling him," said another platoon mate, who believes Locklin's motive for killing Schneider was "nonsensical drug-addled grudges." At his court-martial Locklin pleaded guilty to unpremeditated murder. Sentenced to 25 years at hard labor, he was released in 1979, having served just eight years and seven months.


Scott Schneider

Locklin was the perpetrator of a crime that was all too common during America's long war in Vietnam. "Fragging," as it became widely known, was the murder or attempted murder of officers or NCOs by their own troops. The term derived from the frequent use of a fragmentation grenade, which the assailant would roll or throw into the area where his superior was sleeping. Although the M26 and M67 were often the weapons of choice—they left no fingerprints—fraggers also resorted to other devices, including Claymore mines, booby traps, dynamite, rifles and pistols. Fraggings occurred in two locales—in camps (where explosives were preferred) and in jungles or rice paddies (where bullets were preferred). Attacks were most common in Army and Marine Corps units and rare in the Air Force and Navy. In addition to actual attacks, wartime records allude to thousands of threats never carried out.

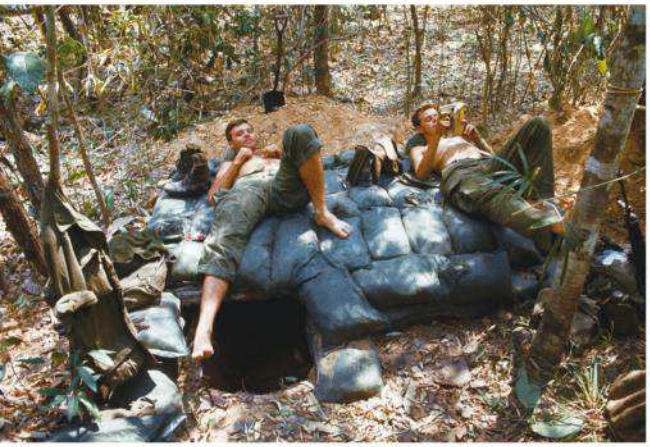
During the Vietnam War assailants carried out nearly 800 confirmed fraggings or attempted fraggings, killing 86 men and wounding an estimated 700. "But this was probably only the tip of a deadly iceberg," says historian James Westheider. Thousands of additional attacks may never have come to light. Some may have been falsely reported as accidents, to spare family members the pain of knowing a fellow soldier had slain their loved one. Still other fraggings may have been known only to the killer, as when a soldier covertly shot a superior on the battlefield. Vietnam veteran Micheal Clodfelter, a researcher for the Dupuy Institute, estimates that about 5,000 such fraggings went unrecorded, though there is no way to quantify that number.

Given the lack of definitive forensic evidence, most fraggers escaped arrest or conviction, says Army veteran George Lepre, author of *Fragging: Why U.S. Soldiers Assaulted Their Officers in Vietnam*. Although Lepre was obviously unable to study those who "got away" with murder, he did research the cases of 71 men convicted of assaults with explosives in Vietnam. He found that 56 percent were white, 36 percent black, and 8 percent Hispanic. The typical fragger was 19 or 20 years old, a high-school dropout and a frequent consumer of excessive amounts of drugs and alcohol. He often came from a dysfunctional family and had been in legal trouble before entering the service (often for such offenses as burglary and drug trafficking). Lepre concluded the convicted fraggers were troubled men before they arrived in Vietnam and "became further troubled by Vietnam."

Drugs and alcohol—with their tendency to reduce inhibitions and cloud one's thinking—played a major role in most known cases of fragging in Vietnam. In the early years of the war GIs in-country could buy marijuana, amphetamines, barbiturates, opium and hallucinogens at low cost. In 1969 heroin made the scene. Extremely pure, highly addictive and cheaper than marijuana, it soon became the most destructive of all substances. In 1971 the military reported an estimated 60,000 U.S. servicemen in Vietnam were addicted to heroin. Each year dozens of them died from overdoses. In 1971 fewer than 5,000 GIs were hospitalized for battle injuries, while 20,529 were hospitalized for "serious drug abuse."

Some fraggers were so drug-impaired they gave themselves away. In the early hours of April 21, 1969, Marine Pvt. Reginald F. Smith killed his company commander, 1st Lt. Robert T. Rohweller, by throwing a grenade beneath the cot on which the officer was sleeping. When a sergeant subsequently ordered a company formation,

VIRTUALWALL.ORG; OPPOSITE, CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: BETTMANN/GETTY IMAGES; ASSOCIATED PRESS; TIM PAGE/CORBIS VIA GETTY IMAGES



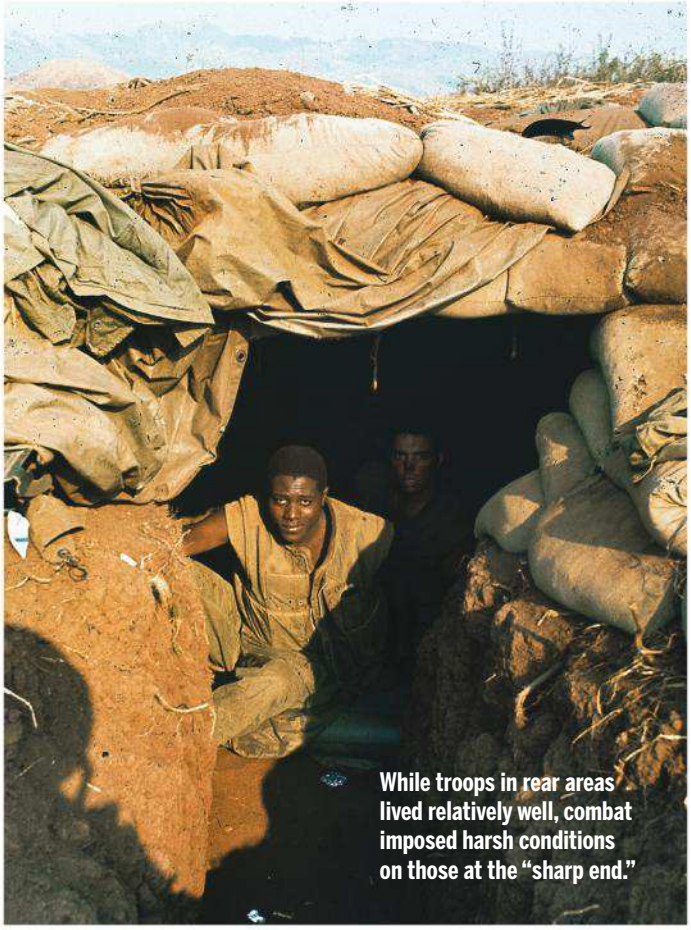
Clockwise from top left: Drug abuse was a major factor in fraggings; exhaustion prompted by the rigors of jungle warfare also played a role; field bunkers occupied by NCOs and officers were vulnerable to attack.

Smith was caught literally red-handed—the grenade pin still dangling from an index finger. "He was probably higher than a kite," his defense attorney stated. Smith was convicted and sentenced to 40 years behind bars. He also did not serve out his time—a dozen years into his sentence a fellow inmate murdered him.

Although drugs were a major factor in most fraggings, racial tensions played a part in some cases. In the early morning hours of March 15, 1971, someone threw a grenade into a sleeping area at the Army base in Bien Hoa, killing Lts. Thomas A. Dellwo and Richard E. Harlan, both of whom were white. Soon thereafter a black private, Billy Dean Smith, was arrested and charged with two counts of murder. The prosecution contended Dellwo and Harlan were not the killer's intended victims; the actual targets, they said, were company commander Capt. Randall L. Rigby and 1st Sgt. Billie Willis, with whom Smith had repeatedly clashed, allegedly over their racist treatment of Smith.

Due to the racial overtones, the case received international attention, and the trial was moved from Vietnam to Fort Ord, Calif. The prosecution produced a grenade pin it said was found in Smith's pocket shortly after the attack, though the defense argued the pin had been planted on Smith by investigators. The only reason Smith had been fingered, the defense argued, was that he had made antiwar statements before the murders. *Black Scholar* magazine suggested he'd been deemed the "logical guilty party" because he was "a black GI with a bad attitude." In the end a court-martial panel of seven officers found him not guilty.

"Perpetrators [of fraggings] often neglected to isolate their intended targets," author Lepre notes, "and, as a



While troops in rear areas lived relatively well, combat imposed harsh conditions on those at the "sharp end."

result, innocent bystanders were killed or injured." In 1969 Battery D of the 11th Marines at Phu Lac received a new commander, a first lieutenant who immediately cracked down on discipline. That made him unpopular with certain Marines, and there was talk of fragging him. On the night of February 27 someone threw a grenade into the quarters where the lieutenant usually slept. As fate would have it, the officer was sleeping elsewhere that night, and the explosion instead killed 1st Sgt. Warren R. Furse, a beloved, fatherly NCO scheduled to return home to his wife and children a few days later. No one was ever convicted of the killing.

M26 Frag

Developed after World War II as a replacement for the classic Mk 2 "pineapple" grenade, the M26 and M26A1 both saw service in Vietnam. They were the weapons most used in fraggings, though the term was also applied to attacks using firearms.

Motives for fragging generally fell into two broad categories. The first was anger and resentment over real or perceived harsh discipline. One notable strict disciplinarian was Roy Moore (the 2017 candidate for a U.S. Senate seat from Alabama), who in 1971 was an Army captain and incoming commander of the 188th Military Police Company near Da Nang. Moore soon discovered some of his MPs had serious drug and alcohol problems, and he freely filed disciplinary charges against substance abusers and insubordinate soldiers alike. As a result, "Captain America" was threatened with fragging. "I became a marked man," he recalled in his autobiography, *So Help Me God*. Moore refused to soften discipline. He did, however, take precautionary measures: "I placed sandbags under the bed and in the walls of my quarters."

Moore learned "a known drug user by the name of Kidwell" was planning to kill him. "Several weeks passed before I was called one evening and informed that Kidwell had shot 1st Sgt. Howard and was coming for me. Armed with an automatic rifle and my .45-caliber pistol, I proceeded to company headquarters, only to find that Kidwell had been taken into custody and was sitting in my office. I made arrangements for a prompt court-martial and was relieved that 1st Sgt. Howard had survived."

The second category of motives for fragging was self-protection—the near-universal desire to survive the war. Especially hated was "the glory hound," an overly aggressive superior who put the lives of his men at unnecessary risk in order to gain praise, win medals and advance his own career. "The new lieutenant comes in, all gung-ho for body count," reflected former Army Lt. Vincent Okamoto in an interview for the Ken Burns documentary *The Vietnam War*. "He wants contact. He goes crazy and says, 'I want a volunteer for this—I'll commit you to this.' That new gung-ho officer is a clear and present danger to the life and limb of the grunts. The men would give subtle hints, like a little note saying, 'We're going to kill your ass if you keep this up.' Or instead of a fragmentation grenade, they might throw a smoke grenade in an officer's hooch or bunker. And if he didn't correct his behavior and outlook, yeah, they would frag them."

Author Eugene Linden, who wrote a 1971 *Saturday Review* article about the demoralization of U.S. troops in Vietnam, told of one company commander, a hard-charging captain in the 23rd Infantry Division ("Americal"), who was injured when he fell on a sharpened bamboo booby trap known as a punji stick. The accident removed him from combat and may also have saved him from being murdered. "I don't think there was a single man in this unit who wasn't thrilled when he fell on that stick," a medic confided to Linden. "He was constantly putting his men in danger, and he just lacked common sense. That punji stick just cut short the talk of fragging him."

As it was often difficult to discern who fired at whom during combat, rifles were the most common weapon used by infantrymen seeking to frag "bad officers" in the course of field operations. "Sometimes, an errant bullet struck an incompetent fool amid a firefight," notes author and former infantry officer Robert Nylen. "Problem solved. Next?"

Among those Linden interviewed was a disabled man in a stateside Veterans Administration hospital.

BETTMANN/GETTY IMAGES; WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

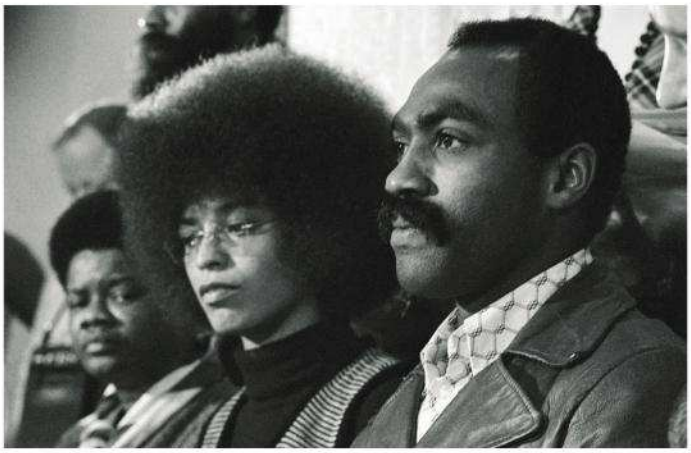
Though facing a determined enemy and often confusing tactical goals, with their political and military leaders often at odds, the majority of U.S. military personnel in Vietnam served with honor. Bottom right: In the most publicized fragging case of the Vietnam War, Pvt. Billy Dean Smith (sitting beside political activist Angela Davis) was ultimately acquitted of murder in 1972.

The veteran confided that when he was in Vietnam, he had killed a sergeant without getting caught. He'd shot the NCO during a firefight, as he felt the man's inability to read a map was "getting good men in the unit killed." Linden noted the veteran expressed zero shame or remorse.

The very threat of fragging was enough to undermine discipline. In his 1971 article Linden wrote that in parts of Vietnam the threat "stirs more fear among officers and NCOs than does the war with 'Charlie.'" As an Army judge in Vietnam, former Capt. Barry Steinberg presided over several fragging trials. Death threats, he explained to Linden, were "the troops' way of controlling officers." Many cowed superiors subsequently declined to give orders that might incite subordinates to frag them. Discipline went to hell.

Most military historians agree that while the murder of officers and NCOs has occurred in all wars, it was far more frequent during the last years of the Vietnam War. What was different about Vietnam? The availability of hard drugs was clearly a contributing cause. Another factor was a noticeable decline in the quality of recruits inducted from 1966 to 1973.

President Lyndon Johnson and Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara initially sought to wage the war without upsetting the powerful middle-class voting block, so they allowed college students to use educational deferments to avoid the draft and shielded most of the



HORST FAAS/ASSOCIATED PRESS; LENNOX MCLENDON/ASSOCIATED PRESS

Most U.S. troops in Vietnam were young, and many were draftees (above and opposite), while targets of fraggings were usually older professionals. Opposite bottom: Long Binh Jail held many of those accused of fragging.

1 million men in the National Guard and Reserves from being called to active duty. That left the bulk of the fighting to volunteers and draftees from working-class and poor families.

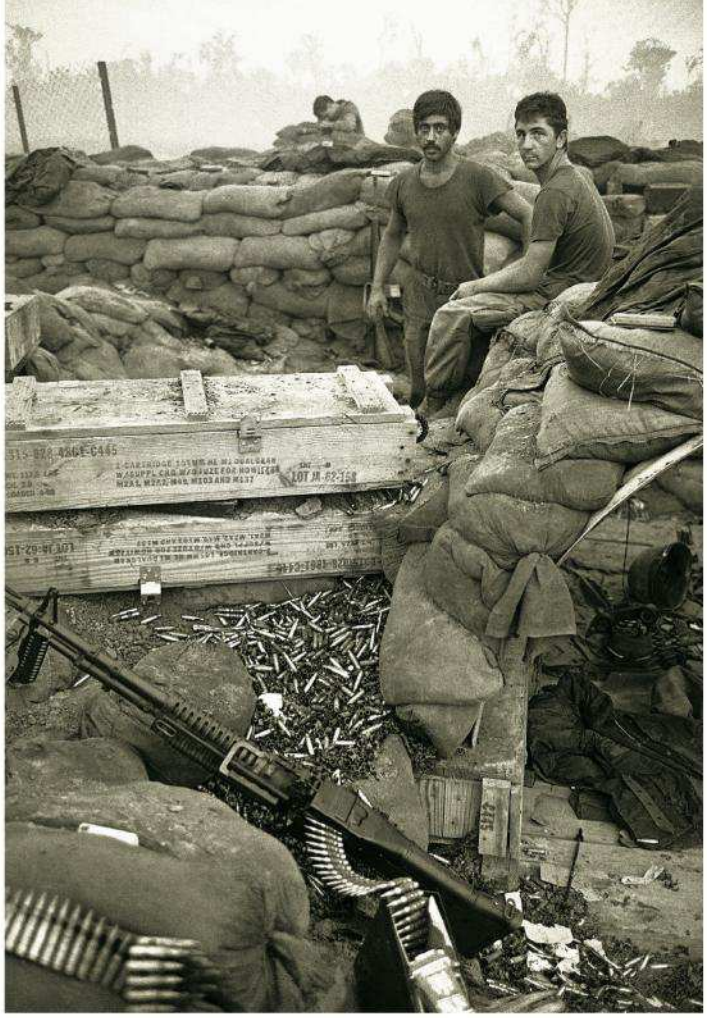
But as the war dragged on, manpower pools diminished, and in 1966 Johnson and McNamara had to find a way to get more troops into combat. McNamara's solution was to lower mental standards for entrance into the armed forces. Under his controversial Project 100,000—billed as a "social betterment" program—the defense secretary brought in a total of 354,000 low-IQ men over a five-year period. Some fared well in the service, but a significant number had difficulties handling stress and controlling impulses. They were more likely than other soldiers to commit such infractions as insubordination, desertion and assault.

'When those people came to Vietnam, that's when disciplinary problems began on the battlefield'

While "McNamara's Morons" did bolster the number of troops in Vietnam, there were not enough of them to offset an unexpected manpower shortage in 1968–69, when 28,679 men died in combat and tens of thousands more were wounded. In desperation the Pentagon again lowered the bar to cull another group of dubious draftees: criminals, drug addicts and psychologically disturbed misfits. Derided after the war by Marine Corps Commandant General Louis H. Wilson Jr. as "the dregs of society," these men would never have been inducted under normal circumstances. Some historians blame the reprobates for a precipitous decline in military discipline over the closing years of the war.

Though felons were supposed to have been disqualified from service, recruiters and induction centers were given the authority to grant "moral waivers" to enlist them. In a common scenario a judge would work with a recruiter and give a young offender a choice—go to jail or join the Army or Marine Corps. Dr. Douglas Bey Jr., a former captain and combat psychiatrist for the 1st Infantry Division, tells of one unpopular soldier, a troublemaker who had entered the Army after being told by a judge he could choose jail or military service. While still in training, he attacked a sergeant, and the Army gave

HORST FAAS/ASSOCIATED PRESS



HORST FAAS/ASSOCIATED PRESS; ED MCDONALD/FLICKR

him the choice between a court-martial or Vietnam. "His infantry unit in Vietnam made him a point man," Bey notes, "hoping to get rid of him." The troublemaker survived leading his unit into combat and was even decorated. Unable to rise above his rough nature, however, he later murdered an NCO and was imprisoned.

Other men were inducted despite having civilian records of mental illness. Army veteran and retired physicist Fred Gray recalled one such man: "As a brand-new company commander of an engineer unit in Vietnam in 1968, I was getting a tour of our rock quarry unit. The first sergeant, platoon sergeant and I had taken coffee in the mess tent and were exiting when one of the soldiers opened fire on us with his carbine. He was about 10 feet away, got off three shots before he was tackled, missed everyone. He never did explain his actions other than repeatedly saying, 'I hate this f---ing war.'"

General William Westmoreland, commander of U.S. forces in Vietnam, was appalled by the presence of "weak-minded, criminal, untrained" men in the ranks in the latter years of the war. "When those people came to Vietnam," he recalled, "that's when disciplinary problems began on the battlefield."

Sharing Westmoreland's outrage were many other Vietnam-era military leaders, who campaigned to change manpower policies after the war. Efforts were made to raise standards and exclude problematic individuals like those who had caused trouble in Vietnam. The draft had already ended in 1973, giving rise to the all-volunteer armed forces. As a result, contend some historians, incidences of fragging have been rare since Vietnam.

What happened to the Vietnam fraggers? Of the 71 convicted men Lepre studied, all had left prison by 1982. "A number of the men," he notes, "wound up either homeless, dead or, most commonly, back behind bars. Four are known to have committed homicides after leaving military confinement." One atypical inmate was a model prisoner who expressed deep remorse for the "horrible, inexcusable crime" he had committed and, to all appearances, became a dedicated family man and law-abiding citizen.

As for the victims of fraggers, they have not been forgotten. Joseph Romatowski, a veteran who served under and admired the slain Capt. Schneider, wrote of seeking out the murdered officer's name during visits to the Vietnam Veterans Memorial on the National Mall in Washington, D.C.: "When I find it, I touch the letters chiseled into the cool dark granite and tell Scott how sorry I am that life was taken from him prematurely—and so stupidly. I ask that God grant peace and understanding to his parents." MH

Hamilton Gregory, a U.S. Army veteran of the Vietnam War, is author of McNamara's Folly: The Use of Low-IQ Troops in the Vietnam War, Plus the Induction of Unfit Men, Criminals and Misfits. *For further reading he recommends* Fragging: Why U.S. Soldiers Assaulted Their Officers in Vietnam, *by George Lepre, and* Not a Gentleman's War: An Inside View of Junior Officers in the Vietnam War, *by Ron Milam.*

Tactical Takeaways

Armies Reflect Society
Military forces mirror the nations they serve. Vietnam was a divisive issue for America, and the fissures at home were also present among the troops.

Perceptions Matter
NCOs and officers seen by their troops as incompetent or as "glory hounds" out for their own advancement at the expense of their men were far more likely to be fragged.

Murder Is Murder
No amount of after-the-fact rationalization can ever justify the unlawful killing of a fellow warrior. Fragging is murder.