Songs of the Vietnam War:
An Occupational Folk Tradition

Les Cleveland

Whatever the military perplexities of Vietnam, at least the social behavior of its Western participants conformed to some of the traditional experience of modern warfare. Like a previous generation of U. S. and other Allied services personnel in World War II, the troops in Vietnam used occupational folksong to define the complexities of their situation. This can be explored by applying the concept of organizational culture to a selection of the songs that were current during the war.

Edgar H. Schein (1985:9) defines the culture of groups within occupational communities and organizations as a pattern of basic assumptions invented or developed by a given group as it learns to cope with its problems of external advantage and internal integration. This pattern of assumptions needs to have worked well enough to be considered valid and therefore to be taught to new members as the correct way to think and feel in relation to these problems. In other words, organizational culture is the way groups face the world and maintain their own internal solidarity. Their cultures can be studied formally through officially sponsored customs and observances of particular units, or they can be investigated informally through a group's folklore.

From a military point of view, the essential requirement of the organizational culture of a combat unit is that it be productive of a strong sense of solidarity and esprit de corps. Along with leadership and training, such esprit de corps is key combat motivation. Military sociologists and historians have long known that esprit de corps is an outcome of a strong sense of group identity as well as commitment to military goals. It requires that each individual feel integrated with the others in his squad, section, gun crew, flight or team because that is the primary organization in which he lives and fights and the group on which his personal survival ultimately depends. Central to the experience of most infantry and combat aircrew is the paradox that the individual struggle for survival often demands collective dedication in which a person may be risking his life and making sacrifices for others. The pattern of basic assumptions by which he learns to cope with this kind of crisis is of very great importance. Its centrality to the organizational culture of the ordinary combat soldier in Vietnam is apparent in a few lines of a song entitled "Grunt" (Lansdale 1976; Ellis 1980). It teaches that learning to improvise under circumstances of deprivation is what matters most, and that comradeship (and hence the integration of groups) requires sharing.

Being a Grunt, you learn to live with what you've got
Little things mean a lot, when they're things you haven't got;
Share between you what you've got
And learn to live with what you've got, etc.

This homily on the imperatives of group socialization was far from universally accepted by all who served in Vietnam. That there was a great deal of conflict concerning the problem of integration within the organizational cultures of the military in that campaign is a notorious historical fact that can be amply illustrated in both the popular music and the
folkson of the era. In their early phases, the hostilities were depicted in popular commercial entertainment as a crusade for freedom by heroic U. S. soldiers helping their South Vietnamese allies. An outstanding example of this romantic patriotism is Barry Sadler's "Ballad of the Green Berets" (1966).

Fighting soldiers from the sky,
Fearless men who jump and die;
Mean just what they say,
The brave men of the Green Berets. Etc.

As the war continued and opposition to it intensified, however, there emerged a stream of anti-war, protest songs like "Piss on Johnson's War," "Hitler 'Ain't Dead Yet" and "The Army's Appeal to Mothers". At the same time, folk compositions circulating in the military (specifically those of Army Air Force pilots) showed similar ideological polarities.

On the one hand they contain a very strong sense of the integration of particular groups of men and machines as part of their core of basic assumptions about life in the military organization. The classic statement of this cohesive relationship occurs in a song about a type of aircraft known popularly as the Thud, an abbreviation for the F-105 Republic Thunderchief, a jet fighter-bomber used in Vietnam.

I'm a Thud pilot, I love my plane;
It is my body, I am its brain;
My Thunderchief loves me,
And I love her too,
But I get the creeps with only one seat
And one engine, too. (Tuso 1990: 204-205; Getz 1981:T-14-; Jonas 1987)

Such total identification between weapon and operator suggests that the technological and specialized nature of the occupation can influence the degree of integration of the workforce as reflected in its folkson and social behavior. Tuso comments on the centrality of folkson to the social life of the pilots at some fighter bases, and even romantically compares the all male, war-oriented culture of the officers' mess to the life of Anglo Saxon warriors in the comitatus!

Certainly the war seems to have appealed to some participants as a kind of game, celebrated in "Wild Weasel" (Tuso 1990:224 226; Getz 1981:W-11-12) and sung to the tune of "Sweet Betsy From Pike."

Wild Weasel, Wild Weasel, they call me by name,
I fly up on Thud Ridge and play the big game,
I fly o'er valleys and hide behind hills,
I dodge all the missiles then go in for kills;
I'm a lonely Thud driver with a shit-hot fine bear. Etc.

On the other hand, many Vietnam songs expressed unheroic and highly resistant attitudes. Tuso (1999:152-154) reproduces an item from the songbook of the 35th Tactical Fighter Wing at Phan Rang which satirizes the unit's leadership.

Our leaders, our leaders
Our leaders is what they always say,
But it's bullshit, it's bullshit
It's bullshit they feed us every day! Etc.

By parodying the World War I popular song "The Caissons Go Rolling Along" infantry draftees sang of their contempt and anger towards the volunteer professionals signified by "R.A.,” presumably an abbreviation for Regular Army.
Over hill, over dale, as we hit the dusty trail  
As the lifers go stumbling along,  
Watch them drink, watch them stink,  
Watch them even try to think,  
As the lifers go stumbling along.

For it's heigh heigh hee, truly fucked are we,  
Shout out your numbers loud and strong. R.A.!  
For wher'e're you go, you will always know  
That the lifers go stumbling along.

Stumble! Stumble! Stumble! (Brown 1969)

They even made fun of the semi-sacred "Ballad of the Green Berets" (Lansdale 1976):

Frightened soldiers from the sky  
Screaming "Hell I don't wanna die,  
You can have my job and pay,  
I'm a chicken any old way!" Etc.

A parody of "Take This Hammer" (Lansdale 1976) advocates nothing less than the complete abandonment of combat service.

Take my rifle,  
Take it to the Chieu Hoi³  
Tell 'em I'm gone, boy,  
Tell 'em I'm gone. Etc.

Unashamed, time-serving reluctance is expressed in "Short Timers' Blues" (Broudy 1969:46). A rotation date marked the end of the twelve months service which drafted personnel were obliged to serve.

I'd like to leave this country far behind;  
This yellow streak is creeping up my spine;  
I've got to see the doc 'fore it's too late,  
I'm nearing my rotation date. Etc.

Cynicism toward war surfaced in revisions to old standards like "Dear 'Ole Dad" (Brown 1969) collected from a Vietnam veteran who learned it in 1965. It was always sung as a big group effort, usually in bars.

I want a war, just like the war  
That mutilated dear 'ole Dad;  
It was the war and the only war  
That Daddy ever had;  
A good 'ole fashioned war  
That was so cruel,  
But we all abided by Geneva rules  
Hey! (Come in with gusto)  
I want a war, just like the war  
That mutilated dear 'old Dad

The organizational culture of most field units in Vietnam voiced ambiguous attitudes towards the war, including a criticism of military authority and questions of individual motivation. In addition to celebrating unheroic behavior, Vietnam songs featured a good deal of nostalgic, I-want-to-go home sentiment, probably encouraged as much by the policy of individual rotation as by conscription and the ideological objections to the war of some draftees. "Freedom Bird" (Lansdale 1976, Ellis 1980) expresses a kind of dream-like yearning for the coming of the aircraft that will transport the soldier back to the homeland at the end of his period of service.
I hear the sound,
Of that freedom bird,
Comin’ down the way.
It won’t be long now.
Til I’m in the world.
It's been a long, long time,
It's been a long, long time,
It's been a long, long time.

The war also provided wide-ranging opportunities for protest and mockery along lines similar to those attributed to World War II conscript soldiers by Cleveland (1985). There were innumerable jokes about politicians, bureaucracy and the Brass, evident in the disillusionment and cynicism of compositions like "We are Winning" (Lansdale 1976) sung to the tune of "Rock of Ages."

We are winning, that I know,
McNamara tells us so. Etc.

A song called "Saigon Warrior" (Broudy 1969:61) sung to the tune of "Sweet Betsy From Pike" is a variant of a World War II composition which could be used to complain about base camps, training establishments, or headquarters anywhere in the world. For instance, a version sung in the New Zealand Army during World War II (and still in circulation in 1986) was entitled "Waiouru’s a Wonderful Place." Waiouru was a much disliked training camp in a mountainous and lonely part of the country. (The source of this and other unacknowledged texts reproduced here is the present writer’s field collection of soldiers’ songs).

Oh they say that Waiouru’s a wonderful place,
But the organization’s a fucking disgrace,
There are Bombardiers, Sergeants, and Staff Sergeants too,
With their hands in their pockets and fuck-all to do;
And out in the bull ring they sing and they shout,
They scream about things they know fuck-all about,
And for all that I’ve learned there I might as well be
Shoveling up shit from the Isle of Capri.

The "Saigon Warrior" variant of this song collected in Vietnam by Broudy has Captains and Majors and Light Colonels too instead of Bombardiers etc. It is also organized in four-line stanzas with each one followed by a two-line chorus:

Singing dinky dau, dinky dau, dinky dau doo,
With their hands in their pockets and nothing to do.

It satirizes "Saigon Commandos" who have lunch at the Cercle Sportif (a fashionable club in Saigon) and wear a Bronze Star which they got for writing reports about the war. Then it concludes prophetically:

When this war is over and you all go home
You'll meet Saigon warriors wherever you roam
You'll know them by sight and they're not in your class
They don't have diarrhoea, just a big chairborne ass!

Broudy states that the text was transcribed from a tape-recorded performance by Maggie, an Australian woman. This suggests that it may either have been part of some Australian-inspired entertainment, or that it may have originated with the ANZAC forces in Vietnam. Dinky dau is a corruption of the Vietnamese die cai dau, literally sick the head, hence, meaning crazy. This makes no sense unless it is related to a traditional Australian folk ballad, current in World War I and 2, entitled "The Lousy Lance-Corporal" (Cleveland 1959, 1961, 1975, 1982, 1994:110-112; Tate 1982:17) which makes repetitive use of the expression "dinky die" as a chorus.
This is a slang term meaning truly, emphatically, indisputably.

Another Vietnam War version about an airbase is entitled Ol' Phan Rang" (Broudy 1969: 47). This follows the World War II text more closely, even to shoveling sand on the Isle of Capri, but does not make use of a chorus. Other songs with World Wars I and II origins that emerged among Americans in Vietnam are a fragment of "The Quartermaster's Store" (Lansdale 1971) and a parody of the World War I epic, "Mademoiselle from Armentieres" (1969:60), but except for those of Air Force pilots, the songs of U.S. forces in Vietnam do not retain many direct linkages with the World War II allied services' repertoire, although their content has some strong similarities.

Fear of the enemy or of death, wounding or captivity could be brought under social control by such expedients as calling the enemy Charlie, indulging in humor about booby traps, claymore mines, mortars, or the fear of running out of fuel, getting hit by a SAM missile, or having to make a forced landing and ending up a guest at the Hanoi Hilton, a prison camp in North Vietnam. Guilt and anxiety over having to engage civilian targets could be relieved by the black humor of pilots' songs like "Two, Four, Six, Eight, Who're You Going to Defoliate" (Lansdale 1976) and "Strafe the Town" (Broudy 1969:67; Getz 1986:SS-16-17). This perfectly reflects the mad, Catch-22 contradictions of the war which by its fatal, obsessive technology of over-kill destroyed some of the very people it was supposed to save.

Drop some candy to the orphans
And as the kiddies gather round,
Use your 20 millimeter
To mow the little bastards down.
Isn't that sweet!7

Criticism of the War

In scandalous actuality, resistance towards the war reached the point of demoralization in some U. S. formations, with insubordination, refusals of duty, fragging of unpopular NCOs and officers, engagement in black market trading and the consumption of drugs, while at the level of comic self assertion, some soldiers symbolized their personal autonomy from the military organization by giving peace signs, wearing non-regulation clothing and growing idiosyncratic styles of moustache.

The recordings made by Lansdale in 1967 had a highly original purpose that arose from a fundamental disagreement about how the war should be fought. The tapes were sent to President Lyndon Johnson, the Vice-President, the Defense Secretary, the Secretary of State and to various officials in Saigon including General William Westmoreland. The intention was to impart a greater understanding of the political and psychological nature of the war to the top decision makers in Washington, but this unique use of folksong as a creative attempt to influence cultural perceptions and to change the basic assumptions of the policy makers in the external environment of Washington was to no avail. Washington was not listening to what is perhaps the only example known to military history of folklore being used as a device for the transmission of intelligence. If the policy makers had been paying attention they might have heard a very sensitive account of the dealings of American advisors with the Vietnamese peasantry, along with this kind of plea:

Hello General Westmoreland
This is Advisory Team 54;

We can't take much more,
We're damn near out of ammo
And we haven't got much gas;
If you don't help us out
We'll be out of work for sure. Etc. (Lansdale 1976)

The command might also have adopted a different strategic approach to the campaign, with more reliance on small group operations among the South Vietnamese, backed up by counterinsurgency warfare on a larger scale, and less emphasis on big operations supported by massive manpower and firepower as well as the large-scale use of bombing and defoliation.

This critique of the operational conduct of the war also emerges in the comments of some of its ANZAC participants. For instance, Ross (1983:83) comments that Australian soldiers whom she interviewed thought Americans undisciplined and unprofessional and were critical of their trigger-happy tendencies and the way U.S. officers wasted the lives of their men. Some New Zealand rank-and-file veterans interviewed by the present writer considered both the Australians and the Americans inferior because they had not, unlike the New Zealanders, mastered the techniques of jungle warfare that required a more stealthy style of aggressive patrolling in the jungle rather than relying on open trails and large-scale operations.

**Conclusion**

The cultivation of myths and symbols that consolidate a sense of historical continuity is a normal defensive strategy of organizations under attack or exposed to hostile circumstances that challenge their purpose. Organizations as culture-bearing milieus provide an environment in which people associate regularly and can arrive at shared understandings. The occupants of military organizations in the field have the cultural advantage of being closely integrated communities as well as group networks engaged in the performance of tasks, consequently much of their folksong is occupationally based.

Workplace cultures like the U. S. Air Force units described by Tuso (1990:5-18) have their grounding in technological specializations which give them a distinctive language of "unique" terminologies, codes, acronyms and sign systems, as well as the symbols and metaphors that convey the culture of the particular organization." (Evered 1983:115-126). Thus the artificial community of the pilot's mess is the functional equivalent of the family of gunners and the fraternity of ground units or any other military organization with a strong sense of its identity and traditions. Little of this kind of research has been done in the U. S., but a cursory investigation of the symbolism and mythology of aggressive formations like the U. S. Marine Corps and some Airborne units confirms these findings. For instance there is an elaborate sub-culture of hyperbolic, aggressive, self-assertion at the center of the folklore of the Marine Corps that derives its inspiration partly from events in the history of the corps and partly from the mainstream tradition of American folklore. This cadence, circulating in a boot camp in Texas, draws upon the elemental tall tale to case its hero in the image of epic frontiersman.

Born in the backwoods, raised by bears,
Double-boned jaw, three coats of hair,
Cast-iron balls and a blue-steel rod,
I'm a mean mother-fucker,
I'm a Marine, by God! (Tuckness 1982:)

Similarly, Airborne soldiers consider themselves the army's elite. There is a special insistence on physical fitness and a strong sense of regimental pride evident in cadences like

Airborne, Airborne, where you been?
Round the world and gone again.
Emblems like the paratrooper's wings symbolize the dedication of those who have a highly dangerous task.

If I die on the old drop zone,
Box me up and send me home,
Pin my wings upon my chest,
Tell my gal I done my best. (Johnson 1983:95)

The songs and humor of such organizations express the socialization crises of the individuals within them, as well as their degree of dedication to the organization itself. The Thud pilot who is both the body and the brain of his aircraft is symbolically related to the gunner who "wouldn't wanna be in tanks or infantry" and the Air Cavalry trooper whose trademark is "guts and pride" as well as the Airborne Ranger who wants "to live a life of danger" (Johnson 1983: 139). Integrating elements of occupational folksong from World War II and Korea, celebrating the exploits of particular units, making good-natured fun, and criticizing those running the war, the songs of the Vietnam War embody important lessons for those who are concerned about the maintenance and well being of the military organization, especially, in periods of peacetime indifference and even hostility.

Notes

1. Thud Ridge was a ridge west of Hanoi where many Thunderchiefs crashed.

2. Slang: shit-hot means excellent. Getz (1981, W-II) explains that "The Bears" were electronic warfare officers who rode the back seats of the F IOS. "Wild Weasels" were two-seated F-105s especially equipped to detect and knock out hostile SAM sites.

3. Enemy soldiers who have surrendered under a U.S. psychological warfare program directed at the Vietcong.

4. Robert McNamara, U. S. Secretary of State.

5. British Army slang: parade ground.

6. "The Isle of Capri" was a popular song in the late 1930's.

7. For an extended discussion of this chant and its variants, see Burke's JAF article (1989).

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Les Cleveland.

Les Cleveland is a World War II veteran who is currently a Senior Research Associate in the School of Political Science and International Relations at Victoria University of Wellington, New Zealand. He is a specialist in the field of military occupational folklore.

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