

The Vietnam War and American Society (1960-1975)

The Course of the War



Battlefield Conditions

- Many of the U.S. soldiers that fought in Vietnam went willingly and enthusiastically
 - Although they were proud to serve, some found the war disturbing and confusing
- The South Vietnamese government was dishonest and inept
- The South Vietnamese people seemed indifferent to the help of the U.S.

“We are the unwilling working for the unqualified to do the unnecessary for the ungrateful.”

- U.S. Soldier



Fighting Conditions

- Troops carried 60-pound packs, had to walk through jungles of 10-foot tall elephant grass and across flooded rice paddies
 - Much of the time they fought leeches, fever, and jungle rot – a tropical fungus that affected the skin
- They never knew what to expect next and were never sure who was a friendly citizen and who was an enemy
 - V.C. allies were everywhere
 - A child peddling candy could be carrying a live grenade



Effects on Civilians

- *Napalm*...a jellylike substance, when dropped by a plane, burned uncontrollably
 - Stuck to peoples bodies and seared off their flesh - used primarily in Vietnam as an anti-personnel weapon – used to kill Vietcong (who hid in the dense jungle)
 - Also used to burn the dense jungles of Vietnam.
 - Developed in 1942 by a Harvard researcher - Its first recorded use was in the European theatre of war during World War II
 - Used extensively by the United States in incendiary attacks on Japanese cities in the Pacific War as well as during the Vietnam War.



- *Agent Orange*...one of the herbicides and defoliants used by the U.S. military as part of its herbicidal warfare program, Operation Ranch Hand, during the Vietnam War from 1961 to 1971.
 - The U.S. employed herbicides and defoliants to destroy the crops, bushes, and trees of communist insurgents.
 - Used to kill plants in thickly forested areas and farms of Vietnam
 - No plants = easier to see the Vietcong
 - No food/water for Vietcong
 - Extremely toxic! TCDD concentrations in soil and water were hundreds of times greater than the levels considered safe by the U.S. EPA.



- 4 million Vietnamese citizens were exposed to Agent Orange
 - As many as 3 million have suffered illnesses because of it
 - Deformities among children born to those exposed (cleft palates, mental illness, extra appendages)
 - Severe health effects for those initially exposed.
- U.S. veterans exposed to agent Orange have increased rates of cancer, and nerve, digestive, skin, and respiratory disorders
- The contaminated soil and sediment continue to affect the citizens of Vietnam, poisoning current food chains and causing illnesses, serious skin diseases and a variety of cancers in the lungs, larynx, and prostate.



Tet Offensive

- Despite the large U.S. presence in South Vietnam, the communists only intensified their efforts
- January 30, 1968...during Tet (Vietnamese New Year holiday), the Viet Cong and North Vietnamese launched a major offensive
 - This included surprise attacks on major cities and towns and American military bases throughout South Vietnam, including Khe Sanh, an American base near the North Vietnam border
- In Saigon the V.C. boldly attacked the American embassy and the presidential palace
- This fighting continued for several weeks...the siege of Khe Sanh lasted until April
- The V.C. were turned back, but had won a psychological victory
 - The Tet offensive proved that the V.C. could launch an organized, massive attack on targets throughout South Vietnam



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OBJECTIVES

- Describe the tunnels of Cu Chi.
- Analyze and evaluate the conditions of the tunnels and what life was like if you were a Vietnam soldier working and living there.

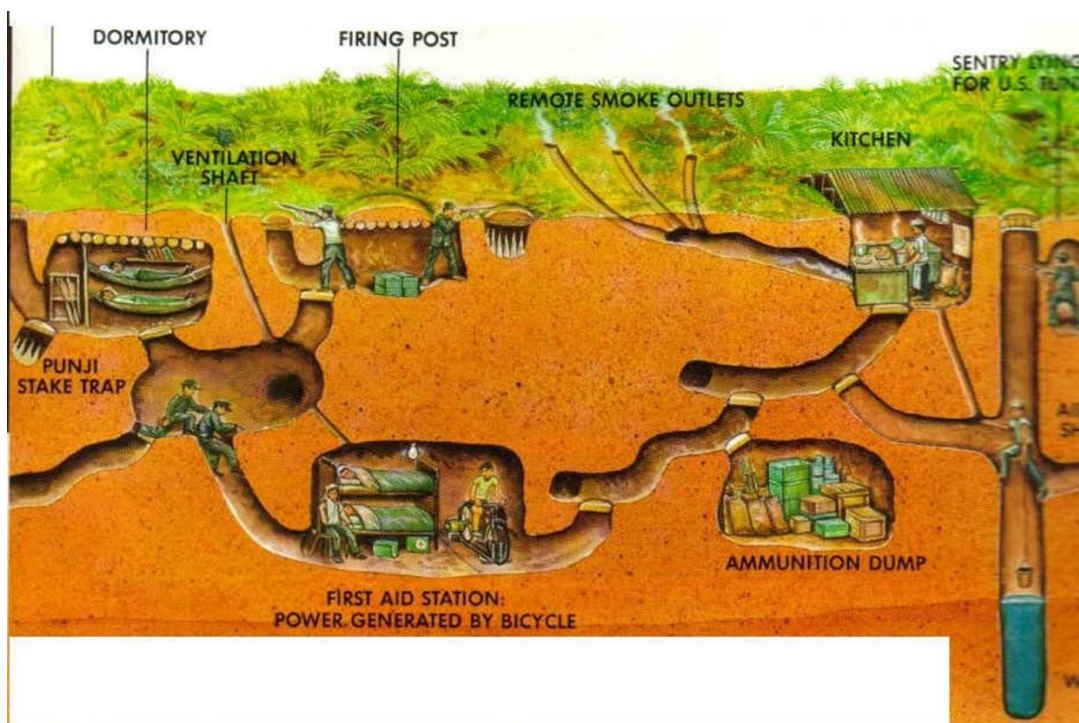
The Brutality of War: Tunnels of Cu Chi

- The V.C. used jungle guerilla tactics and never fought head on...frustrated the American troops
 - Hid in elaborate underground tunnels equipped with running water and electricity
 - Hid amongst the villagers...couldn't tell who was V.C.
- The Viet Cong also used various booby traps
 - Animal snares, camouflaged holes filled with razor-sharp punji stakes that were sometimes poisoned, carefully hidden land mines, grenades triggered by concealed trip wires
 - There was always the possibility of danger



"The VC [Viet Cong] are getting much stronger, so I think this war is going to get worse before it gets better...I try and take great pride in my unit and the men I work with. A lot of men have been in a lot of trouble and have no education or money. But I feel honored to have them call me a friend."

-letter home from U.S. soldier





VIETNAMS CUCHI TUNNELS



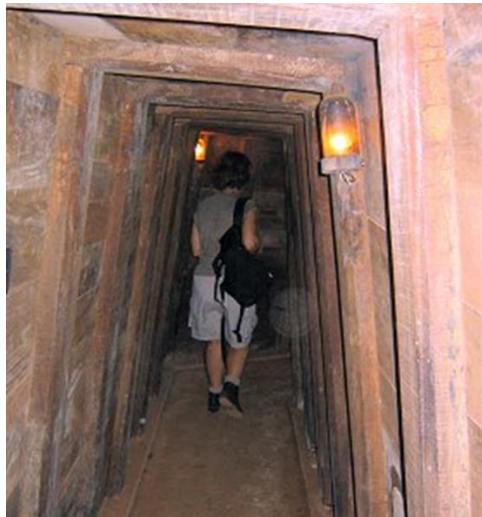
Tunnel entrances were usually very well hidden and they were often booby trapped with explosives. The U.S. military created a special force known as the "Tunnel Rats" to fight in the Viet Cong tunnels. Many of the Tunnel Rats were small Latino soldiers.



The tunnels of Cu Chi have become a popular tourist destination. Many of the tunnels have been increased in size by four times their original size in order to allow tourists to experience them. It was difficult to breath in most of the tunnel system because there was not enough ventilation holes. The Viet Cong were worried they would give away the locations of the tunnels or cause the tunnels to collapse when American tanks passed overhead.



This tunnel has been enlarged, but it still seems like it would be very claustrophobic. Very few men could successfully navigate through the extensive tunnel systems. Most people lost their sense of direction soon after entering the tunnel systems which wound up and down and zig zagged.



(Left) A major communications tunnel that is well braced. (Right) A smaller tunnel that has been enlarged to allow tourists to crawl through it without suffering panic attacks.



The tunnel systems included large rooms used for planning military strategy, sleeping, hospitals, and for storing large quantities of weapons and food. There was over 200 miles of tunnels. The tunnels were first started by the Vietnamese to fight against the French, who controlled Indochina as a colony until 1954 when America took over.



Shown above is a ventilation hole for the tunnels below. Ventilation holes for cooking stoves were usually a significant distance away from the kitchen.



Here you see another type of punji stick trap that featured (right side) two separate axles with punji sticks attached. The soldier would step in the middle and fall so that his legs, side, or arms were punctured with punji sticks. (Left side) Another type of trap was spring loaded and punctured the soldier when he stepped in the middle of it.



Here you see a model of two Viet Cong soldiers carefully sawing open an American bomb which was a dud. They carefully sawed these shells open in order to get the explosives out of them. They poured water over the shell casing as they cut, to keep it cool. Many Viet Cong died when the friction created heat and exploded the bomb.