

Drug use in the american army in the vietnam war

[War](#), [Vietnam War](#)



In 1898 the United States gained control of the Philippines. Shortly after acquiring the islands, they began a bloody struggle to suppress the guerrilla uprising that was looming. Soon after their arrival in the Philippines, the troops that were stationed in the Philippines were taught how to smoke opium. Even though this practice was very common among the troops, the current U. S. Opium Commissioner Hamilton Wright decided to deny all claims of them participating in this act. He stated in 1909 that “ among the personnel of our Army and Navy [in the Philippines] there is not the slightest evidence that the use of opium or its derivatives has been introduced (Brush, n. d.).” This use of opium in the Philippines was defiantly not the last time that the U. S. military would use drugs such as opium during the fight to combat guerilla forces. The next time that this practice was used was in the United States’ involvement in the Vietnam War between the years 1965-1975.

Since the beginning of the 20th century the United States had taken upon itself to start controlling drugs by forming different policies to regulate drugs and protect the people of their country. One of the leading fronts of the regulation of drugs was the president of the Bureau of Narcotics, Harry Anslinger. During the decade of the 1950’s, the bureau first established different posts in Southern Asia in hopes to curve the source of where different drugs were coming into the United States from (Kuzmarov, 2008). Then later in 1962, the Kennedy Administration provided Mexico with “\$500,000 worth of helicopters, light planes, jeeps, and rifles through the Agency of International Development for special narcotic destruction campaign

targeting marijuana and opium growers (Kuzmarov, 2008).” This would set a precedent for the near future.

The Vietnam War followed the First Indochina War and was fought between North Vietnam and South Vietnam. North Vietnam was supported by communist forces and South Vietnam was supported by anti-communist countries such as the United States. A few years before in 1945, President Truman stated, “ I believe that it must be the policy of the United States to support free peoples who are resisting attempted subjugation by armed minorities or by outside pressures. I believe that we must assist free peoples to work out their own destinies in their own way (Yancey, 2001).” The United States saw that the support of the Southern Vietnamese people as a way to combat their idea of “ containment” (Yancey, 2001).

Many soldiers in the enacted during the Vietnam War did not want to make the Army a career. They were generally uneducated individuals who lacked in the experience that the higher ranking officials did. These GI’s lack of interest, education, and experience in wars may have been one of the many reasons that morale for the Vietnam War faded so quickly. In 1971, President Nixon announced the formation of the Special Action for Drug Abuse Prevention (SAODAP) that was in charge of coordinating and reporting on the growing drug problems of the Vietnam War. Some of their findings included that about 40% of the voluntary enlistees of the troops were school dropouts and many of them enlisted in the military before the appropriate age because of how many little opportunities that they had concerning aspects of their lives such as jobs. They also had much more drug experiences than

that of the draftees later on in the war (Korsmeyer and Kranzler, 2009). In the later years of the war, the draftees were chosen by a lottery designed to make a selection less susceptible to “ social class biases (Korsmeyer and Kranzler, 2009).” Their top priority in this strange land was survival and many turned to drugs as a way to escape (Yancy, 2001). In this paper I will discuss the role alcohol, marijuana, opium, and amphetamine had on the Vietnam War.

In the early stages of the Vietnam War, alcohol abuse was the most common drug used. Many of the men partook in daily drinking in order to pass the long days and nights in Vietnam. This alcohol abuse did not cause much controversy in exception of those who were underage. The high ranking officers who partook in daily alcohol abuse were nicknamed “ the juicers,” and the lower ranking draftees of the war were nicknamed “ the heads” due to their indulgence in illicit drugs such as marijuana (Kutler, 1996). Drinking alcohol was significantly encouraged by the Army men. The drinking did everything to encourage their stereotype of the tough and hearty men that they tried to portray. Bars around the bases were given special licenses in order to dispense beer and other alcohols to the troops, even in the bunkers (Kutler, 1996). As the war continued, many could not ignore the fact that marijuana use was steadily increasing. As the Army’s combat role in the Vietnam War wound down, illicit drugs continued to be a problem. With the decreasing support from the home front, the U. S. forces decided to turn to the Nixon Doctrine. Through the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) and the Vietnamization program, soldiers were required to spend countless lonely months behind bunkers in isolation (Sanders, 1973). The men endured

many lonely nights in a world that was completely new and foreign to them. They were thrown into a world that was so unfamiliar to them and their families and friends that were dear to them were halfway around the world. This negative attitude on the war and the home front caused the Vietnam War to lose its support and much of its legitimacy which fueled an exceptional environment for drug use and abuse (Kutler, 1996). The most commonly abused of the drugs being marijuana.

Marijuana is one of those unique drugs that can have a very different effect on different people. In one hand, it can act like a stimulant but at the same time act as a depressant (Iversen, 2008). The United States has been trying to regulate the distribution and sales of marijuana since the 1930's after the Marijuana Tax Stamp. In 1954 the Federal Bureau of Narcotics began to investigate the trafficking of opium from Laos. The terrain of Laos is mostly mountainous with many hills and plateaus. This provided the perfect landscape for smuggling narcotics such as opium with little suspicions from the government and other prying eyes (Kuzmarov, 2008). As the soldiers came pouring in from the United States during the war, this caused worry about the illicit drugs being smuggled through the terrain and what this meant for the U. S. Military. Many of the farmers around of the area sold and packaged marijuana as a means of additional income. Marijuana is a very easy plant to grow because it is a weed. It does not need very fertile soils or even a large amount of water, making it the perfect crop for these poor farmers (Iversen, 2008). It was also a result of the little enforcement of Drug Laws that were not well defined and of little importance in the eyes of the Vietnamese criminal justice system. There was no government control or

enforcement agency over marijuana (Brush, n. d.). The farmers would often pack their marijuana in different brands of cigarettes and other smoking tobacco for distribution.

The very potent marijuana was sold for a \$1. 50 in US currency, which was very cheap when compared to the price in America. U. S. News and World Report quoted that “ Marijuana in Vietnam is cheap, easy to find and potent. All a person has to do to get it is say the work Khan Sa (Zinberg, 1975).” Even though this drug was readily available many men only smoked it casually to calm down after a battle or to escape the death and destruction that they were seeing every day. In a study done at the Long Binh Jail, psychiatrist Roger A. Roffman concluded that only 28. 9% of GI’s stationed in the Southern Corps had tried marijuana at least once. After later publishing their study, the mass media inflated their findings and were reporting that as high as 90% of American troops in Vietnam were on drugs (Kuzmarov, 2008). Only a small percentage of American troops reported heavily smoking marijuana. Media attention to the use of drugs in Vietnam was greatly construed to what was actually going on. They did not distinguish for the masses between the drug use and the drug abuse (Zinberg, 1975).

In constant concern over the ever increasing “ addiction” problem amongst the GI’s, in 1969, a campaign for the destruction of marijuana was launched by the Bureau of Narcotics and Dangerous Drugs and the Vietnamese special police. Some speculate that this was also an alternative agenda to the Vietnamese to force out any guerillas and force other villagers into government ran camps. The aftermath of this mission included “ 504, 795

marijuana plants” being destroyed. These farmers were paid a small amount of money, less than one U. S. cent for every crop that was destroyed on their land (Kuzmarov, 2008). Journalist Richard Boyle commented, “ The United States is now waging two wars in Vietnam; one against the Vietcong and the other against Mary Jane (Sanders, 1973).”

With the constant pressure from the military to cut down marijuana smoking in Vietnam, many of the GI’s found the risk of smoking marijuana much too great to continue their use. Because of this crackdown, soldiers found a different means of getting high in this foreign world, and its name was heroin. The heroin of the area was so readily available and pure that the men could discreetly hide the heroin in their cigarettes and smoke it with no discriminating odor of any kind, allowing it to be easily hidden (Kutler, 1996). As the 1970’s slowly came, heroin addiction rapidly increased throughout all ranks of the military in Vietnam. An estimated 450, 000 U. S. military forces in Vietnam were reportedly currently using or had tried for the first time heroin. Because of the strict enforcement of marijuana, it literally knocked out all of the competition that heroin had. Heroin was more readily available than marijuana had ever been. In The Senate Staff Report on Drug Abuse in the Military it stated, “ The upshot was the GI’s who had been smoking ‘ grass’ turned to heroin, which was initially passed off to them as a nonaddicting cocaine. They reasoned that the substance itself, heroin, and the smoking of it were more easily concealed from prying eyes and noses than marijuana (Kutler, 1996). The inexpensive and highly pure heroin estimated at about 94-96% led to frequent use by the U. S. military in

Vietnam. “ Few men injected it and intravenous use was rare (Morgan and Puder, 1989).”

In a way to deal with the growing problem of ‘ drug use, the U. S. military was also trying to encourage their troops to seek help with the heroin, marijuana, and other addictions by offering a sort of amnesty and treatment for any of the GI’s who chose to seek help with their problems. Before this idea of seeking treatment, soldiers who were caught participating in drug activity were subject to court marshal and the possibility of dishonorable discharge (Korsmeyer and Kranzler, 2009). As this new idea was being set out, more and more troops were being sent back to the United States. The downside to more troops being sent home was the fact that many of these men were regularly using illicit drugs such as marijuana and heroin on a daily bases. The men were bringing back their drug habits into the United States with them. As the impending fear of drug addiction on the home front became clearer and clearer, Nixon proposed a plan in 1971 to conduct urine testing for GI’s returning home. If the men did not pass the drug test, then they could not return. This new policy was dubbed Operation Golden Flow. These fears of heroin addiction reaching United States soil did not occur at the level that was expected. An estimation of more than two-thirds of the returning GI’s from Vietnam never even touch heroin once they returned home (Morgan and Puder, 1989).

Although the media attention on this new policy focused mainly on the dreaded heroin, the goal was to detect as many different drugs the troops may have been using while in Vietnam. As to be recognized, the methods

used for this testing was in its very primitive state, causing some discrepancies to the testing methods. “ The 1971 program was confined to testing for residue and/or metabolites of opiates, barbiturates, and amphetamine (Morgan and Puder, 1989).”

Amphetamines were another drug used during the Vietnam War. Even though marijuana and heroin were more plentiful during this time, some amphetamines were also used. They were used mainly in part because the military would dispense these drugs in order to keep their men awake. The pills were commonly called ‘ go pills’ which allowed the soldiers to stay alert awake during special assigned missions (Korsmeyer and Kranzler, 2009). GI’s could also purchase vials of liquid amphetamines on the black market and use them for staying alert during patrol duties or even for parties in rear areas. Some veterans remarked that when asked how coming off the drug was, they replied that it made them edgy and extremely irritable. One soldier even stated that coming off of the drug made the fell like shooting “ children in the streets.” It could be assumed that for reasons like this, marijuana was often the drug of choice for the soldiers over in Vietnam (Tucker, 1998).

Drug use has been a staple in wars throughout history with the Napoleonic Wars, World War I, and World War II just to name a few (Sanders, 1973). The Vietnam War was no different than these other wars. In Vietnam the most common drugs used were alcohol, marijuana, heroin, and some amphetamines. These GI’s in the Vietnam War were sent to a land in isolation that was foreign to them. Many leaned towards drugs in order to

combat the loneliness and horror they saw on the battlefield and many just out of boredom during their stint in Vietnam. At first drugs were used in moderation, but as the war continued on some drug problems among the soldiers became clearer. Statistics concerning exactly how many men were using different forms of illicit drugs tend to be unclear, but the one fact that is clear is that they were in constant supply and utilized in the American Army during the Vietnam War.