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# "I Quit!" The Vietnam War and the Early Antiwar Activism of Master Sergeant Donald Duncan

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## Keywords

Vietnam War;  
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*Ramparts*

*L'opposition à la guerre du Vietnam et la brutalité de ce conflit ébranlèrent les principes fondamentaux inhérents au consensus anticommuniste de la guerre froide aussi bien que l'idée de base sur l'exceptionnalisme des États-Unis, nation à la politique étrangère bienveillante. C'est récemment seulement que les raisons de ce changement ont été analysées par les chercheurs. Cet article retrace le militantisme anti-guerre du sergent-chef Donald Duncan et la décision de ce premier vétéran de la guerre de prendre la parole et de militer. Ses écrits comme son militantisme permirent de remettre en cause les postulats de départ sur l'intervention américaine au Vietnam et furent une source d'inspiration pour le mouvement pacifiste grandissant.*

The anti-Vietnam War movement was the largest protest movement against a war in the United States' history. The war and its brutality forced many Americans to confront assumptions at the core of American exceptionalism during the Cold War. Chief among these was the notion that the United States was a benevolent force in the world having to intervene in small nations like Vietnam as they faced aggressive takeover by communist revolution.<sup>1</sup> The rationale for intervention was articulated in February 1965 when the State Department argued in its White Paper that the United States was coming to the aid of the non-communist government in South Vietnam

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1. For an excellent analysis the post-Cold War American identity as an exceptionalist nation and how the Vietnam War challenged these basic assumptions, see Christian Appy, *American Reckoning: The Vietnam War and Our National Identity* (2015).

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which faced “a carefully conceived plan of aggression” by communist North Vietnam. The paper, a defense of the large-scale bombing campaign Operation Rolling Thunder, argued that Hanoi was leading and directing the local guerrillas (Viet Cong or National Liberation Front) in the South with infiltrators, weapons, and other supplies against an independent government (“Aggression from the North” 29).

Over the remainder of 1965 leading figures and organizations in the burgeoning antiwar movement refuted these and other claims against the sustained bombing of North Vietnam and the deployment of ground troops to South Vietnam with teach-ins, marches on Washington, local and national demonstrations, draft card burnings, and other forms of direct action. In these early months of American escalation, the antiwar movement included students, draft resisters, intellectuals, pacifists and women’s organizations such as Women Strike for Peace. A central component in the confrontation to the pervasive Cold War consensus in the United States was the antiwar movement’s expansion to include the voices of Vietnam veterans and antiwar G.I.s. These veterans and soldiers brought an authenticity to the antiwar movement that was not easily challenged or ignored by its critics.

While much has been written on the veteran and G.I. movements, most of this scholarship focuses on the years after 1967 when organizations such as the Vietnam Veterans Against the War (VVAW) were created and the G.I. underground press was born. The actions of antiwar veterans and GIs galvanized around the disclosures of the My Lai massacre in November 1969 and climaxed with a series of events organized by VVAW in 1971, such as the Winter Soldier Investigation and Operation Dewey Canyon III when veterans tossed their medals over a makeshift fence erected at the Capitol Building in Washington, DC. Little has been written on the early military resisters and antiwar veterans before the advent of a mass G.I. and veteran’s movement and how they influenced and inspired the broader antiwar movement. Scholars tend to briefly highlight the actions of key war resisters between 1965-1967 as a way to set up their larger discussion about the growth of these interconnected movements when G.I.s and veterans began antiwar organizing, leading marches and publicly telling their stories.<sup>2</sup>

This article focuses on the antiwar activism of Master Sergeant Donald Duncan to help us explore and better explain the emergence of both the G.I. and veteran’s movements against the Vietnam War. A member of the Army’s elite Green Berets Special Forces, Duncan engaged in counterinsurgency operations

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2. For broader works on the anti-Vietnam War movement, see Charles DeBenedetti with Charles Chatfield (1990) and Tom Wells (1994). For excellent analyses of the G.I. and veteran antiwar movements during the Vietnam era, see David Cortright (1975), Andrew Hunt (1999), James Lewes (2003), Gerald Nicosia (2004).

in the jungles of South Vietnam for 18 months in 1964-1965 and returned to the United States deeply affected by his experiences. In September 1965, after already refusing a promotion to Captain, Duncan sought an honorable discharge from the military. Once a hardened anti-communist, Duncan became disillusioned with what the United States was doing in Vietnam and rose to prominence as the nation's most influential antiwar Vietnam veteran after publishing an explosive exposé in *Ramparts* magazine in February 1966 titled: "The Whole Thing Was a Lie!" The highly publicized *Ramparts* edition—featuring Duncan on the cover, in full uniform and wearing a signature green beret, with the caption "I Quit!"—included his treatise against American counterinsurgency.<sup>3</sup> Duncan famously wrote the oft-quoted passage: "The whole thing was a lie. We weren't preserving freedom in South Vietnam. There was no freedom to preserve. To voice opposition to the government meant jail or death. ... It's not democracy we brought to Vietnam – it's anti-communism." He called anti-communism "a lousy substitute for democracy" (Duncan, February 1966, 23). The article cemented Duncan as a prominent critic of the war and helped him become a central figure in the antiwar movement on the west coast.

### **"The Whole Thing Was a Lie!"**

When Donald Duncan penned his *Ramparts* article in early 1966, it was a lonely time for many antiwar activists across the country. The mood in the United States was much different: 1966 was the year Staff Sergeant Barry Sadler's song "The Ballad of the Green Berets" became a hit and topped the *Billboard* pop charts, selling two million copies in its first six weeks (Appy, 123-124). Duncan himself was the first Vietnam veteran to publicly oppose the war in print. "It was a personal protest," he recounted in the 2005 documentary *Sir! No Sir!* "It was just getting out of the service. There was no movement to join."

Donald Duncan was born in Toronto, Ontario, in 1930, and became a naturalized U.S. citizen in 1955 after he was drafted into the United States Army. After basic training, Duncan was sent to Germany, where he observed the fallout and crushing of the 1956 Hungarian uprising. He described himself during these years as a "militant anti-Communist" and he would spend ten years in the Army, six of them in the Green Berets. He served eighteen months on active combat duty in Vietnam, was highly decorated, receiving the South

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3. *Ramparts* was a radical muckraking monthly magazine founded in San Francisco in 1962. Originally a Catholic literary quarterly, by 1965 the *Ramparts* staff transformed the publication into a centerpiece of new leftist critique of U.S. foreign policy, the Vietnam War and the Central Intelligence Agency. After Donald Duncan published his exposé, he became the magazine's military affairs editor. For an excellent history of *Ramparts*, see Peter Richardson (2009).

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Vietnamese Silver Star, the Combat Infantry Badge, the Bronze Star, and the United States Army Air Medal, and would eventually turn down promotion to Captain in March 1965. He participated in numerous missions in South Vietnam, such as in the NLF stronghold of War Zone D above Saigon and he was part of the covert Project Delta along the Laotian border. In July 1965, Duncan received a "Letter of Appreciation" after personally briefing Defense Secretary Robert McNamara about Special Forces operations in South Vietnam. He left Vietnam on September 5, 1965, and received an honorable discharge that same month (*Ramparts* February 1966).

Duncan had seen the dark side of counterinsurgency in Vietnam and came home an ardent, if somewhat reluctant, public opponent of the war. Not long after leaving the service, he quickly became involved in the nascent antiwar movement on the West Coast where he lived. Speaking at his first antiwar demonstration in Oakland on November 20, 1965, Duncan told the crowd of 8,000: "I was marching for 18 months in Vietnam. It's a pleasure to march today for something that makes sense" (Turner 32). Organized by the Vietnam Day Committee, the demonstration was the first of many events where Duncan would speak. Afterward, Robert Scheer, staff writer for *Ramparts*, got a hold of Duncan and convinced him to write about why he had left the service and was speaking out against the war (Ridgeway 37).

Duncan agreed to write about his experiences and carefully composed his cover story in late 1965 and early 1966. At the same time, *Ramparts* crafted a public relations campaign to ensure maximum exposure for the article's release in February. Writing with an authority no other antiwar activist could claim, Duncan exposed classified information, challenged the Johnson administration's narrative about why it was fighting in Vietnam, wrote candidly about torture and the killing of Prisoners of War (P.O.W.s), the culture of the armed forces and the racism inherent in U.S. operations in Southeast Asia, and the narrow-mindedness of policies based on anti-communism. He argued that the South Vietnamese resistance was an indigenous movement and that the effect of the bombing was imperiling the stated mission.

Among other bombshell revelations, Duncan exposed U.S. covert missions into North Vietnam under the auspices of the Studies and Observation Group (SOG) set up by the Military Assistance Command, Vietnam (MACV) in 1964. "SOG was a combined forces effort. The CIA, Air Force (US), Navy, Army and detached Special Forces personnel were all in on the act," he wrote. As historian John Prados notes, the SOG was set up as a part of OPlan 64-A which sought covert means for subverting the North Vietnamese (Duncan 1966, 16; Prados 78-83, 106). It was while working for the SOG during his second assignment under Project Delta that Duncan better understood why the U.S. was in Vietnam and the true nature of the war. Under Delta, he was one of the "specially selected" Special Forces officers

who trained small teams of Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) forces to be infiltrated into Laos to perform “reconnaissance” missions along the Ho Chi Minh Trail.<sup>4</sup> During one operation, when the team of Vietnamese soldiers was ready to depart, the U.S. personnel were pulled from the mission because “it was an election year and it would cause great embarrassment if Americans were captured in Laos.” This amounted to a startling exposure: the United States was participating in covert military operations in Laos as early as 1964. “It suddenly occurred to me that the denial of American participation was not based on whether it was right or wrong for us to be going to Laos. The primary concern was the possible embarrassment to President Johnson during an election campaign,” he wrote. Of the forty Vietnamese soldiers sent on the mission, six returned and the rest were killed or captured, a piece of classified information previously unknown to the American public (Duncan 1966, 16-17). Such information drastically undercut the premise that the Johnson administration was dragged into a quagmire in Vietnam. Duncan was in the middle of the action in 1964 performing the very operations designed to stem the tide of communist advances in South Vietnam. Attempting to covertly undermine the North Vietnamese, these operations only deepened the United States’ long-term presence in Southeast Asia because President Johnson did not want to rock the boat at home or abroad during an election year.

In Vietnam, Duncan observed how the National Liberation Front’s (NLF) strength grew by the time he left in late-1965. Confirming what other observers such as war correspondent and historian Bernard Fall had been writing for years (Fall 1965; 1967), he argued that the NLF had significant popular support in South Vietnam, in stark contrast to what he and all of the other U.S. personnel in Vietnam were told by their superiors. Soldiers had been routinely told that a majority of South Vietnamese people opposed the NLF and cooperated with guerrillas only out of fear and intimidation. Duncan concluded that NLF forces, which “started as small teams,” had evolved into “battalion and regimental strength.” By the time he had left South Vietnam, “the Viet Cong could put troops in the field in division strength in almost any province.” This led him to conclude that “such growth is not only

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4. The Ho Chi Minh Trail was the crucial network of paths and roads connecting North and South Vietnam through Laos and Cambodia, strategically bypassing the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ) established by the Geneva Accords of 1954. This crucial supply route for soldiers and material was initiated in May 1959 after the Lao Dong, the Vietnamese Communist Party, passed Resolution 15 which affirmed its support of an armed struggle in the South against the extreme repression of Vietnamese communists that started after 1954 by the U.S.-backed South Vietnamese government of Ngo Dinh Diem. The Ho Chi Minh Trail eventually extended 12,000 miles despite U.S. Special Forces infiltrations and massive bombing campaigns along the borders Laos and Cambodia to disrupt and destroy the Trail (Prados xiv, 9-13, 18; Lawrence 61-66).

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impossible without popular support; it actually requires an overwhelming mandate.” This information called into question a crucial rationale for U.S. involvement: halting the NLF’s rule of the countryside by stopping further atrocities, terrorism, and intimidation. In reference to the terrorism employed by the Vietcong through the killing and kidnapping of village chiefs and their families, Duncan stated that these chiefs had been “appointed, not elected.” Few resided in the villages over which they presided, and often turned out to be “outsiders being rewarded for political favors.” After restless nights escaping detection in the jungles of South Vietnam and seeing off numerous comrades to their deaths in poorly planned missions into Laos, he felt Vietcong terrorism a weak justification for U.S. intervention because “our own military consider such actions good strategy when the tables are reversed” (20-21). The arguments for war by Duncan’s superiors began to lose their shine after his participation. For him, Americans needed to ask “whether communism is spreading in spite of our involvement or because of it” (23).

The release of the exposé presented an opportunity for *Ramparts* to break a major story on the war and they laid the groundwork for its publicity. The magazine employed Marc Stone, a public-relations officer from New York City and brother of journalist and Vietnam War critics Judy and I. F. Stone, to manage a carefully constructed media bazaar. On the eve of the launch of the article, Stone set up an exclusive interview with Duncan and Jack Raymond of the *New York Times* at a hotel in Washington, D.C. The interview ran on the same day that Stone organized a press conference featuring Duncan and *Ramparts* announcing the launch of the February edition (Ridgeway 37). Raymond, quoting extensively from the piece, reported that Pentagon spokesmen had “no comment” on the information provided by Duncan. “Qualified sources,” he added, “could recall no other instance in which a veteran of combat in Vietnam had so sharply and publicly assailed the United States intervention there.” Asking Duncan if his references to operations and the existence of the Studies and Observation Group “did not constitute breaches of security,” the veteran answered boldly: “Radio Hanoi had reported on the Laotian infiltration effort. Only six out of the 40 men involved returned.” With regard to the revelations about U.S. and ARVN infiltration into North Vietnam, Duncan replied: “Hanoi knows that happened. It’s time the American people knew it, too” (Raymond 2). The SOG group undercut the entire rationale of the Johnson administration’s claims in 1965 that it was responding to “aggression from the North.”

At the press conference, Duncan urged the Johnson administration to recognize the NLF and repeated that a majority of South Vietnamese people sided with the guerrillas over the Saigon government. He reaffirmed his position that he opposed Communism, but claimed that it was none of the United States’

business what political program the South Vietnamese or any other country followed. The press conference drew the attention of the *Washington Post*, the *New York Times*, and the *Los Angeles Times* among other news outlets. Afterward, asked for comment, Major General William P. Yarborough, the commander of the Special Forces Center at Fort Bragg, North Carolina, when Duncan was there, expressed “shock” over the “distortions, misstatements and disclosures of sensitive information” and Brigadier General Joseph W. Stilwell, the current commander at Fort Bragg, rejected the charges by Duncan. The Pentagon released a statement quoting the two generals “emphatically” denying “that methods of torture are taught to Special Forces personnel. On the contrary, they are taught that torture is a stupid and ineffective way of eliciting information.”<sup>5</sup> Despite such official denials, Duncan’s revelations about torture later received corroboration at a series of independent hearings between 1970 and 1972, organized by antiwar Vietnam veterans.<sup>6</sup>

The brass’s denials notwithstanding, the authenticity of Duncan’s account drew wide praise. Senator Ernest Gruening, one of two members of the Senate to oppose the war, inserted Duncan’s entire article into the *Congressional Record* on February 10, citing many important passages. “These are important observations by a fighting man who served 18 months on active combat duty in Vietnam,” Gruening said. “The position of the United States in Vietnam and its future course of action should be judged in the light of these observations.”<sup>7</sup> In a February 16 *New York Times* advertisement, *Ramparts* offered readers the February edition free of charge if they signed up for a year’s subscription and played up Duncan’s credibility. “Sgt. Duncan, the first man so qualified—and courageous enough—to come forth and speak, documents his story point by point. It is unquestionably authentic and utterly believable,” it said.<sup>8</sup> I. F. Stone

5. See: *New York Times* 11 February 1966, 8; *Washington Post* 11 February 1966, A6; and *L.A. Times* 11 February 1966, 9.

6. Other than Donald Duncan, U.S. intelligence officer Peter Martinsen testified in November 1967 about U.S. torture of Vietnamese prisoners of war. These early testimonies by Vietnam veterans were corroborated in a lengthy section on POWs and torture in Vietnam published in the book *Against the Crime of Silence* published by Seymour Melman and Clergy and Laymen Concerned About Vietnam in 1968. The book gathered published materials such as newspaper articles that reported about various violations of the laws of war. The section on POWs and torture is featured on pages 55-90. Moreover, after the revelations of the My Lai massacre in 1969, a plethora of Vietnam veterans’ voices were added to corroborate the United States was committing war crimes in Vietnam. The Vietnam Veterans Against the War’s 1971 Winter Soldier Investigation is one example of this. See also Michael Uhl (2007).

7. See *Congressional Record* 10 February 1966, found in CREST, National Archives Research Administration II, College Park, Maryland.

8. The advertisement also plugged Duncan’s speaking engagement at Town Hall in New York City on 3 March 1966 with I. F. Stone and Stanley K. Sheinbaum. *New York Times* 16 February 1966, L26.

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wrote in his *Weekly* that Duncan's revelations were not impressive simply because the Green Beret was an insider, but because of the "light it sheds on a cancerous growth inside our society." Stone argued: "To train men in crime, to teach them cynically that the end justifies the means, to make professional conspirators of them is to breed at home the same anti-democratic menace that faced France in the wake of the Algerian settlement." (*I. F. Stone's Weekly*, 2). Furthermore, after the *Ramparts* story, a paid advertisement from Veteran For Peace in Vietnam was printed in the *Chicago Daily Defender* featuring a large photo of Duncan with the signatures of veterans. The ad called for a cease-fire, an agreement to negotiate with all forces, including the NLF, and clear support for the 1954 Geneva Accords, which called for national elections to reunify the country after the end of French rule in Indochina (22 March 1966, 9). Finally, the national security state took notice of Duncan's participation in the second International Days of Protests on the weekend of March 25 and 26 when national security council staff member D.W. Ropa wrote to President Johnson's press secretary Bill Moyers about the global protests (Ropa to Moyers 25 March 1966).

Duncan's article even prompted one fellow Green Beret, Gary Rader, to question the war. Rader was classified I-A draft-eligible in the summer of 1965 and joined a Special Forces reserve unit where he began part-time training. Duncan's article "shook" Rader's belief in the war, but it was not yet enough to convince him to leave the military. In the fall of 1966, Rader went on active duty at Ft. Bragg, North Carolina. "While I was there," he recalled, "I spoke to a great number of Green Berets who were Vietnam returnees. Many of them quite candidly reinforced what Duncan had said." He ended up burning his draft card in Sheep's Meadow in Central Park as part of the April 15, 1967 Spring Mobilization march, which drew upwards of 500,000 people. Rader's decision to participate in the draft card burning came in early April after he had gone through the dehumanizing reservist training at Ft. Bragg. On April 15, he went to Central Park in his Green Berets uniform, covered with a black jacket, got in touch with the Cornell University contingent and burned his draft card. Duncan was an important sponsor of this national day of action and it marked a decisive moment for the antiwar movement as it was largest demonstration to date. Along with Rader and the largest draft card burning, Martin Luther King, Jr., forcefully spoke out against the war and the Vietnam Veterans Against the War was created. It was this kind of gathering momentum and coalescing of different constituencies against the war that became contagious for others. Two days later, on April 17, Gary Rader wrote his letter of resignation to his commander at Ft. Bragg. As he wrote in the pages of the *New York Review of Books* in 1967, Rader called Duncan's article "the single most effective introduction to the anti-war position that we have" (Rader).

## The Reluctant Antiwar Veteran and the Growth of the Antiwar Movement<sup>9</sup>

Duncan rose to prominence in this period thanks largely to his firsthand knowledge of the role of the Special Forces in Vietnam and his willingness to speak out publicly against the war. He also led by example, inspiring others to act. He was an embodiment of the post-World War Two Nuremberg Principles that endowed soldiers with individual responsibility for their actions and the moral and legal duty to refuse illegal orders. While he never refused these orders in the field, he turned down a major promotion because the war violated his conscience and the laws of war. As Duncan explains in his book, *The New Legions*, published in 1967, he was an eager recruit for the Special Forces and loved his job.<sup>10</sup> His experiences and disillusionment in Vietnam led him to work full-time opposing the war in much the same way his earlier commitment to defend the United States propelled him to join the military. In this capacity, he acted as an effective bridge between the civilian, G. I., and veteran antiwar movements. And yet, despite his ever expanding role in the antiwar movement, he still regarded himself as a reluctant activist, and did not say yes to every invitation that came his way.

In one instance, Duncan said no to a request by a Fifth Avenue Peace Parade Committee organizer in the summer of 1966 to re-print the *Ramparts* article for distribution to soldiers about to embark to Vietnam. “To think that such a campaign will convince any significant number of these men to lay down their weapons and refuse to serve is naïve and unrealistic,” he wrote to the organizer. Duncan felt these soldiers “were the products of at least eighteen years” of Cold War propaganda, and to place doubt in their minds as they entered into combat would risk their very survival and that of their comrades. A realist, Duncan understood that “the few” who refused faced “severe” punishment. “Theirs is a lonely and isolated position and takes a bravery far beyond that required to face bullets,” he wrote (Duncan to Mr. Forest 25 June 1966). Still missing in this early period, of course, was the weight of the

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9. This section is based on a much larger study of the growth of the antiwar movement amongst draft and military resisters of which Donald Duncan played a central role. For the context and expanded discussion, see my dissertation, “‘A New Kind of War’: The Vietnam War and the Nuremberg Principles, 1964-1968” (University of Waterloo, 2014).

10. Intensely personal, the book displayed Duncan’s creative and lucid writing style. Transporting us into the thick jungles and covert operations in the heat of Southeast Asia or to the maniacal, rapacious Special Forces’ training at Fort Bragg, we get a sense of the difficulties of fighting a counterinsurgency. Despite the book’s appeal to war enthusiasts and antiwar activists, it was not as widely distributed as the *Ramparts* exposé. Moreover, the book became required reading for U.S. pilots shot down over Vietnam along with other authors critical of the war such as Arthur Schlesinger, Jr. and Wilfred Burchett. See Jack Anderson, “U.S. POWs in Hanoi,” *Washington Post* 6 April 1969, 35.

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antiwar movement that military resisters such as Gary Rader could lean on, a movement that developed over the following two years. However, Duncan acted as an important movement builder, constantly providing other resisters with inspiration and support. In two important cases of military resistance—the Fort Hood Three and Dr. Howard Levy—Duncan lent his support.

On June 30, 1966, in a press conference at New York's Community Church, Private first class James Johnson, along with Privates Dennis Mora and David Samas announced their intentions to refuse orders to deploy to Vietnam calling the war "immoral, illegal, and unjust." The three soldiers from Fort Hood, Texas, were the first to publicly refuse orders to embark to Vietnam and they did so in collaboration with the New York-based coalition the Fifth Avenue Peace Parade Committee (with leading figures of the antiwar movement such as David Dellinger, Staughton Lynd, and Fred Halstead forming the Fort Hood Three Defense Committee) as well as African American civil-rights organizers Stokely Carmichael of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) and Floyd McKissick of the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE). The three soldiers linked the war in Vietnam to the waste of resources in the US and spoke of racial violence at home in connection with American racism in Vietnam.<sup>11</sup> The public press conference and subsequent media attention continued to offer much-needed inspiration to the struggling antiwar movement. Up until the actions of the Fort Hood Three, soldiers refused orders out of the public spotlight and with no broader support.

With this unprecedented move at a critical juncture in the widening American war in Vietnam, Donald Duncan was also invited to speak at the press conference in solidarity with the Fort Hood Three. Unable to attend, Duncan sent a message of support that was read aloud. Warning the soldiers of the multiplicity of "pressures" that "will be brought to bear on you," Duncan proclaimed: "Yours will be a lonely position. Your actions, if properly motivated, take a strength greater than that required to go to Vietnam. To persevere will be an act of personal bravery far beyond the capabilities of most of us, certainly far beyond anything I have ever done" ("Letter from Donald Duncan"). Duncan's statement was included in a pamphlet created by the Fort Hood Three Defense Committee that was widely circulated in movement circles. The pamphlet was an excellent movement resource and helped publicize the case of the Fort Hood Three to civilians and soldiers alike (Stewart Ch.4; Halstead, 178).

While Duncan was willing to write in support of the three soldiers, he nonetheless turned down an invitation to testify at their eventual court-martial for disobeying orders. Duncan was a soldier who loved his country and it

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11. James Johnson was an African American, Dennis Mora a Puerto Rican, and David Samas a Lithuanian.

was out of this love he felt compelled to take a principled stand against the war. He clearly had complex reactions to his place in the antiwar movement as exemplified by the previously quoted letter to Mr. Forest. Nonetheless, a combination of factors – not least of which included the growing base of antiwar protest by active-duty soldiers – propelled Duncan to take bolder steps to move out of his comfort zone. By the spring of 1967, he was asked again to participate in the court-martial of another dissenting soldier. This time it was Dr. Howard Levy and Duncan, albeit reluctantly, agreed to testify as a witness. According to Charles Morgan, Dr. Levy’s civilian attorney and lawyer for the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU), it was only after he “enlisted” members of the *Ramparts* staff and others in the peace movement to talk with Duncan that the former Green Beret agreed participate (Morgan 140; Strassfeld 906).

In June 1966, Dr. Howard Levy, a dermatologist and a captain at Fort Jackson, South Carolina, refused to teach Green Berets medical skills they could use in Vietnam as part of counterinsurgency operations. These Green Berets, part of 12-man “A-teams,” were not doctors or medics; they were soldiers who would use their medical training in villages in South Vietnam to win the “hearts and minds” while they also engaged in active combat missions. For Levy, this violated medical ethics and the laws of war (particularly the Geneva Conventions of 1949). The doctor was charged with disobeying orders and “promoting disloyalty and disaffection among the troops.” All together, he faced 11 years in military prison with these charges (Stewart Ch. 5).

At Dr. Levy’s historic court-martial, the presiding judge allowed Levy’s defense team to present evidence to help corroborate his arguments that such orders to train the Green Berets in medicine were against medical ethics and the laws of war. In a one-day out of court hearing dubbed “the little Nuremberg” by *New York Times* correspondent Homer Bigart, Donald Duncan testified along with Robin Moore, author of the bestselling book *The Green Berets*.<sup>12</sup> During his testimony, he recalled many of the incidents he wrote about in the February 1966 edition of *Ramparts* as well as his new book *The New Legions*. An incident Duncan referred to took place near An Khe, where he was ordered to “get rid of” four Viet Cong prisoners whom his team had taken. Duncan testified that he interpreted this order to mean “shoot ‘em or stick a knife in ‘em” and that he had pretended he misunderstood the order. When his team returned to base

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12. Robin Moore’s book became a bestseller in 1966 and was adapted into the 1968 movie of the same name, starring John Wayne. Incidentally, the same February 1966 of *Ramparts* edition featuring Donald Duncan also included a scathing critique of Moore’s book. Duncan called the book “The Army’s Longest Recruiting Pamphlet” and criticized Moore for being “a willing victim of Special Forces propaganda” (Duncan February 1966, 66).

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camp, the Major chided Duncan, saying “You know, we almost told you right over the phone to do them in” and was told that “you wouldn’t have had to do it; all you had to do was give them over to the Vietnamese.” Furthermore, both Duncan and Robin Moore testified “that the Green Berets encouraged the mutilation of enemy dead by paying a bounty on ears clipped off the heads of slain Vietcong” and that the money, according to Duncan, was “supplied to the Special Forces by the Central Intelligence Agency.” Duncan testified that it was a \$10 bounty for each right ear. The irony was that Duncan had turned against the war while Moore was still an ardent supporter of it. Moore unwittingly contributed to the defense’s case. Ultimately, the military judge declared that the evidence presented did not amount to “calculated atrocities in Vietnam” on the part of the Green Berets (Bigart).

Duncan’s testimony in support of Dr. Levy marked an important shift in his opposition to the war in Vietnam. His participation is indicative of the difficulty antiwar veterans faced in navigating their opposition to the war and their identity as soldiers. Duncan’s article in *Ramparts* was a major achievement and he was already a regular speaker at antiwar demonstrations on the West Coast. However, he needed to be persuaded by Robert Scheer of *Ramparts* to write his exposé as well as by others in the peace movement to participate at Levy’s trial. As Morgan recounts in his memoir, Duncan’s “reluctance to testify had been well founded” because Army public information officers issued media releases critical of Duncan’s allegations “designed to undercut his credibility.” On the witness stand, the military prosecutor considered Duncan to be “an opportunist” (Morgan 144-145). Duncan’s warning in his letter of support to the Fort Hood Three about the “pressures” the military would bring to bear against dissident soldiers was on display against Duncan himself. The military is an obedience nurturing institution that demands loyalty of its soldiers and once they step out of this mould, they are ostracized.

Duncan’s support of the Fort Hood Three and Dr. Levy came at a time when it was extremely unpopular to refuse orders in the military. Dennis Mora was given a three-year sentence, while David Samas and James Johnson received the maximum of five years at hard labor. Dr. Levy, by contrast, was given three years in prison. Levy’s court-martial ended just as the antiwar movement was on the cusp of bursting into a full-fledged mass movement against the war, represented most characteristically by the Spring mobilization in April 1967, and the October 1967 march on the Pentagon and Stop the Draft Week. Duncan’s support of the early resisters and their courageous actions despite harsh punishment provided civilians and soldiers alike with examples to follow. Such actions multiplied by the end of the 1960s (Cortright).

Duncan’s conversion from reluctant activist to active participant is exemplified by his testimony as a witness in the Roskilde Session of the

International War Crimes Tribunal in late November 1967. At Roskilde he offered lengthy testimony, complete with cross-examination, covering much of the material he wrote about in the article and his book. A little over half way into Duncan's testimony, tribunal member Simone de Beauvoir asked why he ultimately chose to testify about American war crimes in Vietnam. Referring to his experiences and the "accumulation of events" in Vietnam, Duncan argued it was a "matter of conscience" that he speak out publicly because of the "obvious contradictions" and "dishonesty" in what the American people were being told by their political and military leaders and what was actually happening. Nonetheless, the former Green Beret included as an aside:

*[I]t gives me no great pleasure to come here and to say these things that I said here today [...] I don't think it gives anybody any great pleasure to say things against their own country. I happen to love the United States very much. Things are being done in its name and I'm a part of that country; I must say something. I feel that my main motivation is in fact that what we are doing in Vietnam, as horrible and tragic as it is for the Vietnamese, is equally horrible and as tragic for what it is doing for our society at home. I feel very strongly about this – that we are in fact dangerously close, if we have not already arrived at that point, to becoming a military nation that thinks, and can think, only in military terms.*

(Duncan 1967, 488-91)

Duncan clearly did not feel completely comfortable with the role he assumed in the antiwar movement after the publication of his *Ramparts* exposé. Nonetheless, he felt a great responsibility after what he witnessed to help contribute to ending the war.

By the middle of 1968, Duncan's thinking about the war and the soldiers place in it had shifted from when he originally declined to let his exposé be distributed by antiwar activists to soldiers embarking for Vietnam. That summer he traveled to South Vietnam to report on the war for *Ramparts* and the trip was a revelation for Duncan. His first time in Vietnam since September 1965 and he was astounded to find a military completely transformed by a new type of soldier. "[I]t is safe to say that this new soldier is no more prone to accept officialdom's explanations than he was when he was a civilian," Duncan wrote. "In fact, what may set him apart from the GI's of a few years ago is the fact that he is really still a civilian – his basic training somehow didn't take." These soldiers, according to Duncan, were part of the new wave of draftees entering the military outnumbering the career or professional soldiers that made up the fighting force between 1964 and 1966. The citizen-soldiers, and even those who enlisted in the military, had been exposed to the tumultuous debate about the war in Vietnam and are "well informed" as information increasingly "has become an enemy of the military establishment." Such information, for example, was contained in Duncan's original exposé and

subsequent articles for *Ramparts* as well as the development of the G.I. underground press (Duncan October 1968, 12).<sup>13</sup>

## Conclusion

Donald Duncan's exposé in *Ramparts* magazine in February 1966 came at a propitious time for a growing antiwar movement. Duncan helped expose the true nature of the war that was not easily ignored because he had personal experience in Vietnam and this status propelled him into the national spotlight as the first public antiwar veteran. His actions and personal inspiration were contagious as he went on to support many of the first military resisters such as the Fort Hood Three, Dr. Howard Levy, and Gary Rader. As the war escalated and when tens of thousands of Americans and millions of Vietnamese were being killed, Duncan believed the war was destroying the soul of the United States (Duncan 1971).

While Duncan took a giant leap in early 1966 to tell his story, by 1971 he could proclaim "I'm not lonely anymore." Giving the closing statement at the Winter Soldier Investigation (WSI), the VVAW war crimes investigation in Detroit, Duncan urged his fellow veterans to continue organizing and speaking out against the war. By this time, the VVAW's membership had grown from 1,500 in the winter of 1970 to close to 10,000 (Hunt 39, 77). For Duncan, the work of Vietnam veterans in the antiwar movement helped "to remove once and for all the blinders and the blinds from in front of America's eyes." From his time in the Special Forces to the testimony covered in WSI, a period spanning 1963 to 1970, Duncan argued "nothing has changed." "Our country has set out very systematically to kill whatever number of people [is] necessary in Vietnam to stop them from resisting whatever it is we are trying to impose on that country," he exclaimed. The once-reluctant antiwar veteran was now charging the leaders of the United States with genocide in Vietnam (Duncan 1971). While such criticism could be considered hyperbole, many

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13. In his October 1968 article, Duncan cites "an increase of friendly mail" from G.I.s in Vietnam who enjoyed reading his articles. He continued to expose the effects of the U.S. covert and overt wars in Southeast Asia, traveling to Cambodia in July 1966 on a fact finding mission to inspect the effects of U.S. bombing. He traveled there with the group "Americans Want to Know," organized by Dagmar Wilson and Ossie Davis of Women Strike for Peace, and including Floyd McKissick (CORE's new director), Kay Boyle (author), Rabbi Israel Dresner (of Temple Sharon Shalom in Springfield, New Jersey), and Russell Johnson (the Peace Education Secretary of New England American Friends Service Committee) (Johnson 12-18; Hershberger 63-64). Furthermore, as military editor at *Ramparts*, Duncan continued to write articles critical of the war and about soldier resistance. He wrote an early piece on "draft dodgers" moving to Canada to escape the draft in April 1967, two articles condemning the use of anti-personnel bombs (otherwise known as cluster bomb units (CBUs) in the May 1967 and December 1967, and he co-authored an article about the court-martial of Dr. Howard Levy in July 1967.

Vietnam veterans came to the same conclusion by the time of the Winter Soldier Investigation.

Donald Duncan's trajectory helps illuminate the beginning and growth of the G.I. and veteran antiwar movements. While it is difficult to reduce the success and growth of movements to one person, Duncan played a vital role throughout the Vietnam War years to help bring about the war's end by exposing its violence and brutality, organizing veterans, and supporting those soldiers who found it necessary to refuse to fight in Vietnam.

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