

America and Vietnam in the Vietnam War: A Material Culture Lesson Package
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Course: HI302, History of the Military Art, 1900-2013

Lesson 26: American De-escalation and Defeat in Vietnam, 1968-1975

Cadets occasionally have stories about family members who served in the Second World War or the Korean War, but it is the Vietnam War that the most have some kind of family connection to. Despite these prolific connections and the relative popularity of movies about the Vietnam War such as *We Were Soldiers*, *Platoon*, *Apocalypse Now*, and *Full Metal Jacket*, few Cadets are familiar with the complexities of the conflict and those who fought it, prior to being introduced to them during the three lessons which cover the conflict from the First Indochina War through 1975.

This material culture display is meant to highlight some of the distinct types of troops who fought during the Vietnam War. Included in the display are a Vietcong soldier (VC), a People's Army of Vietnam soldier (PAVN), and a American soldier that also represents a soldier of the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN). Included with each soldier is a variety of weapons and pieces of equipment they would have used during the conflict. The main point of the display is to articulate to the Cadets the differences between the combatants, especially between the VC and the PAVN.



The three mannequins with their respective equipment. American and ARVN weapons which can be handled are in the cart to the left while PAVN and VC weapons are in the cart to the right. The items on the stage cannot be handled by the Cadets.

One of the common, albeit uninformed, sentiments about the Vietnam War is that the United States, a well-trained, technologically advanced, and well supplied military was defeated by men in black pajamas who survived on rice and lived and fought in tunnels. To combat that idea this material culture display allows the Cadet's to visualize the problem of dealing with two different kinds of forces, guerilla fighters (VC) and conventional units (PAVN), or what General William Westmoreland described as "termites and bully boys." By examining each mannequin and the associated equipment and asking the Cadets to share their observations they begin to realize how starkly different the VC guerillas, with their light uniforms and largely improvised equipment, and PAVN soldiers, with their more standardized uniforms and advanced gear, were

and realize how those differences contributed to the strategic problems the United States faced in Vietnam. In the same vein, they also realize how similar the American soldiers and the PAVN soldiers were, prompting questions about what made the U.S. Military superior at the tactical level.

These observations and questions, as well as many others, help bring the complexities of the Vietnam War into focus. While not an official theme or objective of the course, tackling myths and common misconceptions is one of the more rewarding aspects of teaching. Being able to use material culture to help correct these beliefs by replacing them with authentic representations of the past that the Cadets will hopefully remember is invaluable.

For use of West Point instructors, the following items were used in this display:

1) 15177: Submachine Gun, Blowback Action, Magazine Fed, US Army, Steel/Wood, Blued/Brown, M1A1, Thompson, .45 Caliber ACP, US, World War II, SN: 343314

*The Thompson is present merely as a comparison to the VC improvised version

2) 14948: Carbine, Semiautomatic, Detachable Box Magazine, US Army, Steel/Wood, Black/Brown, M1, .30 Caliber Carbine, US, World War II, SN: 5717893

*The M1 helps to distinguish between the ARVN and U.S. soldiers

3: 14866.01 Rifle, Select Fire, US Army, Steel/Plastic/Aluminum, Gray, Black, M16A1, 5.56mm, US, 1968, Vietnam Era, SN: 1049127

*Minimal difference from modern M16/M4 series rifles

14866.02 Magazine, Select Fire, 20 Round Detachable Box, US Army, Aluminum, Black, AR \15/M16, Type 2, 5.56mm (cal .223), US, 1968, Vietnam Era

4: 21841 Machine Gun, General Purpose, Air Cooled, Belt Fed, US Army, Steel/Plastic, Black, M60, 7.62mm NATO, US, Late-20th Century, SN: 208866

*Very similar to M240B, but actually lighter than its successor.

5: 14323: Carbine, Semiautomatic, 10-Round Box Magazine, Folding Bayonet, North Vietnamese Army, Steel/Wood, Parkerized/Brown, Type 56 (SKS M1945), Simonov, 7.62 X 39mm, North Vietnamese, Vietnam Era, SN: 7051989

6: 14362.1 Rifle, Select Fire, 30-Round Det. Box Magazine, North Vietnamese Army, Steel/Wood, Black/Brown, Type 56 (AK47/AKM), 7.62 X 39mm, North Vietnamese, Vietnam Era, SN: 8412164

14362.2: Magazine, Automatic Rifle, 30-Round Det. Box Magazine, North Vietnamese Army, Steel, Black, 7.62 X 39mm, North Vietnamese, Vietnam Era

7: 21837.1: Machine Gun, Squad, Folding Stock, Det. Box/drum Magazine, Airborne, Iraqi Army, Steel/Wood, Dark/Brown, RPKS, 7.62 X 39mm, Soviet, Circa 1972, SN: 7492

21837.2: Magazine, Automatic Rifle, 30 Round, Iraqi Army, Steel, Black, (AKM), 7.62 X 39mm, Soviet,

8: 13980: RPG-2, North Vietnamese SN: 309686

*Instead of an RPG-7, the RPG-2 is used to demonstrate that the VC were fighting with outdated equipment

9: 12606: Thompson (copy), Viet Cong made

*This is an improvised Thompson and can be compared to the real Thompson on the weapons rack

10: 14352: Kar98k, Mauser, Viet Cong, SN: 12408C

*This is a captured Kar98k and also demonstrates that the VC often fought with WWII weapons, like the ARVN.

11: 14353: Shotgun, Improvised, Viet Cong, (No SN)

*This "shotgun" is very rudimentary and hardly looks like a shotgun, but the barrel would not have been able to sustain any high pressure if the gun fired a conventional rifle round.

12: 16235.1: Machete, North Vietnamese Army

*Folded metal, not a conventional machete.

13: 13797: Grenade, Viet Cong

*Likely used for a booby trap based on the additions.

14: 16415: Radio Receiver, Homemade, Viet Cong,

*This is a very rudimentary radio compared to the much more robust PAVN radio.

15: 16414: Radio Receiver-Transmitter, North Vietnamese SN: 630163

16: 14279.2: Hat, Jungle, Viet Cong, Cotton, Green,

*Alternate head-gear for either the VC or PAVN.

17: 14956 A-F: Equipment bag, Viet Cong. Rucksack w/ grenade & mag pouches

18: 17898: Flag, Battle, Triangular, Viet Cong, Cloth,

19: 22307: Sandals (Pair), "Ho Chi Minh", POW, NVA

*Much larger than Vietnamese sandals, for big American feet.

20: 22302: Food Cup, Aluminum, NVA

*POW cup, covered in propaganda.

21: 22303: Spoon, Aluminum, NVA

*POW spoon, made from metal of downed aircraft.

22: 22309: Cigarettes, NVA

23: 22806: Poncho Liner, US, Vietnam Era

*Everyone's favorite piece of gear!!!

24: 14230.02: Cap, Field, Hot Weather, US Army, Vietnam Era

25: 22767.1 (.2 & .3) Helmet, M1 US, (Helmet Liner & Helmet Cover)

26: 14230.03: Shirt, Fatigue, Cotton, Green, US, Vietnam Era

27: 14230.07: Trousers, Fatigue, Cotton, Green, US, Vietnam Era

28: 14980.5: Jungle boots, black leather olive drab canvas

29: 16488: Belt, Individual Equipment LCE w/ first aid, canteen, etc...

30: 18742: Sun Helmet, NVA

31: 14465 A & B: NVA Uniform Shirt & Pants

32: 15500: Equipment Belt, w/ Grenade Pouch & Canteen in Cover NVA

33: 15508: Pouch, Magazine, AK47, Chicom

34: 14272.1: Sandals Viet Cong

35: 14277.1 (& .2): Shirt, Viet Cong (and Trousers, Viet Cong). Set

36: 14272.2: Sandals Viet Cong

37: 14282.2: Bag, Bandolier, Rice Carrier, Viet Cong,

*Bold Items are a part of the teaching collection which do not need to be requested on the museum support request form but can be drawn from the arms room with this request.

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