



## THE CASUALTIES<sup>1</sup> OF WAR: A HISTORICAL APPROACH ON THE BASIC TRAINING OF PAVLO HUMMEL AND THE VIETNAM CONFLICT

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### Abstract

The Vietnam War, which started on March 15, 1965 and ended as a twist of fate on March 15, 1973, was one of the bloodiest confrontations of recent Vietnamese history. This wasn't only a conflict between ideological clashes or nations, this was a conflict within the lives of young people and naïve souls. David Rabe was a veteran who joined this war and re-explored the conflicts in Vietnam through Pavlo Hummel, a young and "juvenile" American soldier who "got no beard, no ways to shave" (49, Rabe). The play focused on the progress of the training that young Pavlo Hummel received. In this essay, his struggle to become a "real man" among the ranks of soldiers will be juxtaposed with the historical facts and their psychology during and after the war that convey the reality of how North Vietnamese and Americans grasped each other.

**Keywords:** David Rabe, Vietnam War, Psychology of War, American War Theater.

### 1. Introduction

*Nations customarily measure the "costs of war" in dollars, lost production, or the number of soldiers killed or wounded. Rarely do military establishments attempt to measure the costs of war in terms of individual human suffering. Psychiatric breakdown remains one of the most costly items of war when expressed in human terms.*

*Richard Gabriel*

*No more Heroes*

This article intends to commemorate those who died in the series of the Vietnam War (1965-1973) through David Rabe's milestone play *The Basic Training of Pavlo Hummel* as well as the post-war traumatic experiences of veterans. Therefore, the article stands between contemporary history and literature under the effect of posttraumatic stress order. To put it in a different way, this article purports to utilize historical criticism on the contemporary conflict aroused in Vietnam in a perspective akin to Rabe's play, which reflected the true stories of the traumas and agonies that the American soldiers witnessed. Though the text focused on the American side, nothing can explain the fearful deaths of both sides, and especially those of Vietnamese civilians and soldiers who were simply defending their country, but nothing more. In the play, juvenile Pavlo Hummel is just a random example whose psychology and experience represented the ordinary American soldier who participated in the Vietnam War blatantly. More soldiers were drafted and forced to fight rather than wanting to fight, regardless of knowing what they were going to be faced with. Historically speaking, mankind has experienced hundreds of thousands of wars throughout its journey since its existence. War and the instinct of killing have occurred from the proposed beginning of humanity as Abrahamic religions believe them to be, and in such scriptures, the first bloodshed was befallen when Cain killed his brother. As civilizations developed bit by bit, the numbers of casualties skyrocketed. In the modernized times, a fistful of deaths became dozens, dozens leapt to hundreds and hundreds grew to thousands and millions. While some nations tended to see wars from an epic perspective to commemorate heroic deeds and unforgettable victories, others mourned for their losses and non-humanistic massacres. Wars have been causing unfathomable agonies and sorrows throughout history. So often, literature has been echoing such grieves through various writings. When we look at our present-day, especially in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, global conflicts have become one of the markers of the age. Two world wars devastated the world and caused more mass deaths than the world has ever witnessed. Particularly the use of the nuclear bomb, which was called "Little Boy"<sup>2</sup>, had an immense effect on the entire planet, despite its nickname. Yet, war is in the DNA of mankind. Millions of deaths haven't taught any lessons to humanity and the opposite seems unlike for the time being.

In 1965, a conflict arose between South Vietnam and North Vietnam, which dragged America, at the time an ally of Viet Cong, into it. The gross casualties of this war have shaped global movements all around the world, mainly stemming from America to all other countries. But what made this war so notorious and

<sup>1</sup>Inspired from the cult movie "Casualties of War."

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<sup>2</sup> <https://wdet.org/posts/2016/05/27/83193-the-detroit-origins-of-atomic-bomb-little-boy/>



dramatic wasn't the number of the people killed or the money that the governments spared for this war. It was the trauma that the war triggered among especially young people. Like in the First World War and the Second World War, the Vietnam War created a 'lost generation.' The only difference was that this lost generation deeply affected America, if not the rest of the world. History tends to count on the numbers of losses and the possible motive behind war, and of course the casualties. That is, it focuses on why a war starts and how it ends and who won; what kind of treaties were agreed on, and so on. "History is an organic process, a continuity of related events, inexorable, yet not inevitable. Leaders and the people who follow them make and support choices, but within the context of their experience[s] and aspirations (Karnow, 11)." But history also teaches us something else - in wars, none of the sides win. Since the focal point is humanity, humans are always the losers, not the victors at the end of the wars no matter how big or small scaled the wars are. There are mental breakdowns, and identity crises occur with ambiguity appearing on the surface. Many people's dreams have shattered and disappeared during the Vietnam War. One person who experienced this, a veteran named David Rabe, witnessed the brutal atmosphere of the war and passed on his experiences via Pavlo Hummel, who characterized the typical naïve American GI turned up from the American ghettos to the jungles of Saigon to fight for a cause that has nothing to do with him. The rest of the play was just a projection of the realities that occurred and shattered the minds of young soldiers during the Vietnam War.

### 1.1 VIETNAM: WAR, HISTORY, TRAUMA AND DRAMA

"The great god Mars tries to blind us when we enter his realm, and when we leave, he gives us a generous cup of the waters of Lethe to drink." Glenn Grey (Cited by Grossman, 2009, 34)

One can be curious about how the Vietnam War shed light on today's world. Actually, like other wars, except for being a contemporary clash, the Vietnam War prepares us for future wars through being one of the bloodiest confrontations of our time. This confrontation brought great loss and trauma which are reflected through human experiences juxtaposed with moral and spiritual dimensions of humanity. Moreover, the play embodies the lost generations' lost dreams through the eyes of Hummel. As mentioned above, the Vietnam War, along with other 20<sup>th</sup> century contemporary wars, is a very good example of an East-West clash. After the Second World War, imperialist powers sought to encapsulate the rest of the world against the dangers of Communism and socialism. Like the war in Korea, the Vietnam War is another perfect example of such a clash. Throughout the play even the Vietnamese women in Saigon that the American soldiers are supposed to protect are mere whores:

*Listen, I don't have too much time, I got to go pretty soon. How long you gonna be talkin' shit to that poor girl? I mean, see, she's the whore I usually hit on. I'm a little anxious, I'd like to interrupt you, you gonna be at her all fucking' night. I'll bring her back in half an hour.*

SERGEANT WALL: *Sorry about that. Sorry-*

PAVLO: *I didn't ask you was you sorry.*

SERGEANT WALL: *This little girl's my girl.*

PAVLO: *She's a whore, man-*

SERGEANT WALL: *we got a deal, see, see; and when I am here, she stays with me.*

PAVLO: *You got a deal, huh?*

SERGEANT WALL: *You guessed it, PFC.*

PAVLO: *Well, maybe you shoulda checked with me, you shoulda conferred with me maybe before you figured that deal was sound (Rabe, 83).*

The way that Pavlo and Sergeant approach to the woman is clear. They see her as a possession to be used by turns. The tendency to see people of Saigon dependent on America is an illusion since prior to their arrival, these people still had similar conditions but at least without being used by American soldiers in such humiliating ways. In fact, when American soldiers step on Vietnamese lands, the war turns into a concept which is far from being a physical clash since wars are no longer physical contests of two or more armies which try to disempower each other. Karnow asserted that "[i]n human terms at least, the war in Vietnam was a war that nobody won - a struggle between victims. Its origins were complex, its lessons disputed, its legacy still to be assessed by future generations. But whether a valid venture or a misguided endeavor, it was a tragedy of epic dimensions (Karnow, 1997, 11). The traumatic experiences of both American soldiers who went to Vietnam and American society are often recalled by American playwrights. The trauma that the American soldiers experienced during the war was as dramatic as the trauma they would experience back at home after the war. Lt. Col. Dave Grossman, a retired soldier and a psychiatrist, pointed out the trauma of American soldiers in Vietnam:



[T]he American soldier in Vietnam was first psychologically enabled to kill to a far greater degree than any other soldier in previous history, then denied the psychologically essential purification ritual that exists in every warrior society, and finally condemned and accused by his own society to a degree that is unprecedented in Western history. [That was] the terrible, tragic price that America's three million Vietnam veterans, their families, and our society have paid for what we did to our soldiers in Vietnam (Grossman, 2009, intro xxxii),

This terrible price that American soldiers paid in Vietnam was second to none when their conditions back in America are considered. Expecting to be welcomed as heroes, instead they were seen as murderers. According to one Vietnam combat veteran "the U.S. Army [in Vietnam] was like a mother who sold out her kids to be raped by [their] father to protect her own interests" (qtd in Shay 2003: 5). Back in home, American soldiers were criticized harshly, far from home, in Vietnam, they died in flocks. This was a causality of the war, and history tends to prove itself to be an animate process, a continuity of linked actions. As Sir Isaac Newton stated, "Every action has an equal and opposite reaction" - wars have brought more problems than they are supposed to; the participants expect them to be solutions. The U.S. government has claimed that its existence overseas and in the remotest continents can only be explained through their (supposed) wish to maintain world peace. As Karnow admits, "...a more prevalent strain in American expansionism was evangelical - as if the United States, fulfilling some sacred responsibility, had been singled out by the divinity for the salvation of the planet (Karnow, 1997, 13). While Americans have been claiming to go to war with peaceful and compassionate intents, they have been taking a harsher method to conquer their supposed goal. During the Vietnam War, cluster bombs were dropped by B-52 bombers and caused lots of casualties, including civilians. Karnow emphasized the destruction caused by these bombers:

*'The B-52 attacks were terrible,' recalled Colonel Bui Thin, who survived more than twenty raids. 'The planes flew at high altitudes so that we had no warning. Suddenly the bombs were exploding around us. We would block our ears, scatter in every direction and look for holes in the ground in an effort to escape a direct hit. The bombing lasted only a few minutes, and we would come out to bury the bodies of our unlucky comrades, many mangled beyond recognition.' Equally horrible was napalm, which melts its victims into a kind of gelatin. Some hideously disfigured survivors, mortified by their appearance, crept off to live in caves and other remote spots (Karnow 1997, 22).*

Putting the horrible B52 attacks aside, in the play, Pavlo received a training on how to use grenades. Even the imagination of both using and carrying a grenade might be enough to display the defragmentation of soldiers' psychological mindset as if the physical explosion causes a psychological explosion and turned soldiers into mere fragmentations:

ARDELL: *You had that thing in your hand, didn't you? What was you thinkin' on you had that thing in your hand?*

PAVLO: *About throwin' it. About a man I saw when I was eight years old who came through the neighbourhood with a softball team called the Demons, and he could do anything with a softball underhand that most bigleaguers could do with a hardball overhand. He was fantastic (Rabe, 9).*

In Pavlov's shattered and fragmented mind, the grenade became something similar to a baseball, an inoffensive thing that can harm no one (when used as intended). While Americans tried to crack the morale of Communists through inexorable attacks from March 15, 1965 to March 15, 1973, they were actually cracking American soldiers' morale. Therefore, the attacks didn't bring the desired outcome:

*[S]o the United States, which had brought to bear stupendous military power to crack Communist morale, itself shattered under the strain of a struggle that seemed to be interminable. An original aim of the intervention, first enunciated by President Eisenhower, had been to protect all of Southeast Asia, whose countries would presumably "topple like a row of dominoes", were the Communists to take over Vietnam. Ironically, as Leslie Gelb of The New York Times has observed the real domino to fall was American public opinion (Karnow, 1997, 24).*

Appalled under the pressure and circumstances, American soldiers were confused and lost their sense of reality:

*Where you think you are? You think you in the movies? This here real life, Gen'lmen. You actin' like there ain't never been a war in this world. Don't you know what I'm sayin'? You got to want put this steel into man. You got to want to cut him, hurt him, make him die. You got to want to feel the skin and muscle come apart with the push you give. It come to you in the wood. RECOVER AND HOLD! (Rabes, 38).*

So it came to a position whereby juvenile American soldiers failed to realize that this was not a game but a real war. Lacking experience, though they fought bravely, things started to turn upside down. Meticulously designed American plans backfired in Vietnam. Not only did they retreat from Saigon, but also the American soldiers were protested in their home country as mentioned earlier. They were seen as losers and killers:

*One veteran told a CBS television team that "A lot of people want to make sure that we don't engage in that type of situation again." Gus Wilson, [who was a] mayor when the young men departed with their National Guard unit in 1968, [and] was still mayor: "We believed that the first thing that you did for your country was to defend it. You*



*didn't question that. But I think we realized as we went along – maybe later than we should have – that the government was pulling a bit of flimflam. We weren't people – the way it was conducted, its ultimate purpose. Though I am still a patriot, I ended up very disillusioned (Karnow, 1997, 26).*

The war in Vietnam didn't last as the officials expected. The U.S. Army lost its reputation, and American people protested the unlawful deaths in Vietnam. It was far from being a conflict between two nations. Vietnam was a remote country, and many countries tried to colonize Vietnamese territory one by one. Chinese, Japanese and French armies controlled Vietnam's territory and the Vietnamese militia endured them with a cost of around 3,000,000 casualties (though this number might be higher since it was impossible to count all of the casualties of the bombing). "Of the nearly three hundred thousand GIs killed in World War II, more than 20 percent were missing, and the same proportion applied to Korea. But, by 1996, the bodies of only a tiny fraction of those who died in Vietnam had not been recovered. (Karnow 1997: 54)" Americans, on the other hand, lost their beliefs in this war. The U.S. army had disintegrated as the war wound down during the early 1970s. With Nixon repatriating American troops, nobody wanted to be the last to die for a cause that had lost its meaning, and for those awaiting withdrawal, only survivals counted. In addition to that, "the broader impact of the war on the U.S. armed forces was even worse. Between 1965 and the departure of the last American combat soldiers in early 1973, the bill for Vietnam totaled more than \$120 billion – much of which would have normally been invested in modernizing the nation's defenses. (Karnow 1997: 31)" These numbers would easily present the total loss of American economy and policies, save for the near loss of 60,000 soldiers. The other part of war is psychological. Psychological costs of the wars in 20<sup>th</sup> century were far greater than anything else in that setting. Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder became a common sickness for soldiers who survived the wars. Karnow stated that:

*A Veterans Administration survey released in 1988 estimated that some five hundred thousand of the three million U.S. troops who served in Vietnam suffered from "post-traumatic stress disorder" – a higher percentage than those affected by "shell shock" in World War I and "battle fatigue" in World War II, as a similar infirmity was termed in those conflicts (Karnow, 1997, 33).*

The battle in Vietnam was something unusual. Unlike the two World Wars, in Vietnam, GIs weren't sure about the enemies' capabilities (or lack thereof). In The Basic Training of Pavlo, Corporal talks about a story when they came across an old man and a little Vietnamese girl presumably carrying "enough TNT on 'em to blow up this whole damn state (Rabes, 34)":

*"...I'm thinkin', "Damn, ain't that a bitch, she's so scared of us." And Tinden, right then, man he dropped to his knees and let go two bursts – first the old man, then the kid – cuttin' them both right across the face, man you could see the bullets walkin'. (Rabes, 33-34)"*

As Rabe displays the paranoia among American soldiers, they have an inexorable feeling towards any Vietnamese person as a potential enemy soldier or suicide bomber though it is true that sometimes such bombers pop-up suddenly. As a matter of fact, Vietcong forces and North Koreans infiltrated into Saigon easily, they even disguised themselves as civilians. Like Corporal reports one of his encounters, detecting the real enemy became impossible. In one occasion, Nick Uhernik stated the bloody vision of this war in the moments of deadly crises:

*Simultaneously everyone leveled his weapon at him and fired. "Jesus Christ!" somebody gasped behind me as we watched his body reverse course back toward the trees; chunks of meat and bone flew through the air and stuck to the huge boulders. One of our rounds detonated a grenade the soldier carried, and his body smashed to the ground beneath a shower of blood... (Cited from Nick Uhernik, Battle of Blood by Grossman, 2009, 268).*

Confusion at the battlefield was far more furious than they had ever thought. The enemy and the fellow seemed to be blended with each other. In a chaos that no one no longer knew who the actual enemy was, the American military was just like a machine focused on survival. Soldiers were free of emotions, fighting in a way that did not know what was real and what was simulation. For whom was this massacre and for what?

What is more, though the average age of American soldiers was somewhat very young, GIs had to fight against children warriors and women as well. As Grossman asserted:

*At a Vietnam Vets Coalition meeting in Florida, one vet told me about his cousin, who was also vet, who would say, "They trained me to kill. They sent me to Vietnam. They didn't tell me that I'd be fighting kids." For many, this is the distilled essence of the horror of what happened in Vietnam. The killing is always traumatic. But when you have to kill women and children, or when you have to kill men in their homes, in front of their wives and children, and when you have to do it not from twenty thousand feet but up close where you can watch them die, the horror appears to transcend description or understanding (Grossman, 2009, 268-269).*

This was also one of the facts why American soldiers lost their way while demarcating innocents from the enemy. Nevertheless, the charges of their oppressors always turned around the doing of murder. While those who had in any way contributed to slaying actions were called baby





assassins and murderers, the outcome was frequently profound traumatization and damaging as a consequence of the antagonistic and condemning "homecoming" from the state for which they had agonized and sacrificed. Moreover, this was the only homecoming obtained by them. "At worst: open hostility and spittle. Or at best, as one put it in his letter to Greene, an indifference that verged on insouciance." (Grossman, 2009, 281).

This trauma kept Americans' ferocious attention. To recover from it, soldiers were given excessive drugs. However, without any therapy, drugs were useless and further deteriorated their minds:

*Drugs may help make an individual more susceptible to some forms of therapy, if therapy is available. But if drugs are given while the stressor is still being experienced, then they will arrest or supersede the development of effective coping mechanisms, resulting in an increase in the long-term trauma from the stress. What happened in Vietnam is the moral equivalent of giving a soldier a local anesthetic for a gunshot wound and then sending him back into combat. (Grossman, 2009, 273)*

Like the effects of these drugs, Pavlo created his illusionary world. He blended fiction with reality, and at the end his fictitious reality became somewhat the only thing that he belonged to:

MICKEY: *For all I know, you been downtown in the movies for the last three months and you bought that goddamn uniform at some junk shop.*

PAVLO: *I am in the army.*

MICKEY: *How do I know?*

PAVLO: *I'm tellin' you.*

MICKEY: *But you're a fuckin' liar, you're a fuckin' myth-maker.*

PAVLO: *I gotta go to Vietnam, Mickey.*

MICKEY: *Vietnam don't even exist. (54, Rabes)*

Pavlo's civilian and military lives intermingled with each other, and there came an illusion through reality where Pavlo encapsulated himself to most probably lessen his pains and/or the trauma that he witnessed. By doing so, he cannot prevent his own destruction, but he at least stands as a good example of one who displays the loss of a whole American youth drawn in their dreams never to be saved. The basic-training of young soldiers has become a kind of last exercise before they die or eventually lose their minds. Historically speaking, the Vietnam War has not only fallen into history as a black mark of humanity, but it has also caused a massive generation of severe traumas. Therefore, David Rabe, in his play which reflects his experiences, has actually shown a historical reality, screening the cold but true picture of regardless nationalist emotions.

## 2. Conclusion

When the truth is found that American soldiers fought not only against Communist Vietnamese but also against their dreams and ignorance, it was already too late. David Rabe presented fragmentations of this brutal war through *The Basic Training of Pavlo Hummel* where the conflict of juvenile American soldiers clashed with their own identity as the waves hit sharp cliffs. Trained to kill and conquer, American soldiers only conquered the deaths of all sides: to the deaths that they caused, their personal deaths, and the deaths of their comrades. It is not conceivable to separate the historical datum and facts revealed here from what Rabes experiences. Written like a form of an auto-biography (though it is not), Rabes revealed all his hidden nightmares through the play. The disillusionment, trauma and frustration that American GI's witnessed through the virgin forests laid bare among the trees. The ghosts of the lost dreams of Americans still haunt them day and night, and the hauntings are blended with those of the innocent Vietnamese soldiers. No matter what social media or television tell us today about the things happened in Vietnam, there is no one to explain for what reason those 'children' were fighting there. American troops disembarked in Vietnam for the so-called political interests, led to the battlefields and died because they were ordered so. North Vietnamese, for many years to end the order of the slavery, paid the cost of this war with their lives without considering what would happen next. Wars have no point to be honored so long as innocent people and children are dying. In this context, David Rabe in this play presented the conflict on the stage as it is, neither more nor less.

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