

## **Informal Communication Systems in the Vietnam War: A Case Study in Folklore, Technology and Popular Culture**

**[Lydia Fish](#)**

Popular culture and folklore are interdependent. As part of a matrix of expressive activity and meaning in the lives of the rank and file, they mediate between the discrepancies and help to integrate the individual into the fabric of military life. (Cleveland, Dark Laughter, 3)

The men and women who served in Southeast Asia were daily exposed to the many different levels of culture that coalesced around war: official military culture, domestic popular consumer culture, occupational folk culture, vernacular cultures of various sorts ranging from United States regional and ethnic cultures to indigenous Vietnamese and other Asian cultures. They needed to somehow mediate among this array of intersecting, often clashing, cultures, to make sense of them, and, most importantly, to find their own voice to speak about them, and to create their own channels of communication. With classic Yankee ingenuity, this first generation of techies coopted as much as they needed of the official hardware and networks and made them their own, in order to tell and preserve their own stories.<sup>1</sup>

Modern Western armies, as Les Cleveland points out, devote extensive resources to the social welfare and entertainment of their troops and for the purpose adopt whole segments of the popular culture of the homeland. During the Vietnam War organizations like the Red Cross, USO and Special Services ran clubs, recreation centers and libraries where soldiers could keep in touch with the magazines, books and recordings from home. With the advent of Armed Forces Radio in the early years of World War II popular music had become an increasingly important part of life in the combat zone; by the end of 1967 eleven American Forces Vietnam Network (AFVN) radio stations were broadcasting in the southeast Asian theatre.

However, the controlled repertory of music and the "managed" news considered suitable by the authorities for troop listening and the availability of sophisticated communications equipment led to the rise of local networks run on field radios and eventually to pirate radio stations. Excellent recording equipment could easily be purchased, which enabled men and women to record and document their own war: everything from the sounds of incoming shells and flight mission recordings to performances by local bands. Much of the occupational folk music produced in country circulated on an informal tape network. Although most soldiers got their news from the Stars and Stripes the ubiquity of the typewriter and, later, the office copier made possible the duplication of unit songbooks and informal newsletters from World War I on.

### **Radio**

Radio has been an important part of the effort of the United States military to export the stateside popular culture to troops in the field. Before World War II, in the Canal Zone and in Alaska, servicemen had created primitive radio

stations. Once hostilities erupted, soldiers spontaneously started stations in the Philippines and in Casablanca. Only later in the war did Armed Forces Radio begin to train broadcasters and provide radio equipment for stations that sprang up in all combat theaters. Likewise, in Vietnam, during the early advisory period, the few military personnel stationed there had to create their own stations, not only in Saigon, but wherever U.S. troops and advisors found themselves in remote areas.

Prior to the formal beginning of American Forces Radio and Television (AFRT) service in Vietnam, there is also evidence of a uncoordinated, spontaneous effort underway among American servicemen to provide some sort of home style radio entertainment for themselves. This movement does not appear to have been confined to the Saigon area, but occurred in many places where troops and advisors were stationed. (Hauser 24) In Saigon, the station began broadcasting from a bachelor enlisted men's quarters using "informally" requisitioned equipment which the soldiers assembled into a facility that reached the military mission in the South Vietnamese capital. (Suid)

As the American presence in Vietnam escalated, so did the activities of what was to become a network of eleven armed forces radio stations in Vietnam by the end of 1967. (Radio First Termer, proposal, 21) Some of the larger military units had their own radio stations, which rebroadcast AFVN news and sports shows, but did their own DJ and local news shows. AFVN was chartered to boost morale and help provide servicemen with useful information and many American military personnel isolated in the field counted on Armed Forces Radio to keep them in touch with what was going on at home and to relay accurate news reports.

However, the news was sometimes censored and AFVN's idea of suitable music to play in a combat zone was not always that of the men and women stationed there. Thirsting for uncensored news and music, ambitious GIs put to use the abundance of available communications equipment and became Vietnam's underground radio pirates. The pirate stations used military communications equipment instead of commercial broadcast equipment, and simply hooked up a mic and turntable or tape deck via a homebrew mixer to the commo transmitters. Grunts in the field could hear the broadcasts on the PRC-10, or similar field radios. (Robbins)

In 1967, late at night after the senior officers had left the communications command post, artillery officer Barry Romo and a friend took control of a small military field radio, setting up on a frequency normally used for signal testing. Known as "Good Guy One" and "Good Guy Two," they played music from the records they had brought back from R and R in Hawaii on a small battery-powered record player to fellow soldiers tuning in from remote locales. Soon, requests were called in over the two-way transmitter.

Many veterans remember another use of after-hours field radio air time commonly known as the "bullshit" net, an open conference among enlisted men. It was a memorable source of entertainment and frivolity in the midst of shelling, bunkers, boredom and a weak Armed Forces Radio signal. Not always used for music, the "net" passed along advice and support not communicated by upper echelon military personnel. (Radio First Termer, proposal, 25-26)

Jim Scheukler (Polecat 56) remembers:

Either the 3/506 Infantry of the 101st Airborne Division or C Company of the 75th Rangers, I don't remember which, had one station. They operated on the FM band that was used for tactical radios so the guys in the field could listen on their PRC-25 or PRC-77 radios. They played the rock music that most nineteen-year-olds

liked. Originally they attached a microphone to the front of a speaker from an open-reel tape recorder. One of the avionics technicians from the 192nd heard the resulting poor audio quality, and insisted that they use a cable that he made up to connect the tape recorder directly to the microphone input, dramatically improving the audio quality. They used a frequency that was not assigned for tactical use, and had pre agreed songs that would inform the guys in the boonies to change to their assigned tactical frequency.

The other pirate station was run by the 192nd's avionics techs. They used a VHF aircraf transmitter modified to create FM instead of AM, and tuned it down to the top of the FM broadcast band. They played rock music from open-reel tapes. While I was there, they purposely were not doing vocal announcing to minimize the risk of pissing-off somebody who could shut them down. (Scheukler, Jim. Electronic mail to the author. 22 February 1993)

Bill Davis, in one of the episodes of Radio First Termer (special program, All Things Considered), tells about a portable pirate radio station run out of the barracks in Korat. It was so popular, he says, that it was played in the mess hall and the hospital.

The most famous of all the radio pirates, the legendary Dave Rabbit ("Radio First Termer, 69 on your radio dial") may in fact have been an elaborate hoax on the part of some AFVN radio technicians. Several tapes of broadcasts featuring hard rock and lots of talk about sex, drugs and the general incompetence of the military are still in wide circulation, but the quality of the recordings is suspiciously high for a station using improvised equipment.<sup>2</sup>

The attitude of the authorities seems to have been fairly tolerant towards these amateur efforts, Steve Robbins writes

...one of the stranger aspects of those pirate stations was that MACV-SOG (the group that I flew PSYOPS radio broadcast missions over North Vietnam with) used the existence of the pirate stations as a cover for their PSYOPS broadcast operations. The powers that be correctly assumed that the VC would not attack and/or destroy any of the pirate stations since they had a slightly anti-war or anti-military flavor at times. According, word was spread that some of the SOG broadcast operations were really pirate radio stations. This may also account for the reason that many of the pirate stations were left in operation, instead of being closed down by the military as some of the brass wanted to do. Don't know for sure whether the ruse worked, but I'm pretty sure that none of the SOG ground stations was ever attacked. (E-mail from Steve Robbins to the author, 25 January 2001)

## Print Media

There is little doubt that *Stars and Stripes* reflected the official version of the war and was generally sympathetic to the administration of the time. A common complaint among many of the servicemen, newspaper and wire service correspondents was that the publication was heavily censored before it hit the battlefields of South Vietnam. It was not surprising, therefore, that underground newspapers proliferated during the Vietnam War, purporting to tell the real truth of combat. Although there were a least 245 unofficial underground newspapers circulated in Vietnam between 1967 and 1972, few went beyond a single issue and their readership was severely limited.

Ken Sams, who served as the Chief of the Air Force Contemporary Historical Evaluation of Combat Operations (1964-1971) began to publish *Grunt*, a sort of in-country *Playboy*, in 1968. He did the layout himself and paid a couple of moonlighting *Stars and Stripes* staff to handle printing and distribution. Sams claims there were spooks planted in his office who ransacked his apartment and seduced his live-in maid. Grunts sent poems, drawings and photos and offered their service as artists and by the third issue the magazine was selling 30,000 copies.

In 1969 *Grunt* "went hippie" and became the *Grunt Free Press*. In the words of the editor and publisher, "the art became more psychedelic, the articles more far out, the nudes more explicit, the humor blacker and the editorial tone more anti-regulation army." It was printed in Saigon by a moonlighting Vietnamese Air Force officer who had access to a US AID printing press. Many of the centerfolds were the work of a Vietnamese student artist, Tran Dinh Thuc. The "peacenik" leanings of his drawings brought him to the attention of the Vietnamese authorities, who decided to draft him. When the word got out, grunts arranged for him to be smuggled aboard a plane to Darwin. Despite attempts to ban the publication, Sams managed to keep it going until he retired in 1971.(Sams)

There are some superb folkloric comments on the official reporting of the war, including songs about the Five O'Clock Follies and war correspondents who never left Saigon. One of the best, by an unknown singer who may have been a Public Information Officer, is "[Ballad of the Republic of Vietnam.](#)" The underground classic of the Air War is "What the Captain Means," a satirical interview of "a shy unassuming Phantom pilot," by a civilian reporter, with interpolations by the Wing information officer who is present "to make sure that the real Air Force story is told." This was recorded by Colonel Travis McNeil, Lt. Colonel Joe Kent, and "a major from PACAF" at Cam Ranh Bay in August or September 1967 (General Travis McNeil. Letter to Toby Hughes. Summer, 1992) and circulated among pilots in Vietnam and Thailand until the end of the war – it is included in almost every Air Force tape which I have found. Bill McClosky, who served with the 1st Signal Brigade in Saigon and Long Binh in 1967-1968, suspects that "the civilian press corps in Saigon that some of us tried to hang with had something to do with helping pass it around." (E-mail from Bill McClosky to the author, 7 September 1999) There were numerous spinoffs, including one by EC-121R pilots at Korat in 1968, and one by Sandy (Air Rescue) pilots, probably at Danang, and another A-1 version from the 633rd Special OperationsWing at Pleiku. <sup>3</sup>

## **Military Occupational Folk Music**

All the music of the sixties was part of life in the combat zone.<sup>4</sup> Military and civilian personnel performed in glee clubs and gospel quartets; rock bands; and blues, jazz, folk and country music groups. Early in the war concerts were organized as benefits for orphanages and other charities. Informal groups performed musical skits and Christmas pageants. The Command Military Touring Shows, run by Special Services out of Saigon sent more than 115 groups, over 500 performers in all, on tour to give musical and theatrical performances to more than 500,000 troops.

Joseph Treaster, a member of the New York Times Saigon bureau, wrote in 1966:

Almost every club has a resident musician, usually a guitar player, whom the men crowd around, singing songs about their lives in a strange country and the war they are fighting. The songs are laced with cynicism and political innuendoes and they echo the frustrations

of the "dirty little war" which has become a dirty big one. Above all, the songs reflect the wartime Yank's ability to laugh at himself in a difficult situation. The songs grow fast as first one man, then another, throws in a line while the guitar player searches for chords. The tunes are usually old favorites. (Treaster, 104)

Some of these songs were part of the traditional occupational folklore of the military.<sup>5</sup> The pilots who flew off the carriers and out of Thailand sang songs that were known by the aviators both World Wars. Captain Kris Kristofferson, performing with a group of helicopter pilots in Germany called the Losers, rewrote one of the most popular of all Korean War aviation songs, "Itazuke Tower" and his buddies in the Blue Stars of the 48th Assault Helicopter Company carried it to Vietnam where it was sung as "Phan Rang Tower" and reworked again in Thailand by Phantom Jock Dick Jonas as "Ubon Tower." Americans learned British Army songs like "I Don't Want to Join the Army" and "The Lousy Lance Corporal" from the Australians who served in Vietnam. The ancient military tradition of bawdy and scatological songs flourished.

Other songs grew directly out of the Vietnam experience: songs about flying at night along the Ho Chi Minh Trail, defoliating triple-canopy jungle, engaging in firefights with an unseen enemy, or counting the days left in a 365-day tour. Some truly amazing singer-songwriter material emerged, ranging from extremely sophisticated satire, often written by advisory or intelligence personnel ("I'm a Russian Advisor to a Chinese Hoard") to straightforward songs in support of the mission. ("This is the Story of a Man"). I was recently sent a tape of anti-war songs, some of them recorded against the background of mortar fire, by Hospital Corpsman 2nd Class Ken Wright. In some cases both the words and music were original, usually new lyrics were set to folk, country or popular tunes. Barry Sadler's *Ballad of the Green Berets* alone spawned dozens of parodies.

These songs served as strategies for survival, for unit bonding and for the enhancement of morale. They provided entertainment and a socially sanctioned means of expressing emotions such as fear, frustration, grief and longing for home. All of the traditional themes of military folksong can be found in these songs: praise of the great leader, celebration of heroic deeds, laments for the death of comrades, disparagement of other units, and complaints about food, incompetent officers and vainglorious rear echelon personnel. They also served as a conduit for some extremely witty satirical comments on the local political and military scene, especially those that circulated among CIA and other intelligence personnel.

## **Official Attitudes Towards Occupational Folksong**

Some of the music was given official support. When Ike Pappas put together a broadcast of ["Songs of War"](#) for CBS in 1967, he used material sent to him by the Public Information Officers of various units. Many singers and performing groups were sent on tour by Special Services. In 1965 Hershel Gober and his band the Black Patches were the first performers to go on tour for Command Military Touring Shows. (CMTS). Later in the war Bill Ellis, who wrote songs about the First Cavalry Division, did a tour for CMTS and later went to Japan to cut an EP record for the Cav Public Information Office, a copy of which was given to each member of the division in 1968. (This is probably the record which is referred to below.) Colonel Joe Starker (11 CAB) arranged to have Mike Staggs transferred to the 173rd Assault Helicopter Company so he could sing with the Merry-men.

In 1966-1967 General Seneff, Commander of the First Aviation Brigade, instituted the custom of monthly meetings of commanders from Battalion level or higher and solicited singing groups to provide entertainment. The

proliferation of singing groups among Army aviators during this period – Bite and the Strikers, the Beach Bums, the Intruders, the Blue Stars, the Four Blades, the Merryman and Three Majors and a Minor – was probably due to the interest stimulated by these contests. ([Heuer](#)) Major John Roberts, aide to the Vice Commander of the US Air Forces in Vietnam, collected tapes from all the air wings in Southeast Asia and put together a narrated collection of songs that was distributed to the commander of each wing. A few performers were filmed or recorded for radio or television release over the Armed Forces Network or in the United States.

Although veterans occasionally mention "censored" or "forbidden" songs, I have only run across one instance of an official attempt to discourage the performance of a song. In the records of Advisory Team 70, the 5th ARVN Division combat assistance team, in the National Archives there is a letter, dated 19 September 1968, from Colonel James H. Leach, Senior Advisor, to Colonel Harold DeArment, Commanding Officer of the 23rd Artillery Group enclosing a letter from General Thuan, Commanding General of the 5th ARVN Division. The general is complaining about a song entitled "Drinking Song: Didi Mau," which is being performed by American soldiers in the Phu Loi area. Colonel Leach says that he has forwarded the letter to General Kerwin (CG II FF/SA III Corps) "so he might take appropriate steps at his level to prohibit public distribution or singing of this song" and asks that Colonel DeArment forward a copy to the members of the musical group. A hand-written note is appended to the effect that General Kerwin directed that the group comply with General Thuan's request and that they agreed. A copy of the song, a not particularly-inspired-version of the boy-picks-up-girl-in-bar-and-acquires-a-social-disease-in-the- process genre is included.

Civilians, too, used songs as social comment and occasionally appear to have been taken seriously by the authorities. In the course of a discussion of New York Times correspondents on my Vietnam War LISTSERV group ([vwar-l@listserv.acsu.buffalo.edu](mailto:vwar-l@listserv.acsu.buffalo.edu)) Jim Graves wrote:

Homer Bigart was an old (54) war correspondent at the time with 25 years experience and perhaps had done one war too many as by the 60s he was gloomy, distrustful of any institution (even the NY Times) and very much a Cold War skeptic and eaten up with cynicism. It did not help that he detested Vietnam and considered his assignment there a curse.

The reason he got the boot was because he had created a song, to be sung to the tune of "I'm an Old Cowhand" that ran.

We must sink or swim  
With Ngo Dinh Diem  
We will hear no phoo  
About Madame Nhu  
Yippee-I-aye, I-aye,

It was never published but everyone (including Diem) was aware of it and when a headline got onto the front page of the Times, which said "Sink or Swim with Ngo Dinh Diem", he (Diem) was not amused.  
(Graves)

[Next](#)

*New Directions in Folklore 7 2003*

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[Newfolk](#) :: [NDF](#) :: [Archive](#) :: [Issue 7](#) :: [Page 1](#) :: Page 2

## Relationship to Formal and Informal Broadcasting page 2

It is difficult to ascertain the exact relationship of these songs to the formal and informal broadcast traditions of the war. Bill Ellis sent me a tape of his EP record, First Cav: Impressions of a Skytrooper, being played on "Skytrooper News," AFVN, Saigon in 1969. Joe Tusso obtained a tape of Dick Jonas, one of the best-known Air Force singer-songwriters, from Hank Fordham, who claims to have recorded it from AFTN Radio. Alexis Muellner recorded an interview with Pete Zastrow, who was an infantry captain and brigade information officer for the Second Brigade of the First Air Cavalry Division from 1968 to 1968.

...and I know that at one point in the First Air Cav a troop who had been a painter and done all types of things and in any case, ended up recording a bunch of songs for the First Cav, in fact before he'd come to Vietnam he was singing "I won't go to Vietnam" songs, when he got there he was singing songs about how he wanted to get home and while they were in some ways anti-war songs, they weren't so violently anti-war that the First Air Cav Division wasn't willing to support him, so they made recordings, gave recordings of his songs to everyone and part of our job at Lai Khe was to get Radio Lai Khe to play these. We would stomp over to the Radio Lai Khe office and stomp around outside for a while and say, "Here we are, here are some great songs that you won't get anywhere else." And as I recall they wouldn't play them because they were from the First Air Cavalry Division and there was some rivalry between units. (Muellner, Alexis. Letter to the author. 23 February 1988.)

Doc Ball, who served with AFTN in NKP, Udorn and Korat between 1966 and 1970 writes:

You noted that at some bases and some times, the work of the local songwriters was played on our AFRTS/AFTN/AFVN stations. I'm sure that was true, and I know I did it several times. But we were VERY attuned to anything which might be offensive to the host country(ies), or which violated our "good practices" dictums. I suspect that this limited a great deal of the "original music" of our songwriters of the day, but even though we didn't play a lot of it, we did our best to help out by making copies of the tapes for the guys who wanted them. (E-mail to the author, 15 June 2003)

In 1968 a major sound overhaul on AFVN network radio included the institution of three local entertainment programs featuring country and western music performed by musical talent from various military units in Vietnam. (Hauser 75)

## Tape and Songbook Networks

The widespread availability of portable tape recorders meant that concerts, music nights as the mess, or informal bar performances could be recorded, copied, and passed on to friends. As Dave Post put it, "We didn't have access to a lot of things (like soap, for example) but, ironically, to state-of-the-art (for then) recording equipment." (E-mail to author, 29 January 2003) Bob Salzman recalls that fifty copies were originally made of "Songs of the UTT." Toby Hughes recorded the three songs he wrote in country for some



friends, but asked that they not make copies of the tape, since he planned to include the songs in a book someday. Toby says, "Copies of the tape were all over SEA in thirty days. One actually beat me back to the States." Some groups, such as the Merry-men, put special tapes together for their fans. Several edited and narrated collections were compiled and circulated widely. Ann Kelsey, Special Services librarian, remembers, "The Special Services library at Dong Ba Thin had a taping facility and a huge 'catalog.' You brought blank reel to reel tapes and chose from the 'catalog.' Tapes were usually three hours long, ninety minutes each side." (Letter from Ann Kelsey to the author, n.d.) A copy of the edited collection produced by Major John Roberts was in the library at Udorn, where it was copied, in whole or in part, by an amazing number of pilots – I have complete copies from three sources and at least a dozen partial copies.

The narrators of these tapes make it clear that they are intended to be historical records. John Roberts prefaces his collection with the comment

As might be expected, the war in Southeast Asia has generated quite a number of songs, written and sung by the participants, and, as much as anything else, they tell it like it is. This is history, and it deserves to be preserved. So on this tape you will hear some fifty songs that I've been able to collect from the wings in Vietnam and Thailand. Some of them are happy; some are sad. Some are fresh and enthusiastic; some may seem cynical or disdainful of the way things are. Fighter pilots have never been reluctant to complain a little. Just let's not forget that we often pretend to deride those things we hold most dear. You're going to hear genuine courage, and honest understandable doubts about the good sense of doing things which are then done with the fullest enthusiasm. But let's also not forget that not nationalism, not even patriotism, but only comradeship, the loyalty to the group, is the essence of fighting morale. And that morale is certainly embodied in the songs you are now going to hear.

According to the narrator of the widely circulated "Hundred Mission Tape," an edited tape of the singing at Irv Le Vine's hundred mission party at Korat on 14 February 1968, a copy was sent to General Ryan, the Commander of Pacific Air Forces. One of the most moving of the edited tapes, which is often incorporated into larger collections, was compiled by Al Tichenor, who flew with an RF-4C squadron at Udorn RTAFB, from songs he had recorded with Dave Post, Dave Buermeyer and Fred Wozniak two nights before Wozniak was shot down on 17 January 1967.

In 1965 General Edward Lansdale began taping the singing at parties at his Saigon villa. The entire cast of the early years of the war appears on these tapes: visiting American dignitaries and newsmen, Philippine and Korean visitors, American soldiers serving as advisors to the Vietnamese military, and American civilians working for the CIA, USIS, CORDS, the Foreign Service or AID. The great Vietnamese singer Pham Duy was a regular performer as well as Vietnamese students, military men and bureaucrats. In 1967 Lansdale put together a narrated tape of 51 of these songs as a "report from the Senior Liaison Officer of the U.S. Mission in Vietnam to top U.S. Officials" and sent copies to Lyndon Johnson, Hubert Humphrey, Robert McNamara, Dean Rusk, Walt Rostow, Henry Cabot Lodge, Henry Kissinger and General William Westmoreland, among others. He had hoped, he wrote later, "to try to impart more understanding of the political and psychological nature of the struggle to those making decisions." (Fish 9) Unfortunately, Washington was not listening to what Les [Cleveland](#) has described as "perhaps the only example known to military history of folklore being used for the transmission of military intelligence. (Cleveland)



Unit songbooks proliferated, plagiarizing from each other to such an extent that several completely unsingable texts show up in identical versions in half a dozen Air Force songbooks. These collections contain many of the old World War II and Korean War standards, with the references to equipment and places updated, or songs from other units with a few words changed. If your squadron hadn't gotten around to making its own songbook, Chip Dockery (13th TFS, 432nd TFW) explained, you just used somebody else's. However, some units, for example the [Blue Stars](#) (148th AHC Helicopter Company), compiled wonderful collections of songs written by its members, with the authorship carefully noted. These compilations were not limited to the military; Civilians serving agencies such as OCO, JUSPAO, AID, CORDS, the State Department, and the CIA had their own songbooks. One of them, *Songs of Saigon*, was published in office copier format in at least three editions. I have been given copies by an Army nurse, an officer of the 101st Airborne, and several members of the CIA.

## Servicemen and Women as Archivists and Historians

As Les Cleveland has pointed out, very little has been written about the informal and off-duty of activities of the military, especially of troops in wartime. (Cleveland, NMAH lecture) The men and women who served in Southeast Asia served as their own archivists and historians and it is primarily due to their efforts that we owe our knowledge of the in-country culture of the Vietnam War. When Alexis Muellner of Interlock Media produced his superb series on radio in Vietnam, *Radio First Termer*, for NPR in 1987, he discovered that Armed Forces Radio had literally no recordings of their own broadcasts. It was from the cherished tapes of soldiers, sailors, nurses, and doughnut dollies that he was able to reconstruct the sounds of in-country radio: sixties rock, spots reminding personnel to check their jeeps for booby traps and take their malaria pills, and the antics of Chicken Man, as well as pirate broadcasts by the infamous Dave Rabbitt, of Radio 69, Saigon, fame. When Robin Williams was studying for his role in *Good Morning Vietnam*, he learned the traditional opening to the Dawnbuster Show ("Gooooooooooooooooooooood Morning Vietnam") from tapes supplied by Roger Steffens, an in-country DJ. Armed Forces Radio did not have one example! (Vietnam Special, parts one and two)

They also taped incoming rounds and rocket attacks. One tape that has been copied many times was made when someone taping a letter home left his recorder running during a B-40 rocket attack at Binh Thuy while he headed for the bunker. Ray McCleery cherishes a tape made on the flight line at Takhli – two hours of Thuds taking off and landing. (He says it helps him to sleep.) I have many tapes of parties: a fourth of July party in Pleiku in 1969, a party with some wonderful singing from Chu Lai in 1971 which includes members of a MACV team, some Marines and a few stray Australians, a concert at a Commanders Conference in Nha Trang in 1967, a Mike Force initiation at Bien Hoa in the course of which the participants shoot holes in the ceiling, a Hundred Mission party from Korat, and the party the night before the F-105s left Korat. Bill Scaff issued a fascinating commercial recording, *Bong Son Blues*, of some of the bits and pieces he recorded in Vietnam: helicopters taking off and landing, an electric guitar solo, several minutes of chat with a Malaysian mercenary, a children's choir from a local Protestant church, songs by ARVN soldiers, and a marvelous traditional narrative by an Afro-American soldier. Bob Salzman recorded a unknown singer named Barry Sadler in a safe house in Saigon in 1964: the first extant version, as far as I know, of "Ballad of the Green Berets."

Many pilots recorded the radio transmissions of their own missions, with the aid of miniature tape recorders. Some of these recordings "Detroit Lead," "Strobe Eleven: The Death of 'General Worley" and "Pintail Shootdown,"

became classics and circulated throughout the war. In 1968, four Phantom drivers at Cam Ranh Bay revved up their planes and recorded a wonderfully funny fake mission, "Sharkbait 21," while sitting on the runway.

These tapes were cherished and now, thirty years later, often form the basis of personal websites. Sometimes an amateur historian will collect tapes and photographs from a unit and put up a more elaborate website. Cruising the Veterans' Web Ring will turn up a fascinating assortment of these. The Blue Stars (the 48th Assault Helicopter Company) includes copies of its unit history and songbook on its website. Recordings of in-country songs are available from several small [record companies](#) and squadron songbooks circulate on CDs and zip disks. Rainer Otter, the primary collector of NATO songbooks, works through a [website](#) and sends and receives his manuscripts electronically.

The relationship between technology and folklore is an old one. As soon as print became widespread and cheap, ballads were disseminated as broadsides; one of the first uses of the Net was for the transmission of jokes and legends. The ingenuity of the youngsters who turned the world's most sophisticated communications technology into a vehicle for the transmission of their own folk and popular culture is therefore hardly surprising, but I think it serves as a particularly interesting case study in the many creative ways the folk use whatever media and technologies that are available to them. The technology that these soldiers coopted enabled them to create and preserve their own vision of the war. They would be quite at home with the bloggers of the Iraqi campaign.<sup>6</sup>

## NOTES

- [1.](#) I am indebted to Michael Kramer, author of a brilliant dissertation on rock music during the war, for this insight.
- [2.](#) Steve Robbins, who served four flight tours in Vietnam flying airborne radio/TV broadcast missions with the U.S. Navy Project Jenny, the original military airborne broadcast PSYOPS outfit, writes:

As to the existence of Dave Rabbit, I just have no specific personal knowledge. I have however, listened to some of the clips on the Radio First Termer web site (<http://www.ibiblio.org/jwsnyder/rft/rft.html>), and something simply doesn't sound right to me. The production (switching, mixing etc) seems a bit to professional for a field operation and probably would have had to have been done at a larger base such as DaNang AFB where the studio equipment could have been thrown together. The small portable mixing consoles that are available today, were not generally commercially available during the Vietnam War period. However, almost any good military technician with a basic knowledge of audio systems could have fabricated one. Clearly, the folks who produced these shows had some professional broadcast experience, there are some cross fades used on the Rabbit shows that others probably wouldn't have known how to do. There were a number of folks who came into the military with broadcast experience, and for whatever reason, found themselves turned down when they tried to get on the staff of AFVN. This might account for this type of pirate broadcast, guys got PO'd and simply set themselves up in business. The 69 MHZ broadcast frequency listed on the Radio First Timer as the broadcast frequency would have been a valid frequency for the type of reception gear generally used by the field troops. At that frequency, reception would have been strictly line of sight, and accordingly quite limited in coverage area. (Robbins)

3. At some point the opening of the original recording of "What the Captain Means" appears to have been damaged. There were two attempts to supply an introduction to replace the missing first lines. The only version of the recording currently on the Web has the less common "here in Cam Rahn Bay, where the sewer meets the sea" [introduction](#). The more popular version, which describes an interview with a "[shy unassuming Phantom pilot](#)," is available on the Web in text only.

4. An excellent discussion of the relationship between popular song and military occupational folksong in wartime can be found in Les Cleveland's "Singing Warriors: Popular Songs in Wartime."

5. For a more complete discussion of these songs, see Lydia Fish, "[General Edward G. Lansdale and the Songs of Americans in the Vietnam War](#)," JAF, 102 (1989): 390-412 and "[Songs of the Air Force in the Vietnam War](#)."

5 The tapes and manuscripts on which this paper is based are part of the archives of the Vietnam Veterans Oral History and Folklore Project (<http://faculty.buffalostate.edu/fishlm/folksongs>) The men and women who contributed these and who untiringly answered my questions are too numerous to name here, but I would like to give special thanks to Roger Steffens, Steve Robbins, Doc Ball, Steve Brown, Bob Morecook, and Alexis Muellner for their tapes and information about AFVN and to Ann Kelsey and Rick Holen, who generously shared their research on CMTS. Also to Les Cleveland, for his invaluable insights about the relationship between folklore and popular culture in wartime.

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[Back](#)

*New Directions in Folklore* 7 2003

[Newfolk](#) :: [NDF](#) :: [Archive](#) :: [Issue 7](#) :: [Page 1](#) :: Page 2

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