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SPECIAL VETERANS EDITION

# ECHOES FROM VIETNAM

50 years ago, Tet Offensive changed conflict's course



ON SALE THROUGH 5/14

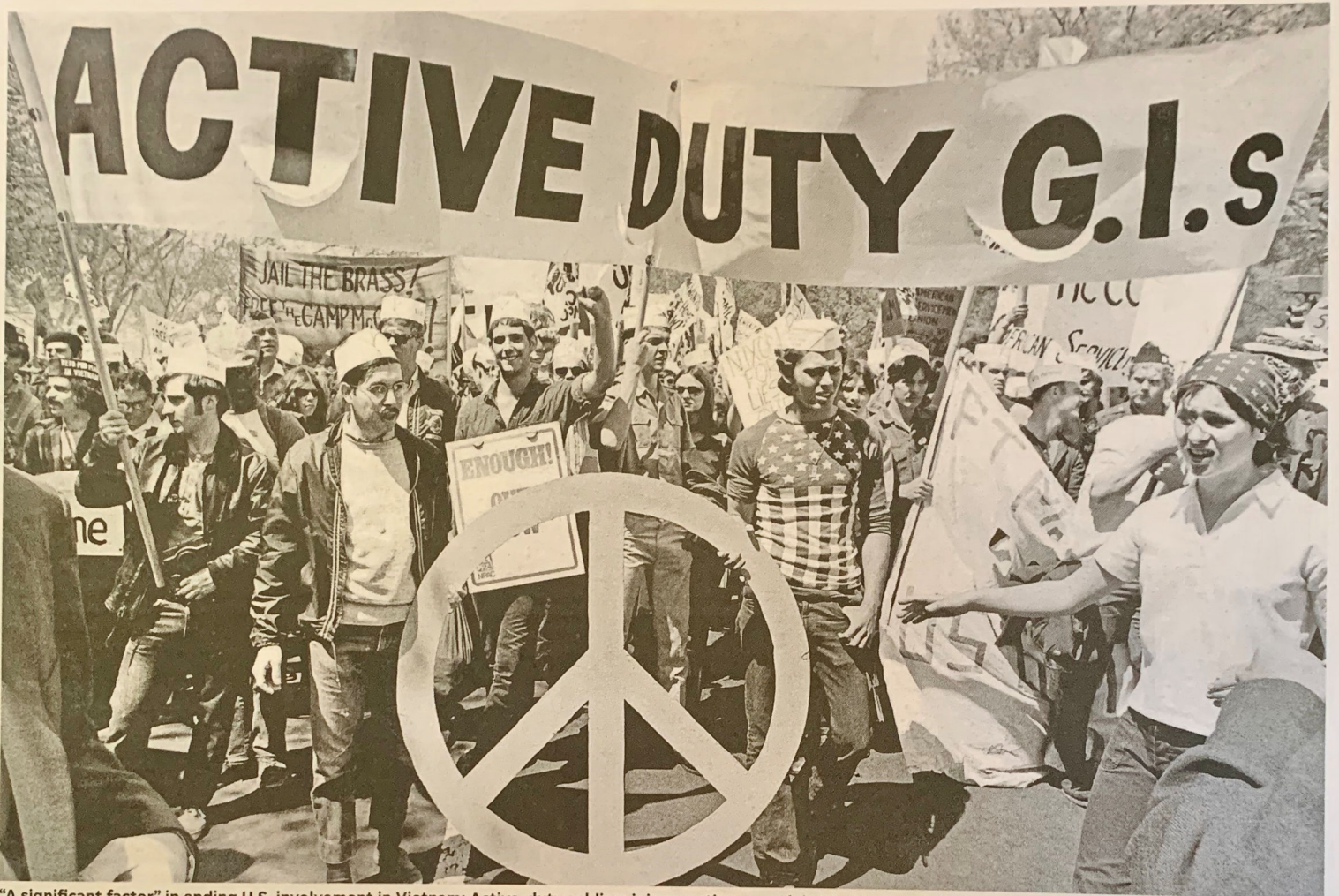
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PBS

**REMEMBRANCES FROM THE WAR:  
VETS, FAMILY, FRIENDS SHARE**





"A significant factor" in ending U.S. involvement in Vietnam: Active-duty soldiers join an antiwar march in Washington, D.C., in April 1971. DAVID FENTON, GETTY IMAGES

# GIs provided powerful voices against the war

Hippies made the history books, but servicemembers risked prison

Thomas Maresca Special to USA TODAY

HO CHI MINH CITY — Jeff Roy remembers the exact moment he began turning against the Vietnam War. ■ The Minnesota native had been a radio operator coordinating airstrikes, but he asked to be transferred into the field so he could take part in the fighting firsthand. ■ On a hillside near the border with Laos, his gung-ho attitude started to change. Roy says he was deeply shaken by the indifference among him and his comrades toward a North Vietnamese soldier who had been shot in the stomach and was dying. ■ "I thought at the moment: 'What would his mother and father be thinking right now, realizing that he's just lying there suffering?'" Roy says. "We're sitting there, we're talking, we're



smoking, we're laughing. What does that mean about me as a human being? What does that mean about my fellow Marines?"

Roy would eventually return state-side, where he started working with other servicemembers actively questioning and protesting the war. He and other enlisted men played a key, and often overlooked, role in the antiwar movement.

Beyond the familiar images of students and hippies marching in the streets, the actions of military personnel had a profound effect in helping end the war, says David Cortright, a Vietnam veteran who came to oppose the war. Today he is a professor at the University of Notre Dame and author of *Soldiers in Revolt*.

"The resistance in the military was a significant factor in urging U.S. political leaders to withdraw troops and to end the war," he says. "Because we were in the military and some were combat veterans, we had a kind of authority to speak on the issue that couldn't be dismissed."

Cortright says the day-to-day functioning of the troops in the field began to fall apart, and servicemembers began actively disobeying orders in a war they felt was unjust and meaningless.

"People don't understand today what it was like. By 1969 and 1970, there were massive numbers of soldiers going AWOL; there was resistance among many troops."

Roy, Cortright and dozens of other veterans returned to Vietnam in March to mark the 50th anniversary of the My Lai massacre and launch an exhibition at the War Remnants Museum in Ho Chi Minh City called "Waging Peace."

The exhibition, curated by longtime civil rights activist Ron Carver, features rare photo archives, testimonials and copies of underground newspapers that proliferated around military bases and coffeehouses during the war. The exhibition will move to Notre Dame in May.

"No one had any idea that (the antiwar movement) would grow the way it did," Carver says. "It started with isolated incidents of resistance by people of conscience, but it grew into a movement."

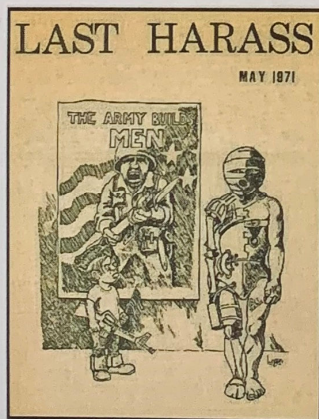
The message was spread in part by more than 300 antiwar newspapers published by active-duty troops and veterans with names such as *Gigline* and *Up Against the Bulkhead*.

"I see the GI underground press as the equivalent of our social media today," Carver says. "They were spreading the word in almost real time."

For some, opposition to the war grew out of experiences in it. Others, such as J.J. Johnson, now 72, began questioning the war before they shipped out.



Military prisoners sing *We Shall Overcome* during a protest at the Presidio Army post in San Francisco on Oct. 14, 1968. The protest, which Army leaders deemed a mutiny, drew attention to opposition to the Vietnam War among GIs. WILLIAM SHORT



"The equivalent of our social media today": The May 1971 issue of *Last Harass*, an underground antiwar newspaper published by GIs for Peace.

Johnson was one of the first active-duty GIs to refuse to go to Vietnam. He was drafted in December 1965. While undergoing communications training, he and a few other soldiers began a study group.

"I was almost agnostic about the war," Johnson says. "I didn't know a lot about it." After studying, however, he concluded that the war was "illegal, immoral and unjust." Johnson and two fellow privates refused orders to ship out to Vietnam. They became known as the Fort Hood Three, after their post in Texas.

They were court-martialed in September 1966 and spent 28 months in prison.

For many Vietnamese who attended the "Waging Peace" exhibition, the size and scope of the GI-led peace movement also came as a surprise.

"This is the first time I've heard the stories from the U.S. veterans' side of the antiwar movement," says Nguyen Thi Bich Ha, 50. "It's very moving. I can see

how the war affected both sides. I think everybody lost."

Nguyen Ngoc Hung, 70, a North Vietnamese soldier during the war, says he was aware of the antiwar movement in the U.S. and Europe but did not hear about the soldiers' involvement in it until much later.

"As a soldier, you just listen to orders," he says. "But when you stand up and say, 'I will not accept it because my conscience tells me that I should not do it,' that is important. It certainly played a part in helping to stop the war."

Ton Nu Thi Ninh, a former Vietnamese ambassador to the European Union, says antiwar efforts among U.S. troops deserve to be more fully recognized.

"A peace movement in general is precious," she says. "The peace movement among the veterans and the active-duty soldiers is even more precious because they had to risk so much. It's important to remember their lesson and build on it for the future."