

Helmet Graffiti, Soldier Expression,
and Institutional Tolerance in the Vietnam War

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Introduction

On a night outside Da Nang, amidst the Vietnam War, the phrase “Teenage Killer” popped into the head of American SSGT Russell C. Fordham after a bottle of “Panther piss.” Fordham recalled hearing as a recruit in Marine boot camp that Eleanor Roosevelt called Marines “over-sexed, under-paid, teenage killers.” With a Magic Marker, Fordham promptly scribbled “Teenage Killer” on the side of his M1 helmet.¹ The attribution to Eleanor Roosevelt was a boot-camp legend circulating among recruits; no evidence exists that she ever made the remark. The phrase belonged to the vernacular culture of the ranks.

The graffiti was a violation of official uniform rules. When he was eventually asked to remove the cover of his helmet, Fordham ignored the order. He was given non-judicial punishment under Article 15. Nevertheless, his graffiti went entirely unregulated during daily jungle patrols early on, and he was only “asked to make [himself] scarce” when photographers were around.² Hence, Fordham was not punished for violating uniform rules by

decorating his helmet. Rather, his punishment came from his disobedience of the order to remove his marked helmet cover. This implies his rule violation only became punishable when it challenged command authority.

During the Vietnam War, it was not uncommon to find U.S. soldiers adorning their M1 helmets with graffiti ranging from patriotic promises to peace signs. The M1 helmet was the combat headgear that was issued to U.S. forces throughout the war. Some soldiers turned these headgear into personal statements by drawing on the helmet covers or decorating the helmet bands used to secure the Mitchell covers and hold small items like mosquito repellents and LSA lubricant.³ However, formal U.S. military formally treated any unauthorized marking of government-issued equipment as punishable or defacement on government-issued combat equipment, including M1 helmets and their Mitchell pattern cloth covers. Soldiers caught drawing slogans, imagery, or personal insignia on their headgear face penalties under Article 15 or formal criminal charges for destruction of military property under Article 108.⁴

Graffiti can be defined as any form of unauthorized communicative expression—encompassing scribbles, writing, pictures, drawings, or paintings—that appears on surfaces within public spaces or on public property.⁵ When conventional avenues for expression are limited by social norms or personal restrictions, graffiti becomes a channel for voicing suppressed feelings, thoughts, affections, personal announcements, or even political declarations. The power of graffiti often lies in its nature as a sudden visual intervention that is encountered unexpectedly rather than as part of a conventional authored work. Furthermore, graffiti frequently serves as a symbol of revolt against societal authorities, sometimes even being viewed as an act of destruction. The illicit or unauthorized aspect of graffiti is crucial because these expressions occupy spaces belonging to others and remain partially unclaimed by both artists and conventional institutions.⁶

The Vietnam War provides a unique context for the phenomenon of helmet graffiti and many other artifacts carrying historical memory of this era. A large proportion of the US troops consisted of young men—often poor,

working-class, or African American—drafted or enlisted directly from high school without choice.⁷ American combat troops in Vietnam were strikingly young—popular memory fixes their average age at nineteen,⁸ though Defense Department casualty records put it closer to twenty-three,⁹ still several years younger than the twenty-six average of World War II.¹⁰ Many lacked the voting rights that, until the Twenty-Sixth Amendment was ratified in 1971,¹¹ would have granted them a voice in the very mission they were sent to enforce. These soldiers entered a geographically and culturally alien environment—Vietnam’s hot, humid climate, watery fields, dense jungles, and unfamiliar villages¹²—where discipline inspections became difficult and incomprehensible. They faced an enemy employing guerrilla tactics and battled constant fear, anxiety, and frustration punctuated by moments of intense terror rather than large-scale battles.¹³ Declining morale amongst the US troops increasingly caused unwillingness to engage in combat and widespread resistance, from “sandbagging” (patrolling in a manner designed to avoid contact while reporting otherwise) to outright combat refusals, on an unprecedented scale.¹⁴

Facing the widespread blatant violations of military regulations, the fact that frontline commanders repeatedly chose leniency rather than crackdowns raises the central questions: why did a military institution that formally criminalizes helmet graffiti tolerate this practice across combat zones? What unspoken boundaries separated acceptable helmet graffiti from punishable violation of law? Who delineated these boundaries, and what exchange existed between commanders and rank-and-file troops that justified the self-expression of the troops? To answer this question, this paper seeks to argue that frontline officers exercised calibrated discretionary authority to tolerate limited helmet graffiti. This calibrated tolerance functioned as an informal trade-off: a sliver of permitted self-expression, exchanged for continued obedience from a conscript army teetering on breakdown. This bargain manifested as a set of shared limits visible through consistent patterns of selective enforcement.

I. The Military Institution

On paper, the US military constructed a framework that included all GI equipment as state-owned assets subject to uniformity. Article 108 of the Uniform Code of Military Justice (UCMJ) criminalized the damage, defacement, or unauthorized alteration of federal military property.¹⁵ Even fabric helmet covers, which are designed to be interchangeable and washable, fall under this regulatory umbrella, meaning there is no clear textual exemption for hand-drawn personal markings.

The ideological foundation of the ban on personal expression such as graffiti lies in the operational logic of the military as a classic total institution defined by American sociologist Erving Goffman. Total institutions function through the systematic “mortification” of the self:¹⁶ standardized processing strips incoming recruits of all personal identifiers, unique clothing, private possessions, and individual bodily autonomy to erase civilian identity and forge a collective military persona. Training rituals such as haircuts, identical issued uniforms, serial number identification, and the prohibition of certain bodily self-expression are designed to create a sense of order and subordination of individual desires to

institutional demands. The uniformity of issued equipment extended this erasure of self to the objects a soldier carried: every item was government property, standardized and interchangeable, and the individual soldier was a temporary custodian.

Marine Corps training during the Vietnam era actively sought to suppress individuality and create soldiers whose primary identity was defined by institutional belonging. In the memoir “A Rumor of War” by Philip Caputo, a former U.S. Marine Corps second lieutenant and platoon leader in the Vietnam War, he described his experience at the Marines boot camp where drafted men were subject to “monastic isolation” in which a total commitment to the doctrines and values of the Marine “society” is essential. Caputo and his fellow men were “shouted at, kicked, humiliated and harassed constantly” and referred to as derogatory terms such as “shitbird,” “scumbag” or “numbnuts” instead of their names in their drills.¹⁷ The purpose of this ordeal was to instill not just discipline and teamwork, but a conditioned reflex of “obeying orders instantly and in unison without thinking.” As Caputo notes, the individuals within each platoon had been

reduced to a collective machine in which they were “merely parts.”¹⁸ More so, the Marine Corps sought to reshape recruits’ identities through intense psychological conditioning. Caputo described this process of indoctrination through the ritual chanting they routinely practiced:

We had to chant slogans while running: “Hut-two-three-four, I love the Marine Corps.” And before meals: “Sir, the United States Marines; since 1775, the most invincible fighting force in the history of man. Gung ho! Gung ho! Gung ho! Pray for war!” Like the slogans of revolutionaries, these look ludicrous in print, but when recited in unison by a hundred voices, they have a weird, hypnotic effect on a man. The psychology of the mob, of the Bund rally, takes command of his will and he finds himself shouting that nonsense even though he knows it is nonsense. In time, he begins to believe that he really does love the Marine Corps, that it is invincible, and that there is nothing improper in praying for war, the event in which the Corps periodically has justified its existence and achieved its apotheosis.¹⁹

By erasing possibilities of forming independent second thoughts and judgement at orders through vicious training, humiliation, and indoctrination, the individuality and the personhood of the soldier is intended to be erased and replaced by internalized institutional values of the Marine Corps.²⁰

More so, the psychological conditioning of the Marine Corps sought to redefine the individual's understanding of self-worth and align personal aspirations with the desire to embody the ideals of a Marine. Caputo, reflecting upon himself retrospectively, concluded that he was motivated by the desire to prove himself as a “legitimate” member of the Marine Corps' “machismo” culture.²¹ He was willing to risk his life for “a few favorable remarks in a fitness report.”²² This demonstrates how military institutions achieve conformity by reinforcing values surrounding identities that encourage individuals to discipline themselves according to institutional expectations.

Despite fierce procedures to create conformity within the military, institutionalization did not eliminate individual identity entirely. As for attempts at defacing government property like helmets, whether a helmet's painted text qualified as punishable by UCMJ existed entirely at the discretion of unit commanding officers. As the Court of Appeals for the Armed Forces reaffirmed in *United States v. Daniels* (2002), the word "damage" must be reasonably construed to mean "any change in the condition of the property which impairs its operational readiness."²³ A slogan inked on a cloth helmet cover rarely impaired a helmet's protective function, which helps explain why frontline commanders possessed genuine legal latitude: they could plausibly judge most graffiti as outside the statute's reach rather than as violations they chose to ignore.

Contrary to criminal statutes like Article 108, Article 15 establishes a layer of discretionary power that makes the informal tolerance of helmet graffiti permissible. This administrative punishment framework grants unit commanders full authority to decide whether minor infractions merit reprimand, fines, or extra duty, with no mandate to penalize every technical

violation.²⁴ The rulebook forbids helmet marking, but it does not require officers to punish every instance they encounter. The apparent leniency observed across Vietnam's frontlines could be interpreted as the intentional exercise of discretionary power granted by UCMJ to officers who wielded them depending on the necessity of punishment in the situation.

Moreover, neither the Marine Corps nor the Army defined compliance in strictly measurable terms. In Marine Corps Order (MCO) P1020.34, though actions like chewing gum, tobacco, having hands in pockets “detract from an appropriate military presence,²⁵” the application of policy “in the field environment” was governed by “good judgement.²⁶” As for uniforms, whether uniform alterations conformed to “the spirit and intent” of regulations and the “intended appearance or function of the garment” was vague and could be left to the commanders’ interpretation.²⁷ These definitional looseness widened the discretionary space created by UCMJ Articles 108 and 15 and officers to make their own judgements of markings that offended a regulation’s purposes of camouflage, uniformity, and discipline.

The enforcement of military regulations in Vietnam depended not only on formal rules issued by the armed forces but also on the hierarchical structure through which those rules were interpreted and applied. During the Vietnam War, Marine and Army units operated through a layered command system in which authority flowed from higher headquarters to small combat units. A typical infantry organization consisted of a company commanded by a captain, divided into platoons led by lieutenants, which were further organized into squads generally led by sergeants or corporals. While senior officers established operational policies, everyday discipline was largely carried out at the small-unit level by platoon leaders, noncommissioned officers (NCOs), and company commanders who directly interacted with enlisted soldiers.²⁸ Therefore, the question of whether a soldier was punished for a minor violation such as helmet graffiti was rarely determined by distant military authorities. Rather, it depended primarily on the judgment of immediate commanders and NCOs responsible for maintaining discipline within their units.

Caputo also recalled in “A Rumor of War” an instance where the Bravo Company was ordered to assist a marine reconnaissance patrol outnumbered by the Viet Cong (VC). As the company prepared for immediate deployment, a staff officer from the regiment halted the column upon noticing that the Marines were not wearing flak jackets and ordered them back to their tents. Lieutenant Colonel Bain, the battalion commander, erupted at what he called the “chicken-shit staff officers who care more about uniform regulations than about helping Marines in trouble.”²⁹ The disagreement between the staff officer and Colonel Bain illustrates the disagreements commanders have within military discipline: the practical enforcement depended on commanders’ interpretations of battlefield priorities and did not always align with regulations on paper that controlled soldiers’ behavior and equipment.

This discretion must be understood against the wartime loosening of uniform enforcement: by the late 1960s, the Army’s discipline crisis had made strict grooming and uniform standards an increasingly low priority for combat units. Only after the war—through the Vietnamization-era

drawdown and the transition to the all-volunteer force in 1973—did the military re-tighten standards and rebuild the authority of the NCO corps. The clause “Wearing of civilian decorations and jewelry” alongside the main text of the 1975 edition of the Army’s AR 670-5 (Uniforms and Insignia)³⁰, for example, is longer and far more granular with specifications that were not mentioned in the 1968 edition published during wartime.³¹ The clause “1-5. Wearing of civilian decorations and jewelry” introduced explicit new prohibitions on fad medallions, talismans, and personal amulets in 1975; such categories were entirely unmentioned in the 1968 version of Army Regulation.³² The expanded granular language of the post-war Army Regulation represents a deliberate toughening of appearance standards that eliminate the unregulated gray zones of self-expression permitted during the Vietnam combat era. Thus, officers’ tolerance of helmet graffiti could be understood as a rational ordering of priorities under wartime conditions which was reversed only when it could again afford strictness. Lenient and ambiguous wording in wartime uniform regulations left room for officer-soldier negotiation possible under UCMJ Article 108 and 15,

including for graffitiing helmets, and allowed officers to put priority on combat and survival instead of uniform discipline.

II. Conditions of Negotiation

Although the U.S. military formally maintained strict regulations governing soldiers' appearance, equipment, and behavior, the Vietnam War created conditions in which the everyday enforcement of these rules became increasingly complex.

One major factor that complicated military discipline during the Vietnam War was that the United States relied on a permanent peacetime conscript army rather than the temporary wartime mobilization characteristic of previous conflicts. The Selective Service Act of 1948 reestablished nationwide peacetime conscription that was continuously enforced throughout most of the Vietnam War until 1973.³³ Unlike during the world wars where drafted soldiers were absorbed into a national emergency and

released after victory, the postwar Army integrated drafted civilians into permanent military formations alongside career soldiers so that a large standing army was maintained during the Cold War.

In other words, the Vietnam Army was composed largely of civilians who were temporarily converted into soldiers. The draft quotas were initially low, with only 11% of soldiers on active duty coming in through conscription in 1964.³⁴ Thus, deferments allowed many eligible men to avoid service through excuses such as marriage, college education, or equally important careers.³⁵ As a result, the burden of conscription fell disproportionately heavier on lower-income Americans and racial minorities.³⁶ Many were teenagers or barely beyond adolescence when they entered service; the average American combat soldier in Vietnam was significantly younger than the average soldier of World War II. Historian Christian Appy confirms in *Working-Class War: American Combat Soldiers and Vietnam* that the Vietnam War was disproportionately fought by young working-class Americans for whom college was not a realistic choice and who were unaware of easier ways to evade the draft than foreign exile or

imprisonment. Furthermore, drafted soldiers are more likely to be deployed to infantry units in Vietnam as a forced decision because they had little control over their assignments.³⁷

The short-term nature of Vietnam service was further reinforced by the Army's rotation policy, which rotated soldiers through Vietnam on one-year tours (13 months for Marines) after completing basic and follow-on training. To finish their two-year commitment, upon their return from Vietnam, they usually had around eight months of further mandatory service, which is insufficient for them to be of much use to his gaining unit.³⁸ Those with few months of service in Vietnam remaining are referred to as "short timers." This constant movement meant that units in Vietnam were composed of soldiers at different stages of their deployment: newly arrived green replacements, experienced troops, and "short-timers" preparing to leave Vietnam who often lay low and shirk hazardous duty.³⁹ The rotation policy ensured a continuing supply of low-quality, inexperienced officers in combat units. Major Richard A. Gabriel and Lt. Col. Paul L. Savage wrote *in Crisis in Command: Mismanagement in the Army* that the rotation policies operative

in Vietnam foreclosed the possibility of establishing fighting units with a sense of identity, morale, cohesiveness, unit integrity and responsibility.⁴⁰

The vastly young, naive American men who grew up consuming the romanticized heroism of their fathers in the world wars, who bought relics of their fathers' history of taking down "the Japs and Krauts⁴¹" and constantly fantasized bravery and heroism, encountered a reality "completely at odds with the official justifications of the war presented by American policymakers."⁴² Though many men arrived in Vietnam believing they had been sent to stop communism and to help the people of South Vietnam preserve democracy, their experiences fundamentally contradicted those explanations. While they were told their mission was to protect Vietnamese soldiers from aggression, they learned in combat that the central US policy in Vietnam was to maximize the body count with complete neglect for the civilian-combatant distinction of the Vietnamese deaths⁴³. Unlike conventional conflicts characterized by clearly defined battle lines and large-scale engagements, Vietnam was primarily a counterinsurgency war fought through patrols, ambushes, and small-unit

operations⁴⁴. American infantry units operated in unfamiliar environments characterized by dense jungle terrain, hidden enemy movements, and constant uncertainty. Facing an extremely elusive enemy, the majority of American infantrymen's deaths in Vietnam were caused by enemy ambushes, enemy booby traps and mines, or their own side's bombs, shells, and bullets.⁴⁵

Perceiving the war as meaningless and dire, some threw themselves into war and detached the political purpose from their duties, while others engaged as little in the war as possible through various means of avoiding or resisting combat.⁴⁶ By the later years of the Vietnam War, declining morale made rigid enforcement of regulations increasingly difficult. Morris Janowitz assessed in the journal *Foreign Affairs* in 1972 that widespread dissatisfaction and a legitimacy crisis among American troops and the military establishment developed through the impact of Vietnam, racial tensions, extensive drug use, corruption, loss of command and operational effectiveness, and widespread anti-military sentiments.⁴⁷ In 1970, *Newsweek* wrote of "the New GI" who opposed the war, embraced the counterculture, and identified with protest politics⁴⁸. Soldiers expressed resistance through

various forms, including protests, underground GI newspapers, refusal to participate in certain operations, desertion, and instances of violence against officers and fellow soldiers known as “fragging.” Cortright reports that the number of fraggings rose from 126 fraggings in 1969 to 333 in 1971, while the total number of American troops in Vietnam dropped from over 500,000 to under 200,000. 80 percent of the victims of reported fragging were officers and NCOs.⁴⁹ “Not since the Civil War,” stated the Washington Post in 1971, “has the Army been so torn by rebellion.”⁵⁰

These developments created a security dilemma for military leaders. Discipline was essential for maintaining an effective army, but excessive punishment could further damage the already fragile relationships between officers and enlisted personnel. A commander who responded to every minor violation with maximum severity risked creating resentment and weakening cooperation within the unit. In specific instances, such as on the frontline where Caputo described the reaction of Colonel Bain in *A Rumor of War*, ensuring survival and soldiers’ willingness to carry out dangerous missions were often more urgent than enforcing regulations concerning appearance.⁵¹ Therefore, officers had to determine which violations

genuinely threatened military order and which could be tolerated without undermining authority. Helmet graffiti existed within this interpretation space: although officially prohibited, commanders often evaluated it according to whether it affected camouflage, discipline, or the willingness of soldiers to perform their duties.

III. Negotiating the Boundary

Negotiations between military authority and soldier autonomy were not exclusive to loosening appearance regulations and allowing love beads and peace signs. Throughout the later years of the Vietnam War, in response to declining morale and the psychological pressures of combat, some officers tolerated or even facilitated practices that technically conflicted with official regulations when they believed such compromises preserved unit effectiveness.

A clear demonstration of this negotiation can be seen in the change of official response to drug use among US soldiers. Drug use became increasingly widespread among American troops in Vietnam, particularly during periods away from combat. According to a 1971 report by the Department of Defense, 51 percent of the armed forces had smoked marijuana, 31 percent had used psychedelics, such as LSD, mescaline and psilocybin mushrooms, and 28 percent had taken hard drugs, such as cocaine and heroin.⁵²

Unauthorized drug use was formally treated as a serious military offense punishable under the Uniform Code of Military Justice by imprisonment, dishonorable discharge, and forfeiting allowances.⁵³ When the Army began clamping down on marijuana usage by arresting roughly 1000 G.I.s per week for marijuana possession and destroying native marijuana-growing fields, many G.I.s shifted their drug use to heroin, which was odorless and thus harder to detect.⁵⁴ The scale of heroin consumption forced commanders to eventually introduce an amnesty program that allowed soldiers to voluntarily identify themselves as users and receive rehabilitation rather

than receiving immediate punishment. Nevertheless, few soldiers asked for amnesty because they feared that declaring themselves users could still result in punishment from noncommissioned officers or commanding officers after returning to their units.⁵⁵

The inability of traditional punishment alone to resolve widespread drug use pushed commanders toward systematic detection and rehabilitation to maintain military effectiveness. On June 22, 1971, the Army implemented the Free Radical Assay Technique (FRAT) and required soldiers departing Vietnam to undergo urine testing for recent heroin use. Soldiers who failed to pass FRAT were placed in involuntary treatment centers, but they focused primarily on avoiding detection and passing future urine tests rather than addressing their drug dependency. While FRAT testing created sufficient anxiety to reduce some occasional users, the remaining population became increasingly composed of heavier users, with some rehabilitation units reporting that a significant proportion of patients were “mainliners” who inject heroin intravenously.⁵⁶ Studies commissioned by the White House Special Action Office for Drug Abuse Prevention

(SAODAP) found that roughly one in five enlisted returnees reported having been addicted to narcotics in Vietnam.⁵⁷

Officials commented that the actual scope of the impact of drug use in the military is minimal. However, Harvard psychiatrist Norman E. Zinberg, writing in the New York Times magazine on the above story in December 1971, criticized how the Army tried first stamping out marijuana, then trying to stamp out heroin. Rather, a more effective institutional response may have been to acknowledge the complexity and scale of drug abuse and adapt regulations to soldiers' lived realities through negotiation.⁵⁸

Realizing the adverse effects of harsh absolute institutional punishment, one army commanding officer commented that he would "buy all the marijuana and hashish in the Delta as a present" if his troops could give up hard drugs.⁵⁹ Additionally, officers themselves were complicit in contributing to substance abuse of the soldiers. Officers commonly prescribed amphetamines to boost performance and sedatives to help relieve anxiety and prevent mental breakdowns but later contributed to withdrawal

symptoms.⁶⁰ Through such interactions, commanders learned to apply rules selectively according to whether violations threatened effectiveness. Helmet graffiti existed within the same institutional tension between formal regulation and practical accommodation.

French philosopher Michel Foucault proposes in his 1975 book *Discipline and Punish* that disciplinary power operates through a combination of observation, classification, and “normalizing judgement.” The purpose of discipline is not to identify violations and use punishment, but to classify and treat individuals according to their degree of compliance with institutional norms.⁶¹ Applied to helmet graffiti, this suggests that commanders were not necessarily confronted with a simple choice between enforcing or ignoring regulations; instead, they evaluated whether particular markings were acceptable assertions of individuality or disruptions to military order. Therefore, the key mechanism for allowing helmet graffiti from the officer perspective is not whether they enforced or ignored regulations, but how they determined the boundary between

acceptable personal expression and punishable challenges to military authority.

Officer tolerance of helmet graffiti was shaped along three dividing lines: the geographic location, the content, and the visibility of helmet art.

First, the intensity of regulatory enforcement is divided clearly by zone. Rear-echelon units operating near safe base compounds maintained strict adherence to uniform standards through conducting regular inspections that punished helmet graffiti. Rear bases had accessible command oversight and minimal immediate combat risk, which allowed military bureaucracy to enforce discipline. By contrast, infantry units engaged in continuous jungle warfare on the frontlines abandoned rigid appearance oversight almost entirely. The unpredictable, dangerous terrains of the Vietnam jungle rendered consistent inspection practically impossible, while the constant threat of mortal danger directed officers' priorities away from discipline of appearance and toward survival and safety. As for soldiers, according to recounts of Hospital Corpsman Master Chief Ronald C. Mosbaugh, soldiers

on the frontlines rarely worried about receiving punishments because they were “already in Vietnam.” That is, being punished for defacing property is no longer a threat when survival is their only consideration.⁶² Michael Herr confirms in *Dispatches* that the frontline soldiers, or “grunts,” were “hip to” and “savored” “the madness, the bitterness, the horror and doom” of war because “it was no more insane than most of what was going down” while having its own “refracted logic.”⁶³ Many grunts would completely ignore even the wartime nuances in uniform regulations to write the extremely subversive “Eat the apple, fuck the Corps” on their helmets, flak jackets, or even tattoo them specifically for their officers to see.⁶⁴ Nevertheless, officers tended to have much higher tolerance for helmet graffiti on the frontlines than in garrison.

Second, the specific content of helmet art is subject to different levels of tolerance. According to recounts from Vietnam veterans, as long as graffiti did not interfere with the purpose of camouflage in combat and did not disparage the Marines, the United States, or the chain of command, graffiti was usually tolerated on the frontlines in any place or manner. Thus,

personal monikers, hometowns, tributes to loved ones, neutral comments or quotes, and anti-war one-liners with no direct institutional blame fell within acceptable bounds. In fact, many officers participated in this self-expression to graffiti their own helmets.⁶⁵ Battery Commander of C Btry 1/21 Steve Russell recalls himself writing “Frodo Lives” on his helmet after reading *Lord of the Rings* from a care package, and infantry company commander John Alexander Hottell wrote on the right side of his helmet the words of the first two verses in German to the German tank song *Das Panzerlied*.⁶⁶

Third, visibility of the helmet graffiti determined the enforcement of discipline as much as the content. Instead of asking soldiers to eliminate the graffiti or change the helmet cover, officers prioritized keeping helmet graffiti out of public media. Soldiers who wrote graffiti on their helmets are instructed to stay away from journalists or photographers.⁶⁷ Nevertheless, the existence and the number of helmet graffiti photojournalism suggests otherwise—the enforcement of these rules appears to have been lax, perhaps particularly as the war dragged on and morale declined. The exhaustion and disillusionment of American soldiers later in the conflict could have

contributed to an atmosphere where minor acts of disobedience were tolerated or overlooked.

Taken together, these conditions are the frontline commanders' considerations for whether helmet graffiti could be permitted. Graffiti is allowed only if it existed on the frontlines and remained non-subversive, maintained camouflage, and was invisible to external civilian media. Any marking crossing one of these lines risked receiving non-judicial punishment under Article 15 if commanders interpreted the act as violating existing regulations.

Given the gradual decline in morale among American soldiers in Vietnam, one may question whether tolerance of helmet graffiti expanded as the war dragged on. Although journalistic photographs appear to contain possibly more examples of graffitied helmets as the war progressed, the increasing visibility of helmet graffiti in visual records cannot automatically be interpreted as evidence of increasing institutional acceptance. The apparent growth may also reflect changes in documentation practices, including

increased presence of combat photographers, greater media attention toward the soldier experience, or higher survival rates of photographic archives from the later stages of the war. Therefore, rather than measuring tolerance through the frequency of surviving images alone, it is more appropriate to examine the conditions under which commanders exercised discretion and the boundaries they maintained.

However, the institutional environment that produced this negotiation was temporary. The end of the draft system fundamentally altered the relationship between soldiers and the military institution. The transition toward an all-volunteer force began under the Nixon administration, following the recommendations of the President's Commission on an All-Volunteer Armed Force: the last induction calls went out in December 1972, draft authority expired on June 30, 1973, and the Selective Service System lapsed into standby status.⁶⁸ Although political legitimacy, economic efficiency, and public opposition to compulsory service were the primary reasons for why the draft ended,⁶⁹ the discipline problems associated with

Vietnam gave rise to broader concerns within military leadership about the sustainability of the existing system.

The end of conscription, however, should not be interpreted as a direct consequence of soldier resistance. Rather, Vietnam-era discipline problems formed only one component of a larger institutional crisis. Helmet graffiti, more specifically, brings up discussion of the conditions under which informal exemption from institutional law became necessary. The post-Vietnam US military raised its standards of discipline following the creation of the all-volunteer force,⁷⁰ enhanced the authority of NCOs in the chain of command,⁷¹ and sustained the formal ban on defacing equipment like helmets through UCMJ. Whether similar forms of tolerance continued in later conflicts falls beyond the scope of this study.

As for soldiers, they often considered a commander's "man-to-man way of meting out punishment⁷²" more preferable to the "impersonal retribution" of UCMJ⁷³ because it allowed soldiers to avoid official disciplinary records that could damage their rank or future promotions. This informal system preserved the authority of commanders while preventing minor infractions

from becoming larger disciplinary problems. Therefore, helmet graffiti is the product of a historically specific moment that emerged because commanders temporarily recalibrated discipline in response to extraordinary wartime pressures. The graffiti on soldiers' helmets is the visible trace of this negotiation.

IV. The Soldier's Side of the Bargain

Whether it was a war pledge or a peace sign, the act of graffitiing the helmet was itself significant. The M1 helmet was issued identically to thousands of soldiers as a standardized piece of military equipment, but its meaning could change through individual experience. Bill Moran of the 199th Light Infantry Brigade recalled that throughout much of his deployment from October 1969 to October 1970, he rarely wore his helmet except at night, mainly using it to protect himself from rain. It was only later, when he became a "short-timer" approaching the end of his service, that the helmet became a more constant companion.⁷⁴ The fact that Moran spoke from the perspective of his own helmet demonstrates the personal

significance soldiers attached to standardized equipment during combat.

The helmet was one of the most personal items of issued equipment alongside uniforms, rifles, boots, and dog tags; thus, to mark it was to reclaim, on government property, a small territory of self. Most soldiers who decorated their helmets intended no challenge to the system. These small, intimate markings of personhood are what total institutions can never fully eliminate.

As German political scientist Gerhard Kümmer argues in “Military Identity and Identity Within the Military,” military training and organizational culture can never fully eliminate individual resistance⁷⁵. While some extreme cases of resistance such as fragging, defection, and mutiny have far-reaching consequences, most soldiers only maintain minor forms of opposition such as unofficial rituals that allow them to negotiate their relationship with military expectations.⁷⁶ Helmet graffiti represents exactly such a practice, for it was a small ritual through which soldiers modified the meaning of their assigned equipment and maintained connections between their civilian selves and military identities. This relationship between

institutional control and individual adaptation resembles what sociologist Erving Goffman describes as “secondary adjustments”—“practices which do not directly challenge staff management but which allow inmates to obtain disallowed satisfactions or allowed ones by disallowed means.⁷⁷” These practices do not seek to overthrow institutional authority; as Goffman observes, “our sense of selfhood can arise through the little ways in which we resist the pull... our sense of personal identity often resides in the cracks.⁷⁸”

Soldiers in the Vietnam War found numerous ways to express themselves, often using whatever materials or methods were available to them in the challenging environment. The underground GI press of the Vietnam era was produced mainly by active-duty GIs, recently discharged veterans, and deserters.⁷⁹ These publications provided a collective expression of dissent and critique, but they were unable to capture the experiences of individual soldiers directly in combat. Aside from expressing their attitudes through growing longer hair, wearing peace buttons, smoking, and drinking, other significant means of self-expression used by soldiers were wartime letters,

diaries, and oral histories narrated on personal websites or in archives dedicated to the memory of the war. Soldiers also personalized other parts of their gear such as uniforms, utility patches, bags,⁸⁰ and graffitied public spaces such as latrines⁸¹. The same phrases could therefore exist across different material contexts, revealing how soldiers used available surfaces as rhetorical spaces. For example, similar slogans appeared both in public spaces such as Saigon latrines (“This is a war of the unwilling/Led by the unqualified/Dying for the ungrateful”)⁸² and on personal military equipment such as helmets (shortened to “UUUU,” meaning the unwilling, led by the unqualified, doing the unnecessary for the ungrateful)⁸³ and Zippo lighters.⁸⁴ However, the meaning of the phrase shifted according to its location. On a helmet, the slogan became attached to an individual body, which erases the anonymity of the graffiti otherwise preserved on a latrine wall. Among these means of self-expression, helmet graffiti is a particularly prominent form because of its relative abundance of existing literature and firsthand documentation in photographs, museum collections, and veteran recollections. Hospital Corpsman Master Chief Ronald C. Mosbaugh

recollected that helmet graffiti was a means of negotiating identity, expressing dissent, and brooding camaraderie.⁸⁵

The importance of helmet graffiti therefore lies not only in what was written, but also in why soldiers felt compelled to write at all. Vietnam soldiers experienced an unusually disruptive relationship with military service. Many were young conscripts who entered an unfamiliar environment where traditional markers of identity such as family, hometown, occupation, and civilian social roles were temporarily suspended. Entering the military at a younger age with limited life experiences and less established identity, personal markings became methods of maintaining connections with a self that existed beyond the battlefield.

Visual documentation of helmet graffiti usually comes in two types: black-and-white photo journalism of graffitied helmets with the owner of the helmets visible in the photos taken during the war, or colored photo scans of graffitied helmets preserved by veterans, antique collectors, or

museums. It is worth noting that since TA-50 requirements mandated that U.S. service members return all issued combat equipment upon discharge,⁸⁶ the authenticity of helmets taken in color could at times be questionable. Despite the visibility of helmet graffiti in photojournalism—most famously captured in images like the iconic Horst Faas “War is Hell” photograph⁸⁷—formal academic literature has largely neglected its role as a communicative artifact. Much of the documentation of helmet graffiti is anecdotal, preserved in online personal collections or scattered across Internet forums and even YouTube videos. Vietnam War veterans had generally been reluctant to retrace and recall their wartime experiences. Having suffered from PTSD, which was officially unrecognized until 1980,⁸⁸ and having been exposed to harmful long-term physical effects from Agent Orange, many veterans struggled to have their conditions recognized as service-related while facing a government that denied and delayed responsibility and compensation. Emerging from a humiliatingly unvictorious war, many veterans faced indifference, blatant misunderstanding and misrepresentation, and outright hostility back home, unlike the welcoming atmosphere experienced by veterans of previous

victorious wars.⁸⁹ While some fought to have their conditions recognized and their experiences exposed, others remained reluctant because of stigma, trauma, guilt and grief.^{90, 91} Systematic analysis is thus hindered by the lack of comprehensive archives or databases. Nevertheless, it is crucial for future scholarship to bring these fragments together by treating helmet graffiti as a primary text worthy of analysis.

This analysis examines more than 120 photographs of Vietnam War helmet graffiti from various unofficial online archives, supplemented by veteran accounts, archival sources, media reports, and military forum discussions. The content of the graffiti varied widely but falls, for the purposes of this paper, into four broad types:

1. Sentiment about the war (“Make Love Not War⁹²”, “WAR IS HELL,⁹³” etc.)
2. Patriotic and religious beliefs (“In God We Trust⁹⁴”, “God Bless America⁹⁵”, etc.)
3. Personal identity (Names of loved ones, unit insignia, initials, significant dates, etc.⁹⁶)

4. Practical markings (Calendars⁹⁷, lucky charms, etc.)

The framework of these four thematic categories emerged from recurring patterns within the collected material. Each category reveals different rhetorical strategies and contextual tensions with and under which soldiers graffitied their helmets. The first category includes overt statements that express personal sentiments about the war, such as “WAR IS HELL,⁹⁸” “Bring ‘em back ALIVE,⁹⁹” “War is good business, invest your son!¹⁰⁰” and drawings of peace symbols.¹⁰¹ Some make allusions to rock anthems and youth pop culture like The Rolling Stones.¹⁰² Some use humor to deflect dangerous situations, such as “Don’t shoot, I’m short¹⁰³” and “Don’t follow me, I’m lost.¹⁰⁴” This category is the most relevant to the anti-war movement back in America, likely because many young drafted Americans were previously involved in the anti-war movement or that the soldiers had gradually become disillusioned to a war that grows increasingly futile and meaningless. The majority of messages in this thematic category capture the brutality and helplessness experienced by those on the frontlines.

The iconic “WAR IS HELL” photo taken by Horst Faas featuring a young man looking directly into the camera with a subtle smile¹⁰⁵, perhaps best exemplifies this category. While the message of the graffiti is clearly antiwar, the soldier did not display negative facial emotions commonly associated with victims of the ruthlessness of war, such as grief or anger, but gave the audience a seemingly all-knowing, even defiant smile, which adds complexity to the message of the photo. Helmet graffiti is what transformed individual experiences of fear, frustration, and disillusionment into statements that visibly challenged the official narratives surrounding military service even back on the homeland.

In contrast, a second category of helmet graffiti invokes patriotic and religious slogans such as “Death From Above,¹⁰⁶” “In God We Trust¹⁰⁷” or “Just you and me, Right, Lord?¹⁰⁸”. Some messages also express dissent against domestic anti-war protests, such as the phrase “Make War Not Love¹⁰⁹” from the helmet of Marine Corporal Michael Wynn. Mr. Wynn was not drafted into the army; rather, he joined the Marine Corps out of a mixture of patriotism and adventure-seeking and remained patriotic and

proud as a war veteran. According to Corporal Wynn, they were “unhappy” about the antiwar protests in America because they thought that as soldiers, they were just “doing [their] job.”¹¹⁰ Hence, the slogan was written in response to the famous countercultural antiwar slogan “Make Love Not War.” This graffiti served as a visual counter-narrative and became a way for him to publicly articulate his commitment to the war cause and distance himself from a perceived lack of support back home.

At the same time, the existence of these messages alongside antiwar slogans displays the ideological diversity within the ranks and challenges the popular conception of a uniform military culture. The coexistence of conflicting messages on the same battlefield—and sometimes even on the same helmet—reflects the complexity of individual wartime personal experiences. For example, the classic “Born to Kill” juxtaposed with a peace sign, later popularized in the 1987 movie “Full Metal Jacket,” where the reason for these two conflicting messages was “a Jungian thing.”¹¹¹ As war correspondent Michael Herr writes in *Dispatches*, for those caught on the frontlines, sometimes conflicting sentiments toward the war “alternated so

rapidly that they spun together in a strobic wheel rolling all the way up until [they] were literally High On War.¹¹²” These contradictory inscriptions demonstrate that helmet graffiti was a material space on which individuals negotiated conflicting emotions, identities, and relationships with the war they experienced.

It is unlikely that all soldiers would form singular perceptions of and sentiments toward the war, and not all sentiments can be sorted under the prowar-antiwar dichotomy. Personal experience, especially in warfare, is inherently diverse and therefore can seem initially conflicting when documented on the same helmet, but regardless, they serve as a representation of the complexity of the war experience and the magnitude of the emotional shockwave it created for a generation of young, inexperienced men. In the words of Michael Herr, the war “filled [the young men] with the twin obsessions of Death and Peace, fixed them so that they could never, never again speak lightly about the Worst Thing in the World.¹¹³”

The third category of graffiti centering on personal identity—names or initials, references to loved ones, unit insignia, or hometowns¹¹⁴—serves two purposes: practically, helping fellow soldiers in identifying fallen comrades and contacting their relatives; nostalgically, becoming reminders of the self beyond the war and humanity in the face of extreme brutality. It is worth noting that since soldiers were all issued dog tags—metals stamped with key personal information like names, identification numbers, blood types, and religions—which also fulfills the first purpose, soldiers may prefer writing more intimate information that are specific to one's identity on their helmets for nostalgic purposes, such as the names of their girlfriends, insider jokes, or homages to their fallen comrades. After all, unlike the emotionally and politically-charged messages from the previous categories that may warrant punishment or removal, there are no restrictions for writing politically-neutral personal information. Nostalgic information offers lasting links to their pre-war lives or how their senses of self were changed by the war.

Helmet graffiti in this category truly became a material artifact—a primary source of individual memory, while its postwar rediscovery and reconnection with loved ones and institutions helps reconstruct postwar memory. One particularly heartwarming example is a helmet inscribed with intimate personal information that, after being handled and cross-checked by an antique dealer, was returned to the fallen soldier’s family and is now displayed at the New Jersey Vietnam Veterans’ Memorial and Vietnam Era Museum. User “matthewsq” shared his findings on the U.S. Militaria Forum in 2019 about a graffitied M1 helmet he recently acquired. He noted that the graffiti included the nickname of the soldier “Snorkle,” the name of his “high school sweetheart” “Betty Lou,” the day they met “8/2/60,” and his fraternity “Omega Gamma Delta¹¹⁵”—intimate personal information that would not be found on dog tags. User “matthewsq” was able to cross-check this information and verify its validity with a former USMF member (User “pchepurko”) and multiple firsthand sources, including a news excerpt from The Herald and personal and military data from the Coffelt Database of Vietnam Casualties, with the help of several fellow forum users, such as “Sgt. Stubby” and “aznation.”¹¹⁶ A month later, “matthewsq” shared on the

same forum that he got in touch with Betty Lou and mailed her the helmet “so that she can have a part of Dutches' back home with her.” Lou spoke to “matthewsq” that she “finally feels like he's back home and at peace.”¹⁷ In 2022, the New Jersey Vietnam Veterans’ Memorial and Vietnam Era Museum posted on Instagram that Lou had sent this helmet to the museum, which is now on public display as a part of the “There & Back: The Journey to Vietnam & Home” exhibit.¹⁸ Unlike politically charged graffiti that entered public memory through iconic photographs, more intimate markings like those in the third category demonstrate how soldiers maintain personal connections and identity beyond the identity of the soldier.

The final category includes practical markings: “short-timer” calendars, lucky symbols, or other functional notations to help soldiers to track time or ward off misfortune. Michael Herr writes in *Dispatches* that every American soldier in Vietnam “had his obsession with Time.”¹⁹ For instance, “no one ever talked about when-this-lousy-war-is-over,” only “how much time you got.”²⁰ As US Marine Corps veteran Gustav Hasford describes in his autobiographical novel *The Short-Timers*, “almost every Marine in Viet

Nam carries a short-timer's calendar of his tour of duty," whether drawn on flak jackets, helmets, tattoos, or other personal objects.¹²¹ Lucky charms like four-leaf clovers, crosses, red bull's eyes,¹²² and ace-of-spades playing cards are also drawn as graffiti.¹²³ These practical markings function both as superstitions that improve the morale of American troops and as commentaries on the cruel randomness of survival. Soldiers graffitied helmets with practical timekeeping systems and lucky charms to reclaim a limited sense of control and humanity within the demoralizing pressure from a total institution and the environment of war.

Throughout history, soldiers operating within the rigid structures and often oppressive conditions of military service have similarly sought outlets for personal expression by inscribing their experiences, identities, and emotions onto the objects and environments of their wartime existence. America has a long tradition of war graffiti, such as the "trash talk" exchanges of both sides of the Civil War,¹²⁴ the trench art of the First World War,¹²⁵ "Kilroy was here" during World War II,¹²⁶ and the graffiti of more recent conflicts widely circulating on the Internet such as in the war in Afghanistan. Graffiti is "a

defiant and public proclamation of a human being's existence.¹²⁷ Each of these forms of expression in history reflects the desire of soldiers to assert their individuality, to make sense of their experiences, and to communicate with others across different political beliefs. The persistence of such practices, even in the face of official disapproval, demonstrates the enduring power of material culture as a medium for self-expression and historical memory. Helmet graffiti is one such form of graffiti that takes place in wartime, where helmets become intimate and accessible canvases for soldiers to negotiate their identities in a strictly impersonal environment like the military.

However, this negotiation also involved boundaries. Soldiers understood that helmet graffiti existed within a system of rules and potential consequences. The military could tolerate certain forms of expression because strictly banning informal practices damages morale and risks mutinies, but tolerance was conditional. Messages that interfered with camouflage, criticized the military, or challenged authority could invite punishment. The existence of this informal boundary created what can be

understood as a “soldier’s side of the bargain”: soldiers accepted the institution’s authority and discipline, while the institution informally allowed limited spaces for individuality and emotional release.

Nevertheless, soldiers were not passive beneficiaries of military tolerance. Their decision to write a name, a joke, a political statement, or a countdown calendar represented an awareness of their opportunities and associated risks. The intensive boot camp training that soldiers had previously been subjected to provided them with the knowledge of those boundaries had they been interested in testing and crossing them. Therefore, helmet graffiti reveals a more complicated relationship between soldiers and institutions. Military organizations require obedience, but soldiers remain individuals with memories, emotions, and identities that cannot be completely absorbed into institutional roles. Helmet graffiti is one instance where soldiers renegotiated this relationship in ink on government property by preserving a fragment of personal identity within it.

Conclusion

Although the U.S. military formally prohibited defacing government-issued equipment, the realities of frontline warfare during the Vietnam War created a space where commanders selectively tolerated certain forms of self-expression when they did not threaten operational effectiveness, camouflage, or military authority. Within this negotiated boundary, helmet graffiti allowed soldiers to preserve aspects of personal identity, express complex feelings ranging from patriotism and faith to disillusionment and protest, and maintain connections with loved ones and comrades.

At the same time, the existence of helmet graffiti does not represent the disappearance of military discipline or a complete rejection of institutional authority. Rather, it demonstrates how discipline within a total institution is often maintained through informal regulation and adaptation. Soldiers and commanders participated in an implicit negotiation in which soldiers gained limited opportunities for personal expression while commanders preserved overall cohesion and order by allowing minor, nonsubversive deviations. The creation and survival of helmet graffiti therefore depended on specific

historical conditions—the Vietnam War’s decentralized combat environment, mixed soldier attitudes, and the practical difficulties of enforcing strict uniform standards in an alien terrain. Hence, by examining helmet graffiti as the product of negotiation in the hierarchy rather than a unilateral soldier’s resistance, Vietnam War helmet graffiti offers a unique case for understanding how individuals negotiate identity and agency within highly regulated institutions.

Notes

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