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# The Soldier at the Heart of the War: the Myth of the Green Beret in the Popular Culture of the Vietnam Era

ALASDAIR SPARK

If you kill for money you're a mercenary. If you kill for pleasure you're a sadist.  
If you kill for both you're a Green Beret.

(Sign at a Special Forces Camp, Me Phuc Tay, Vietnam.)<sup>1</sup>

On 11 March 1983, at a provincial court at Nakhon Phanon in Thailand, Lieutenant-Colonel James Gritz, an ex-Green Beret and highly decorated Vietnam veteran,<sup>2</sup> received a suspended one-year prison sentence for the illegal possession of a sophisticated radio transmitter. Gritz had been using the radio, in connection with a series of secret raids into Laos he had organized to search for some of the 2,500 American servicemen still unaccounted for at the end of the Vietnam War. Though Gritz found no trace, persistent rumour has it that some are still alive, held captive in communist prison camps in Laos, Kampuchea, and Vietnam.<sup>3</sup>

Gritz's mission was a further contribution to the myth of the Green Beret, the soldier most intimately associated with the Vietnam War in the public mind. Perhaps the strangest aspect of the affair was that Gritz's mission had been financed in part by two Hollywood stars, William (*Star Trek*) Shatner and Clint Eastwood, reportedly on the basis that they would have the rights to the story if Gritz succeeded. Their interest was not inappropriate, for the Green Beret has proved a consistent focus for

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<sup>1</sup> Quoted by Michael Herr, *Despatches* (London: Pan, 1978), p. 205.

<sup>2</sup> For an account of Gritz's activities in Vietnam see William C. Westmoreland, *A Soldier Reports* (New York: Doubleday, 1976), pp. 289–94. General Westmoreland was the Commander, US Forces, Military Assistance Command, Vietnam, from 1964 to 1968.

<sup>3</sup> Neil Kelly, "Gritz given suspended sentence in Thailand," *The Times*, 12 March 1983, p. 5.

popular interest in the Vietnam War. Alone of all the many US Army and Marine units to see service in the war, the Green Berets secured and have sustained a place in the popular imagination. From the very beginnings of American involvement, through withdrawal to post-war self-examination, the myth of the Green Beret has served as a vehicle to express the purpose and experience of Vietnam.

Robin Moore's 1965 best-seller *The Green Berets* was, as its cover proclaimed, about a "... new kind of soldier in a new kind of war."<sup>4</sup> Prior to its publication, the activities of the Green Berets – or to use their official title, the US Army Special Forces – had been a mystery to the general public. Moore's novel, which he began to research in 1962, put flesh on the Green Beret myth of the early nineteen-sixties. It evokes the attitudes of the Kennedy era, where the myth began and was cultivated most assiduously.

Eliot Cohen makes the point in *Commandos and Politicians*<sup>5</sup> that elite units usually meet with resentment from the regular forces, and rarely prosper without an effective civilian or military patron. Certainly, the US Army had a traditional disdain for elite units, which it believed took an unfair share of both resources and glory. In particular, elite insignia were disliked, and in the late nineteen-fifties the Army banned the wearing of the green beret. It was further to the Green Berets' disadvantage that they were associated with the CIA, at whose instigation and with whose funding they had been established in 1952. The Army did not take kindly to units not of its own creation, and especially not to those directed by a civilian agency. The Green Berets did not flourish, and by 1960 were a nearly extinct corps of less than 2,000 men.

In 1961, however, they attracted the interest of the most influential patron of all, the President. Kennedy was pledged to re-order the national defences, and his particular concern – reinforced in January 1961 by Khrushchev's speech of support for "Wars of National Liberation" – lay in countering subversive Communist insurgency, notably in Indo-China. In an extension of their original mission in Europe as guerrilla organizers behind the Iron Curtain, the Green Berets had themselves developed an active interest in the insurgency problem, particularly under the influence of such radical officers as USAF Colonel Edward Lansdale. Aware of the President's concern, they brought themselves to his notice with an impromptu display during a pre-inauguration visit he made to Fort Bragg.

<sup>4</sup> Robin Moore, *The Green Berets* (New York: Avon, 1965).

<sup>5</sup> Eliot Cohen, *Commandos and Politicians* (Centre for International Studies, Harvard University, 1978), p. 53.

Kennedy was impressed, and the fortunes of the Green Berets rose accordingly. Their numbers were quadrupled, funding was given, and in 1962 units of the Fifth Special Forces group departed for Vietnam, to train and advise local counter-guerrilla forces.<sup>6</sup>

Counter-insurgency rapidly became something of a fad within the Kennedy administration, and the Green Berets, as the agents of the doctrine, the objects of considerable glamour. Kennedy took a close interest in the details of their training and equipment, and late in 1961 he restored the wearing of the green beret, despite objections from the army, urging the Special Forces to "... wear it as a trademark of distinction and a badge of courage in the difficult years ahead."<sup>7</sup> Kennedy was eventually to receive his own green beret. At his funeral the Honour Guard was composed of Green Berets and at the close of the service a soldier placed his own beret on the grave.<sup>8</sup>

The appeal of the Green Berets in the Kennedy era, in Moore's novel, and in subsequent popular culture can be traced to three elements. Firstly, the Green Berets were an elite. Forces such as the Commandos, airborne troops, or 617 squadron (the Dambusters) have always evoked a mystique, often as much by virtue of their exclusivity as by their actual military performance. The Green Berets were exclusive to an extreme. Even to be considered, a volunteer had already to be both Ranger- and Airborne-qualified, super-fit, and able to speak at least one foreign language. Once selected, the Green Beret had to become proficient in skills such as demolition, communications and field medicine, adept at unarmed combat, SCUBA diving and mountaineering, and be able to use all kinds of weapons.<sup>9</sup>

Beyond such fundamentally military skills, Kennedy's vision was of a select breed of men (in everything the equal of the enemy) at work in the defence of freedom in the newly emergent nations of the Third World. Together with counter-insurgency theorists such as Roger Hilsman, Walt Rostow, and Alexis Johnson, Kennedy envisaged the fusion of civil and

<sup>6</sup> Seven Special Forces groups were eventually established, the largest and most prominent being the Fifth S.F. Group, based in Vietnam. In addition to the Special Warfare School at Fort Bragg, other centres were established in Okinawa, Panama, West Germany, and Vietnam. For an account of the Special Forces and their promotion by President Kennedy see Douglas Blaufarb, *The Counter-Insurgency Era* (New York: Free Press, 1977), pp. 52-88. Also, Richard Betts, *Soldiers, Statesmen, and Cold War Crises* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1977), pp. 129-34, and Charles M. Simpson III, *Inside the Green Berets: The US Army Special Forces* (London: Arms and Armour Press, 1983).

<sup>7</sup> Moore, p. 16.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 17.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 16-19.

military roles in an elite. As Richard Betts describes the ideal Green Beret, he was:

an ambassador, propagandist, medical and economic aide, applied anthropologist and surrogate ward healer for the client government. He was to inspire loyalty and anti-communist nationalism in remote peasant villages and act as an intelligence agent. His military role was limited: training irregular troops and conducting isolated ambushes.<sup>10</sup>

In short, Kennedy's hope was to counter ideologically inspired Communist subversion with an ideologically inspired American soldier. In Richard West's words, he had the confident belief that:

anything the communists did the Americans could do better, they would be better jungle fighters, more courageous, more ingenious, more popular with the Vietnamese and above all motivated by a better ideology of liberty, democracy, and free enterprise.<sup>11</sup>

Therefore, secondly, the Green Berets possessed a select knowledge based upon their own emulation of the enemy. At the Special Warfare School at Fort Bragg, they were taught not just the practice of subversive insurgency, but its ideological underpinnings, taken from the writings of Mao Tse-tung and the victor of Dien Bien Phu, General Vo Nguyen Giap of North Vietnam. With insurgency studies in their infancy at the time in the United States, knowledge of this arcane and seemingly oriental art inevitably intensified the mystique of the Green Berets.

Despite their supposed role as the ideological soldiers of the New Frontier, the third element in the appeal of the Green Berets was action. In part this was a legacy of the romantic appeal traditionally associated with the daring deeds of an elite military unit. However, it also reflected a confusion about the true role of the Green Berets. Part of their appeal to Kennedy lay in his awareness of their subversive potential. As Theodore Sorenson, a Kennedy aide, wrote, "The President did not doubt the necessity or the legitimacy of dirty tricks when confronted with a covert, conspiratorial adversary in an age of hidden peril."<sup>12</sup> Consequently, the Green Berets, as America's own guerrillas, were capable of covert and direct action to cut through the Gordian Knot of delay, public fuss and diplomatic nicety and get "necessary" things done.

<sup>10</sup> Betts, p. 130. See also a special issue devoted to "Unconventional Warfare," *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, May 1962.

<sup>11</sup> Richard West, *Victory in Vietnam* (London: Andre Deutsch, 1974), p. 91.

<sup>12</sup> Theodore Sorenson, *Kennedy* (London: Pan, 1966), p. 698. George E. Smith, *P.O.W.* (Berkeley: Ramparts Press, 1971), recalls being taught torture techniques while being trained in "Counter-measures to Hostile Interrogation," p. 73.

The Green Berets themselves faced the dilemma that nation-building was never as glamorous as acts of derring-do. The cultivation of mystique was essential to their survival in the face of the Army's continuing (if less vocal) hostility and the other Services' promotion of their own special forces. The Green Berets carefully nurtured their exotic image, which David Halberstam captures perfectly:

They were all uncommon men, extra-ordinary physical specimens and intellectual Ph.D.s, swinging through trees, speaking Russian and Chinese, eating snake meat and other fauna, springing counter-ambushes at night on unwary Asian ambushers who had read Mao and Giap, but not Hilsman and Rostow.<sup>13</sup>

They also were careful to impress upon Kennedy that they were truly *special* forces. At a display at Fort Bragg in 1961:

troops stormed the beachhead, machine guns rattled, rockets and flares exploded. . . . As part of the demonstration a soldier wearing a rocket flying belt took off. . . and literally flew three hundred feet over the water towards the Chief Executive.<sup>14</sup>

This was very impressive, but had little to do with Third World counter-insurgency. Robin Moore's novel, *The Green Berets*, published in the first months of American involvement in Vietnam, was immensely popular and was widely regarded as a successful exposé of the Special Forces. The *Sunday Telegraph* called it ". . . the first intelligible account of what is going on in Vietnam"; the *Kirkus Reviews* ". . . a bloody, blazing account, filled with revelations of the kind that never make the pages of the *New York Times*"; and Hanson Baldwin (of the *New York Times*, no less) commented: "*The Green Berets* has stirred up a fuss in Washington. The official objection to the book apparently is that it is too close to fact."<sup>15</sup>

Moore wrote unequivocally in his preface, "This is a book of truth," and warned his readers: "You will find in these pages many things you will find hard to believe. Believe them, they happened this way."<sup>16</sup> Yet, for

<sup>13</sup> David Halberstam, *The Best and the Brightest* (New York: Random House, 1972), p. 154. The Army believed that the Kennedy Administration was "oversold" on counter-insurgency (Betts, p. 130) and Chief of Staff George Decker told the President that "any good soldier can handle guerrillas" (Blaufarb, p. 80). In short, the army regarded counter-insurgency as simply another military skill to be taught through the Service schools, not a special mission calling for a special force, superior to the regular Army in prestige and popularity.

<sup>14</sup> David Wise, "Guerrillas growl for Kennedy," *New York Herald Tribune*, Oct. 1961, p. 5. A participant in the display regarded it as deliberate self-promotion by the Special Forces; see Donald Duncan, *The New Legions* (New York: Random House, 1967), p. 146. This swashbuckling image impressed many Army recruits: see Philip Caputo, *A Rumor of War* (London: Macmillan, 1977), pp. 16-17.

<sup>15</sup> Moore, reviews on inside cover. <sup>16</sup> Moore, p. 9.

Moore, the truth is not based on simple reportage, but upon elite fellowship. At his first meeting with a Green Beret, he was told: “We don’t have any short cuts in this business. If you really want to understand us, you should be able to go through our training. Then you’ll know what this green beanie means” (p. 11).<sup>17</sup> Moore took the training, passed, and spent six months in Vietnam with a twelve-man Green Beret “A” team.<sup>18</sup> Throughout the novel, he is at pains to make it clear that he carried a rifle like the others, and was not merely a reporter tagging along to observe. His reward was the respect of the team, and the receipt of his proudest possession, his own green beret. Truth therefore depends upon the fellowship of the elite, and in his preface, Moore echoes the Green Beret: “Truly to understand and appreciate the Special Forces operations, one has to know the nature and details of Special Forces training” (p. 10).

Moore’s novel is therefore an ideological fiction, an expression of his own fellowship with the elite. In the novel, Moore relates some dubious incidents as fact. The French colonials come off particularly badly, with every plantation owner paying Viet Cong taxes, and one guerrilla band being led by a six-foot tall Frenchman in cowboy boots.<sup>19</sup> Even his more authentic details omit crucial elements: the Viet Cong are a determined enemy (they mount suicide attacks), but the depth of their commitment – their ideology – goes unexplained; the South Vietnamese Army and state bureaucracy are profoundly corrupt, but no explanation is given as to why America should prop them up.

Ideology is chiefly present in *The Green Berets* as elite fellowship. Moore’s soldiers owe allegiance only to their comrades and to their cause, which is “to fight Communism and make friends for America in the underdeveloped nations of the world that are targets for Communist expansion” (p. 334). Moore was clearly smitten by the Green Berets. He characterizes the ideal Green Beret as follows:

Special Forces was his life; fighting, especially unorthodox warfare, was what he lived for. He had no career to sacrifice... no desire to rise from operational to supervisory levels... he was unmarried and had no attachments in the world beyond the Special Forces (p. 31).

Such dedication, Moore argues, gives the Green Beret the right to act as he thinks best. As Richard West notes, it is the constant refrain of the novel that “the ‘guy in the field’ who is ‘fighting the war to win’ could soon

<sup>17</sup> Green Beret slang for their distinctive headgear.

<sup>18</sup> The Green Berets organized themselves into “A”, “B” and “C” teams, rather than the traditional squads, platoons, and companies of the regular Army.

<sup>19</sup> Moore, pp. 143–66.

smash the communists if he were not held back by cowardly politicians.”<sup>20</sup> This is often made evident in accounts of disputes with the Army. An exchange between a regular officer and a Green Beret runs:

“you know you can’t go off attacking across borders, hiring bandits, acting like . . . the CIA. We’re part of the US Army. Do you think this [green beret] gives you some kind of special license to go off on operations that may endanger the peace of the world?”

“Sir, I’ve been in the Special Forces almost ten years. All that time I was trained to get special jobs done any way I can. And I was on loan to the Agency for a year. I know what I can and cannot do to get the job done” (p. 56).

As an elite fellowship Moore’s soldiers know what must be done, and from knowledge flows action – the torture of a suspect, the kidnapping of a Viet Cong general, secret raids into the North, all acts of American guerrilla warfare. As pragmatists in a brutal environment, they are right to secure the aid of a Vietnamese girl by showing her photographs of her murdered father; stand by while Vietnamese tortures Vietnamese; and, in perhaps the most grotesque incident in the novel, recycle the freshly slaughtered bodies of enemy soldiers as so many sandbags, to concentrate the force of an explosive charge.<sup>21</sup>

The Defense Department regarded Moore’s novel as inaccurate, sensation-seeking, and simply not suited to the climate of the war in 1965. As an expression of Moore’s elite fellowship, the novel was of course propaganda for the Green Berets, whose fortunes had begun to slide with the death of Kennedy. Certain of the incidents in *The Green Berets* have a prescriptive flavour, as if Moore were saying “If only . . .”, notably the secret raid on Hanoi, which he declares presages imminent victory:

Next thing we know there’ll be “A” teams around Hanoi and Uncle Ho will be asking for a peace conference. Only, we’ll be talking from strength (p. 331).

*The Green Berets* was an immense popular success, and inspired a flood (relative to other Vietnam War fiction) of novels, including *Pride of the Green Berets* by Peter Dering, *Search and Destroy* by Irwin Blacker, *Killing at Ngo Tho* by Gene Moore, *Coasts of War* by Scott Stone, and Charles Runyon’s *The Bloody Jungle*.<sup>22</sup> The Green Berets themselves took advantage of the publicity. In 1966 a long-playing record called *Ballads of the Green Berets* was released. On it, Sergeant Barry Sadler of the Green Berets sang

<sup>20</sup> West, p. 97.

<sup>21</sup> Moore, pp. 114–15; 47–48; 324–27.

<sup>22</sup> Listed by Charles Moskos, *The American Enlisted Man* (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 1970), p. 23.

ballads such as *Badge of Courage* and *The Trooper's Lament*.<sup>23</sup> Captain Hugh Donlon, the first Green Beret to win the Congressional Medal of Honor, wrote his memoirs *Outposts of Freedom*. Finally, and less worthy, was the Green Beret comic book, diligently read by many GIs in Vietnam, a cover of which West remembered showing "an imperilled and half naked white woman with underneath the caption 'Nothing stood between the Reds and Saigon thirty miles away, except a handful of Green Berets.'" <sup>24</sup>

The most notorious offspring of Moore's novel was the 1968 John Wayne film of the same title. Hollywood had shown an interest in the Special Forces since 1963, when Columbia took out an option on the subject. However, due to financial difficulties and problems with the script, nothing came of it, nor of producer David Wolper's interest in 1964.<sup>25</sup> The problem Hollywood faced in making a major film about Vietnam was that the war was being fought in the absence of a national consensus. Any film would inevitably alienate opinion and, as Mel Shavelson noted, "Hollywood can't take sides because if it does it can't sell tickets to the others."<sup>26</sup> Hollywood was paralysed, caught between the pressure for pro-war films from successive administrations, and the reality of a predominantly youthful cinema audience, growing steadily more hostile to the conflict.

Only a deliberate intention, such as John Wayne's, to make a partisan statement, could produce a film about the war. Wayne's expressed aim was to make a film to reveal America's ideological purpose in Vietnam, since he believed that "it is extremely important that not only the people of the US, but people all over the world, should know why it is necessary for us to be in Vietnam."<sup>27</sup> To secure an audience for his epic, Wayne counted upon his screen persona and the evident appeal of the Green Berets. Despite his ideological intentions, the film dealt more with the destructive than the constructive aspects of the Green Berets' mission. Early script drafts detailed a covert raid into the North to destroy a "vital installation," but after objections from the Defense Department, the script settled for two other incidents from the novel: the defence of a Special Forces camp, and the kidnapping of a Viet Cong general. The raid into the North, Wayne was told, was "not one that the Green Berets would participate in."<sup>28</sup>

<sup>23</sup> Advertisement, back cover, *The Green Berets*.

<sup>24</sup> West, p. 101.

<sup>25</sup> See Lawrence H. Suid, *Guts and Glory: Great American War Movies* (New York: Addison Wesley, 1978), p. 221.

<sup>26</sup> Quoted in David Manning-White and Richard Averon, *The Celluloid Weapon* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1972), p. 240.

<sup>27</sup> Wayne, quoted in Suid, p. 222.

<sup>28</sup> Suid, p. 224.

Despite revision, the focus of the film remained upon the myth. The Green Berets depicted are all resourceful military supermen, but kind and paternal towards the South Vietnamese, notably to an orphan the team adopts. The Vietnam presented is a backlot affair, with eccentric details such as a Mata Hari-esque spy and a champagne-drinking Viet Cong general. The film reverses even the details of Vietnam which Moore recognized, presenting its audience with devoted South Vietnamese and corrupt Viet Cong. Reality intrudes chiefly in details of destruction such as 'killing zones,' napalm, and "Smokey," an aerial gunship.

What ideological explanation the film does provide comes from its reprise of Moore's own conversion to the Green Berets' cause. At the beginning of the film, at a Stateside press conference, a reporter called Beckworth tells Colonel Kirby (John Wayne) that he is not sold on the idea that "we should be in South-East Asia." Kirby replies, "You ever been to South-East Asia?" – "No I haven't" – "Huh!" Invited to Vietnam, Beckworth swiftly gets on the team when he sees things as they are. Brutality, he learns, is sometimes required – or, as Kirby says, "Out here due process is a bullet." The Vietnamese want and need the Americans to protect them from the heathen Viet Cong. The key incident in Beckworth's conversion is the brutal rape by the Viet Cong of a child he has befriended, proof of the enemy's utter barbarity. The final exchange between reporter and soldier takes place:

KIRBY: "What you gonna say in that newspaper of yours?"

BECKWORTH: "If I say what I feel I may be out of a job."

KIRBY: "We'll always give you one."<sup>29</sup>

Like Moore, Beckworth has earned his green beret. The film comes to the same conclusion as the novel: trust the judgment of the Green Berets; the elite fellowship "in the field" know best.

*The Green Berets* was a controversial film, provoking demonstrations and pickets on its release. Contrary to what many imagine, it was a success, bringing in (for an outlay of \$6,000,000) \$8,700,000 in the first six months.<sup>30</sup> Apart from notoriety, its success does indicate the desire of the American public for familiar action-adventure entertainment about an unfamiliar war. In the confusing situation of Vietnam, this was only possible by focussing on a microcosm of the war – an embattled elite unit, special men carrying out daring missions, which promised to bring the

<sup>29</sup> Quotations from Gilbert Adair, *Hollywood's Vietnam* (London: Proteus Press, 1981), p. 49. See also Lief Furhammar and Folke Isaakson, *Politics and Film* (London: Studio Vista, 1968), pp. 145–48.

<sup>30</sup> Suid, p. 234.

end of the war materially closer. The ordinary infantry soldiers lacked this special appeal. Their war did not so easily lend itself to popular images of traditional heroics, somehow making their courage seem less satisfying. Guerrilla warfare and American tactics were such that most opportunities for heroism took place not in attack, but in defence – in ambush, or under siege. Individual acts of courage, in defence or on “baiting” patrols, seemed in themselves to do little to bring victory.

The reality of Green Beret operations differed from legend. The majority of their time was spent training and fighting alongside local forces, chiefly the Civilian Irregular Defense Groups – the CIDGs. Some clandestine operations were undertaken – for instance Projects Sigma and Delta – but these concerned night forays against local Viet Cong targets, not elaborate raids on Hanoi. The official history of the Special Forces, written by a Green Beret, lists their more typical achievements:

49,902 economic aid projects; 34,334 educational projects; 35,468 welfare projects; 10,959 medical projects; 14,934 transportation facilities; supported 479,569 refugees; dug 6,436 wells; repaired 1,949 Km. of road; 139 churches; 272 markets; 110 hospitals; 398 dispensaries; 1,003 classrooms; 670 bridges....<sup>31</sup>

Of course, speculation continues about covert activities, and feeds the mystique of the Green Berets. The Special Forces – and men of the other Services – did however take part in the only officially admitted raid into the North, the attempt to free American POWs from Son Tay prison camp in 1970. The mission went perfectly, but all the prisoners had been moved some weeks earlier.<sup>32</sup>

The Army remained hostile to the Special Forces – more so after their publicity – and, with the entry of large-scale regular forces into the war in 1965, gave serious thought to abolishing the CIDGs. A Green Beret officer told Richard West in 1967:

The Brass are trying to get rid of us. LBJ doesn't like us, nor does the other Johnson, the Chief of Staff. What they're doing is filling up the A teams with men from other regiments. Most of them haven't jumped, some are no good at all.<sup>33</sup>

However, the dilution of the Special Forces had begun before 1967, under

<sup>31</sup> Colonel Francis J. Kelly, *United States Army Special Forces* (Washington D.C.: Vietnam Studies, Department of the Army, 1973), pp. 90–91. Col. Kelly commanded the Fifth Special Forces group in 1966.

<sup>32</sup> For an account see Westmoreland, pp. 308–09.

<sup>33</sup> West, p. 101. It is common for elite units to fill up with “rejects” from other units; see Betts, p. 133.

the pressure of the expansion in the Kennedy era. One Green Beret recalled:

I had few qualifications for the Special Forces, except that I was a pretty well trained medic. I didn't know how to climb a mountain, or rappel from a helicopter, or ski. I could swim but not 500 yards underwater at night or whatever... I didn't know any foreign language...<sup>34</sup>

Nevertheless LBJ was certainly not the same patron as Kennedy, and the Army managed to relegate the Special Forces to simply another career way-station through which personnel could be rotated. Indeed, by 1967 the Green Berets were given less space in the official Army handbook than another special corps, the Dog Handlers.

It was inevitable that the myth of the Green Berets would prejudice the realities of war. A CIA field officer commented:

at the outset of the war the Green Berets were a symbol of Counter-Insurgency and they were excellent... Barry Sadler was the worst thing that ever happened to them. He came out with this song, and all of a sudden the Green Berets were no more an elite small unit. They got all kinds of cowboys in there and the cowboys wanted to go out and shoot and kick down doors, and beat up people. That's not the way to run a Counter-Guerrilla outfit.<sup>35</sup>

From some testimony, such elite anarchism became common in Vietnam. In 1971 a Green Beret described his colleagues as:

reprobates... they were just beautiful dudes. They were here, not for the political thing. They didn't give a fuck about communism or anti-communism, or even Vietnam. They were there for the benefits, because I think they wanted to belong to something, but mostly it was the only war we had at the time. They were the kind of guys who would have been hired soldiers, Jesse Jameses, thieves, anything.<sup>36</sup>

Some Green Berets took seriously their image as judge, jury and executioner. In July 1969, Colonel Robert Rhealt, the Commanding Officer

<sup>34</sup> Smith, p. 35. Nevertheless, at the time (1962) the Green Berets failed a third of all volunteers.

<sup>35</sup> Bruce Lawlor, quoted in Al Santoli, *Everything We Had: An Oral History of the Vietnam War* (New York: Random House, 1981), p. 201.

<sup>36</sup> An anonymous veteran, quoted in Murray Polner, *No Victory Parades* (New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1971), p. 112. As the Vietnam War intensified, and was fought more conventionally, the Green Berets' role became increasingly marginal, until they did little else but train Montagnard CIDGs. The Green Berets' relations with the Army did not improve; by 1971 all Special Forces had left Vietnam, and by the end of the decade there were fewer than 5,000 Green Berets remaining, from a peak strength of 12,000. Some were engaged in advisory programmes in Latin America. Conflict in that continent may yet bring about the resurgence of the Green Berets.

of the Fifth Special Forces Group, was charged by the Army with the murder of a Vietnamese civilian, in a real-life model of *Apocalypse Now*. Rhealt believed the man to be an informer and, some allege, had him thrown out of an aircraft over the South China Sea. In September, however, the charges were dropped by the Army, since vital witnesses, being CIA agents, could not testify for security reasons.<sup>37</sup>

The potential for anarchy in the image of the Green Beret was realized in the “vengeful veterans” films of the early Seventies. A recurrent plot of these low-budget independent films has a returning Green Beret veteran joining a Hell’s Angel bike gang. This has been dismissed by critics such as Gilbert Adair as simply an exploitation genre.<sup>38</sup> However, there are connections: like the Green Berets, the bike gang has an image of select membership, secrecy and violence. Films such as *Angels from Hell* (1968) and *Satan’s Sadists* (1969) show the veteran using his military skills back home in America. In *Chrome and Hot Leather* (1971) four Green Beret veterans form a bike gang to avenge the murder of their leader’s girlfriend by a Hell’s Angel.<sup>39</sup>

Unlike other “vengeful veterans,” the Green Beret is not depicted as directly criminalized by the war. His violence remains part of the training and experience of an elite fellowship. In part this theme is used to suggest that the Green Beret soldier has become a “killing machine,” the flawed product of America’s ambition in Vietnam. For instance, in *Welcome Home Soldier Boys* (1972) four Green Beret veterans systematically use their military skills to wreck a small town, and then fight off the US Army forces which come to its defence. However, there is the suggestion that the Green Berets, in America as in Vietnam, retain the right to judge and act as they see fit. Their rampage is prompted by a petty insult about the war at the town’s gas station. The implication seems to be that the Green Beret delivers a just punishment upon an America neglectful of its soldiers and unwilling to face up to them as symbols of defeat in Vietnam. The same theme of just punishment is also evident in *Tracks* (1976), which closes with a Green Beret embarking upon a course of revenge prompted by the unsympathetic attitudes of the Americans he meets while ferrying his comrade’s coffin home.<sup>40</sup>

<sup>37</sup> See Kelly p. 147; West, p. 102; Westmoreland, p. 368. At the time Rhealt commanded the Fifth Special Forces group, making him in effect the top Green Beret in Vietnam.

<sup>38</sup> Adair, pp. 85–87. See also Julian Smith, *Looking Away* (New York: Scribner, 1975), and his article, “Between Vermont and Violence,” *Film Quarterly*, 26, 4 (1973), 10–17. Other films include *The Angry Breed* (1968), *The Losers* (1970), and *The Hard Ride* (1971).

<sup>39</sup> Smith, *Film Quarterly*, p. 15; Adair, p. 86–87.

<sup>40</sup> Adair, pp. 94–97. Other films include *Slaughter* (1972) and Tom Laughlin’s *Billy Jack* series, see Adair, pp. 88–89.

Therefore, in the American environment, the Green Beret assumes a subversive role. This theme has recently been revived in the 1982 film *First Blood*, in which an embittered Green Beret uses his skills to fight a guerrilla war against domestic society, taking up the mantle of the Viet Cong in an American forest. In David Morrell's 1972 novel, on which the film is based, the soldier is clearly a "killing machine," and the reader's interest lies chiefly in whether he can outwit the forces of law and order. The film, reflecting a contemporary awareness of the neglect of veterans, portrays the soldier as an outcast and his revenge therefore as just. At the end of the film he cries out "How do they know what it was like, unless they've been there?"<sup>41</sup> As a Green Beret, according to myth the soldier at the heart of the war, he stands as representative of all veterans of Vietnam.

The Green Beret is made similarly representative of the experience of the war in the two most ambitious of a crop of post-war films about Vietnam, *The Deerhunter* and *Apocalypse Now*. In *The Deerhunter* (1978) the Green Beret again serves as a motif for elitism and select knowledge of the war.<sup>42</sup> But now, in its aftermath, the select knowledge does not concern ideology, but personal survival. Of the three friends sent to Vietnam – Michael, Nick and Steven – only Michael becomes a Green Beret, and only Michael survives the war intact. Ideological explanation is almost completely absent in the film, and the war, it suggests, is the product of Vietnam alone; it can only be survived – never understood – by Americans.

From the beginning, Michael is put forward as the holder of a special self-awareness. Hunting deer in the mountains, he is the perfect creature, moving with an animal assurance, while the others swear and stumble about below him. He hunts with detachment, matching himself to his adversary allowing himself only one chance, only "one shot." He cannot put his special awareness into words; the best he manages, while holding up a bullet, is: "This is this. It isn't anything else. This is this!" The only element to disturb his self-assurance is a uniformed Green Beret, unexpectedly present at Steven's last-minute wedding. Asked by the trio what things are like in Vietnam, the brooding soldier replies, darkly hinting at his sour experiences, "Fuck it."

Once in Vietnam, Michael survives by again matching himself to his

<sup>41</sup> David Morrell, *First Blood* (Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1972). See the film review by Tom Milne, *Monthly Film Bulletin*, 50, 558 (Jan. 83), 14. The term "killing machine" is Milne's.

<sup>42</sup> E. M. Corder, *The Deerhunter* (London: Corgi, 1979). The cover says of Michael "He had . . . steady nerves, the grace of a cat, and high mountain passes in his heart. He would need all of them to survive."

environment. In the first scene in Vietnam, a soldier in uniform drops a grenade into a bunker crammed with South Vietnamese civilians, and is then killed by a camouflaged guerrilla. In a startling reversal of expectation, the soldier is North Vietnamese, and the guerrilla is a Green Beret – an almost unrecognizable Michael, now hunting prey in Vietnam. Reunited, the three friends are captured by the Viet Cong and forced to play Russian Roulette against each other. Again, Michael's special awareness of his situation secures survival. More manic than his captors, he asks for extra bullets for the gun. By what seems pure force of will (he says to Nick, "It'll be all right, I promise you.") he keeps the chambers empty for both Nick and himself, until he can use the extra bullets to shoot the guards dead. Only Michael, the Green Beret, functions and is able to reason in such circumstances.

After escaping, the three are again separated. Steven, the least adaptable to Vietnam, returns home the least functional, minus an arm and both legs. Michael returns, but cannot at first go home. Immersed in his experiences of Vietnam, he now finds his local community alien. His knowledge of the war, which is also knowledge of himself, proves, like that of the Green Beret at the wedding, to be incommunicable to those who have not known Vietnam. However, Michael's reaction is not violent. Indeed, though he rediscovers his hunting skills, and through them his affinity with his native environment, he can no longer bring himself to shoot the deer. Vietnam has cut into his self-assurance, and the price of survival has been impotence.

Nick has also survived, betting his life daily in games of Russian Roulette in the gambling dens of Saigon. He is a lesser man than Michael, not a Green Beret, whose experiences have been translated into an obsession. When Michael returns to Vietnam to bring him home, Nick's spell of luck, his adaptation to Vietnam, is broken, and he dies in a final game of Russian Roulette. Knowledge, the film implies, is contaminating to those who cannot control it, or are not aware of its power. Nick survives, but only while immersed in Vietnam. Self-destruction follows upon the instant he becomes aware of his feat of survival and the possibility of a return home.

*The Deerhunter* distorts reality (the Vietnamese were not irredeemably brutal and, all reports suggest, never inflicted Russian Roulette upon American POWs) to promote reconciliation at the price of falsifying the recent past. In doing so, it asks for a familiar response: sympathy for the wounded and applause for the brave. *The Deerhunter* skilfully uses the figure of the Green Beret to show that only the very special could survive the

horror and contamination of Vietnam. The authority given by the Green Beret clearly impressed the director, Michael Cimino, since he went so far as to claim wartime membership of the Special Forces, which his Pentagon service record does not substantiate.<sup>43</sup>

*Apocalypse Now* (1979) attempted to encapsulate the totality of America's experience in Vietnam within the boundaries of a single film. In director Francis Coppola's words, its aim was "to look at the heart of what the war was really like, what it looked and felt like" so as to "create a film experience to give the audience a sense of the horror, madness, sensuousness, and moral dilemma of the war."<sup>44</sup> To examine the heart of the war (the script was based upon Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*), *Apocalypse Now* considers Green Beret Colonel Walter Kurtz, accused of murder by the Army command. It details the journey up the Nung river of Captain Benjamin Willard to find and kill Kurtz, who has retreated into the jungle with his native army, and is thought to be hopelessly insane.

Willard pursues a dual mission: his official, if covert, object to kill (or in the secret language of the CIA, to "terminate with extreme prejudice")<sup>45</sup> the Colonel; and his personal ambition, to penetrate the mystery of Kurtz, to discover what it was he learned to lead him so far astray. Though Willard maintains a spectator's detachment from much of the war (he is not a Green Beret, but an officer in the 173rd Airborne Regiment, a more orthodox elite) he has a kinship with Kurtz. Unlike the senior officers or the ordinary soldiers, both Willard and Kurtz are creatures of the war. Both are fascinated by the secret knowledge of human affairs *in extremis* they are sure it contains. Both have committed "passionless killings" in the course of the war, and neither can return home. Willard has returned to Vietnam after finding it impossible to re-adapt to America. Having divorced his wife, he is mid-way through his second tour and feels the need of a mission lest his powers slip away. Kurtz has broken, not just from his family, but from the Army, and retreated into the jungle. Willard therefore finds Kurtz seductive, as the emblem of his own potential madness if he were to abandon totally his detachment.

Willard's journey upriver is through a kaleidoscope of the war, a dense interplay of sound, image, and incident, which encompasses almost every feature of Vietnam. Knowledge forms the dynamic of the film. It comes first from a secret dossier on Kurtz which Willard has been given. This details his promising career, which saw him heading for a "top-slot" in the Army, until he developed a fixation about Vietnam after his first tour

<sup>43</sup> Richard Grenier, "A New Patriotism?", *Commentary*, 67 (1979), 78-91.

<sup>44</sup> Adair, p. 145.

<sup>45</sup> An authentic CIA expression.

in 1964. After submitting a secret report on the war to the President, he applied, at the late age of 38, to join the Green Berets. The Army refused him three times, but finally gave in when Kurtz threatened to resign. He returned to Vietnam in 1967, as a Green Beret.

Once again, it is knowledge, immersion in the secrets of the war, which permits the Green Beret to judge and act. On his return, Kurtz mounted a successful operation (code-named *Archangel*) entirely on his own initiative, without the authority of his superiors. "He just started up and did it," admires Willard, "what balls!" Kurtz's crime is revealed to have been the murder of four South Vietnamese civilians he was convinced were double agents. Willard himself is capable of such ruthlessness. He has assassinated six men while on assignment with the CIA. On his journey, Willard does whatever is necessary to reach his goal: he sanctions the destruction of a Viet Cong village at the mouth of the river; his mission results in the death of all but one of the boat's crew; and he shoots dead a Vietnamese girl, wounded in a skirmish with the boat, who is an impediment to his mission.

At the end of the river, Willard finally confronts Kurtz in his jungle fortress. All about is evidence of his power: the rebel army, composed of Americans, Viet Cong, North Vietnamese, and Montagnard tribespeople – all loyal to Kurtz; a spaced-out war photographer, in awe of the Colonel ("You don't talk with that man, you listen to him. He has enlarged my mind," he says.); and, in particular, the presence of an officer, sent on the same mission as Willard some months earlier, who has succumbed to Kurtz. An intercepted letter sent to his family, which Willard reads, is scrawled "Sell the house, sell the kids, I'm never coming home."

Hesitantly, Kurtz reveals himself to Willard. Willard is told what he already suspects: that experience and self-knowledge are everything in this war, and that he and Kurtz are brothers:

I've seen the horrors, the horrors that you have seen . . . It's impossible for words to describe what is necessary to those who do not know . . . horror, horror. Horror has a face, and you must make a friend of horror. Horror and mortal terror are your friends, if they are not, they are enemies to be feared. [All quotations from film soundtrack.]<sup>46</sup>

Kurtz's awakening ("It seems a thousand centuries ago," he says) came during his first visit to Vietnam, with an experience of the ruthless brutality of the Viet Cong. After his men had inoculated some children against polio,

<sup>46</sup> *Apocalypse Now*, Elektra Records, K-62025.

the Viet Cong came, and cut off the inoculated arms. Kurtz then realized, with a diamond clarity, why the enemy were the stronger:

these men, not monsters, trained cadres, these men who fought with their hearts, had families and children, were filled with love, but who had the strength... to do that... The strength!

He then offers Willard his own prescription for American success in Vietnam:

You have to have men who are moral, and yet at the same time, who are able to utilise their primordial instinct to kill, without feeling, without passion, without judgement... for it's judgement that defeats us.

Kurtz refers, not just to the enemy, but to an idealized image of his own unit, the Green Berets. He tells Willard, "If I had 10 divisions of such men, our troubles here would be over, very quickly."

Many critics have regarded Kurtz's message, and the closing scenes of *Apocalypse Now*, as unsatisfactory, usually pointing out that Coppola began filming without a completed script, and come to a conclusion via multiple rewrites and sessions of improvisations with his actors. Certainly, there are weaknesses and inconsistencies, but, in the framework of the Green Beret myth, Kurtz's message is consistent. Gilbert Adair is wrong to dismiss it because it suggests only genocide and the removal of all civilized restraint.<sup>47</sup> That is the point. To be truly successful, Kurtz concludes, an elite fellowship must become, not just the equal of the enemy in brutality, but his master. This revelation is curiously foreshadowed for Willard in an encounter with a soldier at the last American outpost on the river. "Soldier, do you know who's in charge here?" asks Willard. "Yeh," he replies, and turns away. The implication is clear – the enemy.

As in *The Deerhunter*, knowledge is depicted as contaminating, though in *Apocalypse Now* America also contaminates Vietnam. Kurtz, despite his knowledge, is tired; he cannot return to the fold, and he seeks release. Willard is his chosen instrument, and Kurtz hints to him, "If I were to die, Willard... I would hope someone would go to my home, and tell my son what I tried to achieve here." In the mythology of Sir James Frazer's *The Golden Bough*, to which the film alludes, Kurtz is the old King, who must die and be replaced to secure collective vitality. But Willard is not the new King – significantly, he is not a Green Beret – and has been told by Kurtz that he is not an assassin, but "an errand boy, sent by grocery

<sup>47</sup> Adair, p. 164.

clerks, to collect a bill.” Kurtz wants to die, and in killing him Willard carries out the orders of a superior officer – Kurtz himself.<sup>48</sup> Kurtz has calculated the effect of his own death as he has that of countless others. He knows that Willard can kill without succumbing to the desire to succeed him and perpetuate the renegade army, and will therefore survive to carry his testament back to the world. Willard and Kurtz are finally united by an awareness of the futility of Kurtz’s achievement. Sailing away, back downriver, Willard does not cancel a B 52 bomber raid on the fortress (scheduled to take place if he should fail), and so he seals the fate of Kurtz’s followers.

In the popular culture of the Vietnam War, the Green Beret has provided a focus for traditional heroics; for ideological expositions of America’s purposes in Vietnam; and for expression of the American experience of defeat. As Samuel Huntington points out in *The Soldier and the State*, in America the military profession has traditionally been unpopular, considered un-American, and a threat to liberty.<sup>49</sup> The almost unique popularity of the Green Berets in the early years of the Vietnam War can be ascribed to the general confidence and enthusiasm of the Kennedy era. The Green Berets were popular because, in ideals and ingenuity, they seemed to personify all that was best about America. An identification with the enemy was a virtue; the Green Berets were America’s own ideological soldiers, the equal of the Viet Cong in a new kind of war. When, in Vietnam, this type of struggle proved largely unintelligible to the general public, the continuing popularity of the Green Berets relied upon this identification with the enemy; it represented a faith that someone on the American side knew what the Vietnam War was about, and how to win it. Notably, much of the wartime pro-Green Beret fiction rests upon this propaganda point; trust the Green Berets, they declare, the trained, committed soldiers who know what must be done.

Despite the failure of the American effort in Vietnam, and the great unpopularity of the armed forces with elements of the public, the Green Berets remained a focus for popular culture. Now, however, the image drew upon their subversive potential as an anarchic, anti-establishment elite. The Green Beret was depicted as literally the domestic enemy, and

<sup>48</sup> John Pym, “An Errand Boy’s Journey,” *Sight and Sound*, 49 (Winter 1979/80), 9–11, makes a similar point; however, he does not discriminate between Willard and Kurtz in terms of the Green Berets.

<sup>49</sup> Samuel Huntington, *The Soldier and the State* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1957), pp. 154–55. Large standing armies, general staffs, and military schools have historically been seen as threats to liberty and democracy.

furthermore, as the soldier most intimately associated with the war, representative of all Vietnam veterans. His select knowledge was evoked to imply flaws in American ideology, and the culpability of the public in America's defeat.

Both *The Deerhunter* and *Apocalypse Now* draw upon the figure of the Green Beret, though to different effect. Both films use dual protagonists (Willard/Kurtz; Michael/Nick) in order simultaneously to symbolize, and yet transcend, the American experience of defeat. In *The Deerhunter*, the Green Beret is used as a symbol of special American strength. Only Michael can consider with detachment, and hence survive, the contamination of Vietnam (the enemy), which traps and destroys the unwary, such as Nick. In essence, this is a traditional and positive image of the Green Beret, and reflects *The Deerhunter's* basic faith in America. It even suggests that, with an entire Army of Michaels, the war might have been won.

In contrast, *Apocalypse Now* draws upon the subversive potential of the image; America is her own enemy, contaminating Vietnam. Kurtz is an anarchic soldier, out on his own, beyond the boundaries of civilization. The Green Beret in *Apocalypse Now* is a symbol of contaminating self-knowledge and independence, which can be transcended only by a non-Green Beret, aware of, but able to reject, the symbol's seductive appeal. *Apocalypse Now* therefore reaches a fundamentally different conclusion: that such an elite fellowship is ultimately futile, because in emulating the enemy it makes Americans terrorists whose actions no "superior" ideology can either excuse or redeem. To paraphrase a famous statement made during the war, it would become necessary to destroy Vietnam in order to save it.<sup>50</sup>

In his commencement address to the US Military Academy, West Point, on 27 May 1981, President Reagan spoke of America's noble cause in Vietnam, and declared: "the era of self-doubt is over." Appropriately, it is the Green Beret, the soldier at the heart of the Vietnam War, who has been recruited to express such a reappraisal of American involvement, and restore Vietnam as a fit subject for the popular imagination. The proposed Shatner-Eastwood project would presumably disregard introspection (or self-doubt) to concentrate upon American courage, in a Cold War context

<sup>50</sup> From the remark, "It became necessary to destroy the town in order to save it," said by an American officer after the destruction of Ben Tre by American firepower during the Tet '68 Communist offensive. During *Apocalypse Now*, Kurtz is heard to say on an intercepted radio broadcast: "We must kill them all, cow after cow, pig after pig, village after village. . .," and, as in *Heart of Darkness*, he leaves a final testament to this effect. Glimpsed briefly in the film, it has scrawled across its pages the words, "Nuke them all."

indicated by Eastwood's recent film, *Firefox* (1982). Probably, given its subject matter, it would assert a continuity in Vietnamese brutality, during and after the war.<sup>51</sup>

A similar absence of reflection is visible in *The A-team*, currently one of the top-rated television shows in America.<sup>52</sup> *The A-team* draws upon the subversive image of the Green Berets, and details the activities in America of four renegade soldiers on the run from the military authorities. But they are not criminals, as the voice-over at the beginning of each episode carefully explains:

Ten years ago, a crack commando unit was sent to prison by a military court for a crime they didn't commit. These men promptly escaped from a maximum security stockade to the Los Angeles underground. Today, still wanted by the Government, they survive as soldiers of fortune. If you have a problem, if no-one else can help, and if you can find them, maybe you can hire the A-team.

In the series, the experience of Vietnam is not contaminating; indeed it is made to seem almost wholesome. The war is referred to frequently, but not as a dark secret. Instead, the characters reminisce, smile, and say, "Just like in Nam." They have no guilt or bad memories about Vietnam; even the crime they are accused of is not murder, as in *Apocalypse Now* or the Rhealt case, but simple bank robbery. Each episode is based upon the customary Green Beret formula, and achieves a synthesis of subversive violence and Americanism: the resourceful elite (plus a reporter they have recruited) use criminal methods against criminals (including members of the establishment), justified by the assistance they give to the weak, and by their commitment to basic American values. Every week, the mythical Green Berets take up arms against a host of other familiar figures: the grasping landlord, the crooked lawyer, the Southern redneck, the Hell's Angel, the bent cop, or the corrupt sheriff. Once in reality an ideological soldier, the product of a confident society, and America's hope in the Third World, the Green Beret now fights his fantasy battles in the domestic arena of police thrillers, World War II dramas, soap operas, and quiz shows.

<sup>51</sup> The Green Beret still serves as the traditional hero in contemporary "potboilers" about Vietnam, almost as if the war had not been lost. See, for instance, James Hudson, *Five Fingers* (London: Corgi, 1979) and Jack Hamilton Teed, *Fireforce* (London: Star, 1981).

<sup>52</sup> For background material on the origins of the series see John Wyver, "Hearts, Minds, and TV Ratings," *The Listener*, 16 June 1983, p. 8. *The A-team* is currently one of the most popular programmes shown by the British ITV network, averaging nine million viewers weekly. See Peter Fiddick, "Audience Research," *The Listener*, 25 Aug. 1983 and subsequent weeks.