Balcony on the Pacific:
Vietnam to 1946

WOUNDS OF WAR
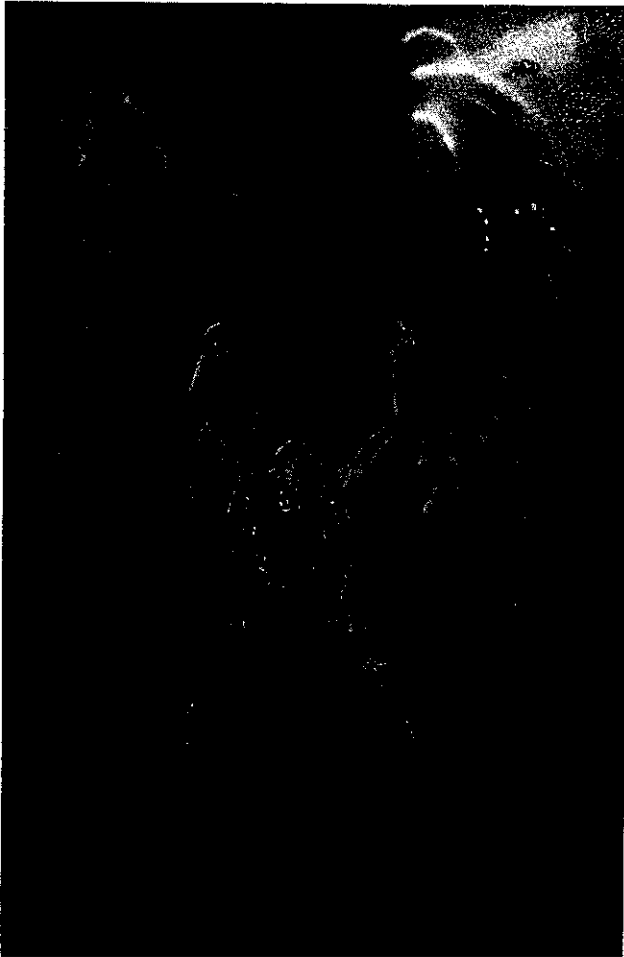
The Vietnam War is fading into history. For many young people, the long and bloody struggle between U.S.-backed South Vietnam and communist North Vietnam is best known through Hollywood movies, such as *Platoon*, *Apocalypse Now*, and *Rambo*. Yet the Vietnam conflict was an American tragedy, and it still casts a long shadow on this country's culture and politics. Over 58,000 U.S. soldiers were killed and more than 304,000 were wounded in Vietnam. For those drafted into the war, Vietnam was often a nightmare that ended adolescence. The dense, tangled landscapes of Southeast Asia, with their strange place names — Da Nang, Khe Sanh, Plain of Jars — and people with radically different language, customs, and dress, must have seemed totally alien to a nineteen-year-old who had just arrived from Ohio or Kansas. These young soldiers often had to contend with the prospect of imminent death from an enemy they rarely, if ever, glimpsed.

Along with personal tragedy, the war also brought national humiliation. While the United States was proving it was the world's most technologically advanced nation by putting men on the Moon, it was also losing a war against a primitive, Third World country whose citizens lived lives that were medieval in their simplicity. When the war ended with

victory for North Vietnam, the American people had to confront the fact that thousands of lives and billions of dollars had been wasted.

Yet if the United States came away scarred from the war, the cost to Vietnam was far greater. Over three million Vietnamese people lost their lives in the conflict. The U.S. Air Force dropped more bombs on North Vietnam than it did on Japan during World War II. In South Vietnam, U.S. warplanes, intending to deprive North Vietnamese guerilla forces of cover, devastated the environment by spraying chemical defoliants over vast tracts of jungle. In day-to-day fighting, many villages and cities were razed.

Journalists covering the Vietnam War had unprecedented access to troops and actual combat, and the brutal reality of the conflict was delivered to the American public on nightly television news bulletins. As the American people witnessed villages burned to the ground and Vietnamese civilians massacred, antiwar protests and civil unrest in the United States escalated.

▼ Vietnamese children, their flesh burning with napalm dropped by U.S. planes, run screaming. This famous photograph came to symbolize the awful effect of the war on Vietnam's civilian population.

Vietnam, which the French called their "balcony on the Pacific," lies on the edge of Southeast Asia. It is bordered by China to the north, Laos and Cambodia to the west, and the South China Sea to the east. A long, narrow country, Vietnam is 1,025 miles (1,650 kilometers) from top to bottom. It has four distinct areas.

The densely populated Red River Delta, where the capital city of Hanoi is located, lies to the north. The large and fertile Mekong Delta, which is home to Ho Chi Minh City (formerly Saigon), lies to the south. In between lies a coastal plain that is heavily populated. The Annamese Cordillera mountain chain takes up two-thirds of the country. Vietnam's climate is generally hot and humid, with monsoon rains and frequent typhoons.

VIETNAM'S PAST

Before U.S. involvement in Vietnam, few Americans could have located Vietnam on a map. Yet this small, mountainous country has a history that began over three thousand years ago, with the emergence of a Vietnamese people in what is now North Vietnam. Chinese warriors invaded this area and ruled it for a thousand years, between 100 B.C. and 900 A.D. Although the Vietnamese repeatedly rebelled against the Chinese occupation, their own culture became inextricably linked with that of China. The Vietnamese, for example, adopted China's Confucian philosophy, with its respect for the past, as well as China's Buddhist religion.

The Chinese occupation also left the Vietnamese people with a deep antagonism towards foreign domination. Unfortunately, the arrival of Europeans in the sixteenth century led to more foreign interference, first by the Portuguese and then later by the French.

FRENCH OCCUPATION

After a long struggle, French troops finally conquered Vietnam in 1883. That same year, the French lumped together Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos to create the colonial territory of French Indochina. The Vietnamese never stopped rebelling against this foreign occupation, and in the 1930s there were Vietnamese strikes against the French and also executions of rebels by the colonial authorities.

During World War II (1939–1945), France was conquered by Germany and ruled by a Nazi-approved fascist regime. Germany ceded French Indochina to its Axis partner Japan, but administration of the territory continued under the French.

The future leader of North Vietnam, Ho Chi Minh, first came to prominence during the war. Ho had been away from his native Vietnam for thirty years. He had lived in Paris, where he embraced left-wing politics, and he had traveled to such places as the Soviet Union and China. After ending up in Bangkok, Thailand, he made contact with several rebel Vietnamese factions, which he united under his leadership as the "Vietminh." During the war he led the resistance against the French and Japanese, receiving arms and supplies from both China and the United States.

Ho Chi Minh — his name translates to "he who enlightens" in Vietnamese — led the Vietnamese communists from 1945 until his death in 1969. A slight figure, Ho suffered from tuberculosis, malaria, and dysentery, but he was an incredibly resilient and charismatic man. Originally named Nguyen Tat Thanh, Ho was the son of a teacher. As a young man, he taught briefly, then became a sailor and traveled the world. After World War I, he settled in Paris, where he came into contact with leftist political groups. Ho was greatly inspired by the communist revolution in Russia and became a founding member of the French Communist Party.

When the war ended, Ho, like many Vietnamese, expected that the French would leave Vietnam along with the defeated Japanese. In a 1945 speech before 100,000 people in the Vietnamese city of Hanoi, Ho declared Vietnam to be an independent country. "The oppressed the world over are wrestling back their independence," he said. "We should not lag behind. Under the Vietminh banner, let us valiantly march forward." France, however, wanted to keep its Far Eastern empire, and it would struggle against Ho and the Vietminh for the next nine years.

When the French finally left Vietnam in 1954, the country was divided into communist North Vietnam and non-communist South Vietnam. Ho became leader of North Vietnam, but until his death in 1969, he would seek to unite the entire country into one communist nation.