

# Vietnam War Stories: Stories from All Sides

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**Abstract**—Wars are often described and discussed from a single point of view. *Vietnam War Stories: Stories from All Sides* is an interactive digital storytelling platform that incorporated video interviews recorded from over 150 Vietnam War veterans and survivors from all sides, including U.S., North Vietnam, South Vietnam, Europe, and Asia on a historically accurate map. This project utilizes the perspectives of network science to integrate digital historical multimedia artifacts into a coherent network of linked resources that can then be visualized and represented in an interactive prototype. This allows the historians, researchers, and scholars to easily access the previously undocumented and segmented historical content, and easily explore connections between them. It also serves as an educational platform, allowing the public to navigate war stories in a highly personal and engaging fashion. Most importantly, “Vietnam War Stories” enables historical argumentation and interpretations of the individual experiences of Vietnam War by presenting multiple accounts and perspectives from primary sources as previously undocumented evidence of both sides of the Vietnam War. Furthermore, “Vietnam War Stories” will inform the design of future platforms that will offer the veterans a way to connect with other veterans and survivors and empower them with a channel to share their own stories.

**Index Terms**—War Memories, Digital Heritage, Digital History, Digital Historical Argumentation, Interactive Digital Storytelling, Video Narratives, Crowdsourcing, Geographical & Geospatial Information System

## I. INTRODUCTION

*“After the battle we did our body count. This guy (North Vietnamese soldier), he was like a sergeant, he had a book and in it was a letter he had written and had not posted. He was saying the same things we complained about. Now I look back at it and realize he was just like me.”*

Vietnam veteran Arthur Barham shared this story during an interview Professor Osgood conducted several years ago for *My Vietnam Your Iraq*, a PBS documentary broadcast in 2011 [15]. Barham reflected that while he was able to send his letter home, the enemy combatant, another young man, was not. This story became the inspiration for this project.

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“Vietnam War Stories: Stories from All Sides” aims to identify engaging ways to bring scholars and the general public in direct contact with the lived experiences of both American and Vietnamese combatants or civilians who participated in the Vietnam War & American War. Through the lens of first person video narratives, “Vietnam War Stories” documents the Vietnam War through a wide range of first-hand accounts, which provide a unique window into the complexities of this controversial war, while offering a more holistic and personal record that will contribute to extant research and scholarship. “Vietnam War Stories” brings new insight into war through intimate personal narratives of involvement in the war which are key to understanding the history of the Vietnam War/American War and its profound impact on both the United States and Vietnam. Likewise, in addition to understanding the political and societal impact of the war, this project reflects on the role of memory autobiographical memory, distorted memory, emotive memory and the importance of building empathy by humanizing the enemy. It provides diverse perspectives on a war too often described and discussed from a single point of view.

The time is now ripe to document these accounts, as veterans in both countries are aging and willing to share their stories. To date more than 150 video interviews have been recorded and there continues to be an on-going effort to add interviews to the database. The interviews feature a broad sampling of topics and reveal how all sides were affected during and after the war. For example, while American veterans may not have been revered upon return, the situation for South Vietnamese veterans and refugees was significantly worse as many were sent to reeducation camps or forced to flee Vietnam. Although they liberated the country, many North Vietnamese civilians and veterans lived through 30 consecutive years of war beginning in 1945. The effects of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), Agent Orange, and physical scars have created a difficult time for many veterans and civilians. The experiences of marginalized and forgotten individuals in the Vietnam War must become part of the collective narrative, along with the contributions of those from other countries, such as Korea and Australia. Now, some forty to fifty years later, aging veterans from all these countries are willing to share their experiences.

The Vietnam War Stories interactive digital storytelling platform utilizes the perspectives of network science to in-

tegrate digital historical multimedia artifacts into a coherent network of linked resources that can then be visualized and represented in an interactive prototype. This allows the historians, researchers, and scholars to easily access the previously undocumented and segmented historical content, and easily explore connections between them. It also serves as an educational platform, allowing the public to navigate war stories in a highly personal and engaging fashion. Most importantly, “Vietnam War Stories” enables historical argumentation and interpretations of the individual experiences of Vietnam War by presenting multiple accounts and perspectives from primary sources as previously undocumented evidence of both sides of the Vietnam War. Furthermore, “Vietnam War Stories” will inform the design of future platforms that will offer the veterans a way to connect with other veterans and survivors and empower them with a channel to share their own stories. The success of “Vietnam War Stories” can serve as an example for other digital humanity platforms to follow.

## II. RESEARCH BACKGROUND

The dominant discourse in public history of the Vietnam War has focused on the suffering and pain of American veterans [1], [5], [7]–[9], [17]. Many nations attempt to diminish the record of mixed emotions that mark the experience of its soldiers and to contain legacies of trauma and pain in order to justify the sacrifice their war policies necessitated. In the context of this discourse, soldiers are honored as patriots—which they may have been—and praised for their heroic service. At the same time, memorializations that emphasize honor and patriotism overshadow the full record of combatant feelings and experience, and in effect places distance between the commonality of human experience that transcends national borders.

As a result, notions of a patriotic war that defended the interests of the American homeland and justified the sacrifice of human lives have had difficulty taking hold in both political and cultural circles. While there are those who defend American actions in Southeast Asia and praise the loyalty and sacrifice of American veterans, there are a plethora of films and novels about Vietnam that privilege soldier suffering and question patriotic sentiments and national interests. Even the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington, D.C, focuses its aesthetic and emotional message on death and loss.

## III. METHODS

The project extends, rather than duplicates, the information available through existing Vietnam War websites and databases (e.g., The Library of Congress Veterans History Project [21]; The Vietnam Center & Archive at Texas Tech University [22]; The West Point Center for Oral History [23]; Wilson Center [25]; The History Channel [20]; Vietnam War Interactive [24]). We aim to identify engaging ways to bring scholars and the general public in direct contact with the lived experiences of both American and Vietnamese combatants or civilians who participated in the Vietnam War/American War. Through the lens of first person video narratives, we document the Vietnam

War through a wide range of first-hand accounts which provide a unique window into the complexities of this controversial war, while offering a more holistic and personal record that will contribute to extant research and community engagement. To date more than 150 video interviews have been recorded and there continues to be an on-going effort to add interviews to the database. The interviews feature a broad sampling of topics and reveal how all sides were affected during and after the war. For example, while American veterans may not have been revered upon return, the situation for South Vietnamese veterans and refugees was significantly worse as many were sent to reeducation camps or forced to flee Vietnam. Although they liberated the country, many North Vietnamese civilians and veterans lived through 30 consecutive years of war beginning in 1945.

## IV. STORIES FROM ALL SIDES

“Vietnam War Stories: Stories from All Sides of the Vietnam War” emphasizes the shared experience of soldiers on both sides of the war by establishing a geospatial and network-science structure in which to present the experiences of combatants and civilians on both sides of the war. Through the lens of first person video narratives, “Vietnam War Stories” builds on the human framing of the war already established in American culture while simultaneously addressing the imbalance that has placed the travails of veterans almost completely on the American side to the exclusion of the Vietnamese [4], [10], [12], [16], [26].

For example, the following reflection on the horror of B-52 bombing and the U.S. Militarys use of chemical weapons (i.e., Agent Orange) is a story that is commonly depicted in popular media.

*“and they bombed from 30,000 feet... and this whole valley just completely turned upside down and just completely turned into a fireball as far as you could see and you didnt hear it happening because they were so high and then we would push through that and it was still hot, still burning, still the heat, and there was still the chemical and we still took fire... and you think ‘how in the hell could anybody live through this.’ ”—Suel Jones, U S Marine Corps.*

The following account of a similar bombing from a North Vietnamese veteran describes the experience in similar ways. There are many other shared experiences on the battlefield such as this that are captured in the video interviews.

*“But the reality was more terrible than that. As an experienced soldier, you always knew when the B-52 was coming. Suddenly the battlefield became very quiet and all the recon planes and helicopters and other stuff left the region. Then we knew that the B-52 were coming, but we didnt know where the bomb would come. You sit there like a duck trying to cover yourself and waited. I lost one of the hearing in my ears in one of the B-52 bombings and lots of my friends died in that bombing, 1971.”—Nguyen Ngoc Hung, North Vietnam Army.*

In addition, not only the former enemies share similar sentiments, there are many Vietnamese refugees that fled and grew up in the U.S. Their lives are continuing to be affected even though their voices are not documented or shared with the public.

*“and there were a lot of bombings and because we lived in the countryside, there were quite a lot of that. That was my earliest memory of the war and then, just basically, I just never thought anything was different, you know, after a few years, you think that is just the way of life.”*—Haley Nguyen, Vietnamese refugee.

## V. INTERACTIVE DIGITAL STORYTELLING PLATFORM

While there is a lot of traditional historical scholarship on Vietnamese and comparative Vietnamese/American experience in the war, their shared experiences are typically not made available to the general public due to the overly Americanized public-sphere view of the war.

Fig. 1 illustrates our interactive digital storytelling platform, “Vietnam War Stories: Stories from All Sides”. Historians, scholars, and the general public will be able to search and filter these previously undocumented video interviews by region, time period, affiliations, and topics.

Throughout our study, many American/Vietnam veterans have expressed their interest in finding connections to the unit they served with. With “Vietnam War Stories”, they will be able to filter the videos by region or time period, and subsequently share with others and start a conversation. Teachers can prepare a lesson plan with segmented clips, eliminating the need to sort through several sections of a single DVD or finding several segments in an online film (e.g., YouTube). Users can search by topic that they are interested in to identify common shared experiences from all sides (e.g., agent orange, anti-war movement, a specific battle they have heard about). The network/geospatial structure of the site helps the users find, and then articulate, these similarities that would otherwise be difficult and almost impossible to uncover. Our argument is that young men and women may go to war and fight against one another, yet have similar hopes and dreams for their future. After engaging in the content, the audience will have an understanding towards developing a critical perspective that they may not have thought about before.

“Vietnam War Stories” provides significant enhancements by offering what these online collections/databases lack shared stories from both Vietnam and the United States. Our goal is to build on lessons learned from Vietnam War Stories: Stories from All Sides, in which we analyzed and annotated existing interview data and designed and implemented a proof-of-concept interactive digital storytelling platform, in order to understand several important factors that would make for a successful public humanities project, such as:

- 1) profiling types of materials that veterans or those touched by the Vietnam War are eager to share,

- 2) understanding options for converting materials to digital form following best practices,
- 3) modeling the materials along with the documentary content to establish the necessary connections between the two,
- 4) exploring options for more automated submission and review of contributed content,
- 5) identifying the barriers (i.e., demographics, geospatial, etc.) for receiving this content and potential solutions, and
- 6) providing a platform for historians and scholars to make better argumentations of war time experiences based on multiple perspectives presented from all sides.

In addition to the balanced viewpoint that the “Vietnam War Stories” contributes to the vision of Vietnam that is dominant in the public sphere, the crowdsourced nature of the interactive digital storytelling platform makes possible further contributions to historical scholarship on the Vietnam war. We consult the recent digital humanities literature on crowdsourcing and identify projects that serve as exemplars to avoid pitfalls and prepare for challenges [2], [3], [6], [11], [13], [14], [18]. “Vietnam War Stories” generates an iteratively designed interactive digital storytelling platform for scholars and the public to interact with the materials and easily access annotated, segmented portions of interviews. For example, a user interested in soldiers whose Military Occupational Specialty (MOS) was to create art in support of the war effort, could search for and be provided with access to a number of segmented movie clips dealing with this topic. Examples include introductions to an American soldier and a North Vietnamese soldier. “Vietnam War Stories” creates a platform that incorporates digital argumentation mechanisms as a means of engaging the scholars and the veteran communities in both the United States and Vietnam. The materials presented could assist the construction of historical argumentation of the experiences of Vietnam War veterans on both sides.

## VI. CONCLUSION

Ultimately, the “Vietnam War Stories: Stories from All Sides” digital interactive storytelling platform seeks to move away from debates about the morality of the war and instead explore questions of how human beings on all sides shared feelings of fear, anguish, or empathy. The Vietnam War Stories interactive prototype is designed to look at the ways war becomes inscribed on the life histories of ordinary individuals. Soldiers and civilians who experienced the horrors of war are left to reconcile as they assess what they encountered for years after the conflict ended. This project's inclusion of both combatants and civilians serves as an important reminder of the broad social consequences of war, and how all those involved continue to suffer from its legacy in ways that an American public has long forgotten. By giving voice to individuals violently displaced by war and by engaging with memories of war, resettlement and displacement, the interviews tell the stories of refugees reconstructing lives and identities in the aftermath of forced migration.



Fig. 1. Screenshot of Vietnam War Stories: Stories from All Sides.

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