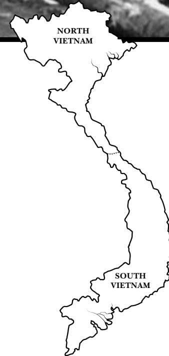
American Museum of the
Moving Image
SCREENING AMERICA

# DearAmerica: Letters Home From Vietnam

*Home Box Office. First broadcast April 3, 1988. 90 minutes. Directed by Bill Couturie. Produced by Bill Couturie and Thomas Bird. Written by Bill Couturie and Richard Dewhurst from the book edited by Bernard Edelman. Edited by Stephen Stept.*

Dana Stone/UPI

**American soldiers in the 173rd Airborne Brigade entrench themselves in North Vietnamese Army bunkers during battle, 1967.**




## WITH THE VOICES OF

*Tom Berenger, Ellen Burstyn, J. Kenneth Campbell, Richard Chaves, Josh Cruze, Willem Dafoe, Robert De Niro, Brian Dennehy, Kevin Dillon, Matt Dillon, Robert Downey, Jr., Michael J. Fox, Mark Harmon, John Heard, Fred Hirz, Harvey Keitel, Elizabeth McGovern, Judd Nelson, Sean Penn, Randy Quaid, Tim Quill, Eric Roberts, Ray Robertson, Howard Rollins, Jr., John Savage, Raphael Sbarge, Martin Sheen, Tucker Smallwood, Roger Steffens, Jim Tracy, Kathleen Turner, Tico Wells, and Robin Williams.*

*Dear America: Letters Home From Vietnam* is a film in which letters—almost all of them written by American soldiers to their families and friends back home—are used to tell a personal history of the Vietnam War. The film covers the war from the Tonkin Gulf Resolution in 1964 to the return of American prisoners in 1973. A brief sequence before the main titles gives a preview of the film's structure—actual scenes from the war are placed beside home movies and still photographs taken by soldiers while in Vietnam, as well as clips from network newscasts, press conferences, and other related events in the United States. The end of each year is marked by on-screen graphics listing the total number of American soldiers in Vietnam and the rising number of those killed and wounded in action. Thirty-three actors, many of them famous, provide dramatic readings of the letters, and a soundtrack combines original music with popular songs of the 1960s and 1970s.

Dennis Mannion

***Dear America* tells the stories of actual American combat soldiers in Vietnam, using their own words and images.**

Because the film uses actual letters and footage shot during the war, it is considered a documentary, or non-fiction, film. Like fiction films, however, documentaries still aim to tell a specific story. In *Dear America,* the filmmakers wish to emphasize soldiers' voices over other accounts of the war. As the titles at the very beginning of the film announce, "This film is about young men in war. It is their own story, in their own words...Words they wrote home in letters from Vietnam."

**WHAT TO LOOK FOR: THE SOLDIER** *Dear America* clearly tries to create a sympathetic portrayal of America's soldiers in Vietnam. Early on, the film shows them acting just like any other group of young men—playing volleyball, surfing, and clowning around. These scenes emphasize that the soldiers sent to Vietnam were little more than boys, with an average age of nineteen. Once they experienced combat, however, these boys would never be the same again. As one soldier wrote, "You'd be amazed

HBO

**Most combat soldiers in Vietnam were very young, with an average age of nineteen.**

at how much a man can age on one patrol." The film's strongest statement on the subject comes from nurse Linda Vandevanter, who wrote home that she was "sick of facing every day a new bunch of children ripped to pieces." Over hospital scenes of bloodied and wounded teenage soldiers, her letter continues, "They're just kids...18, 19...their whole lives ahead of them cut off. I'm sick to death of it."

Kyoichi Sawada/UPI

**A radioman calls for a medic after his squad leader is wounded, 1967.**

In their eagerness to portray Vietnam veterans in a positive light, the filmmakers downplay or ignore some negative facts about the soldiers. Although in one letter we hear about "too many guys getting messed up," there is no direct mention of the widespread drug abuse among the ranks. Nor is the film very honest about the racial tension within the military, especially following the 1968 assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr. The film does briefly discuss the 1968 My Lai Massacre, in which U.S. troops murdered hundreds of Vietnamese civilians, but it ignores other war crimes. John Kerry, then head of Vietnam Veterans Against the War and now a U.S. senator, testified in 1971 that the My Lai Massacre was not an isolated event, but "was symbolic of a war gone berserk."

Ron Haeberle, LIFE Magazine/© Time Inc.

**Over four hundred people, mostly women, children, and old men, were killed by American soldiers in and around My Lai on March 16, 1968.**

## WHAT TO LOOK FOR: THE REALITY OF WAR

As the newly-arrived boy soldiers head into the jungle for the first combat scenes of *Dear America,* the filmmakers try to recreate their fear and anticipation for the audience. We see the soldiers discover a booby trap set by the Viet Cong, while a letter expresses a common frustration that enemy soldiers stay hidden rather than come out in the open to fight. We hear another letter in which the writer confesses that "there is no way around it. We are all scared."

The filmmakers use a long sequence on the siege at Khe Sanh to summarize their point of view on the war and its aftermath. In January 1968, in the jungle around the village of Khe Sanh, the North Vietnamese army began a large troop buildup. Within a month almost 40,000 Vietnamese soldiers had surrounded the 5,600 Marines stationed there. A subtitle informs us, "Cut off from reinforcements or re-supply, except by air, the Marines dig in." The siege lasted 77 days, despite heavy U.S. bombing, until the North Vietnamese simply withdrew from their positions. *Dear America* presents the siege at Khe Sanh as a symbol for a senseless war in which hundreds

of thousands of American combat soldiers were cut off from their families, their country, even each other, fighting in a conflict they never really understood.

Bettmann

A transport plane drops supplies into the U.S. outpost at Khe Sanh after Marines are surrounded by the North Vietnamese army, 1968.

Bill Hall/UPI

A Marine, wearing a camouflaged helmet, scans the high grass for booby traps while on patrol, 1967.

**WHAT TO LOOK FOR: CHANGING OPINIONS**

The Khe Sanh sequence also stresses the soldiers' increasing lack of faith in the war. In a letter read early in the film, a soldier explains to his aunt and uncle that Americans are in Vietnam because "I would rather fight and stop Communism in South Vietnam than in Kincaid, Humboldt, [or] Kansas City." By the time the film reaches Khe Sanh, the soldiers we see and hear are less willing to repeat this official explanation of their presence in Southeast Asia. Many felt the same way as the soldier who was awarded a Purple Heart in his hospital bed: "They left me sicker than I was before and with a medal I never wanted anyway." The soldier's despair was shared by many in the United States as well, where antiwar sentiment forced President Lyndon Johnson to decline to run for reelection.

For many of the soldiers who fought in Vietnam and survived, coming home was often not a relief but a new ordeal. *Dear America* makes the point that the tragedy of Vietnam did not stop with the men and women who died there. As a subtitle at the end of the film reminds us, "58,132 Americans were lost to the Vietnam War...and nearly 3 million came home."

HBO

As the war progressed, even American troops in Vietnam demonstrated opposition to the war, including the soldier (center) who wears a peace symbol around his neck instead of military identification tags.

## HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

America's direct involvement in Vietnam lasted almost 25 years—from September 1950,

when we sent our first military advisors, to April 30, 1975, when the last U.S. helicopter lifted off the roof of the American embassy in Saigon. At first, few people in the United States understood that the Vietnamese were willing to fight as long as necessary to gain control of their country. As the years progressed and the death toll increased, how-

The Geneva Accords of 1954 separated Vietnam into the Communist-controlled North and the pro-western South, and mandated that elections be held within two years to create a united Vietnam. The elections were never held.

ever, United States government officials, and especially the American public, began to recognize the hidden strength and determination of the opposition. By the 1972 departure of the last combat forces, more than 58,000 Americans were dead, and over 300,000 had been wounded. Nearly 500,000 of the 2,700,000 Americans who served in the war had received less-than-honorable discharges, a measure of the anger common among the military's personnel. As many as two million Vietnamese soldiers and civilians were killed, and the country was devastated by mines, booby traps, and bombs.

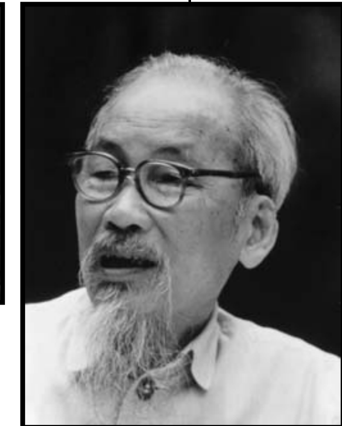
**THE COLD WAR** The U.S. commitment to the war in Vietnam is understandable only when viewed in the context of the American fear of Communism during the Cold War. In the decades following World War II, many Americans believed that the Communist ideas of the Soviet Union threatened the entire world. Communism was described by Eisenhower's secretary of state, John Foster Dulles, as a "godless terrorism which would crush us unless we



restrained it." This belief led American policy makers to try to prevent Communism from spreading to other countries.

Peter Turnley/Black Star

During the Cold War, American leaders feared Soviet military might and the spread of Communist ideas.



Charles Bonnay/Black Star

Ho Chi Minh, leader of the Vietnamese Communist and nationalist party.

**FRENCH INDOCHINA AND THE GENEVA ACCORDS** Before U.S. involvement in Vietnam, the country was part of Indochina, a colony ruled by the French since 1858. In the 1940s, the Vietnamese Communist leader Ho Chi Minh and his party, the Viet Minh, began a movement to gain control of the country. The United States helped the French retain Vietnam because government officials believed that a strong France would help America fight the spread of Communism in Asia.

President Eisenhower began sending money and military advisors to the French government in Vietnam in 1950 for the war effort against Ho Chi Minh's guerilla army. But the Viet Minh, with help from China and the Soviet Union, proved to be a difficult and frustrating enemy. After four years of fighting, all sides met at the 1954 Geneva Accords and agreed to divide Vietnam into two parts: the

North, supported by the Soviet Union, and the South, supported by the West. Elections would be held within two years to create a permanent government of a united Vietnam.

Bettmann/UPI Roto Service

**Vietnamese civilians watch a parade of the People's Army of North Vietnam in training, 1965.**

The leader appointed by the United States in the South, Ngo Dinh Diem, appeared incapable of winning wide support. As a result, the United States and its Western allies prevented the elections called for in the Geneva Accords rather than risk a loss. Instead, the United States sent many advisors and hundreds of millions of dollars in aid to develop the South Vietnamese army, police, and social agencies. Still, by 1961 the Viet Cong, Southern rebels secretly controlled and supplied by the North, were conducting hit and run attacks throughout the South.

**THE DOMINO THEORY** When John F. Kennedy, Jr. became president in 1961, U.S. policy makers viewed Communism as a threat to the survival of democracy. They believed that the loss of Vietnam to Communist forces was only the first step in the fall of all Southeast Asia. This belief was known as the domino theory. Kennedy sent advisors, helicopters, and money to strengthen South Vietnam, but the fighting continued to get worse. After Kennedy's assassination in November 1963, his vice-president and successor, Lyndon Johnson, faced a South Vietnam whose government controlled only 60 percent of its own territory.

By the summer of 1964, secret American naval activities in North Vietnamese waters led to an incident in which North Vietnamese patrol boats were reported to have fired on U.S. ships in the Gulf of Tonkin. Johnson responded by asking Congress for authority to take "all necessary measures" to "repel any armed attack" on American forces. Congress granted these powers in the Tonkin Gulf Resolution, thereby allowing Johnson to begin fighting in Vietnam without making a declaration of war.

**THE WAR ON THE GROUND** The inability of the South Vietnamese to defend their own territory led to the arrival in 1965 of the first U.S. combat units on the beach at Da Nang. The war on the ground was, as the film reveals, dirty and dangerous. The average combat soldier lived in constant fear of snipers, booby traps, and

Bettmann/UPI

**Soldiers on patrol battled natural enemies as well as the Viet Cong, including mud, razor-sharp grass, dense jungle, drenching rains, ants, and mosquitos.**

attacks from an enemy that seemed to disappear and reappear at will. Battles were usually begun by the Viet Cong, often at night. As one soldier reported, "The days are fairly peaceful, but the nights are pure hell." United States policy makers decided to determine victory by body counts, believing that the Viet Cong would give up and go home if enough of its soldiers were killed. After the discovery of miles of underground Viet Cong tunnels and living quarters, Americans finally came to understand the determination of their opponents, who refused to recognize defeat or negotiate a settlement.

Bettmann/UPI

**Members of the Women's Strike for Peace demonstrate outside the Pentagon against the war, 1967.**

**TET AND NATIONAL DISCONTENT** As casualties rose, more and more Americans began to question the wisdom of entry into the war. These doubts increased in February 1968 when the Viet Cong launched their surprise Tet Offensive. By attacking over 100 sites throughout the country, the Viet Cong demonstrated once and for all that they were not on the verge of collapse.

Back home, Americans watching the "living-room war" on their television sets became more divided in their opinions about Vietnam. Some Americans saw the war as an immoral use of force. They viewed the war's supporters, and often the soldiers who fought in it, as murderers. Other Americans, however, even if they came to question the reasons behind the war, viewed those who protested the war as traitors whose disrespect toward authority had to be stopped.

Bettmann/UPI

**Participants in a demonstration sponsored by Students for a Democratic Society display signs calling for racial equality and an end to the war in Vietnam, 1968.**

Bettmann/UPI

**Holding American flags, tens of thousands of construction workers march around New York's City Hall in support of the Vietnam War effort, 1970.**

On March 31, 1968, under fire from anti-war protestors, President Johnson announced he would not run for reelection. Five days later, riots spread across the nation after the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr. Within a month Robert Kennedy, the anti-war Democrat who was likely to be his party's presidential candidate, was himself assassinated. The violence and turmoil of Vietnam appeared to infect the nation.

**WITHDRAWAL** Republican Richard M. Nixon narrowly won the 1968 presidential election and took office promising to find an honorable way to get the United States out of Vietnam. He and his national security advisor, Henry Kissinger, sought an easing of tensions between the United States and Communist governments in the Soviet Union and China.

Public opinion was now strongly against continuing the war in Vietnam. Most Americans, in and out of Congress, no longer viewed the goal of containment as worth the cost of fighting. Nixon began withdrawing ground troops. However, in order to strengthen his hand for hoped-for peace negotiations with the North Vietnamese, he increased the number of bombing raids in North Vietnam and secretly expanded their targets into Laos and Cambodia.

Bettmann/UPI Telephoto

**A woman reacts with horror upon seeing the body of a student who was shot and killed by National Guardsmen during an anti-war rally at Kent State University in Ohio, 1970.**

In 1970, "for the purpose of ending the war in Vietnam and winning the just peace," President Nixon announced the invasion of Cambodia by U.S. and South Vietnamese ground troops. The nation exploded. Protests erupted on college campuses, and Congress voted to repeal the Tonkin Gulf Resolution. By August 1972, when the last U.S. combat troops departed, peace negotiations had been dragging on, unsuccessfully, for four years. The North Vietnamese knew they could outlast the United States' commitment to the war, and they had little doubt they could defeat the South if the Americans withdrew.

**Marines evacuate the last remaining American civilians and South Vietnamese supporters from the roof of the U.S. embassy in Saigon, 1975.**

Nik Wheeler/Black Star

Finally, on the eve of the 1972 presidential election, the U.S. and North Vietnam agreed to a mutual cease-fire. All U.S. military personnel, including pilots, would leave Vietnam, but all other support services would remain in place. In exchange, the North would return all U.S. prisoners of war. Nixon won the election by a landslide, and in January 1973 Congress voted to end funding for military operations in Indochina. For the United States, at least, peace was finally at hand. For many Americans, the fall of Saigon in April 1975 and the evacuation of the last U.S. personnel was a distant end to a long tragedy.

**HEALING THE WOUNDS** By the end of the war, many Americans were unsympathetic to

Ron Bennett

**The national Vietnam War Memorial during ceremonies marking Veterans Day, 1985.**

Vietnam veterans. Veterans were ignored or even, in the words of one critic, looked upon as "drug-crazed, psychopathic baby killers." In movies and on television in the 1970s, when they were portrayed at all, Vietnam veterans usually appeared as loners or emotional cripples. In the late 1970s and early 1980s, however, this image changed.

In 1982, ready to come to terms with its terrible memories of Vietnam, the United States dedicated the Vietnam War Memorial in Washington, D.C. The memorial consists of a wall of black marble built into the earth and engraved with the names of the 58,175 Americans who died in the war. The wall has become a site where veterans, anti-war protestors, and the relatives of dead soldiers can remember and weep together.

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***Education programs*** *at the American Museum of the Moving Image are made possible by grants from The New York Community Trust, The William Fox Jr. Foundation, The New York Times Company Foundation, The Hearst Foundations, JPMorganChase, Independence Community Foundation, Joan and Art Barron, Con Edison, the Michael C. Tuch Foundation, and the Max and Victoria Dreyfus Foundation. Public support is provided by New York City Department of Cultural Affairs, New York State Council on the Arts, and the office of the Queens Borough President.*

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