FRAGGING: WHY U.S. SOLDIERS ASSAULTED THEIR OFFICERS IN VIETNAM[1]

REVIEWED BY FRED L. BORCH III[*]

This is an important book for judge advocates, because it is the first in-depth and comprehensive study of the crime of "fragging" during the Vietnam War. It also is important because it shatters the myth that the killing or maiming of Army and Marine Corps officers and non-commissioned officers (NCOs) with fragmentary grenades or other weapons occurred mostly on the battlefield. Finally, the book is important because it disproves the claim by Vietnam anti-war activists and various academics that anti-war ideology and political antipathy to the United States presence in Southeast Asia played a *direct* role in the fragging of officers and NCOs.

As author George Lepre acknowledges at the outset, soldiers have tried to "frag"—kill or harm—"unpopular comrades since the earliest days of armed conflict."[2] It was during the war in Vietnam, however, that such incidents became sufficiently prevalent to cause the Army and Marine Corps to take institutional steps to stop it. Starting in 1970, prominent U.S. news media sources like the *New York Times* and *Newsweek* began reporting that "fraggings"—a slang word used in both the Army and Marine Corps—were no longer isolated instances, but instead "were averaging about twenty per month."[3] More importantly, some journalists and anti-war activists suggested that these fraggings were proof that the U.S. Armed Forces was disintegrating. Finally, when respected politicians like Montana Senators Mike Mansfield and Lee

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[1] GEORGE LEPRE, WHY U.S. SOLDIERS ASSAULTED THEIR OFFICERS IN VIETNAM (2011).

[2] *Id.* at 1.

[3] *Id*. at 48.

Metcalf insisted on the floor of the U.S. Senate in April 1971 that fragging was a manifestation of a "failure of order within our armed forces" and that the murder of a young West Point officer with a fragmentary grenade was the "insane and senseless action of one soldier" in "an insane and senseless war,"[4] many Americans concluded that the phenomenon of enlisted men assaulting their superiors must be the direct consequence of the unpopular war in Southeast Asia.

The book *Fragging* begins by explaining in general terms that by 1970, the draft, a strong anti-war movement, student protests, and strife in American society resulted in the Army and the Marine Corps being unable to either attract the best young men to serve in uniform or maintain the high disciplinary standards that had existed in both services just five years previously. Subsequent chapters then explain the fragging phenomenon,[5] motivations for it,[6] and institutional steps taken by both the Army and the Marine Corps to stop it—or at least mitigate its effects.[7]

The book illustrates conclusively—chiefly through an exhaustive examination of military police investigations and courts-martial records[8]—that virtually all fraggings or attempted fraggings occurred not on the battlefield, but in rear areas geographically removed from the battlefield. For example, Lepre shows that an oft-repeated claim by a Marine that he witnessed the murders of "five or six officers" during combat in Vietnam was simply false. The story was revealed as a total fabrication after Lepre examined unit personnel rosters and interviewed every commissioned officer assigned to the unit in question; all were still "alive and kicking nearly thirty years later."[9]

But even if fraggings occurred mostly in rear areas—away from the dangers of combat—what was the motivation of those enlisted soldiers who tried to kill or maim their leaders? According to Lepre, the likelihood that a soldier might engage in fragging depended on a variety

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[4] *Id*. at 52–53.
[5] *Id*. at 19–60.
[6] *Id*. at 61–127.
[7] *Id*. at 128–84.
[8] Lepre consulted investigations conducted by the Army and the Marine Corps in Vietnam and also examined the records of trial of fifty-four soldiers and seventeen Marines who were convicted by courts-martial of assaults with explosive devices against fellow servicemembers. *Id*. at 67.
[9] *Id*. at 134.

of factors. For example, McNamara's Project 100,000 permitted the induction of men who previously would have been rejected for military service because of their failure to meet intelligence standards, and who were less adaptable and more likely to have psychiatric problems.[10] Additionally, the degradation of a professional *junior* NCO corps, and its replacement with 'Shake 'n' Bake' NCOs,[11] caused a crisis in small-unit leadership. Finally, drug and alcohol use impaired judgment and lowered inhibitions about using violence against fellow soldiers and Marines.

An additional motivation for fragging was frustration with officers and NCOs who insisted on "vigorous conduct"[12] of military operations, even though President Nixon had announced that American Forces were being withdrawn from Southeast Asia. No soldier or Marine—especially a draftee—"wanted to be the last man killed on the last day of the war."[13]

Finally, racial strife was a factor in some fraggings involving black soldiers and white officers and noncommissioned officers. In particular, African-American soldiers were increasingly angry with what they saw as unfair and racially discriminatory treatment, especially after the shocking assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King, and this anger sometimes led to assaults on superiors.[14] Racial animosity in Vietnam was certainly inflamed by statements from prominent African-American activists like Black Panther Eldridge Cleaver. In writing *To My Black Brothers in Vietnam*, for example, Cleaver exhorted his readers to "start killing the racist pigs who are over there with you giving you orders. Kill General Abrams and his staff, all his officers. Sabotage supplies and equipment, or turn them over to the Vietnamese."[15] While there were no reported attempts to kill Army General Creighton Abrams, the four-star general commanding the Military Assistance Command, Vietnam, or members of his staff, this sort of language must have caused unease among more than a few white officers in Vietnam.

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[10] *Id*. at 63-64.
[11] "Shake 'n' Bake" was pejorative slang referring to "hastily trained or newly assigned or promoted noncommissioned officers in combat units during the Vietnam War." The three word phrase came from a well-known and widely used packaged food product designed to reduce the meal preparation time for baked chicken. Chan Floyd, "Shake 'N' Bake," HISTORICAL DICTIONARY OF THE UNITED STATES ARMY 427–28 (2001).
[12] LEPRE, *supra* note 1, at 84.
[13] *Id*. at 94.
[14] *Id*. at 100–12.
[15] *Id*. at 106–07.

Ultimately, *Fragging* shows that there were a multitude of motivations for soldier and Marine assaults on superior officers and NCOs, and Lepre examines these motivations in a nuanced and logical manner. He does, however, conclude from an analysis of court-martial records that "perceived harassment of subordinates was the *primary reason* for most grenade assaults."[16]

The book's section on "fragging and anti-war activism"[17] is particularly noteworthy, because Lepre concludes that there was no *direct* link between anti-Vietnam War activism and fragging. While conceding that the war was unpopular with many GIs—as it was with many Americans—and that this antiwar sentiment did shape Vietnam-era enlisted culture (and therefore influenced the fraggers), there is no evidence that assaults on superiors were part of a widespread "GI revolt" or "part of a larger political struggle against immoral U.S. policies at home and abroad."[18] On the contrary, Lepre's examination of individual cases found only two instances in which "antiwar or antigovernment utterances" were referenced.[19]

One of the most interesting cases cited by Lepre—demonstrating again that soldiers had very different motivations for assaulting a superior—involved Staff Sergeant Allen G. Cornett, Jr. In 1972, he fragged his unit's executive officer, Lieutenant Colonel (LTC) Donald Bongers, after Bongers made repeated racist, sexually offensive, and vulgar remarks about Cornett's Vietnamese wife and made Cornett's life unbearable by forbidding him from either visiting his wife on weekends or bringing her onto their base. Although Cornett complained about this mistreatment, he was unable to get a satisfactory resolution and took to drinking heavily. On the afternoon of November 30, 1972, Bongers was sitting in the unit's radio room when Cornett tossed a grenade into the building. The quick-acting Bongers managed to jump clear of the blast. Cornett was taken into custody and court-martialed for attempted murder.[20]

At his trial, Cornett was found guilty. But most of his fellow officers and NCOs appeared as witnesses on his behalf and testified that he was a

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[16] *Id*. at 97 (emphasis added).
[17] *Id*. at 115–23.
[18] *Id*. at 115.
[19] *Id*. at 116.
[20] *Id*. at 81–83.

good soldier while LTC Bonger was a poor leader and had treated Cornett unfairly. The fact that Cornett had volunteered for Special Forces, served seven years in Vietnam, been decorated with the Bronze Star Medal with "V" for Valor, and been recommended for the Silver Star almost certainly influenced the court-martial panel that heard his case. The members sentenced Cornett to a year in jail—but no punitive discharge. Consequently, when Cornett finished his time in prison, his request to be restored to duty was approved. He served another seventeen years and retired as a master sergeant in 1989. Since this reviewer served briefly with Cornett in 1983—and heard Cornett talk openly about having been court-martialed for trying to kill a lieutenant colonel—Lepre's recitation of this story is no tall tale.[21] But Cornett's case also shows that, in those few cases where it was appropriate, a fragger could remain in the Army—despite the fact that assaulting a superior officer with the intent to kill or maim him strikes at the very heart of good order and discipline.

Two minor criticisms of this book should be mentioned. First, the subtitle is somewhat off-putting: NCOs were just as likely to be the victims of fraggings as commissioned officers. Second, the book would be better if the author had not included a fifteen-page "comparative analysis" of fragging in the U.S. and Australian armies. Fragging in the Australian forces was never as prevalent as in the U.S. Army and Marine Corps and this explains why the Australians never took any "command-wide action"[22] to prevent fragging. More importantly, since Lepre spends more than 200 pages examining the fragging phenomenon in the Army and Marine Corps, it is difficult for this reviewer to understand how fifteen pages on the Australian experience allows anything but the most superficial comparison to be made. But these are minor criticisms of an otherwise valuable book that deserves to reach a wide audience.

A final note: while fragging is rare in today's professional Army, it is not unheard of, as evidenced by the recent court-martial of Staff Sergeant Alberto B. Martinez for allegedly killing two officers by placing a claymore mine near the window of their office in Tikrit, Iraq, in 2005.

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[21] In 2000, Ballantine Books published Cornett's *Gone Native: An NCO's Story*, in which Cornett recounted his multiple tours as a soldier in Vietnam. In this memoir, he freely admits attempting to murder his superior commissioned officer with a fragmentary grenade.

[22] *Id*. at 199.

Martinez was acquitted by a military panel at Fort Bragg in 2008.[23] Similarly, Army Sergeant Joseph Bozicevich was court-martialed for killing two fellow NCOs "after they criticized him for a series of battlefield blunders" in Iraq in 2008.[24] He was convicted of pre-meditated murder by a panel sitting at Fort Stewart and sentenced to life imprisonment without parole.[25] Both the *Martinez* and *Bozicevich* cases demonstrate that the phenomenon of fragging can also be akin to a war crime. The unfortunate reality is this: no matter how well-trained, well-educated or disciplined its troops; whether deployed on the battlefield or in the rear detachment; a frustrated and discontented soldier among the military ranks can still possess the motivation to commit this type of crime.

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[23] Joe Gould, *Widow Sues for Court Transcript of Husband's Accused Killer*, ARMY TIMES, Feb. 7, 2011.
[24] Michelle Tan, *Trial Begins for Soldier Accused of Killing 2 NCOs*, ARMY TIMES, May 2, 2011, at 32.
[25] Russ Bynum, *Soldier Gets Life, No Parole, in Iraq Slayings*, ARMY TIMES, Aug. 14, 2011, at 3.