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Preface and Acknowledgments

On a warm desert morning on April 30, 2000, I walked out of my house and to the sidewalk to pick up the Sunday Arizona Republic. Little did I know that I soon would embark on a long journey of research and writing.

That day, Betty Reid wrote a story, nearly two full pages long, about a band of brothers, most of them recent graduates of Morenci High School, who had headed to Marine boot camp on July 4, 1966. Within two and a half years, six of the nine died in combat in Vietnam. The newspaper piece articulated well the sorrow of the three who survived as well as the community. As I read the story, I fixated on its importance and how much more probably existed to it.

After reading the piece, I cut it out and filed it away. I already had a number of projects under way on topics ranging from US–Latin American relations to a biography of a prominent antiwar Tennessee senator. Still, I wanted to write a longer version of that Arizona Republic article.

Slowly, I began amassing materials and doing some interviews. Even then, I realized that I needed to know more about the experiences of Americans who served in the front lines in Vietnam. Although several good surveys existed, they largely did not cover people like the nine young men from the Southwest. I backtracked and wrote another book, a macrostory on Vietnam combat soldiers entitled Grunts: The American Combat Soldier in Vietnam. Once that work was completed in 2008, I dived headfirst into this book.

Though I wrote four other books in the past decade, this story was the one that I woke up thinking about each morning and the one on my mind when I fell asleep. It consumed me, all elements of it. I wanted to understand why the nine marched off to war, even as it became increasingly unpopular. I sought to better comprehend how the community shaped
them. I needed to better determine how their friendship played out, both in life and in death. Many more questions arose as I pushed forward, a process that never proceeded fast enough for me or others. Still, after years of hard work, the final product came together.

There are many people to thank for sacrificing their time to assist me. George Herring, my doctoral adviser and a dean of the historians of the Vietnam War, read chapters and provided insightful feedback. He remains the single most important intellectual influence in my life as well as a good friend who never anticipated the frequent phone calls and correspondence that would come years after he sent me out into the academic world.

The same dedication to this book also came from one of my favorite people in the world: Vicki Ruiz. She provided encouragement throughout, from writing grants to finishing the work. During her time at Arizona State University and then at University of California–Irvine, she took time out of her busy schedule to talk with me not only about this project but also about her own work, which strongly shaped my focus on topics related to race and gender. She remains a valued friend and colleague.

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supportive. These individuals, along with numerous others, have been
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Others within the President’s Enrichment Program have become
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More important, we have spent much time together outside the classroom,
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best of what our country produces, hardworking and generous individuals.
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Finally, I have many family and friends to thank for their encouragement
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an academic, she knew the drill when we married. She carried a heavy
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The Morenci Marines
Introduction
A Small Town and the Vietnam War

For weeks in June 1983, tensions had been building in the copper-mining town of Morenci, Arizona, paralleling the rising temperatures in the desert. Since the last major strike in 1967, threats of work stoppages had arisen every three years when negotiations on contracts began. Occasionally, stoppages happened, though they tended to be very short as the company planned for maintenance, and families built their vacations around the anticipated breaks.

This time, however, the stakes were higher because the Phelps Dodge (PD) Company appeared emboldened by the antiunionism of the Reagan administration, which already had crushed the Air Traffic Controllers Union. In their New York high-rise offices, the executives had listened carefully as analysts from the Wharton Business School and others mapped out a strategy to destroy the miners’ union and turn back years of gains by the workers. The negotiations with the Morenci workers would conclude a grand battle for supremacy. In the past, company officials had always avoided hiring scabs and had shut down the mine during negotiations, but now, PD leaders issued ominous warnings about their plans to fire strikers and hire replacements.¹

At midnight on June 30, workers walked off their jobs at the massive open-pit mine, accompanied by their colleagues from the smelter that operated in the shadow of the nearly always fuming smokestacks. “PD will flex its muscles. We’ll flex ours. PD’ll make a few claims, crunch a few numbers, cut a few deals, and then we’ll settle. Everyone will be back at work in a few weeks,” one worker proclaimed. Not everyone agreed. “We’re going to lose this one. The best thing is if the union accepts what
they can so they can hold the union here and keep us together,” another responded, adding, “too many souls owed to the company store.”

This work stoppage lasted much longer than anyone anticipated. Both sides dug in their heels, the workers listening to their union leaders’ promises of victory even as the PD executives prepared for the long haul, secure in their plan to destroy the opposition. The stoppage would bear more of a resemblance to the nine-month stalemate of 1967 and 1968, when many of the men now manning the picket lines had been serving in Vietnam. This time around, however, no prolabor politician resided in the White House, nor had fifty thousand workers walked away from their jobs simultaneously in solidarity with their union brothers. Instead, management decided to take on one small group in isolated southeastern Arizona.

That fateful day, three men stood with their union brothers. Joe Sorrelman, Leroy Cisneros, and Mike Cranford had been in the military in 1967 during the last long standoff. No longer teenage Marines, they now had families and bills to pay. Yet they refused to abandon their friends. Joe told one person, “I couldn’t betray the other people in the union.” Mike added, “We wouldn’t let one of the group fall out [in Vietnam]. And that’s where it all starts. That’s where your unionism goes back to.”

For the three men, the strike constituted just another part of a journey they began together seventeen years earlier when they joined six other friends—Stan King, Bobby Dale Draper, Van Whitmer, Larry West, Robert Moncayo, and Clive Garcia, Jr.—in making a fateful decision. In March 1966, these sons of miners and smelter workers chose to volunteer for the Marine Corps, and on July 4, 1966, they boarded a bus for San Diego. They stuck together in boot camp, helping each other endure the rigors. Then, at various junctures, each headed to Vietnam. Unfortunately, only Joe, Leroy, and Mike returned. The others died in combat between August 1967 and November 1969. Ultimately, their story received national attention, and the group became known as the Morenci Nine.

That critical day in June 1983, the survivors had to wonder what it might have been like with their friends standing alongside them. Mike and Larry had been good buddies since elementary school, and Larry would never have deserted his friend. The pugnacious Clive would have been a vocal leader, denouncing anyone crossing the picket line. Another natural leader and the son of a longtime smelter worker, Stan would have
towered above everyone at 6'5" and been a dominating presence. Few doubted that the quiet and introspective Robert would have stood with his friends and family, an extremely loyal soldier.

But others in Morenci would not stay strong. Though Bobby Dale would never have left behind his childhood friends just for a job, some of his fellow Mormons chose to cross the picket line in 1983. Van, who shared Bobby Dale’s faith, might have joined his friends as well, although his family’s roots in Morenci were not as deep as those of the others and he may not have been there at the time of the strike. Nonetheless, there would have been other veterans, all joined together by their shared experiences of the military and Vietnam. A larger presence would have strengthened the resolve of the three friends.

Unfortunately, events years earlier had tragically changed the trajectory of the lives of six members of the Morenci Nine—young men who never aged a day in the minds of their friends. Now, the community’s losses would only be compounded as the town divided when PD began firing workers and replacing them with scabs and individuals who deserted the union. The environment became a powder keg, with threats made against those who betrayed their friends and crossed the picket lines. In response, Governor Bruce Babbitt ordered the Arizona National Guard, complete with snipers and armored vehicles, to occupy the camp. Ultimately, guardsmen attacked the strikers with tear gas and clubs. Yet despite the pressures, Joe, Mike, and Leroy stood firm for more than a year before joining many of the displaced workers in a massive exodus from Morenci, with only Mike ever returning to live in the area again.

In the end, PD emerged victorious after three years, destroying the power of the union and forever changing labor relations in Morenci. The mining camp, one that had experienced momentous turmoil throughout its existence, never fully recovered from the divisions caused by the 1983 strike. It was a sad chapter in a rich history of vibrant community, one that too often had been replicated in other mining and industrial towns across the country.

Some may question whether the story of nine young men and their decision to join the Marine Corps in July 1966 really deserves much attention. The answer is unequivocally yes. Though it has unique characteristics, the
tale of the Morenci Nine has several significant commonalities with the stories of many others who fought in Vietnam. Their narrative spotlights a generation of young adults who joined the military during the tumultuous 1960s and informs people not familiar with the period about the often hard choices that were made, many with long-term consequences.

During the Vietnam War, young men from across the country joined in large numbers, pushed forward by patriotism, the draft, and declining economic opportunities. Many came from small towns, especially those who joined the Army and Marines and comprised the frontline combat troops. Many had just graduated from high school and were the sons of farmers, miners, industrial workers, tradespeople, or lower-middle-class clerical and government workers. Although the demographics changed over time with the ending of deferments and the implementation of the lottery system, the Morenci Nine in 1966 represented a significant number of the American combat soldiers who fought in Southeast Asia.

In particular, the Nine reflected a demographic of the Southwest, where Mexican Americans and Native Americans constituted a sizable part of the population. People east of the Mississippi typically viewed race relations through the lens of a black-white dichotomy, but in the Southwest and the Mountain West, the racial dynamics were far more complex and fluid. And throughout the region, many Mexican Americans and Native Americans joined the US military, particularly the branches that funneled large numbers of soldiers into the fighting in Vietnam. Among the names of the casualties from the area extending from Oklahoma to Southern California and from Arizona and New Mexico up to Idaho, Mexican American surnames appear frequently. Thus, the story of the Morenci Nine in many ways reflected the realities of the Southwest regarding military service.

Finally, the Morenci story was replicated across the country in various small towns and urban industrial communities that experienced a significant clustering of deaths. In Bardstown, Kentucky, for example, the activation of a National Guard unit and its deployment to Vietnam ultimately led to a considerable number of deaths. Beallsville, Ohio, lost 6 young men out of a population of just 475. In some cases, even large cities experienced a concentration of deaths. Thomas Edison High School in Philadelphia had 54 graduates die in Vietnam. The disproportionate death rates—and the lost potential they represented—often arose
from patriotic idealism, youthful feelings of invincibility, and a lack of economic opportunities.8

The blood sacrifice made in Vietnam was uneven for small towns and working-class and lower-middle-class communities. They experienced death on a much greater scale compared to areas of affluence or communities with strong antiwar cultures. Many factors played out in this regard—the bad luck of being in the wrong place at the wrong time; the timing of service, since more Americans died in 1968 and 1969 than in the other years combined; and a host of other dynamics. However, certain common factors, including the draft and socioeconomic background, fostered a concentration of deaths in some sectors of the country.

Yet there are also unique characteristics in the story of the Morenci Nine that make it especially compelling. The young men came from a segregated mining camp completely dominated by a major corporation, PD. The company controlled all aspects of life, telling people where they could live and with whom and managing all facets of the community, down to the schools and the security forces. It provided health care along with all utilities and even a company store where people shopped. Being such a small, insular community created a distinct political culture that shaped the decisions people made about joining the military during the Vietnam era, as well as how people dealt with the losses the war brought.

Furthermore, the fact that the nine young men all headed to the front lines in Vietnam also ensured a relatively distinctive experience for the group. Most of the more than eight million Americans who served in the military during that era never neared the shores of Vietnam. And of the more than two million men who did serve in Vietnam, the majority never fought in the rice paddies or jungles on the front lines. At the most, only 20 percent drew the difficult task of humping through the harsh environment in search of the enemy. The Morenci Nine all received that assignment, as did many others from small towns across the United States, demonstrating an uneven distribution of the most dangerous duties in the Vietnam War.

The clustering of deaths among the Morenci Nine was unusual as well. The odds of dying in Vietnam in combat were less than 10 percent. Thus, based on probabilities, in a group of nine only one person should have
died. However, 66 percent of the Morenci Nine died in Vietnam, five within an eight-month period. Something similar happened often in World War II due to the fact that many communities had National Guard units mobilized and deployed throughout the world, but this was much less frequent in Vietnam. Consequently, the Morenci case study provides insights into how families and friends and, to a larger degree, the small and tight-knit community dealt with the staggering losses they sustained.

This project was exceptionally challenging to construct. My earlier work focused on prominent politicians such as José Figueres and Senator Albert Gore, Sr. In each prior study, I had a multitude of sources to consult in archives, public documents, letters, and published oral histories. If anything, I had too much to review rather than too little, and that forced me to make many choices on what to include.

However, in this book, the materials were sparse, and I needed to capture much of the detail through legwork—for instance, by conducting a large number of personal interviews. In addition, I devoted significant time and energy to tracking down people with primary materials, including letters, photographs, and videos that provided vital insights into the personal lives of the Morenci Nine. There was no central depository to aid the process, no easy way to glean materials for relevance. The project proved a challenge on many levels.

One of the most difficult aspects of re-creating the story of the Morenci Nine involved capturing the voices of the dead. The book is uneven in certain ways, but it was never my intent to honor the lives of some more than others. It just worked out that the primary materials and other sources privileged some, especially the living, because their voices were present. At times, family members refused to talk about their relatives due to the great sadness that it caused. Others gladly provided letters and access to numerous people who wanted to talk and who provided in-depth information. It was not by choice but by circumstance that the imbalance occurred, and it naturally shaped the narrative.

When available materials were redundant, the timing of the person’s service in Vietnam influenced the story. For example, I described in detail Joe Sorrelman’s experiences in a frontline combat unit as opposed to those of Robert Moncayo or Van Whitmer. Joe went first, and it would have
been unnecessarily repetitive to describe everyday life in a frontline rifle company more than once. In addition, because Van was in country just forty-three days before he died and Robert just eighteen, only a limited amount of information existed for these two soldiers. Again, my goal was not to privilege one over the other or diminish the importance of either; rather, access, timing, and the demands of the narrative structure dictated the relative attention given to individual actors in the compelling drama at the heart of this book.

In addition, the types of materials that the study relied upon to build the story contained inherent challenges. Historians who use oral history understand the obstacles that exist in employing such materials. The narratives are often compiled many years after the events they describe. In that time, memories fade and details disappear. Furthermore, the events become viewed through filters reshaped to protect a memory or promote a particular perspective that bears either positively or negatively on the subject.11

In the case of Morenci, several issues highlight this reality. For example, what people did during the 1983 strike, whether standing with the union or acting as scabs, colors the way in which they view their community and how it evolved. Thus, the fact that the three surviving members of the Morenci Nine stood strong with their union brothers might affect their own memories of the events of 1983 or those of others.

Race can also play a role. Some Anglos promote an idealistic view of Morenci, recalling that even though segregated by the company, it really had few racial problems. But some Mexican Americans contest that portrayal, pointing to a repressive environment that often became apparent only after they left the camp and discovered different realities in other settings. In both visions, the perspective of the individual has been shaped over time by his or her own experiences, clouding views of the past.

Even when presented with letters written by the Morenci Nine, I recognized the limitations of such primary materials. While in combat, the young men frequently censored the words they wrote for the consumption of their parents, friends, and other loved ones. They worried about disclosing too much to their worried mothers and fathers about the dangers they faced. Others withheld information about their extracurricular activities for the obvious reasons. Consequently, the letters only provide
a part of the story, a story that I often struggled to corroborate through other official sources.

Despite the obstacles, enough materials surfaced to create an in-depth study of the Morenci Nine. The story that follows is a moving depiction of an intrepid community composed of hardworking people who made an uneven blood sacrifice during the Vietnam War. They rarely questioned the conflict, even after the war ended. Yet ambivalence developed over the losses they endured. Some questioned why so many of Morenci’s sons died, and they expressed their sorrow. Simultaneously, few could fully accept that the young men died in vain, as radical opponents of the war would have people believe. An inherent tension remains even today as the questions linger—a tension that is unlikely to be resolved in the near future.