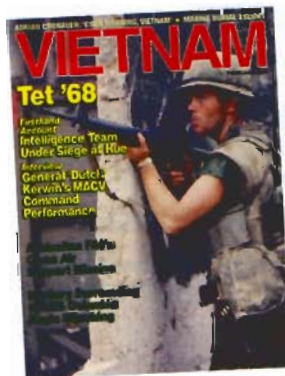


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Played by Robin Williams in the film *Good Morning, Vietnam*, the real Adrian Cronauer is a complex man.

By Gordon Zernich



Former Air Force radio announcer Adrian Cronauer, photographed in 1989, admitted to having watched *Good Morning, Vietnam* five times, but insisted that the film's account of his experiences during the war was largely fictional.

radio station. By 1962, he was a full-time student majoring in broadcasting at the American University in Washington, D.C.

Cronauer needed only 11 credit hours to graduate when the draft board pressed him to exercise his option to volunteer. Like many young men eligible for the draft in the 1960s, he decided to volunteer for the Air Force, hoping this would provide him with a wider choice of assignments than he otherwise would have had.

His first choice was for flight training, and he passed the battery of tests necessary to qualify. The time commit-

ment for that option, however, was more than he wanted to make, so he withdrew the application in order to make another choice. The Air Force found his next selection more suitable to their needs: Cronauer entered training for broadcasting and media operations.

In the mid-1960s, broadcasting was practiced in a fairly unimaginative and routine manner in the armed forces. It often included making training films and recording mind-numbing lectures. Things finally picked up a bit for Cronauer when he transferred from Stateside duty to an Armed Forces Radio station in Greece. There he found ways to add a little style and moxie to an otherwise pea-green military broadcasting universe.

With one year left of his enlistment and a change of assignment due, Cronauer had another choice to make. He could either go back to the States to make more training films, or he could sit behind the microphone and broadcast live to the American

community in South Korea or South Vietnam. He chose Vietnam. But shortly before he arrived in-country, the Gulf of Tonkin incident changed the whole scope of the American effort there.

Cronauer's broadcasting style was more like something a person could hear on Stateside radio than on the military radio and television service. In that day, military radio and television tended to follow its own rigid rules, procedures, regulations, codes and interests rather than focusing on its audience—frequently resulting in broadcasts that were tough to listen to or watch without falling asleep. It seemed as though its mission had very little to do with improving the morale of the American community in Vietnam.

Cronauer balanced innovation, imagination and enthusiasm with practicality and realism. He pushed as much as he could for reforms within the military broadcasting hierarchy, but there were times when he knew it would be senseless to push any harder. He met resistance from those who were deeply invested in military broadcast operations, from those who worked without incentive or motivation and from those who simply feared making waves. "Why go to all that effort?" they would ask. "It's going fine. Why change it?"

Cronauer did, however, swim against the current of the staid conventions of that time, risking the ire of his bosses on more than one occasion. With his friend Ben Moses, who had also served in Vietnam, he wrote a screenplay in 1979 based on his experiences more than 10 years earlier. They managed to sell the rights to the story to a Hollywood producer in 1982. After the release of *Good Morning, Vietnam*, Cronauer was the first to say that the film was largely a fictional account and was not intended to be a biography. It was rewritten, produced, directed and acted primarily for entertainment purposes. He has also said many times that if he had acted in real life as he was portrayed in the film, he still would be serving time in the military penitentiary at Fort Leavenworth, Kan.

After his tour of duty in the Air Force ended, Cronauer worked as a television

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Adrian Cronauer is the name many people associate with the movie *Good Morning, Vietnam*—the story of an Air Force radio announcer who used imagination and innovation to make more of a difference with his craft than his superiors felt they could tolerate. The real Adrian Cronauer, although he may not be as outrageous as the myth makes him, is a man whose talents and experience give him a unique perspective on the Vietnam War.

Cronauer's involvement with communications and media began at a very early age. The only child of a machinist and a teacher, he got his first taste of television by playing piano on a locally produced children's program in Pittsburgh. During his high school years, he volunteered at the local Public Broadcasting System station. He started out opening letters but ended up doing radio announcing by the time he was attending the University of Pittsburgh. He also played a major part in starting the school's campus

PERSONALITY

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news anchorman for a small station in Ohio and later became a program director for a small television station in Virginia. He moved to New York City 10 years later, doing commercials, working part-time for *The New York Times'* FM radio station and teaching part-time at the New School for Social Research. He also worked in media management consulting and radio station management and operated his own advertising agency. While living in New York City, he also earned a master's degree in media studies.

Cronauer recalled that by sharing his expertise and knowledge with others in the broadcasting business, he frequently worked himself out of different positions. He would hand over the torch of a job or professional expertise to those with whom he had contact or whom he had trained.

The handsome profit he made on *Good Morning, Vietnam* enabled Cronauer to consider a career change in 1987, from media and communications broadcasting to media and communications law. He attended the University of Pennsylvania Law School and was able to pay for his tuition and expenses out of the proceeds of the movie and his tour on the lecture circuit after its release.

Cronauer gained an unusual personal perspective on events in Vietnam that many may not appreciate. "The public was put into a difficult position knowing what the war effort was about in Vietnam," Cronauer said. "It was like the illustration about the elephant and four blindfolded men. One felt the elephant's leg and said it was like a tree trunk, another felt its trunk and described the elephant as being like a fire hose, another felt its ear and said an elephant is like a tobacco leaf, and the last blindfolded man felt the tail and said the elephant is like a clothes line. They were all absolutely right, but none of them singly or together gave you an accurate picture of what an elephant was.

"We have a very unfortunate accident of semantics in the Bill of Rights, where it mentions the freedom of the press. For a long time people have used that to imply that perhaps electronic communication is not entitled to full protection under the first amendment as is printed material. That's sheer nonsense. The Bill of Rights doesn't have anything to do with protecting the product of the printing press, but it has to do with protecting the whole process of gathering and disseminating information and news. I've maintained for a long time that if Benjamin Franklin had invented television rather than bifocals, the first amend-

ment would have read freedom of media, because that's what it really means.

"You have to consider the way the news media were structured in those days. At that time it was possible to differentiate between news for the troops and news intended for consumption for the folks back home. A lot of the coverage in Vietnam was censored because it was stuff that could not be aired in a war zone without compromising the mission of the men who were involved. But there was a lot of bureaucratic nonsense, too."

He also noted that much of the news was sensationalized for consumption on the home front. "For instance," he said, "someone was quoted as saying, 'We have to destroy the village in order to save it.' That was one individual idiot making a comment out of context. Many people, though, believed it really was the philosophy of the war." Cronauer also noted that much of the news coverage was skewed because many people in the military were going to Vietnam to get their tickets punched, make a name for themselves and then move on to bigger and better things, rather than staying there for three or four years to develop a full understanding of the war. "There were people with no geographical or geopolitical or historical context for all this, and so much of what was reported was isolated incidents and completely out of context," he said. "It allowed those who were opposed to the war to marshal public opinion against it. The fact that we were not fighting a war to win made their task that much easier.

"Vietnam was fought as a no-win war," he observed, "and when you don't have an objective to win, you've reduced the whole effort to waking up in the morning and seeing how many NVA and VC you can shoot—if you were allowed to shoot at all. It became a body-count game. But that was a political decision forced upon the troops. The troops never wanted to do that.

"When I was stationed in Vietnam, I did interviews with the troops out in the field, and one of the reactions I got from them was one of frustration. They would be in hot pursuit of an enemy unit and then they would have to disengage because the unit would cross over some invisible barrier or border." He also cited another example: "They'd be sitting there receiving incoming fire, and not only were they not permitted to return the fire, but they weren't even allowed to load their weapons without permission from headquarters."

Cronauer also noted that, while during the Vietnam War it was possible to separate news for public consumption from battlefield events, today such separation is hardly possible. "We saw that in Desert Storm," he said. "Can you imagine an Iraqi artillery officer watching CNN as one of its reporters describes the location and blast of one of

the Scud missiles in, say, Tel Aviv? That's something that could easily be used to direct the fire of even more missiles to other targets in the city."

Cronauer said he believes there must be some control of information taken out of a war zone. He also thinks the American people can make intelligent decisions about a war without having the minute details of every skirmish presented to them, no matter how sensational, in full and living color. On the other hand, he believes the military will try to clamp down on all the information it is allowed to. "We saw in Desert Storm that the military and media came to an uneasy truce," he said, "and that is about the best we are going to get, because the military is never going to trust the media with information, and the media isn't going to trust the military with it either. I think that attitude helps to keep both sides a little more honest."

Cronauer also believes that it would be ludicrous for the media to be able to influence the conduct of a battle. "Once during the Somali conflict our troops came in, supposedly for a secret landing in the middle of the night," he said. "And when they hit the beaches, all the television lights lit up the beach so that it could be broadcast. That's ridiculous.

"We cannot be the policeman to the world," Cronauer commented. "A while back, during the Reagan administration, Casper Weinberger, then the secretary of defense, tried to outline the lessons we should have learned from Vietnam. It became known as the Weinberger Doctrine. It says, among other things, that there are certain criteria that should be met before involving our troops in a conflict: there must be a definable and significant U.S. interest to be served; there should be significant support for it on the home front; the goal should be definable and we should go in to win; and it should have a sound exit strategy after the first three objectives are obtained." He added, "We saw the results of that doctrine achieved in Desert Storm. In Bosnia we are seeing what happens when those principles are violated."

Cronauer said he maintains that the military should not be an organization for social experimentation. The sole purpose of the military is to defend the country and to win wars: "Anything that contributes to that is good and anything that detracts from its ability to do that is bad."

Although Cronauer said that he does not have a real desire to go back to Vietnam to visit, he knows of some veterans who have gone and others who are planning to go back. "I believe that American business interests would have the most positive effect there by moving that country more toward a market economy," he said. "That's the best thing that can happen to them." ☆