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Remembering Tet

A Conversation with Vietnam War Veteran Poets

Between 30 January and the end of February 1968, the North Vietnamese military launched a series of devastating attacks against South Viet Nam's major cities, extending from Khe Sanh in the north to Ca Mau on the country's southern tip. Now known as the Tet Offensive, this operation was timed to coincide with the beginning of Tet, an annual celebration of the lunar New Year and the most festive of Vietnamese holidays. Previously, the combatants had observed a cease-fire during Tet. Hence the American forces and their South Vietnamese allies, relaxing and celebrating as in years past, were caught completely off guard. The results, writes historian George C. Herring (in *America's Longest War*), were the bloodiest battles of the war: "in the first two weeks of the Tet campaigns, the United States lost 1,100 killed in action and South Vietnam 2,300. An estimated 12,500 civilians were killed, and Tet created as many as one million new refugees" (209).

The Tet Offensive, then, was particularly tragic for the South Vietnamese populace. It also reverberated loudly back home in America. In particular, it negatively impacted American public opinion, calling into question Pentagon and Johnson Administration claims that America was winning the war. Indeed a mere two months after Tet, on March 31, 1968, a somber President Johnson, faced with mounting pubic protests, famously addressed the nation on public television: "I shall not

seek, and I will not accept, the nomination of my party for another term as your President." American participation in the war did not officially end until January 1973, yet Tet is widely recognized as a key turning-point.

In February 1998, the United States Air Force Academy hosted a symposium on War, Poetry, and Ethics to commemorate the 30th Anniversary of Tet. Invited guests included five Vietnam War Veteran poets—John Balaban, D. F. Brown, W. D. Ehrhart, Yusef Komunyakaa, and Dale Ritterbusch—and two literary critics who specialize in the literature of the Vietnam War, John Clark Pratt and Kali Tal. Pratt was assigned to the Air Force Academy from 1960-74. In 1969-70 he served in Vietnam, Laos, and Thailand, flying combat missions in Laos. His 1974 novel *The Laotian Fragments* initiated his acclaimed writing about the Vietnam War. Pratt retired from active military duty in 1974, was Chair of the Department of English at Colorado State University from 1975-80, and is at present Professor of English at CSU. Tal is the founding editor of *Vietnam Generation*, a quarterly devoted to promoting and encouraging interdisciplinary study of the Vietnam War and the 1960s. Her most recent publication is *Worlds of Hurt: Reading the Literatures of Trauma* (Oxford UP, 1997).

John Balaban is the author of ten books of poetry and prose. His first book of poetry, *After Our War*, was nominated for the National Book Award, as was his 1997 work, *Locusts at the Edge of Summer: New and Selected Poems*. One of the few Americans who translates Vietnamese poetry, Balaban has chaired the Translation Panel of the National Endowment for the Arts and served as President of the American Literary Translators Association. He is currently Professor of English and Director of the MFA in Creative Writing at the University of Miami, Coral Gables.

D. F. Brown is author of *Returning Fire*, winner of the 1984 San Francisco State University Poetry Book Prize. Born and raised in the Missouri Ozarks, Brown served as a combat medic with B Company, First Battalion of the 14th Infantry Division in Vietnam in 1969-70. He directs *Literacy Through Photography* for the Houston-based non-profit, FotoFest, and is a frequent speaker on visual literacy and the uses of photography in writing curricula.

W. D. Ehrhart served in the US Marines for three years, including thirteen months in Vietnam (1967-68), achieving the rank of Sergeant and receiving the Purple Heart for wounds received in Hue during Tet 1968. A poet, writer, and editor, he was most recently a research fellow of the American Studies Department, University of Wales, Swansea, United Kingdom. Among his numerous publications are *Matters of the Heart, The Outer Banks & Other Poems, To Those Who Have Gone Home Tired,* and *Winter Bells.*

The 1994 Pulitzer-Prize winner for Poetry, Yusef Komunyakaa is Professor of Humanities at Princeton University. He served in the US Army, 1968-71, as an information specialist, including service in Vietnam, 1969-70. Komunyakaa has authored thirteen volumes of poetry. His poems have been translated into French, Vietnamese, Korean, Czech, Russian, and Italian. His more recent work includes *Thieves of Paradise, Dien Cai Dau, Magic City,* and *Neon Vernacular: New and Selected Poems.*

Dale Ritterbusch served in the US Army from April 1966 until September 1969. After receiving his commission from the Infantry School at Fort Benning, he worked as a hazardous munitions escort officer. While in Vietnam he was responsible for coordinating shipments of aerial mines for dispersal along the Ho Chi Minh Trail and other infiltration routes. Ritterbusch is the author of *Lessons Learned,* winner of the 1996 Council for Wisconsin

Writers' Posner Award for the finest volume of poetry published by a Wisconsin writer. He is an Associate Professor in the Department of Languages and Literature at the University of Wisconsin-Whitewater, where he teaches creative writing and literature.

Judging from the participants' feedback, the symposium, class visits, and subsequent poetry readings were all a grand success. One wrote: "I came back to my own university quite surprised by my visit to the Academy. Instead of the rigidities—even antipathies—I expected to find in the cadets and teaching staff, I found instead very bright young men and women, intellectually alive and full of inquiry, taught by committed, highly capable instructors, both military and civilian." Another said: "Many thanks for providing such an extraordinary experience at the Academy. And having said that, there is not much to say except that in the current climate dismissive of the literature of the Vietnam War, to engage in highly literate conversations with the few enlightened . . . made this event memorable beyond imagination." ❑