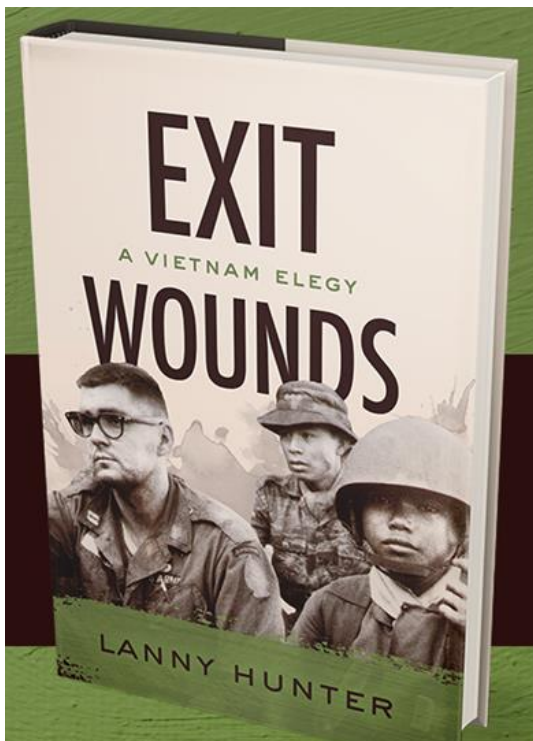


# EXIT WOUNDS

## A Conversation with Lanny Hunter

Donald Anderson

**T**here were ways in which I could do no more than a good Special Forces medic. Glorified first aid. And yet, there were intangibles that I brought to the field. The most important tool in my therapeutic armamentarium was the mystique of a physician. The men thought I knew more and believed I could do more. Because of battle conditions and limited medical supplies, my comrades' confidence in me was misplaced. In another way, it wasn't. My broad knowledge of medicine and surgery provided me with intuitive judgment regarding the life-threatening nature of wounds. Instinctive *triage*. I knew when a wound was minor—most of the time—a casualty that could be held in the field. I knew when a



wound was mortal—sometimes—a casualty that also stayed on the ground. I knew who could survive with a full-court press at a field hospital—maybe—a casualty that got evac'd. At least I usually knew. I had the power to save or lose a life. With that knowledge, I had the power to risk or conserve Dust Offs and their crews. A Huey and four crewmen shouldn't be endangered for non-critical wounds or body bags. I tagged some casualties for a medevac and consigned others to their deaths.

—from EXIT WOUNDS

In the aptly titled *EXIT WOUNDS*, Lanny Hunter revisits his Vietnam War experience from behind the lens of a life lived. Aside from the grace and clarity of his prose, it is the perspective of a lifetime of contemplation of the unusual yoking of medicine and combat that draws one to this work—that and the story of the author’s return in the late ‘90s to Vietnam to reestablish an old combat friendship with a Montagnard interpreter. Lanny Hunter served early in the war as a Special Forces Medical Officer: a “warrior doctor.” Set in the Central Highlands of Vietnam, Hunter reports from the front lines the battle of Plei Me, the first major contact between the North Vietnamese and US armies. He discovers the carnage of modern weaponry, the burden of the responsibility of triage, and the many possible lessons of fear, courage, loss, faith, loyalty, and the wreckage of mind and body that war imposes—all of which is salted with a burgeoning disillusionment with the nation he serves.

I have long held that reports of war are best written not in the omniscient, third-person plural of historians, but in the singular first. We live in a culture that values the individual. Our best works of art about war mirror this welcome bias. At their best, war memoirs testify to the power of word and image and to the human craving for meaning. In reading *EXIT WOUNDS*, I am reminded of Tim O’Brien hitting the mark when he writes in “How to Tell a True War Story”:

War is hell, but that’s not the half of it, because war is also mystery and terror and adventure and courage and discovery and holiness and pity and despair and longing and love. War is nasty; war is fun. War is thrilling; war is drudgery. War makes you a man; war makes you dead.

After reading *EXIT WOUNDS*, it was my privilege to participate in conversation with Lanny Hunter. As you will see, my questions are common and predictable. Lanny’s answers are anything but.

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**Donald Anderson (DA):** I know you are conscious of the elusiveness of memory, its slippery nature. How did you deal with this problem, given that you are writing about events that occurred almost 60 years ago?

**Lanny Hunter (LH):** Interesting question. Especially in this era where a segment of society apparently has no interest in actual facts. But your question goes to memory—the heart of our identity. Are memories authentic? Can they be relied upon?

To begin with, there is a social contract, relied on for hundreds of thousands of years, that regards memory, by and large, as reliable. Otherwise, history (personal and social) is totally up for grabs. The *science* of memory doesn't really offer practical help. We are told that cells in the brain create memories through chemical, enzymatic, and hormonal processes. They are stored for retrieval in the brain's short-term and long-term memory banks. Coincident with this process, memories are imprinted with emotions, also a function of molecular biology. This is biochemistry; not documents filed in a cabinet. Knowing this, (rhetorical question) do we understand the fierce, fragile process of memory any better?

Apart from weird science, personal experience teaches us that memory is capricious. It ambushes us when we least expect it and deserts us when we need it most. Memory is selective, self-protective, self-serving, and sanitizing.

Jurisprudence has long been aware of the unreliability of eyewitnesses. No two pairs of eyes witness the same event. No two pairs of ears overhear the same conversation. No two hearts ache with the same discernment. No two minds recall with exactitude the same story. Which, or whose, recollection is the truer? Memories are authentic, but only for the person doing the recalling. Memory remains mysterious, sketchy and fragile.

As for memories of war, memories of violent events are always fraught. Combat is chaos. It's impossible to know what's happening twenty yards away, let alone on the other side of the perimeter. The idea of telling a war story is almost absurd. War stories should end in grief. Glory is spit-shine. Having said that, and being of reasonably sound mind, I believe my memories of a war a half century in the past are reasonably accurate. My story, as I perceive it, is true. But my memories have also been supplemented by personal materials and mementos. Access to correspondence was important. I reviewed letters written to and preserved by my wife, my sister, and two of my daughters. Mr. Joe Batzel provided the letters I had written to him from Vietnam when he was in the sixth grade. These letters provided an invaluable timeline of my tour of duty, as well as documentation for events, experiences, and emotions. In recent years, I have engaged in extended conversations with military comrades who shared many of the events related in EXIT WOUNDS. This reservoir of experiences and insights contributed intimacy and fidelity to this story.

**DA:** How did the project start? Was it always in the works?

**LH:** Vietnam, the hinge on which my life was hung, taught me that my life story was too small, too narrow, too thin. EXIT WOUNDS was an attempt to frame a coherent story. We live life forward but make sense of it backwards. The book was a lifetime in writing.

People were killed by courage, cowardice, bravado, bad luck, carelessness, and incompetence.

—from EXIT WOUNDS

**DA:** Did you find yourself seeking out, like Hemingway, larger accounts of your war after you returned from Vietnam?

**LH:** Absolutely. One can't create anything but baloney from ignorance and hubris. I have spent a lifetime reading and writing—the tools of scholarship. Beyond my education in medicine, I have read history, sociology, theology, philosophy, and world religions. I have read much of the literature arising out of the Vietnam era, both fiction and nonfiction.

**DA:** A few words about the process of selection of the particular events, conversations, and scenes that make up EXIT WOUNDS.

**LH:** I selectively chose from those that seemed particularly suited for carrying forward the themes I hoped to elaborate.

**DA:** How do members of your family feel about EXIT WOUNDS? Have fellow soldiers read the manuscript?

**LH:** My family has always been supportive of my writing, and particularly EXIT WOUNDS. I have rarely felt the pressure of their censorship. I do think their support is suffused with some anxiety. I detect wounding, but I may be projecting. Most of the comrades mentioned in the book have read the material and made suggestions that contributed accuracy and insight.

**DA:** What writers have influenced you? In the book, you mention Graham Greene.

LA: The purchase of Greene's *The Quiet American* from a waif in Ho Chi Minh City in 1997 was entirely fortuitous. But reading it during my return pilgrimage resonated strongly and it seemed to flow effortlessly into the crafting of EXIT WOUNDS. My introduction to war literature began with notable authors of World War Two: Herman Wouk, James Jones, Bill Mauldin, Norman Mailer, Leon Uris, William Shirer, Irwin Shaw, Cornelius Ryan, William Manchester, and others.

**The United States dropped 2,530,000 tons of bombs on North Vietnam alone! By comparison, the total tonnage of bombs dropped by the United States in all of World War II was 2,057,244 tons. The total tonnage of bombs dropped on both North and South Vietnam—an area one and a half times the size of Kansas—was 7,850,000 tons!**

**—from EXIT WOUNDS**

DA: In particular, what books, poems, films, documentaries about the Vietnam War (or other wars) have spoken to you?

LH: I have been impressed with *In Pharaoh's Army* (Tobias Wolff), *The Things They Carried* (Tim O'Brien), *Gardens of Stone*, (Nicholas Proffitt), and *Achilles in Vietnam* (Jonathan Shay). David Halbertstam's *The Best and the Brightest* and *A Bright Shining Lie* by Neil Sheehan were important. "The Vietnam War," a video series by Ken Burns and Geoffrey Ward, is worthy. I have long appreciated the landmark British television series on World War Two, "The World at War." I don't go to Vietnam War movies, as a rule.

DA: What niche or gap do you see EXIT WOUNDS filling? What is your hope for the book?

LH: EXIT WOUNDS explores themes that have universal implications. I hope it speaks to anyone—veteran or civilian—who seeks to understand the circumstances that led almost inevitably to America’s involvement in Vietnam. My story of the war and its aftermath, as

**No army—in any war in any age—has clean hands. None have a corner on cruelty. War, sooner rather than later, inflicts injustice on the innocent and terror on the helpless. War erodes the humanity of combatants and non-combatants alike. I left the American War Crimes Museum feeling debased and ashamed. Not because of my association with the American military in Vietnam, but because of my humanity.**

**—from EXIT WOUNDS**

revealed through the lives of a Special Forces doctor and the Montagnard youth who became his interpreter—provides insights into medicine, soldiering, war, and moral injury. The story is woven into the larger fabric of history, sociology, culture, governance, politics, philosophy, religion, and cultural imperialism. It chronicles the search for living a considered life.

DA: What personal sense do you have of the unexpected yoking of destruction and healing—the dual roles of soldiering and doctoring?

LH: Doctoring seeks to preserve life. Soldiering takes life. Both can be used for evil purposes. Both, at their core, are attempts to make things right in a malign world. As I served both professions for a time, I observed the necessity and limitations of both vocations. I came to know that we are not just one thing and that destruction is a form of creativity.

DA: Would you expand on how destruction is a form of creativity?

LH: Saying that destruction is a form of creativity may raise eyebrows. One of my comrades in Vietnam was a demolitions expert. He once said to me, “I love to blow things up.” He could

create a pile of rubble from a single span in a bridge. In that moment, humankind's capacity for good and evil is encapsulated.

History is the story of humankind's imaginative pursuit of its heart's desire (beneficent or malevolent). Once upon a time we rubbed two sticks together to make fire. A few decades ago, we pushed nuclei of enriched uranium together to make a bomb. In past time, catapults hurled flaming pitch into walled cities and flying machines dropped an explosive device that obliterated cities. Science gave us knapped stone, iron, bronze, steel, gunpowder, and nuclear fission. Armorers blended technology and art to create clubs, axes, spears, swords, daggers, crossbows, longbows, muskets, rifled barrels, munitions, vehicles, aircraft, and ships. They were beautiful! Warriors used these *objets d'art* to unleash destruction that stupefied and gratified.

Humankind also carries the spark of knowing the difference between good and evil. Religion and philosophy cast stories to establish guidelines for humane behavior. We still sit, entranced, before the fires in our hearth. The mushroom cloud takes our breath. We are caught on the horns of that dilemma of creating good or evil.

**DA:** EXIT WOUNDS is such a perfect title for this project. How did you come to it?

**LH:** I wrote the manuscript untitled. I ruminated on the events and themes and kept a running list of almost fifty potential titles. While writing an anecdote in which I turned a soldier to his side to search for exit wounds, it came to me that much of the narrative concerned exit wounds. We are touched, sometimes, by moments of inspiration.



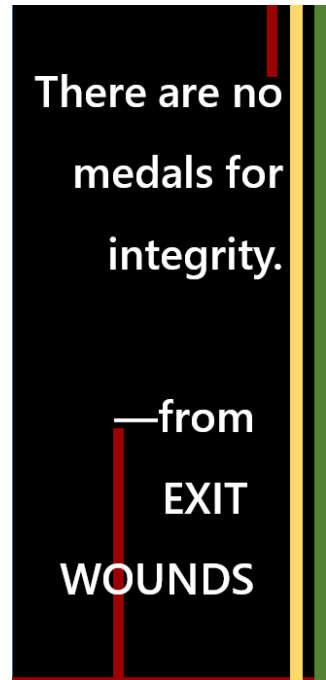
**DA:** In the memoir your religious faith plays a prominent role. Given what you have seen and experienced, not only in war, but in your decades on the planet, how to square it with faith in a caring God?

**LH:** I don't know. People have meditated on this conundrum since someone first uttered the word, "God." Unaware, I think, that at that moment humankind was on the edge of language. Religious folk babble platitudes that extend God's providence to justify the most monstrous circumstances. In the post-modern world, we address these issues using evidence-based science and sophisticated terminology.

We are still stumped. Now, science has brought us to a place where we can either blow the world up with nuclear weapons or burn it up through neglect. I want to grab both religion and science by their lapels and scream, "Stop it! Give us some help here!"

Speaking as a humanist, it's clear that human nature is a mix of good and evil. And we possess, I think, a moral sense. For instance, we recognize cruelty, and we can love someone more than evolution dictates. My religious experience was shaped by the Christian Bible as influenced by late 19<sup>th</sup> Century American Frontier Protestantism. At its best, it held a world view that we live in a fallen world in which reconciliation rests on death and resurrection. It is centered on Christ on the cross. Atonement theories abound.

My body is engaged in the material world. My heart is balanced on the edge of the transcendent. I await the last passage, death, and the unknown future of mysteries beyond all comprehension. That seems for me an improvement on nihilism.



**Donald Anderson** is emeritus editor of WLA. His most recent books are *QUAGMIRE: Personal Stories from Iraq and Afghanistan* and *Fragments of a Mortal Mind: a nonfiction novel*.

**Lanny Hunter** is one of the most highly decorated medical officers of the Vietnam War. He has written other works, including *Living Dogs and Dead Lions* and *Stories of Desire and Narratives of Faith*.