

Busted

A VIETNAM VETERAN IN
NIXON'S AMERICA



W. D. EHRHART

Editor's Choice

WLA is pleased to note the publication of *Busted: A Vietnam Veteran in Nixon's America*, the third volume of W. D. Ehrhart's autobiographical Vietnam War trilogy. With the publication of *Busted*, the University of Massachusetts Press has also reissued the first two volumes of the trilogy: *Vietnam-Perkasie: A Combat Marine Memoir* and *Passing Time: Memoir of a Vietnam Veteran Against the War*.

Long-known and respected as a poet and editor of Vietnam War poetry (*Carrying the Darkness* and *Unaccustomed Mercy*), Ehrhart's nonfiction has not found the larger audience it so clearly deserves. H. Bruce Franklin queries the undersize of Ehrhart's following in his foreword to *Busted*:

Part of the problem may be in Ehrhart himself. Some of the very qualities that make him such a potent writer—his passion, his searing honesty, and scorn for greed, duplicity, pettifoggery, selfishness, bureaucracy, and the self-serving ethos of the corporate world—make him an inept businessman particularly unsuited for success in these tough times for serious authors in the U.S. publishing industry.

Novella-length and reading like a novella, *Busted* tells Ehrhart's story as a post-Vietnam merchant marine who is "busted" for possession of a small amount of marijuana. Barred from shipping out while awaiting his trial at the hands of the Coast Guard and the Department of Transportation, Ehrhart drives his MG across and about America only to find his country unable to confront either itself or his hippie hair. All encounters (real and imagined) with the government in this book—with policemen, highway patrolmen, investigators, lawyers, ghosts, and Presidents—are sad, complicated, and instructive. All the time we are moving towards Ehrhart's on-and-off-again trial, Nixon is sinking ever deeper into the murk and mess of Vietnam and Watergate. The juxtaposing of Ehrhart and Nixon proves itself as realistic as it does surreal. Put another way, *Busted* is a chastening sermon about the links

between ordinary citizens and the geopolitical decisions and ambitions of their leaders.

In an upcoming special issue of *WLA*, we will feature discussion of and inquiry into Ehrhart's growing body of work. Meantime, in treating yourself to *Busted*, you'll understand why Robert Olen Butler credits Ehrhart for having "long burned bright as a public center of moral consciousness for the Vietnam War generation."



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Recommended Reading

In Pharaoh's Army: Memories of the Lost War. Tobias Wolff. New York: Knopf, 1994. Pp. 221. \$23.00.

Lacking the bitter, intense surrealism of other personal accounts of the Vietnam War—from writers who mainly use the Vietnam experience as a trope for the postmodern condition—Wolff offers a perspective which recognizes the horrors of the war, but which also refuses to allow the experience to consume him personally and metaphorically. Whereas books by such writers as Tim O'Brien and Michael Herr explode with pyrotechnic images of the war, Wolff's memoir explores the war's ironies with deliberate sparseness.

Despite the tonal and stylistic differences from other Vietnam books, Wolff's memoir also describes an absurd and lost war, but in this text it is the war that is lost, not the soldier. In other Vietnam War accounts, the soldier represents a government-issue, combat-green Adam—up-dating and ritualizing original sin—the new paradigm of the lost man. Wolff's man, however, maintains his bearings because he has kept his sense of humor and irony. Instead of the anxious black humor that predominates other well-known

works on the Vietnam War, Wolff's memoir resonates with self-deprecating and reassuring humor—humor that leads to finding one's spiritual way back home.

Because he has provided us with a fresh look at Vietnam, Wolff's experience is as important for what it isn't than for what it is. In the chapter, "White Man," Wolff, who served as an American adviser in a South Vietnamese regiment, discovers that he was one of only a very few white men in this area of Vietnam. After his discovery, he senses that because of his whiteness, he "was dead sure somebody had [him] in his sights" (77). Wolff thus adopts paranoid behavior: "I kept scanning tree lines for his position, feeling him track me. I adopted an erratic walk, slowing down and speeding up, ducking my head, weaving from side to side" (77). Lost in Wolff's anxiety is any thought of an enemy as some nationalistic or tropological foe; Wolff is only aware that his "whiteness" had made him a target. Even his only fellow local American soldier Sergeant Benet, who is black, made Wolff feel different. Yet, because Benet had experienced racial discrimination throughout his life, he understands Wolff's predicament. After Vietnamese soldiers mistake Wolff for another white American and beat him up, Benet tends to Wolff's wounds. In a scene suggestive of the relationship between Jim and Huck in *Huckleberry Finn*, Wolff describes his experience:

He had a touch as gentle as a women's, and feeling him take me so tenderly in hand, dabbing and clucking, wincing at my pain as if it were his own, I started to feel sorry for myself. "I don't get it," I said. "Polk doesn't look anything like me. . . . We don't look *anything* alike!" (79)

Benet's sympathetic treatment of Wolff underscores the black sergeant's own wounding from racial discrimination. In other words, Wolff has had to travel half way around the world to discover a bitter lesson about the deep-running racism in his own country. Throughout this acutely observed and elegantly written memoir, Wolff describes other such lessons he learned in Vietnam.

As is true of *This Boy's Life*, this second Wolff memoir also reminds me of what I've always like best about Henry Adam's

Education: the idea that someone can successfully live in a moment in history as both victim and artist. No matter what we do, we are all victims of history, but the successful artist is one who both survives and transcends his own personal history to make literature for the rest of the world to enter and enjoy. And like Adams's autobiography, the art in Wolff's memoirs does more than just reaffirm our own worst fears about the times we live in—it boosts us towards transcending our own personal history.

A marvelous example of understated tone, *In Pharaoh's Army* is a sensitive, intelligent book about an accidental and reluctant soldier. Don't read this book looking for another tale of the tortured Vietnam vet; rather, read it looking to uncover the ironies thoughtful soldiers will always find in the middle of any war.

—James H. Meredith
United States Air Force Academy



Recommended Reference

Vietnam War Films: Over 600 Feature, Made-for-TV, Pilot and Short Movies, 1939-1992, from the United States, Vietnam, France, Belgium, Australia, Hong Kong, South Africa, Great Britain and other Countries. Jean-Jacques Malo and Tony Williams, editors. Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland and Company, 1994. Pp. 567. \$55.00.

For the casual film buff, the mere size of Malo and Williams' *Vietnam War Films* is impressive enough. Eighty-three separate films are catalogued in over five hundred pages. Many Vietnam

War films are of foreign origin; surprisingly, the Republic of Vietnam has maintained a vibrant movie industry since the war and their productions represent a good portion of the entries in the text: the American classics, such as *The Deer Hunter* and *Apocalypse Now*, are not the norm for the Vietnam film genre. More surprises await readers of this comprehensive, yet accessible reference guide.

Twenty-nine contributors collaborated on the book, using Malo and Williams' selection criteria. It is an eclectic group, representing film historians, critics, and cultural scholars. A good number actually saw action in the conflict, like Marc Leepson, arts editor of *The Veteran* magazine. Malo and Williams' introduction lists what they call pragmatic categories, their criteria for a film to be catalogued as "Vietnam." They stress the importance of including indirect representations of the conflict in the book to make the collection truly comprehensive. Thus, films that touch on the lives of Vietnamese refugees and the struggles associated with acclimating to their new homes (such as the French comedy *Le Fils du Mekong* [1991]) are not only included in the collection, but are listed on an equal footing with the actual combat films.

The book reflects meticulous bibliographic detail. Each film entry lists the title's country of origin, production studio, director—even film length (in meters) and number of reels are annotated for the Vietnamese films. Each entry also features a brief but comprehensive synopsis and critical evaluation. The final section focuses on theme and cinematographic expertise, quite an undertaking considering the rough quality of the "B" films and most of the Vietnamese productions.

By including two revealing essays, "Southeast Asia in the French Cinema" and "The War and Vietnamese Films," Malo and Williams reinforce the research efforts of their contributors. The former essay documents French cinematographic interest in Vietnam, both during their own occupation and during the later American conflict. Malo, the author, concludes that although there has been some renewed interest in the war era in this decade, the French continue to grapple with their ambivalent perceptions of the region. In the latter essay, Vietnamese film critic Phan Dinh Mau argues that the "true, simple and accurate nature" of

Vietnam's films represents the most artistic approach to depicting the nation's "crucial artistic values," "heroism and humanitarianism."

Vietnam War Films is a bibliographic work that deserves to be in more locations than a large library's reference section. It should find an essential place in the collection of cultural historians, film critics, and just plain movie buffs who seek the world cinema's perspective on the chaos and tragedy that was the Southeast Asian conflict.

—Richard S. Keating
United States Air Force Academy



Recommended Reading

Aftermath: An Anthology of Post-Vietnam Fiction. Donald Anderson. New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1995. Pp. 272. \$12.95.

"The mind will often make a metaphor when it cannot make anything else," writes Stephanie Vaughn in "Kid MacArthur," one of the fourteen moving short stories in *Aftermath: An Anthology of Post-Vietnam Fiction*. Vaughn's metaphor builds on a severed human ear, a traditional Vietnam trophy, but an ear transformed into the topology and character of Vietnam. Vaughn's grisly image is not unusual in this collection, but her transformation of the proffered gift, twice given but once received—first by a student, then by a brother—marks the female narrator's awareness of all that was and is grisly about the Vietnam Conflict. But the story is

not about a human ear at all; the story is about postwar adjustment for a Vietnam veteran and his sister instead.

Donald Anderson has collected some brilliant stories to depict not war so much as its wake, its *Aftermath*. The volume has a foreword by George C. Herring that attempts to explain the context for the art that follows, art that brings out what Donald Anderson summarizes as the “memory and love and resentment and loss and disbelief and defiance and humiliation and earnestness and blame and shame and blood and sacrifice and courage and sorrow.” Paradoxes abound even in Anderson’s introductory “Confessions of a Noncombatant” and his story “Baby Teeth,” where metaphorical shrapnel buds like babies’ teeth in the souls if not the bodies of survivors of Vietnam. “The wounds which blanket me,” Anderson writes, “form cloudily . . . the imprint of entire cities. Map grids. Hue. Quang Tri. Khe Sahn” (196).

Coping with grief, with wounds, with memories of the victims at home and abroad shapes many of the stories in this stunning collection. Recovery is never a single act, despite the attempt to make one lasting tribute compensate for continuing loss. In “The Art of Living,” John Gardner honors a son’s death in the culinary art of the father who prepares Imperial Dog, one of the son’s last meals in Vietnam, “one of the oldest dishes known in Asia,” one requiring a black dog. Getting the dog was the first difficulty, but butchering, cooking, and eating it require deft negotiations among a host of well-drawn characters as well as a strong stomach. Eating Imperial Dog, the father recalls the son writing, allows you to “imagine you were eating with the earliest wisemen in the world” (131), and something of that wisdom does at last emerge from the tale’s improbable festal board. The culinary arts, like the literary arts, recreate imaginatively what cannot be had ever again.

Lynne Hanley’s “War Torn” contrasts the American protestor Elizabeth with a nameless Vietnamese female civilian at Tan Son Nhut the day Saigon falls, but her story, like Vaughn’s, extends into the present 1990s, when the wounds have scarified but have yet to fade into glorified war scars. Post-Traumatic Stress Syndrome looms large here and in other stories in this extraordinary collection, aptly characterizing the nation’s niggardly appreciation

for those who died and those who survived a war that never quite earned the honorific of "War." In country or out, soldiers serving at the time of the Vietnam Conflict suffered its ravages and suffer them still, if the metaphors in these stories be as true as they seem.

In Robley Wilson's "Despair," is the competition within a postwar marriage; in Tim O'Brien's "Speaking of Courage," the boiling shit field where a friend died cannot be absorbed into the dull endless round of days without purpose. Suicide, imminent and real, can be found in these stories, but the metaphors of how to go on beyond the smells and tortures of war loom larger than war's ravages.

The idea of war, fought or imagined, inspires mythological references, anger, pride, and prayer, sometimes simultaneously, but always metaphorically. Letters to and from a veteran's Vietnamese daughter initiate Robert Olen Butler's dramatic tale, "Letters from my Father." But buried in its heart is another story, one of a Vietnamese daughter conned into thinking a shadow on the wall is her father (and not the American GI who actually is) because this supposed father, a South Vietnamese soldier, was not home to tuck her in. Plato's cave in modern dress looms fresh and clear and haunts the narrator whose own father is now a stranger illuminated by the shadow of letters sent to Saigon.

Memorabilia like uniforms and medals precipitate a Marine's memory of "The Pugilist at Rest" by Thom Jones, the one story in the collection that takes us into the field, where a surprise attack lays to rest a would-be Bohemian, leaving a modern Theogenes, "the greatest of gladiators," on the way to becoming an epileptic and borderline alcoholic as a result of a bad boxing match at Camp Pendleton. The irony that one gentle soldier dies shouting so another Marine can grow up and abuse himself is typical of war stories from any generation, but from Vietnam the ironies are more strident and more profound.

You can survive a war and lose your life anyway, as a pilot does in Barry Hannah's "Testimony of a Pilot." Or, you can lose your life and be immortalized in art, as is the goodnatured Scarborough with the idiot smile in James Park Sloan's "Vietnam No Big Deal." Sloan says it takes about ten years "before a war begins to congeal into material fit for art" (7), and in twice ten the art becomes

enriched by the layers of metaphors piled on the memories and by the experiences of the veterans discharged into civilian life.

Louise Erdrich sets "The Bridge" in North Dakota where a former Vietnam POW passes a drunken night with a teenage runaway Chippewa girl who reminds him of a murdered Vietnamese woman:

And he saw her as the woman back there.

How the hell could you figure them?

She looked at him. They had used a bayonet. She was out of her mind. You, me, same. Same. She pointed to her eyes and his eyes. The Asian, folded eyes of some Chippewas. She was hemorrhaging. (56)

The brutality of war is not over for this veteran, nor for the runaway. War has a way of inserting itself into what we think of as civilization.

Art may well be our only stay against chaos, and art in the practiced hands of Maxine Kumin empowers the mother of an MIA to do battle with a city's bureaucracy. Conserving and preserving the little life she has left on the farm, Ellie suspends her grief just long enough to venture with her husband Alan to the city to see her missing son's wife act in a repertory production. Fascinated by the crowd and crush of people, she loses her way and loses Alan too. But in her loss, she finds her survival instinct, forcing "the city to declare Alan a missing person twelve hours ahead of schedule" (114). Small triumphs are triumphs still. They become metaphors of lives lived beyond the war.

The best story in the book is the last, Robert Stone's "Helping," a tale of a bored and boring Massachusetts mental health counselor, who would like to shoot his health-addicted neighbors as well as his wife's antagonistic defendants in a child-abuse case that suggests that the war is always beneath the surface of modern society. Haunted by a litigious derelict's waking dream of blackness, "the black sky" of Vietnam, Chas Elliot, sober for fifteen months, goes on a bender that rocks his marriage and his soul. He is perhaps saved by grace and Grace his wife, in the manner of Hawthorne's "Young Goodman Brown," who might have been saved by faith and Faith, his wife with pink ribbons, but wasn't.

Wars on poverty, wars on neighbors, wars on gun control, wars on child abuse, wars on wars and rage and weakness—all, all are an aftermath to the war no one wanted and no one wants to remember.

But the metaphors live on in fiction and in fantasies that are very worth remembering, recorded as they are here in art of a much higher order than the war they immortalize. Regardless of our individual and collective responses to the Vietnam Conflict, no reader can deny its place in our national and international history, and with this collection no reader can deny that Vietnam has given us cause to admire the many metaphors that drive the stories of its *Aftermath*.

—Patrica L. Skarda
Smith College

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Fortunate Son. Lewis Puller. New York: Bantam, 1993. Pp. 457. (Paper) \$5.99.

Lewis Puller Jr. chose as the epigraph for his autobiography the following lyrics by John Fogarty from the Creedence Clearwater Revival song “Fortunate Son”:

Some folks inherit star spangled eyes
ooh they send you down to war.
And when you ask them ‘How much more should we
give?’
They only answer more! more! more!
It ain’t me, it ain’t me;
I ain’t no military son.

It ain't me, it ain't me;
 I ain't no fortunate one.

Puller had a well-earned sense of irony about his life, as his choice both of epigraph and book title indicate. He was indeed a “military son,” despite the denial; he was also the least fortunate of men. His story is indeed an American tragedy. Now—in the wake of Robert McNamara’s belated admission that Puller’s sacrifice was, as Puller suspected, a waste—his story takes on added poignance.

Fortunate Son falls into three parts: the first takes the author from his early childhood through college, Marine OCS, marriage, and service in Vietnam, culminating in the grievous wounding that sent him home in October, 1963. The second part describes his long hospitalization and heavily qualified physical recovery, culminating with his release from the hospital and his entry into law school in the fall of 1971. The third section recounts his doomed run for Congress against a flagwaving draft dodger, his subsequent depression, alcoholism, and attempted suicide, the near collapse of his marriage, and his eventual emotional recovery, which allowed him to write the book that in 1992 won him a Pulitzer Prize.

Of the threads that hold Puller’s long narrative together, the most important is his father’s nearly fabled military career, vivid personality, and final illness. The press-agent prose of an ad for a biography of Chesty Puller in the paperback edition of *Fortunate Son* gives a sense of the public image of the man:

Chesty Puller enlisted in the Marine Corps in 1918 at the age of 20. He chased bandits in Haiti and Nicaragua, commanded the Horse Marines in Peking, battled his way from island to bloody island in the Pacific, led the landing at Inchon, and fought the most savage rearguard action of the Korean War. He became a legend in his own time, yet was forced into early retirement . . . Why? (457)

As a six-year-old first grader, Lewis Puller Jr. observed an award ceremony for his father and later recalled the moment when his “father strode briefly from the field on which he had just been honored and knelt briefly to let me view the object of the

morning's pageantry"—that is, his fifth Navy Cross. That moment would remain indelibly fixed in his memory—in the person of his honored father he had “first begun to grasp the concept of battlefield glory and with it sensed a commitment to a calling over which I would be powerless” (6-7).

Powerless: here the word suggests hereditary determinism; later it will echo with great pathos in the story of Puller's life, and of the country itself. By the time he graduated from William and Mary College in 1967, in the middle of the Viet Nam War, Puller's enrollment in Marine OCS was all but inevitable. By his own account, Puller's college years had been devoted to partying and Viet Nam was a distant concern; but by the time his lieutenant's bars were pinned on and he saw the pride in his father's face, he felt as if he were “on the verge of fulfilling” his “destiny”: “It was fitting that time and circumstance had so conspired as to make me an officer in the Marine Corps during a period of war, and if I was by temperament not suited to assuming the mantle of leadership, I certainly was by birth” (51).

Once in, Puller was fully committed, and volunteered for frontline infantry duty in Vietnam, scorning the safe paths chosen by some of his fellow OCS candidates who, after the Tet Offensive in 1968 looked for safety in the rear: “Why die? Go Supply”; “What the fuck; drive a truck”; “Motor T and out in three” (55). This lack of bravery introduces a second major thread that ties the narrative together: some people, a very few, gave everything they had, while most were ignorant or evasive—not just civilians at home, but fellow soldiers as well. He recalls feeling a “keen sense of irony when the lance corporal/clerk” who processed his papers assigning him to Vietnam “turned out to be one of the officer candidates who had flunked out of my OCS class. His reward for failure would be a safe stateside tour of duty behind a typewriter . . . [he was] living proof of the Marine Corps axiom that the shitbirds get the easy assignments” (64). “I thought wryly,” Puller writes, “of the differing degrees of sacrifice demanded of a pig and a chicken when forced to contribute to a breakfast of ham and eggs” (66). Foreshadowing suggested by this and other comments leads to the central event of Puller's life, his terrible wounding. In reviewing *Fortunate Son* for *The New York Times*, William Styron praised it

for its honesty and its detail, while noting that it also had an artless and naive quality. But note the points of similarity between Frederick Henry's description of his injury in Hemingway's *A Farewell to Arms* and Puller's. Henry hears the mortar:

I heard a cough, then came the chuh-chuh-chuh-chuh—then there was a flash, as when a blast-furnace door is opened, and a roar that started white and then went red and on and on in a rushing wind. I tried to breathe but my breath would not come and I felt myself rush bodily out of myself and out and out and out and all the time bodily in the wind. I went out swiftly, all of myself, and I knew I was dead . . . Then I floated, and instead of going on I felt myself float back . . . The ground was torn up and in front of my head there was a splintered beam of wood . . . I tried to move but I could not move. . . I sat up straight and as I did so something inside my head moved like the weight on a doll's eyes and it hit me inside in back of my eyeballs. My legs felt warm and wet and my shoes were wet and warm inside. I knew that I was hit and leaned over and put my hand on my knee. My knee wasn't there. My hand went in and my knee was down on my shin. (54-55)

Here is Puller's account after he steps on a boobytrapped howitzer:

. . . a thunderous boom suddenly rent the air, and I was propelled upward with the smell of acrid cordite in my nostrils. . . Colors and sounds became muted, and although there was a beehive of activity around me, all movement seemed to be in slow motion. I thought initially that the loss of my glasses in the explosion accounted for my blurred vision, and I had no idea that the pink mist that engulfed me had been caused by the vaporization of most of my right and left legs. As shock began to numb my body, I could see through a haze of pain that my right thumb and little finger were missing, as was most of my left hand, and I could smell the charred flesh, which extended from my right wrist

upward to the elbow. I knew that I had finished serving my time in the hell of Vietnam. (185)

The differences in style are of course obvious, including Hemingway's imaginative metaphor of the doll's eyes versus Puller's cliché of the beehive, and the suggestive horror of a missing knee versus the specific trauma of seared flesh. But Puller's account is like Hemingway's in its emphasis on objectifying and clarifying a process that is by its very nature a welter of pain and confusion. Both include noise, movement, and color; both use the method of literary impressionism to recreate a critical moment, rather than render it realistically, which brings it closer to literature than simple reminiscence. And there is at least one sentence in Puller that I think Hemingway might have admired and respected: "I had no idea that the pink mist that engulfed me had been caused by the vaporization of most of my right and left legs."

Only in this most modern and technologically advanced of wars could Puller have survived his injuries which he took stock of at the Da Nang field hospital. When he was checked into the Philadelphia Naval Hospital in the fall of 1968, where he would spend the next two years, Lewis Puller was four feet tall and weighed 65 pounds. Before his wounding, he had been six feet tall and he had weighed 160 pounds. He was only 24 years old.

The key figure in the first third of Puller's story is his fabled father; now, as the son begins to recover in part from his injuries, he also has to watch his father sink into illness from repeated strokes, and the mutual anguish they feel for each other is difficult for both them and the reader. Puller's only salvation is the sustaining love of his wife, Toddy, who will have their first child, conceived before Vietnam, shortly after Puller's return, and their second, conceived in the hospital, shortly before Chesty Puller dies in 1971. Toddy is a figure of saintly proportions in Puller's account, particularly in that his self-portrait is one of a demanding, self-pitying and irritable halfman, full of self-reproach and unable to help himself. There are others who help him, either by the force of their personality, like his friend John Kerrey, who lost a leg, won the Medal of Honor, steadfastly refused to take painkillers, and teased the hospital staff by putting jelly beans in his stools, and

Commander Shaugnessey, the formidable physical therapist who constantly challenged him to work for “balance and strength, Lieutenant, balance and strength” (243).

But the country itself was out of balance when Puller emerged from the hospital. The first two thirds of Puller’s book represent experiences with which most readers can sympathize but with which few have had any shared experience—the emotional and psychological consequences, both for good and for ill, of having a famous hero for a father, and the terrible trauma of being wounded so badly. But the trauma of Vietnam is a shared experience for all Americans now older than 35, and Puller’s account of what he felt in the early 70s will seem both fresh and familiar to those readers. Puller began taking classes at the University of Virginia law school in January 1971 and was struck by the “surprising common denominator” among his classmates—their lack of direct “Vietnam involvement.” Only two or three of 150 in his law class “had experienced the terror of war in a way with which I could relate,” and they kept those experiences to themselves, as did Puller (306). By the spring of 1971, Puller had come to share the common belief that the war in Vietnam was, “if not immoral, certainly a mistake of epic proportions,” and that his own sacrifice

and that of all of us who had fought the war was meaningless . . . I felt used up and discarded, and as I tried to dispel with alcohol the magnitude of the obscene fraud of which I had been a willing victim, I was assailed by conflicting and unresolved emotions. On the one hand, I wished that all the unscathed young men from whom I was now hearing a different view of the war had been forced to endure the war experience firsthand. On the other, I wished that none had been called to serve and that the insanity still unraveling in Southeast Asia would simply stop. (308)

By this time, Chesty Puller had been reduced to mere existence through further strokes, and the parallel destruction of his apparently immortal father and his faith in America had driven Puller to sporadic bouts of alcoholic and almost suicidal despair. He kept these under control sufficiently to graduate from law

school, to find a job with the Veterans' Administration, and to be appointed to President Nixon's clemency review board, on which he acted as a moderating force to those like Marine General Lewis Walt, an old friend of his father's, who wanted the harshest penalties possible for all draft evaders and deserters. Puller felt that inasmuch as "the architects of the war bore no stigma" (307), it was inappropriate for their designees to sit in judgment on the young men who were most affected by their mistakes. He continued to function adequately, it but only after the fashion of the court jesters he recalled from Irving Stone's *The Agony and the Ecstasy*, which explained how their lips were sliced off so that their faces were carved into "permanent smiles" (330).

What finally saved Puller for the moment at least was the invitation by local Democrats to run for a newly vacated Congressional seat in Virginia against a young district attorney who had obtained a medical deferment from the draft. Puller doubted the validity of the medical excuse and despised his opponent, Paul Tribble, for loudly proclaiming the necessity of a national defense second to none and a hard line toward communism . . ." (346). As Puller describes it,

Tribble had learned how to wave the flag . . . with a fervor that he, for all his background and experience, could not muster: Ironically, I, who had been raised in the Marine Corps and had fought a war and seen firsthand the death and destruction that cheap rhetoric can engender, was made to appear less patriotic than my opponent, who could fire up the most zealous flag-wavers, without ever have worn a uniform or heard a short fired in anger. (368)

When Puller lost by a 2 to 1 margin, he returned to the VA and to alcohol—and to thoughts of self-destruction. Eventually, through AA, through the emotional catharsis of working with Jan Scruggs and others for the approval of the Vietnam Memorial, and with the help of his long-suffering wife, Puller recovered once again the "balance and strength" that Commander Shaugnessy had helped him to regain. He concludes his difficult story "looking

both backward in sorrow and anger and forward in hope and exultation" (437).

A happy ending, of sorts: admiring reviews for Puller's courage and grace and final peace with himself. It would be nice to be able to leave Puller at that moment described in *The Washington Post* when he learned from a reporter that he had won the Pulitzer Prize: "Well, it's a nice book. It got good reviews, average sales," said the always understated Pentagon attorney about his five-year labor." Then he grew more excited. "I can't believe it! What does it mean to win this!" What it meant, the reporter said, was that "no matter what else you do for the rest of your life, the headline on your obituary is Pulitzer Prize-Winning Author Dies" (David Steinfeld, *The Washington Post*, Apr. 8, 1992).

Unhappily, almost exactly two years later—on May 11, 1994—Lewis Puller Jr. died by his own hand, and the headlines said not a word about the Pulitzer Prize. Rather, and more accurately, they said "The Last Battle" (*People Weekly* May 30, 1994), "The Wound that Would Not Heal" (*Time* May 23, 1994), and, perhaps most compellingly, "Last Week the Vietnam War Killed This Man" (*USNWR*, May 23, 1994).

—Anthony Arthur
California State University, Northridge

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Fighting and Writing the Vietnam War. Donald Ringnalda. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1994. 260 pp. \$37.50.

Like many critics before him, Ringnalda argues that the traditional realist narratives of the Vietnam War, with their propensity for

making sense and seeking order, bungle the task of reflecting the essence of that war. Favoring the fragmentary, the nonlinear, and the experimental, Ringnalda shows how such works as Stephen Wright's *Meditations in Green*, Tim O'Brien's *Going After Cacciato* and *The Things They Carried*, and Michael Herr's *Dispatches* (each author gets a separate chapter) provide experiences for the reader that more closely approximate the experience of the war itself. On the other hand, novels like John Del Vecchio's *The 13th Valley*, in the service of literary realism, disguise the war, domesticating it into something familiar, rational, and safe.

If he had done nothing else but develop and elaborate this key distinction, otherwise found in a chapter here and an article there, Ringnalda would have performed a valuable service. But Ringnalda goes much further. He argues that the authors of scores of volumes sharing the techniques and esthetic assumptions of Del Vecchio and James Webb, because they write the war within the mindset of its very fighting, become accomplices (perhaps unknowingly or unintentionally) in the national criminality of our Vietnam misadventure. Such writings cast a convenient but unhealthy closure, promoting cultural blindness and amnesia. This indictment is powerful and shocking, but Ringnalda is up to the task of making it stick. His arguments—too rigorous and sophisticated to be shortchanged here by summary—are compelling, just as his fervor is unmistakable.

Oddly, Ringnalda's approach ushers in no radical alteration of the canon. Most of the works he treats are well-known standards in the Vietnam War literature classroom. In treating the fiction, Ringnalda's main anticanonical gesture is to offer Peter Straub's *Koko* as an example of how stock genre devices can be remade in the service of a radical and cleansing vision. Ringnalda also uses *Koko* as part of his instructive attempt to undermine the privileged status of the Vietnam veteran as official scribe and/or arbiter of the Vietnam experience.

Two sturdy chapters of *Fighting and Writing* examine respectively the poetry and the drama of the war. In each, Ringnalda points out how these genres, in part because of their very marginality, provide tools for bringing the truths of the war

home—truths obscured by the very nature of narration, no matter how innovative. Among the poets, Ringnalda gives most attention to John Balaban, D. F. Brown, W. D. Ehrhart, Walter McDonald, Marilyn McMahan, Yusef Komunyakaa, and Bruce Weigl. For students of Vietnam War literature, the new voice Ringnalda introduces is that of Jerry Hansen. For Ringnalda, the power of these poets lies in the fact that they have not covered over or rationalized or romanticized the pain that the Vietnam War produced. They have not sought to control or contain it. In their best work, they make us live with discomfort and disorientation; they force us to counter our national habit of wasting that suffering.

Throughout, Ringnalda elaborates this metaphor: the most significant Vietnam War authors write like the enemy fought. Nowhere does he develop this conceit more effectively than in his chapter on drama, "Doing It Wrong, Getting It Right." Misdirection, collage techniques, and an ostensible poverty of resources underpin a theater of successful guerrilla operations. Along with several plays by David Rabe, Ringnalda explores John DiFusco's *Tracers*, Emily Mann's *Still Life*, Amlin Gray's *How I Got That Story*, Arthur Kopit's *Indians*, and Steve Tesich's *The Speed of Darkness*. Few of the key dramatic works, Ringnalda asserts, are set in Vietnam; thus the plays as a group reveal most clearly that Vietnam begins and ends at home. Along the way, Ringnalda reminds us that these artists have received scant attention from the critics, in spite of (or because of) their effective and affective distance from convention.

In the last chapters of *Fighting and Writing*, Ringnalda has us turn a corner and confront a ghost. For most critics (and imaginative writers), the problem with writing the Vietnam War is finding the means to render its uniqueness. Indeed, one could read this far in Ringnalda's book and miss a handful of cues pointing away from this standard assumption. But now Ringnalda confronts us with "The Paralysis of Uniqueness." Many, if not all, of the narratives, poems, and plays that he has profiled explode the myth of uniqueness. If read with alertness and imagination, they portray the horrific normality of America's involvement in Vietnam. Atrocities perpetrated by American soldiers, confusion of friend and foe, hostility toward returning veterans, and other supposedly

unique features of the Vietnam War are not unique after all. Conscientious historians know this, and so do the imaginative writers toward whose works Ringnalda directs us. Though this chapter reads too much like a series of book reports, it is conceptually rich and absolutely necessary.

If Vietnam was business as usual, we can learn no useful lessons from treating it as freakish or aberrant. Indeed, to do so is to participate in a comforting hoax. The Vietnam War was not a time-bound mistake, a lapse of national character, or an exception to the traditions of U. S. military and political conduct. According to Ringnalda, the most significant writers of the war have needed to find extraordinary means to see through the emperor's mythic clothes. The striking and yet radical ordinariness of Maya Lin's Vietnam Veterans Memorial implicates us all, embraces and reflects (in Ringnalda's view) the whole dysfunctional American family across time and space. It reflects the nearby traditional icons to Washington and Lincoln as well as the visitors and its very self. Maya Lin, too, has done it wrong to do it right, has broken with convention to give us a way of seeing what convention blinds us to.

Ringnalda concludes his study by stating this belief: "we will fight less if we learn to write better." Having written so well himself, he deserves our gratitude for more than thoughtful literary and cultural criticism. Right now, if I were asked to recommend one book to a students concerned with the Vietnam War and its literary representation, *Fighting and Writing* would be that book. I would recommend it not for its thoroughness (it makes no claim to thoroughness), and not for its objectivity (a foolish and delusional goal of so much academic writing), but for its passion, its wisdom, and (despite all the bitter pills it forces down readers' throats) its healing power.

—Philip K. Jason
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Farewell, Darkness. Ron Zaczek. Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 1994. Pp. 364. Photographs, drawings, glossary. \$26.95.

What role do Vietnam Veterans play in our society? Are they heroes, objects of pity, anachronisms? Ron Zaczek explains that since his return from Vietnam in 1968 he has worn many labels, from “Pariah” to “Tragic Figure.” As Zaczek recounts his time as a helicopter crewchief in Vietnam, his rocky reunion with American society, and his slow recovery from Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, we get to know a man who is not easily labeled. What makes this autobiography exceptional is Zaczek’s honest and realistic portrayal of himself: he is bright, heroic, and patriotic, yet vulgar and egotistical. The same language he uses to describe himself—and of his struggle to deal with himself—also provides an incredibly vivid picture of the sights, smells, sounds, and emotions of ordinary and extraordinary days in Vietnam.

Farewell, Darkness narrates a “story woven in threads. One thread recounts what happened to me—to us—in Country [Vietnam] . . . The second thread to the story is the therapeutic process I followed in the Vet Center Outreach program.” A third thread, however, is equally significant: Zaczek’s account of his relationship with “The World” (anywhere other than “In Country”) after he returned from Vietnam. Through it all we get to know Zaczek as a man who needs reassurance that, despite all he has said and done, he is a good person.

Memory also ties these three threads together, for memory defines both the cause and the cure for Zaczek’s Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. His “shrink,” Dr. Tom Murtaugh, explains PTSD in one of their therapy sessions: “We think, in PTSD, that traumatic events aren’t assimilated into long-term memory because they contradict the basic rules of your universe.” Murtaugh tells Zaczek that since he never assimilated these memories, the power of the original emotions was never defused. So the therapy sessions, and the book, are designed to relive the original experiences and order

them somehow, bringing the feelings they carry back to a controllable level.

One of Zaczek's key memories involves a mission to airlift wounded footsoldiers under heavy enemy fire, a mission for which Zaczek earned a Bronze Star. His description:

We turn to the last Marine, stumbling over the bodies. It is the radio operator, shot in the chest and legs. His eyeglasses lie crookedly across the bridge of his nose, a star fracture in both lenses. *Christ, the dude is still wearing his fucking glasses. Fucking shit!*

When Zaczek examines this experience more deeply, however, we see his urgent need to be *right*. Because his helicopter is so heavy, and the fire so intense, Zaczek and his crew leave dead American soldiers behind. One of his fellow Marines challenges his decision, and guilt overwhelms him. At the Vet Center, Zaczek is able to redefine *right*. While in retrospect he knows he could have dumped some cargo to make room for the corpses, he knows he did the best he—or anyone—could under the chaotic circumstances. He explains, “each time I think about that day, about the mystique and legend that judge so harshly, the only explanation that makes sense is that I was human.”

Zaczek does not rely solely on the fantastic or the dramatic to convince us that he is indeed human. He also describes the mundane: oppressive weather, horrid food, and a demanding schedule that mark nearly every ordinary day of his tour, days when we can see how he suffered, despite his claim that he has no feelings. Practical jokes break the tedium. “Most of the grunts wear rectangles of red cloth sewn into their trouser legs and centered on their utility covers. We tell the mamasans these are V.D. badges to mark the diseased. In truth, it is the proud and simple badge of the Sparrowhawk [helicopter assault team].” While vivid descriptions of the ordinary make the book interesting, Zaczek's numerous intimate descriptions of his bodily functions seem to serve no purpose.

Still, Zaczek is an unusually wise nineteen-year-old—he realizes that he is not always likable. At times, he works to save lives, both Vietnamese and American. He loves his own life as well as those of

his girlfriend and future wife, Grace, and his best friend, Ron Phelps. But just as often he is incredibly brutal. He describes a Vietnamese urchin: "A slender, dark-eyed kid who might have been pretty in another world peeks coyly over his shoulder. She . . . could be eight or ten. In a few more years and with a pound or two on each tit she might make a good piece of ass." He alternates between coolly "greasing" the "gooks" or "zips" and wondering with horror what kind of man he has become, how he could possibly rejoin society.

Zaczek's return to the States only exacerbates his—and our—frustration with his sometimes-distasteful personality. No one knows what to say to Ron the Vet, except a neighbor he has always had a crush on, who calls him "babykiller." His cocktail-party banter is sadly amusing. He responds sarcastically to the naive question "Did you like killing?":

"Yeah, it was a real trip. Killing, man! It just made you feel like you had The Power!" I feign a far-off look, as if gazing in wistful longing for a time long past, and say, "Man, it's been years since I've blown anyone away. God, I miss it."

His anger is understandable, pathetic, brutal.

While Zaczek describes his frustration over his failure to be appreciated as a Vietnam Veteran, he neglects to acknowledge that this rejection is as responsible for his disorder as the original experience. But his need to order his memories, to make sense out of what he did, depends in part on some confirmation of his role as self-sacrificing patriot, if not noble hero. It seems a bit odd that after all his very candid self-disclosure, he hasn't realized, or admitted, this need.

At times, Zaczek's incongruous language can be distracting. The same man who is so vulgar gracefully quotes Shakespeare, refers to "Gordian threads," and describes someone as "Mephistophelian." But perhaps this incongruity explains Zaczek's complex, sometimes fragmented, personality, without which the experience would never have been so traumatic, or the memories so intense.

With Zaczek's personal darkness so apparent, why would we want to stay with him long enough to see him say farewell to it? He certainly convinces us that, after all he has been through, he has been treated unjustly. But perhaps more significantly, we can understand his desire to enjoy some self-satisfaction after having sacrificed so much to do what he felt was honorable. He writes not merely to memorialize himself, but to help everyone who has experienced PTSD (or knows someone who has) so that his combat time and recovery time serve a purpose. He explains, "To say, 'I don't want anyone to remember me' is like wishing not to have lived at all. God how awful; what a waste it would be to pass this way and gain nothing, or leave nothing. How can anyone want that?"

—Susan Ross
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