

COMMENTARY BY PHILIP BEIDLER

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*The Invisible ARVN: The South Vietnamese Soldier  
in American Representations of the Vietnam War*

**M**Y TITLE IS AT ONCE CONTRADICTORY AND DESCRIPTIVE. In most libraries, under the official Library of Congress Subject Heading, “Vietnamese Conflict, 1961-75,” you will simply look in vain across an entire American literature of the war for anything more than incidental representations of the individual soldier or the army more or less interchangeably called the ARVN. The ARVN: at the height of the American war, a body of soldiery numbering one million, or roughly twice the size of American forces in-country; over the course of that war and its 58,000 American names on the Memorial Wall, counting its own Vietnamese casualties at more than 220,000 dead and 1.2 million wounded.<sup>1</sup> In American or Vietnamese accounts, the ARVN soldier remains at best a creature of scattered references, hand-me-down scholarship, supplementary statistics squirreled away in the odd military history archive or document collection.

Sub-topical searches under main headings, if anything, only demonstrate further the totality of documentary and historical unconcern. Studies under the subheading “participation” are listed as African-American, American, Australian, Canadian, Hispanic, Hmong, Indian, Japanese, Mexican-American, and New Zealand. “Personal Narratives” include American, Australian, Canadian, French, Hmong, Jewish, New Zealand, North Vietnamese Army, Viet Cong, and Philippines. Tucked into the latter is a small handful headed “Vietnamese.” One is by a naval commander, another by an ARVN liaison officer to US forces; a third by a general. The rest are civilian. In the military or the civilian domains, “people’s” histories invariably use the term in the Marxist definition, concentrating

on the North Vietnamese, the Viet Cong, or, at a stretch, the American antiwar movement. Cultural studies offerings concentrate on civilians and refugee ethnic minorities—Hmong, Meo, Nung. Back up at the level of the big picture, we find assorted studies of Diem, Thieu, Ky, Little Minh, Big Minh. Big deal, if you were a common South Vietnamese soldier, one would have to say.

The same point is easily made across the spectrum of well-known American popular-culture representations. The ARVN soldier appears nowhere in Michael Herr's *Dispatches*, and only as an abstraction in Frances Fitzgerald's *Fire in the Lake* or David Halberstam's *The Best and the Brightest*—most often considered the great triad of journalistic reference. The same is true of the standard narrative canon, ranging from Philip Caputo's *A Rumor of War* and Ron Kovic's *Born on the Fourth of July* through award-winning literary texts such as Tim O'Brien's *Going After Cacciato* or Larry Heinemann's *Paco's Story* and popular classics such as Bobbie Ann Mason's *In Country* or Winston Groom's *Forrest Gump*. Among Hollywood imagings the ARVN is briefly caricatured in *The Green Berets* and then slips into total invisibility in *Apocalypse Now*, *The Deer Hunter*, *Platoon*, *Full Metal Jacket*, and *We Were Soldiers*.

Marvin the ARVN we used to call him; or Marvelous Marv.<sup>2</sup> The ARVN: the soldiers of the Army of Vietnam. In the official language of the times, they were "our counterparts" or "our Vietnamese allies." On the radio, they were the "Victor Novembers" or "the little people." In our soldier-talk, to tell the truth, they were usually just "the fucking ARVNs." They were the brothers in arms we were allegedly helping to defend their nation from the communists. We were there for one-year tours, in the case of the poor Marines, thirteen months—with the most beautiful word in any soldier's vocabulary being "DEROS," the official acronym for Date of Estimated Return from Overseas. In contrast, it being their country, or a country under an anti-communist government they chose to serve or were conscripted to serve, they were there more or less, as the phrasing goes, for the duration. Draftees did a minimum two or three years. You could find officers and NCOs who had been at it since the days of the Viet Minh.

As American Army and Marine soldiers, those of us serving directly in combat—junior officers, NCOs, enlisted men—prided ourselves on being called grunts. For the same reasons, we frequently expressed our respect, even admiration, for opposing combatants on the Communist side, the "hard soldiers" a character in Gustav Hasford's novel *The Short-Timers* calls them, "strange diminutive phantoms with iron insides, brass balls, incredible courage, and no scruples at all" (131). "They are hard as slant-eyed drill instructors," says another. "They are highly motivated individuals."

Somewhere in between, we now see, fell a whole, other, invisible army, who somehow managed to keep it up in one way or another, for at least twenty years; who

frequently, in the particularly savage and remorseless combat that characterized the war of Vietnamese against Vietnamese—as Philip Caputo has noted, combining the worst aspects of both civil war and guerilla insurrection—went down fighting to the last man. The cliché of the hapless ARVN persisted.

Further, for most of us—whether veterans of the war or other Americans schooled in the history of its representations—it is a cliché that we did lamentably little to challenge in life or in art. At Fort Knox, Kentucky, during Armor Officers' Basic in 1968, I vaguely remember that a barracks next to ours was being used to house South Vietnamese lieutenants and captains going through training similar to our own. I do not recall meeting or speaking to a single one of the Vietnamese officers, although I do remember vaguely on certain evenings hearing their music. To this day, I am now ashamed to reflect, my most compelling recollection of the brief experience seems to be that of several of my fellow lieutenants who, irritated by the high, eerie, sing-song sounds of Vietnamese music and/or Vietnamese voices in the hot summer night, retaliated by shoving one of their cars into a ditch.

In-Country, about a month into my tour, the light infantry brigade I had joined was detailed to a major combat collaboration with ARVN forces. The project was called "Operation Forward Together." The Area of Operations involved some truly terrible places up in War Zone D, where nobody had been since the Eleventh Cavalry had shot Binh Thuy province to pieces more than a year earlier during Tet. Our counterpart Vietnamese unit was the Tenth ARVN Division, the old number ten, as it was once known. By that time the unit in question was so ingloriously renowned on the sliding scale of military and civilian slang—number one, great; number ten, terrible; number ten thou, off the chart—that it had in fact been redesignated the Eighteenth. There had been nothing to suggest that the name change had affected combat performance. But by then, in mid-1969, there were larger name issues to reckon with. Most important was the name of the game as far as the war was concerned, which had officially become Vietnamization. As an armored cavalry troop—a company-sized unit of assault carriers and tanks organic to the brigade, and operating with the line infantry battalions more or less in the traditional role of light armor—my unit was going to do training and combined arms exercises with the corresponding divisional armored cavalry squadron. It never happened. I can't recall what happened with our line infantry battalions; but in Delta Troop we never saw a single ARVN soldier on the ground during the whole continuous jungle-busting combat time we were there.

Now I look back, addressing not only personal memory but an academic career of thirty plus years of study of American representations of the Vietnam War in history, literature, and film, and now find correspondingly, as far as the ARVN is concerned, taken as the individual soldier or the collective military entity—that it seems to be the story of the war. Somewhere in between us and the enemy, even

between us and the Vietnamese civilian population we saw ourselves as defending, fell a whole, other, invisible army. Who were they, the grunts of the RVN? Who speaks for them? Where are they now? Where were they then? Where, in American representations of the war, do we find them depicted?

I move now to a set of notes, at least, toward some effort at recovery. You will find the ARVN occasionally in the big American histories. They get a kind of grudging attention in Stanley Karnow and various encyclopedias and recitations of chronological and statistical fact.<sup>3</sup> A volume is also actually devoted to them in a now largely-forgotten *Time-Life* series. Early journalism covering their role in the war is of the *National Geographic*–*Saturday Evening Post* variety: “Democratic Vietnam Resists Communists;” or, “The Bright Spot in Asia.” In the work of pioneering investigatory reporters such as David Halberstam, Ward Just, Neil Sheehan, Malcolm Browne, and others, we get the occasional account of Saigon government military operations. Sometimes the force involved is an ARVN regular infantry unit, a company, battalion, brigade, or division; and the action reported is as often a debacle as a triumph—most notably the legendary rout of an entire ARVN division at the Battle of Ap Bac. But more often the mainstream press (foreshadowing a preference reflected in depictions of American forces during the era) elected to tout special operations units: Marines, Airborne, Armored Cavalry, Airborne. You can almost date the writing by the adjectives—“crack,” “elite,” “first-class.” Buried within texts, one can also see local militia and village defense units, regional and popular forces commonly known as ruff-puffs (RF/PF). But they all shortly disappear. From 1965 onward—the beginning of the American War, with the introduction of major US ground troops—what small representations of South Vietnamese combat formations that can be found justly reflect their essential sidelining by Westmoreland to support roles such as pacification and security. With the exception of some small notice devoted to the ARVN role alongside American units in repelling the countrywide 1968 Tet Offensive, it is as if they have simply disappeared from the war, falling out around Johnson’s 1965 big-unit American war into strange, feckless, bystander status and suddenly returning in 1970 for Nixon’s Vietnamization. In certain famous postwar accounts, to be sure, they reappear after the fact, the most notable being Neil Sheehan’s chapters in *A Bright and Shining Lie* on John Paul Vann’s advisory career during the early and late stages of the war. They also briefly surface in advisor-memoirs such as David Donovan’s *Once a Warrior King* or Tobias Wolff’s *In Pharaoh’s Army*, as well as in celebrity autobiographies such as those of Colin Powell and Norman Schwartzkopf, both of whom describe at length early advisory tours. One may find the ARVN occasionally in texts by small military presses—Presidio or the Naval Academy—or in pulp paperback offerings from Ballantine or Ivy. As in the literary fiction, poetry, and drama, that has come down to us, the fact is that if we see the ARVN at

all, it is generally through representations of scandal or exposé. If common South Vietnamese appear, they are almost always civilians, women, children, old people, the human flotsam of the war. If the spotlight of historical or political interest falls on Vietnamese males, they are government officials, generals, village chiefs and elders; among younger Vietnamese men, we find privileged students, influential draft-dodgers, many of them vanished from the country itself, living abroad; those remaining are cripples, beggars, urban scourings; pimps, hustlers, cowboys.

Where, then, is the individual Vietnamese fighting soldier, who once numbered in the millions? Only a handful of even brief attempts at complex depiction come to mind. The most important, on which I will concentrate, is David Halberstam's *One Very Hot Day*, the only early attempt at sustained, serious literary representation of the ARVN ground soldier in fictional narrative. Another, with which I will conclude, is Philip Caputo's *Del Corso's Gallery*, which contains pivotal scenes from the 1975 defense conducted by ARVN units at the siege of Xuan Loc. And even here, as one will see, both confirm questions of authorship and representation—attitudes of history, politics, culture, but also, increasingly, conventions of literary and popular-culture myth—comprising what we might call generally the issues of an entire fugitive genre. The first, published in 1968, is a combat novel of the pre-1965 war written by a well-known journalist, already the author of *The Making of a Quagmire*, shortly to become famous as the author of *The Best and the Brightest*, to this day the pre-eminent study of the war from the perspective of Washington/Saigon policy-making; the second, published in 1987, is a novel about a journalist written by a well-known combat memoirist of the 1965 Marine expeditionary-force war, the author of *A Rumor of War*, still regarded as one of the two or three definitive American soldier memoirs of the era, Neither is generally included in the canonical literature of the war; at best, each is regarded mainly as a literary curiosity—a vaguely interesting “other” book by a writer associated with the canon.

Set in the advisor war of the early to mid-60s, just before the major commitment of US ground forces, *One Very Hot Day*, in its style of spare, matter-of-fact reportage, now reads like a non-fiction novel; almost a documentary. Its putative subject is the work of American Army advisors with South Vietnamese Army conventional combat forces, in this case the fictionalized ARVN 8th Infantry Division. The dramatis personae are two sets of officers, paired American and Vietnamese, parallel characters both in terms of their own nationalities and across cultural lines in what were called in those days “counterpart” relationships. The most attention throughout centers on a cynical, over-the-hill American captain, Beaupre, on his third war. Fat, tired, out of shape, he is decidedly the American hero out-of-date, weary in body and soul. Crucial also for the reader proves to be his “American” relationship with a brave, ramrod straight, West Point lieutenant cohort, Anderson, as fit and dedicated as Beaupre is slack and doubt-ridden. Beaupre is assigned to

an ARVN battalion commander, Captain Dang, corrupt, cowardly, ingratiating, politically well-connected, given to decamping conveniently, in the face of danger, to a Saigon villa. Anderson is assigned a to company commander, Lieutenant Thuong—the latter an equally brave and fit, albeit intellectual and conflicted son of the educated classes, an anti-communist who understands that whatever regime holds power in Saigon for the moment is probably is nothing to die for. (The rank structure, one should add, is revealing: an endless supply of American officers shuttling in and out, a Vietnamese line battalion commanded by a captain, a company commanded by a lieutenant, only the latter of which is likely to be found in the field with his men.)

The novel includes telling minor figures. The big, jovial, endlessly bullshitting black ranger captain, William Redfern, treating his Vietnamese charges like junior campers; (How they hanging *Vienamese*,” he begins every day. “They hanging fine, Big William,” the Vietnamese answer.) There is the American Colonel in charge of the advisory group, as cynical as Beaupre but still playing the game, humorous, detached, aware that he has been just honest enough in his reporting and earnest enough in his training duties to insure that he will never make general.

Among the main characters, once the operation is launched, something important happens. The parallels described turn into something more like a triangulation, with the novel coming increasingly to concentrate on a focal figure, the Vietnamese Lieutenant, Thuong. Beaupre remains a sad sack of shit, at least honest in his despair. Anderson, the young West Point idealist, is clearly a believer, earnest, well-intentioned, even, it turns out, fluent in Vietnamese. The real man in the middle becomes the Vietnamese lieutenant. As we meet him, he is engaged in an angry interior monologue. As opposed to one of the headstrong blundering Americans or one of the lackadaisical privates under his command, it turns out that it is already he, Thuong, who has begun the day by stepping in a punji pit, driving the sharpened, shit-smearred bamboo spike all the way through his foot. Enraged with the terrible pain in his foot and the shame at his stupidity, he will spend the rest of the mission keeping it a secret. As the man in the middle, he now has one more thing to make a very angry man even angrier. He is the living war that will never end—or, somehow, will end as everyone already knows it will. It is one very hot day for the American, Beaupre, a bad *Walk in the Sun*—the very title, for those conversant with American war fiction, a reference to a similar World War II masterpiece of minor irony. It is every day for Thuong, who as it turns out, has once stepped on a punji stick on a day like this on a mission like this back when he was much younger. Thuong’s is the forever war, the agony of the ARVN. And there too he is exactly the man in the middle. Dang, the captain, is hopelessly corrupt, a junior Saigon time-server striving to become a senior Saigon armchair and villa officer. The privates under Thuong’s command are a hopelessly ill-disciplined

rabble, uneducated peasant boys, city scum, unsoldierly, slack, jabbering, playing their radios, taking unscheduled breaks whenever they wish. Thuong is old for a lieutenant, 31. He has told the Americans he is 25. They think he is younger. For any number of other reasons, quite literally neither here nor there, he also knows he will probably not be promoted. Unlike his troops, as with many members of the leadership and the officer corps, he is a Northerner who has come south, still doing his best to lose his dialect. His northern ways will take longer—his seriousness, his discipline, his self-control, his respect for authority. But there is more. Unlike many of his fellow members of the officer class, he is a northerner who is not a catholic, the son of a father who has almost perversely remained a Buddhist. He is a tired, dubious man like the American captain. He is a brave, fit, able officer like the American lieutenant. He is a northerner in the south; he is a Buddhist among Catholics. He is an honest, skilled, combat officer in a morass of incompetence and corruption. He has no respect for Dang; he has no confidence in his soldiers. He admires the Americans for their dedication and military power; he hates them for their patronization and condescension.

By the end of one more very hot day it has been a very bad walk in the sun for Americans and Vietnamese alike. Two other American-advised Vietnamese battalions involved in the operation have been hit and badly savaged. In the first, Big William is killed; in the second, Thuong's friend, a brave and dedicated battalion commander named Chinh is dead; Beaupre's friend Raulston is probably dying. There are dead ARVNs all over the place. The third ambush hits. When the fighting ceases, Dang is nowhere to be found. Anderson, the West Pointer is dead. Beaupre and Thuong, screaming at each other in confusion and rage, have somehow managed to save the force from being completely annihilated. Beaupre, on the far side of a near heatstroke and the attempt to mitigate one more ARVN disaster is even further from illusion than he was to begin with. At least, he thinks, there is Thuong. "It struck him that the Vietnamese lieutenant, Thuong, had been very good," he observes, "and that he hadn't seen Dang since the ambush." Thuong, he notices, "walked slowly now, a short hulk of a man carrying an immense load, almost graceful now because of the care he must take as he walked." There is still the terrible punji wound in his foot. But there is also the weight—to echo the title of the best known and most widely read of all American books of the war—of the things he carries. There are his comrade Chinh's remembered words about the Americans, for instance. "You are too hard on them," he has told Thuong, "because you do not disagree with the way they are fighting. You think it is pointless for people to fight so well for so little, but you are too hard, that is their business. They are nice people. They are brave although their food is bad, and their cigarettes are for women. So what. I know you, Thuong; if they fought not so well, you would probably like them more. It is fortunate for us that we are not all intellectuals like

you.” Further, these are also paralleled in memory now with his own words to the American lieutenant, Anderson, concerning one more ARVN “snabu,” as he has tried to call it, the way the Americans do—the SNAFU, he tries to explain, “the fucking up.” “I know that it was a disgrace, and, Lieutenant, it was not our first, and it will not be our last. I wish I could tell you why it happens that way and that it will not happen again, but I cannot.” Anderson tries to put a kind face on it, trying to talk about improvements, better discipline, helicopters and the like. The Americans are there, he emphasizes, “Not to save, to help.” Thuong is not buying, and he is not selling in return, either. “No, save, save is the better word, but I am afraid, Lieutenant, that we are not an easy people to save.”

For once Anderson did not protest, and Thuong continued, his voice lower, his eyes almost closed, speaking as though he were talking to himself. “We cannot even save ourselves. That is the worst thing. We cannot save ourselves. I am sorry.”

Relentlessly in such scenes, strategically interspersed throughout the novel, it is thus Thuong who brings the war into relief. Even as the Americans begin to crowd in, he has already seen the end.

That vision of the end is brought into horrific focus as the prize photograph in Philip Caputo’s *Del Corso’s Gallery*, which may here supply a brief literary coda. The novel is based on events taking place a full, tragic decade of American and Vietnamese war later. The year is 1975. The place is Xuan Loc. The event is the ARVN last stand against the onrushing North Vietnamese final offensive against Saigon. The unit, it turns out, is the ARVN 18th—the old number ten. Del Corso is a celebrated young military photojournalist, albeit already a veteran of the dark places of the earth including Africa, the Middle East, and Hue in 68. (When he dies near the end of the book, shot down by the newest set of militia crazies in Beirut, his last word will be “shit.”) His rival is a famous older figure nicknamed “Horseman”—based on the legendary combat photographer David Douglas Duncan. At Xuan Loc, Del Corso takes the shot that breaks the game. It is the great image that every war photographer seeks to capture, the real one, the forever career-maker. It also catches, Del Corso knows, the shame, the obscenity, the filthy sensationalism and vicariousness of what he does. It is the ultimate combat photograph, the one he calls The Dying ARVN. The Horseman has taken a lot of the first and any number of big ones in between: the famous one of the women and children, grieving, in the French Military Cemetery in Hanoi, 22 May 1953. The concrete monument, inset with a marble stone, bearing a French inscription: “Ici Repose Pham-Ngoc-Linh, Partisan, 3/6 R.I.C., Mort Pour La France, 20-6-50; the one of the incredibly young French-Vietnamese recruits marching out of Hanoi,

Berets, Khaki shirts and shorts, submachine guns in shoulder slings; the others of the French Army and Legion Auvergnats, Bretons, Alsatians; Laotians, Annamese, Tonkinese, Senegalese, Soudanese, Mauritians, Moroccans, Guineans. Later, they have been replaced in the Horseman's photos by Americans at Con Tien and Khe Sanh. Now it is Del Corso's turn. The Americans, too have gone. The gallery is empty again save for the Vietnamese. Del Corso records the death of an individual soldier that says it all, as Capa once did, he thinks, with the famous picture of the Spanish Loyalist captured at the moment of impact. But this, he understands, is also more. Frozen in time, it is the death of a soldier and the death of an Army.

The war comes down at the end to an American image. And so, appropriately, as in the beginning, it rewrites a host of earlier representations, verbal and visual, flooding in upon memory. For many Americans, there has been the ur-text, The Green Berets, John Wayne and Aldo Ray with their cinematic counterparts. The ARVN Colonel is Jack Soo, fished up from Hawaii 5-0 by way of Barney Miller. The fireating young Captain is George Takei, Mister Sulu from Star Trek, late of Howard Stern. They are "real sharp individuals," as the army saying would go, hard-core anti-communists, frequently with vengeance on their mind—quite rightly so—for family members tortured or killed by the other side. "If I had a hundred like Trung, here," says the archetypal American advisor, "I could tear the belly out of this war in six weeks." Beyond that, we are lucky if we see anything of the spear carriers, maybe a few montangard strikers, irregulars, local militia; or in the distance, miniscule, happy-go-lucky, national-guard weekend types, slopping around in their enormous helmets, tight little tailored fatigues. Off duty, they go down the street holding hands. There is a buddy movie Americans would never understand. As one marine tells another in Martin Russ' *Happy Hunting Ground*, "Steve says the reason the South Vietnamese have such a lousy army is because everybody's all the time goosing each other." In contrast, there is the inevitable demonization/deification of Charlie. "I love the little commie bastards," says yet another Marine in Gustav Hasford's *The Short Timers*. "Grunts understand grunts. These are great days we are living bros. We are jolly green giants, walking the earth with guns. The people we waste here today are the finest individuals we will ever know. When we rotate back to the World, we're gonna miss having somebody around who's worth shooting."

For the soldier, there would be the dreadful nostalgia: Marines and VC/NVA playing cowboys and gooks in the country that was the war. The ARVN would always remain the other and the other's other. But this would be true at home as well, in the polarizations of the students and intellectuals, anti-war movement. Guerrilla theater called for Guerrilla fighters, with all concomitant for South Vietnamese loyalists. An early cheer, Hey, Hey, LBJ. How many kids did you kill today?, found its echo in Ho Ho Ho Chi Minh; Ho Chi Minh is gonna win.

For soldier and civilian, Marvin the Arvin was politically incorrect then and remains politically incorrect now, guilty by command influence, as we used to call it, or at least political association. To invoke the ARVN is to recall the Army of Thieu, Ky, the police generals, the corrupt Province Chiefs, Region and Corps Commanders. Puppet soldiers, they were called by the enemy. Ghost soldiers they were called even by their own commanders—real or fictitious names on a roll, non-existent, not present for duty, maybe AWOL, maybe deserted, maybe dead, at least totally unaccounted for, for whom ration allowances and pay were collected by higher-ups.

And now, coming up on fifty years since Dien Bien Phu and forty years since the Ia Drang and thirty years since the Fall of the South, it is still a fitting phrase: ghost soldiers. Everybody now gets remembered except the ARVN. The ARVN fought a war as long, as bloody, as traumatizing, and as heartrending as anyone else's. They had wives, lovers, and girlfriends; they had children, parents and grandparents, brothers and sisters. They had futures they wanted, if possible, to stay alive for. They died for the Americans, just as surely as the people listed on those old tombstones that say "ici" so-and-so "partisan," "mort pour le France."

Worst of all, for us, at least, not to mention themselves, they died for a nation called the Republic of Vietnam. And in so doing, they became the image of our failure. It is a very bad move, allowing yourself and your troops to find contemptible the serving individual soldiers of nation you are supposed to be fighting alongside. It is equally bad, romanticizing the enemy in the name of grunt solidarity. For us it became necessary. It justified our own ideas of our own sacrifice. It reinforced our eventual mythologizing of our own army of Vietnam as betrayed, sacrificed, used up, hung out to dry.

In the big picture, the ARVN was always fated to remain the bit player, the spear-carrier, the extra—supposed lie there get photographed for the after-action report or the last scenes of the somebody's bad novel or bad movie. So Beaupre sees, at the end of *One Very Hot Day*:

There was a trail of dead Vietnamese. They were scattered in all directions, as if someone with a giant hand had rolled them out like dice. He realized that he did not recognize them or know their names. One of them had been sucking on a sugar cane stalk and the cane was still in his mouth. Beside him was another man with part of his face shot away, he had been caught in the chin and neck. The first burst, Beaupre thought, had obviously been been a little high or it might have been worse. Another lay toppled over on his side, with his palm outstretched as if he had been praying; another

lay sprawled down, his eyes closed, completely silent, but his transistor radio on, either he had switched it on when he was dying, or else he had violated the new blackout, the radio was playing their damn singsong music.

For the dead American, Beaupre knows, he will have to be writing a letter home to the grieving wife. At least he will not have to lie about Anderson's behaving bravely and doing his duty. As to the meaning of his death, whatever the mission was supposed to be or how it turned out, Beaupre knows himself too well to go there. He will just tell Anderson's wife that he died somewhere near Ap Than Thoi. It is a unit joke among the Americans. Ap Than Toi is an imaginary place that is supposed to be there but nobody can find on a map. It is an American joke. The ARVN dead will get no such letters. They will not be worth even an American joke. They will just have died on one very hot day.

Ten years later, at the end, they are still dying vividly enough to make another American's combat photographer's career, one more prize exhibit, in the great pornography, as he calls it, of violence. He has snapped the shutter "at the instant the slivers of shrapnel had pierced the man's lungs like miniature spears. But it the eyes, he understands, that tell the story. "This is what it's like to be mortally wounded," they say; "this is what it's like to feel your own death and there is nothing good about it, nothing to redeem it, nothing to mitigate it."

It is a fitting requiem. Probably as good as any soldier gets. For it is too late to change history—obviously—or even, as far as the dominant imagings have come down to us decades later, much rewrite it. Political revisionism about good guys versus bad guys won't do any good either. What we might do—and it has really been my purpose here—is honor at least the memory of a large number of people who remain the least discussed, acknowledged, or understood participants in a war that took 58,000 American and between 2-4 million Vietnamese lives. Many of them are gone now. The rest, wherever they may be, are right about my age, in their late 50s, early 60s; and, like their American and Viet Cong and NVA, they carry as deeply and painfully the burdens of what we call the Vietnam War and the Vietnamese call the American War: all of us shortly to join all the other grunts and spear-carriers who died scared and alone on the battlefield for the booby prize of going to the great tomb of the unknowns. As for me, I try to remember to consult the memory of all such people, contained in a picture I keep of myself, sitting on an ACAV at a crossroads called Trang Bom in early 1969. By that time, the American war had been going on for five years. Five years later, during the final offensive, the place where I am sitting, exactly, the road junction, that intersection at Trang Bom would become the place at the end of the pipeline the where the last big NVA envelopment would come down, a right hook through the rubber, with fifteen

more divisions behind, trapping the defenders of Xuan Loc, the old number ten, about to become the legendary 18th. It would turn out to be in fact the place of the ARVN's last stand—even as it became in fiction the one recorded by the titular protagonist in *Del Corso's Gallery* in the photograph that would make him famous forever. Xuan Loc, 1975. Whoever that ARVN soldier was, he was a soldier of the 18th ARVN Division, his dying captured at the place and the moment he got killed as an image of history, albeit if only to be remembered as a living human person to his family or perhaps the household gods.

And Del Corso is correct. The photograph is right up there with Capa's Spanish Loyalist; Goya's Horrors of War, perhaps even Sallust's The Dying Gaul. Because it represents the tragic awareness arrived at by any soldier in any war. Being wounded or killed does not make you a hero. You can't get unwounded or unkilld. Nor really does getting sculpted or painted or photographed, written down in a documentary, a novel, or a movie. But it does in its strange, haunting, even horrific way, at least get you remembered. This is the message in the photo, the one we still read in the imaginary, nameless, mortally wounded ARVN infantryman's face. And out of such rare works as *One Very Hot Day* and *Del Corso's Gallery*, it is what we ought to keep. Any soldier who did his duty faithfully and honorably deserves that.

## Notes

1. The most reliable reference for such data remains James Dunnigan's *Dirty Little Secrets of the Vietnam War*.
2. Beyond the merely alliterative, the phrasing also carried a direct popular allusion—as was well known at the time—to Marvelous Marv Throneberry, first baseman of the castoff, feckless, original New York Mets, immortalized by the Sporting News as “a weak hitter but a poor fielder.”
3. Stanley Karnow, *Vietnam: A History* remains unsurpassed as the standard non-specialist reference, particularly in its connection with the well-known television/video series. As a large-focus, readable popular history, its only more recent competitor is A.J. Langguth's *Our Vietnam*. At the same time, both remain notable for paucity of reference, particularly in accounts of the American War, to South Vietnamese fighting forces, officially designated RVNAF (Republic of Vietnam Armed Forces)—and including everything from conventional army, navy, air force, marines, and a host of irregular or militia formations—RF, PF, village self-defense forces, to myriad other special operations units—not surprisingly—mirroring American counterparts—Airborne, Rangers, Commandos, LRRPs, Swift Boat, Search and Rescue, Phoenix assassination, Black Ops.

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