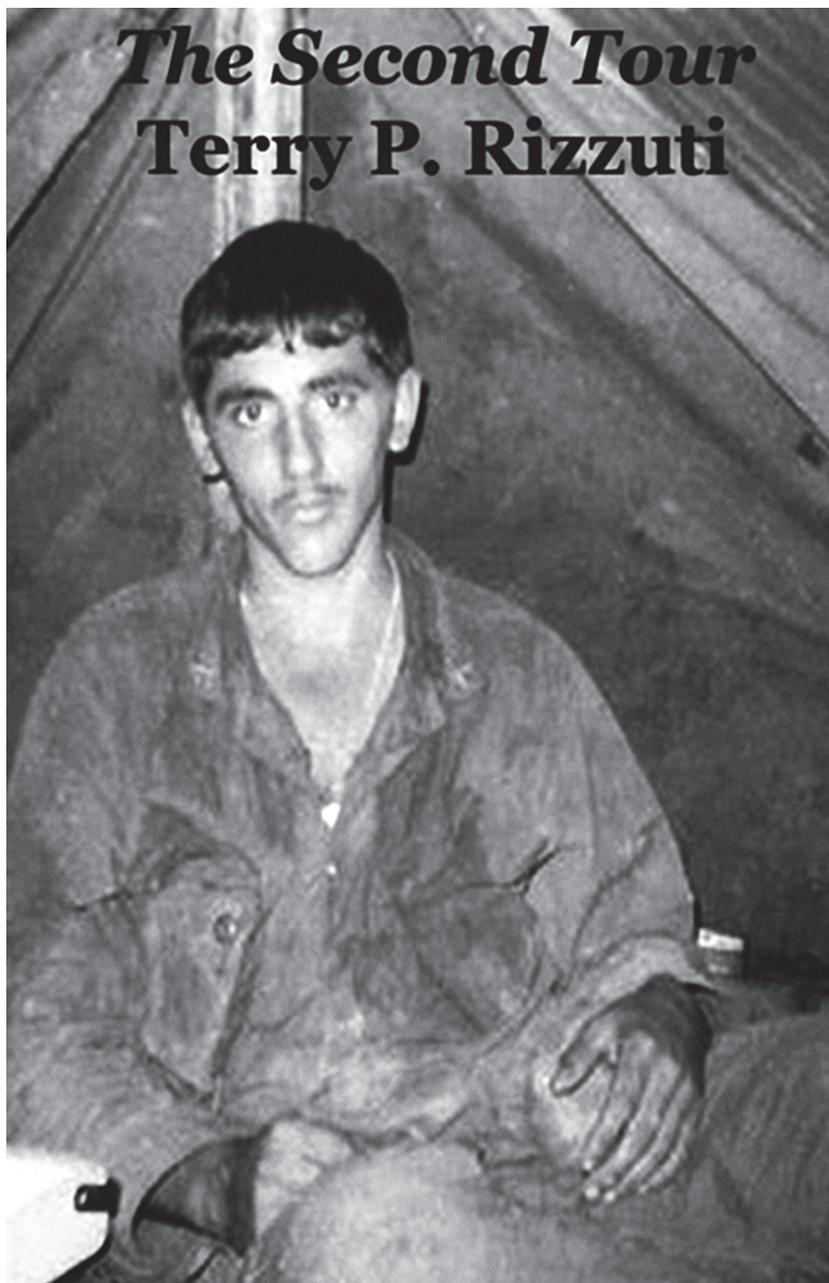


The Second Tour
Terry P. Rizzuti



COMMENTARY BY TERRY P. RIZZUTI

Art As Therapy: The Biography of a Novel

I DON'T REMEMBER WHEN I FIRST DISCOVERED therapeutic value in writing. For sure, some 25 years ago I was conscious of it, but maybe even unconscious of it as long ago as childhood when I kept a journal and would write myself to sleep. Even at that early age, writing gave me the feeling that I was staring at a window and seeing a mirror-image of myself, a reflection of my innermost feelings. Paper & Pens were my best friends. Unfortunately, that window was smudged, the feelings unclear, the writing mostly sad. Which came first, my self or sadness, is a personal mystery I still ponder.

In late 1966 I began serving a 13-month tour in Vietnam as a low-level combat Marine. It was there that I started believing in ghosts, mostly because the enemy seemed capable of appearing and disappearing at will. In 1970, I was out of the Corps and enrolled at The University of Oklahoma. Five years later I watched the Vietnam War come to an end on my TV set. A deep sadness over the war's loss mixed with an overwhelming happiness that it was finally over. I truly did not know how to feel.

Two years later I graduated with an English Literature degree and entered graduate school. I was struggling with my war memories at that time and doing everything I could think of to conceal that struggle from friends, family and co-workers. Simply told, the "ghosts" of dead war buddies intruded on my thoughts, all hours of the day and night, which while intellectually explainable, emotionally was very disturbing.

What was inexplicable were the intrusive thoughts of Vietnamese "ghosts." One recurring nightmare involved an angry Vietnamese woman charging at me with a

knife. I'd wake up in a sweat, terrified at the very point of impact. Another involved a patrol through a small village. Suddenly someone, a grunt, steps out of a hootch to my right. I whirl to face him. He's framed by the dark doorway behind him. We lock eyes and he looks familiar, like a distorted version of me. Then he looks away in shame. At this point, I'd wake up shaking. Over time, this nightmare evolved into a day dream that would intrude during the worst of moments: a meeting at work, an important phone call, or a social gathering of friends or relatives. I had no idea what the dreams meant, but I lived in fear of going to sleep, and lived each day with nagging thoughts that something was very wrong.

I remember when I came home from Vietnam, everyone kept asking me what the experience was like. Part of me, a big part, didn't want to talk about it, but in reality, I had no clue how to talk about it. I couldn't put the experience in perspective until many years after I had begun writing it down, an initial act that began eighteen years after my involvement in the war. I called what I was writing *The Second Tour*. The year was 1984 and I was fully participating in the work force by then.

Sometime early in the writing, I realized I was not only helping myself make sense of the war, but also giving myself something I very much needed: a constructive outlet for negative feelings. Soon there was pride in what I was doing. I began to feel I was driven and had purpose. I honestly believed the Vietnam War had been the war to end all wars, and that *The Second Tour* would be one more nail in that coffin. I believed I was *the* destined spokesperson for all Vietnam Veterans, in particular the grunts, and that my novel, as I later began to think of it, would be taught in academic settings throughout the world and forever into the future. Boy, was I naive.

The writing didn't start out as a novel; it started as a vent, a memoir that over time got shaped into a novel as I learned more about writing. As I said, it was 1984. I was reading the paper one morning, an article about the Vietnam Memorial. I remember feeling ashamed to learn there was a place in Washington, D.C., where the names of several war buddies were inscribed on a gigantic tombstone of sorts, and that it had been built two or three years earlier, yet I knew absolutely nothing about it. The news made me angry at myself for being so oblivious of current events.

Then, later that week I was watching TV when a PBS show came on called *The 10,000 Day War*. It was a mini-series, a documentary, and as I watched it I kept getting madder and madder with each episode because I felt they were describing the war from every perspective except the grunts. And to me, at the time, grunts were the only ones qualified to talk about war, the only ones who knew what it was like in Vietnam. I still feel like that. Anyway, I rushed into the other room to grab

paper & pens, and several hours later in the middle of the night I remember staring at twenty pages of “stuff” that hardly made sense. The opening line read “I awoke one morning with a leech on my dick,” the last line “Life’s a bitch, and then you die.” Everything in between was one gigantic thousand-piece puzzle.

The next morning was a work day, so I took *The Puzzle* with me in a briefcase. At the time I was working at The University of Oklahoma, and every morning between 9 and 10 I’d take a break with my closest friend, Jin Brown, who worked in another department. We’d meet in the student union for biscuits & gravy, to guzzle coffee and discuss “life its own self,” as we called it. When we sat down that morning, I handed him *The Puzzle*. “What do you make of this?” I asked him.

Now Jin was the best writer I knew, still is, and I had tremendous respect for his abilities, still do. He had a bachelor’s and master’s in English Literature and was working on a doctorate in Communication. He read *The Puzzle* and handed it back to me. There was a strange look on his face. “Keep working on it,” is all he said, but that’s all it took, for in my mind, *The Second Tour* was not just born, it was christened by a future doctor.

From that point forward, memories started pouring out of me, sometimes so fast I couldn’t keep up with them. I would rush for my best friends (paper & pens) to write them down as soon as they came. Sometimes a memory was nothing but a sound, or a smell, or a vision, or even just a word I could write down to help trigger a memory later, to make sure the concept didn’t get left out of the manuscript.

It was not unusual for me to wake up in the middle of the night in a sweat, sometimes scared and sometimes angry, but always with a thought or idea or memory that I would rush to write down before it was lost. My wife at the time was a light sleeper and would get really angry, later referring to the book as “that bastard child of yours.” But I couldn’t control myself. I had the nagging terrifying thought that I was going to die before I could finish the book.

And that troubling thought lasted a full year. I was convinced of it, so convinced in fact that I was barely sleeping and eating. I was working, working overtime to answer the question “What was it like in Vietnam?” I had to find that answer, not for others so much as for myself. And my friend Jin kept helping me through it all, teaching me more and more about writing, about narration techniques and voice consistency in particular.

So I kept working at it, and the writing consumed me. I began taking it to work and would write there at the expense of my other tasks. I was the manager of a small publications section within a large department. That meant I was in charge of the copying and word processing shops, so I asked one of the Word Processors

to type up what I had. In other words I took advantage of my work position to illegally usurp its resources to my benefit. But I couldn't help it; I was totally out of control. The people working for me and around me saw what was happening and took care of me, watched my backside and saw to it that my department continued to function well.

Soon I had a typed electronic version of what I initially called *Vietnam: The Second Tour*. I would stare at it in disbelief, touch and fondle it, wonder and think about it, even "play" with it through revision techniques that I'd learned in school. Wow, what a rush! But with that rush came a new fear, that someone would steal it. Paranoia simply wouldn't let go.

By mid-1984, some of The Puzzle's pieces began falling into place and making sense. By the end of the year I had a finished draft of about one hundred pages, but I knew something was missing, something big that lay at its heart and defined the novel. That something kept me awake at night, still does, even though it's no longer missing.

By this point, the big memories, the important ones, had slowed to one or two per week, so I shifted to edit mode. I began looking for ways to universalize my experience, and ways to insert metaphorical meaning. I wanted *The Second Tour* to stand as literature. That meant fictionalizing what had begun as basic memoir. I toyed with imagery, changed names and places, imposed structure, inserted mystery. I thought of Faulkner's work and what I'd learned from him about using multiple narrators and a modernist technique called stream-of-consciousness. So I scrambled time even more than it was already scrambled in order to simulate different narrators as well as demonstrate the nature of my thought intrusions, or what later came to define one symptom of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD).

The notion of literature was very important to me — the sense that what I was creating was literature as opposed to "just a story" or "just a novel" — the distinction being that literature not only entertains but through metaphor achieves an illuminating didactic function as well. I found myself seeking that mysterious interface between form and function, i.e., the relationship between the structure of *The Second Tour* and its message. And I knew that the blending of memoir and fiction, or what I sometimes call fiction-memoir, would appeal to two audiences, thus increase readership potential.

In the process I came to believe in therapeutic art (i.e., art as therapy), whether that art takes the form of writing, music, painting, wood working, "workaholism" or any other creative means of channeling negative energies into positive outcomes. Specifically, what I discovered was that writing could add a layer of fiction between

me and the actual experience, that that layer of fiction could create a buffer zone within which I could “play around” with the experience in ways that were therapeutic.

By mid-1984, the novel’s physical and perceptual structures had revealed themselves, although it took years of revision to fully achieve what I envisioned. I wanted the book to represent a circle so that readers could jump into it at any point and still arrive at its core, its central meaning. My logic was that most troops are replacement troops that are inserted into the middle of war.

But since most readers don’t start a book in the middle, I imposed a physical structure by dividing the 13-month tour into three parts. I shaped most of *The Puzzle* into Part 1 and made it represent the first three months of the tour. And I left it purposefully confusing in order to make readers feel what I felt when I first got to Vietnam: lost, intimidated and confused, yet still gung-ho. I wanted readers to gain a sense of what it’s like to be dropped out of a helicopter into the middle of a firefight.

I made the seven-month-long Part 2 lead readers into the heart of the novel, a world of determinism where life is fated. And I wanted them to feel numbed in the process, thus I made the center of Part 2 hammer hard with one bad thing happening after another until as a reader one almost can’t take it anymore because there’s no comedic relief, no *deus ex machina* to the rescue. But I also made some chapters purposefully boring, because let’s face it, most of what we think of as war is sheer boredom, i.e., the absence of actual combat predominates the experience.

Part 3 represents the final 100 days of the tour. It focuses on the paranoia and paralysis of knowing it’s nearly time to go home, but also demonstrates what it’s like living with the terrifying knowledge that death can occur on the very last day. And I put a list of names at the end to simulate a giant tombstone, but with a difference: I included the names of the living, too. I wanted to emphasize both the fact that we miss our comrades, and that in many ways we felt dead, dead to ourselves, and dead to each other in the sense that most of us never tried to contact one another after we’d rotated home.

For the perceptual structure, there is the original experience (i.e., the fragmented recall of the first tour), and there is the aftermath of that experience (the second tour), which in reflection is a never ending accumulation of the original experience and all the lived emotional days of absorbing and coming to grips with it. Beyond both, I believe the book itself represents a personal immortality for me, as author, as well as a literary event for my readers. Ironically, *The Second Tour* seems truly to have been my “bastard child,” and the war itself my mistress.

Sometime in early 1985 I got a phone call from a past girlfriend, a woman I had written to many times from Vietnam but hadn't heard from in years. She was calling to see if I'd attend our twenty-year high school reunion in New York. During the conversation, I said I was busy writing a book about Vietnam, and she mentioned she still had all my letters. When she asked if I wanted them, an uneasy feeling took hold. I said "let me think about it." Well I thought about the letters a lot, even discussed them with friends and family before calling to have them sent. Then one thing led to another, enough time went by, and I forgot all about them.

One afternoon I was walking home from work and came to the street corner where I lived. I stopped to look for traffic when I noticed a two- or three-year-old Vietnamese girl standing catty-corner and staring at me. My first thought was "who is this person, and why is she all alone?" Then I looked in the other direction across the street toward my home. A big manila envelope was sticking out of the mailbox, and my next thought was "the letters!" Quickly I looked back toward the little girl but she was gone, and I realized she had been a ghost, a figment of my imagination. A shiver of fear coursed through my body.

"No," I thought, and ran across the street. "It's not true," I thought, as I grabbed the package and hurried into the house. "Please, god, no," I thought as I tore the envelope open and began sorting the letters by postal date. I remember shaking my head and thinking "please no," as I went straight to the April and May 1967 letters and started scanning through them quickly. "Oh god no," I thought as I sat on the couch stunned, reading pieces from the middle of a May 1967 letter.

In one galvanizing moment I learned the meaning of my nightmares, recognized what was missing from my book, knew why I believed in ghosts, and remembered that I was a murderer. I sat there, uncontrollably sobbing. It would take several days before I could see the bright side of this experience, the recognition that the central horror of war is collateral damage, and that I now had a mechanism for conveying that message to the world, not as fiction but as truth.

For the first time in years I could go several days without recurring dreams. By mid-1985 I began querying publishers, and in early 1986 I registered the manuscript's copyright with the Library of Congress, which laid to rest my fears it would be stolen. Somewhere in between I started doing research, deciding it was time to see what the competition was up to. So I started buying all the Vietnam fiction I could find. I read Michael Herr's *Dispatches*, John Del Vecchio's *The 13th Valley*, Larry Heinemann's *Paco's Story*, and all of Tim O'Brien's work including *The Things They Carried*. I read *The Deer Hunter*; *Apocalypse Now*; *Born on the Fourth of July*; and *Cease Fire*. I read *Chickenhawk*; *And a Hard Rain Fell*; *One Very Hot Day*; and

Guns Up. I read *Green Knight*, *Red Mourning*; *The Grunts*; *Once a Warrior King*; and *The Killing Zone*. I read *Rambo*; *Mekong*; *Fragments*; *Jacob's Ladder*; and *One Soldier*.

As I devoured these books along with several others, including non-fiction, I always came away feeling like I had no competition. This felt good, real good in fact, but it wasn't true, of course. Some of these books are absolutely outstanding — very well written — but I was on a mission and they just didn't do for me what I felt had to be done for posterity. They didn't tell the whole story of what it was like to be a grunt in Vietnam, didn't demonstrate the effects that experience had on us then and even now, years later. With very few exceptions, they were not literature. And as elitist and pretentious as that statement is, it was important to me that what we writers had to say about Vietnam absolutely had to stand the test of time in order to not have our "say" relegated to obscure or even lost archives.

Then came the summer of 1990: the brink of another war. I could feel it in my bones and I was angry. America was once again bloodthirsty, and from my perspective trying to put the humility of Vietnam behind itself by flexing its muscles as proof of military might. The 1991 Gulf War broke my heart, and as images of the so-called precision smart bombs took over our television sets, I stood in front of my TV shaking and sobbing — recognizing I had been wrong for the past sixteen years, that Vietnam really hadn't been the war to end all wars, that there would always be wars. I couldn't sleep, or eat, or even think straight for weeks.

Making matters worse — juxtaposed with our troops being welcomed home in the spring of 1991 to parades and confetti was the fact that almost simultaneously all the Vietnam War fiction began drying up on the shelves of bookstores all across the country. It was as though the Gulf War had become America's atonement for Vietnam. Anger doesn't describe my feelings at that time, and neither does deep depression. I was as close to homicidal as I had ever been since 1967, my time in Vietnam.

Meanwhile, the rejection slips had been pouring in, nearly 70 spanning the previous five years. Most were similar. "Thanks for thinking of us," they'd say, or "Unfortunately your book does not meet our needs right now, but let us know if you ever decide to put it in chronological order." Sometime in the middle of receiving these rejection slips, I dropped *Vietnam* from the title, thinking it was biasing editors and publishers against the novel. By the end of 1991 I stopped sending out the manuscript altogether and had pretty much abandoned that "bastard child" of mine, but not soon enough to save my marriage, which was all but over. I turned to

other means of expressing my negative feelings — short stories and poems — and took pride in the positive outcomes.

Fast forward to the fall of 1994. My friend and current wife, Mary Banken, convinced me to visit The Wall, the Vietnam War Memorial in Washington, D.C. What an experience that turned out to be! The hair stood up on the back of my neck as we approached. It felt like I was walking straight into an ambush. I was so scared, I felt wobbly and covered the final hundred yards at a snail's pace with Mary holding onto me. I remember sitting in front of Panel 19E with tears streaming down my face. I could feel people filing behind me, see their ghostly images reflected on The Wall, and I could hear Mary clicking her camera. I held in my lap a copy of *The Second Tour* enclosed in a Ziploc bag to leave as a gift. And I remember staring up at the names of three of my friends, introducing them to Mary, and explaining why I had to tell our story as fiction.

I don't think I was home from that trip more than two days before I had written the "Epilogue" to *The Second Tour*. At long last, I had discovered a fitting and positive ending to an otherwise rather bleak novel. I was inspired again, and in early 1995 I sent the manuscript to three more publishers, all resulting in rejections. Then I sent it to John Drayton, editor & chief of The University of Oklahoma Press.

John read and forwarded the manuscript to Dr. Louis Owens in early 1996. Louis, sadly now deceased, was an award winning Native American novelist and creative-writing professor at The University of New Mexico. He had a keen interest in the Vietnam War because his brother had served three tours there. He wrote John a tremendous in-depth review of *The Second Tour* that I'll always appreciate. For weeks I was on cloud nine. Louis fully understood the novel and my intentions, and even offered suggested improvements that I incorporated into the next and, as it turns out, final draft. John ultimately turned down the manuscript, but he put me in contact with Louis who put me in contact with his agent, B.J. Robbins.

B.J., in turn, began the process of shopping the manuscript to five of the largest publishers in New York. Meanwhile, I sent it to Professor Donald Anderson, editor of the journal *War, Literature & the Arts*, at the US Air Force Academy. Donald selected an excerpt from Part 1 and offered to publish it. The thrill of receiving his notification is hard to describe. I titled the piece "Fragments," and when it appeared in the Fall/Winter 1996 issue, I held my copy of the journal like it was a newborn child. Finally, and at long last, I was a published writer. My stay on cloud nine lasted a full year.

But with every rise there's a fall, and mine came with the realization that B.J.'s efforts had not panned out. The Vietnam War was pretty much dead-in-the-water

in the eyes of most publishers, so *The Second Tour* went on the back burner again, but it never occurred to me it would stay there for three long years. Therapy, if it was going to come from writing, would have to come from other projects. I plugged away at short stories, although mostly I worked on another novel. But nearly everything I wrote had an aura of sadness about it. I could not for the life of me rise above deeply disturbing themes that pointed back at my Vietnam service.

In 1997 I found myself in therapy at VA facilities, diagnosed with PTSD. Armed with new understanding of my thought intrusions, I could now look back at *The Second Tour* and see that my writing style of non-sequential story-telling actually served its intended purpose of demonstrating the life-lasting effects of war.

And I could see that my writing had served for me over the years the same function that group therapy now served, a way to openly discuss memories and feelings. But as I sat and listened to the stories of other Vietnam Veterans, I thought “this isn’t really helping me; I’ve been here/done this for thirteen years.” Nevertheless, for the next five years, counselors worked at convincing me to stop writing about Vietnam, never recognizing that their “sanctioned” therapy strategy of “talking about war” was actually no different than my own devised strategy of “writing about war.” Or perhaps they recognized it but realized the strategy was/is flawed, that no amount of talking or writing about one’s war experience actually cures the negative effects of war, that all it really offers is a reprieve, and a usually quite temporary one at that.

Nevertheless, I tried to stop writing about war, and was actually successful in cranking out a few non-war themed short stories, including a children’s story. This led to the realization that it wasn’t the act of writing about war that was therapeutic, it was the act of writing itself, although I couldn’t pinpoint why.

Then in early 1999 I was contacted by John Van Peenen, editor of *The Christmas Cracker*, a journal produced by Goatfoot Press in Ponca City, OK. He had read “Fragments” in *War, Literature & the Arts* and wanted a copy of the full manuscript. John’s subsequent praise for *The Second Tour* was uplifting. He offered to publish an excerpt from Part 2 in his journal. Once again I was excited, and felt one step closer to finding a publisher.

In 2000 a friend of mine and myself teamed up as writing partners and began co-authoring material by email. In many ways, R.E. Armstrong saved my writing career. His enthusiasm kept me plugging away at writing projects at a time when I needed help most, especially during the wake of 9/11 and all that followed that horrible day. At a critical moment when my creative well had run dry and my energy had been sapped, along came R.E., chock full of ideas and more than enough adrenaline to see them through to completion. We cranked out *Veterans’ Benefits: A Guide To*

State Programs, followed by *The American Veterans Cookbook*. Next we tried our hand at a novel which, even though it remains in manuscript form today, was an absolute blast to work on. We liked to joke that writing kept us off the streets and out of trouble, a statement containing more truth than fiction.

Meanwhile, since 1999, *The Second Tour* had lain peacefully in a box, one of four containing copies of every version, every draft I'd ever written. I had been saving them convinced my novel would one day be famous, that it would be examined by English professors whose field of interest included textual criticism. But it was 2006, and not to be. My wife and I were packing to move, having made the decision to leave Oklahoma for new lives in Colorado. I examined the four boxes, long and hard. It was time to let go of my dream, and within twenty minutes I had torn up and thrown away all but a couple of the earlier manuscripts. In one fell swoop the textual evolution of *The Second Tour* was lost to posterity.

And then in 2008, R.E. sent me a link to a writers' website called Authors Den. Immediately I recognized its value in two respects. It would allow me to post all my work in one place, thus preserve it; and it would provide me a way to get feedback from readers, which after all is what most writers crave. Within weeks of posting *The Second Tour*, I began receiving feedback from readers all over the world encouraging me to self-publish it. By June, *The Second Tour* had found a home with Spinetingers Publishing. Fittingly, it was released in book form on Veteran's Day, November 11, 2008.

The positive effects that have come from self-publishing *The Second Tour* are numerous, yet difficult to describe. The professional reviews have been tremendously encouraging, most notably from *Midwest Book Review* and *Military Writers Society of America*. And the reader's comments posted on the *Amazon* website are overwhelmingly positive.

There's also the absolutely unbelievable story of Charles W. Bricker, one of my closest friends who was killed in Vietnam by the same explosion that wounded me. His sister, Linda Sample, whom I did not previously know, made contact to thank me for telling our story. I can't fully describe how exciting that connection has been. Plus there's the beginnings of a dream come true: literature professors are now seriously considering teaching *The Second Tour*. And there's the story of the woman who saved and sent me the dozens of letters I wrote to her from Vietnam. She has re-contacted me and has read *The Second Tour*. But most remarkable, is that she has uncovered several dozen more letters that's she's sending me.

And I'll always be grateful for the courage of Dr. Wilbur J. Scott, professor of Behavioral Sciences at the US Air Force Academy. Wil nervously adopted the book

for the “Aftermath” section of his 2009 spring semester course titled *Military & Society*. He knew his students were predisposed to think of war as a noble effort filled only with valor and morality, thus likely to dismiss my work as too dramatic a departure from their view of what war is like. Wil understood that *The Second Tour* would take them, up close and personal, to the hellish side of war, and that the vision of my novel would be troubling for them. He worried that some students might, in reaction to the new vision of combat, condemn the author as a bad ex-Marine trying to make the noble efforts of others look bad. But Wil’s excellent teaching guided them beyond any such shallow understanding.

To wrap up this discussion, I believe that military history is initially written by the survivors, and through whatever fortune, I’m one of the survivors of the Vietnam War. However, speaking primarily through the voice of *The Second Tour’s* narrator, a low-level Marine, I’ve found it difficult to be heard above the din of political voices vying to shape history in a bigger, more profound conceptualization. But I’ve come to the recent hope that this is a problem of the past. Today anyone can proffer their personal truths through non-traditional publishing options made possible by the expanding nature of the internet. We can easily make our stories part of the historical record. *The Second Tour* will survive as long as there are readers. My novel may be only one tiny drop in a huge bucket of all that is available by way of war research material, but by god it’s my drop and I’m proud of it. *Therein lies the therapy*, the recognition of accomplishment that comes from the appreciation of others for a job well done, regardless of the endeavor, and even if it does take twenty-four years to accomplish.

The deeper one goes into the military experience, the greater the likelihood of one’s understanding of the human condition. Literary war novels are the essence of great literature. Born under fire, they speak to us about the unspeakable, providing some of our most profound lessons about humanity, including war’s aftermath — the psychological, emotional and collateral damage. And for those of us that create them, the artistic expression provides us a door through which to re-enter that humanity, however socially disadvantaged we might be.

Essentially I’m saying that, for me, writing has over the years become my lifeboat in an inner storm of intrusive thoughts and feelings. That’s not to say that creating art makes the turbulence go away, but rather that writing provides a means of psychic survival. I’m very thankful for that, personally, and hope that my book, *The Second Tour*, provides some catharsis or inspirational value for readers.

So I call upon all war veterans — take up pens and paper, make them your best friends, add more drops to that bucket until it overflows. Together we can set the war records straight, our hearts at peace, perhaps even our minds at rest.

—from *The Second Tour*, by Terry P. Rizzuti

SADDLE UP DAMMIT! C-More repeated. We be beatin' feet fast. Captain jus radioed, said recon reported bookoo VC this area. He want us to be regroupin' with 3rd squad, says he's sending 1st platoon out soon's he can. They sposed to sweep, then we mop up behind 'em.

C-More was irritated 'cause we'd already been humpin' over four hours. Now we'd have two hours back to base, an hour of fuckin' around, then two hours back again. The mood of the whole squad changed with the news. Even the climate turned different. The wind picked up and started blowin' real hard.

I was deep in thought, walkin' along thinkin' about Benjie, comparin' him to high school and all my friends, thinkin' about how close we'd been, how we'd stuck by one another. Thinkin' about the promises we'd made about visiting each other when I got home in the fall, and maybe even livin' together. I moved slowly, stiffly. Benjie was in front of me, his rifle up on his shoulder, butt toward me, one black hand holdin' the flash suppressor, his other swattin' at mosquitos. His bare ass hung out a gaping tear in the back of his filthy trousers. I started to say something, to make a crack, but he beat me to it.

Hey bro, he said, flingin' me a smiling carefree look back over his rifled shoulder. What's hapnin' man? Why yo face be lookin' so low?

You be gone home in twelve days, Benjie. I'm gonna miss you, man. Don't know can I make it without you.

No big thang, he said expressively. We both be gittin' back home. The real world be plenty big for two bad dudes like us.

Guess I'm just worried, Benjie. You been my lookout, man, my partner. I owe you my life.

Be cool Rootie, he said. Don't do nuttin stupid, yo time be up no time. You be home hot on my ass. Sides Rootie, he said, C-More be round help you out.

Suddenly C-More dropped, signaling Quiet, waving us to our knees. The wind picked up bad, blowing worse than I'd ever seen it. There was a village up ahead. I could smell smoke, burning leaves and wet wood. And then the wind changed into gusting, low, sickening moans and came roaring at us slanting rain from the northeast. Lightning pounced and struck the daylight like angry warring laser beams. Crystal cracking strokes of thunder pierced and split the atmosphere. Ozone mixed with the smell of smoke as the rain unexpectedly died to a trickle and the wind gathered more force.

I remember keying on Benjie, watching his stretched eyes and his black face slightly twitchin' like he'd sensed somethin' didn't set right with him. His nose began to flare and I listened hard then, straining outward from the inside. Just as everything went into slow motion, the smell of betel juice filled the air and things started goin' down fast. First — scraping and shuffling. Then — thudthudthud as everyone pitched forward and rolled.

BOOMBOOMBOOM!!! went all three satchel charges damn near at once as Benjie suddenly rose straight up in the air legs first. Stunned from the concussion, I scrambled awkwardly trying to get there to get under him but he came back down on top of his shoulders, both legs sorta crumblin' on his chest and crotch, then flopping off to one side all twisted and contorted, his rifle smackin' his face hard. I froze for a second or two, then sped toward him again, taking his hand gently in mine.

This isn't real, I thought. This can't be happening. Benjie's legs were slabs of tenderized raw flesh, both trouser legs ripped to shreds of individual strips flapping in the wailing wind, slapping at what remained of his legs, lapping up the blood and flinging it in a rectangular pattern. Jagged splintered white bone stood out against the red background. Flies buzzed around the blood. A machine gun tore open a fallen tree trunk to our front. Tracers pierced the dusky sunlight, crissing and crossing like wolves eyes stalking a campfire perimeter.

C-More screamed CHARGE suddenly and the whole squad moved out quickly, zigging and zagging and diving in holes and behind trees, spraying the area like fire fighters, chunks of lead and M-79 rounds exploding on impact. I leapt up too, then fell back down, jerked by Benjie's tight hand on my arm. I looked at his swollen face, watched it turn ashen and then bluish purple as he held his breath fighting the pain and the inevitable, his whole head bloating out, then caving in quickly as his breath rushed out loud.

Rootie, he whispered hoarsely, his fingers gouging deep in my wrist. I be messed up bad, man. Looks... looks like I no be hangin' round... dees lass twelve days.

I looked at him not knowin' what to say. GOD! I remember shouting through clenched teeth. YOU SON-OF-A-BITCH. But God is boys, and I was a boy and couldn't do nothin'. Tears shot out my eyes I remember, rocking back on my heels looking straight up. Arrrrrrrr. . . . I clenched and screamed, but the wind swept the sounds to the mere decibels of silence.