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History with a Human Face Creative Nonfiction and the Oral Histories of the Vietnam War

What happened in Vietnam? What did it look like? How did it smell? What happened to you? Vietnam veterans know firsthand the statistics, the heroism, the evil and the madness. They are the ones qualified to look inside the casket and identify the body for what it is—a dead boy killed in a war, who had a name, a personality, a story all of his own. (Baker, *NAM*, xii)

This is a memory book, rather than one of hard fact and precise statistic.

—Studs Terkel, *Hard Times*

‘We Were the War ...’

Returning home to the ideological maelstrom that was the United States after the Vietnam War, it was ironic that those few voices legitimately qualified to relate the truth of what happened in Southeast Asia were the ones seldom heard amongst the multitudes.¹ This was because those who had served in Vietnam had very much become like a scarlet letter on the national psyche. However, unlike the insignia which had incriminated Hester Prynne in Hawthorne’s novel, the veteran symbolised not a personal but a communal sense

of shame. They represented to many Americans the possibility that theirs was not an exceptional nation, and that in their dealings with other peoples, they may not have always 'nobly and generously' (Herring 343). Consequently, as the years after the war rolled by, the veteran existed largely in a state of silent pseudo-exile as those around them, the politicians and the protestors, told *their* truths about the war. In this article, I argue that *Everything We Had* is Al Santoli's attempt to *reclaim* the narrative of the war for the veteran, and that in using creative nonfiction in the guise of oral history to do so, I contend that his text was not only a credible recollection, but one whose personal insights conclusively rejected the glorification of war which was for so long a key component of America's exceptionalist ethos.

First published in 1981, *Everything We Had* emerged at a crucial time in the nation's post-war history. The inaugural year of the Reagan presidency, many Americans were still struggling with the outcome of the war. One of Reagan's most pressing issues upon being elected to office was to address what Patrick Hagopian describes as the American public's 'collective amnesia' (*Vietnam War* 8) towards the conflict. The geopolitical rationale for this was simple. The ignominious withdrawal from Vietnam in 1975 had resulted in a national mind-set marked by hesitancy and shame which had crippled the United States on the geopolitical stage.² On assuming the presidency, Reagan and his proxies sought to recast the war in Vietnam as "a noble cause." The hoped for outcome of this transformation was that it would replace the overall sense of guilt in the American conscience since the war with a more edifying image of both the United States and its exceptionalist ideology. Subsequently freed from the stigma of having fought (*and lost*) an immoral war, the powerbrokers of the U.S. government would then be able once again to re-assert the nation's status as the world's primary super-power. Key to this process, however, were the Vietnam veterans, the living, breathing 'reminders of a war that Americans preferred to forget' (Hagopian, *Vietnam War*, 18).

Whether Reagan's attempted rehabilitation of the Vietnam War was truly successful or not was for many years an issue of on-going debate.³ A significant corollary of his political manoeuvring, however, was the hegemonic approval it provided the veterans which aided their re-assimilation into the wider community. This government-sanctioned change of mind became steadily more apparent throughout the Eighties. Films such as *First Blood* and *The Deerhunter*, and television programmes such as *The A-Team* and *Magnum, P.I.* began to portray veterans not as disturbed and highly volatile killers, but as they largely saw themselves; survivor-victims of a terrible war who had been much abused by those who sent them to fight. Plans were coming to tangible fruition for a monument to their soldiers-

in-arms that had fallen in Vietnam to be erected in Washington DC alongside those commemorating the Korean War and World War II. Similarly, medical professionals were beginning to officially recognise post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) as a valid psychological condition.⁴ However, to the forefront of this 'new discourse about Vietnam veterans: a sentimental and personalized discourse in which the key idea was that veterans had been misjudged and misunderstood by the public' (Hagopian, *Vietnam War*, 18) were the litany of authors writing creative nonfiction about the war. The post-war period from 1975 to 1980 saw an increase in the number of nonfictional narratives portraying the war, many of which were lauded by peers and critics alike for their realism and accuracy.⁵ But comprised of the testimonies of thirty-three veterans of the conflict, few, if any, combined such singularity of purpose with a multiplicity of voice as Al Santoli's *Everything We Had*.

Transcending boundaries of race, gender and class in one single narrative, *Everything We Had* provided the reader with a panoptic view of the war in Vietnam. Drawn from a cross-section of American society, Santoli sought to present the true realities of the war as experienced by those doing the fighting. This version however would differ greatly from that which had been fed through the hegemonic spectrum, and subsequently disseminated by the American media on the other side of the globe. Central to these emotions were feelings of anger towards an Administration that seemed far removed from the conflict, unconcerned by the toll it was taking on American lives, and which betrayed in Vietnam many of the exceptionalist ideals which had initially prompted its incursion into Southeast Asia. Although largely hidden or over-looked in government-sanctioned accounts of the war, this anger is a constant reoccurrence in *Everything We Had*. In a damning indictment of 'the people who controlled the war (114),' Platoon Leader Robert Santos describes parallel realities for those who led in Vietnam and those who followed. The manner in which he portrays the U.S. officer overseas is a far cry from the image of the great defender of democracy striving to liberate lesser nations from the iniquities of Communism. Showing clear evidence of the misplaced hubris Neil Sheehan identified in the American military during his time in Vietnam, to many ordinary infantry the officer corps were a throwback to an age of colonialism, men existing in a world cossetted by time and space from the reality of the war. Recounting a brief visit to the Military Assistance Command centre in Saigon (MACV), Santos recalls how the officers were 'drinking and talking about the old days, when the war was going to end real quickly and people would come across from Washington and sit on a hill and watch the war going on in the distance' (113-4). The only

disturbance to the reminiscing officers in such an absurdly tranquil wartime scene was the sight of enlisted men scurried around them carrying out menial chores. A platoon leader who had watched his troops fight and die in the Vietnamese jungle, Santos is presented to the reader as a contrast to these modern-day heirs to the colonial tradition of Southeast Asia. Unlike the paper soldiers he describes who existed in the cocoon of the MACV, the latter describes a series of firefights and ambushes which inflicted both serious wounds and death upon him and the men in his command with frightening regularity. Commanded to seek out the Viet Cong and disrupt their infrastructure by whatever means possible, Santos is faced with the brutal realities of the war in Vietnam for a largely innocent native population. Asking himself how he would react if the everyday occurrences of rape and murder were taking place in his hometown, Santos displays the sense of tragic awareness so often lacking in the words and deeds of those orchestrating the war. He belies the stereotypical portrayal of a dispassionate and detached leader, and instead admits to being like 'a father and mother to these guys' (107). Demonstrating the obvious care and affection of a parent more so than a commanding officer, the world he describes is a society characterised by needless violence and loss, and one largely unknown to those in the loftier ranks of the military hierarchy.

While Santos's ironic observation regarding the total disparity between the experiences of the enlisted men and those above them is strikingly obvious, this reality of the war is further presented to the reader by the inclusion of an interview juxtaposing the experiences of two men whose tours of duty were drastically different: Supply Officer, Scott Higgins, and Fire Team Leader, James Hebron. The former epitomised what was known as a "Rear Echelon Motherfucker" (REMF). Operating as a barracks-master in Saigon, Higgins compares his role in the war to 'almost like running a hotel' (79). Sheltered from the misery and terror of the frontlines, his only experiences of an enemy attack during his time in Vietnam were two errant missile strikes, both of which landed relatively safely in the distance (Incidentally, the number of attacks also matched the number of R&R breaks taken by Higgins. In contrast, the average soldier in the field was entitled to only one). His impression of the war was that while it was 'out there and around you, and some of your friends were getting killed or wounded or whatever ... you ... could carve out an okay existence' (82). If presented to the reader as a standalone interview, the recollections of Supply Officer Higgins would present a pretty damning insight into how those who escaped the frontlines lived through the war. However, Higgins' experiences of the war are interspersed amongst those of fellow veteran, James Hebron. As the latter relates the living horror of Khe Sanh, the

difference between their respective experiences of the Vietnam War is stunning. Ill-equipped and underfed throughout his time in Southeast Asia, unlike the apathy of Higgins' account, Hebron's recollections are noticeably defined by anger at the mistreatment and abuse he encountered at the hands of the U.S. Army. While Higgins' daily routine consisted of the hiring of Vietnamese bar-girls or the overseeing of maintenance and repairs to the officer's billets, Hebron's included walking point on patrol, fire-fights, avoiding ambushes and incoming artillery, *in addition* to what he describes as 'the most terrible fucking humping I ever did in my life' (81).⁶ In contrast to the air-conditioned and well-fed tour of duty put down by Higgins, for Hebron, basic acts such as a change of clothes or washing one's teeth were seen as unnecessary luxuries. In an anecdote which truly reveals the reality of Khe Sanh for those marooned there, Hebron recalls to Santoli how helicopters bringing in his unit's first hot meal in weeks were forced to abandon their mission due to enemy sniper fire. In recompense to the men below, the pilots dropped ice-cream from above. Hitting the landing zone from a height, Hebron recollects that 'it just splattered all over' (81). Eager for at least some semblance of the comforts of home, Hebron and his peers 'all dove for it and had it all over our faces' (81). That it was melting into the Vietnamese earth was no deterrent to the desperate American troops.

However, the suffering endured by Hebron because of his superiors was largely confined to deprivation of basic amenities such as food, water and suitable equipment to fight a guerrilla war. Some veterans would suggest that these men were actually relatively *fortunate* in that the machinations of their officers were limited to over-zealous rationing or the unnecessary enforcement of Army discipline. For many of those who served in Vietnam, the officer corps represented a greater threat to their immediate safety than any Vietnamese enemy lurking in the jungle. Describing one particular colonel as having watched 'too many General Patton movies' (158), soldiers such as Herb Mock were aware that overseeing the American troops in Vietnam were certain officers more than willing to trade lives for the possibility of medals. Citing his own experiences with a colonel he refers to as 'Fullback 6' (158), Mock relays how the former would purposely direct the Rifle Squad Leader and his team into specific areas without telling them beforehand that the enemy were there. Realising that the colonel was seeking to win battlefield honours, Mock states that 'what he wanted to do was promote himself, and he didn't give a damn who it cost or what it cost' (158). Rather than attempting to safeguard his men, Fullback 6's priority was 'a body count because that looks good' (158). This reality of the war, one encapsulated by Mike Beamon's pithy statement

that 'I was more at war with the officers there than I was with the Viet Cong ... because I was certain that they were going to get us killed' (191), was one largely hidden from the general public. Any instances of animosity, dissention, or worse, were concealed by the military so that the U.S. Army could maintain its image of a body of men united as one by an esprit de corps and the rectitude of the American mission in Southeast Asia. For example, James Hebron relates during his tour of duty how a friend of his 'put sixteen rounds in a staff sergeant's back' (78) because of the officer's insistence on full field inspections every time upon their return from weeks spent patrolling the jungle. Yet rather than revealing the true circumstances of the sergeant's death, Hebron tells how instead the latter 'received a Purple Heart, was put in a green bag and packed home. No autopsy or anything else' (83).

Stories such as these are littered throughout *Everything We Had*. Describing the veteran's reactions to a military hierarchy both removed from the realities of the war and, at times, apathetic to the deaths of those who fought in its name, perhaps the most jarring are told by Santoli himself. While working as a physical therapy assistant on the amputee ward in Fort Gordon, Augusta, Georgia, he describes the meeting between two parents and their son who had just returned from Vietnam. As Santoli derisively recalls, 'this kid from ... somewhere in the mountains of Tennessee ... had lost both legs and part of a hand' and all he had to show for his sacrifice was 'this goddamn picture of this fucking general shaking his hand' (134). Santoli is equally scathing as regards the squalid medical conditions wounded veterans faced upon their return home. Housed in an old barracks built during World War II to house German prisoners of war, the VA hospital Santoli worked in was in an appalling state. Infested with cockroaches and freezing cold, it bore greater resemblance to an establishment found in Victorian England than the United States of the twentieth century. Highlighting one of the many flaws of an Administration whose priorities lay elsewhere, Santoli comments that 'they were spending millions of dollars a day on the war at the time, but they couldn't afford to build a new hospital' (134). However, the lion's share of his ire was reserved for Secretary of Defence, Melvin Laird. Visiting the hospital as part of a government tour, Laird is exposed to the harsh and bloody truth of the war in Vietnam. Santoli describes how he was attending to the needs of a fellow soldier whose legs had been amputated. Laird and his entourage 'walked by, single file (135).' The fates had combined to bring the Secretary of Defence face to face with the human cost of his government's policy-making. But despite the poignant sight of a young man on a stretcher whose life had been ruined, Santoli is disgusted to note that 'that son of a bitch walked head on—didn't even look to the right or the left of him'

(135). Symbolizing of all those who came before him, and many of those who would follow in his bureaucratic footsteps, Laird remained oblivious, 'he didn't bat an eye and he didn't look' (135). In that corner of America, the true reality of the war for the ordinary infantryman is conveyed to the reader. Regardless of the gravity of the sacrifices they made for their country in Vietnam, their 'lives and ideals meant nothing' (Santoli, *Bear*, xxii). Cast aside once their tour of duty was done, they became nothing more than 'just cold statistics in Washington's political computers' (Santoli, *Bear*, xxii).

In "The War That Never Seems to Go Away", George C. Herring describes benevolence as the cornerstone of the American ideology. In protecting an ally from a totalitarian enemy threatening invasion, it was this benevolence which ostensibly motivated the U.S. intervention in Vietnam. As a metonymic representation of a wider society, it was thus axiomatic that the U.S. military should have been one of the leading upholders of such an altruistic belief-system.⁷ Intent on demonstrating the righteousness of their global crusade against Communism, any use of force by American soldiers was consequently recast as one 'done so only in the pursuit of noble goals' (Herring 343). However, belying this alleged confirmation of America's status as a nation marked by Divine Providence were the accounts contained with *Everything We Had*. Interviews such as those with Kit Lavell and Bruce Lawlor detail how the behaviour of U.S. personnel in Vietnam expressively betrayed the exceptionalist principles which were supposed to be an intrinsic part of the American psyche. Both men claim that many of the missions undertaken by the U.S. military in Southeast Asia were either used 'to settle old scores' (175) between rivalling South Vietnamese political factions, or as means of consolidating the local ruler's power over a region. Rather than protecting the people of the embryonic nation of South Vietnam from their Communist neighbours, Lavell, a pilot for the U.S. Navy notes that 'quite often ... targets were dreamed up by the province chief if people didn't pay their taxes or whatever' (121). Any Vietnamese casualties that arose as a result of such actions were largely dismissed by the American military as collateral damage. However, the ability to write off these deaths as the unfortunate happenstance of war was greatly challenged by the public discovery of military approaches such as the infamous Phoenix Program in 1967.⁸

This strategy, initially designed to neutralise the Viet Cong in South Vietnam, quickly descended into chaos. Described by Thomas Bailey and Bruce Lawlor as 'an assassination program' (174) and 'an extermination program' (175) respectively, the Phoenix Program was comprised of American and Australian Special Forces teams working in bizarre cohesion with local Provincial Reconnaissance Units, a sinister

entity Mike Beamon describes as being 'made up by and large of guys who were doing time for murder, rape, theft and assault' (177) who had been pressganged into working for the CIA. The end result was a modern-day equivalent of the Spanish Inquisition. In a maelstrom of deliberate accusation, interrogation and torture, little heed was given as to whether the accused were actually guilty of their alleged crimes. Yet, while the program was shut down in 1971 after being brought to public attention in a series of Congressional hearings, in reality, the barbaric practises it had carried out against the Vietnamese people were actually a mainstay of many a veteran's experiences of the war in Southeast Asia.⁹ Recollections of the abuse of prisoners, the dismemberment of corpses, the needless killing of livestock and the entire destruction of villages in *Everything We Had*, all support the claim that the American spirit was corrupted in Vietnam. In a fashion similar to how Tim O'Brien had questioned the integrity of America's Manifest Destiny in *If I Die in a Combat Zone*, Doug Anderson, a corpsman who served with the Marines near Danang between February 1967 and 1968, recalls two separate incidents of needless brutality which he describes as 'not compatible with the ideals I'd been brought up to believe in' (59). In the first he tells of how he witnessed a fellow American soldier 'push an old man into his family bunker ... and throw a grenade in after him' (60). In the second, he recounts how a prisoner of war was beaten, tortured and chained to the back of an Armoured Personnel Carrier, and then dragged 'until all the flesh was torn off his body' (61). Occurrences such as these however were frequently disregarded by the military hierarchy as the work of a few "rotten apples" or the result of a particularly bad week in terms of men lost to booby traps and sniper fire.¹⁰ Yet Mike Beamon recalls a much more insidious practise in his interview which substantiates the opinion that there existed a much darker side to the supposedly benevolent American character, one marked by apathy, premeditation, and cold-blooded pragmatism. For Beamon, whether the mission was to kill a genuine enemy target or 'assassinate a village chief and make it look like the Viet Cong did it' (178-9), he states that for him and many like him, the war in Vietnam had simply become 'a business, and the business was terrorism' (191). Such actions were much removed from the sense of humanitarianism which had allegedly prompted the United States to intercede in Vietnam. But they were an everyday reality for an army which was growing ever more frustrated by the increasing number of casualties being inflicted on them by what seemed to be an ephemeral enemy. Despite the Administration's insistence that the military personnel who were serving in Vietnam were an extension of the those that helped to defeat the Germans and the Japanese during "the Good War," as the conflict entered into

the latter part of the Sixties, there was an increasing awareness amongst American soldiers that there was something inherently wrong with their approach to the war in Vietnam.

Many veterans had arrived in Southeast Asia with the same preconceived notions as Douglas Anderson. In the global standoff between the United States and the combined forces of Communism, the former was 'supposed to be the good guy' (59). Yet upon their departure twelve months later, the opposite was generally agreed to be the actual reality. As Gayle Smith, an American nurse who was stationed in Binh Thuy, states 'I thought organized crime was the last word in bad guys, but I swear, the Army had them beat. You just paid off the right person and that was it' (128). Rather than fulfilling the role of "the world's policeman," veterans such as Anderson began to look upon the U.S. military as some kind of "gun for hire." This view would appear many times throughout *Everything We Had*. The ex-soldiers themselves admit to being somewhat culpable for this transformation. Karl Phaler readily admits that 'I was an American. I was party to all this. I was responsible for it. You can't say I'm just a cog in a machine' (46), while Jan Barry simply states 'we were the war' (5 author's emphasis). Yet this acceptance of responsibility by the veterans for the events which occurred during the war leads onto what is perhaps the most pivotal aspect of *Everything We Had*. There is little or no equivocation about the primary cause of the American metamorphosis in Vietnam. It was not found in the actions of those who served on the ground, but more so in the actions of those who directed them from above, the statesmen in Washington. But as duly-elected representatives, responsibility for the killing in Vietnam lay not *just* with these politicians, but ultimately with the ordinary American people themselves. This was the essential truth that the veterans of Vietnam sought to express to an American public who, regarding the servicemen and women with suspicion and unease, had ostracised them from society. The veterans had been asked by their government to uphold a tradition which had existed in their society since the War of Independence, and they did so because they had been taught to believe the same values and ideals that had also beguiled men such as Philip Caputo in *A Rumor of War*. This was the longstanding belief that 'when your country needs you, you go. You don't ask a lot of questions, because the country's always right' (44). Thus, in the classroom that was American society, while some pupils may have run amok, but they had only done so at the behest of their teachers.

Yet rather than using the misdeeds and prejudices of an anonymous officer or statesman, *Everything We Had* identifies one specific figure as the source of this Administrative folly, one whose integrity should have been all but impeccable in

the United States of America, President Lyndon Johnson. The latter is portrayed as deliberately misleading the American public as regards the exact nature of the war in Vietnam, and the enemy they were facing. Karl Phaler served as a communications officer aboard the U.S. Navy Destroyer *Richard S. Edwards* during the Tonkin Gulf incident and he describes in *Everything We Had* how dubious radar information was interpreted specifically to allow the American boats to fire on their North Vietnamese equivalents, an order issued directly by President Johnson himself. Compounding this duplicity was Phaler's comments about the president telling the people of the United States that 'he was not going to send American boys to fight an Asian war' (14). But as Phaler recollects from that day in August 1964, 'I looked across the water and there was a whole bunch of Americans getting ready to fight that Asian war' (14). Johnson's role in the manipulation of the American people is further highlighted by David Ross recalling that 'I remember President Johnson in one of the psy-op flicks we saw saying that the communists weren't like us – they didn't have feelings' (41). The veracity of each of these incidents can be interpreted as questionable, and in the greater context of the Vietnam War, they would appear to be of relatively minor importance. However, just as C.D.B. Bryan made explicit mention of Richard Nixon's willingness to send American troops into Vietnam as early as 1954 in a footnote in *Friendly Fire*, what is significant is the *inclusion* of these events in the text and the unequivocal mentioning of Johnson as an integral part of these machinations. By inferring that the American president would knowingly and willingly deceive the American people, Santoli could show how the government had manipulated everyone in its remit, whether they were citizen or soldier. Both were 'ordinary human beings' and both were hugely affected. The only difference was however, that the government's deception had subjected the latter to 'an awesome nightmare not of [their] doing' (Santoli, *Bear*, xix).

'A Human Ordeal ...'

The anger which many veterans felt towards the Administration is thus evidently clear. They had been duped by their government into fighting an unpopular war that had more to do with neo-imperialism than any global struggle against Communism. When the barbaric realities of the war came to light, that same government turned its back both on those same veterans, leaving them to face the public outcry alone. However, by the onset of the Eighties, America was slowly beginning to come to terms with Vietnam. Ronald Reagan exhorted his fellow Americans to remember the conflict not with 'guilt and shame,' but with a sense 'pride and self-belief' which would 'restore the dead to the place of honour that had been unjustly denied to them

and would give veterans ... the recognition they deserved' (Hagopian, *Vietnam War*, 38). Aided as such by the White House, the stigma of being a veteran of the Vietnam War was gradually beginning to fade. But as previously stated, there was an ulterior motive to Reagan's political machinations. The political turmoil that had arisen as a consequence of the Vietnam War had manifested into what many observers called "the Vietnam Syndrome." This had forced the U.S. government to curtail its foreign policy, and by corollary, strengthened that of their rivals. If Reagan could eradicate the negativity surrounding Vietnam by transforming it into something which edified the United States rather than degrading it, he would be able to begin reasserting America's position as the world's leading superpower. However, many ex-soldiers were cognizant of this attempt to establish a modern-day "Pax Americana" by trading off of the burgeoning sense of pride in the Vietnam veteran. They were aware that being rebranded as a product of Reagan's neo-exceptionalism would provide a false history to the American people of what the Vietnam War actually entailed, and most likely only perpetuate the cycle of "regenerative violence" which had blotted the history of the United States up until that point in time. I argue that as a consequence, Santoli sought to impress on the American public that for those who had been forced to assimilate its horrors into the fabric of their being and not through the protective gauze of a cathode tube or the print of a newspaper page, that more than anything else, the Vietnam war had ultimately been 'a human ordeal' (xv), one which caused psychic wounds that no amount of national pride could heal.

With this purpose in mind, *Everything We Had* was presented to the American public with the 'hope you will see what we saw, do what we did, feel what we felt' (xvi). But for Santoli to convey this humanity to the reader, he had to first reclaim the narrative of the war from those who sought to use it to further their own ideological purposes. This required distancing those who had served in the war from what had become the widely accepted portrayal of the veteran as 'deeply disturbed, often homeless, and always alone and misunderstood' (Baldwin 323). In addition to this negative depiction, Santoli also had to confront the new-found jingoistic ardour which Reagan's Administration was conveying for the veterans. But in order to quell the contradictory "baby-killer"/John Wayne stereotypes, Santoli would have to depict not just the physical horrors of the war, but also demonstrate the harrowing psychological effects that the conflict had had on the veterans. More so than the awful conditions many of those injured in Vietnam had to endure in some of the older Veteran's Association hospitals scattered around the States (as briefly described by Santoli during his fleeting encounter with Melvin Laird), this

also meant presenting to the reader the trauma of fighting the war in Vietnam. Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) had lingered around the peripheries of accepted medicine since World War I. It had been loosely defined as an anxiety disorder caused by exposure to a terrifying incident in which severe physical harm was threatened or actually occurred. As such, PTSD was a particularly pertinent medical condition for those who served in the military. However, it was not until 1980 that it was officially recognised by experts in the field of psychiatry. Listed in *A Trauma Artist: Tim O'Brien and the Fiction of Vietnam* by Mark A. Heberle, the symptoms of PTSD are many and include

Psychic or emotional numbing; apathy; repressed anger, rage and hostility; anxiety and fears associated directly with combat; sleeplessness and recurrent nightmares; irritability; suicidal thoughts and feelings; self-destructive behaviour; survivor guilt; flashbacks to traumatic events; self-deceiving and self-punishing patterns of relating to others, inability to discuss war experiences with them, and fear of losing them; fantasies of retaliation and destruction; negative self-image; alienation and feeling 'different'; and a sense of meaninglessness (12).

Although often unnoticeable to the naked eye, these after-effects of the war were as damaging to the veteran as a physical wound, and an unforeseen reality that many had to live with. Reflective of a horrendous ordeal more so than an opportunity of glorious sacrifice for one's country, the interviews of the military personnel comprising *Everything We Had* are replete with these signs of trauma. Most commonly found amongst the thirty-three testimonies is the inability to discuss the war with others. In a variety of different ways, Lee Childress, Doug Anderson, Donald Smith, Brian Delate, John Muir, David Ross, Gayle Smith and Thomas Bird all demonstrate obvious difficulties in sharing their experiences of the war with those around them. Bird's inability to relate his trauma is one of those most noticeable. Even though he is speaking to Santoli, a fellow veteran who went through many of the same horrors of the war, Bird is unable to communicate the emotions he felt as he heard the final cries of his fellow countrymen who lay dying on the battlefield, 'they kept asking for medics and some them started screaming, "Shoot me. Kill me." I got very confused in returning fire. As it got darker ... the wounded guys ... I started knowing that ...' (35). The ellipses are inserted by Santoli and indicate to the reader Bird's inability (or unwillingness) to relive the anguish of his experiences. In the words of Brian Delate, many of the veterans 'ended up being

the same way. Almost mute' (117). Compounding this silence was a society that was not willing to re-embrace its returning soldiers. In *Home from the War*, Robert Jay Lifton explains quite clearly the effect that these returning soldiers were having on American society. Lifton states that

In the past, the warrior as hero could be a repository for broad social guilt. Sharing in his heroic mission could serve as a cleansing experience of collective grief from whatever guilt had been experienced over distant killing, or from the need to feel any guilt whatsoever (132).

However, the role of the American soldier in the years after Vietnam was somewhat different as Lifton goes on to say

But when the warrior-hero gives way to the tainted executioner-victim, not only is his repository taken away, but large numbers of people risk a new wave of unmanageable guilt and a profound sense of loss, should they recognise what their warriors have actually become (132).

To accept the veteran, despite an awareness of what had occurred in Vietnam, would possibly allow some greater admission of guilt by American society in relation to its propensity for violence and perhaps even an implicit acknowledgement of the bloodiness of the nation's historical past. As a consequence, many veterans were rejected by their countrymen, a course of action that further exacerbated the sense of alienation many of those who had been to Vietnam already felt from the greater American society. For many veterans, life upon their return to the U.S. was one which was marked by frustration and meaninglessness. Describing his attempts to readjust to life with friends and family, Lee Childress encapsulates a common difficulty faced by many of his fellow soldiers. He states 'today I go down the street and I see things in a way that nobody else sees them' (55). Robert Rawls testifies to a similar issue telling Santoli that 'you try to talk to somebody about it, they think you're out of your mind or you're freaked out. They want to put you in a straight jacket' (137-8). Having been forced to survive in an alien land where the morals and ethics of normal civilisation didn't always apply, one in which violent death or injury was an accepted occurrence, and where even everyday language took on a nuanced and often ominous form, even the veterans who *wanted* to talk about their experiences in Vietnam saw those at home as being unable to truly comprehend the magnitude of what they had been through.

Other signs of trauma are equally prevalent throughout the narrative. Whether it was the realisation that the NVA was being supplied by American charities, the poor treatment of the ordinary soldier, or simply just the sheer waste of human life in wartime, the testimonies of Robert Santos, James Hebron and Gayle Smith are noticeable for the anger and hostility each contains. Similarly, Scott Higgins tells of having repeated nightmares about artillery strikes even when stationed in the safety of Fort Lee, Virginia, while Karl Phaler, Douglas Anderson and Jan Barry are all shown to be still struggling with a negative self-image in the aftermath of the war. Survivor guilt is prominent in the words of James Bombard, a Rifle Platoon Leader in Saigon during the Tet Offensive who saw close friends killed, as it is in those of Robert Rawls, who expresses clear suicidal tendencies as he declares that 'I can't say now if I was one of the lucky ones. Sometimes I wish I could've went ahead and died with my friends' (140). Describing altercations with police, motorcycle gangs and fellow soldiers, as well as a litany of exploits which would be considered serious crimes if committed in peace-time, Mike Beamon presents evidence of self-destructive behaviour. Likewise, when he sees Secretary of Defense, Melvin Laird, Santoli's desire 'to strangle him, to pull a Frankenstein, put a death grip on his neck and not let go until he's dead' (135) indicates the presence of a number of symptoms of PTSD from rage and hostility to fantasies of retaliation and destruction in the veteran's psyche.

But while each of these were detrimental to the ex-soldier's psychological well-being, possibly the most damaging symptom for the veteran in the long-term, and also one of the most evident throughout the text, is mental constriction. Described by Mark Heberle as 'the shutting down of physiological, emotional and cognitive responses' (12), this had resulted in the veteran's noticeable apathy towards the war, society, and everything else around them. This mood was best surmised in *Everything We Had* by David Ross who described it simply as 'not knowing whether to laugh or to cry ... and kind of doing both at the same time' (222). But what were actually the protective processes of a mind trying to integrate the horrors of Vietnam into the everyday living of normal society were often misinterpreted by civilians as an unwillingness to re-assimilate back into U.S. society. In many ways, this apathy could be interpreted as the primary causal factor for the veteran's pseudo-exile from the wider community. Although the American public was eager to forget the war and misdeeds that had occurred within it, ones which challenged the apparent innate benevolence and civilisation of the nation's ethos, the returning soldier could not take partake in what for them would have been an elaborate sham. This entire dynamic is played out in a scene recalled

by Stephen Klinkhammer who describes the reception met by ex-prisoners-of-war at the Great Lakes Naval Station, Illinois. Despite the gaiety of the affair, Klinkhammer remembers one particular POW who deliberately took no part in the celebrations, slipping away as Brian Delate had described himself leaving his own return-home party earlier in the text. But unlike Delate, whose exit was the angry response to the tactlessness of a neighbour who had 'no idea of the dimension of [her] question' (117) in asking the helicopter door-gunner whether he had killed anyone in Vietnam, this unnamed POW bore very obvious marks of having lived through a harrowing physical and mental ordeal. Malnourished and uneasy in the presence of such a large crowd, Klinkhammer notes that he 'looked like a man who was very tense and very bitter and had a whole lot to say and no one was letting him say it' (202). The veteran's attempts to reclaim the narrative of the Vietnam War can thus be seen to be much more complicated than the "morality plays" previously put forward by rivalling parts of American society. The true reality of the war for those who fought it was that they saw themselves as survivors and victims, more so than warriors and heroes. Their words and tears were indicative of a catharsis, and signalled a sense of humanity and an emotional awareness that many Americans had not recognised in the veterans, one that was often hidden by apathy or anger. But expressing a mixture of shame, sadness, and fury, with the pride of serving one's country, *Everything We Had* spoke with an honesty that penetrated through the competing ideologies of the lingering hawks and doves, and revealed a final and lasting truth about the events which had occurred in Vietnam. For the veterans knew and saw this truth. They had seen the atrocities committed by the sons of Middle America at the behest of their surrogate military and political fathers. They knew that America had 'lost more in Vietnam than the troops [they] lost' (95). They had personally witnessed this reality of the war, and *Everything We Had* was their response to a very deliberate attempt by the United States to forget it.

'Oral History, in Practise, is an Art Form ...'

But despite the sincerity of its narrative, authenticity was an issue for Santoli. As the years progressed, the conflict in Vietnam became ever more a hotbed of uncorroborated anecdotes and incidents. As Tim O'Brien observed in *The Things They Carried*, 'Vietnam was full of strange stories, some improbable, some well beyond that' (87).¹¹ The purpose of these stories however 'wasn't a question of deceit' (O'Brien 87). It was more so an attempt by the veteran 'to heat up the truth, to make it burn so hot that you would feel exactly what he felt' (O'Brien 87). This tendency towards myth-making was amplified even further in the years after the war. In addition to seeking to validate their presence in Vietnam, the returning veterans

were struggling to garner the attention of a wider society with little or no interest in their experiences. Particularly given the abundance of stories being brought back from the war, many moved 'back and forth across the border between trivia and bedlam, the mad and the mundane' (O'Brien 87). As a consequence, it was highly likely that at least some were comprised of nothing more than 'generalisations, exaggerations, braggadocio, and ... outright lies' (Baker xiii). So how exactly did Santoli create a text whose apparent authenticity would allow it to resonate so powerfully with the American people?

He did so in part by adhering to several of the tenets of autobiography/memoir. This view that an oral history could be interpreted as a form of "mini-memoir" is supported by several theorists of the historical form. Saul Benson, Paul Thompson, and John Tosh all concur with this view, with the latter stating that testimonies such as those found in oral histories like *Everything We Had* can be read as 'a fragment of autobiography' (Tosh 314). That 'oral history provides a source similar in character to published autobiography' (Thompson, "Voice," 24) is demonstrated by a very brief review of the theory underpinning autobiographical narratives. The primary caveat is that every interview reveals to the reader a veteran's true experience of the Vietnam War. Unlike previous accounts, whose authenticity was challenged because the author was either not in Vietnam or had not personally witnessed all of the events described, everything within *Everything We Had* could be personally vouched for by the narrator of the respective interview. In our personal correspondence, Santoli does acknowledge the power of what he calls 'emotional memory' to distort a person's recollection of events. He states that 'memory and emotion have a tendency over time to cloud the actual events as they took place.' But as mini-memoirs or autobiographies, each account was intrinsically governed by Lejeune's autobiographical pact.¹² As such the integrity of the information relating to people, places and events of the war were safeguarded to some extent from many aspersions of doubt. In addition to these structural measures, the narrative voice in each extract comprised of a combination of the historical and narrating "I," which allows each veteran to convey his or her emotional reactions, as well as recount historically verifiable events of the war. While this nebulosity might be read by some as a sign of fictionality, these measures taken by Santoli to underline the account's status as a mini-memoir encouraged the reader to view the respective testimonies as works ground in an empirical reality quite typical of creative nonfiction.

This referential undertone is also increased by the abundance of bibliographic codes present in the text which combine to imbue it with the Benjamin-esque aura so

often found in creative nonfiction. Foremost amongst these codes are photographs of twenty-six of the thirty-three interviewees which encourage the reader to view the events described as having actually occurred to a real person and not some faceless entity. This association between the text and reality is further strengthened by peritextual material such as the preface section written by Santoli. Unequivocally informing the reader that the events depicted within are a direct representation of reality, this link between the textual and empirical world is subsequently copperfastened by the unnecessary but significant inclusion of an exact temporal and real world address for the author. Similarly extraneous information is also found in the inter-title of each section. In providing the reader with the “proper name” of the veteran, as well as his or her service details, as per Jonathan Culler yet another connection is provided which guides the reader towards a factual interpretation of each account (This was not a staple practise for oral histories of the war. Mark Baker’s *NAM* was comprised in its entirety by anonymous speakers, and although Gloria Emerson did name those she spoke with in *Winners and Losers*, the narrative thread she wove throughout her text frequently interspersed Emerson’s own feelings and experiences of the war with men and women she interviewed). He outlines the full force of this signature on the reader in *On Deconstruction: Text and Criticism after Structuralism*. Here, Culler states that it ‘[attests] to the presence to consciousness of a signifying intention at a particular moment’ (125). Its presence can be understood as ‘[implying] a moment of presence to consciousness which is the origin of subsequent obligations or other effects’ (126 my emphasis). While the obligations Culler’s analysis centres on are those of a legal nature, there is no reason to suggest that the “other effects” he mentions cannot be the desire to establish the historicity of a narrative. The cover too offers a generic indicator in addition to these codes located within the confines of the text. In quite a similar fashion to Bryan’s *Friendly Fire*, the title of *Everything We Had* is segmented into two separate thematic and rhematic sections; the actual title of the novel and what is then worded as ‘An Oral History of the Vietnam War By Thirty-Three American Soldiers Who Fought It.’ Unlike previous narratives of the war, ownership of the testimonies contained within is explicitly and directly accorded to the “characters” whose words constitute the account. Accompanied by prefatorial blurb from other authors acclaimed for their nonfictional works, such as Gloria Emerson, which infer that the narratives enclosed within are consequently presented to the reader as something diametrically opposed to fiction. What is most significant about this theoretical interlude is how substantially the *oral history* that is *Everything We Had*

adheres to the autobiographical and bibliographic coding principles of creative nonfiction.

Santoli can thus be seen to incorporate a multitude of attributes into the text that encourage the reader to perceive *Everything We Had* in the same light as a referentially viable work. However despite its apparent veracity, as Ronald Grele notes, 'there is scepticism ... doubt, and distrust of oral history among professional historians' (38). Such concerns are common to creative nonfiction and centre primarily on the fallibility of memory and the unavoidable poesis that occurs as a result. But they also include issues relating specifically to the selection of interviewees, the transcription of interviews and the intrinsic ideological biases of the interviewer. With particular reference to the oral narratives of the Vietnam War, Patrick Hagopian notes that oral histories such as *Everything We Had* are at best the 'nodal points around which the recalcitrant memory of the war is being contested and negotiated' ("Oral Narratives" 148). This can easily be seen to be the case in Santoli's text as many of the issues that critics of oral history, such as Babara McKeever, David Henige and Ronald Grele, have regarding the form are prevalent in the narrative. Several of the scenes included by Santoli are highly traumatic and thus questionable in terms of their referential validity. Speaking to Patrick Hagopian in 1991, the transcription process Santoli related told of how he used actors to re-read the many transcripts he had compiled, a practise which enabled him to 'to edit and reedit them between readings until he had distilled the stories to their essence' ("Voices" 597). Further damaging to the historical worth of his work was Santoli's admission to both Hagopian and I that he had used the Japanese haiku as a literary model to structure this editing process. The original conversations with the veterans chosen for his narrative were thus rendered into a succession of 'sparse raw images' ("answers") which were then wielded in 'an impressionistic manner as illustrative support for the various themes discussed' (Tosh 321). The outcome of such lexical origami was an account of the war which was at best a paraphrased version of what actually occurred, and one whose congruity to the original set of events was nigh on impossible to verify due to the absence within the text of interview transcripts or other related source documentation. Similarly, while Santoli's narrative is an admirable attempt at providing an insight from all of those who served in Vietnam, there is no obvious methodology apparent in his selection of interviewees. Furthermore, several of the interviews included in *Everything We Had* are dual interviews, an aspect of the text that brings what David Henige refers to as 'small group dynamics' (50) into play. This type of situation is one recognised by psychologists and often occurs when groups of people are questioned on a topic as a

singular entity rather than individually. The resultant outcome is frequently not an accurate synopsis of events derived from the memory of the entire group, but rather that remembered by the more dominant and expressive members of collective. This paradigm is clearly apparent in some of the joint interviews found in *Everything We Had*, as the words of Santoli and Bruce Lawlor visibly outstrip those of Jonathan Polansky and Thomas Bailey in their respective dual accounts. With no means to ascertain as to whether the former two veterans spoke at greater length, or whether the latter two merely had very little to say on the subject at hand (or, having spoken at length, had had their words edited down by Santoli), it is nigh on impossible to decipher if the interviews accurately reflect the events which occurred in Vietnam. Given Santoli's presence in the narrative itself (a highly unusual tactic for oral histories), this latter issue becomes even more pressing. Emotionally invested in the experiences of those he spoke with, it is difficult to imagine him adopting the part of a detached and silent sounding-board as those he served with relived their most pressing and often troublesome memories of the fighting in Southeast Asia. In reality, he actually admits to being quite the opposite in the narrative's preface. He describes his role in *Everything We Had* as that of one who 'travelled around the country and spent countless hours talking, crying and laughing with other veterans and their families' (xvi). Despite being labelled as an oral history of the war in Vietnam, much to the ire of many academic historians, *Everything We Had* actually manifested many of 'the fictions of factual representation' (121) which had been so controversially brought to light by meta-historians such as Hayden White.

But it must be stated that this study is one of literary, not historical analysis. As such, many of the perceived historical failings of *Everything We Had* can be seen to be of great benefit when the text is viewed as a work of creative nonfiction. As Hagopian stated, these oral histories were sites in which memories of the war were incredibly ductile. Although quite important, absolute historical veracity was not the utmost priority. What mattered most was that the reader was encouraged to *interpret* the text as a document directly representing reality. Santoli clarifies this aim in our personal correspondence, stating that he had 'a mission which was to give a voice and turn into literature the collective experience of fellow soldiers, who could not convey all that they had experienced and were feeling about their experiences which isolated them' ("Re: answers"). Quoted in a personal correspondence in June 2014, what is significant to note about Santoli's comments is how he affiliates the phrases "to give a voice" with "turn into literature." Santoli acknowledges that to produce an effective and credible oral history, the interviewer 'must make the commitment to study the chronology and facts and figures that are

associated with a given event (“Re: answers”).’ However, his overarching view of the form was that ultimately it was ‘dramatic literature which gives a meaning to the academic history of events’ (“answers”). As such, it is of little surprise that in an interview with Lois Lindstrom in 1996, and in my own personal correspondence with the author, that Santoli has repeatedly cited Studs Terkel as ‘an influence and inspiration’ (“answers”). Terkel was the author of two of the most celebrated oral histories of the twentieth century, *Hard Times: An Oral History of the Great Depression* and *“The Good War”: An American History of World War II*. Although lauded as a works of creative nonfiction, presented as a conversational narratives obviously guided by Terkel himself, and each devoid of source notes, the latter’s oral histories were a source of frustration for many academic historians trying to appraise his work in accordance with traditional parameters. Santoli’s approach can be seen to mirror that of his mentor. The narratives in *Everything We Had* were deliberately constructed to become ‘stories with the bare economy of haikus’ (Hagopian, “Voices,” 597). While academic historians such as David Henige saw this reduction of the original testimony into a succession of sound-bites and images as a destructive act, such a practise was totally in keeping with Santoli’s view that oral histories were a site of poetic endeavour. It was ‘not “editing”’; it was ‘written art’ (“answers”). In “Oral Narratives: Secondary Revision and the Memory of the Vietnam War,” Patrick Hagopian discusses at length how oral histories such as those written by Santoli have ‘in fact been diced and cooked in accordance with recipes concocted by the editors and publishers,’ despite being ‘offered as raw’ (139) testimonies of the war. As no text is written in a vacuum and there is always going to be some level of distortion in a written text, this is true of all oral histories. However, what is curious to note is that Santoli also minimises the extent of the possible third-party interference in *Everything We Had*. He states quite clearly when asked about the role that publisher played in the construction of the text was that ‘the best thing [they] did was stay out of my way’ (“answers”) and that the number of veterans included in his text was a choice solely of his making. In addition, while he worked in cohesion with a team of editors (and actors), the manner in which he constructed a text was one which was marked by a ‘dramatic style where punctuation [was] for emotional effect and not the King’s English’ (“answers”) and in which ‘every page packed a punch’ (“answers”). Remarks such as these by Santoli do emphasise his opinion that ‘oral history, in practise, [was] an art form’ (“answers”). Taking it upon himself to be what Alessandro Portelli describes as ‘a partner in the dialogue ... a “stage director” of the interview ... an “organizer” of the testimony’ (72), the part Santoli played in the composition of

the text is celebrated, not hidden. Furthermore, much to the chagrin of historians, it becomes difficult to differentiate between the views of Santoli and those around him. Santoli freely admits to the respective interviews being led along a pre-established path. He states that while he 'did not present questions,' he did have 'notes which I used to structure discussions ("answers").' Candid about the fact that his narrative represented 'a combination of literature, dramatic arts and journalism' ("answers"), rather than attempting to prove the empirical validity of *Everything We Had*, Santoli embraces the poesis which allowed him to convey what he and his fellow veterans felt about the Vietnam War. Instead of creating a historical document which depicted a sterile and apathetic version of the war, the paraphrased testimony presented to the reader in the most efficient and powerful way possible 'the complicated psychic and physical realities of what [the veterans] went through in Vietnam' (xvi).¹³

So what was it exactly about Santoli's oral history that lent it to such a convincing recollection of the events of the Vietnam War? The most apparent aspect of *Everything We Had* is that, despite the multitude of narrators contained within the text, it appears to adhere to the chronology of the war. Beginning with the early years of the conflict, Santoli's text describes the reactions of American soldiers to important early historical milestones of the conflict, such as the fall of the Diem regime in 1963 and the Tonkin Gulf incident of August 1964. Largely complying with this historically verifiable timeline, moving from the American landing in Da Nang in 1965 through to their final withdrawal from Saigon a decade later, the structure of *Everything We Had* encourages the reader to view the events enclosed as comparable to history. This consistency in relation to other accepted historical sources allows the narrative to satisfy what Paul Thompson calls the one of 'basic tests of reliability' (*Voice* 153). The historical events documented in Santoli's narrative mirrored the general recollection of those same events which had been engrained in the public conscience. His status as a veteran offered further validity to the verity of the enclosed narratives. In my personal correspondence with Mr Santoli, he spoke of how 'being a war veteran was a bond of trust with the veterans I interviewed' ("answers"). Having served in Vietnam, and wounded in action, Santoli was more qualified to appraise the words of his fellow soldiers with regards to the integrity of their content. A similar dynamic would appear to be in place regarding the selection of interviewees. Encompassing speakers who were male and female, black, white and Hispanic, infantry and officer, military and non-military, Santoli's narrative encourages the reader to believe that it is giving voice to just about every demographic who served in Vietnam (This was actually his intent.

Santoli told Patrick Hagopian in his interview that he had picked speakers 'for reasons of racial diversity' ("Re: Al Santoli"), while gender was also spoken of by the veteran as a very prominent concern). But by being seemingly allocated a place in the text in accordance to their time in Vietnam, a methodology orchestrating the precise placement of each interview in the overall narrative is implicitly inferred to the reader. Not only does it present the reader with a relatively smooth, and thus seemingly authentic, narrative-flow in the text, significantly, it also further elides the active role taken by Santoli in the construction of the narrative, making the narrative seen even more credible. Furthermore, the fragmentary nature of each account is accepted by the reader as a condition of the sizeable amount of veterans recollecting their memories of the war contained within the text. Characterised by a noticeable brevity (one amplified even further by Santoli's rendering of the individual pieces), each interview is exempt from the demand of thoroughness in terms of detail that would be expected from a single life narrative. Characterised by an obvious dissatisfaction towards the U.S. government, an underlying dissent matching the zeitgeist of the early Seventies becomes apparent, one whose authenticity is reinforced as seemingly veteran after veteran reiterates either the same or similar sentiments to the reader. Rather than representing the views of one ex-soldier, who may or may not have been content with his or military service, the accounts of the war found within *Everything We Had* now assume an air of typicality regarding the average veteran's time in Vietnam. As Paul Thompson notes, 'in general, a historical interpretation ... becomes more credible when the pattern of evidence is consistent, and is drawn from more than one viewpoint' (*Voice* 228). A significant aspect about what Hagopian describes as this 'Frankensteinian quality' ("Oral" 138) of the narrative was that it prevented its veracity from being undermined by a specific ideological position held by the author. This was an important concern for the perceived authenticity of the work. If one were to look at Tim O'Brien's status as an unwilling conscript, the circumstances of Philip Caputo's ignominious discharge from the army, Neil Sheehan's association with known anti-war campaigners such as Daniel Ellsberg and David Halberstam, and C.D.B. Bryan's obvious sympathies for both the Mullen family and for Norman Schwarzkopf all could be cited as potentially distortive influences on the veracity of their respective texts. Yet by being comprised of an immensely heterogeneous group of "authors," a group of assorted gender, class and ethnicity, any such concerns regarding *Everything We Had* would appear to be vitiated.

The underlying authenticity of the narrative is further enhanced by the actual wording of the individual accounts. In each interview, each serviceman or woman's referentially verifiable historical information, what Mas'ud Zavarzadeh called

'factoids – fact-like details of empirical reality which help create a fictional likeness of the real world' (60), is given to the reader. Before they even begin to share a veteran's experiences, they are provided with his or her name, rank, regiment, dates and area of service while in Vietnam. Most crucially however, each veteran is also presented to the reader as if speaking their own words. The repetitious phrases, and unique vernacular of the war, what David Henige describes as 'crutch words' (107), as well as pauses, cadence, and other minutiae of speech indicating the physical condition of the interviewee are incorporated into the text. But unlike Terkel's explicit authorial interventions in *Hard Times* and in *The Good War*, bar the odd explanation of a specific military term, there is no obvious evidence of Santoli's presence in the narrative, or indeed any clue that such large scale editing took place. The revelations regarding actors and haikus only came much later in conversations where questions regarding the editing process were specifically asked. Furthermore, while it is more than evident from the litany of interviews given by Santoli over the years that he played an active role in the poetic reconstruction of the text, what is important to note is that at no time does he refer to himself as an "author" in the text. Most often self-described as a veteran, the greatest divergence he makes in terms of this act of labelling is to call himself an 'interviewer/editor/writer' ("answers") in our correspondence. While we know the opposite to be true, the effect of Santoli's reluctance to align with any obvious form of poesis encourages the reader to view the accounts contained within *Everything We Had* as a tableau of unadulterated experience, with the latter's role in the construction of the text merely that of a facilitator rather than a creator. The resultant piece is one which David Henige considers to be in the same vein as 'testimony' (2) and which Mark Baker would describe as 'bearing witness' (xiii) in his oral history of the war, *NAM*. This undertone is further emphasised in the preface. Referring to himself as just another member of a collective group of veterans, his words, those of the men and women he served alongside, and their inherent sincerity are actually juxtaposed against two of the most maligned sources of fictitiousness during the Vietnam era; the Hollywood scriptwriter and the Washington speechwriter. Retold in a bevy of differing dialects and tones, the respective narratives not only reinforce the view that the interviewees were drawn from all strata of American society, but also provide the impression that each spoke from 'some kind of spontaneous, ideologically innocent position' (Hagopian, "Oral," 142). Crucially, in a marketplace dominated by narratives on the war written by politicians, singularly talented veteran-authors, and journalists who had reported from Southeast Asia, *Everything We Had* offered an opportunity for the "everyman" who served in Vietnam to speak of his or her

experiences. Only now the primary source wasn't some pseudo-celebrity of the war, but a normal person living an everyday life quite possibly in the same city or town as the reader. Supported in many cases by a photograph of the veteran, the speakers put a human face on what had become through the mass use of technology, a very inhuman war. Buffered by Santoli's prefatorial claim that *Everything We Had* 'tried to put into honest words the raw experience of what happened to us' (xv), the reader had no reason to believe that what he or she subsequently reads is anything other than a sincere recollection of the events of Vietnam. The reality, as discussed, is something much different. But using these empirical structures to create a vestige of referentiality throughout the text, Santoli was able to craft an account of the war in Vietnam which appeared to be devoid of ideological purpose yet which spoke with an authority based on personal experience, and an authenticity derived from historical fact.

This personalization of history is one much discussed by Paul Thompson, and its significance is fundamental to any attempt to tell a true version of the Vietnam War. While once the private domicile of hegemonies and the ruling elite, oral histories such as *Everything We Had* had the potential to alter the balance of history-making and replace it with a process much more democratic and thoroughly entwined in the interests of the people. Oral historians such as Santoli, Terkel, Wallace Terry, Gloria Emerson and Mark Baker hoped 'to give back to the people who made and experienced history, *through their own words*, a central place' (Thompson "Voice" 22 my emphasis). The veterans of the war in Vietnam were these people, and their memories of the war represented those of their countrymen. Framing it in the context of 'Greek theatre' in his interview with Lindstrom, Santoli asks that his narrative be read as a form of chorus to the tragedy that was the war in Vietnam. Representing a *collective* voice, the traditional function of the chorus was to assist the audience by further clarifying the events occurring onstage. It was a mechanism which could express a truth that the actors could not; their fears, their secrets, their unspoken thoughts. In the context of the Vietnam War, the veterans were this chorus; faceless voices that were seldom heard in the 'theatre of ideological warfare' (Hagopian, *Vietnam War*, 431) that Vietnam had become. But unlike the homogenous entity found on the stages of Ancient Greece, Santoli's chorus was comprised of real people whose experiences in Vietnam had equipped them to act as a chorus should, and reveal the unspoken truths about the war. *Everything We Had* became the mouthpiece for an entire disenfranchised generation as it reiterated the words of O'Brien, Caputo, Sheehan, Bryan and countless other veteran-authors of the war. It emphasised how the nation's expectations had been shaped by its

Frontier past, how brutal the American persona could be, how the nation had lost its moral compass, and how responsibility for the war in Vietnam lay not just with the veterans, or with the politicians, but with the American people as an entire nation. But unlike previous nonfictional narratives, *Everything We Had* coalesced each of these issues into one voice as the call grew stronger to recognise that the efforts of those who served in Vietnam were as valiant as those who had fought in World War II. But unlike many other works of creative nonfiction which combined the referential validity of the official accounts of the conflict with what Tim O'Brien called a 'story-truth,' (*The Things They Carried* 179) *Everything We Had* was a historiography of multiplicity which sought to instigate even further the burgeoning dynamic of social change for the veteran. Fittingly, given that its composition would appear to be a democratic affair, the oral history presented by Santoli could be seen as representing the first uniquely American interpretation of the war as it sought to bring recognition to the veteran who had fought, suffered, and some say needlessly died, on a field far away from home in the service of his or her nation, in order to ensure that such a tragedy never occurred again.

Notes

1. The conspicuousness of the Vietnam Veterans Against the War (VVAW) in the anti-war movement from the late Sixties to early Seventies would prompt most critics to question the validity of this claim. Images of dissatisfied veterans expressing their anger with their government by throwing their medals on the steps of Capitol Hill are some of the most memorable of the war. However, in the greater context of those who served in Vietnam, according to historian Andrew Hunt, 'membership rolls listed almost twenty-five thousand card-carriers, or fewer than 1 percent of all eligible Vietnam era veterans' (197). My intention here is not to understate the impact that the VVAW had on the outcome of the war or how people would come to perceive it. Rather, my argument is that despite the prominence of the VVAW as a vocal critic of the American government's actions in Vietnam, many of those who fought in Southeast Asia did not play an active part in the subsequent protests.
2. The condition was known as the "Vietnam Syndrome" and refers to the American's public's reluctance for the U.S. to intervene militarily anywhere in world, as well as an over-riding sense of guilt or shame towards the nation's position of strength in relation to smaller countries.
3. Reagan's effort to recast the Vietnam War was one which was a hugely sensitive issue. The United States was still a country largely divided over the Vietnam War. But as Patrick Hagopian states 'the Vietnam War did not divide the nation into opposed prowar and antiwar groups. Instead, the war divided U.S. society into several factions' (*Vietnam* 25). For further information on this highly complicated political problem, see Hagopian's *The Vietnam War in American Memory: Veterans, Memorials and the Politics of Healing*.
4. Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) was listed in the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* for the first time in 1980. This was largely due to the work of Dr Robert Jay Lifton and Dr Chaim Shatan. For a more detailed account of this endeavour, refer to Patrick Hagopian's *The Vietnam War in American Memory: Veterans, Memorials and the Politics of Healing*, (49-78), or for a more personal insight, see Lifton's own recollection *Home from the War: Vietnam Veterans, Neither Victims nor Executioners*.

5. A significant amount of creative nonfiction concerning the conflict was written during and immediately after the war. However, the period of time from the late Seventies until the mid-Eighties saw a bevy of nonfictional works published, many of which would come to be recognised as the canonical works of the Vietnam War. These included Michael Herr's *Dispatches*, Gloria Emerson's *Winners and Losers*, Ron Kovic's *Born on the Fourth of July*, C.D.B. Bryan's *Friendly Fire*, and Philip Caputo's *A Rumor of War*.

6. To walk "point" meant that whilst on patrol, Hebron had to lead the other men as they walked in single file through the jungle. It was often seen as the most precarious position of the platoon as the person in front was most likely to trigger any hidden booby-traps. Similarly, the term "humping" referred to the forced march of American troops for periods of up to 30 days. Often having to cut through dense undergrowth and elephant grass, a journey which would normally take a few hours on foot could turn into an entire day's endeavour. Several authors, such as Michael Herr in *Dispatches*, have dwelt on the manner in which the loss of human life was effectively sterilised by this distinct idiom of the Vietnam War, 'the cheer-crazed language of the MACV Information Office' (224). However, for the most extensive study to date on the many unique terms and colloquialisms used by American personnel during the Vietnam War, see Linda Reinberg's *In the Field: The Language of the Vietnam War*.

7. This relationship between the U.S. military and the American nation is discussed by Richard Slotkin in *Gunfighter Nation* (359).

8. The Phoenix Program was a strategy devised by the CIA whose central aim was to neutralise the Viet Cong infrastructure in South Vietnam. Beginning in 1967, it was responsible for the deaths of between 20000 and 40000 Vietnamese. One of the most controversial aspects of the American war in Vietnam, the final figure is unknown but it is believed up to 5000 of these deaths were innocent of any ties with the Viet Cong. For a much greater examination of the successes and failures of the Phoenix Program, refer to John Prados' *The Hidden History of the Vietnam War* (204-220).

9. Virtually every text on the Vietnam War gives some mention to the atrocities committed by American soldiers in Vietnam. However, by far one of the most comprehensive is Nick Turse's *Kill Anything That Moves*.

10. This act of "lashing out" in response to unrelenting casualties caused by booby traps and sniper fire is a commonplace occurrence in virtually every Vietnam War narratives, fictional and nonfictional. Having experienced the emotion while patrolling the heavily mined and immensely hostile Quang Ngai province (known to the American soldiers as "Pinkville") in the months immediately after the My Lai Massacre, Tim O'Brien describes the resultant combination of terror, frustration, anger, and helplessness in *If I Die in a Combat Zone* as akin to a heart transplant operation which is interrupted midway by the noted absence of a replacement heart. While O'Brien played no part in any atrocity while serving in Vietnam, even he understood how men such as Lieutenant Calley and those like him succumbed to 'the wickedness that soaks in your blood and heats up and starts to sizzle' (O'Brien "Vietnam In Me") and obeyed their most animalistic instincts in committing some of the most heinous war crimes of the twentieth century.

11. Perhaps one of the most well-known examples of such a tall tale emerging from the Vietnam War can be found in one of the short stories contained in Tim O'Brien's metafictional *The Things They Carried*. In "The Sweetheart of Song Tra Bong," one of the soldiers that the narrator served alongside tells of how another soldier managed to smuggle his American girlfriend into Vietnam. While some critics might argue that the veracity of this particular story is undermined by its inclusion in a fictional text, accounts such as these, rooted in the base fears and desires of the U.S. infantrymen, rarely drifted into the realm of verifiable fact. Other unsubstantiated rumours which were prevalent in Vietnam was the widespread belief in the early part of the war that the Viet Cong had tanks and helicopters to rival those used by the Americans and ARVN, and that there were American soldiers who had defected after being taken prisoner and were now fighting for the North Vietnamese. The latter was most famously encapsulated in Gustav Hasford's fictional Vietnam War novella, *The Phantom Bloop*.

12. Lejeune's autobiographical pact is defined as a 'retrospective prose narrative written by a real person concerning his own existence, where the focus is his individual life, in particular the story of his personality' (4).

13. Santoli is not alone amongst Vietnam War historians in his view oral histories represented an art form. In an interview with Eric Schroeder in *Vietnam: We've All Been There: Interviews with American Writers*, Wallace Terry, the author of *Bloods* describes an editing process which mirrors Santoli's (66).

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