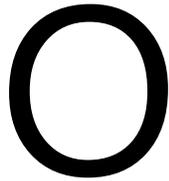


Revisiting *Winning Hearts and Minds* A Conversation with Jan Barry

Kevin Basl



On an unseasonably warm night in October 2017, I visited friend, poet and activist Jan Barry, at his home in Teaneck, New Jersey. He had just returned from an afternoon poetry reading in Nyack, New York, where he had read work along with other veteran poets of various service eras. Several now hung out in his living room. Energized from a well-received reading, they shared photos and stories with me.

After his friends left, I interviewed Barry. Here, he talks about co-editing *Winning Hearts and Minds: War Poems by Vietnam Veterans* (WHAM) (1973), an anthology initially published by 1st Casualty Press (begun under the auspices of Vietnam Veterans Against the War (VVAW) and later reprinted by McGraw-Hill. The legacy of WHAM—four decades and counting—is the story of Vietnam Veterans looking deep within themselves and their culture and sharing their visions and lessons through poetry, no matter how ugly or disconcerting the subject matter. The work is presented in the spirit of activism, but it goes beyond mere poetic dissent. WHAM introduced readers to several poets who would go on to have successful writing careers (the editors particularly), and the poems continue to inspire today's emerging veteran writers to use verse to grapple with their own war experiences.

Aptly, Barry also talks about another historic project going on right next door to the VVAW poetry discussions, at the organization's New York office. Renowned psychologist Robert Jay Lifton helped facilitate "rap group" discussion circles, researching what would come to be known as "post traumatic stress disorder." PTSD, minus the yet-unwritten clinical language, would be the

subject of WHAM's follow-up poetry collection, *Demilitarized Zones: Veterans After Vietnam* (DMZ)(1976), co-edited by Barry and W.D. Ehrhart.

Kevin Basl (KB): Where did the idea to publish a book of poetry by Vietnam veterans come from? How did the writers and editors get involved?

Jan Barry (JB): One of the vets in VVAW, Larry Rottmann, had been collecting poetry, short stories, novels, photographs and artwork [by Vietnam veterans]. He had an idea for an enormous compendium book. He couldn't find a publisher, so he asked me, because you live in New York City can you find a publisher? I said maybe we should start by making separate books, a poetry anthology and a short story anthology. I went to networking meetings with Random House and other publishers. And they all said essentially the same thing: These are all unknown poets and the war will be over by the time the book comes out. It was a put down. No one knew who Norman Mailer was when he came home in 1945, you know?

KB: Is that when you decided to self-publish the book?

JB: I was very aware that other groups were self-publishing. For example, [the Boston Women's Health Book Collective] who put out *Our Bodies, Ourselves* [1971]. The Latino poets, etc. So I suggested, why don't we publish the book ourselves? I had been editor of my high school yearbook, so I knew the layout process. In those days you pasted things on a board. And through people in the antiwar movement, we found a publisher who primarily did high school and college publications, but they were also on the radical side, so they were really into doing our kind of a book.

We started in the fall of 1971. We put a notice in *The New York Times Book Review* saying

we were looking for poetry by veterans. That caught a professor's attention at Swarthmore, who then told Bill [W.D.] Ehrhart. When he called us—I don't know how we got a hold of people in those days. You had to use old fashioned telephones and track people down! Anyway, Bill was so excited that he came to Brooklyn. He had a bunch of poetry.

Another veteran, Basil Paquet, who had gotten a degree at University of Connecticut, and I think was in graduate school and teaching as an adjunct [in fall 1971], he had written some poetry that had been published in the *New York Review of Books*. He got involved. Then, around January of 1972, we read that the Yale Younger Poet's Prize had gone to a Vietnam vet, Michael Casey. So we tracked down a copy of his manuscript [*Obscenities*] so we could get some of his poems. But in most cases the people's work in our book hadn't been widely published, so we had to do a lot of networking.

KB: Where did WHAM's poems by non-veterans come from?

JB: Larry Rottmann had picked up a poem by a North Vietnamese soldier ["Tan"] somewhere along the way. There was a woman [Mary Emeny] who had been in Vietnam with the American Friends Service Committee. She wrote about barbed wire. Turns out someone in her family had invented barbed wire. Initially it had been invented for cattle, now she's seeing it used for people. Beyond irony.

A high school student even sent us a poem, "I'm a Veteran of Vietnam." We decided to put it at the very end. *I'm also a veteran of Vietnam, I saw it on TV*. It was so well-written, there was no disagreement. We had to include it. Today, [Sue Halpern] is a well-known writer.

KB: Building the anthology sounds like it was an organic process, perhaps energized and informed by the grassroots organizing of VVAW. After the poems were gathered, how did the editors decide the order and layout of the book? How deliberate was that process?

JB: We were having a discussion about the book's format and it came to me to arrange the poems in a sequence, not alphabetically by poets' names. *This is what it felt like when you first arrived in Vietnam. Here's what you felt like the first time something a little weird happened. Here's how things felt as they got weirder and weirder.* And then towards the end there are some really bitter poems. We arranged the sequence like that.

As we were laying it out, I had this thought: *Wait a minute, I had this experience and I could write it and it could go right here.* I realized I could write to spec.

KB: You wrote poems to fill in the collective narrative?

JB: Yeah. I had written only two or three poems before that. My first poem was "Floating Petals," written in 1969. But many of my other early poems, I wrote them because I would get excited when a veteran had written about something and I had had a somewhat similar experience. I would bounce off what a poem was talking about. I realized I could get really focused and tell a story in a short form.

KB: Were the editors reading any instructive authors or anthologies at the time?

JB: We had taken a close look at Wilfred Owen and the other World War I poets. Because it was *bitter* poetry. Civil war poetry too. With World War II poetry, there wasn't yet an anthology to look at. You had to track down individual authors.

I happened to be fascinated by poetry anthologies. I had been collecting them—books

from the 20s, 30s, 40s. *Best American Poetry*, etc. They gave me a sense of possibilities. I had an interest in telling stories, but not in the traditional way. At some point—and we hadn't even collected many poems yet—it struck me that it would make sense to arrange WHAM in the "emotional order" I just described.

KB: It makes sense. It encourages readers to read WHAM front to back, which I don't usually feel compelled to do with other poetry anthologies. I'm curious how you promoted the book, which is always a challenge with self-published titles.

JB: We never expected WHAM to have a great readership. But, much to our surprise, just as we were about to come out with the book, Gloria Emerson, a well known correspondent in Vietnam for *The New York Times*, got wind of what we were doing. She talked to some of the people she knew and that led to not just a review in *The New York Times Book Review*, but also several poems from the book showing up on the op-ed page of *The New York Times*, just as the book is coming out. That was a *huge* promotion. Then the *Chicago Tribune* wanted some poems. Then the *Chicago Sun Times* wanted poems, and so on.

Another surprising phenomenon, at least from my perspective, was that we were asked to read the poetry at various places. Colleges, etc. Our presentation was no introduction, no titles, just start reading. All of a sudden this story was just thrust out there. And I quickly discovered, whether it was college or high school students or other audiences, people actually listened. We [VVAW] had been talking for years, trying to get people to pay attention. But I discovered, somehow, if our message was compressed into a poem format, that gets people's attention. My wife [Paula Kay Pierce] even turned WHAM into a play, which was performed off-off Broadway, in Brooklyn. *War Play*. She cast veterans. The show got a big story in the *Daily News*.

KB: What you're describing sounds a lot like what some of us today are calling the "veteran art movement." Veteran art shows are quite common now. Veteran poetry readings. Plays involving, or written by, veterans. I thought all of this was a recent phenomenon, but apparently not. As with the promotion of self-published books, distribution is not always straightforward either. I'm curious how WHAM got distributed—especially considering it came out over two decades before the Internet and its slew of self-publishing platforms.

JB: Larry Rottmann had a truck and he took a bunch of boxes of books and traveled across the country, presumably leaving them at bookstores to sell. I ran out of books! I said, wait a minute, I need books back here! It turned out to be more practical to order another printing.

KB: How many got printed?

JB: I think we got 10,000 in the first run, then another 10,000. So I'm sitting in our kitchen in Brooklyn filling all the orders. The books sold for \$1.95, and in those days you could mail them for \$0.25. I had to get all the packaging, package the books up. I'm doing a lot of fulfillment and, from my perspective, [Rottmann's] off having a good time. I was ticked off! [laughs]

After we printed the initial 20,000 copies, McGraw-Hill asked if they could reprint it. And they sold a lot of copies.

KB: But before McGraw-Hill picked it up, people sent in orders to you—clipped from newspaper ads or wherever—and a couple bucks? Am I picturing this correctly?

JB: That's right. And we distributed fliers. Some of the guys in VVAW were even taking boxes and selling them on street corners in Brooklyn and Manhattan. They'd go out on a weekend and sell a box or two of books.

KB: You were doing all of this as 1st Casualty Press at this point?

JB: My recollection is that Larry Rottman was then editor of *1st Casualty*, VVAW's newspaper, which went along with the idea of "1st Casualty Press." That's why Larry, who was from Missouri and went to college in Boston, eventually came to New York [to be *1st Casualty's* editor].

So, simultaneously, in 1971, I started the process that led to the VVAW rap groups. Those happened in the VVAW offices, which had maybe two rooms. The rap groups would be meeting in a conference room space, around a table, and out in the larger room all sort of things would be going on. That's where Rottmann—because he was putting out the newspaper—and whoever else was interested, would get together and talk about the poetry. We never even saw the connection!

KB: Between the writing and the rap groups?

JB: Right. The rap group is talking, then there's this writing project going on in the other room. We didn't put them together.

KB: Is this when psychologist Robert Jay Lifton came into the picture?

JB: Robert Jay Lifton got involved with helping us get the rap groups off the ground. Towards the end of 1970, or early '71, I had seen an article, probably in *The New York Times*, that Lifton had testified before a congressional committee, saying that they should be aware of this readjustment issue. He was tentatively calling it "Post-Vietnam Syndrome," which was not a good name. I sent him a letter and said I work with a bunch of Vietnam veterans who'd probably be interested in having a conversation. I think at that time he was at Yale, but he had an apartment in New York City. We got together and he said he had a number of colleagues he could bring into this

discussion. I said that's great, but we don't want to have a doctor-patient relationship. We'd rather have something like a conversation among colleagues. He had been in the Air Force during the Korean War. We'd all had similar experiences. So we asked, what are we looking at? How can it be addressed? We had nothing definitive other than knowing that for lots of veterans, life just really felt unsettled, relationships didn't work out so well, there were loose ends as to what to do with themselves. This is even before getting into any deeper discussions.

We had rap groups once a week. I mainly just listened. I couldn't remember some really horrendous, particular thing [from my Vietnam War experience]. But I began to realize, it's the *culmination*. You know, where is it written that free fire zones are okay? I arrived in Vietnam in December 1962 and there were free fire zones. *Go to it. Shoot anything that moves.* By that time [1971], we were researching the Nuremberg Trials. People in the German army got into serious trouble for doing things like that. Just following orders.

Incidentally, the V.A. at that point was worthless on this topic. What we heard, at least anecdotally, was *It's your problem. What was your relationship with your mother like? Your siblings? Your life before the army?*

KB: We've come a long way, but the V.A. does still ask such questions when doing PTSD evaluations, trying to identify pre-existing conditions to challenge claims. How did the subsequent poetry anthology come about, *Demilitarized Zones: Veterans After Vietnam* (DMZ)(1976)? What about the other VVAW-affiliated publication, *Free Fire Zone: Short Stories by Vietnam Veterans* (1973)?

JB: Rottmann and Paquet moved the 1st Casualty Press operation to Connecticut and teamed up

with another vet writer, Wayne Karlin, to publish *Free Fire Zone*. I wasn't involved in that project. That was partially because short stories I tried to write unraveled into tangled strands of yarn. Another reason was that I felt burned out from doing WHAM and needed to do something else, which for a while was assisting my wife with theater projects.

We thought we had done something tremendous with WHAM. But we gave no thought to keeping in touch with the contributors, doing anything further. Then, after a couple years, a Vietnam veteran I knew said, "When are you going to do another anthology?" I asked him, "Why would I want to do another anthology?" He said, "Because some of us have poems we'd like to publish!" I had a conversation with Ehrhart and he said, yeah we can do that.

One of the huge differences that you see looking through DMZ is that it's all about PTSD, without the terminology. All the issues are described in graphic detail—including in the artwork—without the terminology officially existing. We didn't have a theme other than "the war is winding down, but it's not going to go away."

DMZ didn't get nearly as much attention as WHAM. By 1976, the country wanted to forget about the war. That's why I still have so many copies [laughs]. I think we only printed around 2,000.

KB: Regarding DMZ's structure, you didn't take a narrative approach, as you did with WHAM?

JB: No. The combination of the book's elements actually "found" the theme for us. Putting it together was a matter of pacing.

KB: Both WHAM and DMZ have been influential to a lot of folks in today's veteran arts community. Do you have any anecdotes that illustrate the inter-generational connection?

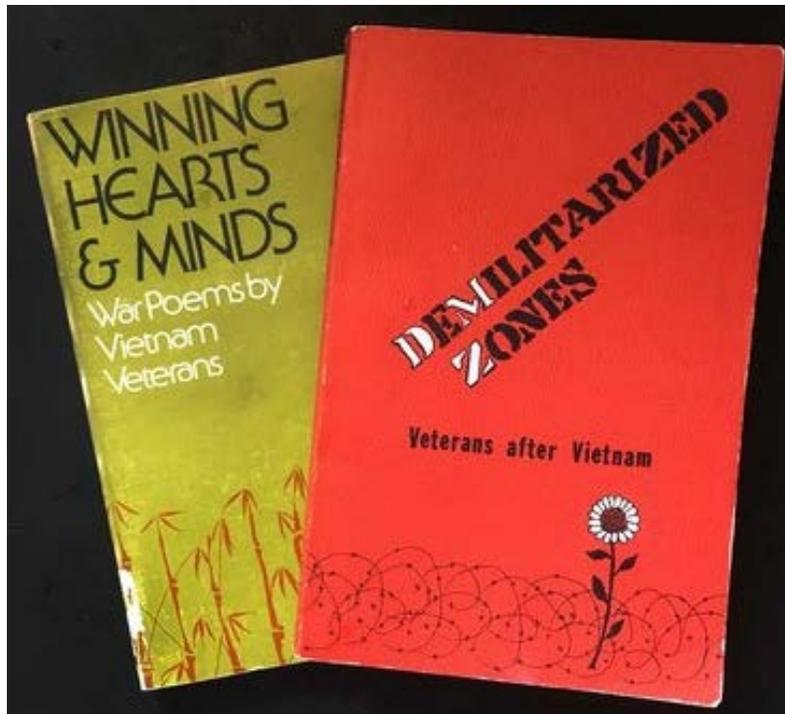
JB: In the summer of 2007, VVAW had a 40th Anniversary celebration in Chicago. I went there with

some copies of DMZ and set up a display table. There was a guy sitting next to me, at another table, with a thin book—the first Warrior Writers collection. It was [artist and Iraq Veterans Against the War organizer] Aaron Hughes. I said, "Would you like to trade?" He said, "Yeah!" When he saw the combination of poetry and artwork, he said, "That's what we've got to do."

KB: Very interesting. That's been the format for all subsequent Warrior Writers anthologies. How else have the books been influential?

JB: I know they've been used in a lot of college courses. Once in a while, something pops up on Facebook saying, "I've been teaching for umpteen years using this book."

Dave Connolly, one of the guys who helped put together the William Joiner Center at the University of Massachusetts in the 80s, told me a story. Dave was a student there, and he and some other students were ticked off at what was being taught in the classrooms. He asked a professor, "Why don't you teach what we want to learn?" And he forced the issue for a course that would address what they were interested in. That was the seed for what became the William Joiner [Institute for the Study of War and Social Consequences]. Dave had been writing poetry and interacting with Bill Ehrhart and me. So as soon as the Joiner Center got off the ground, Bill and I were invited to come and participate. Bill was even given an assignment that kept him on campus for a semester.



While planning the 40th anniversary event [celebrating the publication of WHAM] at the Puffin Cultural Forum here in Teaneck, I received several emails that I excerpted and put into the program-book. Dayl Wise, who started Post Traumatic Press, described walking down the street in Brooklyn and seeing a strange green book [WHAM] sitting on top of some trash. He wrote a poem about it. I received another email that said, "I discovered WHAM in Rochester, Minnesota in 1973. Wow! The book gave me permission as a Vietnam veteran to write about my own experience." And that's the theme I've heard over and over again for years.

Kevin Basl is a writer, musician and activist based in Ithaca, NY. He served in the Army as a mobile radar operator from 2003 to 2008, twice deploying to Iraq. He holds an MFA in fiction from Temple University, where he has taught writing. Currently, he facilitates art and writing workshops for veterans, with Warrior Writers and Combat Paper. He is co-editor of *Warrior Writers: An Anthology of Veteran Writing and Artwork*. For more, visit www.kevinbasl.com

For more information about **Jan Barry**, visit <http://www.janbarry.net/>