HISTORY AND THE TRUE WAR STORY:
READING FOR MORAL INJURY IN VIETNAM VETERAN LITERATURES

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This effort is dedicated to the counselors, social workers, therapists, and mental health nurses at work for our Veteran’s Administration. Thank you for listening.
The insights of one hour are blotted out by the events of the next, and few of us can hold on to our real selves long enough to discover the momentous truths about ourselves and this whirling earth to which we cling. This is especially true of men at war. The great god Mars tries to blind us when we enter his realm, and when we leave he gives us a generous cup of the waters of Lethe to drink.

—J. Glenn Gray, *The Warriors, Reflections on Men in Battle*
ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

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by

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Settled on a low plateau between two rivers, Hà Nội is a city of lakes, the largest of which are surrounded by tranquil parks. The landscape is dotted, too, with myriad nondescript ponds. One of these, Hồ Hữu Tiếp—B-52 Lake—is nestled in a quiet neighborhood. Remnants of a fuselage rise from its opaque green surface. This strangely square pond was born of American bombing, which pummeled North Vietnam with hundreds of thousands of tons of explosives. In 1972, a B-52 bomber was shot down and crashed into this city block. People hauled the rubble away and stripped much of the aircraft. Eventually, rain filled the crater. A tidy wrought-iron fence now discourages further scavenging. Wildflowers encircle its banks.

When cognizant of their origin, we can immediately recognize the ubiquitous lakes of Hà Nội as battle scars, analogous to the holes that trauma often leaves in human memory and, consequently, in our histories. This thesis investigates a particular absence of evidence regarding the Vietnam War, which has been lost or is inaccessible because the material is too emotionally, politically, or morally volatile to approach in the direct, nonfictional forms that history traditionally accepts as valid documentation.

I shall argue that the historian able to recognize trauma in veteran fictions will uncover valuable historical information there. Borrowing the concept of moral injury from psychology and trauma narrative from literary scholarship, I will demonstrate how these interdisciplinary interpretive strategies enable us to incorporate eyewitness accounts of war in more substantive, meaningful ways. The introduction provides theoretical framing and historical background to the post-traumatic stress diagnosis and moral injury. I then locate signs of trauma and moral injury in three noted fictions by Vietnam War veterans. Chapter one introduces trauma narrative through Tim O’Brien’s “How to Tell A True War Story”. In Chapter two, North Vietnamese Army veteran Bảo Nihn’s novel, The Sorrow of War, shows that fiction can simultaneously mask and express political and moral dissent. Chapter three considers the betrayal and disenfranchisement aspects of moral injury through Gus Hasford’s novel, The Phantom Blooper. A brief conclusion ends the thesis.
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INTRODUCTION

I say in my John Wayne voice, ‘Vietnam is giving war a bad name.’

—Gustav Hasford, The Short Timers

Novelist and Vietnam War veteran Tim O’Brien’s “How to Tell a True War Story,” begins with the brief but potent promise that, “This is true.” As the title suggests, this piece considers the nature of narrative exchange. To tell is to communicate one’s experience to others. O’Brien addresses listener and speaker simultaneously: he urges the listener to recognize and value abstract experiential data as well as fact, and encourages his fellow combat veterans to tell us the ugly, uncomfortable truth about war. The word tell has an important dual meaning, however. It also means to distinguish, to recognize by distinct features. In this sense, “How to Tell a True War Story,” is a trauma-narrative manual. Although just fifteen pages long and buried in the center of the slim novel, The Things They Carried, it is a definitive essay, an invaluable reflection on how historical truth is complicated by the combat experience.

Like the events they describe, war stories are often chaotic, confused, grotesque, and even amoral. Therefore, O’Brien suggests, when we accept the veteran’s promise that “This true,” we must also examine our own assumptionss about truth. Further, he asks, are we able and willing to listen to stories that are painful for the veteran to recount and for us to

hearth? We can tell that a war story is true by its specific narrative traits and by the powerful emotions it elicits.

Historian Hayden White argues that below the surface of any historical text is another, latent structural content. The historian necessarily organizes events into a chronicle and processes this material to form a coherent story according to this deeper purpose, using a limited number of possible plots. Each of these “emplotments”—romance, comedy, tragedy, and satire—express a given ideology and impart specific meaning to the narrative. An individual’s metahistorical purpose determines what sort of narrative he or she will craft of any given history and guides which facts are chosen, in what combination. All of our histories, therefore, both come from and reach particular and, ultimately, political conclusions.3

This thesis uses the term “political” not to mean competing points of view classified as “conservative” or “liberal,” but to suggest the entire political and social community of the state, as in the polis of classical Greek civilization. It explores how combat-veteran writers of the Vietnam War viewed the relationship between the state and its citizens, and between themselves as soldiers and as citizens. Like ancient political thinkers, the soldier-authors of this study address issues of freedom and coercion, critique their state and civilization, consider human nature, ponder the nature of law and the obligation to obey or defy unjust laws, and question the legitimacy of authority. Novelist Tim O’Brien’s call to his combat comrades to tell their true war stories is “political” in that he is urging them to boldly recount their sacrifice in combat and to assert the rightful position of veteran in the republic.

The ancient Greek polis needed hoplite citizen-soldiers—men recruited not only from the city but also from the outlying areas—to defend its region of influence, the borders of its political control. If a man was to fight for territory distant from his home, to fight on behalf of his neighbor when not threatened directly, he had to conceive of himself as part of this larger, conceptual community. He had to view war as necessary to the security of the polis

and, further, of the polis to his own security. Prior to battle, then, the work of the polity was to foster agreement among the people that war was necessary and then to convert that consensus into military might. “Today,” psychiatrist Jonathan Shay writes of modern America, “because of a conscious policy of both promoting national unity and protecting any single town from being bereaved of a whole generation of this young men, every unit is made of recruits from anywhere in the country.” After a war, the polity must craft a history that reaffirms that it was indeed necessary and that, in hindsight, the benefits outweigh the costs, because without this the people will be difficult to rally in to defense of the polis again.

This makes history a poetic project in the etymological sense, a type of poiesis. The line that Aristotle drew so famously between poetry and history—that poetry speaks of the universal and history exclusively of the particular—is not so clear at all. Historical conclusions attempt to lay claim to truth and in so doing they generate debate that is not strictly about the specific, singular facts of an event. So long as it is concerned with truth, historic narrative cannot speak only of the particular, cannot avoid a measure of universalism. Was the war necessary? Did the benefits to the polis outweigh the costs? Are questions about truth and the meaning of history, and their answers are determined by the metahistory of the person crafting the historic narrative: the history-teller.

According to White, this used to be understood. Prior to the nineteenth century, history was a branch of rhetoric, inclusive of all variety of subjective and relative perspectives. Historic events were not assumed to have intrinsic logic or to make any more sense than “wit and rhetorical talent could impose. . .” In order to be considered a valid discipline of study, however, history itself had to be “disciplined.” Historians set limits on what was to constitute a historical event and defined a narrative aesthetic for the proper definition of, and attitude toward, objects of the study. They attempted to apply a standard

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for pure objectivity which, in White’s view, is far better suited to the physical sciences.\textsuperscript{6} Thus the first, most significant political stand that a historian must take is required by the discipline itself: before all else he or she must again “reaffirm the Aristotelian distinction between history and poetry.” The historian’s primary task is to affirm that the ‘stories’ she is citing are emotionally neutral, intellectually objective, and are found in the evidence rather than invented.\textsuperscript{7}

The field of history, therefore, struggles conscientiously against something that White says cannot be avoided: the problem of presentism—that is, introducing present-day ideas and ideals anachronistically into the interpretation of the past. The difficulty is that metahistorical factors are more than mere logical fallacies; they are intrinsic to the intellectual process of historical analysis itself. There is no pristine historic data, no way to see the past but by the light of subsequent events and discoveries, and according to contemporary understanding. If this is the case, there is no single, purely objective reality to ferret out and no single historical narrative to depict it perfectly. History, then, cannot be neatly separated from rhetorical art. This is doubly so because so much historic data is made up of human memories. Memory, “whether real or only felt to be so,” cannot be deprived of its emotional charge.\textsuperscript{8} Emotionally charged data cannot be purely objective. Therefore, the notion of objectivity in historical study, if it includes human memory, is necessarily “quite different from anything that might be meant by that term in the physical sciences.”\textsuperscript{9}

While White refuses the label postmodern to describe his own thinking about history, he is certainly an important contributor to the great intellectual shift during the late 1960s and early 1970s from an essentially Aristotelian model of history to post-modern, poetic one.\textsuperscript{10}

\textsuperscript{6} White, “The Politics of Historical Interpretation,” 127.
\textsuperscript{7} White, 122.
\textsuperscript{8} Ibid., 135.
\textsuperscript{9} Ibid., 123.
\textsuperscript{10} In Metahistory White explains that his analysis is not truly post-modern because it is more narrowly concerned with the nature and meaning of narrative, not with the limitations of objectivity inherent in all representations of lived experience.
Combat veteran and poet Lucas Carpenter argues that the Vietnam War the single most important factor in this shift—particularly in the development of literary postmodernism—because the war contributed so significantly to the “dissent, disillusionment, and radical skepticism” which shaped both the literature of that time and postmodern theory itself.\(^{11}\)

Televised violence, political tumult, moral ambiguity, drug counter-culture, conflicting discourses about “truth,” and fear of nuclear annihilation required innovative thinking and experimental literatures. Carpenter writes:

> Prior to Vietnam there was always the historiographical assumption that there was a larger event…called a ‘war’ that somehow contained all of the individual experiences. . . For postmodernism there is no longer an all-encompassing category; there is only the unique perspective of subjective experience, multiplied by hundreds of thousands… of simulacra rendered in an eternal now.\(^{12}\)

Our criteria for truth in memory is additionally complicated by psychological and neurological research since the Vietnam War, which indicates that perception is substantively altered by both the physiological and emotional trauma of combat itself. Studies in cognitive neuroscience, for example, show mounting evidence that the better a person’s capacity for memory, the more susceptible he might be to post-traumatic stress. There is evidence too, that emotional arousal improves certain aspects of memory, particularly recall of emotion, smells, tastes, bodily sensations, and the passage of time.\(^{13}\) If a traumatic experience becomes the landmark event in a person’s larger life narrative, this may make memories of these events overly accessible, causing a high degree of intrusive thoughts and flashbacks, making the eyewitness’s chronological order of traumatic events particularly unreliable.\(^{14}\)


\(^{12}\) Carpenter, “It Don’t Mean Nothin’,” 35.


The American Psychiatric Association’s *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*’ criterion for the traumatic event is one in which a person experiences, witnesses, or is confronted with actual or threatened death or serious injury, causing intense fear, helplessness, or horror. Post-traumatic stress, then, is an emotional and physiological response that persists or reoccurs after the traumatic event is over. Psychiatrist Judith Lewis Herman is among the foundational figures in the development of the Post-traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) diagnosis and therapeutic techniques for treating it. In *Trauma and Recovery*, she explains that since the Vietnam War, political action and advocacy have been inherent to both the study and treatment of post-traumatic stress and credits combat veterans themselves for catalyzing the development of diagnostic tools and treatments for PTSD. During the First World War, men were said to suffer from “shell shock” or “soldier’s heart.” Through the Second World War these same symptoms were known as “combat fatigue” or “combat neurosis.” No large-scale investigation of the long-term psychological effects of combat was undertaken, however, until after the Vietnam War, and the push for research came not from the military or medical establishment, but from the “organized efforts of soldiers disaffected from war.”

Beginning in 1970, the newly formed “Vietnam Veterans Against the War” met with psychiatrists Robert Jay Lifton and Chaim Shatan. The veterans asked the doctors to provide counseling for discussion groups that they had organized, called “rap groups.” These were gatherings of combat veterans who retold and relived traumatic experiences of the war together, and they continued to meet throughout the decade. In partnership with psychiatrists, psychologists, social workers, and other veteran’s organizations, the Vietnam Veterans Against the War did much to raise public awareness about the psychological toll of combat. Their collective efforts finally instigated the first comprehensive studies to trace the impact of wartime experiences on the lives of veterans. These tests demonstrated a direct

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relationship between combat exposure and an array of troubling and virulent psychological problems.

A decade of advocacy and research culminated in a formal definition of the syndrome of post-traumatic stress disorder in 1980 and its inclusion in the American Psychiatric Association’s *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (The *DSM*). Additionally, the DSM categorized the psychological problems associated with PTSD into three general symptom “clusters:” hyperarousal, constriction, and intrusion.

- Hyperarousal describes a state of extreme vigilance.
- Intrusion refers to intrusive memories such as flashbacks and nightmares.
- Constriction is emotional numbness.

These three main symptom-clusters interact chaotically with one another to create the unpredictable emotions and behaviors that characterize post-traumatic stress. This unevenly oscillating cycle is the “dialectic of trauma,” an essential psychological conflict between the desire to deny horrible events and the need to proclaim them aloud.17

Psychiatrist Jonathan Shay worked with combat veterans at the Boston Department of Veterans Affairs Outpatient Clinic for twenty years. He has long lobbied against the phrase “post-traumatic stress disorder,” preferring “post-traumatic stress injury,” because psychological damage from combat is a form of injury, not a disease, disorder, illness, or malady. He suggests dropping the “D” and introduces “moral injury,” not to replace post-traumatic stress as a diagnosis, but to help elucidate it. Put simply, moral injury is a specific type of damage to the conscience. It is a profound shame and anger that a person suffers when, while in mortal danger, they witness or perpetrate acts that both transgress a culturally defined moral code and violates the proper use of authority. It is a distinct — albeit co-morbid — syndrome from post-traumatic stress, a deep sense of betrayal by those in power which causes serious psychological injury, leads to long-term personality changes, and obstructs treatment.

17 Herman, *Trauma and Recovery*, 37.
Shay clarifies these points in *Achilles in Vietnam: Combat Trauma and the Undoing of Character* and *Odysseus In America: Combat Trauma and the Trials of Homecoming*. These books explain the nature and causes of psychological damage in combat by establishing parallels and considering contrasts between the experiences of American soldiers in Vietnam and those depicted in Homer’s *Iliad* and *Odyssey*. The primary source of psychological dysfunction for ancient Greek veterans of the Trojan Wars was moral injury. The same is true, he argues, for modern Americans who suffer from post-traumatic stress. Shay does not introduce modern American ideals into the interpretation of the Greek past, however, nor does he argue that any specific, universal sensibility is violated in all wars. The circumstances that were traumatic to Achilles were not the same events that traumatized young soldier Tim O’Brien in Việt Nam because cultures esteem and denigrate different things. The sort of experience and the degree to which it will be injurious depend upon the place and time in which one fights.\(^\text{18}\) In this sense, the notion of moral injury can help address the fallacy of historical presentism—the anachronistic introduction of present-day ideas and perspectives into depictions or interpretations of the past—by enabling us to compare and contrast specific traits in combat narrative while taking into account varied and changing cultural definitions and moral standards in war.

While allowing for variety in mores, Shay quietly asserts that violence itself is necessarily destructive to civility, that war transgresses human codes of decency no matter what those codes might be. His very limited definition of moral injury—in which a person or entity who holds legitimate authority violates said moral code—is not strictly clinical. It is also pragmatic. Shay is an advocate as well as clinician. He argues tirelessly that much of the psychological suffering of soldiers and Marines in the Vietnam War was due to poor military policies and leadership malpractice. In sum, the modern military apparatus violated soldiers’ trust during the Vietnam War.

While this is certainly a bleak assessment, it means that we have the ability to improve things for the future. The central aim of *Achilles in Vietnam*, then, is not merely to make the modern veteran feel good by placing him in the noble company of ancient warriors. Shay’s analogies and recommendations — for example unit rotations rather than individual tours—are meant to lessen the psychological damage to future combat veterans through policy improvements informed by the painful experiences of Vietnam.19 “Just as the flak jacket has prevented many physical injuries,” Shay tells us, “we can prevent many psychological injuries.”

To demonstrate how this might be done, Shay employs Classical history and the best-known, foundational fictions of the Western world. The ancient Athenians, he says, used plays that dealt with issues of grief, loss, and anger to communalize the veterans’ experiences and rebuild “the social and cognitive capacities required for democratic participation” which had been lost in combat.20 Tragic theater served to reincorporate traumatized veterans back into the democratic process, restoring them to civil society and to civility. He cites the collective mourning described in the final books of Homer’s *Iliad*— when Achilles at last returns Hector’s body to the Trojans and allows them a reprieve from battle to grieve their hero properly—as an example of this sort of communalization.21 Much as Aristotle made tragedy “the centerpiece of education for citizens in a democracy,” Shay urges American citizens and our polity to participate in veteran healing, to work to understand the conditions that create psychological injuries in war and support measures to prevent them.

One major obstacle to this is simply the human repulsion for ugliness and discomfort at injustice. War stories remind us of the fragility of human morality as well as our bodies. Shay calls this the “law of forgetting and denial.” “If forced to hear them,” he says, “normal people often deny that war stories are true. If forced to accept them as true, they often forget

them.” Because our definitions of right and wrong are socially defined, hearing and empathizing with a person who has suffered a moral injury presents a challenge to the rightness of the social order as a whole. In order to hear the veteran’s story, the listener must make a conscious decision and effort to consider a truth that may call the integrity of the great polis, modern society, into question. For this reason, Shay says, “trauma work can never be apolitical; trauma testimony refuses the affectively neutral position.”22 Alluding to philosopher Martha Nussbaum’s famous work, he writes, “To hear and believe is to feel unsafe…It is to know the fragility of goodness.”23

Other experts in the field, such as retired U.S. Navy Medical Corps Captain William P. Nash, M.D., are now promoting an alternative, far looser definition of moral injury and explaining its relationship to combat stress differently. Nash has thirty years of active military service and psychiatric practice with combat veterans. He was stationed with the Marine Corps from 2000-2008, including a deployment to Iraq in 2004 with the 1st Marine Division as a psychiatrist embedded with ground combat forces. From October 2005 to May 2008, Nash was stationed at Headquarters, Marine Corps, in Quantico, Virginia, where he directed combat/operational stress control policies and programs for the United States Marine Corps. Currently Assistant Clinical Professor of Psychiatry at the University of California, San Diego, Nash is among those redefining the morally injurious event as any that “transgresses deeply held moral beliefs and expectations.”24 The primary precondition for moral injury under Nash’s expanded definition is that expectations for moral behavior are shattered in a life-and-death situation. A moral betrayal in combat then, can be committed not by an external source of authority, by one’s self, against his own ethical standard. Much

23 Ibid., 193.

Shay is alluding to Philosopher Martha Nussbaum’s 1986 book, The Fragility of Goodness: Luck and Ethics in Greek Tragedy and Philosophy.

of Nash’s therapeutic work is focused on helping patients to accept their own—often recent—past actions because it is designed for quick interventions, for combat troops who may be returning to combat soon.25

In 2007 Nash co-edited *Combat Stress Injury- theory, research, and management*. In the generally complimentary forward that Shay supplies for the book, he takes care to recognize and praise specific points and chapters. But, Shay quips, “…because he (Nash) is a nicer person than I am, he sees our collective cup of…knowledge…as half full, rather than half empty, as I do.”26 Nash may have another significant reason to be optimistic about the military’s ability to manage post-traumatic stress. By removing Shay’s criteria that a legitimate authority commit the morally injurious act, Nash and others significantly downplay the role of hierarchy, policy, and power structure in causing post-traumatic stress. Shay’s definition of moral injury is an inherently critical tool, which can be used for policy change.

Military psychologists and psychiatrists, conversely, are bound in varying degree by the high value that military culture places on loyalty. Ultimately, they must adhere to military policy. Perhaps it is simply not possible for mental health practitioners within the military to advocate for policy change in the very public and uncompromising way that Shay can, as an outsider.27 Speaking about the general reluctance within the military services to discuss moral injury, clinical psychologist and professor Brett Litz says, “I’m very respectful of how difficult it is for them to embrace,” says Litz, “After all, Service members have to follow orders, and if ordered to do something it is, by definition, legal and moral.”28


Sociologist Jonathan F. Lewis offers six reasons that evidence of an historic event may be absent: the event does not occur, evidence does not survive or is lost, the researcher fails to notice or does not criticize it accurately, or the researcher does not employ the evidence in the final historic project. ²⁹ The liabilities of traumatic memory, the notion of objectivity in history, the comparative recency of trauma studies, the frank unpleasantness of war stories, and military culture itself, all pose obvious difficulties for the historian who is working to assimilate eyewitness testimony into the historical analysis of traumatic events.

English and Judaic Studies professor James E. Young cautions against rejecting these accounts as inaccurate, however, or regarding them as too “overly laden with pathos”³⁰ to serve as documentary evidence. Chair of a Berlin commission for a national Holocaust Memorial to European Jews, Young is troubled by the “near-blanket exclusion of the survivor’s memory from normative histories of the Holocaust.”³¹ Young laments that history has been “altogether intolerant of the tricks memory plays on survivors as they recall events.” It is a loss to history, he says, that all but the most accurate and historically verifiable accounts are discarded as “so much archival chaff.”³²

By leading witnesses away from historically inaccurate statements and devaluing subjective or flawed testimony, he argues, historians miss the vital role of contemporaneous perception in shaping events. Accepting that a degree of hindsight logic is inherent to history—that we cannot forget what we already know when we interpret the past—Young reminds us that the contemporaneous eyewitness is indeed blind to contingent events: that each person responds not to a single, unanimous and knowable happening but to his or her individual perception at that time. By taking into account the “apprehension and


³¹ Young, “Between History and Memory,” 276.

³² Ibid., 282.
misapprehension of events,” and the participants’ interpretations of experience, we can both understand more deeply why and how people responded to unfolding events and restore a “measure of contingency to history as it unfolds.”\(^\text{33}\) This opens up the possibility for new interpretations of historical causes and effects that would otherwise be lost.

Young suggests an eyewitness-centered history in which the empirical value of mistaken testimony is not that it reveals what happened, but what was understood—what novelist and Vietnam War veteran Tim O’Brien calls the “seeming truth.” After all, it is what we understand of events, not the events themselves, which determine our subsequent actions; it is our understanding of events which determine both the course and record of history. Further, Young explains, because the survivor’s account includes both the experience of history and of memory, his or her story is “necessarily organized retrospectively.” Thus, all aspects of the narrative—how it is organized, its combined insights, contradictions, and shortcomings—offer insight into how the person has understood the event in the intervening time since witnessing it. Metahistorical frameworks guide eyewitness first, the scholar second. Confused as it may be, the survivor’s narrative represents a history of memory itself.

In journalist Fox Butterfield’s view, it speaks well of any history on the Vietnam War that it be difficult and tumultuous, as this reflects the political and cultural realities of that time. A New York Times correspondent in Vietnam between 1971 and 1973, Butterfield was awarded the Pulitzer Prize as a member of the Times team that published the Pentagon Papers in 1971 and covered the 1975 fall of Sài Gòn. In 1983, Butterfield published an important historiographical essay titled, “The New Vietnam Scholarship,” in which he argued that the opposite of Occam’s razor best describes the case of the Vietnam War. Due to the complexity of the history and interrelated political and cultural factors, if an explanation of the Vietnam War is easy to understand, if right and wrong seem clearly elucidated, then the analysis is probably not sound.

President Ronald Reagan defined the illusive “lesson of Vietnam” this way:

\(\text{33} \text{Ibid., } 278.\)
If we are forced to fight, we must have the means and the determination to prevail or we will not have what it takes to secure the peace. And while we are at it, let us tell those who fought in that war [Vietnam] that we will never again ask young men to fight and possibly die in a war our government is afraid to let them win.\textsuperscript{34} This is just the sort of neatly overarching lesson that Butterfield cautions against. After all, the misapplication of both the methods and lessons of the Second World War—the overarching rule to never again appease aggression—played a large part in United States involvement in Southeast Asia in the first place. If there is a political and military lesson to learn from Vietnam, it is too impossibly complex and specific to reiterate. As State Department and White House East Asia specialist during the 1960s, James C. Thomson, Jr. once quipped, the central lesson of Vietnam was that the United States should “never again take on the job of trying to defeat a nationalist anti-colonial movement under indigenous Communist control in former French Indochina.”\textsuperscript{35} Although Thomson’s comment was sardonic, Butterfield says this it is exemplary of the best analyses of the Vietnam War.

Historian George Herring agrees that the effort to learn from the war “has misled as much as it has enlightened.” He, too, returns to Thomson’s witticism whenever pressed to expound upon the lessons of Vietnam. Herring describes young men who returned from the war after the tumultuous year of 1968 as having “come back to a country that wanted not to hear of the war, [that was] disillusioned with it.” While he works to maintain the “detachment of a historian,” he finds this particularly difficult after intense periods of exposure to veterans.\textsuperscript{36} He recalls a time when he had been reading some of the “huge proliferation” of “very distinguished literature” written by veterans. He read novels by Tim O’Brien, Philip Caputo, and Jim Webb, to name but a few, and recalls finally having to put one of these novels down, “saying, ‘it’s very hard to keep on reading this.’ It’s so

\textsuperscript{34} Ronald Reagan, “Peace: Restoring the margin of safety”, speech at the VFW Convention, Chicago, August 18, 1980.


emotional,” Herring says, “and so tragic in so many ways, and so depressing, to put in one word.” An insightful and nuanced scholar, Herring has nevertheless encountered the challenges that war stories pose; even the finest historians must contend with the law of forgetting and denying.

When Shay first began to note the relationship between Homer’s *Iliad* and the testimonies he had heard from Vietnam War veterans, he was encouraged to continue in this line by one of the world’s leading scholars of classical literature, Gregory Nagy. Nagy assured Shay that scholars and critics of *The Iliad* would benefit from these parallels; academics would be better able to interpret this great work of literary art if they listened to the modern combat soldier. This thesis is built upon the idea that knowledge can “flow in the opposite direction,” as Nagy put it to Shay. The historian can benefit from what scholars in psychology and literary studies have learned thus far, particularly in the interpretation and synthesis of personal accounts of traumatic events. The cross-disciplinary application of psychological and literary concepts represents a point of entry for historians in learning how to recognize disturbed memory through disturbances in narrative. Fluency in the language of trauma—shifting, often confusing and even contradictory—necessarily represents a departure from the “accuracy-inaccuracy” dualism that is inherent in historical fact-finding.

Chapter One will discuss the nature of trauma narrative and the relationship between psychological practice and literary theory through soldier-author Tim O’Brien’s piece, “How to Tell a True War Story.” Chapter Two will focus on North Vietnamese Army veteran Bảo Ninh’s *The Sorrow of War*, a politically-volatile alternative portrayal of North Vietnam’s “liberation” of Sài Gòn. Chapter Three will consider Marine Corps combat correspondent Gustav Hasford’s novel *The Phantom Blooper*. This surreal story centers around the evacuation of the Marine base at Khe Sanh following the bitter and deadly months-long siege.

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37 “Herring Interview,” 296.

38 Shay, *Achilles*, xiii.

in which American 274 Marines an estimated 2,541 North Vietnamese were killed. Through Hasford’s novel we will explore betrayal, self-betrayal, and political disenfranchisement as aspects of post-traumatic stress.

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Figures do not include USAF personnel or American killed in other concurrent battles in the region, including Operation Scotland I and II. Also does not include and South Vietnamese (ARVN) soldiers killed during the siege or in those concurrent battles. Estimate of NVA troops killed between siege dates of January 20 through July 20, 1968.
CHAPTER 1
WHY TELL A TRUE WAR STORY?

Is it true? The answer matters. You’d feel cheated if it never happened. Without the grounding reality, it’s just a trite bit of puffery, pure Hollywood, untrue in the way all such stories are untrue. Yet even if it did happen—and maybe it did, anything’s possible—even then you know it can’t be true, because a true war story does not depend upon that kind of truth. Absolute occurrence is irrelevant.\(^{41}\)

—Tim O’Brien, *The Things They Carried.*

On 16 March 1968, U.S. army soldiers of Charlie Company entered a hamlet in Quảng Ngãi province known as Mỹ Lai 4. Although encountering no resistance, Lieutenant William Calley gave the order to fire on civilians.\(^{42}\) To the horror of Army helicopter pilot Hugh Thompson, Jr., who famously landed his helicopter between the advancing ground unit and a group of villagers that day, Calley’s men killed hundreds of unarmed people—most of the women, children, and old men. As Thompson and others later testified, some villagers were herded into ditches and shot in mass. Soldiers raped women, burned buildings, poisoned wells, and killed livestock.\(^{43}\)

Several soldiers involved were later interviewed in the brigade’s initial investigation of the Mỹ Lai operation. They falsely reported that only twenty civilians had been inadvertently killed. In the following months, however, the army received several

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\(^{41}\) O’Brien, *The Things They Carried*, 83.


complaints from American soldiers that they had seen other Americans, too, be routinely brutal toward Vietnamese civilians in Quảng Ngãi Province. Soldier Ronald Ridenhour heard stories about the particular incident in Mỹ Lai 4, Quảng Ngãi Province, from members of Lt. Calley’s company beginning in April of 1968. Over the course of a year he became convinced that the stories were true and, three months before being discharged sent a letter to thirty members of Congress imploring them to investigate. Although most recipients ignored the letter, Congressman Morris King “Mo” Udall urged a Pentagon investigation.

Lt. Calley was finally charged with several counts of premeditated murder in September 1969; twenty-five other officers and enlisted men were later charged with related crimes. Another two months passed, however, before the American public learned about the massacre. After extensive conversations with Calley, independent investigative journalist Seymour Hersh broke the story in November of 1969, for which he received the 1970 Pulitzer Prize for International Reporting.

Only after the massacre became public did General Westmoreland appoint General William R. Peers to conduct a full investigation. Published in March of 1970, the final Peers Commission Report was critical of Charlie Company and top officers in the subsequent year-long cover up. Helicopter pilot Hugh Thompson and his crew, according to the report, were alone in attempting to stop the massacre. In all, the Peers Commission recommended the court-martial of thirty-four men. Lieutenant Calley was found guilty of the premeditated murder of twenty-two civilians, but his sentence of life imprisonment was met with nationwide protest. The “Free Calley” movement painted him as the government’s scapegoat. Protests were held in Washington D.C. on his behalf. A blatantly jingoistic song titled, “The Battle Hymn of Lt. Calley” sold 200,000 copies, and in Florida flags were lowered to half-mast upon his conviction.

Under mounting public pressure, President Richard Nixon intervened on April 1, 1971. He ordered Lieutenant Calley’s release from the Army stockade, substituting house

arrest. Calley’s sentence was reduced repeatedly. When paroled in November 1974, he had served just four months. Mý Lai became a shocking symbol to many of an unjust war. Other Americans, however, considered the killings little more than an unfortunate episode in the pursuit of the enemy. War is war.

Novelist Tim O’Brien served in the Army, primarily in Quâng Ngâi province from 1968 to 1970. He recalls that American soldiers referred to the area around Mý Lai as Pinkville because of the “shimmering shade of elephant pink” that it was colored on military maps to indicate a developed, semi-populous area. Pinkville, O’Brien tells us, was a particularly “feared and special place on the earth.” Hostility was palpable in the atmosphere. But like the other young soldiers in his unit, he did not know initially why it such a brutal place. He knew little of Vietnam and nothing of Quâng Ngâi province: that it had traditionally been an independent region. Hardened by poverty and rural isolation, it was home to some of Vietnam’s fiercest, most recalcitrant and zealous revolutionary movements. The people had been openly resistant to French colonialism as far back as the nineteenth century and were among the first to rebel against France in the 1930s. Most importantly, O’Brien and his unit were not aware of the slaughter that had taken place one year previous in the small hamlet of Mý Lai 4. “The news about that only came out later,” he recalls, “while we were there, and then we knew.”

O’Brien wrote during his tour of duty in Pinkville and published articles from the combat zone in Playboy Magazine. These segments later formed the basis for his first book,

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On August 20, 2009, Calley publicly apologized for his actions in a speech to the Kiwanis Club of Columbus, Ohio.


If I Die in a Combat Zone, Box Me Up and Ship Me Home, published in 1973. A non-fiction memoir, it is a series of loosely chronological vignettes about war in the hamlets surrounding Mỹ Lai, and the cover-up, discovery, and investigation of the massacre. Drawing a parallel to events at Mỹ Lai, he writes of one battle fought in Quảng Ngãi province:

Scraps of our friends were dropped in plastic body bags. Jet fighters were called in. The hamlet was leveled, and napalm was used. I heard screams in the burning black rubble...There were Việt Công in that hamlet. And there were babies and children and people who just didn’t give a damn, too.  

Like Ronald Ridenhour and other young soldiers who were disturbed enough by the violence they witnessed to file formal complaints, O’Brien describes excessive force as pervasive in the area. “Wreckage was the rule,” he writes. “Brutality was S. O. P.” Fellow Vietnam veteran and novelist Larry Heinemann recalls that, “After news of (the) Mỹ Lai massacre hit the streets, it was Whoa. They asked, ‘this happen a lot?’ And I said that the spirit of atrocity was in the very air.”

In the final chapters of If I Die in a Combat Zone O’Brien addresses the impossible moral conundrum of Mỹ Lai through an Army officer named Major Callicles. Major Callicles is put in charge of the investigation more than a year after the fact and is vexed by it. “GI Joe,” Major Callicles says—like the American people—has “turned into a pansy.” In ceaseless rants he blames the press and the anti-war movement for the scandal. In his view, war is simply war. And yet, the massacre troubles him. He looks increasingly haggard, drinks more, sleeps less. Despite the similarity in their names, it is unlikely that the major is named after William Calley, since O’Brien writes about the lieutenant directly in the book.

50 Tim O’Brien, If I Die in a Combat Zone; Box Me up and Ship me Home. (New York: Delacorte Press, 1973), 120.
51 O’Brien, “The Vietnam in Me.”


SOP is an acronym for Standing Operating Procedures: military SOP refers to a unit’s unique procedures; “Standard” could imply that there is one (standard) procedure to be used across all units. In cognitive restructuring therapies PTSD sufferers use writing to restructure both the past event itself and their response to it.
Because he opens this chapter with lines from Plato’s *The Republic*, it is likely that the name refers instead to the ancient Greek political thinker Callicles. O’Brien uses this character in a manner similar Plato’s use of Callicles: as a vehicle through which to debate morality and justice, and consider the nature of truth and rhetoric. These issues came to form the central, unifying themes of O’Brien’s entire body of literary work.

In Plato’s dialog *Gorgias*, the Greek Callicles argues with Socrates. Together, they touch upon the central dilemmas that American Callicles considers regarding the Mỹ Lai massacre. Plato’s Callicles argues that law and morality are established by men, not gods. By their very nature men pursue their own interests. It is natural and just that the strong should dominate the weak. When the weak resist oppression and establish laws to limit the natural power of superior men, they practice not true justice, but merely political artifice in the base pursuit of self-preservation. O’Brien’s Major Callicles is a relentless crusader for military discipline, an uncompromising defender of military necessity.

He is not without humanity, however. He ruminates over civilian deaths and debates with O’Brien like the “best defense attorney, simultaneously defending and justifying and denying—all in one broad, contradictory stroke.” He concedes that killing civilians is wrong. But in Pinkville it is impossible to distinguish between the enemy and one’s friends. “When you go into Mỹ Lai you assume the worst,” he says, “that they’re all VC.” The problem at Mỹ Lai, Major Callicles feels, is that “some pipsqueak squeals and everyone runs to make a national scandal. We’re trying to win a war here, and Jesus, what the hell do you think war is?” In an effort to make the press understand, the major take groups of reporters on trips to hamlet Mỹ Lai 4 to give them “a peek of the dank, evil-looking place.”

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55 Ibid., 193.
56 Ibid., 195.
Major Callicles has never been in combat in the Pinkville area himself, however. One night, drunk and feeling rueful, he calls O’Brien and a handful of other soldiers cowards and orders them to join him on a patrol of a hamlet with a particularly bad reputation. He lies on the ground in the brush for many hours hoping to ambush the enemy, finally declaring that there are no Việt Cộng in the area after all. “Who says Tri Binh 4 is such a bad place,” he yells at the men, “you guys been giving me a line of bullshit?” The major is later admonished by the battalion commander, yet he feels that at least he has finally proven the point: “All it takes is guts—right, O’Brien?” Nevertheless, Callicles knows that a terrible wrong has been committed at Mỹ Lai and that justice cannot be meted out equal to that crime. He has “stuffed the burden of Mỹ Lai into his own soul” and there it festers. When the investigation is complete he appears a pitiful tyrant, drinking to excess and smiling strangely into space.

The most significant aspect of O’Brien’s application of Plato’s Gorgias to the investigation of Mỹ Lai is his enduring conviction that, “When you return from a war you have to assume responsibility.” He encourages his fellow combat veterans to tell true war stories in part because he believes—as Plato’s Socrates often relates—that to be freed from suffering a man must bare himself, make whatever wrongdoings known, and be judged. Of his own participation in the war O’Brien writes:

I was there, I took part in it, I did pull the trigger, and whether I literally killed a man or not is finally irrelevant to me. What matters is I was part of it all, the machine that did it, and do feel a sense of obligation, and through the story I can share some of my feelings…

Upon completing his tour of duty, O’Brien began (but did not complete) a Ph.D. program in Government at Harvard. He wrote for the Washington Post, published his war memoir in 1973 and his first novel, Northern Lights, in 1975. In 1978 he won the National

57 Ibid., 204.
58 Ibid., 192.
Book Award for Going After Cacciato. The Things They Carried, a collection of twenty-one related semi-autobiographical stories also set in Quang Ngai province, was a finalist for the Pulitzer Prize for literature in 1991. It is arguably his masterpiece.

In early meditations from If I Die in a Combat Zone, O’Brien himself seems skeptical of the soldier’s ability to convey his experience. He does not have great confidence in the reliability or value of that testimony.

Do dreams offer lessons? Do nightmares have themes? Do we awaken and analyze them and live our lives accordingly or advise others as a result? Can the foot soldier teach anything important about war, merely for having been there? I think not. He can tell war stories.

In The Things They Carried, by contrast, O’Brien insists on the value of veteran testimony. He wrestles with America’s metahistory of Vietnam and urges his fellow veterans to tell their own true war stories despite the psychological and political obstacles because the nation needs to incorporate veterans’ experience into its history. To do this, we citizen listeners must learn to distinguish the truth of trauma by its narrative traits, and the veteran speaker must communicate it somehow.

The chapter, “How to tell a true war story” is, in this aspect, a trauma narrative tutorial. In it, O’Brien argues that listeners should judge the veracity of a war story by the degree to which it reflects the soldier’s lived experience, not by its strict adherence to chronology or factual accuracy. This assertion parallels many concurrent innovative post-war therapeutic methods, many of which use concepts adopted from literary theory. As veterans and mental health professionals learned to value the combat narrative, so did America’s soldier-authors and literary scholars. O’Brien concurs with the postmodern position that dangerous, violent events defy linear structure and agrees with mounting psychological and neurological evidence that memories of trauma are often confusing and even hallucinatory. Yet he insists that these experiences are not beyond linguistic representation. They simply blur the lines of fact and fiction to such a degree that the distinction itself is irrelevant.

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60 Tim O’Brien, Combat Zone, 23.
Fellow veteran, literary scholar and poet, Lucas Carpenter praises O’Brien as the most accomplished of the Vietnam War novelists and applauds his “bold, leap-of-faith forays into . . . uncharted realms of postmodern war fiction.” Further, Carpenter says, the literary traits we recognize in the work of soldier-authors like O’Brien reflect a larger cultural trend. Because the Vietnam War was so extremely contentious, stories of that time are necessarily fraught with contradiction. As a result there is no all-encompassing story upon which we can all agree, only an infinite array of unique, subjective, and competing perspectives.

This reinforces historian Hayden White’s argument that the historian is an active participant in the construction of history. Even if the historian limits himself to only the most flawless and sterile documentation, he must create a narrative. Thus, there are necessarily at least two versions of any history—that of the historian and that of his source materials—and things only become more complicated from there. Vietnam combat veteran writers purposefully dismantle the boundaries between story and history so that the “truth” can accommodate an unlimited number of highly subjective individual experiences. According to Carpenter, these narratives are invaluable not in spite of, but because of the discrepancies between them. The proliferation of so many varied narratives may call their veracity into question for the historian, but this is unfortunate. The differences themselves reveal the political and moral ambiguity inherent in the Vietnam War. While Carpenter interprets the infinite divergence of literary and historic perspectives as primarily political, O’Brien sees it as a highly individualized psychological phenomenon. After a battle, he says, each soldier will have vastly different stories to tell, and “when a war is ended it is as if there have been a million wars, or as many wars as there were soldiers.”

“Merely allowing ourselves to hear the combat veteran’s story threatens our culturally defined sense of self-respect,” Shay says. This is among several “powerful

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62 Lucas Carpenter, “It Don’t Mean Nothin’”, 46.

motives not to listen to the veteran’s story, or to deny its truth.”\textsuperscript{64} For O’Brien, this listener discomfort is a hallmark of authentic veteran testimony. “You can tell a true war story if it embarrasses you,” he writes. “If you don’t care for obscenity you don’t care for the truth…Send guys to war, they come home talking dirty.”\textsuperscript{65} Fortunately, this too may serve to undermine the veteran’s credibility among civilians.

In \textit{Soldier Talk: The Vietnam War in Oral Narrative}, Paul Budra and Michael Zeitlin point to a deep cultural distrust in the western tradition for soldiers’ stories as “testosterone-addled” exaggerations. The ‘miles gloriosus,’ or ‘braggart soldier,’ for example, has long been a stock comic caricature.

A war front creates its own myths as surely as it requires its own jargon. And young men, caught in daily tests of courage, slip easily into a rhetoric of machismo that masks fear and lauds excess. For this reason, the language of the grunt has found virtually no place in the official records of war. The traditional historian interviews generals and reads reports, but instinctively mistrusts the… accounts of the combatants in the files.”\textsuperscript{66}

Budra and Zeitlin caution the historian not to filter out tall tales because they are, at the very least, a valuable source of knowledge about the soldiers themselves.

In \textit{The Things They Carried}, a character named Rat Kiley is known to exaggerate. If Kiley claims to have “slept with four girls one night,” O’Brien estimates roughly, “it was about a girl and a half.” When listening to his braggadocio one has to perform “rapid calculations…subtracting superlatives, figuring the square root of an absolute and then multiplying by maybe.”\textsuperscript{67} Kiley, however, is crafting a narrative to convey accurately not what happened, but the way he felt that night. Kiley’s stories are “formed by sensation, not the other way around…”\textsuperscript{68} When it comes to his combat memories Kiley may not be lying

\begin{footnotes}
\item[64] Shay, \textit{Achilles in Vietnam}, 37.
\item[65] O’Brien, \textit{The Things They Carried}, 69.
\item[67] O’Brien, \textit{The Things They Carried}, 90.
\item[68] Ibid., 89.
\end{footnotes}
or exaggerating; he simply may not remember the events of combat accurately. He strives instead to describe what he does remember—his felt experience.

O’Brien’s narratives focus on the brutal physical environment of combat, the unique mental states that this environment creates, and how those mental states affect the soldier’s memory. O’Brien calls this the “story-truth,” as opposed to the more familiar “happening-truth.” He writes:

In any war story, but especially a true one, it’s difficult to separate what happened from what seemed to happen. What seems to happen becomes its own happening and has to be told that way. The angles of vision are skewed. . . . When a guy dies. . . you look away and then look back for a moment and then look away again. The pictures get jumbled; you tend to miss a lot. And then afterward, when you go to tell about it, there is always that surreal seemingness, which makes the story seem untrue, but which in fact represents the hard and exact truth as it seemed.69

If O’Brien’s description of the combat experience is indeed representative, then it is easy to imagine that many earnest and honest eyewitness accounts might be relegated to fiction: this passage simply sounds more like a literary description than historical record. O’Brien tells us that to understand combat we must heed the bizarre, the beautiful, and the grotesque. We must value and even seek out the seemingly pointless, sometimes amoral tale because these narratives provide experiential and emotional context to an otherwise sterile chronology of the most chaotic, messiest of human events.

Neuro-psychiatrist and trauma theorist Bessel van der Kolk has researched post-traumatic stress since the 1970s, focusing on the physiological aspects of trauma, cognition and memory through brain-imaging studies of post-traumatic stress patients. In Traumatic Stress: the Effects of Overwhelming Experience on Mind, Body, and Society, he explains the highly subjective nature of Vietnam War stories in neurological terms.70 During a traumatic event the brain makes an extremely accurate record of smells, images, sounds, and other

69 Ibid., 78.

physical sensations because this data is immediately necessary to survival. As a result, combat memory is first processed as neurobiological data: sensations and feelings. These details are etched onto the mind and “remain unaltered by subsequent experience and by the passage of time.” Other perceptions—those typically valued as the important stuff of history such as the order of events—are sublimated during combat, because the soldier is wholly focused on vital physiological data. As a result, the chronology and causality of events may be incomplete or corrupted, as that information was not essential to survival. Van der Kolk argues that the tenacity and accuracy of these physical and emotional memories, in contrast with accompanying liabilities in factual recall, underlies much of post-traumatic stress symptomology.

Van der Kolk describes a period of latency after a traumatic experience in which the witness is not able to communicate what he or she has endured. This is due, he says, to the significant neurological effect that psychological trauma has on the brain. It simply takes time to process the volume of sensate and emotional data taken in during combat. Because it is a largely biological product, memory cannot truly be evoked at will. Narratives about those memories, however, can be evoked at will and manipulated. Veteran testimony about war, therefore, is ultimately symbolic and “adapted to the needs of both the narrator and the listener… according to social demands.”

This is the sort of intentional, considered dialog that soldier-author O’Brien champions. Veterans should share the pain of war not for their mental health but because combat testimony contributes to the moral depth and historic awareness of the nation. Through their representatives, American citizens sent him and his fellow soldiers to fight. Hence, in O’Brien’s view, “the people” are not wholly innocent of the misdeeds of war and cannot—rather, should not—remain ignorant of its horrors. To understand the impact that America’s collective decision for war had on the real lives of the citizen-soldiers who fought, civilians need to know about combat. Combat memory is made of different stuff from traditional histories of our world, however. It is formed by physical sensation and

psychological reaction and details such as, “the special way that dawn spreads out on a river when you know you must cross that river and march into the mountains and do things you are afraid to do.”

There is novel value in the divergences of each veteran’s story from the next, and in their collective testimony precisely because their stories do differ so dramatically from traditional historic documents and accounts. Supported by concurrent developments in psychology and literary scholarship in the decades following the Vietnam War, “trauma narrative” gives the historian new tools with which to study materials previously considered nonhistorical. Methodologies developed in talking therapies and university literature courses now provide a theoretical framework through which to analyze the strengths and liabilities of soldiers’ memories. They offer a language with which to interpret otherwise inaccessible narratives, to include them as part of history and convey their significance in meaningful ways. The study of trauma narrative has the capacity to widen the parameters of historic research by expanding the type, volume, and form of data collected, enabling us to approach primary sources—particularly oral histories and memoirs—far more critically.

In her article in the journal *Literature and Medicine*, “The Narrative Shape of Traumatic Experience” Jane Robinette offers a succinct summary of how psychological concepts and therapeutic methods combine with literary theory to form the interdisciplinary study of trauma narrative. She argues that various forms of group and writing therapy such as cognitive restructuring corroborate “what readers of literature have long suspected.” Whether in art or therapy, the narrative effort itself represents a drive to reorder trauma-damaged memories and articulate them to others in familiar, communicable terms.

Survivors rebuild the psychological self and repair human relationships by first reestablishing the relationship between their lived experience and narrative. Thus the literary study of


In cognitive restructuring therapies PTSD sufferers use writing to restructure both the past event itself and their response to it.
trauma narrative aims to distinguish commonalities between stories told by people who suffer from trauma, which also mirror the psychological symptoms of post-traumatic stress.

Robinett locates the symptoms of Judith Herman’s “dialectic of trauma” in two important novels by soldier-authors—*All Quiet on the Western Front* by World War I army veteran Erich Maria Remarque, and *The Sorrow of War* by North Vietnamese army veteran Bả Ninh. She explains how we can recognize hyperarousal, constriction, and intrusion in a veteran’s story by distinctive traits that mirror Herman’s symptom clusters. Intrusive memory can be recognized in passages with repetitive, looping story structures, by figurative and immediate language, and abrupt changes from past to present tense. Emotional constriction is indicated by “unvaryingly straightforward” syntax, a flatness of tone, and indifference to even the most horrific sights. Memories formed during hyper-arousal will be rendered in vivid visual images and potent physical descriptions. Because these symptoms interact, trauma is as dynamic within the narrative context as it is in lived experience. Specific passages in a novel may show one, two, or all three symptoms, because narrative markers overlap as do the experiences they convey. To distinguish the active dialectic in a narrative readers should look for a chaotic, non-linear chronology and “abrupt, capricious shifts” in tense, time period, place, and point of view. As the survivor-narrator is suddenly caught up in an intrusive memory, the reader, too, experiences the unsteady rhythm of post-traumatic stress in the text. This method can be fruitfully applied to Tim O’Brien’s “How to Tell a True War Story,” both an eloquent example of a trauma narrative and a useful guide for recognizing the signs of trauma in a narrative.

O’Brien builds his psychologically complex story around a very simple plot. Throughout, our perspective is tied firmly to the point of view of a purportedly fictional narrator, also named Tim O’Brien. This narrator vividly recalls the people, places, and events of one particular death in chaotic, rueful, and repetitive memories. As he describes sorrow and rage among the other surviving soldiers he simultaneously re-experiences his own physical and emotional sensations. The narrative moves unevenly backward and

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74 Robinett, “Narrative Shape of Traumatic Experience,” 290-311.
forward through time and space, taking the reader from memory to memory, revealing the chaotic and disorienting stages of Herman’s post-traumatic stress symptom clusters.

The centerpiece of the story is a dead soldier named Curt Lemon, killed in combat in Viêt Nam. After his death, his grief-stricken best friend Rat Kiley writes an emotional letter to Lemon’s sister, who never writes back. Deeply hurt by her silence, Kiley later acts out his grief and anger, torturing and killing a baby water buffalo. In the context of the story Lemon’s death comes to represent all traumatic losses that the men sustain in combat, the center around which all chaotic thoughts and memories of the larger narrative swirl. Further, Kiley’s frustrated attempt to communicate his grief, and the sister’s lack of response, comprise a parable for all dismissive civilian responses to veterans’ experiences. As the chapter opens, soldier Rat Kiley is writing his letter to Curt Lemon’s sister about “what a great brother she had...a number one pal and comrade. A real soldier’s soldier...” Through the narrator’s eyes we watch him struggle to compose a piece so “very personal and touching” that he “almost bawls writing it.”

Then suddenly, seamlessly, the reader is swept forward into the postwar present. O’Brien reflects that Lemon’s death is now twenty years in the past and yet the physical sensations are perfectly clear in his mind. “I still remember that trail junction and the giant trees,” he muses, and “the smell of moss. Up in the canopy there were tiny white blossoms.” Following this thought, the narrative shifts back again to the war in Vietnam. It is the day that Curt Lemon will die. Moments before the explosion, we see “the shadows spreading out under the trees.” Sensory details are vivid, as Lemon’s death is not merely recalled, but fully re-experienced. These passages reflect the powerful and lasting impact of images and sensations burned into the mind. It is a narrative composed from hyper-aroused memories.

Later in the chapter the narrator again recalls the moment of Lemon’s death, this time during a phase of emotional constriction. As Robinett predicts, the constriction trauma cluster is distinguishable by the opposite traits of the hyperarousal cluster: a flat tone and

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75 O’Brien, *The Things They Carried*, 87.
indifference to horror. “We crossed the river and marched west into the mountains,” O’Brien says numbly. “On the third day, Curt Lemon stepped on a booby-trapped 105 round. He was playing catch with Rat Kiley, laughing, and then he was dead.” Here, Lemon’s death is recalled with detached calm, with none of the emotional or sensory description seen in the previous passage.

Often, Robinett says, such constricted-phase passages leave the reader “stunned not only at the incidents themselves, but . . . also at . . . the state out of which the narrator is speaking.” Kiley’s rage at Lemon’s sister simmers and finally erupts. He shoots a baby water buffalo at apparent random, firing multiple times, “slowly, just for the hurt.” Suffering a phase of emotional constriction themselves at the scene they are witnessing, the rest of the men stand “in a ragged circle” around the dying animal, speechless. As O’Brien explains, in some cases “you can’t even tell a true war story. Sometimes it’s just beyond telling.”

The narrative structures that O’Brien uses to relate the story of Lemon’s death, like those memories themselves, are both recursive and disjointed. He shifts frequently and abruptly from a peaceful scene of a forest clearing to an overwhelmingly traumatic one. In one passage we see the staggering gore of violent death, in another the beautiful, even calm unfolding of each sensory moment. Both accounts are true, but even the sensate truths of war are contradictory. “It can be argued, for instance, that war is grotesque,” O’Brien writes, “But in truth war is also beauty. For all its horror, you can’t help but gape at the awful majesty of combat . . . It’s not pretty, exactly. It’s astonishing. It fills the eye . . . you hate it, yes, but your eyes do not.”

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76 Jane Robinett, “Narrative Shape of Traumatic Experience,” 311.
77 Tim O’Brien, The Things They Carried, 85.
78 Robinett, “Narrative Shape of Traumatic Experience,” 311.
79 O’Brien, The Things They Carried, 79.
80 Ibid., 81.
Philosopher and World War II veteran J. Glen Gray counts this “unforgivable spectacle” of wanton destruction among the “enduring appeals of war.”\textsuperscript{81} It is a vision which often persists in the veteran’s memory many years after battle via repetitive thoughts that interact with one another in his or her daily life. This is the essence of Herman’s dynamic, chaotic dialectic of trauma.\textsuperscript{82} O’Brien describes the experience throughout his novels. “This one wakes me up,” his narrator muses, remembering the day of Curt Lemon’s death again from yet another place and time, many decades later:

There was a noise, I suppose. . .I glanced behind me and watched Lemon step from the shade into bright sunlight. His face was suddenly brown and shining. A handsome kid, really. Sharp gray eyes, lean and narrow-waisted, and when he died it was almost beautiful, the way the sunlight came around him and lifted him up and sucked him high into a tree full of moss and vines and white blossoms.\textsuperscript{83} Of course, the sun did not suck Curt Lemon into the trees. He was thrown upward in a violent explosion when the grenade he was playing with accidentally went off.

Confusion over what seemed to happen versus what did happen is an important part of the combat experience. Through multiple retellings of the same events from different psychological phases of trauma, O’Brien offers the reader insight into the tenacious, involuntary nature of intrusive memories and demonstrates the utter inadequacy of chronology to order or interpret such experiences. In her study, Robinett found “substantive and startling correspondences” between the ways in which Bao Nihn and Remarque “subvert conventional narrative structures in order to communicate the psychological trauma they suffered in combat.”\textsuperscript{84}

In “How to Tell A True War Story” O’Brien not only subverts conventional narrative but actively recommends the unreliable. Take Rat Kiley’s letter. Its factual accuracy is highly suspect. Kiley tells Lemon’s sister about a Halloween night when her brother painted

\textsuperscript{81} J. Glenn Gray. \textit{The Warriors; Reflections on Men in Battle}. (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1959), 55.

\textsuperscript{82} Robinett, “Narrative Shape of Traumatic Experience,” 311.

\textsuperscript{83} O’Brien, \textit{The Things They Carried}, 78.

\textsuperscript{84} Robinett, “Narrative Shape of Traumatic Experience,” 311.
his naked body an array of wild colors, donned a mask, went out alone on an ambush naked, “just boots and balls and an M-16.” Knowing Kiley’s tendency to embellish, one can assume this is an exaggeration. But the important truth of his letter is that he considered Lemon “a tremendous human being. . .You could trust him with your life.” A less extravagant story, while more accurate, would not express his feelings. The tall tale of Lemon’s naked Halloween patrol can be seen an example of all the “true stories that never happened,” factually unreliable but rich with authentic and revealing experiential data.

If Robinett is correct that the narrative effort itself is an attempt to heal emotional wounds by sharing experience, then Kiley’s letter can be seen as an attempt to construct a sensible story from chaos, to comfort Lemon’s sister, and regain his own sanity. Unfortunately his carefully crafted narrative does not create the heroic portrayal of Lemon that he imagines it will. Attributes that he considers admirable are repugnant to Lemon’s sister. For example, he writes to her about a time when her brother went fishing in a river with “a whole damn crate of hand grenades. Probably the funniest thing in world history…all that gore, about twenty zillion dead gook fish.”

Robinette explains that sharing grief is threatening to veterans for this very reason: emotional disjunction isolates them not only in their daily lives, but also separates from their prewar past and the “possibility of a reconnection to a future life.” Rat Kiley wants to connect to Lemon’s family but he has lost the reference points of normalcy. He has little concept of what might comfort Lemon’s sister or, ultimately, himself. The narrative that Kiley crafts in hopes of connecting with his dead friend’s family only isolates him further. As Robinett explains, “the failure of friends, neighbors, and other civilians…to recognize the complexity of the losses produced by participation in combat and the resulting psychological trauma adds another layer to the devastation which the soldier must endure, and this lack of

85 O’Brien, *The Things They Carried*, 76.
86 O’Brien, *The Things They Carried*, 90.
87 Ibid., 76.
compassion deepens his isolation." One day Kiley offers a baby water buffalo a snack, but the animal refuses it. His affection is again spurned. In a fit of unaddressed grief for his dead friend he turns to rage and random brutality.

At the end of “How to Tell a True War Story” the reader is lifted out of the plot entirely to discover that the whole chapter has been a public lecture by an author named Tim O’Brien. When the talk is over, a well-meaning woman approaches him with kindly, comforting words: he should get on with his life and “find new stories to tell.” O’Brien reflects bitterly that if she thinks that there are other stories he could or should tell, then clearly she was not truly listening. He does not say this. He does not tell her that the stories she found so moving were crafted and there was, in fact, no Curt Lemon or Rat Kiley.

No trail junction. No baby buffalo. It’s all made up. Beginning to end. Every goddamn detail—the mountains and the river and especially that poor dumb baby buffalo. None of it happened. None of it. And even if it did happen, it didn’t happen in the mountains…

These are not lies, but evidence of the chaotic symptoms of trauma manifest in conversation as they are in talk-therapy sessions. They are also sincere attempts to fully communicate the violence, chaos, and amorality of combat. An attempt fails, O’Brien says, if the story seems to hold a feel-good lesson or if it presents neat solutions such as “get on with life” or “find new stories to tell.” Having failed to communicate to this woman he resolves himself to telling his true war story another way, on another day. “You can tell a true war story,” he says, “if you just keep on telling it.”

Vietnam veteran and English professor Tobey Herzog notes that despite critical and popular success, “not everyone is willing to forgive O’Brien his falsehoods and narrative artifices in the name of art.” Some veterans feel emotionally manipulated by his “fact or

88 Robinett, “Narrative Shape of Traumatic Experience,” 311.
89 O’Brien, The Things They Carried, 84.
90 O’Brien, The Things They Carried, 85.
91 Ibid., 85.
fiction games.” Some literary scholars and fans of fiction too, feel tricked by such seamless grafting of fact and art. Herzog has written extensively on O’Brien’s work and conducted many personal interviews with the author. He offers eight hypothetical purposes for O’Brien’s inscrutable methods, which can be grouped into three general categories: literary, psychological, and political. First, Herzog concurs with Butterfield and Carpenter that ambiguity in general best reflects the divisiveness of the Vietnam War. Second, that like many combat veterans O’Brien is politically disenfranchised, deeply angry at the ignorance of civilian political body that sent him to war. Writing may be a form of political activism, his literary career a prolonged protest. And perhaps, Herzog suggests, he exacts some subtle revenge on civilian readers by highlighting the experiential distinctions between those who faced war and those who did not. “Vietnam veterans. . . fall from glory alongside the nation that bred us,” novelist Gus Hasford writes, “because a country that degrades, stigmatizes, and humiliates its young for committing the heinous crime of steadfast loyalty can no longer be trusted or taken seriously by anyone.”

Psychiatrist Jonathan Shay cites this “indignant rage” as “possibly the primary trauma of post-traumatic stress, “an intrinsic part of moral injury.” It is, he says, “uncomfortably familiar to all who work with combat veterans.” For a host of cultural and military reasons, which he outlines in *Achilles in Vietnam*, much of the grief of modern combat is never acknowledged. Unaddressed grief quickly becomes rage on the battlefield. For many of the veterans Shay treats, this grief-fueled rage lasts for decades and can become entrenched in the personality. Although it is not known what portions of grief and rage are biological universals and which are cultural constructs, much psychological therapy aims to reawaken and address latent grief, thereby diminishing rage and enabling healing.

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As evidence that rage is a universal and defining aspect of combat Shay compares Homer’s *Iliad*—in which the hero Achilles behaves in markedly anti-heroic ways—to the stories of Vietnam veterans. Vietnam veteran Larry Heinemann, author of the National Book Award winning novel *Paco’s Story*, describes anger and atrocity in combat as a way to communicate the sentiment, “Fuck with us and this will happen to you.” He says, “That’s what got to me about reading The Iliad. Achilles ties Hector’s corpse to a pair of horses. He gives them a whack on the ass and Hector’s body gets dragged round and round the city until there was nothing left but what was tied at the ankles. How’s that for ‘fuck you?’”

Shay outlines several ways in which modern war is unlike ancient war, however, and the Vietnam War unique among modern wars. The one-year individual rotation cycle of soldiers in and abruptly out of combat with little or no support upon re-entry was unique, for example. This policy had a negative effect on unit cohesion on the battlefield, and on the veterans’ mental and emotional cohesion in the long-term. Shay argues that this and many other factors distinctive to modern American combat contributed to America’s comparative failure to “communalize” Vietnam veteran grief and to deal socially and culturally with their rage. While nothing may be novel about O’Brien’s anti-hero from a literary standpoint, the specific circumstances of that war imbue it with tragedy and make the classical stories of Western tradition particularly potent metaphors for the veteran’s experience.

Like Achilles, the narrator of O’Brien’s “How to Tell a True War Story” suffered moral injury in combat when his culturally specific notion of right and wrong was betrayed. Nevertheless, he has reintegrated sufficiently to maintain a set of cultural values. Speaking at the podium, he expects that his fellow citizens will strive to understand the veterans’ experience. It is the “right” thing to do. When the woman in the audience violates this trust, he re-experiences the grief-fueled rage of combat and thinks of her much as Rat Kiley

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thought of Lemon’s sister: as a “dumb cooze.” It is a mean thing to think, and not a heroic literary moment. But war, O’Brien insists, is not heroic. The American polis needs to hear his true war story though, in order to understand how combat subverts moral direction and the ideals of culture. O’Brien writes:

The true war story is never moral. It does not instruct, nor encourage virtue, nor suggest models of proper human behavior. . .If a story seems moral, do not believe it. If at the end of a war story you feel uplifted…if some small bit of rectitude has been salvaged from the larger waste, then you have been made the victim of a very old and terrible lie.98

In the tenth grade O’Brien wrote a term paper critical of the U.S. military involvement in Southeast Asia, never imagining he would fight there one day.99 Born in 1946 and raised in small Minnesota towns, he inherited a specific, culturally-defined value system from his family, hometown, and nation. This included an essentially Christian expectation of goodness and a deep faith in reason, imparted by his education in the Western classical canon. As a young man attending Macalester College in Saint Paul, he participated in minor protests against the war. After earning his B.A. in Political Science in 1968, he received his own draft notice. He spent the summer months before boot camp walking the streets of Worthington, Minnesota, pondering deeply, debating with family and friends, and imagining ways to desert to Canada. All the while, however, he felt a God-like presence over his shoulder, “somewhere…like a conscience bearing witness, and just there.” Finally he knew that he could not bear the ostracism that desertion would bring.100 On August 13, 1968, he boarded a bus for Fort Lewis, Washington.101

98 O’Brien, The Things They Carried, 68.
99 O’Brien, If I Die in a Combat Zone, 138.
While in boot camp, O’Brien continued to try to reconcile his sense of patriotic and familial duty with his moral misgivings. He even contemplated escape. Eventually he sought the council of army chaplain Captain Edwards, telling the chaplain that he thought the war was wrong and outlining the historic events and political concerns that led him to this conclusion. “Is it then also wrong to go off and kill people?” he asked the Chaplain. “If I do that, what happens to my soul? And if I don’t fight, if I refuse, then I’ve betrayed my country, right?” The Chaplain’s job, O’Brien recalls, was to “weed out the pussies from the men with real problems.” He did not see O’Brien as a young man with real problems.

Việt Nam was not a crusade for Christ, the chaplain conceded, and perhaps “no wars are truly fought for God.” But, he insisted: “You’ve got to have faith in somebody. Sometime, O’Brien, you’ll realize there’s something above, far above your puny intellect.” His sense of a heavenly countenance watching from above dissipated quickly, but his feeling that the war was wrong never did. O’Brien continues to say that acquiescence to the draft against his deepest convictions was the first wrong that he committed in the war. “I was a coward,” he says. “I went to Vietnam.” But he could not escape the contradiction either. Bound to do wrong by one or another source of moral authority, to either shirk his duty or participate in something he felt was wrong, he had been betrayed by morality itself. Shay calls this the “undoing” of a soldier’s character. Because self-identity is inextricably bound to our cultural values and definitions of right and wrong, when we are caught in circumstances where those standards conflict with one another, the “self” is destabilized. Personality itself begins to unravel. A moral injury, then, occurs when “what’s right” is betrayed by a recognized authority figure in a life-and-death situation. It is the single most damaging aspect of combat trauma.

Young Tim O’Brien placed his trust in the loftiest and most abstract authorities: God, human goodness, and the power of reason. These moral ideals were betrayed before he ever

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102 O’Brien, *Combat Zone*, 60.
103 Ibid., 58.
104 O’Brien, “The Vietnam in Me.”
stepped into a combat zone. But the real assault, what Shay refers to as the “undoing” of O’Brien’s character, began on the ground in Việt Nam. For the common infantry solider, he writes, “war has the feel—the spiritual texture—of a great fog, thick and permanent. There is no clarity…the old rules are no longer binding, the old truths no longer true. Right spills into wrong…” For O’Brien, who has placed such stock in reason, the very randomness of combat violence is immoral. After a particularly brutal firefight he gazed at the corpse of a slim young North Vietnamese soldier he killed—or might have killed. It is impossible to know, in the fray, who fired the fatal bullet. It is troubling enough to O’Brien that pulled his trigger too. He hopes, “dear God, dear God, please don’t let it have been my bullet. Dear God, please.”

Greatly influenced by concurrent developments in psychotherapy, literary study has made steady efforts to incorporate psychological concepts into the study of Vietnam War literature. With this, literary scholars have moved away from broad efforts to heal America’s cultural wounds, and focused instead on individual experiences of war. Published in 1982, the language and tone of Vietnam veteran and literature professor Philip Beidler’s *American Literature and the Experience of Vietnam* reflects the anti-heroic spirit of the post-Vietnam War period. He describes, for example, soldiers “stoned out of their skulls, weighed down with their totems, their talismanic nicknames and buddy-lore.” Beidler explains that literary heroes created by great American writers such as Mark Twain and Herman Melville defined war as a great adventure. These fictional icons were so omnipresent in the culture of the 1960s, their influence so potent, that they altered both American foreign policy and the way that the war was fought on the ground.

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105 O’Brien, *The Things They Carried*, 82.


Nevertheless, Beidler’s hope for the transformative capacity of literature is great. While documenting the fall of the literary hero in American culture he simultaneously suggests a new literary hero. The “soldier-author” is a war veteran writer with a “commanding perspective of some great and awful burden of remembrance imaginatively mastered and brought into the province of collective understanding. . .for all . . .” Despite having been betrayed by his earlier literary war heroes, Beidler yet hopes for a Vietnam veteran novelist to heal America’s cultural war wounds and bring forth a new, anti-heroic literary hero.

Veteran Don Ringnalda’s 1994 book, Fighting and Writing the Vietnam War opposed “sense-making” fiction entirely. He argued that because the Vietnam War was not sensible we should doubt any narrative—literary, political, or otherwise—that tries to make it appear so. For Ringnalda, America’s involvement in the war, the manner in which it was fought, and most of the fiction that emerged from it, were wholly symptomatic of a national failure—or refusal—to face the nation’s own anti-heroic folly and malice.” The last thing America needs to do with the Vietnam War” Ringnalda argued, “is to make sense of it.” While distinguishing meaningful patterns in past events may be the very aim of history, Ringnalda sees meaninglessness as an important and particular fact of his war. In his view, by puzzling out various rationales for Vietnam we impose an inorganic, anachronistic perspective. Any coherent narrative about the war then, imposes its own anachronistic, present-day perspective onto it.

As literary scholars have striven to better understand war stories and veteran storytellers, psychological and neurological study has given greater insight into the complex relationship between trauma and memory, memory and narrative. As literary theory has been informed by psychology, so has post-traumatic stress therapy relied greatly on the sharing of spoken and written narrative. Tim O’Brien’s The Things They Carried is a pivotal

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108 Beidler, American Literature, 234.
piece in part because it directly addresses this reciprocal relationship between psychology, literature, and history. He presents the act of confronting one’s anti-heroic past as heroic in its own right. He offers this explanation for his fact or fiction games:

In many cases a true war story cannot be believed. If you believe it, be skeptical. It’s a question of credibility. Often the crazy stuff is true and the normal stuff isn’t, because the normal stuff is necessary to make you believe the truly incredible craziness.\(^\text{110}\)

In his 1994 novel, *In the Lake of the Woods*, O’Brien addresses Mỹ Lai once more. As the story begins, Vietnam War veteran and candidate for United States Senate John Wade suffers a humiliating defeat in the primary elections when it is revealed that he had took part in the massacre and altered his service record to conceal it. Wade and his wife Kathy, from whom he had also hidden this secret, flee to a remote cabin on the edge of the Minnesota’s Lake of the Woods where they attempt to rebuild their relationship. Then, on their seventh night at the cabin, she vanishes along with the only boat on the property. Perhaps she wandered off and died accidentally. She might have fled with a lover or simply have been lost in the wilderness. Perhaps she is still alive.

The book’s mysterious narrator, the purported writer of the book, speaks to the reader directly in footnotes and authorial comments, providing page after page of actual testimony from Lt. Calley’s court martial and other documentary evidence. The novel offers eight hypothetical scenarios of Kathy’s death, each a feat of imagination that allows John Wade to escape the truth. Although he cannot remember it, he murdered his wife. On the night of her disappearance he got out of bed and, in a rage, poured a kettle full of boiling water on each houseplant in the cabin. He then poured another kettle full of boiling water on Kathy’s face, drowning her painfully. He concealed the crime by weighting her body and the boat and sinking both in the deep water. More than a month later John borrows another small boat—ostensibly to search for her—and disappears into the remote recesses of the lake, whose labyrinthine shoreline extends deep into the Canadian wilderness.

In some ways this novel deals more directly with Mỹ Lai than any of O’Brien’s previous works, yet it also offers more room for error and more avenues for denial. The Kathy Wade’s disappearances is mysterious. The reader must determine his or her view of the events by considering a huge array of disordered, emotional, contradictory testimonies from a great variety of sources in the text and footnotes, including many documents lifted directly from the pages of the Peers Commission Report.

Senator Wade himself does little to help us distinguish what happened. Interspersed with his memories of the Mỹ Lai massacre, fragments of Kathy’s agonizing death erupt continually. The most grisly details, repeated several times in the novel, evoke the same response: “Puffs of steam rose from the sockets of her eyes. Impossible, of course.” While readers may choose to believe whichever scenario they wish, In the Lake of the Woods is a mystery only if the one indulges in the same elaborate fantasies of denial that Senator Wade invents for himself. He muses, “This could not have happened. Therefore it did not.”

The story is a metaphor for O’Brien’s view of Mỹ Lai in American history: if we cannot conceive of atrocity then we cannot discover the truth about war, no matter how well documented or meticulously footnoted. Of America’s long-term response to Mỹ Lai, Tim O’Brien writes:

I know what occurred there, yes, but I also feel betrayed by a nation that so widely shrugs off barbarity, by a military judicial system that treats murderers and common soldiers as one and the same. Apparently we’re all innocent—those who exercise moral restraint and those who do not, officers who control their troops and officers who do not. In a way, America has declared itself innocent.

When speaking to high school or university students or even to the general public he often finds that no one in the room has heard about the massacre. In his view this is akin to “a Texan never having heard of the Alamo. Or somebody living in Montana never having heard of Little Big Horn…events both critical to American history and exposing the flaws in

The puzzled, disbelieving stares he often receives at his lectures cause him to wonder what might be going wrong in history classes and in American historic discourse generally. It seems to him that “evil has no place, it seems, in our national mythology. We erase. We use ellipses.”

When provided a satisfying explanation for war, historian Hayden White argues, people become complacent and accept that, grotesque as they are, such things are necessary. The idea of meaninglessness, on the other hand—that wars might be fought for no worthwhile reason or outcome “goads the moral sense of living human beings to make their lives different…and to endow their lives with meaning for which they alone are fully responsible.” Thus he White describes all historic narrative as political he is referring to a contest over two different utopian ideals. One, a conservative utopian ideal, views the present as a utopia in need of preservation. The other is a liberal historic narrative that envisions a future utopia achievable through change. In this context, the politics of Marxist historic narrative is no more visionary than any other because it. . .

shares with its bourgeois counterpart the conviction that history is not a sublime spectacle but a comprehensible process, the various parts, stages, epoch, and even individual events of which are transparent to a consciousness endowed with the means to make sense of it in one way or another.

He argues further that the esteem accorded a given source to historic study depends upon how closely it adheres to falsely imposed standards of the discipline, a discipline which fundamentally misunderstands itself as akin to the physical sciences and “rules out as unrealistic “any thought in the least tinged with utopianism.” While it makes no more sense to pretend that one can understand history on the “same level of epistemic plausibility” as a

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114 O’Brien, “The Vietnam in Me.”
physical science as it does to claim that history “makes no sense whatsoever,” latter at least has the capacity to improve the world. 116

While Tim O’Brien’s stories are clearly not utopian in vision, his conviction that stories do have power, is. According to White then, the major impediment to incorporating his true war stories in traditional history is that trauma narrative does not meet a standard for objectivity modeled on the physical sciences. Second, the telling of combat stories is a fundamentally utopian activity in that they not only make social and political change possible, but virtually demand it. By grappling with the futility of war, that its causes may be arbitrary and its violence beyond logic and proportion, we might create a more informed, cautious democracy. O’Brien devotes the entire chapter of “How to Tell a True War Story” chapter to the cause of getting other veterans to open up about the war to families, friends, and community. If people do not understand, he says, the veteran can only “tell it one more time, patiently, adding and subtracting, making up a few things to get at the real truth.” 117 Fellow veteran and author Gus Hasford puts it more bluntly. “Fighting history is a ball-breaking hump,” he says, “and it is not for everyone.” 118

Psychiatrist Jonathan Shay stresses the importance of soldier-citizen reciprocity through the communalization of combat. This is essential he says, to both the psychological reconstruction of the veteran’s character and to his or her social, cultural, and finally political reintegration. Through emotive narrative the veteran can reconstruct memory, address long latent emotions such as grief and rage, and reinterpret past events experienced in healthier, more meaningful ways. By sharing the experience with the community, a veteran’s trust in that community may be restored. As he reinvests in its culturally defined ideas of right and wrong and participates in society according to these restored morals he becomes a citizen

117 O’Brien, The Things They Carried, 85.
again, able to contribute uniquely and importantly to his democracy. In turn, the political reintegration of the veteran into democratic life is beneficial to the entire polis.\footnote{Jonathan Shay, “The Birth of Tragedy—Out of the Needs of Democracy.” in Didaskalia: Ancient Theater Today, [an on-line journal] Vol. 2 No. 2, April 2, 1995.}

Like Judith Herman, who has argued since the Vietnam War that psychological trauma can be understood only in its broad social and political context, Shay describes himself as having been “politicized” by his work with veterans. Effective trauma therapy is always political, he explains, in that it requires moral and emotional engagement. If morally engaged one is not truly apolitical. “I cannot contemplate a ‘professional,’ affectively neutral position toward trauma work without misgivings,” he writes, because such a distanced position would make empathetic connection impossible and thus defeat healing.\footnote{Shay, Achilles in Vietnam, 194.} It is only through moral and emotional engagement that the listener can understand, accept and communalize the soldier’s grief. And it is only by reconnecting to the shared cultural values of his given community—by becoming grounded again in some moral sense of “what’s right”—that the veteran might genuinely return, emotionally and intellectually, from war.

Shay looks to ancient Athens for an example of a culture that was to some degree successful at reintegrating its combat veterans. In Athens, he explains, “every citizen was a soldier or former soldier and warfare was more or less constant.” Athenian tragic theater was created and performed by war veterans for audiences of war veterans. They regained the ability to function in a democratic polity together, through “recurring participation in the rituals of theater,” both on stage and by serving as actively engaged audience members.\footnote{Jonathan Shay, “The Birth of Tragedy—Out of the Needs of Democracy.” Didaskalia: Ancient Theater Today, [an on-line journal] Vol. 2 No. 2, April 2, 1995.} As theater offered Athenian veterans a “distinctive therapy of purification, healing, and reintegration,” the soldier-authors of the Vietnam War now invite the vast community of readers world-wide to engage with them.

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\footnote{Shay, Achilles in Vietnam, 194.}

CHAPTER 2
DISSENTER TO VICTORY
BẢO NINH’S TRAGIC COMMUNIST ROMANCE

Dawn broke clear and cool, and extraordinarily beautiful. 122

—Văn Tiến Dũng, Our Great Spring Victory

Sài Gòn, 30 April, victory Day. It was pouring rain. Yes, on that momentous day of total victory, after that terribly hot noon, Sài Gòn had been drenched in rain. After the downpour the sun came out from behind the clouds and the gun smoke. 123

— Bảo Ninh, The Sorrow of War

In the minds of many Americans, the Vietnam War ended with the signing of the Paris Peace Accords in 1973 and the withdrawal of the United States military a few months later. U.S. involvement lasted for two more years, however. In the hopes that continued financial support and guidance would enable South Vietnam to maintain its independence, 159 U.S. Marines remained in South Vietnam to secure the American embassy and offices in key cities. Another 50 military officers remained in the new Defense Attaché’s Office (DAO), to manage U.S. aid and the distribution of munitions and weapons to the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) and support contractors still in Việt Nam. A tenuous calm held until the end of 1974 when several factors—including the Arab-Israeli War of 1973,


global economic crises, and the 1974 resignation of President Richard Nixon—led Congress to cut aid significantly.

In early 1975, Hà Nội leadership seized the long-awaited opportunity to launch an all-out military offensive. From the central highlands, the Spring Offensive pushed quickly south. As central and southern cities fell, the political situation in Sài Gòn rapidly deteriorated. Many senior military officers abandoned their posts, leaving the people and remaining ARVN troops to fight alone or find their own way to safety. Panic spread. Roads became crowded with refugees and leaderless soldiers. City harbors filled with desperate people fearing retribution from Hà Nội. Many set to sea with nothing but the clothes on their backs. On April 29, the North Vietnamese established positions outside of Sài Gòn and began shelling Tân Sơn Nhứt air base. Twenty-four hours later, the North Vietnamese army came streaming into the city on foot and in tanks. The last remaining Americans evacuated with their dependents, taking as many Vietnamese who had worked for the U.S. government as possible.

In the United States it is difficult in to find Vietnamese accounts of the “liberation of the south,” which Americans refer to as the “Fall of Saigon”. The limited availability of source materials in English seems obviously due to the fact that, as Walter Benjamin famously declared, “History is written by the victors.” Because of strict post-war censorship and repression by that government, however, sources in Vietnamese are nearly as limited. In education and literature, the official history of Vietnam has long been unequivocal in glorifying the American War. Whether investigating these events as liberation or defeat, historians must contend with the lack of any accounts or information that contradicts official histories. This chapter will compare Việt Nam’s nationalist narrative, provided by North Vietnamese Army General Văn Tiến Dũng’s memoir, Our Great Spring Victory, and The Sorrow of War, a novel by North Vietnamese combat infantryman Bảo Ninh. 124

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124 In comparing The Sorrow War and Our Great Spring Victory it should be noted that Bảo Ninh’s novelistic account has been organized into a more chronological order here for the purpose of analysis. Because these neatly sequential sections do not reflect the trauma-narrative style of the book, direct quotes are used frequently as is more common in literary scholarship. Textual samples
Although a work of fiction, Bảo Ninh’s testimony is essential to understanding both the final days of and battles of the war and the atmosphere of political oppression in post-war Việt Nam. In fact, the novel’s clandestine publication itself is a concrete example of that atmosphere. *The Sorrow of War* was smuggled out of the country, translated, and published abroad in 1996, a full decade before it was released in Việt Nam. This chapter will demonstrate, further, that Bảo Ninh not only resorted to fiction as the only way to be critical of his government, but veiled his message additionally in romantic metaphor. This follows a Vietnamese anti-colonial literary tradition in which love stories were employed as a guise for nationalist hopes and colonial critique. If we consider his work in this tradition, then, each unrequited romance in the novel reveals a post-war failure of the Communist Party; the historic and artistic values of the narrative are complementary and, ultimately, inseparable.

PART ONE—THE ‘LIBERATION OF SÀI GÒN’ IN MEMOIR AND FICTION

General Văn Tiến Dũng’s memoir, *Our Great Spring Victory* is focused narrowly on military strategies and battle plans, his interpretation and tone stiffly patriotic. He wrote it at government request 1976 as a series of articles to commemorate the first anniversary of the end of the war and it was published in the newspaper of the Vietnam Workers Party, *Nhân Dân (The People)* in 1976. A Party committee then reworked the articles to “eliminate repetition and refine the presentation” of Dũng’s articles into book format. Conscientious objector, journalist, and High School teacher John Spragens, Jr., then translated the text into English. Long-time anti-war activists Peter and Cora Wiess—the first Americans invited to visit reunified Vietnam in the summer of 1976—were authorized by the Socialist Republic of Vietnam to publish the memoir in the United States in 1977.¹²⁵ “The primary aim of this book,” Dũng explains, “is to present…the clear sighted leadership of the party’s Central

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Political Bureau and Central Military Committee, and...the brilliance of our party, our army, and our people.”

Born in 1917 to a peasant family in the northern, Tonkin region of French Indochina, Dũng had negative associations with military service as a young man. He equated the military with the French Foreign Legion: colonial soldiers keeping order for a foreign power. As an ardent nationalist, this held no interest for him. In the 1930s, however, the Communist Party offered young peasants like Dũng the opportunity to fight for national independence. He joined the Party in 1936 and was arrested by French authorities shortly thereafter for anticolonial activities. He was imprisoned for four years, escaped, and was recaptured on multiple occasions.

The Japanese invaded Việt Nam and other parts of Indochina during the Second World War and occupied these territories from 1940 to 1945, allowing the French to continue administer much of the region. Like many young nationalists, Dũng fought with the Việt Minh against Japanese occupation and battled the Vichy-French colonial administration simultaneously. In August of 1945, immediately following the Japanese surrender to the Americans at the close of the Second World War, Hồ Chí Minh and the Việt Minh declared national independence for Việt Nam. France moved immediately to retake their former colonies in Asia. Fighting continued without pause. Dũng proved himself a capable logistic planner in the First Indochina War and became General Võ Nguyên Giáp’s Chief of Staff during the Battle of Điên Biên Phủ in 1954.

Widely regarded as second only to Giáp, Dũng was promoted to Commander in Chief of the People’s Army of Vietnam (PAVN) in 1974 and rose to the rank of General. His memoir, Our Great Spring Victory, focuses on the latter part of the American War, when he served as principle planner and commander of the Spring Offensive and the final Hồ Chí Minh Campaign into Sài Gòn. This series of increasingly large-scale and ambitious offensive operations began in December 1974 and eventually overwhelmed South

126 Dũng, Our Great Spring Victory, 2-3.
Vietnamese defenses in April, 1975. In his memoir, Dũng gives himself full credit for this final victory, while in no way disparaging the revered General Giáp.

Bảo Ninh was born in 1952, during the First Indochina War, just two years before the great victory at Điện Biên Phủ. At that time people in both the northern and southern regions considered themselves citizens of a single ‘Democratic Republic of Vietnam,’ a unified nation at war with France. He grew up in Nghệ An, Hồ Chí Minh’s home province, approximately 200 miles south of Hà Nội. He had no concept of Việt Nam as French colony nor a divided nation. In Bảo Ninh’s young mind, the battle for national independence simply continued against the United States as it had raged with France since before his birth. When he was sixteen, he joined the army. He fought the Americans for ten years along the Hồ Chí Minh trail with the “Glorious 27th Youth Brigade.” Of the five hundred Vietnamese youths who went to war with the brigade in 1969, he is one of only ten who survived. He then spent another decade on a body-gathering team, collecting the remains of the Vietnamese war dead for proper reburial with military honors. When he was finally demobilized in 1987 at the age of forty, Bảo Ninh began to write.

Though decades had passed since the war, it remained dangerous, even potentially deadly to express a critical view of the war or the Party. Bảo Ninh disguised his deep moral injury and political disenfranchisement in a dream-like trauma narrative and carefully coded fiction. Albeit it subtle, this ruse mirrored a long-standing anti-colonial literary tradition in Việt Nam in which the political message is disguised as love story. At a time when his nation’s official national history demanded ‘glorious’ accounts of victory, he presented the war as wrong: wasteful, inglorious, and grotesque. It was hell for the winners too, particularly for foot soldiers like himself, who fought in good faith on behalf of the ideals and promises of the Communist Party.

His first and only novel was originally titled Thân Phận Của Tình Yêu, (The Destiny of Love.) It was printed in secret in Hà Nội in around 1990 in Roneo form, an archaic stencil duplication process. The novel was illegal in Việt Nam until poet Phan Thanh Hào brought a

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Bảo Ninh’s given name is Hoàng Âu Phương.
crudely copied underground manuscript to the attention of London publisher Secker & Warburg. They recruited Thanh Hao and Australian war correspondent Frank Palmos to work with Bao Ninh on an English version of the manuscript. Published under the title *The Sorrow of War* in 1994, the book received Britain’s Independent Foreign Fiction Award that year and quickly became an international bestseller. It was published in at least fourteen languages before the Communist leadership officially approved the novel for publication in Viet Nam a decade later. It remains controversial in today, however, because it depicts the North’s violent defeat of the South and portrays the Party’s treatment of the South after the war as heavy-handed and unjust.

The life of Bao Ninh’s main character Kien parallels his own. The novel opens in the immediate post-war months. Kien works on a remains-gathering team in the Central Highlands, exhuming the bones of fallen comrades so they can be reburied with military honors. He rides in the back of a truck filled with bodies and bones through the Jungle of Screaming Souls, the region where years ago his entire first team of soldiers was killed, save for himself. Suspended above their remains in a swinging hammock Kien dozes fitfully, slipping seamlessly from conscious reminiscences into dreams and nightmares. Over the course of this journey a sublimely nonlinear narrative unfolds, told by multiple amorphous narrators who offer no single point of view, place, or time. As Jane Robinett demonstrates, *The Sorrow of War* immediately manifests the traits of combat stress in its narrative form: all perspectives are fluid, shifting frequently and without warning.

By novel’s end, however, a story emerges which can be unraveled and reordered into a discernable plotline. Kien was born in a suburb of Ha Noi. His father was an artist and his mother a political ideologue; years before the war she left the family to serve the Communist Party. A teenager when American jets begin to hammer the city, Kien leaves his father and his childhood sweetheart Phuong behind to enlist in the army. This patriotic exuberance is quickly replaced, however, by the simple, constant fear of reprisal. If he refuses to fight, deserts the army, or proves cowardly or inept in battle, he will be punished by both the army and the Party. In these early months his bravery is inspired by the desire to survive and avoid shame. He labors on the front lines through the entire war. Ten years of continual fighting make him a truly professional soldier and accustom him to death. There is no joyous victory
for Kien, just grim fatigue among the corpses as the Americans withdraw from Sài Gòn. He returns to Hà Nội a damaged man, having lost all drive, desire, even and a sense of self.

Upon reaching his late father’s house, he finds a mute girl who has taken up residence there. They enter into a strange, strained relationship that ultimately saves Kien from utter self-destruction. The mute girl listens to his stories about the war when he begins to feel compelled to write them. She encourages him. Near the end of the novel, when Kien has finished his manuscript, she stops him from burning it in the stove. In the last few pages of Sorrow, however, Kien’s tragic and damaged voice is abruptly replaced by a cheerful new narrator who claims to have found the unbound manuscript, its pages hopelessly out of order, still in the care of the mute woman. It is years after the war, and the author—Kien—has disappeared. This new narrator tries to rearrange the manuscript pages to make it read like a familiar book, but it is “a work created by turbulent, even manic inspiration.” The “flow of the story continually changes,” he says. “From beginning to end the novel consisted of blocks of images. A certain cluster of events, then disruptions, some even wiped off the page as if it had fallen into a hole in time.”

Nevertheless, this stranger envies Kien his inspiration and “optimism in focusing back on the painful but glorious days.” He reminisces the war as “caring days, when we knew what we were living and fighting for and why we needed to suffer and sacrifice. Those were the days when all of us were young, very pure, and very sincere.”

This neat, upbeat ending feels false and out of place, but it offers a vital service to the author, Bảo Ninh: it creates an additional layer of deniability between his critique and Việt Nam’s intolerant post-war government. Perhaps had hoped that his chaotic narrative might confuse and exhaust the Party censors, causing them to simply skip to the end. Reading this patriotic summary one might easily mistake the novel for an inspiring memoir of great national victory.

In early March of 1975, General Dũng brought his Spring Offensive to bear on the large, centrally located southern provincial capitol of Ban Mê Thuột. He needed to capture

130 Bảo Ninh, The Sorrow of War, 233.
this town in order to take Sài Gòn, but to take Ban Mê Thuột, Dũng would have to move a large force—including twelve regiments of infantry and the special technical branches—into position in secret, overnight. These hours before an attack are “especially tense” for a commander, he explains in his memoir, because of such “extremely difficult and complex problems” which have to be solved. His plan at Ban Mê Thuột was to first isolate the city by cutting it off from the main highways and taking Hòa Binh Airfield and Mai Hac Duc supply depot. Then his People’s Army of Việt Nam would “take care” of the military police, police, communications, and regional forces’ training compounds.

During the night of March 10, a number of PAVN units would take positions close to the city. The main body of mechanized infantry and tanks waited in position far out, in different directions. Each would follow its own specific route to various “predetermined objectives in town.” All troops would finally meet at the 23rd division headquarters as an armed special action unit entered the town. This battle plan proved so successful at each step, Dũng recalls, that they “had basically wrapped up Ban Mê Thuột” by 10:30 a.m. on March 11. His narrative reflects Việt Nam’s idealized national character: success in this battle was due to large-scale plan executed with precision and patriotism. “We were happier than words can express,” he recalls. “The soldiers were ecstatic. Large as the town was, we had completed our attack in just over thirty two hours.”

Like the author himself, Bảo Ninh’s main character in The Sorrow of War serves under General Dũng in this battle and later in the fight for Sài Gòn’s Tân Sơn Nhứt airfield. At some point during March 10 and March 11, 1975, character Kien is in the leading force against the Ban Mê Thuột police headquarters. Ordered to “kill all men wearing white shirts and release those wearing yellow,” Kien and the other soldiers fire nonstop, though no one knows who has given the order or why. The command to kill simply moves down the ranks, man by man, and they follow it. They fire and fire but “the white shirts continued to pour out like bees,” he recalls.

131 Dũng, Victory, 64.
132 Ibid., 70.
Finally entering Police Headquarters with fellow soldier Oanh, Kien gets into a firefight in the halls and offices of the building. By the time they realize that they are shooting at females, Kien has already shot three uniformed women. They tumble backward down the stairs. The last to fall is “just a girl really.” She sits slumped at the base of the stairs, dying but still alive. As Kien continues up the stairs his friend Oanh goes to the fallen girl’s side and encourages her to surrender. If she does, Oanh promises, she will not be shot. He then turns his back to follow Kien up the stairs. Kien hears a gunshot behind him: the dying girl has shot Oanh in the back. As he walks back down the stairs toward her, the girl takes aim at Kien. She pulls the trigger. Nothing happens. The bullet that killed Oanh was her last. Kien then shoots her repeatedly, “for revenge.” He fires the remainder of his magazine into her, then squats down near the four corpses and vomits. Whereas General Dũng describes feeling “ecstatic “ following the victory at Ban Mê Thuột, Kien has “never felt as bad…in all of his ten long years of fighting.”

General Dũng describes the South Vietnamese as weak “quislings” throughout his book. Conversely Bảo Ninh’s novel portrays them as fiercely determined fighters, even when dying. The southern government’s police force at Ban Mê Thuột, he says, “defended themselves as staunchly as any regular soldiers in the southern armed forces.” Where Dũng’s Spring Victory makes the northern attack appear perfectly planned and morally measured, Sorrow portrays chaotic combat. In the example of the command to kill anyone in a white shirt, for example, military commanders give arbitrary and even inexplicable orders, which soldiers may question, yet obey.

The South Vietnamese and Americans in Sài Gòn attempted to conceal their defeat at Ban Mê Thuột, Dũng says, and they claimed that it was still in their hands. On March 13 French journalist Paul Leandri reported that the city was in fact under NVA control. The next day Sài Gòn immigration police shot him in the head. Although the police ruled his

133 Bảo Ninh, The Sorrow of War, 106.
134 Ibid., 104.
135 Dũng, Victory, 73.
death accidental, Leandri had called friends before going to the station “in case anything happens.” Dũng’s indictment of his enemy as treacherous and murderous is clear in this vignette, as it is throughout his memoir.

Bảo Ninh, on the other hand, portrays war itself as murderous regardless of which side a soldier fights on. Kien, for example, has strong moral convictions against harming women. But when his Oanh friend is killed in the battle for Ban Mê Thuột, Kien goes into what Jonathan Shay describes as a “berserk state.” This uniquely violent, trance-like rage takes its name from the Norse warriors of legend who went into battle “in a godlike or god-possessed—but also beastlike—fury.” He shoots the unarmed, already dying girl in frenzied excess. Bảo Ninh’s character violates his own moral code by killing a girl, and in a way that he considers murderous rather than soldierly. In portraying such scenes, the author questions the infallible morality of northern troops and violates the government’s proscription on criticizing the war.

Following the loss of Ban Mê Thuột, many South Vietnamese army officers used helicopters to pick up their families and flee south. Civilians began to evacuate the countryside too, crowding roads and the pathways in a mass exodus for the coast. Seaports were jammed with great numbers of people seeking transport south. Even those whose participation in the war was minimal headed south, fearing bad treatment from the communists. As the phenomenon increased and spread, it undermined the South’s morale. On March 21 General Dũng’s army severed Route 1—the highway immortalized by Bernard Fall in The Street Without Joy—which linked the centrally located, ancient capital city of Huế with the south. At the same time, he attacked coastal cities and enclaves. Dũng then wheeled his army southward for the “final battle of ten thousand days of fighting.”

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137 Shay, Achilles In Vietnam, 77.


139 Tảng, Việt Cộng Memoir, 252.
Bảo Ninh describes the troops’ experience of these advances from the ground, as the army moved from the coast inland over mountain passes, past the hydroelectric station and continuing on a “long, tiring march... down to Lộc Ninh, then turning around to regroup of an attack on western Sài Gòn, to end the war.”\footnote{Bảo Ninh, \textit{The Sorrow of War}, 150.} The village of Xuân Lộc, located on National Route 1 only 37 miles northeast of Sài Gòn, fell on April 23. This battle lasted twelve days and left Biên Hòa Air base indefensible. Dũng’s forces severed the roads around Sài Gòn and shelled the airbase as the last remnants of South Vietnam’s air force carried out its final effective operation from the Biên Hòa tarmac. There was little now to prevent or slow the advance toward Sài Gòn.\footnote{Tảng, \textit{Việt Cộng Memoir}, 254.} General Dũng writes:

In the spring of 1975, in the formation of vehicles and artillery advancing to the Sài Gòn front, just as in every village, on every dock, in every trench in the South, it was impossible to distinguish southerners from northerners. There were only Vietnamese, charging toward the final battle against U.S. imperialism and its lackeys, to win back complete independence, freedom, peace, and unity. The whole land was on the march at top speed. The whole land was going to the front. The spring of earth and heaven and the spring of our nation clung fast together...\footnote{Dũng, \textit{Great Spring Victory}, 145.}

Bảo Ninh’s character Kien has been marching on foot and fighting continuously these many weeks. One morning he awakes with his fellow soldiers in an unknown field before dawn and he reflects upon their faces, “weather-beaten from days of exposure to sun and dew.” The men speak excitedly. They know they are nearing the city of Sài Gòn, but are “unsure of their exact whereabouts.”\footnote{Bảo Ninh, \textit{Sorrow of War}, 150.} They are moving toward Tân Sơn Nhứt airport under the command of General Dũng. They will perform an essential role in bringing about a great spring victory.

General Dũng writes:

\footnote{Bảo Ninh, \textit{The Sorrow of War}, 150.}
Tân Sơn Nhứt airfield still allowed the enemy to continue committing their crimes, and from there, all kinds of transport aircraft were carrying American and quisling leaders abroad at a rapid pace, with no letup.\textsuperscript{144}

Late in April, reviewing the situation from campaign headquarters, he and other army leaders believed that their South Vietnamese and American enemies were now completely confused. The southern command, Dũng believed, was “in an uproar.” In just the first two days and nights of the campaign for Sài Gòn, “all wings of our troops had completely implemented the plans.” He issued orders for a general offensive on the whole front. At five o’clock in the morning on April 29, the North Vietnamese Army advanced into Sài Gòn. Dũng received a long cable from the political Bureau in Hà Nội almost immediately, profusely praising “all the units which have scored big exploits in recent days, smashing the defending gang.” He was given lofty instructions to “strike with the greatest determination” while maintaining “strict discipline.” His orders, he recalls, were to “protect the life and property of the people…uphold the revolutionary nature and victorious traditions of our army…and achieve complete victory for the campaign with bears the name of our great Uncle Ho.”\textsuperscript{145}

In Sorrow, the northern conquerors do not spare the conquered Southerners but employ brutal, disproportionate violence. In the pre-dawn hours Kien’s scouts wait in position just across an overgrown field from the Cu Chi defense line. They will serve as advance guard, leading the attack on the Tân Sơn Nhứt airfield. “The dew evaporated quickly,” Bảo Ninh writes, “Signal flares flew into the air.” It is an hour before the opening barrage of the campaign and Kien and his men play a card game called “advance.” They do not like how their cards are falling and become increasingly superstitious as morning and battle draw nigh. “The infantry noisily came to life,” Bảo Ninh writes, “and began to move out. Armored cars motored to the front line, their tracks tearing the earth, the roar of their engines reverberating in the morning breeze.” While in trenches and shelters the exhausted

\textsuperscript{144} Dũng, \textit{Our Great Spring Victory}, 212.

\textsuperscript{145} Ibid., 222.
NVA infantrymen “were trying to enjoy last moments of sleep,” the Sài Gòn defense forces returned fire with artillery and machine guns, registering “some lucky hits.”

“Along the way,” General Dũng reports, “our troops knocked out many enemy tanks, armored cars, and troops north of Củ Chi and at the Bong ridge and Hóc Môn.” But it is a rational, bloodless, even picturesque journey in his account. Looking at the combat operations map, he says, “the five wings of our troops seemed like five lotuses blossoming out from our five major objectives.” These targets were: the General Staff headquarters, the Ministry of Defense, the Special Capital Zone headquarters and Police, the Presidential Palace of South Vietnam, and Tân Sơn Nhứt airfield. As the NVA moved through Sài Gòn, Dũng tells us, “The people of the city, especially the workers, protected factories and…turned them over to our soldiers.” In soaring terms he praises the patriotic actions of the people, who “created a revolutionary atmosphere of vast strength on all the city’s streets” and “helped disperse large numbers of enemy soldiers, forced many to surrender, chased and captured many of those who were hiding out, and preserved order and security in the streets.”

Bảo Ninh offers a very different account. Within an hour of leaving their card game in the grassy field, Kien’s comrade Van has been burned alive in a tank. His body is reduced to ash, with “no grave or tomb to throw the (playing) cards into.” Soldier Thanh dies next, near the Bong bridge, also in a tank, which burns like a “white-hot steel coffin.” Many years later, a post-war drinking buddy who “chased the 18th Division southern soldiers all over Xuân Lộc” will recall to Kien that when driving the tank toward the city he “could not tell the difference between mud and bodies, logs and bodies.” Reaching Sài Gòn, he recalls ruefully that his tracks became “choked up with skin and hair and blood. And the fucking

147 Dũng, *Our Great Spring Victory*, 229.
148 Dũng, *Our Great Spring Victory*, 244.
maggots! And the fucking flies! Had to drive through a river to get the stuff out of the tracks.”

From 8:00 to 8:30 that morning, Dũng barraged Tân Sơn Nhứt airfield with relentless, concentrated artillery fire. Flames and smoke rose into the skies. When the artillery stopped, the 24th infantry regiment, which had been waiting in tanks and armored cars, took the Bảy Hiền crossroads. They moved on to the airfield and captured Gate 5 by 9:30 AM. Like Bảo Ninh, his fictional character Kien is there, fighting his way toward Gate 5. Beside him is Tu, the only man who has made it with him all the way to the airport. But then Tu is killed as well, with just three hours to go before war’s end. When the last counterattack by the ARVN commandos has been beaten back, Kien moves in slowly from the edge of the main runway. He drags himself to the airport lounge in hopes of finding his regiment, but of the entire Scout platoon sent into the airport he is the lone survivor.

General Dũng swells with pride at how “resolutely, intelligently, and courageously” his troops behaved as they rolled through the liberated city of Sài Gòn. Bảo Ninh, in contrast, describes escalating chaos back at Tân Sơn Nhứt airfield when the victorious NVA soldiers discover that “there is plenty of free booze at the airport.” Kien wanders around in a daze, watching the drunken, looting soldiers:

They turned over furniture, smashed and ripped fittings and scattered them everywhere. Glasses, pots, cups, wine bottles, were broken or shot up. They used machine guns to shoot out the chandeliers and the ceiling lights…and they all seemed to be drunk, half-laughing, half-crying. Some were yelling like madmen. Peace had rushed in brutally, leaving them dazed and staggering in its wake. They were more amazed than happy with the peace.

Soon, he is drunk, too. He sits in the Air France terminal throughout the afternoon and evening drinking brandy in silence, “the way a barbarian would, as if to insult life.”

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150 Ibid., 152.
151 Dũng, *Our Great Spring Victory*, 239.
153 Ibid., 100.
154 Ibid., 106.
drinks long after the rest have fallen asleep or passed out.\textsuperscript{155} Five kilometers away in Sài Gòn, guns fire in celebration. But at the airport, all becomes “strangely quiet” with the coming of night. Smoke rises from oil fires but the air has been cooled by the earlier rain, and “all around the airport the victorious troops were enjoying their greatest prize: sleep.”\textsuperscript{156} The air is occasionally punctuated by machine gun fire, the sky brightened by surreal bursts of red, blue, and violet, as signal flares are fire randomly. Dozing in this “apocalyptic” atmosphere Kien reflects that the end of the American War is the end of an epoch of constant combat for the Vietnamese, who have been fighting continuously for more than thirty years. By nightfall he and the other young soldiers at the airport feel suffocated. “And why not?” he reflects, they had “just stepped out of their trenches.”\textsuperscript{157}

Bǎo Ninh told fellow combat veteran and novelist Larry Heinemann that by the morning of liberation only twelve of the original five hundred men in his battalion were alive. By the end of the day they had taken the airstrip but only three remained: himself and two others.\textsuperscript{158} Like his character, he fought in the American war for ten years. For his generation “war had been their whole world. . . The end of the fighting was like the deflation of an entire landscape, with fields, mountains, and rivers collapsing in on themselves.”\textsuperscript{159}

In order to triangulate events immediately following reunification, it is necessary to also include the memoir of former North Vietnamese Minister of Justice Trương Như Tằng. Tằng fled his native Sài Gòn a few years after the war. He had been living in exile in France for eight years when his book \textit{Việt Công Memoir} was published in 1985. Although he was not present for the events depicted by Dũng and Bǎo Ninh, the latter chapters of his memoir are instructive in this comparison because, like Dũng, he portrays the war as necessary and

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{155} Ibid., 107.
\item \textsuperscript{156} Ibid., 100.
\item \textsuperscript{157} Ibid., 108.
\item \textsuperscript{159} Bǎo Ninh, \textit{Sorrow of War}, 107.
\end{itemize}
rationally executed. As the General’s account focuses on military maneuvers, Tặng’s account is so focused on political strategy that the reader may forget that any bloody battles were going on at all. Like Bảo Ninh, however, Tặng condemns the North for grave injustices and cruelties that befell the South following liberation. His critical assessment of the post-war government corroborates Bảo Ninh’s purportedly fictional account. The crucial difference is that Tặng wrote his memoirs safely from exile in France, while Bảo Ninh returned home to Hà Nội.

Tặng was born a French colonial subject in 1923. His family was wealthy and highly regarded in Sài Gòn’s Chinatown, the Chợ Lớn district. His father owned a rubber plantation and printing house, and taught at the Collège Chasseloup-Laubat. This French “Native High-School” was established in 1875 to train young Vietnamese professionals to work in the colonial administration. After studying the exclusively French-language curriculum at this school, Tặng went to Hà Nội University for a year. He went to France to study pharmaceutical science after World War II but was introduced to the Vietnamese independence movement in Paris, where he met Hồ Chí Minh and quickly transferred to political science. He earned a master’s degree and law license from the University of Paris. Upon his return to Sài Gòn, Tặng joined the French School of Naval Supply to avoid being drafted into the South Vietnamese army. He became involved in anti-government activities primarily in opposition the Ngô Đình Diệm regime.160

Capitalizing on his international contacts and the connections that a new corporate position with the Việt Nam Bank for Industry and Commerce offered him, Tặng recruited prominent non-communists to the nationalist cause. He was arrested for these activities in 1965 and was jailed for six months by the National Police. He paid expensive bribes to the authorities in order to secure a light prison sentence of just two years, and paid still more to have that sentence suspended.161 He continued urban-organizing upon his release and was arrested again in 1966 by agents working under South Vietnam’s infamous chief of National

160 Tặng, Việt Cộng Memoir, 25.
161 Ibid., 101.
Police, General Nguyễn Ngọc Loan. Loan held Tăng for seven months without charge in a secret prison, where he was periodically tortured until finally released in 1967 as part of a clandestine prisoner exchange for two American prisoners.

Following the exchange, Tăng was handed over to Việt Cộng operatives and stayed with the Communists in the war-torn jungles of South Vietnam for many years. He became Minister of Justice for the Provisional Revolutionary Government of the Republic of South Vietnam (the PRG) in 1969. This was an underground, alternative government to South Vietnamese President Nguyễn Văn Thiệu and included delegates of the National Liberation Front—or Việt cộng—as well as several smaller groups. The PRG was recognized as the government of South Vietnam by most communist states and would be signatory to the 1973 Paris Peace Treaty.

Foreign Minister Tăng did not have a firsthand view of the battles described by General Dũng and Bảo Ninh because he was travelling frequently between Việt Nam and Algeria at the time, representing the PRG in his role as Foreign Minister. As the Americans pulled out of Southeast Asia Tăng’s focus turned to Cambodia. “Blissfully ignorant of the sea of blood into which Cambodia’s new rulers would lead their country,” he would later lament, he congratulated the Khmer representative in Algeria on their recent victory over the Americans. Throughout his political career Tăng’s central concern had been the relationship between the government in the north and the southern revolutionary efforts. Suddenly those issues were merely academic. North and south seemed of little relevance as the end of the war approached.

As the political arm responsible to govern the south during the war, Tăng and others in the PRG expected to serve as the provisional government of the south through the unification process. They assumed that the PRG would be incorporated as part of a new,

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162 General Nguyễn Ngọc Loan was made infamous two years later when photographed by Associated Pressman Eddie Adams, executing a handcuffed prisoner, who himself was reported to have executed dozens of unarmed civilians earlier the same day.

163 Tăng, Việt Cộng Memoir, 126.

164 Ibid., 254.
united government and so watched Dũng’s movements through the major cities of Huế and Đà Nẵng on Hà Nội television, joyful anticipating peace. Increasingly confident that the “opportune moment” they had awaited had finally arrived, party leaders ordered General Dũng to prepare a plan for an immediate assault on Sài Gòn itself within a month. Tàng was “overwhelmed at the thought of going home” to the south. He and other southern ex-patriot political leaders crowded around a radio at President Nguyễn Ngọc Thơ’s house on April 30, 1975 as the news was announced.

Sài Gòn had been liberated “without any house-to-house fighting or the die-hard defense that everyone feared would bring massive destruction to the city.” Outside, in the Hà Nội city streets, the people were in a “swirl of delirium.” They cheered, sang, and hugged each other. Tàng recalls that “many of the ordinarily grim and stoic” residents of Hà Nội were ‘sobbing with a force of emotion unimaginable to anyone who had not endured and suffered as they had.” Amid the smoke of firecrackers peach and cherry trees bloomed, their fragrance sweetening the air in a “spring time of peace.”

On the morning of May 1, 1975, General Dũng recalls, their Hồ Chí Minh Campaign headquarters celebrated the “complete liberation of the South” and commemorated International Labor Day. Candies, cakes, and soft drinks were set out on the table. The day happened to be the General’s own birthday, and a bottle of liquor had been sent to him “from the ‘rear’” in celebration. Everyone toasted the day of victory in honor of President Hồ Chí Minh, the “heroic party,” the Central Committee, and the Political Bureau. Touring Sài Gòn by car that day, the General passed the vital positions that they had liberated in the few days preceding. “Along the highway, in the villages, and in the city streets,” his memoir recalls, “there was no sea of blood, only a sea of people in high spirits, waving their hands and waving flags to welcome peace and the revolution.”

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165 Tàng, Viêt Cộng Memoir, 259.
166 Dũng, Our Great Spring Victory, 251.
167 Ibid., 252.
Meanwhile, Kien walks past piles of southern corpses and snoring northern soldiers who have passed out around the airport terminal. Though drunk through the night, it is not until morning that his brain really starts “reeling.” Exhausted, he falls asleep just before dawn and awakes hours later to the smell of food. The men are cooking over an open flame in the terminal. Weary, hungry, still bleary-eyed, Kien is disturbed to find that he has been sleeping next to the naked corpse of a young female southern soldier. When a big male NVA soldier drags the girl’s body down a set of stairs roughly, another soldier, angered by such disrespectful treatment of the dead—even enemy dead—threatens to shoot him. A heated argument breaks out and Kien intervenes. He and some of the other men dress the body, comb her hair, wash her face, and lay her in a row with other bodies they have collected and rolled in curtains. Bảo Ninh writes:

In later years, when he heard stories of V-day or watched the scenes of the fall of Sài Gòn on film, with cheering, flags, flowers, triumphant soldiers, and joyful people, his heart would ache with sadness and envy. He and his friends had not felt that soaring, brilliant happiness he saw on film. After the war Kien does not think back to parades but to this naked corpse at the airport, “her chest white, her hair messy, her dark eyes swarming with ants, and on her lips a terrible twisted smile. . .This was a human being who had been killed and humiliated, someone even he had looked down on. Those who had died and those who lived on shared a common fate in this war.”

Despite his impatience to return home, cadres from various Northern ministries were dispatched to Sài Gòn ahead of Tằng and his fellow southern PRG leaders. A southerner himself, he bristled to hear the Hà Nội comrades admonished to maintain their revolutionary, working-class morality, to resist the temptations of material wealth and other seductions that

168 Bảo Ninh, Sorrow of War, 108.
169 Ibid., 100.
170 Ibid., 107.
171 Ibid., 108.
would assault them in the dissolute south. When he finally arrived at Tân Sơn Nhứt airport on May 13, Tăng was greeted by NLF dignitaries and a triumphal crowd, banners, and flowers. He was driven through the city streets in a cavalcade, past cheering, flag-waving people. Tăng’s early elation was to dissipate quickly, however, on an occasion which both he and Dũng mention in their memoirs. Both men returned to Tân Sơn Nhứt airfield on May 15 to greet national leaders and dignitaries were arriving from the North for the victory celebration. Joyous crowds of Sài Gòn citizens gathered at the airport to welcome the victors, lining the streets all the way to the celebration at the newly renamed Independence Palace—former home of the last President of South Vietnam, Nguyễn Văn Thiệu.

Tăng climbed to his place on the reviewing stand with his colleagues from “the front, the Alliance, the DRV, the Party,” some of whom were wiping away tears. All around, he recalls, an immense throng of people stretched out in all directions. After several inspiring speeches and various parades of “representatives of every group and stratum in the city,” the parade of military units began. First came troops from every North Vietnamese Army outfit, followed by tanks, artillery, and missiles. When the southern Việt cỏng units finally came marching, however, they looked “unkempt and ragtag.” Above their heads flew a red flag with a single yellow star: not the flag of the PRG but the Democratic Republic of North Vietnam.

Tăng “experienced almost a physical shock” when he saw only the DRNV flag flying above the southern troops. There was no designation for, or recognition of the role of the PRG. He looked at General Dũng, who was standing beside him, and asked where the remaining southern divisions were, why they were not in the parade. Dũng stared at him for a long, disconcerting moment before replying with equal deliberateness, “The army has already been unified.” Tăng recalls that the corners of the general’s mouth “curled up in a slight smile” when he demanded to know when the decision had been made.

Without answering, Dũng slowly turned his eyes back to the street, unable to suppress his sardonic expression, although he must have known it was conveying

172 Tăng, Việt Cộng Memoir, 259.
173 Ibid., 263.
too much. A feeling of distaste for this whole affair began to come over me—not to mention premonitions I did not want to entertain.174

This chilling encounter with General Dũng at the victory celebration revealed a power imbalance in Sài Gòn between southern patriots such as himself and the northern cadres. In in Tàng’s view this was tantamount to betrayal. He outlines his personal disenchantment, the loss of political power, and finally his escape to exile, all amid the backdrop of continued suffering in his beloved Sài Gòn and throughout the south. The re-education camps trouble his conscience in particular, as he saw people arrested by the army, local authorities, and police, in raids that were more akin to kidnappings than arrests.175 By 1977, he and a large band of other Sài Gòn citizens jammed into a small riverboat and set to sea. He no longer saw the war as a nationalist collaborative campaign but reminiscent of America’s Civil War: the North had indeed vanquished the South.176

After the war Bảo Ninh’s infantryman Kien returns home to Hà Nội on the “Unification” troop train. It is overcrowded with soldiers, many wounded and sick, blind, and mutilated. The swinging of their hammocks make the railcars resemble resting stations in the jungle. The homebound soldiers are bitter at the disrespect they receive from the general population who seem not to care about them. Worse still, the authorities search them repeatedly, checking “every pocket of their knapsacks…as though the mountain of property that had been looted and hidden after the takeover of the South had been taken only by soldiers.”177 At every station along the way the ears of these “white-eyed, gray-lipped,” malarial troops are blasted by loudspeakers, which blare “endless stream of the most ironic of teachings.” They are urged to “ignore the spirit of reconciliation, to beware of the ‘bullet scarred with sugar’.” In particular they should “guard against the idea of the South having

174 Ibid., 265.
175 Ibid., 289.
177 Bảo Ninh, The Sorrow of War, 79.
fought valiantly or been meritorious in any way.” To defend against the “barrage of nonsense,” the soldiers begin to ridicule the announcements. Bảo Ninh writes,

By the time we reached the northern Red River Delta areas, we were all deliriously happy. Even the most conservative among us expressed wildly passionate ideas of how they would launch into their new civilian, peacetime lives.  

Back home in Hà Nội, Kien seeks out his childhood sweetheart, Phương, only to find her a deeply damaged woman, now living with another man. Months later he is still in the military. It is just before the dry season in the fall of 1975. As did the author during that time, he exhumes the bodies of dead soldiers from the central highlands battlefields where he once fought.

In his 1977 introduction to Our Great Spring Victory, General Dũng reflected at length on the limitations of his memoir. In particular he recognized that, “because of the tremendous scale of the victory, no one person’s vision can encompass everything.” The true source of the book’s shortcomings is that the post-war government did not allow critical histories: even the most patriotic general’s memoir was subject to a censorious Party committee. Dũng goes to far as to thank the committee for ensuring that his memoir would represent “an early refutation of certain erroneous, mistaken, and reactionary interpretations of the victory.” Further, he appreciates government censors for protecting narratives such as his own story from alternative, southern-sympathizing stories and from the accusation of those who had “usurped and sold out” the country and who now “wished to distort history in defense of their shameful defeat and to denigrate the victory of our people.”

After the American War Dũng went on to direct Việt Nam’s invasion of Khmer Rouge Cambodia and the resulting border war with China in 1979. He then replaced the elderly and ailing General Võ Nguyên Giáp as Defense Minister. He served in this capacity

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178 Ibid., 80.
179 Ibid., 84.
180 Ibid., 3.
181 Dũng, Great Spring Victory, 3.
for six years under increasingly harsh criticism from within the army for his autocratic style and nepotism. In the mid-nineteen eighties, Việt Nam was among the poorest countries in the world. The people suffered triple-digit inflation, severe food shortages, and high unemployment. The 1986 Party Congress announced the ‘Đổi Mới’, or “renovation period”—the Vietnamese version of glasnost—in response to these hardships. Among many economic reforms instituted, the Communist Party permitted private owned enterprises in commodity production and abandoned the push to collectivize the industrial and agricultural sectors. During this time Dũng and several other members of his “half-century-old leadership clique” were removed from office. He died in Hà Nội in March of 2002 at the age of 84.

As for Bảo Ninh, his Sorrow of War was banned briefly in Việt Nam after its overseas release in 1991. As poet Linh Dinh reports on the post-war literary atmosphere, by 1978 there were 163 confirmed cases of writers formerly active in the South detained in reeducation camps. The even more politically indoctrinated and repressive North had “produced almost no literature of artistic worth form 1954 to 1975.” Despite the remarkable liberalization that came with Đổi Mới, the prevailing political atmosphere remained dogmatic and was sometimes brutally repressive of writers. Internationally, however, critics quickly counted Sorrow among the most important war novels of all time. With financial security and global recognition, Bảo Ninh came under the scrutiny and censorship of the authorities. On the other hand, global recognition likely also held those powers somewhat in check. With the liberalization that swept Việt Nam since the 1990s, Sorrow is no longer an illegal

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novel. It has gained wide Vietnamese readership, particularly in the South. In 2010, the prestigious Society of Authors of London listed the Frank Palmos-Thanh Hao translation of *Sorrow* as one of the “Best 50 Translations” of the previous century, sharing the honor with works such as *War and Peace* and *The Tin Drum*. Through the success and acclaim of this English version, Bảo Ninh laid the international foundation of the new wave of post-war Vietnamese authors, many of whom, like Dương Thu Hương, have done their work from outside of Việt Nam.

In wartime Việt Nam, virtue was inseparable from political conviction, political conviction inseparable from military service. That his generation, both north and south, had invested and lost their lives only to have their sacrifice squandered in inglorious victory and political platitudes was the source of grave moral injury to Bảo Ninh. It imparted an enduring, mute rage, which demanded expression. American veteran and novelist Larry Heinemann met Bảo Ninh in 1997 and describes him as a hard drinking man who “just looks like he never had an easy day in his life. Never.” Heinemann found Bảo Ninh to be “as pissed off as any American veteran I’ve met,” and Heinemann reflects, he “pretty much said so in his novel.” He says of his conversation with Bảo Ninh:

> I once asked him as a soldier, as an ordinary, everyday garden variety, ground-pounding grunt, what was the hardest thing he ha to do. He said it was bury all his friends. That’s when I stopped complaining about how hard I had it.\(^{186}\)

Today the writer lives in a quiet, quaint suburb of Hà Nội, not far from the Red River. He says, “I became more famous, so people know about me and other writers respect me. But it also affected me badly because I became self-conscious.”\(^{187}\) He edits a literary weekly and claims to write constantly but, he says, “writing novels is a struggle.”


PART TWO—UNDER THE GUISE OF LOVE

On the surface, Bảo Ninh’s novel is as much about love as war. Striking up a new romance at every turn, Kien seems a remarkable ladies’ man. None of these romances are sexually consummated, however. Kien muses, “The sorrow of war inside a soldier’s heart was in a strange way similar to the sorrow of love.”188 Like Ernest Hemmingway’s war-ravaged character Jake Barnes in The Sun Also Rises, he has suffered “a terrible wound between his legs.”189 We cannot be certain of the nature of the injury or what portion of it is physical and psychological, but it is clear that for Kien even “small acts of love” are omens of “terrible events to come.”190 The problem becomes still more severe and troubling after the war. A prostitute at Hà Nội’s Balcony Café quips, “You’re pretty small yourself,” and slips her hand between Kien’s legs. ”Hah!” she shouts, and withdraws her hand, exclaiming, “God, you’re dull!”191

While the primary manifestation of Kien’s post-traumatic stress is impotence, this sexual dysfunction is more than a combat injury. It is also a political metaphor, craftily employed. The seemingly innocuous love stories that Bảo Ninh weaves throughout the novel disguise an additional layer of covert critique. The saccharine sentimentality of Kien’s romantic youth parallels naïve political idealism and traces the process of indoctrination. His sexual impotence after the war is a metaphor for the author’s political disenfranchisement and disillusionment with the Communist Party. The entire romantic theme that permeates Sorrow can be understood as subterfuge to distract the cursory or censorious reader from the primary theme of political repression. Kien’s chronically unrequited affection and unfulfilled sexuality ultimately represent the suppression of veteran testimony itself.

The Sorrow of War includes a remarkable number of female characters. Many appear only fleetingly in the novel, while others remain constantly in Kien’s thoughts. They are

188 Bảo Ninh, The Sorrow of War, 94.
189 Ibid., 141.
190 Ibid., 31.
191 Ibid., 154.
officers and soldiers, friends and allies, wives, sisters and mothers. Women serve to illustrate loss in the larger community, as when a wife loses her husband and must rely on the goodwill of neighbors and friends. They are political actors like Kien’s mother and Mother Lanh, godmother to new army recruits. The strength and beauty of women preoccupy Kien. Memories fill him with longing and nostalgia. Much of his sorrow stems from having seen women victimized, impoverished, starving, prostituted, and raped. These things haunt sentimental, romantic Kien. He often reflects that desire is linked to disaster in his mind because “he matured in time of war.”

Scholar and translator Huỳnh Sanh Thông explains a Vietnamese literary tradition, not uncommon among colonized peoples, of couching political critique and nationalist aims in a love story. By using the metaphor of love to communicate political ideas, the Vietnamese writer was able to let the “anger and despair at the loss of his country to the French to flow freely.” Harriet Phinney, too, notes that throughout their history, Vietnamese intellectuals, nationalist, and political leaders have transformed existing conceptualizations of love to produce new discourses of love for the purpose of mobilizing and governing the populace. By the late 1920s, romantic narratives in particular were being used as a vehicle to address colonial oppression, to suggest revolution, and to imagine a new, emerging modernity. In the middle and late 1960s Ho Chi Minh called upon young people to set their personal lives aside and help with the final push to liberate the South. The Party urged young soldiers to have “little or no romantic involvement or emotional ties.” Love, too, had become a tool for constructing an idealized socialist state.

The Vietnamese phrase “Trong ý ngoài lời,” means “the idea is hidden under the words.” Like the English phrase “read between the lines” it comes from military

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192 Ibid., 51.
steganography—not merely coded, but concealed messaging which does not attract attention to itself—a craft with a history as long as war itself. Lemon juice, for example, is normally transparent on paper. It can be used as ink and, when heated over a candle flame, it becomes legible. Because a courier delivering an apparently blank piece of paper would be immediately suspect, covert military messages were written in invisible ink between the lines of seemingly innocuous letters. Today, the expression in both languages has come to describe an ability to find hidden meaning, to decipher coded communication.

As their young romance blooms Kien and his childhood sweetheart, Phương, ditch an indoctrination session at school and go to Hà Nội’s West Lake. They kiss and embrace until “a sudden sharp pang” strikes him and he withdraws from her, feeling guilty. They are violating one of the Communist Party’s “Three Don’ts,” he reminds her: love, marriage and sex. As Phinney writes, by controlling and redirecting cultural ideas about love, sex and marriage, the Party “laid a foundation for making requests on its own behalf.”

As the female body has often been used in narrative, Bảo Ninh employs women as metaphor for the body politic. Rather than the Communist Party or the state, his female characters represent the trust that the people place in these institutions. The many rapes he depicts in the novel symbolize violation of the people’s trust by the Party, the government, and the army. After military training and further indoctrinations, Kien prepares to depart for the battlefront. The Americans are bombing Hà Nội. Amid the rush and chaos, Phương again tries to convince him not to go to war, but Kien fears he will be charged with desertion if he does not board the troop train. Finally relenting, Phương insists on riding with him as far South as possible and they board together. When the train is bombed Kien is thrown from the car. When at last he finds Phương, she has been raped by a group of North Vietnamese soldiers. She is bleeding. Her clothes are torn.

Phương is a metaphor for Bảo Ninh’s own innocence and that of his generation. Her rape is the violation of public trust, not by southern soldiers, the French, or Americans, but

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by the Party and the Army. From a very young age Kien’s masculinity has been tied to a soldierly and communist ideal. “One day you’ll be a member of the Youth Union,” his deeply indoctrinated mother tells him, “then one day you’ll become a real man. So, harden your heart and be brave, my son.”

That terrible day on the train burly NVA soldier taunts Kien. “A little bourgeois softie, aren’t you?” he asks, as Kien tries to protect and comfort his injured love. The big soldier’s direct insult to both Kien’s political commitment and sexual prowess firms his resolve. No bourgeois softie, Kien leaves bleeding Phương behind rather than desert the army. For the rest of his life calls her rape his own “first war wound” associates innocent beauty with violence, regret and shame.

Eventually, all of Kien’s memories are intrusive. Each potential lover reminds him of a woman he has seen victimized, and when he witnesses them being victimized, women fill him with nostalgia for his past loves. Viewed in this metaphoric context, the girl that Kien kills at the Ban Mê Thuột police station is not merely a random enemy female. She represents the already fallen South Vietnam, crumbling as the NVA advance toward Sài Gòn. Though fatally wounded, she continues to fight, shooting soldier Oanh in the back despite his generosity to her. Treacherous as she was, it haunts Kien that she was unarmed and gasping when he killed her. He killed her with abandon, in a frenzy, much as the North devastated the South at Ban Mê Thuột. Similarly, the beautiful dead girl at the Sài Gòn airport represents South Vietnam. Although dead, her body should have been treated with a modicum of respect. Kien and a few of the other men dress the dead girl and make her look pretty once more, but they cannot restore her life. And, he reflects, they will never truly know who she was. As Dũng links his two final battles with the South at Ban Mê Thuột and the Sài Gòn airport strategically, Kien connects the deaths of these two young enemy women morally. He portrays Hà Nội’s defeat of Sài Gòn as inglorious as his battle with the women.

198 Ibid., 123.
199 Ibid., 207.
200 Ibid., 204.
After the war Kien meets an invalid girl soldier named Hien. Because her leg is injured, he carries her to his hammock on the Unification Train and they lie together. The rocking of the car sets their hammock swinging and despite the cheerful teasing from the soldiers around them they hug each other and fall asleep. They wake and kiss hurriedly, “sharing the last moments of their uniformed lives, the last kilometers of their battlefield of youth, in passionate embrace.”201 A war hero herself, Hien is the correct Communist mate. By partnering with a woman of desirable party background, Kien might recover some small measure of the emotional, physical, and spiritual investment he has made in the party.202 Unfortunately, lying beside her on the train reminds Kien of being on the troop train with Phương on a train a decade before, and thus calls forth the memory of his sweetheart’s rape. Easing himself from Hien’s embrace, he peers out through the train window and “for an eerie moment he seemed to be with Phương ten years earlier, both of them seventeen, going south, south, south.”203

In Hà Nội, Kien finds that a mysterious mute girl has moved into his late father’s former attic art studio. They begin a strange relationship and the neighbors wonder at how they can make it work, considering the fact that “one’s dumb, the other’s crazy.”204 The mute girl helps him remember and listens to his war stories, encouraging him to write them down. Writing renews his “thirst for living and for love,” but unfortunately it is not pleasant that writing feels like love, because for Kien love is pain. As he writes the endless combat of his life moves “from the lines on pages into the real life of the author.”205 His writing craft

204 Ibid., 113.
205 Ibid., 109.
asserts “its own logic, its own flow.” Stories loop and float through his mind and into the chaotic but complex and mysteriously coded manuscript he writes.

As his muse and the focal point of his chaotic memory, the mute girl has “no way to express herself,” but she enables Kien to recall his experience, to get the words on paper and resist an “orgy of self-destruction.” Sometimes she wants to scream at him for his constant, pathetic confusion, which causes him to mistake her “for a jungle girl named Hoa, then for Phương, the girl next door. Then for the invalid Hien on the train. Then, horribly, for a naked girl at Sài Gòn airport…he also mistook her for certain ghosts. At times. . . he changed her name from masculine to feminine.”

In the end she finds that he has written her into his novel, “in the first person, then in the third.” When the manuscript is completed, however, he has no use for it. She places a hand over his to stop him from putting another page into the fire and then:

In the total silence he then possessed her as though nothing else in the world mattered. She gasped in desperation for him and for many hours they remained locked together. His loneliness pierced her like a knife, throbbing painfully. He left while she was still asleep. This was his final departure.

The mute girl represents Bảo Ninh’s own silenced political voice, and not in a merely abstract or literary way. She is a direct, consciously crafted coded symbol for the novel itself. She is the process of writing about the war in a politically volatile manner. The story of their love affair is the story of the novel’s suppression and its eventual publication. In this clearly sexual scene, Kien is sated at last. The writing is finished. Together, the mute and crazy—those opposing forces which make up the dialectic of trauma—have found a way to tell a true war story. Having dissented at last against the univocal glorification of war, combat veteran Bảo Ninh was no longer politically mute. His character, therefore, no longer sexually impotent.

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206 Ibid., 88.
207 Ibid., 113.
208 Ibid., 110.
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I was honored to meet and speak at length with Bào Ninh in his home in Hà Nội in June, 2011. My translator during this meeting was a young Vietnamese woman named Oanh. As we left his home on that rainy day I felt disappointed that we had scarcely touched upon my prepared questions. I was reflecting on how famously reticent the writer had been during our conversation, because, as an American, I had heard nothing new to add to our own historic narrative: Americans are accustomed to debate, regret, and harsh criticism of the Vietnam War. But young Oanh was shocked. She wept over what Bào Ninh said that day because his words were so bold, new, and unsettling to her. She had never heard before that war might be bad or sad, that Hà Nội’s victory might be remembered as anything other than glorious.
CHAPTER 3
GETTING GUS HASFORD’S PRIVATE JOKE

Only in Vietnam is hypocrisy fatal.209

— Gustav Hasford, The Phantom Blooper

Vietnam War veteran Gus Hasford’s second Vietnam War novel, The Phantom Blooper is the story of a Marine combat correspondent, Private James T. “Joker” Davis. Knocked unconscious by a concussion blast during the final battle at Khe Sanh, he awakes to find that his nemesis, a mysterious American turncoat Marine known as the Phantom Blooper, has dragged him off into the jungle and turned him over to the Việt Công. During his prolonged captivity in their village, Private Joker tries to gain the enemy’s trust in order to escape, yet becomes increasingly empathetic toward them. He becomes involved in their lives, enmeshed in their social structure, and finally understands their political cause as well. Joker becomes a communist sympathizer first and finally a Phantom Blooper himself, stalking and firing on his fellow Americans.

Outlandish as this plot may be, there were a handful of documented cases of American defection and collaboration with the enemy during the Vietnam War, and the idea of the “white-Cong” or “super-Charlie” turncoat was fairly widespread among American soldiers and Marines in Việt Nam. Owen Gillman argues that these “shadowy figures… scattered throughout the diverse zones of combat” were most powerful in metaphor form. They were particularly scary, he says, in that they embodied the “weakness of the American

position in Vietnam” and in public opinion at home. A reported sighting of blue-eyed Charlie suggested to the troops “that the United States role in the war was not sufficiently privileged to hold all Americans in unwavering allegiance.”

The Vietnam War offers a clear and lasting example of political breakdown, of a polis finally unable to maintain support for military action, and few events of the war were more damaging than the Tết Offensive of 1968. While the battle is now widely recognized as part of this larger offensive, an enduring question of Khe Sanh is what Hà Nội’s true strategic goal there may have been. The two primary alternatives are summed up by John Prados and Ray Stubbe this way: “either the Tết Offensive was a diversion intended to facilitate NVA/NLF preparations for a war-winning battle or if Khe Sanh was a diversion to mesmerize Westmoreland in the days before Tết.”

After the war, reknown NVA General Võ Nguyên Giáp confirmed that Khe Sanh had in fact been a strategic diversion to divert U.S. forces away from the cities in South Vietnam, which were to be the main targets of the offensive. American General Westmoreland, however, continued to conceive of Khe Sanh as a discrete and direct attempt to replicate the Việt Minh triumph over the French at Giáp in 1954. Westmoreland hoped to give Giáp a “Dien Bien Phu in reverse,” by using far superior firepower to kill large numbers of the North Vietnamese troops amassed in the hills around Khe Sanh. Espousing the value of a positive kill ratio in his biography, Westmoreland claimed that Giáp’s casualties at Khe Sanh were far in excess of those incurred by the French at Điện Biên Phủ. “A Western


212 Richard Ellison, Stanley Karnow, Lawrence Wilson Lichty, Elizabeth Deane, Austin Hoyt, Bruce Palling, Andrew Pearson, Martin Smith, and Judith Vecchione. Vietnam, a television history. (New York: Sony Corp. of America, 1987.) DVD.
commander absorbing losses on the scale of Giap’s” he imagined, “would hardly have lasted in command more than a few weeks.”213

While North Vietnamese deaths did far exceed Marine losses, the numbers were nevertheless untenable to the American public: 1968 was the deadliest year of the war for United States, with 16,899 soldiers killed.214 Tết, and particularly the battle at Khe Sanh, created a crisis within the Johnson administration. It became increasingly difficult to convince Americans that the offensive had in fact been a major defeat for the communists. Officious and optimistic assessments met with new suspicion and came under increasingly heavy criticism as a national “credibility gap” opened into a dark abyss.215

Despite the staggering volume of material available about the battle for Khe Sanh, very little has been written on the dismantling and abandonment of the base. This likely stems first from the clandestine nature of the withdrawal itself. Further, if the work of the polity is to foster agreement among the populace in support of military defense, then America’s national metahistory must downplay the withdrawal in historic record much as it did contemporaneously.

This chapter will track Marine veteran Hasford’s use of metaphor to argue that the abandonment of Khe Sanh was, in his view, tantamount to large-scale American military collaboration with the enemy. He perceived that his nation’s power was used disproportionately against the enemy and with careless disregard for its own citizen-soldiers at Khe Sanh. The command to withdrawal was, therefore, exponentially morally injurious to him and left him politically disenfranchised. Like Bão Ninh, Hasford chose to tell his story in fiction because it distanced his testimony from the endorsed narrative of a nation that he


Credibility Gap is euphemism first used in journalism to describe public skepticism about the war, which arose from lies told the war by politicians and reported in the media.
distrusted and from the highly politicized journalism that informs it. Further, *The Phantom Blooper* is a psychological metaphor, a study of the relentless fear that stalks the soldier or Marine: that his own misstep might prove fatal to himself and his comrades. Through fiction, Hasford provides us an eyewitness account, an alternative, critical assessment of the battle, and insight into the emotional and political betrayal he suffered in combat.

Commander of U.S. forces in Vietnam General William Westmoreland established the Marine Corps’ Khe Sanh Combat Base (KSCB) in 1962 on the site of a former United States Army Special Forces airfield, once a French colonial fort. He intended for the base to serve as western terminus of the famed McNamara Line. It was to protect against the movement of men and supplies from north to south through Laos. The location proved challenging from the beginning, however, prone to ambush and difficult to supply. In August of 1967 the Americans closed Route 9, the northernmost road in South Vietnam below the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ), due to the constant threat of ambush. Through fall and winter the North Vietnamese Army (NVA) amassed troops and supplies in the mountains around the Khe Sanh until, by January of 1968, 20,000 NVA soldiers had surrounded the 6,000 U.S. Marines garrisoned there. Resupply had to be made by air. Khe Sanh was under siege. Between January and March alone, allied airmen dropped 80,000 tons of ordnance in the surrounding hills—more than the nonnuclear tonnage dropped on Japan throughout World War II. Under such overwhelming airpower the NVA was unable to hold fixed positions. They concentrated instead on shelling the base continually with rocket, artillery, and mortar rounds.

Although it had too dangerous for the outnumbered Marines to leave the base in numbers sufficient to engage the enemy, the U.S. Defense Department continued to argue that Khe Sanh blocked five avenues of infiltration from Laos into South Vietnam. If it were

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abandoned, according to the official view, entire North Vietnamese divisions would pour down Route 9 and along other natural approaches through the valleys to overrun a chain of other U.S. held positions. Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara argued that this would have grave political, as well as military consequences. The presence of the base, he believed, reduced American reliance on bombing North Vietnam. This, in turn, increased Washington’s flexibility in diplomatic negotiations. Military commanders were also concerned that American troops and the public back home would suffer a heavy psychological blow if the Marines were to retreat.

The fighting at Khe Sanh grew ever more violent, however. During the first six weeks of the siege, Marines killed an estimated 1,300 North Vietnamese Army regulars within a four-mile radius of the base. The North Vietnamese, in turn, pummeled the base with nearly 200 artillery, rocket, and mortar rounds a day. At night, under cover of darkness, NVA sappers, combat engineers, tunneled under or penetrated the encircling barbed wire and encroached on the combat base. American dead and wounded flowed in a steady stream to the Khe Sanh aid station. Then, in late February of 1968, the 3rd Platoon Bravo Company 1st Battalion 26th Marines—immortalized in Marine lore as the lost ‘Ghost Patrol’—was ambushed in a blanket of fog just outside the base perimeter. Twenty-six Marines were killed. Their bodies rotted for five weeks before their fellow Marines could fight their way with fixed bayonets one hundred yards beyond the wire to recover the corpses. Eleven more Americans died in the March 31 battle to retrieve them.217

That same day, President Johnson announced on national television that, as a “gesture of peace” he had ordered a halt to air and naval bombardment of North Vietnam above the twentieth parallel.218 He remained determined, however, that Khe Sanh not be an “American Dien Bien Phu.” The base was to be held at all costs. The beleaguered troops at Khe Sanh

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were given the heaviest air support ever accorded to ground forces. B-52 Stratofortresses flew from bases in Okinawa, Guam, and Thailand to bomb the surrounding jungle, offering sporadic, delusory encouragement that the “at all costs” strategy might eventually prevail.

By April of 1968, however, it was clear that the logistical situation had changed. The North Vietnamese had built several roads to replace Route 9 into South Vietnam, effectively circumventing Khe Sanh. The NVA could now transport troops, heavy weapons, and ammunition to the front more quickly and in greater quantity. These new capabilities had profound implications. The approximately 6,000 Marines at Khe Sanh had represented a calculated fulcrum of balance between the number of troops that could be supplied and the level of force necessary to defend them. According to McNamara’s calculations, the Communists’ increased ability to launch attacks against the base due to this new infrastructure tipped that balance. On April 5 General Westmoreland announced from headquarters in Sài Gòn that the siege had been lifted, but offered few details. As if the red-mud quagmire of Khe Sahn had simply evaporated, the Chicago Tribune reported, “Yanks Break Commie Siege—some Marines may be withdrawn.”

The battle was not over, however. Marines continued to occupy the base and various nearby hill positions and to engage in search and destroy missions. More than 400 Americans were killed and 2,300 wounded in the 10 weeks following the official end of the siege. This was more than two times the casualties sustained by the Marines in the siege itself. The battle continued in the media as well. Khe Sanh captured the attention of the media and the American public like no other battle of the war. The siege had been the major news headline coming out of Việt Nam in late March 1968; roughly 25 percent of all war film footage reporting shown on evening television newscasts during February and March 1968 were devoted to Khe Sanh. In the case of CBS, the figure was 50 percent. By March, opponents of the war outnumbered supporters. Gallup polls indicated that nearly one person

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220 *Chicago Times* April 5, 1968 (page 8, section 1).
in five switched from the hawks’ to the doves’ between early February and mid-March. In a June 1968 report, New York Times reporter Douglas Robinson described Khe Sanh as “still a fearsome place of exploding shells and death.”

On June 11, 1968, General Westmoreland relinquished command of U.S. forces in Việt Nam. His successor, Army General Creighton W. Abrams, believed that the only way to minimize the negative impact that the siege was having on American support for the war was to close the base immediately. He implemented a plan for extraction that had been previously suggested by Generals William Rosson and Robert Cushman, which Westmoreland had rejected. As the Marines began packing their equipment and filling in foxholes, Chaplain Ray Stubbe noted in his diary, “The general attitude of people in the base is that it is wrong to abandon the base after fighting so long for it.” Many were furious. One of the Marine battalions was “almost in open revolt” over the decision.

The process itself was complicated and dangerous, and the Marines were extremely vulnerable to enemy attack while the base was being dismantled. U.S. command wanted to leave a “completely clean piece of real estate” at Khe Sanh, to leave nothing to indicate that the Americans had been forced to withdraw. Ruined aircraft were cut up and hauled away so that they could not be used for practical or propaganda purposes. Eight hundred bunkers, miles of barbed wire, and acres of metal runway materials were buried, destroyed, or physically removed. Nine allied infantry battalions operating in the vicinity had to be deployed elsewhere without advertising their movements to the North Vietnamese, or perhaps, to the American press. Trench lines were filled in and sandbags were emptied as NVA gunners continued to fire on the Marine positions. On July 5, 1968, the base was officially closed. Five Marines were killed in fighting near Khe Sanh that day. The final withdrawal was conducted at night. It was interrupted for several hours when Communist


artillerymen scored a direct hit on a bridge on Route 9. The battle for Khe Sanh was finally over.

North Vietnam was quick to exploit the news. In the five-day period beginning on July 7, 1968, Hà Nội radio devoted 70 percent of its broadcast time in all Asian languages to discussions of the “American defeat” and the “Communist victory” at Khe Sanh. In a report from Hong Kong, the New York Times noted that Asian nations generally believed the North Vietnamese explanation for the base closing and rejected the American version that they had simply responded to a changed logistical situation. On the American side, the abandonment of the base was kept secret for as long as possible and when finally made public, only a minimum amount of detail and explanation were provided.

John Carroll, a young journalist for The Baltimore Sun, flew into the Marine’s outpost at Khe Sanh and was surprised to find that it was “obviously in the process of being destroyed.” Although some newsmen in Sài Gòn knew about the evacuation, no one had yet filed the story because U.S. command had not “given them the go-ahead.” John Carroll’s report was breaking news. It travelled quickly around the globe. He was immediately charged with having released information of troop movements to the enemy and his press credentials were suspended. Carroll argued that no information had been revealed that the North Vietnamese did not already have through simple observation. Upon his arrival in Khe Sanh he said, he had seen the Marines withdrawing all salvageable material and “destroying everything else, in plain sight of the North Vietnamese.” He asked the Marines directly whether the enemy knew about the withdrawal or not, “and they answered that of course they did.” Carroll’s slim report garnered him “one of the harshest disciplinary actions ever taken against an American reporter in Vietnam,” not because he had revealed troop movements to the enemy but to America’s voting public.223

223 Newsweek, August 12 1968, 80.
PART ONE: PHANTOMS FACTUAL AND FICTIONAL

On the opening pages of *The Phantom Blooper* Hasford quotes from an August 1968 *Newsweek* article about a “slender young Caucasian with long brown hair” that Marines had sighted on multiple occasions fighting alongside the Việt Cộng near the town of Phú Bài. The Marines reported that he wore a “shabby green uniform with a red sash tied across his chest,” and carried a Soviet AK-47. They shot him in battle and he cried “Help!” as he fell dead into a river. They searched for his body the next day but did not find it. They thought that he was likely a Marine enlisted man who had been missing in action since 1965. Or, perhaps, it was someone else. There had been a number of other reports of Americans operating with Việt Cộng units in the area. One “high ranking U.S. officer,” said of these purported turncoats, “You know there’s always bound to be one nut out of so many GI’s who get captured.”224

By opening his novel with this reference to an article in a trusted news magazine, Hasford introduces us to both the reality of American defectors and collaborators with the Việt Cộng, and to the “sea stories” about them that circulated among Marines. He also further enhances the ambiguity—or mystery—of the book: we might believe from *Newsweek* that there really was a Marine deserter in the Phú Bài area in 1968. Or we might trust only that soldiers and Marines believed that there were deserters in the Phú Bài area. Because Hasford’s is a work of fiction we might assume that he invented the *Newsweek* piece entirely. The article is in fact, genuine. And a handful of real cases of alleged collaboration with the enemy during the war lent much to his parable of *The Phantom Blooper*.

U.S. Army Private McKinley Nolan, for example, served with the 1st Infantry Division near Sài Gòn. He was reportedly seen with a native woman on the Cambodian frontier just before his mysterious disappearance in November of 1967, and was the subject of rumor and sporadic sightings for decades to follow. Some believed that the Việt Cộng had captured Nolan, but others considered him traitor or turncoat. When caught in some

nefarious black market trade, they said, he had strangled two American guards and retreated to the jungle. He was rumored to have joined the Khmer Rouge, done broadcasts for Radio Hà Nội, and written propaganda leaflets circulated among American prisoners of war. Upon their return to the United States, several American POWs reported having seen Nolan and his Cambodian second family almost daily. James Stockdale, highest-ranking naval officer held as a prisoner of war in Việt Nam described Nolan matter-of-factly as a “U.S. soldier who defected in South Vietnam and supplied Hanoi Hannah with tapes on defecting.”

In 1986, several national news articles reported that, according to U.S. intelligence documents at least seven missing Americans had been seen alive in Việt Nam during the previous decade, including McKinley Nolan.\(^{225}\) His American wife and family in Texas hoped anew that he might eventually be brought home. POW/MIA advocacy groups, too, anticipated his return, hoping that he might bring information on other missing men. No further word surfaced on Nolan in the next few years, however. Hopes dwindled again until 2006, when veteran Dan Smith returned to Việt Nam to do humanitarian work. Smith encountered a black man of his own approximate age on the street in the city of Tây Ninh, near the Cambodian border. They shared a brief, cryptic conversation, which led Smith to contact military investigators. When shown McKinley Nolan’s picture, Smith immediately picked him out of the photo lineup. One of the last Americans unaccounted for in Southeast Asia, Nolan had been forgotten by nearly everyone but his American and Cambodian families.

This mysterious sighting in Tây Ninh caught the interest of journalist Richard Linnet, who had been following the Nolan case for 12 years. Linnet teamed up with director Henry Corra and together they created the 2010 documentary, *The Disappearance of McKinley Nolan*. The film follows Nolan’s brother Michael and reporter Dan Smith on their journey from the impoverished cotton belt of Texas to the former battlegrounds of Việt Nam in

search of the missing man. The trail finally leads them to Cambodia, where Nolan and his wife had been sighted in May, 1974 on a coffee plantation.

Pol Pot’s Khmer Rouge were then still fighting alongside the Vietnamese. But when the Americans withdrew in 1975, relations between Việt Nam and Pol Pot’s Cambodia deteriorated. Việt Nam invaded Cambodia in 1978, and Nolan and his new family were caught in the middle. The film reveals that in 1977 McKinley Nolan was killed by the Khmer Rouge. In the film, Cambodian veterans excavate the “Chaukar Café” site where Mike and the filmmakers think McKinley was killed. Bone fragments were found but they were too decomposed for analysis. Though no overt accusations or confessions are made in the documentary, his brother Mike Nolan believed that the Cambodian man who claims to have been McKinley’s best friend played a role in his death.\[^{226}\]

Conjecture swirls throughout McKinley Nolan’s story; his life is a study in moral ambiguity. He may have been captured, may have been a traitor, and may have been an American operative. He may have killed two American MPs and then hidden in the jungle, afraid to go home and face prosecution for murder. He may have joined the Khmer Rouge, perhaps for political reasons. Or perhaps he simply fell in love.

Among the many Phantom Blooper legends that Hasford’s character Private Joker recounts is a tall handsome blond man in black pajamas with a folding-stock AK-47 assault rifle.\[^{227}\] This iconic “all-American boy” fits the description of alleged collaborator Earl Weatherman. A big, muscular twenty year old Marine with blond hair and blue eyes, Weatherman was imprisoned in the brig at Đà Nẵng in 1967 for slugging an officer. On November 8 he escaped the brig. This act alone constitutes desertion. Upon escape, Weatherman hired a driver to take him to his Vietnamese girlfriend’s house. But, the story goes, the driver delivered him to the Việt Cộng instead. He was then detained for many years in various POW camps in Quảng Nam Province. In 1973, a series of diplomatic negotiations between the United States and North Vietnam known as Operation

\[^{226}\textit{The Disappearance of McKinley Nolan}: Directed by Henry Corra. (Sundance Films, 2010).\]

Homecoming led to the return of 591 American POWs. Earl Weatherman was not among them.

Opinion regarding the political loyalties and fate of Earl Weatherman was and remains divided among his former fellow prisoners. Like Private Joker’s blond “round-eye Blooper, “who was “assumed killed by Force Recon in the A Shau Valley,”” it was widely believed but never proven that Weatherman was killed in an ill-fated escape attempt in the spring of 1968. Conversely, late-returning POW Robert “Bobby” Garwood—who was himself court-marshaled and found guilty of desertion and treason—felt that Weatherman’s only crime was falling in love with a communist. Garwood reported that he and Weatherman had been held in the same group of POWs several years after Weatherman’s supposed death. POW David Harker considered Weatherman’s alliance to the Việt Cộng to have merely been an act of survival. He recalled Weatherman cautioning, “Don’t believe everything you hear about me.”

Robert Garwood disappeared under far less mysterious circumstances, but his actions and motives are equally debated. In September of 1965 he was a nineteen-year-old Marine Private First Class with just ten days remaining in his tour of duty. A chauffer for officers, Garwood was captured from his jeep in Đà Nẵng, South Vietnam. Over the course of his fourteen years in captivity—or in collaboration—he was reportedly seen by several American and South Vietnamese prisoners of war in various camps but did not resurface until February of 1979, when he smuggled a note identifying himself to a World Bank official in a Hà Nội hotel. The note generated international attention. The Vietnamese released Garwood and he returned to the U.S. in March. Based upon the reports of several previously released former POWs who accused Garwood of having “gone over” to the

228 Hasford, The Phantom Blooper. 5.
229 Anton and Denton, Why Didn’t You Get Me Out?
Communist side, the Marine Corps immediately charged him with several violations of the Uniform Code of Military Justice.\(^{231}\)

In February of 1981, Garwood was found guilty of collaborating with the enemy. Specifically, he was charged with having served as an interpreter for the enemy, informing to the enemy on his fellow American POWs, and working to indoctrinate them to “cross over” to the enemy cause. He was convicted of having struck David Harker, another American in captivity, of serving as a guard for the enemy, and interrogating fellow soldiers on military topics such as escape plans.\(^{232}\) He was reduced to the rank of private and was given a dishonorable discharge from the Marine Corps, and had to forfeit all back pay and allowances of almost $150,000. He appealed the court-martial but the 1985 Court of Military Appeals upheld the verdict.

Robert Garwood was the only serviceman to have been charged with such crimes during the Vietnam War. Some, particularly POW activists, still feel that he was singled out to discredit the stories he had told regarding other Americans he had seen, who were also held long after the war was over. To them, Garwood became an unlikely champion.\(^{233}\) Retired Navy Captain Eugene “Red” McDaniel, a former POW and president of the American Defense Institute, is among those who believe Garwood was silenced for his knowledge of Americans left behind.\(^{234}\) “I am convinced they were on a mission, and they carried it out,” McDaniel said of the Pentagon. “The mission was to discredit Garwood because Garwood had seen live American prisoners, because they all were officially supposed to be dead, so they set out to destroy Garwood.”\(^{235}\)


\(^{233}\) Anton and Denton, Why Didn’t You Get Me Out?

\(^{234}\) The American Defense Institute is a non-profit organization active in POW and MIA issues.

While enigmatic, these few documented incidents of desertion and collaboration provided bits of bent truth around which the “White Cong” legend could accrete and gain credibility. Various versions of the legend stalked ground troops through triple-canopy jungle wearing rubber-tire sandals and loose linen pajamas. A traitor who had not simply abandoned the fight but actively aided the enemy. He spoke communist propaganda to soldiers and Marines in American English through a bullhorn, urging them to surrender. Like Việt Nam’s terrain and weather, he told them, the Vietnamese people could not be overcome. Hasford writes:

Below Phủ Bài the Phantom Blooper is a black Marine Lieutenant who inspects defensive positions at bridge security compounds. The next night, they get hit. North of Huế City, the Phantom Blooper is a salt and pepper team of snuffy grunts who guide Marine patrols into L-shaped ambushes set by the Viet Cong. Force Recon claims a probable kill for shooting the Phantom Blooper in the A Shau Valley...a round-eye, tall and white, with blond hair, wearing black pajamas and a red headband...The Phantom Blooper started visiting Khe Sanh the night after the siege was lifted by Operation Pegasus. 237

In 1970 veteran John Baky, Director of the Imaginative Representations of the Vietnam War Collection at La Salle University, witnessed firsthand as a cluster of legends centered around periodic sightings of renegade GI’s the spread among soldiers and Marines. Baky describes these “robustly inventive and varied tales” among the most resilient stories to survive the war, and cites many enduring cultural references to the myth, most notably the Colonel Kurtz character in Francis Ford Coppola’s 1979 film, Apocalypse Now. 238

Winston Groom and Duncan Spencer interrogate the myth extensively in their biography of Robert Garwood, Conversations with the Enemy. In a war in which each side completely misunderstood the other, they argue, the central outrage was that the turncoat soldier “had abandoned not only his country and his ideology, but also his hemisphere and

236 The phrase “Salt and pepper” refers to a racially mixed team.


238 Baky, John. “White Cong and Black Clap: The Ambient Truth of Vietnam War Legendry.” The 60s Project: (IATH), University of Virginia at Charlottesville.

http://www2.iath.virginia.edu/sixties/HTML_docs/Texts/Scholarly/Baky_White_Cong_02.html
his race.” Regardless of the facts, Garwood had become so associated with the legend of
‘Super Charlie’ that when he finally returned to the United States he was a scapegoat of
“almost religious significance…whereby all the losses and effort wasted, the lies and
hopeless blood could be made right and fair.”

The principle commonality between the few documented cases of American defection
and Hasford’s fictional Phantom Blooper is moral ambiguity. “Everybody who talks about
McKinley Nolan is really talking about themselves,” says documentarian Henry Corra,
“because he is a ghost.” Similarly, Private Joker ruminates over the Phantom Blooper
precisely because he is unseen and abstract. He is, among other things, the unknown,
untested quality within that “attacks without warning from out of the darkness, the one
incorruptible bearer of the one unendurable truth.”

One of the primary reasons for Joker’s transformation from grunt to turncoat is that,
while living in their village, he begins to see the Việt Cộng as people and to respect them as
adversaries. They are as tough as his own Marines. As the humanity of the enemy becomes
evident, he begins to suspect that his own government has misinformed him. In this, Joker
provides insight into both the respect for the enemy that many soldiers and Marines gained,
and the political disenchantment that many suffered. When he finally faces his own troops
as a Phantom Blooper himself, Joker literally sees his fellow grunts through the eyes of the
enemy he has come to esteem.

Psychiatrist Jonathan Shay asserts that “any ideology that debases the enemy
endangers the lives of soldiers,” because underestimation of the enemy leads to tactical and
strategic disaster.” The American tendency to dishonor the enemy had “toxic psychological
results” as well, because by degrading our enemy we also degrade the valor of our own battle

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239 Winston Groom and Duncan Spencer. *Conversations with the Enemy: The story of PFC

240 Ashley Wren Collins, “The Disappearance of McKinley Nolan: Must-See Vietnam Feature
(accessed February 17, 2013).

against him. If our opponent is not worthy, then the blood we shed in battle against him is utterly wasted. Thus, the veteran must restore honor to enemy in order to restore self-respect and recover from post-traumatic stress. In this sense, private Joker’s psychological state itself is contradictory: as looses his grip on reality he gains a more healthier, more humane perspective.

Gus Hasford was completing work on *The Phantom Blooper* during the Garwood trial and was almost certainly exposed to the media sensation and public debate surrounding the case. His Private “Joker” has much in common with Robert Garwood, McKinley Nolan, and Earl Weatherman. Like Garwood, Nolan, and Hasford, Private Joker comes from the poor, rural American South. Like Nolan and Weatherman, he falls in love with a native communist woman. Like Garwood he is demoted to private. Like Nolan, he becomes involved in Southeast Asian village life and politics and identifies emotionally with the enemy. And although Joker himself is not involved in nefarious dealings, the novel confronts black market trade by American soldiers, in which Nolan was reputedly involved.

Similarly, real life geographical locations and historic battles—Phú Bài, Huế and Khe Sanh—imbue Hasford’s novel with the authority of his experience. The August, 1968 *Newsweek* article that he used to contextualize *The Phantom Blooper* reported a “White VC” in the area of Phú Bài, near the ancient imperial capital of Huế, in Central Việt Nam. Hasford passed through Phú Bài en route to fight in the battle for Huế and then moved on to Khe Sahn with Operation Pegasus. These two brief *Newsweek* articles—one about a Marine defector and the other about journalist John Carroll who was punished for publishing the truth about the closing of the base—encapsulate the central themes of his fiction, just as their locations became the respective settings for *The Short Timers* and *The Phantom Blooper*.

An Alabama native, Gus Hasford was a voracious reader from childhood and always longed to become a writer. In high school he edited and wrote for the school newspaper and worked part-time for two area papers. When he was sixteen, his grandfather lent him the

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money to begin a literary journal called *Freelance*. It was a glossy 56-page quarterly magazine for writers, with advertising and 1,300 paid subscribers nationally at five dollars per subscription. “All this stuff was written by professional writers,” Hasford later explained to his friend Grover Lewis. “I was just a kid. I couldn’t write the stuff. I was sixteen.” Although only able to publish and distribute a few issues of *Freelance*, Hasford recalled, “the experience and the contacts helped me get my writing job in the Marines.” He joined the Marine Corps in 1967 at the age of twenty and, like the main character of his war novels, went through basic training at Parris Island, South Carolina. He served most of his time working for Marine base newspapers in the United States. Then, with just ten months left to serve he requested to be sent to the field of battle in the hopes that he might experience Hemingway’s ideal war, man’s greatest adventure.

Hasford was assigned to the First Marine Division Information Services Office (ISO) as combat correspondent. The group called themselves The “ISO Snuffies”, a Snuffy being a junior enlisted infantryman. He soon came to see himself and other combat correspondents as public relations men. “We appeared to be journalists,” he would later reflect, “but were really simply promoting the war and promoting the Marine Corps.” Writing articles for *The Sea Tiger, Pacific Stars and Stripes*, and *Leatherneck Magazine*, he reported good news from the frontline throughout the war: either stories of Marines defeating and outsmarting the enemy on battlefields, or stories of Marines “winning hearts and minds” in the hamlets. Nevertheless, he reflected, “in the field a Marine correspondent is just another rifleman.” Hasford participated in the effort to break through to Khe Sanh during the siege. In January 1968 he was among the Task Force X-Ray Marines called in to bolster the South Vietnamese in the Battle for Huế. In March he took part in the overland relief expedition known as Operation Pegasus, a combined Marine and Army sweep which eventually broke through to

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244 Jason Aaron. ”Mangling Frail Civilian Sensibilities: The Story of Gustav Hasford, Literary Snuffie." *Aura Literary Arts Review.* (Birmingham: University of Alabama Press.)
245 Hasford, The *Short Timers*, 38.
the base. He began work on his first war novel and joined the Vietnam Veterans Against the War organization while still in-country.

A few months before Baltimore Sun writer John Carroll was disciplined for his story on the abandonment of Khe Sanh, Hasford was reprimanded for a story in which he reported that the Fifth Marine Regiment in Huế had used beehive rounds, a type of artillery filled with hundreds of tiny, steel darts. The piece “drew the ire of a colonel at the Marine combat information bureau who killed the story” and had Hasford reprimanded for suggesting that American soldiers would use such an inhumane weapon.246 “In the land of 1,000 lies,” Hasford would later write, “to be an honest man is a crime against the state.”247

In August 1968 Newsweek suggested that the suspension of John Carroll’s press pass represented an “increased hostility between the press and the military,” particularly since General Abrams had taken over command from Westmoreland.248 This hostility, and indeed the oppositional relationship of truth to war, is a major theme of Hasford’s work. “It takes talent to convince people that war is a beautiful experience,” Joker says. “Come one, come all to exotic Vietnam, the jewel of Southeast Asia, meet interesting, stimulating people of an ancient culture…and kill them.”249

On the day that he returned home to Alabama, before he had “even had a chance to get the soil of Viêt Nam out from under his fingernails,” Hasford’s parents announced that they were moving the following day to Washington State.250 The Hasfords were a Confederate family—his great-great grandfather James Curtis had been imprisoned in Jasper for refusing to join the Confederate Army. His family’s Civil War past had fascinated him since childhood and this southern identity had long been a grounding emotional and

246 Aaron, "Mangling Frail Civilian Sensibilities."
247 Hasford, The Short Timers, 222.
248 Newsweek, August 12 1968, 80.
249 Hasford, The Short Timers, 45.
psychological force. Not sure what else to do he moved with his parents to the Pacific Northwest, but this wholly foreign America compounded the difficulty of his transition from combat back into civilian life. He worked at a variety of jobs and enrolled in literature classes at Lower Columbia Community College, where he wrote his iconic short story, “Is that You, John Wayne? Is this Me?” in 1972.

Throughout his writing life Hasford would continue to employ actor John Wayne to personify his contempt for all pretty lies told about war. “John Wayne was the central mythic figure in Vietnam,” Hasford recalled. “He was used in so many ways. He permeated the language. To ‘do a John Wayne’ was to do something senselessly heroic and stupid…The name was invoked all over Việt Nam. It was almost like a presence, because the mind-set of the people came from watching these old war movies.”

A powerful short story about a confrontation over a peace button between a Marine and his angry superior, “Is that you, John Wayne?” became a pivotal scene in The Short Timers. After Hasford’s death his friend Earl Gerheim—a fellow ISO Snuffie and model for Hasford’s character, Crazy Earl—reflected that this short story encapsulated Hasford’s philosophy and the themes he worked on throughout his writing career. “This thing about the button,” Gerheim said, “there’s nothing fictional about that. He actually wore a peace button… and an Army lieutenant colonel just jumped all over Gus for wearing this peace button.”

In the early 1970s, Hasford moved from Washington State to Southern California, where he supported himself with whatever jobs he could find and continued to work on the novel that he had begun writing in Việt Nam. Most of his work during this time was highly experimental, and he associated most commonly with science fiction writers. He had works published in magazines and anthologies such as Space and Time and the Orbit series, and


briefly shared an apartment with fellow aspiring writer Art Cover and author Harlan Ellison. When he attended the Clarion Workshop in Science Fiction and Fantasy 1971, he presented part of a piece titled “The Tattooed Chicken.” This story would one day become the basis of his first novel, The Short Timers, and would eventually be filmed by director Stanley Kubrick. In those early stages Hasford envisioned a surreal set of vignettes about the Civil War, to include three chapters set in Viêt Nam, in which the main characters turned into werewolves whenever violence erupted. Strange as it was, Art Cover would later reflect that, “Writing all that experimental fiction was the only way Gus could back into writing directly about the war.”

In 1972 Hasford published a poem titled “Bedtime Story” in Winning Hearts and Minds, the first anthology of writing about the war by veterans themselves. In 1978, Harlan Ellison invited him to the influential science fiction workshop, the Milford Writer’s Conference, where he read the first section of The Short Timers for the first time, to a generally very positive reaction. Joe Haldeman and Gardner Dozois, both science fiction authors and former Army draftees, were notable exceptions. They did not feel Hasford offered an accurate reflection of the military. Halderman “couldn’t believe that the person who wrote this silly piece of tripe had ever been in combat.” And Dozois said of Hasford’s story that he “couldn’t buy soldiers acting like that except in a cheesy movie.” Noted science fiction author Frederik Pohl, then an editor at Bantam Books, liked Hasford’s work, urged him to submit his manuscript, and promptly bought it for Bantam.

Soon, Gus Hasford’s semi-autobiographical war novel was a best seller, drawing the attention of Stanley Kubrick. Hasford, Kubrick, and Michael Herr, the author of Dispatches,

went to London to work on adapting the novel for the screen. It was a rancorous collaboration. Hasford fought Kubrick constantly to ensure that the film version of his novel would not be another “John Wayne” glorification of war. In a letter he wrote to friends from London, Hasford said that Kubrick had been “trying to come up with a more satisfying ending for ‘Shorty.’”

I said, ‘But Stanley, the Vietnam War bloody well wasn’t satisfying.’

‘Right,’ he said, ‘…but we’ve got to convince people to pay to see this movie. That’s show business…’

The thought that his own writing might be used to persuade another generation of impressionable youths into war was, for Hasford, a further violation of his personal ethics, an insult added to moral injury. He railed against such movies in a 1987 opinion piece for *Penthouse* titled, “Vietnam Means Never Having to Say You’re Sorry.” Furious over the promotional blurb written for the paperback edition of *The Short-Timers*, Hasford addresses his fellow veterans:

> It’s time to throw off the leper’s bell of the Vietnam veteran. It’s not enough to touch the names on the Black Wall and remember. Our finest tribute to our fallen dead would be to convince their sons that we were not Rambo and neither are they.

Nevertheless, Kubrick’s *Full Metal Jacket* was released in 1987, a decade after the novel had been published and two decades after Hasford had begun writing it from the battlefield. The film received good reviews and enjoyed great box office success. Kubrick, Herr, and Hasford were nominated for an Academy Award in 1988 for best screenplay.

Whatever gratification this hard-won recognition might have given him was short-lived, however. On January 4, 1988, California Polytechnic State University campus police discovered 748 missing library books in a storage locker rented by Gus Hasford. He was charged with stealing the books from eight libraries around the United States and one in England. The eighty-seven overdue books and *Civil War Times* magazines that he had

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checked out from the Cal Poly library alone were valued at over $2,000. An inconstant
former friend and an ex-girlfriend who worked was a librarian at the school “hooked up with
some showboat rent-a-cop at Cal Poly who thinks he’s Matlock,” Hasford said, and together
they turned him in. As he understood it, his Full Metal Jacket success and pending Academy
Award had inspired his enemies to conspire against him.260

First reports of his arrest misstated that police had discovered 10,000 stolen books.261 The press attacked him. Long time friend Grover Lewis writes, “…a charge of library theft
was the toughest kind of antisocial beef to beat, a universally despicable offense that even
literate slobs could feel superior about.” Lewis felt that Hasford was branded a “bug”
immediately upon the first report and that “any chance for him to win the Oscar had vanished
and that his career had been permanently blighted, if not destroyed.”262 Hasford initially
denied the charges, but finally pled no contest to possessing stolen property. Deeply
disturbed by his legal troubles and by his Hollywood experience, Hasford chose to skip the
Oscar ceremonies. He watched on television as Full Metal Jacket lost to The Last Emperor
for Best Adapted Screenplay.

On June 23, 1989, he pled innocent to two counts of grand theft and ten counts of
possession of stolen property. He was booked at the San Luis Obispo county jail and freed
on $7,500 bail until trial. Despite the difficulties of their working relationship, Stanley
Kubrick tried to help. He asked actor Clint Eastwood to make a personal appeal to Superior
Court Judge Warren Conklin, explaining that Hasford had collected the books for research on
a book he was working on about the Civil War. The Judge assured Eastwood that Hasford,
who was “obviously mentally unstable,” would probably be given a suspended sentence and
psychiatric help.263 Despite these assurances, in the end Conklin sentenced Hasford to six

262 Lewis, “The Killing of Gus Hasford.”
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months in jail and five years’ probation, ordering him to pay restitution from his royalties on his future works.

Hasford felt that “This whole battle between me and the law is, as usual, portrayed as a moral issue when it is in fact, as usual, a power issue…These people think I have too much power, so they’re spanking me a little bit, putting me in my place. Only they’ve ended up spanking me a lot…because I have absolutely refuse to recognize they [sic] authority.”

This unnecessary display of power harkened back, in his mind, to the war in Việt Nam. He served three months of his sentence, during which time his physical and mental health began to deteriorate. “The only difference between jail and the Marine Corps,” he said, “is that in jail they don’t hit us and we don’t get to shoot guns.”

Owen Gilman argues that the Hasford family’s confederate history and his continual, even obsessive research into America’s Civil War became the lens through which he would understand his own experience in combat. Gilman points out that one of the most important and most humanizing aspects of Private Joker’s reflections in Việt Cộng captivity is the realization of the differences between North and South Vietnam, and the development of a parallel, in his mind, between Việt Nam and America’s Civil War and antebellum divisions. Joker notes similarities between the American South and the Vietnamese North, such as the difficulties that the NVA have getting to the battlefields, the difficulty of their impoverished living conditions, and the effects of the war on farming and village life. He likens American black market trade in Việt Nam to the carpetbaggers, Northerners who moved to the South after the American Civil War and profited from the instability and power vacuum that existed at the time.

Through Joker’s near political conversion, Hasford contrasts the organic power of nationalism which the Communists harnessed, and the complacency and entitlement of America’s political and military leadership. As a Southerner, Gilman argues, the revelations


\[265\] Aaron, "Mangling Frail Civilian Sensibilities."
of his imprisonment destine Private Joker “to break away from mainstream America.” He notes the bitter irony of Hasford’s own imprisonment as well. The writer’s “long road to the South,” Gillman writes, “one that passed through the perils of combat in Vietnam, would eventually led [sic] him to transgress federal Law, the very sort of pattern that put southerners into the crucible of the Civil War.” Seeing his Việt Cộng captors, now his comrades, under heavy attack by the Americans coming to rescue him, Joker fires his M-79 grenade launcher at an Army helicopter. He hears the weapon’s familiar Bloop! and reflects, “It is the first time in over a hundred years that a member of my family has fired upon federal troops.”

His friend Bob Bayer remembered that Hasford “just wasn’t ever himself again after going to jail...It weighed on him heavily, you know, on his mental attitudes.” Living in a motel in El Cajon, California, “the goofy, flower-child in green fatigues” began to drink heavily for the first time in his life. Feeling his credibility irreparably damaged by his foray into Hollywood and stint in jail, he abandoned both the Vietnam War trilogy and the Civil War project for which he had pilfered hundreds of library books. He focused his dwindling creative energies on a six-part mystery series of which only the first, *A Gypsy Good Time*, was published. Suffering from diabetes and badly depleted spirits, he moved to the Greek island of Aegina, where he died alone of heart failure at the age of 45 on January 29, 1993. Friends noted that the date coincided eerily with the 25th anniversary of the start of the Tét offensive, the campaign he had so graphically and movingly portrayed in his war novels.

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268 Jason Aaron. "Mangling Frail Civilian Sensibilities."
269 Fellow USMC combat correspondent Earl “Crazy Earl” Gerheim referred to Gus as “Goofy.”
Two weeks after his death, five of Hasford’s fellow ISO Snuffies, a “cadre of Gus,” sat in a row behind his family at his memorial service in Tacoma, Washington, their battle ribbons pinned to their lapels, representing eight Purple Hearts among them. The 1st Marine Division ISO sent a floral tribute that spelled out SEMPER GUS. Hasford’s first novel, The Short-Timers introduces a fictional team of salty Marines who call themselves The Lusthog Squad. Although few of the original members survive this first book, the squad continues to fight in The Phantom Blooper. The protagonist and narrator is Private James T. “The Joker” Davis. Like Gus Hasford, he is a Marine combat correspondent from Alabama. Though his ultimate defection to the enemy takes place in The Phantom Blooper, Joker’s transformation actually begins in the first novel with a string of mercy killings, fragging incidents, and senseless deaths by friendly fire. It is important, then, to understand the significance of his fellow Lusthogs to Joker’s character and view his later actions in the context of their deaths.

In Part One of The Short Timers, titled “The Spirit of the Bayonet,” Joker endures Marine Corps boot camp. He befriends two privates there: a Texan nicknamed “Cowboy” and the inept Leonard “Gomer Pyle” Pratt. Pratt finally commits murder-suicide in front of the whole platoon after graduation from boot camp. The second section, “Body Count” focuses on Joker’s experience—which mirrors Hasford’s own—as a Marine combat correspondent in 1968. As the Têt Offensive begins, Joker is promoted to sergeant and dispatched with his photographer, Rafter Man, to Huế to report on the enemy’s wartime atrocities against civilians there. While on this assignment they cross paths with Joker’s old

271 Jason Aaron. "Mangling Frail Civilian Sensibilities."
272 Lewis, “The Killing of Gustav Hasford.”
friend from boot camp, Cowboy, now Assistant Squad Leader of the Lusthog Squad, a tough bunch of Marines that includes a beastly warrior known only as Animal Mother; a large, imposing black point man named Alice; the radioman, Donlon; corpsman Doc Jay; T.H.E. Rock; platoon commander Lt. Robert M. ‘Mr. Shortround’ Bayer III, to name a few. These men are important to Joker and their deaths motivate Joker’s later actions. They represent the soldier’s moral bond to his fellows. Further, their unique personalities and roles in the squad allow Hasford to consider emotional issues of responsibility, duty, guilt, and regret from a variety of angles.

In part three of the novel, titled “Grunts,” we learn that Cowboy was made Squad Leader of the Lusthogs because their previous leader was killed “doing a John Wayne”. He attacked an NVA position armed only with a BB gun. Now under Cowboy’s command, the Lusthogs are on a jungle mission near the Marine base at Khe Sanh. Alice, walking point, has a bad feeling as they near a particular clearing, but Cowboy insists that they continue. “Let’s move, Midnight,” he says. “I mean it.”

Alice is the first Lusthog to be shot by the enemy sniper as he steps into that clearing. Next to fall are corpsman Doc Jay and New Guy Parker. Cowboy decides to retreat rather than sacrifice the rest of his men in a foolhardy attempt to save the wounded. Machine gunner Animal Mother refuses, however. He will kill Cowboy rather than leave his fallen friends, still exposed and being riddled by sniper fire. So Cowboy promotes Joker to his own position as Squad Leader and runs into the fray himself, pistol in hand. He shoots each of his dying men in the head, thereby ending their suffering and silencing Animal Mother’s protest.

Unfortunately, Cowboy is badly wounded himself while committing these mercy killings. He has sacrificed the wounded Lusthogs so that the remaining men do not sacrifice themselves. As a result he sacrifices his own life. He tries to shoot himself in the head, but the sniper shoots him through the hand. Joker considers it his own duty then, to put Cowboy, paralyzed by shock, out of his misery and lead the surviving Lusthogs to safety. In a moment’s fond memory of their friendship he hesitates, but Cowboy looks up the barrel of

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Joker’s gun and yells, “I NEVER LIKED YOU, JOKER. I NEVER THOUGHT YOU WERE FUNNY—” And Joker shoots him in the head. The squad is stunned to silence.

“Saddle up,” Joker tells them. He picks up Cowboy’s muddy Stetson hat and the squad moves down the trail again the way they had previously come, back toward Marine Base Khe Sanh. Having had no particular respect for Joker previously, the remaining Lusthogs—including Animal Mother—submit wordlessly. “Putting our minds back into our feet, we concentrate all our energy into taking that next step, that one more…We try very hard not to think about anything important, try very hard not to think that there’s no slack and that it’s a long walk home. There it is. I wave my hand and Mother takes the point.”

Hasford pays lavish attention to the details of responsibility and consequence in this firefight, as each man is later haunted by his role in it; the psychological traumas experienced in this central moment of the novel become embodied in phantom form.

As are nearly all of Hasford’s central plot elements, the Lusthogs’ doomed patrol at Khe Sanh is anchored in real events. The most infamous such incident has become known in Marine Corps lore as the Ghost Patrol. On February 25, 1968, a two-squad patrol of Bravo Company 1st battalion 26th Marines, instructed not to venture farther than 1,000 meters from the base perimeter at Khe Sanh, vanished. Two weeks later, casualties of the so-called ghost patrol were established as nine dead, 25 wounded, and most mysteriously, 19 missing. On March 30, a company-size patrol went on mission to the recover the bodies of the ghost patrol and suffered three dead, 71 wounded and three missing before being ordered to pull back; they succeeded in recovering only two bodies from the ghost patrol.

274 Ibid., 178.
275 Ibid., 180.

Photographer Robert Ellison captured the dramatic efforts of Bravo Company’s 3rd platoon to get back to the combat base. His images appeared in a 2-page spread in the March 18, 1968 issue of Newsweek.
The Phantom Blooper is also organized into three parts and picks up shortly after The Short-Timers leaves off. The first section is titled “The Winter Soldiers.” Joker has been demoted again to private for failing to recover Cowboy’s body after the battle near Huế that left nearly all of the original Lusthogs dead. The whereabouts of the seemingly indestructible machine gunner Animal Mother are unknown as well. Joker blames these deaths and Animal Mother’s disappearance on an American fighter of great skill who has defected to the Việt Cộng—a Phantom Blooper.

These are the final hours of Operation Charlie, the evacuation of the Khe Sanh Combat Base. Sitting on a lawn chair atop an abandoned bunker, Joker keeps a strange sort of guard at the nearly dismantled base. A hard, cold monsoon rain is coming down, but he is barefoot and naked save Cowboy’s old grey Stetson hat, adorned with a peace button. In Joker’s increasingly fluid, non-linear narrative, the reader discerns an ever more erratic and violent pattern of behavior, and growing preoccupation with killing or capturing the lurking monster. With a final salute to “Sorry Charlie” — a napalm-blackened human skull wearing a pair of felt Mickey Mouse ears that the Marines have mounted on a stake—he slips beyond the base perimeter armed with the Phantom Blooper’s own preferred weapon, an M-79 grenade launcher, or bloop-gun. He presses further and further into “No Man’s Land,” probing the ground for mines with his toes, making his way slowly in the dark, slipping barefoot in Khe Sanh’s famously heavy, red clay mud.

As he makes his way in the cold, wet, darkness, he has a battle fantasy that “begins like a movie inside my mind.” But in reality, he is an unknown lurking figure outside the wire in the last hours of Khe Sanh, and his fellow Marines do not recognize him. An illumination shell “hisses up in a high arc, pops, burns, pours down a football field of harsh white light” as the perimeter opens up with gunfire, tracer and fragmentation rounds.

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Winter Soldiers refer to a 1971 media event sponsored by the Vietnam Veterans Against the War (VVAW) which charged that atrocities in Việt Nam were the direct result of faulty and even immoral military policies. The winter soldiers were those who testified publicly to having committed or witnessed war crimes. Current Secretary of State John Kerry is the most recognizable and iconic example of the winter soldier.
Struggling for consciousness, he tries to “talk tough to the Phantom Blooper.” But his head bumps on a rock and he drops his M-79. The Phantom Blooper drags his body off into the jungle to bury him alive “in a Viet Cong tunnel…”

Part two, “Travels With Charlie” begins over a year after Joker’s capture. He has been detained by the Việt Cộng, but not in a POW camp. He has not been interrogated or tortured, but is allowed to live and work in their bucolic village. As a Marine, his first duty is to escape. The first step is to gain the trust of his captors and convince them to remove his leg irons. “I’ll never escape from Hoa Binh until the Viet Cong trust me enough to allow me to go on a combat mission,” Joker reflects. “Until then, I must wait patiently and pretend to be a genuine defector or they will ship my scrawny ass nonstop to a broom closet in the Hanoi Hilton. If I’ve learned anything from these people, it is the power of patience…”

His plan is to fool them into believing that he has converted to their cause until, eventually, they ask him to accompany them on an attack against an American position. Then, when the battle begins, he will slip away. As time passes, however, Joker begins to empathize and ultimately identify with the Việt Cộng. He understands and appreciates the difficult conditions in which the Vietnamese guerrillas live and fight; he admires the tenacity with which they conduct their daily lives while American bombs drop from the sky. And, in classic Stockholm style, he falls in love with one of his captors, a tough beauty named Song.

Khe Sanh veteran Michael Archer recalls the Marine defector myth in his memoir, “A Patch of Ground, Khe Sanh Remembered.” Archer attributes these rumors to the propaganda wars. The NVA would shoot leaflets at the Marines, “in artillery shells and usually explode in airbursts, scattering over the area in the breeze.” On one side of the page would be arguments against U.S. involvement in the war, supported by quotes from The New York Times, and on the reverse, the promise of humane treatment upon surrender. In the tense last days of Operation Charlie, he recalls, “we would hear of GIs who had gone over to the other

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278 Hasford, The Phantom Blooper, 55.
279 Ibid., 43.
side and were leading VC and NVA troops against us. But to those of us hunkered down at Khe Sanh, that was inconceivable.”

The Americans shot propaganda leaflets at the enemy, too, which featured photos of a B-52 bomber dropping its entire bomb load on one side, on the reverse a photograph of a VC soldier surrendering to a “friendly ARVN” that was “so far removed from the reality of things, a kind of Vietnamese Norman Rockwell portrait” that the image became the object of the Marines’ dark humor. Archer doubts that either sides’ efforts were effective, but he remains “amused by the incongruity of these little ‘love notes’ being delivered by such lethal means” as the bomb bay of a Boeing Stratofortress. Both the terror that Joker feels when he is caught on the VC side during American bombing runs and the humane treatment he receives in the idyllic VC village seem literally lifted from the two sides’ opposing propaganda pages.

Eventually, Joker is indeed invited to join his Việt Cộng captors on their missions. His principle captor, The Woodcutter, returns his old peace-buttoned Stetson and gives him a bullhorn. His role in the raid, like his role as a combat correspondent, is ironic and dual: “I’m armed with an olive-drab megaphone. My assignment as the Phantom Blooper is to beat the big drums of propaganda and do a head-trip on the enemy, the Elephants, the United States Army. My assignment as a United States Marine is to escape.” But in the actual battle he finds himself caught between the Americans and his VC captors with no chance to escape from either side. “I was somebody’s favorite sight picture every step of the way,” he says. Commander Be Dan orders him to lie in a hammock and the VC carry him away into the jungle again.

Then, one sunny day back in the village, the Army comes to rescue Joker: the tall white man rumored to have been sighted in the rice fields on several occasions. He is in an underground tunnel when the firefight begins and emerges to see Cobra gunships firing

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280 Archer, A Patch of Ground, 115.
281 Hasford, The Phantom Blooper, 95.
282 Hasford, Blooper, 113.
rockets as tanks and ground troops move in. The “world of shit” that comes down on the village leaves all of Joker’s captor-friends dead: The Woodcutter, Song, Commander Be Dan, Johnny Be good, even the little red village rooster.\textsuperscript{283}

Joker himself is badly wounded, but amid the chaos he somehow manages to shoot down one of the Army choppers with a discarded M79 “bloop-gun” without even being noticed. He passes out. In a morphine haze and only sporadically conscious, Private Joker hears the “Fwop, fwop, fwop,” of the helicopter. He is evacuated with the other wounded and dead Americans. As he sinks “into a warm sleep,” an Army medic reads out the names and serial numbers of causalities into a field radio headset. “Somewhere far away, in a nice quiet office,” Joker says, “some candy-assed pogue is already turning the sticky red blood into clean white paperwork so that it can be filed and forgotten.”\textsuperscript{284} Like Hasford, his character Joker distrusts the sterile process by which combat becomes historic record.

The title of section three, “The Proud Flesh,” refers to a medical condition in which exuberant amounts of soft granulation tissue develop during the healing of large surface wounds. Joker is convalescing and undergoing psychiatric therapy at a Naval hospital. After many surgeries in Việt Nam and in the hospital in Japan, scars cover his face. He looks all right, he says, “for a dumb grunt with his ass grafted onto his face…a little bit like Errol Flynn if Errol Flynn had ever played Frankenstein.”\textsuperscript{285} The military brass does not know what to do with a self-proclaimed Phantom Blooper like Private James T. “Joker” Davis. Psychiatrists try to diagnose him as a victim of various syndromes, complexes, and tendencies, but Joker is dismissive. “A Navy psychiatrist is to psychiatry,” he says, “what military music is to music.”\textsuperscript{286} They threaten him with court-martial on the charge of treason in time of war, but Joker refuses this accusation, too. “War has not been declared by

\textsuperscript{283} Ibid., 166.
\textsuperscript{284} Ibid., 123.
\textsuperscript{285} Ibid., 127.
\textsuperscript{286} Ibid., 190.
Congress,” he says. “There is no war.” He is finally discharged on a Section 8, a military discharge for those deemed mentally unfit for service.  

Joker is sent home to the United States, where he meets up with the few surviving Lusthogs. He travels to Cowboy’s family home in Kansas and endures a brief and uneasy meeting with his dead friend’s parents, who lament that their son’s body was never recovered. By the time Joker finally reaches his own family farm he has travelled across the nation and has come to feel a foreigner in Alabama. The sun does not appear real to him. “Cardboard leaves flutter lifelessly on cast-iron trees… the telephone poles are black and look like Tinker toys…My happy little hometown,” he reflects, “has been transformed into a brick and neon camp for round-eyed refugees.” His younger sister, Stringbean, was about eleven years old when he enlisted. Now she is fourteen, tall and thin like him, and boisterous. Through her, we can envision what young Jim Davis might have been like before the war, before he became Private Joker.

During an awkward breakfast he tells Stringbean, his mother and Grandmother, Old Ma, that he is “going up North to farm.” He does not clarify that by “North” he means North Vietnam. On his way out of town he once again visits the Rock Creek Cemetery where his ancestors are buried. He reflects on the fate of the south in the American Civil War and visits his father’s grave, a Navy veteran of World War II. Joker touches the tombstone and wonders if his father knows that he is there. If so, if he is still a proud of his son? “I’m not even twenty-one years old yet,” Joker laments, “and already I’ve killed more men than Billy the Kid.” At dusk the family drives him to the bus station. They bid him awkward goodbyes and send him off with wishes to “do real good up North.” The family drives away in their pick-up truck and the veteran stands in the gathering summer darkness. He has a fruit

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287 Section 8 discharge is no longer used, as medical discharges for psychological/psychiatric reasons are now covered by a number of regulations.


289 Ibid., 238

290 Ibid., 241.
glass jar of fireflies in a brown paper bag. When the Birmingham Express bus appears over the hill, he opens the jar and releases the fireflies with a swat of Cowboy’s Stetson hat.
PART TWO: BLOOPER AS BETRAYAL AND MISTEP

In two days the flying cranes will carry off the last piece of expensive American Machinery and the last of the Marine grunts at Khe Sanh will fly out on gunships...Then, when night falls, the jungle will emerge from out of the darkness and will move like a black glacier across the red clay of No Man’s Land and will silently consume our trash-strewn fortress. And back in the World, no one will ever know about our self-inflicted Dien Bien Phu.\textsuperscript{291}

That Hasford suffered combat trauma in the war can be distinguished according to Robinette’s criteria: we read it in his surreal, non-linear, often chaotic narrative style. Through metaphor and parable \textit{The Phantom Blooper} also reveals the specific causes of his moral injury. First in his role as combat correspondent, Joker is caught in a contradiction that forces him constantly violate of one or the other of two opposing moral codes: he must either lie to his fellow Marines and generate good press as ordered, or defy orders and report the truth. He regards all American falsehoods regarding combat —whether in journalism, on propaganda leaflets dropped out of airplanes, or in John Wayne’s movies — as self-betrayal on a national scale. Clearly, collaboration with the enemy against other “grunts” is the most egregious wrong in the Marine imagination. Hasford uses this bizarre scenario to assert that for American military commanders to make the Marines demolish their base after having shed so much blood for it was tantamount to collaboration with the enemy.

Lastly, while a blooper is a “bloop-gun,” an M-79 grenade launcher, the word is most commonly used in civilian language to mean a mistake. The Phantom Blooper is a metaphor for emotional, psychological, and intellectual fallibility in combat. Combat forces the soldier or Marine to live under impossible circumstances in which he is certain to err at some point, and in which errors may cause his death or the death of his fellows. Hasford’s phantom is the fear of that misstep. His blooper is the veteran’s regret for real or perceived mistakes that haunt him years later, regardless of guilt or innocence. Joker is the Phantom Blooper that stalks him, as each man’s blooper stalks him in combat from inside his own mind.

\textsuperscript{291} Ibid., 7.
The ultimate blooper, however, is on a national scale. It is America’s terrible misstep at Khe Sanh. On the final night of Operation Charlie, Private Joker stares at Sorry Charlie, the charred skull of a dead enemy soldier mounted on a post on the base perimeter, and reflects on the evacuation. The Marines at Khe Sanh are “sneaking out the back door like hippies,” not to avoid detection by the Việt Cộng, he reflects, but the American media. His character Daddy D. A., while contemplating suicide, puts it this way: “But Khe Sanh was never a battle; it’s been a publicity stunt. And green Marines are not elite troops; we’re movie stars. The Marines…were just show business for Time magazine.”

Hunkered down in a trench at Khe Sanh, Daddy D.A. is dry-firing his .45 against his head. Joker understands. He laments too, that just the previous week “there must have been two platoons of civilian pukes in spit-shined safari jackets strutting around Khe Sanh, making exciting TV shows, telling the civilian pukes back in the World that we’d won another big victory and that the siege…had been broken and how the American Marines had held Khe Sanh…So now we’re sneaking out the back door like hippies who can’t pay the rent. The evacuation…is a secret back home but it’s not a secret from Victor Charlie.”

“So whose side are we on?” the distraught Daddy D. A. asks Joker.

In his memoir of Khe Sanh, veteran Michael Archer recalls a disturbing day during the dismantling of the base when a Mess Sergeant named Bill “went over the edge.” Alone in his bunker, Bill dug a foxhole into the dirt floor and he crawled down into it with his M-16 rifle and “…began shooting at anyone who approached the doorway. …convinced that the base had fallen and that everyone outside the bunker was the enemy. His friends called for him to come out, but he believed the enemy was coercing them.” The standoff with Bill lasted for several hours and although Archer recalls several other such incidents at Khe Sahn, this was particularly disturbing to the Marines as they had particular respect for Bill. “He

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292 Hasford, Blooper, 46.
293 Ibid., 47.
was the last person we thought would crack under the strain. If it could happen to Bill, it could happen to anybody.”

The awareness that in combat anything can happen to anybody at any time—physically or psychologically—is the most revealing aspect of Hasford’s eyewitness testimony. More than anything else, Joker fears his own fear. However else we might interpret the novel or enjoy its mystery, Hasford tells us outright that “

The true identity of the Phantom Blooper…is the dark spirit of our collective bad consciences made real and dangerous…He once was one of us, a Marine. He knows how we think. He knows how we operate. He knows how Marines fight and what Marines fear.

When the Phantom Blooper laughs, Joker laughs. When he carries an M-79 grenade launcher, or bloop-gun, the Phantom Blooper carries the same weapon. Joker is stalked by the Phantom and also taunts him, waving “Maggie’s Drawers” from the desolation of the abandoned Khe Sanh Combat Base in a suicidal challenge to shoot for him again. Finally, he runs naked into the No Man’s Land surrounding Khe Sanh, abducted by fear and by guilt. When Joker wakes up in a Naval hospital in Japan and the psychiatrists give him a Section 8, it is a difficult diagnosis to discount. Joker is his own Phantom Blooper, and not only in the abstract. By waving Maggie’s Drawers to draw enemy fire he poses a serious physical threat to himself.

Upon closer reading, however, all of the Lusthogs are phantoms, as they all commit a blooper which proves either fatal to themselves or to their fellow Marines. This is why there are so many stories about the Phantom Blooper, and why he goes by so many names and descriptions. “Every night the Phantom Blooper comes into our wire and talks to one grunt,” Joker says of the Khe Sanh version of this monster-self. This is a problem because there can

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296 Maggie’s Drawers: a red flag raised a military firing range to indicate that a shooter has missed the target and should fire in that direction again. In the opening scene of *Blooper*, Joker waves a pair of silk panties on a broken broom.
be no philosophers in a foxhole. “Any dumb grunt who starts to think too much becomes
dangerous, both to himself and to his unit.”

Joker often describes the Lusthogs as a squad of phantoms. In *The Short Timers*, he
reflects on times “when we’re so bone-sore tired that our minds seek contact with our bodies,
we hump even faster, green phantoms in the twilight.” Night in Khe Sanh is a “world
where all men are phantoms.” Things move in the dark, he says, “maybe a torn and decaying
sandbag being blown around by the wind. Or a stray water buffalo.” Maybe the shadows are
Việt Cộng troopers, or perhaps it is the Blooper himself. “North of Huế City the Phantom
Blooper is a salt and pepper team of snuffy grunts,” Joker says, “who guide Marine patrols
into L-shaped ambushes set by the Viet Cong.” Not coincidentally, his own Lusthog Squad
is a salt and pepper team—a racially mixed squad—of snuffy grunts—low-ranking Marines.
They, too, are North of Huế City when Cowboy commits multiple mercy killings of his own
wounded men.

But even if he had not literally shot his fellow Marines in the head, by making the
decision to proceed into the clearing Cowboy condemns them to death. On point, Alice hears
something. Maybe it is a bird, or a branch falling, Cowboy suggests. “You’re paranoid,
Midnight,” he says. “We’ve got to keep moving or we’ll give the gooks time to set up an
ambush in front of us. You know that…” This is Cowboy’s blooper, but Alice is a
phantom too. He thrives on being out front, and like the illusive turncoat, he understands and
respects the Vietnamese as “hard soldiers, strange, diminutive phantoms with iron insides,
brass balls, incredible courage, and no scruples at all.” Alice carries an M-79 grenade
launcher; like the tiny but fatal error in combat, “the ‘blooper’ is like a toy shotgun,
comically small.”

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298 Hasford, *Short Timers*, 164.
300 Hasford, *Short Timers*, 165.
301 Ibid., 153.
This scene defines the no-win situation in which the Phantom Blooper traps his quarry, a metaphor for the guilt that many combat veterans describe for situations beyond their control. Irrational, often baseless guilt, according to Jonathan Shay, is inseparable from grief and “often represents the same inner process of bringing the dead into the present.” Sometimes the pain of self-blame and sorrow are so unbearable that a soldier commits suicide.\(^{302}\) Cowboy has to make a decision on that trail and it is the wrong decision. But any number of the options open to him as squad leader might also have led to a Lusthog’s death. “This is it, the big game,” Joker says of combat. “This is the biggest game of your life and you’re playing for keeps…A sudden move at the wrong time could be your last. A slow move at the wrong time could be your last. And not moving at all could be fatal.”\(^{303}\)

John Baky—veteran, oral historian, and Director of the Imaginative Representations of the Vietnam War Collection at La Salle University—suggests that the most useful way to contextualize the combat legends generated by the Vietnam war is to view them as Ralph Ellison valorized the Blues: as “an impulse to keep the painful details and episodes of a brutal experience alive in one’s aching consciousness, to finger its jagged grain, and to transcend it, not by the consolation of philosophy but by squeezing from it a near-tragic, near-comic lyricism.”\(^{304}\) As a form, Ellison says, “the blues is an autobiographical chronicle of a personal catastrophe expressed lyrically.”\(^{305}\) The Phantom Blooper, then—in both novel form and in the legend it immortalizes—is more than a creative literary exercise but a chronicle of the psychological catastrophe of discovering the enemy in one’s own self.

The military ethic places such a high value on loyalty that to state that one has seen or committed an act considered morally wrong may be yet another wrong: a violation of that very loyalty. For this reason, the novels, poems, film, and graphic art of the Vietnam War


\(^{303}\) Hasford, *Blooper*, 5.


can be an indispensible resource to the historian who hopes to acknowledge and include veteran testimony of events that evoke such dark, secretive feelings as shame and regret. Metaphor both describes the heightened intellectual and physical sensations of combat and creates a language through which this “hallucinatory guilt” can be expressed. But in expressing guilt, might veterans also do themselves another form of moral injury? The single precondition for moral injury under William Nash’s expanded definition is that expectations about fairness, the value of life, and so forth, are shattered in a high-stakes—life and death—situation, as in combat. This means that the veteran might violate his or her own moral code simply by sharing a true war story.

Human beings ruminate over failings, and fear the fallibility that is inherent to our nature. One problem with removing the abuse of power from Shay’s original criteria for moral injury, however, is it reduces the term to mean little more than “guilt.” It describes emotion but does not define an event or inform a diagnosis. Second, by this looser definition almost all direct or indirect participation in nearly every act of war has potential to cause moral injury; this dilutes both the potency of the concept and the deep anger and disillusionment it describes. Lastly—and most important for veteran advocacy—this easy definition releases military and civilian leadership from much of the responsibility to change psychologically-damaging policies and practices.

Ultimately, individual feelings of shame and moral injury are inseparable. Joker and all of Hasford’s other fictional Marines commit acts that violate their own sense of “what’s right” because they have been put into the impossible situation of war in which any action or inaction may be both unethical and deadly. They have been trained to do things as Marines that they were instructed not to do as boys and so are immersed in a set of overlapping, contradictory, and competing value systems.

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Hasford’s suggestion that the abandonment of Khe Sanh was tantamount to large-scale U.S. military collaboration with an enemy nation against its own Marines reveals his great moral outrage at what he perceived as gross misuse of his nation’s power. After the war he describes himself in one article for The Los Angeles Times as “a devoted enemy of the federal government of the United States.” Hasford feels exiled from the American polis he fought to defend, hated in return by his fellow citizens on both the right and left. “Hawks hate Vietnam veterans,” he says, for not fighting World War II, for being “candy-asses who couldn’t get the job done…Doves hate the Vietnam veteran because, in their view, each and every one routinely slaughtered helpless civilians, especially babies.” Hasford calls this phenomenon “reviling the veteran” and considers it a “civilian hobby.” In response to both hawks and doves he quotes Ron Kovic, author of Born on the Fourth of July, who said of American civilian critics of his book and his politics, “They should be glad that I came home from Vietnam and wrote a book. I could have bought a gun.”

CONCLUSION

Now pogue historians want to embalm us and put us on exhibit, more gargoyles for the museum, while Rambo fans in the White House. . .yearn to provoke another war, somewhere, anywhere. . .It’s amazing how brave some people are willing to be with other people’s sons. It’s time to stop sipping our beer and get wired and hit back at all these silly people who presume to define us, our actions, and our motives.


Almost everything else in invented. But it’s not a game, it’s a form. . .Right here, now, as I invent myself, I’m thinking of all I want to tell you about why this book is written as it is.\(^{308}\)

—Tim O’Brien, The Things They Carried

On April 18, 2012, a combat veteran named Eddie spoke to a Religious Studies class at San Diego State University about his experience in Việt Nam. In an informal talk of less than an hour and prompted by no interviewer — asked only to tell about his experience in combat — Eddie’s narrative reveals each aspect of Judith Herman’s dialectic of trauma. He describes phases of hyperarousal in battle as moments of “intense fear” which he still recalls in “vivid colors and sounds” as a sort of “hyper reality.” In Việt Nam, he says, he rarely slept. He was too “keyed up” and “high” on war. He also describes the numb sensation of being on “automatic pilot,” and credits this ability to “submerge” his feelings for saving his mental health.

\(^{308}\) O’Brien, The Things They Carried, 179.
He began by projecting a well-known quote by Friedrich Nietzsche on the wall overhead, which he described as encapsulating his talk: “If you gaze for too long into an abyss, the abyss gazes also into you.” A Silver Star recipient who estimates that he may have killed as many as three hundred people both directly and indirectly, Eddie joined the U.S. Army in 1965. During his first tour he served as a medic and had to “essentially euthanize people who were not going to make it.” There was an element of revenge, he says, in his request to transfer for his second tour from medic to combat infantry.

Eddie was severely head-injured in an explosion in 1968, which temporarily “knocked out” much of his memory of the war. In those days, he says, “If you could walk and talk” they would let you out of a veteran’s hospital, so poor was our understanding of physiological and psychological brain trauma. Today his speech pattern is marked by long pauses. Perhaps he is searching for a word due to his head injury, or perhaps he is struggling to suppress the intrusive memories that began when his memory returned. He tells the class that even as he speaks he sees “ghastly images” in his mind. When Eddie was in Việt Nam, “home” was not real to him. War was real. But upon returning to the United States he found that could not “hold onto the Vietnam experience” because with his memory, rage was reemerging. He began to have flashbacks. He returned his medals and honors and relinquished his combat veteran’s benefits it partly in protest, but says that his main purpose was to simply let go of the war entirely. We can quickly recognize that many of the points covered in this paper are present in his story, details which, while subjective and highly personal, might be as relevant to the historic project as they are to Eddie himself.

In Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History, Cathy Caruth argues that trauma is incomprehensible at first. Therefore, it is also indescribable, and, essentially, unrepresentable. Only later, after a period of latency, can it be organized into narrative. Thus the construction of a history of the traumatic event necessarily develops from the delayed response of trauma and so, like discourses of the “other” in all of its forms—of the
sublime, the sacred, silent, and subconscious—trauma destabilizes language and demands a vocabulary unlike that which came before it.309

Combat is traumatic. Thus, in order to write better histories of war we must become fluent in the language of trauma. Prior to the development of the trauma narrative concept there was no language or theoretical framework through which the historian could study the impact of combat trauma on witness testimony. Eyewitness accounts have been far more accessible to literature than to history, however, because trauma narrative simply sound more like literature – by tone alone they are more easily understood in the idiom of literature. Cooperation between the disciplines of psychology and literature since the Vietnam War has increased our understanding of the brain, emotion, and memory exponentially, enabling us to apply their methodologies and language to history. The trauma narrative concept widens the parameters of historic research, to expand the type, volume, and form of data collected. Still more significant, it may generate an entirely new set of skills, new ways to analyze primary sources—particularly oral histories and memoirs—allowing us to interpret traumatic human events with far more depth and approach primary sources in general more critically.

Psychiatrist Jonathan Shay offers a compelling argument for the importance of narrative in healing from post-traumatic stress. “The survival story is central to recovery from severe trauma,” Shay says. “It’s not simply the telling of the story, it is the whole social process.”310 Communicating the traumatic experience to willing and skilled listeners, he says, enables the survivor to “rebuild the ruins of character” shattered by war.311 The historian is not a therapist. Our aim is not to help the combat veteran piece together his “cohesion of consciousness.” Nevertheless, in the effort to piece together a cohesive picture of the past we necessarily collect and sift through narrative data. If experts in the fields of psychology and literary theory are correct, much of the narrative data that the historian


310 Rick King, Director. Voices In Wartime: Nobody Escapes Unchanged. (Burbank, California: Cinema Libre Studio, 2005) DVD.

311 Shay, Achilles in Vietnam, 188.
receives from combat veterans will be fragmented. The brain-trauma component of post-traumatic stress may alter memory function, for example, causing sensory aspects to be recalled acutely while the chronological order of events are murky. The emotional, moral injury component may cause the witness/participant to withhold large chunks of information entirely because recollection brings feelings of great shame or rage.

Although the constructs of post-traumatic stress and moral injury overlap, each is thought to have unique components that make them separable consequences of war. Some veterans and military personnel are uncomfortable with the moral injury concept and feel that the term itself implies that a solider has acted immorally or has no moral code. The Marine Corps and the National Center for Post-traumatic Stress Disorder prefer the term “inner conflict” to “moral injury,” arguing that it is evocative and specific. Shay understands these concerns and is sensitive to the fine points of meaning. Moral injury is certainly not a matter of blame or shame. In fact, he muses, if placed in the same situations as the veterans he has worked with, the stability of his own character—that sense of one’s proper self—would not have been any more firm. This can be a disquieting realization for even the most careful listener. “Merely allowing ourselves to hear the combat veteran’s story threatens our culturally defined sense of self-respect,” Shay writes. “We have powerful motives not to listen to the veteran’s story, or to deny its truth.” Like O’Brien, Shay insists that it should be disquieting to experience real empathy for veterans; this is precisely what makes their stories so important.

The more we have learned about veteran stories and storytellers the more aware we have become of the traumatic nature of combat and of the complex psychological and neurological relationship between trauma and memory, memory and narrative. Like reciprocity between soldier and citizen, the reciprocal exchange between disciplines is ongoing. How these methodologies might be employed and what such a history might in fact

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313 Shay, Achilles in Vietnam, 194.
look like will certainly be considered further as veterans and the military community focus increasingly on the psycho-emotional aspects of service. As psychological language becomes ever more common, and as psychological damage is increasingly included in cost-benefit policy analysis of war, it seems likely that soon histories of war will necessarily include records of veteran experiences, emotions, and memories.

It is one thing to assert that veteran narratives have value to history, but when we accept a veteran’s promise that “this is true,” what do we assume that truth to be? Whether in therapeutic rap-groups, personal conversation, through art or fiction, a veteran’s highly personal, impressionistic and poetic search for universal truth is concerned not simply with reconstructing the past events of his or her life, but with discovering and sharing the reality of experience. As listeners at work in the historic project it is vital to allow for abstraction, ambiguity, emotionality, divergence, and subjectivity in eyewitness accounts. Interdisciplinary interpretive strategies that employ the methodologies and language of psychology and literary scholarship enable us to examine trauma-damaged memories where they lie, before reordering the shards into traditionally linear historic formats.
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APPENDIX A

DIAGNOSTIC CRITERIA (DSM-III)

DIAGNOSTIC AND STATISTICAL MANUAL OF MENTAL DISORDERS, III

Diagnostic Criteria 238 for Post-traumatic Stress Disorder, 1980

A. Existence of a recognizable stressor that would evoke significant symptoms of distress in almost everyone.

B. Re-experiencing of the trauma as evidenced by at least one of the following:
   (1) recurrent and intrusive recollections of the event
   (2) recurrent dreams of the event
   (3) sudden acting or feeling as if the traumatic event were reoccurring, because of an association with an environmental or ideational stimulus

C. Numbing of responsiveness to or reduced involvement with the external world, beginning some time after the trauma, as shown by at least one of the following:
   (1) markedly diminished interest in one or more significant activities
   (2) feeling of detachment or estrangement from others
   (3) constricted affect

D. At least two of the following symptoms that were not present before the trauma:
   (1) hyper alertness or exaggerated startle response
   (2) sleep disturbance
   (3) guilt about surviving when others have not, or about behavior required for survival
   (4) memory impairment or trouble concentrating
   (5) avoidance of activities that arouse recollection of the traumatic event
   (6) intensification of symptoms by exposure to events that symbolize or resemble the traumatic event
APPENDIX B

DIAGNOSTIC CRITERIA (DSM-V)

DIAGNOSTIC AND STATISTICAL MANUAL OF MENTAL DISORDERS, FIFTH EDITION, 2013

Diagnostic Criteria 309.81 (F43.10) for Posttraumatic Stress Disorder

Note: The following criteria apply to adults, adolescents, and children older than 6 years.

A. Exposure to actual or threatened death, serious injury, or sexual violence in one (or more) of the following ways:
   1. Directly experiencing the traumatic event(s).
   2. Witnessing, in person, the event(s) as it occurred to others.
   3. Learning that the traumatic event(s) occurred to a close family member or close friend. In cases of actual or threatened death of a family member or friend, the event(s) must have been violent or accidental.
   4. Experiencing repeated or extreme exposure to aversive details of the traumatic event(s) (e.g., first responders collecting human remains: police officers repeatedly exposed to details of child abuse). Note: Criterion A4 does not apply to exposure through electronic media, television, movies, or pictures, unless this exposure is work related.

B. Presence of one (or more) of the following intrusion symptoms associated with the traumatic event(s), beginning after the traumatic event(s) occurred:
   1. Recurrent, involuntary, and intrusive distressing memories of the traumatic event(s). Note: In children older than 6 years, repetitive play may occur in which themes or aspects of the traumatic event(s) are expressed.
   2. Recurrent distressing dreams in which the content and/or affect of the dream are related to the traumatic event(s). Note: In children, there may be frightening dreams without recognizable content.
   3. Dissociative reactions (e.g., flashbacks) in which the individual feels or acts as if the traumatic event(s) were recurring. (Such reactions may occur on a continuum, with the most extreme expression being a complete loss of awareness of present surroundings.) Note: In children, trauma-specific reenactment may occur in play.
   4. Intense or prolonged psychological distress at exposure to internal or external cues that symbolize or resemble an aspect of the traumatic event(s).
   5. Marked physiological reactions to internal or external cues that symbolize or resemble an aspect of the traumatic event(s).
C. Persistent avoidance of stimuli associated with the traumatic event(s), beginning after the traumatic event(s) occurred, as evidenced by one or both of the following:
   1. Avoidance of or efforts to avoid distressing memories, thoughts, or feelings about or closely associated with the traumatic event(s).
   2. Avoidance of or efforts to avoid external reminders (people, places, conversations, activities, objects, situations) that arouse distressing memories, thoughts, or feelings about or closely associated with the traumatic event(s).

D. Negative alterations in cognitions and mood associated with the traumatic event(s), beginning or worsening after the traumatic event(s) occurred, as evidenced by two (or more) of the following:
   1. Inability to remember an important aspect of the traumatic event(s) (typically due to dissociative amnesia and not to other factors such as head injury, alcohol, or drugs).
   2. Persistent and exaggerated negative beliefs or expectations about oneself, others, or the world (e.g., “I am bad,” “No one can be trusted,” “The world is completely dangerous,” “My whole nervous system is permanently ruined”).
   3. Persistent, distorted cognitions about the cause or consequences of the traumatic event(s) that lead the individual to blame himself/herself or others.
   4. Persistent negative emotional state (e.g., fear, horror, anger, guilt, or shame).
   5. Markedly diminished interest or participation in significant activities.
   6. Feelings of detachment or estrangement from others.
   7. Persistent inability to experience positive emotions (e.g., inability to experience happiness, satisfaction, or loving feelings).

E. Marked alterations in arousal and reactivity associated with the traumatic event(s), beginning or worsening after the traumatic event(s) occurred, as evidenced by two (or more) of the following:
   1. Irritable behavior and angry outbursts (with little or no provocation) typically expressed as verbal or physical aggression toward people or objects.
   2. Reckless or self-destructive behavior.
   3. Hypervigilance.
   4. Exaggerated startle response.
   5. Problems with concentration.
   6. Sleep disturbance (e.g., difficulty falling or staying asleep or restless sleep).

F. Duration of the disturbance (Criteria B, C, D, and E) is more than 1 month.

G. The disturbance causes clinically significant distress or impairment in social, occupational, or other important areas of functioning.

H. The disturbance is not attributable to the physiological effects of a substance (e.g., medication, alcohol) or another medical condition.
   Specify whether, with dissociative symptoms:
The individual’s symptoms meet the criteria for posttraumatic stress disorder, and in addition, in response to the stressor, the individual experiences persistent or recurrent symptoms of either of the following:

1. Depersonalization: Persistent or recurrent experiences of feeling detached from, and as if one were an outside observer of, one’s mental processes or body (e.g., feeling as though one were in a dream; feeling a sense of unreality of self or body or of time moving slowly).

2. Derealization: Persistent or recurrent experiences of unreality of surroundings (e.g., the world around the individual is experienced as unreal, dreamlike, distant, or distorted). Note: To use this subtype, the dissociative symptoms must not be attributable to the physiological effects of a substance (e.g., blackouts, behavior during alcohol intoxication) or another medical condition (e.g., complex partial seizures).

Specify if, with delayed expression: If the full diagnostic criteria are not met until at least 6 months after the event (although the onset and expression of some symptoms may be immediate).