

Vietnam: At the Frontier

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Foreword

Any reading of realistic Vietnam literature immediately brings to mind the Southern-African situation, past and present.

One cannot help seeing the parallels between Vietnam and happenings in Angola, Zimbabwe, South Africa, Mozambique and my own country Namibia. Those of us who were participants in the previous bush wars view any account of events in Vietnam between 1964 and 1975 in a different way from people who were civilians. On the whole we find the anti-war, anti interventionist sentiment many hold unacceptable. This sentiment is expressed in the final voice-over in Oliver Stone's film *Platoon* (1986)

*I think now, looking back, we did not fight the enemy, we fought ourselves
– And the enemy was in us”.*

In the post-independence era we live in Africa, and the post 9/11 era in the US, there are too many other troubling questions we can ask ourselves about our situation than to consider whether the enemy was within us or not.

Unfortunately, more often than not, a veteran's judgement is clouded by his experiences and feelings in a combat situation, so his writings (and readings) on issues he was involved in are seldom objective.

*You have never lived, till you have almost died;
And for those who have fought for it,
Life and freedom have a meaning
The protected will never know.*

Abstract

Realistic novels and memoirs of the Vietnam War tell a common tale in which the youthful protagonist leaves behind the society of his immediate father to connect with the cultural father by entering the frontier of Vietnam. There he suffers the traumatic shock of finding that he has entered a crazily inverted landscape of American myth frustrating all his expectations. The youthful protagonist leaving his family to enter the frontier in Vietnam is depicted clearly in many Vietnam novels and films. One of the clearest examples here is Ron Kovic's novel *Born on the Fourth of July*. In the film young Ron watches an Independence Day rally in his hometown in awe. All the veterans of previous wars America has been involved in, including the last war in Korea, march down the street. Ron grows up learning to be competitive and an "upright" American. His mother cheers for him to do well in wrestling and she scolds him severely for looking at pornography. We are given the picture of a sound, yet strict upbringing. His father tries to dissuade him from going to war in Vietnam. In the end he goes, full of patriotism; a true son of America. Once in Vietnam he is exposed to the brutality and chaos of war, but his greatest fight is when he returns home wounded. He struggles to adapt to a society which is against the war and is rejecting its war heroes. He suffers the trauma of rejection and adaptation in a "hostile" environment. In the end he joins the anti-war lobbyists. This aspect of being rejected by one's own society is seen in the poem *Private Jack Smith, U.S.M.C.*[1]

[1] All poems referred to are to be found in *Carrying the Darkness – The Poetry of the Vietnam War*, W. D. Ehrhart.

Vietnam: At the frontier

Private Jack Smith, U.S.M.C.

Since he came back
he never met with friends he fought with in Nam
and never mentioned the war:
Once he was ordered out
of his five-man fire team
to go and be point man.
He was about a hundred feet up front
when someone in his fire team
tripped a land mine,
and whoever it had been,
along with the other three,
were left somehow
unreasonably alive – just.
And there had been a Lance Corporal in his squad
whom the threat of peace always made aggressive.
The Lance Corporal was a sniper
with twenty-six kills marked up.
The private was with him
when the Lance Corporal was cut down by a V.C.
sniper,
and as the private held him,
the Lance Corporal held his intestines in his hands,
saying, "I don't want to die. I'm afraid to die."
And died.
One night the private and two other guys
slept in a sandbagged hootch
that was hit by two direct mortar rounds,
he being blasted awake and away
without a scratch
while those other two
were just pieces of themselves.
He could not find their heads
but laid the rest to rest
in ponchos that no one could tag
because their remains were Officially Unidentifiable.
After that he decided
to avoid moderation at any extreme
and shot every thing that moved.
He came to think that his officers
were more concerned with rank and medals
than with the lives and deaths of their men.
He came to feel that his politicians were garbage
who should have been wasted.
When he finished his tour of duty
and was sent home and Honourably Discharged,
he decided to live with his parents
and began college,
and majored in history on the GI Bill.
He thought he might join the peace movement
and started going to rallies.
His college was shut down four times
the semester he started,

and during the fourth shutdown,
his college president was beaten up
by several anti-imperialists
who took over the college
and burned down the ROTC building
and the library
and who kept the president in his office
until he resigned, on his own account of course.
But the ex-private kept going to the rallies,
looked, listened, learned.
He got to thinking
that most of the rally speakers
were happy with hallucinations,
and he thought
that several of the tens of thousands
in the crowd who were yelling Right On
had either forgotten, or had never known,
that absolutism is addictive
and that the mob, any mob for any cause,
is always
pregnant with fascism,
The fifth time his college was shut down
by the anti-imperialist anti-
fascists,
he knew what he knew,
and knew that he must try
to walk through and beyond the mob
which had blocked his way to History.
He tried, knowing they would beat hell out of him,
and they did.
But it was he who was arrested
for disturbing the peace.
He was jailed.
His dad bailed him out
and told him he hoped he was satisfied
and that he should have felt ashamed.
But instead, the ex-private felt himself feel nothing.
He went home again, and packed, and left.
That was four years ago.
Nobody has heard from him since.

In *Sticks and Bones* we see that the protagonist's upbringing backfires on him and his family. His upbringing was that all non-whites are inferior. When he gets to Vietnam and has a sexual relationship with a Vietnamese girl his conscience troubles him.

At home his father's reaction mirrors his racist upbringing:

You screwed it. A yellow whore. Some yellow ass. You put in your prick

and humped your ass. You screwed some yellow fucking whore! (Rabe, 1987, p. 25)

Later on when his father is arguing with his mother (the realization of what his son has done is starting to become too much for him) he says the following:

LOOK...AT...HIM! YOU MAKE ME WANT TO VOMIT! HARRIET! YOU – YOU! Your internal organs – your female organs – they’ve got some kind of poison in them. They’re backing up some kind of rot into the world. I think you ought to have them cut out of you. I MEAN, I JUST CAN’T STOP THINKING ABOUT IT. LITTLE BITTY CHINKY KIDS HE WANTED TO HAVE. LITTLE BITTY CHINKY YELLOW KIDS! DIDN’T YOU! FOR OUR GRAND-CHILDREN! (Rabe, 1987, p. 49)

The tragedy of David’s life is that the dual morality of his upbringing and the society he lives in is making him unbalanced. It is important to remember that the Vietnam War was fought during the troubled 1960’s. The 1960’s saw the birth of mass drug abuse, the sexual revolution and the culture of peace/protest.

We see David’s father reacting to his brother Rick coming home late:

Rick: I had the greatest piece of tail tonight. Dad; I really did. What a beautiful piece of ass.

Ozzie: Did you, Rick?

Rick: She was bee – uuuuu - tiful.

Ozzie: Who was it?

Rick: Nobody you’d know, Dad.

Ozzie: Oh. Where’d you do it – I mean get it?

Rick: In her car.

Ozzie: You were careful, I hope.

Rick: *(laughing a little)* C’mon , Dad.

Ozzie: I mean, it wasn’t any decent girl.

Rick: Hell, no... (Rabe, 1987, p. 76)

Here we see the idea, commonly found among men, also in American society, that to “sow one’s wild oats” is fine as long as it does not result in pregnancy. In David’s upbringing this idea has the added proviso that promiscuous behaviour is fine as long as it is with a white girl.

David’s father applied this double standard in the upbringing of his sons but he failed to bear in mind that soldiers visit prostitutes and that in Vietnam the prostitutes were Vietnamese girls, i.e. non – white girls. Other soldiers had the same problem in their upbringing. Many equated sex with violence towards the Other and there was no respect or gentleness involved. We see an example of this in Gerald McCarthy’s poems 9 and 11 in *Excerpts from “War story”*

9

They shot the woman in the arm,
four of them
raped her
and killed an old man
who tried to interfere;
and later killed the woman too.
She was the enemy.

10

Hot sun.
I walk into a whorehouse
pay the girl
unbuckle my pants
and screw her
sweat sticking to my fatigues

small legs grasping my back
her slanted eyes look up at me
as I come.
Outside the tin-roofed hut
another GI waits his turn.

We see similar behaviour amongst some soldiers in the group-rape of an abducted Vietnamese girl in the film *Casualties of War*.

This now brings me to the two main books I wish to examine in detail, Tim O'Brien's *If I Die in a Combat Zone* and Michael Herr's *Dispatches*.

In both these books the youthful protagonist leaves behind the society that has shaped him and enters the frontier in Vietnam.

O'Brien says that home he was "...fed by the spoils of 1945 victory" and that "In patches of weed and clouds and imagination [he] learned to play army games" (O'Brien, 1995, p. 21).

He also says, "Growing up, I learned about another war, a peninsular war in Korea, a grey war fought by the town's Lutherans and Baptists. I learned about the war when the town's hero came home, riding in a convertible, sitting straight-backed and quiet, an ex-POW" (O'Brien, 1995, p. 23).

He vacillates between going to war and becoming politically aware but his upbringing and pressures (real and imaginary) from society "force" him to enlist.

...I owed the prairie something. For twenty-one years I'd lived under its laws, accepted its education, ate its food, wasted and guzzled its water, slept well at night, driven across its highways, dirtied and breathed its air, wallowed in its luxuries (O'Brien, 1995, p. 28).

He then goes on to tell us:

The family indulged in a cautious sort of Last Supper together, and afterwards my father, who is brave, said it was time to report to the bus depot (O'Brien, 1995, p. 28).

During basic training O'Brien and his friend Erik discuss the motivation behind their participation in the war. Erik sums it up by using as an example a poem by Ezra Pound.

He says:

Pound is right...look into your own history. Here we are. Mamma has been

kissed good-bye, we've grabbed our rifles, we're ready for extinction. All this is not because of conviction, not for ideology; rather it's from fear of society's censure, just as Pound claims. Rather from fear of weakness, afraid that to avoid war is to avoid manhood (O'Brien, 1995, p. 45).

O'Brien decides to become a conscientious objector to the war and decides that he wants out. He goes to see the army chaplain and for the first time he clearly sees the embodiment of his cultural father in Captain Edwards.

After explaining that he thinks the war is wrong and that he does not want to fight in it hears this:

See...you've read too many books, the wrong ones. I think there's no doubt the wrong ones. But goddamn it – pardon me – but goddamn it, you're a soldier now, and you'll sure as hell act like one! Some faith, some discipline. You know, this country is a good country. It's built on armies...If you accept, as I do, that America is one helluva great country, well, then, you follow what she tells you. She says fight, then you go out and do your damndest. You try to win (O'Brien, 1995, p. 63).

On speaking to the battalion commander later he hears a similar line of argument:

The Chinese are behind these Asian wars...Its good we're stopping the Chinese when we have a chance (O'Brien, 1995, p. 67).

Having resigned himself to his fate O'Brien now enters the frontier in Vietnam where he soon experiences that his whole "pro-war" childhood and upbringing and the "father figures" of his basic training representing American Ideology have all misled him. We see this experience expressed by other soldiers in Vietnam e.g. W.D. Erhart in his poem *A Relative Thing* and in David Hall's poem *no.14 in Excerpts from "The ambush of the Fourth Platoon."*

A Relative Thing

We are the ones you sent to fight a war
you didn't know a thing about.

It didn't take us long to realize
the only land that we controlled
was covered by the bottom of our boots.

When the newsmen said that naval ships
had shelled a VC staging point,
we saw a breastless woman
and her stillborn child.

We laughed at old men stumbling
in the dust in frenzied terror
to avoid our three-ton trucks.

We fought outnumbered in Hue City
while the ARVN soldiers looted bodies
in the safety of the rear.
The cookies from the wives of Local 104
did not soften our awareness.

We have seen the pacified supporters
of the Saigon government
sitting in their jampacked cardboard towns,
their wasted hands placed limply in their laps,
their empty bellies waiting for rice
some district chief has sold
for profit to the Vietcong.
We have been Democracy on Zippo raids,
burning houses to the ground,
driving eager amtracs through new-sown fields.

We are the ones who have to live
with the memory that we were the instruments
of your pigeon-breasted fantasies.
We are inextricable accomplices
in this travesty of dreams;
but we are not alone.

We are the ones you sent to fight a war
you did not know a thing about-
those of us that lived
have tried to tell you what went wrong.
Now you think you do not have to listen.

Just because we will not fit
into the uniforms of photographs
of you at twenty-one
does not mean you can disown us.

We are your sons, America,
and you cannot change that.
When you awake,
we will still be here.

14

I combed my hair in ducktails
in that eighth grade history class
when Mrs.Porter said God would never allow
the Communists domination over
a Christian people
and Mrs. Porter
this day
grows old and fat

on her porch back home
unmolested
by the yellow horde
and if my gold pins mean anything
Mrs. Porter
expect a rattling of your windows
some terrible night:
we have much to discuss
and we both have much
to learn.

On arriving in Vietnam O'Brien is confronted with the crazily inverted landscape of American myth. The images of the frontiersman he knew as a youth are shattered. The battalion re-up NCO speaks to the new troops:

I seen some action. I got me two Purple Hearts, so listen up good. I'm not saying you're gonna get zapped out there. I made it. But you're gonna come motherfuckin' close. Jesus, you're gonna hear bullets tickling your asshole. And sure as I'm standing here one or two of you men are going to get your legs blown off. Or killed One or two of you, its gotta happen (O'Brien, 1995, p. 77)

Pretty heady stuff! The NCO then makes a strange proposal;

Sure, sure – I know. Nobody likes to re-up. But just think about it a second. Just say you do it - you take your burst of three years, starting today; three more years of army life. Then what? Well, I'll tell you what, it'll save your ass, that's what, it'll save your ass. You re-up and I can get you a job in Chu Lai. I got jobs for mechanics, typists, clerks, damn near anything you want. I got it. So you get your nice, safe, rear job... You lose a little time to Uncle Sam. Big deal. You save your ass. So, I got my desk inside. If you come in and sign the papers – it'll take ten minutes – and I'll have you on the first truck going back to Chu Lai, no shit Anybody game? No one budged.... (O'Brien, 1995, p. 84).

After this shocking discovery of the Catch – 22 situation he is in, O'Brien starts on a journey that will show him even more clearly how all the “good” American values he has grown up with can be inverted. He discovers that the true comradeship he came to know in basic training is strangely missing amongst many of the soldiers in Vietnam. Many of the soldiers are negative, cynical, insulting and only interested in saving their own skins. He learns that the term “FNG” means “fuckin' new guy”.

I learned that GIs in the field can be as lazy and careless and stupid as GIs anywhere. They don't wear helmets and armoured vests unless an officer insists; they fall asleep on guard, and for the most part, no one

really cares; they throw away or bury ammunition if it gets heavy and hot. I learned that REMF means “rear echelon motherfucker”; that a man is getting “short” after his third or fourth month; that a grenade is really a “frag”; that one bullet is all it takes and that “you never hear the shot that gets you”; that no one in Alpha Company knows or cares about the cause or purpose of their war; it is about “dinks and slopes”, and the idea is simply to kill them or avoid them. Except that in Alpha you don’t kill a man, you “waste” him. You don’t get mangled by a mine, you get fucked up (O’Brien, 1995, p. 84).

He also meets some really scary “frontier types” and discovers that some people actually love killing. It is like being in a Wild West movie at times.

The madness in Mad Mark, at any rate, was not hysterical, crazy, into-the-brink-, to-the-fore madness. Rather, he was insanely calm. He never showed fear. He was a professional soldier, an ideal leader of men in the field. It was that kind of madness, the perfect guardian for the Platonic Republic. His attitude and manner seemed perfectly moulded in the genre of the CIA or KGB operative.

This is not to say that Mad Mark ever did the work of an assassin. But it was his manner and he cultivated it. He walked with a lanky, easy, silent, fearless stride. He wore tiger fatigues, not for their camouflage but for their look. He carried a shotgun – a weapon I’d thought was outlawed in international war – and the shotgun itself was a measure of

his professionalism, for to use it effectively requires an exact blend of courage and skill and self-confidence. The weapon is neither accurate nor lethal at much over seventy yards. So it shows the skill of the carrier, a man who must work his way close enough to the prey to see the enemy’s retina and the tone of his skin ... Mad Mark was not a fanatic... It was more or less an Aristotelian ethic that Mad Mark

practiced: making war is a necessary and natural profession. It is natural, but it is only a profession, not a crusade : ”Hunting is part of that art; and hunting might be practiced – not only against wild animals, but also against human beings who are intended by nature to be ruled by others and refuse to obey that intention – because war of this order is naturally just” (O’Brien, 1995, p. 86).

After his initial “admiration” of this seemingly quintessential American soldier and defender of American culture and its values O’Brien is abruptly brought down to earth,

Someone turned on a flashlight. Mad Mark sat cross-legged and unwrapped a bundle of cloth and dangled a hunk of brown, fresh human ear under the yellow beam of light. Someone giggled. The ear was clean of blood...It looked alive. It looked like it would move in Mad Mark’s hands, as if it might make a squirm for freedom.

“Christ, Mad Mark just went up and sliced it off the dead dink!

No wonder he’s Mad Mark, he did it like he was cuttin’ sausages or something.” “What are you gonna do with it? Why don’t you eat it, Mad Mark?”

“Bullshit, who’s gonna eat a goddamn dink? I eat women, not dinks.”

O’Brien hardly has time to recover from this shock when he is introduced to his first experience of that typically American phenomenon “overkill”.

Mad mark called in gunships. For an hour the helicopters straffed and rocketed Tri Binh 4...We heard cattle and chickens dying...In the morning another patrol was sent into the village....Little fires burned in some of the huts, and dead animals lay about, but there were no people. We searched Tri Binh 4 , then burned most of it down (O’Brien, 1995, p. 88).

The concept of “overkill” is also examined in Bryan Alec Flynn’s poem *Corporal Charles Chungtu, U.S.M.C.*

Corporal Charles Chungtu, U.S.M.C.

This is what the war ended up being about:

we would find a V.C. village,

and if we could not capture it

or clear it of Cong,

we called for jets.

The jets would come in, low and terrible,

sweeping down, and screaming,

in their first pass over the village.

Then they would return, dropping their first bombs

that flattened the huts to rubble and debris.

And then the jets would sweep back again

and drop more bombs

that blew the rubble and debris

to dust and ashes.

And then the jets would come back once again,

in a last pass, this time to drop napalm

that burned the dust and ashes to just nothing.

then the village

that was not a village any more

was our village.

O'Brien also comes into contact with his culture's treatment of the Other as personified by the showering soldier's treatment of an old Vietnamese man in chapter 1.

A blind old farmer was showering one of the men. A blustery and stupid soldier, blond hair and big belly, picked up a carton of milk and from fifteen feet away hurled it, for no reason, aiming at the old man and striking him flush in the face. The carton burst, milk spraying on the old man's temples and into his cataracts (O'Brien, 1995, p. 105).

The old man's behaviour shows the resilience of the Other's culture and its endurance in the face of foreign brutality being imposed on it.

He was motionless and finally he smiled...he dunked into the well and came up with water, and he showered a soldier (O'Brien, 1995, p. 105).

One of the most beautiful poems I have read about the Vietnam war deals with this issue. It is a poem by Frank A. Cross, Jr. called *Rice will grow again*.

We were walking
On the dikes
Like damn fools –
Steppin over dud rounds.

Mitch was stepping light
When he saw the farmer.
 The farmer:
 With black shirt
 And shorts.
 Up to his knees
 In the muck
 Rice shoots in one hand,

 The other darting
 Under the water
 And into the muck
 To plant new life.

Mitch saw the farmer's hand
Going down again
With another
 Shoot
 But the hand
 Never came up
 Again –

After Mitch
Ripped the farmer up the middle
With a burst of sixteen.
We passed the farmer,
As we walked
Along the dike, and
I saw rice shoots
Still clutched in one hand.
He bubbled strange words

Through the blood
In his mouth,
Bong , the scout,
Told us the farmer
Said:

“Damn you
The rice will
Grow again!”

Sometimes,
On dark nights
In Kansas,
The farmer comes to
Mitch’s bed;
And plants rice shoots
all around.

Both soldier’s behaviour here was largely as a result of fear of the unknown. The image of the fearless American frontiersman is becoming increasingly frayed around the edges.

Many of these frontiersmen are shown as incompetent and unbalanced. After introducing us to Mad Mark, the overkill expert, O’Brien shows us the total lack of competence some officers had in managing a combat situation. This is shown in the incident where the APCs went into reverse, after taking RPG fire and ran over members of his platoon under the command of Captain Smith.

After the helicopter had gone, Captain Smith and the track commander argued again...Smith said the track commander should have informed him that they had a policy of backing up when taking incoming fire. “Damn it, I’m going to suffer for this”, Smith Said. What’s my commander going to think? He’s gonna see a damn casualty list a mile long, and it’s only my first operation. My career is in real jeopardy now.” And the track commander swore and said Smith should have known the rudiments of track warfare (O’Brien, 1995, p. 155).

Another example of incompetence is seen when Smith tries to convince his men to follow the APC commander's unreasonable commands that they detect mines ahead of his APCs.

Smith called his platoon leaders over, explained the problem and tried to talk them into going along with the track commander. The platoon leaders laughed and said they wouldn't do it...Smith waddled over to the command track and continued his argument. In ten minutes he waded back and told us to get aboard. The track commander was tired of arguing... (O'Brien, 1995, p. 156).

Shortly after this disaster we are shown the lack of feeling some officers had for men in an even more dramatic way.

We called the battalion commander, a tough colonel circling around in his helicopter directing things..."We've got two men badly hurt. Need an urgent- repeat , urgent – dust-off. One of the men will die. There's no time." "Roger", the colonel said. His helicopter buzzed the treetops, scouting the battlefield. He flew for another five minutes, then called again and told us to call for the dust-off through the normal channels. "Damn it, I haven't got the time to do everything. Got to direct this operation".

We acknowledged, but the first platoon man broke in and said his friend had a sucking chest wound and would die without quick help. "Soldier, stay off this net. You relay your damn request to your CO..." When the jets went home and the smoke was gone, the battalion commander came down and picked up the wounded officer and the dead man with the sucking chest wound (O'Brien, 1995, p. 158).

This is also a comment on betrayal and cowardice in its most extreme form. Needless to say, O'Brien's sarcasm and disillusionment grows throughout the book as he exposes this crazily inverted landscape of American myth. This reaches its peak in chapter 18 entitled *The Lagoon*. Here we see what can happen when a "superior" culture comes to impose its will (and help) on another.

We came to protect the place. We came to provide security for the small

village that took its food and living out of the lagoon...perhaps the place once boasted its own lagoon monster, a sea serpent with green scales and bulging eyes with an appetite for careless fisherman and little boys...One night [we] made a mistake. The firing data recorded in the gun pits were not the data recorded in the bunker...the rounds fell on the little village. Thirty three villagers were wounded. Thirteen were killed...the children...No lagoon monster ever terrorized like this (O'Brien, 1995, p. 162-167).

These events bring to mind a poem by W.D. Erhart *Making the Children Behave*.

Making the Children behave

Do they think of me now
 in those strange Asian villages
 where nothing ever seemed
 quite human
 but myself
 and my few grim friends
 moving through them
 hunched
 in lines?
 When they tell stories to their children
 of the evil
 that awaits misbehaviour,
 is it me they conjure?

The myth (perfected in America during the “Cold War”) that one must win the hearts and minds of a “hostile” population before winning a war is expressed as such in Chapter 21. Here we see an American captain’s lack of compassion for a Vietnamese scout helping America in the war. It also shows the distrust of the Other, even if they are allies.

The Chieu Hoi, a scout for Charlie Company, came into the headquarters building...”Sir, my baby is sick...I must have a pass for three days to see her.” The captain said: ”Is your baby sick now? I wonder. Or are you afraid to go to the field with Charlie Company tomorrow?...”See here”, the captain said, stern and fed up. ”What do I do when my baby gets sick? Hell, my

wife and kid are thousands of miles away...If I come over here and bust my balls, well, shouldn't you take the shit with everyone else? " The Chieu Hoi said: "You are here for one year. I've been in war for many billion years. Many billion years to go".

He was embarrassed, not quite distraught. He turned to look for help from the others in the office. A fellow's pride will suffer when he pleads a favour. A fellow suffers when he is a suspect coward (O'Brien, 1995, p. 185).

Another graphic example of an American victim of the war is seen in major Callicles. He is suffering badly under the burden of the My Lai massacre in March 1968, even though he only took over command of the Pinkville - MY Lai area a year and a half later. As O'Brien says:

...Major Callicles stuffed the burden of My Lai into his own soul. He lost sleep. He lost interest in pot and prostitutes (the vices he tried to root out of the Army) and his thick, brown face became lined with red veins haemorrhaging with the pain of My Lai (O'Brien, 1995, p. 188).

Clearly he is no Mad Mark, but in an effort to cover up American atrocities in the war he takes a tough "all is fair in love and war" stance against the press. This attitude is shown in the poems *Interview with a Guy Named Fawkes*, *U.S. Army* and *Guerrilla war*.

**Interview
with a Guy Named Fawkes,
U.S.Army**

_____you tell them this_____

tell them shove it, they're
not here, tell them kiss
my rear when they piss about
women and kids in shacks
we fire on, damn,
they fire on us.
hell yes, it's war
they sent us for.
what do they know back where
not even in their granddam's days

did any red rockets glare,

don't tell me
how chips fall.
those are The Enemy:
waste them all.

Guerrilla war

It's practically impossible
to tell civilians
from the Vietcong.

Nobody wears uniforms.
They all talk
the same language,

(and you couldn't understand them
even if they didn't).

They tape grenades
inside their clothes,
and carry satchel charges
in their market baskets.

Even their women fight;
and young boys,
and girls.
It's practically impossible
to tell civilians
from the Vietcong;

after a while,
you quit trying.

Callicles realises he is serving a cause gone wrong and starts drinking heavily and indulges in the ridiculous mission to prove his courage and test O'Brien's.

At midnight Major Callicles came down from the officer's club, his eyeballs rolling. "O'Brien! Get your pack and rifle and ammo and a radio. We're goin' to Tri Binh 6 – run a little patrol, just you and me and a Vietnamese scout. Let's see if you got guts" (O'Brien, 1995, p. 197).

It is as if he is, by means of this test, trying to expiate all the wrong in American society which has washed over into "his" military world.

"Professionalism", at least, was the word he used most. But what he wanted and what he furiously went after was to return to the old order...Callicles' suspicion and assumption, in the end, was that the massacre at My Lai may have in fact happened just as *Newsweek* reported it, but that dope and whores and long hair – all suggesting the collapse of discipline – were responsible (O'Brien, 1995, p. 193).

It is ironic that at the end of the "mission" the professional soldier proved to be a drunken incompetent and the "hippie" was the brave soldier.

Despite all these negative examples O'Brien gives, and experienced, he also found the good in America at the frontier and saw that what he stood for and believed in was not all bad.

He discovered that not everybody was a killing-machine thriving on death and that even in the crazily inverted landscape of American myth; good (in a soldierly way) did exist. We see this in his description of Captain Johansen.

...I wondered what it was about him that made him a real hero. He was blond. Heroes are blond in the ideal...He had medals. One was for killing the Viet Cong, a silver star. He was like Vere, Bogie, Shane, Adams, and Frederic Henry, companionless among herds of other men lesser than he, but still sad and haunted that he was not perfect...Like my fictional pre-war heroes, Captain Johansen's courage was a model.

And just like I could never match Alan Ladd's prowess, nor Captain Vere's intensity of conviction, nor Nick Adams' resolution to confront his own certain death...I could not match my captain. Still I found a living hero, and it was good to learn that human beings

sometimes embody valour and that they do not always dissolve at the end of a book or movie reel... Vietnam was under siege in pursuit of a pretty, tantalizing, promiscuous, particularly American brand of government and style. And most of Alpha Company would have preferred a likeable whore to self-determination.

So captain Johansen helped to mitigate and melt the silliness, showing the grace and poise a man can have under the worst circumstances, a wrong war. We clung to him (O'Brien, 1995, p. 144, 145).

Michael Herr's book *Dispatches* gives a totally different perspective on the Vietnam War. Unlike O'Brien he was not against the war and later a participant. He went to Vietnam voluntarily, without combat training and was a kind of "voyeur to violence". Despite the ability to fly in and out of combat situations, he eventually got caught up in the war. Fortunately, unlike his colleagues Dana Stone and Sean Flynn, the war did not swallow him and he managed to keep "distant".

We see that some reporters were affected by the culture of violence born from the war. We see this displayed in Stanley Kubric's film *Full Metal Jacket*.

This is also shown in the poem *News Update* by John Balaban, specifically in the second and fourth stanzas (Ehrhart, 1985, p. 21).

Through Herr's eyes we see Vietnam as an American civilian would have seen it. His account deals mainly with the trauma and the wrongness of war.

Herr is exposed to the frontier and its children early in the novel. He tells of his first interview with a long range reconnaissance patroller (Lurp);

"I just can't hack it back in the World", he said. He told me that after he'd come back home the last time he would sit in his room all day, and sometimes he'd stick a hunting rifle out of the window leading people and

cars as they passed his house... "I used to put my folks real uptight", he said. But he put people uptight here too, even here (Herr, 1978, p. 13).

He also tells us of his experiences in Saigon and Danang:

... We'd get stoned together and keep the common pool stocked and tended. It was bottomless and alive with Lurps, seals, recondos, Green-Beret bushmasters, redundant mutilators, heavy rapers, eye-shooters, widow-makers, nametakers, classic essential American types; point men, *isolatos* and outriders like they were programmed in their genes to do it, the first taste made them crazy for it, just like they knew it would (Herr, 1978, p. 35).

Like O'Brien, Herr too discovers that the people in charge are not always competent "father figures" to the young troops.

A few days later Sean Flynn and I went up to a big firebase in the American TAOR... The colonel in command was so drunk that day that he could barely get his words out... (Herr, 1978, p. 18).

He also tells of the effect combat has on young soldiers;

(How do you feel when a nineteen-year-old kid tells you from the bottom of his heart that he's gotten too old for this kind of shit?)... These were the faces of boys whose whole lives seemed to have backed up on them, they'd be a few feet away but they'd be looking back at you over a distance you knew you'd never really cross (Herr, 1978, p. 21).

This, and his reaction to death, and the troops treatment of it all form part of his traumatised experience in Vietnam.

[War] may have legitimized my fascination, letting me look for as long as I wanted; I didn't have a language for it then, but I remember now the shame I felt, like looking at first porn, all the porn in the world. I could have looked until my lamps went out and I still wouldn't have accepted the connection between a detached leg and the rest of a body, or the poses

and positions that always happened (one day I'd hear it called "response-to-impact"), bodies wrenched too fast and violently into unbelievable contortion. Or the total impersonality of group death, making them lie anywhere and any way it left them, hanging over barbed wire or thrown promiscuously on top of other dead, up into trees like terminal acrobats, *Look what I can do* (Herr, 1978, p. 23).

After the VC attack a base and are repulsed Herr witnesses the events of the next day. The myth of American soldiers treating their enemies humanely is soon dispelled.

"Close but no cigar", the captain said and then a few of his men went out there and kicked them all in the head, thirty seven of them. Then I heard an M-16 on full automatic starting to go through clips, a second to fire, three to plug in a fresh clip, and I saw a man out there doing it. Every round was like a tiny concentration of high velocity wind, making the bodies wince and shiver. When he finished he walked by us on his way back to his hooch, and I knew I hadn't seen anything until I saw his face. It was flushed and mottled and twisted like he had his face skin on inside out...he looked like he'd had a heart attack out there...Really a dude who'd shot his wad. The captain wasn't too pleased about my having seen that (Herr, 1978, p. 24).

What really shocks Herr is the total disrespect some soldiers seemed to have for their own dead:

The living, the wounded and the dead flew together in crowded Chinooks, and it was nothing for guys to walk on top of the half covered corpses packed in the aisles to get to a seat, or to make jokes among themselves about how funny they all looked, the dumb dead fuckers (Herr, 1978, p. 28).

The indiscipline reigning in Vietnam was also a shock to him:

...a fat middle-aged man was screaming at the troops who were pissing on the ground. His poncho was pulled back away from the front of his

helmet enough to show captain's bars, but nobody even turned around to look at him... (Herr, 1978, p. 29).

This attitude to human life and the cynicism the war brought about was something else he comments on. It was vented in slogans on helmets and flak jackets:

Pray for War was written on the side of his helmet, and he was talking mostly to a man whose helmet name was *Swinging Dick* (Herr, 1978, p. 29). On their helmets and flak-jackets they'd written...*Far from Fearless, Born to lose, Born to Raise Hell, Born to Kill, Born to Die...Just you and me God-Right?* (Herr, 1978, p. 65).

The example he found the most amazing was a Marine who had written

"Yea, though I walk through the Valley of the Shadow of Death I shall fear no Evil, because I'm the meanest motherfucker in the valley" (Herr, 1978, p. 75).

This attitude to death was also in some cases coupled to a kind of death-wish:

Once I ran into a soldier standing by himself in a small jungle clearing where I'd wandered off to take a leak...He told me that the guys were all sick of sitting around waiting and he'd come out to see if he could draw a little fire... (Herr, 1978, p. 30).

Some of the same issues that Tim O'Brien came to face also meet Herr head on. The issue of pressure by society to make one enter a war and how ones expectations during a war situation can be frustrated is seen in the comment of a marine speaking to Herr;

First letter I got from my old man was all about how proud he was that I'm here and how we have this *duty* to do, you know I I don't fucking know, whatever...and it really made me feel great. Shit, my father hardly said good morning to me before. Well, I been here eight months now, and when I get home I'm gonna have all I can do to keep from killing the cocksucker... (Herr, 1978, p. 31).

The issue of soldiers not being able to see the boundaries between good and bad, right and wrong is also shown:

Shit the last three patrols I was on we had fucking orders not to return fire going through the villages, that's what a fucked-up war it's getting' to be anymore. My last tour we'd go through and that was it, we'd rip out the hedges and burn the hooches and blow all the wells and kill every chicken, pig and cow in the fucking ville. I mean, if we can't shoot these people, what the fuck are we doing here? (Herr, 1978, p. 31).

Herr soon discovers that the problems in American society are also present in Vietnam. He finds that black Marines sit separately from whites and that after the assassination of Martin Luther King he is shunned by the black marine who was friendly with him the previous day. The essence of what Herr has experienced and learnt in the razily inverted landscape of American myth frustrating his expectations in Vietnam is best described in the following passage from his book:

The best –armed patrols in history went out after services to feed smoke to people whose priests could let themselves burn down to consecrated ash on street corners. Deep in the valleys you could hear small Buddhist chimes ringing for peace, *hoa bien*; smell incense in the middle of the thickest Asian street funk; see groups of ARVN with their families waiting for a transport huddled around a burning prayer strip. Sermonettes came over the Armed Forces radio every couple of hours, once I heard a chaplain from the 9th Division starting up. “Oh. Gawd, help us learn to live with Thee in a more dynamic way in these perilous times, that we may better serve Thee in the struggle against Thine enemies...” Holy war, long-nosed jihad like a face-off between one god who would hold the coonskin to the wall while we nailed it up, and another whose detachment would see the blood run out of ten generations, if that was how long it took for the wheel to go around... (Herr, 1978, p. 43).

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