

# **VETERAN NARRATIVES**

*and the Collective Memory of the Vietnam War*

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# Introduction

## *They Were There*

Robert Mason graduated from US Army Primary Helicopter School in the spring of 1965, fulfilling a lifelong dream of becoming a pilot. That summer he shipped out for Vietnam.<sup>1</sup> The helicopter Mason flew during the war was a troop carrier, “the Bell HU-1 Iroquois, known as the Huey.”<sup>2</sup> He often attracted enemy gunfire when he dropped off or picked up “grunts” (foot soldiers) at landing zones (LZs) throughout South Vietnam. After numerous forays into such “hot LZs,” Mason got somewhat used to bullets pinging off his Huey, along with “the confusion, the crackling door guns, the smell of gunpowder, the yells of the grunts, [and] the radios going crazy.”<sup>3</sup> He “learned how to function, even though [he] was scared shitless, by doing it over and over again.”<sup>4</sup> A fellow pilot eventually dubbed Mason a “chickenhawk.” He was a chicken because he was terrified before every mission, but a hawk because he bravely kept flying in spite of his fear.

The strain of too many hot LZs, however, started to take their toll on Mason in the final weeks of his twelve-month Vietnam tour. He had trouble getting to sleep, and when he managed to doze off, nightmares about horrible things he had seen over the previous months jolted him awake. He started blacking out, waking up in a state of utter panic and dread. He lost weight and even hallucinated.<sup>5</sup> Mason made it back to the United States in one piece, but his psychological problems persisted. He left the army and frantically searched for peace of mind, fulfillment, and a means to support his family. He studied photography, worked as a car salesman, traveled around Europe, and devised several get-rich-quick schemes, but nothing panned out. To make matters worse, Mason was drinking heavily, popping pills, and smoking marijuana in a futile effort to

2 control his anxiety. One day he confided in an acquaintance who worked as a literary agent that he was thinking about writing a novel based on his Vietnam experiences. The agent was encouraging, but suggested Mason write a memoir instead. He took the advice, and after completing the first seventy pages felt real satisfaction for the first time since returning from Southeast Asia.

Mason finished his memoir in 1980.<sup>6</sup> His agent friend agreed to shop the manuscript around to publishers, but was not optimistic about its chances because “nobody wanted to publish books about the Vietnam War.”<sup>7</sup> A few Vietnam memoirs were released in the 1970s, and one of these books, Philip Caputo’s *A Rumor of War* (1977), was a great critical and commercial success.<sup>8</sup> Mason discovered that his agent’s pessimism was well founded, however, as his manuscript was rejected again and again over the next few years. Publishers “liked the writing . . . but none of them thought people wanted to read about Vietnam.”<sup>9</sup> They were wrong. Mason’s memoir, *Chickenhawk*, was finally published by Viking Press in 1983. Critics loved it and thousands of copies were eventually sold.<sup>10</sup> And Mason was not the only successful Vietnam book author that year. In December 1983, the *New York Times* announced that titles “about Vietnam [were] rolling off the presses in record numbers.”<sup>11</sup> The *Times* reported in 1987 that the “Vietnam-Book Boom” was still in full swing, and it asked several veteran-authors to give their thoughts on this “latest artistic trend.”<sup>12</sup> One of the authors, Caputo, dismissed it all as “Vietnam chic.” Another, Tim O’Brien, speculated that interest in Vietnam would soon fade, and readers would move on to books about other wars.<sup>13</sup>

Caputo and O’Brien were wrong in thinking that Vietnam War books were only a passing fad. Hundreds of titles about the conflict appeared in the years following the 1987 *Times* article, many of them written by veterans. Some well-known war novels have been produced by ex-soldiers, such as *Paco’s Story* by Larry Heinemann, *Fields of Fire* by James Webb, and O’Brien’s *The Things They Carried*. Other veteran-writers, such as Bruce Weigl and W. D. Ehrhart, are known for their war-related poetry. Nonetheless, far more nonfiction veteran narratives, namely memoirs and oral histories, have been published since the war ended. And a number of these books, like *A Rumor of War* and *Chickenhawk*, were best sellers, lauded by reviewers, or both. Writing a memoir, moreover, has become a seemingly mandatory milestone for famous Vietnam veterans. Heinemann, Weigl, and other writers who were first recognized for their Vietnam War fiction later penned nonfiction accounts of their tours. Veteran-authors who

gained recognition by writing books unrelated to Vietnam, such as Tracy Kidder and Tobias Wolff, later became war memoirists. Colin Powell, John McCain, Bob Kerrey, and other politicians have written about their Vietnam experiences as well.

Owing to their longtime prevalence and popularity, veteran memoirs have undoubtedly influenced America's collective memory of the Vietnam conflict for decades. The same can be said for films, news media reports, political rhetoric, and other cultural products. But war narratives produced by "those who were there" have long held a special authority for people, Americans included.<sup>14</sup> Paul Fussell observes in *The Great War and Modern Memory* that British veterans of the First World War saw recalling their battlefield experiences as a duty or "moral obligation." A war memoirist himself, he adds that all ex-soldiers share this "obsession to some degree."<sup>15</sup> Samuel Hynes, another veteran-scholar, explains that this preoccupation with remembering has long been colored by the assertion that former warriors are the absolute authorities on the conflicts in which they have fought.<sup>16</sup> A veteran maintains that what he says about war "is true *because* he was on the field," and "if you don't know that, you don't know anything."<sup>17</sup> Many Vietnam veterans similarly assert that "the 'Nam" was so surreal and unlike other conflicts that only they can truly comprehend it. Phil Klay, a former marine who served in Iraq, pokes fun at this attitude in *Redeployment*, his award-winning short-story collection. A character in one story tells this old joke: "How many Vietnam vets does it take to screw in a light bulb? You wouldn't know, you weren't there."<sup>18</sup>

Some Vietnam veterans, then, have claimed a special, infallible knowledge of the war. Equally important is the fact that the rest of the country has been primed to believe this assertion. When *A Rumor of War* and other early veteran memoirs were published in the late 1970s, Americans were angry and disillusioned by the recent failure in Vietnam and the Watergate scandal.<sup>19</sup> In this atmosphere of distrust "the veteran was admirably placed to proclaim . . . his knowledge of events and perception of the truth."<sup>20</sup> Feeling that their leaders had lied to them about the war, people turned to the ordinary ex-soldier, someone "who spoke at a worm's-eye level"<sup>21</sup> and "had witnessed the hypocrisy of power first hand."<sup>22</sup> The veteran memoirist consequently came to be seen as an "investigative writer"<sup>23</sup> who was better equipped than anyone else "to solve the mystery surrounding Vietnam."<sup>24</sup>

The late 1970s also saw the emergence of the belief that GIs in Vietnam were denied victory by the actions of antiwar protesters and then

4 literally spat on when they came home. This narrative gained strength in the 1980s, and proponents of America's first war with Iraq used it to silence peace activists in 1991. The populace was warned that if they did not "support the troops" in the Middle East, they would be just as cruel as the radicals who allegedly victimized GIs in the sixties and seventies.<sup>25</sup> The idea that US forces in Vietnam were "stabbed in the back" by malevolent antiwar activists persists in the twenty-first century. This is unsurprising considering that "uncritically hagiographic Support Our Troops rhetoric,"<sup>26</sup> which unquestionably celebrates soldiers, has flourished since the 9/11 terrorist attacks.<sup>27</sup> Tales of abused Vietnam veterans, however, as chapter 5 explains, are of questionable validity. But such stories nevertheless affect public perception and are part of the Vietnam veteran "mystique."<sup>28</sup> Readers, surely wary of repeating the supposed mistakes made by the protesters of yesteryear, are disposed to believe veterans' claims that they alone know what *really* happened in Vietnam.

Despite their importance, Vietnam veteran memoirs have hitherto received inadequate treatment by scholars. Many literary scholars have analyzed veteran narratives, and some thoughtfully postulated on how these works may have influenced how Americans think about the war. Some contended that veteran narratives offered hard-hitting truths about Vietnam that might prevent future military quagmires.<sup>29</sup> Susan Jeffords, conversely, argued that some memoirs, along with movies and novels, actually contributed to Reagan-era jingoism.<sup>30</sup> Other scholars focused more narrowly on how veteran-writers illustrated certain aspects of the war, such as race relations among GIs<sup>31</sup> and the treatment of Vietnamese women.<sup>32</sup> These writers, however, each covered only a small number of memoirs. Plus, they usually made little distinction between nonfiction narratives, veteran-authored novels, films, and other Vietnam-themed pop-culture products.

Many renowned Vietnam War historians have used veteran memoirs in their scholarship, including Christian G. Appy, Marilyn B. Young, and George C. Herring.<sup>33</sup> Unlike scholars working in other fields, however, historians have not seriously explored how these books might have affected collective memory.<sup>34</sup> Most historians take just a few quotations from veteran-authored books to bolster various arguments, but a few others, Peter S. Kindsvatter being a notable example, rely heavily on these sources.<sup>35</sup> Few historians, in any case, scrutinize veteran memoirs any more than they would an unimpeachable primary source retrieved from an archive. This is a problem, since memory, according to historian David

Thelen, “private and individual as much as collective and cultural, is constructed, not reproduced.”<sup>36</sup> “This construction,” he adds, “is not made in isolation but in conversations with others that occur in the contexts of community, broader politics, and social dynamics.”<sup>37</sup> Yes, veteran narratives were written by men and women “who were there,” but they are still recollections, not objective historical records. They are, therefore, governed and limited by properties inherent to every form of memory.

This book is a work of history, but it does not treat veteran memoirs as sources that can be straightforwardly mined for information. Instead, it is concerned with what veterans say about the war, but also how and why they say it. Like some pieces of past scholarship, it explores how veteran narratives have affected the collective memory of the war. But this book, unlike past works, presents a comprehensive analysis of the Vietnam narrative genre. It examines fifty-eight of the most prominent memoirs and oral histories published between 1967 and 2005. These books were best sellers, award winners, reviewed in the *New York Times* or another major publication, written by famous people, or referenced in scholarship. Only well-known narratives were included in this primary group because only titles that achieved recognition could have had a significant impact on collective memory.

The analysis of these fifty-eight works addresses the actual fighting experienced by veteran-authors, but it also delves into issues not directly related to combat. These include, as Meredith H. Lair puts it, “[t]he usual factors for consideration in social and cultural history—the troika of gender, class, and race,”<sup>38</sup> but also politics, the war’s aftermath, and its commemoration. This approach follows the lead of Lair, Appy, Heather Marie Stur, and other scholars who have clearly demonstrated that there is much more to Vietnam War history than B-52 strikes, firefights, and booby traps. Material gleaned from memoirs is compared to and enhanced by supplemental sources, including newspaper articles, films, US government studies, and historical scholarship. Also employed are narratives that were not included in the primary memoir group because they were not prominent or not written by veterans. These accounts from Vietnamese civilians, African Americans, women veterans, and others are valuable perspectives not often provided by most famous memoirs.

The analysis begins, in chapter 1, by looking at the backgrounds of fifty-one veteran-authors for whom sufficient information is available. Demographic data taken from memoirs and other sources were organized into a variety of categories, including age, amount of time served

6 in Vietnam, education level, and length of military service. These data are important because social, economic, and educational level helped determine both what an author experienced in Vietnam and how he or she interpreted these experiences. Those factors in turn influenced how aspects of the war would be portrayed in the veteran's memoir.

Research into memoirists' backgrounds ascertained that the majority were white, college graduates, and former officers. They served in Vietnam at an average age of twenty-seven. These statistics are potentially troubling because ground combat in the war was primarily fought by men of opposite backgrounds: poor and working-class white and minority enlisted personnel, many of whom went to war before their twentieth birthdays. This demographic disparity suggests that narratives were written by ex-soldiers who did not share the same experiences and viewpoints as the average American combat soldier. Closer examination of the data, however, leads to a more nuanced conclusion. Twenty-six veteran-authors fought as low-ranking, "junior" commissioned officers. Unlike their higher-ranking counterparts, junior officers lived, fought, and sometimes died alongside the men they commanded in Vietnam. The existence, then, of so many former low-ranking officers among the authors ensures that even though most authors were not grunts in background, most were grunts by measure of their wartime experiences.

Chapter 2 explores the interrelated issues of combat conditions and the Vietnamese people. Most veterans describe combat in a graphic, unromantic manner. Their collective depiction of warfare as chaotic, frustrating, and pointless amounts to a searing indictment of the American effort in Vietnam. It is strange, therefore, that these accounts simultaneously depict Vietnamese civilians, perhaps the greatest victims of the war, as two-faced enemy collaborators and greedy exploiters of GIs. Vietnamese rarely appear in narratives as anything more than racist, one-dimensional caricatures. Supplemental sources suggest that Vietnamese actions loathed by many US troops are understandable in the context of Vietnam's tumultuous history. Memoirists frequently say, for instance, that GIs were irritated by the constant presence of beggars, peddlers, pimps, and other Vietnamese in search of American dollars. They do not explain that many South Vietnamese were forced into such activities because the war had wrecked their nation's economy. The omission of this crucial information is understandable, however, since most mid-twentieth-century Americans, soldiers included, were largely ignorant of Vietnam's language, history, and culture.



A great number of African Americans and other nonwhites fought for the United States in Vietnam, and racial tensions were high in the military during the war. Nearly all of the best-known memoirists, however, are white, and many of them do not broach the subjects of race and racism at all. Chapter 3 handles this situation by analyzing nonwhite narratives. Many of these works were not included in the primary memoir group because they are too obscure, but they are used in this chapter to show how ex-soldiers of color developed a race-centric “countermemory” of the Vietnam War. This nonwhite interpretation of the conflict consists of two competing, antagonistic paradigms. The first nonwhite version of the Vietnam experience emphasizes racial cooperation and pride in the combat performance of one’s own racial or ethnic group. The second version focuses on incidents of white racism, the self-segregation of GIs, and is influenced by the Black Power movement.

Chapter 4 tackles issues related to women and sexuality. Veterans suggest male soldiers acted generally sexist in their interactions with women in Vietnam. This depiction of male–female relations is confirmed by historical scholarship, wartime newspaper articles, the narratives of American women who went to Vietnam, and other sources. The misogynist behavior of male GIs was rooted in mainstream and military cultures that promoted hostility towards women and the belief that soldiers at war deserved sex. All women were subject to this attitude, but it was intensified in dealings with Asian women because of the racism that pervaded the Vietnam-era US armed forces. Veteran-authors, additionally, often make light of instances in which GIs disrespected and abused women, and both American and foreign females who appear in their narratives are usually depicted as offensive stereotypes.

Chapter 5 examines how memoirists dealt with their homecomings and postwar lives. Many veterans forthrightly admit that they suffered from post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and other readjustment difficulties after returning to the United States. Postwar studies confirm that many Vietnam veterans came home from Southeast Asia with psychological wounds. Not everything memoirs say about postwar topics, however, is supported by other sources, including the contention that Vietnam veterans, unlike soldiers who survived earlier American wars, were harassed or ignored by their fellow citizens. Most veteran-authors, like Americans in general, were evidently unaware that ex-warriors have struggled to readjust to peacetime since the dawn of warfare. Veteran narratives also suggest that the passage of time invariably erased the PTSD and other

8       homecoming troubles of the men and women who went to Vietnam. This is misleading because many veterans never found relief from economic and psychological problems related to their Vietnam service. This was especially the case for ex-soldiers who, unlike most memoirists, came from disadvantaged circumstances.

Political messages conveyed by veteran memoirs are covered in chapter 6. Some narratives feature unambiguous antiwar statements, and most portray the war in an overall unflattering light. Curiously, though, many memoirists also express hatred of antiwar protesters and were obviously proud that they had fought for their country. The chapter concludes by exploring why narratives conveying this ambivalent attitude dominated the memoir genre. One reason is that mainstream literary critics lavished praise and attention only on narratives that portrayed the war in a nuanced but generally negative light. Yet, according to opinion polls, Vietnam veterans as a whole thought the war was a mistake and disliked antiwar protesters, but remained patriotic and proud of their military service at the same time. In this sense, at least, the memoirs accurately reflected the conflicted views held by most men and women who carried out America's mission in Vietnam.

Chapter 7, finally, compares Vietnam narratives to those produced by veterans of pre- and post-Vietnam American wars. Great differences, of course, separate the Vietnam War from World War II, the Gulf War, and post-9/11 conflicts. But this chapter focuses on the amazing similarities that exist between Vietnam memoirs and those that chronicle other wars. Authors who served in the military before, during, and after Vietnam all feature the following themes in their narratives: soldiers loathing civilians, combat-related psychological maladies, battlefield atrocities, and GIs preoccupied with sex. And this is only a partial list. One cause for these similarities is the fact that wartime experiences for the average American foot soldier did not change in many ways from the 1940s to the 2000s. At least some cross-conflict parallels, however, resulted from the supremacy of white, college-educated, former officers in the veteran memoir genre for the last seventy or so years.