

12-1984

Who Owns The Night? Vietnam: Personal and Fictional Narratives

Charles F. Angell

Bridgewater State College, cangell@bridgew.edu

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Recommended Citation

Angell, Charles F. (1984). Who Owns The Night? Vietnam: Personal and Fictional Narratives. *Bridgewater Review*, 3(1), 3-7.

Available at: https://vc.bridgew.edu/br_rev/vol3/iss1/5

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Novels and reminiscences written by Vietnam combat veterans are being published with increasing frequency. Dust jackets and end papers proclaim that each new narrative is for Vietnam what *All Quiet on the Western Front* was for World War I and *The Naked and the Dead* or *Catch 22* were for World War II. Unfortunately, if it can be said that generals fight current wars using the tactics of earlier wars, so Vietnam War authors structure their narratives using the frameworks of earlier writers. Too many — Winston Groom's *Better Times Than These* or Steven Phillips Smith's *American Boys* are typical — place contemporary soldiers on the battlefields of an earlier literature where young men encounter ironies, absurdities, and paradoxes. Most attempts to write about what young men experienced in Vietnam reveal that the conventions of war fiction, as we have come to know them, cannot adequately shape the experience of that war. Authors have not yet found a narrative form articulating the Vietnam combat experience.

Articulation has always been the major problem in America's experience with Vietnam. During the war, our leaders, from the President on down, were unable to articulate precisely what it was America hoped to accomplish by fighting communism in a small, poor, agricultural country. Protesters verbal as many of them were, could not articulate through reasoned argument what about the war was morally, politically, and militarily wrong. Many words, too many words, were written and spoken on each side. They revealed, in their accumulation, a nation's infected will.

Until recently, the men who fought the war have remained virtually silent. America has wanted it that way; the military has wanted it that way; and the men themselves — it seems — have not wanted to add to the irrelevance, inaccuracy, and untruthfulness that characterize too much of what has been written about the fighting in Vietnam. Their attitude was (and may to an extent still be) that of the soldier described in Fred Reed's "A Veteran Writes:" "Once, after GIs had left Saigon, I came out of a bar on Cach Mang and saw a veteran with a sign on his jacket: VIETNAM: IF YOU HAVEN'T BEEN THERE: SHUT THE FUCK UP. Maybe, just maybe, he had something." Unlike the more articulate, most veterans did not render their Vietnam experience in sophisticated literary tropes and motifs that previous generations had appropriated to describe their war experience. Unlike the British soldiers in the Flanders' trenches whom Paul Fussell depicted in *The Great War* and *Modern Memory*, American

Who Owns The Night?

Vietnam: Personal and Fictional Narratives

By Charles F. Angell



Boston Globe Photograph

soldiers in the rice paddies did not feel they had come through battle to be reborn or that the myth of their destiny lay in trial by fire.

Their destinies are perhaps suggested by the images retained of Vietnam. Vietnam's legacy is remembered pictures of screaming children burned and disfigured by napalm, an anguished Kent State coed bent over the body of her college classmate, Buddhist monks immolated before horrified onlookers. In his essay, "Photographs of Agony," John Berger writes: "Confrontation with a photographed moment of agony can mask a far more extensive and urgent confrontation." Berger tells us that the most honest response we can have to the horror of agony is to understand how we have been transformed and to continue a conscious transformation of ourselves.

The American soldiers who landed in Vietnam had previously confronted war only through a succession and accumulation of movie and television images. In *A Rumor of War*, Philip Caputo recalls the briefing given prior to his Marine company's departure for Danang and remembers the commanding officer saying: "I don't want anyone going in there thinking he's going to play John Wayne." Despite the admonition, a reader of the Vietnam narratives discovers real and fictional soldiers alike entering combat with images of themselves as John Wayne, Sergeant Rock, and The High Plains Drifter. And yet, if initially they viewed themselves as the traditional American hero, the more perceptive began to recognize an inevitable transformation. One soldier (interviewed by Mark Baker for NAM) writes of his actions: "calmly and methodically, but disconnected, like you're watching yourself do it -- Clint Eastwood would have been proud of me -- I moved my M-16 so that eventually the muzzle flashes from the graveyard lined up through my sight." The heroic albeit innocent soldier becomes a killer -- detached, methodical, and fascinated by an image of himself. Another soldier (also interviewed by Baker) carries this fascination further: "I loved to just sit in the ditch and watch people die. As bad as that sounds, I just like to watch no matter what happened, sitting back with a homemade cup of hot chocolate. It was like a big movie." War becomes spectacle which, no matter how agonizing to others, one can sit back and enjoy. Curiously, when these soldiers came home, the transformation of images of war into war came full circle.

But *Deer Hunter* was a different story . . . I'm in Vietnam again, I said to myself. I'm back in Vietnam. All of a sudden they are in a firefight on the screen and if I had had a gun on me I would have started shooting. Can you imagine if I had really opened up on a crowd in a theater? . . . I'm serious, I came apart. I

crouched down behind the seat and crawled up the aisle of the theater and out into the light on my hands and knees. I didn't know that it was a movie anymore. I was back in the war and that was what I had to do. (Baker, NAM)

The military was aware from the start of this interplay between war and images of war in the minds of the teenagers it recruited to fight the North Vietnamese soldiers. "They told us in training," Mike Beamon recalls in Al Santoli's *Everything We Had*, "that you could become a master of illusion if you believe enough in the illusion. And it works. I couldn't believe it. Also, the power of your eyes, not to look directly at something but to look off to the side of it. You wouldn't concentrate your focus because if you look at something too long, it'll look back at you, and you don't want them to turn around and see you there."



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Illusion and reality became further intermingled as the recruit penetrated deeper into his military experience. Most of the young men who served in Vietnam (their average age was twenty-three) had formed no strong concept of self-identity; their confusion of movie wars and soldiers with real soldiering implies that much. Most of them had not observed firsthand the sort of all encompassing violence they were to witness in Vietnam. The army and the marines were aware of the young recruit's ambivalence toward violence and were partially aware of the degree to which exposure to cinematic and fictional presentations of violence underlay the ambivalence. In novel after novel, soldiers-turned-authors describe their basic training experiences in identical terms; the characters

are the same; the racial and ethnic insults are the same; the outcome is the same. Older, combat experienced soldiers would warn trainees or buck privates and lieutenants to avoid the John Wayne postures, yet they developed a training process that compelled boys to prove their willingness to risk injury or death in order to be considered fighting men. Told at one moment they would encounter unimaginable violence, at the next they were trained to inflict violence precisely as they'd imagined it. The soldiers quoted earlier reveal the training's effectiveness in ways both anticipated and unanticipated by the military.

When finally confronted with the battlefield and its horrors, most soldiers could only exclaim -- and novel after novel echoes the outburst: "Jesus Christ, this is for real!"

Listen to Ron Kovic describe men being wounded in *Born on the Fourth of July*:

Men are screaming all around me. Oh God get me out of here! 'Please help!' they scream. Oh Jesus, like little children now, not like marines, not like the posters, not like that day in the high school, this is for real . . .

But even real horror had to be transformed as the dimmest 'grunts' grew aware of the discontinuity between the movie and recruiting posters and the real thing. Here is a soldier's recollection (again from Santoli's *Everything We Had*) of the aftermath from a nightlong firefight at Fire Base Burt:

General Westmoreland flew in. All the news outfits and everything. It was the most hilarious thing. As these sons of bitches came out there, the GI's started lying. The newsmen



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would walk up to just anybody and say, "What did you do?" "I singlehandedly killed three hundred thousand with my Bowie knife." And man, they'd write it up.

The horror becomes transformed into tall-tale swagger for those at home watching the nightly news images of war. But there came a point for those who had been bloodied when there was no language adequate to tell the tale because there was no audience adequate to understand it. Michael Herr, in an oft-quoted passage from *Dispatches*, suggests to what narrative terms fighting in Vietnam reduced itself:

But what a story he told me, as one-pointed and resonant as any war story I ever heard, it took me a year to understand it:

"Patrol went up the mountain. One man came back. He died before he could tell us what happened."

I waited for the rest, but it seemed not to be that kind of story; when I asked him what had happened he looked like he felt sorry for me...

What was the lasting effect of all this? In NAM, Mark Baker quotes a veteran who (like numerous others) admits:

I miss the sound of the nights in Vietnam, with the choppers landing and the outgoing -- not the incoming fire. Although, even the incoming was exciting. The sounds are particularly vivid. The force after a large gun fires or a round lands, the feel of the gas from it on your face. Thinking about Vietnam once in a while, in a crazy kind of way, I just wish for an hour I could be there. And then be

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transported back. Maybe just to be there so I'd wish I was back here again.

On the plane home after his year in Vietnam, Tim O'Brien (in *If I Die in a Combat Zone*) comments: "The stewardess serves a meal and passes out magazines. The plane lands in Japan and takes on fuel. Then you fly straight on to Seattle. What kind of a war is it that begins and ends that way, with a pretty girl, cushioned seats, and magazines?"

The answer I am suggesting is that American soldiers went to Vietnam to fight the sort of war they had already conceived in their minds.

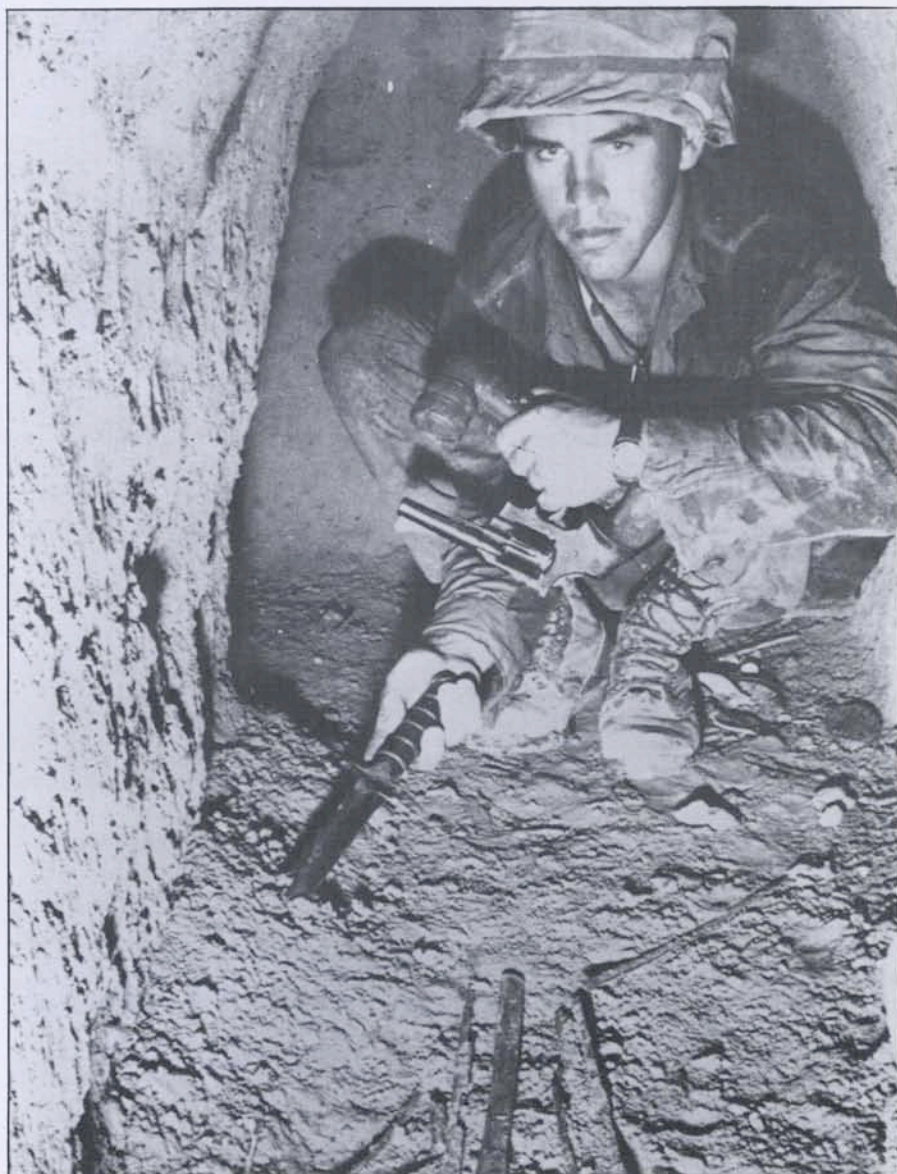
I keep thinking (Herr writes in *Dispatches*) about all the kids who get wiped out by seventeen years of war movies before coming to Vietnam to get wiped out for good. You don't know what a media freak is until you've seen the way a few of those grunts would run around during a fight when they knew that there was a television crew nearby; they were actually making war movies in their heads, doing little guts-and-glory Leatherneck tap dances under fire, getting their pimples shot off for the networks. They were insane, but the war hadn't done that to them.

If one can claim that this is so of the teenage "grunts" who did the fighting, one can also say it is so of the generals who conducted the fighting. While General Westmoreland's strategy for winning the war was undoubtedly shaped by diplomatic and political concerns, it also was shaped by an Americanized conception of the enemy. "During the invasion of Cambodia in 1970," Frances Fitzgerald notes in *Fire in the Lake*, "American officials spoke of plans to capture the enemy's command headquarters for the south as if there existed a reverse Pentagon in the jungle complete with Marine guards, generals, and green baize tables." Stanley Karnow's recent history of the Vietnam War reports that early in the war General Westmoreland and his staff undertook to discover and capture this

jungle command center which they viewed as a network of tunnels and bunkers deep in the Vietnamese mountains. This strategy, based on a conception of the enemy as a reflected image of oneself, had disastrous results, though General Westmoreland continued to insist that with a few more men, a bit more material and somewhat more time, he would be able to see "the light at the end of the tunnel."

To be sure, the troops found tunnels and bunkers, occasionally extensive complexes, which discoveries validated the command's certainty that an even more extensive network must exist. Every narrative includes at least one account of finding and destroying tunnel complexes. Individual soldiers speak of their fear, even terror, at having to search tunnels for weapons and supplies. Too frequently the tunnels are booby-trapped or occupied by Viet Cong prepared to kill a few Americans before they in turn are killed. Frequently enough, the tunnels are hiding places for village women and children whom the terrified soldiers shoot. Consequently the tunnels come to possess for the soldiers a double horror of the tomb and the slaughterhouse, of butcher and butchered. Many of the novels employ the tunnels solely for suspense and horror. The cumulative effect of these novels finds the tunnels holding an ambivalent position in the soldier's mind. They become places where he might become either the victim or the perpetrator of an atrocity. Crawling into the tunnels and bunkers, the soldier was compelled to confront the terror and violence Vietnam had imposed on his life.

Two of the best Vietnam novels use the tunnels as central motif. John DelVecchio's *The Thirteenth Valley* and Tim O'Brien's *Going After Cacciato* both accept the military's premise that the tunnels and bunkers represented an important strategic objective. Both novels carry the premise to its extreme conclusion, DelVecchio through apparent realism. O'Brien through fantasy. DelVecchio's troopers are required to operate in a harsh jungle terrain of ridges and valleys searching for an NVA command center. The novel provides the reader with detailed maps and frequent official situation reports which, much like Melville's *Moby Dick* chapters on whaling, provide a realistic foundation for an increasingly symbolic action. As they move from valley to valley, the soldiers discover tunnels and bunkers, some well-lit and equipped, others leading deep into unknown regions. Though none are occupied, they provide concrete evidence of the enemy's comfortable underground existence. This jungle comfort contrasts with the miserable heat, humidity, insects and vegetation the American soldiers must endure. Moreover,



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the tunnels appear to have purpose and direction which will become apparent to the Americans if only they can unearth the command headquarters. The Americans see evidence of a society, but they are blind to its structure; they see tunnels and bunkers without perceiving their place in the overall scheme. The soldiers become increasingly aware of their own torment and of the fact that their survival depends on whim. In DelVecchio's novel, Lieutenant Brook composes notes for an academic monograph on the inter-relatedness of military and personal conflict while the action around him forces questions about the inter-relatedness of anything. The soldiers finally force their way into the 13th valley where suddenly the enemy emerges in strength, organized and determined, appearing as it

were out of the ground. The Americans are defeated; the principal characters shot down performing individual, though futile, acts of heroism.

O'Brien carries the idea of the tunnels further. His *Going After Cacciato* deliberately fashions the tunnel motif in cinematic terms familiar to most readers. Cacciato goes AWOL and a platoon, which includes the novel's narrator Paul Berlin, is ordered to find him and bring him back. Cacciato has headed out of Vietnam in a direction whose terminus is ultimately Paris. His pursuers eventually discover and enter "a tunnel complex lighted by torches every fifty meters, an interlocking series of passageways" which "curved, widened, and emptied into a large lighted chamber." In the chamber they find . . .

Men who traveled to Vietnam to fight political insurgency have come to live in a society that treats them as potential insurgents.

along the far wall, his back to them, sat a small man, dressed in a green uniform and sandals, a pith hat on his head. He was peering into a giant chrome telescope mounted on a console equipped with meters and dials and blinking lights.

O'Brien skillfully plays this underground Oz (and its wizard) off against the surface landscape. The small man, Li Van Hgoc (Leeuwenhoek, inventor of the microscope?), tells the Americans that the underground "was a literal summary of the land, and of mysteries contained in it; a statement of greater truth could not be made" and adds some pages later "'So you see,' said Li Van Hgoc as he brought down the periscope and locked it with a silver key, 'things may be viewed from many angles. From down below, or from inside out, you often discover entirely new understandings.'" Finally, when asked by the Lieutenant heading the search party "Which way out?" Li Van Hgoc answers: "'Don't you see that's the whole point? No way out. That is the puzzle. We are prisoners, all of us. POW's'."

The novel continues, pursuer and pursued, hunters and hunted, joined in a combat neither can escape. They follow a path that moves back and forth between the real and the imagined until the narrative enters a landscape of complete ambiguity where nothing is certain. "What about Cacciato?" Paul Berlin asks of the Lieutenant near the novel's end.

"We had him," Stark said, "Did we?"

"Sure, we had him good."

"Who knows?" The lieutenant was smiling broadly now. He looked happy. "Maybe so, maybe not."

The novel ends a page later with the Lieutenant repeating "Yes. . . . Maybe so."

In a way the veterans came home to even greater ambiguity and discontinuity than they had experienced in Vietnam. Perhaps it is more accurate to say that the ambiguity of their war experience transferred itself to their experience back in the World. Americans greeted the returning soldiers in terms that reflected the images they had formed of them from magazine and television reporting. "How many babies did you murder?" How many women did you rape?" were questions that confronted soldiers who made the mistake of travelling in uniform. In NAM, Mark Baker reports

one soldier's story of going into the airport lounge for a drink:

"Home on leave, are you," the guy says to me.

"Nope, just got discharged."

"You just got back from where," one of the kids says.

"Vietnam."

"How do you feel about killing all those innocent people?" the women asks me out of nowhere.

I didn't know what to say. The bartender got a little uptight. But I didn't say anything. They told me when I got discharged that I was going to get this shit. But, I didn't believe them.

"Excuse me," I called the bartender over.

"Could I buy them all a drink?" I felt guilty. I did kill. I tried to make amends somehow.

"We don't accept any drinks from killers," the girl says to me. . .

Veterans provided evidence that real men were committing the violence shown on TV. The American public treated the veteran much as the soldiers had treated the Vietnamese. They were invisible. What Frances Fitzgerald wrote about the Americans in Vietnam could as easily be applied to the veteran back in America:

The effort of trying to hold reality and the official version of reality finally took its toll on the Americans in Vietnam. When added to the other strains of the war, it produced an almost intolerable tension that expressed itself not in a criticism of American policy so much as in a fierce resentment against the Vietnamese. The logic of that answer was a simple one, combined of guilt and illusions destroyed.

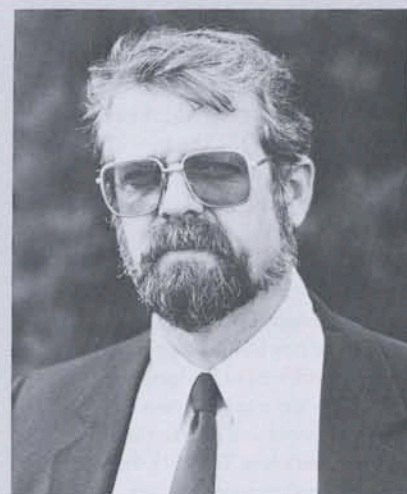
One has only to substitute the American public for the military and the veteran for the Vietnamese to see that a perilously similar condition existed and has continued to exist in the United States regarding the veteran. Men who traveled to Vietnam to fight political insurgency have come to live in a society that treats them as potential insurgents.

Today, we have at least agreed to see the veteran, though our politicians insist on imagining him in irrelevant terms. John Kerry was quoted last May in *Newsweek* as saying: "People have confused the war with the warriors. I'm proud of having been a warrior. As a whole, this country should not be proud of what we did as a nation. We have never adequately distinguished between the two." Very few veterans, in their

fictional or personal narratives, finally view themselves as warriors, nor do they separate themselves from the war they fought, since for so many the war came home inside their heads. Yet, in a way, Kerry is sadly right, for the recently unveiled Vietnam Memorial is constructed of polished black granite engraved with only the names of those men who, year by year, died. Names are cut loose from deeds and the only image the viewer has is of his blurred reflection in the polished stone.

It was said during the war that the American military possessed Vietnam by day, but the Viet Cong repossessed it at night. "I know a guy," Michael Herr writes, "who had been a combat medic in the Central Highlands, and two years later he was still sleeping with the lights on. We were walking across 57th Street one afternoon and passed a blind man carrying a sign that read, MY DAYS ARE DARKER THAN YOUR NIGHTS. 'Don't bet on it, man,' the ex-medic said.

The Viet Cong now live for us only in images on which Vietnam novelists are trying to concentrate their focus. Their narratives tell us that ownership of the night is still very much in doubt.



Photograph by Robert Ward

Charles Angell has taught in Bridgewater's English Department since 1969. He earned a doctorate in English Literature from the University of Massachusetts. His interest in Vietnam fiction developed from a concern about the war's place in current thought. Angell has never served in the military.