

VOICES FROM VIETNAM
THE NEW LITERATURE FROM AMERICA'S LONGEST WAR

Stephen Kneeshaw
The School of the Ozarks

Wallace Terry. Bloods: An Oral History of the Vietnam War by Black Veterans. New York: Random House, 1984, pp. xviii, 311. Cloth, \$17.95; paper, \$3.95 (paper from Ballantine Books).

Lynda Van Devanter with Christopher Morgan. Home Before Morning: The Story of an Army Nurse in Vietnam. New York: Beaufort Books, 1983, pp. 320. Cloth, \$16.95; paper, \$3.95 (paper from Warner Books).

Keith Walker. A Piece of My Heart: The Stories of Twenty-Six American Women Who Served in Vietnam. Novato, CA: Presidio Press, 1985, pp. x, 350. Cloth, \$18.95; paper, \$4.95 (paper from Ballantine Books).

Kathryn Marshall. In the Combat Zone: An Oral History of American Women in Vietnam, 1966-1975. Boston: Little Brown, 1987, pp. 270. Cloth, \$17.95.

Bernard Edelman, editor. Dear America: Letters Home from Vietnam. New York: W.W. Norton, 1985, pp. 316. Cloth, \$13.95; paper, \$6.95 (paper from Pocket Books).

John Clark Pratt, compiler. Vietnam Voices: Perspective on the War Years, 1941-1982. New York: Viking, 1984, pp. xiii, 708. Cloth, \$25.00; paper, \$12.95 (paper from Penguin Books).

Kim Willenson with the correspondents of Newsweek. The Bad War: An Oral History of the Vietnam War. New York: New American Library, 1987, pp. ix, 451. Cloth, \$19.95.

One of my favorite pastimes is to read through the comic strips over morning coffee, searching each day for a cartoon with a memorable message. You all know the kind of cartoon--the one you cut out to put on the refrigerator door or to send to a friend or--in my case--to use in a class. Some months ago I found a pointed commentary in "Bloom County" on the current media and movie glorification of war and violence.¹ In the strip Binkley shares a recent revelation with his friend, Milo:

I just attended a Hollywood mayhem film festival . . . Saw
"Red Dawn," "Rambo" and "Top Gun" . . .
I've reached one overwhelming, inescapable conclusion . . . I
. . . It's . . .
WAR IS SWELL!!

By the standards that Hollywood seems to promote, war is swell, indeed. It is the stuff that makes heroes, even legends. It is the jet jockey theatrics of a "Top Gun" and the mountain man machismo of a "Red Dawn" and the one man against the world assault of a "Rambo." At least, that is the image of war that many young people seem to take away from two hours in a theater.

In the late 1980s we face a student generation without much memory of war, a generation born during the Vietnam war but coming of age during the era of born-again Americanism endorsed and stirred by Ronald Reagan. We have come too far from Vietnam for them to remember much about America's longest war--we are fifteen years distant from the disengagement of 1973.

But the story is being told to them now in classrooms and other forums across the United States, and young people seem to be listening as the nation begins to recover from a prolonged period of national amnesia about Vietnam.² They seem to listen best when the story is told by the men and women who were in Vietnam and cared enough to share their experiences.

During the first decade or more after America's exit from Vietnam, soldiers-turned-authors, novelists, and journalists produced a mass of literature that started to unravel the myths and mysteries of our Vietnam experience. For me the most impressive of these early memoirs is A Rumor of War (1977) by Philip Caputo--with Dispatches (1977) by Michael Herr close behind.³ Caputo and thousands of others just like him got "swept up in the patriotic pride of the Kennedy era." These were young men "seduced into uniform" by their young president's challenge to "ask what you can do for your country." By the time they completed their tours of duty and left Vietnam they had become "peculiar creatures, with young shoulders that bore rather old heads." As Caputo put it, "I came home from the war with the curious feeling that I had grown older than my father." Like the country that had sent them across the Pacific, they had grown tired and disillusioned.⁴

In the early eighties oral histories of the war jumped to the forefront, with Al Santoli's Everything We Had (1981) and Mark Baker's Nam (1981) leading the way.⁵ These narratives told about Vietnam "in the words of the men and women who fought there." They told memorable tales that both entranced and appalled their readers. These were stories about young boys like Lawrence, a nineteen-year old from Brooklyn who, after a long night under rocket and mortar fire, was "never the same person again." And about veterans who suffered abuses when they arrived back home, feeling "like the man from Mars visiting the Earth."⁶ Through these personal revelations and others like them the American people began to understand, perhaps for the first time, what Vietnam really meant for them, for their country, and for the young Americans who served in the war.

By 1983, at the ten-year anniversary of America's withdrawal from Vietnam, the volume of literature on the war and the war years began to swell, reflecting what Philip Caputo has called "Vietnam chic."⁷ Publishers who earlier had rejected novels, poems, and personal narratives on Vietnam began to believe that Vietnam literature had become "the most important literature being written right now."⁸ Suddenly the story that had been told only piecemeal over more than a decade was being told in fuller detail and in clearer images.

The early rounds of personal narratives, memoirs, and oral histories focused on white American men in Vietnam. Occasionally, in oral histories such as Everything We Had and Nam, we got bits and pieces of the minority experience, from both blacks and women. But not until recent years, during this latest round of Vietnam literature, has their story been told.

Longtime journalist Wallace Terry first traveled to Vietnam in 1967 to cover the war for Time magazine, with special emphasis on black Americans in the military. Drawing upon his Vietnam experiences, Terry began to compile materials for an oral history of blacks in Vietnam. Many writers on Vietnam struggled to find outlets for their material, but Terry labored with "the special problem of publishing not just an oral history on Vietnam, but one on the black experience in the war." He worked his way through a list of 120 publishers before he could stir interest in Bloods: An Oral History of the Vietnam War by Black Veterans (1984).⁹

Finding themselves strangers in a strange land, black Americans bonded themselves together as "bloods." In Bloods Wallace Terry gave twenty of them an opportunity to tell their side of the story. They cover a wide range--heroes and losers, officers, NCOs, and grunts. They tell of heroism and racism in an affecting narrative that adds both substance and texture to our knowledge of the Vietnam war.

The "bloods" are memorable characters who fought one kind of enemy in the field, only to face another kind of enemy in base camp. In combat they dodged bullets and sidestepped land mines and booby traps; in camp they heard epithets ("chocolate bunny" and "Brillo head") and suffered personal abuse. But they stayed and fought. As Pfc. Reginald "Malik" Edwards put it: "I knew Americans were prejudiced, were racist and all that, but, basically, I believed in America 'cause I was an American."

The personal reminiscences in Bloods run the gamut from horrific to heroic, with tragedy laced through every one. Spec 4 Gene Woodley, who admits to turning "animal" in Vietnam at only nineteen years of age, tells of finding another American in the field, skinned and staked to the ground, pleading to Woodley to kill him rather than leave him to maggots, mice, and wild animals. "I still have the nightmare," Woodley told Wallace Terry. "I still cry. I see me in the nightmare. I see me staked out." For Gene Woodley, for many veterans, the war just will not go away.

One of the most telling points of Bloods is the general agreement that racism seldom showed in the front lines. During fire fights soldiers fought side by side without concern for color: "... once you started to go into the field with an individual, no matter what his ethnic background is or what his ideals, you start to depend on that person to cover your ass." In the words of Spec 4 Charles Strong: "When I was in the field, they had no room for racism at all. Maybe someone would first come in with it, but after a while, he knew that you were working together as a unit and he needed each man."

When Wallace Terry began Bloods he wanted to ensure that the significant role blacks played in Vietnam would be told. He achieved that end brilliantly. Speaking at a 1985 conference on "The Vietnam Experience in American Literature," Terry expressed his fears that by the year 2000 blacks again would be lost in the telling of Vietnam.¹⁰ On the contrary, I would argue that Bloods has engraved the black experience in Vietnam indelibly onto the pages of history.¹¹

Like the "bloods" of Vietnam, American women who served in Southeast Asia generally have been neglected in studies on the war. Perhaps the oversight owes to numbers: Defense Department figures estimate that only 7465 women--mostly nurses and other medical personnel--served among the 2.6 million Vietnam war veterans; another 7500 civilian women probably served in Vietnam during the war years. Perhaps it is because women were seldom in the field of fire in Vietnam, instead serving in MASH units, hospitals, and base camps. Perhaps it is because three major studies on Vietnam veterans, funded in part or wholly by the Veterans Administration, did not include women. Or perhaps, as one Vietnam nurse suggested, it is because people "didn't realize there were any women there and never thought of it."¹²

During the early 1980s information on American women in Vietnam began to appear, at first in newspaper articles and essays, and later as minor parts of oral histories. In Everything We Had, for example, two Army nurses are included among the 33 veterans profiled by Al Santoli, but with only ten

out of more than 250 pages in the narrative.¹³ In Nam there are brief snippets obviously from Vietnam nurses, although the characters are not identified specifically. Not until 1983, with the publication of Lynda Van Devanter's memoir Home Before Morning: The Story of an Army Nurse in Vietnam, did Vietnam nurses begin to receive the sort of attention and recognition they deserve.

Even before her memoir was published, Lynda Van Devanter had become a kind of symbol for Vietnam nurses. In fact, she is one of the two nurses who tell their tales for Everything We Had. And she is regarded among women veterans as "a pioneer in securing recognition and support for those women, each and every one, who went to Vietnam."¹⁴ Van Devanter's story is unique because it is her own story, but at the same time it is universal because she has followed the same tortured and tortuous path of the other women and men who served in Vietnam.

Bright-eyed and energetic and committed "to give part of myself to keep America great," Van Devanter volunteered for Vietnam after nursing school, serving at the 71st Evac Hospital in Pleiku in 1969-1970. After that year in the Central Highlands, dealing with young Americans whose bodies had been shattered and spirits broken, she became different--tired and war-weary, sometimes numb and sometimes disillusioned, and she evolved from patriot to protestor with "dislike for our own government." Still "proud to be an American," she began to believe that American involvement in Vietnam was "all a mistake," and she judged that "most others in Pleiku felt the same way."

Home Before Morning offers a graphic, sometimes blood-stained, view of the Vietnam war, with enough heroes and villains for a lifetime. The heroes were friends who helped through the hardest hours: other nurses like Coretta and Mickie, surgeons like Carl Adams (who was also Van Devanter's lover) and Bubba Kominski ("a virtuoso with a knife"), and Father Jacques Bergeron, a Catholic priest who was tortured and killed by the Viet Cong.

And there were villains--a medical services officer who tried to cut down on "hanky panky" among the troops; "Saigon warriors" who sat out the war in safety; and President Richard Nixon who wouldn't end the war--evoking a range of feelings from frustration to disillusionment to hatred. Van Devanter and the others who served in Vietnam reserved a special venom for "the damned lily-livered ARVNs," that is the army of South Vietnam. In her words, "If the GIs, Australians, Montagnards, and CIDGs had anything to say about it, the ARVNs would all be strung up by their fingernails."¹⁵

Home Before Morning is one of the "must read" books on Vietnam, because it is about American women who traditionally have been invisible in war stories and because Lynda Van Devanter represents the women and the men who spent a lifetime during their one year in Vietnam. This memoir gives readers a gung-ho American who gave the best effort of her youth, who changed profoundly during her tour of duty, even to questioning the war, who returned home to a country that scorned her and literally spat upon her, who gave herself to drinking, to drugs, to one-night stands, who suffered broken relationships, nightmares, depression, and suicidal tendencies.

Then, after many years back home, after months of therapy designed at first "to exorcise the Vietnam war from my mind and heart," Van Devanter--like many other veterans of America's longest war--finally came to understand that "my feelings about the war will never go away," that those feelings and those memories had become an integral part of her life, that

she could control her life. After suffering through "a long, dark night," Lynda Van Devanter was "finally reaching home." "Vietnam doesn't own me anymore," she realized. "I own it."

To supplement Lynda Van Devanter's material on American nurses and to add information on civilian American women who served in Vietnam, Keith Walker published A Piece of My Heart (1985), with reminiscences from 26 American women, including nurses, WACS, "Doughnut Dollies" from the Red Cross and USO, and women with other service-oriented groups. These women were volunteers who went to Vietnam "because American fighting men were over there" and the men deserved encouragement and support.

Walker admits that he faced countless problems putting this collection together. Women veterans were hard to locate, and it was difficult to get them to talk; letters went unanswered or were returned to the sender; telephone calls turned up wrong numbers; scheduled interviews were cancelled; stories were told but not returned to Walker after he sent them to the women for editing. But after three years of helping these women break down "emotional walls," exorcise "ghosts," and confront their flashbacks and nightmares ("... the war really did a number on us"), Walker had some important stories to share.

Much of what appears in A Piece of My Heart echoes Home Before Morning and memories from the nurses included in Everything We Had and Nam. But there is one point that might strike strangely for readers who are not familiar with Vietnam stories--the desire to return to Vietnam. Sometimes the feeling flowed from a sense of duty ("... there was still so much to do."), or from a spirit of friendship ("I was leaving the best friends that I'd ever had in my life" and "I missed... the people... so much."). Or to find a place to fit in ("I was happy to go back to Vietnam because that was where I felt secure.").

The women of A Piece of My Heart also reveal their strong sense of personal commitment, during the war to helping the men and women who served in Vietnam, and after the war to ensuring that veterans learn to cope with their experiences and that the United States does not repeat the mistake of Vietnam. As Army nurse Anne Simon Auger told it:

Probably my two biggest goals now are, I'll do my damndest to keep something like that [Vietnam] from ever happening again, and if I can help even one other woman veteran to work it through as I have, then it's all worth it. I'm not normally an outgoing person, but I'll spill everything if I have to, if that will help just one other person. Because nobody needs to live through this.

The most recent material on American women in the war comes in Kathryn Marshall's In the Combat Zone: An Oral History of American Women in Vietnam (1987). In many ways In the Combat Zone overlaps with A Piece of My Heart. Still, Marshall's collection of oral histories can stand on its own, offering interviews with twenty women who bring an interesting mix of ethnic backgrounds (white, black, and Asian-American) and occupations. Nine of the women were nurses, including Air Force nurses; others worked for the Red Cross or for Quaker or Mennonite committees; one was a free-lance reporter; another "went on her own to Vietnam."

These women provide some important insights into the war. For example, Marjorie Nelson, a medical doctor with the American Friends Services Committee, working with Vietnamese civilians, recounts being captured during

Tet and spending two months in a POW camp before her release. Her reminiscences have no parallel in any of the collections on American women in Vietnam. Ann Powlas, an Army nurse, reflects on the problems women veterans have getting recognition from traditional veterans groups, notably the American Legion: "The Legion just does not believe women Vietnam veterans are really veterans--the older vets have no respect for any women vets."¹⁶

These several narratives on American women in Vietnam--Van Devanter's memoirs and the oral history collections by Walker and Marshall--underscore the point that American women experienced the same problems during the war and the same traumas after the war that American men have shared in their stories. For all of them the telling was hard but important--to them and to others. Becky Pietz, a Red Cross volunteer in Vietnam, put it this way:

I guess you think it gets easier the more you talk about Vietnam. But I don't think it gets any easier at all. In certain respects, it gets kind of scary . . . I'm not going to be in control of the aftermath [of this interview]. The aftermath is going to be in control of me. But I think the story needs to be told.

This holds true for all American veterans of Vietnam, men and women. The story needs to be told for them--and it needs to be told to all of the American people to ensure that our national amnesia about Vietnam becomes collective memory instead.

Beyond these works that explore the experiences of blacks and women in Vietnam, several other collections of documents and reminiscences have opened up new ways of looking at the Vietnam war. These include Dear America: Letters Home from Vietnam (1985), edited by Bernard Edelman for the New York Vietnam Veterans Memorial Commission; Vietnam Voices: Perspectives on the War Years, 1941-1982 (1984), compiled by John Clark Pratt; and The Bad Year: An Oral History of the Vietnam War (1987), by Kim Willenson and correspondents of Newsweek.

Most of the oral histories and memoirs on Vietnam have been shared by veterans many months or even years after their exit from Southeast Asia. In contrast, Dear America has the benefit of present tense, being "letters home from Vietnam." Occasionally, as in Home Before Morning, part of the narrative of Vietnam memoirs is composed of letters to family and friends, but Dear America is the only collection given entirely to letters written by GIs while in Vietnam. What you get in Dear America, then, are "the true voices of Vietnam again--not filtered by the media, not smoothed out in recollection, but direct, raw, personal: the way it was."

Everyone gets time and space in this remarkable collection, from "cherries" just arriving to grunts who "humped the boonies" to "paper soldiers" at base camp to young men about to die. This is the story of ordinary young Americans sent ten thousand miles away from home to fight in "a country of thorns and cuts, of guns and marauding, of little hope and of great failure." This is the story of "gentle heroes" who will find a special place in the hearts of people who read their letters.¹⁷

Vietnam Voices offers a compilation of documents arranged chronologically, running from 1941 through 1982, designed to help the American people understand their nation's involvement in Southeast Asia. John Clark Pratt has gathered a remarkable range of primary materials, including government memoranda, clips from press conferences, letters from

soldiers, excerpts from novels and personal narratives, poems, songs, and "GI latrine graffiti." He mixes in a few maps and charts, an occasional bit of chronology, and a single picture, the famous photograph of the Saigon Police Chief executing a captured enemy soldier during the Tet Offensive.

Pratt has done enormous work narrowing down the vast store of materials that could have been included--he suggests that "Vietnam Voices should have been 3,000 pages." And he has provided a good collection of information that faculty can draw upon to enrich their lectures (especially the poems, songs, and graffiti) and a lengthy bibliography to help prepare reading lists. Unfortunately, the lack of an index (except for a short list of "The Voices") makes the book difficult to use.

The newest comer in the growing list of Vietnam literature is The Bad War: An Oral History of the Vietnam War (1987). What began as a cover story for Newsweek to recognize the tenth anniversary of the 1975 fall of Saigon has been expanded to offer generally balanced perspectives between hawks and doves on Vietnam. Kim Willenson and his colleagues at Newsweek have gathered an interesting mix of interviews for The Bad War, from military officials and diplomats, from political leaders, from grunts and POWs, from reporters and correspondents, from Vietnam protestors.

As might be expected from such a generous mix of characters, some of the interviews cover old ground. Others are fresh and insightful. For example, Charles Liteky, a Catholic Army chaplain, won the Congressional Medal of Honor but lost his vocation and came away from Vietnam questioning that war and America's involvement in other parts of the world. CBS anchor Walter Cronkite voiced disbelief in America's war efforts during Tet: "God, what in the world is happening out there?" At that point, President Lyndon Johnson lamented: "Well, if we've lost Cronkite, we've lost Middle America." Cronkite's commentary on that celebrated episode makes interesting reading.

Whether one agrees or disagrees with the observations of these hawks and doves and others, this collection is valuable for bringing together so many different people and so many different points of view. In addition, the reflections of people like Liteky and Cronkite and others who are new to oral histories on Vietnam make The Bad War an important addition to the growing Vietnam literature.

The Vietnam War has generated a tremendous amount of literature over the past fifteen years, and we should expect more in the years ahead, given the current popularity of Vietnam literature and the penchant of the American people for reflection on their past. To see Vietnam through the eyes of people who were there, to hear it from the voices of America's veterans, will make that war more real for all of us, and in time perhaps help us to understand what really happened. In the Forward to Dear America William D. Broyles (1Lt. in Vietnam) commented: "I doubt if anyone who reads this remarkable book--who listens to the voices--will ever think the same way about the Vietnam War or its veterans again." These words rightly apply to all of the books described in this essay.

NOTES

¹Berke Breathed, "Bloom County," June 14, 1986.

²This concept of national amnesia has been introduced by several writers: for example, Myra MacPherson, Long Time Passing: Vietnam & the Haunted Generation (New York, 1984), 8, and Timothy J. Lomperis, "Reading the Wind" The Literature of the Vietnam War (Durham, NC, 1987), 4.

³Philip Caputo, A Rumor of War (New York, 1977, paperback 1978); Michael Herr, Dispatches (New York, 1977, paperback 1978).

⁴Caputo, A Rumor of War, xii, xiv, 4.

⁵Al Santoli, Everything We Had: An Oral History of the Vietnam War by Thirty-Three American Soldiers Who Fought It (New York, 1981, paperback 1982); Mark Baker, Nam: The Vietnam War in the Words of the Men and Women Who Fought There (New York, 1981, paperback 1982).

⁶Baker, Nam, 142-46, 269-70.

⁷New York Times, August 4, 1987.

⁸John Chace, editor for the New York Times Book Review, quoted in Lomperis, "Reading the Wind," 8.

⁹Lomperis, "Reading the Wind," 44.

¹⁰Ibid., 56.

¹¹Bloods came to a national television audience on May 20, 1986, in a remarkable offering from the PBS Frontline series in a program called "The Bloods of 'Nam." Seeing the "bloods" such as Gene Woodley share their memories in person makes Terry's narrative all the more compelling to read. "The Bloods of 'Nam" is available for purchase (\$300) or rental (\$95) from PBS Video, 1320 Braddock Place, Alexandria, VA 22314.

¹²David Grunwald, "Crying Need," Parade supplement to Springfield (MO) News-Leader, August 23, 1981. This article appeared in the Parade supplement in Sunday newspapers across the United States. The nurse quoted in the article on neglect of the nurses is Lynda Van Devanter.

¹³Santoli, Everything We Had, 142-50 (Gayle Smith), 163-64 (Lynda Van Devanter).

¹⁴Walker, A Piece of My Heart, x.

¹⁵ARVN was the acronym for Army of the Republic of Vietnam, and CIDG for Civilian Irregular Defense Group, manned by Montagnards.

¹⁶Although often neglected by older veterans' groups, Vietnam nurses have won recognition from their colleagues in younger groups such as Vietnam Veterans of America. In fact, in 1987 the VVA elected Mary R. Stout, an Army nurse in Vietnam in 1966-67, to be national President of VVA. New York Times, August 3, 1987.

¹⁷Home Box Office (HBO) will present a documentary based on Dear America to HBO subscribers in the spring of 1988. USA Today, October 29, 1987.