

## USING FIRST-PERSON SOURCES TO TEACH THE VIETNAM WAR

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As an avid proponent of student-active teaching pedagogy, one of the various methods that I employ is to build an entire course around discussion of a body of readings. First-person sources serve as one of the best media for this approach. Two of my most popular offerings, "Women's Lives in Asia and Africa" and "The Civil Rights Era," focus on a film and the discussion of one or more first-person accounts each week. My course "The Vietnam Experience" is more heavily lecture-oriented, but reading, discussing, and writing about first-person sources is a central component of this course as well.

In nearly thirty years of teaching Vietnam and more than twenty years of writing about teaching the subject, beginning with an article in *Teaching History* in 1981,<sup>1</sup> my approach and my pedagogy have evolved, but one important point of continuity is an emphasis upon understanding the multifarious dimensions of the conflict from the perspectives of the major groups of participants. Reduced to only the most basic differing perspectives, they are the United States' South Vietnamese allies, the North Vietnamese and the Viet Cong, American government and military leaders, American war participants, and the anti-war movement. Obviously, each of these groups is far from monolithic, with many perceptions and viewpoints represented. A quick visit to Amazon.com (<http://www.amazon.com>) reveals almost 3000 books under the category of Vietnam War personal narratives.

I attempt to expose students to as many different first-person perspectives as I can squeeze into the reading load of the course. Admittedly, I sometimes push the envelope more than I ought with too many readings. The task of selection is daunting. Because I cannot use each of these sources every time, I vary some of the readings each time that I teach the course.

I am quite conscious of the criticism of scholars such as Ronald Spector, Frederick Z. Brown, Allan Goodman, and others that the teaching of Vietnam must rise above "a ditty bag of war stories" or "anecdotal accounts of what the fighting and

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<sup>1</sup>Joe P. Dunn, "Teaching the Vietnam War as History," *Teaching History: A Journal of Methods* 6 (Fall 1981): 50-59.

decision making were like (at home and abroad).<sup>2</sup> Serious analysis of the causes, policy process, impact, and continuing legacy are essential. Goodman, for example, stressed the need to raise questions about when to use force and when to employ diplomacy. He also called for teachers to address the issue of the efficacy of war even for justified reasons. Is war worth the social and economic costs that continue for generations? While acknowledging the truth of these scholars' warnings against superficial analysis,<sup>3</sup> an important place still exists for introducing students to the perspectives of participants and the first-person account is an excellent tool. With all the caveats noted, I offer my favorite first-person sources from each of the above groups.

Probably my favorite book on any aspect of Vietnam is Duong Van Mai Elliott's *The Sacred Willow: Four Generations in the Life of a Vietnamese Family* (1999). Elliott uses the story of her family from her great-grandfather through her siblings and her own life to capture the many dimensions of the Vietnam experience. It is an amazing *tour de force* that seems to touch virtually every aspect of Vietnam's past from the colonial period through the present, and it personalizes the complex world of Vietnamese politics in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Mai's father, her uncles, and her siblings represent different allegiances during the war, and her own story about growing up in the late 1950s through the 1960s is instructive. Mai attended Georgetown University from 1960 to 1963, where she met David Elliott, today a leading Vietnam scholar, whom she married when he arrived in Vietnam as an Army sergeant in 1964. She provides her perspectives during American escalation until she left Vietnam in 1968 to join her husband in the United States. She continues to tell both her own story and that of her family through the fall of South Vietnam in 1975 and afterward. Although this combination of history, memoir, and autobiography is lengthy and sophisticated, students praise the book. My suggestion is that it is used best in segments as students progress chronologically through the course.

*Sacred Willow* is the story of an educated, elite Vietnamese family. Two other of my favorite books also trace the lives of two Vietnamese men of family, stature, intellect, and privilege who took opposite directions in South Vietnamese politics. Bui Diem, a key figure in the Republic of Vietnam, held several important positions, including chief of staff (1965), secretary of state for foreign affairs (1966), ambassador

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<sup>2</sup>Ronald H. Spector, "What Did You Do in the War Professor? Reflections on Teaching About Vietnam," *American Heritage* 38 (December 1986): 98-101; Frederick Z. Brown, "Myths and Misperception Abound in Our Courses on the War in Vietnam," *The Chronicle of Higher Education* 34 (May 25, 1988): A48; and Allan Goodman, "Scholars Must Give More Serious Thought to How They Teach and Write about the War in Vietnam," *The Chronicle of Higher Education* 36 (July 25, 1990). Quotes are from Spector and Goodman.

<sup>3</sup>See, for example, Joe P. Dunn, "The State of the Field: How Vietnam is Being Taught," *Journal of the Vietnam Veterans Institute* 4 (November 1995): 4-15.

to the United States (1967–1972), and special envoy to the Paris peace talks (1973–1975). His memoir, *In the Jaws of History* (1987) tells the story of how and why so many of his generation supported the Republic of Vietnam. Ambassador Diem, whom I have been privileged to know for many years and to host in my home, is one of the finest gentlemen I have met. His story is powerful, poignant, and illuminating. It has become virtually cliché in many circles to depreciate the South Vietnamese. However, any fair-minded person cannot help but appreciate the nobility of men such as Bui Diem whose love for and loyalty to their country were beyond reproach. And the former ambassador continues to distinguish himself to this day with his ongoing work on behalf of the Vietnamese people. This fine book offers a valuable perspective.

Truong Nhu Tang's *A Vietnam Memoir* (1985) provides an excellent counterpoint. Tang reflects the same family background, commitment, and love of country, but he followed a different path. Tang fought the Ngo Dinh Diem regime, was a founding member of the National Liberation Front, and held the same kinds of high-level positions in the NLF that Bui Diem did for the South Vietnamese government. Tang's moving memoir explains why a patriot would pursue this life. No better source exists for students to understand and appreciate the "enemy" than this book. It is a perennial favorite of my students. Interestingly, both of these men ultimately were sold out by their allies. The United States abandoned Bui Diem and its South Vietnamese allies in 1973 and afterwards, and the North Vietnamese after victory in 1975 swept aside Tang and his comrades in the National Liberation Front.

A few other sources that I sometimes employ deserve mention. North Vietnamese colonel, liaison to the foreign press, spokesman concerning American POWs, and the first North Vietnamese officer to enter Saigon in the final collapse, Bui Tin relates his life in *Following Ho Chi Minh* (1995) and his recent retrospect, *From Enemy to Friend: A North Vietnamese Perspective on the War* (2002). Both brief volumes provide good insight into North Vietnamese thinking and why Bui Tin, like Tang, also broke with the Communists after the war. David Chanoff and Doan Van Troi's *Portrait of the Enemy* (1986), a collection of interviews with North Vietnamese and Viet Cong captives, offers a large number of individual accounts and perspectives. Two illuminating novels, each written in 1995 by the two finest contemporary Vietnamese writers, Bao Ninh's *The Sorrow of War* and Duong Thu Huong's *Novel Without a Name*, employ a first-person perspective to capture the mind and angst of many North Vietnamese soldiers.

Although I do not use the following two books in my Vietnam course, students read them in the "Women in Asia and Africa" course. Le Ly Hayslip's *When Heaven and Earth Changed Places* (1990) is a sweeping tale of the life of a Vietnamese woman who experienced the war from the South Vietnamese, Viet Cong, and American sides—the last as the wife of an American Vietnam veteran. A mediocre movie based on the book entitled *Heaven and Earth* is a somewhat useful auxiliary source as well. Duong Thu Huong's exceptional novel, *Paradise of the Blind* (1994), employs a first-person family history to provide retroactive insight on the war and the miasma of post-

war life in the Socialist Republic of Vietnam. Her more recent *Memoirs of a Pure Spring* (2001) discusses the same themes without the family history. Finally, Yung Krall's melodramatic *A Thousand Tears Falling: The True Story of a Vietnamese Family Torn Apart by War, Communism, and the CIA* (1995) at least deserves mention in this context.

The bibliography on American policy officials is lengthy and rich. I used Robert S. McNamara's books, *In Retrospect: The Tragedy and Lessons of Vietnam* (1995) and later *Argument Without End: In Search of Answers to the Vietnam Tragedy* (1999), when they first came out because they were *au courant* and much in the news. However, I would not assign them again. Even though *Argument Without End* has the virtue of counterposing American and North Vietnamese first-person perspectives, I have problems with both books.<sup>4</sup> But my single biggest concern is that they are simply too long and tedious to assign with all the other reading in the course. William Colby's *Lost Victory: A Firsthand Account of America's Sixteen-Year Involvement in Vietnam* (1989) has much to offer, but again it falls victim, as do many other extremely useful books, to what is possible to require in a single course.

The same problem exists with anti-war critics. Selecting any one source as representative from the many first-person accounts is impossible. On this topic I have determined that a more analytical assessment of the wide range of protests is necessary, and Adam Garfinkle's detailed, balanced, and nuanced *Telltale Hearts: The Origins and Impact of the Vietnam Antiwar Movement* (1995) stands head and shoulders above all other accounts.

My solution to dealing with both the policymakers and the challengers in my course is a useful brief volume, Gil Dorland's *Legacy of Discord: Voices of the Vietnam Era* (2001), that engages a wide range of important policymakers and critics in a question-and-answer format. Some reviewers correctly criticize the relatively brief interviews for failing to develop the complexity of the issues with each respondent. However, Dorland packs an amazing number of perspectives into a useful format. My students praise the book enthusiastically, and it has been an invaluable tool in my class.

Finally, we turn to the most difficult challenge in setting up the course: electing reading to represent Americans who fought the war. The categories of participants here seem endless. I have written about groups such as American POWs and women in Vietnam, and I usually attempt to include a reading from each of these categories.<sup>5</sup> The

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<sup>4</sup>See Joe P. Dunn, "In Retrospect in Context: McNamara, Military Strategy, and the Literature," *Journal of the Vietnam Veterans Institute* 5 (1996): 11–18. Indeed the entire journal in this double-issue edition is dedicated to a critical analysis of the McNamara book.

<sup>5</sup>Joe P. Dunn, "The POW Chronicles: A Bibliographic Review," *Armed Forces and Society* 9 #3 (Spring 1983): 495–514; "The Vietnam War POW/MIAs: An Annotated Bibliography," *Bulletin of Bibliography* 45 (June 1988): 152–157; "Women and the Vietnam War: A Bibliographic Review," *Journal of American Culture* 12 (Spring 1989): 79–86; and "The Vietnam War and Women," 47–67, and "The Vietnam War and POWs/MIAs," 68–83, both in *Teaching the Vietnam War: Resources and Assessments*, edited by Joe

fact that I teach at a women's college lends particular relevance to the latter category. However, a strong case could be made that it is an important issue no matter what the nature of the educational institution.

The quest for one representative combat narrative is futile. The war was so different during each year of American involvement and the regional theaters varied so greatly that no book can be representative. The experiences of Army, Marine, Air Force, Navy, and Coast Guard combatants each had unique elements. So how do we respond to the perennial student query: "Is this what it was like?" The only answer is that it depends upon year, place, military service, and job. One way to address the multiplicity is to employ one of the dozens of collective oral histories, a genre that continues to proliferate. The present bibliography is too long to mention even a few.<sup>6</sup> Many of them are quite good, but I never know what to do with the books after students read them. My preference remains the individual narrative.<sup>7</sup>

Of the many hundreds into the thousands of combat narratives, a few of the old staples remain the best. No book is better in depicting the hard day to day in the field than John Del Vecchio's novel *The 13<sup>th</sup> Valley* (1982). The detail and the beautifully crafted characters provide a vivid first-person "grunt" view of the war, but it is a sophisticated and lengthy read that often overwhelms novice students. With all the other readings that I assign, the book is just too much for the purpose that I wish the combat narrative to play. I have used many different first-person combat narratives at various times—Tim O'Brien, Ron Kovic, Winston Groom, James Webb, David Donovan, to name only a few—but I keep returning to the old classic, Philip Caputo's *A Rumor of War* (1977), the book that students react to best.

Two problems remain. If I use *A Rumor of War*, a Marine account from the first months of American combat involvement in 1965, by definition it does not represent

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P. Dunn, Center for the Study of Armament and Disarmament, 1990.

<sup>6</sup>For a list of most of the collective oral histories, see Joe P. Dunn, "Texts and Auxiliary Resources," in Marc Jason Gilbert, ed., *The Vietnam War: Teaching Approaches and Resources* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1991), 201–25, especially pp. 216–17; and "Personal Narratives and Oral Histories," in James S. Olson, ed., *The Vietnam War: Handbook of the Literature and Research* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1993), 29–47. The best new collective oral histories not noted in these two sources are James R. Wilson, *Landing Zones: Southern Veterans Remember Vietnam* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1990); Ron Steinman, *The Soldiers Story: Vietnam in Their Own Words* (New York: TV Books, 1999); and Frank L. Grzyb, ed., *A Story for All Americans: Vietnam, Victims, and Veterans* (West Lafayette, IN: Purdue University Press, 2000).

<sup>7</sup>However, I have found the film, *Dear America: Letters Home From Vietnam*, produced by HBO in 1988, an excellent first-person source. These excerpts from actual letters written from all kinds of Vietnam participants and read by movie stars while various forms of visuals are displayed, including movies taken by participants, capture the multifarious nature of the war in powerful visceral reality. The film, a staple of my course, is always one of the most popular sources.

the nature of the war as it developed. A different reality existed by 1970, for example, than the one that Del Vecchio depicts. And to return to the question, "Is this what Vietnam was like?" the truth is that only a small percentage of Vietnam veterans saw any form of combat. The story of the "typical" Vietnam veteran would be an account of a rear-echelon participant (derisively referred to as REMFs) far from any combat role. Of course, very little published literature has come from this vast majority sector. The Vietnam memoirs of cooks, jeep drivers, clerks, mechanics, cartographers, or personnel specialists have little market. Only a handful of books exist in this genre, and most are not particularly useful.

This situation led me a few years ago to write my own memoir, *Desk Warrior: Memoirs of a Combat REMF* (1999), a book that I propose is distinctive in the vast Vietnam bibliography. In brief, I was drafted while well into my Ph.D. in diplomatic history and teaching at a university. I went to Vietnam in late 1969 as a private first class, which put me in the upper ranges of education for one at the lowest military rank in country. Trained originally in artillery fire direction control and later in electronic intelligence, I was assigned when I arrived in country as a clerk/typist in the brigade intelligence office. I was an REMF, although at a forward combat headquarters, not a conventional one. Over time I worked my way into the dual role of clerk/typist and the non-commissioned officer (NCO) head of the electronic intelligence unit. I alternated between combat activity and clerical functions. The book's title and subtitle are oxymorons, but they reflected my reality.

Almost every day I wrote a letter to my parents addressing everything that I was doing and thinking. Thirty years later I employed these letters, a virtual intellectual and explanatory diary, as the basis for the memoir. The book portrays my thoughts as a young participant augmented by the perspective of an academic who has devoted most of his career to studying and teaching the war.

As a REMF, my story reflects the reality of Vietnam for most of the 2.6 million participants. I functioned in the rear echelon bureaucracy in all its absurdities, and I observed daily the world of a command headquarters. In a limited and decidedly tangential way, I had access to how the war was fought at the infantry brigade level. Although by grace in only a small number of situations, I engaged in combat so I identify with the warrior role. In so many ways, I was a typical low-ranking enlisted man who experienced the normative pattern from Basic Combat Training to the stages of maturation during a year in country from innocent naïf, through the rights of passage such as R&R, to grizzled and semi-hardened veteran, and the universal coming-home adjustment syndrome. In another sense, my academic inclinations, background in war and diplomacy, efforts to chronicle activities, and my rather unusual job responsibilities made me anything but typical.

I witnessed and participated in the Vietnamization process, including the training of the 18<sup>th</sup> ARVN Division to replace American units, the drawing down of the numbers of American forces in the country, and indeed the deactivation of my own unit, the 199<sup>th</sup> Infantry Brigade. I observed the nature of the war in the field and on base camp in those

pivotal winding-down years. As an academic on "sabbatical" in military uniform, I juxtaposed the interpretations of and reactions to the war on the American campus against the realities of my daily life, particularly during the upheaval of the Cambodian incursion. As an inveterate historian, I lived Vietnam constantly contemplating how this experience would be interpreted twenty years later.

My students have a talking artifact before them and the book expands their confrontation with another first-person source. One of the reasons that I opt for Caputo's *A Rumor of War* in my class is that I can use Caputo's and my experiences to counterpose topics such as the early combat days against the Vietnamization years; a combat marine in 1965 vs. an Army REMF in 1970; the I Corps theater in the northernmost provinces of South Vietnam vs. the less-intense war in III Corps in the southern portion of the country, etc. Yet the themes of innocence to reality, the year-long evolution, the brotherhood of warriors, and the coming-home syndrome resonate the same in both works, as they do in most participant memoirs.

First-person accounts can play a valuable role in teaching the Vietnam War. The degree and emphasis upon this literature vs. other kinds of sources, whether texts, monographs, analytical treatises, or document collections, depends upon the nature of the course, the teacher's preferences, and local institutional realities. I hope that the suggestions and comments in this article are helpful for those who wish to employ or increase the use of the various genres of first-person sources.

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