

DIVIDED ONLY BY THE 17<sup>TH</sup> PARALLEL: A STUDY OF SIMILARITIES  
BETWEEN AMERICAN AND VIETNAMESE SOLDIERS IN SELECTED  
WORKS

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**DECLARATION**

I declare that *Divided Only by the 17th Parallel: A Study of Similarities Between American and Vietnamese Soldiers in Selected Works* is my own work and that all the sources that I have used or quoted have been indicated and acknowledged by means of complete references.



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Signature  
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*15/9/2009*

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Date

## **Abstract**

### Divided only by the 17th Parallel: A Study of Similarities Between American and Vietnamese Soldiers in Selected Works

This dissertation undertakes a comparative study of certain works of literature concerning Vietnamese and American troops during the United States' involvement in Southeast Asia in the 1960s and 1970s. My assumption was that during war it is possible to conclude that enemy forces behave in the same manner in order to reach the identical goal, that of victory over the 'other' side. I sought to ascertain how under the selfsame conditions they could be considered as enemies.

By close reading of six texts, three from Vietnamese and three from American perspectives, I have attempted to extract their similar views from each in order to create a context in which the likeness of each side is demonstrated. This was achieved by exploring four themes: those of landscape, time, conflict and ghosts. It was discovered that the protagonists' behaviour was the same and that rather than being the others' adversary their true enemies were found within their own ranks.

The results indicate that a wider perspective should be adopted on war than one which regards it as a simplistic binary consisting of two opposing sides. Contrary to any supposition that enemies must remain separated, there is more than enough evidence for one to conclude that they actually occupied mutual psychological territory.

Key Terms: Landscape, time, ghosts, psychological damage, Reader Response, CSR, PTSD, New Historicism, dehumanisation, conditions of war, 1954 Geneva Agreement, ideology, war literature.

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### **Explanatory Note**

While conducting research for this dissertation I discovered that the war in Vietnam was defined differently by the respective armies who participated in the fighting. Americans referred to it as ‘the Vietnam War’ while for the Vietnamese it was ‘the American War’. In order to maintain consistency throughout this dissertation I was forced to choose between the two terms. After consideration I decided to refer to the conflict between the Americans and the Vietnamese as ‘the Vietnam War’ simply because my initial exposure to the war was through Western interpretations and thus I am most familiar with this term. Where possible I have described the conflict as such, unless quoting a source which specifically alludes to ‘the American War’.

There is also the issue of the various factions involved in the fighting. The main Vietnamese forces were the North Vietnamese Army (NVA), the People’s Liberation Army (PLA) and the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN). The PLA was the armed wing of the National Liberation Front (NLF), the communist insurgents in South Vietnam who supported the armed and political struggle of the NVA. The PLA and NLF were more commonly known as the Viet Cong. The ARVN consisted of the soldiers of the Republic of Vietnam (South Vietnam). This army was accorded financial aid military hardware and troops by the U.S. Where possible I have referred to the NVA as ‘the North Vietnamese’, the PLA and NLF as ‘the Viet Cong’ and the ARVN as ‘the South Vietnamese’. This decision was taken simply to remove the complexity of these different factions in order to concentrate on the ideas in the texts that I wish to promote. The U.S. Armed Forces are simply referred to as ‘the Americans’.

## Introduction

Between 1954 and 1975 the 17<sup>th</sup> parallel effectively divided Vietnam into two regions: the North and the South. On either side of this imaginary line of latitude were villages, towns, roads and railways, the topography of Vietnam. From a distance it was impossible to tell them apart. The politics and policies that were formulated in Hanoi and Saigon, the capital cities of North and South Vietnam respectively, were influenced by an ideology that insisted upon the 17<sup>th</sup> parallel becoming a well-publicised boundary. And here they met in a clash of contrasting projections. At this single point on the map, severely bitter disputes and disruptions were kept apart by the extreme solution of war and the necessity of artillery, armour and aircraft. The 17<sup>th</sup> parallel became a symbol for the starting point of the conflict: moreover, in typically euphemistic military jargon it was called the demilitarized zone (DMZ). From this invisible line a *zeitgeist* defining a generation would emerge. John Muir, a rifleman in the Marines who served in Vietnam from February to November 1966, described it in the most unexpected of terms, '[t]he DMZ didn't look like anything, didn't have a fence or anything. I expected to see a big white stripe down the side. Wasn't there' (Santoli 2006: 24-5). The heated conflict between democracy and communism and their many historical justifications had been minimized to an imaginary, man-made line of latitude, of assistance only to geographers, cartographers and navigators. The deep-seated antagonism between the two sides that met along the parallel was not visible; furthermore, the threat from either side to that parallel could not be repulsed, so that the crux of the dispute was protecting an invisible, that could neither be caged or contained. The lack of any distinction of character found in the 17<sup>th</sup> parallel is a useful tool when contemplating exactly what kept the North and its armies divided from their counterparts in the South. Veteran Paul Camacho recalls a confrontation

between the soldiers and the inhabitants of a Vietnamese village as follows: ‘GIs stare at the villagers who are all staring at the GIs. The representatives of two widely separated cultures and races staring at each other with mutual distrust, fear and hate’ (Leventman and Camacho 1990: 58). Both sides were enemies, yet there on the ground, in a specific moment, there was ironically much to unite them. Consequently this dissertation will present the two sides, American and Vietnamese, not as enemies divided but juxtaposed, foes united.

The overall condition of war was not limited in any specific way to either side involved in fighting it. In this dissertation I will show that all the soldiers were moulded by the same climate, terrain, and even the same battles. Although their allegiances in the texts I shall investigate are different, and by extension so too are their goals, the context of their shared situation leads to their mutual experiences. Rather than juxtaposing the two sets of enemies, I propose to highlight their similarities and in this way demonstrate how the perceived differences lacked any real dimension. What kept them apart was an invisible divide. The lack of distinctive character that John Muir recognised in the 17<sup>th</sup> parallel can be used as a broader definition for the more acute absences of difference between the North and the South. This dissertation will illustrate how the physical and psychological struggle turned the opposing sides into comrades rather than adversaries and will indicate how the differences separating the two sides were nothing more than a thin veneer, a smokescreen, something unreal and unmarked, encompassed to perfection by the 17<sup>th</sup> parallel.

Representations of the Vietnam War can be found in numerous narratives. A study of popular culture including music and film also offers varying perspectives on the war, yet rather than focus on the war itself I have chosen to concentrate on elements inside war. While writing *Paco's Story* Larry Heinemann realised that 'within the tight genre of Vietnam War fiction (both American and Vietnamese), there is a broad vein of ghost stories, which tells you a good deal about that war as a human event' (Heinemann 2000b: 45). I will deal with ghosts in particular, in a later chapter; however it is the overall human context within the war that forms the basis of this dissertation. It is evident that this contrasts a more abstract generalisation of war. What does the human element teach us about the soldier who fought the war? What then might the 17<sup>th</sup> parallel mean in these terms rather than simply being viewed in terms of its geographical definition? Working from six primary texts, this study will explain how, despite nationality, the hardship and brutality of war, towards the mind and the body do not discriminate. Through the context of the following texts which were chosen because each author personally experienced the conflict of the war:

Bao, N. 1996. *The Sorrow of War*.

Duong, T.H. 1995. *Novel Without a Name*.

Hayslip, L.L. 2003. *When Heaven and Earth Changed Places*.

O' Brien, T. 1975. *Going After Cacciato*.

O' Brien, T. 1969. *If I Die in a Combat Zone Box Me Up and Ship Me Home.*, and

Webb, J. 1978. *Fields of Fire*,

I will examine the war from within, from the soldiers' perspective; and reveal how when these volumes are read in parallel it is a single voice that can be heard.

Peter Jones classifies the war novel in general as a *Bildungsroman* (Jones 1976: 1) which I believe is a helpful tool in placing the novel within the wider context of the corpus of war literature. The interpretation of such work has undergone various changes since the attitudes to war metamorphose during each era. These approaches will be dealt with accordingly at different junctures in this dissertation. James Dawes notes that, following the First World War, ‘literary reaction to war revealed a pervasive fixation on the crisis of what humanity had made and what it could make, without the failed promises of human creation at all its sites – artistic, moral, scientific, biological’ (Dawes 2002: 75). Modernism emerged, producing ‘thinkers who had questioned the certainties that had supported traditional modes of social organization, religion, and morality, and also traditional ways of conceiving the human self’ (Abrams 1985: 119). The literature of this war reflects this altered attitude, one in which the authors ‘became soured by what they saw’ (Walsh 1982:80). A landmark change in the interpretation of the said literature surfaced from the smoking ashes of the Second World War. Modernism was succeeded by postmodernism, which Paul Crosthwaite recognises as correctly prioritising ‘the significance of the Holocaust and the inaugural deployment of the atomic bomb’ (Crosthwaite 2009: 3); I will discuss this in more detail in chapter 2. Postmodernism represents the functional basis in terms of which the displacement and confusion of the literature can best be interpreted. Perceived within this context of the given literature, the war novel exemplifies the point that ‘far from being circumscribed in time and space, the effects of war continue to shape the webs of signification in which literary writing is enmeshed’ (Crosthwaite 2009: 3), thereby extending the novel beyond its microcosmic boundary and into the wider experience of the larger macrocosm of war literature. The Vietnam War, I will later argue, is firmly situated as

a postmodern event. The uncertainty that the war created in the minds of its participants perpetrated a situation where the accepted modes of thought and experience are subverted and expose a condition of ‘nothingness’ or as Terry Eagleton writes ‘the proposition that there is no solid basis to things seems as uncertain as everything else’ (Eagleton 2001: 24). ‘Just as a doctor may become a butcher and a penis a gun, just as any tool may become a weapon, so may law become propaganda, and so may a treaty of peace become an instigator of war’ (Dawes 2002: 215-6). It is precisely these perversities that emerge time and again to define the Vietnam War in the chosen texts, thereby confirming its postmodern nature. Lucas Carpenter correctly realises that ‘critics and historians of American war literature are far from unanimous regarding the efficacy of applying the term postmodern to the literature spawned by the Vietnam War’ (Carpenter 2003: 35). The interpretation of war literature is manifold in its nature;<sup>1</sup> however I will show why there are good reasons to regard postmodernism as a valuable instrument of analysis.

American war correspondent Michael Herr collected his experiences in Vietnam during 1967-9 in his book *Dispatches*. The frustration, angst, anger and waste were summed up in a corpsman’s reflection that it did not matter whether mortars were incoming or outgoing. The only difference, he said, was who got killed and even then there was no difference at all (Herr 1996: 30). Through the choice of these texts I hope to be able to convey a greater degree of similarity between the soldiers than the notion of being at war may ordinarily allow. Just as the aforementioned corpsman

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<sup>1</sup> There is a theory based upon the premise that men are bullied and manipulated into going to war because the alternative is to be seen as feminine and weak. Although I do acknowledge that this theory may have some merits it conflicts with my personal belief. The politicians and arm-chair strategists on both sides of a political conflict may insist that brute force is the only way to treat the situation: however, there is no shame in not wanting to fight, and there is no stigma in crying at a funeral or admitting to fear. This dissertation will demonstrate the ugliness and cruelty of war: if men (and women) need to be bullied into participation this suggests there is some hope for humanity.

remains unnamed and as he is indiscriminately an object of the incoming shells, so too were there hundreds of thousands of unnamed casualties and victims of the war who faced waves of damage that did not differentiate between either side. Despite war's apparently blatant differences, the core of this dissertation will intend to prove that soldiers are the same. This will be established by covering four main themes that I have identified for the purpose of this work: landscape, time, conflict and ghosts. Each theme will distil the essence of who the enemies were and explain why it is impossible to differentiate between them. By allowing the novels to speak for themselves, i.e. placing key themes in context, either juxtaposed or complementary, I will discuss each theme from the soldiers' perspective, drawing together my arguments at the conclusion of each chapter.

I have used a consciousness of history to assist in my interpretation of the narratives. Just as the soldiers were placed inside the war, similarly war can be located within the wider limits of events and situations that occurred around it. Politics, society and economics have always been necessary for understanding the reason why war is waged. According to Polly Low, 'warfare formed a central part of the political, social, and ideological structures of classical Greece' (Low 2003: 98). It was Aristotle who determined that one of the purposes for military training was to save the Athenians from becoming subject to others (Aristotle 1967: 289), and since ancient times this justification for war has not changed. In this dissertation I will discuss and employ the concepts of both New Historicism and Reader Response, the latter of which has several different forms. However, I will make use of both theories as they are understood generally. According to Jonathan Culler an experienced reader has gained a sense of what can be done with literary works and so the reader has assimilated a

system which is largely interpersonal (Culler 1975:121). It is the interpersonal that will be used to help define my findings. As explained above, New Historicism is useful because it constructs an historical context around the narratives. I believe it is of primary importance to be able to contextualise the literature. It is the all-important connection between the texts and the cultural and political framework which enhances the literature and allows it an added dimension. Steven Jones writes that connection 'between writing and life gets lost when attention is devoted exclusively to texts' (Jones 1989: 132), thereby making a sense of history vital, particularly to this genre. Similarly every text is open to the interpretation of its reader. Patricia Harkin believes it is the readers and not only the authors who make the meaning in a text. Her opinion is that readers are, however, constrained by conditions not of their own choosing (Harkin 2005: 413, 9). I will return somewhat more specifically to my own position as a reader at the end of this study. It is precisely these economic and social conditions, extracted from what Louise Montrose cited as the historicity of texts (Abrams 1985: 249) that create the atmosphere of understanding for the reader. Therefore, I believe, the deployment of New Historicism, and an awareness of Reader Response, is vital for explaining and understanding the context of the narratives.

The landscape of Vietnam was bigger than the soldiers, certainly as a physical entity but also in the sense that it was an abstract notion which symbolically represented what they were fighting for. It overwhelmed them since they were obliged to fight on it, in it and against it. It may be easy to dismiss American antagonism to it as obvious, and chapter 1 will definitely reflect their inability to respond to or accommodate themselves within the land. Surprisingly, the same can be said for the Vietnamese who themselves were as bewildered and confused by the war. Without guidance the

Vietnamese became lost in their own backyards and what seemed to be the advantage of familiarity is exposed as a misconception when the landscape became 'ever more dense, ever more deep, ever more unfathomable' (Duong 1995: 147). The soldiers simultaneously harboured conflicting feelings of affection and hostility towards the landscape, by means of which a situation was created proving it to be as much an enemy and an obstacle as any opposing force. It will be revealed that the landscape was an indiscriminate symbol of loss of self, of confusion and bewilderment, thereby demonstrating that there was greater similarity than difference.

This chapter will also expose both sides as bullies who wreaked havoc on the land and terrorised it as well as the civilians. This dissertation will deal with the concept of the Vietnam War itself as a labyrinth that confused and disoriented the soldiers to such an extent that they were all lost in the same landscape of war, both geographically and emotionally.

The complicated network of paths that is a labyrinth serves to enhance the theme found in chapter 2; that of time. Elisa Arias notes that a dependence on time 'emerged with the need for dating events. Seasons, seed, harvests, births, battles, catastrophes, positions of the celestial objects were events that regulated the evolution of civilisations in ancient times' (Arias 2005: 2289). Society has therefore become accustomed to the regulation that time instilled. I have specifically employed a subjectivist understanding of time. This approach is taken further in chapter 2. The literature of creation, be it legend or scientific, also deals with beginnings. According to this conditioning the notion of time must begin, and by the running of the clock must flow towards an end. Therefore, an acceptable notion of time as regards any

event ensures that there is a beginning, logically progressing towards an end. By contrast, time as experienced by those who fought in the war was altered and rearranged so that past, present and future lost their meaning. In order to understand the concept of time as placed within the context of the soldiers' view of the war I have attempted to redirect my approach towards this notion of time. Because time is infinite it can have neither true beginning nor end, an idea that is reflected in the experiences of war for both Vietnamese and American troops. This chapter will argue how time, a dimension that constrains all else, a dimension which one perceives subjectively, as of course the soldiers were doing, within the context of this literature becomes something new in meaning and conceptualisation. The soldiers, and indeed the readers, fall into the action of the war, without beginning or end, as it churns forward crushing lives and livelihoods: in investigating this war without end this dissertation will attempt to explain how time diverged into two or more meanings so that for those who were part of the war it was irrevocably changed.

In wartime, past, present and future no longer conform to their accepted understanding as they dissolve into and around each other, taking on an elasticity and fluidity so that any assurance or certainty of time dissipates. I will argue that once the soldiers joined the fray their past was ripped away, leaving them unmoored and drifting in the continual timeframe of the war with their present and their future belonging solely to the war. Their time, which had once been theirs to use and spend as they pleased, became conscripted into battle; they found themselves caught in a maze that had no end, keeping them locked inside the terrible confines of the war.

This dissertation will examine how the soldiers came to be dominated by time and how it took over their lives. The single, strongest notion in this theme, I will argue, is that long after it is over, most of the veterans are still fighting the war. The past becomes an increasingly complex notion that rules the present and destroys the future. I will study the psychological scarring stemming from the condition known as Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. Michael Herr described war as a ‘machine [that] was devastating. And versatile. It could do anything but stop’ (Herr 1991: 71) and because of this the soldiers kept up the momentum so that even when the war had disappeared around them it still resounded in their heads, thereby ensuring that they would be incapable of ending it. The veterans who suffer from PTSD are neither exclusively American nor Vietnamese; neither was the altering perception of time exclusive to one group alone. This devastating loss of awareness of where they were located in time was shared by both sides.

Chapter 3 will focus on the soldiers’ experience in war. Departing somewhat from abstract ideas attached to landscape and time, this chapter will instead deal with the conflictual conditions of war. The common denominator between two warring sides is the fighting itself. As stated in chapter 1, each faction was subject, and exposed, to the same physical aspects of climate and terrain. Similarly the condition of war was also shared by both sides; each infused with the mentality of battle and the possibility of death, coupled with the assured hardships and suffering. The soldiers’ shared experience helps to consolidate the fact that although there was the obvious division of warring enemies, the two sides shared the sameness of their war, thus bringing them closer to each other than ‘enemies’ ought to become. Despite the different ideologies or motives that thrust enemies toward each other the goal of each side was

exactly the same: to win at all costs; to save face and to extricate itself with nothing less than total victory. War tactician Carl von Clausewitz believed that in war it was necessary to ‘put [the enemy] in a situation that is even more unpleasant than the sacrifice you call on him to make’ (Clausewitz 1976: 77). Both sides therefore were driven by their commanders to enter the war with a gung-ho attitude towards victory that would be achieved by completely overrunning the foe. This chapter will show that the soldiers’ mentality was shaped by their respective military commands and will explore how the commanders on either side abused their power and disregarded the soldiers for whom they were responsible. More than simply sharing the war and attitudes towards it the soldiers experienced this disrespect, originating from the very superiors on whom they relied. Both sides entered the war bound by a myth of the past, exploited by their superiors, which in the bush proved to be nothing more than a figment of imagination instead of a hard reality. By concentrating on the actions of the soldiers it should be possible for me to justify my argument that, despite being enemies and being forged by contrasting ideologies, they were in essence the same.

This chapter will further demonstrate how each set of soldiers consisted of nothing more than ‘the whores of authority’: the expendables in a government’s thoughtless policy, as evidenced, I will argue, by the abuse disguised as orders from the military command in order to better its own position or justify its wrongdoings. This study will expose war as a time of opportunities and opportunists where those who suffered were the soldiers, where death is merely a by-product of the war, a necessary occurrence on the road to an elusive goal. As Mark Bradley puts it, ‘[i]n such works as Bao Ninh’s *Sorrow of War* and Duong Thu Huong’s *Novel without a Name*, ... a far more critical picture of the Vietnamese experience of the American war began to emerge, one of

corrupt and selfish military and party leaders and of ordinary soldiers who felt betrayed by the state's wartime promises' (Bradley 2003: 472-3). The real enemy was neither the Vietnamese nor the Americans but the line of military commanders who stood behind them. These soldiers experienced great difficulty fighting the mazes of the jungle and of time. Added to these dead-ends and sharp turns is another layer of struggle since they not only combat the other side but are handicapped by their own military command and must also fight each other. In this chapter the darkness of the maze will reveal another, unsuspecting aspect of the enemy; more terrifying than the landscape, their commanders or ideology: the enemy that was sitting inside each of them. This conflict between soldiers also concerns internal struggles and enemies who sit alongside one another rather than on the opposite sides of trenches.

This chapter will emphasise that they went to war for similar reasons of compulsory service to country or ideology, as well as responsibility, and will indicate how war, ironically, made them the same. For all the talk of victory, none of the soldiers dreamed about it. They surely hoped for an end to the bloodshed and unnecessary slaughter but they did not dream of victory marches or parades; they dreamt of being alive, of doing ordinary things, consequently exposing the truth that they were closer to each other than they knew and that their differences were as unreal as a line on the ground that no one could see.

The concluding chapter of this dissertation will deal with the category of the unreal; issues without specific definition that were experienced by the soldiers. The unreal is representative of those issues against which both sides fought but which they could neither see nor acutely define. The most obvious of these is the notion of ghosts.

Although these ghosts are present throughout all of the chosen literature this concept is not confined to the supernatural. I will be extending the definition of ghosts to include the sense of loss and emptiness that defined both the war and the state of the soldiers themselves. I will show how the soldiers are depicted as ghosts: belonging to no recognisable section of society, they may continue the functions of the living but are dead inside, their lively spirit broken by and bound to war so that they have become little more than moving corpses. Both in victory or defeat the Vietnamese and the Americans end up in the same place: struggling with their pasts, haunted by what they have seen. They come to occupy a limbo, shared with and understood only by the ghosts that haunt their tours of duty. I will conclude that the unreal, ghostly, quality of war merged with the living so that it became increasingly difficult to tell the two apart. I will make use of the structure of time in the narratives, discussed in detail in chapter 2, to formulate the argument demonstrating how for the soldiers the boundaries of time are blurred. I will attest that the ghosts and the living must occupy the same space.

More than merely understanding the metamorphosis of the soldiers, it is also imperative to be able to recognise how this dissolution of the psyche into some other form occurred. 'It left a horrible scar on the nation's psyche because of the nature, conduct and divisiveness of the struggle' (Lovett 1987: 67), but even more of a mark on those who were there doing the fighting. Therefore, this chapter will deal with the unreal notions of ideas and myth: phenomena that are created by the mind for residence in the mind alone. I aim to define how these concepts of idea and myth became intertwined with the soldiers' reality so that they were fighting the unreal just as they were facing their enemies on the field of battle. When soldiers were thrown

into this hell of war they were broken by the constant battering of their morale and their will. Elements of unreality such as fear and distortion crowd any war. In order to endure the oppression of the unreal sometimes the soldiers' only means of survival was to turn into ghosts themselves and become part of the unreal. They dissolved right into the war so that their bodies survived but their spirits became some altered concept of their former selves. It was these selves that disappeared into the murky quagmire, lost forever to the terrible business of creating death and mayhem.

This chapter will concentrate on another element of the unreal: a darkness more terrifying than bullets and armour. I include the paradox that these powerful men not only experienced difficulty bearing the burden of weightless ghosts but also lost their sense of identity under the pressure of war and became spectral in quality. There is also the historical use of propaganda in war, a fearsome weapon based on lies and myth that is almost always unreal and is used to such effect that its ghostly images are as dangerous as any enemy. Considering the notion of propaganda and the ways in which it was explored and utilised from printed and reported matter through to the mythical notions of 'Uncles' Ho and Sam, I intend to show that the unreality of the war stretched far beyond the battlefield conditions and seeped into the psyche and soul of those who were doing the fighting.

In contemplating the unreal I can argue that it is necessary to take a leap of faith in elements that are not found directly on the page but rather in connotations, allusions and reactions, in keeping with my previous argument regarding Reader Response theory. The notions of the unreal rely heavily on the subjective nature of one's response, yet I believe that it is in that very blurred region of reader subjectivity that

the ghosts of war, and indeed every facet of critical analysis are allowed to exist, and for that reason it is absolutely necessary to draw from definitions beyond the text.

This chapter takes the notion of the presence of spirit in the living, the dead and various localities and conceptualises the idea of the ghostly insinuations of the war in Vietnam. Far from distinguishing the two sides the aforementioned unreality as well as the reader, who remains an unseen element of the text, contribute to the shared experiences and possible way in which these seemingly divided sets of enemies may be viewed in the same light. The unreal possesses no boundaries; and can thus encompass both sides that fought in the war. This dissertation will deconstruct both sets of soldiers and reconstruct them in order to demonstrate how only the unreal separated them. Greater than the nationalism and necessity that sent the soldiers to war, their underlying humanity drew them together. By exploring the themes of landscape, time, conflict and ghosts I hope to uncover this single, common thread.

## Chapter 1 – Landscape

Remember Charlie, remember Baker  
They left their childhood on every acre

Billy Joel 'Goodnight Saigon'<sup>1</sup>

The troops who waged war with each other, the civilians and themselves during the American involvement of the Vietnam War, left more than their footprints on the strange, and red-coloured, land of Vietnam. They left behind their innocence, their youth, their friends and comrades, and, in too many incidents, their lives. War is usually waged in the quest for some sort of trophy; in the Falklands War (1982) it was 'those barren, Falkland Islands, inhabited by a mere 1,800' (Franck 1983: 109) or in the case of the Crimean War (1853 – 1856) a struggle for power over the declining Ottoman Empire and influence in the area, including control of holy Christian sites in what was then Palestine (Puryear 1931: 220-2). Since ancient times the expansion of empires has required the act of war and the annexation of territories; Caesar's strategy was 'to defeat the Germans to win the prize of Gaul' (Armstrong 1941: 139). Often the ultimate prize is not the psychological damage inflicted, but rather the ground underfoot. Even the ideological battle of the Cold War that raged between the-then sole superpowers, the United States and the Soviet Union, was waged over territory, not only terrestrial but lunar. Once the dead have been buried and the wounded removed to fight their psychological battles in their own private theatre of hell, what is left behind is the burnt and smoking ground, the only true witness to what has occurred.

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<sup>1</sup> From the 1982 album 'The Nylon Curtain'. The song was released as a single in 1983.

I argue, therefore, that the landscape of Vietnam was a victim in and of itself. It was the object of the conflict of the opposing sides: since they each sought the same prize, their loyalties and nationalities are irrelevant. The central focus of this chapter is the landscape of Vietnam and the way in which it was both the victim and the victimiser; tortured and torturer, indiscriminately fighting and being fought against. In this chapter I will comprehensively view the landscape of Vietnam: not just the hills, jungles, mountains and valleys, but also at the landscape of war, and its interpretation by the opposing armies, in an attempt to show how fighting on the same terrain created more similarities than differences between the Vietnamese and Americans. Both sides were exposed to the same landscape; each abused it through a lack of respect. The landscape in turn proved to be both a deadly enemy and a comforting ally during the war. Left behind on 30 April 1975, the day the North Vietnamese army marched into Saigon, was a generation of frustration, anger and tears; what was taken from the landscape was, I believe, equal to the priceless sacrifice made for its possession.

In the narratives under discussion in this dissertation the colour the soldiers most closely associate with the landscape is red. The loose red dust covers them in a fine film, creating an ambiguous image of both intimacy and repulsion. A relationship has therefore been established between the soldiers and the land whereby boundaries are blurred and the perception of the war is distorted. In order to be effective soldiers those perceptive enough learn that a degree of intimacy with the landscape is required in order to survive. In *Fields of Fire* Snake sits comfortably on the edge of an NVA trench (Webb 1978: 88) because he knows that he is not fighting the hole in the ground but rather the hands which dug that trench. Snake's 'ability to master the

insanity of dust and weeds' (Webb 1978: 201) is his greatest ally, for without that knowledge of the landscape he would become one of its victims, 'jungle's okay. If you know her you can live in her real good, if you don't she'll take you down in an hour. Under' (Herr 1991: 10). I contend that in *Going After Cacciato* Paul Berlin seeks such an intimacy, naively perhaps, for one price to be paid for knowing the landscape is to become wild and tired and sickly like his own Lieutenant Corson; the other is far more costly and will be discussed later in this chapter. However, his determination to move from the unknown to the known means that he is willing to gamble his innocence for the simple understanding of where he is, and in turn to fine-tune himself to the place he believes he ought to know more about. He hopes to gain the above-mentioned intimacy, which will make him a better soldier and, most importantly, will allow him to endure the war that his own military command has not bothered to teach him how to survive.

Snake and Paul Berlin are two soldiers who do learn to exhibit a greater degree of understanding towards the landscape. It is my opinion that to know the landscape is to be at one with the jungle, to become a part of it. The soldiers dig holes in the land and sit in them during the night, learning 'the textures of the soil, the colors and shadings, the slopes of countryside in relation to grander slopes and higher angles of vision' (O'Brien 1975: 223). The landscape may have been scarred and bloodied and in some places rendered lifeless as will be discussed later, but I argue that, living in the dirt and dust, and sweating from fear and heat in the foxholes, the soldiers develop an affinity with the land and understanding thereof which is far closer than that of any of the policy-makers who claim to have possessed the answers. And it is out there in the scarred and wounded landscape that the men proudly display their wounds: 'Baby

Cakes the long pink gash, like a strip of cord laid from his midback to his neck. Ogre the deep crisscrossings in his calves and thighs that disappeared under his tiger shorts' (Webb 1978: 240). Like those soldiers who have suffered wounds, the landscape bears the scars of the fighting too. Each has been forced to suffer through endless cycles of fire and mortars: by mastering the jungle the soldiers become the landscape's equals, and each earns the right to wear his scars like a medal or a badge of honour. By proudly showing off their wounds, the likes of Baby Cakes and Ogre are demonstrating a type of kinship with the land.

Lacking this kind of intimacy the soldiers were surely condemning themselves to death. In *Novel Without a Name* Duong Thu Huong describes how Quan loses his way in the dense, overgrown forest. He becomes disoriented and confused and with no recognisable landmarks or paths he walks in circles, tortured by a jungle trying to choke him as it chokes the path. The vines twine chaotically around one another, tougher than any man-made rope (Duong 1995: 50), leaving Quan no alternative but to fight them as he would any other enemy, 'slashing [with his knife] at the brambles that hung overhead' (Duong 1995: 50). The landscape is presented in all its malicious and malignant glory, where the wind howls and venomous snakes might be coiled for a springing attack. The landscape of the narratives is inviting while simultaneously repelling, leaving the soldiers little alternative but to be both sympathetic lovers and cruel enemies. The close comfort that is imperative for survival works against itself by laying the foundation of animosity, thereby constructing an aggressive, conflicting situation where they are both needing and loathing the land on which they are fighting. The dust becomes ingrained into their skin, and into the fibres of their clothing and supplies, 'dust so deep inside the weaves that no amount of brushing or

scrubbing would ever erase its color' (Webb 1978: 191); settling on everything: on weapons and clothing and boots, stubbornly entrenching itself under fingernails, in spectacle frames (O'Brien 1975: 225). Like an itch and an irritation the complete dissolution of distance between the soldiers and the landscape creates negativity, thereby tinting their view to a Vietnam red. The concept of dissolution is a theme that will be considered in other areas of this study. Boundaries of time and reality, which will be discussed in chapters 2 and 4, are distinctly lacking and reinforce my premise of a sameness between the two opposing sides.

The soil of the central highlands is red because of the high proportion of iron ore deposits in the ground. However, through close reading of the text the red soil can be symbolically related to the blood which flowed almost obscenely throughout the war. Bao Ninh's narrator, Kien, in *The Sorrow of War*, describes a battle wherein the fatalities are shot by gunners in helicopters that hover above them, 'the blood spreading out spraying from their backs, flowing like red mud' (Bao 1993: 5) and saturating the soil, mirroring the landscape of *Novel Without a Name*, which is described as 'nothing but sand as red as blood all the way to the horizon. A savage expanse of scarlet sand. A desert of congealed blood' (Duong 1995: 70). The ground of Vietnam, soaked in blood, is automatically associated with the blood of the fallen, giving weight to the bloody symbolism while simultaneously attributing to it some kind of grotesque personification. In its own right any landscape is an expanse of life; however through the transfusion of blood from the soldiers into the land of Vietnam a manifestation of life has evolved whereby in some macabre parody the landscape acquires human characteristics that override its natural ones.

The influence of war over soldiers ensures that the view they adopt is fixed on an altered form of landscape where in reality it does not exist. I would suggest that this is a sobering tribute to the atrocities of war where the blossoming beauty and splendour of nature is stifled by abomination. The landscape's flora cannot escape the burden of serving as evidence of the lives lost. The descriptions of the undergrowth can be as horrific as 'bamboo shoots of such horrible color, with infected weals like bleeding pieces of meat' (Bao 1993: 6), or as deceptively gentle as the purple flowers nestling in the thorns and scrub of the brambles (Duong 1995: 93). Each image draws itself back to the blood spilled. In Bao's description the ground is literally bleeding and raw from what has occurred, while Duong's flowers are like bruises formed from the drops of blood that have been shed in the war. In the eyes of the soldiers the splendour of the landscape has been replaced with traits associated with people and thus, by means of its mud and flowers, it is seen to bleed and bruise.

Purple is the colour that emerges as most often associated with corpses and bruising, displaying a particular connection with suffering. In *Fields of Fire* Lieutenant Robert E. Lee Hodges attributes the colour to Major Otto's scar, '[h]is right forearm was gashed with a six-inch, purple trough left by a bone-shattering machine-gun bullet' (Webb 1978: 67); *Going After Cacciato* describes 'purple biles' (O'Brien 1975: 2), pairing the colour with illness, while in *Novel Without a Name* '[t]he corpses were bruised violet' (Duong 1995: 3). Even the heavens, which never meet the ground, and thereby should remain untouched by what happens below, prove that the battle for the landscape lies beyond the tangible and that enemies will go to any lengths to claim it, and victory. In the purple of the sunsets and the flowers and the twilight of 'violet

evenings' (O'Brien 1975: 109), it is impossible to determine whether one is seeing beauty or brutality. In his song 'Purple Haze' Jimi Hendrix sings,

Purple Haze all around  
Don't know if I'm comin' up or down  
Am I happy or in misery?

Clearly Hendrix is at a nexus in his own state of mind, 'unsure if he was happy or miserable' (Chenowith 1971: 30), like the soldiers, torn between the extremes of their emotions. The song was released in 1967 and although it is not specifically related to Vietnam I include it here because by 1967 the war in Vietnam was already defining the music that was produced (James 1989: 128; 131). The landscape creates discord within the psyche of the soldiers, blending the beautiful and brutal at the same time; the two blending into one continuum.

The American troops felt a particular affinity with the colour purple since Purple Hearts were decorations awarded to those who were wounded or killed in action. They were often given in lieu of a body part or a life, replacing something that was taken away from the recipient, something he could never be given back: a recurring theme in this dissertation, where sacrifice goes unrewarded, that will be covered in more detail in chapter 3. '[T]hey'd get a Purple Heart for what was left of them' (Santoli 2006: 131). Purple Hearts had to be paid for in blood; and with each one awarded came the assurance of something having been left behind on the landscape of Vietnam. The purple blossoms and the violet skies so keenly described in the selected narratives may be used to symbolise the blood that can never be washed away as well as the deeper entrenchment of the land as a battered body; hurt by the war, bleeding in its agony.

In war it is easy to stray from the path, to be severed from the known and be left to die alone and hungry in unfamiliar territory. It is also easy to drift from the figurative path of strength and morality and descend into the decay that accompanies any war. I would suggest that in wartime what is asked of those who are in its midst cannot be foreseen. The actions of soldiers and citizens alike that arise because of war are both unspeakable and unpredictable. The necessity of war changes ordinary citizens, creating both bullies and the bullied, and because the clouds of war hang over the landscape, it becomes impossible to see clearly. Quan is advancing towards the South, when his troops enter a warehouse filled with medicine, supplied by the Americans for use by the South Vietnamese. One soldier begins shooting wildly at it, so that it spills out uselessly on the floor. His reasoning for this waste is that 'this stuff is American, so I'm destroying it' (Duong 1995: 271). Both sides find themselves adrift in the war. Likewise, while spending a night in an observation post on the beach overlooking Quang Ngai, Paul Berlin comes to realise that '[t]hey did not know good from evil' (O'Brien 1975: 241). The good and evil to which he is referring is the moral and ethical code of the soldiers in the American divisions, brigades, battalions, companies, platoons and squads. Arriving in Vietnam, they were lost. They were in a strange, foreign country with different landscapes, climate and population. They did not speak the language and could not, therefore, communicate with the locals. They did not know how to distinguish civilians from guerrillas, nor could they ask. No one gave them any lessons in the history, culture or ideology of the country and its population. It simply consisted of odd-sounding villages with odd-looking people. This was indicative of a particular connection with a simple lack of knowledge which lead to a general lack of respect. Lost in the figurative landscape of the war, the American soldiers found no beacons depicting right or wrong; morality and

immorality. In chapter 3 I will discuss how this disorientation allows for the possibility, and even acceptance, of demeaning behaviour.

Duong and O'Brien describe the way in which war tampers with the internal sensibilities of the soldiers, clouding their judgement and their conscience and confusing any sense of right and wrong. They no longer follow a navigable path since there is nothing to guide them. The stars are obscured and lost in the bright light of tracer fire and mortars, leaving the soldiers bereft of any moral compass, or indeed any recognition of what they are doing. In my opinion they become clouded by bad judgement, led astray by conspirators and conjurors. This point will be explained more thoroughly in chapter 3 and 4; however for the purpose of discussing landscape it is useful to consider how in William Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*, Brutus struggles with the option that is presented to him by Cassius. Before making his fateful decision to join the conspirators, he announces

I cannot, by the progress of the stars,  
Give guess how near to day (II:i: 2-3).

This entire scene, with its ominous backdrop of a natural storm, is punctuated with his qualms. The cloud of conspiracy out of which was hatched the plot to murder Caesar indicates that '[i]t was a time of confusion and uncertainty when the most basic category by which men order their experience seemed to have become unstable and untrustworthy, subject to arbitrary political manipulation' (Burckhardt 2004: 211). Like Brutus, the soldiers in Vietnam have been manipulated and forced into situations so that it is impossible for them to tell right from wrong. As with Brutus they are no longer guided by the stars which have become dim in this landscape of war.

At this juncture Paul Berlin can be identified with those soldiers who were in Vietnam but were removed from the experiences of war. He arrives directly from a society where the military is propelled by the legacies of the Second World War and Korea as well as the Hollywood influences of John Wayne and Audie Murphy movies, or what Philip Kuberski likens to 'being briefed by a canon of media wars' (Kuberski 1986: 180). This will be discussed in depth in chapter 3; however it is evident that these young, impressionable boys who arrived to fight a war were armed with scant and erroneous knowledge. 'The place Vietnam has exposed the incapacities of the rational American order which had expected to contain and comprehend it' (Carton 1991: 301); when these expectations did not come to fruition the boys handicapped themselves further by refusing to adjust their perspective so as to see the landscape through anything other than a foreigner's eyes. I am of the opinion that Tim O'Brien is clearly demonstrating Paul Berlin's struggle with his own pre-conditioning about Vietnam in order to shake off the disadvantages placed on him by the military. With no proper sense of how they should be conducting themselves and with no knowledge of what to do, the Americans feel overwhelmed by the strangeness of the place.

Paul Berlin writes to his father '[r]ight now I'm a little lost' (O'Brien 1975: 36). When he looks up at the constellations he sees some that are familiar. There, under the skies of Vietnam, he recognises the Southern Cross, but there are 'other stars he could not yet name' (O'Brien 1975: 187). The use of the word 'yet' is a clear indication that he wants to familiarise himself with his surroundings, that he desires to better understand where he is and to try and establish 'a special affinity with this ancestor-worshipping land' (Lomperis 1987: 75). After the Third Squad gives chase to Cacciato it discovers 'a partly burned map' (O'Brien 1975: 25). Cacciato's action in

burning the map of Vietnam allows Paul Berlin to recognise the symbolic destruction of the way in which the Americans are taught to see Vietnam so that unfamiliar constellations may now be recognised. Once the limitations that others have placed on the land are removed, what opens up before him is situated beyond just the war. This action returns to the land its own identity, the whole sum of its parts. Yet this journey of rediscovery is one that few take. Not everyone understood the landscape of Vietnam. Not everybody was willing to try. For every Paul Berlin there were hundreds who do not care, who destroyed merely out of spite and boredom and condescension. Not once was there ever a moment where they stopped to concede that what they are doing to the country and the countryside might be wrong: '[t]here wasn't anybody around to tell us we hadn't done the right thing' (Santoli 2006: 26). The clouds of war lessen any difficulty over the choice to become lost. Hodges will observe, after only a few months in the bush, how close to 'gooks' he and his comrades have become (Webb 1978: 162). Here is proof that war does not discriminate between those who participate in its tragedy. The parallel lies in the mirrored actions of enemies rather than on any degree of latitude.

In contrast, in Le Ly Hayslip's autobiographical account of the war, *When Heaven and Earth Changed Places*, there is a clear indication that she, and other rural dwellers, possess a sense of harmony and tradition beginning with the land. Her loyalty to the nation of Vietnam is presented through the land, for in her native soil she can always find her sense of belonging and need never question who she is. She is indoctrinated at a young age when her father teaches her about the special connection with the land, 'to love god, my family, our traditions, and the people we could not see: our ancestors' (Hayslip 2003: ix). The life of the Vietnamese is inextricably bound to

the history and the traditions of the land, so much so that the two are easily melded into one. Kien perceives his life like a river, the ebb and flow of memories and past merely a drop of water in a larger body of 'his nameless, ageless river' (Bao 1993: 117). By this statement I suggest that the people of Vietnam are also to be identified with the land of Vietnam and, through this logic, I argue that the further they move away from the land and their sense of being a part of it, the more lost they become.

However if it is possible to construe the landscape in terms of intimacy and distance, consolidating itself as an integral part of the war, then the same can be applied to the towns and hamlets that were built upon the terrain. If the landscape is the foundation upon which cities are erected it stands to reason that the spirit of that land is infused into what is found upon its surface. For Truong Nhu Tong the city of Saigon was steeped in French colonial history but it was also a place of family history. As he recalls in *A Vietcong Memoir: An Inside Account of the Vietnam War and Its Aftermath*, his grandfather's house 'was the place where we gathered on all the feasts, holidays and anniversaries of deaths, to mourn or celebrate, to venerate the ancestors and to reassert our own identity as a family, the family Truong' (Truong 1985: 3). They are city-dwellers who keep their traditions alive through the nurturing concept of their family. His grandfather tells them of the two unshakeable necessities, 'protection of the family's honour and loyalty to the nation' (Truong 1985: 4). The underlying strength of their foundations is this notion of family and tradition; therefore Truong's Saigon is a city with heart and character. Like a house that requires solid foundations in order to stand securely, Saigon is in need of a great heart and strong, familiar connections to become a place of comfort and familiarity. Without these elements, Saigon becomes an empty, desolate place. Juxtaposed with

the city and its inhabitants is the pagoda described at the outset of *Going After Cacciato*, ‘a single square room built like a pillbox with stone walls and a flat ceiling that forced the men to stoop or kneel. Once it might have been a fine house of worship, neatly tiled and painted, but now it was junk’ (O’Brien 1975: 3-4). It is possible to perceive a parallel between this pagoda and the larger city of Saigon, both of which become empty and old without the infusion of tradition and worship. All the soldiers see is a run-down pagoda that they use to suit their own needs, regarding it merely as ‘junk’.

For the deprived Vietnamese villagers in the South, Saigon became ‘a shimmering oasis in a desert of fear and poverty’ (Hayslip 2003: 64). It held the materialistic goals and self-satisfying needs that the West imbued with importance. It prised the villagers away from their true notion of self and cast them into an alien landscape of consumer goods, greed and exploitation. ‘Saigon was a small and terrified city, and though money could not kill, the vast influx of American dollars had almost as much influence on it as bombing had on the countryside’ (Fitzgerald 2002: 352). Away from the set social order of village life, the Vietnamese easily slipped into a maze of corruption and exploitation. Supply Officer Scott Higgins remembers Saigon as ‘an incredible city, an incredibly active bustling town’ (Santoli 2006: 78). With hindsight, Hayslip discovers that to leave for Saigon is to turn their backs on their past and their livelihood in exchange for foreign rules and ideas; ideas that are projections of some foreign view. By the term foreign I mean alien to their tradition and livelihood rather than the notion referring to Americans and foreigners. The idea of projections onto the landscape is a theme that may be constantly outlined in the narratives. Abandoning her ancestral ties, Hayslip is seduced by the machine of Western culture at work,

which excites her. She is drawn to the bright lights and the possibility of making real money off the Americans, eventually allowing the city to exploit her, giving in to everything that the North regards Saigon to be, ‘the symbol of Western decay; a town of whores, corrupt politicians and greedy citizens who measured themselves more by their resemblance to their foreign masters than by fidelity to their ancestors’ (Hayslip 2003: 64). What stands strongly as far as Truong is concerned becomes a rickety, badly constructed mess for Hayslip; exhibiting only the potential to fall down, not unlike the pagoda described in *Going After Cacciato*. Without her past and her traditions, Hayslip loses herself in the landscape of Saigon. She is disconnected from her true self and her understanding of her native soil. By leaving the village, Hayslip severs herself from its real riches, and without them she becomes lost. The view of the Americans, and by associative influence that of the Vietnamese, reduces Saigon to a state of decay, thereby creating ‘a Viet Nam in which the poor are exploited by the rich, and [which] shows that the Americans join the rich, not the poor when they arrive’ (Christopher 1995: 74).

In *Fields of Fire* Dan, a simple Vietnamese farmer, must leave his family plot and replace his dead brother in the Viet Cong forces. When the Viet Cong arrive and conscript him against his will he argues, ‘I am a farmer ... There is rice ... only today I am putting the seeds in’, but lacking his respect for the land they reject this with a curt: ‘You come today. Plant rice when the war is over’ (Webb 1978: 179), leaving him no choice but to follow or be shot. He understands that to take up arms means a severance from the land and the vital need to grow rice in order to nurture the generation to come. Dan’s greatest desire is to be allowed to plant rice and live with his family, ‘I do not like to fight. I like to farm. And to be with my family’ (Webb

1978: 183). The demands of war forced men to fight instead of plant. Men killed each other instead of building, and thus reduced the importance of the landscape and placed themselves at risk of its wrath. Without family, tradition and love the landscape became cold, soulless and void of any forgiveness. Without rice its denizens were left to starve; without tending the ground in which their ancestors lie they starved themselves in a metaphorical sense and it is in these two parallel landscapes that Hayslip and Dan are forced to wander. Those who wish to survive must kill or be killed. War alters the situation so that they no longer recognise themselves. Citizenship is no guarantee of forging a kinship with, and being protected by, the land. The landscape proved cruel even to its own when they lose their understanding of how it ought to be respected. When both Dan and Hayslip are taken from the land, their connection to it is severed, and they wander around Vietnam lost in a landscape that they ought to know. Without the stars to guide Brutus, he falls foul of Cassius' plot. Without the support of the constellations, the victims on both sides are confused, and lacking light they make terrible mistakes.

I would suggest that the Vietnamese are of, for and about the land. They worship the rice that they plant, nurturing it as they would a child; the wet dikes are a nursery for the young shoots. They live in the soil, the dirt of Vietnam. There is a continual 'sensual contact between our hands and feet, the baby rice, and the wet, receptive earth, [it] is one of the things that preserved and highlighted our connection with the land' (Hayslip 2003: 7) and yet the soldiers see nothing of this, only the danger of elephantiasis, 'viruses live in the paddies see, so when you pee, the little buggers'll swim right up your urine stream, right up into your prick' (O'Brien 1975: 224), emphasising that the landscape is being forced into the narrow funnel of a foreign

perspective. The reader is afforded the two views of love and hatred for the landscape, as described earlier, and enjoys an omniscient view over both perceptions of landscape; hence it becomes impossible to remain objective when one is drawn to the love of the land displayed in Hayslip's dike and yet comprehends the justification for the soldiers' fear of what it can do. History offers no reconciliation between the two since both perceptions are valid. It is up to the reader, then, to hold a mirror to both sides and extract from parallel readings of these two notions the deduction that what is viewed on one side must surely emerge in the other. The broad understanding that Reader Response affords to the collective audience, should that audience be aware of the theory, may imply objectivity; however, allowance is made for a degree of manipulation ensuring that, rather than readers 'producing interpretive acts, they are the product of one' (Fish 2004: 220). In other words such a group of theories may explain the specific responses that emerge toward the text. I believe this prospect limits the reader's interpretation and places too much weight on a generalisation regarding the reading audience. Instead I would propose that the reader has, as Edmund Husserl argues, what I like to term a 'proactive prerogative', that is 'I can shift my standpoint in space and time, look this way and that, turn temporally forwards and backwards; I can provide myself constantly new and more or less clear and meaningful perceptions and representations' (Husserl 2004: 138) which may weaken Fish's theory by placing the focus also on the individual reader, rather than just the collective.

It is important to acknowledge that the Americans reached Vietnam without any prior experience of comprehending any land that they were inhabiting, even that of the United States itself. It can even be argued that while the unique connection of the

Vietnamese with the land was destroyed by the war, the Americans were never in possession of such awareness. Whereas the Vietnamese possessed an understanding of history and family the Americans were found lacking. Tim O'Brien grew up on the landscape of Middle America. His was the childhood of endless prairies in the heartland of the country. Unlike the Vietnamese who had been worshipping their ancestors on the land they cultivated, his came from the 'Norwegians and Swedes and Germans' (O'Brien 1969: 21) who arrived and dispossessed the Native American Sioux tribe from the plains. The American heritage does not stretch as far back as that of the Vietnamese and it is one that hides a certain degree of shame. The history of the prairies belongs not to those Europeans, but rather to the Native Americans who understood the land and worshipped the memories of their ancestors.

O'Brien's narrative exposes a lack of any sense of belonging in America when he writes that 'one part of it is like any other part' (O'Brien 1969: 23). There is no special characteristic or feature that makes it his own. The whole place seems interchangeable with some other flats of the prairie so that even the town is rendered characterless, 'flat, tepid, small, strangled by algae' (O'Brien 1969: 23). With little regard or connection for where he, and hundreds of thousands of others like him, originate from, the 'pattern of desolation' (O'Brien 1969: 35) that they impose over the landscape of Vietnam is reminiscent of that on the prairies. If the Americans depicted in the chosen narratives cared to expand their surroundings they needed to enlarge their knowledge rather than rely on what they already knew. In chapter 4 it will be shown that Paul Berlin is the moral compass of the war, because he meets the challenge of altering his perception of the overall picture of the war. This familiarising himself within the context of his surroundings, I believe, allows the

reader the right to associate the term 'moral' with his participation in the war. The subsequent chapters of this dissertation will reveal how Paul Berlin struggles both with the war itself and his participation in it. He is conscious of his own pursuit of adopting a larger perspective in order to fully comprehend his country's decisions in general and his own position in particular. It is difficult to reconcile the word 'moral' with the nature of war, a notion held by O'Brien himself, since as he writes in *The Things They Carried*, the 'true war story is never moral. It does not instruct, nor encourage virtue, nor suggest models of proper human behaviour, nor restrain men from doing things men have always done. If a story seems moral, do not believe it' (O'Brien 1991: 89). There can therefore be no morality about Paul Berlin; nevertheless his willingness to be objective allows the reader to regard his position as being closer to the ideal of morality than that of his comrades and counterparts.

The landscape of Middle America is perceived only by how these people relate to it individually rather than as a collective. According to Sharon Begley, 'The West epitomizes individualistic, do-your-own thing cultures, ones where the rights of the individual equal and often trump those of the group and where differences are valued. East Asian societies exalt the larger society: behavior is constrained by social roles, conformity is prized, outsiders shunned' (Begley 2008). The generation that went to war was one whose members were concerned with their individual issues and causes rather than those of a larger community. In his review of Paul Lyons' book *Class of '66: Living in Suburban Middle America*, Phillip Robinette points out that 'environmental factors closer to the daily lives of subjects are more influential than ones originating from cultural forms more removed. Localized culture tends to buffer its inhabitants from larger social forces' (Robinette 1997: 256). The Viet Cong troops

were divided accordingly so that '[the] three cell members were known only to themselves. They would not know the members of other cells and only the cell leader would know the squad leader and so on up the chain-of-command' (Rottman 2007: 31). War created its own localised culture, one where an immediate group was of far more importance than the larger structure; not only among allies but between enemies as well. Small units of soldiers gave rise to close-knit groups that registered little beyond their own survival and that of their brothers-in-arms.

O'Brien has stated that '[t]here was a great uncertainty and ambiguity and ignorance about what the Vietnamese wanted and what the culture was' (Lomperis 1987: 73), serving as both a fortification against outside intrusion and a type of internal consolidation. In this atmosphere of localised culture 'Vietnamese exist, [in the literature] as a threatening background noise and local color, barely separable from village dogs and water buffalo' (Nielson 1998: 212), revealing the intrinsic tendency of each set of soldiers to focus on themselves at the expense of the larger requirements of responsibility and obedience. Snake breaks the law in order to mete out punishment to the killers of Baby Cakes and Ogre (Webb 1975: 294); Kien transgresses the rules so as to undo his initial transgression of missing the train (Bao 1996: 166). War creates the ultimate choice of survival of self, for without taking that decision the soldiers, like the landscape, become 'forgotten, damaged, impassable' (Bao 1996: 3). These factors will be elaborated on in the respective themes of time, conflict and ghosts in the subsequent chapters of this dissertation. The soldiers were constricted by others and themselves so that they were kept from a better, broader conceptualisation of the war, and themselves.

I reiterate here the importance of the impression of projections. While on the road to Paris in *Going After Cacciato* the squad encounters three refugees, fleeing the devastation brought about by war. When Paul Berlin asks Sarkin Aung Wang where they are heading she answers 'The Far West' (O'Brien 1975: 50), inverting the accepted Western notion of the place 'The Far East' and aligning it directly to fit into the perceptions of those who live there. The Far East can neither be 'far' nor 'east' if one is already there. It simply becomes 'here' and 'near'. 'Like all other Asian countries, Viet-Nam has a quality and character of its own, which must not be blotted out under the weight of the sweeping generalizations about the "East"' (Smith 1968: 6), which is exactly what the Americans did. The action in *Fields of Fire* takes place in 'the hell that is known as the Arizona valley' (Webb 1978: 52). 'They gave everything American names' (Lomperis 1987: 73) which highlights the American means of relating to the strange environment in which they were fighting, but it would be more correct to interpret this reaction as an overarching condemnation of Vietnam's right to exist as its own entity. Therefore 'Vietnam is a landscape for American projections' (Doherty 1988: 28), a statement the implications of which will also be developed in chapter 3.

Such an interpretation is translated into the metaphorical deconstruction of the landscape. Vietnam, a country of millions, became synonymous with a war rather than a place. Geography was reduced to grids and locations and dots on a map, in order to accommodate the military's needs, thereby ensuring that the real landscape ceased to exist. The intruders did not understand the landscape they surveyed, using 'outdated maps which has no relevance to victory or defeat in a guerrilla war' (Jakaitis 1986: 204). They did not bother to learn the names of places nor recognise

the landscape for what it was, other than a battleground. It was far easier to order a bombing campaign over sections and quadrants rather than on towns and villages, and since the Americans denied the Vietnamese areas their rightful names I believe it was also easier to hate and bully the landscape. Similarly this pattern of behaviour can be seen amongst the inhabitants, a theme detailed in chapter 3. Places became merely targets to be attacked and beaten into submission. The terrain of 'An Hoa was one of a large number of collective farming or communal village associations in the heart of a densely agricultural region' (Salisbury 1967: 103), yet it became by definition 'Grid eight-niner-five, five-zero-three, direction five-one hundred, distance two hundred' (Webb 1978: 159) or 'grid 711888' and 'Grid 789765' (O'Brien 1969: 129, 165). The Americans took away the landscape's distinctive character and left it as a numbered, faceless entity. Despite this, or indeed perhaps because of it, the men who are thrown into the fire had little concept of where they were. Comprehension is stripped down to a simple equation of '[w]e are here ... *They* are everywhere else' (Webb 1978: 77). Earlier I noted how the soldiers' survival depended upon their immediate environment. They identified themselves in opposition to the rest, yet taken in context everyone's identity can be reduced to a third-party object, seeing that they were all someone's enemy. It is crucial to remain aware that identification in war is often just temporary. A soldier's identity as 'enemy' or 'ally' is necessitated by war. Maggie MacLure raises the argument that choosing between the description of 'freedom fighter' or that of 'terrorist' indicates an allegiance with certain moral or political positions (MacLure 1993: 378); allegiances which were often the result of the immediate milieu. Identity therefore is a fickle issue, incorporating and relying upon perception for its formation. In chapter 4 I will further detail the perception of self in relation to the elements of the unreal.

Despite all their careful co-ordination the soldiers were still left to ‘stand nailed there in [their] tracks sometimes, no bearings and none in sight thinking *Where the fuck am I?*’ (Herr 1991: 43). Some may argue a great deal for the underlying metaphysical meaning of this question; however, in terms of the literature one may answer more simply that the soldiers were lost in a vast landscape, one that was stripped of personality, devoid of any singular attribute that excites enthusiasm. What kind of a wasteland have they emerged into? It is not the ‘I’ on which the emphasis of this question falls but rather the ‘where’. Into what hell have they been turned out, where a living surface is organised by number? The answer lies partly in the undeniable fact that through their own behaviour and aggression and deep personal conflict they have created the landscape in which they are lost.

With the landscape stripped of its quality and actual terrain, assaulting the countryside is made easy, for both sides. In *The Sorrow of War* Kien recalls two acts of rape: the first brutality is inflicted on his childhood sweetheart Phuong, while the second incident concerns his guide Hoa. Both women may be viewed as metaphors for the landscape of Vietnam itself, taken by force, without consent. There is no argument against the fact that rape is an act of violence which brutalises and degrades the victim. Claudia Card describes rape as an act of terror that ‘breaks the spirit, humiliates, tames, produces a docile, differential, obedient soul’ (Card 1996: 6). The rape of Phuong occurs on a train during an American bombing raid, and is committed by Vietnamese; a chilling replication of the violence that is being inflicted upon them by the Americans. This serves as a clear example of the ability to cause damage of which each side is capable. Both Kien’s initial removal from the scene, albeit beyond

his control, and his inability to contextualise what has happened to Phuong may serve as a parallel for the Vietnamese soldiers who blindly followed the ideology of their leadership, unwilling to notice that it was a pretext, a condition, 'just a leader's trick' (Duong 1995: 159). They did not see what had been done until it is too late, and thereby the Vietnamese leadership is exposed: it is as wholly cunning and deliberate as that of the Americans. This issue will be elaborated on in chapter 3. As Susan Bond and David Mosher comment, '[r]ape is a crime motivated by power, anger or sadism [and] selects a victim of opportunity; uses force, often excessive force, to overcome resistance and to degrade the victim' (Bond and Mosher 1986: 163). Rape is an atrocity but when the damage stems not from an enemy, but rather from the same side, it is still worse. Vietnamese nationalism can be regarded, therefore, not as a source of pride, but as a means to an end. The landscape was raped as a self-serving means, to further the ideals of nationalism and communism. A relationship as sensual and tender as that which Hayslip shares with the rice paddies can be turned into a savage display of power. Political and ideological affiliation distorts and destroys the fragile coexistence between the landscape and its occupants; regard alters to indifference and respect to contempt. Any sentiment of intimacy credits the soldiers with vulnerability, which in wartime is equated with weakness and exposure to attack; consequently, in order to hide this perceived shortcoming they alter their stance towards the landscape and become violent rapists.

Like the Vietnamese who gang-raped Phuong, what the Vietnamese did to their own land is an atrocity. The shady row of trees at Kien's school 'had been chopped down, its yard crisscrossed with deep trenches' (Bao 1993: 117), while on the outer edges of Hanoi, '[t]he landscape was half marsh, half rubbish dump' (Bao 1993; 72) and

wholly tragedy. The Vietnamese hurt the landscape because they had to, or because they could. The landscape could not fight back: 'insecticides [that] the farmers used had depopulated the countryside just as the bombs had killed something in our souls, the divine inspiration that had once filled our lives' (Duong 1995: 114). The welts left on the jungle show up in the scars and bruises of the selfsame soldiers who walk through, inflicting the damage.

The second instance of rape that impacts on Kien is that of his guide Hoa. They discover an American patrol being led by a sniffer dog. The only way to save the unit's wounded is for Hoa to expose her position, which she does by shooting the dog. She sacrifices herself to the Americans who, 'rushing towards her and then surrounding her, like bare-chested apes, puffing and panting, grabbing her, breathing heavily over her body' (Bao 1993: 46), assault her. In the same way that the Vietnamese violated their own landscape to feed the insatiable beast of war, the Americans take what they need from her because of their desire for satisfaction and revenge. Hoa is a symbol of the landscape and they grab from it as they please. They blatantly, rudely, impose themselves and their own needs on a landscape which cares little for their intrusive presence and from which they ask no consent. Without understanding the land the Americans displaced their anger onto it instead of onto their enemies: with 'no enemy soldiers to shoot back at, only hedgerows and bushes and clumps of dead trees' (O'Brien 1969: 121), the landscape of Vietnam becomes a dirty, slushy maze, an obstacle and an inconvenience to the soldiers who have to wade their way through it. Vietnam is defoliated, dug up, bombed, napalmed and shattered. The American rapists are no worse and no better than their Vietnamese counterparts. Kien, who witnesses the trauma of both acts, does nothing to help either woman. In

the case of Hoa, intervention on her behalf would have been contrary to the aid she was trying to render and would have resulted in his being shot, or worse. However, the lack of concern shown for Hoa is surely '[t]he most brutal aspect of Hoa's sacrifice ... that none of the men she saved ask about her and then Kien, too, finds himself forgetting' (Turner 1998: 132). This fact, together with his inability to comprehend what had happened to Phuong, '[w]hat was going on? He knew so little!' (Bao 1996: 204) exposes his own frailty. Rape implies that the swagger of temporary power it bestows on the rapist is surely a disguise for his own unwillingness and inability to participate in war. This is strongly reiterated in Hayslip's own experience of rape, 'he seemed like a sad little boy, who believing he was not a man, settled for the imitation of manhood' (Hayslip 2003: 96). In none of the aforementioned incidents is there any indication that the rapist is in the wrong. And those who witness the tragedy show no emotion over what has occurred.

It can be argued that soldiers who participate in war very rarely manage to extricate themselves. The same is true for every soldier who roamed over the landscape of Vietnam. If he managed to meander out at all it was with part of him still lying on the ground somewhere. Soldiers left parts of themselves in battle; sometimes that part was physical, while at other times it was emotional and psychological. Mixing blood and flesh and bone into the soil makes them prisoners of the land: those who fought have inevitably become a part of it, 'there, somewhere, soaking with the rain into the earth, were a hundred pieces of Big Mac, and the bones of Phony's arm' (Webb 1978: 347). Paul Berlin remembers that after Buff's body is taken away in a helicopter it will be buried in America. However, left there on the ground in his helmet are the remains of Buff's face, which Cacciato heaved 'into the tall, crisp grass' (O'Brien

1975: 253). Part of Buff, and all those who fought, died or were wounded during the Vietnam War will always be in Vietnam, mixed in with the soil and dirt and the dust, 'an earth soaked in blood strewn with human flesh' (Duong 1995: 218). Those who bore witness to Buff's death and his final Vietnamese resting place will take it with them and will forever have a part of themselves buried in Vietnam.

Although Paul Berlin is in a sense dreaming up what happens on the road to Paris, Tim O'Brien has stated that 'it's not an *Alice in Wonderland* ... sort of thing where events happen at random' (Napersteck 1991: 10): it is a conscious understanding of the situation of war. Inside the bowels of the earth the red dust that plagues the Americans on the surface is gone; instead they are surrounded by 'hard red stone' (O'Brien 1975: 75) as if the land becomes a fortified jail. This is made apparent when the squad meets up with Major Li Van Hgoc and he tells its members 'we are all prisoners, all of us POWs' (O'Brien 1975: 87). The land has trapped them in this war. They either fight on it or in it but it can never be beaten because it is bigger and stronger than they are.

This chapter opened with the disappearance of any distance between the soldiers and the landscape. On the surface they are covered by it; inside it they are imprisoned. The dust that ingrains itself is the surface representative of the hard rock found inside the earth. The landscape becomes their prison. It inflicts brutalities on them that are equalled only by their own horrific behaviour. Both the landscape and the soldiers are mirrored in the other. To become intimate with a landscape that is malignant and twisted essentially means to become the same as it. Landscape and soldier alike are bloodied, scarred and bruised until the reader cannot be certain whether the ooze is

mud or innards; whether the blood seeps out of corpses or whether it is the land itself that is bleeding. On this perverse landscape which may be reality or may be a proportion of the psyche, the only piece of logic is to scream out ‘where am I?’

After Li Van Hgoc tells Paul Berlin’s squad that they are all trapped by the land, Lieutenant Corson informs him that he is free to join them. Mortified, Li whispers ‘[t]he land cannot be beaten. Accept it’ (O’Brien 1975: 89). As this chapter has revealed, the land was bloodied and bruised and disrespected by both the invading enemy force and its own people; it was divided along imaginary lines of longitude and latitude but it remained intact and a larger force than the sum of the guns that were aimed at each side and itself. In the end it could not be beaten. Both Ogre’s scars (Webb 1978: 240) and the Vietnamese schoolyard’s trenches (Bao 1993: 117) are symbols of terrible damage that has been inflicted. Like the intersecting lines they depict the scar tissue on the landscape, and the soldiers’ bodies can each be interpreted as an extension of the other. The story in each acre of landscape is of the war that was being fought. Itself a warrior and a survivor, the land of Vietnam has as much right to be heard as any of the hundreds of thousands of pairs of feet that marched over it. And those who did the marching were motivated, guided or acted by the same feelings of anger, guilt and understanding – regardless of which side of the 17<sup>th</sup> parallel they stood. The landscape has been shown to be one shared aspect of the soldiers’ experience. Those that fought shared both an affinity and an intimacy with it, something that is well documented in the selected works. There were other issues common to the Vietnamese and Americans: the following chapter will deal with the concept and mechanism of time.

## Chapter 2 – Time

I had a brother at Khe Sanh, fighting off the Viet Cong  
They're still there, he's all gone

Bruce Springsteen 'Born in the U.S.A.'<sup>1</sup>

In the second decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Albert Einstein discovered a law of nature that had hitherto been overlooked; he called it the law of relativity. This 'tells us that the flow of time at a location with high gravity or high velocity is actually slower than at another location with lower gravity or lower velocity' (Schroeder 1997: 42). Simply put, this means that the flow of time and its perception depends upon the relative perceptions of the person observing. In terms of this understanding it is possible to transfer the context of a scientific theory so that it covers a subjective art such as literature. I have already discussed the impression of projections as they relate to the landscape: in this chapter I will shift the focus to concentrate on the notion of time. This chapter will attempt to convey how the sense of time, as it was understood by those who limped off the battlefields, was so irrecoverably altered by the war that their perception of it was no longer the same. It is my firm belief that no one survived the war in any traditional understanding of the term 'survival'. The *Shorter Oxford English Dictionary* defines the word survive as 'continuing to live after some event, (specifically of the soul after death); remaining alive, living on' (s.v. 'survive'). Surviving a battle or a war does not necessarily mean emotionally surviving the period of the fighting itself. The literature set forth for consideration in this dissertation will show that past, present and future seem to fuse together, creating an impossible gyre in which the veterans of the war: soldier and civilian, American and Vietnamese, are trapped, fighting with themselves and their experiences. In this

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<sup>1</sup> The single from his album, also titled 'Born in the USA', was released on 30 October 1984.

chapter I will concentrate on the experience of time, as perceived both during and after the war. I will examine the metaphorical parallel existences of time, the paradoxes of this concept, and disclose how war can be branded a thief, stealing time from those who were forced to fight. This chapter aims to indicate how the relativity of time, with no reference to either gravity or velocity, keeps the veterans fighting the Vietnam War.

There exists among human beings an ungovernable urge in their nature to ignore the present and seek the future, as I will presently show. Never is this urge made more apparent than during a war. Time, as Henri Bergson perceived it, 'is a[n] homogenous and indefinitely limited medium' (Dolson 1910: 584) which exhibits the property of infinity that allows humankind to continually seek something worthier, better or perhaps simply different. Humans make use of time as a vehicle to reach the future; Barbara Adam explains of Bergson's view that 'the future is *becoming* in a way that can never be a mere arrangement of what has been' (Massey 1999: 267). In his essay 'On the Vanity of Existence' Arthur Schopenhauer correctly marks humanity's relationship with time by considering the present to be 'regarded as something quite temporary and serving only as the road to our goal' (Schopenhauer 1970: 53). Such an interpretation would have appealed to the soldiers who looked for means to project themselves away from their present to a future where a myriad of choices seem to await them. When Tim O'Brien admits that he 'spent some time thinking about things I would do after Vietnam – after first sergeants and rifles were out of my life' (O'Brien 1969: 96), this is a clear indication of an attempt to escape one's physical presence in Vietnam by concentrating on one's departure from the war. O'Brien's sole ambition can be equated to that of Paul Berlin, a character in one of his own

novels, 'whose only goal was to live long enough to establish goals worth living for still longer' (O'Brien 1975: 24). Using these two references I conclude that the soldiers made use of time as an alternative to the war. A discussion of time should, therefore, highlight the dual imprisonment of the soldiers. The previous chapter showed how the physical snared them geographically, whereas the prison in this chapter comprises a psychological parallel; and the present chapter will illustrate how the fourth dimension intruded right into the soldiers' physical and/or psychological locale. The soldiers implemented time as a lever, thereby trying to wedge themselves out of their grim surroundings. Unfortunately time cannot be manipulated in any real sense and these imaginings of time did not solve the problem: in fact, it will be argued that they made the situation worse.

On his homeward journey O'Brien describes the external transformation from soldier to civilian. 'You go into the back of the plane. You take off your uniform. You roll it into a ball and stuff it into your suitcase and put on a sweater and blue jeans' (O'Brien 1969: 205). T.J. Lustig correctly notes that the 'I' in the title of O'Brien's novel has been replaced by a constant string of references to 'you'. The change in pronoun from first to second person highlights the fact that serving in Vietnam has created a rift in the soldiers' movement through time. 'It is as if the "you" of the final chapter is unable to leave Vietnam because the "I" of the title has been left behind' (Lustig 2001: 89). Not only is this a crucial point as far as the survivors of the war are concerned but it also indicates more than simply the definite loss of an article. The lost 'I' is a result of the traumatic separation of self from the past. Time diffuses the 'I', leaving only a 'you', a third party pronoun that can be used to mean everyone in general and no one specifically. The unfixed identity that results from war is clearly

demonstrated in this shifting description. The war bestowed upon the soldiers one specific identity, as mentioned in chapter 1: now, without it, they are bereft of their ability to command themselves. O'Brien's loss of direct reference to himself conveys uncertainty regarding his identity, and indeed, where he is. The unease of the returning soldier, accented by this displaced perception, leaves the reader uneasy at having to contend with this new characteristic of the narrative. The significance of the language is directed inward, focusing on its own history. Tellingly, the significance of the soldier's return is also directed inward, in search of some history from which he can fashion his identity. The characteristics of O'Brien's 'I' are created by the energy of another time and history, that of the war, to which this 'I' now no longer belongs and must therefore transform itself into 'you'.

Moving into the war, it may be deduced, is just as damaging as the return journey. In the chapter titled 'Calling Home' Paul Berlin waits to be connected via phone with his family. As he waits for his turn he imagines what is occurring halfway around the world; what is happening in the parallel existence of his former life. Here is a single composite of the way in which the Vietnam War dissects the soldiers' lives into two: the past and the present or the World and the War: each word is capitalised as if it were a geographical term describing where they once had been and where they now are. Upon entering the war they become detached from their homes and family and the life they understand. In Vietnam they are fighting for their survival while, simultaneously located in some other place, in a normality of which they were once part, life there exists unabated, where crazy neighbours remain intent on preserving their immaculate lawns (O'Brien 1975: 141). Returning to the World did not erase their participation and experiences in the War. Crossing between war and non-war

was impossible since the chasm between the two states of being cannot be bridged. The soldiers paid the heavy duty of trading in the particularity of 'I' to become a generic 'you' in order to return home physically. As surely as they physically became a part of the war, as described in chapter 1, so too were they forced to concede a part of themselves to the past in order to maintain their existence in two continua of time. There no longer existed an 'I' depicting the returning soldier. An element of himself had been erased and lost to the past; lost in the no-man's land between that World and this War. The two separate zones of War and World can never be reconciled to one another: this invisible but pivotal force detains the soldiers in the war even when their tour of duty ended. That component of themselves was the portion of their psyche that would never be free of the war. This particular theme will be further discussed in chapter 4.

However hard the soldiers may try, the present can never be discarded in favour of the future, for it is the very present that is the vehicle ferrying the survivors to their futures. Although O'Brien makes it clear that the future is his objective, the present of his war can be neither easily sidestepped nor forgotten. One important premise regarding time that is recognised by Paul Davis is 'the flow or movement of time from past to future' (Davis 1990: 45). It is the 'now' that bridges the divide between the past that was, and the future that is still to be, while at the same time occupying its own relative space and meaning. The disturbing fallout from any war can be perceived in the misplacement of the soldiers' lives both during and after the event. The disassociation and disorientation created by war are effortlessly gleaned from the pages of the literature selected. The notions of 'now' and 'then' become easily confused, mixing past with the present.

While O'Brien is at boot camp he befriends a fellow draftee named Erik. Together one afternoon they smear some black shoe polish onto a log, 'marking it with our presence' (O'Brien 1969: 44). This can be interpreted as more than simply a gesture of their shared time in Fort Lewis: suffering the humiliations of being new army recruits, feeling homesick, fearing their futures and learning how to kill other men. These two recruits need the weeks they spent in Fort Lewis to be marked forever, thus symbolising the human desire to be anchored in a specific point in history, thereby preventing themselves from disappearing. To war are fed the masses, who are rendered lost to history; becoming nameless, faceless victims of the slaughter of the body and soul of a nation. The simplicity of leaving a mark, albeit one this small, becomes a symbol of their existence at one particular moment; while at the same time preventing them from becoming just another two victims of war. This dab of polish is applied at a moment of clarity and sanity as if to say: this is me, here and now, while I know who I am and before I am cut down by the scythe of death and/or time; before I become another lost 'you'. This ritual is completed before O'Brien collapses into the strange sinkhole of the war, allowing for lasting proof that he was once whole and sane and had once existed without the war. For these selfsame reasons, when he reaches Vietnam, he 'start[ed] a journal, vaguely hoping it will never be read' (O'Brien 1969: 75), which again carefully places him in a specific moment for future reference. The black boot polish, the words written in a journal or letters, each remain a constant pin-pointing of where he is so that he will remember who he was at each crucial stage of his war experience and will never forget it. These are memos to himself, an action that is juxtaposed with his initial intention to simply slip through the present and into the future, demonstrating that time can never be bypassed.

Through writing, that part of the soldier which was left behind in the war is reinforced. Writing becomes the method of specifying this unspoken, unrecognised and unacknowledged part of the soul, left to languish in the past of the war. Remembering the war in words, both fiction and non-fiction, is a means of re-living it, exorcising it, but certainly indulging in an act of recuperating the past of the war in the present. Bao Ninh has Kien endeavouring to complete a novel, his history, with an almost religious desperation: 'life cannot be ended until the writing is done' (Bao 1996: 193). There is a fine line between the character Kien and the author Bao. Bao conceals the binary of past and present; one that manifests itself in the character and actions of Kien, who is the representation of his own past. According to Brad Coltrane, 'Ninh also writes as a way to reconsider and resolve the past ... Clearly Kien (the character) and Ninh (the writer) take the craft of writing seriously, both as a way to create reality and to recreate what was lost' (Coltrane 2002: 31). Kien is writing about the past while Bao is writing about writing about the past: these concurrent actions amalgamate past and present together, each of which is left without a real future. In this murky world, linear reality and relativity merge in an obscure path until there is no certainty at all concerning where the past ends and the present begins. Each time O'Brien and Kien write about the war, it becomes present to them; consequently, no matter how strong their intention to reach for the future, any such prospect keeps being dragged back into the past. All that the future offers is some vulgar parody of the past. It is as empty as the soldiers' present had been when they were doing nothing but looking towards the future. In the previous chapter I discussed how Paul Berlin's squad fell into the earth and met Major Li, who announced that

they were all prisoners of war; however, it is not just the land that holds them, they are also prisoners of time.

I firmly believe that literature is influenced by the times and events surrounding its conceptualisation. It is Stephen Greenblatt's view that if writing lacked engagement, if it withheld judgments or indeed failed to connect the present with the past, then it would seem to be worthless (Greenblatt 1990: 16). Texts are not written in a vacuum; hence it would be folly to try and contextualise them without an understanding of the surrounding history. This reinforcement of my earlier statement has undergirded Jonathan Culler's positing that the theoretical orientation of oneself towards history requires a broad understanding and good deal of hindsight (Culler 1984: 5). While I concede that Culler may be partially correct, I argue that a broader background perspective is beneficial but not necessary. History's influence lies more in the actual narratives than in any external documentation. I believe that it is enough to read Hayslip's revelation that 'I, along with so many of my countrymen, had been born into war and that my soul knew nothing else' (Hayslip 2003: 200), to acquire sufficient understanding of how protracted the troubles in Vietnam were. History teaches us the high cost of statehood, and well documented struggles of sacrifice over years, even decades, to achieve or maintain this status strengthen this argument.

The long struggle in Vietnam War was not an exclusive occurrence. Experiences in the Horn of Africa and the Middle East provide two examples of war's prolonged existence. After a protracted struggle, Eritrea was granted independence from Ethiopia; nevertheless, hostilities did not cease. Five years after independence, '[t]he outbreak of hostilities was instigated by an exchange of gunfire on 6 May 1998' with

the ‘war surge[ing] on two more occasions’ (Lata 2003: 379, 382). Since 1948 when Israel gained independence the country has continually faced ‘military threat on a daily basis (whether through terrorism or war)’ (Weiss 2001: 40). The historicity of texts is accessed partly through the reader’s interpretation rather than simply relying on prior knowledge. In *Fields of Fire* Dan equates the war with the seasons, regarding it to be ‘as natural as the rains’ (Webb 1978: 176). War peppers his present: as it did his past; therefore in his future, like the rains, it will always return. He notes with a sad practicality that some years there are no rains and some years there is no war but, seasonal or not, there will always be the possibility of both.

The Vietnamese may have been dropped into the muddy marshland of war from birth, but by all accounts the Americans were no less removed from such an ordeal. The soldiers who were sent to Vietnam were raised on the legacy of wars fought and won by the United States. Having been ‘fed by the spoils of 1945 [*sic*] victory’ (O’Brien 1969: 20) for over twenty years, this generation of Americans, like the Vietnamese, were born into war and were offered little alternative but to uphold their impossible legacy and come back victorious. The Americans idolised the men who went to Europe and the Pacific to combat totalitarianism. Unaware of their handicap, the Americans were living in the past. In 1938 Britain and France hoped to appease Hitler’s claim to the Sudetenland by signing the Munich Agreement. British Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain ‘argued that, since Hitler had said he sought nothing beyond the Sudeten lands “we should take him at his word now and not give him [*sic*] opportunity of going back on it”.’ (Schmidt 1952: 177). The lesson learned was that Chamberlain’s mistake could not be allowed to occur again. Successive Secretaries of State for the U.S. believed ‘that they were following the lessons of World War II

when they committed American troops to fight in Vietnam. If Hitler had been challenged early, they were convinced, the carnage of World War II might have been avoided' (Nelán 1996: 46). By tackling the insurgency in Vietnam the American government was hoping to avoid past mistakes, but instead stumbled into a set of new ones, which will be discussed further in the following chapter. Francis Fitzgerald observes how the Americans 'believe in the future as if it were a religion; they believe that there is nothing they cannot accomplish, that solutions wait somewhere for all problems' (Fitzgerald 2002: 8). By remaining submerged in the euphoria of their past and secure in its apparent safety, the Americans employed it as their means and justification to forge ahead with the war in Vietnam. When they reached the shores of Vietnam they marched into the jungle, after which the action of the war became their whole lives too.

It may be argued that history is as integral for the Vietnamese as it is for the Americans. In *Novel Without a Name* Quan is recruited by means of rhetoric calling for 'our chance for a resurrection. Vietnam had been chosen by History: After the war our country would become humanity's paradise. Our people would hold a rank apart. At least we would be respected, honoured, revered' (Duong 1995: 31). The lives of the Vietnamese are 'directed towards the past, both by the small tradition of the family and the great tradition of the state' (Fitzgerald 2002: 11). By manipulating the traditional sense of family and history their leadership was able to impose a view of the attractiveness of war without revealing its realities. Like the Americans the Vietnamese were sent to fight for a future based on some noble rekindling of the past. Future and past become melded into one so that they both represented the same concept, the Vietnamese being uncertain of which was which: 'the fluid shifting

images of the future, and those of the past, already so murky, so far away' (Duong 1995: 187). To the detriment of both sides they realised that their past thrived only in an accommodating environment so that on the hostile soil of the battlefields they had to succumb to the continual pounding of their immediate present.

Earlier I discussed how Paul Berlin sought refuge in a future time when there was no war. The use of his imagination allowed him to move beyond the physical boundaries of the war. Although this chapter aims to prove that this action was impossible, temporary escape was not unachievable. In *If I Die in a Combat Zone* O'Brien describes the month of April as offering 'early mornings [that] were clear, like a kind of distorted glass. A person could see impossible things' (O'Brien 1969: 104). This distorted, impossible lens is what Paul Berlin uses. With the exception of the chapters in *Going After Cacciato* that are titled 'The Observation Post', each episode of the novel is played out in Paul Berlin's mind's eye. Confronted by the grim prospect of being stuck in an endless war, Paul Berlin actively seeks a means of escape. Cacciato's disappearance provides him with such an opportunity. '[D]uring his stint on observation post duty from midnight to 6 a.m., time itself seems suspended as the surreal images glide in and out of his mind' (Timmerman 2000: 106), thereby creating his own world within his own point of reference regarding time in Vietnam. Somewhere between the facts of what was and the possibility of what might be lies the present: by grasping hold of that instant when Cacciato deserts and resting everything on it, Paul Berlin takes a moment in time to express the hope that the 'bad time' will end: 'Go, he whispered, then said and finally shouted' (O'Brien 1975: 23). T.J. Lustig recognises that 'Berlin's command "Go!" represents 'the last known fact' and is, therefore, the fulcrum on which the weight of the novel rests, the moment

when 'what happened' gives way to 'what might have happened' (Lustig 2001: 86). The soldiers wrestle with the fear of the present; thus Cacciato's flight becomes a means of hope which was encouraged to blossom and grow in Paul Berlin's mind, gaining its own momentum and simultaneously giving him reason to carry on. If 'war time' prevents any soldier escaping the daily grind of war, then only in an alternative notion of time can any exit can be contemplated. Paul Berlin spins himself into his own time; when he notices that the 'night did not move' suddenly 'anything was possible' (O'Brien 1975: 26, 58) and as a result he is able to employ his imagination to figuratively leave the grim place where he is.

In 1968, during the Tet Offensive, Michael Herr joined the marines in Hue as they battled for control of the city. In *Dispatches* he describes the following scene:

The courtyard of the American compound in Hue was filled with puddles from the rain, and the canvas tops of the jeeps and trucks sagged with the weight of the water. It was the fifth day of the fighting, and everyone was still amazed that the NVA or the Cong had not hit the compound on the first night. An enormous white goose had come into the compound that night, and now his wings were heavy with the oil that had formed on the surface of the puddles. Every time a vehicle entered the yard he would beat his wings in a fury and scream, but he never left the compound, as far as I know, no one ever ate him (Herr 1991: 76).

The goose in the compound becomes a metaphor for all the victims of the grinding war machine. The war does not merely kill and maim: it leaves a far more damaging residue that seeps in and weighs down all participants. Because they were bogged down for so long in the war both the Vietnamese and Americans become waterlogged and trapped by what the time span of the war created. Those who could not leave, because they had nowhere to go, and those who were obliged to stay because they were put there, became victims trapped by the period of the war. The longevity of the war restricted movement and crippled flight. Hayslip's mother fears that the war will

go on forever (Hayslip 2003: 105) while Dan replicates these exact thoughts. 'Sometimes ... it will never end' (Webb 1978: 373); and neither is entirely wrong. Without any certain knowledge of a beginning, how can there be an end? War's continuous, vicious, futile path is neither particular nor exclusive to any era. Larry Heinemann, himself a Vietnam veteran, likens the long grind of his tour of duty to the time spent in the trenches of the First World War: 'the war moved from one year to the next and then the next, grinding on and on and *on* (so that the soldiers could well imagine their permanent stalemate of slaughter stretching into their middle age)' (Heinemann 2005a: 44). Like the veterans of wars before them, those fighting the Vietnam War suffered the lack of a defining start which ceased to warrant a formal finish. A pattern emerged in terms of which, due to the endlessness of the war, the momentum of action began to carry itself through, because those who fight it simply could not stop fighting. No number of complaints or corpses can change this.

Since the war was created in the distant past, and was kept afloat by its uncanny ability to metamorphose along with the times and the imperatives of the military command, it can be argued that the conflict became its own independent organism. Into this pulsating self-contained world the soldiers were dropped. Here again one encounters the idea that the pattern of war constituted the compulsory structure within which all were forced to accommodate themselves. The war rolled on unabated so that, in order to avoid being crushed, the soldiers and civilians alike had to adapt to its rules. David Ross, a medic in Vietnam from 1965-1967, remembers a group of new recruits who had recently arrived in Vietnam, and were exposed to the sudden appearance of helicopters that hovered only long enough to dump some body bags onto the ground. 'One of the bags broke and what came out was hardly recognizable

as a human being ... some people were shaking and some people were throwing up, and one guy got down and started to pray. I said to myself, “Welcome to the war boys” (Santoli 2006: 3). This event serves to illustrate how the war kept its own time. It began long before Dan and Hayslip and the Americans arrived and the incident dramatises the way in which they were all forced to jump right into the melee and catch up with the action. For the American population their participation in the war was not very different. Patrice Pritzl writes that she grew up with the Vietnam War. ‘Along with our mashed potatoes and roast beef, we were served the bodies of young American men with our dinner ... I firmly believed hell was being televised on the six o’clock news’ (Pritzl 1985: 50). The advanced technology of the times allowed the media to bring the war right into viewers’ homes. Fifty years previously, during the First World War it had not been television but rather literature that infiltrated the lives of the civilian population in Britain. Barbara Korte and Ann-Marie Einhaus recognise that the ‘short story’s strength is its affinity to the experience of the mere moment, which goes hand in hand with a special closeness to its moment of publication and reception’ (Korte and Einhaus 2009: 55): together with the close proximity of the fighting in the trenches the stories were able to draw their audience into the world of the war. Literature displays the powerful ability to bring the war right to its readers. This is highlighted in O’Brien’s autobiographical account of his tour of duty which begins when he is already in Vietnam, throwing the reader right into the war, highlighting its long, continuous motion. So too is the reader shaped by the path of war that is recreated in the texts.

Mikhail Bakhtin wrote that the consciousness of a character is given as *someone else’s* consciousness, another consciousness, yet at the same time it is not turned into

an object, is not closed, does not become a simple object of the author's consciousness (Bakhtin 1984: 7). The character is regarded as the object of the author's vision; though that perspective is not restricted entirely to the author as he recognises that 'I give myself verbal shape from another's point of view, ultimately to the community to which I belong. A word is a bridge thrown between myself and another' (Clark and Holquist 1984: 214). Charles Schuster is therefore correct in stating that Bakhtin was concerned with the use of language and how it conveys multiple orientations and interpretations which, Schuster argues, function in favour of the theory of the reader as playing the primary role in making meaning (Schuster 1985: 602). The particular detail of the language's lack of description of the narrative's linear progression forces the reader to interpret both what is written and what is not. Precise beginnings do not exist. They have disappeared into the spaces between the words, thus creating a sense of disorientation. Owing to this particular technique, the reader, like O'Brien, joins a war which was being fought long before he arrived there. The reader is forced into gleaning their own understanding from what is given in the text, which is no different to the experience of the soldiers who were forced to reach their own conclusions using the meagre details allotted to them. The effect of this on the reader, I believe, is to replicate the disorientation, havoc and perhaps even the fear that the soldiers were forced to endure. Ironically it is the best way to offer a clearer and better understanding of the peculiar momentum of war. War has no beginning, no end, and simply continues under its own momentum, engineering the same obstacles and harassment for those who carry out the fighting. Soldiers are tossed into the experience and forced to survive as best as they can. Both sides were being shaped by the war's action, rather than the converse.

Even birth and death, which can be viewed as the ultimate beginning and end, are eclipsed by the larger, overpowering presence of a conflict. Paul Berlin learns from Sarkin Aung Wan how, minutes after she was born, her father was stood against the hospital wall and executed. Despite the occurrence of both birth and death, 'the war continues' (O'Brien 1975: 49), swallowing up any start or finish, one obscured by the presence of the other. In his poem 'An Irish Airman Foresees His Death' W.B. Yeats concludes

I balanced all, brought all to mind  
The years to come seemed waste of breath,  
A waste of breath the years behind  
In balance with this life, this death (Albright 1994: 184-5).

Yeats captures the underlying effect of war: to reduce its participants to nothing by removing what they once had possessed and what they might yet want. Any hope the soldiers held as regards the future was thus lost so that their own imaginings only served to exacerbate their situation. Long after the war Kien is able to recognise that it was a lie, with 'no new life, no new era, nor is it hope for a beautiful future that now drives me on, but rather the opposite. The hope is contained in the beautiful prewar past' (Bao 1996: 47). In war, all experiences are obscure and bizarre and in the end become irrelevant because war will always be so much greater than the sum of its participants. Such consequential issues as '[t]he past and the future' are 'juxtaposed and dismissed' (Albright 1994: 556), allowing war greater scope in which to cause damage.

Getting through and then getting out of the war may have mattered the most to the soldiers: however, in reality this goal conscripted them into staying. Kien admits that the war 'had been their whole world' (Bao 1996: 107). Quan left for the front at eighteen, without a trade and just enough education: all that the war has taught him to

do is fight; he can do nothing else. Even when the war is over there is no certainty about what he should or even can do next. At the war's end Thai asks of Quan: 'What happens afterward?' and Quan replies 'How do I know? We're all in the same herd of sheep' (Duong 1995: 28). On the contrary O'Brien's platoon leader, Mad Mark, knows exactly what he will do when his war is finished; he 'once said that after the war and in the absence of other U.S. wars he might try the mercenary's life in Africa' (O'Brien 1969: 85). However, despite their differing perspectives neither Mad Mark nor Quan has another *modus operandi*. War is the only thing they know and understand.

Not all soldiers were moulded to be warriors, yet because they were cast into the war they could not survive without it. In her short story 'Perquisites' Susan O'Neill has one character, Scully, 're-up'. Re-upping was trading in a year's tour for three years, often to avoid combat duty in the bush, but Scully offers very different reasons for his choice: 'I'm a clerk. What'm I gonna do back in the World? Be somebody's receptionist ... [here] I get *respect*' (O'Neill 2004: 81). Scully re-ups because his time spent in the war has accorded him something the World cannot give him. The absurd circumstances of his surroundings, his suspension from the real time of the World, have created a Scully that can never exist anywhere else. He re-ups because of the one thing all the soldiers fear the most: no longer having a place in the World. To save themselves the difficulty of reverting from War to World they choose to stay. As Oscar profoundly observes in *Going After Cacciato*, '[t]he world don' stop' (O'Brien 1975: 142). After the war the soldiers will be faced with the choice of adjusting to the World that they no longer recognise, or adjusting their lives to accommodate the change War has wrought in them. Since they can never leave the war the alternative,

to stay, is in fact no real decision at all. In *Fields of Fire* Bagger is continually threatening to quit the war, to which Cannonball's blunt retort is '[y]ou ain' got the balls. Ah doan' either' (Webb 1978: 327). His meaning is obvious; if they remain in the bush the possibility that they will die is great; however, if they quit and leave, their destination is another type of death. War has given Scully the only thing he craves or cares about and consequently he chooses to stay. Men like Scully and Mad Mark and Cannonball realise long before their contemporaries that there is no going home. The World has passed them by; like Quan and Thai they can never go back.

Beatrice Heuser comments that the 'Vietnamese Communists had truly vital stakes in the conflict, and they had time on their side' (Heuser 2007: 157), meaning that although they faced the stronger, richer, greater power of the Americans, they enjoyed the luxury of being able to fight forever. They were not going away because they had nowhere to retreat to. However, with the infinity of time at their disposal, they too became lost inside it. The Vietnamese soldiers can therefore be described as 'lifers'<sup>2</sup>. After Cannonball shoots an enemy soldier the squad congregate around the corpse. Inside his pack they find a letter written to the equivalent of his congressman in the North. The interpreter translates: 'he fight French, then he fight South for four years now, he want to go home. He say, he been in Army since 1949' (Webb 1978: 355). The squad are both confounded and amazed that this man has been in the army for so long. Bagger refers to him as a lifer, but Snake simply shrugs and points out, '[t]hey are *all* lifers' (Webb 1978: 356). Whether he is specifically referring to the North Vietnamese is unclear because, regrettably, without many being aware of it, as explained previously the Americans were 'lifers' too. Before the final battle in the

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<sup>2</sup> The term 'lifer' is used by the Americans to describe a soldier who makes a career out of the army. Among the soldiers themselves it is used in a derogatory way (Webb 1978: 413).

novel, the one that will claim his life, Snake extends his tour of duty. 'Extend? Hell yeah. I'll extend until this goddamn thing is over' (Webb 1978: 333). All that he has is 'here. None there' (Webb 1978: 333). In the short space of months Snake, like the dead NVA soldier, has become a lifer. Neither he, his comrades, nor the enemy, will ever be free of the war.

Although the period the American soldiers spent in Vietnam was supposed to be temporary it did not take long for it to seem like a cruel delusion. Remembering her year at the 24<sup>th</sup> Evacuation Hospital in Long Binh in 1970-1, Stephanie Genthon revealed that '[t]he hardest part of the year was the middle of it ... I had been here so long that I couldn't remember not being there. I had so long to go, I couldn't imagine getting to leave' (Powell 2003: 118). Their lives became the war, imprisoned in its present with 'one thought only of war and fighting, fighting and war' (Bao 1996: 14). They were under no illusion that they would escape unscathed and remain whole. Kien remembers how the soldiers sang to the awful background cacophony of the Kanton carnage,

Oh, this war without end,  
War without end.  
Tomorrow or today,  
Today or tomorrow,  
Tell me my fate,  
When will I die (Bao 1996: 15).

The days bear no markings or specifications; each bleeds into the next so that neither day nor year makes any difference; the only change would occur if death came and ended existence. 'Time was Vietnam ... Time was everything. Time kept them there, and time would let them leave' (Webb 1978: 213). The paradox is cruel and clear: they have no lives, no meaningful existence other than to march on towards death, waiting for it wherever and whenever it may come.

In *Novel Without a Name* Quan comes across a wooden gate with the words 'Special Unit M.035' printed on it. The gate itself, like all items exposed to the ravages of time, 'had begun to rot and the wood split like long cracks' (Duong 1995: 170). Similarly, the soldiers flung out into the war and left there to fight have begun to rot. They all evidence the weathering of age and the toll of war's burden. The intensity of war and the time spent in it, as previously discussed, hardens and changes them, not only their character but physically too. Quan calls out to someone he presumes to be an old man: however, he is simply well-disguised by the depredation of war. When he reveals to Quan that 'I'll be twenty-four next month' (Duong 1995: 172), it is possible to recognise how the war robbed them and other young men robbed of their youth and crippled them by disease brought on by the hostilities.

From the previous paragraph in particular I conclude that war is a thief; a non-discriminating thief, stealing time from every person who fights in one. This image is evident where Kien laments what has been lost to him, 'my lost years, months and days! My lost era. My lost generation' (Bao 1996: 45). Kien's cries offer proof of the brutal method by which time is wrenched from the war's participants. The apparent advancement of time that is attributed to the progress of the sun across the sky enjoys no further credibility in the war zone when the soldiers suffer this alternative force. They become mired down in the variations of time, '[m]onths and years had passed. Months and years of wallowing in mud and carnage' (Duong 1995: 86); watching the best of themselves and their friends simply seep away with no means of stemming the loss. The war stole indiscriminately, from the Vietnamese and the Americans; it confiscated youth and strength and left nothing but empty, aged husks.

Closure is important for the human psyche and spirit in order to hasten the process of healing and getting on with the business of living; as Mark Klempner explains '[c]losure is signalled by a sense of completion, the feeling that one does not *have* to dwell on the distressing event of the past' (Klempner 2000: 70). For hundreds of thousands of Vietnam veterans that possibility of closure is dim at best. Events of the past often force these ex-soldiers to continue living with them. John Modell and Timothy Haggerty note that 'wars may end, but they continue to reverberate in the lives of those who fought them and within the soldiers' societies' (Modell and Haggerty 1991: 205-6). Hayslip reveals, at the end of her memoirs, that for the veterans, 'the war has not ended' (Hayslip 2003: 218). Their time has been tampered with so that past and present must simultaneously co-exist as one, which ultimately denies them their future.

In this respect a phenomenon that was neither new nor surprising emerged in the years following the end of the Vietnam War. Many of those veterans who returned home developed what is known as Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). This is defined by Leslie Roberts as 'the development of a set of symptoms in the aftermath of a psychologically distressing event – an event outside the range of human experience' (Roberts 1988: 241). The symptoms are usually manifested psychologically, including nightmares, flashbacks, withdrawal from the world and insomnia; however, additional studies have also found that PTSD may lead to physical deterioration including alcoholism, back pain, chest pain and digestive problems (Solomon and Mikulincer 1987: 131). The study by Solomon et al. introduces additional symptoms of PTSD, 'including hyperalertness, sleep disturbance, survivor guilt or guilt feelings about

behaviour during the war' (Solomon et al. 1987: 134), among others. PTSD is just one condition that prevents closure. The symptoms it displays afford the veteran little chance of leaving the war behind.

Furthermore, the character Senator in Webb's novel makes a good case study, not only for PTSD but also for Combat Stress Reaction (CSR). 'CSR refers to psychological breakdown on the battlefield, which is expressed in cognitive, affective and behavioural symptoms. Its definition is first and foremost functional: the soldier ceases to function as a combatant or his functioning is severely impaired' (Benyamini and Solomon 2005: 1267). Senator, Smitty, Speedy and Burgie are caught in the crossfire during a battle. When Smitty and Speedy die, Senator experiences the two extremes of time joining together in an impossible state, and he becomes 'frozen in panic' (Webb 1978: 146). The rush of adrenaline from the battle creates this terror inside of him. Yet, concurrently, time has stopped as he succumbs to the inertia of dread. In his 'frozen panic' he denies his sensory perceptions while watching Burgie bleed to death, an image that will continue to haunt him. As previously discussed, O'Brien repressed his present in order to try and obtain some means of moving through it with a greater sense of ease and speed. He could no more do so than Senator can emotionally and morally survive Burgie's death. Senator undergoes a violent case of CSR: unable to react because of the terror of the battle around him as well as the horror of both the sudden and excruciatingly slow deaths of his brothers-in-arms. Following this incident he suffers further inertia in responding to situations, which ultimately costs New Mac his life and leaves Senator haunted by and forever trapped in this war.

The experiences of the Vietnam War scarred both sides and although a generation has passed since the war ended, 'for some, the war rages on' (Norman 1982: 1696). In a study conducted on Israeli soldiers 20 years after they served their combat duty in the First Lebanon War, it was noted that almost three quarters of the participants did not develop PTSD; nonetheless there are still 'those who carry the mental and physical scars of an acute traumatic event that happened 20 years ago' (Binyamini et al. 2005: 1275). Donald Smith of the 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne Division claims that 'the only sounds that really freak me out now, even after this amount of time, are bangs' (Santoli 2006: 69). A few weeks after Michael Herr returned from Vietnam he recalls that, 'I woke up one night and knew that my living room was full of dead Marines' (Herr 1991: 244). The unequivocal truth is that like the rains, war will always return to the veterans. By paralleling Dan's images of the returning rains and the veterans' dead nightmares the discourse describes any respite from war as being of a temporary nature only. The rains will always return, as will the war; like malaria it can never be cured, only contained.

The American psyche was arguably no more damaged than the Vietnamese one, as evidenced in *The Sorrow of War*. Kien returns to the jungle, after the war, to try and recover the remains of MIAs. There in the Jungle of the Screaming Souls he is closer to his war than ever as his past surfaces and mingles effortlessly with his present. Although it 'has been so long ago ... it was still vividly clear in his mind' (Bao 1996: 33): the fusion of his present and his past is one of the deceptive tricks that time plays on the survivors of war. The team's truck driver is obliged to shake him awake one night, asking 'Kien, Kien, what the hell makes you cry so loud?' (Bao 1996: 45). There are no boundaries to the fourth dimension. Kien lives with the guilt of surviving

when most of his battalion had not; he survived intact while Hoa did not, whereas Phuong was broken into pieces by her rape. The lack of closure that the Vietnam veterans feel, I believe, only adds to the confusion of their war which lacked true beginnings and endings. Modell et al. mention the 'extent to which the lives of the PTSD sufferers reflected ... disorder' (Modell et al. 1991: 213): that disorder is very clearly mirrored in the chaotic narrative and timelines of the literature.

Time unfolds in a strange sequence and even the reader is unsure of its passage; of what is reality and what is not. According to Jinim Park, the war 'produced a postmodern space where images precede realities and where causes are distorted by effects' (Park 2007: 177). Park's reference to the term postmodern stresses the fact that the Vietnam War is regarded as a postmodern conflict. Miriam Cooke, perhaps simplistically but nevertheless usefully, equates postcolonialism with postmodernism. She writes that the 'dissolution of colonial enterprises ... has produced conditions in which wars are waged, experienced, and expressed in radically new ways' (Cooke 1996: 70-1). For Lucas Carpenter the characteristics of the postmodern show how 'the Vietnam War was ... a chaotic quagmire with no clear boundaries and no easily identifiable enemy, powerfully representative of the ambivalence and uncertainty' (Carpenter 2003: 35). The prose and poetry emerging from the war unfold in the same manner as the action of the war, with immense confusion and powerful innuendos as to loss and/or lack of direction. I believe that Jones's notion of a *Bildungsroman* is useful particularly when taken within the context of Cooke's interpretation of the postmodern. Each defining era of war literature allows the reader a broader scope within which to define their understanding and make better use of what I referred to in chapter 1 as the 'proactive prerogative'.

Early literature of the First World War, particularly from the American perspective, 'is imbued with the mystique of violence which vicariously exalts death in battle onto a self-evident virtue' or what is termed as 'concepts of redemption and sacrifice' (Walsh 1982: 12, 10). As the war dragged out into long months and then years of stalemate, coupled with the meaningless slaughter and atrocious conditions of trench warfare, the literature then 'presented the horrors of poison gas; long periods of anxious waiting; the pains of hunger, exhaustion, and cold; killing and mutilation' (Li 1997: 77), eventually allowing for the inclusion, albeit conservatively, of an appreciation and empathy for the opposing side in British literature (Korte et al. 2009: 63). The organic growth of this literature, resulting from the changing circumstances of different eras as previously discussed and the attitudes that arise from these alterations, suggests that it became more than a tool for representation: it became experienced and expressed in new ways. Along with each new set of hostilities the literature recorded the shift in expression. The conditions of the Second World War allowed for its poetry to make use of 'a pattern of imagery dramatising the encroachment of technological warfare in which the machine, the creator of illusory aesthetic spectacle and the dispenser of death, expropriates many of the powers and functions traditionally attributed to God' (Walsh 1982: 153). Events including the Third Reich's 'Final Solution' and the dropping of the atomic bomb<sup>3</sup> rendered a world godless: made so by the men who waged war. There no longer exists the

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<sup>3</sup> The term 'Final Solution' was coined in 1938 by Franz Stuckart, then Undersecretary of the Reich's Ministry of the Interior (Grossman 1955: 56). It was a systematic programme to rid Europe of all Jewry through forced labour, starvation and, ultimately, organised murder.

On 6 and 8 August 1945 the U.S. dropped atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki respectively. The argument was that this would end the war sooner and save countless American and Japanese lives (Morton 1957: 334). These actions may have brought about unconditional Japanese surrender yet paved the way for a nuclear arms race and a world where 'Mutual Assured Destruction' currently exists.

illusion that war is moral. It is a series of events creating tangible chaos and death. 'Religious wars, just war, wars of succession, civil wars, total wars, and now postmodern wars. We name and categorise wars so as to give ourselves the illusion that we understand, and therefore that we can put order into the suspension of order' (Cooke 1996: 82). War allows for an evolving corpus of war literature that will continue to change as the nature of warfare continues to threaten humanity's progress.

There are no distinguishing or differentiating features in war, which, I argue, extends to incorporate the facets of time itself. Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari propose that in the postmodern the 'world has lost its pivot; the subject can no longer even dichotomize, but accedes to a higher unity, of ambivalence or overdetermination' (Deleuze and Guattari 2004: 380). Time has thus lost its definitive features and consequently the sporadic movement between the characters' pasts, distant pasts and their present, creates a concurrent event without spatial constraints. This is presented by means of the lack of linear structure in the literature. Even the veterans' futures lie firmly rooted in their pasts. Although it may be perceived that Kien and Quan and Cacciato have departed from the war, the different variations of time make this impossible to confirm. The psychological desire for stasis following a rush of adrenaline is never achieved. The structure of the novel, sallying back and forth between past and present, keeps the levels of adrenaline high and constitutes the strongest of indicators that the soldiers are, and indefinitely will be, fighting the war.

Andrew Rutherford recognises that 'the extensive use of flashbacks in ... [war novels] is a means of illustrating the war novelist's pre-occupation, psychological and ethical, with ways in which men's characters are affected by the war' (Rutherford 1982: 202).

The fragmenting narrative conveys the spasmodic and strange arrangement of time, both during the war and after. The staccato movement between flashbacks and present day is akin to the gunfire that punctuated the veterans' wars. This technique is also useful, as has been observed regarding Michael Herr's *Dispatches*, because the 'disjointed narrative frustrates [the reader's] desire for orderly sequence' (Oldham 1986: 56) as well as heightening the awareness of the soldiers with respect to the war and their surroundings. Years later the novelists, to a greater or lesser degree of success, place the reader in precisely the same disjointed and disturbing nightmare in which they found themselves. The mental prison in which they are trapped acts as the starting point for interpretation by the reader. The writers are able to do this because the power of the narratives transcends the gap between their subjective reality and the interpretive view of their readers. As Ian Maclean comments, it is the language and style of particular authors that reveal what he refers to as their 'mental universe', giving insight into the distinctiveness of their consciousness and indicating that this 'uniqueness ... the consciousness of the subject (the author) thus recovered is not biographical or even psychological, but is a unique pattern or character which can be experienced through empathy' (Maclean 1986: 129). It is from the text that the reader is able to reconstruct the hellish situations that are described; the selfsame text that, according to Joanne Golden and John Guthrie, 'functions as a blueprint or set of instructions for the reader' (Golden and Guthrie 1986: 411) so that his or her awareness of the subject is heightened. The '[m]eaning of the text 'lies at the intersection between text and reader' (Golden et al. 1986: 412), and as I have shown in this chapter, if the blueprint of the text is clear enough it will transport the reader right into the textual historicity of the narratives. Terry Eagleton suggests that when reasoning about literature, '[k]nowing, doubting, convincing and the like make sense

only against a taken-for-granted background of propositions' (Eagleton 2001: 25-6): thus the reader's response could not be shaped as such without some external context. As I have previously argued<sup>4</sup>, a complete knowledge of history is unnecessary. Greenblatt concurs in his argument that if the meaning of literature is fixed, 'if it would stand still or allow its history to be adequately written, it would not so successfully serve its social function' (Greenblatt 1997: 469). The social function of literature rests not in what it is trying to say but rather in what the reader interprets as having been said. I previously argued that each side was shaped less by its own activity than by the war's action. Similarly it is justifiable to argue that the passivity of the narrative sparks the action of the reader's understanding. Response in this way transcends time since the text can be read and re-read: each time it opens the possibility of again experiencing emotion connected with the narrative of war.

In *The Sorrow of War* Kien remembers a young boy named Can, whom he finds one rainy day sitting at the edge of a stream, fishing. When he asks him if he has caught anything Can responds, '[n]o. Just killing time' (Bao 1996: 19), while further on in the exchange Can admits to Kien that he is thinking of deserting the squad. Win or lose, he tells Kien, '[s]ooner or later, that means nothing to me. My life is fading fast' (Bao 1996: 22). Can's time is being wasted in the war; he has already lost most of his life to it and, perhaps knowing that he does not have much of a life left, he chooses to flee his regiment and go home. Can is adamant that the war is killing him, that it is stealing his days from him and, because it has already robbed him of the best of his life, he chooses to take the risk of reclaiming what little time he has left. He is fishing not for sport but to pass the time; killing time in the same way that time is killing him.

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<sup>4</sup> My overall view leans towards history being essential for the understanding of any text; this is particularly so for the narratives of this dissertation which are focused so completely upon one particular historical occurrence.

The paradox is that both the soldiers and time are trapped in the war but while each is trying to squeeze and crush the other the war is effectively managing to do both to them. The period the veterans served in Vietnam, whether at Khe Sanh, Ia Drang, the Ashau Valley or dozens of other places, will remain with them. They will carry the baggage of their past with them into the future. Although everyone has left, they will still always be there. 'Until those most injured by the war in both countries can put their pain aside, the war will go on and on' (Hayslip 2003: 270).

Kien thinks to himself that the soldiers 'who had died and those who had lived on shared a common fate in the war' (Bao 1996: 108). Their shared fate can be traced through their experiences of time and of how war affected their state of awareness regarding the relative nature of all things. As this chapter has demonstrated, the motion and momentum of time are so completely altered by the state of war that neither differences in ideology nor in perspective spared the soldiers from the effects of their experience in war. They had all given their time fighting: most of the veterans (those who survived physically) were left to face a darker battle for their emotional and psychological well-being. The bleak parameters of time left them with 'nothing to hope for, no dreams for the daylight' (O'Brien 1969: 18). The following chapter will deal in more detail with the darkness that the soldiers experienced as they came to terms with varying tensions and fissures created by the horrifying conditions of war.

### Chapter 3 – Conflict

All those who remember the war  
They won't forget what they've seen  
Destruction of men in their prime

Paul Hardcastle '19'<sup>1</sup>

Martha Gellhorn argues that war is 'a malignant disease, an idiocy, a prison, and the pain it causes is beyond telling or imagining' (Gellhorn 1988: 2). In the previous chapter I discussed the psychological distress to which some soldiers succumb: the unforgiving pain that locks them inside their past. Having dwelled in part upon the diagnosis, I now propose to look at the cause which created this hellish world. Gellhorn is correct in her recognition that war is stupid; the history of humankind is filled with grievous harm and suffering as a direct result of a cabinet, tyrant or members of the nobility deciding to go to war. Refugees, famine, a depleted and wrecked countryside represent just a few of the destructive results of war. If the pain caused by these subsidiary effects is boundless, then how severe is the crushing force for those who find themselves at the epicentre of such a devastating quake? The disease of unease that is created by war impacts on soldiers in ways that belie any rational understanding. I will show how the soldiers who fought in the Vietnam War were obliged to forsake their humanity in order to destroy life and in turn be destroyed. The devastation that occurred during the Vietnam War transcended the burning of villages, the defoliating of the jungle, and the cutting down of life by bullets, mines, torture or gangrene. As certainly as the soldiers lit the matches, sprayed the chemicals and released the clips in automatic rifles that spread the havoc, so too were these same destroyers plunged into an alien world: one in which their

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<sup>1</sup> This single was released in 1985, from his eponymous album of that same year. The song is a commentary about America's involvement in the Vietnam War.

souls and their selves were taken apart until nothing was left but the caricatures of who they had been supposed to be. In this chapter I will discuss how the lack of interest and understanding on the part of the respective governments and military commands involved in the conflict created a terrible beast that should never have lived. Such an insatiable monster, I argue, was the result of the undoing of self through negligence, lack of responsibility and sheer stupidity. Like a disease it ravaged the forces on both sides and plunged them into a metaphorical darkness. Friedrich Nietzsche observed of war that ‘it is the winter or hibernation time of culture’ (Nietzsche 1986: 163). More than simply a suspension of intellectual achievement, I will argue that it was a time of regression, where men become monsters, and that in the jungles of Vietnam all soldiers were the same: frightened, sick, angry boys.

The country of Vietnam had the misfortune to become the stage of an epic Cold War struggle. In 1954, the signing of the Geneva Agreement divided Vietnam into two zones, with the intention of reunification after the 1956 elections. ‘Accepting the 17<sup>th</sup> parallel as the *temporary* dividing line between North and South was an acceptable compromise at the time, because Hanoi was confident that reunification would follow in two years, in part because they [the U.S. Government] believed the Chinese and Soviets would guarantee it’ (McNamara et al 1999: 383). However, these elections never occurred. While initially ‘announcing its support for the Accords, Washington secretly planned to sabotage them amid reports that elections would sweep the Communist revolutionary hero, Ho Chi Minh, to a landslide victory’ (Cuddy 2003: 354). The Americans therefore did not sign this agreement, in the hope that they could supply enough support in order to prevent any possibility of reunification. Their

intention was to keep South Vietnam as a sturdy bulwark from which the wave of Asian Communism could be repelled. The temporary division was, therefore, actually aimed at becoming permanent. The 17<sup>th</sup> parallel thus became symbolic of a demarcated boundary, one that determined where ideology and loyalty lay. The view in 1954 was that the ‘West had now “lost” Vietnam north of the 17<sup>th</sup> parallel, via the Geneva Agreement, just as the U.S. had “lost” the mainland of China when Mao’s [Communist] forces triumphed in 1949’ over Chiang Kai-shek (McNamara et al 1999: 103). As such the Western powers were determined to retain a foothold for their policies in Southeast Asia, ‘to hold [it] outside the Communist sphere’ (Gallucci 1975: 20); hence by 1955 the first American military advisors began arriving in Vietnam in order to maintain a situation in the South that would be favourable to their interests. In response, or perhaps it had been largely their initial intention, in January 1959 the North Vietnamese altered the status of the struggle from a political to an armed one (Rottman 2007: 6). Starting with this armed struggle I begin to trace the fissures created by war. In his review of Renny Christopher’s book, Mark Bradley notes that Bao’s *The Sorrow of War* and Duong’s *Novel Without a Name*, among others, ‘concentrate on the disillusioning experience of the North Vietnamese soldiers during and after the American war in a manner that closely resembles the attitudes of protagonists in Vietnam fiction by American veteran authors’ (Bradley 1998: 905). I intend to use this chapter to show where that disillusionment began and how the two sets of soldiers suffered through the same trials resulting from a war situation.

The North Vietnamese soldiers were sent off to war having been raised on a political diet of Marxism. Karl Marx was ‘the god who reigned in our grade-school textbooks, who bolstered our daily morale, inspired our solemn view’ (Duong 1995: 29).

Instilled with an unshakeable belief in the policies and politics that drove them to war, the North Vietnamese soldiers were caught in the fickle, mesmerising trap of theory. Marx envisioned a classless society where needs were met without any hindrance to abilities. In his manifesto he discussed the inevitability of the workers' revolution detailed in the theory, derived from Hegel, of thesis/antithesis/synthesis. Capitalism, the thesis, creates the working class, which constitutes the antithesis; out of the conflict of the two emerges a synthesis, the culmination of the socialist worldview (McLellan 1986). As rewarding and fair as any theory may sound it is nonetheless often near impossible to put into practice. Problems such as who oversees the transformation from a society of classes to a classless one; or how democracy can thrive if the system operates in favour of some and not others, steadily undermine the overall integrity of such an idea. An instance of this was evident during the 1950s in the U.S. where certain Southern States defined specific qualifications for voter registration in an attempt to keep black voters off the voter's roll. Alabama introduced 'literacy and good character tests, among others, Mississippi enacted a double literacy and understanding test, and Louisiana implemented an organized effort to purge black voters from voter rolls on the basis of technical registration infractions' (Quinlivan 1989: 2370). Redefining the conditions for participation in a democracy is a blatant misuse of the system. At the other end of the political spectrum is the example of the police state that emerged in the Soviet Union under Stalin's regime. His series of Five-Year Plans which were intended to oversee economic development would lead to a system that 'was not the better and freer world of the dreamers, but a Caliban state' (Lewin 1976: 139). Both these incidents illustrate how greed and the pursuit of self-preservation, particularly at the expense of others, are common traits of human nature; and since society is run by humans rather than impassive and objective

machines, theories often falter and crumble when put into practice. As surely as the North Vietnamese and Americans may have fought for their respective ideologies, it is for these reasons that each side was failed by them.

Duong narrates an episode in *Novel Without a Name* where Quan is lost in the jungle. Near death from starvation, he eventually stumbles upon a bunker shared by a small girl and her grandfather. There he is nursed back to health. During his final night he looks up toward the roof beams and ‘in a furrow I spotted a nest of fleas. Sated, they slept soundly. The war was paradise for them. They lived well, always satisfied. We offered them unlimited blood’ (Duong 1995: 69). The fleas were not the only parasites living well during the war. In the ranks of the Party the officials likewise lived well, always satisfied by the unlimited blood that was being spilled on the battlefields. I firmly believe that the Vietnamese sought to float their position and principles on a sea of miserable inequality. This is further illustrated when Quan travels on a train to Thanh Hoa and two men embark, both of whom are ‘fat ... [with] just a small travel case, probably for food’ (Duong 1995: 158); moreover they take the seats belonging to two soldiers. These soldiers, like the rest of the travellers, are tired and hungry, yet it is they who are forced to give way to these two officials. This highlights the sacrifice of the needy for the comfort of the privileged. By their physical description alone we can assume that the last-mentioned have more than enough to eat, unlike the soldiers and civilians who are always famished. The inequalities of the purportedly equal system are starkly contrasted with the situation surrounding Quan who himself has recently refused ‘a piece of dry, stale bread’ (Duong 1995: 155) from an old man who considers this meagre find as luck. On that

train Quan identifies the hypocrisy and vast inequalities brought about by the Party who, like the fleas in the roof beams, are literally feeding on the blood of the nation.

The American government, whose behaviour was perhaps not as barefaced as that of the Vietnamese officials, held its own agenda in the highest regard. Its official position ‘was that North Vietnam intended to enslave the people of South Vietnam and that mass executions and torture of political opponents would follow the defeat of South Vietnam’ (Shay 2003: 104). Gareth Porter claims that the ‘citing [of] public statements and official national security documents on the threat to Southeast Asia [was] evidence of the thought processes and even motivations that are presumed to have driven U.S. policy’ (Porter 2008: 68). Despite this rhetoric no clarity was made available to the soldiers whom the government sent to fight. Prior to his enlistment Tim O’Brien attempts to understand the political response to the situation in Vietnam and even ‘tried going to Democratic party meetings. [He had] read it was the liberal party. But it was futile ... could not make out the difference between the people there and the people down the street boosting Nixon and Cabot Lodge’ (O’Brien 1969: 23). Neither political party offered a differing perspective on what is happening in Vietnam. Both uttered the same strain of rhetoric, allowing for the conclusion that perhaps there was really no difference in the two political positions and that the united front of any opposition was located in the streets and on the campuses rather than on Capitol Hill. O’Brien is presented with a murky political view with no solution on offer: ‘the facts were clouded ... and the specifics of the conflict were hidden away – partly in men’s minds, partly in the archives of government, and partly buried in irretrievable history’ (O’Brien 1969: 26). The only thing that was clear was the determination to continue the war, a trait these two parties shared with their enemy

counterpart, to the detriment of those who were directly involved with, or affected by, the fighting.

Both the Vietnamese and American soldiers bore witness to the inadequate concerns of their leadership towards their respective citizens. Instead of concentrating on the participants of the war, the authorities determined their own issues to be more pressing. In *Novel Without a Name* the village is visited by the secretary of the communal Party section. Mr. Buu's impression of this man extends to include all the party officials when he exclaims, '[n]ever have the little despots conducted themselves so shamelessly ... [they] are all ignoramuses who never even learned the most basic morals. They study their Marxism-Leninism, and then come and pillage our vegetable gardens and rice fields with Marx's blessing' (Duong 1995: 133). The smokescreen of war and ideology behind which the Party hides is thus removed, exposing the true, self-serving, interests it pursues. The war promoted a notion of a false ideal; such an ideology continued to ruin Vietnamese society long after the war was over. Dana Sachs, an American who lived and worked in Hanoi in the early 1990s, recounts in her book *The House on Dream Street* the confidence of a neighbour claiming that Ho 'ruined the country. Look at the poverty here. Our people don't have enough to eat. What kind of rubbish is communism?' (Sachs 2003: 172). Sachs learns that Ho Chi Minh was not the supposedly venerated leader with universal appeal. This fact will be discussed further in chapter 4, but in terms of the conflict this Vietnamese woman's anger at Ho is finally revealed to be her anger and frustration at the system under which she lives. This system not only exploited the Vietnamese during the war, but also continues with its exploitation thereafter.

A more muted form of exploitation existed within the fighting ranks of the Americans. In *If I Die in a Combat Zone* Captain Smith, a useless, inexperienced man without either leadership skills or authority, marches his troops into a disastrous ambush. Astonishingly, in the aftermath, his assessment of the situation is that it is his 'first big operation, and I get a Purple Heart. Gonna be a long year, Timmy. But wow, I've lost a lot of men today' (O'Brien 1969: 155). Smith's primary thought is for his own accolade, a Purple Heart. By his own admission it is nothing more than a scratch, yet his pride at this accomplishment reduces everything else to secondary importance. The shame remains that although it is really no true achievement at all it is still placed above the tragedy of lost lives. Captain Smith epitomises the attitude of the American command.

Hodges also learns that commanders hold their own, different set of priorities. The military command demands that he, and other soldiers like him, go out into the bush and search for and destroy the Viet Cong, NVA, their sympathisers and supporters. For carrying out these orders Hodges and his men are treated as little more than expendable goods, 'a floating islet waiting to be killed just because Those Bastards think we should be killed so they can have more bodies on their tote boards' (Webb 1978: 162). During a night battle his squad calls for artillery back-up. 'The plane arrived. It was a Basketball<sup>2</sup>. Figures, thought Snake ironically. Just what we need with Baby Cakes out there' (Webb 1978: 55). In a cruel twist that Snake recognises as ironic, the Basketball is more a hindrance than a help since both sides are as exposed to their enemy and are each turned into easy targets. The soldiers' requirements, which ought to have been of utmost importance in the campaign of winning the war,

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<sup>2</sup> A 'basketball' is an illumination-dropping aircraft mission, capable of lighting approximately a square mile of terrain (Webb 1978: 411).

were instead lost on a military command that lacked any understanding of the intricacies of fighting a jungle war. Lives were wasted for the cause of furthering policy and the soldiers suffered, since they saw and experienced first-hand how their respective military commands deceived them, used them, and at the same time destroyed them. While Sachs is in Vietnam she learns about the life, society and customs of a people whom she had been taught were enemies. She views the war as ‘Americans too eager to define a civil war in terms of superpower politics; Vietnamese leaders too intent on consolidating their power’ (Sachs 2003: 151). This situation caused each side to exhibit a dichotomy bearing a strain of resentment between those who gave the orders and those who had to carry them out. The rift between the command and the soldiers was remarkably wide. For each side the war was played out in two realms: on two different battlefields. On one hand the executives displayed no understanding of what they were doing except for their own gain; while on the other the soldiers faced the cold knowledge that they were cannon fodder.

Michael Herr describes in *Dispatches* how there were two versions of The Soldier’s Prayer, ‘[s]tandard, printed on a plastic-coated card by the Defense Department, and Standard Revised, impossible to convey because it got translated outside of language into chaos – screams, begging, promises, threats, sobs, repetitions of holy names until their throats were cracked and dry, until some men had bitten through their collar points and rifle-straps and even their dog-tag chains’ (Herr 1996: 58). I consider this to be indicative of the two worlds that existed in Vietnam: one world was presented by the military command, sealed off like some laminated text that could not be properly touched and could be wiped clean in the event that it became dirty. In direct

contrast was the chaos of the other world: the reality, the world of raw pain and emotion that the military command refused to recognise. In the latter world nothing was easily erased; there was no plastic protection from harm. In that madness God had suddenly become godless. The ritual of religion was transformed into its own ritual: one of chaos. The cosmos ceased to be itself in the jungle and consequently the incoherence and absurdity of the standard revised version was formulated in the mouths of the inmates<sup>3</sup> who were fighting the war. Park notes that '[i]rony, absurdity and confusion of identity, which constitute postmodern assets, are terms that may define the common characteristics of the narratives of the Vietnam War' (Park 2007: 106). The standard revised edition of the prayer was heard in the mouths of not only the Americans but the Vietnamese too, as they hacked their way through the chaos and confusion that was thrust upon them not by the enemy but by their own side. This constitutes the pitiful emergence of the dissolution of boundaries of what it is to be human. The self was undone so that it came to resemble its complete opposite. The blandness of the standard issue prayer mirrored the blandness and apathy of the military commanders; their disregard for what was happening with and to the troops. Herein was situated the fertile breeding ground of psychological damage.

Tensions not only divided the military command and the soldiers but also the soldiers themselves. Within the ranks of the American forces there was a discord that was certainly not exclusive to the Vietnam War: the ongoing struggle between black and white. After Hodges takes over leadership of the squad Flaky refers to someone as a 'splib' and by way of explanation Flaky confides, 'Splib. You know, sir. A neee-gro' (Webb 1978: 72). Flaky's intonation reflects a personal lack of respect for black

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<sup>3</sup> I use the term 'inmates' deliberately since for the soldiers Vietnam was not unlike a prison or an asylum.

soldiers; his language and attitude may also have reflected those of other white soldiers which conveyed an underlying innuendo of the long-standing intolerance towards black servicemen. This attitude serves to reinforce the latter's feelings of alienation and discrimination. Jeff Loeb refers to this as 'the frequent white criticism, dating back to the Revolution [1776], that black soldiers are not equal to the task of war' (Loeb 1997: 107). In keeping with the tendency of the command to ignore important details it also conveyed a bias towards the black soldier and paradoxically calls on him to fight a war at a time when blacks are denied certain civil rights in their own states. The questions raised include the following: 'if the war in Vietnam was for freedom and democracy, as U.S. policy makers claimed, why were those blessings still denied to Americans at home?' (Appy 2003: 142); and how could they possibly feel themselves either equal or willing partners when they were still victims of racial discrimination by their government, their command and, worst of all, their comrades with whom they shared the burden of war?

It is inevitable therefore that there should develop a sense of separation described by O'Brien who relates how the black soldiers 'group together and laugh and say shit to the system' (O'Brien 1969: 171), but also what James E. Westheider calls a 'black subculture' which 'became a vehicle for venting their hatred and frustration with white society' (Westheider, 1997: 95). During battles when the most urgent necessity was that of survival the soldiers grouped together as a single unit. Almost 'all combat units were racially integrated and mostly color-blind in combat, but when they came to the rear, social cohesion fell to pieces' (Shay 2003: 60). Once the Vietnamese enemy had retreated this black subculture exploded out of its temporary confinement. In *Fields of Fire* Webb consolidates this racial discord into The Black Shack, with its

slogans of 'No Chuck Dudes Allowed: This Means You' and 'Kill the Beast. Death to all Chuck Pigs' (Webb 1978: 194). Evident is the violent hostility of the black soldiers towards their commanding officers and their fellow white soldiers. 'The Black Shack was the place to come and rap about the horrors of racism and prejudice' (Webb 1978: 194) which is ironic since the black soldiers are promoting their own brand of racism, or 'reverse racism' (Westheider 1997: 97). The black soldiers display anger at being denied the same opportunities for jobs in the rear and having to fight another 'brown man' for the sake of a country that barely allowed them their own rights. Homicide tells Cannonball, 'Been bleedin' Whitey's war. Killin' brown folks, ain' no reason. Been dyin' fo the Beast' (Webb 1978: 196). The Vietnam War staged the setting for the long-standing racial tensions to spill over.

Not always did an element as blatant as race cause friction. In *Going After Cacciato* Paul Berlin recalls how Jim Pederson is caught in friendly fire, yet the gunners seem not to care that they have cut down one of their own. Pederson reacts in an unthinkable way: instead of screaming for help or crawling away he simply moves 'slowly, lazily, he raised his rifle ... He squeezed off a single shot ... He fired again and again' (O'Brien 1975: 118). He turns his fire on his own side, just as they have shot him, evidencing what I regard as proof that 'the enemy' had nothing to do with the Viet Cong. Like the black soldiers who said 'to hell with the system' Pederson's return fire is a transparent demonstration of his own lack of concern. It proves that he no longer cares for the system of command which has placed him in a situation where his comrades clearly show no concern for his own well being. I believe that this conclusively shows how the American soldiers discovered their enemy from within their ranks and fought him with equal, if not greater, ferocity.

John Gates notes that ‘the war in Vietnam was never a war of northerners against southerners’ (Gates 1990: 333). I disagree since the post-independence struggle was aimed at the reunification of the North and South, which is a clear indication of civil war. Engagement in civil war connotes murky boundaries between the two opposing sides and it becomes impossible to identify a clear divide. Therefore, despite American involvement, or perhaps because of it, the war in Vietnam was as much a war of Vietnamese against themselves. As such it was difficult to construct a working visual image of the enemy. Duong, herself a soldier during the war, recalls ‘the first time I saw prisoners of war, in 1969. I saw they had black hair and yellow skin like me. They were Vietnamese, like me. I thought it wasn’t what we were told, just a war against Americans’ (Kamm 1996: 149). The battle that had been so clearly defined in their minds as one against a foreign imperialist power became less certain. Truong Nhu Tang regards the North and South as ‘two enemy brothers’ (Truong 1986: 96). In *When Heaven and Earth Changed Places* Hayslip describes how during the war she and her friends are recruited into helping the Viet Cong forces. For her efforts she is imprisoned on more than one occasion. The first time this happens her interrogator asks if the Viet Cong ever come to her village, and when she responds in the affirmative he asks ‘[a]nd what do they look like?’. Her answer is simple, honest and chilling: ‘They look like you’ (Hayslip 2003: 52). Both Northern and Southern soldiers neither looked nor acted differently. The Viet Cong employ bullying, force and torture against the very people they have sworn to liberate, in order to justify their struggle. The immediate environment created by the Viet Cong, ‘benevolent benefactors or savage terrorists’ (Rottman 2006: 13), impacted directly upon the villagers for whom the law of South Vietnam was too far removed to be influential.

The villagers became products of a rampaging Viet Cong that was both submissive and aggressive in 'promising respect for your homes and the shrines of your ancestors and execut[ing] only those who are traitors to our cause' (Hayslip 2003: 47). The Southern army was no different and certainly no better: 'ARVN soldiers did the same [tortured and killed prisoners] when their American advisors weren't around' (Fitzgerald 2002: 371). Both sides used the villagers for their own ends, and justified their brutality in the name of the cause.

The North Vietnamese and the southern insurgents, the Viet Cong, were both battling against the Americans and the South Vietnamese Army, which further splintered the struggle. The lack of harmony already examined with regard to the American troops similarly existed within the Vietnamese troops as 'North Vietnam had no intention of allowing the NLF to play any part in a unified Vietnam. The NLF and the PLA were merely tools of the northerners' (Rottman 2007: 6). Truong, himself a member of the Viet Cong, wrote of how they had begun to find themselves 'ever more obviously dominated by the party and by the Northern government' (Truong 1986: 131). Just as American policy had no intention of allowing elections to be held in 1956, the North had no intention of affording its Southern allies either status or recognition. This was made apparent by the treatment of the Viet Cong during the victory parade. Truong writes that it was 'as if they [Party staff cadres] believed that they were the conquerors and we were the vanquished' (Truong 1986: 266). Despite the fact that they had fought on the same side history, society and politics keep them divided, and thereby created friction.

In George Orwell's *Animal Farm* the final scene describes how the barnyard animals are looking into the house and are unable to tell the difference between the pigs and the men. They 'looked from pig to man, and from man to pig, and from pig to man again; but already it was impossible to say which was which' (Orwell 1996: 55). According to Ricardo Quintana, Orwell's *Animal Farm* (together with *1984*, which I will briefly mention in chapter 4) is a satiric work (Quintana 1961: 31). The simple method of correlating the pigs and the men clearly exposes those types who thrive on, and profit from, warmongering. There is an obvious connection to the shared traits of the manipulating powers that reinforces Orwell's imagery. As Hayslip so innocently pointed out, both Northern and Southern soldiers are impossible to distinguish since they are the same in looks, and, as I have shown, behaviour. Despite being enemies they are as close to one another as the pigs and the men of Orwell's story although 'they are still essentially enemies and share only a greed for power' (Latemendia 1992: 133). Hayslip has recognised that the Viet Cong and the ARVN hate each other because they share a desire to be in control. Their exact behaviour and their exact features are mirrored in their identical thirst for domination. The conflict no longer concerned respect or concern for ancestral rights but rather the will to want to win. And it was this grim will to win that created the damage, which was distributed equally to and spread evenly over both sides. If greed and necessity can transcend the divisions of ideology then an imaginary line on the ground is going to be easily trampled over until its meaning and symbolism disappear. The satire of using Orwell's pigs can also be set against the parallel drawn earlier with the nest of fleas that Quan sees. More than debasing the powers or using blurred boundaries to lessen the differences or highlight the similarities, the use of Orwell's satire exposes the tragic, unfair situation of war.

At this juncture it is necessary to question why the war was allowed to gain the momentum that it did. The answer, I believe, is to be found in the spirit of nationalism, responsibility and belief that the soldiers accumulated, and which began with an idea, a myth. In American literature 'the young men sent to fight are shown again and again to have had their impressions of war, bravery, masculinity, nationality and self-identity shaped by the fantasies of the culture industry, by the celluloid heroism of John Wayne, Errol Flynn, Audie Murphy, and so on' (Nielson 1998: 215). The movies they watched as boys depicted the victorious armies in the Pacific and Europe during the Second World War: 'Nazis were always bad, every Nazi was bad, every bad guy had a foreign accent. The Japanese were the people who were always torturing people' (Gwaltney, 1995: 695) This notion of living in the past was discussed in chapter 2. Yet it was this concept which further fuelled the GIs' own ideas of swagger and bravado upon reaching Vietnam. It is precisely the myth of the past that nurtured another myth of a determined American hero fighting an evil that needed to be stopped. With the past resting heavily on the Americans' shoulders, the Vietnam War became their chance to prove themselves as their grandfathers and fathers had done before them; '[i]f the fathers had their Nazis and "Nips", then Kennedy would see to it that the sons had an enemy too' (Faludi 1999:25). The yardstick by which they were forced to measure themselves was a past in which their fathers had fought a war for the apparent simplicity of good overcoming evil. Not only were the soldiers who went to war victims of the culture that created this myth; they, like their Vietnamese counterparts, had also taken on too heavy a burden.

The Americans were taught that the Second World War had '[n]othing to do with cause or reason: the war was right ... and it had to be fought' (O'Brien 1969: 21). 'If John Wayne wasn't God then he was at least a prophet' (Webb 1978: 169), when he taught a generation of boys about taking responsibility, being a man and not being pushed around; it 'was all there on the screen. Standing up and fighting back' (Webb 1978: 34). Hollywood shied away from making movies about Vietnam during the war years because of the vast amount of television coverage. Nevertheless 'John Wayne's "The Green Berets" was released in 1968 as a corrective, it was hoped, to the TV coverage that was turning the country against the war' (*The Economist* 30 August 2008: 74). It was nonetheless too late because by the time the John Wayne persona had been discharged from the Second World War and had enlisted in Vietnam the atmosphere had changed and the past had been forgotten. The mounting failure of the Americans to declare victory in Vietnam had only served to create more disillusionment, '*The Green Berets* is nothing if not a lecture on the failings of representation and the necessity of "seeing for oneself"' (Berg 1986: 110). So great was this antagonism towards the John Wayne myth that when the actor died in 1979, Larry Heinemann observes, 'the larger-than-life Hollywood character, the very beans of testosterone-poisoned, cartoon-macho movie bullshit, was dead; finally, and thank God' (Heinemann 2005a: 9).

I believe that Heinemann's response touches on a raw nerve. There was the darker, untouched side to the John Wayne heroes: the truth that sometimes soldiers returned home in a coffin; the truth that war is an evil that creates a beast inside the hero, a creature which does appalling things both to the enemy and its own comrades in order to survive. In the end John Wayne was little more than a delusion in which lay hidden

the inadequacies of the American military machine. Years after the war is over Kien watches an American war movie and sees none of the glorious rhetoric of old; instead he notices only the ‘thirst for killing, the cruelty, the animal psychology, the evil desperation’ (Bao 1996: 47). Bao does not state which movie Kien watches, whether it stars John Wayne or John Rambo, but what it depicts is the single reality of war: that it can be nothing but savage.

Paul Berlin went to war because ‘he believed in the law, and because LBJ and others had a rightful claim to their offices. He went to war because it was expected. Because not to go was to risk, censure, and to bring embarrassment on his father and his town ... Because he loved his country and, more than that, because he trusted it’ (O’Brien 1975: 235). Such is the notion of a reciprocal agreement or ‘social contract’. The concept of a social contract first emerged in the writings of Thomas Hobbes, a British philosopher, who introduced ‘the notion of a voluntary association of individuals who agreed that one or more of their numbers should represent the common will’ (Savur 1975: 33). Hobbes’s concept of state is far different from the democratic principles applied by society in the late 20<sup>th</sup> and early 21<sup>st</sup> centuries, but he was writing within a completely different framework of social order. Later it would be John Locke who would be able to better re-define the concept of a social contract since the political and socio-economic spheres had altered and could allow for this refinement. So far has the notion of civil obligation progressed that ‘in recent times the institution of elections involving most adults, and at regular intervals, has given rise to the argument that anyone who takes part in a (genuine) election has consented to the authority of the government’ (Watt 1981: 709), thereby accepting government rule. Because there has been consent that the government has been legally and fairly

chosen for office a situation may arise in which the ‘obligation of the citizen towards the state’ is demanded (Scruton 1983: 359). Logic therefore determines that if the government advocates war then the citizens are obligated to adhere to those terms.

This sentiment is echoed by Scott Higgins, a Supply Officer at Bien Hoa, who admits ‘[i]f I was called I was going to go. I suppose it comes from a certain kind of patriotism many people had back then’ (Santoli 2006: 76). The same can be noted of Ta Quang Think, a doctor’s aide from North Vietnam, who declares that there was little option for the North Vietnamese. ‘Of course we had to fight to protect our country but we were really sick of war’ (Appy 2003: 21). The wrong of war was overridden by the conscientiousness of fulfilling an obligation. In order to live in freedom it was necessary to fight for it. Hayslip’s father understands the price of freedom – it is a difficult bargain but it has to be kept. He remarks that freedom ‘is never a gift By Ly. It must be won again and again’ (Hayslip 2003: 30). National pride and patriotism summoned both sides to war, despite its horrors, and also called them to continue fighting.

While some contend that no war is worth dying for ‘others argued that no war is worth losing your country for’ (O’Brien 1969: 29). Neither Kien nor Quan want to fight, while the Northern soldier whom Cannonball shoots has also had enough. One of the sorrows of war is that it is crowded with people with no wish to fight but who do so out of a sense of moral obligation and accountability towards their respective countries and their families, as well as being driven by their sense of duty. As O’Brien states in *If I Die in a Combat Zone*: ‘I did not want to be a soldier, not even an observer to war. But neither did I want to upset a peculiar balance between an order I

knew, the people I knew and my own private world' (O'Brien 1969: 31). The feeling of what he must do is extremely strong; that the underlying motives are right even though the actual act of going to war is wrong. O'Brien contemplates deserting; however, even though the 'AWOL bag is ready to go ... I wasn't' (O'Brien 1969: 73). In *Fields of Fire* and *The Sorrow of War* there are similar conflicts of resolve. Senator could have avoided the draft but he does not. Kien could have deserted and not followed the train but instead he chooses to do so. The ideal of being a man, of standing up and doing the duty asked of him, the essence of the John Wayne myth if you will, makes the decision for them. The soldiers fulfilled this duty in order to retain their own sense of morality and dignity.

Despite Kien's strong sense of responsibility, among his comrades in *The Sorrow of War* desertion 'was rife throughout the regiment at that time, as though soldiers were being vomited out, emptying the insides of whole platoons' (Bao 1996: 23). Such was the horror created by war and the desperate need to be removed from it that sometimes there was no honour to salvage. During the First World War 'about 500 French soldiers were shot for desertion or cowardice' ('The War Over Pity' 16 June 2008), while Martin Gilbert notes that 'more than sixty soldiers were executed for desertion or cowardice during the Battle of the Somme' (Gilbert 2006: 248-9). The notion of desertion is a stigma highlighting the lack of bravery and honour of the soldier. Yet the military tribunals refused to acknowledge the miserable conditions and mental fatigue suffered by the soldiers. Fighting 'in the trenches was so horrible that soldiers devised creative ways to escape them' ('The War Over Pity' 16 June 2008), with desertion being one of the most common. In light of the heavy sense of moral obligation the issue of desertion is a difficult one because the choice it offers is

unfair when one considers that the deserter is not alone in his situation. Since it has been made clear that the objectives of the command and the goal of the soldiers not only differed but clashed it seems logical for the latter to do everything in their power to stay alive. Kien tells Can that ‘you’ve no right to escape ... you can’t. You’ll be brought back. Court-martialled. Shot’ (Bao 1996: 21). Not only is it a waste of life, but it is also unfair. After Cacciato deserts Oscar claims ‘we got certain responsibilities to consider’ (O’Brien 1975: 32); and pursuing Cacciato means taking responsibility of another sort. Contrary to the view that following Cacciato means desertion the fact remains that he must be brought back because no one should be allowed to desert; it just is not fair. If one soldier leaves then it becomes easier for the next. No one has the power to decide for himself when he has had enough. When Lieutenant Corson announces that ‘Third Squad goes after Cacciato’ (O’Brien 1975: 6) it is a dramatic choice in taking responsibility despite the consequences.

An unexpected perspective of this war novel is the lack of overt confrontation between the two sides. According to Dana Healy *The Sorrow of War* ‘is one of the most moving accounts of war ever written in Vietnamese. It is a rare picture of war (as well as the post-war period) in Vietnam literature where all glorification of war is stripped away’ (Healy 2000: 48). Together with Duong’s *Novel Without a Name* and O’Brien’s *Going After Cacciato* there is very little engagement with the conventional enemy. The reader is invited to reflect on the ravages of war caused by the most unexpected of enemies. The authors infuse a subtle innuendo regarding the characteristics of fighting a war so as to highlight the notion of what an enemy can be. Bao presents the troops as a ragged lot who, all the while they are fighting, remain hungry, frightened and alone. Their existence reduces them to something less than

human; lacking food and 'suffering successive bouts of malaria, the troops became anaemic and their bodies broke out in ulcers, showing through worn and torn clothing. They looked like lepers, not heroic forward scouts. Their faces looked moss-grown, hatched and sorrowful, without hope. It was a stinking life' (Bao 1996: 16). Here is a portrait of the soldiers' life sans the fighting. There are new and different enemies to be kept at bay; those included hunger, fear and disease. 'Bao Ninh goes beyond the tactics and campaigns; he is concerned with the people' (Healy 2000: 48); by fleshing out the characteristics of the said people the authors are able to focus on the often overlooked tragedies of war. In *Novel Without a Name* Quan settles down for a meal of 'rice, more green papayas sautéed in wild chillies and shrimp sauce. Nothing for dessert. No more sweet potato' (Duong 1995: 93). The war has removed everything sweet and enjoyable. There is nothing to complement life as dessert complements a meal. The void is filled only by war and tragedy and hunger.

Regardless of the soldiers' intentions and strong sense of responsibility as discussed earlier, these unbearable conditions of war and the continuity of the situation brought out an unparalleled anger and hatred, which made the participants willing accomplices to inflicting more damage, thereby exposing them to the possibility of becoming that which they were not. The enemy was a silent brute lurking inside of them. Rifle Platoon Leader James Bombard confesses that 'I think we lost a lot more in Vietnam than the troops we lost' (Santoli 2006: 95). Hayslip writes that 'I found revenge ... tasted sweeter than I expected' (Hayslip 2003: 39) while for Quan the issue was the indoctrination of glory: '[a]nything was good for killing, as long as it brought us glory. We pulled the trigger, we shot, we hacked away, intoxicated by hatred; we demanded equality with our hatred' (Duong 1995: 72). As Stanley Hoffman points

out, clichés ‘such as the one about how our enemy “understands only force” may tell us a great deal about ourselves’ (Hoffman 1986: 9). Fighting the war was less about gain than it was to do with loss as exposure to its damaging atmosphere caused the soldiers to lose a quintessential part of their selves to the need for more bloodshed.

All of the narratives focus on the heartache and suffering that is induced by the all-consuming power of war. During a visit to see Bien, imprisoned for supposedly being mad, Quan finds that his friend has degenerated into something filthy, depraved, ‘expressionless ... emaciated ravaged’ (Duong 1995: 88). He is a mere shadow of who he once had been, a stranger altered by the passage of time. Because Bien’s madness is simply staged in order to keep him away from the front it speaks volumes about war and what it does to young men. The perversity of war becomes apparent when it begins to convey a sense of normality. In 1966 The Rolling Stones released ‘Paint It Black’. The song manages to capture that singular matrix born out of war. It ‘is about darkness and death, and has a quick exciting beat’ (Cox 1990: 405). As Jinim Park put it, the boredom of walking and waiting meant that ‘the rare chance to fight provided them with excitement rather than fear in spite of the danger the fight might incur’ (Park 2007: 109). Despite any misgivings about committing atrocities the action was a welcome release. The horror and terror experienced by the soldiers was encompassed by a simultaneous rush of adrenaline and the thirst for more of the same. Like the rains and the seasons, war similarly became a natural way of life; overexposure to the war dulled the combatants’ senses and hardened their consciences. Caught between the bad and the worse, the only way for them to survive was to embrace the ugly as it promoted distance, remoteness and, ironically, sanity. This can be best appreciated in the lines,

I see the girls walk by dressed in their summer clothes,  
I have to turn my head until my darkness goes.

Michael Herr recalls a little girl with a 'face like a child dakini'<sup>4</sup>, so beautiful that people who needed to keep their edge blunt could hardly look at her' (Herr 1991: 36) Nothing about war can accommodate beauty and in this darkness the only means of survival is brutality; hence beauty must be reviled.

By dehumanising the enemy the soldiers attempted to make their own situation, which was dire and disgusting, seem better. The term 'gook' was used by the Americans with 'the psychological function of image-replacement; through its use a human being becomes liquid slime' (Lifton 1973: 200-1). It was partly the jungle conditions, partly the elusive enemy, as discussed in chapter 1, that created a vacuum which was filled by madness. 'The loss of the ability to empathize or care deeply about other people is a theme in all novels by Vietnam veterans' (Tal 1990: 76). The American troops did not reserve their condescension for the troops alone. In *Going After Cacciato* Stink Harris called the Vietnamese language 'Dinkese ... monkey chatter, bird talk' (O'Brien 1975: 232), and his view of the Vietnamese people is no less demeaning: 'Dinks from Dinksville' (O'Brien 1975: 56). Often the American soldiers saw the Vietnamese as simply 'dinks', 'slopes', 'Charlie', 'gooks'; they were not human (Santoli 2006:41). This was not always the case, as noted in John Irving's *A Prayer for Owen Meany*, where the eponymous protagonist sees his destiny in the Vietnam war as being not to kill but to save. In his diary 'there were several pages of Vietnamese vocabulary and expressions' (Irving 1989: 557): proof that understanding

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<sup>4</sup> The term 'dakini' refers to an energetic being in Buddhism that takes a female form: 'she is every human woman encountered'. The dakini is essential to the attainment of enlightenment. Herr's use of the term may be in keeping with the general 1960s Western interpretation of a dakini which was 'the notion that the dakini ... represents all that man is lacking for and which he yearns' (Simmer-Brown 2001: 14, 13). In the midst of the atrocities of war the dakini would have been heartbreakingly beautiful.

an enemy went further, in the direction of retaining a hold on the insanity occurring in war. Holding onto their humanity was, however, a difficult battle for the soldiers to fight. Often the conditions of the prevailing atmosphere were more difficult to resist so that it was easier to simply succumb. In *When Heaven and Earth Changed Places* we read Hayslip's capitulation to this method of thinking. She becomes so attuned to the American way of thinking that she even considers herself in terms of 'this little "gook" girl' (Hayslip 2003: 261). What she has done is confirm what the Americans expect of, and see, in Vietnamese women. 'Hayslip is lowered into a world of exploitation ... of Vietnamese women by the American military establishment' (Christopher 1995: 73).

The conditioning of war bore witness to a deeply disturbing inhumanity that rose to the surface, something the soldiers could not fully control and which only worsened as time passed. As Hodges and his squad face the realities of being figuratively abandoned in the bush he recognises that the '[b]astards sit somewhere with air conditioners around them and Coca Cola inside them while we drink this goddamn wormy water. We're closer to being gooks than we are to being them yet we are wanting to kill gooks because of this anger that eats inside my guts' (Webb 1978: 162). Hodges's revelation that he feels closer to being the enemy brings the two sides into closer proximity than ever, reinforcing Hoffman's earlier argument. If the bush has reduced Hodges to defining himself in terms of the enemy I believe that this substantiates the point that the soldiers were not enemies at all. The very factors that divided them dissipated in the reality of war. The anger Hodges displays originates from the ordeal he is experiencing. He is caught in an abnormal, unfair situation with death hanging over him and stinking up the air to the extent that he succumbs to the

powerful desire to act on his anger and take out his frustration on the enemy. Both Bao and O'Brien 'refuse to glorify their cause or vilify the enemy. If anything, the inverse is true: both narrators seem to question their reasons for killing and both humanize their enemy' (Coltrane 2002: 31) and therefore I believe it is possible to argue that the internal friction emerged from hating the place, both internally and externally, where they found themselves.

As I have already discussed, the downward spiral from humanity into savagery in conditions of war was neither a long journey, nor one that was particularly difficult. The trauma and loss sustained by each side created an instinctive barbarism in order to help gain control. This behaviour was not confined to the conventional battlefields. Susan O'Neill writes in a short story titled 'What Dreams May Come' about the anesthesiologist who is so sick of the carnage and loss of life that he takes his own form of revenge by keeping the Viet Cong brought in for treatment conscious during the entire operation: Jewett 'couldn't kill the gook, no. But he could make damned well sure the little fucker knew where he was, and who was who in this man's war' (O'Neill 2004: 237). Despite their overriding oath to first do no harm the doctors were angry and helpless and fighting their own losing battle owing to the wasted lives they could not save. And as regards the lives they could save, the knowledge of what they were saving them for was worse. 'On both sides during the American War, nurses and doctors faced the hard fact that war was fought by the young' (Turner 1998: 137); these soldiers sacrificed their youth to the horrific fate of war. Even if they survived or had their lives saved in field hospitals they still lost themselves to nightmares and a crippled existence.

Snake takes a look at the confusion and comments, ‘I think we’ve all gone *dinky dau*<sup>5</sup>’ (Webb 1978: 3). I argue that this is indeed accurate. The soldiers were completely and utterly destroyed by the war. Piece by piece the war altered them both physically and emotionally until they lost the essence of their selves. The war erased any opportunity for moral victory as it demanded the very souls of those who were to undertake the fighting. As Vietnamese poet Nguyen Duy wrote ‘in every war, whoever won, the people always lost’ in the end (Appy 2003: 257). Exploitation by their own command and the lack of respect accorded to those who fought were pervasive among both sides. The soldiers and the civilians suffered war’s unease: when it was over they had become empty husks, spent from the effort, with nothing to show as if participating in the war had been something unreal. In the concluding chapter I will discuss how the unreal occupied the war, and the deadly effect of these ghosts on the spirit of a generation of soldiers.

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<sup>5</sup> From the Vietnamese expression *dien cai dau* which translates as ‘to be crazy’ or literally ‘off the wall’ (Webb 1978: 412).

## Chapter 4 – Ghosts

Your eyes have died but you see more than I

Elton John ‘Daniel’<sup>1</sup>

While the previous chapter dealt with the tangible obstacles that altered the soldiers, this chapter will cover a category that cannot be attributed to the physical. It will discuss the illusory concepts of ghosts that are either particular to the individual, or those which transcend the singular and become established within the collective. The hypothesis of a ghost is most commonly attributed to a product of the psyche. The psyche is itself a manifestation of an abstract idea. It can neither be held nor beheld, yet it is no less real or unreal<sup>2</sup> than any other abstract notion such as optimism or belief. And I am of the opinion that like these abstractions the psyche is an integral element of both self and identity. Therefore the psyche touches both the worlds of the real and the unreal. Prominent Swiss psychiatrist Carl Jung wrote that ‘the psyche and its contents are nothing but our own arbitrary invention or the more or less illusory product of assumption and judgment’ (Jung 1938: 4). In chapter one I concluded that the soldiers created their own landscape in which they become lost. In this chapter I will identify another landscape in which they managed to lose themselves.

War creates the conditions which favour the emergence of these ghosts. Since the real world of the war consumes the soldiers’ whole selves it is inevitable that this world will eventually touch on the element inside of them that is their psyche. And it is here in the psyche, shaped by the atrocities witnessed, and in many cases committed, that

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<sup>1</sup> This song was released as a single on 26 March 1973, appearing on the album ‘Don’t Shoot Me I’m Only the Piano Player’. Lyricist Bernie Taupin was inspired by the events of the Vietnam War.

<sup>2</sup> Both the terms ‘real’ and ‘unreal’ are subjective and abstract; however each is important to understanding this chapter. By ‘real’ I refer to that which is tangible, particularly to the sense of sight, touch and sound. ‘Unreal’ covers a larger, greyer area of innuendo, impression, perception and understanding.

the ghosts of war come to be. The soldiers build in their own subconscious a place for themselves where they are manipulated; where they punish themselves with their own torturous inventions; where these imaginings are allowed to assume a kind of existence. It can be argued that war turns the soldiers' minds on themselves, where what began as a figment of the imagination comes to transcend the barrier of rational consciousness and affects, in a very real way, the soldiers' existence. The ghosts of war are those phantoms that manipulate the living, haunting them for the remainder of their lives. Upon visiting the Somme, 89 years after that particular battle ended, historian Martin Gilbert notes that it 'still had the power both to haunt and inspire' (Gilbert 2006: xviii), and with a consideration of this power I conclude this dissertation.

Heonik Kwon writes of the ghosts of war that they inhabit a milieu of historically reflexive, morally inclusive societal practices. They are, he concludes, not the same thing as a 'collective phantom' or the 'spectre' of a past conflict (Kwon 2008: 165). What he refers to as the 'collective phantom' is clearly recorded in the spontaneous outburst of President George Bush, following the allied victory in the 1991 Gulf War. Bush told a group of state legislators, 'we've kicked the Vietnam syndrome once and for all' (*Newsweek* 11 March 1991: 21). Whether the collective weight on the American psyche was exorcised is debatable; but from this the assumption is very clear that the Vietnam War as a whole is a phantom in and of itself. This chapter is not pursuing that particular ghost. Upon close inspection of the literature of the Vietnam War it is possible to pick up a common, singular strand joining the veterans of the war, whether soldier or civilian. I argue that a subtle subtext emerges in the literature demonstrating that ghosts are not only associated with corpses; they also lie within

each of the participants of the war as an accumulation of the sorrows, tragedy and experiences of the war. Chapter 2 dealt with the concept of time and the way in which the participants of war would never be able to move forward; forever fighting the battles in their mind. Now the dogs of war have become the ghosts of war, unable to occupy a single particular space. These ghosts are large and fearsome and possibly evil; they reside nowhere but in the mind that created and carries them. How then do the products of the imagination, itself a property which is unreal, come to be this fearsome entity? The answer to that question lies in how these ghosts are created and the unhealthy unreality they populate. The ghosts exist because of the very existence of war. In chapter 3 I have already discussed the horrific effects of war. In the light of such consequences it is possible to see the extent to which the soldiers are damaged so that they allow their imaginings to take control.

This chapter will consider the ghosts of the war in terms of the illusion that existed both in the minds and the conditions of the soldiers; it will examine a fragile humanity that was damaged to such an extent that the physical shattered and the wraith within came to dominate. The chapter will also discuss the notion of ghosts of place. Historians often regard the Tonkin Gulf Incident of 1964 as the beginning of recognised American troop involvement in Vietnam. Karl Phaler, a Communications Officer aboard the U.S. Navy Destroyer *Richard S. Edwards*, recalls that they were ‘not too certain whether we were shooting at the real thing or ghosts’ (Santoli 2006: 13). In terms of the aforementioned argument they were, in effect, shooting at both.

*Fields of Fire* offers a description of Hodges’s initiation into the war. It is the opposite of any conventional orientation. Whereas he ‘expected the Major to wave the flag and

talk about Iwo Jima, then send him aboard the resupply helicopter with fire in his head' (Webb 1978: 69) he finds, instead, that Major Otto tells him the truth, describing the hell that awaits him. I believe that the Major's response stems from the source of his personal experience of the war. Major Otto's words betray all the gross negligence, the unfairness and the hypocrisy discussed in the previous chapter. The Major's ghosts emerge from the shadowy machinations of the war. Hodges will soon find himself surrounded by the very real events of war, out of which he too will create his own ghosts, which will come to haunt him as they haunt Major Otto. Like Hodges, Paul Berlin in *Going After Cacciato* is also initiated into the war in an unconventional manner. In lieu of enthusiasm and encouragement 'the corporal sat down in the sand. He turned away and gazed out to sea. He did not speak' (O'Brien 1975: 34-5). The corporal's ghosts cannot be described in the same way that Major Otto is able to do. The reality of war forces the corporal to confront insanities and contradictions, like those discussed in chapter 3, until the ghosts in his mind loom so large that they displace any rational explanations. Unlike Major Otto the corporal has no words to prepare the soldiers for what they will inevitably encounter in the war. Instead Paul Berlin is met with a very different kind of truth: silence. Once in the jungle, Hodges muses that '[t]he only real test of success anymore was how many men came back whole from each patrol' (Webb 1978: 161). If this is the case then it is possible to argue that each and every mission was a failure. Major Otto and the corporal are proof of this. After experiencing battle they are ironically broken by their own nightmarish world of things unreal: neither Hodges nor Paul Berlin would ever be intact again.

During battle the soldiers became acquainted with and then accustomed to death. O'Brien observes in *If I Die in a Combat Zone* how the dead 'are heavy and awkward to carry' (O'Brien 1969: 31). There is a double meaning in the heaviness of the corpses which connotes not only the actual bodies that are carried out of battle, but also the psychological weight of the dead. In *Dispatches* Michael Herr recalls how the men on helicopter crews admitted 'once you'd carried a dead person he would always be there, riding with you' (Herr 1991: 9). I emphasise that this is the point at which the conception of the ghosts of the war emerges for the individual. The ghosts that transcend the singular person will be discussed later in this chapter. For those soldiers who physically carried the dead, they were forced to comprehend the dual existence of their load. Perhaps only a few seconds earlier the now lifeless corpse had possessed life. Both the weight on the backs of the living and the heaviness of their memories opened the limbo which they inhabited. The burden suffered by the war veterans was to literally carry the dead on their backs, like some latter-day albatrosses (Carton 1991: 331) and they were forced to confront, and live with, the dead. James Webb describes how Baby Cakes 'carried Vitelli over his shoulder' (Webb 1978: 58); which reveals that, simultaneously, both Baby Cakes and Vitelli are dead. The former has become the still-living ghost, haunted by Vitelli's death, encumbered by the excessive weight of the latter's ghost. A paradoxical situation emerges where the soldiers were burdened by a psychological entity that weighs nothing. The heaviness created in their minds was translated into their physical burden. Paradoxically, therefore, these physically powerful men struggled under their load of weightlessness. For Baby Cakes, to carry Vitelli out of the battle is a simple task. For him to carry the memory of Vitelli out of the war is an impossible burden. The complete immersion into a hell comprising nothing but death and decay was undoubtedly enough to haunt the living,

and this, coupled with the imaginings of the soldiers, created a fertile ground for the ghosts to flourish. The collaboration of death and their imagination made it easier to allow their ghosts to take over. The living soldiers were ‘broken by combat [and] lost the capacity for a sense of well-being, self-respect, confidence and satisfaction’ (Shay 2003: 175); consequently they allowed themselves to go astray inside their unreal world: that of the dead. The mind was so damaged by the tragedy of war that it was able to exercise a supreme power that manipulated the soldiers into passively living with the ghosts, so that they carried them still, even once the war was over. The war that was being waged around the soldiers came to define them in explicit and exact terms. Although they are the subjects of the narratives, they have been dehumanised by the influence of the war. Chapter 1 noted how the identity of the soldier was determined by the war: at this juncture the perception of self can be defined in relation to the unreal. Mikhail Bakhtin suggested that a ‘word in language is half someone else’s. It becomes “one’s own” only when the speaker populates it with his own intention, his own accent, when he appropriates the word, adapting it to his own semantic and expressive intention’ (Bakhtin 2004: 677). During wartime ‘death’ belongs to the event of war as a whole, but it becomes ‘one’s own’ as it is specifically and accordingly interpreted by each individual soldier as he encounters another’s death.

Like sugar in water the soldiers dissolved into the war, and lost the essence of their selves and deliquesced into the psyche of war until there were no longer any barriers between themselves and the unreal. The boundaries of what is real and unreal are blurred as, according but not exclusive to the research of Jung, the conscious and unconscious have contents in common, which pass between each other (Jung 1938:

93). In Larry Heinemann's novel, *Paco's Story*, he narrates how Paco Sullivan's Alpha Company was obliterated in a single night's fighting, 'we were all dissolved all right, everybody but Paco' (Heinemann 2005b: 17). Paco is left in the limbo of neither dying with his company nor moving on with his life. He is forced to coexist with the ghosts of the dead, never escaping the scars of battle; either physical or emotional. After the war he displays 'a way of stiffening up and staring right through you. As if he's a ghost. Or you're the ghost' (Heinemann 2005b: 206); this makes it difficult to recognise the contours that define the veterans. As Jinim Park observes, 'Paco is endowed with the freedom of omnipresence beyond the reality principle' (Park 2007: 50). Herein lurks the difficult concept of perceiving and perception. The soldiers were in two places simultaneously. They were in the World and the War; in the present and the past. They had no definitive boundaries. Like ghosts they cut across the tangible definitions of conventional surroundings because time and space were altered. It is possible to perceive that were been left behind but as the description of Paco reveals they were in fact occupying a space, albeit of their own making, which could not be understood or recognised by those who had never experienced war as they had. As such it was possible to see right through them, to regard them as ghosts. These once powerful men were reduced to spectres and wraiths.

Haunted by the dead, and cohabiting with the dying, the soldiers released themselves to the abstraction of the psyche, the imaginings of the unreal were allowed to take over the reality of their living. In *Novel Without a Name* Quan describes how in 'the glow of the hearth, faces ravaged by dysentery appeared radiant. The green, ashen pallor of skin pinched by rheumatism and hunger somehow looked fresh, luminous' (Duong 1995: 179). This is an example of the mask of the living stretched over the

spectre inside which picks up on the theme that opens T.S. Eliot's 'Whispers of Immortality':

Webster was much possessed by death  
And saw the skull beneath the skin (Eliot, 1963: 45).

It is the unmistakable representation of the ever-present reality of death lurking beneath the reality of life. Far from being healthy, the men Quan describes are really dying since 'the sun would reveal the cruel truth' (Duong 1995: 179). The concept of ghosts is interwoven with the infinity of time, a theme covered in chapter 2. According to Claus Uhlig, Eliot's image displays 'an interdependence of present and past' (Uhlig 1985: 488) which is confirmed by the merger of life and death into one grotesque mask as it is reaffirmed that the two are in fact one. It was as if the soldiers had each been dissected into two separate organisms, one representing life and the other death. These two halves of the same subconscious were fighting for supremacy within a single being. The weaker one, life, lurked on the exterior. It was merely a guise covering the true intent of the stronger half, death. The consequence of this struggle is that the soldiers have become more ghost than human, they capitulated to the landscape of their psyche. Of Eliot's words it is written that 'images are the inadequate forms by which the intellect represents to itself the unrepresentably heterogeneous, undivided moments of life' (Childes 1991: 482), which is no less significant for this particular description offered by Quan. The war has given their minds the capacity to rule over their living selves, believing them to be some otherworldly ghostly creatures merely waiting in line to die; waiting their turn to leave the war in one of the coffins they work so hard to make. After dinner Quan is taken to sleep in one such coffin. Once inside he notices how the 'smell of wood mixed with sweat was becoming familiar to me. I no longer felt uneasy. It seemed as if I had always slept in this kind of bed' (Duong 1995: 182), a remark which I believe only

serves to reinforce the point that the soldiers are all but dead in biological terms. The smell and feel of a coffin have become as it were a familiar, comfortable shell for them so that they are more at ease with aspects of death than with those of life. As their physical form is slowly being disintegrated by the soldiers' own ghosts they have no alternative but to succumb to its domination. They are slowly being made passive by the aggressiveness of the war.

In an earlier scene in the novel when Quan becomes lost in the forest he is accompanied by the skeletal remains of a dead soldier. I believe it is obvious that two ghosts are present: one living and one dead, which leads to a fundamental understanding of the unreal. The issue is, in itself, paradoxical since nothing dead can live and nothing alive can be dead, yet the war had painfully extracted chaos out of the orderly so that all established structure was inverted. I argue that the war was so damaging it created a rift in the psyche of those involved, the impossible was allowed to exist and the unreal could appear real. As discussed in relation to Paco, and witnessed by the temporary occupants of the coffins, war drew the life and vitality out of the living. It can be asked of the veterans: who is dead and who indeed is alive? The parameters of war make it impossible for the soldiers to distinguish such an ordinary division. The living are trapped in an indeterminate state where the real and the unreal merge together as they move and walk with the dead, so that it becomes impossible not to become one with them. The Vietnam War killed too many and made ghosts of a great many more. The survivors were too preoccupied with the ghosts of the dead, the shadows of the unreal, to be anything but living phantoms themselves. The parallel between the living and the dead was so complete that one blended into

the other, with '[i]llusion and reality mixed with each other as figures merged with the dark green jungle backdrop' (Bao 1996: 98-9).

The soldiers who returned more dead of soul than living spirit can therefore be contextualised as belonging more to the ghostly world than the real one. However the soldiers' own view of their surroundings, as first-hand recipients of war's trauma, was rather different. From their perspective it was the world that had altered around them. The world as they knew it was now some ethereal representation of a life past. When Paco stares out at those who observe him it is they who are the ghosts of his life gone by; they who are calling to him through the veil of time. Like matter that is sucked into the nothingness of a black hole, the soldiers were sucked into the endless maze of the war. To the observer they had been blown to smithereens, if not physically then certainly psychologically; however to the war's participants the opposite occurred. They literally soldiered on even as death was perpetuated around them. Death was not necessarily confined to the events of war: it extends as far as the World itself. The world to which they returned was a dead ghost of the past. Not only had the soldiers been altered by their experiences but because the unreal of the imagination had replaced the real, for the veterans the world had also become a place which they no longer recognised. The uncertainty of war was replaced by the uncertainty of peace, which was neither better nor any easier to bear. In the silence of war's aftermath the damage that it had caused became more obvious. It is in this context that Phillip Robinette's quote, recorded in chapter 1, takes on a new, inverted dimension. The larger forces of the war, the ghosts which it created, were buffered by their own urgent need to survive. The factors of the soldiers' (and civilians') environment shut out the complete scope of fighting until such a time as localised needs diminished and

the larger ones could filter in, '[o]ur job now, as it had always been, was to clean up and rebuild our lives with whatever the war had left us' (Hayslip 2003: 68). Without the deafening roar of the war the ghosts that might have been lost amidst the more urgent fight for survival could now occupy the minds of the survivors more fully. Sometimes it took the opposite of war, such as the quiet of Kien's room, to allow war's consequences to become visible so that 'each man reappeared before him' (Bao 1996: 85).

Kien returns from the war dragging his excess baggage of ghosts; as discussed earlier, the ghosts are insubstantial by definition yet they constitute a massive psychological burden. In his father's old apartment he begins to write his novel, a narrative of the sorrow of war, which becomes his obsession, 'I must write! To rid myself of these devils, to put my tormented soul finally to rest instead of letting it float in a pool of shame and sorrow' (Bao 1996: 146). The weight of his ghosts is brought to bear heavily on him. Upstairs in the attic lives a mute girl who, I believe, is a wraith herself, visible only to Kien as he bears the burden of the two other ghosts of his own making: Hoa and Phuong. While Phuong may have physically survived her ordeal she is as much a ghost as the dead Hoa. To write is to finally be at peace with the ghosts of his comrades-in-arms, but, by saying nothing of either Hoa or Phuong, Kien is forced to suffocate under the presence of a vision who will speak neither to accuse him nor to ease his load. The mute girl in the attic is a reminder of his own guilt and shame over the loss of Hoa and Phuong. Bao writes that Kien 'began to hope for something like a miracle, for some strand from his past to follow into his postwar life' (Bao 1996: 226). It is my view that Kien desperately seeks some vestige from the past that he may follow; something linking that which was but is now gone, to that which

is and survives. In Greek mythology Theseus volunteers to travel to Crete in order to slay the Minotaur to whom 14 Athenian youths are sacrificed every seven years. 'Theseus kills the Minotaur by his own heroic power, and with the aid of the thread of Ariadne, finds his way out of the labyrinth with the young people' (Borgeard 1974: 16). It is quite clear that Kien is searching for a thread that may lead him through and subsequently out of the labyrinth of his war ghosts towards daylight and hope. However, unlike Theseus, Kien's Ariadne – Phuong – cannot help him because any thread she may possess has also been frayed by and mislaid in the war. There can be nothing intact to get him away from the pain of his spectral world. Therefore it is clear that he, and other veterans, face little alternative but to become ghosts themselves.

In the opening of Duong's *Novel Without a Name* Quan listens 'all night to the wind howl through the Gorge of Lost Souls. Endless moans, punctuated by sobs' (Duong 1995: 1). I do not believe that the use of the word 'gorge' is coincidental. A gorge is described in the *Shorter Oxford English Dictionary* as, 'a narrow opening between hills; a ravine especially one that gives passage to a stream' (s.v. 'gorge'). There is not enough space in all the steep, narrow valleys of Vietnam to contain all the ghosts of war. Battalions and platoons may have physically thinned out, yet they figuratively remain clogged up with the dead. A lovely pastoral scene along the Dac Po Xi river, in *The Sorrow of War*, has, by 1972, become 'a heap of ash and corpses, and one imagined the spirits of the dead flying away in such numbers they'd make a fog bank along the river' (Bao 1996: 120). The Americans lost around 58,000 servicemen, while the Vietnamese figure during American intervention has been estimated at nearly 2 million (Naidu 1985: 61). 'Gorge' could also refer to the way in which the

war greedily ate of the soldiers: when considered within the context of the sorrow of war it is also one's gorge that rises at the senselessness of war and waste.

*When Heaven and Earth Changed Places* describes how Hayslip and her mother flee to Saigon. There, alone and without connections to either family or land or their ancestors' altar, they 'were less than the wind – vagabonds with only the clothes on our backs – ghosts who, unlike real people, had no place to sleep or even a way to keep ourselves fed' (Hayslip 2003: 115). Hayslip's memoirs are constructed in such a way that past and present intertwine; keeping the ghosts and the living together. It is as if her childhood village can be mirrored in her life story where the past and present are continually meshing. This is never more evident than during the war where those two existences are starkly contrasted in life and death, 'Gradually Ky La became a village filled with such ghosts – both living and dead' (Hayslip 2003: 239). She guides the reader through her story by placing her focus on both the past and present; joining them together where they might not ordinarily fit. A simple proverb to welcome her home, 'The meat has been brought to the tiger' (Hayslip 2003: 101), becomes a menacing warning since proverbs provide 'a lexicon of symbols that express psychological awareness, and concern for, intrapsychic and interpersonal conflict' (Nguyen et al 1991: 313). Hayslip's interpersonal conflict results from the fact that her life, as with that of many other war veterans, is determined by ghosts. The living ghosts are those who are forced to adapt with no real goal but to be driven forward by the motion of war, lost in a sea of millions where anyone is just another product of the deplorable situation. Both civilians and soldiers alike occupy the hellish limbo of hostility where death is inevitable and suffering a constant. Their lives are

unfinished, destroyed by the chaos in which they are made sick and frail and anonymous.

All new recruits in the American forces were simply referred to as 'FNGs'. They were deprived of their given names and saddled with a collective nickname, 'I wondered what an FNG was. No one told me until I asked' (O'Brien 1969: 81). O'Brien and all the other 'Fucking New Guys' were just bodies that are alive for the moment but could soon be dead. In a region where there was a high possibility of death there was little time to consolidate identity. The miniscule identity that was permitted was linked to the war rather than the individual. Like the term 'gook', as discussed in chapter 3, 'FNG' reduced the identity of the soldier to a singular, unimportant unit. In a latrine Paul Berlin reads the graffiti on the walls, the '[n]ames, dates, residue' (O'Brien 1975: 39) of everyone who had been there: names which embody the fragments of self that are lost while serving in Vietnam. In the absolute muck of humanity, the waste and filth that the body must physically produce, in a place that was despised and reviled and given no thought, names collected. It was as if what was special and unique about every soldier is as worthless as the shit flushed down a toilet. Like graffiti on a wall, or abbreviations which were spoken aloud, the war reduced its participants to nothing but letters of the alphabet. Kien equates the fallen soldiers to 'merely names and remains' (Bao 1996: 25) and, as Paul Berlin notices, even the living are nothing more than names and remnants on the wall of a latrine.

Vietnam was a place where people lost their names. They 'are relinquished in the Bush' (Carton 1991: 302), so as to better serve the ghosts that they were slowly becoming. Someone like Snake is able to use this to his advantage. Back home his

actions brand him a criminal, causing him to be treated with suspicion, yet in Vietnam he can disregard the past and create a new persona, a ghost of the 'Ronnie' he once was, in order to become a hero, a leader, a man. 'Snake. He [Sergeant Austin] mimicked the word silently. Even Hodges calls him *Snake*. Like he's some kind of celebrity that can't be called by his last name or his rank' (Webb 1978: 122). In *If I Die in a Combat Zone* O'Brien recollects an incident involving his partner, 'a kid called Reno. His real name was Jim or something. He probably chose Reno as a nickname over such others as Ringo, the Sunset Kid, and Flash' (O'Brien 1969: 93). Creating a new identity that conformed to that ghost inside was a means of surviving the war. When two officers are killed 'the tragedy was somehow lessened by telling ourselves that ol' Ready Whip and Quick got themselves wasted by slopes' (O'Brien 1969: 84). The soldiers might never have escaped death, yet by using nicknames one's demise became easier to handle; this was a way to survive. This is re-definition by taking or accepting a nickname to suit one's surroundings or one's personality, as if in Vietnam they were born again as different people; ghosts of the person they once were, yet with their original selves gone. Should they die, their end, without a proper name, became easier for the survivors to accept.

Paul Berlin remains an exception. He 'was almost always called by both names, first and last together' (O'Brien 1975: 130), which is why I have used them constantly throughout this study. Unlike those characters who adopted nicknames, or had one developed for them, Paul Berlin is allowed to keep his full name because as the narrator he is, ironically, the moral compass of the novel. It is necessary that he remain complete to ensure that neither he nor the reader he is guiding become lost in the action. This is not a claim that two names made him more immune to the

wraithlike mutation of Vietnam. As a participant in the war he automatically gains access to the ghostly world of the unreal. Despite wandering the landscape of his psyche Paul Berlin never allows his imaginings to gain control and thus is able to remain whole. Paul Berlin arms himself by becoming familiarised with the landscape of war in as much as he tries to understand the ground on which he walks and the politics of manoeuvring that land him in the war. My reasoning is that O'Brien is trying to show how, although it is difficult, it is possible to be both opposed to, yet simultaneously participate in, the war; to accept responsibility and fight while despising what one does. During the time Americans fought in Vietnam the city that served as Paul Berlin's surname was divided. It had become a symbol of the Cold War struggle between two conflicting ideologies. Inherently Paul Berlin, like the city of Berlin, is a symbol of conflict within a common denominator. His reluctance towards and acceptance of the war both stem from his self. This similarity is evident in the city of Berlin; despite being one city its 'common history has been reshuffled into two separate decks, numbing memories and polarizing attitudes' (Vesilind 1982: 13). His is an internal struggle between the two ghosts of belief and morality. These are ghosts that transcend the singular and impact on the collective. 'He just didn't know if the war was right or wrong or somewhere in the murky middle. And who did? Who really *knew*?' (O'Brien 1975: 234-5). Paul Berlin acknowledges this struggle and because of this acceptance I argue that he is a more suitable candidate than most to express a complete perspective. The truth was, of course, that no one knew; in the war everything was murky; in war everything was relative yet somewhere in the war there lurked the truth, which was nonetheless illusory. The unreal manifested itself in the ghosts of war, the loss of name, while the place where the voices of the soldiers could be honoured was a latrine. No glory remains; just ghosts and gorging.

In the introduction to this chapter I mentioned the ability of ghosts to haunt and inspire. Both types of phantoms are generated within the human mind, yet while the former are personalised the latter are more generic and can influence a larger audience. The powerful entities of propaganda and myth generated illusions that either inspired or created an additional dimension of the unreal against which the soldiers struggled. Propaganda exploited feelings of insecurity in order to achieve its goal. It was also often ‘produced by some of the most influential, powerful and respected people in society’ (Silverstein 1987: 50). In his memoirs Truong recalls a meeting in Paris with Ho Chi Minh. Ho tells them, ‘I want you to call me Bac Ho [Uncle Ho]’ (Truong 1986: 13). Hayslip remembers his image as ‘Uncle Ho – Ho Chi Minh – who, we were told, awaited news of our heroism like a kindly grandfather’ (Hayslip 2003: 41). The myth of the man was infused into the Vietnamese family unit, something they held dear. The illusion of Ho’s being granted access to the personal space of each Vietnamese was a means whereby they were assured that he was looking after their interests. So devoted were they to this image that they willingly marched off to war and their deaths. George Orwell identified the potential dangers of totalitarianism following his participation in the Spanish Civil War (1936-1939). It was his view that ‘radio, press-censorship, standardized education and the secret police have altered everything. Mass-suggestion is a science of the last twenty years, and we do not yet know how successful it will be’ (Bowker 2003: 226). This Svengali-like control was later captured in his novel *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. On a poster in Winston Smith’s building was ‘one of those pictures which are so contrived that eyes follow you about when you move. Big Brother Is Watching You, the caption beneath it ran’ (Orwell 2003: 1). In Oceania where Winston lives the political intrudes

into the personal until there is no clear division between the two so that reason 'is synonymous with party orthodoxy' (Mahanta 1983: 927) and obedience is mandatory. 'The worst moment in *1984* is not the cage of rats or the slash of the rubber truncheon but the moment when Winston decides that he loves Big Brother' (Hitchens 1984: 138). This is the culmination of the perverse fears that pervade the subconscious of the characters, the author and the readers. That which is oppressive and loathsome turns to take its precedence as the thing most valued and loved. The power of persuasion and the illusion of a fourth estate is documented in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* and the power exposed in the pages of a novel emerge to be imitated in life. The power of Ho's myth is a clear indication I believe, that the Uncle has become Orwell's Big Brother. A further illusion lay firmly in the eponymous Ho Chi Minh trail, a 'network, which stretched from North Vietnam through Laos and Cambodia with branch trails running into the RVN [Republic of Vietnam]' (Rottman 2006: 16) and which harnessed the power of invincibility by not only bearing his name but also symbolising the determination of the North and their allies in the South during their struggle for unification. Clearly the unreal consisted of a kindly old uncle whose interest at heart was the unified Vietnamese people, yet one must ask how his ideal of unification could have been so bloody. The North Vietnamese continued to fight in his name and for his vision even though in 1963, 'on a visit to the Soviet embassy in Hanoi, he announced his retirement from day-to-day political affairs. After this, his role increasingly became that of an icon of the revolution' (Quinn-Judge 2008: 126). At the helm of the Vietnamese war machine was an absent leader who personified a grandfatherly figure, who was an extended member of the family, yet called on his children to kill each other.

Similarly ‘Uncle Sam’ is one of the most popular personifications of the United States (‘The Most Famous Poster’ <http://www.loc.gov>), yet he was no more real than the iconic symbol of ‘Uncle Ho’. Some months into the chase after Cacciato Paul Berlin’s squad find themselves in Teheran, summarily imprisoned and sentenced to death. Doc’s final hope is ‘for Sammy to step in on our behalf’ (O’Brien 1975: 204). As Susan Faludi observes, a particular feature of this generation was that ‘[t]he liberal establishment in ascendancy with President Kennedy had wooed them with visions of an honourable future and the sons gladly succumbed’ (Faludi 1999: 301), yet in direct contrast to this is Nigel Harris describing a chilling scene of ‘the hooded windows of the US embassy in Grosvenor Square [London]’ (Harris 1992: 2097), of a government that was in hiding from the public and most of all from those whom it called to war, to fight in its name. Uncle Sam was not assisting anyone. Instead he had allowed the soldiers to become entangled in the war. The soldiers believed in Uncle Sam, and they believed in Uncle Ho – and neither one really existed. They were simply icons used to manipulate the conscience of a generation so that its members trudged off in their millions to fight a war and to die for these non-existent beings. By 1967 Thich Nhat Hanh, a Vietnamese Buddhist monk, had realised that ‘the war has reached a state of tragic absurdity’ (Nhat 1967: 14). The warring sides may have clung on to ideas of unification and democracy but were fighting for the unreal; to put it most paradoxically, the ghosts of the shadows that dispatched them to war. Rather than being deserted by Uncle Sam, the soldiers never had him with them at all. Unfailing in their desire to be loyal to him, they plunged into his wars and were left to die. They learned the hard way that Uncle Sam was nothing more than a figment of the collective imagination. Because of this, why would he have cared that the soldiers in Vietnam are being sentenced to death? ‘[Y]our government does not know you. Or

chooses not to. In either case, I fear the same outcome' (O'Brien 1975: 204), which for the Third Squad means death by beheading, but in a wider sense, for the forces in Vietnam, meant death by ignorance, carelessness and hypocrisy.

In this respect Joseph Goebbels, Nazi Germany's Minister for Public Enlightenment and Propaganda, believed that in order for propaganda to succeed, it 'must affect the enemy's policy and action', it 'must evoke the interest of an audience and must be transmitted through an attention-getting system' (Doob 1950: 424, 426). Both the Vietnamese and Americans deployed propaganda through the effective media of radio and the written word. 'Radio Hanoi played rock and soul music, while a series of soft-voiced Oxford-accented women announcers known collectively to the troops as Hanoi Hannah competed with AFVN disk jockey Chris Noel for the hearts and minds of the American soldiers' (Fish 1989: 390). During one battle Snake notices that somewhere, 'maybe a mile away, a speaker droned. Some gook promising Australia vacations to anyone who surrendered. Something like that' (Webb 1978:57). In turn the Americans dropped Chieu Hoi<sup>3</sup> leaflets, encouraging the soldiers in both the Northern Army and Viet Cong to give themselves up and be resettled: 'The Marines dropped them from airplanes during psychological-warfare missions. They were safe-conduct passes for those who wished to surrender' (Webb 1978: 183). Whether this form of propaganda succeeded is irrelevant, but what it manages to do was create in the minds of the soldiers' ghostly illusions that became real. In this way the constructed unreal seeped into the collective and was able to manipulate it on a broad scale.

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<sup>3</sup> This is a Vietnamese term meaning 'open arms'. It was a programme instituted by the Americans whereby enemy soldiers could surrender without any penalty or repercussions. Afterwards they were often actively drafted into helping the American Marines (Webb 1978: 412).

The rules that govern war can also be construed as illusory. They may exist on paper yet to the fighting forces they may not exist as all. Instances of this are ‘the 1954 Geneva Agreement, which specifically forbade PAVN south of the 17<sup>th</sup> parallel’ (Pike 1986: 44), or the way in which the Viet Cong and NVA would often attack and then fall back to ‘wait for rescuers to expose themselves and would tie down the attack. Medics were often fired on; for this reason they ceased wearing Geneva Convention crosses and carried rifles to protect their patients and themselves’ (Rottman 2006: 14). The rules that govern war are unashamedly ignored by both sides for the simple objective of gaining an advantage or inflicting maximum damage on the enemy. By means of inverted logic the new rules are that there are no rules at all. Despite being recognised as the official guidelines to warlike behaviour they are as useless as The Mutual Military Travel Pact of 1965 (O’Brien 1975: 173), which is a figment of Doc’s imagination. Regulations do exist; however, they are ‘like smoke in my stupid head’ (O’Brien 1975: 174) simply because they cannot be contained or implemented; thus the soldiers are bound by the unreal, that which exists but at the same time does not. It is no coincidence that Cacciato’s choice of destination is Paris. I am certain that O’Brien chose Paris because there the Paris Agreement of 1973 was signed, an accord that was intended to end American intervention in the region. In Paris Paul Berlin and Sarkin Aung Wan stand in an empty room, before ‘the echo of an audience no longer present’ (O’Brien 1975: 283). The lack of participants and the term ‘echo’ both imply that what is or was signed is illusory. It was not a true agreement to bring about peace: its signing occurred ‘[a]fter 202 plenary sessions and 24 private meetings that took place over four years and nine months, the Paris agreement did not mark the end of the war but only heralded a new stage of fighting in Indochina’ (Nguyen 2008: 222).

It consisted only of a long process of delegations and committees and meetings and memos that did nothing but waste time and lives.

The presence of ghosts is established in each of the novels by the protagonist: as readers we are subjected to these phantoms through the narrative. We must experience them as we interpret them via the narrator. The challenge to readers as regards interpreting the text lies in the unreliability of the narrator, who is subjective and indeed affects the subjectivity of the reader. This bias can to some extent be overcome by considering the narration within the historical context of the war. Quoting Hayden White, Louise Montrose argues that ‘textual histories necessarily but always incompletely constitute in their narrative and rhetorical forms the “History” to which they offer access’ (Montrose 2004: 588). In accepting the socio-political context of the narrative each interpreter-reader is accorded the same basis from which to begin. According to Immanuel Kant the representation of any thing, be it an idea or a subject, ‘cannot exist in [itself], but only in us’ (Kant 2004: 131); similarly, ‘[i]n attending to dialogue, [Mikhail] Bakhtin perceived and identified the obscure boundaries between author, text, milieu, reader, tradition, and critic’ (Bagby 1982: 37). We are, by temporary proxy, the interpreters of what we are reading. However, in Bao’s *The Sorrow of War* that interpretation becomes blurred when, at the end of his novel, he ‘recognizes that inside [Kien’s] story were ideas and feelings and situations of mine’ (Bao 1996: 231).

Bao wishes to bring his reader to an awareness regarding the sorrows of war. He accomplishes this using Kien’s own wartime journey. Bao’s technique constructs a multi-layered dimension for understanding the war. On a simple level, Bao’s narrative

is an ode to the tragedy of war which employs Kien's journey through it. A similar method is used in *Going After Cacciato*, where 'O'Brien sends his protagonists on a journey which will reveal that the only thing left to the soldier is the atrocity, the remembrance and the retelling of it' (Pasternak 1998: 46). The perspective offered to the reader is that of two worlds. These are identified by Edmund Husserl as the arithmetical and natural worlds: each 'are present together but *disconnected*, apart' (Husserl 2004: 139). I have already touched upon the notion of Bao and Kien mirroring each other to form a complete being consisting of past and present; consequently one can observe this complete entity being dissected according to new criteria. Past and present may now be understood in terms of ghost and living person. Therefore, on a more complex level, Bao's narrative of Kien's story is not a simple retelling but an interweaving of Husserl's two worlds. Located right inside Bao's natural world is Kien's arithmetical one; Kien is 'a ghostly rhythm' in Bao's 'nameless song' (Bao 1996: 90). Renate Prescott notes that '[t]hose who write about the war add another layer to the narrative from yet another perspective, making the process always more complex' (Prescott 1999: 48); the acknowledgement of this parallel convinces the reader that in fact Kien the character is the ghost of Bao the writer. The complexity further compounds itself when it is extended to include the silent witnesses of these worlds: the readers. Both Kien's fictional readers and Bao's real ones are the same entity. If Kien is the known ghost of Bao's creation then we become the unknown, disassociated ghost of the narrative. Bao writes for an audience he does not know and will never meet. He has no means of controlling us as he controls his creation Kien. In order to help us arrive at the same understanding of war he must manipulate our interpretation of what we read. Once he is assured of our presence he is able to step completely into the role of narrator and we are able to

encounter at first hand the dissolution of the boundary between the real and the unreal. Jerry Mathes wrote that in war literature narrators always live even if the protagonist of the novel is killed (Mathes 2009: 43). In light of this the story will continue, and the story teller will live on no matter who reads the text. The ghost of the voice does not disappear. James Tatum poignantly describes the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington D.C. as ‘concentrat[ing] starkly on morality and nothing else. Each name is a terse summation of the main business of war, one that visitors are reminded of on sunny days when they can see their reflections imposed on the names of the dead’ (Tatum 2003: 4). The bold imagery of overlaying the living with the dead fuses the participants with the observers of war; the writers and the readers of history; all the narrators of a text. Thus it is always the living who extend the life of war literature.

In most civilizations and societies the dead are nearly always interred. Often they are buried in the ground so that the carbon matter of the corpses can decay and return to the earth, nourishing it. If the dead lie buried in the ground the landscape somehow becomes the final keeper of their souls. It is fitting, then, that while yet filled with the dead the landscape itself maintains its own identity beyond the inanimate buildings and roads. Writing about the reaction to the bombing during the Second World War, Kenneth Hewitt observes that ‘even total physical destruction has not finished their place forever’ (Hewitt 1983: 261-262). In his study, Michael Bell considers that ghosts ‘also help contribute the specificity of historical sites, of the places where we feel we belong and do not belong, of the boundaries of possession by which we assign ownership and nativeness’ (Bell 1997: 813). From this argument it is clear that places can be as ghostly and complex as any living organism. Like a shell left soulless after the war, postwar Hanoi had also become a wraith, where ‘streets revealed an

unbroken monotonous sorrow and suffering' (Bao 1996: 149). As Shivakumar puts it, '[e]ven today any visitor to North Vietnam observes [a] lot of evidence of [the] destruction and torment the place endured, either physically or among the people' (Shivakumar 1995: 1836). The same idea can be projected onto the countryside where the battles were most often fought; the landscape has become eerie, housing more than one 'ghost town that had once bustled with villagers' (Webb 1978: 198). Herein lie the ghosts of place: the people who live there accord it its character, its history and quality, but once they are gone the land, more than the ghosts of the dead, projects and magnifies all the character that it has absorbed. The land becomes a physical mark of the spirit of the people, now departed, more often than not dead; because of the war 'the ghosts of place are always *presences* and as such appear to us as spirits of temporal transcendence' (Bell 1997: 816).

After the war, in a tiny hamlet of Doi Mo Kien finds Lan, who is much changed by the sorrow and death in her life: 'I live in this shell of loneliness' (Bao 1996: 54). Kien realises that there is no thread to guide him out of his ghost-filled existence. There is nothing connecting that life and this: it is all unreal. 'Vietnam is as much a state of mind as a place or event. It is a kind of mystery which cannot be represented or even adequately named by straight or exterior history' (McInerney 1981: 191). The past is no more; what remains of it is so changed it can never be recovered. Bao has himself stated that 'America is right to search for its missing. It may be politics, in order to delay normal relations with us [the Vietnamese], but the American wives and mothers, we understand them' (Kamm 1996: 254) because the ghosts need to be put to rest, because they need to stop living and allowed their finite ends. As phantoms represent unfinished lives, the ghosts of war remain endless in both number and time.

They are always going to be there: Kien's beloved Phuong; his beloved Vietnam, will never 'be untouched, unchanged' (Bao 1996: 227).

After almost a century since the Battle of the Somme its fields now evoke a peacefulness unknown while the First World War still raged. So too in the country of Vietnam the once heated fields of battle know only peace; however, the external tranquillity does not hide the dreadful turmoil that lives on inside the veterans of this war. If the power to haunt the French countryside is still potent over 90 years later then there can be little doubt that a more recent tragedy exercises the same power with far greater intensity.

Vietnam consequently is haunted with the burden of the ghosts of the dead. In a landscape where time is prevented from moving forward and the past weighs heavy upon the present of the veterans Vietnam, like the latrine visited by Paul Berlin, can also be described as the veterans' favoured place. The old soldiers frequently return to the scenes of those battles wherein their scars originated. They relive the past to learn from it, or be healed by it, or perhaps to keep the hurt of it fresh and raw. In this chapter I have attempted to define the other, unseen landscape of war. The very nature of the unreal escapes definitive boundaries or limitations, much like the situations that cloud war. Ghosts survive in the living people governing them. Larry Heinemann describes the 'reverberations [which] still provoke body tics and shudders; long nights, still; extraordinary nightmare, vivid and precise, still; and otherwise, yet and still a *severe* unease' (Heinemann 2005a: 46). The power afforded the ghosts ensures that the living flesh of the veterans is manipulated until the haunted spirits within are released. The fragility of humanity is exposed by the war as the phantoms relentlessly

circle the veterans' minds and spirit until they are left with little to hold on to, as substance gives way to residue. Such haunting inspires these stories because the past and the ghosts need to be narrated. Like familiar surroundings the veterans return to this, their ghostly gathering place, because the power of the dead is as current and persuasive as the power of the living. Paul Berlin tried 'to imagine a proper ending' (O'Brien 1975: 21) but there is no end. Kien, Quan, Hayslip, O'Brien, Paul Berlin, Snake, Hodges and Dan will remain haunted by the ghosts of their war, carrying their burdens, a Sisyphean task forever unfinished.

## **Conclusion**

Each of the four chapters of this dissertation begins with a quote from a song. Every lyric is a reference to the war in Vietnam, but from a Western viewpoint. From each excerpt I have attempted to take the plunge into the four different themes of my study. Using each of these lyrics in the context of the literature I have selected, I have tried to interrogate the notion of two antithetical enemy armies by concentration on the similarities of their situations. It has been observed that a ‘film, novel, short story or poem about the Vietnam War provides its audience with a sense of catharsis’ (Hantke 2001: 64). The release that these works offer their authors captures a particular spirit that affects the audience. Patricia Harkin explains that ‘readings are shaped and even constrained by cultural and economic conditions. Readers make meaning, but not in conditions of their own choosing’ (Harkin 2005: 419). I could have just as easily chosen stanzas/quatrains/couplets from the Vietnamese corpus: however, my choice is deliberate since these were the songs I heard while I was growing up. They became a part of my own foundation for understanding the scope and tragedy of the Vietnam War. The notions of endurance, loss and survival to which my choice of extracts refers can be found in the canon of Vietnamese culture. Vietnamese poet Nguyen Ngoc reflects that ‘people of my generation had a lot of experience to draw on simply because we had to pass through a long period of war’ (Bowen and Nguyen 1995: 139). The songs I heard, the books I read and the movies I watched were packed with raw emotion but were distinctly lacking in Vietnamese perspective. Such was my conditioning, yet similar to my own experiences is the conditioning of the post-war Vietnamese generation. They are the generations who listened to songs with a distinct Vietnamese perspective. For people like myself, exposed to a single view of the war, this constituted a disadvantage. As Kevin Bowen so aptly points out, ‘place names we

[Americans] know are few and tend to be confined to the sites of battle – Da Nang, Quang Tri, Hue, Dak To, Dien Bien Phu – not the names of villages or provinces that conjure entire other histories, real and imagined, of their own’ (Bowen 1995: 49). Therefore it is possible to identify the themes of landscape, time, conflict and ghosting, upon which each quote touches, in the writings of those who held the other viewpoint. And to do justice to the perspective once lacking in my own education I include them here, in order to continue the theme of this dissertation: that is, finding no distinction between either side.

Tran Dong Khon’s poem ‘The Alabaster Stork’ contains an obvious reference to the planting season; however, when Fred Marchant translated the poem into English he wrote that ‘I could not help but imagine how this poem’s stork is a winged figure which serves as an imaginative comeback to the other winged figures in Khoa’s childhood village, namely the B-52s which bombed so regularly’:

When rain blackens the sky in the east,  
when rain blackens the sky in the west,  
when rain blackens the sky in the south, the north  
*I see a stork white as alabaster  
take wing and usher in the rain ...* (Marchant 2001: 12-13).

The contrast of a blackened sky and a white stork highlights the notion that the end of the fighting did not necessarily mean the end of the war. Using similar imagery T.S. Eliot created the image of the German bombers during the Blitz of the Second World War in his poem ‘Little Gidding’:

After the dark dove with the flickering tongue (Eliot 1963: 203)

Similarly Eliot’s contrasting use of a dove, symbolically and ironically a bird of peace, for a man-made tool of war draws attention to the disturbing notion of using a bird’s image for a bomber. Hence ‘the obstructive facts – that the bomber is

mechanical and metallic, vastly bigger and heavier, has fixed wings, and drops high explosives rather than liquid siftings – squash the one tiny encouragement that both aeroplanes and doves fly’ (Kendall 2006: 132). Likewise Marchant’s obvious allusion to the war crushes any belief that the war is not still a profoundly present entity within Vietnam itself. As I observed in the chapter on time, the fighting may be over but the war is still at hand. In 1990 Larry Heinemann returned to Vietnam and recalls how ‘I was told to look for the swaths of B-52 bomb craters, and sure enough as we descended through the smoky heat of the Red River Delta there were plenty’ (Heinemann 2005a: 111). Damage was inflicted upon both sides in the war. Its aftermath is one of constant reminders and struggles to remember, to forget or to continue. Surrounding both the Vietnamese and Americans are the ongoing reminiscences of the debris that the war had left behind. The enduring notion underlying the chosen literature and those related texts is that life continues, all things shall pass, and the rains and the seasons will always return. Life must be renewed, even in a scarred countryside. Following a visit to his boyhood city of Quang Tri in 1983 Vo Que composed ‘The River Flowed’ in which he laments a place and a youth lost to the war.

Old city destroyed in the war  
I ache for your every small street,  
ache as of my blood ran through those flamboyant flowers,  
part of me falling away with each lost petal  
(*Humanities* 24 April 2009).

As devastating as the war was to its participants, the writers among them were equally forthcoming in their vivid expression that allowed the literature on both sides to reveal this desolation. In 1981 the Vietnamese government continued its battle against illiteracy through the establishment of a new curriculum. In this year the technique of introducing letters and sounds to grade one Vietnamese school children was

implemented by using lively sentences and lines of poetry. These lines were taken from the fifteenth-century works of Nguyen Trai, as well as from the writings of classical nineteenth-century poets like Nguyen Du and Nguyen Khuyen (Woodside 1983: 418). Just as my understanding of the war was initially shaped by the songs of Billy Joel, Bruce Springsteen, Paul Hardcastle and Elton John, and their reflections on the war, so too was a generation of Vietnamese influenced by the writings of Nguyen and the likes of Tran and Vo. During the war years ‘the People’s Army newspaper, the *Quan Doi Nhan Dan*, routinely published poetry, stories, and literary essays along with the news’ (Heinemann 2005a: 58) thereby illustrating the strong connection of the Vietnamese to their own large canon of literature and their reinforcement of this.

My conclusion, drawn from the foregoing dissertation, concerns the very humanity concealed inside the jargon of military exercises and diplomatic circles. On the surface the war seemingly pitted the two enemy armies against each other. In reality they were not so far apart, indeed sharing the horrors of war. Nguyen Du’s ‘Summons to the Souls’ was written in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, many decades before any notion of American military intervention in Vietnam. Yet even two centuries ago the core issue of the similarities among soldiers is neither novel nor unrecognised.

There are those with proud ambitions  
Set on conquering entire countries  
What use now to recall glorious fighting days?  
How painful, now your luck has run out!

Nguyen ‘is invariably compassionate and filled with pity for these lost souls’ (Nguyen et al. 1970: 108) because of the toll war has levied upon them. There is no discrimination between enemy or ally; the ‘us’ or ‘them’ in the case of war are indistinguishable when it comes to those involved. At the edge of the urban wasteland where Snake had grown up he found a Marine recruiting station (Webb 1978: 19). It

initially pulled at him, then coaxed him in and eventually situated him on the edge of another wasteland, half a world away, where he and the rest of the American soldiers were spat out and shoved headfirst into a hostile landscape. On this stage they, and the very people they were fighting, were all caught up in the strange and tragic theatre of war. By making use of history and its socio-political contexts, together with an interpretive discourse influenced by Reader Response, focusing in particular upon the individual reader but allowing also for the inclusion of a broader general reaction, I have opened up the perspective of similarity even further. It extends these experiences beyond Vietnamese or American application towards the reader of this study, who, I would argue, as long as she or he is able to understand the context of war, may be enabled to recognise the resulting suffering objectively and unreservedly. By employing the themes of landscape, time, conflict and ghosts I have suggested how the Vietnamese and American soldiers were more than brothers-in-arms: they were one and the same. Lee Childress, a sergeant with the 206<sup>th</sup> Assault Helicopter Company in 1967-8, summed up the whole false sense of opposition in these words: 'I had the overwhelming feeling that if I could talk to these people, that they really are the same as I am, that it's not us that are doing it, it's some other system and we're just pawns in this fucking thing, throwing shit at each other' (Santoli 2006: 55): the 'enemies' were truly divided only by the 17<sup>th</sup> parallel.

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