

*Commentary by
Donald Anderson*

Vietnam and Korea: W.D. Ehrhart's Continuing Journey

Ordinary Lives: Platoon 1005 and the Vietnam War. W.D. Ehrhart. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1999. 334pp. \$29.50.

In a 1996 special issue of *WLA* focusing on the work of W.D. Ehrhart, I make, I hope, a strong case for his Vietnam War autobiographical trilogy as being among the best such accounts published. In fact I call *Vietnam-Perkasie*, the first of the trilogy, “the best single, unadorned, gut-felt telling of one American’s route into and out of America’s longest war”—a claim I believe down deep in my bones. In addition to completing his trilogy with *Busted* in 1995 (*Passing Time* was first published in the mid-80s and *Vietnam-Perkasie* in the early 80s), Ehrhart has published two other nonfiction books about his Vietnam experience: *In the Shadow of Vietnam: Essays 1977-1991* and *Going Back: An Ex-Marine Returns to Vietnam*. Both of these volumes are available from McFarland Books. The trilogy is newly available from the University of Massachusetts Press. To this impressive list, Ehrhart now adds *Ordinary Lives: Platoon 1005 and the Vietnam War*. What makes *Ordinary Lives* different from Ehrhart’s previous nonfiction publishings is that this work is not a personal memoir.

Ordinary Lives is not a book about me. It’s a book about the other seventy-nine men of Platoon 1005. And it’s a book I could not have written even ten years ago, let alone fifteen or twenty. None of these men, at least among those I’ve had the opportunity to sit down and visit with, shares my perspective on the war or the depth and breadth of my knowledge about its origins and causes and history. And for a very long time I was

so angry about the war, and so impatient with anyone who didn't see things my way, that it would not have been possible for me to sit for three or four or five hours in the same room with someone who thinks we could have won if only the politicians wouldn't have interfered, or if only we had invaded North Vietnam, or if only any of the other myriad ideas and beliefs Americans hold about the war. Yet in the course of doing these interviews, I spent a lot of time with people who didn't see things my way, and rather than arguing, as I would have done without hesitation a decade ago, I just kept my mouth shut and listened (21).

In the summer of 1966, Platoon 1005 was the platoon young Bill Ehrhart joined as a brand-new recruit at the Marine Corps Recruit Depot on Parris Island, South Carolina. For eight weeks, eighty young men trained for war. *Ordinary Lives* is one man's attempt to trace and catch up with seventy-nine Marines a generation after their war. With ingenuity and doggedness and considerable personal expense, Bill Ehrhart has done just that. Ehrhart makes the point that when he set out in search of the other men from Platoon 1005, he had no idea what he might find. He did, however, believe that each man's story was a relevant part of history.

For if history is shaped and moved by huge forces like capitalism and communism and powerful men like presidents and secretaries of state, the nameless millions who suffer the consequences of those huge forces and powerful men do in fact have names and lives and stories to tell. (26)

Ehrhart's book contains those stories, unvarnished by his own voice:

What can I say about a person who has a personal relationship with Jesus but thinks we should have blown North Vietnam off the face of the earth? What can I say about a person who is convinced the United States could have won the war if only the military had been allowed to fight to win, but who has never read a book about the American war in Vietnam, or the French war in Vietnam, or the long history of Vietnam and China?

About a person who believes someone's a hero just because he's dead? About a person who wishes he'd served in Vietnam from the comfortable position of never having done so? (27)

Ehrhart allows these soldiers their say and gives them over 300 pages to speak. To listen to their voices is to hear what must be a representative cross-section of late 1960s and early 1990s America. I found the book sobering and imagine that you might, too. I also found myself re-steeled to my obligations as a professor at the United States Air Force Academy. It's a daunting responsibility to teach embryo warriors, for soldiers ought to know what they are capable of destroying at the same time they are learning about following orders. In a military career, the highest humanity may sometime depend on questioning authority or examining myths. The artless voices in *Ordinary Lives* more than imply this necessity, they prove it.

Retriving Bones: Stories and Poems of the Korean War. Edited by W.D. Ehrhart and Philip K. Jason. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1999. 225pp. \$22.00 paper.

In 11 years of editing *WLA*, with the exception of Bill Ehrhart's special issue on the "Soldier-Poets of the Korean War," I've received and published only one piece on Korea—an essay about the 1950s comic book treatments of that war. Nearly any reader is aware of the big books to come out of WWII—*The Naked and the Dead*, say, *From Here to Eternity*, *Slaughterhouse-Five*, *Catch-22*, not to mention books like Styron's *Sophie's Choice*, Hersey's *Hiroshima* or Wiesel's *Night*. "The Good War" remains a lively source of art today. Witness Spielberg's *Schindler's List* and *Saving Private Ryan*. Just last year *Private Ryan* and *The Thin Red Line* vied for Academy Awards. Think of the stir caused by the Smithsonian's exhibit of the Enola Gay. I could go on, but let me stop by suggesting that Picasso's *Guernica*, painted after the German and Italian Air Forces bombed the Spanish city in an early sideshow of WWII, remains the single most powerful war art of the century. World War Two is with us. Similarly, the Vietnam War ("The Television War") has spawned and continues to spawn high art of all forms—drama, film, fiction, memoir, poetry, sculpture, dance, photography, painting.

It might be easy to explain why so much work came out of “The Good War,” if only to say it’s a case of sheer numbers. World War II was, after all, the greatest war in world history, with fronts in Western and Eastern Europe, Africa, the Pacific, and Asia, resulting in nearly 60,000,000 military and civilian casualties and enormous destruction—a conflict which perfected firebombing and introduced atomic war. It was a war that involved over 16 million American soldiers, resulting in over one million U.S. casualties, with 407,316 recorded deaths. By contrast, there were some 54,000 American deaths in Korea and 58,000 in Vietnam. Further, the geographical fronts for these two later wars were also much diminished from the multiple world-wide fronts of “The Good War.”

“The Television War” was just that—available to all America daily. In Vietnam, we insinuated ourselves into someone else’s civil war at the same time we were fighting our own civil wars—racial, sexual, gender, socio-economic—at home, and not much of this larger picture was lost on a self-aware, activist, and informed generation. Maybe it makes sense that a “small” war falling between a war involving the world and a war more protested than supported would be “forgotten” by the public, and consequently by its artists. But if Korea is “The Forgotten War,” Ehrhart’s and Jason’s book, *Retrieving Bones*, works to remedy this inattention.

A character from James Drought’s excerpt from *The Secret*, the final selection of the twelve fictions in *Retrieving Bones*, offers a reasonable summation of American reaction to a pittance of a war after the big “good one,” and is worth, I believe, the length of the quotation:

The unfortunate thing that I discovered next, in the years of the Fifties, working like a slob for the finance company, not much different from the slobs I was trying to pump some money out of—was that the fat-cats are not content to exploit us, bleed us, work us for the rest of our lives at their benefit, but they want us to win them some glory, too. This is why every once in a while they start a war for us to fight in. Like everybody else, I suppose, I read about the North Koreans invading the South Koreans, and just like everybody else—including the South Koreans it turned out later—I just didn’t give a shit. Somebody was always invading somebody in our God-forsaken world and I couldn’t keep up an interest in who was taking over who. And I can tell you this: I sure as hell didn’t think this invasion was a

threat to me, my family, my country, or even the whole goddamn world. But Harry Truman did. He decided that Americans—under the age of twenty-five of course, which left out him and the Congress and the businessmen and doctors and teachers and scientists and ministers—that we were going to defend South Korea. “We’ll teach those bloody Communists!” Harry said, waving goodbye to the troop-ships; and Congress agreed and began appropriating all kinds of money to pay to the businessmen for weapons and war materials—plus a profit, of course. It’s a funny thing, but a lot of the experts say we were surely headed for a Depression if it hadn’t been for the Korean War; and the shot in the arm that this war gave to production, to business, and even to religion—since right away everybody returned to church to pray for their brave sons overseas—was something that the fat-cats had to have or they might have gone under and suddenly become poor folks like the rest of us—a situation they are quite ready to try anything to avoid. So suddenly we were at war, although the term applied was a little more subtle—“a police action” Harry called it; but still it was the same old thing, the flag-waving in the newspapers and on the movie-screens, the speeded up draft, the processing centers, the crazy uniforms, the guns, the firing ranges, the squad-training, the troopship—and then war, death, murder for all under twenty-five, while Congress resounded with virulent speeches, much chest-thumping, and the artists began to “soul search,” and the businessmen pocketed the profits, as did the elderly war workers, the housewives, the physically unfit, the “professional patriots,” and the grey-haired ministers who gleefully led their flocks again in something worth praying about. Again the fine and free Americans were being inflated with death. Oh, there was much band-playing and march-tingling and “we’ll-kill-them” shouting, and everyone including General MacArthur predicted the war would be over in a few weeks. The military journals explained “Korea will be a useful testing ground for our young field commanders,” and everyone expected to gain something—except, that is, those under twenty-five. And even for these younger souls, slipping into their uniforms provided them at a tidy profit, there were voices like old Ernie

Hemingway's which told them that war gave them a one in a million chance, a way to test their manhood, their courage and all that was in them. You can tell how great you are, the young were informed, by how willing you are to give up your life, to charge the blazing guns for your buddies and for your country; and when it is over you will never be afraid again, because you will have discovered yourself. Nobody mentioned what those would discover who lay ripped open after the battle, bleeding, dying, dead from monstrous wounds. (146-7)

Of course the twenty-five-year-olds were the most aware. The older veterans from WWII were attending college (the GI Bill) or buying homes (with VA loans) or pretending major wars were forever ended. The children of WWII vets *were* children during Korea, which may account for their remembering only their fathers' war, with their next attention to war on hold until their own in Vietnam. I know that my reading of *Retrieving Bones* makes me think immediately of the Vietnam War literature I read and teach. The parallels are strong. Consider the following, also from *The Secret*:

We had been placed deliberately in an intolerable situation for no reason that we could understand, and the very best we could hope for was someday to get *OUT!* It was telling a boxer that he had to step into a ring and fight fifteen lousy rounds to a pre-determined draw, during which time he and his opponent would try to kill each other, and when he asked, "Yes, but what for; what do I get" you tell him that if he does well and survives then he won't have to do it anymore. When the fifteenth round is over, you ask him to fight five more, and when these are finished you say, "Don't worry, it will all be over soon, just a couple of more rounds." Well, as you can imagine, long before your boxer ceases counting the rounds, and he stands in the ring dull and uninspired, hammering away at his opponent, who thank God is just as dull and uninspired as he is, and if some slob yells from the sidelines "Give him a good one in the gut for the freedom of mankind,"—well, my friend, you have the very picture, the allegorical image, the representation of all that was the Korean Conflict. I hope that it grinds in your gut as much as it grinds in mine. (154)

Ehrhart, most recently, has been working as a research fellow of the American Studies Department of the University of Wales in Swansea, United Kingdom, where he has focused on the literature of the Korean War. One consequence of this focus has been, as mentioned earlier, a special issue of *WLA: I Remember: Soldier-Poets of the Korean War*, (9.2, Fall/Winter 1997), nearly 250 pages of poetry. A selection of that poetry appears in *Retrieving Bones*, along with twelve fictions (short stories and novel excerpts), maps, a graceful framing introduction, author notes, a chronology, and a bibliography of Korean War texts and films. *Retrieving Bones*, which Ehrhart co-edited with Philip K. Jason (a Vietnam War literature scholar and Professor of English at the U.S. Naval Academy), is a well-wrought primer for all students interested in the recollection of a disremembered war.

Donald Anderson is editor of *WLA*. He's editor, too, of *Aftermath: An Anthology of Post-Vietnam Fiction* (Henry Holt, 1995).