

Reviews

Understanding the Literature of World War II: A Student Casebook to Issues, Sources, and Historical Documents. James H. Meredith. Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1999, xix + 250 pp., index. \$39.95.

Reviewed by Stephen J. Rippon, United States Air Force Academy

At one point in James H. Meredith's book, poet and WWII veteran Richard Wilbur tells an interviewer about his generation's response to WWI literature: "It may be that the literature of World War I, which told of so much beastliness and stupid waste of lives, prepared us to be not altogether surprised [about World War II]" (69). If that is true, then how much more will Meredith's *Understanding the Literature of World War II* and the works it introduces be useful for teaching students today? I recommend Meredith's casebook for anyone who teaches at the high school or college level and is looking for provocative material to engage students with literature—and not just the literature of WWII. While the focus of Meredith's book is WWII, the literature he covers has a larger, timeless vision. As he mentions in the first chapter, "the intensity of combat compresses a lot of life into a small amount of time (the essence of poetry and fiction itself)" (14). Meredith, in turn, has compressed much into 250 pages, while preserving the richness and ambiguity of real life questions.

As part of the Greenwood Press "Literature in Context" Series, *Understanding the Literature of World War II* is the fruit of Meredith's balanced and wide-ranging research. In each of the five chapters, he starts with summaries of pertinent literary works, then goes on to provide historical background. Interviews, historical documents, journalistic accounts, memoirs, and questions designed to help students explore their own WWII connections supplement his discussion. The many-faceted approach succeeds in establishing a broad context.

In negotiating among the diverse materials, students will have to deal with questions that resist easy answers. For example, Meredith states in his opening comments to the chapter "The Combatants," "The one common characteristic of these works is a de-romanticized view of war:

war indeed is hell” (1). “War is hell”—is it really that simple? In a conversation with several undergraduate students at the Air Force Academy in 1986, transcribed in Meredith’s book, the late Joseph Heller recounts his own experience in the war and brings that common sentiment about the hellishness of war into question:

No, my own experience in World War II was, I’m ashamed to say, extremely beneficial—from the time I enlisted to the time I was discharged with the exception of a few months toward the end of my tour of duty when I was scared. It was very orderly, very beneficial. I also think for most Americans—except those who were wounded, killed, or taken prisoner—for most of them, it was one of the most meaningful, delightful experiences in their life. (52)

At this point, a student working through the book might ask, “How can war be hell, and at the same time be remembered fondly?” Such counterpoint—one view raised, followed by a contrasting view—is typical of Meredith’s method here, and captures war’s ambiguity economically.

When Heller passed away in December 1999, I heard *Catch-22* described several times in the media as an “antiwar novel.” But in a 1997 interview conducted by Meredith and Kathi Vosevich (and included in this volume of *WLA* as well as in Meredith’s book), Heller goes beyond the superficial popular understanding of his work as simply antiwar. In response to the question “Do you consider *Catch-22* to be an antiwar novel?” Heller remarks,

It is more anti-traditional establishment than antiwar. To say it’s antiwar doesn’t say much to differentiate it from other stories about the war. I used the military organization as a construct, as a metaphor for business relationships and institutional structures. Of course, it was antiwar. I can’t think of any good American fiction that is not antiwar. But I don’t think anyone in *Catch-22* raises the question whether we should be fighting the war. (57)

Heller’s response might cause a student to ask, “How could Heller say that all good fiction is antiwar, and yet [as he clearly asserted elsewhere

in the 1986 conversation] not question America's involvement in WWII?" Educators have long been challenged with the task of helping students get past simple dualistic, good-versus-evil judgments about events and characters in order to notice underlying complexities. Through Meredith's juxtaposition of Heller's interviews with the other voices from the war, students might come to appreciate the resulting tension: the worthiness of the United States' WWII involvement—and the terrible fact that the war had to be fought. Furthermore, Heller's use of the military as a metaphor for human institutions may encourage students to perceive how war literature can shed true light on many other aspects of human existence.

In addition to the fascinating new insights into Heller's life and work, "The Combatants" provides summaries of other works by several other authors, including Martha Gellhorn, Kurt Vonnegut, Norman Mailer, James Jones, and Irwin Shaw, as well as poets Wilbur, James Dickey, and Randall Jarrell. Complementing the summaries is a thorough background into the major campaigns and events of the war.

The next four chapters broaden the war considerably to include the experiences of those on the United States' home front; the deceptions involved in occupation, resistance, and espionage; the Holocaust; and, finally, the use of the atomic bomb against Japan. Resonances emerge. For example, while I had been initially unimpressed by Meredith's appropriation of the cliché "war is hell," his final chapter on the use of the atomic bomb reprises the "war is hell" metaphor in a grand way, with a thorough discussion of John Hersey's *Hiroshima*. In describing Hersey's narrative, Meredith alludes to Dante's *Inferno*, and I sensed that Meredith himself had patterned his casebook in the same way—as a journey through the fiery underworld of WWII. Those layers of hell also include the incarceration of Japanese-Americans on the U.S. home front, buttressed by a discussion of David Guterson's *Snow Falling on Cedars*; the U.S. military's discrimination against African-Americans; and the Holocaust, including discussions of Elie Wiesel's *Night* and William Styron's *Sophie's Choice*. Meredith enhances all of these areas with sections of personal accounts. As a result, the seemingly trite statement "war indeed is hell" begins to ring with more nuanced meaning.

Perhaps the most important idea Meredith promotes in this book is that students should explore their own connections to WWII. In his introduction, he reflects on the way he became curious about the war:

I distinctly remember in the 1960s sitting on the spacious front porch of my grandmother's Greenville, Mississippi, boarding house drinking cold, southern-sweet iced tea out of ample glasses. On that porch I listened to my uncles talk about their experiences during World War II. These two men were reluctant storytellers about their combat experiences. My father had to fill in the details later. (xiii-xiv)

Now it is Meredith who provides students the details, just as his father did for him, with an excellent selection of historical documents ranging from transcripts of President Roosevelt's "fireside chats" to Ernie Pyle's dispatches to the actual instruments of surrender signed by Germany and Japan. The interviews Meredith includes are not with reluctant storytellers, but with Heller, Wilbur, and with Robert Ellis, who wrote an extensively researched memoir about his combat experience entitled *See Naples and Die*. He also includes Paul West, whose novels *The Very Rich Hours of Count von Stauffenberg* and *Rat Man of Paris* depict the German resistance and occupation, respectively. Meredith's colorful interview with former Air Force Academy English Department head Brigadier General Jesse Gatlin, who had been directly involved with nuclear bomb testing, allows the student to imagine living in the wake of World War II, as the Cold War began. All of the interviews serve as models, preparing the students to fulfill one of the most valuable goals of the book—learning to ask their own questions about the war.

Meredith's chapter-closing "Topics for Written and Oral Discussion" aim to move the student from a provincial frame of reference to a broader understanding of human nature. Meredith starts locally on his grandmother's porch, and having done so, emphasizes to students that their investigations can begin right where they live, right now. For example, after Meredith's chapter on the Holocaust, students may be uncomfortable with what it reveals about the negative potential of human nature. How, then, should students deal with the tragedy of the Holocaust? Meredith's solution is appropriate. In his chapter-closing topics for discussion, he challenges students to interview a Holocaust survivor, to find out more about how anti-Semitism may be prevalent in their local community, and to visit the services of a religion other than their own. As a result, students may integrate new insights with their existing

personal commitments. They may even be compelled to write a story, as Meredith suggests in another chapter-closing topic.

Understanding the Literature of World War II fulfills an urgent need. As Meredith writes in his introduction,

The World War II generation is dwindling. . . . Soon only those will remain whose connection to the war, like mine, will be what they have either heard or read. It is important to get the story right. The lessons of World War II are so great and weighty that we cannot afford to repeat them. (xiv)

That generation is indeed passing away; since the publication of Meredith's book, Joseph Heller himself has died. But Meredith, who also has a book devoted to Heller's fiction coming out later this year, has learned well from Heller's own ability to present an enigma, as he did most famously in *Catch-22*. *Understanding the Literature of World War II* distills the war's complexities into ideas the students can apply to their own WWII connections, and ultimately to the world they are already inheriting.

Black Hawk Down: A Story of Modern War. Mark Bowden. New York: Atlantic Monthly Press, 1999, 386 pp., maps, photos, sources, notes, index. \$24.00.

Reviewed by Jeff Collins, United States Air Force Academy

In an interview with Noah Adams, author Philip Gourevitch converses about the “shadow of Somalia” that, seven years after the event, still “falls heavily” on decisions made at the United Nations. This shadow has helped solidify our nation’s thinking about war in a way exemplified by Kosovo, a war, as George Will puts it, “waged on the principle that there are values important enough to fight, meaning kill, for, even if they are not important enough to die for.”

For students of modern war, understanding the shadow created by the 3 October 1993 incident in Mogadishu—during which 18 American soldiers were killed and some 70 wounded—is essential. Mark Bowden’s book, *Black Hawk Down: A Story of Modern War* is, foremost, an exhaustive presentation of the events that took place in Somalia that long day. Fortunately, the book propels the reader through the events with a tremendous narrative drive and an almost breathless attention to the physical and emotional details of what took place. Take this scene, for example, as Delta Force medic, Sergeant Kurt Schmid, attempts to save one of the wounded Army Rangers:

Corporal Smith was alert and terrified and in sharp pain. “Give me some morphine for the pain!” Smith demanded. . . .

“I can’t,” Schmid told him. In this state, morphine could kill him. . . .

The wounded Ranger bellowed as the medic reached with both hands and tore open the entrance wound. Schmid tried to shut out the fact that there were live nerve endings beneath his fingers. It was hard. He had formed an emotional bond with Smith. They were in this together. But to save the young Ranger, he had to treat him like an inanimate object, a machine that was broken and needed fixing. He continued to root for the artery. If he failed to find it, Smith would probably die. He picked through the open upper thigh, reaching up to his pelvis, parting layers of skin, fat, muscle, and vessel, probing through pools of bright red blood. He couldn’t find it. Once severed, the up-

per end of the artery had evidently retracted up into Smith's abdomen. The medic stopped. Smith was lapsing into shock. The only recourse now would be to cut into the abdomen and hunt for the severed artery and clamp it. . . . (Bowden 211-14)

Such gripping, detailed descriptions make this book a cinematic read and help the book portray an authenticity more often found in memoirs or fiction than in after-the-fact accounts written by non-participants (Bowden is a reporter for *The Philadelphia Inquirer*). According to the Afterword, the author conducted interviews with participants from both sides of the fighting to "corroborate" the happenings and avoided secondhand anecdotes altogether (351).

The book's cinematic qualities are further accentuated by a rapidly changing point of view. Some of Bowden's best scenes come on the Somali side; here, for example, is the description of an attack on a meeting of clansmen:

That day in July, the leadership had gathered to discuss how to respond to a peace initiative from Jonathan Howe, the retired American admiral who was then leading the UN mission in Mogadishu. Men of middle age were seated at the center of the room on rugs. Elders took chairs and sofas that had been arranged around the perimeter. . . . Behind the elders, standing against the walls, were the youngest men. . . .

They were the best-educated members of the clan. Ever since the collapse of order and government in Somalia there was little work for intellectuals. So a meeting like this was a big event, a chance to argue over the direction of things. . . .

Farah was on the perimeter of the room with the younger men, but instead of standing, he had set himself down on one knee between two sofas, which probably saved his life.

The TOW missile is designed to penetrate the armored hull of a tank. . . . Equipped with a shaped charge inside its rounded tip, on impact it spurts a jet of plasma, molten copper, which burns through the outer layer of its target, allowing the missile to deliver its full explosive charge within. The explosion is powerful enough to dismember anyone standing near it, and hurls deadly sharp metal fragments in all directions.

What Farah saw and heard was a flash of light and a violent crack. He stood and took one step forward and heard the *whoosh!* of a second missile. There was another flash and explosion. He was thrown to the floor. . . . He tried to move forward, but his way was blocked by bodies, a bloody pile of men and parts of men a meter high. . . .

There was another explosion above him. Then another and another. Sixteen missiles were fired in all. (72-74)

As vivid as these scenes are, however, this book clearly comes off as an American tale—a tale with at times, a not so subtle narrative bias for the American soldier on the ground. From the prayer Army Ranger Matt Eversman recites as his lead Black Hawk heads into “Indian country” (3-6) to the photo of an uncomfortable-looking President Clinton visiting with Ranger Scott Galentine (350) whose hand was sewn inside his stomach to aid healing, it’s clear the reader is supposed to side with the common soldier doing the bidding of his military and civilian leaders who are, in varied measures, clueless, incompetent, unqualified, or uninformed.

Perhaps this bias toward the common American soldier is intentional or unavoidable, given the proportion of interviews Bowden conducted with wounded ex-Rangers (351). Unfortunately, the pervading narrative bias overcomes Bowden’s withering efforts at objectivity. One of my students told me the book made him feel “bad.” As our discussion continued, it turned out he was using “bad,” as students sometimes do, to mean full of pride and he was talking about this scene where Bowden provides a Somali description of the Americans’ routine “profile flight” (39) tactic, designed to keep the Somalis guessing about when actual raids would occur (21-22):

They all stepped out to see. Yusuf, too, saw the legs dangling and knew it was the Rangers. They all despised the Rangers, and the Black Hawks, which seemed now to be over the city continually. They flew in groups, at all hours of day and night, swooping down so low they destroyed whole neighborhoods, blew down market stalls, and terrorized cattle. Women walking the streets would have their colorful robes blown off. Some had infants torn from their arms by the powerful updraft. . . . The

residents complained that pilots would deliberately hover over their roofless outdoor showers and toilets. Black Hawks would flare down on busy traffic circles, creating havoc, then power off leaving the crowd below choking on dust and exhaust. (75)

Clearly there was some disconnect here with the student's reading, but taken within the context of the rest of the work, his reading would not be unlike the view of Bowden's narrator at points in the text. For example, "War was ugly and evil, for sure, but it was still the way things got done on most of the planet. . . . If the good-hearted ideals of humankind were to prevail, then they needed men who could make it happen. Delta [Force] made it happen. . . noble, silent, and invisible" (33-34). Like the narrator in *Thud Ridge* or *The Green Berets*, Bowden's narrator is unconfused by the moral dilemmas faced by combat soldiers in heated action—a stark contrast to the narrator's careful appraisal of the broader moral considerations of sending soldiers to war.

Despite these inconsistencies in narrative texture, the book is instructive and worthwhile. It apportions blame for the incident's outcome among the military participants and its civilian leadership. More clearly than most analyses of war, this book makes explicit how assumptions and mindset affect decisions at all levels, from the decision by individual rangers to leave their night vision equipment and canteens at home, since it was to be a short daylight raid (which wound up lasting all night); to the decisions by the generals about how to mount a rescue convoy; to the decision by the National Command Authority to be involved militarily in Somalia at all. In this book, Bowden makes clear how what we believe affects what we decide to do.

Thus, we see a reason we should pay attention to the "shadow of Somalia." If nothing else, we need to recognize that this incident has affected the American mindset about war; perhaps *Black Hawk Down* is one step toward analyzing what we are to do about it.

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The Vietnam War and Postmodernity. Edited by Michael Bibby. Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2000, 238 pp., including chapter notes and notes about contributors. \$50.00, cloth; \$16.95, paper.

Reviewed by George Luker, United States Air Force Academy

Anyone interested in seeing the Vietnam War in the context of the postmodern should first read this set of essays. *The Vietnam War and Postmodernity's* editor and contributor, Michael Bibby, has perceptively chosen and structured the readings in such a way that audiences should come away with clearer historical, cultural, and aesthetic impressions of the Vietnam War and the attendant complex concept of the postmodern. Generally speaking, the contributors view the postmodern as a positive, liberatory project, both historically and aesthetically, and both in critical modes and in contemporary artistic narrative. Most offer the more prominent postmodern theorists—Jean Baudrillard, Michel Foucault, Francois Lyotard, and Frederic Jameson, to list some of the major figures. Jameson and Michael Herr get plenty of attention, in tandem and separately, throughout these works. And rightly so. Michael Herr's *Dispatches* is often canonized as an icon of postmodern literature (along with his filmic representations in *Apocalypse Now* and *Full Metal Jacket*); Jameson gets credit for defining the Vietnam War as postmodern as early as 1984 (44) and even cites Herr's *Dispatches* as a prime example of a text that reflects the difficulties in representing that war. Frequently glancing at the major iconography of the postmodern, then, Bibby's collection strongly advocates "the recuperation of the war's significance in any account of the postmodern" (xv) and serves as a fine introduction to the representations of the Vietnam War in the context of postmodern culture, literature, and film.

As editor, Bibby organizes nine chapters thematically into three sections, metaphorically taking the reader from initial luminosity to a suggested fire fight and then to a view of "post/Vietnam" argumentation. Section One, called "Illumination Rounds" (clearly referring to the famous chapter of the same name from Herr's *Dispatches*) includes truly insightful essays by Philip Beidler, Michael Clark, and Cynthia Fuchs. Beidler's "The Last Huey" synthesizes literature's pervasive image of the UH-1 helicopter with Lyotard, Herr, and others, to help locate many of the Vietnam War's postmodern attributes: its fragmentation,

its spectacle, its recurring metafictional character. Acknowledging the myriad of Huey missions, Beidler reminds us of the final irony of the Huey's many techno missions: although it was an advanced air machine, the Huey often led troops to disaster, the "thwak-thwak-thwak" of its rotor blades always giving away the element of surprise. The self-subverting Huey, Beidler says, stands as a dominant icon for this postmodern war.

Michael Clark's essay, "The Work of War in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," puts together Walter Benjamin's concept of "representational technologies" (qtd. in Clark 25) and films such as *Apocalypse Now*, *Universal Soldier*, and *Jacob's Ladder*, and reveals some troubling thoughts about the Vietnam War as more "specular" than real. Clark argues that in representations of the Vietnam War—well before the Persian Gulf War—we see the conflation of doing and spectating. In "‘What do we say happened here?’: Memory, Identity, and the Vietnam War," Cynthia Fuchs compares and contrasts representations of post-Vietnam War films, predominantly focusing on four films—*Universal Soldier*, *Jacob's Ladder*, *Boyz in the Hood* and *Dead Presidents*. All four, she argues, are postmodern narratives that critique the traditional Vietnam film's nostalgic search for redemption, a linear story "about going back in time to recuperate a national identity, pride, purpose, and survivable memory" (54). For the white male protagonists in *Universal Soldier* and *Jacob's Ladder*, Fuchs shows that "temporal stability and fixed identity seem forever remote, pretty-to-think-so fantasies" (71). The two African-American films, *Dead Presidents* and *Boyz in the Hood*, remind us that there is no nostalgic return for black vets. Vietnam was an extension of the pre-war racist hegemony at home, and in these films the "war has never been over, it just comes back to the hood" (74). Although Fuchs' seems to favor *Presidents* and *Boyz* as postmodern representations, her discussion of the four films shows them all to be provocative interrogations of national identity and memory in the postmodern era.

Section Two, "Tracers," begins with what is perhaps the most challenging piece in the collection, Brady Harrison's "‘This movie is a thing of mine’: Homeopathic Postmodernism in Michael Herr's *Dispatches*." In it, Harrison resists Baudrillard's more pessimistic postmodern theory in favor of Jameson's therapeutic brand of the same to illuminate the therapeutic power of Herr's "filmic" approach. In Baudrillard's postmodernism, simulacra (representations which we come to experience

as reality) lead to cultural ennui or paralysis. Herr is acutely aware of the dangers of simulation and his homeopathic description is powerful:

in the back of every column of print you read about Vietnam there was a dripping, laughing death-face; it hid there in the newspapers and the magazines and held to your television screen for hours after the set was turned off for the night, an after-image that simply wanted to tell you at last what somehow had not been told. (qtd. in Harrison 99)

Herr's language is homeopathic in that it inoculates itself against ennui or paralysis and creates a text with progressive power. Harrison argues that Herr homeopathically employs his own simulacra—images of the “freaky-spooky, otherside-of-the-worldness of the war . . . as if on film, but in words” (99) as a kind of therapy, a therapy that involves telling what somehow had not been told. Herr's desire to explain the unexplainable, Harrison says, by “turning simulacra against simulacra” is what brings homeopathic engagement to *Dispatches*; he “uses simulations not to erase history but to achieve a clearer, deeper sense of it” (103). What Harrison labels a “homeopathic” approach, postmodern theorist Linda Hutcheon might call a historiographic metafiction (105-23). Whatever label we want to assign to Herr's fragmented memoir, Harrison's final analysis is compelling. The way that Herr's text frequently folds back on itself, suggesting that truth and falsehood may not be the right terms for assessing the Vietnam experience, offers a more profound historical understanding of the Vietnam War. What Harrison offers is a deeper understanding of Herr.

Looking to Jameson, W.F. Haug, and Arnold Van Gennep, Tony Williams's Marxist reading of Phil Caputo's *Indian Country* and Bobbie Ann Mason's *In Country* fires tracers point blank at these narratives to expose their shortcomings as postmodern texts. While both novels show signs of postmodernism, says Williams, they are in reality quite reactionary because they ultimately recast complex stories involving troubling racial and gender components as master narratives of male regeneration (through traditional literary formulas like the bildungsroman). They elide the complexities and painful memories of the Vietnam War's history. Both novels, Williams argues, “promise a mythic incorporation back into the community” (113). Williams relies

on the Marxist concepts of “use value” and “exchange value” to make clear why such novelistic closure is unsatisfactory. In a novel with *use value* the protagonist would grapple with the painful past without glossing over social problems of race and gender that contributed to the pain of that past. A novel of mere *exchange value* allows its protagonist access to personal redemption without dealing with larger underlying social concerns. What reduces the novel to exchange value is that it resorts to familiar narrative formulas and recycled genres, for once we enter that realm of formula, we lose contact with lived history. In Williams’s mind both Mason’s and Caputo’s texts “eventually move toward a dangerous transcendental exchange value” (124). One could argue that all contemporary American texts participate to some extent in the exchange system that is the literary market place of today; nevertheless, Williams’ tracer rounds cut sharply and illuminate *Indian Country* and *In Country* in interesting ways.

As if responding to Williams’s thesis about Vietnam narratives disguised as postmodern texts that lack the postmodern courage to interrogate history, Eric Gadzinski’s essay, “Bruised Azaleas: Bruce Weigl’s Postwar Aesthetic,” provides some equilibrium. Focusing on the postmodern sensibilities of Bruce Weigl’s Vietnam War poetry, Gadzinski finds in it not a desire for incorporation but a “rhetoric of apocalypse,” a term he borrows from Julia Kristeva. This sort of rhetoric, Gadzinski asserts, dares to look deeply into the horrors of war and recreate with devastating clarity the memories of those horrors. Even though some would say Weigl’s poetry reflects an archetypal masculine experience, Gadzinski shows that his poetry’s “affinity” (137) with Holocaust and Hiroshima survivors’ accounts helps stake Weigl’s claim to postwar and postmodern aesthetics. Gadzinski offers a composite description of postmodern schizophrenia from Baudrillard and Jameson to represent what Weigl’s poetry shares with Holocaust and Hiroshima survivors’ narratives:

“the absolute proximity, the total instantaneity of things, the feeling of no defense, not retreat”; an experience of “heightened intensity” in which “isolated . . . material signifiers” bear a “mysterious and oppressive charge of affect” and where there is a lack of a sense of “the persistence of the ‘I’ and ‘me’ over time.” (qtd. in Williams 137)

As an apologist for Weigl as a postmodern Vietnam War poet, Gadzinski levels effective cover fire and finishes off Bibby's "Tracers."

Michael Bibby, himself, begins the last section, "Post/Vietnam/Modern," with his essay entitled "The Post-Vietnam Condition." In it, he takes up an ontological debate over the relationship between the postmodern and the Vietnam War. Bibby's argument with Frederic Jameson—that the Vietnam War helps construct postmodernity, rather than merely appearing as a postmodern side-effect—ably reveals that the war made a tremendous impact on world history and that an "organized discourse on postmodernism was not widely available until after the war"; thus, he maintains that postmodernity is more accurately situated as a post-Vietnam condition. To be sure, Bibby's argument is compelling. After some reflection, however, readers may ultimately come away thinking that Jameson and Bibby are both right—that the Vietnam War can be seen as an expression of postmodernity, and that the concept of postmodernity owes a great deal to that war. Still, Bibby's reminder is helpful: discussions of postmodernity should more frequently acknowledge the presence and consequences of the Vietnam War.

In the next essay, Chris Hables Gray extends Bibby's argument. In his "Postmodernism with a Vengeance: The Vietnam War," Gray believes the war signals a crucial historical break from "modern" warfare and that all wars since Vietnam's are clearly postmodern. By outlining the postmodern attributes and painstakingly drawing up a list of the contradictions inherent in contemporary warfare, Gray proves the soundness of his case with a vengeance: his essay becomes a strong warning about the dangers of fragmented, technological postmodern "little wars." Toward the end of the essay, as if he wants to demonstrate a postmodern paradox of his own, Gray undoes his efforts somewhat when he remarks that "despite the dying children of Iraq, despite the massacres in Bosnia and Somalia and the Caucasus mountains, I can be optimistic" (192) because he feels the Vietnam War era taught us how to better raise our voices in protest. Although Gray believes he can put little faith in the Clinton administration, he argues that the "discourse [on contemporary wars] is open more than it's ever been." While his essay concludes with a series of paradoxical assertions, Gray nevertheless succeeds in situating the Vietnam War and subsequent wars in postmodernity and forcefully reminds us that warfare has changed. Furthermore, he believes that because of technology, warfare will be mutable in the future. Undoubtedly.

The final essay in the collection, Douglas Kellner's "From Vietnam to the Gulf: Postmodern Wars?" questions the validity of calling the Vietnam War postmodern at all. Instead, from a historical position, Kellner views the Vietnam War as "a highly modern war that showed the pretensions and flaws of the project of modernity" (200). Likewise, from an aesthetic standpoint he argues that Michael Herr's *Dispatches* should be considered a modernist narrative. For many of us who are intrigued by the debate over whether *something* should be called "modern" or "postmodern," Kellner's coda, reflects the slipperiness of both terms. Even while Bibby's collection of postmodern advocates are convincing, Kellner too makes a cogent case for modern influences in culture and art, post-Vietnam. Kellner initially admits that the Persian Gulf War perhaps has more attributes to be called postmodern—as a war of spectacle and simulacra—but in the end Kellner believes the Gulf War was actually an extension of our modern project in the Vietnam War. Technology, he says, moves us closer to a concept of the postmodern, but finally, while humans remain integral to warfare, warfare remains modern.

As mentioned above, Michael Bibby's collection of essays is required reading for anyone wondering how the Vietnam War and subsequent wars might be situated aesthetically and historically in the postmodern. Certainly, there are times when postmodern theorists can become trapped in their own language when trying to describe these ironic, paradoxical, and outright contradictory concepts. This collection of essays is no exception. On the other hand, when writers push language to its limits, as these writers do, we should expect this. Only through a studied interrogation of warfare and the postmodern—traps and all—will we yield insights into the future of warfare, and this reviewer thanks Michael Bibby and his selected essayists for challenging readers with the language and for making us face the future with one eye fixed in the rear-view mirror.

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Forging the Sword: Selecting, Educating, and Training Cadets and Junior Officers in the Modern World. Edited by Elliott V. Converse, III. Chicago: Imprint Publications, 1998, xiii + 393 pp., bibliography, contributors, index. \$39.95, paper.

Reviewed by John Clark Pratt, Colorado State University

Thoughtfully arranged and edited, *Forging the Sword* contains 27 essays that consider the differing ways that military officers have been trained (not always successfully) in numerous countries of the world in the twentieth century. Primarily a compilation of papers read at the United States Air Force Academy's 1996 Military History Symposium, this book offers an eclectic, wide-ranging examination of officer training and education in such disparate countries as the USSR, Germany, Great Britain, Mexico, France, Italy, Morocco, Japan, China, and the United States, among others. The concluding essays make suggestions for future programs

Some of the essays are scholarly and data-filled, some are passionately personal, and while most suggest that readers listen carefully to all the distant drummers, a few quite obviously beat their own. No author attempts to be definitive on his or her subject, but each one considers questions and situations that military planners must take into account in order to design effective officer training and education programs for the future. Only by understanding where, how, and why so many well-intentioned programs went wrong, this anthology shows, can we successfully achieve a proper balance between "military" and "non-military" academic courses, incorporate the rapidly expanding demands of new technologies, solve the continuing race and gender problems, determine what the ethics and ethos of the 21st century military officer should be, and create a curriculum of education and training programs that will incorporate the best elements of both the liberal and scientific/engineering disciplines.

Rather than attempt to summarize each essay, I would like to note in passing some of the elements that stood out for me, a former faculty member at the Air Force Academy and a graduate (one of the few with a college degree) of the Aviation Cadet pilot training program. My initial assignment at the Academy was to have been what D'Anne Campbell calls a "strange [military] way of doing things" (238), a three-year teaching appointment following the acquisition of an MA. I was then fortunate to be selected to return to school for the PhD and

spent the rest of my military career (with the exception of what we then called a year-long “Vietnam sabbatical”), teaching and flying at the Academy.

I certainly did not fit the profile of what Tim Travers shows to be that of the early twentieth-century British officer who had to have been “born, not made” for the profession (23); nor did I experience what some of the authors characterize as the varied and sometimes incomplete ROTC programs. I certainly saw no Air Force units that were “exclusively the preserves of the nobility,” as Holger Herwig notes was the norm in pre-WWI Germany (35). Unlike E.C. Keisling, who identifies no “sense of common cause”(60) as the greatest single detriment to the French training between the wars, I usually found dedicated young colleagues, most of them then rated officers, who were determined to integrate military and academic instruction in ways that had not been done before. Malham Wakin’s essay on the USAFA’s Core Curriculum (217-224) deftly shows how this program differed from those at the other service academies, yet he does not mention the highly demanding Honors program that for a few years produced as many Rhodes, Marshall, and other graduate scholars as did Harvard and Yale.

I also saw few examples of what Mark von Hagen defines as a major flaw in the Soviet military, the attempt to politicize trainees “virtually from the start “ (85). I can well remember the looks on my first-year students’ faces when I would tell them that they were taking a course in the Humanities and that unlike their experience in military training, I was ordering them to think for themselves. Those cadets who saw the irony and smiled first usually turned out to be the best. And I totally support the views of Josiah Bunting and the others who lobby in their essays for an amalgamation of the Liberal Arts, Science, Military, and Engineering courses in service academy programs, in opposition to the view of David Smith who decries the inclusion of liberal arts courses in the curriculum (375, *passim*). What Smith overlooks is what Wakin articulates, that current graduation credit requirements at service academies far exceed the normal 128 semester hours in civilian universities. At the Air Force Academy, for instance, because of the large core requirements in science and engineering, an English or History major graduates with a B.S. degree, a rarity in academic circles.

Finally, I can also attest, as does John Flanagan, a USAFA graduate, to the often coincidental value of taking a foreign language. As he found in Vietnam (369), his ability to speak French became crucial to the

good relationship between his unit and their Vietnamese counterparts. I, too, used my rusty French in Laos and helped some senior Lao and American officers better understand each other.

To approach *Forging the Sword*, I would suggest reading from cover to cover. Although each essay is an independent study, by going chronologically through the book one begins to see the increasingly significant flaws in the military training and education programs that either stood on a prescribed tradition or ignored all that had gone before in their attempts to reorganize the future. This collection, I suggest, should be incorporated into military academy curricula so that future officers can better understand not only *what* they are learning—but also, and more important, I think, *why*.

Loving Arms: British Women Writing the Second World War. Karen Schneider. Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1997, 182 pp., notes, bibliography, index. \$34.95.

British Women Writers of the World War II: Battlegrounds of Their Own. Phyllis Lassner. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1998, x + 252 pp., notes, bibliography, index. \$55.

Reviewed by D. A. Boxwell, United States Air Force Academy

Two books examining the response of British women writers to a war still comparatively neglected by literary historians: one concentrating on a limited selection of writers who best embody many of the ideas originating in Virginia Woolf's 1938 pacifist, anti-militarist tract *Three Guineas*, the other breaking newer ground by inscribing a larger matrix of creative figures who did much to question Woolf's foundational discourse.

As a feminist revisionist of British cultural history, Karen Schneider forcefully and convincingly argues against Paul Fussell's contention in *Wartime* that, in contrast to the Great War, the Second World War yielded very little literature, but instead, as he asserts, "something close to silence" (qtd in Schneider 35). Rather, the rich and extensive body of work produced by the authors she examines in depth—Stevie Smith, Katherine Burdekin, Elizabeth Bowen, and Doris Lessing, as well as Woolf herself—challenges that supposed "silence." These women's vocal critique of militarism before, during, and after the war, served as a way of articulating desire for the social transformation of patriarchal culture. But Schneider insists that these women spoke about war from substantially different perspectives: "they never speak univocally, for each seems to be in dialogue with herself, struggling to reconcile conflicting impulses triggered by the often contradictory pressures of war" (26). Moreover, "their own vexed positions as women within a patriarchal, militarist culture externally threatened by an overtly fascist one seems to have catalyzed both an acute ambivalence and, perhaps consequently, a significant literary response" (6). In her coda, Schneider argues that the experimental alternatives of British women writers had a lasting effect, if not necessarily to dislodge the militarist nation-state, but to inform the frequently essentialist feminist discourse since the 1960s which has been concerned with the interconnections of gender and war. Karen Schneider refracts these writers through the lens of second wave

feminist theory, whereas Phyllis Lassner is more insistent on allowing these writers to question the limitations of such theory.

Phyllis Lassner, like Karen Schneider, scrutinizes the works of Woolf, Burdekin, Bowen, and Smith in her account of British women's literary engagement with the justness of a second world war. But Lassner does valuable cultural work in her more readable and nuanced investigations of numerous figures who have been awaiting the kind of rediscovery needed for a fuller account of the literary landscape of Britain in the 1930s and 1940s. Lassner pays due attention to such compelling women writers as Storm Jameson, Naomi Mitchison, Ethel Mannin, Lettice Cooper, Ann Bridge, Betty Miller, and Phyllis Bottome. Some of these women's novels have been reprinted in the last decade or so by the Virago Press of London, but it is only now that Lassner comprehensively surveys how these other, once popular writers questioned "whether Britain was ever justified in its claims to moral rectitude" (6). These writers, Lassner argues, not only challenge patriarchy, but also preemptively challenge important feminist scholarship since the 1970s which has too readily taken Virginia Woolf as the most authoritative voice of the 1930s and assumed, "that women are only passive war victims, war protesters, or complicit with the power of a masculinist war machine" (4). Lassner is concerned to show how other voices besides Woolf's in the 1930s complicated the gendered discourse which too readily associated men with war, women with peace. Rather, women's complicity and resistance were not discrete, but overlapped (9) and while some remained lifelong pacifists (Mannin, Woolf, Vera Brittain), many changed their attitudes as the 1930s turned into the 1940s. Storm Jameson, for example, came to believe that pacifism was a conservative and escapist position. Stevie Smith, while critiquing fascism in her novels of the 30s, argued for the necessity of fighting it as she critiqued Brittain's *England's Hour* (1941). In sum, Lassner shows, "within the dramatically disparate combinations of war attitudes among and within British women writers, many linked their arguments to their ideals of social justice and their constructions of their nation" (46). In essence, "some saw the war as subverting those ideals and yielding to tyranny while others found the war itself a ground on which tyranny was defined and social justice could be affirmed" (46). The complexities of a multivocal female response to the war are done justice in Lassner's finely wrought and comprehensive account of "the moral and political victory enacted by the individual and collective voice of so many" (252).

The Eyes of Orion: Five Tank Lieutenants in the Persian Gulf War.

Alex Vernon with Neal Creighton, Jr., Greg Downey, Rob Homes, and Dave Trybula. Kent, Ohio: Kent University Press, 1999, xix + 330 pp., maps, photos, appendices, notes, bibliography, index. \$35.00.

Reviewed by Mark S. Braley, United States Air Force Academy

The Gulf War, one of America's shortest, was in many ways fought in the shadow of America's longest war, the Vietnam War. *The Eyes of Orion*, written by Alex Vernon with the contributions of four of his comrades in arms, subtly acknowledges the historical presence of the earlier conflict in its dedication "to our fellow 24th Infantry Division soldiers who made the supreme sacrifice while serving in Southwest Asia" (v). While literally accurate, the geographical designation "Southwest Asia" for the Persian Gulf echoes "Southeast Asia" in a way that makes the Persian Gulf War on some level a metaphorical extension of the Vietnam War. For many, including, as Vernon points out, George Bush, the nearly bloodless (for the allies) knock-out punch that was the Gulf War signified America's recovery from and redemption for the national humiliation that was Vietnam. As Bush put it, the Gulf War "closed the book on Vietnam" (281). To his credit, Vernon resists such simplistic thinking and makes the case for the Gulf War being its own distinct conflict, with its own challenges and lessons learned. Still, there is something to be gained in reading the Gulf War in light of Vietnam. There is also something to be gained in reading Vernon's book in light of an earlier one, James R. McDonough's now classic Vietnam memoir, *Platoon Leader*. Both the texts and the wars reflect back on each other, giving us a clearer understanding in each case.

Published in 1985, McDonough's book is one man's account of his tour in Vietnam as a platoon leader for the 173rd Airborne Brigade. In 1970, just one year after graduating from West Point, McDonough found himself in Vietnam protecting the village of Truong Lam in the Binh Dinh province, a district notorious for its heavy Viet Cong presence. For most of the next year he oversaw an ever-changing group of about 20 men. For McDonough that time was his education in war and leadership, the main goal of which was to keep his men alive. He was mostly successful. Several incidents he recounts are riveting. In one instance, a replacement to the platoon takes a warning shot at McDonough's back with an M-79 grenade launcher and claims to have dropped his weapon. McDonough responds by sticking the barrel of

his M-16 under the private's chin and saying loud enough for the whole platoon to hear, "You son of a bitch. . . . Drop your weapon again, and you'd better pray to God it hits me square in the back. Because if it doesn't, you bastard, I'll blow your brains to kingdom come" (74-75). Although he doesn't lose anyone to combat, two of his men drown when he makes them take time at the beach for rest and hygiene. What McDonough provides is a glimpse at a young man's struggle to become a leader and a decision-maker and a sense of how tough in the midst of a real war that struggle is. Following the climactic and failed defense of Truong Lam near the book's end, he remarks, "In an instant the insanity of war was revealed to me: people die or people live without rhyme or reason" (182).

The Eyes of Orion is at once more ambitious and more superficial than McDonough's work. *Orion's* ambition lies in its attempt to present the Persian Gulf conflict beginning with the Desert Shield deployment through the aftermath of Desert Storm, from the perspective of five different lieutenants. Each of them is a tank commander and platoon leader under the 24th Infantry Division. Four of the five (Vernon, Neal Creighton, Rob Holmes, and Dave Trybula) are 1989 West Point graduates, second lieutenants during this period. First lieutenant Greg Downey has found his way to the army and the Gulf through ROTC at the University of Nebraska-Kearney. The five lieutenants play a variety of roles. Downey holds the respected position of the battalion's scout platoon leader. Creighton gets the unenviable responsibility of leading his company from the port to the assembly area in the middle of a shifting desert with the benefit of only a compass and his tank's odometer. Vernon's platoon is initially attached with the Delta Company of the 3-15 Infantry to the 2-4 Cavalry Squadron, which served, during Desert Shield, as "a screen position for the entire theater—the most forward American unit" (33). During Desert Storm both Creighton and Holmes lead their respective companies into action. Trybula leads the battalion's reserve tank company. Vernon helps round out the force in between. In short, the five lieutenants provide a good cross-section of experience in both Desert Shield and Desert Storm. The considerable challenge for Vernon is to orchestrate his own and the contributions of his fellow novice leaders. He proceeds chronologically, interlacing the testimony of the five lieutenants.

In part, the book's feel of superficiality is a product of this fragmented structure. McDonough's narrative is a traditional, straightforward one,

with him as the first-person narrator, telling his own powerfully affecting story of trial and survival. Were Vernon to have focused solely on his own experiences, he might have achieved something similar. Instead, the jump between voices produces an uneven stylistic quality and varying emotional impact. Vernon's sections are the most reflective and literary, and of all the lieutenants, we get the best sense of him as a person. And yet to account for the differences between *Orion* and *Platoon Leader* simply by referring to structural distinctions is to miss the inherent differences between the two conflicts each grapples with. At the risk of sounding dismissive, the Gulf War *was* superficial in comparison to the Vietnam War. Instead of ten years, the Gulf War—including Desert Shield—lasted less than six months. The ground war, from kick-off to cease-fire, lasted four days. Instead of over 58,000 American casualties, the U.S. lost fewer than 300. Instead of confronting a determined, ideologically invested enemy, the Gulf War forces found a conscripted, demoralized group, many of whom were “barefoot with bloody feet some with cut Achilles’ tendons. They had no choice but to fight; they could hardly walk” (227).

That said, Vernon and the others remind us that different wars yet have much in common. For those who would say with cultural critic Jean Baudrillard that “the Gulf War did not take place,” *Orion*’s first-hand testimony demonstrates that even a short “easy” war inspires the same fears and doubts on the parts of the combatants, generates the same terrible exhilaration of battle, produces the same mortally tragic mistakes, and—debate about the justice of the cause aside—creates the same regrettable end: violent death for what is always an unacceptable number of people.

Vernon’s own hesitations entering the conflict as a fledgling platoon leader help give the book a refreshing honesty. He admits early on feeling inadequate to his leadership responsibilities:

Having gone through West Point, through Air Force Survival Training, two trips to the National Training Center at Fort Irwin, California, and several other field and simulation exercises, I knew I did not have the stuff to lead soldiers in combat. Within minutes in the chaplain’s office I was bawling. I had myself convinced that soldiers would die because of me, that I would panic, think too much, seize up, make a critical mistake. I did not want to go. (12)

Of course he does have “the stuff” to lead soldiers in combat and does so. The lesson may be that there is no mystery to what that stuff is. Ordinary young men placed into extraordinary circumstances with good training and equipment rise to the occasion. Still, Vernon’s story isn’t about conquering fears and becoming in the end a supremely competent and confident fighting man. Almost immediately following the war, the Army offered early outs for Alex’s 1989 year group. After serving for three years, he left the military. He writes, “I resigned because, having trained for years and fought in combat, having witnessed others doing the same, I knew I did not have the stuff to command troops. . . . I remain a soldier, but I never was, never could have been, a warrior” (287).

Despite the ease with which the Allies brought about Iraq’s capitulation, Vernon experienced things in combat that unsettled him. Greg Downey offers some insight on that account in speaking about the aftermath of a skirmish on the second day of the ground war. Having suppressed an enemy position by calling in an artillery barrage, he speaks to a surviving Iraqi captain, who tells him that

he was in the Republican Guard 26th Commando Brigade and that there had been 650 men in the brigade. When I asked him how many more men were alive, he said, “This is all . . . this is all.” He started weeping. Only forty-nine Iraqi soldiers remained, all standing before me with horrified looks on their faces. They had just glimpsed hell.

I had called the artillery that erased the lives of over six hundred human beings. In forty-five minutes, I had killed more people than what lived in my hometown of Merna, Nebraska. Combat is a series of contradictions. One moment you’re trying your best to kill the enemy, the next moment you’re doing your best to save him. I looked at the shock in the Iraqi’s eyes. For the first time during the ground attack, I felt guilt and sorrow. (205-6)

These moments in the book give it a bit of the heft that is sustained in McDonough’s account. But again, what may seem to be a flaw in *Orion* in reality represents the fortune of not having had to fight a protracted war in which such moments would be multiplied beyond bearing.

A longer conflict most assuredly would have had other negative consequences as well. Of the five lieutenants, Rob Holmes is one of the more interesting. Rob is the most vocally patriotic and the most dichotomous in his way of thinking about the war. At one point he reflects,

As I walked around while we refueled, I had on my game face like never before. I didn't jump around like at a pep rally, didn't want to go "kick their ass" or anything like that. I just felt intense and focused. My world was very simple. We were about to attack a heavily defended objective that threatened the lives of my men. Get in my way, and I will kill you. (207)

At various other times he reveals the kind of attitude toward the Arabs (even his own allies) that might have, over a longer, more frustrating combat experience, produced the kinds of atrocities we saw in Vietnam. "Saudi Arabia was clearly the most bizarre place I had ever been" (54) he says. And later, "Arabs never cease to amaze me" (194). When his gunner deliberately misses an Iraqi scout truck, he remarks, "I'd like to think that I never had any bloodlust," but "I almost looked forward to our next engagement with the enemy, so Downing could destroy a target and restore my confidence" (203). In highlighting some of Holmes's remarks, I don't intend any harsh criticism of him personally. The life-and-death reality of war encourages the dehumanization of the enemy. The more like us the enemy is, the harder it is to do the job of killing. For those entering the conflict predisposed to think of the enemy as "bizarre" and "amazing," it's no surprise that the strain of battle might exacerbate and harden those attitudes. In war we create "gooks" and "ragheads" so that we can maintain our sense of our own humanity. Fortunately for those fighting this war, there was not time for morale to degenerate or frustrations craving violent release to mount.

The Eyes of Orion does a number of things well. It demonstrates for the Gulf War the truth of McDonough's claim about Vietnam, that "it was different for everyone involved" (1). As Vernon puts it, "no war is the same. The wars of two veterans of the same war are not even the same war" (284). The book, like the war itself, also gives us virtually the entire arc of war from build-up to aftermath in a condensed form. Perhaps most importantly, it shows us that this made-for-TV war was not

just high-tech simulation. Soldiers killed other soldiers, killed other civilians, even killed their own. And those doing the killing were changed. The stories of Alex Vernon, Neal Creighton, Greg Downey, Rob Homes, and Dave Trybula are, like the story of James McDonough, the same stories that need to be retold with each new war in hopes that they may help prevent the next one.

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