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Viet Pulp

In the military history sections of the big chain bookstores and the paperback buy and swaps, one continues to find entire “Vietnam” shelves taken up by paperbacks with titles like *LRRP Team Leader*, *Marine Sniper*, *Assault on Dak Pek*, *Death in the Delta*, *Death in the Jungle*, *Death in the A Shau Valley*, *Inside the LRRPs*, *Inside Force Recon*, *Inside the Crosshairs*, *Inside the VC and NVA*. On the lists of the big internet marketers such offerings currently number around a hundred. More than forty years after the first American counterinsurgency warriors began arriving in Vietnam, and more than twenty-five years after the last helicopter lifted off from Saigon, Viet Pulp is a going concern.

As a mass-market paperback phenomenon, besides its abundance of titles and widespread availability, it is distinguished by its relative uniformity of presentation and design—a cover illustration, frequently a personal photograph, of jungle fighters in camouflage, along with the title, and then a characteristic blurb, something in the guts-and-glory style, vintage-Vietnam, about SEALs, LRRPs, SOGs, Snipers, Special Forces, Rangers, or Marine Force Recon. “Whether they were beating through razor-sharp elephant grass or spending all night soaked and shivering in the monsoon, walking into an ambush or getting caught in a hot LZ,” one breathlessly begins, “sudden death for the First Recon was never far away. Second lieutenant Paul Young had to be concerned not only with his own life but also with those of the men in his command. For Vietnam too often seemed like a monster with an insatiable appetite for blood” (*First Recon—Second to None*). “Vietnam, 1968,” another reads. “All of Sergeant John Burford’s missions with F Company, 58th Infantry were deep in hostile territory. As leader of a six-man LRRP team, he found the enemy, staged ambushes, called in precision strikes, and rescued downed pilots. The lives of the entire team depended on his leadership and their combined skill and guts. A single mistake—a moment of panic—could mean death for everyone. Pictures” (*LRRP Team Leader*).

Over the years, prices have remained low, even for mass-market paperbacks, usually between five and seven dollars. The current figure for most titles is \$6.99.

At this writing, the market is increasingly dominated by a single publisher—Ivy, with a handful of titles from its parent company Ballantine, and a scattering of other imprints—Avon, Bantam, Berkley, and Pocket. Virtually all texts are paperback originals or exclusives. A few titles are imported from mainstream publishing, such as Tom Mangold's and John Penycate's *The Tunnels of Cu Chi*, reprinted by Berkley, or Lewis Puller Jr's *Fortunate Son*, picked up by Bantam. Three major oral histories, Al Santoli's *Everything We Had*; Wallace Terry's *Bloods: Black Soldiers in the Nam*, and Keith William Nolan's *A Piece of My Heart*, the narratives of twenty American women, were republished by in the late 80s by Ballantine. There are also a scattering of reprints from two popular military publishers, Presidio and the Naval Institute Press, at present working increasingly in mainstream trade hardbound and paperback, but themselves frequently given to such lurid entitlings as *Hunters and Shooters* or *The Magnificent Bastards*.

Chronologically, one might be attempted to locate Viet Pulp in certain ur-titles such as Robin Moore's *The Green Berets* (1965) or David Morrell's *First Blood* (1972), the genesis of the Rambo saga. Suggestive early counterparts can also be identified as part of paperback lines as diverse as the Barry Sadler *Casca: The Eternal Mercenary* series or W.E.B. Griffin's *The Brotherhood of War*. In the production model described, however, it is almost exclusively a phenomenon of the last decade, beginning slowly in the late 80s and peaking in the last five years with the new appearance of ten to fifteen titles annually. On the listing of internet booksellers, 2002 titles are now beginning to appear.

As a popular genre, it is distinguished by an emphasis—invariably betokened, as above, by its signature “in-country” entitling and cover copy—on “authentic” combat narrative, and, as importantly, by its nearly exclusive concentration on elite or special operations units. Most of the texts present themselves as personal narratives by veterans, on occasion with collaborators. There is usually a photo section. Prominent terms of advertising include “diary,” “journal,” “true story,” “firsthand account.” Some comprise histories or extended accounts of operations in particular kinds of units. Prominently displayed in these cases are the prepositions “with” or “inside.” Yoking the two appeals are also texts that target their reference to better-known literary and popular-culture productions. With its creatively ambiguous entitling, Robert Hemphill's *Platoon/Bravo Company*, the narrative of an infantry company commander in the 25th Infantry Division during late 1967 and early 1968, blazons the experiences described as simultaneously including those of a unit member, Oliver Stone, who made them the basis of the movie *Platoon*.

With a cover blurb by Lieutenant General (ret.) Hal Moore, former commanding officer of the 1st Battalion, 7th Cavalry, Larry Gwin's *Baptism* likewise announces its status as an inside first-person narrative of the 1965 Ia Drang campaign described in Moore's and Joseph Galloway's *We Were Soldiers Once . . . And Young* by an actual First Cavalry platoon leader prominently featured in that widely-read text—although not in the current movie, which concentrates solely on only the battle of LZ X-Ray, and not on the parallel action at LZ Albany in which Gwin's battalion, commanded by a far less competent lieutenant colonel, had the misfortune to be literally shot to pieces.

In a number of cases, as elaborated below, veterans who became authors have emerged as veterans of the genre, producers of multiple titles with a considerable following. Michael Lee Lanning, for instance, began with a two-installment personal memoir, *The Only War We Had: A Platoon Leader's Journal of Vietnam*, and *Vietnam 1969-70: A Company Commander's Journal*, and has now moved on to popular history titles including the four “inside” books listed above: *Inside the Crosshairs*, *Inside Force Recon*, *Inside the LRRPs*, and *Inside the VC and NVA*. Similar is the career of Kregg P.J. Jorgensen, author of *Acceptable Loss*, *Lrrp Company Command*, *Mia Rescue: Lrrps in Cambodia*; *The Ghosts of the Highlands: Ist Cav Lrrps in Vietnam 1966-67*; and, most recently, *Very Crazy G.I.: Strange but True Stories of the Vietnam War*. There is also Gary A. Linderer, author of *Eyes of the Eagle*, *Eyes Behind the Lines*, and *Phantom Warriors*, books one and two; or, Dennis Foley, author of two novels, *Night Work* and *Take Back The Night*; and two autobiographical narratives, *Special Men: A LRP's Reflections* and *Long Range Patrol*—with the latter blurbed for its authenticity by Gary A. Linderer. Alternatively, one may also peruse single titles that have now enlarged into series, such as *Six Silent Men*, with book one written by Kenn Miller, author of a previous Ivy offering, *Tiger the Lurp Dog* book two by Reynel Martinez; and book three by, once more, the aforementioned Gary A. Linderer. The industry champion here for diversifying the model, however, has to be former Navy SEAL Richard Marcinko—and U.S. Federal Prison inmate, for defrauding the U.S. Navy on equipment contracts. Co-author, with prolific crime and adventure novelist John Weisman, of the eight-installment *Rogue Warrior* series, he has also become the prominent producer of best-selling business and leadership self-help guides, including *The Rogue Warrior's Strategies for Success: A Commander's Principles of Winning* and *Leadership Secrets of the Rogue Warrior: A Commando's Guide to Success*.

In some cases, actual Vietnam veteran status, if not available, can also be conveniently fudged. There is Charles W. Sasser, for instance, ubiquitous co-

author of Viet pulp productions including *One Shot-One Kill* and *The Walking Dead* (both with Craig Roberts); *First Seal* (with Ray Boehm and Faye Wildman); *Taking Fire: The Story of a Decorated Chopper Pilot* (with Ron Alexander); *Doc: Platoon+Medic* (with Daniel E. Evans). Among a plethora of other titles, Sasser has also written a novel of Vietnam, *The 100th Kill*, and an allegedly autobiographical narrative, *Always a Warrior: The Memoir of a Six-War Soldier*. The authenticity of the experience described by the primary narrator in several of the co-authored texts has been called into question by internet website reviewers. The novel has been termed by one such respondent as “phony, even for fiction.” As to Sasser’s own Vietnam combat credentials, the biography is creatively ambiguous. One cover credit lists him as “a decorated Vietnam veteran and Green Beret . . . and one of today’s most respected military and true crime writers.” Another says “Mr. Sasser served 29 years in the U.S. Navy, where he was a journalist, and in the U.S. Army as a Special Forces paratrooper (the Green Berets).” On a website sketch, the military record reads: “U.S. Navy, 1960-64; became journalist second class. U.S. Army, 1965-83, medic with U.S. Army Special Forces (Green Berets) in Southeast Asia and Central and South America; became sergeant first-class, U.S. Army reserve, 1983—combat tactics instructor. Military police company, first sergeant, 1991.” In a personal synopsis, Sasser himself lists to adventures as a “policeman, educator, airplane pilot, Golden Gloves boxer, paratrooper, sailor, rodeo bronco rider, rancher, fur trapper, newspaperman.” He continues, “For stories I have parachuted into Korea’s demilitarized zone, rode buses from the United States through Central America, chased after pirate treasure in the Caribbean, canoed 700 miles solo across the Yukon territory, chased wild mustangs, raft-floated the Mississippi River, solo-sailed the Caribbean in a 17-foot sailboat, searched for ‘lost cities’ in Central American jungles, hunted bear, caribou, and other big game.” Amidst all this, Vietnam service as a decorated Green Beret medic goes egregiously unmentioned.

In this same connection, one final entry worth mentioning, apropos of authority and authenticity issues addressed below, is Shelby Stanton’s 1993 *Rangers at War: LRRPs in Vietnam*. It was Stanton’s first entry in the particular product line, although he had previously made his mark with a number of publishers as a popular historian of Vietnam combat with what was alleged to be substantive personal experience as a Green Beret combat veteran. In *The Rise and Fall of an American Army: U.S. Ground Forces in Vietnam, 1965-73*, he allowed to go unchallenged, for instance, Col. Harry G. Summers’ description of him in the foreword as “a Vietnam combat veteran decorated for valor and

now retired as a result of wounds suffered on the battlefield.” Shortly after the Ivy issue of *Rangers at War*, Stanton was revealed to have falsified his combat credentials almost in their entirety. Nonetheless, his early “classic,” *Green Berets at War*, was apparently deemed sufficiently saleable to reappear in a 1999 Ballantine reprint. In both cases, the cover copy is now carefully ambiguous about Stanton’s combat record. Presumably to avoid resetting type, the Presidio paperback re-issue of the hardbound *Rise and Fall of an American Army* reprints the Summers preface intact. The cover bio, on the other hand, carefully claims only that “Shelby Stanton was on active duty with the U.S. Army for six years.”

The putatively first-person narratives in the genre sometimes rather conventionally structure themselves according to the protagonist’s entry into military training or arrival in-country and then move into an extended presentation of the experience of combat. As often, however, the reader enters the text in the midst of a gripping mission with background information supplied along the way or developed in flashbacks. Sometimes, as in canonical texts, the 365 days format obtains. Frequently, however, as opposed to well known examples such as Tim O’Brien’s *If I Die in a Combat Zone* or Philip Caputo’s *A Rumor of War*, or in corresponding combat novels such as James Webb’s *Fields of Fire* or Larry Heinemann’s *Close Quarters* depicting the common infantry soldier—the enlisted man or junior officer of the line unit—the Viet Pulp protagonist finds a home in some elite, specialized, highly trained formation. Accordingly, he often extends his time in the war zone or elects for multiple tours of duty, allowing the combat narrative—now extended beyond the standard initiation into warfare—to continue into the realm of more advanced and rare information as he becomes increasingly expert and professionalized at his dangerous task.

Popular history texts, as noted above, likewise frequently bill themselves as the work of authors credentialed by their experience with elite formations, frequently involving multiple tours. They are replete with unit legends, campaign records, and detailed personal accounts of particular combat actions. Indeed, as seen below, their reader popularity frequently depends on how quickly they move from historical overview to close combat focus. Like the personal narratives, they are detailed, specific, and extremely accurate as to the particulars of individual combat experiences and the use of Vietnam era soldier-slang and military terminology. Many include glossaries.

In a word, Viet Pulp stakes its very appeal on being authentic in every way, providing precise, you-are-there, minute-by-minute accounts of combat

action, complete with names and roles of fellow unit members, comrades dead and wounded, details of battlefield maneuver, individual acts of bravery, loyalty, and sacrifice, in many cases apparently vividly recalled and/or reconstructed from experiences decades earlier. Within a given text, we find the particulars of every firefight, ambush, insertion, extraction, move-out or stand-down. In some cases, source records are attributed. Michael Lee Lanning, for instance, in the two-volume memoir described earlier, actually opens each narrative chapter with contemporary journal entries. He further notes his use of letters he wrote during the period. Likewise Joseph Ward's, *Dear Mom—A Sniper's Vietnam*—surely one of the strangest titles in the lot—announces its manner of documentation up front. The book actually arises from information contained in 238 letters the boyish assassin wrote home to his mother. Others admit that they kept unauthorized diaries or journals or have likewise relied heavily on letters written in sufficient detail at the time to accurately reconstruct experience. In the case of unit histories, authors attest to the reliability of individual sources. Those sources, interestingly, now also frequently turn out to be other works in the genre.

For all that, Viet Pulp seems oddly innocuous, curiously generic, a vast number of texts with an incredible specificity frequently nonetheless reminding the reader mainly of each other. *Tan Phu* is a Special Forces book; *None Go Home Alone*, a Marine book; *The Men Behind the Trident*, a SEAL book; *Diary of an Airborne Ranger*, a LRRP book; *Dead Center*, a sniper book. But in significant ways, they are the same book, a hotshot version of what the average G.I. remembers as the battle of the latest bunker complex or trailbend. There are helicopter insertions and helicopter extractions, firefights and ambushes, dustoffs and standowns, the occasional hot meal or cold beer. Radio exchanges, frequently rendered at great length, become tutorials in the phonetic alphabet and the identification of missions and grid coordinates, full of snappy call signs and vintage airwave slang. Radio-telephone procedure is carefully observed. Nobody says “roger” when they mean “wilco.” Nobody says “repeat” when they mean “say again.” And nobody *ever* says “over and out.” (I am reminded here of the snotty marginal notation of an old college creative writing teacher on one of my stories. It may be real, he scribbled, but it ain't writing.) In the case of personal narratives, a quick immersion into combat leads to an ongoing series of such experiences, eventually provoking a crisis of personal and perhaps patriotic purpose and commitment. A growth of military prowess and confidence takes place along with a deepening loyalty to one's unit and close comrades. Deaths of buddies occur along with rota-

tions of platoon and company officers. Frequently there is personal wounding and evacuation, perhaps a hospital stay. Upon return to the unit, tension increases as a tour of duty approaches completion. The narrator-protagonist gets short. Eventually the magic word comes into focus: DEROS. There is the great moment of departure, with some attempts at personal reflection on what the experience has meant. Only rarely, again as opposed to many canonical texts, is there any continuation of the narrative back in the world

The structuring of narrative in virtually all these texts is largely sequential and fairly unselective. Voice is completely generic. Those that derive from personal experience, with their frequent interpolations of anecdote and comment, read like popular history; those presenting themselves as popular history provide an idiosyncratic mix of the personal and the documentary.

They are also cursorily edited. A moment after describing the completion of a successful ambush a given narrator will be expatiating on the relative merits of C-ration offerings or grouching about REMF bastards and their back-in-the-world comforts. What seem to be important details frequently wait for explanations that never really get supplied. *Operation Tuscaloosa*, for instance, is subtitled *2nd Battalion, 5th Marines at an Hoa, 1967*. By Marine veteran John Culbertson—also the author of *A Sniper in the Arizona*—it details his participation in an early battle of the war in which a battalion of marines destroyed a comparable unit of main force Viet Cong. Why is the book called *Operation Tuscaloosa*? Presumably because that was the name of the engagement described. In fact, bookending the photo section of the text is a typographic copy of the headquarters mission order. As it happens, I have made my home for three decades in Tuscaloosa, Alabama. Was some officer a native of the place? Did someone at headquarters attend the University of Alabama? Was there a Crimson Tide football fan in the unit? A devotee of early Alabama history who may have remembered a legendary Indian warrior of that name? The most likely answer is, of course, none of the above, but rather that *Operation Tuscaloosa: 2d Battalion, 5th Marines at An Hoa, 1967*, is the kind of title needed for product recognition. It sounds like another good Ivy paperback, along with *Diary of an Airborne Ranger: A LRRP's Year in the Combat Zone* or *Team Sergeant: A Special Forces NCO at Lang Vei and Beyond*.

Where does one most frequently find the print product? As noted above, entire shelf sections are now devoted to it in big chain bookstores. It also proves ubiquitous in paperback buy and swaps, frequently going out at secondhand prices of two to five dollars. The most significant sales venue of the moment, however, surely has to be that of the large internet marketers—

Amazon, Barnes & Noble, Books-a-Million, and the like. This is also the site, as might be expected, of the most intensive marketing as well. A search for an author or title yields all other texts by the same author or related titles frequently bought by previous customers. A click on a particular item yields an avalanche of further information, including enlargements of front and back covers, a paragraph of exciting description, usually reproducing the cover blurb, and as many as thirty sample pages of text. There follow in a large majority of cases compilations of as many as five to ten reader reviews.

The latter, as might be expected, in their large numbers and in the highly personalized nature of many responses, prove unusually revealing as to who buys and reads these texts. The largest audience seems to be male. Again, if shelf demographics are to be trusted, along with the Civil War and World War II, the Vietnamese war as a subject of popular military history now seems to account for a substantial audience of buffs. Some are Vietnam veterans, themselves now in middle and late-middle age, frequently using their reviews to connect with their own experiences in combat. In the main they write approvingly, offering factual corroboration, praising a given author for telling it like it was, and frequently expressing gratitude for a book written from a perspective they feel to be mainly ignored or disparaged by cultural elites. The same is true of what seem to be male non-veteran readers, many of them Vietnam-era Americans, who frequently base their approval on a wide knowledge of the genre coupled with their own sense of appreciation for the veteran's sacrifice. Interestingly, such responses also include the contributions of many young male readers, frequently identifying themselves as teenagers or writers of book reports, avid to learn of Vietnam combat or of the experiences of fathers, uncles, family acquaintances. At the same time, significant numbers of female reviewers also identify themselves. Frequently they too are members of households in which a husband, a father, an uncle, or some family friend has been a combat veteran of the war. These are distinguished by a particular interest in long-term veterans' problems having to do with combat stress disorders, drug and alcohol dependency, troubled interpersonal relationships, and associated ongoing difficulties of adjustment in the post-Vietnam civilian world. Finally, in response to a flurry of headline-grabbing wannabe activity—itsself, I will suggest below, a phenomenon not unrelated to the extensive marketing and reading of the literature in question—a number of individual readers, self-described as themselves veterans of multiple tours in various elite formations described or as experts with a copious knowledge of the literature—seem to have appointed themselves as authenticity police,

at once singling out exaggerations, inaccuracies, and outright falsehoods, at times calling into question not just the authenticity of certain particulars in the text and the representations of combat experience described but of the author's own claims to have experienced such action firsthand if at all.

For the reader such as myself who served in what might be called the more conventional war of the brigades and battalions in Vietnam, however, or who is conversant with the general literature by and about Vietnam combat veterans, what surely remains most arresting overall about the genre in question is the demographics of subject-matter. It is estimated that 3.5 million Americans served in-country during the Vietnamese war. Of these, by my calculations (as opposed to those of others, which run as high as $\frac{3}{4}$ million) a maximum of 350,000 probably had any extended combat experience in the field with a line infantry, armor, or artillery unit. If the percentage of interest categories here were applied, let's say, to my numbers, just for the sake of illustration, 50,000 would have been snipers, 50,000 would have been SEALs, 50,000 would have been Special Forces, 50,000 would have been Marine Force Recon, and 50,000 would have been Army LRRPs. The 100,000 left over would all have been either marines or members of the First Cavalry and/or 101st Airborne Divisions, except for maybe two helicopter pilots and a medic. I spent my entire tour with an armored cavalry troop, first as a platoon leader and then as an executive officer, operating at one time or another with four different infantry battalions. I saw two snipers the whole time I was there. We had some transfers from the LRRPs, guys I realize in retrospect who must have quit or have been thrown out. They were nothing but trouble. The Green Berets we saw occasionally were expert scroungers and good to trade with. SEALs? SOG? Never heard of them. Marines up north were good for brotherly commiseration, the saddest joke of all. Question: what's the basic difference between the marines and the boy scouts? Answer: The boy scouts have adult supervision. Everyone knew the marines always had the lousiest food and equipment while getting their asses shot off on the worst missions. As for the airborne, most veterans know even today that there was only one combat jump during the whole war, by a battalion of the 173d Airborne, into a landing zone that had already been secured. As for the legendary units, under the standard Vietnam replacement system, the famous 101st airborne division quickly turned into a leg outfit just like everybody else. Ditto with the first cav: all they had was more helicopters. The special operations mystique may have gotten us into Vietnam; but from 1967 onward, major U.S. combat units, army and marine, were all basically conventional infantry, armor, and

artillery. The war they fought was a dismally conventional, large-unit, mass-destruction, meatgrinder war, resulting in the deaths of more than 56,000 Americans, most of them members of standard combat formations, and an estimated two to four million Vietnamese, with a large proportion of these noncombatant civilians.

So what, then, does Viet Pulp, as a relatively recent publishing phenomenon, tell us about evolving popular conceptions about America and the Vietnamese War? One is tempted initially to lament the degree to which a substantial body of literature has now brought us back around to popular glorification of the elite special operations warrior myth—Natty Bumppo in the central highlands, Batman in the Delta; John Wayne in the Iron Triangle, Chesty Puller in the DMZ—that got us foolishly involved there in the first place. It is the same problem, in any event, that pervades the more general literature, running the cultural gamut from Robin Moore's cartoonish *The Green Berets* to Michael Herr's highly-praised *Dispatches*. Virtually ignored as well is any attempt at human representation of the Vietnamese, whether friend or foe. In this regard, all one can say here is that it is, primarily, a combat literature, generally set in enemy territory, where there is little occasion, save for the odd return to some rear area, for contact with Vietnamese not identified unambiguously as VC or NVA.

It is a literature that sits uneasily with an equally copious literature of trauma and recovery. Without much apology, the soldiers in these narratives nonetheless come across then and now, to use Michael Herr's phrasing, as unapologetically high on war, proud of their service and their wartime prowess in dealing death to the enemy. Indeed, if anything, one is struck by how closely these narratives parallel PTSD narratives: prolonged service in heavy combat, extended or multiple tours of duty, increasing absorption in lethal ability and willingness to use it, voluntary participation in increasingly hazardous and secret and/or illegal operations. The only real difference seems to lie in the recurrent emphasis in traumatized veterans' narratives on indiscriminate killing and atrocity. As a recent development in this regard, there is also an increasing literature of psychological and cultural imposterism—a problem itself dating from the tendency of early clinicians, deeply invested in the ideological aspects of the treatment of troubled veterans, to accept stories from an already unprofessionally small and statistically unreliable sample of multiple tour veterans and activists involved in rap groups without checking service records for verification. VA hospitals now report an influx of Vietnam PTSD imitators, touting a garishly implausible history of multiple

tours in specialized hunter-killer units, often claiming experience in multiple branches of service, coupled with the awarding of numerous, high-level combat decorations—multiple Purple Hearts, the Silver Star, the Distinguished Service Cross or Navy Cross, even the Medal of Honor—when in fact they served in Vietnam noncombat assignments or in some cases never left the United States. After all, the worst war stories bring the highest disability ratings and benefits. Nor does it pay to get well. As a result, decades later, common grunts become LRRPs; supply clerks become SOGs and paid assassins in Phoenix program. To complicate matters, well known oral histories such as Al Santoli's *Everything We Had* and Wallace Terry's *Bloods* have also been shown to include false claims of combat experience and ensuing psychological trauma. It is likewise no surprise that well known public impostures frequently involve hair-raising tales of special ops adventures. One the first giveaways of the recent Joseph Ellis scandal, for most veterans at least, was his claim to have been a Vietnam "paratrooper" in the 101st Airborne when that unit did not conduct one jump during the entire war. As regards the literature at hand, the far more garish prevarications of the celebrated popular historian of Vietnam combat Shelby Stanton have already been discussed. One cannot at present make any large connections between Viet Pulp and the false claimant and wannabe phenomena. The myth of the American soldier in Vietnam as stoned heavy killer has been around for a long time, as have cultural representations running the gamut from the literary and cinematic to the clinical. The stories are everywhere, walking the thin line between pathology and overheated imagination. Across the culture, it seems to be one of the ongoing problematic legacies of the war.

Other cherished cultural and academic commplaces about the Vietnam soldier also come in for some new questioning in this literature. If the soldiers in Viet Pulp do not seem to suffer from long-term combat trauma, neither do they come off then or now as particularly alienated from their culture, victimized, betrayed, abandoned, etc. Nor, as working class soldiers, almost to a person the natives of rural areas and small towns or from blue-collar urban backgrounds, do they prove to be particularly ideological. There is frequent anger expressed against the disparagement of military service and traditional notions of patriotic duty by antiwar intellectuals and political elites. But this is done without much overt class consciousness. Finally, as opposed to academic theorizing about Vietnam war narrative, Viet Pulp is invariably nothing if not linear. Nor does it, by its very nature, create some sense of inevitable immersion into a world comprehensible only through complex strategies of

imaginative experimentation. Vietnam may well have been America's heart of darkness trip, the first rock n roll war, the first postmodern swar, as it is variously tagged by theorists of literary and cultural representation. If anything, the depiction of extended combat service here, even among elite warriors, will be largely as many veterans, including me, remember it: laborious; fairly repetitious; mentally and physically exhausting; even in sporadic but inevitable contacts with the enemy, marked by a dreary punctuality; in the endless vigilance and movement between engagements, downright boring.

Still, as with what people find interesting in much popular culture production, in this case allegedly true-to-life representations of American soldiers in combat during a sad and strange Asian war taking place more than three decades ago, timing really does seem to be everything. The last ten years have certainly marked the continuing cultural rehabilitation of the Vietnam veteran. The wild swings in a cycle of figurations ranging from pariah to psychopath to victim to forgotten hero have now stabilized as a whole generation reaching late middle age becomes increasingly reflective about issues of choice and circumstance made by individual citizens decades ago. I, for one, find little surprise in the puffery attending hit status of the current movie, adapted from Hal Moore's and Joe Galloway's book of the same title, "We Were Soldiers Once . . . and Young" as the "Saving Private Ryan of Vietnam." (The movie, I am at pains to interject, is a good deal more than that.) I should add that in this same connection, there is also no question that the Vietnam veteran has profited from lavish valedictories being accorded the vanishing generation of World War II, with a cohort now entering their own later years seen increasingly as trying to live up to the example of their predecessors. The Vietnam soldier, too, now begins to find honor in old age. As to the prestige of combat service, one may also point to the nearly total rehabilitation of the post-Vietnam military generally. A series of late post-Vietnam immaculate interventions, Grenada, Panama, Haiti, largely carried out by special operations units, have been crowned by the dazzling performance in the Desert War and again in the current war against terror of formations combining specialized, elite forces with far larger conventional units including soldiers, sailors, airmen, and marines. Nor has the image of the Vietnam combat veteran suffered by lavish media emphasis on a generation of commanders, in both the Desert War and in the post-September 11 campaigns—Powell, Schwarzkopf, Boomer, McCaffrey, Clark, Shelton, Franks—re-forging an innovative professionalism out of the memory of hard lessons learned as junior officers in Vietnam.

It is in this latter context, I believe, that we ought to see the current popularity of what I have called Viet Pulp on balance as not a terribly alarming development. Accentuate the positive, goes the old World War II song, and that is the generation I grew up trying to emulate. The English professor in me likes the idea that lots of people apparently are still reading book-length writing, period. The Vietnam veteran in me likes the idea that they are interested in reading stories about the personal experiences of American soldiers during the Vietnamese war as a way of knowing at least something about a troubled era in the national history now rapidly passing out of living memory. These, unquestionably, are war stories, frequently of a sort that various students and would-be arbiters of culture may deem pernicious. I must say that I, myself as a veteran, take offense at the dreary uniformity of the sensationalistic entitling and cover copy. In an era when teenagers regularly execute commando plans to shoot up their high schools, I also recoil from the dreadful fascination conveyed in frequent reader reports. As in: "I've read all the sniper books, and this is the coolest." Nor, as a career academic and popular culture interpreter, does this particular emerging genre make me feel particularly good about my inclination to give elite force rock n' roll recondo romanticism a pass under the cultural studies radar all these years as long as it's purveyed by postmodern virtuosos like Michael Herr. It may have sounded sexy in *Dispatches*—"Lurps, seals, recondos, Green-Beret bushmasters, redundant mutilators, heavy rapers, eye-shooters, widow-makers, nametakers, classic essential American types; point men, *isolatos* and outriders like they were programmed to do it, the first taste made them crazy for it, just like they knew it would" (35). In contrast, one is astounded how the actual narratives all come to sound so dismally familiar when all the essential American types get around to telling their stories. Despite the garish titles and the overheated cover blurbs, "High on war" just doesn't cut it here. If Viet Pulp chronicles a war that was a season in hell, it doesn't read like Herr-Rimbaud; and, if the inevitable popular progeny turned out to be *First Blood*, it doesn't read much like Morrell-Rambo, either. As the texts begin to flow into each other, the concentration on the mystique of the elite special operations warrior, particularly in the vast majority devoted to the experiences of youthful soldier-protagonists, melds into the far more conventional structure of the Vietnam initiation narrative. Nor is there much attempt to resurrect or reinstitute the counterpolitics of a lost American idealism. These are disillusionment narratives. Their murky epiphanies mirror those of most of us who went there young: largely misinformed, confused about our convictions, scared about

our prospects, curious about our prowess; somehow already sensing that what we would be fighting for while we were there, was ultimately each other.

On the other hand, let me verify that Viet Pulp titles inside the covers at least do not really glamorize much about war. They do not go lightly on the bad stuff. The sheer physical misery of it, the confusion, the terror, the ugly, graphic woundings and deaths, will be acknowledged with those who were there as the real thing. Nor do they romanticize violence or overplay heroism. The soldiers in these books are, again, mainly like the ones I remember: dutiful, forbearing, incredibly loyal; humorous; poorly educated in many cases but plenty smart; competently brave, in a word, because they find it possible to fashion what is called bravery out of the content of average character.

In the end, it is probably just this simple. Vietnam soldiers are beginning to get old. The increasing prestige attached to their veteran status has emboldened increasing numbers of them to tell their war stories. People want to hear war stories, particularly as they are told by the old ones. They are what they have always been in cultures all throughout history: part of the legend of the tribe.

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