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Through “Star-Spangled Eyes”: *Fortunate Son* and the Problem of Resolution

“STORIES CAN SAVE US,” TIM O’BRIEN WRITES (*Things* 213). But what can we learn about trauma from the life-writing of a Vietnam veteran who committed suicide? In the decades after the American War in Vietnam, veterans produced numerous accounts of trauma. Some of the best non-fiction, Tim O’Brien’s *If I Die in a Combat Zone* (1973), Philip Caputo’s *A Rumor of War* (1977), Michael Herr’s *Dispatches* (1977), Ron Kovic’s *Born on the Fourth of July* (1976), and Lewis B. Puller Jr.’s *Fortunate Son* (1991) challenge the dominant ideologies of the Cold War era, such as American exceptionalism. These memoirs are also intimate responses to war-related trauma. They testify to war’s lasting consequences. Some authors constructed these narratives as ways to cope with their experiences, communicate their memories, and resolve the lasting effects of trauma. The post-modern narrative structures of these books help create the quintessential Vietnam War experience in American memory.

Trauma disrupts the survivor’s understanding of self in relation to the world and defies conventional narrative structures. Trauma also transforms the ways people remember and retell experiences. In this essay, I reconceptualize narrative arcs to acknowledge this transformation by inverting Freytag’s Pyramid. Story-telling customarily includes exposition, rising action, climax, falling action, and resolution. By inverting the structure, the climax becomes the nadir—rock bottom. Reimagining the structure of trauma narratives in this way illustrates the challenges of post-war recovery. Autobiographers often impose resolutions upon their own life-stories. I assert that resolution is not simply a literary device but a social construct that distorts the realism of trauma narratives. The idea of resolution in veteran autobiographies denies the long-term, and sometimes, permanent effects of war. As historian John M. Kinder argues, “war is not a temporary phenomenon, something that can easily be left behind; rather, its human legacies are felt for decades, if not entire lifetimes” (Kinder 11). These autobiographical resolutions reveal the influences of cultural war myths on veterans and result from the soldiers’ attempts to reconcile their preconceptions of war with their actual experiences.

Although this essay primarily examines the post-war chapters of Lew Puller’s autobiography *Fortunate Son*, it will be necessary to discuss other notable memoirs of the

Vietnam War era to emphasize the unique narrative structure of Puller's and demonstrate its problems of resolution. Tim O'Brien resists traditional modes of story-telling in his masterpiece, *The Things They Carried*. O'Brien confronts the limitations of his own memory and experiences in Vietnam by blending fact and fiction, telling and retelling stories that contradict themselves in the text, imaginatively recreating a collective experience of the war, and producing what can be described as autobiographical fiction—creative literature based from lived experience. As Paul John Eakin argues, it “is as reasonable to assume that all autobiography has some fiction in it as it is to recognize that all fiction is in some sense necessarily autobiographical” (Eakin 10). Trauma manifests throughout the war-stories of Tim O'Brien. The author reveals how he relives his traumas during the writing process: “I'm forty-three years old, and a writer now, and the war has been over for a long while. Much of it is hard to remember. I sit at this typewriter and stare through my words and watch Kiowa sinking into the deep muck of a shit field, or Curt Lemon hanging in pieces from a tree, and as I write about these things, the remembering is turned into a kind of rehappening. . . . The bad stuff never stops happening: it lives in its own dimension, replaying itself over and over” (*Things* 31). My analysis borrows O'Brien's language, “rehappening,” to describe the ways trauma resurfaces in the lives and stories of trauma survivors.

Some war narratives contain traces of what I call “ideological shock”—a form of trauma in which violence disrupts the survivor's preconceived worldview and understanding of self in relation to the world. I employ the term ideological shock because no single term exists to define trauma at this level. Its effects are similar to cognitive dissonance, but its causes are different from moral injury—a trauma of the “soul” which happens when someone transgresses their deeply held moral beliefs. Ideological shock appears in numerous Vietnam stories that follow a common pattern: the young man joins the military, answering Kennedy's Inaugural Address; the soldier believes romanticized preconceptions of war based on hyper-masculine representations, such as John Wayne films. When he experiences violence and atrocity firsthand, a rift grows between his understanding and his experience of the world. In the transformation from soldier to veteran, the survivor reexamines his identity and position within the nation. Ideological shock occurs at both the individual and national level because personal and collective trauma are inextricably linked. Historian, Christian G. Appy argues that the “War shattered the central tenet of American national identity”—what he refers to as American exceptionalism. “So deep were those convictions” about the superiority of the U.S.

and its institutions, that “they took on the power of myth—they were beyond debate” (Appy xiii-xiv). Men confronted these illusions while on the ground in Vietnam, and the sudden impact of violence sometimes dissolved romanticized myths of war, manhood, and patriotism. These realizations are not unique to the American War in Vietnam. Literature from the First World War expresses similar messages—such as Wilfred Owen’s, “*Dulce et Decorum Est*” and “Disabled.”

In *A Rumor of War*, Philip Caputo frames the ideological context of the Cold War and describes soldiers’ violent encounters within it: “War is always attractive to young men who know nothing about it, but we had also been seduced into uniform by Kennedy’s challenge to ‘ask what you can do for your country’ and by the missionary idealism he had awakened in us. America seemed omnipotent then . . . [W]e saw ourselves as the champions of ‘a cause that was destined to triumph.’ So . . . we carried, along with our packs and rifles, the implicit convictions that . . . we were doing something noble and good. We kept the packs and rifles; the convictions, we lost” (*Rumor* xiv). As the war became increasingly unpopular, veterans felt betrayed by the government that sent them to go to Vietnam and unwelcomed by the public after their return. As a result, many Vietnam veterans searched for meaning in their sacrifice but could not easily justify their participation in the war.

Tim O’Brien, Philip Caputo, and Michael Herr conclude their stories without resolution. The authors do not suggest that their problems ended when they left Vietnam. The deeper problems are only beginning at the conclusion, as they adjust from war to peace. This feature of war literature is what I call anti-resolution—the conclusion of a war story without resolving the tensions or the problems experienced by the trauma survivor. Because of the extent of their injuries, Ron Kovic’s *Born on the Fourth of July* and Lew Puller’s *Fortunate Son* conclude radically different from the other books listed above. Kovic’s and Puller’s stories are ideological quest narratives in which the writers cope with the difficulties of severe bodily injury that precipitated political consciousness.

The texts of O’Brien, Caputo, Kovic, and Puller are journeys of ideological rebirth. In their introductory chapters (the exposition), they set up a familiar trope of innocence lost. These veterans discuss being seduced by the adventure of war and the need to fulfill the legacy of military service. Caputo explains, “the heroic experience I sought was war; war, the ultimate adventure” (*Rumor* 6). The narratives that emerged after the war challenge the “authority of the father and his military model,” Tracy Karner asserts (Karner 63). The protagonist enters

the military, expecting a heroic adventure, a test of his manhood, and a hero's welcome—a rite of passage into American manhood. "That did not happen," Samuel Hynes argues, because "the war had an anti-war myth of national dishonor. A Bad War after a Good War: it was like a fall from grace" (Hynes 178). Tim O'Brien experiences trauma, crossing this generational divide. In the exposition, he discusses his Cold War childhood, growing up hearing war stories of the "great campaign against the tyrants of the 1940s" (*Combat Zone* 11). O'Brien's literature attempts to reconcile his participation in a war he considered wrong. "I was a coward. I went to war" (*Things* 61). The legitimizing narratives for war punctuate a sense of betrayal and irony in Vietnam when the young soldiers experience the realities of violence. John Hellman explains, "[u]nderlying [these] separate works is a common allegory, an ironic antimyth in which an archetypal warrior representative of the culture embarks on a quest that dissolves into an utter chaos of dark revelation" (Hellman 102). The protagonist discards patriotism as he fights to survive.

World War II provided the dominant archetypal narrative of war; their fathers' stories defined how cold warriors thought about nationalism and American exceptionalism. Philip Caputo writes, "we learned the old lessons about fear, cowardice, courage, suffering, cruelty, and comradeship. . . . We learned about death at an age when it is common to think of oneself as immortal" (*Rumor* xv). The Vietnam veterans endured the hardships of war but were denied the idealized experience of war that they believed was a special rite of passage into manhood. Cold warriors had been indoctrinated to believe that war would be the ultimate test of their strength, bravery, and manhood. The experience would form their lives as men, revered by their countrymen as patriots and afforded a special status as veterans. Vietnam-era writers contextualize their personal struggles within national, political, and ideological shifts away from those of their fathers.

Tim O'Brien invokes the spirit of the Great War poets: "it would be fine to confirm the old beliefs about war: It's horrible, but it's a crucible of men and events and, in the end, it makes more of a man out of you. But still, none of this seems right." O'Brien refuses to romanticize violence. He writes, "Now, the war ended, all I am left with are simple, unprofound scraps of truth. Men die. Fear hurts and humiliates. It is hard to be brave. It is hard to know what bravery *is*. Dead human beings are heavy and awkward to carry. . . . Is that the stuff for a morality lesson, even for a theme?" (*Combat Zone* 23) O'Brien rejects the notion that violence can be didactic. His statement echoes Caputo's Epilogue: "It might, perhaps,

prevent the next generation from being crucified in the next war. But I don't think so" (*Rumor* xxi). Ambivalence creates anti-resolution. The question for readers—what can we learn about trauma from the ways survivors construct their war stories?

Within the structure of war narratives are remnants of the rehashing of trauma. Because trauma reoccurs throughout a survivor's life, it resists resolution in life-writing. O'Brien's memoir avoids this problem. Departing Vietnam aboard a commercial flight, the narrator returns to the United States anticlimactically and the book abruptly ends. "When the plane leaves the ground, you join everyone in a ritualistic shout, trying to squeeze whatever drama you can out of leaving Vietnam. But the effort makes the drama artificial. You try to manufacture your own drama. . . . You keep to yourself. It's the same, precisely the same, as the arrival: a horde of strangers . . . wanting you to share with them" (*Combat Zone* 206). O'Brien spent much of his literary career recreating his war experience, using fiction as a channel to manage the traumatic memories. In *The Things They Carried*, Tim recounts a time when his daughter asked if he had ever killed anyone: "'You keep writing these war stories,' she said, 'so I guess you must've killed someone.' . . . She was absolutely right," the narrator claims—that "is why I keep writing war stories" (*Things* 125). O'Brien implies that his *oeuvre* is the product of his inability to resolve the traumatic experience of Vietnam.

Tim O'Brien warns us to be cautious of literature that rationalizes war. In the chapter of *The Things They Carried* entitled, "How to Tell a True War Story," he asserts that a "true war story is never moral. It does not instruct, nor encourage virtue, nor suggest models of proper human behavior, nor restrain men from doing the things they have always done. If a story seems moral, do not believe it. If at the end of a war story, you feel uplifted, or if you feel that some small bit of rectitude has been salvaged from the larger waste, then you have been made the victim of a very old and terrible lie" (*Things* 65). Alluding to Wilfred Owen's "*Dulce et Decorum Est?*"—O'Brien suggests that resolution perpetuates dangerous ideologies.

In his autobiographical essay, "The Red Write of Courage," Philip Caputo helps us map the structure of war narratives. He argues that telling a true war story "requires a minimalist approach to character and plot because modern war destroys or at least blurs human character, and it does not conform to archetypal cinematic narrative, with its setup, its three acts divided by 'plot points' and its final resolution" ("Red Write" 43). With these problems in mind, he wondered if the best way to capture his Vietnam experience was fiction or documentary. "Most of the enduring literature of war," Caputo writes, "from the *Iliad*

through *The Thin Red Line*, was fictional. The imagination seemed to shed a brighter light into the truth of war . . . than a slavish adherence to facts” (“Red Write” 39). He explains the “truth of war” by quoting William Tecumseh Sherman, “War is cruelty. You cannot refine it” (“Red Write” 39). Caputo thought the best way to communicate his experience was to use “novelistic techniques, the idea being to show rather than tell the reader what it was like to fight in Vietnam” (“Red Write” 40). For these reasons, Caputo wrote *A Rumor of War* as a journalistic memoir instead of a novel.

A Rumor of War resists the archetypal narrative structure just described. With the final moments of his tour of duty, it concludes anticlimactically like O’Brien’s memoir: “The plane banked and headed out . . . toward freedom from death’s embrace. None of us was a hero. We would not return to cheering crowds, parades . . . We had done nothing more than endure. We had survived, and that was our only victory” (*Rumor* 320). Caputo creates an impression of uncertainty—an appropriate rhetorical move that recreates the anxiety of a generation of combat veterans returning from Vietnam—an anti-resolution. Ten years after his first tour, Caputo returned as a correspondent. The epilogue briefly recounts his rushed evacuation from Saigon during its fall: “‘The end of an era.’ I suppose it was, but I was too tired to reflect on the historical significance of the event in which I had just taken part: America had lost its first war.” Capturing the mood of a generation of amnesiac and “war-weary” Americans in 1975, Caputo writes, “We took the news quietly. It was over” (*Rumor* 328).

Michael Herr’s *Dispatches* and the New Journalism with which he reports on the American War in Vietnam relies more on cinematic narrative structure. Maggie Gordon argues that Herr employs “film as the basic paradigm of structure” in *Dispatches*, its “genre as Classic Hollywood Narrative” (Gordon 17-18). John Wayne war films are its closest archetype. Michael Herr subverts the traditional plot structure from the beginning, “Breathing In.” The introduction immerses the reader into Vietnam instead of an exposition that builds up toward the conflict. He describes conditions in the field and the “death from above” helicopter assaults. In Herr’s story, “all the mythic tracks intersected, from the lowest John Wayne wet dream to the most aggravated soldier-poet fantasy” (Herr 20). The author contextualizes his account within Cold War ideology and then contradicts it. He facetiously writes, “Hearts and Minds, Peoples of the Republic, tumbling dominoes, maintaining the equilibrium of the Dingdong by containing the ever encroaching Doodah; you could also hear the other, some young soldier speaking in all bloody innocence, saying ‘All that’s just a *load*, man. We’re here

to kill gooks. Period.’ Which wasn’t at all true of me. I was there to watch” (Herr 20). Ambivalence and irony appear throughout these narratives frequently enough to suggest a common theme in Vietnam War literature.

Anti-resolution marks the introduction of *Dispatches* when the author recounts the reintegration of a green beret. The veteran experienced psychological trauma after his unit was ambushed. Only he survived, by hiding beneath the corpses of friends. “I just can’t hack it back in the World,” the veteran admitted. He confessed that “after he’d come back home the last time he would sit in his room all day, and sometimes he’d stick a hunting rifle out the window, leading people and cars as they passed his house” (Herr 5). Unlike other writers of the war, Herr confronts the postwar in the introduction, acknowledging the lasting effects of trauma from the start of the story.

The conclusion of *Dispatches* mirrors its introduction. Herr’s “colleague” writes, “[b]ack in the World now, and a lot of us aren’t making it. The story got old or we got old, a great deal more than the story had taken us there anyway, and many things had been satisfied. Or so it seemed . . . we were simply tired. We came to fear something more complicated than death, an annihilation less final but more complete, and we got out. . . . We got out and became like everyone else who has been through a war: changed, enlarged and . . . incomplete” (Herr 243-44). Herr emphasizes the transformation after war, a change that’s irreversible and never whole. Herr also concludes his book anticlimactically: “it didn’t end like any war story I’d ever imagined. . . . The war ended, and then it really ended. . . . And no moves left for me at all but to write down some few last words and make the dispersion, Vietnam Vietnam Vietnam, we’ve all been there” (Herr 259-60). This passage reflects the nature of a trauma narrative—the repetition of the experience. The war story does not resolve; it repeats, circles the wound, folds back upon itself, and collapses under its own heaviness.

The structure of Ron Kovic’s *Born on the Fourth of July* appears cyclical, a narrative that traces the edges of the war wound. The first chapter opens in the moments after his injury. The conclusion details the circumstances of the wounding. “All I could feel,” Kovic concludes, “was the worthlessness of dying right here in this place at this moment for nothing” (Kovic 222). Shot in the foot and the shoulder, the marine suffered a spinal cord injury, and his memoir depicts the struggles of adjusting to his disability as well as the intellectual evolution that followed him home from Vietnam. After being injured, Kovic underwent an ideological shift to the left and became an influential anti-war protestor. *Born on the Fourth of July* is a story

of reintegration, ideological rebirth, and political quest, with an elliptic narrative structure that gravitates toward the trauma of the body.

Kovic's ideological narrative travels between a dichotomy of childhood innocence and traumatic experience, a common theme in the Vietnam War canon. The author revisits his childhood twice in the memoir. Both reflections of childhood follow scenes of bodily trauma—once at the beginning and once at the end. The final page returns nostalgically to his backyard, a space where he could play baseball, and Mickey Mantle was still his hero. He could hula-hoop and experience young love; he “could live forever” (Kovic 224). He reminisces of a time when he thought of himself as immortal and his country invincible. Kovic grew up in middle-class suburbia, sheltered in the privileges of post-war America. The baby-boomer recollects fond memories playing baseball—and war games. He idolized Mickey Mantle, Audie Murphy, and John Wayne. He volunteered for the Marine Corps in 1964. In the new introduction to his 2005 edition, Kovic writes, “we cross certain thresholds where there is no going back, no return to the innocence we once knew; the change is utter and irreconcilable” (Kovic 15). These reflections acknowledge a permanent change that war inflicts upon its survivors. The narrative structure of his memoir emphasizes the importance of this transformation.

Kovic attempts to resolve the ideological conflict of the memoir at the climax of the story, just before the story returns to Vietnam. In this scene, Kovic recounts the 1972 Republican convention. He protests President Nixon's policy in Vietnam on live national television. Kovic recalls, “[t]his was the moment I had come three thousand miles for, this was it, all the pain and the rage, all the trials and the death of the war and what it had done to me and a generation of Americans It was all hitting me at once, all those years, all that destruction, all that sorrow” (Kovic 182-83). The tension in Kovic's narrative builds toward this point. When he interrupts Nixon's speech, the Secret Service agents forcibly remove him. The crowd spits on him and calls him traitor. “So this is how they treat their wounded veterans!” he responds (Kovic 183). In tears he ends the chapter—“[w]e had done it. It had been the biggest moment of our lives, we had shouted down the president What more was there left to do but go home? I sat in my chair still shaking and began to cry” (Kovic 184). Kovic's description suggests closure or fulfillment; however, the chapter appears as anything but resolution. The scene describes a nation divided, conflict, “pandemonium”—an anti-resolution (Kovic 184).

These anti-resolutions seem representative of the Vietnam War experience because the trauma is both personal and collective. As veterans try to readjust from war, many must also reconcile their losses in an unpopular, and what many consider, unjust war. Vietnam veterans served in the first major war the United States lost. The long and painful withdrawal ended anticlimactically. The desperate end to the morally ambiguous Vietnam War contributed to the inability of veterans to reconcile their participation, and their stories reflect these crises.

The following sections of this essay explore the problem of resolution in Lewis B. Puller Jr.'s *Fortunate Son* and suggest that this literary device in war-trauma narratives is often a fictionalized, misrepresentation of the realities of combat-injury and post-war readjustment, a lingering relic of heroic war adventure stories. Puller's Pulitzer Prize-winning autobiography has received surprisingly little scholarly attention since its publication. The autobiography portrays Puller's life, eclipsed by the shadow of his legendary father, Lewis "Chesty" Puller—the most decorated marine in the history of the Corps. Lew Puller could never "reconcile [his] father's triumphal return from World War II with [his] own" (Puller 234). Comparing his own military experience to his father's propagandized service record, Puller struggles to accept his physical limitations and doubts his masculinity throughout the text. Although Puller received a Silver Star for his conduct on the battle field, he believes that he failed to live up to his father's image. As he begins to question the justness of the war, he considers throwing his medals upon the steps of the Capitol. At the foreground of the text, Puller questions the worth of his bodily sacrifice—a quadruple amputation—both legs, his left hand, and several fingers on his right hand.

Fortunate Son moves along a system of constructed resolutions, throughout which Puller's quest toward rehabilitation and the process of readjustment become frequently interrupted by the return of the narrative to chaos. This series of resolutions results from the irreparable damage to the body and his inability to cope with the invisible wounds of war. As Puller embarks on a journey of "healing," the trauma rehappens at intervals, marked by personal loss. The trauma manifests in numerous ways both psychologically and emotionally. Trauma theorist, Cathy Caruth suggests, "trauma is not locatable in the simple violent or original event in an individual's past, but rather in . . . its very unassimilated nature—the way it . . . returns to haunt the survivor later on" (Caruth 4). Caruth calls it the "double wound," identifying "the repeated infliction of a wound" (Caruth 3). However, she also suggests that "the breach in the mind's experience of time, self, and the world, is not, like the wound of the

body, a simple and healable event” (Caruth 4). I disagree with her premise; severe bodily trauma is not always “healable,” and physical injury can precipitate psychological trauma, survivor’s guilt, and moral injury. Lew Puller’s bodily and psychological trauma exacerbate one another throughout his life. The rehappening of trauma led to his death decades after the injury. Caruth explains, “the survival of trauma is not the fortunate passage beyond a violent event . . . but rather the endless *inherent necessity* of repetition, which ultimately may lead to destruction” (Caruth 62-63). Lew Puller leaves behind a footprint of the rehappening of trauma in his autobiography. The trauma narrative follows a cyclical pattern of improvement and decline. The problem of resolution relates to what Caruth describes as “the enigma of a human agent’s repeated and unknowing acts” and “a human voice that cries out from the wound, a voice that witnesses a truth” that the trauma survivor “cannot fully know” (Caruth 3). The resolutions raise a false hope that the worst is finally past.

Throughout *Fortunate Son*, patterns of movement toward resolution are followed immediately by relapse, creating a cycle of readjustment, resolution, and rehappening. The tensions between Puller’s drive to overcome the war and his inability to recover from the wounds illustrate underlying problems that have led to a systemic crisis of readjustment problems that veterans still face today. Two years after winning the Pulitzer Prize and after decades of suffering from physical pain, depression, addiction, and a myriad of social and emotional afflictions, Lew Puller committed suicide on May 11, 1994. As Elizabeth Grubgeld argues, the “shadow of Puller’s last months and his terrible death colors any reading of his autobiography, but within the text itself lies a fundamental tension between the upward movement toward a narrative of quest and rebirth, and the gravitational pull of the language of the body, which threatens to return the quest to the agony of chaos” (Grubgeld 198). Lew Puller’s suicide proves the artificiality of his resolution. Puller’s inability to recover from the wounds of war disrupts the narrative structures of heroic journeys. His death reminds us that trauma sometimes never heals.

As a theoretical framework to analyze the trauma narrative in *Fortunate Son*, I employ Arthur Frank’s concepts of the restitution, chaos, and quest narratives as defined in *The Wounded Story-teller: Body, Illness, and Ethics*. Frank conceptualizes these forms of story-telling that attempt to give voice to illness. Restitution narratives have the basic plot: illness is a temporary phenomenon that the body will overcome. At the end of the restitution narrative, the story-teller is as “good as new”—similar to resolution (Frank 77). Chaos narratives are the

opposite of restitution, in which the quality of life never improves. While gradual improvement defines the linear trajectory of the restitution narrative, the chaos “story traces the edges of a wound that can only be told around. Words suggest its rawness, but that wound is so much of the body, its insults, agonies, and losses, that words necessarily fail” (Frank 98). Chaos is a narrative of disorder in which the voice of pain has no language and the body has no sovereignty. Frank identifies another cultural form of illness narrative, the quest. This is a form of story-telling in which illness becomes a journey and personal suffering can be didactic. Quest narratives are the most popular memoirs of healing, as Lew Puller writes his to be.

Despite the subtitle—*The Healing of a Vietnam Vet*—Lew Puller’s trauma remains unhealed at the end of the autobiography. The chaos narrative exists just beyond the text because, as Frank suggests, it is incommunicable. The chaos narrative appears more recognizable during Puller’s most vulnerable states during the following episodes: immediately after his wounding; during the death of his father; after his political defeat; his alcoholism; and his attempted suicide. Chaos narratives force the acknowledgment “that life sometimes *is* horrible. . . . This horror is a mystery that can only be faced, never solved,” (Frank 112)—or *resolved*. “In the chaos narrative,” Arthur Frank claims, “troubles go all the way down to bottomless depths. What can be told only begins to suggest all that is wrong” (Frank 99). Puller’s autobiography recounts numerous episodes of recovery and relapse, a perpetual cycle of trauma that both drives the narrative forward and disrupts the trajectory of restitution. For purposes of brevity, this essay will focus only on three chapters of *Fortunate Son* in which Puller imposes resolution upon the unresolved traumas in his life: after his release from the hospital; after the death of his father; and at the end of the book after his attempted suicide, when he begins to recover from alcoholism.

Puller’s physical trauma narrative begins with his wounding. Puller hit a booby-trapped landmine constructed from a howitzer shell, and the lower half of his body instantaneously vaporized into a “pink mist” (157). Puller recalls the moments after the explosion:

As I drifted in and out of consciousness, I felt elated at the prospect of relinquishing my command and going home to my wife and unborn child. . . . I could not see the jagged shards of flesh and bone that had only moments before been my legs, and I did not realize until much later that I had been forever set apart from the rest of humanity. (157)

In the initial moments after the blast, Puller feels relieved to leave the Vietnam battlefield, but leaving his men behind created survivor's guilt. This moment is the first of many constructed resolutions in the text. His tour of duty was over. He was returning to his wife and unborn child—wounded but alive. The passage creates a stark contrast between Puller's need to fulfill the duties of the husband and the father—and the mangled body that “set [him] apart from the rest of humanity.” He “did not realize” the extent of his injuries. His body would require him to redefine his understanding of what it means to be a man. In his reflections, we hear a haunting echo of a Holocaust survivor when asked to reflect on his liberation from a concentration camp: “Then I knew my troubles were *really* about to begin” (qtd in Frank 106). The nadir of his physical trauma narrative lies in the hospital scene at the beginning of Chapter V.

Near death, Puller experiences the chaos narrative. The “unremitting pain . . . was by now a constant companion I was also receiving morphine injections every three or four hours, and my memory of the . . . next several weeks remains clouded” (Puller 163). His wounded body becomes a sight of horror. The trauma overwhelms the witnesses so that they cannot see past the pain. It is unimaginable. Puller's twin-sister confessed that “her initial impulse on seeing [him] was to pray for [his] death” (163). The chaos narrative is so powerful and overwhelming that it threatens all around it. Puller writes,

Toddy was nearing the end of her pregnancy, and there was a very real danger that her anxiety and the shock caused by my wounding would precipitate an early delivery. She promised to return as soon as possible and even then left reluctantly, but I was too absorbed in my own suffering to enjoy the company for long of even those I loved most dearly. . . . I was completely helpless. (165)

The chaos narrative consumes Puller's world, endangering the lives of his wife and unborn child. Puller projects his anxiety onto the reconstruction of this memory—that his presence burdens the lives of his family. This feeling becomes a recurrent problem throughout the text. His anxieties are rooted in military masculinity—which indoctrinates young men to believe self-reliance and freedom are the highest virtues, and a man's intrinsic worth depends on his independence.

As he readjusts to his “helpless” body, Puller’s ideological understanding of the world undergoes a process of rebooting. The body begins to heal, but the chaos narrative becomes the dominant mode of story-telling. As Puller recounts these agonizing weeks in the hospital, he emphasizes the anesthesia that numbed the pain. The writer attributes this episode as the crux of his addiction. Lew describes the pain as suffocating and dehumanizing. Puller recollects,

By the end of my first two weeks in the intensive care unit, the odds favoring my survival had improved considerably, although to the unpracticed eye the reverse must have seemed the case. Several times a day my bandages had to be changed, and without morphine the ordeal was so painful that I was quickly reduced to the level of a snarling animal. (165)

The wounds leave him “completely immobile” and dependent on others to sustain his life. His body destabilized his identity as a man and as a marine (165). The agony reduces the man to a sub-human state, “a snarling animal.” Pain deprives Puller of his most human characteristic—language. Trauma specialist in the language of bodily pain, Elaine Scarry theorizes, “[p]hysical pain does not simply resist language but actively destroys it, bringing about an immediate reversion to a state anterior to language, to the sounds and cries a human being makes before language is learned” (Scarry 4). Incapable of consuming food, the corpsmen gavage Puller, force-feeding him through the nose. Puller’s sixty-pound body is rotated constantly in a mechanical device to help prevent the inevitable bed sores. Puller’s body undergoes a traumatic series of operations and recoveries. The medical procedures give a sense of time, chronology, and structure to the chaos narrative, and as he begins the years-long process of physical rehabilitation, the chaos narrative recedes. The veteran embarks on a quest of post-war readjustment.

At the end of this section of the autobiography, Puller has survived. The writer constructs a literary trope to resolve this chapter in his life—he rides off into the sunset. Part One of his autobiography concludes with him behind the wheel—symbolic of his mobility—driving into the dusk with his son in the backseat and his wife by his side. Puller writes:

we had passed the hospital and were headed south toward Virginia and home, and I watched the gray central spine of the hospital in my rearview mirror until it passed from sight. For a long time neither of us spoke. When I finally turned my head toward Toddy, she smiled and squeezed my arm just above the elbow. I was a civilian for the first time in our marriage, and she was two and a half months pregnant with our second child. From the car radio a line from a song by Creedence Clearwater Revival interrupted my reverie, and I wondered if it augured well for my family: “Tryin’ to find the sun, I went down Virginia seekin’ shelter from the storm.” (249)

The end of the first half of *Fortunate Son* ends with hope. Puller creates a resolution, leaving the hospital behind and the military in the past. The memory emphasizes the wife’s touch to the wounded body. Lew recommits to his marriage, performing the role of husband and father. Growing within his pregnant wife, the promise of new life drives out the darkness of the narrative. New possibilities suggest that the worst could be over. Driving into the sunset gives readers a misleading impression of happily ever-after. When Puller returned from Vietnam, he had remained isolated in a hospital. His injuries delayed the difficult transition from war to peace. “When liberation from the hospital comes, as welcome as it is, one’s real trouble begins: the trouble of remaking a sense of purpose as the world demands,” Arthur Frank writes (105). The ominous foreshadowing hints to the difficult road to recovery ahead. He stares into the rearview mirror, unable to look away from his past. The Creedence Clearwater Revival lyrics give us a hint to the coming of a “storm.”

“Some folks inherit star-spangled eyes.” The lyrics of “Fortunate Son”—the anthem of a generation—provide a glimpse into the relationship between Lewis and his father Chesty Puller. From Lew’s earliest memories, Chesty served as the model of military masculinity and the embodiment of American exceptionalism. “Some folks are born made to wave the flag.” “There was no soul-searching agony” about the decision to volunteer for combat duty in Vietnam. “I could not have faced my father, or lived with myself if I had chosen an easier way,” Lew recalls (47). Fulfilling his family legacy both defined his choice and created lasting shame. Lew confronted the impossibility of reaching the unattainable standards by which he judged his own manhood—the mythologized persona of Chesty the war hero. Lew accepted without question the ideological worldviews of his father and adopted the creed of the “Old

Breed” of the Marine Corps. Lew equated the love between father and son to an idealized relationship between nation and citizen. Lew wanted to become what the war hero symbolized—a warrior bound by honor—a man and a patriot. When Chesty Puller dies, Lew experiences an ideological rebirth. In the wake of his father’s absence, Lew searches for meaning in his war experience and finds purpose helping other veterans. This need drives his quest.

In an interview, Puller says, “I think it's a bigger book than Vietnam.” The book is as much about relationships as it is about war. Puller continues,

This book is certainly about some difficult things, but it's about some beautiful things too. It's about the power of love and relationship between a man and a woman, and a man and his father, and a man and his son, and a man and his country, and a man himself, and those are all love relationships, which are all resolved satisfactorily. (Interview)

However, these relationships are not resolved satisfactorily. For decades after returning from Vietnam, the symptoms of trauma deeply impact his interpersonal relationships. He is incapable of providing the emotional stability that his family needs. His struggles with addiction and alcoholism irrevocably damage his marriage and his relationships with his children.

Fortunate Son articulates the lasting impact of war on families and illustrates the intergenerational trauma of father/son military legacies. After Chesty survives a stroke, Lew attempts to communicate with his father. Lew’s parents visit shortly after the birth of their granddaughter. Puller had been struggling to come to terms with his war experience. He was beginning to question the value of his losses. Left to themselves, Chesty and Lewis try to empathize with one another. Puller recounts their first and final conversation about the Vietnam War:

. . . his faltering efforts to begin sentences made it obvious that something was bothering him. . . . I gradually became aware that he was trying to discuss the war with me. When I realized how important the conversation seemed to him, I tried desperately to fill in the gaps in his phrases and to anticipate what his

questions were, but the effort was heart-wrenching for both of us. He seemed to understand that the United States was not winning the war, a situation he found bewildering, and he wanted to know how I was handling our lack of any positive results. I tried to assure him that I was fine; but my words had a hollow ring even to me, and I realized this dear sick old man knew the agony in my heart and what trouble I was having finding meaning in my experience. . . . It was the only conversation my father and I ever had about the war. As I look back on it, I find it excruciatingly sad that while my father was ready to talk about it, he was unable, and while I was able, I was unready. (262)

Puller felt betrayed by his government and the American public. He sought resolution from his father, but the efforts to communicate fail. The tension in this scene reveals an inaudible desperation. A stroke left Chesty voiceless. The once omnipotent hero becomes powerless. The sense of frustration between the father and son mirror the frustrations so symbolic of the Vietnam War. Uncharacteristically vulnerable, his father reaches out for the first and final time, but the moment slips through Puller's war-torn fingers. Unresolved regret reverberates, as Lew expresses the evanescence of last chances and lost opportunities.

Lew Puller constructs the death of his father as an allegory of the United States military in Vietnam. As his father's strength weakens, Lew's support of the war declines sharply. He begins to think critically about previously unquestioned ideals, such as American exceptionalism. Chesty became symbolic of the once limitless strength of United States, and as his body fails him, Lew realizes that America was losing its first war. Puller recreates the memory of seeing his father in a state of helplessness:

My father lay bare-chested on his back in the middle of a sterile field of starched white sheets, and his hands secured to the chrome rails of his bed by restraining straps. He was struggling hard against the straps, but his movements were convulsive, and he seemed unaware of his condition. . . . [T]he respirator tube that was taped to his nose made an obscene rhythmic sucking noise that for a few moments was the only sound in the room. My first impulse was to pull the tube from his nose. (256)

The straps and the tubes give the impression of a torture scene. Seizing his dying body, the convulsions are the language of the body in chaos. The impulse to release his father from his condition seems important to the allegory. To pull the tube from his nose would have been merciful, but it would have ended any hope of winning the struggle.

This image of his dying father haunts Puller's memories. Driving home from the hospital, he "played and replayed [his] first sight of him in intensive care" (257). Puller had drawn his strength from his father all his life, and in a moment of introspection, he began to recognize how much he still needed his father. He writes, "I did know that I needed his help in coming to terms with my own experience," but "there was very little strength left in my father on which I could draw (257). Their relationship had been constrained by gendered expectations, in which men neither express weakness nor ask for help. He regrets the words left unspoken. "I laid my head on my dead father's chest and wept for a lifetime of missed opportunities," Lew remembers (269). The idea of a restitution narrative denies the possibility of unresolved relationships, unfulfilled life, or unexpressed love. The relationship between Lew and his father was expressed in the incompleteness of the chaos narrative.

Ideological shock draws from levels of personal and collective trauma. For Puller, the two are inextricably linked by the trauma of the body, grief for his father, and disillusionment with the war. Immediately after recounting the final communication with his dying father, Lew discusses his growing interests in peace activism. Remembering the veterans who marched on the Capitol and threw away their medals, Puller writes, "soldiers and marines, many of whom had paid for their perspectives with shattered lives and shattered limbs . . . were now saying that their sacrifices had been meaningless, that my sacrifice had been meaningless" (263). He recalls, "For years I had been hearing similar rhetoric from antiwar spokesmen and whose ideology was foreign to me; but I was now hearing it from those young men whose kinship with me had been forged in the bloody crucible of Vietnam, and its impact, like a fog lifting from a shrouded landscape, stripped me of my remaining self-delusions." (263) Puller transformed his grief and disillusionment into social activism, deciding to dedicate his "career to addressing veterans' concerns" (278).

In 1975, Puller served on the Presidential Clemency Board, which granted pardons to draft evaders and deserters. This experience galvanized his conviction that the war was unjust. "[I]t was unsettling to me" Puller writes, "that the individuals most directly affected by the war require forgiveness while the architects of the war bore no stigma at all" (285). Lew searched

for meaning in his personal losses by advocating for other veterans. Ideological shock impacted Puller as deeply as the violence of the war itself. He describes it as “shattering an experience as the loss of my legs and a dozen good friends in Vietnam to discover face-to-face the arrogance and the blindness that so often passed for leadership during the Vietnam era” (290). During this time, Puller resolves to exercise an antiwar ideology from within the political system by running for Congress. His eventual defeat only increases his sense of betrayal. A hawkish conservative, whose privilege insulated him from the war, won the election in a landslide—by “wrapping himself in the American flag” (300).

The activism to which Puller had attached his own recovery dissolves in a wave of alcoholism that carries him to the brink of suicide. Lew risks not only his career—but the abuse threatens his relationships. He writes, “I slept late each morning, often drank my lunch . . . and ended my days brooding alone in darkness . . . with a half-empty scotch bottle” (330). Puller becomes a belligerent drunk. He feels worthless and drinks himself to sleep most nights. He begins “to isolate” and “avoid social occasions and “seize on any pretext to maintain [his] self-imposed exile” (332). Alcoholism disrupts the trajectory of his narrative as his quality of life plummets. His depression and dependency stem from the ideological shock. Puller writes, “I also became *more* obsessed with the Vietnam War, and I dwelt endlessly on the unfair treatment and lack of respect that my fellow veterans and I received from the media, from society, and from our government” (332). Lew realizes, “I was going to have to give up my crutch before my children realize that their father was becoming a lush,” but he “always found some excuse to continue drinking” (332). His family, alone, did not inspire Lew to survive. The pattern of Puller’s self-destruction comes into full view.

Drinking delayed the post-war readjustment process for over a decade. He writes, “[f]or years I had used alcohol to numb the pain of my Vietnam experience and the loss of my legs, and now in what I regarded as cruel irony, alcohol was failing to bring the relief of oblivion” (333). He drinks more excessively. He confesses, “[a]fter six months on the job, I could tell I was becoming powerless over my ability to control my drinking, and though terrified about my situation in a way I had not felt since Vietnam, I dared not reveal my dark secret to anyone” (333). He tries to hide the drinking from his family, but “Toddy sensed that something was severely wrong” (333).

The consequences of trauma threaten his life. Puller laments, “too isolated to ask for help, I decided that I was a failure as a lawyer, a husband, and a father, and I began contemplating suicide” (334). Puller reconstructs a (second) attempted suicide scene:

I wrote Toddy a brief note telling her that I loved her and the children and that what I was about to do was not her fault. I then drank half dozen shots and called a prominent Vietnam veteran in New York whom I barely knew to tell him what a rotten deal we veterans had gotten from our country. After the phone call, I had one more drink, went to the car, and tightly closed the garage and kitchen doors. I put the key in the ignition. For what seemed like an eternity I sat behind the wheel with my hand on the ignition key and tears streaming down my face and thought about never seeing my family again. Unable to turn the key and suddenly feeling the effects of so much vodka, I decided to put my head down on the seat for a few minutes before getting on with my plan. When I came to several hours later, Toddy was standing over me, screaming and slapping my face, and all I could think was that my suicide gesture, like my life, had been a failure.” (334)

Readers can identify the chaos narrative reemerging in this passage because Puller constructs the suicide attempt with clichés. The clichés attempt to penetrate the incommunicability of chaos. He summarizes the content of the note with a trite expression: it’s “not [your] fault.” Interrupting his suicide attempt, he reaches out to another veteran whose only connection is the experience of Vietnam. His attempt becomes an extension of his helplessness. Puller’s survival reaffirms his sense of failure and weakness. He checks in to a psychiatric ward, “diagnosed as clinically depressed” (334) Again, Puller loses agency, as “strangers plotted the course of [his] future” (334). He feels “humiliated and shamed to have so lost control of my own life that professional help was needed to piece me back together” (334).

Puller begins to recover gradually as he sobers. The narrative trajectory changes again. “[M]y flagging spirits revived, and I became more hopeful” (334). Therapy helps with the depression but he “gained no real understanding” of the problem (335). Lewis expresses frustration with his therapist. “I wanted my doctor to tell me that I was healing. On a few occasions I brought up the Vietnam War . . . but I decided that there was no point in pursuing

it with him since he, like most young men, had never served and had no reference point for my feelings” (335). Puller’s inability to reintegrate seems as much psychological as it is social. He drinks to cope with the memories of the war, but sobriety does not help him connect with other people. It continues to get much worse before it gets better.

Puller’s self-destruction makes him an inconsiderate father and husband. Puller describes himself as a helpless man, a selfish husband, and a dysfunctional father:

Toddy did her best to maintain appearances and keep the family and our relationship going, but I was far too self-absorbed to grasp the heroism involved in her effort. When lovemaking became an impossibility during the nighttime, she accommodated me by accepting my advances after I had awakened in the morning, but there was no joy and no tenderness in my desperate attempts to prove myself still functional. On those rare occasions when my head was clear enough for self-reflection, my conscience reminded me that Lewis and Maggie were getting old enough to realize what was wrong with their father, but while I did not want them to remember me as a hopeless drunk, I was powerless to alter my self-destructive course. (338)

He obsesses about the ability to perform sexually. Unable to provide stability as husband or father, he feels hopeless, powerless—broken. Puller “drink[s] just to feel normal” (339). He drinks at work to make it through the day, and he drinks at midnight to avoid withdrawal. Puller’s self-medicating becomes self-destructive. He spends his days “engaged in a life-or-death struggle” with “demons” from his past (339). John Talbott argues, “[t]he urge to drink is a common impulse of soldiers haunted by reenactments. Take the case of Puller, whose wounding . . . became his life” (Talbott 442). His wounding also became his death. At the nadir of his psychological traumatic narrative, alcoholism consumes his life. Puller writes, “At four o’clock in the morning, with the house silent and the almost totally dark, I was now in a world of my own, and I wondered if I would ever rejoin the world of the living” (343). It takes being alone to want to reach out for help. Toddy leaves him and takes the kids. At one of his lowest moments, he makes a choice—to survive.

Puller’s language reflects the heroic narrative structure illustrated by Freytag’s Pyramid as he enters a falling sequence. “Over the next several months,” Puller writes, “I came down

from the pink cloud that had eased my transition into sobriety” (363). As he comes down, “[t]he descent” is “gradual” (362). He moves toward resolution, as he “learn[s] to deal with [his] long-unresolved feelings about Vietnam” (362). He comes to the realization that the source of his tension lies “internal rather than external” (362). Puller writes his resolution as a spiritual epiphany:

I realized the Vietnam War had been over for ten years. If I were going to come to grips with it, I would have to change because events happening a decade earlier could not change. When I looked at it that way, it became easier for me to accept the fact that I had lived while so many of my comrades had died and even eventually to take pride rather than feel guilty about having survived. I also came to see that while the Vietnam War was a tragic mistake and never should have been fought, my role in it had been honorable as circumstances would permit. I had not performed perhaps as well as my father might have; but I had done the best I could, and it was time to move on to new challenges. (362)

The author reconstructs the moment of resolution relying on trite language that resembles the utterances of Alcoholics Anonymous members when they recite a version of the Serenity Prayer: “God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, courage to change the things I can, and wisdom to know the difference.” Puller mentions many of the unresolved problems that resulted from the war which had nearly severed his relationships with his wife and children. The trauma had led to ten years of alcoholism, two suicide attempts, and social stigmatism. He had battled depression and survivor’s guilt for nearly a decade. He had missed his opportunity to reconnect with his father. To claim he simply could not change the past appears a superficial cliché. A few months of sobriety could not resolve the untreated illnesses which had plagued Puller’s life, as he claims. Puller’s participation in Alcoholics Anonymous facilitated recovery from addiction, but alcohol was self-medication for deeper, unhealed wounds. At the source of his problems was the Vietnam War and its consequences to his body, mind, and social life. He acknowledges Vietnam as the source of his problems, but he falls back on personal definitions of honor to reconcile his participation in a war he considered dishonorable. He compares his service to his father’s heroism but tries to reconcile his

shortcomings. He moves forward by searching for a nobler cause. Perhaps recognizing the fragility of his recovery, Puller leaves the impression of uncertainty. Twice more in the final chapter, he alludes to Creedence Clearwater Revival's lyrics, "went down to Virginia seekin' shelter from the storm" (Puller 362, 369).

Puller begins to process the war by memorializing. The Vietnam Veterans Memorial Wall resuscitates him back to the world of the living. Puller decides to write "an autobiography in which [he] would surrender the Vietnam War," suggesting that the book was created as a type of exposure therapy (363). Puller's quest narrative transforms into a testimony of suffering and "turn[s] illness into moral responsibility" (Frank 137). The act of writing becomes another form of advocacy for other veterans. Frank notes, "[t]elling his story is the final discharge of his responsibility" (Frank 163). The traumatic "journey is a process of learning that their own suffering touches and is touched by the suffering of others" (Frank 178). The book inspired a generation of Vietnam veterans, but its lessons remain relevant in the twenty-first century. Puller's autobiography reveals the need of support systems, the love of family, and higher causes to which veterans can dedicate their lives. And as Puller's life and death show, survivors need lifelong access to counseling and support services to recover from trauma.

Lew Puller's narrative is driven by a need to find meaning in war, but he discovers purpose in supporting veterans. Winning the Pulitzer Prize and National Book Award for *Fortunate Son*, Puller became a symbol of resilience in the face of adversity. The writer recreated himself in the image of a role model to whom other survivors could aspire—as a man who overcame trauma through perseverance. Like his father—the image became a myth. Post-text, Puller's life continued down a trajectory of self-destruction.

The subtitle of *Fortunate Son: The Healing of a Vietnam Vet* illustrates most poignantly the problem of resolution in autobiographical trauma narratives and the cultural misconceptions of war-injury. The subtitle denies the complexity and longevity of trauma. My analysis has revealed the instability of Lew Puller's recovery. Because alcoholism was a symptom of the trauma not the cause, Puller's narrative of healing remains surface-level. Contrary to the book's claim, sobriety did not bring resolution. Puller battled chronic pain and unhealed wounds from Vietnam. When he fell and broke his hip, all at once the traumas resurfaced and suffocated Lew's life. He became addicted to opiates. His marriage fell apart. When his wife Toddy left him, Puller had neither the strength nor the motivation to recover.

Lewis Puller turned a gun on himself, ending his life on May 11, 1994. In his obituary, Toddy wrote: “To the list of names of victims of the Vietnam War, add the name of Lewis Puller. He suffered terrible wounds that never really healed.”

The Vietnam Veterans Memorial excludes the names of veterans who killed themselves, denying the recognition of suicide as a casualty of war. The Wall reflects cultural attitudes toward war, trauma, and suicide. Recognizing the permanency of war wounds will enable us to develop a more integrative process to help veterans reintegrate, one that does not stigmatize or minimize trauma. Memorialization as a healing process seems another construction that masks the underlying problems of the war. The Wall did not heal ideological ruptures in the aftermath of the Vietnam War. Americans have not sufficiently come to terms with the consequences of the war in Vietnam. Those lessons are desperately needed in the twenty-first century, as another generation of veterans return carrying the costs of a Global War on Terror.

Ideological shock triggered a fundamental transformation in Puller’s understanding of the United States and its wars. The Epilogue describes a scene in front of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in 1989—months before the fall of the Berlin Wall. Puller ritualizes remembrance, donning his “fading ribbons,” and searching the “crowds [for someone] with whom [to] share some connection to the past” (371-72). He finds solidarity with veterans of the Soviet-Afghan War—men he once considered America’s greatest enemy. “I became aware of how similar to me they really were. They wanted to build a memorial in the Soviet Union for their fallen comrades, whose sacrifice they regarded as having been for nothing. They felt alienated from their own countrymen, and they did not understand why the poorest and the least educated in their country had been called to fight” (372). He understood his own traumatic experience as “universal with men who have been to war” (373). His activism became transnational. Lew Puller dedicated his survival to peace and advocacy. Puller attempted to make amends for the destruction he caused. Wanting to create a living memorial to the Vietnamese victims of the war, he returned to Vietnam the year before his death. With other veterans, he established the Vietnam Children’s Fund, an organization dedicated to educating Vietnamese children. Puller’s legacy is reparative.

Lewis Puller’s autobiography represents many of the problems of Vietnam veterans, but studying *Fortunate Son* gives us only a limited understanding of the full impact of trauma. Oral history interviews with people of color, women, and other working-class veterans offer

a more inclusive understanding of war and its effects on survivors. We must also pay more attention to the impact of intergenerational trauma on families and document the consequences of service from their perspectives. For as much attention to the relationship between Lew and his father, strikingly absent from *Fortunate Son* are the voices of his own children. Finally, we should bear in mind that while the effects of trauma on perpetrators of violence are lasting and terrible—the impacts on recipients of violence are far greater.

“[T]hose forever youthful ghosts memorialized in stone” speak to the permanent consequences of war (371). When listening closely to war stories, we recognize why so many rely on tropes, metaphors, and rehearsals of the same tired description: *war is hell*. War stories are chaos narratives of collective trauma—and chaos narratives are incommunicable. Survivor narratives are cultural quest narratives rooted in the instability of chaos. Puller’s recovery remains fragile at the end of the autobiography. A consistent pattern emerges in *Fortunate Son*—readjustment is frequently disrupted by the rehashing of trauma. Another Creedence Clearwater Revival song, “Have You Ever Seen the Rain,” seems appropriate: “There’s a calm before the storm, I know; It’s been comin’ for some time . . . ‘Til forever, on it goes. Through the circle, fast and slow, I know; It can’t stop, I wonder.”

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