Reading, Writing, and Going to War
An Interview

During the last decade, North Carolinian Clyde Edgerton has published six novels: *Raney* (1985), *Walking Across Egypt* (1987), *The Floatplane Notebooks* (1988), *Killer Diller* (1991), *In Memory of Junior* (1992), and *Redeye, A Western* (1995). Before becoming a figure on the landscape of Southern fiction, Edgerton taught English at Campbell University in Buies Creek, North Carolina. Earlier still he completed 167 combat missions over Southeast Asia. His 1988 novel, *The Floatplane Notebooks*, and his more recent short stories, "Venom" (*Southern Exposure*, Fall 1991) and "Search and Rescue" (*Southern Review*, Summer 1994), spring directly from his involvement in that conflict. This interview took place November 1993. The interview was conducted by Christopher D. Campbell in Durham, North Carolina, where he found Edgerton before an antique Smith Corona in the office of Dusty's Air Taxi and Bush Pilot Service. In this interview, Edgerton talks about his approach to teaching literature, and about the interplay of his reading, his fiction, and his experiences in the Vietnam War. Mr. Edgerton has received numerous writing awards, including the Lyndhurst Prize and a Guggenheim Fellowship.

=

Campbell: My first question has to do with the title of our journal. I'm curious to know your reaction when you first saw it.

Edgerton: I thought back to my own experience in the war, but also I thought about the tensions that might be produced studying war and literature and art. My belief about making war, assumes that there are threats to a way of life—in our case what we can call a democracy—and therefore, a need for

defense. Now, in war, in my experience in the military, the norm was—and it seems to make sense—you don't ask questions. What is demanded of a person in a military situation is obedience. For the mission to be accomplished, the obedience is necessary. In that context though, of being a part of a war machine, people still have an opportunity to read and study. And that creates a certain kind of openness. There is a certain mystery and a certain stance of rebellion against authority which is a part of art.

Campbell: A little Meredith in all of us. [Meredith is the central character of Edgerton's *The Floatplane Notebooks.*]

Edgerton: Yeah. So when you put all that together—war, literature, art—in a university where truth is supposed to prevail as a consequence of discussion, it seems to me it could be very interesting.

Campbell: If you were going to put together a core literature course for a military academy—one that every cadet preparing to be a military officer would have to take, how would you approach it?

Edgerton: I would give them some choice. I would take maybe a list of thirty novels, and give choice. And I would certainly include my favorites if I were teaching it. That would be Twain, Hemingway, Eudora Welty, and Flannery O'Connor, at least. I would include those people because what I would be trying to do is allow the student to see in the teacher enthusiasm for the subject. A student who sees that is more likely to develop a habit of reading, and to be led where that student is meant to be led, whether it's left or right, or conservative or liberal, or rabble rouser or fanatical follower. So I would try to be enthusiastic and to create a permanent reading habit by reading what I enjoyed most, rather than trying to prescribe what content they needed. I wouldn't worry about that so much because the only reason I'm teaching this class is to get students to read for a lifetime. So I've got to pick what I'm very

excited about. We can talk about it, and they can see it's meaningful in my life. That's what I'd teach.

Campbell: Among your own books, one that excites me is *The Floatplane Notebooks*. When you wrote it, did you have a major theme in mind?

Edgerton: I don't think I did. At some draft my editor told me that it was about loss, and I didn't disagree with that. I wanted to get history, boyhood, and my experience in Vietnam—of the war that I went into willingly and came out of with questions about what I had chosen to do with my life—into the book.

Campbell: What did you fly?

Edgerton: I flew OV-10s—the same as Mark [another character from *The Floatplane Notebooks*] —reconnaissance over the Ho Chi Minh trail.

Campbell: An image from the book that's always stuck out in my mind is of the VC walking along the road and Mark's shift to equating that with someone back home going to the store for a loaf of Merita bread. Was that an experience that you had?

Edgerton: It's funny how that scene came about. It was one of the most memorable mornings of my wartime experience, which lasted a little less than a year. It was a 167 combat missions and probably another hundred in training or as an instructor. A lot of missions, and a lot of hours. I don't know how long I'd been flying out there putting in air strikes, but I'd never seen a person until that morning. I was flying looking through the binoculars and there's this guy walking along the road. Somehow it had never quite registered before. But the image of this person walking along the road seemed so normal. That person did not seem like an enemy. And what I had in mind when I went out there every day, beneath that jungle, was *enemy*. I mean something ferocious, scary as hell, because we did believe—and it's probably true—that they would chop your head off.

Campbell: Mark says that.

Edgerton: That was the rumor. And so, it was scary. But here, against that view, that mental view, was a real person, just clomping along the road. And I knew I had to write about that when I was writing a book, but I didn't know how to write about it exactly. But I also had all these munitions manuals that I brought back with me, and as I was working on the book I was going through all of my Air Force material, and in all this stuff were these dry munitions manuals. So I had this scene about this guy written, and I had all these manuals, and it seemed to me that somehow I just needed to put them together and whatever would come out of that was something I wanted to write down. So, I just did that. What I wanted the reader to do was to read this munitions stuff till the reader got bored and dull and tired. So I put that together and that's a scene, I think, which works pretty much the way I wanted it to, and I like to read that [at public readings]. Although my editor doesn't like for me to read that scene, it seems to get the effect that I want.

Campbell: Why do you think she doesn't like for you to read it?

Edgerton: I think maybe it makes her uncomfortable, and she doesn't like for an audience to be uncomfortable.

Campbell: Do you think that an audience should be comfortable reading about war?

Edgerton: Oh no. I think not. I think it's impossible to bring to a reader the environment of war. Just like it is impossible to bring to a reader death. You can't do it; you can only approximate it and hope that it will arouse something in readers—certain readers, not all readers—that will kind of approximate that emotion, if that's what you're trying to do. And it's not an easy thing. It's one thing art's about—*trying* to duplicate. And that being uncomfortable, being frightened, being exhilarated—all that exists in all wars.

Then you run into the question of this particular war. You have to talk about this particular war in a different way. So when thinking about and talking about one war—like when I talk about my experience in Vietnam—I know I'm always talking about two things: my experience in war, and my experience *in the Vietnam War*. And my experience was at a distance. There was no blood, no hand-to-hand combat. There was no watching my friends die. There was a situation which in some ways could be worse or better, and that is waiting for them to come back and their never returning and then listening to people talk on the radio who are trying to find them while you're waiting for them to come back. This business of just disappearing into the air has negative consequences, like seeing people die has negative consequences. All in all, though, I would say the impact on me of the war is less in some ways than it is if you were in hand-to-hand combat and were holding on to someone when he died.

The closest I came to that would be in a non-combat situation, when a friend of mine died in a crash and I was in charge of gathering and cataloging all his belongings, and writing his family, writing his fiancée, whom I knew, and gathering up his clothes, his boots with the seams all burst—when he hit the ground it burst the seams—and his watch, which was stopped at a certain time. Gathering up all that and having the person who was in charge of the morgue ask me if I wanted to come in and see him, which I didn't. But that was the closest personally I came, and this was a friend, and I'll never forget that.

Campbell: So Meredith's injuries are . . .

Edgerton: Meredith is completely made up. I had to call a doctor about some of the things. I didn't want to get into it too much because the whole point is not to be distracting, and I think when you're talking about these medical things you can be distracting by being precise. But you can also be distracting by being evasive. And I wanted to get it just right so that the reader wasn't distracted, so that it was believable. But I didn't know anybody who was wounded that way. I

could probably name three or four people who helped me make up that character, including some of myself, but the character himself is no one in particular.

Campbell: I noticed in *The Floatplane Notebooks* that you touched on most of the major wars since the Civil War. Was that intentional?

Edgerton: I realized that there were unspoken things in my family about war that I wanted to write about. I grew up with stories of war. My Uncle Clem was in World War I, lost his left arm, came out of the war an alcoholic, and finally shot himself, in 1978, on my bed, with my father's shotgun. Watching his life, living with him in the same house, only years later learning that he was a depressed, lost soul probably in a good part as a consequence of being in the trenches in World War I, and being overcome with mustard gas, going for seventeen days in all these pits without changing clothes, twenty-four hours without having any attention to his arm, after his arm had been shot off. I moved him up to World War II in my mind and in my fiction—in *Raney* anyway, just because he was so old, being born before 1900.

And then I grew up with this story of Yankees in my grandmother's yard stealing meat and her pouring hot water on them and telling them that she hoped they burned in the belly of hell. That's a family story, and I can show you the actual place where they were sitting on the ground. Whether or not it's true I'm not altogether sure, but I've heard the story all my life.

Even though the Civil War is so central to the South, I remember thinking, in maybe the fourth or fifth grade: who was Grant and who was Lee—which side was who on? The only name I ever heard was Sherman. That was the one. That was the hated name, and I knew he was on the other side.

Campbell: Going back to Vietnam and *The Floatplane Notebooks*, how similar are Clyde Edgerton and the character Mark in their war experiences?

Edgerton: One of the main differences, I guess, is that Mark stayed in the Air Force, and I didn't. But I had never planned to

stay in. I'd always planned to teach English, but I wanted to fly airplanes. And that was my ticket in 1962. All I had to do was sign up and pass all the physicals in ROTC, and I could get my boyhood dream of flying jets, which was, for both Mark and me, pretty much the same.

Campbell: Well, you've answered one of those open-ended questions that's left at the end of any book. Because it ends in 1971, Mark's time due the Air Force for training wouldn't have been up yet. Now we know that Mark stays in.

Edgerton: That's right—he stays in. It doesn't say? I didn't know that it didn't. But that's my guess.

Campbell: He's still in the Air Force at the end of the book, but it doesn't say whether he stays in longer.

Edgerton: Actually that touches on my philosophy of the author's relationship to the work. It's so much dependent on the reader. Because it's made for the reader, not for the author. And I, as an author, have to experience it at least twice. I experience it as a writer and then I try to read through it objectively, as if I'm a reader, to find out what's distracting about it that may have come from the author that I as a reader don't need. And then, later on, if people do ask me about the characters *after*, you know, they don't exist after. I mean, they exist, yet a reader is free to do whatever the reader wants to with them. And what the reader brings to the book in terms of experience and observation and imagination determines the characters for that reader. It means they're going to be a little bit different than they are for the reader who's next to him, or next to her. And it means that they're going to be a little bit different than they are for me, the author. It doesn't mean anything goes, but it does mean that there's a certain fluidity there that depends on the reader's experience, which opens up interpretation and opens up meaning, I think, to a comfortable, reasonable degree. I disagree with writers who come to a work and think they own it to such extent that only they have the authority to answer questions about what's true about the characters.

Also, a person who has a background similar to mine may find that their lives and feelings resemble Mark's even more than mine really does. But that resemblance, rather than duplication, is what happens, in my view, in fiction—in my fiction. When it becomes duplication it becomes autobiography, or an attempt at autobiography. And usually, when I'm working with a real character—based on a real person or an incident that happened to a real person—I don't write very long before the split takes place and I've got this new, fictional character who is Uncle Hawk, who may resemble my Uncle Bob, but he will resemble him like neighbors in a community of neighbors resemble each other, or brothers may resemble each other.

Campbell: Knowing a little of your history, your military experience in particular, it's always been Mark who struck me as being the most autobiographical. I've always remembered the image of the VC on the jungle road and the bird-huntng scenes—with the quail that quivers—as probably being real.

Edgerton: I tried to make those bird-hunting scenes, *scenes*. I mean *real*. That makes an interesting point I've never thought about before. I try to make real fictional characters, but I try to make *real* real scenes. I try to duplicate, not the scenes, but the feeling that's a consequence of the scenes. You can't duplicate the scenes unless you're a painter or photographer, but you can duplicate details that may bring the scene on in the mind of the reader. If a reader's had similar experiences, that especially helps. I think a person who has hunted quail will find more in that quail-hunting scene than a person who hasn't, because nothing can be brought back to the non-quail hunter. But, if I did that quail-hunting scene right, things can be brought back.

I first shot a quail when I was eight years old. And then after that at some point, if I didn't kill a bird with the shot (probably fifty percent of the time they're not dead), I would grab him and pop his head over my heel or sometimes the gun barrel. But if that didn't work, then you felt that quiver. I felt bad about that. I felt awful about that. And I always imagined that

nobody else felt that way—certainly not my uncle and my father and my buddies. So, of course, I'd never talk about it.

Campbell: But you talk about it in *The Floatplane Notebooks*.

Edgerton: I do. I'm free to do it there, because it's Mark and not me.

Campbell: I don't remember any of your other novels really touching on topics of war very much.

Edgerton: In fact, I had a scene in *In Memory of Junior*, which was too heavy for the book and which is now a short story, "Search and Rescue." It's the most concentrated war story I've written, with the exception of one called "Venom." But the scene as it appeared in *In Memory of Junior* was so heavy that I had to take it out.

Campbell: Can you think of any other ways your military experience surfaces in your writing?

Edgerton: When I got out of the Air Force and went to graduate school to study American Literature, I took a Black Literature course, with Blyden Jackson, and I wrote my term paper about racial prejudice and classism or rankism in the military—in the Air Force. The military is ripe for arrogance of power. And the segregated South was ripe for arrogance of power. So I was outraged at that, in a way. And also, I felt, not necessarily deceived by my government, but not fully informed either. I believed in the need for civilian control, and I also believed in the need for a military arm, which is a point of view I satirized in *The Floatplane Notebooks* with the brother Thatcher.

But I also realized while I was in Vietnam—or came to believe, slowly—that we shouldn't be there. And I had to rationalize my being there. And I rationalized it by remembering I had buddies in South Vietnam. I was protecting them by bombing or having the trail bombed. I was keeping them from getting blown up down there. That's kind of the way I talked my way through the end of it. But by the time I got there, seeing the nationalism that

existed in Southeast Asia, and how these people hated each other, I started to see that it wasn't so much a matter of making the world safe for democracy as I had thought and had been led to believe.

Campbell: Do you think of the sort of dehumanization of that forest and that horrible enemy down there as being a sort of racism?

Edgerton: No. No. Although I did deal with a racism, it was an incredible dual attitude. It's never as simple as it seems. There was this racism of language. We'd call these people "gomers," "slopeheads," and so on. So you got that on the one hand, but on the other hand there was a great respect for the enemy. And the way it showed up, oddly enough, and no one ever complained or it didn't seem odd, was when an airman was leaving to go back to the States. On his last night, there'd usually be a party, and there'd be toasts. And it was not at all unusual for an airman to propose a toast to—and he wouldn't say the "gomers," or he might—but to the people on the ground, on the trail, because they were so tenacious and so unbelievably brave to go against what they were going against, like ants. They kept coming. The B-52s would drop tons and tons and tons of bombs in wide areas, and they'd keep coming through. So there was this respect for these people, and also this racism toward Asians, all together in some odd way.

Campbell: In your first novel, *Raney*, isn't the black friend of her husband someone that he met in the Army?

Edgerton: Johnny Dobbs. He was one of his best friends in the Army. And that was based on an experience that happened to me when I was in the Air Force. I was just out of college, and had grown up in this racist atmosphere, or at least the language was very racist. But I grew up in that, and was from the South, and there was this one black pilot in my squadron in Japan. He was from New Jersey. He had never been south, and we didn't have many Southerners in the squadron. He later told

me that he was a little wary of what my views might be. But we ended up being very, very close friends. And I brought that out of the Air Force as a good experience and tried to put it in a novel in *Raney*.

Campbell: I also noticed in *The Floatplane Notebooks* that men and women are very distinct in their views of war. It's Bliss who's most sensitive to what's going on with Meredith and what's going to happen, and who feels an anxiousness for the whole family as they seem to avoid that realization. Do you think that there is a gender difference in the way that men and women react to that topic?

Edgerton: I think, in Bliss in particular, I have these characters representing my own views on this war. Bliss didn't think that it was going to be worth it. And I think that in the case of Vietnam, it was not worth it. I think in the case of other wars that it sometimes has been. But I don't feel Vietnam was worth it. I think Bliss had an angle on this whole thing which a very old and wise person might look back and have. I think the fact that she's a woman is coincidental. In any case, she didn't think the war in Vietnam was going to be worth it. Somehow she intuited that. Even though her vantage point was not that of a military person, nor of a civilian leader, nor of a politician, nor necessarily of a voter. Her vantage point was somewhere else. My job is to tell stories about relationships between people, in which different points of view get revealed. It's often much easier to know my characters' points of view than it is my own sometimes.

Bliss's view reflects a little bit my own mixed feelings when the Gulf War started. I saw on TV these interviews with these fighter pilots after the first day or two, and I had this almost brotherly need to be there to help these guys out and do whatever I could. But as soon as I heard the first one was dead, I started thinking about next spring—that this dead pilot would miss it. And somehow, that debate that all people have about all wars—is it worth it?—I saw differently than I would have when I was young. I wouldn't have thought about me or anybody else

missing a spring, about how incredibly valuable spring is, or about how we can or should weigh and talk about these things–missing a spring and going to war.

Campbell: What would you say is literature's role in that discussion of whether a war is "worth it"? For instance, can you remember any particular ways literature, the arts, or even the movies of the time shaped your war experience?

Edgerton: I'm not aware of how they did. Not so much literature, because if anything, most war literature would probably, in balance, be considered anti-war literature, I think because it's easy to write about that. Plus I hadn't read much literature about war, but I'd seen a lot of movies. I saw Audie Murphy when I was into war heroes. And I looked at Audie Murphy—he was a war hero and now a movie star—and, man, what a thrill to be a hero. What a charge to kill a bunch of whoever and come back to parades and tickertape. What a great, glorious, honorable kind of wonderful thing to do, especially for democracy and right and God and freedom and all that. So, I think I had a dose of "heroism" in movies and in culture growing up, and it made me somehow eager.

I did see a commercial, at some point, where a guy's flying the F-104 and he does the aileron roll, and they recite the poem "High Flight." That made me want to fly worse than anything. So I signed up for ROTC. It just ended up that my time flying airplanes came at about the same time a war was happening. In *A Separate Peace* this guy ends up being killed. He goes into war as a consequence of seeing a commercial about a snow skier who was an army person, and that was the sale. You could be in the army and you could ski. And that's why he wanted to go in the army. He was killed; I wasn't. But we were both victims of sales. That commercial with that guy flying—that pilot in the F-104—that got my blood going, the juices revved up.

And I experienced that feeling of being a hero when I was in the war. Mainly it was when I was taxiing the F-4 in Japan, and there were tourists on rooftops looking through binoculars. And also when I was taxiing out to fly combat missions in the OV-10,

and there were Thais working on the runways to whom we would always flash peace signs and they would flash them back and then we would go do our thing. And there was being in control of that machine, and sitting up there with that white helmet—everything I dreamed that I could ever get out of that, I got. But I'm older now, and the question is: was war worth it? And the answer is like in the ending of *The Great Escape*—it depends on your point of view. And my point of view was close enough to the fiancée of my friend to recognize the horror that we can get ourselves into while looking through these feelings of heroism which are there when you're in your big machine.

Campbell: Do you think that it's possible for literature and art to ever make that horror real enough to cause people to hesitate?

Edgerton: I'm sure it has. Again, it's so complicated, but I think it does, and I think it could, especially in older people. I'd be much more reluctant to fight in a war now than I was when I was twenty. And I think most older men feel the same way, whether they're in the military or not. When you look at the death rolls of any war with the ages out beside them, you find out something. I think that most of the personal, first-hand accounts of war are not all that glorifying. Again, it depends on the war and the situation.

I think that if I could have gone through a situation in my training to become a warrior that said, "I want you to think about what you're doing and *why* you're doing it," I would have been happier as a warrior somehow, or I might not have gone. But you can't argue against the power of norms among men or women. You've been through four years of ROTC, and then you've been through a year of pilot training, and another six months of flying the F-4. So this camaraderie is so powerful that the whole business of any kind of moral question gets pushed aside. You don't have room or time for that.

Campbell: Did you consider those questions during the four years of ROTC? Did you have to? Were there teachers who were trying to raise that awareness through the literature that they taught?

Edgerton: The war was popular then. I was writing right-wing, anti-peacenik poems for *The Daily Tarheel*. And there was just this teeny minority of people against the war. Then I was sucked up into flying, and to exhilaration, and to the academia of studying to be a pilot, which took a lot of time. And I missed it, the peace movement. I was out of the whole anti-war movement in flying airplanes in this little cockpit looking at my altitude and trying to stay alive. And then when I was in the war, I started to think, "What the hell are you doing here?" But as a young warrior it would be good to answer these questions considerably beforehand.

Campbell: Do you have any favorite works about the Vietnam War other than *The Floatplane Notebooks*?

Edgerton: I haven't read them. The only one I read was *A Rumor of War*. I've just somehow not wanted to read them. It's like I had enough of it. I was over there. I felt it. I was around it. I sensed the horror in it, and I haven't especially wanted to read about it so I haven't. I don't know why I read *A Rumor of War*.

Campbell: Well, if you've read enough about it, have you written enough about it? Did *The Floatplane Notebooks* cleanse that need?

Edgerton: No, it didn't. That's why I wrote this short story for the *Southern Review*. It's a fairly long short story. It's about a guy who hears his buddy die on the ground. I heard a guy die. It wasn't my buddy. It was somebody I didn't know, but I was in the process of flying cover for him. He'd been shot down. We talked for about fifteen or twenty minutes until the rescue people got there. But there was a cloud cover and they couldn't get down to him. They had two A-1E's and me, and the helicopters were waiting up north, and we had radio contact with him below the cloud cover amongst the Laotians. So we tried to find him—went down below the cloud layer and went down the valley two or three times, getting heavy ground fire. We couldn't find him, but we could talk to him. And he started screaming, and you could hear the gunfire.

over the radio. He'd been shot. So we heard him die—or heard him stop talking. I did. And I've never been able to write about that, until this short story. □

Christopher D. Campbell is a major in the United States Air Force. He has flown as a navigator in KC-135s. He is currently pursuing a Ph.D in English at the University of Virginia.