

Darkness Carried

W. D. Ehrhart's Memoirs

The 1995 publication of *Busted: A Vietnam Veteran in Nixon's America* completed Bill Ehrhart's autobiographical Vietnam War trilogy. Ten years before, *Vietnam-Perkasie: A Combat Marine Memoir* initiated the work, followed, in 1989, by *Passing Time: Memoir of a Vietnam Veteran Against the War*. My reading of the trilogy was reversed. I read *Busted*, then worked my way backwards to *Vietnam-Perkasie*, an account that is, by my lights, the best single, unadorned, gut-felt telling of one American's route into and out of America's longest war. That is not to say that the route out has brought cure. Like the country he fronted, Bill Ehrhart has been poisoned by the experience. Throughout my reading of the trilogy, I kept hearkening to Tim O'Brien's actual and metaphorical caution from "How To Tell a True War Story": *If you don't care for obscenity, you don't care for the truth; if you don't care for the truth, watch how you vote. Send guys to war, they come home talking dirty.*

In the first pages of *Vietnam-Perkasie*, Ehrhart recounts his uneventful, earnest, and normal youth. He read books about John Paul Jones, Pecos Bill, collected money for UNICEF, heard the dinnertime admonishments about starving Chinamen, respected Ike, and began each school day with the Lord's Prayer and the Pledge of Allegiance. On Memorial Days, he rode his decorated bicycle in the town parade. He knew by heart the Twenty-third Psalm and the Gettysburg Address, and suffered nightmares about Sputnik. His favorite game was war, and favorite toy, a Christmas-delivered, battery-powered .30 caliber machine-gun mounted on a tripod stand, with simulated sound and flashing barrel.

I mowed down thousands with it. Everybody wanted to be on my side, until I broke my plastic miracle hitting the dirt too realistically. For a long time afterwards, I

was regularly appointed a dirty Commie. It was almost unbearable. (*Vietnam-Perkasie* 7-8)

In tenth grade when Kennedy was shot, Ehrhart traveled to Washington to stand in line to view the casket. He took fully to heart the dead President's mild reproof, "Ask not for what your country can do for you; ask what you can do for your country." He followed the Cuban missile crisis and worried over the huffing Khrushchev. As Ehrhart's senior year in high school neared its finish, he had lettered in track and been elected a member of the National Honor Society. He had been granted admission by four universities. Then teachers began to stop Ehrhart in the school halls to congratulate him, for Ehrhart's photo had appeared in the local weekly, standing beside the Marine Corps recruiter, in front of the school. Because he was still seventeen, Ehrhart had needed his parents' signatures.

For the next 300-odd pages, Ehrhart carries us to boot camp, to Vietnam, and, as the short-time and returning vets termed it, "back to The World" again. The concluding scene in *Vietnam-Perkasie* brings us to a boy at a dance-bar in a town near the Marine Corps Air Station at Cherry Point, North Carolina. After thirteen months in Vietnam, he's still underage, too young to legally drink, to vote, or to buy and title a car (with his war-earned money) without signed parental permission. He's drunk and sad. None of the women will dance with him.

I thought of the young woman with the AK-47, the one in the photograph I'd taken off the dead Vietcong. I thought of the woman in the gun pit in Hue. After awhile the beer made thought impossible. My stomach heaved up and down. I went to the men's room and threw up. I left the bar. I called Jenny [his high school sweetheart] from a pay phone and begged her and begged her to love me, running out of change about the time I realized that I was talking to Jenny's dorm counselor. I went back to the base and masturbated in the shower, passing out beneath the warm stream of water before I finished. (*Vietnam-Perkasie* 311)

Here is enough impotence, forlornness, and shame for us all. Between the opening and this closing paragraph of *Vietnam-*

Perkasie, the text breathes—a living thing—a memory, confession, and cry against our or any nation which ignores the links between its ordinary citizens and the geopolitical decisions and ambitions of its leaders. As I worked through Ehrhart's prose, it became increasingly impossible to not hear five presidents—Truman to Nixon—vowing not to be “the first U.S. president to lose to Communists!”

Busted, the trilogy's final volume, is, to my mind, more sophisticated in both its structure and politics, but *Vietnam-Perkasie* is its source, and *Passing Time* the bridge. But, always, Bill Ehrhart's honesty as a person and writer is full-faced, up front, and clear.

“Anybody wanna get laid tonight?” asked Wally, grinning.

“Where?” asked Seagrave. “Here? In Hue?”

“Yeh,” said Wally. “We found a whore over at the University. She'll take us all on and it won't cost us a single piastre. All she wants is food.”

“A fuck for a box of C-rations,” added Mogerty.

“A case?”

“No. One box. One meal per fuck.”

“Count me in,” said Hoffy.

“Why not?” said Seagrave.

“All right!” Wally whooped. “Get some!”

“Where's all this gonna happen?” asked Seagrave.

“I got a buddy in the 60-mike-mike platoon by the river,” said Mogerty. “It's all set up. He'll let us use his gun pit if we cut him in on it.”

“Someone's gotta stay here on radio watch,” said Seagrave.

I thought about volunteering. I wasn't sure I wanted in on a gang-bang. But I wasn't sure I wanted out, either. The idea repelled me, but it aroused my curiosity, too, and I didn't want the others to think I wasn't game.

“I'll keep an eye on the radio,” said Morgan. “You guys go on.”

The rest of us slipped into the darkness, moving cautiously in single file as though we were on any

ordinary patrol. It was raining. Mogerty led us to the river, found his friend, and the two of them muscled the little 60-millimeter mortar out of the gun pit. "I hope to hell we don't get a fire mission," said the friend. Wally arrived a short time later with a Vietnamese woman wearing dark silk trousers and a light silk blouse. It was too dark to see how old she was or what she looked like. Wally and Mogerty counted heads—six—and paid for all of us: one-half a case. We sat in the rain, smoking and listening to the gunfire coming from the other side of the river, while each of us took his turn. No one said much.

When my turn came, I jumped down into the pit. The woman was sitting up on some cardboard, protecting her body from the mud. She was naked from the waist down. I didn't know what to say or where to begin. "Chow Co," I said. "Hello." She just grunted softly, and fumbled for my belt buckle. Her hands were cold. I undid the buckle myself, and dropped my trousers. Cold air and rain bit at my buttocks and tightened my thighs. I hadn't had much experience at this sort of thing but even I knew that the woman's awkwardness and stiff body suggested either inexperience or deep hatred. "Probably both," I thought. My stomach felt sick. I finished quickly, pulled up my trousers, and climbed out of the pit.

"I don't think she was a whore," I said to Hoffy as we sneaked back through the rain toward the MACV compound. Hoffy said something that I couldn't hear. "What?" I asked.

Hoffy leaned into my ear. "So what?" he said. (*Vietnam-Perkasie* 263-4)

If *Passing Time* traces the political development of a Vietnam vet attending college, then *Busted* brings us an Ehrhart to whom the only sensible escape is escape. Having survived both war and college, his goal is to ship out as a merchant marine, to clear the mainland of the nation he'd killed for. In a sweep aboard ship, he is "busted" for a vial of marijuana. All the while we are moving towards Ehrhart's on-and-off-again federal trial, Nixon is sinking

forever deeper into the murk of Vietnam and Watergate. In an embarrassed argument with his mother, Ehrhart comes to a simplified but telling postulate: "So marijuana is illegal, but it's okay to drop napalm on gooks" (21). Later, following his acquittal from the drug charge, Ehrhart responds to his mother's query if he wasn't happy when the "system" worked to his benefit?

"No, I wasn't happy about it. They made up the game. They made up the rules. They said, 'Play or else.' They could have sent me to prison, Mom. To prison. For smoking pot. You know what it says on the back of my Purple Heart Medal? 'For Military Merit.' I'm guilty, all right. I'm guilty of murder, attempted murder, arson, assault and battery, aggravated assault, assault with a deadly weapon, robbery, burglary, larceny, disorderly conduct, you name it, I've done it. And according to our so-called system, it was all perfectly legal. They gave me a medal for it. Am I relieved about the way the trial turned out? Yes. Am I happy about it? Not hardly." (*Busted* 141)

But if Ehrhart is honest about his own history, he is honest, too, about his nation's:

The fire hoses and police dogs unleashed against Negroes singing hymns and offering prayers on a bridge in Birmingham, Alabama, had shown Americans something they had not wanted to see. Beefy police officers swinging their black polished nightsticks like so many Splendid Splinters in the streets of Chicago, their badge numbers taped to prevent identification, had shown Americans something they had not wanted to see. The bodies of men women, and children strewn higger-mugger in thick piles in a ditch at My Lai, gunned down by American boys like Jews in a Nazi concentration camp, had shown Americans something they had not wanted to see. (*Busted* 27)

And:

In 1968, the Reverend Doctor Martin Luther King, Junior, was shot dead and America's cities, already tinderboxes of Black frustration, caught fire and burned. Robert Kennedy ruthlessly stole Eugene McCarthy's thunder, only to be ruthlessly murdered for his trouble, plunging the Democratic party into the hands of Lyndon Johnson's lapdog and the country's yearning for peace into the hands of Richard Nixon. In 1971, broken-hearted veterans hurled their medals back at the Congress in whose name they had been given while Congress cowered behind a cyclone fence it had erected to keep its members safe from the unclean rabble that had done its bidding. The Pentagon Papers, commissioned by McNamara himself though never intended for public consumption, finally revealed what any dumb grunt could have told you after ninety days in Vietnam, that the war was a madness. And none of it had mattered. The war went on like a ballpeen hammer in the hands of a steady workman. (*Busted* 61)

Then:

"Four Students Killed at Kent State," read the headline. I sat down on the curb and read for a while. Then I got up again and went back to my room.

It isn't enough to send us halfway around the world to die, I thought. It isn't enough to turn us loose on Asians. Now you are turning the soldiers loose on your own children. Now you are killing your own children in the streets of America. My throat constricted into a tight knot. I could hardly breathe. (*Passing Time* 88)

Long-respected as a poet and editor of Vietnam War poetry, Ehrhart's nonfiction autobiographies have not found the larger audience they so clearly deserve. H. Bruce Franklin queries the undersize of Ehrhart's following in his foreword to *Busted*:

Part of the problem may be in Ehrhart himself. Some of the very qualities that make him such a potent writer—his passion, his searing honesty, and scorn for greed, duplicity, pettifoggery, selfishness, bureaucracy, and the self-serving ethos of the corporate world—make him an inept businessman particularly unsuited for success in these tough times for serious authors in the U.S. publishing industry. (xi)

Of course, what Ehrhart reports is unpleasant:

Around mid-morning, we came onto a small cluster of houses—or rather, what was left of them. The hooches had been blown to splinters, probably the night before. There was no one around but a middle-aged woman sitting amid the rubble in a dark pool of coagulated blood. She was holding a small child who had only one leg and half a head, and she had a tremendous gaping chest wound that had ripped open both of her breasts. Flies swarmed loudly around mother and child. The woman was in a kind of trance, keening softly and gently rocking her baby. . . .

“Holy Christ, what hit this place?” said Pelinski.

“Artillery,” I said, trying to hold my voice steady, “or naval gunfire. The VC got nothing big enough to do this kind of damage.” One of the corpsmen came over and looked at the woman, then gave her a shot of morphine.

. . . “She’ll be dead soon.” (*Vietnam-Perkasie* 115)

Swallow the casual factuality of:

I rubbed the sleep out of my eyes and stood up. Gerry was pointing toward the east. “What?” I asked.

“That red streak,” he said. It was gone, but I could see the lights of an airplane circling in the sky far out over the dunes, maybe six or seven miles, out near the ocean. I was awake now.

“Keep watching,” I said. The lights continued to circle over the same spot. The aircraft was too far

away to hear the engines. Suddenly a brilliant red streak silently began to descend toward the earth until it connected the flashing lights to the ground below with a solid bar of color. Many seconds later, as the flashing lights and red bar continued to move like a spotlight sweeping the sky from a flexed point on the ground, a sound like the dull buzz of a dentist's slow-speed drill came floating lazily through the humid night air. Sound and visual image appeared to be synchronized for awhile. Then the red streak slowly fell away from the circling lights and disappeared into the earth, leaving the thick sound humming alone in a black vacuum. Finally, long after the lights had stopped circling and begun to move off in a straight line toward the south, the sound abruptly stopped.

"That's Puff the Magic Dragon," I said. "The gunship."

"What's that?"

"Air Force C-47 with Vulcan cannons." I explained that the old transport plane, a military version of the DC-3, had been converted into a flying battleship by mounting three Vulcan cannons along one side of the fuselage. The Vulcan worked like a Gatling gun; it had six barrels that rotated as the gun was fired, so that each barrel fired only once every six shots. Each of the three cannons could fire 6,000 bullets per minute. Since the guns were in fixed mounts, they could only be aimed by tilting the entire aircraft toward the ground and circling around and around over the target.

"That's 18,000 rounds a minute, my man," I said, "300 bullets per second. Chops up anything and everything like mincemeat: fields, forests, mangroves, water buffalo, hooches, people. Everything. Take a patch of redwood forest and turn it into matchsticks before you can hitch up the horses. I've seen places where Puff's left his calling card. Unbelievable. Looks like a freshly plowed field ready for planting. I saw a body once, got chopped up by Puff. You wouldn't have known it had ever been a human being. Just a pile of

pulp stuck to little pieces of cement and straw that used to be the guy's hooch—or her hooch, absolutely no way to tell the difference. It was so gross, it wasn't even sickening. It was just there, like litter or something."

"Jesus fucking Christ," Gerry whistled. "Puff the Magic Dragon?" (*Vietnam-Perkasie* 63)

H. Bruce Franklin concludes his foreword to *Busted* by pointing out that the men in the White House and the Pentagon probably never gave thought to the idea that the literature produced by the U.S. veterans of the Vietnam War would constitute one of the few great American achievements of that war (xxiii).

Whose very earliest recollections doesn't include, the request Tell Me a Story? Bill Ehrhart has told his. Find these books and read them. The human race needs stories. We need all the experience we can get. □

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W.D. Ehrhart
1967, Operation Pike, near Da Nang.