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The War Inside the War in Vietnam



Photograph from the cover of *The Best Medic in the Green Time* by Marc Levy. Photo: Fernando Escalante.

On the cover of Marc Levy's *The Best of Medic in the Green Time* is a photo of a Colonel in clean, starched fatigues with a bit of a paunch. He's been choppered in for a little pep talk. Behind him are a group of soldiers from Charlie Company 1/5, First Cavalry. They are exhausted, filthy from the tops of their heads to their boot soles and not a one of them is smiling. This unit saw some of the nastiest fighting of the Vietnam War against crack PAVN troops both in Vietnam and across the border in Cambodia. This photo receives its own full chapter by former soldier Roger Byer who writes, "Look at our faces. To a man we are miserable, dirty, battle worn, and fed up with it all." After the pep talk the Colonel was flown back to the rear where he would sleep on clean sheets. In most cases the only officers who

saw actual fighting in Vietnam were lieutenants and captains. Once promoted to major, they entered the fog of career politics.

Marc Levy has assembled letters, essays, poems and anecdotes from members of his own unit and others, including ones from our more recent wars. Some of the contributors are working writers; others are impassioned witnesses who, after many years, could not help but speak. Not least is the fine writing by Levy himself, a medic who served with Delta 1/7 First Cavalry Division, and like many of us is still unpacking a war that remains woefully present after nearly half a century. After accumulating nearly three hundred multi-paged blog entries for *Medic*, Levy and his friend Blake Campbell compressed the blog into a compelling and necessary book of 559 pages. The scope of the book is Dantean; the reader is led through the many layers of Hell by Levy's Virgil, and is met by witnesses whose searing testimonies are unforgettable. What they reveal is a war inside the war, a war that only combatants at the sharp edge of the fighting knew. But this is not just any war; it the first the US lost, and one so mindless in its intent and execution that it split the country in half and many of its veterans internally.

We see in *Medic* both the viciousness of the fighting and the minutia of everyday life in the field: how to heat coffee with a tiny ball of C-4 plastic explosive, standing watch and staring into the darkness, the screams of maimed and dying enemy outside the wire, the perimeter being probed, overrun and the enemy suddenly close enough to see his chin hairs. We see men improvising in a disaster where the tactics continually fail. We see men killed their first day in the field and a well-liked platoon sergeant killed by his own "automatic ambush" of trip-wired claymores. We see the clouds of mosquitoes and a jungle heat that could rise to one hundred twenty degrees during the day. We see good young men having the decency beaten out of them daily, being pushed to limits beyond anything they were prepared for, and put in morally impossible situations that would haunt them the rest of their lives.

About another war, Paul Fussell wrote: "Every war is ironic because every war is worse than expected." This was true of the war he was writing about and it is true of the Vietnam War.

Nowhere is this irony more evident than in the humor of the combatants: "We didn't want the feel-good gags trotted out in *Humor in Uniform*, a monthly Reader's Digest column. We refused to pin a smiley face on war and its aftermath. Instead we sought tasteless, obscene, unforgivable, lawless jokes whose wit and irony strip combat of its mythic bones, look death full in the face, and somehow make it comical." These jokes fit Tim O'Brien's now classic poetics of war literature: "...you can tell a true war story by its absolute and uncompromising allegiance to obscenity and evil." Brandeis anthropologist Janet McIntosh, who wrote the excellent introduction to *Medic*, has been researching the language of veterans, and contributed this joke: A reporter asked a Marine, "Where do you stand on terrorists?" He replied, "Well, the windpipe usually does the trick."

Many Vietnam veterans would not talk about the war until decades later. People speculate that it was too painful, or that vets were treated so badly when they came home they were shamed into silence. While both of these things are partially true they omit the most important reason: it is impossible to tell people who were not in the Vietnam War what happened because they're incapable of understanding it. It's not that vets are being mysterious; civilians just can't get it because they were not there. And when civilians are shocked at what they finally hear they often feel let down or insulted.

The pretext for the war was the "domino theory" left over from the Eisenhower years and drove Joseph McCarthy's HUAC hearings. This abstract enemy, plus a few cups of racism, kept people at home from actually comprehending what was going on in the war—who the Vietnamese were and why they were fighting apart from the feared communist hegemony. Many veterans began to wonder who the enemy actually were. Hate them they might, but they respected their toughness and commitment. Something like the master and slave dialectic was at work. Additionally, they could not help but notice that most of the rural population supported the communists. The villagers may not have understood the finer points of dialectical materialism, but they hated the Saigon government. The war was thus structurally ripe for atrocities.

In *Medic* we see how the daily murder and crushing fear slowly degraded a soldier's morality in a war that made no sense. Somehow the religious values they'd been raised with did not apply anymore. We see men who'd forgotten the purpose of the war and fallen back into a survival mentality in which "patriotism" was a faint echo. Former military policeman Richard Boes, who was assigned to handle enemy prisoners, writes, "Most of us didn't want to be there. We counted off the days, but the longer I was in Vietnam, the more *I* became the thing I hated most. This war was about getting out alive, and nothing else mattered." This demoralization would increase as the war lengthened. And its failed tactics led to a proliferation of atrocities.

Levy has looked at atrocities head-on. The public was appropriately horrified by them but clueless as to how they actually happened. Atrocities were both intentional and accidental. Understanding them involves slipping into the skin of a combat infantry grunt. Levy describes an NVA female he tried to help, after an ambush. "I tell the lieutenant both her legs are broken. From the mines or machine guns, it's hard to tell. I tell him there's nothing to make splints except rotted bamboo. She groans, *more water. More.*" This would be an atrocity of the accidental variety. But then he goes on to describes a unit called "Tiger Force" of the 101st Airborne, which committed hundreds of atrocities with the full approval of their commanding officers. The My Lai massacre, the most infamous of the Vietnam War atrocities, was accomplished intentionally at the orders of company commander Captain Medina and platoon commander Lieutenant Calley. But how do you separate these atrocities from the larger atrocity of the war itself with its wholesale killing of civilians by bombing,

short rounds, and mistaken identity? Of the four million Vietnamese killed in the war half of them were civilians. The unspeakable, indigestible horror of the war would lead Levy back to Vietnam, and to friendships with his former enemies.

Psychiatrist Jonathan Shay, who has worked with many veterans, describes moral injury as “a betrayal of what’s right, by a person who holds legitimate authority, in a high stakes situation.” Veteran John Ketwig writes: “I abandoned my morality....It [the war] was about corporate profits and garish stripes sewn onto a sleeve, about genocide and the screwed-up notion you can make a total stranger’s existence better by killing or maiming him.” Most American combatants quickly learned that the rural population favored the communists. Some of them even began to speculate that the US was fighting to support a Saigon aristocracy who cared nothing for the overtaxed rice farmers that made up eighty percent of the country. This made some grunts just hate and mistrust the Vietnamese more; still others began a deep questioning of why they were there. A surprising number of them would step over the line and join the demonstrators when they got home.

And some of them would become scholars of the war. They would dig back into history to find out just what this country was that was only a war to many Americans. Many of us had never heard of Vietnam until the war began. We didn’t know the French had been defeated there in 1954, we didn’t know the Americans were allied with Ho Chi Minh against the Japanese during World War II. Levy writes about the Organization of Strategic Services, the OSS, that was the ancestor of the CIA. During the Japanese occupation of Indochina, agents of the OSS befriended Ho Chi Minh and gave him weapons and medicine in return for which Ho helped them find downed American pilots before the Japanese could get to them. They traveled in the mountains with Ho so they could radio back weather reports to pilots flying against the Japanese. These agents, including Charles Fenn, Henry Prunier, and Peter Dewey, respected Ho and the Viet Minh. Some of them thought Ho was the man to lead the country after the war, but colonialism would prevail along with anti-communism. At the end of the war, during a surrender conducted by a prize idiot, the British General Douglas Gracey, when the Viet Minh fought for a foothold in postwar Vietnam, Peter Dewey was mistaken for a Frenchman and killed in an ambush. It is not surprising that the OSS would emerge years later as a historical punctum for veterans who hated the war and wanted to know how we got into it, and how we could have stayed out.

Whatever their view of the politics of the war veterans came home knowing they’d been lied to. It didn’t help that they were rejected by both their peers in the anti-war movement and the politicians behind the war who now wanted to blame them for its loss. There must have been something wrong with them. Drugs? Poor character? Not the “greatest generation” certainly. Some vets were eaten up inside by the killing they’d done in a war that turned out to be a lie. Add moral injury to PTSD and you’ve got serious damage. As veteran Marine Andrew Fassett writes, “The individual who signed in on the [enlistment] contract is never the same

one who signs out.” And what happens inside a vet when he’s informed that President Richard Nixon conspired with South Vietnamese officials to undermine Johnson’s peace talks to make himself look good in the forthcoming election, during which delay a few thousand more Americans and Vietnamese died?

The image of Vietnam veterans was rehabilitated during the Reagan years because it was politically expedient to do so. Vets were now forgotten heroes who never got their parade. Reagan needed their votes and claimed the Vietnam War had been fought for a “noble cause.” He wanted to rid the country’s self-image of the “Vietnam Syndrome.” The rediscovery of Vietnam vets by the culture finally created new rituals, the most famous of which became, “thank you for your service,” which appeared during the second Iraq War. It may have been popularized by the 2017 film, *Thank You for Your Service*, written and directed by Jason Hall based on a nonfiction book of the same name by David Finkle. In any case, a lot of veterans don’t love to hear it. Levy writes about the motivations of people who use this phrase. Some are sincere but don’t really have the language to express anything real, some are virtue signaling, and some are going through the motions to protect themselves from the pain of actual empathy and recognition of what war actually is. In *Medic*, Marine veteran Gregory Ross, finally exasperated, wanted to say, “You know I killed that one particular Vietnamese just for you.” In 1991, George Bush senior, after invading Iraq, proclaimed that the “Vietnam Syndrome” was finally over. On March 29, 2010, Vietnam Veterans Day was declared and veterans were presumed to have completed their historical rehabilitation. Vietnam veterans considered this to be another joke.

If some Vietnam vets became active in the anti-war movement, some took it further by getting to know their former enemies. I met Marc Levy in the nineties at the Joiner Institute for the Study of War and its Social Consequences at UMASS Boston where I was a veteran writer and teaching affiliate. The Joiner Institute was founded by a black Vietnam veteran William Joiner as a means to reach out to Vietnam Veterans. Writer Kevin Bowen, the Center’s director, poet Bruce Weigl and others, began making trips back to Vietnam to get to know their literary counterparts in Vietnam, poets and writers who’d fought against us in the war. During this time Levy formed an enduring friendship with the novelist, Bao Ninh. In 1994 and 1995 Levy backpacked through Southeast Asia, a trip that included an emotionally wrenching return to Vietnam. He began reading Bao Ninh’s *The Sorrow of War*. Levy writes, “...when reading my paperback copy, I would fall into a trance, feel as if I were floating above my bed.” And later “...at the sight of Ninh’s dust jacket photo I saw those we hunted, and who hunted us.”

Bao Ninh served with the Glorious 27th Youth Brigade. There were five hundred of them when they went to the war in 1969. Ninh was one of ten survivors. Far from a nationalist epic, *Sorrow* has been rightly compared to *All Quiet on the Western Front*. After a long correspondence Levy finally met Ninh in Boston, where he had been invited to the Joiner

Institute. Upon seeing him, Marc called out his name. Ninh responded, “Who has called me? and then, upon recognition “Moc Leby, Moc Leby” (Ninh’s pronunciation of Levy’s name). Levy writes, “Ninh and I put our arms around each other. I barely managed to hold back my tears.”

In the nearly half century since the war’s end many veterans have reached out to former enemies. The war was the beginning of our real education in a way. And there was terrible unfinished business inside us. It is no accident that many of us became writers. Seeking the language to understand the war was a long process. This is so well expressed in Levy’s writing and in the huge, heteroglot expanse of *Medic*.

There is no talk of “healing” in *Medic*. The US lost over 58,000 and probably 3 million wounded. And there were thousands of suicides among Vietnam Vets. I can’t help but think they killed themselves because, unlike the voices in *Medic*, they couldn’t find the language to speak of the unspeakable. Worse still, the Vietnamese lost four million, with hundreds of thousands still missing and a country poisoned with defoliants, including forty million acres of prime rice land. Their children still suffer birth defects from Agent Orange and veterans in the US die of its cancers with regularity. How do you “heal” something like this war? The voices in *Medic* don’t wallow in self-pity or ask for forgiveness. They just tell it like it is. People don’t heal from such an experience. They carry it the rest of their lives. Something the recruiters don’t tell you.

David Connolly, one of the poets included in *Medic*, and one of the founding members of the Joiner Institute, tells it like it is:

Ratshit and the Weasel and I
are behind this dike, see,
and Victor Charlie,
he’s giving us what for.
And Ratshit, he lifts his head,
just a little, but just enough
for the round
to go in one brown eye,
and I swear to Christ,
out the other...

Here, the poet’s southie vernacular is intimate, like you’re sitting next to him in a bar and he’s telling you a story, a personal story, one you won’t forget. This kind of intimacy pervades *Medic*. The witnesses take you aside, want you to hear their stories, and they are unforgettable. *Medic* is the most comprehensive anthology of veteran writing yet published. It is many times better than the oral histories of the war published years ago in which interviews were merely transcribed. First of all, it is a book of writers, professional and other, who’ve

found their voice. Levy has stepped back and let his witnesses speak without editorial intrusion. There is a certain grace and large-heartedness to his non-meddling.

Further, Levy extends his hand to veterans of subsequent wars which are, like Vietnam, “wars of choice.” We did not have to invade Afghanistan and Iraq after the attacks on the twin towers, and some veterans of those wars have begun to smell a rat. Instead of Agent Orange, Levy has detailed how these vets suffered the effects of inhaled toxins from burn piles, petroleum fumes, depleted uranium used in armor piercing bullets, and bad malaria drugs. And they suffered the moral injury of such a war where the enemy is embedded in the civilian population. The Afghanistan War has continued longer than the Vietnam War and has further, possibly permanently, destabilized the Middle East.

What strikes me as most ironic is that Levy had to self-publish this book. Since he lives on Water Street in Salem, Massachusetts he picked the street name as his publisher; but the book deserves a major publisher and wide readership. Levy said his queries did not spark interest so he did it himself. I’m glad he did. Mainstream publishers, who are now entirely marketer driven, have missed an opportunity here, and I hope one of them has the good sense to reconsider and embrace this remarkable book. It is to me the most comprehensive book about combat experience in Vietnam yet written.

In the introduction to *Medic*, Levy writes about the years following the war:

In ten years, sorrow will overtake me. In twenty, by startling luck, I will meet the enemy; when we embrace, I will weep the deepest tears of my life. But when first home, day after day, I will care only for third platoon, and each night, every night, lying down in the killing heat, I will curse you, love you Vietnam. Vietnam.

That is the koan for understanding Vietnam Veterans. *The Best of Medic in the Green Time* is the heart’s commentary.

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Doug Anderson served as a corpsman with a marine rifle company in Vietnam. His most recent book of poems is “[Horse Medicine](#).”