



# The Vietnam War

## FICTION & NONFICTION

BY TAYLOR SISK

**V** IETNAMESE WATER BUFFALO had a determined dislike for and aggression toward the U.S. military. Or so the stories go. In Wallace Terry's book *Bloods: Black Veterans of the Vietnam War: An Oral History* (1984), Army Spec. 4 Stephen A. Howard recounts a story in which soldiers procured from farmers a water buffalo and attached it by cable to a UH-1 helicopter. The pilot then lifted the bovid 300 feet off the ground.

"The game plan was to drop it," Howard recalls. "And when you drop a water buffalo 300 feet, it has a tendency to splatter. So that meant the farmers around know that you were almighty. That you would take their prized possession. That we'll come and get your sh\*t."

This harsh anecdote typifies much of the finest writing that came out of the Vietnam War. War is cruel—to human, beast, nature, culture—and many of the best writers of this literature, both fiction and nonfiction, knew it.

Certainly, novels from previous conflicts had underscored the absurdities of war. Joseph Heller's *Catch-22* (1961) comes to mind. But given the frustrations of fighting on such uncertain terms—a guerrilla war against an enemy that was nowhere and everywhere; villages friendly

by day, Viet Cong controlled by night—the absurdity was quite often laid bare. Not much of anything made sense.

Gustav Hasford, in his novel *The Short-Timers* (1979; from which the movie *Full Metal Jacket* was adapted), describes an encounter between a marine who has just witnessed the death of several members of his squad and a colonel who takes exception to a peace symbol the marine wears on his chest. The colonel questions the marine's commitment to the cause: "Do you believe that the United States should allow the Vietnamese to invade Viet Nam just because they live here?" The colonel then advises the marine that "we've all got to keep our heads until this peace craze blows over."

American soldiers returned to conflict and contradictions at home, and this, too, is a dominant theme of this literature. Veterans received a very different reception than had previous soldiers. For some there was no return. In Wallace Terry's *Bloods*, a Special Forces paratrooper says that he went to Vietnam "as a basic naive young man of eighteen. Before I reached my nineteenth birthday, I was a animal. When I went home three months later, even my mother was scared of me." He attests to his ongoing "war for survival."

So much about war is lost in translation: that sorrow, the horror, the frisson of proximity to death. In Michael Herr's *Dispatches* (1977), British war photographer Tim Page receives a letter from a publisher proposing a book that would once and for all "take the glamour out of war."

Page is taken aback: "Take the glamour out of war! I mean, how the bloody hell can you do *that*? ... Can you take the glamour out of a Cobra, or getting stoned at China Beach? It's like taking the glamour out of an M-79. ... I mean, you *know* that it just *can't be done!*"

Writer Tim O'Brien tells us that if there's a moral, "it's like the thread that makes the cloth. You can't tease it out. You can't extract the meaning without unraveling the deeper meaning." The following books reveal, at times, those deeper meanings.

## SOME LESSER-KNOWN RECOMMENDATIONS

### The Short-Timers

By Gustav Hasford (1979)

Gustav Hasford was a Marine Corps combat correspondent. This semiautobiographical novel, a ground-level account of the Tet offensive, "husks it right down to the kernel" (*Kirkus*). Sooner or later, Hasford writes, Marines surrendered to "the black design of the jungle." They lived by the law of the jungle, "which is that more Marines go in than come out. There it is."

Told in three parts, the novel follows Joker, who is trained as a barbaric killer and fights in the battle of Huế, the former imperial city of Vietnam, which housed a citadel and a walled palace. The sun that rose over Huế on the morning of February 25, 1968, illuminated a dead city, Hasford writes. United States Marines had "liberated Huế to the ground," converting it "into rubble in order to save it."

"A terse spitball of a book," the *Kirkus* critic wrote, "fine and real and terrifying." Few novels equal Hasford's in its graphic portrayal of violence, rage, and death, which somehow become normalized. Sequel: *The Phantom Blooper* (1990).

### Bloods

**Black Veterans of the Vietnam War: An Oral History**

By Wallace Terry (1984)

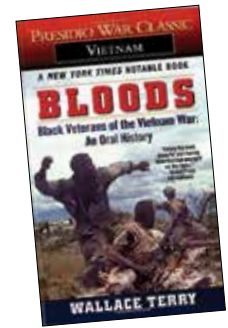
Little had been heard from black veterans until Wallace Terry, a war correspondent for *Time* magazine, dedicated a book to their perspectives. A "powerful and disturbing" book, *Bloods* offers a visceral sense of what it was like for

a black man to serve in Vietnam and then return home to "the real world" (*New York Times*).

Gene Woodley, a Special Forces paratrooper, says he never questioned the war. He considered it his duty as an American citizen to halt the spread of Communism before it reached American shores.

When out in the field, black and white soldiers had the utmost respect for one other, Spec. 4 Richard J. Ford III explains, "because when a fire fight is going on and everybody is facing north, you don't want to see nobody looking around south."

When back in the rear, it wasn't uncommon to see Confederate flags. "They didn't mean nothing by the rebel flag," Ford says. "It was just saying we for the South. It didn't mean that they hated blacks. But after you in the field, you took the flags very personally." A *New York Times* Notable Book, *Bloods* gives voice to the ongoing tests of patriotism these men faced.



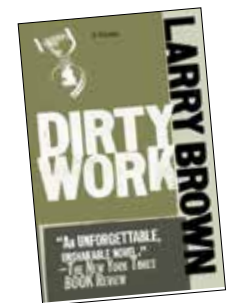
### Dirty Work

By Larry Brown (1989)

In Larry Brown's debut novel, two Vietnam veterans—one black, one white; both from Mississippi and impoverished upbringings—have adjoining beds in a VA hospital. It's been years since they served, but the war is an immediate, oppressive presence. One, the black man, Braiden Chaney, has lost his arms and legs; the other, whom we know only as Walter, has a horribly disfigured face.

Braiden has been bedridden these many years, and when Walter shows up, he makes a subtle plea to his ward-mate to carry him out of his misery. The men drink beer and smoke weed smuggled in by a sympathetic nurse; relive brutal childhoods, dark days in Nam, and more recent tragedies; and advance toward a seemingly inevitable conclusion.

*Kirkus* called *Dirty Work* a novel equal to Dalton Trumbo's *Johnny Got His Gun*, "which it modestly invokes." The *New York Times* reviewer agreed, asserting that there had been no antiwar novel quite like Brown's since that book. Told in "indisputably authentic language," the novel journeys into "the alien world of the unseen, half-dead hospitalized wounded."



### When Heaven and Earth Changed Places

**A Vietnamese Woman's Journey from War to Peace**

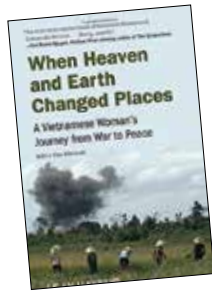
By Le Ly Hayslip with Jay Wurts (1989)

Le Ly Hayslip's acclaimed memoir offers a rare glimpse into the war from the perspective of the Vietnamese locals. "To

Americans,” wrote the *Washington Post*, “almost always, the peasants of Vietnam were part of the scenery of the war, no more.” Le Ly was born to a peasant family in the village of Ka Ly on Vietnam’s central coast. American troops arrived when she was 12. Villagers fought on both sides of the war; Le Ly’s own family was split. At 14, she was tortured in a South Vietnamese prison. Upon her release, she was suspected by the Viet Cong of being a spy, was raped as punishment, then fled to Da Nang. She went to Saigon, where she worked and got pregnant. She returned to Da Nang province to have her child and worked various jobs—including prostitution.

In 1969, Le Ly married an American civilian contractor, with whom she had a second child. They settled in San Diego, but Le Ly was soon widowed. In 1986, she returned to Vietnam. Her village had been almost entirely destroyed—shrines and pagodas, her schoolhouse “wiped away by the hand of war”—but she was reunited with some of her family.

As the *New York Times* concluded, “If Hollywood has the courage to turn this book into a movie, then we Americans might finally have a chance to come to terms with the tragedy in Vietnam.” Le Ly subsequently dedicated her life to improving relations between Vietnam and the United States. *Child of War, Woman of Peace* (1993) continues this part of her story.



## The Sorrow of War

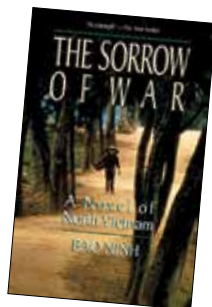
**A Novel of North Vietnam**

By Bảo Ninh (1991)

The Vietnamese government initially welcomed Bảo Ninh’s novel, which opens with soldiers on a postwar mission to collect the remains of dead comrades for reburial. According to *Salon*, they congratulated themselves on their openness in allowing Ninh’s “defiantly non-ideological novel to be published—until people began reading it, and Ninh began winning international literary prizes.”

A veteran of the North Vietnamese’s Glorious 27th Youth Brigade, Ninh eventually found the strength to write about his experiences: “I must write! To rid myself of these devils, to put my tormented soul finally to rest instead of letting it float in a pool of shame and sorrow. Otherwise the pain will be unbearable.”

In his novel, North Vietnamese soldier Kien returns to Hanoi, where he roams the streets at night, stalked by memories. Ninh’s assessment of the aftermath of the war is uncompromising. Where is the “reward of enlightenment”



for the sacrifices made? He and his fellow soldiers’ efforts had been for nothing.

For Kien, “the most attractive, persistent echo of the past is the whisper of ordinary life, not the thunder of war, even though the sounds of ordinary life were washed away totally during the long storms of the war. The prewar peace and the postwar peace were in such contrast.” Narrated in a stream of consciousness style, *The Sorrow of War* moves back and forth in time to reflect on the personal horrors of war and, not least, Kien’s childhood sweetheart.

## They Marched Into Sunlight

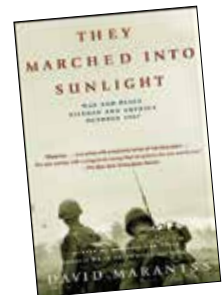
**War and Peace, Vietnam and America, October 1967**

By David Maraniss (2003)

David Maraniss follows two events of October 1967: first, the movements of the Black Lions battalion, which was nearly wiped out in the battle at Ong Thanh, and their foe, the Viet Cong’s Ninth Division (their slogan: “To be victorious everywhere and completely wipe out enemy forces in every attack.”).

He intersperses this conflict with accounts of the simultaneously mounting antiwar protests back home, especially the riot at the University of Wisconsin, Madison. Maraniss writes that, together, these stories stress “the connections of history and of individual lives, the accidents, incidents and intentions that rip people apart and sew them back together.”

In the book’s epilogue, Clark Welch, a seriously injured company commander, returns to Vietnam in 2002 and meets with Vo Minh Triet, a commander in the Ninth Division, to retrace their steps. En route to the battlefield, Maraniss writes, Triet turned to Welch, and said of the long-ago battle on the ground they were revisiting, “No one won that day.” Together, these narratives depict a tragic, divisive portrait of America in the 1960s. (★★★★ Jan/Feb 2004)



## ... AND A FEW CLASSICS

### The Quiet American

By Graham Greene (1955)

At heart, Graham Greene’s novel explores the devastating consequences of American exceptionalism and questions American involvement in Vietnam in the 1950s. Thomas Fowler, a jaded British journalist covering the conflict in Vietnam between the French and Viet Minh guerrillas, meets Alden Pyle, an idealistic American intel-



ligence officer intent on rescuing the Vietnamese from Communism. When a car bomb explodes, killing civilians, Fowler is deeply troubled and is convinced that Pyle was involved. Pyle is subsequently found dead. His murder remains unsolved, but the authorities suspect that Fowler was complicit. Into the murder story comes one about the rivalry of these two white men for a Vietnamese girl. “I never knew a man who had better motives for all the trouble he caused,” Fowler says of Pyle. He is disdainful of the Americans’ attempts to spread democracy throughout the third world and of the theory that if one country falls to Communism, others will topple like dominoes.

In a 1956 review, the *New York Times* took issue with Greene’s characterization of America as a “crassly materialistic and ‘innocent’ nation with no understanding of other peoples.” But this, perhaps, was one of Greene’s most prescient points. “The novel asks every one of us what we want from a foreign place, and what we are planning to do with it,” Pico Iyer told NPR in 2008. “You must read *The Quiet American* ... because it explains our past, in Southeast Asia, trains light on our present in many places, and perhaps foreshadows our future if we don’t take heed.”

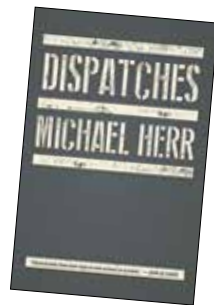
## Dispatches

By Michael Herr (1977)

Hired by *Esquire*, in 1967 Michael Herr traveled with a band of gonzo journalists and photographers who were free to venture pretty much where they pleased. Moving among the troops, Herr captured the cadence of the Vietnam War, the language soldiers created (“Never happen.” Experiencing “a mad minute.”) and the soundtrack to which the war was scored (Hendrix, Motown, “stop, children, what’s that sound”).

Herr struggles to explain why he’s in Vietnam. When asked, he finds it difficult to say “anything honest about it except ‘Blah blah blah cover the war’ or ‘Blah blah blah write a book.’” A young soldier explains to Herr why he himself was there: to kill. “Which wasn’t at all true of me,” Herr writes. “I was there to watch.”

Herr later said that he invented parts of the book—written in the New Journalism style—including some of the characters and their surreal, hallucinatory fighting. That admission, however, does not detract from his descriptions of the disillusioned young American soldiers who fought a war they didn’t understand. “Thanks to his reckless immersion in the war at one of its craziest moments—working as a magazine journalist during the Tet offensive of 1967 and its aftermath—[Herr] catches the mix of humour, madness and drugs, setting it all down on the page with a rare combination of precision and compassion so that, as the reader, you think: I was there” (*Guardian*).



## The Things They Carried

By Tim O’Brien (1990)

In this acclaimed collection of linked short stories that the *Los Angeles Times* called “memory as prophecy,” telling us not where we were but where we are and perhaps will be again, Tim O’Brien drew from his own experiences with the U.S. Army’s 23rd Infantry Division between 1969 and 1970.

In the title story, O’Brien catalogues the things a soldier carried each day: C rations, packets of Kool-Aid, lighters, matches, sewing kits, mosquito repellent, chewing gum, candy, cigarettes, two or three canteens of water.

Grenadier Ted Lavender carried tranquilizers until he was shot in the head outside the village of Than Khe. Platoon leader Jimmy Cross, besides carrying reminders of Martha, his unrequited love, more heavily “carried the responsibility for the lives of his men.”

These men carried, as well, O’Brien writes, the soldier’s greatest fear—the fear of blushing. “Men killed, and died, because they were embarrassed not to.” They fought “to avoid the blush of dishonor. They died so as not to die of embarrassment.” In war and its aftermath, O’Brien shows, there are no winners.



## Tree of Smoke

By Denis Johnson (2007)

♦ NATIONAL BOOK AWARD

Denis Johnson’s novel features a cast of many characters, including Skip Sands, a young anti-Communist enthusiast in the Quiet American mold; his uncle, Colonel Francis Sands, a former Flying Tiger and prisoner of war, now a shadowy, though towering, figure in Vietnam; the Houston brothers, who came totally unhinged in Nam and discover there’s no place for them back in the world; and Kathy Jones, a Canadian aid worker who ends up in a wartime liaison with Skip but is left to try to make sense of so much death and destruction. The novel binds these disparate characters together through the mayhem of war and a universal, if often fruitless, search for salvation.

The *New York Times* called the novel “a great whirly ride” that starts out sad and gets sadder, “loops unpredictably out and around, and then lurches down so suddenly at the very end that it will make your stomach flop.” The critic wrote that the novel is the product of an “extraordinary writer in full stride.” As the *Minneapolis Star Tribune* summed up, “Sound like you’ve read it before? Trust me, you haven’t.”

(★★★★ SELECTION Nov/Dec 2007) ■

