"Vietnam, Vietnam, Vietnam, we've all been there." – The War Novel and the Vietnam Experience.

Andrea Fabiana Rodríguez*
Universidad del Salvador

There have been wars ever since the dawn of mankind and there will be more to come for sure. Literature presents ancient battles as epic, as the places where heroes are made. To die in such combats is to achieve an honorable death and there is always a higher purpose for war. Such model of bellicose idealism has ruled most of the war novels even up to World War II. How does Vietnam change this? The Vietnam War novels break with many conventions of the genre ranging from the form of the texts to the perception of the soldier and veteran.

These novels have a shared origin in that their authors were involved in one way or another in the conflict. The writers experienced Vietnam themselves. Because of this, most of the texts carry a great deal of personal narrative in which the line that divides fiction and non-fiction is rather blurred. Vietnam War novels seek above all to transmit a faithful portrayal not of war but of what being at a war is. In consequence, these works include multiple instances of introspection triggered by everything the men were exposed to in such a limit situation: people, places, battles, death.

We will focus on two aspects of the experience: the unknown geography and death. For this purpose, we will take three of the most representative texts dealing with Vietnam: *Dispatches*, Michael Herr's account as a war correspondent; *The Things They Carried*, veteran Tim O'Brien's collection of short stories embedded in a larger narrative and *A Rumor of War,* Philip Caputo's memoir as a marine. Although the three authors had different occupations during the war (journalist, infantryman and officer), their experiences were similar. War does not distinguish ranks.

Living Geography

For most Americans, the sole existence of Vietnam was a novelty let alone its geography. Men were thrown to the exotic jungles of Southeast Asia where the physical dangers were twofold: weaponry and nature. In addition to the landmines and booby traps, G.I.s also had to fight mosquitoes, leeches, snakes, tropical vegetation, swamps and the unbearable heat. But at least these were tangible issues.

The jungle presented stranger problems: the sounds and the blackness. Although impalpable, exposure to unfamiliar local sounds and the inability to see were actual impediments for warfare – soldiers had further trouble moving through the jungle and difficulty identifying the presence of the enemy. But that was not all. Both extreme sensorial conditions acted as psychological agents to defeat in the process of fighting. The Vietnamese mountains brought a plethora of unknown sounds; did they belong to animals, insects, spirits or Charlie? In *The Things They Carried* private Sanders tells the story of a six-men patrol involved in a "listening-post operation" which consisted in spending a

* **Andrea Fabiana Rodríguez** is a Bachelor in English Language from the School of Modern Languages of Universidad del Salvador. She works at Universidad del Salvador as a professor in the American Literature and History, English and America Literature and English Language subjects. She is a member of Dr. Ofelia Veltri's research team at the School of Modern Languages. Currently she is doing a Masters degree in History at IDEAS Institute from Universidad Nacional de San Martín. Contact: rodriguez.andrea@usal.edu.ar
SUPLEMENTO *Ideas*, I, 3 (2020), pp. 115-120

whole week deep in the jungle in complete silence just listening for VC activity. As Sanders reports: "The sounds carry forever. You hear stuff nobody should ever hear." (O'Brien, 1990, p. 77) The inability to name them could push men to the doors of madness.

An even stranger manifestation of this phenomenon was an unexpected instance of absolute silence as described in *Dispatches*:

> "There were times during the night when all the jungle sounds would stop at once. There was no dwindling down or fading away, it was all gone in a single instant as though some signal had been transmitted out to the life: bats, birds, snakes, monkeys, insects, picking up on a frequency that a thousand years in the jungle might condition you to receive, but leaving you as it was to wonder what you weren't hearing now, straining for any sound, one piece of information." (Herr, 1977, p. 50)

If unidentifiable noises were unbearable, the complete absence of them was even more unsettling. There was the risk of needing to fill the emptiness with the voice of one's thoughts.
Equally or more frightening was the darkness of the jungle. At night, the men involved in missions in the mountains were submerged in a complete blackness with no moon or stars. There was no point of reference and the only way to keep up with the team was to touch each other's shoulders. In such conditions it made no difference whether the eyes were open or closed; there was nothing to see. All three authors resort to the color black to define the intensity of this darkness and Caputo describes it even further in *A Rumor of War*:

> "Even after my eyes adjusted, I could not see the slightest variation in color. It was absolutely black. It was a void, and, staring at it, I felt that I was looking into the sun's opposite, the source and center of all the darkness in the world." (Caputo, 1977, p. 236)

With all its weirdness, the jungle had the power of scaring men, driving them mad. So much so that it became another agent to deal with. The landscape then stopped being just the setting of the conflict and became another army to defeat, an ally to the Viet Cong. In the chapter Speaking of Courage, Tim O'Brien shared the story of a stormy night in a swamp by the Song Tra Bong river. The swamp, an "oozy soup, […] thick and mushy" (O'Brien, 1990, p. 164) was a deadly trap that would not let the men fall sleep at risk of sinking in the mud, the worst part however was the smell, "a dead fish smell" (O'Brien, 1991, p. 164) for starters but upon further examination the swamp felt more like "the village toilet" (O'Brien, 1991, p. 164). That same night O' Brien's platoon received mortar fire which caused private Kiowa's death. In a very sad and pathetic episode, private Bowker attempted to save Kiowa's corpse from being taken by the swamp, an action that could have granted him the Silver Star for courage in battle, but failed due to the pungent smell. Kiowa fell a victim to both, the enemy fire and the enemy land. The swamp swallowed the dead soldier's body, ate him until there was nothing left of him.

The Vietnam geography took the American army to the extreme of endurance and they reacted seeking to destroy the land, already an antagonist as fierce as the VC. Animals were killed, plants were cut down, jungles were bombarded and burnt to ashes. Modern warfare had something to add to the picture with the use of chemicals such as napalm and white phosphorus.

> "Frail grey smoke where they'd burned off the rice fields around a free-strike zone, brilliant white smoke from phosphorus ('Willy Peter/ Make you a buh liever'), deep black smoke from 'palm […]." (Herr, 1977, p. 10)

The traits of destruction became the familiarity against the strangeness of that foreign and hostile environment. This destruction they knew how to read.

Close Encounters with Death

Among many uncertainties, one thing is for sure in war: all soldiers will meet Death. Some will meet their own death, some will meet someone else's and some will inflict it upon others. All of them will eventually come face to face with it. Our three novels deal with this fateful end pursuing once again to convey a realistic portrait not of death itself but of the mental struggle men went through upon their closeness with it.

In Vietnam, men discovered all the ways in which a body could be broken: shot, bled out, dismembered, torn to pieces. Soldiers learned about the fragility of the human bodies the hard way, they saw the terrible effects of war weaponry and "were sickened by the torn flesh, the viscera and splattered brains."(Caputo, 1977, p.128).

The gore was even more horrifying when it touched the men in their own platoons. In *The Things They Carried*, private Lemon met his maker after being blown away by a landmine. O'Brien and another soldier were the ones in charge of retrieving Lemon's remains, a task that consisted in peeling him off a tree. Bones, pieces of skin and "some wet and yellow mush that must've been the intestines" (O'Brien, 1990, p.89) was all that was left of Lemon.

Of the three authors, Philip Caputo is the one who was much closer with death. Already in Vietnam he was transferred to an administrative position in which he was in charge of documenting the death of all men, both American G.I.s and VC. He would record causes and circumstances of the casualties as well as keep the statistics updated, he recognized himself as "death's bookkeeper." (Caputo, 1977, p. 169) An even more disturbing aspect of his job involved identifying the cadavers of American soldiers. The procedure was to match a face to a photograph, or using dental records. But sometimes there was no face, or no jaw or not even a head. And if the soldier had been unlucky to find his end at an explosion, not even fingerprints would do. The proximity to corpses allowed him also to observe the appalling process of decay of the now organic matter and even though he may have been desensitized to some degree, there was an aspect that continued to disturb him: the stench of the dead.

> "Because the odor of death is so strong, you can never get used to it, as you can get used to the sight of war. And the odor is always the same. It might vary in intensity, depending on the state of decomposition, but if two people have been dead for the same length of time and under the same conditions, there will be no difference in the way they smell." (Caputo, 1977, p. 170)

However, even once the dead had turned into rotting matter, they were never gone for good. They would undergo yet another transformation to become part of the soldiers' folklore as Herr observed:

> "Men on the crews would say that once you'd carried a dead person he would always be there, riding with you. Like all combat people they were incredibly superstitious and invariably self-dramatic, but it was (I knew) unbearably true and close exposure to death sensitized you to the force of their presence and made for long reverberations; long." (Herr, 1977, p. 9)

Maybe this was a way of paying their respects to the men that had fought on their same side, or maybe it was an attempt at coping with the constant presence and menace of death. Viet Cong soldiers definitely did not receive the same treatment with G.I.s making jokes all around their empty carcasses and worse with Americans brutalizing their corpses as in the somehow extended practice of cutting off VC's ears.

The realm of dreams was another instance of reunion with the dead. At times the departed would come back to haunt the living. Curiously they reappeared bearing the aspect of their corpses.

In one of the occasions in which Caputo had to identify the men KIA, he met the bodies of a few of the soldiers he had commanded while in charge of a platoon. That night he saw them again in his own army of the dead:

> "Devlin, Lockhart, and Bryce were in the first rank, Bryce standing on his one good leg, next to him the faceless Devlin, and then Lockhart with his bruised eye sockets. Sullivan was there too, and Reasoner and all the others, all of them dead except me, the officer in charge of the dead. […] They marched along, my platoon of crippled corpses, hopping along on the stumps of their legs, swinging the stumps of their arms, keeping perfect time while I counted cadence." (Caputo, 1977, p. 199)

O'Brien tells the story of his battalion's doctor, Rat Kiley, whose experience took a stranger turn picturing men dead and seeing their organs while he was awake. At night everything would be worse, if that was possible:

> "I start seeing my own body. Chunks of myself. My own heart, my own kidneys. […] I swear, it's too much, I can't keep seeing myself dead." (O'Brien, 1990, p. 250)

Kiley sought a way out of the war by shooting his foot in a calculated episode that included anesthetizing himself and preparing his first-aid kit. He could not be blamed.

We may be tempted to believe that there is nothing worse than dreaming with death, however Herr shares a major's comment:

> "'After the first tour, I'd have the goddamndest nightmares. You know, the works. Bloody stuff, bad fights, guys dying, *me* dying… I thought they were the worst,' he said. 'But I sort of miss them now.'" (Herr, 1977, p. 187)

Some dreams cannot even be told.

Conclusion

There is an exclusive aspect to wars that lies in that not everybody gets to be at one. The battlefield is a restricted experience. This exclusiveness however, carries no privilege whatsoever; instead it bears high prices to pay.

The American government forced many to take part in a savage conflict they did not understand. Men went to Vietnam to kill and to die without a clear reason. They suffered physical pain, they lost limbs, they saw their friends die, they took lives. They discovered the atrocities of war and found they were able to commit them without flinching. In order to cope with the darkest side of humanity, soldiers went through a deep introspective process which sought to signify a war that was completely meaningless for them.

The three authors agree in that their texts do not intend to teach a moral lesson. Instead, they strive to communicate as faithfully as possible what it is like to be in the battlefront, a place in which there is no moral, only absurdity. *Dispatches*, *The Things They Carried* and *A Rumor of War* overwhelm us with a truth so painful that cannot use euphemisms. War can only be described in a language matching its brutality. The three novels show that the classic ideal of the war hero is not valid anymore for there is nothing heroic about a war. There are no heroes, only victims.

The Vietnam War was a life-altering experience for these men. It left outer and inner scars, marks that could never be erased and would stay with them until the end of their days in this world. There were no winners in this war. Not even those who survived.

> "We had survived, but in war, a man does not have to be killed or wounded to become a casualty. His life, his sight, or limbs are not the only things he stands to lose" (Caputo, 1977, p. 207)

References

Caputo, P. (1977). *A Rumor of War*. New York: Picador.

Herr, M. (1977). *Dispatches*. London: Picador.

O' Brien, T. (1990). *The Things They Carried*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin/Seymour Lawrence.

Beattie, K. (1998). *The Scar That Binds. American Culture and the Vietnam War*. New York: New York University Press.

Carpenter, T. (2003). "It Don't Mean Nothin'": Vietnam War Fiction and Postmodernism. *College Literature*, Vol. 30, No. 2, pp. 30-50. Retrieved February 15, 2018, from http://www.jstor.org/stable/25112718

Cobley, E. (1986). Description in Realist Discourse: The War Novel. *Style*, Vol. 20, No. 3, pp. 395-410. Retrieved February 8, 2018, from http://www.jstor.org/stable/42945614

Epstein, R. (1993). Talking Dirty: Memories of War and the Vietnam War Novel. *The Massachusetts Review*, Vol. 34, No. 3, pp. 457-480. Retrieved February 8, 2018, from http://www.jstor.org/stable/25090459

Gerber, D. A. (2012). *Disabled Veterans in History.* University of Michigan Press.

Mariani, G. (2015). *Waging War on War. Peacefighting in American Literature.* Urbana, Chicago and Springfield, University of Illinois Press.

Marín, P. (1985). The Vietnam War Novel: Scholarship Today. *Atlantis*, Vol. 7, No. 1/2, pp. 81-88. Retrieved February 8, 2018, from http://www.jstor.org/stable/41054519

McInerney, P. (1981). "Straight" and "Secret" History in Vietnam War Literature. *Contemporary Literature*, Vol. 22, No. 2, pp. 187-204. Retrieved February 15, 2018, from http://www.jstor.org/stable/1208187

Puhr, K. M. (1984). Four Fictional Faces of the Vietnam War. *Modern Fiction Studies*, Vol. 30, No. 1, pp. 99-117. Retrieved February 8, 2018, from http://www.jstor.org/stable/26280901

Taylor, G. O. (1980). American Personal Narrative of the War in Vietnam. *American Literature*, Vol. 52, No. 2, pp. 294-308. Retrieved February 8, 2018, from http://www.jstor.org/stable/2924818

Walsh, J. (1982). *American War Literature 1914 to Vietnam*. London: Macmillan.