

**THE REALITY OF IT ALL:  
A COMPARISON OF PLAYS ABOUT VIETNAM VETERANS  
WITH REAL LIFE EXPERIENCE**

by

**TERRY WUNDER**

B.F.A., Emporia State University, 1985  
B.S.E., Emporia State University, 1987

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A THESIS

submitted in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree

MASTER OF ARTS

SPEECH  
KANSAS STATE UNIVERSITY  
Manhattan, Kansas

1989

Approved by:



Norman J. Fedder  
Major Professor

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1989

TO LISA

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## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

When you do anything for the first time, you always have doubts about your ability to succeed. For me, writing this thesis was no exception. There were times when I had no idea what I was doing, or where my work was taking me. As always, there were a few people whose input and patience held me together and gave me encouragement. I would like to thank the following individuals; Joel Pollock, David Narverud, and Larry Morgan for their friendship and their help through discussion of the Vietnam War; Christopher McManaman for being an excellent roommate and for typing the final draft of this beast; Alfred Sheffield, Lew Shelton, Kate Anderson, John Uthoff and Harold Nichols for their instruction and guidance; and Norman J. Fedder for his confidence and his tenacious editing which made this entire project possible.

Terry Wunder  
March 14, 1989

## INTRODUCTION

There is as much difference between the stage and the films as between a piano and a violin. Normally, you can't become a virtuoso in both.

Ethel Barrymore

The Motion Picture has, for many years, been a way of conveying the images of war. Most of us have seen, on many occasions, John Wayne, or an actor of his prototype, fall down wounded on the battle field only to get up with one good arm or leg and still reach the top of the hill. This desire to keep battling the enemy at all costs, and in the end come home a winner, has been ingrained in us since childhood.

Viewers have credited this willingness as the basis for the American fighting spirit. This image--usually drawn from World War I, World War II, and in some cases the Korean War--also illustrated that the American fighting man was backed by loyal friends and family on the home front. This loyalty took many forms: Mom and Dad expressing their pride to the neighbors over their son being sent to stop the hordes that could threaten our own shores; the veterans from previous wars saddened because their age wouldn't allow them to take part in the new found glory; an entire country sacrificing many comforts so the boys across the sea could have a little more; and the faithful wife and girlfriend standing patiently in the doorway waiting for her Joe to come home.

But the Motion Picture Industry hit an obstacle in the 1970's and the 1980's. Producers and directors were faced with the problem of re-creating a different kind of war: a war America lost. The John Wayne image was being

shattered by the disaster in Vietnam, the United States' most unpopular war. Loyalty for the fighting man was hard to come by: parents were disturbed by the spectacle of their sons killing innocent people; old war veterans were appalled at the thought of Americans not being the victors; most comforts were sacrificed in the form of protest and avoidance of military service; and many GI's were demoralized when they came home to find their wives and girlfriends had left them.

What could the movie makers do? Those intent on producing modern day war films were puzzled. They could always resort to the old standards and rely on wars of the past for their subjects. But America had seen enough of those wars, and besides, you could only win them so many times. They had to come up with something, so they tried their luck.

Once the Vietnam War had ended, film makers made attempts at portraying it from a negative point of view, which had a great impact on their audiences. Films such as The Deer Hunter and Apocalypse Now, from the late 1970's, and Full Metal Jacket, Hamburger Hill, and Platoon, from the 1980's, all provide a horrifying look at the plight of the common soldier in the battle fields and jungles of Vietnam. Major television networks followed by airing such realistic Vietnam War series as Tour of Duty and China Beach.



These series and movies were not only in opposition to the perpetuation of the John Wayne image; they were also in response to the question Americans wanted answered about Vietnam. America's involvement in Vietnam has fast become one of the most important topics of our time: countless books and articles have been written about it; it has been made a separate course of study in colleges and universities, and some magazines, such as Penthouse, include sections on advising Vietnam veterans.

This obsession with Vietnam affected me as well. I picked this topic out of a need to understand an event that I missed by a matter of years. I took no part in the war as a soldier because I was too young, so I could not explore the subject from personal experience. My knowledge would have to come from another source, from something I was familiar with.

Being a student of drama, I turned to the playwrights. Lucky for me, there were many plays written about the Vietnam experience. Finding as many as I could, I began to read them. I became captivated. These plays touched on every one of my emotions. I laughed. I cried. I became angry. I felt ashamed. I felt pity. I was so affected I couldn't sleep nights. The reading led me to what I believed all along: as powerful as the motion picture can be, the real answers to my questions couldn't be found in film. The genius of the playwright and the immediacy of the stage generated the most

realistic and truthful account of the Vietnam experience. Each play brought to life the most significant aspects of the war, and put them on the stage for me to understand. I experienced first hand what the war meant to those who were directly and indirectly involved.

The purpose of this study is to examine selected plays written about the experience of the Vietnam veteran in order to determine if they are based on sufficient actuality to make them valid representations of that experience. The subject matter of the plays will be compared to real events that happened during the Vietnam years. The question to be answered is this: To what extent do the fictional experiences of the plays represent experiences that happened to real people?

I selected the plays Medal of Honor Rag by Tom Cole, Still Life by Emily Mann, and Strange Snow by Stephen Metcalfe for my study. All three plays are in the anthology Coming to Terms: Americans Plays & the Vietnam War and deal specifically with the veteran who has returned home. In my judgement, dramatizing this experience gives us the best overall picture of what the veteran went through before, during and after his time in Vietnam. All three plays share striking similarities, but it's the playwrights' comparative handling of these that sets the plays apart--such as the common problem facing the returning veteran--the hostility against him by society as a whole. Each veteran, no matter what his

color, was "blamed by the right in our society for losing the war, and by the left for being the killers of the innocent" (Terry XVII). Every other problem the Vietnam veteran has stems from this.

Other plays representing the Vietnam experience were considered as well. Amlin Gray finds humor in a reporter's attempt to cover the war in How I Got That Story. The boredom and monotony of the war can be observed in Terrence McNally's gruesome tale of Botticelli. For a look at the flower power movement and the anti-war sentiments of the college generation of the 1960's, there's Michael Weller's Moonchildren. Megan Terry employs the improvisational techniques of the Open Theatre to present her views on the war in Viet Rock.

I decided against these plays because they dealt specifically with aspects of the war other than veterans returning. Although Botticelli and Viet Rock are concerned with the Vietnam Soldier, they stop short of bringing them home.

Probably the most popular of the Vietnam War Playwrights is David Rabe. His trilogy on the subject-- Streamers, The Basic Training of Pavlo Hummel, and Sticks and Bones--was considered as well. In Streamers, Rabe depicts racial tensions in an army barracks at the onset of the War. In The Basic Training of Pavlo Hummel, Rabe recreates the life of a young recruit as he goes from basic training to his death at the hands of an American

in Vietnam. And in Sticks and Bones, Rabe portrays middle-class America at its worst as a soldier blinded in Vietnam returns home to be rejected by the perfect American family.

Although Sticks and Bones is about a returning veteran, I decided against using it for this analysis. The basis of this study is a search for realism, and Sticks and Bones, in my opinion, over-steps these bounds. The play has a dreamlike quality that exaggerates the Vietnam veteran's struggle in adjusting to his return, and has a "we are the perfect family" attitude that satirically magnifies the inability of Americans to accept him back home. By presenting an American family as inane and blatantly insensitive, Rabe caricatures the civilian mentality perceived by Vietnam veterans. This cartooning makes the play a fantasy, and therefore hard to compare to reality.

The materials used for comparisons are personal stories from actual Vietnam combat veterans. Because the plays chosen portray veterans from different races and branches of the service, every attempt was made to get a broad range of accounts and opinions. Regardless of who these men are, the war has had lasting impact on their lives.

The veterans who returned home from wars previous to Vietnam, came home to a country that was willing to listen to its soldier's tales. The survivors had lived

up to the expectations of America, and could proudly relive the experience. But the Vietnam veterans returned to people who cared little about them. They returned with problems that were far different from those before them. Only now are they willing to come forward and try to make the world understand what they felt. By demonstrating how these three theatrical versions of their ordeal genuinely render their true experiences, I hope to add to this understanding.

**CHAPTER ONE**

**THE BLACK VETERAN**

**MEDAL OF HONOR RAG**

**BY TOM COLE**

Human blood is heavy; the man that has shed it cannot run  
away.

African proverb

Be peaceful, be courteous, obey the law, respect anyone;  
but if someone put his hand on you, send him to the  
cemetery.

Malcolm X

In May, 1971, Tom Cole became captivated by a story in the news. It seemed that a black man, named Dwight Johnson, took a gun and walked into a Detroit Supermarket. He became very threatening and demanded that the storekeeper give him money. Acting in self-defense, the manager produced his own gun and shot Johnson repeatedly. During the skirmish, Johnson made no attempt to defend himself.

Usually a story like this would catch little attention. Attempted robberies and even killings happen all the time. But this story was different, and it triggered Tom Cole's fascination.

Dwight Johnson was more than just another statistic of big city violence. His background made him part of a special group of Americans. Dwight Johnson was a Vietnam veteran who had been awarded the Medal of Honor. What set him apart even more is the fact that he was black. For Cole, his fascination with this story took the form of a play called Medal of Honor Rag.

The black Vietnam veteran--and many other minority veterans for that matter--managed to come away from the war with attitudes somewhat different from those of their white counterparts. Although all Vietnam veterans shared similar experiences and problems, the added sufferings of the black veterans contributed bleak images to their already clouded picture of the war. Murray Polner recognizes this difference. In his introduction to No

Victory Parades, Polner tells us why he only interviewed white veterans for his book. The minority veterans he talked to refused to partake in in-depth interviews. Polner sympathized with their feelings:

In fact, a separate book needs to be written dealing with black veterans, whose casualties were proportionately far in excess of the estimated black population in the United States, whose doubts as to the war's justice must surely have been greater than their white counterparts', and whose perceptions of equality and justice in and out of the military service differed markedly from many of their white peers'. (xiii)

These problems rare to the black veteran are discussed in Medal of Honor Rag. By comparing the story inherent in the play to experiences of actual Vietnam veterans, a better understanding of the reality in the play will be attained.

Medal of Honor Rag is Tom Cole's admittedly fictitious version of the story of Dwight Johnson. The play presents problems familiar to all veterans, as well as those unique to the black ones. Since this play is about the dilemma of black veterans, all the comparisons--unless stated otherwise--will be from their experience.

In order to make the play his own creation, Tom Cole made a few changes. For dramatic purposes, Dwight



Johnson becomes Dale Jackson, or D.J., and has been put in the psychiatric ward of Valley Forge Army Hospital. D.J. is still a member of that special group of soldier: Vietnam veterans who have received the Medal of Honor and are still alive. Unable to cope with civilian life, D.J.'s award makes him eligible for the best treatment the army has to offer. With the hospital staff failing to make a breakthrough with D.J., a special physician--simply called Doctor--is called in to analyze him. In an hour session, the doctor and patient meet in a battle of wits and mental games that eventually convinces D.J. to discuss his problem.

But the road to revelation is not an easy one. D.J. fights the doctor's request every step of the way. Finally the doctor has no option but to read D.J.'s story out loud and try to provoke a reaction. The story is nothing short of incredible.

D.J. was a member of a tank crew who had been together since they arrived in Vietnam. Orders came one night to transfer D.J. to a different tank. Although he was reluctant, he followed orders. The next day on patrol, they came under attack, and D.J.'s former tank and crew were hit by a rocket. He tried to save the crew, but it was too late. In anger, D.J. hunted down the enemy for the next thirty minutes by himself, killing twenty to thirty Vietnamese. During his rage, D.J. ran out of ammunition and came face to face with a Vietnamese

soldier holding a gun on him. D.J. was certain his life was over, when the gun misfired, and he beat the Vietnamese to death with his rifle.

By rights, D.J. should be dead. This is where his problem lies. He has a hard time accepting the fact that he lived while others died. And that he received the Medal of Honor for it only adds to his confusion and depression. The doctor's final monologue describes D.J. as a man with a death wish. Like Dwight Johnson, the bullet that should have been for him in Vietnam, finally came from the gun of a supermarket manager.

The first thing noticeable about D.J. is his inability to relate to others. When questioned about Vietnam, he has conditioned himself to turn off his emotions. Most Vietnam veterans went through similar periods of denying their feelings. They felt that only other Vietnam veterans could understand their situation. David Chambers, a white veteran who served with the Marines, found it hard to relate to anyone who wasn't in Vietnam. When confronted by people who tried to understand him, he responded with one simple question: "Were you there" (Parades 13)? In a similar case, veteran Frank Goins closed the door to his feelings as well. In Charlie Company, a book by Peter Goldman and Tony Fuller, Frank's wife Mattie tells how she tried many times to get him to sit down and talk about it. Having survived Charlie Company, an outfit which saw some of the

most intense fighting of the war, Frank was bothered and Mattie knew it. She just couldn't picture it, and every time she asked him what was wrong, "he would say, 'nothing'" (249).

Tom Cole creates a doctor whom D.J. might be able to relate to, because he has shared a similar experience. Realizing that D.J. needs to be in the company of someone who understands, the doctor goes beyond common psychiatric practice and describes his own horror story to D.J. The doctor was the only member of his family to survive a concentration camp in Poland during World War II. This helps D.J. see that others have been through similar encounters and overcome them. Although the doctor wasn't in Vietnam, surviving a concentration camp can hold its own against any experience in Vietnam.

Regardless of what a soldier lived through in Vietnam, a tour of duty lasted only a year. If an American was lucky enough to endure the insanity of the war, exactly 365 days later he was sent home and replaced by a green recruit. D.J. compared this to running men through a computer. You were sent in one end, and if you were lucky, you came out the other. This system was much criticized by veterans. It was good because a soldier only had to be there for a year. It was bad because experienced soldiers were constantly taken out of the jungle.

Marine rifleman Reginald "Malik" Edwards never understood this reasoning. He felt that in order to protect a specific area, you needed to know everyone in the area and stay put. Rotating people every twelve months always meant that new troops had to be trained. There was always the possibility that a new soldier could die the first day. "If you take a guy on patrol," exclaims Edwards, "and he dies the first day, what good is he" (Bloods 12)?

The infantrymen, or "grunts", were affected by this regularly. Even though D.J. was in a tank, he recalls stories he heard about the grunts in combat. After ten or eleven months in the jungle, there were incidents where soldiers would "lose it" during a firefight. After almost a year of seeing the inhumanity of war, with a short time left in their tour, they would just stand up. There were no reasons why. Usually the victim was not around to answer questions.

In an interview in No Victory Parades, a white veteran named George Ryan describes the death of his friend Walt Miller. One night, Walt talked about dying. The next day, it came true. During a brutal firefight, Walt went crazy. "He just couldn't take it anymore," said Ryan. "He stood up, picked up a weapon, and started firing" (36). Later, the same thing would happen to Ryan. He stood up just like Miller did, killed a Viet Cong, and couldn't stop shooting. Luckily his lieutenant

pulled him to the ground (40).

George Ryan stood up in the face of death and managed to come out a survivor. Because someone was there to intervene, Ryan was able to live and tell about it. In Medal of Honor Rag, D.J. experienced two such incidents. In the first situation, he was like George Ryan. When he saw his former tank get hit, he jumped from his new one and ran into enemy crossfire to try to save the crew. How he survived, God only knows. In the second, D.J. found himself looking down the barrel of an enemy rifle, only to have it misfire. For some reason, D.J. was supposed to live.

Wilbert Brown experienced two no-win confrontations with death as well. In Stan Beesley's Vietnam: The Heartland Remembers, a book of interviews conducted with Vietnam veterans from Oklahoma, Brown recalls an occasion when he was on patrol. At midnight, enemy mortars began to come in on top of them. Brown could hear the Viet Cong walking in around them. In the light of the flares, he could see that all but he and four others were dead or wounded. They prepared themselves for the attack, but it never came. A voice in good English came over a loud speaker: "'Hey, GI...Not Tonight.'" Then they left (60-61). Brown lived because of a joke.

The second incident was more mysterious than the first. The north Vietnamese believed black Americans were pawns in a white American war. They were aware of

the mistreatment of blacks (which I will discuss later), and used it as an instrument of propaganda against both white and black soldiers. One day while walking lead--or point--Brown walked into an ambush. People were standing all around aiming rifles at him. He figured the situation was hopeless. He dropped his gun and waited for the bullets to rip into him. Fortunately, a strange thing happened:

One guy stepped forward and motioned at me with his rifle, and I figured he was going to be my executioner, but he said to me, "Same same, no fight," and then he and all the others melted into the jungle. (125)

What he said has puzzled Brown to this day. Did "same same" mean he was the same as the Vietnamese? That because he was black he was struggling for freedom like them? Brown also asked questions to which he will never find the answers. "Why did they let me go? Why didn't they take me prisoner? Kill me?" (125)?

It's questions like these that haunt D.J. His guilt for surviving while others died even carried over into his dreams. This is one problem that all combat veterans have encountered. The experience is common, but the subject matter and the intensity of the dreams vary depending on the soldier and his situation. D.J. dreams of a soldier, with his finger on the trigger of an AK-47 rifle, standing in front of him. As the soldier slowly

presses the trigger, the gun always misfires. These images have become D.J.'s hell.

Arthur "Gene" Woodley Jr. is haunted by a dream also. The story behind his dream is one of the most shocking images of the horrors of war that I've encountered. But his dream is so similar to D.J.'s that it's worth using for a comparison. As a combat paratrooper in Vietnam, Woodley was the leader of a squad that was sent on special assignments. Once on patrol, he and his platoon came across a white American who had been staked out in the jungle. The soldier had been partially skinned and beaten. He was near death and they had no way of helping him. The pain was so great that the soldier said repeatedly, "Please kill me. I'm in pain. I'm in agony. Kill me." (Bloods 249). Woodley called headquarters and was told to make a decision. Finding it the hardest thing he had to do during the war, he put his gun to the soldier's temple and shot him (248-250). When he was interviewed twelve years later, Woodley was still having nightmares about it:

I see me in the nightmare. I see me in the circumstances where I have to be man enough to ask someone to end my suffering as he did. I can't see the face of the person pointing the gun. I ask him to pull the trigger. I ask him over and over. He won't pull the trigger. I wake up. Every time. (265).

D.J.'s survivor guilt is heightened because he received the Medal of Honor, an award seen as a symbol for bravery "above and beyond the call of duty." But what seemed heroic to military and civilian leaders was usually nothing more than an instance of insanity, or being cornered with no other option but to fight. Most heroic acts, I'm sure, contained a little of both.

Billy Walkabout was one of the most highly decorated soldiers in the war. A full-blooded Cherokee, the ranger team leader had his say about heroics. Although the media considered his behavior heroic, to Walkabout it was more of "getting into positions where I couldn't get out" (Vietnam 120). Walkabout recalled the day he jumped into a hole running for cover, and landed on top of a live enemy soldier. During the fall, Walkabout broke his opponent's rifle and lost his own. He tried to reach for his .45, only to have the "gook" hit him and break his nose. They both screamed for help. As Walkabout tried to climb out, he was pulled back in, leaving his fingerprints in the dirt. Walkabout was, as he puts it, "scared shitless" (121). Luckily, Walkabout managed to grab his knife and stab his rival. When the lieutenant arrived, he saw what happened and called in the brass. Seeing the nail marks in the dirt, the general assumed the dead Vietnamese had tried to escape and Walkabout pulled him back. " I tried to tell them they had it



wrong," said Walkabout, "but nobody was listening" (Parades 121).

On another occasion, Walkabout was pinned down on a hill for twelve hours, wounded, and waiting for help. He was surrounded by the enemy, and all the others in his team were wounded or dead. When help finally arrived, Walkabout refused medical attention, insisting that his friends be evacuated first. He had refused to leave his men, even though many were dead (75-81).

Walkabout received medals in both circumstances, but had only acted out of an instinct to survive and a desire to save his friends. D.J. is similar to Walkabout because he killed many and stayed alive. Neither one really saw their acts as heroic. But D.J.'s deed evolved more from revulsion at seeing his friends get killed than desire to stay alive. In the hill incident, Walkabout was aware of being the only one able to fight. D.J. momentarily lost all concern for his own life and went into a killing frenzy.

The closeness that D.J. felt towards those in his tank crew was evident in any outfit, anywhere, and at any time during the Vietnam War. Quite frankly, it was common in every war ever fought in history. Proof of this comraderie in Vietnam is evident in the words of Don Stagnaro, a white veteran, who was a member of Charlie Company:

What men felt for one another there had been stronger than the love most men feel for their wives. (Charlie Company 201)

D.J.'s love for his friends that were killed came in the form of revenge. This was a very natural reaction. Machine gunner Charles Strong remembers his revengeful feelings. A friend of his, who was walking point, hit a booby trap and got his leg blown off. The attempt to save him failed, and he died on the way to the hospital. "I remember praying to the Lord to let me see some VC--anybody--jump out on that trail" (Bloods 60).

Watching friends die, and being unable to help them, should be enough to explain D.J.'s depression. However, the doctor thinks there's more. Because D.J. is black, the doctor assumes his problems are racially oriented and tries at various times to make it an issue. But D.J.'s images of the war--or those he chooses to remember--are not influenced by color. The doctor is trying to insinuate something that D.J. doesn't believe is important. He makes no comments to the doctor concerning race until the end of the play, which will be discussed later.

The black soldier in Vietnam traveled a two way street. All those interviewed in Bloods recalled experiences with whites of both discrimination and hatred and acceptance and mutual respect.

The discrimination end of this spectrum could be seen in the number of black and/or minorities in combat units. Many outfits on the front lines found themselves with more than their share of non-white troops. Wilbert Brown described his unit in that regard:

75 percent minority: blacks, Puerto Ricans, Chicanos, Indians. We didn't have many whites, but the CO, the first sergeant, and the RTO were white. (Vietnam 60)

As mentioned earlier, the North Vietnamese were well aware of the struggle of black Americans. Hanoi saw the disproportionate number of blacks in combat. They would send out radio broadcasts telling them to go home, that this was not their war. The messages would call the war "a trick of the Capitalist empire to get rid of the blacks" (Bloods 42). Security Policeman Don F. Browne remembers the situation after Martin Luther King's assassination. More blacks were being killed in combat units than whites, because there were more blacks in combat units than whites. Eventually the Viet Cong began to show sympathy for black soldiers by sparing them while shooting their white counterparts. Many times front line companies would arrange their personnel so they had "all black or nearly all-black units" (Bloods 161). Blacks saw this as an excuse to put more of them there.

Another form of discrimination was evident in the job assignments issued to blacks and whites. In Bloods,

"Gene" Woodley, Jr. tells of this discrimination even during training. Jobs such as KP, and sweeping underneath barracks went to the "dark-skinned brothers," while the easy jobs went to the "light-skinned brothers and Europeans" (245).

Once in battle, blacks saw the war in a different light. When the bullets started flying, color was the farthest thing from a soldier's mind. D.J. seems to share this opinion, although his true feelings are never discussed. By avoiding the issue of color, D.J. gave the impression that he was not bothered by it. "Gene" Woodley Jr. conveyed this impression as well. After experiencing discrimination off the battle field, he never encountered it. "Once you started to go in the field with an individual," recalled Woodley, "you started to depend on that person to cover your ass" (246). Frank Goins echoes Woodley's sentiments:

We would eat out of the same pan. We all shared boxes and stuff. Color didn't matter to nobody. Everyone was trying to make it back home alive. (Charlie Company 248)

D.J. saw the true racial conflict in Vietnam as not between blacks and whites, but between Americans and Vietnamese. The American GI's hatred toward the North Vietnamese had justification: they were the enemy. But Americans didn't always see the South Vietnamese as allies. They found the South Vietnamese to be people

they could both love and hate. Many Americans felt they were sent to Vietnam to help the south. What they found instead, was a country of people who refused to help themselves, and took the GI for everything he had.

Fighting a war where you were never sure who was friend or foe became very frustrating for the Americans. This resulted in acts of physical violence, causing much death and destruction to Vietnamese civilians. This killing of the innocent led Americans to be accused of genocide, and what came to be known as the "gook syndrome." Many Americans, opposed to the involvement in Vietnam, saw these acts as proof that the United States Government was trying to wipe out an entire race of people. D.J. encountered some of this madness on his first day in Vietnam. Although Medal of Honor Rag refers to this issue, it is just another cause of D.J.'s insanity. But, as will be discussed later, in Still Life by Emily Mann, this topic takes on major relevance.

After getting off the airplane in Vietnam, D.J. hitches a ride to his assignment with a group of soldiers in a truck. As they drove recklessly down the road, the driver had to swerve to miss some kids. This angered the guys on the back of the trucks and they started yelling at the kids. After the truck passed them, the kids started laughing and gave the Americans the finger. The GI's yelled at the driver who slammed on the brakes, backed the truck up and tried to run over the kids. They

ran away laughing, only to have everyone on the truck open fire. The kids didn't run far. When they finished, the soldiers blew the smoke away from their guns and checked their weapon just like participants in an old west shoot out.

This picture of war involves two aspects. The first is the influence of the Americans on the Vietnamese. Giving the finger is a classic American gesture, and nobody but an American can teach someone else the meaning, and the lesson was not confined to those dead boys. Once when his platoon was walking through a village, Stan Beesley, a white veteran related, a very beautiful Vietnamese woman was leaning on a Shell sign. One of the men fell instantly in love with her, threw her a candy bar, and said, "'Here you go, Baby, be my girlfriend.'" The girl looked at them, slowly lifted her hand, shot them the finger and said, "'Fuck you, GI,'" (Vietnam 134).

And this was not the only American thing the Vietnamese learned to the detriment of the black soldier. In the introduction to No Victory Parades, Murray Polner tells of one black veteran who was called 'nigger' by a Vietnamese woman. This led him to ask, "'Where else but from a white American could she have learned the term'" (xiii)?

The second aspect is the conduct of the Americans. The terrors of war were a major cause of D.J.'s insanity.

All veterans recall some form of resentment for the Vietnamese after seeing Americans die. But the South Vietnamese lack of appreciation for Americans created other problems. This caused real hatred towards the Vietnamese. In No Victory Parades, three veterans confirm this: Steve Harper describes the ARVN--Army of the Republic of Vietnam (South)--as cowards. "In firefights they'd turn and run, from their officers on down" (26); Harry O'Connor's hatred stemmed from what the Vietnamese he encountered were. The only kind he saw were "whores, black marketers, VC...dirty old men and women" (71); and George Ryan, who confesses he liked the children, hated the older Vietnamese because they would raise the price on everything when the Americans came through a village. Eventually, everyone Ryan knew would "just as soon shoot a South Vietnamese as a VC" (38). He felt the same way. "They just had no appreciation" (38).

At the end of D.J.'s story, the doctor asks if the soldiers on the truck were white. D.J.'s memory is not real clear, and once again the doctor makes an issue of color, which D.J. doesn't feel is important. Although color had an impact on some veteran's views of brutality, D.J. saw a soldier as a soldier.

Some blacks, for instance, saw whites as more violent. Combat Engineer Harold "Light Bulb" Bryant remembers Armstrong, his white squad leader, as a ruthless individual. Obsessed with a desire for action,

Armstrong always wanted his squad to lead the ambush. After the killing was done, Armstrong "immediately started cutting ears off" and putting them in his rucksack (Bloods 100).

But this thirst for killing was evident in minorities as well. Steve Harper, in No Victory Parades, recalls an Indian they called Geronimo, who sneaked up on a woman who had opened fire on them and cut her to pieces. When he finished, he began laughing like he "enjoyed it," and "starting wipin' off the blood from his knife as if it was a movie" (23).

Blacks were also noted for their madness in combat. Interpreter Emmanuel J. Hollomon tells how the blacks got along with the Vietnamese better than the whites. However, the North Vietnamese feared the blacks soldiers more. Two or three of them he interrogated said the black soldiers "fought more fiercely, with more abandonment" (Bloods 87).

Regardless of how intensely black soldiers fought, many of them believed that Vietnam was only basic training for the real war to be fought back home. Because of the racial tension in the United States--resulting from incidents such as the Watts riot and the assassination of Martin Luther King--some blacks were calling for the violent over-throw of the whites. In D.J.'s final statement of the play, he warns the doctor and guard of a possible uprising among blacks. He claims



that many of his race didn't want black veterans to throw down their arms so quickly, and to prepare themselves for the real struggle here in America.

"Malik" Edwards heard this call. When he returned from Vietnam, Edwards joined the Black Panthers. He felt naked without a weapon, and the Panthers gave him an incentive to carry one. In Bloods, Edwards describes this desire to unite as "the first time black people had stood up to the state since Nat Turner" (12). If blacks wanted anything from the whites, it was obvious they would have to take it. "I had left one war," exclaims Edwards, "and come back and got into another one" (13).

The black experience in Vietnam included much more than the struggle to survive. They were forced to go through what whites did, and then some. Blacks were still subject to the effect of 200 years of racial prejudice. They were called upon to fight the "white man's war." When they returned, black veterans such as Frank Goins still had to enter a cafe by the back door. "When wartime comes," Frank recalls, "you're just like brothers." But when the war is over, it's "hey boy, you get back in your class now" (Charlie Company 249).

In Medal of Honor Rag, D.J. is more a victim of war than a victim of racial prejudice. The medal he received is only a reminder of the terrible tragedies of war. Although the doctor confronts D.J. with questions of racial attitudes, Tom Cole chooses to avoid the issue of

skin color, and make death and destruction the origin of D.J.'s problem. By doing this, I believe that Cole has excluded an interesting dimension of the Vietnam War. Because of the unique experience of the black Vietnam veterans, the playwright could have taken a chance and allowed D.J. to be more radical in his view on race.

Although Tom Cole strays away from the issue of skin color, the play is not hurt by it. As a play portraying the Vietnam veteran as a victim in need of understanding, Medal of Honor Rag is dynamite. Aside from its naive use of psychiatry--which Clive Barnes, in his February 29, 1976 New York Times review of the play calls "obvious but sensible," but "stupid and shatteringly insincere" (45:4)--I do believe D.J. reveals an accurate account of the Vietnam veteran's struggle to come to terms with the war. For some veterans, like D.J., the answers never came. Harold "Light Bulb" Bryant remembers reading a Bible in Vietnam that his mother sent him. He searched diligently in it for reasons to explain the war. Since he got back, he's read the Bible every year from beginning to end. "I keep looking for the explanation. I can't find it. I can't find it" (Bloods 32).

Medal of Honor Rag covers all aspects of the Vietnam veteran's experience, but some were not included in the discussion such as the doctor questioning D.J. about his reaction to war protestors, the absence of victory parades for returning veterans, and D.J.'s commenting on

veterans harming people such as wives and girlfriends. These were not discussed because they were not relevant to an understanding of D.J.'s character. These elements take center stage, however, in Emily Mann's Still Life.

CHAPTER TWO

SOCIETY, WOMEN AND THE VIETNAM VETERAN

STILL LIFE

BY EMILY MANN

Men march off to war because the women are watching.

Anonymous

One kills a man, one is an assassin;  
One kills millions, one is a conqueror;  
One kills everybody, one is a god.

Jean Rostand

Michael Herr went to Vietnam in 1967 as a war correspondent for Esquire magazine. In the opening page of his book Dispatches, there is a brief note about the author and how the book came to be. The excerpt states that after arriving in Vietnam Herr, having no restrictions, "roamed the war-ravaged countryside watching, looking, listening, and writing it all down." The observations he made were astonishing.

In Chapter 5, Herr described the reaction of many American soldiers who knew the camera was on them. During a firefight, there were some who became instantaneous "media freaks" (225). They looked at war as a adventure, and were never afraid to please the potential viewing audience. These "kids," as he called them, began losing their lives because they had fallen victim to "seventeen years of war movies" (225). When a television crew was in the area, the attempts at heroics would reach a peak:

They were actually making war movies in their heads, doing little guts-and-glory Leatherneck tap dances under fire, getting their pimples shot off for the network. (225).

This was insanity, but it wasn't the war that provoked them. War films made death something that only happened to stand-ins and made survival seem more glamorous for those who took chances. The true soldier could only be found behind the eye of the camera.

Victory could only be achieved by living on the edge, and besides, the guys always looked good doing it. They could prove they were soldiers in front of the whole world.

Robert Jay Lifton told of this reinforcement in his book Home from the War. As a psychiatrist, Lifton conducted rap sessions with Vietnam veterans who turned against the war. His analysis revealed that many veterans were brought up with a continuous reinforcement of the ideal of "heroic service," to be someone who "stood fast against a threat to the life of one's people." This was passed down from generation to generation (244). The male youths of previous wars who survived their mission taught the new generation how to carry on:

The young man can be true to this legacy, repay the 'debt of honor' he owes his father and his nation, and take responsibility for his portion of the unending survivor mission, only by answering his call to his war. (244)

Women, too, had a role in creating this ideal. By providing inspiration, women assisted in confirming this concept of manhood. The ideal of "chivalry" and the need to protect the "weaker sex" are partially responsible for sustaining the "brutalized supermanhood cultivated among certain groups of socialized warriors" (Home 245).

Through the desire to uphold manhood and defend womanhood, young men went off to fight the war in Vietnam. They traveled to foreign shores in hopes of maintaining a tradition lived to the fullest by their ancestors. But this war was different from preceding wars. It was different by nature, and it questioned the general principle of being a warrior. Instead of a heroic warrior, the Vietnam soldier usually became a "confused monster or a blind (or helpless) giant" (Home 245).

Emily Mann's Still Life takes a close and personal look at the effect of this tradition on the Vietnam veteran. The play is the result of an interview Mann conducted with three people she met in Minnesota during the summer of 1978. It deals with the life of Mark, an ex-marine, whose life before, during, and after the war are described by him and the two women who are in love with him. By comparing Mark's story to the experiences of genuine Vietnam veterans, I will show that the play is typical of the influence of women and society on the Vietnam veteran.

Still Life is written in documentary style. The setting is a long conference table with Mark in the middle showing a slide show and the two women on either side of him. In the playwright's notes for Still Life, Mann writes that she decided on the documentary style "to insure that the reality of the people and events" are an

actual recreation of those who experienced them (Terms 214-215). The actors directly confront the audience, and may portray, according to Mann, "the sense of improvisation one finds with the best jazz musicians" (215). Mann calls the play a "traumatic memory," and wants the audience to hear and experience what she did (215).

Mark is a Vietnam veteran with a disease called power. The war made him addicted to killing in order to stay alive. He has developed a lot of anger from the war, and sometimes there's no controlling it. His violence is evident through his slides, his perverted art work, and his attitude towards people and society. Mark was the master over life and death during Vietnam, and it is the basis for all his problems. Because of the war, Mark has trouble relating to his family and others, has physically and verbally abused his wife and strangers, and has failed to come to terms with himself and Vietnam.

Mark's wife, Cheryl, is a casualty of his power. She is completely turned off by his obsession with the war. Cheryl has many wounds to show for it, and she is often the subject of his twisted art work. She is afraid to leave Mark because of her son, and she has a paralyzing fear of being alone. Mark is aware of this dependence, and Cheryl becomes a victim of his power. Because she conveys this weakness, Mark preys on her with his force.



Nadine is just the opposite. She enjoys Mark's power. Just being with him leaves her breathless. Nadine is Mark's other woman, and is no secret to Cheryl. After a grueling marriage and divorce from her own husband, Nadine is an equal to Mark. She is fascinated by his war stories, and finds him the most gentle and loving man she has ever met. Mark treats Nadine differently, because she accepts his power and can match it with her own. She understands what Mark went through during the war and takes him for what he is.

Mark, Cheryl and Nadine are all victims of society and the Vietnam War. Their story tells of the danger of society that for so long has programmed people to think a certain way about men and women.

Mark is the center of the play. Most of the comments made are either about or because of him. Many observations by Nadine and Cheryl are their impressions of how Mark has been affected by the teachings of society, man's view of women, and the Vietnam war.

The first topic to consider is the influence of society on Mark, particularly of religion. Nadine blames Mark's condition on the commandments. "You know why they went crazy out there? It's that totally negative religion" (Terms 240). All the "thou shalt nots" constantly reinforced throughout a person's life can bring about guilt once he's sent out to kill. The teachings of priests and nuns can lead to revolt once a

soldier is in a live or die situation.

This contradiction in philosophies was a great problem for military chaplains. Robert Jay Lifton dealt with this conflict in attitudes during his sessions. After a discussion between military officers, one chaplain described the strain he felt between "ministering to one's flock" on the one hand, and "offering spiritual strength to go on murdering civilians" on the other. When the group convened, the chaplain approached Lifton and said: "I guess it's a little like the way it was for chaplains in Nazi Germany" (Home 336).

Such teachings of society--as the promotion of the warrior image and at the same time the pacifist ideal of Christianity--make combat even more perplexing. All the values taught since childhood were shattered by the Vietnam War. Nadine was aware of these teachings in herself as well as in Mark and she can't believe they accepted them all. She talks about hating this country and remembering since she was two "all these terrible things they taught us" (Terms 251). In Home From The War, one veteran expressed his anger about being in Vietnam, and admitted that the country, his parents and everyone he believed in "told you a whole pack of lies" (269).

Stephen A. Howard understands this psychological depression. He talks about trying to suppress "this

psychological thing" (Bloods 133). Howard believes that holding it in, can kill a person quicker than a bullet to the head:

'Cause it eats away at your inner being. It eats away at everything that you ever learned in life. Your integrity. Your word. See, that's all you have. (133).

Parents played an important role in this influence. They were crucial in supporting patriotism and religion. After practically pushing their sons into war, some parents had little to do with them when they returned home. Americans had a bad taste in their mouths for the war and for those who took part in it. Often this meant turning away from their own offspring.

Mark felt this lack of concern from his own parents. They showed no interest in hearing his war stories. They had changed drastically while he was away. Mark noticed this the moment he returned and stepped in the door of his parents home. He came in and asked for some coffee, only to have his mother start "raggin" on him about it. "The whole thing broke down" (Terms 258). They never asked him about the war or how he felt. Robert Jay Lifton perceived this as a very common problem among Vietnam veterans:

Above all, the men had the impression that their parents did not want to hear or know about the extent of horror, absurdity and

corruption they experienced in Vietnam. (Home  
295)

All of this happened to Mark despite his ability to write his father during the war and tell him everything. In hopes that his father would understand, Mark would admit to him that he was scared. It was also the only way Mark was able to cry (Terms 257). Unfortunately, he lost this closeness the moment he stepped foot in the door of his home.

Mark was not the only soldier to experience this. In Home From The War, a former army sergeant tells of his attempt to keep a close relationship with his mother by writing her letters while in Vietnam. He tried to convey his thoughts and doubts about the war, only to find indifference when he returned home. Because of the knowledge he gained in Vietnam, he immediately saw the gap between him and his parents:

The person that I was, was entirely foreign to them. And [despite] what we had shared before...there was still a vast gulf there.  
(297)

Parents were only a part of what Mark had to deal with when he returned. Like a cycle, society trained the veterans to think a particular way before they went to war, and then when they came back, it expected them to blend back into the real world as if nothing happened. Mark had trouble finding a job, was sent to prison for

smuggling drugs, and thought about killing people and blaming it on the war. He had been trained to kill, and that was all he knew.

This attitude is echoed by Nick D'allesandro. In No Victory Parades, Nick expresses his disgust at the way society expected veterans to act after arriving back home. It was beyond him how this country could send them off to fight communism, "and still come back the same way they went in" (116-117).

The power that Mark acquired in Vietnam is proof of the changes that took place in him during the war. The need to survive had given him control over life and death. These feelings of might went contrary to everything he previously learned, and when the combat would start, Mark became invigorated by it.

This phenomenon was shared by many Vietnam veterans. Bob Bowers remembers this sensation. In Charlie Company, Bowers enjoyed it so much, he would volunteer to get more. "Your adrenaline would start to flow," recalls Bowers, "when you were near danger." It became a high to him. "You liked that feeling, face it" (265).

Mark liked it, too. He admits there is nothing better. He claims it was a bigger kick than any sex or dope he ever had. This created a lot of guilt, because it was something you weren't supposed to feel good about (Terms 231).

In Bloods, machine gunner Charles Strong got the same kind of rush. The power he possessed in Vietnam gave him a "good feeling," and stimulated his senses. Strong compared the thrill of seeing a Viet Cong dead to "a drink of alcohol," or to smoking a cigarette (59-60).

Jim Howarth experienced the same thrill. In Vietnam, he described his first firefight. It had lasted all day and he recollects everyone of his senses being alive. As things exploded all around him, he had thoughts of "'Wow! This is neat, this is war! Exciting'" (84-85).

The Marines had trained Mark to do a job: and that was kill. War was a game, but it had to be played right. It became such an obsession with Mark, that he and his best friend, R.J., began to compete against one another to see who could do the most destruction. They both wanted to be the best that they could be (Terms 228).

David Chambers also saw combat as a job. He recalls being "exhilarated during and after combat." He enjoyed being in a fighting unit and felt he was doing his part for his country:

The spirit of the platoon was great and it was a man's job--the one job in the world where you're good or you're dead. I was good.

(Parades 7)

Occasionally, the enthusiasm for the job would push soldiers beyond the limit of simple survival and

destruction of the enemy. Like D.J., in Medal of Honor Rag, Mark was driven to moments of rage. One incident in particular left a wound on his emotions. Mark, like the soldiers on the truck that D.J. hitched a ride with on his first day in Vietnam, killed children. This has become the hardest thing for him to talk about.

Once on patrol, a friend of Mark's hit a booby trap. Mark knew that the Vietnamese in the area were aware of the trap, so he tried to get them to confess. He had lost a friend and his anger overtook him. With many people watching, Mark killed a mother and father and their three children (Terms 268).

Mark was hurt deeply because he loved the Vietnamese children. But the death of his friend and the significance of the situation pushed him over the edge. The desire to help children and wipe out the enemy at the same time became another contradiction in attitudes faced by the Vietnam soldier.

War is hell, but it has to be doubly so on children. Many Vietnam veterans who came in contact with the Vietnamese children felt sorry for them and tried to help them. David Chambers was one of these veterans. He admits that he "loved Vietnam" and that he was proud to have helped the children. "I could never have lived with myself," confesses Chambers, "if I had turned my back on them" (Parades 8).

Unfortunately, the Viet Cong looked at children differently. They saw them as a weapon to be used against the Americans, as I learned from my friend whose father served in Vietnam. His father told him stories of the Viet Cong handing grenades to little children and sending them over to the Americans. If the child reached you, you blew up with him. His father and those with him had no other alternative but to shoot.

Private John O'Halloran witnessed a similar incident. In Letters from Vietnam, a book of letters from soldiers while in Vietnam, editor Bill Adler includes a letter by O'Halloran written to his father concerning the Viet Cong's use of women and children. A woman carrying a baby came walking at them from the opposite direction. She started crying like a baby. O'Halloran was unaware of what was going on and before he knew it, "the sergeant shot the hell out of the both of them." She had a grenade under the baby's blanket (15).

It was hard to fight an enemy when you never knew who or where he was. John Norwood Jr. describes the many faces of the Viet Cong--America's most unpredictable enemy ever:

He takes many forms: a salesman turning all the profits over to a cause; a prostitute paying a percentage; a child stealing bullets and grenades; the soldier; a betel-chewing old woman making sandals; the little flower girl



who hands you her flowers with a smile on her face, hangs a grenade or explosive on your jeep, pulls the pin and walks off into the crowd; and even the ten-year-old child who takes a weapon from the V.C., shoots a couple of people until he gets shot before the GI realizes the situation and then is blamed for a war atrocity. (Letters 56).

It was events like these that caused so much hate inside American soldiers. Although Mark committed an atrocity, the war itself lent some justification. After seeing so much tragedy and knowing what the enemy was capable of, it was easy for hatred to become an obsession.

This was the case with Warrant Officer Richard Elliot. After taking part in a fierce firefight, he never thought he could hate anyone like he hated the Viet Cong. In a letter to his father, Elliot expresses this hostile attitude:

Dad, now more than ever I am determined to do everything possible to wipe the rotten bastards off the face of the earth...total and complete destruction is the only way to treat these animals. (Letters 22)

When the Vietnam veterans returned home, they carried their desire for power and their capacity to hate with them. The veterans did their best to suppress these

monsters inside them. Occasionally, something such as drugs and/or alcohol, or simply someone around them, would trigger these pent-up emotions causing the veterans affected to do harm to themselves or others. In Mark's case, the instigator was alcohol. The victim was usually his wife.

The Vietnam veteran's anger towards society is easy to justify. These boys were sent into a jungle war most of them knew very little about. They fought in a conflict that only had the support of part of the country and they were treated like dirt when they returned home. But certain soldiers needed desperately to release this anger; and almost always, whether verbally or physically, it was taken out on a wife or girlfriend.

Robert Jay Lifton discerns a probable cause for this treatment of women. During his sessions with Vietnam veterans, he had the opportunity to discuss the training Marines went through. It held up an image of a Marine as a man who shared the power of the "immortal group" in which women were not important and considered a "lower element" (Home 242-243). This was true in the training of the other services as well, but not as extreme as in the Marines. Until a marine was confirmed as a man, he was often referred to as a "woman" or a "pussy." For this reason, the Marines Corps "was referred to as 'the crotch,' while other branches of the military were called 'the sister services.'" Even the women marines were

looked down upon. A former marine grunt stresses this attitude and its effect on conduct in Vietnam:

Women marines were always something less than human just as the Vietnamese women became later--something less than human. They were a lower element. We were men. (242-243)

As an ex-marine, his training would explain Mark's treatment of his wife Cheryl. He pictures her as this "lower element," and punishes her for dependence on him. She is aware of Mark's other women, but is afraid to be alone, so she hangs on to him. Through it all, they both confess to loving each other, but Mark is still stuck in Vietnam and Cheryl has become his battlefield.

The problems started as soon as Mark returned from the war. He needed someone to relate to, and Cheryl made one more person who wouldn't listen. The options were all closed. First his parents didn't want to talk about it, then the older veterans in the VFW halls couldn't communicate with him (Terms 223), and now Cheryl was having trouble understanding.

A lot of this was caused by Mark's silence. Cheryl wanted Mark to talk, but when he did talk, she was completely turned off. Cheryl was shocked to think that men like Mark got such a thrill out of the war. "Gene" Woodley had the same experience with women. In Bloods, Woodley talks about the inability of women to understand flashbacks:

Try to talk to them (women), they wouldn't wanna hear it. Didn't want to hear about no gross war stories. Hear about dead people.

(261-262)

For this reason, Mark refused to get close to Cheryl and was afraid to let his true feelings show. Eventually the use of slides helped him to contemplate the war and what he went through. But this resistance to relationships was common to many Vietnam veterans. They would distance themselves from women and relationships because they felt that falling in love was another way to hurt or be hurt. In Home From the War, those that did fall in love -- especially right after returning from Vietnam--found the relationships were short-lived because the veterans didn't "want to be tied down." In reality, they, like Mark, broke away for another reason:

Their psychological work as survivors was so demanding as to preclude, as least for a certain period of time, sustained intimacy or long-range personal commitment. (271)

Mark's way of coping with conflict was to get drunk. This allowed him to release his anger, and usually it was directed towards Cheryl. Violence became his only form of expression.

Nadine has never seen Mark use violence, but she knows he's capable of it. In fact, it's the violent side of Mark that attracts her to him. She knows Mark's past,

and she is not bothered by what he's done.

Nadine is Mark's equal. Her divorce has made her a very independent woman. Nadine doesn't demand the support from Mark that Cheryl does. She sees gentleness and honesty in Mark's power and can balance it out with her own.

Mark has helped Nadine come to terms with her own violent past. While married, Nadine would get drunk and hit her husband. Once, after beating her husband, he turned to Nadine and said, "I didn't think you cared." She never hit another person again (Terms 234). Knowing Mark and knowing others are capable of violence has helped her deal with her own tendencies to rage.

To Mark, Nadine is a comrade. She is the only one he can talk to about the war, about life. Other veterans were also attracted to the same kind of woman. In Home From The War, one veteran spoke of meeting a girl that he felt so drawn to, he had to tell her things he's never told anyone. When he opened up to her, she confessed she preferred him now to the way he was. He was becoming free with his feelings (274-275).

Although Cheryl and Nadine see two different sides of Mark, there are a few things they have in common: childbirth and motherhood. For Cheryl, delivering her baby was relatively easy. She compares it to having a tooth pulled (Terms 226). Nadine found the task a little more difficult. She had to undergo an anesthetic,

a tracheotomy and a C-section while delivering two of her three children (224-226). These bouts brought Nadine close to death and are another reason why she can relate so well to Mark.

As to being a mother, the two women are no different. Taking care of children has become one of their greatest concerns, and Cheryl and Nadine both talk openly about it. The playwright suggests that in this regard they have much in common with Mark. Their description in Act I, Scene VI of Still Life indirectly compares motherhood to being a marine.

At the beginning of the scene, Mark simply states, "I want to tell you what a marine is." However, he is immediately cut off and says nothing for the rest of the short episode; while Cheryl and Nadine jump right in, speaking about their children and overlapping each other, almost as if Mark were still talking. Nadine speaks of having so much to do just to keep her and her kids going, she never gets any sleep. And when her kids complain about the food they're having for supper, she tells them to "throw it up." Cheryl is exhausted by the "kid routine" as well. She now realizes that she is not important, and it gets confusing mixing up their "best interest" with her best interest. Cheryl always has to be "looking out" instead of looking into herself.

Nadine and Cheryl are like Mark and the other marines who had to keep on going just to keep themselves

and their men alive. They hardly ever slept. Nobody did in the jungle. As for good food, combat soldiers would go without it for weeks. A soldier friend of mine told me that food was the main topic of discussion among soldiers in the field. And throwing up, well that was probably an everyday event for some. The war and taking care of your men became as routine as taking care of children. Mark's main interest was always his men, and it was a job to look out for them. The marine ethic was never leave your man in the field. Their best interest was your best interest.

Emily Mann has done this deliberately to turn the marine into the mothers. Mark eventually tells what a marine is in the following scenes. But the comparison is there and Mann portrays this cleverly.

Still Life raises many questions about the role of society in shaping America's image of war and the warrior. And it draws a tragic picture of domestic violence and how this violence is influenced by American culture. The play also represents the role of women in unknowingly helping to shape the heroic image men want to emulate, only to fall victim to its consequences in the end.

In his 1981 New York Times review, Frank Rich rips Emily Mann and Still Life to shreds. Rich claims that the performance he viewed of the play correctly fits the title. It left the audience cold and trivialized such

issues as "the plight of the Vietnam veteran, war atrocities and feminism." Rich also says the play failed at dramatizing the "tragic readjustment traumas of the veterans" and that Mann should have picked a veteran who had a "genuine right to his bitterness and rage."

First of all, it should be pointed out that Frank Rich may well be alone in his judgement. Still Life won Obies for playwriting, directing, acting of all three performers, and best production in 1981.

Second, I think I have demonstrated that Mark is an excellent example of the plight of the Vietnam veteran as compared with the examples of other soldiers given in this analysis.

Third, Mann was far from trivializing war atrocities. She has Mark admit these existed and that he committed them. But they were provoked by the enemy and the circumstances in Vietnam. A little unbiased observation on the part of Rich would have made this evident.

Fourth, if Rich thought Mann should have chosen a more appropriate veteran to use as a subject, he ought to have given us some examples of what kind of veteran this might be. Is it possible to find one who didn't try to survive? Who is not bothered by the killing and destruction he caused? Who can admit he didn't get off on the killing? Who is happy he returned home to a



country who cared nothing about him? Is he out there? I doubt it.

Finally, Rich doesn't explain why he thinks Still Life trivialized feminism and I don't see how he could. Presenting a woman who supports herself and her children, openly speaks her mind, and understand the struggle between men and woman makes the topic very significant.

Still Life contains all the reality of the Vietnam war. It demonstrates that war affects more than just the men who fought it. Although this documentary style could hamper the movement possibilities in a production, I believe the words alone are enough to captivate any audience. The images created vividly reveals the endless struggle a Vietnam veteran has in trying to come to terms with the war. This battle with reconciliation becomes an obsession in Strange Snow.

## CHAPTER THREE

### RECONCILIATION AND THE VIETNAM VETERAN

#### STRANGE SNOW

BY STEPHEN METCALFE

There's nothing worse than taking something into your head: it turns into a revolving wheel that you can't control.

Ugo Betti

It's hard. Martha, it's so God-fuckin' hard to put the fatigues to sleep.

Megs

Strange Snow

The biggest problem the Vietnam veteran faces is acceptance of the past, the ability to pick up what is left and move on. In Medal of Honor Rag, D.J. failed to do this and forced his own death to relieve the anguish. Mark was so obsessed with the war in Still Life that he used slides to hang onto the very thing that constantly wrecked his existence.

Fortunately, there are some Vietnam veterans who have achieved control over the trauma left by the war. Harry Foxwell is a good example. In Charlie Company, Foxwell admits he has put the war behind him. Vietnam had stolen enough of his time. By learning about computers, Foxwell adapted to his post-war life. Determined not to blame the past for current problems, Foxwell tries not to dwell on it. "You can't go back," remarks Foxwell, "and change what you went through" (290).

Strange Snow is a play concerned with this reconciliation between Vietnam veterans and the part they played in the Vietnam war. Stephen Metcalfe develops this issue by presenting two veterans: one who has come to terms with the war and strives to find what good came out of it and another who constantly struggles with the war and the dreams it shattered. These contrasting attitudes help to show the different roads that Vietnam veterans have taken since they returned home. By

analyzing these two extremes and comparing them to the attitudes of actual veterans who have experienced similar feelings, a better understanding of the characters in the play and the Vietnam veteran's adjustment to life will be achieved.

Strange Snow is the story of Megs, a Vietnam veteran who mysteriously runs into an old war buddy of his named Dave. Intent on keeping a fishing engagement the two made, Megs arrives at Dave's house only to find two things: Dave hung-over from a night of drinking and Martha, Dave's misfit school teacher sister.

Megs, being quite the odd-ball himself, slowly develops a "we were meant for each other" kind of romance with Martha. She is not accustomed to the attention Megs gives her and she sees her chance to end her old school maid image.

Dave, however tries to stop his sister from falling for Megs. Dave remembers the crazy, careless maniac Megs was during the war, and he wants Martha to have nothing to do with him. Little known to Dave, Megs has changed. He has put the war behind him and refuses to let anything get him down. He has turned his anger into laughter and makes the best of what he has. For Megs, it's live and let live.

Dave is just the opposite. He is still stuck in the war. Unable to accept what the war took from him, Dave's depression is only heightened by Megs' visit. Dave, like

Mark in Still Life, blames the war for everything, and spends most of his time drunk trying to forget about it. Throughout the play, Dave and Megs remember their friend Bobby, who was killed trying to save Megs. Dave believes it should have been Megs that died and not Bobby. Eventually, they confront each other with their feelings and thereby which bring themselves closer together. In the end, Dave comes nearer to accepting the war, Megs regains an old friend, and Martha gets her man.

Megs' attitude towards life is apparent from the opening lines of the play. He is extremely enthusiastic, and even a simple fishing trip becomes a festive event. But Megs' zest for living was hard to achieve. The adjustment from soldier to civilian left some deep scars and pushed him into life-threatening situations. After returning home, it was not unusual for Megs to drink and take his aggression out on inanimate objects such as glass. He would also occasionally get into fights where he was terribly out numbered and get the "piss kicked" out of him (Terms 297).

Joe Boxx had the same problem when he returned. In Charlie Company, Boxx recalls taking to whiskey to help "quiet his ghost." Before the war, he hardly ever drank or smoked. When Boxx came home, he had become a "red-eyed giant" who drank heavily, broke up bars, and got into fights with buddies (209).

Megs also considered suicide. Things got so bad he began to look at the ceiling and wonder if the rafters could hold his weight (Terms 297). Bill Poffenberger wanted to end his pain as well. In Vietnam, Poffenberger remembers reaching the point that Megs did. He tried to shoot himself, only to have a gun slip out of his hand and blow a hole in the ceiling. (155).

Fortunately, like Poffenberger, Megs could not follow through with his thoughts of suicide. Instead, his failure to tie a rope around his neck turned into a revelation. During the war, Megs had made and lost a good friend named Bobby. Realizing this happened for a reason, Megs set out to make that reason a good one. Megs started to see Bobby as an inspiration and tried to live out all the plans they had made in Vietnam. This gave Megs some incentive to overcome the trauma left by the war. Finally, Megs began to like himself.

This became Megs' first step in overcoming the guilt he felt from fighting in Vietnam. The war was terrible, but Megs had made friends, and whether they were dead or alive, they were friends for life. By keeping the memories alive, Megs remembered the good times he had with them and fought his obsession with the bad.

Stan Beesley acknowledges this need to seek out forms of relaxation even in the most adverse situations. In Vietnam, Beesley tells of the rides they took back to their company at the end of missions. The soldiers would

become careless because it was good to be out of the bush. They drank beer and yelled at all the women they would see. "It was fun," recalls Beesley. "No other word for it" (133-134).

Nick D'Allesandro used his memory of friends to his advantage, also. In No Victory Parades, D'Allesandro admits he feels no guilt for what he has done. The war allowed him to learn about people, and he speaks of earning a best friend named Buchanan:

Like knowing him was worth everything I put up with...to get a good friend out of anything makes it worthwhile somehow. (120)

Megs also started believing that he had seen the worst that life had to offer. Anything not resembling the war would be a pleasant situation. He is satisfied with his job as a mechanic. Megs has no goals. He is just happy to be alive.

In Charlie Company, Omega Harris echoes Megs' contentment. After experiencing life-and-death situations during the war, Harris became confident that anything short of war would be easy for him:

What is there to scare me? I been shot at. I had bombs dropped at me. I've sat there and seen people with their guts blown away. What's left after that? (176)

Dave's life after the war has been just the opposite. Vietnam took a lot from him, and he can't

bring himself to accept his present situation. Dave was a high school hero before the war, and he was pushed by his father to enlist. Because of this, every dream he had vanished. Two broken ankles he received during the war sent him home on crutches and sentenced him to a life as a truck driver (Terms 289). Dave is also haunted by the death of Bobby and lacks the optimism that Megs has. Like Mark in Still Life, Dave was influenced by society to go to war, and now he refuses to forgive.

Dave is far from alone with his feelings. In reality, many Vietnam veterans hold the same grudge. For instance, Peter Cohen, in No Victory Parades, tells of a war buddy named Danny who couldn't adjust after Vietnam. Like Dave and Megs, Cohen and Danny also lost a mutual friend in battle. This left a scar on Danny. Now he is unable to live the dreams he had prior to the war. For Danny, it has become a constant struggle to find out why:

You know who you are before you go. You go and you come back and you have to find out all over again who you are. You aren't what you thought you were. (123)

Dave was left wondering who he was as well. Like many Veterans, Dave hoped to return from Vietnam and start where he left off. But the war had taken too much from him, and his legs would never be what they were in high school. His days as team captain were over, and his athletic ability was a thing of the past (Terms 289).



Like Dave, Roy Rossen knows about dreams shattered by Vietnam. In Charlie Company, Rossen says that he had wanted to be a rodeo star before and after the war. Upon returning home, Rossen took to the circuit only to find he was far from the cowboy he used to be. "The men he used to beat riding bulls had left him behind" (192).

Denial was the next step for Dave. He began to act like the war never happened. Unlike Megs, who achieved some acceptance of the war by talking about it, Dave refused to discuss the subject and would become furious at the mention of it (Terms 297). By blocking out the war and Bobby's death, Dave hoped he would stop re-living it.

Denying the existence of the war is very common among Vietnam veterans. Many desired to end the horrifying dreams and flashbacks by rejecting what they knew was reality. Examples from three Vietnam veterans will help to explain Dave's position. First is "Malik" Edwards. In Bloods, Edwards relates that he once thought Vietnam had no effect on him. Unfortunately, it has become a persistent memory. "I been living with Vietnam ever since I left," admits Edwards. "You just can't get rid of it" (16). Second is Fred Schoenwald who prays that nothing like Vietnam will happen to him again. In No Victory Parades, Schoenwald calls Vietnam a "bad dream." Since returning, he's "blotted everything out...it never happened" (99). And third is Omega Harris

who affirms, in Charlie Company, that at least he learned to trust himself. Only Harris knew what was happening inside. "As long as I keep it blocked out and it stays out," says Harris, "I'm all right" (179).

Dave denies more than just the war. Dave also struggles with the reality of his sister, Martha. Because of her appearance, Martha has never fit into Dave's scheme of things. She was the complete opposite of the high school all-American image that Dave projected prior to the war which caused him to treat her in a condescending way and resulted in her developing guilt feelings about her appearance. This attitude towards Martha became worse when Dave returned home. He only stayed with her so he could have someone to clean up after him and fix his dinners.

Martha now has her own shattered dreams. She describes herself as "plain and unattractive," and having a body of a battleship with the "face of an icebreaker" (Terms 293). Aside from one embarrassing experience in high school, men have refused Martha because of her looks. But she is still a woman who craves male attention. She finds it in Megs.

Megs, who is far from handsome, is not bothered by Martha's features. Living through the Vietnam war has helped Megs to live his own life and do the best that he can. Megs sees Martha as a lonely person, also, and he uses humor and charm to attract her.

Martha is different from most women Megs is acquainted with. She is intelligent and finds him and his past truly interesting. She doesn't want explanations. Martha can take Megs for what he is, and she can expect the same treatment in return.

But Dave wants Martha to have nothing to do with Megs. Dave remembers Megs as a reckless individual always on the verge of doing danger to himself or others. He is unaware of the changes in Megs, the changes he can't make in himself. This stands in the way of Megs and Martha in their attempt to get together.

Megs needs to find sincere companionship. Like Mark in Still Life, Megs searches for a woman who is not shocked by what he has done, and he needs a woman with whom he can share his true emotions. Mark found it in Nadine, and Megs hopes to find it in Martha.

Steve Markley also hunted for this of woman and shared the same goal as Megs. In Rick Eilert's book For Self and Country, the story of disabled veterans recovering from the pain and heartbreak of wounds received in Vietnam, Steve Markley recalls his trials with women:

Since I lost my girl I realized it's best that I start a relationship with a lady that never knew me before the Nam--at least that way I won't have to explain how much I've changed.

(222-223)

The war itself had a lot to do with Megs' ability to express his emotions. Vietnam broke him down and let him be more free and open to others. Martha sees this in Megs and finds the stories Dave tells her hard to swallow. In Home From the War, one veteran shared Megs' new capacity for self expression. After seeing him cry, the veteran's girlfriend asked him, "'How did you get so soft?'" He answered back, "'It took a war to do that'" (255).

This yearning for romance makes Strange Snow, essentially, a love story. It differs from Medal of Honor Rag and Still Life because the budding relationship between Megs and Martha is the central focus, while the Vietnam War serves as a back drop. The effects of the war on Megs and Dave and their conflict over the death of Bobby are points of departure to help establish their characters. Even though the war brings Dave and Megs together, it's Megs' interest in Martha and her loneliness that force the action of the play as Mel Gussow concluded in his February 1, 1982, New York Times review of the production, that the play is an "aftermath of war."

Strange Snow does end happily. Megs and Martha withstand the pressure of Dave's obsession with the war and his patronizing attitude towards Martha. Martha is determined to make her own decisions, and Megs will no longer let the war dictate his life. The final scene

stirs up visions of the fishing scene of the opening, as Martha finally reels one in and leads Megs upstairs to her bedroom (Terms 311-312).

The play also ends happily for Dave. After his confrontation with Megs about Bobby, Dave starts to see Bobby's death from a new perspective. For too long he has blamed both himself and Megs for something they couldn't have stopped. Dave realizes that there are memories worth keeping and that everything in Vietnam was not painful.

The title Strange Snow refers to Megs' description of the opening day of fishing. As he tries to convince Dave to join him, Megs talks of the "frost in the air" and the "wondrous strange snow" that lies on the ground. Megs never tells why the snow is strange; he just makes mention of it.

But Stephen Metcalfe had a reason for choosing this title. To me, the snow is strange to Megs because he believes it shouldn't be on the ground at this time of year. This parallels the appearance of Megs. It is odd that he should appear. Megs has come with this strange snow, and by doing so, makes the world of Dave and Martha a little out of the ordinary.

Strange Snow is a play of acceptance. Unlike Medal of Honor Rag and Still Life, the characters of Strange Snow learn to adapt to their past. Even though Megs is

still affected by Vietnam, he has turned the bad into good and tries to enjoy life. Megs also helps Martha gain some self-confidence, and he shows Dave that the war didn't take everything away from him.

Megs and Dave are Vietnam veterans at opposite ends of the spectrum. Strange Snow helps to bring them together, and the comparisons to actual Vietnam veterans helps to show that both of these people do exist.

## CONCLUSION

We live in what is, but we find a thousand ways not to face it. Great theater strengthens our facility to face it.

Thorton Wilder

In Strange Snow, Megs tells Martha about his time in Vietnam, and how he talks about it even when "there's no one around to listen." Megs compares the memory of the war to an "ugly melody" that becomes stuck in your head. "You can't get rid of it," exclaims Megs, "no matter how hard you try to hum something else" (Terms 297).

For the veterans of the Vietnam War, this "ugly melody" will play on forever. These plays prove this. The pain and guilt collected by those who returned from Vietnam can lead to endings as drastic as suicide or premeditated death, such as D.J. experienced or to beginnings such as the acceptance of self and coming to terms with the war that Megs achieved. Either way, the memories still continue to cloud the minds of these special individuals.

The reality of the plays is evident. Two of the plays--Medal of Honor Rag and Still Life--are based on actual facts. Although this helps with the realism, these plays are still creations, dramatic portraits of what actually happened. But, as I have demonstrated, there is ample evidence that they are valid representations of what happened before, during and after the Vietnam War. The four veterans involved in these plays--D.J., Mark, Megs and Dave--can be seen in the pages of every account I read in researching the Vietnam war. Their experience with death and destruction, their fear, trauma and guilt, and their courage and endurance



have truthfully been placed on the stage by these playwrights for the entire world to view.

All three plays are packed with extreme emotion and can make demands on actors. This emotion is heightened because each play is based on an actual event, an event that left its mark on anyone it involved. Trying to achieve this actuality could push a performer to the limit, for it becomes more than playing a role; it becomes a portrayal of reality. Knowing the extent of this reality will help actors, directors and designers better understand the size of their undertaking.

The Vietnam War will always have an important place in the history of America. In the future, when scholars and laymen sit down with their questions, they can turn to these plays to find answers, because it is evident that their authors have done their part in providing them.

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THE REALITY OF IT ALL:  
A COMPARISON OF PLAYS ABOUT VIETNAM VETERANS  
WITH REAL LIFE EXPERIENCE

by

TERRY WUNDER

B.F.A. Emporia State University, 1985  
B.S.E. Emporia State University, 1987

AN ABSTRACT OF A THESIS

submitted in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree

MASTER OF ARTS

SPEECH

KANSAS STATE UNIVERSITY  
Manhattan, Kansas

1989

The Reality Of It All is a study of three plays written by Americans about Vietnam veterans returning home from the war. The three plays selected portray three different experiences of Vietnam veterans fighting to come to terms with the war and life. The purpose of the thesis is to find out how well the plays dramatize these experiences as compared to what has been recorded in journalistic and personal accounts. It is an attempt to find similarities between the stories derived from persons and events in the plays, to stories from actual persons and events in the war. The question to be answered is this: to what extent do the fictional experiences of the plays represent experiences that happened to real people?

The following three plays have been chosen for analysis: Medal of Honor Rag by Tom Cole, which dramatizes the struggle of the black veteran; Still Life by Emily Mann, which reveals the effect of women and society on the Vietnam veteran; and Strange Snow by Stephen Metcalfe, which shows the Vietnam veteran coming to terms with himself and the war.