



## Reference Texts (Reference Section of Library)

- Tucker, Spencer C. *Encyclopedia of the Vietnam War: A Political, Social and Military History*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1998
- Hillstrom, Kevin and Laurie Collier Hillstrom. *The Vietnam Experience; A Concise Encyclopedia of American Literature, Songs, and Films*. Connecticut: Greenwood P, 1998.

## Brief Timeline

- Viet Nam conquered by French in 19<sup>th</sup> century
- Occupied by Japanese in W.W.II
- 1945 end of W.W. II
- 1946-54 – Communist Viet Minh League formed and led by Ho Chi Min; not recognized by France
- French and Viet Minh fight for control of Indochina
- 1954 – Viet Nam divided with DMZ; elections promised by UN; country to be re-united in 1956
- 1955-6 Ho Chi Minh controls Communist North (DMV); Diem, supported by U.S. controls South; U.S. delays elections for reunification

- U.S. has domino theory where it fears spread of communism;
- 1957 – U.S. has Special Forces troops involved in intelligence gathering and training of South Vietnamese, including the Montagnard indigenous people, in guerilla warfare – no official involvement
- 1961 John F. Kennedy elected
- 1963 – Pres. Diem assassinated; 3 weeks later, Kennedy assassinated
- 1964 – Tonkin Gulf incident – 2 U.S. gunboats claim they are torpedoed by North Vietnamese; became excuse for increased U.S. involvement in V.N.
- March 1965 – first U.S. combat troops land
- October 1965 – first draft card burned

- 1968 peace negotiations begin in Paris
- 1969 My Lai massacre exposed
- 1970 revealed that Johnson deceived Congress about the Tonkin incident
- 1973 agreement signed between U.S. and DRV; official withdrawal of U.S.
- April 1975 Communists take control of Sai Gon; 200,000 Vietnamese flee
- 1976 N. and S. Viet Nam reunited
- 1979 China invades

## Glossary of Terms

- Lurp – long range reconnaissance patroler
- Cav – cavalry
- MACV – U.S. Military Assistance Command, Viet Nam
- Psyops – psychological operations
- RVN – republic of Viet Nam (south)
- ARVN – Army of the Republic of Viet Nam
- DRV - Democratic Republic of Viet Nam (north)
- Henry Cabot Lodge – appointed ambassador to South Viet Nam by Kennedy 1963-4, 65-67; helped effect coup of Ngo Dinh Diem's presidency; Diem murdered

- Ho Chi Minh Trail – allowed DRV to move supplies and men
- Agent orange – one of 30 types of herbicides used in Viet Nam to remove foliage and potential camouflage for DRV as well as food; agent orange less potent than agent purple, pink or green; many of the herbicides discovered to contain 2,3,7,8-tetrachlorodibenzo-p-dioxin which is toxic and carcinogenic
- DMZ – demilitarized zone
- White Mice – Sai Gon police
- MPs – U.S. Military Police
- *Heart of Darkness* – title of a Joseph Conrad novel (1902) in which the protagonist, Marlow, travels into the African jungle by steam boat. Marlow confronts the depravity of European imperialism, the madness of Kurtz, an ivory collector, and the primitive nature of humanity.

- Alden Pyle – fictional character in Graham Greene's novel, *The Quiet American*. Based on actual events surrounding covert involvement of U.S. in Indochina; bombings in Sai Gon attributed to communists, make way for takeover by General Thé; later discovered that Thé and American supporters had engineered bombings.
- Artaud – Antonin Artaud, 1895-1948 Theater of Cruelty- notion of theatre as experience between audience and actors in which audience is awed, terrified and loses control of reason to expose primitive nature; instead of standard plot line in which conflict is resolved, there is no resolution

## Dien Bien Phu

- Spring 1954 French commander baited Gen Giap's troops believing that the Viet Minh lacked artillery
- French didn't even bother to disguise or protect their positions
- Viet Minh used porters to move artillery
- Chinese supported Viet Minh
- French outnumbered 5:1; surrendered in May
- Led to French exit from Indochina

## Khe Sanh

- Spring of 1967, Marines establish base at Khe Sanh
- Late 1967, military intelligence estimates 40,000 NVA in area
- Marines surrounded and outnumbered 8:1
- Jan 21, 1968 NVA attack Khe Sanh
- U.S. responds with Air Force and Marine bombings
- By April, Khe Sanh base secure and predicted battle never occurred
- In hindsight, appeared that Gen. Giap had baited U.S. to deploy troops to Khe Sanh, away from urban areas, counting on U.S. fear of another Dien Bien Phu (Pres. Johnson was rumoured to have a scale model of Khe Sanh in the incident room)

## Tet Offensive

- 31 Jan 1968; lunar New Year – most important holiday of year
- Communists arranged synchronized attack in 12 cities in South Viet Nam
- Expected South Vietnamese to come on side
- Confusion about timing of attacks led to lack of anticipated surprise
- U.S. was caught off guard by timing and scale of attack
- U.S. public shocked since they had been told the war was won
- Communist forces breached walls of U.S. embassy in Sai Gon

- Communists defeated; local uprising never materialized; Viet Cong lost large number of troops
- Fighting in city of Hue very difficult;
- U.S. military saw opportunity to end the war, but the public fed up
- psychological turning point in the war; beginning of anti-war movement

## Michael Herr – Brief Biography

- b. 1940
- Wrote for literary magazine at Syracuse University, where he dropped out
- Wrote volunteer film criticism for *New Leader*; fired for liking the wrong movies
- Wrote travel pieces for *Holiday* magazine - quit
- 1967 asked his friend, Harold Hayes, editor of *Esquire* magazine to send him to Viet Nam
- Obligated to submit one article a month
- Stayed for one year and *Dispatches* submitted one piece “Hell Sucks” –1968 (becomes chapter 2 of)
- Took 18 months to write “Khe Sanh” – chapter 3, “Illumination Rounds” – chapter 4, “Colleagues” – chapter 5

- **Literature:**

<i>“Hell Sucks”</i>	1968
<i>Dispatches</i>	1977
<i>The Big Room</i>	1986 with Guy Peellaert
<i>Walter Winchell</i>	1990

- **Drama:**

<i>Dispatches, a Rock-War Musical</i> (music by Elizabeth Swados)	1970
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- **Film:**

Narration for <i>Apocalypse Now</i>	1979
<i>Full Metal Jacket</i> with Stanley Kubrick and Gustav Hasford	1987

## Style

- First person narration, "I" – we don't find out he is a correspondent until page 6 and by then he has established his credentials of first hand experience
- Lack of linear narrative – "Illumination Rounds" (chap. 4) discusses Herr's first three days in Viet Nam:  
"And I was new, brand new, three days in-country, embarrassed about my boots because they were so new"(167); event occurs out of chronological order
- Events are anecdotal, fragmented, incomplete (6)
- Use of obscenity
- Use of colloquial language (20)
- Use of military jargon ('lurp,' 'lz,' 'grunt')

- New Journalism mixture of fact and fiction; Herr:  
"Oh, yeah. A lot of *Dispatches* is fictional. I've said this a lot of times" (interview of Herr with Paul Ciotti).
- For example, the characters of Mayhew and Day Tripper were fictionalized; *Dispatches* published in France as a novel.
- Herr's says he is there "to watch" (20), but gives up pretense of objectivity:  
"In my heart of hearts, I've always privately thought of it as a novel. The "I" in the book shouldn't be taken – at any rate, always – as me (interview with Schroeder 35).



- note use of 'we' (62)
- Intertextual references to music, film, books, historical and fictional events
- Use of parentheses (3) and italics (10, 11)
- Lack of closure – no conventional ending to book or to the war (cf Theater of Cruelty)
- Book is all about loss of boundaries, large run-on sentences where experience seems beyond words

- Net result is that the novel appears to be a confused, random account using 'in-group' language that obscures any resolution
- Text mimics Herr's experience and that of 'grunts' in Viet Nam
- Reader tries to force text into coherent, linear narrative of the type to which we are accustomed just as Herr and 'grunts' try to make sense of their experience
- We begin to see that it is not possible to make sense of the Viet Nam experience in a conventional way
- Get a multiplicity of experiences and voices and we can't be sure where the truth lies

## Oral History

- *Soldier Talk: the Vietnam War in Oral Narrative*, ed. Paul Budra and Michael Zeitlin—argue in their introduction that language of the combat veteran is an oral one
- Typically ‘news’ comes from official and designated spokesperson, not from individual in subordinate position
- Soldiers’ oral accounts often conflicted with accounts of media and war bureaucrats

- From early 60s, press had been pushing idea that the military’s view on war was less than accurate
- 1967 *Newsweek* nationwide poll – 64% said that television coverage of the war made them more supportive of US participation in Viet Nam (Ringnalda – DLB)
- most correspondents didn’t question American intervention, but rather its effectiveness

- Herr wanted to expose the “real” story: “I don’t know why I was attracted to Vietnam. I couldn’t really begin to answer that except to say that I felt it was the story at the time and I also felt that it wasn’t being told in any true way” (in Schroeder 33).
- “All in-country briefings, at whatever level, came to sound like a Naming of the Parts, and the language was used as a cosmetic, but one that diminished beauty. Since most of the journalism of the war was framed in that language or proceeded from the view of the war which those terms implied, it would be as impossible to know what Vietnam looked like from reading most newspaper stories as it would be to know how it smelled” (*Dispatches*).

- Herr shows that there are always two accounts: one for public consumption and for the ‘grunts’:  
 “I went out and killed one VC and liberated a prisoner. Next day the major called me in and told me that I’d killed fourteen VC and liberated six prisoners. You want to see the medal?” (Herr 172).
- Critique of media scrum with military brass, the “Five O’clock Follies... an Orwellian grope through the day’s events”(99);
- Shows media to be an accomplice – whether wittingly or unwittingly - to construction of official, stateside version of the war

- Page 150 vs. p 63
- Language becomes “one of the primary battle sites of the war” (Budra and Zeitlin 7).
- Obscenity is “a kind of insurrection against an official, sanitized account that shies away from the real obscenity of the war...”(Budra and Zeitlin 8).

- Herr maintains that the ‘real’ obscenity is the euphemism used to describe reality:
  - It was characteristic of a lot of Americans in Vietnam to have no idea to when they were being obscene, and some correspondents fell into that, writing their stories from the daily releases and battlegrams, tracking them through with the cheer-crazed language of the MACV Information Office, things like “discreet burst” (one of those tore an old grandfather and two children to bits as they ran along a paddy wall one day....” (222).

- Herr offers as indication of his credibility that he can skip official briefings since he is not obliged to produce a daily or weekly report
- “No matter how highly placed they were, they were still officials, their views were well established and well known, famous. It could have rained frogs over Tan Son Nhut and they wouldn’t have been upset; Cam Ranh Bay could have dropped into the South China Sea and they would have found some way to make it sound good for you....” (216).

- Not only Herr’s account, but the oral narratives of the combatants may not be fully accurate
- But Herr also says, “Very few lines were literally invented” (Ciotti).
- Budra and Zeitlin: “fictional/non-fictional binary is a false one to be resolved dialectically in the direction of a new synthesis: oral narrative”(10).
- Such oral accounts may involve a “machismo that masks fear and lauds excess”(10)
- As Herr says, “It doesn’t matter that memory distorts...” (108).

- Authentic experience cannot be conveyed in formal language
- Note that Herr's descriptions of the grunt experience is one of smells, sounds, bodily sensations which conflicts with dispassionate language of the official accounts.
- Number of stories, complexities of those experiences, the mistrust of unofficial, personal accounts and failure of official version to relate totality of experiences
- There was a need to "find a form and an expression for a very extreme experience.... We had to find this in order to save our lives" (Herr in Schroeder 40)
- book has received praise as "finest documentation" of Viet Nam in the 1960s (DLB)