William J. Brinker

Oral History and the Vietnam War

In the summer of 1988, I and fifteen fellow travelers journeyed to Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia. No matter what our backgrounds and occupations were, each of us was enormously affected by our experience. Most obviously we were able to witness the still evident ravages that the decades of war had left. For years the region's infrastructures had suffered from almost constant fighting and remained fragile, beset with intermittent electricity, poorly maintained or nonexistent transportation facilities, and pockmarked buildings. Demographically, Vietnam appeared to be a nation of young people and old women—middle-aged men seemed in short supply. The legacies of war rarely faded from sight.

As a consequence of that tour and my interest in Southeast Asia, I proposed a community oral history project subsequently funded by the Tennessee Humanities Council. A group of volunteers conducted interviews with about forty Vietnam veterans and a few of their wives, mothers, and daughters. The volunteers then transcribed, edited, and prepared the interviews for publication. The result was William Brinker, ed., *A Time for Looking Back: Putnam County Veterans, Their Families, and the Vietnam War* (1990).

The book is divided into brief thematic chapters: Job; Coming Under Fire; Reasons for Fighting; Morale; etc. Each section has a short introduction followed by minimally edited excerpts presenting the multiple perspectives expressed by the interviewees. At the beginning of the project, there existed an element of suspicion about the uses to which the interviews might be put. As a consequence, we identified each speaker in the book by branch of service, rank, and dates of service in Vietnam, but not by name. If it were to be redone, I would recommend a better coding system, perhaps using pseudonyms, making it easier for the reader to follow the recollections of each individual throughout the book.

Our interviews corroborated that each American who served in Vietnam experienced his or her own war. Each veteran interviewed knew a small portion of America's experience in Vietnam. Almost none had the occasion to experience circumstances that would have given them an overview or broad perspective. When the interviewees read the finished product, it came as a revelation that other veterans could have such disparate views and memories.

We easily forget that in wartime support personnel vastly outnumber combat troops. Many of the men in our sample saw little or no combat. Some interviewees performed tasks that could easily have been done on any military base in the United States. One man reported, "We handled paperwork. And our purpose was to see that requisitions were handled, sent to the warehouse yard for the food to be distributed to approximately 100,000 people, three meals a day." Another veteran whose job was less than dramatic said, "Basically, I worked in the post headquarters which was run by a lieutenant colonel. . . . He didn't tell the company what to do. He sort of took care of the garbage, that kind of thing. . . . So I wound up being kind of an assistant post commander."

We learned further about the great differences in combat experiences. For some men combat meant frequent or extended periods of time in the field: "I stayed in the field for, like, we'd go out sixty days and sleep in the mud-holes with leeches, snakes. Then we'd come back three days, stand down, then went right back out in the field." For others combat situations were episodic. One helicopter pilot remarked, "We went to war on a dawn to dusk basis, the rest of our time was as casual and comfortable as a college student. That gave you a twist." A signal officer remembered, "I had to, occasionally, go out into the field, go out in the outlying areas in helicopters. . . . We were sort of somewhere in between being an infantry unit and being in Saigon."

Men of our community were involved in differing degrees with drugs, racial tension, fragging, corruption, atrocities, and all the unspeakable parts of war present in Vietnam. Significantly, the recollections of these matters increased over time: veterans who served in the early stages of the war denied the existence of most of them, while men who served later recalled their relative prevalence.

These eloquent interviewees also described the problems of the veterans' homecomings. The abruptness of their return meant that in twenty-four hours after departing Saigon, they could be in Los Angeles or San Francisco. There was no time to adjust. Almost uniformly they commented about being cold in California, their bodies still acclimated to the heat and humidity of Vietnam. They also described their often difficult readjustment to life in the United States.

Work on the project led me to value oral histories. It has also allowed me to read them from a critical perspective. In general, oral histories create atmosphere and vivid descriptions, but they are usually episodic and, by definition, too small and fragmented in sample for making easy generalizations. To get the big picture, it is essential to utilize oral histories in conjunction with more traditional accounts.

It is difficult to date the beginning of American involvement in the Vietnam war. Administratively, under Truman the U.S. moved from indifference to diplomatic and financial support for French efforts to reestablish colonial control. Under Eisenhower, this was augmented by small numbers of American military advisors, as well as the attempt to firm up South Vietnam politically. Kennedy added counterinsurgency specialists who sometimes took the struggle into the field. With Johnson came the "Americanization" of the war. These incremental steps brought numerous changes in strategy, often based upon rarely questioned assumptions. For most Americans, the results included confusion and misunderstanding. Growing opposition to the war caused the withdrawal of Lyndon Johnson from the 1968 presidential race. Richard Nixon's administration took over four years to accomplish American disengagement.

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> *Demographically, Vietnam appeared to be a nation of young people and old women—middle-aged men seemed in short supply. The legacies of war rarely faded from sight.*

To tell this lengthy and complicated story in a single text, even one as excellent as George Herring's *America's Longest War*, requires much generalization. Oral histories take readers beyond the general to the personal with often previously unrecorded voices, which may either corroborate or challenge existing interpretations of the war. At a very basic level, they present family members with an opportunity—not likely to come from written sources—to grasp the experience of their Vietnam veteran relatives. Interestingly, veterans and others who served in Vietnam disagree among themselves over the nature of the conflict, a fact that might not emerge from a general history. Vietnam oral histories bring the war and its impact to the human level necessary for comprehending something as chaotic as war. They show the war was fought by men in the field, not by Washington policy makers.

One of the earliest and most popular oral histories dealing with the men who fought in Vietnam was compiled by a soldier-author with first hand Vietnam experience. Al Santoli's *Everything We Had: An Oral History of the Vietnam War by Thirty-three American Soldiers Who Fought It* (1981) dramatically presents stories of men who had various responsibilities and experiences in Vietnam between 1962 and 1975. His work is a good introduction to the genre.

Santoli's work, arranged chronologically, reminds us that the experiences of men and women in Vietnam were far from uniform. Those who served early, before 1965, knew a different conflict, a different welcome, and a different sense of duty compared with those who served after "Americanization." Those who served after Tet (1968) had yet another set of experiences. If specific years of service spent "in country" shaped attitudes and experiences among veterans, so too did their branch of service, their assignment, and their rank. Each of these factors situated individual men and women to see their own war, a war unlike that of others who were differently located in time, place, and purpose.

An Army radio technician, who went to Vietnam in 1962, arrived at his unit on Christmas Eve. He remembers being greeted by a "guy who's really drunk" and told that, "Everybody else is downtown drinking." After a few days the technician realized, "If we wanted to go out . . . and shoot at them and get them to shoot back at us, we had a war going on. . . . Our people, including Special Forces, used to stop at four-thirty and have a happy hour and get drunk. On Sundays, no war. On holidays, no war. . . . [A] nine-to-five war." In 1967, a Marine private received a different reception: "There was no romance at all in it. Absolutely none. That was stripped bare immediately. . . . They gave me a flak jacket, pack and all this other [expletive] and, you know, I wasn't used to humping all that gear in that heat. I had to go up to the LZ and wait for a ride up to Hill 860 and commence humping." Revealing great bitterness and a dark side of the war in 1970-71, a nurse said, "I thought organized crime was the last word in bad guys, but I swear, the Army has them beat. You just pay off the right person and that's it. That's what goes down."

Santoli's work also illustrates an important question that arises from histories based upon oral interviews. As do most of the author-editors included in this essay, Santoli arranges the interviewees' words and thoughts into coherent paragraphs—and he does it very well. He gives structure and flow to the narrative that, however, is unlikely in most unedited interviews. What is at issue is whether the authors of works based upon oral interviews intend their results to be understood as the words of the interviewees, the words of the author based upon the interviews, or something in between.

One of the most valuable oral histories of the Vietnam era is Harry Maurer's *Strange Ground: Americans in Vietnam, 1945-1975* (1989). In his introduction, Maurer clearly states his own vantage point during the war: "Let's get it out of the way: I am a draft dodger." Maurer explains the dilemma created by having accepted a deferment and getting on with his life while making little effort to work for an end to the war. Work on this book was his search to understand this war that he had avoided.

Maurer's work is monumental in breadth and depth. *Strange Ground* begins when the war in Vietnam was being fought by the French, a time when American interests were real but marginal. The complex interaction of Vietnamese, French, Nationalist Chinese at the outset, and Americans during this seminal period is most instructive. James O'Sullivan, a foreign service officer who arrived in Hanoi in 1946, remembered those days:

> A complicated game was going on in Hanoi. You had the Chinese occupation troops, supposedly under the control of a very urbane general, Lu Han. But he didn't control these guys. He only controlled a corporal's guard. The rest were taking orders from various headquarters in Nanking, Kunming, and Chungking. . . . They [the Chinese troops] didn't like the French particularly. And they didn't like Ho. . . . Meanwhile, the French were doing their best to get the Chinese out.

Jim Crane, a United States Information Service staffer, remarked, "I hardly knew where Vietnam was. . . . A very obscure place. You'd heard of the Philippines, but not this kind of French, half-hidden country. Indochina. Was it India, or was it China?" Another foreign service officer, Edmund Gullion, recalls that in the mid-

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1940s, "Vietnam was not a place of importance to Americans. There was little trade in that area. We only had a consulate in Saigon."

Another important study is Michael Charlton and Anthony Moncrieff's *Many Reasons Why: The American Involvement in Vietnam* (1989). This work differs from most oral histories in that it evolved from another medium. It is a reworking of a series of radio programs broadcast in 1977 by the BBC based on interviews done by Charlton. The book contains material not included in the original radio programs and is edited to include names and dates and to make the text more readable. In the foreword, George Herring, a specialist on the Vietnam War, alludes to the fortuitous timing of the interviews, conducted soon after the war when "memories of the participants were still quite fresh but long enough after the experience so that some perspective was possible."

Many Reasons Why is less successful in covering the same broad period than the Maurer study. The reader is left with some disturbing gaps. For example, after noting the 1946 breakdown of the agreement between the French and Ho Chi Minh and the commencement of fighting, the authors skip to 1950, leaving the reader wondering what happened in the intervening years. In a book covering thirty years of complicated political and military maneuvering, omissions are bound to occur, but they are disappointing, especially in a book titled *Many Reasons Why*. Readers might also detect considerable interviewer bias. The interviewers ask leading questions, frequently almost putting words into the mouths of the interviewees.

Tears Before the Rain: An Oral History of the Fall of South Vietnam (1990) is a good example of a study of a limited time period. In the spring of 1985, writer Larry Engelmann began talking with American and South Vietnamese veterans about their experiences. He then traveled to Southeast Asia and asked more than 300 men, women, and children "what they remembered about the last days of the war in Vietnam and about their lives since that fateful spring of 1975."

Many of the interviewees witnessed the same situation yet remember it differently. For instance, the memories of people serving in Saigon in 1975 often contrast with those of American ambassador Graham Martin, as the following excerpts illustrate:

> When my office heard what the Embassy plan was for evacuating—I won't tell you what they said. You can't print it. We couldn't believe it. I just sat there dumbfounded, thinking, This man's in a position of responsibility? Elementary school kids would have seen holes in the plan."
>
> -Becky Martin, Defense Attache Office

> And the big mystery, the big X-factor, was the Embassy. There had been no plans for any big evacuation out of the Embassy. The Embassy plan was a very simple plan. Several hundred, max, would be bused out to Tan Son Nhut [the Saigon airport] and some fifty, sixty, or so, the ambassador and his inner circle, would be Air America'd off the roof of the Embassy.
>
> -Stuart Herrington, Joint Military Team

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> I felt that Martin was committed to keeping us there as long as possible, and he probably did not want to do anything that would precipitate a rush that might make it look like we were going to pull out of there without warning. . . . And quite frankly, up until about five days before we actually left, he was successful. . . . But then all hell broke loose.
>
> -Major Jim Kean, Marine

> On the helicopter going out, I was thinking we had gotten away with it, really. We had gone through all of this and we had gotten out every American. My primary responsibility was getting out the Americans. We had gotten all of the Vietnamese we could. We should have gotten out more. We could have brought out those last 400. But there is bound to be that kind of confusion and what-not anyway. I think the Americans have a right to be proud of the evacuation. I have absolutely nothing for which I apologize at all.
>
> -Ambassador Graham Martin

In Englemann's book we begin to understand the complexities involved in decisions made and actions taken. We also perceive the ambiguities connected with the writing or telling of history. The result is not a simple point and counterpoint; instead, the reader encounters a kind of mosaic sometimes found in literature but uncommon in histories. Readers of oral histories such as Englemann's experience the ambiguity, contradiction, and complexity involved in assessing the roles of individuals as well as the personal agendas and biases of the narrators.

Various oral historians of Vietnam have limited their studies to specific groups—a technique that might work well for students. While working at the Washington bureau of *Time* in early 1967, Wallace Terry flew to Saigon to cover a story on the role of black soldiers in Vietnam. He soon returned to Vietnam for two years. Fifteen years

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later, Terry published *Bloods: an Oral History of the Vietnam War by Black Veterans* (1984). These twenty interviews are of black *combat* soldiers who served between 1963 and the end of the conflict.

Like many other authors, Terry did not elaborate on his interviewing and editorial methods. Each man interviewed discusses his experience in Vietnam and usually includes something of his adjustment upon returning to the United States. The volume includes graphic descriptions of combat death and wanton destruction of life and property, although expressed in a manner that suggests an effort to avoid profanity during the interviews. *Bloods* vividly portrays the struggle faced by black men fighting a foreign enemy while simultaneously dealing with fellow Americans across a racial gulf.

Not only men served in Vietnam. Elizabeth Norman wrote her dissertation about nurses in Vietnam and expanded her research to produce *Women at War: The Story of Fifty Military Nurses Who Served in Vietnam* (1990). Like other authors, Norman learned from the interviews that, "There was no standard experience or common reaction to the war. Rather, these fifty stories illustrate the variety and incredible extremes of war." Thus it was important "to show the spectrum of their experiences, that it was not one woman's story that was important, but all their stories, *together.*"

Unfortunately, while Norman provides a valuable account of the nurses, she uses very few direct quotes; the drama that surely existed in the interviews is absent. In contrast, a nurse interviewed for the Putnam County project shared the following:

> At Christmas time, Bob Hope came to Chu Lai. We had this huge amphitheater that sat right behind the hospital. And the troops had been coming in for five days before he was due. . . . We had reserved several of the front-row benches for some of the hospital patients, and we took the ones that couldn't walk. . . . We were moving some of the patients around, and had our backs to the stage, and we heard this tremendous cheer and they're standing up . . . We thought, "God, we're missing the show," you know. So we turned around and there's nothing, nothing on the stage. It was the nurses, it was us, as we were bringing these patients in, that these guys were standing, cheering.

The reader longs for more of this human dimension.

Several books have been written by and about men who were prisoners of war; however, Stephen A. Rowan's *They Wouldn't Let Us Die: The Prisoners of War Tell Their Story* (1973) stole the march on the topic. Formerly associated with CBS News, Rowan began interviewing ex-POWs in April 1973, only days after the last men had been released from prison. This makes Rowan's work one of the earliest oral histories associated with the Vietnam War.

Rowan utilized a somewhat unusual, but clearly manageable, technique; he interviewed his subjects in groups of two or three. He used the group technique because he believed "it encouraged men who were tight-lipped or shy to open up more than they would in a one-on-one interview." Rowan noted that readers might question the method, that one participant's comments might lead another into copycat behavior. However, he believed that the "ideas and experiences spoken by one person" sparked an ability and willingness to remember in others.

Another group of men found themselves ostracized and worse—those who sought conscientious objector (CO) status. Gerald R. Gioglio's *Days of Decision: An Oral History of Conscientious Objectors in the Military During the Vietnam War* (1989) focuses on men who served *in the military* and were classified as conscientious objectors. Gioglio, a CO himself, instructively describes the scope and method of his study. He recognizes that his interviews with twenty-four men conducted between 1985 and 1987 does not comprise "a fully comprehensive analysis of in-service conscientious objection; rather, it seeks to present a distinctive range of perspectives on the war." However, he fails to include either nonwhites or members of traditional peace churches.

Most of the COs he interviewed enlisted or were drafted during the period 1968-1972. The book chronicles their decision to declare CO status and the consequences encountered—prison, noncombatant assignment, or discharge. Upon entering the service, they had the innocence and idealism of youth, but with little prior knowledge of conscientious objection. A few entered armed service expecting to receive noncombatant assignments but had to overcome resistance to achieve them. More often the men developed or confirmed their aversion to the Vietnam War and/or warfare in general during basic training. Once declaring their desire to acquire CO standing and requesting to serve in a noncombatant position or to be discharged, they encountered a mixture of hostility, insult, and, occasionally, grudging respect.

Steven DeBonis presents an especially shocking and largely ignored dimension of the Vietnam War in *Children of the Enemy: Oral Histories of Vietnamese Amerasians and Their Mothers* (1995). This study is based upon interviews with Vietnamese Amerasians in the Philippine Refugee-Processing Center in Bataan. DeBonis includes information regarding the legal difficulties and opportunities facing Amerasian children, their parents, and even stepparents in their attempts to emigrate. The marginal existence of many of the Amerasians while in Vietnam is poignantly treated as are their experiences after leaving Vietnam.

Few groups emerge from the study unsoiled. Callousness exhibited by the Vietnamese, Philippine, and American governments, the degradation of refugee camp life, inadequate funding, and bureaucratic red tape all tell a dismal tale. The story of Vietnam's refugees, especially the Amerasians, hammers home the fact that war leads to much unintended wreckage of human lives. One man's life began as follows:

> I don't really know where I come from or who my parents are. I was abandoned at the Da Nang market when I was a newborn and picked up there by a lady who had a stall selling fabric. She says that I was about three days old when she found me. . . . She was good to me, but her sister, my aunt, and my aunt's husband, they hated me. . . . They despised me because I was Amerasian. They made my life miserable, and finally I ran away when I was still pretty young.

The interview goes on to describe his life on the streets, arrest, and confinement in a labor camp. Upon release, he fell in love, fathered a child, and went to the refugee center, while the mother and child remained in Vietnam.

As travel by Americans to Vietnam has become easier, opportunities to expand understanding of the war increase. Martha Hess, who went

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to Vietnam several times between 1989 and 1991, has compiled *Then the Americans Came: Voices from Vietnam* (1993). With a Vietnamese interpreter and guide, Hess visited towns and villages, the two major cities, and battle sites, interviewing Vietnamese citizens who opposed American involvement in the war. Her book is understandably accusatory of United States actions. The following excerpts illustrate the complexity of trying to understand the former Vietnamese enemy:

> When the Americans first came in 1964, a few military trucks were blown up by mines. And so, in retaliation the Americans soldiers killed every family they found in the shelters. They rounded up the women. They cut off their hair and cut off their ears, and they raped them. They threw old people in the river.
> -Mr. Bao of Binh Trieu village

> The people in this village shot down two planes. When the pilots were captured the people came, and if the army had let them, they would have been killed in seconds. But our soldiers kept them away.
> -Mrs. Luu of Dong Hoi

> The American people didn't make the mistake [coming to destroy], it was the government. American people and Vietnamese people are alike, we work in the fields, we till the land. We have blood, we have hair, we have skin. . . . And the debt, the distribution from the Paris Agreements, why haven't they given us anything? We are very poor because of the war. The Americans don't see how they destroyed everything, and they won't pay their debt. I listen to the radio and hear how the Americans still have an embargo on our economy, and have no diplomatic relations with us. That's not right.
> -Cau Ngoc Xuan of Dien Chau

> We consider the American people our friends. We have gained freedom and unification. . . . We don't hate and we don't think of vengeance. We remember the war, to keep peace.
> -Doctor Tran Quoc Do of Hanoi

The Vietnam War and its impact was hardly limited to Vietnam. Students and teachers might profitably be directed to consider people and events at home, even in their communities. Some citizens opposed the war, some citizens supported the war, and others straddled the fence throughout the period. Groups of people representing these divergent views are well worth investigating. In almost every community, for example, there are people whose recollections of serving on draft boards would be revealing. What of the local clergy? How did they espouse their views? What of teachers in the schools? Officials of the local media may have fascinating memories of how and why newspapers, radio stations, and television stations imparted their information. Regarding the list of possible topics, the only limits are those of imagination and creativity. Only when we see that the war involved combatants and their relatives, as well as citizens in Vietnamese and American communities whose lives were touched, will we begin to realize the enormity of the Vietnam War. ❑

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All quotations come from the following sources:

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