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Sue Ellen Savereide  
*University of Northern Iowa*

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"Honor the Warrior Not the War": Who Are the Warriors of the Vietnam War?
A Seven-Week Unit for Eighth Graders

by Sue Ellen Savereide

WHEN THE ARMY CAN'T, RAMBO CAN! Rambo is America's ultimate weapon—unequaled in courage, unfailing in patriotism, he is a man who knows no defeat. His strength and skill allow him to accomplish dangerous missions that no ordinary man would attempt. Martial arts, weapons, explosives—Rambo is master of all!

So reads the Coleco package enclosing "Rambo the Force of Freedom," an action figure toy complete with "Spring-Loaded RATTLE ACTION Rocket Launcher!" for "ages 5 & up." In the process of playing with Rambo toys and/or watching Rambo movies and home videos, a generation of kindergarteners through teenagers decides that war is exciting and warriors of the United States infallible. As Vietnam veteran, teacher and poet W. D. Ehrhart (1988) explains: "Each generation knows only what preceding generations are willing to teach it, and very little has been taught about Vietnam... In the absence of such teaching, [students'] knowledge of Vietnam... is largely determined by Sylvester Stallone's Rambo..." (p. 26).

On the plus side, recent Rambomania does stimulate or at least heighten student interest in a long and controversial war that the United States did not win. "'Honor the Warrior Not the War': Who Are the Warriors of the Vietnam War?" is a unit for eighth graders that capitalizes on this interest. And it is a unit that may hit home. In all likelihood, students in an eighth grade class will have parents, relatives, or family friends who either fought in the Vietnam War in southeast Asia or protested, supported, or ignored it in America in the late 1960s and early 1970s.

"Honor the warrior not the war" is the slogan of the Vietnam Veterans Against the War, hence the title of this unit which intends neither to honor nor dishonor the Vietnam War—i.e., to assess per se its rightness or wrongfulness. That sort of investigation may be within the scope of a social studies unit. The intent of this language arts unit is to honor the warriors of that war. Focusing on those who fought in the war and exploring the question "Who Are the Warriors of the Vietnam War?" leads adolescents to a major discovery—i.e., that most of the warriors were teenagers. Young adult nonfiction writer Don Lawson (1986) describes the Vietnam War as "America's first teenage war" (p. 28). The average age of the American soldier in the Vietnam War was 19 as compared to 26 in World War II. If the United States was still fighting in Vietnam today, many of the students studying the unit could anticipate becoming the warriors in a few years.

This particular unit was designed for an actual eighth grade heterogeneous language arts class of approximately 25 students whose reading levels range from fifth to eleventh grades. They are a community of thinkers and language users for whom informal small group discussions and reading and writing response conferences with peers and instructor are routine.

Sometimes desks are in a horseshoe for class discussions; sometimes students move their desks into clusters of four of five for small group work. Students' cumulative writing folders and independent reading records are readily accessible. So are classroom sets of paperback books, cassette players with headsets, dictionaries, and handbooks. Among classroom reference material are books like Boston Publishing Company's excellent multi-volume series The Vietnam Experience and cassette tapes of Vietnam War era music and speeches. Included on a book table are numerous young adult and a few adult fiction and nonfiction selections about the Vietnam War and/or
its aftermath for students to check out for independent reading. A classroom bulletin board displays photos of the war, a map of Vietnam, and a chronology of events chart. Display areas invite Vietnam era memorabilia that students may bring from relatives or friends.

Spanning seven weeks, the lessons generate the following understanding about the warriors of the Vietnam War:

1) they were primarily teenaged draftees;
2) they were vulnerable young men and women subject to human not superhuman emotions—i.e., loneliness, fear, doubt, pride, guilt, confusion, camaraderie;
3) they share their feelings in poetry, letters, novels, stories, film, oral histories, interviews.

The lessons promote a wide range of skills:

1) interacting in small and large groups;
2) drafting group and individual writing;
3) viewing film critically;
4) listening to prose, poetry, music, and oral history for comprehension, empathy, and critical evaluation;
5) role playing;
6) making predictions and inferences;
7) synthesizing details;
8) reading in various genres—e.g., poetry, short stories, letters, young adult novels and nonfiction;
9) interpreting music and poetry creatively;
10) selecting and reading literature independently;
11) taking notes;
12) responding in writing and reading workshops;
13) studying the nature of language from a linguistic point of view;
14) conducting an interview;
15) responding verbally and nonverbally (body language) to speakers;
16) setting goals and solving problems collaboratively.

The lessons provide for assessment of various student behaviors:

1) participation in small and large group discussions;
2) interaction with peers and instructor in reading and writing conferences;
3) compilation of a writing portfolio;
4) comprehension of story structure, including characterization;
5) collaboration in creative group projects;
6) initiation of creative individual projects.

DAY 1

Initial motivational activities aim to establish common ground—i.e., an information base about United States involvement in the Vietnam War. Students receive two response sheets—"What I Know About the Vietnam War" and "How I Know What I Know About the Vietnam War." They write on these topics for 10 minutes. To provide focus and to further assess students' prior knowledge, the teacher divides students into groups of four or five, instructing each group to draft answers (guesses) to the following questions:

1) Where is the country of Vietnam?
2) What is "the domino theory"?
3) When did United States involvement begin and end in the Vietnam War?
4) In what capacities did American women serve?
5) What was the draft lottery?
6) What was the average age of the American soldier in Vietnam?
7) What was the Gulf of Tonkin incident?
8) What was the Vietnamization policy?
9) What was the Ho Chi Minh Trail?
10) How many American troops fought in the Vietnam War?
11) How many American casualties were there?
12) Why did some Americans oppose the war in Vietnam?

The class comes together for discussion of group-drafted answers and individual response sheets, discovering how much—or how little—they know about the Vietnam War and its warriors and reflecting upon how they know what they know. In what ways, for example, have current films and videos informed them about this war? Appropriate at this time are the instructor’s personal recollections of the Vietnam War era. Further intergenerational sharing can occur beyond the classroom as students talk to family members about their recollections of and/or involvement in the war. The unit should stimulate student initiative in not only bringing memorabilia of the era but also inviting veterans—fathers, mothers, aunts, uncles, family friends, neighbors—to the classroom.

Thus the first day’s discussion not only encourages students’ involvement with and investment in the unit, but also generates students’ enthusiastic anticipation of visits by Vietnam veterans to the classroom for student interviews. Such anticipation motivates students to use forthcoming unit activities to increase their knowledge of the war and its warriors.

**DAY 2**

_The Class That Went to War_, a 35-minute 1977 documentary, portrays members of the Class of ’64 in a New Jersey high school who fought in Vietnam. Students view this work that expresses pro and anti-war sentiments. They watch and listen for ways to answer the question—“Who Are the Warriors of the Vietnam War?” (E.g., How old are they? Do they remind you of friends? of yourself? What do they think? How do they feel?) Students pair off and respond to the film and the guide questions for 10 minutes. In addition to group oral response, individual written response for placement in the student’s portfolio of work is encouraged. Given numerous opportunities to practice writing skills and to include writing in a burgeoning portfolio, the student can discover the connection between writing frequency and writing improvement. The portfolio grade—at the end of a grading period—will most likely reflect that growth.

**DAY 3**

_Fallen Angels_, black author Walter Dean Myers’ excellent 1988 young adult novel about a young black soldier from Harlem who volunteers to go to Vietnam right after graduating from high school, provides excellent opportunities for in-common student reading. A reference to the book’s title on page 44 of the novel illustrates the work’s appropriateness to the unit’s warrior theme. At the death of an infantryman, Lt. Carroll, platoon leader, responds: “‘Lord, let us feel pity for Private Jenkins, and sorrow for ourselves, and all the angel warriors that fall. Let us fear death, but let it not live within us. Protect us, O Lord, and be merciful unto us. Amen.’” Richie Perry, the main character, asks Carroll why he called Jenkins an angel warrior.
"'My father used to call all soldiers angel warriors,' he said. 'Because usually they get boys to fight wars. Most of you aren't old enough to vote yet.'

'How old are you?'

'Twenty-three,' he said.

'How come you're not retired?'"

The best way to introduce Fallen Angels is for the instructor to read aloud the first four chapters as students follow along in paperback copies. Such oral reading affords in-common literature experiences for students and enhances classroom community. In addition, oral reading enhances understanding for students at risk and at low reading levels. Finally, oral reading encourages active appreciative listening, comprehensive listening, critical listening, and empathetic listening.

Before oral reading of Fallen Angels begins, the teacher can relate the book to the unit’s warrior theme and engage students’ interest. By calling attention to the book’s title, its cover illustration, and the author’s dedication to his brother “whose dream of adding beauty to the world through his humanity and his art ended in Vietnam on May 7, 1968,” the teacher encourages students to make predictions and inferences about the book’s content.

Additionally, to focus student listening and to teach note taking, the instructor briefly introduces students to the novel’s main characters (warriors) and devises guide questions. Initial guide questions might deal with setting, obstacles, mood, as well as with characters. A diary format provides one way for students to note these story elements as they listen to the first four chapters and as they independently read subsequent chapters. The student chooses a character; diary entries are jottings of that character’s experiences and impressions—i.e., the telling of happenings that triggered responses. Two upcoming lessons—Comparing Soldiers’ Responses to Surroundings and Feelings; Soldiers’ Letters: Reading and Writing Between the Lines—employ student responses to Fallen Angels.

Students read Chapters 5 through 9 for Day 4. Guide questions include: What sort of warrior is Lt. Carroll? Sgt. Simpson? Richie? Peewee? Lobel? Lt. Doyle? On page 101, Richie describes himself noticing “that lately there were things I would let myself think about, and things I wouldn’t. But every once in a while things would come into my mind, not like a thought but like a picture, and I felt a little strange about that.” What does Richie mean? What sorts of experiences has he had?

**DAYS 4-6**

Now at least four days into the unit, students should provide feedback on their conversations with friends and family about Vietnam War recollections and possible participation in a classroom panel. After instruction in telephone and letter writing skills, including collaborative drafting of letters in small groups, students can make other contacts as well. Most communities have veterans’ organizations listed in the telephone book. The Vietnam Veterans of America Foundation is in the process of organizing speakers bureaus in its 400 chapters across the nation. Addresses and telephone numbers of the following national veterans’ organizations will provide information about possible speakers in students’ communities or nearby communities (Starr, 1988, unit 13. pp. 12-13):

American Legion
P.O. Box 1055
700 N. Pennsylvania Street
Indianapolis, IN 46204
(317) 635-8411

Vietnam Veterans Against the War
P.O. Box 22592
Chicago, Il 60625
(312) 327-5756
On Days 4 and 6, the instructor checks students’ comprehension of the in-common reading. Students individually write out answers to the guide questions for evaluation. Then the instructor divides the class into groups of four or five to discuss how reading Fallen Angels helps answer “Who Are the Warriors of the Vietnam War?” The assignment for Day 6 is Chapters 10 through 14. Helpful guide questions include: How does Lt. Carroll’s death affect his men? What do they say? What do they do? How do they feel? Why do you think Richie’s mother writes a letter to Peewee? On page 167, Richie reflects, “The war was not a long way from where we were, we were in the middle of it, and it was deeply within us.” What does he mean? What has happened? In Chapter 14, what is the setting when Richie says: “We could have killed as easily as we mourned. We could have burned as easily as we put out the fires. We were scared, on the very edge of control, at once trying to think of what was right to do and hating the scene about us” (p. 178)? On page 185, why does Richie cry? What is the response of Peewee, fellow warrior?

A Fully Developed Three-Day Lesson:
Comparing Soldiers’ Responses to Surroundings and Feelings

Behavioral Objective: If students have critically examined the expression of emotion in a text and/or film, they will be able to compare the portrayal of Rambo in a scene from the film Rambo: First Blood II (Cosmatos, 1986) with that of Richie Perry in Fallen Angels. In class discussions, the majority of students will be able to cite at least three ways the characters differ.

Motivation: Students pair off in order to role play the following scenario. “You have just met each other in Glacier National Park at a summer camp emphasizing wilderness living and survival skills. This kind of “roughing it” is a new experience for both of you. Neither one of you really wants to spend the summer away from friends and family. You have been hiking all day in a remote part of the park and have been warned about a female grizzly bear that has been spotted with her two cubs. Now it is dark. You get out bedrolls in anticipation of sleeping under the stars with a stranger and a grizzly stalking nearby. How will you campers feel? How will you respond to your feelings? to your surroundings? to each other?”

After the role plays, volunteers enact the scene for the class. Discussion focuses on feelings, surroundings, and responses.
Lesson Procedure: On Day 5, the teacher distributes copies of the short story “Night March” by Vietnam veteran Tim O’Brien (1978), advises students to listen for clues to how the character feels, and begins reading aloud. Stopping after the second paragraph, she or he asks: Do you find a relationship between the role play and the story so far? How is Private First Class Paul Berlin feeling? How is he reacting to his surroundings and to his feelings? The teacher resumes oral reading, stopping from time to time to focus on clues to Berlin’s intense responses to his feelings and the surroundings. At the end of the story, students summarize: What did Private First Class Paul Berlin experience on his first day at war? How does he feel at the end of the story? Is he a believable character?

On Day 6, students learn that another Vietnam veteran, Oliver Stone (1986), has portrayed a young infantryman’s responses to feelings and surroundings. Stone’s medium is film—i.e., Platoon. Students look for the portrayal of fear in the scene depicting Chris Taylor’s first night patrol and ambush. How does music contribute? Photography? Acting? Is the scene realistic or fake?

Evaluation: For the first time in class, students watch a 10-minute jungle scene from Rambo: First Blood II. The instructor asks them to note Rambo’s responses to surroundings and feelings. In addition, the instructor reads a fresh episode (Chapter 15) from Fallen Angels and asks students to note Richie Perry’s responses to surroundings and feelings. In small groups, students cite at least three specific differences of portrayal. Then class discussion focuses on the believability—realness—of each character.

DAYS 7-12

The in-common Fallen Angels reading assignment for Day 7 is Chapters 16 through 19. Guide questions include: What does Richie write instead of “a real letter” (p. 212) to Mama? What would he write in “a real letter”? What experiences in Chapters 18 and 19 would Richie include in an actual letter to Mama? to Kenny? What experiences, if any, would he exclude?

By Day 8, students have completed their reading of Fallen Angels. On the final page, Richie daydreams about certain warriors “trailing the platoon”? Who are they—i.e., are they “fallen angels?”

A Fully Developed Five-Day Lesson:
Soldiers’ Letters—Reading and Writing Between the Lines

Behavioral Objective: If students have noted details of setting, characterization, action, and mood in Fallen Angels and have understood the function that letters play in the lives of soldiers, they will be able to assume the role of a Fallen Angels character and write an imaginative, detailed letter with at least three items of interest to someone back home.

Motivation: Instructor divides the class into groups of three or four for interaction and relates the following scenario. “You are still on that four-week survival camping trip in the wilds of Glacier National Park. You have two and one-half weeks to go before your parents meet you for the
trip home. You have made a couple of good friends by now. But you also got into some poison
ivy and can’t seem to get along with your counselor, who keeps reminding you that you are
in lousy shape. That grizzly bear with the two cubs did show up three days ago and tried to
rush one of your friends. You are really homesick, tired, and scared. A ranger does keep track
of your group, and there is a drop-off point for provisions and mail—incoming and outgoing.
Do you write letters home? To whom do you write? About what do you write? About what don’t
you write?”

After small group sharing, the class comes to some conclusions about letter writing and letter
writers.

Lesson Procedure: Instructor distributes copies of “APO 96225,” a poem by Vietnam veteran
Larry Rottmann (Rottman, Barry, & Paquet, 1972, p. 9) and reads it aloud.

APO 96225

A young man once went off to war
in a far country
When he had time, he wrote home and
said, “Sure rains here a lot.”

But his mother, reading between the lines,
Wrote, “We’re quite concerned. Tell us
what it’s really like.”

And the young man responded, “Wow, you ought
to see the funny monkeys!”

To which his mother replied, “Don’t
hold back, how is it?”

And the young man wrote, “The sunsets here
are spectacular.”

In her next letter the mother
wrote, “Son we want you to tell us
everything.”

So the next time he wrote,
“Today I killed a man.
Yesterday I helped drop napalm on women
and children. Tomorrow we are going to use
gas.”

And the father wrote, “Please don’t
write such depressing letters. You’re upsetting
your mother.”

So, after a while, the young man wrote, “Sure rains a
lot here. . .”
Students are asked to infer the title's meaning. After clarifying that, the instructor rereads the poem and asks students to state its meaning in a few words. As a result of the motivational discussion, students may be able to identify with the young soldier in the poem and to understand why he at first leaves out the details finally expressed in lines 18-21. Discussion includes the following: Why does he finally include those details? How are those details different from the ones in lines 4 (“Sure rains here a lot.”), 8-9 (“Wow, you ought/to see the funny monkeys!”), and 12-13 (“The sunsets here/are spectacular.”)? Why are the details in lines 25-26 different from those in lines 18-21? What does “reading between the lines” (line 5) mean? Can everyone read between the lines of a letter? Do you think the young man will write to someone else about killing a man, dropping napalm on women and children, and using gas? Why or why not?

Next, the instructor distributes paperback copies of *Dear America: Letters Home From Vietnam*, Vietnam veteran Bernard Edelman’s (1985) collection of soldiers’ letters and poems written to families and friends. Together the class looks at chapter headings and photos that precede each chapter, making predictions about the content of letters in each section. One section is entitled “We Gotta Get Out of This Place,” and students listen to that song (Animals, 1984) as they look at the photo on page 250 of a young soldier sitting with his head in his lap and his hands clutching a Christmas card. As a volunteer reads aloud a soldier’s letter to his brother on page 45, students note details that the soldier includes. His fourth sentence reads: “Everything is OK here.” Is it? What do you find when you read between the lines? Do you think the soldier’s letter would have been different if written to his mother?

A volunteer reads an Army nurse’s letter on page 190 next. Guide questions include: Do you need to read between the lines? What does her letter express about her feelings? To whom is she writing? (The latter question requires students to make inferences.)

**Evaluation:** Students have been listening to and independently reading *Fallen Angels*. Now they use their listening and reading notes—i.e., diary entries—for a writing assignment alluded to earlier by the instructor. They are each to assume the role of a *Fallen Angels* character and write an imaginative letter including at least three items of interest—e.g., details of setting, mood, action, and character—to someone back home. The letter may require its reader to do some reading between the lines. The following four-day composition assignment schedule (Days 9-12) emphasizes in-process writing. It provides opportunities for students to interact with each other in 10 to 15-minute response conferences and with the instructor in individual mini-conferences during class.

1) Students pair off to discuss their ideas for letters as suggested by diary entries they have made during silent and oral reading of *Fallen Angels*. As partners, they help each other identify strong or potentially strong images, feelings, and impressions.

2) On Day 10, students pair off and respond to first drafts of letters. They can help each other by focusing on the following: Am I doing more than retelling the plot of the story? Am I capturing details of setting, mood, and action? Am I making a character come to life?

3) In groups of three on Day 11, students read their letters aloud and respond to each other with brief written comments. The class decides upon two or three response questions that will be helpful to them as writers—e.g., Do I express the letter writer’s feelings? Is there an authentic voice? Do I provide specific details and images to help with that expression?

4) On Day 12, students submit final drafts—revised and edited—to the instructor for written comments and then for placement in cumulative writing folders in consideration of a portfolio grade.
Publication is an important step in the writing process. The class decides if it wants to forward letters to author Walter Dean Myers. Class members arrange a showcase display in the school’s front lobby of these letters and Vietnam memorabilia.

Also on Days 9-12, students read in Dear America: Letters Home From Vietnam. Focusing on guide questions like: What is the writer experiencing? What does he or she have to do? How does he or she feel? The class is divided into six groups—one for each chapter. In these groups, students concentrate on their responses to the letters in a particular chapter and decide how best to share these responses with the rest of the class so as to help clarify the question—‘Who Are the Warriors of the Vietnam War?’ A group may decide, for example, to draft a summary statement and then to read one or more letters aloud to the rest of the class.

Teaching Vietnam War literature provides excellent opportunities for demonstrating to students the vitality, the utility, and the emotivity of language. Dear America: Letters Home from Vietnam contains a glossary of 153 words, phrases, and acronyms—from AFVN to Zippo raids—that soldiers use in their letters. Students can use this helpful glossary throughout the unit as they listen to and read Fallen Angels and other works. A heightened awareness of language and of language users results as students spot examples in their reading of military jargon, euphemisms, acronyms, doublespeak, pidgin (Americanized Vietnamese), derogatory and slang expressions, rock music lyrics, drug lingo, colloquialisms, and idioms.

With the help of the Dear America glossary, students might try to translate the following:

I’m with the Lurps at Bien Hoa, extended for my didi early out, and been humping the boonies titi time since I got back from leave in the World. Been humping an M-60 with the grunts, blowing claymores at the gooks, and can’t sleep because of the incoming. I just can’t hack it! NCOs are all messing over me. They say I’m stoned with the soul brothers beaucoup times. Every time I didi for a short-time girl, I get harrassment, but same-same if I don’t. My CO gives me an Article 15 and a bust for titi reasons and says he’ll see me in LBJ. Now the dude wants to 212 me!

(Edelman, 1985, p. 24)

Dear America (Couturie, 1987) is an excellent film based on Edelman’s book. At this point in the unit, the instructor may opt to extend the unit by showing the 87-minute production over two class periods for students’ enjoyment and enlightenment. Its appeal to young adolescents is enhanced by stars like Tom Berenger, Matt Dillon, and Michael J. Fox. Actresses and actors are heard and not seen as they read some of the letters in Edelman’s collection. Students hear, as well, popular music of the era as they see newsreels of the 1960s and early 1970s.

DAY 13

Near the end of the third week, students are introduced to more young adult literature about the Vietnam War and/or its aftermath. The classroom teacher can employ the talents of a librarian to assist in giving book talks on both fiction and nonfiction works representing various subject areas—e.g., refugees, soldiers in combat, veterans at home, family survivors, the peace movement. For each book, the teacher writes an annotation on an index card and places it in the book to aid students in independent reading selection and to promote books not covered in the book talks. The Selected Annotated Bibliography of Young Adult Vietnam War Literature, representing extensive research and included at the end of this unit, will be helpful to the instructor for guiding students to works of interest to them. Most books are 175 to 250 pages in length. Grade placement of books is based on the Fog Readability Index, and it ranges from grades five to twelve with most books falling at grades seven, eight, and nine. The young adult books beyond the ninth grade reading level are, for the most part, nonfiction works. The teacher can
carefully guide more mature readers to adult books about the war, realizing that such books often employ graphic, violent words and images.

Most of the young adult fiction works are not set in Vietnam during the war but in the United States after the war. The teacher can explain that during and immediately following the Vietnam War, writers of young adult literature, especially writers of fiction, deemed the war and its aftermath unsuitable topics for their youthful audience. Compilers of book lists shied away from including those books that had been written, citing the unpopularity of the war and the need to present balanced views of the war in the literature. The coming of Vietnamese refugees to the United States after 1976 and the opening of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in 1982 occasioned more writing. And now more than a decade after the war’s end, both fiction and nonfiction writers in the field of juvenile and young adult literature are beginning to seek and reveal perspectives on the war.

Students can try to determine what those perspectives are in the books they choose for individual reading. Students learn that they will be sharing their reactions to books with each other in reading conferences three weeks from now. They will form response groups according to the subject area of the book—e.g., Vietnamese refugees. Guide questions for fiction and nonfiction works are distributed at this time—e.g., In what ways did the Vietnam War touch the lives of characters in this fiction book? What facts about the Vietnam War received the most emphasis in this nonfiction book?

Though a challenge in view of 55-minute or shorter class periods and an abundance of material, allowing for Uninterrupted Sustained Silent Reading is a goal. Rather than strictly scheduling this time, the teacher may opt for flexible scheduling. Because demands on students’ outside-of-class time are great, all students, regardless of reading level, can benefit from in-class reading time.

DAYS 14-18

Also in the third week students study the warrior as poet and use collections like Winning Hearts and Minds: War Poems by Vietnam Veterans (Rottmann et al., 1976), Demilitarized Zones: Veterans After Vietnam (Barry & Ehrhart, 1976), and W.D. Ehrhardt’s (1984) To Those Who Have Gone Home Tired. Using powerful images to sharpen senses, thoughts, and emotions, the poets—all Vietnam veterans—voice their Vietnam experience. In some poems, the poet is a soldier in Vietnam. In others, he or she is a veteran in America.

Students experience poems individually, as members of small groups, and as a class. Over a five-day period they interact with texts, classmates, and instructor. They are creative, active listeners, speakers, readers, and thinkers. On the first day, students engage in making inferences about Vietnam War poets and their poems. Why have so many soldiers expressed themselves in poetry? What makes the poem an appealing, effective medium? What are some emotions that you predict these warrior poets want and/or need to express? Fear? Courage? Pride? Guilt? Loneliness? Anger? Joy? Sadness? Love? Hate? the teacher lists students’ suggestions on the board or overhead, advising them to keep notes for future reference.

Next the instructor models a way to share poetry for understanding and enjoyment—the reading performance—adapted from Muriel Ridland’s (1988) “Group Presentations of Poetry” in Focus on Collaborative Learning. Students receive copies of “at the airport” 3 by Bert Allen (Barry & Ehrhart, 1976, p. 38) and two guide questions or suggestions for general understanding of the poem. What is the setting? What dominant emotion is the poet expressing? The instructor then reads the poem aloud.
**at the airport**

at the airport  
the war hero stood alone  
an island of army green  
surrounded by whirling waves  
5 civilian colors  
and  
entering a passing cab  
he was carried through city streets  
where the only parade  
10 was the march of pedestrians  
across the avenue  
when the light turned green

A two-part prepared instructor’s presentation follows. Aiming to have the class experience the compacted meaning and emotion of the work, the instructor begins by playing softly a recording of “When Johnny Comes Marching Home Again” as background. He or she begins to read “at the airport” aloud, paying careful attention to meaning and rhythm. Finally the instructor engages the class in a ten-minute discussion aimed at making a final impact. Focusing on the poet’s use of the parade image, the instructor asks students to imagine themselves as a fellow 1970s traveler waiting for luggage at the airport or as the taxi driver. What would you say to “the war hero”? The class discusses effective presentation of the feeling and thinking levels of a poem—i.e., how to draw listeners into a poem, how to read a poem aloud, how to design questions that cause listeners to react to the poem. Students evaluate the instructor’s poem presentation.

Students are divided into groups of three. Each group receives a copy of two poems by veterans with instructions to choose one and bring it to life. Specifically each group is to: 1) provide the class with two or three guide questions for prior individual reading of the poem; 2) present the poem to the class in an imaginative, appropriate, effective manner that includes at the very least an oral reading of the poem; 3) engage the class in a meaningful, lively discussion as response to the poem.

Group work continues the next day, and the teacher circulates among all groups. At the end of the period, groups submit drafted guide questions to the instructor. On the third day, he or she distributes copies of all presentation poems and guide questions to the class. Students are to be active listeners and responders by reading poems and guide questions prior to presentations. Group planning and practicing of the ten to fifteen-minute presentations continues. In the final five to ten minutes of class, the instructor shares aloud a sampling of more poetry by veterans.

Two performance days follow. Students evaluate presentations by noting what worked and what did not—i.e., guide questions, presentation, and concluding discussion—and rank the presentations. The instructor evaluates performances in a similar manner, noting as well each individual’s contribution to the group effort. After the instructor has looked at the response forms, they are shared with individual students.

DAY 19

"Goodnight Saigon," a song by Billy Joel (1982), follows lessons on veterans' poetry. (See Appendix A.) With copies of the lyrics in front of them, students listen to this haunting song that focuses on the youth and the camaraderie of the warriors. They listen for enjoyment first. Next they note the images, ideas, and emotions that come to mind as they listen a second time. (E.g., what do lines 36-42 mean? On whose side is Charlie? Baker? What does it mean to leave one's childhood "on ev'ry acre"? Why doesn't it matter "who was wrong" and "who was right"?) Students are encouraged to interpret the song in a medium of their choice: dance, music, art, prose, poetry. This work is done outside of class, and students are given the opportunity to share their interpretations in the weeks to come. The culminating activity certainly provides a possible arena for performance and sharing.

DAYS 20-25

Introducing students to "The Wall," the Vietnam Veterans Memorial located in Washington, D.C., and dedicated in 1982, familiarizes students with not only how the nation honors the warriors of the Vietnam War but how individuals do. Some in the class may have visited the Memorial; their classmates will benefit from the sharing of any firsthand experiences and impressions. Vietnam Memorial is an excellent introduction and worth the full class period that it takes. Portraying events of the National Salute to Vietnam Veterans, a five-day tribute culminating in the dedication of the Memorial as a national monument, the video highlights interviews and informal conversations with veterans.

Additional resources that capture the Memorial’s uniqueness among America’s national monuments include the photo essay The Wall: Images and Offerings from the Vietnam Veterans Memorial (Lopes, 1987), Shrapnel in the Heart: Letters and Remembrances from the Vietnam Veterans Memorial, (Palmer, 1988), To Heal A Nation: The Vietnam Veterans Memorial (Scruuggs & Swerdlow, 1985), and Always to Remember: The Story of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial (Ashabranner, 1988), an excellent young adult work. Showing a photo of Frederick Hart’s bronze sculpture of the three combat soldiers at the Memorial site and reading a portion of the Always to Remember text can motivate student writing:

By an inspired placement of the statue, the three men seem to have emerged from a clump of trees atop the hill. They have sighted the black wall in the distance and seem to be looking at the names there. Are they looking for the names of comrades? Are they looking for their own names? (p. 63)

Students should respond imaginatively to this passage from either a first person or third person point of view and free write for 15 minutes. Then in small groups or in pairs, students share responses. As an optional assignment for placement in their portfolios, students can write further drafts. The teacher should encourage this and suggest the poem or the song as an effective form of expression.

Another optional assignment relates to the proposed monument for the 265,000 women who served in the United States military during the Vietnam War—10,000 of them in Vietnam and 90 per cent of them nurses. To date, the design and location of that memorial have not been decided, but Congress has given its approval for a memorial for women veterans of the Vietnam War on federal land. And the National Capitol Memorial Commission has determined that the memorial can be built near the existing Vietnam Memorial. The instructor encourages students to design a memorial for women warriors of the Vietnam War. Students can draw, make a model, and/or describe in writing their proposed design.
The Vietnam Veterans Memorial has inspired writers of young adult literature, especially fiction. In anticipation of the upcoming reading conferences in which students interact with each other about the young adult Vietnam War literature they have read, the teacher reads excerpts that place adolescent characters at the Memorial. Better yet, she or he asks students who are reading these books to do the oral reading. Listeners note details that convey characters’ responses to the experience of being at the Memorial. Appropriate young adult fiction books include: *Charlie Pippin* (Boyd, 1987), *December Stillness* (Hahn, 1988), and *Park’s Quest* (Paterson, 1988). Another timely book is *In Country* by Bobbie Ann Mason (1985), which has recently been made into a motion picture. Although not a young adult book *per se*, it is an excellent choice for class listening and for independent reading by more capable readers. The protagonist is a 17-year-old girl whose father died in the Vietnam War.

On a subsequent day, the teacher distributes classroom sets of *Johnny’s Song*, a paperback volume of poetry by Steve Mason (1985), former Army captain and Vietnam combat veteran designated Poet Laureate of the Vietnam Veterans of America. Students focus on “The Wall Within,” a lengthy work on pages 3-18 that Mason read at the beginning of dedicatory ceremonies for the Memorial and that was entered into the Congressional Record. (See Appendix B.) The poem lends itself beautifully to interpretative choral reading, especially in these closing stages of the unit. Students will recognize many images and expressions and be able to fit them into the context of the Vietnam War.

The teacher explains that the class will experiment with and interpret this poem in its own choral reading—an imaginative collaborative effort. Before a preliminary oral reading, the teacher instructs students to note troublesome or unclear passages and to think about presentation in terms of casting. What lines should be said by one person? by several? by the entire class? Into how many parts should the poem be divided? Where should the divisions be?

After the reading, students get into groups of four or five to discuss meaning and interpretation. The next day the class comes together for clarifying meaning, deciding upon interpretation, and casting (including lines particularly appropriate for girls). In trying out different versions, students learn how mood, characterization, and tempo contribute to the connection between a poem’s form and its meaning. Engaging students in choral reading fosters creativity and self-expression; it fosters appreciation and enjoyment of poetry. As students experiment over the next two days with how to interpret and present “The Wall Within,” they practice, read, and listen to each other over and over again until they experience that connection between what the poem says—its meaning—and how the poem says it—its form. The unit’s culminating activity can provide an excellent opportunity for students to present this choral reading (and others!) to an audience beyond the classroom. Students may choose to video tape the presentations as well.

**DAY 26**

At this point in the unit—i.e., the beginning of the sixth week—students spend a class period sharing reactions to the individual reading of young adult books about the Vietnam War that they have been doing. (Refer to Day 13 for guide questions.) They group themselves according to the main focus of the book—e.g., soldiers in combat, veterans and/or their families at home, Vietnamese refugees. Using previously distributed guide questions for fiction and nonfiction, individuals share interpretations and impressions. They may choose to read aloud brief, illustrative excerpts. Each group drafts a summary statement expressing ways that young adult writers have dealt with a particular aspect of the Vietnam War and shares it with the class. The class makes a “Top Ten” list of recommended books.
A Fully Developed Two-Day Lesson:
Listening to Oral Histories and Drafting Interview Questions

Behavioral Objective: If students have listened to oral histories and have modeled the kinds of questions—open-ended, unbiased, nonthreatening, knowledgeable—that the professional interviewer/writer asks to get specific, candid answers, all will be able to hypothesize five interview questions that might have been asked for a fresh selection from *In the Combat Zone* (Marshall, 1987). The majority of students also will be able to formulate 10 interview questions to ask a Vietnam veteran visiting class.

Motivation: Four veterans of the Vietnam War have accepted the class invitation to talk about their war and postwar experiences. In just three days, these three men and one woman will be in the classroom to respond to student questions.

Lesson Procedure: In preparation for class interviews with veterans, the teacher tells students that writers of oral histories are first of all skilled interviewers who know how to get people to talk. In this unit, students see how Wallace Terry affords black warriors and how Kathryn Marshall affords women warriors the opportunity to tell their stories and to satisfy the need to talk about the Vietnam War—i.e., their part in it. By carefully listening to what Terry and Marshall got veterans to share, students can hypothesize questions the interviewers might have asked.


Before reading the excerpt from *In the Combat Zone*, the instructor reminds students of Judy Duncan, the female character in *Fallen Angels*. Then he or she provides background information on women’s involvement in the war. Reading aloud the oral history of Army nurse Leslie McClusky on pages 52-61 of *In the Combat Zone*, the teacher advises students to listen carefully and to try to determine the questions that might have prompted McCluskey to tell her story—i.e., to include those particular events, those particular feelings, those particular memories. The instructor should review note taking skills because students will take notes as they listen, especially for clues to the questions.

The reading takes about 20 minutes. Then students form groups of four or five and appoint a recorder and spokesperson for each group. In 10 minutes, the groups compile lists of questions they think Marshall might have asked—e.g., Why did you go to Vietnam? What was your first day there like? What are some experiences you especially remember? What was it like to come home? What do you do now? Group spokespersons share group responses with the class, and the questions are recorded on the board.

The next day the procedure is repeated with excerpts from *Bloods*. First, the instructor shares information from Terry’s introduction about the involvement of Black Americans in the Vietnam War and tells of his years in Vietnam as war correspondent for *Time* magazine. He or she reminds students to take notes as they listen to two excerpts: the oral history on pages 235-42 of Sergeant
Robert L. Daniel, radio wireman and Howitzer gunner, and on pages 243-47 of a portion of the oral history of Specialist 4 Arthur E. Woodly, Jr., combat paratrooper. Again the class forms small groups, drafts hypothetical interview questions based on the oral histories heard, and comes together for sharing.

**Evaluation:** Students listen to warrior Judy Jenkins’ oral history on pages 128-35 of *In the Combat Zone* and individually draft five interview questions that Marshall might have asked to prompt Jenkins’ candid telling of her story. E.g., what question would have prompted an answer like the following: “The women, you know, were noncombatants in a place where we could have gotten killed just as easily as the men. Only we couldn’t shoot back. We never had the chance. So what do you do with all your fear and anger? You internalize it. You just absorb it. Because you have a job to do, and that job involves taking care of people” (p. 312). Then students individually make a list of 10 relevant, clear, unbiased, open-ended, accurate, nonthreatening interview questions to ask the Vietnam veteran class visitors and speakers that will prompt the telling of detailed stories and the sharing of memories and honest feelings.

**DAY 29**

On the preparation day for guest speakers, the instructor begins by projecting on the overhead and reading aloud W. D. Ehrhart’s (1984) poem “Imagine” about a speaker answering questions about Vietnam.

**Imagine**

The conversation turned to Vietnam.  
He’d been there, and they asked him  
what it had been like:  
had he been in battle?  
5 Had he ever been afraid?

Patiently, he tried to answer  
questions he had tried to answer  
many times before.  
They listened, and they strained  
10 to visualize the words:  
newsreels and photographs, books  
and Wilfred Owen tumbled  
through their minds  
Pulses quickened.

15 They didn’t notice, as he talked,  
his eyes, as he talked,  
his eyes begin to focus  
through the wall, at nothing,  
or at something inside.  
20 When he finished speaking,  
someone asked him:  
had he ever killed?
Students are asked to infer why this poem is being shared at this particular time. Why is it relevant? What are the questions? How does he respond to the questioning? What do the lines: “They didn’t notice as he talked, / his eyes, as he talked, / his eyes begin to focus / through the wall, at nothing, / or at something inside” (15-19) mean to you? Students note the last line. Did he welcome the question? Students write in a few words what the poem says to them. They share responses. Finally the class determines: What is the lesson of the poem for us as interviewers of Vietnam veterans?

“Imagine” provides a meaningful example for students of the sensitivity and care with which they need to approach the interviews. The poem provokes heightened student anticipation and interest as well.

The instructor has typed a list of the interview questions submitted the previous day. The class pairs off and carefully evaluates them in terms of being relevant, clear, unbiased, open-ended, accurate, and nonthreatening. The class comes together for final drafting including deletions, addition, revisions. Decisions are made concerning students’ responsibilities: Who makes an opening statement? Who introduces the speakers? (This student needs to telephone the speakers for this information.) Who asks what questions and when? Who moderates the discussion, keeps it running smoothly, and advises the speakers that they can decline to answer certain questions? Who makes a closing statement and thanks the speakers? What should the opening and closing statements express? Finally speakers are reminded to be active listeners and responders—nonverbally (e.g., eye contact, posture, facial expression) at all times and verbally when appropriate.

**DAY 30**

On the following day, students conduct interviews with four Vietnam veterans from the community. This experience adds a personal and powerful dimension to the exploration of the question—“Who Are the Warriors of the Vietnam War?”

**DAY 31**

Upon arriving in class, students quietly reflect on their in-common experience and respond in writing to the question “Who Are the Warriors of the Vietnam War?” for 10 to 15 minutes. Class discussion centers on students’ reflections.

Next, students consider how they want to respond to the veterans’ visits. Should we write thank-you notes? Should we do more than that? What? How can we thank our guests and at the same time culminate our exploration of “Who Are the Warriors of the Vietnam War?”

The instructor can write the word *hootenanny* on the board and ask students to infer the meaning of this word from the 1960s. The word is clarified, and students discuss the connection between a hootenanny and honoring warriors of the 1960s and 1970s.

**DAYS 32-35**

The final days of this unit are open-ended. Students determine the nature of the warrior’s recognition and commemoration. They share responsibilities of planning and implementing—creative goal setting and problem solving. Perhaps the community has a Vietnam Memorial. If so, students can secure permission to gather there with friends, family, veterans, veterans’ families, veterans’
friends, and newspaper reporters on an upcoming Saturday or Sunday. A class visit to the site beforehand can result perhaps in a clean-up or beautification. An alternative site could be the school or a community park. As students reflect on what they have said, written, read and on what they have seen and heard over the past six weeks, they may decide to share poetry, music, prose—including their own—on the day of honoring.

Footnotes

1 From Rambo the force of freedom [Action figure toy], 1986, West Hartford, CT: Coleco. Copyright 1985, 1986 by Carolco Int. N.V. Reprinted by permission.


References


Rambo the Force of Freedom [Action Figure Toy]. (1986). West Hartford, CT: Coleco.


APPENDIX A

"Goodnight Saigon"

We met as soulmates
On Paris Island
We left as inmates
From an asylum
And we were sharp
As sharp as knives
And we were so gung ho
To lay down our lives—

We came in spastic
Like tameless horses
We left in plastic
As numbered corpses
And we learned fast
To travel light
Our arms were heavy
But our bellies were tight—

We had no home front
We had no soft soap
They sent us Playboy
They gave us Bob Hope
We dug in deep
And shot on sight
And prayed to Jesus Christ with all of our might—

We had no cam’ras
To shoot the landscapes
We passed the hash pipe
And played our Doors tapes
And it was dark
So dark at night
And we held on to each other
Like brother to brother
We promised our mothers we’d write—

And we would all go down together—

We said we’d all go down together—
Yes we would all go down together—

Remember Charlie
Remember Baker
They left their childhood
On ev’ry acre
And who was wrong?
And who was right?
It didn’t matter in the thick of the fight—

We held the day in the palm
Of our hand
They ruled the night
And the night
Seemed to last as long as
six weeks

On Paris Island
We held the coastline
they held the highlands
And they were sharp
As sharp as knives
They heard the hum of our motors
They counted the rotors
And waited for us to arrive—

And we would all go down together—

We said we’d all go down together—

Yes we would all go down together—
APPENDIX B

"The Wall Within"

Most real men
hanging tough
in their early forties
would like the rest of us to think
they could really handle one more war
and two more women.
But I know better.
You have no more lies to tell.
I have no more dreams to believe.

I have seen it in your face
I am sure you have noticed it
in mine;
that thousand-yard stare
that does not look
it looks in—
at the unutterable,
unalterable truth of our war.

The eye sees
what the mind believes.
And all that I know of war,
all that I have heard of peace,
has me looking over my shoulder
for that one stray bullet

which still has my name on it—
circling
round and round the globe
waiting and circling
circling and waiting
until I break from cover
and it takes its best, last shot.
In the absence of Time,
the accuracy of guilt is assured.
It is a cosmic marksman.
Since Vietnam,
I have run a zigzag course
across the open fields of America
taking refuge in the inner cities.
From MacArthur Park
to Washington Square
from Centennial Park
to DuPont Circle,
on the grassy, urban knolls of America
I have seen an army of combat veterans
hidden among the trees
Veterans of all our recent wars.
Each a part of the best of his generation.
Waiting in his teeth for peace.

They do not lurk there
on the backs of park benches
Drooling into their socks
above the remote, turtled backs
of chessplayers playing soldiers.
They do not perch upon the gutter’s lip
of midnight fountains
and noontime wishing wells
like surrealistic gargoyles
guarding the coins and simple wishes
of young lovers.
No.
I have seen them in the quiet dignity
of their aloneness.
Singly, in the confidence
of their own perspective.
And always at the edges of the clearing.
Patrolling like perimeter guards,
or observing as primitive gods,
each in his own way looks out to the park
that he might “see” in to the truth.

Some, like me
enjoy the comfortable base
of a friendly tree
that we might cock one eye
to the center of the park
toward the rearing bronze horseman
of other wars
who would lead us backwards to glory.
Daily, they are fragged
by a platoon of disgruntled pigeons
saying it best for all of us.

And with the other eye,
we read the poetry of America the Beautiful
as she combs her midday hair
and eats precise shrimp sandwiches
and salad Nicoise catered by Tupperware—
and never leaves a single crumb.
No wonder America is the only country
in the world which doesn’t smell like food.
... and I remember you and me
picnicking at the side
of the Ho Chi Minh Trail in the rain
eating the Limas and Ham from the can
sitting easy in our youth and our strength
driving hard bargains with each other
for the C-ration goodies
we unwrapped like Christmas presents.
Somehow it really seemed to matter
what he got versus what you got.

It wasn't easy trading cheese and crackers
for chocolate-covered peanut butter cookies!
And the pound cake—Forget about it!
I knew a guy would cut a hole in it
and pretend it was a doughnut.
For six months I watched that
and refused to ask him about it.
I did finally. And you guessed it.
He hated pound cake.
And remember the water biscuit
that came in its own tin?—
I think they had the moxie to call it a cookie—
It came with the marmalade
and was made by that outfit in Chicago
we promised to burn to the ground someday.
Damn, how did your buddy, the animal,
ever eat that crap?
Then, we'd happily wash down the whole mess
with freckly-faced strawberry Kool-Aid
straight from the canteen
some days there'd be goofy grape
(anything to keep from choking
on the taste of purified water).
Bleck.
But somehow I sensed all the while
that I'd never be able to forgive myself
for enjoying your company so much
or being so good at the game we played.

We were the best—You & I.
In our parks,
there are whole other armies of veterans
mostly young and mostly old
but always ageless
who are not alone.
They share with their families
and their friends
these open-aired
above-ground time capsules
of our national culture.
They read aloud to themselves
and their children
from the plaques and statues
monuments and markers
those one-line truths
of our common experience
as if there could be a real significance
in words like Love and Hate tattooed
on the clenched, granite fists of America.

Sometimes, when I am angry
it seems as if I could start my own country
with the same twenty Spill and Spell words
we shake out at the feet of our heroes
like some crone spreading her hands
over the runes prior to a mystic reading.
Words like:
peace and sacrifice, war and young
supreme and duty, service and honor
country, nation, men and men and men again,
sometimes God and don’t forget women!
Army, Air Force, Navy, Marines and freedom.

Then, just as quickly, the anger passes
and reverence takes its place.
Those are good words, noble words, solemn
& sincere.
It is the language of Death
which frightens me;
it is unearthly to speak life concepts
over the dead.
Death is inarticulately final
refusing forever to negotiate.

That, and the awesome responsibility
we place eternally on our fallen
teenage sons,
seems unbearably heavy
against the lengthening, prancing
shadows of Sunday’s frisbees.

Apparently, there is no period
which can be placed after sacrifice.
All life is struggle,
An act of natural balance
and indomitable courage.
As it is with man
so it is with mankind.

If we permit Memorial Day
to come to us every day,
we ignore the concept of sacrifice
and dilute its purpose.
When we do that
we incur the responsibility
to effect change.
If we are successful,
the sacrifice has renewed meaning.
It seems there is no alternative to life.
But there may be to war . . .

The values of our society
seem to be distributed in our parks
and reflected in the eyes of veterans
who look there for validation
and find only confusion and sadness.
Strange, I have observed no monuments
to survivors.
No obelisk to mark the conflict
of those who risked
and lived perhaps to fight again
or perhaps to speak of peace.
Nowhere, yet, a wall for the living.
There is no wonder
guilt is the sole survivor of war.
We do not celebrate life after combat
because our concept of glory
lives neither in victory nor in peace
but in Death.

There are plaques at the doorsteps
of skyscrapers;
in New York on 10th and the Avenue
of the Americas it reads:

IN MEMORY OF THOSE
FROM
GREENWICH VILLAGE
WHO MADE THE SUPREME SACRIFICE
IN THE KOREAN CONFLICT
1950-1953

In Nashville’s Centennial Park
in a shaded wood
Sue Ellen Savereide

to one side of the Parthenon
built to scale and to the glory
which was Greece,
a small statue stands;
it is inscribed:

I GAVE MY BEST
TO MAKE A BETTER WORLD
1917-1918

I stood there one fall
ankle deep in leaves
and looked up at the night sky
through a hole in a ceiling of trees
wondering how much better the world
might look from up there.

From the moon
only one manmade object
can be viewed by the naked eye:
The Great Wall of China
(a tribute to man’s functional paranoia).
It’s a peculiar perspective
because we’re a lot closer
and the only manmade object We can see
is THE Wall in Washington, D.C.
(the veterans’ solemn pledge to remember)

There is one other wall, of course.
One we never speak of.
One we never see,
One which separates memory from madness.
in a place no one offers flowers.
THE WALL WITHIN.
We permit no visitors.

Mine looks like any of a million
nameless, brick walls—
it stands in the tear-down ghetto of my soul;
that part of me which reason avoids
for fear of dirtying its clothes
and from atop which my sorrow and my rage
hurl bottles and invectives
at the rolled-up windows
of my passing youth

Do you know the wall I mean?
I learned of mine that night in the rain
when I spoke at the Memorial in Washington.
We all noticed how the wall ran like tears
and every man's name we found
on the polished, black granite face
seemed to have our eyes staring back at us;
crying.
It was haunting.
Later I would realize
I had caught my first glimpse
of the Wall Within.
And those tears were real.

You and I do not walk about the Wall Within
like Hamlet on the battlements.
No one with our savvy
would expose himself like that
especially to a frightened, angry man.
Suicide loiters in our subconscious
and bears a grudge; an assassin
on hashish. We must be wary.
No. We sit there legless in our immobility
rolling precariously in our self-pity
like ugly Humpty Dumpties
with disdain even for the King's horses
as we lean over the ledge to write
upside down with chalk, bleached white
with our truth
the names of all the other casualties
of the Vietnam War
(our loved ones)

the ones the Pentagon didn't put in uniform
but died anyway.
Some because they stopped being who
they always were
just as truly as if they'd found
another way to breathe.
Others, because they did die
honest-to-God casualties of the
Vietnam War
because they lost the will
to breathe at all.

My mother gave her first recital
at Carnegie Hall at age eleven.
Sometimes, when I was a boy
I'd watch her play the piano
and wonder if God, after all, was not a woman.
One evening when I was in the bush
she turned on the 6:00 news
and died of a heart attack.

My mother’s name is on the Wall Within.

You starting to get the idea?
Our lists may be different
but shoulder to shoulder
if we could find the right flat cloud
on a perfect, black night
we could project our images
upon a god-sized drive-in theatre
wide enough to race Ben Hur across
for a thousand years . . .

Because the Wall Within
adds up the true cost of war . . .

We can recite 58,012 in our sleep
even the day after they update it,
but how many of those KIA had kids?
How many of them got nice step-dads?
Whose wall do they go on?

And what about you vets
who came home to your wife and kids
only to divorce her because
there wasn’t anybody else to be angry at?
How many dimes
have you long-distance fathers
dropped into the slot
to hear how another man
was raising your children?
Yeah, Yeah, I can hear you hollerin’,
"Put it on the wall! Put it on the wall!"
Damn right, it’s on the wall . . .
And you remember how that came down?
You told the three year old
his daddy loved him
and his mommy loved him
and nothing would ever change that.
But it did anyway.
But not because you didn’t love him enough,
but because you loved him too much
to be a part-time daddy.
And you couldn’t explain that to him
because you couldn’t explain it to you.
What the hell? I mean who were you,
Spinoza? You came home a twenty-two-year-old machine gunner for chrissake, you did the best you could.

PUT IT ON THE WALL!

And somewhere, in an art gallery, maybe, is a portrait of American Grieving Parenthood. Handholding, Rockwellian caricatures of wisdom and forbearance and oh yes, pride sitting on the front porch of the township waving their lemonades at the Greyhound bus driver. Baloney. The names go UP! Because every time you can’t find Mom, you damned well better call Doc Smith ‘cause she’s up on the second floor again sitting on the floor in Johnny’s closet smelling his Varsity sweater with the sleeves around her shoulders sobbing something maybe only Johnny ever understood.

But don’t worry about dad, who never fished again, or watched a ballgame on TV again and won’t talk to anyone this year between the ages of thirty and forty. He’s doing fine. He just doesn’t exercise as much as he should, but Doc Smith assures us there’s no medical reason why the folks should have separate bedrooms; Dad just likes to read a lot these days.

If you and I were men of common conscience we might agree on a collective dedication to our Walls Within. As for me they could all read: This wall is dedicated to mothers, fathers, sisters, brothers, wives, husbands, sons, daughters, lovers, friends and most of all dreams
of the men and women
who risked it all in Vietnam
while you continued to lose them
during and after the war
With less a chance than they for a parade
and no chance at all for an explanation.

You lost them to bullets, internment,
drugs, suicide, alcohol, jail, PTS,
Divorce, but never never did any of you
ever lose them to the truth
which is now being shared
across this great nation
in such an act of spontaneous
moral courage, its like may never
have been seen on any battlefield
in the history of mankind . . .
Amen to that, brother.
Selected Annotated Bibliography
Of Young Adult Vietnam War Literature

This excellent father-daughter collaborative effort chronicles in an informative text and moving photos the building of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington, D.C. and the subsequent public response to it. Grade 7 reading level.

Part of this novel’s value is its British viewpoint of the Vietnam War. Teenaged Simon seeks information about the war when his parents adopt Ha, a Vietnamese war orphan. In a somewhat complicated story line operating on action and psychological levels, Simon experiences the same war in dreams that Ha experienced in reality. Grade 6 reading level but more suitable in terms of subject matter for a Grade 9+ reader.

This is a fiction account of one Vietnamese family’s escape from Ho Chi Minh City at the end of the war. On board a rickety boat, the family heads for Malaysia with no food, no map, and little fuel. Grade 8 reading level.

This story centers on a 17-year-old boy’s attempts to find out more about how his father, a Navy pilot, died in Vietnam. Grade 6 reading level but more appropriate in terms of mature language for Grade 8+ reading level.

Chartreuse “Charlie” Pippin is a black sixth grader whose father will not talk about his Vietnam War experiences. She wants to find out why. Grade 7 reading level.

In this nonfiction book, the author offers a history of and a rationale for the American military build-up in Vietnam. Grade 9 reading level.

This fiction work tells the effect a mother’s protest and antiwar activities have on a lonely young boy. His mother is a fugitive wanted by the FBI, and Warren copes by fantasizing. When his grandmother dies, Warren is certain that his mother will come out of hiding to the funeral. Grade 5 reading level.

Em is a refugee living in American and recalling his life in Vietnam before and during the war when an American journalist befriends him. Fiction. Grade 9 reading level.
This guide to Vietnam’s political history published in the midst of the war explores how the United States got involved in South Vietnamese affairs and how that involvement grew from a minor to a major factor in its own political history. Nonfiction. Grade 9 reading level.


Set in a small, conservative New Hampshire town, this story focuses on the cold reception given Lon, a 14-year-old Vietnamese refugee whose father was an American soldier in Vietnam. Grade 6 reading level.

This nonfiction work explains amnesty in general and the granting of amnesty to Vietnam War deserters and draft evaders in particular. The book is instructive rather than persuasive in nature. Grade 12 reading level.

Set in Vietnam and published during the war, this fiction book tells how a young Vietnamese boy saves an American Green Beret from “the box” and torture at the hands of the Viet Cong. Grade 8 reading level.

An injured Navy veteran of Vietnam and his wife adopt the Vietnamese boy who saved him when his patrol boat hit an old mine. Fifteen-year-old Annie distrusts and resents Taro. This is the story of a family’s adjustment to a new life in Texas with Taro, and a father’s attempt to live with painful war memories. Grade 5 reading level.

The author summarizes issues of the Vietnam War in a clear and concise manner. He usually presents both sides of issues. He discusses the problems faced by Americans as soldiers in Vietnam and as veterans back home. Nonfiction. Grade 12 reading level.

An injured Vietnam veteran with emotional problems helps a young cousin with even more severe emotional scars come to terms with the loss of his parents. By sharing his poetry with young Jamie, Clem is able to reach him and to convince him that he can stop running away from his traumatic past. Clem only wishes he could do the same. Fiction. Grade 7 reading level.

Written from the vantage point of the late 1970s, this book is valuable for the reader to gain a perspective on the war. Nonfiction. Grade 12 reading level.

When his family sponsors a Vietnamese refugee family, Harvey undertakes the Americanization of Nguyen Tuan, including changing his name to Tom. Primarily light in tone, and, as the title suggests, even silly and condescending at times, the book does include accounts of Tuan’s nightmares and recollections of escaping from Vietnam by boat and being attacked by pirates. Fiction. Grade 6 reading level.
Published during the war, this subjective nonfiction account focuses on war as “nightmare” and “ongoing agony.” Grade 10 reading level.

Harry, a young American soldier separated from his company and lost in the jungle, meets Mi, a South Vietnamese child who has survived an American bombing attack and the total destruction of her village. This is a fiction book with vivid descriptions. Grade 6 reading level.

Twelve-year-old Jessica tries to befriend Daphne, a newcomer who wears bizarre clothes, keeps to herself, and never smiles. As they work together on a creative writing assignment, Jessica learns that Daphne’s father was killed in Vietnam when she was only five and that her mother died in a car accident. Daphne’s grandmother refuses to believe that her son is dead. Fiction. Grade 6 reading level.

Thirteen-year-old Kelly tries to befriend a homeless Vietnam veteran who spends his time in the public library reading books about the Vietnam War. She decides that he suffers from treatable but incurable post-traumatic stress disorder. Kelly and her father make a meaningful visit to the Vietnam Veterans Memorial when the veteran is hit by a car and dies. Fiction. Grade 8 reading level.

The author describes the youth, the inexperience, and the confusion of the American soldier in Vietnam. Nonfiction. Grade 10 reading level.

This book focuses on the effect of the war on the lands along the Mekong River. Nonfiction. Grade 10 reading level.

This early fiction work set in New York City focuses on draft resisters and the generation gap. At the end of the story, the reader does not know whether Jeremy, a black 18-year-old, will register for the draft or not. Grade 9 reading level.

This autobiography relates nostalgic memories of family, village, and adventures in central Vietnam. The author was drafted into the South Vietnamese army and permanently paralyzed by a gunshot wound in the war. Grade 9 reading level.

This retrospective look at a presidency acknowledges that historians will debate its nature for years to come. Readers find a balanced portrayal of the Vietnam era president in this biography. Grade 10 reading level.

This is part of the publisher’s “Young People’s History of American Wars” series. Nonfiction. Grade 12+ reading level.
The author is strongly critical of American involvement in the Vietnam War. Nonfiction. Grade 9 reading level.

This is an oversized, illustrated history of American involvement in the Vietnam War. Includes information on soldiers at war, veterans at home, and the Vietnam Veterans Memorial. Nonfiction. Grade 8 reading level.

The authors interviewed and photographed Vietnamese children in refugee camps, orphanages, hospitals, and city streets to show children as innocent victims of war. Nonfiction. Grade 8 reading level.

The author believes that today's youth need to think about the issues raised by the Vietnam War. The author has a clear sense of her young audience and provides an excellent synopsis of the war. Grade 10 reading level.

As nuclear missiles are being stockpiled outside their town, seventh grader Matt Tyson and his father, a Vietnam veteran who lost a leg in the war, disagree on the advisability of nuclear arms. Illustrating a young boy's questioning of war and peace issues, the story provides no clear-cut answer. Fiction. Grade 5 reading level.

The author's purpose is to instruct young readers about pacifism or resistance to war. Three chapters deal specifically and critically with the Vietnam War. The book reviews the antiwar movement of the 1960s and Kent State and the Pentagon Papers of the 1970s. Grade 11 reading level.

The author captures the essence of what it was like for a teenage soldier to experience war. Fiction. Grade 7 reading level.

A 16-year-old boy's friendship with a Vietnamese refugee girl and her 80-year-old sponsor provides the basis for this fictional story. Whereas distance separates Thao Nguyen from her parents and language from friends, parental disinterest and his own shyness inhibit Jason. Grade 9 reading level.

This book makes a strong and graphic antiwar statement. It is a complex fiction story of human vulnerability and the senselessness of war as illustrated by the lives of four young people—an Ojibway Indian, an illegal Mexican migrant worker, a rock musician, a sheep rancher's daughter—and three veterans of past wars. One of the veterans is Timothy Johnson, a Marine rifleman in Vietnam who was hit at age 19 and now lives in a care facility for the disabled. Grade 8 reading level.
Haunted by memories of friends who died in Vietnam, Sgt. Robert S. Locke drinks to forget. This is the story of his friendship with 14-year-old Manny, a kid of the streets in Juarez, Mexico. Robert could not save his friends in Vietnam, but he can save Manny by giving him a chance at a new life. Fiction. Grade 9 reading level.

Eleven-year-old Park relates his quest for information about his father, a bomber pilot killed in the Vietnam War, to the fantasy of King Arthur’s quest for the Holy Grail. Park’s quest is complicated by the fact that his mother refuses to talk about his father or about his father’s family. When his mother decides that it is time for Park to visit his father’s family, he goes to his grandfather’s farm and makes several startling discoveries. Fiction. Grade 7 reading level.

The year Ellie Farley turns 12, her Uncle Joe joins the Air Force and goes to Vietnam. When he comes home, he will not talk about the war, but Ellie sees him cry at times. Grade 5 reading level.

A high school English teacher and Vietnam veteran draws Julie, a senior, into staging a classroom psychodrama that will teach her to avoid both blind trust and the sacrifice of friendship. As the experiment becomes more frightening and its choices more complicated, Julie learns that as a soldier in Vietnam, her teacher had been set up by the United States Army to be captured by the Vietcong and divulge phony information. He betrayed his best friend in the process. This book forces consideration of difficult questions that lack answers. Fiction. Grade 9 reading level.

Ancil’s father has been missing in action in Vietnam for more than 10 years and declared legally dead. She clings to the hope that he is alive and will return home even though her mother has remarried. Grade 5 reading level.

This is a nonfiction account of a Vietnamese refugee family’s efforts to adjust to life in a noisy, crowded Chicago neighborhood. Grade 7 reading level.

Thirteen-year-old Catty’s brother Beau ran off, joined the Marines, and died in Vietnam as a hero at age 18. The family will not talk about Beau, but Catty needs to. His last letter to her states that he cannot go on killing. Fiction. Grade 10 reading level.

Twelve-year-old Jessie Oates wants to be a pilot like her father was before he died in Vietnam. Upset over that death, her grandfather has closed down the airstrip her father used, and her mother wants Jessie to forget about airplanes. Fiction. Grade 7 reading level.

This is a vividly illustrated “picture book” with handlettered English and Vietnamese texts on
the same page. Both illustrations and text emphasize the prewar beauty of Vietnam. Hien, a young girl weaver, sustains a severe throat injury when her home is bombed by Americans and goes to America for treatment. She experiences confusion, loneliness, and homesickness. Fiction. Grade 6 reading level.

This is a character study of Mina, a sensitive black teenager who wants to ease the grief that a minister friend has been carrying around for years. Mina’s friend continues to grieve for a boyhood friend killed in Vietnam. Fiction. Grade 9 reading level.

This story of young Vietnamese orphans who leave Vietnam at the time of Communist attempts to unify the country portrays the ordeals of the boat people—i.e., storms, starvation, pirate attacks, rejection, refugee camps. Fiction. Grade 6 reading level.

In this sequel to *A Boat to Nowhere*, the American who rescued the orphans from the sea now sponsors them. The story focuses on Kien, who experiences loneliness and discrimination instead of the good life he had expected. Tension develops in a fishing settlement between American and Vietnamese communities over fishing rights. Fiction. Grade 7 reading level.

This novel follows two 17-year-olds from Tennessee, where they are enemies, to Vietnam, where they become friends. The price of friendship is high, however, as one dies in battle while protecting the other. Grade 7 reading level.

This story opens with a family poised in front of the television set on a summer night in 1970 to watch the draft lottery. Nineteen-year-old Stevie’s number is picked first, and he decides to go to Canada as a draft dodger. This angers his father and saddens his sister Becca. When Becca later visits Stevie in Canada, they both realize that there are no easy solutions. Fiction. Grade 5 reading level.

Twelve-year-old Marcie’s father is a Vietnam veteran still in the clutches of war. When he goes on a rampage and nearly destroys their home, Marcie’s mother tells him to leave. Fiction. Grade 7 reading level.