

**NO VICTORY PARADES:
The Return of the Vietnam Veteran**

by Murray Polner

Holt, Rinehart & Winston,
169 pp., \$5.95

Reviewed by William Beauchamp

■ What has been the impact of the war on Vietnam veterans? After interviewing 204 of them from all parts of the country, Murray Polner has selected nine—three hawks, three doves, three who are “haunted”—to tell their stories. If they offer a microcosm of the (white) Vietnam veteran from 1964 to 1969, as he believes, what emerges from their cumulative accounts may well be the most persuasive, comprehensive, poignant indictment of the Indochina disaster published to date.

Polner focuses on the men themselves in compassionate vignettes of nine representative, often troubled human beings. No caricatures, no propaganda. Yet, gradually, as they speak—of themselves or others, of “Nam” or the return home—a compendium of ingenious fallacies and fictions takes shape. It serves as an anthropological source book of catastrophic attitudes, fostered by our institutions and swallowed by our people, toward war and the war-waging state. This is one of the principal riches of Polner’s remarkable book. For example:

War is inevitable:

“War was war, always was, always

would be. Consciencewise, it never bothered me.”

War is altruistic:

“Everytime we used napalm the ARVN were overjoyed. I know they were; I spoke with them. We really helped those people. In the long run we gave them something to live for.”

The enemy are subhuman:

“I couldn’t look at them anymore without thinking ‘gook, dink,’ anything to show how much I hated them. And soon I found out I was right for thinking that way. . . .”

The state (one’s own) is sacred:

“The *Pueblo* was piracy by a two-bit nation; it made us seem like nothin’. America was always like a religion to me. . . . We should’ve leveled Wonsan harbor. . . .”

Our leaders must know what they’re doing:

“If Vietnam was such a mistake, how come the leaders of our country, the wisest men we have, the men we elected in free and democratic votes, the men who have *all* the facts, how come they sent us in?”

War is a game:

“That day . . . we had lost dozens in killed and injured. Both sides fought good. It was a good fight; just another wartime incident.”

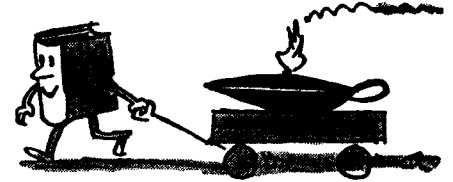
War is exhilarating:

“People often asked me how it felt to kill someone. My answer was consistent: ‘It felt great.’ Hell, what did they, could they, know about war and killing?”

In war, morality no longer holds:

Some GIs were overheard talking in a bar: “A question had been raised: would any of them be willing to crush the skull of a Vietnamese infant for a million dollars and a guarantee of immunity? They shouted and laughed; the vote was three to one for.”

Desensitization, as in the last example, is not uncommon. When news of Mylai broke, none of the nine were shocked: they had seen its like too often. One of Polner’s “haunted” had been at Tu Doc. Before moving in, the men were harangued about what to expect: VC and NVA would be everywhere, kids would be strapped with bombs, troops were concealed inside the school, there was a weapons stash on the second floor. At the sound of the first shot, everything opened up. A Zippo gun set the school ablaze. “There was fire coming from inside. . . . Kids were running out wildly. We knew they



were kids. Some of the teachers had kids in their hands. And they were all shot. . . . Later we found among the ruins a stash of arms in the hamlet but nothing in the school.”

Another of the nine, a dove, had murdered an eight-year-old. When the boy unexpectedly emerged from a tree, the GI grabbed him. The child pulled away, his hand behind his back; the hand moved. “Shoot!” yelled the officer-in-charge. “I fired at him. Again and again, until I emptied my whole M-2 carbine chamber at him. When I looked again, he was cut in two, with his guts all around. I vomited. . . . It was out-and-out murder.” Afterward he consulted a psychiatrist and a Catholic chaplain; both assured him he had only done his duty. “You know, that little boy had a three-inch penknife, and I had a carbine.”

When most of the nine—hawk, dove, or haunted—tried to tell people back home what Vietnam was really like, reactions were often fearful, skeptical, violent. The father of one stopped speaking to him; his brother threatened to beat him up. Another tried talking to a group of his father’s middle-aged friends in a hometown bar: they ganged up on him, punched him in the face, and threw him bleeding onto the sidewalk. One of the doves and his buddy were picketing in an antiwar protest when a policeman came up. “‘Any of you people ever *been* in the service?’ the cop asked. ‘We both were,’ my friend answered. ‘He was an officer and I was an SP-4 Infantry. I was wounded twice and him once.’ The cop smiled. Then he shook his head. ‘Too bad,’ he said to us, ‘too bad you weren’t both killed.’”

How have these and other experiences, both in the war and back home, affected the Vietnam veteran? How is he different from past veterans? Despite divergent convictions, from hawk to haunted to dove, Polner discovered remarkable similarities. None of the nine returned unchanged; some try to block the war out; some have become politicized or radicalized; some are looking for answers in religion. Not one has come home untouched by resentment, cynicism, or alienation. Of the larger group of 204 interviewees, many preferred no one to know they had been in Vietnam; almost all thought they had been manipulated. All of the nine, including the hawks, felt at least some shame because of the

**FRASER YOUNG
LITERARY CRYPT NO. 1459**

A cryptogram is writing in cipher. Every letter is part of a code that remains constant throughout the puzzle. Answer No. 1459 will be found in the next issue.

. . . MLB DJVM YDIJPMCEM
ABVVJE TJP BQBPH MYDB JT
AYTB — YV MLYV: “EBQBP
LXPM CEHFJSH.”

—PJXVVBCX

Answer to Literary Crypt No. 1458

Men talk about Bible miracles because there is no miracle in their lives.

—THOREAU.

war. "In 1945," Polner says, "few ex-soldiers apologized for Hiroshima; a staggering number of veterans I spoke with refused to defend U.S. action in Vietnam."

The author concludes that "never before in American history have as many loyal and brave young men been as shabbily treated by the government that sent them to war; never before have so many of them questioned as much, as these veterans have, the essential rightness of what they were forced to do."

For the sake of the common weal, Murray Polner's cool, shattering reportage should be serialized on the front page of every American newspaper.

William Beauchamp is currently working on a book examining social attitudes toward war and peace.