

**Corporeal Territories:  
The Body in American Narratives of the  
Vietnam War**

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## ABSTRACT

Focusing upon American veterans' depictions of the US intervention in Vietnam and its aftermath, this thesis argues that bodies and issues concerning embodiment form the epicentre of these representations.

Chapter One uses narratives by Ron Kovic, John Ketwig, Philip Caputo and others to illustrate that military training is a transformative process wherein the recruit's body serves both as *index of*, and *vehicle for*, his metamorphosis into a soldier. As these authors suggest, training inculcates a utilitarian attitude towards embodiment: the soldier's body is, primarily, a *disciplined* body whose value— and masculinity— resides in 'its' power to inflict injury upon the 'enemy'.

As Chapter Two demonstrates, however, such *machine-bodies* (and the conceptualisation of embodiment which engendered them) were 'out of place' in-country. Veterans like W.D. Ehrhart, Nathaniel Tripp, Robert Mason, and Tim O'Brien portray the Vietnam environment as inherently threatening to the US soldier's corporeal integrity. Viet Cong and NVA strategies also disempowered the American soldier, challenging his faith in the innate superiority of the machine-body.

Confronting injury further undermined the soldier's sense of corporeal invulnerability. Chapter Three considers the wounding, and treatment, of American casualties of Vietnam, arguing that narratives by Caputo, Kovic, and (ex-Navy surgeon) John Parrish 'recover' aspects of

injury excluded from officially-sanctioned discourse. Chapter Four extends this scrutiny of wounding, exploring its interpretation both in-country and 'back home', and highlighting Kovic's depiction of injury and its consequences in *Born on the Fourth of July* (1976).

Chapter Five demonstrates that encounters with irreparable corporeal damage are imbued with a sense of *crisis*: such wounding simultaneously *demand*s and *resist*s representation. Texts by O'Brien, Kovic and others are considered as 'trauma narratives' here, and a connection is made between *writing-as-retrieval*, and the potential of narrativisation to promote psychical recuperation, both for veterans themselves and also, perhaps, for US society generally.

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## PREFACE

Interest in the body as a topic of intellectual debate has increased markedly in the last decade and this concern is evident in the work of British scholars, as demonstrated by the appearance of the first issue of the now flourishing journal *Body & Society* in 1995, and the popularity of events such as the 'After the Body' conference at Manchester University in June 1998. However, while a wide range of commentators who have discussed the American experience in Vietnam draw attention to issues connected with the body, no in-depth study has yet been carried out with regard to the pivotal, yet complex, role of bodies and notions of embodiment within the narratives produced by those who fought there. This is not to say that I have been working completely in isolation, nor that every aspect of the argument presented here is entirely original. Indeed, at a late stage of my research I encountered a study by the American scholar Michael Bibby, entitled *Hearts and Minds: Bodies, Poetry, and Resistance in the Vietnam Era* (1996). In its discussion of 'the Vietnam-era oppositional politics of corporeality' within GI Resistance poetry, this work provides a crossover, at times, with my own arguments regarding the concern with the body that exists at the epicentre of veterans' narrative representations of the in-country experience and its aftermath.<sup>1</sup> As Bibby's study focuses upon the poetry of three activist groups-- Black Liberationists, Women's Liberationists and those in the GI Resistance movement-- his analysis of Vietnam veterans' work is much less

extensive than my own. It is significant, though, that his discussion also draws to the fore issues such as the associations pertaining to militarised bodies within US culture, the function of military training in reshaping the soldier's attitude towards his own embodiment, and veterans' focus upon bodily mutilation in their representations of the war. These are areas that I consider in much greater depth here, and hence our two studies serve to complement and reinforce, rather than to detract from, each other.

Even today, the American perspective on the war is a limited, and limiting, one. Since, for the most part, I am referring specifically to American representations of the in-country experience and its aftermath, the view of the war provided here is necessarily restricted and partial. As Rick Berg and John Carlos Rowe rightly note in their Introduction to *The Vietnam War and American Culture* (1991), Americans tend to think of 'Vietnam' in terms of their own losses.<sup>2</sup> Hence, while my analysis demonstrates that the texts provided by veterans operate as *counternarratives* to dominant modes of cultural discourse by foregrounding the broken and ruptured bodies produced by the war, nevertheless they tend to direct the reader's attention towards the wounds and injuries suffered by American soldiers, rather than considering the corporeal damage inflicted upon the Vietnamese combatants and civilians. There are, moreover, limitations to the accuracy of my study as a representation of American experience as a whole. Although I refer to a substantial number of veterans' narratives, the majority of these, with a few notable exceptions, focus upon the



experience of combat. In reality, as commentator James William Gibson has pointed out, roughly 90% of Americans who served in Vietnam did so in a support capacity.<sup>3</sup> My own research *does* suggest, however, that the narratives discussed here are generally representative of the wider field of depictions of the in-country experience authored by male American veterans. It might be contended, then, that there was something about the very nature of combat in Vietnam that impelled a disproportionate number of those who participated to articulate their experiences— a notion arguably borne out by the issues raised in my analysis.

The nature of my project has, perhaps, spawned its own bias, namely, a tendency in the argument to elide distinctions between the various groups within the population of Americans who served in Vietnam. As many have noted, one of the effects of the extended duration of the American intervention was that the military personnel deployed in the initial stages had significantly different experiences from those who served later, both with regard to their time in-country, and their reception upon return to civilian life.<sup>4</sup> Moreover, veterans and commentators alike repeatedly stress that there are discernable patterns in the relationship between individuals' gender, race and cultural backgrounds and their experience of service and its aftermath. While my analysis has sought to incorporate the perspectives of female personnel and African-American veterans, I tend to do so at points where they are relevant to my argument, rather than divorcing their comments from my general discussion. While there are, obviously,

restrictions to such an approach, I feel that my method here is in keeping with the purpose of my study, in that its focus is upon the unifying threads that link various representations of the in-country experience and its consequences, rather than the distinctions between them.

My analysis employs an interdisciplinary approach, utilising resources from a variety of disciplines in conjunction with a range of narrative renderings of the in-country experience provided by authors who served in Vietnam during the period of the conflict. While some of these texts are first-person memoirs, others are fictionalised representations, and yet others seem to be a blend of the two. While critics of my study may contend that the apparently 'factual' accounts have more credence than the fictionalised versions, I would argue that what is at stake here is not the facticity or accuracy of these renderings, but rather their function and implications as *representations*. My *modus operandi* has been much influenced by arguments provided by James William Gibson in his lengthy and detailed study *The Perfect War: Technowar in Vietnam* (1986). Here Gibson draws our attention to 'the tacit rules governing "legitimate" knowledge about the war' and the manner in which these have 'marginalized and discredited the warrior's knowledge'.<sup>5</sup> Moreover, he addresses the distinction that has been made between veterans' fictional and non-fictional accounts of the war, highlighting the fact that 'Novels and poems, as "fictional works," are customarily discredited as sources for cognitive claims.'<sup>6</sup> Gibson himself, however, suggests that such divisions among veterans'

representations are far less important than the crucial link between them, namely that, whether presented in fictional or autobiographical form, these renderings of the in-country experience are, in various ways, at odds with the accounts produced by those 'at the top of the stratification system'. These 'war managers', Gibson argues, 'had a virtual monopoly on socially accepted "scientific" knowledge' concerning the US intervention in Vietnam and thus, he contends, 'The warrior's knowledge falls under Michel Foucault's conception of "*subjugated knowledges*".'<sup>7</sup> In the light of this, he states:

What the warriors and their close observers have told us about the war is far more important than the question of whether they wrote "fiction" or "nonfiction". All forms of discourse can serve as ways to make serious claims concerning important facts or concepts, claims worthy of scholarly consideration.<sup>8</sup>

Gibson's points are particularly pertinent here for, as my study demonstrates, both the autobiographical and the fictional narratives that I examine draw attention to issues omitted from, or masked by, officially-sanctioned versions of the war.

My discussion begins with an analysis of the military training of US combat troops and support personnel prior to their deployment in Vietnam, highlighting the manner in which the body of the recruit acts as the focal point in the process of 'becoming' a soldier. I take as my starting point Michel Foucault's observation that the soldier-identity demands a particular form of embodiment within Western culture, and I argue that the military preparation for Vietnam entails the use of the

recruit's body both as an *index of*, and a *vehicle for*, his conversion from civilian into soldier.<sup>9</sup>

My discussion of the tactics employed by the American military to effect the desired metamorphosis makes reference to the descriptions of training provided in narratives by veterans such as Ron Kovic and John Ketwig, drawing attention to a similarity between the treatment of military recruits and the ritualistic degradation of the bodies of inmates of Nazi concentration camps.<sup>10</sup> Indeed, veterans such as Tim O'Brien exploit this parallel in their textual representations in order to highlight their sense of disempowerment during training.<sup>11</sup> As my consideration of the strategic use of physical punishment by Drill Instructors demonstrates, however, there are crucial distinctions between recruits' experiences and those of camp inmates. Drawing upon Kalf Tal's suggestion that basic training is intended to engender trauma in the recruit as a means to effect his transformation, I contend that this *psychological* distress is induced specifically through the treatment of his body.<sup>12</sup> However, while military training is frequently described in terms of an enforced regimen to which recruits are subjected, my discussion shows that they, too, have an important part to play in their metamorphosis into soldiers.

As my argument illustrates, factors specific to the Vietnam conflict made it necessary for the US soldier to conduct, and to conceptualise, his body in particular ways. The American military attempted to refashion both the bodies and the behaviours of recruits in accordance with idealised (and, as various commentators have

emphasised, profoundly misogynistic) models of masculinity and male embodiment. With reference to the work of theorists Antony Easthope and Klaus Theweleit, my argument demonstrates that the American military sought to mould the bodies of recruits into hard, closed, *machine*-bodies, through the promotion of an ethic of extreme self-discipline and the equation of the 'value' of the soldier's body with its utilitarian potential.<sup>13</sup> Moreover, military training, I argue, encouraged recruits to base their sense of their own masculinity not only upon their heightened level of physical endurance, but also upon their ability to inflict injury upon other bodies.

The opening sections of my second chapter refer to a range of narrative accounts and interviews with veterans and support personnel to show that arrival in-country was often a disorientating experience. The analysis is complemented by the incorporation of comments by female veterans, many of whom served either as military or civilian nurses. Unaccustomed to this tropical milieu, Americans frequently emphasise their response of physical repulsion when recalling their first encounter with the in-country environment. As my discussion details, the depiction of Vietnam not only as alien and *other*, but also as inherently threatening to the health and welfare of the American soldier, prevails both in the narratives provided by veterans and the officially-sanctioned reports produced by military commentators. Having highlighted the presentation of the in-country environment as a squalid and pestilent place, I then consider a scenario from Tim O'Brien's *The Things They Carried* (1991) as a means to suggest that veterans'

narrativisations of the Vietnam experience exploit both the literal and the symbolic implications of the soldier's confrontation with detritus in-country.<sup>14</sup>

The conceptualisation of the environment as enemy is, I contend, a crucial element in a wide range of narratives. As my analysis illustrates, representations of the in-country experience repeatedly emphasise the American soldier's difficulty in negotiating the diverse terrain. Veterans such as Philip Caputo, Gustav Hasford, Nathaniel Tripp and Stephen Wright focus specifically on the jungle setting in their narratives, characterising it as an arena in which the soldier's corporeal integrity is profoundly threatened.<sup>15</sup> John M. Del Vecchio and Tim O'Brien depict the jungle as both unremittingly hostile and yet simultaneously alluring, and as such, it serves within their texts as the epitome of the in-country environment as enemy.<sup>16</sup> The analysis draws attention to a propensity within the narratives of (male) combat veterans to gender the in-country environment as female, and to describe it in corporeal terms. Such depictions of Vietnam, I argue, not only serve to underscore its threatening quality, but also carry profoundly destructive implications both for the landscape itself and for those who inhabit it.

The relationship between the US soldier and the in-country environment was, I argue, shaped by the specific mode of combat itself. Reference to a range of veterans' accounts evidences not only that the soldier frequently experienced his body as a liability here, but also that circumstances often rendered him a potential target for an elusive

enemy. As the closing portions of this chapter illustrate, the soldier suffered a profound sense of loss/lack of control over his own body within the combat zone. The tactics utilised by hostile Vietnamese forces further heightened his awareness that corporeal frailty could not only overwhelm American militarised bodies, but could also threaten to undermine the very principles that had seemed to guarantee the supremacy of this form of embodiment.

As many critics and commentators have argued, there are both links and discrepancies between the war in Vietnam and prior combat situations. Having drawn the reader's attention to the peculiarities of the nature of combat, I begin the third chapter by citing military-medical reports which indicate a disparity between the wounds inflicted upon US soldiers in earlier wars and those sustained in Vietnam. As military commentator Major General Spurgeon Neel has stated, 'The problems which medical personnel in Vietnam encountered were more complicated than before'.<sup>17</sup> In response, as my analysis details, the American military devised a system of treatment for their casualties which was so effective that it actually resulted in a far lower mortality rate for the wounded than in previous wars.

While officially-sanctioned accounts of the treatment of American casualties celebrate the triumph of military medicine in the Vietnam context, my analysis demonstrates that veterans' narratives tend to provide a much more disillusioned perspective on the injuries suffered by US soldiers in-country. Although the frequency of encounters with ruptured bodies varied considerably among

servicemen, the emphasis upon the disturbing impact of such occurrences is common to a wide range of veterans' representations of the in-country experience. As my argument illustrates, the witnessing of instances of bodily injury involved not only a confrontation with corporeal frailty, but also an experience of *abjection*, the nature and implications of which are examined with reference both to the work of Julia Kristeva, and also to the discussions of trauma by Kalí Tal and Robert Jay Lifton.<sup>18</sup>

I consider in particular the narrative accounts of Philip Caputo, John Parrish and Ron Kovic to illustrate that certain details concerning bodily wounds and wounded bodies, having been excluded from the officially-sanctioned reports, resurface in veterans' representations. Caputo's *A Rumor of War* (1978) foregrounds the difficulties that soldiers confronted when encountering (and attempting to describe) instances of severe injury in-country. Parrish's *Journal of a Plague Year* (1979) not only provides extensive descriptions of the wounds that he had to treat while serving as a Navy doctor in Vietnam, but also points out the limitations of military medicine's restorative/recuperative capabilities within this context.<sup>19</sup> An in-depth discussion of Kovic's *Born on the Fourth of July* (1976) later in the chapter considers both the experience of injury and that of military-medical management from the perspective of the wounded soldier himself. As my analysis emphasises, Kovic presents himself as one of those individuals whose wounds would have proved fatal in previous wars, and hence his



narrative alerts us to the consequences of survival for the irreparably damaged.

Having elucidated the nature of the injuries inflicted upon American soldiers in Vietnam, I then examine the interpretation of this corporeal damage. While the discussion in Chapter Four focuses mainly upon the significance of bodily wounds and wounded bodies within the in-country context, the closing portion reflects upon the connotations of the mangled bodies of veterans following their return to the US. I begin by considering the effects and implications of the use of the body count as a criterion for judging the progress of the US military effort in Vietnam. As I detailed in my third chapter, the reducing of the dead and wounded to numbers had the effect of masking both the humanity of these individuals and the viscerality of their injuries. What is more, the emphasis upon the body count undermined the notion that the human body has intrinsic value *in itself*.

Several commentators have pointed out that the intense focus upon the body count by military decision-makers created an atmosphere which encouraged the deliberate desecration by US soldiers of the bodies of dead Vietnamese. I contend that this manipulation and/or mutilation of corpses had complex connotations, and my analysis draws upon Mikhail Bakhtin's concept of *carnival* in order to elucidate the significance and implications of such transgressive behaviour. Indicating both the similarities and the differences between Vietnam and prior combat situations with regard to the treatment of the bodies of 'enemy' dead, I refer to the work of Lifton,

Easthope and Theweleit to suggest that such behaviours may in fact represent an (unconscious, and ultimately misguided) attempt on the part of the US soldier to express and/or negotiate the uncomfortable paradoxes pertaining to bodies in Vietnam.

As my analysis demonstrates, the interpretation of corporeal damage was fraught with ambiguity within this context. Consequently, I argue, the American military sought to manage the 'reading' of the bodies of their own dead and wounded both in-country and following their return to the US. References to *Born on the Fourth of July* detail the manner in which paraplegic veteran Ron Kovic found his authority over his irreparably damaged body contested, as others sought to manipulate the symbolic significance of his injuries for their own ends. It is my contention that Kovic's narrative itself enacts a form of 'return of the repressed' through its expression of the physical reality and implications of the incurable injuries that resulted from combat in Vietnam, aspects evaded/suppressed within officially-sanctioned discourses. However, the subversive potential of Kovic's deliberate display of his own damaged body and articulation of his experiences is, I suggest, tempered by his reactionary notions of masculinity and his interpretation of his bodily paralysis in terms of failure, loss and catastrophe.

In my concluding chapter, I turn my attention to the process of narrativisation itself, arguing that veterans' focus upon the body in the stories that they write or tell about the in-country experience affects the very form of these representations. The notion of recovery— both as

retrieval and as recuperation-- is of much importance to my discussion here, as I show how veterans' discursive salvaging and articulation of their in-country encounters with irreparably wounded bodies may function as a means for them to deal with the disturbing impact of these experiences. With reference to Arthur W. Frank's notion of the 'wounded storyteller', I outline the ways in which Kovic's contingent embodiment defines the style and structure of his narrative rendering of the experience of injury and its aftermath.<sup>20</sup> Having already described how Western medical thought and practice assumes governance over the bodies of its patients in my third chapter, I suggest here that Kovic's narrativisation of his experience serves as a means for him to recover his own voice. Moreover, I argue, *Born on the Fourth of July* discusses in detail the fragile nature of human embodiment, an issue generally suppressed within US culture.

As my previous chapters illustrated, a range of veterans emphasise the ungrounding impact of encountering irreparable bodily wounding. I argue here that the *traumatic* effect of such encounters is due to the fact that they provoke in the survivor a realisation of his/her own corporeal vulnerability. Referring again to Kalli Tal's work and to the theories of Judith Lewis Herman, I outline certain key aspects of traumatic experience, and the type of memory that it provokes, in order to highlight the problems faced by veterans who seek to represent adequately the in-country experience and its aftermath.<sup>21</sup> As my analysis demonstrates, veterans attempting to express previously hidden truths concerning bodily wounding in their narratives repeatedly

foreground their difficulty in doing so, and hence, in many cases, the stories that they write or tell overtly reflect upon issues connected with representation. I focus in particular here upon the work of Tim O'Brien and, citing theorist David Aberbach,<sup>22</sup> highlight the recuperative potential of the imagination in the depiction of the Vietnam experience and its consequences. Considering O'Brien's contention that 'Stories can save us', I suggest that his deliberate cultivation of the medium of storytelling serves as a means for him not only to face up to, and begin to deal with, the traumatic impact of his service in Vietnam, but also to express (and to negotiate) the difficulties faced by Western culture (and particularly American society) in acknowledging and accepting bodily vulnerability and mortality.

As my five chapters demonstrate, bodies and issues concerning embodiment form the epicentre of veterans' narrative renderings of the in-country experience and its consequences. In the Afterword to my study, I suggest that this overriding concern with bodies is not restricted to the versions of events provided by those who actually served in the war, but is, in fact, a crucial factor in the ongoing conceptualisation and representation of the American experience in Vietnam within US culture more generally.

The propensity of many American veterans to portray the US soldier as a victim in their representations of service in-country and its aftermath has been an ongoing issue of concern for me in the research and writing of this study. Several commentators draw our attention to the fact that the situation was actually much more complex than this for,

as Kalí Tal remarks, 'The soldier in combat is both victim and victimizer'.<sup>23</sup> While I have attempted here to maintain a self-conscious and critical stance towards veterans' assuming of the mantle of victimhood, the reader may feel that a similar bias has, on occasion, seeped into my own argument, particularly in the later chapters, where I consider veterans as trauma survivors. Contending with this 'difficult terrain' has not been an easy task. I have, however, been much encouraged by the remarks made by commentator Lloyd B. Lewis in his own study *The Tainted War: Culture and Identity in Vietnam War Narratives* (1985): '[. . .] sociological understanding implies neither apologetic nor condemnation. If the argument here suggests sympathy for the soldiers, it is only to *do justice to*, not *pass judgement upon*, them.'<sup>24</sup>

## CHAPTER 1

### Building The Military Body<sup>1</sup>

'To understand what happens to the GI among the mine fields of My Lai, you must know something about what happens in America [. . .] You must understand a thing called basic training'.

Tim O'Brien *If I Die in a Combat Zone*<sup>2</sup>

'Training, like the assembly of a machine, is the search for, the acquisition of, an efficiency. Here it is a human efficiency'.

Marcel Mauss 'The Notion of Body Techniques'<sup>3</sup>

In his autobiographical narrative *Born on the Fourth of July* (1976), disabled Vietnam veteran Ron Kovic vividly recalls the visit of representatives from the Marine Corps to his High School. The immaculate appearance and sober demeanour of the Marines make a strong impression upon the teenager. Not only do these soldiers appear superhuman-- 'almost like statues and not like real men at all'-- the speech that they give to their assembled audience asserts the transformative power of military training thus: 'They told us that day that the Marine Corps built men-- body, mind, and spirit'.<sup>4</sup> In this chapter I will be discussing the initial preparation<sup>5</sup> of US combat troops and support personnel prior to their participation in the Vietnam War.<sup>6</sup> Using the descriptions of this training process provided by Vietnam veterans and others, the analysis will elucidate the manner in which the body of the recruit acts as the focal point in the process of 'becoming' a soldier.<sup>7</sup>

Michel Foucault has highlighted the important changes that took place in the conception of the soldier between the early-seventeenth and the late-eighteenth century. He suggests that in the former historical period a man's soldierly ability was dependent upon his possession of certain innate characteristics, and that his body acted as an index of these traits to the observer. By the late-eighteenth century, however, the soldier is perceived as 'something that can be made' through a process of military training and the 'inapt' body of the recruit is seen to act as the 'formless clay' from which the ideal soldier can be fashioned.<sup>8</sup> In these circumstances, the body is invested with a dual significance for it is perceived both as the outward sign that necessary changes have occurred, and also as the vehicle for effecting the desired transformation. It will become increasingly evident that, in keeping with Foucault's theory, the process of military training in this context is conceptualised-- both by the American military and by the recruits themselves-- in terms of a progression from a disordered body (the body of the recruit) to a disciplined body (the body of the soldier).<sup>9</sup> As my analysis in this chapter will detail, the US military establishment employed a range of tactics to transform recruits into soldiers. Such methods can be summarised as follows: the removal of the recruit's clothing and other markers of civilian identity; the mapping of spaces within the training environment; the enforcing of a regimen of synchronised physical exercise; the use of sporadic physical

'punishment' and the promotion of an ethic of self-discipline and bodily control.<sup>10</sup>

In his brief but influential essay 'From Boot Camp to My Lai' (1971), Peter Bourne contends that the basic training of US recruits for combat in Vietnam was composed of two distinct parts: an initial 'stripping' phase which is followed by a 'learning' phase. 'During the first four weeks of training', Bourne writes, 'the recruit is subjected to a systematic stripping process in which many elements of his civilian identity and self-image are deliberately denuded from him'. The means used by the military to achieve this are outlined by Bourne as follows:

The early weeks of training are characterized by physical and verbal abuse, humiliation, and a constant discounting and discrediting of everything in which the recruit believes and everything which serves to characterize him as an individual. His head is shaved, his ability to think independently is scorned, and every moment of his day is minutely programmed and scheduled. Even his customary language pattern must be renounced.<sup>11</sup>

As a psychiatrist primarily interested in making connections between basic training and the occurrence of battlefield atrocities, Bourne discusses the 'stripping process' in terms of a psychological dismantling, an enforced erasure of many of the recruit's beliefs and ideas. While Bourne implies that the body of the recruit may have a role to play in this transformation-- thus referring above to the shaving of heads and to the use of physical punishment-- this is an issue yet to be explored fully. It is my contention that the 'psychological stripping' that takes place in basic training is induced primarily via the treatment



of the bodies of military recruits, beginning with their ritualistic exposure as part of a comprehensive physical stripping exercise.

In *Born on the Fourth of July*, Ron Kovic describes his experience of basic training, recounting the degrading 'stripping' procedure to which he was subjected. These events occur as follows. On the first day of training, Kovic and his fellow recruits are herded into a large hangar where they are ordered to remove their clothing and other accessories en masse. These items are then packed up in a numbered box to be shipped home. After hurriedly undressing, the recruits are taken to have their heads shaved and are then crowded into hot showers. Under directions from the drill instructor they must then dress in military-issue clothing. In accordance with Bourne's theoretical framework, the procedure is carried out in a systematic and regulated fashion. During these events the men are harassed and abused by the military personnel in authority.<sup>12</sup>

Looking at the descriptions of this stripping procedure provided by Kovic and others, parallels emerge between the treatment of military recruits and the ritualistic degradation of the bodies of inmates of Nazi concentration camps, particularly with regard to the ways in which the bodies of those in both subject groups acted as the focus of attention for those in authority. It is highly significant that many of the inmates of the concentration camps had to endure brutal stripping procedures (practically identical, in many cases, to that described above) upon their arrival at the various camps<sup>13</sup>. In seeking to discover the

purposes and effects of the physical stripping exercise and allied tactics in the preparation of US personnel for deployment to Vietnam, I have thus found it helpful to refer to accounts of life in the concentration camps provided by Holocaust survivors and others.

The stripping procedure acted as a means to disorientate profoundly those subjected to it. In a chapter on the nature of military training through the ages, within his study *Firing Line* (1986), Richard Holmes alerts us to the purpose of the removal of facial hair and the shaving of recruits' heads at the outset of the training process. 'Firstly', he states, 'hairdressing produces a uniformity of appearance which submerges the recruit's individual identity'. In his description of such events, Black veteran David Parks, whom Holmes quotes, draws our attention to the mass of shorn hair 'all mixed up on the floor together, white hair, Spanish hair and soul hair-- all going the same route'. Thus, as Holmes has noted, not only does the stripping process serve to erase the men's individual distinguishing features, it also functions to submerge/dissolve markers of racial and cultural identity.<sup>14</sup>

In addition to this, Holmes suggests, 'a radical transformation of appearance helps to impress upon the recruit his change of status'.<sup>15</sup> Indeed, veterans have described the impact of the physical stripping procedure in terms of its inauguration of a larger process of total transformation. To quote one Vietnam veteran:

They strip you, first your hair. I never saw myself bald before. Not just your goatee, but your hair [. . .] I *always* had a moustache. All of a sudden, no hair on my lip, no hair on my chin, no hair on my head. Guys I

had been talking to not an hour before [. . .] I didn't recognise no more [. . .] It was weird how different people look without their hair. *That's the first step.*<sup>16</sup>

A profound sense of estrangement is evident here. As a result of the physical stripping procedure, the recruits are no longer able to identify each other and can barely recognise themselves. A parallel can be drawn here with the experiences of former concentration camp inmates such as Ladislaus Ervin-Deutsch, who has written of the disorientation that such a stripping procedure engenders. Having had their hair and clothing removed upon arrival at the camp, Ervin-Deutsch and the other members of his group are ordered to dress in identical uniforms. Again, a sense of alienation predominates, as individuals are unable to recognise old friends and even their own family members:

We received tattered underwear, blue and white striped prisoners' clothing made of linen and similarly striped round caps. You could not recognise people. It took some minutes before I found my brother Gabriel and my friend Paul Engel, with whom I had gone to high school for eight years. And they were standing right next to me!<sup>17</sup>

It is significant that both concentration camp inmates and military recruits were forced to dress in ill-fitting uniforms as part of the induction procedures to which they were subjected. This acted as another form of humiliation and discomfort, another means to make them feel distanced from their past lives, to render their sense of identity problematic and also to estrange them from their fellow group members. There were, however, additional symbolic implications in this for the military recruit. The recruits were about to embark upon a

period of rigorous physical (and psychological) training which would both reshape their physiques and transform their attitude towards their bodies. At this point in the training process, the majority of the men did not have the physique nor the self-discipline and physical endurance required, they did not conform to the prototype of the ideal soldier. It is thus symbolically appropriate that the clothes that they had to wear during this transitional phase were ill-fitting and uncomfortable.

In order to increase the disorientation of those subjected to the stripping process, it was essential that the procedure be carried out in such a way as not to allow them the opportunity to reflect upon or to adjust to their new situation. Camp guards and drill instructors prevented the men from resting or from taking a few moments to gather their thoughts. Max Mannheimer, a survivor of several concentration camps, vividly recounts the sense of urgency that characterised the stripping procedure: 'Suddenly an iron door is thrown open. Leads to another room. Prisoners with special functions roar: Get moving! Faster! [. . .] seems to be the camp idiom. With blows from cudgels we are driven into an ice cold room under showers'.<sup>18</sup> Vietnam veterans such as John Ketwig and Ron Kovic also emphasise the constant movement of the group of recruits during their initiation into boot camp. Ketwig recalls being 'hustled through pale green room after pale green room, accompanied by the ranting and raving DIs', having to 'Run from station to station, balancing a mountain of gear'.<sup>19</sup> Ron Kovic writes of being 'swept along', as on the conveyor belt of an assembly line, as the

freshly-shaven recruits, now 'strange looking', are 'Shoved and pushed' along to the showers. His sense of estrangement and disorientation evident through his use of third-person narration, a bewildered Kovic wonders 'Where were they going? [. . .] What were they becoming?'<sup>20</sup> This expression of confusion, of panic and even of crisis echoes the testimonies of camp survivors subjected to similar brutal treatment:

We crossed a ditch on a board and stood at the entrance to a building. The entrance was not very wide, our rows of five abreast could not get through without jostling. SS-soldiers and overseers kept guard at the wide-open gates, and, with their truncheons and riding-whips, drove the thronging people inside, some of whom lost their footing or their balance. The blows did not even appear to be aimed at keeping order. They merely increased the crowding and breaking up of the rows and they caused confusion, horror and helplessness. "What is happening? What will become of us?"<sup>21</sup>

Ervin-Deutsch suggests that this disorientation of the camp inmates was intentional, that the confusion and fear engendered in them was an essential part, rather than a by-product, of the conditioning process:

Perhaps it was precisely this helplessness with all the question marks that was the purpose of this inhuman treatment. Knocking down the people's self-esteem with a steam-roller, accustoming them to this nightmare atmosphere, cutting off all opportunities from the beginning, breaking their will, nipping any resistance in the bud.<sup>22</sup>

Likewise, so it would seem, for the military recruit. Kali Tal's theories regarding the nature of traumatic experience in general, and her comments on the basic training process in particular, are of much help to the discussion here. In her in-depth analysis of various forms of

'survivor narratives', *Worlds of Hurt: Reading the Literatures of Trauma* (1996), Tal argues that a key facet of trauma is its transformative effect. The trauma survivor, Tal argues, 'can never entirely return to a state of previous innocence'.<sup>23</sup> In keeping with this notion, the writings of both Vietnam veterans and Holocaust survivors frequently describe the stripping process in terms of a watershed or turning point:

Cutting off our hair, removing our clothing, the arbitrarily distributed, crumpled prisoner's outfit that was tight to bursting point or hung loosely like a sack, the rudeness, the rubber truncheons- all this had created an insurmountable *abyss* between our past and present in just a few hours.<sup>24</sup>

According to Tal's line of argument, crucial to an understanding of the function and the effects of the basic training process is a realisation that the shock experienced by the military recruit is not merely incidental but its central aspect, its *modus operandi* in fact. Basic training, she states, 'is designed to traumatize the recruit', for if the key aspect of trauma is its transformative effect, then the systematic inducing of psychological distress in recruits may act as a means to bring about their metamorphosis from civilians into soldiers.<sup>25</sup> It is my contention that the military personnel in charge of the training procedure attempt to engender this anxiety/trauma in the recruit primarily by treating his body in particular ways, initially through the physical stripping and shaving routine, and later through the use of other methods such as physical punishment.

As James R. Ebert has stated, 'The initial phases of basic training seemed to resemble nothing more than pointless harassment

and mindless physical stress. But there was method to the madness'.<sup>26</sup>

In keeping with this notion, veterans and others have suggested that the abusive treatment endured by military recruits in preparation for Vietnam was carried out in a systematic fashion, as a means to achieve a pre-established goal. To assert that recruits were subjected to what I will term 'strategic abuse' is not to imply that spontaneous acts of brutality did not occur, but rather to suggest that the various forms of abuse inflicted conformed to a pattern, and that all aspects of ill-treatment worked in conjunction to achieve specific objectives. In his narrative *A Rumor of War* (1977), Philip Caputo, a former Officer in the Marine Corps, has written of the frequency of the physical and psychological abuse that he and his fellow recruits endured as they were 'shouted at, kicked, humiliated and harassed constantly' during the training process, while the protagonist-narrator of Gustav Hasford's Vietnam War narrative, *The Short-Timers* (1979), describes the physical abuse suffered by the recruits as an organised, even ritualised, event:

Beatings [. . .] are a routine element of life on Parris Island [. . .] Gunnery Sergeant Gerheim and his three junior drill instructors administer brutal beatings to faces, chests, stomachs, and backs. With fists. Or boots- they kick us in the ass, the kidneys, the ribs, any part of our bodies upon which a black and purple bruise won't show.<sup>27</sup>

In his description of the 'stripping stage' of the training process, Peter Bourne implied that verbal and physical abuse play a central role in the psychological stripping of recruits that takes place during the

initial stage of basic training. While I certainly agree with Bourne that the physical abuse of recruits does further 'strip' them psychologically, I also intend to show that the functions and effects of the use of physical punishment/violence in this context are more varied and complex than this. A brief discussion of several key distinctions between the use of physical abuse within concentration camps and its use in the military setting under discussion will enable me to elucidate my contentions in this respect.

Several important parallels have already emerged with regard to the treatment of concentration camp prisoners and the methods used by the US military to prepare men for combat in Vietnam. Both Holocaust survivors and Vietnam veterans, the analysis has suggested, expressed similar feelings of anxiety and disorientation as a result of the physical stripping procedure. For both subject groups these events frequently resulted in the individual's sense that he no longer had any control over his own physical appearance and, by extension, that he no longer 'owned' his own body. The descriptions of the violence perpetrated by those in authority during the basic training process again seem to echo the testimonies of former concentration camp inmates with regard to their brutal treatment at the hands of camp guards and others. Indeed, several veterans have used concentration camps as reference points both implicitly and explicitly when discussing or narrativising their experiences of basic training, in an attempt to emphasise both the brutality of the training process and also the



feelings of terror and helplessness that this could provoke. In Tim O'Brien's autobiographical narrative *If I Die in a Combat Zone*, for example, the author writes of regularly experiencing 'The same hopeless feeling that overwhelmed inmates of Treblinka' during his basic training at Fort Lewis.<sup>28</sup> However, while there certainly are parallels between the use of violence in concentration camps and that found within the military training environment, there are clearly crucial distinctions between the two.

In 'Destroying the Innocent with a Clear Conscience: A Sociopsychology of the Holocaust' (1980), John P. Sabini and Maury Silver write of the purposes and effects of the 'perpetual degradation' of concentration camp inmates. In order for the guards to be able to treat the camp inmates in such a brutal manner, the authors state, 'The captives must somehow not only be labelled as inferior but also must be made to appear that way'. It was not enough, they argue, for groups such as Jews and Gypsies to be presented as subhuman within Nazi propaganda, such individuals somehow had to be made to conform to this image in actuality. Referring to the theories of Des Pres and Goffman, Sabini and Silver highlight the ways in which the filthy conditions and the starvation that camp inmates were forced to endure served as a means to 'validate' their further brutal treatment in the eyes of their captors. The emaciated, filthy and wounded bodies of camp inmates became the focal point for the operation of a self-perpetuating circular logic, seeming to 'prove' the degeneracy/genetic inferiority of

these individuals and to bolster notions of Germanic racial superiority.<sup>29</sup> For the concentration camp inmate the stripping process was continuous, its practitioners intended the literal destruction, rather than the symbolic rebirth, of their subjects. Within the basic training process, as Robert Jay Lifton (1974) has stated, it is the recruit's identity as a civilian which is 'eradicated', whereas the intended function of many of the concentration camps was the destruction of the inmates themselves.<sup>30</sup> In this manner the Nazis and their agents within the concentration camps used physical violence as a tool in the ongoing attempt to break the spirits of the camp inmates, to push them beyond the limits of their endurance and to degrade them totally.

While, as Bourne has indicated, physical abuse within the military context functioned as a means to 'strip' or degrade the recruit, as Bourne himself points out this degradation was only temporary. Furthermore, it could be suggested, it was also only partial. Unlike those in authority in the concentration camps, the US military's ultimate purpose in the brutal treatment of recruits was not to crush these men's spirits entirely but rather to reinforce them. 'Instead of growing weaker through the long days I felt myself taking on strength', writes veteran Tobias Wolff of his basic training with the US Army.<sup>31</sup> Elsewhere Philip Caputo states:

The mental and physical abuse had several objectives. They were calculated first to eliminate the weak [. . .] But such abuse was also designed to destroy each man's sense of self-worth, to make him feel worthless until he proved himself equal to the Corps' exacting standards. And we worked hard to prove that,

submitted to all sorts of indignities just to demonstrate that we could take it.<sup>32</sup>

Several important issues are at stake here. Caputo suggests that the abuse received during the early stages of training strips away the recruit's dignity and sense of self *as a means to convince him of the need for his own transformation*. Furthermore, Caputo implies that the strategic violence that the military personnel inflict upon the recruit's body motivates him to play an active rather than a passive role in his transformation from civilian into soldier. This would seem to challenge the assumption implicit in Foucault's comments, quoted earlier, that the body of the recruit (the 'formless clay'), and indeed the recruit himself, becomes merely a *tabula rasa* upon which the will of the military institution is inscribed. While the violence committed upon the recruit by his superiors serves to encourage him, as Peter Bourne suggests, to 'accept his impotence in the face of military discipline', Caputo and others (particularly those being prepared for duty in the Marine Corps) have illustrated the ways in which instances of physical abuse also serve to awaken the recruits' aggressive tendencies.<sup>33</sup> Vietnam veteran R. Wayne Eisenhart, writing of his experience of basic training in the Marine Corps, relates that recruits were 'brutalized, frustrated, and cajoled to a flash point of high tension' by their instructors and that as a result the men were 'often stunned by the depths of violence erupting from within themselves'. He outlines an incident in which, during hand-to-hand combat training, he violently attacks his adversary, choking him into submission while biting and gashing him

on the face. While Eisenhart is horrified by his own actions, he is highly praised by his instructor.<sup>34</sup>

Bourne's division of the training process into two mutually exclusive stages, 'stripping' and 'learning', and his relegation of physical punishment to the former category, could be somewhat reductive. It can be argued that the physical abuse practised by many drill instructors and others within the basic training context had an 'educational' effect on military recruits. That is to say, it taught them to think about and to utilise their bodies in specific ways. Veterans and others frequently foreground the ways in which the violence wrought upon the bodies of recruits, in combination with a rigorous regimen of physical exercise, taught them to extend the limits of their physical endurance:

Now, when Sergeant Gerheim and his junior drill instructors stomp us we tell them that we love it and to do it some more. When Sergeant Gerheim commands: "Okay, ladies, give me fifty squat-thrusts. And some side-straddle hops. Many, many of them," we laugh and then do them.<sup>35</sup>

Elsewhere another former Marine, reflecting upon his experience of basic training, comments on how the violence he suffered at the hands of his military superiors served several purposes:

I can see how subtle and how insidious ... the changes are. Because as determined as we were not to change, we certainly were changed. ... Unless you had this pressure on you ... somebody beating you ...well, it was good in a way [in that] you found you were capable of doing much more than you've ever anticipated you could do ... So, you know, this was a valuable thing ... [And it] carried through into when we were functioning later on ... in Vietnam.<sup>36</sup>

Such comments suggest that the physical violence inflicted upon recruits was a brutal but necessary part of their preparation for combat in Vietnam. This reasoning is frequently echoed in the remarks made by military personnel to justify the harsh nature of the training process. Thus a drill sergeant quoted in Holmes' *Firing Line* argues that, in order to endure the stress of battle, "you have got to have harassment" during training. While Holmes himself admits that 'there is a toughness about basic training that can sometimes become brutality', he sees this as necessary for the forming of bonds between the group members, highlighting 'a direct link between the harshness of basic training and the cohesiveness of the group which emerges from it'.<sup>37</sup> Nevertheless, the abuse of trainees was an ongoing topic of concern during this period, both for those within and those outside the military institution. For example, in 1968, as Ebert has noted, several units at Fort Lewis took part in a programme intended to curtail the physical abuse of recruits. Moreover, as Faris points out, the later transition to an all-volunteer army (1971-1973) involved the issuing of directives attempting to eradicate drill instructors' ridicule and degradation of the trainees. These later restrictions, however, were widely ignored, and this was, Faris has suggested, due to the belief that such degradation was an essential element within the training process.<sup>38</sup>

Veterans themselves are divided as to whether the treatment they received was excessively abusive. Indeed, experiences of training vary both with respect to the amount of physical 'punishment' inflicted

and with regard to the recruits' attitude towards this violence. Ebert reports that among the veterans he interviewed, gross abuses occurred only rarely and that only a small minority of those he spoke to described their training as unreasonably harsh.<sup>39</sup> Others such as R. Wayne Eisenhart, however, oppose this view, arguing that basic training exacted 'a high toll in suffering' and 'created intense emotional conflicts' for many of those who experienced it.<sup>40</sup> The physical and psychological abuse inflicted upon recruits as part of the basic training process, in keeping with Tal's 'trauma as transformation' theory, serves to further facilitate their metamorphosis into soldiers. The psychological distress that this may induce, however, can prove too great for some. Certainly several of the narratives produced by veterans make reference to individuals who have died or committed suicide as a result of the physical and/or psychological pressures of training.<sup>41</sup>

Thus far the analysis has considered the manner in which the psychological 'stripping' of the recruit is induced via the undressing/exposure of his body, and has outlined the functions of physical abuse in the early stages of the basic training process. I have also suggested that while military training is frequently described in terms of an enforced regimen to which the (bodies of) recruits are subjected, the recruits also have a part to play in their own metamorphosis into soldiers. The latter part of the analysis will consider in more depth the notion that the *militarised* body that is the

intended end product of training is disciplined, to varying degrees, both from within and without, examining the ways in which the adoption of an ethic of self-discipline is enforced within the training process. As the analysis progresses there will be an increasing focus upon the fact that the transformation from civilian to soldier is conceptualised in terms of a progression from a disordered body (the body of the recruit) to a disciplined body (the body of the soldier). The closing sections of the chapter will outline the physical characteristics and the concept of embodiment pertaining to the soldier-body, drawing to the fore some of the implications of such qualities and attitudes for individuals thus transformed. As a means to explore these notions further, I want to turn my attention now to the manner in which the mapping of the training environment and the ordered positioning of the bodies of recruits within this space further facilitate the conversion of the recruit into the soldier.

Immediately upon arrival at boot camp, the recruit must conform to/confine himself within a pre-existing rubric, which dictates the positioning of his body. Having stepped off the bus at the training centre, the recruits in Richard Currey's narrative, *Fatal Light* (1988), are ordered to stand upon footprints 'painted on the asphalt at regular intervals'.<sup>42</sup> In like fashion, an ex-Marine quoted in Mark Baker's *Nam* recalls the first command that the recruits receive as their bus pulls into the boot camp and a Marine officer climbs onboard announcing: "All right, you'll grab your bag. You'll get off the bus. You'll fall into the

yellow footprints painted on the pavement".<sup>43</sup> The mapping of the training environment and the focus upon the ordered positioning of the bodies of recruits within this space are recurrent features of the preparation of US troops for combat in Vietnam. As they undergo the physical stripping procedure it is commonplace for recruits to be placed in an ordered formation by the military personnel in charge of the exercise. Thus in *Fatal Light*, Currey describes having to position his body in a designated area during this procedure: 'We were marched into a long armory, Drill Hall 31: white squares on blue-fleck linoleum. I was assigned a square'. Here the space is literally partitioned as the grid marked on the floor of the Drill Hall designates the configuration that the men must adopt.<sup>44</sup>

On one level, this mapping of space serves to establish the rigid power hierarchy within the boot camp, highlighting the fact that the recruits, unable to adopt positions of their own choosing with regard to this space, are powerless within it. In this manner such exercises fulfil another of the key functions of basic training, which is, as Bourne has indicated, to engender in the recruit both an awareness and an acceptance of military discipline.<sup>45</sup> There are also, however, additional benefits for the military institution in the use of these procedures in this context. Analysis with reference to examples of the operation of drill exercises will serve as evidence that there were features specific to the combat in Vietnam that necessitated the recruit's development of a heightened sense of self-consciousness with regard to his own body.



Philip Caputo's recollections of the early part of his military training at Officer Candidate School (which he describes as 'roughly the equivalent of enlisted boot camp'), focus upon the formation exercises that were a key element of recruit induction:

What I recall most vividly is close-order drill: the hours we spent marching in a sun so hot it turned the asphalt field into a viscous mass that stuck to our boots; the endless hours of being driven and scourged by McClellan's voice- relentless, compelling obedience, a voice that embedded itself in our minds until we could not walk anywhere without hearing it, counting a rhythmic cadence.<sup>46</sup>

Here the men must not only perform the required actions exactly, moving particular parts of their bodies in specific ways, but must do so synchronically with other group members. Beyond simply having to be aware of, and keep in step with, the movements of others, each recruit must also maintain a measured distance or 'interval' between himself and his fellow marchers. The Drill Instructor's intonation of 'Thirty- inches- back- to- breast- forty- inches- shoulder- to- shoulder' alerts the men to the specificity of the prescribed distance between group members when marching, and demands their continual vigilance to ensure that the required gap is maintained.<sup>47</sup>

The manner in which this war was fought, both in terms of the type and nature of the weaponry used and in terms of the way that combat troops were deployed, made it necessary for the US soldier to learn to conduct his body in particular ways. This was a war fought primarily by ground troops (with aerial back up), a war where success in combat was judged by body counts and kill ratios, a war with no

recognisable 'front', where contact with the enemy was sporadic and often unexpected.<sup>48</sup> For the infantryman in Vietnam, the preservation of a specific distance between himself and his fellow soldiers when on patrol was essential for his own self-preservation. The use of explosive mines and other booby traps by the VC and other hostile forces was widespread, particularly in the later years of the conflict. By keeping a standardised gap between themselves and others, soldiers hoped to minimise the injuries caused should any individual in the platoon inadvertently detonate one of these devices. In these and other situations, the positioning of the body within the combat zone was critical-- it could be a life-or-death matter in many cases. For this reason it was necessary for the recruit's view of his own body to be transformed via the process of basic training. He could no longer be allowed to take his embodiment for granted, he had to develop an awareness of his own body, often to the extent that he regarded 'it' as a form of object, for he needed to become conscious of and attentive to the spaces that 'it' occupied and the movements that 'it' performed. This heightened awareness of the body was engendered, as has been suggested, through the repeated performance of synchronised physical exercises such as drill procedures, and was enhanced further through the formulation of certain 'rules' regarding bodily conduct within the combat zone. The Marine captain in charge of preparing John Parrish and his fellow recruits for their duties as doctors in Vietnam outlines these dictates as follows:

Never stand in groups or gather too closely together when in open country. One incoming round could get you all! On field manoeuvres, don't give or return salutes, or wear any rank insignia, because snipers can use these signs as cues to select out officers for assassination. Immediately 'hit the deck' when any loud, unexpected noise occurs. [. . .] An upright, running body is more likely to be struck by flying shrapnel than a prone body. Shrapnel goes up and out. Sleep as near the ground as possible. Sleep under the ground if possible.

The recruits' internalisation of these directives, it is suggested, further facilitates the aforementioned transformation that occurs through basic training, thus: "Rules for responses that become habits make soldiers".<sup>49</sup>

Within the basic training process, then, attention is focused upon reshaping/redefining the recruit's attitude towards his own embodiment in order that his life be preserved and the US war effort maintained. The recruit is encouraged to develop a heightened perception of his own physicality to the point of disengagement with his body, for the soldier's consciousness must operate 'outside' of his body in order to gain a maximum of physical control. Arthur W. Frank has argued that the cultivation of this 'attitude of dissociation' on the part of the military recruit is an essential aspect of the training process. Such disengagement, he suggests, is characterised by one's '[ceasing] to feel the body's pain or hunger as one's own'. Narrative accounts provided by US survivors of combat in Vietnam refer frequently to the sense of dissociation that results from having to 'master' one's own body and physical responses in order to endure combat conditions.<sup>50</sup>

Within basic training, drill instructors and others frequently highlight the need for recruits to develop endurance above all else—physical and mental abuse; as discussed earlier, act as key tactics in promoting this. The recruits whose experience of basic training is described in Hasford's *The Short-Timers* are taught that 'Marines run; they double-time. Or, if the distance to be covered is great, Marines hump, one foot after the other, one step at a time, for as long as necessary'. The recruits' internalisation of this ideology of endurance is evident later in their attitudes and behaviour in-country. On a squad patrol through the jungle 'Joker', Hasford's narrator, relates:

My body is aching with all the thousand natural shocks that flesh is heir to after every fiber [sic] of every muscle is begging you to stop but you choose to overrule such objections by a force of will stronger than muscle, bullying your body into taking one more step, one more step, just one more step.<sup>51</sup>

As I suggested earlier, while the initial attempt to maximise the recruit's physical endurance is frequently presented as a project of mastery on the part of the military institution, the motivation for this physical discipline is increasingly shifted to the recruit himself as training progresses.<sup>52</sup> For the soldier in combat, the struggle for control of his physical responses takes place on an individual (internal?) level. That is to say, it is not the institution but the individual who must now 'overrule' his own body if he is to survive the conditions of combat. In Hasford's *The Short-Timers*, Joker expresses the effects of this dissociation through the dry, gallows humour, which gained him his nickname. In the midst of a firefight (gun battle) he relates: 'I send

guard-mail directives to my personal Tactical Area of Responsibility, which extends to the perimeters of my skin. Dear Feet, tiptoe through the tulips. Balls, hang in there. Legs, don't do any John Waynes'. While this humour may function, at times, to divert combat stress for the soldier, such instances serve to heighten the reader's awareness that this mind/body dissociation could well have problematic psychological implications for the individual thus divided.<sup>53</sup>

As my analysis has shown, the process of training for combat in Vietnam compelled recruits to adopt a high level of physical self-discipline. This facilitated the development of a particular attitude on the part of these individuals towards their own embodiment. The similarities noted by Mauss, Foucault and others between training and industrial production have much to offer with regard to this area of analysis. 'Training', Mauss states, 'like the assembly of a machine, is the search for, the acquisition of, an efficiency'.<sup>54</sup> To demand that one's body behave in an 'efficient' manner is to render 'it' machine-like in itself and such a conception of embodiment is in evidence in the narratives provided by the US survivors of combat in Vietnam.<sup>55</sup> While the implications of the notion of the body of the soldier as a machine will be picked up again later in my analysis, I will, for the moment, turn my attention to two paradoxes or points of tension connected with this issue. The first of these is the tension between the extent to which training enables the recruit to gain greater control of his own body, and

the degree to which, through training, his body becomes controlled by the military institution.

Many veterans equate the basic training experience (particularly in its early stages) with a loss or relinquishing of control, and several have described this in terms of being consumed by/absorbed within the institutional machine. The following extended example, quoted by Susan Jeffords from John Clark Pratt's *Vietnam Voices: Perspectives on the War Years 1941-1982*, portrays basic training as an industrial process and makes explicit the manner in which the soldier becomes disempowered and dehumanised by the military institution:

Like any other machine, the green machine [the Army] is impersonal to your life and death. You are only another piece of equipment, like a tank or the M-16 you carry, and your loss would be counted and calculated only in those terms. The machine would not care that a man had died, only that another part of its inventory had been lost and would require replacement, like the destroyed tank. And like the totaled tank, the Army would simply put in another order at another factory- a boot camp, where your replacement was being tooled and trained on a different kind of assembly line.<sup>58</sup>

Within the process of basic training itself, as described by US combat veterans, it is not unusual for members of the military institution to lay claim to the ownership/control of the body of the recruit in no uncertain terms. Thus Sergeant Gerheim tells the assembled recruits in *The Short-Timers* "You can give your heart to Jesus but your ass belongs to the Corps", while Ron Kovic's drill instructor in *Born on the Fourth of July* proclaims "Your souls today may belong to God, but your

asses belong to the United States Marine Corps!"<sup>57</sup> While the instances quoted above might serve to suggest that the soldier is merely a passive pawn of the military institution, this is an oversimplified view of events for the recruit has a part to play in his own transformation into a soldier. The control which he has gained over his body through the training process, however, can often be compromised/complicated by the fact that the military institution claims him as another item within its inventory of combat resources.

The second point of tension that I want to identify concerns the notion that basic training acts as a bonding experience between fellow recruits. Lyon and Barbalet contend that particular aspects of the training process, such as route marches and drill procedures, serve to 'generate relevant feelings and emotions' which unite the members of the group performing these exercises into a 'collective body'. Certainly this notion that a group identity is established and maintained through 'engaging aspects of the individual body in a particular and direct manner' does seem to be supported by the testimonies of former recruits.<sup>58</sup> Philip Caputo, for example, writes of the sense of comradeship between himself and his fellow recruits as a result of the training process: 'Like the marriage of cells in a body, each marine, each squad, platoon, and company was bonded to the other to form an entity with a life and spirit all its own, the battalion'. Elsewhere, however, Caputo's descriptions of the effects of synchronised physical exercise complicate/render problematic the notion that bonding is

occurring, for any sense of comradeship is compromised by the reduction of these individuals to virtual automatons:

The purpose of drill was to instill discipline and teamwork, two of the Corps' cardinal virtues. And by the third week, we had learned to obey orders instantly and in unison, without thinking. Each platoon had been transformed from a group of individuals into one thing: a machine of which we were merely parts.<sup>59</sup>

The attempt to turn recruits into what Parrish describes as 'an efficient killing machine' on the part of the military institution requires that they be rendered machine-like.<sup>60</sup> If the recruit has been stripped of his emotion and of his humanity in this way, then surely the degree to which synchronised physical exercise can operate to 'generate relevant feelings and emotions' is debatable. Arthur W. Frank highlights this paradox when he states:

The other-relatedness of the disciplined body is monadic, as the body becomes isolated in its own performance even if, as in military drill [. . .] the body performs among others. In drill unlike communal ritual, the disciplined body may be among others, but it is not with them.<sup>61</sup>

In the light of these contentions it might seem that the recruit being prepared for combat in Vietnam has little choice but to submit to the will of his military superiors during the training process. This is not strictly true, for the narratives written and the stories told by veterans provide much evidence that there were instances of transgression against the harsh military regime both within and outside America's boot camps at this time. Adam Yarmolinsky, highlighting the sharp increase in the levels of desertions and AWOLs during the Vietnam



War period (rising particularly sharply in the later years of the conflict), writes that 'the basic training of the recruit and sustained military discipline fail to achieve subordination to authority for increasing numbers of young men'.<sup>62</sup> The reasons behind these lapses in discipline, though varied and complex, are not of concern to me here. A thorough discussion of the rejection of military authority in this context, committed both by recruits during their preparation for duty in Vietnam, and also, in many cases, by soldiers in-country on active service, is, unfortunately, far beyond the scope of the present analytical project. A few remarks should be made, however, with regard to the ways in which the body of the recruit frequently becomes a focal point for such transgression.<sup>63</sup> John Ketwig, for example, in *And a Hard Rain Fell*, writes of his ongoing attempts to resist military discipline, albeit in a covert manner. Having arrived at boot camp and undergone the physical stripping procedure, Ketwig and the others in his group are allotted ten minutes to queue up, eat, and then reassemble in front of their piles of Army-issue clothing. Ketwig relates:

I managed to stall to the eleven-minute mark, which gave me a great deal of satisfaction. I vowed never to respect their limit on time to eat, and I never did. Even if it was just seconds, I took longer than the allotted time for every meal I ate at Fort Dix. It was my secret, my token individuality, and they were never able to strip it away.<sup>64</sup>

It is highly significant that Ketwig's rebellion, although more symbolic than actual, centres upon the act of eating. While the military seek to achieve the transformation from civilian to soldier via the body

of the recruit, the recruit who attempts to resist that enforced metamorphosis does so by reassuming a degree of control over his bodily activities. Likewise Tim O'Brien, appalled at the brutality of the training process and at the boorish behaviour of his fellow recruits, finds token ways to maintain his sense of identity and to keep a distance from 'the unconscious, genuflecting herd', and again these relate to his reassertion of control over his body:

I mouthed the words, shaping my lips and tongue just so, perfect deception. But no noise came out. The failure to bellow "Yes, Drill Sergeant!" was a fist in the bastard's face. A point for the soul. Standing in formation after chow, I learned to smoke. It was a private pleasure. I needed my lungs and my personal taste buds and my own hands and thoughts.<sup>65</sup>

While these covert acts of rebellion may provide the individual with an outlet for his feelings of resentment, allowing him to 'resist' military discipline in a symbolic and 'safe' fashion, such behaviour clearly does little to challenge the prevailing social order within the boot camp. Indeed, when the behaviour of Ketwig and his fellow recruits becomes more openly rebellious, the military personnel in command discipline them harshly. Thus when these recruits hack each other's hair off with razor blades in the middle of the night 'to cheat the army barbers of their fun', they are marched outside in their underwear 'to await some officer who would decide whether to court-martial us for "destruction of government property"'. In this manner those in authority attempt to reassert, in no uncertain terms, their ownership/control of the body of the recruit.<sup>66</sup>

The basic training process, as my analysis thus far has demonstrated, sought to transform civilians into soldiers by using the body of the recruit both as a vehicle for effecting this metamorphosis and also as an index that such a change has occurred. As various commentators have emphasised, the prototype for the body-- and the attitude towards embodiment-- that the military sought to create/promote within recruits gained force from the association of the soldier-identity with a kind of *hypermasculinity* within Western (specifically US) culture. Veteran authors who describe the training process frequently foreground the fact that the conversion of civilian into soldier is explicitly equated-- both by the military and within US culture more generally-- with 'becoming a man'. Consequently, as Lawson has suggested, 'The thirteen weeks of basic training served as a rite of passage, the first step toward initiation into manhood'.<sup>67</sup> Robert Jay Lifton has commented upon the military's 'constellation of super-maleness', which draws its force from the images and assumptions concerning 'manhood' disseminated within US culture<sup>68</sup>. Lifton draws our attention to the values and behaviours associated with this notion of 'super-masculinity' that the Marine Corps' training regime serves to engender in its recruits:

[. . .] extreme physical strength and endurance; channelled brutality and violence which one was expected first to take and later dish out; blind obedience to absolute authority and to the immortalizing entity of the Marines; and the ability to draw upon that obedient identification (whatever one's awareness of weakness) to sustain a connection with

and a feeling of hyperaggressive, numbed, omnipotent maleness.<sup>69</sup>

Within this context, masculinity is equated with physical endurance. 'This ability to prevail in the face of hardship, discomfort, fear, and pain, to be durable and resilient, is an index of masculinity', as critic Lloyd B. Lewis has stated.<sup>70</sup> In *A Rumor of War*, Caputo comments that 'The essence of the Marine Corps experience [. . .] was pain'. The version of masculinity prescribed by the Marine Corps (and also, although perhaps to a lesser extent, by the military generally) is a profoundly masochistic one, and thus he writes: 'There is an ineradicable streak of *machismo*, bordering on masochism, in all marines'.<sup>71</sup> 'Masochism, the pleasure of being hurt, perfectly combines with the narcissism of the masculine ego,' remarks Antony Easthope in his analysis of the myth of masculinity within popular culture. He explains: 'If I can hurt my body freely, by an act of my own will, then my mind is proved to be master of my body'.<sup>72</sup>

The military's attempt to inculcate such attitudes, as Lawson, Lifton and others have noted, gains force from the anxieties concerning emasculation, which proliferate within American culture. Such slogans as "The Marine Corps builds men", Lawson argues, 'trade openly on male fear-- the fear of emasculation, of becoming sissified, of losing one's manhood in front of other men, in short, the fear of becoming a woman'. Both Lawson and Lifton draw our attention to the use of misogynistic and homophobic verbal abuse by instructors during basic training as a means to engender in recruits the preferred 'masculine'

attitudes and behaviours. 'Humiliating new recruits in basic training by calling them "pussies", "pansies", "ladies", and "faggots" actualizes this fear of emasculation, bringing it immediately to the surface', writes Lawson.<sup>73</sup> Robert Jay Lifton's lengthy comments regarding the extent to which the 'coercive death-and-rebirth' process of basic training relies upon profoundly misogynistic rhetoric are worth quoting in full here:

As a number of former marines emphasized (and the same principle applies, if somewhat less extremely, in the basic training of the other services), confirmation as a Marine and a man were one and the same; one became both only upon successfully completing the training. Until then one was a "snuffly", "pussy", or "woman"- terms which, in that environment, had the connotation of homosexual, coward, female genitalia, or some undefined non-human female creature. This debased sexual imagery served the psychological purpose of providing an intolerable alternative, one which each man felt to exist within himself and feared all the more, to the fragile-brutal male-marine ideal. Thus the Marine Corps was referred to as "the crotch", while other branches of the military were called "the sister services": any woman mentioned was likely to be named "Susie Rottencrotch" [. . .] to graduate from contemptible unmanliness- to be confirmed as a Man-Marine sharing the power of the immortal group- one had to absorb an image of women as a lower element.<sup>74</sup>

'War does not create misogynists', Lawson has argued, and she draws our attention to the 'predisposition to misogyny' that is 'built into the very fabric of American culture'. Highlighting 'the equation of virility with violence' within US society, Lawson quotes from the work of cultural critic Mark Gerzon who argues that 'one of the obvious links between the two [. . .] is the emotion of fear...Only something as repugnant as being considered a woman or a faggot...is sufficiently terrifying that men are willing to die to avoid it...This fear of our

feminine side, the 'anima' in Jungian terms, seems inextricably involved in triggering our capacity for destructiveness'. 'Trainees in boot camp are conditioned, by both culture and the military, to see the enemy (and the enemy within, the Jungian "anima") in misogynistic terms', Lawson continues. Hence, she argues, 'Killing an enemy in battle may thus also be an attempt to eradicate the other, more fearsome enemy- the feminine'.<sup>75</sup>

As I have already suggested, the American military institution's undertaking to 'make men' out of recruits involved both the refashioning of the bodies of these individuals and the transformation of their attitude towards their own embodiment. This metamorphosis, as Caputo describes it, is presented as a conversion from a disordered body to a disciplined body. Highlighting the physical changes wrought by the basic training process, Caputo writes: 'Gone were the shaggy, somewhat overweight children who had stumbled off the buses at OCS a long time before. They had been replaced by streamlined marines, whose hardened limbs were adapted for walking great distances or for thrusting a bayonet into a man's ribs with ease'. As my analysis suggested earlier, the soldier is 'taught' to regard his body as a machine. Here, again, the 'value' of the soldier's body is equated with its utilitarian potential.<sup>76</sup>

As Caputo's remarks imply, the corporeal changes achieved via the training process are gendered ones-- the body of the recruit is transformed from a 'shaggy', 'overweight' (i.e. 'soft', hence 'feminine')

condition, to a 'streamlined', 'hardened' (thus 'masculine') state. Various commentators have drawn our attention to the 'gendering' of specific corporeal qualities and characteristics within Western society. 'The physical differences between male and female bodies are relatively slight', writes Easthope, 'Only one gene in eighteen is different, the rest are shared'. Despite (and, perhaps, *because of*) this shared ground, he argues, 'popular culture selects a certain stereotype to stand for the masculine body'. '[T]he self finds its identity in a body image', Easthope states, and the prevailing stereotype of the (ideal) male body is one which is '[v]ery clear in outline and firm in definition'. 'So long as there is very little fat, tensed muscle and tight sinew can give a hard, clear outline to the body', he writes, 'Flesh and bone can pass itself off as a kind of armour'. While Easthope's analysis focuses upon the masculine body in general (rather than the *militarised* body in particular), the phrasing of his argument (the notion of body as *armour*) and the textual example that he provides (from Norman Mailer's *The Naked and the Dead*), suggest that the body of the soldier is the epitome of this ideal form of masculine embodiment-- a *hard, closed* body.<sup>77</sup> 'For the masculine ego', Easthope contends, 'the body can be used to draw a defensive line between inside and outside'. He explains:

A hard body will ensure that there are no leakages across the edges between inner and outer worlds. Nature, it seems, has betrayed the perimeter of the male body. It has opened up there a number of gaps and orifices, though mercifully fewer than the female body. What holes remain must remain firmly shut, for, as

Norman Mailer makes clear in his war book *The Naked and the Dead*, the first worry for men in combat is "keeping a tight arsehole."<sup>78</sup>

The military establishment adopts this paradigm of idealised masculine embodiment and seeks to 'mould' the bodies of recruits (and their attitude towards embodiment) to fit this model, which Easthope describes as 'the hard, trained, disciplined body under rational control'.<sup>79</sup> Hence, as is frequently detailed in the narratives of veterans, instructors repeatedly single out overweight recruits for verbal and physical abuse during the training process. '[T]here is invariably a fat kid in every veteran's recollection of boot camp, who either kills himself in the first two weeks or becomes the sentimentalized object of everyone's pity', writes Lawson.<sup>80</sup> Describing his induction into basic training, Ron Kovic details the treatment of an overweight youth who-- when the recruits are provided with uniforms-- finds himself unable to get into his trousers:

They were all crowding around the fat guy, all the drill instructors, there must have been six of them standing all around that fat kid, circling him for the kill with their angry stares and one at a time they'd scream into his ears, laughing at him and cursing him because he couldn't fit into his pants.

Despite the fact that many of the assembled recruits find the clothing provided ill-fitting, the instructors quickly 'home in' on this particular individual, brutally assaulting him:

Now they had him surrounded so you couldn't see what was happening, and they were punching him, yeah punching, he could hear that fat kid shout every time they jabbed their tight fists into his gut. And now he



sounded like a little whining three-year-old, he sounded like a little baby, he was just like a little frightened baby.

This episode serves as another example of the sort of 'strategic abuse' I described earlier. Singling out this overweight youth, the instructors create a spectacle for the assembled recruits:

"Are you gonna cry?" screamed the sergeant. "Is that what's gonna happen? Everybody, I want you to look at this, look over here, people, I want you to see the baby cry!"

Everyone looked over to where the fat kid was.<sup>61</sup>

Elsewhere, relating his induction into basic training with the army, John Ketwig recalls that he was glad he was slim as the drill instructors 'were harassing the overweight guys'. Ketwig details the manner in which such harassment was later directed towards a particular individual, christened 'Fatso' by Sergeant Anderson, a particularly sadistic drill instructor. When 'Fatso' collapses during a two-mile run he is savagely beaten by Sgt. Anderson. Having vomited on his uniform, 'Fatso' is then ordered to strip naked because "You're a fat pig, and we don't allow pigs to dress like soldiers, boy!". This 'exhibition', Ketwig tells us, 'served its purpose' as the assembled recruits-- in terror that they might suffer a similar fate-- 'ran with all the conviction holy terror could muster'. 'Fatso's' humiliation continues, however. Having refused to get back upon his feet and run, 'Fatso' must face further verbal abuse, abuse which serves to educate those present as to the attitude that must be adopted towards corporeal fallibility. Anderson, representative of the military (*masculine*) order, decodes the crisis for the assembled recruits thus: "I know your

problem. You're fat! Fat! FAT! You're a fat, filthy, fucking pig, aren't you, boy?" The transformative power of the training process will, however, effect the necessary changes, Anderson contends:

Boy, I'm gonna make you a man! You're an animal, boy! A fat fucking pig! A disgrace to the uniform of the United States Army! I'll make you a man, pig! I'll get that weight off you! I'm gonna make you sweat, and cry, and beg, and bleed, and some day you're gonna be a soldier. I'll make you a man, and I'll make you a soldier.

Having made an 'exaggerated inspection' of 'Fatso's' genitals, Anderson concludes, "He's got balls! His fuckin' stomach hangs over so you can't see 'em, but they're there! Long as he's got balls, I can work with him!" Anderson then places a cigarette on the ground and demands that 'Fatso' defecate upon it because "We gotta get the weight off you, son [. . .] which means you'll have to exercise, and sweat, and ache, and you're gonna have to eat less and shit more!". Having completed his task, with much straining and weeping, 'Fatso' must then get dressed and carry his excrement away with his bare hands.<sup>82</sup>

Though these examples may well be extreme cases, such incidents draw to the fore several key issues at stake with regard to the type of body-- and attitude towards embodiment-- necessary to the soldier-identity in this context. Within the military milieu-- where masculinity is equated with the 'possession' of a hard body-- the 'fat kid' is profoundly out of place. By deliberately abusing such individuals to the point at which they weep, cower and thus become pathetic (i.e. *feminine*), the drill instructors concerned identify the 'threat' to the

achievement of Marine (read *masculine*) status. The soft, flabby, *feminine* body-- and the snivelling 'babyish' response to physical attack of one thus embodied-- must be rejected if one is to become a soldier (i.e. a *man*). In the case of the 'Fatso' incident, Sgt. Anderson uses the situation not only to reassert the nature of military training as metamorphosis, but also to encode the male genitals as a site/sign of masculine agency, a motif that my analysis will allude to below.

The rejection of the feminine-- and physical attributes and attitudes identified as such-- is thus an essential element of the quest for an authentic masculine (in this case military) identity, as Lawson, Lifton and Easthope have suggested. As Easthope, and others-- notably Klaus Theweleit-- have argued, this rejection of the feminine can be seen as an attempt on the part of the masculine ego to disavow both the physical frailty of the (male) body and the psychic frailty of the (male) self. 'The most important meanings that can attach to the ideal of the masculine body are unity and permanence', Easthope has stated. The exclusion/repression of the feminine is essential to the maintenance of the masculine ego's sense of unity, he argues:

At present in the dominant myth the masculine ego is imagined as closing itself off completely, maintaining total defence. To be unified it must be masculine all the way through and so the feminine will always appear as something other or different and so a security risk. [. . .] when the feminine seems to have infiltrated within, as it must do because of the bisexual nature of every individual, it threatens the whole castle and must be savagely suppressed.<sup>63</sup>

In their foreword to the second volume of Klaus Theweleit's *Male Fantasies*, subtitled *Male Bodies: Psychoanalysing the White Terror* (1978), Jessica Benjamin and Anson Rabinbach summarise a key aspect of Theweleit's extensive discussion, which is of much interest with regard to this current line of argument. Theweleit's study, they state, 'shows that in this world of war the repudiation of one's own body, of femininity, becomes a psychic compulsion which associates masculinity with hardness, destruction and self-denial'.<sup>84</sup> This notion of the 'repudiation of one's own body' I take to mean the rejection of one's own corporeal frailty, that is to say, one's existence as a penetrable and-- more importantly-- a *damageable* entity. Indeed, Theweleit himself states: 'The most urgent task of the man of steel is to pursue, to dam in, and to subdue any force that threatens to transform him back into that horribly disorganized jumble of flesh, hair, skin, bones, intestines, and feelings that calls itself human- the human being of old' (i.e. the *pre-transformation* self).<sup>85</sup>

In attempting to refashion the bodies of recruits into hard, closed, masculine *machine*-bodies, the US military disavow the viscerality-- and hence the frailty-- of the male body. Moreover, when Caputo writes of his group's conversion into 'streamlined marines, whose hardened limbs were adapted for walking great distances or for thrusting a bayonet into a man's ribs with ease', he highlights the fact that the masculinity of these bodies depends not only upon their heightened level of endurance but also upon their power to inflict injury

on other (softer?) bodies.<sup>86</sup> As commentator Milton J. Bates has noted, 'The soldier is taught to identify with his rifle in its hardness, precision, and capacity for inflicting death without remorse'.<sup>87</sup>

Thus the basic training process achieves both physical metamorphosis-- converting the 'soft' flesh of recruits into the hard bodies of soldiers-- and psychological transformation, as it compels the recruit to think of his body not only as a machine, but more importantly, as a weapon. As an ex-Marine quoted in Mark Baker's *Nam* comments, '[. . .] by the time you get to the end of that whole process, you feel like you're the baddest thing that ever walked the earth'.<sup>88</sup> 'Armoured' against injury and the physical privation of war by his 'hard' body, the soldier was now ready to enter the in-country environment where, his training had taught him, his body-as-weapon would serve as an invulnerable tool guaranteeing his success in defeating the enemy.

To conclude this first chapter, my analysis has shown that the preparation of US recruits for combat in Vietnam focused upon the bodies of these individuals in various important ways. The undressing/exposure of the recruit's body in the initial stage of training, I have argued, served to facilitate his metamorphosis into a soldier, both by forcibly erasing the visible markers of his civilian identity and by inducing a sense of traumatic shock, which, it has been suggested, had a transformative effect. Violence was inflicted upon recruits in a strategic manner, in order both to 'strip' them psychologically and also to engender in them a particular perception of their bodies. The

mapping of the training environment, the use of synchronised physical exercise and the formulation of rules regarding bodily conduct were designed to induce in the recruit a heightened self-consciousness with regard to his own body.

Elements specific to the Vietnam conflict-- particularly the reliance upon ground troops and the high incidence of booby trap devices-- magnified the level of physical discipline required by US troops to the point where individuals frequently manifested a strong sense of dissociation or disengagement with regard to their own embodiment. Moreover, while the recruit may have gained a heightened control of his physical responses through training, this is contested by the ongoing attempts of the military institution to claim ownership/control of his body. This tension exacerbates the disturbing psychological implications inherent in the recruit's view of his body as a machine, and these are magnified further as the possibility for the recruit to bond meaningfully with others around him is rendered uncertain. There are, however, I have suggested, instances of transgression and rebellion against military authority both by the recruit in boot camp and by the soldier in-country. Thus, while the military institution attempts to 'use' the recruit's body as a vehicle for converting him from a civilian into a soldier, he may try to reassert his own individuality and identity, using his body as a means to do so.

Basic training, as we have seen, is portrayed in the narratives and comments provided by veterans as a transformative process.

Caputo has described its effect in terms of an 'evolution' in the appearance and attitudes of those subjected to it. While he argues that 'the most significant changes were not the physical ones', the psychological metamorphoses that occurred were, I have argued, effected primarily through the treatment of the bodies of recruits by the military institution and the inculcation of a specific (self-disciplined and utilitarian) attitude within recruits towards their own embodiment.<sup>89</sup> The body of the recruit, as this chapter has demonstrated, served both as a vehicle to effect the necessary (physical and mental) 'evolution' from civilian to soldier, and as an index of the transformative effect of the training process. The metamorphosis of civilian into soldier is represented-- both by the military institution and within US culture more generally-- as 'making men' out of recruits. This conversion is equated with the shift from a disordered to a disciplined body whose value (and, in effect, *masculinity*) resides in 'its' power to inflict injury upon the 'enemy'. As the next chapter will show, however, such *machine-bodies* (and the notions of embodiment upon which they were based) were out of place within the in-country environment. In this milieu, as we shall see, the US soldier was often forced to confront the fragile nature of the human body. Moreover, as my analysis will demonstrate, once in-country he frequently experienced his body not as a weapon, but rather as a target.

## CHAPTER 2

### The Body In-Country

'We were deep in the land of Oz, a place so strange that only a cosmic tornado could have brought us there, a place where even the trees could move and speak, and magic spells lurked everywhere. [. . .] it was clear by now that the man behind the curtain was an incompetent fake, and that even Kansas would never be the same, should we be so lucky as to make it back. Nonetheless, we kept trying to kill Munchkins'.

Nathaniel Tripp *Father, Soldier, Son: Memoir of a Platoon Leader in Vietnam*<sup>1</sup>

'Oh, that terrain! The bloody, maddening uncanniness of it! [. . .] You were there in a place where you didn't belong...'

Michael Herr *Dispatches*<sup>2</sup>

'We are in Nowhere's land. Some green-brown, oblivious place that looks like shit and feels like shit.'

Unnamed soldier quoted in Mark Baker *Nam*<sup>3</sup>

Basic training sought to teach the recruit a heightened level of self-discipline. In so doing, it engendered in the emergent soldier a view of his own body as a machine which, when 'used' in the prescribed fashion, would function as an effective weapon in defeating the enemy. Following his arrival in-country, however, he frequently found that the specific conditions of combat that he encountered did not 'fit in' with the patterns of thought and modes of action that had been established in basic training. This chapter highlights the manner in which key aspects of combat in Vietnam—such as the nature of the in-country environment itself<sup>4</sup>, the specific



methods of combat employed by the US military and the strategies practised by Vietnamese combatants-- had profound consequences for the ways in which US soldiers conducted and conceptualised their own bodies (and perceived and related to the bodies of others) during their time in-country. Such factors, it is suggested, caused many individuals to experience their bodies not as useful tools, but rather as cumbersome obstacles which hindered the achievement of military objectives. As my discussion will argue, the deeply disturbing quality of the Vietnam experience-- an enduring topic of interest for critics and commentators-- is inextricably connected with these issues.

Arrival in-country was, particularly for those serving in the early stages of the conflict, a disorientating experience. The aptly titled 'Baptism of Fire' section of Mark Baker's *Nam* (1981)-- a collection of snippets from his interviews with veterans-- provides us with a range of veterans' recollections of their initial encounters with the in-country environment. The majority of these descriptions of arrival focus upon individuals' sensory impressions of the place, and many of those interviewed foreground two key aspects of this encounter. The intensity of temperature is referred to repeatedly: 'When we came off the plane it must have been [over 100 degrees]. There's no air or nothing. I stepped to the door and was drenched'; 'It takes your breath away as you step out of the airplane'; 'The door opens and there's a blast of hot air that drops you to your knees'.

The presence of an overwhelming, unpleasant odour is also frequently mentioned: 'It stinks'; 'The place smelled like an old urinal. Sweaty, stale and dank. All the nasty smells you can imagine'; 'The thing that I can't forget about Nam was the smell of it...Nothing smells like Vietnam smells'.<sup>5</sup> Such comments hinge upon these individuals' immediate physical responses to the Vietnam milieu. Unused to such high temperatures and unaccustomed to such intense odours, the bodies of US personnel reacted violently to these new surroundings.<sup>6</sup> Such responses highlight from the outset a mismatch between the body of the soldier and the environmental context in which he found himself in Vietnam. In *Red Thunder, Tropic Lightning* (1993)-- a study of the experiences of the 25<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division of the US Army in Vietnam-- military historian Eric M. Bergerud alerts us to the ways in which arrival in-country served as a 'shock to the system' for the American soldier. 'Vietnam is a quintessential tropical country', he writes, 'To most Americans from milder climes, the fertility and fecundity of that land were unknown'. Soldiers' initial encounters with the in-country milieu are often portrayed as profoundly uncomfortable experiences. The intense heat and overpowering odour are frequently experienced/described in terms of an assault upon the body and an attack upon the senses; hence such representations serve to characterise the Vietnam milieu not only as strange, alien and *other*, but also as unpleasant and profoundly hostile.<sup>7</sup>

This perception of the in-country locale as antagonistic and intimidating extends beyond the soldier's first impressions. In fact, the conceptualisation of *environment-as-enemy* is a central element in a wide range of representations of the Vietnam experience, as veterans and other commentators frequently depict the Vietnam milieu as inherently threatening to the corporeal integrity of the American soldier. Military-medical commentators repeatedly draw our attention to the deleterious effects of the climate, which was particularly extreme in the southern regions. 'South Vietnam has a typically tropical climate of two seasons: hot and dry and hot and rainy', wrote Spurgeon Neel (Deputy Surgeon General of the US Army in 1972), 'the high ambient temperatures and humidity adversely affect the efficiency and health of US troops fighting in this area, and the medical personnel supporting them'.<sup>8</sup> While high temperatures had been encountered in earlier combat contexts (the desert warfare of WWII is one such notable instance), the humidity levels here posed additional problems. Moreover, the effects of these conditions were rendered particularly intense due to the extensive reliance upon search-and-destroy operations, reconnaissance patrols and ambushes as key elements of the US fighting strategy. Among the footsoldiers (Army infantrymen and those in the Marine Corps) who undertook these assignments 'heavily encumbered' by weaponry, supplies and weighty body

armour, heat casualties, as B. Eiseman (ex-US Navy Surgical Consultant) has suggested, 'were inevitable'.<sup>9</sup>

In addition to the harmful effects of high temperatures upon bodies unused to such heat, the tropical character of the Vietnamese climate gave rise to other difficulties. Both narrative accounts and military-medical reports emphasise the prevalence of viruses and bacteria within the combat zone. Here, as British combat correspondent Tim Page reports, both the soldier's belongings and, more alarmingly, his own body, were under constant threat of attack from micro-organisms: 'Gear dropped apart in a million mysterious mildewed ways, the body seemed to grow things that existed only in horror movies'.<sup>10</sup> This emphasis on the potential of environmental factors to attack and infect the body of the soldier is redoubled in reports by Colonel John A. Feagin, B. Eiseman and other military-medical commentators who characterise the in-country milieu as a pestilent place: 'Endemic conditions of filth and disease frequently intruded upon basic care of injuries', wrote Feagin, 'Fevers of unknown origin invaded the health of our troops'. The Vietnamese people themselves, Eiseman suggests, are carriers of lethal contagion and thus even non-combatants present a threat to the body of the soldier: 'Malaria, cholera, plague, malnutrition, venereal disease, and many enteric parasites abound in the civilian population, and variously represent threats to military personnel'.<sup>11</sup>

Such descriptions of Vietnam as a fetid location inhabited by a diseased people also feature prominently in the narratives of veterans. John Ketwig, whose experiences of Army service are detailed in his first-person narrative *And a Hard Rain Fell* (1985), characterises Vietnam as a 'land of squalor' and writes of 'the ragged hovels and piles of garbage', again commenting upon its odour, a foul, 'almost overpowering', stench.<sup>12</sup> While veterans connect this odour in part with the tropical— hence fecund— character of Vietnam, they more frequently associate the unpleasant smell with the reek of human detritus. Hence, while an infantryman quoted in Bergerud's *Red Thunder, Tropic Lightning* initially links the stench with the fertility of the landscape, he quickly qualifies his remarks by drawing attention to the absence of 'proper' waste disposal systems:

The tropics have an aroma all of their own. [. . .] It's the smell of growth; it's the smell of death. Decay, of stuff growing, of stuff dying. The oppressive heat and humidity make that smell stronger. There was very little sanitation the way we know sanitation. Sewers were open in Bien Hoa, so your first impression is of a dirty place.<sup>13</sup>

As US personnel repeatedly emphasise, to inhabit the Vietnam milieu is to confront human detritus on a regular basis. Ex-army pilot Robert Mason, describing his landing at Qui Nhon runway, provides the reader with the following description:

The smell of human waste drifted from the sand dunes beyond the concertina wire that bordered the runway, apparently part of the city's latrine. I saw people squatting among the dunes and shreds of paper drifting in the breeze...A young boy wiped himself with a bare hand and then licked same.

US personnel reacted to such encounters with the excremental with shock, surprise and/or disgust— on witnessing the above scene, writes Mason, 'We stared like tourists at the people we had come to save'.<sup>14</sup> The absence of indoor toilet facilities is frequently mentioned in American personnel's recollection of their experiences in Vietnam. The response of Nurse Gayle Smith to this state of affairs is typical: 'On the bus from the airport to this camp, the first thing I saw was some Vietnamese guy peeing on the side of the road. And I thought, "Oh, geez, this is a backward country."' <sup>15</sup> Here and elsewhere the disparity between the in-country environment and the American milieu is depicted in terms of a (loaded) binary opposition as the US is, implicitly or explicitly, represented as inherently 'better' (more culturally advanced, more *civilised*) than Vietnam. Hence a US soldier quoted in *Backfire* (1985), cultural commentator Loren Baritz's critique of the war, remarks that 'somebody had to show poor people better ways of livin', like sewer disposal and sanitation and things like that'.<sup>16</sup>

In *Vietnam-Perkasie: A Combat Marine Memoir* (1983), W.D. Ehrhart reflects upon his view of the Vietnamese as *other* during his time in-country, an outlook which, he suggests, stemmed from his perception of the villagers that he encountered as inherently dirty and diseased. 'Asians weren't like us', he writes, 'old women with black teeth and mouths full of betel nut; children with open running sores and flies all over their bodies; men with loose pajama legs

pulled up, urinating in full view of the world'. The strong odour that prevails accentuates, for Ehrhart, the alien quality of both the Vietnamese environment and its people:

The first thing that struck me about Vietnam was the smell: a sharp, pungent odor compounded of cooking fires, fish sauce, rice fields fertilized with human and animal excrement, water buffalo, chickens, unwashed bodies, and I don't know what all else, but it clawed violently at my nose and caught fire in my lungs. It was awful. It permeated everything. I kept thinking, "Jesus Christ, these people don't even smell like human beings."  
And they were so little. So *foreign*.<sup>17</sup>

In this manner, the in-country environment and its people are portrayed as squalid, unpleasant, and profoundly *other*. Entry into this arena involves exposure to human detritus-- an experience with implications of contagion and infection on both literal and symbolic levels-- making Vietnam a milieu inherently dangerous to the health of the US soldier. Vietnam is presented, in the above instances and elsewhere, as a place at odds with the familiar, sanitised character of American society where bodily wastes are expelled in private and then quickly flushed away before they can pollute the surrounding environment. Service in Vietnam meant an ongoing confrontation with aspects of embodiment and corporeality generally suppressed within mainstream US culture, an encounter that was both physically and metaphorically 'dangerous' for the US soldier.

My analysis of the implications of the soldier's confrontation with the realm of the excremental has, up to this point, referred to examples from two distinct types of discourse, the military-medical

mode and the literary narrative, using these very different kinds of texts in conjunction to highlight the manner in which the environment is depicted as inherently dangerous to the body of the soldier. As elsewhere in the thesis, however, this current line of enquiry also draws to the fore key differences between literary narratives and other forms of textual representation. While military-medical discussions of the problems posed by the unsanitary character of the in-country environment restrict their focus to the threat of actual infection or contagion, many narrative accounts of the combat experience, while also addressing this area, tackle issues above and beyond the realm of the purely literal, using a variety of representational manoeuvres and literary strategies to do so.

Tim O'Brien's *The Things They Carried* (1991), one of the more self-consciously 'literary' Vietnam narratives, exploits both the literal and the symbolic resonances of the confrontation with the realm of the excremental through the scenario of Kiowa's death in the 'shit field'. Here O'Brien presents us with an episode in which the soldier's encounter with detritus occurs in the most extreme manner imaginable. Kiowa is not merely confronted by excrement, he is totally engulfed by it, sucked down into a 'deep, oozy soup' of mud and faeces when artillery shells rain down on the Vietnamese village latrine field where the men have (mistakenly) set up camp for the night. O'Brien deliberately positions his narrative on the fact/fiction border, enabling him to reshape certain elements of the



'shit field' incident in order to manipulate the symbolic potential of the scenario. While issues pertaining to (the process of) representation will be explored in more depth in Chapter 5, what I want to highlight here is the manner in which O'Brien's narrative (re)construction of this episode serves to foreground the physically and psychologically disturbing effects of the encounter with corporeal detritus in-country. In the 'Speaking of Courage' section of *The Things They Carried*, O'Brien manipulates the circumstances of Kiowa's death and the reaction of other squad members to it, in order to draw our attention to particular aspects of the Vietnam experience and the psychological fallout resultant from them. Here the perception of Kiowa's death is filtered through the figure of Norman Bowker, O'Brien's former fellow squad member and (deceased) friend. Bowker's description of events focuses upon the physical revulsion that the stench of the faeces-laden field invokes in him, suggesting that Bowker experiences a 'failure of nerve' due to the overpowering excremental odour which renders him incapable of saving Kiowa from sinking under the slime: '[. . .] I had the chance and I blew it. The stink, that's what got to me. I couldn't take that goddamn awful *smell*'. Within O'Brien's narrative, the 'shit field' incident is framed as a form of the 'return of the repressed'. Incoming artillery shells churn up the earth 'opening up all those years of waste, centuries worth', and the excrement previously expelled from the bodies of Vietnamese villagers now resurfaces not

only to invade and infiltrate the body of the US soldier, but also, in Kiowa's case, to consume him entirely. Bowker is nauseated and repulsed as he feels himself sliding into the mire: 'He could taste it. The shit was in his nose and eyes [ . . . ] the stink was everywhere-- it was inside him, in his lungs-- and he could no longer tolerate it'. While he eventually manages to extricate himself from the slime, O'Brien highlights the overwhelming sense of physical defilement that Bowker experiences: 'All he wanted was a bath. Nothing else. A hot soapy bath'.<sup>18</sup>

The 'shit field' incident, it can be suggested, involves a confrontation between the soldier and elements of the in-country experience which not only threaten his physical safety but also serve to undermine concepts of embodiment instilled in the basic training process. In highlighting 'the terrible killing power of [the] shit field', O'Brien foregrounds the triumph of environment-as-enemy over an individual soldier and, by extension, over the American military mission in general.<sup>19</sup> Moreover, on a symbolic level, this scenario can be interpreted in terms of a struggle for mastery between two oppositional notions/aspects of corporeality. That is to say, the 'shit field' episode literalises the ongoing clash between the military model of embodiment (body-as-machine) and the physical vulnerability that this ideal must necessarily suppress/control. In this case, as elsewhere, the notion of body-as-machine is undermined as the soldier is overwhelmed (Kiowa physically and Bowker

psychologically) by human detritus, a signifier of corporeal frailty. Within *The Things They Carried*, as in other narratives, the nuances of the term 'waste' are exploited in order to highlight the rich symbolic potential of the 'shit field' incident. Kiowa is 'wasted in the waste'.<sup>20</sup> His immersion in excrement deprives him not only of his life but also, in a sense, of his identity and his humanity. The description of Kiowa's sinking into the mire in terms of his being 'folded in with the war' and becoming 'part of the waste' has implications which raise several important issues.<sup>21</sup> These remarks foreground the triumph of the realm of the excremental in drawing the body of the soldier into itself, incorporating him within the excremental space.<sup>22</sup> What is more, such comments highlight two other issues: firstly, the contention that the loss of life, both in this particular case and in the war in general, served no meaningful purpose and secondly, the notion that the in-country experience frequently resulted in a sense of moral/psychological pollution.

O'Brien uses the circumstances of Kiowa's death and Bowker's inability to find listeners for his retelling of the 'shit field' incident as a means to exemplify the difficulties inherent in the representation of the Vietnam experience and to emphasise the unwillingness of American society in general to listen to or accept such representations. O'Brien equates this refusal to acknowledge or validate these stories with a general tendency within US culture to suppress, evade or conceal the realm of bodily waste. Bowker is

amused by the thought of enacting a literal (as opposed to a merely discursive) 'return of the repressed', '[Putting] on a suit and tie and [standing] up in front of the Kiwanis club and [telling] the fuckers about all the wonderful shit he knew. [Passing] out samples, maybe.' He realises ultimately, though, that his story must remain untold: 'nobody in town wanted to know about the terrible stink', 'It was a brisk, polite town. It did not know shit about shit, and did not care to know'. The in-country milieu, with 'No indoor plumbing' is a place rendered foreign and 'other' when compared to US society as exemplified by Bowker's home town, 'a nice little town, very prosperous, with neat houses and *all the sanitary conveniences*'. In this manner, O'Brien suggests that the confrontation with the realm of corporeal detritus that takes place in-country can have (literally and symbolically) dangerous consequences both for veterans themselves and for wider American society.<sup>23</sup>

The scenario of Kiowa's demise in the 'shit field' also draws our attention to another crucial aspect of the in-country milieu-- the terrain. In the first chapter of *Red Thunder, Tropic Lightning*, Eric M. Bergerud alerts us to the manner in which the various types of terrain encountered in-country not only determined the form of the fighting that took place there, but also had great bearing upon the day-to-day lives of the combatants:

The nature of combat, whether defensive or offensive, is largely shaped by the topography of the battlefield. But considerations of terrain go much further than this. The physical relationship between

the battlefield and the rear, together with the climate involved, will have an extraordinary influence on the complex process of moving forces and supplies. Furthermore, the physical environment shapes the experience of the soldiers involved to an exceptional degree.<sup>24</sup>

The debilitating effect of the relentless heat upon the footsoldier was frequently compounded by the characteristics of the landscape that he had to traverse. Vietnam, as British combat correspondent Tim Page has noted, 'would normally have ranked as one of the most beautiful spots on this planet'. Eiseman also initially describes the landscape in a picturesque fashion: 'The terrain varies from beautiful sandy beaches, interminable rice paddies, and verdant jungle, to the inland mountains that constitute the central spine of Vietnam'. However, both writers are quick to qualify these remarks by emphasising the threatening quality of the natural setting. Page makes use of a vivid metaphor in order to highlight the destructive impact of various aspects of the topography upon the US fighting force: 'The hill country was ravenous: it could eat a whole brigade and its supporting aviation and artillery units alive for breakfast; the swamps and paddies could eat the reserves for lunch'.<sup>25</sup>

Philip Caputo suggests that military training left him ill-prepared for his encounter with the tropical forest. 'The manuals we had used in guerrilla-warfare courses cheerfully stated that the modern, civilized soldier should not be afraid of the jungle', he writes; however his own experiences of attempting to traverse this

terrain render the dictum "the jungle can be your friend as well as your enemy" somewhat ludicrous: 'I could only conclude that those manuals had been written by men whose idea of a jungle was the Everglades National Park', quips Caputo. His comment that 'There was nothing friendly about the Vietnamese bush' is a deliberate understatement which underscores rather than undercuts the effect of his lengthy description of a grim patrol through the jungle landscape which occurs at a later stage of the narrative.<sup>26</sup> 'Once, I led a difficult platoon-sized patrol near Charlie Ridge', Caputo recalls. He continues: 'First we had to hack our way through a patch of bamboo and elephant grass ten feet high, the worst, thickest patch of jungle we had encountered'. The soldiers' attempt to penetrate the dense undergrowth foregrounds the limited efficacy of the militarised body as a useful tool in this context:

Working in shifts, the point man and I chopped at the growth with a machete. When we had cut as much as we could, three or four marines would come up and flatten the wall of brush by hurling their bodies against it. That done, the rest of the platoon would move forward a few yards. Then the point man and I would start out again. All this in bake-oven heat.

Although Caputo's group eventually work their way out of the jungle, the patrol's difficulties are far from over, for they face further encounters with problematic and perilous terrain:

Coming out of the jungle, we entered a swamp, which we had to cross by hopping from one small island of solid ground to the next. Corporal Mixon lost his footing once, fell into a quicksand pool, and had sunk up to his chest before he was hauled out, covered with muck and leeches.

Corporal Mixon's 'loss of footing' is particularly significant here. As evidenced by the 'shit field' incident within O'Brien's *The Things They Carried*, a key component of the in-country milieu-- the very ground on which the soldier stood-- is characterised as unstable, and often literally fluid. Having crossed the swamp, Caputo's patrol find themselves on firmer ground. However, this precipitous terrain likewise confounds the soldiers' attempt to traverse it:

The patrol route took us over the swamp, then up an eight-hundred-foot ridge. The only trail up the ridge was an overgrown game-track. It was easy at first, but then the slope became so steep we had to climb hand over hand, clutching at the bone-gray roots of mahogany trees, hand over hand a foot at a time, gasping and sweating in the moist air. Sometimes a man fell, toppling several of those behind him as he rolled downhill.

As we have seen, such losses of footing are frequently accorded much metaphorical import within the narratives in which they appear. As later sections of the analysis will show, the US soldier finds himself on treacherous ground in both a literal and a metaphorical sense during his time in Vietnam.

In addition to the difficulties posed by the consistency and gradient of the earth during their patrol, Caputo's group find their progress further impeded by the natural vegetation. 'Thorn bushes clawed us, cordlike "wait-a-minute" vines coiled around our arms, rifles, and canteen tops with a tenacity that seemed almost human', he remarks. Such comments draw our attention to veterans' tendency to attribute sentient qualities to the in-country terrain within

their narratives. Writers as diverse as Caputo, O'Brien, Hasford, Del Vecchio et al. repeatedly represent the landscape and the vegetation within the Vietnam milieu as actively resisting the soldier's advance. As Caputo stresses in this episode, the attempt to traverse this terrain is not only difficult and dangerous, but it also frequently yields no constructive outcome: 'When we finally reached the crest, I checked my map and watch: in five hours, and without making a single enemy contact, we had covered a little over half a mile'. Having 'pitted' their militarised bodies against a hostile landscape, the patrol members have only physical exhaustion and corporeal lacerations to show for their efforts. This episode highlights, for Caputo, not only the inherently hostile character of the in-country environment, but also the futility of the attempt to traverse (and, by implication, to achieve mastery of) this milieu. 'I like to think of it whenever I hear some general who spent his tour looking at maps and flitting around in helicopters claim that we could have won the war', Caputo remarks with bitterness.<sup>27</sup>

Narrative renderings of the in-country experience-- particularly those provided by ex-infantrymen and footsoldiers-- repeatedly focus our attention upon the jungle setting, which is depicted as a locale in which the US soldier's fears and anxieties concerning the landscape-as-enemy are fully realised. '[O]ur real enemy is the jungle' remarks Joker, the narrator of Hasford's *The Short-Timers*. Indeed, Hasford represents the tropical forest as an



arena in which the body of the soldier is subject to an unrelenting assault from the foliage and its animal and insect inhabitants: 'Limp sabers of elephant grass slice into hands and cheeks. Creepers trip us and tear at our ankles. [. . .] Insects eat our skin, leeches drink our blood, snakes try to bite us, and even the monkeys throw rocks'. It is significant that both Hasford's and Caputo's narratives describe the jungle with reference to the realm of the excremental. 'Humping in the rain forest is like climbing a stairway of shit in an enormous green room constructed by ogres for the confinement of monster plants,' Joker comments, 'Birth and death are endless processes here, with new life feeding on the decaying remains of the old'.<sup>28</sup>

Elsewhere Philip Caputo provides the following vivid description:

A gray-green twilight filtered through the jungle canopy. Plant life grew in snarled profusion along both banks; tree branches, vines, and tendrils were locked together, trying to strangle each other in a struggle to climb out of the shadows and reach the sunlight. Water oozed from the sides of the ravine, and the dead air was thick with the smell of rotting wood and leaves. It seemed as though we were walking through a sewer.<sup>29</sup>

By representing the jungle in excremental terms, both Hasford and Caputo underscore their characterisation of this milieu as an arena in which the soldier's corporeal integrity is profoundly threatened.

In addition to the danger of the ground literally shifting beneath his feet, the soldier who had to traverse the terrain of the tropical forest was frequently at risk of losing his bearings, becoming disorientated by the plethora of vegetation. The narrator of

Hasford's *The Short-Timers* characterises the Vietnamese jungle with the following remarks: 'Monotony. Everything samey-same--trees, vines like dead snakes, leafy plants. The sameness leaves us unmoored'.<sup>30</sup> Within Nathaniel Tripp's *Father, Soldier, Son* (1998)-- a first-person account of his experiences as an infantry officer in Vietnam-- Tripp vividly describes the sense of disorientation and the growing feeling of anxiety (bordering on sheer terror) that ensues when his platoon lose their bearings while on manoeuvres in the jungle:

In the gathering gloom I could see a big hill looming up ahead where there wasn't supposed to be a hill at all. For the first time in my life, I was truly lost in the woods.

I gathered my platoon close around me, like my own children. I told them what the situation was, where I thought we were, and how we had gotten there. I could hardly even whisper, it looked so bad. I figured we were about two kilometers from our ambush site, uncertain of our real location, with one guy having some sort of nervous breakdown and the rest of us pretty close to it. [. . .] We were in deep trouble, foundering in the jungle, and it was getting dark so fast, a lot faster than usual, as though somebody was just gradually fading us out. It was hard to breathe, too, the air was so thick and wet. This could only come to a bad end; nobody could come to help us, we didn't know where we were.

In this instance-- due to luck, rather than by design-- Tripp and his platoon not only emerge unscathed, but also manage to wound several enemy soldiers, having unwittingly set up camp for the night beside a Viet Cong base. As Tripp himself acknowledges, however, the tropical rainforests remained, for the most part, under the control of 'enemy' forces: 'They never belonged to us; we always just took

the clearings, and then tried to make the clearings bigger with our defoliants, our B-52s and the Rome plow (sic)'.<sup>31</sup>

Narratives such as Del Vecchio's *The 13<sup>th</sup> Valley* (1982) and O'Brien's *The Things They Carried* acknowledge the seductive, yet treacherous, quality of the tropical forest. Both repellent and yet simultaneously alluring, the jungle is portrayed as the epitome of the in-country environment as enemy, for the soldier who is lured into its dark and mysterious depths risks injury/annihilation. Del Vecchio's *The 13<sup>th</sup> Valley* provides just such a scenario when the point man, Rafe Ridgefield, becomes mesmerised by the myriad of plant life around him, as he tries to choose the best way for the platoon to proceed:

Rafe stared into the dark holes in the vine masses, into the pockets where all light was excluded, blocked by moist living vegetation high above and layer upon layer of dead rotting support entanglement below. Older life supporting new life, he thought. The dead supporting the living in ever increasing heights of jungle, old trees dying, smothered and strangled beneath ever newer covers of green, spreading, reaching for the sun, climbing over the decaying structure, weighing heavily upon disintegrating branches, dying and decomposing as each new layer smothered the one below until the substructure weakened and the weight increased to the point of collapse. Ridgefield stared at the vegetation. A supporting limb snapped. A slow-motion avalanche of green crashed as a section of canopy imploded. He jumped down, squatted. Behind him others sought cover. He stared into the vegetation. It shook as if the earth below had opened its jaws and eaten a huge chunk of life. Ridgefield looked into the new wall, into the new life growing from the old, and he understood it all.

However, Rafe's moment of epiphany is depicted as a confrontation with 'the void', an encounter which has fatal consequences:

He laughed delighted with the revelation and he jumped back onto the tree trunk and searched the black voids and the greenness for a trail to make the climb to the peak easier. As he stared directly into one black nothingness its center flashed bluewhite, a perfect circle, a blinding muzzle flash from within the depths of the void. He never saw anything again.<sup>32</sup>

The magnetism of the jungle environment and its dangerous consequences are also explored within O'Brien's *The Things They Carried* via the 'Sweetheart of the Song Tra Bong' tale, a story filtered through the perception of Rat Kiley, the platoon medic. This anecdote concerns the fate of Mary Anne Bell, the fresh-faced American girl who arrived at a small medical compound in-country to visit her boyfriend, one of Rat's fellow medics, Mark Fossie. Initially, as Rat Kiley emphasises, Mary Anne's presence is profoundly--and comically-- at odds with the surroundings: 'This cute blonde- just a kid, just barely out of high school- she shows up with a suitcase and one of those plastic cosmetic bags. Comes right out to the boonies. I swear to God, man, she's got on culottes. White culottes and this sexy pink sweater'.<sup>33</sup> As time passes, however, Mary Anne becomes increasingly integrated into her new environment, manifesting an interest in the landscape and its inhabitants and becoming involved in the medical activities in the compound. Mary Anne's increasing engagement with the in-country milieu is denoted by radical changes in her appearance and her behaviour. Rat relates: "[. . .] she quickly

fell into the habits of the bush. No cosmetics, no fingernail filing. She stopped wearing jewelry (sic), cut her hair short and wrapped it in a dark green bandana'. A key part of Mary Anne's in-country 'education' involves learning both how to disassemble an M-16 assault rifle and how to fire it. Moreover, Mary Anne's transformation entails a corporeal alteration comparable to that achieved via the basic training process: 'Her body seemed foreign somehow- too stiff in places, too firm where the softness used to be'.<sup>34</sup> Much to the horror of Mark Fossie, she joins the much-feared group of Green Berets stationed in the compound when they go on night ambush in the jungle. Fossie's efforts to reassert his authority are, ultimately, unsuccessful as Mary Anne, despite a pose of compliance, is increasingly drawn into the jungle setting:

Near the end of the third week Fossie began making arrangements to send her home. At first, Rat said, Mary Anne seemed to accept it, but then after a day or two she fell into a restless gloom, sitting off by herself at the edge of the perimeter. She would not speak. Shoulders hunched, her blue eyes opaque, she seemed to disappear inside herself. A couple of times Fossie approached her and tried to talk it out, but Mary Anne just stared out at the dark green mountains to the west. The wilderness seemed to draw her in. A haunted look, Rat said- partly terror, partly rapture. It was as if she had come up on the edge of something, as if she were caught in that no-man's-land between Cleveland Heights and deep jungle.<sup>35</sup>

Finally, Mary Anne vanishes without trace into the jungle, having 'crossed to the other side', and become 'part of the land'.<sup>36</sup>

Veteran and commentator Tobey C. Herzog, in his study *Vietnam*

*War Stories: Innocence Lost* (1992), links Mary Anne Bell's reaction to the Vietnam milieu with Michael Herr's descriptions of his own response to events in-country within *Dispatches* (1977), Herr's first-person account of his experiences as a combat correspondent in Vietnam. Both Herr and Mary Anne become, Herzog argues, 'hooked on the allure of combat', "fascinated by the abomination", in the words of Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*.<sup>37</sup> My own analysis here provides a slightly different, though complementary, reading of Mary Anne's disappearance for, I would argue, she is seduced by the in-country milieu itself, rather than merely 'hooked on the allure of combat'. Mary Anne's remarks prior to her disappearance would seem to support both readings:

"You hide in this little fortress, behind wire and sandbags, and you don't know what's out there or what it's all about or how it feels to really live in it. Sometimes I want to eat this place. Vietnam. I want to swallow the whole country- the dirt, the death- I just want to eat it and have it there inside me. That's how I feel. It's like . . . this appetite. I get scared sometimes- lots of times- but it's not *bad*. You know? I feel close to myself. [. . .] I can feel my blood moving, my skin and my fingernails, everything, it's like I'm full of electricity and I'm glowing in the dark-I'm on fire almost- I'm burning away into nothing- but it doesn't matter because I know exactly who I am. You can't feel like that anywhere else."<sup>38</sup>

This fascination with the jungle finds extended expression in Stephen Wright's fictional narrative, the aptly titled *Meditations in Green* (1985). Wright's narrator, James Griffin, works for military intelligence as an 'image interpreter', scanning photographs of the

Vietnam landscape which are taken daily with a camera fixed to the underside of an Army helicopter. Poring over the monochrome pictures with a magnifying glass, Griffin's task is 'to interpret the film, find the enemy in the negatives'. While this tedious and painstaking endeavour to decode the landscape is intended to provide clear-cut, accurate information as to the movements of the Vietnamese 'enemy', Griffin's efforts are shown to generate a contrary effect, producing inconclusive and ambiguous results as the attempt to decipher the Vietnamese landscape is rendered difficult by its monotonous character:

He turned the crank. Trees, trees, trees, trees, rocks, rocks, cloud, trees, trees, road, road, stream, stream, ford, trees, road, road. He stopped cranking. With a black grease pencil he carefully circled two blurry shadows beside the white thread of a road. Next to the circles he placed question marks. Road, road, road, road, trees, trees, trees. His eyes felt hard as shells, sore as bruises. Trees, trees, trees, trees.<sup>39</sup>

Griffin, who 'had always been interested in plants', is later transferred to 'herbicide studies', learning about the techniques and effects of chemical defoliation from Specialist Fifth Class Ronald Winehaven, who ascribes qualities of sentience and hostility to the Vietnamese vegetation. Griffin, who has never ventured forth beyond the perimeter of the base camp, has not experienced the intimidating effect of Vietnam's flora and fauna first-hand and hence has difficulty comprehending Winehaven's view that 'it's not as if bushes were innocent'.<sup>40</sup> When he himself encounters the jungle at

a later stage of the narrative, however, his experience leads him towards similar conclusions. While, from the safety of a helicopter, he can appreciate 'the simple beauty of the land' and the 'lushness of organic color (sic)', traversing this milieu on foot with a unit of Marines is an overwhelming and terrifying experience:

He had never before seen a limb or a leaf this close or without the interdiction of a lens. [. . .] As he moved in deeper and deeper, he had the eerie sense of vegetation thrusting itself at him for inspection and comment. Green tongues lapped at his calves, elastic branches tugged at his arms. And there was no end to it. [. . .] Buckling walls and decaying furniture were repaired automatically here in this home of the future where matter itself was perpetually pregnant. The effort to bring down this house, of which Griffin was a part, seemed at this close distance to be both frightening and ludicrous. On the ground [. . .] he sensed a force the camera could never record, a chemical hardly subdued.

Even to the experienced footsoldiers, the jungle is a mysterious arena, filled with ambiguities, impossible to decipher or decode:

They came to a place where all the vegetation seemed to be growing sideways; they crawled for yards, bumping their heads, scraping knees on hard tough horizontal stems. "What is this shit?" Griffin heard someone whisper. "Bamboo?" He hadn't the vaguest notion. [. . .]

Then they came to a collection of boulders, narrow passages you could slip through sideways, high walls you climbed hand over hand up the vines clinging to their sides. "What is this?" asked someone on top, pointing out clumps of green excrement. "Monkey shit?" No one knew. No one had heard or seen an animal of any kind.

Here, again, the jungle is portrayed as an arena in which the excremental predominates. Confused, unable to breathe and incapable of seeing where he is going, Griffin is overwhelmed by the



jungle milieu, experiencing 'a vegetable overdose, a chlorophyll freakout' which provokes in him an aggressive and destructive stance towards the environment:

Then Griffin got mad, indignant, why was he being forced to endure this unnecessary agony? The whole stinking forest should have been sprayed long ago, hosed down, drenched in [Agent] Orange, leaves blackened, branches denuded, undergrowth dried into brittle paper.<sup>41</sup>

For the American soldier, the jungle epitomises the notion of environment-as-enemy. While not explicitly described as a 'feminine' space, the qualities ascribed to this milieu-- moistness, fecundity, impenetrability, darkness, mysteriousness, and *corporeality*-- are those traditionally associated with the realm of the feminine and, more particularly, with the female body. This is in keeping with a tendency evident within the narratives of veterans to gender the in-country environment, either directly or by implication, as female. Both Klaus Theweleit (whose observations acted as a point of reference at the close of Chapter 1) and Susan Jeffords have highlighted this propensity to equate the perceived threat (both to the actual body of the soldier and to the metaphorical body politic) with the realm of the female/ feminine. Jeffords writes:

[T]he feminine is used finally to identify the "enemy"- that against which the soldier had to struggle in order to fight and possibly win the war in Vietnam, whether the Vietnamese [or] a *difficult landscape* [. . .] Not the official enemy of governments or armies, this is the enemy of the soldier.<sup>42</sup>

The casting of the landscape in the role of feminised *other* is reflected in the linguistic codes employed by soldiers in-country. Hills, for example, are routinely renamed as 'tits' within this discourse, serving to present the landscape as inherently 'foreign' and (here implicitly) hostile.

As a means to emphasise the threatening quality of the Vietnam milieu, authors frequently describe Vietnam in corporeal terms. Critic Sue Best, in her discussion of the persistent link made between women and space within cultural discourse, draws upon the work of Mary Douglas to argue that the conceptualisation of space in terms of a body indicates 'a persistent desire to domesticate space, to bring it within a human horizon and, most importantly to "contain" it within this horizon'. However, as her analysis emphasises, while 'the use of the body-model indicates the demand or desire for a clear limit or boundary', the use of the body as a reference point when thinking about/discussing space accentuates uncertainties and anxieties concerning boundedness: 'it is when the body is invoked that the boundary is probably most uncertain'.<sup>43</sup> Hence within *The Things They Carried*, O'Brien uses corporeality as a reference point in order to emphasise the 'spooky' quality of the landscape after dark:

Around midnight things always got wild. All around you, everywhere, the whole dark countryside came alive. You'd hear a strange hum in your ears. Nothing specific; nothing you could put a name on [. . .] Like the night had its own voice- that hum in your ears- and in the hours after midnight you'd

**swear you were walking through some kind of soft black protoplasm, Vietnam, the blood and the flesh.<sup>44</sup>**

Likewise, as my analysis indicated earlier, O'Brien and Tim Page repeatedly represent the in-country environment as a monstrous body, which seeks to destroy the soldier by devouring/engulfing him.<sup>45</sup>

As I have detailed above, the in-country milieu is also frequently likened to a specifically female body. As Best argues, the use of the female body to describe/represent space 'seems to suggest [. . .] the production of a safe, familiar, clearly defined entity, which, because it is female, should be appropriately docile or able to be dominated'; however, 'this very same production also underscores an anxiety about this "entity" and the precariousness of its boundedness'.<sup>46</sup> The female/feminine, as highlighted in my discussion in the previous chapter, is defined as an enemy of the soldier-male within the basic training process and thus, while the Vietnam environment may initially seem alluring, it is ultimately shown to be treacherous and deadly. Elsewhere, in keeping with the depiction of the milieu as pestilent, Vietnam is conceptualised in terms of a diseased body. Stephen Wright's fictional narrative *Meditations in Green*, for example, features an incident in which an Army Captain, lecturing recruits on the nature of the US involvement in the conflict, likens Vietnam to a foreskin afflicted with 'a bad case of VD or, if you will, VC'.<sup>47</sup>

As critics and theorists such as Douglas (1984) and Lakoff and Johnson (1980) have noted, the body serves as a rich fund for metaphorical discourse within Western culture generally. In this particular context, the depiction of the in-country environment in corporeal terms is not a neutral descriptive technique. Indeed, the concept of Vietnam-as-body carries with it crucial implications not only with regard to the representation of the Vietnam experience, but also with respect to the actual tactics and strategies employed by the US military to 'deal with' the environment-as-enemy. The three variations on the Vietnam-as-body metaphor (Vietnam-as-monstrous-body, Vietnam-as-female-body, Vietnam-as-infected-body) each function as a type of metaphor that theorist Donald A. Schön would term as 'generative'. This form of metaphor serves both as a way of describing a situation/event/issue and as a means of generating a solution to it, by setting in motion a particular pattern of thought prompted by the metaphor and the cultural values associated with it.<sup>48</sup> By framing the in-country milieu as enemy, these metaphors generate strategies and tactics with profoundly destructive implications both for the landscape itself and for those who inhabit it. A narrative example of the 'generative' power of such metaphors is presented in Gustav Hasford's *The Short-Timers*, as one of the Marines makes an apparently throwaway, yet telling remark: 'some cunts smell really bad, and Viet Nam smells really bad, so I say, fuck it'.<sup>49</sup> As has already been highlighted in my

analysis, the American cultural mindset tends towards misogyny. As Chapter 1 demonstrated, the basic training process served to engender and/or exacerbate this way of thinking in military recruits, fostering within them an attitude towards the female/feminine which was profoundly antagonistic in nature. Hence, when employed by US soldiers, the metaphor of Vietnam-as-female-body often had disturbing consequences, as evidenced by the remark cited above. Such comments betray an attitude of intense hostility which is expressed in terms of sexual aggression (with its encoded male agency). This aggression was frequently released on both a symbolic and a literal level: in the actual rape of Vietnamese women and the violent destruction (metaphorical 'rape') of the feminised landscape via the extensive, and hitherto unprecedented, use of herbicides/anti-plant agents.<sup>50</sup>

As my analysis has shown thus far, Vietnam is represented-- both within officially-sanctioned discourse and within veterans' narrative accounts-- as an inherently pestilent, hostile, and dangerous environment. In addition to emphasising the unsanitary quality of this tropical milieu, writers such as Caputo, O'Brien, Hasford, Tripp, and Del Vecchio frequently draw our attention to the problems that ensue when attempting to navigate, negotiate or traverse the terrain in-country. Hence such representations portray the land and its flora and fauna as a danger to the soldier's corporeal integrity and, by extension, to the American intervention in

Vietnam. In keeping with the portrayal of Vietnam as a virulent, unhygienic environment, the American military mission is frequently depicted— as Philip Melling has suggested in his study *Vietnam in American Literature* (1990)— as an exercise in purification. Hence, as commentator David Welsh has noted, military assaults upon both the Vietnamese people and the in-country landscape were often couched by the US military in language and/or metaphors connected with hygiene and/or surgery. Thus the Army Captain who likened Vietnam to a diseased foreskin in Wright's *Meditations in Green* represents the US intervention as a form of 'cure', an act of benevolence, stating: 'we're just pumping in the penicillin, gentlemen'.<sup>51</sup>

Thus far the analysis has highlighted several important patterns in the representation of the US soldier's encounter with the in-country environment: the depiction of the milieu as inherently hostile, dangerous to the physical health of the soldier; the equation of Vietnam with the realm of the excremental; and the conceptualisation of Vietnam as a body. What has yet to be addressed, however, is the manner in which the relationship between the US soldier and the in-country environment was defined by the specific nature and mode of combat itself. Certain tactical and situational variables peculiar to the US intervention in Vietnam, it can be suggested, destabilised the traditional relationship between the soldier and the land-as-territory. In so doing, I will argue, these

factors rendered problematic individuals' attempts to 'use' their bodies according to the patterns prescribed by the basic training process, resulting in many experiencing their bodies not as effective weapons but as vulnerable targets. As I have already suggested, veterans' accounts frequently characterise the nature of the in-country experience as an encounter with physical frailty. This crucial issue will be subject to more detailed analysis in the ensuing sections of my discussion.

In a chapter entitled 'The Retreat From Meaning' in the excellent *The Tainted War: Culture and Identity in Vietnam War Narratives* (1985), Lloyd B. Lewis highlights the 'formless' quality of Vietnam combat experience as it is expressed in narratives such as Caputo's *A Rumor of War* and O'Brien's *If I Die in a Combat Zone* and *Going After Cacciato*, outlining both the nature of this perceived lack of structure and the problems that it posed for US soldiers who fought in this war. Prior to their arrival in Vietnam, Lewis suggests, soldiers had preconceived ideas as to the nature of the experience ahead of them, notions formed on the basis of their knowledge of the US participation in World War II. However, the Vietnam War did not 'fit into' the pattern established by the 'paradigm war' (World War II), and thus the in-country experience, Lewis contends, can best be understood as 'a systematic disconfirmation' of 'the meanings associated with warfare brought to Vietnam from the United States'. Lewis focuses our attention on the manner in which the concept of

land-as-territory functioned as a defining principle in previous instances of combat. The activities of US troops and allied forces in the Second World War were based, Lewis asserts, upon one fundamental strategic axiom: 'push the enemy back to his point of origin, capture that point of origin, declare yourself triumphant'. Within this operational context, the soldier was provided with a clear goal towards which to direct his efforts. Moreover, the strategic method necessary to achieve this objective was well-defined and there existed a universally-accepted criterion, the capture of land, for the evaluation of success or failure.<sup>52</sup>

The experience of combat in Vietnam, however, did not conform to these structural principles. There was no clearly defined battlefield, nor was there a secure rear area to which the battle-weary could retire. To quote Major General Spurgeon Neel, 'the entire Republic of Vietnam had been designated a combat zone' where 'casualties [could] occur anywhere at any time'.<sup>53</sup> Engagements with Vietnamese troops often occurred by chance and without warning. These skirmishes tended to be brief and were unproductive when judged by previously established criteria for success in battle. In the words of one of the veterans quoted in Baker's *Nam*, 'there was no ground taken. Nobody won anything or moved their lines'.<sup>54</sup> This was a war of attrition in which US military forces' key strategy was to attempt to weaken/wear down the opposition as a means to 'win', a situation where the tabulation of



losses in combat for both sides (body count) was the only means for the participants to gauge their position in the conflict. The concept of land-as-territory had been rendered null and void in this context. The soldier who sought to comprehend his experience with recourse to models of previous wars found himself in a situation which did not 'make sense', and the psychological ramifications of this, as later sections of the analysis will demonstrate, were profoundly damaging. The absence of well-defined 'front' and 'rear' echelons placed US personnel in a position of vulnerability immediately upon their arrival in-country. While some areas were, obviously, safer than others, the knowledge that one might possibly encounter attack from hostile forces at any time provoked anxiety both in combat troops and in support personnel. 'You could be in the most protected space in Vietnam and still know that your safety was provisional,' wrote combat correspondent Michael Herr.<sup>55</sup>

Under such conditions, soldiers had to subordinate their physical impulses in order to minimise the threat of death or injury. In attending to bodily needs in the combat zone (i.e. sleeping, eating, drinking, smoking, urinating, defecating etc.), particularly when on operations in open country, the soldier rendered himself vulnerable to enemy attack.<sup>56</sup> One of the unnamed veterans quoted in Mark Baker's *Nam* refers to the fate of his commanding officer, beheaded by mortar shells while masturbating just outside the main camp area.<sup>57</sup> Elsewhere, in O'Brien's *The Things They Carried*, Ted

Lavender is 'zapped while zipping' while on patrol, shot in the head as he returns from urinating. This latter incident is particularly notable in terms of highlighting the potentially fatal pitfalls of dropping one's guard, even for a few seconds. At the very moment Lavender is shot, the platoon is sharing a moment of relief as one of its members, Lee Strunk, has just emerged unscathed from a potentially life-threatening tunnel searching operation. Had he not obeyed the demands of his body at that moment, Lavender might not have been killed. However, the matter is not as simple as this. 'There's a moral here', one of the men tells his fellow platoon members as they await the arrival of a helicopter to transport Lavender's body, but the moral is not 'avoid relieving yourself in open country', as we might have expected, but is instead 'Stay away from drugs', a reference to the dead man's propensity for tranquillisers and marijuana. The soldier thus draws a somewhat irrelevant moral, which makes a mockery of the notion that morals can be drawn at all. In this way, the text subverts the idea that Lavender's death might serve as a valuable lesson and enable those remaining to better ensure their own safety in-country. While the curbing or controlling of one's bodily needs-- in keeping with patterns established in basic training-- is a sensible precaution, it does not serve to protect the individual fully from harm. Hence, attendance to physical needs puts one at risk yet, conversely, refraining from doing so does not guarantee safety. Taught in boot

camp to conceptualise his (newly constituted) embodiment as a source of empowerment, the US soldier, on the other hand, frequently experienced his body as a liability within the combat zone where circumstances forced him into the role of potential target for an elusive enemy.<sup>58</sup>

Lloyd B. Lewis foregrounds the issue of the 'invisibility of the enemy' as a crucial point of departure from prior modern combat situations. He draws our attention to two essential aspects of the *modus operandi* of the NVA and VC operatives which enabled them to work in a clandestine manner: firstly, their ability to 'blend in' with the civilian populace and secondly, their use of a particular type of weaponry-- booby traps-- to inflict injury on American soldiers.<sup>59</sup> It was difficult, and at times impossible, for the US soldier to distinguish between combatants and non-combatants in Vietnam, for appearances frequently proved to be deceptive. 'The average GI had no more idea who was a VC than who was a "friendly farmer"', writes journalist Tim Page, who accompanied various units on their operations in-country.<sup>60</sup> Not only were hostile operatives difficult to identify, they were also difficult to find. Familiar with the terrain and environmental conditions and equipped with knowledge gained from years of experience of guerrilla warfare, enemy operatives seemed able to appear and disappear at will, and Lewis writes of the focus upon the 'almost preternatural invisibility' of the Viet Cong in veterans' narratives, where they are frequently described as

"phantoms", "apparitions" and "ghosts".<sup>61</sup> O'Brien, Caputo and others repeatedly refer to the apparent insubstantiality of the VC/NVA forces, a factor of crucial importance in O'Brien's perception of the in-country milieu as an inherently uncanny environment:

The countryside itself seemed spooky- shadows and tunnels and incense burning in the dark. The land was haunted. We were fighting forces that did not obey the laws of twentieth-century science. [. . .] It was ghost country, and Charlie Cong was the main ghost. The way he came out at night. How you never really saw him, just thought you did. Almost magical- appearing, disappearing. He could blend with the land, changing form, becoming trees and grass. He could levitate. He could fly. He could pass through barbed wire and melt away like ice and creep up on you without sound or footsteps. He was scary.<sup>62</sup>

Elsewhere Caputo foregrounds the manner in which the invisibility of the enemy placed the US soldier in an impossible situation: how could one be expected to track down and eradicate 'a formless enemy who evaporated like the morning jungle mists, only to materialize in some unexpected place'?<sup>63</sup> Within this milieu, the Vietnamese 'enemy' gained the upper hand by exploiting their ability to conceal their corporeal presence. A key tenet established in the basic training process, as the previous chapter detailed, was the belief that the 'hard' body of the US soldier would serve to overpower and defeat the 'feminine' (hence *soft*, *weak*) body of his Vietnamese opponent. However, the principle of the inherent supremacy and efficacy of the hard, militarised American body was

often contested-- and frequently rendered invalid-- by the combat context in which the American soldier found himself in Vietnam.

As Lewis suggests, the reliance of the VC and NVA fighting forces upon booby traps gave extra credence to the myth of an omnipotent and omnipresent enemy. An infantryman quoted in Bergerud's study, *Red Thunder, Tropic Lightning*, states: 'The "enemy" was mostly unseen and therefore didn't exist as a person. His weapons existed- his bullets, his mortars, his booby traps, his punji stick traps- but he himself didn't generally exist. VC was a name, a subject, an object that we were fighting'.<sup>64</sup> Lloyd B. Lewis's analysis provides an in-depth commentary upon the implications of 'the most psychologically devastating anti-personnel weapon in the modern military arsenal' for the American soldier. Lewis foregrounds both the horrifically destructive impact of such devices for those wounded (which will be addressed in Chapter 3), and also the intense levels of anxiety and dread provoked by the expectation/fear of detonating one of these weapons. Lewis refers to a passage from Caputo's *A Rumor of War*, which is worth quoting at length here:

**We were making history: the first American soldiers to fight an enemy whose principal weapons were the mine and the booby trap. That kind of warfare has its own peculiar terrors. It turns an infantryman's world upside down. The foot soldier has a special feeling for the ground. He walks on it, fights on it, sleeps and eats on it; the ground shelters him under fire; he digs his home in it. But mines and booby traps transform that friendly, familiar earth into a thing of menace, a thing to be feared as much as machine guns or mortar shells. The infantryman knows that any moment the ground he is walking on**

can erupt and kill him; kill him if he's lucky. If he's unlucky, he will be turned into a blind, deaf, emasculated, legless shell.<sup>65</sup>

Within Lewis's discussion and in keeping with his focus upon 'the retreat from meaning', the above textual quotation serves to illustrate both the 'demoralizing' and the 'meaning-subverting' implications of this type of combat. While Lewis does not explicitly state the nature of the specific meaning that is subverted in the above instance, it is evident, in accordance with points made earlier in my argument, that this refers to the disruption of the traditional relationship between the soldier and the land itself, as the 'friendly, familiar earth' is rendered threatening and hostile.<sup>66</sup> This anxiety frequently engendered a heightening of consciousness regarding the movements of the body, 'You decide to be ultracareful', writes Tim O'Brien, 'You try to second-guess the mine. Should you put your foot to that flat rock or the clump of weed to its rear?'. This state of hyper-vigilance, however, itself created intense psychological pressure: 'The moment-to-moment, step-by-step decisionmaking preys on your mind', O'Brien writes, 'The effect sometimes is paralysis'.<sup>67</sup> Moreover, while such an 'ultracareful' attitude might lessen one's chances of injury-- as might the adoption of other protective practices such as the wearing of a helmet and flak jacket-- these measures could not be relied upon to protect one from sudden violent death or wounding. Within this context, death and injury took on an arbitrary, random quality-- in many cases, according to

veteran writers, it was a question of chance or luck as to whether one died or survived, was wounded or emerged unscathed. '[E]arly death, blindness, loss of legs, arms or balls, major and lasting disfigurement- the whole rotten deal- could come in on the freakyfluky as easily as in the so-called expected ways', writes journalist Michael Herr.<sup>68</sup>

In a 1985 study of the relationship between traumatic stressors and the later development of post-traumatic stress disorder in Vietnam veterans, Robert S. Laufer et al. suggest that the fear of death or injury was a major concern amongst soldiers in-country, and that this anxiety had long-term consequences for some individuals. While Laufer writes of 'the disorienting impact of fear', O'Brien suggests that it is the unpredictable quality of the soldier's day-to-day existence in-country rather than the fear *per se*, which, in the words of one of his fellow troopers, 'chews on your mind'. 'It's an absurd combination of certainty and uncertainty', this unnamed soldier explains, 'the certainty that you're walking in minefields, walking past the things day after day; the uncertainty of your every movement, of which way to shift your weight, of where to sit down'. Here and elsewhere, the soldier's body becomes both a source and an index of his vulnerability within the in-country environment.<sup>69</sup>

For some, the confusion as to the identity and whereabouts of the enemy led to psychological anxieties concerning the death of civilians; it also gave a quality of purposelessness to patrols and

'search-and-destroy' missions for, as Tim Page writes, 'Most of the time [was] spent slogging about in vicious circles looking for [the enemy], trying to discern who was who'.<sup>70</sup> Through their 'invisibility' and familiarity with the environment, the Viet Cong and other hostile operatives were often able to remain, literally, one step ahead of US troops. Not only were the VC adept at evasive manoeuvres, but they are also frequently shown to have stage-managed actual encounters with the Americans. According to figures quoted by commentator James William Gibson, over 80% of gun battles between US and Vietnamese troops were initiated by the latter.<sup>71</sup> Philip Caputo reiterates this imbalance of power, highlighting the degree to which the operational activities of his unit were subject to the machinations and manipulations of the Viet Cong at every turn:

The war was mostly a matter of enduring weeks of expectant waiting and, at random intervals, of conducting vicious manhunts through jungles and swamps where snipers harassed us constantly and booby traps cut us down one by one.

The tedium was occasionally relieved by a large-scale search-and-destroy operation, but the exhilaration of riding the lead helicopter into a landing zone was usually followed by more of the same hot walking, with the mud sucking at our boots and the sun thudding against our helmets while an invisible enemy shot at us from distant tree lines. The rare instances when the VC chose to fight a set-piece battle provided the only excitement [ . . . ]<sup>72</sup>

Two crucial issues emerge from Caputo's comments here. Firstly, these remarks suggest that despite the efforts of the US military, the Viet Cong retained control over much of the action that took place in-country. Secondly, Caputo highlights the sense of persecution



('snipers harassed us constantly') felt by many US soldiers in these circumstances, and this is later reinforced by his remarks regarding the psychological effects of the prevalence of mines and booby traps. 'We could not fight back against the Viet Cong mines or take cover from them or anticipate when they would go off', Caputo declares, 'Walking down the trails, waiting for those things to explode, we had begun to feel more like victims than soldiers'.<sup>73</sup>

Chapter 1 highlighted the manner in which many veterans represent themselves as victims within the context of basic training. Renderings of the in-country experience-- particularly within texts which seek to detail the experience of footsoldiers and infantrymen-- pick up this narrative thread and emphasise the soldier's ongoing sense of victimisation within the Vietnam milieu itself. Texts such as Caputo's *A Rumor of War* frequently draw our attention to a perceived imbalance of power between the US military and the hostile Vietnamese fighting force, suggesting that Viet Cong and NVA combatants often gained the upper hand over the Americans via their ability both to blend into the environment and to exploit the natural characteristics of this milieu. In their 1983 study *The Geography of Warfare*, Patrick O'Sullivan and Jesse W. Miller Jr. acknowledge that the success of combatants within the context of guerrilla warfare is dependent upon their ability to engage in 'an intense exploitation of the character of the landscape', to utilise the terrain and its resources to their advantage.<sup>74</sup> As James William

Gibson has noted, the Vietnamese fighting forces frequently used nature to defeat technology, contravening the American assumption that possession of industrially advanced weaponry guaranteed their victory against a more 'primitive' enemy. 'By far the most important Vietnamese use of nature was their use of the *earth*', writes Gibson, drawing our attention to Viet Cong and NVA combatants' construction of intricate underground tunnel systems which 'totally confounded American commanders':

Vietnamese villagers and Vietcong cadres and NVA troops all built thousands of miles of elaborate tunnels inside the south. The more sophisticated tunnel networks stretched from the northern supply routes along the Ho Chi Minh Trail in Cambodia to the very outskirts of Saigon. Hundreds, if not thousands, of more locally oriented tunnels hid Vietcong troops and supplies from US search-and-destroy operations, artillery barrages, and air strikes.<sup>75</sup>

Prior to the escalation of America's involvement in Vietnam, as cultural commentator Loren Baritz has argued, Americans were united in their faith in technology. During this period, he writes, many felt that 'America's technological supremacy was a symbol of its uniqueness, and technology made the nation militarily invincible'.<sup>76</sup> As combat correspondent Tim Page wryly notes, 'the average GI was a walking ad for the offshoots of NASA':

They were all looped, draped or hung with the latest gizmos of Western innovation [. . .] They were equipped to do a job; command had all the big toys to support them, plus the computers to convince everyone, including themselves, that they were winning, or at least envisaging lights at the end of the tunnel. I always wondered whose tunnel, since

Charlie had a 200km underground complex extending to the outskirts of Saigon.<sup>77</sup>

In keeping with this faith in technology, the basic training process sought to produce militarised 'hard' bodies whose machine-like qualities (such as bulk, strength, endurance and self-discipline) evidenced their superiority-- and assured their triumph-- over a diminutive, feminised enemy. However, as veterans and other commentators stress, the Vietnamese fighting force frequently confounded the American assumptions by turning apparent shortcomings-- such as their slight stature-- to their advantage. Hence, as 'tunnel rat' Phil Boardman states, the Vietnamese underground passageways were often constructed so as to be inaccessible to American soldiers:

At the mouth, they were fairly large: maybe 2 feet by 2 feet. That was so the VC could jump back in on a run. Then they would narrow right away to maybe 1 foot by 1 foot. Vietnamese are really small, and they would make it a tight squeeze for them. I was thin, but there were tunnels I couldn't get into. Making it narrow like that would keep most GIs from going in after Charlie [ . . . ]<sup>78</sup>

In this context, the American soldier's corporeal bulk was a disadvantage, rather than an asset. Tobias Wolff writes of feeling 'oafish' within the Vietnamese milieu due to his size: 'I didn't fit here. I was out of proportion not only to the men around me but to everything else- the huts, the villages, even the fields. All was shaped and scaled to the people whose place this was'.<sup>79</sup> In addition to the problems the US military faced when attempting to

access the subterranean tunnel network<sup>80</sup>, veterans also draw our attention to the fact that the US soldier's larger size increased his visibility, magnifying his chances of being injured by enemy fire. Within the in-country context, the American soldier's body was not only out of place, but was also visible and vulnerable. Platoon leader James McDonough details a relevant instance here: 'Taylor, one of three black soldiers in the platoon, was a first-rate rifleman. Well over six feet tall, he had suffered the fate of many big men in Vietnam: he was an easy target; he had already been wounded twice'.<sup>81</sup>

The defoliation of the Vietnamese landscape-- while intended to reveal the whereabouts of the elusive enemy-- frequently had a converse effect, as Gibson has noted, rendering the US soldier exposed, without a place to take cover in the event of attack from hostile forces. "Let me tell you about that defoliation program", declares an unnamed speaker in Ronald J. Glasser's *365 Days*, "It don't work":

"The trouble with the whole thing is that the VC and NVA use guns in their ambushes instead of bows and arrows. Nobody mentioned that. They don't have to be sitting on top of you to pull off an ambush. An AK-47 round is effective up to 1500 meters and accurate up to 600. So we'll hit an area, like along a busy road, billions of gallons of the stuff, and pretty soon there's nothing except some dead bushes for fifty or even 300 meters on both sides of where the road or track used to be. So the gooks will start shooting at you from 300 meters away instead of five, only now you're the one that ain't got no place to hide."<sup>82</sup>

The ability of the Vietnamese fighting force to gain the advantage by harnessing the natural characteristics of the environment represents, as Gibson has noted, a triumph of nature over technology. Hence the strategies of the NVA and Viet Cong not only served to disempower the US soldier, they also challenged his faith in the inherent superiority of the machine-body. As further analysis will show, the tactics utilised by hostile Vietnamese forces not only compromised the American soldier's ability to employ his body as a weapon within the combat milieu, they also reveal the manner in which corporeal frailty could overcome the technologically-driven form of embodiment at the very crux of the soldier-identity.

As this chapter has already demonstrated, Vietnam itself is frequently presented, both in officially-sanctioned discourses and in veterans' narratives, as an *excremental* arena. As such, the in-country milieu poses an inherent threat to the soldier's corporeal integrity and to the American military mission in general, on both a literal and a symbolic level. As my analysis has detailed, veterans' accounts of the in-country experience frequently foreground instances which represent a triumph of the excremental over the machine-body of the soldier-- such as Kiowa's sinking to his death in the 'shit field', an incident whose symbolic potential is explored at length in O'Brien's *The Things They Carried*. As has already been suggested, the realm of the excremental-- and the corporeal frailty that it represents-- is thus depicted as encroaching upon the

seemingly-impenetrable fortress of the militarised body. The threat posed by faecal matter is rendered literal by the tendency of the NVA and Viet Cong to use human and animal detritus as weapons. Several commentators draw our attention to the use of 'punji' or 'pungi' sticks, which Jonathan Shay describes as follows: 'A sharpened bamboo or metal stake fixed vertically into the ground at the bottom of a camouflaged pit big enough to step or fall into. Usually the tip was smeared with feces (sic) to insure that the resulting wound would become infected'.<sup>83</sup> In the early (pre-1968 Tet Offensive) years of the US intervention-- before the Viet Cong and NVA came to rely increasingly upon mines and other explosive booby traps-- these weapons were widely feared, for they caused a significant proportion of injuries among US footsoldiers and infantrymen.<sup>84</sup> In a statistical study of 17,726 US soldiers wounded in Vietnam from March 1966-July 1967, Robert M. Hardaway (MD) reports the following:

Patients with Pungi stick wounds [. . .] numbered 334, required no blood, but required an average of 12 days hospitalisation in Viet Nam compared to 9.63 days for all wounds. This was probably due to the unusually high infection rate of 10.07%, the highest of any wound cause, most likely related to the fact that the wounds tended to be deep but innocuous looking puncture wounds and therefore many were not properly debrided, and possibly that the Pungi sticks were reputedly dipped in fecal matter before being set. There was one death due to Pungi sticks.<sup>85</sup>

Elsewhere, commentator H. Palmer Hall cites the punji stick and the helicopter as 'central symbols of the Vietnam War' because they

epitomise the attitudes, assumptions and strategies of the Vietnamese versus the US military. He writes:

Just as the helicopter can be seen to represent the American way of doing war, the speed with which the country kept hoping to end the war, the punji stick and the explosive mine may be seen to stand for the Viet Cong. A symbol of patience and of the willingness to fight as long as necessary, the punji stick points up waiting for its victims. The helicopter on the other hand, flies frantically, searching for an elusive and patient enemy, rarely finding him, often becoming a victim itself.<sup>86</sup>

Vietnamese combatants are thus represented as using natural-- specifically *excremental*-- materials to triumph over their US opponents, whose possession of high-tech machinery, such as the helicopter, does not necessarily ensure their success on the battlefield.<sup>87</sup> Indeed, Robert Jay Lifton draws to our attention a key instance in which the Vietnamese fighting force utilise bodily excretions as a means to render hi-tech machinery ineffective within the combat zone. This 'parable of piss-power', as Lifton wryly describes it, involves the Vietnamese combatants' employment of containers of urine as a decoy to trick the US military's high-tech 'people sniffers', 'sensors designed to detect human presence by means of organic odors' (sic).<sup>88</sup> Elsewhere, in Mark Baker's *Nam*, a veteran describes-- with great disgust-- a similarly ingenious use of faecal matter on the part of his Vietnamese opponents: 'At one point, the NVA were throwing shit bombs at us. They take advantage of the ammonia in the shit when it breaks down as an explosive'.<sup>89</sup>

The American soldier in-country thus frequently found himself overpowered and overwhelmed by the excremental on a number of fronts simultaneously. The VC and NVA forces' recourse to faecal matter and urine as useful and dangerous weapons not only contravened accepted assumptions concerning human detritus as 'waste', a concept explored on a myriad of levels within O'Brien's *The Things They Carried*, as the earlier portions of this chapter demonstrated; such detritus is also symbolic of the frail, 'leaky' constitution of the human body, which is clearly at odds with the impermeable, resilient form of embodiment demanded of the soldier-male. In addition to these disturbing excremental encounters, service in Vietnam frequently necessitated the US soldier's confrontation with his own bodily wastes, an experience which often proved profoundly disconcerting.

While the facilities available to US soldiers and support personnel in Vietnam depended upon factors such as the branch of service, the nature of their in-country assignments and the unit to which they were attached, many narratives pinpoint the elements of material deprivation and physical hardship as key characteristics of the in-country experience.<sup>90</sup> Philip Caputo, stationed at a somewhat rudimentary base camp outside Da Naang, comments upon the primitive existence and physical deprivation that the men had to endure:

Dust, filth, and mosquitoes filled our hooches at night. Our one cooked meal seemed always to be



rice and beans. C rations [canned food] constituted the other two meals [ . . . ] We had no field showers at first; there was seldom enough water for drinking let alone bathing [ . . . ]<sup>91</sup>

For the US serviceman on ambush, the level of deprivation was far greater. Lacking toilet facilities, reduced to surviving solely on canned food and to taking a few hours' rest (when circumstances allowed) in a temporary bunker or under his military-issue waterproof poncho, he returned to base camp filthy and fetid. 'Life for the grunts in the valley was grim,' writes Robert Mason, 'In a few days they were reduced to sodden, weary, leech-encrusted men'.<sup>92</sup> For many, day-to-day existence in-country necessitated an ongoing involvement with dirt and grime, a situation at odds with the conditions and prescribed behaviours prevalent in the US. "When I was a kid, my mom used to get pissed as hell at me for makin' mud pies. Now I'm livin' in one!" quips a young Marine in *Vietnam: Perkasio*, W.D. Ehrhart's biographical account of his experiences in-country.<sup>93</sup>

A sense of loss of control over the body was frequently experienced as access to the items and procedures required to eliminate corporeal odours and to maintain physical cleanliness was denied. Caputo makes explicit the manner in which these conditions caused himself and his fellow soldiers to experience self-disgust, to feel ill-at-ease with their own bodies: 'what with waste-matter caking to anal hairs [due to lack of toilet paper] and no baths and [ . . . ] uniforms stiff and white with dried sweat, it got so that we could not

stand our own smell'. When a visiting General complains that the bunkers the men have erected compromise the 'offensive spirit' crucial to the Marine combat ethos, one of the men present remarks that, having laboured for weeks in a high temperature and without bathing facilities, the assembled soldiers 'were about as offensive as they could get'.<sup>94</sup>

Confronting one's own detritus (and the excretions of others) was a key element of the in-country experience which-- as my analysis has already shown-- had a disturbing effect upon US personnel. Contact with faecal matter, an index of corporeal vulnerability, was best avoided, then, if the US serviceman was to maintain an image of the soldier-body as machine and/or impenetrable fortress. James William Gibson draws our attention to the US military's development of waterborne sewage systems in-country, referring to a US Army report on base construction within the Vietnam milieu, to highlight the manner in which 'Sewage development [. . .] aided relations between the allies, as well as laying the foundation for future urban progress'. His comments here foreground the unpleasant/disturbing nature of the experience when American personnel encountered their own detritus:

Military standards called for building waterborne sewage systems for bases classified as "temporary" (meaning they were to last at least four years, as opposed to the two more primitive levels of encampment, "field" and "intermediate"). In these two lower levels, fecal matter was burned with diesel fuel in cutaway 55-gallon drums. Troops did not like such bonfires in their base towns: "Morale was

adversely affected by this dense, foul, black smoke generated during burning.”

Contact with ‘foreign’ excrement was even more unsettling:

In particular, Americans were especially upset by those occasions when Vietnamese “local-hire personnel” were not available for disposing of Vietnamese fecal matter associated with their employment in American base areas: “Troops were particularly disgruntled when they had to burn out latrines restricted to Vietnamese workers.”<sup>95</sup>

Here and elsewhere we sense an unease concerning the maintenance of body boundaries within the in-country milieu which exhibits itself via the desire to conceal, eliminate or avoid substances such as faeces, urine, pus, blood etc. Contact with this ‘marginal’ matter triggers anxieties concerning the ‘boundedness’-- and hence invulnerability-- of the soldier-body.<sup>96</sup> ‘There is nothing so vulnerable as a Marine with his pants down’, remarks veteran W.D. Ehrhart as he details the risks involved when, suffering from diarrhoea, he is forced to defecate while on manoeuvres in open country.<sup>97</sup>

As Chapter 1 detailed, a key element of the soldier-identity involves self-discipline, specifically mastery of one’s own body. Within the in-country context, however, the soldier frequently experienced a lack or loss of control over his bodily functions, either due to illness or as a result of the psychological stress of combat. James R. Ebert draws our attention to the prevalence of the terms ‘pucker factor’ and ‘scared shitless’ among combat troops in Vietnam to denote the involuntary contraction of the anal sphincter

experienced by many in terrifying situations. Such was the persistence of the ethos of corporeal control instilled via basic training that the soldier who confronted a fear-provoking situation was often less concerned about the prospect of bodily injury, than he was about losing mastery of his own body. Ebert quotes infantryman Dwight Reiland on his reaction to walking into an ambush while on patrol in-country:

“Oh God! I was so damn scared! My stomach was turning. I suspected I was going to vomit and also have a bowel movement at the same time. I remember thinking I would rather throw up because that wouldn't show, but I can also remember- and why a person would think about that at a time like that- but I thought, God, I don't want to shit my pants. If they find me and see that I've shit my pants they are going to know how scared I was.”<sup>98</sup>

Arguably, it is this confrontation with one's own frailty that gives to the Vietnam experience its profoundly disturbing quality. For the soldier-male in battle, as military historian Richard Holmes has noted, the real enemy is fear itself.<sup>99</sup> To soil oneself in this context was to display one's terror openly, invalidating the notion of one's body as a machine, hence disconfirming one's identity as a soldier and, more importantly, one's status as a man.<sup>100</sup> Here, as elsewhere in my discussion, excrement is depicted as both a source and an index of disempowerment, in that it endangers the soldier's sense of corporeal boundedness-- and hence, by implication, his invulnerability. As we shall see in the next chapter-- which focuses upon the wounds suffered by American soldiers in Vietnam-- the

machine-body ideal at the very foundation of the soldier-identity is further undermined by the witnessing of instances of injury. These in-country encounters with severe corporeal damage were often deeply distressing, as my analysis will demonstrate.

We have seen in this chapter that the in-country environment is presented-- both in official discourse and in veterans' narrative accounts-- as an unpleasant and dangerous milieu which was inherently threatening to the soldier's bodily integrity. While the US military were initially confident that their employment of high-tech gadgetry would quickly defeat a less well-equipped enemy, the strategies employed by hostile Vietnamese combatants-- particularly their use of environmental factors to their own advantage-- frequently rendered US machinery ineffectual. Within basic training, as Chapter 1 detailed, the US military both refashioned the body of the soldier and transformed his attitude toward his own embodiment, encouraging him to conceptualise his body as an essential weapon in the military arsenal. Within a belief system which is predicated upon the notion of 'salvation through technology' (as Lifton has termed it), the construction of machine-bodies would seem to guarantee victory for the US military effort.<sup>101</sup> Once in-country, however, this faith in technology, and in the machine-body as *technology* (and hence invulnerable), was severely challenged. Within the combat milieu here, as analysis above has detailed, US soldiers often experienced their bodies not as useful instruments,

but rather as burdensome obstacles to the achievement of military objectives, another of 'the things they carried', to quote the title of Tim O'Brien's narrative. As veterans' renderings of the in-country experience evidence, both the material deprivation and the sheer terror of combat itself forced soldiers to face their own physical limitations. Such encounters with aspects and elements of embodiment generally suppressed within American culture were, as further analysis in the next chapter will detail, profoundly unsettling experiences for many individuals.

## CHAPTER 3

### Bodily Wounds and Wounded Bodies

'The main purpose and outcome of war is injuring.'

Elaine Scarry *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World*<sup>1</sup>

'I stared blankly, contemplating the ominous dark fly that crawled through the tacky, viscous fluid that was oozing from the hole in the young soldier's head. I examined the helmet again and noticed the trite saying he had scrawled on the camouflage cover. It was now his epitaph: "Don't shoot me, I bleed!"'

Todd Dexter, Infantryman, quoted in Eric M. Bergerud *Red Thunder, Tropic Lightning: The World of a Combat Division in Vietnam*<sup>2</sup>

'We put their bodies back together *as best we could*.'

American Nurse, quoted in Myra MacPherson *Long Time Passing: Vietnam and the Haunted Generation*<sup>3</sup>

As the previous chapter demonstrated, the US soldier frequently experienced the in-country environment as a hostile milieu where the climate, topography and vegetation posed constant threats to his physical safety. Veterans' narratives foreground the myriad of difficulties that American personnel faced in attempting to traverse the Vietnamese landscape, highlighting the physical hardships and afflictions endured by the footsoldier in his seemingly endless search for an elusive enemy. In a context in which Viet Cong and NVA operatives frequently gained the upper hand by their 'invisibility'--and hence their apparent lack of corporeal presence-- the American soldier often experienced his own body as a liability, both a locus and an index

of vulnerability. While basic training had taught the recruit to think about and utilise his body as a machine, the connotations of impenetrability and indestructibility associated with this notion of embodiment were violently contradicted by his encounters with corporeal frailty in-country.

Exposure to injury formed a key element of the in-country experience for many who served in Vietnam. While the extent of this exposure may have varied widely-- the footsoldier could confront multiple instances of severe wounding on a daily basis, while deployment in a rear echelon supporting role might render such exposure minimal-- a high proportion of veterans who have spoken or written about their experiences in Vietnam have emphasised the tremendous impact of witnessing the wounding of others while in-country. The issue of injury, and of the ways in which it is discussed in the narratives of veterans, occupies both the current and the next chapter. While the present section of the discussion will, in the main, restrict itself to analysis of the literal aspects of corporeal wounding-- providing some factual background regarding the nature of these wounds and their treatment-- attention will be drawn to the manner in which witnessing instances of bodily injury involved not only a confrontation with corporeal frailty, but also an experience of *abjection*, an area which previous sections of my argument have already touched upon. The fourth chapter will extend this scrutiny of injury to explore



the various complex (and often contradictory) metaphorical/symbolic significances of bodily wounds and wounded bodies within this context.

The previous chapter foregrounded some of the ways in which the US soldier in Vietnam found himself in a situation vastly different from that faced by Americans who served in earlier wars. Moreover, it was evident that those who sought to describe their time in Vietnam frequently identified the unique qualities of the war as defining features of the in-country experience itself, emphasising the highly problematic implications of such elements both for the individual soldier and for the American military mission in general. This drawing of distinctions between the Vietnam experience and prior combat situations is further reflected in discussions of the injuries suffered by US soldiers who fought there. According to reports provided by military-medical personnel, the wounds received by American troops serving in Vietnam differed significantly from those experienced in earlier conflicts. Various commentators direct our attention to the major changes here with regard to the weapons employed and the injuries that resulted from their use. In the *Vietnam Weapons Handbook* (1986)– ‘a quick-reference source for all military enthusiasts’– David Rosser-Owen highlights the importance of the widespread use of assault rifles by both US and Vietnamese combatants. In prior combat contexts, US soldiers had been reliant upon pistols and sub-machine guns as close-quarter weapons. Vietnam marked the advent of the M-16 (developed during the 1950s, it became standard issue for US military personnel

during the Vietnam conflict), and the widespread use of the AK-47 (various versions of which had been in existence since the 1940s) by the Viet Cong and NVA forces. These assault rifles, with their automatic-fire capabilities, were designed to fulfil particular requirements-- 'the need for compactness, light weight and high rate of fire'. Consequently such ordnance also inflicted specific types of wounds.<sup>4</sup>

In a detailed overview, *Medical Support of the US Army in Vietnam 1965-1970* (1991), Major General Spurgeon Neel elucidates the mechanics of wounding with regard to this weaponry:

High-velocity, lightweight rounds from M16/AK47-type weapons have greater kinetic energy and leave larger temporary and permanent cavities than do low-velocity projectiles, and their easy deflection by foliage resulted in tumbling and spinning and the generation of even larger entrance wounds. Moreover, blood vessels not in the direct path of the missile were affected. The bullet usually disintegrated and was rarely found whole even when an exit wound was present.<sup>5</sup>

In their discussion of the wounding power of various missiles used in Vietnam, Rich et al. state that the use of high-velocity bullets produced 'greater tissue destruction than any weapon used in this or [previous] wars'.<sup>6</sup> Moreover, comparing statistical data from the Vietnam conflict with that of World War II and the Korean War, Neel alerts us to another important consequence of this use of rapid-fire weapons-- a significant increase in incidences of multiple wounding.<sup>7</sup>

The frequent employment of mines and booby traps by the VC and NVA was also highly significant in this regard. In Vietnam, a much

greater proportion of casualties resulted from small-arms fire and from mines and booby traps than in either World War II or Korea. This conflict marked the first field use of the 'Claymore' mine which, with its 'intensity of peppering and velocity of fragments' served to inflict 'deep penetration in a number of sites', again resulting in more cases of individuals with multiple injuries. In incidences of wounding by mines or booby traps, as Neel notes, 'the proximity of the blast caused severe local destruction, and tremendous amounts of dirt, debris and secondary missiles were hurled into the wound'. As the conflict progressed, there was a marked proportional increase in such 'fragment' injuries.<sup>8</sup>

General patterns emerge, then, with regard to the wounds suffered by the US casualties of the Vietnam conflict. According to Neel and Rich et al., the tissue damage inflicted was generally more extensive, while Neel also asserts that there was a higher frequency of multiple wounds, and that these wounds tended to be contaminated to a greater degree than those experienced in previous wars. 'The problems which medical personnel in Vietnam encountered,' he states, 'were more complicated than before'.<sup>9</sup> In view of these factors, one might expect that the mortality rate for US personnel injured in Vietnam would represent a significant increase upon that of earlier conflicts. However, for a variety of reasons, this was not the case.

In order to cope with their casualties in Vietnam, the US military developed a sophisticated system of medical support. 'Medevac'

helicopters (or in the case of the Marine Corps, gunships) were used to transport the injured to well-equipped medical facilities within the theatre of operations, thus minimising, in most cases, the lapse of time between wounding and definitive care. Military-medical commentators have emphasised the link between evacuation times and mortality rates for those injured in battle— the quicker a combat casualty is transported to hospital, the better are his chances of survival. Thus in Vietnam, the dramatic reduction in time lapse between wounding and treatment is paralleled by a significant decrease in mortality for the injured in comparison with that of previous wars. Those wounded in the First World War could expect to wait up to 18 hours before being evacuated for treatment, and this resulted in an 18% mortality rate for these casualties. There was a sharp decrease in evacuation time in the major wars that followed: 4-6 hours for the US soldier wounded in World War II, 2-4 hours for troops injured in Korea and an average of 1-2 hours for the serviceman in Vietnam. Mortality rates for such casualties matched this declining trend: approximately 3.3% for World War II, 2.4% for Korea and 1.8% for Vietnam.<sup>10</sup> Elsewhere Neel has stated that roughly 97.5% of those wounded who reached a medical facility alive survived their injuries.<sup>11</sup>

In addition to the effects of the speedy evacuation of the injured, Neel has foregrounded the 'excellence of medical care' in general, and its success in diminishing the mortality rate for the wounded. He draws our attention to factors such as the increased

availability of essential life-saving supplies, the existence of well-appointed forward hospitals, the extensive employment of sophisticated surgical procedures and the use of advanced medical management techniques, considering them crucial in lowering the morbidity and mortality of injured individuals.<sup>12</sup> Comments made by Neel and other military-medical veterans emphasise that surgery as practised within the theatre of operations represented a significant advance upon prior combat contexts, and they state that surgical intervention here was much more invasive and aggressive than that performed previously. Confronted by new extremes of injury-- the broken bodies of individuals who would not have reached treatment facilities alive in earlier wars-- military medicine 'upped the ante', with doctors and surgeons now willing to open up and enter into the bodies of the wounded to a much greater extent than ever before.<sup>13</sup> Eiseman, in his 1967 article 'Combat Casualty Management in Vietnam', cites the cases of two Marines saved by military doctors through the use of such invasive procedures, asserting that their severe abdominal injuries would have proved fatal under World War II conditions.<sup>14</sup> In the case of those with open head wounds, Eiseman alerts us to the fact that aeromedical evacuation to well-equipped hospital facilities in-country widened the time window available for neurosurgeons to perform advanced surgical procedures. These factors saved many more lives than would have been possible 'under ordinary conditions of war'.<sup>15</sup> As technological advancement produced weaponry with an increased capability for inflicting multiple

injury, military medicine 'retaliated' by constructing a more sophisticated system of treatment for the wounded. As a result of this, as Neel, Eiseman and others have emphasised, US soldiers wounded in combat in Vietnam were surviving with injuries that would have resulted in their deaths in prior combat contexts.

There are several key issues at stake here with regard to the discussion that follows. It is apparent from remarks made by military-medical commentators that soldiers injured in Vietnam frequently experienced different-- and in some ways, more severe-- forms of wounding than in earlier combat situations. The narratives provided by veterans also draw our attention to instances of extreme corporeal damage. However, as analysis below will demonstrate, such narratives often highlight issues omitted from officially-sanctioned accounts of the injuries suffered by US soldiers and others in-country. As my argument will illustrate, texts such as Philip Caputo's *A Rumor of War* (1978) provide an insight into the predicament that soldiers faced when witnessing (and attempting to describe) instances of severe injury. John Parrish's *Journal of a Plague Year* (1979)-- which depicts his service as a Navy doctor in Vietnam-- provides detailed description of the horrific wounds inflicted upon bodies within this context and draws our attention to the tactics used by military-medical personnel in their attempt to deal with such corporeal damage. However, as my analysis will show, Parrish uses the narrative arena not to outline the effectiveness of combat medicine but, conversely, to foreground its

shortcomings and limitations when confronted by instances of irreparable injury. In the closing section of the chapter, Ron Kovic's *Born on the Fourth of July* (1976) will be used as a touchstone for the consideration of the wounded soldier's experience both of injury and of the military-medical management provided for him. Kovic self-consciously presents himself as one of those individuals whose wounds would have proved fatal in previous wars. In its graphic description of his injuries and their implications, *Born on the Fourth of July* raises crucial issues with regard to the consequences of survival (both immediate and long term) for the irreparably damaged, those veterans suffering from permanent physical or mental impairment.

Not surprisingly, officially-sanctioned accounts of US military-medical treatment of American soldiers and support personnel injured in Vietnam focus upon the positive aspects of this process. Commentators such as Neel and Eiseman present the Vietnam conflict as a learning experience for military physicians, outlining significant achievements and improvements in the treatment of casualties and citing statistics regarding decreased mortality. Such celebration of the triumph of US military medicine within this context is, however, (implicitly or explicitly) contested by veterans such as Caputo, Parrish and Kovic who, while not disputing certain material facts (low morbidity rates of casualties, development of advanced systems/methods for treatment), provide a much more disillusioned perspective with regard to their own experiences of wounding. What I am particularly

interested in here are the realms of knowledge and experience concerning wounds and injuries which, having been excluded from the officially-sanctioned reports, resurface in these narratives. Such texts frequently provide a much-needed counterpoint to statistics on decreased mortality rates, bearing witness to the horror of the injuries of others, in the case of Caputo's *A Rumor of War* and Parrish's *Journal of a Plague Year*, and verbalising the suffering of the wounded themselves, as in Ron Kovic's *Born on the Fourth of July*.

Witnessing instances of injury in-country was, for many soldiers and support personnel, a distressing and disturbing experience. '[T]he mutilation caused by modern weapons came as a shock', writes ex-Marine Philip Caputo in his narrative *A Rumor of War* (1977). The extensive employment of mines and booby traps by the VC and NVA forces, as discussed in the previous chapter, frequently resulted in the partial or complete disintegration of the bodies of those US soldiers who fell victim to them. Caputo relates the instance of Lieutenant Colonel Meyers who, having stepped on a booby-trapped shell, was literally blown to pieces, fragmented to the degree that those attempting to collect his body parts could not find enough pieces to fill a small bag.<sup>16</sup> Elsewhere, veterans quoted in Wallace Terry's *Bloods: An Oral History of the Vietnam War by Black Veterans* (1984) attest to the corporeal chaos that frequently resulted from wounding in this context. 'Dudes got legs shot off and shit, got half their face gone and shit', remarks Charles Strong, US Army machine gunner, while combat



paratrooper Arthur E. 'Gene' Woodley Jr. notes, 'I had never experienced anything quite as horrible as seeing a human being with his face blown apart.'<sup>17</sup>

For many footsoldiers, infantrymen and others, such contact with human remains was not limited to merely *seeing* these broken bodies, they often also had to physically handle them. Veteran Charles Strong impresses upon the reader the horror of having to gather up the torn and ruptured bodies of dead comrades: 'Can you imagine walking around policing up someone's body? Picking them up and putting them in a plastic bag? Maybe you find his arm here, his leg over there'.<sup>18</sup>

Col. Robert J. Ursano-- Chairman of the Department of Psychiatry at the Uniformed Services University of the Health Sciences in Maryland, Director of the Centre for the Study of Traumatic Stress and national adviser for the planning of healthcare initiatives and research programmes in the wake of the September 11th terrorist attacks in New York-- has done extensive research on the psychological effects of body handling. In a brief article entitled 'The Nature of a Traumatic Stressor: Handling Dead Bodies' (1990), Col. Ursano and James McCarroll report the findings of their interviews with approximately fifty individuals experienced in handling the bodies of the dead in roles such as pathologists, disaster relief workers and emergency medical technicians etc. On the basis of comments made by their interviewees (who include Vietnam-era military body handlers), the authors foreground the particular elements of contact with dead bodies which

have the most disturbing impact upon those individuals exposed to them. 'The body handler is traumatized through the senses, through viewing, smelling and touching the grotesque, the unusual, the novel, and the untimely dead', they write; 'The extent and intensity of the sensory properties of the body such as visual grotesqueness, smell and tactile qualities are [thus] important aspects of the stressor'.<sup>19</sup>

Elsewhere, in an article entitled 'Secondary Disaster Victims: The Emotional Effects of Recovering and Identifying Human Remains' (1985), Col. David R. Jones expands upon the overwhelming and unpleasant odour associated with decomposing flesh. 'It is difficult to convey to someone who has not had first-hand experience what a week in a tropical climate can do to human remains', writes Jones; 'The changes in color and size, the infestation by various insects, and above all the overpowering and unforgettable odor of just *one* body are beyond imagination'.<sup>20</sup> In a similar vein, echoing the remarks of other veterans concerning the appalling odour of corporeal decay, Caputo comments that 'The stench of death is unique, probably the most offensive on earth, and once you have smelled it, you can never again believe with conviction that man is the highest being in earthly creation'.<sup>21</sup>

In his discussion of the narrative representation of the Vietnam experience in *Shattered Dream: America's Search for Its Soul* (1994), critic Walter T. Davis draws upon Julia Kristeva's notion of 'abjection' when considering soldiers' responses to the horror of combat.

'Abjection begins with a terrifying experience of defilement that produces repulsion, repugnance and disgust; a skin-tingling loathing that causes fear, spasms, vomiting, retching, trembling', he writes, 'And yet it is at the same time a defilement that fascinates and attracts [. . .]'.<sup>22</sup> Davis's remarks here, which call to mind the soldier's terror of, yet fixation with, the jungle milieu, are helpful in explicating the conflicted responses of those confronting mangled bodies in-country. Indeed, soldiers' recollections of their encounters with bodily injury frequently hinge upon this duality-- they seem compelled to look at these mangled corpses, yet are simultaneously appalled and horrified by what they see. To encounter ruptured and/or decomposing bodies was, as veterans emphasise, an experience that literally provoked a 'gut reaction'-- sometimes to the extent of actual vomiting-- in many soldiers. 'Anything that you can mention that would make you throw up, that you can possibly dream of, happened', remarks ex-US Army machine gunner Charles Strong, with regard to the range of injuries that he witnessed in-country.<sup>23</sup>

'The abject is produced when a body crosses the boundary between the human and non-human', remarks critic Barbara Creed in her discussion of horror films and the carnivalesque.<sup>24</sup> This seems highly relevant here, for, when describing instances of corporeal damage witnessed in-country, veterans repeatedly stress that mangled corpses and body parts often provided little visual evidence of their prior human form. Infantryman Paul Meringolo-- quoted in Ebert's

study *A Life in a Year: The American Infantryman in Vietnam, 1965-1972* (1993)-- recalls the first time he encountered a dead body in-country:

"It didn't have a defined shape to it, but you could see the white skin like the coloration of a pig. Upon closer scrutinization, we realized that it was a piece of a human body [. . .]. But it was strange when you realized that this piece of flesh you were looking at was once a living, vibrant person."<sup>25</sup>

Veterans frequently emphasise the manner in which injury could transform the human body from a holistic, contained entity into a hotchpotch of unrecognisable fragments, as limbs and other body parts were dismembered and internal organs spilled out from gaping orifices. Mike Beamon ex-Scout, US Navy SEALs-- quoted in Al Santoli's *Everything We Had: An Oral History of the Vietnam War by Thirty-three American Soldiers Who Fought It* (1981)-- likens the experience of having to search the body parts of a wounded Viet Cong suspect to 'picking through a broken car', for such was the extent of the corporeal damage that 'It wasn't like a human body any longer'.<sup>26</sup> Beamon's description of another encounter with a mangled corpse underscores the way that bodies could become irreparably transformed, rendered strange and alien, through injury:

"I'll never forget coming up on a [dead Viet Cong soldier]-- his whole face was blown away. He looked like a bowl of spaghetti. His eyeballs were just sitting there, and one of the guys behind me picked an eyeball up and put it in his pocket. I just thought, "Wow, what the hell is going on in this madness?" It was just insane. Just incredible."<sup>27</sup>

Such incidents, as Beamon states, become indelibly imprinted upon the memories of those who witness them. Medic David Ross-- also quoted by Santoli-- describes an episode which, he suggests, epitomised his experience of the war. Ross was standing outside the main hospital building when four helicopters dropped off a cargo of body bags containing the corpses of US soldiers. In front of Ross, several colleagues and a large group of soldiers who have just arrived in Vietnam, one of the bags bursts open. '[W]hat came out was hardly recognizable as a human being', Ross remarks, and the sight of this mangled body provokes a reaction of horror and disgust in those assembled. He relates: 'All the guys stopped laughing. Nobody was saying anything. And some people were shaking and some people were throwing up, and one guy got down and started to pray'. Though a seasoned medic at the time of the incident-- and hence, presumably, familiar with torn and contorted bodies-- Ross's description of the episode, and his response to it ('I said to myself, "Welcome to the war, boys"'), underscores, rather than diminishes, the disturbing impact of contact with fragmented, *object* bodies.<sup>28</sup>

Several commentators have drawn our attention to the detrimental effect of encounters with violent death and human remains. Just as Ursano and McCarroll (1990) and Jones (1985) refer to the sensory impact of corporeal damage upon body handlers, Bonnie L. Green, in her discussion of the generic 'stressor' elements that cut across different types of traumatic experience, refers to the

psychologically harmful effect of exposure to instances of 'the grotesque' ('seeing another person severely injured, dead or mutilated'). Furthermore, she highlights the possible long-term consequences of such experience, drawing our attention to the link between witnessing 'grotesque' incidents and the later development of post-traumatic stress disorder 'and other stress-related symptomologies'.<sup>29</sup> As Philip Caputo details in *A Rumor of War*, the sight of corporeal damage could frequently generate traumatic effects. Before his military service in Vietnam, the only corpses that Caputo had encountered were those of friends and relatives, displayed in their coffins prior to burial. Viewing such bodies, which were not only intact, but had been stripped of any physical markers of injury or suffering by morticians and embalmers, did little to prepare Caputo for his duties as a casualty reporting officer in-country. In contrast with the orderly, *prepared* corpses he had witnessed previously, the bodies of those who met their deaths in-country were frequently characterised by a profound sense of disorder. Kalf Tal has drawn our attention to the manner in which an individual is 'radically ungrounded' by traumatic experience.<sup>30</sup> In keeping with this, Caputo describes the repeated sight of 'the torn flesh, the viscera and splattered brains' as provoking a form of existential crisis for him, rendering meaningless his previously-held beliefs regarding the status (and the sanctity) of the human body. For Caputo, having grown up learning the traditional precepts of Catholicism, 'The horror lay in the recognition that the body, which is

supposed to be the earthly home of an immortal soul [. . .] [was] in fact only a fragile case stuffed full of disgusting matter'. The broken and mutilated corpses that Caputo was repeatedly forced to confront while in-country made a mockery of the notion that man is created in God's image, for these dead men 'were more the image and likeness of the crushed dogs seen lying at the sides of highways'.<sup>31</sup>

In keeping with Kristeva's theories, Barbara Creed remarks that 'The corpse [. . .] represents the body at its most abject [. . .] it is a body evacuated by the "self"- but worse still, it is a body that has become a "waste"'.<sup>32</sup> In the case of the corporeal carnage witnessed by US soldiers in Vietnam, the wounded bodies encountered here were not only reduced to the level of inanimate objects through death, they were often rendered unrecognisable, fragmented and eviscerated, forcing witnesses to literally confront what Kristeva describes as 'the horror within'.<sup>33</sup> Thomas Bird-- a rifleman quoted in Santoli's study-- recalls a furious gun-battle with an NVA unit, and his description of events highlights an interesting response to exposure to extreme instances of corporeal damage:

During the course of the fighting all the horror of people being wounded, parts of their body being blown off, became a blur. I think I stopped seeing that after some guy got shot in the midsection and doubled over and he caught all kinds of blood and crap coming out of him. I sort of got... it either blurred or I didn't see any more of that or I just concentrated on what I thought I had to do and kept looking for a direction to take [. . .]<sup>34</sup>

While, understandably, he was caught up in a chaotic and confusing situation, it could be suggested that Bird's reaction here indicates that

the extent of corporeal damage witnessed in-country often exceeded the soldier's mental capacity to process/cope with it. Perhaps, then, Bird's inability (or refusal) to look at, or see, any more of what was happening served as an involuntary psychological defence mechanism, preventing him from experiencing visual/mental 'overload'.<sup>35</sup>

Although the basic training process could not provide experience that would effectively prepare the GI for exposure to the sight of mangled bodies in Vietnam, it *did*, in many cases, establish a pattern of preferred responses to emotionally charged situations, demanding that fear or grief be denied or suppressed, and that such feelings be channelled instead into aggressive action. Robert Jay Lifton (1971), a psychotherapist who has worked with veterans and other survivor groups, suggests that many traumatised individuals involuntarily experienced a form of 'psychic closing-off' or 'psychic numbing' in response to such disturbing events. This 'cessation of feeling' functioned as a damage-limitation technique, as the individual underwent 'a reversible form of symbolic death in order to avoid a permanent physical or psychic death'.<sup>36</sup> In keeping with this, soldiers in Vietnam frequently adopted tactics such as grim 'gallows' humour and macho posturing to deflect the psychological impact of witnessing the injuries of others. In *The Things They Carried* (1991), Tim O'Brien outlines the peculiar rituals used by himself and his fellow Marines, both to mask their own fear of death and to divert the emotional fallout of the deaths of others:



They found jokes to tell. They used a hard vocabulary to contain the terrible softness. *Greased* they'd say. *Offed, lit up, zapped while zipping*. It wasn't cruelty, just stage presence. They were actors. When someone died, it wasn't quite dying, because in a curious way it seemed scripted, and because they had their lines mostly memorized, irony mixed with tragedy, and because they called it by other names, as if to encyst and destroy the reality of death itself. They kicked corpses. They cut off thumbs. They talked grunt lingo.<sup>37</sup>

As psychiatrist Stephen Howard notes, such slang terms were 'more suited to the discussion of objects and mechanical events than to anything having to do with human beings'.<sup>38</sup> Thus, in an attempt to counterbalance their increasing sense of vulnerability within the in-country environment, the soldiers retaliated by adopting a linguistic register which 'redescribed' instances of potentially traumatic experience so as to repress or divert their emotional responses. Unable to exercise control over their experience or to make sense of it according to existing conceptual frameworks, soldiers attempted to impose boundaries upon their perceptions of that experience by placing strict limits upon the language that they used to describe it.<sup>39</sup>

While, at times, 'grunt lingo' served to mask the visceral horror of corporeal injury, several commentators direct our attention to the manner in which the use of the term 'wasted' (to redefine instances of death in combat) conversely generated a re-emergence of disturbing issues connected with bodily wounding in this context. 'Death was taboo', writes Tim O'Brien in *If I Die in a Combat Zone*, 'The word for getting killed was "wasted"'. Elsewhere, in *The Things They Carried*,

he outlines the reasons behind this particular linguistic substitution: 'By our language [. . .] we transformed the bodies into piles of waste. Thus, when someone got killed [. . .] his body was not really a body, but rather one small bit of waste in the midst of a much wider wastage'.<sup>40</sup> As Walter T. Davis has noted, 'In combat, soldiers use euphemisms to soften the experience of killing and dying. But "he was wasted" is not as neutral as "he bought the farm." "Wasted" connotes cynicism, senseless death, needless destruction'.<sup>41</sup> Moreover, while the use of this linguistic manoeuvre might initially seem to mask the suffering and viscerality involved in injury, this term (which emerged for the first time in Vietnam) depicts corporeal damage as abject-- hence symbolically threatening to those who witness it. Thus O'Brien repeatedly exploits the emblematic qualities of the term 'waste' within *The Things They Carried* as a means to highlight the nature of the in-country experience as an encounter with abjection (hence the death of Kiowa in the 'shit field'-- itself a metaphor-- is described as his being 'wasted in the waste').

It is not difficult to see that such confrontations with torn, mutilated and broken bodies could be psychologically distressing. As Richard Holmes has noted, encounters with corporeal carnage are a core feature of war in general, and hence it could be argued that these experiences (and the range of feelings that they provoke) serve as an area of common ground between Vietnam veterans and US survivors of prior combat situations.<sup>42</sup> Elsewhere, however, Vietnam veterans and

other commentators argue that the unique features of this conflict played a crucial role in forming the soldier's immediate response to these experiences and also, in many cases, affected the longer-term psychological fallout from them. As Lloyd B. Lewis has argued, the 'formless' quality of the in-country experience— the lack of territorial objectives, the invisibility of the enemy, the arbitrary quality of instances of injury— created a context in which the key ideas and values traditionally associated with war (cited as 'heroism, nobility, sacrifice, victory, duty, honour') became 'de-objectivated' (i.e. lost their meaning). In prior combat contexts, Lewis argues, soldiers used these concepts as cognitive reference points, ways to make sense of (and also, arguably, to sanction) the chaotic and disturbing elements of combat. The Vietnam experience, however, 'was no longer navigable using the old cognitive maps'.<sup>43</sup> There seemed to be no ultimate purpose to the wounding taking place here, and the deaths and injuries that occurred in this context could thus no longer be made to 'make sense' on any level. Hence the cognitive 'armour' that had previously served to shield the soldier from psychological injury had been chipped away, exacerbating the harmful implications of witnessing instances of bodily injury and corporeal destruction.<sup>44</sup>

As Chapter 1 detailed, basic training sought to transform recruits into soldiers by converting their flabby, soft, *feminine* bodies into muscular— hence 'hard'— *masculine* bodies. Instructors encouraged recruits to conceptualise their embodiment in utilitarian

terms, to think of their bodies as weapons, implying that the training process would imbue these *machine-bodies* with qualities of impenetrability and invulnerability. For the soldier-male, as Chapter 1 demonstrated, physical frailty had to be repressed in order to maintain the illusion of the machine-body. Once in-country, however, many soldiers were reminded of their physical limitations. As Chapter 2 detailed, life in the combat zone involved a confrontation with aspects of corporeality generally suppressed within US culture. For many US soldiers such encounters had the effect of foregrounding the frailty and/or shortcomings of their own bodies-- in many cases presenting embodiment *itself* as a locus of weakness/disempowerment. The viscerality and gruesome nature of the corporeal damage that they witnessed further challenged/contradicted the notions instilled in training, for it both refuted the concept of the body as a machine, and contested the notion that acceptance of, and compliance with, military precepts guaranteed immunity from injury.<sup>45</sup>

While soldiers in-country frequently 'redescribed' instances of injury in an attempt to avoid the psychological repercussions of confronting grotesque death, their representations of their experiences in retrospect often hinge upon the detailed rendering of episodes of irreparable corporeal damage. Hence, Al Santoli's decision to use David Ross's recollection of the bursting body bag incident, together with the horror it provoked, as the opening section of *Everything They Had*, not only draws our attention to the tendency of veterans to

foreground instances of bodily injury within their representations of the in-country experience, it also highlights veterans' contention that the acknowledgement of all aspects of corporeal damage must necessarily underpin any meaningful analysis of the war.

Caputo's *A Rumor of War* alerts us to the fact that the viscerality and suffering involved in bodily wounding is effectively excluded from officially-sanctioned discourses concerning the Vietnam conflict. Assigned to the role of casualty reporting officer while in-country, he provides the reader with an insight into the way that the process of writing military reports about instances of injury involved the redescription of grotesque death via the use of 'clinical, euphemistic language'.<sup>46</sup> Highly critical of America's involvement in the war, Caputo's narrative representation of his experience in-country serves to undermine the officially-sanctioned version of events in several important ways.

The casualty report and the literary narrative are clearly two distinct types of text which vary greatly with regard to the ways in which they use language. Caputo employs features specific to literary narrative in order to highlight the shortcomings of the military-medical mode in its use of terms such as 'traumatic amputation' (the preferred expression for dismemberment). Thus:

After I saw some of the victims, I began to question the accuracy of the phrase. *Traumatic* was precise, for losing a limb is definitely traumatic, but *amputation*, it seemed to me, suggested a surgical operation. I observed, however, that the human body does not break apart cleanly in an explosion. It tends to shatter

into irregular and often unrecognizable pieces, so "traumatic fragmentation" would have been a more accurate term and would have preserved the euphemistic tone the military favored.<sup>47</sup>

Here Caputo reveals the manner in which military-medical parlance glosses over the horrific reality of dismemberment by employing language suggestive of surgical precision to (re)describe corporeal rupturings which are violent and 'messy' in the extreme, hence obscuring the abject nature of such instances of injury. In addition to this, Caputo is also able to exploit the irony that results from his own recasting of language to 'fit' the aims of the military-medical discursive mode which, with its standardised form and reliance upon fixed meaning, seeks to produce texts that purport to be objective and factual. Caputo's narrative, as a literary text, seeks to challenge officially-sanctioned discourse by harnessing the slippery nature of the connections between words and the objects/ideas that they represent. Thus by exploiting the nuances of the word 'traumatic' here, Caputo effectively undermines the principle of fixed meaning fundamental to military-medical discourse. In medical usage 'traumatic' is used to define a wound or injury caused by the impact of a violent external force. Caputo's allusion to the more commonly understood meaning of the term (to describe a harrowing, life-changing event) lifts the lid on those realms of experience which military-medical reports seek to suppress: the suffering of the wounded and the implications of their injuries, and the horror (and psychologically damaging effects) of witnessing such instances of wounding. Hence *A Rumor of War* not

only alerts the reader to the manner in which such reports perform acts of redescription, but also fills in the gaps left by such discourses, 'writing the trauma back in' by focusing upon the disturbing aspects of the encounter with the bodies of the wounded and emphasising the visceral qualities of their injuries.

John Parrish's *Journal of a Plague Year* (1972) also directs our attention to the tendency of official military discourse to minimise the suffering of the wounded and to mask the horror of witnessing their mangled bodies. Although he worked within the military-medical institution in-country-- having spent his tour of duty as a Navy doctor stationed at a hospital compound in Phu Bai-- Parrish's experiences of tending the injured caused him to become disillusioned with both the US intervention in Vietnam and the system of treatment for casualties there. Parrish provides much material concerning the injuries suffered by US soldiers in-country and the tactics used by the American military to treat these injuries. Appalled by the horrific nature of the wounds that he witnessed and the manner in which both the viscerality and the implications of such injuries were rendered invisible within official reports, Parrish's narrative serves as an antidote to standard military-medical discourse which transforms injured individuals into statistics. Moreover, as we shall see, he provides us with a text which operates as a counternarrative to those official versions of events which celebrate the success of the military-medical effort in Vietnam, for *Journal of a Plague Year* not only draws our attention to the extremes

of corporeal damage suffered, it also foregrounds the limitations of US combat medicine to repair the bodies of the wounded.

US military medicine in Vietnam conformed in many ways to the principles of Western medical practice more generally. Claiming as its function the reparation of 'broken' bodies or minds, Western medicine conceptualises illness and injury as forms of corporeal disorganisation, thus defining the physician's role as that of regularising-- reducing to order-- the body of the patient. The successful (re)creation of a state of bodily order and autonomy in the wounded or diseased patient is dependent upon the existence of treatment areas (clinics and hospitals) which are themselves highly organised and regulated. Thus the fundamental ordering principle of Western medical philosophy and practice both defines the intended result of the treatment process and determines its *modus operandi*.<sup>48</sup>

While this impulse was central to the practice of combat medicine by the US military in Vietnam, various factors could undermine the attempts of physicians, nurses and medics to reduce the bodies of the wounded to order. The seriously injured (many of whom, as already indicated, would have died before reaching medical facilities in previous wars) were frequently in a state of complete corporeal disarray. Moreover, factors such as the frequency of mass-casualty situations, the risk of running out of necessary medical supplies and the danger of (in-country) hospital facilities being attacked or overrun by enemy forces, meant that treatment areas could not always operate



as highly organised environments. As discussion below will suggest, US military-medical decision-makers attempted to counter these potential threats to their mission in Vietnam in several ways. However, as Parrish's text is at pains to point out, such attempts were not wholly successful.

In keeping with the descriptions of corporeal damage provided by Caputo's *A Rumor of War*, Parrish's narrative details many instances of injury involving the partial or total severing of body parts, and he too draws our attention to the fact that the wounds sustained frequently rendered the organs of the inner body externally visible. Hence the prior existence of the body as a holistic, contained entity had been (sometimes irrevocably) compromised. Confronted by such corporeal chaos, the physician attempted to restore order by using surgical procedures such as debridement and limb salvage to re-establish bodily boundaries.<sup>49</sup> Debridement involves the removal of 'dead' or contaminated tissue from around a wounded area, together with any foreign matter that has been forced into the wound, thus ridding the body of any 'anomalous' material which threatens to undermine corporeal order on both a literal and a symbolic level. In a similar fashion, the partially severed limb also blurs the boundary between the body of the patient and the outer world, while its relationship with the body to which it is (often minimally) joined is problematic. In seeking to regularise the wounded body, the physician must either reattach ('salvage') the limb or amputate it. The following

example from Parrish's narrative provides a vivid description of the disordering effects of injury and shows the use of such surgical techniques in dealing with it:

On the first stretcher lay a boy whom, earlier in the day, any coach would have wanted as a tackle or a defensive end. But now, as he lay on his back, his left thigh pointed skywards and ended in a red brown, meaty mass of twisted ligaments, jellylike muscle, blood clots, and long bony splinters. There was no knee, and parts of the lower leg hung loosely by skin strips and fascial strings. A tourniquet had been placed around his thigh, and a corpsman was cutting through the strips of tissue with shears to remove the unviable dangling calf. Lying separately on the stretcher was a boot from which the lower leg still protruded.<sup>50</sup>

Unable to reattach the severed limb/s and reorganise the patient's body in this sense, the medic re-established a sense of order by removing the 'unviable' body part. The regularising function of amputation is made more explicit elsewhere, as Parrish describes his return to his unit from a short break: 'I put my canvas suitcase in the corner and *began to make some order* out of a mud brown, blood red, shaggy mass which used to be the left foot of a nineteen-year-old boy', reporting the prognosis as 'Amputation. Probably at the ankle. Maybe mid-foot, though'.<sup>51</sup>

While the benefits of amputation-- the prevention of infection and thus the preservation of life-- cannot be disputed, officially-sanctioned military-medical discourses which celebrate the advantages of this procedure frequently overlook or minimise the problematic repercussions of amputation for the patient him/herself.<sup>52</sup> This issue is addressed within Parrish's text and also repeatedly referred to by other

medical personnel in their descriptions of their experiences in-country. Physically and emotionally drained due to lack of sleep, Parrish is confronted by a Marine whose arm has been badly wounded by gunfire. 'Am I going to lose my arm, Sir?', asks the wounded man. 'Not if we can help it,' Parrish responds. While in this case an amputation 'would have taken twenty to thirty minutes', Parrish and Senior Surgeon Bill Bond undertake several hours of surgery, despite their exhaustion, in an attempt to 'save' the man's arm. While officially-sanctioned versions of events tend to present amputation as one of the success stories of modern surgery, medical personnel frequently equate the removal of limbs with a sense of failure and loss. 'I'd give you the whole fucking rice paddy for the return of just one of those blown-off legs we see every day', remarks Bill Bond.<sup>53</sup>

A nurse quoted in Mark Baker's *Nam* cites the case of a 19-year-old soldier, who has lost both arms, as a means of drawing our attention to the traumatic long-term implications of amputation for those who survive, and highlighting medical personnel's sense of powerlessness in this context:

'There wasn't anything we could do, so the corpsman just held on to him for a couple of hours. The kid just cried and cried and cried. He didn't even have enough left to put a decent prosthesis on. It turned out that his wife had just had a baby, but he was never going to get to hold it.'<sup>54</sup>

While, as Parrish suggests, medics could become somewhat inured to the sight of torn and contorted bodies, they were far from immune to the psychologically distressing implications of irreparable corporeal

damage. Immediately following the operation to salvage the wounded Marine's arm, Parrish suffers from a vivid and disturbing dream in which he imagines himself among the dead bodies in the 'Graves Registration' section of the hospital compound:

I was in Graves crawling among the twisted, mangled bodies, over miles of bowels, mountains of brains, and giant tongues.

'We couldn't help it, buddy,' I whispered to each one. 'We couldn't help it, buddy.' Somehow I felt I was lying.<sup>55</sup>

As designated caregivers, medical personnel often experienced a tremendous sense of helplessness, which could manifest itself in feelings of guilt, as they were confronted-- sometimes on a daily basis-- with bodies so seriously damaged that their injuries exceeded the restorative powers of medical intervention.

While they were far from novices in the arena of corporeal damage, the extent and severity of the injuries suffered by US soldiers and Vietnamese civilians could come as a shock to those who had to treat them. 'The first dressing I changed was a guy who had lain in a water-filled ditch for two days waiting for somebody to get to him', remarks an experienced military nurse quoted in Baker's *Nam*, 'I took the dressing off his arm and he didn't have an arm. All he had was bone. It had gotten full of maggots in the ditch'. When faced by such horrible and repulsive instances of injury, medical workers could not choose to look away, as passive witnesses might; their role demanded that they undertake prolonged close contact with damaged bodies. Many were, at least initially, thrust into a psychologically difficult

situation, torn between conflicting responses of repulsion and responsibility. '[I was] trying to talk to this guy and trying not to gag and throw up', continues the aforementioned nurse. While she did eventually manage to complete her task, she alerts us to the distressing and disturbing impact of this encounter with the *abject* body: 'I had to go into the little utility room with the mops and brooms to regroup, get my shit together to go do the rest of them.'<sup>56</sup>

Parrish's *Journal of a Plague Year* provides much detail regarding the manner in which treating the wounded necessitated intimate contact with ruptured bodies. Given the extremity of corporeal damage here, such contact frequently involved the purposeful (or accidental), *entry into* the bodies of others, an experience that often left medical personnel smeared with bodily fluids. Describing a mass-casualty situation, Parrish notes: 'My boots were soaked with blood; my toes sloshed around inside. Blood, vomit, and sweat covered my clothing. My hands got so sticky with dried blood that it became difficult to work'. So intense is his concentration on the task in hand, however, that, he remarks, 'The only part that really bothered me was the brains under my fingernails'.<sup>57</sup> Thus Parrish's descriptions repeatedly emphasise the viscerality of the wounded body, vividly evoking both the chaotic nature of the bodily disruption caused by wounding and the viscosity of the ruptured body's inner regions. Elsewhere he provides the following description of ensuing events

when a truckload of injured US soldiers arrives at the hospital compound:

I climbed up one side of the transport truck and lowered myself over the railing in among the horrible pile of bleeding flesh. One marine with a large wound in his neck tried to stand up and take a step towards me. He fell into my arms and we both crashed into the middle of the pile. Screams of pain came from beneath us. I pushed my hand behind me to right myself and placed it inside a gaping faeces-filled tear through a marine's rectum and pelvis.

The marine next to him vomited blood and began to aspirate. I tried desperately to turn him over on his stomach so that he could breathe. I pulled at the leg that prevented me from turning him and noticed that a leg was all I had. There was no body attached to it.<sup>58</sup>

The medical personnel who sought to aid those wounded in combat thus not only had to deal with extreme instances of bodily injury, they also had to confront mass-casualty situations, where the high numbers of wounded converging upon the treatment area threatened to cause profound confusion. In the instance quoted above, Parrish finds himself literally tangled up in a mass of torn bodies. On a symbolic level, his description of this episode illustrates that-- like the footsoldiers who attempted to traverse the in-country environment-- the medics who tried to impose order upon a situation of corporeal chaos found themselves struggling to find their footing at times.

So as to prevent a situation in which treatment areas in-country became overwhelmed by a large influx of patients, military-medical personnel employed triage, an ordering procedure invented specifically for use in combat medicine. Described by Kennedy et al. (1996) as 'a medical decision-making process', triage extends the ordering impulse

beyond the management of individual bodies to deal with situations involving multiple instances of corporeal disorder. This procedure involves the classification of injured bodies in accordance with a predetermined scheme, in an attempt to allocate limited medical resources.<sup>59</sup> While commentators such as Vayer, Ten Eyck and Cowan imply that triage operates democratically, 'to allocate scarce resources in a manner that will provide the greatest good for the most people with minimum consumption of those resources', evidence provided by Parrish and others demonstrates that the combat triage practised in Vietnam allotted preferential treatment to US soldiers.<sup>60</sup> Swan and Swan have indicated the pattern that American military-medical practice tends to follow: 'traditionally, US combat casualty care has been directed towards US casualties first, allies second, civilians third, and enemy fourth'.<sup>61</sup> While the preferential treatment given to wounded US soldiers in Vietnam may be at odds with the 'democratic' ethos, it is in keeping with the principle of economy and conservation of resources. As Chapter 1 demonstrated, the military claimed (the body of) the soldier as an item in its inventory of combat resources via the basic training process. Hence the privileging of this particular group of wounded bodies becomes necessary in the interests of military economy, and the combat physician is in the position of ensuring that these bodies-as-weapons are rendered capable of further 'use', if possible. As Kennedy et al. note, 'the priority is to return the soldier to action' via the practice of combat triage, and thus 'the major objective is

to sort who can be returned to the front immediately, who needs treatment before returning to duty, and who will not be able to return to active duty'.<sup>62</sup>

Swan and Swan provide more detail with regard to the three-tiered form of triage. This system sorted patients into the following groups: the 'walking wounded'-- those with relatively minor injuries, who could thus wait for treatment; the 'priority'-- those whose condition was critical and required immediate medical attention; and lastly the 'expectant'-- those whose wounds were of such a degree of severity as to render medical attention ineffectual.<sup>63</sup> Parrish's *Journal of a Plague Year* provides the reader with a range of instances in which this form of triage was used in an attempt to re-impose order upon mass-casualty situations. His descriptions of the triage procedure in action yield some interesting points with regard to the thrust of my analysis here, for he suggests that while the sense of order established by the use of the triage procedure was a limited one-- tenuous and contingent at best-- this classification of patients functioned as a distancing technique for the combat physician, enabling him to cope with an otherwise overwhelming situation of corporeal chaos. Parrish describes the nightmarish aftermath of the 1968 Tet Offensive, where he was faced with 'a wall-to-wall carpet of wounded bodies' in the triage area of the hospital. Disorganisation and disorder predominated as 'Many of the wounded lay on the ground. The dead lay with the wounded, and some wounded joined the dead.' Amidst this chaos, 'The triage officer



system broke down completely' as 'Each doctor picked and stepped among the prone bodies choosing who to work on'. Parrish's representation of this episode foregrounds the disjunction/conflict between medical intervention (as an attempt to produce order), versus corporeal injury (which is depicted in terms of chaotic flux). At such times it would seem that the system (both in terms of the triage procedure and, by implication, that of military-medical management in Vietnam as a whole), hovered on the point of breakdown, as the extent of corporeal chaos threatened the equilibrium of the very systems set up to try to contain it.

Interestingly, when confronted by the collapse of the formal process of classifying the wounded, Parrish and his fellow doctors respond by engaging in their own 'Rapid, scientific and professional appraisal of the torn bodies', selecting 'who to work on, who could be saved, who could wait, and who would be a waste of precious time'. For the medic faced with a situation characterised by profound corporeal disorder on a potentially overwhelming scale, the classification and evaluation of the injured serves as a form of emotional 'buffer'. Like the footsoldier who redescribes instances of injury so as to suppress/divert his emotional responses to them, we find Parrish reducing the bodies of the wounded to objects in his assessment of them:

My numbed senses registered: possible salvageability, twenty per cent chance; needs both legs amputated below the knee, left hand amputated, will lose his left eye; lung probably penetrated; rigid abdomen, required

a laparotomy; needs first aid now, tie his bleeders; O.R. time with amputation and exploration at least three hours. At best he will be a one-armed, one-eyed wheelchair job.

His vivid description of his mental process here alerts us to the fact that this mode of thinking involved a desensitisation (in keeping with Lifton's notion of 'emotional numbing'). Faced by such circumstances, the medic found it necessary to shield himself from the emotionally-distressing elements of the corporeal carnage around him so as to be able to provide the best possible medical care to the injured. '[U]nder the circumstances', Parrish argues, 'compassion was best shown by cold, hard efficiency'.

However, despite being months into his service in-country, Parrish is still affected on some level by the corporeal destruction around him. 'If I allowed myself to think beyond my immediate task, the sense of waste was overwhelming', he writes.<sup>64</sup> And so, while the triage procedure might serve as a form of psychic 'shield' for the physician in this context, nevertheless, as we have seen in the case of the footsoldier's redescription of injury, it did not fully protect him from the psychological ramifications of his encounter with irreparably wounded bodies. Indeed, the classification of patients as 'expectant' had paradoxical and disturbing implications-- while the system of triage, in allocating a category to such cases, enabled some form of ordering to occur, the 'expectant' individual's wounded body was consequently defined as being beyond repair, again foregrounding the limits of military medicine's remedial capabilities.

With regard to the following stage of analysis, there are several further issues at stake here. As I suggested above, the objectification of the body of the patient served as a distancing technique for Parrish and his fellow medics within this context of corporeal chaos. As both Parrish and military-medical veteran Ronald J. Glasser have noted, the classification and codification of the wounded was a central element in the system of treatment for those injured in Vietnam. This process began before casualties reached the treatment area, for the injured were often categorised within a basic system of codification by the personnel on medevac flights, who radioed the hospital in advance of their arrival. 'Three numbers were announced in triage', Parrish explains, 'The first represented the number of litter-borne wounded, the second the number of ambulatory wounded, and the third represented the number of dead'. Hence he describes the communication of this information by another medic thus: "Six, ten, and two, Sir," a corpsman announced as I made my way through triage on my way back to the medical ward, "arriving in twenty minutes".<sup>65</sup> While the apparent purpose of this conversion of the wounded into mathematical variables was the provision of the highest possible standard of medical treatment for casualties, the reduction of injured individuals to the level of 'a series of contrapuntal numbers'-- as Glasser notes-- served to minimise the human cost of the war, 'to make it all not only acceptable, but strangely palatable as well'.<sup>66</sup> Theorists such as Bryan Turner (1987,1992), Drew Leder (1984,1990,1992),

Arthur W. Frank (1995) and, of course, Foucault, have commented upon the tendency of Western medicine in general to dehumanise and de-individualise the patient.<sup>67</sup> Turner alerts us to modern medicine's conceptualisation of the human body as a 'biochemical machine', arguing that this serves to '[negate] the idea of the patient as an embodied subjectivity'.<sup>68</sup> Such remarks are of much relevance here, because they help to draw to the fore a parallel between the medical treatment system for the wounded in Vietnam and the military institution's attempt to produce machine-bodies via basic training. Both processes, it can be argued, rely upon tactics which not only conceptualise the body of the soldier as a resource, but also implicitly deprive him of his individual identity and, by extension, his humanity. Texts such as Parrish's *Journal of a Plague Year* and Glasser's *365 Days* not only highlight the dehumanising effect of the presentation of the bodies of the dead and wounded within a discourse of economics, they also emphasise that the conversion of the injured into statistics both masks the visceral nature of their wounds and glosses over the suffering that they experience. Having been assigned to an Army hospital in Japan, Glasser comments upon the way in which those wounded in battle are 'written off each month', reduced to the level of 'a wastage rate'.<sup>69</sup>

There is much common ground between Caputo's narrative project in *A Rumor of War* and Parrish's undertaking in *Journal of a Plague Year*. Both veterans were, in a sense, enmeshed within the

military institution while in-country. Both had to undertake their respective duties as part of a system in which bodies were conceptualised as weapons and hence viewed as objects. Both remark upon the fact that, in this context, the wounded were reduced to the level of statistics and the descriptions of injured bodies suppressed the visceral elements of wounding. Thus, in their accounts of the performance of their duties, both writers highlight the manner in which their own thoughts, remarks and actions (sometimes unwittingly) helped maintain and/or endorse such ways of viewing the body. However, in their narrative representations of these events in retrospect, both Caputo and Parrish repeatedly draw our attention to the 'messy' and *abject* aspects of corporeal injury. Thus their texts serve to counter the sterile, neutralising effect of officially-sanctioned military-medical discourses concerning wounding, exposing the true 'price tags of war- the cost in bodies [and] the debt in minds'.<sup>70</sup>

It is fitting, then, that the final section of Parrish's narrative underscores the disparity between official reports regarding fatal wounding and his own perception of extreme instances of injury. The closing lines of the text reproduce a military death certification form, which provides information about the dead man's wounds using a detached and objective linguistic register. Parrish's own response to such corporeal damage provides a stark contrast to this. He emphasises the chaotic disorder of the ruptured body by means of a breakdown in coherent sentence structure at this point, and draws our

attention to his overwhelming sense of loss and defeat when confronted by such instances of injury: 'Gruesome, torn, mangled, destroyed. Kids, intestine, muscle', he writes, 'Waste! I said over and over and over again'.<sup>71</sup> As my analysis has shown, *Journal of a Plague Year* attests to the limits of military medicine's ability to repair the bodies of American soldiers injured in Vietnam, drawing our attention to those who were evaluated as 'expectant' and thus 'would be a waste of precious time', those who died despite medical intervention, and those who survived but who were permanently maimed or crippled by their wounds. Veteran Ron Kovic falls into the final category and it is to his autobiographical narrative *Born on the Fourth of July* and its presentation of injury and its aftermath that my discussion will now turn.

While serving as a Marine in Vietnam, Kovic was seriously wounded during a gun battle. Initially shot through the foot-- the bullet 'blew out nearly the whole of my heel', he writes-- a second bullet entered his left shoulder moments later, passing through his lung and shattering his spinal cord. Although speedy evacuation saved Kovic's life, his injuries resulted in permanent paralysis from the mid-chest down and *Born on the Fourth of July* is a narrative rendering of Kovic's struggle to come to terms with the fact that his injuries are irreparable. As analysis below will detail, Kovic's narrative representation of the experience of wounding and of military-medical treatment draws to the fore the terrible physical and psychological consequences of his injuries, providing a harrowing testimony of wounding and its

repercussions which is at odds with officially-sanctioned accounts of the in-country experience and its aftermath.

Whereas narratives such as *A Rumor of War* and *Journal of a Plague Year* provide a (more or less) chronological account, beginning with details of military training and then moving on to discuss the in-country experience, *Born on the Fourth of July* does not follow this pattern. The text opens with a description of the chaotic moments after Kovic's shooting, placing his wounded body centre stage from the outset and emphasising the crucial role of corporeal trauma (both as bodily wound and as life-shattering event) in this act of narrative recounting.<sup>72</sup> The textual subordination of the events leading up to, and following on from, the moment of Kovic's wounding directs our attention to the violent impact of injury upon the course of his life. This immediate focus on Kovic's wounded body is reinforced by shifts between first- and third-person narration throughout the text. Kali Tal argues that Kovic uses the third-person form as a means to 'distance' himself from the distressing elements of his story.<sup>73</sup> However, analysis below will illustrate my own sense that this technique serves to foreground the manner in which Kovic's experience of injury, and of subsequent military-medical management, destabilised his former conception of his own embodied identity, causing him to objectify his damaged body, to regard 'it' as alien or 'other'.

The opening image of *Born on the Fourth of July* is that of the wounded Kovic lying in his own blood during a gun battle in an

anonymous location in-country. Kovic's use of first-person, present tense narration at this point invests the retold events with a powerful sense of immediacy: as readers, we are plunged into the wounded man's consciousness, and the lack of specific detail concerning the circumstances of Kovic's wounding throws us into a state of confusion which mimics that felt by the wounded man himself. This turmoil which introduces the narrative evokes the all-encompassing nature of the physical pain Kovic experienced and the fracturing of objective perception that it caused. The reader's attention is directed towards Kovic's feelings of total helplessness (*'Oh get me out of here, get me out of here, please someone help me! Oh help me, please help me. Oh God oh Jesus!'*) and his overwhelming sense that he cannot control his own body ('I keep trying to move my legs but I cannot feel them'). Kovic's initial sense of panic subsides as he is carried off to safety by another American soldier and then transported to a medical treatment facility. Following his removal to relative safety, however, his distress at being unable to control the lower half of his body becomes more pronounced. His sense of disbelief, incomprehension and alarm at his condition is described in terms of dissociation or *dis-embodiment*, as he writes of 'my body all gone, all twisted up dangling like a puppet's', 'the bottom of my body that can no longer feel, twisted and bent underneath me'. As medical personnel attempt to strap Kovic to a stretcher, his legs 'dangle' over the sides uselessly. The voice of the wounded Kovic, who 'screamed' and 'cried' for assistance earlier, has now fallen



to the level of a murmur: "I can't move them", I say, almost in a whisper. "I can't move them".<sup>74</sup> As we shall see, this lowering of the voice of the wounded soldier to a much less audible level prefigures the ways in which Kovic's experience of wounding and medical management by the military institution distorts and belittles both his sense of his own embodied identity and of his existence as a strongly speaking subject.

Upon arrival at the hospital in-country, Kovic is subjected to the following exchange with an anonymous representative of the military-medical institution:

'What's your name?' the voice shouts.

'Wh-wh-what?' I say.

'What's your name?' the voice says again.

'K-K-Kovic,' I say.

'No!' says the voice. 'I want your name, rank, and service number. Your date of birth, the name of your father and mother.'

'Kovic. Sergeant. Two-oh-three-oh-two-six-one, uh, when are you going to...'

'Date of birth!' the voice shouts.<sup>75</sup>

It is apt that this induction into the realm of military medicine is reminiscent of the treatment of recruits by their drill instructors during basic training, for this exchange serves to re-establish Kovic's subordinate role in the encounter with the military 'machine' and its representatives. As theorists such as Foucault, Turner, Leder and Frank have noted, an imbalance of power between the injured individual and those who treat him is characteristic of Western medicine generally. In the context of *military*-medical management, certain principles and strategies central to Western medical theory and

practice become accentuated/amplified, enabling the military institution to continue to exercise its authority over the bodies of its soldiers and, in many cases, disempowering the injured individual. While the attempts of Western medicine to regularise the bodies of the injured have been recognised by Foucault et al. as a process of mastery on the part of the medical institution, it can be suggested that in this context the attempt of the US military-medical institution to reduce to order the bodies of American personnel wounded in Vietnam also operates as a continuation of the American military's effort to assert ownership/control over the soldier-body. As Chapter 1 detailed, the US military sought to gain mastery over the (body of the) recruit via the basic training process, claiming him as an item in their inventory of combat resources. Further discussion, both here and in the next chapter, will demonstrate that this authority was frequently reasserted--rather than relinquished-- when the soldier was wounded or killed.

As his narrative recounts, Kovic's extensive experience of sports training in High School introduced him both to a gruelling physical exercise regimen and to the notions that 'The human body [. . .] is a beautiful remarkable machine' and that 'If you want to win [. . .] You're going to have to drive your [body] far beyond what you think you can do'. It is not difficult to see how joining the Marine Corps, an organisation which, Kovic had been told, 'built men- body, mind, and spirit', seemed like a natural progression for him. Through the ethos of the Marine Corps, Kovic found a way to sublimate his own desire for

(hyper)masculinity. Despite the physical deprivations of training, Kovic was, predictably, determined to 'face it like a man'. At this stage, Kovic's goals seemed to match those of the military institution so closely that he did not consider the disturbing implications of his drill instructor's pronouncement to the recruits that "[. . .] your asses belong to the United States Marine Corps!".<sup>76</sup> For Kovic as a naive teenager, the transformation from recruit to soldier seemed to offer a means to total self-empowerment, a way for him to gain greater control over his own body. However, his involvement with the military institution was to prove ultimately disempowering, as his later experiences of disability and hospitalisation divest him of any sense of bodily control.

Within the basic training process, the military institution 'broke down' recruits physically and psychologically in order to rebuild them in accordance with a pre-established pattern (using the bodies of these individuals as vehicles to effect this transformation). Hence, in this context the bodily hardships and mental suffering faced by the recruit were frequently conceptualised (both within officially-sanctioned military discourse and, to a lesser extent, within the narratives of veterans) as necessary, though unpleasant. For the short-term hospital patient too, levels of discomfort and deprivation are often deemed not merely appropriate but necessary in order to achieve the desired transformation from illness/injury to 'wellness'. As Bryan Turner has suggested, entry into the hospital environment within Western society is characterised by what can be described as

'degradation ceremonies'.<sup>77</sup> In a manner akin to the physical 'stripping' procedure that takes place in basic training (and also, as others have noted, upon entry into prison), the diseased or injured person is placed in an alien environment and required to remove his/her clothing and other markers of his/her identity as an individual, and to don the 'uniform' pertaining to his/her new role as patient-- sometimes nightwear, often a surgical gown. The ill-fitting uniforms issued to recruits in military training, as I suggested earlier, served a symbolic function, acting as an outward indicator that a physical and mental change must occur for them to 'fit into' the role of the soldier. Likewise the ubiquitous white surgical gown operates as a symbol, reinforcing the patient's feelings of anonymity and highlighting the fact that in this setting his/her body will not be afforded any degree of privacy but will be constantly (more or less) exposed to the medical gaze. As in the training and prison contexts, a 'hospital number' is frequently assigned to the patient as a means of identification, suggesting that his/her name and prior identity have no currency or relevance within this milieu. For the chronically sick or wounded individual who cannot be repaired or rendered well, the experience of medical treatment-- and its attendant indignities-- is not merely a transitory phase on the route to recovery. Indeed, for Kovic, the ongoing experience of medical management takes on an all-encompassing, and frequently more sinister, quality.

Kovic's descriptions of the conditions and the treatment that he endured during his various periods of hospitalisation following his

return to the US are, in many ways, deeply shocking. Within Western culture, the predominant image of the hospital has (until recent times) been that of an environment in which the principles of cleanliness, order and efficiency reign supreme.<sup>78</sup> Adherence to these principles, intended to create a sterile recovery environment, produces a space in which actions and events are 'contained' (and constrained) by rigid routine and a well-defined social hierarchy. As the extended description below evidences, however, the hospitals where Kovic receives treatment following his return to the US do not match up to this model:

The wards are filthy. The men in my room throw their breadcrumbs under the radiator to keep the rats from chewing on our numb legs during the nights [. . .] There are never enough aides to go around on the wards [. . .] The most severely injured are totally dependent on the aides to turn them. They suffer the most and break down with sores. These are the voices that can be heard screaming in the night for help that never comes. Urine bags are constantly overflowing onto the floors while the aides play poker on the toilet bowls in the enema room. The sheets are never changed enough and many of the men stink from not being properly bathed.<sup>78</sup>

It is interesting that Kovic likens this environment, which is characterised by filth and the overflowing of corporeal waste, to a concentration camp-- 'It is like the pictures of all the Jews that I have seen. This is as horrible as that', he writes.<sup>80</sup> While Kovic directs our attention to the emaciated condition of the patients, and to the incarcerative function of facilities such as this-- 'It is like being in a prison,' he writes, 'But it is not a prison, it is a hospital'-- his use of the

concentration camp parallel also alerts us again to the psychologically disturbing effects of the encounter with corporeal detritus.<sup>81</sup> As Terrence Des Pres has noted, a key element of concentration camp life was inmates' ongoing confrontation/contact with bodily wastes, an experience he terms 'excremental assault', thus indicating the disturbing psychological ramifications of such encounters.<sup>82</sup> Kovic's confinement in a (different?) veterans' hospital, which is described later in the narrative, draws our attention more explicitly to the deleterious effects of prolonged contact with one's own bodily wastes, an experience described in terms of profound mental and physical degradation. Left alone to lie in his own excrement despite his cries for help, Kovic is labelled a 'troublemaker' and isolated in a separate room by the head nurse when he asks 'to be treated like a human being', requesting to be bathed and for the vomit to be cleaned up from his floor.<sup>83</sup>

The medical 'treatment' that Kovic and the other wounded men receive is depicted as a series of humiliations; the day-to-day hospital regime is presented as brutal. 'It is as if we are a bunch of cattle,' Kovic states, 'as if we do not really count anymore'.<sup>84</sup> The subjection of patients to the constant surveillance of the hospital staff, who 'can look into all the rooms and see the men through the curtains that never close', characterises this hospital environment as 'panoptic', the ideal 'prison-machine' as described by Foucault, where the inmate, 'caught' in a permanent position of visibility, experiences surveillance as a form

of discipline.<sup>85</sup> For Kovic and many of the other veterans at the hospital 'There is no real healing left anymore', their injuries, beyond the reparative powers of medical science, have resulted in permanent disablement.<sup>86</sup> The hospital environment is thus divested of its function of curing or 'repairing' broken bodies, and Kovic suggests that the 'therapies' offered to the individuals detained here frequently serve not to 'rebuild' them physically or psychologically but, instead, to remind them of their physical limitations. Hence he highlights the ultimately demoralising effect of physiotherapy sessions in the hospital's well-equipped exercise room:

There are newly invented machines sold to the hospital by the government [. . .] to fix these broken bodies. There are machines that make you stand again and machines that fix your hands again, but the only thing is that when it's all over, when the guys are pulled down from the machines, unstrapped from them, it's the same body, the same shattered broken man that went up on the rack moments before.<sup>87</sup>

In this context, it would seem, the breakdown of the body/bodily control leaves both the individual and the military institution in a kind of limbo of pointless exercise and futile regimen.

As an individual whose late childhood and adolescence revolved around extending (and demonstrating) his control over his own body, Kovic struggles physically and psychologically with his condition of helplessness, unable mentally to submit to a state of paralysis. His efforts to reassert a degree of control over his body, however, have damaging consequences. Following his release from hospital, he breaks his thigh bone while attempting to take a few steps.

This results in another extended period of hospitalisation where his struggle to retain possession of his body occurs on a literal, as well as a symbolic level. An unnamed doctor informs him that it would be better to remove the injured limb altogether, despite Kovic's reluctance. His response to this suggestion is clearly expressed in terms of ownership, as he states: 'I don't want them to cut my leg off. It is numb and dead but it still means something to me. It is still mine. It is a part of me and I am not going to give it away that easily'.<sup>88</sup> In order that Kovic may 'keep' the injured limb, it has to be reformed with the addition of a steel plate and many screws, and thus the leg itself is transformed into a crude form of machine. The continuous operation of an external pump is also necessary, 'keeping everything flowing nicely' for a short time, until, however, this device suddenly breaks down.<sup>89</sup> Although it does eventually start up again, Kovic's fear that it could shut down at any minute-- necessitating the removal of his leg-- causes him extreme anxiety, for it highlights the degree to which he has lost control of his own body, which is now 'managed' by the medical institution via complex (and in this case, unreliable) machinery. Both here and elsewhere in *Born on the Fourth of July*, Kovic foregrounds two distinct- - yet in some sense interrelated-- issues, as he alerts us to the contest taking place over bodily ownership in this context and, at the same time, draws our attention to the loss of physical control over that body and the profound implications that ensue.



Kovic's use of the present tense, in this episode and elsewhere, gives the text a raw immediacy as he struggles to articulate the fear and anger that accompanied his increasing awareness that he will never regain the use of his legs. Having previously based his identity upon his corporeal strength and physical prowess, Kovic finds that his notion of selfhood has been profoundly damaged as a result of his injuries. The text slips into third-person narrative mode as he articulates the feeling of dis-embodiment that accompanies his paralysis: 'there would be no change in his condition', he writes, 'no reconciliation with the half of his body that seemed so utterly lost forever'.<sup>90</sup> Kovic explicitly attributes his continued existence to the US military's technologically progressive attempt to minimise casualties:

He was a half-dead corpse and no one could tell him any different. They could use the fancy medical words like they had in the hospital but he knew who they had brought back with all their new helicopters and wonderful new ways of killing people, all that incredible advancement in technology. He would never have come back from any other war. But now here he was. He was back and dead and breathing.<sup>91</sup>

As his remarks here suggest, the narrative that Kovic relates regarding his survival is at odds with officially-sanctioned discourses, where preserving the lives of the chronically wounded is presented as a great medical achievement. Throughout the text Kovic reiterates this sense of ambiguity and ambivalence both with regard to his own continued existence and with reference to the permanently disabling injuries suffered by other Vietnam veterans. As 'the man with the numb legs, the man in the wheelchair', Kovic feels 'Lost in some kind of limbo land

of the dead', trapped in a hazy, indefinable state. 'It is like some kind of numb twilight zone to me', he remarks, foregrounding his sense that his status as a living human being has been irreparably compromised through injury as he equates himself with 'the corpse, the living dead man'.<sup>92</sup> Confined to the veterans' hospital following his return to the US, he repeatedly describes the 'broken, twisted' patients-- himself included-- as 'dead bodies', 'living deaths'.<sup>93</sup> Elsewhere, in his account of the Memorial Day Parade, the attitudes of able-bodied onlookers reflect this ambivalence as they stare at Kovic and Eddie Dugan 'as if they were ghosts'.<sup>94</sup>

In *The Wounded Storyteller* (1995), Arthur W. Frank asserts that the loss of control is a central dynamic within the experience of illness and/or injury, arguing that the individual's reduced ability to master his/her own body is experienced as a catastrophe on both a physical and a psychological level. He writes: 'People define themselves in terms of their body's varying capacity for control. So long as these capacities are predictable, control as an action problem does not require self-conscious monitoring'. However, disease (or injury) is experienced as 'a loss of predictability' which 'causes further losses', such as 'incontinence, shortness of breath or memory, tremors and seizures'.<sup>95</sup> Frank suggests that the issue of (the loss of) bodily control in this context can best be understood by conceptualising a continuum of mastery over the body, with predictability positioned at one end of the spectrum (ballet and gymnastics are cited as examples

of the highest form), while contingency characterises the opposite extreme. A contingent body is, Frank explains, 'subject to forces that cannot be controlled', and he posits the 'infantile body'-- 'burping, spitting and defecating according to its own internal needs and rhythms'-- as an exemplar of this embodied condition. While, within Western society, contingency of embodiment is expected of babies-- 'infants are afforded some period to acquire control'-- we are, Frank argues, less tolerant of lapses among adults who are expected to recoup bodily control if possible and, if not, to conceal the 'failing'. Frank's argument makes reference to the work of sociologist Erving Goffman on the topic of stigma, and his summary of Goffman's main points, which is particularly pertinent to Kovic's situation, is worth quoting in full here:

Erving Goffman's classic work on stigma shows that society demands a considerable level of bodily control from its members; loss of this control is stigmatizing, and special work is required to manage the lack of control. Stigma, Goffman points out, is embarrassing not just for the stigmatized person but also for those who are confronted with the stigma and have to react to it. Thus the work of the stigmatized person is not only to avoid embarrassing himself by being out of control in situations where control is expected. The person must also avoid embarrassing others, who should be protected from the specter (sic) of lost bodily control.<sup>96</sup>

In *Born on the Fourth of July*, Ron Kovic's predicament is depicted as a crisis of control which involves his inability not only to utilise his limbs, but also, crucially, to exercise his former mastery over bodily functions. The text makes frequent reference to instances in which Kovic's bodily excretions literally spill out, much to the concern

and/or alarm of those around him. While at the veterans' hospital, Kovic's attempt to stand up with the aid of leg braces and parallel bars initially results in his body spasming violently and his oversize hospital trousers falling down. Although he is eventually able to get onto his feet, he then vomits uncontrollably while his mother and sister look on, their distress made palpable as Kovic describes them 'clutching each other, holding real tight to each other's hands'.<sup>97</sup> Elsewhere Kovic describes the reactions of his friends and family as his overfull catheter bag leaks on the way home from a drunken night out. Kovic's young female companion reacts with disgust and confusion--"He's pissed all over the fucking seat [. . .] What should we do?"-- and, once home, his mother continues in the same vein, 'screaming hysterically' and 'racing in and out of the room' while bemoaning his drunken condition. His father's reaction to Kovic's predicament is to take control of the situation, undressing and cleaning him up before tucking him into bed. In keeping with Goffman's theories, Kovic's father-- faced by 'the specter of lost bodily control'-- carries out the necessary 'work' to restore a degree of order. Kovic seems aware, at least in retrospect, of the symbolic value of his father's actions because he presents the careful reconnection of the catheter tube as a ritualistic procedure which serves to restore order in a situation fraught with corporeal contingency:

The last thing he did was to connect the rubber tube that went into the boy's penis to the long plastic tube that went into the bag on the side of the bed. That was what the nurses in the hospital had taught him to do. It

was very important to connect the rubber tube in the boy's penis to the plastic tube when he went to bed at night. So that everything would run okay. So that everything would be all right.<sup>98</sup>

Here and elsewhere in the text, instances of corporeal leakage abound. Through injury, Kovic's body has become 'unruly' on several levels, proving a source of embarrassment, shame and horror both to Kovic himself and (ironically, often to a greater extent) to those around him.

Kovic's ongoing condition of bodily paralysis renders invalid his prior concept of his own identity, predicated as it was on his physical prowess and corporeal control. As the closing pages of Chapter 1 indicated, the fit, healthy, disciplined body is a key constituent not only of the soldier-identity, but also of the stereotypical conception of masculinity that predominates within Western popular culture more generally. As cultural critic Antony Easthope has argued, 'the self finds its identity in a body image'. The ideal form of masculine embodiment within Western society is, he contends, a body which is 'Very clear in outline and firm in definition', i.e. a *solid, closed* body. The body of the soldier, Easthope suggests, is seen as the epitome of idealised masculinity, which Easthope describes as 'the hard, trained, disciplined body under rational control'.<sup>99</sup> Hence the corporeal damage that Kovic has sustained is accompanied by a profound sense of demasculinisation. While Kovic foregrounds his feeling of having been 'unmanned' through injury by means of an almost obsessional fixation with his inability to achieve an erection following paralysis, one must not overlook the ways in which his sense of compromised masculinity is

grounded in his loss of corporeal control more generally, and in his inability to employ his body actively as in former times. Hence, in the aftermath of the drunken night out and the leaking catheter bag incident, he expresses nostalgia for his previous condition of embodiment thus:

He wanted to explode, to get out of this crazy numb body and be a man again. He wanted to be free again, to walk in his back yard on the grass. He wanted to run down to Sparky's and get a haircut, he wanted to play stickball with Richie, to swing the bat, to feel the gravel on Hamilton Avenue beneath his feet again. He wanted to stand up in the shower every morning with the hot water streaming down his back and off his legs.<sup>100</sup>

The above analysis has shown that Kovic's condition of fragmented, contingent embodiment is characterised by an abundance of corporeal outflow. As Easthope argues, the ideal of masculine embodiment demands that the body be hard, closed and impermeable so as to contain and protect 'the fortress of the self, for (in literal and symbolic terms) 'A hard body will ensure that there are no leakages across the edges between inner and outer worlds'.<sup>101</sup> Hence the uncontrollable tide of corporeal matter issuing forth from Kovic's damaged body further 'unmans' him, as his body-- no longer the sinewy, disciplined *machine-body* of the soldier-- is rendered soft, porous, 'leaky', and hence *feminine*. As the ensuing chapters will detail, the status of Kovic's body as a 'leaky vessel' is 'dangerous' on a myriad of levels.<sup>102</sup>

In later sections of *Born on the Fourth of July*, Kovic foregrounds the issue of visibility with regard to his own situation and that of other veterans, suggesting that, at the time of writing, a 'conspiracy of silence' operated not only to conceal the material facts and implications of the wounds received by American soldiers and others in Vietnam, but also to render veterans themselves invisible. He suggests that his body, torn and disabled by his experience in Vietnam, makes him 'a living reminder of something terrible and awful', and hence the powers that be, he contends, 'wanted to make him hide'.<sup>103</sup> Indeed, Kovic's narrative implies that the confinement of disabled combat survivors within veterans' hospitals-- often for prolonged periods of time-- served a purpose beyond the merely therapeutic, also functioning to protect the general public from encountering the bodies of the irreparably wounded.<sup>104</sup> Kovic's extensive experience of hospitalisation and its attendant humiliations leads him to view the veterans' hospital as 'more like a factory to break people than to mend them and put them back together again'.<sup>105</sup> The purpose of psychologically 'breaking' the incurably wounded, he suggests, is to coerce them into rendering themselves invisible when they are released into the wider community, discouraging them from speaking about their experiences in Vietnam and engendering in them a sense of shame about their broken bodies. Kovic's narrative thus draws to our attention two interesting issues that will resurface in my analysis in the chapters that follow: firstly, the contention that the US military

deliberately attempted to mask the human cost of the war; and secondly, the notion-- repeatedly asserted in the various narratives discussed in this chapter-- that the mangled and/or fragmented bodies produced by the conflict must act as a crucial touchstone for any meaningful discussion of the war.

The above analysis has demonstrated that veterans' narratives and officially-sanctioned discourses tend to exhibit contrasting impulses in their depiction of the in-country experience and its aftermath, particularly with regard to their presentation of bodily wounds and wounded bodies. Indeed, as texts by Caputo, Parrish, Kovic and others evidence, whereas military-medical discourse frequently encourages its readers/listeners to avert their gaze from the mangled bodies of the injured, veterans' narratives tend to urge us to confront instances of mortal and/or severe injury. In this manner, veteran writers seek both to draw to our attention the visceral and *abject* qualities of such instances of corporeal damage (and the bodily frailty that they represent), and to foreground the disturbing implications of surviving with permanent physical impairment, thus 'transfusing' their representations of the war with aspects of injury absent from officially-sanctioned accounts.

As I have attempted to show in this chapter, veterans' narrative renderings of their experiences in Vietnam hinge upon the portrayal of wounding, often with a particular focus upon instances of irreparable injury. In so doing, Caputo, Parrish, Kovic and others suggest that the



torn and mangled bodies of those wounded in Vietnam serve as a key to deciphering the nature of the war and its implications. The subsequent chapter will attempt to untangle the delicate, complex (and sometimes contradictory) strands of meaning attached to these bodily wounds and wounded bodies, both by focusing upon their significance within the in-country context and also by examining the various connotations associated with the scarred and/or mangled bodies of veterans following their return to the US.

## CHAPTER 4

### **Bodies as Evidence: The Interpretation of Corporeal Damage In-Country and 'Back Home'**

'The wound is where private and public cross-- the transit point between the individual and the collective, between the body of the individual and the collective body of men.'

Mark Seltzer *Serial Killers: Death and Life in America's Wound Culture*<sup>1</sup>

'At first I felt that the wound was very interesting. I saw it almost as an adventure. But now it is not an adventure any longer. I see it more and more as a terrible thing that I will have to live with for the rest of my life.'

Ron Kovic *Born on the Fourth of July*<sup>2</sup>

'The human ego identifies its unity above all in an image of the body as a unified whole and fears above all the image of the body in pieces.'

Antony Easthope *What A Man's Gotta Do: The Masculine Myth in Popular Culture*<sup>3</sup>

Issues connected with bodily wounding feature prominently in veterans' accounts of their experiences in Vietnam, as we have seen in the previous chapter. Those who describe their confrontations with wounded bodies frequently foreground the visceral and *abject* quality of such instances of injury, and also draw our attention to the manner in which officially-sanctioned military-medical discourse tends to gloss over these aspects of corporeal damage. Veterans' accounts, as my analysis illustrated, not only detail the destructive impact of weaponry upon the human body-- attesting to the disturbing effect of witnessing

such corporeal damage-- they also highlight the limits of military medicine's capacity to repair these torn and mutilated bodies.

Having thus already established the pivotal importance of the representation of irreparable corporeal damage in veterans' depictions of the in-country experience and its aftermath, the discussion that follows will elucidate the complex (and often contradictory) array of meanings that were projected upon, attached to or associated with these bodily wounds and wounded bodies. Initially the analysis will concern itself with the significance of ruptured bodies within the in-country context. Later sections of the argument will then examine the connotations of the mangled or scarred bodies of veterans following their return to the US, referring again to Kovic's *Born on the Fourth of July* (1976)-- a crucial touchstone for the discussion in the previous chapter. Having already shown how Kovic's narrative foregrounds his feeling that his body was beyond his control (both as a result of his physical paralysis, and through the ongoing process of military-medical management), further discussion below will outline another important aspect of his struggle for mastery of his own embodiment-- his battle to gain control over the interpretation of his injuries.

As Chapter 2 confirmed, the conditions of combat in Vietnam did not conform to patterns set by prior US military engagements. Factors such as the lack of a battlefield, the unpredictable and sporadic nature of encounters with the Viet Cong and NVA, and the heavy reliance of Vietnamese combatants upon booby trap weaponry,

coalesced to create a situation which confounded the expectations of a generation of US soldiers whose notions of warfare were fuelled by Hollywood reconstructions of World War II scenarios. As Lloyd B. Lewis has put it in *The Tainted War: Culture and Identity in Vietnam War Narratives* (1985), the in-country experience served as a 'systematic disconfirmation' of 'the meanings associated with warfare brought to Vietnam from the United States'.<sup>4</sup> As Lewis and others have noted, the key concept of land-as-territory was, in this instance, radically undermined. Here the Viet Cong and NVA combatants' strategic use of the landscape to their own advantage resulted in the alternative conceptualisation of *land-as-enemy*. Moreover, the absence of territorial goals simultaneously deprived the US soldier of both the means of measuring the success of the American military mission and the method of achieving it. Finding himself 'adrift', bereft of 'familiar cognitive and normative landscapes', the US soldier had little choice but to direct his efforts towards the only readily visible objective-- in the words of Philip Caputo, 'to kill Communists and to kill as many of them as possible'.<sup>5</sup>

While-- as psychiatrist and veterans' counsellor Robert Jay Lifton has pointed out-- the tabulation of lives lost in battle has been a convention of warfare since ancient times, the 'body count' had a greatly inflated status here, for 'kill scores' were the *only* available criterion for judging the success or failure of the American military mission in this context.<sup>6</sup> '[T]he measures of a unit's performance in

Vietnam were not the distances it had advanced or the number of victories it had won', writes Philip Caputo, but rather 'the number of enemy soldiers it had killed (the body count) and the proportion between that number and the number of its own dead (the kill ratio)'.<sup>7</sup> For US military decision-makers, the body count seemed to provide both an achievable objective and an effective criterion for judging the progress of US soldiers in combat. However, as veterans and commentators repeatedly emphasise, the overwhelming focus upon body counts and kill ratios here had a myriad of problematic ramifications.

In theory, the system for the calculation of the body count required an assigned group of soldiers, or 'body count detail', to tally the number of corpses at the scene of combat. In *A Rumor of War* (1977), Philip Caputo outlines his role as Casualty Reporting Officer, which involved relaying this information from the battalion adjutants to the division combat casualty reporting centre, and tabulating the figures for each battalion within his regiment on a 'scoreboard', a chart divided into columns and with a wipe-clean surface, kept in the Colonel's office:

The vertical columns were headed, from left to right, KIA, WIA, DOW (died of wounds), NONHOST, VC-KIA, VC-WIA, and VC-POW. The horizontal columns were labeled with the numerical designations of the units belonging to, or attached to, the regiment: 1/3 for 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion, 3d Marines, 2/3 for 2d Battalion and so forth. In the first four vertical columns were written the number of casualties a particular unit had suffered, in the last three the number it had inflicted on the enemy.<sup>8</sup>

The usually easy-going Colonel was, Caputo writes, 'adamant' regarding the maintenance of an 'accurate' scoreboard so that he could 'keep track' of the soldiers under his command and 'rattle off impressive figures to visiting dignitaries'.<sup>9</sup> In *The Body in Pain* (1985), Elaine Scarry has drawn our attention to 'the human tendency to count in precarious situations'.<sup>10</sup> Viewed in this light, the definition and display of 'combat effectiveness' in terms of mathematical variables evidences an attempt here on the part of Colonel Wheeler (and, of course, the US military establishment more generally) to retain a vestige of control in a context where previous methods of judging military progress were no longer relevant.

Although, as James William Gibson has noted, the US military's focus upon body counts and kill ratios created the illusion of the war as a 'highly rational' exercise, the translation of deaths into mathematical variables was, nevertheless, far from an exact science.<sup>11</sup> As the previous chapter detailed, the nature of the weaponry employed (particularly the high incidence of mines) meant that those injured were often literally blown to pieces, a situation which could pose problems for the statistician. Caputo relates a scenario in which a jeep dumps its cargo of Vietnamese corpses at headquarters:

The driver parked behind the adjutant's tent and unhitched the trailer. It tipped forward, the hitch clanging against the ground and the bodies tumbling over on top of each other. A half-severed arm, with a piece of bone protruding whitely through the flesh, flopped over the side of the trailer, then flopped back in again.<sup>12</sup>

Confronted by this corporeal chaos, Caputo finds it difficult to decipher the mass of tangled flesh before him:

I checked to make sure there were four bodies. There appeared to be. It was difficult to tell. Tossed around in the trailer, they had become entangled, one barely distinguishable from another. Three of them were entangled, anyway. The fourth did not have arms below the elbow, and his legs had been shot or blown off completely. The others had been mangled in other places. One had been hit in the head, his brains and the white cartilage that had moored them to his skull spilling onto the bottom of the trailer. Another, hit in the midsection, had been turned inside out, the slick, blue and greenish brown mass of his intestines bulging out of him.<sup>13</sup>

While the medics who had to treat the injured were often unable to put the bodies of the wounded back together, those trying to convert such instances of corporeal chaos into quantifiable data faced analogous difficulties. Here, again, 'messy' ruptured bodies literally and metaphorically 'spilled over' the boundaries or limits intended to contain, describe or classify them. Elsewhere in the narrative, Caputo's query as to the figure for the enemy body count following a lengthy gun-battle receives the following response: "There were a lot of pieces and blood trails around, so we estimate eight VC KIA". How has this figure been calculated, Caputo asks a Marine at Company Headquarters: "Oh, I guess somebody just counted up the arms and legs and divided by four", is his reply.<sup>14</sup> While this estimate might seem logical under the circumstances, there is clearly an element of the arbitrary about the calculation.

James William Gibson foregrounds the use of 'inferential counting rules' as standard procedure in the reporting of body counts in-country. 'An inferential counting rule', Gibson explains, 'is a rule that a company uses to infer numbers of enemy dead according to some found object or sign-- an enemy weapon, a blood trail, a dismembered body part' and so on.<sup>15</sup> Not surprisingly, such methods of calculation tended to maximise the reported number of 'enemy' operatives who had lost their lives. The propensity of the US military to overestimate the enemy body count has been well documented by a wide range of commentators and veterans. Rather than operating in terms of accurate quantification, the body count was in practice, Gibson argues, more often an exercise in fabrication. Providing a wealth of examples in which the figures reported by American soldiers bore little correlation to the actual number of 'hostile' casualties, Gibson highlights the manner in which the falsification of enemy body counts was encouraged, frequently rewarded and often demanded in all echelons of the military institution-- 'At higher command levels the numbers just got larger'.<sup>16</sup> On a wider scale, this process was extended outside the combat zone as military commanders and key pro-war governmental decision-makers employed fabricated statistics as a potent weapon in the war of public opinion regarding America's involvement in Vietnam.

While exaggerated reports of Viet Cong casualties (and underestimated figures concerning enemy strength<sup>17</sup>) may have served to boost morale back in the US-- at least in the war's early stages-- the



misrepresentation of this information had a less beneficial effect upon American personnel in-country. The soldiers' awareness of the calculation of body counts and kill ratios as a process of falsification frequently had the effect of invalidating any sense of achievement that they might have gained from their sporadic encounters with Vietnamese combatants. In *Chickenhawk* (1983), a narrative describing his experiences as an Army helicopter pilot in Vietnam, Robert Mason has drawn attention to the widespread awareness of the gap between fact and fabrication among the soldiers in-country: 'Week after week, the magazines reported kill scores that we knew were inflated with villagers', he writes.<sup>18</sup> Elsewhere, in Army veteran Stephen Wright's fictional narrative *Meditations in Green*, one of the characters highlights the extent to which the US military underestimated their own fatalities (and those of civilians), and grossly exaggerated 'enemy' casualties, by parodying an informational broadcast of casualty figures:

The U.S. Command announced today the loss of three more jets in the latest bombing raids over North Vietnam. This brings the figure of downed aircraft to seventeen for the week. Dead total two hundred seventy-eight Americans, three hundred forty-six Vietnamese, and four thousand five hundred eighty-two NVA and Viet Cong.<sup>19</sup>

Thus, while veterans frequently suggest that the in-country experience could not be made to make sense with recourse to established paradigms, they also draw attention to their awareness that officially-sanctioned representations of the situation within the combat

zone did not tally with their own perception of events. Following this spoof of the falsification of body counts, another character in Wright's narrative wonders: 'Has anyone ever bothered adding up those numbers [. . .] We must have wiped out the entire population of North Vietnam at least twice over by now'.<sup>20</sup> In practice, then, the attempt of US military decision-makers to focus upon 'hard numbers' as an antidote to their precarious situation in Vietnam often had the opposite effect, magnifying the arbitrary quality of the in-country experience. The American soldier's awareness of the fabricated nature of the body count rendered the notion of US military 'progress' in Vietnam an illusion. While responses to this state of affairs varied, soldiers frequently demonstrate a profound sense of disillusionment both with regard to the US war effort in general and to the body count in particular. Thus the narrator of veteran Larry Heinemann's fictional account *Close Quarters* (1977), reflecting upon the number of enemy soldiers killed by his platoon, remarks: 'That summer the number would become fifteen and later twenty-six, and later still we would lose count and give up the counting, saying among ourselves, "Who fucken cares?"'.<sup>21</sup>

Nevertheless, as Caputo explains, 'The pressure on unit commanders to produce enemy corpses was intense, and they in turn communicated it to their troops'.<sup>22</sup> Such was the fervour that, according to sources cited by Lloyd B. Lewis, various forms of 'competition' existed as to which platoon, brigade or company could achieve the

highest number of confirmed kills.<sup>23</sup> According to anecdotal sources, soldiers would be rewarded for high performance: "You'd get better supplies; steaks, booze once in a while...everything would come your way", claimed one Marine Corporal.<sup>24</sup> Within this context, the loss of human life became a question of accountancy rather than a moral or an ethical concern: 'Victory was a high body-count, defeat a low kill-ratio, war a matter of arithmetic', writes Caputo.<sup>25</sup> This had manifold repercussions upon the attitudes and actions of American soldiers in-country. Psychiatrist and veterans' counsellor Robert Jay Lifton contends that the primacy of the body count was of pivotal importance in the creation of what he has termed an 'atrocious-producing situation' in Vietnam.<sup>26</sup> He writes:

A key to understanding the psychology of My Lai, and of America in Vietnam, is the body count. Nothing else so well epitomizes the war's absurdity and evil. [ . . . ] in the absence of any other goals or criteria for success, counting the enemy dead can become both malignant obsession and compulsive falsification. For the combat GI in Vietnam killing Vietnamese is the entire mission, the number killed his and his unit's only standard of achievement and the falsification of that count (on many levels) the only way to hold on to the Vietnam illusion of noble battle.<sup>27</sup>

Both Lifton and Lloyd B. Lewis have pointed out that the intense focus upon the 'production' of 'enemy' corpses often 'conflated quantity with success' (as Lewis has put it), resulting in the frequent murder of Vietnamese civilians.<sup>28</sup> Within a context in which 'The amount of killing-- any killing-- becomes the total measure of achievement', Lifton argues, 'one lies, to others as well as to oneself, about why, who, what,

and how many one kills.' He foregrounds the widespread tendency among US soldiers in-country to interpret/'read' all available Vietnamese bodies/body parts as 'proof' of triumph in battle. 'Once a corpse has been identified (or imagined) it *becomes* that of a slain "enemy"', Lifton explains, and hence, according to this twisted logic, the ruptured bodies of the Vietnamese serve to corroborate the soldier's skill as a 'warrior' and, by extension, to substantiate his identity as a man.<sup>29</sup> Lifton alerts us to the prevalence of the language and imagery of the hunt among American soldiers in-country, highlighting the manner in which this frame of reference engenders a specific view of the (bodies of the) Vietnamese, and prompts particular behaviours towards them. Within this system of discourse, he writes, 'The "animals" one shoots serve merely to provide trophies, evidence of one's prowess'.<sup>30</sup> In keeping with this line of argument, Lloyd B. Lewis contends that 'The policy of equating a high body count with military success, spawned a situation wherein atrocity was prescribed and rewarded', for soldiers were encouraged (and often required) to provide 'proof' of having killed one of the enemy, necessitating the mutilation of dead bodies in order to provide 'evidence' of a 'confirmed kill'.<sup>31</sup>

Elsewhere, James William Gibson draws our attention to the rivalry that existed between various units as to who could be most 'productive' with regard to the body count. He highlights a notable instance described by a US field officer who 'almost had to get into a fist fight with an ARVN adviser over an arm, to see who would get

credit for the body, because they were sorting out pieces'.<sup>32</sup> As Chapter 2 demonstrated, the in-country environment acted as an arena in which American soldiers' established value systems and beliefs were challenged on various levels. As has already been suggested, veterans often depict the in-country experience in terms of a confrontation with aspects of embodiment generally submerged within US culture. While the torn bodies encountered in-country could provoke a form of existential crisis in some-- for Caputo, for example, the repeated sight of mangled flesh conflicted with Christian teachings regarding the sanctity of the human body-- veterans also frequently direct our attention to the disparity between the treatment of bodies prescribed in mainstream American culture, and that exhibited within the combat zone. On many occasions this discrepancy was extreme, as the treatment of the bodies of the dead and wounded in-country involved a total contradiction/reversal of the attitudes and behaviours deemed appropriate 'back home'. The response of the American officer to his dispute with the ARVN adviser emphasises the transgressive element of the situation, and the horror and disgust that such behaviour provoked: 'It just made him sick to the stomach that he was put in such a position that a body was so important to the next higher headquarters or to the division, that he had to go down and argue over pieces of a body to get credit for it'.<sup>33</sup>

Paradoxes and contradictions abound with respect to the 'value' of ruptured bodies within this context. While mangled bodies

were 'so important'-- being the only 'things' that 'counted' here-- the scuffling over the 'ownership' of a severed limb implies that (Vietnamese) bodies lacked any inherent value *in themselves*, directly contradicting a system of belief which placed paramount importance upon human life (and, by extension, upon the human body). Hence the emphasis on body counts and kill ratios (and the behaviours that this engendered) stripped bodies of their familiar meanings and rendered problematic the notion that the human body was possessed of any intrinsic worth.<sup>34</sup> The standard military guidelines for the computation of body parts in-country are particularly revealing in this regard. As Gibson states 'severed limbs signified a whole body for counting purposes'.<sup>35</sup> While this edict is clearly intended to provide clarity-- to reduce to order a (literally and metaphorically) 'messy' situation by transforming tangled body parts into 'tidy' figures-- it also, paradoxically, contravenes, blurs, and/or complicates pre-existing assumptions and beliefs concerning what a body 'is' and what 'it' signifies. Within this context, as critic Susan Jeffords has noted in *The Remasculinization of America: Gender and the Vietnam War* (1989), 'the body [. . .] ceased to have meaning as a whole and [. . .] instead [became] a fragmented collection of disconnected parts that achieve the illusion of coherence only through their display as spectacle'.<sup>36</sup>

There are several important issues at stake here that merit further consideration. As discussion above has suggested, and further analysis will detail, the all-pervasive emphasis on the body count within

the combat milieu undermined in itself pre-existing assumptions concerning human embodiment; what is more, it encouraged American soldiers to engage in activities which were profoundly at odds with the norms and values of mainstream US culture. And these very activities further compounded/complicated the meanings associated with ruptured bodies in this context. Veterans repeatedly present the in-country environment as an arena in which various forms of transgressive behaviour proliferate, revealing that the socio-cultural codes which prevailed 'back home' were not merely rendered irrelevant here, but were flouted in an extreme manner. In *Journal of a Plague Year* (1979), recounting his experience as a Marine doctor in Vietnam, John Parrish emphasises that the transgressive quality of the combat milieu hinges upon the (mis)treatment of bodies within this arena, a place where, 'Bombs are murdering thousands of civilians. Four-year-old boys try to kill me', and-- most significantly-- 'Children dance around the bodies of their uncles and cousins'.<sup>37</sup>

Critic Michael Bellamy has highlighted a tendency towards the depiction of the in-country experience as a kind of Bakhtinian carnival in US representations of the Vietnam War, alerting us to the association of carnival with carnage within the American cultural mindset.<sup>38</sup> Bellamy reminds us that transgression and inversion were key components in the practice of carnival, as has been established by literary critic Mikhail Bakhtin in his analysis of the work of Rabelais. 'Generally speaking, carnival's irreverence playfully inverts the

everyday official hierarchies of customary usage', Bellamy explains. He draws to the fore Bakhtin's notion that carnival activity was frequently driven by a 'preoccupation with the grotesque'-- a fascination/fixation with 'all aspects and manifestations of life that the established order ordinarily wants to repress'-- and states that this preoccupation found an outlet in the focus upon 'lower bodily strata', and the substances and activities associated with these regions.<sup>39</sup> My analysis in Chapter 2 has already shown that the in-country environment is frequently depicted by veterans as an arena at odds with the American milieu. While US social norms demand the (literal and metaphorical) exclusion/expulsion/concealment of bodily waste, such detritus proliferated within the combat zone. Hence, when assessed by the criterion of the American cultural mindset, the Vietnam milieu was often perceived as an inherently carnivalesque space. The triumph of the excremental within this context-- as already discussed with reference to Tim O'Brien's depiction of Kiowa's death in the 'shit field'<sup>40</sup>-- represents a carnivalesque inversion in several respects. Not only do veterans draw our attention to the fact that the excretion of waste matter, an activity hidden/disguised within mainstream US culture, took place in full view here, they also foreground the manner in which the environmental characteristics of this milieu overturned the soldier's sense of physical invulnerability, undermining his perception of his own body as an impenetrable fortress. Moreover, as many American soldiers soon found out, a muscular, bulky, disciplined body did not



necessarily guarantee the victory that military training had promised. In fact, as Chapter 2 detailed, such assumptions-- prevalent within mainstream American culture and accentuated via the training process -- were effectively contradicted here, for the possession of a 'hard', militarised body often proved to be a distinct disadvantage. And thus the very premise of military training-- the creation of "hard" bodies to ensure military victory-- was turned on its head within the Vietnam context.

In her discussion of the use of aspects of the carnivalesque within contemporary horror films, critic Barbara Creed reflects upon the cultural norms that carnival activity 'mocks and derides', and (again) her remarks locate the body/bodily matters at the crux of carnival activity. Carnival, she argues, serves to disparage 'all established values and proprieties: the clean and proper body, the desire for immortality, the law and the institutions of church and family, the sanctity of life'.<sup>41</sup> As my discussion in Chapter 3 argued, the Vietnam milieu was a space in which the US soldier was repeatedly confronted by the vulnerability of the human body-- not only did he frequently experience his embodiment as a locus of frailty within the combat context here, he often witnessed instances in which corporeal boundaries were violently and irreparably transgressed as wounded bodies were dismembered and their inner regions exposed to view. In this manner, the notion of the inherent value of human life was challenged on a regular basis by the events witnessed by the soldier

in-country. As various theorists on the body have noted, there is a pronounced tendency within Western culture to assume that the relationship between mind and body is a hierarchical one, in which the mind (the 'ghost in the machine') generally maintains mastery over the various organs and other parts of the body. As Chapter 1 illustrated, the US military establishment harnesses this principle, asserting that the heightened level of self-discipline engendered through the training process will enable the soldier to exert a greater degree of control over his (potentially) unruly body. In-country, however, as earlier sections of my discussion have shown, the soldier frequently found himself unable to master his own body as he experienced involuntary physical reactions to the Vietnam milieu (e.g. heatstroke, dehydration, diarrhoea), and he was powerless to protect himself from the invasive attacks of parasites, viruses, and other forms of threat to his physical well-being and corporeal integrity. In this manner, the soldier's deep-seated assumptions concerning the mind/body dialectic were effectively inverted within the combat zone here, creating the impression that he was at the mercy of his own body, rather than in control of 'it'.

In keeping with the representation of the combat experience provided by veterans, my remarks up to this point frequently portray the American soldier as a 'victim' of the in-country environment. Within this milieu, as previous chapters have illustrated, US personnel were confronted by corporeal frailty on a myriad of levels, an experience

which they often found upsetting and disturbing. As it stands, however, this predicament does little to explain instances of the dismemberment and display of corpses by American soldiers themselves, for if they were appalled by the repeated sight of torn bodies, then what could have impelled them to deliberately engage in acts of corporeal mutilation? Commentators draw our attention both to the commonalities and the distinctions between Vietnam and prior combat contexts in this regard. Hence Joanna Bourke highlights a parallel between World War I, World War II and Vietnam in *An Intimate History of Killing* (1999), stating that 'Pranks involving enemy bodies were very common in all three conflicts'. However, she notes that 'The tendency to collect human trophies escalated during the conflicts in Korea and Vietnam'.<sup>42</sup> Elsewhere, in *A War of Nerves: Soldiers and Psychiatrists, 1914-1994* (2002), Ben Shephard tempers his remark that 'Atrocities occur in all wars-- even "good" ones', with the observation that 'There were [. . .] aspects of the Vietnam War that encouraged this behaviour'.<sup>43</sup> In their discussion of the motivating factors behind US soldiers' treatment of bodies within the combat zone, veterans and others have pointed out that the focus upon the body count encouraged the removal of body parts from Vietnamese corpses, as I mentioned earlier. However, discussions of this behaviour frequently assert that the manipulation and/or mutilation of bodies here served purposes beyond that of merely providing evidence of productivity in battle.

In his analysis of the depiction of the in-country experience as 'carnival', Michael Bellamy reflects upon the 'gruesome games' carried out by US soldiers: the mutilation of the Vietnamese dead, and/or the posing of their corpses. He cites the notable instance of the arrangement of the dead body of a North Vietnamese soldier, as described by former Marine William Broyles:

I [. . .] found the dead man propped up against some C-ration boxes. He had on sunglasses, and a *Playboy* magazine open in his lap; a cigarette dangled jauntily from his mouth, and on his head was perched a large and perfectly formed piece of shit.<sup>44</sup>

Bellamy sees 'an uncanny similarity' between such 'imaginative play' and the fascination with the grotesque which directs much carnival activity.<sup>45</sup> Moreover, as theorist Barbara Creed points out, the grotesque body frequently served as 'a source of obscene humour' within the context of carnival.<sup>46</sup> These comments help to account for Broyles' involuntary reaction to this spectacle, which he describes as follows: 'I pretended to be outraged, since desecration of bodies was frowned upon and un-American and unproductive. But it wasn't outrage I felt. I kept my officer's face on but inside I was...laughing'.<sup>47</sup>

Elsewhere, at several points in his narrative *If I Die in a Combat Zone* (1969), Tim O'Brien presents laughter as the only adequate response to a situation that was inherently ludicrous. Hence, O'Brien suggests, the propensity of US soldiers in-country to describe the appalling corporeal damage wrought by landmines 'with a funny laugh, flippantly, with a chuckle', is oddly apt. Because such carnage is

apparently meaningless and purposeless, O'Brien contends, 'It is funny. It's absurd.'<sup>48</sup> He continues by drawing our attention to the factors which rendered combat in Vietnam untenable, in both practical and psychological terms, for the US soldier who fought there, again emphasising that laughter was the only appropriate reaction to such circumstances:

If land is not won and if hearts are at best left indifferent; if the only obvious criterion of military success is body count and if the enemy absorbs losses as he has, still able to lure us amid his crop of mines; if soldiers are being withdrawn, with more to go later and later and later; if legs make me more of a man, and they surely do, my soul and character and capacity to love notwithstanding; if any of this is truth, a soldier can only do his walking laughing along the way and taking a funny, crooked step.<sup>49</sup>

Chapter 3 has already drawn attention to the use of grim 'gallows' humour and linguistic substitution among soldiers in Vietnam as a means to deflect the psychological impact of witnessing the injuries of others. However, as my analysis demonstrated, while 'grunt lingo' served to mask the visceral horror of corporeal injury at times, terms such as 'wasted' conversely generated a re-emergence of disturbing issues connected with bodily wounding. As I noted, commentator Walter T. Davis has differentiated the use of this expression (coined by soldiers in Vietnam) from the linguistic coping strategies employed in earlier wars. In *Shattered Dream: America's Search for Its Soul* (1994), Davis argues that while those in combat tend to use euphemisms in order 'to soften the experience of killing and dying', "Wasted" connotes cynicism, senseless death, needless destruction'.<sup>50</sup> Hence, while this

term might initially appear to mask the gory aspect of instances of wounding, its use among soldiers in Vietnam served to expose the nature and implications of the corporeal damage suffered here, implying that bodies were frequently squandered, devastated, desecrated, and/or reduced to detritus through injury.

In a similar fashion, as Davis argues with reference to Hasford's *The Short-Timers* (1979), 'laughter is frequently used to hold the horror at bay, but the laughter is never innocent.'<sup>51</sup> Indeed, in many cases, the black humour employed in representations of the in-country experience serves to alert us to the inversion of familiar norms and values within the combat milieu and, at times, to foreground (rather than to conceal) the viscerality of corporeal injury in this context. Within Hasford's narrative, Joker's response to the mortal wounding of Winslow, killed in his attempt to aid a fellow soldier, serves as a prime example of the operation of such humour. 'It took a lot of guts to do what Winslow did', Joker remarks, 'I mean, you can see Winslow's guts and he sure had a lot of them.'<sup>52</sup> In exploiting the double meaning of the term 'guts' here, Joker's comment undercuts the (more traditional) interpretation of Winslow's actions as heroic, instead focusing upon the resultant scene of visceral carnage. Joker's observations here and elsewhere in Hasford's text can thus be viewed in terms of a subversive decoding of the wounded body, for he repeatedly emphasises the messy, repulsive and grotesque elements of bodily wounding, refusing to interpret the corporeal damage which results from combat as

evidence of heroism, or a 'red badge of courage' (to borrow the title of Stephen Crane's Civil War novella).<sup>53</sup>

Michael Bellamy suggests that while the attitudes and behaviours exhibited by soldiers in Vietnam 'unconsciously enact carnival's celebration of life's amorphous multiplicity', the posing of bodies and dismemberment of corpses serve to 'reverse [carnival's] ultimate meaning'. 'Whereas traditional carnival celebrated the evolution of life forms', he writes, 'the grunts' carnivals reflect the post-Puritan tendency to see only death and degradation in the same process'. Hence the purpose of the 'freak show' that Broyles responds to with mirth, was, as Bellamy asserts, 'not to remind us of our participation in life's mind-boggling multiplicity, but rather to distance us from our (dead) brothers'.<sup>54</sup> Broyles himself explains:

I laughed-- I believe now-- in part because of some subconscious appreciation of this obscene linkage of sex and excrement and death; and in part in exultant realization that he-- whoever he had been-- was dead and I-- special unique me-- was alive.<sup>55</sup>

As I have emphasised here and elsewhere in my study, military training pinpointed physical frailty as the enemy of the soldier-male. To maintain the illusion of corporeal invulnerability essential to the soldier-identity, the recruit had to control and/or overcome any weaknesses, and to suppress and/or conceal anything that might draw attention to his physical vulnerability (and, by implication, the frailty of the American body politic). As Broyles' remarks suggest, the dismembering and/or manipulation of the bodies of dead Vietnamese can thus be understood

as an attempt to assert the solidity and impenetrability (and hence, superiority) of the American male body, to disavow 'its' vulnerability by projecting this onto the body of the 'other'. In *What A Man's Gotta Do: The Masculine Myth in Popular Culture* (1990), cultural theorist Antony Easthope writes: 'The unity of the body is affirmed when the body of the other is destroyed, as though its motto in killing and mutilating were "I am everything so you are nothing-- earth, a piece of shit, a dead body, a body I master by making dead"<sup>56</sup> Elsewhere, in *Male Bodies: Psychoanalyzing the White Terror* (1978), Klaus Theweleit remarks that the violence committed by soldiers upon the corpses of their opponents represents 'an affirmation of life', for these destructive acts serve as a means to verify that 'It is the *other* who is dead [. . .]'. Hence, Theweleit continues, 'Corpses piled upon corpses reveal [the soldier-male] as victor, a man who has successfully externalized that which is dead within him, who remains standing when all else is crumbling.'<sup>57</sup>

The phenomenon of 'berserking' among US soldiers is examined by psychiatrist Jonathan Shay in *Achilles in Vietnam: Combat Trauma and the Undoing of Character* (1994). Shay cites a range of instances described by Vietnam veterans where they lost control and were driven to reckless, frenzied and/or bloodthirsty acts during their time in-country. Significantly, in his discussion of the characteristics of the berserk state, Shay notes that the berserker often experiences a feeling of godlike omnipotence during his rampage:

Gods are immortal; man is mortal. Gods know no limit on their power [. . .] man is often powerless and



trapped. *Gods are invulnerable; man is fragile, easily mutilated and killed.* The berserker feels godlike in his power and acknowledges no limit to his power and invulnerability. He acknowledges no restraints of any kind.<sup>58</sup>

Shay's remarks here describe the *modus operandi* of berserking in terms of the achievement of a (momentary) feeling of transcendence through transgression. As Lifton has argued, 'The ultimate transgression is joy in killing and mutilating'<sup>59</sup>, and hence the desecration/violation of bodies by the US soldier perhaps acted as a (misdirected) attempt to transcend various limits, be they the military regulations regarding his behaviour, the frustrating restrictions of the character of combat in Vietnam (which seemed to involve endless effort for little overall progress), or-- as the comments from Theweleit, Easthope and Shay cited above suggest-- the limitations of his own corporeal frailty.

Michael Bellamy draws our attention to an incident described by a veteran in Mark Baker's *Nam* (1981) to highlight the manner in which, by 'temporarily suspending the ordinary constraints of behaviour and the customary modes of perception', carnival can serve as a 'learning experience', enabling the individual 'to see what is usually disguised or even invisible', in this case the inner recesses of the human body. The unnamed soldier explains:

Watching guys die is a drag, but there's a weird educational side to war, too. Like the first time I seen a guy's guts laying on top of him, as disgusting as it was, I said to myself. "Oh, wow. So that's what they look like." If you want, you can go in there and help yourself

to a handful, you can wash them off and keep them. You can perform major surgery, right there.

The whole world gets absurd after a while. You do things that seem not right now, but which seemed right at the time. I used to love to go over to guys who would catch rounds in the chest or the guts and pretend I was a doctor. You had the licence to do whatever you wanted. I'd go over there and I'd take my hand and I'd stick it inside their guts, pick it up, wash it off or do the old chest routine. I would sort of experiment. You know, I couldn't do nothing to hurt these guys, they were dead. But there was something about sticking my hands in warm blood that I used to love especially during the monsoon seasons.<sup>60</sup>

Bellamy describes this account as 'a kind of carnal knowledge, not only about human anatomy, but also about man's boundless curiosity', and he suggests that 'war, especially a lost war, uncovers much that might otherwise remain hidden'.<sup>61</sup> Significantly, in his discussion of Stephen Crane's *The Red Badge of Courage*, Mark Seltzer (1992) asserts that 'These primal scenes of battle are, finally, struggles to make interior states visible: to gain knowledge of and mastery over bodies and interiors by tearing them open to view'.<sup>62</sup> While the unnamed soldier in Baker's *Nam* stresses the liberating aspects of freedom from restraints in-country-- 'Here you are with bodies going up all around you, so if you're going to do something absurd, do it and don't worry about it'-- his remarks exhibit a sense of unease about his actions in retrospect. Although he asserts that 'It's hard to believe, but I didn't have a care in the world while I was in Nam', his attitude towards his actions following his return to the US-- 'You do things *that seem not right now*, but which seemed right at the time'-- draws our attention to the psychologically disorientating effect of engaging in the mutilation/desecration of bodies

while in-country. Hence the paradoxical quality of his assertion, 'I can actually say I never felt bad about anything I did in Nam, *except for doing something like that once in a while. Or getting the pleasure out of it.*'<sup>63</sup>

As Bellamy's analysis suggests, the feelings of pleasure experienced as a result of such 'investigations'-- and, moreover, the sense of guilt that may follow in retrospect-- are connected with the equation of the de(con)struction of the human body with the quest for 'forbidden' knowledge. This association is implied at several points within the narratives produced by veterans themselves. Notably, in Stephen Wright's fictional *Meditations in Green* (1985)-- one of the more self-consciously 'literary' narratives-- the seemingly trite limerick, casually composed by drug-addled ex-Army Intelligence Officer James Griffin, hints at this connection:

*There was a young man from the tracks  
Who wanted to know all of life's facts  
He found nothing nowhere  
So to let out the air  
He poked holes in other folks' backs.*<sup>64</sup>

The notion that the visceral act of tearing open bodies could lead to some sort of revelation might seem rather paradoxical in itself, for much of Western thought is predicated upon the idea that the realms of the spiritual and the corporeal exist in a dichotomous relationship, as separate, unrelated (and irreconcilable) spheres. One is reminded, however, of Georges Bataille's remarks concerning the revelatory aspect of human sacrifice in ancient societies. In *Erotism* (1957),

Bataille asserts that in the religious rite of human sacrifice transcendence is achieved through transgression, for 'The victim dies and the spectators share in what his death reveals', which accords the death of the victim the status of the 'sacramental'.<sup>65</sup> Interestingly, many veterans describe acts of mutilation and dismemberment in ritualistic terms, though such activities operate more as parodies of religious rites, than parallels of them. Robert Jay Lifton draws our attention to an incident cited by an ex-infantryman, a member of a veterans' discussion group that Lifton supervised in his capacity as counsellor and psychiatrist:

He had been talking about the horrors of combat and told how, after a heavy strike on an NLF [Viet Cong] unit, his company came upon a terrible scene of dismembered corpses. Many of the men then began a kind of wild victory dance, in the course of which they mutilated the bodies still further.<sup>66</sup>

Lifton emphasises the horror, disbelief and confusion felt by his patient in response to witnessing this episode, describing the incident in terms of an '*image of ultimate transgression-- of having actively violated the human order beyond anything resembling acceptable limits*'.<sup>67</sup> As Lifton suggests, and further analysis will show, any sense of transcendence, revelation and/or temporary liberation gained from the mutilation/dismemberment of bodies comes at a high psychological cost to those involved.

The removal of body parts from Vietnamese corpses is referred to repeatedly by veterans. Tim O'Brien's *If I Die in a Combat Zone*, for example, details an incident in which a group of soldiers, having

returned after a successful night patrol, produce a trophy of their victory: the severed ear of one of their victims, which is 'passed [. . .] around for everyone to look at'.<sup>68</sup> While this instance might suggest that the removal and collection of body parts functioned merely as a means to provide palpable proof of one's productivity in battle, veterans have drawn our attention to a tendency in soldiers to keep these items, occasionally for long periods. For example, one of the characters in Gustav Hasford's fictional narrative *The Short-Timers*, a Marine nicknamed 'Alice', collects the feet from Vietnamese corpses that the unit have 'wasted', hacking them off and placing them in a blue canvas shopping bag which he carries throughout the narrative.<sup>69</sup> Such behaviour would seem to indicate that these severed body parts have become imbued with some additional significance for those who carry them. While it can be argued that engaging in acts such as these reduces the body of the enemy/'other' to detritus (in keeping with the remarks of Easthope and Theweleit, cited above), retaining possession of these body parts seems-- conversely-- to invest them with some sort of value, perhaps as talismen/sacred objects.

In *An Intimate History of Killing*, Joanna Bourke refers to comments made by a Vietnam paratrooper to suggest that such souvenirs 'conveyed immense power upon the servicemen', and that the 'wearing' of these gruesome mementoes frequently acted as a means to confer manhood upon the soldier in the eyes of the other members of his combat unit.<sup>70</sup> It could therefore be argued that this

behaviour, at least in part, functions as an attempt on the part of the US soldier to bolster his own crumbling sense of physical invulnerability through the ongoing possession/control of a fragment of the body of the 'other'. However, Joanna Bourke continues by suggesting that this practice acts as a way of establishing a bond-- as opposed to a distance-- between killer and victim. While her point is contestable, it is worth quoting here:

In one sense, the search for souvenirs enabled men to link death of the 'other', the enemy, with love of themselves. Indeed a necklace of ears could be called "love beads". The fact that men would also *leave* souvenirs, such as photographs of themselves, on top of the corpses or cards representing their unit in lifeless hands was also important. The individual corpse came to represent a universal condition and the terror of death was diminished. Souvenirs asserted that the killed enemy was "like us".<sup>71</sup>

Thus, whereas I argued earlier that the posing, mutilation and/or collection of body parts of the Vietnamese dead would seem to disavow (the soldier's own) corporeal frailty, by distancing him from the corpse, Bourke conversely contends that such acts established a connection between the perpetrator and (the ruptured body of) the deceased. At the most simplistic level, one could argue that within a context in which the matrix of meanings pertaining to bodies was suffused with multiplicity and ambivalence, the pattern of behaviours that such meanings generated was, necessarily, beset by apparent inconsistencies. However, it might alternatively be suggested that the paradoxical quality of the implications accompanying the (mis)treatment of bodies in-country indicates that such actions were connected with

the soldier's ongoing attempt to contend with the moral and psychological dilemmas engendered by combat.

Robert Jay Lifton has proposed that instances of atrocity may have been prompted, at least in part, by soldiers' desire to 'put their world back in order' in a situation which (to borrow Lewis's phrase) does not 'make sense' with reference to prior conceptual models.<sup>72</sup> While Lifton is primarily referring here to incidents such as My Lai, his remarks are helpful when considering the ways in which American soldiers' posing and/or mutilation of bodies or body parts in Vietnam can be considered in terms of a (warped) attempt to express and/or negotiate the myriad of problems and paradoxes pertaining both to bodies and to embodiment itself within the in-country environment. Perhaps, then, the desecration/dismemberment of corpses operated as an attempt to express (and perhaps also to 'work through') the contrary impulses experienced when confronted by instances of irrevocable corporeal injury. Hence, by deliberately manipulating and/or mutilating the bodies of the Vietnamese dead, the soldier perhaps 'acted out' contradictory urges-- the desire to acknowledge, accept and draw attention to irreparably ruptured bodies, versus the compulsion to conceal, suppress or disown the corporeal frailty that they signify.<sup>73</sup> Nevertheless, as various commentators have noted, such actions in fact often served to *provoke*-- rather than to diffuse or resolve-- long-term psychological conflicts for those who carried them out.

Lifton contends that veterans' sense of 'having crossed boundaries that should not be crossed, gone beyond limits that should not be exceeded' frequently resulted in feelings of overwhelming guilt following their return to civilian life.<sup>74</sup> Elsewhere, several statistical studies concerning the psychological repercussions of the combat experience for American soldiers have drawn our attention to the disturbing consequences of witnessing and/or participating in atrocities and/or acts of abusive violence while in Vietnam. Laufer et al. (1985) alert us to the 'long-term depressing and disorienting impact' of US soldiers' exposure to 'arbitrary and immoral acts of violence which ignored the value of human life and the rules of human relations' during their time in-country.<sup>75</sup> As Lifton notes, 'there are mutilations, midst absurdity and evil, in any war', yet, as he and other commentators have stressed, Vietnam veterans seem to be more troubled by feelings of guilt concerning their behaviour in-country than do veterans of earlier conflicts.<sup>76</sup> Both Lifton and Ben Shephard-- in his study *A War of Nerves: Soldiers and Psychiatrists, 1914-1994* (2002)-- suggest that the context of combat in Vietnam and the reception Vietnam veterans received upon their homecoming played a crucial role in provoking this response. Shephard explains:

In Hitler's Germany, soldiers who committed terrible atrocities against Russians, Poles and Jews appear not to have carried guilt about it because they felt supported in their action by their society and government. But after Vietnam, many soldiers on returning home began to develop intense feelings of guilt about what they had done because it conflicted with the underlying Christian values of their society and



because their society did not endorse what they had done. They were not given victory parades and church services; did not receive absolution. Because the war seemed to them to have no meaning, the killing was doubly sinful.<sup>77</sup>

As I argued in Chapter 2, the 'formless' quality of combat in Vietnam created problems for the soldier who sought to comprehend his experience with recourse to models of previous wars. Both while in-country and following his return to the US, he found himself in a situation which did not 'make sense', and the psychological ramifications of this were profoundly damaging. 'Crucial even to [the] partial resolution of survivor conflict is the veteran's capacity to believe that his war had purpose and significance beyond the immediate horrors he witnessed', writes Lifton, 'He can then connect his own actions with ultimately humane principles, and can come to feel that he had performed a dirty but necessary job.'<sup>78</sup> Elsewhere, in *Trauma and Recovery* (1992), psychiatrist Judith Lewis Herman remarks that 'The trauma of combat exposure takes on added force when violent death can no longer be rationalized in terms of some higher value or meaning', and hence the after-effects of combat suffered by Vietnam veterans were exacerbated by the absence of achievable objectives and the lack of coherence that characterised the US military effort.<sup>79</sup> Deprived of an attainable goal for their efforts while in-country and denied the social validation which would sanction their actions following their homecoming, veterans who speak/write about their time in Vietnam frequently foreground a sense of the meaninglessness of

the conflict, drawing our attention to the difficulties that this poses in their attempts to come to terms with their experiences.

As Chapters 2 and 3 demonstrated, entry into the in-country arena involved a confrontation with aspects of experience not normally encountered in everyday life 'back home'. As noted earlier, veterans were often disturbed by the sights that they witnessed. 'A man saw the heights and depths of human behavior in Vietnam, all manner of violence and horrors so grotesque that they evoked more fascination than disgust,' writes Caputo, 'Once I had seen pigs eating napalm-charred corpses- a memorable sight, pigs eating roast people.'<sup>80</sup> Illustrating the comments made earlier regarding the perception of the combat context as carnival, Caputo here suggests that the US soldier witnessed a complete inversion of established hierarchies and behavioural codes while in-country. However, the phenomenon of carnival, as Bakhtin has noted, was a pre-planned, structured exercise -- the inversion of hierarchies that took place in this context was temporally limited, a means to 'let off steam' before once again reassuming one's position within the tightly-structured social order and conforming to the established behavioural codes. Unlike the traditional practice of carnival, the transgressive aspects of the in-country experience were not restricted or limited, nor could they be understood with recourse to traditional patterns of experience or established modes of reasoning, hence veterans found it difficult in retrospect to deal

psychologically with the sights they witnessed, or to justify their own behaviour in-country.

While commentator Joanna Bourke has argued that the carnivalesque quality of combat in Vietnam served to protect individuals from the disturbing consequences of killing and mutilating<sup>81</sup>, her discussion in *An Intimate History of Killing* largely overlooks the long-term psychological implications of such behaviour for US veterans. In keeping with the notion of carnival as a form of transgression which ultimately upholds the existing social order, Bourke suggests that the dismemberment of bodies by soldiers in Vietnam served as an officially-sanctioned means to negotiate a psychologically problematic situation.<sup>82</sup> While her analysis quite rightly alerts us to the fact that the mutilation of Vietnamese bodies was permitted-- and frequently rewarded-- by the military institution, Bourke goes on to assert that soldiers maintained their innocence through the perception of the in-country context as carnival.<sup>83</sup> This view is challenged by the remarks made by a range of veterans and commentators for, as Walter T. Davis and others have noted, a major theme within representations of the in-country experience is that of 'confronting evil in oneself'.<sup>84</sup> Bellamy, in his extended discussion of the depiction of the war as carnival, writes, 'In the broadest sense, we not only lost the war in Vietnam; we lost our innocence as well'<sup>85</sup>, while Davis has vehemently asserted that "'The loss of innocence" is too

tame a phrase to describe the mixture of depression and despair that comprise this massive weight of meaninglessness'.<sup>86</sup>

Several commentators have connected the inability-- both of US veterans and of American society in general-- to come to terms with America's role in the Vietnam conflict, with the meaningless quality of the war and its aftermath. 'Human beings possess an innate need and instinct for meaning,' writes Davis. He continues, 'Order and security at the personal as well as the social level require a coherent interpretation of reality that makes sense of experience and provides structure for human existence.'<sup>87</sup> The apparent futility and lack of coherence of the American military strategy and the fragmentary, haphazard and seemingly purposeless character of combat not only made it impossible for the American soldier to 'make sense' of his experience while in-country, but also, in many cases, led to his disillusionment with the US military effort in general.

Contact with instances of 'grotesque' death frequently has a disturbing effect on individuals whatever the circumstances in which it takes place, as Chapter 3 argued. When such exposure occurs within a context characterised by meaninglessness and futility, profound problems arise in trying to 'make sense' of such corporeal damage. As my discussion has already demonstrated, the connotations of bodily wounds and wounded bodies within the in-country context were often fraught with paradox, ambiguity and ambivalence. Not only did the overwhelming focus upon the body count here necessitate close

contact with corpses— particularly for infantrymen and footsoldiers (a group who, as veterans, have produced a disproportionately high number of war-related narratives)-- it also created a situation in which, while bodies and body parts were the only 'things' that mattered, they were stripped of any intrinsic value. How bodies were interpreted in-country depended, of course, upon who was 'reading' them. For the American soldier, Jacqueline E. Lawson has noted, 'success was measured in body counts and kill ratios, and defeat was the sight of your buddy blown to bits in front of your eyes'.<sup>88</sup> While US personnel may have been appalled by the damage inflicted upon the human body in-country, their own position of vulnerability (coupled with the attitudes instilled by the training process) encouraged them to make distinctions in their interpretation of the dismembered corpses that they confronted. Hence, while the ruptured bodies of the Vietnamese may have been construed by the American soldier as proof of victory, the corpses of US personnel were often 'read' in-country as signs of failure, evidence of loss on a personal, military and/or national level.

Under these circumstances-- and paradoxically-- for US military decision-makers, Vietnamese *dead* bodies (the much sought-after 'evidence' of success in combat) acquired paramount 'worth'. Indeed, it can be maintained that they were considered more 'valuable' than *living* American bodies. Thus, in *The Perfect War* (1986), commentator James William Gibson suggests that the focus upon the 'production' of a high enemy body count was so intense that ground troops were

deliberately 'sacrificed' in the process, sent in to draw fire and thus reveal the enemy's location, only to be simultaneously destroyed themselves by the ensuing US aerial bombardment. 'United States lives were quite secondary to primary production of enemy deaths', asserts Gibson, supporting his argument by indicating the high number of US soldiers wounded while carrying out body count procedures.<sup>89</sup> Given this state of affairs, the coining of the expression 'waste' by US personnel to describe instances of death in-country seems particularly apt. In a similar vein, in the closing sections of the first-person autobiographical narrative *And a Hard Rain Fell* (1985), veteran John Ketwig posits the term 'expendable' as 'the key' to reaching an understanding of the experiences of US soldiers in Vietnam, citing the Webster's Dictionary definition of the word: 'in military usage, designating equipment (and hence, men) expected to be used up (or sacrificed) in service'.<sup>90</sup> If the American body counted for so little, perhaps the deliberate mutilation of Vietnamese corpses may have served as the US soldier's attempt to express— if not to resolve— this uncomfortable paradox, by reducing the Vietnamese body to detritus and hence demonstrating the superiority/invulnerability/*value* of his own (American) body. Of key importance in this respect is the profound discrepancy between US soldiers' treatment of Vietnamese bodies, and their attitudes and behaviour with regard to the corpses of American personnel who met their death in-country. While, as I suggested in the previous chapter, the conversion of dead and/or

wounded US soldiers into statistics within officially-sanctioned accounts strips certain meanings from their bodies, the fashion in which American soldiers themselves tend to treat the corpses of their dead comrades seems to evidence a refusal to concur with this process.

The narratives provided by veterans draw our attention to the importance accorded by American soldiers to locating and collecting the bodies of US personnel who have been killed in battle. In basic training, as Caputo notes, those in the Marine Corps are taught that Marines 'never leave their casualties on the battlefield'<sup>91</sup>, while in Hasford's fictional narrative *The Short-Timers*, the Drill Sergeant instructs those assembled that 'It is a Marine Corps tradition [. . .] that Marines never abandon their dead or wounded'.<sup>92</sup> The fact that the retrieval of American bodies/body parts-- a risky business for the soldiers who had to undertake it-- was not only sanctioned, but often enforced by those higher up in the military command structure might seem somewhat paradoxical. Indeed, as was demonstrated in previous chapters, the US military institution equated the worth of the soldier's body with 'its' potential to wound the enemy, hence, once this capability was compromised, the soldier's broken body would appear to be of little use to the military campaign in Vietnam. However, the prospect of discarding American bodies within the in-country environment had disturbing symbolic implications, which are highlighted by a scenario provided in Richard Currey's fictional narrative *Fatal Light* (1988). In the aftermath of a gun battle with Vietnamese troops, a disagreement

occurs between the Top Sergeant, who wants some of the survivors to search the area, and Linderman, who fears that this may cause more casualties. The Top Sergeant rebukes him:

“So we just gonna leave our boys out there? That coulda been you out there, Linderman. Tomorrow it probably will be. So I can just write to your mother, Hey, no sweat, your boy don't care if his body turns to shit out there in no-man's-land. [. . .] I'll be damned if I'll leave even one of our guys to rot in that slime.”<sup>93</sup>

Following this diatribe, Linderman is chastened and repentant. Thus, the notion that the soldier's body (representative both of the military mission and, in more general terms, the American body politic itself) might become incorporated into the excremental space of the in-country milieu-- might 'turn into shit'-- is clearly a terrifying one, hence the refusal, both of the individual soldier and the American military institution, to countenance such a prospect.

In her discussion of the structure of war in *The Body in Pain* (1985), theorist Elaine Scarry alerts us to the ambiguity regarding the 'ownership' of the corpses produced as a result of military combat.<sup>94</sup> Within the Vietnam context-- where, due to the reliance upon body counts and kill ratios, bodies were the only thing that 'mattered'-- it was of crucial importance to the US military effort to claim jurisdiction over as many bodies as possible. In foregrounding both the function of the wounded body as 'the ultimate source of substantiation' and also 'the fluidity of the injured body's referential direction' within the context of battle activity, Scarry highlights the fact that, while the body functions as evidence, its meaning is open to multiple and conflicting



interpretations. Her analysis is thus helpful in clarifying the reasoning behind the American military institution's efforts to (re)assert their authority over the bodies of the dead and wounded.<sup>95</sup> As Scarry has remarked, the 'nonreferentiality' of the corpse imbues it with 'a frightening freedom of referential activity'.<sup>96</sup> Bearing in mind that-- as discussion above has demonstrated-- the 'reading' of corporeal damage was particularly fraught with paradox and ambiguity within this context, it was in the interest of the US military that the meaning of wounded bodies be carefully 'managed' lest they be interpreted in ways that could be detrimental to the war effort.

As several commentators have indicated, the US military sought to preside over the interpretation of the dead and wounded bodies of American soldiers both in-country and 'back home'. Both Lifton and fellow psychiatrist Chaim Shatan have noted the manner in which the memorial ceremonies that took place in-country were frequently transformed into 'calls for rituals of vengeance' by presiding officers.<sup>97</sup> Such 'militarized mourning'-- in the words of Shatan (1986)<sup>98</sup> -- encouraged those present to channel their sense of grief into further acts of corporeal destruction. Here, as elsewhere, the gathering of a group of individuals together at the site of irreparable corporeal damage entails the attempt to 'make sense of/interpret these instances of bodily wounding. In this case, the military stage-manage the event so as to defer certain meanings of these bodies while imposing other, more militarily 'useful' interpretations, presenting these ruptured bodies

as evidence of the need for more aggressive combat tactics. While irreparably damaged bodies were no longer of *practical* use to the military effort, they could thus still be exploited on a symbolic level, serving as 'props' in the construction of pro-war/patriotic rituals both within and outside the Vietnam milieu.

The 'management' of the soldier's body by the military institution was intensified, rather than diminished, following his death in-country. The US Army assigned military personnel, known as 'body escorts', to accompany and oversee the progress of the casketed remains of dead soldiers from their arrival in the US to their burial. Ronald J. Glasser's *365 Days* (1971) quotes their instructions as follows:

*"[. . .] to make sure that the body is afforded, at all times, the respect due a fallen soldier of the United States Army. Specifically [. . .] 1) To check the tags on the caskets at every point of departure. 2) To insist, if the tags indicate the remains as non-viewable, that the relatives not view the body. Remember that non-viewable means exactly that- non-viewable...."*<sup>99</sup>

As Chapter 3 demonstrated, the extent of the corporeal damage suffered by US soldiers killed in Vietnam was often so severe that the deceased was rendered unrecognisable. The initial restoration of the bodies of the mortally wounded took place in-country, and ex-Rifle Platoon Leader Robert Santos describes a visit to one such morgue:

I looked over and there were guys in these chairs. Dead bodies, all naked. They just had big stitches. I mean, they were like Frankenstein. A guy's face had been blown apart. They just stitched it, a job you wouldn't put on your face for Halloween.<sup>100</sup>

While more complex and extensive cosmetic procedures were frequently undertaken following the return of the corpses to the US, the capabilities of embalmers and morticians to reconstruct mangled and torn bodies were limited. US soldiers killed in landmine explosions were literally blown to bits, as earlier sections of my analysis detailed. In such cases, witnesses collected whatever parts of the body they could find to send home for burial. Combat photographer Stephen A. Howard notes that often not all the pieces could be located, and hence: 'you can't bury all of them. You'll never have all of them again. They will never be whole. Or what we know whole is'.<sup>101</sup>

The US military realised that such irreparably fragmented bodies had potent and potentially 'dangerous' symbolic implications. By defining them as 'unviewable', military decision-makers attempted to avoid/defer the interpretation of such remains either as evidence of the futility of the American intervention in Vietnam, or as a 'sign' of corporeal vulnerability more generally. The instructions for 'body escort' duty draw our attention to the US Army's concern that these corpses may begin to decay before burial:

*"Coastal Airlines loads the bodies on an angle. Be sure that if the body you are escorting is being carried by Coastal Airlines that the caskets are loaded head down: this will keep the embalming fluid in the upper body. If the body is loaded incorrectly, namely, feet down, the embalming fluid will accumulate in the feet and the body may, under appropriate atmospheric conditions, begin to decompose."<sup>102</sup>*

The anxiety that American bodies might degenerate prior to their interment is linked to the aforementioned fear that the soldier's body/body parts would 'turn into shit' if abandoned in-country, for both concerns evidence a dread of-- and a desire to evade or mask-- corporeal disintegration and putrefaction. The tendency to 'bury', literally and symbolically, anything that connotes physical mortality and decay is rife within US culture, as Robert Jay Lifton and others have noted. Lifton has coined the term 'Forest Lawn Syndrome' as a label for the manner in which 'we have buried not just the dead but death itself under the cheerfully manicured grounds of our cemeteries'.<sup>103</sup> Hence Lifton argues that the use of carefully instructed 'body escorts' stems from an impulse other than that of simple sensitivity to the feelings of the dead man's family. He writes: 'The larger symbolism of these instructions lies in the general collusion- asked for by the military and acceded to by civilian society- in turning away from the actualities of war, in keeping the corpses "non-viewable"'.<sup>104</sup>

The interment of the soldier's corpse involved a reassertion of the military institution's authority over his body. The ceremony itself was carefully stage-managed so as to denude the corpse of certain connotations, while simultaneously re-encoding it with militarily-sanctioned meanings. Hence the body-- if deemed 'viewable'-- was used as a prop for the display of military regalia:

*"Regardless of the branch of service: The emblem of the Infantry, crossed rifles, will be carried on every coffin. The deceased, where the remains are viewable, will be buried in full military uniform. The emblems on*

*his uniform will be that of the service to which he was attached at the time of his death.*<sup>105</sup>

While military decision-makers sought to achieve the burial-- in both literal and discursive terms-- of the irreparable corporeal damage suffered by American soldiers in Vietnam, these ruptured bodies were actively resurrected within the narratives of veterans on a number of levels, as earlier sections of my analysis have already demonstrated. Fittingly, Larry Heinemann's *Close Quarters*, a fictional rendering of the in-country experience, alerts us to the disparity between the impression created by the military's stage-management of the funerals of its soldiers, and the reality of the corporeal destruction masked by such ceremonies. Narrator Philip Dossier reflects upon the case of a soldier who is so utterly blown apart by an explosion in-country that his entire body has apparently disintegrated. The only pieces that can be identified and returned are scraps of the dead man's clothing: a piece of his boot and part of a trouser leg. The absence of the body, or of any of its constituent parts, renders the funeral service a purely symbolic, and somewhat absurd, exercise:

In a couple days [sic] his family will be gathered around a hunk of a boot, a piece of trouser, and his ID card. His headstone will say Such-and-so is buried here, but it isn't so. They don't see the body, the Army won't open the coffin.<sup>106</sup>

As Lifton has suggested, the military institution's attempt to manage the burials of those fatally wounded is only a part of a wider process of collusion which involves the concealment of unpleasant facts pertaining to these instances of injury and the masking of the

disturbing symbolic resonances of such corporeal damage. The US military's classification of severely mutilated remains as 'non-viewable' may perhaps help to explain their treatment of disabled combat survivors, many of whom, like Ron Kovic, were confined within veterans' hospitals-- out of public view-- often for prolonged periods of time following their return to the US. Indeed, the exclusion/absence of the maimed (both from public discourse and from everyday life) in the years during and immediately after the war is repeatedly referred to by veterans, one of whom, quoted by Mark Baker, remarks: 'I thought, "Boy, there's going to be a lot of people walking around after this war with no feet." But I still haven't seen them. Where are they?'.<sup>107</sup> As further discussion of Kovic's *Born on the Fourth of July* will show, the drive to conceal irreparable corporeal damage is evident on both a literal and a discursive level. Hence we tend to find that just as those killed are buried, those chronically wounded institutionalised, and those disabled socially marginalised, so too an additional form of 'screening' operates at the level of discourse itself, as the topic of irremediable injury is either relegated to the margins or actively excluded from discussion altogether.

As I demonstrated in the closing sections of Chapter 3, a central concern in *Born on the Fourth of July* (1976) is the 'unruly' nature of Kovic's wounded body following injury. My earlier discussion illustrated that the apparently uncontrollable outflow of his bodily fluids was alarming and upsetting to those who witnessed it. Likewise, the

text itself is also an outpouring of disturbing material— information concerning wounding and its consequences hitherto masked by, or omitted from, officially-sanctioned discussions of the war. Hence Kovic is a 'leaky vessel' in both literal and discursive terms, for he undertakes a mission to display his damaged body openly and to articulate his experience of injury. Kovic's account of combat and its aftermath repeatedly foregrounds his sense of disempowerment as his permanently disabling injuries, coupled with his ongoing endurance of 'treatment' by the military-medical institution, left him feeling that his body was beyond his own control. Following his release from the veterans' hospital, Kovic found his authority over his crippled body further contested as others sought to manipulate the symbolic significance of his injuries for their own ends.

At the behest of the American Legion, Kovic and his boyhood friend Eddie Dugan (an amputee who had lost both legs in Vietnam) take part in a Memorial Day parade. The two disabled veterans, driven in a Cadillac adorned with banners, are positioned at the front of the parade. While the inscriptions on the large placards-- 'WELCOME HOME RON KOVIC AND EDDIE DUGAN' and 'SUPPORT OUR BOYS IN VIETNAM'-- define the parade as an exercise in pro-war propaganda, the relegation to a smaller sign of the words 'OUR WOUNDED VIETNAM VETS...EDDIE DUGAN AND RON KOVIC', highlights the manner in which the acknowledgement of injury has been sidelined here in favour of the construction of patriotic ritual.<sup>108</sup> Kovic,

who is initially surprised that he and Eddie are not treated as fallen heroes by the crowd, begins to sense a connection between his reaction to this situation and his earlier feeling of disempowerment at the hands of the military-medical institution: 'he couldn't help but feel like he was some kind of animal in a zoo or that he and Eddie were on display in some trophy case', hence he feels 'trapped, just like in the hospital'.<sup>109</sup> This sense of unease increases as he and Eddie are carried onto a platform where various speakers 'spoke very beautiful words about *sacrifice and patriotism and God*'. The episode culminates in a particularly emotional speech by an unnamed military commander who employs Kovic's and Eddie's broken bodies as points of reference to justify his own pro-war stance: '*We have to win...*', he announces, '*because of them!*'.<sup>110</sup>

This is not the only situation in which Kovic experiences the 'use' of his damaged body as 'evidence' in support of pro-war ideology. Prior to the parade episode, Kovic had been singled out while attending a church service. Here the priest, Father Bradley, directs the congregation's attention towards Kovic by suddenly pointing at him during the sermon, telling those assembled that Kovic is 'a hero' and 'a patriot in the eyes of God and his country for going to fight the Communists'. He then exhorts the churchgoers to pray 'for brave boys like Ron Kovic', before adding, significantly, 'And most of all [. . .] we must pray for victory in Vietnam' and, almost as an afterthought, 'peace throughout the world'. Following the service, many of the congregation



had come to shake Kovic's hand, thanking him 'for all he had done for God and his country'. Kovic draws our attention to the fact that he experienced a violent purgative physical reaction to this incident-- 'he left the church feeling very sick and threw up in the parking lot'. This response indicates not only his sense of discomfort at being thus exploited, but also his growing unease with the ideologies projected onto his damaged body. His reaction to the Memorial Day speech-making provides further evidence of his increasing rejection of pro-war dogma for, following the applause of the assembled crowd, 'All he could think of was getting out of there and going back home', because 'he didn't want this shit'.<sup>111</sup>

Theorist Lindsay French draws our attention to Allen Feldman's comments concerning the 'semiotic' aspect of the body and its powerful communicative potential. Significantly, Feldman highlights the possibility of 'the mobilization of values through the spectacle of the body' wherein 'the individual body is constructed as a mass article and as a social hieroglyph', enabling 'mythic communication with the masses'.<sup>112</sup> This theory explains the manner in which Kovic's wheelchair-bound body is utilised as a vehicle to transmit pro-war doctrines in both of the above instances. The notion that the body can serve as a medium for communication returns my argument to the work of Michel Foucault, specifically his concept of the body as a surface of inscription. As Barbara Creed has noted, for Foucault the body is not only 'analogous to a writing surface on which "messages" are

inscribed', but is also, potentially, 'a site of resistance' for the embodied individual.<sup>113</sup> In accordance with this theory, the movement from passivity to activism-- a central element in the trajectory of Kovic's narrative-- is effected through the struggle to re-establish control over the symbolic potential of his own body. Kovic's encounter with the military-medical institution left him disillusioned about the role that he played in the war. Having already begun to 'see what it all add[ed] up to', his participation in an anti-war demonstration and subsequent arrest further promote his realisation that entry into the military institution served ultimately to disempower him, crippling him physically and emotionally. Switching (again) to third-person narration, Kovic describes his condition of disablement and disempowerment in vivid, visceral terms: 'He had never been anything but a thing to them, a thing to put a uniform on and train to kill, a young thing to run through the meat-grinder, a cheap small nothing thing to make mincemeat out of.'<sup>114</sup> After a prolonged period of soul-searching and dejection, he began to grasp the implications of the communicative potential of his own broken body: 'I could see that this thing- this body I had trained so hard to be strong and quick, this body I now dragged around with me like an empty corpse- was to mean much more than I had ever realized'.<sup>115</sup>

Kovic refuses to collude with the attempt of the powers that be (and of wider society in general) to make him 'disappear'.<sup>116</sup> He suggests that those who would wish to silence him 'had never seen

blood and guts and heads and arms. They had never picked up the shattered legs of children and watched the blood drip into the sand below their feet'.<sup>117</sup> Kovic realises that his own experience of wounding and his exposure to the injuries of others have imbued him with 'forbidden' (and hence dangerous) knowledge. Now conscious of 'the power he had', Kovic thrusts himself into the public arena both physically, through the display of his broken body, and discursively, by speaking and writing about his experiences. He alerts us not only to the physical reality of the incurable injuries that resulted from combat in Vietnam, but also to some of the stigmas associated with corporeal impairment within US culture generally. The last of the three inscriptions prefacing Kovic's narrative is particularly pertinent here.

Kovic writes:

*I am the living death  
the memorial day on wheels  
I am your yankee doodle dandy  
your john wayne come home  
your fourth of july firecracker  
exploding in the grave*

Hence, from the outset, he explicitly characterises the text-- and, implicitly, his placement of his damaged body in the public gaze-- as a self-conscious attempt to generate a form of 'return of the repressed'. By rendering himself visible and articulating his experience, he shifts the unpalatable 'evidence' of the war-- irreparably damaged bodies-- from the margins to the very centre of the discursive arena. Utilising the 'semiotic' possibilities of his embodied condition and his textual narrativisation, Kovic endeavours both to resist the meanings projected

upon him by the military institution, and also actively to refute pro-war propaganda.

While the analysis thus far has identified the operation of Kovic's text as counter-cultural protest, it should be noted that the subversive tone and status of *Born on the Fourth of July* is somewhat tempered by Kovic's own ideological entrapment within a very narrow (and extremely reactionary) definition of masculinity. As Chapter 1 pointed out, Kovic explicitly presents the act of joining the Marine Corps in terms of a sublimation of his desire to achieve hypermasculinity. While his stance towards the US intervention in Vietnam undergoes a radical transformation over the course of the narrative, his concept of manhood does not. One might contend that *Born on the Fourth of July* is radical in that it alerts us to the social and cultural marginalisation which can result from injury, illness or disability in a society where young, 'attractive', healthy and whole bodies are privileged in various ways. Indeed, Kovic's frank discussion of his injuries, the treatment that he endured and the ongoing indignities involved in being a paraplegic, not only forces the reader to confront the implications of being irreparably wounded in this particular war, but also demands that we face up to more general truths concerning the fragile nature of embodiment itself. However, Kovic's continued equation of manhood with physical intactness, able-bodiedness, and with the capacity to engage in penetrative sexual intercourse with women, serves to endorse a limited (and limiting) paradigm of

masculinity. In his discussion of disability and masculinity, theorist Paul Mcllvenny (2002) draws our attention to the profoundly 'ableist' nature of Western culture, within which the preferred ideas of masculinity are incompatible with the cultural assumptions concerning corporeal impairment. While manhood is equated with such qualities as 'ability, superhuman strength and stamina, physical violence, unemotionality, hardness, autonomy, potency, assertiveness, authority [. . .]', Mcllvenny writes, 'the cultural inscription of disability is one of failure or the inability to act or perform'.<sup>118</sup> As further discussion will demonstrate, Kovic's perception and representation of his condition are not only confined within these parameters, but also sanction the interpretation of bodily impairment in terms of debility and catastrophe. Accordingly, critics such as Jacqueline E. Lawson subscribe to the 'ableist' interpretation of Kovic's embodied condition as 'evidence' of loss and failure on both a personal and national level. Hence Lawson writes: 'Kovic's emasculation is a hideously apt metaphor for the cultural castration that marked America's failure in Vietnam'.<sup>119</sup>

Kovic's reaction to, and attitude towards, his impairment are echoed by the comments made by a host of other veterans who articulate their terror that permanent disability or dismemberment might result from injury during their time in-country. '[W]henver we took fire, [. . .] I forgot about all the things that ever mattered, except I want to be a whole body if I go out of here,' remarks combat photographer Stephen A. Howard.<sup>120</sup> As Herman Rapaport has asserted, 'To lose a

leg or a hand or a foot in American society is a most terrible consequence in a society that believes everyone must be “whole”, hence the thought of returning ‘without all one’s parts, all one’s organs’, was an ongoing source of anxiety for soldiers in-country.<sup>121</sup> An unnamed veteran in Baker’s *Nam* explicitly connects the fear of disablement with the dread of losing sexual virility, as he describes the effect of a particular type of landmine:

They explode and get your thighs, take your penis, your rectum. So big deal, you get a guy to the hospital and you save his life, but if he’s not a quadriplegic, he’s got a colostomy, he can’t have sex, he can’t have kids. A lot of guys committed suicide on the way to Japan or in Japan or in a VA hospital. [. . .] What nineteen-year-old kid wants to live like that?<sup>122</sup>

Within the context of US culture, Rapaport contends, physical impairment is itself equated with an erasure/absence of sexuality for the individual concerned. Moreover, due to the deep-seated assumptions concerning masculinity within American society, the loss of limbs, or limb function, is associated specifically with a loss of sexual potency in men. He explains:

To be missing the capacity to move, as in paraplegia, or to be missing an arm or a leg contradicts the ideology that insists libido is only attracted to unities. When “Charlie” castrated the corpses of its enemy, it wasn’t anything else but a sign pointing to the fact that dismemberment means a loss of sexuality, a ruining of Western man’s acceptability as a man in the eyes of his peers.<sup>123</sup>

Hence Kovic, wheelchair-bound and impotent, is mentally confined within a reactionary mindset whereby his masculinity is irremediably compromised as a result these factors. He writes:

[. . .] I am left with the corpse, the living dead man, the man with the numb legs, the man in the wheelchair [. . .] the cripple, the sexlessman, the sexlessman, the man with the numb dick, the man who can't make children, the man who can't stand, the man who can't walk [. . .]

]<sup>124</sup>

Kovic's own interpretation of his injuries, and his continual presentation of his body as 'a living reminder of something terrible and awful', evidences a perception of disablement in terms of loss and failure.<sup>125</sup> His stance towards his own corporeal impairment has been shaped/defined by the profoundly retrogressive attitude towards physical disability prevalent within US culture at the time that he was writing (the early to mid-1970s). As the next chapter will show, this way of thinking was to influence the degree to which the act of writing could function as a form of recovery/recuperation for him.

As this chapter has demonstrated, the interpretation of the corporeal damage that resulted from the war in Vietnam was an activity fraught with paradox and contestation, both within the combat context and 'back home' in the US. In-country, the reliance on the body count as a gauge of military 'progress' gave rise to a situation in which bodies were reduced to numbers-- and hence stripped of their inherent worth-- and where mutilation of 'enemy' corpses was encouraged, and often rewarded, by the US military. The dismembering and/or manipulation of Vietnamese bodies may have been an unconscious attempt on the part of US soldiers to express and/or negotiate a psychologically difficult situation, a way of disavowing the vulnerability of the American (male) body, of achieving a momentary feeling of transcendence

through transgression, and/or of redressing the balance in circumstances where the Vietnamese corpse was 'more valuable' than the American body. However, any sense of relief thus gained came at a high price, for participation in the desecration of corpses was frequently a source of overwhelming guilt for veterans following their return to civilian life. While the perception of the Vietnam milieu as 'carnival' helps to explain the atmosphere of moral inversion that soldiers ascribed to the combat zone, the lack of structure and coherence of the military effort meant that this context lacked the limits that normally confine/constrain carnival activity. Without these protective boundaries (or this 'cognitive armour', as Lewis might put it), the soldier found it difficult in the long term to deal with the events he had witnessed and/or participated in while in Vietnam.

The absence/loss of meaning that accompanied the US intervention in Vietnam expresses itself, in part, in the difficulties, problems and paradoxes that ensue when trying to interpret the corporeal damage produced within this context. The 'frightening freedom of referential activity'-- as Scarry terms it-- pertaining to the resultant corpses was intensified here due to the lack of an overarching structure or sense of progress to the American military effort. Moreover, as Chapter 3 demonstrated, while the weaponry employed here resulted in a high incidence of dismemberment or loss of limb function, the sophisticated system of treatment devised for casualty care meant that soldiers were surviving with injuries that would have



proved fatal in prior combat contexts. It was in the interest of the US military that the interpretation of these irreparably wounded bodies be carefully controlled, lest they be 'read' as proof of the futility of the American intervention in Vietnam, as evidence of loss on personal, military and/or national levels, or as a 'sign' of corporeal vulnerability more generally.

Hence, as my analysis demonstrated, Ron Kovic's display of his damaged body and his articulation of the experience of injury were counter-cultural acts in several respects. Resisting the meanings projected upon him by the military institution and wider US society, Kovic tried actively refuting pro-war propaganda by 'lifting the lid' on aspects of the in-country experience and its aftermath that had hitherto remained hidden. Moreover, by speaking and writing about wounding and its implications, Kovic directed attention to issues connected with corporeal frailty, a topic omitted or actively excluded from mainstream discourse in America. However, as the previous section of my analysis detailed, in the textual representation of his situation and his reaction to it, Kovic remains confined by limited, profoundly 'ableist', notions of masculinity. While his continual depiction of his own paralysed body in terms of loss and failure no doubt served as a potent antidote to the myth of American military progress in Vietnam, his text served to bolster reactionary assumptions concerning masculinity, particularly the equation of manhood with corporeal 'wholeness', physical strength and erectile function.

Robert Jay Lifton draws our attention to the fact that US veterans disabled in this war found it well-nigh impossible to come to terms with the feeling that their corporeal integrity has been needlessly 'wasted', squandered for no ultimate purpose. Highlighting the psychologically untenable position of the permanently incapacitated American veteran, Lifton quotes the remarks made by a 19-year-old Marine, shortly after the loss of part of his lower leg: 'I think any other war would have been worth my foot. But not this one', the soldier comments, 'One day, someone has got to explain to me why I was there.'<sup>126</sup> For veterans such as this, a return to physical 'wholeness' is impossible. The conflict between the sense of irredeemable loss and the desire for recuperation is a central dynamic within *Born on the Fourth of July*. The next chapter will elucidate the manner in which the issue of 'recovery' is, on many levels, a crucial element in veterans' representations of the in-country experience and its aftermath. Focusing specifically on the process of narrativisation itself, the analysis will consider the 'recuperative' potential of writing, and will reflect upon the degree to which the discursive retrieval and recounting of instances of irremediable injury may function as a means for veterans to come to terms with their service in Vietnam and its consequences.

## CHAPTER 5

### Writing and/as Recovery

'Another crowd had gathered around a trench. It was hard to tell what had happened there, how many bodies there were. Maybe three all mangled together in a heap, a bunch of arms and legs. [...] There was nothing any of us could do but pick up the pieces.'

Ron Kovic *Born on the Fourth of July*<sup>1</sup>

'BUT THIS TOO IS TRUE: stories can save us.'

Tim O'Brien *The Things They Carried*<sup>2</sup>

As the preceding chapters of this thesis have demonstrated, issues pertaining to the body/bodies/embodiment constitute the very core of the stories told/written by veterans regarding the in-country experience and its aftermath. By focusing in this final chapter on the process of narrativisation, my discussion will foreground the ways in which this concern with corporeality is not restricted to the *content* of these representations, but also plays an important (and complex) role in veterans' attempts to transpose/adapt their experiences to written form. A key concern here is the operation of the concept of recovery-- in the sense of retrieval and/or recuperation-- as a central dynamic in texts by veterans, and the manner in which such forms of recovery may (or may not) be achieved through the act of writing. As my earlier chapters have detailed, writers such as O'Brien, Caputo, Parrish and Kovic use their narratives to *recover* (i.e. salvage) an aspect of the US involvement in Vietnam which had/has been either evaded in, or

actively excluded from, officially-sanctioned accounts of the war-- the viscerality of the corporeal damage suffered by American soldiers and others, and the implications (both literal and symbolic) of such instances of injury. In the discussion that follows, connections are made between writing as an act of retrieval, and the potential of writing as a form of (psychological) recuperation. By drawing attention to several crucial issues that face Vietnam veterans *as writers*, the analysis will examine the degree to which narrativisation can serve as a means for individuals like Philip Caputo, Tim O'Brien and Ron Kovic (and also, perhaps, their audience) to face up to and/or come to terms with the irreparably injured bodies that resulted from the US intervention in Vietnam.

The closing sections of the preceding chapter focused upon veteran Ron Kovic's attempt to 'reclaim' his paralysed body in symbolic terms, as described in *Born on the Fourth of July* (1976). In many respects, Kovic's text stands apart from the narratives produced by Philip Caputo, Tim O'Brien, John Parrish et al. Kovic is the only author under discussion here who has been permanently disabled as a result of service in Vietnam. Not only does this differentiate him as an individual, it also sets his narrative apart from those produced by veterans whose embodiment has been neither significantly compromised nor radically altered during their time in-country. As I argued in Chapter 3, it is the experience of injury and its aftermath which governs the trajectory of *Born on the Fourth of July*. Within

Kovic's text, events in-country are afforded little narrative space, for they are important only in the sense that they provide a context in which Kovic's injuries (and their implications) can be fully understood. The work of sociologist Arthur W. Frank, who has described the way ill people act as 'wounded storytellers'<sup>3</sup>, provides a useful reference point for connecting the activity of narrativisation with the process of recovery/recuperation in the case of Kovic's depiction of his experience of injury and its aftermath. As further analysis will demonstrate, *Born on the Fourth of July* parallels— in both form and content— the stories told by ill people about their experiences more generally. Moreover, it can be suggested that it is Kovic's own self-conscious presentation of himself as a 'wounded storyteller' figure which imbues the text with its compelling urgency and potency.

Frank and others have highlighted the manner in which Western medical science— with its emphasis upon the 'management' of diseased or wounded individuals— subordinates such 'unruly' bodies in both a literal and a discursive sense.<sup>4</sup> As my previous chapters have illustrated, *Born on the Fourth of July* both emphasises the fact that Ron Kovic's sense of 'ownership' of his own body has been threatened by his experience of (military) medical treatment, and identifies his marginalisation as a key aspect of his encounter with the military-medical institution. Frank's comments upon the 'post-colonial' stance of the tellers of illness stories are particularly useful here. 'The possibility, even the necessity, of ill people telling their own stories has

been set in place by the same modernist medicine that cannot contain these stories', he explains, and he draws our attention to the parallel between the effects of colonialism upon the colonised and the consequences of Western medical thought and practice for many of its patients in recent times.<sup>5</sup> Frank (who has detailed elsewhere his own experience of having cancer) highlights the existence of a large group of people— himself included— who, though 'effectively well...could never be considered cured'.<sup>6</sup> While the existence of this 'remission society' is a distinctly modern phenomenon ('the technical achievements of modernist medicine make these lives possible'), Frank asserts that 'people's self-consciousness of what it means to live in the wake of illness is postmodern'.<sup>7</sup> 'In modernist thought', he explains, 'people are well *or* sick'; however, modernist medicine's major achievement is to enable individuals to survive (in many cases to survive *with*) illnesses or conditions that would have previously proved fatal. Hence, Frank asserts, the indeterminate status of those within the 'remission society' confounds the 'well *or* sick' paradigm essential to modern medical thought and practice, and thus 'modernist medicine lacked a story appropriate to the experience it was setting in place'.<sup>8</sup>

'Post-colonialism in its most generalized form is the demand to speak rather than being spoken for and to represent oneself rather than being represented or, in the worst cases, rather than being effaced entirely', Frank argues, and he stresses the point that many individuals within the 'remission society' are actively 'claiming voices',

'refusing to be reduced to "clinical material"' in the construction of medical discourse.<sup>9</sup> In *Born on the Fourth of July*, Kovic explicitly presents himself as one of those who 'would never have come back from any other war', foregrounding his sense of indeterminate status due to his disablement and drawing our attention to the psychological fallout which this provokes.<sup>10</sup> Kovic's text (originally published in 1976) foreshadows the connection that Frank establishes between the evolution of medical practice and the state of marginality experienced by many individuals whose lives have been preserved as a result of improvements in treatment. Within the context of officially-sanctioned discourse, his survival would, no doubt, be celebrated as an example of (military) medical triumph over mortality. However, Kovic's narrative, which repeatedly reiterates his feelings of frustration, anger and fear, and emphasises his overwhelming sense of loss, conversely provides a depiction of survival which is profoundly at odds with the notion of having been 'saved'. Following his wounding, Kovic struggles to come to terms with the fact that his injuries are irreparable. While his condition and the treatment that he endures in the veterans' hospital initially have a 'silencing' effect upon him, he begins to realise that his 'broken' state-- and the isolation that this engenders-- necessitates 'speech', both in verbal and narrative form.

As I suggested in Chapters 3 and 4, the incurable corporeal damage that Kovic has suffered functions as the focal point of *Born on the Fourth of July* in terms of the text's subject matter. What is more,

Kovic's condition of contingent embodiment encroaches upon-- and in many respects *determines*-- the structure/form of the narrative itself. Frank alerts us to the fact that the stories told by wounded storytellers are 'told not just *about* the body but *through* it'.<sup>11</sup> Thus, as Frank argues, people who narrate their experiences of illness and injury do not merely describe their wounded or diseased bodies, 'their bodies give their stories their particular shape and direction'.<sup>12</sup> Frank writes of the experience of illness and injury as 'a call for stories' on two levels. Firstly the ill/injured individual is frequently called upon by others to narrate his/her symptoms, not only to health professionals but also to friends, family members and other associates. Secondly, Frank argues, 'Stories have to *repair* the damage that illness has done to the ill person's sense of where [s/he] is in life, and where [s/he] may be going'.<sup>13</sup> One of Frank's subjects likens the experience of illness to losing one's map and destination, and Frank also refers to the work of Ronald Dworkin who describes having been turned into a 'narrative wreck' by a condition of corporeal contingency.<sup>14</sup> Serious illness or injury necessarily reduces one to a 'narrative wreck', Frank argues, because it disrupts one's sense of temporality, 'the central resource that any storyteller depends on':

The conventional expectation of any narrative, held alike by listeners and storytellers, is for a past that leads into a present that sets in place a foreseeable future. The illness story is wrecked because its present is not what the past was supposed to lead up to, and the future is scarcely thinkable.<sup>15</sup>



The form/structure of *Born on the Fourth of July* is, like Ron Kovic's damaged body, frequently disrupted, disjointed and discontinuous. Events are not related in a linear fashion here, and the setting of the opening portion of the text in the immediate aftermath of Kovic's wounding-- a section in which a sense of chaos and panic predominates-- establishes from the beginning the idea that his injuries (and their implications) irrevocably intrude upon and disrupt the trajectory of his life. Time shifts recur throughout as the narrative lurches from present to past tense, and hence the exact sequence of events is often difficult to follow. Further disjointedness upsets/disturbs the narrative coherence of *Born on the Fourth of July*. As I mentioned in earlier chapters, there are frequent changes between first- and third-person narration, reinforcing the point that injury has problematised Kovic's sense of self and destabilised his previously harmonious relationship with his own body. With regard to the tone/mood of the narrative, this, too, is subject to a number of shifts-- from horror and panic to emotional numbness, and from nostalgic longing to seething, explosive rage, for example-- as is the rhythm of narration itself, which alternates between a sluggish pace at times and a more brisk, dynamic tempo elsewhere. The textual 'body' of the narrative, like the unruly body that it describes, is torn between conflicting impulses. At times, progression is impeded by the emotional retentiveness of the narrative voice, while elsewhere violent outpourings of rage erupt from its pages,

as the text— acting as a ‘return of the repressed’— spews forth information which US society would prefer to keep hidden/contained.<sup>16</sup>

In keeping with the notion of ‘writing as recovery’, Kovic’s text does evidence the *beginning* of the journey towards recuperation. Through the narrativisation of his experiences (and his action in speaking publicly about them), Kovic recovers his own voice, which had been effectively silenced during the periods of his hospitalisation and medical treatment. This aspect of storytelling has communally restorative implications, as argued by Arthur W. Frank: ‘When any person recovers his voice, many people begin to speak through that story’ enabling the individual to act as ‘witness to the conditions that rob others of their voices’.<sup>17</sup> Frank equates such storytelling with an acceptance of social/moral responsibility, for he argues that ‘[s]urvival does not include any particular responsibility other than continuing to survive’, whereas ‘[b]ecoming a witness assumes a responsibility for telling what happened’. Moreover, Frank highlights the potentially subversive quality of illness stories, stating that ‘[t]he witness offers testimony to a truth that is generally unrecognised or suppressed’.<sup>18</sup> As I have already suggested, Kovic’s narrative is socio-politically radical in its drawing to the fore of elements of the Vietnam experience excluded from official discourse— namely, injury and its aftermath— and ‘recovering’ aspects of corporeal frailty generally suppressed within US culture. In this respect, Kovic’s text perfectly illustrates Kalí Tal’s

remark that 'Bearing witness is an aggressive act [. . .] born out of a refusal to bow to outside pressure to revise or to repress experience'.<sup>19</sup>

When considering the restorative potential of narrativisation for Kovic, however, one confronts several paradoxes. As the previous chapter demonstrated, the text describes Kovic reasserting his power to define himself and seizing opportunities to put his damaged body to 'use' in effecting political change. However, critics and others provide divergent 'readings' of these actions, which suggests that Kovic's undertaking is not only subject to a variety of interpretations, but also has multiple and conflicting implications for the wider socio-cultural milieu. Philip H. Melling-- whose 1990 study *Vietnam in American Literature* highlights the 'Puritan imprint' upon the 'cultural mind' of America, drawing parallels between Kovic's narrative undertaking and Puritan notions of 'duty', 'mission', and 'testimony'-- offers a reading of the text which emphasises its positive, life-affirming aspects. Melling's comments explicitly present Kovic in heroic terms, first as a winner-- '[Ron Kovic] is able to tap a source of inner strength in order to defeat the inertia of the country and his own despair'<sup>20</sup>-- and then as a saviour, a Christ-figure through whose injuries his readers/audience are 'converted', or brought to some kind of spiritual (?) understanding:

Kovic's body provides the evidence of what has been done by the faithless ones; it becomes a reminder of the innocent "dead" who were sent to Vietnam, betrayed by lies. Kovic's body is used to convert the people into life and faith. The conversion of those who do not know Vietnam is achieved through the dispossession of one who does. In the act of exposure

the burden of pain is shared by others. "One look is enough" [ . . . ] to prove his loss and inspire our faith.<sup>21</sup>

While Melling bases such comments (at least in part) upon verbal remarks made by Kovic himself— informing us that 'At a recent conference Kovic explained the affliction of paralysis as a means of attaining spiritual insight'<sup>22</sup>— this assessment somewhat glosses over the profound sense of loss underlying the text. In the light of Kovic's remarks— which were made a significant length of time *after* the text was written— Melling suggests that 'Kovic [ . . . ] is reborn through the ruin of his sexual loss, the memory of a wound that can never be healed'.<sup>23</sup> While this may indeed be the case with regard to the longer term, no such overwhelming mystical conversion or 'recovery' occurs within the narrative itself. The key characteristic of Kovic's injury is— for him— its irreparability, and his sense that his paralysis has left him irrevocably 'unmanned', issues explicitly foregrounded by Melling's comments above. Melling's 'reading' of *Born on the Fourth of July* interprets Kovic's act of narrativisation and display of his wounded body as an attempt to recoup/reassert his masculinity— notably, he refers to Kovic's use of 'muscular' language in the text.<sup>24</sup> However, while Melling's analysis implies that Kovic's efforts to 'recover' his masculinity in this way are beneficial on both a personal and a social level, there are several veterans who draw our attention to the detrimental implications of Kovic's actions, suggesting that Kovic's zealous anti-war activity does, in fact, promote reactionary notions of male identity. An unnamed veteran quoted in Walter T. Davis Jr.'s

study *Shattered Dream: America's Search for Its Soul* (1994) remarks: 'Even though he turned against the war after his injury, he still had to play the hero-- this time an antiwar hero-- at the Republican Convention. Kovic still doesn't get it. It's the hero thing that does us in.'<sup>25</sup> While this individual's criticisms are specifically directed towards the film version of *Born on the Fourth of July*, a close reading of the narrative suggests that they are also highly relevant to the written text. 'All his life he'd wanted to be a winner. It was always so important to win, to be the very best', Kovic relates, again slipping into the third-person style of narration so indicative of the apparently irreconcilable gulf between his expectations and his present situation.<sup>26</sup> Elsewhere, *Born on the Fourth of July* makes explicit the fact that it is Kovic's desire to be 'a winner' which propels him into the public sphere. Significantly, when he describes his undertaking to use his body as 'evidence' in active protest against the war, he does so with reference to the sporting aspirations of his youth:

He would come back very soon and he would make it like all the stories of the baseball players he had read when he was a kid. 'He's picking up the ball. He's running across the field. Kovic is making a terrific comeback, folks! A terrific comeback...'<sup>27</sup>

It is poignant that the paralysed Kovic describes his compulsion to reveal his wounded body in terms of his youthful dreams of athletic triumph, because this allusion indicates a refusal on his part to leave behind a notion of masculinity and selfhood which is predicated upon corporeal wholeness and physical prowess.

It is important to bear in mind that *Born on the Fourth of July* was copyrighted in 1976. As Kovic entered military service in 1964, not much time has elapsed since the occurrence of many of the events described. Thus, although he is narrating these events, thoughts and feelings in retrospect, the reader senses that at the point of writing, Kovic was still very much caught up in the 'narrative wreckage', an impression which is heightened by the use of the present tense during much of the account. It is also significant that, unlike other veteran writers, Kovic does not reflect self-consciously upon the process of narrativisation within the text itself.<sup>28</sup> This lack of an authoritative authorial presence-- a grounded narrative voice which looks back on the past from a position of stability and security-- contributes to the reader's sense that the text captures Kovic's experience of having been overwhelmed by the events and emotions that he describes.<sup>29</sup> The argument that *Born on the Fourth of July* operates as a form of personal and social 'healing' is, as I have tried to suggest, fraught with contradiction and complexity. As Arthur W. Frank has argued, 'Many illness stories do discover purposes in suffering, but even these are rarely without ambivalence'.<sup>30</sup> Indeed, the very fact that the text discursively salvages the *irretrievably* wounded body-- and, by implication, the corporeal contingency and frailty which it signifies-- pre-determines that its overall tone be predominantly one of defeat, rather than triumph over adversity, because it is essential for us as

readers to appreciate that Kovic's physical paralysis is permanent and irreparable.

Kovic repeatedly articulates a sense of frustration, anger, and overwhelming loss throughout the text: 'I am twenty-one and the whole thing is shot, done forever. There is no real healing left anymore, everything that is going to heal has healed already [. . .]'.<sup>31</sup> Kovic's narrativisation of his experiences, his public speaking and his display of his wounded body were intended as restitutorial acts on both a personal and a political level. But, despite his repeated attempts to influence public opinion, the war in Vietnam continued. Moreover, Kovic's actions, rather than helping him to break free from the anguish of his experiences, seemed to imprison him more completely within it. He writes:

The speaking went on and on, and so did the war, and after a while it all began to seem endless. My friends told me I was starting to sound like a broken record [. . .] The speaking had brought back everything-- the hospital, Vietnam. Each time I spoke about an experience it was just like reliving it.<sup>32</sup>

In *Born on the Fourth of July*, Kovic describes a cycle of regret and despair which is endlessly repeated. Like Arthur W. Frank's patient, who represented serious illness in terms of a loss of both a map and a destination, we find Kovic unwilling-- or perhaps at this stage *unable*-- to abandon or rethink his prior assumptions concerning masculinity and selfhood. In his paralysed condition he has little else to 'cling' to. We are left, then, with a text whose depiction of the Vietnam experience and its aftermath contains both subversive and reactionary elements,

and which oscillates between the desire for a return to physical and psychological wholeness, and a sense of regret and despair that such recovery is impossible.

In the penultimate section of Kovic's narrative, he 'returns' to Vietnam to describe the circumstances that led up to his injury. His remark concerning the moments following his shooting-- 'All I could feel was the worthlessness of dying right here in this place at this moment for nothing'<sup>33</sup>-- both denudes the experience of any sense of heroism, and implies that America's intervention in Vietnam was itself bereft of purpose. In continuation, the final short section of the text involves Kovic engaging in nostalgic reminiscences about his childhood. While this portion of *Born on the Fourth of July* might at first appear lighter in tone than the rage-filled passages which characterised earlier sections, a close reading of the text leads one to conclude that this segment reiterates-- rather than revokes-- the mood of defeat and anguish which permeates the narrative as a whole. Kovic's recollections of his childhood here foreground his prior able-bodied condition-- '*Can you see me balancing like Houdini? [ . . . ] Can you see me flying a kite, making a model, breaching a stream?*'-- and they form an implicit but striking contrast with the state of paralysis described throughout the narrative. Moreover, his emphasis upon the *innocence* (and hence, ignorance) of childhood, enables him to draw to our attention the traumatic impact of the confrontation with physical frailty and mortality engendered by his experience in Vietnam and the injuries he has



suffered there. '[W]e were young back then and really alive and the air smelled fresh', he writes, 'This song was playing and I really got into it and was hitting baseballs and feeling like I could live forever.' The narrative concludes with Kovic looking back wistfully at the feeling of bodily invulnerability and immortality that characterised his youth, and quoting a lyric from a popular song: 'It was all sort of easy. It had all come and gone'.<sup>34</sup> This 'ending' provides little closure for the reader, for it reiterates Kovic's sense of entrapment amidst the psychological fallout from his injury, and highlights the profoundly 'ungrounding' (and hence *traumatic*) effect of his confrontation with corporeal contingency.

While there are clear differences between Kovic's (embodied) condition and that of the other veteran-authors discussed in my study, the concern with the disturbing impact of confronting one's own mortality is common to a wide range of narratives that address the in-country experience and its aftermath. As earlier chapters of my study demonstrated, the soldier's entry into the combat zone involved an encounter not only with human waste-- a signifier of physical frailty-- but also, more importantly, with irreparably, and fatally, wounded bodies. As Chapter 3 illustrated, confronting bodily wounding in-country was, for many soldiers and support personnel, a deeply distressing experience, whose psychologically damaging effects were further heightened by the apparent lack of coherence, purpose or *meaning* to the American military effort. What is more, as both veterans and commentators point out, the problematic consequences of

witnessing instances of wounding were exacerbated by the youthful age of many of the US soldiers who fought in Vietnam. Jacqueline E. Lawson contends that the effect of combat in Vietnam was 'particularly devastating' due to the 'psychological immaturity' of American soldiers: they were, on average, much younger than those who went into combat in previous wars-- 19.2 years compared to 26 years for US soldiers in World War II.<sup>35</sup> Psychiatrist Stephen Howard, writing of the psychological fallout from the experience of combat in Vietnam, alerts us to 'the fantasy and desire in each of us-- but especially in the young -- for invulnerability'.<sup>36</sup> Indeed, infantryman Jeff Yushta, quoted in James R. Ebert's 1993 study *A Life in a Year: The American Infantryman in Vietnam, 1965-1972*, remarks that 'at nineteen years of age you felt you had an indestructible body'; consequently, the effect of witnessing instances of corporeal carnage was all the more disturbing.<sup>37</sup> In *A Rumor of War* (1977), Philip Caputo describes his response to the death in combat of a friend, Sergeant Sullivan-- an occurrence which forced him to confront his own mortality:

That could be me someday, I thought. I might look like that. If it happened to him, there's no reason it can't happen to me. [. . .] Except in an abstract sense, the chance of being killed had never occurred to me before. As a young, healthy American raised and educated in peacetime, or what passes for peacetime in this century, I had been incapable of imagining myself sick or old, let alone dead. Oh, I had thought about death, but only as an event that would happen far in the future, so far that I had been unable to consider it as a real possibility.<sup>38</sup>

Prior to this, Caputo tells us, death had seemed like an alien concept to him, distant and unfamiliar. Sullivan's demise, and the wounding of

Ingram, another US soldier, have a profoundly destabilising effect on the remaining members of the company. Caputo, who writes of experiencing 'a cold, empty, sick feeling in the pit of my stomach' on hearing the news, tells us that the men in the battalion have now lost 'the youthful confidence in their own immortality' as a result of Sullivan's death, for he was their first casualty in combat.<sup>39</sup>

Recent work on the nature of trauma and its effects contends that confrontation with one's own vulnerability is the defining feature of traumatic experience. Philosopher and psychiatrist Patrick J. Bracken draws our attention to the words of Ronnie Janoff-Bulman: 'The confrontation with real or potential injury or death breaks the barrier of complacency and resistance in our assumptive worlds, and a profound psychological crisis is induced'.<sup>40</sup> As earlier chapters have demonstrated, many Vietnam veterans who seek to narrativise the in-country experience and its aftermath place the 'ungrounding' (and hence, *traumatic*) impact of witnessing irreparable corporeal damage at the epicentre of their representations. Recent theorists such as Kalf Tal and Judith Lewis Herman<sup>41</sup> have examined the stories related by survivors of events that provoked an overwhelming sense of the storyteller's own corporeal frailty and powerlessness. Drawing our attention to the parallels that exist between them, Tal and Herman contend that these narratives-- whether in spoken or written form-- can be considered as constituting an identifiable genre. This genre-- which they classify as 'trauma narrative'-- has characteristics which

differentiate it from other modes of discourse. 'Trauma narrative confronts the normal adult with the fragility of the body. These stories bring mortality into view', writes psychiatrist Jonathan Shay in his study *Achilles in Vietnam: Combat Trauma and the Undoing of Character* (1995).<sup>42</sup> In attempting to analyse the various techniques employed by veterans in their endeavour to achieve recovery through the narrativisation of their experiences, it is helpful to consider their texts as belonging to the genre of 'trauma narratives'. While such a classification may appear potentially reductive, my argument will in fact show that an appreciation of trauma and its consequences is essential to an understanding of the difficulties faced by the Vietnam veteran when he tries discursively resurrecting the wounded bodies that have been 'buried' (suppressed or misrepresented) both within officially-sanctioned discourse and within US culture in general.

Theorist Elaine Scarry, whose study *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World* (1985) underlines 'the centrality of the act of injuring in war'<sup>43</sup>, both foregrounds the disturbing implications of confronting the irreparably injured body, and contends that, nevertheless, such a confrontation is necessary, in fact *essential*, if we are to reach an adequate understanding of military combat and its consequences. Although the bodily wound has, she warns us, the potential to 'stupefy us into silence or shame us with the shame of our powerlessness to approach the opened human body and make it not opened as before', descriptions of wounding which 'place the injured

body several inches in front of our eyes' are crucial if texts are to represent combat and its effects accurately.<sup>44</sup> Veterans who attempt to speak or write about this fundamental aspect of their experience face many obstacles, not least of which is the fact that US society seeks to gloss over the unpleasant truth of corporeal frailty and mortality, as previous sections of my study illustrated.

In *Trauma and Recovery* (1992), Judith Lewis Herman foregrounds the tendency (on both an individual and a social level) to ignore, evade or suppress 'horrible events'.<sup>45</sup> However, while 'The ordinary response to atrocities is to banish them from consciousness', such events and experiences 'refuse to be buried'. This conflict-- 'between the will to deny horrible events and the will to proclaim them aloud'-- is, Herman asserts 'the central dialectic of emotional trauma'.<sup>46</sup> Her comments here help to explain Kovic's conflicting responses to his situation following his release from the veterans' hospital-- on the one hand he feels a strong desire to hide himself away, to 'disappear', yet conversely he is impelled to display his wounded body, and thus to reveal the 'truth' of the implications of American intervention in Vietnam.<sup>47</sup> Unlike other veterans who were content to remain (literally and symbolically) out of sight in locations such as the Mexican resort of the 'Village of the Sun', Kovic takes the harder path, displaying his wounded body publicly, and recalling and recounting his experiences.

While recuperation seems beyond Kovic's reach within the confines of the actual narrative itself, the in-depth discussions of

trauma and recovery provided by Herman and Tal suggest that such acts of self-revelation constitute a key element in a larger process of recovery, and function on two important levels. 'Remembering and telling the truth about terrible events are prerequisites both for the restoration of the social order and for the healing of individuals' writes Herman.<sup>48</sup> Similarly, in *Worlds of Hurt: Reading the Literatures of Trauma* (1996), Kalí Tal has highlighted both the 'personally reconstitutive' and the 'socially reconstitutive' potentials of the 'telling' of traumatic experience.<sup>49</sup> However, as Herman, Tal and others have detailed, the traumatised author has much to contend with when attempting to verbalise the disturbing experience and/or transpose it to textual form.

Significant in this regard are the far-reaching problems with social interaction that result from an individual's exposure to traumatic experience. Alexander C. Mc Farlane and Giovanni De Girolamo (1996) have defined traumatic stressors as 'elements that violate our existing ways of making sense of our reactions, structuring our perceptions of other people's behaviour, and creating a framework for interacting with the world at large'<sup>50</sup>, while elsewhere Herman has written of the 'disconnection' ('the damage to relational life') that occurs as a result of traumatic experience. 'Traumatic events call into question basic human relationships', she writes, 'They breach the attachments of family, friendship, love, and community. They shatter the construction of the self that is formed and sustained in relation to

others'.<sup>51</sup> Hence the *disrupting* effect of the trauma takes place on a number of levels, unsettling the survivor's former belief system, destabilising his/her sense of self and causing difficulties with his/her established relationships. For the veteran who seeks to speak/write about his experiences, these various disruptions problematise the process of narration in several important ways. The term 'narrative wreck' again comes to mind here, for trauma survivors find themselves 'adrift'— not only have they been cut off from the conceptual touchstones previously used to comprehend their experiences, they also often encounter obstacles in attempting to communicate them to others. Even Kovic, for whom 'The speaking went on and on [. . .]', nevertheless admits in *Born on the Fourth of July* that, in the early days of his anti-war activism following his return from Vietnam:

[. . .] there were some things I never talked about [. . .] I can't remember one time when I even came close to telling anyone exactly what had happened over there. Back then it was still deep inside of me and I shared it with no one— not even the men I had come to know as my brothers.<sup>52</sup>

Both Herman and Tal have written of the 'unspeakability' of traumatic experience. But whereas, for Herman, the struggle between the urge to reveal 'horrible events' and the desire to hide them is the central hurdle for the trauma survivor, Tal foregrounds another crucial area of difficulty: the existence of an unbridgeable gap between the experience itself and the *description* of that experience. 'If the goal is to convey the traumatic experience, no second-hand rendering of it is adequate', she writes, 'The horrific events that have shaped the

author's construction of reality can only be described in literature, not recreated'. Hence, Tal argues, 'The combination of the drive to testify and the impossibility of recreating the event for the reader is one of the defining characteristics of trauma literature'.<sup>53</sup> In keeping with this, Vietnam veteran Stephen A. Howard, quoted in Wallace Terry's *Bloods* (1984), struggles to capture in words the sensory impressions aroused in him by the ruptured bodies he was assigned to photograph whilst in-country:

[. . .] the stink, the stench of death, was-- was unbelievable. I had never smelled death before. Not after two weeks. And you just smell 'em from a 100 yards [sic]. You know you're walking into the smell of death. They--they-- they smell like-- if you ever smell it again, you'll know.<sup>54</sup>

Apparently unable to locate a point of reference that might clarify the nature of his traumatic encounter with corporeal wounding here, Howard's halting delivery implies that he is *losing* an essential part of his experience *in the very process* of attempting to describe it. This instance suggests that the confrontation with torn and ruptured bodies-- and the awareness of one's own mortality engendered by such encounters-- is somehow inherently *incommunicable* to those who have not experienced it. If this is indeed the case, the writer who seeks to transpose his experience to text faces a seemingly unbreachable *impasse*.

Tal has argued that the 'ungrounding' effect of trauma is so profound that it destabilises one's relationship with language itself, for she asserts that traumatic experience 'catalyzes a transformation of



meaning in the signs individuals use to represent their experiences'. She explains further: 'Words such as *blood*, *terror*, *agony* and *madness* gain new meaning within the context of the trauma, and survivors emerge from the traumatic environment with a new set of definitions'.<sup>55</sup> Thus, while a trauma survivor may share the same language as the non-traumatised, the meaning of communal words has been irrevocably altered for him/her by the traumatic experience. Caputo's reaction to the death of his friend, Sergeant Sullivan, is the perfect example of a familiar word taking on new meaning as a result of traumatic experience. He writes: '[. . .] Sullivan dead. Dead. Death. *Death*. I had heard that word so many times, but I had never known its meaning.'<sup>56</sup> For Caputo, the import and implications of the word 'death' have now been irreversibly modified. In view of these circumstances, it is hardly surprising that, as Tal has suggested, veterans' accounts of the in-country experience and its aftermath exhibit a preoccupation with the inadequacy of language.<sup>57</sup>

As my discussion in Chapter 3 illustrated, veterans Philip Caputo and John Parrish draw our attention to the fact that the language used to describe corporeal damage within officially-sanctioned discourses masks the suffering of the wounded and the viscerality of their injuries. Relating his experience as Casualty Reporting Officer in-country, Caputo argues that the wounding witnessed was, at times, so extreme that it surpassed the (re)descriptive capacity of military discourse. Moreover, he also

suggests that, in some cases, severe and/or extensive injury exceeded the expressive power of language itself. 'The shattering or fragmenting effect of high explosive occasionally caused semantic difficulties in reporting injuries of men who had undergone extreme mutilation', he writes, 'It was a rare phenomenon, but some marines had been so badly mangled there seemed to be no words to describe what had happened to them'.<sup>58</sup> Consequently, veterans who seek to expose previously hidden truths concerning bodily wounding in their narratives repeatedly foreground the difficulties involved in finding the appropriate words to do so.

The work of Tim O'Brien frequently highlights the shortcomings of linguistic representation, particularly with regard to instances of corporeal damage. Within *If I Die in a Combat Zone* (1969), his first extended attempt at the narrativisation of his experiences in-country, we find O'Brien self-consciously struggling with the limitations of language and emphasising the problems that he faces in attempting to translate traumatic experience to text. Placed midway in the narrative is a section where O'Brien describes the destructive effects of various types of booby trap and mine. O'Brien claims that (an early draft of?) this section was written while in-country. If this is indeed the case, it could indicate that the casual, somewhat detached style of narration employed here operates as an extension of the emotionally distanced attitude required to continue functioning for the duration of a traumatic situation.<sup>59</sup> While he was in the process of writing this portion of the

narrative, O'Brien relates, more men were horribly wounded by these devices. The coincidental occurrence of the latest instance of injury left him angry and disturbed, and seemed to render his pose of nonchalance in his narrative rendering of events inappropriate, if not unethical. 'The immediacy of the last explosion-- three legs, ten minutes ago-- made me ready to burn the midsection of this report, the flippant itemization of these killer devices', he writes.<sup>60</sup> Nevertheless, he decides to allow the offending passage to stand because, although his description risks minimising the profoundly destructive impact of these weapons upon the human body, he feels that it provides an accurate representation of the soldiers' own responses to this 'absurd' situation: 'The catalogue of mines will be retained, because that is how we have talked about them, with a funny laugh, flippantly, with a chuckle'.<sup>61</sup>

While the veteran who seeks to confront the experience of combat must negotiate the moral dilemmas and/or psychological predicaments induced by events that occurred in-country, the veteran-as-author has also to deal with the *literary* implications of representing these issues. Whereas soldiers frequently adopted an 'emotionally numbed' stance to deflect the disturbing psychological consequences of their encounters with ruptured bodies in the combat zone, the veteran-as-author must confront and master his own urge to deny or suppress these incidents so that he can represent them in retrospect. If he is able to do so, he opens himself up to the deeply unsettling

effects of his experience. If he cannot, then his rendering risks falling short of adequately representing a key element of the in-country experience. Many veterans contend with this complex problem in their narratives, and in so doing, they utilise a range of literary strategies-- some of which are, perhaps, more successful than others.

Several authors employ the techniques of irony and black humour in their depiction of bodily wounding. As Tim O'Brien suggests, however, such tactics can have serious shortcomings. His own description of what happens when a 'Bouncing Betty' bomb is triggered -- 'The fellow takes another step and begins the next and his backside is bleeding and he's dead. We call it "ol' step and a half"<sup>62</sup>-- relies upon profound understatement for its effect, and hence, as he admits, risks trivialising the horrific impact of such devices upon the human body. While O'Brien explicitly acknowledges the limitations of his methods-- and thus, perhaps, diminishes (or, at least, alerts us to) their ill-effects-- the same cannot be said of Gustav Hasford's fictional narrative, *The Short-Timers* (1979). Set in-country, the text is saturated with the ghoulish, 'black' humour employed as a coping mechanism by the novel's protagonist and narrator. The overwhelming cynicism of the aptly nicknamed 'Joker' has problematic consequences -- while 'he' frequently draws our attention to instances of bodily wounding, 'his' representation of them is a limited one. The implications of the use of irony and 'gallows' humour to depict instances of corporeal damage can be illustrated with reference to Joker's remarks concerning a

comrade's fatal wounding-- 'It took a lot of guts to do what Winslow did. I mean, you can see Winslow's guts and he sure had a lot of them'.<sup>63</sup> While, as I indicated in Chapter 4, such blackly comic remarks can be seen to operate subversively (revealing the absurdity of the correlation of carnage with heroism), it can be argued that the narrator's mocking tone distances the reader from the irreparably wounded individual, whose fragmented and ruptured condition is presented as *abject*. Corpses, as Julia Kristeva writes, '*show me* what I permanently thrust aside in order to live'<sup>64</sup>, and thus Joker's ability to continue functioning in-country is predicated upon a repeated deferral, or 'thrusting aside', of the common bond of humanity (and hence, vulnerability and *mortality*) between himself and the torn bodies that he witnesses. Consequently, while Hasford's text implies that Joker's cynical and distanced pose restricts his perception of the corporeal damage that he describes, we gain very little insight into the aspects and implications of injury that exist beyond this limited viewpoint.

Arguably, then, Hasford's narrative focuses upon the soldier's struggle to *evade* the revelation of corporeal mortality, to the detriment of the project to *recover* important aspects of bodily wounds and wounded bodies. Joker's description of a scenario where he was in close proximity to a fatally-wounded Marine serves to reveal this tension:

On the ground beside you is a Marine without a head. Exhibit A, formerly a person, now two hundred pounds of fractured meat. The Marine without a head is on his back. His face has been knocked off. The top of his

skull has been torn back, with the soft brain inside. The jawbone and bottom teeth are intact. In the hands of the Marine without a head is an M-60 machine gun, locked there forever by rigor mortis. His finger is on the trigger. His canvas jungle boots are muddy.

You look at the dried mud on the jungle boots of the Marine without a head and you are stunned that his feet look so much like your own.

You reach out. You touch his hand.<sup>65</sup>

While this episode draws our attention to his apparent feeling of kinship with the dead soldier, it also— conversely— reasserts Joker's pose of detachment. It is significant that this section is narrated in second-person mode, which could be seen as evidence of the narrator's aloofness, his distance from the events that he describes. The fact that his tone is conspicuously devoid of emotion would seem to support such a reading. However, his action of reaching out to touch the dead man's hand demonstrates the recognition of a bond between himself and this fellow Marine. Moreover, the repeated use of the second-person ('On the ground beside *you*', '*You* look at the dried mud', '*You* reach out' etc.) serves to establish a connection between *the reader* and the dead man, by situating us at the site of the wounding in discursive terms. The detailed description of the physical condition of the dead man— which functions, in Elaine Scarry's words, to 'place the injured body several inches in front of our eyes'— would seem to sustain this interpretation.<sup>66</sup> Elsewhere in the text, however, Joker's attitude of indifferent nonchalance towards irreparably damaged bodies serves overwhelmingly to distance us from them. Describing an injured female Vietnamese sniper, for example,

Hasford's narrator states: 'Guts that look like colorful plastic have squirted out through bullet holes. The back of the sniper's right leg and her right buttock have been torn off.'<sup>67</sup> The profoundly dispassionate tone of such passages arguably encourages/engenders an attitude of detachment in the reader towards these instances of injury, and also ignores/evades the suffering experienced by the wounded individual in order to concentrate upon the deferral of the impact of such corporeal damage upon those who have survived.

One might contend that in both the texts cited above the omission of key elements connected with corporeal injury is so striking, so conspicuous, that it serves-- somewhat paradoxically-- to foreground that which is so obviously lacking: the emotional involvement of both narrators and, in O'Brien's case, the gruesome detail of the injuries suffered. Indeed, the existence of such 'gaps' at the very core of the stories told concerning injury is deliberately-- and strategically-- foregrounded in O'Brien's work as a means to emphasise the uncomfortable and frustrating paradox that instances of corporeal damage both *demand* and simultaneously *resist* linguistic representation. While Hasford's narrative foregrounds the fact that encountering torn, ruptured bodies is psychologically problematic, the issue of representation is not dealt with in an explicit and self-conscious way in *The Short-Timers*. Although a similar tone of cynicism pervades other novelistic renderings of the in-country experience, it is important to note that this does not, in itself, preclude

the author from addressing issues of literary form and style with regard to the representation of bodily injury. This does, in fact, occur in the case of Stephen Wright's *Meditations in Green* (1985), where the author overtly confronts these literary dilemmas.

*Meditations in Green* repeatedly draws to our attention the difficulties experienced by its protagonist-- drug-addled Army Intelligence Officer James Griffin-- in his attempt to accommodate psychologically, and articulate discursively, the corporeal damage that he witnesses. Matthew Stewart's contention that Wright's narrative 'possesses an overt sense of "literariness"'<sup>68</sup>, is borne out in our first textual encounter with Griffin, whose response to having narrowly escaped a mortar attack is a profoundly cerebral, *literary* one:

He didn't have time to scream. The smoking rubble of morning yielded one charred finger and a handful of blackened molars

a flap of skin and a torn nail  
a left ear, a right hoof  
a hambone and the yolk of an eye

He could never decide how to finish. Real death was a phenomenon at once so sober and so silly his imagination tended to go flat attempting comprehension. Like everyone else he was able to picture possibilities. The gathered parts, the body bag, the flagged casket, grief, tears, the world going tritely on, the war too, the sky above an untarnished blue.<sup>69</sup>

Here, again, it is suggested that death-- both as concrete event and as philosophical concept-- operates as a sort of mental and discursive 'stumbling block' for the human mind. Griffin's assertion that death challenges his imaginative capabilities is particularly significant. Not



only does it demonstrate that the depiction of mortal injury is an inherently difficult task, it also suggests that the human mind—lacking the capacity to comprehend or describe death—tends to lapse into/seek refuge in inane clichés which mask, rather than reveal, the fact of human mortality and corporeal frailty. While one might argue that Griffin's concern with style here operates in itself as a distancing mechanism, a retreat into the intellectual realm which enables him to deflect/evade the acknowledgement of his own corporeal vulnerability, Wright's text suggests that the issue is more complex than this. Although the apparent cynicism and aloofness exhibited by Griffin here, as elsewhere, renders him comparable, perhaps, to *The Short-Timers*' 'Joker', Wright's text arguably demonstrates a greater degree of self-consciousness than Hasford's in the connection that it makes between the disturbing psychological impact of confronting corporeal damage and the discursive problems faced when trying to describe it. The import of Griffin's use of his imaginative/creative capacities to represent corporeal damage is twofold, as reference to another textual example will evidence.

At a later stage of the novel, Griffin considers the war in terms of a predictable B-movie, a mode of representation in which the death of a new recruit would, he imagines, be portrayed in the following banal, mawkish fashion: '[. . .] The Kid trips a land mine and blows his guts out, anointing his new buddies with a moist spew of panchromatic gore, his large colon, floating in a nearby lotus pond, spelling out good-

bye among the fronds'.<sup>70</sup> As critic Gordon O. Taylor has suggested, within many narrative accounts of the war, literary method 'emerges as an aspect of the subject itself'.<sup>71</sup> In keeping with this, Wright's self-conscious and critical reflections here serve as a means for the narrator (and, by implication, the author and the reader) to judge the effects and comparative efficacy not only of different *literary* techniques but also of other forms of representation in the depiction of bodily wounding. What is more, such deliberations also suggest that the imagination has a crucial role to play in the individual's struggle to contend with the disturbing ramifications of mortal injury, an issue that will be addressed in greater depth below. The concern with form and style that we encounter in *Meditations in Green* is redoubled in the work of Tim O'Brien, as further discussion will demonstrate. Since O'Brien repeatedly foregrounds the intricate relationship between the construction of narrative and the operation of memory, my analysis will first explicate the nature of this relationship, with reference again to the theories of Judith Lewis Herman.<sup>72</sup> Having done so, I can then highlight the ways in which this concern moulds O'Brien's representation not only of the bodily wounds and wounded bodies encountered in-country, but also of the human frailty and mortality that such corporeal damage signifies.

Judith Lewis Herman and others have drawn attention both to the fragmentary, discontinuous nature of traumatic memory and to its intrusive effect upon the consciousness of survivors. A key facet of

trauma, Herman contends, is its enduringly interruptive and invasive influence upon the lives of those affected: 'traumatized people [. . .] cannot resume the normal course of their lives, for the trauma repeatedly interrupts'. Rather than becoming incorporated into the individuals' consciousness, as is the case with other (non-traumatic) events, the traumatic memory, Herman argues, 'becomes encoded in an abnormal form of memory' that 'breaks spontaneously into consciousness' resurfacing without warning in flashbacks and nightmares. In this manner the survivor is trapped in psychological terms, forced perpetually to relive the traumatic incident 'as though it were continually recurring in the present', unable to process cognitively -- and hence move beyond-- the horrible event.<sup>73</sup> Whereas the ordinary memories of adults are, Herman states, 'encoded [. . .] in a verbal linear narrative that is assimilated into an ongoing life story', traumatic memories are 'frozen and wordless'. 'Traumatic memories lack verbal narrative and context', she explains, 'rather, they are encoded in the form of vivid sensations and images'.<sup>74</sup> These points are reiterated by van der Kolk and McFarlane (1996), who state:

Ordinarily, memories of particular events are remembered as stories that change over time and that do not evoke intense emotions and sensations. In contrast, in [Posttraumatic Stress Disorder] the past is relived with an immediate sensory and emotional intensity that makes victims feel as if the event were occurring all over again.<sup>75</sup>

It is the contention of trauma theorists, then, that traumatic experience gives rise to memories that are disordered, fragmentary, emotive and

sensory. This not only hampers the psychological process of trying to 'make sense' of the past for the survivor, it also renders the project of representation problematic. The traumatised veteran who seeks to represent disturbing events as he experienced them faces a hurdle for, according to trauma theorists, the only material which he has available consists of a series of disconnected impressions which are, as Herman has emphasised, resistant to verbal expression.

In order to clarify the means by which veterans attempt forms of recovery in their texts, it is helpful to draw a parallel between the irreparably ruptured human bodies that they place at the epicentre of their narrativisations and the fragmented, disjointed nature of traumatic memories themselves. While the main emphasis in Ron Kovic's *Born on the Fourth of July* (1976) is upon his own damaged body, nevertheless, towards the close of his narrative, he foregrounds other important instances of irremediable injury. Impatient for enemy 'contact', Kovic and his fellow Marines shoot a group of civilians-- an old man and several young children-- in the darkness and confusion of a night patrol. Having opened fire from the outside, they enter the small hut where the Vietnamese man and children have been sheltering and Kovic's reaction to the horrific scene therein is a highly significant one. Unable to simply stand and do nothing, he scrabbles around with medical supplies:

He knelt down in the middle of the screaming bodies and began bandaging them, trying to cover the holes where the blood was still spurting out. 'It's gonna be okay. It's gonna be okay,' he tried to say, but he was

crying now, crying and still trying to bandage them all up.<sup>76</sup>

Following the arrival of a helicopter to evacuate the wounded, Kovic continues his endeavour to remedy the corporeal chaos, and his act of bandaging the totally severed foot of a young boy to the remaining stump of his leg emphasises the futility of his crude attempt to 'fix' these irretrievably wounded bodies. At a later stage in the narrative, following an artillery attack in which several men whom he knows well are mortally wounded, Kovic acknowledges that the corporeal damage suffered is irreparable, and he implicitly connects the infeasibility of putting these ruptured bodies back together with the impossibility of 'making sense' of the scene before him:

Another crowd had gathered around a trench. It was hard to tell what had happened there, how many bodies there were. Maybe three all mangled together in a heap, a bunch of arms and legs. There was a smell of gunpowder and blood mixed with burning flesh. One of the heads was completely severed, chopped off, with the exception of a strand of muscle-- that was the only thing that continued to connect the head to the stinking corpse. There was nothing any of us could do but pick up the pieces.<sup>77</sup>

This image of 'picking up the pieces' is an important one, for it draws our attention to the irreparability of the wounds wrought upon bodies in this war, whilst also indirectly alluding to the profound difficulties encountered by many US veterans in their attempts to 'make sense' of this aspect of the in-country experience in psychological terms.

The drawing of a parallel between irreparably broken bodies and the fractured, disparate nature of traumatic memories serves to

highlight the sense in which the traumatised Vietnam veteran-- profoundly ungrounded by his repeated confrontations with his own mortality-- may find himself 'adrift' on a number of levels. Kovic suggests in the above textual example that the physical picking up of the corporeal debris which results from these instances of mortal injury is an act which seems purposeless, serving to benefit neither the dead, nor the survivors. However, as Kovic himself realises in the aftermath of his own injury, the impulse to 'bury' instances of irremediable corporeal damage is indicative of an attempt to avoid confronting the corporeal frailty that it signifies:

No one, he thought, ever wanted to think about final things, dead things, things that ended abruptly or could not be explained. Once someone died, he thought, people just put them in the ground, they put them in the ground and stood above the grave saying words that helped explain why there was an end to the person, words that were beautiful like the flowers and the big stone, words that helped others realize that it wasn't the end, but only the beginning of a wonderful thing. It was so easy for them to say the words, to deny the finality.<sup>78</sup>

The denial/evasion of bodily vulnerability signified by such acts of burial is, as Kovic's text implies, not only misguided, but ultimately harmful-- both to the American survivors of the conflict and to wider society. Hence, although *Born on the Fourth of July* is saturated with a sense of loss and regret, as earlier sections of my argument have demonstrated, the very act of metaphorically 'picking up the pieces', which is effected through Kovic's representation of his vivid-- though

fragmentary-- memories of combat, wounding and treatment, brings definite recuperative consequences.

Recent work, both in the field of trauma theory and elsewhere, suggests that the articulation of experience can help survivors to accommodate psychologically the disparate and fragmentary memories produced by profoundly disturbing events. In his discussion of the disorientating and ungrounding effects of illness or injury, Arthur W. Frank argues that 'The way out of the narrative wreckage is telling stories', specifically stories in which 'The self is being *formed* in what is told'.<sup>79</sup> Elsewhere, theorists such as Herman and Tal assert that, in keeping with Frank's comments here, such 'storytelling' can serve a restorative/regenerative function, helping to 'rebuild' the survivor's fractured sense of self and identity. In *Trauma and Recovery* (1992), Judith Lewis Herman foregrounds the importance of the practice of storytelling to the survivor's psychological recovery following traumatic experience. While her role as a clinician leads Herman to focus upon the individual's telling of his/her story *within a therapeutic relationship* (i.e. the patient relating his/her memories to a therapist), many of the points that she makes are of relevance to those who express their experiences through the medium of narrative. As Herman describes it, the storytelling undertaken by a trauma survivor is best understood as a *process*-- that is to say, the story will be told and retold, and will itself alter over time as part of the therapeutic treatment. Although the articulation of trauma *can* produce a change in the processing of

traumatic memory, more is needed for recovery than the mere reconstruction of the traumatic event. It is the *repeated* telling and retelling of the story that makes possible its adaptation and eventual integration into the survivor's consciousness, Herman contends.<sup>80</sup>

'Stories can save us', proclaims Tim O'Brien in his narrative *The Things They Carried* (1991), a text where the nature of traumatic memory is a central concern. This remark exploits the dual meaning of the term 'save', for, as further discussion will demonstrate, his work alerts us to the twofold purpose of telling stories: they are a means both to salvage or retrieve, and also to rescue or restore. While O'Brien is quick to reject the notion that writing operates purely as a form of psychological rehabilitation ('I did not look on my work as therapy, and still don't'), he suggests that the process of narrativisation serves as a form of psychological release for him. Although, he tells us, he spoke little about his experiences in everyday conversation following his return from the war, he has, he admits, been discussing it 'virtually nonstop' in his writing. Indeed, O'Brien's comments suggest that his use of the medium of storytelling-- whose function is 'Partly catharsis, partly communication'-- enables him to perform psychological 'work' in several respects: 'it was a way of grabbing people by the shirt and explaining exactly what had happened to me, how I'd allowed myself to get dragged into a wrong war, all the mistakes I'd made, all the terrible things I had seen and done'.<sup>81</sup>



As O'Brien himself has suggested, it is his awareness of the obstacles that he faces in attempting to transpose his memories to text that drives him self-consciously to cultivate and hone his use of the medium of storytelling to do so. In an interview with Eric James Schroeder in 1984, O'Brien indicated a movement, over the course of his writing career, away from autobiography and towards the increasing manipulation of his own experience for literary effect; hence he differentiates *If I Die in a Combat Zone* from his later work, commenting that 'It's just there as a document. It's not art. I didn't know what literature was. *If I Die* is just a straightforward telling'. When asked by Schroeder whether *If I Die in a Combat Zone* paved the way for his second Vietnam-related narrative, *Going After Cacciato* (1978), O'Brien's response is interesting: 'Yes', he replies, 'I'm glad I got it out of my system. Otherwise I would have ended up writing [. . .] autobiography cast as fiction'.<sup>82</sup> Such comments connect well with my concerns in this chapter, for O'Brien not only highlights the purgative effects of writing about his experiences in-country, he also makes a link here between the process of recovery-- both as retrieval and as recuperation-- and his progression as a writer. O'Brien's differentiation of *If I Die in a Combat Zone*-- 'my effort at just relating an experience'-- from *Going After Cacciato*-- 'my effort at literature'-- is also of relevance here. O'Brien equates literature with 'work that goes beyond the mundane', arguing that writers who write literature 'transform their material into something that's going to last. It has resonance,

vividness. It grabs your emotions and squeezes them'.<sup>83</sup> Here, as elsewhere in his work, we sense that creativity-- and the use of the imagination in particular-- is of crucial importance to O'Brien's storytelling.

O'Brien's remarks concerning the nature of the storytelling process assert that his imaginative reworking of his experience creates a sense of distance from the traumatic memory. He writes:

By telling stories, you objectify your own experience. You separate it from yourself. You pin down certain truths. You make up others. You start sometimes with an incident that truly happened, like the night in the shit field, and you carry it forward by inventing incidents that did not in fact occur but that nonetheless help to clarify and explain.<sup>84</sup>

The self-conscious manipulation of traumatic incidents through the process of storytelling, O'Brien suggests, enables him to gain a sense of control over events which, in their original form, were devastating and which-- as they have already occurred-- he cannot change. While this sense of control is, in itself, no doubt, helpful in expediting the process of psychological recuperation for him, he also draws our attention to the recuperative potential of the human imagination, which enables him to 'make sense' of his traumatic experience by creatively reshaping it. Thus he asserts: 'the act of writing [. . .] led me through a swirl of memories that might otherwise have ended in paralysis or worse'.<sup>85</sup> His contentions here are reiterated by journalist and author Robert Stone, whose comparison of the efficacy of fictional writing versus journalism in the representation of the Vietnam experience

again draws our attention to the 'sense-making' potential of the fictional mode. In writing fiction, he explains, 'You can get at the nature of events and the nature of human kind in a very direct way because you can manipulate events so that patterns of causality are made clearer.'<sup>86</sup> Furthermore, earlier sections of my argument demonstrated that traumatic experience has a 'disconnecting' effect, producing a sense of isolation that tends to make itself felt on a number of levels simultaneously. In this regard, Tal argues that 'Expression, in the form of narration, is frequently a step on the journey towards [. . .] *rewriting* the traumatic events that severed [the survivor's] connections to the rest of society'.<sup>87</sup> Hence it might also be suggested that O'Brien's refashioning and manipulation of his experiences via the storytelling process serve additionally as a means to 'build bridges' between himself and the wider community, enabling a readership who did not share the in-country experience to connect with the events described in his narratives and to appreciate their implications.

In order to discuss further the manner in which O'Brien's use of the storytelling process is bound up with the issue of 'writing as recovery', I will refer again to the depiction of the death of Kiowa within *The Things They Carried*, an episode which served as a crucial touchstone for my discussion in Chapter 2. As my earlier analysis suggested, O'Brien alters and manipulates certain elements of the 'shit field' incident so as to harness its symbolic potential. In the 'Speaking of Courage' section, O'Brien creates a version of the 'shit field' episode

which uses the figure of Norman Bowker as a filter for the perception of Kiowa's death. In this rendering, Bowker experiences a 'failure of nerve' due to the overpowering excremental stench, and hence he is unable to save Kiowa from sinking into the mire. O'Brien later tells us, however, that Bowker 'did not experience a failure of nerve that night', that, in fact, O'Brien has altered this aspect of events via the storytelling process and hence, he writes, 'That part of the story is my own'.<sup>88</sup> Why, then, has he chosen to refashion the incident in this manner? 'You tell lies to get at the truth', O'Brien has commented with regard both to his narrativisation of the Vietnam experience and to the nature of storytelling itself.<sup>89</sup> In this case, the 'lies' that O'Brien tells regarding Bowker's loss of nerve may serve to foreground certain key 'truths' regarding the in-country experience, revelations which concern not only the potentially destructive impact of combat upon the body of the US soldier but also, more disturbingly, the nature of corporeal vulnerability in general.

In *The Things They Carried*, O'Brien provides several 'versions' of the 'shit field' incident and its aftermath. As he suggests in the 'Notes' section, these writings and rewritings of events serve as a means for him to 'return' to that night in the 'shit field', and thereby allow him to recoup and express an essential element of the in-country experience that he had been unable to represent (and, he suggests, to confront psychologically) prior to this point.<sup>90</sup> In his 'Notes', O'Brien highlights the fact that, as I have suggested earlier, the dilemmas

encountered by the writer who seeks to represent the in-country experience and its aftermath are both moral issues and literary problems. The 'Speaking of Courage' section of *The Things They Carried* is, he tells us here, a reworking of material that he had attempted-- and, he feels, failed-- to represent adequately at a former point in his writing career. The earlier version of 'Speaking of Courage' was, he claims, written as a response to a request he received from Norman Bowker in 1976/77, asking him to 'write a story about a guy who feels like he got zapped over in that shithole'. Although 'Speaking of Courage' subsequently became a separate short story, O'Brien initially intended to incorporate his narrative response to Bowker's request within *Going After Cacciato*, which he was working on at the time. This plan led, he tells us, to his making certain literary choices which compromised the effectiveness of the exercise as a representation of the in-country experience:

Almost immediately [. . .] there was a sense of failure. The details of Norman Bowker's story were missing. In this original version, which I still conceived as part of the novel, I had been forced to omit the shit field and the rain and the death of Kiowa, replacing this material with events that better fit the book's narrative. [. . .] What the piece needed, and did not have, was the terrible killing power of that shit field.<sup>91</sup>

O'Brien's sense of failure upon the completion of the original version of 'Speaking of Courage' was, he tells us, compounded by Bowker's own critique of this representation of events: '[. . .] you left out Vietnam. Where's Kiowa? Where's the shit?'.<sup>92</sup> Bowker's remarks, his expression of his own feeling of inability to articulate the events of that

night, and his subsequent suicide-- tellingly lacking any note or message-- are referred to by O'Brien as a means to draw our attention to two crucial issues. Firstly, these factors establish the importance of the 'shit field' episode as an event which epitomises certain key 'truths' concerning the nature of the in-country experience and its disturbing implications. Secondly, O'Brien relates the circumstances surrounding his original narrative rendering of the 'shit field' incident and his later need to rework it, in order to show not only the vital importance of the effective representation of such events, but also the sense of failure-- and, by implication, the potentially tragic consequences-- that inevitably result from the refusal to confront and/or the inability to articulate this aspect of the in-country experience.

'Trauma [. . .] does not simply serve as a record of the past but precisely registers the force of an experience that is not yet fully owned', theorist Cathy Caruth has argued.<sup>93</sup> Viewed in this light, it may be contended that O'Brien's repeated textual 'returns' to (and strategic reworkings of) the circumstances of Kiowa's death serve as a means for him both to assert and to effect 'ownership' of these disturbing events. In *The Things They Carried*, O'Brien self-consciously performs an act of textual recuperation through the use of imaginative storytelling, rescuing an element of the Vietnam experience which had previously been lost. Here, he tells us, 'The central incident-- our long night in the shit field along the Song Tra Bong-- has been *restored* to the piece', and he explicitly connects this *narrative* recovery with his

own 'working through', and psychological accommodation of, the traumatic elements of these experiences.<sup>94</sup> When writing the original version of 'Speaking of Courage', he tells us, 'something about the story frightened me-- I was afraid to speak directly, afraid to remember'.<sup>95</sup> 'Returning' to the events of that night has, O'Brien admits, been very difficult: 'It was hard stuff to write. Kiowa, after all, had been a close friend, and for years I've avoided thinking about his death and my own complicity in it. Even here it's not easy'.<sup>96</sup> In keeping with Herman's theories, O'Brien repeatedly emphasises in *The Things They Carried* that recovery is best understood as an ongoing process, which necessarily entails the revision and reworking of experience over time. O'Brien's storytelling involves 'getting to grips' with the disturbing incidents of his past, utilising his creative capabilities in his repeated attempts to represent them adequately. He underlines the crucial importance of the imagination in the telling (and retelling) of stories, for it enables him to engage in a *rewriting* of the in-country experience and its aftermath on both a literary and a psychological level.

Having deconstructed and discussed his rendering of Norman Bowker's imagined perception of events within the 'Notes' section, O'Brien then extends his creative reworking of the circumstances surrounding Kiowa's death in a section entitled 'In the Field'. Here O'Brien depicts the aftermath of Kiowa's submergence in the filth through the perceptions of two other members of the platoon--

Lieutenant Jimmy Cross and a young, unnamed soldier-- and, furthermore, he supplements these renderings with the responses of others from the group who search for, and finally discover, Kiowa's body. What is more, in addition to the 'versions' of the 'shit field' scenario already discussed, O'Brien's 'recovery' of Kiowa's body and the events surrounding his death in *The Things They Carried*, also involves an imaginative rendering of a *literal* return to the location in a section of the narrative entitled 'Field Trip'. O'Brien's fictional re-encounter with this milieu<sup>97</sup> enables him to highlight the emotional numbness which has, he claims, haunted him since Kiowa's death:

After that long night in the rain, I'd seemed to grow cold inside, all the illusions gone, all the old ambitions and hopes for myself sucked away into the mud. Over the years, that coldness had never entirely disappeared. There were times in my life when I couldn't feel much, not sadness or pity or passion, and somehow I blamed this place for what I had become, and I blamed it for taking away the person I had once been.<sup>98</sup>

Within the confines of his constructed scenario, O'Brien's 'return' involves an adjustment of perception-- while previously the field had 'embodied all the waste that was Vietnam, all the vulgarity and the horror' for him, it is denuded of this metaphorical import on his imagined revisit, becoming 'just what it was. Flat and dreary and unremarkable'. Moreover, this scenario seems to entail/engender the relinquishing of an overwhelmingly negative attitude on O'Brien's part, in favour of a more positive, life-affirming one. Having textually relocated himself within this setting, O'Brien depicts himself carrying out a highly emblematic act, whereby he wades into the filth and



deposits Kiowa's moccasins, 'letting them slide away'-- an imagined gesture intended to signify the author's willingness to lay the events of the past to rest, rather than being 'buried' by them. 'In a way, maybe, I'd gone under with Kiowa,' he writes, 'and now after two decades I'd finally worked my way out'. The sense of psychological recuperation implied here is underscored by O'Brien's description of an exchange of looks between himself and an old Vietnamese farmer, an encounter which seems to generate a palpable shift in his consciousness: 'As we stared at each other, neither of us moving, I felt something go shut in my heart while something else swung open'.<sup>99</sup> A glance at O'Brien's subsequent work suggests that the impression of psychological closure indicated here is, in fact, an illusory one for, as Eric James Schroeder recently noted, 'Tim O'Brien keeps returning to Vietnam as he discovers that the subject isn't through with him yet'.<sup>100</sup> One senses, however, that the textual revisitations of the in-country milieu that take place in *The Things They Carried*, and elsewhere in O'Brien's writing, are not intended to suggest that such recovery has, in fact, been achieved, but rather that recuperation is a difficult and complex process which is hampered by conflicting impulses towards denial and acceptance.

David Aberbach's 1989 study *Surviving Trauma: Loss, Literature and Psychoanalysis* explicitly connects the creative impulse with the process of recovery from trauma. 'Creativity', he writes, 'the affirmation of the wholly individual ability to imagine, may act as a vital

part of survival, of the re-emergence of the whole and unique human being' following traumatic experience.<sup>101</sup> His emphasis upon the imaginative aspect of the creative process ties in well with O'Brien's own remarks. Indeed, in his interview with Schroeder, O'Brien comments that the main theme in *Going After Cacciato* 'has to do with how we use our imaginations to deal with situations around us, not just to cope with them psychologically but, more importantly, to deal with them philosophically and morally'.<sup>102</sup> Both Aberbach and O'Brien have emphasised the importance of the individual's imaginative capacity in enabling him/her to deal with everyday circumstances. However, as Aberbach has pointed out, traumatic events, and the psychic closing off that they frequently engender, can inhibit the individual's imaginative responses. Thus, Aberbach asserts, 'far from opening the wellsprings of creativity' trauma can, in fact, 'destroy the survivor's power to fantasize and thus greatly diminish spontaneity and individuality'. Aberbach's connection of 'incomplete mourning' (and its harmful psychological implications) with 'the inhibition or blockage of fantasy' enables him to emphasise the centrality of creative self-expression to the process of recovery from traumatic experience.<sup>103</sup> 'Through creativity', Aberbach writes, 'the artist may confront and attempt to master the trauma *on his own terms* and, in so doing, complete the work of mourning'.<sup>104</sup> Such seems to be the case with Tim O'Brien, for in *The Things They Carried* he utilises-- and self-consciously analyses his use of-- the storytelling process as part of an 'acting out' of his

unresolved grief. In this respect, this narrative rendering of the in-country experience and its aftermath may best be understood in *dynamic* terms. It is a project of recovery *in progress* and operates on two levels simultaneously: both as a representation of aspects of the author's ongoing attempt to 'work through' disturbing experiences, and as a means to effect the confrontation with, and psychological accommodation of, profoundly traumatic events.

The process of 'owning' the in-country experience, as the narrative accounts provided by O'Brien and others suggest, involves returning to and confronting its most disturbing aspect-- namely, the irreparable damage done to human bodies within this context. In the section of *The Things They Carried* entitled 'The Lives of The Dead', O'Brien focuses on an episode in which he and several others have to collect 'enemy' bodies and body parts following a battle in-country. His placement of the description of this incident in the closing pages of the text is both deliberate and strategic, for this enables him to exploit its symbolic potential to the full. Writing in retrospect about these events, O'Brien tells us that this prolonged encounter with bloated, stinking and torn bodies-- and, by implication, the recognition of corporeal frailty that it provoked-- made this, 'my worst day at the war'.<sup>105</sup> His depiction of this episode functions not only to underscore the psychologically ungrounding effects of witnessing such extreme instances of bodily wounding, but also, and perhaps more importantly, to draw the reader's attention to the traumatic effect of realising one's

own mortality-- a realisation which is, paradoxically, absurdly straightforward, yet also complex and deeply disturbing:

The smell was terrible. At one point Mitchell Sanders looked at me and said, 'Hey, man, I just realized something.'

'What?'

He wiped his eyes and spoke very quietly, as if awed by his own wisdom.

'Death sucks,' he said.<sup>106</sup>

Though seemingly trite, Sanders' remark draws our attention to the revelatory impact of the in-country experience for many American soldiers, as their confrontations with ruptured bodies provided overwhelming 'evidence' of corporeal frailty. This episode enables O'Brien to reassert the contention, foregrounded in so many narrative renderings of the US soldier's service in Vietnam, that the depiction of bodily wounding is crucial to the 'truthful' representation of the in-country experience and its aftermath. Furthermore, he also uses this scenario to make a connection between the problems inherent in describing and coming to terms with the instances of injury encountered in Vietnam, and the difficulties faced by humanity more generally in acknowledging and accepting bodily vulnerability and mortality.

In order to alert us to the wider significance of the encounter with corporeal damage that service in Vietnam involved, and to draw our attention to the recuperative potential of storytelling more generally, O'Brien situates this incident within his discussion of another scenario concerning the confrontation with human mortality: the death of a close

friend during his childhood. In 'The Lives of the Dead', O'Brien describes his boyhood response to Linda's death from brain cancer in order to illustrate the use of the imagination as a means to cope with difficult and disturbing experiences. 'Memory and imagination as devices of survival apply to all of us whether we are in a war situation or not', O'Brien has stated,<sup>107</sup> and here he emphasises his recourse to imaginative activity when attempting to negotiate the sense of helplessness, confusion and loss experienced as a result of this childhood bereavement. 'Lying in bed at night, I made up elaborate stories to bring Linda alive in my sleep', he writes; 'It was a kind of self-hypnosis. Partly willpower, partly faith, which is how stories arrive'.<sup>108</sup> Grieving, David Aberbach argues, is a complex process within which specific stages can be discerned. As Aberbach and others have noted, many people initially experience a sense of numbness when confronted by loss. Subsequently, Aberbach writes, 'Numbness following a loss gives way to yearning and searching for the dead', and this period of 'yearning and searching' can be 'particularly conducive to creativity'.<sup>109</sup>

He explains:

During the period of yearning and searching for the dead, which even in normal conditions may last for months or even years [. . .] the searcher still commonly believes, or half-believes, that the dead can be found and recovered. This irrational hope stirs up anxiety which may find a creative outlet.<sup>110</sup>

For O'Brien, in his grieving process, storytelling serves as a kind of 'magic'— it is a way of recapturing some essence of the person who has been irretrievably lost:

I didn't want to lose Linda.

She was dead. I understood that. After all, I'd seen her body, and yet even as a nine-year-old I had begun to practice the magic of stories. Some I just dreamed up. Others I wrote down-- the scenes and dialogue. And at nighttime I'd slide into sleep knowing that Linda would be there waiting for me.<sup>111</sup>

In 'The Lives of the Dead', O'Brien explicitly connects his use of his imaginative faculties in early childhood with his telling of stories concerning his experiences in Vietnam. Crucially, storytelling is presented here as a means to negotiate the disturbing implications of confronting lifeless and broken bodies:

**BUT THIS TOO IS TRUE:** stories can save us. I'm forty-three years old, and a writer now, and even still, right here, I keep dreaming Linda alive. And Ted Lavender, too, and Kiowa, and Curt Lemon, and a slim young man I killed, and an old man sprawled beside a pig-pen, and several others whose bodies I once lifted and dumped into a truck. They're all dead. But in a story, which is a kind of dreaming, the dead sometimes smile and sit up and return to the world.<sup>112</sup>

Aberbach has suggested that the 'yearning and searching' stage of grief is often beset by the seemingly contradictory tendencies of denial and acceptance. '[W]hen disbelief and denial of loss commonly oscillate with acceptance, denial might be expressed in a "living" work of art, a form of "holding on" to the lost person or persons', he writes, 'while acceptance might find expression in the form of a memorial to the dead'.<sup>113</sup> It can be argued that O'Brien's textual representations of the corporeal damage wrought upon the bodies of US soldiers in Vietnam-- and the human frailty and mortality that it signifies-- both draw our attention to these conflicting impulses and

attest to the author's attempts to negotiate them through the medium of storytelling.

As this chapter has demonstrated, the narratives of O'Brien, Kovic, Wright, Caputo et al. draw our attention not only to the profoundly disturbing impact of the soldier's encounter with his own mortality in-country, but also to the difficulties that the veteran faces in negotiating and articulating the psychological fallout from this revelatory experience. Whilst in-country, the soldier often attempted to evade or defer the 'ungrounding' effect of his confrontations with corporeal vulnerability in order to continue functioning effectively. In the longer term, however, as Judith Lewis Herman and others have pointed out, the impulse to 'bury' the memories and implications of such disturbing experience is not only misguided, but is also ultimately damaging, both for the traumatised veteran and for society at large. Vietnam veterans' narratives frequently alert their readers to a conflict between the desire to conceal the disturbing aspects of combat and the compulsion to reveal them, a dilemma which, as Herman, Tal and others have noted, is characteristic of survivors' responses to traumatic experience. Recent work by such theorists suggests that, despite the many obstacles that face survivors of trauma in the articulation of their experiences, speaking/writing about disturbing events can serve a restorative/regenerative function both for them as individuals, and for the socio-cultural milieu more generally.

'There is in fact a genuine psychological sense in which confronting the war, at least for Americans, is a question of corpses', writes psychologist and counsellor Robert Jay Lifton, recalling the sceptical comment made by a member of one of his veterans' discussion groups, who remarked: 'The only way Americans could begin to understand what this war is would be for them to have to see a few corpses right in front of them'. While Lifton acknowledges that 'Perhaps no society is capable of taking more than a passing glance at its corpses, actual or metaphorical', he proposes that 'constructive corpse-viewing'— which would involve 'taking a hard look at such questions as the operation of the warrior ethos in Vietnam and the morality of killing or dying there'— is a prerequisite for social and individual recovery from the Vietnam experience.<sup>114</sup>

At the point of writing, in 1974, Lifton suggested that some progress had been made in this area, that a number of people in US society were starting 'to "view"— even see and feel those corpses', thus instigating a process of recovery by, 'open[ing] themselves to truth and the possibility of renewal'.<sup>115</sup> The veterans whose work I have discussed in this study engage in a form of 'constructive corpse viewing' through their repeated depictions of torn and ruptured bodies. As my discussion here in this chapter and elsewhere has demonstrated, Caputo, Kovic, Parrish et al. were, they tell us, compelled to 'recover' and reveal the viscerality of the corporeal damage wrought in-country and the implications of such instances of



injury-- aspects of the war that had, they argue, been largely excluded from officially-sanctioned discourse and evaded in more general discussions of the war.

Lifton's use of 'corpse-viewing' as a metaphor is also significant. He contends that the analysis and deconstruction of the 'warrior ethos' is a necessary element in the complex and difficult process of recuperation, a contention which is, perhaps, borne out by the points that I have raised concerning *Born on the Fourth of July*. As my analysis has demonstrated, Ron Kovic's narrative discursively salvages the irretrievably wounded body-- and, by implication, the corporeal contingency and frailty which it signifies. However, while his text serves both as a cathartic outpouring and as a means for him to 'recover' his own voice, its potential for effecting social recuperation is rendered problematic by the counterbalancing of the narrative's socio-culturally subversive aspects, with its promotion of retrograde ideas of masculinity and ableist notions concerning embodiment. Moreover, not only does Kovic fail to address and deconstruct the 'warrior ethos' that Lifton refers to, his narrative in some ways perhaps serves to promote it, for Kovic seeks to adopt the stance of 'hero' through his undertaking to reveal the hidden 'truths' of the war, and, as an unnamed veteran in Walter T. Davis' study claims, 'It's the hero thing that does us in.'<sup>116</sup>

While Kovic's position amid the 'narrative wreckage' at the time of writing perhaps precluded such self-conscious reflection, others such as Hasford, Caputo, Wright, Parrish and O'Brien use their

narratives not only to reveal the corporeal damage wrought by the war, but also to deconstruct the connotations of valour and heroism traditionally projected onto the bodies of the dead and wounded within the context of combat. Confrontations with ruptured bodies— and the awareness of one's own mortality frequently engendered by such encounters— were not only difficult to cope with psychologically. As trauma theorists suggest, Vietnam veterans also have many obstacles to contend with when attempting to verbalise the content of their disturbing experience and/or transpose it to textual form. Hence those who seek to expose the physical reality and psychological implications of corporeal damage in their narratives repeatedly foreground the difficulties involved in finding the appropriate words to do so. Consequently, Caputo, Wright and O'Brien in particular are much concerned with 'literary' dilemmas and ponder the efficacy of specific literary techniques (and, in Wright's case, of other forms of representation) in the depiction of wounded bodies.

My survey of narratives by a range of veterans suggests that their encounters with extreme and/or fatal wounding in-country were imbued with a sense of *crisis* on multiple levels. The basic training process served to enhance these young men's feeling of bodily invulnerability, and hence the 'evidence' of corporeal frailty that they confronted in-country left them radically 'ungrounded' in various ways. As writers, looking back on their traumatic experience in retrospect, veterans repeatedly foreground their struggle to articulate and describe

adequately instances of bodily injury that both *demand* yet simultaneously *resist* representation. As my analysis has suggested, various literary strategies are brought into play in the attempt to traverse this tricky discursive territory. While some of these tactics are more successful than others, writers such as O'Brien and Wright suggest that the imagination has a crucial role to play in the individual's struggle both to contend with the disturbing ramifications of mortal injury, and to represent this aspect of the in-country experience effectively. Tim O'Brien's imaginative reworking of his experience through the medium of storytelling serves a twofold purpose, enabling him to articulate elements of his experience that he had been otherwise unable to represent, and also helping him to confront the profoundly disturbing experiences of his past and, perhaps, begin to 'make sense' of these incidents by creatively reshaping them.

Veterans' narrativisations of the in-country experience and its aftermath are not merely preoccupied with the notion of recovery, they are, in many cases, *driven* by impulses towards retrieval and/or recuperation. As trauma theorists argue, however, recovery is no simple task, rather it is a protracted and complex *process* involving the repeated retelling, analysis and adaptation of the traumatic experience in order to achieve its eventual integration into the survivor's consciousness. As my study has demonstrated, veterans repeatedly contend that recovering, and *recovering from*, the disturbing aspects of the in-country experience entails a discursive resurrection of the bodies

irremediably damaged in this war. Perhaps stories can save, then, *precisely by* picking up the pieces, displaying the bodies of the wounded and symbolically disinterring the bodies of the dead, in the hope that these bodily wounds and wounded bodies, and their implications, can be finally *owned*-- acknowledged, examined and accepted-- and perhaps, eventually, be laid to rest.

## AFTERWORD

**'I mean this rally they're planning for Washington, to "welcome home the Vietnam Vets". If I could arrange it I'd go there for the rally and shit in the middle of the streets.'**

**Unnamed veteran quoted in Ben Shephard *A War of Nerves*<sup>1</sup>**

Nearly thirty years have passed since the withdrawal of the last US troops from Vietnam, and this period has been marked by palpable shifts in the perception of the war and its veterans within the American cultural consciousness. Following their return from Vietnam, US soldiers and support personnel were not greeted with homecoming parades, as veterans of earlier conflicts had been. Moreover, they frequently found themselves not only socially marginalised, but also, as Lloyd B. Lewis has argued, 'sentenced to silence', deterred and discouraged from articulating their experiences.<sup>2</sup> However, recent decades have seen a dramatic upsurge of public interest in America's role in Vietnam, as critic Susan Jeffords and others have noted.<sup>3</sup> Writing in 1991, Rick Berg and John Carlos Rowe contend that, while 'Fifteen years ago, Americans didn't want to talk about Vietnam', conversely "Vietnam" has become today an *unavoidable* word in American culture, a term in everyone's vocabulary, however various its meanings'. What is more, they foreground a noticeable change in both the representation and the treatment of Vietnam veterans during the 1980s, remarking that 'the Vietnam veteran in the 1980s was celebrated by the mass media and offered a certain compensatory

heroism', a shift further exemplified by the construction of monuments and memorials for the American dead, and the proliferation of belated 'Welcome Home' parades during this decade.<sup>4</sup>

Significantly, the conceptualisations, representations and activities which constituted the belated national response to the war during this period frequently evidenced a preoccupation with bodies and issues connected with embodiment. However, the 'use' of the body as a focal point in this context often served a markedly different purpose from the one which characterised veterans' narratives. As my analysis has demonstrated, veterans' placement of ruptured and contingent bodies at the epicentre of their texts tends to have *counter-cultural* connotations, contradicting officially-sanctioned accounts of the war, and challenging assumptions concerning male militarised embodiment. In contrast, as Berg and Rowe have noted, the widespread national impulse to 'get over' the war in the 1980s often had regressive implications, for it involved 'patching up our conventional myths and values, rather than subjecting them to necessary criticism and revision'. Hence, they contend, the proliferation of discussions and activities concerning the war, and the sudden media interest in those who served there, 'merely announced a new *use* for the veteran'.<sup>5</sup> In keeping with this, as further discussion will show, the 'program of organized mourning'<sup>6</sup> that took place during the 1980s frequently sought to employ the bodies of veterans as a

means to reassert-- rather than reassess-- traditional, reactionary attitudes.

My discussion in Chapter Four drew attention to the manner in which the US military stage-managed the burials of American soldiers as a routine practice throughout the duration of the war. As my analysis illustrated, this enabled them not only to defer/evade interpretations of this corporeal damage which might be at odds with officially-sanctioned versions of events, but also to employ these bodies as focal points in the creation of pro-war spectacles. This attempt on the part of the American military (and, by extension, the *State*) to utilise the irreparably wounded bodies of their soldiers as vehicles for the transmission of nationalistic ideologies finds its ultimate expression in a very controversial sequence of events-- the circumstances surrounding the interment of the bones of a Vietnam veteran in the memorial sarcophagus at Arlington National Cemetery, Washington, as highlighted by James William Gibson in his 1986 study, *The Perfect War: Technowar in Vietnam*. In his discussion of the entombment of these remains alongside those of other unknown soldiers from both World Wars and the Korean War, Gibson quotes from the *New York Times* report of the ceremony as follows:

The Pentagon, which waived its informal rule that 80 percent of a body must be recovered for it to be designated an Unknown, has now intentionally destroyed all identification records relating to the Unknown to prevent inadvertent disclosure of information that might provide clues to the identity of the man intended to be a universal symbol of the Vietnam battle dead.

'In other words', Gibson writes, 'the Pentagon had remains that might someday have been identifiable'. His contention that 'The military destroyed this man's records in order to stage a symbolic patriotic ritual and thus gain support for future battles',<sup>7</sup> is given credence by the remarks made by the then President Ronald Reagan during the ceremony itself: "An American hero has returned home.... He accepted his mission and did his duty. And his honest patriotism overwhelms us."<sup>8</sup> Susan Jeffords, who argues that the representation of the American intervention in Vietnam can best be understood in terms of a greater national venture of 'remasculinization',<sup>9</sup> suggests that the claiming and entombment of these remains by the US government is one element in an ongoing process of 'cultural debriding' of the Vietnam veteran's image, whose principal goal is 'the display and regeneration of a victimized American masculinity'.<sup>10</sup> She explains:

[. . .] in the context of a patriarchal representation of the Vietnam veteran, Reagan's act makes sense. If, on the one hand, this and other bodies were kept until identified, the war that produced them, both literally and representationally, would not be over. [. . .] Consequently, the disruptions to the formulation of masculinity produced in conjunction with the Vietnam War would continue.<sup>11</sup>

As the analyses provided by Gibson and Jeffords suggest, the ceremony for the interment of the unknown soldier constituted the prescription of an officially-sanctioned attitude both towards the war itself and those physically damaged by it. The words of Ronald Reagan take for granted several controversial assumptions: that



military action in Vietnam was 'heroic', that the soldier whose remains are being interred made a deliberate choice to fight there, and that his behaviour was prompted by love of his country. The carefully orchestrated event blurs the boundaries between Church and State in that it draws upon the religious connotations of sacrifice. The words of Ronald Reagan are 'made flesh' in this ritualistic pseudo-sacrament: the presence of the physical remains serves to substantiate the official 'reading' of the war as defined in Reagan's speech. Moreover, not only is a concrete material object used to validate an abstract claim, but, in the 'official' version, the body itself acquires a redemptive dimension: through his 'freely-chosen' self-sacrifice, the unnamed (and hence representative) soldier assumes Christ-like status, his corporeal dissolution-- discursively bypassed here-- being a necessary condition of his role as an instrument for national redemption.

The ceremony for the interment of the unknown soldier not only seeks to impose a definitive interpretation upon the Vietnam experience and its consequences, but also attempts to bring closure to the discursive process, through the ritualistic burial of human remains. However, my analysis has shown throughout that the corporeal damage resultant from the war-- and the revelation of bodily contingency that it represents-- tends to resurface, despite the myriad of literal and discursive attempts to conceal it. In keeping with this pattern, there occurred a resurgence of controversy concerning the

interment of the unknown Vietnam soldier, reported by *The Times* newspaper on January 21st 1998 as follows:

Pentagon officials were trying to decide yesterday how to deal with the embarrassing possibility that a serviceman buried in America's tomb of the unknown warriors is not unknown at all.

*CBS News* said its seven-month investigation had determined that the remains in the memorial were almost certainly those of Michael Blassie, an air force pilot whose jet was shot down close to the Vietnam-Cambodia border in May, 1972.

[. . .] Even more awkward for the Pentagon, activists among Vietnam veterans are convinced that officials concealed their knowledge of Blassie's identity in 1984 when they were under pressure to find "unknown" remains from Vietnam, then in short supply, for inclusion in the tomb with victims of both world wars and the Korean War.

One option facing the Pentagon is the unprecedented step of reopening the tomb at Arlington National Cemetery outside Washington to exhume the Vietnam remains for DNA testing. Careful thought would be given to this idea, the Pentagon said.

Given the issue's sensitivity, a decision may go all the way to President Clinton.<sup>12</sup>

In response to requests from Michael Blassie's family (and increasing pressure from Vietnam veterans' groups and the media), the Pentagon ordered the disinterment of the remains, which took place in May 1998. 'We disturb this hallowed ground with profound reluctance', declared Defense Secretary William S. Cohen, at the brief but formal ceremony for the exhuming of the coffin, which was carried away from the tomb by a military 'Honor Guard'.<sup>13</sup> Subsequently, following DNA testing, the remains were positively identified as those of Michael J. Blassie in June of 1998.<sup>14</sup> The official response to this turn of events is very significant: on the 1st of July, Defense Secretary William S. Cohen

acknowledged that the advances in genetic testing that had made possible the identification of these remains cast doubt upon the likelihood that there would be any more unknown soldiers for placement in the national monument, either from Vietnam or from any subsequent wars. While Cohen emphasised the positive aspect of this development of DNA testing, suggesting that it would aid the State in its attempt to 'account' for those killed or missing in action, the improved techniques of identifying corpses posed a palpable threat to established traditions concerning collective mourning, an anxiety underscored by media reports of events at the time.<sup>15</sup> Blassie was finally laid to rest in a veterans' cemetery near his childhood home in Missouri in July of 1998, following a full military funeral at which the Secretary of Defense was present alongside hundreds of mourners, many of whom were themselves veterans.<sup>16</sup>

The controversy surrounding the interment, exhumation, identification and reburial of the 'unknown' soldier demonstrates that within this context, as my five chapters illustrated, bodies (and the corporeal contingency that besets them) tend to operate as a flashpoint for discord and unease, rather than providing a medium for redemption or reconciliation. Significantly, in June 1999-- perhaps in the wake of the socio-cultural anxieties engendered by these events-- the Pentagon made a statement announcing their decision to pay tribute to those US soldiers still missing in action in Vietnam by placing the following inscription on an empty crypt at the memorial tomb at Arlington:

'Honoring and keeping the faith with America's missing servicemen'.<sup>17</sup>

However, it might be suggested that this much-belated homage to the missing is itself indicative of the fact that these *absent* bodies remained an ongoing source of concern and disquiet nearly twenty-five years after the war's end. Indeed, as commentator Amanda Howell has detailed, American society displays an almost obsessional fixation with those missing in Vietnam, a circumstance which is rendered all the more remarkable by the fact that the percentage of total losses classified as missing is proportionally much lower than in previous wars.<sup>18</sup>

Highlighting the pervasiveness of the somewhat fantastical belief that these lost soldiers may yet be found *alive*, Howell's discussion suggests that, although the socio-cultural fixation with the missing 'facilitates a continuing imaginary engagement with scenes of bodily trauma', the enduring belief in the recuperability and, by implication, the *corporeal intactness*, of MIA and POW soldiers also 'depends on and sustains a denial of the effects of the war on the body'.<sup>19</sup> While her analysis focuses mainly upon recent Vietnam veteran-centred horror films such as *Deathdream* (1972), *House* (1986), *Jacob's Ladder* (1990) and *Universal Soldier* (1992), Howell's drawing to the fore of the intense focus upon 'bodies that are out of control' within these representations is very significant. These popular movies-- in which 'dead, missing and imprisoned American soldiers *are* resurrected, and [. . .] return to the United States as monsters'-- are,

she contends, indicative of the contrasting and conflicting impulses that beset US culture in its attempt to negotiate the consequences of the war. 'These films are symptomatic of not only the desire to disown the injuries of Vietnam', she writes, 'but also the fascination exerted by those losses and the compulsion to repeat them'.<sup>20</sup>

As I have tried to suggest here, irreparably wounded bodies and the corporeal frailty that they signify repeatedly re-emerge as sources of anxiety in the ongoing conceptualisation and representation of the war and its consequences, despite— or, perhaps, in reaction to—the continual attempts of the State to lay them to rest, literally and discursively. In his discussion of the entombment of the 'unknown soldier', Gibson alerts us to the fact that the Pentagon prohibited veterans from marching in the funeral procession because, due to their informal appearance, 'These men did not fit into the choreographed spectacle'.<sup>21</sup> Hence, as Gibson suggests, the activities and events that comprised the belated official response to the war were often geared towards the concealment of the socially unacceptable consequences of the in-country experience, rather than the acknowledgement and discussion of them. Against this backdrop, the remarks of the anonymous veteran cited at the beginning of this Afterword become more pertinent and meaningful than they might at first appear: 'I mean this rally they're planning for Washington, to "welcome home the Vietnam Vets". If I could arrange it I'd go there for the rally and shit in the middle of the streets'. This man's aggrieved response to the

belated celebrations calls to mind Norman Bowker's reaction to his inability to find listeners for his account of the 'shit field' incident in O'Brien's *The Things They Carried* (1991)-- he fantasises about giving a detailed speech on the subject of human faeces to the local Kiwanis club, 'Pass[ing] out samples, maybe'.<sup>22</sup> As my earlier analysis of this episode illustrated, the suppression of stories like the 'shit field' incident-- and the marginalisation of those with the potential to articulate them-- is related to the more general propensity within US culture to mask or evade the realm of the excremental, and hence to forestall acknowledgement of the corporeal contingency which it signifies.

The unnamed veteran's fantasy of 'shitting in the middle of the streets' during an officially-sanctioned 'Welcome Home' parade is thus imbued with additional symbolic import beyond the obvious idea that he has been *metaphorically* defecated on-- maltreated and ostracised-- by wider US society. While his proposed act of public defecation would be regarded as inherently transgressive according to the social standards of Western culture, to do so amidst an official, *formal* event renders such proposed behaviour all the more shocking. As my analysis has already demonstrated, there is a profound divergence and conflict between official versions of the in-country experience, and those produced by veterans themselves. The widespread response of horror and disgust that would, one imagines, be provoked in those who witnessed the infuriated veteran's act of 'shitting in the middle of the

streets', draws to the fore the *obscène* quality of the 'forbidden knowledge' which is suppressed by officially-sanctioned representations, and alerts us to the threat that the disclosure of such information poses to social and cultural stability. Hence, while commentators such as Lloyd B. Lewis have suggested that the 'program of organized mourning' might serve as 'a halting first step in the process of confronting the taint from the war',<sup>23</sup> it may, in fact, indicate a continued unwillingness in American society generally to listen to, or accept, the revelations concerning corporeal contingency that formed the core of the in-country experience and its aftermath for veterans themselves.

## NOTES

### Preface

1. Michael Bibby, *Hearts and Minds: Bodies, Poetry, and Resistance in the Vietnam Era* (Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1996), 5.
2. Rick Berg and John Carlos Rowe, 'Introduction: The Vietnam War and American Memory', in *The Vietnam War and American Culture*, edited by Berg and Rowe (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), 2.
3. James William Gibson, *The Perfect War: Technowar in Vietnam* (Boston: Atlantic Monthly Press, 1986), 239.
4. Commentators Jennings and Markus state:

Those in uniform during the early years of the Vietnam War served in a much more positive and supportive context than did those entering during the later years, when opposition to the war and civil disobedience was rampant and the government was searching desperately for face-saving ways to terminate the strife. By the same token, those returning to civilian status at later stages faced a different reception than did earlier returnees.

See M. Kent Jennings and Gregory B. Markus, 'Political Participation and Vietnam War Veterans: A Longitudinal Study', in *The Social Psychology of Military Service*, edited by Nancy L. Goldman and David R. Segal (Beverly Hills, CA: Sage, 1976), 177-78. Jennings and Markus also draw attention to changes within the US military itself over the period of the war, an issue addressed by Charles C. Moskos, Jr. in 'The American Combat Soldier in Vietnam', *Journal of Social Studies* 31.4 (1975): 25-37.

5. Gibson, 461.
6. *Ibid.*, 471.
7. *Ibid.*, 462.
8. *Ibid.*, 474-75.
9. Michel Foucault, 'Docile Bodies', in *Discipline and Punish* (1975), translator unknown, excerpted in *The Foucault Reader: An Introduction to Foucault's Thought*, edited by Paul Rabinow (London: Penguin, 1991), 179-80.
10. Ron Kovic, *Born on the Fourth of July* (1976; reprint, London: Corgi, 1990); John Ketwig, *And a Hard Rain Fell: A GI's True Story of the War in Vietnam* (New York: Macmillan, 1985).
11. Tim O'Brien, *If I Die in a Combat Zone* (1969; reprint, London: Flamingo/ Harper Collins, 1995), 46.
12. Kali Tal, *Worlds of Hurt: Reading the Literatures of Trauma* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 127.



13. Antony Easthope, *What A Man's Gotta Do: The Masculine Myth in Popular Culture* (Boston, MA: Unwin Hyman, 1990); Klaus Theweleit, *Male Fantasies, Volume 2: Male Bodies: Psychoanalyzing the White Terror*, translated by Stephen Conway in collaboration with Erica Carter and Chris Turner (1978; reprint, Cambridge: Polity Press, 1989).
14. Tim O'Brien, *The Things They Carried* (London: Flamingo/ HarperCollins, 1991).
15. Philip Caputo, *A Rumor of War* (1977; reprint, London: Arrow, 1978); Gustav Hasford, *The Short-Timers* (1979; revised edition, London: Bantam, 1987); Nathaniel Tripp, *Father, Soldier, Son: Memoir of a Platoon Leader in Vietnam* (Vermont: Steerforth Press, 1998); Stephen Wright, *Meditations in Green* (London: Sphere, 1985).
16. John M. Del Vecchio, *The 13th Valley* (1982; reprint, London: Sphere, 1987); O'Brien, *The Things...*
17. Major General Spurgeon Neel, *Medical Support of the US Army in Vietnam 1965-1970* (1973; reprint, Washington DC: Department of the Army, 1991), 53.
18. Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, translated by Leon S. Roudiez (1980; reprint, New York: Columbia University Press, 1982); Robert Jay Lifton (MD), 'Absurd Technological Death', in *Crimes of War: A Legal, Political-Documentary, and Psychological Inquiry into the Responsibility of Leaders, Citizens, and Soldiers for Criminal Acts in War*, edited by Richard A. Falk, Gabriel Kolko, and Robert Jay Lifton (MD) (New York: Random House, 1971), 23-27.
19. John Parrish (MD), *Journal of a Plague Year* (1972; reprint, Glasgow: Fontana/Collins, 1979).
20. Arthur W. Frank, *The Wounded Storyteller: Body, Illness and Ethics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995).
21. Judith Lewis Herman, *Trauma and Recovery* (1992; reprint, London: Pandora/ Rivers Oram Press, 1998).
22. David Aberbach, *Surviving Trauma: Loss, Literature and Psychoanalysis* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989).
23. Tal, 10. This is an issue foregrounded also by Robert Jay Lifton at several points in his aptly titled study, *Home From the War: Vietnam Veterans: Neither Victims nor Executioners* (London: Wildwood House, 1974).
24. Lloyd B. Lewis, *The Tainted War: Culture and Identity in Vietnam War Narratives* (Westport, CT: Greenwood, 1985), 108-9.

## **Chapter 1: Building the Military Body**

1. An earlier version of the first part of this chapter appeared in *Borderlines* 4.8 (1998).
2. Tim O'Brien, *If I Die in a Combat Zone* (1969; reprint, London: Flamingo/ Harper Collins, 1995), 40.
3. Marcel Mauss, *Sociology and Psychology: Essays*, translated and edited by Ben Brewster (1950; reprint, London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1979), 108.
4. Ron Kovic, *Born on the Fourth of July* (1976; reprint, London: Corgi, 1990), 57-58.
5. Basic training, it should be pointed out, is, as its title implies, only the first step of the training process. Following basic, recruits undergo some form of advanced individual training, which is more specialised in terms of preparing each individual for his specific assignment in the combat zone e.g. Advanced Infantry Training, Wheel and Track Vehicle Repair Training, Airborne Training etc. While there may be a different format and emphasis to these later stages of training, many veterans experienced a continuation of the same sorts of physical and psychological abuse that they suffered at boot camp. For examples, see: John Ketwig, *And a Hard Rain Fell: A GI's True Story of the War in Vietnam* (New York: Macmillan, 1985), 24; Tobias Wolff, *In Pharaoh's Army: Memories of a Lost War* (London: Picador/Macmillan, 1995), 47; and Robert Mason, *Chickenhawk* (1983; reprint, London: Corgi, 1989), 19.
6. While my focus is thus specific rather than general, many of the points that I will be making are also applicable, to varying degrees, to other instances of military training.
7. My mode of expression here and elsewhere risks presenting the body of the recruit as though 'it' were somehow distinct or apart from his 'inner self' or 'consciousness'. Rather than suggesting that this is the case, I will be arguing that it is the process of military training which induces a form of mind/body split in the recruit, for it causes him to objectify his own body.
8. Michel Foucault, 'Docile Bodies', in *Discipline and Punish* (1975), translator unknown, excerpted in *The Foucault Reader: An Introduction to Foucault's Thought*, edited by Paul Rabinow (London: Penguin, 1991), 179-80.
9. The assumption implicit in Foucault's comments that the recruit himself merely adopts a passive role in this process of metamorphosis is, however, somewhat misleading. While the analysis that follows deals in the main with the nature of military training as an enforced regimen, it will also be suggested that the transformative effect of training necessitated the collusion (to varying degrees) of those subjected to it.

10. It could be argued that any attempt to make generalised comments regarding the preparation of US personnel for combat in Vietnam is rendered problematic due to the protracted nature of the conflict. There can be little doubt that differences must have existed between the experiences of basic training undergone by personnel deployed to the combat zone in the early sixties, and those of US recruits in boot camps in 1972, more than a decade later. However, in his article 'The Impact of Basic Combat Training: The Role of the Drill Sergeant'— in *The Social Psychology of Military Service*, edited by Nancy L. Goldman and David R. Segal (Beverly Hills CA: Sage, 1976)— John H. Faris alerts us to 'several features of basic training which make it extraordinary and which have persisted through the years and appear in much the same form from one post to another'. These features are outlined as follows :

[ . . . ] a disparagement of civilian status, which takes the form of degradation and humiliation on both the group and individual levels [ . . . ] extreme isolation from civilian society on one hand and an almost complete lack of privacy from other trainees on the other [ . . . ] much of the evaluation of performance in basic training is done at the group level rather than on the individual level [ . . . ] basic combat training includes an emphasis on masculinity and aggressiveness [ . . . ] basic training is designed to place the trainee under various forms of stress, both physical and psychological [ . . . ] (14-15)

My own reading of the narrative accounts provided by veterans attested to the existence of this pattern within the training process, which extended across the period and applied— to varying degrees— to the different branches of US military service in this context.

11. Peter Bourne (MD), 'From Boot Camp to My Lai', in *Crimes of War: A Legal, Political-Documentary, and Psychological Inquiry into the Responsibility of Leaders, Citizens, and Soldiers for Criminal Acts in War*, edited by Richard A. Falk, Gabriel Kolko, and Robert Jay Lifton (MD) (New York: Random House, 1971), 463.

12. Kovic, 61-64.

13. While similar stripping procedures are also used elsewhere (notably in prisons), I have chosen to concentrate specifically upon the parallels between military recruits and concentration camp inmates as this best fits my purposes here.

14. Richard Holmes, *Firing Line* ( London: Penguin, 1986), 34.

15. Ibid.

16. Quoted in Mark Baker, *Nam: The Vietnam War in the Words of the Men and Women Who Fought There* (1981; reprint, London: Abacus/Sphere, 1982), 14-15. Emphasis added.

17. Ladislaus Ervin-Deutsch, 'About Those Who Survived and Those Who Died: From Auschwitz to Labour Camp III in Kaufering', in *Dachau Review: History of Nazi Concentration Camps: Studies, Reports, Documents, Volume 1*, edited by W. Benz and B. Distel (Brussels: Comit International de Dachau, 1988), 121.

18. Max Mannheimer, 'Theresienstadt–Auschwitz–Warsaw–Dachau: Recollections', in *Dachau Review: History of Nazi Concentration Camps: Studies, Reports, Documents, Volume 1*, edited by W. Benz and B. Distel (Brussels: Comit International de Dachau, 1988), 69.
19. Ketwig, 18.
20. Kovic, 62.
21. Ervin-Deutsch, 122.
22. Ibid.
23. Kalif Tal, *Worlds of Hurt: Reading the Literatures of Trauma* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 119.
24. Ervin-Deutsch, 121. Emphasis added.
25. Tal, 127.
26. James R. Ebert, *A Life in a Year: The American Infantryman in Vietnam, 1965-1972* (Novato, CA: Presidio, 1993), 29.
27. Philip Caputo, *A Rumor of War* (1977; reprint, London: Arrow, 1978), 8; Gustav Hasford, *The Short-Timers* (1979; revised edition, London: Bantam, 1987), 7.
28. O'Brien, *If I Die...*, 46. For other examples see Baker, 14 and Hasford, 3. Veterans' own frequent drawing of parallels between their experiences of basic training and the experiences of concentration camp inmates may well fit in with a tendency to frame themselves as 'victims' of the Vietnam War on various levels. The critic must therefore remain cautious about such parallels for, as Tal has suggested, "Soldier as victim" representations depend upon the invisibility of the soldier's own victims, namely Vietnamese soldiers and civilians', 138.
29. John P. Sabini and Maury Silver, 'Destroying the Innocent with a Clear Conscience: A Sociopsychology of the Holocaust', in *Survivors, Victims and Perpetrators: Essays on the Nazi Holocaust*, edited by Joel E. Dimsdale (MD) (Washington: Hemisphere, 1980), 346, 347-8.
30. Robert Jay Lifton (MD), *Home From the War: Vietnam Veterans: Neither Victims nor Executioners* (London: Wildwood House, 1974), 28. Elsewhere, in "'Old Kids": The Adolescent Experience in the Nonfiction Narratives of the Vietnam War'—in *Search and Clear: Critical Responses to the Selected Literature and Films of the Vietnam War*, edited by William J. Searle (Bowling Green, OH: Bowling Green State University Press, 1988)—Jacqueline E. Lawson has described this process as 'destroying one's masculinity in order to make one a man'. Via 'a combination of punishing physical exertion and emasculating rhetoric', Lawson contends, 'Boot camp forced the complete abandonment of ego, the regression of personality to a primal, infantile state'. This 'destruction' of the recruits' masculinity, she argues, laid the groundwork for 'the eventual restructuring of the personality into nothing but the mythic identity: the super patriot, the noble-warrior, the killing machine' (29-30).

31. Wolff, 46.
32. Caputo, 10.
33. Bourne, 465. Mention is made in several of the texts under discussion of the mystique attached to the Marine Corps. Indeed, when training recruits for service in the Corps, drill instructors and others frequently assert that Marines represent the pinnacle of the US military institution. The level of self-discipline required of a Marine, it is suggested, far outstrips that required in other branches of military service. For example, recruits in Hasford's *The Short-Timers* are taught that 'Marines are supposed to bleed in tidy little pools because Marines are disciplined. Civilians and members of the lesser services bleed all over the place like bed wetters', 20.
34. R. Wayne Eisenhart, 'You Can't Hack it Little Girl: A Discussion of the Covert Psychological Agenda of Modern Combat Training', *Journal of Social Issues* 31.4 (1975), 16.
35. Hasford, 19.
36. Quoted in Lifton, *Home From the War*, 242.
37. Richard Holmes, *Firing Line* (London: Penguin, 1986), 52, 47.
38. Ebert, 37; Faris, 23.
39. Ebert, 37, 60.
40. Eisenhart, 13-14.
41. For examples, see Hasford's *The Short-Timers*, Ketwig's *And a Hard Rain Fell*, and Wolff's *In Pharaoh's Army*.
42. Richard Currey, *Fatal Light* (1988; reprint, London: Faber and Faber, 1989), 26.
43. Baker, 13.
44. Currey, 26.
45. Bourne, 465.
46. Caputo, 9.
47. Ibid.
48. The specifics of combat here will be detailed in greater depth in the subsequent chapter, 'The Body In-Country'.
49. John Parrish (MD), *Journal of a Plague Year* (1972; reprint, Glasgow: Fontana/Collins, 1979), 14-15.
50. Arthur W. Frank, 'For a Sociology of the Body: An Analytical Review', in *The Body: Social Process and Cultural Theory*, edited by Mike Featherstone et al. (London: Sage, 1991), 56.
51. Hasford, 11, 164.
52. For Ron Kovic, however, the desire to discipline his own body preceded (and perhaps encouraged) his entry into the military institution. See *Born on the Fourth of July*, 47-49, for his description of his youthful athletic ambitions.

53. Hasford, 98. For an extended example of the manner in which the attempt at humour often fails to allay the anxieties connected with this sense of disembodiment (and also of the disturbing implications of the conception of the body as a machine), see Hasford, 94.
54. Mauss, 108.
55. For example, see Hasford, 100. This point also applies to other kinds of physical training. Thus Ron Kovic, training to develop his wrestling skills as a teenager, is told by his High School coaches to regard his body as 'a beautiful remarkable machine that will last you a lifetime if you care for it properly', 48.
56. Quoted in Susan Jeffords, *The Remasculinization of America: Gender and the Vietnam War* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989), 16.
57. Hasford, 19; Kovic, 59.
58. M.L. Lyon and J.M. Barbalet, 'Society's Body: Emotion and the "Somatization" of Social Theory', in *Embodiment and Experience: The Existential Ground of Culture and Self*, edited by Thomas J. Csordas (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 55.
59. Caputo 32, 10.
60. Parrish, 16.
61. Frank, 'For a Sociology of the Body', 55.
62. Adam Yarmolinsky, *The Military Establishment: Its Impact on American Society* (New York: Harper & Row, 1971), 398-9.
63. Likewise the body of the soldier was also frequently the focus/vehicle for lapses of discipline in-country. Military regulations regarding uniform, both in terms of what should be worn and the way it should be worn, were often flouted by infantrymen and others in Vietnam, as were military regulations regarding the close cropping of the soldiers' hair. According to the accounts provided by veterans, the wearing of badges and even of peace signs by soldiers was not infrequent, while there was also a vogue for the writing of provocative slogans (many of which, if not overtly anti-war or anti-military, certainly leant in that direction) and the drawing of pictures on helmets and flak jackets.
64. Ketwig, 18.
65. O'Brien, *If I Die...*, 41.
66. Ketwig, 19.
67. Lawson, "Old Kids", 29.
68. Many veteran authors foreground the figure of John Wayne as of crucial importance in generating and maintaining this mythic notion of hypermasculinity. In *The Tainted War: Culture and Identity in Vietnam War Narratives* (Westport, CT: Greenwood, 1985), critic Lloyd B. Lewis notes: 'A close examination of the accounts growing out of the Vietnam War reveals several hundred direct references to the

influence of the late actor, all of them affirming Wayne as the embodiment of the American warrior and therefore as the spirit of war itself' (25). Other commentators such as Lifton (*Home From the War*, chapter 8); Lawson ("Old Kids", 28-34, and "She's a Pretty Woman...for a Gook": The Misogyny of the Vietnam War', in *Fourteen Landing Zones: Approaches to Vietnam War Literature*, edited by Philip K. Jason ((Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1991)) 19) and Jeffords (15) have also drawn attention to the prevalence and repercussions of this.

69. Lifton, *Home From the War*, 242.

70. Lewis, 34.

71. Caputo, 19, 29.

72. Antony Easthope, *What A Man's Gotta Do: The Masculine Myth in Popular Culture* (Boston, MA: Unwin Hyman, 1990), 53.

73. Lawson, "She's a Pretty Woman... For a Gook", 20-21.

74. As Lifton has emphasised, the 'general psychosexual victimization of women' within the discourse of the training environment had great influence upon the behaviour of GIs towards women within the in-country environment itself (*Home From the War*, 242-3). Lawson provides a detailed analysis of this issue in "She's a Pretty Woman...for a Gook", in which she states:

Raping a Vietnamese woman became the hallmark of the guerrilla phase of the war- the war fought on the ground by young American males intent on asserting their superiority, their potency, their manhood (and by extension, their country's) by terrorizing, torturing and abusing the women of Vietnam. The extent to which these practices were allowed, accepted, encouraged, and carried out [. . .] suggests how close to the surface misogynistic attitudes lie and how easily women are reduced and objectified when the rules of social engagement no longer apply. (25-6)

75. Lawson, "She's a Pretty Woman... For a Gook", 17, 22. As Lawson, Lifton (*Home From the War*, 243), and others have pointed out, the misogyny and homophobia so entrenched within the rhetoric of the training process, were employed (both during training and in-country) as a means to disparage the fighting ability of the Vietnamese. Lawson writes:

[. . .] the Vietnamese came to be regarded as weak, effeminate, devious and wanton. The South Vietnamese soldiers in the ARVN were particular targets of American contempt, reviled by many GIs for their cowardice, passivity, feebleness, and servility- in short, their effeminacy.

She continues: 'Dehumanizing- by feminizing- the enemy was crucial to the military's propaganda program, both in country and back in the States' ("She's a Pretty Woman... For a Gook", 23).

76. Caputo, 21.

77. In *Receptions of War: Vietnam in American Culture* (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 1993), cultural critic Andrew Martin writes:

In American culture the military body has traditionally been a valorized body, presented and represented for social consumption as a natural and useful project for young men to take up. That presentation is not so much of corporeal styles as of *the* corporeal style- an ideological body style that is positioned within those legitimizing discourses that underwrite and extend the power of the state. The military body is thus sanctioned as a national asset to be displayed within the spectacle of politics and celebrated in every conceivable media format. (137)

78. Easthope, 51-53. As Mailer's remark suggests, the situation of combat puts the soldier under great pressure to maintain a high level of control over his own body. This issue will be explored in the next chapter.

79. Easthope, 53.

80. Lawson, "Old Kids", 29.

81. Kovic, 64-65.

82. Ketwig, 18-22.

83. Easthope, 53, 42-43.

84. Klaus Theweleit, *Male Fantasies, Volume 2: Male Bodies: Psychoanalyzing the White Terror*, translated by Stephen Conway in collaboration with Erica Carter and Chris Turner (1978; reprint, Cambridge: Polity Press, 1989), xiii. Jessica Benjamin and Anson Rabinbach draw our attention to the fact that, while Theweleit's discussion is initially based upon the study of writings connected with the German Freikorps of the 1920s, the arguments and observations that he makes regarding male fantasies and the notion of the male warrior, are also highly relevant to other contexts. Interestingly, they link Theweleit's project in this volume with that of Vietnam correspondent Michael Herr's 'evocation of the language of American pop culture that accompanied the Vietnam War' in *Dispatches* (1977)— a text that I discuss elsewhere in my study— though they argue that Theweleit's work does not fall prey to the 'unappetizing romanticization of the "high" of battle', as does Herr's text, xiii.

85. Theweleit, *Male Fantasies, Volume 2*, 160.

86. Caputo, 21.

87. Milton J. Bates, 'Men, Women, and Vietnam', in *America Rediscovered: Critical Essays on Literature and Film of the Vietnam War*, edited by Owen W. Gilman, Jr. and Lorrie Smith (New York: Garland, 1990), 35. The obviously phallic overtones of this identification— referred to here by Bates, and elsewhere by Lawson ("She's a Pretty Woman... For a Gook", 27), Cynthia J. Fuchs ("Vietnam and Sexual Violence": The Movie', also in *America Rediscovered*, 127), and others— connect with the coding of the male genitals as site/sign of masculine agency as referred to earlier.

88. Baker, 17.



89. 'We had become self-confident and proud, some to the point of arrogance. We had acquired the military virtues of courage, loyalty, and *esprit de corps*, though at the price of a diminished capacity for compassion', writes Caputo (21).

## Chapter 2: The Body In-Country

1. Nathaniel Tripp, *Father, Soldier, Son: Memoir of a Platoon Leader in Vietnam* (Vermont: Steerforth Press, 1998), 134.
2. Michael Herr, *Dispatches* (1977; reprint, London: Picador/Pan Books, 1978), 81.
3. Mark Baker, *Nam: The Vietnam War in the Words of the Men and Women Who Fought There* (1981; reprint, London: Abacus/Sphere, 1982), 52.
4. Although I am using the singular ('environment') for clarity here, the combat zone comprised a range of very different areas (e.g. jungles, deltas, mountainous areas etc.). Despite the geographical and other discrepancies between these regions— as further analysis will suggest— the soldier found his body 'out of place', to varying degrees, in all of them.
5. Baker, *Nam*, 40, 26, 33, 26,37,48.
6. I use 'personnel' rather than 'soldiers' here because Baker's text, to his credit, incorporates interviews with those in non-combat roles, some of whom were women. It is interesting to note that the comment likening the odour of Vietnam to that of a urinal is excerpted from an interview with a female nurse.
7. Eric M. Bergerud, *Red Thunder, Tropic Lightning: The World of a Combat Division in Vietnam* (1993; reprint, New York: Penguin, 1994), 11.
8. Major General Spurgeon Neel, *Medical Support of the US Army in Vietnam 1965-1970* (1973; reprint, Washington DC: Department of the Army, 1991), xlii.
9. B. Eiseman (MD), 'Combat Casualty Management in Vietnam', *The Journal of Trauma* 7.1 (1967): 55.
10. Tim Page, *Tim Page's Nam* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1983), 34.
11. Colonel John A. Feagin, 'The Soldier and His Wound in Vietnam', in *Surgery in Vietnam: Orthopedic Surgery*, edited by Col. Anthony Ballard et al. (Washington DC: Office of the Surgeon General and Center of Military History, United States Army, 1994), 1; Eiseman, 53.
12. John Ketwig, *And a Hard Rain Fell: A GI's True Story of the War in Vietnam* (New York: Macmillan, 1985), 30,29.
13. Bergerud, 13.
14. Robert Mason, *Chickenhawk* (1983; reprint, London: Corgi, 1989), 58.
15. Quoted in Al Santoli, *Everything We Had: An Oral History of the Vietnam War by Thirty-three American Soldiers Who Fought It* (New York: Random House, 1981), 142.

16. Loren Baritz, *Backfire: A History of How American Culture Led Us into Vietnam and Made Us Fight the Way We Did* (New York: Ballantine, 1985), 4.
17. W.D. Ehrhart, *Vietnam-Perkasie: A Combat Marine Memoir* (London: Jefferson & McFarland, 1983), 281, 20.
18. Tim O'Brien, *The Things They Carried* (London: Flamingo/ HarperCollins, 1991), 142-48.
19. *Ibid.*, 158.
20. *Ibid.*, 165
21. *Ibid.*, 151.
22. Elsewhere, in Richard Currey's fictional narrative *Fatal Light* (1988; reprint, London: Faber and Faber, 1989), a scenario is provided which again draws our attention to this issue (89-90). This incident attests to the horror/anxiety associated with the notion that the soldier's body may somehow become incorporated into the excremental space of the in-country milieu. This point will be taken up in Chapter 4.
23. O'Brien, *The Things...*, 144-48. Emphasis added.
24. Bergerud, 9.
25. Page, 34; Eiseman, 53. Eiseman's description here, with its reference to the 'spine' of the country, evidences a tendency prominent within the various discourses and narratives concerning the war to describe Vietnam in corporeal terms. I will be referring to this issue again as the analysis progresses.
26. Philip Caputo, *A Rumor of War* (1977; reprint, London: Arrow, 1978), 111.
27. *Ibid.*, 147.
28. Gustav Hasford, *The Short-Timers* (1979; revised edition, London: Bantam, 1987), 150, 149.
29. Caputo, 121.
30. Hasford, 151.
31. Tripp, 94-95, 101.
32. John M. Del Vecchio, *The 13<sup>th</sup> Valley* (1982; reprint, London: Sphere, 1987), 319.
33. O'Brien, *The Things...*, 88.
34. *Ibid.*, 94.
35. *Ibid.*, 98-99.
36. *Ibid.*, 107. As David R. Jarraway notes, in his quirky yet interesting article "Excremental Assault" in *Tim O'Brien: Trauma and Recovery in Vietnam War Literature*, *Modern Fiction Studies* 44.3 (Fall 1998), Mary Anne Bell 'becomes immersed in the excremental assault of the war first hand', for, as Rat Kiley notes, "She was up to her eyeballs in it" (700). At times my argument in this chapter intersects with issues raised within Jarraway's analysis. For example, he also pinpoints the 'shit field' incident as a key episode within O'Brien's text. However, his

discussion moves in a different direction to my own line of argument here and elsewhere, and hence his article provides a helpful counterpoint to my interpretation of such incidents within this chapter.

37. Tobey C. Herzog, *Vietnam War Stories: Innocence Lost* (London: Routledge, 1992), 30.
38. O'Brien, *The Things...*, 103-4.
39. Stephen Wright, *Meditations in Green* (London: Sphere, 1985), 43.
40. *Ibid.*, 63, 132.
41. *Ibid.*, 212, 276-8.
42. Susan Jeffords, *The Remasculinization of America: Gender and the Vietnam War* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989), 155. Emphasis added.
43. Sue Best, 'Sexualizing Space', in *Sexy Bodies: The Strange Carnalities of Feminism*, edited by Elizabeth Grosz and Elspeth Probyn (London: Routledge, 1995), 183.
44. O'Brien, *The Things...*, 216-17.
45. This image is unmistakably reminiscent of the Freudian notion of the 'vagina dentata', which is particularly apt here with regard to the representation of the in-country environment as a female— and hence hostile— body.
46. Best, 183.
47. Wright, 9.
48. Donald A. Schön, 'Generative Metaphor: A Perspective on Problem-Setting in Social Policy', in *Metaphor and Thought*, edited by Andrew Ortony (2nd edition; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993).
49. Hasford, 160.
50. For an in-depth analysis of instances of sexual violence carried out by US soldiers in-country see Jacqueline Lawson "She's a Pretty Woman...for a Gook": The Misogyny of the Vietnam War', in *Fourteen Landing Zones: Approaches to Vietnam War Literature*, edited by Philip K. Jason (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1991). Also of interest with regard to this issue are Cynthia J. Fuchs' "Vietnam and Sexual Violence": The Movie', and Milton J. Bates' 'Men, Women, and Vietnam', both in *America Rediscovered: Critical Essays on Literature and Film of the Vietnam War*, edited by Owen W. Gilman, Jr. and Lorrie Smith (New York: Garland, 1990). Also relevant are Ketwig (70-3), and Jonathan Shay (MD), *Achilles in Vietnam: Combat Trauma and the Undoing of Character* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1995), 134. In "She's a Pretty Woman...For a Gook", Lawson likens the US intervention in Vietnam to 'a protracted and brutal act of sexual intercourse' (24). Elsewhere, in *The Perfect War: Technowar in Vietnam* (Boston: Atlantic Monthly Press, 1986), James William Gibson points out an analogy drawn by President Johnson between the military strategy of 'limited' bombing in Vietnam and sexual

relations (329). For more detailed information on the use of chemical and biological weapons in Vietnam see Julian Perry Robinson and Milton Leitenberg, *The Problem of Chemical and Biological Warfare, Volume I: The Rise of CB Weapons*, SIPRI, Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (Stockholm: Almquist & Wiksell, 1971), and Paul Feeny with Jim Allaway, 'The Ecological Impact of the Air War', 1972, reprinted in *Vietnam Documents: American and Vietnamese Views of the War*, edited by George Katsiaficas (New York: M.E. Sharpe, 1992). For more recent updated information as to the ongoing after-effects of the American military's extensive use of Agent Orange upon the Vietnamese people and their environment see Cathy Scott-Clark and Adrian Levy, 'Spectre Orange', *Guardian Weekend Magazine*, 29<sup>th</sup> March 2003: 21-30.

51. Philip H. Melling, *Vietnam in American Literature* (Boston, Mass: Twayne, 1990), 146; David Welsh, 'Pacification in Vietnam', in *Crimes of War: A Legal, Political-Documentary, and Psychological Inquiry into the Responsibility of Leaders, Citizens, and Soldiers for Criminal Acts in War*, edited by Richard A. Falk, Gabriel Kolko, and Robert Jay Lifton (MD) (New York: Random House, 1971), 291, 303; Wright, 10.

52. Lloyd B. Lewis, *The Tainted War: Culture and Identity in Vietnam War Narratives* (Westport, CT: Greenwood, 1985), 69, 73.

53. Neel, xiv.

54. Baker, 73.

55. Herr, 19.

56. Attendance to physical needs was a perilous exercise, even when in a more secure area. Veteran James McDonough, in his memoir *Platoon Leader* (1985; reprint, California: Presidio, 1996), relates an episode in which a young Sergeant, about to sit upon an outdoor latrine, narrowly escapes being blown up by a booby trap which had been triggered to explode when the user reclosed the lid of the toilet (135).

57. Baker, 40.

58. O'Brien, *The Things...*, 11,17.

59. Lewis, 89-98.

60. Page, 34.

61. Lewis, 95.

62. O'Brien, *The Things...*, 200-201.

63. Caputo, 95.

64. Bergerud, 255.

65. Caputo, 288.

66. Lewis, 88-89.

67. Tim O'Brien, *If I Die in a Combat Zone* (1969; reprint, London: Flamingo/ Harper Collins, 1995), 126.
68. Herr, 19. As commentator Jonathan Shay notes, the 'freakyfluky' quality of instances of wounding here could also result, conversely, in individuals escaping serious injury through a bizarre stroke of luck (138-9).
69. Robert S. Laufer, Ellen Frey-Wouters and Mark S. Gallops, 'Traumatic Stressors in the Vietnam War and Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder', in *Trauma and its Wake (Vol. 1): The Study and Treatment of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder*, edited by Charles R. Figley (New York: Brunner/Mazel, 1985), 86; O'Brien *If I Die...*, 127.
70. Page, 34.
71. Gibson, 11.
72. Caputo, xiii.
73. *Ibid.*, 288-89.
74. Patrick O'Sullivan and Jesse W. Miller Jr., *The Geography of Warfare* (London: Croom Helm, 1983), 114.
75. Gibson, 122.
76. Baritz, 30.
77. Page, 34.
78. Quoted in Bergerud, 189-90.
79. Tobias Wolff, *In Pharaoh's Army: Memories of a Lost War* (London: Picador/Macmillan, 1995), 74.
80. As Bergerud states, these tunnels were particularly extensive and sophisticated in Cu Chi, the 25<sup>th</sup> Infantry's area of operations, posing a myriad of difficulties for US soldiers stationed in that locale, as he details in *Red Thunder, Tropic Lightning* (188-93).
81. McDonough, 166.
82. Ronald J. Glasser, *365 Days* (1971; reprint, New York: George Braziller, 1996), 227.
83. Shay, 225.
84. H. Palmer Hall, in his article 'The Helicopter and The Punji Stick: Central Symbols of the Vietnam War', in *America Rediscovered: Critical Essays on Literature and Film of the Vietnam War*, edited by Owen W. Gilman Jr. and Lorrie Smith (New York: Garland, 1990), notes a shift from the Viet Cong's extensive use of punji sticks prior to the rapid increase in numbers of US troops in Vietnam in 1965, towards their increasing utilisation of explosive mines in the subsequent years of the conflict. He writes:

The transformation occurs after the build up of American troops in 1965, but the explosive mine does not fully replace the punji stick as a symbol until the 1968 Tet Offensive when the Viet Cong and the

North Vietnamese Army demonstrated their ability to attack in force in many places in the country at the same time. From that point on the punji stick is effectively ended as a symbol. But its replacement serves the same symbolic purpose. (151)

85. Robert M. Hardaway (MD), 'Viet Nam Wound Analysis', *Journal of Trauma* 18.9 (1978), 637. The medical procedure of debridement— the removal of dead or infected tissue and foreign objects from wounds— will be referred to again in Chapter 3 as part of the analysis of the wounds received by US soldiers and the medical management of these injuries by the US military.

86. Palmer Hall, 151.

87. In the next chapter I will be discussing one aspect of the importance of the helicopter to the US military campaign in Vietnam— its role in medical evacuation. For more detailed information regarding the uses, benefits and shortcomings of the employment of the helicopter in-country, see Palmer Hall; Alasdair Spark, 'Flight Controls: The Social History of the Helicopter as a Symbol of Vietnam', in *Vietnam Images: War and Representation*, edited by Jeffrey Walsh and James Aulich (London: Macmillan, 1989); and, for a pilot's view, Robert Mason's *Chickenhawk*. Also of interest is journalist Michael Herr's effusive paean to the helicopter in *Dispatches*, where he remarks 'It made you feel safe, it made you feel Omni, but it was only a stunt, technology' (19).

88. Robert Jay Lifton (MD), *Home From the War. Vietnam Veterans: Neither Victims nor Executioners* (London: Wildwood House, 1974), 357.

89. Baker, 142-43. The NVA's utilisation of faecal matter as ammunition here links up with the tendency of the Vietnamese fighting forces to convert other sorts of detritus into weaponry, as discussed by commentator James R. Ebert. In his study *A Life in a Year: The American Infantryman in Vietnam, 1965-1972* (Novato, CA: Presidio, 1993), Ebert draws our attention to a US Army Film of 1965 which stated that '90 percent of the material used by the enemy in the construction of mines and booby traps was of American origin'. He continues: 'The enemy was quite adept at modifying that material so that the most innocent pieces of garbage were frequently altered with lethal effect' (195). Elsewhere, Bergerud remarks: 'A certain percentage of the bombs that were dropped and the artillery shells that were fired [by the US military] failed to detonate, and properly modified, they were natural raw materials for mines' (118).

90. While Bergerud— in keeping with my argument here— draws our attention to the material hardships suffered by American infantrymen and footsoldiers in Vietnam, he qualifies this with the following remarks: 'No Army in history has ever received the sort of creature comforts in the field that the U.S. Army did in Vietnam. When possible, hot meals were lifted out in helicopters. The choppers also delivered ice cream...' (277). James William Gibson also draws our attention to the ways in

which the US military moulded the in-country environment to their requirements, reducing the material deprivation of many US personnel stationed in Vietnam. In Chapter 7 of *The Perfect War: Technowar in Vietnam*, he highlights the construction of hi-tech base camp areas, the drilling of wells, the development of sewage systems, the introduction of air-conditioning and the provision of fresh food and vegetables for the garrison troops (which comprised roughly 90% of the US personnel stationed in-country). As I have already outlined in my Preface to this thesis, the majority of the narratives under discussion here have been produced by infantrymen and/or footsoldiers (the 10% of soldiers classified as combat personnel) and hence, at times, their representation of the in-country milieu may not be wholly characteristic of that experienced by the veteran population as a whole. Nevertheless, as is evident within this chapter and elsewhere in my study, certain key patterns 'cut across' the veteran population, to varying degrees.

91. Caputo, 65.

92. Mason, 245.

93. Ehrhart, 210. In his fictional narrative, *Close Quarters* (1977; reprint, London: Faber & Faber, 1987), Larry Heinemann often exploits the metaphorical resonances of the soiling of the soldier's body in-country, as the narrator's awareness of having been physically polluted by his encounter with the Vietnam milieu frequently shades into a sense of (irreversible) moral or ethical defilement (277, 280-81).

94. Caputo, 65, 61.

95. Gibson, 238-39. Gibson is quoting here from Lieutenant General Carroll H. Dunn, *Base Development in South Vietnam, 1965-1970*, Department of the Army Vietnam Studies Series (Washington DC: US Government Printing Office, 1972).

96. A more thorough analysis of such 'marginal' substances, what they represent, and how and why they must be avoided, will occur in the context of my comments concerning 'abjection' in the next chapter. At that point the discussion will refer to the works of Barbara Creed and Julia Kristeva. Interestingly, these anxieties concerning the 'boundedness' of one's own body in-country are also voiced by female veterans. A notable instance is detailed in Baker's *Nam*, which cites the following comments provided by a nurse: 'Every nurse's fear was being taken prisoner and not having any Tampax. You couldn't count on being in the jungle and using a leaf, because the jungle was defoliated [. . .] My flak jacket was so full of Tampax that nothing could have penetrated it' (109).

97. Ehrhart, 199.

98. Ebert, 134-35.

99. Richard Holmes, *Firing Line* (London: Penguin, 1986), 204-5.

100. For other notable examples of the anxiety and shame associated with losing control of bodily functions in response to instances of terror see Wolff (87); Ehrhart

(224); and O'Brien, *The Things...* (16), and *Going After Cacciato* (1978; reprint, London: Flamingo/ HarperCollins, 1988), 312.

101. Lifton, *Home From the War*, 360.

### Chapter 3: Bodily Wounds and Wounded Bodies

1. Elaine Scarry, *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), 63.

2. Eric M. Bergerud, *Red Thunder, Tropic Lightning: The World of a Combat Division in Vietnam* (New York: Penguin, 1994), 310.

3. Myra Macpherson, *Long Time Passing: Vietnam and the Haunted Generation* (1984; reprint, London: Sceptre/ Hodder and Stoughton, 1988), 528.

4. David Rosser-Owen, *Vietnam Weapons Handbook* (Wellingborough: Patrick Stephens/Thorsons, 1986), 30.

5. Major General Spurgeon Neel, *Medical Support of the US Army in Vietnam 1965-1970* (1973; reprint, Washington DC: Department of the Army, 1991), 53. With regard to the issue of the mechanics of wounding and the nature of the injuries caused by the M-16, my research unearthed an interesting anomaly. Philip Melling's *Vietnam in American Literature* (Boston, Mass.: Twayne, 1990), referring to Herman Rapaport's essay 'Vietnam: The Thousand Plateaus', in *The 60s Without Apology*, edited by Sohnya Sayres et al. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), states:

The bullet of an M-16 was designed to impact in such a way as to 'tone down' the reality of damage in the mind of the person who inflicted it. The bullet, says Herman Rapaport, 'tumbles when hitting the body, shearing off portions of flesh and bone. To be wounded by this bullet is to sustain extensive physical damage, but not so much that the body will never recover, not so much as to be "inhuman"'. The creating of an aesthetically acceptable wound distanced the soldier from the object of his attentions and obscured his knowledge of the consequence of his actions. (131-2)

Based on my own consultation of resource materials, it would appear that the lack of 'stopping power' of the M-16 bullet has been a source of ongoing concern for those who actually used the weapon both in Vietnam and more recently (see Rosser-Owen, 31). However, the majority of military-medical commentators focus upon the destructive capabilities of this weaponry and the difficulties they faced when treating such injuries, as further discussion will demonstrate.

6. N. M. Rich, E.V. Johnson, and F.C. Dimond Jr., 'Wounding power of missiles used in the Republic of Vietnam', quoted in Col. John A. Feagin, 'The Soldier and His Wound in Vietnam', in *Surgery in Vietnam: Orthopedic Surgery*, edited by Col. Anthony Ballard et al. (Washington DC: Office of the Surgeon General and Center of Military History, United States Army, 1994), 7.



7. Neel, 53.

8. According to statistics provided by Neel, wounds caused by small-arms fire fell from 42.7% of injuries recorded in June 1966 to 16% in June 1970, while the rate of 'fragment' (mine, booby trap, rocket, or mortar) injuries rose sharply from 49.6% to 80% during this period (Neel, 53). This general trend is reflected, to a lesser degree, in statistics for admissions to the Second Surgical Hospital (MA) in Lai Khe in 1969 provided by Lt. Wesley G. Byerly and Major Prabhakar D. Pendse in 'War Surgery in a Forward Surgical Hospital in Vietnam: A Continuing Report', *Military Medicine*, 143.3 (March 1971), 221-226.

9. Neel, 53.

10. Figures cited by Ronald D. Stewart, 'Prehospital Care', in *Trauma Care Systems: A Guide to Planning, Implementation, Operation and Evaluation*, edited by Richard H. Cales and Robert W. Heilig Jr. (Rockville MD: Aspen, 1986), 116.

11. Neel, 70.

12. Ibid., 49.

13. According to both Neel and B. Eiseman (MD)— in 'Combat Casualty Management in Vietnam', in *Journal of Trauma* 7.1 (1967)— this aggressive approach is reflected in the increased use by medical personnel in-country of laparotomy (defined by the Concise Oxford English Dictionary as 'a surgical incision into the abdominal cavity, for diagnosis or in preparation for major surgery' ((1911; revised tenth edition, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002)) 799):

Laparotomies were done "on suspicion"... in a zone where hitherto there was a degree of reluctance to operate even when abdominal penetration was certain. Primary repairs were performed on veins which had simply been ligated in earlier conflicts [ . . . ] (Neel, 57)

Regardless of the size or site of skin wound, any missile injury that possibly has violated the peritoneal cavity warrant[ed] formal laparotomy [ . . . ] Careful inspection [ . . . ] of even the remote reaches of viscera such as the posterior aspect of the duodenum, stomach and cecum, [were] required if there [was] any suspicion of injury [ . . . ] (Eiseman, 62)

14. Eiseman, 54.

15. Ibid., 60.

16. Philip Caputo, *A Rumor of War* (1977; reprint, London: Arrow, 1978), 128, 167.

17. Quoted in Wallace Terry, *Bloods: An Oral History of the Vietnam War by Black Veterans* (1984; reprint, New York: Ballantine Books, 1991), 54, 237.

18. Quoted in Terry, 54.

19. Col. Robert J. Ursano (MD) and James E. McCarroll, 'The Nature of a Traumatic Stressor: Handling Dead Bodies', in *The Journal of Nervous and Mental Disease* 178.6 (1990), 397-98.

20. Col. David R. Jones, 'Secondary Disaster Victims: The Emotional Effects of Recovering and Identifying Human Remains', in *American Journal of Psychiatry* 142.3 (March 1985), 303.
21. Caputo, 169-70.
22. Walter T. Davis, Jr., *Shattered Dream: America's Search for Its Soul* (Valley Forge, Pennsylvania: Trinity Press International, 1994), 90.
23. Quoted in Terry, 54.
24. Barbara Creed, 'Horror and the Carnavalesque', in *Fields of Vision: Essays in Film Studies, Visual Anthropology and Photography*, edited by Leslie Devereaux and Roger Hillman (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 136.
25. Quoted in James R. Ebert, *A Life in a Year: The American Infantryman in Vietnam, 1965-1972* (Novato, CA: Presidio, 1993), 144-45.
26. Beamon's remarks here again draw our attention to the conceptualisation of the body as a machine.
27. Quoted in Al Santoli, *Everything We Had: An Oral History of the Vietnam War by Thirty-three American Soldiers Who Fought It* (New York: Random House, 1981), 209, 211.
28. *Ibid.*, 3.
29. Bonnie L. Green, 'Defining Trauma: Terminology and Generic Stressor Dimensions', in *Journal of Applied Social Psychology*, 20.20 (1990), 1636. An earlier article directly focused upon Vietnam veterans by Green et al.— 'Multiple Diagnosis in Posttraumatic Stress Disorder: The Role of War Stressors', in *Journal of Nervous and Mental Disease* 177.6 (1989)— also suggests a direct link between exposure to death and injury when in-country and the later development of PTSD symptoms.
30. Kalf Tal, *Worlds of Hurt: Reading the Literatures of Trauma* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996).
31. Caputo, 128, 179.
32. Creed, 146.
33. Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, translated by Leon S. Roudiez (1980; reprint, New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), 53.
34. Quoted in Santoli, 39.
35. In keeping with my argument here, Walter T. Davis, Jr., maintains that the widespread use of expressions such as "It don't mean nothing" among US soldiers in response to instances of corporeal carnage 'signifies circuit overload, both a negation of all previous meaning and an excess of new meaning, a psychic numbing so profound that neither the words nor the will can be found to make sense of it' (112).
36. Robert Jay Lifton (MD), 'Absurd Technological Death', in *Crimes of War: A Legal, Political-Documentary, and Psychological Inquiry into the Responsibility of Leaders*,

- Citizens, and Soldiers for Criminal Acts in War*, edited by Richard A. Falk, Gabriel Kolko, and Robert Jay Lifton (MD) (New York: Random House, 1971), 559, 560.
37. Tim O'Brien, *The Things They Carried* (London: Flamingo/ HarperCollins, 1991), 16-17.
38. Stephen Howard (MD), 'The Vietnam Warrior: His Experience and Implications for Psychotherapy', in *American Journal of Psychotherapy* 30.1 (1976), 124.
39. In *The Body in Pain*, Elaine Scarry defines redescription as 'one of the linguistic paths by which injury disappears from view' (64). While this 'redescriptive' vocabulary, and the process of emotional numbing that it set in motion, may have enabled individuals to keep functioning within the in-country environment, theorists such as Robert Jay Lifton and Judith Lewis Herman have argued that, for the majority of participants, this was not ultimately a psychologically beneficial response. As Lifton argues in 'The Concept of the Survivor'— in *Survivors, Victims and Perpetrators: Essays on the Nazi Holocaust*, edited by Joel E. Dimsdale (Washington: Hemisphere, 1980)— 'psychic numbing could readily outlive its usefulness and give rise to later patterns of withdrawal, apathy, depression and despair' (121). Elsewhere, in *Trauma and Recovery* (1992; reprint, London: Pandora/ Rivers Oram Press, 1998), Judith Lewis Herman contends that such attempts to divert the effects or to submerge the memories of traumatic events are doomed to failure— 'Atrocities', she states, 'refuse to be buried', rather they tend to re- emerge in a destructive fashion (1). O'Brien's use of the term 'encyst' in the instance cited here would also seem to indicate that the repression of emotional responses to the sight of damaged bodies created long-term psychological problems.
40. O'Brien, *If I Die in a Combat Zone* (1969; reprint, London: Flamingo/ Harper Collins, 1995), 141; *The Things...*, 231.
41. Davis, 107.
42. 'Death and wounds are an inseparable part of battle', writes military historian Richard Holmes in *Firing Line* (London: Penguin, 1986). Chapter 5 of Holmes' study provides much material regarding the experience of confronting death and injury in a variety of combat contexts and he highlights several elements common to the responses such encounters provoke in those who witness them.
43. Lloyd B. Lewis, *The Tainted War: Culture and Identity in Vietnam War Narratives* (Westport, CT: Greenwood, 1985), 98.
44. This notion of 'making sense' of injuries will be explored in depth in the next chapter where I analyse the range of meanings pertaining to bodily wounds and wounded bodies in this context.
45. Lt. Richard Blanks, quoted in Bergerud, refers to an instance which underscores the contention that even an archetypal militarised body is, essentially, a fragile entity.

Here Blanks is confronted by the corpse of a soldier he had known, whom he describes as follows:

He was a black soldier, an incredible physical specimen. Obviously an athlete, he was well over 6 feet tall and muscular. His body was lying in this shed, perfect in every way, with no flaws except this small hole in his chest where the bullet had hit him. But he was lying there dead, waiting for graves registration to come pick him up. (218).

46. Caputo, 166.
47. *Ibid.*, 167.
48. For more detailed discussion of these aspects of Western medical theory and practice see: Drew Leder, 'Medicine and Paradigms of Embodiment', in *The Journal of Medicine and Philosophy* 9 (1984), 29-43; 'Introduction' and 'A Tale of Two Bodies: The Cartesian Corpse and the Lived Body', in *The Body in Medical Thought and Practice*, edited by Drew Leder (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1992); and Bryan S. Turner, *Medical Power and Social Knowledge* (1987; reprint, London: Sage, 1991) and *Regulating Bodies: Essays in Medical Sociology* (London: Routledge, 1992).
49. Col. Kenneth G. Swan— an experienced surgeon and Vietnam combat medical veteran— asserts that these techniques (alongside triage, which will be discussed later) are essential elements of successful combat casualty medical care in his article, written with K.G. Swan Jr., 'Triage: The Past Revisited', in *Military Medicine* 161 (August 1996), 448.
50. John Parrish (MD), *Journal of a Plague Year* (1972; reprint, Glasgow: Fontana/Collins, 1979), 35-36.
51. *Ibid.*, 134. *Emphasis added.*
52. This issue is discussed in depth within Kovic's *Born on the Fourth of July* (1976), as later sections of the analysis will detail.
53. Parrish, 210-12, 159.
54. Mark Baker, *Nam: The Vietnam War in the Words of the Men and Women Who Fought There* (1981; reprint, London: Abacus/Sphere, 1982), 183.
55. Parrish, 213.
56. Baker, 39.
57. Parrish, 216.
58. *Ibid.*, 97-98.
59. Katharyn Kennedy (MD) et al., 'Triage: Techniques and Applications in Decisionmaking', in *Annals of Emergency Medicine* 28.2 (August 1996), 136.
60. Joshua S. Vayer, Raymond P. Ten Eyck (MD), Michael L. Cowan (MD), 'New Concepts in Triage', in *Annals of Emergency Medicine* 15.8 (August 1986), 109.
61. Swan and Swan, 451.
62. Kennedy et al., 137.
63. Swan and Swan, 448.

64. Parrish, 215-17.
65. *Ibid.*, 46.
66. Ronald J. Glasser (MD), *365 Days* (1971; reprint, New York: George Braziller, 1996), 5.
67. Again, see Leder and Turner. Also see Arthur W. Frank, *The Wounded Storyteller: Body, Illness and Ethics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995); and Michel Foucault, *Madness and Civilization* (1961), translated by Richard Howard, and *Discipline and Punish* (1975), translator unknown, sections of which are excerpted in Michel Foucault, *The Foucault Reader: An Introduction to Foucault's Thought*, edited by Paul Rabinow (London: Penguin, 1991).
68. See Turner, *Medical Power...*, 9; and *Regulating Bodies...*, 24.
69. Glasser, 5.
70. Parrish, 156.
71. *Ibid.*, 283.
72. The link that I make here between trauma and narrativisation is an issue that will be the subject of more detailed analysis in Chapter 5.
73. Tal, 140.
74. Ron Kovic, *Born on the Fourth of July* (1976; reprint, London: Corgi, 1990), 13-15.
75. *Ibid.*, 16.
76. *Ibid.*, 48, 58, 66, 59.
77. Garfinkel, quoted in Turner, *Medical Power...*, 58.
78. Since the late 1990s, much attention has been paid in the (British) media to issues such as overcrowding in hospitals and to highly publicised 'scandals' like the death of patients due to medical 'errors' and the removal of organs from the deceased without relatives' permission. More recently, this attention has focused upon the prevalence of bacteria and viruses within the hospital environment (particularly the so-called 'super strains' of bacteria, i.e. those resistant to antibiotics and standard sterilisation procedures) and the threat that this represents to patients' health. In the light of these various concerns, the hospital is no longer always perceived as the orderly, hygienic and 'contained' environment that it was once believed to be.
79. Kovic, 31.
80. *Ibid.*, 28.
81. *Ibid.*, 99.
82. Terrence Des Pres, *The Survivor: An Anatomy of Life in the Death Camps* (1976; reprint, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980). As Chapter 1 indicated, many veteran authors also use the concentration camp experience as a point of reference when describing military training. As I suggested, such uses of this parallel are somewhat problematic for— to paraphrase my earlier points— the deprivations endured by camp inmates were intended to destroy their minds and bodies permanently, while the use of

'stripping' procedures in training served instead merely to prepare the recruit for mental and physical 'reconstruction'. Kovic's use of the comparison here to describe his experiences of hospitalisation is, arguably, more apt. The link that he makes is intended to highlight the fact that this specific type of institution— the veterans' hospital— functions as an incarcerating, rather than a curative, environment. Moreover, as I argue in this chapter, *Born on the Fourth of July* alerts us to the manner in which contact with bodily excretions is psychologically problematic on various levels.

83. Kovic, 99.
84. *Ibid.*, 29.
85. *Ibid.* Foucault, 'Complete and Austere Institutions', excerpted in *The Foucault Reader*, edited by Paul Rabinow, 217.
86. Kovic, 30-31.
87. *Ibid.*, 34-35.
88. *Ibid.*, 100.
89. *Ibid.*, 101.
90. *Ibid.*, 90.
91. *Ibid.*, 127.
92. *Ibid.*, 30-31, 89.
93. *Ibid.*, 27-28.
94. *Ibid.*, 78.
95. Frank, *The Wounded Storyteller*, 30.
96. *Ibid.*, 31.
97. Kovic, 35.
98. *Ibid.*, 88-89.
99. Antony Easthope, *What A Man's Gotta Do: The Masculine Myth in Popular Culture* (Boston, MA: Unwin Hyman, 1990), 53.
100. Kovic, 89.
101. Easthope, 52.
102. Recent critics have raised issues regarding the shortcomings of *Born on the Fourth of July* as a representation of (male) disability, as I will discuss in Chapter 4.
103. Kovic, 128.
104. Elsewhere in *Born on the Fourth of July*, Kovic visits the 'Village of the Sun', a resort in Mexico designed for disabled veterans, whose brochure was displayed at the veterans' hospital. While Kovic found this environment more comfortable than the hospital— many of the veterans living at the resort, he suggests, intended to stay there for the rest of their lives— it can be suggested that this served, again, as a (more benign form of) 'holding facility'.
105. Kovic, 100.

#### **Chapter 4: Bodies as Evidence: The Interpretation of Corporeal Damage In-Country and 'Back Home'**

1. Mark Seltzer, *Serial Killers: Death and Life in America's Wound Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1998), 278.
2. Ron Kovic, *Born on the Fourth of July* (1976; reprint, London: Corgi, 1990), 30.
3. Antony Easthope, *What A Man's Gotta Do: The Masculine Myth in Popular Culture* (Boston, MA: Unwin Hyman, 1990), 41.
4. Lloyd B. Lewis, *The Tainted War: Culture and Identity in Vietnam War Narratives* (Westport, CT: Greenwood, 1985), 69.
5. *Ibid.*, 98; Philip Caputo, *A Rumor of War* (1977; reprint, London: Arrow, 1978), xvii.
6. Robert Jay Lifton (MD), *Home From the War: Vietnam Veterans: Neither Victims nor Executioners* (London: Wildwood House, 1974), 59. If, as Elaine Scarry contends in *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), all wars are 'about' injuring—wounding, she argues, 'is the relentless object of all military activity' (72-73)—the magnified focus upon the production of high body counts here served less as the provision of a new goal for the military mission in Vietnam, and more as a form of 'return' to the fundamental purpose of war.
7. Caputo, 168.
8. *Ibid.* The other designations are: (US soldiers) Killed in Action, Wounded in Action, Non-Hostile Casualties, and then the figures for Viet Cong Killed in Action, Wounded in Action and Prisoners of War.
9. *Ibid.*, 168-169.
10. Interestingly, Scarry cites the example of triage (358, footnote 9), which ties in with some of the issues raised in my previous chapter.
11. James William Gibson, *The Perfect War: Technowar in Vietnam* (Boston: Atlantic Monthly Press, 1986), 124. Gibson argues that this conversion of instances of wounding and death into mathematical variables aided pro-war propaganda by making America's involvement in Vietnam seem rational (and hence legitimate).
12. Caputo, 172.
13. *Ibid.*
14. *Ibid.*, 126.
15. Gibson, 126. It is highly significant that, as Gibson states, 'Severed limbs signified a whole body for counting purposes' (126). I will return to this issue later in the discussion.
16. *Ibid.*
17. The 'doctoring' of statistics pertaining to the US war effort extended beyond the fabrication of body counts and kill ratios. In 'The Uncounted Vietcong: How the Military Cooked the Books', Walter and Miriam Schneir comment on issues raised by 'The

Uncounted Enemy: A Vietnam Deception', a documentary exposé aired by CBS News in January 1982. The authors unearth much evidence here in support of the programme's main contention, namely that key military and government officials (General Westmoreland being singled out as the main offender) conspired to systematically under-report the strength of the Vietnamese fighting force so as to create and maintain the illusion that progress was being made in Vietnam as a result of the American military intervention (*The Nation*, May 12<sup>th</sup> 1984: 570-576).

18. Robert Mason, *Chickenhawk* (1983; reprint, London: Corgi, 1989), 293.

19. Stephen Wright, *Meditations in Green* (London: Sphere, 1985), 30.

20. *Ibid.*

21. Larry Heinemann, *Close Quarters* (1977; reprint, London: Faber & Faber, 1987), 4-5.

22. Caputo, xvii.

23. Lewis, 101.

24. Quoted in Michael Maclear, *Vietnam: The Ten Thousand Day War* (London: Thames/Methuen, 1982), 21. James William Gibson provides some more examples of the sorts of 'competitions' that proliferated as a means to encourage greater 'productivity', particularly among lower echelons of military personnel (see Chapter 5 of *The Perfect War: Technowar in Vietnam*, 'Technowar at Ground Level').

25. Caputo, xvii.

26. Here, as elsewhere, the use of the term 'atrocities' by veterans, critics and commentators has several problematic implications. While some sort of working definition of the expression is necessary, this can risk suggesting that the war was, on the whole, legitimate, and that high-profile events such as the My Lai massacre were isolated cases of brutality. Those who employ the term when discussing the US intervention in Vietnam tend to use it as a means of drawing our attention to one or more of the following: the My Lai episode; the indiscriminate murder of civilians in general; the desecration and/or mutilation of Vietnamese bodies/body parts; the maltreatment, rape and/or torture of prisoners and/or civilians; and the use of chemical warfare.

27. Lifton, *Home From the War*, 59.

28. Lewis, 101-109; Robert Jay Lifton (MD), 'Absurd Technological Death', in *Crimes of War: A Legal, Political-Documetary, and Psychological Inquiry into the Responsibility of Leaders, Citizens, and Soldiers for Criminal Acts in War*, edited by Richard A. Falk, Gabriel Kolko, and Robert Jay Lifton (MD) (New York: Random House, 1971), 23-27.

29. Lifton, *Home From the War*, 64-65.

30. The operation of the imagery of the hunt here is in keeping with Schön's theory of 'generative metaphor', which I referred to in Chapter 2 (Donald A. Schön, 'Generative



Metaphor: A Perspective on Problem-Setting in Social Policy', in *Metaphor and Thought*, edited by Andrew Ortony, 2nd edition ((Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993))). As Lifton acknowledges in *Home From the War*, the imagery of the deer-hunt— a frequent allusion among veterans who seek to describe the in-country experience— characterises the 'enemy' as vulnerable, 'relatively gentle creatures', which is at odds with their depiction as 'tough', 'determined', 'strong' and 'brutal' elsewhere (45).

31. Lewis, 101. Elsewhere, in *The Remasculinization of America: Gender and the Vietnam War* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989), Susan Jeffords cites a grisly instance in which a group of US soldiers, impelled by the 'body count itch', murder an elderly Vietnamese civilian for the purpose of obtaining his ears so they can claim a kill, and thus 'save face' among the other units in the battalion (8).
32. Quoted in Gibson, 126-127.
33. *Ibid.*
34. The notion of *intrinsic* value with regard to the bodies of the dead and wounded appears to conflict with (or even, at times, to be negated by) the idea of *value* in the economic sense— this calls to mind the military-medical use of the triage procedure as a means to maximise resources in this context, as discussed in the previous chapter.
35. Gibson, 126.
36. Jeffords, 14.
37. John Parrish (MD), *Journal of a Plague Year* (1972; reprint, Glasgow: Fontana/Collins, 1979), 197.
38. Michael Bellamy, 'Carnival and Carnage: Falling Like Rock Stars and Second Lieutenants', in *America Rediscovered: Critical Essays on Literature and Film of the Vietnam War*, edited by Owen W. Gilman, Jr. and Lorrie Smith (New York: Garland, 1990).
39. *Ibid.*, 11, 20.
40. Tim O'Brien, *The Things They Carried* (London: Flamingo/HarperCollins, 1991), 143-148.
41. Barbara Creed, 'Horror and the Carnavalesque', in *Fields of Vision: Essays in Film Studies, Visual Anthropology and Photography*, edited by Leslie Devereaux and Roger Hillman (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 132.
42. Joanna Bourke, *An Intimate History of Killing: Face-To-Face Killing in Twentieth-Century Warfare* (London: Granta Books, 1999), 37, 39. Among soldiers in Korea and Vietnam, Bourke notes, 'the bodily parts most favoured were ears, teeth and fingers but the collection of heads, penises, hands and toes were all reported' (39).
43. These factors are outlined by Shephard as follows:

The enemy was everywhere, yet impossible to identify. They were not perceived as "human". The pattern of fighting put a heavy responsibility on junior officers who frequently lacked the authority or experience to

control their men. At the same time, the frustrations of the war created a pressure to act, to do something; and often gave dominance within the unit to individuals prepared to shoot first and ask questions later. Finally, young, poorly trained soldiers were given terrible firepower.

- (Ben Shephard, *A War of Nerves: Soldiers and Psychiatrists, 1914-1994* ((London: Pimlico, 2002)), 370-371).
44. Quoted in Bellamy, 20.
  45. Bellamy, 20.
  46. Creed, 134.
  47. Quoted in Bellamy, 20.
  48. Tim O'Brien, *If I Die in a Combat Zone* (1969; reprint, London: Flamingo/ Harper Collins, 1995), 129.
  49. *Ibid.*, 130.
  50. Walter T. Davis, Jr., *Shattered Dream: America's Search for Its Soul* (Valley Forge, Pennsylvania: Trinity Press International, 1994), 107.
  51. *Ibid.*, 90.
  52. Gustav Hasford, *The Short-Timers* (1979; revised edition, London: Bantam, 1987), 73.
  53. Stephen Crane's *The Red Badge of Courage* (1895) is a frequent point of reference both for critics discussing the narratives of the Vietnam War, and also for theorists dealing with the issue of wounding and injury within American culture more generally.
  54. Bellamy, 20.
  55. Quoted in Bellamy, 20-21.
  56. Easthope, 65.
  57. Klaus Theweleit, *Male Fantasies, Volume 2: Male Bodies: Psychoanalyzing the White Terror*, translated by Stephen Conway in collaboration with Erica Carter and Chris Turner (1978; reprint, Cambridge: Polity Press, 1989), 19.
  58. Jonathan Shay (MD), *Achilles in Vietnam: Combat Trauma and the Undoing of Character* (New York: Touchstone/Simon & Schuster, 1995), 84. Emphasis added.
  59. Lifton, *Home From the War*, 67.
  60. Quoted in Mark Baker, *Nam: The Vietnam War in the Words of the Men and Women Who Fought There* (1981; reprint, London: Abacus/Sphere, 1982), 58.
  61. Bellamy, 21.
  62. Mark Seltzer, *Bodies and Machines* (New York: Routledge, 1992), 162-163.
  63. Quoted in Baker, 58. Emphasis added.
  64. Wright, 73.
  65. Georges Bataille, *Erotism: Death and Sensuality*, translated by Mary Dalwood (1957; reprint, San Francisco: City Lights, 1986), 82.
  66. Lifton, *Home From the War*, 37.

67. Ibid., 104-105.
68. O'Brien, *If I Die...*, 88.
69. Hasford, 96, 121.
70. Bourke, 39. Elsewhere, in *A Life in a Year: The American Infantryman in Vietnam, 1965-1972* (Novato, CA: Presidio, 1993), James R. Ebert examines the motives cited by American personnel for engaging in acts of mutilation, remarking upon the 'use' of severed body parts as amulets, and the desecration of corpses as 'warnings' to the enemy (287-91).
71. Ibid., 40.
72. Lifton, 'Absurd Technological Death', 423.
73. Both Kalif Tal— in *Worlds of Hurt: Reading the Literatures of Trauma* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996)— and Judith Lewis Herman— in *Trauma and Recovery* (1992; reprint, London: Pandora/Rivers Oram Press, 1998)— draw our attention to the fact that trauma victims frequently exhibit similarly conflicting impulses, namely the desire to 'bury'/hide the trauma, versus the urge to proclaim it. This is an issue that will be addressed in Chapter 5.
74. Lifton, *Home From the War*, 100. See also Herman, 54. Similarly, Shay draws our attention to the guilt and remorse frequently exhibited by those soldiers who engaged in 'berserking' behaviours whilst in-country, as, in retrospect, they describe their actions— and, by implication, themselves — as beastlike in their lack /lapse of restraint (82-83).
75. Robert S. Laufer, Ellen Frey-Wouters, and Mark S. Gallops, 'Traumatic Stressors in the Vietnam War and Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder', in *Trauma and its Wake (Vol. 1): The Study and Treatment of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder*, edited by Charles R. Figley (New York: Brunner/Mazel, 1985), 78. See also: Robert S. Laufer, Elizabeth Brett, and M.S. Gallops, 'Symptom Patterns Associated With Posttraumatic Stress Disorder Among Vietnam Veterans Exposed to War Trauma', *American Journal of Psychiatry* 142.11 (1985): 1304-1311; and Naomi Breslau and Glenn C. Davis (MD), 'Posttraumatic Stress Disorder: The Etiological Specificity of Wartime Stressors', *American Journal of Psychiatry* 144.5 (1987): 578-83.
76. Lifton, *Home From the War*, 38.
77. Shephard, 371-372.
78. Lifton, *Home From the War*, 39.
79. Herman, 78.
80. Caputo, 4.
81. Bourke, 37.
82. Ibid., 371.
83. Ibid., 41-42.
84. Davis, 80.
85. Bellamy, 21.

86. Davis, 91.
87. *Ibid.*, 23. Davis's analysis views storytelling as an attempt to 'make sense' of the Vietnam experience (5), an issue that will be discussed in Chapter 5.
88. Jacqueline E. Lawson, "'Old Kids": The Adolescent Experience in the Nonfiction Narratives of the Vietnam War', in *Search and Clear: Critical Responses to the Selected Literature and Films of the Vietnam War*, edited by William J. Searle (Bowling Green, OH: Bowling Green State University Press, 1988), 31.
89. Gibson, 111, 120.
90. John Ketwig, *And a Hard Rain Fell: A GI's True Story of the War in Vietnam* (New York: Macmillan, 1985), 297. Ketwig extends his remarks to the treatment of hospitalised veterans (referring to that endured by Ron Kovic in particular): 'once their usefulness has been "used up", the VA hospitals to which they are committed are a disgrace', he writes (298). His comments here highlight the disturbing ramifications of the utilitarian standard for judging the value of the militarised body. Elsewhere Mark Baker also emphasises the expendability of US personnel deployed to Vietnam, whom he describes as 'disposable soldiers'. Baker's comments again refer to the notion of waste as he draws our attention to the predicament of veterans following the war, many of whom, he argues, were 'treated like [. . .] human refuse' upon their return to the US (209).
91. Caputo, 12.
92. Hasford, 18.
93. Richard Currey, *Fatal Light* (1988; reprint, London: Faber and Faber, 1989), 90.
94. Scarry, 119.
95. *Ibid.*, 130, 137.
96. *Ibid.*, 119.
97. Chaim Shatan, 'Afterword— Who Can Take Away the Grief Of A Wound?', in *The Vietnam Veteran Redefined: Fact and Fiction*, edited by Ghislaine Boulanger and Charles Kadushin (Hillsdale NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 1986), 176. Robert Jay Lifton draws our attention to the fact that the night before the My Lai massacre the 'combat briefing' for the company involved incorporated a memorial ceremony for several of their soldiers who had 'died grotesquely' in mine explosions. During the course of this event, Lifton writes, 'The men were exhorted to get back at the enemy for the sake of (to bear witness to) those dead buddies [. . .]'. See Lifton, 'The Concept of the Survivor', in *Survivors, Victims and Perpetrators: Essays on the Nazi Holocaust*, edited by Joel E. Dimsdale (MD) (Washington: Hemisphere, 1980), 124.
98. Shatan, 176.
99. Ronald J. Glasser (MD), *365 Days* (1971; reprint, New York: George Braziller, 1996), 260-261.

100. Quoted in Al Santoli, *Everything We Had: An Oral History of the Vietnam War by Thirty-three American Soldiers Who Fought It* (New York: Random House, 1981), 129.
101. Quoted in Wallace Terry, *Bloods: An Oral History of the Vietnam War by Black Veterans* (1984; reprint, New York: Ballantine Books, 1991), 121.
102. Glasser, 261.
103. Lifton, 'The Concept of the Survivor', 115. Also of relevance here are Seltzer's discussion of the denial of death in Western culture (*Serial Killers*, 36-37), and Richard Holmes' remarks on the disparity between Anglo-American and Spanish-American cultures in their treatment of death in *Firing Line* (London: Penguin, 1986), 30.
104. Lifton, *Home From the War*, 368.
105. Glasser, 267.
106. Heinemann, 214.
107. Baker, 66.
108. Kovic, 78.
109. *Ibid.*, 79.
110. *Ibid.*, 80-81.
111. *Ibid.*, 82.
112. Lindsay French, 'The political economy of injury and compassion: amputees on the Thai-Cambodia border', in *Embodiment and Experience: The Existential Ground of Culture and Self*, edited by Thomas J. Csordas (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 74.
113. Creed, 127, 128.
114. Kovic, 102, 128.
115. *Ibid.*, 114.
116. *Ibid.*, 128.
117. *Ibid.*, 129.
118. Paul McIlvenny, 'The Disabled Male Body "Writes/Draws Back": Graphic Fictions of Masculinity in the Autobiographical Comic *The Spiral Cage*', in *Revealing Male Bodies*, edited by Nancy Tuana et al. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2002). Also of interest here is Tom Shakespeare's 'When is a Man Not a Man? When He's Disabled', in *Working With Men For Change*, edited by Jim Wild (London: UCL Press, 1999). Significantly both authors make reference to the film version of Kovic's narrative, and their discussions of the limited representation of physical impairment therein are also highly relevant to the written text. Shakespeare's extensive discussion of the issue of sexuality is particularly useful here, for he draws our attention to the restricted notion of male sexuality in Western culture. He writes, '[The] narrow notion of normal sexuality— which is focused primarily on the male erection— is detrimental to the sexual and psychological health of both men and women', and, moreover, 'is particularly oppressive and undermining of disabled men' (51-52).

119. Lawson, "Old Kids", 34.
120. Quoted in Terry, 121.
121. Herman Rapaport, 'Vietnam: The Thousand Plateaus', in *The 60s Without Apology*, edited by Sohnya Sayres et al. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), 145.
122. Quoted in Baker, 198.
123. Rapaport, 145.
124. Kovic, 31.
125. *Ibid.*, 128.
126. Robert Jay Lifton (MD), 'Victims and Executioners', in *Crimes of War*, edited by Richard A. Falk, Gabriel Kolko, and Robert Jay Lifton, 424.

### **Chapter 5: Writing and/as Recovery**

1. Ron Kovic, *Born on the Fourth of July* (1976; reprint, London: Corgi, 1990), 163.
2. Tim O'Brien, *The Things They Carried* (London: Flamingo/ HarperCollins, 1991), 221.
3. Arthur W. Frank, *The Wounded Storyteller: Body, Illness and Ethics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995).
4. In addition to Frank, see also Drew Leder, 'Medicine and Paradigms of Embodiment', in *The Journal of Medicine and Philosophy* 9 (1984): 29-43; 'Introduction' and 'A Tale of Two Bodies: The Cartesian Corpse and the Lived Body', in *The Body in Medical Thought and Practice*, edited by Drew Leder (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1992); and Bryan S. Turner, *Medical Power and Social Knowledge* (1987; reprint, London: Sage, 1991) and *Regulating Bodies: Essays in Medical Sociology* (London: Routledge, 1992).
5. Frank, *The Wounded Storyteller*, 8.
6. Frank elaborates:
 

Members of the remission society include those who have had almost any cancer, those living in cardiac recovery programs, diabetics, those whose allergies and environmental sensitivities require dietary and other self-monitoring, those with prostheses and mechanical body regulators, the chronically ill, the disabled, those "recovering" from abuses and addictions, and for all these people, the families that share the worries and daily triumph of staying well. (1995:8)
7. Frank, *The Wounded Storyteller*, 9.
8. *Ibid.*, 9-10.
9. *Ibid.*, 12-13.
10. Kovic, 127. Kovic's sense of existing in 'limbo' operates in three distinct, yet related, ways. As an individual, he experiences his own embodiment as being compromised as a result of his injuries. On a social level, Kovic emphasises the

manner in which his interactions with others have been irrevocably altered as a result of his disability *in itself*. In addition to this, he attributes this social marginalisation to his status as a (disabled) Vietnam veteran.

11. Frank, *The Wounded Storyteller*, 3. Emphasis added.

12. *Ibid.*, 27.

13. *Ibid.*, 53.

14. *Ibid.*, 54

15. *Ibid.*, 55.

16. The connection between contingent body and disrupted narrative here calls to mind a section in William Burroughs' *Naked Lunch*— a text which addresses the topic of unruly bodies on a myriad of levels— where Burroughs likens his disjointed prose to a body out of control: 'this book spill [sic] off the page in all directions, kaleidoscope of vistas, medley of tunes and street noises, farts and riot yipes [. . .]' (1959; reprint, London: Paladin, 1992), 180.

17. Frank, *The Wounded Storyteller*, xii-xiii.

18. *Ibid.*, 136.

19. Kali Tal, *Worlds of Hurt: Reading the Literatures of Trauma* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 7. As Tal and others have emphasised, however, once a survivor's story is 'out there' (whether in textual or verbal form) there is frequently a struggle over the interpretation of that story— particularly if the story that is told 'threatens the status quo'. 'If survivors retain control over the interpretation of their trauma, they can sometimes force a shift in the social and political structure', writes Tal. If, on the other hand, 'the dominant culture manages to appropriate the trauma and codify it in its own terms', she contends, 'the status quo will remain unchanged' (1996:7). On a metatextual level, the alteration and adjustment of Kovic's story in its transition from text to movie has been interpreted by several critics as an example of the dominant culture's appropriation and revision of Kovic's experience for its own ends. As Tal has stated, 'The struggle to fix the floating signifier of "Vietnam" is necessarily a contemporary political struggle' (1996:61). See also Tal (1996:11).

20. Philip H. Melling, *Vietnam in American Literature* (Boston, Mass.: Twayne, 1990), 56.

21. *Ibid.*, 58.

22. *Ibid.*, 56.

23. *Ibid.*, 57.

24. *Ibid.*

25. Walter T. Davis, Jr., *Shattered Dream: America's Search for Its Soul* (Valley Forge, Pennsylvania: Trinity Press International, 1994), 147. It should be noted that other veterans have contrasted their own experiences of wounding and treatment with

that of Ron Kovic. For an example, see Eric M. Bergerud, *Red Thunder, Tropic Lightning: The World of a Combat Division in Vietnam* (New York: Penguin, 1994), 200.

26. Kovic, 142.

27. *Ibid.*, 129.

28. For other authors, such as Tim O'Brien, the issue of narrativisation (and its implications) is a central component of the text itself, as further sections of the chapter will evidence.

29. The only hint that we are given that Kovic has 'moved on' in any real sense from the situation and state of mind described in the text is to be found in the following comments on the 'Acknowledgements' page:

And finally, thanks to Connie Panzarino— beautiful, strong, and brave woman— who believed in me and the book years before it had been written. She stood by me like no one else, listening through nights and days, caring and loving, understanding and encouraging, wiping the tears from my eyes. She was like a light shining from the darkness of what seemed to be an endless storm.

While no additional information is provided concerning either Ms Panzarino or the nature of their relationship, these comments may indicate that Kovic has been able to forge a nurturing relationship with a woman on some level, something which— as he repeatedly states during his narrative— he longed for, but felt was beyond him.

30. Frank, *The Wounded Storyteller*, 59.

31. Kovic, 30-31.

32. *Ibid.*, 115.

33. *Ibid.*, 170.

34. *Ibid.*, 171-72.

35. Jacqueline E. Lawson, "'Old Kids": The Adolescent Experience in the Nonfiction Narratives of the Vietnam War', in *Search and Clear: Critical Responses to the Selected Literature and Films of the Vietnam War*, edited by William J. Searle (Bowling Green, OH: Bowling Green State University Press, 1988), 26.

36. Stephen Howard (MD), 'The Vietnam Warrior: His Experience and Implications for Psychotherapy', in *American Journal of Psychotherapy*, 30 (1976), 125.

37. James R. Ebert, *A Life in a Year: The American Infantryman in Vietnam, 1965-1972* (Novato, CA: Presidio, 1993), 144.

38. Philip Caputo, *A Rumor of War* (1977; reprint, London: Arrow, 1978), 162.

39. *Ibid.*, 159, 162.

40. Patrick J. Bracken, *Trauma: Culture, Meaning and Philosophy* (London: Whurr Publishers, 2002), 59.

41. Judith Lewis Herman, *Trauma and Recovery* (1992; reprint, London: Pandora/Rivers Oram Press, 1998).

42. Jonathan Shay (MD), *Achilles in Vietnam: Combat Trauma and the Undoing of Character* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1995), 193.



43. Elaine Scarry, *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), 80.
44. *Ibid.*, 72, 65.
45. Hence Norman Bowker (of O'Brien's *The Things They Carried*) acknowledges that his story of the 'shit field' may have to remain untold, for 'nobody in town wanted to know about the terrible stink' (148).
46. Herman, 1.
47. Kovic, 128.
48. Herman, 1.
49. Tal, 121.
50. Alexander C. Mc Farlane and Giovanni De Girolamo, 'The Nature of Traumatic Stressors and the Epidemiology of Posttraumatic Reactions', in *Traumatic Stress: The Effects of Overwhelming Experience on Mind, Body, and Society*, edited by Bessel A. van der Kolk, Alexander C. Mc Farlane, and Lars Weisaeth (New York: The Guilford Press, 1996), 131.
51. Herman, 51.
52. Kovic, 115.
53. Tal, 121.
54. Wallace Terry, *Bloods: An Oral History of the Vietnam War by Black Veterans* (1984; reprint, New York: Ballantine Books, 1991), 121.
55. Tal, 16.
56. Caputo, 159.
57. Tal, 122.
58. Caputo, 167. See also John Parrish (MD), *Journal of a Plague Year* (1972; reprint, Glasgow: Fontana/Collins, 1979).
59. As I have suggested elsewhere, however, the use of such emotional distancing techniques could not completely shield an individual from the psychological impact of repeated confrontations with mangled and ruptured bodies.
60. Tim O'Brien, *If I Die in a Combat Zone* (1969; reprint, London: Flamingo/ Harper Collins, 1995), 128-29.
61. *Ibid.*, 129.
62. *Ibid.*, 125.
63. Gustav Hasford, *The Short-Timers* (1979; revised edition, London: Bantam, 1987), 73.
64. Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, translated by Leon S. Roudiez (1980; reprint, New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), 3.
65. Hasford, 102.
66. Scarry, 65.
67. Hasford, 118.

68. Matthew Stewart, 'Stephen Wright's Style in *Meditations in Green*', in *Critique* 34.2 (1993), 126.
69. Stephen Wright, *Meditations in Green* (London: Sphere, 1985), 12.
70. *Ibid.*, 26.
71. Gordon O. Taylor, 'American Personal Narrative of the War in Vietnam', in *American Literature* 52.2 (1980), 295.
72. The mutuality of interest between Herman and O'Brien will become increasingly evident as my analysis progresses. It is borne out not only by the fact that Herman employs examples from O'Brien's *The Things They Carried* at several points in *Trauma and Recovery* (see pages 38 and 53), but also by O'Brien's quoting from *Trauma and Recovery* in another of his narratives, *In the Lake of the Woods* (1994; London: Flamingo/HarperCollins, 1995). This latter text also addresses the nature of trauma, again with reference to the in-country experience and its repercussions (see pages 27, 29, 140, 144).
73. Herman, 37.
74. *Ibid.*, 37-38.
75. Bessel A. van der Kolk and Alexander C. McFarlane, 'The Black Hole of Trauma', in *Traumatic Stress: The Effects of Overwhelming Experience on Mind, Body, and Society*, edited by Bessel A. van der Kolk, Alexander C. McFarlane, and Lars Weisaeth, 8.
76. Kovic, 158.
77. *Ibid.*, 163. As I indicated in Chapter 3, this linkage between corporeal repair and sense-making is made more explicit in John Parrish (MD), *Journal of a Plague Year* (1972; reprint, Glasgow: Fontana/Collins, 1979), 134.
78. Kovic, 89.
79. Frank, *The Wounded Storyteller*, 55.
80. Herman, 183.
81. O'Brien, *The Things They Carried*, 157.
82. Tim O'Brien, *Going After Cacciato* (1978; reprint, London: Flamingo/HarperCollins, 1988). O'Brien's remarks are quoted in Eric James Schroeder, 'Two Interviews: Talks with Tim O'Brien and Robert Stone', in *Modern Fiction Studies* 30.1 (1984), 148.
83. *Ibid.*, 148, 147.
84. O'Brien, *The Things They Carried*, 157.
85. *Ibid.*
86. Quoted in Schroeder, 'Two Interviews...', 160.
87. Tal, 122. *Emphasis added.*
88. O'Brien, *The Things They Carried*, 159.
89. Quoted in Schroeder, 'Two Interviews...', 141.
90. O'Brien, *The Things They Carried*, 158.

91. Ibid., 156-58.
92. Ibid., 158.
93. Cathy Caruth, 'Introduction' to Part II: 'Recapturing the Past', in *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*, edited, with introductions, by Cathy Caruth (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995), 151.
94. O'Brien, *The Things They Carried*, 159. Emphasis added.
95. Ibid., 158.
96. Ibid., 159.
97. The visit to Vietnam that O'Brien describes in the 'Field Trip' section is, apparently, a fabrication. In an extensive study of O'Brien's work, critic and Vietnam veteran Mark A. Heberle notes that 'O'Brien has no daughter; no actual trip took place until 1994; and instead of providing solace, that visit reopened and extended O'Brien's trauma— if we are to trust the testimony of [O'Brien's 1994 essay] "The Vietnam in Me" as being more factual than the fiction of "Field Trip".' See Mark A. Heberle, *A Trauma Artist: Tim O'Brien and the Fiction of Vietnam* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2001), 31-32.
98. O'Brien, *The Things They Carried*, 185-86.
99. Ibid., 186-87.
100. Eric James Schroeder, *Vietnam, We've All Been There: Interviews with American Writers* (Westport, Connecticut: Praeger, 1992), 7.
101. David Aberbach, *Surviving Trauma: Loss, Literature and Psychoanalysis* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989), 3.
102. Quoted in Schroeder, 'Two Interviews...', 139.
103. Tal has also foregrounded the importance of writing in engendering 'the reclamation of emotion' necessary to move beyond the state of 'alienation' characteristic of the condition of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (1996:137).
104. Aberbach, 3.
105. O'Brien, *The Things They Carried*, 234.
106. Ibid.
107. Quoted in Schroeder, 'Two Interviews...', 144.
108. O'Brien, *The Things They Carried*, 234, 235.
109. Aberbach, 6, 8.
110. Ibid., 7.
111. O'Brien, *The Things They Carried*, 235.
112. Ibid., 221.
113. Aberbach, 8.
114. Robert Jay Lifton (MD), *Home From the War: Vietnam Veterans: Neither Victims nor Executioners* (London: Wildwood House, 1974), 368-69.
115. Ibid., 369.

116. Walter T. Davis, Jr., *Shattered Dream: America's Search for Its Soul* (Valley Forge, Pennsylvania: Trinity Press International, 1994), 147.

## Afterword

1. Ben Shephard, *A War of Nerves: Soldiers and Psychiatrists, 1914-1994* (London: Pimlico, 2002), 375.
  2. Lloyd B. Lewis, *The Tainted War: Culture and Identity in Vietnam War Narratives* (Westport, CT: Greenwood, 1985), 153.
  3. Susan Jeffords, *The Remasculinization of America: Gender and the Vietnam War* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989), xi.
  4. Rick Berg and John Carlos Rowe, 'Introduction: The Vietnam War and American Memory', in *The Vietnam War and American Culture*, edited by Berg and Rowe (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), 1, 2, 10.
  5. *Ibid.*, 10.
  6. Lewis, 173.
  7. James William Gibson, *The Perfect War: Technowar in Vietnam* (Boston: Atlantic Monthly Press, 1986), 8.
  8. Quoted in Berg and Rowe, 10.
  9. In *The Remasculinization of America...*, Jeffords defines this as '[. . .] the large-scale renegotiation and regeneration of the interests, values, and projects of patriarchy now taking place in U.S. social relations' (xi).
  10. In Chapter 3, I detailed the surgical procedure of debridement, the metaphorical import of which is outlined by Jeffords as follows:
 

The image of the Vietnam veteran in the United States can be said to have undergone a process of cultural debriding in the whirlpool of ideological structures, in which "foreign" matter was removed from the "healthy tissue" of the American body.
- See Susan Jeffords, 'Debriding Vietnam: The Resurrection of the White American Male', *Feminist Studies* 14.3 (Fall, 1988), 525.
11. *Ibid.*, 539.
  12. Michael Evans and Ian Brodie, 'Unknown warrior is named', *The Times*, January 21<sup>st</sup> 1998, 13.
  13. John H. Cushman Jr., 'Remains of Vietnam Unknown are Disinterred', *New York Times*, May 15<sup>th</sup> 1998 (Late edition, Section A), 22.
  14. Steven Lee Myers, "'Unknown" Soldier Now Has a Name', *New York Times*, June 30<sup>th</sup> 1998 (Late edition, Section A), 1.
  15. Myers, 'Cohen Sees No Further Unknowns for Tomb', *New York Times*, July 1<sup>st</sup> 1998 (Late edition, Section A), 14. For example, see Myers, 'Ideas & Trends; Laying to

Rest the Last of the Unknown Soldiers', *New York Times*, May 3<sup>rd</sup> 1998 (Late edition, Section 4), 5.

16. (NYT) author unknown, 'From the Tomb of Unknown To Grave of Lieut. Blassie', *New York Times*, July 12<sup>th</sup> 1998 (Late edition, Section 1), 14.

17. David Stout, 'Tomb to Note Vietnam M.I.A.'s', *New York Times*, June 18<sup>th</sup> 1999 (Late edition, Section A), 32.

18. The figure for those listed missing in Vietnam is subject to alteration as, over time, their status is reclassified by the military to 'Killed in Action'. Howell cites the number of MIA soldiers as 2,546. Expressed as a percentage of total losses, in comparison to those of previous wars, she gives the following figures: just over 5% for Vietnam, 25% for the Korean War, and just over 22% for World War II. See Amanda Howell, 'Lost Boys and Angry Ghouls: Vietnam's Undead', in Thomas Foster, Carol Siegel and Ellen E. Berry, *Bodies of Writing, Bodies in Performance* (New York: New York University Press, 1996), 302. Interestingly, Steven Lee Myers cites the figure of the missing as 2,087 in the *New York Times* in July of 1998. See 'No Longer Unknown', *New York Times*, July 5<sup>th</sup> 1998 (Late edition, Section 4), 2.

19. Howell refers to statistics from a survey undertaken by the *Wall Street Journal* in 1991, in which 69% of respondents expressed their belief in the continued existence of American prisoners of war in Southeast Asia (302); 328, note 5.

20. Howell, 297-98.

21. Gibson, 8.

22. Tim O'Brien, *The Things They Carried* (London: Flamingo/ HarperCollins, 1991) 144.

23. Lewis, 173.

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