aftermath

an anthology of post-vietnam fiction

DONALD ANDERSON, EDITOR

FOREWORD BY GEORGE C. HERRING, author of *America's Longest War*

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Henry Holt and Company
New York

Henry Holt and Company, Inc.
Publishers since 1866
115 West 18th Street
New York, New York 10011

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Published in Canada by Fitzhenry & Whiteside Ltd.,
195 Allstate Parkway, Markham, Ontario L3R 4T8.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Aftermath : an anthology of post-Vietnam fiction / Donald Anderson,
editor ; foreword by George C. Herring. — 1st ed.
p. cm.
1. Vietnamese Conflict, 1961–1975—Veterans—United States—
Fiction. 2. Vietnamese Conflict, 1961–1975—Influence—Fiction.
3. American fiction—20th century. 4. Short stories, American.
I. Anderson, Donald.
PS648.V5A69 1995 4-33932
813'.5409355—dc20 CIP

ISBN 0-8050-3655-5
ISBN 0-8050-3656-3 (An Owl Book: pbk.)

Henry Holt books are available for special promotions
and premiums. For details contact: Director, Special Markets.

First Edition—1995

Designed by Betty Lew

Printed in the United States of America
All first editions are printed on acid-free paper. ∞

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2
1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2
(pbk.)

Acknowledgments appear on pages 271–272
as an extension of the copyright page.

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for anne, marnie, stephen, and joseph

foreword

By George C. Herring

The Vietnam War produced a voluminous, varied, and, in many cases, distinguished literature. Soldiers-turned-authors have written important works of fiction ranging from Tim O'Brien's surrealistic *Going After Cacciato* to John M. Del Vecchio's epic *The 13th Valley*. Veterans have produced countless memoirs, running the gamut from Philip Caputo's classic story of disillusionment, *A Rumor of War,* to Frederick Downs's gung ho *The Killing Zone*. It would be necessary to go back at least to World War I to find a literature dealing with the personal experience of war comparable in size, introspectiveness, and sheer emotional power to that of Vietnam.

The reasons for that phenomenon can be found in the nature of the war and the people who fought it. The Americans who served in Vietnam were on the average seven years younger than their World War II counterparts. Members of the "baby

boomer" generation, they were raised on tales of American heroes and heroism in the Second World War, fed to them most prominently in a steady diet of John Wayne movies. They were driven to enlist by fears of the communist menace—the dominant feature of American life in the 1950s—and inspired to serve by the eloquence of John F. Kennedy. At least in the early stages, they went to war willingly, even eagerly, certain of the rightness of their cause, expectant of gratitude from those they went to save.

What they found was quite unlike the vision that drew them to Vietnam. By the time Americans were there in large numbers, the war had already raged for nearly twenty years, first as a nationalist struggle against French colonialism, subsequently as a determined effort on the part of Vietnamese revolutionaries to unite a country arbitrarily divided by the 1954 Geneva Conference. By 1965, National Liberation Front insurgents had mounted a full-scale revolution that threatened to bring down the American-backed South Vietnamese government. North Vietnam, under the leadership of the charismatic Ho Chi Minh, had fully committed itself to the southern insurgency, dispatching men and supplies and then sizeable detachments of its own army along the fabled Ho Chi Minh Trail into South Vietnam.

The war proved extremely difficult for Americans to fight. It was waged in a climate and on terrain that were singularly inhospitable: thick jungles; foreboding swamps and paddies; rugged mountains; heat that could "kill a man, bake his brains, or wring the sweat from him until he died of exhaustion," Philip Caputo tells us.

At least in its initial stages, it was a people's war, where people rather than territory were the primary objective. But Americans as individuals or as a nation could never really bridge the huge cultural gap that separated them from all Vietnamese. Not knowing the language or culture, they did not know what the people felt or even how to tell friend from foe. "Maybe the dinks

got things mixed up," one of novelist Tim O'Brien's bewildered GIs comments after a seemingly friendly farmer bows and smiles and points the Americans straight into a minefield. "Maybe they cry when they're happy and smile when they're sad."

Recalling the emotionless response of a group of peasants when their homes were destroyed by an American company, Caputo notes that they did nothing "and I hated them for it. Their apparent indifference made me feel indifferent." The cultural gap produced cynicism and even hatred toward those people the Americans were trying to help. "We're fighting, dying, for a people who resent our being here," one GI wrote home. The cultural gap also led soldiers to question their own goals and produced a great deal of moral confusion among many of those fighting the war and among many people at home.

It was a war without distinct battle lines or fixed objectives, where traditional concepts of victory and defeat were blurred. It was, Caputo writes, a "formless war against a formless enemy who evaporated into the morning jungle mists only to materialize in some unexpected place," a type of war particularly difficult for Americans, schooled in more traditional ways, to fight. And there was always the gnawing question, first raised by John Kennedy himself—how do we tell if we are winning? The only answer that could be devised was the notorious body count, as grim and corrupting as it was ultimately unreliable as an index of success.

It was a limited war in terms of both ends and means, and that brought special frustrations for those who fought it. The United States never set out to "win" the war in the conventional sense, in part because it was thought that winning might provoke a larger war, even a nuclear conflagration. As a consequence, the U.S. did not use all the resources at its disposal and fought under restrictive rules of engagement. The result was extremely frustrating for those who could not shoot unless fired upon, who could not pursue the enemy into sanctuaries in Laos and Cambodia, and who therefore sometimes felt they were fighting with

one hand tied behind their backs. It was even more frustrating after 1968, when the United States stopped bombing North Vietnam and began withdrawing its troops even as the war raged on.

The impact of the war was equally profound on the home-front. With the exception of its own civil war a century earlier, the Vietnam War was also America's most divisive. It occurred in a time of social upheaval, when Americans were questioning their values and institutions like in few other periods in their history. It occurred in a time of generational strife. It divided neighbors and colleagues, churches and campuses, class against class. As the war dragged on and the protest mounted and the divisions deepened, the internal turmoil itself contributed to a war-weariness that came to pervade the nation and feed a desire, even among those who supported it, to get out of Vietnam regardless of the cost and consequences.

The outcome of the war was the most traumatic of all those the United States has fought. Americans had become so accustomed to success that they took it for granted. Failure came hard. It came especially hard in the case of Vietnam, where American armies were never really defeated and the nation was frustrated by a small, presumably backward, and—perhaps worse—Oriental enemy. The fall of Saigon in 1975 thus came as a rude shock to the national psyche, leaving the nation afflicted with much repressed anger and deep, unresolved divisions.

Those Americans who fought in the war were in many ways the primary victims of the nation's conflicting emotions. Younger than veterans of earlier wars, having endured a conflict far more complex and confusing, they were whisked home virtually overnight by the miracles of the jet age to a nation that had grown hostile to the war and indifferent to their plight. Some returning soldiers were made to feel guilt for the nation's moral transgressions; others, responsibility for national failure. Most veterans simply met silence. Forced to turn inward, many of them grew

profoundly distrustful of the government that had sent them to war and deeply resentful of the nation's seeming ingratitude for their sacrifices. The great majority of veterans adjusted, although often with difficulty, but many experienced problems with drugs and alcohol, joblessness and broken homes. Many also suffered from what came to be called post-traumatic stress disorder.

Selecting from the fiction borne of this wrenching period in the life of our country, Donald Anderson's *Aftermath* tells the stories not only of men who fought the war, but also of those who stayed behind. His selections bring out, in his own words, the "memory and love and resentment and loss and disbelief and defiance and humiliation and earnestness and blame and shame and blood and sacrifice and courage and sorrow." Perhaps better than any other art form, fiction such as is gathered here helps to probe the essence of the human experience in a war that was the defining event for an entire generation of Americans.

confessions of a noncombatant

An Introduction by Donald Anderson

The closest I got to Vietnam was Beale Air Force Base near Yuba City, California: the placid, rural town where Juan Corona courted, then hacked and buried all those faceless, nameless, randomly hapless male fruit-pickers in the local peach orchards. The nation picked up this body count too—all the victims past draft age—the count beginning at one, rising to two, then nine, eighteen, twenty-four, twenty-five. Corona's work became the grisliest mass murder known to date in the United States. The nation gasped at this reasonless act, drew back.

The week the twenty-five orchard graves were unearthed along the Yuba City banks of the Feather River, twenty-nine GIs were killed by a North Vietnamese rocket at Charlie Two, a tiny firebase near the Demilitarized Zone. The average weekly U.S. death toll that year (1971) in Vietnam was forty-nine, down from a weekly average of eighty-one the year before.

Stationed at Beale, I began to meet people who had served or were on their way to serve in Vietnam. For one, there was the marine corporal in a night class I enrolled in at Yuba City Community College. In this class, we read and wrote stories and poems. The corporal had come home from the war, mustered out of the Corps after a voluntary second tour. In class, he read aloud harsh, unrhymed, unmetered lines he wrote about death and Vietnamese women. "YEA, THOUGH I WALK THROUGH THE VALLEY OF THE SHADOW OF DEATH, I FEAR NO EVIL . . . 'CUZ I'M THE MEANEST MOTHERFUCKER IN THE VALLEY," was the silk-screened quote that read split on the front and the back of a T-shirt the corporal had made and brought home. Every time I saw him he was wearing the shirt. In this shirt he bestrode the campus. If you gazed his way, he would thump his chest and grunt. He was looking for fights.

Unlike the marine, I'd not stood in battle, but Vietnam was the reason I was on his campus. I joined the air force to avoid the draft—*the army tour of Vietnam*—my choices ruled by the distant battle, its awful, final toll of fifty-eight thousand dead, two hundred thousand wounded. Two hundred fifty-eight thousand is twelve one-hundredths of one percent of the U.S. Vietnam-era population, yet how often I meet someone who knows someone who died in Vietnam or who came home in some way damaged. What happens to soldiers in wars happens also to the rippling circles of those who know or love them.

My father's best friend died in World War II at Pearl Harbor. As I heard things, my father's friend Sidney had been selected, then situated in Hawaii in 1941: the nation's sole and brave, though inadequate, defense. In time, I learned it was Sidney *and* the U.S.S. *Arizona* that had been struck. *Attack!: An Island Boy's View From Oahu* was the title of a child's account of the Japanese sneak bombing I'd read in junior high. I read the boy's story, then

discussed it with my father. A different Sidney emerged: a smaller figure, but a more significant loss. This revised view introduced me to the place of the common person in history. My father had let me know that the sweeping facts of history are accurately written not in the omniscient, third-person plural, but in the singular first.

Sometime during the nine minutes after the U.S.S. *Arizona* was initially struck, my father's best friend, Sidney, died. "Drowned," guessed my father. At 8:10 A.M., December 7, 1941, a 1,760-pound bomb pierced the deck of the ship to explode a fuel tank. Seven seconds later, when the forward ammunition magazines blew (1.7 million pounds of ignited gunpowder), heads and other human parts and random metal debris rained down on the sailors and the seemingly steelier decks of adjacent ships. The few *Arizona* crewmen to survive swam to shore naked, their clothes stripped from them by the force of the ship's detonations. By 8:19, the *Arizona* had settled to the bottom of Wai Momi, as the early Hawaiians had titled the "pearl waters" of the Harbor.

All you find above water of the *Arizona* today is its anchor, displayed conspicuously ashore. Cast in 1911 in Chester, Pennsylvania, and weighing in at 19,585 pounds, the *Arizona*'s dry anchor is exhibited near where you catch the National Park Service's one-hundred-fifty-person boat shuttle for transport to the strictly managed fifteen-minute tours above the submerged wreck. Aboard the U.S.S. *Arizona* Memorial—a concrete-and-steel floating bridge—you can study the sunken ship: a gray and algaed lump, its stern and bow marked with Day-Glo paint. There's a peacock iridescence to the water, for the *Arizona* has bled oil for fifty years. Above the *Arizona*, a wall of white marble stands engraved: a permanent listing of the dead. You can find and touch names.

In 1940, my father and Sidney were twenty years old. In Butte, Montana, the navy was teaming up pals, promising

buddies assignments aboard the same ships. But my father was unable to join Sidney. A wood chip caught in the eye in a wood lot mishap blinded my father enough to disqualify him for war. He served (wearing safety glasses) in copper mines in Montana.

The loss of battle in World War II always seemed to me a galling and double privation for my father: he not only lost his best friend, he also missed his one good chance for war. Not one to dodge fights or forget friends, my father long spoke of both losses. But if he'd been accepted for enlistment as he'd wished, my father would have sailed with Sidney. Whatever would have happened to my father aboard the *Arizona* would have happened to him more than four years before my birth.

Although some twenty ships were destroyed or damaged (as well as most of the parked aircraft at all nearby airfields), the deaths inflicted upon the *Arizona* account for half of all U.S. casualties at Pearl Harbor. Aboard this one vessel, 1,170 men died. Of this number, 1,102 remain entombed—below water, below deck. The average age of the ship's dead was twenty-three. Among the ship's victims were twenty-two sets of brothers and uncounted sets of friends. Seventy percent of the ship's crew perished.

A summer of '46 birth, I supposed myself an emphatic consequence of armistice, my father and mother properly delaying my birth until their upheaved world became safe—*for me*. This dreamy version of my parents' decision about my conception seemed to me sound and true for years. Actual military events in Korea and French Vietnam and Hungary and Poland and the Suez seemed distant and unmournful as I confronted them from within the high-windowed walls of my schools through my *Weekly Reader*.

Sputnik, though, and the discovered presence of Soviet ballistic missiles in nearby Cuba quailed me. Weapons which could climb to space to descend unimpeded to earthbound

targets pressured up dread, particularly when my father pondered aloud (during family meals) the constructing of an underground shelter, then actually began storing water in emptied Clorox jugs and storing canned and dried foods in an interior room in our basement, along with a box of bullets and bottles of aspirin and vitamin C.

At school there were inflexible drills during which we ducked under our desks (pushing our own heads with our own hands toward the floor), as if the drawn blinds and our desks and our suppliant positions would have saved us from nuclear doom.

Then: 1963. John Kennedy's dead. Eight months later, in what seems an unknowable world, I register (within five working days of my eighteenth birthday) with the Selective Service. With that act, I become aware of a new factor in the situation of my possibly being in uniform: the United States is involved in Vietnam. Before Kennedy died, I find, he had positioned "advisers"—fifteen thousand—in Vietnam and had authorized hundreds of millions of dollars in aid. Kennedy? I mused. Our Jack Kennedy in Vietnam? Had he thought he'd found a way to respond in safety to the hectoring Khrushchev?

Now, one month after I register with the Selective Service, U.S. aircraft begin bombing North Vietnam. Within another seven months (March 8, 1965), U.S. Marines land at DaNang. By December 1965, there are 200,000 American soldiers on the ground in Vietnam, a figure that takes but one year to double. By the next Christmas, December 1967, there are 500,000 U.S. soldiers assigned to Vietnam—*twelve times* the population of any city I've ever yet lived in, *fifty times* the ten thousand students enrolled at the state university I then attend.

1968. The U.S.S. *Pueblo* is seized by the North Koreans. The Tet Offensive begins. The chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff announces the request for additional soldiers (200,000 *more* is what Westmoreland asks his boss for). Martin Luther King, Jr., is murdered. Robert Kennedy is murdered. Fear and

peril feel yeasty, viral. A small victory: Westmoreland is refused the request for 200,000 new soldiers, though he does command, by year's end, 540,000—the additional forty thousand representing for me every resident of the town I was raised in. Nonetheless, this reduction in U.S. military reinforcements I accept as personal relief, for as 1968 closes, there is hard talk of a draft lottery and termination of all college deferments.

Draft lottery "number one" for the 1970 drawing is July 9: *my* birthday. I immediately join Air Force ROTC. My plan is to stay clear of the army (more soldiers being buried than airmen). And if forced to Vietnam, I mean to be forced there as a lieutenant—an *officer* in charge of his future. The month I sign up for the Air Force Reserve Officer Training Corps, the Pentagon releases to the public news of thirty-four deaths in two hundred nine incidents in Vietnam of officer "fraggings"—that is, U.S. officers being attacked by their own soldiers. (Attacks by their own troops on officers in time of war reached unprecedented proportions in Vietnam, with some historians reporting as many as two thousand incidents a year.)

During my time in Air Force ROTC, more officers are killed by their own soldiers. Four students are shot to death at Kent State. William Calley is tried and convicted. D.C. is marched upon by unhappy citizens. *The New York Times* begins publishing the Pentagon Papers.

All the time I was enrolled in ROTC, I believed I had, in an acceptable way, dodged war. But when I received my first ROTC check ($100 a month), I felt bothered enough to donate the sum to the American Red Cross. But I needed the money, so after giving away the first check, I began to keep them. I did, though, donate blood every six weeks or so when the Red Cross set up to collect in the gym. All-Service ROTC classrooms were housed in the same building as the gym, and everyone knew the blood collected was being shipped to Southeast Asia. I donated the blood (drank the Tang, ate the Oreos), and tried not to chafe at

the Marine ROTC midshipmen who would arrive in noisy squads, an enthusiastic arrangement which allowed for competition as to which midshipman could fill his blood bag soonest. These embryo marines brought handballs to squeeze and clipboards and charts and stopwatches. I worried for the marine midshipmen then, as I would worry for them now: they could hardly wait to give blood.

After classroom military training, I'm commissioned: a newly minted air force second lieutenant. It is July 14, 1971. Not lost on me is that on this date, French peasants stormed the Bastille. One hundred eighty-two years later, I review *my* standing: I'm *on* active military duty, but *not* in Vietnam; I'm *air force*, not army; and, in particular, *this*: in Vietnam, U.S. forces are cut to two hundred thousand. Of course, as I know now, when I reported in for active duty, we were less than a year away from the arrests at Watergate, and less than two years away from the important date of March 29, 1973: the day U.S. ground troops leave Vietnam.

Because I'd served a few years as a church missionary before attending college, I was older than my college peers. What I failed to grasp when, in my panic, I contracted with the air force was that the draft lottery dates drawn applied primarily to *that* year's (1970's) newly turned nineteen-year-old males. I turned, that summer, twenty-four, and could have completed school and soon, especially with the war winding down, moved past the specified draft-age window (nineteen-to-twenty-five-year-olds). I'd been born on July 9 all right, but July 9, *1946*, not *1951*. I joined the air force because I misinterpreted what the lottery meant for me—an error I didn't discover until years after the war.

About halfway through the poetry class at Yuba City Community College, the marine corporal died while driving his car: a gruesome solo wreck. He'd been drinking because a friend had been