Vietnam Narratives and the Collective Memory of the Vietnam War, by John A. Wood

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have given greater attention to formatting and editing to improve its structure and eliminate typographical errors that distract the reader. In particular, the intersection of long quotations from other authors sometimes confuses the narrative; perhaps some of these longer passages could have been placed in an appendix so the authors’ narrative would not be interrupted. Last, some of the additional essays by other authors do not seem to fit within the theme of the book. However, these shortcomings need to be taken in context, given the nature of the book and its intended audience. Readers should keep in mind that the work is intended to be neither a definitive history nor an academic book, so they should not expect it to engage with the academic literature or offer extensive footnoting. But for its intended audience and modest ambitions, it does succeed in bringing a valuable perspective with a great deal of personal experience to the reader in an approachable and readable format. It will be of use to readers who want more anecdotal details of the history of naval operations and the naval cultures of India and Pakistan, and those who want a short overview of the naval aspects of the conflicts in question.

PATRICK BRATTON


More than forty years after the last U.S. combat troops departed Vietnam in 1973, the conflict looms large in American popular culture and memory. Vivid depictions of guerrilla warfare, antiwar protests, and psychologically troubled veterans proliferate in print and film. This was not always the case, however. Silence followed in the immediate aftermath of the Vietnam War as veterans and civilians alike grappled to forge meaning from the long, costly intervention and ultimate American defeat. The arrival of veteran-authored memoirs in the late 1970s and the 1980s reignited popular interest in the war and inspired numerous others to follow suit. In subsequent decades, the gritty authenticity of these best-selling narratives, written by “those who were there,” profoundly shaped American collective memory and historical discourses about the war. John A. Wood’s Vietnam Narratives and the Collective Memory of the Vietnam War aims to expose myriad misconceptions that have developed as a result. Undertaking a comprehensive analysis of the best-known Vietnam veteran memoirs, Wood delineates the accuracies, omissions, and miscues inherent in the genre to ascertain its overall influence on American understanding of the war. His methodology centers on the collective analysis of fifty-eight Vietnam veteran memoirs and oral histories published between 1967 and 2005. He supplements this primary set of texts with films, newspapers, U.S. government studies, historical scholarship, and personal accounts from Vietnamese civilians, African Americans, women veterans, and other less prominent authors. Wood’s primary argument is that veteran narratives are subject to the properties and limitations of memory. Based on personal recollection usually written long after the events in question, memoirs necessarily provide a fragmentary and biased perspective.
Seven chapters ranging in topic from author demographics to race, sex, and postwar life illustrate this point. Examining the backgrounds of the most prominent authors, chapter 1 generates a demographic profile for the typical Vietnam-veteran memoirist: a college-educated, white, male officer. Although enlisted personnel tended to be younger and more-diverse working-class men, Wood astutely notes that most veteran-writers were low-ranking officers whose combat experiences were not only similar to but representative of those of the men they commanded. Chapter 2 delves into the authorial ambivalence common to many veteran narratives, which simultaneously disparage the military mission and condemn Vietnamese civilians as duplicitous enemy collaborators and greedy opportunists. Wood attempts to rehabilitate popular perception of the Vietnamese by justifying their behaviors as the desperate actions of the inhabitants of a war-ravaged nation. Observing a conspicuous absence of racial tensions in the best-known Vietnam memoirs, chapter 3 foregrounds the narratives of nonwhite veterans as a race-centric “countermemory” of the Vietnam War. Wood’s analysis reveals two competing paradigms: authors either highlight racial cooperation and pride in the combat performance of their particular ethnic groups or they underscore incidents of white racism and express a separatist racial ideology derived from the Black Power movement. Women and sexuality are the focus of chapter 4, which concedes that male soldiers generally behaved in a sexist manner in their interactions with Asian and American women in Vietnam. Wood attributes the prevailing misogynist attitude of American servicemen to mainstream and military cultures that emphasized sex and promoted a general hostility toward women. Chapter 5 debunks prevailing myths about veterans’ homecomings and postwar lives: first, that Vietnam veterans suffered from post-traumatic stress disorder at a greater rate than soldiers who survived earlier wars; second, that Vietnam veterans literally were spat on by an ungrateful American public on their return home. Chapter 6 underscores the ambivalent political sentiment common to Vietnam veteran memoirs and concludes that such characterizations accurately reflected the views expressed in U.S. government opinion polls. The final chapter tracks numerous similarities between Vietnam memoirs and narratives produced by veterans of other American wars, arguing that cross narrative parallels reflect a consistent demographic among authors as well as the fact that “combat soldiers’ wartime experiences have not changed in many fundamental ways since at least the 1940s” (p. 109).

Wood’s desire to present a comprehensive analysis of the genre has produced a volume that is both more superficial and more repetitive than necessary. Wood also overlooks the ways that memoirs as a genre guide veterans’ selection of stories to include. Memories are at once distilled to a carefully curated collection, embellished with expository detail and context, and stitched together to form a compelling narrative arc. Vietnam veteran narratives not only inspired and made acceptable “uncensored” accounts but provided a model and template for the types of stories that should be featured. Noncombatant veteran memoirs, for example, represent a potentially rich, untapped vein of information for scholars but almost
certainly lack the high-intensity combat usually considered “worthy” of retelling. Although Wood's research is voluminous, it relies heavily on published materials. Archival records and Vietnamese-language sources would strengthen an already insightful analysis of American veteran narratives and their imprint on popular perception of the war. Moreover, Wood's reliance on previous scholars' works undercuts his oft-repeated claim that the book offers an overdue corrective to existing scholarship. Indeed, this slender volume is directed not only to the casual reader but to the professional historian. According to Wood, Vietnam veteran memoirs have received “inadequate treatment” by literary scholars and historians, who generally consider only a small sample of texts and fail to distinguish fiction from nonfiction narratives. He further charges that few military historians scrutinize veteran-authored texts. Yet Wood's fundamental premise that this book “is a work of history, but it does not treat veteran memoirs as sources that can be straightforwardly mined for information” belies a naive understanding of professional historical practice (p. 5). Any responsible scholar approaches her sources—archival and secondary—with a professionally critical eye.

Even so, this book would be an excellent addition to an undergraduate military history curriculum. Wood's clear and impressive synthesis of historical and literary scholarship provides a useful introduction to the critical study of Vietnam veteran memoirs. Interested readers will want to supplement Wood's book with fine-grain examinations such as David Kieran's *Forever Vietnam: How a Divisive War Changed American Public Memory*, Thomas Myers's *Walking Point: American Narratives of Vietnam*, and Jerry Lembcke's *The Spitting Image: Myth, Memory, and the Legacy of Vietnam*.

BREANNE ROBERTSON


Although arguably not a very enticing title for American naval professionals, this small, hardback book is nonetheless well worth their time. The author's aim is to illustrate the contribution that the maritime service can make to a nation's foreign policy in peacetime, and in particular to the health of its shipbuilding and defense exports. While the book obviously showcases the fortunes of twentieth-century Great Britain, the points it makes are broadly transferable and increasingly relevant in this era of growing emphasis on seamless intergovernmental cooperation. Besides, the subject matter is refreshing: How often among naval monographs do you find a top-notch scholarly investigation into that most mundane and yet ubiquitous naval mission of “presence” or “showing the flag”? Naval officers are quick to extol the virtues of these activities in conversation, but few actually can substantiate their claims. This book goes some way toward filling that gap.

The book has its origins in a PhD dissertation on the history of the relationship between the Royal Navy and its Chilean counterpart. As such it limits the focus to a manageable analysis of the presence...