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Source: *The Journal of American History*, Sep., 2000, Vol. 87, No. 2 (Sep., 2000), pp. 593-601

Published by: Oxford University Press on behalf of Organization of American Historians

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/2568766>

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# Voices from Vietnam: Veterans' Oral Histories in the Classroom

Patrick Hagopian

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Vietnam was full of strange stories, some improbable, some well beyond that, but the stories that will last forever are those that swirl back and forth across the border between trivia and bedlam, the mad and the mundane.

—Tim O'Brien, *The Things They Carried*

War stories become just that—stories. Just as time distances the storyteller from the events themselves, so do the repeated tellings. Gradually the stories are embellished in places, honed down in others until they are perfect little tales, even if they bear little resemblance to what actually happened.

—David Hackworth, *About Face*

Many of my students have seen films about the Vietnam War and are avid to learn about the war experiences of Vietnam veterans. Some, like the fictional protagonist of Bobbie Ann Mason's novel *In Country*, have felt the effects of the war through family members' avoidance of the topic and want words to fill up those silences.<sup>1</sup> Others want to understand why the war so fractured the United States. Still others, who know of the atrocities United States soldiers committed in Vietnam, believe that only the ordinary veterans who fought there could explain why they occurred.

Many Vietnam veterans have been eager to share their painful experiences with students. Veterans have witnessed events beyond the bounds of ordinary experience, and they can feel an urgent need to communicate what they have seen and done, both to spring themselves from the trap of isolating knowledge and to ensure that society draws the proper lessons. For veterans and students, listening to war experiences and discussing them can be cathartic.<sup>2</sup> Veterans thus appreciate seeing their accounts published in collections of interviews and being invited to classrooms.

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<sup>1</sup> Bobbie Ann Mason, *In Country* (New York, 1985).

<sup>2</sup> Clark Smith, "Oral History as 'Therapy': Combatants' Accounts of the Vietnam War," in *Strangers at Home: Vietnam Veterans since the War*, ed. Charles R. Figley and Seymour Leventman (New York, 1980), 20; William Marshall testimony in the film *Hearts and Minds*, dir. Peter Davis (BBS Productions, Rainbow Pictures Corporation, 1974).

The appeal of veterans' accounts is evident in the frequency with which teachers of courses on the Vietnam War invite veterans to speak to students and use published oral histories. A survey of 89 university courses on the Vietnam War reported in 1993 that 11 of them invited Vietnam veterans as guest speakers. Students in a popular course at the University of California, Santa Barbara, taught by the late Walter Capps, used to greet guest speakers who were veterans in ritual "welcome home" ceremonies. Such events enabled students to touch part of the nation's history, and the students took satisfaction in compensating veterans for the public indifference they encountered when they returned from the war.<sup>3</sup> In sharing the veterans' stories, veterans and their student listeners believed they could contribute to the "healing" and reconciliation that veterans' organizations have placed at the top of the nation's post-Vietnam agenda.<sup>4</sup>

Even in printed form, first-person testimony can provide both a sense of what the war felt like that official documents and secondary sources do not capture and evidence of hard truths that some other sources evade. The 1993 survey found that oral history collections appeared frequently on syllabi; for example, the two most used books that explore the African American experience were oral histories—*Bloods* and *Brothers*.<sup>5</sup> But, while veterans' narratives have value for tellers and listeners alike, teachers who ask students to interview Vietnam veterans should be mindful of the limitations—and not just the potential value—of such interviews.

### The Wannabe Phenomenon

One limitation concerns what some have called "the wannabe phenomenon." Not all who claim to be Vietnam veterans actually served in Vietnam, while others exaggerate their experiences.<sup>6</sup> Yet "fake" veterans have been known to spin compelling accounts that can lead unsuspecting students (and even professional historians) to accept their stories at face value. In fact, a number of "veterans" whose reminiscences appear in oral history collections have been exposed as fakes. One diligent researcher discovered falsehoods and inventions in stories in two oral history collections frequently used in the classroom, Wallace Terry's *Bloods* and Al Santoli's *Everything We Had*, and in the account of a "Green Beret" invited to speak repeatedly in the University of California, Santa Barbara, course.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>3</sup> Patrick Hagopian, *Report on the 1990–1991 Survey of Courses on the Vietnam War* (Fairfax, 1993), 22; "Vietnam 101," *60 Minutes*, prod. CBS News (CBS, Oct. 4, 1987), transcript, vol. 20, no. 3, pp. 10–11. The transcript was obtained from Journal Graphics Inc., 2 John St., New York, NY 10038.

<sup>4</sup> See Jan C. Scruggs and Joel L. Swerdlow, *To Heal a Nation* (New York, 1985), 41; and Keith Beattie, *The Scar That Binds: American Culture and the Vietnam War* (New York, 1998), 13–15.

<sup>5</sup> Wallace Terry, *Bloods: An Oral History of the Vietnam War by Black Veterans* (New York, 1985); Stanley Goff and Robert Sanders with Clark Smith, *Brothers: Black Soldiers in the Nam* (New York, 1985). Other frequently used collections were Mark Baker, *Nam: The Vietnam War in the Words of the Soldiers Who Fought There* (New York, 1981); and Al Santoli, *Everything We Had: An Oral History of the Vietnam War by Thirty-Three American Soldiers Who Fought There* (New York, 1981). Two of the three most frequently used works on women in Vietnam were oral histories: Keith Walker, *A Piece of My Heart* (New York, 1985); and Kathryn Marshall, *In the Combat Zone* (New York, 1987). See Hagopian, *Report on the 1990–1991 Survey of Courses on the Vietnam War*, 22, 27–35.

<sup>6</sup> *Baltimore Sun*, June 12, 1998, p. A19; *Sacramento Union*, April 21, 1992, p. A8.

<sup>7</sup> B. G. Burkett with Glenna Whitley, *Stolen Valor: How the Vietnam Generation Was Robbed of Its Heroes and Its History* (Dallas, 1998), 390–93, 432–33, 454–60.

Just as feature films and novels about Vietnam frequently dwell on atrocities and the emotional anguish that veterans suffered, many oral histories center on those hot-button issues. Such stories do not turn their narrators into heroes but nonetheless aggrandize them by presenting them as tragic figures or as eyewitnesses to extreme experiences. Stories of the horrors of war bring veterans sympathy and other rewards and give them ready-made, all-purpose excuses for failure.<sup>8</sup> And such stories can rivet listeners by allowing them privileged access to knowledge of taboo subjects.

### The Cultural Script of the Vietnam Veteran

The existence of Vietnam War wannabes poses two problems for classroom oral history projects on Vietnam veterans. First, teachers must help students understand the need for—and the difficulty of—critically evaluating the reliability of all evidence, not just Vietnam veterans' accounts. Second, the phenomenon of faked veterans' accounts raises a significant interpretive problem: the extent to which all Vietnam veterans follow a cultural script in portraying their own experiences. Even when they remain true to events, veterans' stories may adjust to societal expectations—or what veterans *believe* their audience wishes to hear. The stories may also respond to the other narratives that circulate around the storyteller.<sup>9</sup>

In the 1980s veterans' advocates helped establish a stereotype of Vietnam veterans as victims: They included a disproportionate number of poor and minorities, had not been welcomed home from Vietnam, and suffered high rates of unemployment, psychiatric ill health, incarceration, homelessness, and alienation.<sup>10</sup> Other advocates refuted the victim stereotype point by point: Over the whole course of the war, minorities did not serve in disproportionate numbers; veterans were well educated and did not suffer high rates of unemployment; and so on. Surprisingly, there is no consensus on such basic facts as how many veterans suffer from the psychiatric condition post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), leaving considerable room for debate on the true situation of Vietnam veterans.<sup>11</sup>

Can veterans' stories confirm or deny the stereotypes? Because oral narratives constitute a classic instance of anecdotal evidence, the simple answer is no. To determine whether an individual's experience is typical, one needs to consider its conformity to the aggregate. Were atrocities so widespread in Vietnam that veterans came

<sup>8</sup> Eric T. Dean Jr., *Shook over Hell: Post-Traumatic Stress, Vietnam, and the Civil War* (Cambridge, Mass., 1997), 198; *Washington Times*, Oct. 10, 1989, p. B8.

<sup>9</sup> This process has been noted in a different context in Alessandro Portelli, *The Death of Luigi Trastulli and Other Stories* (Albany, 1991), 1, 26.

<sup>10</sup> Arthur Egendorf et al., *Legacies of Vietnam: Comparative Adjustment of Veterans and Their Peers* (Washington, 1981); Arthur Egendorf, *Healing from the War: Trauma and Transformation after Vietnam* (Boston, 1985). For accounts of the work of early practitioners and advocates of counseling for Vietnam veterans, see Wilbur Scott, "PTSD in DSM-III: A Case in the Politics of Diagnosis and Disease," *Social Problems*, 37 (Aug. 1990), 299–301; and Dean, *Shook over Hell*, 200.

<sup>11</sup> "Vietnam Warriors: A Statistical Profile," *VFW* (March 1993), 3. Richard Kolb, chairperson of the Vietnam Veterans Leadership Program of Houston, provided me with: Vietnam Veterans Leadership Program of Houston, "Education Kit: A Teaching Guide to the Vietnam War and Its Veterans," [1984] (in Patrick Hagopian's possession). On the lack of consensus, see Dean, *Shook over Hell*, 15.

home brutalized and disillusioned? It depends on whether one believes wartime testimony that emphasized atrocities or recent publications of veterans' narratives that dismiss them.<sup>12</sup> Were veterans spat upon, called "baby killers," and shamed into silence when they returned from the war? Again, it depends on whom one believes, because interviews with veterans have led authors to reach diametrically opposed conclusions.<sup>13</sup> Students exposed, unprepared, to either stereotype might not recognize the account as part of a highly vexed debate, instead accepting one version or the other as the whole truth.

### The Conventionality of Vietnam Veterans' Narratives

Certain episodes in veterans' narratives have assumed the currency of parables. Those who interview many Vietnam veterans are invariably struck by how frequently particular stories recur. For example, the journalist Myra MacPherson examined the dense clusters of meanings in stories that surfaced time after time and concluded that they were primarily significant for their metaphorical, not their factual, qualities. In another project, several veterans told the television producer Patrick S. Duncan the same suspenseful story as he researched his series, "Vietnam War Story." A soldier on patrol steps on a mine. His comrades hear the click of the plunger, but the mine does not explode. It is a "bouncing betty" and will spring up to waist height and detonate when the soldier lifts his foot. He remains motionless for hours while his comrades decide what to do. Finally, one of them suggests they tie a rope around his waist and yank him away. They succeed, and the mine explodes harmlessly.<sup>14</sup>

I, too, heard this story—from a homeless veteran who haunted the California Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Sacramento, who showed me the scars on his leg where shrapnel from the mine hit him. According to a trusted informant, though, it was unlikely that the homeless man had ever been in Vietnam. But I had reason to doubt the story anyway, because I had previously read it in the words of Harold "Light Bulb" Bryant in *Bloods*. In 1991 I assumed that the homeless man had copied the story from Bryant. Now I regard it as equally possible that Bryant (who turns out to have falsified his wartime experiences) heard it as the yarn went the rounds. Duncan, too, knew a good story when he heard one and used it in one of the TV shows, with some elaboration of his own.<sup>15</sup>

<sup>12</sup> Compare Mark Lane, *Conversations with Americans* (New York, 1970); and *Winter Soldier* (Winterfilm and Vietnam Veterans Against the War, 1972), a documentary film on the Vietnam Veterans Against the War hearings in Detroit; with Ron Steinman, *The Soldiers' Story: Vietnam in Their Own Words* (New York, 1999); and Otto J. Lehrack, *No Shining Armor: The Marines at War in Vietnam: An Oral History* (Lawrence, 1992).

<sup>13</sup> Bob Greene, *Homecoming* (New York, 1989); Jerry Lembcke, *The Spitting Image: Myth, Memory, and the Legacy of Vietnam* (New York, 1998); Bruce Jackson, "The Perfect Informant," *Journal of American Folklore*, 103 (Oct.–Dec. 1990), 402–3.

<sup>14</sup> Myra MacPherson, *Long Time Passing: Vietnam and the Haunted Generation* (New York, 1984), 569. For more on the stories MacPherson heard, see Patrick Hagopian, "Oral Narratives: Secondary Revision and the Memory of the Vietnam War," *History Workshop Journal*, 32 (Autumn 1991), 134–50. Patrick S. Duncan interview by Patrick Hagopian, Nov. 10, 1992, notes (in Hagopian's possession).

<sup>15</sup> Michael Kelley interview by Hagopian, April 8, 1991, notes (in Hagopian's possession). For Harold Bryant's story, see Terry, *Bloods*, 19–20. Burkett with Whitley, *Stolen Valor*, 456; "The Mine" (episode in "Vietnam War Story," prod. Todd Holland and Patrick S. Duncan, dir. Jim Anderson), HBO (1987).

Stories are told and retold because they are meaningful to the speakers and, presumably, to the listeners. The measure of such stories' interest may not be whether they are factually correct but whether they convey a moral or psychological truth important enough for the narrator to wish to share it.<sup>16</sup> Storytellers attentive to their audiences adjust the rhythms and the content of their narratives to capture and sustain their listeners' interest. Tobias Wolff and Tim O'Brien, both Vietnam veteran authors, fictionalize situations in which narrators meet or disappoint the expectations of their audiences. Wolff's narrator, recounting a terrible story, says, "I naturally pitched my tune to his [the listener's] particular receptivities, which were harsh and perverse and altogether familiar, so that even as he anticipated me I anticipated him and kept him laughing and edgy with expectation." O'Brien's narrator is coached even while he recounts a story: "You need to get a consistent sound, like slow or fast, funny or sad. All these digressions, they just screw up your story's *sound*. Stick to what happened." Such coaching does not take place in fiction alone. A seminar for veterans who speak in the classroom, sponsored by the Vietnam Veterans Memorial Fund, suggested that they tell stories with a beginning, middle, and end and that they not let unnecessary details sidetrack them. Polished through multiple retellings, the most successful stories sometimes take on a life of their own.<sup>17</sup>

In some published oral histories, the process of refinement continues after the initial interviews. Oral histories appeal to readers as the raw, unembellished truth of the war. The jacket of one of the earliest collections describes it as "the gut truth"; the most recent oral history and the television series that accompanied it are praised in remarkably similar terms, as "what the war was really like" and an account "unburdened by analysis or debate." But authors of oral histories sometimes craft the stories in the editing. For example, Al Santoli, the author of two oral histories about the Vietnam War, asked actors to read the transcripts of his interviews aloud, allowing him to edit and reedit them between readings until he had distilled the stories to their essence. The results, he said, were stories with the bare economy of haikus. Wallace Terry cut and pasted his transcribed interviews to produce well-formed narratives in keeping with techniques he had learned in a short-story writing class. He knew each story was complete when reading it made his wife cry. Although there may be nothing wrong in principle with editing oral histories so extensively, the introductions of the collections do not disclose that the interviews have been edited. Instead, in the publications' front matter, Terry's and Santoli's publishers quote reviewers who praise the books' essential truth and rawness.<sup>18</sup>

<sup>16</sup> Vietnam veteran Tim O'Brien succinctly distinguishes between "story-truth" and "happening-truth" in war stories. Tim O'Brien, *The Things They Carried* (New York, 1990), 203.

<sup>17</sup> Tobias Wolff, *In Pharaoh's Army: Memories of a Lost War* (London, 1994), 199; O'Brien, *Things They Carried*, 116–17. I attended the Vietnam Veterans Memorial Fund Seminar, "Teaching the Vietnam War in America II—Telling the Real Story: Veterans in the Classroom," National Archives, Washington, D.C., Nov. 9, 1992.

<sup>18</sup> Mark Baker, *Nam: The Vietnam War in the Words of the Soldiers Who Fought There* (New York, 1983), front cover; Steinman, *Soldiers' Story*, back dust jacket; Al Santoli telephone interview by Hagopian, March 18, 1991, notes (in Hagopian's possession); Wallace Terry interview by Hagopian, March 15, 1990, *ibid.*; Wallace Terry interview by Hagopian, Nov. 4, 1987, *ibid.*

## How Teachers and Students Use Oral Histories

If teachers and students who use the oral history collections recognize that they are edited, the absence of information about the editing techniques may not be a problem. In order to determine how teachers and students regarded the oral histories, in 1992 I conducted a questionnaire survey of teachers who used oral histories in their teaching on Vietnam and a follow-up survey of some of their students. To avoid predisposing the respondents to cogitate too directly on editing, I asked them instead whether the oral histories constitute primary or secondary materials. The responses indicated that the teachers were somewhat more inclined to treat the oral history collections as secondary sources; the students were more inclined to treat them as (in the words of two students) “original truthful accounts” that provide “an actual feel for part of the situation in Vietnam.”<sup>19</sup>

In February 2000 I asked my students at Lancaster University to characterize the oral history collections as primary or secondary materials *before* we had discussed the editing of the collections. Almost three-quarters of the students regarded them as primary. One wrote, “Primary materials definitely because they come straight from the person who had the experiences. Nobody outside is interpreting or analyzing or making assumptions.” Another wrote (in words consistent with the publishers’ blurbs), “Primary, of course. They are the raw, unprocessed thoughts and grievances of participants.”<sup>20</sup> These questionnaire results, although drawn from a limited number of courses and students, indicate that students trust published oral histories as presenting the unembellished, unedited words of the narrators. They have every reason to do so, in the absence of any information to the contrary. Students can be judicious and discriminating readers and listeners. Their critical faculties are more likely to operate, though, when they have access to information about the construction of particular oral history collections and about the conduct of oral history in general.

## Students’ Vietnam Oral Histories in the Field

Despite questions about the authenticity of veterans’ narratives, I have occasionally encouraged students to interview Vietnam veterans. In my 1987 course at the Uni-

<sup>19</sup> I mailed the questionnaire in 1991 and 1992 to those participants in the 1990–1991 survey of courses on the Vietnam War who had reported using oral histories in their courses. Here I summarize responses from eight university and college teachers who have taught courses on the Vietnam War at nine different institutions. In spring 1992 I sent a follow-up questionnaire, via their teachers, to students in courses that used Vietnam oral histories. The article refers to the follow-up questionnaires completed by Catherine Calloway’s students at Arkansas State University and Marc Jason Gilbert’s at North Georgia College. Both sets of questionnaires are in my possession. For the student respondents, I defined “primary” and “secondary”: “A distinction is frequently made in academic circles between *primary* and *secondary* materials. This distinction is supposed to distinguish between original documents from a historical period, on the one hand, and the accounts that observers write based on those documents, on the other. Another way of expressing the distinction would be to say ‘first-hand’ or ‘second-hand’ for *primary* and *secondary*.”

<sup>20</sup> I used practical examples of primary and secondary sources: primary sources included historical documents, memoirs, contemporaneous newspaper articles, and letters; secondary sources included history books, literary criticism and commentary, and sociological works. The goal in this and the previous questionnaires was to provide definitions that did not predetermine the responses. The questionnaires are in my possession.

versity of Pennsylvania, “Remembering Vietnam,” I asked students to interview veterans after they had read four Vietnam oral history collections, two memoirs written by veterans, and a book of historical documents. They also had talked with four Vietnam veterans and Wallace Terry, author of *Bloods*.<sup>21</sup> I instructed the students to analyze the rhetorical construction and content of the narratives and the events that seemed especially significant to narrators. In preparation for the interviews, I also asked the students to read critical essays about memory and oral history. Students had to conduct their interviews in teams of two to four, and each group interviewed a different veteran. Among other things, students asked veterans if they had volunteered or were drafted for Vietnam service, what their expectations were, what was especially memorable about their Vietnam experiences, and what lessons they believed the nation should draw from the war. Underlying these and many other questions was the injunction “to listen attentively and to follow the spirit of what is being said.”<sup>22</sup>

After the students completed the interviews, each group submitted a copy of the interview audiotape and a photograph of the veteran. Every student individually submitted a transcribed excerpt of the interview and a critical commentary, examining the excerpt and the remainder of the interview, that analyzed the issues that seemed important to the narrator, what motivated him to speak, and how he interpreted the war. The instructions also asked students to contemplate and comment on the strengths and weaknesses of oral history as a means of learning about the war.

Rereading these papers over a decade later, I am struck by how sophisticated and sensitive some are. They demonstrated the writers’ ability to read the silences and hesitations (or their absence) in the narrator’s speech, to assess the emotional impact of the war on the narrator, and thus to compare the interviewee’s recollections with other accounts of the war. It must be noted that the subject of the class was the remembrance of the war, and so such questions were in the foreground, as they might not be in a history course in which the emphasis is on “what happened.” Still, reviewing the students’ work reminds me that these freshmen were no less capable of a critical oral history practice than some of the more advanced students I have subsequently taught.

<sup>21</sup> The oral histories were Santoli, *Everything We Had*; Walker, *Piece of My Heart*; Terry, *Bloods*; and David Chanoff and Doan Van Toai, *Portrait of the Enemy* (New York, 1986). The memoirs were Philip Caputo, *A Rumor of War* (New York, 1977); and John Ketwig, . . . and a *Hard Rain Fell: A G.I.’s True Story of the War in Vietnam* (New York, 1985). The documentary collection was William Appleman Williams et al., eds., *America in Vietnam: A Documentary History* (New York, 1985). The veterans they met were Joe Urgo and Dave Blalock, members of Vietnam Veterans United to Prevent World War III, a successor organization to Vietnam Veterans Against the War; Dwight Edwards, team leader in the Vietnam Veterans Outreach Center in Olney, Philadelphia, and one of the veterans featured in the documentary “The Bloods of Nam,” prod. Wallace Terry, WGBH Boston for PBS (PBS, 1986); and Phil Robinson, a participant in the battle for Ap Bia Mountain (“Hamburger Hill”) in 1969. When Wallace Terry spoke at the University of Pennsylvania on November 7, 1987, he met with my students and spoke to them about his work.

<sup>22</sup> “Oral History,” *History Workshop Journal*, 8 (Autumn 1979), i–iii; Alessandro Portelli, “The Peculiarities of Oral History,” *ibid.*, 12 (Autumn 1981), 96–107; Michael Frisch, “The Memory of History,” in *Presenting the Past*, ed. Susan Porter Benson, Stephen Brier, and Roy Rosenzweig (Philadelphia, 1986), 5–17; “Assignment 7: Veteran Interview and Critique,” p. 1, syllabus for the “Remembering Vietnam” course at the University of Pennsylvania, fall 1987 (in Hagopian’s possession).





Dwight Edwards (in the foreground), one of the Vietnam veterans interviewed by students in the University of Pennsylvania class "Remembering Vietnam," marches at the dedication of the Philadelphia Vietnam Veterans Memorial, 1987.

*Photograph by Patrick Hagopian.*

The students reflected on why the narrator was choosing to tell *them* the things he spoke about. The fact that some of the interviewees came from a list provided by an antidraft organization running an "interview a vet" project highlighted this question, because those interviewees were primed to anticipate that their narratives might influence the life choices of the young interviewers.<sup>23</sup> (The veterans involved in this project were not all, however, opponents of the war, and they included a career soldier still in the armed forces.) My view is that the circumstances of the interviews did not diminish their value: Every oral history interview takes place in a context and against a background of mutual expectations on the part of interviewer and interviewee. In any interview, the oral historian must reflect on how those factors shape the narrative, and she or he must decide whether to treat that shaping as a "bias," and hence an obstacle to knowledge, or as an element that is usefully amenable to interpretation. The students completing the assignment responded intelligently to this challenge by considering why the narrator told them what he did. The

<sup>23</sup>The course coincided with an "interview a vet" contest organized by the Central Committee for Conscientious Objectors (CCCO), a Philadelphia organization, and students interviewed Vietnam veterans from a list the CCCO provided. The CCCO also provided a list of questions and guidelines for conducting the interview. *Put Yourself in His Shoes: Interview a Vet Contest Booklet* (Philadelphia, [1987]), issued by the Central Committee for Conscientious Objectors, 2208 South St., Philadelphia, PA 19146 (in Hagopian's possession).

purpose of such reflections on the interview process was to enrich the students' understanding of the experience each veteran underwent and what it meant to him. Listening critically thus meant, not devaluing what was said or skeptically distancing oneself from the narrator, but being more fully attentive to his words.

### **Oral Histories in the Classroom**

The value of the oral histories does not lie in their providing unmediated truths. They can reveal—or conflate—*both* individual participants' recollection of the war *and* how that recollection has been shaped by the years of talk that have surrounded veterans since the end of the war. An understanding of how narratives are shaped by the flow of history in which they travel can lead to a richer understanding of both individual lives and the consequences of the Vietnam War. Students are capable of treating difficult materials with caution and sophistication, but they presumably will be more likely to do so if they are encouraged to approach the materials skeptically. In contrast, if students are encouraged to bond emotionally with veterans or to focus on the reconciliation that occurs when society pays attention to veterans, they may emphasize this aspect of the veterans' witness at the expense of others. Oral history can privilege the personal at the expense of history and politics, if the personal and the political are allowed to become distinct spheres. Fixating on veterans' emotions in line with a stereotype of them as victims can, paradoxically, trivialize the feelings embedded in their words and detach those feelings from the history and politics of the war. Vietnam veterans' knowledge came at far too high a cost for it be squandered in this way.