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**“DISTURBERS OF THE PEACE”:
LYNDA VAN DEVANTER’S *HOME BEFORE MORNING*:
THE STORY OF AN ARMY NURSE IN VIETNAM
AND W. D. EHRHART’S *PASSING TIME: MEMOIR*
*OF A VIETNAM VETERAN AGAINST THE WAR***

Abstract

In the late 1960s, Lynda Van Devanter and W. D. Ehrhart volunteered to serve in the Vietnam War as nurse and combatant respectively. Both believed they were part of a generation of Americans who had been chosen to save the world, but both quickly discovered that they had been profoundly ignorant and naïve, for what their government had promised in the name of liberty, freedom, and democracy was none of those things. In their memoirs, both writers expose the questionable nature of the American government’s mission in Vietnam, lay bare the explicit policies that jeopardized and undermined the psychiatric health of American soldiers and military nurses, and take aim at the military for not having done everything it could to insure that protective mechanisms had been put in place before sending young Americans into harm’s way. Van Devanter’s and Ehrhart’s memoirs document the extent to which they were traumatized by their wartime experiences and record their long and painful journeys to recovery. Both writers thus fulfill what trauma theorist Kali Tal refers to as “the urge to bear witness, to carry the tale of horror back to the halls of ‘normalcy’ and to testify to the people the truth of their experience.”

Key words

Trauma; trauma theory; the Vietnam War; representations of the enemy; the plight of the returned soldier/nurse

According to the American poet/memoirist/essayist W. D. Ehrhart, “most Americans [...] believe that we are a selflessly good and caring people, a nation of al-

truists acting for the benefit of others, the down-trodden and the oppressed, often at great cost to ourselves. The United States and its military would never stoop to morally insupportable deeds. Nor would our government willfully lie to us, deceive us, or betray our trust. For many Americans, it remains another tenet of faith that we have, regardless of its flaws, the most perfect form of government the world has ever seen” (Ehrhart 1989: 78). Thus when the seventeen-year-old Ehrhart volunteers to fight the spread of communism in Vietnam in the spring of 1966 with the U. S. Marine Corps, he believes “absolutely that [he is] doing the right thing, a good thing, [his] duty” (Ehrhart 2002: 54). Veteran-nurse Lynda Van Devanter also deeply loves her country and, like Ehrhart, feels she is part of a generation of Americans who were “‘chosen’ to save the world,” and to “help save those in need” (Van Devanter 2001: 29); correspondingly, she places her faith in those who would send her to war, and at the age of twenty-one, armed with a graduate diploma, she volunteers to nurse in Vietnam in 1969. But both Ehrhart and Van Devanter eventually learn they had been overwhelmingly naïve and ignorant, for they never imagined that their government was “capable of profound arrogance, willful self-deception, and deliberate lying [...]. [W]hat [they had promised] in the name of liberty, freedom and democracy [was] [...] none of these things” (Ehrhart 2002: 31). Both were traumatized by their government’s betrayal and both produced books – Van Devanter’s titled *Home Before Morning: The Story of an Army Nurse in Vietnam* (1983) and W. D. Ehrhart’s *Passing Time: Memoir of a Vietnam Veteran Against the War* (1986) – which document their long and painful journeys to recovery. Although their work has never, to my knowledge, been compared, the similarities between them, as my paper will reveal, are legion. Both writers expose the questionable nature of the American government’s mission in Vietnam and lay bare the explicit policies that jeopardized and undermined the psychiatric health of American soldiers and military nurses, and both take aim at the military for not having done everything it could to insure that every possible protective mechanism had been put in place before sending America’s young people into harm’s way. Both Ehrhart and Van Devanter have also fulfilled what trauma theorist Kali Tal (1996: 120) refers to as “the urge to bear witness, to carry the tale of horror back to the halls of ‘normalcy’ and to testify to the people the truth of their experience.”

According to trauma theorist Judith Lewis Herman (1992: 51), “[t]raumatic events call into question basic human relationships. 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. They undermine the belief systems that give meaning to human experience.” Tal extends Herman’s reference to “belief systems” by arguing that individuals derive their assumptions about how the world works and their place in it through a series of intersecting “national” and “personal” myths. She explains that “national (collective) myth is propagated in textbooks, official histories, popular culture documents, public schools, and the like. This myth belongs to no one individually, though individuals borrow from it and buy into it in varying degrees” (Tal 1996: 115), whereas

personal myths are “the particular set of explanations and expectations generated by an individual to account for his or her circumstances and actions” (Tal 1996: 116). Tal then cites psychologist Daniel Goleman’s view that

[p]ersonal myths take the form of schemas – assumptions about experience and the way the world works. What information an individual absorbs and interprets is determined by the schemas operating in a particular situation. Schemas frequently operate at the level of the unconscious, and it is inevitable (and in fact, it is their *purpose*) to automatically skew perceptions of events. The misinterpretation of much of what goes on around us is frequently useful as a coping strategy, if a properly interpreted event threatens important, foundational schemas. This process results in the “trade-off of a distorted awareness for a sense of security,” and Goleman believes that this is an organizing principle of human existence. (qtd. in Tal 116)

Furthermore, Tal argues:

Grand revision of a personal myth must always spring from a traumatic experience, for the mechanism that maintains those foundational schemas will automatically distort or revise all but the most shattering revelations. Chaim Shatan, a psychiatrist who works with Vietnam combat veterans and other survivors of trauma, describes this drastic uprooting of belief as the “basic wound” that creates a new, permanent, and adaptive lifestyle.

(qtd. in Tal 116)

Although the war experiences of Ehrhart and Van Devanter differ – he is participant, she is witness – both become “mythfits” when their nation sends them to serve in an unwinnable, pointless, and dishonourable war.

Van Devanter’s decision that she can best serve her nation by volunteering to nurse in the Vietnam War arises out of intersecting personal and national myths which find her “playing nurse” at the age of four, pursuing that goal through adolescence, and then graduating at twenty-one with a nursing diploma from Mercy Hospital in Baltimore. As Elizabeth Norman (1990: 8) writes, nursing was a logical career choice for young women in the late 1950s, because girls at that time learned to “view themselves in relation to others, as mothers, sisters, and friends – not as individuals,” and the “the task of caring for others is the core of the profession.” Aside from following prescribed cultural norms, Van Devanter was also heavily influenced by the “noble sentiments” of John Fitzgerald Kennedy, who convinced her and millions of other young people that they were “part of a just and honorable nation” (Van Devanter 2001: 29) which would always help those in “mass misery” and “defend [their] freedom” because “it is right” (30). Thus after she enlists and travels to Texas for army training, Van Devanter feels a “surge of pride. I was a citizen of the greatest country in the world and was about to give part of myself to keep America great” (2001: 29). But Van Devanter’s desire to

join the military was also fuelled by her father's three-time rejection from the army during the Second World War. Van Devanter thus signs up in part to fulfill her father's aspirations (she had earlier become a "tomboy" to compensate for being one of five girls in her family), but also because both she and her patriotic father greatly admired Kennedy's "glorious words, 'Ask not what your country can do for you – ask what you can do for your country'" (2001: 30). According to Norman (1990: 9), young women (like Van Devanter) gave very little "deep thought into what the experience would really be like [...]. It was a time in their lives when decisions were quick and consequences not pondered." In addition, as Van Devanter points out during an interview with Carolyn Mithers, the women who served in Vietnam were "different than the men who carried the guns – on the average, they were several years older, more educated, overwhelmingly white and middle-class – idealistic 'good girls' who 'grew up in Catholic homes, graduated from three-year diploma Catholic nursing schools and had never been more than fifty miles away from their parents'" (Mithers 1986: 79–80). These nursing students had "little time for or interest in questioning government policy" because they "spent those three years living in a dormitory, usually on the hospital grounds, and working long shifts on hospital wards [...]. It was a cloistered, carefully monitored world" (Norman 1990: 9). They were also uninformed about current events because "the antiwar movement, so prevalent on college campuses during the war, was missing from the hospital schools of nursing" (Norman 1990: 9); true to form, Van Devanter finds time to watch the "television" war only when she is about to graduate. Although she witnesses wounded soldiers being carried onto helicopters and hears Walter Cronkite refer to "body counts," she does not ponder the "human destruction" (Van Devanter 2001: 48), but rather concludes, somewhat melodramatically, that "if our boys [are] being blown apart, then somebody better be over there putting them back together again [...] and that somebody should be me" (49). In addition, when her friends and mother suggest that she should marry and have children instead of answering the clarion call of her president, Van Devanter confidently lists the opportunities promised by the army recruiter – "the benefits, the pay, the extra training, the free travel, the excitement, and the challenge" (49) – and soon turns down a marriage proposal from a good-looking Vietnam War veteran because she wants to be, albeit only temporarily, as her nursing friend Barbara puts it, "'free as the wind'" (23). When her friends protest that she "'might get killed,'" Lynda assures them that military personnel have assured her that "nurses don't get killed" because they're all in the "rear areas" and "the hospitals are perfectly safe" (49). Moreover, Barbara, who comes from a military family, boldly asserts that nurses will "'never really be under fire'" (67).

Bill Ehrhart's reasons for enlisting are also governed by a series of prescribed cultural myths, but they have been so deeply ingrained that he does not recognize the extent to which his values and aspirations have been shaped by a nation which has traditionally had a "fascination with guns and violence and martial glory" (Ehrhart 1989: 236) until after he has served two tours of duty. Then, he recalls

that as a child, he had been “awestruck” watching uniformed men march on Memorial Day and thrilled by the 21-gun salute to their “fallen comrades” (208). Even as a child, he “wanted a medal. A Red Badge of Courage. A sign that I was a hero in the company of Stephen Decatur and Alvin York” (163). Even then, he knew he “wanted to *be* those men. [He] wanted to do what they’d done and know what they knew” (Ehrhart 2002: 208), and books like *All Quiet on the Western Front* and *The Red Badge of Courage* told him “what they knew.” Both reinforced the power of the “great myth of war” which “holds that combat is the ultimate test of manhood, and that once a man has been to war, he has been initiated into the realm of greater wisdom” (Ehrhart 2002: 83). In his desire to answer Kennedy’s challenge, Ehrhart knew he would join the Marines, for he wanted to “be a man,” and the recruiting slogan boldly declared that “The Marine Corps Builds Men.” More than anything else, he wanted to be a hero, and “the Marines were heroes almost by definition. The Halls of Montezuma. [...] Guadalcanal. [...] And what in the world looked sharper than the U. S. Marine Corps dress blue uniform” (Ehrhart: “The Volunteer”) on display at annual high-school Armed Forces Day assemblies. Ehrhart claims that most of his classmates “bought into these myths” (Ehrhart 1989: 83) and admits that graduating as a Marine was the “proudest moment in his life” (25). Television cartoons also played a role in de-sensitizing him and his friends to violence, because they just “laughed” when Popeye or the Roadrunner punched out their enemies’ eyes or blew them up with dynamite (236). Ehrhart also came under the spell of the great legendary figures of American history like Wyatt Earp, David Crockett, and even George Armstrong Custer, whom Ehrhart eventually realizes was “practically canonized” as a “mass murderer” (236). Ultimately, Ehrhart concludes that violence in America was so pervasive that not even ordinary men like his father – a minister – saw anything incongruous about giving his grade-school son a toy “five-caliber automatic pistol” or a “genuine plastic thirty-caliber machine gun at Christmas on the ‘birthday of the Prince of Peace’” (237).

Like Van Devanter, Ehrhart also reveres JFK’s memorable words and after his death, writes them on the cover of his high-school notebook (1985: 8); he then enlists because he believes he “owes something to his country” and, like Van Devanter, “consider[s] it a blessing and a privilege to be an American citizen” (Ehrhart 1989: 125). Moreover, in an editorial he writes for a high-school journalism class, Ehrhart rebukes those who feel that Americans may be dying for “no good reason” by asking, “What more noble a cause can a man die for, than to die in defense of freedom?” (1983: 9). When his parents suggest that he should take up the offer to attend UCLA instead of enlisting (he was on the honour roll and had been accepted at several universities), he asks if they had raised him “to let other parents’ children fight America’s wars” (1989: 125), knowing, of course, they had not. Once he volunteers for active duty, Ehrhart delights in his status as local hero: high-school teachers shake his hand, his picture appears in the local newspaper, and his sweetheart starts wearing a Marine Corps pin on her blouse (10). Like Van Devanter, Ehrhart departs for Vietnam without any

doubts or hesitations, for “in those days, you didn’t question your government” (Coleman 2006: 78).

Challenges to Van Devanter’s and Ehrhart’s national and personal myths appear even before they leave America, however. Van Devanter’s fiancé refuses to talk about the war and reiterates only that “Vietnam sucked” (Van Devanter 2001: 53). Because love is blind (and often deaf), Van Devanter overlooks his moodiness, bouts of depression, night-time screams about “slopes and gooks” (57), and even frightening attempts to “smash her face” (57). Only in hindsight does she realize that she “should have questioned these things more than [she] did” (57). Similarly, during training at a Texas psychiatric ward full of Vietnam War veterans, Van Devanter never queries why so many “were tortured by their memories of the war” or why so many were potentially violent or tried to commit suicide (69). Nor does she ever question why the “wounded in mind” were offered no counseling (69).

Van Devanter was also blissfully unaware that truth is the first casualty of war, for when she is sent to Vietnam on June 8, 1969, the same day that army nurse Sharon Lane died “as a result of hostile fire” (75), her plane comes under enemy attack. Although the military claims that Lane is the first to die, Van Devanter learns almost immediately that six nurses had already died in helicopter crashes and numerous medical personnel had been sent home in body bags (78). According to Linda Spoonster Schwartz, no one informed nurses that because “the Vietnam War was so different from other wars, the Geneva Convention provisions for noncombatants or medical facilities provided little protection. Hospitals often suffered heavy damages after rocket attacks” (Schwartz 1987: 171). Nor had anyone told Van Devanter that the Vietnamese would shoot at any American regardless of gender or rank. Recognizing for the first time that she could die (Van Devanter 2001: 77), Van Devanter dimly begins to see that “the picture of war painted by [her] recruiter was quite a bit different from the reality” (78). But upon arrival at the 71st Evac Hospital in Pleiku (an area of heavy combat and unending casualties), she is mildly shocked at the sight of the “ramshackle wooden building” (81) that serves as the hospital, and taken aback that so many men, some with “arms and legs blown off,” others with “their guts hanging out,” and others with “ordinary gunshot wounds,” require immediate attention (82). So eager is she to do her part that she ignores the medical staff’s reference to her unit as an “assembly line” (Van Devanter 2002: 85) because they will never have the satisfaction of knowing what happens to these wounded men after they are either airlifted to hospitals in Japan, the Philippines, or sent back home (Schwartz 1987: 171).

Moreover, Van Devanter learns that while military leaders may have wanted nurses’ professional skills, they did little to accommodate their personal needs. The PX stocked plenty of condoms for men, but no tampons or toiletries for women; latrines were situated far from nursing stations; and the military had failed to take into account that women’s breasts would not allow them to crawl under beds wearing the flak jackets designed to protect them during rocket attacks. Van Devanter also draws attention to numerous double standards: the military accepted that soldiers would “screw” as many prostitutes as they liked; it was

rumoured that some commanders brought in bus-loads of Vietnamese women for hire to “keep morale high” (Van Devanter 2001: 122); but military personnel regarded nurses’ sexual relationships as “unladylike” and made them ask for birth control pills, which “were kept in a safe place and rarely dispensed” (122). Moreover, women could not be heroes; when a nurse courageously rescues a man from a burning helicopter (the men had run away), the head nurse recommends her for a Bronze Star with a “V” for valour, but when it arrives, the “V” is missing, because “they didn’t award things like that to nurses” (90). Carol Acton (2001) asserts that acts of courage like this “subverted the military male ideal of physical bravery [...] and challenged the binaries set up in wartime, whereby women were the protected, men the protectors. In the military mind a female nurse rescuing a male combatant was a clear reversal of the natural order of things, and therefore could not be acknowledged, let alone rewarded, with a medal” (90). Once “back in the world,” Van Devanter learns that nurses did not “count” as veterans when members of the Vietnam Veterans Against the War reject their offers to help stop the war (Van Devanter 2001: 231); when she begins writing her memoir, she discovers that nurses literally “didn’t count”: no institution had kept official records of how many women served [in any capacity] in Vietnam, and when she went looking for funding for the nurse-veterans’ project, she found that a feminist magazine like *Ms.* did not think nurses counted, although *Playboy* did. The military had not bothered to check on the physical and mental health of nurse-veterans, and most V. A. hospitals had no facilities for gynecological treatment, either. It had made no provisions for women whose cancer, chloracne, or children born with birth defects might have been caused by exposure to Agent Orange (291). In the “Afterword, 2001,” Van Devanter attests that she was repeatedly denied financial assistance after having been diagnosed with the types of illnesses that could only have been caused from exposure to toxic chemicals in Vietnam (323).

But old myths die hard: Van Devanter believes so fervently in American ideology that she tunes out the anti-war comments uttered by Carl, a thirtysomething doctor whose fine surgical skills and gentle way of dealing with patients initially earn her respect and then her love, and she ignores similar negative remarks expressed by Father Bergeron, another man she admires who has been in Vietnam since the 1950s (131). Instead, she insists that the Vietnam War is a “noble cause to preserve democracy” and publicly displays her pride by always wearing a “rhinestone flag” on her fatigue shirt (87). Van Devanter’s belief in her country’s superiority is further shored up by the moon landing, which her father claims is a “great, great achievement” for the US (115); he continues to incite her patriotism by telling her how proud he is to have a daughter in the army and how much he is “living vicariously” through her (115).

Although Van Devanter admits after her first “Mas-Cal, short for mass casualty situation” that “no amount of warning could ever have prepared [her] for the sheer numbers of mutilated young bodies that the helicopters kept bringing in,” many of them “dead bodies in Glad bags” (Van Devanter 2001: 95), Norman

asserts that military leaders were to blame because they had failed to prepare nurses for Vietnam with the same rigor as for men: “it was as if government planners believed nurses were going to ‘just nurse’ rather than to spend a year working long hours [...] and, at times, witnessing and participating in the dangers of war” (Norman 1990: 13). While the military had insisted that nurses learn useless skills such as how to march and spit polish boots, it failed to inform them that the soldiers who needed mending or patching up were fighting in a guerrilla war where the tactics were particularly savage. American troops were constantly exposed to specialized, well-hidden booby traps, often aimed directly at castration or dismemberment. Permanently crippling or disabling wounds such as multiple amputations were sustained at a far greater rate in Vietnam than in previous wars. As Schwartz writes, in spite of those horrendous wounds, “helicopter ‘dust-offs’ quickly shuttled casualties from the battlefield to medical units; this, combined with the sophistication of trauma care, saved many men who would have died in previous wars [...]. Less than 2% of the casualties treated died as a result of their wounds” (Schwartz 1987: 170). Moreover, “the severity of the injuries [nurses] witnessed was often overwhelming” and exacerbated by the fact that “the soldiers were so young” (Schwartz 1987: 170). Additionally, “napalm and phosphorus incendiaries complicated the injuries with massive, smoldering burns” (Schwartz 1987: 170) and, as Van Devanter is horrified to discover, many of these burns, which scarred men’s bodies beyond recognition, were often a result of “friendly fire” (Van Devanter 2001: 85).

Even though nurses like Van Devanter were under the impression that the normal duty day was ten to twelve hours, six days a week, in reality, during mass casualty situations, “nurses worked around the clock without sleep to care for the enormous numbers of casualties” (Schwartz 1987: 171). Inexperienced nurses found triage especially difficult: “the priorities of a military casualty situation are the reverse of the natural inclination: the most seriously wounded are relegated to the lowest treatment priority [...]. Although this sounds reasonable on paper, it was a crisis for nurses to actually look at patients and implement the policy” (Schwartz 1987: 171). In many regards, as Susan K. Alexander writes, “the cultural ideal of woman as healer and the occupational expectation of a nurse to act as a healer could not be fulfilled in Vietnam. It was simply impossible” (Alexander 1984: 17). But nearly six months pass before Van Devanter realizes that, like many other nurses, “the values [she brought with her] to Vietnam – to help, to heal and to serve humanity – were incongruent with the objectives of war – death, destruction, and devastation” (Schwartz 1987: 169).

Not surprisingly, Van Devanter eventually feels herself in danger of “breaking down” (Van Devanter 2001: 97), but she heeds Carl’s advice: in order to survive, he insists, she must “‘tell [her]self that they’re not people [she’s] working on, but merely bodies [...]. This is a factory’” (97), and for some time, his counsel works. But after Carl goes “back to the world” to join his wife and family in the US, Van Devanter finds it increasingly difficult to sustain that “be tough” (105,

119, 125, 134) approach, because Carl was “the one who helped [her] deal with all the death and destruction” (119). She writes:

[w]here there is nothing remotely resembling sanity around you, you tend to try to find some sense of normalcy, some feeling of comfort, some communication with another person on a level removed from that environment of destruction [...]. Inevitably, the time will come when you’ve finally experienced all the pain, emptiness, and ugliness you can stand. And in that final quiet moment, all you want to do is lean against somebody and cry so they can hold you and love you and remind you that, after it’s finished, you’re still human. (105–06)

(Similarly, when Ehrhart receives a Dear John letter from his sweetheart Jenny, he is devastated because she represented “something beautiful in the midst of the inescapable ugliness” [Ehrhart 1989: 132].) Because Carl’s departure makes the war “look different than the one [she] had believed in only a few weeks earlier,” Van Devanter suddenly starts “*listening* to the local discontents who rail [...] against Nixon, Congress, the joint chiefs of staff and the whole U. S. government” and paying attention to “stories of corrupt South Vietnamese officials, U. S. Army atrocities, and a population who wanted nothing more than to be left alone so they could return to farming their land” (Van Devanter 2001: 134, emphasis mine). Moreover, much as she is appalled by Viet Cong atrocities, she also realizes that “clean-cut, wholesome American boys could be as brutal as the ‘godless communists’” (135). Her letters home, routinely upbeat until that point, now disparage the war effort: she accuses the government of lying because the negotiations they promised have not resulted in an end to war, but to more wounded GIs than she has seen since she’s been in Vietnam, and accordingly, her signature becomes “Peace, Lynda,” instead of “Love, Lynda” (139). Although Van Devanter remains resolute that she is “doing a job that’s needed” (139), she survives only by refusing to cry: she rationalizes that “[i]f you can’t feel, you can’t be hurt. If you can’t be hurt, you’ll survive” (145).¹

But according to nursing veteran Winnie Smith, “the need to weep, to mourn these broken young men, is the culturally prescribed role for women in wartime as well as being a ‘normal’ emotional response, but professional combat nursing is incompatible with mourning”; if nurses lose control, men will die (qtd. in Acton 95). Ultimately, Acton argues, Van Devanter reaches a point “where she can no longer stand her own control or position of power. Moreover, underlying [her] narrative is the implication that to enact this prescribed female role and break down is to awaken to the horror of the masculine arena of war. Such realization becomes the point where [she] recognize[s] that [her] denial of emotion, a stereotypically male response to military demands, makes [her] complicit in the act of war” (Acton 2001: 95). Acton further observes that “the collapse of the conservative political and religious identity, as well as the nursing ideology [she] brought to the war” becomes

a “recurring metaphor for the futility of the Vietnam War and, by extension, for the collapse of her own identity confronted by that futility” (2001: 95).

Van Devanter’s “be tough” approach falters midway through her tour of duty when she is required to treat a “young bleeder” whose face has been partially shot away. At first, she regards him as merely another “faceless, nameless boy who pumps blood out as fast as she can pump it in,” but when she picks up a snapshot that has fallen out of his clothing and reads the inscription on the back, “Gene and Katie, May 1968” (Van Devanter 2001: 169), she struggles to “fight back tears,” for she realizes that Gene is not just another casualty to “try to sew back together again,” but “a person who could love and think and plan and dream” (170). Although Van Devanter attempts to revert to her “be tough” stance, she cannot sustain it and two days later breaks down completely: “all I could see was Gene, [...] Gene and Katie, May 1968. Then [...] I began seeing all of them – the double and triple amputees, boys with brain injuries, belly wounds, and missing genitals [...] all the images came crashing back on me. I lost control and became hysterical – I became a wild person, sobbing and shaking uncontrollably. ‘I want my father,’ I scream, ‘I want my mother, I want to go home, Vietnam sucks, we don’t belong here. This is wrong’” (173). The myths she carried with her to war are now completely destroyed because, as Acton (2001: 96) suggests, Gene and Katie, who appear to be dressed for a high school prom, are the “image of secure Middle America” (96) where Van Devanter can never return to: “Nor can she recreate [her parents’] safe world for another generation. Her beliefs, a combination of a Catholic upbringing where ‘martyrdom was the Catholic girl’s equivalent of growing up to be Babe Ruth,’ and of Kennedy’s ‘Ask what you can do for your country,’ are shattered in this one scene” (Acton 96). At that point, she throws away the “rhinestone flag,” but then feels nothing; that “emptiness” (Van Devanter 2001: 238, 258, 260, 274, 281, 285) which will remain with her long after she returns from the war.

Like Van Devanter, Ehrhart receives several clues before he leaves home that his blind patriotism might be misguided. Two of his favourite high-school teachers in Perkasio (one a former Marine who fought in Korea) try to convince him that his enlistment might be precipitous, that he might not be in command of all the facts, and advise him to complete his college degree first. The woman who teaches a class in public speaking asks Ehrhart to argue against the Vietnam War at a well-attended debate; after several weeks of solid research, Ehrhart concludes that the United States had “picked the wrong place to take a stand beside the wrong ally, and we ought to cut our losses and get out while the getting was good” (Ehrhart 2002: 195), but his belief that democracy could only be maintained once the Americans had defeated the Viet Cong was so strong that he “didn’t believe a word of what he said” (2002: 196). Both teachers’ efforts to delay his signing up prove futile, however, because Ehrhart confesses that he “had dreams of glory, a lifetime of certitude, and a whole community four-square behind [him]. [He] was going to be a Marine, just like John Wayne in *The Sands of Iwo Jima*” (Ehrhart 1989: 199). (Years later, Ehrhart recalls a road trip he took to California, where the Watts riots and his own exposure to prejudice against Af-

rican Americans informed him that “freedom” was not available to all Americans, but these thoughts did not “intrude for long or very deeply” [1985: 127].)

Not even the grueling training at Parris Island, South Carolina, shakes Ehrhart’s faith in the rightness of the cause because according to Tal (1996: 127), “combat soldiers were physically removed from the communities with which they identify, and relocated to a new and foreign environment where previous notions of self were rendered useless. Basic Training is designed to traumatize the recruit, to systematically strip him of his civilian identity. The development of a new set of personal myths is required.” Moreover, “the recruit brings with him to Basic Training a set of values, beliefs, and expectations about his rights as an individual member of society [...]. 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” (Tal 1996: 127–28). The mature Ehrhart echoes this description when he writes that “boot camp is one of the great missionary strongholds of Western civilization. Cut off from love and warmth, familiarity or any semblance of human kindness, surrounded by large angry DIs [drill instructors] skilled in foreign languages and deviant behavior, in fear for your mortal life every single moment, you find yourself yearning for anything stable and comforting to sustain you in your constant need” (Ehrhart 1989: 18). Moreover, the three goals of Basic Training, writes Peter Bourne, “are to destroy the soldier’s civilian identity, to force him to acknowledge and accept discipline from the military, and to convince him of the validity and justice of the military system. Armed with this revised perspective on life, the recruit is sent off to battle, believing that he has earned the right to join the masculine ranks of the warrior” (qtd. in Tal 128). Canadian journalist and military analyst Gwynne Dyer adds that this kind of training is “more complete and more devastating in a nineteen-year-old than in a twenty-six-year-old” (the average age of soldiers in World War Two) because it is deliberately designed “to fragment the recruits’ identity.” But the most important qualities, Dyer stresses, are “enthusiasm and naivete” (qtd. in Coleman 70), which the gung-ho Ehrhart possesses in spades. It is significant that Ehrhart is seventeen when he enlists, for as Bourne writes, Basic Training “evolves in the guise of a masculine initiation rite that often has a particular appeal to the late adolescent struggling to establish a masculine identity for himself in society. The tragedy is that in a training situation specifically designed to produce soldiers, not civilians, the element of masculine identity that are overwhelmingly emphasized are aggression and obedience” (qtd. in Coleman 69–70).

Peter Kilner reinforces that once soldiers enlist, “it becomes the responsibility of leadership to embed in their training the unquestioning faith that America and its leaders will always and only go to war for moral reasons” (qtd. in Coleman 75). Thus in 1964, when American soldiers began to arrive in Vietnam, they had been told to expect “an oppressive, totalitarian, international Communism. Instead they found themselves embroiled in [...] a civil war and a war for independence” (Coleman 2006: 77). The Americans were thus confounded when they

realized that the Vietnamese neither wanted them there, nor were they grateful for their presence; moreover, the Vietnamese “fought as though they had a genuine sense of purpose” (Coleman 2006: 78). American soldiers’ ignorance was understandable, because as Ehrhart admits, he had been given merely a “one-hour cultural orientation” (Ehrhart 1989: 21), and Van Devanter, too, confesses when she returns years later to Vietnam that she had “never known how many eons these people had faced war. America had been only the last in a long line of countries that had tried to overcome this nation by war for thousands of years” (Van Devanter 2001: 312). She then makes the salient point that if people “think of the enemy as human beings with a history and future,” then it will not be possible to “destroy [them] and their land. You must depersonalize someone to kill him, and that is what the war had done to all of us” (Van Devanter 2001: 312).

But American soldiers had been “drilled to think of the enemy as an inferior life form, as gooks” who did not regard death as tragic nor grieved accordingly (Coleman 2006: 70); hence as Peter Davis observes, American soldiers were placed in a terrible situation when they discovered that “having been led to expect an inhuman enemy, whom they could kill with impunity, they were instead confronted with a society of human beings who bled and wept just like the folks back home. Soldiers were left with a terrible choice: to accept what they had been trained to believe, or to believe the evidence they could see with their own eyes, or feel with their hearts” (qtd. in Coleman 70–71). Ehrhart faces that “terrible choice” when he comes upon a funeral procession near Hoi An and hears the “wailing” of the villagers over the death of a young child. As he watches the Vietnamese pass, he feels almost sick, because “their grief [...] seemed so real” (Ehrhart 1985: 102). As Coleman (2006: 74) adds, “it goes without saying that when it has been drummed into a frightened young soldier that gooks, dinks, slopes, or Commies are all blurred subcategories of the subhuman, the ‘other,’ it becomes virtually inevitable that he will blur the distinctions between North Vietnamese, South Vietnamese, Viet Cong, or civilian.”

Moreover, Robert S. Laufer adds that the situation was compounded because peasant men, women, and children all wore black trousers, floppy tunics, and conical hats; American soldiers’ inability to identify a clearly discernible enemy turned them into walking time bombs and hence fuelled the paranoia that became characteristic of the Vietnam War. Moreover, this war “created a milieu which encouraged the military and the individual soldier to justify a personal broadening of the ‘rules of war’ so that soldiers might succumb to an ‘abusive use of violence,’ raping women, mistreating or killing civilians and unarmed combatants” (Laufer 1985: 39–42). One of Ehrhart’s early poems, the cynical “Guerrilla War,” reflects this dilemma, as the final stanzas read, “It’s practically impossible / To tell civilians / From the Vietcong; After a while, / You quit trying” (Franklin 1989: x). Ehrhart knows whereof he writes, for he confesses to having killed a woman of indeterminate age in a rice field perhaps because, as Kilner argues, soldiers were “conditioned to act without considering the moral repercussions of their actions; they kill without making the conscious decision to do so” (qtd. in Coleman 75).

The ever-honest Ehrhart also admits he has killed an innocent old man “because he had been ordered to do so” (Ehrhart 1989: 24–25); only when he is “back in the world” does he compare his actions to those who exterminated Jews in Nazi Germany because Hitler had ordered them to do so (Ehrhart 1989: 24). According to Herman (1992: 54), men like Ehrhart who personally committed atrocities were the most vulnerable to “lasting psychological damage.” Soldiers also killed indiscriminately because, according to Coleman (2006: 84), “body counts” were the gauge of the success of their mission: “those officers who did not produce dead bodies were threatened with replacement, so counts were often falsified to create the illusion of progress or to excuse American losses [...]. [Thus] any dead Vietnamese became Viet Cong.” Ehrhart is aware that this focus on body counts contributed to the My Lai massacre, but he defends Lieutenant Calley’s actions because he was following orders which came all the way from the Pentagon (Ehrhart 1989: 52). Military command was also often unclear, so that soldiers became unsure of what behaviours were permissible: Ehrhart admits to having participated in the gang-raping of a woman (53) and the senseless destruction of an ancient temple (155–56). Here again, Herman argues that these “meaningless acts of malicious destruction” render soldiers most vulnerable to PTSD (1992: 54).

But as Tal observes,

[t]he acts soldiers commit in battle are comprehensible only in a world defined by war [...] In “Beyond Atrocity,” Robert Lifton argues that much violence can be done by men desperate to define their world in a coherent manner. He calls atrocity “a perverse quest for meaning, the end result of a spurious sense of mission, the product of false witness.” At My Lai, for example, they fired upon women and children because they identified them with their elusive enemies, and hence felt they were finally involved in a “genuine military action,” and that they “had finally put their world back in order.” But the “order” of war cannot be assimilated into the order of civilian life, and the combat soldier returning home cannot recall his wartime experiences without negating the national myth. (Tal 1996: 128)

Thus when Ehrhart returns stateside from his first tour of duty in Vietnam in 1968, he can only “define his world” in terms of war; at the air station in North Carolina he is assigned to, Ehrhart is “depressed and unhappy, drinking heavily and thinking suicidally” (Ehrhart 1989: 55) perhaps because, as Gerald Linderman observes, if a soldier (like Ehrhart) remembered his war experience correctly, “he would [be] forced to acknowledge his role as victim of a government and a social order that had exploited him” (qtd. in Tal 119). Ehrhart is not yet, however, ready to accept that the country he loves has betrayed him; feeling that he would rather die than remain in America, he asks to return to Vietnam and is furious when assigned to the Pacific.

Another problem which contributed to the traumatization of both Ehrhart and Van Devanter can be located in the military’s undermining of group cohesion. Ac-

According to Coleman (2006: 81), while the military finally understood that “given adequate exposure to combat, anyone would eventually crack” and had thus taken steps “to protect soldiers from psychiatric wounds” by reducing their terms of service to twelve months (thirteen for Marines), their course of action were deeply flawed because it disregarded the importance of the group. The policy, known as “DEROS (Date of Expected Return from OverSeas),” which turned Vietnam into what Grossman calls “a war of individuals,” led to “physical, emotional, and moral isolation” (qtd. in Coleman 81). In addition, “the endless comings and goings, and the interrupted attempts at bonding and trust undermined effectiveness in the short run and sanity in the long run” (Coleman 2006: 81). Furthermore, unlike recruits in previous wars, “soldiers [and nurses] were arbitrarily separated after boot camp from those with whom they had trained. The bonds they had established were severed, and they had to start from scratch, alone in a new community. They were given individual assignments and inserted like interchangeable parts into the military machine. The process was [...] certain to increase the number of psychiatric casualties” (Coleman 2006: 82), circumstances borne out in Van Devanter’s text. She attests that “perhaps one of the saddest things about the war in Vietnam was that the way we went and returned – not in units but as individuals, one at a time – meant that most of us lost track of even the closest friends” (Van Devanter 2001: 317). Van Devanter and her friend Barbara had initially intended to use the “buddy system” because, as Norman observes, the “presence of a friend might help them adjust to the long and difficult working hours and to the world of bunkers, air raid sirens, jungle heat, and typhoons” (Norman 1990: 10), but when Van Devanter falls ill and her graduation is delayed, Barbara goes without her; by the time Lynda locates Barbara again, both are already severely traumatized. Moreover, as Coleman (2006: 82) observes, “in stark contrast to the endless reunions of World War II veterans, Vietnam vets almost never try to contact their former comrades.” Accordingly, Van Devanter writes in the “Afterword, 2001” that although she had been in touch with Barbara once after the war, she never found her again because she “withdrew from any identity as a Vietnam veteran and let too many years pass” (Van Devanter 2001: 317–18). Similarly, Ehrhart, who was issued orders to DEROS in the middle of a firefight, remarks that he does not even know how many of his mates made it home because he ““never heard from any of ’em again. Strange, ain’t it? You spend all that time with people, really feel like you’re pretty tight – then all of a sudden it’s all over, just like that, like they never even existed except in your own head”” (Ehrhart 1989: 191).

Unlike World War II soldiers who often spent “weeks coming home on troopships, in the company of the men with whom they had fought in the war,” Vietnam veterans were offered “no debriefings, no decompression, no welcoming crowds, no accorded honor. There was no communalization of their trauma” (Coleman 2006: 86). Consequently, “returning soldiers [and nurses] often felt traumatized for a second time when they encountered public criticism and rejection of the war they had fought and lost” (Herman 1992: 32). Correspondingly,

when Van Devanter is dumped off miles from the San Francisco airport and is forced to hitchhike there on her own, she is called an "Army pig" and a "Nazi bitch" (Van Devanter 2001: 210), but it is her mother's rejection of her war experiences (Van Devanter attempts to show her slides of Vietnam so that her family will understand what it was like) that proves especially injurious because it leads Van Devanter to conclude that "Vietnam would never be socially acceptable. Not here, not anywhere in the world" (220). Like Ehrhart, she discovers that although people frequently ask what Vietnam was like, no one wants to hear the truth. While nursing at Walter Reed Army Hospital, she learns that her nursing colleagues, if they recognized at all that women served overseas, regarded her as a "fool," and men assumed she would "leap into bed" with them "at the drop of a hat" (225). Her sense of self shattered, Van Devanter decides it is easier to deny she was a vet, and she does not break that silence for many years. According to Tal (1996: 124),

[i]f a trauma victim perceives herself as suffering alone, and has no sense of belonging to a community of victims, she will remain silent, imagining that her pain has no relevance to the larger society. She will likely come to believe that she has, in some way, brought her suffering upon herself. The internalization of blame for the evils that befall one is difficult to escape even when the notion of community exists; it is all but impossible to avoid when one feels no connection with a community of victims.

Van Devanter is once again traumatized when she realizes that although she had become "technically competent and work[ed] in the capacity of a first assistant surgeon" while in Vietnam, at Walter Reed (and other civilian hospitals), she was treated as a "totally inexperienced nurse" and warned that she should not think that her experience in Vietnam "meant much back in the States" (Van Devanter 2001: 226). She inevitably finds herself forced back into the traditional role of handmaiden within a male-dominated system, and often loses her patience with patients who grumble about minor ailments. (After the intensity of life in Vietnam, she also finds Americans' conversations on humdrum concerns such as mortgages, bridge clubs, and television programs, exasperating [235].)

Both Van Devanter and Ehrhart are haunted by memories/nightmares of their experiences in Vietnam, the kind of symptom Herman calls "intrusion": traumatized people, she adds, tend to relive events as though they were continually recurring in the present. These traumatic memories are "preserved in an abnormal state, set apart from ordinary consciousness" (1992: 34) and, unlike normal memories, they "lack verbal narrative and context; rather, they are encoded in the form of vivid sensations and images" (1992: 38). Although the "ordinary response to atrocities is to banish them from consciousness, they tend not to stay buried for long" (Herman 1992: 1). Both Van Devanter and Ehrhart attempt to either re-press or avoid re-living these traumatic memories (Van Devanter's about Gene, Ehrhart's about the civilians he killed), a common strategy also connected

to the periods of numbness and dissociation called “constrictive cycles,” which serve to “keep the traumatic experience walled off from ordinary consciousness” (Herman 1992: 45) and, as Abram Kardiner confirms, may “allow only a fragment of the memory to emerge as an intrusive symptom” (qtd. in Herman 1992: 45). Victims come to dread or fear these symptoms, because they “overwhelm the ordinary capacity to bear feelings”; and the “attempt to avoid reliving the trauma too often results in a narrowing of consciousness, a withdrawal from engagement with others, and an impoverished life” (Herman 1992: 42). Moreover, the “two contradictory responses of intrusion and constriction establish an oscillating rhythm” which finds victims attempting to find a “satisfactory balance,” but instead they become caught between “floods of intense, overwhelming feeling and arid states of no feeling at all” (Herman 1992: 42). Both Ehrhart and Van Devanter attempt to control their intrusive symptoms by self-medicating with alcohol and other drugs, but as Herman asserts, substance abuse not only “ultimately compound[s] [victims’] difficulties and further alienate[s] them from others,” it also “keeps the traumatic experience walled off from ordinary consciousness,” and thus “prevents the integration necessary for healing” (Herman 1992: 45). Herman then adds:

[s]imilar oscillations occur in the regulation of intimacy. Trauma impels people both to withdraw from close relationships and to seek them desperately. The profound disruption in basic trust, the common feelings of shame, guilt, and inferiority, and the need to avoid reminders of the trauma that might be found in social life, all foster withdrawal from close relationships. But the terror of the traumatic event intensifies the need for protective attachments. The traumatized person therefore frequently alternates between isolation and anxious clinging to others. (Herman 1992: 50)

Consequently, Ehrhart, who “doesn’t want to be alone with his thoughts” (Ehrhart 1989: 62) and hates sleeping alone (105), engages in a series of “one-night stands” or unsatisfactory brief affairs, as does Van Devanter. While Van Devanter eventually finds challenging work, earns respect as a dialysis nurse, and finds a good man to marry – the first to show any interest in listening to what she experienced in Vietnam – she continues to suffer from nightmares, depression, “semi-annual” breakdowns, and suicidal thoughts; because she has not come to terms with her war experiences, as Tal suggests is typical of sufferers, she becomes “a liminal figure who remains, like a ghostly Cassandra, on the fringe of society” (Tal 1996: 122).

Although Van Devanter becomes radically transformed midway through her tour of duty when she recognizes that the reasons the American government gives for its involvement in Vietnam are too insubstantial to support the weight of so much suffering and death, it takes Ehrhart much longer to comprehend that Americans are not winning hearts and minds in Vietnam, perhaps because, as Gregory Bateson explains, “people have many mechanisms to avoid assimilating

disturbing information [...]. There is a sort of subconscious but intentional ignorance in operation in human beings. We do not notice a great deal of what we do not want to notice. What is disturbing can be ignored until (and often well after) it becomes dangerous to continue to ignore it” (qtd. in Tal 134–35). Accordingly, as Tal writes, the “entire autobiography is about Ehrhart’s inability to learn lessons. The book fully articulates the liminal space inhabited by the survivor who still cannot integrate his wartime experience with his life in the postwar world” (Tal 1996: 103).² For example, while a freshman at Swarthmore College, he hears that Nixon has invaded Cambodia. Instantly, he flies into a violent rage and strikes his girlfriend. But just as quickly, he grasps that he has no excuse for his behavior – there was no danger, no officer barking orders (Ehrhart 1989: 87): he has reacted this way because the military has trained him to employ violence during any situation, and “the war was simply that fact on a grander scale” (Casale 2006: 262). Because he still identifies with American cultural myths, the glaring moment of self-realization passes and he reverts to the typical solution of attempting to drink himself into oblivion. But when he hears on the radio that the Ohio National Guard have killed four guiltless students at Kent State University, he declares it is time to “face up to the hard, cold, utterly bitter truth I’d tried to avoid for nearly three years. The war was a horrible mistake, and my beloved country was dying because of it” (Ehrhart 1989: 88). He then declares, somewhat melodramatically, that “It was time to stop the war. And I would have to do it” (88). Although he devotes time to making anti-war speeches, he cannot bring himself to join the Vietnam Veterans Against the War because he thinks they are “totally unhinged, the whole lot of them with one foot in the psycho ward” (162). Moreover, he still cannot bear to part with his medals – and he had plenty, including the Purple Heart – even though members of the VVAW had hurled theirs onto the steps of Congress (163).

Doubts in his belief in American hegemony begin to mount, however, and once he begins to read and investigate the dubious history of America’s lengthy involvement in Vietnam, he wonders why he had not been informed by his teachers, or the government, or popular magazines before he went to Vietnam: “Had people been so ignorant, or had I been lied to deliberately?” (162). When his reading leads him to discover that “everything” he believed in – Thomas Jefferson, JFK, Guadalcanal, the Bill of Rights – might be a lie, “it made [his] heart want to explode with pain” (162). Although he does not know why he suddenly wants to attend a protest march in Washington – he had previously regarded “marching as an unjustifiable defiance against a country he wants desperately to love” (161) – once there, he joins a group of peaceful demonstrators sitting on the steps of the Justice Department singing protest songs and chanting anti-war slogans. Suddenly, the cops, dressed in riot gear and carrying clubs and riot shields, holler, “[t]his is an illegal demonstration” (167) and immediately carry out a violent attack on the protestors. Ehrhart feels as if he has stumbled into a mortar attack, but “this time [he] had no weapon, no flak jacket or helmet, no way to defend [him]self, no protection of any kind. Was this what it felt like to be a peasant in

Vietnam, [he] wondered, wanting to throw up?" (166). His identification with the innocent victims of American foreign policy brings him to an ideological crisis, but it is the publication of Daniel Ellsberg's *Pentagon Papers* in 1971 which forces Ehrhart to realize that "everything he [had] believed in for eighteen years and had desperately tried to cling to through four more years of pestilence and famine had suddenly crumbled into ashes" (172). The war had not been a "mistake," but "a calculated, deliberate attempt to hammer the world by brute force into the shape perceived by vain, duplicitous power brokers" (172). He is devastated when he realizes that he had gone to war "for a pack of dissembling criminals who'd defined morality as whatever they could get away with. For a bunch of cold-blooded murdering liars in three-piece suits and uniforms with stars who'd dined on fine white porcelain plates while year after year they'd sent the children of the gullible halfway around the world to wage war on a nation of peasant rice farmers and fisherpeople who had never wanted anything but their own country free of foreigners, who had wanted only to grow their crops and catch their fish and live. If only I had known it when it mattered" (173). Like Van Devanter, he reaches the conclusion that he had never "counted": "For such men, I had been willing to lay down my life. And I had been nothing more to them than a hired gun, a trigger-man, a stooge, a tool to be used and discarded, an insignificant statistic" (175).³ His continued investigation into American history leads him to more ugly truths, perhaps because, as Tal (1996: 125) writes, "survivors can make sense of their suffering by creating a historical context." Ultimately, Ehrhart concludes that "[t]he United States doesn't give a big rat's ass about freedom or justice or democracy for anybody, and we never have. What we want is freedom to do business on our own terms and as much of the damned pie as we can grab. It doesn't have a damned thing to do with communism or socialism or any other ism" (Ehrhart 1989: 181).

Whereas Ehrhart embarks on his journey of self-discovery and self-education by reading books which inform him that American leaders have been acting out of greed, malice, or pride for decades, if not centuries, Van Devanter's begins after she becomes involved, by chance, with the Vietnam Veterans of America when her husband Bill arranges to make a radio documentary on the newly formed organization.⁴ Recognizing they had forgotten all about women veterans, the organizers ask her to take charge of the "VVA Women Veterans Project" (Van Devanter 2001: 289). Once she begins to think about all of the people "who might need help," she no longer has time for her own problems (289). She easily obtains a diploma in psychology from Antioch University, learns as much as she can about PTSD (which matches her own psychological profile [and Ehrhart's]),⁵ writes an article "on the young bleeder," after which she is asked to testify (unsuccessfully) on behalf of a veteran suffering from PTSD who has killed a police officer. Speaking at the trial is difficult, however, as is typical of PTSD victims, because she finds herself transported back to Vietnam and suffering "heinous nightmares" (295). Fortunately, Shad Meshad, a V. A. counselor and hard-working advocate for Vietnam veterans' rights spots her distress and insists she join a therapy pro-

gram, which saves her life: “it was as if I were exorcising a ghost that had haunted me for a decade” (296). Meshad convinces her that she no longer has to keep up a “tough front,” that is all right to “hurt,” and that it is all right “to ask for help” (297). Most significantly, when he tells her that he has “enormous respect” for nurses – “You were my heroes” – Van Devanter “[feels] reborn” (297), her pride in being a veteran restored. Much as she makes steady progress, as Tal observes is typical of most survivors, she “never gets used to” trauma (1996: 122); it is a “transformative experience, and those who are transformed can never entirely return to a state of previous innocence” (Tal 1996: 119). Some victims manage to become “postliminal” by writing their stories, because “expression, in the form of narration, is frequently a step on [that] journey”; survivors are “rewriting the traumatic events that severed their connections to the rest of society” (Tal 1996: 122).

Tal observes that “survival literature tends to appear at least a decade after the traumatic experience” (1996: 125); accordingly, Van Devanter produces her memoir in 1983. Similarly, Ehrhart, whose first published poems appeared in the VVAW-sponsored anthology *Winning Hearts and Minds* (1972), publishes his first memoir, *Vietnam-Perkasie* in 1983 and *Passing Time* in 1989. In writing these memoirs, Ehrhart and Van Devanter are no longer “hurt lockers,” but have become “disturber[s] of the peace,” or what Terrence Des Pres describes as “runner[s] of the blockade men erect against knowledge of ‘unspeakable’ things. About these [they] aim to speak, and in so doing [they] undermine [...], without intending to, the validity of existing norms” (qtd. in Tal 121). Since the late 1960s, Ehrhart has produced a steady stream of poems and essays (not exclusively about the Vietnam War), and three memoirs, which make the point that “his traumatic suffering was seemingly without purpose, arbitrary, outside the framework of meaning” (Tal 1996: 121): thus he writes “from the need to tell and retell the story of the traumatic experience, to make it real both to the victim and the community” (Tal 1996: 137). But Tal further argues that each traumatized author is “a storyteller with a mission [...]. Each one [...] affirms the process of storytelling as a personally reconstitutive act, and expresses the hope that it will also be a socially reconstitutive act – changing the order of things as they are, and working to prevent the enactment of similar horrors in the future” (1996: 121). In “re-telling the war,” trauma victims are also engaged in the “necessary rebuilding of shattered *personal* myths” (Tal 1996: 117).

After Van Devanter became involved with the VVA organization, which led to many years of treatment in psychotherapy, she stopped drinking. Although she ended up divorcing Bill, they remained close friends until his death. In 1984, she married again, went back to nursing, and claims not to have felt so fulfilled in her career since Vietnam (Van Devanter 2001: 323). The process of storytelling appears to have been “personally reconstitutive,” but she has also engaged in “socially reconstitutive acts” which blur the distinctions between the two. For example, she met a man who was “the embodiment of Gene”; because he was so badly disfigured (and hence felt he should have been left to die in Vietnam),

he was suffering from a lot of anger, which Van Devanter helped dissipate (300). But political activism, which is an essential component of the healing process, seeks change: hence Van Devanter was instrumental in bringing together nursing veterans, who then formed a support system which assembles groups, obtains counseling, and disseminates information about entitlement to veterans' benefits. These support groups organized the construction of the Vietnam Women's Memorial in Washington and individual members work with the army to make "damn sure" that nurses are not sent to war without being properly prepared (318). As well, every V. A. facility in the world has a women veterans' coordinator to help women obtain needed health care: women can easily negotiate V. A. loans to pursue homes, and they can also apply for educational assistance through the GI Bill (320), among other benefits. Van Devanter herself spent many years traveling around America helping to improve veterans' lives and training counselors (319). But in 1994, Van Devanter became seriously ill; she had given birth to a daughter with several heart and intestinal defects and other problems possibly connected with her exposure to chemicals in Vietnam. Eventually, Van Devanter was diagnosed with an auto-immune, collagen-vascular disease which attacked many of her vital organs and bones; after numerous operations and surgeries, she died in 2002 at the age of fifty-five (323).⁶

After his long and torturous journey, Ehrhart seems to have arrived at a good place. He has a wife who loves him, a "daughter who is precious beyond words, and a pen which gives him his 'voice'" (Ehrhart 2002: 58). Writing about the war "was a way to get at what had happened to [him] and why and how [he] felt about it. [He] began to articulate [his] soul and the wound it carries. [He] found a way to try to tell people what [he has] learned and what [he has] paid for that knowledge" (Ehrhart 2002: 56). As a result of his experiences in Vietnam, Ehrhart has rejected violence entirely: he cannot even kill a fish. He also decided to become a teacher, and teaching, he asserts, makes him "feel like [he is] doing something worth doing. [He] hadn't imagined [him]self capable of touching lives without hurting them. That [he] could do it, and do it well, made the wound in [his] soul a little smaller" (Ehrhart 2002: 56). Continually surprised that Americans continue to put so much faith in their government, and angered that the Vietnam War has been subject to revisionary history which has now returned it to "noble cause" status, he writes that he occasionally feels compelled to inform young people "what is happening out there in the world for them," because "[his] deepest fear as a teacher and as a human being is that one day some student [of his] will point an accusing finger back across the years and cry out in anguish: 'Why didn't you tell me?'" (Ehrhart 2002: 57). His poem "The Teacher" (Ehrhart 2002: 57) urges students to pay attention: "I swore an oath to teach you / all I know - / and I know things / worth knowing."

But as H. Bruce Franklin writes in his "Foreword" to *Passing Time*, Ehrhart's warnings have been largely futile, for "the message at the heart of this book is one that 'power brokers' surely do not want the nation now to hear or remember. Because men like these control corporate publishing and the major media, one

can hardly expect that *Passing Time* will ever be ballyhooed” (1989: xiv), and it certainly has not been, as the scant critical attention paid to the memoir attests. Like Ehrhart, Van Devanter tells “things worth knowing,” but her *Home Before Morning* has also been largely ignored because, as Cynthia Enloe has written, Van Devanter is “telling what happened in real life to a woman nurse in wartime. She is telling what we are not supposed to know about women in wartime. The armed forces may get nervous when nurses start telling their stories because they reveal so much about the nature of war itself. Not only the military gender structure is being protected by military nurses’ silence; the basic legitimacy of the military as a pillar of civilized society is being protected by their silence. A nurse who *talks* of war from a military hospital [...] is a dangerous woman” (1983: 113). Although Enloe uttered these remarks in 1983, anecdotal evidence indicates that Van Devanter is still a “dangerous” woman, for when I visited the Women in Military Service for America Memorial in Arlington, Virginia, in February 2010, I did see a dog-eared copy of *Home Before Morning* inconspicuously placed at the bottom of an exhibition on nurses in wartime. But then, when I searched in vain for a copy of the book in the otherwise-well-stocked bookstore, I learned, upon inquiry, that none of the women who worked there had ever heard of Van Devanter or her memoir, either. Apparently, the “message at the heart of this book” is one that the military “surely does not want the nation to hear or remember,” either.

Notes

- 1 Van Devanter has failed to notice that being a soulless automaton might have serious repercussions, because around this time, a male nurse, who “never showed the least bit of emotion” (Van Devanter 2001: 140), attempts suicide.
- 2 Ehrhart’s back-sliding resembles the tale of the Greek king Sisyphus, who was doomed to spend eternity rolling a bolder up a hill, only to watch it roll back down again. Even as his suspicions about the appropriateness of America’s military operation in Vietnam increase, Ehrhart nevertheless joins the Marine Corps Reserves; he gets a tattoo with the Marine Corps insignia in 1970(!); and he signs up to teach riflery at a kids’ summer camp. Ehrhart justifies the work by claiming he needs money, and Tal calls these acts of “insanity,” but it seems more likely, however, that they indicate Ehrhart’s intense desire to feel that his time in Vietnam has meant something.
- 3 Like Van Devanter, whose claims for financial assistance when she falls ill as a result of her service in Vietnam are denied, Ehrhart never receives money or treatment for his hearing loss. Moreover, he complains numerous times that the army does not provide sufficient money for his undergraduate education.
- 4 For a brief account of the differences between the various Vietnam veterans’ organizations, see Tal (10–11).
- 5 See Van Devanter’s thorough description of the symptoms of PTSD (290).
- 6 Ehrhart and Van Devanter had become close friends. See “Home Before Morning,” the poem Ehrhart (2003) dedicated to her in *The North American Review* 88(2), 26.

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