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The Vietnam War: 50 Years On

Writer Norman Mailer joined the military to fight the Second World War in Europe. Harvard-educated Mailer also was putting together the Great American Novel of World War Two, which is why he was asking to be assigned to the European theater. A book based on the European experience would sell more copies than one lost in island hopping across the Pacific among places most Americans never heard of and couldn't locate with a map. He was sent to the Pacific against his protest that the real war was in Europe, but *The Naked and the Dead* is still considered to be the best book to come out of WWII.

Ernest Hemingway drove an ambulance in Italy in the First World War, also with the understanding he could take the experience for the next great American war novel. His *Farewell to Arms* succeeded as such, but his Nobel Prize in Literature was awarded more than 30 years later in direct response to *The Old Man and the Sea*, hardly a war story.

The Vietnam War between the Americans and the Vietnamese communists, roughly 1965-1973 for the bulk of the American presence, had to get underway 20 years after the best book to come out of the war, Graham Greene's *The Quiet American*. Point being, that was done - and done well. Who among the Americans was volunteering to fight in South Vietnam to get the goods for the next great American war novel? Probably no one. Not while they were there, anyway. The war was too unpopular, especially among the literary set. And their girlfriends didn't want to hear about it. Frankly, any memories of the Nam was just plain uncool.

Not only uncool but stigmatizing, too. The American elite, the Harvard MFAs in creative writing, were cranking out diatribes against the American involvement, labeling anybody who volunteered as a sap, the way *The Godfather's* Sonny put it describing his brother Michael and Michael's fellow marines.

Then there were the romantic patriots, the guys who felt kind of bad about the unfairness of the draft while they still felt good about America. Their Ivy League buddies made fun of them, and the girls in the Seven Sisters, the liberal judgmental types who were still desirable, wouldn't have anything to do with the old school sports who signed up.

These noble few, the volunteers who signed up expecting to get shot at, included Bill Broyles, editor of Texas Monthly in the late '70s. Broyles was an intellectual and a writer and a highly-regarded editor who more than 10 years after his time in the marines in South Vietnam said it all:

Look, it was my time and my generation's war, and a lot of guys got screwed while a lot of others hid behind their mama's skirts and their daddy's connections and their family doctor's doings and slipped through the draft. Too many of the guys who got screwed, who obeyed the law and served whether they wanted to or not, got all shot up to hell, and the ones who lived through it can be seen in wheelchairs down front at the World Armadillo Headquarters (Austin).

Four studious American combat veterans of the Vietnam War came home and went to school. Most of us did, but these four fine-tuned their writing skills more than most. Their time in the Nam and their stints in writing courses combine for great literature. They are credited with four of the finest books to come out of the Vietnam War, and they are scheduled to share the stage next week at Rice University in Houston. To ask these distinguished, award-winning writers to talk about what it all meant, finally, is a big day in the lives of the combat vets.

The four writers on the panel discussion and their most admired works:

Philip Caputo

A Rumor of War

Larry Heinemann