Article by Ross Walker

DEAR AMERICA: LETTERS HOME FROM VIETNAM

Edited by Bernard Edelman

INTRODUCTION

*Dear America* is an anthology of letters selected from correspondence between soldiers who served in Vietnam and their friends and families at home. Bernard Edelman, a member of the New York Vietnam Veteran Memorial Commission who had served as a broadcast specialist/correspondent in Vietnam, gathered and edited the collection. The New York Vietnam Veteran Memorial, dedicated on 7 May 1985 to honour those who served in the Vietnam War, contains excerpts from these letters, etched into its glass-block wall. There is a description of the memorial at the end of the anthology (p.315).

The collection is also linked to the national Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington DC, dedicated in November 1982. This consists of three parts, the best known of which is the Vietnam Veterans Memorial Wall. Popularly referred to as ‘The Wall’, it has the names of 58,261 servicemen (including 8 women) who were killed or listed as Missing in Action inscribed onto its black polished granite surface (see photograph p.296). Both monuments were built to give long overdue recognition to the American veterans of the Vietnam War; their sacrifices and sufferings had been largely ignored up until then, due to the controversial and unpopular nature of the war. Many Vietnam veterans experienced hostile treatment and abuse on their return to the United States; they became sacrificial figures to appease the national conscience over the war. The Vietnam War was also the first war which the United States lost, so the soldiers had to come to terms with their participation in a national failure.

Many relatives and friends of the American dead and missing leave notes and items of sentimental value near the names of their loved ones: the letter of Eleanor Wimbish, mother of the late William Stocks, which serves as an Epilogue to the collection, is one such offering. Just as the building of the memorials in Washington and New York (and
subsequently in many other American cities) reflected a public impulse to pay homage to the veterans, so too did anthologies such as Edelman’s. (See ‘Further reading’ for comparable texts.)

Edelman’s anthology has had a considerable impact in the two decades since its publication. Readers have visited the memorial in Washington to see the names of letter writers who died in Vietnam. The letters, and Bill Couturie’s film, Dear America, based upon them, have given younger readers and viewers an awareness of a war that took place before their birth, and have reawakened memories and sharpened the impressions of those who lived through it. The anthology was the basis of Paris Barclay’s musical, One Red Flower, whose title is taken from Marion Lee (‘Sandy’) Kempner’s letter to his great aunt (pp.137–8). Stephen Gregory Smith, an actor in the musical, has described how personally affected he was by what he read. He wrote thus, to the late William Stocks:

Billy … I played you in ‘One Red Flower’ … After speaking YOUR words and portraying YOUR life … after talking to YOUR mother and sister, I am haunted by you … I feel like I have established a kind of kinship with a man I never knew … I visit you quite frequently at The Wall … Your words are in my thoughts at all times, and all I can say is thank you … I will be forever in tandem with your words and your soul. (http://www.virtualwall.org/ds/StocksWR01a.htm).

We can see, then, through tributes such as this, that some of the correspondents whose letters are preserved in Dear America still have a life beyond the grave.

The film of Dear America

Bill Couturie’s film, based upon the book, contains, as well as excerpts from many of the letters, engrossing footage from the war itself, clips from home movies and still photographs. You should watch this film with a critical eye, though, as it presents the history of the war in a way that is sometimes misleading, due to the omission of several key facts. It avoids, for example, any acknowledgement that the United States lost the war. It also accepts uncritically the then American government’s account of the ‘Gulf of Tonkin’ incident, which President Johnson dishonestly used to give himself a blank cheque with which to prosecute the war. It also tends to eliminate the Vietnamese from serious consideration: since the war was fought on their soil, this is rather insulting. While it is
possible to construe the film as making an anti-war statement, at times it seems to be promoting a patriotic message at odds with Edelman’s intention in the book.

**BACKGROUND & CONTEXT**

**The United States in Vietnam**

Vietnam has a violent history. Long before the war that was referred to in Vietnam as the ‘war against the Americans’, the Vietnamese fought the Chinese in countless battles stretching back to the 11th century. By 1887 the French had extended their influence over the whole of Indo-China and Vietnam had the status of a French protectorate. The Indo-China War (1946–54), between France and the communist Viet Minh, ended with the defeat and withdrawal of the French at Dien Bien Phu. The Geneva Agreement subsequently divided Vietnam into two separate states, the communist ‘Democratic Republic’ of North Vietnam and the ‘State’ of South Vietnam, at the Seventeenth Parallel – see the map of South Vietnam (pp.26–7) marked ‘DEMILITARIZED ZONE (DMZ).

By the late 1950s the government of communist North Vietnam, headed by President Ho Chi Minh, had determined to unite Vietnam by conquering South Vietnam, which was under the rule of an anti-communist, pro-American government. The United States, largely as a result of its policy of containing communism in South-East Asia, was committed to defending South Vietnam from attack from North Vietnam, and from the Viet Cong, the South Vietnamese guerrillas opposed to the South Vietnam and US forces (and known as ‘Charlie’ by the American soldiers). As the position of the South Vietnamese government weakened, America became increasingly involved in the struggle, until by the end of 1967, under the administration of President Lyndon B. Johnson, there were half a million American troops stationed in South Vietnam. The war was at its height from the years 1965 to the end of 1970, by which time the United States had begun to scale back its role in the war. Most of the letters in Dear America were written by soldiers serving in South Vietnam between these dates; during this period the United States suffered most of its casualties.

Vietnam is a beautiful country, as many of the letter writers remark, and as many tourists there in recent years have also discovered. But it was a terrible place for Westerners to
fight a war. Nickolas Szawaluk’s comment – ‘It’s a beautiful country, but I hate it!’ (p.240) – reflects both these realities. As the letters make abundantly clear, conditions for the Americans fighting in Vietnam were gruelling, indeed the most difficult of any war in which the United States had ever been involved. The ‘grunts’ (infantry) had to fight their way through thick jungle, containing head-high, razor-sharp elephant grass, plagued by insects; they slogged through swamps and mud, searching for the elusive Viet Cong. They also had to endure ferocious tropical heat. The nature of the ‘boonies’ (an abbreviation of the American term ‘boondocks’ – a jungle or wilderness) is well documented in many of the letters, and also in the extract from an Army slide show, quoted at length on page 57 of the text. It was often difficult for the American soldiers to identify their enemy, with the result that many civilians were killed along with bona fide Viet Cong fighters. Killing appeared to become an end in itself, with the daily ‘Body Count’ considered to be the major measure of success.

**Division over the War**

As the conflict dragged on, many Americans back home, as well as many soldiers in the field, became appalled at the savagery of the war, and judged it as immoral. The devastation which American technology caused to the landscape of Vietnam added to the intense and increasing opposition. The war began to seem increasingly futile, too, with no discernible progress being made and no end in sight. Americans were divided over the war and it was difficult for the soldiers in Vietnam to fight without the support of a united country.

Nevertheless, many correspondents express understanding and even sympathy for the anti-war position. The section of the text entitled ‘What Am I Doing Here?’ consistently reflects the doubts many of the soldiers had about the war. Letters from the earlier stages of the war, such as Jack Swender’s letter of 20 September 1965 (p.205), echo the rhetoric of the American government of the time: he claimed that ‘I would rather fight to stop communism in South Vietnam than in Kincaid, Humbolt, Blue Mound, or Kansas City’. He justifies the American role in Vietnam as necessary to help create a free and peaceful society for the South Vietnamese, but even in this letter there is ambivalence as he ends with the words, ‘Well, enough soothing my own conscience and guilt’.
Later writers express much deeper reservations. Dick Strandberg, in late 1967, claims that the war is ‘worse than any war the US has fought to date’ and that ‘I know most people at home are wondering why we’re even bothering to stick it out’ (p.135). Rodney Chastant, writing in the previous month, angrily criticises President Johnson’s management of the war. He wishes that America had a president ‘who has the long view of history and nation-making, who does not overreact to the label communism, … who can understand that a Ho Chi Minh Vietnam is better than a Vietnam of old men and women without the dedication and vision of its young men …’ (p.210). Very wise sentiments, beautifully and powerfully expressed.

THE LETTER WRITING GENRE

People often say that letter writing (sometimes known as ‘snail mail’) is a lost art in these days of emails, SMS, Skype, and other forms of cyber communications. It is fortunate, therefore, that anthologies of letters such as Dear America still exist, preserving the thoughts and feelings of people from many periods of history. The art of letter writing is a very old literary form: some of the earliest novels, such as Clarissa, by Samuel Richardson, and Dangerous Liaisons, by Choderlos de Laclos, were written in the letter, or epistolary, form. ‘Oral history’ – anthologies of interviews with people involved in particular historical events – provides us with a contemporary alternative for analysis. There are many such histories relating to the Vietnam War; some are listed in the ‘Further reading’ section below.

One of the advantages of studying these letters from the war zone is that they give us a powerful sense of immediacy. They are a vital record of impressions of life at war. Many have been composed in the heat of strong emotions, and so we feel a real connection with the writer and his or her feelings. The letters personalise and individualise the sufferings of the writers. They connect the private and the public, for the sometimes deeply intimate feelings of the soldiers are expressed in the context of a very public event. Indeed, the war itself could never really be a private event for these men, for saturation coverage each day by the news media turned it into instant history.

The writing of any letter implies a relationship, a connection between the writer and the recipient. Thus, we are constantly aware of those for whom these letters were originally
intended: the soldiers’ friends and loved ones back home. When reading many of the letters, we are led to wonder what effect the material in them would have on a loving reader. Once read, they no longer belong to the writers alone. Eleanor Wimbish’s letter to her son, used as the Epilogue for the whole collection, is representative of the thoughts and feelings of so many who lost their sons, husbands, brothers, or friends in the war. Her letter shows that the dead go on living in our hearts and our memories – and that one of the ways of expressing our continuing love for them can be through letters.

**STRUCTURE**

*Dear America* is a highly constructed text. That is, even though other people wrote most of the material, the letters themselves have been carefully selected, arranged and ordered by the editor. Bernard Edelman describes something of this process in his Preface, noting that ‘As affinities between letters began to emerge, chapters suggested themselves. The chapters were then put into a sequence that would relate a year’s tour of duty in Vietnam (p.21)’. The titles of each section indicate the progression, from ‘“Cherries”: First Impressions’ to describe the beginning of the soldier’s tour of duty, to ‘We Gotta Get Out of This Place’, to show the soldier’s response to the accumulated stresses of the war zone. The titles of the intervening sections outline dominant aspects or phases of the soldier’s experiences and indicate the different kinds of service. ‘Base Camp: War at the Rear’, for example, shows us that by no means all American servicemen and women in Vietnam were combat infantrymen, otherwise known as ‘grunts.’ Edelman also remarks in his Preface that ‘The letters were … arranged to create allusive connections between them’ (p.21). We can see this by looking, for example, at the three letters placed almost at the end of the ‘World of Hurt’ section (by John Houghton, Richard Cantale and Thomas Pellaton), which strongly reinforce the dominant impression of grief at the loss of a comrade in arms.

Such arrangement of the letters makes it clear that Edelman has structured the book in order to build its emotional impact. This intention can be seen in other ways, too. Almost at the end of the section ‘We Gotta Get Out of This Place’, Edelman has included the poignant letters that Air Force Major Edward Alan Brudno wrote to his wife during the last year of his long imprisonment in North Vietnam. The fact that these letters – as well as the detailed lists of things about which he had been ‘dreaming’ – are a reproduction of the
actual letters, in Major Brudno’s own handwriting, adds to their emotional power. And the placing of them so close to the end of this section, along with the sad information that Brudno committed suicide after surviving his ordeal, places readers in a state of heightened emotion when they arrive at the saddening ‘Last Letters’ section.

The ‘Epilogue’, consisting only of Eleanor Wimbish’s letter to her late son, concludes the collection of letters. We may ask why Edelman has chosen to end the anthology thus. Perhaps it is to remind the reader of the wider effects of war: the suffering it causes to the many people who have known and loved those whose lives it has claimed. It reminds the reader that it is not only the combatants who are the victims of war.

The inclusion of photographs from the war between the pages of each section is an important aspect of the book’s composition to consider. As well as adding a sense of context to each section, the photographs enhance the emotional power of the written text. So often it is the faces of the soldiers which capture our attention: we see the fear on the faces of the young soldiers at the start of the “Cherries” section, and the exhaustion and despair of the soldier slumped in his tent, cigarette in hand (p.102) is evident in the photograph taken by Bernard Edelman. A number of the other photographs were taken by well-known photographers such as Mark Jury and Larry Burrows, whose work became famous when published in Life magazine, during the war. Burrows was known as ‘the compassionate photographer’; the inclusion of some of his pictures here could be seen as an attempt further to arouse our compassion for some of the American victims of this war.

VALUES, THEMES & IDEAS

Courage and endurance

‘Our mind and soul don’t come from our extremities’ (Fred Downs, p.187).

All wars make enormous demands on their participants. The letters in this collection amply demonstrate this, as they detail the terrible stresses that soldiers and civilians in the war zone endured. While war naturally arouses some of the ugliest and most brutal behaviour of which humans are capable, it can also bring out admirable qualities, especially courage and endurance. ‘Our mind and soul don’t come from our extremities’, writes Fred Downs from his hospital bed as he faces life without one of his arms. Many correspondents
express their admiration of such spirit and courage when they see them in action. Robert C. (‘Mike’) Ransom, for example, is in awe of the unflagging persistence of the Vietnamese enemy in the face of apparently overwhelming odds. ‘It is mostly his perseverance that amazes me’, he writes, concluding that ‘anyone who would dig a 200-mile tunnel and who would still do it after being at war for some 30 years must be right!’ (p.40). Fred Downs writes of the need for himself and his comrades to display such persistence: ‘There is something that keeps us fighting past the time when we feel like quitting’ (p.61). Gary Panko, who flew medevacs – medical evacuations by helicopter of wounded Marines – writes movingly of the courage of one patient who ‘looked scared, but didn’t cry or scream once’ (p.52). Such stoicism is described approvingly by many correspondents. ‘Mike’ Ransom realises that ‘I must not show any emotion’ over the loss of a comrade, even though ‘it really tears me up’ (p.48). In any war zone, soldiers fear the loss of control over their emotions; they fear that they may not be able to recover their self-possession if they let their feelings loose.

**Compassion**

Many of the correspondents display a powerful compassion for their suffering comrades, evident from the distress apparent in their writings about their comrades’ ordeal. Nurse Lynda Van Devanter’s 1969 post-Christmas letter (p.190) is memorable in this regard. The ‘Beyond the Body Count’ section of the anthology is marked by an emphasis on, and concern over, the distress of the Vietnamese in the midst of the war. George Williams feels ‘so sorry’ for the orphans (p.105); Thomas Pellaton expresses sympathy for the Vietnamese people as a whole, who ‘must have been a very gentle, graceful people before the war turned them into thieves, black marketeers and prostitutes’ (p.106); and Bruce McInnes succinctly and memorably describes the gulf between the Americans and the Vietnamese with the sentence: ‘They need, and we have’ (p.113).

**Values readers are invited to endorse**

What values, if any, are readers being invited to endorse? Given the preponderance of material in the letters emphasising the waste, suffering and destruction of war, it can be concluded that we are being invited to value peace, and avoid violence when settling political disputes. While there are letters that strike a patriotic note, there is no glorification
of war found in any of them. The bravery that so many of the soldiers demonstrate can be
admired, but it is regrettable that the soldiers were required to display their courage in the
case of such an unnecessary war. Whatever the rights and wrongs of this war – and
these are still hotly disputed – readers are invited to feel sympathy and compassion for the
young men who have suffered – and for those who are still suffering – in wars.

We can also value the capacity that many of these men have to maintain a sense of
humour under great stress, and to make light of their sufferings. This quality is apparent in
‘Sandy’ Kempner’s letters to his family describing how he was wounded in a socially
embarrassing place (pp.182–3), and in Kenneth Peeples’ letter from his hospital bed in
Japan: ‘Don’t worry, I’ll just “scream and bear it” (smile)’ (p.184). Or again, there is George
Olsen’s droll ending to his letter of 31 August 1969: ‘I hope somebody somewhere is
having fun tonight’ (p.119).

The nature and effects of war

The letters in Dear America describe in detail the many ways in which participants in war
are affected by their experience of it. War is both brutal and brutalising: its dehumanising
influence can be seen in the way in which the Vietnamese enemy are described as ‘gooks’
or ‘dinks’. Louis E. Willett reflects on a battle, after which ‘A lot of guys did asshole things
and didn’t think nothing of it at the time – later on realized it’. He continues, ‘Those dead
Cong didn’t seem like people [as] we dragged them into piles and cut their equipment off
them’ (p.74). After the battles, when there is the time and space to reflect, soldiers often
feel a sense of guilt over their actions. Daniel Bailey, for example, writes to his mother
asking that she and her friends send useful items for the children of an orphanage in South
Vietnam, ‘because I feel I may have killed some of their parents and it makes me feel sick
to know they have to go on with nothing’ (p.110). It is known that the combatants of wars
are haunted by their memories for years after the events that produced them occurred;
there is ample evidence of this in the letters.

Above all, we are made aware of ‘the human damage’ (p.106) of the war. There is
constant fear. ‘We are all afraid to die’, writes John Houghton, ‘and all we can do is count
the days till we go home’ (p.200). One soldier remarks on the fear created by combat: ‘we
are all afraid’ (p.127). Intense physical suffering is a given; even if a soldier escapes being
wounded, he has to contend with the appalling conditions in which he has to fight. Victor
David Westphall, among many others, describes this in his letter (p.100). The cumulative effect of the series of letters from men enduring the siege of Khe Sanh in early 1968 is dramatic. Kevin Macaulay, who survived the siege, explicitly describes the results of an enemy attack, and concludes that ‘with all the death and destruction I have seen in the past week I have aged greatly’ (p.80).

The suffering of the Vietnamese

The military euphemism ‘collateral damage’ refers to the accidental death and injury of non-combatants in war. The civilian populations of both South Vietnam and North Vietnam suffered horrendously as a result of the war, and many of the letter writers describe this suffering with compassion. They certainly do not resort to such blandly offensive terms as ‘collateral damage’, and place considerable emphasis on the sufferings of the Vietnamese, especially the children who have been orphaned by the war. Some soldiers feel that America is helping the people of South Vietnam with its presence there, while at the same time noting that that presence has also damaged the country and its people. Bruce McInnes, for example, writes of children who ‘are orphans as a result of the assistance we have given to their country’ (p.112) – whether or not he intends irony here is unclear.

Concern and love for comrades in battle

In all wars, soldiers must be able to rely upon, and to trust, their comrades in arms. The bonds forged are often very powerful and last long after the soldiers have returned from the war. Soldiers in combat often try not to become too attached to their friends, but this can be impossible. We can feel the grief of Richard Cantale, for example, as he writes about his shock at recognising a recently killed soldier as his friend, Donald Rankin. Like a number of soldiers, he describes how much he cried after making this discovery. His final paragraph is a moving testament to his feelings for his friend, as he describes how ‘the heavens cried for him’ (p.199). Also apparent is the sacrificial love of soldiers such as ‘Sandy’ Kempner, who cut short his letter to his maternal grandmother because ‘it is going to rain and I must make sure my men have their gear stored correctly’ (p.114). His self-sacrifice may well have cost him his life, as, though wounded himself, he insisted that another wounded man be cared for before him (p.138).
The need to write, and concern for loved ones at home

These two themes have been linked as they are intricately connected in many of the letters. An interesting feature of some letters is the way the correspondent begins, almost apologetically, by announcing that he is about to tell worrying news and then explains how important it is to him to do so, because the act of writing will help him to unburden himself. The letters of Kenneth Peeples (p.73) and Richard Cantale (p.199) begin in this manner. Raymond Griffiths writes to his friend, Madeline Valesco, in a state of obvious distress about whether or not he should tell his parents and girlfriend about the mortal danger he is in (p.127). Charles Dawson writes to the mother of the late Richard Carlson, several months after his death, explaining in detail how her son died (p.76). We can speculate that Dawson may have been conflicted over how much to tell Mrs Carlson. On the one hand, he would know that she would be distressed by what she learned; on the other, she would almost certainly want to know as much as possible about her son’s final moments of life.

Homesickness and loneliness

Vietnam was a frighteningly unfamiliar country for the young Americans who served there. Few would have had any frames of reference with which to understand a strange culture, history, and landscape. Soldiers in Vietnam often referred to the United States as ‘The World’, as if to suggest that Vietnam was an alien place. Almost all the soldiers must have experienced the loneliness and homesickness that so many described. Terms of endearment to loved ones abound in the letters. ‘I take your picture out quite often and just look at it’, writes Allen Paul, ‘because it’s such a relief from this pitiful place to see such a beautiful being’ (p.51). Rodney Chastant appreciates his mother’s concern ‘that some of the things you write about are trivial’, then reassures her that ‘they aren’t trivial to me’ (p.211). It could be imagined that ‘trivial’ things would be a blessed relief from the experiences of war, a temporary reminder of the sanity of domestic life.

KEY LETTERS

It is hard to select a mere handful of letters for extensive discussion when there are so many estimable letters in the collection. While it could be argued that there is something arbitrary about my selection, I have used these criteria for selection: all the letters give a
powerful sense of the writer’s personality so that readers almost feel they ‘know’ him; all provide excellent insights into the war and even into life itself; and all are excellently written.

Marion Lee (‘Sandy’) Kempner, 20 October 1966 (pp.137–8)

Marion Lee (‘Sandy’) Kempner (born 16 April 1942) was the younger son of a prominent family from the city of Galveston, Texas. After his death in Vietnam on 11 November 1966, his parents published a small volume of his letters written there under the title Letters From Sandy. Since then, his memory has also been perpetuated through the dedication of a room named ‘Sandy’s Room’ in the Rosenberg Library in Galveston, and in the musical One Red Flower.

His letter of 20 October is remarkable for its philosophical nature and insight. It is a statement about the presence and survival of beauty and gentleness, even in the midst of great ugliness and violence. The red flower is a symbol not only of beauty and gentleness, but also of bravery: it was, according to the author, ‘waving gaily in the downpour’. Kempner’s letter speaks to us of both the transience and the permanence of beauty. The red flower ‘will crackle up and die among the thorns’, but it ‘will always live in the memory of a tired, wet Marine, and has thus achieved a sort of immortality’. It has also had its life preserved through the permanence of this letter. Perhaps, too, the author is anticipating his own death in the near future and hoping for a measure of immortality through his letter. It can be speculated that he is deliberately making a statement of his deepest convictions, in the knowledge that he may not live much longer.

The author uses an element of the natural world to comment upon the human world. Just as the flower would still have had its own unique personality and value even if it had never been noticed, so too is each person valuable by virtue merely of their own uniqueness – ‘you are what you are what you are’. We can clearly see the author’s own unique value through his letter. The compliment that he pays his great aunt – when he saw the only thornless flower ‘I immediately thought of you’ – is extraordinarily gracious. It is hard to read the letter without a feeling of sadness that a man who could compose a letter of such beauty and insight lost his life so prematurely.
George Olsen, 31 August 1969 (pp.117–19)

Another excellent writer, George Olsen is represented by a number of letters written to his friend ‘Red’. Like Kempner, he was clearly a highly intelligent man; he reflects thoughtfully upon events and describes them with accuracy, precision, and power. If the letter is read carefully, his thought process can be traced as it unfolds. He is open-minded and perceptive: amidst all the tension generated by his environment, he is still able to see Mars ‘close up for the first time’. The reflection on nature recalls that of Sandy Kempner and his red flower. All the qualities of his other letters are distilled into this long letter. There is so much in it. He begins with a very clear and wry description of his heavily fortified outpost: ‘a green world with a green canvas roof over me, green sandbags all around me, dressed in green camouflage fatigues and sitting on a green cot that once was white …’ It is an outstanding opening, a model sentence designed to create a dominant impression on the reader.

After describing his own apparently contradictory state of mind – ‘fairly miserable – yet strangely content’ – he launches into a graphic description of the ordeal he and his men had to endure six days earlier. His reflections on killing in war are of special interest. Olsen has clearly been shaken by the battle he describes, so much so that he needs to write about it or ‘go out of my mind’. He has been led to question whether there are any victors in war, and to sympathise with – though ultimately not to endorse – the convictions of pacifists. His discussion of pacifism is of wider interest to any student of a collection of letters such as these.

Tom Pellaton, 16 November 1970 (p.198)

Of all the correspondents, Tom Pellaton is perhaps the most unequivocally opposed to the war. The three letters written by him that appear in the anthology are of a piece, due to the feeling of revulsion they express about the war. His letter of 16 November differs from the other two, however, because of the heightened intensity of feeling which it conveys. Pellaton is writing from a feeling of raw shock, frustration and sorrow over the recent loss of a new friend, Paul. He had found a soul mate in this young man, who shared his opposition to the war but ‘got caught up in the system – like so many of us’.
Like other correspondents, Pellaton reaches beyond his immediate environment to seek consolation. He finds comfort in the text of Handel’s religious oratorio, the Messiah. (In later life, Pellaton was ordained as an Episcopal priest.) But the anguish persists; we can feel it acutely in the succession of agonised questions that he asks in rapid succession. One of those questions – ‘Why do we hate ourselves so much that we have to kill each other?’ is very good indeed, the answer to which could shed light on a possible cause of the world’s endless violence and warfare.

Kenneth Peeples, Jr. (23 February 1967) and his parents’ letter to him (21 February 1967), (pp.184–6)

At an earlier stage in the anthology, there is a letter from Kenneth Peeples describing his shock and distress after surviving a bloody battle near the Cambodian border in July 1966. Peeples was unhurt in this battle, but early the following year he was wounded and hospitalised in Japan. From there, he wrote the letter of 23 February, in response to one from his parents, mailed two days earlier. Much of it is taken up with a description of his wound and the trouble it is giving him; while obviously in pain, he is able to describe it with equanimity and sometimes even humour. The reader can sense the relief, the feeling of safety he must have enjoyed, after being evacuated from the war zone.

An interesting aspect of the two letters is their reference to Peeples’ brother Richard who, we gather, is opposed to the war and contemplating registering as a conscientious objector. We can discern here something of a generational split in attitudes to the war. Peeples’ parents (the letter is signed ‘Mom & Pop’ although ‘Pop’ is clearly the author) praise his decision to fulfil his military duty, while expressing concern over his brother’s reluctance to comply; Richard is said to have a ‘chip’ on his shoulder. Peeples makes no attempt to argue directly with his parents over this matter, simply stating that ‘I don’t think it will be a disgrace [for him] to go to jail for something he truly believes in’. We can surmise that Peeples’ first hand experience of the war has given him knowledge and understanding that his parents lack, and has led him to sympathise with his brother’s attitude. We can also assume that the conflict of views between the two generations in this household occurred in many other families throughout the United States.

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DIFFERENT INTERPRETATIONS

This anthology of letters does not require the same kind of interpretation as might be required of a novel or a play, for example. We are confronted with a polyphony (a composition of many sounds) of different voices, rather than the voice of one author. It could be asked if the editor of the anthology, through his selection and arrangement of letters and other material, is deliberately setting out to lead the readers towards a specific view of America’s role in the Vietnam War; or of the war itself; or of war in general. Or has the editor intended the readers to draw their own conclusions from the material provided?

Just as we read a book, so a book reads us. That is, what we see in a book tells us about ourselves – our values, our perceptions, even the life experiences that have led us to privilege certain aspects of that book above others. Senator John McCain’s preface, written for the paperback edition of Dear America, is a case in point. McCain has read the book through the prism of his own experience as a highly honoured Vietnam veteran, an extremely patriotic American, and as a prominent public man, one of the standard bearers of the Republican Party. (The preface, dated 30 January 2002, predates by six years his candidature for the presidency of the United States.) While McCain in no way attempts to glorify the Vietnam War – he suffered too severely in it to do that – he certainly emphasises the patriotic notes struck in the letters, rather than excerpts expressing doubts about the war, and indeed the outright opposition to it, articulated by many of the correspondents. He makes no mention of the domestic divisions and strife that the war sparked in America. Instead, he places the war in the context of the ‘new struggle for freedom’, the ‘War on Terror’ which followed the events of 11 September 2001. His description of America as ‘a proud and triumphant nation’ ignores the fact that the United States did not triumph in Vietnam, and that many of the soldiers who served there were not proud of their service. He thus presents a highly selective reading of the anthology.

Other readers could construe the book as an overtly anti-war work. To do so, they would need to look no further than the many descriptions of the human damage resulting from the war, regardless of whether this was inflicted on Americans or the Vietnamese. To show how Americans serving in Vietnam became steadily disillusioned with the war, the letters of nurse Linda Van Devanter could be cited: at first believing that America was playing a necessary role in the war, within a number of months she disclosed, ‘I’m beginning to feel like it’s all a mistake’ (p.190). The words of medic Charles Dawson, who wrote to the
mother of a dead comrade: ‘I often wonder if what we’re fighting for is worth a human life’ (p.77), could also be quoted. Or reference could be given to the poems in the anthology, most of which take a strongly anti-war stance, and some of which are reminiscent in tone of some of the anti-war poems of World War I.

ESSAY TOPICS

1. ‘The letters in Dear America pay tribute to the human power of endurance.’ Discuss.

2. ‘The letters in Dear America show that war is, above all, futile and destructive.’ Discuss.

3. ‘The letters in Dear America show how necessary it is for people to be able to express their feelings in times of acute stress.’ Discuss.

4. ‘The letters in Dear America show how quickly the participants in war can become disillusioned.’ Discuss.

5. ‘War can draw out as many positive human qualities as negative ones.’ Discuss.

6. ‘We come to feel as much sympathy for the Vietnamese victims of the war as for the Americans.’ How far do you agree?

7. ‘After reading the letters in Dear America, we feel as if we know some of the writers as individuals.’ Discuss.

8. ‘The letters reveal, above all else, the pain which soldiers experience when far from their homes and loved ones.’ Discuss.

9. ‘Through the letters in Dear America, we learn more about the authors than about the war itself.’ How far do you agree?

10. ‘Although the letters in Dear America describe the horrors of war, they also express a patriotic message.’ How far do you agree?

ANALYSING A SAMPLE TOPIC

‘The letters in Dear America pay tribute to the human power of endurance.’ Discuss.
• This is a fairly straightforward topic; it is not difficult to gather ample material with which to discuss it. Perhaps begin by asking: what kinds of endurance are evinced through the letters? There are many different expressions of endurance, whether physical, psychological, or emotional. A good opening strategy is to think of synonyms for the word ‘endurance’, in order to give the vocabulary variety and range. Words such as ‘resilience’, ‘persistence’, ‘staying power’, ‘stamina’, and ‘perseverance’ are all appropriate.

• The introduction needs to form a general, but clear, contention in relation to the topic. The essay could, for example, begin by stating that all wars demand endurance, because of their very nature – they all involve physical pain, fear, the loss of comrades. Then refer to what the specific nature of the Vietnam War was that demanded endurance from its participants: the unfamiliar environment, the harshness of the jungle, the tropical heat, and the like.

For the body of the essay, break up the material into paragraphs about:

• the courage that the soldiers show in the face of physical pain and suffering. For example: the comment that ‘our mind and soul don’t come from our extremities’; the courage and humour of soldiers such as Kenneth Peeples or Sandy Kempner when they are wounded.

• the emotional and psychological endurance of the soldiers. For example: despite the distress over the death of their comrades, soldiers such as Tom Pellatton, Richard Cantale and John Houghton stay the course, complete their year’s tour of duty, and resume their lives in America; the nurse, Linda Van Devanter’s experiences.

• the admiration that many of the soldiers express for the courage and resilience of their comrades. (‘You should have seen my brave men’ – James Simmen, p.177.) You could also discuss the admiration and sympathy that some correspondents express for the Vietnamese in their suffering.

• the persistence of the soldiers in the face of their own doubts about the war and the knowledge of opposition to it in America. A number of examples could be cited here.
The final paragraph should contain a strong reiteration of the main argument, but without simply repeating it. Aim for a decisive, conclusive statement. A relevant quotation can be effective at this stage. Remember that this paragraph does not need to be long.

REFERENCES & READING

The text


Other works

Baker, Mark 1972, Nam: The Vietnam War in the Words of the Men and Women Who Fought There, Sphere Books, London. An ‘oral history’ of the war, one of the best of its kind.

