

INTERPRETING PRIMARY SOURCES

THE SCARS OF VIETNAM

From 1965 to 1973, U.S. troops fought in Vietnam. The war took a great physical and mental toll on those who served. Many of them questioned why they were there. Many others

felt that their service did not get the respect at home that it should have. Below are excerpts from the recollections of three Vietnam War veterans. Read them, then answer the questions.

Tom Wannamaker *was an infantry officer in the Marines. He later recalled the war from his home in Illinois.*

There was a lot of black humor [in Vietnam], like on a patrol, somebody would say, “If you get killed, can I have your boots?” and everybody would laugh. . . .

I believe that I’m probably old before my time. I have a great life . . . but I think my life is different because I’m just a lot sadder than I would have been. . . . I’m really a lot harder on people than I would have been had I not gone to Vietnam. . . .

I think that no matter what has happened to me, no matter what will happen to me, in the center of my being, I’m always going to be a young **grunt** Marine in Vietnam.

WORDS TO KNOW

- **grunt** (*n*): nickname for U.S. Marine Corps or Army foot troops, especially during the Vietnam War
- **Huey** (*n*): nickname for the Bell UH-1 helicopter commonly used for medevac (medical evacuation) operations during the war

Stanley Marcieski *flew a helicopter into areas often under enemy fire to evacuate wounded and dead soldiers.*

It’s like an old war movie I saw once, with the singular difference that I had a bit part in the action. The slightest familiar odor or sound can bring those memories racing back. . . . I marvel now at how I could possibly understand [all of the memories] and continue to function.

Movies of Vietnam portraying authentic-looking grunts can flood my mind with the odor of their animal sweat mingled with the rot of the jungle clinging to them after days in the field. It can make me smell wounded grunts as they hop or are carried, pulled, hoisted, or half thrown in deadly urgency aboard our **Huey**. And I swear I can smell their blood too. It was a smell that came too often.

Some impressions I want to remember. Some I do not. But I have got them all, burned somewhere deep in my mind.

William Janes, *also a pilot who carried the wounded and dead, remembers a day when news reporters asked for a ride into combat.*

Their leader jumped aboard [and] yelled, “Take me where the war is.” . . .

[But] the war they were looking for was never out there in the [jungle]. It was there on my cargo floor, in the mud and the blood. It was on the doorsteps of America in a mother’s anguish, knowing what her uniformed visitor [sent to inform her of her son’s death] was about to say. It was in the young soldier sobbing from pain and fear of dying as we raced to save his life, and in him again, later, when he was sorry he [had] lived. It is now on a black granite wall [the Vietnam Veterans Memorial] in Washington, D.C.

My unit’s motto was “Boomerangs Always Come Back.” We said it to each other until we almost believed it, but we didn’t all come back either.

SOURCES: Wannamaker: WILL-TV, Illinois, Web site; Marcieski: PBS.org, Vietnam—Stories Since the War; Janes: SoldierWorks.com

DIRECTIONS: Fill in the circle next to the best answer.

- 1. Which sense is most vividly stirred by Stanley Marcieski's memories of Vietnam?
 A sight B smell C taste D touch
- 2. Which of the following does William Janes not list among the places where the war can be found?
 A the battleground C the pain of soldiers
 B the grief of families D the Vietnam Veterans Memorial
- 3. Which attitude would both Tom Wannamaker and Stanley Marcieski probably share about grunts?
 A disapproval of how they acted under fire
 B pride in their victories
 C recognition that they bore the burden of war
 D scorn for their low rank
- 4. What does Wannamaker mean when he says that Vietnam is "in the center of my being"?
 A He is proud of his service.
 B He remembers the black humor of his fellow soldiers fondly.
 C He will never be able to put the war behind him.
 D His wartime experience has helped him to be successful.
- 5. Which of these words best describes the tone of all three men's remembrances?
 A haunted
 B nostalgic
 C proud
 D victorious

DIRECTIONS: Write your answers in the spaces provided.

- 6. What memories do movies about Vietnam trigger in Marcieski's mind? _____

- 7. Janes says that reporters were looking for the war in the wrong place. What does he mean by that? _____

- 8. What do you think Wannamaker means when he calls himself "old before my time"? What details from his account reinforce this belief? _____

- 9. Based on these accounts, do you think it is easy for veterans to forget their wartime experiences? Should veterans try to forget? Why or why not?

- 10. How might you feel now if you had served in Vietnam during the war? Would you resent people who hadn't? Explain your answers. _____

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