

top 30 Vietnam War Books

America's wars have inspired some of the world's best literature, and the Vietnam War is no exception

By Marc Leepson

The Vietnam War has left many legacies. Among the most positive is an abundance of top-notch books, many written by veterans of the conflict. These include winners of National Book Awards and Pulitzer Prizes, both fiction and nonfiction. A slew of war memoirs stand with the best writing of that genre. Nearly all of the big books about the Vietnam War remain in print in 2014, and the 50th anniversary commemoration of the war is an opportune time to recognize the best of them.

In the short history of Vietnam War literature, publishers would hardly touch a book on the war until the late 1970s and early 1980s—a part of the self-induced national amnesia about that conflict and its outcome. After sufficient time had elapsed to ease some of the war's psychic wounds, we saw a mini explosion of important books. Most of the books on the following, very subjective, list of the top 15 fiction and nonfiction titles, came out in the late '70s and throughout the '80s. Only two were published in the past 15 years.

By necessity, compilations of this kind omit worthy titles. Even so, the books below are the cream of the crop among the thousands written about America's most controversial overseas war. They are presented randomly within the categories of nonfiction and fiction.

NONFICTION

AMERICA'S LONGEST WAR: THE UNITED STATES AND VIETNAM, 1950-1975

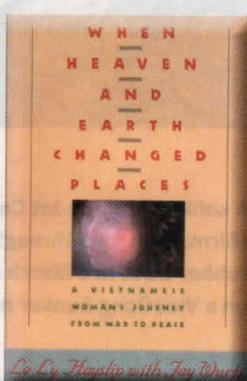
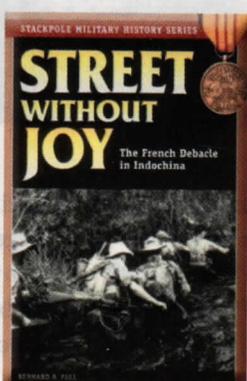
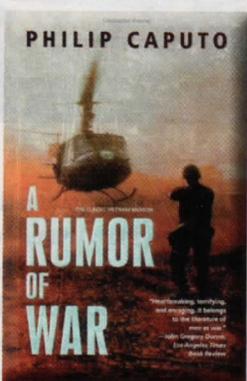
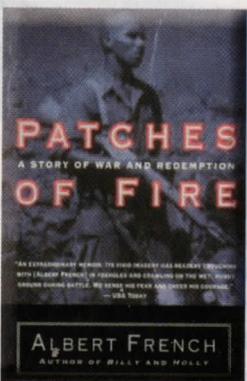
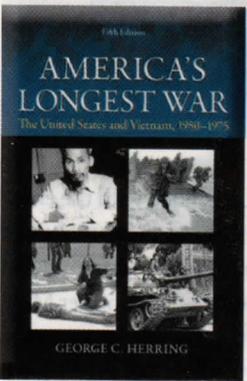
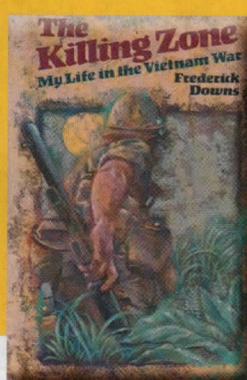
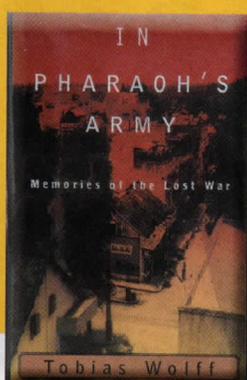
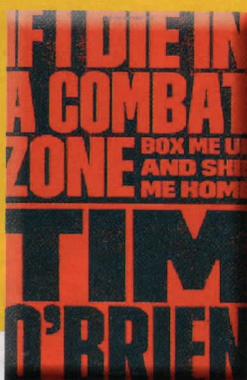
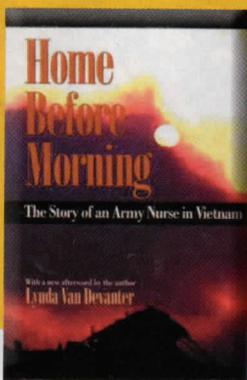
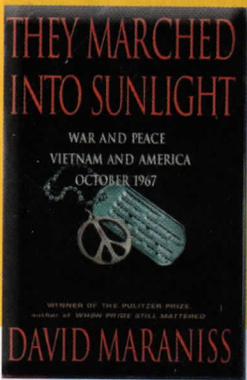
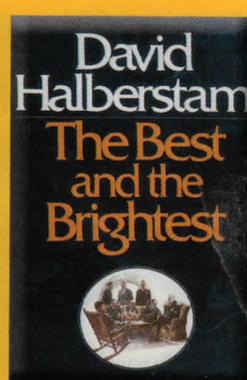
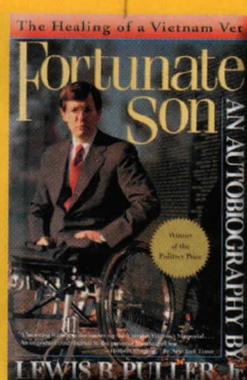
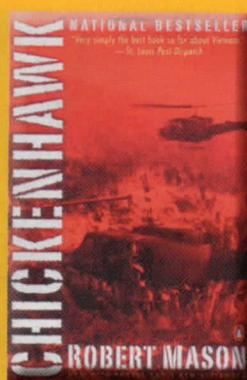
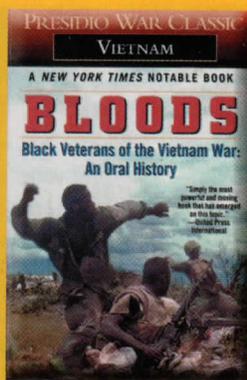
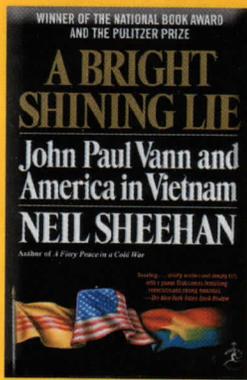
by George Herring, 1978

This book is widely viewed as the best concise history of the Vietnam War. Herring, a former University of Kentucky history professor, covers virtually every important event in the conflict, presenting the war objectively and assessing its legacy. Revised and updated over the years, *America's Longest War* is used in many college courses on the Vietnam War.

THE BEST AND THE BRIGHTEST

by David Halberstam, 1972

Halberstam, who was a Vietnam War correspondent for *The New York Times*, produced a deeply researched, clearly and



engagingly written history of America's involvement in the Vietnam War. He focuses on personalities—primarily the “best and brightest” of John F. Kennedy’s administration, including Robert McNamara, Walt Rostow, McGeorge Bundy, Dean Rusk and General Maxwell Taylor—and the many mistakes they made in prosecuting the war. In *The Best and the Brightest*, Halberstam set out to answer the question, “What was it about the men, their attitudes, the country, its institutions and above all the era which had allowed this tragedy to take place?” Halberstam died in an automobile accident in 2007.

A BRIGHT SHINING LIE: JOHN PAUL VANN AND AMERICA IN VIETNAM by Neil Sheehan, 1988
Former *New York Times* correspondent Neil Sheehan spent 16 years working on a magisterial examination of the life of legendary Army Colonel John Paul Vann and American involvement in Vietnam. A tour de force of research, reporting, analysis and writing, *A Bright Shining Lie* received the National Book Award for nonfiction and the Pulitzer for general nonfiction. Sheehan’s anger about what happened “infuses extraordinary descriptive passages of battle, the machinations of confused

or venal men in Washington and Saigon, and above all the account of the man who serves as both its hero and antihero,” wrote historian Ronald Steel, adding, “If there is one book that captures the Vietnam War in the sheer Homeric scale of its passion and folly, this book is it.”

CHICKENHAWK by Robert Mason, 1983
This is the definitive memoir about the helicopter war in Vietnam. Mason’s penetrating look at his 1965-66 tour as a Huey pilot in the 1st Cavalry Division (Airmobile) contains reconstructed dialogue,



A soldier with the 1st Cavalry Division (Airmobile) runs through a forest of rubber trees in a March 4, 1969, assault on a Viet Cong bunker near Dau Thieng.

which works well in depictions of his many dangerous missions zooming in and out of hot landing zones. There is very little glamour here: Although Mason recounts the tremendous—and at times senseless—risks he and his fellow Huey pilots took almost daily, he also describes his gradual disillusionment with the war.

**FORTUNATE SON:
THE HEALING OF A VIETNAM VET**

by Lewis B. Puller Jr., 1991

The author, a first lieutenant in Vietnam and son of legendary Marine General Lewis “Chesty” Puller from the World War II and Korea eras, won a Pulitzer for this memoir. Puller tells his life story in a straightforward, introspective style. He

joined the Marines after graduating from college in 1967 and less than a year later was in the thick of the fighting. He stepped on a booby trap and lost both legs and parts of his hands. Puller recovered, went to law school, got married and fathered two children. This remarkable tale is written cleanly, intelligently, with insight—and without self-pity. Despite the uplifting message of the book, the pains inflicted by the war ultimately overwhelmed Puller. He committed suicide in 1994.

**HOME BEFORE MORNING:
THE STORY OF AN
ARMY NURSE IN VIETNAM**

by Lynda Van Devanter, 1983

Generally considered the top memoir by a female Vietnam veteran, this brutally frank book is written with many detailed descriptions of the wounded and dying men Van Devanter saw as a nurse at the 71st Evacuation Hospital in Pleiku during

her 1969-70 tour. It is filled with the emotional turmoil she faced in-country and after coming home. Van Devanter used an experienced co-writer, Christopher Morgan, to help tell this strong pro-veteran, antiwar story. In 1978 Van Devanter started the Women Veterans Project at Vietnam Veterans of America. She died in 2002.

**THEY MARCHED INTO SUNLIGHT:
WAR AND PEACE, VIETNAM
AND AMERICA, OCTOBER 1967**

by David Maraniss, 2003

They Marched Into Sunlight garnered a Pulitzer for Maraniss, a former *Washington Post* journalist. A masterpiece of reporting and analysis, the book zeroes in on two noteworthy but previously underexamined events that occurred at the same time in October 1967: the decimation of a 1st Infantry Division battalion in South Vietnam and the violence on the University of Wisconsin

campus during a protest against Dow Chemical Co. Maraniss' presentation of the events in Vietnam and Wisconsin is evenhanded, letting the reader judge who was right and wrong in both places.

◀◀◀ **BLOODS: BLACK VETERANS OF THE VIETNAM WAR: AN ORAL HISTORY**

by Wallace Terry, 1984

Bloods is the preeminent examination of African-American troops' experiences in Vietnam. Terry, a former *Time* magazine correspondent, presents the war and postwar stories of 20 black veterans. Some of the personal histories are inspirational tales from men who overcame powerful odds; others are depressing narratives of death, disfigurement and disillusion. All of them convey, with a strong sense of immediacy, what it was like to be an American fighting in Vietnam. Terry shows that blacks experienced many instances of discrimination and inequity in assignments, medals, promotions and other matters. One of the positive things *Bloods* brings out, though, is the virtual absence of racism on the front lines. Terry died in 2003.

Light Infantry Brigade. O'Brien was a sensitive, intelligent, well-read budding poet-author when he was drafted. He struggled mentally before deciding to submit to the draft, philosophized his way through basic training and survived a sometimes hellish tour of duty. All of what he writes rings true, and the book flows with the natural chronology of a novel.

PATCHES OF FIRE: A STORY OF WAR AND REDEMPTION

by Albert French, 1997

French brilliantly illuminates his war and postwar experiences with insights on the nature of the war in Vietnam, the treatment that returning veterans received and the tenaciousness of post-traumatic stress disorder. He joined the Marines in 1963 and served a battle-heavy tour with E Company, 2nd Battalion, 7th Marine Regiment, until he was severely wounded during the bloody Operation Harvest Moon near Chu Lai in December 1965. The book "is a classic tale, life-affirming and updated for the modern age," Terrence Maitland wrote in the *New York Times Book Review*.

portraying, as he puts it, "the day-to-day life of an infantryman on the ground." The story begins on Sept. 8, 1967, as Downs is flying into Tan Son Nhut and ends on Jan. 11, 1968, when he stepped on a land mine and was seriously wounded.

IN PHARAOH'S ARMY: MEMORIES OF THE LOST WAR

by Tobias Wolff, 1994

Wolff was an Army Special Forces sergeant advising a South Vietnamese battalion in the Mekong Delta during 1967-68 and later became an award-winning short-story writer. His noted memoir of his youth, *This Boy's Life*, was published in 1989. *In Pharaoh's Army* is a memoir about his time in Vietnam—a creative, entertainingly written book filled with brisk, realistic reconstructed dialogue, fascinating characters and enlightened self-analysis. It also covers Wolff's life before he joined the Army, his year of Vietnamese language training in Washington and his return home from the war.

A RUMOR OF WAR

by Philip Caputo, 1977

One of the first classic Vietnam War memoirs, *A Rumor of War* garnered immediate praise for the author, a former Marine first lieutenant. "Caputo's troubled, searching meditations on the love and hate of war, on fear, and the ambivalent discord warfare can create in the hearts of decent men, are among the most eloquent I have read in modern literature," novelist William Styron wrote. Caputo relates his Marine Corps experiences from the time he decided to join through his tour of duty, which began in March 1965 when he landed with the first Marines to fight in Vietnam. The last part of the book is an account of the North Vietnamese takeover in Saigon, which Caputo covered as a journalist in April 1975.

PHILIP CAPUTO'S A RUMOR OF WAR WAS ONE OF THE FIRST MEMOIRS OF THE VIETNAM WAR TO BECOME A CLASSIC.

IF I DIE IN A COMBAT ZONE: BOX ME UP AND SHIP ME HOME

by Tim O'Brien, 1974

If I Die in a Combat Zone was one of the first Vietnam War memoirs released by a major publisher. O'Brien impressionistically writes about growing up in Minnesota, getting drafted, going through infantry training and serving nine months in 1969-70 as a rifleman with the 198th

THE KILLING ZONE: MY LIFE IN THE VIETNAM WAR

by Frederick Downs Jr., 1978

Downs, who served as an Army lieutenant in Vietnam, wrote three memoirs. *The Killing Zone*, his first, is one of the best of the genre. The straightforward, taut prose evokes a clear picture of his 1967-68 tour as a 23-year-old platoon leader in the 4th Infantry Division. Downs succeeds well in

**STREET WITHOUT JOY:
INDOCHINA AT WAR, 1946-54**

by Bernard Fall, 1961

Fall, who served in World War II with the French Resistance and later the U.S. Army, was widely acknowledged in the 1950s and '60s as the preeminent scholar of the Indochina War that ended Vietnam's years as a French colony and put Communist forces in control of the country's northern region. He wrote eight highly regarded books about the war before he was killed in Vietnam in 1967 while riding in a jeep that hit a land mine. *Street Without Joy*, arguably his best book, is a history and analysis of the French war and the beginnings of the American war. It contained a warning (unheeded) about what the U.S. military would be facing. The book is "not only a splendid account of a conflict often forgotten in the aftermath of America's war in Vietnam, but it also speaks to the debate that continues to rage among military experts on the nature of the two wars in Indochina and the proper ways to fight them," wrote George Herring, the author of *America's Longest War*.

**WHEN HEAVEN AND EARTH
CHANGED PLACES:
A VIETNAMESE WOMAN'S
JOURNEY FROM WAR TO PEACE**

by Le Ly Hayslip, 1989

Le Ly Hayslip opened a new world to American readers in this remarkable autobiography. With the help of writer Jay Wurts, she intimately details the life of a Vietnamese woman who grew up in a peasant family, married an American and immigrated to the United States. Hayslip provides "a searing and human account of Vietnam's destruction and self-destruction," former Vietnam War correspondent David Shipler wrote. "Lucidly, sometimes even lyrically, Ms. Hayslip paints an intensely intimate portrait."

FICTION

CLOSE QUARTERS

by Larry Heinemann, 1977

Larry Heinemann's autobiographical novel is one of the earliest pieces of fiction set in the Vietnam War—and one of the best and most underappreciated. This fast-flowing book tells the story of draftee Philip Dosier, beginning with his induction. The plot takes Dosier into Vietnam as the new guy, puts him on an eventful tour of duty and then sends him home. *Close Quarters* is filled with what could be

**"LYRICAL, ENCHANTED DESCRIPTIONS...ARE A
LANTERNED BACKDROP TO A TALE OF IRONY
AND BETRAYAL" IN THE QUIET AMERICAN.**

stock characters—doltish lifer sergeants and clueless officers, for example—but Heinemann gives them unique personalities in a book of hard, brutal prose that accurately conveys life in the trenches. Heinemann served in the 25th Infantry Division from 1967 to '68.

DIRTY WORK

by Larry Brown, 1988

Dirty Work is a gem of short fiction, studied with dialogues and monologues from two Marines severely wounded in Vietnam. Brown, who served in the Marine Corps but not in Vietnam, unwinds the action during one long night of the soul as the two main characters talk with each other in a veterans hospital. One patient lost both arms and legs in a firefright and has been confined to a hospital bed for 22 years. The other, his face severely disfigured in the war, suffers from intermittent seizures from a bullet lodged in his brain. Both characters are clearly and realistically drawn. Brown seamlessly weaves their words and

thoughts into a gripping story that unfolds through flashbacks, soliloquies and conversations. Brown died in 2004.

DOG SOLDIERS

by Robert Stone, 1974

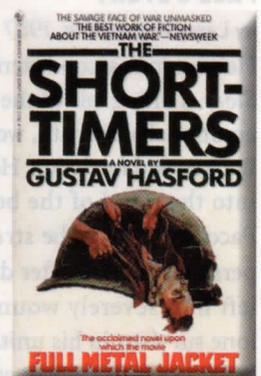
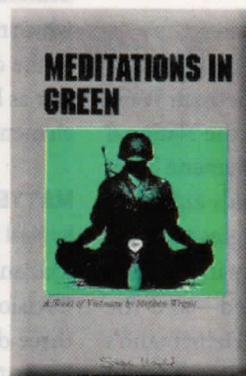
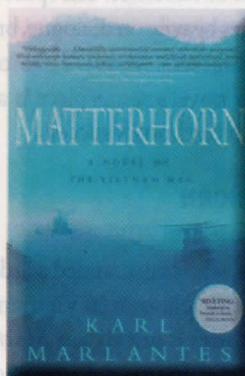
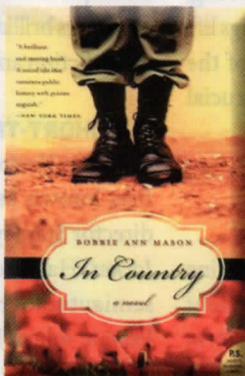
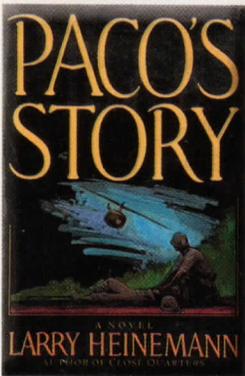
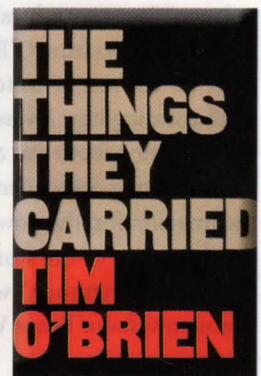
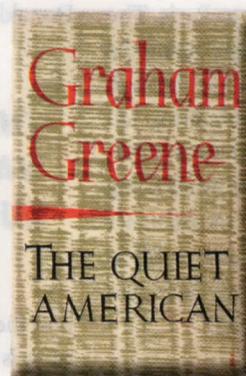
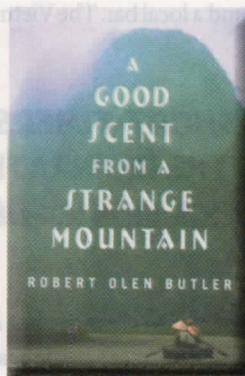
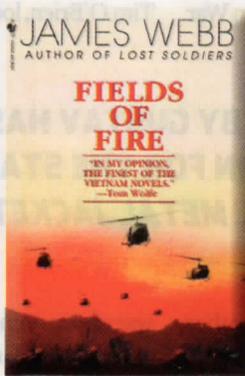
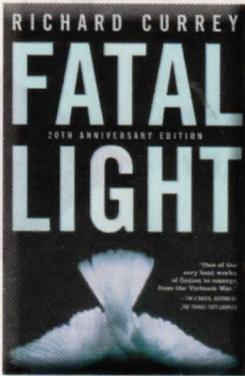
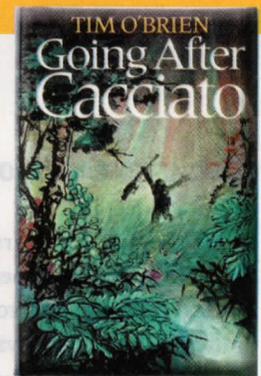
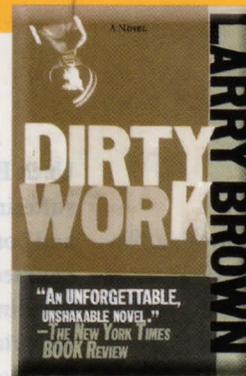
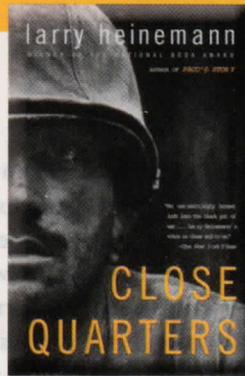
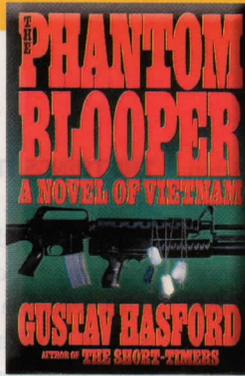
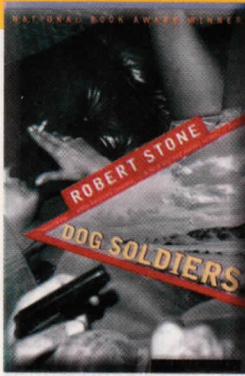
This much-admired novel—it received the National Book Award for fiction—features a plot that revolves around the Vietnam War and drug smuggling. One reviewer called it a "dark descendant of Conrad's and Hemingway's adventure stories, a tale of Vietnam and California, a narrative meditation on the counter-culture." Stone,

who served in the Navy during the 1950s, focuses the story on Ray Hicks, a sailor on the way home from Vietnam, and John Converse, a hapless war correspondent. The main characters are tortured souls and all wind up suffering severely—mentally, physically, or both.

THE QUIET AMERICAN

by Graham Greene, 1955

Greene's book is widely regarded as a classic, prophetic literary tale that examines the start of American engagement in Vietnam. The acclaimed English novelist and journalist, who covered the French war in Vietnam from 1951 to '54, set the book in 1954 Saigon. The quiet American of the title is Alden Pyle, who tries to forge an American solution to the Communist insurgency. Another character, cynical British journalist Thomas Fowler, says of Pyle: "I never knew a man who had better motives for all the trouble he caused." In a discussion of the *The Quiet American*, essayist Pico Iyer said: "Lyrical,



enchanted descriptions of rice paddies, languorous opium dens and even slightly sinister Buddhist political groups are a lanterned backdrop to a tale of irony and betrayal.” Greene died in 1991.

FATAL LIGHT
by Richard Currey, 1988

This one-of-a-kind Vietnam tale, the first novel of a former Navy corpsman, reads like a series of connected, finely written short stories. Dozens of very short chapters are presented in a jumpy, fragmented, staccato rhythm. In this way, Currey convincingly and stylishly spills

out the shocking story of the unidentified narrator who goes through a harrowing tour of duty as a combat medic. Currey skillfully reveals this everyman soldier’s varied and extreme feelings. He helps readers understand what it was like to go to war in Vietnam, feel the heat physically and mentally, and then come home and try to make sense of what happened.

FIELDS OF FIRE
by James Webb, 1978

In his first novel Webb, a former Marine first lieutenant and later U.S. senator, developed a plot that follows the outline

of a conventional war tale: An American platoon, with representative members of different races, ethnicities and sections of the country, undergoes a hellacious time in the war zone. But Webb tells the story without resorting to clichés, and his powerful writing clearly shows what the war was like for those in the bush. “In swift, flexible prose that does everything he asks of it,” *Newsweek* magazine stated. “Webb gives us an extraordinary range of acutely observed people, not one a stereotype, and as many different ways of looking at that miserable war. *Fields of Fire* is a stunner.”

DECEMBER 2019

GOING AFTER CACCIATO

by Tim O'Brien, 1978

O'Brien's ambitious first novel, a National Book Award winner, is a journey of magical realism seen through the eyes of draftee Paul Berlin. Private Cacciato, an off-kilter member of his company, decides to leave Vietnam and walk to Paris. The platoon follows him. O'Brien "opened a door for the rest of us to walk through by illustrating how it was possible to tell deeper truths about war and war's horrible and lasting consequences by allowing the imagination the power to construct the dynamics of the story and to fill in the gaps of memory," wrote poet and Vietnam veteran Bruce Weigl.

PACO'S STORY

by Larry Heinemann, 1987

Heinemann's second literary work, *Paco's Story*, a biting tale of the Vietnam War's emotional aftermath, won the National Book Award for fiction. Heinemann bores into the mind of the book's antihero, Paco Sullivan, as he struggles with his personal demons after duty in Vietnam left him severely wounded—and the lone survivor in his unit. "Heinemann's brilliance is that whenever Paco's world trails into the maudlin, he flings us back to Vietnam, the firefight that killed all of Paco's platoon, the months in the hospital on various pain-killing drugs," one reviewer wrote, "and the anodyne of the present becomes justified, and realistic, and the story of one forgotten, generic GI in [a] non-descript town...becomes part of the local lore."

IN COUNTRY

by Bobbie Ann Mason, 1985

This first novel by Mason is one of the strongest literary treatments of the legacy of the Vietnam War. Sam Hughes, a 17-year-old girl who lives in a small western Kentucky town in 1984, shares a house with

Uncle Emmett, a laconic Vietnam veteran suffering from Agent Orange exposure and post-traumatic stress disorder. She is haunted by visions of her father, who was killed in the war before she was born. Other important characters are Emmett's friends, a group of veterans who hang out at McDonald's and a local bar. The Vietnam War

THE SHORT-TIMERS, BY GUSTAV HASFORD, WAS THE INSPIRATION FOR THE STANLEY KUBRICK MOVIE FULL METAL JACKET.

is at the heart of *In Country*, but another story is entwined: Sam's battle against the demons of adolescence. The spare writing, which relies heavily on dialogue, brings life to the characters. Mason's choice of the war as her novel's centerpiece is a crucial element in the book's success.

MATTERHORN

by Karl Marlantes, 2010

Marlantes, who commanded a 3rd Marine Division rifle platoon in Vietnam, spent three decades working on *Matterhorn*, his first novel. In this semiautobiographical book, a young Ivy League-educated lieutenant named Mellas is enmeshed in sustained, bloody fighting in Vietnam during 1969. *Matterhorn* focuses on a company of Marines and a seemingly never-ending succession of battles primarily in and around the mountaintop base that gives the book its incongruous title. The action scenes evoke Vietnam War combat at its most intense—and its most horrible. Writer Sebastian Junger, who has reported on the war in Afghanistan, called the book "one of the most profound and devastating novels ever to come out of Vietnam—or any war. It's not a book so much as a deployment, and you will not return unaltered."

THE THINGS THEY CARRIED

by Tim O'Brien, 1990

This may be the biggest-selling, most widely read book of Vietnam War fiction. It has become a fixture in high school and college English classes. The interlinked short stories feature a protagonist named Tim O'Brien, looking back on his life in the

THE SHORT-TIMERS

by Gustav Hasford, 1979

Best known as the book that spawned director Stanley Kubrick's film *Full Metal Jacket*, Hasford's *The Short-Timers* is a semiautobiographical tale dealing with Private Joker (James Davis, age 19, from rural Alabama), a colorful iconoclastic Marine combat correspondent in Vietnam at the height of the war. "Nothing I've read that tried to convey the monstrosity of that grave-maker known as the war in Viet Nam even remotely approaches the eloquence of *The Short-Timers*," wrote critic and novelist Harlan Ellison. "It is one of the most amazing stretches of writing I've ever encountered."

THE PHANTOM BLOOPER

by Gustav Hasford, 1990

Hasford, who worked as a combat correspondent for publications serving the military, realistically depicts a hellish, atrocity-filled war in this Marine tough-guy novel. Its central character is Private



Joker, the eternally disaffected Marine brought to literary life by Hasford in *The Short-Timers*. *The Phantom Blooper* begins with Joker trying to stay safe and sane during the final days of the siege of Khe Sanh. Joker tries to go one-on-one with the Phantom Blooper, someone who has been killing men in his unit and may even be an American working for the enemy. Then comes the story of Joker's captivity by Viet Cong villagers. Hasford offers an uncommonly sharp picture of life among the Viet Cong, the North Vietnamese Army and the Vietnamese people in general. Hasford died in 1993.

MEDITATIONS IN GREEN

by Stephen Wright, 1983

Wright's book is based—very loosely—on his experiences as a drafted Army intelligence analyst who specialized in working with aerial photographs during his 1969-70 tour in Vietnam. It shifts back and forth in time to tell the war stories of

off-the-wall characters who work in the 1069th Military Intelligence Group. The spotlight, however, is on Spc. 4 James Griffin. What happens to the men in Vietnam drives most of them, including Griffin, to the edge of insanity. Once Griffin comes home, his emotional problems intensify. *Meditations in Green* received high critical praise, along with the Maxwell Perkins Prize for promising first novels. One critic called it a "brilliant and scarifying," novel, "lurid, extravagant, rhapsodic and horrific by turns—sometimes all at once."

A GOOD SCENT FROM A STRANGE MOUNTAIN

by Robert Olen Butler, 1992

Butler served in Saigon from 1969 to '71 as a Vietnamese-speaking Army intelligence specialist. Today he is one of the nation's most honored literary novelists and short story writers. He received uniform accolades—and a Pulitzer—for this collection of linked short stories, each

A soldier in Operation Wallowa near Tam Ky on Nov. 1, 1967, has a heavy load to bear as he leads a squad from the 3rd Brigade, 1st Cavalry Division (Airmobile).

told in the voice of a different Vietnamese expatriate living in southern Louisiana. "Robert Olen Butler has written an extraordinary book," novelist James Lee Burke wrote. "He has managed to depict both Vietnam and Louisiana simultaneously in stories that have the delicate and graceful quality of tropical flowers."

Marc Leepson has been reviewing Vietnam War books since the late 1970s for newspapers and magazines, including Vietnam. His column on books has appeared in *The VVA Veteran*, the magazine published by Vietnam Veterans of America, since 1986. He served with the Army's 527th Personnel Service Company in Qui Nhon, Vietnam, 1967-68.