

## Interview with Victor Volkman, Marc Levy, Tom Skiens, & Tony Swindell, authors of *More Than a Memory: Reflections of Viet Nam*

Today, Tyler R. Tichelaar of Reader Views is pleased to interview Victor R. Volkman, Marc Levy, Tom Skiens and Tony Swindell who are here to talk about the new book “More than a Memory: Reflections of Viet Nam.”

**Victor R. Volkman** is Senior Editor of [Modern History Press](#), a publishing house dedicated to empowering authors to speak about surviving conflict and seeking identity in modern times. Although not a veteran of any service, he is committed to seeing veterans’ stories told.

**Marc Levy** served with Delta 1/7 Cav as an infantry medic in Viet Nam and Cambodia in 1970. He was decorated once for gallantry, twice for valor, and twice court-martialed. His prose, poetry and essays have been published in various online and print journals, most recently on [counterpunch.org](#). In 2001 he was selected to attend an ACA residence. A video of his war experiences, “The Real Deal,” is distributed by The Cinema Guild.

**Tom Skiens** joined the 11th light infantry brigade in Hawaii, September 1967 a year out of high school. Tom became the 4.2 inch Forward Observer (FO) for Charlie Company, 4th Battalion 3d Infantry Regiment on the USS General Gordon seven days before they arrived in Viet Nam. He later attended Southern Oregon State College from 1969 through 1974. He has conducted critical incident debriefings, conducted 4 interventions, given classes and trained about substance abuse and critical incident stress.

**Tony Swindell** served with the 31st PID, 11th Light Infantry Brigade (LIB), Americal Division, during 1968-69. His unit participated in the My Lai massacre in Pinkville in 1968, and he was later a witness to incidents involving the murder of Vietnamese civilians by brigade commander Col. John W. Donaldson. He is currently an editor at the Sherman, Texas, *Herald Democrat*.

**Tyler:** Welcome, Victor, Marc, Tom, and Tony. I’m happy you could join me today. Let’s begin by your telling me about what is contained in “More Than a Memory”—are they individual recollections of the Viet Nam War?

**Marc Levy:** The book is mostly made up of firsthand accounts of war and its aftermath. The contributors have chosen to express themselves through poetry, fiction, and nonfiction. Some writers are more accomplished than others; each saw his particular share of combat, and each tells a unique story.

**Tyler:** What made you decide to include not just essays but stories and poems?

**Marc Levy:** Actually, poetry, fiction and nonfiction are the dominant forms found in most Viet Nam vet anthologies. A well-written essay, side stepping the eager trap of political or patriotic or academic anthem, speaks directly to the reader. It attempts to wed the writer's past and present experience with the readers, and draws upon the reader's awareness, or lack thereof, and by indirection serves to heighten the traditional narrative forms in the book that precede or follow it.

**Victor Volkman:** We were able to encompass a larger number of writers and therefore viewpoints by expanding the scope of the work to include every possible type of writing. Sticking to just one type of writing would have limited both the range of emotions expressed and some writers would have been left out. An anthology is to a large degree an act of faith on the part of the editor that the contributions will harmonize and weave into something more powerful than the sum of the parts. My faith was in a large part inspired by my work with Rick Ritter on "[Made In America, Sold in the 'Nam 2nd Ed](#)" (2007) who pretty much broke all the rules you could have in an anthology. Although Ritter and Richards' book was born out of the shared experiences of the Ft. Wayne VVA chapter, "More Than a Memory" includes vets from all around the USA: Maine, Oregon, Texas, Virginia, and so on.

**Tyler:** Will you give us more details about the stories? Are these recollections of events, or are they fictional stories?

**Marc Levy:** In my case I've taken actual events, most often interesting but not especially compelling, and fictionalized them in order fully to develop their potential, make them compelling to the general reader. Anyone can trot out a verbatim war story. It takes hard work to develop fictional characters, make them believable, create tension, a story arc, a satisfying ending. It takes discipline to let go of the actual events and successfully distill and expand them into something greater than the sum of their pedestrian parts. It takes guts and skill and heart for a combat vet to tell a good war story that lingers in the mind long after the last page has been reached.

**Tyler:** Will you tell us about some of the authors and their roles in Viet Nam?

**Marc Levy:** I met Tony Swindell through Alex Cockburn, co-editor of [counterpunch.org](#) and the newsletter of the same name. In 2006 Tony wrote an excellent article predicting the massacre at Haditha, Iraq based on his time with 4/3 LIB in Viet Nam ([Our Descent into Hell Has Begun](#)). Recall that this was one of three units involved in My Lai. I did a net search and couldn't find anything on Tony. At the time I didn't know Alex but sent him a carefully worded query. My antennae were up. There are enough fake vets out there to fill the Grand Canyon ten times over for a month of Sundays. Alex promptly forwarded my email to Tony, who responded in a most gracious manner. We immediately hit it off and have been Net pals ever since. Tony's counterpunch article skillfully interweaves his war exploits with his understanding of how the travails of certain American troops in Viet Nam parallel those who went wild in Iraq.

My friend Preston Hood saw extraordinary levels of combat in Viet Nam and elsewhere as an elite Navy SEAL. As did my pal Dave Bianchini, a thrice wounded and much decorated two tour Long Range Reconnaissance Patrol (LRRP) point man, who later married and managed the rock star Laura Nyro, got caught up in drug smuggling, did ten years hard time, and now, as he likes to say, builds houses so he can drink good liquor and eat lobster tails.

I met Alan Farrell at a William Joiner Center Writer's Workshop in 1999. He was an imposing figure. Close cropped hair, compact build, swagger step, full-length leather cape/coat. AWOL style clothes bag. Al's blue eyes could kill a great white shark from anywhere on Earth. "Who were you with?" I asked him, as he walked past me in a cafeteria. The inner radar indicated he was a vet. "Fifth Special Forces," he said. And kept walking, storm clouds filling his face. The first day or two in class the students were terrified of him. Al sat off in a corner; he seemed ready to launch himself like a full back into anyone who dared come close. After a time he methodically spread five inch squares of origami paper atop his desk, gingerly pressed and creased the paper with the blade of military knife, and two hours later was encircled by graceful white swans, green scuttling crabs, galloping horses, the occasional eagle. The women students were immediately smitten and stopped Al from tossing the menagerie into the garbage. He gave them away, the ice was broken, and from that point the entire class looked forward to whatever Al had to say or read. His comments were always gracious; his writing was superb; his sense of humor had people slapping their thighs.

I met Rich Raitano while doing research on 4/3 Light Infantry Brigade (LIB). We have a common medic friend. Rich had one of the worst jobs in Viet Nam: Graves Registration Point, in Iraq the euphemism is Mortuary Affairs.

Rich helped to collect and reassemble the dead in order to send them home. His writing reflects how far he's come from his particular grind in hell.

I met Richard Levine through a mutual friend. He was a grunt in Viet Nam, became a teacher and a Quaker and a very good writer and knows how to read off the printed page. I'm hopeful that a revised edition of "More Than A Memory" will include "Mud Walking," which several distinguished writers consider to be Richard's finest poem.

I met Dayl Wise through a mutual friend while living in a YMCA in Tarrytown, NY. We were in country about the same time, both infantry, probably crossed paths. Dayl was in a recon platoon and hit close quarters. He works hard, plays hard, takes his activism seriously, does not sweat the small stuff, has been a great husband, dad, a generous friend, and brought good things into the world. He takes pleasure in his writing. I'd like to see him take the next step.

I met Richard Boes through Dayl at a poetry reading in Woodstock, NY in 2008. Richard has had supporting roles in several distinguished major motion pictures, and has had long relationships with drugs, alcohol, and the South side of the law. Presently he is dying of cancer. His narrative style in "The Last Dead Soldier Left Alive" is a relentless unfolding narrative stick up that renders the reader bloody and breathless yet craving more. His unique lyrical violence soars above the typical first person war account.

I met Tom Skiens while doing research on a piece for Counterpunch. Tom's website [www.buffgrunt.com](http://www.buffgrunt.com) contains an abundance of info on My Lai and much written material by the men who were there. It's not for the fainthearted. In Viet Nam, Tom was a Forward Observer and point man, both extremely dangerous jobs. He's a naturally gifted storyteller. There is a dream like, take no prisoners, no-deadwood quality to his writing. Every word leaps off the page. His descriptions are unputdownable.

**Tom Skiens:** Thanks for the intro, Marc! I volunteered to join the army and I volunteered to go to Viet Nam. I even volunteered to become the 4/2's Forward Observer (FO). [Ed. Note: The job of a 4.2 FO is to call for and adjust high angle indirect fires in support of his unit.] I don't remember firefight where the enemy engaged us conventionally. I know the battalion hit 70 booby traps the first 6 months.

**Tyler:** Where did you get the idea for this collection and why did you think it would be a good addition to the Viet Nam literature already in print? How did you find the authors to contribute to the book?

**Victor Volkman:** "More Than A Memory" sprang from an [on-air interview with Anya Achtenberg](#) on Author's Access in Fall 2007. She teaches a series of workshops on writing for social change and she mentioned she knew a number of Viet Nam veteran writers who were looking for a home for their work. Specifically, I remember her recommending poet Preston Hood and things kind of snowballed quickly after that once the word got out. Many of the authors were already on a first name basis as you can guess from Marc Levy's earlier answer.

I was immediately impressed by the quality of the submissions rolling in. There is no question that there are many more stories to be told. We've learned the power of storytelling to heal from the Truth And Reconciliation commissions in South Africa, Sierra Leone, and elsewhere. Until the truth can be told, healing doesn't happen. That is part of the overall mission of Modern History Press.

**Tyler:** Why did the authors themselves choose to write about the Viet Nam War?

**Tom Skiens:** What if I am the only person who remembers the dead? I write so the dead will never be forgotten. I write about Viet Nam because that one year of combat has dominated my life. I am obsessed.

**Marc Levy:** Naturally I'll speak for myself. I never had a problem after coming home. I never had a need to read about Viet Nam. True: I slept with a loaded pistol under my pillow for several years (as many vets still do), then a meat cleaver, then a machete; I was fired from every job I ever had; spent long periods alone; was considered strange, felt alienated; with few exceptions had no feelings for many women other than sexual; had nightmares, crying spells, thought of killing people a dozen times a day, suicide a pleasant lullaby; spun, turned, ducked or kicked at the slightest sound; left the country twice for extended periods, etc & etc. But didn't have a problem with war or with PTSD. In '92 while living in Guatemala and backpacking other parts of Central America, I wrote long travel letters to friends. '94 a lost year. Then a year saving money while working in New Zealand. Then eight

months backpacking Southeast Asia, Indonesia, Europe. Many flashbacks, many adventures. Many letters. A melt down in Amsterdam. A two month VA hospitalization for war stress, another lost year. I began to jot things down. Penned terrible poems. Success arrived with short stories that combined war and erotica. Then travel tales. Then post war stories. The occasional war poem. The periodic essay. My best friend and editor is the actor and writer George Dickerson, who has pushed me past the limits of my stunting ego. My good friend and teacher Larry Heinemann encourages all writers to face their dread. That's where the story is. The art comes next.

**Tyler:** I'm impressed that the book also includes poetry, which sounds odd for the subject of war, although great war poems have been written about the world wars. What is it about poetry that you feel captures the war in ways that prose cannot?

**Tom Skiens:** I believe that human drama is best expressed through poetry.

**Tyler:** How does writing in general work as a type of therapy or release for frustrations or stress from the war—even if a soldier has no aspirations toward being a writer, is writing or journaling used by therapists as a way to overcome PTSD?

**Tom Skiens:** You can manage PTSD but you can't defeat it. Writing can be a therapeutic exercise for war vets as well as traumatized children.

**Tony Swindell:** I'm a writer, and writing has helped me deal with PTSD, especially after putting thoughts into words and looking at them after time has passed. Almost always, a new perspective will pop up.

**Marc Levy:** I think the assumption that vets writing about war helps to release stress, etc, is open to debate. There's a fair amount of angry prose on the Internet, in self-published accounts, in accounts of guys who have gone back to where they fought. Often they are close-held grudges against the former enemy. There's an absence of insight and a surplus of ego. It's as if the writer needs to reinforce anger rather than face the deeper issues that come with reflection: Sorrow, grief, guilt, dread; these are not easy memories to face. But in other cases, regardless of the depth or quality of writing, it may serve to open doors that might otherwise remain shut.

**Tyler:** Modern History Press has produced other books about the Viet Nam war as well. What about this particular war still keeps it at the forefront of America's attention, more so than probably World War II or even the current war in Iraq?

**Marc Levy:** Academic friends tell me that high school and college students see Viet Nam as ancient history, just as World War I is to baby boomers. Regards Viet Nam, there is the abstract concept of the United States having lost a war, but absent is an awareness of actual horror, of combatants or civilians loss or suffering. So in a sense the question misleads. The (fading) notion of American invincibility may be at the forefront of a popular consciousness, but few Americans aside from health care professionals, veterans and their families have an inkling of war and its aftermath. Still, Viet Nam remains an enigma. At least to those who accept the official story and block out the strange ideal of self-determination.

**Tony Swindell:** In response to the question about what differentiates Viet Nam from other conflicts, it took me years to understand what was so pernicious and nationally debilitating about Viet Nam. In WW2, you had the seeds planted for all-out war against civilians with atrocities like the concentration camps, Dresden, Tokyo, Hiroshima/Nagasaki, etc. By the time Viet Nam rolled around, however, you had the full flowering of evil with civilians becoming indistinguishable from enemy soldiers. "Kill 'em all and let God sort 'em out" became a national sentiment for a very large segment of the American population. My two cents' worth.

**Victor Volkman:** What's missing in the experience is a sense of closure. Erecting the "The Wall" was the first step on that journey but merely wanting to put something behind you is not enough. Truths need to be told, stories need to be heard.

**Tyler:** Earlier, Marc said that Tony predicted the massacre at Haditha in Iraq. In watching this latest war unfold, does Viet Nam become more relevant. What are your reactions to the war in Iraq, and have we learned lessons from Viet Nam that have helped us in Iraq, or is Iraq another example of how humans fail to work for peace?

**Tom Skiens:** You could say that the word relevant and Vietnam should not be on the same page! This war was predicated on lies about Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMD) lies just like Vietnam was predicated on lies about Domino Theory.

**Tony Swindell:** We haven't learned a damn thing from Vietnam, except that our national leaders are even more corrupt. I'm afraid that America will be paying a high price for these aggressive wars and sooner than most people think.

**Marc Levy:** Parallels to Iraq and Vietnam have been discussed at length in the mainstream and left of center media. In many ways Iraq seems more disastrous than Vietnam. We've destroyed the country in half the time it took to destroy Vietnam, displaced hundreds of thousands of people, killed at least an equal number of civilians, failed to improve the civilian infrastructure, incited barbaric ethnic cleansing, made public the privatization of war, and unleashed a level of financial war contracting fraud unheard of. Our own casualties, many of whom would have died in Vietnam due to their catastrophic nature, are often sent home to die. As in Vietnam, for the most part we remain ignorant of Iraqi culture, and have continually redefined a thoroughly discredited mission. Our military forces appear broken: Multiple combat tours were the exception in Vietnam. In the "war on terror" they are the norm. Wounded veterans have been betrayed by the VA health care system; the Pentagon has been lackluster in its acquisition process: the Humvee scandal comes to mind. Our foot soldier weaponry and battle gear appear to benefit shareholders more than soldiers. As in Vietnam the brass overseeing military strategy in Iraq cannot accept that a (multi-faction) guerrilla insurgency will remain outsmarting high tech, and that the war will only end in stalemate. Iraq is less an example of how humans have failed to work for peace and more an example of how corporations have succeeded in making and prolonging war to increase profits.

**Tyler:** Victor, what about Viet Nam intrigues you that you have edited and published books about it? Do you have a personal connection to the war?

**Victor Volkman:** That's a good question, Tyler. I put it to you that if you look around there is someone in your family who has been affected by this war. It might be a friend of a brother who went to war and never returned or someone closer than that. I personally lost a brother-in-law I never got to meet. He did a tour in Viet Nam and subsequently committed suicide on a base in West Germany a year or so later.

My first conscious contact with Viet Nam vets was when I met David W. Powell and Pieter van Aggelen in 1989. They both spoke eloquently about their recoveries from PTSD at the 1989 Institute for Research in Metapsychology Conference. At that time, the idea crystallized in my mind that the stories MUST be told. However, I didn't act on that impulse until my publishing house started up in 2004 and I began corresponding with David, helping him tell his story. His book "[My Tour In Hell: A Marine's Battle with Combat Trauma](#)" (2006) was well received and resulted in coverage on the Pentagon Channel and Retirement Living TV networks.

The scale of the event, the sheer amount of men and material deployed in Viet Nam, was only recently exceeded by Operation Iraqi Freedom in the past few years. I also saw telling the stories of Viet Nam soldiers as a prelude to understanding to the traumas that were going in Iraq, even though it is barely now starting to be admitted to its full extent.

**Tyler:** What kind of diversity exists in "More Than a Memory" considering how the war is treated by the various writers. For example, is the war seen as foolish by one and necessary by another—and how do the authors' individual experiences create different voices about the war?

**Tom Skiens:** All war is recorded in the eyes and the voice of the individual. We cannot hear all the voices, only the one in front of us.

**Tony Swindell:** It's full of viewpoints most Americans haven't seen before, not just "war is hell and I was there up to my neck in blood and guts."

**Marc Levy:** Each writer provides his own unique perspective on combat. Some go further than others in coming to grips with war and its aftermath. The chapter on the African American soldiers who organized and protested the war and refused to be sent to Vietnam provided a unique counterpart to the various recollections of combat.

**Tyler:** The war is now over thirty years in the past. Will you tell us a little about the beginnings of Viet Nam war literature? As soldiers become more comfortable talking about it, as the literature changed from the years directly after the war to the present. As we achieve distance and perspective over time, do we come closer or farther from understanding and depicting the war accurately?

**Tom Skiens:** The first books to come out about Nam were from writers and artists who may have had early access to documents etc. The grunts are almost always 30 years behind in organizing, collecting documents and reconnecting with Buddies, etc.

**Tony Swindell:** I think "More Than A Memory" is a product of accumulated wisdom from guys who at first were just glad to get back alive, went through a cycle of self-medicating with alcohol and drugs and finally found their voice. We can look back with clarity now, with the benefit of wisdom gained by aging. We are definitely closer to a clearer understanding of our experience.

**Marc Levy:** There seems to have been a flurry of novice and mid level writing during the early 70s and 80s. The short lived chapbook series "DEROS" comes to mind. As does the longer lived but now defunct "Vietnam Generation." The real writing may have started with the 1972 publication of the poetry anthology "Winning Hearts and Minds," edited by Larry Rottmann, Jan Barry, and Basil T. Paquet (which included work by the young W.D. Ehrhart).

Michael Casey won the 1972 Yale Younger Poets Award for his seminal poetry collection "Obscenities." The late Phillip Jones Griffith wrote the scathing photo/essay "Vietnam, Inc." Originally published in 1971, it was more or less banned in the US. In 1972, the captured UPI war correspondent Kate Webb wrote the underrated "On the Other Side: 23 days with the Viet Cong." Larry Heinemann wrote the novel "Close Quarters," which some say is the best war fiction of the Vietnam era. His next book, "Paco's Story," won the National Book Award. Tim O'Brien won fame with "The Things They Carried" and subsequent combat themed books. Yusef Kumanayakaa was heralded for his early and later war poem collections. The late war correspondent Gloria Emerson wrote the 1976 National Book Award winning "Winners and Losers." Comprised of interviews with veterans, their families, friends and acquaintances, its interwoven commentary sears the soul.

Journalist Hunter S. Thompson brought Vietnam Veterans Against the War to brief, but everlasting fame. Michael Herr dug himself a foxhole of fame with "Dispatches." Marine war reporter Gustav Hasford's "The Short Timers," published in 1979, was later adapted to screen in Kubrick's "Full Metal Jacket" (1987). Al Santoli's 1981 oral history "Everything We Had" is mandatory reading. Bruce Weigel's "Song of Napalm" remains a classic of American Vietnam war poetry, as is the lesser known but astonishing "The Moon Reflected Fire" by Marine medic Doug Anderson.

In 1983, the late Lynda Van Devanter wrote her highly acclaimed Army nurse memoir "Home Before Morning" (met by gales of criticism from her sister nurses, who objected to her frank recollections of drugs and sex in war time.). In 1986, William Broyles began the trend of books concerned with vets going back to Vietnam with "Brothers in Arms: A Journey from War to Peace."

It's interesting to note that several of Kumanayakaa's war poems reference the Vietnamese (i.e. You and I Are Disappearing), Broyles interacts with the people and the culture, and in "Full Metal Jacket" the viewer is confronted with the life and death of the teenage female sniper who has killed several men in Private Joker's platoon. On the other hand, though Ron Kovic's enduring "Born on the 4th of July" was well received in the United States, its film adaptation was roundly criticized in the "The Guardian" by England's foremost journalist and war correspondent, John Pilger. "Where are the Vietnamese?" he demands in a two thousand word essay. "They flit across the screen like matchsticks."

In this regard the initial question is somewhat misleading. It assumes the reader equates war literature of the Vietnam era with American writers only. But the Vietnamese have also written about this war, most famously in "The Sorrow of War," by Bao Ninh. In fact many other Vietnamese books have been translated, including the exquisite short story collection, "Night, Again," edited by Linh Dinh. In sum, reading American and Vietnamese literary accounts is essential to having a balanced view of what the Vietnamese in their thousand year history call The American War.

Prof. Edwin Moise of Clemson University has assembled an [extensive bibliography of Viet Nam literature](#). In 2006 Photographer [Jeff Wolin](#) published “Vietnam War Veterans: Inconvenient Stories,” which contains fifty contemporary photos and well-edited interviews of combat veterans. He is currently at work on a book using the same format but will feature fifty North Vietnamese and VC veterans.

**Tyler:** What do you as editor, Victor, as well as the authors of the essays themselves, hope readers will come to understand after reading “More Than a Memory: Essays on Viet Nam”?

**Marc Levy:** After reading this book I hope that readers will be moved to action. That might mean listening to veterans rather than patronizing them on the appropriate holiday. That might mean working with or providing direct service to vets. That might mean questioning why we fight.

**Tom Skiens:** I hope they understand that war is not good for children and other living creatures. Wars without reason are doomed to failure and for each war that fails we seek even more just reason.

**Victor Volkman:** Quite simply, there is no healing without storytelling. My humble contribution is to serve as the conduit to veterans getting heard and listened to.

**Tyler:** Can you provide us with an example of how writing about the war has helped one or more of you to heal?

**Tony Swindell:** I've been a writer all of my working life, but I don't think it was until I got older that the real healing began to take place.

**Tom Skiens:** I wrote down the stories forty years ago and now I have documents listing time, grid coordinates, all names of personnel and places, etc. I no longer have any questions about my tour. That gives me clarity about exactly what did and didn't happen.

**Tyler:** Will you tell us more about Modern History Press's “Reflections of History” series such as what other books have been and will be printed and the overall goal of the series?

**Victor Volkman:** The Reflections of History series shows the impact of American involvement in the world at large. As such we currently have books in print with a first-person perspective of the Viet Nam and Iraq wars. My greatest hope is that this series will contribute to the lessons learned from such conflicts and influence people to take a second look at foreign policy that they may have taken for granted. We have books forthcoming about the AIDS epidemic in Africa, the struggle of women in Pakistan for equality, and “[Saffron Dreams](#),” a novel of tragedy and redemption about a Muslim-American woman whose husband died in the World Trade Center disaster.

**Tyler:** Thank you for allowing me to interview you today, Victor, Marc and Tom. Before we go, will you tell me about the website for “More than a Memory: Reflections of Viet Nam” and what additional information about the book may be found there?

**Victor Volkman:** Interested readers can go to [www.ModernHistoryPress.com](http://www.ModernHistoryPress.com) and click on the book cover that will take them to the book mini-site. There they can find book reviews, audio interviews, and a complete chapter from the book. Additionally, the authors have banded together on their own blog at [www.ReflectionsOfVietnam.com](http://www.ReflectionsOfVietnam.com) where you can read new poetry and other writings.

**Tyler:** Thank you all for being here today and sharing your stories. I wish you much success with “More than a Memory: Reflections of Viet Nam.”

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