

POSUDEK DIPLOMOVÉ PRÁCE

Jméno a příjmení studenta: Bc. Jakub Šindelář
Název diplomové práce: Memoirs of Vietnam War Veterans
Vedoucí diplomové práce: PhDr. Christopher Koy, M.A., Ph.D.
Oponent diplomové práce: PhDr. Petr Dvořák, Ph.D.

- I. Cíl práce a jeho naplnění: 1. Cíl práce byl stanoven a naplněn v souladu s tématem
- II. Struktura práce: 1. Logická, jasná a přehledná
- III. Práce s literaturou: 2. Velmi dobrá práce s adekvátními prameny v patřičném rozsahu
- IV. Prezentace a interpretace dat: 1. Systematická, logická prezentace, originální a důsledná interpretace
- V. Formální stránka: 2. Obsahuje drobné formální chyby
- VI. Jazyková úroveň práce: 1. Výborná
- VII. Náročnost zpracování tématu: 1. Velmi vysoká
- VIII. Přínosy práce: 1. Originální zpracování a názory, předkládá nová zjištění

Vyjádření vedoucího diplomové práce *:

Mr. Šindelář tackled a topic that has likely been rather disturbing to write for every author in this long master's thesis: as he succinctly points out, they reveal painful personal experiences and the authors lay the details before the civilian public to scrutinize. Often the combat experiences revealed will not comport with society's ethical standards, and outside the context of warfare the details may be a source of shame or embarrassment.

Memoirs reveal some aspects of combat operations that are utterly alien to civilian readers who may play video games but cannot truly relate to the real physical conditions of a swamp within a jungle, the kinds of biting or stinging insects, the smell of dead bodies etc in those circumstances and environment. While the public felt well informed from television broadcasts live from Vietnam, much more is revealed in the memoirs under study in this bachelor thesis.

In providing some detail regarding the history of the conflict (a North-South civil war with American intervention involved in major bombing campaigns and combat operations), Mr. Šindelář fails to mention that the war began earlier as a colonial conflict (since Vietnam had been a French colony). After the Japanese invasion during WWII ended, the French once again attempted to assert control and Vietnamese resistance resulted in the collapse of century-long French colonial domination. That should have been included so that the motivation behind the incredibly strong resistance to American intervention by Viet Cong can be comprehended.

I will point out that Mr. Šindelář does present the motivational factors of communist policies very well, employing sources like Pierre Asselin and other specialists in Southeast Asian history. On the other hand, the National Liberation Front's propaganda was less effective on Americans than news broadcasts of the horror of war on TV every night in the 1960s and 1970s, as opposed to the idea set forth by Mr. Šindelář that "[t]his approach [by the NLF] helped turn American opinion against the war and contributed to the rise of anti-war sentiment in the United States..." (p 11). While during the 1968 presidential campaign Nixon promised to end the Vietnam War "honorably," he actually increased troops after the election and expanded bombing raids to Laos and Cambodia. It seems to me that Mr. Šindelář is incorrect when he writes down that Nixon's policy was successful, or as he puts it, "its success was measured by reducing American casualties and outcry against the war" (p. 16). Much more than half of U.S. soldiers who died in Vietnam died on Nixon's watch. Regarding reduced outcry, the Kent State University Massacre and hundreds of bombings inside the United States by the Black Panthers and Weather Underground groups (with the protestors' policy of "**Bring the War Home**") all took place under President Nixon's watch, just to name a few of many hundreds of "loud" and even "violent" anti-war protest organizing taking place. The assured "peace with honor" did not materialize with Nixon. Indeed, the U.S. military forces were utterly defeated, pure and simple. Likewise, there were many POWs and more MIAs unaccounted for, even after Nixon resigned in scandalous shame, producing cynicism among the public in anything the American government promised to attend to or resolve, i.e., far from anything "honorable." Mr. Šindelář effectually details generals opposing the war (pp. 23-27), the details of which I was unaware of until reading this thesis.

In the discussion of *In Pharaoh's Army* by Tobias Wolff, the superstitions – rituals and rites – practiced to stay alive are brilliant in expressing dire fear of death. Slackers may survive while by-the-book soldiers die – it hardly matters: luck plays the prevalent role, more than preparedness. The Tet Offensive (misspelled as "Ted Offensive") is brought to life, along with the notorious hypocrite General Westmoreland, discussed about with his father briefly in Oakland, California in Wolff's book. The rarely shown intellectual presence of Americans is presented in the "Old China" subchapter (though Graham Greene depicts this group as well in *The Quiet American*). The farewell meal of dog meat and Capt. Kale's apparent carnal session with a transvestite is amazing. The transition to civilian life passes comparatively seamlessly compared to many other fictional descriptions of returning veterans that we can read about.

The Robert Stone novel is interesting as it strongly deviates from the standard bill of Vietnam War fiction. (Stone taught English at Beloit College where I got my B.A., but he started teaching there after I had already graduated so I never met him). *Dog Soldiers* is not his only work on this topic: he wrote numerous short stories, some of which won literary prizes, on Vietnam. Journalist John Converse opens up to the reader a world of con-men ripping off the government and the massive practice of drug smuggling. Unfortunately, this novel is given only the plot-summary treatment by Mr. Šindelář, set up by page numbering

rather than thematically-based analysis. The mix of sex and drug-taking by Marge and ex-marine Hicks while escaping authorities gives the feel of a sophisticated chase, though at that time drug-smuggling was not taken as seriously by authorities as it would be from the 1980s onward.

The chapter on Michael Herr's journalistic nonfiction book *Dispatches* is in need of a better introduction to the author than merely his date of birth; unlike Wolff and Stone, Herr is a northerner, a Jew from New York, which usually results in a cultural upbringing with less military traditions or connections. Here in his work the French history of Vietnam gets a little attention. Proscription drugs given to soldiers by the army make them function better under fire, but they also have their side effects. Up-close descriptions of inebriation and lack of discipline are exposed. Snipers, booby traps and details about sniper fire get more attention than Wolff provided.

A correction is needed on p. 69, last paragraph: The Vietnam War was the first war in which combat operations were covered by war correspondents (underlined words constitute my modifications). War correspondents attended to WWI, WWII and the Korean War, but they were not taken out on patrols or embedded with a platoon engaged in combat operations. Likewise, those wars were not televised. Previous wars were reported "patriotically" but in Vietnam "truth" got a lot more print. Herr describes how heroism was less visible than the mere fight for survival. The absurdity of it all was revealed in newspaper reports: like Wolff's fictionalized autobiography, Herr emphasizes "luck." Herr points out the distinction between what soldiers know (being defeated) and what the U.S. high command publicly proclaims (victory). For example, the Khe Sanh siege ordered by President Johnson is lied about by the Military Press secretaries and all the war correspondents know it. Mr. Šindelář shows how Herr's work is duty-bound to tell truths of the combat soldiers which appear oblivious to commanders, so relations with the press could be rough. Herr notes "[o]nly a small percentage of true stories make it past bureaucracy" (p. 81).

The only book to be adapted as a film in this study, *A Rumor of War* by Philip Caputo is probably the most famous one treated in this master's thesis. The effect of the war on Philip Caputo's behavior and psychological make-up after the war is referred to in Mr. Šindelář's introduction. The memoir begins by showing the common naïveté many patriotic boys have about war and how swift and easy a war with little communist Vietnam would be. An elite marine officer rather than an army private, Caputo is quickly schooled of his illusions by the grim reality in the well-paced narrative which suddenly turns quickly to soldiers getting mundane illnesses to seriously injured, paralyzed or killed. Faking bravery, soldiers do not heed warnings about the dangers in search and destroy missions. After a member of his company is killed by sniper fire and he meditates on casualty reports of men women and children dying, "he begins questioning America's true intentions in Vietnam" (p. 89), a developing response not uncommon to many veterans but articulated by Caputo particularly brilliantly. The thrill of cooperating in life or death situations is poignantly depicted, including acts of revenge against civilians, with nightmares to follow. In a revenge killing he gets court-martialed but only gets "a slap on the wrist" (p. 92) with an honorable discharge shortly thereafter. Later as a Chicago Tribune reporter he witnesses the complete victory of the Viet Cong.

Mr. Šindelář's ninth chapter, oddly entitled "Thematic Analysis" (pp. 94-100) offers six pages of an overabundant set of extracts and quotes from texts thematically divided up rather than much of the anticipated analysis, with 9.3 subchapter carrying the not very narrow title "Personal experience {what a memoir must report} and psychological toll of war" repeating the running over of bikes incident and further impact of war's impact on young American boys' behavior following them back after service. Many quote are repeated without

comment in this analysis, which disappointed me greatly. Otherwise, the overall project was carried out well. It would have been useful to formulate ideas regarding the differing writing styles. Stone and Wolff are flamboyant creative writers, so their lack of journalistic reporting appears rather obvious compared to the more realistically-grounded writing style of Caputo or Herr.

Práce splňuje základní požadavky kladené na tento typ prací, a proto ji doporučuji k ústní obhajobě.

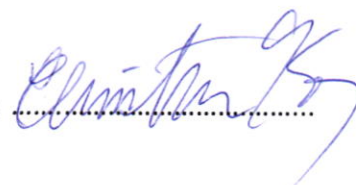
Navrhovaná známka: výborně

Otázky k obhajobě:

1. Nixon's Vietnam War policy you described positively, as in: "its success was measured by reducing American casualties and outcry against the war" (p. 16). Do any of the writers (Wolff, Stone, Herr or Caputo) share this opinion?

2. As a journalist, did Michael Herr suffer as much as the others (since he never served in the military)? Please describe how it impacted him differently after he returned to the United States, compared with Wolff, Caputo or Stone (who served between the Korea and Vietnam wars, hence personally did not face any combat).

Podpis vedoucího diplomové práce/oponenta diplomové práce*:



Datum: 18. 5. 2023

*nehodící se škrtněte