Larry Heinemann in Conversation With Kurt Jacobsen

Larry Heinemann is a stocky 5'10" with graying beard and twinkling eyes. He is a lifelong and steadfast Chicagoan (four generations in the same Northside neighborhood; five, he points out, if you count his son) who was drafted into the Army in 1966. During 1967-68 he served in the 25th Division in Vietnam where he saw extensive action in the tunnel land of Cu Chi, Dau Tieng, Tay Ninh, and the Black Virgin Mountain in the "Iron Triangle" region northwest of Saigon where, among other things, he drove Armored Personnel Carriers. After a brief stint as the surliest bus driver in Chicago in the summer of 1968 (see his mordant comments in Studs Terkel's *The Great Divide*), he collected a BA from Columbia College in Chicago in 1971 and taught afterward in the writing program there until the mid-1980s. His grueling Vietnam combat experience became the grist and grit for his first novel *Close Quarters*, published in 1977.

His second novel *Paco's Story*, which he described as plumbing "the everlasting reverberations of the aftermath of the war," follows a disconsolate Vietnam veteran wandering in a ghastly ghostly haze through an oblivious America. It won the Carl Sandberg Literary Award and the National Book Award in 1986. In 1992 he brought out a very funny but, shall we say, regionally specific novel with the utterly enviable title *Cooler By The Lake*, which was a loving lashing out at Chicago's foibles, fools and scoundrels. His short stories and articles have appeared in *Penthouse*, *Atlantic Monthly*, *Harper's*, *Tri-Quarterly*, and the *Vietnam Writers Association Journal of Arts and Letters*. He has conducted writing workshops at nearly a dozen universities, including Northwestern, University of Southern California and the University of California at Berkeley.

Without burdening the text with innumerable parenthetical breaks and other annoyances it is hard to convey the stream of wry humor he injected into the interview through intonations, squints, and actorly pacing in his unhurried story-telling style. A lot of laughter, rueful or raucous, erupted even during some very grim recollections. Our interview took place in his Chicago home early in December 2002, a few days before he was embarking for Vietnam, via Paris, on a Fulbright scholarship. This would be his fifth trip back to South

East Asia since the war. When I accompanied him, and several companions, to meet Daniel Ellsberg on a book tour stop in Chicago, Heinemann expressed gratitude to Ellsberg for bringing the lies underpinning the Vietnam War to the surface. "A great, brave thing you did, sir," Heinemann told him. He has just completed a book on travel by train and bicycle around Vietnam, as yet untitled.

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Q: Let's start with your Chicago background. I gather that you didn't quite have a privileged upbringing like, say, Oliver Stone who left Yale for Vietnam.

Heinemann: My old man was a bus driver. My mother was a farm girl from Michigan. My mother's side of the family, oddly enough, is connected to Abraham Lincoln. I'm a sixth cousin. My grandfather resembled him. He had high sunken cheeks, a high squeaky voice which Lincoln apparently had, and those melancholy eyes staring off into space like you see in a lot of photographs. My father was born in Chicago and my mother came here in the 1930s and worked as a nanny for a doctor's family up in Winnetka. She met my Dad, got married in 1939 or 1940. I was born in 1944. Went to work when I was 12, caddying summers.

Q: Was your father in the military?

Heinemann: No. He had flat feet. My uncles were. They never talked about it.

Q: Did you grow up expecting to go to college?

Heinemann: No. Like a lot of other families of ordinary working stiffs who came up in the Depression and World War II, the expectation was you finish high school and get a job. Guys like Bruce Weigl and Tim O'Brien and I laugh and say we became writers because of the war, not in spite of it. But my mother was a great storyteller and my grandfather was a wonderful bullshit artist. So I expect I got it from them. I worked for a while after high school. Then I went to Kendall, a two-year junior college across the street from Northwestern. I had a vague ambition to go to San Francisco State and get into theater. In 1966 I ran out of money, dropped out, and was drafted like

that. Bingo. I was 22. I went overseas at 23 where everyone else was 18 and they called me the old man.

Q: How about other family members?

Heinemann: I have three brothers and I am the only one who finished college. Three of us were in the service, two in Vietnam. I was in the Army and my youngest brother was in the Marines. He and I were there at the same time in 1967. He got wounded and sent home and then went back for a second tour. When he came back the second time, he and I didn't speak a word for ten years.

Q: Was that because of different takes on the war?

Heinemann: Oh, yeah. Extremely different views of the war. Not to say, opposite.

Q: Did he have a "kill 'em all let God sort 'em out" attitude?

Heinemann: Yeah. That's what the Marine Corps does. He dropped out of high school and my mother signed him in. The first day of boot camp he volunteers for Vietnam. But you are brutalized in a way that's unconscionable. The first night of boot camp everybody is scared shitless. They've got these monsters in Yogi Bear hats who scream at everybody like they've never been screamed at in their lives. Drill sergeants stand over each guy and scream at him until he volunteers. If he doesn't, they take him out back and beat the shit out of him until he does. But the Marines do know how to dress. Give them that. James Jones called it a "pointless pride." All these guys have is a really flashy fucking uniform. On the other hand, some of my best friends are former Marines, and they'd give you the shirt off their backs.

Q: How does Army training compare?

Heinemann: Compared with the Marine Corps, Army Basic Training was a piece of cake. The one thing it was good for was the physical training. When I went in I weighed about 140 pounds. Skinny, rundown, and nervous was the phrase in my family. After basic I weighed about 160. Romping, stomping dynamite (laughs). I was in the best shape of my life. As an ordinary rifle

soldier if you're not in good shape, you are going to die. The work is just too hard.

Q: There were lots of stories circulating about these superbly conditioned soldiers being spat on by protesters, which seems kind of unlikely.

Heinemann: We all heard the stories of getting spit on, that mythology, when we were overseas. I can tell you that when I arrived home I was not in the mood. Some years ago I read from *Paco's Story* at the University of Wisconsin and it was the only time I ever lost my temper at a reading. This guy, a history professor and the faculty pill, I was later told, said if he had met me at the airport he would have spit on me. I came out from behind the podium. I was shaking with anger and I said, "Shooting someone with a rifle and spitting on them comes from the same place in the heart. Second, I had just come from a place where I didn't take any shit from anybody. You spit on me and you get your ass kicked within an inch of your fucking life." I am not going to be ashamed that I came through the war that in one piece. I'm not proud of what happened in Vietnam, either. How can an honest person be proud of such a thing? But I am not ashamed.

Q: I heard that from other veterans, but did that ever happen?

Heinemann: I've talked with a lot of veterans, and I never heard anybody say they got spit on. Let me back up. I came back in March of 1968, about a month and a half into the Tet offensive. Three weeks later Martin Luther King was murdered. On June 5 Bobby Kennedy was shot and died on the greasy hot kitchen floor in Los Angeles. I got a job on a Chicago city bus and drove through the Democratic Convention. Driving a bus—a horrible job for somebody in my frame of mind. It's one thing about being a soldier that people here didn't get. We said it flat out loud, "I don't fucking care." There were those days when you said, "Just fucking kill me. I'm tired of this." I can't think of another kind of work that is as soul deadening, as dispiriting. I remember coming back to the airport and just feeling exhausted. You've been working on three or four hours of sleep a night for a year. You feel as if you have been taken out of time. Saturday I was in the 90th Reeple Deeple in Saigon. Sunday we stayed overnight at Oakland army terminal. I just want to go home. Please do not fuck with me. It wasn't as if I had a chip on my shoulder, or an attitude. I didn't have any attitude at all. Or maybe it was

more like, “Are you ready to fucking die? Cause I don’t care one way or the other.” The next night I was home in my own room. I slept on the floor.

Q: Think you needed a period of adjustment?

Heinemann: Thinking back? God, yes. Back then? Get me the fuck out of here. I don’t want a fucking parade. I have had it. They take your khakis and give you a brand new uniform so you smell like the box of mothballs it came in. I put it on that afternoon about one o’clock, wore it home. I mustered out a sergeant, and it was the one and only time I wore my stripes. I looked like a toy. Got home that night, took it off, balled it up, hauled it to the garbage, and threw it away. I don’t want anything to do with this anymore. I am a private citizen, thank you very much.

Q: So you start at Columbia College in the spring of 1968.

Heinemann: We’re sitting around that first night in writing class, talking about what we want to write about. I say I just got back from overseas and I want to write about that. And there was this kind of suck of breath that went through the room. There was this look on everybody’s face, like “You’re one of them?” My attitude was, Yeah. I am one of them and if anyone wants to talk about it we can step out onto the fire escape six stories up from Ohio street and talk about it out there.

Q: So how did they wind up treating you?

Heinemann: Actually there was a great deal of empathy. A serious understanding by me of what they were trying to do against the war and a serious understanding by them for who I was and what the war was really about. After the news of [the] My Lai massacre hit the streets, it was, Whoa. They asked, This happen a lot? And I said that the spirit of atrocity was in the very air. We were all working class kids. We were the first kids in our families to go to college. This was Columbia College in downtown Chicago. We found out we shared a great deal. They started out, “You should be against the war, Larry.” And I was telling them, “Let me tell you why you should *really* be against the war.”

If there was an antiwar attitude among the troops I was with it didn’t get any more sophisticated than, “Fuck this. This is bullshit.” When I came back from

overseas I was just furious, and probably more radicalized than anyone I was in school with. I was extraordinarily bitter and for a long time I thought I was the only one. I had this remarkable energy. This "thing" that just blew through me has got to make sense, has got to mean something. I got into writing because I had this story that will not go away. The thing that hooked me was the second week the teacher comes up to me—I didn't know then that he'd been a medic in Korea—and says, "Larry, if you want to write war stories read these." He hands me the *Iliad* and *War and Peace*. Everything that should be in a war story is in the *Iliad*. And *War and Peace* is just a great yarn and a beautiful piece of work. Plus we were reading *Moby Dick* and *The Painted Bird*.

Q: It appears now that *The Painted Bird* was a figment of Jerzy Kosinski's imagination.

Heinemann: I don't care if it's phony, what a great fucking story. Turned out Kosinski was pretty strange. So I came into writing telling war stories. Never to my face did anyone say anything about being a soldier. The closest anyone - came was to say how dare you tell those stories, how dare you use that language, and how dare you represent that point of view. That's when I knew I was on to something. I mean, I wanted to take the war and just shove it up your ass.

Q: Who were these prissy people anyway?

Heinemann: I've run into people like that since, writers and writers who teach, and they act as if there is just one kind of story. They are doing the craft of writing, and teaching, an extraordinary disservice. How dare you tell any young writer that they may not write about something because of subject matter, or language or point of view just because you can't deal with it? That's your problem. Go find another line of work. The worst kind of teachers think stories happen from the neck up, that there's a polite intellectual's armchair distance. But if a story doesn't make your skin crawl or make your bowels ache or your eyes fill with tears—well, what's the point? Goody goody talk never gets anybody anywhere. The way I learned anything was always the hard way. I opposed the war because I was up to here in it. I learned what love really means when I had kids.

Q: What did you want to say?

Heinemann: I always tried to talk about the war in terms of the work. It seemed like a good place to start. What struck me about *Moby Dick* was that Melville talked about what the work was so that you get an honest to God appreciation. There is a reason why the passing of that work is not mourned. Rowing after whales. You're engaged in slaughterhouse work and you're up to your eyeballs in blood. I started writing *Close Quarters* in 1968. I'll hang the story on the work, the same as Melville. It struck me that folks back here not only did not know what it was like to be in an Army barracks, but also knew nothing about the war as work. In every sort of work there is a literal physical satisfaction that comes over you when a job's well done, a personal pride. But if you're an infantryman, your job is to kill people. "Close and engage" the lifers call it. I've heard historians refer to it as "state sanctioned murder." But it's still murder. And how can you possibly have any good feeling about that? The aftermath of a firefight is all exhaustion, and downrange it's all meat. In half an afternoon you are standing in a smell like no other in the world. The stink of body count corpses.

I was in mechanized infantry, a sort of junior armored cavalry. We had APCs, armored personnel carriers. Tracks. What exactly was the work? Well, there's a .50 caliber machine gun that weighs about a hundred pounds and throws a slug about the size of your thumb and can blow your head off at a mile. Joseph Heller's Snowden in *Catch-22* was a fifty gunner. That's what they used to shoot down Messerschmidts. A very serious weapon. I had never seen an APC before, but learned quickly because I was the driver. I was in a recon platoon, so we had four guys on each track. If you fuck up, three guys hump. You hump, but they hump, too. On the back were two M-60 machine guns. Basically, you're driving around in a 13-ton bunker. We had Chevy 283 V-8s with a four-barrel carburetor and a blower about the size of a room fan and a 90-gallon gasoline tank. So, you're always messing with machinery.

So I told stories about night ambushes, search and destroy missions, and firefights large and small. What you do with body count. Smoking grass, drinking ourselves stupid. I never heard the word marijuana until I went to Vietnam, and we smoked it all the time. Stories about how the war worked, the same as you would go at any strange "process." It's the same in Robert Mason's *Chickenhawk*. He talks about what a helicopter is, for what, the first 60 or 70 pages? And if there's one symbol of Vietnam it's the Huey chopper. Mason called it "hauling ass and trash." We just hauled ass.

Q: I remember a famous photograph of a truck pulling VC bodies behind it.

Heinemann: I don't need to see the picture. We did that a time or two. You get in a firefight and afterwards go out and do what we referred to as a dismount, just like the cavalry. Searching the bodies and making the count. You tie the heels together with commo wire, which is like extension cord, and drag them out to the road and leave them. There were some outfits that left playing cards but we never bothered with that. The strong inference was, "Fuck with us and this will happen to you." Sometimes we had to drag the bodies a good long way. That's what got to me about reading The *Iliad*. Achilles ties Hector's corpse to a pair of horses. He gives them a whack on the ass and Hector's body get dragged round and round the city until there was nothing left but what was tied at the ankles. How's that for "fuck you?"

We had maybe ten thousand rounds of ammunition, which will last you all day. Crates of hand grenades. M-79 grenade launchers with both high explosive rounds and canister rounds, which were 40-millimeter casings with double ought buck shot. The barrel was eight or nine inches long so you're walking around with a serious sawed-off shotgun. The M-16s back in those days were junk. I took an M-16 on my first ambush and fired three rounds and it jammed. Fuck this. So after that I took the M-60, the pig, we called it. You really did carry it like Sylvester Stallone (laughs). You tied a long strap to the barrel and the butt plate and slung it over your shoulder, and you've got Pancho Villa style bandoleers of ammunition. I had a 12-gauge shotgun for a while, and then an AK-47, which has be the best in the world.

You couldn't keep an M-16 clean enough. If I ever run into the motherfucker that sent that rifle overseas, I'm going to make short work of him. The other motherfucker I want to talk to is the asshole who sent gasoline-powered APCs. Just behind the driver is a 90-gallon gasoline tank. An engineer told me one gallon of gasoline is equivalent to 19 pounds of TNT and 19 pounds can blow the back of this house off.

Q: How effective was the armor?

Heinemann: It's inch and a quarter aluminum alloy. Small arms fire will ricochet. My track was all nicked up. By the way, it's the same armor that they make the Bradley Fighting Vehicle the Army uses nowadays. And they're both deathtraps. A rocket propelled grenade will go through [an] inch and half

aluminum alloy armor plate like spit through a screen. You hit the gas tank, the track goes up like the head of a match, mushroom cloud and all. Happened more than once. The drivers had their bodies separated from their heads. Many drivers got killed or burned to death. I ever run into the fucking genius who sent gas-powered to Vietnam, he and I are going to have a serious discussion. I would gladly do time in prison for the chance of showing Mr. Genius what I think of his scheme.

Q: Diesel wouldn't do the same thing?

Heinemann: Diesel will burn but it takes more to get it going. The only trick we had was to keep the tank full. That was the myth anyway. The RPG round has a magnesium core which burns of itself because it carries its own oxygen. So if you get whacked with an RPG, the shrapnel will burn right through you. Lots of casualties from that.

Q: It sounds like complicated machinery didn't work very well. What did work?

Heinemann: We used our bayonets to clean our nails and open our mail. Shotguns never failed. The M-79s were much coveted. The .45 pistols weren't much good beyond 25 or 30 feet but looked stylish. A lot of guys had personal weapons. A good friend of mine's father gave him a hand-made Bowie knife. We drove our tracks hard, but they were beaters to start with. Take a thing so ordinary as C-rations. We were once issued rations labeled October 1952. For Korea. And here's the one war souvenir I've got I cherish: my P-38 C-ration can opener. It's the only thing the government ever gave me that worked as advertised. I keep it on my key ring for luck. C-ration food was terrible. But a couple years ago I met a North Vietnamese army veteran and poet who said that they would have given anything to have C-rations. What they did was boil up this really godawful, rotgut wormy rice so it got real sticky and formed it into a log about a foot and a half long and carry it in their shirt. And that's what they ate.

Q: Another major enemy seems to be the "ticket punching lifers."

Heinemann: I have a strong memory of having it in for the lifers just as much as I had it in for the VC. One of the things almost nobody talks about is the fraggings. The boy scouts, the wannabe heroes, the John Waynes, the guys

who buy the bullshit, the control freaks who really think they're in charge, the guys who want their purple hearts and their little medals, I mean they really want it—the clowns who simply will not leave you alone—these were the guys who got fragged. Shithead lifers, the NCOs who were just assholes. Racist black sergeants, racist white officers. Look at it this way. When it was time to get rid of somebody, everybody was in on it, and there'd often be a pot. Everybody would kick in. And the easiest thing in the world was to fake a firefight at night, and somebody gets up behind the guy and simply shoots him. But the great appeal of hand grenades was you could booby-trap the guy's hooch and be, well, elsewhere. I read in Gibson's *The Perfect War* that the general who ordered the assault on Hamburger Hill wound up with a $10,000 bounty on his head, but left for home before anyone could cash in. By the end of the war there'd been thousands of fraggings. But their names are on the Wall too.

Q: You published a short story "The Fragging" in the *Atlantic Monthly* a few years ago. Was that the start of a new novel?

Heinemann: That's the only short story I've ever published that was never intended to be anything but a short story. For a while I had it in the back of my mind to follow the guys "who knew of the matter" after they got home. But, no. No more war stories.

Q: Any exceptional lifers?

Heinemann: I've met a bunch since. Decent and intelligent men. When I was at Fort Knox we had a First Sergeant who got the entire gag. He was a full-blood Navaho Indian, First Sergeant Alva, and I will never forget him. Built like a fireplug. The day I left Knox he took me aside and said, "Heinemann, remember, this is not a white man's war. What do you say to that? "Um, yes, First Sergeant."

The best officer I knew was a University of Wisconsin ROTC graduate with a degree in history. He comes into the platoon, calls a meeting of the NCOs, and says, "Gentlemen, our job is to make sure everybody goes home in one piece." We look at him and say, "Lieutenant, this is a very good plan. How can we help you?" That's when we stopped doing a lot of the dumb things, like ambush every fucking night. Lieutenant Eric Opsahl was a prince. The lifers were there to punch their career tickets: get their medals and their promotions

and their overseas pay. This is what gets me about listening to pilots, any pilot, who say they "were just doing my job." Well, they're doing their job and punching their tickets. Pilots never had to get down on the ground and wallow around in the mess they'd made.

Q: So you saw the aftermath of air strikes?

Heinemann: I remember sitting around a mess hall kitchen table in the enlisted men's club at Dau Tieng, which was a dirt floor tent with a sawhorse bar and couple of coolers full of semi-cold beer. We'd hear B-52 air strikes in the distance and the cans on the table would start dancing around. And the air strike is ten, fifteen miles away. Then they'd send us out to check on the damage. The bomb craters were just a swath, maybe a hundred meters wide and five hundred meters long. It was just a hole, a nothing. The first time I flew into Hanoi was back in 1990, sailing in to the airport. Broad swaths of bomb craters all over everything. This was what Henry Kissinger saw when he flew into Hanoi, what year was that, 1973? I wonder what he thought.

Q: Paco's Story is a very painful book that you just go on reading anyway. Paco, unlike you, just didn't find a voice.

Heinemann: It was like he couldn't get up the breath. Here's a guy who is probably a reflection of my younger brother. I hate to make it sound so pat. But you see it a lot. The war just choked some guys. Homeless veterans may well be the dictionary definition. My brother Philip came back and never said anything about the war. I could not shut up. Something happened to my brother in the two years he spent overseas that he simply could not get around. Lots of things are taken from you when you are soldier. Lots of things.

Q: Such as?

Heinemann: Ordinary human feeling. When you get R & R you have your choice of cities. I chose Tokyo. Everybody on the plane was hornier than a five peckered billy goat. I was 23 and I had a thousand dollars in my poke. In 1967 a thousand was a great deal of money. Got to Tokyo and signed into, I swear to God, the Perfect Room Hotel. Could you think of a better name for a whorehouse? Any room you pick is going to be a delight. I wanted to sleep with a woman, not to say fuck my brains out, and find out it was still possible for me to feel good in my body. Skip the date, skip the dinner, skip the

movie. And yeah, I found out I could. I have a strong hunch my brother found out he could not. When you're 19 you don't even know what has been taken from you. And, sometimes, as I say, you don't get it back.

Bullshit counseling by some chaplain isn't going to do it. A parade isn't going to do it. All the Veterans Administration dope in the world isn't going to do it. Getting on your knees and praying 20 hours a day to Saint Expedite isn't going to do it. You are strictly on your own to rediscover all of these things about what it is be human, and humane. There are a lot of guys like Paco. You get characters like him in Shakespeare. There are Paco characters in the *Iliad*. Psychologists have jargoned it to death, calling it post-traumatic stress-disorder. The term I prefer came into use after the Civil War. Soldier's heart. It amounts to a deep sense of grief that does not go away. Paco is transformed into a piece of meat. He feels as if he's been left behind. Because the guys who are narrating the story are the 93 dead guys of his platoon and they aren't happy about being dead at all. So, it's an odd irony. Wishing you were dead. But Paco is not innocent. You don't find that out until pretty far along in the story. Paco is a pretty creepy guy.

Q: But the story is still surprisingly poignant.

Heinemann: I worked on that book for eight years and I came to appreciate was that everything contains its own irony. There is a shadow side, an irony, an opposite to everything. Some people say the story is overwritten because the description gets to be too much. But there's a texture to the story, just like there's a texture to everything. Look around. There's always more than one thing going on. I don't know about poignant. At bottom what I tried to say was, let's be honest about this.

Paco never says, "Why me?" It would never occur to him. That's whining. What makes you think you are so fucking special? The big wheel turns, so why not you? Then, at the same time, you have the energy of the dynamic of the war. The central scene is the rape. Gallagher drags the captured VC woman into a hooch and 40 guys rape her to death. They all understood that this was a moment of evil—but it couldn't have been any other way because the whole energy of the dynamic points right to that. Let me put it another way: war a special evil all by itself. The politest way to say it is that we were not pleasant people, and the war was not a pleasant business. We were not fun to be around. This is the thing about President Bush's determination to have a war

in the Middle East that just breaks my heart, because these stupid motherfuckers haven't the faintest idea what they are getting us into. And they're not going to be able get us out. Maybe the kindest thing you can say about President Bush is that he's just not smart.

Q: What do you anticipate?

Heinemann: The war going to radicalize more Muslims, and then look out. President Bush is going to turn this country even more so into a country of serious racists. During the Vietnam War it was "gooks." Now it'll be "raghead sandniggers," a slur I've heard they're using. There are already blacklists, and people being pulled over a million times. I saw a piece of film during those random sniper killings around Washington. They had pulled over a SUV with a woman and her kids, and the cop had the shotgun pointed right at her head though the windshield. Well, good morning to you, ma'am. Keep your hands on the wheel or I'll blow your fucking head off. The only thing I've seen since 9/11 is more nosy cops and snitches and trigger-happy air marshals. Try to get on a plane without being searched half to death, and hassled if you ain't right on the bubble. I had a security guard give me lip for my P-38. What's this? Turns out the Vietnam War is so long ago she had never seen one, or the cops either. See what happens when you walk into City Hall, or the Cook County Building. Up against the wall, motherfucker. Cops just love it. They get to be in charge.

Every epoch of war is a social catastrophe. Things accelerate. The changes are not just inventions and such. We're not talking penicillin. We're not talking jeeps. We're not talking Tang. We're talking about a serious hit on ordinary civil rights. What was Goldwater's phrase, extremism in defense of liberty? Where you going? What's your business here? It's only going to get worse, so the other side of the coin will be an explosion like the civil rights movement and the antiwar movement. When they start this war and the bodies bags start coming back by the planeload, maybe that's when folks are going to get religion.

Q: It looks like a purely chickenhawk production.

Heinemann: I'll go along with the war when I hear that the draft age blood kin of the Bushes and Cheneys and McCains sign on. The day I hear that the graduating class of the Harvard Business School has dropped out three weeks

shy of graduation and volunteered for Airborne Rangers, that's the day I'll go along with it. The U.S. government has had the last of me and mine. My son is draft age—and my daughter is draft age too—and I swear on the grave of my father that if Preston is drafted he and I are leaving the country. I don't want anything to do with it.

Q: Have you gone pacifist?

Heinemann: I'm old enough to know that when evil comes into the world you have to kill it.You're not going to buy them off, you're not going to negotiate with them because then you get Munich. The sticky part is, it depends on who is calling who evil. The Arabs, the Palestinians, clearly have a legitimate bitch with the U.S. and the Israelis. The one true thing that President Bush has said is "He tried to kill my daddy." On my block that means his argument with Saddam Hussein is strictly family business. As far as I am concerned his moral authority to conduct this war does not extend farther than you can throw a chair off the porch of his ranch house in Texas. It's none of my business and it's none of the business of any of the draft age men that I know, kids on this block, my nephews, the kids I've been teaching down at DePaul. The war is about oil, and the Bush family business is oil. They're going to make a fortune while the rest of us take it in the neck, and the groundpounders, not to mention working-stiff Arabs, are going to take it up the ass. It's amazing how this National Guard no-show has got everybody cranked up.

Q: Back to literature. A reviewer of your comic novel *Cooler By The Lake* counted about forty war references amid all the wisecracks.

Heinemann: It took two and a half years to write. My daughter Sarah said it was the first time she heard laughing come from my studio. It was great fun to write. I tried to get even with just about everything that irritated me in Chicago. Stupid cops, dumb baseball teams. Rum-dumb politicians. The references to war? Well, you can't get away from them. The stock market. Football. Politics. The evening news. Pick a topic and you get war jargon.

Q: You are going back to Vietnam on a Fulbright Grant. When did you first return and did you have the heebie-jeebies?

Heinemann: In 1988 I was invited to go on a genuine writers' junket to China for two weeks. That group was headed by Harrison Salisbury and it was a great tickle to hang out with him. The China trip was an ah-ha moment. I really do like hanging out in this part of the world. The Forbidden City. What a place. Then we went out to the Great Wall. You look out and there's nothing out there but scrubby mountains and you try to imagine guard duty. It must have been a stone fucking bore. Sort of like the Kentucky hills and you've got to know that on the other side of that is more hills. Or a zillion Mongols on horseback. Then we went to see the terra cotta warriors at Xian. That snapped my head back. They are modeled after real guys so all the heads are unique. Folks on the trip said they saw soldiers that looked like me, that had my face, which was pretty spooky.

Q: Did you check it out?

Heinemann: I don't need to know that I was a soldier in a previous life.

Q: Do you put any store in reincarnation?

Heinemann: I'm not going to say it doesn't happen. But if does—good God. Belt whippings. Again? High school. Again? Soldier. Again?

Anyway, after the China trip I started thinking about going back to Vietnam. Then in 1990 I got an invite to join a delegation of American veteran writers to travel to Hanoi and sit around and bullshit with the Vietnamese writers association. The group was, ahem, in no particular order (laughter) Phil Caputo, Larry Rottman, W.D. Ehrhart, Bruce Weigl, Yusef Komunyakaa. Yusef is a black poet who got the Pulitzer Prize for *Neon Vernacular* a couple years ago. This is going to look so dumb on paper but there's a kind of aura about him. He is perhaps the most naturally elegant man I've ever met. By the time we landed in Hanoi, I couldn't wait. The city that had always been forbidden to me, even to my imagination. The long and short of it is, I love going back. By 1990 it was already a cliche that American veterans got a more warm welcome from the Vietnamese than we got when we came home. As a general thing Americans wanted to shame us. Well, fuck that. And I don't go back to heal, God help us, or have one of those famous crying jags. It is a beautiful country, and there is an ease and a grace that I deeply appreciate. The food is great, and the women are beautiful, and riding the train is all kick.

Q: Which Vietnamese writers did you meet?

Heinemann: A fellow named Le Luu, who is basically the Ernest Hemingway of Vietnam. Another fellow named Pham Tien Duat wrote a poem called "White Circle" which is probably most famous Vietnamese poem to come out of the war. And filmmaker Nguyen Quang Sang, who lived ten years in the Cu Chi tunnels. He still had the look of a guy you want on your side in a bar fight.

Q: Did you meet Bao Ninh?

Heinemann: I met him in 1997 when a bunch of us went over. He came to Boston three years ago. I have great respect for Bao Ninh.

Q: Does *Sorrows of War* seem a counterpart to *Close Quarters* and *Paco's Story*?

Heinemann: I am not going to compare anything I've written to that. The one thing I know about the literature that came out of that war is that there is a sub-genre of ghost stories. I don't know if there is anything comparable in other war literature but in Vietnamese and American writing that came out of the war there is a strong streak of that. I guess you'd say that the voice of the war is speaking.

Q: Please describe Bao Ninh. What is he like?

Heinemann: Bao Ninh is a pen name; it's the name of his village. No one calls him Ninh, his first name in Vietnamese fashion. It's Bao Ninh. I don't know if I've ever seen anybody drink as hard. He drinks with what Tennessee Williams would probably refer to as "some dedication." When people found out he liked Jack Daniels everyone was laying fifths on the guy. I would be the last person in the world to tell Bao Ninh to stop drinking. But you could see it on his face. He's one of the few Vietnamese I've met who actually looks his age. Bao Ninh just looks like he never had an easy day in his life. Never.

He didn't write a lick until he was in his 40s. The story I heard is that in classes and lectures he would sit in the back and drink. Never took a note. Basically, with *Sorrows of War*, he invented a form. I told him that the story just gave me chills. The beginning of the story where the guy strings his hammock above a truckload of North Vietnamese MIA corpses while they are

driving through what they refer to as the valley of screaming souls. Whoa, what a way to start a book. Anybody who thinks that the Vietnamese don't have any ordinary human feelings or that they are somehow evil people should read this book.

Q: Absolutely. Did you click when you met?

Heinemann: I think he is the first Vietnamese writer I really connected with. He and I shared a great deal. He came to writing because he had a story, not the other way around. He's not university trained; he has no background in literature, particularly. He was an ordinary grunt, drafted in 1968, and was in a battalion of 500 guys who walked it down the Ho Chi Minh trail which took, you know, six months. He was in the final battle for Tan Son Nhut Air Base in 1975. He told me that the morning of the last day of the war there were twelve guys left from the original battalion of 500. By the end of the day there were three. And he was as pissed off as any American veteran I've met, and pretty much said so in his novel. Give him credit for that. I once asked him as a soldier, as an ordinary, everyday garden variety, ground-pounding grunt, what was the hardest thing he had to do. He said it was to bury all his friends. That's when I stopped complaining about how hard I had it.

Q: When you go back this trip, what do you aim to do in Vietnam?

Heinemann: I just put my Vietnam train travel book in the mail. Vietnam has this funky little narrow gauge railroad. There is no better way to see the country. The original impulse for the book, my question, was who are these guys? How did they do this? What aspects of national character gave them the resources. I mean, on paper, we were unbeatable. Right? The lifers in Washington were saying these were a bunch of fucking dirt farmers. Vietnam was going to be a walkover. Right?

I'm going on a Fulbright to collect, transcribe, and translate Vietnamese folktales, about the cleanest expression of a people's imagination and self-image as you can find. But my real work is a "family novel" I've had in the back of my mind for 10 years and more, and I want to write it in classic, Grimm Brothers, folktale style. In the last ten or fifteen years I've developed a serious interest in folklore and mythology. It seems all the elements of story have been there from the beginning. It's about as pure a story form as you can possibly get.

Q: You've already written about the legendary mountain near your base camp.

Heinemann: The Nui Ba Den. What we called the Black Virgin Mountain. Everybody I know who has ever been around it remembers it with great warmth. It's like putting Mount McKinley out in the middle of Kansas. It was the one thing that we saw everyday that didn't have anything to do with war. When I go back to Vietnam and folks ask me where I served, I say Cu Chi, Dau Tieng and Tay Ninh. But when I mention Nui Ba Den, absolutely every Vietnamese I've ever met, north or south, man or woman, young or old, knows the mountain and knows the story. A young woman waits for her soldier-husband to return and he never does, and her faith and loyalty was so—what's the phrase?—thorough and poignant, that when she died her spirit became the mountain. How's that for the origin of a place. And that fact that every Vietnamese knows the story says something very special about them. And even though we had no idea of the story, and probably wouldn't have cared, that image of the mountain touched us in a way that got tucked someplace until we needed it. Nui Ba Den is an astonishing place.

Q: You've said that you regret not having the chance to meet James Jones who was also in the 25th division, though in another war.

Heinemann: I just loved his writing. And I've heard he was a real character. He wrote about war from the point of view an ordinary soldier using ordinary language. If memory serves, he was the first American writer to use the word "fuck." *From Here to Eternity* and *Thin Red Line*, his World War II books, are his strongest. He really did call a spade a spade. He came back with an attitude not dissimilar to the soldiers coming back from Vietnam. Jones wrote about guys like Prewitt who would be PFCs for 30 years. Jones really nailed it. The moment Pearl Harbor was bombed, that all changed, of course, but what was preserved were the endless lifer stupidities. Jones died the week my first book was published. The same week, by the way, as my father.

Paul Fussell, a serious scholar, was a platoon leader in the army in Europe. I did get a chance to tell him what his writing meant to me. From "The Great War and Modern Memory" you got a sense of what being in a trench was about, living in a ditch for four years and going mad. He said he will always look at life through the eyes of a pissed-off infantryman, that there is something about being a soldier that does not go away. True enough.

You read *The Thin Red Line* and you understand that a soldier's work is never going to change. You can only mechanize it so much. I'd love to be there the day all the computers go crunch. Now what, colonel? You can bomb a thing to kingdom come, but there is a point at which you must occupy the ground, and the pilots ain't gonna do it. The guys who go and stand on it are the guys with the hundred pound packs and the serious guns. And by the time they get there, these are the guys who will slit your throat for your shoes. The guys who develop what psychologists refer to as combat psychosis, your basic, take no prisoners, stone fucking psychotic. There are those days when guys like that were worth their weight in gold.

Q: In that case, how do you view Bob Kerrey and the massacre scandal?

Heinemann: Bob Kerrey should be ashamed of himself. And he probably is. But only because somebody blabbed. He got a Bronze Star for murdering those people, and he wore it. A month later he gets in a scrape, losses a good bit of a leg, but they gave him the Congressional Medal of Honor. How dare he trade on that. If you want to be an officer, you had better have your shit together. You're the one who has to say no. Like the helicopter pilot, Thompson, at My Lai, who landed his chopper between Calley's troops and the Vietnamese civilians. Give that guy a medal. The heat of the moment? I don't buy that. Of course, it happens, but you don't let it hang for 30 years. You're supposed to man up to it, Bob. It's something the same with John Kerry when he voted for the Iraq war resolution. What the fuck was that? He is definitely off my list. John, where is the moral outrage you had in '71 at Dewey Canyon III when the VVAW showed up to throw their medals away? He ought to know better. And Hilary Clinton betrayed herself as an opportunist of the very first rank. Talk about punching your ticket.

Q: Were you ever involved in VVAW?

Heinemann: I often laugh and say during the 1970s I hardly stepped off the porch. I hardly remember the music. I was, what would be the word, definitely inner-directed. I thought the one good thing I could do was write a good book. I'd been invited to antiwar rallies, and such. But the VVAW? It was run by officers, and I pretty much had it with them.

Q: Finally, did you ever feel your working class background was a disadvantage?

Heinemann: No. Looking at the world from down where the rubber meets the road has a long and honorable history. Sam Clemens never finished grammar school, and he did just fine. John Steinbeck wound up with the Nobel Prize. I do know that I had to start from square one and read the books I was already supposed to have read. Well, you get to read with a very clean eye. And it goes straight back to the energy of ambition that I brought to school and the fact that my teacher gave me a leg up and a good shove. A great gift. Probably the only disadvantage I feel is that I don't have much of an organized background in American literature. I'm still working on Shakespeare, still working on Faulkner. I'm not a philosopher, and God knows I'm not a scholar. I'm a storyteller who got lucky. I can't think of doing any other work. If writing were taken away from me I would wither. Anybody can be a barstool bullshit artist. I take great pride in my craft. And let's get this straight: there's nothing cathartic about writing as a craft. Just because you write it down, put it in a box, and send it out of the house does not mean it's gone. The people who write because they think it's therapeutic are, well, I don't know what they are, but they're not writers. You have to let the chips fall where they're going to fall. I do know this. I will always be able to reach back and touch the war and find a story. That's a mellow irony of the richest kind. And the stories have less and less to do with the war, and more and more are, well, just stories.