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"A lot of guys say, 'I almost feel like I'm coming home."" So said Bill E., a former Marine from his home in Đà Nẵng. His personal experience of revisiting Viêt Nam was so powerful that he began organizing tours for other veterans, bringing them back to sites of personal trauma and famous battlefields. He described how, after years of isolation, anxiety, and confusion, many veterans found healing and a sense of belonging when they finally returned to their former battlefields. Bill E. had originally deployed to Vietnam in 1969 with the Marines and served as a machine gunner along the demilitarized zone (DMZ). After a year in combat, he rotated out of Vietnam and was discharged, returning to the United States four days before the National Guard opened fire on an anti-war demonstration at Kent State University in 1970. Back in the United States, he wanted to talk about the war and his experiences, but found that people did not want to know or did not know how to ask. Bill E. joined the anti-war movement and was arrested for protesting on Veterans' Day. He tried college, but "didn't seem to fit in ... so I went to Mexico." Every day, he thought about the war. "I had this knot in my soul ... I just had to untie this knot." He began thinking about returning to Việt Nam, wanting to find out "why Vietnam is still the ghost that it is."1

Bill E. finally returned in 1994, a decision that transformed his life. For a decade, Bill E. shepherded groups of American veterans to Việt Nam. In 2006, his wife died, and two years later he decided to settle permanently to Việt Nam. He tried teaching English and became involved in Đà Nẵng's expatriate community. He reconnected with Anh, a tour guide he had met years before. They married in 2009, built a house together, and opened their own tour agency, Bamboo Moon. Bill E. visited the United States frequently to see family, but as soon as he was there he

¹ Interview with Bill E., Đà Nẵng, April 19, 2016.

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would begin thinking about being back in Việt Nam. Being in Việt Nam, he said, just gave him "a little peace of mind."² In a letter to a fellow Marine, Bill E. explained: "Some say I changed in Vietnam. I say I was born here."³

This book examines why US and Australian veterans of the Vietnam War returned to Viêt Nam and how they grappled with returning to the site of conflict. I conceptualize veterans as living legacies of war: they spend a formative part of their lives in the warzone, often with enormous personal consequences. They carry the memories of war with them, endure the physical and psychic costs of warfare, and often find their identity as individuals caught up with the meanings and debates around "their" war. For Vietnam veterans, these legacies are particularly fraught. The Vietnam War was deeply controversial in Australia and the United States, where substantial segments of the public questioned the justifications for the war. Veterans have struggled with ideas of patriotism, military honor, and the worldviews that led them to Vietnam in the first place. Furthermore, because the Western forces lost the war, Australian and US veterans who returned to Việt Nam did not do so as victors but instead were confronted with the reality that they had been defeated, with the country they fought in now governed by their former enemies.

Veterans returned to Viêt Nam in search of resolution, or peace, in their individual relationships to the war. Their longing for peace manifested in nostalgia "for a home that no longer exists, or has never existed."⁴ They described yearning to revisit their youth and the Vietnam they held in their memory, or to release the Vietnam that haunted their nightmares. Veterans who returned to Viêt Nam were revisiting a site of violence that was deeply personal and often traumatic in their memories, demonstrating that nostalgic feelings can be more powerful than apprehension, and that trauma and fear can generate feelings of nostalgia. Many returnees expressed to me the idea that they were "born" in Vietnam: it is where their childhood ended, a "rite of passage" that "made them into men." This idea of being "born" in a warzone rests on the notion that violence is primordial and when experienced provides deep and authentic insight into the self. The shared experience of this "birth" compounds the sense of community that is created by modern military training: recruits are trained to depend on one another entirely for survival. Returnees described this to me as being a "link in a chain." Paradoxically, the warzone itself became "home": a place of emotional security and

² Ibid.

³ Bill Ervin, "US Marine: This Is Why I Returned to Vietnam to Stay." PRI.org, May 6, 2015. www.pri.org/stories/2015-05-06/us-marine-why-i-returned-vietnam-stay

⁴ Svetlana Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia* (New York: Basic Books, 2001), xiv.

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profound understanding. This attachment to the place of the warzone was compounded by the experience of displacement upon repatriation from war: the inability to communicate traumatic experience, the lack of structure, the absence of a collectivized, entirely dependent unit. "Home" no longer feels like home after war. Returning to Việt Nam could then be experienced as a return to self and a return to truth: a return home.

Returning veterans thus acted as a diasporic community: one forged in war, sustained by ongoing debates about the war and its legacies in Australia and the United States, and linked by a shared, lost warzone home. Instead of ancestry, ethnicity, or familial ties, veterans' diasporic connection to Viêt Nam flowed from their wartime experience. Where many diasporic communities imagine their homeland as it could be without or before war and catastrophe, for veteran-returnees, the imagined homeland is the war. Apocryphal stories of Vietnam veterans being mistreated in Australia and the United States fostered a sense of collective persecution, a central theme in diasporic consciousness.⁵ Veterans came to think of Vietnam as the place where their identity was created, reflecting the "two core elements" of a diaspora: "the loss of 'home' and the ongoing link to some notion of it."⁶ Their returns to Viêt Nam were then a means to resolve the ongoing debates that swirled around the legacy of "their" war: attempts to find truth, heal trauma, honor friends, reclaim pride, or redeem their role in the war.

I identify three distinct strands of returnees, the first beginning in 1981, when veteran Bobby Muller returned with a delegation from the Vietnam Veterans for America Foundation – the first known return of a Vietnam veteran after the end of the war.⁷ I follow their journeys and the journeys of a handful of other Americans and Australians who returned to Việt Nam in these early years to reconcile with their former enemies. These "reconciliation" returnees returned to address lingering questions about Việt Nam and the war, and their return journeys overwhelmingly took the form of political and humanitarian missions. Returning to Việt Nam had a profound impact on these veterans' emotional well-being and so became the precedent for "healing journeys." The numbers of returnees grew from 1995 to 2006, in what I categorize as the "normalization"

⁵ William Safran, "Diasporas in Modern Societies: Myths of Homeland and Return." *Diaspora* 1:1 (Spring 1991): 83, 92.

 ⁶ Nando Sigona et al. (eds.), "Introduction: The Self as Plural." In *Diasporas Reimagined:* Spaces, Practices and Belonging. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 6.

⁷ "25 Years from Vietnam: An Online Chat with Bobby Muller." *Revisiting Vietnam*, American RadioWorks. April 28, 2000. http://americanradioworks.publicradio.org/fea tures/vietnam/muller_chat.html

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period of return. I argue that "normalization" applies not only to the diplomatic status of Việt Nam to Western eyes but also to the very concept of returning. This period was characterized by "healing journeys," with most "normalization" returnees describing their return to Viêt Nam as therapeutic. From 2006, returning for anniversaries and/or platoon reunions was increasingly common among Australian veterans, coinciding with major anniversaries of battles and significant war events. During this "commemoration" period, discourse on the war in Australia and the United States centered on remembering the service of veterans, rather than the war itself. "Commemoration" therefore refers to the context in which the war is discussed in Australia and the United States, as well as the rise in commemorative returns to Việt Nam. This last period of my study ends in 2016 when more than one thousand Australian veterans returned to commemorate the 50th anniversary of the Battle of Long Tan.

These changes in the nature of veterans' returns reflect broader trends in battlefield pilgrimage in Australia and the United States. American historians John Gatewood and Catherine Cameron find that early visits to Civil War battlefields were "rituals of reconciliation."8 Over time, as battlefield tourism developed, historian Thomas Chambers argues they came to "serve as loci where societies and narrations invent and legitimize their histories, traditions, and myths."9 In What's Wrong with ANZAC? (2010), Australian historians Joy Damousi and Mark McKenna concur, observing that Australian pilgrimages were increasingly ritual performances of national identity, "sentimentality and nostalgia," rather than mourning and reflections on individual experiences of total war, with numbers of pilgrims rising in tandem with political rhetoric that glorified war and soldiers.¹⁰ These studies indicate that pilgrims who visited battlefields shortly after the conflict are likely seeking personal reconciliation, whereas those who do so much later tend to do so for broader commemorative purposes. Veterans' returns to Việt Nam echoed these existing patterns, demonstrating the different needs of veterans' lifestages and the consolidation of public war memories over time.

⁸ John B. Gatewood and Catherine M. Cameron, "Battlefield Pilgrims at Gettysburg National Military Park." Ethnology, 43:3 (Summer 2004): 196.

⁹ Thomas A. Chambers, Memories of War: Visiting Battlegrounds and Bonefields in the Early

American Republic (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2012), 15.
¹⁰ Joy Damousi, "Why Do We Get So Emotional About Anzac?" In What's Wrong with ANZAC? The Militarisation of Australian History. Edited by Marilyn Lake, Henry Reynolds, and Mark McKenna (Sydney: University of New South Wales Press, 2010), 84–102; Mark McKenna, "Anzac Day: How Did It Become Australia's National Day?" What's Wrong with ANZAC?, 103–32.

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These shifts in the nature of veterans' returns, and the existing patterns in battlefield pilgrimage that they mirror, demonstrate different forms of nostalgia. In The Future of Nostalgia (2001), cultural theorist Svetlana Boym sets out two distinct forms of nostalgia: "reflective" nostalgia, which "lingers on ruins, the patina of time and history," and "restorative" nostalgia, which "manifests itself in total reconstructions of monuments of the past."¹¹ The trajectory from one form of nostalgia to another manifested in different visions of the diasporic warzone homeland: from the source of debates about "their" war, to the locus of trauma, to the origin place of veteran communities and war legacies. These visions of Vietnam corresponded to veterans' shifting goals for resolution, or peace, in the return to Việt Nam. Where reconciliation returnees focused on finding new understandings of the war, normalization returnees sought healing from war trauma, and commemoration returnees focused on marking "their" war in Việt Nam. In each return period, returnees demonstrated that their "fantasies of the past [were] determined by needs of the present," as cultural and political shifts prompted veterans to reflect on their war experiences and to reengage with Việt Nam.¹² Veterans' return narratives also illustrated that memories, as well as fantasies, were informed by the needs of the present, as each return cohort described their experiences through cultural discourses particular to their return period. The normalization returnees, for instance, used psychological theories and discourses of trauma, whereas commemoration veterans used language specific to the communities of veteran-expatriate enclaves in Viêt Nam.

I use a comparative perspective to illuminate the effects of returning to the site of conflict. Perhaps surprisingly, given the prolific treatment of Vietnam veterans in oral history, there have been no comparative oral history studies.¹³ Australian studies touch on how the Australian soldiers

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¹¹ Boym, Future of Nostalgia, 41. ¹² Ibid., xvi.

¹³ Comparative research on veterans in both countries has focused on veterans of different wars or on comparative health studies of veterans and their nonveteran peers. See for example: Effic Karageorgos, Australian Soldiers in South Africa and Vietnam: Words from the Battlefield (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2016); Valentine M. Villa, "Health and Functioning among Four War Eras of US Veterans: Examining the Impact of War Cohort Membership, Socioeconomic Status, Mental Health, and Disease Prevention." Military Medicine, 167:9 (2002): 783–89. Oral histories, quantitative histories, and psychological studies with Vietnam veterans provide a mass of information on trends and statistics on veteran adjustment as well as a literary footprint of veterans' postwar lives. See for example: John A. Wood, Veterans Narratives and the Collective Memory of the Vietnam War (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 1906); Peter Siminski, "Employment Effects of Army Service and Veterans' Compensation: Evidence from the Australian Vietnam-Era Conscription Lotteries." The Review of Economics and Statistics

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and veterans differed from their American counterparts in Viêt Nam, but these comparisons focus on rejecting the application of perceived American stereotypes to Australian veterans rather than exploring the two experiences.¹⁴ This book is the first comparative study of Australian and American Vietnam veterans. The justification for studying Australians and Americans and not, for instance, South Korean, Filipino, Thai, or even Vietnamese migrant veterans who have returned to Viêt Nam, is partly logistical: there is a wealth of information about returning Americans and Australians, but little about other allies from the Southeast Asia Treaty Organization (SEATO) returning. While many Vietnamese veterans in the global diaspora long to return, many are afraid or unwilling to do so while Việt Nam is under socialist rule.¹⁵ Although New Zealanders also fought in Vietnam, they did so in very small numbers and consequently I have not been able to track a national return movement - the only New Zealander I know of who returned fought in the Australian Army, lives in Australia, and is counted among the Australian returnees in this book.

Marked differences emerged between Australian and American veterans. Returnees tended to revisit places where they served, so while Australian returnees congregated in the province of Bà Rịa-Vũng Tàu, where the Australian Task Force (ATF) was based during the war, American veterans returned to provinces throughout central and south Việt Nam, and many were curious to see the north. These national geographies of return highlight the comparatively cohesive/disjointed nature of the Australian/American war experience, and mirror the different national imaginaries of Vietnam. Veterans' longing for resolution over the war was entwined with narratives about the Vietnam War in their

^{95:1 (2013): 87–97;} Eric T. Dean Jr., "The Myth of the Troubled and Scorned Vietnam Veteran." *Journal of American Studies* 26:1 (1992): 59–74; Jerry Lembcke, *The Spitting Image: Myth, Memory and the Legacy of Vietnam* (New York: New York University Press, 1998); Carie Uyen Nguyen, "Whose War Was It Anyway?" *New York Times*, August 18, 2017.

¹⁴ See for example: Peter Edwards, Australia and the Vietnam War (Kensington: NewSouth, 2014), 261–62.

¹⁵ Nathalie Huynh Chau Nguyen observes that for overseas Vietnamese "the return to Vietnam is not a decision taken lightly." Nathalie Huynh Chau Nguyen, *Memory Is Another Country: Women of the Vietnamese Diaspora* (Santa Barbara, CA: Praeger, 2009), 141–60. Nguyen also finds that Vietnamese who return to provide aid to RVNAF veterans face scrutiny from Vietnamese authorities and fear repercussions for their activism. Nathalie Huynh Chau Nguyen, *South Vietnamese Soldiers: Memories of the Vietnam War and After* (Santa Barbara, CA: Praeger, 2016): 108, 150. Long T. Bui notes that while overseas Vietnamese are returning to Việt Nam, it is mostly younger refugees and second-generation Vietnamese who make the journey. Long T. Bui, *Returns of War: South Vietnam and the Price of Refugee Memory* (New York: New York University Press, 2018), 190–92.

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home countries. Their nostalgia hinged on how they conceptualized Vietnam as a site of conflict in their memories, which in turn reflected shifts in national war memory in Australia and the United States and changes in how the space of Việt Nam was understood. American veterans first returned when Việt Nam was a hostile nation to the United States: they returned as radicals, advocating for normalization and recognition of Vietnamese pain. Many were anti-war activists and situated themselves as atoning for their war participation and for America's war against the country at large. The first Australian returnees, on the other hand, had no diplomatic gap to bridge. Their returns coincided instead with Australia's "Anzac Revival," the creation of a national tradition of battlefield pilgrimage.

These early returns set the tone for future returnees from each nation: American returnees largely reflected anti-war and countercultural values, while Australian returnees were increasingly conservative, reflecting the domination of traditional veterans' organizations by Vietnam veterans through the late 1990s. These national differences created drastically different interpretations of peacetime Việt Nam. For instance, in Chapter 5 I unpack a near-uniform claim made by veterans that the Vietnamese bore no grudge for the war and welcomed veterans back to Viêt Nam wholeheartedly. Because many American veterans positioned themselves as atoning for wartime participation and the crimes of their country, they viewed this reaction as forgiveness. Australian veterans, conversely, drew from Australia's national mythology to argue that the Vietnamese welcomed them back because they loved and respected Australian soldiers. The comparative approach in this book thus exposes similarities as well as differences, throwing national lenses and exceptionalist narratives into stark relief. While both groups of veterans interpreted Vietnamese welcomes as specific to their nations' historical relations with Việt Nam, commonalities across their experiences undermined these claims.

When they returned, many returnees found that new experiences in Việt Nam added to a "library of images" associated with the country, diluting their war memories with memories of peace. Returnees described this dilution as providing them enormous relief, with some even reporting decreases in specific trauma symptoms. As a result, veterans reported that returning to Việt Nam made it easier and less painful to remember war. Some conducted rituals at sites of personal significance to let go of their grief, or held memorial services to embed their war experience in collective traditions. Others found affirmation and solidarity through reconciling with old adversaries. Many found that simply seeing Việt Nam at peace lifted a weight and gave them some relief. Thus, the return to Việt

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Nam was, for many veterans, a way of achieving resolution at a site of personal trauma. After returning, many veterans engaged with Việt Nam in new ways, reflecting their altered thinking about "Vietnam." Some returned again to explore the country as tourists, while others developed relationships in contemporary Việt Nam, with some even relocating permanently to reside with new partners and families. Many became dedicated to addressing the legacies of war in Việt Nam.

Yet peacetime Việt Nam offered its own challenges. Diasporic longing is defined by distance: we tend to feel that we belong to places most strongly when we are far from them; and upon return often feel estranged and out-of-place. The place that veterans were nostalgic for was Vietnam, a space of war in memory, not Việt Nam, the country. Veterans had returned to a place that was not theirs, but that continued to hold them. They were challenged by the physical erasure of their wartime presence; with the land they had fought in the hands of their former enemies. Many struggled with complex and conflicting emotions: both relief and sadness at the absence of war architecture. Returnees' emotional responses to the permanence or eradication of sites of personal significance showed powerful feelings of belonging and entitlement to Việt Nam as a space.

Returnees' responded to this sense of displacement by drawing on their wartime connections to Viêt Nam; explaining challenges and contradictions through war memories and narratives. Their reactions to the physical space of Viêt Nam revived the politics of memory about the war itself, as they contested Vietnamese authority over the past - and by extension the present - in those spaces. Geographer Karen Till defines the "politics of memory" in relation to place as "the spaces and processes of negotiation about whose conception of the past should prevail in the public realm. Because the meanings of these places are not stable in time or space, the politics of memory also refers to the ways and reasons groups attempt to 'fix' time and identity through the material and symbolic qualities of the place."¹⁶ The extent to which returnees accepted Vietnamese sovereignty was directly related to their recognition of Vietnamese narratives of war. The extent of this recognition also shaped how returnees responded to the Vietnamese themselves: viewing them as active or passive, treating them as victims or perpetrators of violence, feeling solidarity with them or antagonism toward them. Geographer Tim Creswell argues that "the construction of places is more often than not achieved through the exclusion of some 'other' - a constitutive outside."¹⁷ Returnees' selective inclusion and

¹⁷ Tim Creswell, *Place: A Short Introduction* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2004), 290.

¹⁶ Karen E. Till, "Places of Memory." In A Companion to Political Geography. Edited by John Agnew, Katharyne Mitchell, and Gerard Toal (Oxford: Blackwell, 2003), 290.

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exclusion of Vietnamese people, including Vietnamese veterans, by wartime allegiance, age, location, or status were influenced by their political beliefs, claims to place, and memory of the war. Furthermore, as the numbers of veterans returning to Việt Nam grew, the contestation over space extended to other Australian and American veterans, and their inclusion and exclusion of each other by nationality, service position, or even tourist "type" further illustrated the particular views of individual veterans toward place, memory, and the legacy of the war.

Returnees' responses to peacetime Việt Nam hinged on their relationship to war narratives in their home countries. Commemoration of the Vietnam War and its veterans followed an exceptionally contentious and highly political trajectory in Australia and the United States. When veterans reached Việt Nam they discovered that the Vietnamese narrative of the "American War" rendered them perpetrators of atrocities or, at best, passive victims of imperialist warmongering nations.¹⁸ Vietnamese memories of victory were particularly jarring for those veterans who had absorbed narratives about winning "their" war. Returnees displayed a selective acceptance of Vietnamese commemoration and war memory. Across national and ideological lines, returnees tended to dismiss commemorative materials that contradicted their war memories and worldviews, while at the same time incorporating those elements of Vietnamese memory that supported their experiences. This confirmation bias is not exclusive to returnees, but was particularly notable given the war narratives through which they filtered Vietnamese memory.

Finally, many returnees negotiated the space of contemporary Việt Nam through a wartime lens. They performed social practices and political actions that echoed their military presence during the war. These practices – such as recreating a wartime "bar culture," or situating themselves acting as educators and liberators of the Vietnamese – both reiterated returnees' wartime connections to the country and tied them to the contemporary Việt Nam: collapsing time through space to find resolution and relocate their former warzone home.

Vietnam veterans' postwar experiences have been treated prolifically in historical research, popular culture, and journalism. However, the topic of veterans returning to Việt Nam is under-documented academically, with only a handful of scholars recognizing the phenomenon.¹⁹ The

¹⁸ See: Heonik Kwon, After the Massacre: Commemoration and Consolation at Ha My and My Lai (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2006); Robert J. McMahon, "Contested Memory: The Vietnam War and American Society, 1975–2001." Diplomatic History 26:2 (2002): 159–84; Edwards, Australia and the Vietnam War.

¹⁹ See: Isobelle Barrett-Meyering, "Pilgrimage to Vietnam: Australian Veterans as 'Ambassadors of Peace.'" Venour V. Nathan Prize (Undergraduate) (Sydney: University

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earliest scholarship on returns came from returnees themselves, who reflected on their journeys in memoirs and articles.²⁰ Several scholars have analyzed the writing of American veteran-authors.²¹ American scholars who consider early-return memoirs by veteran-writers tend to reach similar conclusions, partly because the sources they draw from are psychologically, socially, and politically similar. The returnees "acknowledge the personal and public desire of coming to terms with the past," seizing the return as "an opportunity for recovery or closure, a chance to replace difficult or painful memories with ones that are less so," and so the returns "are always written about as emotional as well as physical journeys."²² Australian returnees also began to document their returns in memoirs; however, their reflections did not attract academic interest.²³

The first veterans' returns coincided with increasing interest in the Vietnam veteran as a research subject. Academic interest in the Vietnam veteran began in the 1970s, and scholarship on the veterans quickly grew vast, focusing on the psychological impact of war and on its socially damaging effects.²⁴ This focus led veterans to return to Việt Nam

of Sydney, 2007). Veterans returning to Việt Nam are also briefly discussed in "Vietnam War Veterans." In *Encyclopedia of the Veteran in America*. Edited by William A. Pencak (Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-Clio, 2009), 438.

- ²⁰ W.D. Ehrhart, Going Back: A Poet Who Was Once a Marine Returns to Vietnam (Wallingford, CT: Pendle Hill Pamphlet, 1987); William Broyles Jr., Brothers in Arms: A Journey from War to Peace (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1986); Larry Rottmann, "A Hundred Happy Sparrows: An American Veteran Returns to Vietnam." Vietnam Generation 1:1 (January 1989): 113–40.
- ²¹ Cultural scholar Julia Bleakney focused on returning to Việt Nam as one avenue for commemorating war service, historian Patrick Hagopian briefly considered returning veterans in his examination of healing in American discourse surrounding the Vietnam War, and Hai-Dang Doan Phan considered the politics of reconciliation in veteran literature in his 2013 doctoral dissertation. Julia Bleakney, *Revisiting Vietnam: Memoirs, Memorials, Museums* (New York: Routledge, 2006); Patrick Hagopian, *The Vietnam War in American Memory: Veterans, Memorials and the Politics of Healing* (Boston, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 2009); Hai-Dang Doan Phan, "Rumor of Redress: Literature, the Vietnam War, and the Politics of Reconciliation." PhD Diss., University of Wisconsin-Madison, 2012.
- ²² Doan Phan, "Rumor of Redress," 7; Bleakney, *Revisiting Vietnam*, 65; Hagopian, Vietnam War in American Memory, 415.
- ²³ Terry Burstall, A Soldier Returns: A Long Tan Veteran Discovers the Other Side of Vietnam (Brisbane: University of Queensland Press, 1990).
- ²⁴ See for example: Charles R. Figley and Seymour Leventman, "Introduction: Estrangement and Victimization." In Strangers at Home: Vietnam Veterans Since the War. Edited by Charles R. Figley and Seyour Leventman (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1980), xxi-xxxi; Paul Camacho, "From War Hero to Criminal." In Strangers at Home, 267–72; Robert J. Lifton, Home from the War: Vietnam Veterans, Neither Victims nor Executioners (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1973); Chaim Shatan, "The Grief of Soldiers: Vietnam Combat Veterans' Self-Help Movement." American Journal of Orthopsychiatry 43:4 (July 1973): 640–53.