

Aftermath: A Soldier's Return From Vietnam. Frederick Downs, Jr. New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1984, 222 pages, \$12.95 hard.

Reviewed by Steven E. Connelly, Indiana State University

Vietnam. The word still triggers ferocious emotions, puzzling and irrational responses. Consider two recent scenes from a college classroom. (1) A middle-aged freshman angrily denounces the documentary *Hearts and Minds*, declaring that it must have been made by communists. She refuses to believe the maimed and paralyzed veterans interviewed ever really fought in Vietnam; she announces to the class that these men must be actors, because her son was wounded in Vietnam, and she *knows* that no American wounded in the service of his country could possibly oppose the war. (2) A veteran of 60's anti-war demonstrations, once beaten and spit upon by "patriots"—a self-described idealist who marched for peace and preached non-violence—remarks casually, but seriously, that American soldiers killed and wounded in Vietnam have simply received their just due. The crazed, twisted logic that once divided the country endures: erupting in an apathetic classroom of the eighties, it shocks all the more.

In spite of time's distancing, in spite of the ever-more frequent attempts to make sense of the US involvement in the Vietnam conflict—such as the admirable historical perspective of the recent PBS series, and Stanley Karnow's companion volume—America's vision remains askew. Clinical, objective panoramas will not suffice until the country comes to terms with what Frederick Downs calls "the flaw in America's vision of itself": the soldiers who did the fighting. *Aftermath* may help remove that flaw, for it is a superb book, a book transcending opinions of the war, transcending politics, transcending patriotism. It is an account, at once troubling and uplifting, of author Frederick Downs's recuperation—physical, mental, and spiritual—from devastating wounds inflicted by a "bouncing Betty" landmine. From the opening scene, in which Downs watches a nurse drop his left arm into a plastic bag, to the final pages describing Downs's reactions to the fall of South Vietnam, the reader is witness to an heroic struggle, a struggle for something other than recovery—for Downs can never recover his lost arm, his pre-war naiveté, his romantic notions of war, or his dead friends. It is a struggle for life, a valiant effort at reconciliation, and it is a struggle all too often carried on alone.

Halfway through the book Downs recounts his wife's first visit since his return from Vietnam. She walks "in cold to a large army hospital to meet her one-armed, mutilated husband, who had himself received no counseling on what to do or to expect."

At times like these I alternated between anger and outright hate toward the chaplains, the psychologists, and all the other professionals who were supposed to deal with the problems of the spirit, the mind, and the soul.

Where the hell were these people?

Where the hell, indeed? Time and again wounded comrades, fellow sufferers, provide spiritual and mental help the professionals fail to offer. It may be just as well: who but fellow inhabitants of *The Inferno* can know the experience; who else can perceive the vast boundaries of torment? What "professional" could comprehend the wall combat soldiers build "to protect the intellect from death"? The camaraderie, the painful attempts to help fellow sufferers through recovery, the lame jokes intended to lift spirits and to rekindle hope are moving, are—in fact—arguably the book's noblest moments. Yet doubt nags at the reader. Surely if soldiers were prepared for recovery as thoroughly as they are prepared for combat, fewer of the wounded would decide that life is not worth the pain of recovery and simply lose the will to live after physical recovery seemed all but certain—a circumstance Downs illustrates.

The most striking aspect of Downs's book is the detailed account of hospital life for the wounded, from the intensive care ward of the field hospital at Chu Lai through the various evacuation hospitals to Fitzsimmons Army Hospital in Colorado. Downs writes of the field hospital:

I knew I had not seen anything like this ward and I certainly had not been prepared for it. Of course in combat we saw Americans wounded and killed in many ugly ways, but the dead and wounded were quickly "dusted off"—taken out by helicopter. We knew that support groups in the base camps took care of those dead and wounded, but we were unfamiliar with the details. Body bags and hospital wards had not been part of infantry training.

Downs forces the reader to share his discovery that combat hospital wards were nothing like those in the movies, with their freshly bandaged and quickly healing wounds. Downs, for example, was forced to endure debridement at least twice a day in the field hospital. Debridement is the removal of foreign matter from a wound: in Downs's case, pieces of clothing and equipment the mine had blown into him, pieces of the mine itself, scabs, and dirt. After the foreign material was removed, the gaping wounds were cleansed with disinfectant, sterile cloth was stuffed into them, and they were retaped. Later the cycle of torture necessary to healing was repeated—the tape was pulled off, the medicated cloth in the wounds was "pulled out with a pair of forceps," and the probing into the wounds was begun again. Painful as it was, debridement was essential and inevitable; such massive wounds had to heal from the inside out. Infection could mean amputation or death. But debridement was a hell for which no soldier had been prepared.

Each wound had its particular agony. Chest wounds, for example, often meant a suction machine to suck debris out of the diaphragm and to reduce pressure so the lung could inflate. The insertion of the machine's tube through a surgical slit in the chest started a chain reaction of pain: the initial pain of insertion caused a sharp intake of breath, and the deep breath inevitably stretched torn flesh, thus increasing the pain and triggering "coughing and gagging, which intensified the pain he already suffered."

The horrifying variety of wounds and the inevitable pain of essential treatment are dreadful, but so, too, is the alleviation of pain. For the drugs that grant temporary relief from inescapable pain also sap the will to live: they intensify the insidious notion that it might be better to die, that escape from pain would be preferable to life. The struggle to maintain the will to live is constant and horrendous; it is a struggle that Downs makes alone, unprepared. At Fitzsimmons Army Hospital Downs discovers one of his former OCS roommates, now blind after an unsuccessful attempt to dismantle a booby trap. In reply to his friend's "What happens now?" Downs utters a reply that sums up the whole recovery process: "I don't know . . . They didn't prepare us for this."

Aftermath is an honest book. It seeks to place no blame for the war, for Downs's

personal disaster, or for his mistreatment at the hands of his compatriots when he returns. A great deal of the book's power is generated by Downs's ability to be simultaneously dispassionate and deeply moving. Shivering after an infusion of blood ("Blood was always stored in a freezer until just before it was used"), faced with the certain prospect of life with only one arm, and not yet assured of keeping his legs, his other arm or even his life, Downs nevertheless reflects upon the nature of modern warfare:

As I lay there in misery, shivering, I looked at the other beds full of wounded and reflected on the grotesque premeditation of our wounding. It is better to wound an enemy soldier than to kill him. This ward was a graphic example: A dead soldier requires very little from his country—shipment back home, burial. But a wounded soldier requires a great deal. A large part of the budget for the military must be set aside for expensive equipment, hospitals, medical staff, support personnel, medicine—the list goes on and on. Medical care can drag on for years. Psychological care can last a lifetime.

Countries deliberately develop many types of weapons that are designed to maim a soldier instead of kill him.

The book is honest, too, in that Downs never denies his ignoble impulses. The enemy are dinks, and they are intensely hated. He recounts, for example, his—and his wounded comrades'—unrestrained pleasure at the suffering of a severely wounded Vietnam and their openly expressed gratification at her subsequent death. He assiduously dissects his own attitude toward death, and his naiveté toward war, which he explains again and again in terms of the movies. To the very end Downs thinks of himself as a platoon leader, and this keeps him going. Confused by anti-war protests on television, by reports of senators and representatives opposing the war, aware of pressure to accept guilt for Vietnam and to admit that it was wrong, Downs remains firm. He resolves never "to apologize for my action in Vietnam. I was proud to be a soldier, proud of my platoon, proud to be an American. They will never take that away from me." This book is no *mea culpa* aimed at all-round conscience salving; rather it is a book forcing the reader to look past issues directly at the soldier who did his job, did it well, and who has met with hostility, rejection or, at best, disregard.

Aftermath is very like the archetypal hero's journey, for like the mythological hero, Downs descends into hell, confronts the forces of death, and returns with a boon for humankind. In this case, the boon is multiple. Downs provides Americans, whatever their views on the Vietnam conflict, with the means for eliminating the "flaw in America's vision of itself." For any reader should take pride in this account of a fellow human's struggle and eventual triumph against the forces of darkness and despair. It demonstrates, movingly and dramatically, the amazing strength of the human will, for it is not just an account of the recuperation of one wounded Vietnam veteran; it is also a remarkable portrait of human determination.

Perhaps the book should have another epilogue, for Downs has managed to keep the vow recounted in *Aftermath* to change and become more than he was, to take charge of his own destiny. Not only has he learned to pilot small aircraft and to ski, but he has become director of Prosthetic and Sensory Aids Service for the Veterans Administration in Washington, performing award winning work with the handicapped. He has written two books which are, arguably, the two best to come out of Vietnam: *Aftermath* and *The Killing Zone*. And readers of *Aftermath* will surely gain some special pleasure in viewing Downs's acting debut in the movie, *I, The Jury*; he is killed off in the opening scene, zipped into the body bag he so narrowly escaped in Vietnam. Perhaps more satisfying, readers who share Downs's agony adapting to life with an artificial arm can witness his triumph on the large screen, removing the arm for all America to see. *Aftermath* is an unqualified triumph, and clearly, so is the man who wrote it.