

Michael Herr

Until Esquire magazine sent Michael Herr to Vietnam in 1967 to write an article about the Americanization of Saigon, he had been reviewing films for the New Leader. Herr was in Khesanh during the Vietcong siege. He later told an interviewer, "You lost your noncombatant status very quickly, because nobody thought they were going to get out alive. At first I didn't feel like I was covering anything. I just felt very lost."

Herr's Dispatches (1977) exposed the moral dilemma of the American presence in Vietnam. In Herr's awareness of his own complex but always unheroic role as a war correspondent, the war had found its ideal reporter. As Stewart O'Nan understood, the book "takes the reader seemingly everywhere in-country by chopper, touching down with Herr in the middle of the first rock 'n' roll war. While Herr is writing nonfiction, he never lets the reader assume his objectivity, often focusing on his own strange, even parasitic role in the proceedings." After completing Dispatches, Herr went to Hollywood to work on the scripts for two Vietnam war films, Apocalypse Now and Full Metal Jacket.

FROM DISPATCHES

THE DEATH OF MARTIN LUTHER KING intruded on the war in a way that no other outside event had ever done. In the days that followed, there were a number of small, scattered riots, one or two stabbings, all of it denied officially. The Marine recreational facility in China Beach in Danang was put off-limits for a day, and at Stud we stood around the radio and listened to the sound of automatic-weapons fire being broadcast from a number of American cities. A southern colonel on the general's staff told me that it was a shame, a damn shame, but I had to admit (didn't I?) that he'd been a long time asking for it. A black staff sergeant in the Cav who had taken me over to his outfit for dinner the night before cut me dead on the day that we heard the news, but he came over to the press tent later that night and told me that it shouldn't happen that way. I got a bottle of Scotch

from my pack and we went outside and sat on the grass, watching the flares dropping over the hillside across the river. There were still some night mists. In the flarelight it looked like heavy snow, and the ravines looked like ski trails.

He was from Alabama and he had all but decided on a career in the Army. Even before King's murder he had seen what this might someday mean, but he'd always hoped to get around it somehow.

"Now what I gonna do?" he said.

"I'm a great one to ask."

"But dig it. Am I gonna take 'n' turn them guns aroun' on my own people? Shit!"

That was it, there was hardly a black NCO anywhere who wasn't having to deal with that. We sat in the dark, and he told me that when he'd walked by me that afternoon it had made him sick. He couldn't help it.

"Shit, I can't do no twenny in this Army. They ain' no way. All's I hope is I can hang back when push comes t' shove. An' then I think, Well, fuck it, why should I? Man, home's jus' gonna be a hassle."

There was some firing on the hill, a dozen M-79 rounds and the dull bap-bap-bap of an AK-47, but that was over there, there was an entire American division between that and us. But the man was crying, trying to look away while I tried not to look.

"It's just a bad night for it," I said. "What can I tell you?"

He stood up, looked at the hill and then started to leave. "Oh, man," he said. "This war gets old."

At Langvei we found the two-month-old corpse of an American stretched out on the back of a wrecked jeep. This was on the top of the small hill that opposed the hill containing the Special Forces bunkers taken by the NVA in February. They were still in there, 700 meters away. The corpse was the worst thing we'd ever seen, utterly blackened now, the skin on the face drawn back tightly like stretched leather, so that all of his teeth showed. We were outraged that he had not been buried or at least covered, and we moved away and set up positions around the hill. Then the ARVN moved out toward the bunkers and were turned back by machine-gun fire. We sat on the hill and watched while napalm was dropped against the bunkers, and then we set up a recoilless rifle and fired at the vents. I went back to Stud. The next day a company of the Cav tried it, moving in two files on high and low ground approaching the bunkers, but the terrain between the hills offered almost no cover, and they were turned back.

That night they were rocketed heavily, but took no serious casualties. I came back on the third day with Rick Merron and John Lengle of the Associated Press. There had been heavy airstrikes against the bunkers that night, and now two tiny helicopters, Loaches, were hovering a few feet above the slits, pouring in fire.

"Man, one Dink with a forty-five could put a hurtin' on those Loaches they'd never come back from," a young captain said. It was incredible, those little ships were the most beautiful things flying in Vietnam (you had to stop once in a while and admire the machinery), they just hung there above those bunkers like wasps outside a nest. "That's sex," the captain said. "That's pure sex."

One of the Loaches rose suddenly and flew over the hill, crossed the river and darted into Laos. Then it circled quickly, dipped, flew directly over us and hung there. The pilot radioed the captain.

"Sir, there's a gook di-di-ing down the trail into Laos. Permission to kill him."

"Permission given."

"Thank you," the pilot said, and the ship broke its suspended motion and sped toward the trail, clearing its guns.

A rocket whistled by, missing the hill, and we ran for the bunkers. Two more came in, both missing, and then we moved out for the opposite hill one more time, watching the machine-gun slits for fluttering blips of light with one eye and checking the ground for booby traps with the other. But they had abandoned it during the night, and we took it without a shot, standing on top of the bunkers, looking down into Laos, past the remains of two bombed-out Russian tanks, feeling relieved, victorious and silly. When Merron and I flew back to Stud that afternoon, the two-month-old corpse rode with us. No one had covered him until ten minutes before the chopper had picked us up, and the body bag swarmed with flies until the motion of the rising chopper shook them off. We got out at Graves Registration with it, where one of the guys opened the bag and said, "Shit, this is a *gook*! What'd they bring him *here* for?"

"Look, Jesus, he's got on our uniform."

"I don't give a fuck, that ain't no American, that's a fucking *gook*!"

"Wait a minute," the other one said. "Maybe it's a spade. . . ."
