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## Reading "Between the Lines"

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# Reading "Between the Lines"

## **Abstract**

Twenty-seven years: the time it took after Paul O'Connell's return from Vietnam for him to fully reflect on his war experience. O'Connell, a Marine who at the age of eighteen served in the jungles of Vietnam from October 18<sup>th</sup>, 1968 to October 1<sup>st</sup>, 1969, was a purple-heart receiving grunt who faced some of the most horrid experiences of guerrilla warfare. His memoir, *Between the Lines*, is a collection of his letters written home from Vietnam, and reflections about his experiences and the "between the lines" of the correspondences. Throughout his memoir, the themes of heroism, cowardice, suspicion, pride, and integrity are portrayed while his transition home exemplifies emotional and physical change, a loss of innocence, identity, and betrayal by the homecoming society. The timely letters and later reflections have similarities and differences in regards to these motifs, which serve to demonstrate how O'Connell changed after he encountered the homecoming society, and how O'Connell's soldier's tale is representative of all veterans. [excerpt]

## **Keywords**

Vietnam War, veteran, memoir, US Marines, Purple Heart, guerrilla warfare, heroism, cowardice

## **Disciplines**

History | Military History | Oral History | United States History

## **Comments**

This paper was written as the final project for FYS 121-3, *Soldiers' Tales - Reading and Writing War*, in Fall 2013. The course was taught by Dr. Ian Isherwood.

O'Connell's full narrative *Between the Lines* can be found at <http://www.smashwords.com/books/view/300885>.

Reading *Between the Lines*

Sarah Hansen

Professor Isherwood

FYS 121-3: Soldiers' Tales: Reading and Writing War

December 9, 2013

Twenty-seven years: the time it took after Paul O’Connell’s return from Vietnam for him to fully reflect on his war experience. O’Connell, a Marine who at the age of eighteen served in the jungles of Vietnam from October 18<sup>th</sup>, 1968 to October 1<sup>st</sup>, 1969, was a purple-heart receiving grunt who faced some of the most horrid experiences of guerrilla warfare. His memoir, *Between the Lines*, is a collection of his letters written home from Vietnam, and reflections about his experiences and the “between the lines” of the correspondences.<sup>1</sup> Throughout his memoir, the themes of heroism, cowardice, suspicion, pride, and integrity are portrayed while his transition home exemplifies emotional and physical change, a loss of innocence, identity, and betrayal by the homecoming society. The timely letters and later reflections have similarities and differences in regards to these motifs, which serve to demonstrate how O’Connell changed after he encountered the homecoming society, and how O’Connell’s soldier’s tale is representative of all veterans.

Going into Vietnam, O’Connell had a classic, romanticized view of war. John Wayne was a role model to almost all Vietnam-era soldiers who “frequently claimed that their expectations of combat had their origins in Hollywood’s versions of World War II, of John Wayne charging up the slopes of Mount Suribachi in *Sands of Iwo Jima* (1949).”<sup>2</sup> These servicemen were disillusioned by the romanticized version of war; a version that was not accurate in the horrifying guerilla warfare of Vietnam. O’Connell attributed discrepancies between his letters and reality to attempting to make his father “think I was John Wayne or something.”<sup>3</sup> When O’Connell was asked if he had any regrets, he referred to when he was hit by shrapnel from a Vietcong attack. In his reflection, his one wish was that instead of crying for his mother, he “had acted more like John Wayne. That’s my regret.”<sup>4</sup> Especially after he was wounded, O’Connell feared being a “coward” and dreaded being called a “Shit-bird—puke—non-hacker—one of the ten-percent—the ten-percent who will never get the message, and undeservedly survive while getting

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<sup>1</sup> Throughout the paper, the quotes taken from O’Connell’s letters will be italicized and the quotes from his reflections will be normal text, both cited to *Between the Lines*.

<sup>2</sup> Mark Taylor, *The Vietnam War in History, Literature and Film* (Tuscaloosa, Alabama: University of Alabama Press, 2003), 10.

<sup>3</sup> Paul O’Connell, *Between the Lines* (Smashwords: Paul O’Connell, 2013), 15.

<sup>4</sup> O’Connell, *Between the Lines*, 85.

others fucking killed—.”<sup>5</sup> To this day, he is ashamed by how he reacted to getting wounded.<sup>6</sup> After he was diagnosed with battle fatigue, O’Connell refused to write to his parents until a commanding officer ordered him to. O’Connell still wanted to appease his father into thinking that he was akin to John Wayne, and not that he “was a coward who had been to the *nuthouse*...had gone crazy, gone mad, and had disgraced the Marine Corps uniform.”<sup>7</sup> Even though O’Connell believed in the classical approach to cowardice (that it is a soldier’s worst crime to act cowardly), his opinion of heroism was different. Going off to war, O’Connell was encouraged not to be heroic.<sup>8</sup> Many Vietnam veterans felt they were not heroes; they “had done nothing more than endure. We had survived. That was our only victory.”<sup>9</sup> The heroism told in Vietnam narratives is not usually killing the enemy. Instead, the stories are “the protective acts – recovering one’s own wounded, or the dead, or covering a withdrawal – that carry moral and emotional value.”<sup>10</sup> O’Connell portrays this notion after Sergeant Thompson’s death. Thompson was a role model for O’Connell in his early months of service, and O’Connell became upset when he learned Thompson died recovering a Marine’s body. After returning to the United States, O’Connell pictured the courageous death of Sergeant Thompson, though he would also imagine himself saving Thompson “with a heroic charge forward. On paper I would wipe out the enemy, I would erase the guilt of survival, when in reality, I would be all alone in my mind, still fighting a war, slowly going crazy.”<sup>11</sup> O’Connell felt this guilt of survival, especially when he receives a purple heart and “*there’s no worry, as I didn’t even have to be medavaced.*”<sup>12</sup>

O’Connell also reflected on the Marines’ battle tactics and his war conscious. O’Connell dutifully followed orders to destroy Vietnamese dwellings and “had no problem with my conscience in doing so.”

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<sup>5</sup> O’Connell, *Between the Lines*, 166.

<sup>6</sup> “I wanted to take back every word that had come from me, every action; every display of fear, because I instantly was overcome with the feeling of being a sissy...for a split second, I would have rather been dead.” O’Connell, *Between the Lines*, 84.

<sup>7</sup> O’Connell, *Between the Lines*, 143.

<sup>8</sup> “Keep your head and ass low – and don’t try and become a hero.” O’Connell, *Between the Lines*, 15.

<sup>9</sup> Larry R. Johannessen, “Making History Come Alive with the Nonfiction Literature of the Vietnam War,” *The Clearing House*, Accessed October 27, 2013, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3019808>, 121.

<sup>10</sup> Samuel Hynes, *The Soldiers’ Tale: Bearing Witness to Modern War* (New York, New York: Penguin Books, 1998), 214.

<sup>11</sup> O’Connell, *Between the Lines*, 255.

<sup>12</sup> O’Connell, *Between the Lines*, 79.

O'Connell does however have a conscience, and when he saw Marines killing pigs brutally, he shot the pigs to save them "from a prolonged misery – but they were still dying without the killer feeling any qualms."<sup>13</sup> O'Connell had no problems killing the enemy either as long as it was militarily justified. Reflecting on killing a human, O'Connell explained, "I felt like I had gotten an 'A' on my report card. I felt proud and I still have fond memories of Captain Burns, when he came to my fighting hole to tell me I was going to be meritoriously promoted because of my actions under fire."<sup>14</sup> This is not to say O'Connell relished the idea of killing. In Vietnam, the popular "get some" battle tactic was utilized. This method entailed winning the war "by attrition – kill more of the enemy's troops than they kill of yours: kill so many that they lose the capacity and the will to fight."<sup>15</sup> O'Connell hated this notion. He figures "while we were trying to get some, the enemy was trying to get some too, and it seemed to me, regardless of how many of them we killed, we could never kill enough to make up for the loss of even one marine."<sup>16</sup> In O'Connell's eyes, countless Vietcong deaths could never measure for one American death; the Vietnamese were not the same. O'Connell, like a majority of the Marines, was suspicious of the enemy. In Vietnam, "The enemy was invisible, or indistinguishable among civilians, and all Vietnamese looked alike to the young short-timers; how could a soldier kill in a discriminating, careful, soldierly way?"<sup>17</sup> After O'Connell experienced being shot at, he mistrusted the Vietnamese citizens.<sup>18</sup> As O'Connell's service endured, his mistrust increased exponentially when he saw two Marines killed approaching a Vietcong-sympathizing village that was surrounded by booby traps. In response, O'Connell grabbed a Vietnamese girl and has her lead him safely to the village. O'Connell described how "Her reactions were making me feel very powerful... I did not shoot her dead, but to keep my squad members from thinking I

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<sup>13</sup> O'Connell, *Between the Lines*, 129.

<sup>14</sup> O'Connell, *Between the Lines*, 136.

<sup>15</sup> Hynes, *The Soldiers' Tale: Bearing Witness to Modern War*, 188.

<sup>16</sup> O'Connell, *Between the Lines*, 131.

<sup>17</sup> Hynes, *The Soldiers' Tale: Bearing Witness to Modern War*, 189-190.

<sup>18</sup> "They were not running, but were acting suspicious – but weren't all Vietnamese in black pajamas suspicious?" O'Connell, *Between the Lines*, 201.

was not weak, I kicked her to the ground.”<sup>19</sup> After the girl attempted to run, O’Connell’s mistrust grew.

When they finally reached the village, he described the following:

I was consumed with fear and anger... They [the Vietnamese] were nothing more than a target for the ultimate release of emotions built up inside me; all I had to do was pull the trigger. But then another idea came to me—before killing them, I would scald them with a kettle of boiling water which was being heated over the fire. I would pour the scalding water over the heads of the wretched children.<sup>20</sup>

Feeling a betrayal that is incomprehensible to any reader, O’Connell held the village responsible for his possible demise and the deaths of the Marines. Prior to being stopped,<sup>21</sup> O’Connell is prepared to express his rage on the citizens of Vietnam, but, whether they are the enemy or not, this would not convey good humanity in war. This anecdote exemplifies how, mentally, O’Connell has changed in Vietnam. Although he later admits that he could never kill innocent Vietnamese, some war situations bothered him to such a degree that he was enraged enough to act.

O’Connell’s descriptions of the battle conditions differ severely between his letters and his reflections. Rather than depicting the military gothic with gruesome details, his correspondences are nonchalant about the matters of death and near-death experiences. When O’Connell plundered a village, he described, “*somehow, a little kid got in the way of a round. Tough shit!*”<sup>22</sup> When he saw some diseased enemy, he depicted, “*Let me tell ya, dead bodies stink... It was gross; but as you say, ‘If you sleep with the dogs, ya gonna wake up with fleas.’*”<sup>23</sup> Even when O’Connell wins the Bronze Star, he described how he achieved by: “*a VC started running until I put an automatic burst up his back and head...I saw another one run for a stream, so I chased him but couldn’t find him until he came up for air right at my*

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<sup>19</sup> O’Connell, *Between the Lines*, 122-123.

<sup>20</sup> O’Connell, *Between the Lines*, 122.

<sup>21</sup> “‘O’Connell, do something stupid and it will be the last thing you ever do.’ It was the voice of Captain Burns, the voice of sound reasoning, the voice I needed to hear because I never really wanted to shoot anyone in this situation—not women and children—but my mind had been made up, and I did not possess inside me, a way out. If it had not been for Captain Burns and his forceful intervention, I would have acted upon the most fateful decision of my entire life.” O’Connell, *Between the Lines*, 123.

<sup>22</sup> O’Connell, *Between the Lines*, 128.

<sup>23</sup> O’Connell, *Between the Lines*, 20.

*feet; so I kind of did him ,too...so there you have it.*<sup>24</sup> This normalized tone discards the horror that was occurring. This shows a clear contradiction between his letters and reflections, which are much more somber in terms of their perception of events as shown through the descriptions thus far.

While O’Connell is in Vietnam, he changed emotionally. Perhaps the most lasting effect was his mental hardening. Coming into the theater, O’Connell expected to mature, and is told in training, “Once you saw your first dead marine, your life would never be the same again. They said the sight would turn you cold—then hard. You would become, in fact, *Hardcore*. You would become hardcore unless you snapped mentally.”<sup>25</sup> O’Connell does experience this *hardcore* development. Although he is first disgusted by the dead enemy, he learned to accept them as part of surviving in Vietnam. His letters reflect how,

*After being in Vietnam I have grown almost 5 years in maturity...You’ll see when I get home. When a man is responsible for the lives of 35 men he can’t be thinking like a glue sniffing kid. When a man sees his best buddy die beside him he really knows he ain’t any kid. Plus for the past year I have lived in filth, sweat and some of the most primitive conditions a man can go through.*<sup>26</sup>

This maturing phenomenon is constant for almost all servicemen, and many coming-of-age narratives are created after Vietnam in order to explain the effect of “a lifetime of experience compressed into a year and a half.”<sup>27</sup> As the soldiers harden, their innocence is lost. Reflecting on how the war affected him, O’Connell described how “The loss of innocence comes to mind.”<sup>28</sup> He also believed if other veterans were to publish their tales from Vietnam, “this loss of innocence would be a common thread that ran through them.”<sup>29</sup> Even though he is merely eighteen at the beginning of his service, O’Connell matured to

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<sup>24</sup> O’Connell, *Between the Lines*, 105.

<sup>25</sup> O’Connell, *Between the Lines*, 41.

<sup>26</sup> O’Connell, *Between the Lines*, 218.

<sup>27</sup> Johannessen, “Making History Come Alive with the Nonfiction Literature of the Vietnam War,” 122.

<sup>28</sup> Paul O’Connell, Interview by Sarah Hansen, December 1, 2013.

<sup>29</sup> Paul O’Connell, Interview by Sarah Hansen, December 1, 2013.



a seasoned soldier who “For the first time ever” had to explain his life to fellow Marines upon leaving Vietnam. Not only mentally, but physically O’Connell had changed throughout his service.<sup>30</sup>

O’Connell also demonstrated military leadership and integrity. He has pride for the Marines, and after he finished his service, he was “feeling proud to be a marine”.<sup>31</sup> O’Connell noted in the theater, “Marine Corps pride and honor was on the line, and the enemy knew it. The battle was not about defeating communism...the Marine Corps never left their dead behind.”<sup>32</sup> Despite this, many soldiers expressed disregard for the Marines, believing the leaders were “fucking” them over. This was not tolerated by the commanding officers, especially Sergeant Thomson,<sup>33</sup> and many learned to respect their holistic organization. A poll taken in 1980 found that seventy-one percent of Vietnam veterans were glad they served in the war.<sup>34</sup> O’Connell was proud to be a Marine, and constantly attempted to follow the footsteps of Sergeant Thompson.<sup>35</sup> Even though O’Connell’s personal integrity remained intact,<sup>36</sup> what he experiences in Vietnam is utterly horrifying. Perhaps the most iconic quote he wrote in one of his letters was, “*When I die, I’ve got to go to heaven, because I’ve been through hell.*”<sup>37</sup>

O’Connell mistrusted the Marines and the government. Although he is proud he served, when O’Connell was in the theater he felt as if “It was bad enough the enemy was having its way with us, now I felt the Corps was fucking us too.”<sup>38</sup> In his letters like his reflections, O’Connell explained the Marines will not be satisfied “*until half of us are dead.*”<sup>39</sup> O’Connell felt the leaders of the Marines and

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<sup>30</sup> “My life now included a slight flesh-wound to my side, the wound that made me yell out for my mother, when in fact the wound had been nothing more than a nick, not even worthy of the Purple Heart I had received. There also was my trip to the nuthouse, and the death of Terry Householder who had died in my place.” O’Connell, *Between the Lines*, 129.

<sup>31</sup> O’Connell, *Between the Lines*, 232.

<sup>32</sup> O’Connell, *Between the Lines*, 86.

<sup>33</sup> “When Sergeant Thompson had finally heard enough of the grievous rhetoric, especially when someone cried out, “Fuck the apple; fuck the Corps,” he pinned that guy face first, up against a tree, then said, “You’re job isn’t to question orders—it’s to carry them out, even if you don’t understand what the fuck it is that we are trying to do.” He also added, “Don’t ever badmouth my Marine Corps again!—understood?” O’Connell, *Between the Lines*, 66.

<sup>34</sup> Taylor, *The Vietnam War in History, Literature and Film*, 137.

<sup>35</sup> “Trying to fill Sergeant Thompson’s boots was proving to be very difficult.” O’Connell, *Between the Lines*, 120.

<sup>36</sup> “He knew I could not kill the innocent, and I knew it too.” O’Connell, *Between the Lines*, 153.

<sup>37</sup> O’Connell, *Between the Lines*, 27.

<sup>38</sup> O’Connell, *Between the Lines*, 50.

<sup>39</sup> O’Connell, *Between the Lines*, 39.

government had no idea what it was like to be grunts; why were they making such decisions?<sup>40</sup> He even compared them to the homecoming society, stating, “Although the Marine Corps hadn’t spit on me, or call me a baby killer, I was not feeling a sense of recognition for having fought in a war in which friends of mine—comrades in arms—had sacrificed their lives.”<sup>41</sup> O’Connell was especially enraged that the government considered grunts to be non-critical.<sup>42</sup> When he heard people admit that the United States “never had a plan on how to win the war,”<sup>43</sup> O’Connell became irate because he believed his friends died for a reason; the Marines were in the war to win it, whereas Congress doomed the entire conflict.<sup>44</sup> Reflecting on his service and political opinions, O’Connell stated,

I have never been able to escape from Vietnam, but have always stayed positive in the way that it has affected me. I have never had the *poor me*’s regarding the war, or bitterness towards those who did not serve, or beat the draft—none what so ever. I do have problems with politics because I do get caught up in the notion that we could have won the Vietnam War if Washington had not meddled with the military, or that we should have never gotten into the war in the first place.<sup>45</sup>

O’Connell experienced firsthand what Vietnam was like, and in his opinion, if the public, Marines leadership, and Washington politics had not given up, the war could have been won, and all the suffering the Marines endured would have been sufficiently justified.

Along with military and Marines mistrust, the American public was adamantly protesting the war, causing the veterans to feel as if their service was meaningless. O’Connell’s belief was “no one cared.”<sup>46</sup> He described how, “I arrived home just in time for the Moratorium, when everyone drove around with their headlights on in the broad daylight, in protest of the war. Even my buddies drove with their

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<sup>40</sup> “Fuck Nixon – he hasn’t an inkling of what goes on over here, and he doesn’t really care.” O’Connell, *Between the Lines*, 151.

<sup>41</sup> O’Connell, *Between the Lines*, 148.

<sup>42</sup> “Had someone sitting behind a desk determine this? Had they been in the jungles or the rice paddies of Vietnam? Maybe I didn’t understand politics and the finances of war, maybe I couldn’t see the big picture, but what must have been the little picture to the man in Washington was the entire picture to me.” O’Connell, *Between the Lines*, 168.

<sup>43</sup> Paul O’Connell, Interview by Sarah Hansen, December 1, 2013.

<sup>44</sup> “In failing to provide immediate military assistance, Congress was not only dooming the army of South Vietnam to ‘ultimate defeat’ but was also condemning ‘quite possibly millions’ of civilians to ‘brutal death.’” Taylor, *The Vietnam War in History, Literature and Film*, 330.

<sup>45</sup> O’Connell, *Between the Lines*, 280.

<sup>46</sup> Paul O’Connell, Interview by Sarah Hansen, December 1, 2013.

headlights on, even while I was sitting in the backseat downing beers.”<sup>47</sup> Seeing how the American public disrespected the veterans, O’Connell “formed a new perspective--forget Vietnam.”<sup>48</sup> O’Connell figured no one could understand his war experiences; so, he does not attempt to explain what he went through.<sup>49</sup> He saw how different he had become compared to his “poolroom buddies” who had not experienced any of the atrocities of war.<sup>50</sup> O’Connell had difficulty returning to the American society, a crucial ascription of the Vietnam War. His transition home deviated severely from the experiences of veterans of the First and Second World Wars, when the public supported the war and its soldiers. Attributing this difference, “The anti-war climate at home also presented special readjustment problems for returning veterans. Many veterans reported feeling isolated and alienated from their peers and society in general.”<sup>51</sup> This led to veterans’ psychological problems because “they felt isolated by their reception in America and because they had not enjoyed the satisfaction of victory or the consciousness of having participated in a worthwhile national endeavor.”<sup>52</sup> O’Connell feared he and his comrades “might be called baby killers...”<sup>53</sup>, and when he tells his friends what he had endured in Vietnam, one “pulled me aside and whispered in my ear, ‘You know all that stuff about burning villages and killing people—it’s not cool. It’s exactly why the country is against the war.’”<sup>54</sup> This disturbed O’Connell; he had been engaged in heavy combat, and even without this neglect, he was mentally damaged.

Facing his experiences was extremely difficult for O’Connell. He did not reread his letters until ten years after his service had ended, and even then, he had to put the correspondences away before he finished reading them because they were too provoking. After he read the complete collection of the

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<sup>47</sup> Paul O’Connell, Interview by Sarah Hansen, December 1, 2013.

<sup>48</sup> Paul O’Connell, Interview by Sarah Hansen, December 1, 2013.

<sup>49</sup> “I felt Dwight would never be able to understand Vietnam, even if I could have found the words to explain it. Saying nothing was easier, less painful, and less complicated. It would be easier to live with Vietnam out of sight, out of mind.” O’Connell, *Between the Lines*, 136.

<sup>50</sup> “My poolroom buddies, the teenage kids, the teeny-bopper girls, all seemed immature... Maybe I felt different because I knew that on the other side of the world, things were different. No one at The Surf had any idea what the war in Vietnam was about. Yes, I felt different but didn’t know exactly what the difference was, and I had no way of putting it into words.” O’Connell, *Between the Lines*, 142.

<sup>51</sup> “History – VA History,” *United States Department of Veterans Affairs*, April 5, 2012, 18.

<sup>52</sup> Taylor, *The Vietnam War in History, Literature and Film*, 135.

<sup>53</sup> O’Connell, *Between the Lines*, 151.

<sup>54</sup> O’Connell, *Between the Lines*, 139-140.

letters sixteen years later, he thought about destroying them in order to forget Vietnam.<sup>55</sup> For twenty-seven years O'Connell learned to "forget Vietnam," and when he read the correspondences, he was able to recollect how his experiences shaped his identity. For O'Connell, reading his letters "took a lot out of me and it would interfere with my life...it took me back."<sup>56</sup> They also helped. Psychologists have stated, "the antidote to recurring dreams, memories, random associations, and the more intrusive recollections called flashbacks is...to ground oneself more fully by engaging one's experience and by discovering what it is to be a home with oneself."<sup>57</sup> O'Connell grounded himself by rereading his letters and writing *Between the Lines*. *Between the Lines* has allowed O'Connell to "live without feeling shame."<sup>58</sup> Not only is it a war book, it reflects O'Connell "coming to grips"<sup>59</sup> with his past. To move on from Vietnam, O'Connell acknowledged he needed "to accept the past as I see it, and hope I am never driven to the point of madness again."<sup>60</sup> When asked what the message of *Between the Lines* is, O'Connell stated, "Never let shame and guilt rule your life. That we are only human. That every man and woman can be broken, and yet, the kind people of the world can help put us back together."<sup>61</sup> *Between the Lines* is a channel for O'Connell; it allows him to acknowledge the past in the letters and comprehend how he has developed into who he is today with the reflections.

Vietnam is still with O'Connell, much like it is with every veteran. When writing *Between the Lines*, O'Connell was brought back to the death of Terry Householder. After O'Connell refused to be point on a mission, Householder volunteered, embracing the "get some" philosophy. Householder was killed, and O'Connell "live(s) everyday thinking he died in my place." O'Connell continues to describe how, "On good days, Terry lives deep in my subconscious. On bad days, he is right on the surface of my mind...I hope his spirit is forgiving, for I am eternally sorry for his death in which I feel I played a part

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<sup>55</sup> O'Connell, *Between the Lines*, 278.

<sup>56</sup> Paul O'Connell, Interview by Rob Hakala and Lisa Azizian, *South Shore Morning News*, 2013.

<sup>57</sup> Arthur Egendorf, *Healing From the War: Trauma and Transformation After Vietnam*. (Boston, Massachusetts: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1985), 43.

<sup>58</sup> Paul O'Connell, Interview by Sarah Hansen, December 1, 2013.

<sup>59</sup> Paul O'Connell, Interview by Rob Hakala and Lisa Azizian, *South Shore Morning News*, 2013.

<sup>60</sup> O'Connell, *Between the Lines*, 130.

<sup>61</sup> Paul O'Connell, Interview by Sarah Hansen, December 1, 2013.

in.”<sup>62</sup> Not only does O’Connell have to come to grips with Householder’s death, he also has to accept that soldiers were not to blame for the war even if it is what the public believes. Although today, the common belief is “it’s wrong to blame policies set in Washington on nineteen-year-olds who went to war respecting the law and their fathers’ example,”<sup>63</sup> this was not how it seemed when O’Connell returned from the war. At O’Connell’s therapy sessions over ten years after his service, his doctor enabled O’Connell to understand “I was not the creator of the universe, that I had not started the war, and was not to be blamed for it. That I had not killed Terry Householder, that I am only human with limitations, capable of breaking.”<sup>64</sup> O’Connell learned to “separate the war from the warrior,”<sup>65</sup> and with this notion, began to heal. Although O’Connell was afraid Marines had died for nothing,<sup>66</sup> he accepted “I went to Vietnam as ordered, that I didn’t start the war, and that I did the best I could.”<sup>67</sup> *Between the Lines* demonstrates O’Connell’s search for his identity.<sup>68</sup> In his reflections and letters, he is able to explain to the reader, whether it be a close relative or a distant historian, how Vietnam shaped him into the person he is today.

When analyzing *Between the Lines* it is crucial to consider the values and limitations of the letters and the reflections. Whereas the letters were told while O’Connell was physically in Vietnam, he admits there are inaccuracies. Though the reflections are told after O’Connell is allowed to gather his thoughts, their stories may have changed after being in the homecoming society. Memory is subjective,<sup>69</sup> and “Anything possessed by memory is fiction.”<sup>70</sup> One historian explains how “memory is creative, not mechanical.” Instead, “In retelling the past, we cannot help selecting, arranging, and coloring what took

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<sup>62</sup> O’Connell, *Between the Lines*, 160.

<sup>63</sup> Egendorf, *Healing From the War: Trauma and Transformation After Vietnam*, 27.

<sup>64</sup> O’Connell, *Between the Lines*, 278.

<sup>65</sup> Paul O’Connell, Interview by Sarah Hansen, December 1, 2013.

<sup>66</sup> “I had the conscious thought as I stood in that village in September of 1969 that I might have wasted a year of my life, and worse, those who had died, the brave marines of Mike 3/5, may have died for nothing.” Paul O’Connell, Interview by Sarah Hansen, December 1, 2013.

<sup>67</sup> Paul O’Connell, Interview by Sarah Hansen, December 1, 2013.

<sup>68</sup> “Nobody knew my real story until they read my book;” Paul O’Connell, Interview by Sarah Hansen, December 1, 2013.

<sup>69</sup> “[memory is] who wants whom to remember what, and why.” Alon Confino, “Collective Memory and Cultural History: Problems of Method,” *The American Historical Review* (1997), Accessed July 11, 2013. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2171069>, 1393.

<sup>70</sup> Taylor, *The Vietnam War in History, Literature and Film*, 16.

place in the light of what happened since.” As time progresses and the recalled action becomes more distant, memory becomes a composition of who the narrator is now.<sup>71</sup> So, when O’Connell is reflecting on his experiences, he is not only telling what happened, but he is explaining them through today’s O’Connell. Collective memory is also important to consider because it leads to “the production of texts that are less finished and, from a limited historiographical perspective perhaps, less trustworthy.”<sup>72</sup> Based on this, O’Connell’s retelling exhibits collective memory behaviors, making it less of a raw narrative. O’Connell begins to develop memory the second he leaves the theater, for when he sails out of the Vietnam, “The actual war had ended, yet the memory was just beginning to grow.”<sup>73</sup>

O’Connell is adamant that his reflections demonstrate his true experiences in Vietnam. His reason for writing *Between the Lines* was “to set the story straight.”<sup>74</sup> When O’Connell read his letters, he realized there were discrepancies between what happened and what he wrote to his family, that “when nothing was happening around me in Vietnam, I was making up all sorts of stories, but when the horror struck, I wouldn’t even write.”<sup>75</sup> O’Connell was later astonished by this notion, and when he was writing his reflections he “had to come to grips with myself, wondering why I would write such things.”<sup>76</sup> There are several advantages to the reflections over the letters<sup>77</sup>, including that retelling “allows people to take a more livable stance toward what they’ve experienced, one that may not have been possible when the events took place.”<sup>78</sup> There is unreliability in the narrator that must be taken into consideration. One historian explains,

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<sup>71</sup> Egendorf, *Healing From the War: Trauma and Transformation After Vietnam*, 27.

<sup>72</sup> Renate W., Prescott, “The Vietnam War and the Teaching and Writing of Oral History: The Reliability of the Narrator,” *The Oral History Review* (1999), Accessed October 27, 2013, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3675589>, 64.

<sup>73</sup> O’Connell, *Between the Lines*, 228.

<sup>74</sup> Paul O’Connell, Interview by Sarah Hansen, December 1, 2013.

<sup>75</sup> O’Connell, *Between the Lines*, 13.

<sup>76</sup> Paul O’Connell, Interview by Sarah Hansen, December 1, 2013.

<sup>77</sup> “One of the advantages you get by reading both, is that you learn that the NVA were not waiting for us on the top of Hill 500... That I called out for my mother when I got wounded... That the presence of a supreme being came to me when I stepped over a tripwire attached to a booby-trap... That a marine friend of mine, John Kirchner was blown to smithereens... That I felt another marine had died in my place... That I cowered inside a cave... And on and on...” Paul O’Connell, Interview by Sarah Hansen, December 1, 2013.

<sup>78</sup> Egendorf, *Healing From the War: Trauma and Transformation After Vietnam*, 69.

I am not suggesting that the narrator is not telling the truth. I am using the term ‘unreliable’ in the sense that each person is approaching the same remembered event or emotion from a different perspective and is therefore limited in interpretation. Writing history is by its very nature unreliable because it entails ‘the selection of incidents for recording, the treatment of time and its effects, and the kind of connection which the historian establishes between events.’<sup>79</sup>

Another historian explicates how “Soldiers expecting a violent end, in the clamor and horror and chaos of battle, do not make reliable eyewitnesses.”<sup>80</sup> The latter O’Connell was ashamed of his letters and was confused, stating, “Why would I write such a letter and send it to my mother and father...I now face the fact that I was really disturbed and mentally troubled.”<sup>81</sup> He now feels remorse for his actions – “shameful. Did I really have such an opinion of the Vietnamese back then?”<sup>82</sup> He pays homage to the dead enemy under the impression “Their beliefs were strong enough to die for.”<sup>83</sup> Though, there are still many benefits to reading the letters, as there is “No full understanding of the most disastrous foreign war in American history...without reading these letters from the GIs to their loved ones back home. They tell the total truth about the Vietnam war.”<sup>84</sup> As opposed to the reflections that are “always interpretations,” the letters are “raw perceptions of reality.” Merely, the letters and reflections are different reference frames at looking at O’Connell’s service; both have inaccuracies, but both also have a wealth of individual knowledge about his soldier’s tale that cannot be quantified.

In conclusion, Paul O’Connell served for eleven months and seventeen days in Vietnam. Even after his service ended, the memories of Vietnam never left. *Between the Lines* documents the themes of heroism, cowardice, innocence, mental hardening, mistrust, betrayal, loss of innocence, transition home, and pride through both primary letters and reflections many years after. His soldier’s tale is reflective of other veterans’ stories because it tactfully exhibits these motifs and how they have had long-lasting

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<sup>79</sup> Prescott, “The Vietnam War and the Teaching and Writing of Oral History: The Reliability of the Narrator,” 54.

<sup>80</sup> Taylor, *The Vietnam War in History, Literature and Film*, 14.

<sup>81</sup> O’Connell, *Between the Lines*, 206.

<sup>82</sup> “I find it hard to accept the hatred I had inside me. If the reasons for the hatred are still within, then I am blessed because I cannot fully recall the reasons for the venom I expressed in this letter.” O’Connell, *Between the Lines*, 27.

<sup>83</sup> O’Connell, *Between the Lines*, 82.

<sup>84</sup> Johannessen, “Making History Come Alive with the Nonfiction Literature of the Vietnam War,” 120.

effects on him as a person.<sup>85</sup> Although both his letters and reflections have their individual values and limitations, collectively they provide a holistic view of O'Connell's service. His tale is that of a hero and a survivor; he was an American soldier who learned to accept his past and who he is today. O'Connell is a success story whose healing process is a model for veterans returning from any conflict, whether it be from the past or in the unforeseeable future. Paul O'Connell is a hero to the United States of America, a man who gave his life away to protect the values of this country and who has learned to come to grips with his past.

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<sup>85</sup> "The soldiers' tale of Vietnam is *all* of the stories. We must not choose among them." Hynes, *The Soldiers' Tale: Bearing Witness to Modern War*, 222.



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