Dispatches Study Guide

Dispatches by Michael Herr

BOOKRAGS

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Plot Summary

Michael Herr, a writer in his late twenties, takes a correspondent position with Esquire Magazine to report on the Vietnam War. He covers two major operations, the siege of Khe Sahn and the recapture of Hue, the old Vietnamese capital, plus several other field operations. He meets many Marines, several officers, and fellow correspondents while gathering the impressions and experiences contained in his dispatches. The author prefers field operations over work in Saigon and its relative safety, but in reality no place is safe in Vietnam. The enemy owns the night with mortar attacks and continues the terror tactics with secretly planted bombs that explode anywhere in the city.

The Vietnam War reaches its pinnacle with the Tet Offensive, named after the lunar new year on which it starts, from January 30, 1968 to June, 1968. Shortly before Tet, the siege of Khe Sanh begins on January 21 and lasts until April, 1968. Herr arrives to Khe Sahn by helicopter, the primary mode of transportation during the war, and meets two Marines with whom he shares a perimeter bunker—Day Tripper and Mayhew—along with other Marines. The author describes how the NVA (North Vietnamese Army) surrounds the base and digs trenches up to the barbed wire lines in preparation for a large-scale assault. Everybody expects something big to happen while the NVA probes the wire regularly in the cover of night and the Marines shoot by the light of mortar-fired flares. Suddenly the NVA leaves the area quickly, apparently from the heavy air strikes taking a larger toll than thought.

Herr tells the Marines' stories, some bizarre and others touching, with a deep sense of respect and admiration for what the young men do and think in a foreign country full of danger. With significantly less admiration, the author relates the propaganda of the Vietnam War and sketches the portraits of those promoting the official lines. While other correspondents think of the Marines as unworthy for story material, Herr finds them all to have something of value. His dispatches concentrate on the men who leave the deeper impressions, the background of the war, and the current action, but he also gives a section of vignettes that round out his overall experience. Sections for the other correspondents finish the book, most notably Page, a British reporter who ends up seriously injured from shrapnel.

Death and mayhem, sardonic humor, and extreme fatigue characterize the Vietnam War, along with legal and illegal drug use, and the ever-present rock and roll. Herr captures the sights, sounds, and gut-wrenching terror of war—plus an unexpected amount of beauty within the ravaged country. The author tells the stories truthfully, as the Marines request and as Herr must. All the filth, stench, and death of war remain as testimonies to what the soldiers experience and the survivors carry back home.

Chapter 1, Part I Breathing In

Chapter 1, Part I Breathing In Summary and Analysis

Michael Herr works in South Vietnam as a war correspondent. His apartment in Saigon, capital city of South Vietnam, contains a wall map left behind probably by a French soldier before the United States became involved, at first slightly after the First Indochina War ended in 1954, and then more heavily in the 1960s. Herr lays out a few of the basic characteristics of the war: War has been the way of life for the country over decades of time; wiped-out enemy units keep reappearing in full strength; and, the enemy uses ground cover effectively. One primary American tactic is to destroy this cover.

Part I opens with an account of drug use among the soldiers, given to them by medics. One kind, Dexedrine, is an amphetamine to keep the soldier awake and alert. Another kind is a depressant to lessen pain and anxiety. A Lurp (LRRP - Long Range Reconnaissance Patrol of Green Berets or Marines, also a member of this type of patrol, also the high-quality freeze-dried field rations issued to the Lurps) claims to have found the perfect balance between the two drugs, where he can see at night as well as if he were using a night-vision scope. The Lurp is on his third tour of duty and has survived heavy firefights. He keeps coming back because war is the only life he can handle any longer. Even in the war zone people avoid looking into his dangerous eyes too long. He goes everywhere with at least a .45 sidearm and a knife. The man wears his hair to his shoulders and nobody will ever tell him to get it cut. Herr sees him the next morning with a prisoner from the night field operation, then never again.

Two other correspondents spend about a month with Herr—a man named Page who wears long hair, hippie scarves and beads—and Sean Flynn, son of the famous early movie actor, Errol Flynn. They joke with a soldier and ignore a commander who wants to show off his fighting troops in action in order to get press coverage. They pack marijuana and cassette tapes of rock and roll, then head out into the field to cover the war action.

A soldier tells them that the trick to survival is to always keep moving. Herr describes this as a special craziness that he feels and observes in others, "running around inside our skins like something was after us . . ." He tells of the dramatic impact that the dead have on the living and the ever-present helicopters, like taxis delivering goods to the soldiers. One particular drop-off leaves only one soldier, a highly irregular event and something the soldier wants Herr to forget.

The camp at Soc Trang promises to bring Herr into a firefight. Soldiers prepare for the attack by taping rifle clips end-to-end for rapid reloading. Herr sees odd automatic weapons, not standard issue. Soldiers grab munitions from crates—grenades, mortar shells, and banana clips for the odd rifles. Men paint their faces to reduce glare.

Everyone's nerves tighten for action, but none comes. Herr leaves by helicopter in the morning.

Sean Flynn and Herr visit a large TAOR (Tactical Base of Responsibility), where the colonel is drunk and slurring his words; discipline is lacking, but the soldiers seem comfortable because no VC (Viet Cong—local enemy militias) have been seen in months. Herr ties this in with being stranded at a base for no apparent reason over four days, with the sergeant there playing non-stop country music and continually eating candy bars. The war presents constant surprise, something to which the author never becomes accustomed. He also cannot develop what he terms a war metabolism, which is the ability to slow down when the urge is to run, and to get moving when frozen in place.

The enemy controls the ground, being largely thick jungle. The American forces control the air with numerous helicopters and other aircraft. Night belongs to the enemy; day belongs to the Americans. No place affords safety—the enemy could be anyone during the day and by night will bomb or mortar the Americans they had served a few hours before. Bombs in satchels, mines in the roads, and booby traps on the trails make any movement risky. The lower-level fear of everyday life turns into full terror while heading out toward the field in a fast-moving helicopter. Herr thinks the soldiers who do not seem afraid are insane and feels worse when they do show fear. Herr drops with soldiers under machinegun fire and scrambles to safety with them. Surprisingly, everyone makes it without injury except for one soldier who sprained both ankles from jumping out of the rising helicopter.

Herr notes that war drains the youth out of young men. They see too much death and in ways that most people never experience. Herr jumps on a helicopter full of dead soldiers, none in body bags, their faces only haphazardly covered. The covering over one, a poncho, blows off and disturbs the gunner—the dead man's eyes are still open. The gunner demands that Herr cover it back up. Herr fumbles with the task, but accomplishes it by lifting the head and tucking the poncho beneath, amazed that he could touch a dead man. The gunner thanks him after they land and quickly walks away.

The war that Herr describes is, as most wars are, hellish. Human nerves and emotions tighten and eventually snap, some never to recover. A number of soldiers become killing machines, their compassion for humanity completely gone. Others turn to alcohol and/or drugs for relief, with medics handing out drugs to keep the soldiers going. Danger hangs everywhere and all the time—dead people being the grisly by-product of the whole enterprise. Often chaos reigns and discipline falls apart. No place is safe and the tension never lets up. Herr drives home the point that few people can go through this and survive without having been affected deeply, permanently, and not for the better.

Of significant historical perspective, this type of war correspondence is among the first of its kind, a shocking revelation to the American public of the period for its vivid and harsh realism. Critics point to this realism as having contributed to the failure of the war by turning public opinion against it, and thereby pressuring politicians to hold the military back from its primary missions. Supporters argue that everyone needs to understand

exactly what war means in the hope that some other method of resolving conflict will develop. Meanwhile, the United States and NATO (North Atlantic Treaty Organization) fight the Cold War against the USSR and Red China (supporters of North Vietnam), with the war between North and South Vietnam being the primary overt military action.

Herr employs a narrative style that often seems a flow of consciousness. He strings together flashes of impressions and fragments of scenes, a technique that results in something like automatic weapons fire—short bursts with brief calm periods intermingled.

Chapter 1, Part II Breathing In

Chapter 1, Part II Breathing In Summary and Analysis

Herr recalls his first few weeks as a war correspondent. He remembers as a child looking at photographs in magazines of dead people, killed during war. The impact he feels resembles looking at sexual pornography, a combination of shame and shock along with fascination as to how this can appear so unnatural and yet be so real. This leads to a Vietnam scene where American soldiers ensure that the enemy soldiers killed in recent action are dead by kicking each in the head, then shooting them again. Herr looks at the face of one of the soldiers who did the shooting and sees something like sexual arousal.

People regularly ask Herr why he came to Vietnam. His motivation may be to further his writing career, but the war impacts him more powerfully than he could have ever imagined. The reasons why the soldiers are there vary from romanticized military service to their country to simply killing as many enemy soldiers as possible without being killed. Political clichés work into some of the answers.

Dressed in new fatigues, Herr seeks out contacts on his first day as a war correspondent in the field. He finds himself on an air field in Kontum during a downpour, surrounded by soldiers who had just fought the biggest battle of the war to date. Far from heroic, they seem like a "colony of stroke victims".

Herr describes the battle these soldiers fight at Dak To for three weeks in November, 1967. The front extends for thirty miles over numbered hills. Fighting is the heaviest seen in two years, and whole divisions enjoin as the situation worsens. Then all the fighting suddenly ends when the NVA (North Vietnamese Army) withdraws.

The soldiers offer short snippets of stories, and Herr observes the battle aftermath. Soldiers ignore a captain's commands to police the soggy air field. Another correspondent asks a foolish question about what happened during a particularly bad firefight and receives a curt reply that everyone had been shot to little pieces. A soldier relates that he had refused an order from his lieutenant to go up a ridge and report back. The lieutenant does this himself and dies trying.

As time goes on, Herr discerns that the war stories of most are short and clichéd, with an occasional fresh take here and there. One soldier describes friendly villagers who swamp helicopters while evacuating soldiers from an area. The Americans shoot the villagers to chase them away, but they keep on coming, apparently more afraid of the NVA than the American fire. After about a year, the author has heard it all.

A mortar round lands thirty yards from Herr and the soldiers he accompanies. Everyone hits the dirt, and the soldier in front of Herr accidentally kicks him in the nose. At first both think that Herr is seriously injured, and the soldier expresses great concern, but it

turns out to be just a bloody nose. The soldier laughs at the author, or so Herr interprets the action. Mortified, Herr never returns to that outfit. However, the soldier may have been laughing from relief that the kick in the head did no serious harm.

The author identifies four types of soldier: emerging saints, homicidal madmen, lyrical poets, and the brainless. Even though the stories tend to repeat, the author stays interested and always finds some element of surprise. All, including the author, share the common experience of war, although the soldiers have special relationships with each other that run deeply and sometimes manifest in dramatic moments.

Chapter 1, Part III Breathing In

Chapter 1, Part III Breathing In Summary and Analysis

Herr has dreams but does not remember them due to smoking marijuana before sleeping. Many combat soldiers try in one way or another to avoid dreaming, but this simply delays the inevitable. The subconscious has to sort out impressions from the senses, and with the sensory overloads of war, the dreams become torturous.

The Americans obtain marijuana in the mountains using cigarettes as trade. While getting stoned with a group of other soldiers, Herr encounters a soldier with a bag full of dried human ears. The author speaks to the way men go crazy in wartime and the commonality of body-part trophies. The author recalls how a soldier tried to intimidate him by pointing a rifle at his heart, and then joked about it when Herr objected. In another recollection, newly arrived correspondents ask many questions about the dangers of war, but the only useful thing to learn, a veteran correspondent says, is to hit the floor quickly.

Saigon looks beautiful from the air, but the streets are full of crime and trash. The Vietnamese do not follow American orders, many pick pockets and steal whatever they can, and the danger can cause soldiers to yearn for the firefights in the field. However, Herr points out that the terrorism was at its worse from 1963 to 1965. The timeframe he writes about is 1967 to 1968. Herr brings up the spooks (secret military operatives) of the early war years when the US was not so heavily involved, and how they had been romanticized. These days are long gone by 1967.

The war steadily ratchets upward. Troop requests run into the hundreds of thousands at a time. Meanwhile, the NVA is planning something that US military intelligence does not understand. The enemy attacks, but only sporadically and for short periods. NVA troops never show themselves. What is not known at the time is that the NVA troops are preparing for the Tet Offensive that will begin on January 30, 1968.

Chapter 1, Part IV Breathing In

Chapter 1, Part IV Breathing In Summary and Analysis

The nights that Herr spends in the jungle move in an aural fashion from the usual jungle sounds to disturbing silence to war racket. He describes how fatigue sets in stronger during war than with any other human activity—soldiers miss the details that could have kept them alive, or sleep while standing and talking. The talking refers to whatever they dream, not their actual surroundings. The days are no less difficult than the nights in the jungle. Malaria and other diseases quickly take down strong men.

Everyone uses the phrase "good luck", whether they mean it or not. Luck might mean being killed in your sleep or it might mean living through another day. Soldiers who have experienced a close call and survived are often considered good luck to the others in their units. Most carry some form of good luck charm, religious item, or something from home. However interpreted, luck fails to ward off the war. Most soldiers experience insanity in one or more of its many forms. Herr gives an example of a latrine door booby trapped with a grenade. The enemy does not bother with something this trivial, so the trap must have been set by a soldier who had gone over the edge.

The soldiers talk about how to win the war, and a common idea calls for leveling the country and killing everyone, enemy or not. The pointlessness of this dark joke parallels the pointlessness of the Vietnam conflict except for those who believe the idea that if the Communists are not stopped in Vietnam, they will eventually invade the US homeland. Herr thinks that the US would do better fighting on home turf than in Vietnam.

The author goes out on patrol with the troops. They operation takes all morning but claims only one man, and nobody can positively identify the body as being a VC. The kill is listed as a VC anyway. This happens fairly often and different commands have different policies on when to shoot. The VC tends to conserve ammunition. When the Americans fire, they let fly with everything they can. Herr describes how all the sights and sounds of war stay with a person even while away from a war zone: "Some people took a few steps along it and turned back, wised up, with and without regrets. Many walked on and just got blown off it. A lot went farther than they probably should have and then lay down, falling into a bad sleep of pain and rage, waiting for release, for peace, any kind of peace that wasn't just the absence of war. And some kept going until they reached the place where an inversion of the expected order happened, a fabulous warp where you took the journey first and then you made your departure".

Herr takes up weapons during the initial days of the Tet Offensive. Prior to the Tet, he would do everything for himself except carry a weapon and use it. By the very nature of the Tet, in which the enemy surrounds his camp, he drops his reporter role and becomes a shooter. The next morning he works in a hospital, helping out as best he can. Herr compares the feeling to being in the Alamo.

Chapter 2 Hell Sucks

Chapter 2 Hell Sucks Summary and Analysis

The title of the chapter comes from one of the sayings the soldiers write on their helmets and flak jackets. Herr paints the first weeks of the Tet Offensive in war colors. Strict curfews in Saigon turn the city's usual desolation into a deep shade of dreariness. The US forces feel defeated while the upper brass declares victory. The author notes that in fact the VC and the NVA occupy most of South Vietnam until the day that all US forces leave. Two of the common rumors prove to be true—some Americans fight with the VC and the NVA has executed thousands of South Vietnamese outside of Hue, where Herr goes next.

Herr travels with soldiers and other correspondents packed into a truck. Refugees line the muddy road, and the weather is cold and rainy. The convoys take on sniper and rocket fire. Everyone knows that taking Hue from the NVA will be a hard and bloody fight. As it turns out, they find a deserted village, but the NVA still hold the Citadel of Hue across the Perfume River. The Citadel becomes the goal of the ensuing battle.

Hue had once been the most beautiful city in all of Vietnam. The French had built structures and a university there. But war visited the city, and bombed-out buildings, bullet-scared walls, and napalm-scorched earth greet Herr's eyes. A US boat on a nearby canal accidentally opens fire on the soldiers that Herr accompanies, scattering all for cover. Nobody is hit but they almost open return fire on the boat.

Air strikes hammer at the wall surrounding the Citadel, where the NVA has dug in. Herr witnesses a sniper take down a running NVA soldier. Heavy fighting on the ground makes everyone wonder if they will get through this alive. Casualties build and flood the field hospital, where a doctor must decide who might live verses who will die. One soldier with a knee wound learns that he will be flown back to the States where he will finish his tour. The soldier cannot stop smiling. Marines work at filling body bags with their dead. A difficult task to begin with, the work becomes near impossible when a mortar shell explodes in a pile of filled bags. Finally, after more than a week of fighting, reinforcements arrive and drive the NVA out of the Citadel.

Herr tours a palace after the battle with Major Trong of the ARVN (Army of the Republic of Vietnam). Dead bodies litter the palace and grounds. Restoration of the structure and contents appears impossible. Herr asks who the last emperor of Vietnam was, and Major Trong replies that he is emperor now.

Chapter 3, Part I Khe Sanh

Chapter 3, Part I Khe Sanh Summary and Analysis

They call it "acute environmental reaction" during the Vietnam War, but the commonly understood term from previous wars is shell shock, Herr explains. However, no parent wants a son coming home with shell shock. Whatever the term, the son may not want to return home either.

During the winter of 1968 Herr observes a young Marine who nears the end of his tour. The soldier smiles all the time, but his eyes never show any mirth. His laughter, if it comes out, is a high giggle. He had been in an ambush that took out almost half his company, and the horror of that scene plays behind his eyes.

The day for leaving Khe Sanh arrives. The young Marine goes to the airfield and awaits a C-123 transport, but misses it and returns to his unit. This happens twice more before Herr leaves Khe Sanh, and he never learns whether the young Marine ever departed for home or not.

Chapter 3, Part II Khe Sanh

Chapter 3, Part II Khe Sanh Summary and Analysis

Vietnam consists of distinct geographical regions: delta, flats, piedmont, and highlands. However, news reports on the war use the military designations that carve the country into four regions roughly following the geography and named with simple Roman numerals: I Corps (pronounced "eye-core") from Danang north to the DMZ (demilitarized zone), II Corps (two core) from Cam Ranh Bay north to I Corps, III Corps (three core) from Saigon north to II Corps, and IV Corps (four core) from the southern tip of the country north to III Corps. Herr thinks this takes much of the character away from the country.

He places Khe Sanh in the piedmont area on top of a plateau. The highlands rise close by, a region that would be dangerous even without the war. The Montagnard tribes control the mountains, and they hate the South Vietnamese. This animosity goes back through the ages because the cultures differ significantly, the Montagnards being reclusive and primitive. The tribes hate the North Vietnamese for invading their territory, and so they fight with the Americans against the NVA.

In 1965 the Ia Drang battles of the highlands cost many American lives and represent the first shock of the Vietnam War. The official count is three hundred US deaths, while those who were there believe the number to be three to four times that number. Any American arrogance about the war dissolved afterward. Herr acknowledges that the US has the stronger force but lacks the terms of engagement.

Chapter 3, Part III Khe Sanh

Chapter 3, Part III Khe Sanh Summary and Analysis

The Khe Sanh Combat Base starts in 1962 when a Special Forces A Team, consisting of about a dozen Green Berets, joins with four hundred indigenous troops and occupy what was once a French base. Tactically, the base has little importance at its beginning other than as a token outpost to keep an eye on NVA troops moving into the south.

In 1966, Khe Sanh reports a buildup of NVA troops around the base, which results in a battalion of Marines being sent as reinforcements. A year later more reinforcements arrive. The buildup continues throughout the summer while talk circulates among reporters that compares the Khe Sanh situation with one that the French encountered in 1954, the Battle of Dien Bien Phu, during which the French take a serious beating. The ratio of enemy attackers to defenders is about the same for Khe Sanh. The enemy had dug trenches around Dien Bien Phu, which they are doing around Khe Sanh. Countering this argument, military officials point out that Khe Sanh sits on high ground and that more troops can be brought in if necessary.

A week after the Tet Offensive, the NVA begins to shell Khe Sanh. A battle seems to be inevitable, as the buildup at the combat base draws the enemy's attention. President Lyndon Johnson declares that Khe Sanh must be held at all costs, a political move to transfer any blame for failure onto the military. With eight thousand American and Vietnamese facing off forty thousand estimated NVA troops, commanders hope to fight the battle on US terms and to kill enough of the enemy that the NVA give up and leave South Vietnam.

The Marines have an attitude that one of them is worth ten of anyone else. This, unfortunately for many of the Marine patrols caught in ambushes, does not make them bullet proof. The attitude does foster the idea that being outnumbered five-to-one makes no difference. The Marines at Khe Sanh, their commanders, and the politicians back in America expect to win this battle regardless of a possibly fatal mistake—underestimating the enemy.

Chapter 3, Part IV Khe Sanh

Chapter 3, Part IV Khe Sanh Summary and Analysis

Herr spends several days and nights at Khe Sanh during the seige. The NVA probes the wire, which consists of spread rolls of razor wire surrounding the combat base, three circles deep. The Marines take incoming artillery and mortar rounds sporadically, and they take casualties steadily.

The NVA attacks a position called Langvei five kilometers away. Twenty-four Special Forces soldiers and four hundred ARSV troops defend against nine light Soviet-made tanks, something nobody expects from the NVA. Around half the Special Forces and three hundred of the Vietnamese die in the battle. At the same time of the Langvei battle, Khe Sanh receives a heavy artillery barrage at six rounds per minute. Survivors of Langvei make their way to Khe Sanh, and some have gone insane. Others cannot believe that the NVA has tanks. Herr wants to ask an unspeakable question—what if the NVA mounts a similar but larger attack and overruns Khe Sanh? He keeps the question to himself.

Herr meets two Marines, Day Tripper, a large black man from Detroit, and Mayhew, a white, surprisingly small man for a Marine who is from from Kansas City. They walk together to a mortar pit where Mayhew asks about one of his friends. His friend had been wounded and now is recovering in Danang, after which he will return to Khe Sanh.

The three men walk together past a triage hospital tent on their way to pick up supplies. The sights of the wounded disturb Day Tripper, upset about what war does to people. Mayhew ignores the scene and lightly sings a popular song as they walk by. Herr retrieves his gear from a secure and comfortable Seabee (construction battalion) bunker with the intention of joining Day Tripper and Mayhew in their more dangerous bunker near the perimeter.

Only three hundred meters separate the perimeter bunkers and connecting trenches from the NVA trenches. Herr walks into darkness and stench upon entering the bunker, but nothing worse than he has already experienced. He tells of an NVA sniper who proves impossible to kill in his spider hole even when napalm is dropped on the position, and how this resilience earns respect from the Marines. Mayhew announces that he has extended his tour by four months, which upsets Day Tripper. He cannot understand why anyone would want to spend one minute extra in Vietnam. Herr muses on the many ways one can be killed or maimed in war, and how soldiers react when an artillery shell hits among them: "You could be shot, mined, grenaded, rocketed, mortared, sniped at, blown up and away so that your leavings had to be dropped into a sagging poncho and carried to Graves Registration, that's all she wrote. It was almost marvelous".

The NVA probe the wire at night. After hearing the sustained firing of an M-60 machine gun, Herr and Mayhew go out to investigate. One of the NVA soldiers is wounded and screams hideously into the night. Another Marine shoots an M-79 grenade launcher at the man and puts him out of his misery.

Chapter 3, Part V Khe Sanh

Chapter 3, Part V Khe Sanh Summary and Analysis

Two realities define the war: that of the Marines at Khe Sanh, and that of the higher command levels who talk to reporters. The reality that the higher command levels describe goes directly against what the Marines experience. In simple terms, the higher command levels lie to make things seem better than they are. Bad weather is good; heavy casualties are light; defeat is a change in tactics.

Colonel David Lownds acts as the press secretary for the seige of Khe Sanh. He brushes off criticism with platitudes and false confidence, and he denies any knowledge of Dien Bien Phu, although this is highly unlikely. Despite the slippery ways the colonel has with the press, Herr believes him to be a good soldier who would do things differently if he had his way.

Herr travels with Karsten Prager of Time magazine across the DMZ at the end of February. All of the higher command levels talk optimistically, while Herr and Prager know differently. They meet with General Tompkins, commander of the 3rd Marine Division, who is casually dressed and sits in a clean office while the two journalists have three days worth of filth and stink on them. Prager constructs a long, complex question that runs about three minutes. The General, claiming poor hearing, tells Prager to repeat the question. Prager does with a louder voice, the question boiling down to what the General would do if the NVA attacks Khe Sahn and all the supporting bases at once. The General replies that this is exactly what he wants the NVA to do.

At the end of the DMZ journey, the two journalists go to Danang where a brigadier general from III MAF Marine Headquarters gives a press conference. Peter Braestrup of the Washington Post asks a question in a barely controlled voice. The former Marine demands to know why the troops at Khe Sanh have not dug in. The general brushes the question aside.

Chapter 3, Part VI Khe Sanh

Chapter 3, Part VI Khe Sanh Summary and Analysis

The feared attacks never materialize at Khe Sanh or anywhere else. By the spring most of the NVA troops leave the area and so do the weary Marines, relieved by the Cav (air cavalry). The once beautiful hillsides around Khe Sanh resemble moonscapes due to the heavy bombing, shelling, defoliation, and napalm strikes.

Operation Pegasus, the relief operation for Khe Sanh, begins on April 1. The Cav builds a sprawling base eleven miles northeast of Khe Sahn, then smaller bases along the route to Khe Sanh. Cautiously, Marines move into the hills and discover that the NVA has left in a hurry, abandoning their packs and equipment, an indication that the winter bombing worked. Herr returns to Khe Sanh where the conditions have greatly improved. He talks with a black Marine about the assassination of Martin Luther King and how this impacts all black soldiers.

Chapter 3, Postscript: China Beach—Khe Sanh

Chapter 3, Postscript: China Beach—Khe Sanh Summary and Analysis

Herr goes to China Beach, a place for in-country R&R. Marines sent there lay out in the sun and sand, take hot showers, and eat hot food. Good combat Marines receive leaves to China Beach regularly, but everyone gets to go at least once during a thirteen-month tour of duty.

Two soldiers from the 26th Marines, Hotel Company, recognize Herr and give him good and bad news. Day Tripper has returned home. Mayhew is dead, hit directly in the chest by an RPG (rocket-propelled grenade).

Chapter 4 Illumination Rounds

Chapter 4 Illumination Rounds Summary and Analysis

The author gives twenty unconnected scenes that have only one thing in common—they all happen in Vietnam during wartime.

Herr relates his first encounter with Marines while on a Chinook helicopter. He hears what he thinks is an enormous hammer striking the underside of the helicopter but turns out to be bullets coming from the ground. One of the young Marines takes a bullet and dies before Herr's eyes.

The 173rd Airborne returns from the battle for Hill 975. Young women working for the Red Cross offer coffee, but most of the soldiers are too battle-weary and walk on by without a word or glance. One soldier says something to one of the young women that makes her cry.

A senior NCO (Non-Commissioned Officer) in the Special Forces tells a story about how a friend of his licks the face of a good-looking schoolteacher, and she likes it. The Continental Hotel serves drunken soldiers and American civilian engineers. The Vietnamese tolerate the soldiers but absolutely hate the engineers due to their ugliness and arrogance.

A young Special Forces sergeant runs the EM Club. He has spent thirty-six months in Vietnam and is on the tail end of his third tour. After three purple hearts, he can go home but wants to finish this tour and come back for another. However, he is no longer fit to fight.

A Huey pilot shoots back at someone on the ground who fires at the helicopter. Herr watches the tracers from the helicopter and the winking gun on the ground until they intercept. The winking on the ground stops. A twenty-four-year-old captain in the Special Forces tells Herr about killing one VC and freeing one prisoner. The next day his commanding officer awards a medal for killing fourteen VC and freeing six prisoners.

A freelance photographer tells Herr about seeing the bodies of dead VC being dropped from two hundred feet altitude into the center of a VC villiage. Herr hears of a young Marine asking a Catholic chaplain if his legs were all right. The chaplain says that they are, but in reality both have been blown off. After his treatment, the Marine asks for the chaplain's collar cross pin and then curses the chaplain for lying.

Herr smokes marijuana with a helicopter gunner named Davies. Davies lives with a group of Vietnamese and considers one of the women his in-country wife. The wife, actually a prostitute, angers Davies because she still plies the trade. He decides to move out.

A brigade commander explains why the VC and NVA soldiers are called Dinks. This is a shortened version of Rinky-Dink, which is a substitution for Charlie, a name too often associated with family and friends of the soldiers. Another correspondent asks an exhausted young soldier how long he has been in-country. The soldier answers slowly and sullenly. An obnoxious helicopter gunner from Texas brags about himself.

A large black soldier claims to be a Black Panther trying to recruit for the cause. Another plays Jimi Hendrix during a firefight. A soldier from Miles City, Montana checks the casualty list every day to see if anyone from his tiny hometown has been hit. A sergeant receives a chewing out from his colonel due to having forced a helicopter evacuation from another unit.

A Native American soldier quietly thanks Herr for a favor promised in case the soldier were to die the night before. Herr gives an overworked doctor a beer during an operation. A major tells Herr that a dead Marine costs the government eighteen thousand dollars and talks about his strange dreams.

Chapter 5, Part I Colleagues

Chapter 5, Part I Colleagues Summary and Analysis

Herr begins with a devised scene from World War II. A silver-haired war correspondent types a story in a bunker by candlelight. Two soldiers observe and the young one, the Kid, asks the Colonel why the correspondent does this by choice. The Colonel speculates that the correspondent might feel he has a job to do and that he truly cares.

Referring to war correspondents as "Those Crazy Guys Who Cover The War", Herr describes the complex relationships that develop among reporters, photographers, and different kinds of soldiers. Most of the reporters also haul cameras along with them, but Herr does not. He prefers to do his scenes in words and rejects the added burdens of cameras. The reporters and photographers treat each other as colleagues, fellow professionals who understand each other's motivations and feelings toward the war and the soldiers who fight it. As for the soldiers' feelings about war correspondents, they display various forms of respect, hatred, disgust, and puzzlement over why anyone would be in Vietnam voluntarily.

Too many reporters and photographers showing up just before an expected battle disturb the Marines, who wonder what kind of horrible situation awaits them. Usually the presence of a correspondence brings curious soldiers around for a look at the strange animal that goes to war unarmed. Some, like Dana Stone, earn respect by taking the point during patrols, looking for traps and ambushes. Others are welcome in small numbers because the soldiers expect the correspondents to tell the story truthfully. The presence also lends importance to the Marines' missions.

Sean Flynn gives off a special air. The good-looking son of the movie star, Errol Flynn, seems too good looking to be in a combat zone. Yet he has a presence unique among reporters and a writing style that defines the war darkly, realistically, and to depths many other reporters cannot understand. Herr thinks some reporters are no better than accountants. They report the facts but not the essence and underlying meanings of war. They have no poetry, nor do many of them need any.

All the Marines accept Dana Stone, a twenty-five-year-old combat photographer. Stone likes to confront his colleagues and make them laugh in the process with a hard sense of humor. He tells Flynn, in an attempt to shake him, about the heavy fighting Stone had seen a year before on a ridge that the Marines are about to take. A Marine overhears, which causes Stone to apologize and admit that the untruthful story is just a stupid joke on his colleagues.

Marines with their snapshots taken shortly after battle constantly approach the photographers. Predictably, all the shots are of similar subjects and identical themes, none of them very good or funny, most of them are gruesome and hideously tastelessly —the snaps of tourists at war. The soldiers want to know if Stars and Stripes might

publish some of the photos. The professional photographers cannot help but laugh at the idea.

Herr admits that the occasional soldier who expresses a deep hatred for correspondents may be right. War correspondents do make their living off of other people's deaths, but the correspondents also risk their own lives during the process. At first defensive, Herr develops an understanding: "They weren't judging me, they weren't reproaching me, they didn't even mind me, not in any personal way. They only hated me, hated me the way you'd hate any hopeless fool who would put himself through this thing when he had choices, any fool who had no more need of his life than to play with it in this way".

Chapter 5, Part II Colleagues

Chapter 5, Part II Colleagues Summary and Analysis

Both correspondents and soldiers experience the same reactions to war. Most lose the feeling of adventure after the first few firefights, but others continue as if acting in a war movie. Herr and another correspondent, David Greenway from Time, ask a Marine to cover them as they run through a dangerous stretch, a pointless risk and one taken straight out of the movies. Greenway snaps a photo along the way, another act of daring that could have cost his life. Other correspondents also take risks. Photographer John Schneider rides a bike from the top of Hill 881 North to Hill 881 South in the middle of a battle.

Between the JUSPAO (Joint US Public Affairs Office) and the editors in America, most stories fed to the public emphasize the war from the positive side. Progress always moves ahead. Kill ratios skew against the NVA and for the US. Few honest stories every make it through the bureaucracy. Herr's position with Esquire allows him free reign to spend most of his time in the field, unlike the other reporters who must cover JUSPAO meetings and interview generals.

Herr estimates that between six and seven hundred correspondents are in-country during the height of the Tet Offensive, but many non-correspondents are also granted MACV (Military Assistance Command, Vietnam) credentials: feature writers from religious and gun publications, student journalists, book authors, syndicated columnists, and aging journalists confused by the war. Herr, in his late twenties, dreads becoming like the aging journalists.

The correspondents form a diverse community with shared feelings about the war. All take the job seriously and friendships quickly develop. Only one political position exists—they are in the war, and that is a position. The correspondents also take criticism that their reporting of the war is losing the war.

War correspondents risk their lives while doing their jobs. Herr unwittingly walks down a trail full of bobby traps and miraculously sets none of them off. Reporters and photographers die from machine guns that do not stop even as they holler that they are journalists in Vietnamese (Bao Chi). Herr lists the correspondents who died within a two-week period.

Herr describes a remarkable correspondent from Britain named Page. Page takes many risks and suffers shrapnel wounds several times. When broke, Page expects his friends to support him. When flush with cash, he supports his friends and gives back twice as much. Page's flair and his obvious craziness make the Marines nervous when he walks into a room. Page represents the real enemy that the Marines would like to kill—a freak, a long-haired hippie.

Chapter 5, Part III Colleagues

Chapter 5, Part III Colleagues Summary and Analysis

Upon returning to the States, Herr keeps in touch with his correspondent friends and feels incomplete, but he does not want to desire war all the time. Strange dreams haunt him during the first month back. Longing and emptiness mark his visits with old friends.

The news breaks that a large piece of shrapnel has hit Page at the base of his brain. Not expected to live, Page pulls through. Expected to be paralyzed on one side of his body, Page regains significant but not total use of his limbs. Not only surviving but expanding his odd personality, Page throws a party for his twenty-fifth birthday. He tells of a British publisher who wants him to write a book about Vietnam that would take the glamor out of war. Page turns the offer down flat. He believes that the glamor of war is not only true but an absolutely necessary component.

Chapter 6 Breathing Out

Chapter 6 Breathing Out Summary and Analysis

People who have been to Vietnam avoid talking about it, Herr discovers. He also finds talking more difficult than writing about war. A black soldier with a unique dance, a bulldozer digging up the bones of a VC cemetery, a war photographer, Flynn, a scene of dead soldiers in a truck, his love of flying in helicopters, and China Beach become the subjects of his reminiscing.

For the present, Herr sees no difference between combat and rock and roll veterans. The entire decade of the 1960s has yielded its casualties. Rock artists die steadily "like second lieutenants". He sees a picture of an NVA soldier sitting by the Danang River in a familiar place where he had sat with his friends, during the war that is now over.

Characters

Michael Herr

Michael Herr writes his dispatches from Vietnam for Esquire magazine. He experiences firsthand the siege of Khe Sanh, the battle for Hue, and several other operations. Unlike the Marines, Herr has the freedom to leave the fight when possible and all of Vietnam if he so desires. Because of this, many of the soldiers consider him crazy to stay in a country that they would not hesitate to leave.

While preferring the company of enlisted soldiers, Herr tolerates the upper brass. He finds the rank of captain and below much better than the colonels and generals who feed him standard war propaganda. The author seeks realistic stories from the field, an honesty that the upper brass considers opposed to their goals.

Herr's dispatches paint the Vietnam War as an unconventional conflict, where the enemy has two parts—the regular NVA and the VC. The VC could be any Vietnamese, as this is the militia that operates at night and wears no uniform. American soldiers could very easily work alongside the VC during the daylight hours and not know it. Although they are a mobile and efficient force with better equipment, the Americans fight an elusive enemy that uses any and all tricks to gain an advantage. Herr reports these truths while the military continually exaggerates victories and downplays losses.

In the end, American forces leave Vietnam and the North takes the South. Herr departs from the country before this happens and writes his book after the fall of Saigon. Harshly honest with his own motivations, the author expresses no regrets for having reported the truth as he saw it.

Grunts

Grunts are enlisted Marines who fight the major battles of the Vietnam War. Most of the grunts tolerate Herr and try to feed him good stories, often protecting him during firefights. Young men in their late teens to early twenties make up the majority of grunts. They react to the war in various ways, sometimes bizarrely. Herr notes the taking of ears and other body-part trophies, the wearing of odd fetishes for luck, the practice of writing slogans on helmets and flack jackets, and other distinctive behaviors typical of the Vietnam War, including the widespread use of legal and illegal drugs.

Herr meets Day Tripper and Mayhew at Khe Sanh, two grunts for which he devotes more book space than the others. Day Tripper, a black man from Detroit, wants to get through the war and go home, hopefully in one piece and not too messed up in the head. Mayhew, a white man from Kansas City, wants plenty of action. The two men represent opposites who become friends during the war, one large, burly and quiet, the other slight and talkative. Mayhew always sings a popular song when not talking, lightly singing when passing full body bags. After Khe Sanh, Herr learns that Day Tripper

makes it home in relatively good shape, while Mayhew takes a lethal rocket-propelled grenade in his chest.

The grunts, with their basic training and brief preparations for jungle warfare, develop closer personal relationships than the Special Forces. Not far from civilian life and often serving a single tour of duty, the grunts kid Mayhew for being a lifer (career soldier) when he extends his tour another four months. This decision costs Mayhew his life.

Lurps (LRRPs)

The Lurps (Long Range Reconnaissance Patrols) consist of Special Forces Green Berets. Very highly trained in jungle combat specifically for the Vietnam War, the Lurps seldom know each other's first names or hometowns. They have their own tents and eat higher quality field rations than the grunts, possibly because the odds of their last meal being their final meal run higher than for grunts. Lurps do the most dangerous missions of the Vietnam War, including night-walking, a form of hunting the enemy.

Herr seldom interviews Lurps because they tend to keep to themselves and do not have the need to tell stories. True war professionals, the Lurps keep their stories to themselves and trusted friends. Herr considers an era movie, The Green Berets, to be more about California than actual Lurps.

Cav

Cav is a nickname for the air cavalry, those units that fly helicopters. The Cav transports Marines in and out of combat zones and is known for efficiency. At Khe Sanh, the Cav brings in reinforcements for the Marines, lays a tarmac and rebuilds the base. At the end of the siege, the Cav builds a line of bases very quickly to a point near Khe Sanh.

NVA and VC

The NVA (North Vietnamese Army) consists of trained professional soldiers who attack using conventional strategies. The VC (Viet Cong) consists of citizen militias, often South Vietnamese, who use guerrilla tactics. The NVA surround Khe Sanh and prepare for an attack by digging trenches around the base. The VC build booby traps in the jungle and attack bases at night with mortars. The jungle canopies present the Americans with special problems while fighting the NVC and VC because both types of forces effectively use the cover.

Colleagues

Herr's fellow correspondents receive special attention in the book. The correspondents risk their lives in the field to bring realistic stories to newspapers and magazines worldwide. Sean Flynn captures the true nature of Vietnam, both the war-ravaged and

the still beautiful parts. Page looks like a hippie in fatigues and a helmet but takes great risks for his stories. Other colleagues give Herr their insights and opinions on the action and war, all of which contribute to the overall book.

Helicopter Pilots and Gunners

Helicopter pilots transport Herr and other correspondents throughout Vietnam. The helicopter gunners help keep the ground fire to a minimum. Occasionally the pilots and gunners talk to Herr about their stories, some of which he includes in the book.

Marine Officers

Marine officers often talk to Herr about the war from a broad viewpoint. Correspondents reporting from the field create a primary conflict with perhaps the majority of top officers. As they try to fight a difficult war, the newspaper and magazine stories from war correspondents give too much of a negative view and not enough of a positive view, which turns the American public against the war.

Sean Flynn

Sean Flynn, the son of the movie actor Errol Flynn, carries his father's good looks and fame. His colleagues admire his journalistic flair, if not the burden of family fame. Flynn goes MIA (Missing In Action) somewhere in Laos or Cambodia after American troops leave Vietnam.

Page

A citizen of the United Kingdom, Page uses his pluck and courage to stand out among correspondents. The Marines find him disturbing and frightening, the real enemy—a hippie. Known for taking unnecessary risk for his stories, shrapnel eventually injures Page too seriously for war correspondence work.

Montagnard Tribes

The Montagnard tribes of the Vietnamese highlands ally themselves with the South Vietnamese and Americans; not because they like the government, but because they hate the North Vietnamese more than the South Vietnamese. The Montagnard live primitively and fight fiercely. Herr doubts that their territories in the mountains would be safe even in peacetime.

ARVN Soldiers

The ARVN (Army of the Republic of Vietnam) soldiers accompany Lurp squads of about a dozen Green Berets and seem perpetually frightened to death. This may be a result of the NVA killing so many of them. Herr portrays the ARVN as less than effective, a serious problem for a government without strong public support and a mandatory draft.

Objects/Places

South Vietnamappears in non-fiction

South Vietnam is the country in which most of the ground action takes place during the Vietnam War. The countryside ranges from the delta to flatland, piedmont, and the mountains.

Khe Sanhappears in non-fiction

Khe Sanh is the site of the longest siege during the Vietnam War. The battle never reaches the expected intensity.

Dien Bien Phuappears in non-fiction

Dien Bien Phu is a battle during the French engagement in Vietnam which signaled the end of French presence. Khe Sanh is compared to Dien Bien Phu but never reaches that level of fighting.

Hueappears in non-fiction

Hue is the old capital of Vietnam. The NVA takes Hue and executes many of its citizens. US forces later take the city back.

Saigonappears in non-fiction

Saigon is the capital of South Vietnam. The VC regularly shells the city with mortar fire and infiltrates it to set bombs.

China Beachappears in non-fiction

China Beach is a coastal recreation area near Danang. Those Marines who perform well in the field are rewarded with passes to China Beach.

Triageappears in non-fiction

A triage is the part of a field hospital in which the doctors decide which wounded soldiers to treat first. Some of the wounds are too severe to treat.

Hueyappears in non-fiction

The Huey is a helicopter that transports ground troops and correspondents from place to place during the Vietnam War. Huey gunships escort the transports.

M-16appears in non-fiction

The M-16 is the most common rifle in use during the Vietnam War. Soldiers operate it either as a semi-automatic or full-automatic weapon.

Drugsappears in non-fiction

Soldiers and correspondents often use illegal (marijuana, opium) and legal (amphetamines, barbiturates) drugs during the Vietnam War. This parallels a drug culture that develops in the US during the same time.

Musicappears in non-fiction

The soldiers often interpret the popular music of the era as being about Vietnam. Jimi Hendrix, The Doors, and The Rolling Stones are favorite entertainers.

Themes

War Is Hell

Herr lists the many ways a soldier can die in Vietnam, such as walking on a mine, falling into a spiked pit, all the variations of bullet wounds, and shrapnel from artillery rounds. Other threats include malaria and friendly fire or being shot down in a helicopter. Firefights may be brief or extend over days, weeks, and sometimes months, as with the siege of Khe Sahn.

Besides the physical toll, war takes its measure from the psychological health of young soldiers. Some may go insane and show it. Others go insane but hide their conditions until later when something sets them off. Those who manage to keep their wits and sense of morality must still perform gruesome tasks—nobody walks away from war unaffected.

Destruction of buildings, ruination of the land, and abuse of the population defines war. The once beautiful city of Hue turns to rubble. The once lush hillsides around Khe Sanh become burned over and pockmarked with craters. The Americans treat the Vietnamese like animals, even to the point of destroying a village to save it (from Communists).

The soldiers whom Herr meets cannot understand why he stays when he has the freedom to leave. This leads to a kind of resentment or even hatred because he visits hell for as long as he wants, whereas the soldiers must finish their commitments of thirteen-month tours, during which any second can bring death or horrible mutilation. Even those who think war offers great adventure change their minds after the first few firefights. War is terror, fatigue, constant danger from seemingly infinite sources, including a booby-trapped latrine set by another Marine who has lost his mind.

War Is Glamorous

Herr mentions the war stories he had read and watched in movies while a boy and how the glamour portrayed attracted him to experience the Vietnam War firsthand. Marines who think a camera captures their moves play out their own war movies, actors in a too real situation. The feelings that Herr and his Marine friends, Day Tripper and Mayhew, display as they pass a triage have tragic elements that contribute to the glamour. War has its own beauty, although terrible.

The spooks who operate covertly outside the law have the most glamour, then the Lurps, then the Marines, followed by the Army and finally the Navy, roughly in that order. However hellish the field becomes, however ugly the changes in the soldiers who fight the war, glamour follows. For various reasons, they do what most people would not. Some may truly want to serve their country. Some may have joined to avoid the draft. Others may want to get some—as in some action, some honor, or some reason for being.

Page argues that one cannot take glamour out of war. His daring ways and hippie appearance make him a walking antithesis and a focus for Marine disdain and fear. His glamour comes partly from courage and partly from his lampoons of the military, but he earns it. The soldiers earn their glamour as well, and it comes automatically. Badges of courage mark it on their chests. Graves in Arlington Cemetery mark it. Brass bands and twenty-one-gun salutes mark it. Page marks his war glamour by being Page—crazy, smart, lucky Page.

War stories will forever remain popular. People will forever become character personalities for war stories as the war changes them. Herr and his colleagues miss the war once out of it, as do many soldiers. Part of what they miss is the glamour, sorely lacking in the lives of most civilians. Working a regular, boring job, facing a pathetic, meaningless death, and having too much time to think may seem more difficult and possibly more torturous than war.

Motivations

Herr examines his own motivations and the motivations of others who serve in Vietnam. For Herr, he advances his career as a writer. The pay, low as it is, means nothing. He wants the stories and characters who inhabit them for his book and subsequent projects, such as the screenplays he works on after the war. He also wants the soldier experience without killing anyone, although when in a pinch he picks up arms and shoots. Herr tries to face his motivation honestly and does see how he uses the soldiers in a parasitic way. He may be too hard on himself. Parasites abound in wartime, from government contractors to the glory-bound officers, from the black markets to the whorehouses, from the presidential legacy to the upcoming political careers.

The soldiers have many motivations, a primary one being to stay alive and get through this thing. Others want to kill as much as possible, and some find sexual excitement in the process. Fighting Communism in the Cold War comes up in a few discussions and arguments, but that motivation finds little traction while under heavy fire. Politics mean nothing when survival instincts kick in. A few soldiers like to go out into the jungle at night and hunt the enemy, the motivation possibly being pride in a job well done. A sniper reflects this pride in skill by dropping a running NVA soldier from a long distance and smiling at Herr. A light helicopter pilot takes Herr on a wild ride through a river valley that resembles a canyon and shows off a high degree of skill.

The political motivations of the Vietnam War never come clear. Herr may understand more about the motivations now, but at the time he is as much in the dark as the civilians back home. He does understand that the reasons fed to the reporters are meant more as propaganda for war support than the truth, meaningless when examined closely or even translated into plain English. Body counts vary so widely between American and enemy deaths as to be absurdly high for enemy kills, unbelievably low for the Americans.

Camaraderie

In any work situation camaraderie develops. In war, this bonding takes on extreme levels as soldiers depend on each other for their lives, and correspondents take risks beyond normal journalism. Michael Herr portrays an automatic acceptance among the ranks of war correspondents, whether they like each other or not. The intensity of common war experiences eliminates normal social distinctions and personal discriminations. As for the soldiers accepting the correspondents and vice versa, acceptance does depend upon attitudes. Some soldiers hate correspondents, not because of their freedom to leave but because the soldiers believe the press works against their war efforts. Some correspondents confide in their colleagues about having low opinions about the troops, an attitude that Herr acknowledges but does not share. He benefits from tighter camaraderie with the military as a result of his non-judgmental and respectful position, at times a deep admiration for what these young people go through and do for one another.

When an assassin's bullet takes out Martin Luther King, riots burst forth in many American cities. The racial tensions snap in Vietnam too, leading to fights among the troops. One black soldier who had been friendly with Herr snubs him, but later reaches out. The camaraderie goes beyond simply sharing war experiences to the compassion of shared humanity. The two drink Herr's Scotch whiskey and watch the mortar flares light up the night, an oddly peaceful scene that resembles snowfall and ski runs. The black soldier expresses his doubt that he could ever turn his weapon against other black Americans, a thought that probably arises after hearing the fire of automatic weapons on radio reports about the riots.

The camaraderie developed in wartime lasts throughout life, Herr observes. Few other relationships run as deeply. War may be hell, but it has this characteristic in its favor. Passing through hell together builds strong and lasting friendships.

Courage Among Correspondents

The soldiers in Vietnam display acts of courage regularly; or, as they might say, acts of foolishness while under fire and supercharged with adrenaline. Some of the war correspondents match the courage with their own acts of daring. Herr does this by joining the forces on their operations rather than hanging around Saigon or Danang and submitting pale dispatches from the rear. He wants the same experiences as the combat troops, and for this he risks his life more often than luck would seem to allow.

Dana Stone walks point for patrols, the most dangerous position. He spots booby traps and possible ambush conditions, and by this earns respect. Where the author's luck holds and he avoids injury or death, Page's luck runs out when hit with a large piece of shrapnel that paralyzes half his body. A plucky young man, he works hard to regain the use of his limbs and recovers more movement than expected.

Herr displays another type of courage—honest reporting. A prerequisite to honest reporting, Herr must maintain honesty with his subjects, the grunts in the field. Only a person with the courage to be honest with self can pull this off, and such people are rare. The soldiers with whom Herr goes on operations sense what he tries to do and they protect him. They offer their stories in the hope that Herr will ensure that the essence of them survives intact to the printed page.

Style

Perspective

Michael Herr writes as a curious journalist with a solid background in fictional war stories that he has read, seen in movies, and watched on television. He arrives in Vietnam with no direct experience in the military, let alone a war, during the time of the Tet Offensive, a push by the NVA and VC that may have marked a turning point in the war, and not in the direction of the South Vietnamese or Americans.

The author's saving graces include a good listening ear, an honest respect for the grunts and Lurps, a sense for disinformation when he comes across it and a vivid writing style. Over a period of months, Herr learns exactly what combat soldiers experience, what they think, sometimes how they think, and to the core of matters, what they feel. He arrives in Vietnam a greenhorn with new boots. He leaves a veteran in every sense of the word save one—Herr writes for a living; the soldiers kill. But, just as soldiers write home in a nonprofessional way, Herr may have killed in a nonprofessional way during at least one firefight.

Herr writes as much for the soldiers and their families as he does for the general public. The troops passionately ask him to tell their stories, and he does so with as much grit and insanity in the prose as written English allows. The stories require no dramatization beyond the simple facts. A single look often says more than paragraphs of narrative. Herr leaves his reading public balanced between the horrors of war and its beauty without adding moral commentary, other than from the soldiers themselves, and in their own words. He writes for those who demand the truth about war from the grunt's point of view.

Tone

Herr's tone moves from his subjective observations to laying out the facts, then brushes it with the soldier's souls. His descriptive narratives become long strings of nouns and modifiers in the flow-of-consciousness style favored by some journalists of the time. Background information comes through crisply in an older style, while dialog takes on the characteristics of soldiers in the field—griping, giving each other grief, joking, and at times hitting something profound that encompasses the entire experience of the Vietnam War.

The author's voice maintains warmth and respect throughout. He acknowledges the baser parts of both correspondents and soldiers without undue condemnation, bringing across the attitude of an apolitical observer, not a judge or critic. Nevertheless, Herr's humanity wins out between the lines. He obviously cares deeply for his subjects, with the glaring exception of the top brass. Mutual contempt perhaps best describes the

relationships. The top politician of the time, President Lyndon Banes Johnson, garners very little attention from Herr. Nobody thinks about Washington D.C. while in a firefight.

Structure

Herr uses a rough chronological structure from when he first arrives in Vietnam to after he departs and the war ends. Time frames jump a little in some sections as he recalls events that fit with the subject at hand. Conflicts grow, climax, and ebb with the battles he covers, except for the siege of Khe Sanh. This story begins with high anxiety over repeating the French defeat in 1954 at Dien Bien Phu, a parallel so strong that President Johnson declares that Khe Sanh will not be lost. The author builds a similar anxiety in the reader through carefully constructing the expected climax, only to bring the whole scene down to a relatively bloodless end. As story structure goes, this fails to entertain, but the reader realizes that quite a few American lives have been saved. In reality, the mysterious withdrawal of the surrounding NVA troops spares many American lives at Khe Sanh. Herr mentions this strange behavior of the NVA in an earlier section, thus subtly foreshadowing the outcome of the siege.

Most of the major sections contain subsections that split logically, with the exceptions of Hell Sucks, Illumination Rounds, and Breathing Out, which have no subsections but do include blank line separators. The major sections alternate from having subsections to blank line separators, and all the major sections with subsections also include blank line separators as well. Herr inserts a postscript at the end of the Khe Sanh story. Overall, the chunking out of the book into smaller parts gives the impression of a collected series of dispatches from Vietnam and makes the book easier to read in short sessions. The Illumination Rounds section contains short vignettes from the war of scattered scenes and scraps of conversation, as if seen while mortar fire flares into the night sky. Including this section after Khe Sanh and before heading into Colleagues adds to the dramatic effect and a flavor of theater. Also, putting the soldiers' stories first followed by the stories about colleagues gives precedence to what soldiers do in war, an appropriate bow to those who would be heroes.

Quotes

"His face was all painted up for night walking now like a bad hallucination, not like the painted faces I'd seen in San Francisco only a few weeks before, the other extreme of the same theater. In the coming hours he'd stand as faceless and quiet in the jungle as a fallen tree, and God help his opposite numbers unless they had at least half a squad along, he was a good killer, one of our best". p. 6

"The mix was so amazing; incipient saints and realized homicidals, unconscious lyric poets and mean dumb motherfuckers with their brains all down in their necks; and even though by the time I left I knew where all the stories came from and where they were going, I was never bored, never even unsurprised". p. 30

"Flip religion, it was so far out, you couldn't blame anybody for believing anything. Guys dressed up in Batman fetishes, I saw a whole squad like that, it gave them a kind of dumb esprit. Guys stuck the ace of spades in their helmet bands, they picked relics off an enemy they'd killed, a little transfer of power; they carried around five-pound Bibles from home, crosses, St. Christophers, mezuzahs, locks of hair, girfriends' underwear, snaps of their families, their wives, their dogs, their cows, their cars, pictures of John Kennedy, Lyndon Johnson, Martin Luther King, Huey Newton, the Pope, Che Guevera, the Beatles, Jimi Hendrix, wiggier than cargo cultists". p. 57

"On the worse days, no one expected to get through it alive. A despair set in among members of the battalion that the older ones, the veterans of two other wars, had never seen before. Once or twice, when the men from Graves Registration took the personal effects from the packs and pockets of dead Marines, they found letters from home that had been delivered days before and were still unopened". p. 79

"It was a comfort, all of that power and precision and exquisitely geared clout. It meant a lot to the thousands of Marines at Khe Sanh, to the Command, to correspondents spending a few days and nights at the base, to officials in the Pentagon. We could all sleep easier for it: lance corporals and General Westmoreland, me and the President, Navy medics and the parents of all the boys inside the wire. All any of us had to worry about was the fact that Khe Sanh was vastly outnumbered and entirely surrounded; that, and the knowledge that all ground evacuation routes, including the vital Route 9, were completely controlled by the NVA, and that the monsoons had at least six weeks more to run". p. 101

"During those brief moments when the ground all around you was not rumbling, when there were no airstrikes on the hills, no incoming or outgoing or firing from the perimeter, you could sit inside and listen to the rats running across the bunker floor". p. 128

"The death of Marin 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". pp. 158-159

"The Intel report lay closed on the green field table, and someone had scrawled 'What does it mean?' across the cover sheet. There wasn't much doubt about who had done that; the S-2 was a known ironist. There were so many like him, really young captains and majors who had the wit to cut back their despair, a wedge to set against the bitterness. What got to them sooner or later was an inability to reconcile their love of service with their contempt for the war, and a lot of them finally had to resign their commissions, leave the profession". p. 185

"And always, they would ask you with an emotion whose intensity would shock you to please tell it, because they really did have the feeling that it wasn't being told for them, that they were going through all of this and that somehow no one back in the World knew about it. They may have been a bunch of dumb, brutal killer kids (a lot of correspondents privately felt that), but they were smart enough to know that much". pp. 206-207

"If you ever saw stories written by Peter Kann, William Touhy, Tom Buckley, Bernie Weinraub, Peter Arnett, Lee Lescaze, Peter Braestrup, Charles Mohr, Ward Just or a few others, you'd know that most of what the Mission wanted to say to the American public was a psychotic vaudeville; that Pacification, for example, was hardly anything more than a swollen, computerized tit being forced upon an already violated population, a costly, valueless program that worked only in press conferences. Yet in the year leading up to the Tet Offensive ('1967—Year of Progress' was the name of an official year-end report) there were more stories about Pacification than there were about combat—front page, prime time, just as though it was really happening". p. 215

"Sometimes they were just stupid, sometimes it came about because they had such love for their men, but sooner or later all of us heard one version or another of 'My Marines are winning this war, and you people are losing it for us in your papers,' often spoken in an almost friendly way, but with the teeth shut tight behind the smiles. It was creepy, being despised in such casual, offhanded ways. And there were plenty of people who believed, finally, that we were nothing more than glorified war profiteers. And perhaps we were, those of us who didn't get killed or wounded or otherwise fucked up". pp. 228-229

"Back in the World now, and a lot of us aren't making it. The story got old or we got old, a great deal more than the story had taken us there anyway, and many things had been satisfied. Or so it seemed when, after a year or two or five, we realized that we were

simply tired. We came to fear something more complicated than death, an annihilation less final but more complete, and we got out. Because (more lore) we all knew that if you stayed too long you became one of those poor bastards who had to have a war on all the time . . . I think that Vietnam was what we had instead of happy childhoods". pp. 243-244

Topics for Discussion

How does Michael Herr feel about his role as a war correspondent?

Describe the relationships between soldiers, including top officers, and war correspondents during the Vietnam War.

What does war do to young soldiers?

Why do the Marines become uncomfortable in the presence of Page?

Outline the buildup to the siege of Khe Sahn and its conclusion.

Compare and contrast the siege of Khe Sahn with the Battle of Dien Bein Phu.

What are the differences between the NVA and the VC?

How does a Lurp differ from a Grunt?