

## BOOK REVIEW

### **Matterhorn: A Novel of the Vietnam War<sup>1</sup>**

Sarah Boyce<sup>2</sup>

In *Matterhorn*, Karl Marlantes, a Vietnam combat Veteran and Rhodes Scholar,<sup>3</sup> has created what may be the finest novel yet written on the Vietnam War. Marlantes presents the conflict and its effect on the psyche by reaching deep into the subjective thoughts and experiences of his characters. Consequently, the novel is less about the history of the war than the veterans who fought it. *Matterhorn* is about the shared experiences that led to the particular struggles Vietnam veterans encountered when they returned home, more than thirty years ago, and the struggles they continue to face today. Specifically, this is a novel about trauma: the combat experiences that induce trauma, the onset of posttraumatic stress disorder, and the subjective reality of living with posttraumatic stress disorder. In an interview, Marlantes recounted one Veteran's story:

I'm married, four kids, and I served as a Marine in the area the novel covers. And every time I try to tell them about the war, I'd start shaking or start to get nervous and clam up and I couldn't go through with it. I've been trying for four years and I'm gonna buy this book, because this book will tell it exactly the way it was.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> KARL MARLANTES, *MATTERHORN: A NOVEL OF THE VIETNAM WAR* (2010).

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<sup>3</sup> Author Biography, AMAZON, <http://www.amazon.com/Karl-Marlantes/e/B00383K10U> (last visited Sept. 18, 2011).

<sup>4</sup> Evan James, *A Vietnam Epic Uncovers Old Wounds: An Interview with Karl Marlantes*, MOTHER JONES (Apr. 30, 2010, 3:00 AM), <http://motherjones.com/media/2010/04/interview-karl-marlantes-matterhorn-vietnam>.

As America has moved on to other conflicts and other wars, this novel is a timely reminder that we cannot forget the obligation that we have to the veterans of the Vietnam War, both to provide support in return for their service and to try to understand what they endured, exactly the way it was.<sup>5</sup>

At the outset, it is worth noting the continuing relevance of the conflict in Vietnam with regard to veterans suffering from posttraumatic stress disorder. The number of the afflicted is staggering. According to the results of the National Vietnam Veterans' Readjustment Study, a study mandated by Congress in 1983, 15.2% of male Vietnam veterans and 8.5% of female Vietnam veterans met the criteria for a posttraumatic stress disorder diagnosis.<sup>6</sup> With high levels of war zone exposure, these rates were much higher: 35.8% of men and 17.5% of women met the diagnostic criteria.<sup>7</sup> Overall, the study found that 26%, or approximately 830,000 Vietnam veterans, had posttraumatic stress disorder symptoms and functional impairment.<sup>8</sup> A reanalysis of the data in light of the results of another study completed in 2003 found that four out of five Vietnam veterans interviewed twenty to twenty-five years after the Vietnam War reported recent symptoms.<sup>9</sup>

As time has passed, Vietnam veterans' struggles with posttraumatic stress disorder have not faded into the background; on the contrary, they are more poignant today than ever before. Since the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs has seen a 59% increase in the

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<sup>5</sup> *See id.* (indicating that Marlantes contends that there is still an unwillingness to confront the Vietnam War's legacy, calling it "the alcoholic elephant parent in the room for 40 years. No one wanted to talk about it.").

<sup>6</sup> Jennifer L. Price, *Findings from the National Vietnam Veterans' Readjustment Study*, U.S. DEP'T OF VETERANS AFFAIRS: NAT'L CTR FOR PTSD (Jan. 1, 2007), <http://www.ptsd.va.gov/professional/pages/vietnam-vets-study.asp>.

<sup>7</sup> *Id.*

<sup>8</sup> *Id.*

<sup>9</sup> *Id.*

number of Vietnam veterans who have sought treatment for posttraumatic stress disorder, numbering 196,886 in 2006.<sup>10</sup> This recent growth in the number of Vietnam veterans seeking treatment has been called “puzzling,” but possible causes include the age and retirement of older veterans, the stress caused by the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, and the constant televised coverage of the current conflicts.<sup>11</sup> It has been postulated that retirement provides more time for veterans to relive their memories of the war, while the war coverage has provided frequent reminders.<sup>12</sup> Contrary to expectations, Vietnam-era veterans constitute the vast majority of the increase in the number of veterans seeking treatment for posttraumatic stress disorder since the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Heidi Russell Rafferty, ‘Ghosts and Demons’: *Vietnam Vets Coping with PTSD*, VFW MAGAZINE, Nov. 2007, at 20, 20.

<sup>11</sup> Robert A. Rosenheck & Alan F. Fontana, *Recent Trends in VA Treatment of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder and Other Mental Disorders*, 26 HEALTH AFFAIRS 1720, 1726-27 (2007).

<sup>12</sup> See Rafferty, *supra* note 10, at 20 (identifying two factors contributing to the rise in posttraumatic stress disorder: coverage of the war on terror and retirement).

<sup>13</sup> See Rosenheck & Fontana, *supra* note 11, at 1723-25. Specifically, the increase in the number of Vietnam-era veterans diagnosed with posttraumatic stress disorder accelerated over this period, from an average of 7% annually prior to 2001 to 10.6% annually from 2001 to 2003 and 13.7% annually from 2003 to 2005. *Id.* at 1723-24. Interestingly, some of the increase in rates of treatment for Vietnam veterans suffering from posttraumatic stress disorder may be attributed to regulatory changes. For instance, regulatory changes granting service connection for diabetes mellitus, type II, on a presumptive basis for veterans who served in Vietnam preceded an eightfold increase in the number of Vietnam-era veterans receiving compensation, and the number of Vietnam-era veterans with a diabetes diagnosis receiving mental health treatment increased by 72,000 from 1999 to 2005, which accounts for “only half of the 140,000-veteran increase in specialty mental health service use among Vietnam-era veterans.” *Id.* at 1725. As such, we should expect to see even further increases in posttraumatic stress disorder diagnoses and treatment of Vietnam veterans following the July 13, 2010 change in regulations concerning service connection for posttraumatic stress disorder, which liberalized evidentiary requirements for veterans seeking compensation benefits. See Stressor Determinations for Posttraumatic Stress Disorder, 75 Fed. Reg. 39,843 (July 13, 2010) (corrected by Stressor Determinations for Posttraumatic Stress Disorder, 75 Fed. Reg. 41,092 (July 15, 2010)) (to be codified at 38 C.F.R. pt. 3).

In interviews, Marlantes has freely discussed his own experiences with posttraumatic stress disorder.<sup>14</sup> He explained that writing the novel over a period of thirty years has been his own way of dealing with his post-war trauma from Vietnam, the “post-traumatic stress disorder which goes by a thousand names but has been with us since *The Odyssey*.”<sup>15</sup> In one interview, he related an incident where a car horn startled him, and he found himself out of the car trying to kick in the other driver’s windshield.<sup>16</sup> Then, “I looked around, saw I was in the middle of an intersection, my kid in the car. And I was going to kill this guy. I was really embarrassed.”<sup>17</sup> Marlantes has also talked about the way the Vietnam War has permanently changed his outlook on life.<sup>18</sup> He explained, “I’ll be having a wonderful time with my kids, and then all of a sudden I’ll be aware that this is temporary and I’m going to die.”<sup>19</sup> This awareness of mortality and the fragility of our own happiness, as well as the permanent cognitive changes that result from experiencing combat, are interwoven throughout the narrative in the novel to profound effect.

In writing the book, Marlantes desired “to reach out to those people on the other side of the chasm who delivered the wound of misunderstanding. I wanted to be understood.”<sup>20</sup> He wanted to tell his story to the protestors, the people who made obscene gestures and pounded on the car when his brother

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<sup>14</sup> See *Five Books Interview: Karl Marlantes on Vietnam*, THE BROWSER, <http://thebrowser.com/interviews/karl-marlantes-on-vietnam> (last visited Sept. 18, 2011) [hereinafter *Five Books Interview*]; Chitra Ramaswamy, *Interview: Karl Marlantes, Author, Vietnam Veteran*, THE SCOTSMAN (Aug. 16, 2010), <http://living.scotsman.com/books/Interview-Karl-Marlantes-Author-Vietnam.6475927.jp>; Jonathan Derbyshire, *The Books Interview: Karl Marlantes*, NEW STATESMAN (Aug. 30, 2010), <http://www.newstatesman.com/books/2010/08/interview-vietnam-war>.

<sup>15</sup> *Five Books Interview*, *supra* note 14.

<sup>16</sup> Ramaswamy, *supra* note 14.

<sup>17</sup> *Id.*

<sup>18</sup> See Derbyshire, *supra* note 14.

<sup>19</sup> *Id.*

<sup>20</sup> Karl Marlantes, *Why I Write: Karl Marlantes*, 257 PUBLISHERS WKLY, Jan. 25, 2010, at 22, available at <http://www.publishersweekly.com/pw/by-topic/authors/interviews/article/41727-why-i-write-karl-marlantes.html>.

picked him up at Travis Air Force Base after thirteen months of service in Vietnam.<sup>21</sup> He hoped to show the reader “what it really takes to be engaged in combat, and what it does to people.”<sup>22</sup> Unquestionably, at this, the novel is a resounding success. *Matterhorn* is a riveting but emotionally grueling read; it is impossible to pick it up and remain unchanged.

The novel *Matterhorn* opens at Fire Support Base Matterhorn, the fictional fortified hill in the middle of the jungle for which the novel is named, and begins shortly after the arrival of the protagonist, Second Lieutenant Waino Mellas. Mellas, whom his executive officer Ted Hawke terms a “politician” who went to a “fancy private college,”<sup>23</sup> is ambitious. Indeed, it is the dynamic growth of Mellas’s character born out of his ambition juxtaposed with his growing awareness of the horrors of war and attachment to and respect for his fellow Marines that provides the emotional roadmap through the novel for the reader. Through some parts of the novel, adding to its realism, the differences between characters appear lessened as their individual personality traits are subsumed by the shared experience of trying to stay alive and to keep each other alive. In others parts, Marlantes highlights the different backgrounds, desires, traits, and motivations of each particular character, from Colonel Mulvaney and Lieutenant Colonel Simpson, down the chain of command to squad members like the unforgettable Vancouver and pitiable Pollini.

The novel is set one year after the Tet Offensive<sup>24</sup> and is broadly split into two parts. The first half is devoted to what the Marines call “humping,” defined in the glossary as “hiking out into the bush with seventy or more pounds of gear on one’s back.”<sup>25</sup> Through this section, the reader becomes acquainted with

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<sup>21</sup> Ramaswamy, *supra* note 14.

<sup>22</sup> James, *supra* note 4.

<sup>23</sup> MARLANTES, *supra* note 1, at 12.

<sup>24</sup> *See id.* at 389.

<sup>25</sup> *Id.* at 581.

the characters and with the particular horrors of fighting a war in jungle conditions. The second half is riddled with action that leaves the reader feeling not so much exhilarated as burdened with the onset of battle fatigue. There are also two major interludes. The first takes place on Vandegrift Combat Base and is devoted to deeper development of the characters, as well as the exploration of political maneuvering amongst the officers and of racial tensions present during this period in history.<sup>26</sup> The second interlude is a short but crucial section describing Mellas's time on a hospital ship.<sup>27</sup> Marlantes has said that the novel is structured by analogy to the Percival myth that tells the story of a man who "grow[s] into a knight and then beyond that by becoming compassionate" and by metaphor to the Vietnam War, explaining that "we built it, we abandoned it, we assaulted it, we lost, and then we abandoned it again."<sup>28</sup>

The extent of Marlantes's success at bringing readers into the world of a Marine serving in Vietnam is fully realized during the second interlude aboard the hospital ship where Mellas is eventually taken. At this point, the reader has been with the Marines as they humped through the jungle with insufficient supplies and witnessed heartbreaking acts of bravery during a period of seemingly unending assaults. Consequently, as Mellas is processed in and harassed with administrative questions and protocol incident to his admission for treatment, interacts with staff, and tries to adapt to his surroundings, the reader not only understands his difficulty but actually feels frustrated at the intolerable banality of normal, everyday existence.<sup>29</sup> As Mellas inappropriately throws out dramatic lines like "[b]etween the emotion and the response, the desire and the spasm, falls the shadow,"<sup>30</sup> one empathizes with his desire to invest his experiences

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<sup>26</sup> *Id.* at 259-328.

<sup>27</sup> *Id.* at 504-22.

<sup>28</sup> James, *supra* note 4.

<sup>29</sup> *See, e.g.,* MARLANTES, *supra* note 1, at 504-06 (portraying Mellas arguing over the issuance of a receipt for turning in his sword while awaiting treatment at triage).

<sup>30</sup> *Id.* at 507.

with meaning and wants to shake the nurses and orderlies who, going about their daily tasks, do not seem to understand or appreciate what life is about—how beautiful and heartbreaking it can be, and how terrible.

In one particularly memorable scene, Mellas grabs a handful of silverware and hurls it into a sofa after an awkward and ultimately failed conversation with the one person aboard the ship with whom Mellas feels comfortable speaking, his nurse.<sup>31</sup> The reader, instead of empathizing with the nurse, who has already fled the room, identifies with Mellas and shares his desire to throw something in frustration at Mellas's inability to share his experiences and have them understood by someone who appreciates the depth of their meaning. Through this scene, Marlantes opens a window into the experiences of a person suffering from combat-induced posttraumatic stress disorder. As Marlantes related in an interview, "I often think about kids I knew who were 19—they were squad leaders, they were making life-and-death decisions and having unbelievable experiences. Then they come back and they get a job making hamburgers? It's going to be crazy-making."<sup>32</sup> He explained that their problem is not just dealing with the immediate symptoms of posttraumatic stress disorder, "it's also this existential lack of meaning. . . . You are extraordinarily important and life has meaning, in the sense that your success and failure is life and death. You don't show up for work at McDonald's, who cares?"<sup>33</sup>

It is Marlantes's ability to relate his own experiences with symptoms of posttraumatic stress and the effects of combat—the way a combat veteran's brain has been trained to immediately assume the worst case scenario in response to any unexpected

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<sup>31</sup> *Id.* at 515.

<sup>32</sup> *Five Books Interview*, *supra* note 14.

<sup>33</sup> *Id.*

stimuli<sup>34</sup>—as well as the existential and moral angst caused by the veneer of a civilized world stripped back to reveal a reality where “[p]eople can be nice and ordinary, then suddenly they’re killing each other,”<sup>35</sup> that makes *Matterhorn* such an extraordinary read on a historical, personal, and philosophical level. As a novel, *Matterhorn* not only grants the reader an understanding of the experiences shared by Vietnam veterans but leads us to ask ourselves the same ethical and existential questions faced by those involved.

Most importantly, this novel is far from being irrelevant or thirty years too late. *Matterhorn* reminds us about the dedication of our Vietnam veterans and the horrors of combat they experienced in the jungle, halfway around the world, and has never been timelier. A book that uniquely allows the reader to empathize with both the experiences had overseas and the readjustment problems facing Vietnam veterans upon return to their everyday lives serves as a critical reminder that we are obligated to continue to seek the most effective and compassionate means to care for our Vietnam veterans. Any reader of Marlantes’s book will never forget what our nation once asked those veterans to do for us.

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<sup>34</sup> Ramaswamy, *supra* note 14 (explaining, “You know when you go, what’s that noise? . . . You go, hmmm, I wonder if it’s a bird. Or maybe the wind. Or might it be the enemy? Well, by that time you’re dead. That’s why in combat most people die in the first two months. Their brains haven’t changed yet to react quickly enough. In extreme stress the brain reorgani[z]es so it immediately goes to worst case scenario and that’s what saves your life in combat. It’s a healthy adaptation. The problem is when you come back.”).

<sup>35</sup> *Id.*