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An Examination of the life and work of Gustav Hasford

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AN EXAMINATION OF THE LIFE AND WORK OF GUSTAV HASFORD

by

Matthew Samuel Ross

Bachelor of Arts
University of California, Los Angeles
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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment for the
requirements for the

Master of Arts in English
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THE GRADUATE COLLEGE

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Matthew Samuel Ross

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ABSTRACT

An Examination Of The Life And Work Of Gustav Hasford

by

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While Stanley Kubrick's film *Full Metal Jacket* has remained in the national consciousness twenty years after its release, the author of its source material, Gustav Hasford, has not. Few people know or remember that the Oscar-nominated film was not an original work but was adapted by Hasford, Kubrick, and Dispatches author Michael Herr from Hasford's 1979 novel The Short-Timers. Fewer people remember that following the well-reviewed The Short-Timers Hasford published a sequel, The Phantom Blooper, as well as one final novel A Gypsy Good Time, a frenetic parody of detective fiction. For my Master's Thesis I propose a study both of Hasford's life and his work for the purpose of shedding light on a talented but forgotten author. No extensive biographical study of Hasford has been attempted since the obituaries that followed his death in 1993, and scholarly examination of his literature has been limited to a few scattered book reviews and a short overview of Hasford's work by his cousin/de facto literary

executor. I intend to examine Hasford's life, as well as undertake a critical examination of the key themes running through the two books in his unfinished Vietnam Trilogy, The Short-Timers and The Phantom Blooper, as well as the related biographical undertones in A Gypsy Good Time, for all intents and purposes the unintended ending to that trilogy. It is hoped that through my research some long-overdue critical attention will be paid both to Hasford's novels and to Hasford himself so that he can begin to be recognized as the key contributor to Vietnam War fiction that he was.

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CHAPTER I

EARLY LIFE

Details about Gustav Hasford's childhood are sparse, as Hasford himself was always loathe to discuss in interviews his early life. What is known is that he was born Jerry Gustav Hasford on November 28th, 1947, in Haleyville Alabama. His father, Hassell Gustave Hasford, worked at the Reynolds Aluminum Plant as a foreman. His mother, Hazel Noblett Hasford, was a housewife¹. He had one younger brother, Terry, who would eventually become a 'lifer' in the army. Hasford went back and forth on what he liked to be called in person, sometimes going by Jerry, sometimes by Gus, but for professional purposes "he dumped his first name, Jerry, because it rhymed with his younger brother's name...[and] when your parents are Hassell and Hazel Hasford, one pair of jingle bells is enough for the entire family" (Carlton 4). Though Hasford himself remained tight-lipped regarding his childhood, a few minor details about his early years can be gleaned from secondary sources. His writing indicates that he was very close with his maternal grandmother Verdie Noblett. His relationship

¹ This is according to Bob Carlton's article "Alabama Native Wrote the Book on Vietnam Film" in The Birmingham News. Hasford's 1999 entry in Contemporary Authors lists his mother's occupation as librarian, but may have confused her occupation with that of Hasford's first wife Charlene Broock. If Hazel Hasford did indeed work as a librarian, it is still likely her primary occupation was as a homemaker.

with his father and mother is harder to determine; he would later hold some resentment against his parents for the way they treated him upon his return from Vietnam, but he was tightlipped in general about his family and mentioned them only briefly in interviews.

Perhaps the two most solidly traceable aspects of Hasford's childhood concern the bases of two of his favorite obsessions, the South and reading. Though it manifests itself more in his second novel than his first, Hasford's childhood helped instill in him a very strong Southern identity that colored many of his lifelong interests. Hasford was raised on family legends of Civil War glory, like that of his great-great-grandfather James Curtis. As the story went, Curtis was:

imprisoned in Jasper because he refused to join the Confederate Army. A group of friends came down from Winston County, burned the jail, shot a couple of Confederate soldiers, and freed Curtis. In retaliation, the Confederates, who were members of the home guard, killed three of Curtis' brothers. Curtis, according to legend, tracked down each of the guardsmen after the war ended and killed them in revenge Sandlin 2).

Curtis' civil disobedience was typical of the residents of Winston County, which included Hasford's birthplace, hometown, and high school. The county was often referred to as the Free State of Winston, and Hasford proudly recounted in *The Phantom Bloop* how Winston refused to join

Alabama's secession from the Union and had a history of freedom-minded contrariness. Despite his great-great-grandfather's and Winston County's refusals to participate in the War Between the States, the area's history inspired in Hasford a lifelong interest in the Civil War that sometimes bordered (as Hasford's interests often did) on obsession. Hasford's Southern identity was also grounded in the day to day activities that a childhood spent in rural Alabama entailed. His grandmother would proudly recount how "many of Hasford's favorite memories revolve[d] around summertime visits [to her house] that included fried chicken on the table and fresh vegetables from his grandmother's garden" (Sandlin 2).

Hasford's childhood also helped to inculcate in him a fanatical love of books and reading, a love that would eventually lead both to his becoming a published author and serving jail time for accumulating a storage unit full of stolen library books. Jack London's adventure stories were a particular early favorite in Hasford's childhood, though "he also loved reading pirate stories and spent countless hours at the library." As an adult, Hasford would credit his literary success to the "voracious reading habit" he developed as a child, citing it as the key recurring trait he saw in all successful writers. He is quoted as saying

that "I know dozens of writers, but I do not know a single writer who is not a book nut" (Sandlin 2).

The earliest period in his life that Hasford would address on record began when he was fourteen. He worked as a stringer, or freelance reporter, for two small regional newspapers, the *Northwest Alabamian* and the *Franklin County Times*. In his own words, he "covered football games, car wrecks, stuff like that," recalling that "the first thing I ever published was an article about coin collecting in *Boys Life* when I was 14" (Lewis 5), which earned him five dollars (Walbert 1). During this time Hasford also served as editor of his high school newspaper and "wrote about half" (Walbert 1) of each issue. At fifteen Hasford decided he wanted "to publish an honest magazine for writers" (Walbert 1) and began sending out letters to established authors seeking submissions. A year later the first issue of *Freelance* was published as a fifty-six page quarterly on professionally printed glossy paper, not mimeographed as Hasford had originally intended. According to Hasford, "it had advertising and 1,300 paid subscribers all over the country, \$5 a head. I just did it. My grandfather signed a note for me to borrow the money. I ran articles exposing songwriter ads and other con jobs like that" (Lewis 5). *Freelance* was comprised entirely of articles by

professional writers; Hasford edited it, but felt that at sixteen he lacked the experience to contribute any of his own writing. Though it lasted only three issues (mostly because Hasford became too busy with high school and his own writing to continue editing it), Hasford would later credit the experience and contacts he gained through publishing *Freelance* as the key reason the Marines made him a military journalist. *Reader's Digest* published a letter from sixteen year old-Hasford in 1963 which illustrates both the particular goals he had for *Freelance* and foreshadows the path Hasford would take after his tour of duty with the Marines:

Dear Editor,
Thank God for Reader's Digest. The writer is the loneliest person alive. No one ever really understands the writer, even other writers. Few people respect authors as they do statesmen, soldiers, etc. When people ask what I do for a living, and I reply that I am a writer, they remark casually 'Oh really! That's great. I always wanted to write. Yes, that's wonderful. When are you going to get a real job?'

Of course there are stories of how the 'name' author finds a young writer with talent, takes him under his literary wing, and guides him to fame and publication. There are no literary giants in this neck of the woods. Maybe one will turn up. Until then I struggle on, with even a victory every now and then. Though I enter the jungle alone, at the mercy of publishers and farsighted critics with broken glasses, I am confident of great reward. The writer's world is a challenge, and hard at times, but it attracts the finest people on this earth. These are the people that really live, and the only

people who are really alive. Artists, writers,
publishers, I love them all.
Jerry Gustav Hasford
Russellville, Ala.

Knowing he would soon be drafted and hoping to control his own destiny somewhat, Hasford enlisted in the United States Marine Corps in September of 1967 at the age of eighteen. Following boot camp he received a M.O.S.² of 4312, Basic Military Journalist, and was assigned to write for *Leatherneck* magazine, the U.S.M.C. equivalent of *Stars and Stripes*. Though his alter-ego Private Joker would modestly claim in *Full Metal Jacket* that he "wrote for his high school newspaper" as the reason he received that assignment, Hasford himself acknowledged that his experience editing a literary journal as a fifteen year old had been a key factor as well. Hasford, in his typically sardonic fashion, recalled that before going to *Leatherneck* magazine "first I had to go for training to an Army school³. I hung around with all these beery Army guys. . .so I lost my discipline from Parris Island and became a hippie." As a result, "for punishment" he was assigned to publish a base newspaper in North Carolina, a paper whose staff consisted

² Military Occupational Specialty

³ Likely Fort Benjamin Harrison, Indiana, according to The Short-Timers (25)

of Hasford and one other enlisted man. Churning out articles about Vietnam fired Hasford's desire to be assigned there. As he put it, "when you're reading all this stuff about big events happening somewhere, you get really curious to the point of it being painful wanting to know the real score." Hasford put in an application to be transferred to Vietnam and eventually requested mast, which he defined as "a legal maneuver that you can do in the military if you feel you're being oppressed." Feeling quite oppressed in North Carolina, Hasford eventually earned reassignment to Vietnam even though his service contract had only ten months left on it. Hasford remembered that "because in a sense I specifically demanded to be sent to Vietnam. . .they couldn't think of any reason not to do it and in fact they were perfectly willing." As Hasford dryly noted, "they had plenty of spots to send me" (Lewis 5-6).

Hasford ended up being assigned to the First Marine Division Informational Services Office (ISO) outside Da Nang. Hasford's first few months in the ISO weren't quite as exciting as he had hoped for. His easy-going personality and drawling Southern accent led some of the lifers⁴ to underestimate Hasford and make him their personal go-fer. Earl Gerheim recalls that:

⁴ Career military personnel

They made Gus make the coffee, run errands, and generally be available. One of his tasks was to chauffeur higher ranking lifers to and from the staff NCO quarters, which were a lengthy 400 yards or so down the hill. Every morning Gus has to pick them up in the jeep and drive them to the office up the hill. Then, he drove them to their hootch⁵ after lunch so they could rest their weary bodies. He later had to drive them back to the office after siesta time. And, you guessed it, drive them back the 400 yards to their hootch when their day's work was done (Gerheim 1).

In addition to his chauffeuring duties, Hasford wrote news stories for several military sources including *Sea Tiger*, *Leatherneck Magazine* and *Pacific Stars and Stripes*. The Marine Corps valued efficient and terse writing in their news reports, so Hasford would sometimes write up to ten stories a day with datelines from as varied locations as Quang Tri, Da Nang, and Hue (Aaron 2). Writing story after relentlessly positive story wore on him. Every day "he saw the spilling of blood and the mangling of hearts and minds, but when he wrote them all down, they were just G.I. Joe stories. He had wanted the real thing." In an interview years after the war, Hasford said "we were public relations men for the war and the Marine Corps. . .we appeared to be journalists but we were simply promoting the war and promoting the Marine Corps" (Carlton 1). A few excerpts from a typical story Hasford wrote during his time at the

⁵ Vietnam war slang for living quarters

ISO illustrate the cheery spin that he despised having to put on the war day after day:

Da Nang- An ocean of smiling faces greeted Marines distributing 500 baseball caps to the Vietnamese children of An Ngai Tay and Hoa Ninh, near Da Nang. The Caps, made in Hong Kong and purchased with money contributed by 7th Engineer Bn. Marines, bore the inscription 'A Free South' over a small Vietnamese flag.

'We thought we'd do something for the kids' said GySgt R.E. Maddox, NCOIC of the battalion's civil affairs office...

'We are so pleased with the children's reactions' Maddox concluded, 'that after we give out the 300 caps we have left we'll start collecting money to buy more (Hasford).

After several months at the First Marine Division's ISO churning out similar stories and chauffeuring higher-ranking enlisted men, Hasford and several other correspondents were detached from the ISO and reassigned to Phu Bai to form the core of Task Force X-Ray. Removed from the ISO, Hasford was able to get into the field more often which sometimes led to more of what his fellow correspondents called Gus Stories. Hasford was in Hue covering the fighting following the 1968 Tet Offensive when Steve Berntson observed the following:

I'd set up a base camp in Hue City, and Walter Cronkite rolls up with a camera crew. He was doing a stander-upper with some pogue colonel, asking about rumors that our guys had been looting. Just then Gus busts in with two black onyx panthers and a stone Buddha on his back. 'Hey, there's a whole temple full of this shit,' he hollers. 'We can get

beaucoup bucks for this stuff in Saigon!' I hustled him outside quick, and Cronkite, of course, came back home and declared the war unwinnable on national tv (Lewis 2).

More field time also meant more opportunities for the forthright Hasford to get in trouble with his superiors. An article Hasford wrote about the Fifth Marines' use of *flechette*, or 'Beehive' rounds⁶ in the battle for Hue was quashed by a Colonel at the Combat Information Bureau. Though Hasford was not punished for the story, the Colonel kept it from being published and "demanded that Hasford be reprimanded for even suggesting that American soldiers would use such an inhumane weapon"⁷ (Aaron 2). Such incidents rankled Hasford and furthered his discontent with the way news was reported in Vietnam. Hasford found an outlet for his frustrations through fiction, beginning work while still in Vietnam in Task Force X-Ray on an early draft of what would eventually become *The Short-Timers*. Besides covering the Battle of Hue City, Hasford's time with Task Force X-Ray also allowed him to be present for Operation Pegasus, the overland operation that broke through the encirclement of Khe Sanh following the Tet

⁶ A type of artillery shell filled with hundreds of small metal darts instead of explosives; they were nicknamed 'Beehive Rounds' because of the buzzing sound the darts made as they were expelled from the shell.

⁷ This incident would be fictionalized in both *The Short-Timers* and *Full Metal Jacket*.

Offensive⁸ (Aaron 2). Hasford served ten months in Vietnam, participated in five major combat operations, and earned the Navy Achievement Medal with a Combat V before rotating back to the United States at the end of his tour. He was one of only two men in his ten man correspondent section who was not wounded in action while working for Task Force X-Ray.

Hasford was discharged from the Marine Corps in August, 1968 and returned in a state of "total culture shock." Hasford's homecoming was somewhat less than ideal.

As he tells it:

When I came back and got off the plane, my parents picked me up and took me home to Russellville, Alabama....then they announce they're moving *the very next day* (sic) to Washington state. I've still got the dirt of Vietnam on (me), and I'm looking around the house and everything's gone. All of it, all of my stuff, was already packed up and shipped off, and they wanted to know whether I wanted to stay behind or take off with them. I said, you know, I think I'll go with you guys.

Well. . .I don't think that was the best way for me to come home from the war. Instead of coming back to a familiar place, I was there for one day and then the next day we went to a totally alien environment for someone from the South, which is the Pacific Northwest. Just like moving to Germany or something (Lewis 6).

⁸ The operation was initiated by 2nd Battalion, 1st Marines, 2nd Battalion, 2nd Marines, and three battalions from the Army's 7th Cavalry and later joined by elements of the 5th, 9th, and 12th Cavalries, the 9th and 26th Marines, and an additional battalion of the 1st Marines (Prados and Stubbe 428-436). Hasford's cousin Jason Aaron contends that Hasford was present for the Operation but does not detail what unit he was with. If Aaron's contention is accurate, Hasford likely spent the Operation attached to one of the Marine Battalions I've listed as a roving reporter.

After only one day back in his hometown, Hasford followed his family west and settled in Kelso, Washington. Like his homecoming, Hasford's attempts to put his life back together following his discharge were less than idyllic. He was married briefly to Charlene Broock⁹, but divorced two years later¹⁰. For a time during their marriage, he lived in an apartment over a hardware store while his wife worked at Kentucky Fried Chicken. He also spent time "living in a friend's closet that was eight feet long and five feet wide" (Walbert 2). Hasford wrote during the day while working the night shift as the desk clerk at a hotel frequented primarily by local loggers. Hasford recalls that:

the reason I got the job was because they needed a big guy like me on the graveyard shift because that's when all the loggers would come in from the bars wanting to fight. They'd already been in fights and they'd be dragging these scrubby,

⁹ Who contributed her name to psychotic recruit Private Pyle's rifle in *The Short-Timers*. An interesting tribute on Hasford's part, considering their divorce and his decision to name Private Joker's rifle (and girlfriend) 'Vanessa'.

¹⁰ There is conflicting evidence as to when exactly Hasford's marriage took place. *Contemporary Authors* lists Hasford and Charlene Broock's wedding date as September 1st, 1978, which would have taken place while Hasford was living in California just before *The Short-Timers* was published. Hasford himself describes being married while living in Washington and working at the loggers' hotel, and also lists the break-up of his marriage as one of the reasons he moved to Los Angeles in 1972. Additionally, Grover Lewis wrote of Hasford's ex-wife's re-contacting him after "a dozen years" (10) in 1987 after *Full Metal Jacket's* release, a number which is vague but would give some credence to the notion that the 1978 wedding date is incorrect. Because of these reasons I've chosen to put forth Hasford's version of events as having the strongest claim.

extremely ugly prostitutes with them. The job gave me a lot of opportunity to read. . .after about 3 o'clock when all the loggers had passed out (Lewis 6).

Hasford persevered and continued to work towards his lifelong goal of becoming a writer while occasionally taking classes at the local junior college. In the summer of 1971 he went to a Clarion Writers' Workshop for fiction authors at Tulane University in New Orleans, where science fiction writer Harlan Ellison was the workshop's main attraction. While there he met and befriended fellow writer Art Cover. According to Cover, "every year Harlan had a tradition of picking out the single worst writer with a personal ego who could handle it, and tell him he should give it up, get out of the business. [That] was Gus' year. Gus was not deterred. No one felt he had talent. Not even me. Especially me" (Cover 1).

Hasford ignored the criticism and went back to the Clarion Writers' Workshop when it was held in Seattle in 1972. By then he was starting to get published. Hasford placed a poem, *Bedtime Story*, in *Winning Hearts and Minds*, a poetry collection edited by and comprised of submissions from Vietnam veterans. He also had two pieces published in *Mirror Northwest*, a journal featuring work by Washington State community college students, in 1972: "Twilight," a

western-themed short story, and "Is That You John Wayne? Is This Me?" an early version of the "Peace Button" scene that would make it into both *The Short-Timers* and *Full Metal Jacket*. At the Seattle Clarion, Hasford submitted as a workshop piece the third chapter from the novel he was working on. His fellow students hated it, though as Cover recalls, "we were conditioned to have a certain response from Gus' fiction, which for the most part had not improved." In contrast to his peers, "the instructor for the week, Robert Silverburg, basically told us we were full of shit, that this was a masterpiece and we were too dim to recognize it." Cover maintains that "had he seen the entire novel, he might have come to a different conclusion" (1-2). At that time in his career Hasford "was very infatuated with the techniques of Donald Barthelme, who often dispensed with plot and basically deconstructed the fiction form" (Cover 1). What would become *The Short-Timers* began life with the working title "The Tattooed Chicken" and focused not on Vietnam but on "a series of surreal vignettes about the Civil War" (Cover 1). Eventually, Hasford planned to add three chapters set during the Vietnam War, and it was one of those chapters that had so impressed Robert Silverburg.

Shortly after the 1972 Clarion Workshop, Hasford, Cover, and cartoon television writer David Wise drove down to Los Angeles. They stayed with Harlan Ellison, who Hasford described as being "gracious enough to put up with two 22-year-old twits who had nowhere to go" (Lewis 7). Hasford again parlayed his teenage publication experience, along with his experience as a combat correspondent, into an editing job with American Art Enterprises, "which was then California's largest publisher of--how can we term this?...how about racy material" (Lewis 7). Put more bluntly, American Art Enterprises published thirty-six separate pornographic magazines, "each one featuring some kind of kinky slant." Hasford liked to joke about one in particular entitled "Playpen. . .which featured guys dressed up like babies. Truck-driver types dressed up like babies and being attended to, not in any sexual way, by matronly looking middle-aged women" (Lewis 7). For six months Hasford edited and wrote for these publications under the pseudonym "George Gordon," Lord Byron's given name. After he'd saved up a little money, he quit his job editing porn magazines, moved to Laguna Beach, and "started doing the starving hippie writer trip" (Lewis 7), as he called it.

For the next few years Hasford "lived like a dog in L.A. Worked in used bookstores, did anything to keep [him]self going" (Lewis 7), all the while continually polishing his novel. After reading one manuscript version, his friends Cover and Wise told him that "he really had two different books, *The Tattooed Chicken* and this Vietnam thing where the characters turned into werewolves whenever something violent happened" (Cover 2). Hasford gradually shifted the focus away from the Civil War, setting the complete novel in Vietnam and cutting out the werewolf notion almost altogether¹¹. All told, *The Short-Timers* took seven years for Hasford to write and went through at least twenty-five drafts before taking its final shape (Walbert 2). Hasford sent it out to every publisher that he could think of, and editors would write him back to say they liked it. "They couldn't publish it, of course, but they liked it" (Walbert 2). After seven years spent writing the manuscript, Hasford needed another three years before he was able to sell *The Short-Timers* to a publisher. The Vietnam War was considered "box office poison" and no editor wanted to buy a novel about Vietnam, especially one written by an unknown author (Lewis 7). Eventually Harper & Row published a hardcover edition in 1979 and Bantam Books

¹¹ But not completely, as the next chapter will discuss.

put out a paperback version in 1980, after they had each previously rejected the manuscript at least once. Harlan Ellison bought the first hardback copy of his former student/roommate's book. As for Hasford, "[he] took the money and went to Africa and Egypt and Greece in search of new ideas" (Walbert 2). He was finally a published novelist.

CHAPTER II

THE SHORT-TIMERS

Hasford's first novel, *The Short-Timers*, focuses on two main thematic elements developed under the backdrop of the 1968 Tet Offensive and subsequent fighting in Hue City, Vietnam. The first is the molding of Private James T. Davis, otherwise known as Joker, from a civilian into a reluctant leader. The second is Hasford's vehement and cynical criticism of the Hollywood portrayal of war. The interweaving and comingling of these two themes function to ground the narrative while Joker progresses from a boot recruit at Parris Island to a seasoned combat leader at Khe San.

The first of these themes, Joker's gradual transformation into a leader, in many ways serves as the central narrative arc that prevents the plot from being purely episodic. Yet the manner in which Hasford structures this transformation is interesting in that he seems to deliberately downplay its importance to the text until, and arguably through, the book's climax where Joker is finally forced to assume the leadership role he spends so long avoiding. *The Short-Timers'* structure suggests that Hasford went to great lengths to avoid making Joker's aversion to leadership an overt theme, but instead quietly constructed

the text so that thematically it would shape the narrative without dominating it.

Hasford introduces Joker's reluctance to assume a leadership role nine pages into the first of the novel's three sections, "The Spirit of the Bayonet." In a scene that would be replicated later on in *Full Metal Jacket*, Joker's Drill Instructor Gunnery Sergeant Gerheim¹² asks Joker if he believes in the Virgin Mary. When Joker admits he does not, Gerheim threatens Joker with dire punishment if refuses to profess a belief in the Virgin Mary and offers Joker a chance to recant. Joker stands by his statement, knowing that "it's a trick question. Any answer will be wrong, and Sergeant Gerheim will beat me harder if I reverse myself" (Hasford 8). Admiring Joker's courage, Gerheim promotes him to squad leader on the spot. Joker immediately tries to refuse the promotion, asking permission to speak freely before shouting "SIR, THE PRIVATE DOES NOT WANT TO BE A SQUAD LEADER, SIR"! Gerheim's

¹² The film would change this to Gunnery Sergeant Hartman to avoid legal problems because Hasford had a habit of naming characters after his real life friends. Gunnery Sergeant Gerheim was named for Earl Gerheim, one of Hasford's fellow combat correspondents from Task Force X-Ray. Gerheim had the rare distinction of lending his name to two Short-Timers characters, also serving as the model for Crazy Earl, squad leader of the Lusthog Squad. Potential legal problems will also explain the name change for the Lusthog Squad's lieutenant in *Full Metal Jacket*. In the book he was named Robert M. Bayer III a.k.a. "Short-round," which was changed to Walter J. Shinoski or 'Touchdown' in the movie to avoid complications from the real-life Bob Bayer, another friend of Hasford's from Task Force X-Ray.

response is to "sigh," as if he's had to address this problem many times before, and to drop his voice to a conversational tone many decibels below his usual Drill Instructor's bellow. He then tells Joker "nobody wants to lead, maggot, but somebody *has* to. You got the brain, you got the balls, so you get the job. The Marine Corps is not a mob like the Army. Marines die--that's what we're here for--but the Marine Corps will live forever, because every Marine is a leader when he has to be--even a private" (Hasford 9). Gerheim then informs Joker he will be bunking with resident platoon screw-up, Private Pyle, and charged with bringing Pyle up to the standards of the rest of the platoon.

Joker, while not quite refusing the order, states his preference to remain bunkmates with Private Cowboy, the only real friend he has in the platoon. Gerheim refuses this request by reaffirming Joker's new status as platoon leader, proclaiming that "Private Joker *will* bunk with Private Pyle. Private Joker is silly and he's ignorant, but he's got guts, and guts is enough" (Hasford 10). Two pages later, Joker is fired as squad leader and replaced by Cowboy when Cowboy defeats Joker in a mock sniping exercise. Two pages further on, Cowboy is himself replaced as squad leader by Private Barnard after a bayonet drill.

After Gerheim knocks out two of Barnard's front teeth demonstrating a rifle butt stroke, Gerheim admonishes his recruits that "Every Marine must pack his own gear. Every Marine must be the instrument of his own salvation." Barnard then "demonstrates that he has been paying attention" by sitting up and bayoneting Sergeant Gerheim in the leg. Rather than being angered by being stabbed, Gerheim is instead wildly enthusiastic about Barnard's courage in bayoneting him and the leadership potential such courage showed. After knocking Barnard out as a matter of course, "Gerheim ties a crude tourniquet around his bloody thigh. Then he makes the unconscious Barnard a squad leader" and crows that "He'll make a damn fine field marine. He ought to be a fucking general" (Hasford 15).

Through Sergeant Gerheim, one thing the boot camp section of the book reiterates again and again is that at its most basic level, leadership requires nothing more than courage, or "guts"--the guts to assert oneself, like Joker, or excel in training, like Cowboy, or fight back, like Barnard, while then also having the guts to accept the mantle of leadership when it is bestowed. Gerheim's last words, "Private Pyle, I'm proud-" (Hasford 30), are cut off when the insane Pyle shoots his tormenter, but also represent the degree to which Gerheim prizes guts. In the

world of *The Short-Timers*, Gerheim can admire courage so much that even the guts a recruit would have to show to kill him are worthy of pride. Not fear, not anxiety, but pride, because Marines need leaders and leaders need guts so guts are always to be encouraged and rewarded, no matter the manner in which they are displayed. Though Joker has long since been fired as squad leader by the time basic training ends, and is not named his platoon's outstanding recruit (ironically enough, that honor goes to Private Pyle), Gerheim still awards Joker a commendation that meritoriously promotes him to Private First Class, along with Gerheim's own P.F.C. chevrons to be sewn on in lieu of standard issue (Hasford 24). Though Joker refuses to see himself as a leader, Gerheim recognizes that potential and does his best to encourage it even as his own window of influence over Joker, basic training, is coming to a close.

In the novel's second section, "Body Count," Joker is a Corporal with only fifty nine days left on his tour of Vietnam, a veteran and a "short-timer." Even though as a corporal Joker is a non-commissioned officer, his knee-jerk response to the thought of his own authority is to refuse it and deny that he has any. His excuse for not wanting to take Rafter Man, a New Guy who has been in Vietnam for only three months, out into the field is that he does not want

to shoulder the responsibility if Rafter Man is killed or wounded while under his charge. Joker denies Rafter Man's request, stating "you'll get yourself wasted the first day you're in the field and it'll be my fault. Your mom will find me after I rotate back to the world and beat the shit out of me. That's a negative, Rafter. I'm not a sergeant, I'm only a corporal. I'm not responsible for your scrawny little ass," and choosing to ignore Rafter Man's own retort, "Yes you are. I'm only a lance corporal."

Soon after this Joker finds himself forced to eat his own words, as he is called into Captain January's office to be promoted to sergeant. Joker flatly refuses the promotion, glibly telling the Captain "sir, I rose by sheer military genius to the rank of corporal, as they say, like Hitler and Napoleon, but I'm not a sergeant. I guess I'm just a snuffy at heart" (Hasford 59). Captain January cites Joker's spotless record and experience as justification for the promotion and then orders Joker to accept his new rank. Joker goes off on a long rant intended to provoke Captain January into taking back the promotion before admitting "I don't kill. I write. Grunts kill; I only watch. I'm only young Dr. Goebbels. I'm *not* a sergeant" (Hasford 60). Joker's reticence to accept the promotion has nothing to do with any great desire to share Napoleon's rank. It stems

from his fear of having to take responsibility for others. One of Joker's coping mechanisms for dealing with the war is to see himself as an observer, like the high school reporter he was one year earlier, instead of the participant that he is. Joker does not want to be responsible, whether for Rafter Man's safety or the duties that come with a sergeantcy. He is content to drift through the war as a corporal, just highly ranked enough to avoid the work details of a private and lowly ranked enough to avoid responsibility for anyone besides himself, observing the horrors around him while remaining one step removed from them. He chooses to try to avoid Sergeant Gerheim's pronouncement that while no one wants to lead some will have to and he is qualified to be one of them. Captain January does not give him the option and orders Joker to sew on his sergeant's chevrons before heading off to his next assignment.

Joker's next assignment brings him to Hue, where he finds his fate once again intertwined with his old friend Cowboy. While Joker has been travelling throughout Vietnam writing stories as a combat correspondent, Cowboy has been completing his service as a grunt, just another rifleman with the Lusthog Squad of the First battalion, Fifth Marines. At this point Cowboy becomes a counterpoint to

Joker because his time as a rifleman has braced him for the responsibility he expects he will have to assume. The high number of casualties taken by the Lusthog squad has revealed that none of its squad leaders in recent memory survived his tour. As Cowboy explains to Joker when the two meet up again, "I'm the first fire-team leader. I'll be squad leader soon. I'm just waiting for Craze to get wasted. Or maybe he'll just go plain fucking crazy. That's how Craze got to be honcho. Ol' Stoke, he was our honcho before Craze. Went stark raving. Pretty soon it'll be my turn" (Hasford 42). Soon enough, Crazy Earl does indeed go "stark raving" and gets killed. When he does, Cowboy assumes the mantle of leadership and its accompanying responsibilities without complaint, exactly as he did on Parris Island. Cowboy's first action as squad leader is to stake a personal claim on eliminating the sniper who killed the first Marine under his command, telling Joker "T.H.E. Rock was the first guy to get wasted after I took the squad. He's my responsibility" (Hasford 107).

Unlike Joker, Cowboy immediately accepts the responsibilities of command. In a stark contrast Joker, around the same time, rebukes Rafter Man for slipping up and referring to his rank by saying "don't call me sarge" (Hasford 89), the same thing he will tell a dying Rafter

Man at the end of the section (Hasford 129). When Joker and Rafter Man attempt to hitchhike out of Hue, Rafter Man is accidentally run over by a tank and dies of his injuries. Unlike Cowboy, who looked to take immediate vengeance for the first Marine lost under his responsibility, Joker tries to push the incident out of sight and out of mind, and deny that he had any responsibility for Rafter Man; seconds before Rafter Man's death, Joker stopped himself from cautioning Rafter Man to stay alert because he "remember[ed] that Rafter Man has got his first confirmed kill. Rafter Man can take care of himself" (Hasford 128). The second section of the novel ends with Cowboy's commanding the Lusthog squad, Rafter Man dead, and Joker "shitcan[ned]...to the grunts" (Hasford 138) after an encounter with a by-the-book Colonel. Joker is "[re]assigned to Cowboy's squad as the first fire team leader--the assistant squad leader--until [he's] got enough field experience to run [his] own rifle squad" (Hasford 140). Following his failure to keep Rafter Man alive, Joker is placed in the same position Cowboy was at the beginning of the second section, not yet forced to assume command but anticipating that casualties will assure that will happen sooner or later--probably sooner.

Though his status changes from reporter to grunt in the third section of the novel, Joker's attitude towards responsibility remains unchanged. In an argument with his squadmates, Joker reaffirms his complete aversion to command and the responsibilities that go along with it, claiming "when Cowboy gives me the order I'll eat the boogers out of a dead man's nose. I ain't got the guts to rot in Portsmouth¹³. I admit it. But I don't *give orders*" and that "I'm just a snuffy. A corporal. I don't send anybody out to get blown away" (Hasford 160-1). Meanwhile Cowboy, Joker's counterpart in the matter, has been shouldering the duties of command exactly as Gerheim described them, accepting his responsibility even though he never desired it or sought it out. In Cowboy's own words delivered when Joker finally goes too far in his griping, "Didn't ask to run a rifle squad in this piss tube war...but I *will* break your back, if that's the way you play" (Hasford 163). In fact, it is Cowboy's own adherence to command's responsibilities that finally forces Joker to accept his own.

While on patrol in the jungle, the Lusthog squad point man, Alice, is struck by a sniper. Rather than kill the man

¹³ Naval Prison. I.E., where Joker would end up if he disobeys Cowboy's orders

outright, the sniper instead methodically continues to wound him worse and worse in an attempt to draw out the rest of the squad. Doc Jay, the squad's corpsman, runs out to assist Alice and is picked off by the sniper and, in the same way, is shot continually without being killed outright. Cowboy orders the squad to abandon the two wounded men, knowing that they will all be killed one by one if they attempt to rescue them. In what will quickly foreshadow Joker's own choice and sum up the burdens of command, Cowboy tells the squad that "it's a shitty thing to do, but we can't refuse to accept the situation" (Hasford 171). To a man, the squad refuses to withdraw, leaving Cowboy with an impossible choice. Cowboy is responsible for the two wounded men, who have since been joined by a third after the squad's newest member, New Guy, attempts to rescue them and is sniped in turn. Cowboy has had it drummed into his head since Parris Island that Marines never abandon their wounded, and feels this dictum weigh even heavier upon him since as squad leader he is responsible for their safety. But he is also responsible for the safety of the rest of his squad, who are outside the view of the sniper and still have a chance that the wounded men have since lost to return home safely. Cowboy is responsible for saving both his squad and the wounded

men even though the two goals are mutually exclusive; the "shitty thing" he cannot refuse to accept is that the situation has forced him to pick one group to save at the expense of the other.

Cowboy makes his choice without hesitation, the only choice he can make as the leader while still taking care of all his responsibilities. "Joker, you're in charge. Move these people out" (Hasford 173) he says. Joker intuitively knows what Cowboy is planning and tries to talk him out of it. But since Cowboy is their leader, he has no other option. "It's my *job*" Cowboy says, as though his guts are choking him "Okay?" Joker hesitates, but then acquiesces. "Sure Cowboy. I'll get them all back to the hill in one piece. I promise" (Hasford 173). Having passed command off to Joker, Cowboy runs up to perform his last action as squad leader, the only one he can take that will fulfill his duties both to the squad and to the hopelessly wounded: armed with only a pistol, Cowboy runs out under sniper fire to the wounded men and kills each of them with a shot to the head, ending their torment, removing the temptation for the rest of the squad to risk themselves in rescue, and in the process exposing himself helplessly to the sniper. When Cowboy attempts to kill himself the sniper shoots the gun out of his hand, removing Cowboy's ability to end his own

life, then begins relentlessly inflicting wounds on Cowboy in an attempt to draw out the rest of the squad.

Animal Mother, the toughest Marine in the squad, flatly refuses Joker's orders to withdraw and suggests that the squad rush out to save Cowboy, reasoning that the sniper can't get them all. Thirty seconds into the first position of responsibility Joker has accepted, he is placed in a duplicate of the impossible situation Cowboy was just in, torn between his duty to keep the squad safe and his duty not to abandon a wounded man. Even worse, in Joker's case the wounded man in question is the only real friend he's had in the Marines. When Joker orders his squad to move out he can see that they won't obey him and that Animal Mother, who has previously fragged¹⁴ an officer, is seconds away from killing him if he tries to keep the squad from rescuing Cowboy. Joker is on the verge of seeing his entire squad killed in an attempt to rescue his friend Cowboy, who is being tortured mercilessly by the unseen sniper. Since boot camp Joker has attempted to resist the forces that keep placing him in leadership positions, just as since boot camp he has attempted to rebuff any responsibility for people subordinate to him. For the first

¹⁴ Purposely killed one of his own officers under the guise of a combat accident

time in that moment Joker finally stops resisting and, by making his first and last command decision, willingly assumes responsibility for someone other than himself:

I raise my grease gun and I aim it at Cowboy's face. Cowboy looks pitiful and he's terrified. Cowboy is paralyzed by the shock that is setting in and by the helplessness...I look at him. He looks at the grease gun. He calls out: 'I NEVER LIKED YOU JOKER. I NEVER THOUGHT YOU WERE FUNNY-'

Bang. I sight down the short metal tube and I watch my bullet enter Cowboy's left eye. My bullet passes through his eye socket, punches through fluid-filled sinus cavities, through membranes, nerves, arteries, muscle tissue, through the tiny blood vessels that feed three pounds of gray butter-soft high protein meat where brain cells arranged like jewels in a clock hold every thought and memory and dream of an adult male *Homo sapiens*.

My bullet exits through the occipital bone, knocks out hairy, brain-wet clods of jagged meat, then buries itself in the root of a tree (Hasford 178).

After Cowboy's death, Joker notes that "everyone relaxes, glad to be alive. Everyone hates my guts, but they know I'm right. I am their sergeant; they are my men. Cowboy was killed by sniper fire, they'll say, but they'll never see me again; I'll be invisible" (Hasford 178). Though the squad is relieved that he has done what's necessary for them to survive, they will also never look at Joker the same way again. The entire novel Joker has tried to avoid command, avoid responsibility, avoid having to be an active participant in the nastiness of war even though it is clear

to everyone but him he has both the aptitude and call for leadership. When Joker finally does give in, it requires killing his only friend to finally prove that he is capable of living up to the burdens of command.

Hasford's attack on the Hollywood portrayal of war, the second prevalent theme of the novel, does not function as an aid to the narrative but instead serves as an ever-present undercurrent amongst the actions taking place. For Hasford and many others of his generation, the primary knowledge of war came from watching the sanitized, bloodless war movies of the 1950's and 60's. The realities of the Vietnam War seemed to them doubly horrific in the flesh after having been raised with Vic Morrow and "Combat!" as the chief model depicting combat. After returning with firsthand knowledge of genuine combat, Hasford felt betrayed by Hollywood's sunny depictions of war. He repudiated them for being phony, for being falsely optimistic, and for glorifying war. But most of all he despised them for leaving his generation ill-prepared for the realities of war, leading them believe on their way to Vietnam that they were headed off to a Hollywood War. Until "Rambo: First Blood Part II" provided a new locus for him in 1985, John Wayne became the personified embodiment for Gustav Hasford of all that he hated about Hollywood.

The words "John Wayne" appear twenty-five times in *The Short-Timers*. In a book that runs only one hundred and eighty pages, that averages out to a John Wayne reference just over once every seven pages. The frequency and variety of the references serve to ironically underscore the wide gulf between the Duke's experiences with war in Hollywood and the Joker's experiences with war in Vietnam. At times, Hasford's disgust for the falseness John Wayne represents seeps palpably from the pages. In a scene early in "Body Count," he describes Joker and Rafter Man going to see *The Green Berets*, Wayne's optimistically patriotic take on the Vietnam War, with a host of other marines in Phu Bai. Hasford opens the scene by calling *The Green Berets* "a Hollywood soap opera about the love of guns" before describing the "bearded, dirty, out of uniform. . .lean and mean" grunts watching it to emphasize that unlike Wayne, they have just come from "a long hump in the jungle, the boonies, the bad bush" that Wayne has never been to. In contrast, the Wayne they watch "is a beautiful soldier, clean-shaven, sharply attired in tailored tiger-stripe jungle utilities, wearing boots that shine like black glass" while he and his soldiers "go hand-to-hand with all the Victor Charlies in Southeast Asia." Hasford delights in pointing out the movie's corny digressions from reality,

such as that the "good" ARVN¹⁵ soldier is played by "an oriental actor who played Mr. Sulu on Star Trek" and how "at the end of the movie, John Wayne walks off into the sunset with a spunky little orphan. . .the sun is setting in the South China Sea--in the East--which makes the end of the movie as accurate as the rest of it." Joker/Hasford sums up the feeling of the field Marines watching John Wayne's version of Vietnam by dryly stating "the audience of Marines roars with laughter. This is the funniest movie we have seen in a long time" (Hasford 38). Joker/Hasford remains so disgusted by the Vietnam he sees in *The Green Berets* that several pages later he can't restrain himself from taking one more shot at it. Joker sarcastically describes the perks available to Marines in Phu Bai like being "assured our daily ration of poguey bait and...how those of us who are lucky enough to visit the rear areas get to see Mr. John Wayne karate-chop Victor Charlie to death in a Technicolor cartoon about some other Vietnam" (Hasford 45).

The only other direct reference to a John Wayne movie within the novel also emphasizes the vast disconnect between the false reality of war as portrayed by John Wayne and the genuine reality that Joker experiences. In "The

¹⁵ Army of the Republic of Vietnam

Spirit of the Bayonet," Joker describes physical beatings from drill instructors as "a routine element of life on Parris Island" before launching into an attack on Hollywood's portrayals of drill instructors. Joker explains that these are "not that I'm-only-rough-on-'um-because-I-love-'um crap that civilians have seen in Jack Webb's Hollywood movie *The D.I.* and in Mr. John Wayne's *The Sands of Iwo Jima*," applying the sarcastic honorific "Mr." only to the more hated of the two actors, then describes his reality of how Sergeant Gerheim and the assistant drill instructors "administer brutal beatings to faces, chests, stomachs, and backs. With fists. Or boots...any part of our bodies upon which a black and purple bruise won't show" (Hasford 7). In the most overt attacks on John Wayne, Hasford criticizes his movies directly for their complete removal from anything remotely resembling an accurate portrayal of what Joker experiences.

This same critique is approached more obliquely through Joker's John Wayne impression, which he launches into only when he feels particularly disconnected from Wayne's reality or when trying to entertain his fellow Marines with deliberately ironic monologues given as "John Wayne." "Is that you John Wayne? Is this me?," the line made famous in the film adaptation, is actually spoken

first by Cowboy in the novel on the first day of basic training. Joker's response, "I sound exactly like John Wayne as I say 'I think I'm going to hate this movie'" (Hasford 2) marks both the first appearance of his John Wayne impression and a real-life reference to a phrase Hasford used to say before going out on patrol on Vietnam.¹⁶ While Joker sometimes reverts to his John Wayne impression to entertain his fellow Marines, such as when he gives them a bizarre monologue on the creation of Marines that they fail to understand, it most often pops up as Joker's ironic commentary that he feels something bad is about to happen. Besides the first day of boot camp, Joker's John Wayne impression recurs when he is questioned by the pogue colonel about his peace button (in that case, Joker does think to himself "Is that you John Wayne? Is this me?" (Hasford 135)) and just before the Lusthog squad encounters the sniper in the final scene, where Joker "say[s] in [his] John Wayne voice: 'Vietnam is giving war a bad name'" (Hasford 166).

In addition to the more explicit critiques of the ethos John Wayne represents, Hasford embeds his name into the text whenever appropriate to emphasize how far removed Wayne's kind of war is from Joker's. Hasford goes out of

¹⁶ A fact Hasford relates in his Penthouse editorial "Vietnam Means Never Having to Say You're Sorry"

his way to refer to the cookies that came in a B-3 ration as "John Wayne cookies" (46), even having Cowboy tell Joker at one point "You ain't John Wayne. You just eat the cookies" (158). The final way in which John Wayne is referred to in the text is as slang for a foolhardy charge likely to get a soldier killed in actual combat. Before being knocked out by a B-40 rocket in a combat assault, Joker thinks to himself "Legs, don't do any John Waynes" (Hasford, 98). The deaths of both Crazy Earl and the New Guy are both described in terms of "pulling John Waynes" that exposed them to unnecessary danger. When Joker comes to after the rocket attack, he is told how "Craze did a John Wayne. He finally went berserk. Shot BBs at a gook machine gun...was laughing like a happy little kid. Then that slope machine gun blew him away" (Hasford 107). The New Guy dies just as foolishly, charging towards the sniper because "the New Guy doesn't know what the hell he's doing. He thinks he's John Wayne. He hasn't been born yet" (Hasford 172). In Joker's reality, not only are the fictional exploits of John Wayne dangerous because they do not prepare the Vietnam generation for the realities of war, but they are also dangerous because they will get any Marine who tries to emulate them killed. Hasford takes every opportunity in *The Short-Timers* to mock John Wayne

and criticize the manly ethos he represents as a fantasy that could not have less to do with the reality of war.

Besides these two main themes, a few minor elements in the novel are worth pointing out. Though Hasford abandoned his early conceptions of "The Tattooed Chicken" that would have centered the novel during the Civil War with flash-forwarded scenes taking place in Vietnam, his rewrites did not entirely eradicate a few traces of the earlier draft. Though, thankfully, he changed his mind and decided not to have the characters literally transform into werewolves whenever violent scenes occurred, a few scattered references to werewolves did make it to publication. Immediately before being shot by Pyle, Gerheim's smile is described as being like "a werewolf baring its fangs" (Hasford 30). While the members of the Lusthog squad choose parts for "Vietnam the Movie" under fire in Hue, "the walls are assaulted by werewolf laughter," and when they subsequently move out for a combat assault they are described as "werewolves with guns, panting" (Hasford 99). Later, when the action shifts from urban Hue City back out into "the boonies" of Vietnam, the same Marines are described as "werewolves in the jungle, sweating 3.2 beer, ready, willing, and able to grab wily Uncle Ho by the balls" (Hasford 150). Though he backed down from his

earlier plan to have the Marines physically become werewolves, Hasford was still intrigued enough by the idea to retain it on a metaphorical level in the final draft.

Additionally, while the novel is in no way a strict autobiography, the book does contain autobiographical elements. Like Hasford, Joker worked on his high school newspaper¹⁷ and was assigned to an Army base to attend Basic Military Journalism School following basic training (25). Like Hasford, Joker ended up serving as a combat correspondent with the First Marine Division's ISO¹⁸ in Phu Bai (37). Both were in the country during the Tet Offensive of 1968 and saw action in the following battle for Hue City. Though Joker was made a sergeant against his will, proud that he "rose by sheer military genius to the rank of corporal, as they say, like Hitler and Napoleon" and was a self-proclaimed "snuffy at heart" (Hasford 59), Hasford's sheer military genius took him exactly to the rank of corporal. Like Joker, Hasford wore a peace button on his flak jacket during his tour in Vietnam, a button that led to his being raked over the coals by a rear echelon

¹⁷ Late in the book there is a short description of Cowboy which reads "in his gray glasses Cowboy does not look like a killer, but like a reporter for a high school newspaper, which he was, less than a year ago" (149). This description would have applied to Hasford himself in real life, which raises the question of whether the passage was an editing mistake meant to have been a reference to Joker or a subtle insert on Hasford's part intended to reinforce Cowboy's function as a double or counterpart of Joker.

¹⁸ Informational Services Office

lieutenant colonel.¹⁹ Though it is not a strict autobiography, autobiographical elements (as well as the names of his fellow ISO and Task Force X-Ray snuffies) run through the text. Earl Gerheim stated that to his knowledge, "I think Gus looks at [Joker] as his alter ego" (2) rather than a direct representation of Gustav Hasford with a different name. Whenever he was asked to compare himself to Joker, Hasford would deny a direct correlation and reply with some variation of "I'm a lot meaner than Joker is" (Richardson 1).²⁰ However, it cannot be denied that though *The Short-Timers* is a fictional work and presented as such, it is enriched with autobiographical parallels to its author, parallels that would be explored further in its eventual sequel.

¹⁹ According to Earl Gerheim, Hasford was hassled by an Army officer, not a Marine, and the incident occurred in the combat base at Phu Bai and not the highway outside of Hue City as depicted in the novel.

²⁰ Or alternately, "the guy in the film was much nicer than I am" (Carlton 4)

CHAPTER III

FULL METAL JACKET

Unfortunately for Hasford, the publication of his first novel brought him neither fame nor fortune. *The Short-Timers* was well-reviewed but "the hardcover sold in the low thousands" and by 1982 it was already out of print (Aaron 3). Hasford continued to 'do the starving hippie writer trip,' plowing away at another novel while working as a security guard for an antique store in Malibu (Richardson 1). His luck changed when Stanley Kubrick came across a write up of *The Short-Timers* in *The Virginia Kirkus Review* that called it "a terse spitball of a book, fine and real and terrifying, that marks a real advance in Vietnam war literature," and compared it favorably to Kubrick friend Michael Herr's book *Dispatches*. Looking for source material for his next project to follow *The Shining*, Kubrick read *The Short-Timers* in 1982 and quickly dispatched "a Munich businessman with no visible ties to the movie world" (Lewis 5) to option the novel while initially concealing his own involvement. Hasford, who "had been living in his car between motels" (Lewis 5) was only too happy to receive an unexpected windfall of money and didn't question its mysterious German source. Money in Hasford's pocket meant the opportunity to buy rare books

and to travel, and he broke the happy news to his friends "by brandishing a one-way Qantas ticket to Australia" (Lewis 5). He took off immediately for the land down under and didn't learn "that Stanley Kubrick owned the rights to his first novel" (Lewis 3) until he was vacationing in Perth. Hasford began having long telephone conversations with Kubrick while in Australia, conversations that would continue when he returned to the United States in May of 1983. Hasford's letters home from his time in Australia nearly represent in microcosm the arc of his involvement with *Full Metal Jacket's* screenplay. Initially, there was elation. On November 23, 1982 he wrote to Grover Lewis, "I am, as we say so poetically in Alabama, happier than a pig in shit...some big star is supposed to be interested in 'Shorty', but they won't tell me who it is until they sign the deal." That same week, in a letter to Bob Bayer, he wrote that:

My famousness seems out of control and may grow to proportions so awesome I'll be scared to speak to myself. Yesterday I got a call from Stanley Kubrick--no shit...it was like Moses talking to the burning bush, a pea picker from Alabama and your basic cinematic legend...don't tell anybody, but I think I wet my pants. I feel totally out of my class...so now I'll be more famous and more people will get mad at me, but there it is...just don't anybody accuse me of becoming arrogant- I always been arrogant

Following elation, there was good-natured creative disagreement. On December 8th, he wrote again to Lewis to say that:

Stanley...is a thoroughly charming and easy-going fellow, just a good ole boy who happens to have made about half of the classic films in America. I talk to him every few days. We are trying to come up with a more satisfying ending for 'Shorty'...I said, 'But Stanley...the Vietnam war bloody well wasn't satisfying.' 'Right,' he said, 'but they made you go...while we've got to convince people to pay to see this movie.'...that's show business.

Finally, there was flat out disagreement. Just under a month later, Hasford wrote the following to Bayer on January 4th, 1983:

Greetings Bob & America...Stanley and I, after about a dozen long talks, are lobbing frags²¹. I told Stanley he didn't know shit from Shinola about Vietnam. And he's so sensitive, he got mad...boy, famous people think they know everything (Lewis 6).

Hasford and Kubrick's relationship wouldn't really deteriorate for another few years, but their interactions while Hasford was in Australia foreshadowed the path their relationship would take. Hasford spent his time in Australia talking about "Shorty" with "Stanley," attempting to work on a thriller about a female American president, and contemplating whether or not he should settle permanently in Australia. In May of 1983 Hasford gave up both his stalled novel and his thoughts of emigration and

²¹ Military slang for fragmentation grenades

returned to America, settling into a motel in San Luis Obispo, CA to be near his treasured storage locker of books.

Over the next year and a half Hasford recalled speaking with Kubrick on the phone "three or four times a week, usually for hours and hours at a time," with the longest conversation lasting "six or seven hours..[and] ranging over just about any subject you could think of" (Lewis 4). Hasford soon began making plans to move to London. In a letter to journalist and long-time friend Grover Lewis dated February 1st, 1984, Hasford proclaimed "I'm going to go live at Stanley's house and we'll write the screenplay. Then I'm going to be technical advisor during the production. The other day he threatened to hire Michael Herr to help him write the film [and] I told him, be my guest. Stanley can't replace me" (Lewis 7). Lewis himself was more cautious in his optimism, writing in 1987 that Hasford "hadn't been invited onto the team as such...but Kubrick hadn't discouraged his visit, either. [He] counted on the fact that Kubrick liked to talk to him on the telephone... [but technically speaking] Hasford had no contact, no agent, or other representation- just a lot of lengthy phone conversations punched through the long-distance ether" (3). According to Michael Herr, Kubrick was

eager to meet Hasford in person and welcomed Hasford's presence despite Herr's own reservations that the two would fail to get along.

Despite the ambiguity over his official role Hasford flew to England at the end of 1984 with the intention of joining the screenwriting team. He spent several weeks in early 1985 playing the tourist and getting to know Herr, the *Dispatches* author who had been a close friend of Kubrick's since 1980. It was at this point that Kubrick brought Herr officially onto the project as he'd "threatened" to do a year earlier. However, it should be noted that Herr's involvement began at the start of 1985, following nearly two and a half years of Hasford and Kubrick's discussing the adaptation in weekly transatlantic telephone calls. On January 17th, 1985, Hasford had his first and last personal meeting with Kubrick. Hasford, Kubrick, and Herr had dinner at Kubrick's house to talk over *Full Metal Jacket*. The next day Hasford wrote to Lewis gushing about how "Stanley and I are getting along great [and] Michael Herr and I are big pals" (Lewis 7). The famously difficult Kubrick, on the other hand, was far less enthused. As Herr had predicted, the shy, insular director was put off by the forceful and brash ex-Marine. During the same dinner that Hasford thought went so swimmingly

"Kubrick passed Herr a note saying: 'I can't deal with this man'" (Vulliamy). The two never met face to face again.

The three men spent the next several months immersed in writing the script for *Full Metal Jacket*. With Kubrick wanting to avoid any more time spent around Hasford in person, he organized the script-writing team like a resistance cell where one hand didn't know what the other hand was doing. "The director would phone in his orders to Hasford and Herr, who would mail him their submissions. Kubrick would read what they had written, edit it and then start the process over again" (Carlton 2). In Hasford's words, "I would send my work to Stanley, and undoubtedly Stanley was having Michael write the same scene. Then Stanley would work it around the way he wanted it. For some reason, Stanley had given Michael a lot of my work to look at, but I never read any of the things Michael wrote for the film. We really didn't talk about it much" (Lewis 5). Herr's version of the screenwriting process differs greatly from Hasford's. In the foreword to the movie's published script, Herr writes that:

Stanley wrote a detailed treatment of the novel...I wrote the first-draft screenplay from this, in prose form. The pages, if any, went out by car every afternoon, followed in the evening by a phone call...when I finished the draft, he [Kubrick] rewrote it, and I rewrote that. Gus came to London

and wrote. Stanley rewrote all through shooting (Herr vi).

Kubrick, who gave interviews only sparingly, never addressed the exact contributions made by Herr and Hasford to the screenplay. Vincent LoBrutto's biography of Kubrick, the unofficial biography endorsed by Herr, unsurprisingly backs up Herr's version of events nearly word for word. On the official record, Herr acknowledges Hasford contributed to the screenplay without specifying to what extent. However, he has made no public comment on Hasford's claims that Kubrick would forward to Herr scenes written by Hasford for Herr to revise.

Seven months into the writing process, Hasford was beginning to grow dissatisfied with what he perceived as a lack of recognition for his work on the script. As he would later describe it, "it's a question of whether you're a member of the team or just a hired hand...I give advice for free. But I have to be paid if I'm writing" (Lipper 2). Kubrick's dismissive attitude towards him began to foster a great sense of resentment in Hasford. On May 27, 1985 he wrote:

- Stanley feels that all my efforts for the past 2 ½ years are
1. Minimal
 2. Only Natural--and expected--of me as the author of a book being made into a film.

This explains why he never says 'Thank you.' But this is bullshit--I'm being ripped off. Stanley has held up the screenplay credit as a carrot (and jokes about how he 'may' use my title). I wrote endings for the film 2 weeks after he started talking to me. I've been here 5 months and I've seen him once. He said "Come over and we'll 'work together.'" What's his hang up? He doesn't want to share the credit. He'll give Michael credit. 2nd credit. But if he gives me a credit and I wrote the book as well then I will seem to rival him as the 'author' of the film...he wants my ideas, yes, but he doesn't want to give me credit for them--neither publicly nor in his own mind--witness his pathetically unfounded attempt to dis[miss] my 2 ½ years of effort as 'a couple of phone calls.'...Michael says that he thinks the film is going to be a classic. If so, then it will be in large part due to my book and my screenwriting...i.e.; a multi-million dollar success for which I have been paid peanuts. Typical of Stanley's manipulations is his saying he'll give me \$7000 because 'he likes me'

In a July 14, 1985 letter Hasford describes his view on what he was already terming "the Great Movie Wars."

According to Hasford:

The situation is very complex, but the basic issue is one of screen credit. I've pretty much written Stanley's movie (Michael [Herr] and I are big pals now, but--off the record--Michael's biggest contribution...has been his famous name) and Stanley has added a few minor things but essentially the screenplay is by me. But Stanley wants to give me an 'additional dialogue' credit...he threatens to pull the plug on the whole thing (Lewis 7).

In the same letter, Hasford goes on to relate how principal shooting for the movie had been scheduled to start on July 1st but was already delayed for two weeks because of Hasford's credit dispute. Hasford's naïveté in going to

England without an agent had somehow turned to his advantage; throughout all his work on the film he had never signed a legal contract. After he started taking issue with his credit Hasford refused to sign a contract until Kubrick agreed to bump up the "additional dialogue" credit to a screenwriter's credit. Hasford's lack of a contract left Kubrick in a potentially perilous legal situation. Kubrick held off shooting in hopes of resolving Hasford's credit dispute. But after six weeks of delays he was finally forced to start shooting on August 25th 1985 (Lewis 8) with Hasford still unsigned. Hasford remained *persona non grata* throughout the shoot and made only one visit to watch the movie's filming. Unsure that Kubrick was even making the movie, Hasford decided to sneak onto the set to reconnoiter the situation. As Hasford tells it:

I was contemplating legal action at the time, and it would've been pointless if there was no movie. I took a couple of friends along with me. We dressed up in tiger-stripe clothes. Our idea was that they'd be shooting and we'd simply blend in as though we were extras. We went in, and this little gofer took us over to the commissary tent while somebody checked out who I was. We were having doughnuts and the gofer asked: 'Who are you? Why'd you come here?' I said: 'Well, I'm the guy who wrote the book that this film is based upon.' His eyes lit up and he said: 'You're kidding! You're the guy? That's you?' I said: 'Yeah, yeah, I wrote the book.' He said, 'Well, I want to shake your hand, because *Dispatches* is the best book I ever read.' 'Hey, I think so too,' I said (LoBrutto 474).

He never made it back on the set again.

Hasford remained unsigned throughout the entirety of the movie's filming. Months later, after the close of principal shooting, he sent the following gleeful letter on March 1, 1986:

I finally pried a copy of the shooting script out of Stanley's famously anal-retentive fingers. It's 99% mine. I got records, copies, witnesses...I got this shit locked in concrete. So here is a motion picture written by a guy who has not signed any kind of contract nor made a verbal contract nor entered into an implied contract. This may be unique, I don't know. Stanley thinks I'm worried about collecting the relatively small amount of money he owes me for screenwriting, plus getting some kind of credit, while I'm thinking that until I have received the money and the credit I deserved and was promised, I own his fucking movie. . . (Lewis 8).

By May 20th, 1986, Kubrick relented and gave Hasford a full screenwriter's credit. When asked how he got Kubrick to back down, Hasford told Grover Lewis that he threatened to go to the press "and say, 'Hey, I'm a Vietnam veteran and Kubrick's ripping me off'" (Lewis 9). According to Hasford, Kubrick was afraid such bad press would sink the movie and so gave in on the credit demand to mollify Hasford. Historically speaking, Hasford won his battle; he is credited as a full screenwriter for *Full Metal Jacket* and would have received an Oscar had the film won its nomination for Best Adapted Screenplay. Determining how

much he (or Kubrick or Herr, for that matter) actually contributed to the screenplay is harder to know conclusively. Hasford claims that "99%" of the script was his, that essentially "those fuckers retyped my book and wanted to put their names on it" (Lewis 9). Herr claims that he and Kubrick each wrote and rewrote several full drafts before Hasford arrived later to make unspecified additions to their work. Figuring out the precise validity of Hasford's credit, however, is difficult because it is impossible to determine the three writers' separate contributions to the screenplay.

Several problems exist in trying to determine anyone's contributions to the screenplay. The first is the collaborative nature of the writing process itself, which, as already mentioned, was organized like a resistance cell. As Hasford described it, "the only person who really knew what was going on was Stanley. . . Michael and I wrote things and handed them in, but we didn't have any idea what stuff Stanley used. He just twisted it all together. We were like guys on an assembly line in the car factory. I was putting on one widget and Michael was putting on another widget and Stanley was the only one who knew that this was going to end up being a car" (Carlton 2). Only Kubrick could have known exactly what each man contributed

throughout the drafting process, and he never spoke on the subject. The second problem is the relation of Kubrick's frequent rewrites to the actual shooting script the screenwriters produced. Kubrick continually rewrote scenes throughout the filming process. Though he strictly forbade his actors from deviating from the exact lines given in the script, the script itself would change as Kubrick would get new ideas. Thus even if exact contributions to the shooting script could be determined, the percentage of any one writer's input into the script might not correlate to the amount to survive Kubrick's constant rewrites. The final problem is the lack of access to even view the final shooting script, even if it would be later rendered partially inaccurate by rewrites. Michael Herr's early prose draft of the script is available, but bears little resemblance to the finished product. Meanwhile the officially published script of *Full Metal Jacket* omits anything that didn't end up in the theatrical cut of the movie. Since it incorporates every Kubrick rewrite that made it to the screen and leaves out any filmed or written scenes that didn't, closeness to or distance from the final shooting script cannot be determined. While these difficulties make it nearly impossible to pin down exactly how much or how little any one of the three co-writers

added to the script, there is sufficient circumstantial evidence to get a good idea of how strong Hasford's claims are.

While elements of the film deviate in places from the material in Hasford's novel, the film remains about as closely tied to the source material as it reasonably could be. It combines elements from what are two different sniper incidents in the book into one incident in the film and changes Cowboy's manner of death so that he dies by the sniper's hands instead of being mercy-killed by Joker. Otherwise it is remarkably faithful to the book, lifting the majority of its scenes and liberal chunks of dialogue directly from *The Short-Timers*. Though Michael Herr's book *Dispatches* was much better known than Hasford's book, only one scene taken directly from *Dispatches* -- the helicopter gunner scene--ends up in *Full Metal Jacket*. Though the heavy reliance on *The Short-Timers* helps Hasford's claim that "99%" of the unseen shooting script was his work, the puzzling absence of more scenes culled from *Dispatches* is even stronger support for his claim that Herr's biggest contribution to the script was his name. In a screenplay adapted from a novel, dialogue that is taken directly from the source text cannot be considered conclusive evidence that the original author contributed it to the screenplay;

there is no way to know how much dialogue taken from *The Short-Timers* stemmed from Hasford's trying to slip in his own work, and how much stemmed from Kubrick or Herr including lines from the book they liked. However, the number of references to *The Short-Timers* in the stage directions of the published *Full Metal Jacket* script is even more indicative of how strongly Hasford's work was imprinted on the language of the script. Though it is plausible to say that not every line of dialogue found originally in *The Short-Timers* that appears in the script had to have been inserted by Hasford, the numerous similarities in the wording of the stage directions to text in *The Short-Timers* is harder to explain as the result of Kubrick or Herr's writing independently of Hasford's influence. For example, what the script describes as "HARTMAN focuses all of his considerable powers of intimidation into his best John-Wayne-on-Suribachi voice" (46) appears in *The Short-Timers* as "our senior drill instructor focuses all of his considerable powers of intimidation into his best John-Wayne-on-Suribachi voice" (Hasford 29). The script's split descriptions "with the hard eyes of a grunt, the SNIPER fires her AK-47 rifle" and "the SNIPER is a child, no more than fifteen years old, a slender Eurasian angel with dark beautiful eyes" (113)

shows up in the original text as "She is a child, no more than fifteen years old, a slender Eurasian angel with dark, beautiful eyes, which, at the same time, are the hard eyes of a grunt" (Hasford 116). Hasford's voice within the script stands out even stronger in the instances in which his specific slang shows up in sections that don't directly parallel the book. *The Short-Timers* makes one brief mention of a character called "Stoke, the Supergrunt" (Hasford 88), who makes no appearance nor is referred to in *Full Metal Jacket*. Nonetheless, the term still shows up in an unrelated scene in which the stage directions describe how a different character "gestures JOKER to stay put and moves forward like Supergrunt to check out the rest of the room" (113). If Hasford was a latecomer and minor contributor to the script as Herr's story and Kubrick's reluctance to grant him a screenwriter's credit would suggest, it would certainly be a fine but arguably neat coincidence that his specific language and slang became so internalized by the other two writers that it would permeate even the non-dialogue sections of the script.

Besides approaching the problem through a textual analysis of the published script, the issue of whether or not Hasford was likely to have deserved his full screenwriter credit should be considered within the context

of the filming. In addition to whatever portions of the novel made it into the script during the official screenwriting process, even more segments of his novel were lifted by Kubrick or others during filming. Actor Matthew Modine writes an entry in his journal halfway through filming that "Stanley asks me to look through *The Short-Timers* for good stuff for my CBS Newsreel Interview scene. I find this: 'Come one, come all, to the exotic Vietnam, the jewel of Southeast Asia. Be the first kid on your block to get a confirmed kill.' Michael Herr and Stanley agree on the choice" (Modine 89). Most of the dialogue spoken by all the actors in the Newsreel Interview scene can be traced directly back to the book, suggesting that whatever amount of that dialogue not already written into the script was taken directly from the novel by the actors, under encouragement from Kubrick but still subject to Kubrick's approval. Modine's recollection of taking dialogue directly from *The Short-Timers* under Kubrick and Herr's direction stands as proof that even if Kubrick was reluctant to credit Hasford's work on the screenplay, he had no qualms about directly inserting lines from Hasford's book behind the author's back. Kubrick was fanatical in terms of not allowing his actors license for unsupervised improvisation. Herr recalls how to Kubrick, knowing one's lines "meant

that you had no other possible lines anywhere in your head, and certainly no lines of your own unless you were Peter Sellers or Lee Ermey" (59). In *Full Metal Jacket*, with the exception of some of Ermey's more colorful insults, an overwhelming number of those lines can be traced directly back to Gus Hasford's book.

Ultimately, perhaps only three men really knew who contributed what to the writing of *Full Metal Jacket*. Of those three, Kubrick and Hasford are now dead, and Herr is a recluse. It is unlikely any of their exact contributions can ever be determined, but it is hard to imagine that Hasford's credit was undeserved. In his book on Kubrick, Michael Herr talked about how "Stanley's money pathology was one of the most amazing behavioral phenomena I've ever witnessed. . .it's possible that a few of Stanley's ships sailed under Liberian registration, that his word was not necessarily his bond; and it's true, if you were only in for the money, I can see where you would feel undercompensated, some have said ripped off" (20). Kubrick met Hasford once and never wanted to see him in person again, while Michael Herr was one of his closest personal friends. It's possible that, as Hasford felt, "those fuckers retyped my book and wanted to put their names on it" (Lewis 9). It's possible Kubrick held an animus towards

Hasford and wanted to deny him the credit because of that. It's also possible that Kubrick's personality simply left him more likely to give his close friend a bigger piece of the financial pie and try to underpay Hasford as he tried to underpay many collaborators. Whatever the real reason was, Hasford had to fight bitterly for months before he received the credit he felt he deserved, credit that recognized his contributions to the screenplay and made him eligible to receive any awards it might win.

In the wake of Hasford's credit dispute it would be fair to say that he won the battle while losing the war. His already volatile relationship with Stanley Kubrick was reduced to a lingering series of bickering letters over R. Lee Ermey's involvement as both technical advisor and actor within the film²². He and Michael Herr, whom he had formerly

²² After initially toying with the idea of trying to act as technical advisor himself, Hasford had lobbied for his old I.S.O. buddy Dale Dye (who was the inspiration for the character 'Daddy D.A.' in both *The Short-Timers* and *The Phantom Bloop*) to be given the job. Dye, who would go on to serve as technical advisor on *Saving Private Ryan* and *Band of Brothers*, turned down the chance to work on *Full Metal Jacket* to serve as technical advisor Oliver Stone's film *Platoon* instead. Kubrick then hired the little-known Ermey as technical advisor. During pre-production Kubrick then gave him the role of Sergeant Hartman after hearing Ermey acting out the part of a drill instructor while berating auditioning extras. Hasford was virulently opposed to Ermey's involvement, partly because he'd wanted his friend Dale Dye to win the part, partly because he felt Ermey was unqualified to be the technical advisor (Dale Dye allegedly compiled a list of over a hundred technical inaccuracies after only a cursory viewing of the film), and partly because he felt Ermey was the kind of careerist "fucking pogue lifer" (Aaron 4) and Marine Corps P.R. man that represented everything he felt was wrong with the military. Even after the film's release Hasford continued to feud with Kubrick over Ermey's work on the film.

referred to as a "big pal" of his, accused each other of being on "I'm speaking to him but he's not speaking to me" terms; while neither one bashed the other to the press, whatever friendship they'd had was over. Hasford burned enough bridges during the battle over his screenwriting credit that no one in Hollywood would hire him to work on a script again. At the time, though, there was still a movie to promote so Hasford was set up at the Westwood Marquis hotel to do press for the impending release of *Full Metal Jacket*. He spent two weeks doing phone interviews and gloating to his friends that he could order all the twenty-five dollar hamburgers from room service that he wanted. He would brag to his I.S.O. buddies about how expensive the hamburgers were but scoff at their suggestion that he simply order steak instead. "What," Gus cried, "and go back on my raising? Burgers are still my meat" (Lewis 9).

Sometimes Hasford would wander down to the hotel bar, make some new friends and invite them up to his suite for comped hamburgers and milk, which he would have served in a silver wine bucket. At the end of two weeks Hasford went to Kubrick's accountant for pocket money only to be told that his hotel bill came to \$26,000 and was still being written off the expense budget he'd hoped to draw from. Hasford, always naïve about money matters, wanted to know why he

hadn't been given money for lodging so he could've pocketed it and stayed at a motel instead (Symposium 13). Still negotiating his own deals, he had been brushed off with net points in the film's profits instead of gross and accounting tricks assured that he never saw a penny of them. He reportedly told his friends that the sum total he made off of *Full Metal Jacket* was the \$20,000 he received for his screenplay credit.

Following the film's release Hasford briefly enjoyed what would be the most successful period in his life. His second novel and sequel to *The Short-Timers*, *The Phantom Bloop*, was picked up by Bantam books for eventual publication in 1990. With the advances from *The Phantom Bloop* and his *Full Metal Jacket* money, Hasford could spend freely for the first time in his life. He bought a Jeep, a big-screen television, a VCR, and of course more books for his growing collection. He drove his Jeep cross-country so he could feed his life-long Civil War obsession by touring battlefields in the South. He moved to San Clemente, California and wiled away hours lying on the beach or fiddling with new writing projects. He dated a series of beautiful women but success in romance eluded his grasp as he feared they were only after his newfound money. During this time his ex-wife Charlene, whom he hadn't seen

in over a decade, looked him up after seeing his pictures in the press in the hopes that he would invest \$25,000 in a phone-sales scam her new husband was directing; he refused and told his friends the story "with a mixture of rue and wrath" (Lewis 10). When the Writers Guild of America announced their award nominees on February 11th, 1988, Hasford found himself nominated for Best Adapted Screenplay along with his old friends Kubrick and Herr. A week later he was nominated for the same honor for the Academy Awards; Gus Hasford, high school dropout from Russellville, Alabama, had the chance to win an Oscar. Hasford downplayed the honor, telling his friends that he wouldn't be attending the ceremonies because "I'd have to wear a tuxedo," yet still asked Grover Lewis' wife to quietly put together an Oscar party for him (Lewis 10). Life had never been better for the long-struggling writer.

And then a month later, when on March 21st, 1988, the L.A. Times broke the story that he was being sought by the California Polytechnic State University Police for having stolen roughly 10,000 library books from libraries across the world.

CHAPTER IV

THE PHANTOM BLOOPER

The Phantom Blooper, like *The Short-Timers*, is divided into three sections and picks up shortly after its predecessor leaves off. The first section, "The Winter Soldiers," is the closest in subject matter to *The Short Timers*, depicting Joker's acrimonious relationships with the "pogue lifers" that make Marine life miserable. *The Phantom Blooper* begins with Joker having lost his rank as an unofficial censure for Cowboy's death and waiting out the remainder of his tour at Khe Sanh's combat base during its infamous siege. Rumors abound that the Phantom Blooper, an American grunt armed with a bloop gun²³, has been actively fighting with the Vietcong against his former comrades. After a raid against the base affords him the opportunity for revenge against the pogues (who take undue credit and paint their inaction during the raid as bravery), a slightly-unbalanced Joker takes off outside the wire to try to hunt down the Phantom Blooper, who he is convinced has been killing off his friends. Instead of finding the Phantom Blooper, Joker is captured by the Vietcong at the section's end and the novel then begins in earnest.

²³ M-79 grenade launcher

Hasford's overriding desire in both novels is to shred any notion that the Vietnam War was good or honorable. In *The Short-Timers*, the tactic he chose towards that goal was to depict the routine horrors perpetrated on and by the American soldiers in-country. Those horrors were contrasted with the clean imagery of war represented by John Wayne and to discredit the idea that the Vietnam War held anything in common with the kind of war shown in Hollywood movies. Joker's character arc in *The Short-Timers* is designed to annihilate any romantic ideas about how going to war affects the men who fight it. War as shown in John Wayne movies depicts leaders whose job requires them to have square jaws and look heroic when they storm a beach; war as shown in *The Short-Timers* turns Joker into a leader whose job requires him to shoot his only friend in the head. Though there are plenty of horrors to be found in *The Phantom Blooper*, Hasford shifts his rhetorical tactics to attack the war from another flank. If Joker's gradual transformation from bystander to leader is the central focus of *The Short-Timers*, then humanizing the Vietcong through the lens of Joker's experiences so the reader will no longer see them as "scrawny rice-munching Asian elves" (Hasford 189) is the central focus of *The Phantom Blooper*.

The Phantom Blooper employs two tactics in its drive to humanize the Vietcong, highlighting the similarities the grunt Marines shared with the grunt Vietcong, similarities that foot soldiers in every conflict have in common, and repeatedly stressing the similarities between village life in Vietnam and small town life in the United States. Emphasizing the respect the Marines had for the Vietcong as fellow fighting men is a theme that pops up once or twice in *The Short-Timers*; Hasford depicts how the Marines admire the Vietcong soldiers for their toughness and bravery even when that toughness and bravery is directed against U.S. Marines. One such scene depicts a hard to kill Vietcong fighter who survives repeated attacks from an American helicopter and who brings it down with only his AK-47. The Vietcong's courage is met with "applauds and cheers and whistles," and one Marine comments "that guy was a grunt." The whole squad "talk[s] about how the NVA grunt was one hell of a hard individual and about how it would be ok if he came to America and married all of our sisters and about how we all hope he lives to be a hundred years old because the world will be diminished when he's gone" (Hasford 126). Even though the Vietcong's courage results in the loss of a helicopter and the (presumed) death of some of their own comrades, the grunt Marines respect this Vietcong because

they have more in common with him, a grunt facing the horrors of the battlefield and doing his best to survive, than they do with their own rear-echelon personnel. That show of the Marines' respect for their adversaries is picked up and amplified further in *The Phantom Blooper*. After the raid on Khe San where he is knocked unconscious by the last act of a sapper he kills, Joker and a friend "drink a toast to the Viet Cong grunt dead on the deck at our feet, an enemy individual so highly motivated that he KO'd my fat American ass even after I dinged him and zapped him and wasted him and killed him, in so many ways, so many times" (Hasford 43). In *The Phantom Blooper's* second section, after being taken prisoner, Joker muses how "as a Marine it took me two years in the field to stop underestimating the Viet Cong. It was just like learning about sex--everything anybody had ever told me about the subject was bullshit" (Hasford 91). Later on, Joker is taken along by his captors on raids and displays nothing but professional respect for the Vietcong as fellow grunts. Watching one fighter fieldstrip his rifle "by the numbers, fast, not missing a beat," Joker comments "he's an enemy of my government, but I think he's good people, a real pro, a raggedy-assed rice-propelled Asian grunt." He then sums up his admiration for the man, both as an individual and as a

representative of the Vietcong as a whole: "Sometimes the respect between men who fight against death from opposite sides of the wire can become bigger than flags. To kill a man as dedicated as Commander Be Dan would require another man of equal dedication. And dedicated men are so rare that Commander Be Dan is practically assured of immortality" (Hasford 156-7). To Joker, and by extension in this case Hasford, though the Vietcong may be his government's enemy, they are not his enemy. In his opinion, dedicated grunts deserve respect no matter which side they fight on. Joker sums up his thoughts on the Vietcong long into his captivity:

When I first came to the village over a year ago I said to myself: *These are not reservation Indians*. These Vietcong people are not Asian mutants like the Vietnamese I saw as a Marine, not those sad, pathetic people with a cloned culture and no self-respect, greedy and corrupt, ragged shameless beggars and whores- Tijuana Mexicans. These Vietcong people are an entirely different race. They are proud, gentle, fearless, ruthless, and painfully polite (Hasford 63).

Besides emphasizing his respect for the Vietcong as fighters, Hasford's main technique to humanize the Vietcong in *The Phantom Bloop* is through the consistent use of similes and imagery that stress how similar the Vietcong are to average small town Americans, instead of how different. Joker's commentary on his captivity in the

Vietnamese village of Hoa Binh continually comes back to comparisons that point out how similar life there is to life in his native Alabama. During a lunch break from planting rice with the Vietcong, while "eating the fish and rice, [Joker] think[s] about how my dad and I, after a long morning of plowing with a mean mule, used to eat lunches of cornbread, mayonnaise and tomato sandwiches, poke salad in a brown paper sack, and well water in Mason jars" (Hasford 77). The Vietnamese saying "Rice fields are battlefields" also reminds Joker of home, leading him to comment "nobody ever said that back in Alabama, but somebody should have said it, because we had the same war, grow to eat, eat to live" (Hasford 75). An antique printing press used to print out communist propaganda pamphlets makes Joker think that "obviously [it] is well cared for or it would not work at all. It's like the old John Deere tractor we had on the farm back in Alabama. My dad would always say, 'it's held together with spit and baling wire. Don't look at it the wrong way or it will fall apart" (Hasford 115). Watching a Vietcong sergeant making his own cigarette causes Joker to note that "he's rolling his own, like my grandfather used to do" (Hasford 102). A Vietnamese wedding "reminds [him] of Decoration Day back in Alabama, when all of your cousins and aunts and uncles that you don't know are trying to

introduce themselves to you all at the same time" (Hasford 139-140, a water buffalo strikes him as being "just like a cow back in Alabama if the cows were built like dinosaurs" (Hasford 141) and a VC grandmother helping to make homemade grenades "like a chamber of commerce volunteer dipping candy apples at the country fair" (Hasford 162). Hasford's language strives to make the Vietcong no more unfamiliar than very, very distant cousins of the sort of Alabama farm folk Joker grew up with rather than inscrutable, impossible-to-relate-to foreigners plucked from the stone age.

The Phantom Blooper also reverses the American-centric perspective to a Vietcong-centric perspective in some instances as a way of further highlighting the similarities between the Vietcong and their American adversaries. The plot device Hasford uses to explain why Joker is kept captive in a village instead of being shipped north to the Hanoi Hilton twists on its head one of the more prevalent stereotypes of Asians: several important figures in the village want to keep Joker around so that they might try to understand his inscrutable Western mind. Joker's patron/protector/surrogate father/captor, an elderly Vietcong fighter called the Woodcutter, initially convinces the town council to keep Joker in their village because "to

win many battles...we must see into the hearts of our enemy. Why do the Americans fight? The Americans are a mystery to us. They are phantoms without faces. This Black Rifle, this Marine, has secrets that I would know" (Hasford 72). Joker sometimes refers to himself as "the Woodcutter's experiment, his theory that victory requires knowledge of the enemy, along with an unflinching acceptance of any unendurable truths" (Hasford 91). In that particular village, it is the Vietcong whose psychology is accepted as natural and it is Joker, the American, whose motivations and mental workings are seen as mysterious and difficult to grasp. Besides this twist in perspective, Hasford shifts perspective yet again upon Joker's return to the United States, where the imagery Joker uses to describe familiar things reflects back to his time in Hoa Binh. On a visit home to meet with Cowboy's parents, Cowboy's father lights up a pipe and Joker feels that "the smell of the pipe smoke is pleasant and reminds me of the Woodcutter" (Hasford 213). On his return back to his family farm, Joker finds that "when I see the farm it looks like a foreign place" because "there are no rice paddies in my father's fields" (Hasford 223). After spending time as a prisoner in a Vietnamese village, Joker's homecoming to rural Alabama becomes a time spent in a foreign culture while the village

of Hoa Bin becomes his idea of what a home should be. The novel ends with Joker planning to return to Hoa Binh because "the only time I ever felt like I was being what an American should be and doing what an American should be doing was when I was a prisoner of the Vietcong" (Hasford 237); his own perspective has been shifted so much by his contact with the Vietcong that when given a choice between Vietnamese and American culture after experiencing both, he chooses the one that appeals to him more.

The entire second section, "Travels with Charlie," is designed to win the readers' sympathy and approval for Joker's later decision to turn his back on Alabama and return to live in the village of Hoa Binh. The imagery Hasford invokes with each of Joker's mental comparisons paints Hoa Binh as a simpler, more honest version of Russellville, Alabama. Hasford's rosy depiction of a Vietcong village is portrayed without a political dimension or motive; he has Joker bluntly tell a Navy psychologist after his rescue from Hoa Binh "I never defected to the Communists. Communism is boring and does not work" (Hasford 190). But he does go to great lengths to show how, for Joker, Hoa Binh is just as valid a home as Russellville, and to make the reader agree with Joker's assessment that "home, that's what we were fighting for in Vietnam. Home

was where we all wanted to be. We thought we knew where that was, but we were wrong" (Hasford 223). "Travels with Charlie" is geared towards humanizing the Vietcong, attaching faces and names to them so they become people to the reader instead of shadowy figures in black pajamas. By putting a face on the Vietcong, transforming them from anonymous boogymen into familiar characters and bringing the reader along on their daily struggle, Hasford provides an alternative viewpoint of the Vietnam war that sheds light on the other side's perspective of the war. Hasford arguably provides more character development to the residents of Hoa Binh than he does to any character besides Joker in either *The Short Timers* or *The Phantom Blooper*; the reader certainly learns more about the Woodcutter and Song, a female Vietcong and possible love interest for Joker, than they ever did about Cowboy. This again is likely by design so that the carnage wrought by American forces on Hoa Binh during Joker's rescue will keep the reader's sympathies on the side of the villagers. Though they are ostensibly the enemy, the deaths of Song, Johnny Be Cool, Bo Doi Bac Si, the Broom Maker, and one of the Phuong twins resonate more with the readers than the deaths of Doc Jay, Alice, T.H.E. Rock or Lieutenant Shortrond,

because the Vietcong characters are given a more detailed depiction than the Marine characters.

The other angle Hasford took in critiquing the Vietnam War that did not appear in *The Short-Timers* was inspired by his life-long fascination with the Civil War. The themes of the long-lost Confederate Dream of freedom and disdain for the federal government run throughout *The Phantom Bloopers*, as Hasford draws a distinct separation between Joker's duties as an American and Joker's duties to the federal government of the United States. The notion of Confederacy is addressed early in "The Winter Soldiers," using Black John Wayne as the proponent instead of Joker. Black John Wayne discusses the notion of a "Black Confederacy" with Joker, arguing that the disproportionate number of African American draftees was symptomatic of institutional racism and therefore entitled the "Black Confederacy [to] seced[e] from your Vietnam death trip" and "be tin-starred marshals of revolutionary justice" (Hasford 24) upon their return to the states. Though Joker initially disagrees with Black John Wayne, telling him to "belay all this Black Confederacy bullshit" (Hasford 23), that discussion with Black John Wayne appears right after the only appearance in *The Phantom Bloopers* of Joker's John Wayne impression. In his John Wayne character, Joker tells "the true story of

the War for Southern Independence" (Hasford 21), which ends when Joker struggles to come up with an end to the story and abruptly declares that "the Civil War soldiers all got hammered out of their minds together and then the war was over and everybody got laid. Of course, the Damnyankees lied about it and told Walter Cronkite that they won and so that's what they put on tv" (Hasford 23).

However after his experiences on raids with the Vietcong and his return from Hoa Binh, Joker reverses himself and adopts Black John Wayne's position that the federal government of the United States no longer deserves his loyalty. Where *The Short-Timers* attacks the Vietnam war for its horrors, *The Phantom Blooper* attacks it for its legitimacy. During an interview with a Navy psychiatrist after his unwanted rescue from Hoa Binh, Joker reveals the depths of his antipathy for the government that drafted him. After first renouncing and belittling communism, he admits that "if the federal government of the United States died, I'd dance on its grave" and claims that he has "joined the side of people against the side of governments." When asked to justify accompanying the Vietcong on raids against American soldiers, Joker retorts, "how can I morally justify trying to kill anybody of any country...The War for Southern Independence proved that you

don't have to hate people to fight and kill them. . .I've been loyal to what's right and been betrayed by my country" (Hasford 191). His statements to the psychiatrist lead to Joker being interrogated by N.I.S²⁴. agents, whose accusations that he was a traitor and threats he might be executed spur Joker to expand even further upon his Confederate thesis. When asked if he confesses to betraying his country, Joker replies:

I confess that I'm a traitor to the federal government. The federal government is not the country. It likes to think it is, and it damned sure wants honest citizens to think it is, but it's not. I believe in America more and have risked more for America than any incestuous nest of parasites who call themselves Regulators. Thomas Jefferson never dropped napalm on peasants. Benjamin Franklin did not shoot students for protesting an illegal war. George Washington could not tell a lie. My government of self-righteous gangsters makes me ashamed to be an American

before ending his speech with a callback to Black John Wayne's declaration, telling the N.I.S. agents "I secede from your Vietnam death trip" (Hasford 196).

The description of Joker's trip home to Russellville is filled with these Confederate sentiments that help to underscore the reasoning behind his return to Hoa Binh at novel's end. On the bus ride home to Russellville Joker thinks that "the South is a big Indian reservation

²⁴ Naval Investigative Service

populated by ex-Confederates who are bred like cattle to die in Yankee wars" (Hasford 215). Recalling his earlier analysis that the Vietcong are not "reservation Indians" (Hasford 63). He reiterates this connection on the next page, musing "that the Greyhound bus is rolling along a black strip of asphalt laid down over the graves of a defeated race of people who lived in a stillborn nation...it's Vietnam, Alabama" (Hasford 216). Joker then expands on the notion of the South as a defeated vassal of the Northern federal government, describing it as "the American Empire's first subjugated nation" and lamenting that "[Southerners] are a defeated people. Our conquerors have cured us of our quaint customs, quilting parties, barn raisings and hog killings, and have bombed us with revisionist history books and Sears catalogs and have made us over into a homogenized replica of the North (Hasford 216). He also returns to the idea that the South is filled with men who "are bred like cattle to die in Yankee wars," describing Russellville as "a town that fears God and raises yearly crops of cotton, corn, and boys willing to die for the President" (Hasford 220) and describing military service as "like being put onto a chain gang for the crime of patriotism, except that on a chain gang you get shot if you run away and in the military you get shot

if you stay" (Hasford 200). The bitterness Joker feels about his--and the South's--treatment by the United States government informs his final decision to reject Russellville after only a few days home in favor of returning to Hoa Binh. Joker's decision to secede from the Vietnam War is thus not presented as a rejection of America, but a rejection of the American government that failed its citizens. Even then it is less a rejection than an embracing of "the Confederate Dream, a desperate and heroic attempt to preserve from federal tyrants the liberty bequeathed to us by Thomas Jefferson and Benjamin Franklin." For Joker, "stubborn sinews of the Confederate Dream live on, deep in our genes" (Hasford 217), which contribute to driving him from Russellville while also winning the reader's sympathy for both his actions and his viewpoint.

In addition to the new themes running throughout *The Phantom Blooper*, it continues the attack on Hollywood's false depiction of war that Hasford stresses so heavily in *The Short-Timers*. In *The Phantom Blooper*, this theme could be said to be at the same time both more and less prevalent. In the literal sense, the presence of John Wayne imagery is more prevalent in *The Phantom Blooper*. As I have pointed out, *The Short-Timers* refers to John Wayne by name

twenty-five times over one hundred eighty pages, or once roughly every 7.2 pages. *The Phantom Blooper* refers to John Wayne seventy-six times in two hundred forty three pages, or once just about every 3.2 pages. From a mathematical standpoint, *The Phantom Blooper* prints the words "John Wayne" three times more than *The Short-Timers* with the phrase recurring twice as often, which, on the surface, would suggest that John Wayne's presence is felt even more keenly. In practice though, the increased number of literal references does not equate to an increased focus on the Wayne imagery.

The majority of those seventy-six references occur in relation to a new character, Black John Wayne, who interacts with Joker at Khe San but is killed before the end of "The Winter Soldiers." The running theme of Hollywood's war movies (embodied in the figure of John Wayne) betraying Joker's generation by leaving them ill-prepared for the realities of war does still crop up in *The Phantom Blooper*. Joker snaps, "John Wayne never died, Audie Murphy never cried, and Gomer Pyle never dipped a baby in jellied gasoline" (Hasford 190) at a Navy psychiatrist who tries to argue that wars inevitably lead to casualties. Joker's unhappy return to Russellville leads him to speculate that "Americans are prisoners of their own

mythology, having watched too many of their own movies. If they ever want to send Americans to the gas chambers, they won't tell us we're going to the showers, they'll herd us into cinder-block movie houses" (Hasford 221). In a standoff with his new stepfather that ends with Joker firing his pistol into the floor and his mother reprimanding him instead for cursing, Joker incredulously says "I shoot a gun in the kitchen and you're worried about my *language*...that's just the way people talk, Ma, when they're not on television" (Hasford 233). Joker's visit to Cowboy's parents features Cowboy's father flatly lamenting "them people lied to us. John Wayne movies murdered my son" (Hasford 212). A brutal early incident skewers John Wayne's image, particularly in *Sands of Iwo Jima*, when Joker berates a replacement by telling him "I know that you've seen all of John Wayne's war movies. You probably think you are in Hollywood now and that this is your audition. In the last reel of this movie I'm supposed to turn out to be a sentimental slob with a heart of gold. But you're just another fucking New Guy and you're too dumb to do anything but draw fire" (Hasford 16). But beyond those few examples and the inclusion of a character named Black John Wayne, Hasford's virulent enmity for Hollywood and John Wayne doesn't really appear in *The Phantom Blooper*. Though the

actual words "John Wayne" show up three times more than in *The Short-Timers*, the impact of those words and the focus of their implied criticism is greatly lessened in *The Phantom Blooper*. While it remains a presence in the text, it is not as embedded into the language of the narrative as it was in *The Short-Timers* and becomes more an underlying theme than a central one.

Also worth noting, while Hasford appears to play around with Jungian notions of The Other in *The Phantom Blooper*, the similarities are only superficial and not meant to be taken as the psychological drive of the narrative. Joker's initial description of "the true identity of the Phantom Blooper" as "the dark spirit of our collective bad consciences made real and dangerous," a phantom who "once was one of us, a Marine. [Who] knows how we think. [Who] knows how we operate. [Who] knows how Marines fight and what Marines fear" (Hasford 6) ostensibly foreshadows a dark and tortuous psychological process in which Joker undergoes a Kurtzian transformation into the very thing he once stood against. The reality is that while in a sense Joker does become the Phantom Blooper, it is not in any sense the reader might expect. While Joker does grow to love Hoa Binh, especially in comparison with the Russellville he finds on his return home, "Travels with

Charlie" continually emphasizes that Joker is not there voluntarily and wishes to escape the village; the reason he simply does not take off into the jungle is because he knows he would not survive there on his own long enough to reach American lines. Similarly, while Joker accompanies the Vietcong on combat missions he does so as a non-combatant armed with nothing more dangerous than a bullhorn and poorly-scripted propaganda slogans to shout at a Green Beret base, and he goes with the intention of seeking an escape opportunity. Joker gains an appreciation for the Vietnamese way of life but is not converted into a communist or a Vietcong; he goes into the field on operations against Americans but does not take up arms against them, nor do the Vietcong trust him enough to give him a weapon. Joker is witness to acts of violence against U.S. troops but an accomplice to them only in the sense that he does not have the power to stop them. While the torture of a corrupt gunnery sergeant who runs a brothel for underage prostitutes does not upset Joker, he shows sympathy for the American grunts attacked in the field by the Vietcong while playing his original role as a willfully unbiased observer. By the time U.S. forces launch an assault on Hoa Binh to retrieve him, the rescue foisted upon him is unwanted, but only because he enjoys living in

the village and not because he actively seeks to fight against the United States. Superficially, Joker does become the Phantom Blooper: after being knocked nearly senseless by an explosion during his rescue and watching the destruction of both the village and its inhabitants, a dazed Joker picks up an M-79 and bleeps a grenade at a U.S. helicopter. He notes "It is the first time in over a hundred years that a member of my family has fired upon federal troops" before watching the chopper explode. He then passes out. But psychologically, Joker does not become the embodiment of every G.I.'s darkest projections or a traitor who willfully lurks in the shadows hoping to destroy his former comrades. "Travels with Charlie" opens with an epigraph by Nietzsche warning that "the man who fights too long against dragons becomes a dragon himself" (Hasford 57) but Hasford is tweaking these conventions rather than promoting them. While Hasford has his fun playing with these ideas, he does not do so seriously and *The Phantom Blooper* should not be considered a work attempting to accurately capture the psychological process that transforms a man into a dragon.

Lastly, a few autobiographical elements in *The Phantom Blooper* are worth pointing out. While Hasford changes some factual details about his own homecoming from Vietnam,

giving Joker a younger sister and a contemptible stepfather that Hasford never had²⁵, the description of Joker's unsatisfying homecoming is undoubtedly a cathartic recall of Hasford's own return from Vietnam. Hasford spoke bitterly in interviews of still having "the dirt of Vietnam on me" (Lewis 6) when he returned home only to be told by his parents that they were moving cross-country to Washington state the next day. In Joker's fictional return, his new stepfather generously gives him an entire week or two to gather his things before being forced to move out. Joker's quick decision to reject Russellville is doubtless a reflection of Hasford's own feelings about his hometown, and it can be no coincidence that he does not change the name of the town his fictional alter-ego returned to. Additionally, many of Joker's feelings of not fitting into his old life are likely representative of Hasford's own troubles in letting go of the Vietnam memories that led him to write two books on the war and a third whose main character was also a Vietnam veteran. Early in "The Winter Soldiers," Joker remarks that "I'm afraid to die alone, but even more afraid to go home" (Hasford 45) and the depiction

²⁵ Hasford fictionalizes the makeup of Joker's family in comparison with his own (he had a brother rather than a sister and his own father was still alive and married to his mother upon his return whereas Joker's father dies while he is in Vietnam), but as noted he was very close with his maternal grandmother and likely based his characterization of Joker's grandmother 'Old Ma' on her.

of his homecoming in "The Proud Flesh," where he "feel[s] like a New Guy in [his] own hometown" (Hasford 218) upholds the validity of those fears. Faced with a lack of familiar surroundings and a family that is incapable of understanding what he has been through, both Joker and Hasford suffered homecomings that challenged their own idealizations of what constituted coming home. If "The Proud Flesh" is an indicator of Hasford's own feelings, it seems he was unable to conceive of a happy homecoming from Vietnam even in fiction, viewing Joker's rejection of his former life as the closest thing to a victorious homecoming he himself could have had given the chance to relive it.

CHAPTER V

LATER LIFE AND DEATH

Hasford had always been a collector of books, and did have over 10,000 of them catalogued in what he referred to as his "library," a storage locker on the campus of California Polytechnic University in San Luis Obispo, California. How that storage locker led to his serving jail time and being assessed the largest library fine in history is a complex story that highlights both the downside of fame and Hasford's own foibles.

According to Hasford's friend Bernie Bernston, the debacle with the library books "was a set-up that started out with a bad romance" (6). One of Hasford's ex-girlfriends was a librarian at California Polytechnic University, and when they were together she would check out books for him with her librarian's pass. Hasford, who always "had an insatiable appetite for books," especially Civil War books, would have her bring him "stacks and stacks and stacks of them" (6). When their relationship went south, the librarian was furious at Hasford and eager to get some payback. Her plan for revenge included going to a man Grover Lewis identities only as "Hacker," a parasitic former houseguest of Hasford's who'd tried to leach off Hasford's *Full Metal Jacket* fame and recently seen his own

relationship with Hasford disintegrate. Lewis recalled Hasford's phoning him five days after his storage locker was seized by Cal Poly campus police and telling him "the assholes ganged up on me...you remember Hacker? Well, he had his eye on Tidwell²⁶, so I took off with some of his books for payback, left him mad. And he got together with my ex-girlfriend, who was mad at me too. They hooked up with some showboat rent-a-cop at Cal Poly who thinks he's Matlock." At that stage, Hasford was brushing off the incident as a "minor annoyance," the worst part of which was that the "college-boy pogues" had confiscated his beloved books (Lewis 11).

While Hasford was ignoring the incident, the Associated Press was sensationalizing it. The Cal Poly campus police had launched their raid on his storage locker in search of eighty-seven overdue books checked out from the university library under Hasford's name. They found a gargantuan stack of books measuring twenty-seven feet long, five feet wide and five feet tall, and promptly seized them all. Hasford had always been lax in returning library books; while in his mind he never stole a single book, he was not above borrowing them for years at a time. Grover

²⁶ A long-time crush of Hasford's who did not reciprocate his advances. He dedicated his final book, *A Gypsy Good Time*, in her honor.

Lewis recalled being initially horrified by "Gus' free ways with library books" as Hasford would freely admit to him that "he sometimes checked out books without returning them or otherwise 'liberated' items he needed," but Hasford's only response if pressed would be to say "I need them more than everybody. If the libraries would just let me, I'd buy the stuff outright. Cut me a huss²⁷, willya?" (Lewis 5). The exact number of books he permanently "liberated" may be impossible to determine conclusively. In the raid's aftermath multiple claims arose as to just how many stolen books he was liable for and how many of the seized books were legally his. In a March 31st follow-up to their initial story, the Associated Press refers to an outstanding warrant on Hasford from a Sacramento library posted in Mid-1985 that charged him with stealing between fifty to a hundred books valued at more than a thousand dollars. The dropped the initial theft count slightly from an even ten thousand to "nine thousand, eight hundred-sixteen books from libraries as far away as Australia and Great Britain" (Lewis 11). The next day Miles Corwin, reporting for the *Los Angeles Times*, dropped the number of books actually taken from libraries to "more than eight hundred" (1) out of the ten-thousand book lot that could be traced to sixty-

²⁷ Marine Infantryman's slang for "do me a favor"

two different libraries. Corwin alludes tangentially to both Hacker and the librarian without naming either of them as the instigators of the bust. Friend Earl Gerheim believed there were "only something like three hundred or something they thought were really overdue, if that many" and alleged that the Cal Poly police happily inflated the numbers, from either ignorance, a desire for publicity, or both. According to Bernston, "I'll tell you how ridiculous it got. He was accused of stealing books from the University of Washington. Gus had never been to a library at the University of Washington." Gerheim continues:

There were books published by the University of Washington Press. So the cops went in and...as we all know universities have their own press...so every book they found that was from like the University of Michigan Press, the University of Washington Press, 'A-ha, we got him'. He also had books from when he was living in London. He had belonged to a subscription library in London...you pay to belong. You don't have a due date, you get to keep the books until somebody says 'Hey, I'd like a copy of this book'. So Gus being a member of the subscription library had a lot of books that he was still using. They thought those were stolen. The fact he was an Academy Award nominee, if the guy had not been so famous, they never would've wasted their time with him (5-6).

Bernston also believed Hasford was targeted for his fame, describing the prosecutor as a "young, up-and-coming woman who wanted to make a name for herself real bad, and there was a political race coming up for prosecutor [while]

she was deputy prosecutor" and suggesting that "she leaped on this right away" because "it was at the same time Gus was in the headlines because *Full Metal Jacket* was up for the Oscar" (6). Meanwhile, regardless of the precise number of books taken or the motivation of the prosecutor, rumors flew that police would be waiting at the Oscar Ceremony to arrest Hasford if he showed up. The "showboat rent-a-cop," as Hasford derisively called him, Ray Barrett, was quoted as saying that "if [Hasford] gets the Oscar, someone could hand it to him and say 'Here's the good news'...then an officer could hand him the warrant and say 'now here's the bad news. . .put your hands behind your back and away we go" (Corwin 2).

Hasford chose not to attend to the Academy Awards ceremony on April 11th, spending the evening at a house party hosted by Grover Lewis and his wife. His friends offered their consolation when *Full Metal Jacket* lost the Best Adapted Screenplay award to *The Last Emperor*, "but Gus actually seemed relieved" (Lewis 12) instead of disappointed. For legal proceedings, Hasford shuttled back and forth between San Luis Obispo and San Clemente throughout the summer. Though he remained confident that his attorney Orlan Donley (who ultimately charged Hasford twenty-thousand dollars for his services) would get him off

the hook for the theft charges, the stress of the situation began to wear on Hasford. His tendency to obsess on a single subject fixated on the notion of clearing his name in the public's eye, and he "started talking nonstop about an idea he'd had for his next book--an expose of the overblown charges against him. He planned to hire private eyes to get the goods on his persecutors, the vicious pack of enemies who'd conspired to turn his fame against him" (Lewis 12). Donley managed to work a plea-bargain for Hasford, who hoped to "plead guilty to misdemeanor possession of property, give the books back and do some community service" (Gerheim 6). Hasford plead No Contest to possession of stolen property on December 2, 1988 in return for the dismissal of two counts of grand theft under the plea bargain. The "up and coming young prosecutor" that Hasford's friends felt was out to railroad him for the sake of her political future, Deputy D.A. Terry Estrada-Mullaney, recommended Hasford serve a jail sentence of six months. At his sentencing on January 4, 1989, Superior Court Judge Warren Conklin listened to her. For the crime of "stealing seven-hundred forty-nine books from eight libraries across the country and one in England," Gustav Hasford was fined fifteen-hundred dollars, additional costs to cover the postage needed to send the overdue books back,

sentenced to six months in the San Luis Obispo county jail and five years of probation (Aaron 5). Hasford, "stunned [and] half expecting to walk free" (Lewis 12) reportedly asked the Judge "have you got the right case? This isn't right" (Gerheim 6). While Estrada-Mullaney crowed to the press that Hasford's case would "serve as a lesson that stealing library books is a serious offense" (Lewis 12), Gus Hasford was taken in handcuffs from the courthouse "directly to a rural annex of the San Luis Obispo County Jail, where he was issued an orange jumpsuit and assigned to manual labor on a road crew" (Lewis 12).

Jail life did not agree with Hasford. Two weeks after his arrival he called Lewis and complained that the San Luis Obispo jail was "hellish--a constant din of racketing tv, stinking meals and nothing to read" (Lewis 13). His friends tried to cheer him up with letters and quotes from old James Cagney prison movies but they could do little to raise Hasford's spirits. He served almost his entire six-month sentence and left jail forty pounds lighter than he'd entered thanks to a combination of the food, the stress, and an extended bout with the flu (Lewis 13). His time in jail hadn't lessened his obsession with clearing his name and exposing what he saw as a conspiracy against him, but intensified it. In a 1990 form letter sent out to his

friends he wrote that "for the past two years I have not read a book, have not had a spare moment to myself, have not written any personal correspondence at all. For the past two years I've been forced to devote absolutely all of my energy to resisting a vicious attack launched against me by moral majority fanatics backed up by the full power of the Fascist State. I have survived, and intend to do more than survive, but it has been a strain" (Aaron 5). His friends tried to gently bring Hasford back to reality but as usual, their efforts did little to check his energy. Bob Bayer tried to dissuade him from fixating on his arrest, telling him "Gus, nobody's gonna care about this shit three years from now--it's a smalltime legal deal. Focus the energy you've got on your bigger projects" but Hasford "wouldn't let go of it." Bayer remembers that "he just wasn't ever himself again after going to jail...it weighed on him heavily...on his mental attitudes. He was afraid to take planes afterwards, and he talked a lot about applying for political asylum in France" (Aaron 5). Gerheim described Hasford as being "kind of like somebody who's been mugged in an alley [who] just can't get over what happened to him" (7), refusing to put the matter behind him so he could get on with his life.

Meanwhile, Hasford's unraveling grip on his personal life helped contribute to the sinking of his second novel, *The Phantom Blooper*. Completed before the release of *Full Metal Jacket* in 1987, it didn't find its way to a publisher until Bantam finally printed it in 1990. Hasford battled bitterly with Bantam over their handling of his book, feeling that the publisher failed to stand behind it with a proper marketing campaign. In Hasford's mind, he was simply standing up for himself and his work in the only way he knew how. He wrote to a friend:

Publishers are greedy S.O.B.s. I'm not a precious little pale academic who writes poetry and never raises his voice; I'm an ex-Marine and that makes me a hard and more or less fearless individual, and if these hardball boys from the Harvard School of Business want to play hardball, I'm in the mood to play hardball. The next arrogant S.O.B. at Bantam that even coughs in my direction is going to wake up with a piece of the world nailed to the side of his head (Aaron 6)

What Hasford perceived as standing up for himself, however, Bantam saw as him being a pain in the ass. After the extended credit battle over *Full Metal Jacket*, the library book debacle, and the frequent blowups with Bantam over *The Phantom Blooper*, Hasford failed to see that the clashes with Bantam were losing him what little credibility he had left. Bantam had asked Hasford to contribute short quotes endorsing some of their other upcoming books; Hasford

refused, saying "No, my work stands alone." When Bantam asked to include such endorsements from other authors in *The Phantom Blooper*, Hasford refused again. From Bantam's perspective, Hasford was an uncooperative and ungrateful prima donna. They paid him back by doing "nothing to publicize the book other than put it on the street." They didn't send advance copies to literary critics or reviewers, didn't purchase any advertising, took absolutely no measures to push the book other than to place it in bookstores. (Bernston 12). Their attitude seemed to be "If Hasford won't play ball and doesn't want our help with endorsements, we won't give it to him."

Hasford, unsurprisingly, was furious. He reacted by taking \$30,000 of his own money and drafting a press release that he sent to every critic and reviewer he could find an address for, titling it "Funeral Notice." In the release Hasford stated that "my novel, *The Phantom Blooper*, was born dead this month. . .because my editor at Bantam Books, Greg Tobin, has, in my opinion, gone insane." The release also reflected Hasford's newfound tendency to promise exposes ripping apart those who'd wronged him, swearing that "the motives for Greg Tobin's bizarre behavior. . .will be explained in merciless detail in a news release I am currently drafting" which would be "a

story [that] is complex, unprecedented, and scandalous." Bantam's response was indifference. When asked what had so infuriated Hasford, their chief publicist replied "Beats me" and defined Bantam's official position as being that "Hasford is someone Bantam believes is a novelist of real talent, and we've believed in him through two books, notwithstanding the fact that he occasionally will exhibit bizarre behavior, the latest manifestation of which you probably have in your hand" (Casey 1). Hasford, who began signing copies of the book with the inscription "For my best friend in the whole world: YOUR NAME HERE, from Gus", didn't bother replying. Ironically Hasford's battle against his own publisher did earn the book some publicity, though that hadn't been his intention. According to Bernston, "he was the first one to be surprised that he started getting publicity. He went in because he was just hacked off. They had violated his literary integrity. And so he went, armed against the publishing company. It didn't bother him, you see, Gus was the kind of guy, it was the principal of the matter...when Gus had his books violated" (12). While the publicity he received over the "funeral notice" for his own book was more than he received from Bantam's public relations department, it still wasn't nearly enough to keep the book from sinking. *The Phantom Blooper* received scant

attention from critics and sold poorly, never making it to a paperback edition or even a second printing.

The failure of *The Phantom Bloop* served as the culmination of the slide Hasford had been on since being released from prison, and soon his health started to go. Hasford had always been a "hardcore eccentric" (Lewis 5) whose personality tended towards the extreme. Since coming home from Vietnam he'd had frequent but relatively minor struggles to keep his weight down, mostly because he paid little attention to nutrition; Bernie Bernston recalled that Hasford's "standard diet was a big milk, a Coke, and French fries. That was breakfast" (4-5). Compared to how well Hasford took care of himself on his own his friends felt that "he actually ate better and got better medical treatment in jail" (7). Before prison, alcohol had never been a problem for Hasford. His friends described him as "the kind of guy who would sit there and nurse a beer all evening" (Gerheim 5). After prison this changed, and Hasford began to drink heavily. He told Bob Bayer that "he couldn't get to sleep otherwise." He knew Bayer collected cans for recycling so "he'd bring over big trash bags full of tall Colt 45 empties every couple of weeks. He drank those by the case. Plus, wine--a lot of wine" (Aaron 6). Gerheim recalls that Hasford was living in a Motel 6 in

Tacoma to be near his mother and brother, when Bernston went in and found Hasford "passed out in the room" where "a recycling center could have had a field day with all the cans lying around"(7). Hasford "was still drinking all the time and feeling lousy constantly," so Bernston "dragged him--almost physically--to a V.A. hospital. They ran tests and gave him an insulin shot on the spot" (Lewis 14). Between his poor diet and heavy drinking, Hasford had developed diabetes.

Despite all this Hasford still had one last novel left in him, 1992's *A Gypsy Good Time*. Hasford had conceived of it as a potboiler, a detective novel he could spin off into a series that might make him some money after *The Phantom Bloop* failed to sell. From a critical perspective, it's hard to see how Hasford could have thought the book would ever have become a moneymaker or appealed to a mass audience; it's either a brilliantly satirical parody of bad detective fiction that embraces its subject matter too closely to make clear that it's a parody, or a horrendously awful detective novel that happens to contain bits and pieces of bitingly witty satire. But whether it parodies hackneyed detective fiction too closely or actually is a piece of hackneyed detective fiction written by a talented author, *A Gypsy Good Time* is not the kind of book that

would ever hold mass appeal. After two books featuring as the protagonist James T. Davis, the inimitable Private Joker, *A Gypsy Good Time* features a new character, Dowdy Lewis Junior, a Vietnam veteran and seller of rare books who by the novel's end moonlights as a bounty hunter. Hasford took the name from two of his real life friends, Andy Dowdy and Grover Lewis, and according to Bernston "if he hadn't wanted to honor two people by the name of Dowdy and Lewis, he would've used the Joker again. Because Dowdy Lewis is the Joker." In some ways, Dowdy Lewis is even more of a personal character than Joker was. Bernston felt that if "you read Dowdy Lewis...Dowdy Lewis is Gus...the very first time I saw [him] after he'd gotten out of the road crew for the county, as he liked to call it, that was the thing I noticed right away: Gus was not the child anymore. Even though he still enjoyed things, he had a hard side, a cynicism which he had not had before." In tracing the evolution of Hasford's literary alter-egos, Bernston sums up the progression starting with *The Short-Timers* as "'Gus goes to war.' There's a youthful enthusiasm, there's a curiosity, there's an innocence. *The Blooper* is written, pretty much, 'Gus becomes disenchanted, reality of war hits Gus, Gus becomes politicized, and Gus comes home'...and if

you read *A Gypsy Good Time*...what you're reading there is 'Gus confronts the real world'" (7-8).

In this sense *A Gypsy Good Time* is best examined as an indicator of Hasford's own mental state at that point in his life. While the novel has little, if any, literary merit, Dowdy Lewis' struggles with alcohol give insights into the demons Hasford was facing at the time. In one scene Dowdy Lewis tells a drug dealer "You take away the dope, that still leaves a void at the center of things. We've had junkies since the Egyptians invented beer. They're called alcoholics. Dope is nothing more than powdered alcohol-nose whiskey" (Hasford 120). Some sections read less like a character speaking than like Hasford confessing the depths of his own depression. In one monologue, Dowdy Lewis says:

I have one drink. While I wait for my first drink to hit bottom and give me a buzz, I don't have anything in particular to do to pass the time, so, what the hell, I have a second drink. Alcohol is the medicine for those allergic to civilization. Drinking removes warts, not only from me, but from the people I'm with...Dead men seek to drink the poison which will bring them back to life. I disembalm myself at least twice a day...reality is an illusion produced by an alcohol deficiency (Hasford 170-1).

In sections like that *A Gypsy Good Time* reads less like a character study of a fictional detective and more

like a character study of its author. Passages such as "old age dampens your spirit and the weight of accumulating fears drags you down as you surrender to the merciless progression of constricting possibilities" (Hasford 127) or "if it's hard for you to get up early in the morning all you have to do is stay up all night. That's called Zen and the art of getting up in the morning. I go to bed so drunk that every time I wake up I'm surprised I'm still alive" (Hasford 133) may not literally be spoken in Hasford's voice, but certainly help to paint the picture of what his mindset post-prison was like. Like *The Phantom Blooper*, *A Gypsy Good Time* flopped and never went to a second printing.

Besides his alcoholism and diabetes, when *A Gypsy Good Time* went off to the publishers Hasford began to face another battle: writer's block. His friend Bernie Bernston summed up the trouble like this:

Gus's material in that *A Gypsy Good Time*, that material was all based on his experiences with this library fine problem, his experiences living down in California, after his Oscar nomination the screenwriting he got hooked up with what you call the crusty edge of Hollywood. He got connected with a couple of very gifted writers from the alternative press, Grover Lewis being one of them. He got introduced to a lot of those characters. And Gus had a problem. Gus was *never* one to be pretentious. Gus was one who dealt with real people. And he got wrapped up with too many of the people that he felt were pretentious. And he

alibied himself by saying 'I'm hanging with these people because they're material for my next book.' He wrote *Gypsy* and that exhausted his material...that was it. He broke from that group of people. He didn't form another group of people, so he didn't have material for a new book. And if there is such a thing, whether people accept it or not, there is a writer's block, well Gus's writer's block was that he had run out of material (4)

In 1992, over the objection of his friends, Hasford decided to move to Greece. He'd initially conceived of *A Gypsy Good Time* as the first in a six-part series. Lacking other ideas, he began to speak of setting the second novel in Greece in the hopes that new surroundings would help get him past his writer's block. Hasford's friends did their best to talk him out of the idea. Hasford had spent most of his last year in America living in Tacoma, where his doctor "kept after [him] to get his diet regulated [and] get his weight down under proper guidance." His doctor "told [him] he probably shouldn't be going to Greece" (Lewis 14), as did all his friends, but in April of 1992 he went anyway. In December of 1992 Lewis called Hasford to ask if he was seeing a doctor in Greece and taking care of himself. "Yeah, yeah, yeah'--you know the drill" (14) was the response he got. It was the last time Lewis talked to his friend.

In Greece, Hasford settled on the island of Aegina, living in a series of *pensiones*, or small hotels. In 1995 author Tim Krieder traveled to Aegina in the hopes of tracking down some people who might have known Hasford in his last days. While he did find them, their descriptions of Hasford in the final months of his life uniformly referred to him on only two dimensions: his good humor, and his drinking. Giorgiou, the mailman in the Aegina village where Hasford lived, identified himself as a friend of Hasford's and said "you know, Gus have problem...he drink all day, alone, without company. No good" (Krieder 7), describing Hasford as a man who was "always joking, laughing" but "everything the doctor tell him [to do], he do the opposite...he drink wine, milk, two or three ouzo, beers, coke- but all at once...all on the same table" (Krieger 9). The owner's wife of one *pensione* where Hasford stayed, Mrs. Pavlou, said of Hasford that he was "quiet. Always reading. Books, books...but drink. Wine and milk. Bottles in the room, all over...he was a nice man. Very quiet. Never any problem. Just, you know. Drink" (Krieder 8). Krieder described Mr. Pavlou, the owner, discussing the quantities that Hasford would drink, writing:

'I tell you something' Mr. Pavlou said...'that man want to die. He drink two bottles of wine every day, mixed with milk. That was his drink. For his

stomach, he said. Two big bottles...not just once in a while. Every day. And then out at night to drink more...drinking is a sickness. I tried to tell him to stop- he look bad, he shake' Mr. Pavlou held his hands in front of him, trembling with the simulated palsy of a morning's withdrawal (9).

Drinking that much every day, while leaving his diabetes completely untreated, Gustav Hasford died alone in a hotel room on the island of Aegina on January 29th, 1993, the official cause of death listed as heart failure. He was forty five years old.

Hasford died leaving several works unfinished.

Besides the Dowdy Lewis series, he'd planned to write a biography of Ambrose Bierce, "a novel about Sherman's siege of Atlanta, seen through the eyes of Bierce" which he described as "*Gone with the Wind* from the Yankee point of view, minus the weepy Valley Girls," and a novel under the working title of The Undefeated which he planned as "a Southern version of *The Red Badge of Courage*" (Aaron 6). He reportedly also planned to complete his Vietnam trilogy with a follow-up to *The Phantom Blooper* that found Joker in Los Angeles working as a reporter in the 1980's, with Exit Wounds as one of several titles he was considering. While Hasford had always had a tendency to wander, roaming episodically into and out of the lives of his friends, depending on them to a certain extent to serve as his

caretakers, his lonely death in Greece left them wondering what had brought him to that point. Giorgiou, the mailman that Hasford befriended on Aegina, said "I think Gus have a good life here [on Aegina...I think he decided, if the doctor say he have only two years²⁸, better to live a good life while he can" (Krieger 9). Bernie Bernston had another theory. Bernston believed that:

what killed Gus was not so much the alcohol, his depression, or the diabetes. What killed Gus was his child innocence was killed. The episode with the books, not so much the going to jail, but the way people turned on him. And people who he thought, you know Gus just didn't realize that there were people in the world as nasty as those he encountered, not in jail, but in the whole process. It broke his faith in supposedly fair play. It broke his faith in supposedly people being honest and forthright. And more importantly, he got savaged by the people, who, you know, here he was, he'd been very popular three or four months before as an Academy Award nominee for *Full Metal Jacket*. He'd been riding high in the Hollywood set. He had people wanting his next book, *The Phantom Blooper*. . .and all of a sudden, everybody turned against him, over something that he didn't understand...a library incident, which he shrugged off right up until the minute the judge [broke the plea agreement he thought he'd had]. . .and so, all of this ruined Gus's childlike innocence. That was the thing I noticed, Bob [Bayer] noticed, Earl [Gerheim] noticed (7).

Whatever was really at the root cause of his death, Gus Hasford produced three books and a classic movie before

²⁸ Whether this is what Hasford told him, something he misremembered Hasford telling him, or simply a metaphor to explain that Hasford knew he was near the end of his life, this statement is factually wrong. Hasford's doctors advised him to stop drinking, lose weight, and manage his diabetes. He was never told that he had a terminal disease.

being claimed by alcohol, diabetes, and his own depression. He had often "joked [that] he wanted his ashes sprinkled along the San Clemente beach so that the beautiful women there could sit on his face forever" (Aaron 6) but it was not to be. After an incident where his coffin was briefly lost at Copenhagen International Airport on his way home to the states and a memorial service in Tacoma, Hasford "was buried next to his father...at a little cemetery next to a dilapidated drive-in theater" (Aaron 6) in his hometown of Russellville, where the "unreconstructed Vietnam veteran" finally found his rest.

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