FAMILY FORGED IN AND AFTER WAR

a review by Anna Froula

Brothers Like These: Vietnam War Veterans. St. Andrews Press, 2017.

Brothers & Sisters Like These: An Anthology of Writing by Veterans. Redhawk Publications, 2023.

Brothers & Sisters Like These: An Anthology of Writing by Veterans, Volume III. Redhawk Publications, 2025.

ANNA FROULA, Professor of Film Studies at ECU, served as Guest Feature Editor of the 2026 issues of *NCLR*. She has published widely on gender and representations of US warfare and is co-editor of *Reframing 9/11: Film, Popular Culture, and the "War on Terror"* (Continuum, 2010), *American Militarism on the Small Screen* (Routledge, 2016), and Televising True Crime in the Digital Age: Critical Feminist Perspectives (Routledge, 2026). She is the founder and co-director of ECU's summer bridge program for new veteran students, the Veteran to School Boot Camp, which worked with its tenth squad Summer 2026. Read her and some of those veterans' interview with Ben Fountain in *NCLR* 2022 and her interviews with veterans in the 2026 print issue.

China Beach (ABC 1988–1991), the only television series about the Vietnam war anchored by a female character, strove to honor the veterans who inspired the show. Each season's filming began with a seminar called "Vets Day," where "veterans shared their experiences with the cast and set a tone of consequence for the coming episodes." But consultations with Vietnam veterans didn't end there. Late in the second season, the series aired "Vets," an episode that played scenes from the fictional show against interviews with veterans recalling similar situations from their own experiences. Star Dana Delaney subsequently helped two participants, Diane Carlson Evans and Nellie Coakley, raise money for the Vietnam Veterans Women's Memorial in Washington, DC (Dukes 136). "Vets" received a Peabody Award, and, years later, its interview segments were incorporated into the Lyndon B. Johnson Presidential Library (Dukes 138).

The work this single episode did in the late 1980s, elevating the stories of Vietnam War veterans – combat soldiers and support roles alike – Joseph Bathanti's veteran-centered writing workshop continues to do in the twenty-first century. Bathanti describes how he approached and continues to expand his method in *NCLR*'s print issue, so I won't retread that ground here.[2] But he does remind us, crucially, that "stories can save us" (97), both, I would add, the writing and the reading of them. Writing down one's painful stories to understand them can be a grueling gut-punch of a process, but on the other side is some semblance of peace or at least a sliver of understanding. As one participant from the first unit of writers explained, "We found a voice we didn't know we had and that we weren't alone or different" (qtd. in Bathanti 107). These writers capture the universality of the war experience.

The 2017 anthology, *Brothers Like These*, was the first published edition of workshop material, and it features Vietnam veterans with prose and poetry arranged in sections delineated as "Before," "In Country," and "After." The 2023 volume spans multiple conflicts, as does the 2025, which notes that post-COVID pandemic adjustments have called for zoom writing classes that also make possible international participation. "Stories are for joining the past to the future," notes Bathanti in his *NCLR* essay (98), and it is on us as a nation to make those connections. As Russell Worth Parker pointed out in the veteran panel interview, also in the 2026 print issue, civilians are the back end of the spear, and the military is the pointed front.[3] We're all in it together.

These anthologies are thick with history lessons, memorializations, releases of emotion, emergences of survivor's guilt

mixed with gratitude, and the grasping toward an understanding of PTS(D) and its symptoms. Some of the stories detail positive experiences and missions. One captures scenes in rural Iraq, where the writer helped conduct humanitarian missions, such as fitting a wheelchair for a polio-stricken twelve-year-old boy (2023: 21). Another crafts an ode to North Carolina's Veterans Healing Farm outside Asheville (2025: 112). A third writer works to bolster those veterans who didn't deploy to war zones and personally enter the conflicts (2025: 114–115). The writers draw the reader into such moments of cultural contact, such as when a US warfighter noticed a man as a "thermal signature" a few kilometers away with his finger on the trigger (2023: 50). When his unit confronted him, they learned he was a shepherd who was confused about why the US personnel were in his country in the first place and shared his only meager provisions with these strangers (51). Another author retains the hope that a young Vietnamese girl remembers the kindness of one US soldier (2025: 44). Still another captures the beauty of landscapes that also linger in memories (2025: 65).

Much of the work delves into physical injuries and their aftermaths. A veteran remembers that "On the ship, I was given an M-16 rifle. But it wouldn't fire until I cleaned the blood off it" (2017: 15). Another piece delves into the factory-like setting of the Graves Registration unit and the mechanical processing of human remains (2017: 35). The reader must consider such material realities of war as "cadavers . . . piled up like discarded ragdolls in a makeshift bin" (2023: 166). Writers detail how war claims lives decades later by lingering in the body as lethal chemicals and haunted memories (2025: 46).

Wars also linger in other formations, such as broken relationships, affinity with past enemies, and moral injuries. Readers encounter the pain of the Jodie figure, who ravishes your loved one while you are deployed (2025: 119), grieving and acknowledging loved ones on both sides of the battlefield (2025: 80), and the lasting scars of moral injuries. One piece reminds us of deployments to lesser-known missions to US territories like Vieques, Puerto Rico (2023: 163). Another gives us the blunt explanation that the "whole damn encounter" of the Vietnam War "was a giant, monumental, big fat lie" (2023: 84). An Army nurse narrates memories of receiving the young, evacuated children and infants of Operation Babylift, memories triggered by a photo of a child handed over barbed wire to a Marine in Kabul during the evacuation forty-five years later (2023: 78). A story reiterates the need for military women to have bathroom buddies because of the potential threat some of their brothers-in-arms pose (2025: 57–58), and the same author's poem recounts in lyrics how women survived rape and other sexual assaults to the Commanding Officers who were too angry about their mere presence to protect them (71–73). An additional story conveys the unspoken horror of keeping the foot on the gas as ordered when the enemy tried to stop her by throwing a child in front of her truck (2023: 172).

The selections in these anthologies are not easy reads, but I encourage readers to take on the mantle of reading them to understand the experiences of those we continue to send to wars. ■

[1] Brad Dukes, *China Beach: A Book About a TV Show About a War* (Short/Tall Press, 2018) 130–31; subsequently cited parenthetically.

[2] Joseph Bathanti, "Miraculous," *NCLR* 35 (2026): 96–109; subsequently cited parenthetically.

[3] Anna Froula, "Grabbing Us by the Ears: A Panel Discussion with Three Veteran Writers," *NCLR* 35 (2026): 86–93.

ABOVE **Several of the veterans from the writing group gathered with their instructor, former NC Poet Laureate Joseph Bathanti (far right) for the performance of *Brothers Like These: A Staged Reading of Writing by Vietnam Veterans,* in Duck, NC, 23 May 2019; front row: Pete Ramsey, Army; George Durden, Army; Ed Norris, Marine; a restaurant employee (name unknown); Wayne Heflin, Army; David Robinson, Army; Ed Spangler, Marines; Alan Perkal, Air Force; Bathanti; back row: Mike Smith, Navy; Charles Erskine, Army; Stephen Henderson, Marine; James Watts, Army; John Hoffman, Army; Michael Ireland, Army; David Rozzell, Army; Bruce Kelly, VA doctor; Butch Gudger, Marine**