

GUNNING FOR HO

Western Literature Series



H. Lee Barnes

GUNNING FOR HO

Vietnam Stories

University of Nevada Press ▲ Reno & Las Vegas

Afterword by John Clark Pratt

Western Literature Series

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**With thanks for thirty years of loyal friendship,
this book is dedicated to Larry M. Gandy, veteran of
Vietnam and the many silent wars that followed.**

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A Lovely Day in the A Shau Valley

Marines at Marble Mountain claimed A Shau was filled with juju; MACV Intelligence said it was filled with a regiment of North Vietnamese. In either case, it was one bad place to go. The men of Delta Company, Fourth Battalion, knew a fierce battle had been waged there four years before and another two years after that. From time to time thereafter NVA had used it as a staging ground, for A Shau remained a primary infiltration route on the Ho Chi Minh Trail.

One at a time the helicopters angled northward, tilted their noses and began the descent. They followed an azimuth north by northwest so as to come out of the rising sun. Ahead on the port side Anderson could see the ghostlike shadows of the craft slipping across the lush green canopy. So, this was A Shau Valley. His wife would love to fly over this. She talked often about exotic lands, the Amazon and the Congo.

He glanced at Candy and Small. Small chewed gum and winked to mollify fear. Candy licked his teeth to do the same. Everyone had a ritual to calm his private dread. As he always did before hitting an LZ, Anderson chambered a round in his M-16 and pictured his wife oscillating beneath a parachute, waving and smiling at him, when they had been in Acapulco on their honeymoon. He framed the image of her in his mind and fixed it there. If it was time for him to die, he wanted to take that one moment with him. It was only fancy now, a fiction to relieve fear, but not then, not when she'd gone up, not once but three times.

Small chewed gum and winked again. Candy ran his tongue over his teeth and squirmed. Anderson clutched his M-16 and watched the ground rush by. As the Huey approached the LZ, it trembled, rotors flattening the tall grass, struts leveling just above ground. Small was out first. The rest of Fire Team Alpha quickly followed. Candy dropped to the ground and flipped the safety catch of his M-60.

The next chopper landed as the first lifted off, and another after that, and another. As each landed, the men flying out of the belly took possession of another small plot of ground. The LZ was cold, a good sign, and when the last of the choppers had landed its cargo of men, the pilots screwed their Hueys down the valley floor, gaining speed for the steep climb over the Annamese peaks.

The men of Delta Company formed two columns and headed west. They marched an hour before the captain brought them to a halt on a rocky crest that overlooked the deep recesses of the valley, a stretch of jungle marred with craters. The camp and airstrip were obtrusive landmarks. Here a pilot had won a Medal of Honor, as had the Green Beret captain who'd led a company of Chinese mercenaries into the camp to save the few Americans who'd survived the siege. Captain Salazar ordered up Fire Team Alpha to scout the camp.

Spec Four Phillips, the rifle leader, squatted beside Lieutenant Lamb and Captain Salazar, who pointed out land features lead-

ing to the camp. "Can you scout it in, say, an hour?" Phillips looked at the dense growth on the valley floor and replied, "Yes, sir, if no one trips a mine."

Fire Team Alpha moved out, Small taking point, Anderson behind him, followed by Candy with his M-60 and Rutkowski with the M-79 grenade launcher, then Phillips, T.P. with the radio, and Sensibar bringing up the rear. Small, Phillips, and T.P. were bloods, and Rutkowski and Sensibar were white, while Anderson was half Mexican and Candy was half Shoshone, but showed none of his father's white blood.

Field-hardened, conditioned like tennis players, they carried somewhere around sixty pounds of gear on their shoulders as they moved steadily but with great deliberation through the undergrowth. The dense forest swallowed the sounds of their footsteps but not the clatter of metal. Caution marked every movement. Each man watched where the man in front stepped, for there were land mines. Each was guarded by the one behind and protected by the one in front, as it was essential to survival that every man depend on every other man. They were grunts, armed beasts of burden, individuals and not individuals. Names and numbers, each with his own history, they faced the same uncertain future. They believed in luck and signs. They believed in each other when there was nothing else to believe in. And that's what made them men.

Sensibar was the professor, always reading. He was a natural killer. T.P., a great basketball guard in high school, had flunked out his freshman year at St. Joseph's because he never got around to attending class. T.P. and Sensibar were buddies. That's why Sensibar followed behind, keeping careful watch.

Phillips, who hailed from Arkansas, had apprenticed as a carpenter and wished only to go home to a girl named Louisa who'd promised to give him ten children. Candy was the quiet one, staying to himself. He seemed to most like Rutkowski, who was from Massachusetts and told stories about his father and uncles, who were cops. Candy wanted to be a cop. Rutkowski wanted to

told him of an American toted about for three years in a bamboo cage over spiraling jungle paths, up and down mountains from Quang Ngai to Quang Tri to Kon Tum Province. According to the vc, who'd collectively agreed to an interview in Nha Trang, that first year the prisoner had attempted escape but had been recaptured and beaten on the soles of his feet, as "bloodied feet," one had said with a grin, "hinder the most determined of men."

One of those same vc, a sergeant, had explained to Calvin how a patrol he was leading had stumbled upon an American sergeant, a very tall man, relieving his bowels beside a trail. A second American and some Vietnamese soldiers came looking for the first American. The second one was shot twice in the chest. The Vietnamese threw down their arms and fled into the forest. The tall man was forced to dig a grave with a stick and bury his dead friend. It had taken two days.

An old man living in Quo Nho'n, a former South Vietnamese soldier who'd been on patrol with Robert Widerly and Lenny Cox, confirmed that Sergeant Cox had been killed. A vc he had interviewed later in Nha Trang, a man who'd served with the 437th and was suffering from skin lesions and palsy, said he remembered a caged prisoner. He believed the captive to have been a mystic who kept bombs from falling. Again, the American had been quite tall. And Lon Truong, now dead, a vc who'd been with the 437th, had worn Robert Widerly's dog tags as a charm. In Pleiku a cinnamon trader spoke of a tall American in a cage, last seen in a village somewhere west of Chu' Pah in Kon Tum Province in 1971.

Mai lifted her cup to her lips. She glanced at Calvin, then looked at his hands as she sipped her tea. After finishing, she spoke to the interpreter.

Tran Van Dao said, "She say her husban' like American cig'rette. You have?"

"Tell her yes. In my bags."

This seemed good news—not immigration to America, but something. She spoke again to Dao.

"She remember."

Calvin tried not to feel what he couldn't help feeling, not joy or relief, but release. Here possibly was the last human, not Viet Cong, to have seen his son. He wanted the truth, if indeed such a beast existed twenty-eight years later. He would listen and fill in what she couldn't know, somehow see the story that nothing in written word or human memory could offer up. He closed his eyes momentarily, then opened them to find her waiting.

"Please, Mai, tell me," he said, "about the man in the cage."

When Tran Van Dao finished translating Calvin's request, she bowed demurely and began.

■

It was midmorning on the plateau when the soldiers slipped out of the forest, two at first, then a dozen more. The villagers, Mai among them, watched. The leader of the detachment, a razorlike man with hurried gestures, signaled and four soldiers ran to each flank before the column advanced. Diminutive figures in dark clothing, the warriors drifted in and out of shadows along the wood line. Though hard to distinguish, the object that seemed to levitate in the midst of them, swaying rhythmically with their steps, was a cage.

As the column trudged slowly atop the berm stretching from the wood line to the village, the inhabitants of Ha Ninh waited. Adolescent boys, their curious eyes tracking the progression, stood at the edge of the village. Feigning indifference, those women in view of the paddies thatched a new roof on a hut as others on bamboo mats rolled rice balls with their hands. They worked and watched furtively, their faces stoic. Mai sat beside her grandmother, who wrapped a rice ball in a palm leaf and handed it to her.

Tidings of the soldiers and the cage they carried had reached the village an hour earlier. The arrival offered a timely excuse for the men to dispose of business that had been set aside. The elder men scuttled off for Pleiku with bundles of cinnamon bark

follow a lawful command, but said it with compassion. “Come on, son, we don’t need trouble, do we?”

Rowe remembered what he’d said in the recruiter’s office about wanting to be a killer. He’d said it for the sake of shock. That was long ago. Now he didn’t want to shock anyone; he just couldn’t move.

Belcher came over and gently hoisted Rowe. He braced him against a shoulder. “Him and Paez, they’re buddies,” he explained. “Went through Tet together.”

James Bull, who by then had recovered some of himself, nodded and said, “Get him up and moving, Sergeant.” He left to join the center of the column.

Belcher sought help from another soldier and together they urged Rowe away, Belcher assuring him that Paez had found an opening and was somewhere nearby laughing. “Remember how he joked, always the joker.”

Rowe couldn’t remember. Just that hole. And Belcher had used the past tense—all the evidence Rowe needed.

In order to shorten his enlistment, Rowe took a three-month extension in Vietnam. It didn’t matter. The Army was the same everywhere if you weren’t in the boonies. He wore clean fatigues and drank cold beer, stood guard at night and listened to that relentless artillery piece chuck bulletins out to Charley.

He was initially delegated to an officers’ club as a waiter, but by accident found an assignment in the Eighteenth Military History Detachment because the lieutenant in charge of keeping records of the Wolfhounds wanted a well-read soldier who could “slip through the smoke screen and write an accurate, readable battle summary.” He monitored casualty figures, tracked bulletins and names of MIAs and POWs and KIAs, but was interested in only one, Paez, who remained an MIA. The remainder was boring—filing photographs and composing synopses of dispatches, mostly unnecessary work made to seem important.

Rowe spent those months listening to Lieutenant Horn talk

about going out in the boonies with his own platoon. He envisioned himself a leader, spoke of the glory of combat. Rowe didn’t bother to wise him up, no point. Division history was as close as he’d ever come to war. Short and round, he wore glasses that could magnify a blade of grass to the size of a tree, and he talked alternately in clipped, military jargon and blocked-up, semi-academic speech. Rowe liked him. He made no demands of him and seemed to enjoy Rowe’s company.

“What was it like, Hobbes?” he asked, as he had many times.

“This time, sir, I’ll tell you the truth. It’s like having a nightmare as a kid and you wake up and it’s still there and you’re a part of it, but you don’t think you are. You know what’s going down and your body acts, but your mind keeps telling you it’s a dream. I guess we just distance ourselves from it, even the guys who were dying acted as if they were watching it happen.”

“Is that really how it is?”

“No, sir, that’s all bullshit. In fact, it’s one big non-ending orgasm, a pulsating sensation that swells and shrinks and swells again immediately. Imagine a two-foot hard-on in all that noise and the confusion. The only trouble is it’s a wet dream. And that’s how it really is.”

“Hobbes, you’re a philosopher.”

“No, sir, just a nothing REMF.”

“Don’t be hard on yourself. Did I ever tell you about the second battle of the Cynocephalai?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Put the Romans in charge of everything. We’ve been the Romans. Now we’re holding on to a dying civilization that never had culture except for jazz and baseball.”

“Sir, may I go to the EM club for a beer?”

“Sure, but remember your toxic reaction.”

“Yes, sir.”

When Lieutenant James Bull’s name showed up KIA, awarded the Purple Heart and recommended for a Silver Star, Rowe felt no satisfaction or sorrow. Bull couldn’t be held accountable. He

tion, a presidential aide spoke. “The president’s close to this, and his concern is deep. No one has worked harder to indemnify veterans for their gallant service to this nation. He wants old wounds healed, but, as a citizen, is obligated to view this as a police matter and cannot comment further. Questions?”

Bruce stood near the steps of the Pentagon, in his closed right hand a pressure-release detonator. As thirty D.C. SWAT cops kept aim, a negotiator standing behind a mobile barricade spoke through a bullhorn, asking what exactly it was he wanted. Bruce stared into the cameras. Calm and lucid as a diplomat at a state dinner, he said, “Lum knows.” Then he lifted his lame hand as if to wave and with his good one released the detonator.

The odd thing about an explosion caught on a microphone is the distortion of sound. It’s physics. Shock waves from the instantaneous expansion of gases override the device’s capacity to capture sound just as an eardrum plugs up under similar circumstances. The sudden swelling of a flash and the tremor of the camera and the smoke that mutated gradually into a shapely column of dark soot attested to the explosion. The broadcast shifted to the studio and the stunned face of the anchorman, whose silent likeness faded to a Toyota 4-Runner commercial. Only theory was what remained of Bruce, slapdash chatter of hypothesizing reporters.

I had somehow knocked books onto the floor, and as I bent over, Amy tapped at the door and asked if I was okay, said she’d heard something fall, but Bruce now was seated across from me, the glaze gone from his eyes. It still was my room, but he was on a cot in the dark billets as he gazed up at me. I heard only the tapping at the door and the internal hum of the house. Crouched on my hands and knees, I felt the hardwood of the floor. I opened my mouth to speak, but had no air in my lungs to form sound, not even enough to protest. I was at a loss to know how I’d come to be there, but I was, on the floor, dazed, crawling like a baby, or a supplicant, or a mourner.

Afterword

With more than seven hundred novels and short story collections published about Americans fighting in the Vietnam War, a reader is tempted to ask, “What more could there be to say?” This book provides a resounding answer: “Lots.”

Lee Barnes fits well into, yet also transcends, one of the two major categories of Vietnam War authors—the men and women who experienced the war, then wrote fiction about it. Many of these writers were on-the-scene correspondents who turned their reporting experiences into often thinly disguised fictional works. Along with many others, Pamela Sanders, Smith Hempstone, David Halberstam, the Kalbs (Bernard and Marvin), and Robin Moore were in-country reporters whose subsequent novels received attention and praise. More predominant, however, is the larger number of writers who served, usually as young enlisted men in the armed forces, then returned home immediately to