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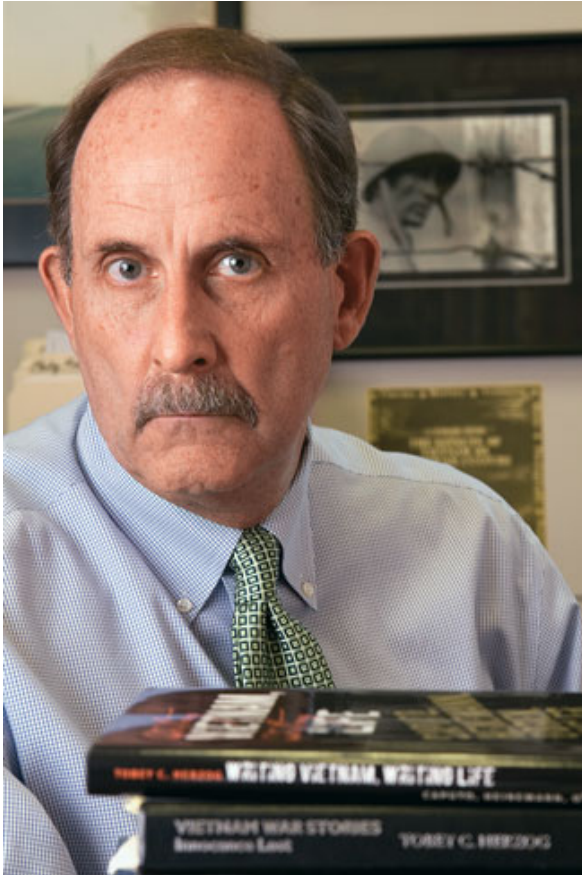
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Reflections of War

Vietnam War veteran Tobey Herzog '68 uses the prism of literature to shed new light on life beyond the battlefield.

Story by Rachel Hatch



Along the wall of Tobey Herzog's Wabash College office stands a bookshelf tightly packed with works by Thomas Hardy, Charles Dickens and other literary greats. There are signs, however, that Herzog's interests range beyond those of the typical English professor. In fact, there is a huge sign resting on top of the bookshelf. In bright red letters, it proclaims, "WAR IS FUN!"

"The WAR IS HELL sign fell behind the bookshelf," Herzog admits with a slight eye roll and then explains the signs: "I gave a presentation on campus about the dichotomy of war stories."

With a solid lean toward the HELL side of that dichotomy, Herzog has been teaching and writing about war literature since the 1970s. In the classroom, he takes his students on a powerful journey through the works of modern war authors, from World War I (*All Quiet on the Western Front*) to Vietnam (Tim O'Brien's *The Things They Carried*).

Herzog published his third book in May 2008, *Writing Vietnam, Writing Life*, in which he interviewed O'Brien and three other noted authors of Vietnam war literature: Philip Caputo, Larry Heinemann and Robert Olen Butler. Just like those authors, Herzog was defined in many ways by serving in Vietnam.

As he sits in his office overlooking the lush trees of the Wabash campus, located in Crawfordsville, Ind., Herzog's sandy mustache curves with a slight smile when asked why he decided to separate his discussions with each author into sections of their lives — son, soldier and writer. "The idea of being a son, soldier and writer all flow together. Everything in a life combines to create the author."

Herzog could be talking about his own life. "You might say getting drafted was one of the best things that could have happened to me. It helped define my career," he says, pausing to allow the painful irony of that statement to soak in. "Yeah, you could say that."

Herzog's generation was born in the shadow of another war: World War II. "Growing up, my images of war were vague, shaped by stories from my parents," he says. His father, Bob Herzog, served in World War II in the 8th Army Air Corps, stationed at a base in Norwich, England. "I'm sure he saw the planes return from their bombing runs shot up and people wounded, but he never talked about that. And one of my biggest regrets is that I never asked him."

His mother, Ann, met Bob on a train to Chicago, and they married six weeks later — two weeks before he shipped out for England.

“She was like many war brides,” Herzog reflects. “She was married for two weeks and then her husband is gone for two years. Can you imagine? What happens two years later when this stranger comes home? What do you talk about? What do you do?”

For the Herzogs, it meant moving back to Bob’s hometown, Peru, Ill. Their only child, Tobey, was born there in 1946.

“My wife Peggy says being an only child defines me,” Herzog says and laughs. “I’m always interested in what I think about everything.”

An early interest was baseball, where Herzog discovered many of his childhood heroes. It was also through baseball that he found a way to connect with his father.

“You could call it a typical father–son relationship,” he says. “There was a certain reserve on my father’s part, but we always bonded over sports.” The two often traveled to Chicago to catch a White Sox game. “My dad and I were close, but we would never sit and talk about our feelings. I think our facts-of-life talk was on the way to a baseball game, and it was brief,” says Herzog, laughing. “We wanted to get to the important stuff — the game.”

As a first-generation college student, Herzog discovered a love of literature, and surprised everyone when he decided that, instead of becoming a high school basketball coach, he would instead pursue a graduate degree in English. He says, “I’m sure my parents had that moment of thinking, ‘How is he going to get a job?’ But they were never dismissive and always behind me” — even when he announced that he and Peggy would marry after her graduation. “They probably thought getting married my senior year was not the brightest move, but they never said it.”

With short, dark hair and a comely smile, Peggy (Miller) Herzog ’67 could easily be described as adorable, but there’s also a smart, no-nonsense flash in her eyes that comes with being a nurse and health educator for 30 years. She grew up in the adjoining town of LaSalle. She and Tobey went to the same high school but didn’t get to know each other until he arrived at Illinois Wesleyan in 1964, during Peggy’s sophomore year. Peggy says she met Tobey at Wesleyan because of motherly concern. “His mom saw my mom and asked if I could keep an eye on him at school,” says Peggy. “I talked to him and found out he had a thing for my roommate,” she adds with a grin.

They saw each other more when Tobey waited tables at her sorority. “They made us dress for dinner, and we were served by these handsome men in white coats,” Peggy recalls. “Can you imagine?”

Between serving as Dennie Bridges’ junior varsity basketball coach, pursuing his studies and socializing with his Sigma Chi fraternity, Tobey found moments to spend with Peggy. “He was so shy, it took him forever to kiss me,” she says, fondly shaking her head. After that first kiss, however, their courtship took off and they were making plans to marry after her graduation.

In 1968, the newlyweds moved to West Lafayette, Ind., to attend graduate school at Purdue University. Just three months after the move, Herzog received a notice to report to his draft board.

“I was what you would call a reluctant draftee,” says Herzog. He tried to delay his induction into the Army until after graduate school, unsuccessfully. Instead, because of his college degree and his teaching experience, he was sent to Georgia after basic training to serve as a Congressional liaison in a general’s office at Fort Gordon. The title “sounds more impressive than it was,” says Herzog.

“Any time a family member on the base would complain to a member of Congress, I would research the topic — anything from ‘Jimmy has bad feet and shouldn’t serve’ to ‘My daughter dated one of your soldiers and ended up with a sexually-transmitted disease.’ I learned a lot about people and the members of Congress, both good and bad.”

Herzog was sent to Vietnam in November of 1969 as a Private First Class. He worked as a personnel specialist, coordinating assignments for officers during and after their tours of duty. “I was not in heavy combat. I was not in danger very much. Occasionally we would have a rocket attack, and occasionally I did perimeter guard, but the base was pretty secure,” he says.



Herzog and his wife, Peggy, on the day he left for Vietnam. He received a Bronze Star for his service.

Although she missed her husband, Peggy says she wasn’t worried about his safety. “Maybe it was because I was so young, but I never was afraid for him. I just knew he would come home.” During that time, Peggy managed an outpatient clinic for the Medical College of Georgia in Augusta. When race riots broke out in the city in May 1970, killing six, Tobey was startled by the news as it filtered to his base at Long Binh. “Here I was in Vietnam,” he says, “worrying if my wife was okay in Augusta.”

Herzog received a Bronze Star for his service in Vietnam, but quickly points out that it was given for meritorious action, not valor. “The medal is hanging up at the house, and the boys loved the wording on it that read, ‘For efforts stemming the tide of Communist aggression in Southeast Asia.’ That’s been an ongoing joke in our family. ‘What was dad doing? Oh, he must have been stemming the tide of Communist aggression.’”

By November 1970, Herzog was home. He and Peggy returned to West Lafayette, where he was set to start graduate school again in three months while Peggy continued working on her master’s degree in nursing. Those months became a time for Herzog to contemplate his experiences. “I was going through my own issues — which in no way compare with the post-traumatic stress disorder combat veterans suffer,” he says. He found himself playing basketball during the day and working intently on a model clipper ship at night.

“I have no idea what possessed me to build this ship,” says Herzog. “I had glue all over the place, it looked like a 10-year-old had built it.” At the suggestion that making the model may have given him a sense of order in the wake of his chaotic war experience, Herzog nods. “Sure, there was some peace to putting together all those intricate pieces. Sounds a bit like Marlowe obsessing over the repairs on his ship in Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*, doesn’t it?” he asks with a wry smile.

“I remember him lying on the living room floor and staring at the ceiling,” Peggy says of that period. “I was thinking, ‘This is not good.’ But he jumped right into a routine once his graduate studies began.”

In graduate school, the Herzogs made friends, and Tobey wrote papers on Charles Dickens and Thomas Hardy. The one thing he did not do was talk about Vietnam. “No one talked about it. This was the 1970s, and people just wanted to get out of there,” he says. He did have one fellow graduate student who also served. “We would talk a little about our experiences, and only with each other. Only if someone became a very close friend would we confide that we were Vietnam veterans. It was kind of bizarre.” Like other veterans, Herzog thought that Vietnam was behind him. Instead, a new period of reflection was just beginning.



Herzog with novelist Tim O'Brien (right), during Wabash College's 2008 commencement. O'Brien, a veteran who has written extensively about war, received an honorary degree from Wabash, where Herzog teaches literature.

After earning his doctorate and teaching for a year at Purdue University, Herzog joined the English faculty at Wabash, a men's liberal arts college, where he has remained his entire professional career. Along with a variety of courses, he taught 19th-century English literature, but gradually felt he was sliding into a rut. "I enjoy teaching Dickens and Hardy, but I got this feeling that everything you could possibly say about them had already been said. Maybe that speaks to my limited capacity," he adds with a chuckle.

When some of his students discovered Herzog had served in Vietnam, they began to ask him questions. "Many of these students were 11 or 12 when the war ended, so they had a sense of what was going on and were fascinated by it," he says. "I realized one way to talk about it was through literature."

At the same time, he found a way to delve into his own lingering questions. "I was beginning to put my experience in the context of the war literature," says Herzog, who remembers one of the most useful things he received in Vietnam was a map of the country, sent to him by his father. "I confess, going over there, I did not have a very good sense of the language or the culture. Most of the people I was with did not. No one really knew anything about where we were, very few of us knew much about the war," he says.

Herzog found a way to confront his past, using the analytical skills he had developed as a college professor. "In some ways, my experience took place over there. But a lot of my experience didn't begin until I started teaching the literature and reading the stories of these authors — how they were exposed to the realities of war in a very emotional, dramatic and traumatic fashion."

When the Vietnam Veterans Memorial was dedicated in Washington, D.C., in 1982, Herzog perceived it as part of a "turning of the tide" of public attitudes toward Vietnam veterans. While movies such as *The Deer Hunter* and *Apocalypse Now* also raised Americans' consciousness about the war, "I don't think the portrayal of the Vietnam vets was very positive, depicting drugs, suicide, mental disorder, lack of commitment," he says. "The whole media trend in the late '70s early '80s was to portray vets in a negative light." Still, those soldiers and their sacrifices were becoming more visible.

"People began to do what they have successfully done with the war in Iraq — to separate the soldier from the politics."

The same year that the memorial, nicknamed "The Wall," rose in the nation's capital, Herzog took his first foray into writing criticism of Vietnam-era literature. His article for the National Council of Teachers' publication *College English*, titled "Writing About Vietnam: A Heavy Heart-of-Darkness Trip," garnered positive attention.

Herzog continued to teach 18th- and 19th-century literature. But writing and teaching about Vietnam writers became his passion. He added a second class that explored works from World War I to Vietnam, looking for the common threads and differences in all war literature. For the class, he used the writings of World War I literary critic Paul Fussell, who asserted that soldiers typically go through three stages of development: innocence, experience and consideration.

"People start off for war with romantic illusions, or at least being innocent of what lies ahead," says Herzog. "Once they get there, they experience the realities and the loss of life, the destruction of people and the

environment. They begin to see things they had never imagined possible and that innocence disappears.” During moments away from the battlefield, Fussell wrote, soldiers begin the consideration stage of examining what they saw, what they did, and what they were becoming. “In all great war literature, the main characters move into the consideration stage,” says Herzog.

Through his research, Herzog added a fourth stage to Fussell’s classification: the aftermath stage. “After he or she returned and is out of the war, the person continues to ask, ‘Who am I?’ This can happen years later, when dealing with how have I changed.” Herzog pauses with the realization that he is speaking in the first person. A smile slowly appears. “I think my process has been a lot longer than other people’s,” he says. “In many ways, I’m still in the consideration stage. And these classes, these books have been my way to face those great questions.”

As his Vietnam class evolved over the years, so did Herzog’s desire to bring understanding of the war he sometimes felt he’d merely brushed against as a soldier. “In

the ’80s, I started getting sons of Vietnam veterans, and here was the interesting thing: They said, ‘You know, my dad was a Vietnam veteran, my uncle was a Vietnam veteran, but they never talk about it.’ And that is where the course really became valuable.”

Herzog is amazed at how the course has remained relevant over the decades since Vietnam. “Now I get students coming in and saying, ‘My brother is in Iraq, or my father, or my mother.’ So there is that interest in there in asking how Vietnam is like Iraq and how it is different,” he says. “That’s what makes teaching this course so fascinating.”

Herzog decided to translate what he’d learned into a book, *Vietnam War Stories: Innocence Lost*, published in 1992. “The first book was a way to take Vietnam literature and place it in a larger context,” he says. “It looked at the depiction of four stages of a soldier–veteran’s evolution across war literature — how Hemingway’s *Farewell to Arms* connects to Tim O’Brien’s *The Things They Carried*.”

Herzog talked with O’Brien, and they quickly formed a strong bond. “We were born a week apart, grew up in small, Midwestern cities, went to small, liberal arts colleges in the Midwest,” he says of O’Brien, who graduated from Macalester College in St. Paul, Minn. “He was a political science major, but took a lot of English courses. We both got drafted around the same time, and both ended up in Vietnam. Though our war experiences were vastly different, we both came out and went to graduate school — me to Purdue and him to Harvard.” Herzog had been teaching O’Brien’s works since *Going After Cacciato*, winner of the National Book Award, was published in 1978. He invited O’Brien to speak on campus and to his Vietnam literature class in 1994. As he was leaving, Herzog pitched the idea for his second book, a brief biography and an extensive critical examination of the novelists’ writings. *Tim O’Brien* was published in 1997.

O’Brien remembers his time with Herzog as well-spent. “Tobey’s interviews with me have been informed, penetrating and wise,” he says. “He has a keen ear and eye for the nuances of the literary endeavor, which is crucial, since ‘nuance’ is everything in a decent book.”

Herzog’s newest book, *Writing Vietnam, Writing Life*, contains edited transcripts of his interviews with Vietnam authors as he asks them about their inspirations, their experiences and their approach to writing as reflected in their roles as fathers, sons and authors. Milton J. Bates, author of *The Wars We Took to Vietnam: Cultural Conflict and Storytelling*, describes the interviews as “a rigorous boot camp of reflection on their craft and personal experience. [The authors] show what they’re made of — indeed, what writing, war and life are made of.”

Herzog says the interviewing process was both fascinating and nerve-racking. “It can be intimidating to write about people with whom you’ve sat down and talked. I mean, Charles Dickens could never complain about

anything I've written about him. Of course, I couldn't ask Charles Dickens about his relationship with his father, either," he says.

Several years ago, Herzog assisted with the Veterans History Project, interviewing local Vietnam veterans for a collection of videos that are now stored at the Library of Congress. "I had one veteran who would not talk to me for the longest time. Then he finally decided he would, and man, what a story he told — losing friends, feeling lost," says Herzog. "I asked him why he finally relented and went in front of the camera. He told me he was getting older and wanted his children to know what he went through, and this was his way of sharing it with them." Herzog lapses into another swollen pause. "That gets to you. That meant I was doing something important, something real."

Herzog says he wants to share his experiences with his own children, Robert, who works for the Justice Department, and Joe, a 1998 Wesleyan graduate and Phoenix-based architect. "Talking to them will be another way of answering the 'Who am I?' question for me, I think," says Herzog, who is planning a trip to Vietnam with his sons in the next year or so. "I'm so proud of my children, of what they have accomplished in the world. You asked me before about my heroes. I think today I would say my heroes are our children."



This fall's Homecoming was a family reunion for Tobey Herzog (center), flanked by his wife Peggy, class of '67, and son Joe, a 1998 Wesleyan graduate. Like his father before him, Joe was selected to receive this year's Young Alumnus Award. Tobey calls both his sons "my heroes."

Joe Herzog — who was named Illinois Wesleyan's 2008 Outstanding Young Alumnus, an award his father also won in 1981 — says the trip to Vietnam will be important for all of them.

"This isn't going to be one of those trips where we'll visit battlefields and dad will break down like they do in the movies. That just isn't his style," says Joe, "We'll explore the culture and the people. We'll go there to learn and intellectualize. It's what we do."

Herzog, who lost his mother in 1995 and his father in 1997, says the latter experience changed his self-image as a father. "My dad died of cancer right in my arms," he says. "That was an emotional moment, alone with my dying father in a hospital room. I think it was that moment that has influenced my sense that I have to talk about more things with my sons."

With each new book, each new semester, each question by a student, Herzog says his exploration of the Vietnam experience in particular and war in general continues. For Herzog, these writers do more than illuminate the horrors of war. They help explore the greatest questions in life. "All war writing is life writing," he says. "You see the same struggles, the same themes from the time of Homer writing about the Greeks. It's similar to the challenges we all face in life, trying to answer the question, 'Who am I?'"

When asked if he is closer to solving that question for himself, Herzog reflects before answering. "Tim O'Brien once said that writing is trying to discover, to probe the mystery of life as it relates to the self and others. In fact, I believe that is what all literature is. And once you discover that mystery then literature is over and life would be pretty dull. So I might come closer to understanding who I am, but that's a mystery that won't be solved while I am alive."