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Many of the poems in this collection are about war, particularly Vietnam. In what unit, and for how long, did you serve?

Two years active duty, all of 1969, all of 1970. My MOS [Military Occupation Specialty] was 02J20, an army bandsman. I served my country then, as now, as an artist.

And that's how you know I'm really a war veteran. That I'm not a wanna-be. Nobody ever lies about being a combat clarinetist. They lie about being a scuba-diving, Green Beret ninja, who flew a B-52 before joining the SAS. Foreign Legion Marines.

I wasn't drafted, by the way. I volunteered. But, to make a long story short, at Fort Polk, Louisiana, about two or three weeks into Basic Training, I realized this was the biggest mistake I'd ever made. But being stationed in the States wasn't all that bad, frankly. After basic, I was stationed at Fort Wolters, Texas, with the 328th Army Band. I was a parade soldier. And I liked playing in a thirty-piece orchestra. I was an enlisted man, a Specialist 4th Class, more or less a corporal.

We were the envy of many. Like the time we played this gig at The Fort Worth Home For Unwed Mothers. Nothing happened besides the music, not that we let the guys back at the base know this. Of such is legend born. But I never thought I'd go to Nam.

Then came Nam, and the 4th Infantry Division. For 174 day, 1 hour and 22 minutes, I was stationed at An Khe, the 4th's base camp in Binh Dinh Province, the Central Highlands. This was during the Cambodian Invasion. I witnessed over 100 rocket and sapper attacks, all of which informs my recently published collection, *A Concise Biography of Original Sin*.

I left Vietnam, and active duty, on December 7, 1970. I was awarded an Honorable Discharge from the army in 1974, after four years in the Inactive Reserves. I also got a few token medals, really attendance prizes. I did nothing heroic or noteworthy.

Much of this book is about death and the events of war, over which I brooded for some time. I was discharged from active duty when I was twenty, an age when most still believe they are invincible. A twenty-year-old war veteran. Thus was I scarred, and robbed of much of the joy of youth. What does Ecclesiastes say? "Rejoice, O young man, in thy youth!" I spent my youth in a state of angst and post-traumatic stress.

I generally didn't talk about Nam, except with my most intimate friends, for almost two decades. And even with friends I usually made it a joke or a wild, exaggerated story. I knew my future wife, at that time a dear friend, for four years before I mentioned I was a veteran.

The longest piece in your book is about an event in World War I, the suffering of a British soldier during the Battle Of Passchendaele. What led you to write about that?

This is the only poem I've ever written that was fully intentional, as opposed to spontaneously inspired. I set-out to write an anti-war poem. I purposefully chose to write about a battle that was indisputably a mindless slaughter. But I also wanted to write about a battle in a war that wouldn't threaten anyone's political history. So I avoided Vietnam, Korean, World War II, wars within living memory. Actually, I originally chose to write about the Battle of Cold Harbor during our Civil War. (I was moved by the image of those boys – this was before dog tags – pinning their names on their uniforms the night before they marched into a certain slaughter.) But I don't really know that much about the Civil War. So I said to myself, "Write about what you know." I have a master's degree in British history. Hence, Passchendaele. At the time it was first published, there were only a few old coots left who fought that battle. And they knew it was mindless.

I researched this poem not like a poet but like an historian writing an essay. It's what gives the poem much of

An INTERVIEW WITH John Samuel Tieman

it's tone. Then I learned of an incident in the Third Battle of Ypres—the other name for the Battle of Passchendaele — when, in July of 1917, circumstances forced a British squad to leave one of their own to die a slow death. I had my image.

The first draft took about an hour or two. Maybe three. I remember saying to myself that I wanted 500 lines. Then I wrote that line, “and tomorrow will be just like today.” I stopped. I knew I had my first draft. And I knew that not as a poet, not as an historian, but as a war veteran. Any war veteran can tell of that sickening feeling when we realize that, as bad as it is today, it can be just this bad tomorrow. The rewrites took a month.

The poem first appeared in the Spring, 1990, issue of *Webster Review*. The first time I ever appeared on a cover. A reading of the poem was soon thereafter recorded by the Imperial War Museum in London.

Most of the other poems are also about mortality in some way. But how else do you see these poems working together as a collection?

First, I really have to thank the editors at BkMk Press for much of the ordering. That ordering lends the collection to being viewed as semi-autobiographical. From young crazy war vet to middle aged stable husband.

But when I really think about how these poems work, I hope they work as a kind of moral pivot, a fulcrum, a tool that provokes thoughtful action.

These poems enter the world at a time when the nation would like to forget about the immoral decisions that led us into Iraq and Afghanistan. Everyone wants to “move on.” But this book says—“Oh, hell no!”

On one hand, Bush says, “We’re this deeply religious nation,” then, on the other hand, Bush and his Bushlings say, “Hey, terrorists threaten our lives, so we have to set aside morality and take action.” But, if we’re truly religious, then we truly believe that times of peril are the precise moments that call for the most profoundly moral reflection. Put simply, if we believe in life after death, we can’t just go around like morality doesn’t matter.

Wasn’t Christ tortured? For love’s sake, can’t we at least frame the thought like that?

While I tend to keep my religious views private, this as a matter of personal preference, if you see my vision, it’s much more theological than philosophical. And while I’m not a liberation theologian, I suppose I’m something of a liberation poet.

How has your passion for poetry developed through your subsequent career as an educator? What other experiences in your life have influenced your art?

Love is what saved me. I hope my little book illustrates not only the terror of war, but also the salvific power of love.

Frankly, there’s a way in which my career as a writer, and my career as a teacher, are quite separate. Until recently, a lot of my colleagues didn’t even know I was a writer. Not long ago, a school district newsletter described me as “a budding poet,” this years after I’d published in *The Iowa Review* and *River Styx*. And published a couple of hundred essays.

I sometimes think I have these mutually exclusive frames, in which people know me as one thing but not the

other. Some know me as a certified teacher. Others as a university lecturer. Some as an historian. Others as a poet. Some as an essayist. Others as a student of psychoanalysis. To some I’m Mr. Tieman, to others I’m Dr. Tieman. Some know me as a veteran, and some know me as a peace activist. I don’t know—maybe I’m a highly accomplished dilettante.

But my poetry, frankly, is just one aspect of my life. An important one, don’t get me wrong. I identify myself as a writer, as a poet and an essayist. And as an educator.

And I’ve written any number of poems about education, because I write about what I know. But, if I was to count up lines, I’ve probably written more poems, “Passchendaele” comes to mind, which are informed by my study of history. I have a bachelor’s degree in English and history, with a minor in education. But my M.A. and Ph.D., these are in history.

The singular experience that today influences my art is the love of my wife. The book is about war. But it’s dedicated to Phoebe. And while there may be more lines about war, I pray that the take-away lesson is in the salvific power of love. Thus does the collection end—

In this dream

there is food and water
and no barrier reef, only shore

this woman is my wife
the compass close enough

the uncertain current I understand
and I feel strangely safe sailing long after dark

still alive days after the disaster
everything I need within reach

I hope my little book illustrates not only the terror of war but also the salvific power of love.

—John Samuel Tieman