

Soldiers' Stories

Representation of Warfare and the Critique of Empathy

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Abstract: The ethical politics of entitlement to narrate the personal experiences of others is one of two key issues raised in this critique of empathy. The other is the poetics of the transformation by which such experiences are transformed into allegory. By allegorizing other's experiences, we draw our own meanings from those experiences and lay claim to mutual understanding. From the earliest recorded stories, the attempt to represent war has drawn upon allegory to grasp its reality. As the work of the distinguished Vietnam War-era broadcast correspondent, John Laurence, compellingly illustrates this is true of news and documentary no less than epic poetry.

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“Soldiers learn what they think about death as they are about to die,” wrote John Laurence (2002:415), one of the Vietnam War-era’s most distinguished broadcast journalists, about a situation that severely tests the limits of human capability to comprehend the experiences of others. And yet an empathetic understanding of those in a position to lose their lives – and take the lives of others – was for Laurence, like Ernie Pyle in World War II and many others before and after, a crucial goal of war reporting. Indeed empathy with people in extreme or merely different circumstances is the definition of cultural significance or creative success for much journalism and documentary media. But while these modes of representation are often directed – whether by conscience or merely by assignment – toward imaginatively reaching across time, space and difference to bring others closer, the crafting of empathy unlike the crafting of journalistic objectivity or cinematic realism remains relatively unexamined as a topic in the poetics and politics of representation.

More than sympathy which denotes an affective response such as compassion empathy also denotes a cognitive response. Empathy requires us to take the perspective of others and to comprehend the world from their point of view. To a psychologist empathy is an act of mental representation (Decety, 2005), and thus to a journalist or documentary media maker it is act of mediated re-representation of a reality we seek to comprehend. As such empathy seems an unalloyed virtue, and yet it is not beyond critique. The representation of war from the perspective of the troops fighting it, a deeply conflicted endeavor now as ever, provides the opportunity to consider the critique of empathy within a context of enduring concern to journalism, documentary media and to their critics.

Critique of Empathy

Among critiques of empathy Amy Shuman’s *Other People’s Stories* (2005) is one of the most trenchant. “[N]arrators become witnesses to others’ experiences, and storytelling provides some hope for understanding across differences,” Shuman writes (p. 5). But she immediately proposes a caution. “The appropriation of stories can create voyeurs rather than witnesses and

can foreclose meaning rather than open lines of inquiry and understating.” Thus empathy which begins with the appropriation of other peoples’ stories may return little to those whose stories are taken. “Empathy offers the possibility of understanding across space and time, but it rarely changes the circumstances of those who suffer,” Shuman concludes. “If it provides inspiration, it is more often for those in the privileged position of empathizer rather than empathized.”

Because good intentions are a weak claim on the right to retell other’s stories, the rights and responsibilities of access to those stories are central to the critique of empathy. Any use of another’s experience is an act of appropriation not only of the story itself but of its moral authority which derives from the ‘I was there’ context of first-hand experience. Thus, according to Shuman, access to other’s stories, both hearing and retelling, raises questions of entitlement. While she is concerned with face-to-face hearing and retelling this appropriation of stories and their moral authority is often crucial to the political and cultural value of news and documentary media.

Appropriation of stories and their authority based on the claim ‘I was there’ is nowhere more essential, and the results nowhere more vivid than in representation of warfare. Correspondents must seek entitlement to soldiers’ stories by ‘being there’ too and sharing, to some extent at least, the experiences of life and death on the front lines. Writing of British reporters covering the Falklands conflict Morrison and Tumber observed that “those experiences were of such emotional intensity that the form of prose which journalists use take the reader into that experience – the ‘I was there’ form – provided not only a window for the reader, but also a door for partiality irrespective of any desire to remain the detached professional outsider” (1988: 95-6). Thus, as these authors suggest, the interpersonal politics of entitlement arising in face-to-face storytelling is overlaid with the professional politics of representation (i.e. the tension between objectivity and advocacy) when storytelling goes public (c.f. Zelizer, 2005:4).

The politics of entitlement to stories is one of two key issues raised in this critique of empathy. The other is the poetics of the transformation by which stories become allegories. As a primary trope for translating experience, according to Shuman, allegory is a form of narrative that “travels beyond its owners; moreover it is intended to travel” (p. 71). These travels, however, are intended less to convey information about events in particular than wisdom about the world in

general. In this way personal stories create a connection between a particular experience and a larger human story. 'War stories' are experiences intended to travel. And even journalists committed to detached observation are not indifferent to the call of stories that promise wisdom about the world. "I'll be content to exit life," writes a war correspondent cited by Tumber, "knowing that I was able to see something of what this world can be like and share a little of it with others" (2004:198). Journalists and documentarists are ever-watchful for personal stories that elucidate a culturally resonant theme such as the soldier's mother and the pain of sacrifice.

Thus a question that may legitimately be asked of any retelling of others' experiences, including soldiers' stories, concerns its larger, presumably wisdom-inducing allegorical meaning. Such meaning need not be a complete ensemble of character, plot and theme that rises to mythic grandeur. More modestly, especially in shorter forms such as broadcast news, meaning may be summoned by just an allegorical element or two – a metaphor or synecdoche, an archetypal figure or iconic image. Moreover this meaning need not be explicit or even intended. "The personal narrative is an example," Shuman writes, "but what it is an example of is often left open to inference and interpretation" (p. 81). And just as for theorists of face-to-face storytelling, the search for the larger meaning of individual stories resonates with theorists of media. "Factual documentation serves as evidence," Nichols observes of documentary (1991:117), "but evidence of *what* becomes the fundamental question."

Any larger human story offered by allegory is not to be confused with the news of world events that is characterized by reporters and their critics as "the big picture" (e.g. Boyd-Barrett, 2004:26). In terms of geo-politics an account of battle is only a little picture even if it may be wisdom-inducing. "You have no idea how the war is going, only how your war is going," writes Jeff Gralnick, another correspondent cited by Tumber (2004:196), "so never turn what you have in front of you into something that ends with cosmic conclusions about the war and policy themselves." As Shuman's work reminds us, however, the drawing of cosmic conclusions may not be entirely in the hands of reporters. Stories do travel. And a picture drawn from personal stories that have traveled and metamorphosed into allegory may well have a better claim to a

cosmic conclusion than any big picture drawn from geo-political information disseminated by officials.

Empathy and Allegory

Whether cosmic or not, the conclusion to an allegory can be empathy. “By allegorizing experience, people distant from an experience draw their own meanings from it and claim some mutual understanding,” Shuman writes (p. 71). “Empathy, then, depends on the sort of translation that allegory provides.” If allegory offers a vantage point on the situation of others it is only from a necessary distance. That distance is necessary in the sense of inevitability; it can be closed only in imagination. Those who hear a tale, take the allegorical meaning and gain a sense of empathy are not actually in the situation of the others. The distance is necessary, moreover, in the sense that empathic understanding, according to Shuman (p. 148), “is defined as a relationship that offers distance as a means of gaining perspective on lives other than our own.” The presumed necessity of distance leads her to seek something closer to actual experience, less mediated by storytelling and therefore more raw and real. “[T]rauma victims require witnesses, rather than empathy,” she asserts (p. 145). “Empathy preserves a distance between those who understand and those who experience trauma; witnessing troubles that distance, and while it does not necessarily close the distance, it transforms the distance enough for the witness to be part of the constituency of sufferers.”

While witness unmediated by story or allegory may be raw and real, mediation is beneficial to those who do not experience the trauma themselves, warfare for example, and therefore cannot close enough distance to join “the constituency of sufferers.” In this context witness no less than empathy is subject to the politics and poetics of representation and is not beyond critique. Schematically or crudely rendered accounts certainly deny readers or viewers the sense of witnessing reality. “Nevertheless, an unmediated event, if such were possible (or at least a minimally mediated event), would also fail to provide the sensation of witness,” argues Ellis (2000:12-13). “[A] superabundance of information would produce a sense of disorientation, not dissimilar to that experienced by contemporary viewers suddenly presented with some scenes from films made at the very beginnings of cinema.” Thus our concern here is the manner

in which the crafts of representation – reporting and writing, cinematography and editing – bridge the necessary distance of empathy and resolve the disorientation of witness.

When enacted with skill, the crafts of representation can achieve more than merely a “sensation of witness” among the individuals that compose the audience. The conception of bearing witness, at least within media studies, is fundamentally social. “Bearing witness, as a collective response to events taking place across time and space,” writes Zelizer (2002:52), “depends on mediated forms of representation, by which the media help people encounter the events as a prelude for taking responsibility for them.” With the hope that through mediated representation the power of witness can reach across time and space, Zelizer’s definition closes the gap between witness and empathy. And with the promise of enhanced responsibility for that which is witnessed, this definition helps allay concerns about empathy’s limitations.

Pictures Big and Little

The critique of empathy raises issues relevant to many contexts in which news and documentaries are made, but such issues become more acute in the representation of warfare. In such settings as public affairs reporting journalistic entitlement to stories is assumed without question. This is true of reporting on the geo-political ‘big picture’ of war; but as revealed by John Laurence’s reporting from Vietnam,ⁱ it is not necessarily true of the little pictures of soldiers’ experiences. The problem of entitlement to soldiers’ personal stories raises a moral issue that the correspondent sought to resolve for himself at the front and again years later in a memoir of his time with the troops.

Another issue confronted by Laurence is the nature of the relationship between the big geo-political picture of the war and those little pictures of soldiers’ lives and deaths. A tension, if not outright contradiction, between big and little pictures is posited by those who argue that news and documentary should pursue “understanding not empathy” (Seaton, 2003:45). From this point of view empathetic treatment of the troops reduces journalism’s critical distance on national policies implicated in warfare. Writing during the Iraq War but thinking of past conflicts Gralnik, who was John Laurence’s CBS colleague in Vietnam, articulates the issue this way:

You will fall in with a bunch of grunts, experience and share their hardships and fears and then you will feel for them and care about them. You will wind up loving them and hating

their officers and commanders and the administration that put them (and you) in harms way. Ernie Pyle loved his grunts, Jack Laurence and Michael Herr loved theirs; and I loved mine. And as we all know, love blinds and in blinding it will alter the reporting you thought you were going to do. (Quoted in Tumber, 2004:195.)

This tension between empathy and understanding is another concern that resonates with theorists of media. “[P]ublic history cannot simply be an aggregate of private histories strung together or nimbly intercut,” writes Renov of oral histories recorded in documentaries concluding that the “favoring of preservation over interrogation detracts from their power as vehicles of understanding” (1993:27). For Laurence, however, the point of preserving “private histories” was precisely to interrogate those stories and harness their power as vehicles of understanding. When “nimbly intercut” into field packages for the evening news or into his landmark documentary, “The World of Charlie Company,” the little pictures came together into the bigger ones that Laurence intended to draw. With the idea that private histories may be seen and heard allegorically, we know to look and listen for the larger meanings that transcend the explicitly stated. Laurence’s work offers a rich source of news and documentary in which to explore the relationship between empathy and understanding and between pictures big and little.

A close-up, empathetic perspective is highly prized in most reporting assignments. In war reporting, however, that perspective – falling in with a bunch of grunts – is problematic. It is easily (perhaps too easily) seen as support of national policy just as criticism of national policy is easily seen as lack of support for the troops. The embedding of journalists with military units in Iraq in 2003 exacerbated and justified this concern. In Vietnam after the Tet Offensive of 1968, however, unquestioning support of US policy among the public and media practitioners was rapidly eroding.ⁱⁱ The big picture painted in Saigon by the Military Assistance Command Vietnam (MACV) had come to be denigrated as the ‘Five O’clock Follies’ so named for the daily briefing on the war’s ‘progress.’ This attitude helped to privilege pictures from the field, even if only battle aftermath, as the real war – or at least as real journalism.

By the time of Tet this reality was, for Laurence, the only reality worth documenting. This, however, had not always been so. “Newly arrived, young, impressionable and idealistic,” he recalls of beginning his assignment in 1965 at age 25, “I thought it was an honorable cause and that success was certain” (2002:137). But he also recalls that after six months of covering the

war his attitude had changed. "I wondered whether [President Johnson and other senior officials] were so obsessed with their idea of victory in this faraway foreign war that they were propelled by perverse lust, a death wish perhaps..." (p. 294). But if Laurence's belief in the cause had drained away, his respect for his grunts had not. In this regard a detail from his memoir about his work on "The World of Charlie Company" is telling: "I had decided to carry that one book, *Brave Men*, by Ernie Pyle, in my field pack, though it weighed more than a pound" (p. 554).

Laurence's memoir, *The Cat from Hué*, (2002) is key source for our commentary on his work. Our concern here is the critique of mediated empathy – soldiers' stories as they appear on the screen – but that critique cannot sidestep the question of how media makers come to know others' minds through first hand encounters with them. Thus in addition to the contents of the reports that Laurence and his colleagues produced, their witnessing of others' experiences must be our concern. We read Laurence's memoir for his impressions and interpretations of that witnessing. That is to say we read it less for an account of what happened to him in Vietnam than for the meanings he makes at the time of the memoir's creation – insights about empathetically narrating other people's stories. While Laurence explicitly addresses that concern only infrequently, he nonetheless has much to say about it.

Our critique of mediated empathy focuses on one of the essential visual documents of the Vietnam War, "The World of Charlie Company" produced for CBS in 1970. "No one can really know what it was like unless they were there," Walter Cronkite said of that documentary. "But to the extent that pictures and sound can provide an approximation, I cannot think of any film that did so better." We also examine several of Laurence's reports aired on *CBS Evening News with Walter Cronkite*.ⁱⁱⁱ Like the documentary we read these reports less for information about events in particular than wisdom about the world in general. This is Laurence's own goal for his memoir. "Something was compelling me to find meaning in America's violent engagement with Vietnam, to make sense of what I was coming to see as a terrible and ironic tragedy," he writes of first attempts in the late 1970s to narrate his experiences (p. 88). "I had to see the big picture."

Being There

In the opening pages of *The Cat from Hué*, Laurence recreates the scene as he and cinematographer, Keith Kay, move toward the front lines of the ferocious battle over the historic provincial capital of Hué during the Tet offensive:

Some of the Marines in the column shook their heads trying to make sense of us. "Well you're sure as hell welcome to come with us" one of them said. "Just make sure you tell 'em back home what's *really* going on out here."
"Yeah, man, tell it like it *is*."
"We're trying," Kay said softly. (p. 30)

The placement of this scene early in the memoir and the single quotation marks which Laurence uses to indicate that he reconstructed the exchange from memory both suggest that he thought it important to emphasize that the troops registered a request with him for reliable witness. Laurence nonetheless felt a need to say still more in defense of his entitlement to what he will report. In the description of his withdrawal from the front lines once enough film had been shot for a story, he meditates on the moral bargain he had struck – in his own conscience at least – with the troops:

The troops rarely objected to our dropping in and out of their location and taking pictures of them, even for a short time. But it made *us* feel guilty especially after a firefight or a heavy shelling, when we'd just begun to get acquainted and were becoming friendly with them, the way you do quickly with people you meet in a war. We usually had to leave in a hurry, knowing we probably wouldn't see them again. Most of them seemed grateful to have us around for a few hours, particularly in fearful places like Con Thien and Khe Sanh and now Hué. (p. 34)

Laurence hastens on to say that his personal motivation for pursuing this journalism was less to serve a public with a presumed right to know than the troops whose stories he could verify and validate via the powers (whatever they may be) of television:

Having a TV crew around added another dimension to their lives, changed it in a subtle way, modifying the usual routine of their difficult existence, verifying some small part of their experience, maybe even validating it, if only for the folks at home. Millions of Americans felt profoundly sympathetic for the men in the field – especially their friends and family, particularly when they saw them on television. (p. 34)

As Laurence and Kay drop back from the frontlines they encounter the officer who had taken command of these troops only the day before:

Hughes seemed fully in command now, confident and decisive, and I was surprised at how much he had changed in less than a day.
"Did you get up to the line," he asked
"Yes, sir," I said.
"How's it going up there?"

'Very slow. Foxtrot is trying to get across the street into that big government building west of the university. Lot of incoming from the south and west. We've lost a few men.'

'Did you get what you needed?'

'Yes, sir, the men are very brave.'

'Yes, I know.' Hughes thought for a moment. "Take care of yourselves today. We'll get you out in the morning." (p. 35)

In reconstructing this exchange, Laurence confirms to the reader of his memoir – and perhaps to himself – that he has indeed *been there*, witnessed bravery himself, thus sealing not only his entitlement but his obligation to it.

In his commitment to witnessing the soldiers' experiences, Laurence is not indifferent to the journalistic mission as traditionally defined: informing the American citizenry. While writing his narration for Kay's footage he assumes that, given the technology of the era, viewers would likely have read an account of the overall battle – a bigger picture, presumably – in newspapers.^{iv} Thus his service to the citizenry, as well as to the soldiers, must be to convey a sense of being there. Here Laurence implicitly broaches the subject of empathy in terms of capturing mood and detail via the realism promised by sound and moving image:

Typing quickly, I tried to capture some of the mood of the Marines and the location and the danger, the deadly seriousness of it, adding specific details like the platoon's assault on the wall and the death of the Marine who ran forward alone. The words and pictures would give only an impression of what was going on, a sense of the mood rather than a straight factual account of the battle... Being on film and natural sound, our work could be more vivid, more realistic than some of the printed accounts. (pp. 39-40)

The resulting report with the working title, "Hué Battle – Day Five," opens with Marines running, Kay's camera moving with them, toward the devastated campus of Hué University. Laurence's narration continues over a shot of a stately building in ruins, a burned-out truck in front: "Hué, the ancient imperial city; it is to Vietnamese what old Boston is to Americans where many of its country's leaders are born or educated..." Next, a minute and twenty seconds of on-camera interview with an officer who describes his troops' objective: to advance a few hundred yards and to take two buildings. Laurence asks what kind of fighting it will be and the officer answers, "House to house and from room to room." To this Laurence responds "Kind of inch by inch." Laurence then turns the interview to the subject of civilians. The officer says that he hopes his troops don't encounter any but finally concludes, "If there is somebody in there right now, they're Charlie as far as we're concerned."

Laurence's voiceover resumes: "Contact." The ambient sound is gunfire. Marines are pinned down in the few feet of dirt and cactus behind a low wall. Kay's camera is behind the wall with them and pans down their ranks toward one who is lying very still. "The first sniper shots ricochet around the thick walls of the building taking the first casualties of the first squad," the narration continues. Amidst unintelligible shouts the men prepare to move ahead to the next wall 40 feet ahead. "The assault." But only one Marine is seen running forward into the fire. That Marine disappears from view and Laurence tells us that he is wounded. Laurence also tells us that two more have run ahead and one has been killed. We cannot see them. Kay too is pinned down by sniper fire. Laurence's last line of narration: "It is inch by shattered inch in the five day battle for Hué" (pp. 28-9).

That Laurence has been at the front certifies both entitlement and obligation. "To witness an event is to be responsible in some way to it," writes Peters (2001:708) of the first meaning of witness – to see for one's self. The second meaning specifies that responsibility – to represent to others what one has seen. "[B]y the very act of looking, individuals in the witnessing audience become accomplices in the events they see," writes Ellis (2000:11). "Events on a screen make a mute appeal: 'You cannot say you did not know.'" This is the responsibility to which Laurence returns throughout his memoir as in this exchange with a Marine in the midst of the day's fighting:

'You guys must be fuckin *crazy* to come out here.'
 'No more crazy than you,' I said.
 'Hey, man, we don't have anything to say about it. You guys have a *choice*.'
 'Not as much as you think.' (pp. 29-30)

The Big Picture is Not the Five O'clock Follies

The account in Laurence's memoir of day five at Hué is a far more gripping war story than his broadcast report. He writes of watching as two Marines run across a street under fire. A third follows:

Red tracers from the NVA machinegun flashed at his knees. The Marine stumbled in the middle of the street and fell heavily, as if tackled at the ankles. He did not cry out. Trying to pull himself out of the line of fire on his elbows, he reached back with each movement of his upper body and dragged his wounded legs, one at a time, with him. He moved only a few inches. The two Marine next to the wall dropped the machinegun and crawled into the street on their forearms and pulled the wounded man with them back to the far wall. They left a ribbon of blood on the black pavement marking where they had been, a thin red line. (p. 24)

This scene does not appear in the broadcast report because Laurence had gone out early and without Kay. In recalling the scene, however, Laurence specifies the use that he will make of the entitlement that witnessing such events earns him:

Keith isn't going to believe this, I though, I wish he were here to film it. No one's got a scene this close before. Despite the volume of war coverage on American TV, combat as close as this was not often captured on film... I was determined to show people at home, especially the families, what was happening to their young men, what the price was for having them here. (p. 25)

Thus, paradoxically, if he and Kay and can get close enough they will be able to capture the big picture that he feels obligated to represent: not the geo-politics of the war but its personal price.

The combat recounted in the memoir is bloodier, more in the manner of Hollywood, than the events actually aired on *CBS Evening News with Walter Cronkite*. Both the memoir and the broadcast report reflect the moral imperative of being there, but the report necessarily also reflects the technological imperative of being there: the need for pictures. Precisely because it was less 'realistic,' however, the report was probably a more suitable metonym for the fight over Hué and all of Vietnam: Marines pinned down by fire from an unseen source; shouting and running out of frame; and then dying, so we understand, to gain an inch. Laurence and Kay's filmed and narrated impressions, which are given some coherence by the officer's explanation, travel easily from experience to allegory. Even if battling and dying to gain an inch is a narrative cliché of war, it is nonetheless the appropriate allegory for *this* battle in *this* war.

If the broadcast report can be read as metonym for some big picture it certainly isn't the picture offered at the Five O'clock Follies. By the time of Tet, the humanity – or lack of it – exhibited by individual soldiers and civilians is, for Laurence, the only picture worth reporting. Recalling the weeks after the Tet, Laurence writes of the mood he shared with his colleagues:

We were tougher now, more experienced, quicker to criticize, less tolerant of the MACV mission of pacifying the country by pulverizing it... Senior MACV officers argued politely that we were so absorbed with day-to-day details of the misery that we couldn't see what they saw, "the big picture", a picture that showed American and Vietnamese forces pacifying hamlets as never before, crippling the VC, killing them in larger and larger numbers and, therefore, by any objective evaluation, winning the war. (p. 486)

From Laurence's point of view, however, the day-to-day details of the misery *were* the big picture that must be reported:

To see someone risk his life for the well-being of another, or for the group, instilled faith in the human condition. But I was coming to see the war as inexpressibly sad, ruinous, wasteful in every way. Something close to truth was being revealed. If you stayed around long enough and went into the field often enough, what you saw was the best and worst of human behavior... (pp. 487)

At his point in his recollections Laurence refers to an event that produced an iconic image of this truth: the murder of a Viet Cong prisoner in a Saigon street – a bullet to the head delivered by General Nguyen Ngoc Loan. “People outside Vietnam were shocked at what appeared to be such a cruel act, but those who were there knew that murder was common in the war,” Laurence wrote. “Corroding, decadent, corrupting, suicidal – the big picture revealed the darkest side of our collective American culture, a government-sponsored death machine careening out of control, little morality or restraint left in it” (p. 488). As the report from Hué suggests, however, this understanding of the big picture was not yet explicitly communicated in Laurence’s reports.

Poetry in the Graveyard

While the report on day five at Hué did capture something of the experience of combat, it did not capture the stories of individual combatants. It was Laurence and Kay’s own impressions of nameless and often faceless grunts engaging an invisible enemy.^v If Laurence’s impressions traveled from experience to allegory, they moved too quickly to engender very much empathy for the combatants. While this story form – faceless soldiers in the face of battle – was common, it certainly was not the only form that Laurence employed in his attempt to represent his big picture: the price of war paid by humanity. In pursuit of this picture Laurence and Kay had decided in late 1967, only a short time before Tet, to follow-up on their earlier reporting from Con Thien, an outpost near the Demilitarized Zone between North and South Vietnam known to the Marines who defended it as the graveyard.

“[T]he biggest reason for going back to Con Thien was that Kay and I wanted to show Americans how costly the war had become, how brutal and wasteful it was, what it was doing to individual young men who were trapped in it,” Laurence writes of his attempt to justify to his worried colleagues his decision to go to such a dangerous place (p.441). After two and half years of war he thought that television coverage had become “routine – straight, everyday reportage without the poignancy, irony or tragedy we believed was there.” Elaborating on his motives he

invokes the concept of empathy. “Our motivation was not high-minded or noble; there was nothing moral about it, not even political. Part of it was our empathy with the American troops,” he writes (p. 442). “It seemed senseless for them to give up their lives for a war strategy that wasn’t working.”

While this passage may well conflate empathy with mere sympathy, Laurence makes it clear that he wants the public to understanding something that both reporters and soldiers knew:

Most of us came to believe the war was an absolute failure of logic, a tragic waste of life. Being there, living it, thinking about it all the time, reporters and line soldiers were able to interpret events with special clarity. Out of our shared experiences came an understanding, an informal contract that was honored without being defined, a trade off. When we visited them in the field, the troops made us welcome, shared their food and shelter, tried to see that we didn’t get hurt, told us as much as they could about what was going on in their small sector of the war. In return, reporters told a part of the soldiers’ story to the people at home. (pp. 442-3)

Laurence and Kay set off for Con Thien with a supply convoy on the only road to the base. They pass the wreckage of a similar convoy ambushed ten days before, but this time there is no ambush. Upon arrival they receive a briefing from the commanding officer and instructions from their assigned escort, Captain Jansen, about what do when the shelling starts. “‘Actually,’ Jansen said, ‘the best thing for you to do is watch the guys. When they start running, you run after them’” (p. 451). The official function of this base is to observe North Vietnamese Army movements through the DMZ, and during a lull in the shelling Laurence makes his way to the observation post. When the shelling begins again an officer calls the post to ask if the men can see where the rounds originate:

“No, sir, don’t see a thing,” one of the Marines in the tower said in reply. He smiled at the suggestion that he put his head above the sandbags and look. More explosions hit the camp. “Every time we get incoming,” the Marine said, confidently, “that lieutenant calls and asks if we see where it’s coming from and every time we say, ‘No sir, don’t see a thing.’ Fact is, those damned guns of theirs are firing from the back slopes in the DMZ. We can’t do much about them. (p. 454)

“The Marines had built a combat base around a hill whose main function was observation, but they didn’t appear to be observing,” Laurence notes of this moment. “Why provide a fixed target for the enemy to shell and sacrifice men every day to defend a position that wasn’t working?”

Neither that moment nor Laurence’s thoughts about it were included in the broadcast report, however. The incident was not filmed. Moreover any such thoughts probably could not

have been molded into the sort of journalism that would have made the evening news. Indeed Walter Cronkite's lead-in to Laurence's report described Con Thien as a "key US outpost." The hard news on the day the report was aired, September 11, 1967, was a series of fire fights around the base that had become more intense in the time between Laurence's day in Con Thien, September 7, and the day of the broadcast. Cronkite reported that 700 Marines had driven off about 3000 North Vietnamese Army regulars. Next MACV's version of the big picture: at least NVA 140 dead. "But the Marines too paid heavily," Cronkite's copy read, "with 34 dead and 185 wounded." This segued to Laurence's little picture of Con Thien described in Cronkite's copy as part of "that deadly struggle to keep the lifeline open."

"The convoy to Con Thien goes once a day and it does not stay long," Laurence's report began. Kay's images taken from a bouncing truck reveal a road dissecting a barren landscape. "It is the only source of supply for the Marine outpost on the Demilitarized Zone, and it rides the only road that goes there." We see, unremarked upon in Laurence's voice-over, a tank destroyed in the ambush. Next we see some of the troops riding in the truck back to their base. "The Marines say the worst part of a pass from Con Thien is coming back." And then a young Marine turns, profile toward the camera, no longer faceless. "Corporal Edward Broderick has been in Con Thien about two month and has written a poem about it." No longer nameless the corporal leans into Laurence's microphone and quickly, without flourish, recites his short poem.

This moment was recorded when, riding the truck to the post, Laurence had noticed the poem written in red and blue ink on the flak jacket of the young Marine who said he was headed home in 15 days. Unable to read the faded words Laurence asked Broderick, age 20 of Alton, Illinois, to read the poem on camera. Laurence reconstructs the scene in the memoir:

"I don't know that I can remember it right off," he said. "It's been a while." His manner was shy, self-conscious.

Well, try it once on your own," I said.

Broderick took off the flak jacket, read the poem to himself, and put it back on again. "Okay," he said, more confidently. With the camera rolling Kay signaled that he was ready. Broderick recited in flat, even voice:

When youth was a soldier
And we fought across the sea,
We were young and cold hearts,
Of bloody savagery.

Born of Indignation
 Children of our time
 We were orphans of creation
 And dying in our prime.

No one spoke. Other Marines in the truck shifted their weight. Flies buzzed.
 "What made you write that poem?" I asked.
 "Well, just the way things are," he said. (p.448)

The broadcast report included, along with the poem, Laurence's question and Broderick's response; but it captured neither the thoughts of the other Marines nor the buzzing of the flies which somehow seems an important detail of the scene as Laurence recreated it.

The report moves on and Laurence's narration continues. "You don't spend long in Con Thien before the action starts." Pictures and sound are a flurry of action. The commanding officer directs a rifle company operating beyond the perimeter until a shell lands nearby. Along with everyone else, Kay and his camera roll into a foxhole. And then we see Laurence, microphone in hand, who composes in that instant an on-camera bridge. "That whistling sound you hear is incoming artillery fire. You may actually be able to see it landing." The camera pans to shells exploding. The sound is mostly unintelligible except for a command: "...God damn...get something going here..." And then another line of Laurence's subtly masterful narration which he recalls was inspired by the image of a wooden coffin under construction: "Every few minutes, and sometimes every few seconds, the guns go off, their guns and our guns, whistling and pounding with the incessant, methodological efficiency of a carpenter hammering nails."

Laurence's voice-overs help make a little sense of the combat that we see in the four-minute report, but only a little. The 27 pages of his memoir devoted to this report from Con Thien make some more sense of it, but only some. And perhaps that is the point: the fog of war. But whatever implicit point may be taken, the report concludes with an explicit point that is Laurence's essential message: the cost of war. Returning down the road from Con Thien, the journalists encounter a US tank column under rocket fire. The goal of the tank movements is not clear but the accuracy of the rocket fire is. The tanks pull back out of range. "They carry some of the casualties from the rocket attack," Laurence's narration concludes, "some of the young men Corporal Broderick wrote his poem about." The report ends with the corporal in voice over: "...Children of our time/ We were orphans of creation/ And dying in our prime."

Without Cronkite's lead-in the report from Con Thien has little hard news value. It is only the ongoing situation in the graveyard which is *still* being shelled. But that situation allowed, if not demanded, poetry in answer to what Laurence characterizes "a difficult question because most troops didn't talk about it often" (p. 448). The question is simply what soldiers thought about the war. "It was hard to but into words," he writes. "Even when they did, it was impossible to give a short honest answer without getting into trouble with the higher-ups." Laurence accepts the poem as an honest answer. It is an answer, moreover, from a soldier with a name, a face and a voice; and with that, Laurence and Kay's little picture is equipped to travel more deeply into consciousness. On its journey from the experience of Corporal Broderick, age 20 of Alton, Illinois, to an allegory of the children of our time, this skillfully appropriated and retold story pauses for a few seconds of its four minutes to allow us the opportunity to empathize with one of those orphans of creation.

A Failure of Representation

Another empathic moment at Con Thien did not appear in the story because it could neither be filmed nor shaped into the broadcast journalism of its era:

When one heavy explosion shook the bunker, I saw a shadow cross Jansen's face, a faint hint of frailty, a look in this eyes that suggested uncertainty, but only for an instant. Then he looked grave again... Each time his Marine officer identity slipped, Jansen pulled it back. He saw me watching and smiled. (p. 460)

The inability to report such moments had long weighed on Laurence. "The true war rarely got reported. A multitude of facts were reported instead," he writes (p. 402). "Even on television which related more graphic images of the violence and its consequences than press coverage of previous wars, it wasn't reality." The level of realism that television could achieve could not capture this elemental reality of battle:

[T]he wild rage of men trying to kill one another at close range, shooting and shouting and reloading their weapons, the roar of gunfire like long continuous explosions in their ears, the frustration a jammed rifle, the panic, confusion and fear, the reckless valor, the anger and desperation, the shock of a gunshot wound and then the slow burning pain, the sensation of one's own blood flowing away... (pp. 403-4)

Laurence goes to confess his sense of inability to empathize with people in this situation:

We could not report these things in truth because we were not soldiers ourselves, we weren't living it. We shared the risks and discomforts from time to time, but we were always outside the disciplined authority and therefore the true experience of wartime

military life. We could leave the field when we wished. We did not have to fight. Although we risked being killed, we did not have to kill. (p. 404)

But confronting this inability was exactly the challenge he undertook, when in 1970 after several years in the United States, he turned to Vietnam, along with Keith Kay and sound engineer Jim Clevenger, to create a documentary that would become his wartime masterwork.

Central to Laurence's concept for a film about the daily lives of soldiers in the field is access to a unit facing combat. "We believed that our film had to have spontaneous dramatic action sequences," he writes (pp. 530-1). "The danger of fighting and death, even on routine patrol, would cause viewers to want to know what was going to happen next." But the film would not be 'bang-bang' for its own sake as the network so often demanded. Rather it would be a message to viewers for whom the war had receded "so far from sight that any urgency to stop the slaughter was diminished by the distance and the endless repetition of its horror." As it turns out, however, the documentary portrays no battles because, despite commanders' expectations, the unit that the army selects (an element of the First Cavalry Division operating near the Cambodian border) happens to engage in little combat while Laurence and his crew are with it. This disappoints them, but in the finished work it also serves to highlight the central allegory – the seemingly intractable entanglement in Vietnam – by not submerging it in bang-bang.

To Those 'Back in the World'

"The World of Charlie Company" begins with, and often returns to an image long familiar to news viewers of the era: a column of soldiers trudging through the jungle, the camera moving with them. Laurence is heard in tersely-phrased voice over:

An American rifle company in Vietnam and Cambodia. The period: March through June, this year. The mission: Kill the enemy. But, even here, the troops reflect the unrest over the war troubling the country they left, 'back in the world.'

This unrest, as reflected specifically by Charlie Company, is the primary frame of the documentary in its guise of a news report on current events. The unrest frame is then illustrated and personified in the juxtaposition of two sound bites. In the first, Laurence asks a soldier for his feelings about killing. "I don't have any; don't mean nothing," responds the soldier later identified as Sergeant Lyman "Killer" Dunnuck. "Just – I guess you could say it was a job to do, either you get killed or you kill him, so better him than me." In the second bite another soldier says,

apparently in response to same question and in the intonation of a 60's teenager, "Oh wow!" This soldier, later identified as Medic Richard "Doc" Howe continues, "There's no doubt about it – it's wrong. You know – I mean, the Bible says, 'Thou shalt not kill.' It doesn't say, 'Thou shalt not kill,' parenthesis, 'unless there's a war or you hate somebody.'"

"The World of Charlie Company" is assembled primarily from reports broadcast on the evening news; and Laurence first uses the interviews with Dunnuck, Howe and others in a report entitled "Charlie Company on Patrol (Part III)." While Dunnuck's thoughts on killing are used in that report, Howe is portrayed less as a dissenter than as a respected medic with guts. He is quoted to say, however, "If I ever do have to kill somebody I think I'd go insane afterwards." Overall this report is framed not in terms of unrest but rather the physical labor of patrolling the jungle. Nonetheless Laurence realizes that the interviews would speak powerfully to the mood of the grunts as well as many Americans back in the world. "Nothing we had seen or read in previous coverage of the war had been so outspoken, so defiant" he recalls (p. 687). Thus "The World of Charlie Company" reframes – that is to say, re-appropriates – the stories of these soldiers with the expectation that the comments of Howe and others, like Hindley who simply refuses ever to fire his gun, "would go off in America like a grenade."

Following the introduction of the antithesis embodied by Dunnuck and Howe, a microcosm not only of the military but the nation, the documentary returns to the column moving slowly through the jungle. "You don't want to go too fast." Dunnuck whispers. "You're liable to walk right into it." He is heard in voice over which is made necessary because the sound camera has malfunctioned. Laurence whispers, "Stay off the trail?" And Dunnuck replies, "You don't want to walk down no trail. You won't be coming back." With the idea of staying off trails introduced, another sound bite follows. "Was there a rebellion today?" Laurence asks from off camera foreshadowing the central event of the documentary. "You might call it that," replies another soldier. "Back in the world we call it rebellion. Here its just downright refusal." The interview is interrupt with a stamp of authenticity for all media made in Vietnam – the thumping of helicopter rotors causing the soldier to turn away from the camera to avoid the noise and dust.

Laurence appears on camera looking earnest and “owlishly young behind horn rimmed glasses,” as *Daily Variety* described him in a review of the documentary. In terms that could still be characterized as strong language in 1970 he explicitly sets the documentary’s frame as the unrest troubling the American military. And more subtly he alludes to time which has flowed on “back in the world” but seems to have slowed here.

Spring 1970. After five years of killing, the gears of the Vietnam death machine were grinding more slowly in the months before the invasion of Cambodia. After years of war, the lives of the line infantrymen – the grunts – were practically the same: young men with guns tramping around the topical jungles, living like the other animals, occasionally engaging in the death game the first grunts were sent here for in 1965. But there did appear to be a change in their attitudes in 1970, a sense of independence. Sometimes there was open rebelliousness.

The theme of time in the life of a soldier will yield one of the most empathically poignant moments in “The World of Charlie Company.” At this point in the documentary, however, Laurence continues with the frame of unrest by describing the conflict between the lifers, career soldiers, and the grunts who are mostly draftees:

The grunts were determined to survive. Since they were forced to endure the most extreme physical hardships, they insisted on having something to say in the making of decisions that determined whether they might live or die. It happened, among other units, in Charlie Company.

Next the CBS Eye fills the screen. The audio is voice over: “This is a CBS News Special Report.” And so the stories of Charlie Company begin their travels.

Mail Call

A scene of soldiers gathering for mail call is a sentimental cliché of war stories whether fiction or fact. That sentimentality, however, is mitigated by the effectiveness of letters from home as an allegory for the distances of space, time and experience that divide those at war from those at home – the distance referenced as ‘back in the world.’ As he reads a letter from back in the world, the boyish face and bare chest of PFC Bob Teschker of Trenton, Michigan, fill the frame of Kay’s camera. The news from his fiancée is that her brother, also in the service, is home for a visit; she has just gotten a raise at work and brought new clothes for the approaching summer. “Mainly, I guess, she wishes I was there with her,” Teschker says. When Laurence asks what he wishes, the young soldier gins broadly as he imagines life back in the world. “Oh, I wish the same thing,” he responds. “But I’m getting along. I’m used to the idea. Mainly, I just keep writing

and hope she keeps writing me.” And so life back in the world goes on, but even its mundane moments are precious when word of them finally arrives here.

Time moves differently in the war zone than back in the world, but it is also moves differently for PFC Jorge Rivera of New York City than for many other soldiers. At 29 he is the oldest member of unit and has been seriously wounded once. Now he has the shortest time left to serve in Vietnam. He pauses while reading a letter from his wife who worries about his situation there. He then speaks of time:

Yeah, when you get short like that, you kind of get started to worrying. You worry when you're going walking down the bush. You worry about getting hit. For me, I worry about getting hit *again*. I don't intend for that to happen again. But you never can tell.

A small man with fine features, Rivera is filmed nestled into the surrounding jungle. He turns the letter over and over in his hands and then gestures pointedly at Laurence who is off camera:

You feel that there's somebody after you, specifically just *you*, because you're short. They don't want nobody else but you. Spooky. It's really something.

Then Rivera smiles wistfully and falls silent. In close up he lowers his gaze. The camera tilts down to the letter in his hands. It is the most poignant moment in the documentary. The soldier's longing for home is palpable. In the memoir Laurence reconstructs an exchange with Kay concerning the interview with Rivera:

'He was great,' Kay said softly as we walked away.'
'How close were you?' I said.
'Head and shoulders.'
'God he was honest.'
'Yeah, I feel sorry for him.' (p. 639)

Although not shown in the documentary, the mail call interviews come to a quick end with word that another company of the battalion has just suffered seven KIA.

While Laurence and Kay's exchange seems to confound empathy, witnessing an honest moment, with sympathy, feeling sorry for the soldier, they are obviously aware of the potential of that moment to help close the distance between the soldier and the viewer. Essential to closing that distance is an empathetic grasp of the experience that is among the most difficult to grasp: temporality. However, Laurence himself has experienced the "short-timer's syndrome" (p. 8); and with Rivera, he and Kay have captured it movingly. At the same time the documentary makers have also created an allegory of their attempt at mediated empathy. For the soldiers' families the

letters are the bridge to the war zone and for the soldiers they are the bridge back into the world – but only in imagination. So it is, despite the powers of television, for the viewers of “The World of Charlie Company” who can cross the bridge only in imagination. And as Laurence acknowledges, despite *being there*, even he could cross it only in imagination.

Walking the Road

Shortly after the scenes of mail call, the soldier who spoke of rebellion in the opening is introduced by name: SPC4 Gordy Lee from San Diego. Now he is speaking of his respect for the company commander. “And it seems like with Captain Jackson, we just kind of lead an almost charmed life,” he says. “And boy, I’m not for knocking that.” Captain Jackson is introduced as a career officer but not one that the troops contemptuously call a “lifer.” Then Jackson speaks. “The people in the company, I’m sure, realize that – that we take a lot less casualties than other people. And they see reasons. Like, we don’t use trails,” he says. “[T]here’s not problem in finding the enemy. You can just walk down a trail and you’ll eventually find him. But it will be on his terms.”

Next, however, we learned that Jackson is to be replaced by a new commander, Captain Rice, who has conclude that Jackson has been too cautious. We see Jackson shaking hands with Rivera, Howe, Dunnuck and others. A soldier says of the change, “It’s sort of like moving from one house to the other and having a different father. It just doesn’t work right for a long time.” After the farewell it’s back into the jungle. Charlie Company moves in a column with the camera pacing along. Laurence in voiceover:

The first few days after the change in commanders are much the same for Charlie Company. The mission and the misery have not changed. But although the men do not know it yet, the world of Charlie Company is about to be shaken. And life will not be the same for months to come. It is April 6th, the end of the first week in the command of Captain Rice. Today, however, his authority is about to be tested, traumatically.

As the column moves on, Laurence continues to set the scene. Rice has been ordered to move his men to a road for pickup by helicopters. The road turns out to be only six feet wide and enclosed by jungle. Choppers cannot land. Rice is ordered to move the company to a landing zone nearly a mile down the road. Sgt. Dunnuck does not like the situation and refuses to step out of the jungle. “I ain’t going to walk down there,” he says. “My whole squad ain’t walking down

there.” The platoon leader, a young lieutenant, looks on helplessly as the entire column stops. Rice comes forward. “I don’t know what to do,” Laurence recalls Rice saying (p. 646). “I’ve got a *mutiny* on my hands.” In the documentary, however, we see Rice immediately demanding that his orders be followed. “We’re going to move out on the road. Period,” he says.

Rice starts down the road. Only a few men follow but then Rice receives new orders to go down the road in the opposite direction a few hundred yards. This time Dunnuck and his squad move out but very reluctantly. “It’s crazy – it’s senseless, walking down the road,” says Rivera as the column spreads out along the narrow track. “I guess we’ll just have to see what happens.” Kay’s camera is in front of them as they walk slowly, nervously scanning the dense foliage. “This is one of the things that I told you about when we were wondering what the new C.O. was going to be like,” says another soldier. The picture is a close up of Rice’s face looking no less tense than the rest – although in military terms he would probably be said to be exhibiting heightened situational awareness. “And these are the kind of things which you don’t want him to be like.” Despite Rivera’s short time, nothing happens. There is no ambush. The company finds a suitable landing zone. Rice takes moment to chew out his lieutenants. The company is lifted out.

After the episode on the road, word of journalists’ presence to document it quickly moves up the chain of command. The next day Laurence and his team are summoned to brigade headquarters. In an attempt to obtain either an explanation for the seemingly arbitrary orders or else a comment on the men’s response, Laurence takes the extraordinary step of reading to the assembled officers the copy he has prepared for the evening news. The commanding officer objects to the wording of the report; and the public information officer, who Laurence knows and feels he can trust, responds even more strongly:

‘*God damn it*, Jack, we don’t think it’s fair to use the word rebellion at all,’ Colman said, angry. ‘You make it sound like a God damned revolt!’

‘Well, J.D., it stands by itself,’ I said. ‘When people see the film of what happened they can make up their own minds whether it was a rebellion or a mutiny or a temporary reluctance to obey orders.’

‘You know damn well it depends on how you set it up in your narration,’ he said. ‘People are going to react to what you say on the film. And how it’s edited. That’s what matters.’

‘Well, we think it *was* a rebellion. So do the troops.’ (p. 658)

As both the journalist and the army officer know very well, factual documentation serves as evidence but evidence *of what* becomes the fundamental question.

The commanding officer does manage to shed some light on the reasons for the order to Rice. An attack had been expected on an outpost near Charlie Company and air strikes had been ordered. Because the unit did not have enough time to walk out of danger, it had been ordered to a helicopter landing zone. The order was not arbitrary and the risk not pointless, the officer argues, although he acknowledges that the air strike was simply cancelled when Charlie Company could not be evacuated quickly enough. Laurence sees all of the officers as protecting their promotions as much as their men. Perhaps too they are metonymically protecting their sense that the entire war is not arbitrary and pointless. In any case the public information officer's anger remains unabated. Laurence listens in astonished silence as the officer finally says:

“You should have tried to get the big picture. The story should be seen in the context of the old company commander leaving and the new one having problems... When we let you guys into our bedroom, you have to understand that all kinds of things happen. And you're seeing everything that happens, the bad with the good. And we want to be able to handle the bad in our own way. We want the dirty linen to come out clean.” (p. 660)

In the days after this meeting Laurence and his team continue to film Charlie Company. They capture the explosive interviews with Howe and others as well as the mail call segment. About two weeks later, however, they are called again to headquarters and learn they no longer will have access to the unit. Protests from CBS included a letter from the president of the news division, Richard Salant, to the assistant secretary of defense for public affairs but to no avail. Laurence leaves Charlie Company enveloped in “gray enduring gloom.” He and his team have filmed no combat while with the unit. He isn't even sure he has enough for a half-hour documentary. Beyond his concern about a final product the gloom is created by his feelings toward the men of Charlie Company – his love for the grunts:

Our attachment to them had become more than professional interest in what happened, more than personal concern for their well-being... No matter that we didn't carry weapons and didn't have to obey orders, we did most everything else with them and they respected us. We were a link between them and the world back home, the guys who covered the war and got it shown in the States. (pp. 741-2)

The episode on the road, like the other episodes in the documentary and the individual reports that came before it, can be read on three levels. The first and most explicit is simply the

personal stories of Dunnuck, Howe, Rivera and the others. Laurence and his team skillfully craft that “sensation of witness” on behalf of the troops and for the presumed benefit viewers. Their ability to witness is constrained by technology, bureaucracy and luck, but they do manage to record the raw materials of poignantly empathic allegory. In the imaginative transformation of experience into allegory, however, experience is first transformed into news. Thus the second level of reading is the appropriation of personal experience for use as broadcast journalism. If, as Ellis maintains, witnessing requires the creation of structure rather than merely the reproduction of raw experience, the news frame – in this case, unrest troubling the ranks of the military – provides that structure.

That the transformation of experience into news is indeed an act of appropriation is betrayed by the fact that the documentary is quite differently framed from the individual reports aired on the evening news. Those reports were framed as moments of daily life with the troops; but in the documentary, these moments become merely the context – daily life as hardship and danger – for examining the troops’ attitude toward the “lifers” who command them and toward the war itself. The episode of the road becomes the pivotal action exemplifying the frame of the entire documentary. What’s more, the act of appropriation is betrayed by the fact that this pivotal action can be counter-framed as simply an example of the challenges that new commanders inevitably confront. Laurence himself confirms this by reporting that a faculty member of the United States Military Academy at West Point asked to use the story in instructional materials intended to help cadets feel empathy for the situation of new commanders (p. 753). In the documentary this alternative interpretation does appear, but Laurence does not allow it to defuse the episode as an example of disarray in the army.

The third level is the transformation of experience into allegory. The mail call sequence as already noted is an allegory of its own creation with its empathy-evoking tale of bridging distance and time.^{vi} The central action of the documentary, Charlie Company’s walk down the road, is even more easily and compelling read as allegory. It is the American situation in Vietnam: a journey into danger undertaken in ignorance. It is, moreover, an exercise in pointlessness because as it turns out that the threat, the nearby bombing, was simply cancelled

when Charlie Company could not be evacuated in time. The allegorical figure of walking the road is better understood as synecdoche than metaphor because it neatly captures the quality of the larger whole of which it is a part: arbitrary commands, denial of common sense, danger without justification, pointlessness of the endeavor. Thus it is an allegory for soldiering in Vietnam and, what's more, the American experience in Vietnam. All America is on the road.

The rejection of the initial order to walk the road by Charlie Company is also an allegory of the reassertion of human agency – another theme developed in the documentary but not the original report. Like Charlie Company the American people too can choose not to walk the road any longer. To be sure, this allegory of political choice is subverted by official invention in the form of new orders that are obeyed even if hesitantly. And yet Sgt. Dunnuck's refusal of the initial order – "I ain't going to walk down there" – does assert at least the possibility of choice. Thus the episode moves from anecdote to example to multi-themed allegory. Shuman would argue that any sense of empathy is bestowed by allegory; but in this case, it is Laurence's attempt at empathy that bestows the reward of this politically-charged allegory. That Laurence did not consciously plan this allegorical meaning in no way refutes the legitimacy of this reading. As Walter Benjamin argued, "Whoever grasps the particular in all its vitality also grasps the general, without being aware of it, or only becoming aware of it at a later stage" (1968:161).

Conclusion

Do Laurence's little pictures matter? That, of course, is a question that cannot be answered with any precision or certainty. But whatever the dynamics of public opinion formation and change in the Vietnam era and whatever the impact of public opinion on the policy process, it is probably safe to say that those American's who turned against the war did so less because their understanding of geo-politics had changed than because they had a gut-full of death. Such feelings may have been influenced by the big picture of mounting casualty statistics and other geo-political realities provided by officials, but it must also have been influenced the little pictures regularly provided by Laurence, Kay and many other correspondents in Vietnam.

In *The Uncensored War* Daniel Hallin (1986) argues that very little actual battle could be seen by television viewers during this, the first supposed living room war. Perhaps, however, not

many reports such as that from Con Thien were really needed for viewers to piece together Laurence's version of the big picture from those many little pictures each with their fragment of allegory. In this regard it may be worth considering that Michael Arlen (1969) who coined the term "living room war" did so when writing for the *New Yorker* about Laurence, Kay and that orphan of creation all returning to Con Thien. And while not every casualty of the war fell wounded or dead in America's living room, perhaps enough like the Marines in Hué could be glimpsed or just imagined from the sofa to make a difference.

And perhaps too "The World of Charlie Company" with no fighting at all made its point. With this in mind it may be worth considering that after the broadcast of the mail call segment, the last of the individual reports about Charlie Company aired on *CBS Evening News with Walter Cronkite*, and in the midst of Laurence's melancholy about the denial of further access to the unit, Laurence received a cable from New York reporting that the network was flooded with calls from viewers who wanted to write to the soldier who had received no letters on the day that mail call was filmed. What may be most worth considering, then, is when and how empathy *is* understanding.

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ⁱ John Laurence made a reputation at New York radio station WNEW in the early 1960s covering the civil rights movement in the South. Moving to CBS News he wanted to cover Vietnam for radio but was told by news division president Fred Friendly that the network could not afford a radio-only correspondent and he would have to report for television as well. He quickly learned television with the help of photographer Jimmy Wilson and on his first year-long tour of Vietnam beginning in August 1965 he had more than 30 stories on *CBS Evening News with Walter Cronkite*. A year later he returned and had more than 20 stories aired between September 1967 and February 1968. His stories contained more interviews with "grunts" as the enlisted foot soldiers were called, than with officers, officials or any other group (as tabulated from 9,450 network evening news reports August 1965-August 1975.) He also reported other major stories as diverse as Woodstock, the 1968 Democratic Political Convention in Chicago and the trial of the "Chicago 8" (later 7). He returned to Vietnam in 1970 specifically to report a documentary about the daily lives of the GIs in a war that had changed a great deal in the previous two years. Segments of the documentary reported by Laurence, photographer Keith Kay and sound engineer James Cleavenger were first broadcast on *CBS Evening News with Walter Cronkite* concluding with a report from inside Cambodia during the "incursion" into that country ordered by President Nixon. The one-hour documentary assembled from this material, "The World of Charlie Company," was first broadcast on CBS on July 14, 1970. Later operating from London, Laurence covered the violence in Northern Ireland and the war in Bangladesh, among many foreign assignments. He left CBS for ABC and frequently contributed to *Nightline* including a two-part "Search for the American Dream" as his final assignment as a staff correspondent in November 1992. He continued freelance reporting including stories from Iraq in 2003 for National Public Radio. He lives in England.

ⁱⁱ The Tet (lunar new year holiday) offensive in which North Vietnamese Army and Viet Cong units attacked more than 100 South Vietnamese cities and towns including Saigon is described by many as a tipping point in US public support for the war. In fact, however, by the Fall of 1967 several polls indicated that the country was for the first time nearly equally divided between so-called 'hawks' and 'doves.' In general, public support for the war gradually but steadily declined from a peak in early 1966. See John E. Mueller's (1973) *War, Presidents and Public Opinion*, especially Chapter 5. Also Oberdorfer (1971), Peter Braestrup (1977) and Schandler (1977).

ⁱⁱⁱ These are available on the DVD compilation "Vietnam War with Walter Cronkite" where Cronkite's praise for "The World of Charlie Company" is voiced.

^{iv} Film was flown to New York for processing and editing resulting in a delay of several days.

^v The visual absence of the enemy, particularly the Viet Cong, is another metonym of Vietnam – if absence of a figure can be a trope.

^{vi} This interpretation draws upon James Clifford's (1986) argument that ethnographies are often allegories of their own creation: the work of inscribing authentic culture just at the moment of its disappearance.