

War and race

Decades in the making, the novel "Matterhorn" depicts racism and patriotism in the Vietnam War

BY MIKE WOLD
STREET NEWS SERVICE

There's something deep inside us that is fascinated by war. As journalist Chris Hedges put it, "War is a force that gives us meaning." At the same time, as countless war novels attest, there are few things that seem as meaningless as the deaths of soldiers in battle.

Karl Marlantes' "Matterhorn: a Novel of the Vietnam War" finely illustrates the fascination of war and its apparent meaninglessness. The plot is structured as a series of exercises in futility: A platoon, led by rookie lieutenant Waino Mellas, establishes a base camp on a mountain (named "Matterhorn" by the U.S. military) and then abandons it when strategy changes. They're sent on a long trek through the jungle to search for North Vietnamese Army (NVA) supply dumps and find very little, but suffer casualties from immersion foot (long-term foot exposure to warm, wet conditions), leeches, cerebral malaria and even a tiger — as well as starvation due to a screw-up at the battalion level.

Regardless of their backgrounds, these experiences bond the men together. Among others, there's Jackson, a black intellectual; Vancouver, a Canadian just looking for a way to forget his life by fighting another country's war; Cassidy, a racist white sergeant; China, a black radical; Connolly, a Boston Irish working man; and Amarillo, a Chicano from Texas. Most of them are teenagers, something Marlantes emphasizes repeatedly throughout the book.

When they get back from the jungle, the NVA has occupied the bunkers they've just built. The platoon is ordered to retake Matterhorn with insufficient force; they're successful, but don't have enough soldiers

to hold it. Surrounded by a major thrust of NVA troops and isolated without enough ammunition or water, they are finally rescued. Then, to "regain their honor," they are ordered to retake the mountain again. As the book ends, strategy changes and the mountain is once more abandoned.

In the process, much of the platoon is killed, replaced by fresh newbies from training. Mellas is promoted to company executive officer, replaced by another white officer, doomed rookie Lt. Fracasso. Marlantes shows how these men become heroes, not for dreams of glory, but because, even faced with insane orders, they care about each other: "The attack went on — not because of any conscious decision, but because of friendship. Jackson went running forward, more to see if Fracasso was alive than for tactical reasons. Vancouver saw Jackson heading for the lieutenant and decided that even if the platoon were in a hopeless shit sandwich he'd be goddamned if he'd let Jackson run forward alone. ... Connolly, seeing Vancouver charging forward, did exactly the same, although his mind cried out to him to merge with the great welcoming earth beneath his feet."

Marlantes makes it clear how this bonding is used. When Lt. Mellas is wounded, a nurse tells him: "You've got to

understand what we do here. ... We fix weapons. ... Right now you're a broken guidance system for forty rifles, three machine guns, a bunch of mortars. ... Our job is to get you fixed and back in action as fast as we can." The callousness of senior officers toward casualties is a given; a few care about the men, but most see them as tools to be used to advance their own careers.

In spite of the bonding, there's also a developing conflict between militant black and racist white soldiers. In the field, they all support each other; but back at the base, fights break out and "fragging" — killing unpopular and racist officers with a grenade — is an implicit and sometimes explicit threat.

Marlantes' novel thus works on a number of levels; the plot is powered by the horrific excitement of battle and the uneasy suspense of being on patrol in a dangerous environment, as well as the social divisions between the men. His description of military strategy is lucid; we understand the calculated reasoning that sends soldiers into battle even when they are certain to suffer heavy casualties. The book is punctuated by an implicit critique of the authoritarianism, hierarchy and racism that allows high-ranking officers to casually send their men to die for questionable reasons. Marlantes

doesn't have much political agenda beyond this, except for a clear dislike of the mixing of politics with military strategy. He admires the spirit of the Marines, even as he criticizes the uses to which they are put.

Marlantes seems more pro-soldier than anti-war in this. The Marines respect the courage of the NVA, as compared to their own South Vietnamese allies, who have little interest in fighting. In a revealing dialogue between Lt. Mellas and a fellow lieutenant, the second lieutenant wishes the NVA were on "our" side. Mellas tells him, "Wait 25 years and they may be; they were 25 years ago." Oh, says the lieutenant, "Who switched sides?" "I think we did — we used to be against colonialism, but now we're against communism."

Like Marlantes, I have to admire the great spirit and courage of people who can sacrifice themselves, in spite of their terror, their exhaustion and their wounds, because of love for each other. Like him, I would question the uses to which this great spirit is put. Perhaps the question is to what use we could put such heroism, if we didn't waste it on war.

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