HAYES, HERR AND SACK: ESQUIRE GOES TO VIETNAM

By

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Special thanks go to Harold Hayes, John Sack and Michael Herr for having the vision, guts and talent to show us that journalism can – and should – be about more than simply a recitation of facts and figures. Done right, their brand of literary journalism continues to enlighten, entertain and captivate us to this day.

Lastly, I would like to thank my girlfriend, Stephanie, for good naturedly putting up with all the requisite mood swings, panic attacks and days of unanswered phone messages as I wrote this thesis.
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This thesis will examine the work of Harold Hayes, Michael Herr and John Sack, and what their loose collaboration while serving as editor and writers respectively for *Esquire* magazine during the 1960s contributed to the journalistic coverage of America’s involvement in Vietnam.

Specifically, this work will look at how, using techniques generally ascribed to literary journalism, Herr and Sack went beyond traditional reporting – often reliant on military press briefings and official interviews conducted in air conditioned offices – to delve deeper and reveal a truer picture of the conflict and its human costs.

Likewise, this thesis will examine editor Hayes’ management style, journalistic vision and personality, and what impact these traits had on his decision to break new ground and give two relatively unknown writers the green light to cover Vietnam as they saw fit.

The text will also include biographical information on each journalist as well as glimpses into the psyches and motivations of three men who wanted to do it differently.
Ultimately, it is hoped that this thesis will demonstrate not only what the work and vision of Hayes, Herr and Sack meant to coverage of the Vietnam War but what their efforts meant to journalism as a whole.
CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

During the 1960s, *Esquire* magazine emerged as the vanguard for literary journalism. Much of the credit, arguably, goes to editor Harold Hayes, who had the vision to see that, in order to better serve its audience, a magazine had to spread its wings and move beyond the strictly objective reporting espoused by conventional journalism.

The result was some of the most poignant, influential journalism in the profession’s history. Indeed, in Hayes’ eyes, it was often better to send a novelist – or at least someone equipped with the tools of the novelist – to do a journalist’s work. Admittedly, the concept wasn’t particularly new; *Esquire* founder Arnold Gingrich had sent Ernest Hemingway to cover the Spanish Civil War 30 years before. But as Carol Polsgrove writes, “It felt new – a fresh way for *Esquire* to approach the contemporary scene, through the unique sensibilities fiction writers would bring to their work” (45).

Witness the venerable and controversial William Burroughs as Hayes dispatched him and others like Terry Southern and flamboyant French writer Jean Genet to cover the 1968 Democratic National Convention in Chicago. Far from offering the milquetoast commentary of their contemporaries, the *Esquire* contingent’s account of the chaos and corruption, balefulness and brutality brought the whole fetid affair to vivid life. Through their words, the reader was ushered straight into the heart of darkness, could almost feel the crack of police batons, eyes and throat burning from the sting of tear gas.

It was through just this sort of “reporting” that Hayes endeavored to tell the tale of perhaps the most contentious American decade since the Civil War. Indeed, in sort of a
strange amalgamation of merriment, wonder and apocalypse, the 1960s had it all: the struggle for civil rights, the drug culture, the explosion of rock and roll as a cultural force, political assassination, the women’s movement, and, of course, Vietnam.

Compared with daily competitors like the New York Times and Washington Post, and big-budget behemoths like Time and Newsweek, Esquire did relatively few stories on the war in Southeast Asia. But what they lacked in number, they more than made up for in both depth and perceptiveness (Indeed, John Sack’s M is to this day the longest article ever to appear in the pages of Esquire).

But far from possessing the notoriety of the Mailers and Gay Taleses of the world, Sack and Michael Herr were relative unknowns – Sack a former Korean War correspondent turned producer for CBS, and Syracuse grad Herr an offbeat freelancer for various, lower-level New York publications.

Nor were the men novelists or fiction writers. But they counted among their literary arsenals all the novelist’s tricks of the trade – and then some. Indeed, while most fiction writers, past and present, rarely venture far from the keyboard, Herr and Sack, to employ the verbiage of the troops they lived and, in some cases, fought beside, got their “ass in the grass,” immersing themselves in the total experience.

Fortunately, they found a willing conspirator in Harold Hayes, who, to his credit, ran his magazine every bit as full throttle as the decade it helped define. Hayes’ desire to make Esquire the voice of its time and place led him to take the chances and provide the backing, both financial and professional, so that his writers would have the time and creative freedom – largely free of the deadlines that so often hamstrung their daily competition – to produce truly meaningful stories. The results, as have been repeated far
and wide by literary and journalistic critics alike, were Sack’s *M* and Herr’s *Dispatches*, arguably two of the most profound and telling accounts of the war and its effects on the men who fought it.
CHAPTER 2
HAROLD T. P. HAYES

Harold Thomas Pace Hayes was born the son of a Baptist minister April 18, 1926 in Elkin, North Carolina. By all accounts, Hayes’ early childhood was spent happy, if a bit restive, moving from Elkin over to West Virginia and then back to North Carolina and the town of Winston-Salem, all by his 11th birthday.

As he grew, the tall, handsome-featured Hayes enrolled at Wake Forest University in his home state. When World War II broke out, Hayes, never one to shirk duty, took a hiatus from school and joined the Navy. After serving in the continental United States, Hayes returned to finish up at Wake Forest, with an eye toward going on to law school. But, as he would soon discover, his future would lie not with the tedium and intricacies of the law but with the written word.

After a semester of law, he fled to the English department after barely earning the lowest passing mark in his class. In a creative writing class, he learned he could write, and he started keeping a journal in an effort to develop the skeptical stance he thought he would need as a writer. (Polsgrove 27)

Hayes threw himself into his new-found passion, resurrecting the campus magazine, The Student, and making himself editor. During his tenure, the publication won the North Carolina Collegiate Press Association’s award for “best all around” magazine.

After college, Hayes managed to log time first as a public relations staffer in the Atlanta offices of Southern Bell Telephone and then as an Atlanta-based reporter for United Press International before once again putting his career on hold for war, this time
in Korea. Hayes, whose older brother Jim had been a Marine, joined the Corps in 1950. Although he never saw combat, Hayes’ work as an intelligence officer at Fort Riley, Kansas may have helped further prepare him for his future career. The work was good preparation for journalism, he noted on the brink of his discharge as first lieutenant, in a personal statement giving his background for the magazine work he had decided to seek. As an intelligence officer his responsibility was “to collect, evaluate, interpret and disseminate all information concerning the enemy.” Granted, he was not doing much writing, “but the thought process remains the same.” (Polsgrove 28)

Hayes landed his first magazine job as assistant editor of New York City’s small, low-budget *Pageant* magazine in 1952. But it was when he left after just two years that Hayes first came into contact with *Esquire* founding editor and current publisher, Arnold Gingrich. Although Gingrich was not hiring at the time, he put Hayes in touch with a friend at *Tempo*, yet another tiny, New York-based magazine. On a shoestring budget, Hayes created *Picture Week* for his new bosses, only to be fired – along with the rest of the editorial staff – after he ran an article entitled “The Worst of Everything,” modeled after a similar feature in the *Harvard Lampoon*. It was then that Hayes again met Gingrich, this time with far better results.

“This time,” as Gingrich wrote later in his memoir, *Nothing But People*, “I took him in like the morning paper, knowing that in a Southern liberal who was also a Marine reserve officer I had an extremely rare bird.” (Polsgrove 29)

Gingrich had been back at *Esquire* for about four years, lured from retirement in Switzerland, when he brought the 29-year-old Hayes on board as an “assistant to the publisher” in 1955. The founding editor knew it had been quite a while since his creation had been known as a “smart magazine,” its stylish, oversized pages featuring fiction from the likes of Ernest Hemingway, F. Scott Fitzgerald and other literary giants of the time.
Now, *Esquire* had become little more than a “girlie” rag, with splashes of male fashion interjected amongst voluminous advertising copy. Gingrich knew the magazine was badly in need of a new look, feel and attitude in order to take advantage of the post-war boom. Perhaps it is possible that even then, somewhere in the back of his mind, Gingrich divined that the young and eager Hayes might be just man for the job.

When Gingrich, promised editorial freedom, returned to the magazine in 1952, he spent several floundering years in search of a new formula, which he found through the eyes of a new generation. The “Young Turks” he hired – the one who became the editor and soul of the magazine in its heyday, and mentor to my generation of writers – was Harold Hayes. (Wakefield 474)

Hayes spent the next two years learning the ropes – and weathering the storm of change (Gingrich fired several high-ranking editors during Hayes’ first year alone, while others came and went of their accord) – until, one day in 1957, he pitched the first in a long line of story ideas that would come to define Hayes’ daring vision. Indeed, Hayes would demonstrate his ability to think “outside the box” long before the term entered the popular vernacular.

The proposal was for a story on the newspaper the *Daily Worker*. The fact that writing about a communist publication in 1950s America – the decade of Sen. Joseph McCarthy, the Red Menace and Sputnik – might not have been the most conventional of ideas did little to dissuade Hayes.

It seemed a lot like a small-town newspaper in North Carolina, he thought. Why not have Martin Mayer write about it in just that way, describing its circulation, staff, and so on – an objective approach to a controversial topic. Let Mayer approach this loaded subject as if it were not loaded at all. (Polsgrove 34)

The floodgates had indeed opened. Hayes quickly followed up one controversial subject with another, commissioning vaunted *New Yorker* columnist Richard Rovere to write an article on poet Ezra Pound, who had broadcast fascist propaganda for Italian
dictator Benito Mussolini during World War II. Next came pieces on such lightning rod figures as McCarthy, Roy Cohn, Whittaker Chambers, Alger Hiss and others. Indeed, over the next several years, *Esquire* – under Hayes’ growing influence – would revisit this theme over and over, this effort to “restore to cutout villains a rounded human reality.”

In taking on these controversial political figures, Hayes was not just motivated by the desire to attract attention, *(Esquire* writer Brock) Brower thought. “He felt this was the great subject area, and that we, writing about this, would make a difference. And it was important to do this to clean up the atmosphere, to stop what we looked upon at that time as verboten topics and the unexamined past.” (Polsgrove 36)

For his part, Hayes always described himself as essentially apolitical. Indeed, he seemed to strike the figure of the big and gregarious Southern boy, roaming the halls of *Esquire* with his particular brand of kinetic energy, often sporting bow ties and loud suspenders, a pipe clenched between his teeth.

But Hayes, as rival Clay Felker was to learn, was no country bumpkin. Felker, along with other “Young Turk” editors like Ralph Ginzburg and Rust Hills, had come on board at about the same time as Hayes. But the two could not have been more different.

Hayes was the good old boy who spoke in the character he liked to wear – the guise of a hick – while Felker played the smooth aspiring aristocrat in the guise of a café society dandy, a jet-set fop. (Wakefield 474)

Differences between the two did not end with their choice of clothes or personal affectations, however. Felker had already been successful at *Life* magazine, but he was far more concerned about what effects the political fallout from publishing such controversial stories espoused by Hayes would have on *Esquire’s* circulation and advertising revenue. Weekly editorial meetings often devolved into shouting matches, as each man jockeyed to guide the magazine in the direction he saw fit. At bottom, the Duke
University-educated Felker never missed an opportunity to let Hayes know what he really thought of him.

At one point in their argument over the *Daily Worker* article, Felker had said to Hayes, “The trouble with you is, you just don’t know.” Felker’s comment bit deep and was one reason Hayes applied in spring 1958 for a Neiman fellowship at Harvard. (Polsgrove 37)

At the pinnacle of his fight for control with Felker, choosing to take a one-year hiatus for Harvard’s study program for professional journalists was a risky proposition indeed, but if he was going to move *Esquire* further into the intellectual stratosphere of New York, Hayes would need more education. Indeed, as Polsgrove writes, “Harvard was Hayes’ bid for remedial education” (37).

Hayes immersed himself in courses featuring American intellectual history, desperately trying to fill in the gaps – real or perceived – between his knowledge and Felker’s.

Hayes’s courses in intellectual history encouraged him to think grandly – to spin off big ideas for writers, to play the role of sociologist and map the culture. Harvard gave him, too, a better feel for the changes American culture had gone through over time. (Polsgrove 38)

In Hayes’ absence, however, Felker seemed to be thriving. He commissioned the first of what was to become yet another weapon in *Esquire*’s burgeoning arsenal of literary journalistic techniques: the in-depth celebrity profile. Indeed, long before Gay Talese was to pen masterful profiles on the likes of Frank Sinatra and Joe DiMaggio for the magazine, Felker tapped former *Esquire* editor Thomas B. Morgan to climb inside the skin of Sammy Davis, Jr. Morgan shadowed his subject for nearly two weeks, turning the end product into as much novel as personality profile.
Despite such successes, Gingrich did not ask Felker to assume the mantle of the magazine. And upon his return from the Ivory Tower in 1959, Hayes’ *Esquire* colleagues seemed to sense that the good-natured country boy had come back a changed man.

He had a new sense of what a magazine and a magazine editor could be. “He stopped being a journalist,” (art director Robert) Benton recalled. “He started thinking of himself as an editor in the largest sense – in a very different way.” (Polsgrove 42)

A year and a half later, Gingrich made his decision, elevating Hayes over Felker to the position of managing editor. Felker hung on for a while longer, but ended up leaving in the fall of 1962. He would eventually go on to run *New York* magazine.

Hayes immediately began implementing what he believed to be the mission of *Esquire*, namely, to be the voice of its time and place. To Hayes, *Esquire*, or any magazine worth its salt for that matter, should offer its readers not only a recapitulation of facts and figures, but interpretation and even opinion, as well.

A magazine is a promise, sometimes fulfilled, sometimes not. Responding to events of the day, it seeks to offer a bit more perspective than the shifting realities reported in the daily press, though the permanence of its views is only slightly less subject to change. Between the morning papers and the Cronkite show, there is often very little to add but – and this is the redeeming strength of all magazines today – attitude. The magazine engages its reader and holds him because it shares with him a certain point of view. (Hayes xviii)

Although Gingrich’s management style has been described by some as “hands off,” it’s clear that he shared Hayes’ desire to shape *Esquire* into the cultural mouthpiece of its era. It’s also clear that the publisher was confident in his young protégé’s ability to pull off such a feat at magazine that had gone from a respected vessel for literary fiction in the 30s to an arguably superficial, yet advertising-friendly fluff rag of the 50s.

As Gingrich wrote in his memoirs, Hayes became “the ‘pitch pipe’ in the *Esquire* choir,” tuning in on “the mood changes that were beginning to develop across the country, and particularly among the young, in the late 1950s, and he was good at working up features that appealed to this spreading sense of skepticism, disbelief,
and disenchantment. Hayes used the words ‘brash’ and ‘irreverent,’” which came to define the times – and the magazine. (Wakefield 475)

With his rival gone and a green light from Gingrich, Hayes’ “pitch pipe” became the whole orchestra, as the transformation of *Esquire* matured and evolved. Some ideas came directly from Hayes, such as the in-your-face Dubious Achievement Awards, modeled after the *Harvard Lampoon’s* idea of irreverently “celebrating” the worst that pop culture had to offer (Norman Mailer, proclaimed, “White Man of the Year,” won the first DAA in 1962).

Other innovations were less direct, but probably no less attributable to Hayes because of his wide open, anything-goes management style. Richard Rovere’s farcical “report” on the rise of the “American Establishment,” with all its ominous, right wing implications. The satirical piece invoked a public outcry among those who took it seriously.

Similarly, Hayes even ran interference for writer John Kenneth Galbraith who penned yet another scathing, satirical piece for *Esquire* when he introduced the “McLandress Dimension,” a bogus, supposedly scientific personality measure which purported to determine celebrities’ and politicians’ viability by the amount of time they could refrain from thinking about themselves. When seriously questioned about the veracity of “McLandress,” Hayes blamed an anonymous fact checker for not catching the story as hoax.

Indeed, modern-day examples of blatant dishonesty in the vein of Stephen Glass and Jayson Blair notwithstanding, Hayes believed the best way to run a magazine was to create a free-thinking atmosphere, a hothouse of ideas where innovation could be incubated and nurtured.
Writers and editors could range across a broad expanse of subjects, so long as their pieces had what Hayes called “point of view.” Hayes knew how to nudge writers and editors in just the right direction, getting into house copy that particular tone, irreverent, knowledgeable, never overly impressed with anything. There was an easy feel to the office – an openness to whatever came up. (Polsgrove 64-65)

And then there was Norman Mailer. While he had written for *Esquire* in the past, there was an antipathy between Mailer and Hayes after the two had had a falling out over the title of Mailer’s 1960 *Esquire* story on the presidential nomination of John F. Kennedy (Gingrich had changed the title from Mailer’s “Superman Comes to the Supermarket” to “Superman Comes to the Supermart” without informing the author.) But Hayes knew that perhaps the hottest novelist and social critic of the day was exactly what *Esquire* wanted – and needed – between its pages.

After a written letter of apology from the magazine’s fiction editor, Rust Hills, who first broached the idea of the reconciliation, Mailer returned to *Esquire*, penning a total of 12 columns in all, ranging the spectrum of what intrigued, outraged or captivated Mailer’s attention at any given moment. Despite his feelings about the man, Hayes understood Mailer’s worth to his vision for the magazine.

However difficult Hayes found him to deal with – and he did find him difficult – Hayes saw what he was doing for *Esquire*. He brought to the magazine a boldness Hayes liked. “He had the audacity to address the President of the United States directly from our pages, thus we acquired the audacity. He spoke out boldly on politics, sex, architecture, literature, civil rights, cancer, anything that challenged his imagination, and many things did. Most of the time, when he shouted, people listened; and to hear him, they had to read *Esquire.*” (Polsgrove 67)

With the mention of Mailer comes the inevitable allusions to *Esquire* and literary journalism. Over the years, many accounts, much more in-depth than what can be presented here, have addressed the role the magazine played in bringing New Journalism to the fore during the 1960s. But, since the *Esquire*-commissioned works of Herr and
Sack, with which this thesis is primarily concerned, are widely considered two of the finest examples of the genre, a brief treatment might be in order.

As John Purdy pointed out in his unpublished 1999 University of Florida thesis, the main techniques of literary journalism, while certainly not constrained to those on the following list, are generally understood to deviate from such conventional journalistic techniques as inverted pyramid, objective reporting of facts, heavy use of direct quotes, abstinence from first-person reporting (the use of “I”), and so on. What follows are the literary journalist’s “tricks of the trade” which underpin the genre’s unique approach to the telling of a non-fiction story.

The “New Journalism” was identifiable by six techniques. They were: 1. portraying events in dramatic scenes rather than in the usual historical summary of most articles; 2. recording dialogue fully rather than with the occasional quotations or anecdotes of conventional journalism; 3. recording of “status life details,” or “the pattern of behavior and possessions through which people experience their position in the world”; 4. using point of view in complex and inventive ways to depict events as they unfold; 5. interior monologue, or the presentation of what a character thinks and feels without the use of direct quotations; 6. composite characterization, or the telescoping of character traits and anecdotes drawn from a number of sources into a single representative sketch. (54-55)

And Hayes made sure that Esquire was chock full of writers – novelists and nonfiction wordsmiths alike – who could employ these tools to present a form of journalism so fresh and innovative we continue to marvel at it to this day.

Indeed, the names read like a who’s who within the pantheon of literary journalism: Mailer, James Baldwin, Garry Wills, Tom Wicker, Terry Southern, Gore Vidal, John Berendt, and more. And then, of course, there was Tom Wolfe.

“He (Hayes) was one of the great editors,” said Tom Wolfe, who wrote some of his first important articles in Esquire. “Under him, Esquire was the red-hot center of magazine journalism. There was such excitement about experimenting with non-fiction, it made people want to extend themselves for Harold.” (Anderson D-21)
Wolfe, who held a PhD in American studies from Yale, had been a feature writer over at the New York Herald Tribune when Esquire under Hayes had begun to hit its stride in the mid 60s, but he longed for a shot with his competitor. Wolfe’s big break came when he successfully pitched Hayes about doing a story on customized cars out in California. While what happened next is now legend among journalists – students, professionals and scholars alike – a truncated retelling will help illuminate not only Hayes’ openness to new approaches and ideas, but the editing philosophy which helped position Esquire as the van guard of New Journalism.

As is known, Wolfe, who’d already been on the story for months and had burned hundreds of dollars in expenses, couldn’t seem to pull the story together. Exasperated, Hayes, who desperately needed the story for the next issue, had Wolfe type and send his notes, hoping on the off chance that Esquire’s automotive editor could turn them into something usable.

After typing for nearly 12 hours straight, Wolfe, who was simply chronicling, albeit in great detail, what he’d seen at the car show, sent his “notes,” 49 pages in all. Byron Dobell, who had replaced Felker in 1962, removed the “Dear Byron” from the top of the manuscript, and the magazine had its story. It was a moment – half writing talent, half editorial vision – that would mark not only an evolution in Wolfe’s writing, but the maturation of literary journalism as well.

To Hayes, here was an example of how a relationship between a writer and an editor can bring forth something a writer might not have produced alone. When Wolfe wrote “Dear Byron” – when he began to tell his story to Byron Dobell – at that moment Wolfe broke away from the straightjacket of standard magazine form and style. What made it different from most magazine and newspaper pieces was that it was so natural – as Hayes said, just as if he were telling something to somebody. “From this decision, and at that very instant,” Hayes wrote later, “came the first words of an extraordinary new voice – italics, ellipses, exclamation marks,
shifting tenses, arcane references, every bit of freight and baggage he had collected out of his past, from newspaper beats back through his postgraduate studies in art history at Yale.” (Polsgrove 86-87)

Indeed, Gay Talese, another celebrated New Journalist who had cut his teeth under Hayes’ tutelage at *Esquire*, believed that his own talent and success owed a great deal to the guidance of his friend and mentor.

*Esquire* “was the center of the new journalism,” said Talese, who wrote 30 articles for the magazine. “All the major pieces I did were under Harold’s aegis. ‘The Kingdom and the Power,’ about the *New York Times* started with his idea. He nurtured a generation of writers.” (Anderson D21)

But Hayes’ work was far from complete. For across town at the CBS studios on West 57th Street was yet another aspiring literary journalist whose career would forever be changed by the editor. Looking to catch the wave of *Esquire* magic, John Sack had an idea.
It is fall 1965, and the latest version of *Esquire* is coming into its own. Hayes is now firmly at the wheel, and under his guidance literary nonfiction and a brash, irreverent style are the orders of the day. And oh what material those young writers and editors at *Esquire* have to work with. The sexual revolution, The Beatles, feminism, a presidential assassination, the drug culture, civil rights and more were all bubbling toward the surface. Is the country coming apart at the seams, or is this just some sort of natural reordering, a predictable rebellion against what Hayes called the “banality . . . passivity . . . aridity” of the bygone 50s (xviii)?

Whatever the case, President Lyndon Johnson, following in the footsteps of his fallen predecessor, has begun to further deepen the nation’s commitment to fight in a far-off land. More than 180,000 U.S. military personnel are now stationed in Vietnam, and casualties are mounting. Nearly 1,400 men will be killed and more than 5,300 wounded by year’s end. In addition, Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara’s ill-conceived Rolling Thunder bombing campaign is now well under way, with 171 U.S. aircraft shot down and direct operational costs running at $460 million (Bowman 132).

Back home, not even the most blindly optimistic government reports can keep such grim numbers from the people, as street protests and violent clashes with police escalate. On November 2, 1965, Quaker and war protester Norman Morrison immolates himself 40 feet from the window of McNamara’s Pentagon office.
But it wasn’t Morrison or the protests that had caught CBS associate producer John Sack’s attention. It was an article in *Time* magazine. Sack had been a war correspondent for *Stars and Stripes* during the Korean War and had even penned a book, *From Here to Shimbashi*, about his experiences during the war. Something in the tone of *Time’s* coverage set Sack’s B.S. detector flashing.

*Time* was gung-ho about the war; it wrote of some soldiers jumping out of a helicopter and described them as “lean, mean and looking for a fight.” At that point I rebelled immediately. I’d been in Korea and I’d never seen a soldier who was lean, mean and looking for a fight. Scared shitless was more like it. But all the reportage about the war in Vietnam was written in that same gung-ho World War II style, and I knew that’s not the way the Army was. The first images that came to me were…people grousing, goldbricking, getting the wrong bullets in the rifles, shooting each other – everybody screwing up. (Schroeder 16)

Sack knew what he had to do. In the spirit of war novels like *The Naked and the Dead* and *Catch-22*, he reasoned that best way to tell the real story of the men who were going off to war was to establish them as human beings first, showing their slow transformation from wide-eyed civilians to wary soldiers to combat veterans. Sack would follow an infantry company through basic training and into its first combat in Vietnam.

But what medium would he use? His position at CBS guaranteed decent funding and a television crew, but would the higher ups stay true to the kind of story he was after? Sack didn’t believe they would. He would have to put on his writer’s hat once again. And just as so many others were beginning to realize, Sack knew that for writers, *Esquire* was the place to be.

He pitched the idea in a letter to Hayes, whom he had met just once before. Hayes immediately responded, and the two agreed on $1,000 in expense money, though neither had an inkling of how much such an endeavor would cost. But more importantly, Sack would be free of such constraints as deadlines and daily filings that were endemic to the
conventional press. Under Hayes, Sack would have the time and backing to do the story right.

But he still didn’t know where, or with whom, he would live the next several months of his life. One thing was certain, however: Sack wanted to hunker down with a group of men with whom America could identify, of all races and socio-economic backgrounds. After getting the go-ahead from the brass at the Pentagon, he settled on Fort Dix, New Jersey.

I wanted to got to a camp that I thought would represent a cross-section of the Army population; I thought that I would have to go to a camp in the South. But the Pentagon said, “They’re all cross-sections, and Fort Dix is as much of a cross-section as any.” I even went down to the Pentagon to assure myself of this. And, in fact, in order to maintain this feeling of generality, I never mention Fort Dix in the book, nor do I mention the name of the division or the battalion or where they are in Vietnam. (Schroeder 17)

Aside from his status as battle-tested war correspondent, the 35-year-old Sack was no novice in the ways of journalism, either. Born in New York on March 24, 1930, he was working as a stringer for Long Island’s Mamaroneck Daily Times by age 15. By the time he began attending Harvard, Sack, who was also on staff at the school’s Crimson newspaper, found time to squeeze in freelance work for United Press and the Boston Globe, even ascending Peru’s Mount Yerupaja, at the time the highest unclimbed peak in the Americas, on a story assignment for the former. He would later expand the story into his first book, The Butcher: The Ascent of Yerupaja.

In 1951, with college finished and Korea looming, Sack volunteered for the Army to avoid being drafted. He got on at Stars and Stripes and found, quite to his surprise, that covering a war could be downright fun.

If you’re going to be in the Army for two years, being a war correspondent offered a wonderful chance to be able to see a war and to leave it whenever you want. It wasn’t so much the glamour of it because there wasn’t anybody whom I could
impress with the glamour. There was just really something exciting about the job, about waking up at odd hours and driving the jeep north to Panmunjom, getting the stories, getting the scoops. I was 22 or 23 years old and really liked being outdoors, the adventure, the camaraderie with the other guys. (Schroeder 14)

As if climbing mountains and volunteering as a combat correspondent weren’t proof enough of Sack’s willingness to take chances, his bid to get the story at all costs ended up costing him his job at *Stars and Stripes* – and almost a court-martial.

In an attempt to interview Chinese prisoners of war, Sack stowed away overnight aboard a U.S. landing ship. Arrested by American military police, he was reassigned to a mailroom in Tokyo while the Army pondered his fate. A month later and unable to find specific charges to file against him, the Army ordered Sack back to Korea – this time as a frontline infantryman. Sack stalled and at the last minute found a position writing radio news for the Voice of the United Nations Command.

But Sack’s time in Korea wasn’t all fun, adventure and intrigue. After witnessing firsthand the way his fellow newsmen credulously accepted as gospel the official Army line, he began to question whether conventional journalism was up to the task of covering war in a realistic way.

In an unpublished interview with James Stewart, Sack recalled covering a press conference in Seoul at which a government official denied rumors of an ammunition shortage. “I was sitting there thinking, ‘Bullshit. Of course there’s an ammunition shortage. I know there’s an ammunition shortage,’” Sack said. A week earlier he had been in a battle during which an American tank crew had run out of shells and was told at the ammunition dump, “Sorry, we’re all out; we don’t have any more.” He had also attended a briefing where spotter pilots were told that, because of low munitions supplies, there would be no artillery strikes on targets of fewer than 14 enemy soldiers. Despite his firsthand knowledge, Sack was compelled to print the denial. “I was writing what I knew was a lie. But under the rules of journalism, that was all I could write.” (Kaul 275)

When the war ended in 1953, Sack went back to work for United Press, covering current events in Korea, Japan and Taiwan. After returning stateside a year later, he
headed back to his home state of New York and covered the state senate for UP. It was during this time that the former war correspondent began a somewhat incongruous second career as a satire writer for *The New Yorker*. Indeed, humor – albeit black at times – would manifest itself in Sack’s writing for much of his career, excluding few subjects.

In 1959 – right about the time Arnold Gingrich was choosing Hayes over Felker as *Esquire*’s managing editor – Sack published his third book, *Report from Practically Nowhere*, a quirky and funny account of his travels through 13 of the world’s smallest independent nations.

He left *The New Yorker* in 1961 and signed on first as a documentary writer and later as an associate producer with CBS. He eventually became the network’s Madrid bureau chief before heading back to New York and his rendezvous with M company and what was to become “M”, the longest story – 33,000 words – in the history of *Esquire* magazine. Perhaps his best known work, Sack would later expand the story into a book of the same name.

Sack arrived at Fort Dix in January 1966. He was immediately gratified that he hadn’t chosen to do the story for CBS. Aware that time is money in the television game, Sack knew that the network would’ve wanted fireworks – and quick. But no one was talking about Vietnam at Fort Dix. In fact, there was no drama at all, just the mundane, but telling, day-to-day rituals of men in uniform.

He quickly singled out one trooper, an Armenian-American named Demirgian who seemed to epitomize Sack’s image of the reluctant civilian soldier forced to serve in America’s military. Much like Joseph Heller’s “Yossarian” in the novel, *Catch-22*, Demirgian was seen by Sack as the modern-day, cynical embodiment of the conscripted
American. Indeed, in one of M’s earliest scenes, we see Demirgian trying to convince a fellow soldier to break his jaw in order to receive a medical discharge. Ironically, Demirgian would emerge as the central figure in Sack’s story, even as the formerly unwilling civilian evolved into the bitterly aggressive, even hate-filled combat soldier he would become.

While he did not sleep in the soldiers’ barracks, Sack would arrive each morning between six and seven and stay with the troops throughout the day. Being a former soldier himself made it easier for the writer to see through the eyes of the men as they were put through the paces of basic training. In turn, this ability may have made it easier for Sack’s readers to see, hear and feel what the men of M experienced as well.

As Robert N. Sheridan wrote in *Library Journal* (1 February, 1967): “Though he is merely reporting what others tell him about their thoughts and feelings, he gives the impression of having lived in each person’s mind and body.” (Kaul 279)

In the best tradition of literary journalism, Sack uses dialogue and powers of description that can only come from being there. In this way, he succeeds in detailing everything from the mundane to the horrific, placing his readers as easily and convincingly into the cavernous guts of an Army barracks at inspection time as he does deep into the mystical and dangerous jungles of Vietnam. Consider the following two excerpts:

So this evening M was in its white Army underwear waxing the floor of its barracks, shining its black combat boots, turning the barrels of its rifles inside out and picking the dust flecks off with tweezers, unscrewing its eardrums – the usual. The air was now thick with the smell of floor wax and rifle oil, a moist aroma that now seemed to M to be woven into the very fabric of army green. Minutes before, the company had heard a do-or-die exhortation by its bantamweight sergeant. “Get yourself clean for *my* sake, Millet had told M. “I’ve got a wife, three kids at home. I leave in the dark, I come home in the dark. I got a boss downstairs, he got a couple bar on his collar, he is the boss I work for. Tomorrow afternoon he will inspect us: don’t make a jackass out of me!” (Sack 13)
And now into the heart of darkness:

Even with machetes, moving through this jungle was like searching a big attic closet on a summer morning, old moist bathrobes drawing across one’s face and rusty clothes hangers snagging in one’s hair, corrugated cardboard beneath one’s feet. Furthermore, in this wildwood there were snipers around shooting people, a rustling in the leaves and a *slap*! But what really bedeviled Williams’ and Morton’s companies as they pushed along weren’t their human enemies but ants, little red ants which hadn’t seen juicy Westerners in a quarter century, even the French army hadn’t dared go to this treacherous place. (Sack 142)

Sack proves equally adept at placing the reader smack in the middle of both the inspection and the bush, detailing the sights, sounds, smells – even feeling – of what it meant to be in that time and place. One can almost smell the pungent aroma of greasy gun oil, hear the brushing of boots and colloquial exhortations of the sergeant – even feel the deadening monotony that surely characterizes soldierly life – as easily as the terror of navigating that dense foliage, wary of every snapping branch, while ferocious ants make a meal of the troopers.

Ironically, Sack was well into writing *M* before he realized that his story had very little of such description. It was only after reading a Michael Herr piece, written with detailed description about Fort Dix in *Holiday* magazine, that Sack began to understand his years as a television producer had dulled his written storytelling abilities. Indeed, well-accustomed to letting the camera set the visual scene, Sack knew he would now have to let his writing paint the vivid pictures such a story demanded. He went back and began interjecting sentences of description into the Spartan narrative he’d created, filling in the gaps and fleshing out visuals for the audience.

While vivid description is indeed one of the lynchpins of literary journalism, Sack might be forgiven for at first neglecting its importance. Truth be told, Sack had read very little of what he would later discover to be New Journalism, and in fact hadn’t even heard
the term until reading a review of Norman Mailer’s *Armies of the Night* two years after *M* had been published. In fact, the *Look* magazine article listed four of the up-and-coming literary journalists of the age – Sack foremost among them. Ironically, Sack came to realize that his experience in television, of setting up his story scene by scene, unwittingly helped rather than hurt his progression into the ranks of the literary journalistic elite.

I saw everything as movie scenes; I really had *M* in mind as a movie; Fortunately, that turned out to be the way things were done in New Journalism. And that’s why I had very little description. I hate writing description. Every time I have to think of some metaphor to describe what things look like I just rebel against it. For Christ’s sake, give me a camera. On film I can show it in two seconds, instead of having to agonize over finding the right words for it. (Schroeder 28)

Sack’s modesty regarding his descriptive prowess aside, his writing contains another element crucial to New Journalism’s unique method of storytelling – point of view. Far from traditional journalism’s stated commitment to the objective reporting of facts – absent the reporter’s judgment or opinion – literary journalism depends upon practitioners injecting their perspective into the story. Of course, this fit right into Hayes’ vision for what he wanted his writers to produce.

Any point of view was welcome as long as the writer was sufficiently skilled to carry it off. To land on the moon is to make news which transcends form: the faster the word gets out, the better. But once established, the fact moves from the simple to the complex, begging interpretation of a thousand varieties. A magazine’s promise is the delivery of its own version of the world, its special attitude toward the reader. (Hayes xix)

Because Sack abstains from insinuating himself into the narrative of *M*, his point of view might be less readily apparent than that of fellow New Journalists Mailer and Hunter S. Thompson, both of whom are known for placing themselves squarely at the center of their stories. Instead, Sack apparently wishes the reader to view the events
described as if firsthand, unfiltered by the writer’s perspective and bias. Sack reveals this to be a ruse, however, and completely by design.

I’m playing a diabolical trick on the reader of M. There’s never any suggestion that I’m even there. You can never tell which scenes I witnessed and which were reported to me second-hand. I did not want the reader to say, “Oh, this guy arranged and interpreted the facts for me.” This is a shuck. Obviously everything has passed through my consciousness, and I’m just taking advantage of this whole American belief in objectivity. I myself don’t believe in objectivity – no New Journalist does. I never say “I” in M, but I’m imposing my point of view, my consciousness, by choosing what facts I’m going to report. I’m recounting the incidents that are important to me, and recounting them the way I happened to see them. (Schroeder 20)

Sack’s point of view, at least initially, was that the war in Southeast Asia was a necessary, albeit, messy evil. But the former soldier’s opinion would begin to change dramatically after witnessing the horrible results of M’s first mistake.

True to his plan, Sack would accompany M on its first combat mission in Vietnam, and that would finish the story. The idea was for M’s battalion to be flown by helicopter on Monday into a Michelin rubber plantation up country. That destination was the source of great consternation among the troopers of M, though, because just about everybody in Vietnam seemed to know that was exactly where the battalion was headed. The situation seemed ripe for an ambush.

This dubious bit of knowledge was not lost on Sack, either. When it came time to board his helicopter, the writer balked. Only a chance meeting with Dan Rather, with whom he’d worked at CBS, bolstered Sack’s courage. He climbed aboard and lifted off with M, its first combat mission now underway.

No ambush was waiting, though, as M set down nowhere near the rubber plantation. The whole thing had been a clever ruse. A few skirmishes aside, the battalion saw little action over the next four days. Then, tragedy struck.
Friday the long awaited happened – M’s battalion killed somebody, at last. The episode was again the doing of Demirgian’s platoon, again it had climbed on those hot APC’s and had driven bump – bounce – bump to Sherwood forest and beyond, burning more yellow houses as it went. Then it was that the incident happened. A cavalryman, seeing a sort of bunker place, a hut above, hole below, and hearing some voices inside it, told Demirgian to throw a grenade in. Demirgian hesitating – a soldier we have met before, though not by name, jumped from his APC and flipped in a hand grenade himself… gasped as ten or a dozen women and children came shrieking out in their crinkled pajamas. A Negro specialist-four, his black rifle in his hands, warily extended his head in, peering through the darkness one or two seconds before he cried, “Oh my God, they hit a little girl,” and in his muscular black arms carried out a seven-year-old, long black hair and little earrings, staring eyes – eyes, her eyes are what froze themselves onto M’s memory, it seemed there was no white to those eyes, nothing but black ellipses like black goldfish. The child’s nose was bleeding – there was a hole in the back of her skull. (Sack 157)

Grim as this scene was, Sack still believed it an aberration, a rookie mistake made by 19-year-olds on their first operation. But he would ultimately turn against the war when he learned such incidents were being reproduced all over the country.

I was talking to the chief of staff of the brigade, and I apologized to him. I said, “Look, I’m really sorry about this; All they did was kill one girl. That’s my story and I’m stuck with it. I’m sorry, I know it isn’t typical.” And Col. Walker said, “It’s typical.” He said it, but I didn’t believe it. It wasn’t until half a year later reading a story in the New York Times Magazine by Tom Buckley where I read that the same thing was happening in the Delta that I began thinking, “Maybe it was typical.” (Schroeder 20-21)

The result was what New York Times writer Neil Sheehan dubbed at the time as “probably the first truly anti-war novel to emerge from the Vietnam conflict” (BR2).

But in order to write a novel, one must fictionalize – a charge Sack steadfastly denied throughout his long career. The confusion, noted Sack, probably rested with his penchant for using many of the fiction writer’s tools of the trade, such as vivid narrative, dialogue and description in his nonfiction writing.

Examples such as the following scene from M are often cited among Sack’s critics as proof positive of fictionalizing portions of his journalistic writing:
When silver airplanes started to dive-bomb the trees, Demirgian could only lie behind his dike observing a colony of black termites eating a grey beetle. Taking his insect repellent from his pants pocket, Demirgian directed a fine needle spray at one of those conspicuous enemies of man, a termite who stopped in the midst of its verminous meal to look at Demirgian bug-eyed. Its shower bath continuing, the termite turned and fled to Demirgian’s right, oblivious of the super saber jets that now dove in from there to drop their bombs with a spherical *boom* on the terrified evergreen trees. (Sack 151)

But other than for use as obvious hyperbole in his journalistic writing, Sack seemed to have a downright aversion to fiction writing of any kind. He earned just a “C” in fiction writing while at Harvard and quit as a humor writer for *The New Yorker* in large part because he had grown tired of the pressure associated with conjuring material out of thin air. He once even tried to write a “movie of the week” but failed miserably after he was unable to shape a coherent storyline. (Schroeder 22)

The writer instead appeared to relish the inevitable legwork that accompanied his desire to get the facts straight. He once even burned half a day in Saigon simply trying to find the proper name of the “terrified evergreen trees” he described in the scene above, and his notes, now part of the John Sack Collection at Boston University, even include a pen-and-ink map of the termite’s route. Ultimately, it seems as if Sack simply believed in the old axiom, “truth is stranger (and better) than fiction.”

(Because) other people who write in scenes and write conversation, fictionalize, everyone assumes that I fictionalize. (There are times when) one really can get to a higher truth by fictionalizing, I’m trying as best I can to get to a higher truth by sitting there like a piece of furniture, by looking and listening for days, weeks, months, until I know exactly what’s going on in people’s minds. (I tell myself) “boy-o-boy, if only this or that had happened, wouldn’t that be great,” it’s never as good as when I put in a couple of hours of work and find out what really, really happened. It’s always much more amazing than anything I could make up. (Kaul 276)

While committed to presenting the facts, Sack nonetheless felt that the supposed objectivity of traditional reporting was mythical at best, dangerous at worst. This notion
probably harkened back to his days as a *Stars and Stripes* correspondent and the canned information the military forced him and others to report, right up through his days in Vietnam and beyond.

A particularly notorious example cited by Sack were the discrepancies between a *New York Times* report on the number of villagers killed during the My Lai massacre in 1968, and the figures he later compiled for a story on William Calley (yet another *Esquire* piece that Sack would expand into book form), the young Army officer implicated in the killings.

Through interviews with Calley, Sack found that the soldiers on the scene were forced to make ballpark estimates of those massacred. The men, perhaps somewhat arbitrarily, arrived at 300 total, simply attributing 50 dead civilians for every platoon involved – an indication that no one knew for sure. But the *New York Times* reported an exact number – 128 dead villagers.

Now where did the *Times* come up with 128? They get it from the official news briefing – (referred to derisively by reporters as) the Five O’clock Follies – in Saigon. Where did they get 128? God knows. But the *New York Times* with its objective reporting is forced to print the JUSPAO story even though the reporters are laughing about it and criticizing it. But the *New York Times* has to tell it, it has to say, “The Army said we killed 128 people.” It can’t say, “The Army said that and the Army’s full of shit.” The *Times* has to put its story on the front page. It’s trapped by its own rules. Any time I’m involved with a story and know what’s going on and then see the press coverage of it, it is utterly insane how wrong they are, and how wrongly they misinterpret it. Objectivity is just impossible.

(Schroeder 30-31)

Not all of Sack’s contemporaries were willing to concede the subjectivity in his writing, however, some even arguing that his commitment to a factual, unbiased narrative – wrapped within a literary treatment – was precisely where the strength of his piece lay.

So many have written about war, including the one in Vietnam, that it is difficult to approach the subject from a fresh angle. He has produced a gripping, honest
account, compassionate and rich, colorful and blackly comic, but with that concerned objectivity that makes for great reportage. (Fremont-Smith 39)

Regardless of the techniques employed by Sack, *M* was quickly recognized as one of the most important works of journalism to emerge from the war, concerned, as the *Christian Science Monitor*’s Elizabeth Pond wrote at the time, not with the generalized treatment Vietnam had thus far received in most of the conventional press, but with the grim specifics, sometimes “funny, lunatic, savage, compassionate and moral,” that nevertheless characterized the true nature of the conflict (11).

Back at *Esquire*, Hayes knew that Sack’s story would change forever the way the magazine presented the war. In the past, *Esquire* had been content to treat the war satirically, running such skeptically humorous stories as “An Appreciation of the Nonmilitary Functions of War,” and “An Armchair Guide to Guerrilla Warfare.”

Even Sack, with all he’d seen and experienced in the preceding months, at first suggested such an approach when discussing with Hayes the cover treatment for the story, set to run in the October 1966 issue. Still clinging to his vision of the American soldier as the reluctant, “sad sack” in Vietnam, Sack proposed a color photograph of U.S. troops jumping out of helicopters, the likeness of goldbricking comic strip hero Beetle Bailey superimposed over each face. But Hayes, ever with his finger on the pulse of cultural ebb and flow, knew that a sea change had taken place.

“No,” Hayes said, “you don’t understand your article at all.” The cover George Lois would create for “M” would be large white words on a black background: “OH MY GOD – WE HIT A LITTLE GIRL.” Then, across the bottom, in smaller type: The True Story of *M* Company. From Fort Dix To Vietnam. In austere black and white, the “M” cover was like a formal announcement of a change of heart. (Polgrove 153)

Thus, it took little to convince Hayes to send Sack back to Vietnam for a second look at his adopted unit.
Indeed, upon his return to New York, Sack had spent much of the summer of 1966 working to make the October deadline for the book version of *M*, which he’d sold to the New American Library. But he was keenly aware that *M* was still slogging it out in Southeast Asia. Perhaps an ode to his past life as a real soldier, Sack believed in way that he had abandoned the men he’d come to know and care for. He would return to chronicle *M*’s final battle and mark the changes that war had affected upon them.

By the time Sack made it back to Vietnam in the late fall of 1966, however, the company was being kept mostly out of the fighting because its tour of duty was near its completion. He would have to reconstruct events based on interviews with troopers like Demirgian.

Again, the resultant story, “When Demirgian Comes Marching Home Again (Hurrah? Hurrah?),” which ran in the January 1968 *Esquire*, revealed, as “M” had before it, much more about the nature of the conflict than could a hundred other conventional journalistic pieces. Hayes was so impressed with the piece, he later included it in his 1969 book, *Smiling through the Apocalypse: Esquire’s History of the Sixties*, an anthology of the best and brightest the magazine had to offer throughout that turbulent decade.

Sack discovered within the men an ever-deepening hatred for the Vietnamese, the very people the U.S. government had sent *M* and others to help. Indeed, Demirgian, the reluctant soldier who had once tried to have his jaw broken to escape the Army, was now a bitterly aggressive warrior fueled by an all-encompassing desire to kill a communist, “the only native people the Army’s regulations allow him to kill” (Hayes 773).

Demirgian hates the Vietnamese people – well, so does every soldier, but Demirgian hates and hates! The goddam bastards! Goddam people! Come to help
their miserable country and what? Anyone get a word of thanks? Dead or alive – crippled, I could be blind, a basket case and they wouldn’t care, not if they’d had my damn piastres first! Money is all they’d care, the crooked bastards! A really and truly detestable race of people. Demirgian’s year of duty among the Vietnamese had taught him to loathe them, the earth and Demirgian would be better rid of them, Vietnamese go to your damnable ancestors, die! (Hayes 773)

This hatred is what Sack called “Demirgian’s Secret,” but upon reflection, Sack admitted that he himself was not immune to such feelings, though perhaps not as virulent as those experienced by Demirgian and others.

If I had been with them for a year, I’m sure that I would have started hating the Vietnamese too. In a sense I did hate the Vietnamese. Even in Saigon I really disliked them – I wouldn’t say hated them – but in my own experiences with them I really dislike them. When I got to Vietnam I was planning to spend half my time writing the book and half my time doing good things for the Vietnamese. To my knowledge, I was the only member of the American Center of the International Pen Club in Vietnam. I called the Vietnamese Pen Center and said that I’d like to meet them and even offered to help them. And they said, “Ah, so, so, so,” and never returned my call. Having also been a producer at CBS I called the Vietnamese television station and offered my services, free. They never did anything. It was impossible to meet any Vietnamese. The only Vietnamese you could meet were prostitutes. You were never invited into Vietnamese homes. Like the American soldiers, I really started disliking them. But of course the soldiers were going to dislike them even more because they were being killed by faceless people who they assumed were the Vietnamese whose faces they saw during the daytime. If I’d gone through that, I’m sure I would have hated them. (Schroeder 24)

Using Demirgian’s hatred as a representation of the overall growing resentment of the Vietnamese by American soldiers, Sack chronicles the soldier’s efforts to finally kill a communist and exercise the demons of frustration and hopelessness that have come to dominate Demirgian’s tour of duty.

At one point, the trooper comes tantalizingly close to his goal while out on a night ambush. But because the Vietcong are now engaged in a serious attempt to overrun the company base camp about a mile away – effectively cutting off the little ambush patrol – Demirgian’s frustration becomes maddening when survival dictates that he sit idly by as the enemy passes near his position. Ultimately, he falls asleep, aware only later that the
base camp survives. But it is on the return trip the next morning, passing the littered remains of what he thinks are all dead communists, that Demirgian finally exacts his bloody satisfaction.

One of the communist soldiers woke up! He looked at Demirgian slowly through one of his eyes, an eye like a twist of lemon rind, an oily eye! A living breathing communist, a boy of about eighteen, a Vietnamese in black, Demirgian brought down his foot on his face and crunch, Demirgian felt his little nose go like a macaroon, he said to the communist, “Bastard – well, was it worth it,” kicking him in his eyeballs. “Stupid bastard – what did it get you,” kicking him on his Adam’s apple. “Goddam bastard, stupid bastard, dumb bastard, thought you were better than us Americans, didn’t you? Ignorant bastard,” Demirgian said and he kicked at that black bag of bones until it had given a consummation to Demirgian’s tour of duty and a success to Demirgian’s quest by quietly becoming dead. Demirgian smiled satisfiedly, Demirgian’s soul was at peace. (Hayes 772-774)

Chronicling such atrocities was not the last contentious piece on Vietnam that Sack would do for Esquire – nor was it the last time he would employ controversial journalism techniques to reveal a truer picture of his subject matter.

On the morning of March 16, 1968, elements of the 11th Infantry Brigade, including Charlie Company and a young platoon commander named Lt. William Calley, entered the village of My Lai on a search and destroy mission for enemy Vietcong troops.

Earlier that winter, some 75,000 Vietcong guerrillas, along with regular North Vietnamese Army troops, had launched what came to be known as the Tet Offensive, a massive surprise attack conducted despite the announced ceasefire in honor of the Vietnamese lunar new year. Despite initial setbacks, which included attacks on South Vietnam’s seven largest cities, 30 provincial capitals, and the penetration of the U.S. embassy in Saigon by Vietcong suicide squads, allied forces had largely routed the enemy by mid-March. Charlie Company’s mission was part of the ongoing counterattack to dislodge the remaining communist guerrillas, including those within the My Lai
region, thought by U.S. intelligence to be particularly sympathetic to the Vietcong.

(Bowman 199)

But despite receiving no fire as it approached the village, elements of Charlie Company, including 1st Platoon, commanded by Calley, began the massacre of between 200 and 500 villagers. Despite widespread assassinations and earlier massacres committed by Vietcong and North Vietnamese troops, including the estimated 5,000 civilians executed in the city of Hue a few months prior, My Lai would become the most notorious and highly-publicized atrocity of the war. Combined with Tet, the massacre helped further fuel public opposition to the war.

By Spring 1970, Calley was set to stand trial back in the United States, charged with the murder of more than 100 civilians. A tragic event of a turbulent decade, Hayes believed *Esquire* should again be on the front lines of the issue. But while Calley was willing to sell the magazine the rights to his story, Hayes couldn’t find anyone willing to tackle so contentious and divisive a project, to associate themselves with a killer. Hayes was turned down by three different writers, including his close friend, Garry Wills, before Sack agreed to take the job.

Sack had followed the coverage in the conventional press, but felt, as always, that traditional treatment of such issues invariably missed the underlying truth. Indeed, Sack had already experienced firsthand a hatred for the Vietnamese, and while certainly not condoning murder, could understand how overstressed soldiers might want to kill them. It was a crucial element of the dehumanizing effects the war was having on American soldiers, and one that Sack felt the traditional media was still not capturing.
Before deciding, however, he wanted to meet Calley to determine whether there
was indeed a flesh-and-blood man hidden beneath the media-constructed image of cold-
blooded killer. Hayes arranged for a meeting in Sack’s New York apartment, and the two
hit it off immediately.

Over drinks, Calley began opening up, describing the pain and disappointment he
felt at wanting to do good, wanting to help – reasons he had joined the Army in the first
place. But in Vietnam, Calley said, the Army had devolved into a monster, roaming
across the land killing those it sought to help.

Sack was stunned. He had never heard a soldier talk like that. Calley, the man
accused of murdering more than one hundred villagers in a hamlet in Vietnam, was
coming across as the most considerate, the most compassionate, the most caring
soldier of any he had met in Vietnam. (Polsgrove 220)

Sack accepted Hayes’ offer, even temporarily relocating to a little town on the
Alabama-Georgia border so he could begin conducting in-depth interviews with Calley,
who was then living across the river at Fort Benning, Georgia. The two even hunkered
down at a nearby lake cabin for several weeks, mixing the interview process with a
healthy dose of water skiing, swimming – and not a little drinking. Sack was getting to
know William Calley as a human being. But in doing so, Sack was again breaking a
cardinal rule of traditional journalism, one that dictated that reporters keep an objective
distance from those they write about. But to Sack, this was folly.

“You might lose your objectivity, but you get closer to the truth.” Only by forming
a personal relationship with someone, by getting past defense mechanisms, he said,
can a reporter understand the motives behind the words and deeds. If that is
accomplished, he believes, it results in a fairer, more accurate story, and subjects
will not feel betrayed even when the story reports that they have done something
that will bring societal disapproval. “Other reporters think that you get to the truth
by asking people questions and by writing down what they say. I think that’s
madness.” (Kaul 280)
What resulted was a three-part series for *Esquire* that would become known as one of Sack’s gutsiest, most acclaimed pieces of journalism – and one of his most controversial.

“The Confessions of Lieutenant Calley,” a largely sympathetic portrayal of the young officer as a scapegoat for a system gone wrong, was written as a first-person narrative in which the accused murderer tells his story directly to the reader. Understandably, with opposition to the war at its peak, the piece generated a firestorm of opposition among both the public and even among certain members of the *Esquire* staff. The cover story for November 1970, “Confessions” also featured perhaps George Lois’ most infamous cover art, that of a smiling William Calley surrounded by Asian children. Staff members were appalled, several high-profile advertisers pulled their ads, and even Hayes’ own secretary, Connie Wood, threatened to resign in protest.

Nevertheless, *Esquire*’s management stood by both author and story, signaling once again that Hayes, regardless of controversy or pressure, would continue to back projects he felt placed the magazine at the center of the decade’s cultural debate. That commitment would soon again be put to the test. For Hayes was about to be approached by a virtually unknown writer who nevertheless had quite an extraordinary idea.
In the spring of 1967, just as Military Assistance Command Vietnam (MACV) chief Gen. William Westmoreland was calling for an additional 200,000 U.S. troops to offset gains made by communist forces in Southeast Asia, 27-year-old New York-based writer Michael Herr was putting in a request of his own.

He pitched Hayes on the idea of sending him to Vietnam as a kind of “correspondent at large” for *Esquire*, roaming the country for months in search of stories that would render a truer picture of the war than had so far been presented in the traditional press. Herr, like Sack two years before, was highly skeptical of conventional journalism’s ability to peel back the superficial façade of official government reports and briefings to get to the heart of what was happening in Southeast Asia.

How could reporters, reasoned Herr, find out what was really going on in Vietnam when they were so often enslaved to such time-worn journalistic conventions as objectivity, tight deadlines and the reluctance of editors to print stories that deviated from those of the rest of the “pack”? To Herr, this form of journalism simply reinforced among reporters the need for quick, canned information, prepackaged quotes, and sterile facts and figures – in other words, the government line or what he would later refer to as “the master narrative.”

Indeed, Herr’s sentiment is echoed by scholars like Thomas Myers, who believed the shifting landscape of the war in Vietnam required a new method of recording history.
The formal structures of the journalist must be reshaped to allow the entrance of the new data that resist traditional fact gathering. What is required is the discarding of old tools and the discovery of new ones. When unchallenged, shared notions of objective reporting produce only the undifferentiated quilt of statement. Greater reliance on subjectivity and invention is required. In short, the journalist becomes not a medium but a component of history, a builder rather than a retriever of public memory. (151)

Nevertheless, Herr, desperate to win the editor’s assent, endeavored to frame his proposal in semi-conventional terms, fully aware that Esquire under Hayes offered perhaps the best hope for the freedom to write as he saw fit. He offered to submit dispatches from Vietnam each month that could serve as a monthly column for Esquire, as well as profiles of the American press in Vietnam, Army Green Berets, even Westmoreland. But Herr was dead set against sending Hayes “news,” not in the traditional sense at least. In fact, Herr believed that Sack’s M was the only real journalism to come out of the war so far.

There had been news enough out of the war, and it had missed the mark. The news had made “conventional propaganda look innocent.” Where were the honest voices of soldiers in Vietnam? The men sounded “programmed, one more symptom of a packaged war.” The news had deadened reality, concealed truth, made the war “look canned and hopelessly remote.” (Polsgrove 171)

Herr had first met Hayes six years earlier when he had interviewed with the latter for a position as a junior fiction editor at Esquire. Herr, who was finishing his undergraduate studies in literature at Syracuse University, was immediately taken with Hayes, a man whose sense of style, Southern charm and easy-going humor he admired. Herr didn’t get the job – it went to friend and fellow Syracuse native John Berendt instead – but the two kept in touch, meeting at parties and lunches over the ensuing years, Hayes even giving him a shot working on an early college issue for the magazine.

But Herr’s journalism experience still left a lot to be desired. While at Syracuse, he had written some fiction and film criticism for the school’s literary magazine, then edited
by Joyce Carol Oates, before dropping out of college to tour Europe. And for a time he
was the unpaid film critic for a tiny, leftist magazine called *The New Leader*, but was
fired after only a year for liking the wrong movies. More recently Herr had done a few
travel pieces for *Holiday* magazine, including the one on Fort Dix which had caused Sack
to reevaluate his need to inject descriptive detail in *M*.

In between, Herr, afflicted with a severe case of wanderlust, drifted throughout
Europe and Asia, never home for more than six months at a time. Still, he could never
shake the belief that deep inside beat the heart of a born writer.

Growing up the son of a jeweler in Syracuse, New York, Herr began writing fiction
at an early age, even penning his own series modeled after Hemingway’s largely
autobiographical *Nick Adams Stories*. Far from an academically gifted student, Herr
nevertheless believed he was imbued early on with a writer’s instincts, the innate
qualities of curiosity and observation that would become famously evident later in his
career.

When I was young, I was a voyeur. I trained myself to eavesdrop while looking out
the train window and not miss a word. I used to walk around when I was 12 and
follow people home. This would even involve taking bus rides with them. I just
wanted to see where and how they lived. (Ciotti 22)

Now, after spending much of his young adult life drifting from country to country,
from one unfinished project to another, Herr believed that Vietnam was the place to make
his mark.

Having thought of myself not as a journalist but as a writer, I thought that it was
time to write something. I was twenty-seven years old…I had spent all the time
previous traveling and writing pieces about places, but not writing what I felt I
should be writing. So I believed before I ever got there that that was the time and
the place and the subject. I was very ambitious for the work and had large
expectations for it. (Schroeder 34)
And Hayes must have felt it was time as well, for he agreed to the young writer’s plan. Hayes knew that Vietnam was fast becoming a blight on the land, could see the nightly body bag counts on the networks, watch the demonstrations as long-haired youths burned their draft cards and clashed with police. He felt it incumbent upon *Esquire* to take the lead in telling its story as faithfully as possible.

Other factors helped bolster Hayes’ confidence in the idea. He knew the costs – at least initially – wouldn’t be too great. Herr had landed an assignment with *Holiday* which would pay for his plane ticket to Vietnam. He also knew that the writer’s agent, Candida Donadio, had managed to convert a contract for a book of short stories into one about Vietnam. What Herr really needed to pull off the assignment, Hayes knew, were press credentials. With them, he could go anywhere, anytime in Vietnam. Hayes got the writer a travel visa, advanced him $500 for expenses, and sent him on his way.

After a delay of about two months waiting for *Holiday* to come through with its share of the money, he finally set foot in Vietnam in December 1967. He arrived full of all the childhood expectations which had led him down the path in the first place. Enamored of Hemingway’s image as the hard-drinking, hard-charging war correspondent during the Spanish Civil War, Herr thought he was living a dream come true.

I’d always wanted to go to war, because I wanted to write a book, because I thought being a war correspondent would be very glamorous, because I didn’t know any better. I was in the time of your life when you think of your life as a movie. (Wadler D1)

Indeed, it took less than a week for Herr to realize that nothing – not Hemingway, movies, the news media, or even his own skeptical view of America’s involvement up to that point – could’ve prepared him for what he would find in Vietnam.

The war Herr was seeing now was different from the war he thought he had seen before, different from the one the press and the government had been saying was
being fought. This war was no quagmire, half-lit by the light at the end of the tunnel. This war was terrifying: the military situation was “desperate,” Herr wrote to Hayes. And the worst was yet to come, he said: despite the epic scale of the war, the superb fighting men, no part of Vietnam was secure. Yet no one there was talking about it. (Polsgrove 173)

For the next two months, unlike many fellow correspondents forced to cover press conferences and attend briefings in air-conditioned offices, Herr was in the field going out on patrols with Marine and Army Special Forces units. Once, while flying in on a mission, the helicopter he was riding in began taking ground fire, and a soldier just feet away was shot and killed. On another night in the Mekong Delta, Herr had even picked up a .30 caliber carbine rifle and helped repel a Vietcong attack.

But none of this could prepare him for Tet, a sweeping offensive by the Vietcong and North Vietnamese throughout much of the South, including attacks on every provincial capital and even the U.S. embassy in Saigon. Just when he thought he was getting his bearings, the whole war had turned upside down for Herr.

He had already sent Hayes material to be used for his upcoming columns, including a power chart that he and Hayes thought would help *Esquire* readers figure who’s who in Vietnam. But in light of all that was happening during Tet, Herr knew that the material he’d submitted was about a time and place that over the course of a few hours had simply ceased to exist.

At the first break in the fighting, Herr wired Hayes and asked him not to run the column. He also broke the news that the entire approach they had discussed could no longer work. The response he got was one of the many reasons the writer would later call Hayes “perhaps the last great magazine editor” (Schroeder 33).

Because he had taken great expense and risk to send me, I wrote to him explaining the situation. He replied: “Well, you’re there. Do what you want to do.” It was quite extraordinary. (Schroeder 33)
Herr did just that and hitched a ride north with the Marines toward the city of Hue, the ancient imperial capital of the Central Highlands. The North Vietnamese Army had swept down in the early days of the offensive and occupied the city north of the Perfume River. The Marines, with Herr in tow, prepared to reclaim it. The experiences he would have in the coming weeks would serve as material for the only true “dispatch” Herr would send while in Vietnam.

Here, Herr describes the sights and sounds as he and the Marines approach the city, the black and foreboding skies serving as a true-life metaphor for the grim days and weeks which lay ahead. The technique is what Maggie Gordon describes as the literary equivalent of cinema’s establishing shot, providing “the audience with a clear sense of the space in which the following scene occurs” (18).

Going in, there were sixty of us packed into a deuce-and-a-half, one of eight trucks moving in convoy from Phu Bai, bringing in over 300 replacements for the casualties taken in the earliest fighting south of the Perfume River. There had been a harsh, dark storm going on for days, and it turned the convoy route into a mud bed. It was terribly cold in the trucks, and the road was covered with leaves that had either been blown off the trees by the storm or torn away by our artillery, which had been heavy all along the road. Many of the houses had been completely collapsed, and not one had been left without pitting from shell fragments. Hundreds of refugees held to the side of the road as we passed, many of them wounded. The kids would laugh and shout, the old would look on with that silent tolerance for misery that made so many Americans uneasy, which was usually misread as indifference. But the younger men and women would often look at us with unmistakable contempt, pulling their cheering children back from the trucks. (73)

Indeed, such compelling narrative, effectively placing the reader in the back of the Marine transport on that dark and ominous day, while plumes of black smoke rise from the spires of a demolished city, calls to mind, as Jon Thompson would later write, a “return to an earlier model of narration, not the novelist exactly (though the narrative is in part novelized), but the storyteller who draws us on” (583).
It was the responsibility of Marine 1st and 2nd battalions, 5th Regiment, with which Herr had hung his hat, to retake a portion of the Citadel wall, the trapezoid-shaped fortress that occupied the center of Hue. The fighting was brutal and intense, with snipers popping rounds by day, and mortars falling like screaming banshees on Marine positions by night. The wall, for which the Marines were battling inch by inch, would cost roughly one casualty for every meter recaptured. Herr captures the fighting’s grim toll on the troops:

The Marines who worked the body detail were overloaded and rushed and became snappish, ripping packs off of corpses angrily, cutting gear away with bayonets, heaving bodies into the green bags. One of the dead Marines had gone stiff and they had trouble getting him to fit. “Damn,” one of them said, “this fucker had big feet. Didn’t this fucker have big feet,” as he finally forced the legs inside. (82)

By late February 1968, Hue was back in allied hands. But the Tet Offensive would be far from over for Herr. Again he headed north, this time to the Marine firebase at Khe Sanh, a fortified plateau which MACV had set up just south of the Demilitarized Zone to interdict infiltration routes from the North.

Accounts vary as to the reason the NVA wanted to dislodge the Americans at Khe Sanh. Some believe the maneuver was strictly diversionary, meant to draw away from other areas the badly needed U.S. troops that could have better helped repulse Vietcong attacks during Tet. Others insist that the North wished to repeat its 1954 victory over the surrounded French garrison at Dien Bien Phu, a political windfall that is widely credited with bringing about the end to French involvement in the Indochina War. Whatever the case, Khe Sanh was indeed surrounded, with communist ground forces tightening the ring around the base, while NVA artillery from the surrounding hilltops pounded the camp at will.
The base’s pitted landing strip was an especially popular target for communist gunners. Indeed, the sound of incoming aircraft engines was invariably followed by the sound of incoming rounds. And it was into this firestorm that Herr would arrive, courtesy of a C-130 transport plane.

Khe Sanh was a very bad place then, but the airstrip there was the worst place in the world. It was what Khe Sanh had instead of a V-ring, the exact, predictable object of the mortars and rockets hidden in the surrounding hills, the sure target of the big Russian and Chinese guns lodged in the side of CoRoc Ridge, eleven kilometers away across the Laotian border. There was nothing random about the shelling there, and no one wanted anything to do with it. If the wind was right, you could hear the NVA .50-calibers starting far up the valley whenever a plane made its approach to the strip, and the first incoming artillery would precede the landings by seconds. If you were waiting to be taken out, there was nothing you could do but curl up in the trench and try to make yourself small, and if you were coming in on the plane, there was nothing you could do, nothing at all. (Herr 88-89)

Insinuating himself into such situations rendered the notion of traditional “correspondence” all but moot for Herr. But it was by participating in precisely these kinds of experiences, in taking the time to truly absorb what they meant, that Herr was able to gather the firsthand perspective he would need to get to his “deeper truth” of Vietnam.

Thus, it is paradoxically appropriate for Ward Just, a former reporter for the *Washington Post*, to call Herr the premier war correspondent from Vietnam, even though Herr rarely corresponded with anyone back in the States. In a sense, it was only by not corresponding in the conventional sense that Herr became a correspondent – the *premier radical* one of the war. (Connery 283, 290)

Indeed, Herr has always maintained that he never truly was a journalist, preferring instead to think of himself simply as a writer. True, the *Esquire* press credentials he carried were essential, bestowing upon him the honorary rank of Lt. Colonel and allowing him access to all manner of military transportation. Herr could indeed go anywhere he wanted in Vietnam, but he still had to play his cards close to the vest, keeping his pessimism about the war known only to a few trusted friends to ensure
continued cooperation from the military. Still, it’s clear that most of his “colleagues,” and
government officials for that matter, thought of Michael Herr as something totally
“other.”

Much of the time he felt like an imposter. “One time the chief government press
officer in Vietnam introduced the press corps at a reception for Teddy Kennedy by
saying ‘the gentlemen of the press and Michael Herr…’ I wasn’t doing daily or
weekly journalism. I was there for something else entirely. I was on a different
frequency. I was just off on long operations, coming back six weeks later and going
into my room and smoking a ton of dope and writing notes. I never thought of
myself as a journalist.” (Ciotti 22)

True to form, Herr spent weeks at Khe Sanh, enduring along with the Marines the
harrowing artillery barrages, the death and destruction, before finally hitching a ride back
to Saigon to begin the writing process. Broke – monetarily and emotionally – Herr holed
up in a borrowed room at the Continental Hotel before starting the writing process. Hayes
wired money to keep Herr afloat, and a week later, he had his story for *Esquire*, the only
one he would in fact send while in Vietnam. The voluminous piece about the battle for
Hue, later titled, “Hell Sucks,” would run in the August 1968 issue.

In all, Herr spent just about a year in Vietnam before rotating back to his small
apartment in New York’s Greenwich Village. The first order of business was to write the
piece on Khe Sanh, which would run in the October 1969 *Esquire*. Again he could count
on Hayes’ support, guarding every word of “this kid’s work” when it came time for the
final edit. And even though the process was grueling and at times contentious –
especially over some of the gratuitous language Herr used in reconstructing the way
soldiers spoke in Vietnam – he never once considered taking his story elsewhere. His
feelings for Hayes and *Esquire* were just too strong (Polsgrove 211).

But it was when Herr finally set about trying to turn his Vietnam experiences into a
book that things really became difficult. Everything seemed to go well for the first 18
months or so. After the publication of his *Esquire* stories, Herr had become the literary
darling of elite New York circles. And the announced publication of his book,
*Dispatches*, could only promise more of the same. But Herr was in trouble. Drinking and
taking drugs, he seemed to be following in the self-destructive footsteps of his idol,
Hemingway. Indeed, Herr had fallen into the quintessential trap that so often ensnares
writers – especially those who’ve witnessed firsthand the ugliest the world has to offer.

“I was 29 and all those people were telling me how wonderful I was, how the world
was my oyster…and I hadn’t even begun to pay dues. I hadn’t begun.” He had
personal problems. He remained alone in his apartment, for a week at a time,
getting stoned. “Grass, yeah, grass was the nail in the coffin that kept me paralyzed.
I couldn’t wait to get stoned every day, not high, *stoned, unconscious*. The terror I
felt, it was worse than Vietnam.” (Wadler D1)

But after receiving word that three photographer friends, Larry Burrows, Dana
Stone and Sean Flynn (son of famed actor, Errol Flynn), had been killed in quick
succession back in Vietnam, Herr sank into a deep despair, nearly unable to function in
any conventional sense. Eventually, he realized he was suffering from something far
more profound than the performance anxiety associated with new-found fame. In a sense,
himself a veteran of the war, Herr was having many of the same feelings as others who’d
returned from Vietnam.

I had several problems, not the least of which was the famous post-Vietnam
syndrome. At that point there was some kind of massive collapse, a profound
paralysis that I can’t *directly* attribute to Vietnam, although Vietnam was certainly
the catalyst. Vietnam was the last portion of a long journey. To blame my collapse
on Vietnam without looking at all of the rest of the factors would be blind indeed. I
think that that’s the tragic confusion of a lot of veterans. (Schroeder 35)

Sack, himself no stranger to the perils of war, might have put his finger on it when
he pointed up the dangerous boundaries Herr crossed, both physical and mental, in order
to offer the truest possible picture of Vietnam.
Michael did a brilliant thing that occurred to no other person, and that’s why I think that his book is by far the best Vietnam book of the ones I’ve read. As a journalist I was tying to feel what the soldiers were feeling by going through basic training with them, being on the operation with them, and imagining what was going on in their minds. But there comes a point when you’ve been out with them in the field for a week, and you realize that it’s beginning to affect your own performance. And you think that because you’re a writer and must stay relatively clearheaded, you’d better get out of the war zone for a few days and get some rest. It never occurs to you that this experience of going nutty, of being exhausted, of losing track of things, is the very experience of being in Vietnam that you should be writing about. Now Michael realized this and allowed himself to live it. Michael was really the one who donated his sanity to the cause of reportage. (Schroeder 19)

Despite writing nearly two-thirds of the book, including the Khe Sanh section, in his first year and a half back in the states, it would take Herr nearly 10 years to complete *Dispatches*. In the end, he prefers to think of the book not as journalism, but as a novel, and it was even published as such in France.

Readily admitting that many portions of *Dispatches* are fictionalized, complete with composite characters and contrived dialogue, Herr has always wondered at the surprise expressed by those who thought the book was a start-to-finish, factual recounting of his time in Vietnam. Even two of the book’s most memorable characters – Day Tripper and Mayhew from the Khe Sanh section – aren’t what they appear to be.

They are totally fictional characters. I have told people over the years that there are fictional aspects to ‘Dispatches,’ and they look betrayed. They look heartbroken, as if it isn’t true anymore. (But) I always carried a notebook. I had this idea – I remember endlessly writing down dialogues. It was all I was really there to do. Very few lines were literally invented. A lot of lines are put into mouths of composite characters. Sometimes I tell a story as if I were present when I wasn’t, which wasn’t difficult – I was so immersed in that talk, so full of it and steeped in it. (Ciotti 22)

But others, such as the University of Tulsa’s Gordon Taylor, welcome Herr’s admitted use of fiction, and have even sought to join literary journalistic works such as *Dispatches* with purely fictional accounts like Graham Green’s *The Quiet American* into an amalgamation of personal narratives about the war. Here, fact and fiction serve the
same ultimate purpose – making sense, or, to return to Herr’s notion, finding a “higher truth” of what happened in Vietnam. (294)

Indeed, as Phillip Beidler writes, Herr’s emersion in the total experience of Vietnam, and the subsequent fact or fiction that he was finally able to render, reveals an understanding that comes close to realizing his ultimate ambition.

Keeping faith with the experience of the war to the degree that the “truth” of it is allowed to seek out its own context, create or invent its own matrix of signification, the book also comes off, however, as a work of complex imaginative ambition, self-conscious artifice of an extremely high order. It finally represents, as one recent author has noted acutely, “the journey of the author through his own consciousness as he repeatedly makes the journey from innocence to experience in these fragmentary memories, searching for truth that will be sufficiently central to the experience,” and in the process, increasingly, “Herr makes the necessity of exploring and ordering the events in Vietnam, not the events themselves, his true subject.” (141)

Irrespective of genre or the techniques used to create it, however, *Dispatches* remains almost unanimously regarded as “the single-most powerful book to come out of that war, and the book is almost universally considered a landmark” of literary journalism (Kaul 101).
CHAPTER 5
CONCLUSION

It is no secret that *Esquire* under Harold Hayes in the 1960s was a veritable
hothouse of writing talent and editorial adventure, an incubator of literary journalism
which helped chronicle perhaps America’s most turbulent decade with all the verve,
humor, truth and just plain good writing for which the genre has since become renowned.
To paraphrase Bob Dylan, the times were indeed changing. And Hayes wanted his
magazine to lead the way in helping its audience understand them.

One of the ultimate virtues of *Esquire* is that it chronicles the change that is upon
us with all its crazy quilting of ideals, contradictions, pratfalls and pyrotechnics.
(Morton 305)

And just as Hayes had the vision to bring together and cultivate the era’s greatest
writers, fiction and nonfiction, “known and unknown” alike (Lehmann-Haupt 35), to
provide unique perspective to the cultural trends of the time, so too did he possess the
foresight to corral just the right mix of talent and guts to shed light on perhaps the
decade’s most contentious event of all – Vietnam.

*Esquire* could never compete in a conventional way with the war coverage of such
big-budget news juggernauts as the *New York Times, Time, Newsweek* and others. But
Hayes was never really interested in “news” to begin with – at least not in the traditional
sense. He would beat his competition by offering what the rules of conventional
journalism said they could not – a point of view.

He never forgot that he was journalist whose job was to help readers make sense of
their times, not by editorializing or hewing to some narrow line, but by making this
magazine a forum for provocative views and detailed reports, for scenes freshly
viewed and ideas newly expressed, in words, images – whatever it took. (Polsgrove 12)

Indeed, the kind of journalism Hayes was after wasn’t the day-to-day grind of deadlines, facts and figures practiced by his more traditional competitors. Rather, he believed that it was the sacred duty of the truly enlightened magazine to provide its readers with the in-depth insights that could peel away the superficial and get as close to truth as possible. In short, Hayes believed in attitude.

Why was *Esquire* the magazine leading the way? Because *Esquire* had an editorial attitude: Anything goes as long as it is interesting and true. (Wakefield 473)

True, it wasn’t Hayes who had come up with his magazine’s groundbreaking approaches to covering the war – the world can thank John Sack and Michael Herr for that. But it was Hayes who had created the sense of endless possibilities at *Esquire*, a wide-open atmosphere that would allow these kinds of ideas to first take hold, then to flourish beyond anyone’s expectations. If anything, Hayes knew good ideas and talent when he saw them. Then, as Robert Smith writes, he simply let nature take its course: “Like the best editors, Hayes displayed gifts for finding good people and then letting them work” (55).

But creating a fertile, open-minded editorial environment was only half the battle. Sack and Herr, like the Mailers, Taleses, Wolfes and so many others before them, were rare talents indeed, imbued with the courage – creative as well as physical – to bring their bold ideas to life.

Both men, like their editor, knew that traditional journalism could reveal only so much about the war in Vietnam. Likewise, both understood that in order to expose, as Herr writes in *Dispatches*, the war’s “grinning, dripping Death Mask” which lay hidden and mocking just below the surface of a thousand conventional reports on Vietnam, they
would have to immerse themselves in the experience, telling the tale through the eyes of those who lived it (Herr 43).

Still, for all their similarities, Herr and Sack took very different roads to reach what is essentially the same destination. For all his skepticism about conventional journalism’s ability to tell the story of Vietnam faithfully, Sack was nevertheless a stickler for facts, painstakingly verifying his information to ensure the most complete telling of the story. Likewise, Sack rarely, if ever, fictionalized portions of his story in order to reveal the higher truths of what was going on.

For his part, Herr, who had always really considered himself more novelist than journalist, never shied away from fabricating characters and dialogue to make a point. He felt, perhaps rightly so, that his uninterrupted year in-country, living – and in some cases, fighting – alongside the grunts he wrote about gave him license to fabricate scenes that experience had taught him were being duplicated all over Vietnam. As for getting the facts straight, Herr readily admits his shortcomings.

A lot of the journalistic stuff I got wrong. You know, this unit at this place. But it didn’t bother me. There is no shortage of regimental histories. (Ciotti 22)

Regardless of methods, Sack and Herr managed to create two of the most enduring, revealing volumes on what it was like to be in Vietnam which, at heart, was exactly what they had set out to do.

As for Hayes, he too had set out at the start of the 60s with a grand dream, and that was to make *Esquire* the true chronicler of its time and place. And along the way, he, and writers like Sack and Herr, managed to render it every bit as entertaining as it was enlightening. Indeed, as Hayes himself once said of the magazine, “Nobody enjoyed reading it more than we did” (Jones 24).
REFERENCES


BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Keith Saliba’s road has been a long and winding one indeed. Born in Montgomery, Ala., Saliba moved with his mother to the Sunshine State in 1975 and spent much of his childhood on the beaches of Florida’s Gulf Coast. He has worked myriad jobs, logging time in everything from drywall hanging and pizza making to surgical technology and the newspaper game. In 2001, Saliba earned his bachelor’s in journalism at the University of Florida and has worked as a freelance writer, general assignment reporter and weekly columnist. During his time as a master’s student at UF, Saliba taught both writing for mass communications and reporting. He has also served as an instructor for the College’s annual Summer Journalism Institute.