ENGLISH TEXT SUMMARY NOTES

“Dear America- Letters Home from Vietnam”

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NOTE: The page numbers in this text guide refer to the following edition of the text:
AUTHOR NOTES

As a collection of letters from hundreds of authors, it would be confusing and impractical, if not almost impossible, to provide notes on all of the authors. Consequently, in this chapter, brief biographical notes for John McCain (introduction), William Broyles Jr (foreword) and Bernard Edelman (editor) will be provided. Those soldiers who have more than one letter included will be further discussed in the chapter “Character Profiles”.

John McCain

John McCain was born John Sidney McCain II on August 29, 1936 at Coco Solo Naval Air Station in the Panama Canal Zone, the second of three children. Following a family tradition (both his paternal grandfather and his father were Four Star Admirals in the U.S Naval Forces), he graduated from the Naval Academy at Annapolis in 1958 and from flight school in 1960.

McCain volunteered for service in Vietnam and was responsible for several bombing missions in North Vietnam before narrowly escaping death when his plane was shot down in October, 1967. He was taken as prisoner of war to the Hoa Loa Prison (nicknamed the ‘Hanoi Hilton’) before being moved around to several other camps. In total, he spent five and half years as a prisoner, three and a half of them in solitary confinement, despite the fact that when his captors learnt of his prestigious background, they offered him early release. He says he denied this because he did not want to violate the military code of conduct and believed his captors would use his release as a powerful piece of military propaganda. Upon his release in May 1973, he was awarded the Silver Star, the Bronze Star, the Purple Heart and the Distinguished Flying Cross. He was elected into the U.S Senate in 1986, easily winning re-election in the ensuing years. In 2008 he was the unsuccessful Republican Nominee for the U.S Presidency, ultimately being defeated by the first African American U.S President, Barack Obama.

For many citizens of the United States, McCain represents a true hero, one who is not only dedicated, but who also risked his own life for the sake of his country, a man who would rather suffer than surrender or betray his comrades or his country.

McCain’s significant personal relationship with the conflict in Vietnam and his status as a highly respected politician of many years standing does, in many ways, make him an obvious choice for the introduction of this edition of the text (2002). This positions the reader to believe that McCain is a reliable narrator, and further reinforces the need for society to reconsider the treatment of returned service men and women and to recognise the sacrifices they made, regardless of the political reasons associated with conflict and combat. Essentially, through his introduction, McCain provides a voice for the thousands of soldiers who lost their lives and hundreds of thousands whose lives have been irrevocably changed by their war time experiences, which have been summarised into this collection of letters ‘home’.
William Broyles Jr.

William Broyles Jr. is a decorated Marine Lieutenant who saw active service in Vietnam during the 1970’s. In the foreword, he reflects on his own tour of duty and his memories of the intensely personal, yet also public, nature of letter writing whilst engaged in combat. He discusses the importance of this process for the sanity and emotional well being of his comrades, drawing particular attention to the soldiers need for the ‘mundane’ aspects of everyday life at home. Academically, he graduated from Rice University in Houston, Texas before completing post-graduate studies at Oxford. He established himself as a journalist and was the founding editor of “Texas Monthly” before his foray into film and television. He has written or been involved in the production of several pieces on the Vietnam War, including “Brothers In Arms: A Journey From War to Peace” (1986) which he wrote after returning to Vietnam in 1984.

Ultimately, Broyle helps to establish a framework for the reader to gain an understanding of the very human element of conflict. Through his anecdotes, we come to understand that long before the advent of modern technology, the humble letter was so much more than a piece of paper. It was an important part of maintaining the soldier’s morale and, in essence, provided them with an opportunity to ‘debrief’ with those at home, far removed from the jungles and the immediacy of combat. From his foreword, the reader also gains an understanding that not only will these letters reveal real people struggling to survive, they will also provide a valuable social commentary on one of the most unpopular wars in living memory.

Bernard Edelman

Bernard Edelman is a member of the New York Vietnam Veterans Memorial Commission, established by the City of New York Mayor Edward I. Koch in 1981 to try to alter the public perception of Vietnam Veterans. Edelman was charged with the task of selecting and editing these 208 letters, from 125 people, from the thousands upon thousands in the archives, and complete it in just ten weeks, in order to coincide with the ten year anniversary of the official end of the war on the 7th of May, 1985.

Edelman served as a broadcast specialist and war correspondent, and in this position was able to establish close relationships with those soldiers sent to a strange land named Vietnam to fight an indirect enemy. As a photojournalist, his work includes the creation of the book “Centenarians: The Story of the 20th Century by the Americans Who Lived It”.

Given Edelman’s former position as a war correspondent, it seems almost fitting that he should be the one to create an accurate representation of the lives, concerns and dreams of the hundreds of thousands of troops deployed on active service during the course of the war.