

# Hayes, Herr and Sack: *Esquire* Goes to Vietnam

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## Introduction

In the 1960s, *Esquire* magazine served as the vanguard for a new generation of literary journalists. These brash young practitioners of “New Journalism” were to play an integral role in defining what that most turbulent of decades was all about. True, cross-town competitors like *New York* and *The New Yorker* were in their own right producing fabulous examples of the genre, but no one was covering the conflict in Vietnam quite like *Esquire* (Weingarten, 2006). Much of the credit goes to editor Harold Hayes, who understood 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. 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. Many of the greatest literary figures in Western history, from Charles Dickens and Jack London, to George Orwell and John Steinbeck had all tried their hand at literary non-fiction (Yagoda & Kerrane, 1997). Even *Esquire* founder Arnold Gingrich had sent Ernest Hemingway to cover the Spanish Civil War 30 years before. But as Carol Polsgrove (1995) writes, the New Journalism under Hayes “just felt new—a fresh way for *Esquire* to approach the contemporary scene, through the unique sensibilities fiction writers would bring to their work” (p. 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 Norman Mailers and Gay Taleses of the world, Sack and Michael Herr were relative unknowns in journalism circles.

Nor were the men novelists or fiction writers. But they counted among their literary arsenals all the novelist's tricks of the trade, from foreshadowing and stream of consciousness, to dialogue reconstruction and even composite characters. Likewise, while most fiction writers, past and present, rarely venture far from the keyboard, Herr and Sack immersed themselves in the total experience of Vietnam, standing shoulder to shoulder with the men they wrote and cared about.

Fortunately, they found a willing conspirator in Harold Hayes, who 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 to produce truly meaningful stories. The results were Sack's *M* and Herr's *Dispatches*, arguably two of the most profound and telling accounts of the war and the men who fought it. This is the story of that loose, but nonetheless remarkable, collaboration between three of journalism's brightest lights.

## **Harold Hayes Takes the Reins**

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 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 11<sup>th</sup> 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, 1995, p. 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, 1995, p. 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 the North Carolina native left after just two years that Hayes first came into contact with *Esquire* founding editor and then-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, 1995, p. 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, 1995, p. 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, 1995, p. 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, 1995, p. 36).

Finally, in 1961, Gingrich made Hayes his managing editor. Control now effectively his, 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, 1969, p. xviii).

Although Gingrich's management style has been described by some as "hands off," it is clear that he shared Hayes' desire to shape *Esquire* into the cultural mouthpiece of its era. It is also clear that the publisher was confident in his young protégé's ability to pull off such a feat at a 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, 1995, p. 475).

Hayes' "pitch pipe" soon 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, provoked 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, 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, 1995, pp. 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 receiving a handwritten 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, 1995, p. 67).

And Hayes made sure that *Esquire* was chock full of writers like Mailer—novelists and nonfiction wordsmiths alike—who could 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: James Baldwin, Garry Wills, Tom Wicker, Terry Southern, Gore Vidal, John Berendt, and more. And, 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, 1989, p. D21).

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, 1989, p. D21).

But Hayes’ work was far from complete. For across town at the CBS studios on West 57<sup>th</sup> 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.

## John Sack Makes the Scene

In the spring of 1965, CBS associate producer John Sack knew something was wrong with the way American news organizations were reporting the deepening conflict in Southeast Asia.. Specifically, it was an article in *Time* magazine that set the former *Stars and Stripes* correspondent'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, 1992, p. 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 (Schroeder, 1992, p. 17).

In keeping with his status as battle-tested war correspondent, the 35-year-old Sack was no novice in the ways of journalism. 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, 1992, p. 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 a bid 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. If he had his way, things would be different in Vietnam.

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 have 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 hopes of a medical discharge.

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 to see through the eyes of the men as basic training ground on. 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, 1997, p. 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, 1967, p. 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, 1967, p. 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. He went back and began interjecting sentences of description into the Spartan narrative he had 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 (Schroeder, 1992).

And Sack's writing contained 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, and its 1960s New Journalism successor, 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, 1969, p. 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 known for placing themselves squarely at the center of their stories. Instead, Sack wants 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, 1992, p. 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, 1967, p. 157).

Such scenes would eventually turn Sack against the war, and the result would be what *New York Times* writer Neil Sheehan (1967) dubbed at the time as "probably the first truly anti-war novel to emerge from the Vietnam conflict" (p. 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.

However, other than for use as obvious hyperbole in his journalistic writing, Sack seemed downright averse to fiction writing of any kind. He earned just a “C” in fiction writing while an undergrad 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, 1992, p. 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. 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” (Kaul, 1997, p. 276).

## **Michael Herr: Dispatches from a War Zone**

John Sack wasn’t the only up and coming writer itching to go to Vietnam. In 1967, Herr approached Hayes with an ambitious plan. He would go to Vietnam and serve 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. Like Sack, Herr 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.”

Herr had first met Hayes six years earlier when he had interviewed 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 gave 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, 1990, p. 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, 1992, p. 34).

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. He knew the costs of Herr's idea—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, Herr 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, 1977, p. 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 (Polsgrove p. 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 nearly 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. 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, 1992, p. 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, 1992, p. 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” (Gordon, 2000, p. 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 (Herr, 1977, p. 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” (Thompson, 2002, p. 583).

The power of literary non-fiction techniques to tell a story is rendered all the more clear when juxtaposed against a conventional treatment of the very same battle. While the following excerpt contains useful information for readers, it does little to place them at the heart of the action.

United States Marines were in firm control of three square blocks of Hue today, compared with two blocks yesterday. They steadily increased the length of their probes in search of the enemy. Marine units were also searching for 32 American civilians listed as unaccounted for by American military advisers (Roberts, 1968, p. A1).

It was the responsibility of Marine 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> battalions, 5<sup>th</sup> Regiment, with whom 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.

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. The base was surrounded, with communist ground forces tightening the ring around the rocky hilltop, while NVA artillery from the surrounding hills

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 (Herr, 1977, pp. 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, 1992, p. 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 (Ciotti, 1990, p. 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, jealously 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, 1995, p. 211).

## Conclusion

*Esquire* magazine under Harold Hayes in the 1960s was a veritable hothouse of writing talent and editorial adventure, an incubator of New 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 (Morton, 1970, p. 305).

And just as Hayes had the vision to bring together and cultivate the some of the era's greatest writers, fiction and nonfiction, "known and unknown" alike (Lehmann-Haupt, 1970, p. 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.

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, 1995, p. 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" (Smith, 1995, 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* (p. 43), 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. 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, 1989, p. 24).

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