When I first sat down, I thought I was going to write a paper on a novel. But as I started writing, all I could think about was myself. For like many great works of art, the book triggered feeling, emotions and memories that had been buried in my own consciousness for years and long forgotten. So rather than review a novel, I am here to tell you about the some of the images and memories that James Webb's Viet Nam war novel, *Fields of Fire*, illuminated in my past life—like a trip flare going off in the middle of the night. I found that many of Webb's imagined characters were real, and many of the real characters in my life were actually imagined. As you'll soon discover, my existence is based upon the death of someone I never knew. The characters in the book also exist because someone has died. Dead soldiers are replaced by those who are mentally dead. The fear of death numbs the soul. The fear of life numbs the heart. Not until I read this brilliant novel did I fully comprehend the battles I have been fighting, not because of the Vietnam War but because of the scars left behind by another fierce enemy, alcoholism. Both of my parents were and are alcoholics. Life in an alcoholic family is like living in the "Arizona Valley" of Webb's book. Life becomes a series of survival tactics. Your soul dies. Your desire to live is controlled by something outside yourself and your rage becomes more a part of you than happiness. And with every step you take, you constantly scan the tree line for signs of the enemy.

I grew up with the Vietnam War. It was on television, in the movies, music and in my life. Vietnam was the first televised war. Every night the network news would show, in detail, the horrors of war. For years, America witnessed bodies sprawled onto stretchers, rushed to an awaiting helicopter. I remember the bandages. They looked as if they had been through the war, too. Soaked with blood, loosely fitted. There was no time for precision. Saving a life meant cutting corners. Just before sign off, the news broadcast would end with the body count for the day. Black silhouettes of faceless soldiers were placed in a neat row over the anchor's shoulder. Each silhouette represented the number of men killed or injured. I think the habit of turning off the television during dinner came from the War. Dead and mangled bodies tend to spoil one's appetite. Each day the count rose, as did my father's anxiety. My half-brother Larry was drafted, and like a good southern boy, he didn't complain. I never knew Larry. I had only met him in old, torn photographs, but he was my brother, my father's first born and first son. I was the fourth born and second son. And, because I was much younger, I had a lot of catching up to do. My father was a widower early in life. In just a few minutes, fire had changed his life forever. I wasn't there that cool North Carolina morning, but somehow I can see the tiny country home
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I can see my father run frantically into the house to save his family. I see him running, frantic, fighting his way through the flames. I see him fight until the moment when one knows defeat is near. The time when body and mind surrender. The children had been saved, but their mother lay quietly as the flames surround her body.

Like a battle on an unnamed hill, the fire had won. My father's life would never be the same. Addictions would consume his every waking moment. I never really thought about it, but had my half brother and sisters' mother survived, I may never have been born. My existence was determined by the death of someone I never knew under circumstances I would never understand. After the fire, my father dropped the children at their grandmother's house and drove off, never to return. While I don't understand why he did many things, I can honestly tell you I understand why he left them. After the fire, my father waged his own war and battled his own addictions. Whether his alcoholism was inherited as some medical experts suggest, or whether it was a product of that fiery night, I don't know. And, he won't say. Talk of that night turns my father's skin gray. You can see the reflection of the flames in his eyes. Alcohol keeps the ghosts buried, at least for awhile. My mother fought the same addiction. However, I know the reasons for her torture. Each night, she would watch the man she loved drink himself into forgetfulness. It became too much to bear. To say that I lived in a dysfunctional family would be kind. Alcohol, like heroin, consumes the individual and the family. Eight-year-old children are forced to make parental decisions. There's no time for child's play; there are alcoholics to care for. Most of the time my parents were too drunk to crawl to bed, so my little sister would put a blanket over them. And, when the morning arrived, nothing was mentioned. Every morning was a lesson in denial.

While I never endured the hardships of poverty, and I was not physically beaten, there were many times I wish I were poor and battered. Instead, I was the child of an alcoholic father and mother. Alcoholic families don't endure, they simply exist. Getting through each day seems to be the only goal. Like the soldiers in the field, children in alcoholic families watch each small detail for the sign of trouble. One wrong move and the enemy wins. In essence, from the time I was old enough to realize the effects of alcoholism, I walked the trail, stepping cautiously, wanting not to trip the wire. I still refer to my parents as "Those People" and I haven't seen nor spoken to them for 15 years. I honestly do not know if they are physically dead or alive. To me, they have always been dead. There was one time when my parents weren't drunk. I knew something was wrong. My mother and father didn't touch a drop of alcohol for days. Both were stone cold sober. A typical ration for these addicts was a bottle a day. I watched the same half-empty bottle for days. It just sat there in the secret hiding place in the china cabinet, collecting dust, just wanting to be touched. I knew trouble was near. My father was usually predictable. Every day he would come home from work and begin drinking. By dinnertime, he was incoherently drunk. If he became angry and yelled, he was only making a point. If he was silent, he was really angry. Silence in our family was unpredictable enemy. There was a lot of silence in our house that week. Sobriety and
silence meant something was wrong. Even when my father was blind drunk, he never missed a
day of work. Ironically, for my father to miss work, be sober, and be silent was frightening. I
still remember every detail of that week. All the frantic telephone calls, the whispers, the missed
days of work. The absolute silence.

Years later I discovered my half-brother was missing in action. As children we were shielded
from the messes of war. My grandmother finally told me the story days before I was inducted into
the Army. My half-brother had been on patrol in Vietnam. His squad had just received a new
leader, a ninety-day wonder, straight from OCS. New officers are called ninety-day wonders
because officer's school is only three months long, less than a semester of college. Three months
is all the time the Army had to recruit and train new leaders. Not many college-educated young
adults wanted to go to Vietnam. My grandmother continued the story as I watched intently. We
were eating lunch at her favorite diner. I had waited years to hear this story. For years I wondered
what was so important. What would keep my parents sober for over a week? While on patrol,
my brother's squad took fire from an enemy hole just off their trail. Several men were hit. During
the mayhem, the Lieutenant ordered the men back and into the bush. For six days, my brother
and what was left of his squad navigated through enemy lines, trying to find their way back to
base camp. Six days behind enemy lines, with only one day's supply of rations. After spending
a sleepless night on the run, my brother discovered the "ninety day wonder" read the wrong map.
It took four hours to calm the Lieutenant and four days to find home. My brother saved the lives
of his squad members, his friends. In war, decisions should be made by the most experienced,
not the highest rank, by soldiers, not politicians. After she told the story, I remember getting
an uneasy, sinking feeling. In many ways, my grandmother had told me the worst news of my
life. Surviving in an alcoholic family wasn't enough torture. Now, I had to live up to the
expectations of a brother I had never met, a bona fide war hero.

I volunteered for the Army in 1973. Although I wanted to go to Vietnam, the recruiter
encouraged me to stay in school and at least get my high school diploma. The Army needed
educated warriors. Thanks to my knowledge of weapons, and my experience gathered through
years of deer hunting, I could hit any target at a thousand yards. Soon after graduation, I prepared
mentally and physically for the transformation into the Army. I remember that my father would
not talk to me for weeks before the bus trip to the Oakland induction center. In many ways, I was
relieved. Then, on the final day, he gave me the best advice he would muster: something about
keeping my head down. Once again, he was sober. Something was wrong. The war wasn't over
yet. (Saigon didn't fall until later that year.) Going into combat was a real possibility, but I was
ready. Ready to fight the VC and ready to dilute the image of my war-hero half-brother.

I purposely signed with the elite fighting brigade of the 25th Infantry Division at
Schofield Barracks, Hawaii. The Tropical Lightning. Everything about the unit was distinctive,
even our patch: a red pineapple leaf with a gold border emblazoned with a gold lightning bolt. The
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same patch Charlie Sheen wore in the film Platoon. The 25th's losses in Vietnam were legendary. Wherever there was trouble, the Tropical Lightning was there. Their motto was "100 percent, 100 percent of the time, Sir." These guys were crazy. Even the war-crazed Australian Army looked up to the 25th Infantry. Once assigned, the indoctrination began. The new recruits were taught early about the losses, about the Lightning Minute, and about bravery. We were only allowed to belong to the Tropical 25th because someone far braver had died. We were simply filling a slot and if we were lucky enough, we would have our chance for the Medal of Honor. In those days, it was still called the Congressional Medal of Honor. Today, Congress has little interest in bravery and duty to country. For those not lucky enough to receive the Medal, the Tropical Lighting division would enshrine our name on a plaque. But, we had to earn that plaque with death. The names of brave, dead soldiers were littered throughout the base. On walls, on sidewalks, on benches, and above parking spaces. Even hallways were dedicated to the brave. Expectations were high. As new recruits, we learned the warm, tropical Vietnam nights were especially cruel to our division. Although the faces of the storytellers were different, the stories were the same. It was the duty of each new recruit to listen to these stories with intentional interest. These stories were not told for pleasure, they were our lessons of survival. Each night, as the story goes, the VC would infiltrate the perimeter of camp, silently killing the division, one man at a time. Knives, not AK-47 rifles, became the weapon of choice for the VC during these quite raids. One by one, another soldier was brought to the steps of heaven and one step closer to the Medal. Short of not sleeping, something had to be done. The infamous Lightning Minute was a counter to the VC raids. Every night, just before midnight, the division would gather at the perimeter of the camp, each man was assigned a small section to defend, their field of fire. The men would silently form a circle around the camp facing outward into the jungle, their bellies hugging the ground. Then, precisely at midnight, the circle would light up the night air with automatic fire. No tree or bush would be left untouched. Leaves, branches and grass would be uprooted. Smoke filled the air and the thick, wet soil would spiral to the ground like a divot from an amateur golfer. In one swift second, the quite Vietnam countryside became a circle of hate. Although the Lightning Minute was not officially sanctioned by the Pentagon, it was effective. The next morning, the men would recover the remains of the enemy, collecting weapons and ammunition, responding almost like children running toward a burst piñata. The Lightning Minute was the great equalizer. The constant flow of new VC recruits ensured a high body count. They affectionately called it the Tropical Lightening Minute, with the emphasis on lighten. These guys were crazy, but in a good way. After hearing these stories, I knew I was home.

James Webb's book, *Fields of Fire*, is a reflection of my life. Both deal with addictions and living with ghosts. In *Fields of Fire*, Webb depicts a subtle addiction, an addiction that is just as corrosive as heroin, and just as blinding as alcohol, yet more consuming. Webb relates a story of addiction that may only be recognizable to those who have been in combat, or those who have trained for combat. It is the addiction of war. Combat, just like drugs or alcohol consumes the individual with totality. You cannot survive war by simply strolling through the bush; you must
become the bush. Every little nuance is magnified. Webb's character Cat Man finds these subtleties, always with horrific results. Bent grass blades in the bush tell a story of weight, direction and number. Grass blades became Tarot cards that could tell the future, but they didn't change the future. Simply seeing the bent blades didn't ensure the team's safety. When Cat Man noticed something unusual, the team usually suffered great losses. But, the team continued forward. Why would a squad continue forward even when they knew there would be consequences to pay? Addiction. The characters in the book were addicted to the action, even if it meant loss of life.

The action became the drug for these characters. And with every addiction, there are casualties. Much like a dog sent into the ring to fight to the death, the taste of blood taints the soul—the thirst for action becomes greater than the fear of death. Even though I did not step foot on the battleground, aggressive training helped me understand the taste of war and even death. While in the Army, I trained day and night, under all types of conditions. Even thought the Vietnam War was coming to a close, we trained as if we were shipping out the next day. During these training battles, I witnessed soldiers killed, often by their own stupidity. For example, in the haste of training, 50-caliber machine guns would explode, incinerating everything from the chamber, back. There was a reason why the operator of a 50-cal machine gun cleaned, inspected and assembled his own weapon. We affectionately called them "The Widow Maker" because of their volatility. To this day, the mixture of smells—diesel, gunpowder, blood and dirt—combine to make powerful images come back to life in my mind, but I can't honestly say that smell repulses me. Instead, it makes my heart start pumping. Throughout the book, Webb describes the smells of war. These smells, like the scent of fresh blood for a hunting dog, help fuel the addiction and keep the ghost alive.

Webb accurately depicts the subtleties and complexities of war in his novel. There is no other profession in the world that comes close to being an infantryman in war. Each day someone is probably going to be killed or hurt. It's like pulling one of those paper numbers as you stand in line waiting for the baker to call your number. War is an assembly line of destruction. Webb captures the agony of the wait. While your chances of getting hurt by the enemy is always there, waiting and doing nothing is also dangerous—sometimes it may be even more dangerous than walking the trail. Like a horror movie, Webb depicts the calm before each storm—the time just before the bogeyman raises his head. For example, when Goodrich takes his team around the tree line instead of through the tree line, danger awaits as Goodrich, ignoring orders, decides to walk through the cemetery. Webb makes the reader believe that Goodrich walked through the cemetery because he wanted to avoid the enemy, but instead, it leads Goodrich right into the enemy. And, like a horror movie, the reader closes his eyes in anticipation, waiting for the bogeyman to appear.

From the first pages, the reader understands that time is really Goodrich's true enemy. It's just a matter of time before Goodrich finds disaster. Experienced veterans know that the best way to
do a job is to do it the way it was done before you. The jungle is no place to be reinventing the wheel. Experience in the field is the best instructor, because you can see firsthand what works and what doesn't. Webb's character illustrates the point very well. In life, as in war, the well-traveled path may have its dangers, but it will lead you home. Soldiers like the disgruntled Goodrich were the most feared during the Vietnam era. The Goodriches got people hurt, not because they thought they knew it all, but because they didn't want to listen to orders or follow procedures. Not listening, for them, was a form of denial. They seemed to believe that if they didn't follow procedures or follow orders, then maybe they weren't really in Vietnam. As Webb points out, these Goodriches were not bad guys, but they were naïve. And stupidity and naivete in Vietnam got you killed—or worse, it got those around you killed. The Goodrich character in *Fields of Fire* could have learned a lesson from my father: beware of the silence!

It is clear that James Webb, as a former Marine officer who served several tours in country, wrote his novel because he hoped that maybe some of the devastating wounds the war opened might be healed by the truth of what actually went on in the jungles of Viet Nam. But as I said at the beginning of this paper, his book opened wounds in me that I didn't even know were there. In fact, there was a time not so long ago when I couldn't even look at the cover of the book because it brought back too many painful memories. Now, thanks Webb's story and to my friends who have shown me they are willing to understand, I believe I might be able to heal the scars of battle in my own heart. As Webb ironically writes at the end of *Fields of Fire*: Welcome home.

*Anonymous*

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Professor Tanaka