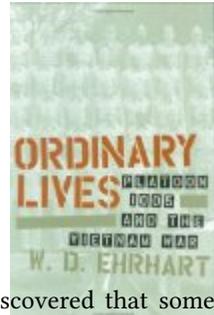


# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

W. D. Ehrhart. *Ordinary Lives: Platoon 1005 and the Vietnam War*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1999. 333 pp. \$29.50 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-56639-674-5.

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By any measure of his work, W. D. Ehrhart stands as one of the most accomplished and seasoned contemporary non-fiction writers who has devoted his pen to the Vietnam War experience. With his work divided between narrative and poetry, Ehrhart has managed to become well known, well read, well liked, and highly respected. He is an artist who writes in a plain style devoid of far-flung imagery, popular myth, or furry references to literary or psychological jargon; yet it is just this quality of honest simplicity—call it a mix between integrity and forthrightness—that makes Ehrhart’s work so engaging and appealing. In a little more than three hundred pages, he writes *Ordinary Lives* with mixed emotions about a diverse group of American marines, himself included, who suffered traumas, wounds, sometimes death, and heart-breaking defeats, as well as about others who bathed in real victories.

Whereas *Vietnam-Perkesie: A Combat Marine Memoir* (1983) was Ehrhart’s first offering that initiated his readership into the seemingly chaotic but highly organized world of the Marine Corps in Vietnam, *Ordinary Lives* introduces his readers to what happened to nearly all the eighty members of Ehrhart’s recruit platoon during and after the war. This book is a result of Ehrhart’s deep curiosity and respect for his fellow marines. His methodology, which evolved from his experience with detective-style journalism and called for patience and persistence after many years of searching, required enormous numbers of phone calls and interviews. The results? There are no stereotypes here, no caricatures nor composite characters. Ehrhart listened to everyone he could find and who agreed to talk to him. He explains how he attempted to find the right marines from cumbersome lists of men with the same names; how he would talk to wives or family members; how he double-checked service jack-

ets with FOIA requests; how he discovered that some men were dead, and others just wanted to be left alone. The joy, of course, came when many of these men and their families welcomed him into their homes with grace and hospitality.

To be sure, this book is anything but simple. Ehrhart manages to put aside his own feelings about the Vietnam war and its effects on him as he seeks out the perceptions of others. What makes this book different is that Ehrhart goes beyond Ehrhart into the minds, hearts, and experiences of his fellow marines of Platoon 1005 with a good deal of grace. As a result, *Ordinary Lives* not only tackles the requisite themes of initiation, disillusion, personal survival, random death, and human tragedy so often found in the broad spectrum of Vietnam war literature and films like Stanley Kubrick’s *Full Metal Jacket* (1987), but also takes into account the common positive traditions of American individualism, diversity, ingenuity, and success.

The story begins in 1966 when Ehrhart and other recruits arrive at the Marine Corps Recruit Depot, Parris Island, South Carolina (pp. 1-7). Tired from a long bus ride from home, each man gets off the bus in the middle of the night and crosses the dividing line between civilian and military life. For each man, the experience is nothing less than traumatic. Greeting them, as Ehrhart says, are “God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Ghost,” the Drill Instructors (DIs), who for eight weeks in Boot Camp function as the agents for the often horrific metamorphosis from free-wheeling civilian to disciplined soldier. Men as large as trees fall; knees weaken, and sometimes hearts freeze in fear of the DIs’ wrath. The recruits learn that they live on an island; that they cannot leave; that swamps surround them, and therein

even the poisonous snakes work for the Marine Corps. In moments of near panic, the recruits are screamed at, moved about in virtual herds, shorn of their civilian curls, and given their first uniforms of green. Their personal articles as well as their privacy are removed, and they fall into the hungry belly of the Corps, from which they must learn how to crawl up and out together. In eight weeks, the men of (recruit) Platoon 1005 learned how to survive and think like Marines; how to march properly and use their weapons; how to communicate within a rank structure, and how important it is to depend on one another rather than only on one's self. Ehrhart comments that in time, the DIs' harassment began to make sense, because eventually the recruits learned the basic tenants of the USMC ethos: "the Marine Corps doesn't want you to die; it wants you to fight"; and "no one gets left behind ... everyone comes out together" (p. 316).

At the heart of the book lies one of Ehrhart's basic principles: that "no life is ordinary." He goes on to say, "Every life is fascinating if you take the time to notice. Everyone has a story to tell if you take the trouble to listen. Every life is its own little drama" (p. 318). How true! Thus *Ordinary Lives* does not serve as a recruiting poster for the Marine Corps; on the contrary, it shows how traumatic life in the Corps could be, especially during the Vietnam war when so many Marines

went into harm's way. What haunts Ehrhart in this book is the memory of his first black friend in the Corps, John Harris (pp. 10, 125-31), who died in Vietnam after their Parris Island experience; what thrills him is something intangible—perhaps "esprit" is the right word here—first gained at Parris Island, that continues to bind these men together, albeit loosely, thirty years after their youth.

No one who has ever read any of W. D. Ehrhart's books or poems could possibly think that he supported the war he volunteered to fight. *Ordinary Lives*, however, gives us a glimpse of the author's other side: "Weren't we grand stepping across the parade deck in perfect close-order formation, precise and confident, passing in review on graduation day, August 12, 1966. Weren't we handsome and proud and strong. Wasn't that as fine a moment as any of us would ever live" (p. 322). Then, Ehrhart lowers the rhetorical hammer and asks, "Didn't we have a lot to learn." The answer, of course, is yes we did, and one can only hope for a future in which we still do.

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