Doug Murray’s The ‘Nam: A Literary examination of the Traumatic Effects of War Told through Visual Literature

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Doug Murray’s *The ‘Nam: A Literary Examination of the Traumatic Effects of War Told through Visual Literature*

by

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Abstract

This thesis examines Marvel’s *The ‘Nam* comic series, written by Doug Murray, through the analytical lens of trauma studies. The paper looks at the early run of the comic series, and shows how the author of the comic book exposes the readers to the traumas of being a US Army infantry man serving in Vietnam. The third chapter explores how the draft and the young age of the soldiers played a role in their experience of trauma and how they reacted to it, while the fourth chapter explains how the traumas of war affected the soldiers during their time in war. The fifth chapter examines the use of the comic book as a medium and shows how the comic book was used to amerce the reader into the experiences of trauma that the young soldiers of the comic stories had to live through. Finally, the paper concludes with how comic books, specifically comics like *The ‘Nam*, can be used in education and as a tool to start a conversation about what it means to be a veteran of war.
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Chapter I: Introduction

The American comic book has had a vast evolution since its introduction in the 1930s; starting its journey as anthologized collections of newspaper comics aimed at children as an inexpensive form of entertainment (Wright 2). The Comic has continued to evolve over the years into its very own medium, one in which storytellers can create advanced plots and tackle major issues (Cohn 1). One such comic book series to help advance comics through history is Marvel’s The ‘Nam, which was first published in the December of 1986, and ran until September of 1993. The ‘Nam was created to go against the standard ideology of superheroes in war comics, where it was one individual showing up, usually a super-human of some sort (like Thor: the god of thunder), and defeating the enemy forces single handedly.

Figure 1.1: Thor (Murray 41:8)

Figure 1.1 shows the old idea of a hero in war, a single individual usually one with super-powers or abilities, acting as a one man army to destroy or subdue an enemy army with the actual U.S. Army thanking him or her for helping them. This example, Figure 1.1, is actually from issue forty-one when the troops are sitting around reading comics and talking
about what it would be like if the heroes from the comics came to fight in Vietnam. So, not only does *The ’Nam* acknowledge the standard comic book mythos; but it nods to it by showing how troops in war would receive comics and read them. The use of the comic medium allowed the author of the comic, Doug Murray, to use a meta-acknowledgement of the ideas and standards revolving around war comics and stories in American culture.

Using the comic medium also helped Murray do what the editor of *The ’Nam*, Larry Hama, told him to do which was to make the comic stories and visual representations of the war as realistic as possible, like in Figure 1.2. Unlike the panel shown in Figure 1.1, the image in Figure 1.2 shows two Americans that had just engaged with the enemy, there are no super-powered individuals, no magic, just two soldiers with guns and a bunker. Hama told Murray that the comic should not contain any “John Wayne heroics or enemy soldiers charging out from behind perfectly good cover right into the sights of a machine-gun… [and that] valor doesn’t always take the form of a guy jumping up and yelling, *Follow Me!* There were guys in Vietnam who re-upped to stay in country so that their draftee kid brothers couldn’t be sent over” (Hama). Marvel and the creators of *The ’Nam*, in the beginning of the comic’s run, helped in reevaluating what a comic book hero should or could be. This reevaluation of heroes in war allows the comic to portray scenes, such as Figure 1.2, that are more honest to the actual events that take place in war: especially in Vietnam.
The ‘Nam tells the stories of fictional characters serving in the very real U.S. Army’s 4th Battalion (Mechanized)/23rd Infantry Regiment (4/23rd) of the 25th Infantry Division during the Vietnam conflict. The original writer of the comic series was Doug Murray. Murray is a Vietnam veteran himself and wanted the audience to read the comic and be able to experience what Vietnam was like from the viewpoint of an American grunt: U.S. Army infantryman.

Jim Shooter, the editor in chief, made it very clear to Hama, the editor of The ‘Nam, and Murray, the author of the comic, that he wanted The ‘Nam to be as accurate as possible (Hama). Murray did this by basing his fictional tales on real events. One example of how he did this was in the seventh issue, titled “Good Old Days.” On the first page the reader sees an interaction between Corporal Marks asking a Kit Carson Scout, a Vietcong Soldier who switched sides and started working with American soldiers in Vietnam, named Duong why he decided to fight with the Americans rather than continuing the resistance as a member of the Vietcong (VC).
Then on the second page (Figure 1.3), as the character begins his story the reader sees note paper-clipped to a picture saying, “The elements of this story are completely true. Duong’s story is actually a composite of the stories of three different VC–not all of whom changed sides and became Kit Carson Scouts” (Murray 7:2).
This image of a note, is how Murray directly addresses the audience letting them know he is trying to give “a clear picture of the roots of the war” and why the Vietcong fought in the manner that they did (Murray 7:2).

The presentation of The ’Nam as a comic book, rather than a novel or film, to the public allowed Murray to do things like what is shown in Figure 1.3. The medium allowed him to address the reader for a moment without having to take the attention away from the story such as in a fully text based genre, where in order for the author to address the audience he or she would need to shift to a second person method of storytelling. An example of text based mediums that does this is Susanna Rowson’s novel: Charlotte Temple. In the novel Rowson shifts from a third person narration to second person narration style, but every time the narrator shifts into second person the story needs to stop so the narrator can speak to the audience. But the comic book format allowed Murray to slip his comments in without stopping the flow of the story, because he and the artist can use the visual component which gives the reader the ability to have a more active role in the interpretation of the story.

To add to the realistic feel Murray was creating, the comic book series was published on a schedule which paralleled the real world. This meant for every month that went by between issues there was a month that went by in the comic book storyline; they called this style of releasing the comic “real-time.” This helped in allowing for a changing cast to emulate how soldiers would serve their one year tour and then go home.

The idea of “real-time” is unique, because it helps with what Murray and the creators of the comic need to make the stories more realistic; the ability to have a changing cast. The only down side is it stopped Murray from creating multiple issue story arches. This style of
storytelling did not allow the team to develop “tune in next week and see what happens” stories, because there was no next week. The ‘Nam was on a monthly release, so “real-time” made a month go by in the comics, which meant the story that started in that issue had to be wrapped up in that issue, or it would be lost in time.

The desire to create a comic that told the story of U.S. soldiers experiences in Vietnam was high during this time in America, as explored in the literature review by Annette Matton and her assessment of The ‘Nam, because there was social reevaluation of the perception of soldiers and their relationship to the government. Murray and the other creators of The ‘Nam wanted the project to expose the civilian public to what it was really like being a young kid for the U.S. being grabbed right out of high school, by the draft or from volunteering, and then thrown in to a war.

At the beginning, Marvel, Murray, and the other workers on the project wanted the comic series to break from the traditional idea of heroes with in comics, especially in war comics. It is here in the comic series earlier run that the practice of realistic story telling shines through and it is that realism that makes The ‘Nam an excellent artifact for examining the trauma experienced by soldiers in Vietnam. It is also worth looking at how the comic format is used and helps in presenting these tough issues to the civilian public.

The application of Bessel van der Kolk and Alexander McFarlane’s research on trauma and Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) to the early issues of the comic will help in showing how Murray presented the traumatic events soldiers experienced in Vietnam. It will also help in exploring how Murray shows the traumatic affects left on the soldiers who had
lived through the war. Van der Kolk and McFarlane’s theory will provide the terminology as well as the tools to identify what Murray is presenting to the audience.

The use of Scott McCloud’s and Neil Cohn’s theories they developed for the field of comic studies will help in showing how and why the comic as a medium is an effective tool when presenting stories of war and the trauma experienced in combat. Their theories will help in exploring how the comic book medium is used by the author and artists to accomplish their mission. McCloud’s theories will be used to look at how the reader interacts with the comic medium as well as how the author and artist use the comic to influence the reader. Cohn’s ideas of comics as a language provide the terminology to explore comics as a structured language.

The mingling of these theorists and their ideas regarding trauma and comics help in looking at *The ‘Nam* and how it exposes the civilian public to the experiences of U.S. soldiers in Vietnam through a comic book. But, in order to do this there must be an understanding of the theories themselves, which is why the literature review is the next section after the introduction. The literature review presents the current academic discussion in regards to *The ‘Nam* as well as it explains the theories being applied in this paper.

The understanding of the theories allows the paper to transition into a looking at the trauma in the stories of *The ‘Nam*, to how it is presenting the trauma to the reader; within the comic format. Chapters three and four look at the narrative showings of trauma and how Murray presents those experiences to the reader. The fifth chapter is designed to show how the use of the comic medium allowed the author and artists to show the audience the mature and hard topics of war. It is through the understanding of trauma which allows one to see it and after they identify the trauma they can begin to understand how it is being presented.
Chapter II: Literature Review

*The ‘Nam* and its desire to present the civilian public with the stories of American troops in Vietnam has been a topic of discussion within the world of academia, but given its role in the world of comics and American culture it may come as a surprising to learn that this comic has not really been a solid item of analysis. It has helped scholars such as Robert J. Kodosky, in his article “Holy Tet Westy!: Graphic Novels and Vietnam War,” explore how comics have helped in shaping the American ideology of war. But, even here *The ‘Nam* acts as a piece of evidence alongside other comic such as *The Short-Timers, Frontline Combat,* and the Sgt. Rock comics just to name a couple. Aaron Clayton, in his article “Bloody Hell: Realism in American War Comics,” also uses *The ‘Nam* as a way to show how over the past decade American comics about war have shifted away from the romanticized idea of Captain America punching Hitler in the face, which was depicted on the first issue of Captain America in 1941, to a much more realistic portrayal of American troops fighting overseas. There are very few scholarly articles written specifically on *The ‘Nam.*

That being said, *The ‘Nam* has grabbed the attention of a only two scholars who have seen the comic series as a worthy subject of examination. The main focus of the these scholars and their examinations of *The ‘Nam* are to show how the comic reflects a shift in American ideology in regards of war, how the relationship between the publisher and the creators of the comic book effect the telling of the war stories, and how the telling of these stories can help with the shift in the American public’s thinking. So in her article, “From Realism to Superheroes in Marvel’s *The ‘Nam,*” Annette Matton looks at the comic and explores how it was a reflection of the changing mentality of the U.S. and its involvement in Vietnam. Matton,
by using Chomsky and his theory of Americans rethinking and rewriting the view of the American soldier in Vietnam, she shows how even with the comic’s realism it does not challenge the standard pro-America ideology in American comics of old. She addresses this when she writes, “Interestingly, despite its pro-American rhetoric and ideology, The ’Nam never seems to be suggesting that America could have won the war in Vietnam, [but]... it is also not suggesting that America was wrong to be in Vietnam” (173). She uses the comic to show both the cultural re-evaluation of history but also the cemented mentality towards war that American culture has maintained for the last decade.

One other scholar who deemed the comic series worth of exploring because of its reflection of 1980s American culture is Tim Blackmore. In his article “Doug Murray’s The ‘Nam, A Comic Battle for Vietnam at Home and Abroad,” Blackmore explores the rocky relationship between Murray and Marvel. He talks about how Murray wanted to create a comic dedicated to the experience of an Army grunt serving in Vietnam, which happened at the beginning of the series run. Blackmore called the first phase of the comics “a postmodern social-workers dream of recovery… It was a shared popular artifact that began to play an active role in a therapeutic project of American war healing” (223) Blackmore continues by explaining how Murray targeted the comic to an older audience, but yet wanted a wide audience so he needed to maintain the Comic Code’s seal of approval.

Blackmore continues to explain how as sales dipped Marvel wanted to increase the body count and action in the comic series (217). Murray tried to resist but Marvel owned the properties of The ‘Nam, so Murray had to play ball. But as time went on, Murray had a hard time aiming his stories at a younger audience with more superhero like character and more
action, so Marvel started to bring in new writers. Blackmore talks about how Marvel brought in Chuck Dixon to write issues and help introduce a new character into *The ‘Nam* who goes by the name of Frank Castle, or as the young readers of Marvel Comics would know him as the Punisher. Blackmore says, “that Dixon, acting as Marvel’s new field general, cast the comic back into the ‘40s and ‘50s” (217). By exploring the relationship between Marvel and its writers, Blackmore looks at why *The ‘Nam* began to slip in sales and show why the series went through so many changes; such as the storylines, the characters, writers, artists, and the use of superheroes in a comic not designed for the traditional superhero mythos.

So, it is Blackmore’s idea that the early run of the comic series is a “postmodern social-workers dream,” because of Murray being able to honestly tell the experiences of American troops with little input from Marvel, that helps in showing why the earlier issues of *The ‘Nam* are the perfect candidates to be examined through the psychoanalytical lens of trauma. But due to the lack of research applied to this comic series, the next section of this literature review will be explaining the materials needed to put *The ‘Nam* under the microscope of trauma.

**Secondary Sources**

Perhaps the first step of analyzing comic books in the literary light is to understand the structure of the visual component of the medium and how it plays a role in its storytelling. Although many might assume comic books are a simple and straightforward medium, scholars like Scott McCloud and Neil Cohn have shown that comic books present a much more complex style to readers because comics marry the visual with the textual.

Scott McCloud’s name is one of the most commonly uttered names in the field of comic studies, and this is due to his book *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art*. Published in
1993, this book is a key piece of literature in the world of comic studies because it provides the groundwork on how to understand comics and approach them with in an academic light. McCloud talks about what comics are, why and how we as individuals identify ourselves in comics, and the multiple problems that can pop up when looking at comics versus standard text based literature or none text using visual art. He explores how the mingling of the textual and visual open doors by making readers use closure to interpret the medium, as well as he talks about how the artist and writers work together through panel structure and the relationship between the images and words to tell their stories and influence the audience.

The first step of understanding comics, for McCloud, is to understand what a comic even is. The first chapter he spends time to create a definition of comics and this is what he comes up with, “[comics are] juxtaposed pictorial and other images in deliberate sequence, intended to convey information and/or to produce an aesthetic response in the viewer” (9). By doing this he gives scholars a working definition on what comics are as well as it lets him explore the history of comics in the world. His definition allows scholars to look farther back than the turn of the nineteenth century where the first American comic books were introduced.

This definition also allows him to talk about the visual components of comics. One of the first things he talks about are icons which for him are “any image used to represent a person, place, thing or idea” (McCloud 27). It is here with icons that McCloud explores why as humans we are attracted to simplified versions of ourselves. He says that it is “the university of cartoon imagery,” which allows people to see themselves in the comic characters and the more abstract the image of a face, the less likely the reader is to identify the face as one race or culture, a wider audience will see themselves in that face (31). McCloud’s idea of abstraction
and realism can show how people can identify with a character, by the abstract nature of comics, but it also shows how it can help with storytelling; such as how an artist can use realism to tell a story built off of actual events.

Not only does the abstraction or realism of the art affect the reader's experience, but also what is not shown in the gaps between frames. In the third chapter, “Blood in the Gutter,” of his book McCloud addresses how the human brain fills in the gaps of reality. An example of this could be three pictures; the first picture is a man holding a gun and pointing it at another man, the second picture is a close up of the gun with a flash and the word “bang,” the last image is the man running away with a wallet in his hand. If the images are arranged in the sequence given in the last sentence, the read may interpret the sequence of images as a robbery turned shooting. “This phenomenon of observing the parts but perceiving the whole has a name; it’s called closure” (McCloud 63). Closure is a tool the human brain uses to take the fragments of our everyday lives and to make it whole.

An example of closure is shown here in Figure 2.1. In these six panels the reader sees American troops capturing what appears to be a VC soldier. The first two panels show the Americans possible questioning him. But the last four panels show the captives death, yet without actually showing his death. Through the snapshots provided by the artist, the reader has the task to place them together and deriving meaning form them.
Figure 2.1: Closure (Murray 12:21)

It is with closure that the artist gains more power when it comes to affecting and/or influencing the reader's interpretation. “Some artists can be deliberately ambiguous, of course,
and offer us no strict interpretation to go on,” McCloud continues by saying, “Closure can be a powerful force within panels as well as between them, when artists choose to show only a small piece of the picture” (86). It is through closure that the artists of The Nam’ were able to hint at the monstrosities of war while not actually showing the carnage and maintaining the Comic Code seal. McCloud’s ideas of closure will be applied to The ‘Nam and analyzed later in chapter five.

Not only does the reader need to use closure to develop the larger picture, but they also need to use it to develop a perception of time. As McCloud points out in the fourth chapter on his book, “Time Frames,” a single panel may contain events that have taken place over several minutes. McCloud shows how it is the interaction between closure and words that allow the reader to interpret time passing. “Just as pictures and the intervals between them create the illusion of time through closure, words introduce time by representing that which can only exist in time—sound” (McCloud 95). So, the reader's interpretation of the visual component, or closure, interacts with the words in the panel and helps them develop a sense of time. Some of the best words to convey time are sounds.

An example of this could be how the image of a bomb and an explosion which can be shown in time is by adding the word “bang” or “boom.” The introduction of the word allows the writers and the artist to inject a “certain duration, short to be sure but nor instantaneous” (McCloud 95). The use of onomatopoeias and pictures help the reader create the idea of a single moment in time. Sounds are one way to create an instant moment in a panel, but panels themselves can be used to convey time.
Sounds can be used for quick instant moments, but panels can be used to draw out time and make a moment feel longer. The first example McCloud shows, in Figure 2.2, is a scene of two friends talking; the first panel a guy saying “D’ya think the sox could finally do it this year?” Then the next three panels are the same image of his friend looking board with his face in his hand, with the last panel being the bored friend saying, ‘I guess’” (101).

Figure 2.2: Five Panels (McCloud 101)

With these five panels McCloud shows how time can be drug out over a moment, because the three panels in the middle have no dialogue and are the same image repeating so the reader gets a sense of time passing, slowly, before the last panel where the friend finally responds. This method of showing time, also shown in Figure 2.3, not only helps in drawing out time like in the earlier example but it helps in creating suspense. Though the second panel in Figure 2.3 uses dialog, it is still used to set up a sense of time and drawing it out.
Some hours later...

I thought there was a truce...

They always do this. Figure they'll catch us off guard.

They did catch me off guard!

Heads up, here they come!

A little closer, then...

Cripes, how many are there!
Another technique that an artist may use to create time is through the shape of the panel itself; McCloud describes this by saying, “as unlikely as it sounds, the panel shape can actually make a difference in our perception of time” (101). McCloud continues with the example of the two friends having a conversation, but in this case instead of having the five panels, shown in Figure 2.2, of all the same size with the three in the middle being the same image he uses three panels the first one being a square of a guy asking a question, the middle panel being in the shape of a rectangle with his friend looking bored with his head in his hand, and the last panel being the bored friend responding (Figure 2.4).

![Figure 2.4: Rectangular Panel (McCloud 101)](image)

Here McCloud shows how by the artist making the panels long and rectangular they can create a longer moment in time, as well as the opposite the smaller a panel the shorter the moment in time, like shown in Figure 2.5.

Like the example of the friends provided by McCloud (in Figure 2.4), the long, horizontal shape of the panels help in drawing out time. Figure 2.5, on the other hand, illustrates how making the panels shorter in width and longer vertically can show time moving
at a faster pace. This technique works well for depicting action and events that are taking place within a very short window of time, such as an airstrike.

Figure 2.5: Panel Shape (Murray 11:11)
This idea of time is very important within the comic *The ‘Nam*. Time and the use of panel shapes to convey time will be a topic for later analysis, because of Murray’s use of real-time. Due to the comic series publication in a reality based time line, the comics are crammed with many of these techniques that McCloud talks about. The use of panels that vary in size, shape, and have or do not have outlines help in shaping the reader's interpretation but it is their use of closure that allows them to put the pieces together.

This combination of action and closure does not only create a sense of time but also motion. As McCloud puts it, “motion in comics are produced between panels by the mental process called closure usually by transition types,” with this he gives the example of a sun rise with six panels and in each panel the sun is higher and brighter in the sky (Figure 2.6).

![Figure 2.6: Sunrise (McCloud 107)](image)

Like film, having panels in a sequential order that depict action step by step allows the reader to use their mind to piece each panel into the greater moment they represent.

But if an artist does not want to spread the action out over several panels the artist can use motion lines as well as other techniques to create an illusion of motion in a static image. “As the moving picture [film] began its spectacular rise, a few of the more radical painters of
the day explored the idea that motion could be depicted by a single image on canvas,”
McCloud continues by saying, “the Futurists in Italy and Marcel Duchamp in France began the
systematic decomposition of moving images in a static medium” (108). It was during this time
of experimentation the motion line came to be. Motion lines have become very popular in
American comics “because of their ability to depict drama…” (McCloud 112). It is this ability
to depict drama that allows American comics, such The ’Nam, to show combat scene in a
serious and realistic way.

The use of lines in comics is such a serious topic that it has become its very own area of
research. One scholar who has looked into the topic of the structure and the visual language of
comics is Neil Cohn. In his book, The Visual Language of Comics: Introduction to the
Structure and Cognition of Sequential Images, he explores comics as a language all in their
own. Cohn talks about how “the idea of a visual language contributes towards filling a gap in
the cultural category regarding the channel of graphic expression…while we readily
acknowledge that verbal communication uses a system of expression, graphic communication
has no equivalent system (i.e., I speak in the verbal language of English, but I draw in_____?)”
(3). It is this gap within the use of comics as a visual language in which he applies a linguistic
lens as well as cognitive lens to see how cultures use visual art, such as comics.

Published in 2013, twenty years after McCloud’s magnum opus, Cohn’s book uses
linguistic terminology to set comics up in a light which allows an individual to look at them as
a structured language. “This intuitive link between comics and language in the minds of their
creators is a belief shared by a number of researchers of language who, with growing
frequency, are discussion properties of comics in a linguistic light” (Cohn 1). Using these
linguistic terms Cohn is able to look at comics in a more scientific light showing how the 
readers of comic books must understand a grammar, the syntax, semantics, as well as 
morphemes to develop meaning; just like people do with any other language. By doing this he 
can explore how individuals and cultures interpret and use comics as a medium.

Cohn focuses his studies on the language, because as he puts it, “comics are essentially 
written in two languages: the visual and written/verbal” (13). It is this view that not only allows 
him to structure his research in the world of linguistics but encourages it, because it allows him 
to show the similarities and differences with in comics between the visual and textual. It is this 
dancing among the pictures and words that allow comics to stand as their own medium.

In the first section of his book Cohn talks about the Swiss linguist Ferdinand de 
Saussure and his ideas of language as arbitrary, meaning “that the sound patterns of words had 
no motivated relationship with their meaning” (Cohn 17). Cohn explores this by showing the 
how the word “dog” looks nothing like the furry four legged creature, but when read by a 
literate English speaker they instantaneously think of a furry four legged creature that is of the 
biological family *canidae*. Being that Cohn’s focus is on the visual language he shows how the 
word “dog” serves a purely conventional function, meaning that “some signs cannot have their 
meaning derived from resemblance or indication, and only can be recognized as meaningful 
through conventional relationship between stimulus and its meaning;” so words only serve as a 
symbolic representation of what they actually mean (Cohn 19).

This leads Cohn to explore the idea of icons, which McCloud also talked in his book. 
Cohn explores the topic of icons deeper because he wants to show how panels, as well as 
comics in general, are not arbitrary. Comics have a harder time being arbitrary because of their
use of icons because icons gain “their meaning by resembling what they meant… for example, a picture of a dog resembles a real dog” (Cohn 18). By doing this, Cohn is able to continue breaking comics down to their simplest forms.

By establishing this concept of comics being a synthetic visual language, Cohn can explore comics with the lens of a linguist which he does throughout the remainder of the book. In the second and third chapter, he shows how comics contain a morphology with lines and panel (Cohn 23-63). By doing this, Cohn exposes the lexicon of comics as a visual language and how we as a culture store and use lines in our mind in order to interpret the lines, icons, and panel structure used in comics.

By understanding the content of the panels we can start to back up and look at the page as a whole and look at the arrangement of the panels and how they tell a story. This is what Cohn does in the fourth chapter of his book; in this chapter he explores the grammar, or syntax (to use linguistic terminology), of visual language and explores the narrative structure of comics. He looks at McCloud’s theory of “sequential art” in a deeper light by exploring the six basic narrative categories: “Orienteer…, Establisher…, Initial…, Prolongation…, Peak…, [and] Release…,” these categories allow Cohn to talk about the syntax of comics. He explains that “together, these categories form phases, which are coherent pieces of a constituent structure,” he continues by saying, “just as phrases make up a sentence in syntax, phases make up an Arc in narrative” (70). This examination of structure helps in explaining how readers of comic make sense of the “sequential images” that construct them.

In the fifth chapter he focuses on the topic of page layout and the challenges that are behind structuring a story via its layout. In this part of the book, Cohn asks the question “How
do people know how to navigate through page layouts?” (92). He continues on by showing the different ways comic creators can structure the pages in order to tell their stories. This leads into the sixth chapter, which is on how readers cognitively interpret and interact with comics as a language.

The second section of the book, chapters seven through ten, talk about the differences in comics and visual language among different cultures. In chapter seven Cohn focuses on the American perception, in eight the Japanese, and in nine the Australian. The American section is worth mentioning because the analysis of The ‘Nam in this paper will focus on the American viewpoint and will be taken into deep consideration. The American view is very important because The ‘Nam is an American comic book series about American history written by a veteran who lived through that history.

Though much of Cohn’s research and theory is establishing comics as a visual language and as a stand-alone medium; he gives the terms and shines a light on how to talk about the language that is comic books. He also allows us to explore how we as a culture interact and interpret comics via their mechanical structure. The focus of this analysis will be on the stories and characters of The ‘Nam, but looking at the mechanics of the comic book structure will help in showing how the medium aids in telling the stories and experiences that many American men and women experienced while serving in Vietnam.

While the field of comic studies is well established, there is not much scholarship on the comic series The ‘Nam. Most of the current scholarship on trauma and the shift to realistic storytelling in comic books and graphic novels focus on books like Maus, by Art Spiegelman, (Chute, Gordon, Ewert, Doherty, etc.) which is a graphic novel that tells the story of a
Holocaust survivor through an anthropomorphic storyline. Luckily there is more and more scholarship being produced on comic books and graphic novels; both on the content of their stories as well as the genre as a storytelling medium.

Just like in the field of comic studies, there is a continuing growth in the field of psychology in regards to trauma. The scholarship regarding trauma and Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) among veterans is one of the areas of study that has seen a large amount of growth. Much of the scholarship on trauma ranges from causes and effects, to the prevention and treatment of trauma, and PTSD causing trauma.

Two such scholars that have been producing articles on the issue of PTSD and its effects on the human mind and body are Bessel A. van der Kolk and Alexander C. McFarlane. In their article, “The Black Hole of Trauma,” they breakdown the effects of PTSD on individuals and explore the different responses people may have to a traumatic experience. These two psychiatrists explorer the idea of what PTSD is and how it is the mingling of reality and the way we interpret the world around us. “Unlike other forms of psychological disorders the core issue in trauma is reality,” so it is a human's interaction with reality that can shape their response to trauma (van der Kolk and McFarlane 6).

It is this relationship between reality and the individual’s interpretation that separates PTSD from a standard neurosis. Unlike standard forms of neurosis, PTSD is a reaction to an event or an interpretation of a past event. This means that “the core issue is the inability to integrate the reality of particular experiences and the resulting repetitive re.playing of the trauma in images, behaviour, feeling, psychological states, and interpersonal relationships”
(van der Kolk and McFarlane 7). So, for some people the reactions to trauma may be instantaneous, while for others the reaction to trauma may be delayed.

This is why van der Kolk and McFarlane believe neurosis, like depression, anxiety, and obsessive behavior just to name a few, are symptoms of an overarching problem rather than the problems themselves, because, as they say, “[when] dealing with traumatized people, it is critical to examine where they have become “stuck” and around which specific traumatic event(s) they have built their secondary psychic elaboration” (7). This means that in order to be PTSD, rather than a simple form of neurosis, the symptoms must be linked to a single period of time or event in which the victim experienced severe trauma.

It is these exposures to traumatic events which allow an individual to develop PTSD. The disorder is created by a person's inability to accept an event/events as their past, so the lack of integration allows the memory to become dissociated from the person’s past experiences (van der Kolk and McFarlane 7). Van der Kolk and McFarlane point out the two types of experiences in which people can develop PTSD; one such juncture is when a person or group of people are exposed to “the human capacity for evil that they had never before imagined,” such as the Holocaust during the Second World War (8). The other occasion, they address in “The Black Hole of Trauma,” is when something happens to an individual that confirms deep-seated belief or fear that that person has been trying to evade, such as a rape (van der Kolk and McFarlane 8).

After living through a traumatic event, such as war, an individual may develop PTSD and with that comes psychological and physical changes which can have long term effects on
that person. Van der Kolk and McFarlane talk about six distinct issues those with PTSD suffer from when processing information. The six issues van der Kolk and McFarlane talk about are:

1. **[Intrusions]** they experience persistent intrusions of memories related to the trauma, which interfere with attending to other incoming information; 2. **[Compulsive Re-exposure to the Trauma]** they sometimes compulsively expose themselves to situations reminiscent of the trauma; 3. **[Avoiding and Numbing]** they actively attempt to avoid specific triggers of trauma-related emotions, and experience a generalized numbing of responsiveness; 4. **[Inability to Modulate Arousal]** they lose the ability to modulate their physiological responses to stress in general, which leads to a decreased capacity to utilize bodily signals as guides for action; 5. **[Attention, Distractibility, and Stimulus Discrimination]** they suffer from generalized problems with attention, distractibility, and stimulus discrimination; 6. **[Alteration in Defense Mechanisms and Changes in Personal Identity]** they have alterations in their psychological defense mechanisms and in personal identity. (van der Kolk and McFarlane)

These are, according to van der Kolk and McFarlane, the main effects on people who suffer from PTSD, but they do admit there needs to be more research on the topic simple due to the complexity of the human reaction to the world of trauma. These six issues are explained in greater detail throughout the article, but this is their synopsis of each they provide for the reader before digging into the meat and potatoes of each one of these effects. There will be deeper looks into each one of these processing issues later in the paper when looking at the characters of The Nam’, because like van der Kolk’s and McFarlane’s patients Murray’s characters will live through events that will impose these psychological issues on them.

Van der Kolk and McFarlane wrap up the article with the fact that there is much research that still needs to be done, simple due to the complexity of the human mind and its ability to evolve and adapt (16). They believe that the world of psychology needs to look at how the biological effects of trauma interact with the psychological effects. As they say, “focusing solely on PTSD to describe what victims suffer from does not do justice to the complexity of what actually ails them” (van der Kolk and McFarlane 16). So, in order to help
those who suffer from PTSD they need to be treated for their symptoms but they also need to find the root problem that has been the source of their torment.

_The ‘Nam_, in regards to scholarship, has been looked at through a couple different lenses, but there is a lack of focus on the issue of trauma and the fact it is a comic book series telling war stories created by an actual veteran of the war in which the stories are derived. By applying the theories of van der Kolk and McFarlane, this paper will flush out the trauma of the soldiers in which the stories are about and how Murray presents those traumas to the audience. Once the trauma is rooted out, the application of the theories created by McCloud and Cohn will show how the medium is use to expose the civilian public to those traumatic stressors. It will also dig into the interaction between the author and the artists and show how the relationship between the creators and their audience influence and shape the interpretation of the comic.
Chapter III: Gaining Independence and Entering Adulthood in War

“Said goodbye to his momma as he left South Dakota to fight for the red, white, and blue. He was nineteen and green with a new M16 just doing what he had to do.” (8th of November, Big & Rich)

Turning eighteen and finishing high school is an exciting time for many of America’s young people. It’s a time of change and wonder, stepping out of the shelter of their parents’ homes into the real world. Some choose college, others take time off of education in pursuits of self-discovery, some jump right into the working world, and others join the military. But, during the Vietnam conflict very few of these young wide eyed and bushy tailed kids had the option to find themselves or jump into the work-force. During America’s involvement in Vietnam, the only options were going to college (for the select few), joining the National Guard, volunteering for the military or mandatorily serve in the U.S. military via the draft, or, as Tim O’Brien talks about in his novel, The Things They Carried, some took up residence in Canada (45).

During this time many young people were drafted or volunteered to be quickly sent overseas and fight; according to nationalvietnamveteransfoundation.org, “9,087,000 military personnel served on active duty during the Vietnam Era (August 5, 1964-May 7, 1975). [and] 2,709,918 Americans served in Vietnam, this number represents 9.7% of their generation” (“Sobering Statistics for the Vietnam War”). As Lieutenant Colon (Lt. Col.) Dave Grossman, a retired U.S. Army officer as well as military historian and psychologist, pointed out in his book, On Killing: The Psychological Cost of Learning to Kill in War and Society, the Vietnam conflict was America’s youngest war because many of the soldiers were drafted right out of high school and would see and experience combat well before their twenties (267). Many of
these young men, much like their peers attending college, had troubles adjusting to their new lives of independence. But unlike those in college, troops in Vietnam had to adjust to their new lives with people trying to kill them and very little, if any, support from older mentors. As Grossman puts it, “They were teenagers leading teenagers in a war endless, small-unit operations, trapped together in a real-world reenactment of *The Lord of the Flies* with guns, and destined to internalize the horrors of combat during one of the most vulnerable and susceptible stages of life” (267). It is this mixture of youth and exposure to combat that helps push what is already a stressful and difficult transition in life –that of adolescence to adulthood-- into a traumatic experience.

The author of *The ‘Nam*, Doug Murray, a Vietnam Veteran himself, does not hide the fact that the Vietnam conflict was fought by teenagers fresh out of high school with no real concept of the world and how it worked. He establishes this right away in the first issue, titled “First Patrol,” when he introduces the reader to the young naive Private First Class (PFC.) Edward Marks. On the first page, Figure 3.1, the reader sees a young soldier in his Army dress uniform hugging his parents as they say their goodbyes, and above the title there is a narrative text box that reads, “Early in 1966, a young soldier leaves home for his first taste of independence, and war” (Murray 1:1). Those words establish the fact that Vietnam was many young American men’s first experience of freedom.
Figure 3.1: Leaving Home (Murray 1:1)

It is the first this issue that establishes the blissful ignorance of young privates in the military as the reader gets to tag along with Marks as he is headed for his one year tour in
Vietnam. The first interaction of Marks’ with a fellow serviceman shows the inaugural glimpse of his sheltered innocence when Marks says, “Hey Corporal what’s this? ‘Looks like green lightning bugs” and, shown in Figure 3.2, the Corporal responds by saying, “They’re tracers, green commie tracers. That’s old Victor Charlie boy welcoming us to the RVN [Republic of Vietnam]” (Murray 1:6).

Figure 3.2: Tracers (Murray 1:6)
It is here that Marks can be read as a representation of the young American boys being sent to war with no idea of what they are getting into. His comment of the tracers looking like lightning bugs sets up his simple inexperience with the world.

This idea of innocence continues throughout the issue when Marks meets his new First Sergeant (Top) and is completely unaware that Top is offering him the opportunity to bribe him in order to get a better job. But, because of Marks’ naivety he does not bribe Top so Top places him in Sergeant (Sgt.) Polkow’s fire team. Top does this to Marks as a punishment for Marks’ lack of financial planning. This encounter is the first of many rude awakenings for the young Marks.

This interaction with Top and Marks is an example of how some of the older more experienced soldiers would take advantage of the new incoming soldiers. Grossman addresses this idea when he says, “In past Wars the impact of combat on adolescence has been buffered by the presence of older veterans who can serve as role models and mentors throughout the process, but in Vietnam there were precious few such individuals to turn to” (267). This lack of mentoring can be very difficult for the young men who come over to Vietnam from their simple lives back home or what the comic calls “the world.”

Murray refers to “the word” as “home, the good old US of A,” in the Nam Notes at the end of the comic (Murray 3:31). Throughout the comic “the world” is talked about like this far off land where normalcy and civilization takes place. This distancing also helps the soldier separate their lives in Vietnam by removing it from their lives back home. But the separation is also in its self a traumatic stressor, because these young kids are overseas fighting in war with a lack of mentors and leadership from more experienced individuals.
This lack of leadership from older more experienced soldiers forces the new arrivals to count on their fellow soldiers who have been in country only months longer than they have. So, the relationships that develop in the comic between the men almost emulate a sibling like relationship, where the barely older brother helps and teaches the younger brother. As Grossman talked about earlier, this is one of the key differences from the other wars that the U.S. had been involved in up until this point (267).

This is exactly what happens when Marks meets his squad. When Marks introduces himself to his new squad he says, “I’m Ed Marks. Guess I’m here because I am too stupid to realize I might have to bribe a first sergeant” (Murray 1:13). The squad introduces themselves to Marks and after the introduction, a character named Mike Albergo says to Marks, “Yeah, the perfect replacement. Green as grass and just stupid enough to fit in” (Murray 1:13). This idea of Marks’ lack of knowledge of how things works in the ‘Nam that is the prime topic of conversation during the introduction phase. It is this lack of knowledge on Marks’ part that allows Murray to show how relationships develop within the squad.

A relationship starts to develop between Albergo and Marks, because Albergo takes it upon himself to show Marks around and introduce him to the squad and the sergeant. Albergo is Marks’ teacher; it starts with Albergo explaining the lingo, showing him the equipment like the new M16 assault rifle. This relationship starts out as simple, a more advanced student showing the new kid around school, but quickly evolves to a brotherhood when Marks goes on his first patrol out in the bush. It is in Marks’ first time in the bush where he experiences the “aspects of the human capacity for evil,” as well as his ideas and fears of killing and being killed will come to be (van der Kolk & McFarlane 8).
The first mission, or trip into the bush, for Marks is a search and destroy operation or as Albergo explains to Marks, “It’s like quail hunting, you flush ‘em and shoot ‘em as they rise” (Murray 1:15). Murray uses this first operation to show two things: the first being how unaware these young boys, and Marks, are when they arrive to the ‘Nam as well as to continue showing how important it is for those who have been in country for a while now to pass on their knowledge to the new arrivals. As the 4/23rd humps through the bush, Albergo has an opportunity to show Marks how to keep an eye out for booby traps, use iodine pills to produce drinkable water, and how to walk when entering a village.

But, it is when the group has their first encounter with VC soldiers does Marks learns how his new life in the ‘Nam works. As the enemy opens fire on the men of the 4/23rd, Marks freezes, or what Grossman would call “submit,” he just stands there as the action begins. As the action ensues one of Marks’ squad members rips him to the ground but he still does nothing. It is not until a squad member yells “C’mon, kid. Don’t take a nap. Do something with that ‘16 [M16]. Shoot it or eat it” (Murray 1:19). So Marks doing as he is told opens fire, but being young and inexperienced, Sergeant Polkow has to grab the gun from Marks because he was shooting to close to his squad and could have been a friendly fire accident; this is when soldiers accidently fire upon soldiers from the same Army, i.e. if Marks would have accidently shot Albergo.

The loss of Marks innocence comes in the sound of a “GAK!” when he vomits at the sight of the dead bodies of the enemies. It is through death that the relationship of the more advanced student showing the new kid on campus around grows into a brotherhood. As Marks is cleaning himself up Albergo says to Marks, “Don’t worry, Ed. First one’s the hardest”
It is in that moment Marks’ ideas of war become a reality: life and death, having to kill or be killed. It is in war where the traumas of man’s inhumanity towards each other become the norm.

But, it is not until the troops are back at the bar on base that the reader fully sees the trauma that builds the brotherhood among the troops. Van der Kolk and McFarlane’s idea of “numbing” takes place in a conversation between Crews and Marks as they are drinking. Marks says, “I don’t know yet I’m still a little numb!” and Crew replies, “Don’t worry, you’ll get more numb than this!” (Murray 1:27). It is in that moment that the reader can understand the trauma that takes place when sending young men to war. But, it is that trauma in which the squad builds their brotherhood; the numbness of having to take another life as well as the constant fear of losing their own, and it is in death they loss their innocence so the fear of death is what fuels their fear of losing their innocence.

Murray uses Marks helps the reader experience being a U.S. Army grunt in Vietnam for the very first time showing his story from the basic start a young soldier saying goodbye to his parents in an American airport to his first time in the bush. In the first issue, Marks starts to learn a lot of information about what it takes to survive in the ‘Nam. It is Marks’ innocence and lack of knowledge that helps Murray show how the Vietnam War was fought by young men who were trying to step into the world of adulthood while fearing for their lives.

The transition from issue one to issue two is drastic when it comes to the innocent nature of Ed Marks. Murray achieves this with the comic’s use of real-time publishing. So at this point in the comic Marks has been in Vietnam for a month now, and that is very apparent in the first couple pages of the second issue: “Dust Off.” Unlike the first issue where Marks is
show on American soil with his parents, the second issue starts out with Marks and Albergo out in the jungle on an ambush.

The two men are sitting and talking; Albergo is explaining to Marks that he need to maintain his equipment in order to make sure it will function when he needs it. As the squad is sitting quietly waiting; a group of VC soldiers begin to make their way through the jungle masked by the darkness of night. But, unknowingly to the VC soldiers they just stumbled into a trap. As the VC soldiers start to come closer to the squad, Sgt. Polkow instructs them to open fire and “Pour it on! Rock and Roll!” (Murray 2:6). It is in this moment the reader can see that Marks is no longer the young innocent kid who arrived in country only a month ago, this becomes very apparent in the images of Marks, because now he is calmer and willing to fire his weapon without hesitation (Figure 3.3).

Figure 3.3: Focused Soldier (Murray 2:6)
At this moment, in Figure 3.3, Marks is focused, he is taking his time to aim at the target, he holds down the trigger with the goal of terminating the target. Marks’ transformation into a calm productive infantry soldier is a byproduct of the combination of the conditioning he received in basic training and the development of the brotherhood among his unit in Vietnam.

As Grossman explains, the Vietnam era was a time of new training methods where soldiers were “being taught... to shoot reflexively and instantly and a precise mimicry of act of killing in the modern battlefield” (256). This was done by making the soldiers going to Vietnam shoot human shaped targets under stressful situations or as Grossman says, “In behavioral terms, the man shaped popping up in the soldier's field of fire is the conditioned stimulus, the immediate engaging of the target is the target behavior” (256). It is Marks’ acclamation to war and his loss of innocence that allows him to become a productive soldier to his unit, and it is this transformation that helps him become a man of war which will be discussed in the next chapter.
Chapter IV: The Traumas of Men at War

“We came in spastic like tameless horses; we left in plastic as numbered corpses and we learned fast to travel light; our arms were heavy but our bellies were tight. We had no home front, we had no soft soap, they sent us playboy, they gave us Bob Hope; we dug in deep and shot on sight, and prayed to Jesus Christ with all of our might.”

(Mark's shift from a stumbling teen into a savvy marksman of a soldier marks his transition into becoming a man of war. Murray’s use of Marks and his transformation helps in showing the reader the shift from childhood into adulthood while being in war. This differs from many other war comics, such as Captain America, because in the old comics the focus tended to be on heroes acting as lone wolves, a Rambo type characters, who charges head first into the fight always coming out victorious and unscathed (both physically and mentally). But, The ‘Nam places its focus on soldiers who mirror those of reality; soldiers who are young and inexperienced and rely heavily on each other for survival. So like the real soldiers of Vietnam, Marks relied heavily on his fellow unit members to help educate him and help him survive, but this only helped in strengthening the already steel clad brotherhood he had developed with his squad.

It is now that Marks is a man of war, does the traumatic effects of becoming a man while being in a war start to become apparent. Murray begins to show what being in war does to the soldiers; he does not just use Marks to show the traumatic effects of war, but Murray also uses the stories and experiences of other characters within the comic to show how different people have their own individual reactions to the traumas of war. Marks tends to be used to show the more subtle effects, such as dreams/nightmares and physical reactions i.e. vomiting which van der Kolk and McFarlane would label as intrusion (9), of the traumas of being in war.
to the readers, where other characters are used to explore what could be considered the more major effects of trauma, such as mental breakdowns. Murray also explores the trauma soldiers experiences while being separated from “the world” while serving overseas.

Murray starts to shows the reader the mental costs of war in the third issue, titled “Three Day Pass.” In “Three Day Pass” Marks, Albergo, and Crew go to Saigon for a three day rest and recuperation (R & R). While at a local hotel Marks falls asleep in the bed and on the next page Murray and the artists are showing the reader what is going on in his head (Figure 4.1). The panel on the left, of Figure 4.1, shows the reader a nightmare Marks is having: the image is of a village, guns, combat, dead VC, his friends, and of a woman that tried robbing him (Murray 3:20).

Figure 4.1: Dream (Murray 3:20)
Murray is using the comic format, which will be explored deeper later in chapter three of this paper, to show *intrusion* and as van der Kolk and McFarlane explain, “These intrusions of traumatic memories can take many different shapes: flashbacks; intense emotions, such as panic or rage; somatic sensations;[and] nightmares…” (9). Marks’ nightmare allows Murray to show the reader that at first “most people who have been exposed to traumatic stressors are somehow able to go on with their lives without becoming haunted by the memories of what has happened to them… [but] most people become preoccupied with the event; having involuntary intrusive memories [which includes nightmares] is a normal way of responding to dreadful experiences” (5). By doing this Murray is able to show how the traumatic events of war can start eating at the minds of the young men fighting in that war.

In the ninth issue, “Pride Goeth…,” Marks has another nightmare, but rather than Murray and Golden showing the reader what is happening in Marks’ dream they show how Marks’ dream affects him in a time of war. In this issue Marks has a nightmare while in the bush while he is pulling guard with Albergo. Albergo told Marks to sleep while he could, so Albergo took the first watch. Then there is a panel with Marks’ panic faced screaming “NO! NO! NO!” (Figure 4.2) and a couple of panels later (Figure 4.3). Sgt. Little is violently shaking Marks awake saying, “Careful! Man, you’ve been shouting in your sleep! Loud enough to wake the dead,” and Marks replies, “Who! What! Sorry! Just a nightmare! It was so real…” (Murray 9:17). So, unlike the first incident the with intrusion the reader experiences, where they saw the inner effects of the trauma on Marks’ psyche, this situation allows the reader to see the real world dangers that intrusions can have while in combat.
Figure 4.2: Wake Up (Murray 9:16)

Figure 4.3: Little Wake Up (Murray 9:17)
Another way Murray shows the more subtle reactions to the trauma is through the physical act of vomiting. Van der Kolk and McFarlane address this when they say, “despite the human capacity to survive and adapt traumatic experiences can alter a people’s psychological, biological, and social equilibrium” (4) and it is the act of vomiting that is most commonly used by Murray to show a soldier's biological adjustment to war. The first time the reader sees a character vomit is when Marks vomits at the sight of his first dead body. This act of violently projection could be seen as a metaphor for the explosion of Marks’ innocence, but for other characters these acts of vomiting are physical reactions to the traumas and horrors of their everyday reality while being soldiers. By showing vomiting, Murray is showing a realistic portrayal of a human’s reaction to the sight of death; unlike many other comics or films about war Murray does not glorify war and the act of killing and seeing death he presents a real reaction.

The cover of the fifth issue in the series, titled “Humpin’ the Boonies,” has the image of three soldiers looking at the dead bodies of what appears to be three Vietnamese men tied to posts. One soldier, Specialist (Spc.) Thomas, is holding his hand over his mouth with expanded cheeks (Figure 4.4).
Figure 4.4: Issue Five Cover (Murray 5: Cover)
This image speaks a million words to the violence of war, but Murray uses the soldiers’ reactions to show how traumatizing seeing the human’s capability for evil can be on an individual both mentally and physically.

There is another situation within “Humpin’ the Boonies” where a soldier vomits, it is when Sgt. Little sees dead bodies tied to poles and after he gets sick he says to Marks, “Sorry Ed I’ve been in the rear too long!” (Murray 5:9). Little says this, because up until this point he has been an office worker for Top, so he has not been in the bush for a while. So, for Little getting sick is an act of reclamation to being in the bush and re-experiencing the traumas of combat he has forgotten or has chosen to repress.

After Little vomits Marks asks the question to Little, “How could anybody human do this?” (Murray 5:9). Marks’ question fits right into van der Kolk and McFarlane ideas of trauma, because in their article, “The Black Hole of Trauma,” they address how people can develop PTSD and one of the ways van der Kolk and McFarlane offer to developing PTSD is witnessing man's ability to be evil and commit inhumane actions to his fellow man (8). In this incident Murray is using the interaction between Marks and Little to explore the traumas that people experience in a war zone and show how people who have been through those experiences may be traumatized by the things that they have seen and done.

As van der Kolk and McFarlane talk about, each person will react differently to a traumatic stressor, like Marks and many other soldiers, some are able to experience the stressor yet still function as a member of their society, but other individuals may experience that same stressor and have a completely opposite reaction and go through a mental breakdown (6-7). Because of the format of The ‘Nam, following a group of US Army grunts and telling their
stories rather than the traditional comic method of following one individual, the superhero, Murray is able to show multiple types of reactions to the traumatic stressors war offers to the soldiers partaking in it. Murray takes advantage of being able to show the war from multiple perspectives and addresses some of the more extreme reactions of war from soldiers. In the eighth issue of the series, titled “In the Underground,” Murray shows the mental breakdown of a soldier whose job is to clear the tunnels created by the VC; the men whose jobs it was to go underground and clear out the tunnels were called “tunnel rats.”

The eighth issue is unique because it is broken into two parts, because Murray wanted to follow one character and his journey as a tunnel rat in the U.S. Army. The soldier of focus is Spc. Frank Verzyl who suffers a nervous breakdown after his exposure to a traumatic stressor within the comic. The audience meets him in the first half of the comic titled, “In the Underground,” when he is serving with 4/23rd Infantry Regiment. Here the reader gets to follow Marks, who is not a tunnel rat but volunteered to help clear out a tunnel, as he goes with the much more experienced Verzyl into a shaft which leads to an underground channel system used by the VC as a hospital and command center.

While underground Verzyl is acting as point, the man in front of the pack, showing Marks the ropes of clearing tunnels; Verzyl shows Marks the booby traps the VC set for the Americans, such as a bamboo shoot that contains a bamboo snake which are extremely poisonous. Verzyl explains to Marks that “Charlie leaves ‘em [bamboo snakes] out here so we brush ‘em off and they brush us off [bite and kill]” (Murray 8:8). But in the tunnel, the first thing shot was not a VC soldier but rather rats. Figure 4.5 shows Verzyl shooting the rats and saying, “Can’t stand rats! Filthy things!” (Murray 8:9).
After the encounter with the rats the two grunts run into a VC soldier and engage him, they continue into the channels and find a hospital and a woman. To Marks’ horror, Verzyl shoots her on sight, but Verzyl shows Marks that she was holding an explosive device and was the VC’s last stand against them. The two men return to the surface and Marks starts asking what Verzyl wants to do because he is short (at the end of his tour). Verzyl replies with, “Gonna re-up and go airborne. Get some extra money and get out of the mud” (Murray 8:18). This is where the comic shifts into part two.

The second half of the comic is titled, “The 5th to the 1st.” The story is named this because the reader is following Verzyl from the 4/23 Infantry Regiment, which at this time was
a part of the 25th Infantry Division, to the 1st Cavalry Division. The second half of the comic not only takes on a new title, but it also takes on a new method of storytelling. Up until this point the comic series has been written in a traditional comic style; that is dialog driven storytelling with the occasional narrative box to help draw context for a scene or situation. But the second half, “The 5th to the 1st,” is written in a first person voice with the narrator telling the story of Verzyl and his eventual mental breakdown.

One of the primary reasons for the change in story telling style is that the story, “The 5th to the 1st,” was originally published in a comic magazine called Savage Tales (Jacks para. 1). In an interview with Brian Jacks, Murray said, “Larry Hama had contacted me around 1984 about doing a Vietnam War series for his Savage Tales black and white magazine. I did “The 5th of the 1st” for that and it was very well received” (para. 1). The interview continued with Murray explaining, that story would later be used to propose the idea of a Vietnam War comic to Marvel. But the inclusion of “The 5th to the 1st” with in The ‘Nam is never explained.

The narrative shift allows Murray to explore two different examples of traumatic experiences: the narrator’s and Verzyl’s. The story of Verzyl being a part of the 1st Cavalry Division starts with the narrator talking about sounds and how certain sounds are associated with memories and there are certain sound that he will never forget such as “the buzz of the Vulcan” (Murray 8:20). The narrator explains how this new weapon, the Vulcan, was a new and improved electric Gatling gun which had a very unique buzz as it spat out rounds at an outrageously high volume (Murray 8:20). This idea of sounds that are locked into the narrator's mind plays right into the previously mentioned ideas of van der Kolk and McFarlane’s theory of intrusion (9-10).
The idea of intrusion due to the sensory stimulation (i.e., smells and/or sounds) is not exclusive to Murray’s writing but is used by many other veteran writers. Another Vietnam veteran who uses sensory stimulation to trigger memories of war in his storytelling is Tim O’Brien. In his book *The Things They Carried*, O’Brien focuses on the smells of a particular place such as in the chapter titled “In the Field.” In the chapter the main character and his squad are at a river bank that is used as a sewage dump for the local villages. The topic of smell comes up again later in the book in the chapter “Field Trip,” because in this section of the book O’Brien is talking about when the lead character and his daughter went to visit Vietnam and the explored all of the places he was when he was there fighting the VC, many years after the U.S. pulled out of Vietnam. This involvement of the senses used by Murray and O’Brien help in immersing the reader into the story, but also helps in showing how war is traumatizing because even the simplest sounds or smells can stimulate an intrusive memory.

So the “The 5th to the 1st” helps Murray explore the intrusion of memories through the stimulation of the senses. The narrative shift also offers a new challenge in interpretation, because it was written in the first person whereas the first half of the comic, “In the Underground,” was written in the third person. The change challenges the reader to wonder if this is Murray himself speaking directly to the readers about some of the traumas that plague his own mind. Knowing that Murray is a Vietnam veteran himself only adds to the idea that it is his voice coming out through the unknown narrator of the tale. It also helps in making one ponder if the character of Verzyl may have actually been a real individual that Murray experienced in his time in the ‘Nam.
In “The 5th to the 1st” the reader, through the eyes of the narrator (possibly Murray himself), gets a better idea of who Spc. Frank Verzyl is. The narrator explains that he was a “tunnel rat” and Verzyl had earned himself “the nickname of Fudd because he loved hunting those ‘wascally wabbits’ in the tunnels” (Murray 8:24). After the narrator tells the reader who Verzyl is, the narrator then exclaims to the reader that he had to leave and “got the rest of the story second-hand from Fats [another soldier]” (Murray 8:24). This clarification made by the narrator only adds to the idea that the narrator may be Murray. The narrator begins the story of what happened to Verzyl when he was in the tunnel, by saying:

He came upon a closed door near the back end of the complex–one he heard noises behind. He figured he’d found a map room or a file center, possibly with a VC officer still in it so he cocked his handgun, kicked open the door and took a look. He wasn’t ready for what he saw. Seems the VC had left in a hurry–this room had been their larder, it had had some food left in it, and the attendant rats. The rats had been without food for days, maybe weeks, and they’d been trapped. When Fudd opened up, he found himself acting as a red carpet for a couple dozen big, hungry rats. (Murray 8:27)

In the comic the reader sees a horrifically frighten man with wide eyes filled terror underground covered by rats; on the next page the reader sees Fats napping on the ground. Then to Fats’ surprise, Verzyl bursts from the earth firing his 1911 pistol into the hole he had just created (Figure 4.6). Clearly traumatized, the last panel on the page in Figure 4.6 shows Verzyl in the fetal position on the ground.
Verzyl experience of trauma comes from a pre-existing fear, as van der Kolk and McFarlane explain, “For many patients, what is most destructive about a traumatic event is that it confirms some long-feared belief” (8). Murray establishes Verzyl’s fear of rats in the first half of the comic, “In the Underground,” when Verzyl opens fire in the tunnel to kill three rats and then tells Marks how much he does not like the creatures (8:9). So in the second half of the comic, “The 5th to the 1st,” when Verzyl is trampled be all of those rats trapped underground
one of his deepest fears becomes a reality, which as van der Kolk and McFarlane explained, was what pushed him to the edge.

But what pushes Verzyl over the edge was an over eager 2nd Lieutenant; “After a couple minutes of shaking and sobbing, Fudd [Verzyl] started to pull himself together… he was almost back to normal when the backup arrived… a brand new 2nd Looie right out of OCS [Officer Candidate School]” wanted to know what was going on and what happened (Murray 8:31). Then the green lieutenant tells, the clearly shaken, Verzyl he wants to go into the tunnel and see for himself what was down there but he needs Verzyl to guide him. This is when “Fudd really started shaking then and asked, heck… he begged the Lt. [lieutenant] not to make him go back down there,” but the lieutenant did not listen to Verzyl’s pleas and threatened to court martial him if he did not comply (Murray 8:31).

It is at this moment, when the lieutenant is trying to make Verzyl go back into the tunnel, the reader sees him break and be pushed over the edge. The reader sees this because in the second to last panel on this page, Figure 4.7, depicts a wide eyed crazed looking Verzyl with tears running down his face, his mouth wide open with saliva drooling out, and his neck tense popping with veins. The last panel, of Figure 4.7, the reader sees on the page is Verzyl on his knees in front of the lieutenant shooting and killing him as his surrounding squad members watch in horror.
Figure 4.7: Verzyl Shoots the Lt. (Murray 8:31)

But this is not where the story ends, the very last page, Figure 4.8, of the tale a series of panels show Verzyl strapped to hospital bed being loaded into the back of a C130 aircraft by the medics. The medics were loading him into the plane through the back hatch of the large aircraft. “But when the C130 rolled up and the rear opened, it looked like the biggest, blackest tunnel mouth you’ve ever seen, he nearly broke free” (Murray 8:32). The narrator continues, “It took four corpsmen [U.S. Navy medic] to get him aboard and he was screaming something awful” (Murray 8:32). It is here, in Figure 4.8, where Murray shows the reader the lasting damage that the trauma placed on the Verzyl.
I saw Fudd twice more. At the Court Martial, which was real short—Fudd was a raving madman when they brought him in and it didn't take Sigmund Freud to realize that he was seriously crazy.

And when they took him to his plane—He was strapped to a hospital gurney. Could barely move, but when the C130 rolled up and the rear end opened, it looked like the biggest, blackest tunnel mouth you've ever seen, he nearly broke free. It took four corpsmen to get him aboard and he was screaming something awful.

I still hear that screaming sometimes in my head—Like I said, the sounds kind of stay with you.
Verzyl freaking out when being loaded into the back of the airplane in Figure 4.8, is an example of what van der Kolk and McFarlane call an “inability to modulate arousal” (13). This is when an individual, like Verzyl, “experience intense negative emotions (fear, anxiety, anger, and panic) in response to even minor stimuli; as a result, they either overreact and threaten other, or shut down and freeze” (van der Kolk & McFarlane 13). Murray shows how the exposure to the traumas of war can leave soldiers without the ability to differentiate stimuli. Verzyl is an extreme case of this, but it is not always this extreme it can be as minor as a veteran dropping to the floor because of the sound of fireworks going off.

As previously explained in the “Black Hole of Trauma” portion of the literature review, PTSD is not only a psychological issue but it also affects an individual biologically as well. As van der Kolk and McFarlane explain, “the PTSD sufferer’s inability to decipher messages from the autonomic nervous system interferes with their capacity to articulate how they are feeling (alexithymia) and makes them tend to react to their environment with either exaggerated or inhibited behavior” (13-14). This exaggerated behavior is very apparent in the character Verzyl. The two examples Murray provides of the overreaction to stimuli are: Verzyl killing the lieutenant because he wanted Verzyl to take him back into the tunnel and the second being Verzyl negative reaction to being loaded onto the C130.

Murray brings the story full circle in the last panel with the narrator saying, “I still hear that screaming [the screams of Verzyl being loaded on the plane] sometimes in my head like I said, the sounds kind of stay with you” (8:32). It is here where Murray brings the focus back to the narrator and the intrusion he experiences from the trauma of having seen Verzyl go through what he had.
By following the 4/23rd as a group rather than looking at a single individual, Murray can show the reader a spectrum of trauma as well as the scale of reactions to the trauma. He can show the reader a multitude of angles when it comes to how a soldier’s mind reacts and adapts to the stressors that war presents them. Not only does he show the direct traumas of war but Murray also exposes the reader to the idea of how being separated from home can be just as traumatizing for the soldiers fighting overseas, like previously mentioned in the prior chapter “Youth at War,” Vietnam was the U.S.’s youngest war with many of the soldiers being only teenagers.

One theme that is common in stories of war like Sam Mendes’ *Jarhead*, O’Brien’s *The Things They Carried*, and Murray’s *The ‘Nam* is the struggles of soldiers being deployed to a new foreign land meanwhile back in the U.S. the world continues to turn without them. Both O’Brien and Murray, as well as other war story writers, show readers an example of a young soldier planning his future with his high school sweet-heart, but then a couple months later that soldier receives a letter from their sweet-heart telling them that Jody boy is there taking care of their gal and that woman will no longer need that soldier around.

This is such a common occurrence that many branches of the military acknowledge that this happens in the form of their call-and-response cadences. The U.S. Army, as well as the other armed service branches, uses these call-and-response cadences in boot camp/basic training to both train the soldiers and maintain pace during cardio activities such as running and marching. And like in the letters going to the battlefield, Jody can be found in these cadences; “Ain’t no sense in going home... Jody got your girl and gone... Ain’t no sense in feelin’ blue Jody got your sister too…” (Armed Fitness USA).
Even the letters that soldiers receive from their loved ones terminating the relationships have their own name: *Dear John letters*. These letters are something that is addressed in many stories of war, but each story shows them in different form some show the more extreme styles of message delivery of these letters/packets. An example of how extreme and damaging *Dear John letters* can be is the 2005 film *Jarhead*, where a married Marine deployed in Iraq receives a video tape of his wife and Jody neighbor together in an adult act. Then at the end of the video the wife tells the Marine that their marriage is over. Murray addresses *Dear John letters* in *The ‘Nam*, but he takes a more subtle approach when it comes to showing the traumatizing effects that these letters can have on the soldiers who received them.

In the twenty-seventh issue, titled “Like a Candle in the Wind,” Murray shows the effects that a *Dear John letter* had on a soldier through the eyes of a fellow soldier and friend. The issue starts with Spc. Clark, a medic with the 4/23rd, telling stories to his companions at a base hospital in Chu Chi. As Clark is talking a helicopter, which is badly damaged, limps its way to the ground and the hospital workers rush to it to mend the injured. Clark pulls out a wounded soldier named Griffis. Griffis is frantically calling out for his friend and brother in arms Steve Baker. To get Griffis to calm down, Clark asks Griffis to tell him about this Baker character (Murray 27:1).

Murray uses Griffis to paint the picture of what kind of soldier Baker was. Griffis tells Clark that Baker “was the coolest man under fire I ever saw; never seemed to have a care in the world; and always seemed to come out on top; it was like he knew nothing could happen to him” (Murray 27:3). Griffis continue be telling Clark how they quickly became friends because they were from the same region of the U.S., married, and loved the Army and wanted
to make it a career. But the one thing Griffis seemed to focus on telling Clark was that Baker was a family man and that he had the best family around and they always seemed to make it work (Figure 4.9).

Figure 4.9: Family (Murray 27:6)
But halfway through the comic, Griffis tells Clark about the day Baker received a letter and how everything changed after Baker read the letter. This is where Murray shows the reader the trauma of those letters. He does not tell the reader what the letter says, but due to the behavioral changes of drinking and running around with Vietnamese women the reader can assume the letter Baker received was likely a *Dear John*.

These behaviors Baker starts to exhibit are what van der Kolk and McFarlane would call *avoiding and numbing*, because Baker starts “ingesting drugs or alcohol in order to numb awareness of distressing emotions” (12). Baker’s response to the news from home shows how trauma affects soldiers on two fronts: the actual battlefield and the relationships back home. The key problem with Baker numbing himself is that “avoidance of specific triggers is aggravated by a generalized numbing of responsiveness to a whole range of emotional aspects of life” (van der Kolk & McFarlane 12). This means that by Baker trying to numb his feelings of depression caused by the letter he received from home he is also numbing the skills and abilities that make him a good soldier.

Griffis continues telling Clark, soon after Baker received the letter they were sent out on another mission. Griffis tells Clark that the mission was to inspect a village that had been napalmed, because “intelligence had reports of a lot of activity in the area” (Murray 27:22). As they arrived at the village they quickly learned that the area was crawling with VC and they were under heavy fire. “In the confusion we had a chance to get to cover; but Baker wasn’t special anymore; he was still my friend though, and somehow we made it” (Murray 27:24-25). This is the moment in where Murray shows the reader a cause and effect of the trauma. Baker
numbing himself because of the trauma of the letter, the cause, led to him losing his edge as a soldier, the effect.

The issue ends with Griffis starting to become increasingly agitated because he has yet to hear any news about his friend, but Clark opens a body bag on a table next to Griffis and in the bag is Baker: dead. The last panel, Figure 4.10, which is not really a panel but unboxed bold words, are the words of Griffis yelling, “PLEASE SOMEBODY TELL ME HOW HE IS! PLEASE! SOMEBODY HELP MY FRIEND!!” and a tiny purple heart medal next to the words (Murray 27:30).

Figure 4.10: Purple Heart (Murray 27:30)
It is hard to tell the severity of the letter because Murray never allows the reader to see the content, but the ending of this issue shows how even a simple letter can be so traumatic to a soldier that it affects him in his ability to do his job, which in this case the inability to perform costed the soldier his life.

It is through the tragedy of Baker that Murray helps readers understand how individuals in the armed services who are deployed can be exposed to traumatic stressor from home as well as war. Being in a war zone is an experience that can compare to no other event a human can partake in. Murray, through his own experience as a Vietnam Veteran, uses the characters in *The ‘Nam* to help open the eyes of the U.S. civilian public to the traumas that U.S. men and women faced as they served in Vietnam.

He uses characters such as Marks to allow the reader to go on the same journey as wide-eyed bushy-tailed young American who is going from high school, living under their parent’s rules and the security home to a wild and exotic land where they need to rely on other young people to survive. Marks and his squad allows the reader to see the more subtle effects that the traumatic stressor of war present, but characters like Verzyl help Murray tell the story of soldiers who mentally broke because of their traumatic circumstance. But not only does Murray show the direct effects war has on a soldier, i.e. the learning to survive in a new hostile environment where it is kill or be killed, but he also explores, through the character of Baker, the stresses that war and being deployed places on both the soldiers and their loved ones. War is an all-round tough and traumatic experience and Murray uses *The ‘Nam* to show people this.

Earlier there have been other works mentioned which have been able to do this, such as O’Brien and his novel as well as films like *Jarhead* (Mendes), *Platoon* (Stone), and *Full Metal*
*Jacket* (Kubrick). Murray is able to expose the audience to these topics through his chosen medium, comic books, in a way that is unique to that language. The concepts of artist and author will be explored in further detail in the next chapter when exploring how Murray and the artist use the comic format to present these stories.
Chapter V: Comics Showing Trauma

“Go straight to hell boys, go straight hell boys; Y’wanna join in a chorus of the Amerasian blues? When it’s Christmas out in Ho Chi Minh City kiddie say papa papa papa-san take me home; See me got photo photo photograph of you and Mamma Mamma Mamma-San.” (Go Straight to Hell, The Clash)

The comic book has had a vast evolution in the U.S. within the last one hundred plus years, and The ’Nam is a product of that change. The ’Nam is a far cry from the original American comic book; this is because as comic books have grown up in American history so has the topic, stories, and art they convey. In his article, “Holy Tet Westy!: Graphic Novels and the Vietnam War,” Kodosky addresses this by saying, “whether one calls them graphic novels or comic books, these illustrated narratives are grappling with issues sacred and profane, personal and political, and social and spiritual” (1048). Murray’s The ’Nam is a true testament to Kodosky’s idea, because of the way it manages to portray and explain the trauma of the Vietnam War to the civilian public.

The comic book, as medium, lends itself well to Murray and his desire to tell the stories of U.S. Army grunts serving in Vietnam. The comic book gives the creators of The ’Nam the ability to blend the visuals of being in war and experiencing combat with the textual narratives, be it a first, second, or third person narration, of the individuals who participated in the conflict. It is because of this mingling of the textual with visuals that the comic book is easily accessible to its readers.

But, this mixture also challenges the reader to read between the lines. The application of McCloud’s ideas of icons and closure, Cohn’s theory of icons, and both of their theories on how comics are a structured language all in their own which will allow for the The ’Nam to be explored as a complex story that offers a multi-leveled experience that traditional mediums
such as books, paintings, and even film cannot offer. The examination of *The ‘Nam* will expose how the comic book is a great medium when it comes to presenting the traumas of war to the civilian public.

Both McCloud and Cohn talk about icons and their views on the topic are similar but focus on different angles of the idea. Cohn focuses on the relation between the image or icon and its direct link to the meaning, such as an image of a dog means the word “dog” (Cohn 19), whereas McCloud focuses on the visual relationship between the object being presented and the object being portrayed or interpreted (McCloud 33).

*The ‘Nam* was designed to look as authentic as possible, meaning the art would show real U.S. Army uniforms, patches, weapons, and vehicles of the period. The editor of the project, Larry Hama, said this in a letter to the reader in the book *Marvel’s Finest: The ‘Nam;* a graphic novel version of the first four issues. In the letter Hama talks about why he originally chose Michael Golden to be the first artist on the project when he says, “If I told him to draw a ma-deuce, he turned in a perfectly rendered Browning M-2 .50 caliber machine gun with the proper ratio of tracer to ball in belt ratio” (Hama). According to Cohn, this kind of attention to detail, matching the words M-2 .50 caliber to the visual representation, means the “*sign* derives their meaning by resembling what they mean, an *iconic* form of reference” (18).

By doing this the artists are able to allow the reader of the comic to draw connections between the images and the words that represent those pictures. Cohn’s idea of an image directly reflecting the meaning of a word is something Americans do all the time as a society. Within the world of education we constantly use flash cards to help students learn. A simpler example of Cohn’s theory on icons is; an individual with a small child may use a flash card,
sticking with Cohn’s earlier example of the dog, with a picture of a cartoon dog on one side and the word dog on the other. As the child learns that that image means dog they are developing a relationship, in their brain, between the stimulus, the picture, and the meaning, the word (18).

The comic as a medium allows the artist and author to have this flash-card effect on the reader. An example of the comic doing this it shown in Figure 5.1, in the first panel, here it shows the visual representation in a direct relation to the textual meaning of the technical name. This comes in very handy when doing a comic book series about the military, because many civilians may not know the technical terms of the equipment and weapons used by the armed services.

![Figure 5.1: M16 (Murray 1:14)](image)

Now the reader has learned the iconic meaning, the technical/proper name, of the weapon they will need to learn the unofficial names of all of the equipment and weapons, and
be made aware of the lingo and slang that the military uses for all of the different guns, vehicles, and even other soldiers. This slang offers a new problem of interpretation, because the nicknames for the weapons, soldiers, and equipment are not a direct reflection of the objects themselves. As Cohn explains, the meaning between the nicknames and the object it is identifying becomes a *symbolic* relationship because the affiliation between the object and the meaning are *purely conventional* (19). This conventional relationship is shown in the second panel of Figure 5.1, which exposes the reader to a new name, Mattel, for the M-16. This name was given to the M-16 by the soldiers who carry it because majority of the gun was made of composite plastics rather than wood like the guns issues in earlier years.

As Cohn put it earlier, the reader is learning a *symbolic or purely conventional* relationship with the stimulus and the meaning (19). Cohn explains in his book that society is filled with these symbolic terms and images, and each culture may have their own meaning for the same sign; “technically there are no *symbols*, just *symbolic signs*” (Cohn 19). This means that one must belong to a certain culture or group to be able to identify the meaning behind the stimulus, because the meaning is not derived from the image itself but rather what the society around that image agree upon as its meaning. So, by learning the nicknames of the weapons, tools, and vehicle the readers are becoming more immersed into the world of soldiers in Vietnam.

Like Marks in the first issue, as discussed in chapter one, the reader gets to go through the learning process of what it was like being in Vietnam during a time of war. Cohn’s theory explains how the artists of *The ‘Nam* were able to educate the reader without directly addressing the reader, so through the comic book’s ability to use iconic and symbolic
references the reader is able to learn the terminology of the era: be it the proper names or the slang terms. This is one of the key features of a comic versus other mediums, like paintings or short stories, because the comic can immerse the reader and educate them while telling the story, whereas an only visual or textual medium would have to explain things through footnotes or a key.

But Murray did not want to leave the learning of names, be it slang or a proper title, up to chance, so if a reader was not able to make the connection between the pictures and the words referring to the images; Murray included Nam Notes which explained the terminology and defined unfamiliar words. These Nam Notes are at the end of every issue of The ‘Nam and are presented as a simple list of words and their definitions.

The comic medium allows the artist to use the visual clues to help readers understand the text; and it is through the understanding of the language and the visuals of the comic that the reader can focus on the stories and the events taking place within the art and words. This understanding allows the reader to become immersed in the story and experience what it is like to be a soldier.

It is this interaction between the pictures within the comic book and the words on the page that allows the comic to be speaking one language to the reader. Because, not only can a reader look at the visual components for context but they can look at the textual to help in building the narrative context as well. This usage of icons and symbols allows the reader to better understand what is going on and what the characters are even talking about, or as McCloud puts it, “words, pictures and other icons are the vocabulary of the language called comics” (47). It is the language of comics which helps the reader develop a better
understanding; one of which that can be lost in a purely visual medium or strictly textual medium.

Like Cohn, McCloud talks about the relationship between meaning and imagery but rather than focusing on the interaction between the textual and the visual he focuses on the abstraction of the visual and how the artist can derive different meaning from making an icon realistic or overly simplified. McCloud explains that “when we abstract an image through cartooning, we’re not so much eliminating details as we are focusing on specific details… by stripping down an image to its essential meaning, an artist can amplify that meaning” (30).

Abstracting images is something that lends its self well to *The ‘Nam*, by focusing on particular parts of the face the artist is able to focus on the emotional state of that character.

The abstracting of a face and making it an icon through cartooning allows the artist to show the reader the characters response to the trauma. An example of this is the character Verzyl (here in Figure 5.2), who was examined in detail in chapter two, the image shows him before his run in with the rats in the first half of the comic book. This picture shows how the artist, through abstracting his face in the comic stylings, is able to focus the reader’s attention to his blue eyes and his calm and collected smirk.
This simplistic abstraction of Verzyl’s face allows the artist to depict Verzyl as a calm, cool, collected soldier who is good at his job, because “by de-emphasizing the appearance of the physical world in favor of the idea of form, the cartoon places itself in the world of concepts” (McCloud 41). So by Golden drawing the reader to the eyes and mouth, he shows the concept of being cool and collected in a time of chaos, because up until this point that is what Verzyl represents; a soldier who is good at his job: war.

Throughout the comic book, Golden focuses the reader’s attention to Verzyl’s eyes. Like McCloud’s idea of abstraction said earlier, with Golden stripping the face down to the essentials he is showing the reader the effect that being exposed to the traumatic stressor of rats
had on Verzyl. Again the stripping of facial features and realism allows the artist to show the concept of trauma and how it affects the person experiencing the traumatic stressor. Golden does this by making Verzyl’s eyes half closed for the first half of the comic book, as in Figure 5.2.

But once Verzyl reaches his breaking point the artist makes the character’s eyes take on totally new characteristics. After Verzyl has his traumatizing run in with the rats in the tunnel Golden makes Verzyl’s eyes wide like in Figure 5.3. In this panel his eyes are wide and uneven he has tears running down his face as well as his mouth is wide open and drool is pouring out of the corners of his mouth. In this panel the reader can see that Golden actually adds more detail to Verzyl’s face; the lips become or prominent, more shading on the cheeks, and the striation of the neck.

![Figure 5.3: Verzyl Crying (Murray 8:29)](image-url)
Golden, through his cartooning style, focuses the reader’s attention to these particular facial features because, as McCloud points out, the simplest icon for a human face is a circle with two dots and a line in it (the smiley face) “and like the atom, great power is locked in these few simple lines released only by the reader’s mind” (45). The eyes and the mouth are the two most universal images represented on an icon of a human head and this is where Golden pushes the reader’s attention.

By pushing the reader’s attention to the more universal parts of the face, Golden is able, with the adding of detail, to show the effects that trauma has on the individual experiencing it. Figure 5.3 shows Verzyl’s eyes are unevenly shaped and his mouth is open in an unnatural manner. Figure 5.2 depicts Verzyl much more proportionally, with very little line details outside of shading. The adding of line detail in Figure 5.3 helps in showing the twisted nature of his expression. The traumatized cartoony face of Verzyl in Figure 5.3 also lets the reader see into his mind. He is crying and screaming with a twisted face, which allows the reader to assume that his mind has been traumatized and badly damaged: emotionally.

Figure 5.4 is the last panel of the eighth issue, in the last half “The 5th to the 1st,” this is where Verzyl is being loaded onto the C130. Like in Figure 5.3, Golden shows the reader the trauma and mental distress through the eyes and the mouth. The eyes are wide and the mouth are open and the face portrays a horrified individual who is experiencing something that is truly frightening.

McCloud says that “through realism, the comic can portray the world without [the physical world] and through cartoon, the world within” (41). So, it is through the abstraction and simplification of the face that draws the readers focus to the eyes and mouth which allows
them, no matter what culture they maybe from, to interpret the image in Figure 5.4 as a distressed man who is experiencing severe trauma. The cartoony look of Verzyl as he is experiencing something traumatic allows the reader to focus on the emotional state of the character rather than his nationality or cultural background.

![Figure 5.4: Verzyl Screaming (Murray 8:30)](image)

But, there is a one key piece to how effective the artist is when using icons: the reader. As discussed earlier in this section, when the artist matches an image with text and the reader pieces the word with the visual items to produce closure. Closure, as explained in the literature review, is the reader’s ability to take the pieces they are given and look at them as a whole picture (McCloud 63). The previous examples (Figures 5.2, 5.3, & 5.4) are straight forward examples of an artist showing the reader the trauma directly and horror of the situation, but sometimes Golden allows the reader’s imagination to have a more active role in the interpretation of a scene.

The use of the reader’s own mind is a type of closure that McCloud explains as a “deliberate inventions of storytellers to produce suspense or to challenge the audience” (63). An example of this is in Figure 5.5, this image uses the gutter, the space between panels, which
“plays host to much of the magic and mystery that are at the very heart of comics… [it is] here in the limbo of the gutter, human imagination takes two separate images and transforms them into a single idea” (McCloud 66). These two panels allow the reader to see the horrors of war within their own imagination. The use of closure to put these two panels together and by doing this Murray and Golden are able to show the events of war that can traumatize a soldier without showing the reader a direct images of war, which in turn could traumatize the reader.

Figure 5.5: Tragedy (Murray 7:11)

Figure 5.5, is an example of how the comic book medium can present something that could be considered a monstrous act, an act that depicts man’s ability and capacity for inhumane treatment towards his fellow man, to the public in a way that allows the audience to read into the tragedy themselves and develop their own understanding of the situation. The artist and the writer allow the reader to apply their own ideas to these two panels and as McCloud put it, for “every act committed to paper by the comic artist is aided and abetted by a silent accomplice [the reader]… [So] to kill a man between panels is to condemn him to a thousand deaths” (68). In the case of Figure 5.5, the reader can see whatever their mind lets them see in the gutter, as well as seeing whom ever they wish in the second panel.
By *The 'Nam* using this style of closure, which forces the audience to be more involved in what is happening with in the story its self. Allowing the reader to do this, the reader becomes more immersed within the story and the characters and when that investment is made the reader can experience and life a grunt through their own imagination. This is how the trauma of war and the exposure of traumatic stressors show themselves to the audience; not by simply showing them pictures of trauma and talking about it, but by letting them use their own minds to create it and see the trauma.

In the second half of the eighth issue, “The 5th to the 1st,” the reader is told a story from a narrator and that narrator sets up the story of one man’s traumatic experience, Verzyl’s, with his own: the constant reminders of war through sounds. In the story Murray is using the textual aspect of the comic to plant the seed of the narrator being haunted by sounds into the reader’s mind, so when they start to use closure with the visual context of the story and actually see a man’s mental breakdown they are exposed to how the sounds of war live with an individual even when the war has been long over with.

The story “The 5th to the 1st” allows the reader to see both intrusion with the narrator and the inability to manage stimuli with Verzyl. The comic book medium with its use of icons and closure helps in developing a story that makes the reader partake in the horror themselves, as McCloud says, “an equal partner in crime known as the reader” (68). In Figure 5.5, in the second panel the reader, using deductive reasoning, is made to piece together the fact that the French soldiers in the first panel shot at a village and killed children as depicted in the second panel. This closure makes the reader admit, or at least acknowledge, the events that are taking place in that scene.
The comic book as a medium also has one other unique ability that is hard to reproduce in a strictly visual or strictly textual medium and that is the comic’s structure which allows writers and artists to show and tell what is happening in the world and what is going on with in the character minds. This happens through the sequencing of panels and events. As talked about in the literature review, both Cohn and McCloud talk about the methods of stringing together panels and how that shapes the reader’s interpretation. An example of how *The ‘Nam* does this is shown in Figure 5.6, in this example the reader can see how the story is broke down into a “subject-to-subject,” because it is “staying within a scene or idea,” but this requires a deeper involvement of the reader in order to create meaning through the movement from one panel to the next (McCloud 71).
Figure 5.6: Hotel (Murray 3:19)
Much of *The 'Nam* is done in this style, because it allows the artist to focus on what is happening in the scene whether it be the actions of the soldiers, the behavior of the enemies, and/or what is going on within someone’s head. Figure 5.6, shows what is happening in a scene in the external world but when the reader turns the page they see Figure 5.7.

Figure 5.7 Nightmares (Murray 3:20)
By using a subject–to subject transition method the comic is able to jump around in the scene and show how the events of war are mentally affecting the individuals involved. The idea of nightmares was something that was talked about in the fourth chapter, but here, by looking at the comic as a medium, the reader can visually see the traumatic effects of the nightmares as the reader can see the nightmare themselves. By doing this the creators of the comic allow the audience to see what is traumatizing the soldiers, as in the case of Figure 5.7 where the reader can see what is plaguing Marks’ nightmare. But this method of arrangement and storytelling shows what the traumatic stressors of Vietnam are mentally doing to the soldiers, such as the intrusion of the traumatic memories in Figure 5.7.

Another thing worth mentioning in Figure 5.7, as well as the comic series as a whole, is the use of colors to help in differentiating and/or emphasizing trauma. The color pallet of the dream is bright and lively in the first panel of Figure 5.7; filled with lots of warm bright colors such as reds, yellows, and oranges. These bright colors help in showing the importance of this scene and the trauma behind it because the main color pallet for the comic consists of cooler and darker colors such as greens, blues, as well as earth tones (i.e. browns and tans). These bright warm colors are used for moments of combat and trauma; McCloud explores the use of bright colors when he says, “through more expressive colors comics can become an intoxicating environment of sensation that only color can give” (192).

That being said The ‘Nam does use yellows, reds, and oranges with in the story during non-combative scenes, but the colors are more muted. Figure 5.5 is another example of the use of bright colors. In Figure 5.5, like the explosions happening in the second panel of Figure 5.7, the bright colors are used for the muzzle flash of the French firing their weapon and the blood
drop next to the hand and doll. The artists of the comic use the bright colors during combat for explosions and gun fire to help in adding to the chaotic feel of the events taking place; as McCloud explains, “colors could express a dominant mood” (190). The use of the bright cools helps in setting the disorganized mood of war and helps in showing the elevated stress levels of the soldiers fighting.

The bright colors show the high pace, high stress situations, but the artists of *The ’Nam* also use the more muted colors to establish traumatic moments where the soldiers are there absorbing the horrors of war. As shown in Figure 5.8, the artists us cooler colors and tones to show the horrific scene of dead bodies. The use of “tones and modelling… [help to] add depth” (McCloud 190). The scene in Figure 5.8 is shown in a more somber tone because the squad stumbled upon these bodies while humping the bush. Unlike the bright red used to show the blood in Figure 5.5, the blood in Figure 5.8 is dark showing the reader that these bodies have been here a while. The darker tones of the colors match the mood of the soldiers who found the terrible sight.
Figure 5.8: Dark Blood (Murray 5:9)

The purpose of the colors throughout the series is used to help in setting the tone and mood of the situation that the soldiers are experiencing. Though the colors may not be the main tool used in the storytelling there is “one thing’s for sure, though when used well, color in comics can–like comics itself–amount to far more than the sum of its parts” (McCloud 192). In
the case of *The ’Nam*, colors help in developing the feel of a particular moment in time only continuing to bring the reader deeper into the experience of a soldier in Vietnam.

The use of the comic medium allowed Murray’s stories to help the reader develop a deeper understanding of how traumatic war can be for a soldier. When using McCloud's theories of icons, closure, and panel arrangement and style mingled with Cohn’s theory of icons, one can see how the artist and author work together to develop stories that both educate and entertain. The use of icons allow the reader to become amerced into the story, while it is their use of closure that helps them develop the story in their own minds and in turn makes the reader develop an investment in the comic they are choosing to partake in. The comic book medium helps in making *The ’Nam* and its characters relatable to the civilian public and by doing this makes the reader care about the characters and through that the reader can see how the characters experience trauma and the effects of war.
Chapter VI: Conclusion

As comic books continue to evolve, so will the maturity of their content. By artists and writers working together to mingle their respected crafts, the ever adapting growth of influential visual literature will continue. The ‘Nam is a great representation of this evolution and maturity, because of the topics and stories it presents to the audience both visually and textually.

By Murray telling his stories in the comic format he was able to show both the external and internal effects of trauma. Like discussed in the previous chapters, comics allowed Murray to show the reader how the soldiers reacted to trauma mentally as well as physical. The comic format also allowed the writers and artists of The ‘Nam to show that was happening in the physical world while simultaneously showing the audience what was happening in the minds of the characters.

Not saying that this could have not been done in other mediums, but the comic medium allowed Murray to transition between the internal and external more seamlessly than a novel or a film could have. The other thing that the comic allowed Murray to do that a novel, painting, and/or film would have prevented him from doing was using real-time to tell his stories and following multiple characters through the series. It is through the comic’s monthly publication release that allowed Murray to cover more terrain when it came to exploring multiple characters and their experiences in war.

A film would have constricted him to a time limit as well as limited viewpoints, whereas the novel may have allowed him to dig deeper into a character mind. It would have limited his audience and placed more of the exposure of trauma on him, unlike the comic
medium which allowed him to have the reader use closure to explore the traumas of war on their own terms or with in the readers own understanding. The comics allow the reader a much more interactive relationship with the stories than books or movies can provide. Through closure and the use of icons there is more responsibility placed on the audience when it comes to the interpretation of the trauma and events being presented. Comics allow Murray and the artists to both directly show traumatic stressors as well as show them indirectly.

It is through Murray’s own experience as a Vietnam veteran that helped him explore these traumas in a realistic manner. Though, The ’Nam started as an idea by Jim Shooter to tell real-world styled accounts of war, it was the hiring of Murray as the writer that allowed Shooter to produce the comic he wanted. Murray used his own involvement in the Vietnam conflict as the basis to produce stories that reflected the life of the American infantry men serving in Vietnam.

It is Murray’s time in the U.S. armed services that helps him use the comic book format to show the audience PTSD and how each soldier reacts to it differently. Like discussed in the fourth chapter, the comic book format allowed Murray to break up a story into two different sections. Each having their own narrative style, third person to first person, this is something that other mediums struggle with. Murray used a narrative switch to follow one character from one unit to another and by doing this he was able to explore the lasting effects of trauma from multiple angles. The eighth issue of The ‘Nam showed the dramatic effects that a traumatic stressor can have on a soldier: Verzyl. But, it also gave a glimpse into the lasting effects of PTSD with the narrator of “The 5th to the 1st.” Being a comic book, gave The ‘Nam the ability
to smoothly transmission from one characters story to another which allowed Murray to show how each soldier is affected by war and combat.

It helps that Murray understand what it is really like to have gone to war, because it gives him the creditability to present how individuals respond to trauma and how they live with the aftermath later in life. Murray does not spend time in the comic glorifying war or combat. He does not try to recruit young readers into joining the armed services, he just presents humans in an unhuman setting. War is an experience that very few people will have exposure to that is why the telling of an honest war story is something that can only be achieved by someone who has lived through those events.

By telling the audience what life was like as a soldier in Vietnam, Murray was able to reveal how traumatic going to war can be, and with the application of the ideas of van der Kolk, McFarlane, McCloud, and Cohn, this paper exposed how Murray, as well as the other creators, exposed and presents the topic of trauma. The topic of PTSD is a sensitive one that can be hard to talk about in the main stream culture, because it is uncomfortable. By making *The ‘Nam* a comic book Murray can make the discussion of such a taboo topic a little more comfortable. This comic gave the civilian public a chance to see a glimpse into the world of a combat veteran, which in turn helps in getting a conversation started about their experiences and PTSD.

Though academia has not spend much time looking at *The ‘Nam*, it is a piece of American culture worth looking at, because of the role it played, as well as continues to play, when it comes to telling the stories of American soldiers. The experience of war is something that very few Americans will ever experience that is why it is worth taking the time to listen and learn from those who have lived through such events. This comic book does just that, it
allows the civilian public the opportunity to listen (read) those stories and not just learn a
history lesson, but see how those events shape who we are today as a culture and as individuals.

This is why The ‘Nam would be a great candidate to introduce into an academic setting.
The comic book could give a young class of students learning about the U.S.’s involvement in
Vietnam a look at what it was like to actually be there. This comic book can be used to teach
students about the life of soldiers, only a few years older than themselves, in Vietnam. The way
Murray sticks to maintaining realism with the story lines helps in giving the comic creditability
to be used in a high school history class. Not allow could this comic help in a history class, but
it could be used in psychology classes as well. The comic shows a multitude of traumas and
how people react to those traumatic stimuli. It is also a great tool to explore the psychological
effects of going to war.

But most importantly it could be used to teach a son, daughter, or grandchild what it
was like for dad or grandpa when he went overseas. This comic can be used as a gateway into a
conversation of what it was like to fight overseas for a veteran. This may sound minuscule, but
this is what leads to the healing of the traumas of war; a simple conversation about that
experience.
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