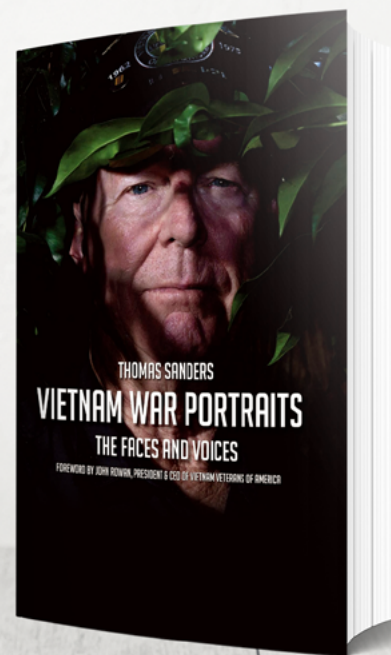


Vietnam War Portraits The Faces and Voices

Thomas Sanders, Casemate,
Philadelphia, 2020, 224 pages



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There was a time when the “coffee table” book was an extremely popular genre. For those unfamiliar or needing a refresher on the genre, let me provide a brief synopsis. These were oversized volumes where the focus was on the photographs and visuals contained in the book. Typically, the verbiage in the book was minimal and utilized to briefly describe the visual or simply provide a title. Because of their larger size and ability to draw conversation, they were often placed on coffee tables in homes or offices. Hence, the name penned on the genre.

For several years, I have not seen many new books of this genre published. Obviously, changes in culture and reading platforms have made the “coffee table” book a bit of a relic. That is why it was a little surprising to come across *Vietnam War Portraits: The Faces and Voices* crafted by Thomas Sanders. Seeing it brought me back to a time when the tangible look and feel to a book was much more important.

Despite my initial interest, I was hesitant to review it. My experiences with the genre caused trepidation and left me disappointed. The dissatisfaction was spurred by the quality of the visuals, the organization and layout of the books, and my desire to have more substantive complementary verbiage within these books. A quick opening of the book quickly intrigued me, and I decided it was worthy of review. It would not

take long to determine this volume was different from many others and would not frustrate me.

Before detailing the book and its many strengths, let me begin by discussing the author. Thomas Sanders is a highly regarded and award-winning photographer. He is equally adept working in a variety of platforms including books, magazines, and films. In regard to the “coffee table” book, *Vietnam War Portraits* is not his first venture into the genre. Several years ago, at the age of twenty-five, he released *The Last Good War: The Faces and Voices of World War II*. This book garnered critical acclaim and, in fact, was named the “Non-Fiction Book of the Year, Editors’ Choice” by the prestigious *Foreword Reviews* magazine. Sanders’s experience in developing that volume led to this project. He states, “The contrast in experience between World War II and Vietnam veterans is what compelled me to do a book about Vietnam veterans, show how they made the same sacrifices, and are heroes just like WWII veterans.”¹

Within his current volume, Sanders has focused on the Vietnam War experiences of nearly a hundred people. It is an eclectic group made up of U.S. veterans of every service, South

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Vietnamese army veterans, conscientious objectors, and South Vietnamese immigrants/refugees. For the preponderance of the group, Sanders includes a powerful photograph of the person and the person's personal thoughts on the war or an event or experience that continues to impact them each day. The combination of the visual and the written works perfectly within the volume.

In addressing the numerous strengths of the book, I would like to key on the three areas I addressed earlier that traditionally disappoint me in the "coffee table" genre. First, the visuals in *Vietnam War Portraits* are incredible. Sanders has made two superb decisions in taking the portraits of his book's contributors. The first is that he has photographed each person set against a jungle background. In making this decision, he states, "I want the viewer to feel the darkness and uncertainty of what those who experienced the war might have felt."² The other decision he made was to photograph his subjects with an object directly relating to their Vietnam War experiences. He states, "The objects help tell a deeper story of a dark and confusing war."³ Unquestionably, these photographs (portraits) are among the best I have seen in this genre.

The second strength I would like to highlight is the organization and layout of the volume. Sanders has molded a book possessing a superb flow for readers. The key element in achieving this is the way he has positioned his visuals and verbiage throughout his pages. Readers will find that as they move from page to page, they are immediately drawn into the content. Sanders's

skill in this area and the time and energy he devoted in designing the volume are clearly evident.

The final strength of the book is its verbiage. As I highlighted earlier, I have found the words contained in a "coffee table" book are normally an afterthought. They are usually utilized to provide a short caption to a photograph and do not provide a great deal of value. Within *Vietnam War Portraits*, this is not the case. The verbiage does not take a minor role in the book and goes hand in hand with the visual to tell the contributor's story and Vietnam War experience.

Sanders has left it up to the contributor to decide what he or she wanted to include in the volume. Consequently, there is a great range in the accompanying verbiage. Some contributors have included a quote or single paragraph, while others have incorporated a detailed account. The narratives also range from a comical story to an emotional discussion on loss or tragedy. In total, they add tremendously to the personal aspect of the volume and will affect readers in many ways.

In summary, *Vietnam War Portraits* is a must-read. Its stunning portraits and the extremely personal and heartfelt thoughts of the contributors will truly impact each reader. However, I believe the true impact of the book is highlighted in the volume's introduction by Sanders himself. He states, "Involvement in this project has served as a form of catharsis for many people involved in the Vietnam War. It honors them in a way they have not previously been honored, giving them an opportunity to tell their story and bearing witness to their service, experiences, and its aftermath."⁴ ■

Notes

1. Thomas Sanders, introduction to *Vietnam War Portraits: The Faces and Voices* (Philadelphia: Casemate, 2020).

2. *Ibid.*, 11.

3. *Ibid.*

4. *Ibid.*