The 40-Year Wait: VVA To Honor Karl Marlantes

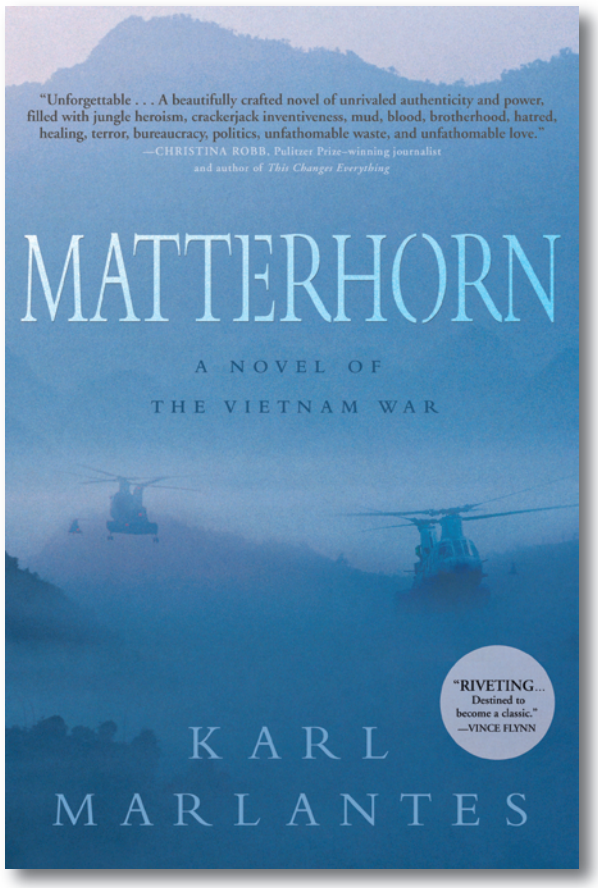
BY DAVID WILLSON

Karl Marlanes will receive the VVA Excellence in the Arts Award at the Leadership Conference in August. He's the author of the highly acclaimed *New York Times* bestseller, *Matterhorn*, and also the author of a philosophical inquiry about war, *What It Is Like to Go to War*. This second book was an unexpected treat, a readable and engrossing journey into Marlantes's war and, by extension, into all wars.

Perhaps it's a surprise that a Marine Corps veteran wrote such a book, but Marlantes is a man of surprises. He was born and raised in Seaside, Oregon, a small logging town, went off to Yale, joined the Marines, became a Rhodes scholar, then served as a lieutenant in Vietnam, and then became a Rhodes scholar again. He is a man of changes. Now he is a famous author and a family man who, with the financial success of *Matterhorn,* can afford a kitchen remodel.

Matterhorn got the prestigious front-page review in *The New York Times Book Review*, written by Sebastian Junger, and countless other positive reviews. Readers, too, loved the book.

As I read Marlantes's novel, the Marines' struggle to take a hill became a metaphor for the struggle that many Vietnam veterans faced trying to explain or justify their tours of duty and the struggles they faced in their lives after Vietnam dealing with people who were home watching the war on television and thought they were experts already, so they didn't need or want to hear the veterans' side of the story. Or the struggle of the veteran to tell the story, when words and emotions failed him.



Matterhorn arrived at the right time. Timing can be important in publishing; like Joseph Heller's *Catch 22*, Marlantes's book resonated with a new generation of readers. Words and emotions did not fail Karl Marlantes. He took forty years and got it right. *Matterhorn* is about a lieutenant and his men trying to survive in Vietnam, but it is also about a lot more than that.

None of this fully explains the success of Marlantes's novel. Nor does it explain how he managed to be the veteran who wrote the blockbuster novel that has a half-million copies in print and demolished the barrier between the Vietnam War and the bestseller list.

I talked to Karl Marlantes on the phone for an hour to find out the secret. Was it his gift for telling detail? Was it the convergence of talent and timing? Was it because America had finally gotten past the Vietnam syndrome? Or was it that Marlantes's book coincided with a shift in America's zeitgeist, as one pundit put it? Or all of these things? Or none?

When I approached this subject with Marlantes—why *Matterhorn* was so popular—all he said, in his self-effacing way, was, "I feel very fortunate."

Marlantes's gift for choosing the telling detail is beautifully and horrifyingly displayed about one third of the way through the book, when the Marines on the top of the hill are sprayed with Agent Orange. Readers know the significance of this, but the Marines do not. When I asked Marlantes about this scene, he said, "Even though I was not with that group on that hill when they were sprayed, and even though I cut the book by 23 percent to make the book more accessible to the reader, I never considered cutting that scene."

It was moral decisions of that sort that make *Matterhorn* so strong and led to his receiving VVA's Excellence in the Arts Award. "Of all the honors I've received," Marlantes said, "this is the greatest because it's from my fellow Vietnam veterans."

Karl Marlantes is a gifted storyteller. Read *Matterhorn* and then read *What It Is Like to Go to War* for the rest of the story. He gives us characters we believe in, situations that involve us and ring true, and thousands upon thousands of details that make us believe he was there and the characters he presents to us are real.

Marlantes is nothing less than our war's Homer. We are lucky to have him. It was worth the forty-year wait.■

FOCUS ON: Bylaws

11:00 am Wednesday, Aug. 8

Do you understand every word in your chapter and state council's bylaws? Do many of the terms seem unclear or all-but-impossible to understand?

It is important that everyone understand the meaning of these words, terms, and phrases. If you want to learn more about bylaws, you should come to the National Leadership Conference and take in the session titled, "Why Does It Say That In The Chapter/Council Bylaws?"

When you do, bring a copy of your chapter or state council bylaws. During the session we will discuss bylaws, answer questions, and explain all the words and phrases. We also will help you write bylaws that match your chapter's or state council's needs—bylaws that are clear, concise, and unambiguous.

Presenters: Leslie DeLong, Chair of VVA's Constitution Committee, and Michael L. Swift, VVA's National Parliamentarian.

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IRVING TEXAS

FOCUS ON: *The Veteran* and the Veterans: VVA and the Media

10:45 am Friday, Aug. 10

The editor, the arts editor, and the art director of *The VVA Veteran* will discuss the production and development of the magazine: where ideas come from and how they get developed into features complete with photos and art. Where does content come from? How about artwork?

We'll talk about building bridges with chapter and state council publications. How we can help each other. How we can share information and photos. We'll talk about how VVA can better use Facebook and other social media as aids and supplements to publications.

This is not a Words-from-on-High seminar. We want to listen as much as to talk. Participants are encouraged to bring their newsletters, flyers, and ads, and their ideas. After the seminar there will be plenty of time for discussions about individual publications.

Presenters: Michael Keating, editor, Marc Leepson, arts editor, and Xande Anderer, art director of *The VVA Veteran*

Bravo! Common Men, Uncommon Valor:

A Tour of Hell in a Small Space

1:30 pm Thursday, Aug. 9

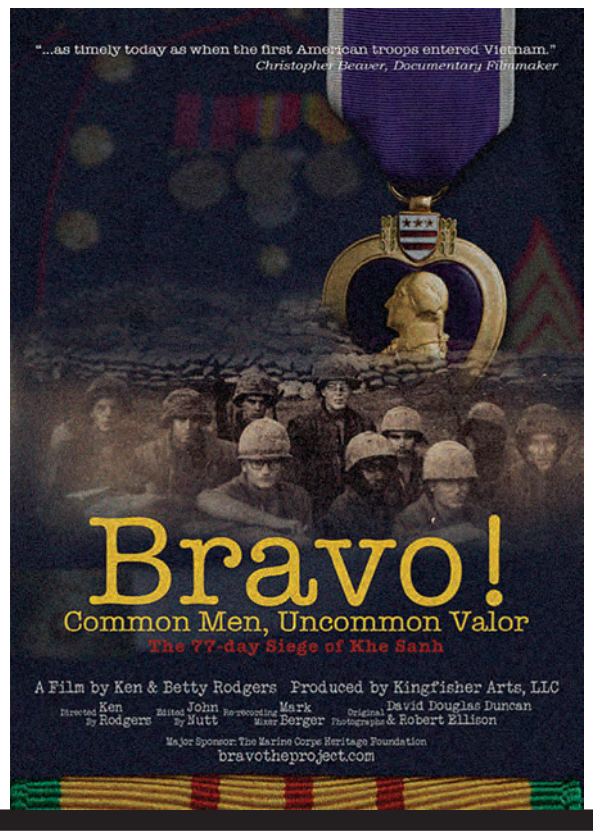
BY STEPHEN HUNTER

We live in an age obnoxious in its corruption of the ancient genre of documentary film. The profusion of cable channels with their insatiable need for product has largely diluted the field with reports from Area 51, speculations on ancient aliens, and re-creations of the Battle of Gettysburg with twenty-five extras. Thus, it's a privilege and an honor to come across a work as disciplined and rigorous as Ken and Betty Rodgers's *Bravo! Common Men, Uncommon Valor.* No recreations, no ancient aliens, no saucers.

Just a tour of hell in a very small space among young men in the prime of life hammered by the existential fury of war. Theirs wasn't to question why, theirs was do nothing—and die, too many of them. The film is a two-hour examination of the ordeal of the siege at the Marine Operation Base at Khe Sanh from January through July of 1968. The focus is on Bravo-1-23, a Marine infantry company that was on the bull's-eye for the worst seventy-seven days of the siege, during which life consisted primarily of two endeavors: digging and praying.

The Rodgerses really aren't interested in history. They provide no voice of authority in the film, no god of context who sets things up geopolitically or even tactically. No pointy-heads or critics explain in front of animated maps the movements of the units, the terrain, the consternation of the policy people ten thousand miles away, the press coverage. Nobody second-guesses or explains, from the safety of a paneled den, what Ken Tice, Bravo's CO, should have done. Instead the filmmakers simply let the boys speak. The Rodgerses are noble witnesses who have committed to recording this all-but-forgotten aspect of that all-but-forgotten time and place. And they know enough to turn on the camera and shut up. So the film finds its rhythm in the excellent editing of John Nutt, which juxtaposes the recollection of several Bravo survivors, men and officers, with archival film.

The men are now all middle-aged, wearing the comfortable padding of the good life in the country they fought so hard for. (You will think, as I did: Boy, if anyone ever earned the right to comfort, it was these guys.) As they talk, a narrative emerges, and the Rodgerses and Nutt cut away to mostly grainy film, as well as to the extraordinary photojournalism from the siege by David Douglas Duncan and Robert Ellison. The record reveals much that has been forgotten, if it was ever noted in the first place: the squalor of the installation itself—it looked like a large urban garbage dump by siege's end—and the feel of the thunder of the incoming.



Other samples of the combat experience emerge, without emotional underlining: the endless fatigue, the endless labor (sandbags had to be filled and stacked each day, human waste had to be burned, supplies had to be offloaded and stockpiled) and the hideousness of what small pieces of heated supersonic metal and vast energy waves of percussion can do to human flesh. The directors also make clever use of sound; occasionally, the screen goes dark, and all we hear is the sound of bombardment, a living symphony of mayhem as recorded on site by an enterprising Marine historical officer.

In general, the movie progresses chronologically, its first concern the arrival of the grunts to the site itself and their initial bewilderment at the intensity and complexity of the situation. It follows through long periods of consistent bombardment, the loss of a large patrol, and could be said to "climax"—the word implies melodrama, but the film is defiantly anti-melodramatic—in Bravo's assault outside the wire late in the siege of a section of NVA trench-

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Bravo! (continued from previous page)

line. The arrival, in July of 1968, of a relief force, effectively ending the siege, is not treated as a triumph but a relief.

The tone is modest, severe, and utterly melancholic.

Regardless of one's position on the politics and the policy that made this episode seem inevitable, one can only wonder at the toughness, the love, and the deep sense of comradeship that got the young Marines—most were twenty or younger—through the ordeal. But no bugles are played, no drums are beaten. The men themselves are now, as they were then, quietly magnificent. No Rambos here, no bravado or warrior zeal.

Most break down at one point or another, and request that the camera be shut down while they compose themselves. Even now, years later, the loss of so many friends and the harrowing nature of the dread that crushed against them are still written vividly on their faces. These are the things that never go away, that we expect our fighters to bear up under. It is pleasing to report that most seem to have done well, and ultimately rejoined and contributed to society. That's the only happy ending the movie provides.

To call Khe Sanh a "battle" is somewhat misleading. The idea, just like the French plan in 1954, was to expose a large unit to enemy attack, under the assumption that it would prove so tempting that the enemy would soon arrive. The second part of the assumption was that the Marines, with their superior firepower and discipline, would destroy the attacking force and break the back and ultimately the morale of the human waves in the wire. But the enemy never came. Instead, the NVA lay back and assaulted by mortar, rocket, artillery, and sniper fire.

Only that one time, late in the engagement, did Bravo emerge from the wire and engage North Vietnamese regulars in a brief but bloody attack, vividly recalled here by all who participated.

Still, at the grunt level, the experience was mostly about the play of right-time/right-place dynamics, as most of the survivors recollect a moment or seventeen when they went into the hole on the right instead on the left and in the next second the hole on the left was obliterated by a shell. They were all—to cite a famous Bill Mauldin cartoon from World War II—refugees from the law of averages.

The base's umbilical was resupply by air. Some of the most horrifying moments in *Bravo!* portray the intensity of arrival and exit, as the C130s hit the runaway in mid-bombardment, spew men and material without ever really coming to a halt, then crank into a 180 at the end of the runway and take off again, all amid bursting shells. Nobody who arrived or departed in that fashion ever forgot it, and the graveyard of burned fuselages and sundered wings that became the central architectural feature of the otherwise low-lying bunker city is an image of war at its fiercest.

A more historically oriented film might cover those brave pilots, as well as the fighter-bomber jocks who slathered the low-lying surrounding hills with napalm and contributed significantly to prevent Khe Sanh from becoming an American Dien Bien Phu, as well as the B-52s that turned much of the outlying jungle to mulch. Such a film might interview someone over the rank of O-3, might even provide a map that would locate Khe Sahn in country and suggest why the war's managers considered it a good strategy. To their credit, the Rodgerses don't care. It's immaterial.

This is a grunt film that looks at history from over the lip of the trench. To watch it is to think: Where did we get such men?■

Stephen Hunter was chief film critic for The Baltimore Sun *and* The Washington Post. *He is author of the Bob Lee Swagger novels.*

National Leadership Conference

Omni Hotel, Irving, Texas
www.vva.org/leadership_conf.html

ROUNDTABLE: **"Tour of Duty"**

Saturday, Aug. 11 1:00 pm

TONY ESPARZA/CBS

Two of the stars of the acclaimed 1987-90 TV series, *Tour of Duty*—Terry Knox, who played Sgt. Zeke Anderson, and Tony Becker, who portrayed Cpl. Danny Purcell—will participate in a roundtable discussion moderated by VVA's Marc Leepson. Audience members are welcome to ask questions and make comments.

Knox and Becker will receive the VVA President's Award for Excellence in the Arts at the Saturday night Awards Banquet and will autograph photos at Saturday's noon book signing.