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Novelist explores war's lessons in Fishing with Hand Grenades

By Tyler Peckham; Staff Intern

To some, a book about Vietnam more than 40 years after the war began might seem a bit out of touch. To others, including Ari Pontz, it could not come at a more important time. Pontz, 31, a long-time Philadelphia resident who was born and raised in Mt. Airy, is the author of the recently published novel *Fishing with Hand Grenades* (Llumina Press, 2008). The novel follows an 18-year-old kid from Germantown, his one-year tour of duty in Vietnam, and the lasting personal battles he faced long after the war was over.

Pontz started writing *Fishing with Hand Grenades* some 13 years ago after his senior year in high school. The book was based on a series of tape-recorded interviews Pontz conducted with the actual Vietnam veteran that the book is based on. Since then, the book has found new meaning during the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, Pontz says, where he says he has seen an American administration making some of the same mistakes of the 1960s in Vietnam.

"My concern is, would we, as a society, have history repeat itself in the way that we treated the troops?" says Pontz.

Fishing with Hand Grenades is not a novel in the traditional sense. Since the book and many of its events were based on someone Pontz knew in real life, Pontz was charged with the task of bringing memories of the main character, referred to as "Danny Sullivan," to life. Switching between Sullivan's journal entries, letters to family, and a narrative of the events that happens in between, Pontz paints a picture of what life, death, and friendship mean for a soldier fighting in a conflict overseas.

"Regardless of how you believe, understand that the soldiers are doing something they believe is right," says Pontz.

Throughout the book Pontz is both critical and sympathetic of the Vietnam War: critical of the decisions and decision makers that brought people like Danny Sullivan into a war on the other side of the Earth, sympathetic for these young Americans risking their lives for their country.

"[The soldiers] were young, naïve, immature - they didn't always understand what it means to go to war," says Pontz.

Like today's soldiers in Iraq, Pontz's Danny Sullivan enlisted voluntarily. Also like many of today's veterans, he came back scarred by the experience. "We saw the pretenses and unpopularity of the [Iraq and Vietnam wars] being similar, and I was worried about the treatment of the troops," says Pontz.

Perhaps the strongest criticism in *Fishing for Hand Grenades* of what happened during Danny's experience in Vietnam is reserved for those that sent these young and naïve men into the war zone. "You also have military and political people that are worldly, but they can make decisions [to go to war] without feeling the effects," adds Pontz.

The book also follows the experience of Danny after the war and his subsequent struggle with alcohol, readjusting to life after war, and post-traumatic stress disorder. Throughout the book Pontz strives to keep his story faithful to the memories of the man Danny Sullivan was based on, while telling a story to his audience as well. "I didn't make anything up," says Pontz. "I just added the pieces where they were missing."

There will be a book signing for *Fishing with Hand Grenades* with Pontz at Borders in Chestnut Hill on Saturday, November 22, from 2 to 4 p.m.

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