

The Truth That Really Hurts

The War Behind Me: Vietnam Veterans Confront the Truth About U.S. War Crimes, by Deborah Nelson, Basic Books, 2008, \$26.95, www.warbehindme.com

ONCE UPON A TIME, there was an army that had been defeated in war. Reeling from the psychological impact of its loss, the mostly conservative officer corps came to a general consensus about why it lost. “We were not beaten on the battlefield,” this reasoning went, “we were beaten by the collapse of will on the home front—a collapse caused by the leftists and defeatists and their allies in the press.” It was, for the officers, an enchanting explanation. This version of events salved their consciences and allowed them their pride. It leaked into the rest of the army and became an item of faith.

Not much later, the main political party of the right adopted the same narrative. This party was dedicated to small-town values, self-reliance, pride in the nation and pride in the armed forces. It vilified the press for “stabbing the Army in the back,” as part of its standard explanation of the nation’s woes. Its charismatic leader rode a wave of patriotic sentiment into the highest office in the land. Does all this sound familiar? It should, but perhaps not in the way that you might think.

The defeated army was that of Germany, post World War I, not the United States, post Vietnam. The political party? They were the National Socialists, better known as the Nazis. Their charismatic leader Adolf Hitler took power in the early 1930s, so do not confuse him with Ronald Reagan in the 1980s. But the “stab in the back” narrative? Well, that story remained pretty much the same in both cases.

It was wrong then, just as it is wrong now. The media of the United States did not, I say again, did not, overreport on American-committed war crimes, atrocities and various desecrations. Indeed, if anything, the journalists vastly underreported what was actually happening: in some cases because they did not know; in some cases because they did not want to tell that story. But the

effect was the same. Sadly, it took a journalist of the early 21st century, and not a historian, to make this crystal clear.

Los Angeles Times reporter Deborah Nelson, through a series of newspaper articles and now the book *The War Behind Me*, demonstrates that the bad stories of Vietnam were massively, gigantically, hugely under-reported at the time.

Her source, you ask? Well, it was not some left-wing group out to “get” the Army. Nor was it a collection of religiously oriented pacifists who investigated the claims of atrocities committed by U.S. troops in Vietnam. No, the primary source upon which Nelson relied was none other than the United States Army itself. Nelson is simply bearing the message that was written by a collection of officers working with what was the then-new Criminal Investigative Division (CID) at the direction of Generals William Westmoreland and Creighton

Abrams, when each was the chief of staff, between about 1970 and 1975. What the U.S. Army, operating under orders from the highest levels, uncovered was more than 800 separate incidents. These were usually incidents involving one or two or a dozen Vietnamese civilians or prisoners, but cumulatively it amounted to a “My Lai per week.” The Army validated hundreds upon hundreds of these cases. It is believed that many more were substantiated, but lacked the necessary evidence to prove in a court of law that a crime had been committed. As it was compiled, the information was reported to the chief of staff on a weekly basis...and then the file was closed, not to reappear for 30 years. If anyone—one of my fellow soldiers of today, a veteran or a historian—would like to dispute these facts, they need to take it up with the U.S. Army and the National Archives, not Ms. Nelson.

The narrative portion (187 pages) of *The War Behind Me* is surprisingly brief for a book of 296 pages. One gets the impression that it could have been much longer, but Nelson prudently took another route. Scrupulously documenting her archival re-

search are 17 pages of endnotes, and then 78 pages are filled with original (photocopied) copies of the actual CID reports from the National Archives, slamming the door on any possible charge that Nelson was making anything up or distorting what the Army wrote at the time.

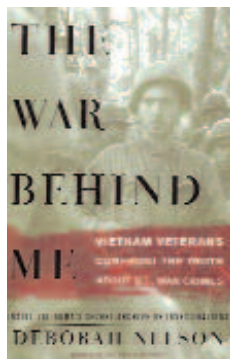
The reason nobody wrote about this before is simple. This portion of the archival records only hit its automatic declassification point a few years ago.

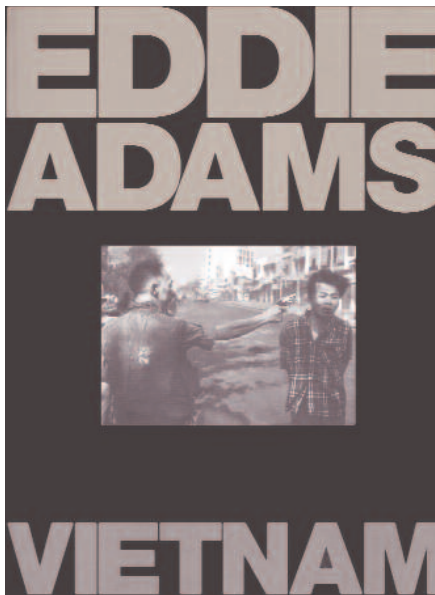
As a young soldier and then officer in the 1980s and early 1990s, I heard the same litany over and over again from senior officers and NCOs: “The ‘liberal media’ stabbed us in the back.” It was not until years later that I learned this was the exact same self-delusional tale that the Germans told themselves after WWI. They even used a single word for the idea, *Dolchstoss*. In both cases the “stabbed in the back by the media” narrative was blinkered and outright dangerous. For the Germans it led to ruin. For the U.S. Army, the institution that I serve and love, it meant we could conceal the facts and then ignore Vietnam almost entirely. If we had not, if we had, instead, sought to learn from our mistakes in Vietnam, then perhaps some of my peers, my soldiers and a couple of my superiors might still be alive today and not lying in a grave in Arlington.

Robert Bateman

Eddie Adams: Vietnam, edited by Alyssa Adams, Umbrage Editions Books, March 2009, \$50

SINCE THE ADVENT OF THE ART of photography a century and a half ago, millions and millions of split seconds have been frozen for eternity, becoming, to the beholder, a solid, uncontroversial document that tells us “the” story—even better than a thousand words. Some images do in fact speak volumes, but no single image can tell the whole story. No less an authority than Eddie Adams, one of the most celebrated photographers ever, says so emphatically in commentaries that accompany a collection of his work. A stunning picture book that grabs you and won’t let go, *Eddie Adams: Vietnam*, also tells us to be wary of believing we can see more in an image than meets the eye.





Gracing the book jacket of this brilliant work, which covers Vietnam from 1965 to 1977 with a brief detour to Detroit's riotous summer of 1967, is one of the most iconic images in history, the summary execution of a VC guerrilla on a Saigon street during Tet 1968. Included is a sequence of Adams' shots, following the young cuffed man as he is pulled down the street and finally shoved in front of National Police Chief Nguyen Ngoc Loan, who proceeds to put a pistol to his temple and blow his brains out. Gruesome. Brutal. An evocation of all that was wrong in Vietnam? No, says Adams, and through his notes and diaries he goes to great lengths to tell us why that picture, in a number of ways, was a lie. "It doesn't tell you why that happened. . . . You don't see all sides of it. But pictures are very important because people believe photos."

The 1968 Pulitzer Prize winner credits his own Marine service in Korea for keeping him alive in Vietnam and, perhaps just as important, enabling him to be in the right place at the right time. After Vietnam, Adams continued on for a stellar career as one of the world's best-known photojournalists, up until his death in 2004.

Eddie Adams: Vietnam includes never-before-published Adams photos, a narrative by Hal Buell and insights from colleagues including Tom Brokaw, Peter Arnett, David Halberstam, Bob Schieffer and Morley Safer.

Editor Alyssa Adams writes that were he still living, Eddie Adams would have not let this book happen, most notably because of his enduring discomfort with the impact of that image on the cover. We are fortunate that Adams has helped us to finally see the whole picture.

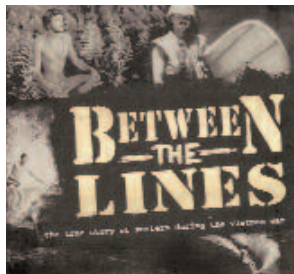
R. V. Lee

An Unlikely Weapon: The Eddie Adams Story, DVD, produced and directed by Morgan Cooper, narrated by Kiefer Sutherland, 85 minutes, 2008, \$24.95
www.anunlikelyweapon.com

WHILE EDDIE ADAMS COVERED 13 wars and took pictures of presidents, dictators, popes and *Penthouse* pinups, his life is forever entwined with America's war in Vietnam. The war was central to his career, and his pictures became central to the war. And no matter how large and varied the scope of his work, we are compelled—Adams, the filmmaker and us—to linger on that Saigon street corner with that one signature image. In *An Unlikely Weapon*, Morgan Cooper has gracefully chronicled the photographer's career through interviews with Adams and many of his colleagues, such as Bill Eppridge, Gordon Parks, Nick Ut and David Hume Kennerly, who share the unvarnished truth of young men learning their trade and making their mark in the crucible of war.

Between the Lines, DVD produced by Ty Ponder, Scott Bass and Troy Page, Pure Frustration Productions LLC, narrated by John Milius, 52 minutes, release date April 15, 2009, 29.95. Limited edition companion book from Headline Graphics, \$39.95, www.betweenthelinesfilm.com

I THOUGHT I'D HEARD just about every kind of off-the-wall story about Americans' experiences in Vietnam, having written about the war and its veterans for more than three decades. Then, last year, I read Craig Venter's memoir *A Life Decoded*. That's when I learned that Venter—the internationally renowned scientist who led a team that unveiled the sequencing of the



Between the Lines explores a strange nexus of surfers and surfing in-country during the Vietnam War.

human genome in 2001—spent his off hours as a Da Nang Navy Hospital corpsman body surfing, board surfing, sailing and swimming at China Beach.

Surfing? Before that, all I'd known about surfing in Vietnam came from the memorable helicopter assault scene in Francis Ford Copolla's *Apocalypse Now*. That's when the insane Lt. Col. Bill Kilgore (Robert Duval) dresses down a young trooper who questions Kilgore's order to Lance "the Surfer" Johnson and other First Cav soldier/surfers to hit the waves in a Viet Cong-infested area. You know the scene, the one punctuated by Kilgore's iconic line: "Charlie don't surf!"

But *Apocalypse Now* was a made-up Hollywood movie; Venter's story was true. He had pictures to prove it.

Which brings us to *Between the Lines*, the surprisingly enlightening and evocative new documentary film that looks at the Vietnam War primarily through the lives of California surfers Pat Farley and Brant Page. Farley, like Venter, was drafted off his surfboard and sent to Vietnam. He did not see a surfboard in Vietnam, but did see combat at its worst from his first day in the field. Farley today still rides the wild surf in California, but is haunted by what he went through in the war.

Page, like hundreds of thousands of others, took measures to avoid serving and—in his case—to keep surfing. He moved to Hawaii and lived a vagabond life for years until the draft caught up with him.

Page, who purposely failed his physical, still surfs in Hawaii, and has no regrets today for his draft dodging.

The film uses Farley and Page's stories as touchstones to shed light on the wider phenomenon of surfing in the Vietnam War. Filmmakers Ty Ponder,

Scott Bass and Troy Page also look at GI lifeguards at the in-country R&R spots (Nha Trang, Vung Tau and China Beach at Cam Ranh Bay) who used their surfboards to save American lives and who encouraged recreating GIs to hit the waves. The film, narrated by John Milius (*Apocalypse Now* co-writer) makes excellent use of archival footage, including GIs surfing at China Beach and elsewhere in South Vietnam, along with a good deal of present-day interviews.

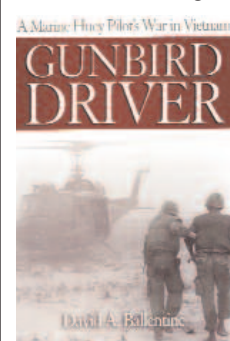
It may focus on surfing, but *Between the Lines* tells a broader story of the Vietnam War—how America’s most controversial overseas conflict permanently affected the lives of a generation of men who came of military age from 1965-72. The movie also happens to have a lot of cool shots of guys shooting the curl from California to the South China Sea. And some really boss surfing music.

The film has an accompanying 164-page, full-color coffee table book and an extensive Web site.

Marc Leepson

Gunbird Driver: A Marine Huey Pilot's War in Vietnam, by David A. Ballentine, Naval Institute Press, 2008, \$28.95

A RETIRED MARINE COLONEL who is now a college instructor in Kansas, in 1966-67 David Ballentine was a young lieutenant flying armed helicopters from a base at Ky Ha, Vietnam. Ballentine’s first book, *Gunbird Driver*, is a very well-written personal narrative that ranges from the serious and



sad to humorous and irreverent. By including “indelicate” topics and language, Ballentine paints a more complete picture of how life was lived by Marines in Vietnam than would be possible in a memoir suitable for “mixed company.” His preface offers insight on accuracy and memory by acknowledging that although truth exists, different people with a common experience may reasonably have different “truths” because of their different capacities to remember. *Gunbird Driver* is Ballentine’s best recollection of the memorable experiences he had in a Marine Corps armed UH-1E (Huey) squadron, in this case VMO-6, MAG-36.

Although the author is a historian, this book is in no way a political or military history of the war. Ballentine is a keen ob-

server of the war. Ballentine is a keen ob-

server. Beyond illuminating descriptions of the events he witnessed, he also offers interesting philosophical comments on the meanings of those events. For example, after making several rocket and machine gun attacks on a single fleeing Viet Cong with unknown results, Ballentine is ambivalent about this sort of overkill, noting “part of me hopes he survived.”

Opening the book with in-depth descriptions of the UH-1E helicopter, including specifications, armaments, capabilities and pilot training, Ballentine heaps praise on the aircraft and calls his time flying it the most rewarding of his life. His missions included armed escort for other helicopters, medevacs, troop insertions, gunfire spotting and supply. Ballentine re-creates dialogue as if it were transcribed from a tape recording.

It is not easy to categorize Ballentine’s varied experiences, or to understand his criteria for inclusion: After landing on one part of an aircraft carrier, he had to reposition his helo to another, a nerve-wracking process because he was low on fuel. While in Vietnam he grew a moustache, and later shaved it off. He escorted Miss World 1966 to various military installations as part of the 1966 Bob Hope Christmas show. When conventional medical treatment to remove a cyst on his wrist failed, he beat his hand against a wall until the cyst burst. His Huey was downed by small-arms fire while on a medevac mission.

Ballentine’s longest and most suspenseful account concerns the insertion of a large special operations force into an NVA-inhabited landing zone in the A Chau Valley. Although the operation was not productive overall, Ballentine did manage to successfully rescue three Nung mercenaries who had gotten separated from the main force.

Ballentine uses words evocatively. His description of a violent Huey crash, with main rotor blades spinning madly, begins simply, “The helo ate itself.” The title to one chapter is: “First Lt. Lyle Motley Gets His Sinus Cavity Crushed” (Motley was badly injured in a Huey crash).

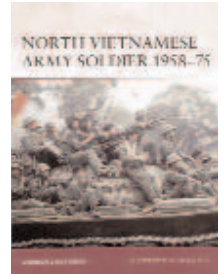
When Ballentine came home in April, 1967, there wasn’t much of a reception as he and Marines landed in California. He is pleased that soldiers returning from the Middle East these days get “fussed over a bit more.” Given their service and sacrifice, fussed over is as it should be. In this first-rate memoir, Ballentine discusses not just Vietnam but also the notions of duty, pride and responsibility, including why life after war is less challenging and exciting, and why veterans like to be around one another.

Peter Brush

North Vietnamese Army Soldier 1958-75,
by Gordon L. Rottman, Osprey Publishing,
2009, \$18.95

FOR THE AVERAGE AMERICAN interested in military history, the North Vietnamese Army soldier, or *bo doi*, has held little of the fascination generated by such enemy soldiers as the British Redcoats or the Japanese kamikazes. For all its troops' near-nondescript appearance, however, the United States' ultimate failure to defeat what was primarily a light infantry army gives the NVA a unique distinction that warrants its fair share of attention.

In No. 135 of Osprey's "Warrior" series, Gordon Rottman, a Special Forces Vietnam veteran with background in intelligence, among other things, has compiled a detailed dossier on the recruiting, training, indoctrination, equipment, tactics, morale and everyday life of the *bo doi*.



As with so many aspects of the Vietnam War, interesting contradictions emerge. The NVA soldier made his way south down the Ho Chi Minh Trail with cunning and patience, sometimes taking up to six months when inclement weather and enemy interdiction measures interfered.

The North Vietnamese Army soldiers' resourcefulness and endurance in the field was quite remarkable. Yet when committed to pitched battles, especially storming firebases, the NVA displayed an obliviousness to the concept of fire and maneuver. Contrasted with the stealthy approaches of their sappers, the NVA rank and file's suicidal rushes on fortified positions often resulted in 50 percent casualties.

For those who may wonder how the NVA prevailed in the end, Rottman's description of the usually improvised, and frequently appalling, medical facilities available to the wounded—if they were available at all—might leave them still wondering. That they prevailed just the same might explain an adjunct of Murphy's Law for Grunts I used to hear in the Army: "The side with the simplest uniforms wins."

North Vietnamese Army Soldier 1958-75 should give the Vietnam War scholar a better idea of what the Americans and South Vietnamese were up against. It should also leave Vietnam veterans counting some blessings that, the war's outcome notwithstanding, he did not have to fight it the enemy's way.

Jon Guttman