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Gary E. Skogen, *Not All Heroes: An Unapologetic Memoir of the Vietnam War, 1971-1972*.

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Forty years after the Vietnam War, many hundreds of American veterans have published accounts of their experiences in that conflict. While many of these memoirs are worth reading, most were written by combat soldiers, who constituted less than 20 percent of the over 2.3 million Americans sent to Southeast Asia during the war. The other 80 percent had experiences often quite different from those of the “grunts” in the field, but just as important to the study of the war as a whole. Far fewer of them, however, have published their stories. All this makes *Not All Heroes* a welcome addition to the field. Gary Skogen, who served in the Army’s Criminal Investigation Division (CID), was about as far from a conventional combat soldier as possible, and his unvarnished account of life in the rear as the Americans were withdrawing from Vietnam provides a valuable counterbalance to more typical memoirs.

Skogen’s military career began in the usual way with a draft notice in 1965. Like many others in the same situation, he decided to take some control of his fate by enlisting for three years and having the luxury of choosing his specialization. Since he had always wanted to be a cop, he chose military police training. Like nearly everyone entering the Army at that time, Skogen assumed he would go to Vietnam. Unlike most others, however, he actually wanted to go. So, of course, the Army sent him first to Turkey, then to Germany, and not to Vietnam until 1971. Along the way, he had re-enlisted and trained for the CID. This meant he would dress in civilian clothes to avoid giving any indication of rank, and live and work largely outside the world of uniformed servicemen.

Skogen was assigned to Chu Lai in the northern part of South Vietnam, at the time the main base of the 23rd (Americal) Division. This unit had a deplorable reputation for morale and discipline and was confronting a rampant drug problem. Heroin had become widely available and posed a much greater threat to the health and safety of the American soldiers than marijuana, which was ubiquitous. Skogen spent the next year investigating drug crimes. Toward the end of his tour, the division turned Chu Lai over to the South Vietnamese and moved into former Marine facilities at Da Nang, where another CID was in place. This left Skogen with little to do except test base security by driving an assortment of military vehicles off base without permission. He returned to the United States in 1972 and was discharged in 1973, going on to a career as a narcotics detective in the Los Angeles police department.

From the beginning of his memoir, Skogen distances himself from common assumptions about the war. His fight was not with the Vietnamese, but fellow soldiers trafficking in and abusing illegal drugs. Most of the casualties he saw were Americans who had died at the hands of other Americans, succumbed to drug overdoses, or committed suicide due to the effects of heroin and other narcotics. He notes with disgust that the names of all these individuals are inscribed on the Vietnam Veterans Memorial Wall in Washington, as if they had been heroes—Skogen sees them rather as “dickheads,” a term he applied to all the criminals he encountered. To drive home the point, he relates the details of cases he conducted, wherever possible citing records deposited in the National Archives, which his brother, a professional historian, helped him locate. The result is a remarkably precise, accurate, unsugarcoated account.

Skogen also stresses that he genuinely enjoyed his time in Vietnam. He liked police work, even at its most gruesome, and could separate drug offenses from other vices, notably drinking and sex, which he sampled enthusiastically when off duty. He and several other members of the small CID unit at Chu Lai occupied a hooch on an undeveloped part of the base overlooking the South China Sea. They commandeered a jeep for work purposes but also to bring in beer and Vietnamese women; they lived like frat boys until a typhoon leveled the hooch toward the end of his tour. Skogen offers no apologies for his use and treatment

of prostitutes (he did not beat them, but often lied to get what he wanted); instead he relates a good deal more about their lives than most other memoirists dare to do.

However much he enjoyed his tour, Skogen harbors no illusions about the larger situation in Vietnam at the time. He often saw Americans mistreating both Vietnamese people and each other. Knowing they were on their way out of Vietnam did nothing for the discipline of US troops still serving there. And, too, Skogen repeatedly found his work undone by his Vietnamese counterparts, who would simply release the Vietnamese drug dealers he had arrested. Corruption in the rear areas was rife among US and Vietnamese personnel alike. Unsurprisingly, Skogen has little praise for the people he came in contact with, aside from some CID colleagues and favorite girlfriends.

Despite his cynicism and iconoclasm, Skogen took his duties seriously, regardless of what was going on around him. This is particularly clear in his lengthy discussion of an investigation that began when he was caught cutting corners on procedure. One night at Chu Lai, when he was the CID man on duty, military police on the main part of the base phoned to say there had been a homicide and he needed to investigate. A soldier named Fike (a pseudonym), while on guard duty in the motor pool, had challenged an intruder attempting to climb over the wire. He shot and killed the man, who turned out to be American, when he failed to obey the order to halt. To Skogen, it seemed obvious that the guard had only done his duty, and that the MPs should have been able to handle the incident themselves. He told them so, hung up, and went back to bed, ignoring the warning from one of his hooch mates that their superior, Warrant Officer Strawberry, would not approve. Sure enough, Strawberry chewed him out the next morning and ordered him to conduct a proper investigation.

Now I was pissed. As I drove away from our office I glanced at the report, saw what unit Fike was in, and headed to his company area. By the time I arrived at the barracks I'd made up my mind that whatever the facts were in this case, I'd prove it was a justifiable homicide. I could have gotten a confession of murder out of somebody and still have determined the shooting was justified. I quickly located Fike, a scared-to-death young kid. I didn't approach him with normal CID bravado. We talked. He told me he'd been in the bush, he'd shot at people, and he'd been shot at, but he never thought he'd kill a fellow GI. Not only did he feel great remorse for an American's death, but also he knew he'd be severely punished for it. "I didn't mean to kill him, I really didn't," he kept telling me. He'd look at me plaintively and ask, "What are they going to do with me?" (125)

Skogen did his best to reassure the soldier that his actions had been justified, but could not convince him. He did, however, spend several weeks confirming every detail of Fike's account. In the process, he determined that the base guards had been on a high level of alert and that motor pool guards were supposed to follow the same procedures as the outer perimeter guards. This fully vindicated Fike's actions. Skogen may have gone into the case bent on proving himself right and his warrant officer wrong, but he also cared about getting the facts straight and protecting the innocent.

Unfortunately, many of his other cases did not give Skogen the chance to help others as he had Fike. Most of the suspects he dealt with were guilty, and whatever he accomplished at his level was often ignored or undone due to corruption on a higher level or the Army's ineffective operating procedures. In such cases, he tended to compartmentalize things, follow orders, and move on. Once, he was sent to the site of Fire Support Base Maryann, which had been overrun by North Vietnamese sappers in an incident that made the Americans look very bad. It was believed base security had failed because too many of the men had been using drugs or were asleep on duty. Rather than being sent in right away to investigate and interview survivors, Skogen was flown out to the base only after it had been abandoned and dismantled. Once there, he was told specifically to look for drugs and nothing else. Skogen knew the Army wanted to discredit the drug stories and that doing anything else would get him into trouble. Having searched what little was left of the base, he found only remnants of drug paraphernalia and no actual narcotics. He simply reported that there were no drugs and left it at that (150-63).

Skogen's memoir fits the larger picture painted in other veterans' stories, as well as in thousands of archived oral histories. Like most of his fellow soldiers, he did not fret over the larger political context of the war or even whether or not the Americans were "winning." He just put his head down and did his job as best he

could; he remains proud of his service. His account of life in the rear reinforces much that has been said and written about how bad things got toward the end of the war. But despite the drug use and indiscipline, most of the people around him at Chu Lai and Da Nang managed to carry on with their jobs. One must bear in mind that military operations tend to look more corrupt viewed from the rear, a phenomenon hardly unique to Vietnam. Because its author describes things not often discussed elsewhere, *Not All Heroes* will be particularly useful to readers interested in the full range of American experiences in Vietnam.