



Enduring Vietnam: An American Generation and Its War by James E. Wright.

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Enduring Vietnam is one of a handful of histories¹ that examine the Vietnam War from the perspective of combat soldiers, reminding readers of the physical and emotional costs of service in America's most controversial military engagement. Its author, historian James Wright, a former marine and past president of Dartmouth College (1998–2009), promises to deliver “history at a personal level” (16). Based upon pertinent secondary sources and over 120 interviews with veterans and their families, Wright's well-written account will be invaluable to students of twentieth-century US military history.

Wright argues that the last five years of the Vietnam War forever affected members of the Baby Boom generation, both those who served and those who protested the war, beginning with President Lyndon Johnson's decision to send combat troops to South Vietnam in spring 1965. Unlike previous wars, Vietnam was not easily situated within its contemporary political and cultural contexts. Wright observes, for example, that, by the time of the 1969 Memorial Day observances, there was precious little to celebrate about the war. Johnson's assurance of a short conflict with little loss of life seemed a distant memory. The cover of the 27 June 1969 issue of *Life* magazine, a thoroughly mainstream publication, bore a portrait of a young, deceased Army specialist and the legend “Faces of the American Dead in Vietnam: One Week's Toll.” “Inside, across 10 funereal pages, LIFE published picture after picture and name after name of 242 young men killed in seven days halfway around the world ...”² That year's Memorial Day speeches and parades concentrated on the Second World War; very few veterans of Vietnam participated, for

Vietnam had not yet entered into the national narrative of war. The war was too current—and too controversial—for its tales to readily nestle among accounts of Gettysburg or Pointe du Hoc or Okinawa. One complication was that the current war was marked by small-scale-combat—and often only platoon-level—engagements. These involved troops defending against an ambush, walking into minefields, securing a trail or a slope. There were few sweeping, blockbuster engagements. In this war, out in the bush, “securing” meant only for the time being. There were no flags planted and no dramatic victories. This was by its nature a different type of war, which did not lend itself to heroic headlines. And the controversy over the war did not enhance the accounts of it. (22–23)

Wright's chapter on the battle fought at Dong Ap Bia, known as Hamburger Hill, amplifies the voices of the frustrated soldiers who could not understand the strategy of their commanders. In a departure from their typical hit-and-run attacks, the North Vietnamese dug in on high ground and repelled repeated American attempts to climb the hill. One soldier complained “That damn Blackjack [Lt. Col. Weldon Honeycutt] won't stop until he kills every damn one of us” (47). Finally, eleven days later, US reinforcements arrived and the enemy fled. When the Americans them-

1. See, e.g., Robert Timberg, *The Nightingale's Song* (NY: Simon and Schuster, 1995).

2. Ben Cosgrove, “Faces of the American Dead in Vietnam: One Week's Toll, June 1969,” *Time* (15 May 2014) – www.miwsr.com/rd/1801.htm.

selves soon departed, they left behind a neckerchief nailed to a tree with “Hamburger Hill” written on it; beneath it, a piece of cardboard bore the question, “Was it worth it?” (66). One veteran reflected that

We all had to face the fact that we were no longer hunters, running an elusive fox, as we had been throughout our time in the AO [area of operations]. We were now two lions facing each other across a territorial boundary, and we had to accept the fact that the other lion might very well have larger claws and the deeper bite. And, more importantly, it was his territory. (58)

Hamburger Hill was emblematic of the fighting in South Vietnam. American forces destroyed many villages and hamlets in order to deny their enemies hiding places and provisions. Military success was gauged by daily, weekly, and monthly body counts of enemy dead. While, as Wright comments, US soldiers found this practice unsatisfying, they continued to fight. American combat troops do not have the luxury of debating the politics or policies of a war. For them,

the experience is a personal one. Other than the dramatic, sometimes distorted stories that characterize many public accounts of war, little of the experience is understood. The accounts of the men who fought on Hamburger Hill provide a different narrative or at least a distinct perspective of the experience, one that touches on the external and existential nature of war. (52)

Most US troops deployed to Vietnam in 1965 had been volunteers. Four years later, they were draftees, mostly in their earlier twenties and from working-class backgrounds.³ That year, writer and Vietnam veteran William Broyles met fifty-eight such conscripts just southwest of Da Nang: only twenty were high school graduates; they listed their occupations as laborer, pecan sheller, or gas station attendant. They were, in short, Broyles wrote, “kids with no place to go. No place but here” (169). In an attempt to balance the demographics of service, the draft lottery system was put in place in 1969.⁴ Still, Wright notes, combat soldiers remained disproportionately young blue-collar men. They constituted 70,000 of the 464,000 military personnel in South Vietnam in 1967. Most of the others were support personnel whose work required higher levels of education.

By the 1970s, soldiers in Vietnam shared the cynicism of many Americans back home about the war and the decisions made by their military superiors. For instance, the bright orange life-vests issued to patrol boat crews made them easy targets for the enemy. Soldiers had to carry sixty pounds of gear in the subtropical heat of Vietnam. Military discipline began to erode when it became clear that the Nixon administration planned to withdraw from South Vietnam. As meaningless patrols, conducted solely to increase body counts, exposed soldiers to unnecessary risks, an estimated 600–850 incidents of threatening or killing lieutenants with fragmentation grenades (known as “fragging”) occurred.

Nor did the rotation system in Vietnam lend itself to maintaining necessary unit cohesion in combat zones. As had not been the case in previous wars, *individuals* rather than units were rotated in and out, putting platoons in a constant state of flux. By the 1970s, drug use began to pose a problem. Wright convincingly argues that the prevalence of drug abuse was greatly exaggerated, as TV shows and Hollywood films created a myth that most soldiers were addicts.

The average soldier in Vietnam served his country with honor and went home to a normal family life with few long-term problems. That said, Wright overlooks neither the psychological

3. See, further, Christian Appy, *Working-Class War: American Combat Soldiers and Vietnam*, rev. ed. (Chapel Hill: U North Carolina Pr, 1993).

4. As an amendment to the Military Selective Service Act of 1967.

challenges some veterans faced, nor the failure of the Veterans Administration to assist them properly. This was at a time, he astutely observes, when veterans of World War II and Korea had reached an age when they particularly needed VA assistance, overwhelming an organization whose staff and budgets were too limited to meet the dramatic increase of patients. Moreover, Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) was an undiagnosed ailment in the 1970s. Wright notes that, by 2012, 30 percent of Vietnam vets had suffered from the disorder to some degree.

Wright closes with a moving tribute to returning combat veterans. For them, there were no parades, speeches, or other recognitions for their sacrifices. Some World War II veterans boasted that they had won their war, while Vietnam veterans had lost theirs. Regarding claims that the Vietnam War had been a mistake, Wright quotes Vietnam veteran Max Cleland, a triple amputee and US senator: “What do you mean, a mistake? Where’s the meaning? Where’s the purpose? What does that do to a guy like me, who lost so much? What does it do to all those who lost so much? Those are questions I’ll be trying to answer for the rest of my life” (350–51). Although James Wright cannot answer all of Cleland’s questions, he has written a nuanced account of the American war in Vietnam, with a salutary attention to the voices of those who actually endured it.