



PROJECT MUSE®

Prelude to Tragedy: Vietnam 1960-1965 (review)

Richard A. Hunt

The Journal of Military History, Volume 67, Number 1, January 2003, pp.
301-303 (Review)

Published by Society for Military History

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/jmh.2003.0038>



➔ *For additional information about this article*

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/40464>

viduals, military operations, etc., and a chronology of events (14 pages); an impressive and very useful annotated bibliography on the war (51 pages); and a two-part appendix containing relevant historical documents and statistical data relating to the war (41 pages). The historical narrative is presented chronologically and provides an overview of the wars in Vietnam. It begins with a brief section on “studying the Vietnam War” and goes on to cover Vietnamese and American historical backgrounds, French colonialism and the French war in Vietnam, the American war in Vietnam, and the legacy of the war in the United States. Anderson focuses heavily on the American involvement in Vietnam and places the war in the larger context of a battleground of the global Cold War. What makes the narrative useful and unique is that within the chronicle, Anderson poses questions that deal with key issues and controversies about the war. For example, in the discussion of Vietnamese history, he asks “What are the nature of and the relationship between nationalism and communism in Vietnam” (p. 13)? In the part dealing with the Kennedy years, he asks “Would Kennedy have withdrawn rather than escalated the U.S. military presence in Vietnam” (p. 41)? With a few exceptions, the relatively balanced answers to these and other such poignant and relevant questions are woven nicely into the narrative and allow the reader to get to the heart of the key issues surrounding the war.

The only drawbacks to this work are the lack of footnotes in the narrative, the alarming absence of much mention of the Lao and Cambodian theaters of the conflict, some confusing claims on Vietnam’s main religion (Confucianism vs. Buddhism), and the author’s inability to really answer some of the questions he poses in the narrative. Anderson’s prose is direct, clear, and free of interfering jargon. Overall, this work provides a very useful introduction and guide to a complex and controversial subject. It should be used as a jumping off point for students and scholars for deeper study into the American war in Vietnam.

Richard B. Verrone

The Vietnam Center, Texas Tech University
Lubbock, Texas

Prelude to Tragedy: Vietnam 1960–1965. Edited by Harvey Neese and John O’Donnell. Foreword by Richard Holbrooke. Annapolis, Md.: Naval Institute Press, 2001. ISBN 1-55750-491-1. Map. Photographs. Notes. Selected bibliography. Index. Pp. xviii, 309. \$32.95.

This is an excellent collection of essays by American civilians and Vietnamese officials who sought to build support for the South Vietnamese government and improve rural living conditions in the period before the U.S. deployed conventional military units to Vietnam. Co-editors Harvey Neese, an American agricultural specialist, and John O’Donnell, a former province representative for the U.S. Agency for International Development (AID), pulled together insightful articles that give the reader a notion of the scope

and character of American involvement in the countryside and the nature of the war before 1965. *Prelude to Tragedy* is a refreshing addition to the burgeoning literature on the Vietnam War, much of which is obsessed with high level policy or strategy. There was a struggle in the villages and this book addresses it. The writers describe issues perhaps little known to those acquainted only with the war the American military fought after 1965. Encompassing a common period of service, these chapters share certain perceptions about South Vietnam's struggle against the insurgency. Without exception, the authors view the introduction of U.S. combat forces and the subsequent "Americanization" of the conflict as tragic and wrong, and decry Diem's overthrow as a monumental mistake and a major turning point in South Vietnam's battle to remain noncommunist and independent.

A number of the authors worked for, or were affiliated with, AID and its Saigon headquarters, the United States Operations Mission (USOM), as it was then known. What is striking in these accounts is the unanimous loathing for the ham-handed and ill-informed intervention in rural programs by USOM bureaucrats, who were trying to manage a variety of programs throughout South Vietnam. Some of USOM's leadership, the authors note, exhibited as much fear of the countryside as they did ignorance about the peasantry. From the perspective of these former advisers, USOM tried to rein in U.S. advisers at the local level who were working to encourage local Vietnamese initiative and leadership. Many of these writers reserve their greatest scorn for James Killen, the new USOM director, who arrived in the middle of 1964 as the Diem regime continued to unravel in the countryside. Although their comments may seem a bit like the griping of the jilted, the authors present abundant and persuasive evidence of Killen's oppressive tactics and his ignorance of counterinsurgency and the interests of the peasantry. They are probably correct that his policies helped undermine USOM's efforts. If Killen is set up as the heavy, Rufus Phillips, who worked in Vietnam for the renowned Edward Lansdale, the Army, and the CIA at various times, emerges as the hero. Phillips comes across as energetic, knowledgeable, and imaginative, but ultimately frustrated by higher ups in Washington and Saigon, deteriorating conditions in the countryside, and the changing nature of the war after 1965.

As welcome and informative as these accounts are, however, one can hardly avoid questioning the notion that the political and rural development they espoused could have kept South Vietnam independent in the face of Hanoi's sustained, unyielding effort to unify all of Vietnam under its flag. The counterinsurgency efforts of 1960–65 were relatively small in scale and characterized by a number of promising pilot programs at the village, district, or province level that were not successfully expanded nationally because of the absence of sound national institutions and a solid political base. Granted that Diem's assassination was a mistake, few would argue today that he had the requisite skill to forge a viable nation or that he could have held out in the long run against a strengthening insurgency. Over time, the corruption of his regime and the clumsiness of his counterinsurgency efforts would have

likely proved no match for his tightly organized and single-minded opponents, the Viet Cong and North Vietnamese. Had Diem not been overthrown, it is doubtful that he could have remained in power for long against such a determined foe without direct American military intervention. Later efforts at building political support for the Saigon government and dismantling guerrilla forces and their supporting infrastructure under Robert Komer and William Colby, enjoyed greater funding, more advisers and military support, and better coordination between civilian agencies and the military. But, to simplify a complicated story, these efforts came up short, partly because of the lack of strong political roots in the countryside and because the communists were willing to employ whatever means it took, insurgency or all out invasion, to bring down the Saigon regime.

Richard A. Hunt

Alexandria, Virginia

Navy SEALs: The Vietnam Years. By Kevin Dockery. New York: Penguin Putnam, 2002. ISBN 0-425-18348-3. Maps. Photographs. Tables. Notes. Index. Pp. x, 339. \$22.95.

This is the second installment in what appears to be a series of histories on U.S. Navy special warfare, from its beginnings through the present. The first volume, *Navy SEALs: A History of the Early Years*, was published in 2001 and took the story from the Underwater Demolition Teams (UDT) during World War II through the creation of the SEALs in the early 1960s. As with the first book, this one is really largely an oral history, although here Dockery makes greater use of documents, after-action reports, and other documents to highlight SEAL involvement in Vietnam.

Navy SEALs received their baptism of fire in Vietnam, and almost six years of combat in the Mekong Delta became the crucible that shaped their capabilities through the postwar decade. The first SEAL platoons deployed to Vietnam in 1966 (other small groups of SEALs had been in Vietnam since 1962) and reached a peak strength in 1968 of about two hundred men. Most SEALs fought as platoons throughout the delta and in the Rung Sat Special Zone southeast of Saigon, but some served as advisers with the Phoenix program (designed to locate and “neutralize” the Viet Cong clandestine political infrastructure) and in the highly classified Studies and Observation Group (SOG) on cross-border operations into Cambodia and Laos. Forty-three SEALs were killed in action in Vietnam, but none were captured or went missing.

Dockery attempts to cover all this ground, managing to touch on most of the SEAL missions in Vietnam. There are two particularly interesting chapters here—one on SEAL operations in support of the Phoenix program and another on Operation THUNDERHEAD, an ambitious plan to insert SEAL teams into North Vietnam aboard a submarine in an attempt to rescue American prisoners of war. In the end, however, the book provides only a narrow glimpse into the history of the SEALs in Vietnam.