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Call Sign Rustic: The Secret War Over Cambodia, 1970-1973
(review)

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their mistakes and achieved ever-more-impressive successes.

This triumphalist story of determination and self-reliance offers a fascinating glimpse of the wartime ideology cultivated by the North Vietnamese—a historical narrative now central to the legitimacy of the postwar communist regime. The book reverberates with moral certainty, repeatedly invoking the Party's infallibility, the genius of "Uncle Ho," and the army's stoic heroism and ingenuity to overcome technological inferiority to defeat the United States and the "puppet" Saigon army.

On subjects that might disrupt this account of harmony and determination, the book remains frustratingly silent. It offers little information, for example, about high-level strategy debates that Western scholars have described as sometimes fierce. Nor does the book acknowledge Hanoi's heavy dependence on Soviet and Chinese military assistance. At one point, *Victory in Vietnam* hints vaguely at the importance of foreign support in the years before 1965, crediting "the Soviet Union, China, and other fraternal socialist countries" with helping to "overcome the many difficulties confronting an economically backward nation" and to upgrade the army's technological capacity (p. 97). But when the book turns to the period of the American ground war, it makes no mention of foreign help.

On less sensitive issues, the authors provide more candid and valuable information. They freely acknowledge, for example, the difficulties encountered by communist forces in South Vietnam during the late 1950s, 1961–63, 1966, and 1969—years when U.S. and South Vietnamese military activity momentarily turned the tide against the communists. The authors offer an especially elaborate discussion of setbacks experienced during the Kennedy administration's intensified counterinsurgency campaign leading up to the Battle of Ap Bac in January 1963, a turning point when communist fighters successfully applied new techniques for overcoming U.S. technology. The book also provides data useful to historians evaluating the role of North Vietnamese troops in promoting the southern insurgency during the early 1960s. While insisting that the Vietcong was "born and grew out of the political forces of the masses," the book also contends that North Vietnam offered "vigorous support" (p. 149) and provides rich detail on infiltration efforts that began in 1959.

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Call Sign Rustic: The Secret War Over Cambodia, 1970–1973. By Richard Wood. Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 2002. ISBN 1-58834-049-X. Maps. Photographs. Appendix. Notes. Bibliography. Index. Pp. xiv, 186. \$24.95.

The forward air controllers (FACs) who flew in Cambodia between June 1970 and August 1973 have received slight historical attention because of

the highly classified nature of their work and the paucity of contemporary records. Author Wood—call sign Rustic 11—has made a heroic effort to preserve the memory of his fellow FACs, relying primarily on oral history to document their activities.

Micromanaged by the White House and subject to restrictive—and frequently changing—Rules of Engagement, the Rustics were a central part of President Richard Nixon's efforts to support the Cambodian government while complying with a congressional ban on the use of American ground troops in the beleaguered country. Air assets could be used in the conflict, and the Rustics provided twenty-four-hour target identification for the U.S. Air Force fighter-bombers that were aiding the Lon Nol forces in their losing struggle against the Khmer Rouge.

Some 250 pilots passed through the Rustic program, and three FACs were killed in action. In comparison, thirty-one Raven FACs lost their lives in Laos, at the rate of four per year. In both countries, the FACs developed close relationships with the men on the ground, and most airmen became embittered over the policies of the U.S. government.

One of the more interesting aspects of the Rustic program grew out of language problems. Few Cambodians spoke English and no FACs spoke Cambodian. Thanks to the heritage of French colonial rule, however, Cambodian officers frequently had learned French as a second language. The solution was to recruit—quickly—French-speaking enlisted men. As a result, cooks and clerk-typists ended up in the backseats of OV-10s, performing their demanding duties without (initially) the recognition of wings and air medals, not to mention hazard pay. Although Wood is incorrect in seeing their participation as “unique”—U.S. Air Force enlisted men flew as Butterfly FACs in Laos with Air America and Continental Air Service—their story forms an especially interesting chapter of the air war in Southeast Asia.

Wood has done a fine job of setting out the organizational nature of the Rustic program, identifying the many problems faced by the FACs, examining the pluses and minuses of the aircraft they flew, and documenting the skill and courage of many of the individuals who participated in the often hazardous missions. One suspects, however, that the Rustics encountered personnel problems that they now prefer to leave in the past. Also, his portrayal of the relationship between the FACs and higher Air Force authority is necessarily one-sided. *Call Sign Rustic* cannot be considered the definitive account of an important aspect of FAC efforts in Southeast Asia, but it will have to serve until better documentary records become available—if they exist.

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