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Victory in Vietnam: The Official History of the People's  
Army of Vietnam, 1954--1975 (review)

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The interview format, as employed by Dockery, simply does not work. He tries to sort the individual accounts so that they fit within topical chapters, such as deployment to Vietnam, the 1968 Tet Offensive, and the Phoenix Program, but a lack of clearheaded editing defeats him. The interviews, which are interesting and full of useful detail, are too long and often repetitive, and most of them dwell excessively on SEAL basic training, known as BUD/S (Basic Underwater Demolition/SEAL). This training is the glue that holds SEALs together in the brotherhood of Special Operations warriors, and it is grueling, but the stories offer little to help the reader understand the SEAL experience in Vietnam. One or two examples of BUD/S training would have sufficed. Other interviews would have been more useful to the reader if they were carefully targeted to specific topics.

In the end, Dockery allows the interviews to ramble on, sometimes with only a tenuous connection to the subject of the chapter. In addition, nowhere in the book is there an attempt to analyze SEAL performance in Vietnam. What impact did they have on the enemy? Aside from a few platitudes about how the Viet Cong feared these “devils with green faces,” there is no new data on the results of SEAL operations or an attempt to understand their place within the greater theater of combat operations in the Mekong Delta.

Readers interested in the history of Navy SEALs will probably find this book useful, but those hoping for new details and analysis of SEAL operations in Vietnam will be disappointed.

Dale Andrade

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***Victory in Vietnam: The Official History of the People's Army of Vietnam, 1954–1975.*** Translated by Merle L. Pribbenow. Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 2002. ISBN 0-7006-1175-4. Notes. Index. Pp. xxvi, 494. \$49.95.

Recent years have seen a proliferation of academic studies, oral histories, novels, and other material providing long overdue insight into the “other side” of the Vietnam War. Merle L. Pribbenow’s translation of the Hanoi government’s official account of the North Vietnamese army provides an important new source for historians interested in military operations as well as scholars concerned with the ideological underpinnings of Vietnam’s communist regime.

Originally published in Hanoi in 1988 and reissued in a revised edition six years later, the book narrates the military’s transformation from an inexperienced and unsophisticated force at the end of the French war into a well-trained, diversified, and technologically advanced juggernaut by Vietnam’s reunification in 1975. At every turn, the authors, a team of military officers under the direction of Vietnam’s Defense Ministry, emphasize the army’s “maturation” as commanders and ordinary foot soldiers alike learned from

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