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Navy Seals: The Vietnam Years (review)

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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.

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.

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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