

Another possibility would have been a comparative analysis of intimidation in Northern Ireland and either somewhere else, Lebanon, for example, where the violence is more intense or somewhere, perhaps Glasgow, where there is ethnic hostility with a much lower level of violence. Such contrasts might have given us a better idea of what is interesting or important in Darby's cases.

The general impression is that this study should have stayed as what it originally was: a hastily prepared report on a collaborative project involving Darby and others undertaken for a government agency. Inflation to book-length and a decade to reflect and return to the areas have not improved it a great deal. It has neither the human detail of an ethnographic case study nor the intellectual challenge of a test of an imaginative theory.

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Drury, Richard S. *My Secret War*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1986.

Rinaldi, Nicholas. *Bridge Fall Down*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1986.

As with many earlier wars, Vietnam has become familiar to most readers through personal narratives and novels written by veterans of the fighting. While books by Philip Caputo, Michael Herr and James Webb have emerged as minor classics, dozens of lesser known works, like the two under review, have arrived on the scene and it is from such publications that many have come to know this conflict in Southeast Asia.

Richard Drury's *My Secret War* is his combat record based on a journal he kept throughout his tour of duty as a pilot in the "special war" fought in the skies over Laos in 1969 and 1970. His is a strange tale of counterinsurgency warfare fought from an antiquated A-1 Douglas Skyraider, a huge, single-seat, propellered aircraft designed in the 1940s. From this "ordnance delivery platform," heavily armed with a multitude of weapons, including 500 lb. bombs, rockets, napalm, and machine guns, he dive-bombed and strafed enemy supplies moving south along the Ho Chi Minh Trail by night and in daylight flew search and rescue missions, where his slow-moving aircraft provided cover for helicopters that recovered downed pilots. This kind of low-level flying required great skill, for these aviators encountered many obstacles, including tropical storms, mountainous terrain, mechanical problems and enemy ground fire to which their ponderous giant craft were particularly vulnerable. At night they navigated by instruments and dead-reckoning, the kind of "seat of the pants" flying that most appealed to Drury, who emerges as the dedicated flyer enthralled by this outdated form of aviation.

The book is elegantly written and the reader is struck by the poignancy of many passages, especially those concerning his feelings about the loss of friends. He was not overly concerned with the politics of war; he was kept going by the great aeronautical experience and dedication to his own ideals of fighting totalitarianism and championing freedom. In contrast to his love of flying, he developed a bitter dislike for the Air Force that shattered his dreams of "celluloid pilot heroes and paper knights." He became highly critical of his senior officers, many of whom had never flown combat missions and were isolated from their men. He was also turned off by Air Force politics over unearned decorations and paper embellishments. Although he derived a great sense of fulfillment from his flying, Drury could not overcome his intense reactions to this bureaucratic side of the war which he felt drove away the best people. Paradoxically, the Air Force became his enemy in the end and showed the futility of his efforts.

Nicholas Rinaldi's *Bridge Fall Down* is a work of a very different kind. A novel in the tradition of *Going After Cacciato* and *Meditations in Green*, it focuses on the absurd bush odyssey of a special unit sent to blow up a bridge that may or may not exist. The platoon includes an ex-nun turned sharpshooter and it is accompanied along the trek by a psychedelically painted helicopter, piloted by a fast-talking huckster who is out to make the great war movie for the benefit of both the Corps and himself. From his lofty perch he keeps the camera rolling in the midst of fire-fights and cheers on his buddies below in the paddy fields only to be shot at for his troubles by the book's protagonist, Simon. Along the way they have strange encounters with a UFO and a black bear which the unit's Indian kills with his hunting knife. At the end of the march the reader is left confused and a little shaken, for he is not really sure what this surreal story is all about. Though not to everyone's liking, this genre nevertheless has an important place in the literature of the war, and some writers feel it is the only way to capture the true character of this sometimes bizarre war.

At first glance these two books have little in common aside from their setting in the Southeast Asian conflict. *My Secret War* is an Air Force officer's memoir of the unofficial war over Laos, while *Bridge Fall Down* is a novel about infantry combat written from the grunt's point of view, and it stands in stark contrast to the romance of the flyer's war. Perhaps this disparity is appropriate for a recurrent theme in the writing on the war is the diversity of the individual experience of Vietnam.¹

Upon closer scrutiny another theme emerges. Neither work is about the ordinary, everyday war in Vietnam; they are books about a special form of warfare, and this provides the only real common ground between them. Drury is involved in counterinsurgency operations using antiquated aircraft, while Rinaldi describes a special operation mounted to destroy a target behind enemy lines. The central figures, Drury and Simon, find specialness and excitement in their wars—piloting old airplanes and deep penetration through the jungle—and this is the most appealing part of the war for them. For Drury flying brings intense

exhilaration, especially during the rescue missions which are his most demanding and rewarding tasks, while Simon finds excitement in the jungle which offers relief from the tenements of the Bronx and the classrooms of City College. But, ironically, this environment also brings with it hazards that hold their ultimate fears and dislikes. Rescue missions are the most dangerous part of Drury's mission and they yield the greatest likelihood of his worst fear being realized: being shot down and captured by the enemy. For Rinaldi, it is a hatred of the "shadowy, underhanded" kind of war associated with the jungle that was so alien to American soldiers. These special environments provide these books with their uniqueness and similarities.

In the end, however, although these writings offer a contrast to the more conventional aspects of the war, one wonders how different the individual's experience was, or indeed how different, at a certain level, Vietnam was from earlier conflicts. Despite its uniqueness as a war of special operations and a war without fronts, the individual soldier still encountered feelings shared by all fighting men. Drury's embitterment toward the Air Force and his reaction to the deaths of fellow pilots, and Rinaldi's sense that they could not win this terrible mistake of a war are common to many servicemen. Likewise, Drury's fear of capture would sound familiar to pilots of the Korean War and Rinaldi's hatred of jungle warfare would find parallels among Marines who fought in the Pacific during World War Two.

There is little doubt that this war in which the soldier could not tell friend from foe was a singular experience for the American serviceman. Yet many of the scenes now found in Vietnam literature—rock music blaring over rice paddies during lulls in the fighting, soldiers stoned on marijuana, tunnel rats, beer and pizza arriving at the front by helicopter—have counterparts in earlier wars. During the First World War, with which some Vietnam writers have strongly identified, British troops attacking on the Somme were preceded by kilted Highlanders playing the bagpipes and individuals blowing hunting horns and punting footballs toward the enemy, while younger soldiers unused to strong Navy rum staggered about No Man's Land. In this war of continuous fronts whole units of tunnellers fought the enemy in a deadly subterranean war, while officers above them smuggled grand pianos into the front lines and received hampers of exotic foods from Fortnum and Mason's. Today these episodes are passed off as the idiosyncracies of a by-gone age. In time, we may come to see many of the now familiar features of what one writer has described as the "Generic Vietnam War Narrative" in a similar way.²

Although these books reflect the diversity of experience and some of the uniqueness of the war in Vietnam, to the reader of memoirs and novels of other wars there is much here that is familiar.

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Endnotes

1. Christopher C. Lovett, "'We Held the Day in the Palm of Our Hand': A Review of Recent Sources on the War in Vietnam," *Military Affairs*, 51(1987), p. 70; George C. Herring, "Vietnam Remembered," *Journal of American History*, 73 (1986), p. 153; C.D.B. Bryan, "Barely Suppressed Screams: Getting a bead on Vietnam War literature," *Harper's*, June, 1984, p. 70.
2. Bryan, p. 68.