

Bergerud, Eric M., *Red Thunder, Tropic Lightning: The World of a Combat Division in Vietnam*. Boulder, CO: Westview, 1993.

While researching an account of the progress of the Vietnam War in Hau Nghia province, a book he published as *The Dynamics of Defeat*, (1991), historian Bergerud collected a massive body of recollections from American veterans of the 25th Infantry Division, which fought in this part of South Vietnam from the spring of 1966 until the end of 1970. It was in the 25th Division's sector that the elusive North Vietnamese headquarters, the Central Office for South Vietnam (COSVN), ultimately came to reside, and here too that were located the now well-known "Tunnels of Cu Chi." The veterans were indelibly marked by their experiences, and the mass of oral histories convinced Bergerud that it was feasible to assemble a study dedicated entirely to the 25th Division, a unit nicknamed "Tropic Lightning." That realization formed the groundwork for *Red Thunder, Tropic Lightning*.

This is no unit history in the traditional sense of books detailing the battles and campaigns of units in World Wars I or II. Rather, Bergerud supplies what is more nearly a social history of what life was like for GIs of the 25th Infantry Division. Bergerud marshalls the comments of his various witnesses on a succession of topics beginning with the land and climate, weapons, battlefields, military doctrine and practices, effects of battle, being wounded, impressions of the South Vietnamese civilians, of the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN), and of the Viet Cong and North Vietnamese, and then on American morale. This organization by subject enables the author to mix and match the comments of his witnesses, which Bergerud intersperses with transitional passages setting contexts for comments or explaining general features of a subject. Very occasionally he interrupts a witness to explain some particular bit of Vietnam vernacular or standard practice. The overall effect is more focused than the usual oral history, and has the virtue of covering the waterfront in terms of the subjects relevant to combat in South Vietnam.

This said, I am driven to admit that something more like a "standard" unit history might have worked even better. The old-fashioned unit history typically handled the relevant events in chronological sequence; the reader can begin and end a narrative and learn something of historical development. This is not to say that subjects like weapons, training, morale and so on are not handled in such accounts, rather that they preface or are fitted into the narrative. *Red Thunder, Tropic Lightning* presents a great deal of preface and not very much narrative. The only historical events Bergerud treats in any detail are those of the 1968 Tet Offensive (rightly seen as the division's "finest single hour during its tour in Vietnam"). (p. 172) Events such as the huge operation JUNCTION CITY (1967) or the invasion of Cambodia (1970) are not systematically treated at all. This is not to say that the author has no material about other events in the 25th Division's campaign in Vietnam, since several of his witnesses were participants in one or another of the key battles.

Bergerud explains that his aim was to “view all the major parts of the soldiers’ world,” (p. xi) **not** to produce a unit history. Ultimately Bergerud hopes to “help people of today better understand what the Vietnam war was like in fact, not fiction.” (p. xi) If so, one must question the contribution embodied here. Recent literature on Vietnam has been overwhelmingly preoccupied with the experience (the “what it was like”) of that place, both in histories and in (serious) fiction. Every account tells of the exotic land, the climate, impressions of the Vietnamese, and there is plenty to read on weapons and tactics. There are whole books, more than one, on the problems of the M-16 rifle for example, problems which typically feature in many Vietnam books, so that the six pages devoted to it here are not unusual. The same is true of the discussions of tunnel warfare, B-52 strikes, and fancy division base camps. Conversely, something missing from *Red Thunder, Tropic Lightning* which totally dominated the **experience** of GIs in Vietnam was the impact, on every facet of life (from willingness to take risks to patrol tactics, leadership quality, disposition to rely upon artillery and air support, and so on), of the 365-day tour of duty. The green soldier/short-timer dichotomy had enormous effects on the conduct of the 25th Division’s war, with commensurate need for treatment in a work seeking to illuminate the experience of Vietnam.

Finally, the preoccupation of the Vietnam literature with retailing individual experience poses special problems for any effort to create a distinctive work. Bergerud’s writing is straightforward and his account competent, but it lacks the flair of a personal story, such as Robert Mason’s *Chickenhawk* (1983). Nor is this approach superior to unit oral histories like Matthew Brennan’s *Headhunters* (1987). As an overview social history, *Red Thunder, Tropic Lightning* makes and implicit assumption that experience was uniform, i.e., that there was no change (in effect, no “history”) between 1965 and 1970. Eric Bergerud clearly has assembled a fine cross-section of recollections of 25th Infantry Division veterans. In doing so he accumulated the raw materials for a distinctive Vietnam book, one that spoke to *Tropic Lightning*’s social environment **and** its history. I wish *Red Thunder, Tropic Lightning* were that book.

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Gottlieb, Gidon. *Nation Against State: A New Approach to Ethnic Conflicts and the Decline of Sovereignty*. New York: Council on Foreign Relations Press, 1993.

In these closing years of the twentieth century nationalism seems to have established itself once again as the foremost geopolitical trend. From the territories of the former Yugoslavia to the newly independent states of eastern Europe and the former USSR, nationalism has caused a surge in the birth of new nation-states from the wreckage of the former communist empire. This increase, however, may not be