

Observations

As we know, war is filled with all sorts of terrible tragedies. We know this based on the cost of human life and quality of life afterwards for those that fought in the war. It wasn't just soldiers and military that were directly involved in the war. Many civilians had first-hand experiences in Vietnam. In Christian Appy's "Patriots," a number of the stories in the book come from these people who were not directly in the war, but still were closely involved. Their experience in Vietnam and with the soldiers offers interesting perspectives and insight into the war.

Trails to War

Helen Tennant Hegelheimer

Helen Tennant Hegelheimer recalls her time spent as a stewardess aboard one of the airlines that was responsible for delivering and recovering U.S. troops from the front lines of Vietnam. She tells her story as though she was responsible for all their lives. She even noted that she felt like their wife, sister, girlfriend, or even their mother. All she could do for these troops was to just be there. For me, Hegelheimer had one of the best views of the troop just entering and leaving Vietnam. For those just entering, she was possibly the last "civilized" person these troops will see before they enter the horrors of war, and for the troops that were returning from their tour, she was the first person the troops would look to and try to ring out some of the bad habits the troops picked up while out in the field. Hegelheimer's unique perspective on the before and after changes to troops has made this one of my favorite stories in this book.

Morale Boosters

Nancy Smoyer

Like Hegelheimer, Nancy Smoyer was one of the few nonmilitary people who met with U.S. troops. Smoyer traveled from base to base in Vietnam with the Red Cross to entertain the troops. Her goal was to play any type of games with the troop that might get their minds off the war, even if it's just for a little bit. Smoyer talks about how some of the troops were so shocked to see an American girl that they stumbled while trying to flirt with her because they were so out of practice. Some of the troops seemed to question the reason why Smoyer was there in a war zone. But that seemed to only make Smoyer more protective of them and want to help them even more. Smoyer's story was interesting in the fact that a lot of

the troops basically lost their life and livelihood. They seemed to have some type of atrophy that washed away the knowledge of how they used to live. This is yet another amazing insight for me, into how some of the troops adjust to the circumstances of the war right in front of observers like Smoyer.

Cameras, Books, and Guns

Duong Thanh Phong

On the Vietnamese side of the war, there may not have been organizations like the Red Cross or USO to encourage their troops, but they did have combat photographers that used the photos taken as anti-American propaganda. Phong was one of these combat photographers that had a number of good views of the war on both sides. Phong recalls his first encounter with the American enemy. He saw an American GI die right in front of him, and shortly afterword, another GI came to take the body of the dead soldier. As he watched, he witnessed the GI crying as he recovered the body. That crying was first time Phong realized that the Americans are just like the Vietnamese, humans, and not aliens. Phong went on to note in another observation that a lot of the Vietnamese soldiers didn't feel fear because they were able to accept their own self-sacrifice for their country. Phong added more to the actual events that happened in the field of war, but was able to do it while adding a bit of emotion to the individual soldier, and not the troops as a whole.

All three of these stories had observers in the war that had a great role to play. They were all trying to be their best in the face of overwhelming pain and grief. Even though they weren't directly involved in the war efforts as soldiers, they might have had the largest effects on those that were serving in the war. Hegelheimer was able to see dismay on the faces of the soldiers before entering combat, and the agony of defeat of those exiting. Smoyer witnessed the hard conditions adding up on those serving on their long tour of duty. Finally, Phong had some of the best observations of the human conditions right in the middle of a warzone. All three were able to add some amazing color to the story of the Vietnam War and offer a unique perspective from individuals closely involved in the war, but not engaging in battle.

Close this window