

Douglas Pike, Vietnam Expert, Dies at 77

Douglas Pike, who arrived in Vietnam as a government information officer the same month the Vietcong were formed and spent the rest of his life explaining the war in eight books and scores of articles, died on Monday at a hospital in Lubbock, Tex. He was 77.

His wife, Myrna, said he had steadily deteriorated since suffering a stroke in November.

His efforts to help people understand one of the United States' most problematic wars included collecting a formidable trove of materials: seven million pages of documents, among them 15,000 books; 15,000 monographs; and 3,000 slides. The collection is part of the Vietnam Center at Texas Tech University in Lubbock.

But his most substantial contribution resulted from knowledge and insights from being in the thick of the political and military maneuvering as American involvement in Vietnam escalated after his arrival in 1960. In particular, he became a leading expert on the Communist armed forces that outlasted the United States and defeated Washington's South Vietnamese allies: those of the National Liberation Front, or Vietcong, in the southern part of the country and the army of North Vietnam.

James Reckner, director of the Vietnam Center, who termed Mr. Pike "a living encyclopedia of the war," said President Clinton summoned Mr. Pike to Washington for a briefing before his trip to Vietnam in 2000. Academics and diplomats around the world subscribed to Indochina Chronology, a quarterly journal Mr. Pike founded in 1982.

In a monograph published in 1970, Mr. Pike provoked attacks from antiwar partisans by publishing evidence, hotly disputed by some, that North Vietnamese troops massacred civilians at Hue during the Tet offensive in 1968.

But he was far from a cheerleader for the South Vietnamese, strongly criticizing their organizational weakness compared with that of their well-organized northern foes; he had made himself particularly expert on the structure of Vietnamese Communist forces and their order of battle.

His persistent message was that the war was so complex that final judgments were necessarily elusive.

"Vietnam has become the great intellectual tragedy of our times," he wrote in "War, Peace, and the Viet Cong" (M.I.T., 1969).

Douglas Eugene Pike was born in Cass Lake, Minn., and grew up in Minot, N.D., where his father had a construction business.

He joined the Army after high school and served in the Signal Corps in the South Pacific. His interest in Asia was kindled by watching the interactions between equally frightened Americans and Japanese after landing in Japan as part of the occupation force.

After his discharge he studied journalism at the University of North Dakota and got a job as a writer for the United Nations in Korea. He earned a bachelor's degree in journalism from the University of California at Berkeley.

As a civilian he edited an Army newspaper in Okinawa and worked for an Army radio station in Tokyo. After two years in Japan he earned his master's degree in international communications at American University.

In 1960 he joined the United States Information Agency in what was then Saigon, starting as a motion pictures assistant. He quickly assumed a broader political role, as evidenced by an anecdote recorded by David Halberstam in "The Best and the Brightest" (Random House, 1969).

In reply to a general who said his job was to kill Vietcong, Mr. Pike said that the French had killed a lot of Vietcong and they had not won.

"Didn't kill enough Vietcong," the general answered.

In 1964 he took a year's sabbatical to write two books on the Vietcong at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. The first was "Vietcong: The Organization and Techniques of the National Liberation Front of South Vietnam" (M.I.T., 1966). The second was "War, Peace and the Viet Cong," which Gavin Young in New Statesman called "the best guide on the Vietcong there is -- outside Hanoi."

At one point during his stay he encountered an antiwar teach-in. He fell into a debate with a professor from the Harvard Dental School, who did not have his facts straight. Mr. Pike asked him if he had ever been to Vietnam; the answer was that that was not necessary.

"I've never been to dental school, but suppose I give you a root canal," Mr. Pike replied.

The State Department sent him around the world to give speeches on the war. He was then assigned to Japan, Taiwan and, in 1973, back to Vietnam. He hated to leave the next year, but he had stayed overseas in one stretch for as long as the State Department allowed.

His wife said it was probably a good thing that he left the country that so fascinated him. After the Communist takeover, he probably would have lost the large collection of documents he had methodically amassed, she said.

He is also survived by his sons Andrew of Las Vegas and Ethan of Washington, D.C., and his daughter, Victoria Pike Bond of Pleasant Hill, Calif.

After working at the Congressional Research Service and the Pentagon, he took his collection to the Indochina Archive at Berkeley. In 1997, after funds for his archival work dried up, he went to Texas Tech, which had built a new climate-controlled library for materials on Vietnam.

His books, all on Vietnam, were praised for their authoritativeness. In The Washington Post, Col. Harry G. Summers Jr. called his book on the North Vietnamese Army, "PAVN: People's Army of Vietnam" (Presidio, 1986), "without question the best work available on what is now the world's third-largest military force."

Mr. Pike worked seven days a week and rode a motorcycle until a year ago, having kept it up even after colliding with a tractor-trailer. He said the truck was at fault.

Photo: Douglas Pike (Texas Tech University)