

Vietnam

South Vietnamese soldiers: Memories of the Vietnam War and after

By NATHALIE HUYNH CHAU NGUYEN

Santa Barbara, CA: Praeger, 2016. Pp. 289. Maps, Plates, Notes, Bibliography, Index.

doi:10.1017/S0022463419000134

With many thousands of books written about the Second Indochina War, most of them being written by Americans or other Western scholars, the primary focus has been mainly on the United States' involvement in Vietnam because of seeing it as an American war and/or the inability of most scholars of the war to deal with Vietnamese sources. The Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV), or North Vietnam under the communist government, comes second in the consideration of the war as the formidable American enemy. As a result, this creates an impression of the United States, the leader of the anti-communist camp at the time, fighting the North Vietnamese communists and their Southern supporters: communist and pro-communist guerillas, called Viet Cong. The Republic of Vietnam (RVN), or South Vietnam, rarely enters narratives of the war, and, when it does, it is mostly portrayed as a feeble and corrupt entity propped up by the United States.

The situation has started to slowly change with scholars gradually uncovering the history of the RVN, the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN), and its people. In addition, some memoirs have appeared that provide images of the South and of the people who fought for it. The two that stand out are Lam Quang Thi's *The twenty-five year century: A South Vietnamese general remembers the Indochina War to the fall of Saigon* (University of North Texas Press, 2002) and Nguyen Cong Luan's *Nationalist in the Viet Nam wars: Memoirs of a victim turned soldier* (Indiana University Press, 2012). As important and illuminating as both these books are, they are products of just two individuals who found a way to make known their histories and personal perspectives on the war. Many of their comrades-in-arms have not made their views and experiences public, leaving their voices hidden from our consideration of the war. Two other books have uncovered more of these voices. Robert Brigham's *ARVN: Life and death in the South Vietnamese Army* (University Press of Kansas, 2006), looks at the ARVN through the eyes of some infantrymen. And Andrew Wiest's *Vietnam's forgotten army: Heroism and betrayal in the ARVN* (New York University Press, 2007) chronicles the experiences and legacies of two ARVN soldiers.

With her book *South Vietnamese soldiers: Memories of the Vietnam War and after*, Nathalie Huynh Chau Nguyen expands the circle of retrieved voices, making a very important contribution to our understanding of the ARVN and its soldiers. *South Vietnamese soldiers* explores the battlefield experiences of multigenerational combat veterans and military doctors. It also looks into their various reasons for enlisting, and what helped them to survive the war. What becomes evident is that in the eyes of the interviewees their army was fully capable of fighting, but that they were seriously affected by problems in US–RVN relations. The stories of friendship and mutual assistance in the army remind us what is really important to soldiers almost everywhere, and, evidently, the ARVN was no exception to this. The veterans

do not dwell on political problems or corruption in South Vietnam. It is unclear whether politics did not fall under the purview of the book or whether the veterans interviewed were not involved in politics or they blocked it from their memories.

Of particular interest is the contrast between the Vietnam-based veterans and those who are overseas, particularly those who now live in Australia. Nguyen's book reveals the difficulties of obtaining official recognition abroad, as many South Vietnamese soldiers and civilians destroyed their identity papers, family photographs, records of service, and qualifications — 'anything that would identify them to the incoming communist regime' (p. 172). We hear of terrible plights — tales of re-education camps, escapes, and difficulties resettling in other countries. This book goes beyond the veterans themselves, bringing into its narrative the families of veterans and the impact of the war and its aftermath on them, especially on their children, providing a unique intergenerational perspective on the transmission of war memories and legacies.

The veterans were not required to answer any particular questions, but could express their memories freely. As Nguyen affirms, in the process, they reflected not only on memory and commemoration, but also 'on the shaping of stories following state repression and forced migration' (p. 12).

One limitation of the book perhaps is that it focuses on officers and does not include rank and file soldiers — but criticising the book for this would not do justice to either the author or what the book does accomplish. Given the scope and importance of the topic and the scarcity of published materials, it would be impossible to avoid some measure of selectiveness, as both Brigham and Wiest too have done in their books. Furthermore, Nguyen's book breaks ground with its broader societal focus, especially in its inclusion of the children of ARVN veterans, who for the most part do not reside in Vietnam.

South Vietnamese soldiers: Memories of the Vietnam War and after gives us hope that more works will appear to uncover the history of the ARVN, the RVN, and its people. It is important not only for scholars of the war, but also for the veterans and their children and grandchildren who have long been robbed of the chance to commemorate the lives and struggles of their parents and grandparents: for many, this has resulted in fragmented memories, ambivalence, and an unwillingness to discuss, if not to even think of, the war. Nguyen's book is a very important step in retrieving the histories of the RVN soldiers. We can only hope that it will inspire more people to pay more attention to this topic.

OLGA DROR
Texas A&M University

The British and the Vietnam War: Their way with LBJ

By NICHOLAS TARLING

Singapore: NUS Press, 2017. Pp. 451. Maps, Notes, Bibliography, Index.
doi:10.1017/S0022463419000146

The most difficult point to note in writing this review of the latest monograph by Nicholas Tarling is the sad fact that it will be the last. On 13 May 2017 Professor