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## The Coast Guard at War: Vietnam, 1965-1975

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students of this nation's longest conflict, should read this biography.

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Larzelere, Alex. *The Coast Guard at War: Vietnam, 1965-1975*. Annapolis, Md.: Naval Institute Press, 1997. 345pp. \$32.95

Most people fail to recognize that the U.S. Coast Guard is this nation's smallest armed force. Captain Alex Larzelere, U.S. Coast Guard (retired), a former commanding officer of two patrol boats in Vietnam, has written a history of the Coast Guard in the Vietnam War that is one of the best examinations of the service's role in combat to be published in many years. While not a historian, Larzelere has done a credible job pulling together many of the documents and other material needed to cover the subject. The author is not the first to broach this subject: Eugene N. Tulich produced a short monograph, *The United States Coast Guard in South East Asia during the Vietnam Conflict*, for the service in 1975. But Larzelere's work adds more to the literature by including a large number of interviews of the U.S. Coast Guardsmen who served in Southeast Asia, and by his coverage of the decisions that led to the service's participation in the war.

In 1965 the U.S. Navy needed small craft to attempt to control infiltration of war matériel by sea. While destroyers and other ships could work off shore, they could not patrol the rivers and shallow coastal waters. The U.S. Navy turned to the Coast Guard and found it

very receptive. The Commandant, Admiral Edwin J. Roland, was "very interested in seeing the Coast Guard get involved in supporting the Navy." The vessels selected were eighty-two-foot patrol boats (WPBs). In peacetime these boats were skippered by master chief boatswain's mates and had a crew of eight enlisted men. For Vietnam, however, two commissioned officers were added, as the "feeling was . . . the presence of an officer was needed for the job of stopping and boarding vessels. [The service also] thought there should be a little more seniority." A few more enlisted men were added to the complements for this duty.

The Coast Guard performed the remarkable feat of having the patrol boats and their crews brought from various locations throughout the United States and made ready in thirty days. This reviewer can recall a cutter on International Ice Patrol being diverted to St. John's, Newfoundland, so a gunner's mate could be quickly transferred to join the first squadron. The U.S. Coast Guard commissioned Squadron One on 27 May 1965, and as early as 24 July the cutter *Point Orient* was exchanging fire with the Viet Cong. Eventually twenty-six patrol boats and thirty larger high endurance cutters were assigned to Southeast Asia.

In general, the patrol boats and high endurance cutters received what little publicity the service generated during the war. Larzelere has done a great service for those interested in Vietnam by detailing all the activities of the U.S. Coast Guard in that conflict. The service had explosive loading detachments, shipping and port security

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groups, a shipping advisor, and aids-to-navigation units in-country. Larzelere's narrative details one overriding feature of these duties—that the Coast Guard met with interservice rivalry and confusion about what they were doing in Vietnam. Their dedication generally won over those who doubted the service's usefulness.

The interviews with the Guardsmen who participated in the war is what places Larzelere's book above anything written on the subject. Thanks to the author's readable style, one is able to see the war from many viewpoints. In addition, the interviews bring out many of the personalities of the participants. Anyone who ever served with Lieutenant Commander Richard J. Knapp in Vietnam will recognize his style. (Knapp retired as a rear admiral.)

The author begins each chapter with an incident, usually highly dramatic, that deals with the subject of the chapter. The only jarring feature is his including himself in the narrative: "Larzelere returned to the bridge to resume his watch." Some of the captions to the illustrations also seem strange: "Saigon's congested waterfront is vital for resupplying the war effort."

I have only a few demurs to this otherwise fine book. A reader seeking a critical analysis of the Coast Guard's role in Vietnam will not find it in this work. For example, the incident of a U.S. Air Force jet attacking the cutter *Point Welcome*, killing the commanding officer and wounding everyone onboard, is mentioned, but the narrative moves on without any further discussion. One is left with the feeling there were no mistakes made in Vietnam by the Coast

Guard, or by anyone else. More importantly, there is no discussion of lessons learned and the final results of the Coast Guard's participation in that divisive war. One is also led to believe that everyone in the service volunteered to serve in Vietnam. While many did, a great many wanted nothing to do with the war, as many "FTG" [F- -- the Guard] initials painted and carved on cutters and stations stateside would attest. Further (as did all the services), the U.S. Coast Guard suffered from drug and morale problems attributed to the war. All of this is part and parcel of the service's role in Vietnam, but none of it will be found in this book.

Like most books on the service, this has very little on enlisted men, although Larzelere, more than any other officer-author, has made an attempt to include accounts dealing with the enlisted force. In his bibliography, however, the author has four and one-half pages of interviews, with a scant ten entries from enlisted men.

Lastly, a minor point: throughout the book Larzelere seems to follow the recent trend of not putting "U.S." or "United States" before Coast Guard. It is, after all, the United States Coast Guard.

Prior to 1997 there was only one very good book in print on the role of the U.S. Coast Guard in combat: John M. Waters, Jr., *Bloody Winter* (revised 1987). Captain Alex Larzelere's *The Coast Guard at War: Vietnam, 1965-1975* expands this category. This will be the standard work on the service's role in the Vietnamese conflict and should be read by anyone interested in the history of the war and the U.S. Coast Guard. *The Coast*

*Guard at War* is arguably one of the best written books on the U.S. Coast Guard's role in combat operations.

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Ewing, Steve, and John B. Lundstrom.

*Fateful Rendezvous: The Life of Butch O'Hare*. Annapolis, Md.: Naval Institute Press, 1997. 408pp. \$32.95

Edward H. "Butch" O'Hare is among a select handful of relatively junior naval officers to achieve lasting fame for service during the Second World War. He singlehandedly denied a wave of eight Japanese bombers a clear shot at USS *Lexington* in February 1942, shooting down or severely damaging six of the attackers. The country needed heroes during those dismal early days of the war, and Lieutenant (j.g.) O'Hare's Medal of Honor-winning feat brought him instant national fame, rapid promotion, and well deserved squadron and carrier air group commands during the following twenty months. On the night of 26 November 1943, Butch O'Hare failed to return from a night mission, and the cause of his fate has been a matter of contention since.

Steve Ewing and John B. Lundstrom have written an extraordinarily complete, highly sympathetic, and easy-reading biography of one of the Pacific war's most public heroes. Steve Ewing is senior curator at Patriot's Point Naval and Maritime Museum in Charleston, South Carolina, and has written several books on naval topics, including *American Cruisers of World War II* and *USS Enterprise*. John B. Lundstrom is curator

of American and military history at the Milwaukee Public Museum and has authored two books on naval air combat in the Pacific.

Extensively researched and well documented, including new sources from the Japanese side, the authors' work apparently leaves very little of O'Hare's life and legacy unexamined. The most enlightening chapters focus on several key questions. Was Butch's appointment to the Naval Academy a "payback" for his father E.J. O'Hare's cooperation with the Treasury Department in its fight against organized crime in Chicago in the early 1930s? Why was E.J. O'Hare gunned down gangland-style in 1939? Did Al Capone order his killing as revenge for E.J.'s help in sending him to jail? How did E.J.'s son Butch nearly annihilate a formation of Bettys (Japanese bombers) inbound on an attack against the almost defenseless "Lady Lex"? What caused Butch's disappearance during night operations west of the Gilbert Islands? Was it mechanical failure, a lucky Japanese hit, or friendly fire? The author's analysis of these issues is thorough and convincing.

Besides simply being a fascinating biography, *Fateful Rendezvous* is a wonderful description of naval aviation during the period and gives the reader an excellent feel for air combat at the squadron and personal levels. Ewing's and Lundstrom's storytelling abilities bring to life this facet of the war, which is lost when one limits one's reading to the lives of the likes of MacArthur, Spruance, and Nimitz.

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