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A Very Short War: The Mayaguez and the Battle of Koh Tang

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understanding by the public and the military alike.

This book is at its best in shedding light on things that can and have gone wrong throughout the history of warfare, but it is at its worst in implying causation and attributing motive. Regan writes of troops "firing in the air and then at each other in frustration," tank crews who "succumbed to the primitive urge to kill in which conscious thought played no part," and of Americans who "ignored the signals and plastered the British position;" he asserts that "a 45 percent casualty rate was not enough for the American High Command." The author, somehow, is able to take the scant information that exists on most "frasualty" incidents and perform psychological postmortems on the motivations of the personnel involved.

Also, in some cases *Blue on Blue* fails to provide substantiating data, while in others it cites potentially misleading statistics. On the very first page it states that "during the Gulf War, coalition troops killed far more of one another than the enemy did." A statement like this certainly deserves further amplification or documentation. Regan also writes of "77 percent of U.S. combat vehicle losses resulting from friendly fire." Seventy-seven percent is a tremendously high number. But is it 770 out of a thousand vehicle losses, or seventeen out of twenty-two? Also, when he mentions that 23 percent of American casualties were self-inflicted, does the author deem the actual number of casualties of such trivial importance that the reader need not be apprised of it? Is it 23 percent of ten thousand or of 146?

Moreover, Regan does a disservice to Charles Shrader, who wrote the report

Amicide: The Problem of Friendly Fire in Modern War in 1982, long before the Gulf war kindled interest in this subject. The author, while using Shrader's superior work as a guide to various "frasualty" incidents, ignores his analytic approach and re-reports these accounts with emotionally charged descriptions intended to appeal to those who have little familiarity with combat operations. Further, the fact that artillery and close air support reduce the casualties inflicted by enemy forces by numbers generally far outweighing the friendly casualties sustained in the process is a point that Regan fails to underscore.

Blue on blue, friendly fire, amicide, fratricide, frasaluties, or whatever people decide to call them, are unfortunately as much a part of warfare as the casualties inflicted by the enemy. Given the awesome power of today's arms technology, it should be no surprise that heightened stress, reduced visibility, inadequate training, faulty intelligence, poor coordination, and mathematical miscalculations can all lead tragically to unintended deaths in times of both war and peace. While many of the anecdotes related in Regan's book are entertaining and some are revealing, most lack any substantial documentation. As a vehicle for objectively informing a curious public or eliciting possible remedies from battlefield commanders, *Blue on Blue* falls woefully short.

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Guilmartin, John F., Jr. *A Very Short War: The Mayaguez and the Battle of Koh Tang*. College Station: Texas A&M Univ. Press, 1995. 264pp. \$39.50

This remarkable "small war," involving U.S. forces in the recovery of the SS *Mayaguez* and its crew, coupled with a short and savage battle on the island of Koh Tang, all occurred a scant twelve days after the U.S. evacuation of Saigon in 1975. The story is deftly told by an associate professor at Ohio State having an extensive prior background as a helicopter pilot in combat over Southeast Asia.

John Guilmartin introduces his story with a brief narrative of the U.S. evacuations of personnel from Phnom Penh and Saigon in April 1975. He then traces the impact of long-range electronic communications (with their ability to link in real time the national leadership with intermediate commands and warriors under fire) on these evacuations as well as on the battle of Koh Tang. The author maintains that "information gathering and transmission technology will create as many problems as it solves until we have fully come to grips with its operational and tactical implications." His estimate of potential problems proved accurate.

President Gerald Ford was suddenly and unexpectedly confronted on 12 May 1975 with the seizure of the U.S.-flag vessel *Mayaguez* and its crew by Khmer Rouge naval forces off the Cambodian coast in the Gulf of Siam. In response the president quickly brought together Marines, Air Force helicopters, and Navy air and surface units from throughout Southeast Asia to carry out an extremely difficult rescue mission. There was little time to plan, and each participating service was forced to improvise. Intelligence on the enemy was sparse and conflicting, and at a critical juncture it was not disseminated to the Koh Tang Island assault forces. At the national

level, the rescue mission's urgency was driven by the provisions of the War Powers Act of 1973, which required the president to consult with Congress before U.S. forces could be committed to combat and to justify that commitment within forty-eight hours. Further, President Ford was faced with the possibility of another *Pueblo* incident and the clear necessity of not again permitting a hostile government to seize an American-flag vessel and hold its crew captive. The author ably details the complexity and difficulty of welding reactive forces together in an overlapping and cumbersome command structure. He depicts the impact that each service's procedures and communications systems had on the tactical parameters of the battle. In the event, worldwide systems that allowed higher echelons of command to communicate among themselves and with the forces in the field rapidly overloaded communications at all levels of command during the twin assaults.

Guilmartin traces the development of a plan whereby Air Force helicopters carrying Marines would simultaneously assault Koh Tang Island and recapture the SS *Mayaguez*, while naval carrier forces conducted retaliatory strikes against the Cambodian mainland. The assault on Koh Tang by a small force of Marines, flown into an unexpectedly furious battle by Air Force helicopters, is superbly narrated. Air Force and Marine personnel quickly fell back on improvisation and raw courage to salvage a situation that came perilously close to disaster. In closing, Guilmartin asks his readers "what lessons were learned and whether they have been assimilated by the U.S. military services and national command staff." He then briefly reviews similar subsequent events, from the April 1980 Ira-

nian hostage rescue attempt to the evacuation of the U.S. embassy in Mogadishu, Somalia, in January 1961, and implicitly answers his own question: "A verdict remains to be seen."

The clear worth of this short and readable book to career military officers of all levels lies in the hope that they will heed its lessons and learn from the mistakes it records when responding to the similar challenges they will clearly face in coming years.

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Lee, Alex. *Force Recon Command: A Special Marine Unit in Vietnam, 1969–1970*. Annapolis, Md.: Naval Institute Press, 1995. 296pp. \$29.95

Throughout its history, the Marine Corps has prided itself on being an elite fighting organization within the American armed forces. The concept of having small, specialized units within the Corps (an "elite within the elite") has always been the subject of some debate. The prevailing attitudes on this subject within its senior leadership led to the formation and eventual disbandment of the Raider and Parachute battalions during World War II. Marine reconnaissance units today, though not direct descendants of these formations, are in a similar position. Funding, manpower constraints, and the view of "the men at the top" have a great deal of impact on these units, as reflected by the recent reduction of amphibious reconnaissance assets within Marine divisions.

Lieutenant Colonel Lee's book is an insightful, hard-hitting memoir of his

experiences as the commanding officer of the Third Force Reconnaissance Company during its combat operations in the northern I Corps area of Vietnam from 1969 to 1970. In many ways, this book goes well beyond a personal account. As the dust jacket states, "This frank and absorbing chronicle traces the evolution of Marine small unit reconnaissance from its origins in World War II, analyzes its use and abuse in Vietnam, and offers . . . lessons learned from a career dedicated to an elite within the elite." Lee not only describes the daily operations of the Third Force Reconnaissance Company but writes in great detail about reconnaissance doctrine within the Corps, the various types of missions that his unit conducted, and his efforts to create a cohesive and technically proficient combat unit. His position as the commanding officer gave Lee an acute insight into how the war in Vietnam was conducted at the most senior levels. He is quite candid about his battles with the bureaucracy of higher headquarters, which often did more to inhibit Third Force Reconnaissance Company from performing its missions than did the North Vietnamese army.

Lee is eminently qualified to comment not only on the reconnaissance community but on the Marine Corps in general. He served in the Corps for twenty-seven years as an infantryman and held command billets from the platoon to battalion level. In addition to the Third Force Reconnaissance Company, he led two rifle companies in combat operations in Vietnam. Much of his knowledge and experience in the field of reconnaissance doctrine, operations, and techniques was the result of his tour as the reconnaissance equipment research and development officer at Quantico, Virginia, prior to his assumption of command of Third Force.