

1991

Redwood Delta

Anthony Walker

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/nwc-review>

Recommended Citation

Walker, Anthony (1991) "Redwood Delta," *Naval War College Review*: Vol. 44 : No. 1 , Article 17.
Available at: <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/nwc-review/vol44/iss1/17>

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at U.S. Naval War College Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Naval War College Review by an authorized editor of U.S. Naval War College Digital Commons. For more information, please contact repository.inquiries@usnwc.edu.

Reservoir is put into the perspective of these other actions. As with Stokesbury, the performance of the South Koreans comes off better than in other earlier accounts.

A reader, looking at Stanton's carefully assembled order of battle and at the opposing numbers, might wonder, as some of us wondered then, "what if the decision had been made not to have withdrawn to the south, but to hold on at Hungnam?"

EDWIN H. SIMMONS
Brigadier General, U.S. Marine Corps (Ret.)
Marine Corps Historical Center

Flesch, Ron. *Redwood Delta*. New York: Berkeley Books, 1988. 272pp. \$3.95

Miller, John Grider. *The Bridge at Dong Ha*. Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 1989. 181pp. \$16.95

These books recount the exploits of two U.S. Marines in Vietnam, one a private first class, the other a captain. They are remarkable for showing the American fighting man at his best: courageous, skillful and resolute. Happily, both authors understood that they needed no scatological detail, vulgarity or profanity. In fact the PFC, Ron Flesch, writing twenty-three years after the event, has produced a totally clean manuscript without in any way reducing the drama of the action.

During 1965 and 1966, Flesch served in Vietnam as a member of Delta Company, 1st Battalion (Redwood), 9th Marines, in the Danang area and spent a year in almost

continual patrolling, skirmishing and fighting in defense of the airfield complex. The Marines' search for the Viet Cong led them into frequent contact with villagers and the problems attendant thereto. Graphic action on almost every page reveals the joys of small-unit infantry combat—field operations day and night in heat, rain and mud, attack, defense, ambush, scouting, patrolling, the ballistic crack of small arms fire, the whump of mortars and grenades, the thrill of stepping on a mine or booby trap, the casualties.

Although Redwood Delta was a regular Marine rifle company, and not one of the Combined Action units used with success by the Marines, the company made good progress in driving the Viet Cong out of the villages and in gaining the confidence of the villagers and their chiefs. Flesch and his comrades understood the problem of pacification and sympathized with the beleaguered civilians. The picture emerges of some very effective fighting Marines, tough, upbeat, basically cheerful through it all—not the murderous psychopaths so often portrayed by disaffected authors. On one of his last days in Vietnam Flesch was promoted to lance corporal, a small reward for one year of hard and dangerous service, but the new lance corporal remains unimbittered, still true to corps and country. *Semper Fidelis!*

Captain John Walter Ripley, USMC, served as advisor to the 3rd Battalion of Vietnamese Marines in the spring of 1972, in the area below

the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ). Almost all American troops had left Vietnam. Only the advisors remained. An experienced officer, Ripley had led a rifle company of the 3rd Marine Division during a previous tour in country.

Colonel Miller, himself at one time an advisor to South Vietnamese Marines, puts himself inside Captain Ripley, voicing Ripley's apprehensions, repeating what Ripley saw, heard and said—an autobiography written by someone else.

As Miller's tale begins, the North Vietnamese, in two-division strength reinforced with armor, cross the DMZ and push rapidly south toward Dong Ha, twelve miles away. At Dong Ha the only north-south artery, Highway 1, passes over a two-lane steel bridge built by American Seabees in other years. Once over the bridge the North Vietnamese can roll south to Hue unimpeded by natural obstacles.

On Easter morning when the enemy attack, Miller focuses on Ripley's effort to destroy the bridge before the enemy can take it.

In his struggle Ripley is aided by Army Major Jim Smock, advisor to an ARVN tank battalion, who knows very little about demolitions. The Marine explains to Smock in some detail how he intends to lay the explosives. The Major responds: "I don't know what in hell you're talking about, but I trust you! What should I do?"

Ripley liked and admired the Vietnamese Marines, who returned his affection and esteem. They called him

"Dai-uy Dien!"—"Captain Crazy!" Later on, the fight of this 3rd Battalion, Vietnamese Marine Corps, almost to the last man, against overwhelming numbers of North Vietnamese troops who crossed the river upstream, forms a tragic conclusion to the story. The book fails, perhaps purposefully, to clarify just who ordered Captain Ripley to blow up the bridge. Had he not done so, however, the South Vietnamese forces would have faced certain defeat.

Redwood Delta may have value to the national security community in reminding today's soldiers and Marines of the problems encountered in Third World countries occupied by our troops. Who is friend? Who is foe? Women and children, who are used by the enemy as cover, are often found in the line of fire. What to do? Withdraw and abort the mission? Cease fire and allow the enemy to gain fire superiority or to escape unharmed? Tough decisions for a captain, a sergeant, a PFC or anyone else.

The Bridge at Dong Ha has value as a lesson in leadership—using one's courage, talent and initiative to save the day in the face of "fearful odds"—to save his unit and in this case his army from destruction. Ripley sets a high standard of performance and grace under pressure, which all American officers might emulate. *Semper Fidelis!*

ANTHONY WALKER
Colonel, U.S. Marine Corps (Ret.)
Middletown, Rhode Island