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Fields of Fire

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thing . . . it is more pragmatic." He is probably correct, too, in his belief that military psychologists could enrich their endeavors if they contrived somehow to keep fully abreast of what each was up to and toward this end Watson proposes yet another "institute."

In short, this volume may be perused with profit by all elements of the armed services. For senior officers it should fall little short of mandatory status. They will find it at once enlightening and exasperating.

CURTIS CARROLL DAVIS

Lieutenant Colonel, U.S. Army Reserve (Ret.)

Webb, James. *Fields of Fire*. Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 1978. 344pp.

The sound and smell of combat in Vietnam at the platoon level permeates *Fields of Fire* with a completeness that is extraordinary and a realism that is almost eerie. Webb's book reeks of gunpowder. It is unusual for an author's first work of fiction to be so real, particularly when describing combat and all its horrors. Webb also masterfully addresses the subtleties of the personal relationships of soldiers at war.

This book is not only for those Americans who went to Vietnam. It will be an intense reading experience for others as well, primarily because of Webb's ability to paint a picture with words and to put his reader on the scene. Additionally, the glossary of terms included at the end of the book will translate all of the colloquialisms of marines in Vietnam into everyday language.

Fields of War is reality revisited. Set in 1968-69 in the vicinity of An Hoa, with such place names as Liberty Bridge, Go Noi Island, Arizona, Charley Ridge, and the Razorback easily recognizable to a generation of marines, the book conjures up memories long submerged.

The attitude of the "grunts" (infantry marines at the platoon and com-

pany level) in the book also portrays reality. There was a "Catch-22" feeling among marines in Vietnam that Webb accurately described in the dialogue. For example, ID cards were issued to the friendly populace so the VC/NVA could be identified. The net effect, however, was that VC/NVA acquired them, and the civilians lost them through VC intimidation or subversion. The resettlement village was set up to isolate the VC from the populace, but people weren't relocated there because corrupt politicians kept the village only half filled in order to pocket money intended for its support of the village. The destruction of rice was intended to starve the enemy and force him out of the mountains, but the effect was to starve the populace and alienate them, thus driving them to the enemy side.

The author's intimacy with combat marines is noticeable in his development of the grunts' outlook. For example, the grunt view of "pogues" (rear area personnel not involved in frequent contact with the enemy) was universal and vividly portrayed. The difference in attitude of grunts and pogues is reflected in the difference in priorities. What was important to a pogue didn't matter in the least to a grunt (at least generally speaking). The adjustments necessary when the platoon returned from the field to the combat base were realistic and at the same time amusing because the two areas were worlds apart. Webb sensitively portrayed the emptiness and frustration felt by men in Vietnam because of the feeling that nobody really cared. To what seemed to be the majority of the American public during 1968-69, Vietnam was just one more unpleasantness (and one that could be turned off—or at least ignored). The man in the trenches had a very hard time understanding why the America that sent him to war was not willing to support his effort in that war.

The combat in *Fields of Fire* is a mirrorlike image. The use of supporting

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arms, the sweeps through the rice paddies, the anxiety of moving toward a village, the exhilaration of being shot at (and missed), the telltale signs and indicators of enemy presence, the reaction and movement during combat, the professional execution of responsibility by sometimes surprising people, all tell it like it is. Many readers of this book undoubtedly will recall the apprehension felt when the point man reported the absence of water buffalo in the fields surrounding the next hamlet. The impression that events occur in slow motion and with great focus and clarity during moments of actual combat seems, at first blush, to be odd, but the fact is that although the events are occurring at blinding speed, they are individual scenes on the screen of one's memory.

The relationships among the central characters sketched by Webb are highlights of the book, and the association of the platoon commander with his men was experienced by literally thousands of marines in Vietnam. The standoffishness and apprehension of both Lieutenant Hodges and the men in the platoon when he first arrived was a natural reaction. The description of Hodges, the central figure, growing into his responsibilities is beautifully done. His gradual acceptance by the platoon, followed by genuine comradeship with them, reflected on the professional as well as personal qualities of both Hodges and the platoon members. The dependence of these men upon each other was total and, although quietly aware of that fact, they didn't fully understand the concept and all that it portended. Webb's treatment of these relationships and the men's dependence upon each other is well done. Dependence is developed throughout the book and its lessons are brought to a convincing climax in the final chapter. Although one would not expect the combat veterans in Hodges' platoon to admit it, the central theme in the book

is man's love for his fellow man and the love and mutual respect that develop among warriors in combat.

Webb's portrayal of the new man in the unit was poignantly and accurately painted. The feeling one experiences when he is the new kid on the block is unforgettable. Likewise, Webb's development of the "new guy" turning into an "old guy" over a period of time and the personal effects of combat reflect his intimacy with the environment and his sensitivity in understanding marines. Webb's presentation of the concept that combat affects different people differently is subtle but enduring.

The sadistic sense of humor displayed by the central characters is magnificently presented. There was nothing—absolutely nothing—sacred among the grunts in Vietnam, and *Fields of Fire* is chock-full of humorous (perhaps shocking for the uninitiated) vignettes.

A comparison of *Rumor of War* and *Fields of Fire* will strongly favor the latter. Both books accurately describe and reflect combat in Vietnam at the platoon level, even though the situation and terrain are different. However, there is a sense of negativism that pervades *Rumor of War* from start to finish, and the reader is left with a sense of disappointment and frustration at its conclusion. Conversely, *Fields of Fire*, despite the ultimate demise of all the central characters, is positive in tone and at the end the reader is disappointed only because there is no more good reading.

The only weakness in *Fields of Fire* is the shallow treatment given the complexities of the Vietnamese people. Lieutenant Hodges and the members of his platoon did not understand the Vietnamese people, their culture and their environment and yet this was one of the greatest difficulties of the Vietnam war—the difference between the American and Vietnamese people and their values and the inability of American money, firepower and lives to

bridge the gap. On the other hand, this lack of understanding was a common failing in Vietnam, and Webb's book deserves credit for presenting the issue as it really was. Nonetheless, some readers will undoubtedly recoil at the characters' inability to put events into perspective at several points in the book.

In summation, *Fields of Fire* is a solid piece of war fiction made better

because it closely paralleled actual events. It is an outstanding war story and an accurate and detailed reflection of combat in the vicinity of Liberty Bridge in 1968-69. While the reviewer has not read all the books about Vietnam, he has read most of them. *Fields of Fire* is unquestionably the best. The rest aren't even close.

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