

Green Ghosts

Lt Col W.C. Floyd USMC (Ret)
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In the preface to his memoir, Alfred Thayer Mahan, the famed naval strategist, wrote: “If you want contemporary color, contemporary atmosphere, you must seek it among the impressions which can be obtained only from those who have lived a life amid particular surroundings.” It is the impressions of war that are so vividly captured in *Green Ghosts*, by Lt Col

W.C. Floyd USMC (Ret). Stories from the Vietnam War are often dominated by themes of disillusionment, futility, and patriotic service. Relegating the experiences of combatants to these broad categories is neither honest nor helpful if one wishes to confront the realities of war. The author transcends these categories by offering a compilation of personal accounts of the Marines of the Third Force Reconnaissance Company, which connect readers, person to person, to those who experienced it. This is beneficial in understanding an important, yet difficult, conflict in our history, because each individual endured his own war. They share their memories of both terrifying and mundane events, which combine to illuminate at once their untold stories and the nature of war. Beyond the personal recollections of operations, readers discover the lessons that have unfortunately been consigned to the annals of history—recorded but not remembered.

The author begins his chronological and thematic approach by providing an overview of the history of the unit, placing it within the larger organization and war. This book excels with its stated purpose of providing first-hand accounts of combat, offering a glimpse of a continuum of motivations and experiences. Some Marines hoped to test their mettle, while others mustered the courage to face the situation in which they found themselves. What is clear from the stories is the pride these men carried into their missions. Cpl Delezen, for instance, captured the mood of these Marines as they faced two fronts while stationed near the DMZ. Constantly being under-strength and on missions different

from the majority of other Marines and Soldiers instilled these “Super Grunts” not with a feeling of superiority, but one of pride in the dangers faced. He also brings a reality to the daily situations faced with lucid prose and visceral descriptions. This is a highlight of the book, as some works examine war from a “top-down” approach, whereas *Green Ghosts* emphasizes the experiences of “boots-on-the-ground” Marines.

Although the seriousness of their duty is never in question, the levity of situations in the midst of tumult is illuminating. It is well documented in literature that combatants often use a macabre sense of humor as a coping mechanism. These Marines were no different. Lance Corporal Ken Smith recounts such an experience when attempting to ensure a group of enemy soldiers were dead by tossing a grenade, before he moved to conduct a search. “Throwing a grenade from the prone position, with your face buried in the dirt,” he concludes, “is not as easy as it looks in the manual.” After throwing it with all his might, it bounced off a tree limb, “landing not 10 feet in front” of his position. “The grenade kicked up a lot of dirt and debris, showering us all, but luckily did not hurt anyone,” he continues. “Needless to say, my teammates were not happy and made several disparaging references to my parentage.” (57) This banter between teammates amongst the uproar of battle may seem absurd to some, but reveals its role in, and the mutual respect engendered by, their common experiences of war.

In addition to the informative personal stories, this work is a continuous stream of valuable lessons. What one might find a mundane detail, another may relish as moment of insight regarding tactics, techniques, and procedures (TTP). A common theme is the lack of preparation for real-world situations, due to the inability for pre-deployment training to prepare one completely. Some lessons could only be learned after spending time in the field. Locating a team for extraction under triple canopy jungle at night, for instance, required using artillery round impacts in the team’s vicinity, then providing pilots with a polar direction plot to its location. Additionally, using artillery bursts every hour to act as a wake-up

call for shift change while in a harbor site. And finally, the corpsman trained everyone in the company to provide advanced first-aid. Although this last example is common practice today, this forward-thinking practice had to be “rediscovered” during the current conflicts.

The stories chronicled in these pages are the intimate and imperfect memories of these Marines’ experiences, as time and distance have conspired to alter them. They nonetheless remain useful to both historians and general readers seeking to understand the true nature of war,

when the glamour has been stripped away and nothing remains but the visceral experiences. The author successfully presents these Marines as people, not the caricatures often portrayed in stereotypical films regurgitating thoughtless bravado and posturing. In addition, the honest expression of these accounts exposes the way levity in an otherwise terrifying moment can be cathartic, which is also useful for those seeking to understand war. Finally, the lessons chronicled throughout are useful for those still vested with the responsibility of patrolling and conducting battle drills overseas.

