

Vietnam 1968–1969

A Battalion Surgeon's Journal

Holley, Byron E. Vietnam 1968–1969. *A Battalion Surgeon's Journal*.
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Review by COL (Ret) Warner "Rocky" D. Farr, MD, MPH

Young doctor-intern-draftee in Memphis, Tennessee, Dr. Byron Holley, spent a year in Vietnam as the battalion medical officer of the 4th Battalion of the 39th Regiment, in the 9th Infantry Division. This battalion was not much different from other such infantry battalions in South Vietnam until a new battalion commander arrived. He was Lieutenant Colonel David Hackworth, one of the most decorated soldiers in the American Army. Hackworth's autobiography is available and also well worth reading.* Hackworth was determined to harden the battalion into a Ranger unit, the "HARDCORE Battalion." He had his battalion surgeon served in the swamps of the Mekong Delta, and the author gives you a feel for chaos of the "patch-'em-up-and-dust-'em-off" medicine that was his job in the 4/39th of the 9th Infantry. Hackworth, the consummate commander, slowly learned the "doc's" role in accomplishing his battalion's mission.

Holley sent letters to his wife from Vietnam and used them to later create this book. The book begins when Holley received his doctor draft notice and went through

the Army Medical Department Center and School at Fort Sam Houston, Texas, to learn to be an army officer and a battalion surgeon. His training included a surgical animal laboratory. His deployment, as an individual replacement, to Vietnam and assimilation to the division is covered.

He talks extensively about battalion operations, his medics, and his Medical Service Corps officers who helped him in his newly assumed role of leading the medical platoon in an infantry battalion. He describes various incidents, the wounded, and his trips to the nearest field hospital to take his acutely wounded. He also describes later visits to his patients there and becoming part of the field hospital response when wounded Soldiers suddenly arrive. Late in his tour, he did some headquarters dispensary duty in and around Saigon, and also tried his hand at ophthalmology.

Surviving all this, he returned to America, became a resident at Tulane University, and later, an ophthalmologist in Florida, and moved on with his life just like most Veterans do. His memories are well worth a read.

*Hackworth DH, Sherman J. *About face: the odyssey of an American warrior*. New York, NY: Touchstone, 1990.