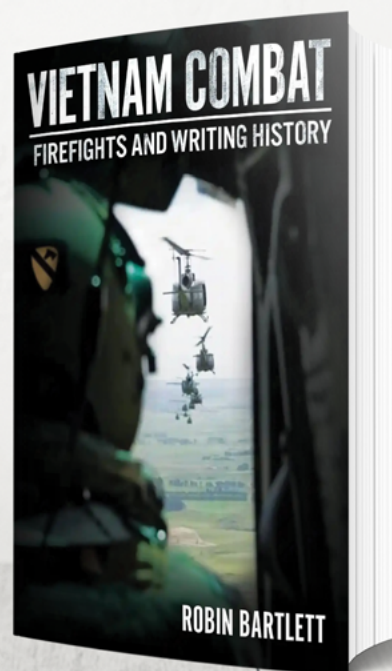


Vietnam Combat

Firefights and Writing History

Robin Bartlett, Casemate, 2023, 288 pages



Lt. Col. Rick Baillergeon, U.S. Army, Retired

The past few years have seen a resurgence of Vietnam War memoirs. I have read many of these offerings and found several to be outstanding. These authors have clearly utilized this extended reflection time to produce powerful and personal memoirs of their own Vietnam War experiences. Within these recent offerings, the best memoir I have read is Robin Bartlett's incredible *Vietnam Combat: Firefights and Writing History*. It is a volume that will undoubtedly impact every reader and generate a wide range of emotions within each.

In *Vietnam Combat*, Bartlett focuses on detailing his experience as an infantry platoon leader with the 1st Cavalry Division (Airmobile) during 1968–1969. Although his platoon leader time is the “main effort” of the volume, Bartlett delves into many other subjects with passion, sensitivity, and conviction. These include posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD), the American public's treatment of Vietnam veterans in the past and the present, and the Vietnam War itself. I will discuss each of these in detail below.

Before beginning this discussion, it is valuable to understand why and how Bartlett crafted his memoirs

after leaving the U.S. Army some fifty years ago. In various forums, he has listed three purposes for developing them. First, after talking to other Vietnam veterans, he felt he had some unique experiences he wanted to share. Second, he believed the process of writing his memoirs would be very cathartic and healing for himself. Finally, he wanted to share with readers why his feelings and beliefs regarding the Vietnam War had changed dramatically over the years.¹

For Bartlett, the development of these memoirs was an extended endeavor. After completing an initial draft, he asked a few of his friends to review and offer comments and recommendations. The main discussion point was the audience for the memoirs. Bartlett wanted his memoirs to be read by general readers. However, the reviewers felt that he needed to “demilitarize” the memoir and make it more personal so it might appeal to broader readership. Bartlett took the advice to heart and spent two years reworking the volume. Finally, after twelve years of writing and rewriting, *Vietnam Combat* was ready for the public.²

Focusing on the volume itself, as highlighted above, Bartlett devotes much of his memoir to his infantry

platoon leader time. His road to this position took many twists and turns. Bartlett arrived in Vietnam in early May 1968 with orders to the 101st Airborne Division. However, because of the Tet Offensive and significant officer losses in country, all officers' orders were canceled. These officers would be reassigned to units with the greatest need. In the case of Bartlett, it was to the 1st Cavalry Division.³

Following a three-week acclimatization period, he arrived at the division and was assigned to Company A, 1st Battalion, 5th Cavalry Regiment. After meeting with the company commander, it was decided Bartlett would begin as the company's weapons platoon leader. This position enabled him to gain some valuable field experience and seasoning before moving to a rifle platoon. This period did not last long, however, and Bartlett took over his rifle platoon in three weeks.

When he took the platoon guidon, he was a twenty-two-year-old, recently promoted first lieutenant. He quickly discovered he was the second oldest soldier in the platoon (the oldest was twenty-five). The average age in his platoon was eighteen.⁴ Many former platoon leaders were fortunate to have a "grizzled," old, highly experienced platoon sergeant to learn from. This was not the case with Bartlett, as he inherited a nineteen-year-old platoon sergeant.⁵ He recalls his initial thoughts when joining the platoon when he states, "It looked like I was in for the greatest ride in my life. And I was."⁶

Bartlett's discussion of this "greatest ride" is superb. He recalls the highs and lows, the emotions, the pressures, and the challenges of his role as a platoon leader in combat. He details some of the over sixty airmobile combat assaults, ambushes, and search-and-destroy missions his platoon conducted. Within this discussion, I believe readers will find three events particularly impactful.

The first is Bartlett's vivid memories and powerful feelings when he lost a soldier during combat operations. Bartlett unfortunately addresses this several times in the memoir. As you might expect, the most poignant for Bartlett was the first time one of his soldiers (Sgt. Ron Roberts) was killed in action (KIA). He addresses this in the following passage:

The days when I oversaw KIAs were always my worst days in Vietnam and Roberts, being the first, was certainly the worst of all. Here was a young man whose potential would

never be fulfilled. His life ended far too soon. One might conclude that his enthusiasm and aggressiveness may have been responsible for his death, but that is how the Army had trained him and the path he chose to follow. After the chopper had removed Roberts's body, I asked one of my men to take a photograph of me so that I would always remember how I felt that day.⁷

The second are the four circumstances when Bartlett found himself face to face with the enemy. On each occasion, Bartlett was literally in a life-or-death situation. In these cases, he recalls that after the initial feelings of surprise and shock, his reflexes and training quickly came into play. Bartlett relates to readers one particular interaction that had a tremendous impact on him then and to the present. "To this day I can recall the actions, emotions, and sensations I felt that night, as clearly as when they happened. Twenty years later, I started to have daydreams and relive this experience as well as other on a frequent basis. I was worried that I was losing control."⁸

The final event is Bartlett's recollection of the night he was hit by shrapnel and lay in the jungle wondering if he would live. He states,

So I lay there. I lay there from 2 AM to 6 AM. I thought about what was happening to me. I thought that I might be close to death. All kinds of thoughts flashed through my mind. What would my parents think if I died? What would my friends and relatives back in California think? What would they say? Who would come to my funeral? But mostly I thought about the life I had lived so far. If I were to die, would my life have had any meaning? Would my death have made a difference? If I died right then, would it have been worth it? What had I accomplished so far in my life? What had been the value of my existence? I had more questions than answers. But I did know one answer was, No, I have not accomplished anything in my life.

Lt. Col. Rick Baillergeon, U.S. Army, retired, is a faculty member in the Department of Army Tactics at the U.S. Army Command and General Staff College, Fort Leavenworth, Kansas.

If I died right then, it would not have served a purpose. I had more to do and more to give. I needed to stay alive to do those things—whatever they might be.⁹

Within *Vietnam Combat*, Bartlett weaves in many other subjects and thoughts he wants to share with readers. One of the principal subjects that clearly resonates throughout the memoir is the subject of PTSD. Bartlett immediately introduces this as it relates to him personally in his preface. He states, “But the traumatic experiences that I endured should have been acknowledged and brought to light. They were not. For many years, I simply locked all those events up in the titanium trunk located in the back of my mind ... until—one day—they started to leak out. Then, I sought and received help from a psychiatrist friend. Writing this book, too, is an effort for me to come to grips with events from 50-plus years ago.”¹⁰

Bartlett provides one of the best summaries of the effects of PTSD on life that I have read or heard. He states,

We all wear the chains of life we forge day to day. We also tend to relive and remember our negative experiences more frequently than the positive ones. Perhaps that is to remind us not to repeat our mistakes. And while my experiences occurred over 50 years ago, those events are as fresh and as real in my mind today as the day they occurred. There is rarely a day that goes by that I don’t recall some event that happened to me during those 365 days. I am sure they will be with me for the rest of my life. They are the chains I drag behind me.¹¹

Bartlett also utilizes his memoirs to address the treatment of Vietnam War veterans in the past and present. As with the preponderance of Vietnam veterans, he is saddened and bitter by the reception they received when they returned home. As the years have passed, Bartlett has seen that the hatred many Vietnam veterans received when returning home has now been replaced by general apathy or unfamiliarity with the Vietnam War. He affirms, “I have been extremely sensitive to the lack of awareness about my war. That is not only true for young people but from my own generation.”¹²

In his preface, Bartlett provides some recommendations to the general public when they meet a Vietnam veteran. He offers,

I hope you will take time to ask your Vietnam vet to tell you his or her story. Listen and ask questions. Many still need to unburden themselves. We only wish to be recognized and to share our own “Stories from the Trail.” We need someone to care. We need your empathy. Above all, please—always use the code words “Welcome home” rather than “Thank you for your service” when you speak with a Vietnam vet. These words are so meaningful to us. They will bring tears to our eyes and lumps to our throats.¹³

As stated earlier, one of Bartlett’s purposes for writing his memoirs is to articulate his feelings on the Vietnam War. Over the past decades, Bartlett has found that his views and thoughts on the war have dramatically changed. The combination of his personal reflection and his study of the Vietnam War have greatly contributed to this reversal. Bartlett explains these changes to readers in the volume’s final chapter.

There are numerous strengths displayed within *Vietnam Combat* that contribute to making this an incredibly valuable experience for readers. The first is the outstanding readability of the volume. Bartlett is extremely gifted at describing events in detail and, in a way, that makes readers feel they are in the environment he is discussing. His reviewers asked him to “demilitarize” the book and make it more personal, and he has clearly succeeded in each. You will find it difficult to put down once you begin reading.

In Bartlett’s introduction, he provides readers why he was able to offer this detail. He states, “As I wrote, I was amazed at how many details my mind retained. At times, the writing transported me back to the day and time more than 50 years ago, and I relived the incident as vividly as it occurred. I saw the colors. I felt the fear. There was sweat on my face and underarms. I even recalled the smells.”¹⁴

To complement his words, Bartlett has inserted a variety of visuals that are outstanding. First, he has included maps and sketches, which greatly assist readers in understanding and clarity. Second, he has added nearly one hundred photographs and combat art pictures to the volume. Many of these come from his personal collection and obviously, greatly personalize the memoirs. Finally, he has placed a collection of North Vietnamese Army and Choi Hoi (Chieu Hoi)

surrender and weapons turn-in leaflets that are extremely interesting.¹⁵

One of the best decisions Bartlett made was to insert letters he wrote to family members and friends during the war into his memoirs. Obviously, these letters again add tremendously to the personalization of the memoir. The inclusion of these letters was not something Bartlett had originally planned to do. In fact, Bartlett did not remember these letters until after he was rewriting the volume.

He addresses this in the book's introduction. He states,

While proofing and rewriting this manuscript, I remembered the 100+ letters I wrote home during my year in Vietnam that my mother had carefully saved. I think she had a premonition I might someday try to write this book. I had also sent a few letters to a college classmate who thoughtfully saved and returned them to me. I dusted the letters off, put them in chronological order and started reading what I wrote 50 years ago. I've included snippets from these letters in appropriate chapters in an effort to add more of my personal feelings at the time and provide insight into the juxtaposition between what actually happened and what I wrote home about.¹⁶

Another clear strength of *Vietnam Combat* is its organization. Many of us have read memoirs where the author continuously combines stories in a long chain. The result is quick confusion, and the volume can be a challenge to read and understand. This is not the case with Bartlett's memoirs. He has essentially dedicated one story or theme per sequential chapter (thirty-four within the book). These chapter breaks enable readers an opportunity to reflect upon what they just read (there is much to reflect upon).

The final strength I would like to highlight is the superb appendix section he has developed for readers. Within this section, he has placed a comprehensive glossary written in his own words and a segment providing detail on the friendly and enemy weapon systems addressed in the memoir. Most importantly, the author has provided an extensive resource section where readers can find websites focused on supporting Vietnam veterans (and veterans in general) causes; Gold Star organizations; family-related topics; information on Vietnam War memorials; and print media, podcasts, and books that have a Vietnam War historical focus. This section was unexpected but is a tremendous benefit for the public in the present and in the future.

In Bartlett's concluding paragraph, he states, "I started this book many years ago to tell some combat stories and events that I thought were unusual. Some of my experiences were gut-wrenching and horrific, some humorous and unbelievable. I hope I have accomplished that goal and that you, my reader, will take away some of the same feelings and understanding of my experience, keeping in mind that the story I've told is from the ground level, face to face with the enemy. It's a small-unit leader's 'boots on the ground' point of view."¹⁷

There is no question Bartlett has achieved his objectives within *Vietnam Combat*. He has truly provided us with numerous unusual experiences. Readers will find these experiences gut-wrenching and horrific at times and then humorous and unbelievable at other times. Thus, it is a memoir that initiates a wide array of emotions as you read it. Bartlett's ability to generate these emotions is extremely rare in a memoir. It is this characteristic which separates it from the preponderance of memoirs you read. I believe you will find it to be one of the best memoirs you will read.

There is really only one appropriate and fitting way to close this review—welcome home, Mr. Bartlett. ■

Notes

1. "How and Why I Wrote This Book," Robin Bartlett, 21 September 2022, <https://robinbartlettauthor.com/how-and-why-i-wrote-this-book/>.

2. Ibid.

3. "History of the 1st Cavalry Division," 1st Cavalry Division Association, accessed 17 January 2024, <https://1cda.org/history/>. In the summer of 1965, the 1st Cavalry Division was certified to become

an air mobile division and soon after began deploying to Vietnam. That fall, they became the first fully committed division in Vietnam. In November of that year, elements of the division were involved in the famous Battle of Ia Drang Valley (detailed in *We Were Soldiers Once... And Young*). In 1971, they became the last full division to leave Vietnam. Thirty soldiers from the division were awarded the Medal of Honor for valor during the Vietnam War.



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4. Skip Vaughn, "Infantry Platoon Leader Recalls Best, Worst of Times," Department of Defense, 23 June 2021, <https://www.defense.gov/News/Feature-Stories/story/Article/2668224/infantry-platoon-leader-recalls-best-worst-of-times/>.
5. Dan Elder, "Shake and Bake Sergeants: How the Army Trained New Officers for the Vietnam War, Fast," HistoryNet, 2 February 2021, <https://www.historynet.com/shake-n-bake-sergeants/>. By 1967, the U.S. Army found it was in critical need of sergeants and staff sergeants in Vietnam. To assist, the Skill Development Base Program was developed. As part of that, the Noncommissioned Officer Candidate Program was created. It was designed to prepare soldiers to lead small units in Vietnam. Graduates were commonly called "Shake 'n Bake" sergeants. Bartlett's platoon sergeant was a graduate of the program.
6. Robin Bartlett, *Vietnam Combat: Firefights and Writing History* (Casemate Publishers, 2023), 59.
7. *Ibid.*, 8.
8. *Ibid.*, 100.
9. *Ibid.*, 160.
10. *Ibid.*, xiv.
11. *Ibid.*, xiv; Susan Zieger, "Marley's Chains," The Dickens Project, 7 December 2020, <https://dickens.ucsc.edu/programs/dickens-to-go/marleys-chains.html>. Bartlett's reference for the chains of life comes from the Charles Dickens classic, *A Christmas Carol* (London, 1843). In the book, Jacob Marley appears to Scrooge as a ghost clad in chains consisting of material items. "I wear the chain I forged in life," replied the Ghost. "I made it link by link, and yard by yard; I girded it on of my own free will, and of my own free will I wore it. Is its pattern strange to you?"
12. Bartlett, *Vietnam Combat*, 232.
13. *Ibid.*, xv.
14. *Ibid.*, xx.
15. J. A. Koch, *The Chieu Hoi Program in South Vietnam, 1963–1971* (RAND Corporation, January 1973), <https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/reports/2006/R1172.pdf>. The Chieu Hoi Program (loosely translated as "Open Arms") was initiated by the United States in 1963. The program sought to entice Viet Cong and Peoples's Army of Vietnam soldiers and civilians to defect to South Vietnamese authority. There are a wide range of thoughts on the effectiveness of the program.
16. Bartlett, *Vietnam Combat*, xxii.
17. *Ibid.*, 234.