

Michael - Call Tuesday

Ogden Williams
267-24-1603

Book Review

THE KILLING GROUND, by Frederick Downs Jr.

The ultimate book on Vietnam - one to cover the broad twenty-year sweep of U.S. involvement there - may never come from the pen of an American. The French have done better in describing their experience, with authors like Houglon, or even Larteguy, Bodard and Bernard Fall, because France's long colonial love/hate association with Vietnam gave them a comprehension from which literature of insight could emerge. But even if no Michener or Oris has come forward to do justice to our Vietnam era, nevertheless some impressive books by Americans are now appearing which deal not with the overall chess-board, but with the intense personal experience of individual players.

Frederick Downs Jr.'s The Killing Ground succeeds quite admirably by not pretending to be more than it is - an authentic and sometimes unbearably honest account of what happened to a 23-year old Lieutenant, recently from an Indiana farm, who arrived in Vietnam on September 8, 1957, commanded a platoon in the U.S. 4th Division, and was wounded four times before a land mine finally blew off his left arm and ended his war on January 11, 1968.

It was Downs' fate to serve in Quang Ngai and Quang Tin provinces - a harsh, uncompromising land of tough, iron-hard people. For decades this area had been a center of Viet Minh, and later Viet Cong, strength. (There were 42 provinces in South Vietnam. In not more than five of these was the ^{majority of the} population clearly pro-Viet Cong, but of these five Quang Ngai headed the list.) Downs could not have been assigned to a more difficult and dangerous place, and what predictably happened to him and his platoon is the subject of The Killing Ground.

This is no book for the squeamish. The author spares neither himself nor the reader in telling it exactly as it was, in detail. His first duty was to guard some bridges on a major highway which, although only about five miles from the major American base at Duc Pho, were already deep in hostile territory. Of course no enemy was to be seen, only peaceful villagers and industrious farmers in the ricefields. But every night the road was mined afresh, paths were booby-trapped, patrols ambushed.

Downs recounts an incident which admirably illustrates one of the American soldier's dilemmas in Vietnam. One old lady, well aware of the traditional American reluctance to shoot old ladies, is seen entering Downs' unoccupied "hootch" and then waddling off in broad daylight with a case of hand grenades. Downs shouts for her to stop, ^{and} ~~which~~ of course she does not or will not understand. If he lets her go, the grenades will soon be killing Americans. But maybe she was only scrounging and does not even know they are grenades. Anyway, how does an Indiana farm boy shoot an old woman in the back? (Downs solves his problem by a lucky shot which severs the rope handle of the case.) Again, Downs shoots a dog which has wandered into his defenses, tripping flares. He expects the villagers to be angry. But no, they invite him to a friendly banquet to eat the dog! But friends dress and look just like enemies, and no one speaks English. and some of them kill you and some don't, and there's nothing you can do about it. Meanwhile your men are sniped at or blown up, and nothing is being accomplished except that you're keeping the road open - in daylight, that is.

Next, Downs' platoon is airlifted 20 kilometers west of Duc Pho to patrol some jungle foothills. Whenever it can find the enemy there are sharp, bloody clashes, ~~described in detail~~. By now the platoon

feels a deep hatred for its invisible tormentors. Neither side takes prisoners unless ordered to do so.

Downs does not boast and he does not whine. He seldom generalizes, and when he does, it is with a few words that go to the heart of the matter. For example: "The American strategy was to draw them into a fight so we could use our superior firepower to destroy them. To win a battle, we had to kill them. For them to win, all they had to do was survive." [Again, commenting on the brutalizing effect of combat, he writes: "The philosophical arguments in favor of man's ability to resist the slide into barbarism sound noble and rational in a classroom or at a cocktail party. But when the enemy is bearing down, bent on taking your life away from you, it's not his country against your country, not his army against your army, not his philosophy against your philosophy - it's the fact that the son-of-a-bitch is trying to kill you and you'd better kill him first."]

Finally Downs' luck runs out in a mined gateway near Tan Ky. He returns to civilian life and goes to the University of Denver, minus his left arm. One day a complete stranger points to his hook and says "Get that in Vietnam > Serves you right!" (~~which for sheer~~, naive indecency must rank right up there with Jane Fonda in Hanoi.) But with his other arm Downs has written an honest and gripping book. It is certainly a testimony to the insanity of war, but it is also a tribute to the courage and sacrifice of human beings under stress, which includes including the author and the men to whom the book is dedicated, and also their enemies.

W. Williams
4621 Q St NW
Washington DC 20007
(202) 965-2139