

**Michael P. Moynihan Jr.** *Fighting Shadows in Vietnam: A Combat Memoir*. Jefferson: McFarland & Company Inc., 2014. 220 pp. \$29.95, paper, ISBN 978-0-7864-7830-9.



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Michael P. Moynihan Jr.'s memoir recounts his experiences as a combat infantryman in Vietnam in 1970. Equal parts harrowing, philosophical, and humorous, this memoir gives readers a compelling portrayal of the frequently overlooked final stages of America's war in Vietnam.

Moynihan begins his memoir with his teenage years and his decision to enlist. He grew up in a working-class Irish family in New York City. His family, church, and community raised him on "patriotism, conformity, our country—the red, white, and blue—(right or wrong), and a distrust of all things communist" (p. 8). At the same time, Moynihan recalls feeling pulled in the opposite direction by pervasive challenges to authority and tradition in the 1960s. He joined the army in 1969 out of a mixture of patriotism and the high likelihood of being drafted anyways.

The memoir then moves to basic training at Fort Jackson. Moynihan describes the rigorous discipline, exhausting training, close quarters, and strict hygiene as nuisances that nonetheless pre-

pared him well for the cauldron of Vietnam. His chapter on basic training is filled with moments of levity at certain aspects of army life. For example, he describes a blood drive in which those who did not want to donate had to do physical training and cleaning all day. Thus, the blood drive was really "a blood-letting on demand" (p. 27). Moynihan left basic training with a deep pride in joining a "brotherhood of men" who would protect the nation and a feeling of readiness for combat (p. 29).

The rest of Moynihan's memoir is devoted to his experiences in Vietnam, starting in January 1970. He spent a large part of his tour at Landing Zone (LZ) Buttons, an American base northwest of Saigon near the Cambodian border. He became a radio operator here, participating in dozens of reconnaissance patrols and ambushes. Moynihan recounts many difficulties of his time at LZ Buttons: punishing heat, ubiquitous insects and rats, rocket attacks from the Viet Cong, constant exhaustion, booby traps, and sickness.

Moynihan also took part in the invasion of Cambodia in 1970, an attempt to destroy North Vietnamese Army (NVA) bases and supply depots along the Ho Chi Minh Trail. He describes capturing NVA facilities, supplies, explosives, weapons, and thoroughly cleared supply trails. During this invasion, Moynihan lost his commanding officer, Lieutenant Morgan, in an accidental claymore mine explosion. The loss of this respected and capable officer deeply shook Moynihan and his platoon, although they had to quickly put their feelings aside to remain focused in a dangerous combat zone.

Toward the end of the invasion, Moynihan was wounded in Cambodia. After convalescing, he was reassigned to a rear echelon position as a mess hall orderly at his division's headquarters for the last few months of his tour. Although he was hesitant to leave his comrades in the field, he expressed much gratitude at being able to spend the remainder of his tour in relative comfort and safety. He returned to the United States in January 1971.

Historians will find much valuable material in this memoir in addition to the fascinating narrative. One issue that stands out is the morale and leadership crisis in the US Army in the early 1970s that Moynihan witnessed. The first time Moynihan met his commanding officer, Lieutenant Klein, the officer was high on marijuana. This incompetent officer refused to take advice and frequently jeopardized the lives of his men. Eventually, Moynihan heard rumblings in his platoon that Klein would be fragged, which cast a pallor of fear and dysfunction over the unit. Luckily, Klein was soon removed and the far more capable Lieutenant Morgan took charge of Moynihan's unit. Later in the memoir, he describes meeting General William Westmoreland in a line of soldiers, many of whom handed letters of protest about the behavior of their commanding officers directly to the army chief of staff. These were only two of several seri-

ous leadership problems Moynihan encountered in Vietnam.

Moynihan is a skilled storyteller who writes in a direct, earnest style. He shows appreciation for both sides' capability for good and evil actions. For instance, during the attack in Cambodia in which he was wounded, one of his friends was captured by the NVA, beaten, and shot in the head. Despite his enemy's penchant for brutality, he also captures their humanity, particularly in one scene during the Cambodian invasion. While looking through the pockets of a dead North Vietnamese soldier, Moynihan found an orange. He notes that the orange, like any fruit, was a rarity in the field and must have taken this soldier considerable effort to hang on to. He remembers being struck with the realization that this soldier would never get to enjoy this simple treat. He recalls, "the orange represented the loss of life more than anything else imaginable" (p. 143).

Moynihan describes his generation of soldiers as "warriors with peace signs" (p. 9). They were pulled between a civilian world in which many looked upon the war and the military with deep skepticism while others called for patriotism and service. Moynihan conveys a mixed sense of pride and frustration with his nation. On one hand, he concludes the memoir by saying: "It was my honor to serve at war as a citizen soldier with the Armed Forces of the United States of America.... Our willingness to sacrifice in the cause of freedom is the cornerstone of our country. Ours is a benevolent, spirited, and free superpower" (p. 207). On the other hand, he expresses significant irritation with the war's conduct, army leadership, and civilians who did not understand what he went through or actively disrespected soldiers. He recalls that the excitement of coming home was mixed with "a resentment of major proportions, born of a nation unable, or unwilling, to simply say, 'Thank you'" (p. 202). In these statements and throughout his entire story, Moynihan captures

the tensions and contradictions of the Vietnam War.

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