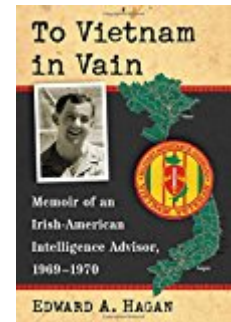


Edward A. Hagan. *To Vietnam in Vain: Memoir of an Irish-American Intelligence Advisor, 1969-1970.* Jefferson: McFarland, 2015. 232 pp. \$29.95, paper, ISBN 978-0-7864-9967-0.



Reviewed by Robert Thompson

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Commissioned by Margaret Sankey (Air University)

In *To Vietnam in Vain: Memoir of an Irish-American Intelligence Advisor, 1969-1970*, Edward A. Hagan recounts his memories of the Vietnam War. The book fluctuates between Hagan's life in America, his family history, and, most significant, his experiences in the Mekong Delta province of Phong Dinh as a US Army intelligence officer attached to Civil Operations and Revolutionary Development Support (CORDS) Advisory Team 56. Hagan's memoir is arranged into fifty-five brief chapters, excluding preface, preamble, and introduction. The last chapter, "A Prayer for the Kids of Cooper Street," functions as a conclusion. Throughout his memoir, Hagan takes readers through a series of related stories in the fashion of Tim O'Brien's *The Things They Carried* (1990). Hagan places his work in the context of other famous Vietnam War memoirs, including Tim O'Brien's *If I Die in a Combat Zone: Box Me Up and Ship Me Home* (1973), Philip Caputo's *A Rumor of War* (1977), and Michael Herr's *Dispatches* (1977). As noted by Hagan, none of these other books deal with the experiences of a US advisor.

Throughout his memoir, Hagan juxtaposes his family history and upbringing with his US Army experiences in the Republic of Vietnam. Indeed, he seamlessly connects his Vietnam War experiences with those of his life back in the United States. Before leaving for South Vietnam, for example, he was visited by his uncle. During the encounter, Hagan's uncle reminded him of his Irish roots and the need to live up to his ancestors' supposed warrior tradition.

At least for Vietnam War scholars, the author's views on the war itself are the most revealing aspects of the memoir. *To Vietnam War in Vain* demonstrates the effect of Vietnam War historiography on Vietnam veterans. For example, Hagan writes that Nick Turse's highly contentious work, *Kill Anything That Moves: The Real American War in Vietnam* (2013), influenced his views of the war.[1] Hagan recalls: "I participated in the missions that Turse cites specifically, but I can't deny he has made a very disturbing case for the routineness of American atrocities" (p. 59). He adds: "My Lai was more the norm than the excep-

tion. And, in the wake of reading Turse, I do question the military validity of the operations I went on during my year as an army intelligence advisor to the Vietnamese Popular and Regional Forces. I wasn't a major monster; after all, I never fired my M-16 on those missions—a kind of technical virginity. Claiming innocence on such grounds makes me feel like a 'flabby devil,' to use Joseph Conrad's phrase in *Heart of Darkness*" (pp. 59-60). With these words, Hagan lends support to Turse's main argument that the US military purposefully committed atrocities against the South Vietnamese people on a massive, nationwide scale.

Nevertheless, the author goes just short of endorsing *Kill Anything That Moves*. Rather, Hagan provides episodes from his time in Phong Dinh that stress the blurry line between fighting the Viet Cong (VC) and purposefully committing war crimes, as Turse claims. As mentioned in the chapter "Faking Ourselves," Hagan writes that US aircraft routinely bombed the rice paddies of Phong Dinh. Such actions "put big holes in the rice paddies and didn't hit many VC, but the local famers of Phong Dinh Province had to have been angered when rice paddies were blown up." He adds that "most air strikes in Phong Dinh in 1970 were probably a fake war tactic: any fool could see that the bombs didn't work tactically. Americans love air power. Infantry troops win wars, but then there are casualties" (p. 142).

In the chapter "How I Learned the Thousand Yard Stare," Hagan delves further into America's execution of the war. He recalls his involvement in a specific Phantom Three mission. Such tasks, he explains, involved "two helicopter gunships (usually AH-1 Cobras) and a Command and Control Huey" striking suspected VC positions. As his Huey descended on a cluster of homes recently "pummeled" by the Cobras, "the door gunner started to shoot his M-60 machine gun at the hootches" until his weapon jammed. Recalling this needless action by the door gunner, Hagan

notes that "it took me a while to realize that I actually had the authority to stop some of this silly nonsense." Indeed, he states, "the VC never shot back" (p. 162). In a separate event, briefly described in the chapter "The American Black and Tans," the author notes: "There is no resolving this difficulty; we killed civilians, and the VC wanted us to kill them." The event Hagan mentions entailed US troops finding women and children in a VC bunker near the wreckage of a downed American helicopter. Hagan surmises that "the VC guerrillas had no rear area to safeguard their children. It is hard to believe they wanted us to kill defenseless members of their families, but there is not much doubt they would use any such deaths for propaganda purposes" (p. 166). With such words, Hagan demonstrates that combat operations certainly claimed the lives of innocent civilians, yet not to the horrific extent that Turse advances.

Another significant contribution of Hagan's memoir is his recollection of pacification and the war for the control of the Republic of Vietnam's countryside. As a US Army intelligence officer, the author observed and wrote about events in the advisory team's monthly progress reports. Certain occurrences reflected a war going poorly for the United States. For instance, in the chapter titled "Progress," Hagan mentions an incident in which Liem, a Vietnamese captain, "confided in me that the Thuan Nhon District Chief was stealing from and gouging the people of Thuan Nhon.... Liem paid for his whistle blowing by being sent to the Seven Mountains area on the Cambodian border—a VC stronghold where the possibility of early death was higher than in Thuan Nhon" (pp. 16-17). Moreover, "Then, on July 19, 1970, at 9:00 a.m., the Viet Cong (VC)—maybe—bumped off the Province Chief, Colonel Nguyen Van Khoung, in a well-executed ambush in broad daylight." Hagan claims that the province senior advisor, Colonel Harold Van Hout, later expressed that "it is not certain that the act was perpetrated by the Viet Cong" (p. 17). At any rate, Hagan perceives the as-

sassination as indicative of the war not progressing well in his province. Essentially, in monthly reports, Hagan wrote about a war in which the United States could never prevail.

Those interested in CORDS and the experiences of a US advisor will appreciate Hagan's work. *To Vietnam War in Vain* represents a significant contribution to both the memory of the Vietnam War and the collective understanding of the conflict at the province level. For that reason, Hagan's memoir is an indispensable primary source for scholars embarking on a study of Phong Dinh Province.

Note

[1]. For the best rebuttal of Turse, see Peter Zinoman and Gary Kulik, review of *Kill Anything That Moves: The Real American War in Vietnam*, by Nick Turse, *Cross-Currents: East Asian History and Culture Review*, no. 12 (September 2014), <https://cross-currents.berkeley.edu/e-journal/issue-12/zinoman-and-kulik>.

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