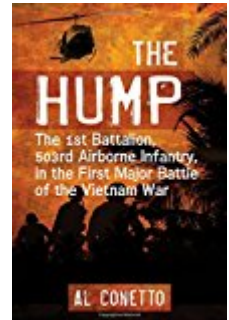


**Al Conetto.** *The Hump: The 1st Battalion, 503rd Airborne Infantry, in the First Major Battle of the Vietnam War.* Jefferson: McFarland, 2015. 216 pp. \$35.00, paper, ISBN 978-0-7864-9925-0.



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**Commissioned by** Margaret Sankey (Air University)

*The Hump: The 1st Battalion, 503rd Airborne Infantry, in the First Major Battle of the Vietnam War* details Operation Hump, an infantry operation that took place from November 5 to November 8, 1965, by assimilating oral histories, written accounts, and the author's personal recollections. The result is an engrossing narrative of Operation Hump and how the battle was remembered (or forgotten seems to be more appropriate) in the years and decades after Vietnam.

Operation Hump was a search and destroy mission carried out in the early months of the American commitment of forces to Vietnam in 1965. The mission was tasked to the 1st Battalion, 503rd Airborne Infantry Regiment, of the 173rd Airborne Brigade "Sky Soldiers." The 1/503 moved into its area of operations near Bien Hoa on November 5 with an objective of reconnoitering three hills, identified by their elevation as Hills 65, 75, and 78, to locate and eliminate suspected concentrations of enemy forces. What ensued would foreshadow enemy tactics used against components of the 1st Cavalry Division during the Battle

of the Ia Drang Valley on November 14, 1965. On November 5, American infantrymen encountered stiff enemy resistance on Hill 65, although the exchange of fire was sporadic. Then, on the morning of November 8, companies of the 1/503 endured a fierce, six-and-a-half-hour surprise assault of human wave attacks, mortar barrages, and heavy .50 caliber machine gun fire from Hill 65 and adjacent hills. Several American platoons, caught by surprise, were surrounded and some American fire squads were annihilated. Throughout the morning and early afternoon hours, battalion headquarters desperately sought to relieve the 1/503 with tactical air support, artillery, and gunships while also calling medevac for the many killed or wounded. When the battle concluded, Americans recovered 49 killed and some 83 wounded. Meanwhile, an unknown number of Vietnamese were killed or wounded, but estimates have ranged from between 319 and 400 Vietnamese casualties.

Al Conetto served two tours with the 1/503 as a junior officer, first in 1965 and again in 1967-68.

Conetto admits that the research and writing of *The Hump* was a way of reconciling himself with what he experienced in Vietnam and constituted part of his self-therapy for post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Hence, Conetto structures the book around his personal perspectives on Operation Hump, as well as broader perspectives of the action from archival sources and oral histories. One can divide *The Hump* into three distinct parts: a general history of how the United States became involved in Vietnam and the 173rd Airborne Brigade's role in that conflict, a day-by-day analysis and narrative of Operation Hump, and Conetto's personal narrative that includes struggling with PTSD during the postwar period and his two return trips to Vietnam.

The proximity of Operation Hump to the Battle of the Ia Drang Valley—the two battles were separated by roughly a week—meant that the former was largely obscured and forgotten during the conflict and especially during the postwar period. While Conetto worked on writing the history of Operation Hump, veterans of the battle began receiving attention in mass culture. In 2005, a then-popular country duo called Big & Rich crafted a song with the counsel of Operation Hump veterans to memorialize the event. The song, "8th of November," debuted in 2005 on the album *Comin' to Your City*. The accompanying music video featured the two country vocalists somberly strumming acoustic guitars and singing in a dark and vast room surrounded by large screens that showed real video footage and photographs of the 1/503. The music video received a Grammy nomination for the Best Music Video of 2005. While Conetto believes that Big & Rich's tribute to the 1/503 was admirable and needed, the song's cultural salience palled in comparison to the popularization of Hal Moore's book *We Were Soldiers Once ... and Young: Ia Drang - The Battle That Changed the War in Vietnam* (2004) through the Hollywood film, *We Were Soldiers* (2002). Conetto wrote *The Hump* with the hope that his work would finally shed much-needed light on the

American sacrifices near Bien Hoa on November 8, 1965.

*The Hump* is an interesting and important work on an otherwise obscure battle during the Vietnam War. Conetto's prose is fluid and engrossing, while the subject matter varies from unit history to personal memoir. Conetto's versatile book would make good reading fare for undergraduates in courses on the Vietnam War or on war memoir and literature. Scholars may also want to consider the portions of this book that are Conetto's memoir and especially his candid reflections on readjusting to civilian life after military service and his struggles with PTSD.

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