

Book Review Essay Everyman in Vietnam: A Soldier's Journey into the Quagmire

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From his military induction into the United States Army until his untimely death in the Vietnam War, New Jersey native Jimmy Gilch wrote letters to family and friends often. Jimmy's mother gave the compendium of letters—detailing Jimmy's experiences from late 1965 until July 1966—to grandson Joseph Gilch, Jimmy's nephew. After taking a seminar on the Vietnam War at Rutgers University, Joseph used his uncle's letters as a basis for a senior thesis, which later turned into this co-authored book. The text encompasses an Introduction, seven chapters, and an Epilogue, which combine a chronological overview of America's early direct intervention in the Vietnam conflict with Jimmy's evolving views about the war. While balanced for the most part, the Epilogue clearly contains an indictment of U.S. policy and actions in Vietnam.

Chapters 1 and 2 covers the period from 1945 through 1963. As the United States formally accepted Japan's surrender in World War II, Vietnam's Ho Chi Minh declared his nation independent. With help from the Soviet Union and China, Vietnam resistance overcame French colonization. The 1954 Dienbienphu battle led to French withdrawal from Indochina and partitioning of Vietnam into North and South, the latter of which the United States supported financially for the rest of decade.

Both American president John F. Kennedy and South Vietnam's president Ngo Dinh Diem were killed in November 1963, altering the path of Vietnam policy. Jimmy Gilch experienced the fads and fears of the 1950s growing up in Runnenmede, New Jersey, including the music of Elvis Presley and the menacing Russian satellite Sputnik. By the 1960s, it was evident that Jimmy's aversion to school, economic situation, and cultural beliefs about communism

coincided with the need for additional military personnel to save South Vietnam.

Chapters 3 and 4 depict events from 1964 to late 1965. The Americans struggled to stabilize South Vietnam's government as President Lyndon Johnson pursued a policy of escalation in Vietnam. After his election, Johnson began sending large contingents to military bases in South Vietnam and bombing North Vietnam, justifying actions on questionable communist attacks such as the August 1964 Gulf of Tonkin incident. Jimmy Gilch was drafted in 1965 and went through basic training at Fort Dix in New Jersey. Once in country, he was assigned to the Cu Chi area outside Saigon, a stronghold for Viet Cong and home to a series of underground tunnels from which enemy forces stored weapons, tended to wounded, and used for attacks and getaways alike. Jimmy's early letters home demonstrated both his support for the war and his beliefs about Vietnamese citizens.

Chapters 5 and 6 trace the period from November 1965 until July 1966. American and North Vietnamese soldiers fought a major battle at Ia Drang Valley in November 1965, which resulted in 305 U.S. deaths. Viewing the event as a victory, Americans continued a military buildup in South Vietnam. The most common tactic used for military operations was search-and-destroy, the success of which was measured by body count. During this span, Jimmy Gilch's letters home turned against many facets of the war while simultaneously expressing sympathy for Vietnamese culture.

Chapter 7 describes the circumstances of Jimmy Gilch's death. Having avoided combat operations in May and June 1966, Jimmy's company was dispatched to the Filhol rubber plantation north of Cu Chi in July. Jimmy's

armored personnel carrier hit a command-denoted mine, killing all aboard

The Epilogue combines a critique of America's participation in the Vietnam War with a posthumous tribute to Jimmy Gilch. The authors charge that the U.S. entered the Vietnam conflict with Cold War blinders; employed a plethora of destructive weapons to no avail; conducted an ineffective bombing campaign; expended hundreds of billions on the war; and supported the losing side in the war even as the enemy lost 50 times the number of troops and citizens. The war derailed Lyndon Johnson's presidency and haunted Defense Secretary Robert McNamara the remainder of his life. Ditto for Jimmy Gilch's father, who died at 62 in 1975, unable to reconcile the loss of his son. As a final irony to their family's Vietnam War experience, the text mentions that co-author Joe Gilch's first job was assist with the demolition of a chemical factory which once produced Agent Orange, the toxic defoliant sprayed on large sections of Vietnam from 1962 until 1970.

Several books over the last generation have examined the Vietnam War from the direct vantage point of the Americans who served and fought in the conflict. Among the best-known of these is Philip Caputo's 1977 book, which details his experiences as a Marine in Vietnam during the same period as Jimmy Gilch's service in 1965-1966. Like Gilch, Caputo thought that Americans were fighting the war for a noble objective, but "somehow our idealism was lost, our morals corrupted, and the purpose forgotten" (p. 328). Robert Pisor's 1982 study focuses on a single battle within a single year: the Khe Sanh siege of 1968.

He investigates the personalities and tactics of military commanders on both sides of the conflict. Charles Carr's 2012 portrays his tour of duty in Vietnam in 1969-1970, when he was stationed with a mechanized infantry battalion in the northern Mekong Delta region. Finally, Wallace Terry's 1984 book furnishes an oral history of the Vietnam War by black veterans. The entries encompass the period from June

1965 to February 1973 and are presented sequentially.

The Adas-Gilch book certainly adds to the literature of veteran perspectives associated with the Vietnam War. The tactic of meshing a soldier's letters from the field with a mostly objective overview of the conflict adds to its uniqueness. Though relatively brief in total length, the book nonetheless contains several helpful end-features, including full replication of some of Jimmy Gilch's letters, a timeline of events, and a list of acronyms and key terms. While pictures and maps are in black-and-white, the quality of these ancillaries is good.

Perhaps the most valuable contribution of the Adas-Gilch book is its concentration with the early period of America's military operations in Vietnam. While 1966 remains a blur for most as far as the Vietnam War, that period witnessed the instability of the South Vietnamese military; uprisings against the South Vietnamese government by Buddhist monks; an expansion of American protests against the war; and a doubling of U.S.

troop strength by the end of the year, to 380,000. Given that there were over 6000 Americans killed in Vietnam in 1966, it is understandable to read in real-time Jimmy Gilch's growing disillusionment with the war, when thoughts of survival eventually supplanted dreams of victory.

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