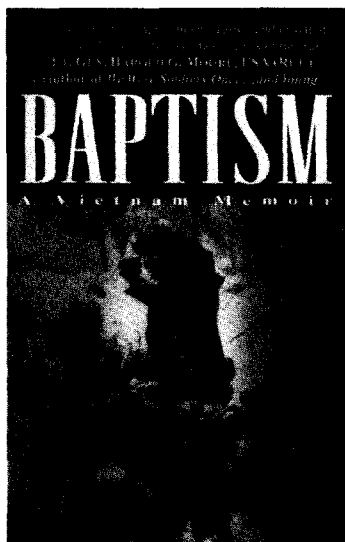


A Company Grade Officer in Vietnam

reviewed by Williamson Murray

BAPTISM: A Vietnam Memoir. By Larry Gwin. Ivy Books, New York, 1999, 353 pp., \$6.99. (Member \$6.00)



Larry Gwin graduated from Yale in June 1963. Unlike most of his classmates who proceeded immediately to graduate school, business school, or law school, Gwin followed a harsher route that many of his ancestors from Tennessee had taken throughout the history of the Republic. He received a commission as a second lieutenant in the U.S. Army and soon found himself on the way to airborne and ranger school and eventually the 82d Airborne Division at Fort Bragg.

Slightly over 2 years after graduation, Gwin found himself in Vietnam. In August 1965, he arrived in that country to serve as part of an advisory team to the 3d Battalion, 31st Regiment, 21st ARVN (Army of Vietnam) Division located in the town of Bac Lieu, directly south of the Delta. There, Lt Gwin might have spent a somewhat uncomfortable year as a junior adviser to a botched-up, weak South Vietnamese battalion.

But there was an unkinde fate in store for Gwin. Under the control of the brightest academic and political

minds in the country, the U.S. Government had decided in the summer of 1965 that it could not allow South Vietnam to tumble to the combined assault of North Vietnamese regulars and local Viet Cong guerrillas. Undoubtedly many readers of the *Marine Corps Gazette* are familiar with H.R. McMaster's *Dereliction of Duty*, a dismal history of the decision to commit the massive power of the U.S. military to the conflict.

Faraway in Washington the President, Secretary of Defense, and their military advisers not only decided that such a commitment was necessary, but that the United States would undertake no special measures such as calling up the Reserves or mobilizing the country. For most Americans, except those poor college students filled with angst at the thought that they might have to serve their country, the succeeding years would be fully "business as usual"—a time of great prosperity and immeasurable experimentation with social norms (most of it bad).

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But for those who served in Vietnam in combat units, it was another story. For units such as the 1st Air Cavalry Division (1st Air Cav) (a brand new unit developed out of the experimental 11th Air Mobile Division) in the summer of 1965, there would be shortages of soldiers even in such critical specialties as medics because there was no mobilization, nor was there any effort to hold those whose time

was up on active duty. The 1st Air Cav, which began arriving in late summer, was even short a full battalion that the Army had to constitute out of the odds and ends of various other units. Thus, Gwin found himself suddenly pulled out of his advisory assignment at Bac Lieu and assigned to a newly constituted battalion of the 1st Cavalry Division—a battalion whose soldiers had not trained together, who had little chance to acclimate themselves to their surroundings, and who were now committed to combat in a heliborne environment in which few had ever had any experience.

To make matters worse, Gwin's initial battalion commander had neither leadership nor personal qualities for such a trying position. He was soon replaced by an officer who had a good combat career as a platoon commander in World War II, but had apparently had little troop time in the intervening period to prepare him to command a battalion in combat. And, in November 1965, the 1st Air Cav found itself committed to a series of explosive battles in the Ia Drang Valley. Again, many readers of the *Gazette* will have read LtGen Harold G. Moore's and Joseph L. Gallaway's account in *We Were Soldiers Once . . . and Young* of what transpired at landing zones (LZs) "X-Ray" and "Albany" during those terrible days in early November.

It was Gwin's fate to receive his baptism under fire in the Ia Drang, not at Moore's embattled defense of X-Ray, but rather at Albany. What Gwin gives is not a history of the disaster like *We Were Soldiers Once . . . and Young*, but rather a terrifying, all too realistic account of a military disaster from the point of view of a participant. Dropped by their helicopters into LZ X-Ray at the end of Moore's battle for survival, Gwin's company (Alpha Company, 2d Battalion, 7th Cavalry Regiment), of which he was the executive officer, helped to police the wreckage of the fighting. Moore's battalion was then airlifted out while the 2d Battalion was to move overland to LZ Albany.

After a long and exhausting march overland through heavy jungle, the 2d Battalion drew close to Albany. Short-

ly before they arrived at the LZ, the battalion's lead scouts ran into a small group of North Vietnamese; the North Vietnamese were as surprised as the Americans. Two of them were taken prisoner, while others escaped. The battalion commander hustled up to the front of the column to interrogate the North Vietnamese prisoners, but other than that took no action in the apparent belief that the two were deserters—despite the fact that they were captured with their weapons.

Unfortunately, they were not deserters, but rather scouts. Moreover, the battalion commander's North Vietnamese counterpart obviously took rapid action to close with the straggling American battalion. While the Americans continued to straggle toward the LZ, the North Vietnamese, undoubtedly helped by the fact that they were looking for the American column that they had seen march away from the X-Ray battlefield, prepared to launch a ferocious attack.

The lead elements of Alpha Company with Gwin, his company commander, and the battalion command group were soon moving onto the Albany LZ; the rest of the battalion was still strung out to the rear. At this point, the North Vietnamese launched their attack on the long, strung-out column of exhausted Americans. Suddenly, a few short bursts of firing to the rear were followed "as if on cue, [by] the entire jungle . . . explod[ing] in an incredible crescendo of small-arms fire, as if everyone had opened up around us with every weapon they had. . . ."

The battalion commander, unable to grasp the enormity of what was happening, spent the first several minutes of the firefight calling for his troops to cease fire. While Gwin could hear his calls for a cease-fire, the lieutenant was watching:

men in uniforms, strange uniforms, mustard colored shirts with floppy hats. PAVN [People's Army of Vietnam]! Jesus, they were PAVN! Twenty, thirty, forty men, moving upright through the trees of the far side of the field where we'd just been [and where the rest of the battalion was]!

The rest of the day was a disaster—much of the battalion wiped out (out of approximately 400 men: 155 dead,

124 wounded, nearly a 70 percent casualty rate). Only the intervention of Air Force fighter bombers with their loads of napalm prevented the North Vietnamese from wiping out the entire 2d Battalion.

In the months after Albany, Gwin and his company faced the grim task of putting what was left of their company back together. The mood of the survivors—"so happy to be alive and

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so heartsick at what had transpired”—was not helped by Gen William Westmoreland's desire to give them a Henry V speech just after they had received their Thanksgiving meal. The men ate a cold Thanksgiving dinner.

Gwin's trials were not over. Although the 2d Battalion eventually got a competent commander, Gwin soon had to suffer the trials of a new company commander who was not only incompetent, but a coward to boot. Eventually the company commander, too, was relieved, and Gwin's year finally ended. It was one of horror, bravery, carnage, but no glory. Gwin

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himself received a Silver Star in 1996 for his heroism in the Ia Drang battles—one suspects as a result of LtGen Hal Moore's efforts, Moore being one of those exceptional officers of honor, competence, and thoughtfulness.

Marines will find this memoir of

considerable interest; it is an important book, perhaps not quite of the literary quality of Webb's *Fields of Fire*, but it has an honesty and sharpness that places it among the more important books about the conflict. Gwin does little to suggest he was a hero; instead he gives an honest, straightforward, and at times painful portrayal of his experiences. In the end he has re-created a year in the war from the point of view of a company grade officer. Rarely does he judge his superiors, and for the most part the book lets the reader judge those deserving of praise and those who not only let themselves down but who let their men down as well.

The 2d Battalion was not a happy outfit in its initial commitment. Its leadership at the top was appalling at first, but most of the company grade officers and noncommissioned officers were good. Gwin is unsparing in his depiction of the contrast between good and bad leadership. In the end, war is about human leadership under the most appalling of circumstances. From what little Gwin suggests about himself, he was a leader; certainly, many of his comrades at the company grade were.

In the end, there is a sad comment to be made about Gwin's honest, forthright story. He was one of the few of his class to answer President John F. Kennedy's call. Many of his classmates were to stay in graduate school or marry to escape the draft (including one future Secretary of Defense). And, of course, now virtually none of the "best and the brightest" from the best colleges and universities in the United States have to serve. Instead, they are earning degrees in strategic thinking and international relations that will allow them to run America's next wars from the comfort of offices within the Beltway.



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