

# Vietnam and Vann

reviewed by Jack Shulimson

**A BRIGHT SHINING LIE: John Paul Vann and America in Vietnam.** By Neil Sheehan. Random House, New York, 1988, 861 pp., \$24.95. (Member \$22.45)

Neil Sheehan has written a most engrossing work. Despite its forbidding facade—861 pages, convoluted chronology, and extensive endnotes—it is a difficult book to put down. It is not only a good read but also an important contribution to the growing literature on the Vietnam War.

Sheehan has attempted to use biography as historical symbol—John Paul Vann as the bright shining lie of America in Vietnam. This does not exactly work. Vann was too far down the chain of command to bear the entire burden of America in Vietnam. In fact when Sheehan deals with the broader political and military aspects of the U.S. involvement in Vietnam, he loses Vann altogether. Still, John Paul Vann's last 10 years were inalterably intertwined with that chapter of our national history.

Despite numerous digressions, John Paul Vann is still the core of this book. When he appears, he holds center stage. Appropriately, the book opens with a vivid description of the Vann funeral procession and ceremony at Arlington National Cemetery, complete with honor guard, the blowing of taps, and the rifle volleys over the grave. At the request of Vann's wife, the Army band incongruously played the antiwar song "Where Have All the Flowers Gone," a subtle foreshadowing of one of the themes of this volume. As a literary device, this dramatic opening permits Sheehan to introduce the impressive cast of supporting characters from President Richard Nixon to Daniel Ellsberg, who leaked the *Pentagon Papers* to Sheehan when he was a correspondent with the *New York Times*.

We first meet Vann as a lieutenant colonel in the spring of 1962, reporting as an advisor to the South Vietnamese Army. In a brief word picture, the author deftly sketches his subject:

The short lieutenant colonel . . . had an ability to convey self-confidence. He had also managed to keep his kha-

ki shirt and trousers unrumpled, despite the heat, and he gave a brisker salute than most officers would have before he accepted [Col Daniel B.] Porter's [the U.S. senior sector advisor] invitation to sit down.

Thus is Vann cast in his role as the model advisor. Clad in the figurative bright shining armor of the hero, Vann opposed both the venal South Vietnamese military leadership, who refused to fight, and the entrenched U.S. military and embassy bureaucracy in South Vietnam who were blind to the corruption and inept leadership of the Ngo Dinh Diem regime.

In one of Sheehan's curious chronological digressions, he quickly leaves Vann and relates a detailed, if somewhat one-sided, account of the American involvement with Diem following the Geneva Accords of 1955. For 60 pages there is no mention of Vann. We then return to him in January 1963 near the hamlet of Bac, shown on military maps as Ap Bac.

Sheehan is at his best with combat narrative. The battle of Ap Bac provided him the broad canvas to portray the full panoply of Vietnam War archetypes. Here we have the surrounded guerrillas, the South Vietnamese commander, more concerned with the preservation of his reputation than the defeat of the enemy, and finally Vann, the idealistic American advisor, helpless to alter the course of events. Intelligence reports located a Communist battalion in the hamlet of Ap Bac. In-

stead of slipping away as was customary for the Viet Cong, the Communist commander decided to stay and fight. Weather and circumstances worked against the government forces. Fog delayed the helilift of an ARVN (Army of the Republic of Vietnam) infantry battalion, while a South Vietnamese militia company made a futile frontal assault against a dug-in enemy. Later in the day, U.S. Army helicopters unsuspectingly lifted the ARVN battalion into a landing zone covered by enemy mortars and machineguns. The Communist gunners were to knock out five American helicopters during the day. At this point, Vann, in a spotter aircraft overhead, wanted a South Vietnamese armored personnel carrier troop to join the battle and turn the enemy flank. The Vietnamese commander refused. A furious Vann screamed into his radio to the American advisor with the armored unit, "shoot that rotten, cowardly son of a bitch right now and move out." The advisor did not shoot, and the personnel carriers did attack, but too late. Although enjoying odds of four to one, and supported by air and artillery, the South Vietnamese forces, through poor coordination and bad luck, sustained heavy casualties and failed to close the loop around the enemy battalion.

Vann endeavored to convince his military seniors on the necessity to reform the South Vietnamese military. Frustrated in his attempts to reach Gen Paul Harkins, commander, U.S. Military Assistance Command Vietnam (USMACV), Vann befriended the American press in Vietnam and gave them the details of the Ap Bac debacle. Among the members of this news corps were both Sheehan, then



John Vann visits the command post of a Republic of Vietnam airborne brigade fighting Communist forces near the Cambodian border.

with the United Press, and David Halberstam of the *New York Times*. Angered at the resulting unflattering stories, Harkins at first considered relieving Vann, but then relented. Nevertheless, Vann remained persona non grata to the American bureaucracy.

At this stage, one of the main opponents to Vann in the bureaucracy was Marine MajGen Victor H. Krulak, special assistant for counterinsurgency and special activities to both the Joint Chiefs and Secretary of Defense Robert S. McNamara. In an influential report, Krulak endorsed Harkins's handling of the war. At another juncture, Krulak prevented Vann, who had returned from Vietnam in July 1963, from briefing the Joint Chiefs on his perspective of the Vietnam War, which differed markedly from the rosy official viewpoint. Although Sheehan quotes another unnamed Marine general that "Brute Krulak is too smart not to have seen what was happening in South Vietnam—he could think circles around those Army and Air Force generals," the author rejects the suggestion that personal ambition motivated Krulak's actions. Sheehan argues that Gen Krulak's preconceptions and his reliance on Gen Harkins prevented him from seeing the situation as it actually existed. In any event, Vann, blocked on all fronts, nobly surrenders what appears to be a most promising Army career and retires.

Sheehan now begins to peel away, one by one, the layers of the aura that Vann had so carefully built for himself. In another sudden spin of the chronological wheel, the author introduces the young Vann, illegitimate and unwanted and neglected by his self-indulgent mother, Myrtle Lee Tripp. Myrtle, an alcoholic and part-time prostitute, later marries Frank Vann, the only man who shows her any affection and respect. Although abused and used by Myrtle, the senior Vann eventually adopts young John and gives him his surname. Growing up almost wild in the streets of Norfolk, VA, the boy is befriended by a young minister who persuades a rich benefactor to send him to a church school and junior college. Only later we learn that the minister suffered from his own emotional difficulties and molested young boys, including in all probability the young Vann.

Vann, nevertheless, seemingly overcame the handicaps of his background. After completing most of his



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junior college courses by March 1943, he enlisted in the Army at the age of 18. Accepted by the Army Air Corps, he became an aviation cadet and graduated as a navigator in early 1945. Commissioned a second lieutenant, he underwent further advanced training on B-29 Superfortresses. In October 1945, he married Mary Jane Allen, the sheltered daughter of a respected middle-class family from Rochester, NY.

After a short overseas tour, Vann decided to make the military a career. Receiving a Regular Army commission in July 1946, he transferred to the infantry in 1947 when the Air Force became an independent Service. At the outbreak of the Korean War, he was with the 25th Infantry Division in Japan. Shipping over with the division to Korea, Vann served as a logistics officer on the division staff and then later took over command of the division's Ranger company. Vann served with distinction during the war, but his combat record was more modest than he would later claim. Returning from Korea in 1951, Vann completed the Advanced Course at the Infantry School in Fort Benning, GA, and the following year was assigned to the ROTC program at Rutgers University in New Brunswick, NJ, where he also earned a bachelor's degree in business administration. After a successful tour in Europe, Vann attended the Army's Command and Staff School at Fort Leavenworth, KS, and then was assigned to Syracuse University to obtain a master of business administration. Selected for early promotion to lieutenant colonel in May 1961, Vann departed for Vietnam the following year, apparently one of the rising stars in the Army officer corps.

By this time, however, Vann and the reader are aware that a general's stars are not in the cards for him; he had not entirely risen above his origins. Vann was almost pathologically promiscuous. At every duty station, he

had a series of affairs that bordered on the scandalous. Because of Vann's outstanding abilities as an officer, his Army superiors and colleagues overlooked his sexual peccadilloes and continued to promote him. While at Leavenworth, however, he went too far. He seduced a 15-year-old baby sitter and made her pregnant. The Army launched an Article 32 proceeding to determine whether Vann should be court-martialed for statutory rape and conduct unbecoming an officer. With almost unbelievable self-control, Vann outwitted a lie detector. Having only the word of the girl, the Army decided against prosecuting him and dropped the charges. The investigative report remained, nevertheless, in Vann's personnel jacket. Vann told many of his close friends about his intent to retire upon 20 years of service. One senses a feeling of personal betrayal when Sheehan writes that Vann, in his struggle against the bureaucracy, "fought that battle in the luxury of believing his career was already lost, and he was decorated for conspicuous moral gallantry while deceiving Halberstam and me and all his other admirers."

We next meet Vann in 1965. After a brief sojourn with private industry, Vann returned to Vietnam in March as a province representative for the U.S. Agency for International Development, which operated much of the U.S. civilian assistance program in Vietnam. Working in Hau Nghia Province near Saigon, he again enthusiastically threw himself into his work. Vann believed the only way to win the war was to reform the South Vietnamese military and civilian government and to bring about what amounted to a social revolution in the Vietnamese countryside.

Once more Vann was bucking the system. The American buildup in country had begun. Gen William C. Westmoreland had relieved Harkins the previous year as commander, USMACV, commanding all U.S. military forces

in Vietnam. With the commitment of U.S. troops and the establishment of his base areas, the American general almost shunted aside the South Vietnamese forces. He focused on wide-ranging, mobile helicopter search and destroy operations aimed at the North Vietnamese Army (NVA) and Viet Cong (VC) regular and main force units in their mountain and jungle base retreats. Although paying lip service to pacification and winning the "hearts and minds" of the rural population, his purpose was the attrition of enemy regular formations. The American commander left to the South Vietnamese Army and local militia and the American civilian advisors the secondary role of pacification and securing the countryside.

Vann disagreed with the basic premises of Westmoreland's strategy of attrition. He believed that the priorities should be reversed. Vann wanted the emphasis on securing the countryside. He proposed through various channels a combined U.S. and South Vietnamese command structure. Under American direction, Vann would have used the South Vietnamese forces and the militia in extensive pacification campaigns. He would have kept the American forces in reserve to engage the NVA and VC regular forces when they came into the populated regions. Employing many of his concepts, he helped to improve the situation in Hau Nghia. In a briefing paper entitled "Harnessing the Revolution in South Vietnam," he outlined his ideas to American Ambassador Henry Cabot Lodge. Although not able to prevail against Westmoreland and his staff, Vann earned a promotion within the American civilian bureaucracy and became project manager of a specially trained pacification cadre that evolved into the revolutionary development teams and program. In this effort, he found a strong ally in a former Marine—Daniel Ellsberg.

In one more of Sheehan's sudden shifts, we leave Vann, and for another 30 pages we deal with the Marine war in I Corps. Although Vann never served in I Corps or with the Marines, Sheehan justifies this digression on the basis of the similarity of ideas between Vann and the senior Marine commanders: Gen Wallace M. Greene, the Commandant of the Marine Corps; LtGen Victor H. Krulak, commanding general, Fleet Marine Force Pacific; and LtGen Lewis W. Walt, the com-

mander of the III Marine Amphibious Force in Vietnam. Although not identical in detail with the Vann concepts, the Marines under Gen Walt in I Corps had instituted a pacification campaign based on what they called the "inkblot strategy" to join eventually the three Marine bases along the I Corps littoral.

Krulak, the villain of the 1963 period, now is cast in the role of hero, one of the chief dissenters to the Westmoreland war of attrition. Both Krulak and Greene shared with the MACV commander their doubts about the search and destroy strategy. Although not in the direct operational chain of command, Gen Krulak, nevertheless, through dint of personality and influence, took his case outside the normal channels. In separate conversations with both Secretary of Defense McNamara and President Lyndon Johnson, he argued against the Westmoreland strategy. Neither Johnson nor McNamara, however, were willing to overrule their field commander.

After the North Vietnamese came directly across the demilitarized zone in the summer of 1966, Gen Westmoreland ordered in October that the Marines establish a base at Khe Sanh in northern Quang Tri Province near the Laotian border. In a backchannel message, Krulak informed Gen Walt of his unhappiness with the current American strategy:

I believe they [the NVA] are glad we have a battalion invested in the defense of Khe Sanh, and that we have

five other battalions operating in the inhospitable jungle which might otherwise be engaged in Revolutionary Development Support. . . . We may expect him [the enemy] to hang on to our forces in Quang Tri as long as he can.

Gen Walt, the III MAF commander, was caught in the middle. On the one hand, he had Krulak urging him to do more in pacification, while on the other, he had Westmoreland directing more and more forces to the conventional campaign up in the north. In actuality, Walt had no choice. Westmoreland was the MACV commander and Walt's direct superior. If Westmoreland wanted Marines at Khe Sanh, there would be Marines at Khe Sanh. Although Sheehan recognizes Walt's dilemma, the author unfairly contends that the III MAF commander did not have "Krulak's acute perception that if Westmoreland had his way, Marines would die from that day forth for the benefit of the enemy." The situation was never that black and white.

If Sheehan criticizes Walt for sending Marines to Khe Sanh, he offers nothing but praise for Walt as a tactician. Sheehan covers in great detail the hill fights outside Khe Sanh in the spring of 1967. After the enemy, entrenched in heavily fortified bunkers on Hill 881 South, bloodily repulsed several fruitless attempts by the Marines to storm the hill, Walt intervened. He called off the infantry and directed Marine air to drop 750-, 1,000-, and 2,000-pound bombs with delayed fuzes.



Gen Walt, pictured here with LtCol William W. "Woody" Taylor, then commander of 3d Battalion, 4th Marines, was caught in the middle.



LtGen Krulak's emphasis on pacification shaped Marines performance. Gen Greene (R) believed just as firmly in the concept.

With the bombs penetrating the ground before exploding, even a "miss was still effective . . . the subterranean shock waves tended to collapse the bunkers from beneath. The concussion from the big bombs was disabling in itself . . . and the delay also gave the pilot time to fly clear." Despite the detail on the hill fights, Sheehan surprisingly makes no mention of M16s jamming during the battle. This latter problem resulted in a Congressional investigation and eventually some modification in the barrels of the weapons.

After this interlude with the Marines, Sheehan again returns to Vann, who continues to receive promotions within the civilian pacification program, now called Civil Operations and Revolutionary Development Support (CORDS) and headed by Robert Komer. Vann by mid-1967 was the Deputy for CORDS for LtGen Fred Weyand's II Field Force, Vietnam, responsible for pacification in III Corps, an area that included Saigon.

Despite Vann's increased responsibility in the pacification hierarchy, Sheehan almost seems to lose interest in Vann's role in the war. The author concentrates mostly on Vann's legerdemain in maintaining two Vietnamese mistresses without either one knowing about the other's existence. When Sheehan does return to the war, he concentrates on the larger picture: McNamara's disillusionment with the war, Westmoreland's request for more men, the intelligence dispute in 1967 between the Central Intelligence Agency and the MACV staff over the size of the enemy, and finally the Tet offensive.

According to Sheehan, the Tet offensive provided Vann with the ration-

alization to continue in the war. Vann believed that despite the Communist psychological gains, they had paid too high a price—the loss of many of their irreplaceable cadre in the hamlets and villages. While many of Vann's closest associates, such as Daniel Ellsberg, became disillusioned, Vann saw an opportunity for victory. By May of 1971, Vann had become the senior U.S. advisor in II Corps, the equivalent of a major general in the U.S. Army. In effect, he controlled all American resources in that Corps sector and had an American brigadier general as his deputy.

Here, instead of focusing upon his subject's increasing responsibility in the conduct of the war, Sheehan returns again to Vann's personal life—his careful balancing act with his two mistresses and his strange relationship with Daniel Ellsberg. While angry at Ellsberg's leaking of the *Pentagon Papers*, Vann maintained the outward forms of the friendship. At the same time, he provided government investigators information about Ellsberg and counseled the Government how to proceed against his erstwhile friend.

Despite Vann's emphasis on the "other war" and his supposed dedication to the restructuring of Vietnamese society, Sheehan surprisingly devotes very little space in his narrative to these themes. He covers the period from Tet 1968 to March 1972 in slightly over 30 pages. On the other hand, he uses approximately the same number of pages to describe Vann's role in assisting the South Vietnamese to throw back the enemy offensive in the spring of 1972. Despite his disparagement of Westmoreland's strategy, Sheehan, like Vann, appears to revel in the big unit war. During the enemy's Easter offensive, the author depicts Vann, although supposedly in an advisory role, in effect, the II Corps field commander. Vann flies from the coast to the highlands to rally the shaken South Vietnamese units. He orders and coordinates massive B-52 strikes against North Vietnamese troop concentrations. At the end of May, South Vietnamese Army units with supporting American airpower turned back the NVA tank-led assault against Kontum City in the Central Highlands. On 9 June 1972, John Paul Vann died in a helicopter crash on his way to Kontum, the site of his last victory. And here ends Sheehan's narrative.

Several themes weave their way through *A Bright Shining Lie*, but do not necessarily make a whole cloth.

First let us grant that Sheehan is knowledgeable about both the literature and much of the documentation of the war. As the channel for Daniel Ellsberg, the author is obviously familiar with the *Pentagon Papers* and makes good use of them. He took advantage of the official unclassified collections at both the U.S. Army Military History Institute and the Marine Corps Historical Center. With the permission of the Vann family, Sheehan had access to Vann's Army personnel jacket and to his personal papers. Sheehan, moreover, conducted hundreds of interviews as indicated by the impressive list of names in one of the appendixes. Most important, Sheehan could tap the resources of his own experiences in Vietnam, first as a reporter for United Press, later as a reporter for the *New York Times*, and finally from his visit to Vietnam in 1972 to begin research for this book.

This last factor, however, proves in the end to be as much a disadvantage as an advantage. Given Sheehan's personal involvement in the war, he cannot be the cool, dispassionate observer. In fact, it probably accounts for his inability to determine the book he wanted to write: a biography of Vann, a history of the Vietnam War, or a therapeutic account of his own brush with the war. The book attempts to be all of these, but ultimately is not any one of them. It succeeds best as biography, but even here Sheehan still has not come to terms with John Paul Vann. Important questions go unanswered. For example, how much knowledge could Vann obtain of the Vietnamese and of their society and culture when he never learned their language? Moreover, Sheehan never resolved Vann's fascination, or his own for that matter, for the big unit war and the destructive power of American airpower with the pacification strategy that Vann advocated.

Notwithstanding the flaws of this book, Sheehan has raised important questions about the American involvement in Vietnam. From the very beginning, the United States deceived itself as to the reality of the situation there. Even if we disagree with Sheehan that the war was a lost cause from the very start, the United States took on very lightly and almost as an afterthought intervention in another country. War is a serious business and should be entered upon for serious reasons, even wars of "low intensity."

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