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Book Review: Nguyen, N. H. C. (2016). South Vietnamese Soldiers: Memories of the Vietnam War and After. Santa Barbara, CA: Praeger. 289 pp. ISBN: 978-1-4408-3241-3

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# Journal of Southeast Asian American Education and Advancement

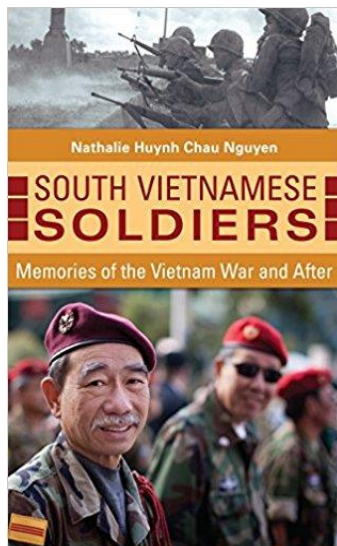
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Nathalie Huynh Chau Nguyen provides a strong oral history in which those who were associated with the *Republic of Vietnam Armed Forces* (RVNAF) discuss in their own words their experiences during the war and its aftermath. A small group of other researchers have presented oral histories from the perspective of South Vietnamese soldiers residing in the United States as well as American soldiers (Brigham, 2006; Li, 2012; Lee, 1992). Nguyen observes that in Vietnam the stories and point of view of the Communist side are expressed in the nation's museums, textbooks and other history sharing institutions. Nguyen's rather unique focus is on the experiences of those associated with the RVNAF who resettled in Australia following their escape from Vietnam in the post-war years.

A particular emphasis of the author are memories and recounted experiences of Republic of Vietnam Armed Forces Soldiers and those who served in affiliated Women's Armed Forces Corps. Those who served in different branches of the armed forces – soldiers, airmen, the navy and army medics recount their memories in distinct sections of the volume. An expressed goal of the author is to increase the visibility of the experiences of members of the RVNAF in histories of the Vietnam War. Most of those individuals who share oral histories in the book recall especially salient and often poignant memories of the war including key events they encountered, life in the aftermath in reeducation camps, their escape from Vietnam in many cases by boat to Malaysia and later life after resettlement in Australia. In her efforts to bring together the diverse anecdotes of her informants, major themes of the author include loss and resilience as well as ways these veterans memorialize the country of South Vietnam and the armed forces they served in.

Nguyen's work provides readers with vivid accounts of experiences on and nearby the battlefield during the war years. Nguyen Manh Tien, a medic with RVNF shares:

“My unit was the 32<sup>nd</sup> Ranger Group. We were stationed mainly in An Loc, a hot spot. We were surrounded by jungle, which was heavily infiltrated by the communists, and the only



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way to get in and out was by helicopter. The communists had heat-sensitive rockets, and to counter them the pilots would drop flares. We always waited for the supplying helicopter because it meant fresh food and vegetables, and especially letters from the family and from my lover: very exciting. Every day, I would look to the horizon to see the flares and special smoke that indicated that a helicopter was coming. Every three to four months, we were allowed about a week's leave to fly back to Saigon to visit our families, and do some work at the base in Bien Hoa, and we would then be back in An Loc. It was a hard time but we accepted that, it was our duty in wartime.

In An Loc, I remember going to the front line and visiting the soldiers in what we called *chot*. *Chot* were like key positions to keep the enemy away. Each had about four or five Ranger soldiers. They all dug a hole and stayed there, they lived there actually, because they could not leave the position. There was a lot of basalt in the area and when it rained, the water couldn't drain away, the mud was like glue, and you have to imagine the soldiers living there with water up to their waste day and night. Quite a few were evacuated to me with terrible gangrene on their feet. So I always feel that the soldiers, the unnamed soldiers, were the real heroes of the war, they suffered a lot and nobody knows." (pp. 75-76).

Nguyen's informants also share the poor experiences they suffered in the reeducation camps set up by the Vietnamese communist government after the war. Tien, a former medic with the RVNF states:

"When they announced that ex-officers would go for ten days of reeducation, 90 to 95 percent fell into that trap. It wasn't ten days but nearly three years for me. For others it was fifteen to seventeen years. We were working in starvation conditions and the only thing we could think about was food, food, food. I saw university professors fighting each other for a piece of corn and some burnt rice. Some people managed to retain their sense of integrity and self-worth but many couldn't. I was moved a few times. At first, we were in Trang Lon for about two months, then they moved us to Long Khanh, and then Bu Gia Map in Phuoc Long Province. We had to clear the forest and build our own accommodation. When I was in Trang Lon – it was a big area so there were many different camps – I heard that a pharmacist who graduated at the same time as me in the Military Medical Academy, his name was Mai Gia Thuoc, he killed himself out of desperation." (p. 81).

Many of the informants also shared with Nguyen the details of their escape from Vietnam and sometimes harrowing journey by sea to Malaysia and then eventual resettlement to a new life in Australia. Tien, the former medic with RVNF also relates:

"It was June 1980. A nine-day sea voyage. A small boat, 9 metres long, with thirty-three people on board. We encountered pirates seven times. They came close to raping the women but the captain shouted in Thai and slapped the face of one or two of the young men. Paradoxically, we were kept alive by the pirates. The first ones wrecked our engine, the next batch felt sorry for us and gave us some food and water. The final batch towed us until we could see the coastline, and then cut off the rope. It took us two days to row, taking turns, using makeshift oars. It was Malaysia. They took most of the refugees to Bidong but because I was a doctor and I went with my fiancé and her brother, the three of us were

taken to Kota Bharu, a nearby refugee camp which had already closed and in which about 1,000 people were waiting for resettlement. It was eighty days from the time I left Vietnam until the day I set foot in Sydney on 19 August 1980. (pp. 81-82).

In *South Vietnamese Soldiers*, Nguyen provides valuable historical information on the Vietnam War from the perspective of RVNF personnel who resettled in Australia. Readers also learn how many of the informants remade their lives in some cases finding work in related fields and/or becoming active in social services or veterans groups serving the Vietnamese Australian community. Accounts of how informants have dealt with the losses they experienced during and after the war and how they work to keep the memory alive of the RVNF and South Vietnam also will be of interest to historians of the Vietnam War and those who study how refugees and immigrants deal with loss and seek to create new lives after resettlement in host societies. This work is strongly recommended.

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## About the Author



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