



Under Fire with ARVN Infantry: Memoir of a Combat Advisor in Vietnam, 1966-1967

By Bob Worthington

Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2018, 240 pages

Reviewed by Maj Timothy Heck, U.S. Marine Corps Reserve

Bob Worthington's *Under Fire with ARVN Infantry: Memoir of a Combat Advisor in Vietnam 1966-1967* is a must-read memoir for those seeking to understand America's involvement with the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) at the tactical level during the early years. Written with humility, honesty, and keen self-reflection, Worthington's writing is absent much of the bravado or exaggeration found in many military memoirs. Instead, readers will find an honest assessment of American and South Vietnamese soldiers as Worthington saw them at the company and battalion level, along with his own role and performance. His later life as a psychologist and journalism professor is evident in the writing and analysis present.

In 1968, David Halberstam released *One Very Hot Day*, a short novel which followed a group of American advisors awaiting an ambush in South Vietnam, early in the American engagement there. The book captures the essence of the advisor mission: confusion, isolation, and the ever-present sense of "otherness" when living and working with foreign forces. The advisors in *One Very Hot Day* would not look out of place in Worthington's memoirs nor he in theirs. Indeed, many advisor veterans of Iraq and Afghanistan will find common ground between Worthington's experience and theirs.

Chronologically organized, the book tells the training, deployment, and personal growth of its author in a meaningful and thought-provoking way. In 1966, America's involvement in Vietnam was growing, causing an increased need for liaison and advisors forces to support the ARVN. Worthington, after lengthy training, was assigned to support ARVN units operating in northern South Vietnam, including the ARVN garrison at DaNang. Initially disappointed by the lack of frontline combat opportunities, Worthington was reassigned to an ARVN infantry battalion conducting operations near Hoi An. His unit, the 3rd Battalion of the 51st ARVN Regiment, was one of the better South Vietnamese units and led by largely competent officers and senior NCOs.

Direct action operations, followed by training and more operations, continued with Worthington gaining increased proficiency and familiarity with the ARVN troops. The book's narrative high point is the eight-day battle between ARVN and North Vietnamese Army troops near Nong Son, South Vietnam's only working coal mine. The 320-man ARVN battalion engaged the significantly larger 1,200-man NVA regiment in a battle whose outcome was by no means certain. Here, again, Worthington's writing is reflective and self-aware. He openly admits to the mistakes he made when interacting with the Vietnamese.

Overall, the author's experiences as a combat advisor during the early American buildup in Vietnam are clear and lack much of the self-aggrandizement seen in other autobiographical works. Worthington does not portray himself as a particularly heroic nor valorous Soldier. He was, as he comments in the end, "a competent infantry leader."

Under Fire with ARVN Infantry is recommended for Soldiers assigned to advisor teams, security force assistance brigades, and those looking to better understand this crucial aspect of irregular warfare.

(As a civilian, Timothy Heck is the deputy directing editor of the Modern War Institute at West Point. While on active duty, he served as an advisor in Afghanistan to the Afghan National Security Forces.)