



Danger Close!: A Vietnam Memoir

By Phil Gioia

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Reviewed by LTC (Retired) Rick Baillergeon

Never judge a book by its cover. How many times in life have you heard that old adage? Yet, despite this sage advice, many of us will literally judge a book by its cover (or title). More specifically, we will make an assumption on the content of a book by its title. This is exactly what occurred to me when I first picked up Phil Gioia's *Danger Close! A Vietnam Memoir*. My first thought was this was a volume focusing solely on Gioia's Vietnam War experience. After completing this superb book, I found it was far more comprehensive in scope than the title suggested.

Before addressing the book itself and its numerous merits, it is imperative that a review of a memoir should provide a concise biography of the author. In regard to Gioia, he grew up in a military family and graduated from the Virginia Military Institute (VMI). Upon graduation, he served as an Infantry officer for nearly 10 years. During his service, he served two tours in Vietnam (as a platoon leader and then as a company commander) and earned two Silver Stars, a Bronze Star with 'V' device, and two Purple Hearts. Upon leaving the Army, he spent 30 years in the civilian sector in the areas of technology, finance, and consulting. He has additionally been published many times in military history publications and appeared in several military history documentaries.

As my opening paragraph emphasized, Gioia has crafted a memoir which delves into significantly more than his two tours in Vietnam. In fact, the memoir focuses on three specific aspects of his life from the period of 1946-1970. These years include his childhood years, his Army schooling (mainly Airborne and Ranger Courses), and his two tours in the Vietnam War. Through it all, he weaves a narrative on what life was like during specific periods of the memoir.

Gioia alludes to this focus in the volume's initial paragraph. He states, "This memoir is a window into a life begun seventy-five years ago, in a very different America. It is of growing up in an Army family during the Cold War, and of combat as a young infantry officer, in a war fought long ago, and far away." I would like to address each of his areas below.

The author's discussion of his childhood years is superb. Gioia grew up in an Army family, and he provides a unique perspective on many things most of us are very familiar with. These include moving numerous times, changing schools, meeting new kids, etc. Gioia is a superb storyteller, and he offers abundant short stories that will clearly keep you engaged. He sums up his childhood and its effect on him by stating "...in spite of the challenges, it was a great way to grow up. It informed my future character with three traits I may not have developed otherwise: flexibility, volunteerism, and leadership."

Gioia essentially devotes the second portion of the memoir to address the period from the time he entered VMI until his first deployment to Vietnam. Personally, the highlight of this discussion is his reflection of

Airborne and Ranger Courses. The author dedicates a significant amount of copy to describe these experiences. They are pages well spent, and for many it will bring up some fond (and not so fond) memories.

The remainder of the volume keys on the author's two combat tours in Vietnam. These were as a platoon leader in the 82nd Airborne Division from February-April 1968 and as a company commander in the 1st Cavalry Division (Airmobile) from April 1969 to April 1970. In both cases, he was medically evacuated back to the U.S.

Gioia's discussion of this experience in Vietnam is brilliant. It rivals any prior Vietnam War memoir I've read in the past. There are several reasons why this discussion is so special. First, the author has an innate ability to capture on paper the spectrum of emotions displayed before, during, and after combat. Second, he is incredibly skilled at describing the sights, smells, and tastes of the battlefield. Third, Gioia translates the human dimension of war better than any author I've read in many years. Finally, he selects content which greatly interests and appeals to readers.

I found the biggest surprise of the memoir was Gioia's decision to weave commentary and discussion on what America was like during different periods of the memoir. Consequently, readers will get insight into what the country was like following World War II, during the Korean War, and before and during the Vietnam War. I found this to be a tremendous added benefit to the volume, and it provides a better understanding of the author's life.

In a volume of this quality, there are obviously many strengths displayed throughout its pages. The first is the book's superb readability; this is an incredibly conversant memoir. Gioia writes in a very informal and free-flowing style. Additionally, as addressed earlier, he has the ability to articulate in words areas which most authors struggle with. In total, you will not find a more readable book, no matter the genre, than *Danger Close!*

The organization of the volume is clearly added value to readers. Gioia has decided to structure the volume into 22 chapters. Within each chapter, he positions numerous "diary" entries (with outstanding titles) related to the chapter focus. I found this organization extremely easy to navigate, and the breaks between the entries make for excellent reflection time for the reader.

Another significant strength of the memoir is the visuals Gioia has inserted. In two separate sections, he has inserted nearly 60 visuals. They are predominately photographs but also include maps, cartoons, a division Christmas card, and a unit "business card." These visuals superbly complement Gioia's words and are even more powerful because of the outstanding captions the author has added to each of them. In the volume's afterword, Gioia summarizes his life experiences by stating, "It has been quite a journey." In detailing this journey, he has crafted one of the best books I have read. It is a volume which is beautifully written, skillfully organized, and impossible to put down once you begin reading. It is also a book which reinforces that you indeed can't judge a book by its cover!