



2011-016

James T. Gillam. *Life and Death in the Central Highlands: An American Sergeant in the Vietnam War, 1968–1970*. Denton: Univ. of North Texas Press, 2010. Pp. xx, 295. ISBN 978–1–57441–292–5.

Review by Peter Brush, Vanderbilt University (p.brush@vanderbilt.edu).

Apparently these are the days when American Vietnam War veterans feel the need to write about their war-time experiences, lest they be lost to the passing of time: hundreds of memoirs have appeared in the last two years.<sup>1</sup> In *Life and Death in the Central Highlands*,<sup>2</sup> James Gillam provides an account of his life during the period 1968–70. Dismissed from Ohio University for poor academic performance, he received his draft notice in August 1968 and arrived in Vietnam about a year later, after extensive military training. As an infantryman, he saw substantial combat in the following nine months. He participated in many search and destroy missions, killed several enemy soldiers, and was repeatedly wounded. Although promoted regularly and rapidly, Gillam never embraced the culture of military life and has nothing good to say about the US Army.

Gillam received a doctorate at Ohio State University and presently teaches Chinese history at Spelman College in Atlanta. This is his first book (he has also written two scholarly articles). His background is critical to how he perceives and writes about his experiences: *Life and Death ...* “is the product of all the pieces of the puzzle that I call my identity” (xv). His service in Vietnam is an integral part of that identity, not just something that happened forty years ago.

This book blends monograph and memoir. The monograph relies on primary sources from US military archives plus various secondary sources. According to Gillam, these materials, being impersonal and objective, only tell part of the story. By contrast, the memoir deals with fear, anxiety, terror, and closure.<sup>3</sup>

The famous 1968 Tet Offensive resulted in high casualty rates for Americans as well as Vietnamese. As a result, the US Army had many vacancies, and draft boards across the country worked hard to fill them. Gillam, an African American, was not an enthusiastic draftee: he went AWOL his first night in the Army and compared his recruit training to slavery. Fed up with harassment by instructors, Gillam kicked one of them in the head, inflicting a broken nose and concussion. Nonetheless, he was named outstanding recruit trainee and went on to infantry training, where he suffered a broken hand. To minimize the time he would have to spend in the Army (and in Vietnam), Gillam volunteered for the NCO (noncommissioned officer) Academy at Fort Benning, Georgia. Normally, it took four to five years for a soldier to achieve the rank of sergeant or staff sergeant. However, due to the existing manpower shortage, a top academy graduate could achieve that rank after twenty-four weeks. Not all was harmony at Fort Benning; NCO trainers “despised the captains and lieutenants” (29) who oversaw them. After only ten months in the Army, Gillam was made a sergeant. After serving briefly as an instructor—he managed to both publically tell a senior NCO “to kiss my ass” (34) and be named outstanding NCO of the training cycle—it was off to Vietnam.

Gillam reported for duty with the 4th Infantry Division in September 1969. By January 1970, he had been promoted to staff sergeant and was serving as a squad leader. The American army in Vietnam was experiencing widespread problems of morale and discipline, including “class and caste antagonisms of officer versus enlisted men and professional soldier, or Lifer verses draftee” (104). Although he held the traditional rank of a career soldier, Gillam harbored “prejudices against officers, Lifers, and West Point graduates”

1. A WorldCat search (4 Jan 2011) for “Vietnam War, 1961–1975—Personal narratives, American” yielded 388 records for 2008–10.

2. Previous edition: *War in the Central Highlands of Vietnam, 1968–1970: An Historian’s Experience* (Lewiston, NY: E. Mellen Pr, 2006).

3. The present revision emphasizes memoir over monograph, curtailing the political content of the original edition in favor of a more personal account.

(266), who embraced the Army's goals of winning the war. Gillam, like other draftees, simply wanted to return home alive.

The post-Tet Army was less professional than the one that had arrived in Vietnam in 1965. Gillam writes that pistols were confiscated from enlisted men to prevent self-wounding to avoid combat and be sent to the rear (212). On one road clearing operation, the men were "really pissed" (83) when Gillam refused to let them drink beer on patrol. At the outset of another operation, the men were "as usual ... hung over" (232-33). In another awkward situation, he had to forbid them to cut the ears off a live prisoner (103). Toward the end of his tour, Gillam adopted "the short timers' habit of sitting inside a bunker as much as possible" (233) on a search and destroy mission. Preparing to leave Vietnam, he threatened to kick a captain's "tubby ass" (238). Just before embarking, he punched and kicked an Air Force policeman and was told to stop threatening to "rip his throat out" if he wanted to board the airplane (246). He then punched and broke the ribs of an obnoxious civilian at the Chicago airport on his way home to Cleveland.

Although his considerable training made him a technically proficient soldier, Gillam never developed the sympathy or loyalty the Army desired in its NCO corps. He remained a violent man in a violent environment. He threatened to shoot a fellow soldier for not maintaining a clean weapon ("[he] was just not into clean weapons" [165]). He considered shooting his company executive officer out of prejudice against officers who wanted to win the war (266). He wanted to murder an Army sergeant he suspected of black market activities, but was prevented from doing so by military police (192-93).

Errors are scattered throughout: "Khe Sahn," the best known battle of the war, is twice misspelled (7) even in this revised edition. South Vietnamese General Loan famously executed a VC during Tet with a .38 Special, not a .357 Magnum (7). Walter Cronkite's famous "Vietnam is a stalemate" speech aired from New York at the end of February 1968, not Saigon early in the month (8). Gillam claims President Johnson, after listening to the Cronkite broadcast, lamented "if I have lost Walter Cronkite, I have lost Mr. Average Citizen" (8). In fact, Johnson did not say this. Cobra helicopter gunships fire 2.75-inch, not 122mm rockets (91, 200). Gillam refers to a South Vietnamese Army corps commander as a "Maj." (41) instead of major general. He claims North Vietnamese Army [NVA] soldiers coming down the Ho Chi Minh Trail in 1969 were "as well equipped as any unit in the US Army" (36), overlooking the armored personnel carriers, self-propelled guns, and helicopter gunships of the US Army in Vietnam. He describes the devastation and bomb craters he witnessed after a B-52 raid, but oddly cites a journal article to support this personal observation (getting the author's name, article title, and page number wrong). He characterizes Operation Ranch Hand as a "chemical rain of death" (133) and non-explosive defoliants and herbicides as "weapons of mass destruction" (116) deployed in the "kind of warfare America went to war in Iraq to prevent" (133). Gillam seems unaware that these herbicides were routinely used in the United States at the time and that the South Vietnamese government had urged their use in Vietnam.<sup>4</sup> He maintains that the NVA, to further its strategic aim of demoralizing US forces, executed two American POWs in September 1969 (102). In fact, the two POWs were captured by the Viet Cong in 1963 and executed in 1965. Certainly the Viet Cong's strategies and tactics in 1963-65 differed from those of the North Vietnamese in 1969-70.

Historian George Lepre has written about the role of the NCO corps in the decline in morale and discipline among US ground forces in the second half of the Vietnam War.<sup>5</sup> Earlier in the war, NCOs, especially staff NCOs (E-6 and above), had managed and mitigated conflict and turbulence during periods of social change. After Tet in 1968, many NCOs who had skillfully overseen the enlisted ranks left the service. Too few replacements for such experienced men were available, since the Army decided not to call up the reserves. Stoppag measures like the "Shake and Bake" NCO Candidate School program by which Gillam so quickly received his sergeant stripes failed to instill the high performance standards achieved in 1965-68. These programs could teach technical skills, but, without the requisite military service, the resulting sergeants did not identify with the values and culture of their predecessors.

4. Paul Frederick Cecil, *Herbicide Warfare: The RANCH HAND Project in Vietnam* (NY: Praeger, 1986) 25.

5. *Fragging: Why US Soldiers Assaulted Their Officers in Vietnam* (Lubbock: Texas Tech U Pr, 2011) 218.

The book's glossary contains obvious terms such as "mortar" and "KIA" but omits many less familiar ones (chieu hoi, military crest, fire base, NVA, AK-47, reaction force). REMF is defined as "a man who lived in a safe area and took advantage of those who did not" (284), unfairly denigrating doctors, chaplains, and bomber pilots. The index, too, suffers from serious omissions: for example, Walter Cronkite, Nguyen Ngoc Loan, and the Tet Offensive (!).

Seen as a monograph, Gillam's book contributes no new evidence or analysis regarding such important topics as the Ho Chi Minh Trail, Vietnamization, Communist goals during the Tet Offensive, and the Cambodian invasion. Much of the narrative is tediously over-reliant on descriptions from archival sources. More interesting are Gillam's personal recollections. These range from bizarre (exchanging clothes with a dead soldier because the corpse's uniform was cleaner, killing a cobra in his bunker with a grenade, and suffering four broken ribs in an encounter with two orangutans) to terrifying (strangling a Vietnamese to death in a dark tunnel). There are some exaggerations: leather combat boots, if kept wet, "would rot off your feet in a couple of weeks" (105); no, but the boots would get moldy. Punji stake wounds "at minimum ... could give you gangrene or hepatitis" (276); "at minimum" such wounds resulted in neither. A few descriptions are quite compelling: Gillam's account of the planning and execution of his first ambush (68–70) is so thorough that this reviewer feels he could carry one out himself. However, as a memoir, *Life and Death in the Central Highlands* lacks the impact and eloquence of the best of the genre.<sup>6</sup>

In 1971, Marine Colonel Robert D. Heintz Jr., in one of the most influential articles ever written about the American forces in Vietnam, asserted that "The morale, discipline and battleworthiness of the US Armed Forces are, with a few salient exceptions, lower and worse than at any time in this century and possibly in the history of the United States."<sup>7</sup> Gillam's book unintentionally confirms Heintz's description of the problems facing the US military in the latter half of the Vietnam War. It also corroborates Lepre's assessment of the NCOs' inability in this period to solve critical problems of discipline, morale, and professionalism.

---

6. E.g., Ron Kovic, *Born on the Fourth of July* (NY: McGraw-Hill, 1976), Philip Caputo, *A Rumor of War* (NY: Holt, 1977), W.D. Ehrhart, *Vietnam-Perkasie: A Combat Marine Memoir* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 1983), and Robert Mason, *Chickenhawk* (NY: Viking, 1983).

7. "The Collapse of the Armed Forces," *Armed Forces Journal* (7 Jun 1971) 1.