

Special Agent, Vietnam: A Naval Intelligence Memoir

Intelligence in Recent Public Literature

Douglass L. Hubbard. Washington, DC: Potomac Books, 2006. 269 pages, photos, index.

Reviewed by Michael J. Sulick

Special Agent, Vietnam, the first published comprehensive account of naval counterintelligence in Vietnam, is a fascinating history of the activities of the Naval Investigative Service (NIS) in Vietnam from 1962 to the fall of Saigon in April 1975. Author Douglas Hubbard, the longest serving NIS agent in Vietnam, chronicles the demanding counterintelligence and criminal investigation missions of the NIS through detailed vignettes of cases drawn from his own experience and interviews with colleagues. In tracking counterintelligence and criminal leads, Hubbard writes, "there was often a strange twist in the Vietnam environment." Counterintelligence and criminal investigations, inherently complex even in peacetime, presented special challenges in Vietnam, where witnesses died in combat before trials and where even travel to a crime scene involved dodging enemy ambushes and mortar attacks. Hubbard captures the "strange twists" of the Vietnam conflict and examines the murky undercurrents of war, the crime and corruption that were unfortunate byproducts of the American experience in Vietnam.

At its peak the NIS contingent in Vietnam numbered fewer than two dozen agents, all of them volunteers, and the striking breadth of investigations vividly detailed in this book reflect the challenges faced by this small

cadre of dedicated professionals. NIS agents were responsible for both counterintelligence and criminal activities, and Hubbard's account reflects the overwhelming burdens of tackling both missions. Early in the conflict, counterintelligence information was a vital necessity as civil unrest increased and Vietcong infiltration became an overarching concern. As the war escalated, however, more troops and more materiel in theater resulted in more crime, and NIS agents became swamped with investigations running the gamut from bizarre murders to shipping pornography through the mail. Counterintelligence was shortchanged in the process, and, as Hubbard notes, even toward the end of the war "counterintelligence remained a low priority."

Counterintelligence collection, according to NIS information for agents newly assigned to Vietnam, was mostly based on "liaison with other U.S. government agencies, personal observation, and contact with Vietnamese sources or foreigners who are in some manner associated with the U.S. Navy or U.S. Marine Corps." Hubbard portrays some of the sources in broad brush strokes, and they cover a wide spectrum ranging from Canadians in the International Control Commission, American correspondents, Vietnamese navy informants to domestic employees, office staff and a Chinese tailor who ferreted out information from customers. NIS agents did not pursue classical counterintelligence penetrations of the Viet Cong (VC) or North Vietnamese Army (NVA), but they were often able to shape snippets of information from their diverse sources into insightful analysis. According to Hubbard, domestic employees gathered accurate information on potential coup attempts against the South Vietnamese government during 1964-65. In another instance, Viet Cong "tax collectors" stopped trucks along Route 1, Vietnam's national highway, to demand bribes, and NIS agents analyzed information from sources about roadmarkers near which these highwaymen operated to identify enemy units and pinpoint their locations.

Special Agent, Vietnam provides more insights into NIS criminal investigations than its counterintelligence operations. Hubbard notes in his preface that his requests for access to NIS Vietnam reports under Freedom of Information Act provisions were denied, which may explain the heavier focus on criminal investigations in the book. A critical aspect of the NIS counterintelligence mission was counterterrorism, though the term was hardly in vogue during the Vietnam conflict. One of the highlights of Special Agent, Vietnam is the portrayal of threats from Viet Cong terrorism and sabotage. NIS and other agencies were responsible for providing early warning indicators of potential Viet Cong sabotage against US interests,

and Hubbard effectively conveys the urgency and frustration his fellow agents experienced in coping with the increasing terrorist threat. A Viet Cong assassin dubbed the Dragon Lady killed a Navy lieutenant and other victims as she rode past them as a passenger on a motorbike. The Viet Cong put the omnipresent motorbikes on Saigon streets to more destructive use by packing explosives in the frames to target Americans and their hangouts. Car bombs, the preferred terrorist method of a later age, also seriously damaged the US embassy and an officer barracks, resulting in extensive casualties. The parallel to modern day Iraq is unmistakable and serves as a reminder that terrorist attacks against American interests and civilians in war zones have roots well in the past. The reader of *Special Agent, Vietnam* will sense the tension felt by current terrorist hunters in the intense efforts of NIS agents in Vietnam to thwart Viet Cong sabotage.

In presenting these incidents and NIS operations, Hubbard deftly weaves in the political context in which they occurred, both in Vietnam and in the United States. He has a distinct knack for conveying the impact of larger political events on the everyday work of an NIS agent, for example, the increasing unrest resulting from the rotting regime of Ngo Dinh Diem in South Vietnam and the growing disenchantment with the war in the United States. Opposition to the war and inflamed racial tensions in the United States reverberated across the Pacific as a handful of US servicemen vented their own opposition in criminal activities.

One particularly heinous crime in this regard was known as "fragging," the slang term derived from the M-26 fragmentation grenades that disgruntled troops would roll or pitch into a tent to kill a superior. This lethal practice represented a dark side of the Vietnam experience that has received little in-depth treatment in histories of the conflict. While some incidents were motivated by opposition to the war or racial militancy, most were individual acts of revenge against a particular officer or non-commissioned officer. NIS had the sad duty to investigate all fragging incidents involving US Navy and Marine Corps personnel, and Hubbard explores a number of these cases in significant depth: a sergeant blown in half by a grenade in his tent, a Marine Corps captain losing his legs to a booby-trapped grenade, a Marine from a militant black group fragging a crowded NCO club during a performance, and even a victim who arranged his own suicide by fragging his tent, carefully placing the grenade so his face and upper body would be uninjured and suitable for viewing at his funeral. As Hubbard sadly notes, "agents were astonished at the futility and often stupidity of killing they were involved with."

Murder investigations were among the most vexing and challenging for NIS agents in the Vietnam environment. Hubbard notes that old hands in NIS claimed "there are many ways to die in Vietnam," and *Special Agent, Vietnam* explores in chilling detail some of the more bizarre murders investigated by NIS. Hubbard skillfully portrays the complexity and cultural nuance in investigating indiscriminate murders of innocent Vietnamese civilians by US military personnel, but perhaps the most senseless one presented in the memoir is the murder of a visiting Australian singer, shot to death during a performance by a Marine for no apparent motive.

NIS, of course, investigated crimes other than fragging or murder. *Special Agent, Vietnam* presents over 30 cases covering a staggering array of crimes that had to be investigated by a handful of agents under dangerous combat conditions. Some of the investigations seem incongruous for a combat environment: misuse of the US mail, stolen checks, obscene phone calls to navy nurses, to name a few. Others were endemic to the wartime atmosphere in Vietnam: opium smuggling, black marketeering, desertions, alleged war atrocities, and even a mutiny when a civilian crew seized a US government-chartered vessel to protest the war. Still others had counterintelligence implications. In one incident NIS agents found a Vietnamese merchant wrapping his goods in classified US documents, which, fortunately, turned out not to be a clever method to pass secret information to the enemy but simply shoddy disposition of classified materials.

Special Agent, Vietnam brims with atmospherics that only someone with firsthand experience like Hubbard could provide: conducting an investigation in the torrential rains of monsoon season, the dangers of travel to remote firebases in the "bush" of I Corps, near the Demilitarized Zone of the divided Vietnam, the sights and smells of Saigon's crowded streets, and the sharp contrast with the colonial elegance of foreign enclaves like the Cercle Sportif club, a throwback to the era of French influence in Vietnam.

Special Agent, Vietnam should appeal to a broad readership, military historians, students of counterintelligence and criminal investigation, and Vietnam veterans like this reviewer, who will recall the seamier side of life in theater that Hubbard captures so well. Despite its treatment of the seamy side, Hubbard's account is an inspiring story of dedicated professionals struggling against insurmountable odds to bring law and order to the chaos of Vietnam.

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