Studies in Intelligence Vol 63, No. 3 (Extracts, September 2019)
Woven into the fabric of the book are biographies of two men famous in their respective communities: Billy Waugh and Lewis Merletti. Both started their federal careers in the military. Jacobsen makes it very clear that the origins of their successes in two very different careers were in Vietnam, when they were members of the US Special Forces conducting direct action and strategic reconnaissance missions against the Viet Cong and the North Vietnamese Army. Billy Waugh began his career as a paratrooper in the Korean War and ended his military career as a highly decorated noncommissioned officer. Merletti served with distinction in Vietnam as a non-commissioned officer and at the end of his tour of duty returned to the United States and separated from service. In the late 1970s, Waugh became a CIA contractor working for Special Activities Division. After college, Merletti joined the US Secret Service. He served on the Presidential Protective Detail and eventually served as the Special Agent in charge of the detail under President George H.W. Bush. He was director of the Secret Service under President Clinton.

Jacobsen has a well-deserved reputation as a good writer and an excellent researcher. The bibliography and notes at the end of the book reinforce her credentials as a journalist who wants to be sure that she has more than one source to corroborate a story. Unfortunately, the book has two problems that make it hard to recommend. First, Jacobsen tries to capture too many topics between the covers. The paired biographies of Waugh and Merletti alone would have easily filled a book and their heroic actions in war and peace would have guaranteed an avid readership. The same could be said if the book had focused on the interplay between White House policymakers and the “foot soldiers” responsible for delivering the required operational successes. Another focus might have been detailing why some covert operations succeeded and why others failed. Instead, readers are left with bits and pieces of each of these topics. Though well researched, the material doesn’t seem to hang together for the entirety of the book.

The second problem is probably of less interest to the general public than to members of either the special operations or IC, and these are a number of small errors that should have been corrected by an editor familiar with the topic. For example, in the first chapter, Jacobsen puts the British Special Operations Executive (SOE) inside the British Secret Intelligence Service (aka MI6). In fact, SOE and MI6 operations were entirely separate during WW II and often were openly hostile to one another. In the same chapter, Jacobsen identifies William Casey as the chief of OSS Special Operations in Europe. He was the head of OSS Secret Intelligence operations running spy networks in occupied Europe and in mid-late 1944 focused on OSS operations inside Nazi Germany. Jacobsen conflates OSS/Special Operations UW missions working with resistance forces in occupied Europe with OSS/SO Operational Groups which were US-only direct action and strategic reconnaissance teams.

Later in the book, Jacobsen compresses the story of the CIA-Special Forces partnership in Vietnam with the Civilian Irregular Defense Groups (CIDG) in a way that readers might assume the partnership began with Operation SWITCHBACK and was almost certain to be a failure. A more detailed reading of CIA and Special Forces histories the partnership would indicate that CIDG operations were showing some success until policymakers in Washington, including the director central intelligence, transferred command and control of the CIDG program to the Military Assistance Command Vietnam (MACV). During what is probably the most dramatic vignette involving Billy Waugh’s multiple Vietnam tours, the text confuses an RPG (rocket propelled grenade) with a Soviet bloc machinegun (either an RPD or RPK). Finally, in the post 9/11 part of the book, Jacobsen glosses over the death of Mike Spann, the first CIA SAD officer to die in Afghanistan. There she reiterates a completely inaccurate account of the events, which implies that Mike Spann’s death was linked to CIA errors in headquarters and in the field. In reality, he was killed in a larger Al Qa’ida and Taliban ambush designed in one stroke to kill the regional Afghan leaders and US Special Forces and CIA officers.

In sum, Surprise, Kill, Vanish is a disappointment mostly because it tries to cover too many topics. Jacobsen conducted research to write multiple books on multiple topics, but compressing them into one book results in a work that sometimes enlightens, sometimes entertains, but often misses the mark.

The reviewer: J. R. Seeger is a retired CIA paramilitary officer and frequent reviewer of books in the field.