

# Peace in the (13th) Valley

Thirty years ago I was working as an editor for a small regional publishing company in Madison, Wis. Barely a decade out of the Army and home from Vietnam, I was doing a pretty decent [job](#) of forgetting the war and pretending I wasn't a vet. That was easy in a place like Madison, which boasted more Vietnam War protesters than Vietnam soldiers.

Back then, *Publishers Weekly* magazine was the bible of [the book publishing industry](#). Even our tiny, two-titles-a-year enterprise accepted as prophecy just about everything *PW* wrote and said about book developments and trends. The subject of Vietnam was not on their radar, except for the occasional nod to the musings of Philip Caputo and Tim O'Brien.

But then one day I opened *Publishers Weekly* and saw a piece by freelance writer Neil Baldwin praising *The 13th Valley*, a new novel about the war by a Vietnam vet named **John M. Del Vecchio**. By the time I'd finished reading Baldwin's piece, I'd gone out and bought *The 13th Valley* and didn't put it down for three days.

As exhausted and overwrought I was from reading *The 13th Valley*, I was strangely upbeat. Finally, somebody had gotten it right -- the language, danger, cadence, frustration, and racial tension were all how I'd remembered them, even if I wasn't engaged in combat myself but rather reported on soldier's exploits from the rear. I'd been there, damnit, and this is exactly what it felt like.

I wasn't alone in my enthusiasm. From the *New York Times* to *Newsweek*, the accolades poured in. "Del Vecchio has constructed a classic war novel," wrote the *Chicago Sun-Times*. I loaned my copy of *The 13th Valley* to several of my fellow vets and, for all I know it's still making the rounds out there. It never came back to me.

And then it was out of print!

But now, 30 years later, the folks at Warriors Publishing Group have acquired the rights to *The 13th Valley* and joined with Del Vecchio to release a 30th anniversary edition of the seminal Vietnam [work](#) in both hard copy and digital formats. Warriors Publishing Group is happy, Del Vecchio is happy, and we are the lucky beneficiaries.

(Full disclosure, Warriors Publishing Group is publishing my Vietnam short story collection this fall. But I read and liked *The 13th Valley* before WPG even existed.)

"This important and impactful book has been out of print for too long," said **Julia Dye**, the senior editor and publisher at Warriors Publishing Group (WPG), "and we're very excited about getting it back into circulation so that a new generation of veterans and other readers can enjoy what John has written."

According to Dye, *The 13th Valley* is available through Amazon and WPG.

By way of summary, and not as spoiler, *The 13th Valley* follows the experience of **James Chelini**, a telephone-systems installer who suddenly finds himself an infantryman, and his fellow members of the 101st Airborne Division (Airmobile) in offensive operations in the Khe Ta Laou Valley in August 1970. That territory, it turns out, is controlled by the North Vietnamese Army (NVA). While we possessed helicopter gunships, artillery of all shapes and sizes, and B-52 bombers and the NVA had only AK-47s, mortars, and bicycles, both sides were courageous and competent.

It wasn't the same, however, with us and our South Vietnamese allies. By that point in the Vietnam War, we were committed to the "Vietnamization" process, i.e., monthly withdrawing U.S. troops by the thousands and in the process handing over combat responsibilities to South Vietnamese Army units (ARVN). It was not a seamless transition, and tight spots like the 13th valley could only exasperate it.

Echoes of classic war novels Mailer's *The Naked and the Dead* resonate throughout *The 13th Valley*. To be sure, war is hell and good people die, but there's nothing irresponsible about the violence of the combat. And then there's that Vietnam War vibe that Del Vecchio just nails -- the arc of a soldier's evolution from cherry to boonierat, the strong racial antipathy, the palpable tension of jungle warfare... It is all here and it is worth reading.

And it still demands to be comprehended.

As I mentioned, this novel was first published in 1982. In his introduction to this 30th anniversary edition, Del Vecchio writes: "Our nation has changed significantly since the day in 1970 when a battalion of young soldiers stood looking down into that 13th Valley below Hill 848. Ideals and optimism, hope and expectations, have been altered; some have been met, others lost, some improved, others distorted. At times I wondered if we've lost our way. I don't have a definitive answer but I do recognize that the seeds of today's good and evil were sown in the '60s and '70s... "

Amen to that brother...

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