**Friday, August 14, 2009**

**Book Review - John M. Del Vecchio's The 13th Valley**



This novel was first published in 1982. The particular story follows the experience of the members of one company of the 101st Airborne Division (Airmobile) in offensive operations in the Khe Ta Laou valley, located in the area of South Vietnam the US armed forces called 1st Corps, between August 13 and August 25th, 1970. By that point in the Vietnam War the Americans were well into the Vietnamization process, withdrawing US troops in the tens of thousands per month and continuously passing over fire and other front line bases to ARVN units. John M. Del Vecchio served as a combat correspondent with the 101st in 1970 and 1971 in the area south of the DMZ (1st Corps) where the actions in this novel took place.

I think it is now safe to say that this work is one of the great war novels of the 20th century, easily keeping company with Solzhenitsyn's August 1914, Jones' The Thin Red Line, Heinrich's The Cross of Iron and Mailer's The Naked and the Dead. This book is not pulp fiction. There is nothing in the least bit gratuitous about the violence of the combat scenes. Nor is the writing of the masturbatory variety like that, most notably in the years since, of Bernard Cornwell's Sharpe novels. With Sharpe we know at all times that he will suffer from no vississitude more inconvenient than a temporary interlude between sexual partners or perhaps a superior officer that he will thwart with ease at the right time. He never misses with musket or rifle, treasure falls into his lap like manna from heaven, and his foes (and lawyers generally) will all suffer from fates that would make any schoolboy shudder.

In The 13th Valley, the opposing forces, NVA regulars and Air Cav infantry, are equally brave and equally capable. There is no attempt by Del Vecchio to portray the character of any particular Vietnamese (except perhaps one Kit Carson Scout). They remain unknown to the reader, except through their deeds, but their deeds are known to the Americans. The difference between the opposing forces in the Khe Ta Laou is material in nature. The Americans had helicopter gunships, artillery of all calibres, B-52 bombers and an endless supply capability. The NVA had AK-47s, RPGs, mortars, bicycles, sampans and rice.

The combat scenes are incredible. Everything that happens has the indelible mark of truth. The interior life of the American soldiers, the transition from cherry to boonierat, the racial tension in the unit, the techniques and tactics of jungle fighting, whether on recon, ambush or in listening posts, or while in movement, during assault or in the desperate anguish of counter ambush, all of this is wholly contained within the pages of this novel.

A somewhat fascinating aspect of this book that has absolutely required the passage of time is the similarity of the mindset between the Nixon establishment and that of Dubya. There are good reasons for this, ones are well beyond the confines of this short review, but time and again the message of that time was capable of being readily transposed to this.

Other contrasts occur to the reader. It has been commonly asserted by American authorities over the last decade (well, at least since the invasion of Iraq) that the current volunteer army is of a higher quality in terms of educational background than that of the draftees (and volunteers) that fought in Vietnam. The 13th Valley offers another perspective on this issue, and one can only wonder how accurate the message of the last few years has been. After all, unless a college graduate dodged the draft, most notably by either leaving for Canada or serving in the Texas Air National Guard, there was a very good chance that he would have ended up in Vietnam in the late 1960s and early 1970s. The images and writings of the Iraq War that I have seen have not led me to consider the US forces there overly comprised of university graduates. This is not to detract from the servicemen and women in either war. I think, ultimately, that despite the fact that this is not an anti-war novel as such, Del Vecchio does continually seek to remind us that America lost far more than a war in Vietnam. It lost tens of thousands of its citizens there, citizens who were thinkers, lovers, caregivers, fathers to be, citizens who learned how to tell right from wrong under the sternest test any person can face. That is the great tragedy of any war I suppose, but it is particularly so where a war is fought for reasons that are open to doubt.

Apart from that, there is the myth in the US, which Francis Ford Coppola, Stanley Kubrick and Oliver Stone bear no little responsibility for, that combat in Vietnam was fought by American soldiers to the accompaniment of music. While this sells soundtracks, it hardly seems credible given the kinds of operations engaged in by US troops in the jungle or to and fro those operations. Of course, this has since changed with the 2003 Iraq war and it now appears clear that heavy metal is de riguer when US forces are unleashing, erm, heavy metal.

One final note on Oliver Stone. There were several moments while reading The 13th Valley that I was reminded of scenes in Platoon. This may well be because Stone experienced similiar events himself. There are some indications that he fought as a recon grunt in the A Shau Valley with the 1st Cavalry Division in 1968. The A Shau is in 1st Corps, south of the Khe Ta Laou. That said, it was interesting to me to compare the images that the prose of Del Vecchio inspired with those that Stone directed into being in Platoon. It seems strange, but Del Vecchio's prose is more cinematic than the very movie that most closely relates to its action. I think this is more of a compliment to Del Vecchio than a criticism of Stone. Film and writing are different media, and it may well be that the former is more limited in what it can portray to our minds. In any event, despite the fact that Del Vecchio wasn't writing a screenplay, his work is profoundly cinematic in nature, and perhaps more than is possible for a work of cinema.

In the final analysis, I simply could not put this book down. If one is interested in the American phase of the Vietnam War for any reason whatsoever this novel is a gold mine. For wargamers, I can't think of any fiction that I've ever read from the Vietnam War canon that has as much intrinsic value. There are obviously excellent non-fiction works about the war that cannot be ignored - most notably for me Bernard Fall's Hell in a Very Small Place: The Siege of Dien Bien Phu - but The 13th Valley is written by a veteran who was in fact a boonierat, and he has recounted his experiences in a way that transcends the narrative of either an academic or a hack. Highly recommended.

Posted by Keir at [7:00 AM](http://thecarpasianwars.blogspot.com/2009/08/book-review-john-m-del-vecchios-13th.html) 

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