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Victory at Any Cost: The Genius of Viet Nam's General Vo Nguyen Giap

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This is actually a semi-autobiographical account. As the author notes in his foreword, the characters are a composite of various people he served with during his career; "The events are real, but not always the sequence." He no doubt did this to avoid embarrassing some of his actual shipmates, and it does not detract at all from his impressionistic account of "tin can" life a generation ago.

Not surprisingly, Sheppard's executive officer and commanding officer tours were filled with various incidents, some hilarious, some of them the nerve-racking, edge-of-disaster ones that most line officers will be familiar with from their own experience, and many of the humdrum, routine events that inevitably fill the great majority of time at sea. The best parts of the book are composite character sketches of various kinds of officers and sailors, both good and bad, showing how their interactions with their shipmates affected shipboard life. Sheppard illustrates how bad commanding officers can destroy the morale and efficiency of their units by being martinets, afraid to delegate the slightest authority; how good officers can inspire confidence by placing trust in those subordinates who earn it; and how the pressures of the real world efface the initial arrogance and bravado of many young officers. Throughout, there are memorable depictions of sailors from a wide range of backgrounds who variously do well and not so well.

This reviewer recently assumed command of a destroyer, which made *Destroyer Skipper* an especially timely, enjoyable read. There is no comparison between the destroyers of Sheppard's

era and today's DDs, which have three times the displacement and far greater capabilities, carry weapons of national-level significance, and are, in short, different platforms altogether. Yet importantly there are continuities as well, particularly at the human level. The leadership requirements, the endless array of problems great and small, the paperwork (!), and other basics have remained remarkably unchanged despite the plethora of trendy programs, management tools, and fads of various kinds that have been foisted on the fleet in recent years—supposedly because the culture, "the younger generation," the Zeitgeist, you name it, are different now. Yeah, right. Commander Sheppard's memoir is a refreshing reminder that despite the inevitable changes in the particulars of the naval profession, certain traditions and leadership fundamentals, especially as they pertain to integrity and *character*, have remained remarkably constant over the centuries. We change them at our peril.

JAN VAN TOL

Commander, U.S. Navy

Curry, Cecil B. *Victory at Any Cost: The Genius of Viet Nam's General Vo Nguyen Giap*. Washington, D.C.: Brassey's, 1997. 401pp. \$25.95

To American military officers and the Western community in general, General Vo Nguyen Giap remains an enigma. In the latest biography of the architect of America's defeat, Cecil Currey portrays his subject as one of the most talented generals in the twentieth century and the greatest living expert on

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people's war. Currey is a retired professor of military history at the University of South Florida and a retired colonel, U.S. Army Reserve. His previous books include *Self-Destruction: The Disintegration and Decay of the United States Army during the Vietnam Era* (1981) and *Edward Lansdale: The Unquiet American* (1988).

Drawing upon a plethora of Vietnamese sources, including lengthy interviews with Giap himself, Currey paints a favorable portrait of the Vietnamese general in an effort to "correct the record and to provide the Vietnamese perspective of the war in Southeast Asia and the role Giap played in the ultimate victory." As indicated by the book's subtitle, the author is an ardent admirer of Giap. The general emerges as a self-taught genius who was additionally a master tactician, strategist, and logistician.

Giap was a learned student of Carl von Clausewitz and Mao Tse-tung. He governed all his campaigns by Clausewitz's basic thesis that the political object, as the original motive of war, should be the standard for determining the military objectives and the application of force to be used. From Mao, Giap learned the importance of the individual in the revolutionary process. He also borrowed Mao's philosophy on the importance of establishing base and rear areas, the value of seizing the initiative and the offensive, the necessity for concentrating a superior force on the battlefield, and the importance of the principle of economy of force. Another teacher was T.E. Lawrence, whose *Seven Pillars of Wisdom* stressed irregular warfare and how it could confound

tradition-minded opponents. In time Giap added the fruits of his own military experience.

To his credit the author also examines the darker side of the man who commanded the Viet Minh and later the People's Liberation Army of Vietnam from 1944 through 1973. Giap was not always victorious, as evident by his 1951 campaigns against the French in the Red River Delta and his effort against the U.S. Army in the Ia Drang Valley in 1965. Both defeats resulted in enormous loss of life. Nor was Giap a nice man. Great captains seldom are. Nonetheless, waging war against numerically superior forces armed with modern technology forced Giap to rely on charismatic leadership and novel tactics to achieve success. In the final analysis, he inspired his army to victory.

Victory at Any Cost is likely to become the most comprehensive Western biography of Vo Nguyen Giap. Yet the reader regrets that the author relies so extensively on highly parochial sources to examine his subject. While one can accept Currey's conclusion that Giap merits consideration as possibly this century's most successful commander, his assessment that Giap was one of the greatest military geniuses of all time and one whose record was unparalleled in the history of warfare is subject to question. What is evident is that Giap evolved into a skilled practitioner of warfare, one who created an army from nothing, who won more battles than he lost, and who devised a strategy that thwarted both France and the United States.

Any officer interested in military biography and generalship, as well as all

students of this nation's longest conflict, should read this biography.

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Larzelere, Alex. *The Coast Guard at War: Vietnam, 1965–1975*. Annapolis, Md.: Naval Institute Press, 1997. 345pp. \$32.95

Most people fail to recognize that the U.S. Coast Guard is this nation's smallest armed force. Captain Alex Larzelere, U.S. Coast Guard (retired), a former commanding officer of two patrol boats in Vietnam, has written a history of the Coast Guard in the Vietnam War that is one of the best examinations of the service's role in combat to be published in many years. While not a historian, Larzelere has done a credible job pulling together many of the documents and other material needed to cover the subject. The author is not the first to broach this subject: Eugene N. Tulich produced a short monograph, *The United States Coast Guard in South East Asia during the Vietnam Conflict*, for the service in 1975. But Larzelere's work adds more to the literature by including a large number of interviews of the U.S. Coast Guardsmen who served in Southeast Asia, and by his coverage of the decisions that led to the service's participation in the war.

In 1965 the U.S. Navy needed small craft to attempt to control infiltration of war matériel by sea. While destroyers and other ships could work off shore, they could not patrol the rivers and shallow coastal waters. The U.S. Navy turned to the Coast Guard and found it

very receptive. The Commandant, Admiral Edwin J. Roland, was "very interested in seeing the Coast Guard get involved in supporting the Navy." The vessels selected were eighty-two-foot patrol boats (WPBs). In peacetime these boats were skippered by master chief boatswain's mates and had a crew of eight enlisted men. For Vietnam, however, two commissioned officers were added, as the "feeling was . . . the presence of an officer was needed for the job of stopping and boarding vessels. [The service also] thought there should be a little more seniority." A few more enlisted men were added to the complements for this duty.

The Coast Guard performed the remarkable feat of having the patrol boats and their crews brought from various locations throughout the United States and made ready in thirty days. This reviewer can recall a cutter on International Ice Patrol being diverted to St. John's, Newfoundland, so a gunner's mate could be quickly transferred to join the first squadron. The U.S. Coast Guard commissioned Squadron One on 27 May 1965, and as early as 24 July the cutter *Point Orient* was exchanging fire with the Viet Cong. Eventually twenty-six patrol boats and thirty larger high endurance cutters were assigned to Southeast Asia.

In general, the patrol boats and high endurance cutters received what little publicity the service generated during the war. Larzelere has done a great service for those interested in Vietnam by detailing all the activities of the U.S. Coast Guard in that conflict. The service had explosive loading detachments, shipping and port security