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The 25 Year War: America's Military Role in Vietnam

Douglas Kinnard

Bruce Palmer Jr.

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description of one conversion—that of the offshore oilfield repair ship *Stena Inspector*—will be of particular interest to American readers because it was performed at the Charleston Navy Yard.

Finally, the author describes how the converted merchant ships operated during the campaign. Information is included on such topics as salvage operations under fire, helicopter and amphibious operations and replenishment at sea using makeshift arrangements, and operations at sea under conditions that included Force 10 winds and temperatures down to minus 3°F.

As successful as they were in the Falklands, converted merchant ships are not a substitute for specially designed amphibious ships and auxiliaries. The British had no alternative, however, and did a remarkable job with what they had. In spite of its advantages, the US Navy might be faced with similar circumstances someday. For example, there are currently no American hospital ships and precious few minesweepers. Under circumstances requiring the conversion of merchant ships to naval purposes, the British lessons from the Falklands would be invaluable. I can think of no better way to begin learning those lessons than to read Roger Villar's *Merchant Ships at War: The Falklands Experience*.

Palmer, Bruce, Jr. *The 25 Year War: America's Military Role in Vietnam*. Lexington, Kentucky: University Press of Kentucky, 1984. 236pp. \$24

This latest memoir from a high-ranking military officer involved in the Vietnam experience is by far the most important. It's value lies in the author's insights, objectivity, and candidness—particularly as concerns the United States' decisionmaking process.

General Palmer's book has two distinct parts. In the first he relates chronologically his experiences from the perspective of the positions he held: Deputy Chief of Operations, Pentagon; field commander in Vietnam; and Vice Chief of Staff, US Army. The second part is Palmer's assessment of the Army's operational

performance, the overall American strategy and his conclusions as to the "larger lessons" of the Vietnam War.

In his Washington days as Operations Chief (1963-67), Palmer watched the War develop from an advisory effort into a full-scale commitment of US forces. His most salient points are, first, that the Joint Chiefs were never able—or did not choose—to expose their differences of opinion to senior civilian officials; and, second, that the Chiefs lost control of the planning process from the summer of 1965 until after Tet 1968, so that in effect Westmoreland's troop requests were made without benefit of an overall Washington concept.

The author's direct Vietnam experience was from early 1967 until the summer of 1968. He was briefly II

Field Force (Corps) Commander, concerned with Army operations in the 11 provinces around Saigon. Subsequently he headed Army support activities throughout South Vietnam. Based on these experiences, he is highly critical of the large-scale search and destroy operations conducted by Westmoreland. This accords with the feelings of many other general officers, as shown in my own study, *The War Managers*.

In the summer of 1968 Palmer returned to the Pentagon as the Army Vice Chief of Staff and remained there until early 1973. He was thus a firsthand witness to the Vietnamization period. Of particular interest is his discussion of the origins and conduct of the "secret" bombing of the Cambodian sanctuaries which began in March 1969. On the decision to conceal the bombings, Palmer feels strongly. "It placed the military in an impossible position, having literally to lie publicly about a perfectly legitimate wartime operation. It made a mockery of any Congressional oversight, for only a handful of members of Congress were informed and they had no realistic appreciation of the extent or implications of the bombings." He characterizes the Cambodian incursion of May 1970 as the second major turning point of the war after Tet 1968, in that it "ended any hope of South Vietnam's chances to remain free." This was primarily because of the downward spiral of public and congressional support which it set in motion.

Palmer is especially interesting in

his characterization of decision makers, particularly the enigmatic Creighton Abrams, Westmoreland's successor in Vietnam. Abrams' primary mission was to accomplish Secretary of Defense Melvin Laird's Vietnamization program. Especially revealing are two anecdotes which Palmer relates. Discussing a late evening visit to Abrams' quarters near Saigon, Palmer notes that "Abrams' routine practice in the evening was to stay up very late sipping scotch and listening to Wagnerian operas played in stereo at maximum volume. He explained that in this way he was better prepared to respond to the inevitable urgent and sometimes contradictory messages that daily arrived from Washington." To draw a comparison, imagine Eisenhower, during the evenings of the Great Crusade in 1944 and 1945 similarly disposing himself.

The other anecdote concerns a visit Palmer made to the then Chief of Staff not long before Abrams' death in the summer of 1974. Palmer urged him to write his memoirs, but Abrams demurred, saying he would never reveal certain aspects of his service in Vietnam. This is unfortunate, because if the true story of the Vietnamization period is to be told, researchers will need access to Abrams' papers of that period. They are presently secured at the Army War College, allegedly until the year 2025. It is doubtful that this secrecy will hold up under a court challenge, which sooner or later is bound to happen.

There are other important charac-

terizations, including those of Generals William Westmoreland, Alexander Haig, and Jack Lavelle. The latter was the commander of the 7th Air Force who was removed and retired because of alleged falsification of records concerning air operations in North Vietnam. The reader interested in high-level decision-making during the war will find Palmer's discussion of these personalities fascinating.

In the assessment portion of his book, Palmer sets forth some insightful judgments and an alternative strategy that might have been followed. He is critical of US intelligence efforts, especially what he describes as an overdependence on Signal Intelligence. Many of his judgments on American strategy have been said elsewhere: failure to understand the enemy and our allies, giving the initiative to the enemy, and too much faith in the efficacy of airpower as a tool to bring about negotiations. He also has a provocative analysis of the fatal consequences of waiting too long to begin the development of the Army of South Vietnam.

Palmer's alternative strategy would have placed American ground strength in the north, stretching into Laos, to prevent movement of supplies and troops from North Vietnam. At the same time, he would have kept amphibious forces at sea, both as a threat to North Vietnam and for occasional use in the south. Most important, there would have been heavy emphasis on developing the forces of South Vietnam behind

the screen of deployed American power. However, in the opinion of the reviewer, it is doubtful that this would have worked, because the war itself was lost at another level. The contest was one not of power, but of will; and though we had the power, the enemy had the will.

The "larger lessons" with which General Palmer concludes his book are intriguing but can only be listed here: the lack of attention paid by policymakers to CIA estimates, the inadequate organization of the Defense Department to conduct wars, the lack of interaction between the President and his senior military, and the failure to involve Congress in LBJ's major decisions concerning the war.

This book contains much more than I have been able to suggest within the confines of a review. It is a wide-ranging, intelligent, and important book which should be read by every student of the Vietnam War. Many of Palmer's observations require further research, and if we are not to repeat the disaster elsewhere, deserve close examination by civilian and military alike. This book is a first-rate effort by a first-rate mind.

DOUGLAS KINNARD
Lexington, Virginia

Gellman, Barton. *Contending With Kennan*. New York: Praeger, 1984. 179pp. \$21.95

Barton Gellman, who is two full generations younger than George Kennan, has illuminated Kennan's thought with care and considerable