



Stories OF Faith
AND **Courage** FROM THE
VIETNAM WAR

LARKIN SPIVEY



Stories OF Faith AND Courage

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Battlefields and Blessings: Stories of Faith and Courage from the Vietnam War

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Published by God & Country Press (an imprint of AMG Publishers)

6815 Shallowford Rd.

Chattanooga, Tennessee 37421

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Print Edition: ISBN 978-0-89957-019-8

EPUB Edition: ISBN 978-1-61715-067-8

Mobi Edition: ISBN 978-1-61715-069-2

e-PDF Edition: ISBN 978-1-61715-229-0

First printing, June 2011

Cover designed by Mike Meyers at Meyers Design, Houston, TX

Interior design and typesetting by Reider Publishing Services, West Hollywood, CA

Edited and proofread by Jocelyn Green, Rich Cairnes, and Rick Steele

Maps by Bowring Cartographic, 258 North Park Dr., Arlington, VA 22203. www.sitemaps.com

Printed in Canada

18 17 16 15 14 13 12 11 –T– 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

DEDICATION

Lani and I dedicate this devotional to the loved ones in our family: Anastasia, Bayliss, Catherine-Alexa, Windom, Ken, Sophie, Owen, Lara, Daniel, Charlotte, Larkin, Radik, Annabelle, Cousteau, Calder, Stephanie, Rosalie, and Kepler.

ALSO BY LARKIN SPIVEY

God in the Trenches

Miracles of the American Revolution

Battlefields & Blessings: Stories of Faith and Courage from World War II
(Military Writers Society of America Silver Medal Award Winner)

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Acknowledgments

I AM GRATEFUL to my fellow Vietnam veterans who gave their time and emotional energy to relive moments from their past, some of which were painful. Their stories have been inspirational to me, as I hope they will be to readers. I am especially thankful to the Khe Sanh veterans who have shared their experiences in a unique magazine titled *Red Clay*. Tom Eichler, the editor, has graciously given me permission to use many of these amazing stories from an important campaign of the war with which I was involved.

I also need to acknowledge every Army, Navy, and Air Force veteran who might conclude I have overemphasized Marine Corps participation in this war. I have tried to be fair and balanced, but have to admit that, as a Marine, I have more contacts, sources, and firsthand knowledge of this part of the war. To be clear, I publicly affirm my undying admiration for every soldier, sailor, and airman who served. I hope their stories are adequately represented in these pages.

I appreciate the many editorial contributions to this book made by Jocelyn Green, a great freelance writer, editor, author of *Faith Deployed: Daily Encouragement for Military Wives*, and co-author of another book in the Battlefields & Blessings series: *Stories of Faith and Courage from the War in Iraq & Afghanistan*. I also thank my priest and pastor, the Reverend Rob Sturdy, for his continuing spiritual guidance and for his specific counsel regarding this work. My wife and partner, Lani, has contributed immensely to the spiritual direction of this and my other books, as well as my life.

Foremost, I acknowledge my Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, whom I have tried to keep at the center of my life and every page of this book. I am thankful to Rick Steele, Dale Anderson, Trevor Overcash, John Fallahee, and all the staff at AMG Publishers who daily devote their exceptional professionalism and vision in service to the same cause.

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Introduction

ON JULY 23, 1967, I walked across the red-dust-blown tarmac of the Da Nang airstrip to catch my PanAm charter flight home. At the top of the ramp I paused briefly to breathe the tropical air and scan the far-off jungle-covered mountains where men were still fighting. I said a silent prayer of thanks that I had made it and wondered again why some hadn't. Once again, no answer came to me. My uneasy standoff with God continued, as I pondered the friends and fellow Marines lost on those distant hills. I continued to struggle with the randomness of death and God's apparent absence from those battlefields. There was not even a glimmer of thought at that time or for decades after that he might have somehow played a role in the decisions I made, or that he had saved lives, including my own.

My previous book (on World War II) was about a simpler and more spiritual era in American history. During that period there seemed to be more evidence of faith in the lives of servicemen and women, their families at home, and our national leaders. Unfortunately for the men who went to Vietnam, the times were more complicated and less spiritual. They had to fight a controversial war and then return home to a rapidly changing culture that seemed to be turning away from God. Writing this book has been an amazing journey, taking me back to that time and my issues with God—and the emptiness of what was then my own skeptical nature.

This book is a daily devotional designed to show the role of faith in the Vietnam War. During the course of my research, I made some interesting discoveries. Some young soldiers and Marines went to this war with a deep spiritual connection to God that played an important role in their experience during and after the war. On the other hand, there were many others who went with little or no faith and had negative experiences that caused them to turn away from God. I was surprised and gratified to find that many of these veterans eventually returned to God or later found him for the first time. Amazingly, these men have found a deeper relationship to God than many of their fellow citizens who never seriously questioned their own faith.

My secondary purpose in writing this book is to correct some of the history written about the war and to provide a more complete image of the veterans who fought it. These subjects are addressed in the monthly summaries explaining the different phases of the war and in many of the daily devotions themselves. I hope to convince every veteran this was a

war the United States needed to fight. Their long struggle was an important part of the Cold War, and they can be proud that their heroic effort in Vietnam contributed to America's ultimate victory over a system of government that never had an elected Congress, free press, or antiwar movement of any kind.

Unfortunately, the antiwar agenda in the United States has lived on after the war, seeking to portray the great men and women who went to fight it as victims rather than as heroes. Independent research confirms my own observations that the vast majority of Vietnam veterans returned home to become well-adjusted and productive citizens. They are proud of their military service, but don't feel their lives were defined by it. They are heroes in every sense of the word and the greatest part of their own unique generation.

This description of the average Vietnam veteran is not meant to ignore or belittle the men who saw the kind of action during the war that caused significant problems afterward. Post-traumatic stress disorder is a real medical condition many have been treated for, and has left some needing help who don't even know it. I hope veterans with issues of depression or repressed anger and guilt recognize themselves in some of the stories told in this book and are motivated to seek the treatment they need.

Although I left Vietnam a religious skeptic, I am gratified to report that many years later the spiritual void in my life was filled by Jesus Christ. I am now proud to serve in his great army and to carry on the mission of glorifying him. If there are fellow Vietnam veterans reading this who have not found peace in their lives, I hope they will be moved by these stories to seek a new life in the one place where peace is guaranteed—the person of Jesus Christ.



Glossary

- APC—armored personnel carrier
ARVN—Army of the Republic of Vietnam (South Vietnam)
Arc Light—B-52 strike
CO—commanding officer
DMZ—Demilitarized Zone
DoD—Department of Defense
Dustoff—medical evacuation helicopter or mission
FAC—forward air controller
FMF—Fleet Marine Force
FO—forward observer (artillery)
Grunt—infantryman
Huey—a UH-series utility helicopter, manufactured by Bell
In country—in Vietnam, as opposed to being “in the world” (anyplace else)
LZ—landing zone
LP—listening post
LRRP—long-range reconnaissance patrol
MACV—Military Assistance Command Vietnam
Medevac—medical evacuation, usually by helicopter of same name
MIA—missing in action
mm—millimeter, as in “7.62-mm ammunition”
NCO—noncommissioned officer
NVA—North Vietnamese Army, also PAVN (People’s Army of Vietnam)
PTSD—post-traumatic stress disorder
P-38—can opener issued with C-rations
RPG—rocket-propelled grenade (Soviet-made)
RVN—Republic of Vietnam (South Vietnam)
R&R—rest and relaxation (or recreation)
Seabees—Navy construction engineers, from Construction Battalion (C.B.)
Tet—Vietnamese Lunar New Year holiday period
VC—Viet Cong, also known as “Victor Charlie,” or “Charlie”



HISTORY OF CONFLICT

WHEN WORLD WAR II ended with the surrender of Germany and Japan in 1945, the world seemed finally and blessedly at peace. Unfortunately, this was not the case for long, as the United States and the Soviet Union, the two emerging superpowers, soon became engaged in a deadly struggle for global military and diplomatic primacy. Due to the possibility of nuclear confrontation resulting from the growth of both countries' nuclear arsenals, this third world war, or "Cold War," was waged in a series of regional confrontations and proxy wars fought on a limited scale.

As early as 1947, the United States began actively opposing further Communist expansion in Europe and Asia by supporting other nations fighting Communist takeovers. Conflicts flared in Greece, Burma, Malaya, the Philippines, Indonesia, and Indochina. In 1949 China fell into Communist hands, and the next year, with full Soviet and Chinese backing, the North Korean army aggressively invaded South Korea. This precipitated direct United States involvement in a larger, but still limited, conventional war, eventually involving China as well. Reluctant as always to allow the war to escalate, the United States refrained from crossing the Yalu River into China and eventually settled for a peace agreement leaving North and South Korea in roughly the same configuration that existed before the war.

As these events were unfolding after World War II, a Communist-controlled group in Indochina known as the Vietminh (also "Viet Minh") moved into the vacuum left by the defeated Japanese and seized power. When France attempted to reimpose its prewar colonial authority over the region, war broke out in 1946. The Vietminh, led by Ho Chi Minh, managed to survive in this struggle until the Communists took over China in 1949, giving the Vietminh an important ally to the north and a decisive advantage over the French.

The Vietminh achieved final victory over France in 1954 by defeating the French Army at a remote location west of Hanoi called Dien Bien Phu. The war was formally concluded by an international conference that divided Indochina into three states: Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia—with Vietnam partitioned at the 17th parallel between Communist and non-Communist zones. During a period in 1954–55 when free movement was



allowed, more than a million Vietnamese, mostly Catholic, moved from North Vietnam to South Vietnam. Although unification under Communist control always remained the long-term goal of North Vietnam, this effort was put on hold temporarily to enable consolidation of power and “land reform” in the areas already under Communist control.

So-called land reform in North Vietnam went forward in the 1950s on the model used in the Soviet Union and China that had produced millions of deaths. Under a 1953 “Population Classification Decree,” the population was grouped into five categories, from landlord down to agricultural worker. Thousands of Vietnamese citizens were either imprisoned or summarily executed for being in the wrong class.¹ Popular revolts against these measures were put down with overwhelming military force.

With the end of the Korean War and increasing Communist activity in South Vietnam, the United States finally began to focus its attention on Indochina. It had little option at first, other than lending support to the newly constituted government of South Vietnam, beset with problems establishing its own viability. Nevertheless, by the early 1960s the entire region finally took center stage in the worldwide superpower struggle.

My Country Needed Me

IN MARCH 1966 W. D. Ehrhart was a senior in high school when he began having serious thoughts about delaying his plans for college and, instead, serving his country. Speaking about the experience of many in his generation, he recounted:

As a ten-year-old, I had cowered beneath my desk at school during nuclear bomb drills, waiting for the Russians to attack us. Over the next few years, the U.S.S.R. and its evil minions had built the Berlin Wall, spawned Communist insurgency in Laos, and tried to put nuclear missiles in Cuba. I had watched on television as Soviet premier Nikita Khrushchev pounded his shoe on the podium at the United Nations General Assembly, shouting, "We will bury you!"

[President] Kennedy had said we would bear any burden and pay any price to prevent that from happening. And then Kennedy was dead. I'd written on the cover of my school notebook [his] clarion call: "Ask not what your country can do for you; ask what you can do for your country."²

When the battles in the Ia Drang Valley confirmed the presence of North Vietnamese regular army troops fighting in South Vietnam, Ehrhart finally made up his mind about his immediate future: *"College could wait. My country needed me now. I would join the Marines."³*

Blessed is the nation
whose God is the Lord,
the people he chose
for his inheritance.
~Psalm 33:12

Seven months later this young man arrived in Vietnam, where he served a yearlong tour with 1st Battalion, 1st Marines, was wounded in action, and rose to the rank of sergeant. There his idealism came face-to-face with the harsh reality of war. His story illustrates the attitude of countless young men and women of his generation who went to war with a desire to do the right thing for their own nation and a foreign country struggling for freedom.

The war was controversial, as some others have been, but this man's motives for going were pure. It is my belief that his nation's motives were equally pure. Preventing the establishment of another repressive Communist regime was a simple and worthy goal. I pray that every man and woman who served in Vietnam shares this confidence. They fought a difficult war for a good reason. God bless each and every one for his or her faithful service.

Endless Tunnel

IN THE early 1950s, French commandos of the Composite Airborne Commando Group, known as the G.C.M.A., operated deep in Vietminh-controlled territory. French officers and NCOs worked with bands of tribesmen to fight an unpublicized guerrilla war against the Vietnamese Communists. Once committed, these troops were seldom brought out of the fight:

(An) important psychological factor for the French members of the G.C.M.A. was the “endless tunnel” aspect of the whole operation. To train a man for guerrilla work was long and tedious. If he managed to stay alive for more than a year in his assignment, he usually had learned at least one, or even several, mountain dialects perfectly and had physically adapted to the murderous climate and the food and the way of life in the jungle. The man had become irreplaceable because of his specialized knowledge, and the better he was the more certain he could be that he would be sent out again and again until his luck ran out, his health broke, or his mind cracked up. There was no magical “fifty missions” to look forward to, no end to the ordeal in sight beyond the end of the war itself.⁴

What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death? Thanks be to God—through Jesus Christ our Lord! Through Christ Jesus the law of the Spirit of life set me free from the law of sin and death.
~Romans 7:24, 25; 8:2

If there is a peacetime equivalent to this kind of “endless tunnel,” it would be addiction. Alcohol and other drugs enslave many to a lifestyle from which there seems to be no release. The apostle Paul described the spiritual effect of the addictive lifestyle. He said drunkenness and debauchery are “acts of the sinful nature,” and warned, “Those who live like this will not inherit the kingdom of God” (Galatians 5:19, 21). He also offered the way out of this condition, now an integral component of the “Twelve Steps” of Alcoholics Anonymous and other recovery programs. A “greater power” is needed to change the addict’s mind-set.

The only power capable of such a change is our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, who seeks to set us all free from every condition separating us from the Father. Jesus said, “He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed” (Luke 4:18). He is the light at the end of every tunnel, even the ones that seem “endless” to us.

Hook-and-Ladder

TO TRAIN and entertain their T'ai tribesmen, one group of French commandos used motion pictures. Just about any subject was acceptable. One of the most popular ever was an American film about a volunteer fire department in a small town in Illinois. The tribesmen had seen aircraft and jeeps, but nothing like these vehicles:

They had never seen anything like the hook-and-ladder assemblies shown in the film. Neither had they ever seen flat land with no mountains on the horizon, or asphalted and straight roads. The hook-and-ladder rig swaying at 60 mph through the Illinois countryside became probably the greatest film success the T'ai hills had ever seen and for days on end, tribesmen would filter in even from the surrounding Communist-held areas to see the "big American car on the straight road."⁵

In some remote Vietnamese mountain village an Illinois fire department still has friends who will forever think of America as a place of hook-and-ladder fire trucks careening down paved roads.

Our understanding of God is roughly on a par with these T'ai tribesmen's understanding of America. Neither they nor we barely scratch the surface. We see the majesty of his creation and can only wonder at his power and purpose. We feel love for our children, and yet we can hardly conceive of the love he has for us. We are blessed to have his Holy Word and the opportunity to spend a lifetime seeking a better understanding and a closer relationship with him. Our greatest blessing is the hope of an eternity in his presence and the opportunity to perfect our knowledge of his character.

For we know in part and we prophesy in part, but when perfection comes, the imperfect disappears . . . Now we see but a poor reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known.

~1 Corinthians 13:9, 10, 12



Shame

IN HIS CLASSIC little volume, *Corps Values*, Zell Miller wrote a thought-provoking piece on the subject of shame, drawing on the time-honored method of the Marine Corps DI (Drill Instructor). When one of Miller's fellow recruits made the mistake of calling his weapon a "gun," the DI didn't hesitate. He had the recruit strip naked, grab his M-1 rifle and run up and down the squad bay shouting, "*This is my rifle!*"⁶ In a later era, I witnessed the same drama played out at Officer Candidates School, with only one difference: The victim wore clothes. DIs have found many other ways to use shame in teaching recruits the Marine way of doing things.

In the modern world of behavioral science, shame and guilt have fallen into disfavor. We are now counseled to get over our guilt and to focus on the positive. I have no problem with this in general and agree most people are best motivated by positive goals and reinforcement of good behaviors.

I do have a problem with dispensing entirely with the guilt. I believe we have a conscience for a purpose. If I feel guilty for overreacting toward my wife, that is usually a good sign. Maybe I will reassess my behavior before repeating it. If a child is ashamed of poor grades when he or she could have done better, maybe that will also lead to better performance later. We can all feel less guilt about guilt.

The ultimate purpose of guilt is to convince us that, as humans, we need help justifying ourselves before God. All fall short of his expectations, either by what we do or what we fail to do. Firmly convicted of this fact, we can clearly see the hopelessness of our eternal condition without the means of salvation God has provided for us.



(U. S. Marine Corps)

Here is a trustworthy saying that deserves full acceptance: Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners—of whom I am the worst. But for that very reason I was shown mercy so that in me, the worst of sinners, Christ Jesus might display his unlimited patience as an example for those who would believe on him and receive eternal life.
~1 Timothy 1:15, 16



Vietnamese soldiers in helicopter. (National Archives)



French troops on tank. (U. S. Army)

A View from France

IN 1967 Canon Jean-Marie Aubert, a French priest, wrote a carefully reasoned essay on his perspective of the Vietnam War. He put the war in a larger context, relating it to the two major opposing worldviews: those of the free world and the Communist bloc. With the specter of the two superpowers' nuclear weapons hanging over this larger conflict, Aubert considered Vietnam to be an issue of *world* peace.

The French priest then turned to those most directly affected by the hostilities, the Vietnamese people themselves. For their sake, he called for an immediate cessation of hostilities. However, having made this plea, he explained that a cease-fire would not be the ultimate solution. He reiterated the words of the Vatican Council: "*Peace is not the pure absence of war,*" and acknowledged the difficulties that lay ahead: "*It is really too simple, when thousands of miles away, to militate for the immediate withdrawal of American troops from Vietnam; even if their presence leaves us skeptical and is somewhat improper, what other presence would follow it?*"⁷ The French priest at least voiced some degree of caution about the long-term effect of a Communist takeover of South Vietnam. He also acknowledged his own country's role in the conflict: "*We Frenchmen cannot consider ourselves strangers in this debate either; we cannot forget our own original responsibilities.*"⁸

In concluding his essay, Aubert wisely turned to God for the ultimate answer about peace in Vietnam and the world:

*If it is the love of Christ that moves our hearts, and if we have faith in the omnipotence of our Father, then, faced with the challenge that the world throws down to us . . . we can only prostrate ourselves at the foot of the Cross and raise our ardent prayer to heaven.*⁹

For he himself is our peace, who has made the two one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility.
~Ephesians 2:14

The Totalitarian Idea

DAVID HOROWITZ was a left-wing activist during the 1960s and editor of *Ramparts*, a monthly magazine associated with the New Left. His schoolteacher parents were members of the Communist Party, and for many years Horowitz considered himself a Marxist. Over a period of years, however, seeds of doubt in his socialist faith began to grow, leading him on a long and complex journey toward the other end of the political spectrum. With the insight of an insider, he later examined the roots of his earlier faith:

Totalitarianism is the possession of reality by a political Idea—the Idea of the socialist kingdom of heaven on earth, the redemption of humanity by political force. To radical believers this Idea is so beautiful it is like God himself. It provides the meaning of a radical life. It is the solution that makes everything possible; it is the end that justifies the regrettable means. Belief in the kingdom of socialist heaven is the faith that transforms vice into virtue, lies into truth, and evil into good. For in the revolutionary religion the Way, the Truth, and the Life of salvation lie not with God above, but with men below . . . There is no mystery in the transformation of socialist paradise into Communist hell: liberation theology is a Satanic creed. Totalitarianism is the crushing of ordinary, intractable, human reality by a political Idea.¹⁰

Thomas said to him,
“Lord, we don’t know
where you are going, so
how can we know the
way?” Jesus answered,
“I am the way and the
truth and the life. No one
comes to the Father
except through me.”
~John 14:5, 6

It has always been clear that Communists were suspicious of any belief system that would detract from their own authority. However, Horowitz shows that their antipathy toward God goes even deeper. The “totalitarian Idea” itself is god. The Idea itself is the reason for being and the way to salvation.

To most people I know, the fallacy of this system of thought is obvious. What is not obvious is the extent to which we all attach ourselves to ideas and activities that give meaning to our lives. Careers, politics, charitable causes, even our families, are all important concerns. However, these concerns are meaningful only as they relate to God and *his* kingdom. God is our ultimate reality, never to be superseded by human causes or ideas.



Sister Mary

THE SISTERS of Charity ran an orphanage near the town of Vinh Long, about eighty miles southwest of Saigon. A reporter stopped there to visit with the staff and was introduced to Sister Mary. She made a lasting impression:

Sister Mary was tall, ruddy of face, keen of eye, stern of jaw, and with a smile warm enough to light up an arctic igloo. She took me around the orphanage and showed me the various activities the orphans—many of them grown teen-age girls—were taking part in. No make-work operation this! The girls were busily washing and ironing the uniforms for the helicopter base nearby, for which the orphanage received a generous remuneration from the officers and men involved, which was used to help pay the bills. There were classes in sewing, cooking, English, religion and the general studies that American youngsters receive in school—but tailored to fit the needs of the Vietnamese. The sisters teaching the classes were serious and so were the students. You can't fake this kind of thing.¹¹

Unfortunately, this orphanage was closed by the Communists when they took over in 1975, one of many properties appropriated by the government, “to transform society toward socialism.”¹² By then the hardworking sisters had been with the children for more than thirty years serving their needs. Under difficult conditions, in a foreign land, these nuns did God’s work faithfully and selflessly. They exemplified a great biblical teaching: “Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world” (James 1:27). The dedication of true religious professionals such as these women is inspiring to us who have so much untapped potential for service in his kingdom and who risk so much less.

Whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me will find it.
~ Matthew 16:25

