

RVN AIR BORNE

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By General Barry R. McCaffrey



The battle record of the Vietnamese Airborne Division and the associated US Army Advisors and Air Force Forward Air Controllers is a tale of courage, self-sacrifice, and honor which stands out in the history of warfare. The ARVN Airborne was the most highly decorated of all the South Vietnamese Army units. Thousands of these brave Vietnamese paratroopers were killed, maimed, or became missing during their 25 years of nearly continuous combat service as an airborne force, from 1951 until 1975.

Eight of the nine Vietnamese parachute infantry battalions and all three brigade headquarters were awarded the United States President Unit Citation during their years of ferocious combat while fighting alongside the US 1st Cavalry, 1st, 4th, and 25th Infantry Divisions; and the 101st Airborne Division as well as the 173rd Airborne Brigade. The Vietnamese Paratroopers also fought valiantly in support of the heroic US and Vietnamese Marine counterattack which successfully recaptured the city of Hue during the Tet Offensive of 1968.

The Vietnamese Airborne was an elite force of all-volunteers. The airborne troopers went nine weeks of intensive combat training followed by a three week jump school modeled after the Ft. Benning parachute training system. These special volunteers received better pay, rations, quarters and family benefits than the common South Vietnamese soldiers. More was expected of them - and more was given.

Vietnamese airborne traditions came from the French Airborne, with whom they jump into Dien Bien Phu in 1953. These Vietnamese Red Berets epitomized the warrior ethic of the Spartans. Their discipline tolerated no surrender and never allowed the abandonment of friendly wounded or weapon. They did not fight for a government, a flag, nor the Americans. These Vietnamese paratroopers, whether officer, NCO, or soldiers, lived and died for the honor of the Airborne.

The Vietnamese Airborne forces served throughout the Vietnam Conflict as the National Strategic Reserve. By 1967, at peak strength, more than 13,000 paratroopers were formed into nine infantry battalions, three artillery battalions, and division troops. Battalion combat teams staged by parachute assault or helicopter insertion from Tan Son Nhut airbase in Saigon as reinforcements to the major battles of the war. Throughout the endless war, the parachute forces were constantly committed to fight wherever the action was most dangerous.

The long years of bloodshed took their steady toll on these brave soldiers. In the final desperate struggles of 1975, the Airborne Division was expended and bled to death in the horrific battle of Phuoc Tuy Province, in the Central Highland, and Xuan Loc. These courageous Vietnamese airborne soldiers fought to the very end. Their spirit and tradition lived on long after the war. For ten years after the downfall of Saigon government, refugees spoke of surviving groups of ARVN paratroopers fighting an unsupported guerilla war in the mountainous jungle of Central Highlands.

The bravery of the Vietnamese Airborne soldiers is also a reflection of the matching courage and professionalism of US Advisory Team 162 (ABN) and the Red Hat USAF forward air controllers who served with their Vietnamese counterparts as liaison officers, fire support coordinators, trainers, friends, and

occasionally advisors.

The American Red Hat advisors were an elite group selected from the many US airborne sergeants and officers who volunteered to serve with the Vietnamese Airborne Division. Most of the advisors were young but experienced American sergeants and captains with four extra months of training in the Vietnamese language and the Ft. Bragg MATA course. They were a bit different from other American paratroopers - a touch of romantic, an ear for the soldier poetry of Rudyard Kipling, and a sense of adventure which led them to volunteer to live and fight with a foreign unit of shock troops. Many of these American advisor volunteers paid with their lives. The casualty rates among these Red Hat Co Van My were enormous in numbers of killed and maimed.

Many of those who survived would go on to prominent positions in the American Army: BG Herb Lloyd, a legend of the Vietnam War; COL Jack Jacobs (Medal of Honor); MG Mike Davison. MG Ben Loeffke; BG John LeMoyne; BG Arvid West; General Jim Lindsay, who retired as the Special Operation Command Commander; and General Normand Schwarzkopf, the US commander in Desert Storm, are examples of the many dedicated and courageous advisors who served with the Vietnamese.

This book will undoubtedly be of great interest to students of military history in the years to come. It will also clearly be a source of compelling insights and lessons to military tacticians at Ft. Benning, Ft. Leavenworth and the Marine Schools at Quantico. However, to those of us who wore the camouflaged parachute uniforms and red berets of the Vietnamese Airborne, this book will open a door to the past and bring back memories both bitter with remembered losses and sweet with battle victories. In our mind's eye, we again hear the roar of Vietnamese and US Air Force C-47s, C-119s, and C-130s lifting us into battle. Our ears again listen for the ragged whistle of incoming rockets and mortar rounds, the vicious whip-crack of machine guns, M-16s, and AK-47s locked in close combat, and the screams of wounded. We also can see again the softness of the rice paddies and the girls of Saigon and Hue wearing their beautiful Ao Dai. We again feel that bone-chilling cold of the Highlands in the monsoon and the thunder of waves on the beach of Vung Tau.

However, in the end, our only lasting memory is the patient, enduring, and brave faces of the Airborne "Binh Nhi" pushing forward into combat. The confidence, the generosity, and the courage of these little paratroopers we can never forget. This book is the only monument.

(Excerpt from "Angels in Red Hats" by General Barry R. McCaffrey)