

The US Army War College Quarterly: Parameters

Volume 21
Number 1 *Parameters* 1991

Article 10

7-4-1991

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Recommended Citation

Gole, Henry G.. "SHADOW WARS AND SECRET WARS: PHOENIX AND MACVSOG." *The US Army War College Quarterly: Parameters* 21, 1 (1991). <https://press.armywarcollege.edu/parameters/vol21/iss1/10>

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Shadow Wars and Secret Wars: Phoenix and MACVSOG

HENRY G. GOLE

A review essay on:

Ashes to Ashes: The Phoenix Program and the Vietnam War. By Dale Andradé. Lexington, Mass., and Toronto: Lexington Books, 1990. 331 pages. \$22.95.

Facing the Phoenix: The CIA and the Political Defeat of the United States in Vietnam. By Zalin Grant. New York: W. W. Norton, 1991. 395 pages. \$22.50.

The Phoenix Program. By Douglas Valentine. New York: William Morrow, 1990. 479 pages. \$24.95.

MAC-V-SOG Command History, Annex B, 1971-1972: The Last Secret of the Vietnam War. By Charles F. Reske. Medina, Ohio: Alpha Publications, 1990. Vol. 1: 353 pages, \$24.95 (paper); Vol. 2: 350 pages, \$24.95 (paper).

In the porter scene of Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, the porter opines that drink provokes and unprovokes lechery: "It provokes the desire, but it takes away the performance." Alas, so it is with the books listed above. The promise of entering the shadow war of Phoenix to witness the destruction of the Viet Cong infrastructure by daring Ninja men, and the prospect of reading the hitherto secret story of the MACV Studies and Observation Group cross-border operations into enemy base camps by pre-Rambo Rambos, provoke high interest. To varying degrees, however, the performance of our authors unprovokes. Your reviewer, who had intimate connections to the secret war of MACVSOG and whose great interest in the shadow war of Phoenix is matched only by his ignorance, experienced disappointment with these books almost as crushing as the discovery that Santa Claus was really Daddy. This will be a grumpy review.

Andradé's *Ashes to Ashes* is by far the most scholarly and objective of the books reviewed here. Unfortunately, the author wrote his book as

though he had to choose between getting it right and making it fun, and chose the former. Institutional histories, even of such an inherently interesting institution as Phoenix, risk devolving to a soggy slog through the bureaucratic bumph of organizational charts aimed at assuring that the reader knows who begat whom. One also accepts the need to use acronyms to avoid the dual sins of the scribe, repetition and verbosity. However, Andradé—and the others discussed here—make such prolific use of acronyms that held at arm's length the pages appear to be something untimely ripped from a code book.

Compounding that fault, the three Phoenix book titles promise that the contents will be about Phoenix, but all three authors find it necessary to provide a glossary of terms, an introduction of players too numerous to remember, and excessive historical background that take up most of their books. Either the Fort Benning KISS admonition (Keep it simple, stupid!) was never learned, or hucksters named the books to promote sales rather than to describe what is between the covers. Apparently publishers and booksellers are ashamed to demand outrageous sums for slim books that are to the point, so writers meander from the subject to produce books to be sold by the pound.

The sections and chapters of Andradé's book are often nicely written, interesting, and self-contained, but he has as much to say about the war in Vietnam as he does about Phoenix. The author would have been better served had his editor insisted that much now in the text be relegated to notes for serious scholars. That would have allowed a brisk narrative welcomed by the general reader less concerned with scholarship and nuance than with a rousing description of what was in fact a most dramatic life-and-death struggle. In brief, while sex is always an interesting subject, most of us prefer the Henry Miller or Flaubert versions to the Masters and Johnson accounts of the very same deeds. Dale Andradé demonstrates some good scholarship as the professional historian he is, but he seems to endorse the med-school style of storytelling. As the author himself eventually demonstrates, it need not have been that way.

Beginning on page 171—one wishes it were earlier—in the chapter called “Dirty Work: PRUs and SEALs,” we learn that when he doffs his scholar's mantle and puts on his flak jacket Andradé can grab our attention. He spins yarns of close combat successes with panache, and his analysis is

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incisive. The CIA-created PRU (Provincial Reconnaissance Units)—indigenous teams under US command, if not always under US control—and the US SEAL teams are accurately characterized as first-rate forces that enjoyed a high degree of success. Brave men, good intelligence, and a readiness to react quickly to that intelligence made these teams so efficient and effective that they became suspect. It is these teams more than any other aspect of Phoenix that allowed critics to regard the program as a kind of Murder Incorporated. Because small teams were so good at ambushes and raids to kill and capture members of the Viet Cong infrastructure, they were branded assassins.

Something in the American psyche allows a readier acceptance of depersonalized killing by bombing and indirect fire—even when it results in the deaths of some innocents euphemistically subsumed under the term “collateral damage” in military briefings—and rejects the close-up and personal killing where the killer gets a good look at the killee. The 1991 war in the Persian Gulf comes closest to our ideal war, since the killing by Americans was both impersonal and relatively precise.

Aside from the public’s aversion to getting soiled from close combat, however, our author says that the timing of Phoenix could not have been worse. Provincial Reconnaissance Units were associated with Phoenix in 1967, but the program had barely begun when the Tet offensive in 1968 and the 1969 revelation of the My Lai massacre (which had actually occurred on 16 March 1968) raised serious doubts at home about the propriety of continued American involvement in the war. It is ironic that those prosecuting the war realized that the conventional tactics used by friendly forces required augmentation by precisely the methods that were unacceptable to many Americans, both at home and in Saigon. Andradé says that My Lai “was particularly awkward since it came just as MACV was contemplating what should be done with PRU.” General Creighton Abrams wanted the Army out of the PRU and saw that happen in October 1970. Our author is probably right in asserting that “the JCS simply wanted someone else to do the dirty work.”

Andradé’s work is a balanced and, to my knowledge, first attempt to calmly assess Phoenix as history. It is a significant contribution to the Vietnam War literature and takes the subject from journalists and participants to the hands of dispassionate scholars.

Zalin Grant’s *Facing the Phoenix* is the best written of the five books under review. In sharp contrast to Andradé’s meticulous scholarship, Grant tells his tale from the insider’s point of view as a working journalist with only a passing nod in the direction of scholarly accoutrements. He provides a few general notes at the end of his book to amplify some conclusions in the narrative, or to let the reader know that an interview Grant conducted with someone is the source of an observation, but there are no footnotes. He informs us that he

Something in the American psyche allows a reader acceptance of depersonalized killing by bombing . . . and rejects personal killing where the killer gets a good look at the killee.

conducted thousands of interviews during his five years in Vietnam as a *Time* reporter and as a correspondent for *The New Republic*, and there is no reason to doubt that Grant knows his beat. The publisher underlines the author's credibility by noting on the flyleaf that Grant was one of the very few Americans in the Saigon press corps who spoke Vietnamese. Your reviewer's only serious problem with the work is its focus.

While the total effect of Grant's work is not unpleasant and the book does inform the attentive general reader, one puts it down more with a feel for the entire American war experience in Vietnam rather than with a sense of having learned something focused on Phoenix. His flashback technique and short chapters keep the narrative moving and maintained this reader's interest, but at the cost of continuity and cohesion. Even awareness that one is in the hands of a capable professional writer and old Saigon hand fails to compensate for the rambling and episodic construction.

Apparently it is difficult to get a good grip on the shadow war. Our author gives us a memorable image of just how elusive the story proved to be: "It was as though we of the Saigon press corps were standing outside a concert hall peering through a thick glass, able to see and describe the movements of the orchestra but unable to hear the music." Since we in the orchestra were making noise, not music, Grant would have been as baffled had the thick glass been removed. To his great credit, he concludes by frankly confessing that "more books of a probing historical nature are needed." He is right.

Grant has many—I think too many—bit players and spear carriers among his dramatis personae, each of them requiring a mini-biography as they step onto the stage to do a turn. Name, rank, serial number, and date of birth would not suffice. The author thought it necessary to tell us how they fit into the story. An unintended consequence is that the cast of thousands becomes disconcerting to the reader when added to the alphabet soup of acronyms and the great number of organizations lamented above. One suspects that the author at some point—and it was not the starting point—recognized that he had amassed some wonderful and copious notes on lots of fascinating people who had lived a great adventure that should not be lost to posterity. But he also saw that his notes were like a stack of leaves, with no roots, no trunk, no

branches. His insider's view, understanding of the culture, facility with the language, long time in country, and desire to tell his version of the story—not to mention a desire to be rich and famous—conspired to produce a book without a theme or thesis. He is not the first writer to discover that a heap of excellent notes, but lacking a thesis, plot, story line, or, in this case, a protagonist, does not make a coherent story.

In Grant's foreword he says, "What befell Tran Ngoc Chau in 1970 is the subject of this book," having decided, evidently, that a protagonist was needed to give the book coherence; but the title is *Facing the Phoenix* and the subtitle is *The CIA and the Political Defeat of the United States in Vietnam*. It seems the Phoenix of the title is both Chau, who rises reborn from his own ashes, and the program designed to destroy the Viet Cong infrastructure. Despite the almost deus ex machina gimmick that puts Chau center stage, his presence is not enough to give the book the unity this reader craves.¹

Others will be more kindly disposed to *Facing the Phoenix*. It is, after all, the work of an author who knows his subject, did his homework, and writes well. We shall see below that authors lacking all of those qualities do find publishers nonetheless.

Between the covers of Douglas Valentine's *The Phoenix Program* are bits and pieces of a good book, but Valentine has yet to sort them out. This is the penultimate draft of a book, a self-consciously cute recitation that fails to discriminate fact from fancy, crimes for which author and publisher will be punished one day by the great editor in the sky. Attempts at Noel Coward cleverness result in muddled writing. The publisher's promotion blurb calls it an "explosive exposé," and on the dust jacket we find the claim that it is "nothing less than a meticulous narrative of Phoenix." Nonsense! This is an example of polemical sensationalism pure and simple. It is an anti-military, anti-CIA, anti-government bad wine of the late 1960s with a 1990 label; it has worsened with the passage of time.

The snotty tone maintained throughout the book is established in the introduction, the point of which is that the United States government lies to us. The author can make this assertion because he was so informed by an unimpeachable source, a man who responded to the author's ad placed in a Vietnam veteran's newsletter!

Not that I scorn Vietnam veterans. Most of my friends are Vietnam vets who say little about their adventures in the land of Terry and the Pirates. But they are not "professional" Vietnam vets. Most of the latter species were bums before Vietnam, bums in Vietnam, and bums since Vietnam. One suspects that the professional vets are disproportionately represented by Saigon warriors, headquarters commandos, rear-echelon clerks, and plain jerks. But the boonie rats, who beat the bush and engaged an enemy who shot

back, are typically proud of being real soldiers, whatever their opinions of the war. The only visible accomplishment of the professional vets, in contrast, is the elevation of whining into an art form. In Valentine's introduction we learn that the professional vet whom he references stabs one girl, shoots another, and blames the government for his actions. Some 330 pages later we learn that the same source's "crisis of faith compelled him to go AWOL in France."

The author continually confuses in his own mind and blurs for the general reader various programs and organizations loosely associated with the war in Vietnam, among them Delta, Phoenix, and MACVSOG. He also poses as a knowing pundit in areas in which he is clearly an apprentice. His source tells of carrying a satchel charge to the location of an enemy .51-caliber machine gun specifically to destroy the weapon. One can only wonder why. A thermite grenade is much lighter, readily available, and better suited to the stated purpose. He refers to black aircraft as being CIA-supplied. Maybe, but the blackbirds this reviewer flew in were crewed by US Air Force personnel in support of MACVSOG. It turns out that the "unimpeachable" source was never in the Phoenix program, and said so when answering the author's ad. And so it goes.

The rest of the book is replete with the clumsiness and error characteristic of the waif stumbling about terra incognita. On page 416 bad writing (one hopes!) suggests that the American Embassy was to be found in Nha Trang. On page 399, "[Special Forces Colonel Michael] Healy came in with his Shermanesque tactics in August [1972]." Colonel Healy, my commander as I served in Kontum in MACVSOG, took 5th Special Forces Group out of Vietnam effective 3 March 1971. Valentine consistently refers to intelligence officers as the "S-two." As all members of the Officers' Wives Club will attest, it is always S-2.

In Chapter 25 we read that Special Forces Mike Forces were under CIA control! Designed as quick-reaction forces, the Mike Forces were the only ready reserve under the operational control of the senior Special Forces commanders in the four corps areas. The group commander in Nha Trang also had a Mike Force that he used to exploit successes or to bail out camps in trouble when conventional US forces in the neighborhood failed to react, another unhappy symptom of the poor coordination between special and conventional forces. Starting in the fall of 1966, the Mike Forces were supplemented and used as mobile guerrilla forces in denied areas. Your faithful reviewer served with Mike Forces and in staff positions directing them; he attests that they were not under CIA control.

On page 351 we discover that July 1968 is "shortly after" August 1967. Relative to a one-year tour, that is a long time. The GI reaction to this egregious goof by a college guy who obviously never pulled KP or served in combat is left to the reader's imagination. In that "shortly after" one or two

guys in the squad died, four or five were dented in little or big ways, and five received Dear John letters. Back home, meanwhile, two semesters, Christmas break, spring madness, and summer vacation punctuated that pleasant year.

Chapter 26 we can mercifully skip over except to note that it reads as though written underwater with a fountain pen.

Transportation officers will ruefully read that CONEX containers were “garbage containers.” CONEX containers were used in a variety of ways, limited only by the fertile imagination of the American soldier in a no-holds-barred combat environment, but they were designed as rugged containers of standard configuration that could be shipped by land or sea on ships, trucks, and trains designed to handle them. Transportation people wanted to keep them in circulation, but field troops saw them as prefabricated bunkers, ammunition storage houses—and, yes, even garbage containers. In his elemental ignorance, Valentine illustrated—just as did the press conferences during Operation Desert Storm—that reporters at least need to know the difference between a corps and a company if they take seriously their responsibility to inform the general public. The public has no need to know psychobabble.

While some writers annoy mildly because they are ignorant of the nuances of the military beat, others enrage because they are unrelentingly sensationalist in their determination to put the government and its minions in the worst possible light at every opportunity. Valentine falls into the latter gaggle. “Phoenix made it as easy to shoot a Vietnamese child as it was to shoot a sparrow in a tree,” he writes. He also alleges that an officer was promoted for losing an incriminating report on My Lai. He links My Lai and the investigation of it by General William Peers to the CIA. (It occurs to me that critics of government are ready to blame the CIA for everything including the common cold, while defenders of government are equally prepared to blame the press. Perhaps we could avoid such acrimony involving the Fourth Estate and CIA if I volunteered to hold the coats of their champions as they duked it out.)

I thought that salon-Marxist polemics had gone the way of the unreconstructed cold warrior, but I was wrong. Valentine really uses terms

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like “reactionary columnist” William Buckley, Jr., nefarious “big business,” and the “black propaganda” of Joseph Alsop; and he accuses a military intelligence group of taking photos while “[Martin Luther] King’s assassin moved into position, took aim, fired, and walked away.” I think that last in a long series of non sequiturs attempts to make the point that the Phoenix mentality pervades my government and pops up everywhere in American domestic and foreign policy. Readers who hate the United States and love conspiracy theories will like this book.

These first three books raise the most basic question about the program they so variously describe: could the United States have defeated the Viet Cong infrastructure in the shadow war?

The policy decision to target the brain of the Viet Cong was rational; it was in finding the means to go after the Viet Cong infrastructure that Phoenix went astray. Americans generally ignorant of the language, culture, and diverse ethnic and religious groups in Vietnam were forced to rely on indigenous hirelings whose stakes in the game were often other than those of their American handlers. One might ask who was handling whom? Personal grudges could be settled under the guise of war, and pure gangsterism could prosper under the cover of political struggle. Among the indigenous Phoenix operatives were thugs and patriots, but few Americans were equipped to sort them out. Not many Americans understood the nuances of culture in exotic Asia; most served a year in-country, counting the days until they boarded the Freedom Bird that would take them home; some were loose cannons on deck.

Many of the key Americans in the program were oddballs. Among them were to be found idealists, adventurers, detailed Foreign Service officers, military personnel, CIA officers, drunks, skirt-chasers, burnt-out cases, and expatriates more comfortable in Asia than in Alabama. Valentine rang true once when he wrote: “The civilians coming to [the Agency for International Development] were running away from bad marriages and bad careers. Many were alcoholics; they’d get a Vietnamese girl and enjoy the cheap living. These people had a good war. But they had little success against the infrastructure.”

Perhaps Phoenix might have succeeded if the Americans could have placed confidence in faithful and competent allies, but it was the rare American who trusted the Vietnamese. Regrettably, it was the rare Vietnamese who deserved trust. One must conclude that Phoenix was too little, too late. The Americans were not sufficiently acculturated to supervise responsibly such a sensitive operation, and there was no way they could be sure that the killings and kidnappings were not the settling of personal scores. Whatever success the program might have enjoyed, political attitudes in the United States after Tet 1968 doomed its continuation.

The shift in topic from the shadow to the secret war is not marked by a qualitative leap in execution from mediocrity to excellence. The basic fault in Reske's *MAC-V-SOG Command History, Annex B, 1971-1972* is his rush to publication with the half-baked sketch of a fascinating story that deserves complete development. Reske would have been well advised to put the entire tale in perspective, but this would have required patience and persistence: first, getting access to more of the still-classified material before letting the cat out of the bag; second, following up the documentary trail by interviewing the men who ran the missions on the ground, those hardy recon men, and the staff people at all levels of command in order to cross-reference various accounts of the same events; third, writing this account with the care it deserves; and finally, finding an editor who demands a tight, clear story line. That would have produced a better first stab at the definitive history of SOG, and it would have done greater justice to the skilled men who conducted missions that defy credulity. Their true story is the human dimension of combat. It deserves better than Reske gave it.

The publisher says of what is actually a sloppy and incomplete presentation: "Virtually everything you ever wanted to know about the Military Assistance Command, Vietnam, Studies and Observation Group (MACVSOG) is contained in this comprehensive two-volume set." This is so only if the reader never wanted to know very much about MACVSOG. Just as tracking the career of a professional boxer or football player after his 35th birthday is hardly a fair indication of his athletic career, reading of the demise of MACVSOG in its last year hardly conveys a fair and accurate picture of this remarkable organization in its prime. Even a year earlier, when this reviewer had the privilege of serving in SOG with the bravest soldiers he met in three combat tours in two wars, the outfit was in decline.

The most exciting part of the story has not yet been told. It begins with the activation of SOG on 24 January 1964 and ends around the fall of 1970, when it became apparent to those involved that Uncle Sam planned to wash his hands of the sorry mess and walk away from it, thus leaving it in the hands of the Vietnamese to face its ignominious end. SOG ceased all operations on 31 March 1972 and was deactivated on 30 April 1972.

Certainly the command history is useful to the telling of the SOG story, but command histories are even less likely than memoirs to reveal anything embarrassing to the subject. It is also essential to know the operations plans that guided execution and the detailed concept and plan of action devised by the recon team leader, who was called the "one-zero." There were several features unique to the SOG recon style worth knowing.

The one-zero was given a mission and time to plan, rehearse, and brief his plan to the commander in the presence of the staff. All initiative for the execution was in the hands of the one-zero, a sergeant or company-grade

Some of the secrets will never come out . . .

officer. Because of the brief-back system the commander knew precisely what the team would be doing and invariably asked if the one-zero had any problems. The bold young leaders rarely hesitated to point to failures by the staff to support them. This resulted in absolute maximum support by the staff.

Further, it was not at all unusual for junior men to be placed over senior men in recon teams. That is, in a team in which there were two or three Americans, a sergeant was often the one-zero while his assistant was a captain or lieutenant. The officer would not get his own team until the one-zero said he was ready to lead a recon team. At the end of a mission an intense and extremely detailed debriefing took place. The point is that young soldiers in SOG enjoyed a freer hand in the planning and execution of operations than most senior officers in conventional forces. None of this comes out in the work under review. The most powerful part of this story is the execution of missions almost impossible. That part of the story requires interviews with the still relatively young men who brought the war to the enemy's backyard.

The subtitle of the work is pretentious and false: *The Last Secret of the Vietnam War*. This rings like Yogi Berra's remark about the restaurant so crowded that nobody goes there anymore. Since mounds of documents from the war—and most particularly from MACVSOG—are still classified, it is safe to say that secrets from that war will continue to be revealed from time to time reaching into the next century. Some of the secrets will never come out, since dead men tell no tales, and since patriotic but wrong-headed people have probably already destroyed classified documents to protect the reputations of people involved and, indeed, the reputation of the United States. Nevertheless, historians, popular writers, and former SOG men eager to tell the story salivate in the wings awaiting the release of more classified information. Reske may be right to say that what he presents is the end of the story, but only for the moment. Much more remains to be told. Unfortunately it will almost certainly come out in bits and pieces as amateurs and sensationalists do their distorted thing lacking perspective, skill, feeling for the subject, love of the soldiers, or all of the above.

The hype and overstatement pervading the publishing business—and so much of contemporary American life—should not obscure the fact that these two MACVSOG volumes contribute to the beginning of an understanding of an operation that was generally well-conceived and well-executed during the early period following its inception in 1964. By 1970, however, in

the opinion of this reviewer, the modus operandi was thoroughly understood by the enemy. The infiltration of recon teams from the Central Highlands launch sites into Cambodia and Laos was exceedingly dangerous. Infiltration from I Corps into Laos or into the DMZ region was near suicidal, but teams led by Special Forces volunteers continued the mission. HALO (high-altitude, low-opening) techniques, jumping into triple-canopy jungle in smoke-jumper protective equipment, and blasting helicopter landing zones with huge bombs were among the methods used to get into denied areas. Stay-time in operational areas decreased as the enemy improved his detection, communication, tracking, and close combat skills. Despite brave men and stalwart staff efforts to stay ahead of the enemy, the tide had turned. By 1970 it is doubtful that losses could be justified by the intelligence gained.

Reske deserves credit for obtaining the release of jealously guarded material, particularly since many in the special operations community responded to requests for the release of such material by muttering "not in this century." Reske avoids outlandish claims about what we will find in these volumes, but he obviously did lend himself to the publisher's hype.

What we have here are two volumes of a photocopied official command history numbering 707 pages. Reske introduces the entire work and provides commentary to the various sections of the history, usually in a couple of pages per section. His total contribution amounts to fewer than 100 pages, double-spaced, and narrative skill is not his strong point. The writing is uninspired, the analysis is crude, and the need to put the story in perspective is ignored because his commentary is little more than a repetition of the text. His publisher apparently printed what he was handed, thereby rendering a great disservice to Reske and his readers. Misspellings, typos, and infelicity of style are particularly unfortunate since Reske is kindly disposed to SOG. This sad story of the wind-down of a band of super soldiers is a fragmented rough cut. The whole story needs to be told.

This curmudgeonly review is only partially explained by the personal defects of the reviewer. Some blame must be shouldered by authors who failed to do justice to the telling of two important and potentially inspiring stories from the war in Vietnam.

NOTE

1. Tran Ngoc Chau was a Vietnamese soldier and statesman of courage and vision who realized early on that the key to winning the war was defeating the communists' political organization. Grant contends that Chau's successful community action efforts degenerated in the hands of the CIA into the infamous Phoenix program responsible for the assassination of thousands of suspected communists. Further, Grant asserts that Chau was an alternative to the corrupt President Nguyen Van Thieu, that the United States backed the wrong horse, and that American officials betrayed Chau. After years of imprisonment, Chau made it to the United States to become a citizen of this country.