

Arlen's Gun: A Novel of War in Vietnam: A Journey from Alienation to Brotherhood

Edgar Doleman

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In Edgar Doleman's historical novel *Arlen's Gun*, a second-choice air force gunner defends an impromptu fort in Vietnam.

Arlen is a down-on-his-luck gunner on an AC-47 gunship. He joins a mission to help ground troops who are under attack. Instead, he crash lands, and an army engineer corps comes to his momentary rescue. But they are attacked too. Following another rescue, Arlen and fellow gunner Otis stay behind to man one of the few defenses left. They are attacked again, this time by hundreds of soldiers; still, they try to hold their perimeter.

The characters are developed via their downtime conversations with one another; they discuss their home lives, the loved ones they left behind, and their plans for the future. They exchange kind words and exceed each other's expectations. Arlen talks to himself, too, reminiscing about his grandmother and sister; even in his military engagements, he carries his torturous memories with him. In battle, people shout commands or obey orders, limited to the duties that are required of them; after these skirmishes, the officers take time to debrief and thank the men. A sense of their complicated humanity is conveyed.

However, discursive passages begin most of the book's chapters; they are used to set scenes, but their descriptions of factors like the weather and the weapons involved are too rote. Further, the book's pacing is uneven; it mixes anxious downtime with moments of action, all occurring over the course of a few days. Though there are some striking observations included, as of the beauty of an explosion, these limited events are reported from multiple vantage points without need, leading to redundancies. Outsiders (higher-ups in distant offices; military representatives visiting missing crew members' families) comment on the action too. While this shows how military personnel work together across great distances, it also leads to a bloated tale.

In the end, this is a story most concerned with highlighting its hero's hidden strengths. Still, to do this work, the book capitalizes on the unprecedented conditions that Arlen faces. He watches his friends fall while he mans his gun; he meets the ghosts of the past and expresses regrets; he shares his story with other people and receives unexpected support. Indeed, he proves himself to be more than the awkward impressions that he gives; that realization is satisfying.

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MARI CARLSON (June 22, 2023)

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