Clarion Review

General

First A Torch
Richard Baker
Ink & Lens, Ltd.
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Four Stars (out of Five)

First A Torch is one hell of a war novel. Richard Baker, who served with the 4th Infantry Division in Vietnam, tells of the epic, six-month siege of the doomed French outpost at Dien Bien Phu in Indochina through characters on both sides of the battle. Bix, the American farm boy who joins the French Foreign Legion, at first appears to be the principal character, but it is Chau, son of a wealthy Vietnamese merchant whom Bix befriends, who is truly the heart of the book. Chau's journey from innocent, wide-eyed Francophile to patriot freedom fighter is the most poignant, touching, and human of the many stories in this grim, yet solidly entertaining work of historical military fiction.

Baker's work opens with a fairly typical "farm boy out to see the world" story set in the American Midwest and South of the early 1950s. Bix saves the student Chau from being beaten to death by racist bullies. They become friends, meet up with an ex-con named Steve, and travel across the country, working at odd jobs while sharing coming-of-age adventures.

Bix and Steve eventually join the Foreign Legion and help to defend the French base at Dien Bien Phu in November of 1953. Chau is there as well, but on the opposing side. By the time the siege nears its weary conclusion, writes Baker, Bix "was beginning to doubt his decision about joining the legion. The grand adventure was growing thin."

Fans of Foreign Legion stories will lap all this up, as Baker regales the reader with tales, myths, histories, quips, and asides about that famed fighting unit. "Good legionnaires had a fascination with death," writes Baker. They "almost craved it, walked its prickly edge to see how long they could balance before succumbing to the icy arms of mortality, then taking the fall into darkness with laughter on their lips and open arms willing to greet the great abyss."

Baker does an excellent job of relating the military history of the battle and its participants, including vibrant characterizations of the officers who led both sides. He also

excels in describing the day-to-day grind of fighting and surviving in a fortress under siege. Through Baker's prose, the reader can hear the whiz of bullets, feel the sticky monsoon mud, and smell the rot and gore of the battlefield.

Like the siege itself, however, the book can at times feel unending. It also has many annoying spelling errors (an officer's "aid" is the most persistent). Such matters aside, Baker has written an epic war novel. Much the same as all truly good war novels, this one delivers insight into the minds of men at war.

Mark G. McLaughlin