

On the Ho Chi Minh Trail: The Blood Road, the Women Who Defended It, the Legacy

Sherry Buchanan

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Combining interviews, history, and reportage, Sherry Buchanan's *On the Ho Chi Minh Trail* illuminates the lives of women during the Vietnam War.

Buchanan was a college student during the Vietnam War. Decades later, her interest in the nation, its people, and its artists led her to travel the now unified country. Her goal was to interview the women who defended the network of rugged, dangerous, and often bombed trails that were vital to North Vietnam's victory. The women spent more than a decade digging tunnels, filling bomb craters, and collecting body parts along the Blood Trail.

Buchanan's interview style gives the women space to tell their own stories in their own words, reviving their youthful energy and dedication. But the women's portraits are double ones: they also speak from the present, as older women whose earlier experiences are overlaid with appreciation for their current, quieter, less idealistic moments. Buchanan refrains from editorializing, adding just enough detail to make each woman distinctive.

Art plays a strong role in their stories: just as other countries embedded photographers with troops, North Vietnam embedded established artists, who sketched and painted the scenes around them. The artists, assigned to keep sketching no matter how hungry or fatigued they might become, produced thousands of pieces, now displayed in museums housed in deserted bunkers. Several, capturing scenes of women working along the trail, are included in the book, bringing their forgotten stories to life. Also included are photographs that capture Vietnam's beauty and contrasts—of mountain ranges swathed in blue mists that hide steep, death-dealing ravines; of a tank abandoned fifty years ago that rusts at the edge of a rice field.

On the Ho Chi Minh Trail is a satisfying cultural history with insights into Vietnam and the women who fought for it.

SUSAN WAGGONER (January / February 2021)

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