

Pass Me the Rice

Robert G. Kay

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Lieutenant Robert Kay wanted more. Life on a US Navy ship lacked the action he craved, especially with the Vietnam War underway. So, while some fled the draft or reluctantly served, he requested a transfer into the thick of it all. In his memoir, *Pass Me the Rice*, Kay offers a glimpse of what life was really like for those who served in Vietnam.

Kay seeks to counter some lingering misunderstandings about the Vietnam War—why the United States military was there, what they did in the country, why some controversial things such as dropping Agent Orange happened—but he only vaguely touches upon such matters. With the stories of servicemen from World War I and II disappearing as a generation passes away, this book offers one opportunity to preserve narratives from yet another era of our nation's history.

The author shares his personal stories and attempts to provide historical and military context throughout. He begins by sharing why he sought a more adventurous life, then relates tales from his time serving as an adviser on a small island, creating an award-winning military newsletter, and leading a river assault group. He describes dramatic events such as his capture of a smuggling boat, killing enemy fighters, sneaking across a river, and the Tet Offensive. Along the way, he provides a picture of daily life—which often proved relatively quiet, punctuated by moments of intense danger, with much of the free time eased by alcohol.

The writing features strong moments with good pacing, description, and word choice. But other times, it is plagued with a weak, passive feel or stilted and unnatural dialogue, with occasionally awkward use of military terminology. In one passage, Kay says to another officer, “Hopefully our sitrep about the secondary explosion alleviates his mood and he can figure out a way to make points towards with the Head-Shad in Saigon.” But this dialogue is never translated or explained for the non-military reader.

Problematic for some readers may be the occasional use of a few ethnically charged terms, such as “round-eyes” or “negro,” and depictions of women that border on sexist—almost every description of a woman includes her breast size. Some explicit sexual scenes are also included. However, these things may be excused by the context of wartime and naval “locker-room” talk.

Kay says he sincerely respects the Vietnamese people: “I marveled at the endurance and fortitude of these people after so many years of being lackeys to the French and as they watched their nation being ripped apart by conflict.” He strives to remain vividly descriptive and to keep the action dramatic; at times he succeeds, particularly during the tense moments. Scattered photographs help readers visualize the military boats and a few people mentioned. The book is, however, over 550 pages due to an unusual font choice and extra line spacing, and at points it plods, dragged down by too many unnecessary day-by-day accounts.

For those interested in a personal narrative, historical research, or stories of those who served in Vietnam, Kay's memoir might be an interesting read. It is one man's perspective about the true purpose of the war and how real life in country differed from both the glamorized and negative perceptions this war often engenders.

DIANE GARDNER (March 12, 2013)

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