Clarion Review

Autobiography & Memoir

Tuy An: A Year of Trying to Help
Richard Carl Wieburg
CreateSpace
978-1-4792-7618-9
Five Stars (out of Five)

"Nothing is prettier and at the same time more deadly than Napalm," writes Richard Carl Wieburg, a US Army lieutenant in Vietnam in 1968, who spent a truly terrifying year as "the leader of a mercenary squad, run by the CIA." What makes Wieburg's memoir unique is not just the role he played in the war but also the men he served with, notably Dai Uy Be, "the most feared district chief in all of Viet Nam," a "half crazy" killer "with the eyes of a madman."

If this were a novel, the story would be built around Dai Uy Be. "There was something terribly frightening about him," recalls Wieburg. "Something ugly and evil seemed to lurk behind his eyes, even when he was smiling." Having this man for an ally, explains Wieburg, "was like having a pet Bengal tiger beside me."

As if this comrade with his "ingenuous, if somewhat twisted mind" were not enough to carry the memoir, there is also Trung Se Hung, one of the most brutal of the gang of mercenaries under Wieburg's command. A cruel killer who collected the ears of dead Viet Cong and found joy in torturing prisoners, Trung Se Hung nevertheless endeared himself to the young lieutenant.

Wieburg's memory, even forty-four years after he served in the war, is as crisp as if he just returned from his tour of duty yesterday. The sights, sounds, and smells of the jungle and the battles he waged in them pop from the page, whether he is describing tripping over the torso of a body he blew in half with his grenade launcher or running for his life with a full regiment of North Vietnamese regulars in pursuit.

Although first and last a war story, there are moments of humanity and humor in *Tuy An*. Each such memory centers around a particular person Wieburg knew, met, or served with. There is the beautiful young bride to whom he made the promise that he would not try to win any medals and who sends him tomato plants—which the rats in his hooch devour the first night.

And there's the corpsman who was an abject failure at home and in the army until he found his calling as the stand-in for the local doctor in a remote village.

Readers will also encounter a young lieutenant who can't keep his hands off the local girls, as well as a "Gung Ho Joe" officer whose brash glory-hunting makes him such a danger to the mercenaries that they "accidentally" toss him out of a chopper to his death. That these are real people and not fictional cast members may surprise many readers, for Wieburg's depiction of them rivals the work of many novelists.

Tuy An is an engrossing page-turner that is brilliantly, honestly, and vibrantly written by a citizen-soldier who understands that in war, "the Living is what is Glorious, not the Dying."

Mark McLaughlin