



Unauthorized Acts: Risky Tales from a Vietnam Medic

Criss Hinson

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Unauthorized Acts is a captivating war memoir—thoughtful, tragic, and true.

Criss Hinson's raw, honest, and skillfully written memoir *Unauthorized Acts* recounts his wartime experiences as a volunteer Air Force medic.

Hinson served in a air evacuation hospital in Vietnam, went on field missions, trained South Korean medics, and flew with Air America. He was thrust right into the thick of the Vietnam War just four days into his deployment when his C-130 was shot down by machine-gun fire and crash-landed on a dirt road. From there, among other things, he and his fellow soldiers were forced to engage the Viet Cong in close-quarters combat; he treated a comrade blown in half by a booby trap; and he was hit by friendly fire, suffering a minor wound.

Unauthorized Acts presents an unvarnished, realistic look at the Vietnam War. Hinson frankly describes events like treating “working girls” who had fallen sick or been beaten, and handing out rations in the “Alley.” There is no effort to gloss over opium trafficking, soldiers getting drunk on leave in Bangkok, or Hinson's somewhat sadistic glee in getting his shotgun modified to fire more deadly flechettes. Officers are sometimes depicted as cowardly and incompetent. They discourage soldiers from taking prisoners. The gore and cruelty of war is described in unsparing detail.

Prose highlights Hinson's strong command of detail, with an impeccable recall of missions, conversations, and even how rations stuffed into a field pack were decades old. Its depictions of battle scenes are vivid, capturing the tense anticipation of Hinson's platoon sitting quietly while holding grenades. Hinson takes clear pains to be accurate, including an extensive glossary so that those without a military background can navigate his pages.

Though grounded in the author's personal experiences, the book does a good job of explaining universal hazards in the war, such as punji sticks, jumper mines, and fallen enemies who booby-trapped themselves by pinning grenades under their bodies just before dying. Veterans of Vietnam and other wars will no doubt find the book relatable. Its insights are perceptive, including the observation that terror can be a “useful weapon,” and Hinson's deep thinking is evident, as when he quotes Herodotus to discuss how fathers bury their sons in war.

The memoir can be disturbing, as when Hinson describes war crimes, like a marine using detonation cord to blow a prisoner's head off to encourage other captives to talk. It's also unstinting with emotions, recalling how Hinson cried for the dead, the living, and “his shattered world.”

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JOSEPH S. PETE (January 22, 2018)

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