

With America now the world's unchallenged superpower, it is all too easy to forget the depths to which we had sunk in the 1970s. Ralph Wetterhahn's Last Battle is a healthy reminder of how low we went and of some of the reasons why.

The book succeeds in three disparate tasks. First, Wetterhahn, a former Air Force pilot, reconstructs the rarely told--and, his research suggests, never completely told before--story of the Mayaguez "rescue", in May 1975, adeptly switching back and forth between the deadly military action and the political games being played in the Ford White House. The stark contrast between the bravery of the men on the ground and the conniving of Gerald Ford and Henry Kissinger, in particular, is an ugly reminder of how disconnected the private political concerns of Washington politicians had become from the reality of sending men to die in Southeast Asia. It is hard to avoid the conclusion, and Wetterhahn makes it even harder, that the Mayaguez affair was scene by Gerald Ford as an easy and cheap way to deflect attention from the ignominious Fall of Saigon two weeks earlier and from his disastrous pardon of Richard Nixon.

Even more maddening is the level of chaos and incompetence that Wetterhahn depicts at the highest levels of the decision making process. From attacking the wrong island to commencing after the Cambodians had already announced they would release the ship to President Ford actually issuing orders to pilots during the attack, the whole mess is one long example of how not to use American military might. One illustrative moment, which would be funny if it weren't so frightening, sees the White House photographer speak up during a meeting to suggest that the massive retaliation Ford is contemplating might be inappropriate. And the most shocking portions of the book detail the administration's willingness to cover up how many men were lost in the engagement--41, including 23 Air Force servicemen killed in a helicopter crash which was treated as if it had nothing to do with the exercise--and the fact that three Marines, still alive and fighting when last seen, were left behind on Koh Tang Island.

Wetterhahn does an excellent job of dissecting the whole morass and drawing out lessons from it. He also makes a convincing case that the failure to openly discuss the problems at the time may well have contributed to future disasters like the botched Iranian hostage rescue in the Carter administration.

The final portion of the book is the most poignant though, as Wetterhahn, by now pretty much obsessed with the fate of those three marines, spends years ping-ponging between the US government and Cambodia, trying to determine their fate and recover them or their remains. Here the story takes on both the nature of a mystery tale, the fate of the three at the heart of it, and of a psychological thriller, with Wetterhahn's own need to reach finality practically taking control of his life.

Mr. Wetterhahn deserves great credit for sinking his teeth into this story and refusing to let go. His determination pays off in the fullest portrait we're likely to get of a relatively minor incident that reveals more than we might like to know about the shabby way we treated our military forces during the Vietnam era. In the end, it reveals the terrible costs, in human lives, human emotions, and the continuance of faulty, even deadly, procedures, that is paid when government refuses to honestly face up to the consequences of its actions. Though the events herein happened almost thirty years ago, the lessons to be learned are always timely. And it is never too late to honor the sacrifices made by our fighting men. For three brave Marines--Danny G. Marshall, Joseph Nelson Hargrove, and Gary Lee Hall--that recognition has waited until now, but they well deserve it.

(Reviewed: 05-Sep-01)

Grade: (A)