

The Killing Zone: My Life in the Vietnam War Study Guide

**The Killing Zone: My Life in the Vietnam War by
Frederick Downs**

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Plot Summary

The author, Lt. Frederick Downs is surprised that the lights are blazing at the airfield when he arrives in Vietnam, on September 8th, 1967. It does not look like an airfield in the middle of a war zone. Still, there is a foreboding notion that there is a war out there, and men will die, be wounded and be crippled. The author, Lt. Frederick Downs, is a Lieutenant, fresh out of OCS, Officer Candidate School. Lt. Downs learns he is going to the 4th Division, based in Pleiku, in the Central Highlands of South Vietnam, and hears that there is plenty of fighting there. The truck driver who is transporting the Lieutenant, tells him about Pleiku. There are many Vietnamese working there, who are called "gooks" by the American soldiers. After 4 days, Lt. Downs is flown on a C-130 plane to Duc Pho, the headquarters of the 3rd Brigade of the 4th Division. His base camp is on a hill called Montezuma Mountain. Lt. Downs is brought in as an observer to some jungle fighting. His first command post is commanding the 1st Platoon to defend three bridges on Highway 1, the Coastal Highway. Lt. Downs leads a number of actions and patrols. Often friendly fire and triggered U.S. mines are as deadly as enemy fire. Lt. Downs learns the ropes of leading a unit and depends on key men like his radioman, RTO Mann, and Acting Sergeant Schaldenbrand. Often, the area is deceptively peaceful and can fool men. An Engineering Battalion goes through and refuses to stop at night on the road. The next day, a truck and men are blown up by mines.

Next, Lt. Downs and his unit are moved to the interior jungle. The battalion sets up Firebase Tempest on a mountaintop, and Lt. Downs' unit is sent out into the surrounding jungle. Here there is more fighting, as a large Vietcong force is concealed in the jungle. After an ambush, Lt. Downs captures two mortars in a battle. Soon after, his unit is ambushed and he is nearly killed but survives intact. After a couple of months in the jungle, the battalion dismantles the firebase and moves on. This frustrates Lt. Downs, who does not understand the reason for all this movement. He also doubts the ability of the ARVN, the South Vietnamese, to do anything for their own defense. For a short time, the platoon is moved back to defend a bridge near the first bridge that Downs defended. More ARVN forces are seen by Lt. Downs to be hostile, worthless and improperly trained.

After, the platoon is moved further north along the coast, in Tam Ky province. This area is closer to North Vietnam and is largely controlled by the Vietcong. Lt. Downs' platoon lands by helicopter and is immediately attacked by snipers. The area is declared by the US Army as a free-fire zone, meaning that all people not US Army, ARVN or other friendly forces, can be killed. The area is honeycombed with tunnels and bunkers and has many mines and booby-traps planted. Lt. Downs is under fire and often in danger of death. Finally, he steps on a "Bouncing Betty" land-mine and is seriously wounded. He loses his left arm, but his life is saved.



The Bridges, p. 15-62, Sept. 8th to Oct. 5th

The Bridges, p. 15-62, Sept. 8th to Oct. 5th Summary and Analysis

The author, Lt. Frederick Downs is surprised that the lights are blazing at the airfield when he arrives in Vietnam, on September 8th, 1967. It does not look like an airfield in the middle of a war zone. Still, there is a foreboding notion that there is a war out there, and men will die, and be wounded and crippled. The author, Lt. Frederick Downs, is a Lieutenant, fresh out of OCS, Officer Candidate School. Lt. Downs sees he is going to the 4th Division, based in Pleiku, in the Central Highlands of South Vietnam, and he hears that there is plenty of fighting there. The truck driver who is transporting the Lieutenant, tells him about Pleiku. There are many Vietnamese working there, who are called gooks by the American soldiers. After 4 days, Lt. Downs is flown on a C-130 plane to Duc Pho, the headquarters of the 3rd Brigade of the 4th Division.

In this battalion, Vietcong, and really all Vietnamese are called, dinks, which supposedly means hairy creatures in Vietnamese. Soon after, for the first time, Lt. Downs accompanies a squad on a search and destroy mission. A whole village is searched and then burned to the ground. True, the women, children and old men are not hurt, but now they have no shelter from the daily rains. The reader is confronted with the stark brutality of war. Any young men that are found are assumed to be Vietcong and can be captured or killed. Lt. Downs also sees the bodies of dead enemy soldiers for the first time.

Lt. Downs gets used to operating in the military at his base camp, Montezuma Mountain, near Duc Pho. He is assigned to lead the 1st Platoon of Delta Company, with the code number of 1-6, which means 1st Platoon, and "6" for Lieutenant. Lt. Downs meets acting Sergeant Schaldenbrand, who tells the Lieutenant, the platoon's motto, "It's a Lick!" This refers to a child who gets his butt whipped by his father, which is what the Army and life does to soldiers. Other important men in the platoon are the Radio Officer, RTO Mann, and the medical officer, known as "Doc." The platoon is now led by Lt. Downs, who receives orders from Company Commander, Captain Sells, and higher ups in the battalion, "Delta Six" and "Dragon Six." The platoon is made up of men from different racial, ethnic and sectional backgrounds, who have to depend on each other to survive and fight.

On September 25, 1967, the platoon drives 3 km. south of Montezuma Mountain base camp, to set up camp on a mountain, and clear a trail from land mines. They move through a village called Duc Pho. Lt. Downs is surprised that normal life and farming activity continues in the village. Somehow he thought that all the civilians would be confined in fenced off areas, but this is obviously not possible. The Lieutenant worries about mines and ambushes. Little kids greet the soldiers, who throw them candy. When



they get to the mountain, the platoon has to work slowly to find and mark land mines and booby traps. After half a day they reach the top of the mountain and the platoon begins to set up base camp. It is unnerving to the Lt. that the countryside looks so quiet and peaceful, yet it is mined and obviously full of Vietcong soldiers. It is difficult to see how they would be attacked from the mountaintop position. The mountain view towards the sea looks too steep to climb, yet there is a foreboding feeling of danger. The platoon is moved on to other tasks in other places, and sure enough, a couple days later, another platoon is attacked by three VC (Vietcong) soldiers, who climb up the cliff and kill two Americans before two of them are killed and one escapes. The next day, Sept. 26th, Lt. Downs' unit is divided into three groups of about 9 men each and assigned to protect three bridges along Highway 1, the coastal highway. This is Lt. Downs' first time that he commands the unit. In addition, there are tanks at the bridges under another commander, stationed at each bridge.

Lt. Downs sets up his command post in an old bunker near the bridge. Other soldiers set up in an old railroad bed created by the French when Vietnam was a French colony. A storm comes in, and men are still setting up mines and barbed wire around the position. Static electricity from the storm sets off a Claymore mine, which wounds three men. The Lt. faces his first test. He tries to get a helicopter flown in, but it is impossible because of the bad weather. Instead, a truck and tank drive the 5 kilometer trip to their home base in the early evening. Luckily, the wounded and their escort are not blown up by land mines and make it to the base and survive. Meanwhile, the Lieutenant's area is heavily flooded and the platoon sets up on the bridge itself. It is difficult to fight in an area full of civilians. On October 4th, 1967, an old lady goes through the platoon's living quarters while they are away. She finds a pack of grenades, probably not knowing what they are. The American troops do not want to kill her and only shoot at the rope handle or her hand, to make her drop the grenades



The Bridges, P 62- 95, Oct 5th to Nov. 2nd

The Bridges, P 62- 95, Oct 5th to Nov. 2nd Summary and Analysis

The next day, the flood waters recede and the platoon sends out a patrol of about 15 men. They go out into rice paddies and surprise a group of 6 Vietcong (or as they are called "dinks"). There is a fire fight and two Vietcong are killed. One American is wounded in the knee by the shrapnel from an exploded hand grenade. Despite superior firepower, most of the Vietcong get away. The men shoot randomly, hoping to hit someone. Lt. Downs aims carefully and makes one hit. The tank men do not get along well with the infantry Platoon, and against advice, come out into the battle; one tank gets stuck in the rice paddies. It is finally dragged out by other vehicles.

One soldier is malingering and threatened with death by Lt. Downs, in order to get him to fight. Lt. Downs continues to send out patrols randomly through the villages. An old man and a young man are captured but turn out to be friendly, not enemy forces. One is the local county clerk and the other an ARVN (Army of South Vietnam) soldier on leave. Luckily, the nasty tank sergeant is kept from killing them before they are identified. It is difficult to fight without knowing the Vietnamese language and who is who. The men are afraid, but only one of them tries to avoid battle. The platoon is forced to try to flush out the Vietcong from the villages in which they are known to be hiding. The platoon meets with some success but usually with tremendous frustration.

On October 10th, an engineering vehicle in a convoy is blown up by a land mine. They had been told not to travel on the highway after dark and did not realize the danger, since the road seems so quiet and peaceful. There is an ongoing, slow motion battle over the road. A couple days later, Lt. Downs takes a random shot by the road when he thinks he sees movement at dusk. This causes a huge explosion. The platoon sends out a reconnaissance squad the next morning and finds out three Vietcong have been blown up by a large mine and other booby traps they were attempting to set up in the road. The next day, a mine-sweeping crew is hit by a remote control land mine of the Claymore type that sprays shrapnel. Luckily, they are not quite in the killing zone. A few days later, a truck blows up from a mine that was not removed by minesweepers during daylight hours. There is a continuous battle to control the road. On October 14th, the local police set up to check the IDs of people passing on the bridge. These are South Vietnamese police and are backed up by the 7 American soldiers stationed by the bridge. The Vietnamese police are on Honda 50 motorcycles and ask the people questions and get intelligence. This is all rapidly ended by a couple bursts of machine gun fire by concealed Vietcong troops. Although the American troops drive the Viet Cong off, the people on the road and the South Vietnamese police all flee. The police on



their motorcycles all escape, and such a checkpoint is never set up there again, as far as Lt. Downs knows.

A couple days later, Lt. Downs shoots a dog that is disturbing their fortifications and setting off flares. The nearby village women motion to him that they want the dog and he gives it to them. That night, Lt. Downs is invited to the village, to see the village chief and have supper. Lt. Downs is nervous but goes with a soldier as a guard. There he is served the cooked dog and other delicacies. He does not know if the people are friendly to the United States or Vietcong supporters, but that night everyone has fun. It remains difficult to flush out the enemy, the Vietcong. Lt. Downs goes to meet one of the other groups from his platoon on the night of October 23rd, to link up and go on a night patrol. The watchman in the other platoon, Jose, is not informed of this, and throws a grenade at them, coming close to hurting the approaching American soldiers with Lt. Downs.

On November 2nd, Lt. Downs and his platoon are about to be moved west into the jungle. A relieving platoon takes their position. Lt. Downs and his commander, code named, Dragon Six (the battalion commander) decide to have the platoon go out at night and surround a village that is rumored to have Vietcong activity every night. They stop when they see light, miles away. It is a U.S. bombing going on in the distance. Finally, the bombing in the distance stops, and a military intelligence helicopter lands with an American intelligence officer, and a Choi-Hoi, a former Vietcong who has turned against the Vietcong, named Fouel. The village is surrounded; when people see the helicopter landing they try to escape by going to the opposite side of the lake. Men who are Vietcong try to escape in boats but are shot by helicopter gunships. One Vietcong is captured and then tortured by the Cho-Hui, Fouel, into giving information. He has a photo showing him with a whole Vietcong squad. Fouel finds more Vietcong hiding out and drags them in. One is a North Vietnamese Army (NVA) soldier, who is only about 14 years old. Fouel hits him just in time to avoid his exploding two hand grenades that are taped to his chest, under his shirt, when he is standing near Lt. Downs, the commanding officer. The mission is successful. A Vietcong squad is destroyed with many men killed, captured or scattered. Nevertheless, Lt. Downs and other American soldiers distrust Cho-Huis, who are turncoat Vietcong.



The Jungle, P. 99-139, Nov. 4th to Nov. 13th

The Jungle, P. 99-139, Nov. 4th to Nov. 13th Summary and Analysis

In the first two months of Lt. Downs' time in Vietnam, his platoon has been guarding a bridge and going through villages in the relatively flat and unobstructed coastal area. Now, in the beginning of November 1967, they are moved into a jungle area. A new base is established on a mountaintop in the jungles of the Central Highlands. The men of Lt. Downs' force start from the base at Duc Pho, and are flown into the landing zone on the mountaintop, by helicopter. Altogether, about 550 men (a battalion) are flown into this newly-built base. A fleet of up to 20 helicopters arrive. Each one flies in at 5 to 10 feet off the ground, and the American soldiers literally have to jump out into the tall elephant grass. Large weapons in wooden packing crates are dropped down, too, including various calibers of mortars and artillery guns.

A defensive perimeter is set up around the new firebase, and the artillery crews have to spend hours positioning their weapons. The defense is established in all directions, since the enemy is assumed to be all around. Supplies and men are flown in. Extra work is done to build the command post, with sandbagging, and a large number of communications antennas. The theory of fighting is to send each platoon-sized unit of about 30 men, out of the firebase, and into the jungle. These platoons are sent up to one kilometer from other units in the mountainous jungle terrain. The objective of the American soldiers is to search out the enemy and kill him with superior firepower, including helicopter gunships and aircraft bombers. The platoon would fight, and as the battle developed, they would call in the adjacent units. Unfortunately, the enemy also knows the American method of operation and tries to suddenly ambush American troops, and then break off action before reinforcements and aircraft arrive. Occasionally, the Vietcong and NVA decide to stand and fight and the American platoon that initiates the action in this case can have very high casualties.

Lt. Downs leads his first platoon's march through the jungle. Mann, his RTO (radio operator) tells him to stop for a leech check and several leeches are found sucking the Lieutenant's blood, and are removed using "bug juice," an insect killer. When the troops stop for the night, they look for a flat hilltop and form a defensive perimeter, with the RTO, the Commander, and the Medic in the center, to respond to attacks. On November 8th, Muto is the first American soldier in the platoon to kill a Vietcong soldier, who is left behind with a nurse. The Americans make jokes about this Vietcong who is caught "malingering" with a woman. Also, the platoon has trouble with their Medic, who does not behave properly and wants to do no regular soldierly duties. The troops meet other obstacles, such as jungle trees that are destroyed by bombers and block their path. Elephant grass is slippery to move on and cuts their hands with its sharp edges. Also



remarkable, is that the Lt. must report the location of the killed Vietcong soldier, and a helicopter flies overhead to verify the location. Deep in the jungle, the war continues to be supported with advanced technology for the Americans.

On November 7th, the platoon stops at the firebase again. Lt. Downs wonders if it is better to be safer inside the Firebase, or out in the jungle, where it is easier to surprise and kill Vietcong. Lt. Downs is code-named Delta-1-6, and is part of Delta Company and the Golden Dragons, or Dragon battalion. Captain Sells is the commander of Delta Company, and meets with Lt. Downs. The Lieutenant complains about the platoon Medic, and it is arranged for the battalion surgeon to fly in and explain to the medic that he must carry out his ordinary duties as a soldier, as well as a medic. Lt. Downs also gets a chance to talk to the other Lieutenants in the Company, while the platoons are linked up at the Firebase. C-rations and ammunition are distributed, along with other goodies. Meanwhile the battalion surgeon explains to the medic, or medical officer, what his duties are. Captain Sells arranges to have his command post move out with the different platoons in the jungle over the next few days, to get a better picture of the action in the field. Captain Sells goes out with Lt. Down's platoon, from Firebase Tempest. Soon, supplies are low, because re-supply is delayed for two days because of bad weather. Even though the American command has superior technology, they also have to deal with difficult conditions. Nerves at times are worn thin. The radioman, Mann complains and cries that even though he is near the end of his year in Vietnam, he may not survive to see his wife and newborn child. Lt. Downs comforts Mann.

On November 10th, Lt. Downs sets up the patrol in a defensive position for the night. Around midnight, Lt. Downs awakes and sees a man standing above his foxhole. The man does not answer a question, and Lt. Downs realizes that it is a Vietcong soldier. He grabs the Vietcong soldier's foot and wrestles with him, but the man runs off. It is found out that a guard had been sleeping. The next day, the platoon hears gunfire. Delta Company has ambushed Vietcong forces. A firefight develops and helicopters are called in. Vietcong are seen running in the distance, and Lt. Downs focuses on one with a long-range rifle. He manages to shoot him down at 300 or more meters distance. Lt. Downs' platoon is on patrol and making contact with the enemy. Lt. Downs sees how he could have been easily killed by the Vietcong that infiltrated the perimeter at night. U.S. communications and technology is used to bring in their supplies and tremendous firepower. Lt. Downs is able to shoot a man from 300 meters. So technology has lots of achievements but is by no means infallible.

The next day, the platoon is set up in their ambush spot and they see four enemy soldiers. The machine gun is stuck, so the Lt. shoots at the enemy using his rifle. Two are killed, but two escape. Lt. Downs looks for them and sees one hiding and is shot superficially in the ear. The Lieutenant runs back, gets covering fire and then charges and kills the enemy soldier. The battalion commander, Dragon-6, comes down to the platoon. Lt. Downs goes to shave, but just then, the machine gunner, Spaag sees an enemy soldier. Spaag is also from a farm background, from Michigan, while Lt. Downs is from a farm in Indiana. There is a fire fight and one enemy soldier is immediately killed, but the other fires back. An American throws a grenade, but the enemy throws it back causing shrapnel would in Downs' shoulder. Downs picks up the dead soldier's



AK-47 and shoots into the brush, but the surviving enemy gets away. On November 13th, a group of 3 enemy soldiers are spotted carrying war material slung over their shoulders from a pole. One of them is hit and the material falls on the ground. It is for assembling grenades. The Chicom (Chinese Communist) grenades are primitive though usually effective, though they sometimes misfire. There are intermittent battles with small groups of Vietcong. The area also has various huts, or as they are called, hootches, tunnels, foxholes, spider-holes and other infrastructure. Obviously, there are many enemy forces in the area, but they seem to be playing a waiting game until they can launch a larger attack. The Vietcong/NVA Tet offensive happens at the end of January 1968.



The Jungle, p. 140- 184, Nov 15th to Dec 8th

The Jungle, p. 140- 184, Nov 15th to Dec 8th Summary and Analysis

On November 15th, 1967, Alpha Company is in a big battle. Helicopter gunships are strafing the Vietcong. ARVN (South Vietnam) aircraft fly by. Dragon-6, the battalion commander orders that Lt. Downs' platoon split in two. Since Sergeant Schaldenbrand leads the other group and gets confused, the two groups inadvertently meet and shots are fired. Luckily, only one man is wounded in the foot. Lt. Downs blames himself for not running the operation properly. The next day, Delta Company links up with Alpha Company. Lt. Downs discusses how the other company, Alpha Company is ambushed when walking on a trail. Many Vietcong have been killed after a hard fight. The American soldiers get used to the idea that they have to kill Vietcong soldiers. Some do it with more relish than others.

Lt. Downs steps on a vine trap which luckily does not go off. It is supposed to trigger a spear dipped in poison to stab him in the side. The men head down a steep path, down the mountainside, where many are stung by hornets. Finally, they stop to eat, near where two streams meet, which is guessed to be a good site for a Vietcong camp. Suddenly, the men see that they have indeed stumbled on an enemy camp. After carefully positioning, they start shooting. The force of over 70 Vietcong soldiers is attacked by the 25 or so men in the platoon, but the Americans have surprise on their side. Many Vietcong are killed and the others flee into the jungle. Also the men discover two Russian-made mortars that are concealed in a bunker. The surviving Vietcong reform above the camp. Lt. Downs wants to leave but is told to stay by Dragon-Six, over the radio.

The third platoon from Alpha Company meets Lt. Downs. Then a man from 3-6's platoon (Lieutenant of Platoon 6's) steps on a mine. The man's leg is blown off and another man below on the mountain is severely injured in the face. Even in the thick jungle, a helicopter is able to evacuate the wounded. The wounded are pulled up by a rope with a life-vest at the end, which is lowered into the jungle. One man falls out 50 feet, stops breathing, and a medic cuts his throat open so he can breathe through a tranche cut. He is taken up to the helicopter, but his chances are doubtful. The wounded are evacuated while there is rifle fire towards the helicopters from the enemy. Finally, near nightfall, the two platoons start up the ridge and spend the night on the mountainside.

The enemy can set off an ambush, or jump out of a spider hole or from behind a tree, firing 30-rounds from an AK-47 automatic rifle. Captain Sells sends the platoon down the hill to the stream to get water, not to look for Vietcong. Lt. Downs is talking to Yoder, who is the point man on the patrol. Yoder is happy because he just got a promotion to become a helicopter door gunner. Suddenly, a machine gun starts blasting, and Yoder is



hit. This is a U-shaped ambush. Yoder cries for help and struggles. The Lieutenant is behind a tree trunk with two other men, Jesse and Bell. Bell and the Lieutenant try to grab Yoder, but a bullet hits Bell's rocket launcher, which explodes, and he is blinded. Yoder, as he moves, is mowed down and killed, and now Bell is wounded and trapped. The Lieutenant manages to retreat to a safer position but then attempts to save Bell, so he tells the platoon to give covering fire and make a lot of noise. The Lieutenant runs back in to get the blinded Bell. He thinks he is hit in the hip, but he manages to get to Bell and bring him back to a safer position. Dragon-Six calls for another platoon to come to Lt. Downs' aid, but that platoon has also been ambushed. Finally, the 3rd Platoon reaches Lt. Downs. By then, the Vietcong have left the immediate area. A helicopter is called in to pick up the dead and wounded. A Vietcong prisoner has been taken under orders from Dragon-Six. The prisoner is blindfolded, so as not to see the American dead. Bell is found not to be seriously hurt and is cleaned up by the medic. He can see again. Bell punches the prisoner and attempts to kill him, with acquiescence by Lt. Downs, but is stopped by Captain Sells. Lt. Downs knows that he came close to being killed in the battle. He had 2 hits on his bullet magazine which protected his body on his hip and other slight wounds. Lt. Downs speaks to Captain Sells to see if he can come in from the field, since he already has been wounded 4 times. He could be reassigned to a desk job in intelligence. Lt. Downs thinks about it, but ultimately decides to stay in the field because the men need him. This is a sort of turning point in the book, with Lt. Downs now dedicated to fighting to the end. His men already have asked that Lt. Downs receive an award for his valor in rescuing Bell. The good news is that the radio man, RTP Mann has completed his year in Vietnam and is returning to the United States.

On December 2nd, 1967, the 1st platoon, Lt. Downs' unit, is taken in helicopters back to the Firebase. By now, after weeks of existence, the firebase has become more comfortable, with sandbagged positions and other amenities. Still, there are dangers there. To avoid a surprise Vietcong attack, 2 or 3 soldiers are sent to a concealed position outside the firebase, as a listening post. If they hear Vietcong, they can throw grenades at them and not give away their position. The troops from Downs' platoon hear noises that night and throw grenades. In the morning it is found that it was a bunch of pigs going through the firebase garbage. On December 5th, it is decided to abandon the firebase. The reverse is done to that which was done to build it. Helicopters fly out the heavy weapons and equipment. The rest is thrown into a dump, with anything explosive put in a separate dump and blown up with a hand grenade. Lt. Downs asks, what is the sense of leaving? He and his platoon now know the area and where to ambush the Vietcong. The problem with the Vietnam War is that the American troops only control the areas where they have troops and there are not enough troops. The five Northern provinces of South Vietnam are never pacified.



Back to the Bridges, p. 187- 205, Dec 10th to Dec. 30th

Back to the Bridges, p. 187- 205, Dec 10th to Dec. 30th Summary and Analysis

Lt. Downs' platoon returns to Base Camp Montezuma, near Duc Pho, and are assigned to a position 3 km. south of the bridge they had previously guarded, still along the coastal Highway 1. RTO Rueto, the radioman returns after healing from his wounds and now works with Lt. Downs. Lt. Downs starts to think of going to flight school. In terms of the war, the Lieutenant thinks the tactics used are wrong and has many doubts. Why do the ARVN do so little? Why is his platoon unable to stay in one or two spots rather being constantly on the move? Things are relatively quiet in the new sector so far. On December 19th, Captain Sells radios a plan to trap the Vietcong who use the adjoining lake for fishing and supply. Towards the east of the bridge position of Lt. Downs' platoon is a large fresh water lake which is separated from the ocean by a sand bar. Vietnamese fishing boats use the lake. The field intelligence agent and his Chou-Hoi assistant return because they have intelligence that the Vietcong are using the lake for supplying forces. The platoon takes positions on the shore, and helicopter gunships drive the boats to the waiting men. Eighteen Vietcong are captured and given to an ARVN patrol. Since the ARVN are not involved until the end, Lt. Downs is resentful of the limited roll of the ARVN in the war, despite many of them being trained for years.

The next day, Lt. Downs is given a day or so off as a reward for capturing the Russian mortars in the jungle. He catches a flight to the base camp at Pleiku, up in the Central Highlands. Lt. Downs is surprised at the poor and dirty looking Vietnamese people in the town of Pleiku. A big industry of the Vietnamese is to go through the U.S. Army garbage dump, salvage metal, and pound it into metal sheets, used to make boxes. Some Vietnamese are in better shape because they have jobs at the adjoining U.S. Base at Pleiku. Lt. Downs goes into the base and is surprised to see a General's large trailer. He goes to the officer's club, but only meets dreary career Army people. Lt. Downs gets drunk and watches TV-serial features. When he goes outside, he sees a drunken officer drive his borrowed jeep into a ditch. Lt. Downs talks to the officer and decides to help him. He stops some enlisted men and pretends to be victimized by some officers, in a funny scene. Downs says that he and the drunken officer are the religious chaplain and his assistant. The drunken officer is frustrated but the men eventually get the jeep out of the ditch.

Captain Sells has Lt. Downs lead the platoon on foot on a patrol 5 kilometers south of their bridge position. Lt. Down's new Sergeant is Sgt. Marley, since Sgt. Schaldenbrand just finished his year in Vietnam. On this march, Lt. Downs and the men pass a Special Forces training camp for ARVN soldiers. The ARVN Special Forces soldiers are above on a hill and make fun of the patrol, even shooting over their heads. Lt. Downs again



thinks to himself about why is the ARVN so awful? Even in the jungle, when ARVN pilots fly on a support raid, Lt. Downs claims that they often shoot up friendly forces. Lt. Downs and his platoon stop at a village on the coast, 5 km. south. Lt. Downs sees a man on crutches who has lost his leg because of a land mine explosion. This foreshadows the increasing danger of mines and booby-traps that will hit Lt. Downs and his comrades.

On December 23rd, 1967, the platoon returns to their bridge position. Radio officer Rueto walks out of the defensive perimeter and is shot at. The platoon takes positions and the fifty-caliber machine gun shoots up the area until it hits, 400 meters away, the huts of a nearby village. Two men and Lt. Downs then enter the area where the shots come from by a flooded rice paddy, near a beach. Suddenly, Lt. Downs, who is walking ahead, hears splashing and realizes he is near the Vietcong soldier. He is fired on at a distance of only 3-4 meters and the Vietcong escapes. Next day, the road mine-sweeping crew arrives. A teenaged girl who is bloody comes out from the village; she is hit by bullets shot the previous night. The minesweepers call to have the girl medically evacuated. The good deed of the minesweeper is contrasted with the bitterness of Lt. Downs and his men from the previous day's battle, who do not want to help her.



North to Tam Ky, P. 211-237

North to Tam Ky, P. 211-237 Summary and Analysis

The Lieutenant's platoon is flown in helicopters to the northern part of South Vietnam, towards Tam Ky province. This area is considered a free-fire zone, since it is so heavily controlled by the Vietcong cadre. A free-fire zone means that practically anyone can be shot. Pro-South Vietnam government officials and police are quickly executed by the Vietcong in this area. The more genocidal side of the Vietnam War is revealed also in the quick shooting of old men, women and children, by the platoon. This is justified by Lt. Downs because the bodies are found to have grenades and ammunition in their back packs. The platoon lands in the Tam Ky area near the coast, in the north. The area is formerly an active rice growing area, but now is largely abandoned. Another platoon in the Company sees a Vietcong squad, and firing erupts. The American force quickly machine-guns an enemy soldier, and the other Vietcong hide in the tall grass. Five other Vietcong are machine-gunned by helicopters.

The next morning, seven civilians are ordered to surrender, but run away. Six of them are quickly killed by the platoon, while a teenager escapes with a shot in the shoulder. Both sides are killing without restraint. The Company Commander, Delta Six has the Company continue to march through a diverse area, broken up by hedgerows and jungle, as well as abandoned villages. Lt. Downs becomes isolated from his comrades in this area and has a close-up battle to the death with a North Vietnam Army (NVA) soldier. As Lt. Downs approaches a bunker, he sees motion and dives for cover as he is shot at. He is shot at again and ducks into a hut and is on the defensive, but his gun jams. Miraculously, he runs through a weak wall, before a hand grenade is thrown into the hut to finish him off. Lt. Downs barely manages to sneak around and stab the NVA soldier to death with a bayonet.

The entire company is flown by helicopter to a village slightly to the north, also along the South China Sea. As they land in helicopters, or are dropped from 5 to 10 feet in the area, there is sporadic ground fire from Vietcong. A new U.S. soldier goes into a bunker and finds an old Vietnamese man and a man about 30 years old. Lt. Downs wants to kill the young man, but Captain Sells has them to let both go. Shortly after, two men, Bell and Hunter go through a hole in a hedgerow, and a small mine explodes. They are injured, and Lt. Downs, just behind them, is stunned by the blast. Their wounds are not very serious, but still the platoon is angry. Lt. Downs feels that the two Vietnamese they let go, should have warned them about the mines, but both Vietnamese are gone. The next day, January 7th, 1968, Lt. Downs' platoon marches further east. They are among some hootches, when two Vietcong soldiers appear. There is a brief firefight, but then the enemy escapes. Further down the line, a black pajama clad figure is hit, but it turns out to be an unarmed old woman, who is shot by the Americans in the jaw. She is let go, to run into the brush, probably to die there as another civilian caught in the crossfire. Later, men in the platoon enter a hootch and find two small Buddha statues. Lt. Downs tells them that the statues could be booby-trapped. There is a foreshadowing sense that

it is bad luck to grab these statues, but Lt. Downs is not afraid. One of them is grabbed for him, and the other one for Captain Sells.

It is January 10th on the evening before Lt. Downs is seriously wounded. He is happy and has also been accepted into flight school. The men sleep in a position which is on top of a sand dune by the beach. The next morning, Lt. Downs marches out as part of the three-man point, or advance party, two days in a row, something he usually does not do. He is confident and going to set up an ambush at the same place as the day before. The platoon advances and sees a Vietcong soldier who then hides again in a tunnel. There is a gate and two men go through it, carefully checking for mines. Despite precautions, when Lt. Downs goes through, he steps on a mine. It is a "bouncing betty" mine that springs in the air and explodes behind him. As Lt. Downs goes up in the air, he sees that his left arm has been blown off above the elbow. He collapses on the ground. Luckily, his back pack absorbs much of the explosion. In the explosion, the radio man, Rueto, is also severely wounded in the legs and the groin. Other men are hit by the explosion and shrapnel. The medic runs forward, applies first aid, and ties a tourniquet around the arm stump. Lt. Downs thinks he is dying, but then a helicopter arrives. His left arm is amputated above the elbow, and there is damage to his right arm as well. Lt. Downs is flown out after a few days to a hospital in Japan and later to a rehabilitation hospital in the United States.

Afterword

Afterword Summary and Analysis

Back in the battle, the platoon is faced with an intensifying fight, and then on January 31st, the North Vietnamese Tet Offensive begins. There is a list of men in the 1st Platoon, including those killed and wounded, in the book. A week later, the Third Platoon leader triggers a bobby-trap and bleeds to death. Despite using a scout dog, another bouncing betty mine explodes and kills one man, with another losing his legs, though he survives. Later, friendly artillery is aimed wrong and wounds ten Americans in the Company in a fight outside the main city of Danang. A helicopter is shot down in the same battle, and a couple of days later, two more American helicopters are shot down. By February 10th, 1968, the 1st Platoon has so many men killed and wounded that it is no longer a functioning unit. Other men severely wounded are RTO Rueto, Steven Spaag, and Lt. Steve Weeks. Some of the men survive Vietnam without major wounds, including Sgt. Schaldenbrand, Private Jim Hahn, Clarence Johnson (Indian's Gun), Sgt. Marley and Captain Sells.

After his wounds, Lt. Fred Downs cannot continue his army career. Later, he becomes an official in the Veterans Administration of the United States. After 7 years, Frederick Downs is appointed the VA's National Director of the Prosthetic and Sensory Aids Service, which provides wounded vets with aids like artificial limbs. As a VA official, Fred Downs goes back to Vietnam. Later, he travels extensively in post-war Vietnam, both North and South. These visits help the author, Fred Downs, reconcile his hatred of the Vietnamese and see that they are human beings, too. Note that comments on the Afterword have been kept short, since it is only in the latest edition of the book, "the Killing Zone."



Characters

Frederick Downs, Lt. Frederick Downs, Lt. Downs, the Lieuten

The book is an autobiographical account of the experience of Frederick Downs in the war in Vietnam, who is a Lieutenant. Lt. Downs arrives in Vietnam, on September 8th, 1967. He is severely wounded a bit more than four months later. Though Lt. Downs is only on the battlefield a few months, he has a wide variety of combat experiences. Lt. Downs feels the joy and pride in being a successful leader of the 1st Platoon, Delta Company and is an aggressive leader. His mission is generally to hunt down the Vietcong and North Vietnamese Army soldiers and kill them. Lt. Downs hopes the U.S. can succeed in the war, which is to defend South Vietnam from being taken over by North Vietnam, and by the communist Vietcong. He is often frustrated with the little effort he sees on the part of the South Vietnamese Army, the ARVN, to defend their own country. He cannot speak Vietnamese and seldom has translators to communicate with the people, except on the most basic level. Lt. Downs is upset that he feels forced to kill Vietnamese civilians, including women and children. Yet, in a guerrilla war, he is more concerned with protecting his men than treating civilians well. This is why he prefers to fight in the jungle, where there are few if any civilians. When Lt. Downs is severely wounded, he has already been slightly wounded four times. Up until then, he and his men think that Lt. Downs can survive anything.

Corporal, later Acting Sergeant, Sergeant Schaldenbrand

Schaldenbrand is a draftee from Philadelphia, Pa., described as a typical guy from a big city. Schaldenbrand has the habit of playing checkers with anyone available during any lull in the fighting and also brushes his teeth a lot. He does not like the war and does not want to be there, nevertheless, has considerable ability to lead. Sergeant Schaldenbrand helps Lt. Downs a lot and manages to survive his one year tour of duty in Vietnam without serious wounds. When Sgt. Schaldenbrand leaves, this creates a crisis for Lt. Downs. In the one instance where Lt. Downs is ordered to split the platoon on a combat operation, Sgt. Schaldenbrand leads the other half of the platoon but somehow goes in the wrong direction and walks toward Lt. Downs' half. Lt. Downs accidentally ambushes his own men. Luckily, only one man is wounded in the foot.

Captain Harold Sells

Captain Sells is the immediate superior officer of Lt. Downs and leads the Delta Company, a force of 3 or 4 platoons, or around 100 men. He is a career military man, who has served about 9 years in the Army. Captain Sells is concerned about Fred



Downs after Downs is slightly wounded twice in one day in a bloody battle. He is willing to allow Lt. Downs to leave the field and get a safe job in intelligence, but ultimately Lt. Downs decides he cannot abandon his men. Captain Sells also has certain hesitations about killing civilians and at least once overrules Lt. Downs to release a captured civilian. In the Afterword, it is mentioned that Captain Sells leaves the Army after he survives his tour of duty in Vietnam.

Infantryman Yoder

Yoder is a soldier in Lt. Downs' platoon. He is described as somewhat of a hillbilly and missing a front tooth. He is also a big man, over six feet tall, and from a large family. Yoder makes a lot of jokes with Lt. Downs and is a very dependable soldier. He is leading the point, the forward element of the platoon, when he is ambushed. Yoder is shot, and it is impossible despite an attempt, to rescue him. Yoder is shot again and becomes the first soldier under Lt. Downs' command to be killed in action.

Radio Man, RTO Mann

RTO Mann is Lt. Downs' radio officer, until at some point he completes his tour of duty in Vietnam and is sent home. He is described as thin and tall. Mann has been serving in Vietnam for many months and helps get Lt. Downs used to life in the jungle. He tells Downs to do things like stop and check for leeches, and put bug juice (repellent) on them. He is married and has a son he never has seen. At one point during a battle in the jungle he breaks down and fears he will be killed, but after some reassurance from Lt. Downs, he regains his composure. Among his idiosyncrasies is that he makes a pot of coffee any chance he gets, even on the battlefield.

Delta Six

Delta Six is the Commanding officer over Captain Sells. He often goes along with different elements of the Companies that make up his unit. Delta Six is military terminology for his rank; his name is never given.

Dragon Six

Dragon Six is the Commanding officer over Delta Six. Dragon comes from the name, the Golden Dragons, the First of the Fourteenth Infantry. He may appear in person several times but mostly is heard over the radio giving orders. His real name is never given.



Lt. Andersen

Lieutenant Andersen is a black soldier and Lieutenant of the 3rd Platoon. He meets Lt. Downs fairly often and they discuss tactics. Lt. Andersen warns Lt. Downs about the danger of walking on trails, which are often mined and booby-trapped.

Fouel, the Chou-Hoi

Fouel, the Chou-Hoi, is a former Vietcong guerrilla who has been recruited by U.S. Intelligence. He and his military intelligence handler are flown to Lt. Downs' platoon twice to question and round up local Vietcong after a village is surrounded. Fouel is described as 5-feet tall and thin, like most Vietnamese that Lt. Downs sees. He is brutal with Vietcong, hitting them and being willing to torture them. Nevertheless, he and such Vietcong turncoats are not trusted by Lt. Downs and other American soldiers.

Spaag, Machine-gunner Spaag

Spaag is one of the machine-gunners of Lt. Downs' platoon. He is described as a dependable man, originally from a farmer background in Minnesota. He is involved in the battle in the jungle where Lt. Downs is slightly wounded in the shoulder by grenade shrapnel. Spaag, like Lt. Downs also ends up with a serious wound.

Infantryman Jose Villasenor

Jose Villasenor is one of the squad leaders in Lt. Downs' platoon. He is described as a swarthy, stocky Puerto Rican, who breaks into Spanish when excited. He participates in the battle in the jungle with Lt. Downs and Spaag, where Lt. Downs is slightly wounded, and many other battles. He is described as always looking for the funny side of situations.

RTO Rueto, Radioman Rueto

RTO Rueto is Lt. Downs' radioman after Mann leaves Vietnam. He is wounded at some point and after a period of medical convalescence returns to the platoon and replaces RTO Mann. Rueto is severely wounded by the same mine that explodes under Lt. Downs.

Infantryman Bell

Bell is an infantry man in Lt. Downs' platoon. In an intense battle, he tries along with Lt. Downs to save infantryman Yoder. He is temporarily blinded by a shot that causes his grenade launcher to explode. He has to be rescued by Lt. Downs. He is described as a black man from the Atlanta, Georgia area.



Delk, Porter, Gallagher, Skelly, and Jesse

Delk, Porter, Gallagher, Skelly and Jesse are other men mentioned under Lt. Downs' command, in the 1st Platoon.

Doc

Doc is the generic name for a platoon's medical officer. Lt. Downs has difficulty with his medical officer (Medic) in the jungle. The Medic, or Doc is described as an overweight boy, aged 18 from Texas, who thinks he has no other duties than patching up men if they are wounded. Doc is given a talk by the battalion Surgeon Officer about his duties as a soldier and in combat. After this, the problem appears to be resolved.



Objects/Places

Pleiku

Pleiku is a city in the Central Highlands of South Vietnam and the site of the main base of the 4th Division, the larger unit to which Lt. Downs belongs.

C-130 Cargo plane

The C-130 is a cargo or transport plane that Lt. Downs takes to get to Pleiku.

Dinks

Dink is a term used by the people in Lt. Downs's unit to describe Vietcong, North Vietnamese Army people and ultimately all Vietnamese. Other battalions use the term gooks for enemy or in general for Vietnamese.

Montezuma Mountain, Duc Pho

Montezuma Mountain is a hill towering over the coast and by the village of Duc Pho. This is where the Battalion command post is for Lt. Downs. Duc Pho is a village near the coast and Montezuma Mountain, where the battalion has their headquarters.

The Jungle

The jungle is the thickly-vegetated area in the Central Highlands where Vietcong and NVA hide out, concealed from American aircraft. Lt. Downs and his unit are sent to the jungle to root out and kill these enemy forces.

The Bridges

The bridges are key defended points along Highway 1. If one of these should be blown up, the Highway is cut-off. First Lt. Downs' platoon defends three bridges, and later they defend one bridge close by.

Highway 1

Highway 1 is the old coastal highway the French built along the length of Vietnam. Sections of it are being reopened and defended by American forces.



Vietnam, North Vietnam, South Vietnam

The former French colony of Vietnam has been divided into North and South Vietnam. North Vietnam is governed by Communists, led by Ho Chi Minh. South Vietnam is defended by US Armed Forces.

ARVN

The ARVN is the South Vietnamese armed forces. In 1968, the ARVN is just being properly organized. Later, the ARVN largely defends South Vietnam but is overrun and destroyed by the North Vietnamese forces in April 1975.

The Vietcong, the NVA

The Vietcong refers to local South Vietnamese that have been recruited to fight for revolution against South Vietnam and for the North. The NVA is the regular North Vietnamese Army. These forces fight together, but NVA forces are usually better trained and in better condition.

Tam Ky

Tam Ky is a northern province of South Vietnam, along the coast. It is heavily dominated by Vietcong and NVA forces. Areas of Tam Ky are a free-fire zone, meaning that friendly civilians have been evacuated and all people there are presumed to be aiding the Vietcong. Therefore, virtually anyone not in friendly armed forces can be shot on sight.



Themes

The Need to Fight and Work Together

Lt. Downs describes his unit as "tight." The men are used to working together and doing what they can to support each other in fighting and routine duties. When the platoon has to work with the armored units that are under separate command at the bridges, there is tension. The two units have unnecessary problems because there are ego games between them, like when the armored unit follows the infantry into a fight, and then two vehicles get stuck in the mud. When a soldier shirks his duty or malingers, he is generally treated harshly. The new recruit who refuses to fight is threatened with being shot in the head by Lt. Downs. The medic who does not want to do his normal soldierly duties is reprimanded by the battalion surgical officer. At the same time, it is recognized that good soldiers can crack under the stress of battle. Soldiers are allowed to voice their fears and are given encouragement. A soldier who is wounded twice or more is given the option of getting a non-combat job. Lt. Downs describes how his men are black, white and from other backgrounds, yet are judged on their abilities, not their race or ethnicity.

The Difficulties of War

The American forces have the best technology available at the time. If soldiers are wounded they can be airlifted by a helicopter to immediate medical care. American air power can kill hundreds of enemy soldiers without risking American lives. Yet against a determined and entrenched enemy, this is not enough to win a quick victory. The enemy is able to disappear during the day and then at night mine the roads. American forces are forced to search for the enemy in the jungle because that is where the enemy hides out and conceals their battle reserves. In addition, the Vietcong and NVA are well supplied with weapons that are smuggled into South Vietnam from North Vietnam, through intervening countries. Facing an enemy that is able to disappear into the population, the American forces resort to drastic measures. All young Vietnamese men are drafted into the army, yet these forces are ineffective. In the north, near Tam Ky, the entire population is apparently ordered out of parts of these provinces. They are declared free-fire zones, where technically anyone can be shot. Huge areas of agricultural land that was once developed and prosperous are reduced to total ruin.

Pride in Being a Soldier

Lt. Downs has tremendous pride in being an officer in the United States Army. In the jungle, he is so active in his platoon's patrols, that his commanding officers keep his platoon in there for as long as possible. After Lt. Downs is wounded twice in a day, he is offered the option of getting a safe non-combat job in intelligence but refuses the offer. He is committed to his unit and leading his men in battle, as safely and effectively as



possible. Lt. Downs has tremendous contempt and resentment for the ARVN for not fighting and for shirking their duty. As Lt. Downs describes the last day of his war in Tam Ky province, he hints that perhaps he goes too far in his determination to be the best soldier and leader. He mentions that he leads the point of his patrol for two days in a row, against his usual practice, the day that he steps on a mine and is badly wounded. The reader gets the impression that Lt. Downs may have gone too far in his determination to fight and may have gone forward into danger. Stepping on a mine is also a matter of chance, since they are difficult to avoid. When Lt. Downs says he is forced to fire on civilians, he only does this when he thinks that his duties as a soldier and a commanding officer of his unit demand he do so.



Style

Perspective

The book is autobiographical about the author's experiences in the Vietnam War, and as a whole is in the 1st person point of view. There are points in the book where the author describes in depth what other soldiers are experiencing. For example, on P. 93-95, there is a detailed description of what Fouel, the former Vietcong, does when he confronts Vietcong soldiers. However, the reader never gets inside Fouel's thoughts, or anyone else's except for Lt. Downs. There are a few passages that question the policy and tactics of the United States in Vietnam. These passages attack the lack of combat readiness of the ARVN, and the fact that they will not fight their own battles. In these passages, the author takes the Point of View of "we, the American forces," so these passages have a more generalized point of view, as observations and recommendations to the United States in fighting this type of war.

Tone

The setting of the book is the nation of South Vietnam, which is part of Vietnam, a former French colony. There is a pro-communist rebellion in South Vietnam, headed by the Vietcong; additionally, forces from North Vietnam have infiltrated the South. The author, Lt. Downs, flies into Vietnam in early September 1967. He is placed in a military unit, under the I and II Corps in the Central Highlands, headquartered in Pleiku. From there, Lt. Downs is sent to Duc Pho, further north and on the coast, by the coastal highway 1. His assignment is to lead a platoon guarding 3 bridges on Highway 1. In the bridge area, there is killing of Vietcong and violence, but the American soldiers seem pretty confident. There are no major attacks on the bridges while Lt. Downs is there. There had been previous attacks. Moving to the jungle later, Lt. Downs sees a higher level of danger. He is leading daily patrols to find and kill Vietcong troops. Lt. Downs finds large amounts of weapons and infrastructure when he ambushes a Vietcong unit. The Vietcong in turn ambush his unit and cause Americans to be killed and wounded. Lt. Downs returns briefly to guarding other bridges on the coast. Then his unit is sent further north on the coast to Chu Lai and Tam Ky province. These areas are generally free-fire zones, where anything can be shot at. The areas are riddled with tunnels and bunkers. It is thoroughly booby-trapped and mined. In this zone, in Tam Ky, Lt. Downs triggers a land mine and is severely wounded, ending his war in Vietnam.

Tone

The tone of the book is very forthright and patriotic in the author's description of his observations in the Vietnam War. The author seems to say that this is how the Vietnam War was for him, and if that is disturbing to readers, too bad. The author portrays himself as the toughest, most determined sort of character. While other commanding officers go soft, Lt. Downs is the one willing to kill civilians, often, where others disagree.



Lt. Downs justifies this because he needs to protect his men. Lt. Downs does not understand why the ARVN and other South Vietnamese authorities cannot make a decent attempt to defend their country. There is a lot of anger in the book, with much of it focused on the inability of the South Vietnamese to fight, despite being given weapons, training and other equipment. Lt. Downs disagrees with the U.S. military strategy. He does not know why his unit and other units have to be moved around constantly. If each unit stayed and fought in one or two places, the units would get to know these places and the terrain and would fight better, he argues. There are also a lot of problems with friendly fire. The Vietnam War lacked the smart-bomb technology that the United States has today, so perhaps with today's technology, the war could have been fought more effectively. Lt. Downs is quite clear about the hardships of living, fighting and dying in the jungle and coastal areas of Vietnam.

Structure

The book is divided into 4 sections and an Afterword. Tension slowly but surely rises as the fighting and danger generally escalate through the book. In the first section "the Bridges," Lt. Downs is introduced to leading his platoon. He and his platoon face danger but seem confident. American forces can control only the area where they are stationed, and cannot communicate with the people. The reader sees that the main vulnerability of American forces, even in a partially pacified area, is their ignorance of the language and their lack of knowledge of what the population is thinking. In the second section "the Jungle," the fighting intensifies. It becomes clear that the Vietcong and NVA have entrenched forces, as American soldiers fight and die. The jungle is used as a hideout of enemy forces from American air power. Lt. Downs several times comes close to being killed, and it is easy to be wounded or killed, a statement that foreshadows Lt. Downs' own maiming late in the book. This tension is somewhat broken up when Lt. Downs briefly returns to guarding bridges. When Lt. Downs gets a pass to visit the American base at Pleiku, the wealth and sometimes luxurious living of the American forces is shown. Finally, in "North to Tam Ky," the war is shown in all its brutality. The whole area is a free-fire zone. Even women and children are killed, and then ammunition and hand grenades are found on their bodies. Most of the civilians have fled the area. Mines are the ultimate anonymous killer. The Afterword ties up many of the loose ends of the story and helps resolve what happens to the other men in the platoon.



Quotes

"Not everyone doing the fighting is in the newspapers. You'll never ever see a reporter up there. It's too rough for them.' He looked at my youth. 'You'll get a belly full of fighting up there, son, if that's what you want.'"

P. 17, the Bridges, Unidentified Sergeant to Lt. Downs

"A lick is a lick on a young man's ass, lieutenant.... Well, when something goes wrong, it's a lick on you, see? Anything that goes wrong will give you a lick, and over here you'll get plenty of licks."

P. 36, the Bridges, Acting Sgt. Schaldenbrand to Lt. Downs

"But all of a sudden the situation became very complex and passed from semi-comical to deadly serious. She grabbed hold of the case of grenades we had had to leave behind. Gripping the case by its rope handles, she started back down the track."

P. 51, the Bridges, Lt. Downs

"I struck him on the shoulder with the rifle stock of my M-16 knocking him down into the dirt. Pointing my rifle within a few inches of his face, I told him (my face undoubtedly contorted in rage), 'You move now, motherfucker, or I'll shoot you through the head!'"

P. 61, the Bridges, Lt. Downs to reluctant U.S. soldier

"He seemed pleased with the gift and gave it to one of the women who secreted it in the back of the hootch. The others, perhaps twenty, seated themselves in a rough circle in front of the cooking dog."

P. 78, the Bridges, Lt. Downs in a village

"Fouel and the agent suddenly burst into the circle of soldiers. Upon spying our prisoner, Fouel yelled a few short words in Vietnamese toward the prisoner. The guerrilla's expression turned from a cool disinterest to one of terror. He obviously knew his adversary."

P. 90, the Bridges, Lt. Downs on the reaction to Fouel

"Chinook helicopters sidled in with the 105 artillery guns slung under their mammoth bellies and the ammo slung under the guns."

P. 102, the Jungle, Lt. Downs at the firebase

"The American strategy was to draw them into a fight so we could use our superior firepower to destroy them. To win a battle, we had to kill them. For them to win, all they



had to do was survive."

P. 108, the Jungle, Lt. Downs on strategy

"I heard a sound in front of us and pooped a grenade out there. That's a fucking dink I hit, and they're all over out there."

P. 124, the Jungle, an infantry man

"I turned up the trail and found myself looking at a dink lying in a depression next to the trail. His rifle was pointing straight at my head as I stared into his face only fifteen feet from me."

P. 131, the Jungle, Lt. Downs in combat

"There was nothing to do but wait, so I started looking through the pack of intelligence material we had captured. The dinks never failed to amaze me. Included in the papers we had put together in the pack was an American publication entitled The Hippie Handbook of Love."

P. 154, the Jungle, Lt. Downs after a battle

"I looked at him in surprise. 'Bell was killing this motherfucker. What's wrong with that?' I retorted."

P. 175, the Jungle, Lt. Downs

"Why were the Americans doing the fighting? It seemed that ARVNs should be doing their own fighting in the jungle, not us. Our tactics also seemed wrong."

P. 188, Back to the Bridges, Lt. Downs on strategy

"A young man was sitting on the shore looking out over the villagers working in the mud. I wondered why he wasn't with them. I found out when he jumped up, balancing himself on a pair of crutches. His right leg was missing below the knee."

P. 203, Back to the Bridges, Lt. Downs

"Chu Lai was a free-fire zone. I was instructed to shoot at everything not American, ROK, or ARVN. The brutal war of the highlands had come to the flat farm ground of the South China Sea coast."

P. 211, North to Tam Ky, Lt. Downs on the war

"Two women survived long enough to cross the bridge and enter one of the hootches. Three of my men crossed over the bridge and threw grenades in the hootches."

P. 216, North to Tam Ky, Lt. Downs on the war

"I never heard the explosion. Black powder and dirt flew by me. My eardrums were ripped. My body was flying through the air."

P. 231, North to Tam Ky, Lt. Downs on the explosion

Topics for Discussion

Discuss pride. Lt. Downs feels tremendous pride in being a leader and a soldier. Though he is wounded slightly four times, he refuses to give up his command in the field. Is his pride a virtue, or does it make him take unnecessary risks?

Discuss cooperation. Lt. Downs describes the men in his unit as "tight." They cooperate with each other and depend on each other for their lives in battle. Except in extreme cases, soldiers with problems are helped and talked to. Is cooperation among the soldiers of the platoon as important as their individual courage?

Discuss technological superiority. The United States has overwhelming technological superiority through its air power in the Vietnam War. It can be a double edge sword, since many American soldiers are killed or hurt by "friendly fire." This may be somewhat minimized by today's laser-directed bombs but is a continuing problem in future wars. Can technological superiority by itself win wars? Some say that the Vietnam War could have been won with today's more advanced technology. Is that true?

What is the nature of the Vietnam War? How does a technologically superior force, take on a guerrilla force? Why is the United States unable to defeat the Vietcong?

Discuss Rites of Passage. For many men over history, military service under fire is a rite of passage, if they survive. Does the military serve this function for Lt. Downs? In the Afterword, the author writes of his later successful career in the Veteran's Administration. Is the message of the story changed from that of earlier editions which end when Lt. Downs loses his arm?

Discuss Devotion to a Cause. In the military, Lt. Downs finds many downsides. The work and the dangers are huge. He sees malingerers, bad soldiers and lack of cooperation from the ARVN. Despite this, what makes him devoted to the cause of the US Military in Vietnam?

Discuss Respect for Human Life. In war, men have the objective of killing other men, yet there are supposed to be some rules to warfare. Prisoners are not supposed to be killed after they surrender. Yet in the jungle warfare, both sides take few if any prisoners. When prisoners are taken, they are often tortured for information or just to express the hatred of the enemy. Civilians are suspected of transporting war material and obtaining intelligence for the enemy. Certain areas are declared free-fire zones, where people can be shot on sight. Is it possible to have war and at the same time, maintain respect for human life?

Discuss Fatalism. Many of the soldiers are against the war but are drafted to fight anyway. Sgt. Schaldenbrand is a draftee and becomes a Sergeant due to his natural ability to lead men. Men fight and die in the war because that is what they have to do.



How do these men justify the sacrifices they have to make? Even Lt. Downs has moments to doubt the methods and objectives of the war. He often feels hate for all the Vietnamese and resents the ineffective ARVN (South Vietnamese Army). Yet, all these American soldiers accept fatalistically that their duty is to find and kill the Vietcong and NVA.

Discuss strength under adversity. Lt. Downs is thrown into a hostile environment and tries to survive and be successful in his mission. Is he successful? Is he too daring? Though he is eventually disabled, is he a successful leader of his platoon?