



12, 20 & 5: A Doctor's Year in Vietnam

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Georgia says

Loved it...hated it....couldn't put it down in spite of my ambivalence. I read for four straight hours, devouring the story, horrified by the brutality of a 'not war' and finally realizing that this book had been written from the gut of a man who had gone through one of the most challenging situations any human being could live through. There were no happy endings per se; but there was some resolution and I guess that's all anyone can ask of an author who lays his soul bare for all the world to see. I don't think I'll read it again, but I certainly won't ever forget it either.

Jan Giles says

Good account of medical triage in Vietnam

Parrish's account of his war experience describes the overwhelming exhaustion and automatic response that it took for him to care for injured and dying marines in Vietnam. However, his description of R&R contained too much sex and obscene language. Another star if those chapters had been heavily edited.

Bud says

The book follows Dr. Parrish into Vietnam where he served as a General Medical Officer in a variety of settings. It's a bit like MASH with teeth. The flow of disabled and dead marines is overwhelming at times and cannot help but disturb the psyche of everyone involved.

Trevin says

Excellent read. I am a huge fan of military type novels, and I absolutely love this book. Definitely one of my favorites.

Andrew Austin says

Excellent first hand account of a doctor in Vietnam. Gruesome, but it is war, after all!

Rod Taylor says

The futility of war

Excellent recounting of the horrors of being an undertrained physician thrown into the hell of an evac unit in Vietnam. Would encourage all nonmedical people with interest in history, especially war, to read.

Skip says

True experience of the horror of Vietnam

I read this book to gain a historical insight from a doctors' point of view. Dr. Parrish describes, in detail, his experiences in field hospitals and aid stations. His style of writing is conducive to a very fast read, if you are as familiar with that period of history as I am. I liked the fact that he told it like it was no matter how unbelievably horrible it was. As a former medic, who served in Germany during that period, I can now fully understand the training we received. This book is not to be viewed as entertainment but rather as educational reference for anyone in the medical field.

Patricia Burroughs says

It's strange that this is considered historical by this point. It's Vietnam. I read it thirty years ago and it was like MASH only in Vietnam. Black humor. Sometimes so awful and funny I had tears in my eyes. And other times... I just had tears in my eyes. Maybe I'll find it again and see how it holds up. Or maybe I'll let it hold its golden place in my memory of a stunning memoir that just grabbed me and wouldn't let me go.

Eric_W says

I suspect just about everyone reading this will have seen one or more episodes of MASH. Add much blood, gore, and horror and you'll have a fair idea of this book. Parrish was drafted, as were most physicians his age, during Vietnam as their skills, such as they were, were in high demand. ("The alternatives were clear—jail for three years, Canada for life, or Vietnam for one year. ") I say, such as they were, because nothing in their training prepared them for Vietnam.

Parrish was first assigned to a rear hospital located on an airbase (closer to the incoming medevac flights) where there were two scheduled fixed-wing arriving flights although others could come in at any time day or night depending on the level of fighting. They received a set of numbers by radio giving them some warning. The numbers in the title are a reference to that set: "The first represented the number of litter-borne wounded, the second the number of ambulatory wounded, and the third represented the dead.

He learns quickly the principles of triage: ignore the dying for whom there is no hope and work on those for whom there is.

He grabbed a handful of scalp hair and raised the marine's head up off the litter at which time a large part of his mashed brain tissue slid like jelly out of his broken skull and onto the litter. "No other evidence of injury," I continued. "His—" He let the head flop back down.

"Are you shitting me?" he said. He gave me a brief look as if I were crazy and then hurried off to help the other doctors as I talked on. "His corneal reflex is absent and—"

"We usually just leave these, Sir. Not much we can do." A corpsman had been watching the whole sequence of events. There followed a silence that made me feel empty and helpless

. "I know. I know," I said finally. "I guess I'm used to a little different approach. I just—"
"We don't always have time to be nice, Sir. You'll get used to it. Do you want me to put him over in the corner, Sir?"
"Corner? To wait to die?"
"Yes, Sir."

To help himself deal with the ennui and boredom in the hours between the last patients and night, Parrish decides to learn Vietnamese, a difficult language in that much of the meaning is conveyed through tone and intonation rather than word content. That decision was to have a major influence on his tour. As the word gets out, he's picked to do visits to local villages to offer medical advice and treatment. Of course, since these are our "friends" whom we are trying to influence and show we care, the marines have to go in first to make sure the village is secure and there is constant worry about booby-traps. Parrish remarks that the patrol's sergeant had things well in hand, there were no rapes (they had one hooch doing a brisk "trick" business) or beatings. "These people don't give their minds and hearts because we come in under guard and pass out pills, candy, and soap. We just provide a little entertainment." "And support our superiority complex," I added. "And increase the income of some of the women," Roland gave an evil smile. "They were getting five hundred piasters a trick from the marines." "I didn't see that."

His colleague replies: *"You put those same kids in the jungle for awhile, get them real scared, deprive them of sleep, and let a few incidents change some of their fear to hate. Give them a sergeant who has seen too many of his men killed by booby traps and by lack of distrust, and who feels that Vietnamese are dumb, dirty, and weak, because they are not like him. Add a little mob pressure, and those nice kids who accompanied us today would rape like champions. Kill, rape, and steal is the name of the game."*

The contrasts are particularly horrifying. Graves registration calls excitedly to report one of the "corpses" moaned. They rush him to triage. He is missing two legs and an arm and his belly is all shot up. Hours of surgery later, he has tubes coming out of everything and one of the orthopods wonders whether they should have bothered given he might only be useful as "third base." Yet the humor masks heroic efforts to save lives and avoid "playing God." They were there to restore life, not decide whether to take it or not. Parrish and the other surgeons worked on the man and sent him to the major hospital in Saigon where the contrast between Parrish, dirty, bloody, smelly is so different from the doctors in Saigon, decked out in white, clean, superior and arrogant. They do all they can. In the end he died. He might as well have stayed in Graves.

"The war took its toll psychologically and tragic stories abound. "One of war's dirtiest tricks is to leave you physically intact and systematically take away little pieces of your very self." A soldier is brought in who hopped aboard a medevac chopper. Parrish talks to him at triage.

"Relax."

"Fucking gunny thinks I'm crazy." The boy was fighting tears. "Fucking gunny took me off my watch. I can stand my own fucking watch, I just need some nerve pills or something. I can stand two watches for every one the fucking gunny wants me to."

"I think you could use some rest. We'll talk again later."

"Fucking gunny. I could kill that son-of-a-bitch. Toughest gunny in the corps. I love the bastard. If he wants me to stand watch, I'll stand watch all night every night."

"I know, buddy."

"It gets so fucking black at night. Everything moves. My eyes play tricks. I get so worked up that my breathing is louder than the crickets and I hear voices. I shot at the fucking voices. That's why the gunny sent me here. If they'd been VC I'd be a fucking hero. Now, I'm crazy. It's not fair."

"We'll talk again." Prince [the psychiatrist] called for a corpsman who stood by the desk while Prince wrote something on the chart. Prince handed the chart to the corpsman, "Snow him. The usual. Thorazine.

Phenobarb later. I want to talk to him tomorrow."

"Is he crazy?" I asked. "Don't know, John. We'll find out tomorrow when he's rested. They're all crazy when they first come in."

"I guess his gunny realized he needed some rest."

"He shot his gunny in the head."

I could go on and on. One of the best Vietnam memoirs I have read. And from an unusual perspective. My thanks to the publisher for this preview in exchange for my always honest review.

Janet Delauter says

Eye Opening

My husband was in Vietnam 3 times. 1st as EOD, 2nd & 3rd Brown Water Navy. He will not talk about most of his time there. I was in the Navy also - as a corpsman, but as a female in the early 70's, we were "protected" from all the bad stuff that happened there. As a Corpsman I understood all the medical lingo, and now, as a wife, I can finally understand my husband so much better. I had no idea of the horrors he faced/saw everyday. Thank you Dr. Parrish for making things so clear. And thank you for your service...even if you were unwilling. At least you faced your obligations instead of hiding behind some silly excuse like my coward brother.

Dennis O'Rourke says

Another perspective

Not only is Dr. Parrish an excellent story teller, the history he relates is interwoven with the limits the human psyche can withstand. Tet was a turning point in the war; his perspective is powerful.

John says

I did not enjoy reading this and felt the author was more interested in selling a book and in impressing the reader about his sexual encounters and his political views than anything else. I see he went on to be a dermatologist, well. He did write some more books which i will not read.

Jan says

I read this book after my brother served in a field hospital in Vietnam Nam. As a nurse, it was fascinating and horrific at the same time.

Don Thompson says

My sister recommended this book. The author is a professor emeritus at Harvard Medical School. This book was published in 1972. It's an excellent book about his experiences as a young internist who joined the Marines and served in very dangerous and difficult situations. The book's focus is very narrow, but it paints a brutal and compelling picture of the horrors of treating horrendous injuries to young Marines, Vietnamese civilians, and a few ARVN soldiers.
