

Review of “Vietnam in HD” by The History Channel

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The first thing I want to say about ‘Vietnam in HD’ is that it is definitely worth viewing. It is the first documentary ever to simply present the war from the perspective of the American ground soldiers who were there and directly involved. We are spared the ABC, NBC, CBS news templates and the Monday morning quarter backing of the academic class. There is not the usual prose devoted to the excesses of US forces or the never ending parade of US veteran victims, both real and pretend. To understand my preceding statement you must know that in the 2000 US census report 12 million people reported themselves as Vietnam veterans. The problem is that there were actually only 2.6 million Vietnam veterans who served in country. That means that 79% of war related problems reported by “Vietnam veterans” are suspect since the math says that for every 10 people claiming to be Vietnam veterans, eight are lying.

Thankfully we are also spared the “The Camelot Chronicles” of the Kennedy administration that sometimes act as the lead in for Vietnam documentaries. Many people will despair that Americas’ allies are left out, the Vietnamese point of view is not covered, and the story is therefore not “complete.” All true, but I picked up early that this was not an all-encompassing story of the war. It is also true that the US Air Force and Navy are left out. Not to slight the Air Force and Navy but their primary job is to support Army ground troops. Sounds harsh, but I’m simply telling you what US defense doctrine makes plain to all US military personal at one time or another over the course of their careers.

This retelling of the Vietnam War relies almost entirely on 8 mm movie film taken by the soldiers themselves. There is some stock footage fill-ins to bridge gaps that always present in projects like this. I did spot some footage used by a BBC documentary from some twenty plus years ago. It comes during the telling of the 1968 TET attack. There is a scene filmed in an obscure corner of the Saigon Airport (Tan Son Nhut) that was a walk down memory lane for me. I recognize the dead enemy bodies shown because I was there and physically witnessed part of the action.

Also missing from this documentary is the usual attention paid to the Huey helicopters that mark so many of these efforts. They do not ignore helicopters, but this documentary is not about the “Air War,” either in South or North Vietnam. All of these things are acknowledged, but they do not take over the documentary’s emphasis on the ground soldiers and their daily routine.

Professional actors are used in the general narration of the film. They will start reading their lines and then there is a transition to the actual veteran who finishes the thought. Interesting technique to watch, but totally unnecessary in my opinion. It doesn’t detract from the films’ impact, but it probably hurt the bottom line over in “budget” when pay day arrived.

While we miss the network narratives that infect scores of documentaries produced in the seventies, eighties, and nineties, we are subjected to some shots of Walter Cronkite. I also believe Dan Rather showed up for a comment or two. Maybe it’s just me, but I could live the rest

of my life and never think of those two again. These distractions never grow large enough to take away from the main focus of this documentary: The “American Soldier.”

There are no academicians pontificating on the shortcomings of the American effort and personnel. It has been my experience that academic types usually start their talking points with the phrase, “What we know about Vietnam veterans is that they were overwhelmingly poor and black.” Utterly false!! Go to your computer and search “Vietnam War images.” Taking care not to double count the same picture spend the afternoon with a pad and pencil making tick marks for the following three categories: “W” for white; “B” for black; and “?” for I don’t know. Unless you’re blind, the false nature of the “black” portion of that statement will make itself readily apparent. The “poor” part is just a gratuitous insult in the same vein as “all Mexicans are lazy.”

I thought at one point while watching the documentary that they were going to go off track and start opining that every day was My Lai. What they actually did was pull no punches on the tough and gritty nature of war in general and this one in particular. No gratuitous glorification of the war here. Some people would disagree with me since the movie doesn’t fixate on every real and supposed act of violence by American forces. That’s fine. It’s still a free country to some degree and people are entitled to believe anything they want.

As I said earlier a good deal of the narration was done by actual veterans. All the veterans presented a non-emotional, non-passionate, straight forward narrative including a veteran named Barry Romo. Only when we get near the end do we find out that Romo was one of the early members of the VVAW (Vietnam Veterans Against the War). One more time the documentary is presented with a chance to come off the rails but manages to stay true to their stated purpose of showcasing the average soldier’s view of the Vietnam War. At this point in many documentaries of the past the narrative was put forward that the VVAW represented the “thinking” of veterans or active duty soldiers. Although this was not put forward as a majority opinion of US soldiers at the time the conventional wisdom of the seventies put forth by academia held that everybody knew the majority of soldiers were mostly poor and black, and by inference stupid. See how this works.

The major problem with this narrative is that the “pro war, anti-war” options do not fit the actual feelings of the American soldier. If American soldiers were allowed to keep the treasure, such as it is, of the lands were they fight, then they might actually adopt a real “pro war” attitude. Most soldiers in Vietnam were paid less than \$250.00 a month during the mid to late sixties. Even by the standards of the late sixties that was true chickenfeed. That part of any society that becomes part of the armed forces does so for basically one of three reasons: They believe, to some degree, in the general underlying reason of the cause; they believe in the concept of “duty;” or they have nothing better to do. That last category would include those who are not inclined for numerous reasons to start the draft dodger, if one is in force, dance. I spent twenty-seven months in the Army in Vietnam. I never had a conversation with anybody that I would class as pro war. I do remember a lot of people wondering why we were there, was it worth it, and how much time do I have left over here?

This documentary was notable for its absence of “experts.” The soldiers were the expert in this case. I did find myself being interested in Mr. Romo. Not being a VVAW acolyte I was not up to date on Mr. Romo’s activities so I looked up his bio. It was the usual “I started out life as a poor, Catholic black child (or in his case a poor half Mexican child) with a father and uncle who were WWII veterans. This validates some mythical minority status while at the same time setting up the scenario that young Barry’s love of country was somehow perverted by corporate America in their lust for never ending profits from the US war machine. Well I’m certified black enough to use these techniques if I were so inclined. I don’t have to substitute anything in the “black” column, but as for the Catholic part I will have to make do with “Episcopalian.” I can go Barry one better by also claiming lineage not only with WWII (father and mother), but WWI (father) as well. Barry was also identified in one of the bios that I read as having spent most of his post war time as a labor organizer. This may buy him currency with some people, but it leaves me completely cold after having spent ten years being subjected first hand to the fraud that is the California Teachers Association.

Since I spent three years in the active Army and twenty years in the Army National Guard (Eighteen of those years on active duty - It’s true, but would take more time to explain than I have available here.) I was too busy with other things to burnish my “organizer” credentials. Yes, I have organizer credentials. In the fall of 1965 while at Sacramento State College (today known as California State University Sacramento) I lead a student shutdown of the campus newspaper called “The Hornet.” The newspaper came out every week, but if you investigate the archives you will discover that there is an issue missing in November of 1965. You will also notice that when they resumed printing the old student editor, Ken Benton, had been replaced. There was never any news coverage and life went on. While in the active Army I started two disturbances based largely, but not completely, on race while in Vietnam. Luckily no one was hurt and they never put me together with the incidents.

Why did I do all of this and what is the point of bringing it up in reference to Mr. Romo. Mr. Romo is driven by different principles. I led those disturbances simply because I could. Instead of being enamored with myself for having that power I became somewhat contemptuous of the people who followed me. How really stupid were these people at that time? Mr. Romo made it his life’s work. I’m sure by now that the average reader has determined that I don’t care much for Mr. Romo. True. I can’t imagine that Mr. Romo and I would have any common ground and the reasons go well beyond the Vietnam War. However, Mr. Romo is part of the Vietnam story and as such needs to be addressed. He gets under my skin but neither he nor his beliefs took over the documentary. This is one of the things that I admire about the producers of this program. They kept control and stayed on subject.

One last plus for “Vietnam in HD.” We were spared the first half hour being devoted to how President Kennedy, with only the best of intentions, wrongly led us down this path. The implication here was that had he not been assassinated the United States would have withdrawn from Vietnam sometime during 1964 and all would have been right with the world. Mr. Kennedy lived in a world that contained the Soviet Union. Between the US and the Soviets there were tens of thousands of nuclear weapons. These two powers were polar opposites and in an earlier, non-nuclear, time would have come at each other directly using their respective militaries. In the nuclear age that was not possible and both sides knew it. The Soviets were the eight hundred

pound Gorilla in the room that American administrations, including Kennedys', had to factor into any equation when they looked at the problems of the world. Many people today maintain that everyone knew the Soviet Union was not going to survive and the US never had to do anything to oppose them. Most of these people are older folks who were alive at the time of the Soviet Union's existence. Well I was alive then too and I don't remember anybody before late 1988, personal friends or national news figures putting forth the notion that the world would one day not contain a Soviet Union.

Within two years of 1988 the Soviet Union was history and nobody, to this day, seems to realize that fact. One of the worlds' major land empires collapses, largely at the hands of the US (remember that Europe has been out of the defense business since they found social spending). Korea, Vietnam and everything in between had a hand in this. Could it have been handled differently and perhaps more efficiently? The answer is: Yes. For the answer as to why it wasn't done better you have to understand that democracy is a messy business. In the case of Vietnam and the Kennedy administrations' hand in the planning you have to consider the horrible choice of Robert McNamara as Secretary of Defense. It seems that Camelot couldn't do any better for this job than the former head of the Ford Motor Company during the largest fiasco the company had suffered up to that time: The Edsel project. History may one day give Mr. McNamara his due credit for his war planning, but probably not in my lifetime. The miracle, left out of this documentary, is that with McNamara's hand in the soup casualties were only 53,000 dead! This does not diminish the sacrifice of those soldiers who served. Vietnam in HD does not wax eloquent about the reasons for this war or the larger geopolitical position of the US. While the public consumption line about the reasons for the war revolved around securing freedom and democracy for South Vietnam that is not really what was going on. That was a worthy goal, but the larger script was the conflict between the US and the Soviet Union with Vietnam acting, at that moment in history, as the stage for that part of the play. This was a truly tragic consequence for Vietnam, both North and South who really, if the truth be known, would probably like to replay that part of their history without either the Soviet Union or the US being involved.

Vietnam in HD, as a story about the American soldier and his devotion first to his fellow comrades and then his nation, is a piece of history that has not been emphasized with all the noise over the last forty years between the political forces in the US. Did the soldiers do their jobs? Yes. Did they succeed in their objective or any objective? Well I don't see the Soviets around anymore. I think you have to do a real stretch to claim that the Korean and Vietnam Wars are mutually exclusive from the eventual fall of the Soviet Union. Many people will make that stretch, but to me they have no understanding of cause and effect. I remember being told by one of these types in an education class when I was in teacher training that the reason for the near doubling of American lifespans between 1899 and 1999 was due solely to improved medicine and had nothing to do with the increased availability of food. Newsflash: Although Americans were not starving in 1899, it is incredible to claim that nutrition has nothing to do with health.

See the documentary. It tells a very important story about the people who actually fought the war and does it without the noise that has become the hallmark of telling American history in the last 50 years. It's not for small children, but young adults would benefit from experiencing history from the soldier's point of view. No glorification here, just a ground eye view of their reality.

Can be purchased at the following link:

http://www.amazon.com/s/ref=nb_sb_noss_2?url=search-alias%3Daps&field-keywords=Vietnam+in+HD

IMPORTANT NOTICE: Your machine will probably ask you if it's OK to connect to this site. If you are uncomfortable with that option then either copy the link and put it into your browser address bar or go to Amazon.com and search for "Vietnam in HD DVD."