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*The Best of Medic in the Green Time: Writings from the Vietnam War and Its Aftermath* by Marc Levy (review)

Richard Levine

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“Great demon kings are people controlled by their big egos, but sometimes their egos inspire them to aspire to realize the empty true nature of mind: and they become Buddhas.”

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***THE BEST OF MEDIC IN THE GREEN TIME: WRITINGS FROM THE VIETNAM WAR AND ITS AFTERMATH***

Marc Levy

Winter Street Press

641 pages; Print \$22.00

*Richard Levine*

It is 1970. The Vietnam War is still going full throttle. Marc Levy is “nineteen, a virgin, innocent in the ways of the world,” and a newly arrived medic in Delta Company, 1st Battalion, 7th Division, U.S. Air Cavalry (Delta 1/7 Cav). He’s an FNG (“Fucking New Guy”).

Levy’s service would earn him a Combat Medic Badge, the Silver Star, two Bronze Stars with V (for valor), Air Medal, Army Commendation Medal, a lifelong battle with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), and a dishonorable discharge. (After a second court-martial this was upgraded to a general discharge, which does not carry the stigma and does not withhold earned benefits. Twenty years later he was finally granted an honorable discharge.)

How, you might wonder, does such heroism lead to expulsion from a service after duties so valorously performed and rewarded? The answer, which is perhaps a window on the military’s failure to meet the needs of its veterans, is part of what is chronicled in *The Best of Medic in the Green Time*.

It brings the war to life in many forms and voices—memoir, reportage, letters, and poetry, some written by Levy. But it reaches beyond personal witness to argue its worth as a valuable historical document. What gives a war captured on the page historical value rather than just being a good yarn? Allegiance to truth, resisting exaggeration to tell a better story, examining events from many vantages, with exacting detail that locates events geographically and in time, knows weapons systems and tactics and identifies key players by name. It's all there in *The Best of Medic*.

Perhaps the best example is an account of a failed invasion into Cambodia. The ill-fated campaign was undertaken clandestinely and without oversight by Congress. Even the families of fallen soldiers were not told. Carl Lee (4th platoon squad leader, Delta 1/7 Cav) told Levy of writing to the parents of Mike Dawson, a close Delta-friend who was killed in the invasion. "I did contact Mike's parents . . . and sent some pictures. I told them he had died in Cambodia which surprised them, because the Army had told them that he had died in Vietnam."

If the first truism of combat is "War is hell!," then the second is surely "You never forget war, but you never remember it quite right." Knowing this, and perhaps not trusting his own memory—he is now in his seventies—Levy contacted members of Delta company, as well Bravo 1/7 and First Cavalry field artillery crews, and invited their recollections of that grizzly time. There are perhaps a dozen different descriptions that begin, "Medic received this account of the attack from . . ." Each account begins with a brief introduction by Levy.

"In the second week of May, lifting off from Quan Loi, we chopper into Cambodia. I remember my fear and dread. . . . *This is it. We're gonna die.* But after the door gunners open up, after the birds (helicopters) swoop low and we jump out, after we rush forward and throw ourselves down, nothing happens. Instead, every blade of grass. Every layer of canopy, every shimmering mote of sunlight is vivid and beautiful—until the cool, summery night when sappers' attack LZ (Landing Zone) Ranch, overrun it."

"Colonel Everette 'Moose' Yon," the battalion commander of LZ Ranch, "was likely responsible for (the base's) poor placement, the eastern berm too

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1 Sappers, a small well-trained force that attacks a base held by a numerically superior unit, inside the enemy's lines. The Vietnamese called this the "blooming lotus" tactic—penetrating a fortified area and assaulting outward.

close to the wood line.” “I want to give the gooks a chance,” he is alleged to have said. After the sapper attack he was relieved of his command.

Medic writes: “On May 16, at 2:45 AM, sappers crawled past the trips and Claymores (anti-personnel mines) on the eastern berm, defended by Delta’s fourth platoon. They killed machine gunner Mike Dawson immediately, then headed for the TOC (Tactical Operations Center), where they tossed in satchel charges and grenades into bunkers and shot GIs at close range.”

*The Best of Medic* also looks closely at friendly fire, the use of pot, examples of racism, atrocities, and torture, and more. There’s even a section on “How to Tell a Joke in Combat,” with samples. One of my favorites sections is “Five Simple Words,” with vets responding to Levy’s query: “How do you feel when people say ‘Thank you for your service?’” Peter Sablock (Bravo 1/10 Cav, 4th Infantry Division, 1967–68) just says thank you and changes the subject, though he’s thinking, “I went a baby and came back one hundred years old, scared of noises, scared of crowds, scared of the dark, especially the dark, hating the government and wanting nothing from it, and angry. Oh, the anger. . . . How did that happen to me?”

The common thread that emerges from all the different experiences is how the war came home with them, and how they didn’t understand what was happening to them. PTSD was a fairly new diagnosis back then, and treatments were developing. (National Center for PTSD—15 percent of Vietnam veterans were diagnosed [late 1980s], and between 5 and 30 percent had it during their life.) Most Vietnam vets found ways to cope with PTSD and built “typical” lives for themselves. But for many, coming to terms with PTSD has meant accepting that they could never hold a job, much less sustain a career or maintain lasting relationships or have a family.

“I stayed quiet for all these years,” Mike Hudzinski (Bravo/HHC 1/7 Cav) told Levy. “I was always one step ahead of the grim reaper . . . in Nam, . . . several times I should have died. My coin flip with Jim Cummings is always with me. If I had lost that toss you’d be sending him emails instead of me. Know what I mean?” (Cummings was in Hudzinski’s squad, and one night they counted odd man out for a detail no one wanted. Cummings was killed that night.)

Perhaps the most poignant illustration of PTSD’s long-term effects came from Larry Heinemann (25th Infantry, Armored Personnel Driver, 1967–68),

author of *Paco's Story*, which won the National Book Award for Fiction. In the section of *The Best of Medic* titled "War Talk," Heinemann writes: "When my kids were old enough I had to teach them not to come up behind me and give me a hug around my throat. Don't make a loud, sudden noise behind me."

After Vietnam, Levy refused to salute, polish his boots, or do any daily rites of peacetime military service. He wanted out. He took his case up the chain of command. Given his exemplary record, officers first tried to reason with him, but ultimately they decided he was insubordinate and court-martialed him. Twice. Why, one wonders, hadn't it occurred to them that he might be having a breakdown? That the problem was more psychological than a case of defiance?

While traveling in Central America and Asia in the 1990s, Levy experienced more powerful and more frequent PTSD episodes. He hiked mountain trails looking for the war. To relive it. Police noticed and ordered him to leave. Fellow travelers he met and guides he hired warned him of the risks he was taking. He was dumbstruck when a guide stopped his motorcycle at Quan Loi and said, "We are here." There was nothing left of the airstrip or base.

At the Hanoi Air Force Museum, Levy wandered off from his friend and found a pile of discarded M16s. Taking one, he sat down and began taking it apart and putting it back together, as he had done so many times to clean it in Vietnam. Finding him, his friend was alarmed. "See this button?" asked Levy. "You push it to split the rifle in half. See this one? You push it to release the ammo clip." All the while his friend was quietly saying, "Marc, put the gun down. You need to put the gun down."

In 2002 he recalled those travels and PTSD episodes: "It began when I first saw NVA on the streets of Hanoi. It began at the haunting hush of the rubber plantation near the town of An Loc. It happened in Sumatra walking a rain forest trail. It started with visible cries of a thousand caged birds in a crowded market-place. After eight months traveling, I didn't know who or when or where I was and once home moved 12 times in two years before settling down."

In 1995 he read *The Sorrow of War* by the Vietnamese writer Boa Ninh. In 1998 he attended a workshop given by Ninh. Ninh had spent six years in the

Glorious 27th Youth Brigade, a unit of the North Vietnamese Army. Out of five hundred, twenty survived. Levy knew Ninh was a big fan of Jack Daniels. He bought a bottle and sat talking with Ninh. After three hours of questioning Ninh about writing and the war, Levy asked, “Is there anything I’ve left out? Is there anything you’d like to add?”

“Yes,” Ninh said, leaning forward. “The NVA were not robots. We were human beings. That is what you must tell people. We were human beings.”

I spoke with Levy while I was writing this review, and he offered the following about Ninh’s influence: “Reading Bao Ninh, meeting him, his closing words at the long interview, all were part of a turning point. Up to then I had thought of Vietnam in pretty much one dimensional terms. It’s been twenty years since Ninh and I met, but I try to recall that day, and the insight of shared humanity. Both have helped lighten the load and inform my writing.”

**RICHARD LEVINE**, who served in Vietnam (1967–68, USMC), is a retired NYC teacher and the author of *Selected Poems* (2019), *Contiguous States* (2018), and five chapbooks. Now in Contest is forthcoming from Fernwood Press. An advisory editor of *BigCityLit.com*, he is the recipient of the 2021 Connecticut Poetry Society Award and was coeditor of *Invasion of Ukraine 2022: Poems*. His review “Poetry for a Pandemic” appeared in ABR’s November–December 2020 issue. His website is [richardlevine107.com](http://richardlevine107.com).