



Diary of an Airborne Ranger: A LRRP's Year in the Combat Zone

By Frank Johnson

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Perhaps the most accurate story of LRRPs at war ever to appear in print!

When Frank Johnson arrived in Vietnam in 1969, he was nineteen, a young soldier untested in combat like thousands of others--but with two important differences: Johnson volunteered for the elite L Company Rangers of the 101st Airborne Division, a long range reconnaissance patrol (LRRP) unit, and he kept a secret diary, a practice forbidden by the military to protect the security of LRRP operations.

Now, more than three decades later, those hastily written pages offer a rare look at the daily operations of one of the most courageous units that waged war in Vietnam. Johnson served in I Corps, in northern Vietnam, where combat was furious and the events he recounts emerge, stark and compelling: walking point in the A Shau Valley, braving enemy fire to rescue a downed comrade, surviving days and nights of relentless tension that suddenly exploded in the blinding fury of an NVA attack.

Undimmed and unclouded by the passing of years, Johnson's account is unique in the annals of Vietnam literature. Moreover, it is a timeless testimony to the sacrifice and heroism of the LRRPs who dared to risk it all.

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Editorial Review

From the Inside Flap

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About the Author

Frank Johnson served in Vietnam as a member of L Company (Ranger), 101st Airborne Division. He received numerous combat awards, including the Silver Star and two Bronze Stars. Since leaving active duty he has served with 12th Special Forces Group (Abn.), U.S. Army Reserves; 4th Force Recon, USMC Reserves; 122d Armor Brigade; Nevada National Guard; 19th Special Forces Group (Abn.); and Utah National Guard. Currently he is serving with the Nevada Air Guard.

He and his wife, Kipp, live in Reno. They have a son, Joshua, and a daughter, Jahnee.

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Introduction

Diary of an Airborne Ranger is indeed a unique literary work. It is the day-by-day story of a nineteen-year-old youth's one-year odyssey into manhood. It is unique because it is not written in the perspective of an aging veteran recalling his warrior years through memories and recollections softened and mellowed by the ravages of time. Frank Johnson's diary is the compelling and refreshingly honest portrayal of a young man's introduction to war, with all the fearless bravado, unquestioned patriotism, intense loyalty, raw courage, and lost innocence that one can get only from being there. There are no pretenses here. What you see is exactly what you get.

When Frank Johnson arrived in South Vietnam in the fall of 1969, the war, for all intents and purposes, had already peaked. "Vietnamization" was the new buzz word,

and Richard Nixon was keeping his promise by announcing troop withdrawals and a reduction in U.S. forces. To those of us who were there, the first indications of an army betrayed were just beginning to surface. No longer was there talk of defeating the enemy and achieving a just and final victory. Withdrawing with honor and grace became an acceptable alternative. To those young men just arriving in-country came the impossible task of covering our "withdrawal." They knew that they would never savor the laurels of total victory. There would be no parades, nor would they be welcomed home in the end. They knew all of this, yet they still volunteered to perform this impossible task.

Their actual mission was threefold: 1) to keep the enemy at bay by continuing to carry out offensive operations; 2) to provide for a smooth and orderly transition of U.S. weapons and equipment to our allies, along with the training and support to enable them to deploy it; and 3) to avoid alarming our allies by having them discover that they were in all actuality being abandoned.

Under these somewhat stressful conditions, Frank Johnson and his teammates were ordered to take the war to the enemy. Unlike their predecessors, the long-range reconnaissance patrollers whose primary mission was to gather intelligence, the Rangers were told to go out and initiate contact with the enemy. The army doctrine behind this gross misuse of five- to twelve-man reconnaissance teams was the doctrine of "force multipliers." Simply put, this meant to do more and risk less with smaller numbers of soldiers. The obvious benefit to our side was experiencing fewer friendly casualties while still maintaining an acceptable attrition rate among enemy personnel. The detriment was solely to the soldiers tasked to accept the risk. Remember, this was an increasingly unpopular war back home. Frank Johnson and his fellow Rangers were just such soldiers.

As you read through the pages of this amazing work you will find yourself wondering, "Why did they keep going back out and doing what they did?" The answer will surprise you. You see, it was not that same sense of duty and honor that had brought many of them into the service. It was not the same patriotism that had inspired their fathers and grandfathers before them. And it was definitely not power nor the promise of wealth that sent these young men into harm's way, day after day, even when they knew the war was already lost. "Why then," you ask? Well, let me tell you! It was camaraderie, the love that one teammate has for

another. It was their motto, "Rangers don't leave Rangers behind!" This was not only their motto, but the guiding force that dictated their ethics, their courage, and their loyalty to one another. Can you understand the power of such feelings . . . the emotion? It is a powerful motivator.

Throughout Frank Johnson's diary, the recurring theme of camaraderie, brotherly love, and living up to the Ranger motto is demonstrated. This was a glorious thing that all warriors experienced to some degree or another during the Vietnam War, perhaps to a greater extent among the small, elite special-operations units that so often stood alone. When you read through each page of this book, forgive the language and the style--the author was just a kid out of high school when he penned it. There will be no literary awards or prizes coming his way. But if you want to understand what heroes are made of, and why so many of our young men come home with emotional baggage they can never shed, then read this book from cover to cover. When you're finished, go back and read it again--more slowly the second time. All of the emotions, the pain, and the memories, both good and bad, are right there. We know where they are. You'll have to find them for yourselves.

Gary A. Linderer
F Company, 58th Infantry (LRP)
L Company, 75th Infantry (Ranger)
101st Airborne Division
RVN 1968-1969

RANGERS LEAD THE WAY!

Users Review

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