

# Canadians in the Vietnam War: Poignant but Incomplete

Fred Gaffen, *Unknown Warriors: Canadians in Vietnam*.  
Toronto: Dundurn Press, 1990.

## *Review by R. A. Sargent*

This book presents a potentially insightful look at a unique chapter in Canadian history, and potentially a rich record of a group of unique individuals. That potential is not met, however, and the book fails to serve as an accurate and penetrating historical account of Canadian men who served in the U.S. military in Vietnam.

Through the recollections of the Canadians who served in Vietnam, *Unknown Warriors* seeks to bring to light the experiences of men who volunteered for action. The core of the book (pp. 42–258) is a collection of statements which attempts to document the individual perceptions and experiences of forty-six Canadian service men. These submissions are, therefore, contemporary historical accounts which provide detail beyond what could be achieved through any documentary analysis alone. The stories are often poignant and vivid. They are, however, raw data that have not been critically analysed or explored.

The recollections of forty-six soldiers provide the author with ammunition to pursue his objective. He seems to want to create a hero's story, or at least redeem their actions in the eyes of a critical public: "They need sympathy not scorn" (p. 333). Furthermore, within the vehicle of personal recollections, the author attempts to achieve his second objective of laying bare the "nature and especially the [negative?] consequences of war" (p. 11).

If the reader can overcome the author's proclaimed bias in favour of the Canadian Vietnam veterans, the book does provide glimpses into a set of experiences that are unique in Canadian military history. However, the book is unfortunately flawed in that there is no indication of the methodology whereby the information was collected, and no evidence that a systematic interviewing process was followed to probe the insights

of the small sample of informants. We are told that there may have been over 12 000 serving personnel from Canada in Vietnam; Gaffen manages to collect evidence from about forty-six. This is a very small sample indeed.

Significant questions arise about the motivation of these men and their decision to go to war in Vietnam. Gaffen manages to illuminate some of their motivations, but this is not a quantitative study, and the very limited nature of the sample raises doubts about the possibility of achieving any meaningful conclusions on this and many other serious questions.

Additionally, the author makes few efforts to weave threads of analysis, search for commonalities, or structure a presentation that would allow the reader to assess the collective mind of the Canadian volunteer. He resorts instead to verbatim recollections that have not apparently been fleshed out through interviews or substantially digested for a balanced perception of these experiences. Gaffen becomes, therefore, a narrator, who is loath to analyse and less likely to criticize. It would be extremely helpful to know how these data were collected, and how the author assesses the quality of the information. Source analysis is, after all, a critical component of historiography.

*Unknown Warriors* is a disappointment. It is, however, a fairly rich, although undigested contemporary account documenting a limited number of Vietnam War stories, and thus provides a restricted view of a perceived reality. The potential that was so promising did not materialize through reading this account, and as a history *Unknown Warriors* must be classified as a primary resources collection and not a critical analysis of data about Canadian service in Vietnam.