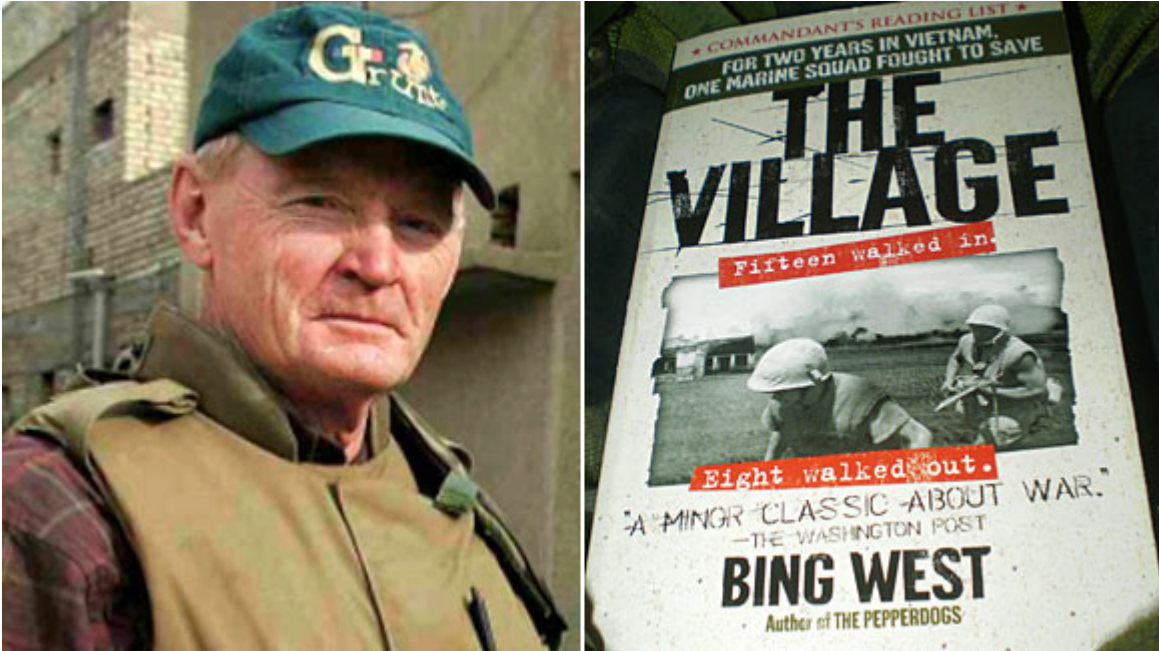


Marines In Afghanistan Take 'The Village' To Heart

Comparisons of Afghanistan to Vietnam are usually negative, but Marines in Helmand believe there are valuable lessons in the experience of 15 Marines who lived in a Vietnamese hamlet for two years.

By Tony Perry



Bing West, who as a Marine Captain evaluated the military effort in a Vietnamese hamlet, wrote a novelistic account of it. At right is a copy of "The Village," which Marine commanders have urged troops in Helmand to read for lessons in counterinsurgency. (Tony Perry □□Los Angeles Times)

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Reporting from Helmand Province, Afghanistan

In political terms, any rhetoric linking the Afghan conflict and the Vietnam War is usually meant to be poisonous -- like the charge that Afghanistan has become President Obama's Vietnam.

But for the Marines in this former Taliban stronghold in southern Afghanistan, a book about the war in Vietnam has become a guide for how to wage a counterinsurgency campaign on a small scale. Though the overall U.S. effort in Southeast Asia ultimately failed, the Marines believe that lessons learned there could help in Afghanistan.

"The Village," by Bing West, first published in 1972, is the story of 15 Marines who spend two years in the remote hamlet of Binh Nghia, protecting villagers and joining with local security forces in trying to thwart a violent insurgency. Seven of the 15 were killed in action.

Although the geopolitical ramifications may be widely different, the missions given those long-ago Marines and the Marines assigned here are roughly similar: Live amid the populace, partner with local forces and together drive a wedge between the populace and the enemy.

Marine Gen. James Mattis, who led Marines into Afghanistan in 2001 and Iraq in 2003 and now heads the U.S. Joint Forces Command, says "The Village" is a must-read for troops "to understand the role of the small unit in the sort of war we're fighting in Afghanistan."

"Cohesive small units, well trained in more than fire and maneuver, and living among the people, are fundamental to victory," Mattis said. "Today's Marines saw how fast they were able to shatter an enemy in Iraq once the people of Al Anbar [province] turned against Al Qaeda."

"The Village" is on the reading list issued annually by Marine Commandant Gen. James Conway. Many commanders also recommended the book to their troops before deploying here; some held group discussions.

Dog-eared copies are common in the living quarters at Marine outposts spread among the farming communities of Helmand province. One company named several of its outposts after the Marines killed protecting Binh Nghia.

Until the 1st Battalion, 5th Marine Regiment, returned last month to Camp Pendleton, 1st Lt. John Schippert commanded a patrol base in Helmand where Marines and Afghan soldiers lived side by side. The outpost was near a village that had been controlled by Taliban fighters until the Marines arrived in the summer.

Schippert asked his officers and senior enlisted Marines to read the book in preparation for the counterinsurgency mission.

"It helps you get out of the mind-set of conventional war," he said. "In a conflict like this, the center of gravity is the people. When you're neighbors with someone, their problems become your problems."

"The Village" does not underestimate the difficulty of counterinsurgency. In the book, written in novelistic style, the Marines are often suspicious of their Vietnamese partners. One squad member goes berserk and tries to kill villagers.

The Marines become complacent and lose several members in an ambush; top brass is too quick to declare victory and move on. "The Village" preaches the principles of constant awareness, persistence, respecting but not fearing the enemy.

The Marines at Binh Nghia faced some of the same challenges Marines encounter in Helmand: corruption and shifting loyalties among local forces, an enemy that can move undetected among the populace, and villagers afraid that the Americans will desert them.

In the book, the villagers slowly begin to trust the Marines and side with them against the Viet Cong, much as today's Marine command wants rural Afghans to turn against the Taliban.

"There was no awe of the unknown in the villagers' dealing with the Marines," West has written. "They were not the anonymous giants of the tanks, jets and helicopters. These Americans lived in their village, ate their food, worked with their men, died in their paddies."

Generals and other visitors have come to Helmand to evaluate the Marines' success. Among the visitors was West, who as a Marine captain in Vietnam was sent to evaluate efforts at Binh Nghia. A former assistant secretary of Defense, West has written three books about Marines in Iraq.

On the verge of a return trip to the front lines in Afghanistan, West said recently that when he wrote "The Village" he thought that "no one would read -- or care -- about what we had accomplished.

"It's gratifying to know that grunts in faraway hamlets today have 'The Village' in their rucksacks."

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