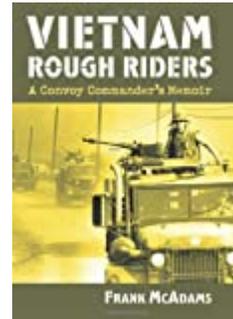


# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

**Frank McAdams.** *Vietnam Rough Riders: A Convoy Commander's Memoir.* Modern War Studies Series. Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2013. xv + 263 pp. \$34.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-7006-1898-9.



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The most compelling exemplars of the war memoir genre not only articulate the realities of their authors' encounters with military service and combat but also convey something of the zeitgeist within which these experiences took place. To identify just a few examples, one need only think of how Robert Graves and Siegfried Sassoon superimposed on their respective (albeit fictionalized) reminiscences of the First World War a set of powerful critiques of British society in the late Edwardian era. Similarly, Samuel Hynes and Alvin Kernan vividly depicted in their memoirs the realities of the Pacific War's air and naval campaigns while illuminating the collective mind-set of a generation of Americans that came of age during the Great Depression. Frank McAdams's *Vietnam Rough Riders* represents a worthy addition to this select group of classic war memoirs. Though it focuses on McAdams's year as an officer in one of the US Marine Corps's motor transport battalions in Vietnam, this remarkable memoir also affords considerable insight into the sociocultural and political turmoil of 1960s America. A perceptive observer of people, institutions, and events, McAdams recounts nearly a decade of his life, from his high school graduation and entry into the Naval Reserve in 1960 to his return from Vietnam in 1969, while placing his own experiences into a broader historical context.

The result is an eminently readable, thoughtful, and sensitive memoir.

As a war narrative, McAdams's story of his time running Marine "Rough Rider" supply convoys is gripping. Assigned to a unit that provided logistical support to the 1st Marine Division in the immediate aftermath of the Tet Offensive in early 1968, McAdams was responsible for leading trucks, equipment, and marines from his parent battalion's compound near Danang to the division's forward-deployed infantry and artillery units. This mission presented particular challenges and dangers. Apart from the treacherous terrain they had to traverse on a daily basis, the convoys were singularly vulnerable to ambushes by North Vietnamese troops operating in the area, prompting several fierce engagements that McAdams describes in vivid detail. These dynamics framed the battalion's unique status as, de facto, both a support and a combat unit. As one of McAdams's fellow marines put it, the Rough Riders' operational tempo was similar to that experienced by American bomber crews in the Second World War's Combined Bomber Offensive. "We have a nice compound here compared to the infantry battalions, a staff officers' club, a theater for movies, and USO shows. But when we go on the road we're bare-assed and rolling" (p. 48).

McAdams's account of this monotonous but critical mission serves as the basis for several distinctive thematic threads. Apart from functioning as a classic war story, the book also provides insight into the organizational culture of the Marine Corps at a critical juncture in its history. Having gained his first taste of active duty as a navy corpsman in 1960-62, McAdams professed admiration for the camaraderie and esprit de corps evident among members of his ship's Marine Detachment. This admiration directly influenced McAdams's decision to volunteer for the Marine Corps's officer training program shortly after his graduation from Chicago's Loyola University in 1966. His wartime experiences indicated that the corps harbored plenty of marines who failed to live up to the standards and ideals McAdams had absorbed in the Officer Candidate School. But this realization never shook McAdams's belief in the US Marines's cultural uniqueness. An individual such as his inept if not downright toxic company commander was, McAdams claims, "an anomaly, an officer not of the Corps, someone whose failings as a leader could not detract from the essential reality that the US Marines were 'a special group of men ... brave, ordinary men in extraordinary circumstances'" (p. 171). Similarly, McAdams emphasizes again and again the diversity of his fellow marine officers's professional and personal backgrounds to demonstrate the fundamentally "democratic" basis of the corps's way of selecting and developing its leaders. "I always felt that this is what set the Marine Corps apart from the other services: There never was or ever has been an exclusive 'Marine Corps Officers Military Academy'" (p. 239).

McAdams's emphasis on the equality of opportunity that the corps afforded to anyone—whether a recent college graduate like himself or a "prior-enlisted" marine, such as several of his fellow officer candidates—eager to test their capacity for leadership and command is intertwined with another important contextual framework evident in his memoir. The perspective through which McAdams examines his journey through war and peace in the 1960s is that of a member of the generation of Americans "brought up on the idealism and hope of John F. Kennedy to the reality and call of Lyndon B. Johnson" (p. 30). His stint in the navy in the early years of the decade absolved him of the obligation to serve in Vietnam, but McAdams nonetheless elected to return to active duty, this time with the Marines. The motivations behind his choice were complex, but in many ways they exemplified the faith that so many Americans of his generation professed in social and political

activism as a mechanism for facilitating the progressive vision of the New Frontier and the Great Society alike. Explaining his rationale for signing up with the Marine Corps to his future wife, McAdams noted that he did not want "to take the normal path, obtaining a degree, getting married, and hiring on with a good company with an impressive strong salary leading to a suburban home" (p. 25). Assuming the responsibilities of military leadership in a war that McAdams believed "was going to be the biggest issue of our generation" would be fully in keeping with the ethos of social and civic responsibility that he had inherited from his father (p. 24). A prominent Chicago attorney with strong connections to Illinois's Democratic establishment, Frank J. McAdams Sr. was a combat-wounded navy veteran of the Second World War (he lost his right arm to amputation due to wounds from the Battle of the Leyte Gulf) who firmly believed that those who aspired to positions of socioeconomic and political leadership in peacetime had an obligation to assume the corresponding burden of sacrifice in war. This attitude set McAdams apart from many of his Loyola classmates who professed "hawkish" attitudes toward the war while going out of their way to evade the draft.

McAdams's ability to recount his Vietnam experiences against the backdrop of political and social unrest in the United States guarantees that his memoir will resonate with many diverse audiences. Casual readers and nonspecialists will find it an eminently readable war story. Professional scholars will appreciate the book as a compelling historical document and a testimonial to the generational and cultural fragmentation of American society in the 1960s. In a similar vein, students of military culture would do well to read McAdams's memoir alongside Aaron O'Connell's recently published monograph, *Underdogs: The Making of the Modern Marine Corps* (2012) on the development of the Marine Corps's corporate identity from the Second World War to the early 1960s, as McAdams's account provides a fascinating "bottom-up" perspective on the broader patterns of cultural and institutional transformation that O'Connell analyzes. Finally, educators will no doubt appreciate the wide contextual aperture through which McAdams tells his personal story, an attribute that makes *Vietnam Rough Riders* an ideal book to assign to an undergraduate class on the history of the Vietnam War or America in the 1960s. A classic of the war memoir genre, McAdams's book deserves to take its place alongside the most prominent personal accounts of modern conflict.

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