

REVIEWS

Only his fellow Communists doubted the allegiance of paradoxical Time reporter—and spy—Pham Xuan An



Perfect Spy: The Incredible Double Life of Pham Xuan An, Time Magazine Reporter and Vietnamese Communist Agent, by Larry Berman. Smithsonian Books, New York, 2007, hardcover \$25.95.

AUTHOR LARRY BERMAN IS A SCHOLAR who has written several books on U.S. politics and the Vietnam War. He met Pham Xuan An in Saigon in 2001, and interviewed him for two years about his incredible life as a spy for the Vietnamese Communists. Initially reluctant, An finally agreed to let Berman write his biography.

An was born in 1927. In 1945 he joined the Viet Minh to fight the French. In 1953 he became a member of the Communist Party (CP), reduced his profile and began his life as a spy. The Party felt the United States was replacing France as the colonial power, and a career in journalism would provide a good cover for An's job as an intelligence agent. During 1957-59, An studied journalism at a California college, a period that he said "was the happiest time of my life" and marked the beginning of An's love for the United States and Americans.

Upon his graduation, a CIA front organization secured an internship for An at the United Nations. Another CIA friend arranged for An to tour FBI headquarters in Washington, D.C. After returning to Vietnam, he became a correspondent for *Time* magazine. In the following years he became acquainted with everyone who was anyone in the world of Vietnamese politics, including journalists Stanley Karnow, David Halberstam and Neil Sheehan; CIA officers Lucien Conein, William Colby and Edward Lansdale (who helped secure An's visa so

he could attend college); and South Vietnamese government (GVN) leaders including Ambassador Bui Diem, General and President Duong Van Minh, and Prime Minister Nguyen Cao Ky. No one among the Americans and South Vietnamese ever suspected An was working for the other side.

Officials in both Hanoi and Saigon valued An because of his ability to "explain the Americans to the Vietnamese." He was accredited as a reporter by the U.S. military for the whole war, from 1965 to 1975. An also was a spy for the South Vietnamese Central Intelligence Organization. The CIA tried to recruit him. He was so close to U.S. and South Vietnamese officials that he was constantly under suspicion by Hanoi. His life was a series of paradoxes. Always a loyal Party member, he was willing to take risks in order to save American friends. He lived in constant fear of capture and death. An never personally betrayed any of his American friends, yet many Americans were killed as a result of his intelligence work. When pressed, An would admit to no personal responsibility for the deaths of Americans: "I had no weapon, and everyone knew I could not shoot anyone." He provided the Viet Cong with important U.S. war planning documents, including information that led to the South Vietnamese defeat in the famous 1963 battle at Ap Bac. He helped select targets in Saigon for VC attack during the 1968 Tet Offensive. Later, working for *Time*, he helped report on these "surprise" attacks.

Near the end, in 1975, An's wife and family left Saigon with other *Time* employees, while An remained to care for his mother, afraid he would be killed as a GVN collaborator by the approaching North Vietnamese Army. When the war finally ended, An watched as his GVN friends were sent off to reeducation camps. Finally he was "officially switched over" to the winning side, and given the uniform of an NVA colonel.

An was proclaimed a hero in the anti-American war, but was always considered tainted by his association with the Americans.

He worked for reconciliation between the United States and Vietnam. An died in 2006, a major general in the Vietnam People's Army who insisted he fought for Vietnam, but not against America. Highly recommended.

Peter Brush
Vanderbilt University

Days of Valor: An Inside Account of the Bloodiest Six Months of the Vietnam War, by Robert L. Tonsetic. Casemate, Philadelphia, 2007, hardcover \$32.95.

"WHEN WERE YOU THERE and where were you?" When two Vietnam veterans meet, those two questions will define the parameters of their conversation. The term "Vietnam War" is a misnomer, because there were many wars in Vietnam. The experiences of those who served during the advisory years from 1959 to 1964 will differ from those who were there during the buildup between early 1965 and mid-1968. The character of the war changed during the period of withdrawal from 1969 to March 1973. Additionally, someone in an infantry unit around Saigon in 1968 will have very different memories from an airman photo-interpreter who served at Udorn Royal Thai Air Force Base in 1971.

Robert L. Tonsetic's *Days of Valor: An Insider's Account of the Bloodiest Six Months of the Vietnam War*, provides verbal combat snapshots of the 199th Light Infantry Brigade during the intense fighting running from December 1967 to May 1968 in and around Saigon, a period encompassing the Tet Offensive. *Days of Valor* resembles Oliver Stone's Vietnam epic *Platoon* in that it leaves the impression that soldiers of the 199th endured constant combat and most were killed or wounded. Not quite, but also not far off target.

Although Tonsetic writes well, the overuse of acronyms and jargon will baffle the militarily uninitiated. Still, *Days of Valor* will resonate with veterans, especially grunts who served anywhere in

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