

Giai Phong, Friendly Fire

Vietnam: Different views, same conclusion

GIAI PHONG! The Fall and Liberation of Saigon.
by Tiziano Terzani
Ballantine Books; \$2.25, paperback
334 pages
(c) 1976

Friendly Fire
by C.D.B. Bryan
Bantam Books; \$2.75, paperback
437 pages
(c) 1976



By KEVIN HARDEN

T.S. Eliot was right. This was the way the world ended, not with a bang but with a whimper.

Tiziano Terzani was in Saigon only three days before the bang turned to a whimper. He was there three months afterward, too. Michael Mullen didn't live to see that happen.

Terzani, an Italian journalist who had written his way through most of the Vietnam war for the German magazine "Der Spiegel," had been thrown out of South Vietnam in March of 1975 by Thieu's lame-duck official information minister who considered Terzani's articles an insult to the Republic of Vietnam.



Those insults may have been what kept him in the liberated Saigon long after other foreign journalists had fled or taken refuge in the French embassy.

By the time Saigon was liberated, Michael Mullen had been buried in a small cemetery outside of La Porte City, Iowa, nearly five years. His family was considered an upstanding, middle-class American family. They were the backbone of Richard Nixon's Vietnam policies; the silent majority that agreed with Nixon's every move in the war. Or so it was suspected.

Terzani's *Giai Phong!* is a natural contrast to C.D.B. Bryan's *Friendly Fire*. Although neither author would have guessed it, they both were asking the same, simple, yet difficult question about the war in Vietnam: was it worth it?

Bryan, his first attempt at non-fiction, was covering the home front while Terzani, a veteran at eyewitness writing, covered the last waning battle and the first dawn over a city liberated from more than just a quarter-century of war.

Terzani's effort is no attempt at objectivity. His novelized chapters paint a picture no American would ever believe — especially after the millions spent on creating fear through psychological warfare and calculated theories such as

comes — as Bryan writes — the driving force behind Iowa's infant anti-war movement.

Peg Mullen caused more trouble than she was worth. The FBI had a file on her and was keeping a diary of her activities. Richard Nixon refused to answer her numerous telegrams asking him to end the war and bring America's youth home. And the U.S. Army had given her the classic run-around, in triplicate, when she repeatedly asked for details concerning the death of her son.

The Army had good reason. Sergeant Michael Mullen was killed by his own fire — friendly fire — while sleeping in a shallow hole for protection from the jungle around him.

Bryan's chronicle is almost too hard to believe, also. Who would believe a middle-class rural family who lost a son in a war thousands of miles away and then threw an Army silver star award away?

Who would believe a family who loved their country enough to want it out of a war that meant little or nothing to anyone?

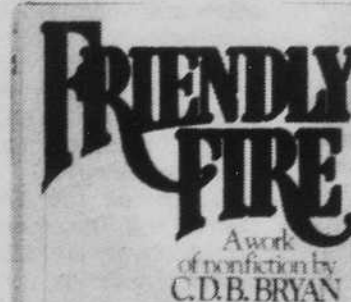
Bryan's book ends, oddly enough, with a visit to Sgt. Michael Mullen's grave and the simple sentence that on April 30, 1975, the Republic of South Vietnam surrendered to the Communists.

The finality of Bryan's work is a difficult contrast to Terzani's ending that leaves the reader looking

for a sequel.

"Peace was victory," Terzani wrote. "Everybody's victory — they said — but above all their victory."

Bryan stayed out of his own book as long as he could, but had to enter the story to interview one of the principal characters, a young black man who had been with Michael Mullen the night of his death.



The black man, Willard Polk, was in a federal penitentiary for shooting at Vietnamese civilians for no apparent cause.

"All I wanted to do was to get out of the field!" Polk told Bryan during the interview.

"You mean out of combat?" Bryan asked.

"Combat!" Polk snorted. "I hadn't seen no combat. All I seen

was guys getting killed!"

"The Americans!" Terzani wrote as the last helicopters faded into the Saigon night air. "They had wanted to annihilate a revolutionary movement, but instead they nourished it. They had come to put things in order, and they left them in chaos. They had come to build and had destroyed...."

"Ten years of tragedy for nothing."

The Vietnamese were now left to rebuild a new civilization, Terzani wrote. It was their country now. They had thrown off a foreign invasion, which was what the war was about in the first place.

Millions of lives had been lost on both sides. Was it worth it?

The war was over, that seems to be all that matters to both Bryan and Terzani.

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