



## Crossing the Street in Hanoi: Teaching and Learning about Vietnam

by Carol Wilder.

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“The Vietnam War in America is an undead war. Just when you think the corpse has been laid to rest, it bolts upright in the coffin in the middle of the funeral in the form of detailed accounts of war crimes in *Kill Anything That Moves*<sup>1</sup> .... It lives in the echoes from Iraq and Afghanistan for a whole new generation” (25). Author Carol Wilder<sup>2</sup> was a student at Kent State University on 4 May 1970 when the Ohio National Guard shot and killed four student demonstrators. For her, the war is an obsession, even though, she concedes, for the Vietnamese themselves, the “American War” represents little more than a blip in their history (23). She writes that “*Crossing the Street in Hanoi* began as a series of historical and critical essays on Vietnam, as portrayed in popular American culture: films, literature, media, art and architecture ... and then evolved into a narrative collage that is now as much about people as about artifacts” (6). This decidedly autobiographical volume collects, somewhat randomly, Wilder’s thoughts, impressions, and experiences, as she grew from a naïve, ignorant teenager into a professional “Vietnam expert” who regularly visits and teaches media studies in Hanoi.

The book comprises nine stand-alone chapters, each detailing a particular aspect of America’s involvement in Vietnam. There are photographs and other illustrations but no footnote documentation, only an eight-page bibliography at the end of the book.

Chapter 1, “The War That Won’t Die,” summarizes Wilder’s awakening to the tragedy of Vietnam and the illogical governmental and public attitudes toward the war and its damaging aftermath:

The first time I was actually able to visit Hanoi in 1993 it was still illegal for an American to visit Vietnam as a tourist, so I traveled as an official visitor sponsored by the Vietnam Ministry of Labor, Invalids and Social Affairs.... I liked the idea of being “illegal” in Vietnam—I mean, wasn’t the war undeclared and thus illegal? I was now illegal in the eyes of the U.S. Government for visiting a country where American soldiers were jailed if they refused to go. (14)

Chapter 2, “Hoa Lo Prison Museum: ‘The Fury Burning Within,’” recounts the author’s nearly year-long residence close to the “Hanoi Hilton” while she researched the city’s Vietnamese, French, and American past; she listened to a ninety-one-year-old French-era female ex-prisoner, Mme. Nguyen Thi Phuc Hang, who recalled that

We couldn’t talk loudly nor make any noise. I was locked in a very small room. Day after day there were more and more prisoners coming to Hoa Lo, and the room just got smaller and smaller. Each of us was provided with two sets of uniform, one blanket and one mat. There were dozens of prisoners staying in one room. We were locked inside most of the time and the guards would bring food to us. We were di-

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1. Nick Turse, *Kill Anything That Moves: The Real American War in Vietnam* (NY: Metropolitan Books, 2013).

2. She has taught Communication Studies at San Francisco State University (1975–95) and served as associate dean of Media Studies and Film at The New School (1995–2007). She was also a Fulbright scholar at Hanoi University (2007–8) and has published widely on communication theory, politics and the media, and the rhetoric of the Vietnam-American war.

vided into political prisoners and economic prisoners and were locked up separately. There was only one bathroom for hundreds of prisoners. It was awful. (44)

Sen. John McCain is also mentioned.

Chapter 3, “Bac Ho: Casting Pearls before Swine,” reviews the life of Ho Chi Minh, beginning with Madame Hang’s recollection of his speech in Da Dih Square (2 Sept. 1945): “At one and the same time in 1945, Vietnam was subject to the Vietnamese emperor, Vichy French rule, Japanese occupation and 200,000 Chinese soldiers arriving in Hanoi.... Still, with the end of World War II and the August 1945 abdication of Emperor Bao Dai, the Democratic Republic of Vietnam was declared, celebrated most famously by Ho Chi Minh’s Declaration of Independence speech” (64). Wilder ends the chapter with a brief tribute: “Ho Chi Minh ‘never carried a rifle with him. His only weapons were his tongue, his pen, his native wit, his strong moral fibre, his passionate devotion to the cause of his people and his determination to achieve his set purpose against all odds.’<sup>3</sup> Never underestimate the will of the people for self-determination, much less underestimate Ho Chi Minh as a luminous example of leadership in the service of liberty” (74).

Chapter 4, “*Life on Vietnam: ‘A Glory Preserved in a Wilderness,’*” the most poignant in the book, traces the experience of a US marine through issues of *Life* magazine and his correspondence with his mother. We see him in boot camp, serving in Vietnam, sustaining and surviving a wound, rising to the rank of Colonel, and finally dying at age fifty-one of a massive heart attack, likely caused by his exposure to the herbicide/defoliant Agent Orange. The veteran’s family

were surprized but gracious hearing from a woman on the other side of the country who had come into possession of a box that had been left for trash in Buffalo. His wife Heather was especially curious and appreciative and we have maintained a friendship over the years. And Steven Tace? The once young marine was a career officer, a colonel assigned to NATO. And the box? The collection? “Yes it belonged to my mother and when she died I threw it out. Do whatever you want with the letters and then burn it. It doesn’t mean anything to me.” When I was able to return the letters to Heather and their daughter Noelle during a memorable 2010 meeting in New York I was glad I resisted his request. (97)

In chapter 5, “Reading Graham Greene: A Promise to the Dead,” Wilder uses quotations from Greene’s novel *The Quiet American*<sup>4</sup> to illustrate linguistic peculiarities of Vietnamese culture as encountered by western, particularly American, British, and French observers.

Take a simple matter of getting the answer to a yes or no question. One of my first lessons was that in Vietnam “Yes”—even when accompanied by vigorous head nodding—does not mean “Yes” but something more like “I heard and possibly understood what you said.” I never heard “No” from anyone, a word that does not seem to be an option in polite company. In the United States, this might be described as passive aggressive behavior; in Vietnam, it is just behavior. In some weird way it is like being in England where “I’m sorry” is as likely to mean “I’m sorry you are such a twit” as it is to stand for a sincere apology. (105)

Chapter 6, “Vietnam Love Songs: ‘Rode Hard and Put Away Wet,’” traces the author’s fractured relationship with Mike, a troubled First Air Cavalry Vietnam vet who captures his experience in his poetry: “At forty years old I can look back and see/ What a child I was when I was nineteen/ But time won’t erase that Asian hell for me” (132).

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3. Peter A. DaCaro, *Rhetoric of Revolt: Ho Chi Minh's Discourse for Revolution* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2003) 69.

4. NY: Viking, 1956.

Wilder, like other female victims, gained a painful firsthand understanding of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) from Mike's dramatic, ultimately violent, mood swings:

the police would still not necessarily even respond to domestic 911 calls. I am not sure the CAARE Project<sup>5</sup> even had a sign, and I do not know what state of grace allowed me to turn up a few days after the assault. I was in absolute denial. I had little self-awareness and less self-esteem and I was fighting the urge to turn around and run out of the door. Instead, the staff artfully led me to a group counseling session that had nothing touchy-feely about it. Alice, the leader, looked me dead in the eye and said, "We see three hundred women a year here, and the profile you are describing—a Vietnam vet with PTSD and substance abuse—is the most violent and dangerous man we see. He could kill you. He will kill you. It happened here not more than six months ago." I learned that abuse creates dependence and that "battery transmits PTSD" so I had it too. (140)

The chapter ends with a poetic restatement by Mike—who was "Rode Hard" in Vietnam and "Put Away Wet" (untreated) upon his return—of the hard reality of his life: "For you and me, Dude, the war never ends/ The battles rage inside our heads / And I'm certain they will til the day we are dead" (145).

Chapter 7, "Reinventing Rambo: Flooding with Love for the Kid," concerns the movie industry's portrayal of the corrosive effect of the Vietnam war on one generation of young Americans, typified by the character Rambo (played by Sylvester Stallone) in *First Blood*<sup>6</sup> and the film's effect on successive generations:

I had an impressionable five-year-old little boy during the height of the Rambo craze, so I may have been more attentive than most to the decidedly ominous way that Rambo was marketed heavily to children and tied to the increase in privately owned weapons in the late 1980s. During this time, Americans became armed to the teeth not only with handguns (an estimated two for every three households) but also with military style assault weapons, with an estimated 500,000 in private hands. This personal firearms build-up was echoed in children's toys which were increasingly combat related. Rambo and Commando toys alone accounted for more than \$200 million in sales through only the end of 1985. Mom and Dad were shooting them up, too, as revealed in tabloids like *Weekly World News*, which reported that "every Saturday night huddies and wives and dating couples flock to the Bulletstop where they get their kicks playing Rambos and Rambettes by blowing away targets with the terrifying firepower of machine guns." (162)

The chapter title refers to Zachary Oberzan's comments on his play *Rambo Solo* (one of many media attempts to explain the appeal of *First Blood*): "Audiences on both continents shared a 'sudden new appreciation for the depth of the story of Rambo'" (168).

Chapter 8, "Murder on May 4th: The Case of the Missing Mob," exposes the misrepresentations that characterised media reports after the murders at Kent State. Wilder was at the time a graduate student there, though she was not herself present at the shootings (175).

Early news reports identified the dead as [National] guardsmen. State officials reported that the shooting started when a rooftop sniper opened fire on the guardsmen. General Sylvester Del Corso said "guardsmen facing almost certain injury and death were forced to open fire on the attackers." None of these statements were accurate. The presidential commission later determined that "the indiscriminate firing of rifles into a crowd of students and the deaths that followed were unnecessary, unwarranted, and inexcusable." ... It took 20 years, until 1990, for a memorial to be completed on the campus, following years of fractious debate ... [with] a university administration that would just as soon forget. It took another 20

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5. A program set up near Fort Bragg to provide a refuge and counseling for victims of PTSD-generated abuse.

6. Dir. Ted Kotcheff (1982).

years for the seventeen acres of the site to be added to the National Historic Register, and several more years, until 2012, for a proper museum to be completed and opened to the public. (175)

Controversy continued long afterward and euphemisms proliferated: “murder” became “slaying” (as in good St. George and bad dragon); “killings” became “shootings”; the cataclysmic event itself became an “incident.” And photographs presented after the murders showed no evidence whatever of the “mob” that had allegedly terrified the Ohio National Guard.

The much happier chapter 9, “Long Bien Story: Giving and Taking Away,” recounts Wilder’s Fulbright project—establishing a small media lab in Hanoi University—as “a hilariously improbable and even insane idea if I had known what was awaiting me on the other end” (203). That said, she succeeded with her eager, mainly female, Vietnamese students. The subject of their documentary film was the Long Bien Bridge over the Red River, linking Hanoi to its port city, Haiphong. “The bridge carries architectural, cultural, historical, agricultural and political meaning, making it among the richest sites in Vietnam” (206). The Vietnamese doggedly reopened the bridge after every American bombing raid in a symbolic triumph over the massive air assaults. The bridge remains open today, except to heavy road vehicles. The student videos led Wilder to island-dwellers living on the margins of flood-dependent farms and rubbish dumps; lovers’ and drug addicts’ bolt-holes; shoestring civil engineering; major and minor logistical links; and the all-pervading French colonial influence on present-day North Vietnamese society.

In the book’s afterword, Wilder dwells on classical philosophy and bemoans the misleading, sanitized American news reports during the 1960s Cold War and “cultural revolution.” She identifies three categories of news analysis:<sup>7</sup> the sphere of consensus (apple pie and motherhood?), the sphere of legitimate controversy (global warming?), and the sphere of deviance (Palestine/Israel?). “Cold War ideology was so pervasive in the United States that it was not open to legitimate discussion—a twilight sleep, indeed. The infamous, deceptively conveyed Gulf of Tonkin incident that provided a pretext for the invasion of Vietnam was capable of manufacturing consent for war in part because of the ubiquity of Cold War thinking combined with a general trust of government which existed at that time” (228).

*Crossing the Street in Hanoi’s* nine discrete, meaty chapters, taken together, furnish a comprehensive sociological overview of the conflict and its lingering, tragic aftermath. Though they are not easy to read, they will interest and reward anyone trying to understand why the United States lost its war in Vietnam.

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7. See further Daniel Hallin, *The Uncensored War: The Media and the Vietnam* (NY: Oxford U Pr, 1982).