

Book Review

A History of the Ho Chi Minh Trail: The Road to Freedom. Virginia Morris and Clive A. Hills. Bangkok, Thailand: Orchid Press, 2006. List of illustrations, notes, bibliography, and index. xv + 180pp. \$29.95 cloth. *ISBN: 974-524-076-1*.

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Along the braided stream of roadways and pathways of the 'Ho Chi Minh Trail' rolled the keystones of warfare that finally ended more than a century of Western dominance in Indochina and led Vietnam to national independence in 1975. Hundreds of thousands of Vietnamese had worked along what they called the Truong Son Strategic Supply Route during the Second Indochina War (Vietnam War). Many thousands were injured or killed while doing so. Today, Vietnam commemorates the landscape as an engineering marvel – their Great Wall of China. Its legacy remains at the heart of the nation. Every now and then, and, in certain instances and circumstances, a burst of patriotic exuberance or expression of nationalistic pride is appropriate when acknowledging the Trail's historical significance; or when empathizing with such sentiment. But the*Road to Freedom* written by a British engineer and a photographer, and published in Thailand, is classified not only as bona fide historical scholarship, but is also based on an experience of traveling upon a landscape cracking with the ruins of collective mass murder. 'Freedom is not free,' proclaimed the Vietnam War hawk John F. Kennedy, an example of double speak that *helped* turn parts of Vietnam and Laos, and Cambodia – a trail segment the authors sidestep – into a highway to hell. By taking the 'freedom' road, which Morris and Hills did here and there and on and off for ten years, they missed an opportunity to offer a deeper understanding of how our human vulnerabilities can physically shape and give meaning to the finite surface on which we all stand. As a result the text lumbers towards a disjointed travelogue.

The book holds out a few achievements. It has a favorable structure that includes an informative set of appendices, a thorough list of references and a generous collection of maps and glossy images. Appendix 2 is most interesting because it offers an historical survey derived from freshly translated material on the development of the Truong Son Army. Some problems arise however in the fabric of the story telling. For example, most maps contain excessive bits of information in the form of lines and numbers intertwined across clinically drab planes. The entanglements prevent easy transition between narrative and map. An initial reference map of Southeast Asia with an inset of Asia would have given readers unfamiliar with the region a wider and detailed perspective on an event and entity that is inherently geographical. Such a map would have nicely complemented the authors' colorful photographs and the black-and-white archival images. The dissonance between narrative and map indicates other problems with the narrative that I think stem from a reluctance to confront this shadowed ground of violence and tragedy with its anguishing, even inscrutable stratum. I hope to explain this in a moment.

In the meantime, I should mention that the authors do gain access to one of the most successful military strategists in the history of warfare, General Vo Nguyen Giap. He led

the North Vietnamese Army to victory against both French colonialists during the first Indochina War and later against US troops during the second. They also meet with Lieutenant General Dong Si Nyguyen, the foremost architect of Truong Son, who was commander of Corps 559 of the People's Army of Viet Nam (PAVN) beginning in 1967. The Corps was responsible for construction, maintenance and operations of the Trail. Under his command it became the Army's most effective weapon. Information gained from interviews with notable figures is not ground-breaking. Nevertheless, the Lieutenant General bestowed on the authors *Lich Su Doan, Bo Doi Truong Son Duong Ho Chi Minh*, a manuscript which they later had translated into English. Although the writing style is officialese, it does offer unique snapshots onto PAVN's daily activities and strategic considerations along segments of the Trail.

A major problem with the narrative is how it steps on and off the Trail, that is, how it attempts to integrate past and present, interview and archive, conversation and reference, experience and everything else. Many transitions are forced and clumsy, and in some spots difficult to follow. Add to this the problem with narrative and map, and one is often left wondering about answers to such meaningful questions of when, where and how. There are a few intriguing passages in the story, yet, the representation of geography and history do not merge in a way that would draw attention away from the writing and place us where these authors hoped we could be.

Perhaps their most notable achievement is 'on being the first peacetime Westerners to complete the grueling and historic Ho Chi Minh Trail....' (p. xv). These are the opening words to the introduction. A short description of their meeting with General Giap follows along with a photograph taken with him after they completed the Trail. For those of us who yearn for the adventures of traveling and trekking, and feel a pinch of envy when knowing that someone has gone where we have not, the*Road to Freedom* will leave a formidable bruise. The tropical rainforest is peerless when it comes to stinging and sucking insects, poking and prickling plants, biting and poisoning reptiles and amphibians. Add to this unassimilated tribals and bandits, mud flats, dead ends and 'trail teases,' and best of all, unexploded ordinance, and there seems hardly a way to 'one-up' their achievement. The original photographs offer a sense of adventure which the archival photos heighten while giving some depth to the landscape palimpsest. But their consideration of the landscape does not go deep or far enough.

The authors sidestep Cambodia, a country that competes with Laos as being the most bombed territory in the history of warfare. Why so? During the early 1950s, a Cold-War proxy war was looming in the region particularly after the US grabbed the war baton from France. Prince Norodom Sihanouk proclaimed Cambodia a neutral country even though he tolerated the presence of communist revolutionaries along its eastern frontier so as to avoid a confrontation that would have most likely destabilized the country. By the 1960s, the area became a major sanctuary for North and South Vietnamese communist fighters who by 1969 had constructed the 'Liberation Route' into neutral Cambodia and helped maintain the Sihanouk Trail that crossed into South Vietnam. For all intents and purposes, these were extensions of the Truong Son supply line, or as the US labeled it the Ho Chi Minh Trail. In response, the US launched a massive bombing campaign along these tributaries, killing 750,000 Cambodians with napalm, cluster bombs and an assortment of other weaponry all while respecting – as the North Vietnamese did – 'the sovereignty, neutrality and territorial integrity of the Kingdom of Cambodia' as Richard M. Nixon infamously affirmed. In 1970, Prince Sihanouk was dethroned by a pro-American, anti-communist government which then attempted to gain control of the eastern frontier, participated in pogroms against ethnic Vietnamese living in Phnom Penh, and provoked North Vietnam to increase support for the Khmer Rouge who after seizing Cambodia proceeded to systematically murder an estimated two million Cambodians (after forty

years, the chief perpetrators of this genocide are now standing trial in Cambodia). By the end of the Second Indochina War, 539,297 tons of ordinance had been dropped by US planes onto this tract of the Trail. Millions of gallons of US manufactured herbicides, defoliants and other synthetic chemicals weapons were spread over what must today be an ecological disaster area that now imprisons many in disease. Human beings designed this shadowed ground; yet, the authors chose to veer onto the off ramp leading to the freedom road in order to avoid not getting the scoop they deemed most lucrative. Continuing on towards a more authentic confrontation with this landscape would have demanded more from the writing and representation.

The authors literally end their difficult journey in the hands of the great, though aged, warriors of the Vietnam War, as their photographs attest to. The polite and charming General Giap says to Virginia Morris, one of the authors, 'I didn't know you before but I have the feeling that by going along the Trail you are younger, and more beautiful' (p. xvi). Freedom roads, I suppose, can do that to a person.