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Among the best books ever written about men in combat, *The Killing Zone* tells the story of the platoon of Delta One-six, capturing what it meant to face lethal danger, to follow orders, and to search for the conviction and then the hope that this war was worth the sacrifice. The book includes a new chapter on what happened to the platoon members when they came home.

The Killing Zone: My Life in the Vietnam War Details

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Hans says

What does it take to fracture the human mind or break the human spirit? Our natural tendency is to constantly seek to make sense out of our environment. So where there is no meaning or purpose our minds will naturally create them. There are however, experiences that seem beyond the capacity of the mind to grasp or ever explain, that of being thrust into the harrowing and chaotic forge of senseless combat that can overwhelm even the strongest. LT Frederick Downs captures this well in his writing taking the reader along for the ride through the sights, smells and his individual transformation during his combat tour in Vietnam.

His most intimate struggle with death was when he faced off one on one against a North Vietnamese Soldier and after his M16 jammed resorted to grabbing the NVA Soldier by his jacket and thrusting a captured dull Bayonet down his throat repeatedly. After letting go of the man and letting his body fall to the ground he retrieved a wallet from his pocket and found the picture of, what is assumed to be, his wife and two children. The author also had a wife and two children at home. And the force of the NVA Soldier's humanity tried to slam into him in that moment but he fought back to not let it. My own Grandfather had a similar experience during World War II and the experience haunted him until his dying days.

I also really like his return to Vietnam later in life where he had a drink with some NVA Veterans when they realized they fought in the same area of operations. The author jokingly told the NVA Veteran "Maybe you planted the mine that blew me up and took my arm" and the NVA Vet replied "Maybe I did, let me buy you a drink". The humanity of the enemy coming full circle. The struggle every Soldier eventually has to come to grips with.

Fred says

This is an excellent book about what it meant to be on the ground with the infantry in Vietnam. It is well crafted and written with both seriousness and candor. The author meant to share the experiences of the soldiers in that brutal jungle war and he succeeds. Written only 10 years after the events of the worst year of the war 1968, it has been updated with an afterwards by the author.

Nicole says

This is a very interesting read, it is written by a Vietnam War veteran and it about his service serving over there but it is written as journal entries. I admire Downs and the sacrifice he has made for this country along with everyone who has served. I just had a bit of trouble with some of the writing style of the book. There were times were the scene would jump around so I was not always sure what was happening, I also do not understand all of the military terms which is a bit of a hindrance for this book. I know some as I've read various war books and I've written a paper on Vietnam, which helps but if you have no background to the War I would not recommend this as your intro into knowing about the war. I was also a little disappointed there was not more on about how Downs himself help about the war and what was happening. But the experiences he went through will definitely show you the level of sacrifice these men had to go

through. I really enjoyed reading the Afterword as I felt as though it really added to the story. Again I have such a hard time rating books like these because how can you put a rating on someone's experiences?

Steve says

The book opens with an account of an encounter on the Denver University campus where a man notices Downs's artificial arm and asks if he got that in

Vietnam. Upon an affirmative reply the man responds, "Serves you right". It was almost as if the student knew Downs's story but there was no way he could have so shame on him. Knowing Downs's story would have reinforced his feeling. I on the other hand think no one deserves that fate.

"The Killing Zone" is a rousing, explicit and somewhat candid story of an infantry lieutenant's experience in Vietnam at the end of 1967 and early 1968. I have mixed feelings about this book. The story does not begin with Down's decision to join the army, enter OCS and becoming a commissioned officer. Was he drafted? What other training had he had to prepare him to be a green lieutenant in Vietnam. Some answers scattered in the book, some at the very end. Some questions remain unanswered. There are inconsistent and confusing statements about his time in the Army prior to Vietnam.

"I had graduated six months earlier from the US. Army's OCS program at Fort Benning, Georgia..." he states when he arrives in Vietnam.

Downs complains when he arrives in-country that he has to take a class for new arrivals. "I've been in training for a year and now I have to go to more classes"?

Then, "After a year and a half of training at Fort Leonard Wood, Fort Jackson, Fort Benning and Fort Gordon, I knew all the tactics and the weapons. I had the knowledge picked up from conversations with sergeants and officers who had been to Nam. I was as primed as a green lieutenant could be".

Well, not really.

"There were other schools — Ranger, Airborne, Jungle Training — that I could have gone to..."

So outside of the Army bases he was at and OCS we really have no idea what his year and half training entailed. What training in the six months after OCS? From enlistment we can assume four and a half months for Basic Training and AIT (hopefully 11B - Infantry) and 3 months for OCS. 8 months total so far. So what was the training for the other 10 months? This may seem nitpicking but it is important for us to understand Downs's background to be an Infantry Platoon leader. Why was this so vague?

The book is written in the fashion of a journal which gives the accounts of events a sense of immediacy considering the book was written nearly 10 years later. In the first third of the book I felt I was reading an account that could have been written by any member of the platoon, not the platoon leader. With the exception of a few comments like 'these men were my responsibility' there were few examples of deeds or thoughts that exemplified a leader. A highlighted point for me was the issue with a medic under his command. The 18 year old medic wasn't being a team player and was resented by platoon members. There was no mention of the platoon leader talking to the medic, trying to correct the medic's behavior or reprimanding him. All he did was bitch and moan about him just like the enlisted personnel. Eventually his continued complaining to the company commander brought about the involvement of the

battalion surgeon. Now there may be a dual chain-of-command involving medics in an infantry platoon but it is hard for me to believe that medics were exempt from the authority of a platoon leader. There wasn't any leadership shown in that account. The ironic element to that story was Downs's lamenting that he was sorry to have come down so hard on the young medic. Downs came down hard? Hell, all he did was pass the problem up the chain and had a superior officer come down on him. In the absence of any direct action from the platoon leader this was the only way to get the medic in line.

Through various comments we learn that Downs, after 3 years of college, at age 21 or 22 (he is 23 when he goes to Vietnam) is anxious to experience combat so he enlists leaving a wife and 2 children to do so. He wants to kill enemy dinks but every Vietnamese is a dink or a gook. Not just the VC or NVA but also the civilians (granted often difficult to distinguish from VC) and ARVN, useless as they were. I understand the need to dehumanize the enemy but it seemed that all Vietnamese were being dehumanized by the narrator. It was refreshing to read that 20 some years later Downs was able to return to Vietnam and view the people at the very least as human beings.

We never find out what happens with Downs's first wife and two children. Downs mentions when he has been wounded for the fourth time that they depended on him. They are not mentioned when he returns to the States. We do learn that he remarries and has two small daughters in the 1980s. These gaping holes just makes one wonder.

After months of time in the bush Downs seems to have established himself as a platoon leader. There is no question about his bravery and heroism and as far as an account of combat in Vietnam this is a fine example. Downsides for me are some inconsistencies, some very awkward attempts at metaphors (just tell the story, don't try to be literary) and some very curious omissions.

George Seaton says

War, any war, is inevitably viewed by the infantry soldier or Marine as encompassing a single truth: kill or be killed. That soldier's or Marine's humanity--if he possessed any to begin with--is necessarily compromised by that truth. Such is what I came away with from "The Killing Zone..." Not a particularly well-written narrative, but a revealing one if only to point out the depth of callousness assumed by Downs and his men. Some examples:

"One of the men took one of the dink's hands that had been severed at the wrist and stuck it upright in the soft dirt at the edge of the crater. He then put a cigarette between two of the fingers."

"This would be my dog. I carefully lined up the M-16's sights on the dog and squeezed the trigger. It was an easy shot of fifty meters. I nailed him with the first shot, pumped a few more rounds in him just for the hell of it..."

"I thought afterward that we were all becoming pretty callous to life. The thought was a small one and soon left me."

"The men were happy we had finally seen action and killed some dinks. They were joking about it as they searched the bodies for souvenirs."

If for no other reason, I gave this book four stars because it does provide insight into the morass that Vietnam was, and the fragility of any man's better angels when faced with that singular truth--kill or be killed.

Steve says

I read the book because my brother was killed in Vietnam back in March of 1969 with a squad of men. Someone tripped a mine. It could have been my brother, George. He was 20 years old. This book gave me a clear picture of what it was like over in the jungles and what he had to endure everyday. When he was injured by a Bouncing Betty Mine, it gave me an explanation of how my brother's squad was killed. When someone trips a bouncing betty, it flies up out of the ground to about waist high and explodes, to kill and disable.

God Bless Our Heroes who lived and died over there.

steve farawell

Trayner Bane says

The Killing Zone: My Life in the Vietnam War is easily one of the best Vietnam war books. Based on the true story of Frederick Downs' deployment to Vietnam in 1967-1968, the book reads like a diary and articulates his experiences in detail. It provides amazing insight into what was going on in his mind (and around him) as he learns to adapt to the chaos of combat while keeping his men alive. Right from the book's preface I was pulled in to the story when he described his post-deployment encounter with a man at the University of Denver in which the man sees his amputation above his left elbow and says, "Serves you right." Wow. It's easy to question another person's morality when yours has never been truly tested.

One of the most powerful passages for me was also the following: "Man's beginning and man's end would always be attended by only a few. Those that bore him at birth and those that bore him at death. The only important thing was what he did in between."

I read the updated reprint of the book and found the Afterword provided an insightful look into the after effects of his deployment, from his career with the VA to his closure revisiting Vietnam 20 years later. He also provided pieces of after action reports that described the fate of his fellow soldiers after his war-ending encounter with a "Bouncing Betty". I highly recommend this book for a true glimpse into the soldier's perspective of the Vietnam war.

R.L. Herron says

Interesting and informative look at the Vietnam War.

Iain says

This book is about men in combat, American infantrymen, in the Central Highlands of Vietnam in 1967~1968. The Killing Zone tells the story of the platoon of Delta One-six, capturing what it meant to face lethal danger, to follow orders, and to search for the conviction and then the hope that this war was worth the sacrifice. The style of memoir follows that of a journal with daily entries retelling what happened to the platoon. Sometimes nothing but waiting around (most of the time) and others consisting of frantic violence that changes the lives of the men in Delta One-six. Essentially you follow Lt. Frederick Downs Jr. who in September 1967 becomes the leader of First Platoon, Delta Company, in the Army's Third Brigade, Fourth Division when he was 23 years old. After just four months in country, Downs was leading an ambush when he triggered a "Bouncing Betty," or a bounding antipersonnel mine. Downs tells the story of his day to day experience and those of the men under his command.

“Man’s beginning and man’s end would always be attended by only a few. Those that bore him at birth and those that bore him at death. The only important thing was what he did in between. Good or bad or indifferent, he would touch those around him in some way and then be gone.”

~ Lt. Frederick Downs Jr.

“The best damned book from the point of view of the infantrymen who fought there.”—Army Times

Alyssa Price says

What an insightful and shocking set of details this book portrays. I cannot possibly fathom what this must've been like to experience. I am grateful to Downs for sharing his thoughts and experiences with the world. It's books like this one that help me to better understand what the Vietnam War was truly like for those who fought. Thank you to each and every one who fought and sacrificed so much.

Cindy Deyo says

I found this book in the history section of Baldwin's Book Barn in Lancaster, Pa...it was published in 1978 and again in 2006 and I'm so glad to have the opportunity to learn more about what was going on in a time when I was living my life as a young, independent adult oblivious to what "real life" meant to so many others of my generation, and more reflectively, to many of my high school classmates who entered the service on their own terms or who were drafted. I recommend this first-hand account of a young, idealistic infantryman to anyone wanting to expand their consciousness about a very difficult time in our history.

John Podlaski says

Fred Downs does an excellent job at depicting the day-to-day life of infantry soldiers in the Vietnam War. Told through the eyes of a Platoon Leader/Second Lieutenant, we see the war from a different perspective. Using a journal approach, the author leads his platoon - alternating between their tedious duty of protecting bridges to the difficult humps through the jungle on search and destroy missions. The battles are descriptive and you are saddened when one of the well-developed characters is killed or wounded. Although the book

only covers six months of the author's tour, he touched upon just about everything that a young infantry soldier would encounter: mines, booby traps, ambushes, fragging, heat, monsoon rains, air assaults, burning down hootches, tunnel complexes, digging up graves, etc.

The story is fast moving and easy to read. As a Vietnam Infantry vet, I have read many memoirs and stories about the war, and find myself always comparing my experiences with those described in the book I'm reading. There are three and a half million different stories that can be told about the war; each is unique in its own way. By reading *Killing Zone*, Mr. Downs brings the reader right into the fold - up close and personal - to learn and experience his war firsthand.

Killing Zone deserves a five star rating and is highly recommended!

John Martin says

I discovered that his journal was only for six months, and I found myself in base camp waiting for the next mission. I am kind of confused why he stopped in the middle of his tour. I am hesitant to pick up his second book, but curious enough to find out why.

Thomas Hunt says

As a former Marine who's father served in Vietnam as a Marine himself, we all know there are rivalries within each branch of the United States Services. I will say, *The Killing Zone* is likely the best book I've read about combat, especially in regards to the Vietnam experience. It also gives me a deeper understanding of the conflict my father experienced in his 13 months in country. God Bless all our service members and thank you LT Downs for sharing his story.

M.G. Edwards says

First published in 1984 and updated in 2007, Frederick Downs, Jr.'s personal account as an infantryman in Vietnam during the war is one of the best books ever written about those who saw ground combat in Vietnam. It's a jarring story of a soldier's life in the field as told through Downs' chronicle of his time near the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ) in 1967-68. That his novel is a must-read for West Point cadets is a testament to its accurate portrayal of military combat conditions.

My father served in Vietnam in the same area and time period as Downs. His book taught me a lot about what life in the killing zone was like for my father, who rarely spoke of the war before he passed away. The author writes with such vivid detail and intensity that he drags the reader into his story. At times, I thought I was in the field with him -- even though I will never know what men like Downs went through during the war. His book is a tribute to the Vietnam veterans who rightly deserve recognition for their sacrifices. I also appreciated Downs' efforts to promote reconciliation with the Vietnamese people.

I gave this book 4 stars because it's not for everyone. Downs tells it like it was. His graphic depictions of the reality of the Vietnam War and derogatory language might leave some readers offended. It should be understood, however, that his narrative portrays the realities of that time period and was not gratuitous. Written as a daily journal, the book does not follow the traditional structure of a novel. The primary conflict in the story -- war -- does not lend itself to a concise climax or ending.

I highly recommend this book to anyone who wants to read a first-hand account of the Vietnam War or about the life of a soldier in combat. In an age when soldiers are still deployed to far-away battlefields in hostile conditions and face grave danger each and every day, this 45-year-old story is just as relevant today as it was when it happened.
