

Ho Chi Minh's Corvette
Reviewed by Tom Paine

NAM-A-RAMA

By Phillip Jennings. Forge. 332 pp. \$24.95

As an editor once said to me nervously about a war novel, "We are to take this ironically, right?"

So many novels have been written about Vietnam, and now here is another: *Nam-A-Rama*, by Phillip Jennings. I mention the slew of other Nam novels because Jennings seems late to be throwing his cover (to use a Marine term for helmet) into the ring. But clearly for many this war is not yet in mothballs, and it is still incredibly alive for Jennings, a former Marine captain and helicopter pilot who flew more than 300 missions in Vietnam, and who also flew for Air America in Laos.

Nam-A-Rama is the story of two marine helicopter pilots, Jack Armstrong and his Tom Sawyer-like buddy, Gearheardt. As Jennings writes, "Gearheardt was one of those people who never looked in the rear view mirror. Causing the Tet Offensive, prolonging the Vietnam war, and getting the President fixed up with the girl who showered in her underpants in Olongopo were hijinks quickly forgotten by the boyish pilot."

One of the things civilians forget time and again is that soldiers are often Gearheardts, with ferocious, fun-loving, but troubling imaginations coupled to a lot of testosterone. And with Gearheardt yanking Armstrong along with him, the story rips up and down like zippers in a Saigon whorehouse.

The two marines are sent on a secret mission by the Prez to meet with Ho Chi Minh to stop the war. They link up with anti-war movie star Barbonella, and there is a cavalcade of vibrant, schizophrenic episodes as the buddies-in-arms head to Hanoi to put a cap on the death toll.

At one point the narrator, Armstrong, is in a Mustang with North Vietnamese Gen. Giap, being chased by Ho Chi Minh in a Corvette. It is pretty surreal. In a letter called "Why I Wrote *Nam-A-Rama*" and included with the publicity material, Jennings comments: "Almost every line in this book, even if perhaps a throw-away or cheap shot, has a sub-textual basis in fact. The silliness of acts that condemned American troops to increased danger and death . . . can hardly be exaggerated." Well, Mr. Jennings, I beg to differ. You do exaggerate (a Corvette for Ho?), your imagination was burning white-hot sulfur, and kudos to you.

Jennings doesn't want the reader kept at the safe remove of irony. This is acid satire, because Jennings is still outraged and sickened by the war he attended. And satire is braver and more meaningful than irony, which is something cowards often hide behind to avoid battling with real life.

And yet this reader was most moved when Jennings seemed to be writing from his actual war experiences. The break from insanity to reality adds to the horror.

Jennings writes during one firefight, "When we hit the ground I jumped out and landed on top of a Marine who had been shot in the throat. I tried to avoid looking down at his face, because I didn't want it to be the kid with freckles and a nervous knee. Blood pumped up over my boot and pant-leg. . . . I saw the crew chief jump out, pick up the Marine shot in the neck, throw him into the chopper in one swift motion, and then they were gone. . . ."

This is only one of several realistic war scenes that depart from the Hanoi-bound hilarity. These pages will stay with me as do the best of Tim O'Brien and John Del Vecchio's *The Thirteenth*

Valley . Everything that finally moved me in this book is captured in "I didn't want it to be the kid with the freckles." For in those words is visible a great soul, still alive in a soldier after the numbing, insane carnage.

Interestingly, Jennings has also written that he wanted to show how the good soldiers who fought the war were betrayed by our military and civilian leaders. His lampoons of those leaders are miraculously funny. But what moved me to outrage and heartbreak were the pages in which he goes beyond satirizing venal leaders and to write fiercely and humanely as a man who was there, served his country, and is still clearly losing sleep over real flesh-and-blood kids with freckles and nervous knees. ·

Tom Paine is the author of "The Pearl of Kuwait," a novel of the Gulf War," and "Scar Vegas," a collection of stories.

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