

Up Country, by Nelson DeMille
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Review by David Eaton Mauk

"We continued our walk, and I thought a minute and said, 'Well, after we air-assaulted in, we made contact with the enemy ...with the North Vietnamese army, but it was obvious they were retreating into Laos. We had light contact for the next week or so. I really can't remember how long we stayed. We saw many hundreds of dead soldiers, many wounded, many graves ...and the rats ...and there was a terrible stench of death, and the land was devastated ...and I had never seen anything like this ...the aftermath of a great slaughter, and in some ways, it was more terrible than battle itself.' I kept saying to myself, 'I am walking through the Valley of Death, and God has abandoned this place.'" Paul Brenner, the primary character and narrator speaks this graphic paragraph mid-way through *Up Country*. It captures the essential message of the novel, which is that war is wretched, and when clutched by its depraved grip, humankind is capable of obscene brutality.

Nelson DeMille's latest thriller is several things more than a taut page-turner. It is a respectful tribute to those who fought in the Vietnam War. It depicts the senselessness that accompanies conflicts waged by killing and maiming enormous numbers of people. And it might be the author's coming-to-terms with the demons born from his own Vietnam experience.

The central story revolves around an assignment given Paul Brenner, the army's Criminal Investigation Division investigator last seen in DeMille's *The General's Daughter*. Now retired, bitter about his past, and ambivalent about his future, he accepts what he believes will be a thankless job, requiring him to return to Vietnam nearly 30 years after his last tour of duty there. It is presented to him as a therapeutic opportunity to get the war behind him, as many other veterans have done by revisiting their scenes of combat. Leaving a dysfunctional relationship behind, Brenner agrees to find the sole witness to an apparent murder that happened in a battle theater where he also fought at the time of the 1968 Tet Offensive. A letter between Vietcong, which was taken as a souvenir with one of their deaths, resurfaces all these years later, and is sent to the army, where it ends up at CID.

Right away the mystery of the original incident is clouded in murkiness. It's clear though that someone who is now prominent might have been involved in the murder episode. The question of whether it's friend or foe behind Brenner's hiring provides tension through the book's final chapter.

Like the war itself, nothing here is quite what it seems. DeMille makes this point over and over, using relationships as his medium. We have Susan Weber, Brenner's evasive female companion during the investigation. Then there's repeated cat and mouse games with a dangerous Vietnamese security official, Colonel Mang. And finally, united Vietnam's divided citizenry, as they struggle to let go of the wounds inflicted by having so many of their own killed by the opposing side.

Much of the book revives the battles Brenner and other characters engaged in during their Vietnam tours of duty. Like Brenner's trip itself, these descriptions seem intended as a catharsis, or cleansing of the nightmares caused by the horrors of the war. It is interesting reading.

Another aspect of the novel that may appeal to readers is the Vietnam travelogue, which is presented in great detail. The coastal beauty where the green mountains meet the aqua sea. The mist-shrouded hills. Thatched-roof villages. Bustling market squares filled with exotic goods and scents.

The author has made a habit of presenting capable young women who fall for gruff, older men. This romance in *Up Country* detracts from what is otherwise a coming-to-terms-with-Vietnam story. The mystery of the book is easier to deal with, though we see this for the device it is in propelling the tour guide and retrospective along. Is *Up Country* DeMille's best work? No. Is it worth reading? Absolutely! *"The journey home is never a direct route; it is, in fact, always circuitous, and somewhere along the way, we discover that the journey is more significant than the destination, and that the people we meet along the way will be the traveling companions of our memories forever."* The book's final sentence serves as an apt conclusion in how we emerge with a better understanding of a tragedy that has left grave scars.