

## **Fearful Odds: A Memoir of Vietnam and Its Aftermath**

### **Simply Stunning**

February 19, 2016

By **John H. Neely**

Do not stop reading this review before the end. Do not stop reading Fearful Odds before the end.

This memoir consists of five separate and essential parts.

- 1) A brief synopsis of Chuck's life before Vietnam. Its significance will be apparent much later. Do not be put off here or later by Chuck's description of a life of privilege. He is straightforward and unapologetic. You the reader need to know who he is. He is a throwback to the Civil War, when sons of wealth and privilege bore a full share of the burdens and risks of military service.
- 2) A top-notch memoir of infantry combat in Vietnam: the 101st saw a particularly grueling variant of infantry combat experienced by only a minority of boonie rats. The area was mountainous forest, unpopulated or at least depopulated by the time Chuck got there. There were no wheeled or tracked vehicles (except those employed by the NVA), and helicopters were in short supply for the 101st Airborne. The weight of Chuck's 140-pound rucksack may have been exaggerated, but not by much. The A Shau Valley, at the western edge of Thua Thien Province, is seared in Chuck's memory. Rightly so.

He could have spent many more pages describing his and his platoon's experiences. The choice of spare language and abrupt transitions adds power without sacrificing impact.

I claim to know a lot about war memoirs and have yet to find one that is 100% true. Fearful Odds is more accurate and true-to-life than most. The only memoir of comparable power dealing with the 1st Battalion, 327th Infantry is a single chapter in *To What End*, a compilation of articles by civilian combat correspondent Ward Just. Tom Carhart's *The Offering* pales by comparison and Michael Sallah's and Mitch Weiss's *Tiger Force* has flaws beyond the scope of this review. Works of fiction round out the genre. Chuck mentions the novel *The 13th Valley*; author John Del Vecchio served in a sister battalion of the 101st as an enlisted combat correspondent. Best selling author of thrillers, Nelson DeMille, served in the A Shau Valley in the 1st Air Cavalry Division and set *Up Country* there, both during and long after the war.

- 3) A memoir of the second half of Chuck's 12-month tour – after he came in from the bush to serve as a part-time warrior and part-time REMF. This is when and where I met him. It is less riveting than the previous section, partly because there was less action. The other

reason Chuck provides incidentally, and probably unintentionally, when he writes that his memories of the first half of his tour were much more vivid than those of the second half. I can vouch for this phenomenon. This is also where I can vouch for the book's accuracy. For example, the chaplain did carry a Thompson submachine gun, although his Irish-American name was not Murphy.

This section helps to fill out Chuck's self description. You do not have to agree with his critique of Senator Kennedy to understand the source and intensity of his feelings.

- 4) Business school and the first 11 years of Chuck's work life come next. It is important to understand that this exceptionally successful venture capitalist worked extremely hard and that in 1982 the scope of that success was by no means assured. It is also important to note the toll that Chuck's work took on his family.
- 5) The fifth and last section begins on March 13, 1982. Up to this point, *Fearful Odds* is a very well-written memoir—quite worthwhile if the topics interest you. Then, in a page, it transcends the genre. It steps up to a higher level and remains there to the end. There is good reason for the blurb on the front cover by a notable Vietnam writer: "Fearful Odds packs a punch in the gut you will be feeling for a long time." There is good reason that a prominent medical school psychiatrist says it is "far better than the great majority of PTSD books." This may be the most searingly personal and painful book I have ever read. I am so proud to know the man who wrote it.