

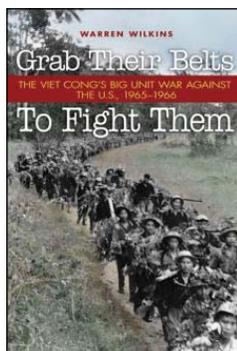
Book Reviews



Grab Their Belts to Fight Them: The Vietcong's Big-Unit War Against the U.S., 1965-1966

**By Warren Wilkins
Annapolis, MD: Naval
Institute Press, 2011, 288
pages**

Reviewed by LTC (Retired)
Rick Baillergeon



Those with some knowledge of the Vietnam War have a fairly ingrained perception on how the Vietcong fought the war. It is a view that believes the Vietcong strategy throughout the war was focused on guerilla tactics and utilizing small units or groups of individuals to execute ambushes and emplace various booby-traps. Author Warren Wilkins will unquestionably broaden most people's understanding of the Vietnam War in this superb volume. It is a book which will be important to any reader, no matter his or her comprehension or expertise on the Vietnam War.

The focus of Wilkins' book is clearly articulated in his introductory paragraph. He states, "... few armed forces have captivated the world as much or been more romanticized than the Vietcong. Regrettably, few armed forces have ever been so woefully misunderstood, and aspects of their military campaign so neglected, as the Vietcong and the 'big unit' war they waged against the U.S. military in Vietnam."

In order to enable readers to begin to "understand" the overall strategy and tactics of the Vietcong, Wilkins has organized his volume very effectively. The author utilizes his initial chapters to educate readers on the Vietcong. He includes discussion on their origins, key figures, infrastructure, organization, and their basic offensive and defensive doctrine. In a minimal amount of pages, he provides readers a solid background so that they can better appreciate the remainder of the volume.

The most fascinating portions of the book deal with the debate in Hanoi on how to prosecute the war as the United States entered it. Wilkins emphasizes there was no solidarity within leadership on overall strategy. Ultimately, it was decided that a conventional, "big unit" fight would overwhelm South Vietnamese forces and persuade the United States that taking heavy combat losses was not in their best interest. The author's treatment of how this strategy was determined will be a valuable contribution to most reader's understanding of the Vietnam War.

Wilkins dedicates the majority of his volume to addressing

the "big unit" battles between forces from the period of August 1965 to May 1966. The author provides concise, but detailed discussions on each of the major conventional fights. Within these battles, the Vietcong fought with regimental-size forces and clearly executed combined arms operations. Wilkins' use of easy-to-read maps is a great asset in providing clarity for readers of these battles. Additionally, he expertly analyzes the changing mindset of the Communists as these battles progressed and the quick and decisive victory did not materialize. It is a mindset which resulted in the Vietcong utilizing the tactics and strategy that most are familiar with.

Research is vital in making a book like this authoritative and valuable. Without question, Wilkins has examined all possible areas in developing his book. This includes drawing extensively on communist sources (many just recently becoming available) such as personal memoirs, unit histories, and battlefield after action reviews. The challenges Wilkins had in the utilization of this research were significant. Not only did he have to acquire his sources, but he had to find expertise in translating them and finally, he had to determine what was fact and what was fiction or propaganda. His ability to meet this challenge is found throughout the pages of this volume.

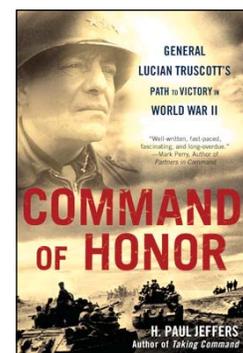
With the wealth of material published on the Vietnam War; it is becoming increasingly rare for an author to add to the existing body of knowledge. However, Wilkins has achieved this in this volume. *Grab Their Belts To Fight Them* will put many events and decisions of the war in far greater perspective for readers. For me personally, it filled in several gaps and answered questions I had for many years. I believe it is truly an important book in our understanding of the Vietnam War.

Command of Honor: General Lucian Truscott's Path to Victory in World War II By H. Paul Jeffers

NY: NAL, 2009, 336 pages

Reviewed by Meg Reeder

General Lucian K. Truscott Jr. was undoubtedly a man of considerable fortitude, tenacity, and humility. His contributions to the Allied victory in World War II were exceptional. Although Truscott was the only American officer to command a regiment, division, corps, and army during World War II, his name has gradually been overshadowed by the other more



celebrated figures. *Command of Honor: General Lucian Truscott's Path to Victory in World War II* by H. Paul Jeffers is a thoughtfully crafted biography that seeks to educate modern readers of military history about Truscott's proper place in WWII history.

Although a major player in the European theater, Truscott chose not to seek the accolades and publicity of some of the more colorful commanders of WWII. Instead, his main objectives during the war were to train his men effectively and do what he could to help ensure the victory of Allied forces. Curiously, considering his vital role in the European theater during World War II, *Command of Honor* is the first biography of Truscott since his memoir *Command Missions: A Personal Story* was published in 1954.

Although the focus of the book is Truscott's "path to victory in World War II," Jeffers does shed some light on Truscott's life before and after the war. Born in Chatfield, Texas, in 1895, Truscott spent his boyhood and early adulthood in Oklahoma. To help his family financially, he began teaching in one- and two-room schoolhouses in Oklahoma's hinterlands. Truscott believed he was rescued from a life of obscurity by World War I. During the war, he was commissioned in the cavalry as a second lieutenant and served in a variety of cavalry assignments between the World Wars. He also taught at both the Cavalry School and the Command and General Staff School.

Truscott's renowned combat record began in 1942 when he was assigned to develop an American-style commando unit he called the Rangers, a name he chose in honor of early American heroes. Truscott became the first American general to see combat in Europe when he led a small contingent of Rangers in the primarily British and Canadian raid on the French port of Dieppe. During the 1942 invasion of North Africa, Truscott led troops under General George S. Patton in the taking of a crucial port in Morocco. After his duty as field deputy to General Dwight D. Eisenhower in Tunisia, Truscott led divisions in the invasions of Sicily and Italy and crafted the breakout from the Anzio beachhead after months of debilitating stalemate. Shortly after the D-Day landings in Normandy, Truscott commanded a successful invasion of Southern France. Truscott then returned to Italy where he took over the Fifth Army and conducted a campaign that demolished a German last stand.

Shortly after the war, Truscott had multiple responsibilities, including command of the Third Army, military administration of Eastern Bavaria, oversight of war crime trials of the top leaders of the Third Reich, and supervision of displaced person camps. He later served as a member of the War Department Screening Board and was chairman of the Army Advisory Panel for Amphibious Operations. In the early 1950s, he was appointed senior Central Intelligence Agency representative in Germany.

There are several factors that contribute to the overall enjoyment of this biography. *Command of Honor* offers a collection of more than 30 photographs, the majority of which were taken during World War II. Additionally, a bibliography is provided for those who wish to do further research on some of the topics covered in the book. Quotes from Truscott's memoir are interspersed throughout the book, so readers have the added benefit of Truscott's own recollections of important people, places, and events. The section of the biography entitled "Decorations and Citations" is an interesting inclusion which underscores Truscott's valor during World War II. It contains both American and foreign awards.

Some readers may be troubled by *Command's* lack of maps, which are almost obligatory in a book of military history. Additionally, toward the end of the book, Jeffers digresses a bit on topics that do not necessarily advance Truscott's story or pertain directly to Truscott. There is also a notable absence of source notes in the text, which would have been useful to students of military history.

Truscott was a tough but unpretentious general, a commander who garnered respect from those who served with and under him. With no need for personal glory, Truscott became what *Time* considered a "brilliant tactician and master of amphibious landings" during World War II. *Command of Honor* is an apt tribute to him.

Command of Honor is a readable, engaging, and entertaining chronicle of Truscott's involvement in World War II. It provides a fascinating depiction of one of the war's unique, remarkable, but frequently overlooked American heroes. I recommend *Command of Honor* to anyone wishing to learn more about Truscott and his triumphs during World War II. It is a stirring story of a great military leader who became a revered but humble hero of World War II.



U.S. Army Rangers assigned to 2nd Platoon, Alpha Company, 2nd Battalion, 75th Ranger Regiment, infiltrate an objective on foot during task force training at Fort Hunter Liggett, Calif., on 27 January 2014. Rangers are constantly training to maintain the highest level of tactical proficiency.

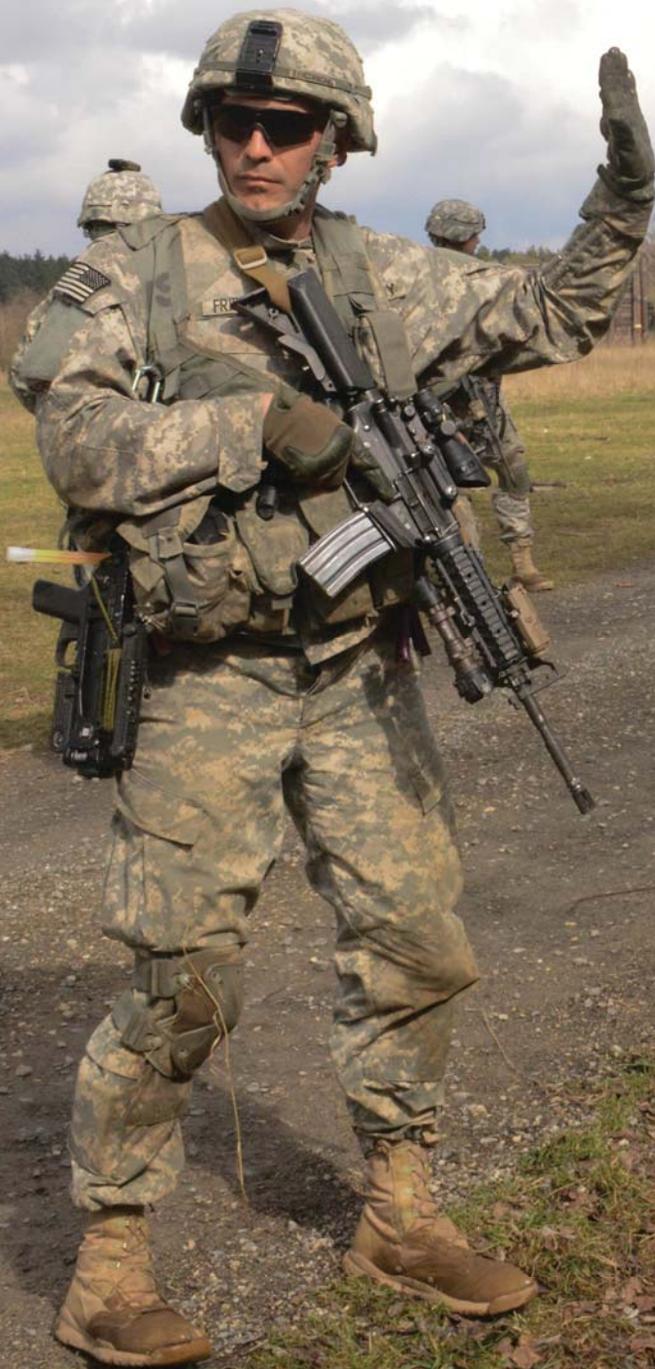
Photo by SPC Steven Hitchcock

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