

In 1988, Neil Sheehan published his Pulitzer prize-winning book, *A Bright Shining Lie*, which was about John Paul Vann and the Vietnam War. As a young war correspondent working for United Press International and then for *The New York Times*, Sheehan spent three years in Vietnam between 1962 and 1966. John Paul Vann served in Vietnam for eight years, one year as a U.S. Army lieutenant colonel from 1962 to 1963 and then seven years in a civilian capacity from 1965 until his death in a helicopter crash at age 47 in 1972. Sheehan, along with other correspondents, came to believe early on that Vann had special insights into what was really happening in the war. Vann also stood out as someone who knew a large number of Vietnamese people and worked very closely with them. While American generals were telling lies about how well the war was going, Vann spelled out the truth to those who would listen—that the South Vietnamese army was refusing to fight and was treating the peasant majority like a subspecies, that the bombing by American planes over South Vietnam was killing far more noncombatants than communists, and that the South Vietnamese government lacked legitimacy and reeked of graft and corruption.

When Vann returned to South Vietnam as a civilian in March 1965, he was an employee of the Agency for International Development (AID)—more specifically, AID's Chief Provincial Representative for Hau Nghia. The assistant he found waiting for him, Douglas Ramsey, age 30, was a Foreign Service officer who had reached the province a month earlier. Two years before that, Ramsey had volunteered for Vietnamese language training and field work in South Vietnam. His first stint lasted from May 1963 until December 1964, when he went home on leave. Upon returning to South Vietnam in February 1965, he assumed a new post as AID's assistant representative for Hau Nghia and awaited his new boss and soon to be friend, John Paul Vann. This is how Ramsey enters Sheehan's book, *A Bright Shining Lie*. In November 1965, Vann moved on to another assignment in a different part of Vietnam, and Ramsey replaced Vann as Chief Provincial Representative in Hau Nghia. On January 17, 1966, Ramsey was captured by the Viet Cong (Vietnamese Communists) and would remain a POW for the next seven years until he was released on February 12, 1973.

For his book, Neil Sheehan interviewed Doug Ramsey, and Ramsey gave him a copy of an unfinished manuscript he wrote about his experiences in Vietnam as well as a typed copy of a letter Ramsey had sent to his parents during his captivity. With these sources plus the official record of Ramsey's State Department debriefing following his release, Sheehan composed what could be considered the most gripping pages in *A Bright Shining Lie*.

Doug Ramsey, Vietnam POW

(*A Bright Shining Lie: John Paul Vann and America in Vietnam*, by Neil Sheehan, Vintage Books, 1988, pages 559-562, 565-567, 660-666.)

Doug Ramsey was captured by the Viet Cong... He was caught late in the afternoon of January 17, 1966...while attempting to hurry a truckload of rice and other emergency food to refugees created by one of the initial operations of the U.S. [Army] 1st Infantry Division. The refugees were located at the village center of Trung Lap in the formidable rubber-plantation area of Cu Chi District. A brigade of the 1st Division had established a command post in the ARVN [South Vietnamese Army] Ranger training camp there.

The four-mile access road to Trung Lap, a dirt affair that ran off Route 1, was considered the most hazardous stretch of road in Hau Nghia, which probably made it the most dangerous road in the whole III Corps region. Hanh [Major Nguyen Tri Hanh, the South Vietnamese province chief for Hau Nghia] told Ramsey that the shipment could wait until the next morning, when travel would be safer. Ramsey was afraid the refugees might be hungry, and he wanted to get the chore out of the way...

He was ambushed by four local guerillas [Viet Cong] less than a mile from the village center and the U.S. command post. The Vietnamese driver took a bullet in the leg, lost his nerve, and stalled the truck. Ramsey [from the passenger seat] might still have shot his way out of the ambush. He was carrying one of the new fully automatic AR-15 rifles (the commercial version of the M-16 that the army was then beginning to adopt), two clips of ammunition for it, and a couple of grenades. He didn't know what to do. He had never had any infantry training. He fired back ineffectively from the window of the truck, wasting critical moments and the clip in the rifle. A bullet from the guerillas punctured a five-gallon can of diesel oil at his feet and sent a jet of the oil into his face, half blinding him.

Ramsey grasped at the one thing he knew how to use—his Vietnamese. “*Toi dau hang!*” (“I surrender!”), he shouted, then dropped the rifle and climbed out of the truck, an overly tall man who looked even taller with his hands stretched high above his head. The driver was released. His leg injury was a simple flesh wound, and he made his way back to Bau Trai that evening to report Ramsey's capture.

Doug Ramsey's captors, farmers in their twenties, were so pleased with their catch they were almost friendly. They asked him how to say *dau hang* in English. To get Ramsey out of sight behind a tree line, the guerillas led him to the nearest hamlet. The farm folk there had a different attitude toward him. Their hamlet had been put to the torch by troops from Chinh's 25th Division [the South Vietnamese Army's 25th Division was commanded by Colonel Phan Trong Chinh] who were participating in the operation. Ramsey had seen burned-out hamlets before. He had always seen them days or weeks after the burning when the places had acquired an archaeological look, abandoned by their disheartened inhabitants, the blackened ruins cold.

The rubble of this hamlet was still smoking, and it was obvious that these people had returned only a short time before to discover what had happened to their homes. Children were whimpering. A couple of old people were standing and looking, shaking their heads in a trance of disbelief. Women were poking through the smoldering debris of the houses trying to salvage cooking utensils and any other small possessions that might have escaped the flames. Ramsey could tell from the conversations he was overhearing that these peasants had lost virtually everything. They had had neither time nor warning to remove any household furnishings. The soldiers had also burned all of the rice that had not been buried or hidden elsewhere and had shot the buffalo and other livestock and thrown the carcasses down the wells to poison the water supply...

Had Ramsey still been a free man, the scene might have severed him from this war. His predicament rendered such thoughts of conscience academic, but he thought them just the

same. He felt sickened and infuriated, betrayed and yet also responsible. During a briefing on the operation two weeks earlier at 25th Division headquarters he had expressed concern about civilian casualties and unnecessary damage to homes. The Army lieutenant colonel who was Chinh's senior advisor had assured him there would be no wanton destruction of hamlets. Chinh had sat nearby without a word of contradiction. Ramsey had had enough. If this was to be the price of preserving the American way of life, he did not want to be one of those exacting it.

Ramsey was also frightened. A number of the farmers from the hamlet had gathered around and were demanding the right to kill him. The four guerillas stopped them. They quoted the National Liberation Front's announced policy of "lenient and humane" treatment for prisoners. Ramsey sensed that they wanted to protect their prize, but they also seemed to be conscientious men who took seriously the preaching of their movement. They reprimanded an old man who spat at Ramsey. The guerillas said that Ramsey was not a soldier who might have been involved in the destruction of the hamlet. He was a civilian who had been captured while escorting a truckload of rice to refugees. A middle-aged farmer in the group asked Ramsey what agency he worked for.

"AID," Ramsey said. The Vietnamese acronym for the Agency for International Development conveys the same meaning as the initials in English.

"AID!" the farmer cried. "Look about you," he said to Ramsey. He pointed, sweeping his finger from one charred remembrance of a home to another. "Here is your American AID!" The farmer spat on the ground and walked away.

[By the time a rescue effort was organized and then began on January 20,] Ramsey was already far beyond...reach at the edge of the Annamite rain forest that was to be Ramsey's purgatory for the next seven years. The day after his capture, Ramsey had been turned over to a three-man liaison team. That evening they had started marching him toward the camp for important prisoners at the region headquarters...in northern Tay Ninh Province, the Duong Minh Chau redoubt of the French war [French Indochina War]... By noon [on the 20th] Ramsey was walking toward the great wall of trees that marks the end of the cultivated lowlands and the beginning of the rain forest and the foothills of the Annamite chain...

Ramsey had been most impressed by the junior member of the team, a sixteen-year-old farm boy. The youth was tall for a Vietnamese, high-spirited, and clearly enjoying the life of a guerilla soldier. Shortly after they entered the trees he spotted a hawk perched on a branch and shot it for their dinner that evening. His pride in his prowess as a hunter amused Ramsey. The boy appeared to have little in the way of formal education, but he was bright, and the clearly extensive political indoctrination he had received had not repressed a nature that was curious and friendly. He had become so talkative with Ramsey at one point on the march that the cadre [who was in charge, an older and experienced man] had reprimanded him for crossing the line and being too familiar with a prisoner...

[Later on] the young man asked Ramsey why the Americans were making war in Vietnam. Ramsey gave the most common reason—the containment of an expansionist China—because he assumed it was the one a sixteen-year-old Vietnamese peasant could most easily understand. He explained that while the war was against the immediate best interests of the Vietnamese people, the United States was benefiting the Vietnamese in the long run by preventing China from taking over all of their country and the other nations of Southeast Asia.

Doug Ramsey's explanation seemed to irritate and arouse the boy. He said that it didn't make sense to him. If the Americans hated or feared the Chinese so much, why didn't they go to China and make war? There were no Chinese soldiers in Vietnam. The only foreign soldiers in Vietnam were Americans and foreign allies of the Americans like the South Koreans, he said. In fact, the last people to bring Chinese troops into Vietnam had been the Americans. They had let the Chinese Nationalists occupy the North after World War II. Now the Americans were talking again about possibly bringing Chiang Kai-shek's troops from Taiwan to fight for them in the South. The Vietnamese would never permit foreign troops to occupy their soil. "We have no fear that the present Chinese regime [Mao's] will attack us or attempt to take us over," the youth said, "but if things changed in the future and a new government ever dared to try..." He began to describe how the Vietnamese had smashed invading armies from China in centuries past.

Ramsey started to explain further why Americans saw the Vietnamese Communists as pawns of the Chinese. The cadre and the other guerilla broke in. Ramsey was wrong, they said. Just because China had become a socialist country did not mean that it could dominate Vietnam. The Vietnamese would not tolerate any foreign domination, regardless of the ideology of the foreigner. Least of all, they said, would they tolerate Chinese domination. The two older men and the youth brought Ramsey into the historical world of the Vietnamese Communists. He was fascinated that these products of a Communist movement, which denounced modern vestiges of "feudalism," could identify so passionately with the figures of their feudal past. Their nationalism was fervid, quite different from the attitude he had become accustomed to on the Saigon side.

They were glad in a way that the task of defeating the United States had fallen to Vietnamese of their time, the guerillas said. After the Americans had despaired and gone home, potential menaces close at hand—they implied they had China uppermost in mind—would not dare to attempt what the most powerful capitalist nation in history had failed to achieve. They were confident they would be able to emulate their ancestors in their war against the United States.

That afternoon they continued their march deeper into the Duong Minh Chau forest toward the prison camp. The geopolitical rationale that the United States was containing China by frustrating her Vietnamese pawn had been "reduced to ashes" for Ramsey. It occurred to him that Americans need look no further than this Vietnamese Communist enemy for the best possible native barrier against Chinese expansion into Southeast Asia.

It was written on tissue paper in a minute hand with a ball-point pen and smuggled out of a jungle prison camp by Pfc. Charles Crafts, one of two captured American soldiers released by the Viet Cong as a propaganda act during the 1967 Tet or Lunar New Year holiday. The letter was from Ramsey to his parents in Boulder City, Nevada. Crafts hid it in his eyeglass case and turned it over to the U.S. Army intelligence officers who questioned him right after his release...

Ramsey, the only child, told his parents, "It is the thought of seeing you again and the memories of home which are keeping me above water at present." He hoped to survive, "but we must be realistic." He wanted the letter to serve as testimony that "I was still alive as of the 13th of January [1967]," the day he completed it, so his parents could collect his back pay to that date "without undue difficulty" should he perish. Ramsey tried, nevertheless, to be encouraging. He had endured a bout with ordinary malaria and then come through an assault by the falciparum variety "said to be 90 percent fatal in this region." (Falciparum is the so-called "killer malaria" that attacks the brain.) "If I can survive something like that I am now completely confident of my ability to survive any of the lesser diseases I have seen in this area—with no sweat," he said. The Viet Cong "medical treatment is quite good, given jungle conditions... As to protection from U.S. artillery, bombs, rockets, etc., you mustn't fret yourselves either." They had deep foxholes in the camp and were in the process of digging underground sleeping quarters. A similarly constructed camp had recently been hit by B-52s and "only one person [was] slightly wounded."

...the information supplied by Pfc. Crafts and Sgt. Sammie Womach, the other prisoner released, ... [gave] a more realistic vision of Ramsey's captivity [than Ramsey's letter did] ...

The two Viet Cong interrogators at the first prison camp to which Ramsey had been taken near the Cambodian border in northwestern Tay Ninh Province had decided right away that he was a CIA agent. In their frame of reference any American with Ramsey's specialized language training who was traveling around the countryside in civilian clothes armed with an AR-15 and carrying a lot of money had to be engaged in spying and clandestine operations. He had about 31,000 piastres on him when captured, money owed to a new local contractor for some office construction. The interrogators assumed that he was out paying salaries to the CIA's assassination teams in Hau Nghia. Ramsey's denials and his attempts to explain what he really did only angered them. They thought that his AID job was a cover. To the guerillas, a CIA agent was a loathsome species of American. The agencies sponsorship since the 1950s of the Saigon regime's intelligence and security services...gave it a mythical aura of evil in their eyes.

Physical torture was apparently regarded by these interrogators as unproductive. Psychological torture was another matter. They turned the guards on Ramsey. To vent their hatred of what they thought he represented and to amuse themselves in the evening, the guards began to compose skits about Ramsey. The skits became elaborate. Ramsey was portrayed as the archetypal U.S. aggressor who "has the blood of thousands of

Vietnamese on his hands.” The skit format acquired a triumphant ending: the dedication of a monument to the demise of this CIA agent in humanitarian cloak... The monument was to be dedicated with Ramsey’s blood by executing him and burying him underneath it. Each guard participating in the skit would propose a fitting demise for Ramsey: shooting after a public trial, lynching, beating to death by the peasants. The rain-forest prison compound was small, and Ramsey could not avoid seeing and hearing the skits. His cell was a large wooden cage. He was kept isolated from the three other American prisoners in the compound, prevented from speaking or having any sort of contact with them. A guard lived above his cell to watch him. At night a kerosene lamp inside the cell was lit so that he could also be watched from the nearby guard shack.

The two interrogators soon sensed Ramsey’s guilty conscience over the killing of civilians and the razing of hamlets like the one he had seen at his capture. They harped on the atrocities in the frequent examination sessions. One of his inquisitors was an older Viet Cong officer, irascible and embittered. Ramsey later discovered that the other prisoners had nicknamed him Grandpa. He would rail at Ramsey, accusing him of all sorts of heinous acts, shouting that the crimes of a civilian were far worse than those of a military man because the soldier at least came in uniform with an announced mission. The other inquisitor, a younger but higher-ranking cadre nicknamed Alex, was quieter and more chilling in his threats. He claimed to have the authority to kill a prisoner. He said that he had selected the prisoners shot in 1965 to avenge the firing-squad execution in the main Saigon marketplace of a young Viet Cong named Nguyen Van Troi who had tried to blow up [Robert] McNamara’s car during one of the [Defense] secretary’s trips to Vietnam. He hoped, Alex said, that he would not have to select Ramsey or any of the other three Americans currently in his charge for like retribution on some future occasion.

The interrogation hut was also in the compound, and so the guards heard all of the sessions and the fury of Grandpa and Alex when Ramsey would protest that he could not give them the names of secret Vietnamese agents of the CIA and similar information they demanded. Ramsey’s seeming obstinacy made the guards hate him all the more. They petitioned the regional headquarters, which was apparently adjacent to the prison, for permission to erect the monument and execute him. When the request was denied, they petitioned neighboring commands for support. Some of the skits were broadcast over the Viet Cong’s youth radio frequency for the Tay Ninh area. Couriers and other guerillas stationed at the headquarters came to see the monster Ramsey in his cage.

Fear, isolation, guilt, and vilification building month upon month pushed Ramsey close to hysteria. The guards taunted him more brutally when they saw that he was losing control, apparently hoping that if they could drive him insane, his potential usefulness would be gone and they could kill him; perhaps he might assist them by committing suicide. Alex and Grandpa were clearly willing to risk killing him on the chance that he might instead break down and give them the CIA secrets they thought he had. If he remained unresponsive, they warned, “it would not be the way to life.”

The difficulty of sleeping at night further weakened Ramsey’s nerves. The [American] advisors who had lived with ARVN (South Vietnamese) battalions in the [Mekong] Delta in

the early 1960s had lost a lot of weight on a good Vietnamese diet. Americans require more calories and protein than Vietnamese. The diet on which prisoners and guards subsisted in these rain-forest camps was usually poor by Vietnamese standards, especially in protein and vitamin B1. It initially caused Ramsey's body to break out in boils. His bed was a crude bench fashioned from pole trees with bamboo slats laid on top. These were in turn covered with a woven reed mat. The slats protruded up through the thin mat and irritated the boils. He got painful cramps in his leg muscles from an incipient case of beriberi, a vitamin-B1-deficiency disease. The light of the kerosene lamp in the cell sometimes kept him awake. The lamp sat in a big tin can that had been cut open on one side to let the light shine out. Whenever the guards heard an aircraft engine they covered the light by pulling on a vine to manipulate a shutter on the side of the can. The clattering of the shutter back and forth was another robber of sleep. Ramsey started to have nightmares when he did fall asleep and to cry out. The guards threatened to shoot him if he did not keep quiet. He became afraid to fall asleep.

One night in August 1966, after nearly seven months of torment, Ramsey's emotions suddenly crested. Some of the guards were saying he ought to be disposed of in any case, because he was too weak to make a difficult march to a new camp. The Viet Cong had decided to move the prisoners because the U.S. Army's operations in III Corps had started to penetrate the Duong Minh Chau redoubt. Ramsey resolved to fight back. He requested permission, which was granted, to work at milling rice and at the other manual chores the prisoners did around the camp. He began exercising vigorously in his cell. When representatives of the Viet Cong's "Red Cross" came around soliciting statements against the war for "Liberation Radio," Ramsey agreed to provide one. He filled the statement with slogans so that it would strike an American as ridiculous and read it into the tape recorder in a tremolo [quivering] voice in the hope of rendering it useless for broadcast. Alex and Grandpa didn't seem to notice. They eased up a bit and let him talk to the other prisoners on occasion and do calisthenics with them.

A fourteen-day trek at the end of October into the jungle of upper Binh Duong Province north of Saigon took Ramsey from psychological to physical torment. The Viet Cong originally regarded the new camp as a bivouac until they could march the prisoners farther north to a hiding place just inside Cambodia in the mountains of the lower Central Highlands. They were instead to stay in this camp for a year, and in their desire for concealment the guerrillas had chosen one of the most inhospitable places in Vietnam. The site was so inaccessible that even the guides got lost during the last part of the trek. The country around it was cut by innumerable ravines that one crossed on log bridges set at crazy angles and covered with slime from the trees. These trails were too rugged for porters to carry in enough food to meet the camp's needs. Poor soil in the area and early and heavy rains in 1967 prevented the prisoners and the guards from growing much in the way of vegetables. The guards hunted for wild pigs and deer and other game and couldn't find any. A nest of rats they discovered one day provided a rare bit of fresh meat and protein. Usually there was nothing to eat but manioc [the starchy root of a tropical tree] boiled in salt water, poor-quality rice, and bamboo shoots, and not a great deal of that.

The mundane variety of malaria hit Ramsey a week after his arrival and laid him out with nineteen days of fever, 105 degrees or higher. For four days he could eat nothing and hold down only thin rice soup most of the other days. The falciparum came on Christmas Eve as he was helping his fellow prisoners prepare a service. He fell to the ground with cerebral convulsions. The camp doctor found a weak pulse and injected a heart stimulant, but the Viet Cong then debated whether they ought to deplete their short supply of quinine and chloroquine on Ramsey. They too were being struck with the malaria, of course. A senior cadre happened to be visiting the camp. Being a CIA agent could also be a saving grace—a valuable prisoner for some possible future exchange. The senior cadre said to try to keep Ramsey alive. Ramsey awoke from the coma sixty hours later in the thatch hut that served as the camp hospital. He noticed that his skin was absolutely white. His superficial blood vessels had closed from the excessive doses of chloroquine the doctor had been forced to use to bring him back from the shadows.

The early and torrential rains of the 1967 monsoon raised the water table and flooded the underground bunkers in which the prisoners were supposed to sleep. Nor could they stay dry in their aboveground cells during the downpours, because the thatch roofs got saturated and turned into sieves. The ground became so water-soaked that the roots of several big trees let loose. The trees toppled over and smashed huts in the camp. No one was hurt, but it was terrifying. Thumb-size leeches thrived in the green wetness. They bit into the legs to feed. The bites became infected. Periodically the fever of the ordinary malaria returned and stayed with Ramsey for a week or longer. The doctor had him put on a special diet of chicken broth and protein supplements for a short time after the falciparum. He and the other prisoners received vitamins in pill and injection form fairly regularly, but nothing approaching what they would have needed to compensate for the malnutrition. The beriberi appeared in full viciousness. Ramsey's skin lost its elasticity. Some of his hair fell out. His left thigh swelled to twice its normal size. Both of his feet and legs also swelled grotesquely. The pain was dreadful.

One of the prisoners at the Tay Ninh camp, an Army major who had been in captivity longer than Ramsey, had died from the combined effects of beriberi, malaria, and malnutrition. Everyone in the compound had listened to his death rattle. Ramsey wanted to be encouraged as well as to sound encouraging when he wrote his mother and father at the beginning of the year. He knew as 1967 wore on that his life was like a candle in the wind.

His captors would have taken him out of this place and measurably improved his chance of survival had he been willing to say publicly and at length and repeatedly what he now truly thought about the war. His honor would not permit him to be used as a tool against his countrymen. The truth he felt could not ease his suffering. He could tell it only in secret to his parents. "We are all hoping that peace will come about soon," he wrote of himself and his fellow prisoners, "and I personally [hope] that our leaders have no illusions... that they do not entertain ambitions going beyond a minimum face-saving roll-back which will permit our withdrawal without undue loss of military prestige. Anything more is wishful thinking, and any attempt to achieve it would be to compound past folly with future folly."