

When Big Blue went to War
Dan Feltham

I can't write objectively about a book written by a friend in which my own name appears with some frequency. Please accept this biased review from a longtime Amazon reviewer.

Dan Feltham has captured an experience that was not only unique within the lives of all of us who participated with IBM in Vietnam, but certainly unique within the history of warfare. Every war is uniquely defined by the technologies it employs, and the rather slow human adaptation to those technologies. World War I, for instance, was defined by trenches, machine guns, gas and airplanes. Mechanically, the Vietnam War was defined by helicopters, computers, and awesome firepower. Politically it was defined by a foreign-policy that did not fit the beneficiary country, Vietnam and a military establishment that was out of sync with domestic social developments.

1960s computer technology was such a vast improvement over other forms of record recordkeeping that it absolutely had to be used to keep track of military supplies and personnel. It was also the best tool available for planning Air Force sorties, managing military intelligence databases, managing civil programs such as land reform, and management reporting on the progress of the war. Transpacific communications were still fairly primitive. A phone call to the United States was a rare and costly thing. Computers generally talked to each other by generating punched cards or magnetic tapes that would be carried to a transmission machine, then sent to another transmission machine to produce input to a computer on the other hand. It was cumbersome.

The upshot was that most of the computer programming in support of the Vietnam War was actually done in Vietnam. IBM supported the programmers, and quite frequently wound up doing some of the programming ourselves. I, for instance, programmed the computer support for keypunching and printing using the Vietnamese language. IBM had a total complement of something over 100 people in Vietnam maintaining computers, supporting programming, and doing the usual sales department tasks of configuring computers and taking orders.

Working in Vietnam changed the lives of this group of bachelors rather significantly. For most of us it was our first experience overseas. It gave us a vast opportunity to travel. We were quite handsomely paid; it did not take much effort to accumulate an appreciable nest egg. And, as the British said of Americans during the second war, we were "overpaid, oversexed, and over there." We had a tremendous amount to offer young Vietnamese ladies who were working for a pittance and whose men were off fighting. And they had the obvious to offer us, and they gave generously. Many of us married Vietnamese, and a substantial number remain happily so. Dan includes some touching love stories in the book.

This assignment took a special breed of manager. One could not go simply by the book – there were unusual judgment calls to be made every day, not infrequently involving the well-being and even the lives of those of us working there. Dan devotes a lot of the book to giving tribute to the extraordinary

men who lead the enterprise. I will say for myself and saying that my friendships from this era, now more than 40 years past, remain the strongest of my business life, and that one of my best friends remains the third level manager who oversaw our operation from Washington DC. These guys represent the greatest generation, or at least following immediately in their footsteps.

I'll close with a thank you to Dan for bringing closure to this project which has occupied him for a couple of decades. It had to be done now, and it was done right.