

Nam Vet, by Chuck Dean (Portland, Oregon: Multnomah, 1988 + 1990).
Reviewed by K. D. Kragen, KaveDragen Ink, <http://www.kdkragen.com>

“I was a coward,” writes Tim O’Brien. “I went to the war” (*The Things They Carried*. Tim O’Brien. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1990, p. 63).

As for me, I didn’t go. I don’t know yet if I was or wasn’t a coward. But I didn’t go. I thought of going—thought of joining the Marines when I found out my number was 82, then, two years later, when I got my draft notice. But I didn’t. I didn’t. I pretty much knew I’d stay out of Nam any way I could. Junior College for a year. Four-year hitch in the U.S. Coast Guard (anything to stay out of Nam). By the mid 80’s I began to feel it. PTSD? But that was ridiculous! I didn’t go! By the 90’s I knew it was a kind of “survivor’s guilt.” I read about survivor’s guilt in stories from the WWII death camps, and out of Hiroshima and Nagasaki (*Black Rain*, *The Hiroshima Murals*, *The Bells of Nagasaki*). I started running into other survivor’s guilt Vietnam Era Vets.

In November of 1990 I read O’Brien’s book, *The Things They Carried*: “I was a coward. I went to the war.” Tim O’Brien said it right out! There it was, in print, right there in his book! “*I was a coward. I went to the war.*” Tim O’Brien went to Nam. I didn’t. Tim O’Brien’s words really helped me. Then some twenty years after Nam I met Chuck Dean of *Point Man International*, a support program for Vietnam vets run by Vietnam vets. Chuck suggested I read his book *Nam Vet*, especially chapter seven on survivor’s guilt.

When the book arrived in the mail, I tore into it, found chapter seven and read: “Guilt from surviving when others did not is one of the heaviest loads a veteran can carry. To spend years of silent confusion, wondering why ‘he got it and I didn’t’, is common in many ‘Nam vets. But there is another guilt which can be equally devastating—a form many take lightly. Guilt from not having ‘been there’ at all” (*Nam Vet*, p. 77). For the second time in my life I heard that message. Read it! God was clearing the air for me.

Chuck’s book *Nam Vet* is not only for survivor’s guilt survivors. It’s for Nam vets, too. Actually, that’s who it’s primarily for. *Nam Vet* is not the most eloquent document, I doubt Chuck figured it was. But in the midst of all the books on Vietnam I’ve read over the years—even obscure ones, such as Vladislav Tamarov’s *Afghanistan, Soviet’s Vietnam* (San Francisco, 1993) or *Home Before Morning* by Lynda Van Devanter (New York, 1983)—both very heavy!—Chuck’s book *Nam Vet* is so straight at you, so sincere. He takes you through the Nam to the VA and the world, back to the Veterans Hospitals, the clinics, through the dreams and running and memories and “two decades and a wakeup.” He takes you there. He carries you along, right there with him.

Only at the end of the book does he lay down the *Point Man International* program. In the first eight chapters Chuck tells the stories of Nam vets, and Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, and “Living For DEROS,” “A Different Kind of War,” “‘It Don’t Mean Nothin’,” “Nightmares,” “Survival Guilt and ‘Things I’ve Done’.” Chapters nine and ten discuss the Veteran’s family, coping addictions, dead ends. Then in chapter eleven, Chuck tells his own story, Vietnam 1965-66, re-uping, the CIA, AWOL to Canada, his and his wife’s recent conversions to Christianity. Final chapter: “Making Peace with Your Past.”

Three times more Vietnam vets have committed suicide since 1975 than were killed in the entire war—that’s over 150,000! The divorce rate for Nam vets is in the 90th percentile. Too often secular counseling and VA programs have held out little hope of fully overcoming PTSD. But, writes Chuck Dean, “I know that PTSD is curable! My trauma was brought into ‘remission’ a few years ago. Now I’m giving my time, strength and resources to help brothers like you find release and final healing for this inner sickness” (p. 47).