

## Reflections on Vietnam and the West Point Class of 1966

Arriving this fall to PBS is Ken Burns' long-awaited mini-series "Vietnam." Ten years in the making, it will feature ten episodes and 18 hours of storytelling. The PBS website notes that Burns promises the film "will be accompanied by an unprecedented outreach and public engagement program, providing opportunities for communities to participate in a national conversation about what happened during the Vietnam War, what went wrong and what lessons are to be learned."

Burns' documentary follows another terrific biopic released two years ago – "The Last Days of Vietnam" directed by acclaimed documentarian Rory Kennedy. Nominated for an Academy Award in 2014, Kennedy's story depicts the final days of Vietnam through the eyes of the last Marines to depart the United States Embassy. If you've not seen it, I highly recommend you do.

In the larger literary library on the subject of Vietnam, there are many epic works. Tim O'Brien's collection of short stories "The Things They Carried" is now found on many high school reading lists. My first book about that war remains with me – "We Were Soldiers Once... And Young" – a 1992 book by Lt. Gen. Harold G. Moore (Ret.) and war journalist Joseph L. Galloway about an early battle for the Da Nang valley.

But it was Rick Atkinson's book "The Long Gray Line" which won the Pulitzer Prize and brought a granular look to the men whose lives were forever changed by Vietnam. Atkinson follows the trajectory of the West Point Class of 1966 from their indoctrination as plebes to their training, graduation and service in the Army. There were 579 in the class; most ended up in Vietnam.

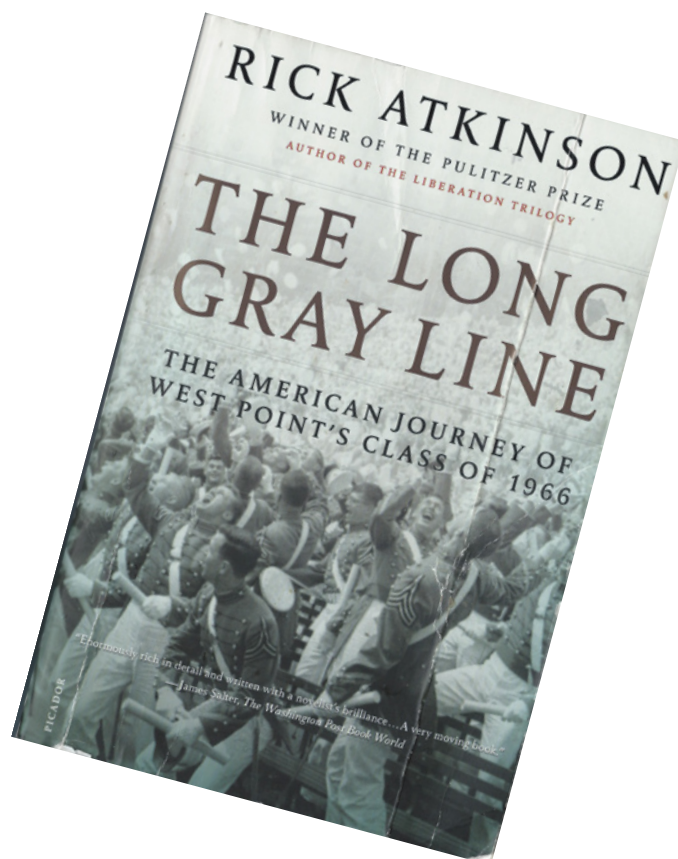
And if you, like me, were unaware of Atkinson's work, the historical significance of the class of 1966, and the sacrifices they made, all that is about to change.

So put the billing clock on hold for 15 minutes because what follows will, if nothing else, serve as a teaser for the upcoming Burns documentary.

### Atkinson's work

Atkinson's book can be considered to be in four parts. Part one describes what life was like for a plebe at the Academy. This represents about one hundred and fifty pages of his book. It would be only a modest overstatement to conclude that to be a plebe at the academy in the fall of 1961 was accepting a year of constant harassment. It would be absolutely no exaggeration to say the first year West Point experience was rigorous in the extreme. Parts two and three describe the preparation and then immersion of those young men into Southeast Asia, their struggles, their bravery, their successes and failures.

The final part describes their return and dealings with a country decidedly antagonistic to those who served our country.



In this month's article, I'm profiling three members of that iconic class of 1966 – Norm Fretwell, Bill Poole, and Buck Thompson.

Fretwell, is a Joplin, Mo., native; after his years of service, he attended Michigan Law school and has enjoyed a successful practice in Kansas City, Mo. Poole, originally from Montana, moved to Atlanta in grade school, was an all-star athlete and declined a scholarship offer from Notre Dame in order to attend West Point. Like Fretwell, after his service, he attended law school at University of Georgia and remains a prominent international attorney in the Southeast.

Thompson, born and raised in Atchison, is extensively profiled in Atkinson's book; he proudly introduced his classmates to a fictional bird we know as the Jayhawk. He was one of a thousand U.S. troops from the 4th Division and 173rd Airborne Brigade who were part of the Dak To battles. This battle climaxed in November 1967, and for our country, Thompson gave the ultimate sacrifice.

These are their stories.

### Norm Fretwell

Norm Fretwell plays a significant part in Atkinson's story telling. He and the author met many times and remain friends. Fretwell is a Kansas City attorney specializing in commercial transactions. He has practiced at Spencer Fane LLP for more

than twenty years. Following his career in the military, he attended Michigan law school, and graduated in 1973. He has been listed in Best Lawyers in America for many years, and in 2017, was named Lawyer of the Year in Kansas City for Banking and Finance by Best Lawyers.

Atkinson introduces his readers to Fretwell on page 118 in describing how the class selected its leader for their final year at the Academy, 1966:



**Norm Fretwell**

"The selection of the brigade commander, the so-called "first captain", is made every summer by the commandant of the Academy and his regimental tactical officers. They select one cadet in the rising senior class who most embodies the ideals of the long gray line. That choice was Fretwell, by a margin of one vote over a rival classmate, Sam Champi, Jr."

Atkinson describes Fretwell as "the son of a laundry truck driver from Joplin, Mo. ... [he] had the square-jawed looks and fullback's carriage considered vital in a first captain. A good student, with exceptional ratings in military aptitude, he was popular with the cadets, who admired his fundamental decency."

With his selection as brigade commander, Fretwell joined a few other names perhaps you've heard before: Douglas MacArthur, William Westmoreland, former Army Chief of Staff and NATO Commander Bernard Rogers and Pete Dawkins, who also won the 1958 Heisman trophy as a halfback.

But one story Atkinson's tome doesn't share is how Fretwell came to aspire to an institution as lofty as West Point. All that came when, as a Boy Scout, he and several other scouts from across the country were selected to present the annual report for the Boy Scouts of America to President Kennedy in the Oval Office. "In connection with this trip there was a side trip to West Point during which I met the then-Superintendent, General Westmoreland" Fretwell recently shared.

"I subsequently had lunch at the Capitol with my Congressman, Durward Hall. He asked if I was interested in attending the Academy, and I responded that I was interested but not sure. The following year I received the Elk's National Youth Leadership Award which was presented by Vice President Johnson, after which my Congressman again took me to lunch at the Capitol and again asked if I wanted to go to the Academy. By this time, I had made up my mind to try to attend the Academy and so informed my Congressman who said he would give me an appointment."

Fretwell remains a central part in Atkinson's book, and fol-

lowed him to Army Ranger school, where, as the author notes "Ranger training was the first hurdle in the Army, and it would fell nearly a third of them in under six months." Fretwell, needless to say, was not among those who failed there.

"Upon graduation from the Academy, I elected to become an Infantry Officer following in the tradition of former First Captains. After graduation I attended Airborne School to become a Paratrooper and following Airborne School spent nine weeks in Ranger School to become a Ranger. I was then assigned to the 101st Airborne Division as an Infantry Platoon Leader and stationed at Ft. Campbell Kentucky for a few months before being sent to command an Infantry Platoon in the 101st Airborne Division in Vietnam, which I did for almost a year, conducting search and destroy missions in the jungle."

Fretwell was awarded, among other distinctions, the Bronze Star for heroism in ground combat in Vietnam, and completed his military service with the Army as the senior aide de camp for the Commanding General of the American Section in Berlin, Germany.

"The characteristics developed at the Academy have empowered not only me and my classmates, but all graduates from West Point, to always do the best they can in any endeavor in which they are involved, to look forward, not backward, and to always have a never-quit attitude."

Fretwell is married to Beverly Haskins, a former public relations executive. Fretwell's daughter is a mortgage banker with Commerce Bank in Kansas City, and his stepson is an environmental scientist in Missoula, Mont.

## William Poole

Also in that class was one Bill Poole, who like Norm, spent one tour in Vietnam, and also like Fretwell, returned to law school and is now a successful attorney in Atlanta. He was the genesis for this article, as he is married to my wife's first cousin, Barbara McCusker Poole. Bill's path crossed with mine at a family reunion in Tybee Island, Ga., July 2016, and over a couple of beers this column sprang to life.

Poole was born in Cheyenne, Wyo., and later, at age seven, relocated to Atlanta, his father's home town. He was Captain of the football team, President of the Senior Class and a National Merit Scholar in high school. He declined football and academic scholarships to Notre Dame to instead attend West Point. "I was from a poor family and needed a scholarship. I had done well in academics and athletics, and I thought West Point would be a greater challenge."

Along the way he came to know Barbara McCusker who was the Homecoming Queen in high school. "Barb and I were high school sweet-



**"Hos" (L) and Bill Poole (R)**

hearts, started dating at the beginning of our junior year. We dated for about six years. We saw each other about 30 days total during college and were married on July 9, 1966, one month after graduation. My best man was my roommate at West Point, a guy named John Hoskins.”

Poole, like Fretwell, also chose the Infantry branch, attended Airborne and Ranger schools at Fort Benning, Ga., and then was a platoon leader, company commander and aide de camp to the commanding general of Berlin, Germany, for his first assignment. In January 1968, Poole received orders for Vietnam where he was assigned to the Military Assistance Command Vietnam (MACV), to serve as part of General Westmoreland's campaign to "win the hearts and minds" of the South Vietnamese people. This required, among other things, a deep dive into learning Vietnamese.

From June 1968 until July 1969, he served in the Mekong Delta, where he advised the local leaders in establishing democratic local elections. His duties also included advising the local militia and ARVN troops, often in combat.

The Mekong Delta, at the southernmost tip of Vietnam, is known for its flat flood plains and the role of swift boats patrolling its many tributaries.

Poole was 24 years old when he left his wife and young daughter behind. In Vietnam, he “spent a lot of time writing letters and sending tapes home to my wife and getting letters and tapes from her and seeing videos. I watched my daughter, who was eight months old when I left, grow up. We tried to do our job while we were there, just hoping to survive long enough to get home to our families.”

The Academy experience forged lasting friendships among the classmates. For Poole, the friend he made for life was a Cajun named John Hoskins – aka “Hos.” “Hos was very typical of the kind of person who was in our class.” Hoskins was from Sulphur, La., which, for the geographically challenged, is between Lafayette and Beaumont along Interstate 10. “Hos was an English scholar (#1 in our class in English)/poet/athlete (corps boxing champion).” When Bill Poole and Barbara married, Hoskins was Bill’s best man.

Hoskins was one of the first graduates allowed to go to Vietnam for their first tour. He was an infantry company commander in the delta. After serving in Vietnam for a year, he decided to extend his assignment for another tour. Poole explains: “Hos wrote to me and said by extending his tour, he could keep some guy like me with a wife and a kid from coming over.”

On May 6, 1968, during the second month of his second tour, he was assigned to an "Air Boat Platoon" as Company Commander of E/3-60 Infantry. Their unit was on a routine search and destroy mission down in the Mekong Delta when his unit was ambushed, and Hoskins was killed.

Poole ended his active duty service in 1970 and enrolled in Law School at the University of Georgia. “I met Secretary Dean Rusk on my first day of law school and asked him to mentor me. He did, and when I graduated, he offered me an LLM in International law and an appointment to the Law of

the Sea UN Committee. He also arranged a meeting for me with the only lawyer in Atlanta at that time with an international business practice.”

This led to a successful career in international business transactions and international tax law. For the last nine years, he has co-chaired the international practice of the AMLAW 100 firm, Nelson Mullins Riley & Scarborough, in its Atlanta office. Poole was recently the recipient of the Global Leadership Award from the World Trade Center Atlanta.

## Buck Thompson

Atkinson introduces his readers to Buck Thompson when Buck was sipping from a bottle of scotch in the West Point barracks, not exactly the conduct embraced by the Army brass. Thompson is described this way: “Fair skinned, with thinning, ash-blond hair, he had a chest that seemed built from barrel staves. He was All Kansas in football, second in the state in discus and shot put, and third in his class academically. He rejected appointments at West Point and Annapolis to play football at KU. At KU, he pledged Sigma Chi and became an instant legend. “Once—as he later told his academy classmates—Buck picked up his date at a sorority house and took her to the state penitentiary at Lansing, where he had passes to a hanging.”

Buck transferred to Benedictine College; there he joined the Army reserve and earned a second appointment to West Point. Along the way he met Fran Urstadt who was a student at nearby Ladycliff College. They were married on June 11, 1966, just after his graduation. They had a son, Richard William II, born eleven months later, May 12, 1967. The next month, in June, he arrived in Vietnam. And in the fall, Buck was a part of a major battle that historians are still studying today.

It was November, 1967, when he found himself at Dak To. This was a strategic area of central Vietnam along the border of Cambodia. It has been the subject of several books, including "Dak To: America's Sky Soldiers in South Vietnam's Central Highlands" by Edward Murphy. This was part of a strategy that General Westmoreland crafted, something called the “hill fights.”

The New York Times, in a recent story entitled “David and Goliath in Vietnam” paints the picture of what the war represented in 1967 this way: “The most gruesome occurred in late November 1967 near the outpost of Dak To in northern Kontum Province in the Central Highlands. It became known as “Hill 875,” after the military practice of naming a battleground for its height in meters.”

“The 173rd Airborne Brigade was dispatched to Dak To, along with battalions of the Fourth Infantry Division under Maj. Gen. William R. Peers, a respected officer.”

Buck was part of the 173rd.



The operations began ramping up in November, culminating on Thanksgiving Day, Nov. 24. The goal for the U.S. military was to prevent the Vietcong from escaping. If they did, they could enter Cambodia where the US military was not to pursue. As the Times notes: "Turns out that at strategic locations of Hill 875, the Vietcong had an intricate series of tunnels and fortifications, hidden below a thick layer of trees and vegetation."

Historical reports note the unforgiving landscape of the central highlands. "Vietnam Magazine" notes "the sharp ridges are covered with double and sometimes triple-canopy jungle. The draws between the ridges are dreary, tangled and places of perpetual twilight. The jungle is laced with vines and thorns, and in it live diverse snakes, a million leeches and about half the mosquitoes in the world."

The fighting was fierce, and Buck had suffered three different wounds. From the "Long Grey Line": "Wounded by small arms fire during the morning assault, he was shot a second time while sprinting between the squads of his platoon, shouting encouragement to the paratroopers. Both times he waved away the medic who tried to help him."

VFW Magazine in March 2006 did an extensive report on this battle. "There is something gut-wrenching about severely wounded men that I will never forget," recalled Earle Jackson, a 173rd medic who served on Hill 875. "It is that most become delirious and almost always cry out for their mothers."

Buck likely would have survived his injuries. But any prospect for a recovery vanished when a Marine Corps fighter bomber dropped two 500 pound bombs on the hill. But both

were misdirected and hit the U.S. troops. Forty-two Americans were killed and 45 wounded. This was the worst "friendly fire" incident from the Vietnam war. Buck died on Nov. 19, 1967.

Thompson was posthumously awarded a Purple Heart, Silver Star, and service medals.

On Nov. 28, 1967, there was a service for Buck at St. Benedict's Abbey in Atchison, Kan. More than 500 locals were in attendance. A "Buck Thompson Scholarship Fund Memorializing Vietnam Veterans" has been established at St. Benedict's College."



**Richard W. "Buck" Thompson**

## Conclusion

These days it seems hard to imagine a time like 1966, where the best and brightest were commissioned and sent halfway across the world to fight a war, the purpose and strategic underpinnings of which were tragically flawed. Those young men who answered the call returned to a deeply divided country that treated those veterans terribly.

And perhaps Burns' special, and books like Atkinson's, can serve to remind us of the unselfish devotion of a segment of our fellow Americans. And now, we can tell them what they rarely heard back then – thank you. ■



### About the Author



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