



**INDOCHINA  
IN THE YEAR OF  
THE DRAGON - 1964**



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***Dedicated to  
Roger H.C. Donlon (Colonel, USA, Ret.)***

*[The first Medal of Honor of the Vietnam War was awarded by the U.S. President in the name of the U.S. Congress to Army Special Forces (then) Captain Roger Donlon for his exceptional heroism and leadership on July 6, 1964 in the defense of Nam Dong Special Forces camp in the former Republic of Vietnam.]*



“Barack Obama epitomizes those who at a young age adopted the anti-Vietnam war mantras of the US evilly standing athwart the path of leftist myths supporting communist expansionism thinly masked as harmless peasants uprising against overlords. Although letting themselves be manipulated by hard leftists, many were trying to avoid the draft and continue their peaceful existences in the bosom of US wealth and comforts. Some became dedicated to foreign foes but most to leftist myths. They ignored that the incrementalism that dribbled our military into the Vietnam War shucked the tried-and-true military and political strategy of applying overwhelming force and allowed the enemy to match and adapt. At every opportunity they created new myths of our brutality and did all they could to blacken the reputation of US soldiers and Marines, while ignoring the gross and purposeful policies and practices of terror and slaughter practiced by the communists. Then, when at huge costs, we still succeeded by 1972 in eliminating the communist threat to the South and building largely self-reliant Asian nations that were formerly at risk, the dedicated anti-Vietnam apparatchiks led hysterics in canceling our pledges to the South of arms, air support and logistics, which led to the loss of South Vietnam in 1975.

“Defense of this mindset requires belief that Vietnam was unwinnable among Barack Obama and most of his foreign policy supporters. Adherence to this critical error has led their attachment to opposition to every forceful US foreign policy exertion since.”

***Bruce Kessler***

# CONTENTS

<b>Introduction: Indochina in the Year of the Dragon</b> .....	3
<b>Decisions in the North—The DRV's War Footing in 1964</b>	
<i>Joe De Santos, Jr.</i> .....	5
<b>Nguyen Khanh</b>	
<i>Dr. Geoffrey Shaw</i> .....	20
<b>OPLAN 34A and the Establishment of SOG</b>	
<i>Robert M Gillespie and Jason Hardy</i> .....	41
<b>USNS Card</b>	
<i>Joe De Santos, Jr</i> .....	52
<b>Provincial Reconnaissance Units</b>	
<i>COL USMC (Ret.) Andrew Finlayson</i> .....	54
<b>MAAG and MACV</b>	
<i>Joe De Santos Jr.</i> .....	61
<b>Leaping Lena</b>	
<i>LTC USA (Ret.) Raymond C. Morris</i> .....	63
<b>Nam Dong and Polei Krong</b>	
<i>James D. McLeroy</i> .....	71
<b>The Vietnam Peace Movement in 1964</b>	
<i>Dr. Roger B. Canfield</i> .....	85
<b>Tonkin Gulf Incident</b>	
<i>Dr. Roger B. Canfield with R. J. Del Vecchio</i> .....	142
<b>Tonkin Gulf Resolution – Authorization for Military Force</b>	
<i>Dr. Robert F. Turner</i> .....	167
<b>Free World Military Assistance Forces</b>	
<i>Joe De Santos, Jr.</i> .....	190
<b>The Montagnard Revolt</b>	
<i>Michael D. Benge</i> .....	192
<b>The True Significance of Nguyen Van Troi</b>	
<i>Stephen Sherman</i> .....	207
<b>U.S. Presidency and the Vietnam War in 1964</b>	
<i>Walter R. Jones</i> .....	213
<b>The Unraveling of the 1962 Geneva Accords: Laos 1962-1964</b>	
<i>Frederic C. Benson</i> .....	222
<b>Brinks Hotel Bombing</b>	
<i>Dr. Roger B. Canfield</i> .....	283
<b>Horoscopes and History</b>	
<i>Victor Chen</i> .....	285
<b>Our Wrap Up</b>	
<i>Phillip Jennings</i> .....	290
<b>References</b> .....	293

## **Introduction**

For South Vietnam, the year 1964 opened with the government in turmoil. Reeling from the November 1963 coup, the government had been purged of supporters of ousted President Ngo Dinh Diem, and the individuals who had replaced them were very often political hacks of little experience or ability. The war effort in the provinces was in freefall, as the government disarmed militias that had secured the rural hamlets.

By the end of January 1964, the situation had become so dire that South Vietnamese leaders engaged in new coup plotting. The U.S. government recognized the seriousness of the situation, and agreed to turn a blind eye. General Nguyen Khanh overthrew the government in a bloodless coup at the end of the month.

By then, however, much of the damage had become irreversible. The South Vietnamese government was unable to regain its grip on the rural population, and its army struggled to cope with a growing North Vietnamese military presence. The militant Buddhists who had brought Diem down agitated against the new government, leveling false accusations of religious persecution. Communist and Buddhist rabble rousers stirred up trouble in the cities and undermined the prestige of the government, resulting in additional coups and changes in government later in the year.

In the White House, the U.S. Presidential election of 1964 hung over all aspects of the Vietnam War. Lyndon Johnson's foremost concern was keeping Vietnam out of the news. So long as events in Vietnam did not spiral out of control, the conflict would avoid becoming a distraction that might derail his lead in the polls. He was willing to pour in huge amounts of money and substantial numbers of additional military advisers, but was reluctant to support any increase in direct U.S. military action, as the latter would be more likely to bring the American public to its senses.

During 1964, the U.S. military leadership advocated military escalation in North Vietnam as a means of discouraging and disrupting North Vietnamese meddling in South Vietnam. Their

recommendations, however, would increase the public profile of the Vietnam War, which Johnson wished to avoid. For most of the year, Johnson and his Secretary of Defense, Robert McNamara, consistently rebuffed recommendations from the Joint Chiefs of Staff for more aggressive actions against North Vietnam.

A partial exception came during the Gulf of Tonkin incidents of August 1964. A reported North Vietnamese attack on U.S. destroyers put pressure on President Johnson to undertake retaliatory action. Johnson authorized a quick bombing raid, but refused to follow up with more sustained bombing as the military wanted. He also took the opportunity to secure a Congressional resolution authorizing force, which would later be invoked as justification for sending U.S. ground forces.

Johnson hoped that the retaliatory bombing raid would convince the North Vietnamese to back off. But the limited character of the bombing led the North Vietnamese to believe that the United States was lacking in resolve. That impression was reinforced by electoral campaign statements from Lyndon Johnson that he would not send American boys to fight wars that Asian boys should be fighting.

When Johnson defeated Goldwater in the November election, the North Vietnamese concluded that the time was ripe for a full-scale invasion South Vietnam. While Hanoi had been infiltrating personnel into the South from the beginning, it had not previously deployed entire units of the North Vietnamese Army. It now chose to deploy entire regiments to the South, with the intention of winning a swift and decisive military victory. Those units would begin arriving in South Vietnam in early 1965.