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Sappers in the Wire: The Life and Death of Firebase Mary Ann

Keith William Nolan

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During the night of 27-28 March 1971, a Viet Cong sapper company infiltrated Fire Support Base Mary Ann, the forwardmost position in the 23d Division (Americal), Snipping through the defensive wire and entering the base without alerting a single guard in a single perimeter bunker, they killed thirty U.S. soldiers and wounded eighty-two in a humiliating defeat that sounded the death knell for the reputation of the once proud U.S. Army in Vietnam.

Although one of the most famous actions of the war, it has never before received a full-scale account. Keith William Nolan has drawn on recently declassified documents and interviews with more than fifty veterans of the 1st Battalion of the 46th Infantry—the unit on Firebase Mary Ann—to re-create minute-by-minute the events of that night, as well as to understand how the military situation in the waning days of the Vietnam War allowed such a disaster to occur. It was a period fraught with problems—combat refusals, drug abuse, racial strife, and fraggings—and Nolan shows how the 1-46th Infantry dealt with them. He describes in detail the personalities of the key players in the 1-46th and the battalion's previous operations around FSB Mary Ann.

The heroism of the grunts, the horror of the carnage, and the nature of guerrilla fighting are all revealed in this first full account of the firebase's story. The vivid detail and immediacy of the first-person accounts give an unprecedented view of the day-to-day tempo of operations and state of morale in the U.S. Army in the tragic final period of U.S. involvement in the Vietnam War.

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