



Last month I had the privilege of reading LTG (RET.) Bolger's latest book [*Our Year of War: Two Brothers, Vietnam, and a Nation Divided*](#) and it quickly became a page turner. The book not only tells the story of Chuck and Tom Hagel and their experiences in Vietnam, but of the country they defended, and the leaders who led the war effort. I recently caught up with him to discuss his book, military service, and the importance of writing for the Profession.

What about the Hagel brothers' story inspired you to write this book?

I grew up during the Vietnam War. I lived in the western suburbs of Chicago. As with the Hagels in small town Nebraska, people in my neighborhood served. I never met a draft dodger. My dad was a Korean War veteran, a wartime Infantry sergeant in 1950-51. The guy across the street was a Marine on Iwo Jima. The man two doors down flew on a B-17 crew over Germany; his wife came from England. His son-in law served in an artillery battalion in Vietnam. The neighbor right next door was in the Air Force security police in Southeast Asia. Most everybody was Catholic, and a lot of the children went to the local parochial school. The fathers held skilled labor jobs. And when the sons were called up, they went.

So when I first heard about the Hagel brothers, their story really resonated. They were the

two oldest of four brothers, raised Catholic in rural Nebraska. Life revolved around family, the church, the American Legion, sports, and work. Both Chuck and Tom had paying jobs from about age eight. Their father served in World War II as a B-24 tail gunner in the Pacific. Chuck and Tom grew up with the idea that if your country needed you, you did your part.

But they did way more than the minimum. In 1967, they volunteered for the draft. They both got chosen for the Infantry and thought that was fine. Then they both volunteered for Vietnam. Once there, they asked to serve together and ended up the same rifle platoon in the terrible year 1968, the height of the war. They walked point together, one out front looking for booby traps, the other navigating, on mission after mission. They were each wounded—Chuck twice, and Tom three times. Along with their Purple Hearts, both earned awards for bravery. Chuck supported the war. Tom didn't. But they fought it together, side by side. When they came home, they were different. So was their country.

I expected this book to focus only on their experiences in the Vietnam War, but throughout the chapters you cover everything from the race riots back in the States, to a prominent military commander's experiences in WWII. Why did you take this approach?

A country's Army always reflects its society. That's especially true for the American Army. The Vietnam-era military was based on a draft. So the force not only looked like America, it *was* America. Anything good—or bad—in the U.S. came into the ranks.

By 1968, satellite feeds allowed near real-time television coverage of the war into our country's living rooms. Both Chuck and Tom wrote and received letters regularly—no e-mail or Twitter, of course. But they also got to phone home once and went on a Rest & Recreation leave to Hawaii to see their family. The war came home. And home came to the war, too.

The immediacy of World War II was also a factor. Superficially, Vietnam looked kind of like the Pacific fighting of 1941-1945: hot humid jungles, a very tough Asian enemy, much the same gear. The helicopters were new, but early versions had been used in Burma in 1944-45 and in the Korean War. The U.S. commanders were almost all World War II veterans. They thought they knew the deal. They did not.

Vietnam was a much different kind of conflict. There were no front lines. The enemy didn't wear uniforms much and often mixed with the populace. And it was very hard to bring about decisive results. By statistics—bombs dropped, roads cleared, enemy killed—we were

“winning.” But the North Vietnamese wouldn’t quit. They never outfought us. But they gave us too many bloody surprises. And they sure outlasted us.

What do you hope military leaders will walk away with after reading this book?

Every war is different. And every war is the same. It’s an old saw, but there’s a lot to it. Chuck and Tom came to Vietnam as rookie privates and left as combat-experienced NCOs. They served with many good leaders and a few bad ones. The overall standard of duty and courage then—and now—is something to behold. Leadership matters a lot, especially under fire.

I was amazed at the similarities between the Vietnam War and the post-9/11 conflicts in Afghanistan, Iraq, and elsewhere. We have experienced many of the same things that frustrated Chuck and Tom Hagel. Insurgents are incredibly hard to beat—they defy decisive battles. More bullets and more bodies don’t solve much.

As Soldiers, we had better think long and hard about committing a big U.S. conventional force against irregulars. The senior officers who recommended we pursue simultaneous counter-insurgencies in both Afghanistan and Iraq did not think it through. Some of the older ones in 2001-2003 were Vietnam veterans. The rest certainly had studied the defeat in Southeast Asia. But we still plunged dead ahead into the messes of Afghanistan and Iraq. The generals should have known better, a lot better. And I know—I was one of them.

We may think our great all-volunteer force could do what the Vietnam draftee military could not. But U.S. troop quality is only part of the equation. In Vietnam, and too often in the recent war, we jump right in to solve it ourselves. That blows up in your face against guerrillas. The locals are the key. The South Vietnamese were not too good. The Afghans and Iraqis weren’t either. We rarely put a priority on helping them. Without getting our local allies in the lead—really in the lead—we’re multiplying by zero.

That’s a lesson, a very hard one. But I’m not sure we’ve learned it.

You’ve been writing (both non fiction and fiction) throughout your entire career, publishing your first book in 1988. You were also an Infantry Officer. Did you feel like both of those titles were in conflict with each other? Do you feel like you took professional risk in writing?

I write (and wrote) to learn more about the military in which I served. Research, thinking, and putting it down helped me understand the Army and war. I’m not sure I “get it” yet. But

I am pretty sure I'd be even further behind and less useful to fellow Soldiers if I hadn't written books and articles.

The U.S. Army sends officers and NCOs to schooling as part of our development. So writing fits right in there. I have written some pretty candid things about this line of work and never got in trouble.

Now of course I always submitted my stuff for security review—that's required by regulation, and not to be ignored. But I don't think I ever got any substantive changes. That check merely makes sure you didn't give away classified stuff, which I would never want to do. Fortunately, our military can accept a lot of self-criticism. I've had senior people tell me I was wrong. But I never had one tell me to stop writing.

What advice would you give to young military leaders who are thinking about writing for professional publication, but have yet to take that first step?

Start. Start now. Do you know that if you wrote a single double-spaced page a day, you'd have an article in a week, a SAMS monograph in three months, and full book manuscript in a year?

We have great branch and professional journals and blogs, both official and unofficial. Take a shot. Contribute something. Be ready, because you'll get some return fire, more if you touch a nerve. And I urge you to do just that.

You know, just after World War I, two young U.S. Army officers wrote and published articles about the potential of tank warfare. Stodgy senior types told both to quit writing such stuff. The Great War was over and "everybody" knew tanks were a passing fad. But the articles were published nonetheless. Other Soldiers read them. And when World War II came around, Dwight D. Eisenhower and George S. Patton got their chance. Those two writers turned out OK. You will too.

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Our Year of War: An Interview with Lieutenant General (RET.) Daniel Bolger

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