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5.0 out of 5 stars **Marc Phillip Yablonka**, September 19, 2013

By

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This review is from: I Am Soldier of Fortune: Dancing with Devils (Hardcover)

Lt. Col. Robert K. Brown, U.S. Army, ret., and his Boulder, Colorado-based magazine Soldier of Fortune are legendary in international military circles. Now anyone who has never picked up a copy of SoF, either because it wasn't on your radars, or because the name "Soldier of Fortune" conjures up a particularly negative connotation, can rest assured that you are in for a fascinating read with I Am Soldier of Fortune Dancing with Devils, Lt. Col. Brown's autobiography co-written with attorney and friend Vann Spencer (Casemate Publishing).

"Dancing with devils" is just about as accurate a term as one can use in describing the life of Bob Brown, who has spent years on a journey seeking what one could call "mental cordite," and the smell of battle. Not because he loves it, and not because he relishes in killing the enemy or watching others kill them. But because he is simply driven to rid this world of its bad guys: communists, terrorists or what have you, at the risk of his own life. And many times the latter has almost happened.

That journey has taken him from multiple trips to Cuba in the 1950s, while a graduate student at the University of Colorado, at a time when the U.S. perceived Fidel Castro as a friend and supported his cause, and the battlefields of Vietnam, where he served as a Green Beret, to smuggling weapons onto the battlefields of faraway lands like Rhodesia, El Salvador, Kosovo and Afghanistan, all the while plying his journalistic trade to bring the truth to the fore that other, more traditional publications did not bother doing. And all for what he knew was a good cause.

In I Am Soldier of Fortune Dancing with Devils, we read that, while soldiering in Vietnam, Brown greatly respected John Paul Vann, legendary soldier turned aid-worker for USAID (the United States Agency for International Development), who left the Army after coming to the stark realization that the U.S. was fighting the war the wrong way and, much like Bob Brown, being very vocal about it. Vann was tragically killed when a helicopter he was flying in crashed in 1972.

"If John Paul Vann had been running that war, and if the [expletive deleted] McNamara, his whiz kids and the politicians, had played with themselves instead of the lives of our military, we would have won the war," Brown and Spencer write.

Readers will be "intrigued by the intriguing" throughout the book. When hunted down by FBI agents who had been tipped off that Brown and a friend were headed to Havana in the late 1950s to help Fidel Castro's rebels out with weapons in the latter's quest to wrest Cuba from dictator Fulgencio Batista, the agents tell them, "We know stuff about Castro you don't know...but in typical FBI fashion [they] refused to get specific."

Along with the plethora of tense moments when Brown and fellow SoF staff seem to be lingering on a fence between reporting and delivering weaponry to rebels and rotting in some dank, dark prison cell in the Middle East for doing so, *I Am Soldier of Fortune Dancing with Devils* is punctuated with humor.

When advised by the same FBI agents who tried to stop Brown and his colleagues from heading to Cuba that, if they go in spite of that official advice, they should contact the legal counsel at the American Embassy in Havana, who is actually a fellow FBI agent, Upon arrival, Brown's first words in the door were, "Any idea where we can get a cheap hotel?"

Cheap hotels, one learns in the book, are something Brown is always on the lookout for, no matter what corner of the world he is in.

"We landed at the international airport in Karachi [Pakistan], and 'What are we doing here?' We all said almost simultaneously. As we packed our luggage into a beat up taxi, we were inundated by swarms of hustlers with hands out and their BO up. We chugged in two separate cabs to the Midnight Hotel, where [fellow Vietnam veteran and soldier of fortune Galen] Geer had stayed earlier in the year because it was cheap. and I mean cheap! Pothole sized fissures in the raggedy ass carpet foreshadowed unknown types of insects walking through the filth in our rooms. A blind man with no taste must have done the interior decorating," Brown and Spencer write.

Whether Bob Brown is indeed a soldier of fortune, a war reporter or a soldier's soldier, might be a matter for conjecture in some circles. But in the end, *I Am Soldier of Fortune Dancing with Devils* stands up on its own fascinating merits regardless.

And besides, says, Brown's fellow Green Beret, writer Jim Morris, former Soldier of Fortune correspondent and author of military fiction and non-fiction, such as *War Story*, *Fighting Men*, *The Devil's Secret Name*, as well as the supernatural thriller *A Battle of Sorcerers*, "A mercenary is only a mercenary if his motives are mercenary. If he's there because he's an anti-communist, or because he loves the country and the people, like the Lafayette Escadrille or the Eagle Squadron, he's not a mercenary. All those terms are loose: mercenary, soldier of fortune, freedom fighter, or thug. The meanings shift depending on whether you like the people or not. But Brown can't be called a mercenary because he was never paid to soldier by anybody but the US. He was a journalist who threw the soldiering in for free."

I Am Soldier of Fortune Dancing with Devils is certainly not free, but its 398 enthralling pages, which march readers through every major battlefield in our collective recent memory, are extremely educative about the life and character of a man many may think they know but will learn eons more about from this book.

Marc Phillip Yablonka

Author

Distant War: Recollections of Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia