

FAILURE TO ATONE: THE TRUE STORY OF A JUNGLE SURGEON IN VIETNAM

Author Allen Hassan. As told to David Drum

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Web address www.daviddrumthewriter.com/books.html

Failure to Atone: The True Story of a Jungle Surgeon in Vietnam tells the tale of a doctor, lawyer and veterinarian, Allen Hassan. The book revolves around his two tours of Vietnam and is as told to David Drum. Classified under the categories of “Vietnam”, “History”, “Medical”, and “Memoir”, the book caters to a broad spectrum of readers. Hassan’s experiences are unquestionably gripping, but will the style of writing employed here captivate readers of these various genres?

This book revolves around the Vietnam War, where two humanitarian tours were made by Hassan. The first trip was a two-month stint in May 1968, and the second, in June 1969. *Failure to Atone* provides a tremendous insight into the horrors of the Vietnam War, as personally witnessed by the author. There are many anecdotes throughout the book, some humorous in nature, and others heroic, but all are described in such incredible detail that the unimaginable can truly be imagined.

The doctor’s first stint as a volunteer physician started in Hue, a city situated in central Vietnam. He then moved northward to Quang Tri, which is nearer to the highly insecure demilitarised zone, and finally to Dong Ha, an area further north just 12 km from the neutral zone. As the only doctor in Quang Tri, Hassan had to operate on hundreds of patients without proper, sterile equipment. In addition to this completely new experience, he had to operate more than 200 times in a month, something unprecedented back in the United States. Significant operations were described in more detail. Short trips to other regions, such as Da Nang and the A Chau Valley, were also made and described vividly in several chapters. During his second stint, Hassan was based in Saigon (now Ho Chi Minh City) but visited hospitals all over South Vietnam to assess hospital conditions. A third trip to Vietnam took place after the war, with Hassan revisiting the places once encountered as a doctor.

In between these rendezvous to Vietnam, the story tells of Hassan’s life in the United States, of the hardships suffered due to misunderstandings and of some discrimination due to his stand against the war. In the last narrated chapter, “The Lessons of War”, Hassan expressed his opinion on the war and described his personal struggle with the incidents spawned from the war. This chapter, containing surprisingly few anecdotes, may be seen as an opportunity for Hassan to express his views publicly, and it is certainly debatable for readers who do not share his particular viewpoints.

Spelling errors noted throughout the book, though trivial, were enough to warrant a mention. A published book should not have any spelling errors at all. Another niggle is of the several poorly-placed interruptions in the text, such as excerpts by people. I was surprised to find a statement from a war veteran in the middle of a short chapter (p. 139) which had little relevance to the chapter at all, as far as my understanding is concerned. Most of these excerpts were not wrongly placed, but in fact poorly placed. Another concern was the use of both the metric and imperial system of units, which can confuse the reader. These errors leave the reader with the impression that the effort put into writing the story was not proportionate to that of Hassan’s humanitarian efforts.

As a history book, medical book and a memoir, there can truly only be a handful of people who can appreciate this story fully. However, as someone who does not belong to this exclusive group, I did not enjoy the story fully due to the errors mentioned above, as well as the details of the surgical operations described. Even as a budding medical student, I had much difficulty when encountering whole paragraphs littered with medical jargon. I strongly suspect it that this will cause much more problems to the layperson. Although this story was told in great detail, I feel that it could be written with better conviction, even in a manner that would evoke further sympathy for the horrors and victims of the Vietnam War.

Verdict: Great story but more effort could be put into the writing. Surely USD 29.95 is a worthwhile buy for a three-in-one history book, medical book and memoir. A 4/5.

Austin FJ Peh

International Medical Foundation Course
University of St Andrews
St Andrews
Fife
Scotland
c/o 3 Ascot Rise
Singapore 289815
Email: austin.peh@gmail.com

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