

# THE GHOST INSURGENCY

A WORLD AT WAR **85** NOVEL



BRAD SMITH

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This novel is a work of fiction. All of the characters and events portrayed in this novel are either products of the authors' imagination or are used fictitiously.



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# **INTRODUCTION**

“The Ghost Insurgency” is set in Keith Tracton’s “World at War ‘85” game series from Lock ‘n Load Publishing. You don’t have to play the game to enjoy this novel but it’s definitely worth checking out if you are one of those people who enjoys having fun. The events that happen herein are a tiny microcosm of that splendid universe but they are no less important than the tank battles that raged in the Fulda Gap or the air war conducted in the skies near Hannover. This story is a little different than the straight-up war stories in the series – it pries up the dark frayed edges of the war and examines the covert battles that were fought in the shadows.

If you haven’t read any of the other books in this series so far, don’t worry. They are mostly self-contained tales that can be enjoyed without knowing any of the backstory. All you really need to know is that it is May 1985 and war has broken out between the Warsaw Pact and NATO. Of course, if you have read the other books, you’ll notice a recurring character from First Strike (that’s CIA operative David Heath if you’re dying to find out) and mention of major events such as the war’s origins and its general progress.

“The Ghost Insurgency” is a much more personal story than the others. Instead of looking at military tactics and hardware, this one is about human beings and the effect of combat and trauma on the individual.

It is also about exploring the legacy of the Vietnam war, which Americans were just starting to come to grips with around the time this novel was set. After a long period in which the war (and sadly, its participants) were ignored by society and the wider culture, the 1980s saw a gradual willingness to look back at what happened and how it affected the men who returned home. This was evident in American pop culture at the time – movies such as *Platoon* and *Full Metal Jacket* were huge hits with audiences while TV heroes like *Magnum P.I.* had a Vietnam war backstory that played a serious and prominent part in the character's outlook and development.

“The Ghost Insurgency” sits at the intersection of Vietnam and “World at War ‘85”. In almost every way imaginable, the American military of the immediate post-Vietnam War years was different than that of the mid-1980s. Rebuilt from the ashes, the latter was disciplined, well-trained, and equipped with the latest technology. It was also staffed with people who had learned the hard lessons of war and knew how to apply them. Many of the enlistees and junior officers who served in the US Army during that time were raised under the tutelage of Vietnam veterans who vowed never again to repeat the experiences that shaped their own youth. This book's main character, Joe Ricci, is one of those very men.

Thanks for reading

Sincerely,

**Brad Smith**

**April 2019**

# **ACKNOWLEDGMENTS**

“The Ghost Insurgency” owes its life to an obscure book called “Improvised Radio Jamming Techniques: Electronic Guerrilla Warfare” by Lawrence K. Myers (Paladin Press, 1989). This is a lengthy manual written for SF operators and it is a fascinating read if you can find it. The book details methods and principles of radio jamming and interception. It also cites historical uses of these techniques in recent conflicts such as Vietnam.

Joe Ricci’s mention of the NVA’s dedicated deception units used to call in American artillery fire on US troops is historically accurate. In 1969, the 25th Infantry Division conducted a raid near Saigon that located a vast underground complex dedicated solely to this task. The enemy prisoners were found to speak flawless English and were trained at breaking all manner of American codes.

The incident described at Sperenberg is based on some speculation in the book about a real-world event that may have been caused by radio deception. Myers hints that the 1988 death of President Zia of Pakistan may have been due to an operation that transmitted false radio signals to the aircraft. I have no idea if this is true or not, but it certainly took the exploits of Joe Ricci and Ned Littlejohn in an interesting direction.

This book could not have happened without the support of my family. My wife and son both gave me the strength to pursue the path of the writer and forego the certainty of a steady paycheck. As luck would have it, I ended up having something to say after all. Thanks to the readers who have supported the books so far and enjoy them despite (or even because) of their flaws. Each novel gets me a little closer to “getting it right” but I admittedly still have a long way to go.



Last but not least, I owe a debt of gratitude to David Heath, Preston Rosales, Marc von Martial, Blackwell Hird, and the many others at Lock 'n Load Publishing who stood behind my work and had the confidence to ask for more. If you keep asking for it, I'll certainly continue writing.

# **THE GHOST INSURGENCY**

**BRAD SMITH**



# **PURSUIT**

**Northern Laos  
July 10, 1970**

Captain Joe Ricci shielded his eyes against the glare of the mid-morning sun and scanned the thick hilly forests to the east. The broad leaves and branches of the tall cypress trees were stirred only by the soft ripples of a hot breeze. With no visible sign of his pursuers, he turned again to the business of trudging up the unforgiving slope that led back home.

Each ragged step sent stabs of agony shuddering along his calves. Like a drunk leaving a bar, he weaved on unsteady legs over the smooth rocky face on his way to the summit. A look up ahead revealed the Hmong fighters with him were just as tired. Running up and down the rugged terrain all night had brought all of them to the breaking point. Now they gasped and grunted as they paced upward like automatons focused only on ceaseless forward motion.

Ricci's vision blurred for a moment as he tried not to think about how much longer this uphill torture would continue. Twenty strides? Thirty? It didn't matter. One careful step at a time, he would make it back to the little village where he and his men lived and trained.

Up ahead, someone stumbled to the ground and did not move.

Ricci scrambled up the bald rocky surface to where one of the Hmong fighters lay. The man threw up an arm as if he were drowning. Ricci grabbed it and let the man's reedy fingers dig into his wrist. Half-lidded eyes veered toward the summit and then stared back at him like an accusation. Ricci threw all his energy into a faint smile.

"Let's go," he creaked.

The Hmong fighter picked up a foot and aimed his body towards the summit. Ricci came staggering up behind him, fending off collapse the entire way.

When all twelve men crested the hill, there was no celebration. They simply fell in a heap on the hard earth. Some guys retched. Ricci did too.

Scott Baker crawled over and yanked on Ricci's sleeve. Six foot three inches and thick as a firefighter, the lieutenant was Ricci's second-in-command. He wasn't the captain's first choice to be out here in the field. There were four others in the A-Team detachment with better instincts for bush fighting. Those men were all back at base camp, training another group of Hmong to fight back against the communists who threatened their autonomy.

"Let's rest," said Baker.

Ricci looked around the bare circle of land that capped the hill. If the enemy charged up here, there would be no cover. Even a single well-placed mortar round could take half of them out. Staying here for any length of time was a dangerous gamble.

"Now?!" asked Ricci. "Here?!"

"I don't see any NVA behind us."

"Doesn't mean they aren't out there."

"We gotta stop. I know we're almost home but...we can't keep this up anymore."

The man had a point.

Three nights of sleep had been denied to them as the North Vietnamese Army hounded them, intent on revenge for the week-long series of ambushes that Ricci and the Hmong fighters had set upon the Ho Chi Minh Trail. Once in a while, the enemy would take potshots in the darkness, hoping the Hmong would fire back and reveal their position.

No one had taken the bait and Ricci was proud of them. Now finally, it seemed the Vietnamese had either gone back home or at least had taken a break from the chase. Ricci weighed his options. The going would be easier downhill. Any textbook would have told him to take heart in that alone and get the men moving. On the other hand, the heavy numbness in his limbs were enough to convince him to take a small rest.

“Sixty seconds,” blurted out Ricci. “You just spent ten of them begging.”

Baker grimaced and shook his head. “Remind me to frag you when we get back to Ban Ngoc.”

When time was up, they got moving again. Each man groaned as they got to their feet and resumed the last leg of their journey.

Twenty minutes later, the band of fighters waded down into the valley. During the descent, the rocky terrain softened to form rice paddies dotted here and there with thick vegetation. Ricci spotted a familiar clump of trees off to the northwest and smiled.

When he directed the men towards it, Baker squeezed out a delirious little laugh.

“I thought you wanted to go home.”

“I do,” said Ricci. “But they might still be following us. We need to stop and check. Besides, I thought you wanted a rest.”

“Fine. You brought a bulldozer to clear a path in there?”

Ricci sighed. “Listen, Scooter. I’ve been thinkin’...Heath told me there’s a desk job open in Bangkok pushing paper in some air-conditioned office. Just say the word when we get back and I’ll vouch for you -.”

Baker rolled his eyes and gestured like a maitre’d at a fancy French restaurant. “Ohhh-kay! Fine. Après vous, m’sieur.”

The Hmong fighters slid their small frames through the narrow gaps between the trees. Accustomed to the rugged landscape, their bodies navigated the thorny brambles of elephant grass. Ricci and Baker took a little longer as they dug the leafy hooks out from their skin. There was a reason it was called “wait a minute” grass.

Finally, they reached a break in the undergrowth that led to a small clearing. Ricci called a halt and watched as the Hmong sat down in silence and ate the last of the salted pork and rice.

Baker flopped to the ground and waved a hand around.

“You been here before?” he asked.

Ricci shrugged. “Yep. Ned found it. Showed it to me a few months ago when we were setting up counter-ambushes against the Pathet Lao. Good concealment.”

Of the six-man Special Forces detachment that lived with and trained the Hmong fighters, Sergeant Ned Littlejohn was the scout of the group. The Indian was wiry like a TV antenna, and never uttered more words than needed to be said.

Deep into his second tour, Ned was a natural fighter who could sniff out a trail in the jungle and direct the team’s efforts while keeping them safe from ambush. Over the long months they had served together, Ricci had formed a bond with the guy despite - or maybe because of - their disparate personalities.

Baker’s eyes closed and a buzzing snore tore out of his mouth. The fatigue seeped back into Ricci’s muscles, and the urge to doze nearly overwhelmed the Special Forces captain. He stood up and slapped his cheeks, conjuring to mind the laundry list of things that needed to be done.

At the top of it was a quick inspection to see what supplies were left. Ricci wasn’t even sure if they had enough food and water to wander around the bush for another day. If they got into a firefight - well, he was down to two magazines and a grenade. The others couldn’t have been doing much better.

In the center of the clearing were a dozen burlap bags laid out neatly on the moss-covered ground. He pulled out what was left of the ammunition and claymore mines and distributed them into twelve even piles. When the group had set out from Ban Ngoc a week ago, each fighter carried a thousand rounds and three claymores apiece. A quick count of the remainder amounted to around a hundred rounds for each man and two mines total.

Ricci pointed at the ground and looked over at Kai, the old man of the group.

“Not much left.”

“Careful,” said the old man.

“Right. Let’s be careful with what we have here.”

By god, the ammo was critically low! Ricci chastised himself for pushing things too far this time. His mode of operations was simple enough - he took a page right out of the Viet Cong playbook and conducted a guerrilla war against the communists in their own backyard.

Each time he went out in the field, he kept stringing along ambushes for the enemy to fall into. But this time, they had laid one trap too many and now their supplies were nearly gone. Ricci sighed and shook his head.

"We killed many," said Kai. "Many." The old man gave a toothless smile and patted Ricci's shoulder.

"Tell your men they did a good job."

"Yes. Good job."

It was true enough.

The leaves near the edge of the camp rustled and Ricci's hand shot out towards his M16 rifle. Before he could shoulder the weapon, the figure stepped into the light. It was Chee. The kid had followed them all the way from Ban Ngoc without an invitation or even asking for Ricci's okay.

Despite his youth and inexperience, the other fighters had accepted him immediately. Ricci had ordered him to stay out of the way and learn the basics of setting up ambushes, fire discipline, and weapon maintenance. Chee had done it all without complaint. After exchanging a few quiet words with Kai, the old man gestured to the kid.

"He says someone there. The hill."

"Hill?"

"Maybe NVA."

Ricci wracked his brains for the possibilities. He had just enough ammunition for a hasty ambush. If they hit the NVA with enough force, the survivors would have no choice but to break off and run for home. That would mean clear sailing all the way to back Ban Ngoc. Or they could keep running and hope to shake their pursuers. It would all depend on how many bad guys were out there. He needed more information before he could decide either way.

He pushed down the little stab of panic and turned to Kai.



“Lunch is over. Get everyone’s butts into gear and get ready to go.”

Kai clicked his tongue twice. The men scrambled for their weapons and sought cover amidst the rocks and tree stumps. Ricci gestured for Chee to lead him to his vantage point. The kid nodded and stepped through the break in the treeline. As they crawled through the tall untamed grass, Ricci mulled through his options.

If someone was indeed out there, they couldn’t risk going back to Ban Ngoc today. If the NVA found the base of operations, they might send in men and tanks to destroy them all. On the other hand, it was possible that Chee was seeing things.

More than once, fatigue had played tricks with his own mind out here. It was so easy to mistake a bush for a sniper lying in wait. With exhaustion clouding the brain, a tree turned into an enemy soldier with a gun raised and ready to fire. What sounded like men talking in whispers usually turned out to be bird chatter.

Ricci scanned the hills and soaked in the view. The crown of mist near the summits had lifted like a curtain to reveal an unblemished blanket of natural beauty. The jungle’s leafy extensions swayed along with the wind’s gentle tides. There were no campfires. No calls or whistles blasted out between search teams. Best of all, no one shot at him. The tell-tale signs of human activity were absent.

Ricci turned to Chee and shrugged.

“Where?”

The kid jabbed a finger and made a sound that held no meaning. What was he trying to say? With the only semi-fluent English speaker of the bunch separated by two hundred meters of thick jungle, Ricci dismissed the idea of going back to fetch Kai.

“Slow down,” he said. He waved his palm at the ground, hoping Chee would get the message and find the word he needed.

It never came. Chee peered through the foliage again and squinted. Ricci followed his gaze with a pair of binoculars. He was pointing at a clump of boulders near the top of the highest hill in the vicinity. The stony escarpment that swept down from it held a hundred crevices to hide in. If someone was up there, they had chosen some prime real estate for concealment. The jagged nature of the terrain could also have led an overactive mind to believe they saw something that simply wasn’t there.

They spent ten minutes observing the hill and looking for any sign of movement. Nothing budged. Ricci's doubts were confirmed when he looked at Chee, who offered only a smiling shrug in reply. He was tempted to just pack up and go. They were all on their last legs and needed to get home.

Several of the men had wounds that needed to be looked at and cleaned up. There was no time to run around in the bush, chasing after ghosts. Still, there was always the chance he was wrong. It was worth at least a token effort to investigate.

When he returned to the clearing, Ricci jabbed a finger at Baker, Kai, and two others. Together with Chee, they staggered up the hillside to look for any signs of life. Poking around the rocks with their rifles at the ready, they encountered nothing but gnarled scrub and blankets of moss.

"We don't have time for this," said Baker.

Ricci pointed over at Chee. "He said he saw someone. We need to check it out."

"And you listened to a fifteen-year old greenie," said Baker. "Joe, I got a bridge back home I wanna sell you. Real cheap too."

Baker was right. They were wasting time up here. Each time Chee was asked to point out the precise location of the NVA, he changed his answer. After trudging around for a half hour and finding nothing amiss, Ricci gave up and headed back to the makeshift camp down in the valley.

"All right," he announced. "That settles it. We're going straight home."

Twenty minutes later, they were back in Ban Ngoc. The wives ran up to greet their exhausted husbands. Ricci settled down for a smoke with Ned Littlejohn while Baker sacked out in one of the mud huts that dotted the little village. Before Ricci could put away his lighter, Big Al wandered over and plopped his massive frame on a nearby stump.

"Heath wants to talk to you," he said. "He's on the radio. Needs you out there again real soon."

Ricci nodded and put the cigarette back to his lips. The CIA area officer was full of ideas about how to stick it to the NVA, which kept men like Ricci and the others very busy.

Since Laos was officially out of bounds for the United States military, it was Heath's show to run how he pleased. The Special Forces operated under the guise of advisers to civilians, which put them in a gray area between military and civilian operations.

The details were messy and Ricci didn't really understand them all - but it was all about politics; plausible deniability and avoiding the reach of an oversight committee. In truth, Laos was just part of the widening war in Southeast Asia that went on year after year with little to show for it all. Two years ago, Ricci had believed in what he was doing. Now, he wasn't so sure. Looking around, he couldn't see how the lives of anyone in this tiny village had improved since his arrival.

He looked over at Ned as the Marlboro burned down to the filter. Suddenly, the image of Brando cruising around on his motorcycle held a distinct and uncanny appeal. There was a better life waiting for him out there somewhere. It certainly wasn't here. Maybe it was as easy as just walking away.

"What do you figure, Ned? How about we just blow this joint instead?"

Littlejohn said nothing. His gaze was fixed on the tree line three hundred meters south. When he finally turned to Joe, his face was drawn and pale. A crease of worry took form over his narrow eyebrows.

"Joe," he said. "Someone's out there."