

Long Road To A Novel

In the novel, there is a passage where the protagonist decides – against several objections to do so – to go on "The Road" to get a story. In much the same vein, I ventured down the road to get a story, but with high hopes and dreams of more. However, it wasn't simply a matter of sit at a typewriter and "pound out" a manuscript. I had to research the history, extensively review all the material gathered, discover and understand the Historical impact on the story and only then could I "pound out" a manuscript of any significance.

Technically, my road began back in November of '76 when my then wife and I separated and my financial situation forced me to move in with my parents. End of March '77 our divorce was finalized and I retrieved the last of my personal items from the house we shared, including my Vietnam mementos.

With a handful of letters my mom saved and several letters written as "your man on the scene" sent to where I worked (and returned), I formulated the idea of creating a Vietnam Memoir. In addition, the office where I worked had access to a vast library network. I inquired if they could gather information on Vietnam I thought might be helpful with the memoir. I accumulated pages and pages covering the daily reporting in Indochina, to include Vietnam, Cambodia & Laos, from 1945 to 1975 that ultimately filled a storage box. No spin or opinion, simply the reporting of what happened on any given day. Quite a treasure trove of information. Far beyond writing a memoir, I absolutely believed I could put together a novel from all the material in the box.

In the course of time, the storage box of pages moved with me from Chicago to California, over several subsequent local moves, and finally to Arizona some thirty years later. January 2016, a year after the move to Arizona, the box once again came into focus. Inside sat a folder with a rudimentary attempt at a novel. The folder contained several typewritten pages, hand-written notes, outlines, details and concepts all in an early developmental stage. A rather ambitious attempt to construct a draft. Regrettably, none of those early pages were dated, but I am fairly certain they were from the early eighties. I moved to California, lived alone in a studio apartment and used my new *Brother* self-correcting portable electric typewriter for writing – worked on a novel back then as well. Not sure why I stopped, but in all likelihood, life got in the way, job, kids - weekend father - you know the drill.

Setting the folder aside, I took a closer look at those pages in the box. 1945-1963 were loose, a bit faded, slightly deteriorated and jammed in the box. 1964 & 1965 were binder-clipped by year, while 1966 through 1975 were velo-bound by year. I elected to take on the task of typing the essential articles required off those

loose pages from the earlier years into the computer as a way to consolidate and preserve the information I would be able to more easily reference.

The by-product of this process left me learning, researching, discovering and gaining a better understanding of what happened during that historical time far beyond a general overview. Reading, deciphering and typing each article gave me a fresh and exhaustive look at what I had.

I learned the post-war history of Vietnam interestingly broke down into three nine year segments: 1946-1954 French War Years; 1955-1963 The American creation of South Vietnam and take over; 1964-1972 The American War. One could imagine 1945 stood as the Prologue and 1973-1975 finished as the Epilogue. The historical time line also included the terms of six Presidents: Truman, Eisenhower, Kennedy, Johnson and Nixon, with a final touch by Ford.

During the Truman administration, American Aid virtually supported the French occupation in Indochina. In one of the many books I read, I saw a line to the effect of: "*By August of 1948 aid was pouring into Indochina at the rate of one-million [American] dollars a day.*" A day! What was most chilling about that statement: August 1948 was a year or so before I was born. Twenty-one years later: now 20, an infantry soldier fighting in the jungles of Vietnam!

That paragraph alone certainly an incentive to write the book.

Upon completion of recovering the essential articles from those loose pages, two volumes were created: 1945 to 1963, and a distinct companion volume: Truman, Eisenhower & Kennedy and Vietnam, both soft leather bound for easier access and reference. Since '64 & '65 were only binder-clipped pages those articles were captured as well and a final volume created: 1964-1965, a significant period of time component.

My research guided me through the two decades culminating in the American War, began in 1964 when [President] Johnson created the Tolkin Gulf incident, and late 1965 saw the first direct combat between North Vietnamese Soldiers and American forces. Without question, Vietnam will always be Johnson's war. I initially thought the period 1946-1965 would be a consequential twenty year period on which to base the novel. An entertaining saga focused on the origins of "how we got there," before The American War took shape.

Hesitating a moment to consider '64 & '65 would put me into Johnson's American War segment, when conveniently, 1945-1963 fit in one volume and finished with Kennedy. A rather functional cutoff I believed gave me an achievable direction to consider and ultimately decided to focus my efforts on those two segments of history as the backbone of this work.

Furthermore, I always believed I should begin the novel at the end of WWII, the quiet before the storm end to 1945. However, I did find it quite informative to explore the transition of Vietnam from the Japanese occupation during the war, including the French overthrow in March 1945 by the Japanese – fearing an American invasion by Admiral "Bull" Halsey – in effect, removing the French control from Vietnam.

As an aside, I was quite surprised to uncover the Roosevelt memo. [President Franklin] Roosevelt crafted a memo to Secretary-of-State, Cordell Hull on January 24, 1944, expressing his thoughts that Indochina should not go back to French Colonial Rule. I have excerpted that particular passage for reference:

"I saw [Lord] Halifax last week and told him quite frankly that it was perfectly true I had, for over a year, expressed the opinion that Indo-China should not go back to France... France has had the country -- thirty million inhabitants for nearly one hundred years, and the people are worse off than they were at the beginning.

One can only imagine, had Roosevelt lived beyond the war what might have been the fate of Vietnam sans the French. More specially, what would have been the American involvement in Vietnam, if not for the French Occupation? More importantly, would we be having this conversation today? It certainly gives one pause and asks the age-old question: what could have been?

Post-war 1945, with China in the North, and the British in the South, both tasked with the disarmament and removal of the Japanese from the country following the Japanese surrender and jointly controlled Vietnam.

During the chaos the French slipped back in: *La colonie français revient.*

In pursuit of a more inclusive picture of the period, I chose to read several books (11) written about that time furthering my knowledge, gathering those details, full of opinion and spin beyond the simply reported materials, including several contemporary as well as these earlier books:

The Ugly American by Lederer & Burdick

Street Without Joy by Bernard B. Fall

The Last Revolution/ Vietnam 1945 - 1965 by Robert Shaplen

Vietnam/ Between Two truces by Jean Lacouture

The Vietnam War As History Edited by Errington and Mckercher

To reference [and "get a better feel for"] the usual currency available during that time through out the country, I actually purchased several French francs circa 1940:

*Cinq francs (5); Dix francs (10); Vingt francs (20);
Cinquante francs (50); Cent francs (100); Cinq Cents francs (500);
Mille francs (1,000); Cinq Mille francs (5,000) Dix Mille francs (10,000).*

With all of these pieces at my disposal, a workable direction set and a defined starting point of post-war 1945, certainly made it so much more difficult converting this mountain of history into an entertaining saga. I strongly believed an engaging tale would be the only way I could reasonably present the story, including as much history as I could weave in without overwhelming the narrative. I once read: "*the history should not be your story, but the knowledge should help you write the story.*"

A relentless search for a definitive concept, with several ideas, I continued to pour over the research and became fascinated with an event leading in another direction that certainly would have changed the course of history:

"In a report to the President [Kennedy] on October 2, 1963 declared the military campaign had made such 'great progress' that 1,000 troops could be withdrawn by the end of the year, and sufficient progress could be achieved by 1965 so that 'it should be possible to withdraw the bulk of US personnel at that time.'"

Really! What if Vietnam did not happen? No American War!

This gave me a unique opportunity than all the other books on the subject. With a plan to not only chronicle the path of "how we got there," but this time finish with a significantly different ending. It ignited the fuse. In 2017 fingers aligned on the keyboard, I just started writing. I cannot begin to tell you how fast those words poured out of me. As stated earlier, I focused on the French return to power in 1946 through the Kennedy years. However, the French War Years turned out to be quite dominant, specifically weaving all the historical and war aspects into the story. Far too much detail to gloss over.

The novel followed my protagonist, arriving in Vietnam post-war 1945. Recruited to make a delivery – and quite surprised to discover what he actually delivered – badgered into being a reporter, living through and reporting on the everyday events covering the historical period, all the while pursuing his affair with Yvonne following their fateful encounter. As I got deeper into the saga, I realized I had a torrid, forbidden love affair emerging throughout the narrative and let that aspect continue to take shape. While still keeping my focus on the main event, I went through and strengthened the romance. The original title for this tome: *Affaire Intemporelle*.

The manuscript rapidly grew to 585 pages and approximately 145,000 words. I can tell you, with all sincerity, the manuscript could have been much longer. The story kept building and would have easily been closer to 200,000 words. However, facing reality I reined myself in and wrapped up the story.

As I went through the material time and again, I had the nagging feeling the ending needed more clarity, or more specifically, a fuller wrap-up of events. I tried to come up with different scenarios and after several more attempts, I created a reciprocal ending, thereby concluding the Kennedy years of the history as well as wrapping up the romance with its own essential ending. A more complex finish to the original story I endeavored to accomplish.

Late 2017, I sent the manuscript off to my editor. Because of the size and his schedule, holidays and what have you, he got it back to me early 2018. After addressing the sea of red pen marks and a final read through, I began the daunting task of pitching an agent and queried an initial 50 agents, who I had previously selected, while waiting for the manuscript return, after studying their submission requirements and determined they would be appropriate given the subject matter. No easy task, I can assure you.

In April 2018, while undergoing an outpatient procedure, I suffered a medical event that required a brief hospital stay, complete rest and recuperation with no added stress and forced me to let the project sit for a time.

When I crawled back into the mix a couple of months or so later, I found most of those original agents had responded no, or not at all (seems to be the option most chosen, to not respond at all). Before I had a chance to put together another group of agents, I happened upon the suggested word count for a manuscript should be between 80,000 to 110,000 words or the book will be priced out of the market and understandably, rejected outright. Apparently, anything greater than the high number of words would jump the price structure and create a book too pricey on the retail side, which brought me to my dilemma.

The manuscript currently sat at 145,000 words and may explain why rejections were so immediate. Realistically, it probably would not be considered by an agent at that size, but, the daunting task of cutting 35,000 words did not seem practical. One thought, if I stopped the manuscript at the end of the French War years, it could work within the 80,000-110,000 target. However, this meant I would have to create a new ending with a hook leading to a possible sequel focusing on the original second half of the book. Or so I believed, but there would be a sequel. Not something I cared to, or wanted to do. I always envisioned this as one book. The complete story needed to fit. But, 35,000 words removed? Unfathomable. I mean, c'mon, really?

Not quite sure why, but for posterity, perhaps some piece of mind, a hint of fear, surely the thought of forever losing the original, maybe all of the above, I printed out the original manuscript on 24 lb bond paper, and had it soft leather bound before I commenced the destruction.

With a deep sigh the process began. I pulled the first half out to create a stand-alone version, made a cursory pass and created a new ending for this alternative. Unfortunately, that bright idea did not work out so well. The true ending was in the second half, plain and simple. Frustrated, I took a pass at the second half to determine what that might look like.

Intrigued, I began to tackle the first half in the hope of getting the full manuscript down to the acceptable level. I cut a word, two words, a sentence, a paragraph, a full page, half a chapter and once, an entire chapter. Upon completion, I put the two halves back together and started all over, further cutting the original novel, a word or two, a sentence here and there, this paragraph, that paragraph, chopping away constantly checking the word count as I progressed through. Then did it again, and again, and again. Finally, I had both halves back together and significantly cut down to 107,000 words. I must say, 38,000 words sure a significant chunk to subtract from the original story.

This process took about three months to accomplish with a new title: *The Hidden American* – my protagonist was born of an American mother and a British father, but raised British. Quite frankly, I had a difficult time coming up with a title for this pass right through to this version. Although not overwhelmed, I felt this fresh title would be more appropriate to the slimmed down story, give it a fresh angle, so to speak. Once again, I passed this [new] manuscript by my editor and waited for the painted red pages to return.

As soon as the manuscript came back I diligently completed all the notations from my editor and once again began to pitch agents. From October 2018 through October 2019, I pitched another researched, selected group of agents. After 192 queries for this [new] manuscript version with no success, time to step back and offer another pass at the novel.

It began by strengthening the back-story of Sinclair and Yvonne's romance with the idea to pitch this as an Historical Romance with little to no mention of the Vietnam involvement. Reworked the ending again, because the first rule of romance is a happy ending! The manuscript appeared to be a more concise version and the word count fell to just over 100,000. Once again, created a new title: *Sinclair Langdon* – my protagonist because it is his story. Indubitably, this meant I should do the process all over again, editing, gathering agent names, reviewing submission requirements, pitching agents ...

First step: send the [newer] manuscript off to my editor in early 2020.

Sometime during May of 2020, I took on the task of creating an unconditional ending that would include and factor in the '64, '65 leg of the story essential to finish the original concept of a twenty-year period. While my idea of ending with Kennedy still held, I came to believe it pertinent to include Johnson's involvement following Kennedy's assassination to show how the tide changed and the war began. Thereby, ending by showing the beginning, because Johnson did have a part in the Vietnam War in 1963 – his decision to "strengthen the American resolve in Vietnam." I had several thoughts on how to incorporate the new ending and after several rewrites, I finally worked it in. My editor took a hard look and concurred. I continued to pitch another group of researched, selected agents with this later version right through October 2020. A total of an additional 126 queries with no success.

I had now pitched the three versions: *Affaire Intemporelle*, *The Hidden American* and *Sinclair Langdon*, to just shy of 400 agents! Only one agent had the decency to respond personally with her opinion on the concept of the work:

"I don't see this - almost regardless of how good it may be - as something likely to interest commercial mainstream editors. I say this in light of working with another book dealing with Vietnam, where response has been tepid at best."

While I sincerely appreciated her honest response, the brutal reality said there may never be a chance of convincing an agent to consider this manuscript. Vietnam is too old and too tired a topic to excite anybody anymore and shall forever be relegated to the "I don't know," shrugged shoulder pile.

After spending some time for reflection and surrendering to the realization I couldn't let go, I began work on another complete rewrite, to soften the impact, highlight the romance and strengthen the overall saga. A refocusing, if you will and created a more reflective title: *Winds of Discontent*. After completing several read throughs, rewrites, tweaks and such over 2021, I passed this recalibrated version by my editor to take another look.

Further, I had a first chapter critique, first 30 pages critique and first 50 pages critique performed with lots of suggestions. Most I took, some I did not. Consolidated some chapters, 38 now instead of 46. Generally, tried to clean up the manuscript one more time, which now sat at around 95,000 words. I swear, I would be hard pressed to cut another word.

Furthermore, it had been suggested I use two beta readers, one familiar with the subject and one not, to review the story aspect amongst the history and vice-versa. My lieutenant from Vietnam graciously agreed to be the one familiar.

A lady friend, who had previously read a couple of my books offered to be the unfamiliar one and take a stab at a read through.

January 2022, I received the readers thoughts and suggestions and the editor's notations. By the middle of January, I completed all the changes, with what I believed, a finished manuscript.

Excited to have this manuscript all wrapped up, I thought it would be prudent not to contact anymore agents, instead contacted my previous publisher in the hope they might be able to take on this work. Unfortunately, they were too busy at the time and begged off. While quite disappointed, I certainly understood. Trying one last effort, I pitched this manuscript to two small press publishers. One of which I received a gracious no. The other had the infamous last words: "...only respond if interested." So. No. Three more rejections.

With apparently all my avenues closed ...

Well, let me digress for a moment. While still gutting it out on this manuscript, I forged ahead with short stories. One such short story grew into A Short Novel of 50,000 words [also known as a Novella, which usually consists of 40,000 - 60,000 words]. (In an ironic twist, here I have created a Novella of 50,000 words, a complete story, and I had painfully stripped 50,000 words from my novel to bring it into an acceptable word count manuscript.)

For this Short Novel I sought out a local consultant I had heard of at a writer's group meeting, who worked exclusively with KDP (Kindle Direct Publishing), to discuss producing the Short Novel as an ebook. She signed on to the project and became instrumental in getting the ebook live and because of several requests for one, I asked her to create a trade paperback edition – which included three short stories.

As I cradled and continued to mull over what to do next with the manuscript, I took a long hard look at the accomplishment with the Short Novel and thought: perhaps that direction might be the best and probably my only answer moving forward.

I contacted that consultant again to discuss the options I envisioned for *Winds of Discontent*, a hardcover edition and of course, an ebook version. However, because of price structures, I thought we should also create a Trade Paperback edition, for those who wanted "a book," but didn't want to fork over the price of a hardcover. We further discussed her availability and current schedule to determine a time frame. Once we worked out a schedule she began work on the production of the book late summer.

With all the book formatting completed and with a nod from my editor, I created a blurb for the jacket cover. In creating what has turned out to be, a somewhat controversial cover, we were ready to publish.

The hardcover edition released early September, 2022.

The ebook edition released late September, 2022.

The trade paperback edition released in mid-December, 2022.

After almost seven years, an extraordinary amount of research, several books read, hours spent reviewing material, numerous set-backs, several re-writes, an unbelievable attempt to secure an agent – perhaps, it is I who failed to take the hint – my passion project finally got out of the gate.

As a Vietnam Veteran, discovering and understanding the reason I am that veteran sure championed the desire to write this book. Although the journey to create this manuscript became long and often disheartening, I have always been quite passionate about writing this saga inclusive of the actual events. However, I came to realize, although an entertaining saga chronicling the history and story of "how we got there" might be of some importance, and certainly of some value, regrettably no one else did.

Never-the-less, now I can say I have reached the end of what turned out to be a longer road than I ever envisioned, or could have ever imagined, and fully understanding whatever else will be said about the way, or how I published the book, I am able to say that novel is now published – a copy sits on my desk – and available for all to read. Although, not quite the end result I hoped for, I can truly say I did try. Good. God. Did I try.