

Books of The Times

Incident on Hill 192

By CHRISTOPHER LEHMANN-HAUPT

CASUALTIES OF WAR. By Daniel Lang. 123 pages. McGraw-Hill. \$4.50. Paperback, \$1.50.

Vietnam has produced its little dramas as well as its big ones. For instance, back on Nov. 16, 1966, five American soldiers, handpicked for their competence, went out on a five-day reconnaissance patrol in the Central Highlands of South Vietnam. Their mission was fairly routine—to comb an assigned area for evidence of Vietcong activity, without engaging the enemy, if possible. But as the patrol set out, the sergeant in charge announced an extracurricular diversion. They were going to find themselves a girl, he said, and take her along “for the morale of the squad.”

The men could not believe their ears. Was the sergeant kidding? As he led them into a nearby hamlet and began searching through its “hootches,” it became quite clear that he was not. The men joined in, and before long a young girl named Phan Thai Mao was picked out and dragged off over the tearful protests of her mother and sister.

In the days following, Mao was secreted in a hut and systematically raped by the sergeant and his men. Finally, weary of her tears and distracted by enemy gunfire, they stabbed her three times with a hunting knife, shot her in the head, and left her to rot in the underbrush.

One member of the patrol dissented—he refused to touch Mao, despite the taunts and threats of his buddies, and decided to tell her story. Back in the platoon area when the patrol ended, he was advised by his commanding officer not to “buck the system.” His battalion commander repeated the message, but was sufficiently worried to transfer him to another regiment. There, he told his story to a chaplain, who informed the Criminal Investigation Division command, who in turn brought the four men to trial. They were convicted and given stiff sentences.

Mixed With Deadly Ironies

This is the story told in “Casualties of War,” which comprises an article by Daniel Lang in the *New Yorker* that appeared in the magazine last October. It is *New Yorker* reporting at its very best—a care-

ful reconstruction of the incident from interviews with the dissenter, beautifully understated, mined with small, deadly ironies.

And it brings the incident to its just conclusion, you may think. All's well that ends well. Except that Mr. Lang has had to withhold his hero's name (Sven Eriksson, he is called), because his conduct was unpopular and because the squad members, some of whom are now out of prison (through reduced sentences and appeals), may be out for revenge. And the book's publisher has seen fit to issue it on Moratorium Day, presumably because the story symbolizes those things about the Vietnam war that are now being protested.

What is one to say? Several things come to mind. One might argue that the spirit in which the book is published is precious and trouble-making—an undermining of the war effort. After all, the majority of Eriksson's compatriots supported the abductors on the grounds that they were, taken for all in all, good soldiers doing their jobs against the Communist threat.

Was He an Effective Snob?

And one might further argue that Eriksson, in his nice abstinence and general swimming against the mainstream, was simply—how to put it?—effete and snobbish. In fact, during the jolly-up, his buddies questioned his virility. And at the courts-martial, the defense tried to discredit him by making him look odd and cowardly.

Or one might remove tongue from cheek and argue that all wars are brutalizing, that their validity cannot be gauged by isolated instances. What does a sensitively written account of a horrifying incident have to do with this week's protest against politics, technology, statesmanship, imperialism, or what have you?

Measured by any calculable scale that I can think of, the connection is tenuous. All the same, many readers are going to see Mr. Lang's story as a powerful metaphor for American involvement in Vietnam. And many readers will wonder once again: If the price of defending liberty is the loss of civilization among those defending it, is the fight worth it?