

*The Bernard Fall Archives
at the John F. Kennedy Library, Boston, MA*

By the end of 1967, the United States had committed over 500,000 soldiers to the military effort in Vietnam. That same year, Philip Caputo received his discharge from the United States Marine Corps, and W.D. Ehrhart began and nearly finished the tour he would later write about in *Vietnam-Perkasie: A Combat Marine Memoir*. In February of that same year, at 4:30 in the afternoon on the 21st, a “Bouncing Betty” mine killed Gunnery Sergeant Byron Highland, a Marine combat photographer, and Bernard Fall, journalist and intellectual, on a mission to revisit the scene of Fall’s earlier book, *Street Without Joy* (Evans 22). Fall’s death on that February afternoon robbed the United States and the world of its leading civilian authority on Vietnam. The Fall Archives opened in 1996 at the John F. Kennedy Library, 29 years after his death.

Fall understood the need to study events not from the perspective of the academician concealed behind the pristine fortress of an institution, but rather from the perspective of those fighting the fight. Not only did Fall consider it a duty to walk into the battle about which he wrote, he knew just as much about war as the warriors themselves. At the age of 16, Fall engaged in guerrilla warfare as a member of the French underground (1942-44), and then he continued his service to his native France in the French Army (1944-46). During the Nuremberg Trials, Fall worked as a war crimes investigator, and in 1950 he moved on to a position as a search officer with the International Tracing Service of the United Nations.

Fall then received a Fulbright Scholarship to Syracuse University, where he earned his Master of Arts degree in

Political Science, and later he earned his Doctorate of Philosophy in International Relations. His efforts towards his dissertation led him to French Indochina at his own expense. Because Fall was a French citizen, he was permitted to accompany French Union forces in all parts of Vietnam, including Communist sectors. During his field work for his dissertation, he went deep into the opposing force's territory, including areas north of Dien Bien Phu. From these experiences, Fall gleaned a wealth of knowledge in the Communist insurgency methods. However, his interest in Vietnam did not wane following the completion of his dissertation; rather, Fall would return several times over the last twelve years of his life.

In 1957, Fall returned to Vietnam to pursue a research project involving problems with administration in Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia. This work led to a SEATO Fellowship to study Communist infiltration in Southeast Asia. His observations also led to his warning against the lurking threat of Communist inroads into the countries surrounding Vietnam, the first person to illuminate this threat; it was his first-hand observation of this event at close range that permitted him this knowledge. During subsequent years, Fall visited Cambodia, where he taught political science; Algeria and France, where he interviewed North African and French survivors of the Battle of Dien Bien Phu; and United States military forces in Vietnam, where he served in both observational and advisory capacities. According to his Curriculum Vitae, Fall served the United States in organizations including the Special Operations Research Office, the US Army Strategic Intelligence School, the Foreign Service Institute, the Military Assistance Institute, the US Army Special Warfare School, the US Marine Corps Amphibious Warfare School, the US Air Force Command and General Staff College, and the Intelligence Research Division of the US Information Agency. Fall's interaction with not only the French, Vietnamese, and American soldiers, but the Australian and North African militaries as well, revealed to him multiple aspects of warfare left unconsidered by most journalists and scholars.

Of course, the revelations Fall gained from his participation in the circumstances of armed conflict led him to a prolific career as a writer. Fall's multilingual abilities enabled him to publish in five languages, contributing to the widespread

dissemination of his work throughout the world. As a result of his extensive research and experiences, Fall singularly authored ten books on warfare and issues surrounding Vietnam. These works include: *The Viet-Minh Regime* (1954); *Le Viet-Minh* (1960); *La Republique Democratique du Viet-Nam* (1960); *Street Without Joy* (1961); *Indochine, 1946-1962: Chronique d'une Guerre Revolutionnaire* (1962); *The Two Viet-Nams* (1963); *The Viet-Nam Reader*; *Viet-Nam Witness* (1964); *Ho Chi Minh on Revolution: Selected Writings, 1920-66* (edited 1964); *Hell in a Very Small Place: The Siege of Dien Bien Phu* (1966); *Anatomy of a Crisis: The Laotian Crisis of 1960-1961*; and *Last Reflections on War* (1964). He consulted on many other scholarly books on topics ranging from Vietnam to Iraq. His Curriculum Vitae also shows that he also authored over 120 articles in American, French, German, Latin American, Swiss, and Indochinese publications.

Although the world lost Fall on that February afternoon in 1967, fortunately his work remains. The John F. Kennedy Library in Boston, Massachusetts, currently houses the Bernard Fall Archive. His wife Dorothy Fall contributed over 191 linear feet of material to the library from 1985 through 1996, and the materials were opened for research in 1996. While it is sufficiently extensive, the true brilliance of the collection is in its diversity: it contains materials relevant to any and every side of the complex, multi-faceted Vietnam War.

In the archival boxes storing Fall's papers, the researcher can find information on virtually any topic on Vietnam and related areas. The collection contains not only those works authored by the celebrated scholar, but materials from which he studied and researched as well. This collection contains over 123 periodicals, ranging from topics including the United States military, Asia, Korea, and Vietnam to Africa and Negro education, spanning the 40s, 50s, and 60s. Also included in the collection are drafts of Fall's works, biographical information, reviews that he wrote on other articles and books, maps, propaganda reports, and press releases. Of key interest is the amount of Communist propaganda from the Vietnam War, essential information to which few American scholars are exposed. Fall's collection particularly bestows upon younger researchers an idea of the political turmoil that surrounded the American public and crept into every aspect of their lives.

Had it not been for a booby trap on that street without joy on that February afternoon in 1967, today the world would find a living treasure in the 71-year-old scholar that Fall would have been. Fortunately, researchers today still have the wisdom of this Vietnam scholar available to them through the preservation of his papers in the Bernard B. Fall Collection at the John F. Kennedy Presidential Library in Boston, Massachusetts.

For more information about the Fall archives, contact Megan Desnoyers, Supervisory Archivist, or Stephen Plotkin, Archive Specialist, John F. Kennedy Library. Phone: 617. 929-4524, 617.929-4538 (fax), or email: megan.desnoyers@kennedy.nara.gov or stephen.plotkin@kennedy.nara.gov. ■

Works Cited

- Evans, Tom. "Death on the 'The Street without Joy.'" *Leatherneck* (July 1996): 22-25.
Falls, Bernard. Curriculum Vitae. Bernard Falls Collection. John F. Kennedy Library, Boston, MA.