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## LETTERS FROM VIETNAM

## SEAN HEUVEL AUTHORS BOOK ON A FRIEND WHO FOUGHT.

by [Jim Hanchett](#) | January 4, 2021*Above: Dr. Sean Heuvel (left) and Eric Svendsen (file photo)**Read time: about 2 min*

When [leadership studies](#) professor Dr. Sean Heuvel was growing up in Williamsburg, one of his neighbors, Wally Clement, was a kindly, elderly U.S. Army veteran. Heuvel, a young history buff, started chatting with Clement about his experiences in World War II and the Korean War. Clement also hinted that he had served in Vietnam but didn't talk much about that.

Years passed before Heuvel discovered that friendly neighbor wasn't just a retired Army grunt with time for a teenager and a gift for storytelling. He was Brig. Gen. Wallace L. Clement, a 1940 West Point graduate who was a highly decorated combat veteran of three wars. Clement's posts in Vietnam included assistant division commander of the Americal Division and director of training for South Vietnamese Army Forces, but, like many Americans, Clement had mixed emotions about the cause of the war and the conduct of the conflict.

Clement died in 2000 while Heuvel was in college, where he was studying political science and history. Once he began teaching at Christopher Newport and started researching topics for books on military history, Heuvel thought about his conversations with Clement, who had mentioned writing memoirs and letters about his military experiences. Heuvel asked Clement's family for access to those documents and discovered a trove of poignant, illuminating war stories told in real time.

Heuvel has compiled and edited more than 300 letters into a book, *From Chu Lai To Saigon: The Vietnam Journey of Brig. Gen. Wallace L. Clement*. His co-editor, Eric Svendsen '20, is a U.S. Army officer who was a [President's](#)

[Leadership Program](#) participant and ROTC cadet during his years at Christopher Newport.

“The book paints a fascinating picture of what happens when a leader who was groomed on the values of ‘duty, honor and country’ is immersed in a highly complicated and controversial political conflict,” Heuvel said. “General Clement was a friend and mentor of mine from my childhood, and he never talked about his experiences in Vietnam with me other than to call it ‘that strange war.’ I now have a much better understanding of why he called it that.”

The book includes recollections from veterans who served with Clement, including his helicopter pilot and his personal aide. But it is the stories of life in the war zone that stand out, such as this excerpt of a letter from Clement to his wife Martha:

*June 4, 1969*

*Dear Mart,*

*Another hot day. This morning I visited several bases – and then a Special Forces Camp at Ba To. Here a very sharp young Vietnamese Mayor (Minh) was in charge, and his assistant was a rugged old Montagnard Captain – Paratrooper, and formerly with the French. He broke out a big jug of rice wine – ceremonial wine – and we had a ceremony. We all had long shoots for straws – he said some magic words about how honored to have the General visit, death to the VC, etc. And then we all drank the wine. Pretty strong. Then he presented me with a Montagnard crossbow. He apparently is quite an old character. VC had killed his wife, and he hates them. Three sons in the Vietnamese Army. Quite a time, and I finally had to go, after leaving my card with a little note on it for him – Captain Dinh-Ênh. He and the young mayor were quite a pair. Mayor Minh, well educated, from Hue, and in complete rapport with this Montagnard veteran. I’m off again now, but I’d rather take a nap. Much love – the General*

The letters are not all so lighthearted and, together, they tell a revealing story about life as a flag officer in a war that was controversial among the combatants and on the homefront. “As someone who knew and learned from General Clement as a young man,” Heuvel writes, “it was an honor to help put his fascinating Vietnam-era letters into print. And as someone who spent an extensive amount of time reading and transcribing those letters, Eric feels the same sense of gratitude. We hope these letters can inform, inspire, and instruct future generations of historians, military personnel, and leadership practitioners in the same manner that they have impacted us.”

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