

HOTEL CONSTELLATION

Notes from America's Secret War in Laos

QnA with author David L. Haase

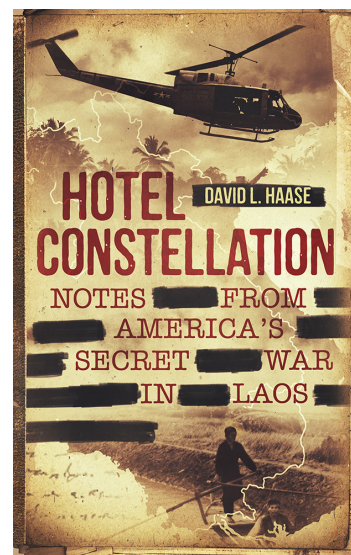
Q. What is your book about?

A. **HOTEL CONSTELLATION** is about the two years I spent in Southeast Asia after I was booted out of Viet Nam in 1970 during the war. I went to Viet Nam to study, not to fight. The Saigon regime wanted nothing to do with me, and I ended up next door in Laos.

I discovered there a secret war between the CIA and the North Vietnamese, and started writing about it as a very inexperienced freelance journalist. So this is about what I saw, what I learned, and how I grew.

Q. You call it **HOTEL CONSTELLATION**. That doesn't sound like much of a war.

A. Certainly the war did not take place there, but my learning did. The Constellation was where the non-Official Americans, like the press, hung out. While I had an apartment in Vientiane, the Constellation was my living room. I had a mail box there. It was home. The subtitle tells the rest of my story: **Notes about America's Secret War in Laos**.



Q. Is this a tell-all about the CIA?

A. No, it's more of a tell-what-I-learned about the Official Americans waging war and keeping it secret from the American people. The CIA ran the war, yes; but it was not a rogue operation. The U.S. Embassy in Laos, and certainly the ambassadors, were instrumental. The Army and Air Force played key roles. USAID, the U.S. Agency for International Development – without it, the war could not have continued. The State Department. The White House.

The CIA was the instrument of official U.S. policy in Laos, but it was far from alone. The secrecy – not just from the American people, but from Congress as well -- started at the top, with the president, and permeated the U.S. war effort. And that comes out in **HOTEL CONSTELLATION**.

Q. Why did you decide to write it now?

A. This is actually my third or fourth attempt to finish my “recollections” of my Viet Nam experience. One thing and another always seemed to keep me from it. In 2015, my wife came down with cancer — she has recovered, I am happy to report — and asked me to finish the memoir. She plays a very substantial role in the book. I couldn't turn her down and did finally force myself through it.

Originally I did not plan to publish the memoir as a book; it was intended for family and a few very close friends. Again my wife pushed me. — You can see the influence she has over me. — Then Ken Burns and Lynn Novick put out their Viet Nam documentary, and we figured it was now or never. We'll see how that works out.



Q. What is it like to look back over almost five decades at a younger self?

A. It's interesting, certainly. It's humbling. And embarrassing. Extremely embarrassing

I was a young, inexperienced, naive, arrogant little shit. (Take away the young, and I'm probably still all those things today, but no matter.) It was very difficult at first — and for a long while — to accept that that is who I was. Now, it's no big deal.

Q. HOTEL CONSTELLATION has an incredible amount of detail in it. How did you remember it all?

A. I kept notebooks. Lots and lots and lots of notebooks. Remember, I went as a student to study. I made myself take notes on everything. I kept a detailed daily journal, recording what who I met and what I thought of them, what I saw, what was going on around me..

As I perhaps belabor in the book, I collected every bit of information I could, and at my wife's insistence I have kept virtually everything since. There is a closet in the basement devoted to luggage and boxes of Laos memorabilia.

At one point in the writing process, my son asked if he could inherit my notes. I said sure. There are seven boxes full. He has since retracted his request, and I suspect they are bound for the shredder in the not too distant future.

Once I finally understood HOW to write **HOTEL CONSTELLATION**, it was just a matter of finding the material I needed, making lists of where to find things, and so on. But it all goes back to the notes I took along the way.

Q. What do you mean, you had to understand HOW to write it?

A. I guess I mean both the process of organizing the material and the form I wanted the story to take. I considered a lot of options: Just type up my daily journal and add a few footnotes. I considered writing it as a series of letters to my children.

I arrived at the current form when I realized that I was documenting a period of growth for myself that coincided with the unraveling of the secrecy surrounding the war in Laos. That became **HOTEL CONSTELLATION**.

Q. You self-published HOTEL CONSTELLATION. Why?

A. Oh, I farmed it out to a bunch of agents, including one who had expressed an interest in it at a pitch fest I attended. No one "believed" in it enough to take it on. This was all before Ken Burns' Viet Nam documentary came out. When the Burns movie came out, I thought, What the hell. Maybe you'll sell a few copies beyond the family and friends and recoup the cost. If it does, it does; if it doesn't, it doesn't. So I guess blame it on Ken Burns.

Q. Speaking of the Burns-Novick documentary, how does HOTEL CONSTELLATION relate?

A. It's entirely different. Entirely new. Burns and Novick did not touch on Laos except for the Ho Chi Minh Trail, the North Vietnamese supply line that ran through southern Laos.

There was an entire secret war taking place throughout the country, but particularly in northern Laos. They simply did not mention it, that I can recall from watching the entire series.

So anyone who reads **HOTEL CONSTELLATION** is going to learn a whole lot more about the overall Viet Nam war.

Q. What did you learn from your experiences?

A. Obviously I learned the U.S. government, not just the CIA, was conducting a very intense war throughout Laos, doing things that would rival anything going on in Viet Nam, but it didn't want the American people to know anything about it. I learned how to be a journalist, first by watching, then by doing. My livelihood depended on it. Perhaps most importantly, I realized I was a naive and arrogant little shit. I hope I earned a little humility and some maturity.

Q. Was there one person who was instrumental to your journey in HOTEL CONSTELLATION?

A. My wife, Elizabeth, first and foremost. In the book, there is a girl I keep mentioning; that was my wife. So she's lived the experience from Day One, and pushed to me write **HOTEL CONSTELLATION**.

But there were so many aspects to the trip —and my subsequent growth — that even singling out my wife is difficult. The professor who inspired me to even think of going to Viet Nam in the first place. The year abroad advisor who helped me every step of the way. The friend who loaned me money to pay for the trip. The four men who took me under their wing in Vientiane, Laos. The people I met. All contributed, and I named as many as I could in the dedication, acknowledgement and the text of **HOTEL CONSTELLATION**.

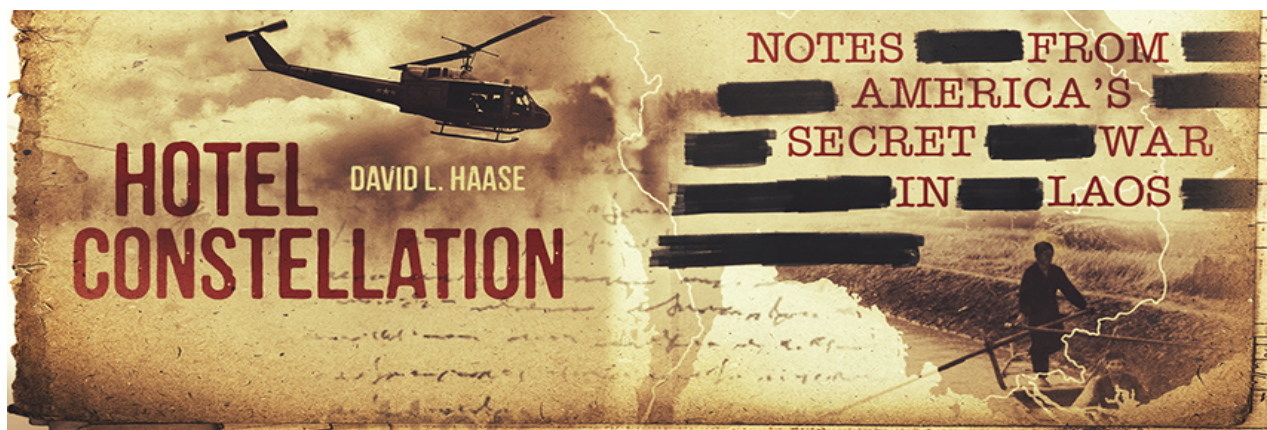
Q. What was the best thing that happened to you during that time?

A. I returned home alive, unlike 58,000 young Americans who went to Viet Nam, including my future brother-in-law.

I also hung out with some very special people, men who were a few years older than me who took me under their collective wing and taught me a thing or two. I suspect most people never have that kind of friendship or learning opportunity.

Q. What was the worst thing that happened to you?

A. Aside from months of diarrhea and a two-year case of crotch rot-diaper rash, I saw a lot of death and human tragedy. I went on a real bender the first time someone died at my feet. Not the sort of thing you forget, I think. I never did.



Q. Even though you met people who became your mentors and friends, were you ever lonely?

A. Only every minute of every day. I think that shows up in every chapter of **HOTEL CONSTELLATION**, and in that, I don't think I was any different from any kid who served in the military in Viet Nam.

Q. Do you have other nonfiction projects you are working on?

A. I keep playing around with a humorous memoir of some of the colorful people and odd events in my life. The working title is "She Asked for Green Salad," which refers to the first time my wife met my parents, particularly my mother. You'll have to read it to believe it, but first I have to write it.

Q. What's next after HOTEL CONSTELLATION?

A. I was actually working on several fiction projects and some short stories when I was compelled to finally finish this memoir. Now I'm revising several science fiction and fantasy books that I've finished. We'll see where they go.

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