

*The story of David O. Chung, an Asian American Vietnam veteran whose activism connects him to FedEx, the Vietnam Women's Memorial, and the VA Secretary's Office in Washington DC.*

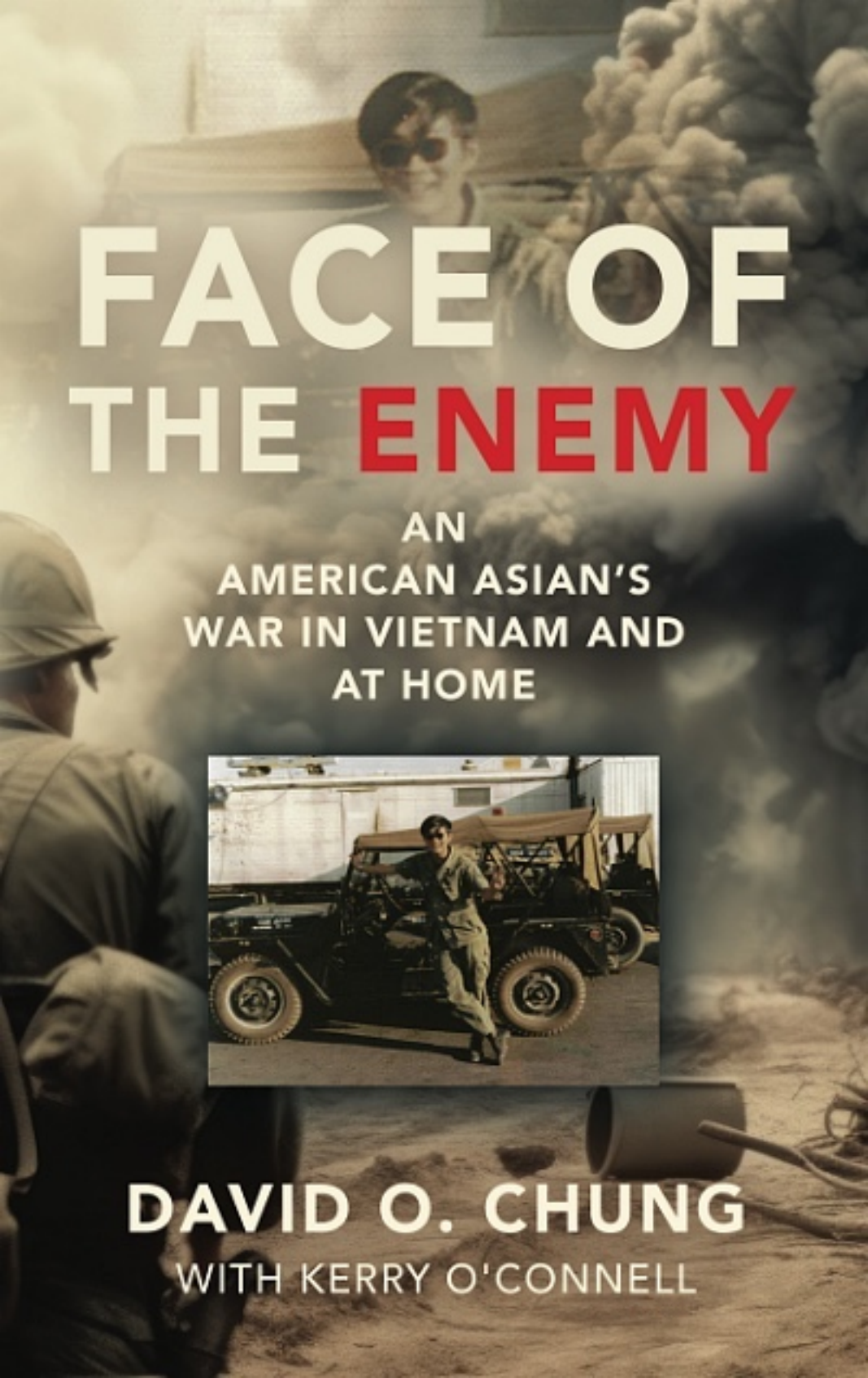
**Face of the Enemy:  
An American Asian's War in Vietnam and at Home**

By David O. Chung

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# FACE OF THE ENEMY

AN  
AMERICAN ASIAN'S  
WAR IN VIETNAM AND  
AT HOME



**DAVID O. CHUNG**  
WITH KERRY O'CONNELL

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You can reach the authors here:

Email: [DocandKerry@DavidOChung.com](mailto:DocandKerry@DavidOChung.com)

Website: <https://www.davidochung.com/>

## **Advanced Praise for *Face of the Enemy***

Face of the Enemy is honest, informative, and heart-wrenching at times. But it's also cathartic as well. It brought many personal memories for me as I know An Loc, Loc Ninh, Quan Loi, and Tay Ninh well. As a Lurp/Ranger in 1969, as a 19 year old, and at 20 with Recon teams in and around those contested areas. I'm only saying this because I tromped the ground, so this book brought back and is still bringing back some old remembrances and feelings. War does that. We may be far away from the time and place, but it's never really all that distant. The book is wonderfully written and Doc's story is one that should be on everyone's reading list.

*Kregg P.J. Jorgenson is the action/adventure author of the highly acclaimed three-book Jungle War series, CHASING ROMEO, and THE BELLY OF THE BEAST, and the soon-to-be-released novel, SWEET SORROW. He has written extensively for military and Martial Arts publications.*

The Vietnam War is a period of history often glossed over by historians, governments, and even the general public; an unpleasant and inconvenient blip in the national narrative that might rather be forgotten. Even when it is considered, the narrative is often provided by historians and commentators sitting in judgement. Rarely do we get to hear the voices of the ordinary men and women whose entire lives have been affected by their experiences in

Vietnam, and this very readable book, *Face of the Enemy*, helps to redress the balance.

The book covers the broad spectrum of David Chung's life, from his very difficult childhood marred by casual racism and his own family's culturally conservative attitude towards their second son, through his traumatic experiences serving in Vietnam during a particularly dangerous phase of the war, to his struggles to come to terms with his experiences in the decades that followed.

The book is, by equal measures, a sober reflection on how childhood experiences can affect us throughout our adult lives, a brutally honest account of the confusing and terrifying experience of active service in a war zone, and a deeply philosophical reflection on how we try to deal with the demons of our past and build a useful and constructive life. In places, the narrative is heartbreakingly tragic and bleak, and in others, inspirational and life-affirming.

Chung's coverage of his time in Vietnam rings true. As a military veteran of more modern wars, I found the descriptions of his experiences eerily familiar. The conflicting emotions, the uncertainty, the chaos and tragedy, and of course the unique, unforgettable smell of a war zone, had me nodding in agreement as I turned the pages.

Chung's account is neither accusatory nor self-pitying. Nor is it triumphalist. The narrative is tightly-written, direct, and to the point; a very honest analysis of an extraordinary life. The concept of having a sense of purpose in life runs through the book like a golden thread, and it is the discovery of that sense of purpose that allows

Chung to eventually find a form of peace in his later years. There are some particularly fine moments in the book that add humor and raise a smile, such as Chung's brief encounter with President Ronald Reagan.

The narrative is fluent, easy to read, and skips along at a nice tempo, without dwelling heavily on unnecessary detail. The result is an eminently readable book which will be of interest to a diverse audience, whether that interest is military history, social science, or plain human interest. This is a commendable account of human life, struggle, and eventual catharsis, and I recommend it unreservedly.

*Andy Johnson was born and grew up in York, England, and he joined the British Army at the age of sixteen as a Junior Leader. He served as a frontline infantry soldier for twenty-four years, seeing active service in Northern Ireland, Bosnia, Iraq, and Afghanistan. Andy served as a leadership instructor at the Royal Military Academy Sandhurst, and finished his military service as the Regimental Sergeant Major of the 1st Battalion Coldstream Guards. On leaving the military, Andy worked in the public, private, and not-for-profit sector, before moving into Higher Education. He is now a senior academic manager and writes historical, military, and fantasy fiction in his spare time.*

*The world breaks everyone, and afterward, some are strong at the broken places.*

-Ernest Hemmingway

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# Chapter 1

Growing up in the 1960s near Chicago entailed running, punching, and evading. I learned to throw punches and fight dirty during the brawls which took place at school or in my neighborhood. The beatings from my mom I couldn't avoid. Those I had to accept. All of it centered around my being Asian American.

My mom immigrated from China. My dad was mostly a mixture of Chinese, Mongolian, and other Asian ancestry he couldn't identify. He also had a little Native American tossed in. When you looked at my family, though, we looked like your run-of-the-mill generic Asian. This characteristic was convenient for the racists walking around since I could represent any Asian they happened to hate at the time. Our faces could stand in for the Japanese who attacked us at Pearl Harbor, the Koreans who were on the other side during the Korean War, or even the Chinese Communists. Take your pick.

Even my name was generic. Born Otto David Chung, everyone called me David when I was little since it was more familiar and easier to say. When I started school, I was still going by David which evolved into Otto being considered my middle name. My cousin, who was into using everyone's initials at the time, thought my name being David Otto Chung meant she could call me "DOC" instead. Somehow this nickname stuck and most people after that called me Doc.

In 1965, by the time I was in ninth grade, I had learned to keep my head on a swivel, to notice the gazes from people that could lead to a fight and sometimes lead to getting my butt kicked. One evening I was walking our dog, and noticed a group of four kids from school lurking on the corner of Racine and Montana.

By myself, my first choice was to sidestep the group and keep my head down. I tightened my grip on the leash as the feeling that I would walk away unscathed diminished with every step.

“Hey you stupid zipperhead! Guess what?” Of the four, he was the only kid I recognized though I didn’t know his name.

“What’s the problem?” I snapped. I knew what was coming next. The only question left was why was I going to get pummeled this time? Was it because I was Asian but not Japanese or Filipino? Was it because I wasn’t White, Hispanic, or Black?

The group of them all started my way. As they closed in I could see they were either White or Hispanic so that answered one question.

“My brother just got drafted,” he said. “You know what that means? He’s gotta go over there and kill dinks like you.”

Over there. I knew that meant Vietnam. Apparently now I served as the stand-in for everything Vietnamese.

“What the hell is a *dink*?” I asked.

The white kid with no name changed his expression from annoyance to rage under the glow of the streetlights. Then he rushed at me.

His shoulder smashed into my diaphragm and drove me into the ground like a linebacker. The back of my head bounced off the sidewalk and fireworks burst in my eyes.

My vision was still clearing when his fist *crunched* into my nose. The back of my head *smacked* the sidewalk again.

*Crunch*

*Smack*

I managed to get my arm up and block the next punch. It was the opening I needed to turn the tables.

I punched the no-name jerk in the teeth with a left uppercut and flipped him onto his back.

By this time, I was dimly aware of some kind of noise outside of my pounding heartbeat. My dog barked and whined, straining on the leash to get further away from our flailing fists.

I looked at the houses around us. Faces appeared in windows, curious as to what the ruckus was.

The rest of the kids started to glance around at the onlookers nervously. It's not like fights were unusual in

the neighborhood or in school, but that didn't mean you wanted anyone else to see you doing it.

Finally, one of the kids hissed, "Hey, we gotta go, man."

My attacker wiped the blood from his nose and looked around for the first time. *Lots* of eyes, and at least one old lady bursting through her front door to see what all the commotion was about.

He spat at my feet. "Goddamned gook."

They all took off, my dog barking after them. Then my furry companion sat on his haunches and looked up at me.

"Couldn't you have bit one of them or something? What kind of German Shepard are you?"

He cocked his head at me, ears flipping forward and back, and let out a small woof.

I sighed and wiped my nose. The back of my hand came back bloody. The dog and I headed home.

As the adrenaline started to wear off, I became aware of more aches and pains I hadn't noticed before. I looked down at my shirt. Streaked with blood. I tried to figure out how to tell my mother what happened. She was going to kill me. Was she going to use the baseball bat on me this time?

Born and raised in China, Mom believed in traditional Chinese values. As the second son, "traditional" meant I

was supposed to be the servant to my oldest brother, Daniel. Only I didn't play the servant very well. It seemed anything I did "shamed" the family name. And my shaming the family name meant a beating for me.

I walked up the few steps to our house and tried to enter as quietly as I could. The dog barreled in after me. I desperately tried to quiet him. And there was Dad.

"What happened to you?" he demanded.

"I got into a fight."

"Again? What am I going to do with you?"

"I didn't start it!" I said through clenched teeth.

He looked at me and sighed. "Hurry up and get yourself cleaned up before your mother sees you."

I hurried to the bathroom. The last thing I wanted was for my mother to see me. If she did, she'd spill more of my blood.

I grabbed a washcloth and started cleaning. The metallic taste was overpowering. I looked in the mirror. No sign of blood left on my face but I could still taste it. Still smell the iron in it. Still feel the sharp, coarseness of it dried in my nostrils. I glanced in the mirror one more time. Good enough. I crept to my room to get some sleep without ever seeing Mom. Dodged a bullet this time.

When I was in 11<sup>th</sup> grade in 1967, Vietnam came up again. This time it was a classmate named John, the rail-

thin, red-haired bully that everyone put up with but no one liked.

We were both at the bus stop at the corner of Sedgwick and Eugenie, in front of the Twin Anchors Bar where some days a drunk would stagger out and climb onto the CTA bus. On that particular chilly November day, there was no one tripping out of the bar. Instead it was John who strutted toward the stop, a stupid cocky look on his face. When he stopped, he was too close to me and I faced him, my guard up.

“My brother got drafted yesterday,” he spat at me. “Now he’s gotta go kill your people over there. Gook.”

The Vietnam draft again. Here we go.

He lunged toward me. I drew up my right hand, stepping back. A burning sensation made me look down at my hand. The tip of a knife blade protruded from it. It had gone right through my right palm! John still gripped the handle, still advancing. Damn my hand hurt!

I exploded toward him. Pushed him with my body and my free hand. He pitched backward which yanked the knife out of my hand. He windmilled his arms to catch his balance before he fell into the street. It was too late.

He fell backward just as the green and cream-colored Sedgwick bus squealed into the bus stop. The bus stopped with a distinct thud. John was going to be on the losing end of that thud. Ah well, better him than me. I was

over being attacked for something that had nothing to do with me.

I stood on the sidewalk cradling my bloody hand as the burley bus driver climbed down and looked right at me.

“What’s going on?” he shouted.

“He stabbed me, so I pushed him,” I shouted back.

At about the same time, I saw the blue-and-red flash just behind the bus.

*Uh oh.*

The bus driver was one thing, but cops?

John screamed and sat up just in front of the bus. One arm dangled at an odd angle and he hugged it to his body with his other arm. Everyone in the crowd was facing him.

I was bleeding, but he was screaming like a little girl. One of us looked and sounded a lot worse than the other. What were cops going to think?

I stood there while the two cops talked to bystanders. John’s howls had reduced to loud moans, with bystanders still turning their heads in his direction.

I overheard some of the conversations around me. Witnesses were telling the cops that I defended myself? That it wasn’t my fault? That was a first.

With nothing left to do, I went to get on the next bus, but one of the cops stopped me.

“You’re going to the hospital, right?” he asked.

Was he actually concerned about me? That was a first, too.

Going to the hospital hadn’t crossed my mind. I looked down at my bloody shirt where I had wrapped my hand. I looked back at the cop.

“Um, yeah,” I said. “This bus route goes past Grant Hospital, so I’ll just get off there.”

The cop nodded at me and returned his attention to the now more or less silent idiot still sitting in the street.

I arrived at Emergency and they put me in an examining room. When they took my information, I gave them my dad’s work number.

“We’ll call your father,” the nurse said, “A doctor will be in soon to see you.”

She left and I slumped on the bed. Dad was better in situations like this than Mom. What’s going to happen when she sees my hand? No way I was going to be able to hide this one.

It took a lot longer for the doctor to deal with me than I thought it would. He said he needed to check for arterial damage before he could stitch me up. When Dad arrived, the doctor told him I needed to stay overnight.

“That won’t be necessary,” Dad said. “I can take him home.”



Leaving the hospital, I saw a pregnant woman sitting in the lobby. I hoped her child would have better luck than me. *Why was I even born into this family?*

It wasn't long and we were in Dad's car, pulling out of the hospital parking lot. He was the first to speak.

"If it isn't your mother bloodying you, you do it yourself."

I started explaining the story, but he held up his hand and stopped me.

"I'll talk to your mother about this. Do *not* talk to her about it yourself."

I nodded. If I never talked to my mother again, that would be OK.

"Your mom is still at work," he added, "When we get home, you go straight to your room and do your homework."

I didn't see Mom until the next evening when she got home from work. I braced for what was going to happen next.

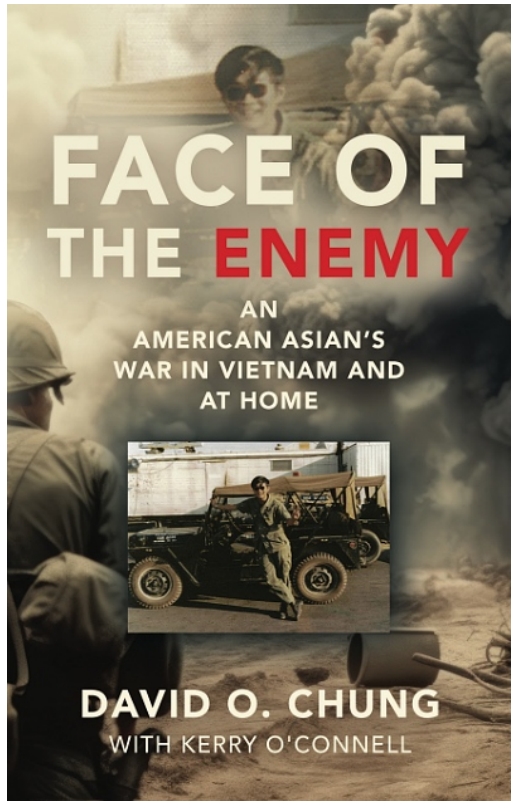
Her face contorted in anger. "Look at you!" she yelled. "How are you going to do your chores, Number Two?"

I shrugged at her. Number Two son of a traditional Chinese family. The servant. That's all I was to her. Did she even remember my name? I was supposed to serve the family, especially my older brother, Daniel. He was always angry about something anyway. I thumped on

him on a regular basis. Just because. Mom treated him like royalty. I didn't respond to her question so she continued to scream at me.

“Who is going to do the laundry? Clean the house? Do the dishes? Walk the dog? These are your chores, Number Two. It is beneath Daniel or your sister, Cathy, to do these things. You are the second son, the one who should support the family. You have shamed us. Shamed your family!”

I left her standing there, steam practically coming out of her ears. I get stabbed or beat up when I leave the house because I'm not white, or because I'm not the “right” kind of Asian, or because of a war in Southeast Asia and everybody's brother is getting drafted, or because of whatever other stupid reason somebody can think of. When I'm home I get yelled at or beat up by my own mother because I shame the family. There had to be someplace I could go where I wasn't bleeding.



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