

New Review and Interview by Larry Abbott: James Wells' Because

✘ **Vietnam: The War That Keeps on Giving . . . and Taking**

Because: A CIA Coverup and A Son's Odyssey to Find the Father He Never Knew, by James B. Wells, Milspeak Books, 2025. Hardcover and paperback.

On September 27, 1965, Jack Wells, a World War II Pacific Theatre veteran, Army captain in Vietnam ("MAAG Counter-Insurgency Expert and Battalion Weapons Advisor with the 24th Civil Guard Battalion, III Corps, Vietnam"), and senior advisor in the Public Safety Division of USAID, with two tours in Vietnam in 1962-63 and 1965, was killed in a crash of an Air America twin-engined Beech C-45 as the plane approached a small airstrip in Bao Trai. Wells was on his way to implement a pilot program to "improve security and reduce corruption in the U.S.-funded Refugee Processing Program." He was 39 years old at the time of his death, and left a wife, Betty and three children, Ora, Kathleen, and the youngest, nine-year old James.

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From the outset, there were some details about the crash that didn't add up. There were supposed to be just two pilots and Wells in the plane, but there is evidence that there were two additional, last-minute passengers. Government officials who arrived at the Wells' home in Georgia the day after the crash told the family that the plane was shot down by enemy small-arms fire. However, there is proof that the shooting originated *inside* the plane. Further, it was officially noted that seven South Vietnamese policemen were killed by Viet Cong

while trying to help the casualties escape the wreckage. Yet there is no documentation, or recollections from villagers whom Wells interviewed, that anyone was killed on the ground.

The effect of the death on the family, especially Betty, was devastating, but it might have been viewed as just another tragedy in the fog of war, except for James's discovery in 1991 of some 400 letters from Jack to Betty during his time in Vietnam.

The letters trigger the desire, which became an obsession, to find the truth about his father's death, and form the centerpiece of the narrative. The book interweaves the personal story of James Wells's search for the truth of his father's death and thereby obtain a sense of peace, the family story centered on the life and legacy of Jack Wells, and the national story of the war that seems never ending. James Wells's desire to uncover the truth leads him to research in seven archives in the U.S. and two in Vietnam and multiple interviews with Jack Wells's supervisors and colleagues in USAID, CIA operatives, Air America pilots, and Vietnamese on both sides of the conflict. While the archival research discloses "factual" material, Wells also utilizes what he calls "triangulated research" to create "evidence-based imagined scenes . . . so even when an event or conversation is imagined, it is emotionally true." However, he provides copious notes and sources for these scenes and they read seamlessly. Nothing seems false or forced in his telling.



Jack Wells (left) at Bon Don on November 26, 1962; the inscription

Reads: "Merry Christmas my Darling Wife, Because."

The letters recount such mundane events as lodgings and dinners, Wells' day-to-day activities and travels in Vietnam, and his interactions with both American officials and Vietnamese allies and villagers, and, understandably, they

express the longing to be back home with his wife and family. But the letters are also quite pointed about the corruption he witnesses in his travels. As early as June of 1962, Wells writes, "the government here is not the best in fact a dam police state, with a R.C. . . . heading it, corruption you've never seen the half."



The situation did not change by 1965. In a July letter written from Hau Nghia, about two months before his death, Wells again talks about his daily activities and hopes that when he gets to Saigon he can have a better place to live. He also gently chastises his son James: "Now it is your turn James are you keeping the trash emptied and picked up around the outside. If not Why, Ha." At the same time there is the concern, and anger, about corruption. He writes, "There are as many dam crooks in this country as before I am not sure we are not training them. Ha. If not we sure a allowing them to grow and multiply. Every one but every one has his hand in some ones pocket . . . "

In another letter dated August 28, 1965, Wells wrote his wife: "Didn't accomplish a dam thing. Perhaps another day. Oh Well, try I must, mad I do get however I told an American Lt. Col and a VN Major they weren't worth a dam and they were giving the VC more service by not doing their job than if they were real VC."

By all accounts, Wells maintained a high standard of honesty and morality for himself and expected others to follow that standard. His ethical commitment was evident early in his military career. After serving in the Pacific theatre, at 21 years old he acted as a "provost sergeant in charge of a special confinement unit at the war crimes trials in Nuremberg." In letters written from Germany from 1946 to 1948 he indicates that American soldiers were selling contraband to prisoners. He turned them in. In an episode in Vietnam

recounted by James Wells, Jack suspected that an ARVN captain was illegally transporting ammo and C-rations through a checkpoint, most likely for delivery and sale to VC. An armed standoff occurred but was de-escalated; Jack decided that the lives of his policemen were more important than stopping every suspect vehicle at the checkpoint. As a result, however, his father was called in by his supervisor, John Kesler, to discuss some recent reports. The upshot was that Kesler wanted the reports to be rewritten to falsify events and eliminate criticism. Jack's response was that he would not be silenced.



James Wells' search for the truth takes him to Vietnam in 2017, over fifty years after his father's death, with the hope that he will find the site of the 1965 crash. Through a series of coincidences (which may not have been coincidences) he meets a number of Vietnamese people who remember, as children, the day in 1965. He talks with "a top-ranking communist official" at the time of the crash who "contradicted what the U.S. authorities told us. . . . I started to feel vindicated, knowing that a tiny hunch, a slight suspicion my mother had years ago, had grown exponentially into what looked more and more like a coverup and conspiracy." After some false starts he finds the location of the crash, and on March 6, 2017, James and his siblings have a resurrection service. He connects his personal story to the family story to the national, really international, story of the war: "I thought of all those lost in this war and those that preceded it, who may have suffered and died here, perhaps even near this very spot we were standing in."

The penultimate chapters take the reader further into the spiritual nature of James' search for truth and closure, and raise issues that are relevant to anyone seeking a sense of peace after the unresolved death of a loved one. His tentative realization is that "Like Odysseus and Telemachus, my father and I have been searching to find each other to complete each

other's lives.'" There are echoes here of Hamlet's search for the father cut off in the prime of life under circumstances that are purported to be true but are actually false. Hamlet's quest is to find the truth and thus put his father finally at ease.

In a recent essay, "[How Photography from the Vietnam War Changed America](#)," Damien Cave notes that "Long after wars cease, the happiest ending you can hope for is survival and the continued search for understanding. As Viet Thanh Nguyen, the Vietnamese American author, wrote: "All wars are fought twice, the first time on the battlefield, the second time in memory.'" In James Wells' decades-long odyssey seeking the truth about his father's death, and to come to some sort of understanding about both his and his father's lives, perhaps the best he can hope for is psychological survival with the understanding that there will never be a final absolute truth.

Larry Abbott talks with James Wells

LA: What was the genesis of the book?

JW: The book began when I found approximately 400 of my father's letters, 26 years after his death, back in 1991. Since I was only nine years old when he was killed, and had been gone on a year-long tour prior to that when I was five, I didn't know the man, so of course I began to study the letters to learn as any son would want to know about their father.

LA: What was the basic content of the letters?

JW: Incredibly, the letters are a timeline of mid-20th century U.S. history, since the first letters are from a 17-year-old runaway delinquent infatuated with the most intelligent girl in school prior to joining the Army in WWII, and the last letter is from a 39-year-old warrior turned humanitarian the day before he is killed in Vietnam.



17-year-old Jack Wells during basic training

At first, I thought I would just publish the letters since they were so interesting and revealing of my father's character. Granted, many of the letters are love letters, but what was most telling was that it came across that he was a very moral, righteous, and religious man, obsessed with the truth, and highly critical of those around him who did not perform their roles as they should. As a criminologist and familiar with whistleblowing, I suspected, and later confirmed, that his actions and words did meet the definition of a whistleblower.

In addition to often expressing his love of God, family, and country so eloquently, my father had a unique gift of writing to my mother as if she were sitting across the table from him as he spoke to her. Just like we engage in multiple conversations with our loved ones each day, he would continuously share his thoughts with her throughout the day, starting before breakfast, then at midday, then at night, and sometimes after waking in the middle of the night. Although they were polar opposites, I don't believe a couple more in love ever existed.

I got caught up in that, feeling like he is communicating with me. The ring I wear—the same ring that belonged to the hand that wrote those letters, and that I scraped the burnt flesh off of when I found it in his personal effects—and whose inscription inside its diameter contains the title of my book, adds to the impact his letters have on me as I read them.

In my book, I describe how, through counseling, I learned how my story parallels Homer's *Odyssey*. Like the *Odyssey*, mine doesn't begin with the exploits of our fathers; instead, it starts with Odysseus' son, Telemachus, who, like me, is languishing in pain and grieving for his father's return.

Meanwhile, on the other side of the world, or perhaps in another realm, our fathers are struggling and battling to return home to reconnect with their sons.

I want to remind you and the reading audience that, initially, my siblings and I generally believed what we were told about our father's death. However, his letters prompted me to question what really happened to him and inspired me to embark on a quest for the truth through archival and field research across two continents, and as a consequence, reveal a CIA coverup. I consider that a miracle.

This wasn't the only miracle I experienced. While in Vietnam, my siblings and I encountered countless wonders that left us in awe. I write about several of these miraculous events in the book. With respect to what drove me to write and finish the book, what initially drove me was simply wanting to get to know my father. Over time, and after counseling, I came to realize that it was about both of us getting to know each other and finding peace with what we learned and may never know. Keep in mind the CIA sent me a response this past April, eight years after my appeal of their 2017 denial, saying they will continue to withhold information due to national security, foreign policy, and personal privacy concerns. I've appealed again, but my siblings are now 75, 73, and I'm 69. We may not even be around when we hear from the CIA again. To tell you the truth, I now suspect it will remain forever classified. I think I'll eventually be okay with that, since I write in my book about what I believe really happened, and what it will take for my father and I to find peace.

LA: What was the most challenging part of writing this book?

JW: Researching and writing faced many obstacles and challenges. In addition to the countless hours and expense of the research, traveling across the U.S. and Vietnam, the most significant challenge was the toll it took on my family, especially my spouse, Brenda. Ever since finding the letters

in 1991, I've been obsessed with them. In addition to interpreting, transcribing, digitizing, and uploading them to an archivist website, I've spent years studying them to better understand my father's actions and how they may have led to his death. On top of that, I spent a few years taking private writing classes, and after that, decided to get an MFA in Creative Writing, my fifth university degree. At least once during each of those years, my wife confronted me with that obsession that has taken so much time away from her. It has taken a toll on our marriage; I write about that in the book. For obvious reasons, the book is dedicated to her.

LA: How did you come up with the title?

JW: My father closed and signed many of his letters with simply the word "because." I found out that it was a popular love and wedding song for much of the 20th century [see [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Because_\(Guy_d%27Hardelot_and_Edward_Teschmacher_song\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Because_(Guy_d%27Hardelot_and_Edward_Teschmacher_song))].

My mother told me it was their song, ever since they were a couple. That, combined with the fact that my father's wedding band contains the word "because" as part of its inscription, is another reason I discuss in the book. I devote part of a chapter to that discussion, and close it with what I think the word means to them.

In addition to *Because* being my parent's song from high school, its single word communicates something much deeper and more revealing than just love. Though difficult to explain, it is a word that attempts to answer whatever questions its recipient might have had, no matter how emotional, sensitive, complex, and difficult they might be. No explanation or reason was needed. It was simply ... "because."

LA: Why do you think the CIA has refused your FOIA requests, especially after appeals and nearly 60 years after your father's death?

JW: On one hand, I suspect that the CIA may not even know exactly what happened, and they are embarrassed about it, which is why the crash investigation report remains classified. As readers will discover, I confidently confirm that there was a coverup and a false narrative surrounding his death. In some respects, I may know more than they do. Unlike them, I had the opportunity to interview former NLF guerrillas and their leaders, who all insisted they had nothing to do with the plane's crash. They were just as puzzled as everyone else about why it happened.

In addition, there is substantial evidence indicating that corrupt officials with a history of misconduct, including murder, particularly related to the refugee processing program and its coverup, may have been involved in his death. On the day he was killed, he was actively pursuing his initiative to reduce corruption within that program. We also know that the U.S. military often tolerated corruption because those often involved were competent military commanders who could assist U.S. forces. Ask almost any veteran of the recent wars we've been involved in in the Middle East and they will tell you this is a common occurrence with our allies.

As I mention in the preface of my book, I informed the CIA of my research agenda in May 2015 and initiated a Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) request for information related to the crash investigation of the Air America C-45 in which my father died. Nearly two and a half years later, in October 2017, the CIA responded, denying my FOIA request. After appealing the decision in December 2017 and seeking support from five different congressional representatives, I have seen no progress until now.

In fact, just recently, eight years after my appeal and 60 years after my father's death, I received a final response from the CIA. They stated that information about the crash investigation of the Air America C-45 will continue to be withheld under FOIA exemptions b1, information kept secret in

the interest of national defense or foreign policy, b3, protection of information prohibited by laws other than the FOIA, and b6, withholding information that would constitute a clear unwarranted invasion of personal privacy.

Through my study of President Obama's Executive Order 13526, I learned that classified information over 50 years old should be declassified. However, "extraordinary circumstances" can justify maintaining classification beyond that time frame. My investigative memoir outlines those extraordinary circumstances for the reader.

Believe it or not, I have been anticipating this news from the CIA, which further validates my story.

One appealing aspect of the book is its whodunit nature, which allows readers to formulate their own theories about what might have happened to him and why.

LA: You are quite clear that there has been and continues to be some sort of coverup. Do you think there will be any type of retaliation for writing this book?

JW: Ha! That's the question I get asked most often. I now joke about it and respond, "Well, if I were found dead one morning with a 22-caliber bullet in the back of the head, that would really increase book sales." But no, I don't fear retaliation, especially now since the book is out. The story about me writing it has been public for over a decade, with probably thousands of social media posts by me and reposts by others. I've personally notified veterans from all sides of the war, and the U.S. Army, the State Department, the CIA, and even Congress are aware of my actions and desire to write a book. If somebody wanted to retaliate, they would have done it before the book went to press. What would it accomplish now? Nothing!



James Wells has had a prolific career. He's written or co-written over 65 books, chapters, and essays, and has authored some 150 reports for local, state, and federal agencies. His work has appeared in *Military Experience and the Arts*, *Wrath-Bearing Tree*, and *Proud to Be: Writing by American Warriors*. In addition to his writing, he was a corrections officer in a maximum-security prison and later assisted architects in prison design. He holds an M.S. degree in Criminal Justice, a Ph. D. in Research, and a creative writing M.F.A. He is a retired criminal justice professor at Eastern Kentucky University and currently lives in Lexington, Kentucky. Further information on his career and current activities can found at: jamesbwells.com.

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