Hue 1968: A Turning Point of the American War in Vietnam

Mark Bowden (Atlantic Monthly Press, 2017), 608 pp., notes, Vietnamese glossary, index.

Reviewed by Thomas G. Coffey

Hue 1968 is a book on a mission, refusing to be just another war story. Instead of simply chronicling the plight of those caught up in it, Bowden is bent on convincing the reader that the battle was not only very consequential but overseen by a foolish top leadership. And so the book is a mixed bag. As a war story, *Hue 1968* is a quite compelling and moving account of its participants—the US Marines and Army, the communist fighters, and the Hue citizens in the middle of the fight. As a larger history of the Tet offensive and Vietnam War, the book is flawed and facile.

The battle for Hue was part of the Tet offensive begun in late January 1968, in which communist units attacked 39 of South Vietnam's 44 provincial capitals, five of six autonomous cities, 71 of 242 district capitals, some 50 hamlets, virtually every allied airfield, many other military targets, and Saigon itself.[1] But whereas the enemy, failing to ignite a general uprising in support of the attacks, was forced to retreat from most places in a matter of days, the fighting in Hue lasted for 25 days. The communists saw control of the former capital and still cultural center of all Vietnam as a prime goal and devoted massive resources to achieve this end—10,000 North Vietnamese army and Viet Cong troops. The US military and its South Vietnamese counterpart (ARVN) retook the city, but at a heavy price. Two hundred and fifty US Marines and soldiers were killed, and 1,554 wounded. Another 458 ARVN soldiers were killed and an estimated 2,700 wounded. Estimates of communist losses run from 2,400 to 5,000. As for the civilians, Bowden calculates about 8,000 died, including those the communists put to death in political reprisals. More than 80 percent of the city's structures were either destroyed or seriously damaged. (495)

Bowden constructs the narrative around the three battles within a battle for Hue: one in southern Hue to retake the Triangle, using the MACV compound there as a base. Another in northern Hue for the Citadel (the iconic, old, walled city center that contained the historic seat of government) consisted of ARVN soldiers holding on at their base until the US Marines could assist them. The last part of the fight for Hue involved a US Army move down from the northwest to overtake La Chu, a key command and supply center for communist forces in Hue. Each battle had its heroic leaders: Lt. Col. Ernie Cheatham in the Triangle, Maj. Bob Thompson in the Citadel, and Col. James Vaught on the road to La Chu. For the enemy, the battle strategy was originally to take the city, prepare for the impending counterattack, and triumph with support from the general uprising of the residents. When no uprising took place, the strategy simply became one of exacting a tremendous toll on the Marine and ARVN attempts to retake Hue. The best way to do that was to stay close—"hold the enemy by the belt" (266)—so the US military could not bring its superior firepower to use without endangering its own troops.

The learning curve required to understand how to fight an enemy in close contact, as well as one entrenched in an urban setting, is one of the most compelling parts of the story. Given that the last experience the US military had had with urban warfare was the battle for Seoul during the Korean War, Cheatham looked for field manuals on the topic, finding two relevant ones, *Combat in Built-Up Areas* and *An Assault on a Fortified Position*. (239) He also chose older, more powerful weapons to blast holes, such as the 106-mm recoilless rifle and bazookas. The often maligned—but still popular with the troops—Ontos, a small armored vehicle mounted with six recoilless rifles, played a paramount role during attacks on entrenched enemy positions. (207)

Much of the power of *Hue 1968* comes from what happened to the Marines when they did not—or sometimes when they did—do what the manuals said: *Stay off the streets. Go through walls, not around or over them. Avoid going through doors and windows. Blast your way forward, through anything that stands in your way. Clear the ground floor on the way to the top. For rooms, toss in a grenade, then have one soldier fire left of center, anoth-*

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er right of center, and another aim at the ceiling, in case more enemy are upstairs. Bowden's detailing these tactics and his accounts of soldiers doing this painstaking and dangerous work is superbly rendered—it's even amusing at times, as when he recounts a Marine captain's visiting an abandoned Esso gas station looking for a proper map of the city . . . or when some Marines changed tactics and conducted a night assault on a building, only to find it abandoned. The enemy found the Marines' predictable focus on day fighting allowed them to rest in safer spaces at dusk.

The plight of the citizens is also well covered. Many of them tried to lay low, or when discovered, just go along, most of them unenthusiastically, with communist attempts to whip up their support for the cause. Citizens pressed into service to help with Viet Cong and NVA defenses worried about being mistaken for the enemy when the seemingly inevitable US military and ARVN counterattack came. When the tide of battle started to turn, many residents tried to get behind Marine lines for protection. Some citizens, however, went along quite enthusiastically with political reprisals for those on enemy lists, which were so sweeping as to include "the law faculty of Hue University." (299) Bowden notes the difficulty of sorting out whether those found in the mass graves were assassinated for political reasons, victims of score settling, or simply people killed during the fighting. (393)

As the rather extensive collaborators list suggests, the communists planned meticulously for taking and holding the city. They distributed new uniforms to boost the morale of the troops and show the citizens the communist forces were not some ragged force but a respectable outfit. Instead of raising the North Vietnamese flag above the royal palace, a new, gigantic one was created that would underscore that the battle was one of liberation—not conquest. Its design and color scheme were chosen to pay respect to the city's major factions—Buddhists, Catholics, and intellectuals. Even when the battle increasingly looked less like liberation and more like a losing cause, a leading general outmaneuvered his political overseers, who were seeking permission to withdraw from the city; the general saw much gain in prolonging the battle and inflicting damage on the image of United States, abroad. (341)

The book gives brief mention to the ARVN's heroic defense of its base at Mang Ca in the Citadel—and that's about it, for the South Vietnamese Army's perspective. Bowden suspects that the presence of a Vietnamese government translator during some of his interviews may have had a chilling effect on those considering whether to participate—too dangerous, even today. Bowden is not alone here: the perspective of the South Vietnamese is sorely missing from most accounts of the Vietnam War. In addition, scant mention is made of the civilian US government personnel (Department of State, US Agency for International Development, Central Intelligence Agency, etc.) who were in Hue. A rough count from the book puts fewer than 20 US officials in Hue, of which seven were killed or executed; four were captured, with two of those dying along the Ho Chi Minh trail while being moved north; and five who made it to safety after a week.[a]

The harrowing experiences of those fighting or trapped in the embattled city should be material enough for a powerful story without having to oversell it, but Bowden seems conflicted about intelligence's role in warning about the Tet offensive, coming down on the side of judging it the "worst intelligence failure of the war." (525) As CIA historian Harold Ford makes clear in *CIA and the Vietnam Policymakers*, CIA's Saigon Station in November and December 1967 drafted three major cables, each of which warned that a powerful, nationwide enemy offensive was coming. And though Headquarters poured cold water on these assessments, the US military command in Vietnam (MACV) did act on the warnings, redeploying some troops to Saigon.

A particularly flawed attempt to make for a better story is Bowden's noting what American soldiers had supposedly told themselves about the war. "The enemy was weak. He had little or no popular support. He had no significant presences in South Vietnam beyond the small bands of rebels capable of minor raids in rural areas." (90) However, it was these very soldiers who provided input into 1967 estimates of the Viet Cong strength alone, with Defense putting the total at 300,000 and the CIA at 430,000.[2] Either estimate shows a very formidable and capable enemy. The biggest unknown about the communist forces was intent, not capability. As for enemy presence in

a. For more on the situation in Hue, see Raymond R. Lau, "The 1968 Tet Offensive in Vietnam and the Seizure of Hue—A CORDS Advisor Remembers," *Studies in Intelligence* 61, no. 4 (December 2017): 1–14; available online at https://www.cia.gov/library/center-for-the-study-of-intelligence/csi-publications/csi-studies/studies/vol-61-no-4/pdfs/a-cords-advisor-in-hue.pdf.

South Vietnam, a 1967 CIA map shows most of the country as either controlled by the enemy or up for grabs.[3]

Part of the problem was Bowden's initial concept for the book. He agreed with his publisher's idea of chronicling the Battle for Hue as a "way of writing about the entire Vietnam War." (541) This explains where an otherwise absorbing book goes wrong, with the author, who has never written anything about the war except for this book, making sweeping judgments for which he lacks established expertise. Bowden is less equipped to assess the larger landscape of one battle than authors who have written voluminously about the same war, such as Stephen Sears writing about the Civil War, and Antony Beevor writing about World War II.

So, the further away from the battlefield Bowden goes, the more assertive, even polemical, *Hue 1968* gets. A case in point is the initial missions the Marines were sent on to recapture territory including the Truong Tien Bridge linking northern and southern Hue. Given that the enemy was entrenched and vastly outnumbered the Marines, these attacks were suicidal. Bowden powerfully details how the Marines fought bravely against all odds. He rightly places blame all the way up the military leadership chain for its stubborn refusal to acknowledge the enemy's strength and control of the city.

When the story gets to Gen. William Westmoreland, though, the narrative gets looser. Besides tiresomely referring to him as "Westy," Bowden draws the general as a caricature, some clueless and hidebound military leader who paled next to his more astute successor, Creighton Abrams. However, as Vietnam historian Dale Andrade points out, both generals faced the same quandary: devote a significant share of US forces to keeping enemy conventional units away from the population, and only then would pacification stand a chance. "Whether the operation was called 'search and destroy' (under Westmoreland) or 'one war' (under Abrams) made little difference."[4]

The book's epilogue does not add much, and includes oft-repeated formulations, such as the Vietnam War "ought to have taught (but has not) Americans to cultivate deep regional knowledge in the practice of foreign policy, and to avoid being led by ideology instead of understanding . . . Beware of men with theories that explain everything." (526) In the end, Bowden admits the book is "mostly the work of a journalist, in that it is primarily based on interviews." (564) *Hue 1968* worked best when Bowden stuck to this modest understanding.

Notes:

1. Harold P. Ford, *CIA and the Vietnam Policymakers: Three Episodes, 1962–1968* (Center for the Study of Intelligence, 1998), 123; available online at https://www.cia.gov/library/center-for-the-study-of-intelligence/csi-publications/books-and-monographs/cia-and-the-vietnam-policymakers-three-episodes-1962-1968.
2. Ibid., 86.
3. *CIA and the Wars in Southeast Asia, 1947–75* (Center for the Study of Intelligence, 2016); available online at https://www.cia.gov/library/center-for-the-study-of-intelligence/csi-publications/books-and-monographs/Anthology-CIA-and-the-Wars-in-Southeast-Asia.
4. Dale Andrade, "Westmoreland was right: learning the wrong lessons from the Vietnam War," *Small Wars and Insurgencies* 19, no. 2 (2008):145–81.

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