

TIMES OF LONDON
16-9-17

Review: Hue 1968: A Turning Point of the American War in Vietnam by Mark Bowden

This is a powerful account of a critical battle in Vietnam, says Anthony Loyd

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According to Vietnamese tradition, the first person you meet at the Tet celebrations that mark the lunar new year will be the harbinger of your luck for the next 12 months.

When they fell asleep on the eve of the Tet holiday on January 30, 1968, the scattered units of US forces in the city of Hue had little reason to doubt their own coming fortunes in the 13-year-old war. Their generals and political leaders assured them that victory was in sight, a claim believed by most Americans back home. Hue, once the seat of the Nguyen dynasty and Vietnam's cultural centre, was a peaceful backwater scarcely touched by war.

Yet when the US soldiers and their Vietnamese allies awoke in the early hours, it was to gunfire not fireworks. Thousands of North Vietnamese army troops, backed by Viet Cong guerrillas and communist militias, had stormed the city. This was the start of the pivotal battle of the Vietnam War.

The Battle of Hue took almost four weeks, the death of more than 8,000 civilians and the city's ruin, for the Americans to reverse their enemy's gain. Although the Americans won this battle — at the cost of 250 dead US troops and another 1,500 wounded — it was a heavy political defeat. Before the battle began the silent majority of Americans still believed the hopelessly optimistic "victory is nearing" message of General William Westmoreland, commander of the US mission in Vietnam.

The sudden realisation that the North Vietnamese could launch such a stunning operation, one of a hundred smaller attacks across Vietnam during the Tet Offensive, despite the presence of more than 500,000 US troops, caused a lasting groundswell of antiwar sentiment. The generals' talk of success was never again believed, and American fortunes in Vietnam fell into unchecked decline.

Mark Bowden was confronted by a five-year task when he began to research and write *Hue 1968*. Hue was a sprawling mess of a fight that involved four overlapping stages across three different zones of action inside and outside the city. There was also a huge cast — the North Vietnamese Army (NVA), the Viet Cong, US Marines, as well as correspondents and the political leadership of each side.

Bowden, the author of *Black Hawk Down*, which detailed the failed US raid to capture a Somali warlord in Mogadishu in 1993, has ridden this bronco in exemplary fashion. He has once again deployed his "deep journalism" style, conducting more than 100 interviews. He tells the tale of the battle through a selection of key characters, such as a female Viet Cong guide, an NVA

sergeant, the Vietnamese wife of a US foreign service officer hiding in the city, and various US soldiers and Marines. Each is introduced to the readers almost as one would a friend, so that their fate and aspirations become of immediate importance.

Bowden's attention to detail is flawless, as I came to learn when we disagreed on the identity of a Marine in a famous photograph from the battle. The picture, taken by John Olson, shows a group of wounded Marines being evacuated on an armoured vehicle. In the foreground, bare-chested and bandaged, lies a desperately injured man. The photo, taken in the rubble-strewn streets, is evocative of Géricault's *The Raft of the Medusa*.

Bowden had identified that Marine as Alvin Bert Grantham. He miraculously survived a chest wound and 50 years later gave an account that appears in the book. Yet I had doubted it was Grantham, and was certain that the wounded man was another US Marine, James Blaine, who died hours after the photograph was taken. I mention this disagreement not out of journalistic rivalry (it seems I was wrong), but because it epitomises how hard it is to verify facts obscured by the fog of war and from the distance of decades.

Involved in my own ill-starred search to find another Hue veteran — the “shell-shocked Marine” photographed by Don McCullin in the same area and timeframe during the battle — I had seen Olson's photograph. I had tracked down and spoken to the Marine with a squid tied to his helmet, tending to the wounded man. Other Marines identified the injured man as 19-year-old Blaine. I found Blaine's college photograph, which bore an uncanny similarity to the dying soldier. I was sure I was right and Bowden wrong.

Yet Bowden found other survivors aboard the tank, who confirmed that the date of the photograph was February 17, 1968, by which time Blaine had been dead for 48 hours. Medical records corroborated the timing. The wounded Marine at the centre of the photo was indeed Grantham.

This kind of fine-tuned detail — and sense of mystery — is the soul of a good historical account. A war story lives or dies on intimacy and intrigue. (Not all war stories need to be long or detailed to be effective. Michael Herr, whose account *Dispatches* rightly has a cult following, reported what a US soldier told him in 1967. He encapsulated the horrors of long-range night patrols behind enemy lines in a three-sentence story that has rung forever since in my head as a model of polished perfection. “Patrol went up the mountain. One man came back. He died before he could tell us what happened.”)

Interweaved throughout Hue 1968 are the reports from journalists in Hue at the time, whose presence was critical in the political fallout of the battle because they challenged the official line. The words of Vietnam legends such as the New York Times reporter Gene Roberts, CBS's Jack Laurence and UPI's Alvin Webb — as well as Herr's observations for *Esquire* — are interspersed among the chapters to great effect.

The detail can be searing. One Marine described, to his lasting shame, how he and his squad had sex with a desperate and hungry Vietnamese woman during the battle in exchange for a packet of C-rations. Two years earlier the Marine had written an article in his school newspaper in which he offered “what more noble cause can a man die for, than to die in defence of

freedom?" It never took long for US troops in Vietnam to lose whatever idealism they may have arrived with and to regard those they had come to save from communism as "gooks" and "dinks". Atrocities were common on all sides.

During the battle, American troops grew sullen and angry with their officers because of the level of casualties they were suffering for a war few believed in. Private Carl Dileo found himself pinned down in a foxhole in paddy fields when a North Vietnamese mortar round landed in the foxhole next to him. It turned two of his friends into a "plume of fine pink mist — tiny bits of blood, bone, tissue, flesh and brain" that coated the hapless survivor. When Dileo stuck his head above the foxhole a bullet hit his helmet and knocked him out. Later ordered to advance with his battalion, which had by then suffered 50 per cent casualties, he thought: "How much more can they ask? Who the f*** did this?"

Hue 1968 carries a sense of immediacy. The Korean nuclear crisis, and western involvement in the conflicts of the Middle East, make this battle as relevant now as it was nearly 50 years ago. The book is a powerful portrayal of what happens when America's Battlestar Galactica military might is applied to a conflict without any accompanying political solution.

The book is a mighty piece of work, and as fine an account of a battle as you will likely read. Hell, I wish I had written it. But if I had, you would have read that the wounded Marine on the tank was James Blaine, and that would have been wrong.

Hue 1968: A Turning Point of the American War in Vietnam by Mark Bowden, Grove Atlantic, 624pp; £20

Bloodiest clash of all

At least 8,000 civilians died in Hue in three weeks of fighting, some executed by communists as traitors, others killed by US fire. About 250 US Marines and soldiers were killed, plus 1,500 wounded. South Vietnamese forces, allied to the US, lost 458 dead and 2,700 wounded. Between 2,400 and 5,000 communist fighters were killed in the battle. So, in fighting for a small city with a population of 140,000, at least 11,000 people were killed in less than a month, making Hue by far the bloodiest battle of the Vietnam War.