

# Hue 1968

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Grove Atlantic, 2017

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## *Epilogue*

THE BATTLE OF Hue has never been accorded the important position it deserves in our understanding of the Vietnam War, or what the Vietnamese call the “Resistance War Against America.” By January 1968 public support for the war in America was eroding, but actual opposition remained on the fringes of American politics. It had entered the mainstream by the end of February. The pivot point was the Tet Offensive and this battle, its most wrenching episode. After Tet, there was no more conjecture that the war could be won swiftly or easily. The end was not in view. The debate was never again about how to win but about how to leave. In a larger sense, Tet delivered the first in a series of profound shocks to America’s faith in its leaders.

The takeover of Hue was so unexpected that, even during the month it took to wrest the city back, the MACV seemed reluctant to believe it had actually happened. General Westmoreland continually and falsely assured political leaders in Washington and the American public that the city had not fallen into enemy hands. This refusal to face facts was not just a public relations problem; it had tragic consequences for many of the marines and soldiers who fought there. If the extent of the challenge had been weighed realistically at the outset, if commanders had heeded the entirely correct CIA assessment on the first day, and if they had listened to their own field commanders, they might have held off the counterattack until they had readied an appropriate level of force and more effective tactics. There would have been a price to pay for the delay—not the least of which would have been giving more time for the National Liberation Front’s commissars to conduct their purges—but a better-prepared counterattack might well have saved both American and civilian lives, and ended the battle sooner. As it was, relatively small units of young Americans were thrown repeatedly against impossible odds, enabling the enemy to drag out its defense and run up the cost.

The conspiracy of denial around Hue also helps explain why this terrible battle has remained, for most Americans, so little known. It has been remembered as just another passing episode in that long war. The director Stanley Kubrick, no doubt attracted by the unusual visuals of urban combat, set *Full Metal Jacket* in Hue, although in his film the battle is just a backdrop. For what we have known of it, we are indebted to the handful of journalists who braved those streets to send back stories and pictures. It has been conscientiously remembered by the US Marine Corps, albeit with more emphasis on the glory than on the leadership blunders that cost so many lives. The books that have been written about it—*Fire in the Streets* by Eric Hammel, *The Siege at Hue* by George Smith, *Battle for Hue* by Keith Nolan, and a few others—have uncritically celebrated the valor of Americans who fought, with little interest in how they were used. They were used

badly. In that sense, the Battle of Hue *is* a microcosm of the entire conflict. With nearly half a century of hindsight, Hue deserves to be widely remembered as the single bloodiest battle of the war, one of its defining events, and one of the most intense urban battles in American history.

Both sides, American and Vietnamese, view the outcome as a victory, the Americans because their immediate objective of retaking the city was achieved; the Vietnamese because the battle had such a damaging impact on American public opinion. It did not, of course, end the war, but it was the point at which everything changed. A month after it ended, President Johnson decided not to seek reelection, and Westmoreland would shortly thereafter be removed as its commander. Richard Nixon was elected president eight months later mendaciously promising not victory, but a secret plan to bring the war to an “honorable end.”

The secret plan prolonged the conflict seven more years, spreading misery and death throughout Indochina. Nixon began gradually drawing down the number of Americans fighting there in 1969, and—catastrophically, as it turned out—began shifting the military burden to Saigon. General Abrams threw greater and greater responsibility for prosecuting the war to the ARVN, shifting his efforts to disrupting and destroying Hanoi’s delivery of troops and matériel. This is what prompted the raids into the neighboring countries of Laos and Cambodia, where North Vietnam had long sheltered troops and supply routes. The bombing of Communist sanctuaries in Cambodia destabilized that neutral country, leading to the overthrow of Prince Norodom Sihanouk in 1970 and the rise of the murderous Khmer Rouge, which would be responsible for the deaths of millions of Cambodians in ensuing years. In January 1973, President Thieu reluctantly signed his name to a peace agreement in Paris that ended America’s direct involvement in the war, although it continued to support his regime as the fighting dragged on for two more years. Eventually the weight of Vietnamization became too much for the Saigon government to bear.

Through these years, opposition to the war swelled, with hundreds of thousands of protesters marching in the streets demanding its end. These protests fueled the great counterculture movements of the 1960s, and they occasionally turned violent. Four students were killed at Kent State University in Ohio in May 1970 when National Guardsmen opened fire on protesters. The incident accelerated the antiwar movement’s efforts, deepening the country’s division. The 1972 presidential election turned almost entirely on the question of the Vietnam War, as Nixon, summoning support from Americans who were troubled by the rise of antiestablishment feelings and by violence in the streets, soundly defeated Senator George McGovern to win reelection. The president’s illegal efforts to undermine McGovern’s campaign led to the Watergate scandal and his resignation in 1974. Under President Gerald Ford, the United States continued to provide substantial assistance to Thieu’s government, but its military was no match for Hanoi’s. An offensive launched in 1975 quickly routed the ARVN. The city of Hue fell again and for good in March 1975, and Saigon followed a month later, as US helicopters scrambled to evacuate remaining American personnel and as many South Vietnamese officials as they could carry. The final images of desperate civilians clinging to the skids of American choppers as they lifted off framed the futility of the decade-long effort.

Nevertheless, in the nearly half century since, some American military historians and many American veterans have insisted that the Battle of Hue was won, and that, indeed, the entire Tet

Offensive was an unqualified American victory. Westy certainly felt that way. Eight years later, in his autobiography *A Soldier Reports*, he was still insisting that he had not been surprised by the Tet attacks—he said he had forecast the attacks on the city but that word apparently did not reach the MACV compound in Hue. He conceded at long last that on the morning of January 31, 1968, “the MACV advisory compound was under siege and most of Hue was in enemy hands, including much of the Citadel.” Yet the battle to win back the city warranted only two pages in his 566-page book. He portrayed it in perfunctory terms, complimenting the American and South Vietnamese commanders on their excellent leadership, exaggerating enemy deaths, and underreporting the number of Americans killed by nearly a third.<sup>2</sup> He lamented the destruction of the historic city, and effectively lay blame for all civilian losses on Hanoi, citing only those killed in the purges. He makes no mention of civilians killed by American and South Vietnamese bombing and shelling. If your knowledge of the Battle of Hue came from Westy alone—from his public statements at the time and from his memoir—you would view it as a thumping American victory.

You have to give the general credit for consistency. On the day after the Saigon flag was run back up the pole at Ngo Mon, he gave a long interview to reporters in Saigon, in which he again declared that the Tet Offensive had been a “military defeat” for Hanoi. He was still anticipating the big attack at Khe Sanh and did not even mention Hue. Even the fact that the enemy had surprised him (slightly) by the number of forces they deployed, to him this was not a setback but an opportunity: “In a very real sense, when he [the enemy] moved out of his jungle camps he made himself more vulnerable and gave us an opportunity to hurt him severely.” He denied that his official casualty estimates were inflated and said that the enemy’s offensive was a sign of desperation. Westy added that many NVA and VC had fought “halfheartedly.”

This was certainly not the experience of those who fought them in Hue. To a man, the American veterans I interviewed told me they had faced a disciplined, highly motivated, skilled, and determined enemy. To characterize them otherwise is to diminish the accomplishment of those who drove them out of Hue. But taking the city back qualifies as a “victory” only in a narrow sense—they achieved their objective. In any larger sense the word hardly applies. Both sides badly miscalculated. Hanoi counted on a popular uprising that didn’t come, while Washington and Saigon, blindsided, refused to believe the truth. Both sides played their roles courageously, and to terrible effect. In sum: Hanoi’s troops seized the city and were then forced at tremendous cost to relinquish it, while the city itself was leveled in the process. The status quo was upheld but greatly diminished, and it lasted for only a few more years. How is this victory? It takes a determined act of imagination for either side to make that claim. It makes more sense to consider the ways both sides lost.

If we use Westy’s favorite measure, the body count, the battle’s clearest losers were the citizens of Hue. In the city today, where memories of that nightmarish month are still bitter, it is said that there is a victim under every square meter of ground. It remains a shameful fact in the Socialist Republic of Vietnam that many hundreds, perhaps thousands, of its citizens were dispatched deliberately by their “liberators.” The ruling Communist Party labors to promote national unity by remembering the conflict not as a civil war but strictly as a struggle for independence, so reprisals against its own countrymen are an inconvenient memory. The party has never named or punished those responsible, not least because they were following clear orders from above.

Many of those who carried out the purges have been celebrated as heroes of the state. The official position is that while there were some excesses, some “mistakes,” the numbers have been exaggerated by Vietnam’s enemies.

Of those who perished, by far the greatest number were killed by accident, either in the cross fire or by allied shelling and bombing. Accidental deaths do not equate morally to mass execution but, as the writer Tran Thi Thu Van has pointed out, the effect is the same. Today we rightly weigh the cost in civilian lives whenever violent action is taken, but I found no such concern expressed in 1968, not in any of the official papers I reviewed, not in contemporary press accounts or the dozens of books and papers written since, and not, for that matter, in any of the interviews I conducted. Vietnamese civilians, when they do come up, are described as a nuisance, even though the battle, like the war, was ostensibly about them. Nearly every marine I interviewed recalled seeing dead civilians in the streets, inside buildings, and in bunkers underneath those buildings. The Citadel, in particular, was a confined area, where escape was all but impossible. Nearly all the civilians I interviewed who survived the battle described losing family members, most often to shells and bombs. The survivors described, without hesitation, bombardment as the most terrifying memory, even those who’d had family members executed. If Hanoi did not win many new friends by taking Hue, neither did the allies in taking it back.

Death tolls for combatants clearly show more Front soldiers killed than Americans, by a factor of five to one, so by Westy’s favorite measure the battle was an unqualified success—by that measure, of course, the United States won the Vietnam War. But losses weighed more heavily in the United States than in North Vietnam. There’s no doubt that an authoritarian state can more easily absorb battlefield deaths than a democracy, where every one is a blow to public support. It is to democracy’s credit, and benefit, that casualties dampen enthusiasm for all but the most vitally important conflicts. Hanoi, on the other hand, had millions of men at its disposal, and could justify its suffering and sacrifice by asserting the noble cause of independence—more inspiring than some abstract theory about the balance of power.

Journalism has long been blamed for losing the war, but the American reporting from Hue was more accurate than official accounts, deeply respectful, and uniformly sympathetic to US fighting men. Reporters in Hue listening, watching, and taking pictures and notes at great personal risk, such as among others Gene Roberts, Al Webb, Catherine Leroy, John Olson, and Jack Laurence, were performing a vital public service.

Because Hanoi ultimately won the war, it’s tempting to ascribe greater wisdom and foresight to its leaders and generals than they deserve. The entire Tet Offensive was driven by grandiose misconceptions. Hanoi hugely overreached when it took Hue. More pragmatic North Vietnamese leaders including Ho Chi Minh and General Vo Nguyen Giap tried to stop it, and professional soldiers down the ranks saw right through the party’s propaganda. They knew they could take the city but that they could not hold it for long. They lost the argument but were proved right. A top Communist general, reflecting on the whole Tet Offensive years later, wrote, “We did not correctly evaluate the specific balance of forces between ourselves and the enemy,” and called its objectives “beyond our actual strength . . . in part on an illusion based on our subjective desires.” The dreams broadcast by the party songbirds were embraced by romantic young recruits like the village girl Che Thi Mung and the Buddhist poet Nguyen Dac Xuan, and when they

were driven from Hue, broken and bleeding, they felt crushed. Their defeat was sealed in the first days of the city's occupation, not by allied guns but by the tepid response of Hue's citizens. I suspect anger over this did a lot to fuel the purges.

The takeover of Hue was a huge success for Hanoi in only one way: it achieved complete tactical surprise, despite Westy's claims otherwise. Conversely, it represents perhaps the worst allied intelligence failure of the war. That's true of the entire Tet Offensive, and particularly true of the attack on Hue. Hanoi spent months amassing an army around the city without attracting notice. And although it is true that after three weeks of heavy fighting the enemy was driven off, it was the impact of the initial blow that resonated most loudly. Bringing the war to city streets deeply undermined the faith of middle-of-the road Vietnamese in President Thieu's government. Nonideological citizens—read, most citizens—were concerned primarily with survival. They wanted to be on the winning side when the war ended. Tet lowered the odds on Saigon as the safer bet. Hanoi may have aimed too high, but in the long run its effort succeeded in ways its leaders could not have fully foreseen.

Alternative history enthusiasts promote the preposterous idea that the United States might have won the war if it had thrown itself more heartily into the conflict. It is possible, of course, that a severe, expensive, long-term commitment by the United States, one with the full backing of the American people and a far greater investment of men and treasure, might have been able to prop up Thieu and his successors indefinitely. But the suppositions are not viable. America had no more appetite for colonial adventures or "third world" conflicts in 1968 than it has today. As some of the nation's more recent wars have helped illustrate, "victory" in Vietnam would have been neither possible nor desirable. It would have required a massive and sustained military presence, and very likely a state of permanent war. Hue illustrates just how bitter that war would have been.

From the perspective of nearly half a century, the Battle of Hue and the entire Vietnam War seem a tragic and meaningless waste. So much heroism and slaughter for a cause that now seems dated and nearly irrelevant. The whole painful experience ought to have (but has not) taught Americans to cultivate deep regional knowledge in the practice of foreign policy, and to avoid being led by ideology instead of understanding. The United States should interact with other nations realistically, first, not on the basis of domestic political priorities. Very often the problems in distant lands have little or nothing to do with America's ideological preoccupations. Beware of men with theories that explain everything. Trust those who approach the world with humility and cautious insight. The United States went to war in Vietnam in the name of freedom, to stop the supposed monolithic threat of Communism from spreading across the globe like a dark stain—I remember seeing these cartoons as a child. There were experts, people who knew better, who knew the languages and history of Southeast Asia, who had lived and worked there, who tried to tell Presidents Eisenhower, Kennedy, Johnson, and Nixon that the conflict in Vietnam was peculiar to that place. They were systematically ignored and pushed aside. David Halberstam's classic *The Best and the Brightest* documents this process convincingly. America had every right to choose sides in the struggle between Hanoi and Saigon, even to try to influence the outcome, but lacking a legitimate or even marginally capable ally its military effort was misguided and doomed. At the very least, Vietnam should stand as a permanent caution against going to war

for any but the most immediate, direct, and vital national interest, or to prevent genocide or wider conflict, and then only in concert with other countries.

After Tet, the American antiwar effort spread from pacifists and principled religious leaders into a broad youth movement, one that galvanized a growing spirit of youthful rebellion. Opposition to the war became cool. It rapidly joined recreational drug use, rock music, and greater sexual freedom as an emblem of the youth counterculture. Youthful idealism—painfully naive in many respects—was also a big reason why many of those who fought in Vietnam had enlisted. Their motivations were every bit as pure. I was moved by the heroism and dedication of those who fought on both sides of the battle. Nearly all the veterans I interviewed—on both sides—are understandably proud of their service. The Americans had a wide range of feelings about it, but there is no question about their bravery and patriotism. In the worst days of this fight, facing the near certainty of death or severe bodily harm, those caught up the Battle of Hue repeatedly advanced. Many of those who survived are still paying for it. To me the way they were used, particularly the way their idealism and loyalty were exploited by leaders who themselves had lost faith in the effort, is a stunning betrayal. It is a lasting American tragedy and disgrace.

Because Americans were plucked off the battlefield on the day their tour ended, or whisked away when wounded, most of these men lost contact with one another when they left Vietnam. Their shared ordeal became thousands of individual memories, which, in isolation, seemed all the more futile and meaningless. The growth of the Internet has enabled many of them to reconnect. They have formed organizations and hold reunions that keep alive memories of the war—good and bad. These networks made it a lot easier for me to piece together this story than those who did so in the past.

The Vietnam I visited in 2015 and 2016 is an exciting, thriving nation, full of industry and promise. It has become a popular tourist destination for Americans, particularly for those who fought in the war. I was privileged to take a walking tour of southern Hue with Chuck Meadows, one of Big Ernie Cheatham's company commanders, who now leads veterans on regular excursions to the city. Given the wholesale violence the United States visited on it, part of the living experience of at least half of its population, it is extraordinary how little resentment is shown toward Americans. To the contrary, I was met with warmth and generosity wherever I went. Government restraints on the economy have eased enough to allow a vibrant private industry, which is evident everywhere you look, from cranes over big construction projects to family restaurants to stores selling the latest Apple products to the swarms of scooters that crowd every street. Still, there is no question that the Vietnamese people lost something precious when Hanoi won the war. One young woman from Ho Chi Minh City, born decades after the war ended, told me that her generation looks at Seoul and at Tokyo and asks, "Is this what we would have been if we hadn't chased the Americans away?" And while the Communist Party has relaxed its hold on the economy, to great effect, Vietnam remains a strictly authoritarian state, where speaking your mind, or even recounting truthful stories from your own experience, can get you in trouble. Researching the Battle of Hue was tricky. In telling the story I was revisiting a heroic chapter in the national struggle, but I was also reopening old wounds. The purges in 1968 left many citizens with profound grievances against the state that they remain frightened to voice. Many were reluctant to speak candidly to me, particularly those with sad stories.

On my first visit I worked with an independent translator and guide, Dang Hoa Ho, a former Vietnamese military officer (he is too young to have fought in the American War and served in Vietnam's modern army), who was skilled at putting people at ease and who fully understood my desire for uncensored memories. On my second trip, against my expressed wishes, Hoa was nudged aside by Dinh Hoang Linh, deputy director of Hanoi's Foreign Press Center, part of the country's Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Linh proved to be unfailingly helpful and charming, and a skilled translator, but his presence had a chilling effect.

The following exchange illustrates my point. I was interviewing Doang Thanh Xu, a former VC leader whose men fought north of the city during the battle. Both Doang and Linh were speaking Vietnamese, which I do not understand (the recording was later transcribed and translated for me by my own assistant).

"I'm talking so that you can record to the Party Committee and the Ward Committee later about this interview between me and the writer," said Doang. "Because I am working as a member of the Ward Committee, I have to make sure I am following the policies."

"Yes, exactly," said Linh, "and that's why I'm here. If there is something not right, I will let you know. I am responsible for press and info. I am from the Foreign Affairs Department. So, Mr. Doang, don't worry about this. If there is something worth the notice, I will give you a warning."

Hardly something to give a reporter confidence. In most cases, answering the kind of questions I asked posed little "worth the notice" of Linh. I was not asking people to explain their political views or to offer sweeping judgments about the past—although on many occasions these were offered. My own concerns were mostly granular: Where were you born? When did you join the liberation forces? What did you see? What did you hear? What did you do? How did you feel? It is the accumulation of these individual stories that provides an overview and informs my perspective in this book.

There were, despite Linh's presence, instances of surprising, even painful candor. Nguyen Dac Xuan, a noted historian in Vietnam, played a role in the purges as a young commissar, and he has been labeled by some a "butcher." I was particularly eager to talk to him. He is a practicing Buddhist and has written extensively about his own experience during the war, in no small part defending himself against specific charges of cruelty raised by Tran Thi Thu Van in her book *Mourning Headband for Hue* (see Part Five, chapter 1). He admits he did play a role, albeit an indirect one, and said he has called repeatedly, without success, for formal apologies to be made.

"In a war, it is impossible not to make mistakes," he told me. "If we did wrong to one person, we have to make an apology to one person. If we did wrong to ten persons, we have to make an apology to ten persons. If it was one hundred persons, we have to do the same for one hundred persons. We have to do that for people to forgive us. But from then until now, from 1968 until now . . . nobody made any apology. They consider everything in the past. And people are still puzzled and in tremendous pain. The people can understand that the mistakes in the war were due to naïveté, due to the lack of information, and so on. Therefore, I always talk about this again and again, in every meeting . . . Today, when Tet is nearby"—we spoke in early February 2016—"I have to repeat one thing, that in my life I did many good things in the war, but I am also partly responsible for whatever mistakes happened in Tet Mau Than, too. I also take responsibility for

the mistakes though the mistakes were not caused by me. But because I was there, in the Front, I still take part of the responsibility with my people.”

The Vietnamese veterans I interviewed had their decorations and honors displayed prominently in their homes and spoke of the battle as a difficult but righteous effort. Most admitted to having been discouraged when they were forced to leave Hue, and described their horror at the catastrophe rained on the city, but they saw the battle as just one episode in a long heroic fight against a foreign power over which they ultimately prevailed. The professional soldiers in particular were puzzled by my focus on this one event, when their careers were spent fighting so many battles—some had fought also against the French, the Chinese, and the Cambodians. It brought home to me how much the Vietnamese perspective on modern history differs from America’s. To them Hue, the entire American War, was just one chapter in a much longer story.

The Americans I interviewed had opinions too various to be summarized, but three major themes predominated: (1) most (but not all) were proud of having served; (2) nearly all were angry over the betrayal of their youthful idealism, mostly at American leaders who sent them to fight a war that was judged unwinnable from the start; and (3) all felt sorrow for the friends they lost and the horror the war inflicted on everyone involved, particularly because, for most (but not all), it appears that the death and suffering served no purpose. Many described their difficulties in adjusting to normal life after returning home, some because of lingering physical wounds and many because of less tangible ones.

Richard Leflar, for instance, the Philly youth who was sent to the marines to avoid juvenile detention and found himself terrified in a hole in the middle of the Citadel fight, returned home from his tour in Vietnam in what he now describes as a state of ferocious anger. Hue was his introduction to Vietnam, and in the remaining eleven months of his tour he changed from a terrified teenager into an enthusiastic killer. He described to me, with deep remorse, witnessing some weeks after Hue a terrible act of gang rape and murder by his own squad—most of whom were later killed. When he returned home, he said, he wore on a strap around his neck a dried ear he’d cut off a dead VC, and went out every night to drink heavily and provoke fights. He is proud of his service as a marine but deeply troubled—he has sought help to reconcile himself to the things he did in Vietnam, and the kind of man he became.

Bill Ehrhart, who was wounded by a B-40 blast in the fight for southern Hue, said, “I am most definitely not proud of it. I am ashamed of having served in Vietnam.” A poet and teacher at the Haverford School in Pennsylvania, Ehrhart became an antiwar activist when his service ended.

He had joined the marines when he was seventeen after writing an editorial in his high school newspaper in support of the war. In a more recent essay, he objects to being frequently thanked for his service, a gesture that has become common in the years since 9/11, when the country rediscovered the heroism and sacrifice of its soldiers. Ehrhart spurns the gratitude.

“How could a nation built upon ‘Give me liberty or give me death,’ ‘all men are created equal,’ and ‘of the people, by the people, for the people’ have ended up waging a shameful, disgraceful war against a people who had done us no harm nor ever would or could?” he wrote. In his classroom he has posted blown-up photographs he took from a VC fighter he killed, two pictures

of pretty young women holding rifles, probably part of his victim's squad. Ehrhart said the victim was, like him, no more than a teenager, scarcely older than his students today. The VC was wearing the thin black cotton *ao ba ba* that Americans called pajamas and was carrying a 1936 vintage rifle with a stock held together with tape and with a bamboo strap replacing the leather one that had long since rotted away. He had a few balls of rice in his pocket. Ehrhart contrasted that with the comfortable, well-equipped—even pampered—ARVN soldiers he observed, soldiers who took off on weekends and holidays and, to his eyes, left the serious fighting to him and his fellow marines. He has ever after felt more admiration for his enemy than for his allies.

Ehrhart wrote a poem in 2011, “Cheating the Reaper,” about a reunion in Hue with his fellow marine Kazunori Takenaga, who was injured with him in the same rocket blast. It reads, in part:

Who would have thought  
the day that RPG exploded  
we'd live to see this day,  
this house, this city, Vietnam?  
Who would have thought  
we'd ever want to come back  
or be happy because we lost?  
This is the very building, Ken.  
This is where we almost died  
for nothing that mattered,  
but didn't.

Jim Coolican, on the other hand, regards such disdain for ARVN troops as self-defeating and unwarranted: “The Americans went in there, and they believed [the ARVN] was just a kind of little colonial military that really could not do much, and they would just step aside and we would take over and show them how to do it.”

With unshaken conviction about the rightness of America's mission, he was convinced when the Battle of Hue ended that the United States would follow up on its hard-won victory by launching a major offensive into North Vietnam itself.

“So much so,” he told me, “that I got my unit [the Hac Bao] reoutfitted with gear. My points to the Vietnamese were that we were going north. I told them, ‘The South Vietnamese will lead the attack, and our unit will lead the South Vietnamese.’ I was convinced of that.”

When President Johnson gave a prime-time televised address on March 31, millions of Americans were watching—and in Vietnam, many were listening. The president, looking grim, wearing a dark suit and steel-rimmed glasses, reviewed his earlier efforts to end the war. He cited his September 1967 offer to stop the bombing of North Vietnam if Hanoi would agree to “productive discussions” about ending the war.

“Hanoi denounced this offer, both privately and publicly,” he said. “Even while the search for peace was going on, North Vietnam rushed their preparations for a savage assault on the people, the government, and the allies of South Vietnam. Their attack—during the Tet holidays—failed to achieve its principal objectives. It did not collapse the elected Government of South Vietnam or shatter its army—as the Communists had hoped. It did not produce a ‘general uprising’ among the people of the cities, as they had predicted. The Communists were unable to maintain control of any of the more than thirty cities that they attacked. And they took very heavy casualties. But they did compel the South Vietnamese and their allies to move certain forces from the countryside into the cities. They caused widespread disruption and suffering. Their attacks, and the battles that followed, made refugees of half a million human beings.”

This was the furthest the administration had gone in acknowledging the impact of Tet. Coolican believed the president was about to announce that he was going to repay this treachery with a bold countermove, a full-scale invasion of North Vietnam. “So tonight, in the hope that this action will lead to early talks, I am taking the first step to de-escalate the conflict,” Johnson said. “We are reducing—substantially reducing—the present level of hostilities, and we are doing so unilaterally and at once . . . I call upon President Ho Chi Minh to respond positively, and favorably, to this new step toward peace.”

Coolican was stunned.

“I realized then that we had just lost the war,” said Coolican. “Because the North Vietnamese, they were slammed during the Tet Offensive, and we could have gone after them. We did not do it, and then my thought was . . . we had no intentions of winning the war.”

Johnson went on: “Fifty-two months and ten days ago, in a moment of tragedy and trauma, the duties of this office fell upon me. I asked then for your help and God’s, that we might continue America on its course, binding up our wounds, healing our history, moving forward in new unity to clear the American agenda and to keep the American commitment for all of our people. United we have kept that commitment. And united we have enlarged that commitment . . . What we won when all of our people united just must not now be lost in suspicion and distrust and selfishness and politics among any of our people. And believing this, as I do, I have concluded that I should not permit the Presidency to become involved in the partisan divisions that are developing in this political year.

“With American sons in the fields far away, with America’s future under challenge right here at home, with our hopes and the world’s hopes for peace in the balance every day, I do not believe that I should devote an hour or a day of my time to any personal partisan causes or to any duties other than the awesome duties of this office—the Presidency of your country. Accordingly, I shall not seek, and I will not accept, the nomination of my party for another term as your President. But let men everywhere know, however, that a strong and a confident and a vigilant America stands ready tonight to seek an honorable peace; and stands ready tonight to defend an honored cause, whatever the price, whatever the burden, whatever the sacrifice that duty may require.

“Thank you for listening. Good night and God bless all of you.”

Mike Downs, on an R&R break in Australia, saw a headline that read, “Johnson Quits.” He thought it was a joke.

The words that mattered for Coolican were “to seek an honorable peace.” Not victory, but “peace.”

He left Vietnam at the end of his tour deeply disillusioned. He retired from the marines as a colonel. Downs considers it a “damn shame” that Coolican was never made a general, and speculates it is because he intimidated his senior officers—“not because he tried to but because he knew so much more than many of them and he was so confident in his knowledge.” Coolican worked as the superintendent of the Peninsula School District in Gig Harbor, Washington, before moving to Michigan with his wife in order to be closer to their children and grandchildren. His son was a marine Harrier pilot, and his daughter teaches at the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor. When he moved to Michigan, he finally made good on his promise to his old friend Frank Doezema, killed defending the MACV compound on the first day of the battle, by visiting his family in Kalamazoo. At his friend’s grave site, he noticed that the information on the headstone was wrong and got the VA to replace it with one that was correct.

Quy Nguyen, the twelve-year-old Vietnamese boy befriended by Doezema in Saigon, joined the South Vietnamese army and then spent six years in a prison camp after the war ended. In 1991 he moved his wife and family to Everett, Washington. He established contact there with the Doezema family, writing to share his memories of Frank and his grief over his loss. He still has the camera his friend gave him.

When Saigon fell, Coolican’s good friend “Harry,” the fierce Hac Bao commander Tran Ngoc Hue, fought on for years. He was wounded attacking NVA troops in Laos and was imprisoned. He slowly recovered as his country and his cause went down to defeat. Hue spent thirteen years in prison, and another eight years unemployable and under watch in Saigon until his old American friends, including Coolican, managed to secure him a visa to the United States. He now lives as an American citizen in Arlington, Virginia, with his family.

“History is not easy,” Hue told me. “People are still confused why a huge force like the United States was defeated. But if you don’t know your enemy, you will lose every time.”

Che Thi Mung, one of the Huong River Squad, was sent for medical training when her wounds healed. She worked as a nurse for the revolutionary forces and was then sent to the north for more schooling to become an ophthalmologist. After the fall of Saigon, she served in the Vietnamese army another four years. When she at last returned home, in 1979, her mother was dead. One of her younger brothers had been killed in the war. She took over as mother to her family. Che married when she was forty, and she has a daughter, who is now twenty-two, four years older than Che was when she fought in Hue. Today Che works as an ophthalmologist in Hue and lives in a house not far from where she was wounded. There is a marker on the street now, outside the soccer stadium, in honor of her and the other eleven girls of the squad. Six of the eleven were killed. Che’s daughter is studying English, and she told me she hopes to attend a university in the United States.

Nguyen Van Quang, the student revolutionary who smuggled guns into the city and then led the Front’s forces through Chanh Tay Gate, retains all of the charisma that enabled him to recruit young people to his cause half a century ago. I met with him twice in Hue, where he has been a long-serving member of Thua Thien–Hue’s party executive committee and the secretary of Hue

City—he became, in other words, the mayor of Hue. Actually, he was the superior of the mayor, given the primacy of the party in all aspects of Vietnam’s government.

“If things had gone smoothly, we would have had an uprising throughout the South,” he said. “More than one hundred cities and towns in the South . . . The first target was Saigon, and the second target was Hue. Imagine that if we could have succeeded, taken over Ho Chi Minh City [Saigon], Da Nang, Can Tho, Da Lat, Nha Trang, just as we did with Hue, the war would have ended much earlier. There would have been less loss for both sides. I believed so. According to the plan, it should have been that way.

“To be honest, after getting out of Hue, in my opinion, I believed that the Americans had no chance of winning militarily in Vietnam. The faith that I had in the party was even stronger after I saw the power of the people during the battle. The people did everything. They transported the armaments, they fed the soldiers, they carried the dead ones out and buried them, they continued working on the next missions. The power of the people was the power of patriotism, of ones who love their country. And whoever could raise the flag of patriotism and had the right policy that followed the path of patriotism would absolutely win.”

Andy Westin, who wrote almost daily to his wife, Mimi, stayed married to her for a long time, but they divorced in 2006. Westin went back to school and earned an MBA. He worked in the health business for thirty years and then earned a nursing degree. He worked as a nurse for another decade, attending to patients in long-term care until he retired.

Jim Bullington and Tuy-Cam married and he enjoyed a long career in the foreign service. He served as US ambassador to Burundi, and later as the State Department’s senior seminar dean.

Mike Morrow, who wandered the streets of the Citadel during the worst of the fighting as a halfhearted journalist, stayed in Asia. As a member of the Dispatch News Service, he was involved in the publication of Seymour Hersh’s story about the My Lai massacres, was captured and held by North Vietnamese forces in Cambodia, and was later thrown out of Vietnam by the South Vietnamese government. After the war he specialized in economic journalism in Asia. I interviewed him (by Skype) where he was living and working in Mongolia.

Steve Berntson recovered from his wounds and went back to school, ultimately earning a master’s degree in American history, specializing in the twentieth century. Through a roundabout process he ended up spending most of his working career first as a technical writer, then as a manager for the Trident Nuclear Submarine Missile Program. Before all that he spent a long time in hospitals recovering from the wounds he received in Hue. His transition to civilian life was difficult. “There were times when I would wake up in the middle of the night almost wishing I was back [in Vietnam], to tell you the truth,” he told me. “I know that sounds strange. But once you are accustomed to such an environment where you are living on adrenaline and you are basically—you are thinking you are outsmarting death. I think it is honest to be locked in.”

Berntson also found it hard to adjust to the way Americans felt about the war when he got back.

“By 1968, 1969 feelings were running pretty hard subject to Vietnam,” he said. “And I remember very well the experience when I got to Long Beach Naval Hospital, which was not on the navy base. So it was in what you would call the civilian world. We were told when we finally got to go

on liberty . . . they would tell us make sure that somebody brings you a set of civilian clothes. We do not advise you wearing your uniform going out on Fridays and Sundays, because there would be an antiwar contingent that stayed across the street that yelled at you. And of course they always made sure that we left the hospital from underground parking. That was really kind of a shock to me because here they were telling us not to wear our uniforms because it would just draw too much unpleasant attention. So that is what we did. And I always thought it would be kind of fun to wear my uniform after coming home. But it was quickly understood that in polite company you did not bring the subject up that you were in Vietnam. And the only time you really relaxed and admitted to being in Vietnam was when you were with other people who had had similar experiences. A lot of times, people would ask, 'What happened to you?' Because I was in a wheelchair or on crutches for a long time. Well in the early years, I just said it was an industrial accident."

As for Hue: "Well, we won the battle, but we lost the war," Berntson said, but added that he wasn't sure the word "won" applied. "We were losing the war before that. I mean it was obvious from everything that had been written, intelligence reports and everything else, that the North Vietnamese realized that the longer they could keep the battle in Hue going the more successful it would be for them. The whole issue there for them was, we will spend whatever it takes as long as we can hang on and retain all the attention of the world press. And the fact that they were holding the most sacred city in South Vietnam and the second-biggest city, I think, outside of Saigon, the fact that they would hang on for twenty-five days altered the whole concept of the war, not just in the United States but the rest of the world, I think."

Big Ernie Cheatham became a general. He died in 2014, alas, before I had a chance to meet and interview him for this book. He was interviewed about his experiences in Hue for a Marine Corps oral history project, and his comments have greatly informed my portrayal of him here. Captains Downs and Christmas and Lieutenant Ray Smith all stayed in the marines and rose to the rank of general before retiring, as did two other officers from 2/5, O.K. Steele and Peter Pace—a truly remarkable showing from one battalion, and a tribute to Cheatham's leadership.

Howard Prince retired from the army as a brigadier general and became a professor at the University of Texas, holding a chair in the ethics of leadership at the Lyndon B. Johnson School of Public Affairs. Forty years after the battle he experienced sharp pain in his right knee. Tests showed that he had an AK-47 round lodged beneath his kneecap. It was removed. He walks just fine. He remains angry about the way he and his men were used in Vietnam. He is a judicious man and has studied the matter.

"I spent a lot of time thinking about it after I came home, because I was nearly killed, and my body was injured in a way that has affected me for the rest of my life," he said. "And I went through a lot of soul-searching over what happened to me. Was it worth it? [It was] very much an extension of the Cold War and policy of containment. It was a place where we could fight and the enemy was a totalitarian police state in the north that was going to impose itself and eventually did. But we had a [South Vietnamese] government that did not serve its people, did not have the support of its people, but that did not justify turning our backs and letting a police state take over, which is what happened.

“I fault our political leadership more than anything else. Vietnam was a place that nobody ever heard of. Ho Chi Minh was a nationalist who reached out to the West more than once and was rebuffed, and who then sought support from the Comintern from both Moscow and China. But China is traditionally Vietnam’s enemy. [Vietnam] had been kicking [invaders] out for millennia. And we were just the latest. And I do not think we really understood much . . . Our policy makers, I do not think really had any grasp at all on what was going to happen.”

Gene Roberts went on to become the national editor of the New York Times, then left to become editor of the Philadelphia Inquirer, where he hired me in 1979 as a staff writer, still the most significant event in my career. He left the Inquirer, in 1990, after leading it to seventeen Pulitzer Prizes in eighteen years, an accomplishment unmatched by any comparable newspaper in American history. He later became managing editor of the Times, and then taught at the school of journalism at the University of Maryland. He and my former colleague Hank Klibanoff won a Pulitzer Prize of their own in 2007 for *The Race Beat*, a remarkable account of the role played by the press (including Roberts) during the civil rights movement.

I knew Roberts as a brilliant editor, one whose skills in that role not only benefited me, but are known far and wide. He was once dubbed, deservedly as far as I’m concerned, “the Best Newspaper Editor in America” by the Village Voice. I had a general notion that he’d also been a great reporter, but I knew little of his work covering the civil rights movement and then Vietnam. His book helped me understand the former. The latter I didn’t learn more about until I ran into him at a memorial service for our late friend and colleague Richard Ben Cramer in 2013.

“What are you working on?” he asked me.

“I’ve started work on a book about the Battle of Hue,” I told him.

“I was there,” Gene said. His was the first interview I conducted for this book, over several days at his home in Bath, North Carolina.

I learned only subsequently—and not from him—that he had not only been there; he was the first reporter on the scene. His well-reported and -written stories were the first and only true accounts of what was happening in Hue. It was a serendipitous discovery. I owed Gene a great deal for his support when I was a young reporter. Indeed, as I have written elsewhere, he and other editors at the *Inquirer* greatly enlarged not just my experience but my ambition. It was in doing research for this book that I realized what an exceptional newspaper reporter Roberts had been. I know of no better example. For all these reasons, this book is dedicated to him.