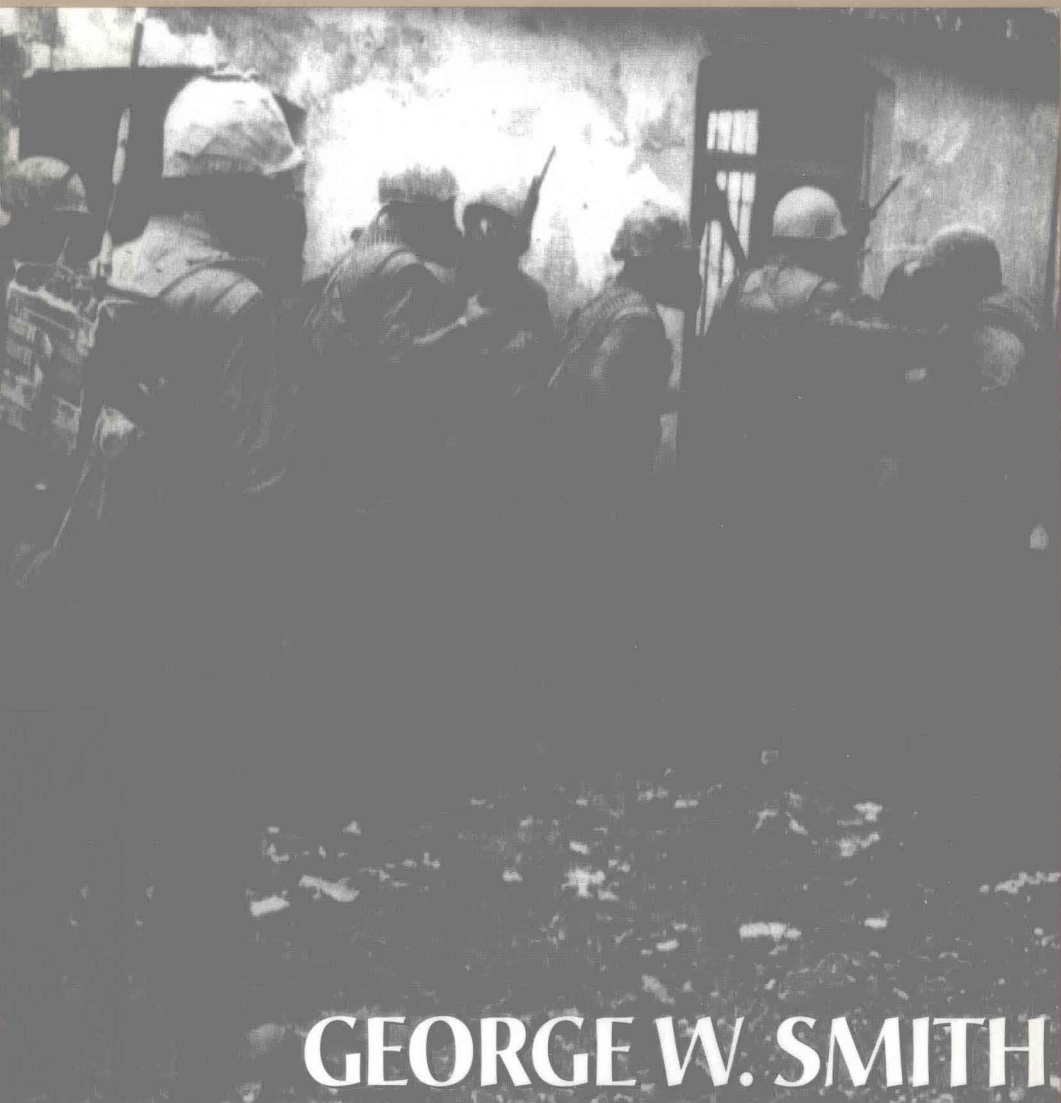


The Siege at Hue



GEORGE W. SMITH

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BOULDER
LONDON

Published in the United States of America in 1999 by
Lynne Rienner Publishers, Inc.
1800 30th Street, Boulder, Colorado 80301

and in the United Kingdom by
Lynne Rienner Publishers, Inc.
3 Henrietta Street, Covent Garden, London WC2E 8LU

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Smith, George W., 1940–

The siege at Hue / by George W. Smith.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 1-55587-847-4 (alk. paper)

1. Hue (Vietnam), Battle of, 1968. 2. Tet Offensive, 1968.

3. Vietnamese Conflict, 1961–1975—Personal narratives, American.

4. Smith, George W., 1940–. I. Title.

DS557.8.H83S65 1999

959.704'342—dc21

99-11843

CIP

British Cataloguing in Publication Data

A Cataloguing in Publication record for this book
is available from the British Library.

Printed and bound in the United States of America

∞ The paper used in this publication meets the requirements
of the American National Standard for Permanence of
Paper for Printed Library Materials Z39.48-1984.

5 4 3 2 1

THE SIEGE AT HUE

Preface

The smell attacked my senses like a blast of hot air from an oven. It was a sour, pungent odor that reminded me of decaying garbage. The first whiff was the worst. Once I started breathing through my mouth it wasn't so bad.

Old women, aided by their children, carefully scooped away handfuls of sand from an individual grave in a football-sized field just outside the walled city of Hue. The diggers, a tattered crew of dirty ragamuffins, wore bandanas over their faces to keep from gagging on the smell.

Slowly, as the sand was removed, part of a body came into view. Then another and another. The bodies of men, women, and even children were uncovered, some after weeks of repose in their sandy graves. Some had bullet wounds, others had their arms bound from behind by rope or wire. Many had their mouths open, silent screams frozen on their faces.

The bodies were wet as if they had been drenched in water before being interred. It appeared that many had been buried alive.

The old women knelt beside each pit and, in slow rocking motions, lifted their faces and blackened teeth to the sky and filled the air with long, mournful cries. Their faces were distorted in agony, and the moaning, interrupted only by sobbing and rhythmic breathing, continued for half an hour or more.

Ten feet away, another group unearthed another body to more wailing. Another and another. Soon, the smell and mournful baying rolled across the barren landscape. The sound reminded me of a pack of wolves howling at a new moon.

Each body was gently dragged to a piece of level ground. The families gathered around and the weeping intensified. Those dead who were bound with wire or rope had their shackles gently

removed, and their arms were positioned across their chests. Wooden flatbed wagons appeared, and the bodies were loaded aboard for the trip to a family burial plot. The holes in the ground were left unfilled.

It was warm and sunny that unforgettable morning in March of 1968, the first pleasant weather in Hue in almost two months. How ironic that something so heinous had been discovered on such a lovely day.

My jeep driver and I stayed behind, watching the families plodding slowly back toward the city with their human cargo. We stared into the vacant holes without a word passing between us. After the previous month's carnage during the Battle of Hue, both of us were numbed by the sights and smells of death.

The Battle of Hue, which raged from 31 January to 25 February of 1968, was the largest single engagement of the Vietnam War, claiming a total of 5,713 lives (142 U.S. Marines, 74 U.S. Army, 384 Army of the Republic of Vietnam, and 5,113 enemy). In the weeks and months following the battle, between 2,800 and 3,000 more bodies, many of them civilians, were discovered in shallow graves around the city, most of them victims of coldblooded murder by North Vietnamese and Vietcong troops and their sympathizers.

The world paid little attention to these atrocities in Hue. Unlike the My Lai massacre by U.S. troops, which occurred at about the same time but was covered up for 20 months, the ghastly events at Hue became mere footnotes in a highly unpopular war.

Historians agree, however, that Hue was the scene of the most vicious street fighting since Seoul in the Korean War. With South Vietnamese and U.S. units surprised by superior forces and hovering on the brink of annihilation for so many days, the struggle at Hue reminded some of the older U.S. veterans of World War II's Battle of the Bulge.

Few doubt that the Tet offensive of 1968, and the Battle of Hue in particular, was the turning point in U.S. involvement in the Vietnam War. Even though the North Vietnamese and the Vietcong sustained huge losses and failed to accomplish their primary purpose—to rally the South Vietnamese to their side—they had shown an amazing willingness to endure the U.S. forces' awesome firepower beyond anyone's expectations and often to the bitter end.

Other experts believe that the North Vietnamese took full control of the war after the Tet offensive. They had to because the Vietcong were virtually wiped out. The Tet offensive of 1968 and the long siege at Hue caused the United States to reexamine its policy in Vietnam and then slowly reverse its involvement.

To those of us on the ground in Hue there was little thought given to any long-term consequences. We took it one day at a time, just praying to survive.

Although I personally witnessed many of the events in this book and have relied heavily on my own notes, records, and interviews, my memory was refreshed by rereading the many after-action reports filed by the various participating units, some of which I wrote myself. Also of great help were the dozens of newspaper clippings and magazine articles on the battle that I perused at my local library. I found the two main books on the battle, Keith Nolan's *Battle for Hue* and Eric Hammel's *Fire in the Streets*, to be very accurate and well done, especially when documenting the contributions of the U.S. Marine Corps. Last, I want to thank the dozens of people I interviewed and reinterviewed in recent years, particularly Brig. Gen. Ngo Quang Truong and Capt. Tran Ngoc Hue and all the U.S. advisers with the ARVN 1st Division and the Vietnamese Airborne—the "Red Hats"—for their cooperation and kindness. Without their help and encouragement this book would have added little to the knowledge we already had on the Battle of Hue.

G.W.S.

Chronology

Allies

Jan. 31, 1968, 0340, NVA rocket attack on all sections of Hue. Enemy troops overrun all of city except the ARVN 1st Division headquarters in the northern corner of the Citadel and the MACV compound in the southern section of Hue. At 0800, National Liberation Front flag raised over Citadel; 1420, two U.S. Marine companies from Phu Bai, 11 kilometers south of Hue, arrive at MACV compound.

Feb. 1, ARVN relief forces arrive at 1st Division headquarters in Citadel from the north; another U.S. Marine company arrives at MACV compound.

Feb. 2, a fourth U.S. Marine company arrives at MACV compound.

Feb. 3, U.S. Marines set up regimental headquarters at MACV compound; U.S. Army commits battalion from 1st Air Cav northwest of city.

Feb. 4, An Cuu Bridge on Route 1, 3 kilometers south of city, blown up.

Feb. 5, a second air cavalry battalion committed northwest of city.

Feb. 6, U.S. Marines take Thua Thien provincial headquarters and prison complex.

Feb. 7, 0500, enemy sappers blow up main bridge across Perfume River; General Westmoreland flies to Da Nang to assess situation.

Feb. 11, two U.S. Marine companies and five tanks arrive in Citadel.

Feb. 12, rest of U.S. Marine battalion and two Vietnamese marine battalions arrive in Citadel; three Vietnamese airborne battalions depart for Saigon.

Feb. 13, initial U.S. Marine attack stymied at line of departure; Gen. Creighton W. Abrams establishes MACV forward headquarters command post at Phu Bai.

Feb. 14–15, huge bombardment of supporting fire directed against enemy strongpoints in Citadel.

Feb. 16, ARVN 1st Division commander, Brig. Gen. Ngo Quang Truong, flies to Phu Bai to brief Vice President Nguyen Cao Ky; a company from U.S. 101st Airborne committed northwest of city; a third Vietnamese marine battalion arrives in Citadel.

Feb. 19, a third air cavalry battalion committed northwest of city.

Feb. 21, U.S. Army forces overrun enemy regimental headquarters at La Chu northwest of city; U.S. Marine replacement company arrives in Citadel.

Feb. 22, two Vietnamese ranger battalions arrive in Citadel.

Feb. 24, 0500, ARVN troops raise South Vietnamese flag over Citadel; 1515, Vietnamese Black Panthers sweep through Citadel's Imperial Palace area.

Feb. 25, Citadel officially declared secure; President Nguyen Van Thieu arrives in Citadel to congratulate defenders.

Enemy

(From captured document, entitled "Twenty-Five Days and Nights of Continuous Fighting for the Wonderful Victory")

Jan. 31, 1968, 1233, attack and control the city. Assault eight advances; strike and kill one hundred enemy; destroy four M113s and many aircraft.

Feb. 1, attack Tay Loc airfield, destroy 40 aircraft and beat back all counterattacks; kill many enemy.

Feb. 3, continue to beat back counterattacks and destroy and kill hundreds of enemy and completely control the city.

Feb. 4–6, destroy nine supply boats (4th, two boats; 5th, two boats; 6th, five boats) all loaded with U.S. troops and weapons.

Feb. 7, destroy one battalion and one company of enemy at Chanh Tay Gate (northwest wall) and Theu Quan culvert (center of west wall).

Feb. 8–10, beat back many phases of enemy assaults and destroy many enemy.

Feb. 11, kill 40 enemy at Chanh Tay Gate; destroy one boat and capture many prisoners, one a captain of the puppet troops.

Feb. 12–13, beat back counterattacks and seize the locations.

Feb. 14, beat back 10 assaults at Dong Ba Gate (center of northeast wall) and at Thuong Tu Gate (southeast corner) and Chanh Tay Gate and Cuang De Street (western corner); kill four hundred enemy, down one aircraft, destroy two APCs; one cell of VC fight the enemy the entire day and destroy 50 enemy and seize the locations, destroy one more boat.

Feb. 17, beat down five phases of assaults, kill hundreds of enemy; capture eight.

Feb. 18, beat back five counterattacks, kill 190; destroy two APCs; bring down two airplanes; destroy six boats (supply boats containing 40,000 liters of gasoline).

Feb. 19, beat back three phases of counterattacks; kill two hundred enemy; destroy one boat.

Feb. 20–21, engage with enemy forces in Bon Tri, Bon Pha (to the northwest); kill more than two hundred Americans, shoot down three combat boats loading enemy troops and weapons.

Feb. 22, beat back seven phases of counterattacks, kill hundreds of

enemy in Citadel; kill one hundred Americans (including 30 Korean troops "Pac Chung Hy"), destroy two trucks, two boats, kill 80 more Americans in La Chu.

Feb. 23, counterattack and kill 50 enemy, destroy one assault boat, two other boats, kill 23 American in Thuong Tu Gate, Dong Ba Gate; capture 25 rifles; during 3 days (21–23) kill four hundred Americans at An Hoa (outside northeast corner); shoot and burn one helicopter.

In February 1966, at a strategy meeting in Honolulu, President Lyndon Johnson asked his commander in Vietnam, Gen. William Westmoreland, what his next step might be if he were the enemy commander.

"Capture Hue," General Westmoreland answered without hesitation, explaining that the city was the symbol of a unified Vietnam. "Taking it would have a profound psychological impact on the Vietnamese in both the North and the South, and in the process the North Vietnamese might seize the two northern provinces as bargaining points in any negotiations."

Two years later—almost to the day—the enemy overwhelmed Hue and held much of it for nearly a month. The only combat troops to resist the initial assault were a depleted South Vietnamese company. The nearest U.S. troops were seven miles away.

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CHAPTER ONE

Next Stop, Vietnam

The road to Vietnam began for me in Panama in mid-July of 1967 where I was sent to attend a two-week jungle warfare course.

I was 27 and a U.S. Army captain with over 3 years of active-duty service, and I had just completed a 17-month stint in a mechanized infantry battalion in West Germany. Most of the officers in my unit were West Pointers, and a few had already served in Vietnam as advisors. Some of the enlisted men had earned their combat infantryman badges in World War II and Korea. One officer was a former member of the French Foreign Legion. Vietnam was the next stop for most of the careerists, and many were looking forward to it.

If you were a career soldier, and most of the West Pointers and senior noncommissioned officers (NCOs) were, combat assignments were the quickest and surest routes to promotion or advancement.

It was different in my case. I was a reserve officer, having earned my commission through a college Reserve Officers Training Corps program, and I was obligated to serve only 2 years on active duty. I could have opted to end my military service after my tour in Germany. But Vietnam was on everybody's mind back then, and I had little trouble convincing myself that I would later regret this once-in-a-lifetime experience.

U.S. military history has always fascinated me; I grew up watching World War II movies, and my college major had been American history. Also, I guess I have always strongly believed that service to our country was the duty of all Americans, with no price too high to pay. I volunteered to extend my military service and looked forward to a tour of duty in Vietnam. What the hell, I told myself, if I did not go it would have been like dropping out of college after 3 years and never getting my degree. Plus, I had come this far in my military experience. Why not see the obligation all the way through?

I was buoyed somewhat by the degree of training I had received in Germany. We were constantly on combat-like maneuvers that included plenty of live-fire exercises at such historic World War II training grounds as Wildflecken, Hohenfels, and Grafenwöhr. How much more realistic could Vietnam be?

I left Germany in June of 1967, just as my unit was being put on alert for possible duty in the Middle East in what became the Seven-Day War. After reporting in to Fort Jackson, South Carolina, a few weeks later, I flew to Panama for a 2-week jungle warfare course. A canary-yellow Braniff jet transporting about 200 company-grade officers and senior NCOs landed at Howard Air Force Base outside Panama City in the dead of night. A 2-hour bus ride across the isthmus brought us to Fort Sherman, a small U.S. military base across the bay from Colón on the Caribbean side of the country.

The training was intense and comprehensive. Parts of it were even fun, like the time a 15-foot snake was passed around among class members seated outdoors on some bleachers. One of my classmates jerked his hands away from the snake and let its head bounce off a wooden plank. The docile critter did not seem to mind at all.

An emphasis was placed on living in the jungle. And though the training grounds were well trodden in many areas, there was still plenty of jungle to give you a feel for what it must be like in the bush country of Vietnam.

The temperature soared past 100 degrees every day. What did I expect in July in a place that was less than 10 degrees from the equator? Leeches were in every stream, and the mosquitoes were particularly nasty. The instructors told us to hang onto something or the mosquitos would lift us right off the ground and carry us away. The place even had scorpions.

We rappelled down cliffs, traversed fast-moving streams, and even participated in an amphibious landing. There were search-and-destroy missions, night ambushes, and an overnight road march that left us all exhausted. The coup de grace was a 2-day escape-and-evasion exercise through some of the wildest terrain in Panama.

There were marine and air force personnel in our class as well as a team of Navy SEALs, an independent bunch that ran rings around the rest of us with their zany and reckless behavior. I was glad they were on our side.

The best news of our 2-week adventure came on graduation day, when we were told our 1-year Vietnam tour had commenced the day we reported in at Fort Sherman. Along with our Jungle Expert badges we received our orders. I was assigned to the 9th Infantry

Division, which operated in the Mekong Delta region of Vietnam, south of Saigon.

After a brief leave, I reported to Travis Air Force Base near San Francisco and then, a couple of days later, boarded a military C-141 for the 20-hour journey to Vietnam. Because the seats of the military aircraft faced to the rear I thought, "great, I'll get to see where I've been but not where I'm going." I bought two TV turkey dinners and five martinis for the trip. The plane stopped at Wake Island for an hour to refuel and then again at Clark Air Force Base near Manila before finally landing at Bien Hoa in Vietnam. It was 0745 hours when I first set foot on South Vietnamese soil.

One of the first things I noticed was that most of the Vietnamese I saw were women. Before I could ask the obvious, a U.S. security guard at the airport told us: "I know what you're thinking. Where are the men, right? They're not here. They're in the jungle with the Vietcong. They are planting mines and sharpening their bayonets, getting ready for fresh meat like you."

Very funny, I thought. But, for all I knew, the guard's comments were probably true.

Vietnam was hot, dusty, and noisy. The "whap whap" sound of helicopters flying overhead was almost continuous. Another constant was the crush of traffic. The buses taking us to a replacement center had to fight their way through truck convoys, motorbikes, and bicycles. Everybody and everything seemed to be on the road at the same time, hurrying somewhere with a me-first attitude. It was like New York City at rush hour, only a lot of these people were carrying guns.

The roads were also lined with hustlers, either begging for hand-outs or trying to sell you anything from candy and cigarettes to radios and televisions. Many of the buildings were covered with netting.

"That's to keep the VC from throwing grenades through the windows," our bus driver said. "Sometimes it doesn't work very well, though. The VC wrap the grenades with string and fishhooks. When they throw the grenades, the fishhooks hang the grenade on the netting and blow out the windows and anything else in the way."

New sounds replaced the old at night. Sporadic gunfire interspersed with artillery could be heard from dusk to dawn. None of the noise bothered me on that first day; I was so exhausted after my long journey across the Pacific that I fell fast asleep without any problem at all. Ah, yes, the sleep of the innocent.