

A Critical Review: *Hue, 1968* by Mark Bowden

By Nicholas Warr, Veteran, Operation HUE CITY
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Mark Bowden, who wrote the excellent book, *Black Hawk Down*, took on the very challenging task of attempting to document one of the largest, deadliest and most controversial battles of the Vietnam War in *Hue, 1968*. This epic book includes 600 pages of dialogue, commentary and information (including glossary, notes and index). Bowden has introduced several new “voices” from the past, including American veterans of that battle and those who fought on the other side, VC and NVA soldiers, as well as many American journalists who covered the war and this historic battle. Over a period of five years, Mr. Bowden studied and researched, conducted countless interviews, and traveled twice to Vietnam. This was clearly a huge effort, but after a thorough reading of the book, I’m left wondering how this new bestseller could possibly be cursed with so many errors and omissions.



Throughout this book, Bowden has committed serious mistakes in terminology (military equipment, geography, etc.), historical facts about people, military organizations and circumstances, as well as strategies and tactics, demonstrating that he does not possess a solid understanding of military chains of command and combat operations. In his acknowledgements, he thanks several veterans of this historic battle for reading the manuscript and making corrections. However, after reading every word, I learned that the book is filled with many historic flaws.

My main criticism of this book is that I believe Bowden dedicated so much time and effort (thus expending many, many words) documenting the *enemy* side of this historic battle, that he ran out of time and space to thoroughly and accurately document *our* side of the story while honoring our heroes, and that of the courageous Vietnamese troops serving in the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) who fought valiantly in Hue, and who paid a very heavy price.

Unfortunately, the affect of these errors and omissions created an incomplete history, a false impression of the reasons for events, incorrect and often confusing statements intended to inform readers about the details of this historic combat operation, yet often results in more confusion, and in several instances a denigration of heroic actions.

Strategies and Tactics:

Mr. Bowden begins the book with a discussion about the initial Johnson / McNamara war strategies (start deploying small units, followed by gradual escalation, body counts / kill ratios, etc.) but ignores the impact of the LBJ / McNamara *micro-management* of the war (i.e. selecting bombing targets to “send messages” rather than choosing truly strategic military targets, etc., etc.). Worse, in the case of Operation HUE CITY, our civilian leadership established Rules of Engagement that were completely out of balance with our ability to accomplish that mission. LBJ rejected their war plans, and blithely ignored the Joint Chief’s initial recommendations early in the war about how to prosecute the war *to win*. From that point on, our military leaders were seldom truly in control of combat operations; their advice was often dismissed out of hand, and unfortunately this attitude flowed forward into the Nixon Administration. One of the most important military “lessons learned” from the Vietnam War is that our civilian leaders, who often had very little or no experience with military operations, often decided they knew better than our experienced military leaders, and more often completely ignored military wisdom gained over millennia. I do not understand how serious historians consistently miss this important factor in the inexorable outcome of the Vietnam War.



2nd Lt. Nick Warr and 1st Lt. Scott Nelson

Bowden asserts that one of the strategic issues in the Tet Offensive was about securing the national rail lines “connecting the giant American base at Da Nang with the DMZ.” In fact, the South Vietnamese rail lines, except for a few short lines around Saigon, had been shut down very early in the war. This points to a lack of concern for historical accuracy on Bowden’s part. Rail lines were never a factor in I Corps from the very beginning of combat operations in 1965. Later, Bowden writes that the Vietnam War had been a questionable undertaking from the start, and that it had been sold as a “relatively minor military challenge.” While that is true, it was LBJ and McNamara who did the selling, *not* the U. S. Military leaders. Bowden fails to distinguish this important fact.

In his Epilogue, Bowden asserts that under President Gerald Ford, the U.S. “continued to provide substantial assistance to Thieu’s government,” when, in fact, it’s a matter of historic record that the U. S. Congress systematically reduced and then ended *all* support to the Thieu Government, starting in 1972 - 1973. By 1974, the South Vietnamese people were on their own, while the north continued to receive substantial support from both China and Russia.

Toward the end of the book, Bowden transitions into opinion, which he is entitled to do. Unfortunately, his seeming lack of interest, or plain ignorance of historic events during these tumultuous years, and his overall ignorance of military strategy, becomes obvious as he opines.

The whole idea of pronouncing the Vietnam War, or any war for that matter, as an “Unwinnable War,” as Bowden and others have stated through their characters, is just ludicrous. This specific opinion by Bowden, along with many others he has accepted, is part and parcel of the Anti-war rhetoric imposed on our nation over the past five decades. I believe there is no such thing as an unwinnable war, if we, as a nation, when faced by war, possess the will to win.

Bewilderment regarding Military Matters:

Mr. Bowden made many mistakes in terminology, about equipment and geography. Some are minor, and a few are silly, but others are important. Bowden reports that the landing craft used to transport 1/5 down the Perfume River were LCM's (Mike Boats). LCM's could carry about fifty troops, maximum. When I crossed the Perfume on the 12th of February, the boat I was in was an LCU, and it was loaded to the gunwales with tons of ammo and probably 100 or more Marines. Had that LCU been hit by enemy fire, most of us would have died.

Bowden relates that a U. S. Navy Corpsman claimed he was *required* to carry a rifle. I had Corpsmen *choose* to carry more than the .45 caliber pistol they were *required to carry* for personal protection, but I've never heard about a Doc who was *required* to carrying a rifle. That just doesn't make any sense. I suppose it could have happened, but I would never have weighed down a U. S. Navy Corpsman with anything that wasn't necessary to do his job, which was to save lives. A rifle would have just been in the way.



Military and Historic Facts in Error:

Evidence of Bowden's lack of knowledge about military affairs in general, and specifically tables of organization, are rampant in this book. Bowden refers to Alpha 1/1 as a battalion (they are a company). Captain Ty Cobb was the American advisor of the ARVN Second Airborne *Battalion*, (not a *Division*).

Bowden has an NVA Major leading two regiments; an NVA general as a *battalion* commander; a 600-man NVA battalion commanded by a Lieutenant; and he insisted that “The top Front Commander inside the Citadel was *Lieutenant* Tang Van Mieu,” thus, a very junior officer was commanding a force that was confirmed to be at least 5,000 soldiers in size. Divisions are led by generals, not lieutenants.

In my mind, Bowden made near-fatal choices. He chose to focus on stories from the VC and NVA that far outweigh (in word and page count) those from the U. S. servicemen who fought in Hue, and there is almost NOTHING in this book from the South Vietnamese military viewpoint. Had there been balance, he might have been able to spend more time getting things right.

Charlie One; Tuesday, February 13, 1968:

We departed the 1st ARVN Division base just after “first light” and deployed south in a loose column formation along both sides of Dinh Bo Linh street, the street we had designated our Avenue of Approach. Our point element moved out when the last Marines of Alpha were about 50 meters in front of us; Thus, we were located about 200 yards from Alpha when that barrage of rockets exploded amongst those Alpha Company Marines.

Bowden claims that on the morning of 13 February, Charlie One (my platoon) was “several blocks back” from Alpha Company’s position when they came under attack, when, in fact, we were one block back from phase line green and a block west of Alpha’s position at that time. Bowden further states that it took us “several hours” to go on the attack, which finally started at around 4:00 pm, when, in fact, as soon as Alpha pulled back and they were replaced by a platoon from Bravo Company, we were ordered to move up and move out, on the attack; our first fight against the NVA waiting for us that morning on phase line green took place at around 1100.

There is nothing in 1/5’s Combat After-Action Report dated 2/13, that indicates the heavy fighting and horrific losses we took that day. The Unit Diary records confirm Charlie One’s tragic losses during that single day. I’ve since heard from a 3rd party, a fellow Marine who was there, who suggested that the Battalion radio chief “lost” the actual Situation Reports I personally and rather forcefully submitted that day.

Bowden reports that at the end of that too-long and tragic day, I had been “effectively demoted.” Anyone who knows just the basics of U. S. military rank structure, would know that it is impossible to demote a 2nd Lieutenant. As a group, we were already on the bleak bottom of the proverbial totem pole. The way I remember it, my job was suddenly and rather violently eliminated.

Bowden claims that our battalion commander, Major Bob Thompson spent the remainder of February 13th trying to get his men back to Mang Ca (adjacent to the 1st ARVN Division Compound along the northern wall of the Citadel, which was nearly a mile behind the “front line”) in one piece. Although Alpha Company pulled back to Mang Ca after being devastated by the initial enemy rocket attack (and possibly Thompson and his Command Group did as well), the Marines of Charlie 1/5 and that Bravo platoon on our left flank pulled back just one block from phase line green and spent the night in houses on the north side of that street, which was our Line of Departure.

Bowden states, "...there was hardly a Marine fighting in the Citadel who had not encountered underground bunkers filled with civilians, alive and dead." I'm one Marine who fought inside the Citadel of Hue who does not remember seeing anything like that. Although there were civilians inside the Citadel, they were all in the areas north of our TAOR, and never in harm's way. We found just one Vietnamese civilian inside the battlespace, the 27 city blocks which comprised our TAOR inside the Citadel – one old lady in a rocking chair. Bowden further claims that the Marines were using flamethrowers to burn bodies. Although I'm not certain of this related to the battles in the "New City," a huge suburban sprawl south of the Perfume River, to my knowledge no flamethrowers were used for any purpose inside the Citadel. Bodies of dead Marines were evacuated; bodies of South Vietnamese civilians were taken away by other civilians. I only saw one living civilian during the fighting inside the Citadel, and no dead civilians. The dead always stayed behind us. He further claims that "children were peddling beer, bulldozers were moving great piles of bodies into mass graves, and that on every block we found people hiding in holes." I never saw anything even resembling that.

The Night Movement:

This is a true, and I think very important story within the overall history of this battle, but Bowden distorted the story. 1st Lt. Pat Polk was absolutely a courageous Marine leader and did take command of Alpha Company in Hue. He lasted one day and one night before he was shot through the neck the next morning and was immediately medevacked. Pat did not go on that night movement, and it was not Thompson's idea; it was Scott Nelson's idea.

When Scott asked me to volunteer to lead that night assault, I resolutely refused to volunteer, because I "knew" it was a suicide mission, so Scott took the idea to Thompson as there were no more officers left in Charlie Company. Thompson then "volunteered" Alpha Company for the mission; this small yet determined assault force was led by SSgt. James Monroe, a very experienced and combat savvy leader.

I was with Scott and our gunny throughout that night, as we helped "soundproof" each Marine who went on that mission. In total, fewer than twenty Marines – a reinforced infantry squad and a Corpsman - went on that night movement mission. I looked every one of them in the eye, and I knew they all agreed with me. To a man, they *knew* they were about to die. Pat Polk was not there that night. He had already left the Citadel. This night raid turned out to be a brilliant maneuver, because although we were not at all aware of this, the NVA had taken to pulling back from their front-line positions well after dark and sleeping in the houses clustered around on the edges of each block. A three-story schoolhouse dominated the center of that rectangular-shaped city block.

During the pitch-black hours of that early morning, Monroe's Marines moved quietly across that street at around 0200, without any trouble, entered the schoolhouse, and quietly snuck up the three flights of stairs, all with no resistance. The NVA were soundly sleeping on the first floor, toward the back of the building, because since the very beginning of urban warfare Citadel-style, the fighting had simply stopped after dark. cautiously entered the school, quickly and quietly moved to the top floor, and hunkered down. They tried to get some sleep, but they were too restless.

Although there were many NVA sleeping on the ground floor, they stayed asleep. Right before first light, the enemy started moving back into their front-line positions, and the Alpha Company Marines on the top floor took those in the courtyard behind the school under fire, killing many of them through windows on the top floor and roof. The NVA, realizing that their lines had been breached, moved back one block and took up their already prepared positions south of the next phase line.



Additional Errors and Omissions:

Bowden perfunctorily describes one of the worst battles that occurred during Operation HUE CITY, in a single sentence. On February 6th, the NVA ambushed a large resupply convoy traveling toward Hue from the major combat base called Camp Eagle, the home of the 101st Airborne Division. Although I was nowhere near Hue at the time (we were stuck up on the Hai Van Pass, guarding the many culverts and small bridges up and down Highway 1 over the pass, especially the long bridge at Lang Co. I heard about it almost immediately, through the “rumor mill.” This extremely effective and very bloody enemy ambush, and the subsequent battles that took place trying to save those in the convoy by a hastily-assembled reaction platoon from Phu Bai, cost the lives of twenty (20) U. S. Marines, and nearly forty more were badly wounded throughout the rest of that afternoon. This story, which I consider to be an important part of American military history, was given short shrift by Bowden.

Mr. Bowden reports American warships out in the South China Sea fired salvos of Naval gunfire, including 16-inch guns, during the 3rd week of February, inside the Citadel in support of the 1/5 Marines. This could never possibly have happened. All naval guns, with their high-velocity, low-trajectory rounds, even those of the smaller caliber (5” and 8”) could have caused enormous “collateral damage.” The idea that an American battleship would be able to fire even one 16-inch shell into that mix is ludicrous. 16” naval guns were designed to penetrate battleship armor using armor piercing rounds. Fragmentation from a high explosive round can cause a lethal wound from 200 meters away or more. Detonation of even just one 2,300-pound shell from a 16” gun could instantly dig a crater 50’ wide and 20’ deep; concussion was likely lethal some distance beyond, maybe even 150 yards or so. Most of the fighting between the Marines and the NVA in Hue took place at very close range – 10 to 50 meters and sometimes even closer. Trying to destroy an enemy position in Hue by using naval gunfire would have killed as many, if not possibly even more Marines than the enemy.



John Olson, Stars & Stripes: Delta Company Marines making one of many assaults to capture the Dong Ba Tower

Last, but definitely not least, throughout this book, when referring to a U. S. Marine, Bowden calls us “marines” (lower case); most serious authors and historians have learned to capitalize the word “Marine” in that context. This is, certainly, the author’s choice, but Mr. Bowden should realize that in failing to do so, he is denigrating those of us who proudly wore the Eagle, Globe and Anchor.

In summation, I believe Mark Bowden has done a disservice to non-fiction military history enthusiasts, by releasing this book in its present form.