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

NONFICTION: "Hue 1968" is a masterful blood-and-guts account of the decisive battle in the Vietnam War.

By GLENN C. ALTSCHULER Special to the Star Tribune  |  JUNE 9, 2017 — 10:26AM

On Jan. 31, 1968, North Vietnamese soldiers shredded the yellow South Vietnamese flag at the Citadel in the ancient city of Hue. They raised a carefully designed new flag, with a yellow national star at its center, a bright Communist-red background, and two blue horizontal strips at the top and bottom, representing Buddhists and Catholics. A writer and a cameraman served as witnesses to the historic moment.

In the ensuing weeks, the U.S. military command continued to maintain that the coup had not taken place. The Tet Offensive, Gen. William Westmoreland insisted, did not prove that the enemy could strike anywhere in the country; it proved Hanoi's weakness.

In "Hue 1968," Mark Bowden, a former reporter for the Philadelphia Inquirer and the author of, among other books, "Black Hawk Down," draws on dozens of interviews with Vietnamese and Americans who were there to provide a masterful blood-and-guts account of the decisive battle in the Vietnam War.

Bowden endorses what is now the conventional wisdom that both sides miscalculated in Hue. A popular uprising of the residents of the city did not occur, as Hanoi expected, and North Vietnamese Army (NVA) and Viet Cong soldiers were forced to relinquish control of Hue at great cost. The battle convinced many Americans that the war was, at best, a stalemate. And, after noting that the corrupt regime of Nguyen Van Thieu and Nguyen Cao Ky in South Vietnam deprived the United States of a "legitimate or even marginally capable ally," Bowden dismisses as "preposterous" claims that the U.S. could have prevailed had it removed all restraints from its military.

The heart and soul of "Hue 1968" lies with its vivid and often wrenching descriptions of the "storm of war" as soldiers and South Vietnamese citizens experienced it. As the conflict "blew away all semblance of law, logic, and decency," Bowden demonstrates, "there were so many ways to die in Hue that it became impossible to sort causes." As they tried to escape the vicious violence enacted against "enemies of the people," thousands of refugees took flight, fleeing first one way, then another, "chased by gunfire."

Soldiers on all sides, Bowden emphasizes, struggled to come to terms with the brutal reality that doing everything right was no guarantee of survival. Many American servicemen — lieutenants as well as privates, Bowden reports — became convinced that their commanders "didn't know what they were doing, and were, as a result, throwing their lives away."

Bowden ends with a plea: "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."

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**Hue 1968**

By: Mark Bowden.

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