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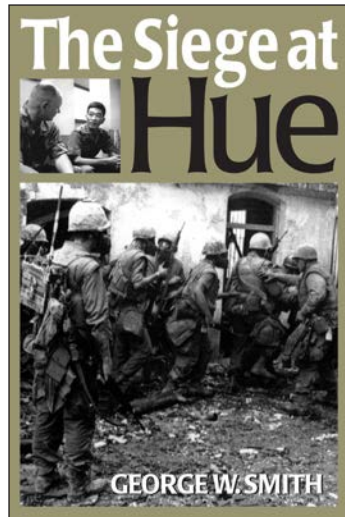
## The Siege at Hue

George W. Smith

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ISBNs: 978-1-55587-847-4 hc

978-1-62637-974-9 pb



LYNNE RIENNER PUBLISHERS

1800 30th Street, Suite 314

Boulder, CO 80301 USA

telephone 303.444.6684

fax 303.444.0824

This excerpt was downloaded from the  
Lynne Rienner Publishers website  
[www.rienner.com](http://www.rienner.com)

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## CHAPTER ONE

# Next Stop, Vietnam

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**T**he 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.

**A**fter 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.

We got acclimated quickly. After only 2 days in country, the new men were taken outside the defensive perimeter at Bear Cat, the 9th Division's homebase, for some live-fire exercises. We ran into another group on a similar mission and a brief firefight broke out. Luckily there were no casualties. Later that day, during a demonstration of the Claymore mine, a young sergeant standing next to me was hit in the leg by a stray pellet from the mine. A cynic in the back quipped: "At this rate we'll all have Purple Hearts by the end of the first week." The in-country orientation concluded with an overnight patrol through a nearby rubber plantation, which proved uneventful because the area was a relatively secure one.

It did not take us long to learn the Vietnamese language—or enough of it to ensure some form of effective communication. If something was good it was "number 1" and if it was bad it was "number 10." In Vietnam, I was to learn, things were either very good or very bad. There was nothing in between. In my entire tour of Vietnam I never heard of anything that was "number 2" or "number 9."

My specific assignment came through later that first week: I was to report to the 9th Division Information Office at Bear Cat. I guess the paper shufflers had noticed that I had experience in that area. My first military assignment in 1964, after completing Infantry School at Fort Benning, Georgia, had been as an information officer with the 1st Army at Governors Island, New York. I did not mind reprising that assignment at all.

The information job allowed me to travel throughout the Mekong Delta region, visiting each of the units of the 9th Division. In the first week I visited the 1st Brigade headquarters in Tan An and battalion outposts in Tan Tru and Bien Phouc. At the latter, I ran into a friend who had served with me in Germany, Capt. Tom Russell. He was now a company commander with the 5th Battalion, 60th Infantry Regiment (Mechanized). It was good to see a familiar face, even if he did look a lot older than the last time I had seen him.

While we toured his encampment I pumped him for information on what it was like in Vietnam. I asked him about rumors I had heard concerning atrocities in his area of operations, particularly the taking of ears from dead enemy soldiers and carving the number 9 into the victims. He did not confirm any of the stories but he did not deny them, either.

"They snipe at us all the time and once in a while drop mortars on us," he said. "We shoot back. We hardly ever see them because they fade away into the jungle or swamps. It gets frustrating some-

times. It's awfully tough to lose men who never get to see the person they are fighting."

Russell's encampment at Bien Phouc was located in a flat, open area and was completely surrounded by barbed wire, with guardposts at the corners. There was an impermanence to the place, as if everyone was ready to pick up and move at a moment's notice. Tents served as barracks, and each was surrounded by sandbags 5 feet high. The motorpool where the M113 armored personnel carriers (APCs) were parked was a muddy swamp. Several of the M113s were dug in as fighting positions.

"We don't have any down time here," Russell said, looking over his encampment. "Nobody is very far from a bunker or his weapon. We're ready to go at all times."

**M**y job was to gather information for stories I would write about 9th Division personnel. The stories were printed in our own unit newspaper and also sent to an individual's hometown paper. Often they would get picked up by *Stars and Stripes*, the U.S. armed services newspaper published in Tokyo.

I put in a lot of chopper time in the Mekong Delta, and it always amazed me how young and cool the pilots were. On one trip to the delta, the engine suddenly quit and we dropped what seemed like 1,000 feet before the engine restarted. One of the fuzzy-cheeked pilots turned to the other, smiled, and shrugged his shoulders; there was not the slightest hint of panic from either of the young pilots. I could not say the same for myself.

Another helicopter pilot, who couldn't have been more than 20, had blessed himself in the best Catholic tradition before liftoff and then turned to me and said: "I sure hope we make it."

Gathering up all the bravado I could muster, I looked him right in the eye and replied: "That makes two of us."

The door gunners were awfully young, too. They were also a colorful bunch, some donning cowboy hats in flight, and some regarded the entire landscape below as a free-fire zone, shooting at anything that moved, human or otherwise.

**I**n late August I visited all the wire services and broadcasting agencies in Saigon, a trip I made several times. I sat in on the daily afternoon military press briefing that the civilians derisively called the "five o'clock follies" or "jive at five." The briefings were very slick, complete with oversized maps, charts, and even film clips. They were delivered by a cadre of officers and NCOs in crisp, fresh-

ly starched uniforms to an audience of civilian correspondents, some of whom looked as if they had just slithered out of a delta swamp, which, in fact, some indeed had.

Many of the civilians and even a few military personnel had long since come to view these briefings as nothing but a propaganda session, a kind of dog-and-pony show designed to put the best possible face on the U.S. war effort. Even generals weren't spared the cynicism of the audience. One civilian journalist sitting next to me, after hearing a briefer state that in his opinion "the enemy no longer maintains a capability to mount, execute or sustain a serious offensive action," not so quietly whispered to a nearby colleague: "Mount this."

Escorting press members and VIPs on fact-finding missions was also one of my assignments, one that would later become a primary one. During my 6 months in the Mekong Delta I went on numerous military missions and visited many battle sites to assess damages. I also conducted dozens of interviews, often with a reporter or film crew in tow. I spent 3 days with the Mobile Riverine Force, participated in leaflet drops, and attended a multitude of awards ceremonies in the field. I even got to meet Charlton Heston, Gen. William Westmoreland, and Raquel Welch, the latter during Bob Hope's 1967 Christmas tour. I endured the ubiquitous mortar attacks and sniper fire but at no time did I feel particularly endangered. All that was about the change.

In early January, my boss called me back to Bear Cat to tell me I was being reassigned as an information advisor to the Vietnamese 1st Infantry Division, up near the demilitarized zone (DMZ), in the city of Hue, which was pronounced "way." The Military Assistance Command, Vietnam, or MACV (pronounced "mac vee"), was apparently unhappy with the increasing number of published reports of incompetence and personal greed in the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN). The U.S. brass had decided to assign U.S. information officers to Vietnamese units as advisors in a public relations move, one that would hopefully lead to better and more consistent coverage by the press in the United States.

The 1st ARVN Division was regarded as the country's best division, and Westmoreland, according to my boss, wanted our best U.S. information officer assigned there. If true, that was very flattering. But I wasn't buying any of it.

In my diary that night, I took note of my new job, ending with this pithy sentence: "It should be a most interesting assignment." How little did I know just how "interesting" my life was to become—or how close I would come to losing it.