Introduction

Welcome to Vietnam

IN MAY 2001, on a day that seemed oppressively hot even to a Mississippi native, while relishing an ice-cold bottle of water in the lounge of the Huong Giang (Perfume River) Hotel in Hue City, Vietnam, I discovered that sometimes a book can quite literally walk up and introduce itself to you. I was in Vietnam on the third and final week of a study-abroad program for my home university, the University of Southern Mississippi. The program, in its second year, was very much a labor of love and was designed to take a group of U.S. students and veterans to Vietnam to learn of “our war” through the eyes of its participants in the land where it was fought. The trip, though, had a deeper personal meaning. While too young to fight in the war, in many ways I grew up with Vietnam. As a child, I watched the war on the evening news, a war so complex that even my father could not explain it fully. Vietnam had always been a part of my life and represented a mystery that needed solving.

After working diligently for years in an effort to learn the facts of the Vietnam War, I felt that something was still missing, so I decided to go to Vietnam. Sitting there that afternoon in Hue City, after having slopped through rice paddies, slithered through the tunnels of Cu Chi, and listened while three U.S. veterans related tales of war and survival that were at once both horrible and touching, I felt more able to grasp the reality of the conflict. I even had the chance to meet and learn from our ex-adversaries, both from the North Vietnamese Army (NVA) and from the Viet Cong (VC). On that steamy afternoon, I awaited the arrival of the last piece of the historical puzzle, a veteran of the South Vietnamese military.

At the age of sixty-four, Colonel Pham Van Dinh, tall, ramrod-straight, and still a commanding presence nearly thirty years after his war, walked into the hotel and introduced himself to me in nearly
perfect English. The ex-Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) officer was scheduled to take us on a battlefield tour during which he would describe the ARVN’s epic struggle to recapture Hue City during the Tet Offensive, in 1968. I knew little about Colonel Dinh other than that he had fought heroically in the battle and that he was brave enough to risk the ire of his own government by talking to my group. After some polite conversation and a sweltering battlefield tour of the city, we all boarded a bus for the drive to visit the old U.S. Marine base at Khe Sanh, site of the historic siege in 1968.

After a winding journey down Route 9, we reached the abandoned U.S. Marine base at Camp Carroll. Dinh asked the driver to stop and instructed the group to exit the bus, and we were soon tramping after him up the steep slope. What had been a center of bloody fighting for so long during the war was now a nondescript hilltop covered by new-growth tropical forest. After a short climb, we came upon a particularly battered-looking memorial that seemed to occupy the geographic center of the middle of nowhere. Much of the writing had faded and some of the sculpture work had fallen to the ground, but Dinh needed no help in telling the group of the monument’s meaning. The crumbling concrete edifice marked the spot where Dinh had surrendered his entire regiment to the North Vietnamese during the Easter Offensive of 1972, after which he had changed sides and joined the enemy.

After our return to Hue, Dinh took me aside and asked if I would like to write a book about his life and career. It took me a moment to process the information. The man was a walking mystery, the only man of such high rank to fight on both sides in the Vietnam War. My next book was standing right there in front of me. Colonel Dinh warned me that there was much more to his story and that it would not be safe for him to conduct interviews in Vietnam. I would have to get him to America, where he could speak in freedom. It was a moment of classic and blinding irony. The communist government to which Dinh had defected during the war would not allow him to speak of his pre-1972 past; more than half his life was an unacceptable and dangerous embarrassment in the brave, new Vietnam. I had gone to Vietnam hoping to gain a fuller understanding of the American war in that country. Instead, I had discovered another war entirely, a Vietnamese war.

Upon my return to the United States, I read what little I could find
on South Vietnam and the ARVN, while Dinh, after calling in favors and convincing his government that he would not defect, eventually obtained an exit visa. After nearly a year, Dinh joined me for a month of interviews, during which it became clear that the convoluted course of his military career was central to understanding a Vietnam War that was much more complex than I had ever realized. However, I had a major problem. The critical evidence in the unfolding story came from a man who was a traitor, so corroboration of Dinh’s account of the war was paramount. As a result, I contacted as many U.S. and Australian advisers who had served with Dinh as possible. I also searched out members of the American Vietnamese community who had known Dinh. The details gleaned from these sources were invaluable in painting a fuller and more reliable portrait of the hero turned traitor. During my continued research, though, a single name kept recurring: Lieutenant Colonel Tran Ngoc Hue. Several people, ranging from U.S. advisers to South Vietnamese generals, told me that I needed to interview Hue as a balance to the story of Dinh. As luck had it, I discovered that Hue lived in Falls Church, Virginia.

After meeting Hue’s family over a wonderful, traditional dinner and convincing them that I meant their father no historical harm, he and I sat down to work at the kitchen table in his comfortable suburban home. I had stepped into the world of the Vietnamese expatriates, at once both exotic and as American as apple pie. Full of an ardent patriotism for two countries, one of which is now a distant memory, the Vietnamese expatriate community is a living, vibrant entity all its own. Tran Ngoc Hue’s home served as an introduction to the community and presented an interesting juxtaposition of things American and things Vietnamese, things new and things old. As I leafed through a proffered collection of family photos, I could not help noticing that the same album contained pictures of Hue’s daughter’s graduation from the University of Maryland and pictures of Hue’s graduation from the Vietnamese National Military Academy, the West Point of South Vietnam. I looked up from the tangible metaphor of Vietnamese expatriate life and was happy to note that Hue was in good spirits, even though he was aware that I had interviewed and was writing a book about the despised traitor Dinh. Only as I listened to the tales of my soft-spoken host did I come to realize that Dinh and Hue had once been friends, brothers-in-arms in the crucible of war. Their lives had once been mirror images but had come to dramatically
different ends. I realized that the story of Tran Ngoc Hue was indispensable; he was the untarnished hero to Dinh’s tortured traitor. Only with the inclusion of an account of Hue’s life would the story become whole.

Mirrored Lives

At its heart, Vietnam’s Forgotten Army is a story of two men at war. From their beginnings in the villages surrounding prosperous Hue City in central Vietnam, the lives of Pham Van Dinh and Tran Ngoc Hue seemed to be intertwined. Though they did not know each other as children, in part because of ties of family and faith, both gravitated toward careers in the military. The elder of the two by nearly five years, Dinh blazed a path that Hue soon followed into the ranks of the officer class of the ARVN. Once in the military, the two men came to know each other well, for they shared a common drive, ability, and devotion to their fledgling nation. The two returned to the Hue City area to assume their commands. Noticed for their military and intellectual prowess, both men enjoyed meteoric rises, sometimes shared the same U.S. advisers, and even commanded the same elite unit, the Hac Bao (Black Panther) Company of the 1st ARVN Division, at different times. After both of the young men had been chosen to become the military protégés of the legendary commander of the 1st ARVN Division, General Ngo Quang Truong, Dinh and Hue next rose to iconic fame as the two brightest young stars in the ARVN for their exploits in the battle for Hue City during the Tet Offensive of 1968. As the two comrades-in-arms reached their military maturity, they watched in dismay as the war unraveled around them, a soul-wrenching process that led Dinh and Hue, so similar in so many ways, to shockingly different conclusions. While Hue fought on to the end against bitter odds, Dinh chose to become a traitor. In the wreckage of their war, Dinh became a hero in the new, communist Vietnam in which Hue was an imprisoned outcast. Even though their lives had seemingly diverged completely, Dinh and Hue remained inexorably linked even during a Vietnamese Diaspora that spanned both decades and continents.

Making sense of the reasons why the lives of Dinh and Hue were so intertwined and yet came to such different military conclusions and
understanding the fundamental reality of their decision-making processes as the war came to its end requires use of historical tools outside the realm of simple biography. To understand Pham Van Dinh and Tran Ngoc Hue, it is necessary first to understand the complex reality represented by the institution to which both men dedicated their lives—the Army of the Republic of Vietnam. *Vietnam’s Forgotten Army,* then, is not only a dual biography of Dinh and Hue but also a study of the institutional strengths and weaknesses of the ARVN and its place in the wider Vietnam War. While an understanding of the ARVN is a necessary prerequisite to the story of Dinh and Hue, a vivid picture of the lives of the two men is essential for a fuller understanding of the ARVN. Together, the careers of Pham Van Dinh and Tran Ngoc Hue included very nearly the entirety of the Vietnam War and its military aftermath. Hue served in the ARVN from 1963 until his capture in Laos in 1970, then spent thirteen years in the prisons of North Vietnam, and finally lived under house arrest in Saigon before emigrating to the United States in 1991. Dinh served in the ARVN from 1961 until his surrender during the Easter Offensive in 1972 and then served in the NVA until his retirement in 2003. Seeing the conflict through the eyes of Dinh and Hue, then, offers a unique historical opportunity to view both the depth and the complexity that was Vietnam at war.

**ARVN: The Forgotten Army of Vietnam**

The ability of South Vietnam to persevere in its struggle for survival hinged on the efforts of the Republic of Vietnam Armed Forces, but especially on the Army of the Republic of Vietnam. Caught amid a historiography that is focused squarely on the cathartic American experience in Vietnam, the ARVN and its struggles have until recently been historically invisible. When not ignored in traditional Western accounts of the conflict, the ARVN often receives only passing, damning reference as a collection of bumbling cowards who were reflective of a political and national system that was broken beyond repair. Even when the ARVN receives more balanced treatment, the proclivities of Western historiography are obvious. Two major studies exist regarding the Easter Offensive of 1972, which took place after the vast majority of U.S. troops had exited Vietnam and which was arguably the ARVN’s most important battle of the entire conflict. While the works
are well researched and of great importance, their very titles indicate an American focus on what was quintessentially an ARVN battle: Colonel G. H. Turley’s *The Easter Offensive: The Last American Advisors, Vietnam 1972*, and Dale Andrade’s *America’s Last Vietnam Battle: Halting Hanoi’s 1972 Easter Offensive.*

That South Vietnamese nationalism was porous, leaving reservoirs of popular indifference or outright support for the enemy, and that the ARVN was certainly a flawed instrument does not mean that South Vietnamese nationalism did not exist or that the ARVN was predisposed to failure. Certainly the South Vietnamese state and the ARVN were imperfect. Even so, South Vietnam fought for twenty-five years, and the ARVN lost more than 200,000 dead. After the war, millions chose to flee South Vietnam rather than live under the suzerainty of their brothers from the North. It is apparent that the ARVN, having fought for so long and suffered so much, was not a historical parody, peopled by cardboard cutout officers and men. Only by putting a more human face on the ARVN and by understanding its complexities can historians truly begin to understand the nature of that troubled institution—and thus the nature of the Vietnam War.

The breadth and depth of Dinh’s and Hue’s military experiences allows for a tantalizing and revealing glimpse into the inner workings of the South Vietnamese military. Dinh began his military career as an aspirant officer and at the time of his surrender was in command of a regiment, while Hue commanded units that ranged in size from Platoons to battalions. Both were sensitive observers and fully recognized the ARVN’s potentially fatal weaknesses, including debilitating internal political infighting and corruption, that both adversely impacted the ARVN war effort and nearly cost them their lives. Dinh and Hue, though, also witnessed something far too often forgotten—South Vietnamese military bravery and devotion, amid a continuous cycle of war against a stalwart foe. Though the costs were high and the odds long, the ARVN fought on, even after U.S. withdrawal from the conflict had arguably dashed any hopes for ultimate victory, a victory that both Dinh and Hue believed had come agonizingly close before their military lives and the life of their fledgling nation tragically were destroyed.

A close examination of the lives of only two young officers cannot propose to represent all of the ARVN. However, examining the extraordinary lives of Dinh and Hue serves to place the Vietnam War
into the critical and understudied rubric of the South Vietnamese military experience. If Dinh, Hue, and the ARVN were of the same martial stock as their communist foes, NVA and VC forces that were so lauded by the bested Americans, it poses an entirely new question. Instead of asking in wonder why the South Vietnamese fought at all, why not ask why, with such sterling raw material, South Vietnam did not win its war? With the aid of the American colossus on the side of South Vietnam, why is it not reserved for the descendants of the North Vietnamese to wonder at the nature of their eventual defeat? If the ARVN was not fatally flawed, if it had even a chance to seize a nationalist mantle, if even some of its leaders were wise and brave, if its men were more than pitiful excuses for modern soldiers—then the questions become much more vexing. Perhaps the ARVN has served as the excuse for America’s lost war for too long, and it is time to consider more fully America’s role in the defeat of a nation that actually did have a chance to survive.\(^5\) The questions concerning the nature of the flawed relationship between the ARVN and the United States, though, come full circle in the troubled end to Dinh’s career, for Pham Van Dinh not only represents what was good and right about the ARVN; he also perhaps represents the worst of the ARVN. In the end, he chose to abandon his country and became a traitor. It will be the central focus of this work to attempt both to explain why Dinh changed so much while Hue did not and to discern how the most critical decisions of their lives were reflective of the Vietnam War as a whole.

A Flawed and Tragic Alliance

Above all else, Pham Van Dinh and Tran Ngoc Hue were combat commanders and leaders of men in battle. In the crucible of combat, the two comrades witnessed an ever-changing war, from the pre-1965 chaos of guerrilla war, to the pitched battles of the “big-unit” war after the arrival of American combat units, to the urban maelstrom of the Tet Offensive, to the press toward presumed battlefield victory in the wake of Tet, to the grim realities of the American withdrawal from the conflict. As battlefield commanders of such long standing, Dinh and Hue occupied a critical, yet poorly understood, position at the nexus of the American and the South Vietnamese war efforts. Victory in Vietnam would come not through the might of American arms alone but
rather through a complete symbiosis of U.S. and ARVN effort. Instead, though, the military relationship between the United States and South Vietnam remained fatally flawed, as the Americans and the ARVN fought two different wars in the same country. In the formative years of the combined war effort, the American military essentially pushed the ARVN to one side in an attempt singlehandedly to destroy the communist threat. Made secondary in their own war for independence, ARVN units struggled first to find and then effectively to play their role in the ever-changing conflict.

At the confluence of the two wars in Vietnam stood the U.S. and Australian advisory efforts. Tasked with aiding ARVN units in becoming effective combat adjuncts to the American war, the advisers were both critical to the war effort as a whole and important observers of the reality that was the ARVN. In a role all too often regarded as only secondary to the dominance of American combat units, the advisers toiled in near anonymity in the jungles and rice paddies alongside their ARVN allies. Dinh and Hue worked with and often became close friends of their advisers, who came and went with monotonous regularity in their one-year tours of duty. At the sharp end of the Vietnam War for so long, the careers of Dinh and Hue provide a vantage point from which to view the successes and failures of the combined U.S.-ARVN war. Testimony from their advisers, so uniquely placed as observers of the critical overlap of the war efforts, also reveals the combat and social realities of an allied war effort that was fatally bifurcated.

At its heart, this is a story of two men at war. From initial skirmishes with a Viet Cong force that was only just finding its military balance, to first clashes with the vaunted NVA, to massive battles of attrition alongside their American allies, to the invasion of Laos and the Easter Offensive, Dinh and Hue fought gallantly in an intensely difficult war that seemingly had no end. Like characters from a Greek tragedy, the comrades soldiered on, only to have their lives and the lives of their families fall victim to forces beyond their control.

Both men were living testaments to the great strengths of the ARVN and of the American war in Vietnam. However, their lives also bore witness to how the weaknesses of the ARVN combined with the flawed symbiosis of the American war to doom South Vietnam to eventual defeat. While the mirror image lives of Dinh and Hue reveal much about the nature of both the ARVN and the American war ef-
fort, it is as their war neared its end, as their lives were shattered, that the central question of their wartime experiences becomes clear. As their war came crumbling down around them, both Dinh and Hue made difficult choices in deadly circumstances, choices that exacted their own retribution. Both men, the traitor and the hero, believe that they acted honorably in the most difficult decisions of their lives. That such can be the case in a war gone wrong is truly remarkable and does much to illustrate the immense complexity that was South Vietnam at war. However, the vexing question remains: how could two men who were so similar and so driven choose to follow such vastly different paths of honor as their country and war imploded around them?

A Note on Sources

While the present study makes extensive and careful use of the myriad archival and secondary sources available to researchers concerning the military effort in the Vietnam War, extensive written and taped interviews with Vietnamese, American, and Australian participants in the events described in the book form the core of what is in many ways a personal story of young men who were involved in the most dramatic and difficult events of their lives. The evidence provided by these archival sources and personal reminiscences serves both to corroborate and to add depth to the focus of the book—the military careers and lives of Pham Van Dinh and Tran Ngoc Hue. Vietnam’s Forgotten Army utilizes more than fifty-five hours of oral interviews with Pham Van Dinh and Tran Ngoc Hue as its bedrock source. In many ways, the interviews with all of the veterans involved were almost conversational in nature and as such do not lend themselves to long direct quotations. Additionally, for several of the interviewees, English is their third language. Out of respect for the source material, the author chose not to edit the grammatical structure of the interviews to cobble together material for quotations. However, all material within the study that is expressive of an opinion of one of the veterans is taken directly from an interview with that veteran. Any opinions expressed by sources external to the story or by the author are clearly indicated. In an effort to keep endnotes to a minimum, the beginning of each chapter makes clear which tapes from the Dinh and Hue collections the author utilized in writing that chapter. Similarly, footnotes within
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the chapters make clear which other taped and written sources the author utilized. All taped interviews utilized by the author are available for use by researchers and are housed in the Center for Oral History and Cultural Heritage at the University of Southern Mississippi. Similarly, all written interviews are available and are housed in the McCain Library and Archive at the University of Southern Mississippi.