

## Book Review

***Vietnam's Forgotten Army: Heroism and Betrayal in the ARVN.*** By Andrew A. Wiest. New York: New York University Press, 2008. xviii, 350 pages.

Reviewed by  
**Greg P. Guelcher**  
Morningside College

Transcending well-established narratives about extensively-researched topics like the Vietnam War can pose a significant challenge for historians. Finding material that incorporates the Vietnamese perspective in the war is equally daunting for professors who teach a general survey course on the topic. The literature (and especially popular survey texts) generally presents the Vietnam War as an American conflict, relegating the Vietnamese to the sidelines. Andrew Wiest's *Vietnam's Forgotten Army: Heroism and Betrayal in the ARVN* credibly undermines one commonly-accepted "truism" of the Vietnam War, while shedding new light on the South Vietnamese experience.

Wiest breaks new interpretive ground in recounting the story of the oft-maligned Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN). Wiest laments a tenacious yet incorrect portrayal of the ARVN as nothing more than "a collection of bumbling cowards who were reflective of a political and national system that was broken beyond repair" (5). Wiest admits that South Vietnam's state and its war machine were both, in a word, "imperfect" (6). However, in presenting case studies of two young ARVN officers, Pham Van Dinh and Tran Ngoc Hue, the author finds reason to believe that South Vietnam's collapse was not inevitable.

The military careers of Pham Van Dinh and Tran Ngoc Hue call into question the dominant view of ARVN troops as incompetent and uninspiring. Both men, Wiest points out, emerged from a long-established martial tradition more generally, and a family record of service to the state

more personally. Both were born into middle-class families and educated in elite Catholic schools where anti-Communism mixed with nationalism in the curriculum, and where teachers held up their charges as the nation's future leaders. Wiest argues that such exhortations to public service took hold, as witnessed by the seamless transitions Dinh and Hue made into military service in the newly-formed ARVN.

Dinh and Hue demonstrated their strong commitment to the Republic of South Vietnam through distinguished service in combat. Wiest focuses in particular on two well-known battles wherein Dinh and Hue both displayed exceptional valor: for Hue City during the Tet Offensive of 1968 and for Hamburger Hill in 1969. During the Tet Offensive, Hue commanded an elite rapid-reaction unit known as the Hac Bao (Black Panther) Company; Dinh, meanwhile, commanded the 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion, 3<sup>rd</sup> Regiment (2/3) of the ARVN 1<sup>st</sup> Division. Both of their units suffered heavy casualties in fierce house-to-house fighting while retaking Hue City from the Viet Cong enemy, and both men catapulted to national fame due to their unit's exploits: Hue's Hac Bao played a key role defending the 1<sup>st</sup> ARVN Headquarters in Hue City's Citadel and, in a tactically brilliant maneuver, seized the symbolically-charged flag tower; Dinh's 2/3 recaptured the historic Imperial Palace. Despite being marginalized in the American press, and seeing their efforts bad-mouthed after the fact by the local U.S. commander, Dinh and Hue had demonstrated to their fellow South Vietnamese (and their American advisors) what well-led, inspired ARVN troops could accomplish even in the face of determined enemy resistance.

Dinh, having acquired the sobriquet "The Young Lion of Hue" (122), demonstrated courage and impressive tactical skills the following year during the bloody fight for Hamburger Hill. While seared into the American national consciousness as an exclusively U.S. battle, Wiest notes that ARVN units fought alongside and suffered as much as their American counterparts. Wiest also documents the startling fact that, contrary to popular portrayals, it was not the Americans but Dinh's 2/3 that reached the summit of Hamburger Hill first, only to be ordered off by the commander of the U.S. 3<sup>rd</sup> Brigade, whose elements then reached the

summit and became national heroes back home. The story of Dinh's 2/3 was subsequently kept out of official U.S. combat after-action reports and hence largely erased from the historical record.

For Wiest, the hubris demonstrated by the U.S. military in purposefully consigning ARVN contributions at Hue City and Hamburger Hill to historical oblivion represent one of several lost opportunities of the war. From the beginning the U.S. military dominated the war effort. When first deciding to create the ARVN, the U.S. ignored Vietnam's long history of insurgency and constituted the ARVN as a traditional-style army dedicated to defending against a full-scale, WWII-style invasion. Then, beginning in 1965 with the Americanization of the war, the ARVN was largely relegated to a spectator's role dealing with pacification while U.S. troops fought the major battles. This bifurcation of responsibilities did little to boost the morale of ARVN troops, and gave rise back home in America to the perception that South Vietnamese soldiers were lazy and undependable. However, as Hue City, Hamburger Hill and other lesser-known examples demonstrated, where U.S. and ARVN troops cooperated closely they achieved considerable successes.

Unfortunately, as Wiest comments, U.S. interest in such cooperation was too little and too late. After Hamburger Hill the Nixon administration focused on rapidly drawing down the U.S. presence in Vietnam, choosing instead to turn the war over to the South Vietnamese in a process known as Vietnamization. However, after nearly twenty years of being consigned to the sidelines, the ARVN was ill-prepared to suddenly assume the mantle of leadership. Especially troubling, little had been done to promote reform in the top ranks of South Vietnam's military, where political loyalty still trumped talent and professionalism. Moreover, consigned to a largely secondary role, ARVN units became overly-dependent on Western advisors and the latter's control over U.S. air and artillery support. American drawdowns after June 1969 swept up Western advisors, leaving many ARVN units not only without one but often without anyone on staff possessing sufficient English skills to call in necessary U.S. firepower. Vietnamization helped set up the ARVN for failure.

The inherent weaknesses of South Vietnam's military, especially poor tactical decisions made by politically-minded generals, finally caught up with Dinh and Hue. Hue was captured after his unit was overrun during the bungled invasion of Laos in 1971. Dinh, as a Regimental Commander, elected to surrender his command to the enemy when confronted with conflicting and impossible orders during the Easter Offensive of 1972. As a worn-down Dinh rationalized, it was more important "to save the lives of his men" (262) than go down fighting.

Wiest admits that Dinh and Hue were arguably not representative of the ARVN as a whole, but the author views these young officers as prime examples of what could have been. They were, Wiest argues, talented warriors motivated by true patriotism. Both fought on stoically and with valor for almost twenty long years, engaged in nearly constant combat, and only quit fighting when captured (Hue) or surrounded and abandoned (Dinh). They and their American allies had even come "close to military victory in the year after the Tet Offensive" (302). Above all, the stories of Dinh and Hue offer tantalizing hints that the Republic of South Vietnam could have survived had the U.S. only treated the ARVN as more equal partners from the beginning, allowed the ARVN to fight the insurgency campaign for which the Vietnamese were better suited, and insisted on real reform of the South Vietnamese military especially at the top. Wiest poses an intriguing 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?" (7). The author's answer to this vital question should be of great interest to scholars and students of all levels alike.