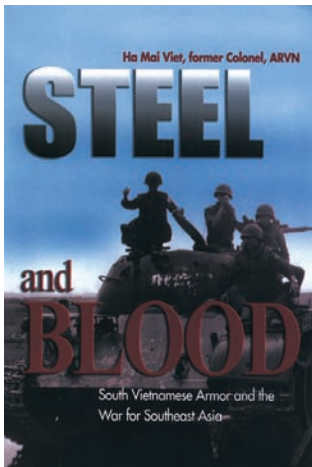

— BOOK REVIEWS —

STEEL AND BLOOD: SOUTH VIETNAMESE ARMOR AND THE WAR FOR SOUTHEAST ASIA

HA MAI VIET, former Colonel, ARVN. Annapolis: U.S. Naval Institute Press, 2008, 459 pages, \$40.00 USD, ISBN: 978-1591149194

Dr J.R. McKay



Ha Mai Viet's *Steel and Blood: South Vietnamese Armor and the War for Southeast Asia* is an ambitious work. The author tried to produce both a history of the armoured branch of the Army of the Republic of Vietnam¹ (ARVN) and a history of the armoured branch's unit's roles on the ARVN's battles with the Vietnamese Communist forces. While South Vietnam, and by default the ARVN, and its armoured branch lasted for only twenty years, this was a nation and an army that fought against its enemies for most of that time.²

Steel and Blood is effectively two smaller books in one. The first part is a "Combat History" of the armoured branch's participation in battles as well as a narrative of the war from an ARVN perspective. The second part of the book, "Military History," is a summary of the organizational history of the South Vietnamese Armor Corps, a compendium of information on that branch and a comparison of its equipment with that of its North Vietnamese counterpart.

The combat history describes a series of battles from 1963 to 1975, based upon ARVN's battles with the Communists. It starts with an orientation on the role of the armoured branch's units in a series of battles, but slowly transforms into a general narrative on the progress of the war. Colonel Viet tried to tell the tale of what happened, balancing between what he stated that he sought to do and providing the proverbial "bigger picture." While this might frustrate some readers, some observations merit mention.

First, one should keep in mind that he has provided a glimpse into a perspective that is often overlooked. The common narrative with regard to the ARVN has been that it was overly oriented on the byzantine politics of Saigon and insufficiently focused on waging counter-insurgency operations until 1968, when the Tet Offensive led to the development of a more combat-oriented ethos. Colonel Viet's book points out that a number of ARVN units often fought harder than was realized at the time or since despite the political proclivities of some of the ARVN's general officers.³

Second, the author left one with the distinct impression that ARVN units tended to view their advisors less as sources of advice than sources of firepower. One gets the sense that during the earlier years, in some cases, ARVN officers may have resented advice from the technically sound yet less experienced advisors. The perception of advisors as sources of firepower appears to have become more acute after the 1972 Easter Offensive. The Nixon Administration's policy of "Vietnamization" meant the phased withdrawal of American combat forces and increasingly shifting the burden of combat onto the ARVN. The Nixon Administration could not reverse this trend for domestic political reasons and sought to make greater use of air power as a result. This is a potential lesson for those destined for

advisory duties; those being advised may be more interested in one's capacity to influence the battle than one's advice on how to do same.

Third, the book leaves one with the distinct impression that as the Communists made the transition from guerrilla warfare to mobile warfare, the importance of ARVN's armoured branch increased. The early battles described organizations analogous to reconnaissance squadrons conducting economy of force operations against the Viet Cong; the later battles described ARVN tanks duelling with the North Vietnamese counterparts. Indeed, the Communist fielding of T-54 equipped units prompted the ARVN's fielding of a number of M-48 "Patton" equipped units to cope with the threat. This also supports a broader point about the nature of insurgencies. The endgame of any insurgency is to set the conditions for assuring victory once conventional warfare begins. Colonel Viet's accounts of battle start with clashes with the Viet Cong guerrillas in the mid 1960s and ends with tank battles between the North Vietnamese Army and the ARVN.

This section of the book, unfortunately, was at times difficult to follow. The author sought to describe both operational and tactical actions without maps, but made references to a series of place names. While there was an appendix providing general maps of South Vietnam and the Ho Chi Minh trail, the inclusion of a series of smaller maps that showed the location and how the battles occurred would have helped clarify the "combat history." Throughout this section, one was tempted to read the "military history" to get a sense of the evolution of the armoured branch's organizations before linking it to their combat performance.

The military history was a collection of related topics designed to inform the reader about the war, the armoured branch's evolution and its equipment. Again, the ARVN perspective was enlightening and it allows one to see the conflict through Vietnamese, albeit Southern, eyes, as opposed to the American or French perspectives. The organizational history began with the Vietnamese National Army of 1950, which was the army raised by the French within Vietnam during the war with the Viet Minh. The ARVN's armoured branch's roots lay in the creation of a series of reconnaissance platoons in 1950, which coalesced into companies⁴ in 1951, battalions by 1953 and regiments by 1954. After the Vietnamese National Army became the ARVN in 1955, these reconnaissance regiments became armoured cavalry regiments, four armoured regiments, a school and an amphibious group. In this period, they were equipped with Second World War era equipment cast off by the French that had been donated by the United States. During the 1960s, the older equipment was replaced by M113 armoured personnel carriers and M-41 "Bulldog" tanks.⁵

The book describes the 1960s as a developmental period where the armoured branch began to specialize more. Armoured cavalry companies were the most common unit, but the branch also began to field reconnaissance and tank companies as well. Indeed, the book left one with the impression that the ARVN armoured branch fought most frequently as companies within larger entities. Indeed, the ambitious combination of the "combat history" and the "military history" was most useful in illuminating such matters. Colonel Viet followed this discussion of the evolution of the branch's units with a compendium of facts. This had the effect of breaking a logical sequence of information in order to provide a series of interesting yet esoteric facts. He identified every commander of an ARVN armoured unit from the troop to the brigade level, the surgeons, and provided an account of their reunion at Fort Knox in 2000. Unfortunately, the multiple sources of information made this section, and indeed the book, seem less of a general history than a sourcebook or compendium of facts about the ARVN armoured branch.

Ha Mai Viet was a South Vietnamese Armor corps officer who served for 21 years, retiring as a Colonel. During that time, he had served in a number of different positions

within armoured units, but his two most noteworthy positions were as an Assistant Division Commander and as the chief of the Quang Tri province.⁶ This meant he had fought the Communists for at least twelve years before leaving his country in its final days. His patriotism and pride in his military have been reflected in his writing. In addition, he wrote some of the accounts of specific battles from a personal perspective. Readers should take these points in mind before passing judgement on the book's value.

Readers may be wondering what value a book about a nation that vanished a quarter century ago may have today. What can the ARVN's experience tell us today? Is it relevant for the Canadian Forces in the early 21st century? The short answer to such questions is yes; however, this depends upon one's perspective and interests. Those interested in comparing the evolution of different armoured branches may also wish to read those parts of the book. One should note that the ARVN's approach to combat development was based upon trial and error in battle; they did not have the luxury of time to consider their organizations in great detail. Furthermore, reading the ARVN perspective may give pause for thought for those destined for advisory duties about what those being advised may be thinking.

Endnotes

1. The RVN is better known as South Vietnam.
2. Many readers will no doubt be aware of the American participation in the war, spanning from 1964 to 1973 and the end of the war between North and South Vietnam (1973-1975), however, many may not be aware that South Vietnam had to contend with several armed groups in its infancy in 1955 and coup attempts from within the ARVN. The Communist insurgency began in South Vietnam in 1957 and North Vietnam began to provide support to that insurgency in 1959. A year later, the North Vietnamese sought to see all armed resistance groups in South Vietnam coalesce into the National Liberation Front for South Vietnam (NLF). Readers may recognize the other, slightly inaccurate, name for the NLF—the Viet Cong. The ARVN began fighting
3. There are two examples of this phenomenon. The author defends the actions and decisions of ARVN tactical commanders at the Battle of Ap Bac (January 1963) and the President's direction that contributed to the disaster in Operation LAM SON 719 (January 1971). For details, see: Ha Mai Viet, former Colonel, ARVN, *Steel and Blood: South Vietnamese Armour and the War for Southeast Asia*, (Annapolis: U.S. Naval Institute Press, 2008), 16-17 and 84. For examples of the criticism levelled on those two incidents, see: Lieutenant General Phillip B. Davidson, U.S. Army, Retired, *Vietnam at War: The History 1946-1975*, (Novato: Presidio, 1988), 573-604, and Neil Sheehan, *A Bright Shining Lie: John Paul Vann and America in Vietnam*, (New York: Random House, 1988), 203-265.
4. Readers should be aware that due to the influence of the U.S. Army, the ARVN armoured branch used the term "Troop" to describe subunit-sized organizations and the term "Squadron" for unit-sized organizations. This review uses the generic Canadian Army terminology of "company" and "battalion."
5. The M-41 "Bulldog" came into American service during the Korean War and entered ARVN service in 1964. It weighed 24 tons, its main armament was 76 mm, it had 12 to 38 mm of armour, and it could reach speeds of 72 km/h.
6. This province was in Military Region 1 / I Corps Tactical Zone, just south of the Demilitarized Zone. He left South Vietnam in 1975, during the final days of that country.