

Writing helps Vietnam vet find healing

Jennie Jones Giles
Times-News Staff Writer
jennie.giles@hendersonvillemews.com

It began as a catharsis, a way to release emotions and memories buried in the darkest recesses of his mind.

As Nicholas Warr wrote the story of his experiences in the Battle for Hue, during the Tet Offensive in 1968 in the Vietnam War, a second motivation surfaced, to tell the truth, a truth that contradicts the official history of the battle. That was 1983.

Today, Warr's book, *Phase Line Green: The Battle for Hue, 1968*, is on the Marine Reading List, is assigned reading for every Marine at the rank of staff sergeant and above, is in its third printing, has sold from 33,000 to 35,000 copies and sits on the bookshelves at the recently dedicated Marine Corps Museum at Quantico.

And, most importantly to Warr, the lessons learned are studied by today's Marines for use in urban fighting in Iraq.

"If we don't learn from history, we are doomed to repeat it," Warr said. "We better be telling the truth."

A young Marine

Warr, 61, of Flat Rock was 20 when he joined the Marine Corps in 1966, not long off the farm on which he grew up in Coos Bay, Ore. By February 1968, he found himself in the midst of the bloodiest city fighting of the Vietnam War in the ancient emperors' city of Hue.

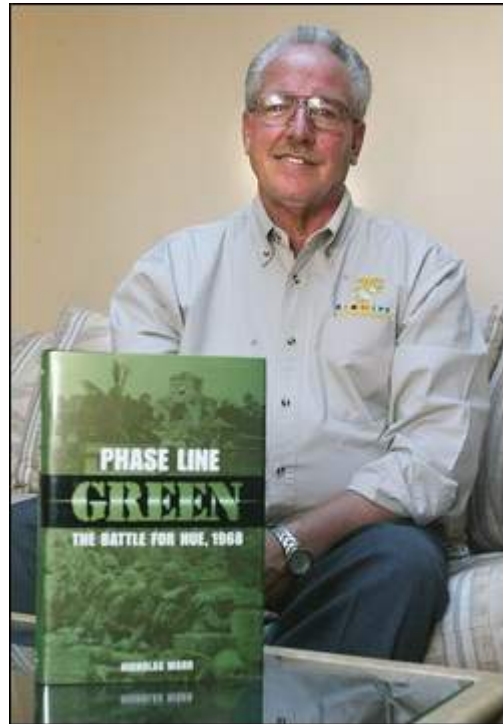
Fifteen years later, he could not shed a tear when his father died. He began talking to his older brother and remembering back to 1968 and Vietnam.

"I had tucked all memories back into the darkest recesses of my mind," Warr said. "When I remembered Vietnam, I began grieving for my men."

He began writing those memories, recommended therapy for those experiencing trauma.

Then he discovered his memories of fighting house-to-house, block-to-block in Hue, contradicted the version written by the general.

"I got very angry because they didn't tell the truth," he said. "The combat history was written as it should have happened, not as it really happened."



Nick Warr, author of 'Phase Line Green the Battle for Hue, 1968,' lives in Flat Rock. (MIKE DIRKS/TIMES-NEWS)

The rules of engagement, resulting in the loss of Warr's platoon, sent the Marines "into that battle with our hands tied behind our backs and outnumbered four to one," Warr said. "The first three days of the battle, we had 40 percent casualties because of the rules of engagement."

As Warr remembered and researched facts, a third motivation for writing the book surfaced, to tell the story of the young men who followed him into combat.

"Not once did any of those Marines ever let me down," Warr, a lieutenant in the war, said as he fought back tears.

"These men, every one of them, those who fought in Hue and on other battlefields, deserve recognition," he wrote in a follow-up to the book. "They deserve to be recognized again, and yet again, for the courage they displayed under fire, for their esprit de corps, for their personal and unflinching sacrifice, and for their love of their Marine Corps buddies. Actions, especially those punctuated by the shrieks, shreds and shrapnel of combat, speak much louder than words. These men spoke volumes through their courageous acts."

The Battle of Hue

The Tet Offensive began Jan. 30 and 31, 1968, when the North Vietnamese army and Viet Cong guerrillas made a major offensive in South Vietnam, overrunning cities and military posts.

"It felt something like being in the eye of a hurricane, but a hurricane whose rain and wind were steel and fire," Warr writes.

Hue, the revered capital of the ancient Vietnamese civilization, was the site of the most hard fought and bloodiest battle during the offensive.

Three themes consistently arise for students of the Vietnam War, Warr writes. American politicians micromanaged the war effort, extremely strict rules of engagement handicapped the troops despite overwhelming advantage in firepower and technology and the military leadership failed to resist or change the self-defeating scenario.

"Is there any other period in mankind's history of warfare during which a war's losing party won virtually every single battle?," Warr writes. "I think not."

Official reports on the Battle of Hue state that heavy artillery, air strikes and naval gunfire supported the troops on the ground from the beginning of the battle.

As Warr describes in graphic detail in his book, this was not the case.

"When I read these 'facts,' I felt that they were a betrayal of the men who fought and died there," he writes. "This discovery became my motivation, my impetus, to see that history was made accurate."

Warr served with the First Battalion, Fifth Marine Regiment of the 1st Marine Division during the Battle of Hue. He writes of almost 30 days of fighting, house-to-house combat, in one of the largest cities of Vietnam, which resulted in a "completely routed and nearly destroyed enemy force of over two North Vietnamese regiments by two battalions of Marines."

At first, the Americans and South Vietnamese underestimated the strength of the enemy and sent

in too few troops, historians write.

Warr tells the story of the beginning of the offensive, where his platoon was routing Viet Cong guerrillas in the jungle, and the move toward Hue, where they went days without food, to the arrival at Hue.

"We had walked through an invisible curtain from an achingly green, vividly living world, into a black and white madness of destruction and death," he writes.

The Marines of Charlie Company encountered ferocious fighting. At the end of the day Feb. 13, 1968, Warr's platoon, Charlie Company, was gone.

"Charlie One had been virtually destroyed on the street called phase line green, by a combination of a large force of determined NVA regulars and the rules of engagement established by American and South Vietnamese politicians," he writes.

The platoon went into Hue with 51 men. Only 13 came out.

"Part of me will be there, in that street, for those terrible moments, for the rest of my days," he writes.

"Repeated attempts were made to reverse the orders that restricted our heavy support," Warr writes. "My frantic requests for heavy firepower were all turned down flat."

The next day, Feb. 14, Warr is listening to the radio, crouched behind a wall, staring at a dead dog.

"... and I could hear the results of the stupidity -- the screams and the agony of the last moments of the dead and the curses of those who lay dying in the street," he writes.

Later, he describes the turning point in the fighting, when a lance corporal, a mortarman, charged out a side door and assaulted the main machine gun nest.

"Lance Cpl. Cheatwood's heroic act was the turning point of the battle for Hue's citadel fortress," Warr writes.

By mid-February, some heavy artillery and other support began arriving.

It was the end of February, after many acts of heroism and bloody fighting, before the city was re-taken.

Lessons learned

There was an unexpected consequence from his book; reunions with the men with whom he lived and fought in Vietnam. A veterans' group, the 1/5 Vietnam Veterans was established. They hold annual reunions and support scholarship programs of the First Marine Division Association.

"We also support the young Marines and sailors serving in our battalion today by sending care packages and conducting seminars designed to teach them about lessons learned during the Vietnam War," he said.

The city of Hue was the ancient capital of Vietnam, the center of the Buddhist religion, a center of commerce and government. It was a fortress.

"It was as if war broke out in Washington, D.C., and the mall was occupied by enemy forces," he said. "The job is to get the enemy out and how to do that without damaging the buildings."

Warr saw first hand what happens when protection of buildings is more paramount than the lives of the young men fighting the enemy. There was no air or artillery support in the first or second waves of fighting. The support only arrived after many Marines had died.

"I saw first hand what happens," he said. "I lost my platoon in one day. We didn't accomplish anything and I lost my platoon."

Marine Brig. Gen. Jim Mattis, who led the Marines' initial campaign into Afghanistan after Sept. 11, 2001, read Warr's book, along with other generals and the Marine Corps commandant.

"They stress these issues, the rules of engagement must be in balance with the unit's ability to accomplish their mission," Warr said. "Generals in the Marine Corps are students of history. They believe and live by it. They are very aware of what's gone before."

As generals planned for the Battle of Baghdad in March 2003, the officers discussed the rules of engagement and what to do if the enemy took a mosque or holy shrine.

"Gen. Mattis learned the lessons from history," Warr said. "He said, 'I'll not lose one Marine for a building.'"

"You can rebuild buildings," Warr said. "You can't rebuild a young man's life."

War in Iraq

"War is horrible," he said. "War should be avoided if at all possible. But I'm a realist. Sometimes situations require us to go to war."

The current war in Iraq makes his head hurt, Warr said. He debates the pros and cons. The public debate troubles him.

"People must understand this is a global world today," he said. "What they say is being listened to by Osama bin Laden."

He fears a repeat of Vietnam.

"During the Tet Offensive in Hue, we were outnumbered four or five to 1," Warr said. "We crushed them militarily. The North Vietnamese were no longer an effective fighting force. The North Vietnamese general has since admitted this in his memoirs."

But the debate at home started, the anti-war sentiment began, "and the North Vietnamese decided to hang on until the Americans went away," Warr said. "There was never a time in the entire war when the Viet Cong or North Vietnamese defeated us militarily."

Students of military history know that the largest number of casualties are taken in the last few months before a war ends, Warr said.

"In World War I and II, if you track the casualties, in the two months before the end of the wars, we took the highest casualties," he said. "Counting casualties is not a good indicator if things are going well or not.

"If this war ends badly, another generation of veterans will suffer terribly," Warr said.

Warr hears people daily stating they don't support the war, but support the troops.

"And I ask, what do you do to support the troops?" he said. "It's easy to say, maybe it makes them feel better. Do they send a letter or a box of cookies? When a platoon of Marines gets a box of goodies and cards from an elementary school, it makes them feel good and they can go another three days. We must take care of the man and women serving today."

People have the right to oppose a war, state opinions and hold peace rallies, Warr said.

"But, the minute someone spits on a young man in uniform, as they did to returning Vietnam veterans, that's where they have gone over the line," he said. "If it gets to that point, there will be 4 million Vietnam veterans marching on Washington."

Vietnam veterans felt the people in the nation were disgusted by them because they served their country, he said.

"Many of us suffered with that for a very long time," he said.

In the dedication of his book, Warr refers back to his father, whose death brought back the memories.

"Dad, you were the only one who welcomed me home," he wrote. "In my newly acquired guilt, I asked you to take the welcome home banner down. Now that I understand, you are gone."

Life after war

Warr, a native of California, grew up in Oregon. After his discharge from the Marines in 1970, he returned to southern California. In 1979, he married Pamela Alexander, a native of Hendersonville. The couple moved to Flat Rock two and a half years ago from Alpine, Calif.

Warr spent most his career in computer technology sales and software services. The couple own Stonehill Productions, a marketing company for small businesses.

Warr's second book is near completion, the story of the Vietnam War from 1965 to the Tet Offensive in 1968. He plans to write a third, the end game, from the Tet Offensive to the end of the war.