



Extraordinary Valor: The Fight for Charlie Hill in Vietnam

By William Reeder Jr.

Lanham, MD: The Rowman & Littlefield Publishing Group, 2022

Reviewed by LTC (Retired) Rick Baillergeon

In the spring of 1972, the United States' involvement in the Vietnam War had significantly curtailed. Assistance primarily consisted of air support and advisors serving with South Vietnamese units. Seeking to exploit the diminished role of the United States, the North Vietnamese launched their largest offensive of the war. Known as the Easter Offensive (Nguyen Hue Campaign), it began on 30 March and involved more than 130,000 North Vietnamese regulars conducting a three-pronged invasion of South Vietnam.

As intelligence began to pick up significant enemy movement, South Vietnamese forces began to occupy defensive positions to repel any enemy attacks. In anticipation that Kontum City in the Central Highlands would be a key enemy objective, the South Vietnamese tasked its 11th Airborne Battalion to meet that threat. In the beginning of April 1972, soldiers from the 11th began to occupy defensive positions northwest of Kontum City. Specifically, they began preparing a defense along "Charlie Hill," one of a series of positions along "Rocket Ridge" outside of the city. Serving as an advisor for the 11th Airborne Battalion was Special Forces MAJ John Duffy. William Reeder's superb volume *Extraordinary Valor* details the fight for Charlie Hill and the incredible heroism of the 11th Airborne Battalion and MAJ Duffy (who earned the Medal of Honor for his actions) in this gallant effort.

There is no one more fitting or equipped to tell this story than Reeder for several reasons. As a Cobra helicopter pilot who supported the ground forces on Charlie Hill, he is clearly familiar with the battle. For his exceptional service during the Vietnam War, Reeder was awarded a Silver Star, two Distinguished Flying Crosses, and three Purple Hearts. Additionally, he was a prisoner of war (POW) in Vietnam for nearly a year. Finally, Reeder is a superb author whose first volume, *Through the Valley*, detailed his POW experience and was highly acclaimed by both readers and critics. In total, to use an old cliché, he has clearly walked the walk and can talk the talk.

For those not familiar with the Battle of Charlie Hill, let me provide a brief overview. On 2 April 1972, the South Vietnamese Army's 11th Airborne Battalion began defensive preparations on Charlie Hill to repel any enemy attacks into Kontum City. The following day, a North Vietnamese Army regiment began its attack. For almost two weeks, the 11th — greatly undermanned and outgunned — was encircled and at the brink of being overrun. Yet, the unit held ground, inflicting well over 1,000 casualties and greatly contributing to a North Vietnamese invasion withdrawal. The cost for the 11th Airborne Battalion was incredibly high. When it finally escaped from Charlie Hill, there were only 36 members of the 471-man battalion left. The rest were killed, captured, or missing in action. It is an incredible story.

In telling the above account, I believe Reeder achieves four main purposes. The first is he draws much-needed attention to a battle that has been greatly overlooked over the decades. Based on when and

where the battle took place, it has received minimal treatment by historians. It is hoped that this volume, coupled with the presentation of the Medal of Honor to MAJ Duffy on 5 July 2022, will expose the gallantry of the 11th Airborne Battalion and MAJ Duffy to a far greater audience.

The second purpose he achieves is to highlight the professionalism and competency of the South Vietnamese Army. The Battle of Charlie Hill is a testament to the mental and physical fortitude of the soldiers of the South Vietnamese Army. Throughout the volume, Reeder highlights the performance of these soldiers and the tactical proficiency of their leaders.

Extraordinary Valor is also a volume which perfectly highlights the human dimension of warfare. In particular, Reeder is able to superbly depict the bond that forms between soldiers during battle. In the case of Charlie Hill, he focuses on the bond between MAJ Duffy and the 11th Airborne's senior leadership, specifically the battalion executive officer (who later assumed command when the battalion commander was killed), Major Lê Văn Mễ. The relationship they forged on Charlie Hill continues today. In fact, Mễ was front and center when Duffy was presented his Medal of Honor.

Finally, this volume pays tribute to MAJ Duffy's heroism. There is no question that readers of *Extraordinary Valor* will completely understand why Duffy was awarded the Medal of Honor for his actions on Charlie Hill. The author details his heroic actions throughout the fight. During the battle, he was wounded twice but continued to do everything he could to save the lives of 11th Airborne Battalion soldiers. This included calling in air strikes, spotting for artillery, providing tactical advice to the battalion's leadership, coordinating rescue and aid transportation, and perhaps, most importantly, circulating the battlefield and offering hope and boosting morale. MAJ Duffy's actions were truly remarkable, and Reeder aptly articulates those in *Extraordinary Valor*.

In a book as superb as this, it is a challenge to single out its many strengths in this review. However, I believe there are three which step to the forefront and greatly contribute to the success of the volume. The first is the outstanding readability of the book. Reeder achieves this through his ability to depict the emotions of the battlefield and to concisely detail the key actions of the battle. Reeder's decision to reconstruct dialogue during the fight adds considerably to readability and portraying the human dimension.

I found the second key strength to be the "extras" Reeder added to the volume to promote understanding and again depict the human dimension of fight. These include an excellent photo section with most of the selections taken from personal collections, a group of maps and sketches displaying the big picture and Charlie Hill itself, and a highly beneficial glossary. Most interesting is the epilogue, which updates readers on what became of the key figures of Charlie Hill.

The final strength I would like to address, and one that relates to the previous two, is the incredible amount of research Reeder conducted for this book. Reeder addresses his sources in his "Author's Notes" section when he states, "It is a true story based on investigation into original source documents and a myriad of other reference materials, as well as my own experience flying a Cobra attack helicopter in support of the 11th Airborne Battalion on the final day of the fight. The research also entailed many hours of interviews with participants, extending over a period of years."

In summary, Reeder has once again crafted a superb book tied to the Vietnam War. It is a book which is superbly written, incredibly researched, and powerful in scope and message. This is a volume which achieves many things including bringing to light a forgotten battle, advocating the performance of the South Vietnamese Army, highlighting the human dimension of war, and paying tribute to the soldiers of the 11th Airborne Battalion and to MAJ John Duffy. I have no question readers will find *Extraordinary Valor* to be an extraordinary book.