

REVIEWS

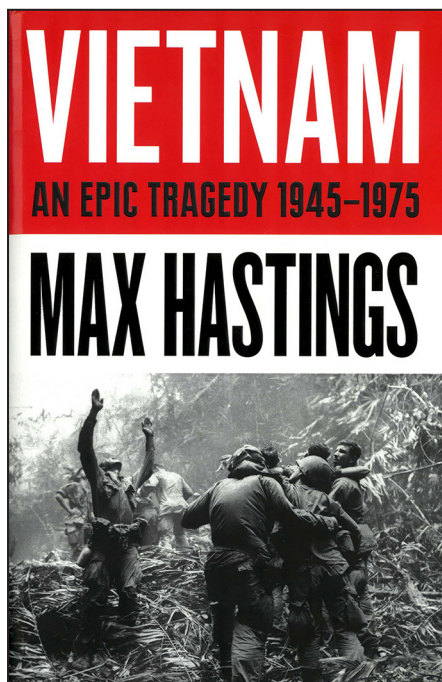
PHILIP CASS is reviews editor of Pacific Journalism Review.

Vietnam War history places correspondent roles in broader setting

Vietnam, by Max Hastings. London: William Collins. 2018. 722 pages. ISBN 978-0-00-813298-9

WHEN SAIGON fell, 44 years ago on 30 April 1975, a number of journalists, photographers and cameramen were there to witness the final humiliation of the United States. Journalist John Pilger and cameraman Neil Davis, both Australians, were there to see the North Vietnamese Army take the city, as was New Zealander Peter Arnett, among others. Pilger's slim volume about those events, *The Last Day*, is a classic. Davis survived Saigon, but filmed his own death while covering an attempted coup in Bangkok in 1987.

Max Hastings was not there to see the North Vietnamese tanks roll into the presidential palace. He held on, he tells us, almost until the last moment when he lost his nerve and 'forced a path through the mob of terrified Vietnamese around the US Embassy and scrambled over its walls... A few hours later I was evacuated in a Jolly Green



Giant to the *USS Midway*' (p. xxi).

Hastings had covered the war on and off for several years, as well as US domestic politics. He was young, ambitious, but a long way, one imagines, from the kind of stoned adventurers who hung around with other wannabe journalists like Sean Flynn. Still, perhaps he was also thinking of himself when he described the journalists in Saigon as 'young, green, pretty bright, fiercely ambitious' young men who fell in love with the romance of it all (p. 133).

Hastings dismisses his own reporting of the war as immature, but says it did at least provide some personal colouring to his description of events in the book.

Since Vietnam, Hastings has made a name for himself as an editor and a

historian, largely of the Second World War. Perhaps it is this last aspect of his career that has gelled with his journalistic experience to make this book such a worthwhile read.

He is able to place the activities of the Vietnam correspondents in a far broader context than it is usually given and, with experience of other conflicts behind him—especially his on-the-ground coverage of the Falklands campaign—of understanding what the war involved on a personal level.

His dissection of the role of correspondents in Vietnam begins with the battle of Ap Bac on January 1963, when an attack by South Vietnamese and US forces on Communist forces ended in confusion, farce and deaths from friendly fire. Senior US military leaders claimed that the VC would soon be destroyed, but journalists who had witnessed the battle knew the truth. They also knew that what was claimed to be a final, great assault on the VC positions was simply a pantomime because by then Communists had withdrawn.

The insistence of the US military leadership on telling lies, its delusional claims and its unwillingness to understand that it was simply propping up a much hated regime and inflicting pain on the very civilians it was supposed to be protecting, became abundantly clear after Ap Bac. Thereafter, despite the best efforts of publications like *Time* to toe the official line, journalists viewed the war with increasing bewilderment, jaundice and disgust.

The story of the Vietnam corres-

pondents is just part of a much wider story that Hastings tells with great skill. For the general reader, the great advantage of this book is that Hastings is not American and so he writes about the war without the conviction of so many American writers that they were the only ones there. He writes about the Australian and New Zealand involvement and makes excellent use of non-Western sources to write about the experience of Soviet troops manning missile batteries in Hanoi and Chinese advisers in the North. He also acknowledges official Vietnamese sources and has found some alternative voices in Vietnamese literature.

Hastings is scathing of those on the right and the left who see the war as having been a one dimensional struggle between good and evil. As Philip Knightley pointed out in *The First Casualty*, American troops committed atrocities so often that nobody bothered to report them. Equally, however, Hastings lambasts those on the left who only wanted to see the Viet Cong as angels and refused to acknowledge the horrors inflicted on southern villagers by VC cadres.

References

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- Knightley, P. (2004) *The first casualty*. Baltimore/London, UK: John Hopkins University Press.
- Pilger, J. (1975) *The last day*. London, UK: Mirror Books.