

CHAPTER 8

The Tet Offensive at Da Nang

*Allied Dispositions—The Enemy Plans His Offensive—The Attack—The Fighting Continues
A Brief Lull and Renewed Fighting*

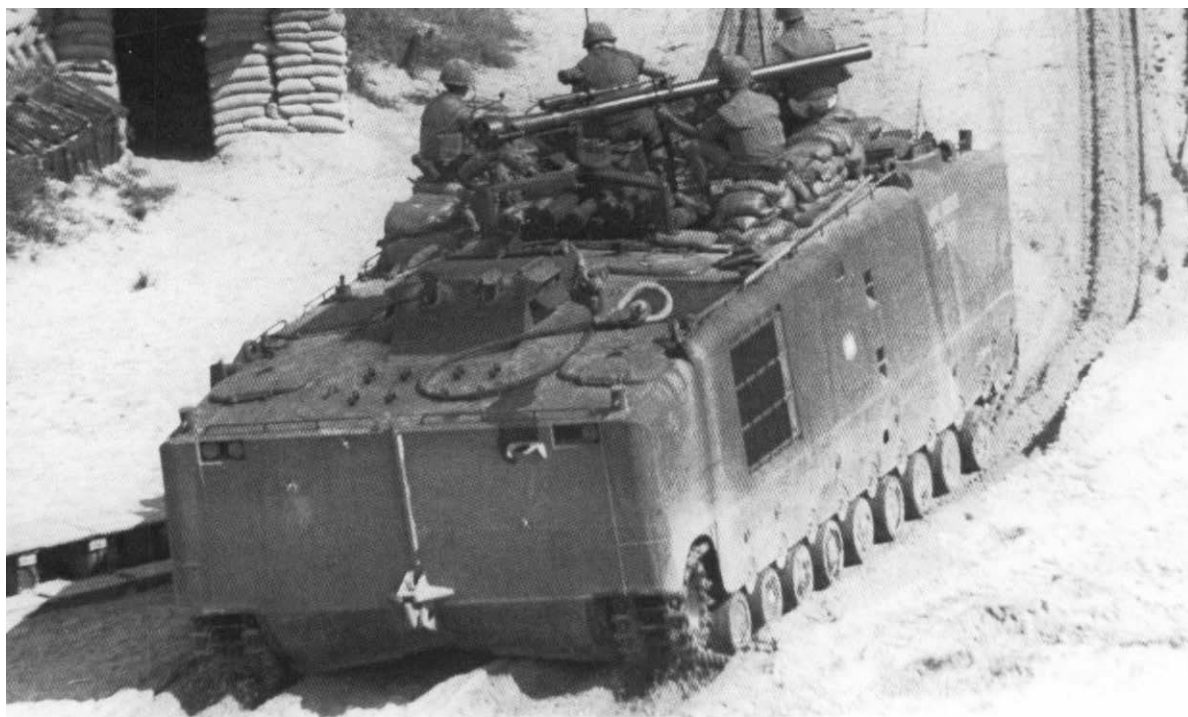
Allied Dispositions

By the time of Tet, Operation Checkers had ended and at Da Nang the situation was precarious. With the departure of the 5th Marines, there was only one Marine infantry regimental headquarters in the extensive Da Nang tactical area of operations. Colonel Ross R. Miner's 7th Marines with all three of its battalions had the responsibility for the northern, western, and southwestern sectors. The 2d Battalion was in the north, the 1st Battalion was in the center, and the 3d Battalion was in the south. With the departure of the 2d Battalion, 5th Marines in mid-January for Phu Bai, the 3d Battalion, 7th Marines extended its area of operations to include An Hoa to the south. Colonel Miner attached two additional companies to the 3d Battalion—Company L, 3d Battalion, 5th Marines and Company H, 2d Battalion, 7th Marines—to cover its extended area.¹

A conglomeration of Marine support units, ARVN, Korean Marines, and two Marine infantry battalions attempted to secure the remaining area. In the Da Nang Vital Area, the artillery regiment, the 11th Marines, continued to oversee the Northern Sector Defense Command and the 1st Tank Battalion, the Southern Sector Defense Command. In both these sectors support troops doubled as infantry, manning fixed defensive positions and conducting patrols. Major General Donn J. Robertson, the 1st Marine Division commanding general, kept under his direct control the 3d Battalion, 5th Marines and the 2d Battalion, 3d Marines. Located between the Cau Do and Thanh Quit

A U.S. Marine amphibian tractor from the 3d Amphibian Tractor Battalion transports Korean Marines during a sweep operation near Hoi An. The tractor is armed with a 106mm recoilless rifle.

Photo is from the Abel Collection



Rivers and on either side of Route 1, the two battalions provided the last line of defense before the so-called "Vital Area." The most eastern of the battalions, the 2d, shared its area with the 3d Amphibian Tractor Battalion, which was responsible for the coastal sand flats south of Marble Mountain. Below the Marine battalions, the Korean Marine Brigade secured the Hoi An sector and the southeastern approaches above the Ky Lam River to the Da Nang base. Behind the Marine and Korean lines, the 51st ARVN Regiment deployed in support of the South Vietnamese Revolutionary Development program. With both fixed-wing and helicopter gunships and more than 120 artillery pieces ranging from 4.2-inch mortars to 175mm guns, General Robertson was confident that he could counter any threat that the enemy posed to Da Nang despite the thinness of his manned defenses.²

In the Da Nang sector, the tempo of operations had picked up during the last weeks of January. The Korean Marines, while not finding any sizeable forces, continued to encounter small enemy units and boobytraps which took their toll. In the 7th Marines sector, the Marines described the same type of activity as well as increased enemy infiltration. The 3d Battalion, 5th Marines reported "a definite increase of enemy harassment" and the movement of sizeable enemy units into the Go Noi Island area. Lieutenant Colonel William K. Rockey, the 3d Battalion commander, commented on the "increasing frequency and ferocity" of enemy contacts. He remembered that because of the number of casualties his battalion sustained, "it was necessary to employ administrative personnel on patrols" with "clerks, cooks, and drivers" on line. In one operation near Dien Ban, the 51st ARVN Regiment sustained losses of 40 men killed, 6 missing, and 140 wounded while accounting for about 80 enemy dead and 13 prisoners. As Igor Bobrowsky, a former Combined Action member of Delta 2 near the village of Thanh Quit, recalled this period: "It wasn't that something happened . . . It was just that the intensity of what was going on kept on increasing, increasing, increasing."³

While activity in the Army's Americal Division areas of operations in Quang Ngai and Quang Tin was somewhat diminished, there was enough enemy in northern and central I Corps to cause concern for both the American and South Vietnamese commands. On 27 January, General Westmoreland announced a cease-fire to be observed by allied forces for 36 hours beginning at 1800 on 29 January in honor of the Tet holidays. Although authorizing the cease-fire, he warned all American commanders to be unusually alert

because of "enemy increased capabilities." At 1700 on 29 January, Westmoreland canceled the truce in the DMZ and the entire I Corps sector.^{4*}

Major General Robertson remembered that "the Cease-fire was to be in effect . . . and the regimental commanders reported intense fire from the enemy and requested authority to continue artillery fire, if necessary . . ." Robertson granted the request and then "about 1840 we got the word from III MAF that the cease-fire had been called off."⁵

The Enemy Plans His Offensive

For some time, the American forces had been aware that the enemy was about to launch some type of major offensive. General Westmoreland was convinced that this big push would come either just before or right after Tet—but not during the holidays and probably at Khe Sanh and in the DMZ sector. At Da Nang, III MAF knew that the Communists were on the move. Marine and Army reconnaissance flights using infrared technology and XM-3 "People Sniffer" airborne personnel detectors (APD) mounted on Huey helicopters indicated strong enemy concentrations in the hills near Hieu Duc west of the 7th Marines. Lieutenant Colonel William J. Davis, the commanding officer of the 1st Battalion, 7th Marines, recalled that his unit began to take fewer casualties from surprise firing devices or boobytraps and began to suspect that enemy troops unfamiliar with the terrain might be attempting to move into his sector. Davis notified the division headquarters of his findings. According to Davis, a few hours later, General Robertson called a division briefing for all battalion commanders. At the briefing, the division G-2 or intelligence officer, told the assembled officers that "they are finally going to come out and fight. We don't know why, but we know they are!" He later confided to Davis, "Bill, your phone call was right on the money! I called all the regiments and battalions and the same was happening to them."⁶

On the evening of 28 January, just west of Hieu Duc, a Marine squad from Company C, 1st Battalion, 7th Marines ambushed a three-man Viet Cong reconnaissance patrol. The Marines killed two of the enemy and wounded the third. The Marines evacuated the

* Lieutenant Colonel John F. J. Kelly, who was an intelligence officer on the III MAF staff, commented that General Westmoreland canceled the truce at "the request of LtGen Cushman, who also requested that the announcement be held until six hours before the scheduled beginning of the truce so as not to tip III MAF's hand." LtCol John F. J. Kelly, Comments on draft, dtd 13Dec94 (Vietnam Comment File).

survivor to the Naval Support Activity hospital where he died of his wounds. Before his death, however, the Vietnamese identified himself as Major Nguyen Van Lam, the commanding officer of the *R-20 Doc Lap Battalion*. From the recovery of Lam's notebook and a detailed sketch map of Hill 10, the location of the 1st Battalion, 7th Marines' command post, the *R-20* commander was obviously on a exploration mission to discover any vulnerability in the Marine battalion's defenses.^{7*}

From other sources, the Marine command learned of other ominous measures taken by the Communist forces in the Da Nang sector. According to intelligence reports, on 15 January, *Group 44*, the forward headquarters of Communist *Military Region 5*, moved from the hills in western Quang Nam, to an advance position on Go Noi Island. On 29 January, Marine intelligence officers received a reliable report that the *2d NVA Division* also had established its command post in western Go Noi. According to Marine Chief Warrant Officer Stuart N. Duncan, assigned to the 5th Counterintelligence Team, a Combined Action unit in the northern Da Nang area, a few days before Tet, killed a VC who tried to hide in a tunnel. The CAPs found several documents on the body and in the tunnel which the man obviously had used as his base of operations. In his last report, the Communist agent wrote, "I have been discovered and mission not yet completed." From the details of the other recovered documents, the VC obviously were making an extensive reconnaissance of the Da Nang area. His notes contained descriptions of military structures, distances, weapons, and other information that would be of value to an attacking force.⁸

Additional intelligence tended to confirm the enemy was about to initiate something big. The ARVN 51st Regiment operating in the southern sector of the Da Nang area of operations came across evidence including documents pointing to a buildup of Communist strength together with probes of allied defenses. On 29 January, a local vil-

lage chief told the security officer of the Naval Support Activity at Camp Tiensha that about 300 VC would attack the Marble Mountain transmitter that night. That same day, the 1st Marine Division notified III MAF that "usually reliable sources" told of staging areas south of Da Nang for an impending attack. Finally, according to Marine intelligence officers, another "very reliable source" flatly stated "that the time of attack throughout *MR (Military Region) 5* would be" at 0130 and no later than 0200 on 30 January.⁹

The Communist forces throughout South Vietnam were about to strike. In I Corps, the allies learned from a defector that the enemy planned an attack against Quang Ngai City. According to this former member of the VC *401st Regimental Security Guard*, local Communist cadre stated that "the war had lasted too long and the Front had to seek a good opportunity to stage a great offensive that would bring the war to an early end." Further, the South Vietnamese National Police reported that Viet Cong local leaders from Quang Tin, Quang Nam, and Quang Ngai Provinces met in a base area in the hills of northern Quang Ngai to plan attacks on Chu Lai and on Quang Ngai City.¹⁰

While the Communists concentrated their forces for the large offensive, many of these units suffered from too many rapid replacements and in some cases from poor morale. As the defector from the *401st* later revealed, his unit lacked "weapons, experienced soldiers, and transportation manpower." He personally believed the plans were impractical and deserted at the first chance he had. Another Communist soldier, who infiltrated from North Vietnam after receiving a year's training as a radioman in Hanoi, was thrust into one of the attacking battalions south of Da Nang so hastily that he never learned the name of his unit let alone those of his officers. Two members of a VC engineering company, also in the Da Nang area, later recounted that nearly 80 percent of their unit was from North Vietnam. The Communists obviously were bringing the local VC main force units up to strength, even if to do so they had to bring in replacements from the north. For example, while the enemy *R-20th* attempted to maintain a full complement of 400 men through the recruitment or impressment of local villagers and infiltration of North Vietnamese "volunteers," intelligence sources rated the unit only "marginally effective."¹¹

Throughout the Da Nang area of operations, the enemy began to move into attack positions. In addition

* Colonel Davis, the 1st Battalion, 7th Marines commander, wrote that, according to the interrogation of another prisoner, Major Lam, if he had not been killed would have become an advisor to the *31st NVA Regiment*, also known as the *3d NVA Regiment*, for terrain and operations. Another prisoner claimed that Lam was the chief of staff for the NVA regiment. Col W. J. Davis, *Tet Marine, An Autobiography* (San Diego, CA, 1987), pp. 117-18, Encl to Col William J. Davis, Comments on draft, dtd 2Dec94 (Vietnam Comment File), hereafter Davis, *Tet Marine*.

to the *R-20 VC Battalion*, south of Da Nang, the *1st VC* and *3d NVA Regiments** both part of the *2d NVA Division* started to deploy toward Go Noi Island. Elements of the *368B NVA Rocket Artillery Regiment* were in firing positions to the west and northwest of the 7th Marines. Other units included the *402d Sapper Battalion*, the *V-25th VC Battalion*, and other VC local forces. A warning order and plan prepared by the Communist Da Nang City Committee called for a preliminary attack on the city by sappers and VC troops. The attack force would consist of two groups, one to move by land and the other by water to knock out the bridge separating the city from Tiensha Peninsula and to capture the I Corps headquarters. This would be followed by a rocket barrage and an assault by the main force units on allied military units and installations. Within the city itself, VC cadre were to force the "inhabitants into the street for demonstrations . . . and prepare the people for continuing political struggle against the government as well as kill GVN and ARVN cadre."¹²

Before the Communist forces launched their attack, the commanders prepared to read to their troops a directive supposedly prepared two weeks earlier by the Presidium of the Central Committee of the National Liberation Front. The Front announced that the 1968 Tet greeting of "Chairman Ho [Chi Minh] is actually a combat order for our entire Army and population." The soldiers and cadre of the "South Vietnam Liberation Army" were to move forward in the attack:

The call for assault to achieve independence and liberty has sounded;

The Truong Son and the Mekong River are moving.

You comrades should act as heroes of Vietnam and with the spirit and pride of combatants of the Liberation Army.

The Victory will be with us.¹³

The Attack

By evening on the 29th, the 1st Marine Division at Da Nang was on a 100-percent alert. During the day, the division had positioned 11 reconnaissance "Stingray" patrols along likely enemy avenues of

approach. At 1600, one of the Stingray units, using the codename "Saddle Bag," situated in the mountains just south of a bend in the Thu Bon River below An Hoa, about 20 miles southwest of the Da Nang base, reported observing about 75 enemy soldiers wearing helmets and some carrying mortars. The 11th Marines fired an artillery mission with unknown results. About 50 minutes later, another recon team, "Air Hose," about 2,000 meters to the northeast of "Saddle Bag," saw more than 50 enemy troops moving eastward. The artillery fired another salvo, which caused a large secondary explosion. At 1920, in the same general area, still another Stingray patrol, "Sailfish," radioed that about 200 Communist troops, some carrying 40mm rocket launchers, passed its positions. Again the artillery responded with "excellent effect on target." Because of an air observer on station, the Marine gunners checked their fire. At that point, three fixed-wing aircraft and four helicopter gunships then bombed and strafed the enemy column. Darkness prevented "Sailfish" from observing the number of casualties that the artillery and air inflicted upon the enemy.¹⁴

At Da Nang, the Marines remained tense. One experienced Marine noncommissioned officer, serving in his third war, First Sergeant Jack W. Jaunal of the Headquarters and Service (nicknamed "Heat and Steam") Company, 3d Amphibian Tractor Battalion, located below Marble Mountain, recorded his impressions. He remembered that before midnight "the alert sounded, and it was all hands to the wire [manning defensive positions]." Although Jaunal's sector remained relatively quiet, he recalled that "we could see flashes of other areas being hit" and heard mortars and rockets: "The Marine helicopter strip [Marble Mountain] two miles to our north got hit . . . Also Da Nang Airfield got it."¹⁵

Major General Raymond L. Murray, the III MAF deputy commander, remembered that he heard a "hell of a lot of racket" and "woke up . . . [to] the airfield at Da Nang . . . being rocketed." At first, the general and

* There is some confusion, probably deliberate on the part of the North Vietnamese, on the designation of the regiments, especially the *3d* of the *2d NVA Division*. According to Marine records the *3d NVA* was also known as the *31st NVA Regiment*. There was also an independent *31st NVA Regiment* that also infiltrated into the western Da Nang TAOR. Although an attempt has been made to use *3d NVA* when referring to the regiment that was part of the *2d NVA Division*, the records do not always differentiate between the two. FMFPac, MarOpsV, Feb-May68.

** Colonel Broman C. Scinemetz, who as a lieutenant colonel, commanded the 1st Reconnaissance Battalion, related that "in preparation for the Tet stand-down the 1st Recon Battalion deployed the largest number patrols ever at one time. These covered the mountainous remote zone west of the Americal Division extending along a line northward up to and including that high ground west of Task Force X-Ray. The collective impact of these patrols, operating in either the Sting Ray—or intelligence gathering—mode, significantly lessened the enemy effectiveness in the 1st Marine Division TAOR during the Tet offensive." Col Broman C. Scinemetz, Comments on draft, dtd 2Nov94 (Vietnam Comment File).

his steward confused the rockets with the traditional fireworks shot off in honor of Tet. Soon reports came in that the base was under attack and a Marine helicopter flew the general from his quarters to III MAF headquarters.* According to Murray, “. . . from then on until Tet was over, there were just constant attacks.”¹⁶

The 1st Marine Division commander, Major General Robertson later compared the enemy activity that night to a “10-ring circus.” In the Da Nang sector, during the early morning hours of 30 January, Communist gunners took under mortar and rocket fire 15 different allied units and installations. On the ground, several enemy infantry and sapper units of varying size probed and attacked various Marine and allied defenses throughout the TAOR. Shortly after midnight, Marine sentries from the 1st MP Battalion, posted near the main I Corps Bridge connecting Da Nang to the Tien-sha Peninsula, spotted two swimmers near the span. They fired, killing one of the enemy underwater demolition team, while the other member surrendered to the Marines. About 0100, a Marine platoon from Company G, 2d Battalion, 7th Marines, positioned near the Route 1 Bridge crossing the Cu De River north of Da Nang, saw another two enemy on a raft with a wooden box. Again, the Marines killed the VC and once more foiled an apparent enemy demolition effort. Two and a half hours later, on the other side of the main Da Nang Bridge, Armed Forces police noticed two VC in the water and several sampans approaching. The MPs shot one of the swimmers, took the other man prisoner, and drove off the boats with a fusillade of bullets. Once more the enemy failed to cut the main lines of communication into Da Nang.¹⁷

About 0230, the enemy struck the perimeters of the Da Nang base itself. In the Southern Sector Defense Command, just north of the Cau Do River and west of Route 1, an enemy 12- or 15-man sapper squad blew a hole in the defensive wire of the joint perimeter of the 7th Engineer and 7th Communications Battalion. The enemy troops attacked a Marine bunker and ran through the Communications Support Company area throwing grenades and satchel charges in the living quarters. The only Marine casualties were two men who failed to vacate their “hootches” in time.



Abel Collection

The Da Nang Airbase comes under VC/NVA rocket attack on the night of 29–30 January 1968. Flares light up the sky, top, as raging fires caused by the rockets burn out of control on the ground, illuminating parked aircraft on the airfield, bottom.

Department of Defense (USMC) Photo A190366



*General Earl E. Anderson, who as a brigadier general was the III MAF Chief of Staff, recalled that General Murray at this time was living at the beach house. Because of security concerns after the Tet attack, General Murray moved into the bachelor officer quarters with him. They each had a bedroom and bath and shared a sitting room. Gen Earl E. Anderson, Comments on draft, dtd 18Dec94 (Vietnam Comment File).

Manning defensive positions, the Marine communicators and engineers repelled the attacking force, killing four of the VC. Enemy gunners then replied with a mortar barrage, which resulted in two Marine dead and two wounded.¹⁸

A half-hour after the assault on the 7th Communication Battalion, the enemy hit even closer to the Marine command nerve center at Da Nang. Another enemy sapper squad, about the same size as the one that carried out the earlier attack, penetrated the 1st Marine Division Subsector Bravo combat operations center and communications facility on Hill 200, less than 1,000 meters from the main command post on "Division Ridge" (Hill 327). Employing small arms fire, satchel charges, rocket propelled grenades, and bangalore torpedoes, the enemy troops thrust through blown gaps in the Marine wire. The communications bunker bore the brunt of the enemy attack where the sappers destroyed both the bunker and the equipment inside and "put the division tactical net off the air until 0400." Headquarters Marines quickly manned their defenses and called in artillery illumination and a fire mission. The Northern Sector Defense Command rapidly assembled its reaction company and deployed one platoon to the division command post. Two other platoons took up positions around nearby hills 244 and 200. In the assault, the Communists killed four Marines and wounded another seven before withdrawing. At first light, a Marine reaction force found enemy blood trails. Major General Robertson later praised the Security and Communications platoons of the 1st Marine Division Headquarters Battalion for their efforts in the defense. He pointed to the rapid reaction of the Security Platoon in reinforcing the perimeter and providing a mobile reserve and "the off-duty personnel from the bunker and staff sections for their provision of security of the immediate bunker area."¹⁹

At 0330, about one hour after the sapper attack on the Marine command post, enemy forces launched an assault against General Lam's I Corps headquarters. Under cover of darkness, elements of the VC *R-20th* and *V-25th Battalions* had crossed the Cau Do River and penetrated the Hoa Vang village complex. With covering fire provided by 81mm and 82mm mortars, about a reinforced company reached the I Corps headquarters compound actually located within the city of Da Nang just outside the northern perimeter of the main airbase. The enemy attacked the compound from two directions, from the south and the east. From the south, about a dozen of the enemy used boards to cross the outer wire and ladders and boards to clamber over

the compound wall into the courtyard below. An alert ARVN sentry took the VC under fire near the flagpole. Four ARVN armored personnel carriers reinforced by a reconnaissance squad maneuvered to contain the attackers. A conglomeration of internal security forces threw back the enemy force from the east that tried to use similar tactics to get inside the compound from that direction.²⁰

Colonel Nguyen Duy Hinh, who was acting Chief of Staff, I Corps, at the time, remembered that he had earlier that night received a call from the South Vietnamese Joint General Staff alerting the command to expect "an increased surge of activities" by enemy forces. After informing General Lam and issuing instructions to subordinate units to be on special alert, Colonel Hinh returned to his quarters about 500 meters from the main headquarters building. About 0330, the colonel woke up to the sound of battle. From his bedroom window, he could see tracers lighting up the nighttime sky. He quickly picked up the phone and called General Lam and told him that the headquarters was under enemy attack. An incredulous I Corps commander gave the equivalent reply in Vietnamese to "baloney! baloney!," but, nevertheless, hurriedly dressed and prepared to depart for his headquarters, which was some distance from his house.²¹

The fighting within the compound continued until daylight. After their breaching of the outer defenses, the enemy squad fired B-40 rockets at the headquarters building, but then fought a delaying action, waiting for reinforcements. These reinforcements never came. The bulk of the enemy attack force remained in Hoa Vang Village bogged down in a firefight with local PF and Regional Force troops reinforced by a Combined Action platoon, E-3. Viet Cong gunners from Hoa Vang, nevertheless, maintained an intermittent mortar bombardment upon the I Corps tactical operations center. Shortly after 0445, General Lam ordered the 4th ARVN Cavalry Regiment, a Ranger battalion, and a detachment of National Police to augment the South Vietnamese militia units in Hoa Vang and the headquarters personnel forces in the compound.²²

III MAF also sent reinforcements. Lieutenant Colonel Twyman R. Hill's 1st MP Battalion operated directly under III MAF and was responsible for the "close-in defense" of the Da Nang Airbase, the two bridges between Tiensha Peninsula and the main airbase, and the Naval Hospital on the Tiensha Peninsula. The MP commander remembered that he received a telephone call at 0345 on the 30th from Colonel Thomas L. Randall, the III MAF G-3, who asked him

"to send three platoons to blocking positions south of I Corps headquarters." With one of his companies on the Tiensha Peninsula and the other three protecting the main airbase perimeter, Hill argued that he could not spare three platoons. He and Randall agreed that they would deploy one of the battalion's two reserve provisional Quick Reaction platoons composed of headquarters personnel. This platoon under First Lieutenant John E. Manning departed the airbase about 0415 and arrived in the blocking positions about 0515.^{23*}

About a half-hour later, the 1st Division learned that the enemy squad in the headquarters compound had disengaged and took its casualties with it. In this fighting, which had lasted about three hours, the South Vietnamese defenders sustained casualties of three dead, seven wounded, and two damaged armored vehicles. The skirmishing south of the headquarters near Hoa Vang, however, continued. Mortars and recoilless rifle rounds continued to land inside the headquarters compound from enemy firing positions in Hoa Vang. General Lam arrived at the headquarters compound shortly after dawn. After a quick appraisal of the situation, the I Corps commander turned to the senior U.S. advisor at the I Corps Tactical Operations Center, Army Major P. S. Milantoni. According to *Washington Post* correspondent Don Oberdorfer, Lam pointed with his swagger stick to the enemy's firing positions on the large map in the room and said: "Milantoni, bomb here. Use big bombs." The U.S. major remonstrated that the site was relatively close to the compound, but Lam insisted that the air strikes be flown. Milantoni relayed the request to the air support center. The Air Force watch officer on duty protested, "that's too close, you'll never get a clearance for it." Major Milantoni replied, "General Lam just gave it."²⁴

Shortly afterwards, Marine fixed-wing aircraft and helicopter gunships blasted the enemy in Hoa Vang. This apparently broke the back of the VC resistance. Under pressure from the Vietnamese relief forces and the Marine MP platoon, the enemy retreated with the allies in full chase. In the initial fighting for Hoa Vang, the South Vietnamese and Americans accounted for 25 enemy dead. In the pursuit, which amounted to a rout, the VC lost nearly 100 dead. In the attack on the I Corps headquarters and in the defense of Hoa Vang vil-

lage the allies sustained losses of nine dead and several wounded. Among the casualties were two Marines killed, including Lieutenant Manning, and six wounded from the 1st MP Battalion.²⁵

The rockets and mortar bombardment of Da Nang also took a toll of Marine lives and inflicted greater material damage upon the Da Nang base and especially upon the airfield and aircraft. In scattered and intermittent attacks beginning before 0200 and lasting about one-half hour, enemy gunners fired both mortars and rockets that landed near positions of Marine artillery, antiair missiles, and the Force Logistic Command. Battery A, 1st Light Antiaircraft (LAAM) Missile Battalion armed with HAWK (Homing All the Way Killer) surface-to-air missiles, in the mountainous Hai Van Pass sector north of Da Nang, reported about 0140 coming under 82mm mortar fire. About 20 minutes later the missile battery sighted enemy rocket firing sites and two minutes later radioed that 12 rockets of undetermined size landed in and around its area. One of the rockets damaged one of the missile launchers and wounded three of the Marines. At about the same time, approximately 15 enemy 122mm rockets struck an artillery complex in the 11th Marines Northern Sector Defense Command which included a detachment from the 1st Armored Amphibian Company, the 155mm Gun and 8-inch Gun Batteries, as well as Batteries H, 3d Battalion and M, 4th Battalion, 11th Marines. The artillerymen sustained two wounded and some equipment damage, but escaped relatively unscathed. Other enemy rocketeers took the Marine Force Logistic Command compound near Red Beach under fire. Approximately at 0200, about four of the 122mm rockets fell in or near the compound, one landing near the 1st Air Cavalry air pad temporarily located there, damaging four of the helicopters, but resulting in no Marine or Army casualties.²⁶

After a lull of about an hour to an hour and a half, the enemy gunners renewed their assault on the airbase and also included the helicopter air facility at Marble Mountain. About 0330, perhaps to divert Marine attention from the ground assault on I Corps headquarters and the city of Da Nang, enemy mortars opened up on Marble Mountain. Approximately 16 rounds impacted in the MAG-16 sector and another four in the Army aviation company area. About the same time, from their firing positions on the western fringes of the Da Nang TAOR, NVA rocketeers let go with a fusillade of 122mm rockets aimed at the main airbase. Some 36 of the large missiles landed on the main base, including the airfield. Fifteen minutes later,

*In his comments, Colonel Hill stated that he deployed only one of his reserve platoons. The battalion's monthly report, however, indicates that both platoons may have eventually moved into the blocking positions south of the I Corps headquarters. Col Twyman R. Hill, Comments on draft, dtd 29Nov94 (Vietnam Comment File) and 1st MP ComdC, Jan68.



Photo from Abel Collection

Firefighters from Marine Aircraft Group (MAG) 11 battle flames engulfing two Grumman A-6 Intruder aircraft from Marine all-weather attack squadron VMA-242(AW).

the enemy gunners followed with another 29 rockets, mostly aimed at the southern end of the airbase. Considering the amount of ordnance that the enemy expended, casualties were relatively small. The rocket attacks resulted in the deaths of 3 Marines and the wounding of another 11. Material and equipment losses, however, were much more extensive. The rockets destroyed five aircraft, nine items of ground equipment, two vehicles, and one warehouse outright. Fourteen aircraft, six pieces of ground support equipment, five buildings, and another two vehicles sustained damage of one sort or another.* Lieutenant Colonel William K. Rockey, the commander of the 3d Battalion, 5th Marines, later wrote: "The rocket trails of approximately 10 to 20 missiles as they rose into the

air to arc over our positions to strike the Da Nang Airbase was vividly clear to all." He observed that the "rocket launching position was located directly south" of his command group, "an estimated distance of more than 3,000 meters."²⁷

The Marine response to the bombardments was rapid. Immediately the 11th Marines artillery units "initiated counter-rocket fires" at suspected avenues of approach. As various outposts reported their sightings to the Division FSCC, the artillerymen then shifted these fires to actual sites. On the ground, at least one Marine unit prevented a rocket attack. A patrol from Company A, 1st Battalion, 7th Marines, operating below the battalion's command post on Hill 10, saw about 10 North Vietnamese soldiers just south of the Tuy Loan River preparing positions. The Marines called in artillery and mortar missions. Although the enemy troops fled, the Marines found five unexpended 122mm rockets on the site. Later that night, the 1st Battalion, 7th Marines reported 15 secondary explosions from Marine counter-mortar artillery fire. In the

*Colonel Robert W. Lewis, who as a lieutenant colonel commanded VMCJ-1 at Da Nang at the time, remembered that the "rocket damage at Da Nang consisted almost entirely of aircraft damage. The rockets were accurate and landed on the MAG-11 flight line." Col Robert W. Lewis, Comments on draft, n.d. [Dec94] (Vietnam Comment File), hereafter Lewis Comments.

morning, the infantrymen discovered blood trails and three NVA bodies in the vicinity of the explosions.*

Colonel Franklin L. Smith, of the III MAF operations staff, remembered that information about the attacks that night came into the headquarters "in dribs and driblets." As he later explained, however, it soon became apparent "that a general offensive was underway." In the Da Nang area of operations, outside of attacks by fire on the Marine base and outlying positions, and the two ground assaults on Marine command and communications positions, the Communist infantry units largely concentrated on the South Vietnamese units. In the Hai Van Pass area in the north, North Vietnamese regulars attempted to cut Route 1. To the south of the airbase, other enemy main force units attacked the District Town of Dien Ban and the provincial capital of Quang Nam, Hoi An, on Route 4. At 0230 on the 30th at Dien Ban, elements of the *R-20th* and *V-25th* struck the sub-sector headquarters defended by the 15th Popular Forces Platoon and the 708 Regional Forces Company. Entering the town from the southwest, the VC fired about 70 rocket propelled grenades at the local forces, but never penetrated the defender's perimeter. About two-and-a-half hours later, the enemy units "ceased fire and withdrew." The Vietnamese militia suffered 1 PF killed and 10 wounded. According to the U.S. Advisory Group at Da Nang, the PFs and RFs accounted for eight dead VC and captured one wounded enemy soldier. In the town itself, 10 innocent people, caught in the crossfire, sustained wounds, but no civilians died as a result of the battle.²⁸

About 5,000 meters to the east, in Hoi An, however, Communist forces gained somewhat the upper hand. Beginning their attack about 0300, about one-half hour after Dien Ban had been hit, two companies of the *V-25th Battalion* used the noise of firecrackers set off and general firing by Tet celebrants to cover their approach. One of the companies captured a German missionary hospital in the city and the other hit

the rear base of the 51st ARVN Regiment, the Chi Long Camp, garrisoned by the ARVN 102d Engineer Battalion. Surprised by the initial assault, the engineers fell back, giving up half the camp to the Communist attackers. Bringing up two artillery platoons, the South Vietnamese gunners lowered their pieces and fired pointblank at the VC. By daybreak, the engineers held their own and the situation in Hoi An was at a stalemate.²⁹

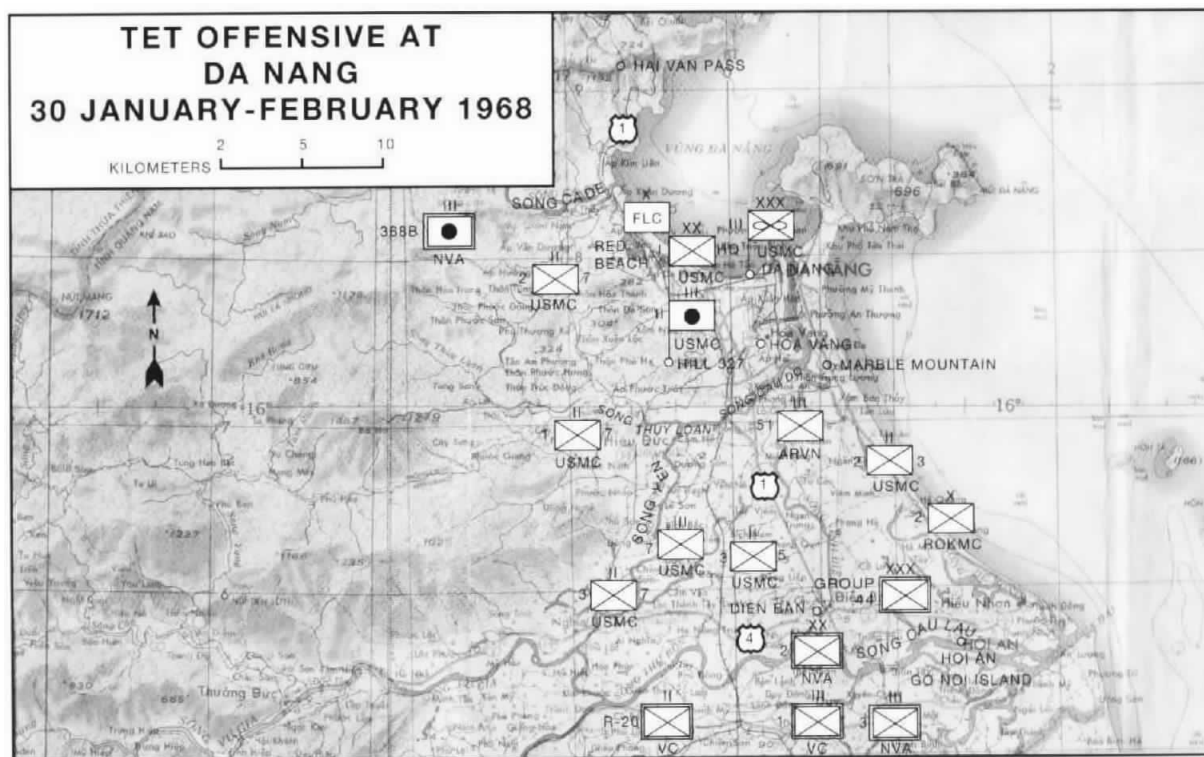
The Korean Marine Brigade deployed six companies around the city and the South Vietnamese 51st Regiment prepared a reaction force. In addition, the 1st Marine Division alerted one company to participate in the relief of Hoi An, if needed. According to Communist documents, captured later, the two VC assault companies were to pull out at first light, but became bogged down in the city. The struggle for Hoi An would continue into the following day.

Still by daybreak on 30 January, the intentions of the Communists were not entirely clear. While the enemy attacks were widespread in the Da Nang area of operations, the intensity of enemy operations in other areas of Vietnam varied. For the most part, the Communist offensive appeared to be limited to its *Military Region 5*. Even here, the assaults were largely confined to the Da Nang area in I Corps and to five provincial capitals in II Corps. In II Corps, the enemy struck the cities of Qui Nhon, Nha Trang, Ban Me Thuot, Kontum, and Pleiku. According to some sources, the Communist high command had scheduled a full nation-wide assault on the night of 29–30 January, but postponed it for one day. Whether *Military Region 5* never received the word, or failed to notify some of its subordinate units is still open to conjecture. Indeed, the Communist leaders may even have had other ulterior motives. At MACV headquarters, at 0700 on 30 January, Brigadier General Philip B. Davidson, the J-2 or MACV intelligence officer, briefed General Westmoreland and predicted "this is going to happen in the rest of the country tonight or tomorrow morning." He was right.³⁰

The Fighting Continues

Outside of the Da Nang and Hoi An sectors, most of I Corps remained relatively quiet during the night and early morning hours of 29–30 January. At 0600, however, about nine kilometers north of Tam Ky in Quang Tin Province, about 100 people gathered for an antiwar demonstration. A Popular Forces platoon attempted to disperse the crowd. According to an ini-

*Igor Bobrowsky, a former Combined Action Marine in CAP Delta 2, located near the Thanh Quit River bridge on Route 1 south of Da Nang, remembered that an enemy team fired from a "spot probably within a click of our positions We took them under fire . . . and cheered when one time, after just getting off/possibly two rockets, they were lit up by a chopper that had apparently been hovering in the dark waiting for them. A number of other choppers/airplanes/ then immediately blasted and raked over the whole area. We added as much machine gun and automatic fire into the mix as we could pump out." Igor Bobrowsky, Comments on draft, dtd 26Nov94 (Vietnam Comment File), hereafter Bobrowsky Comments.



tial advisory report, "an unknown number of grenades were thrown by unidentified persons, killing 20 demonstrators." The report failed to state whether the unidentified grenade throwers were PF troops or members of the crowd. The South Vietnamese militia detained 30 people from the group, 15 men and 15 women, all of whom under interrogation admitted to being Viet Cong cadre. About three and a half hours later in the same vicinity, about 200–300 VC Main Force troops attacked a village in the sector. Elements from the 1st Squadron, 1st Cavalry then engaged the enemy force which broke and fled. Joined by Company C, 7th Battalion, 17th Infantry Regiment from the Americal Division, the U.S. Army troops eventually killed 36 of the enemy, detained another 18, and recovered 11 weapons.³¹

At Da Nang, on the 30th, the fighting did not subside with the coming of daylight. Elements of the VC *R-20th* and local force units which participated in the attack on Hoa Vang and I Corps headquarters attempted to escape the dragnet of Marine and ARVN forces. While the 1st MP Battalion supported by the 1st Tank Battalion established blocking positions north of the Cau Do River, the ARVN 3d Battalion, 51st Regiment swept the sector south of the river. Caught east of the Cam La Bridge and Route 1, on a small island formed by the convergence of the Cau Do, a small trib-

utary of the river, and the Vien Dien River, the VC turned to fight. A Combined Action platoon at 0830 saw a number of VC attempting to swim across the Cau Do to the island.³²

By this time, General Robertson, the 1st Marine Division commander, had taken measures to bolster the ARVN south of the Cau Dau. He ordered the 3d Amphibian Tractor Battalion to form a blocking position on the southeastern bank of the Vien Dien River. First Sergeant Jaunal of the tractor battalion's H&S Company remembered that he received a telephone call that morning "that a few miles from our area the infantry had some VC or NVA trapped on an island and our Amtracs and Marines were to act as a blocking force."³³

Simultaneously, the division ordered the helilift of a company from the 3d Battalion, 5th Marines to reinforce the ARVN and the Combined Action Marines. By 0925 Lieutenant Colonel Rockey, the battalion commander, had formed a "jump battalion command group" and had his Company I, under Captain Henry Kolakowski, Jr., reinforced by mortars, at the battalion landing zone where four Marine CH-46 Sea Knight helicopters awaited them. Within a few minutes the helicopters were airborne and then landed in a flat paddy just south of the island and near the Combined Action unit which had taken three casualties. Marine

rifleman John L. Gundersen in the 1st Platoon of Company I remembered that as soon as he and his squad alighted they came under heavy automatic and small arms fire from the island.* The Marines took what cover they could behind a dirt berm and returned the fire. Within a few minutes the enemy weapons were silent. The company then searched the immediate area at first without encountering any resistance, sweeping first to the west and then retracing their route. As they once more entered the paddy where they started, the Marines again came under heavy fire, including mortars, from the enemy-held island.³⁴

With the increasing intensity of fire from the island and reports that South Vietnamese forces had observed some 250 people dressed in black pajamas moving toward the west, the Marine command decided upon a combined operation with the ARVN to mount an assault on the enemy forces there.** Company I was to cross over the tributary to the island using a nearby footbridge while the ARVN assaulted from the west and protected the Marine left flank. Marine air and supporting arms were to soften up the enemy positions before the attack. As the infantry waited and the artillery fires lifted, the first Marine McDonnell Douglas F4B Phantoms came in and made "a spotting run," then strafed the enemy positions, and dropped high explosives and napalm. Marine John Gundersen recalled that the

... concussion from each bomb shaking my face and eyeballs. The explosions blurred my vision momentarily. Small pieces of shrapnel were falling on us with some larger pieces buzzing over our head. . . . I couldn't imagine anyone escaping such a pounding.³⁵

After the air bombardment, sometime between noon and 1300, Company I rushed over the footbridge, some 50 meters away. Captain Kolakowski dropped off his 3d Platoon to guard the northern entrance of the bridge while the other two platoons continued the attack on the objective, the hamlet of Lo Giang 2 on the island. The Marine assault on the

hamlet soon bogged down as the troops followed a path that led to the village gate. An enemy sniper killed the point man on the lead platoon and then the Marines came under heavy fire. According to John Gundersen, his squad then took the point and went through the gate. They had orders to turn west until they reached a tree line and then hold fast. Gundersen remembered as they ran "seeing numerous one and two-man fighting holes on the edge of the tree-line." When they reached the tree line, only his fireteam was there: "We did a quick ammo check discovering we were very low on rounds having only two grenades and two magazines of ammo between us. Luckily, we met no resistance before being ordered back to the rest of the platoon to dig in."³⁶

By this time it was late afternoon and daylight had begun to fade. The first two platoons of Company I had established a perimeter in the southeast sector of the hamlet while the 3d Platoon remained at the northern end of the footbridge. Gundersen recalled that they had been resupplied and that they had dug their defensive holes along a small path that curved around and led to the river. The Marine rifleman wondered why they established their position there on the low ground and isolated from the rest of the hamlet. At dusk, however, Captain Kolakowski ordered them to leave their vulnerable defenses and silently move up to the top of the slope and again dig in.³⁷

Under cover of darkness the enemy struck. The Marines had called for C-130 "Spooky" flareships to light up the area, but one of the lumbering aircraft had run out of flares and departed before its relief appeared overhead. The enemy took advantage of this approximately 30-minute period of pitch blackness to mass a force before the 3d Platoon guarding the bridge escape route. About the same time, the enemy infiltrated into the lines of the other two platoons in the hamlet. Marine John Gundersen recalled hearing someone inside the perimeter whistling. He was about to tell them to be quiet "when a wall of tracers ripped through my position from the north." This continued for a few minutes when he heard another set of whistles very much resembling "various bird calls." This time enemy fire came from the west and then from another direction with still another whistle. By this time, the relief flareship was overhead and dropped illumination canisters. In the eerie light given off by the flares, the Marines "could see the enemy massing in front of us" and called in artillery and mortar support. Gundersen later wrote: "To escape the artillery which was right on target,

*Lieutenant Colonel Gene W. Bowers, the battalion operations officer, recalled the situation somewhat less dramatically, writing that the landing "was uneventful except for some long range sniping from the island." LtCol Gene W. Bowers, Comments on draft, dtd 30May95 (Vietnam Comment File), hereafter Bowers Comments.

**Lieutenant Colonel Bowers commented that the 250 people in black pajamas were "identified by close passes by UH-1E gunships to be villagers, mostly women and children, who were fleeing the fighting in their village. They collected in a huddled group on the northernmost peninsula of the island at the rivers' convergence. They remained there unmolested throughout the action." Bowers Comments.

they rushed towards us." He recalled that some broke through, but "became trapped between us and the 2d Platoon."³⁸

In the meantime, Lieutenant Colonel Rockey and his small command group had established the battalion command post just below the island on the southern bank of the tributary to coordinate the operation and its supporting fires. Initially the command group consisted of the battalion commander; his operations officer, Captain Gene W. Bowers; the assistant operations officer, Captain Lee C. Gound; and "artillery and mortar F.O.'s, helicopter support team, radio operators, and a few strap hangers who came along for the ride." The first disappointment was the failure of the ARVN forces to support the Marine attack. Although, as Captain Bowers recalled, he heard some outgoing firing from our left flank, but "never saw any ARVNs move forward in the paddy." Bowers sent a senior liaison staff NCO "to find their headquarters to make contact . . . but he came back, saying the ARVNs were in the defensive mode, no one spoke English, and they ignored him." Lieutenant Colonel Rockey during the interim ordered a section of 106mm Recoilless Rifles, mounted on small flatbed four-wheeled drive vehicles, called Mechanical Mules, to reinforce the temporary command group from the 3d Battalion's combat base, some 9,000 meters to the south. The Mule-mounted 106s, however, did not arrive until after dark.³⁹

For the command group, the first crisis occurred when the enemy struck the 3d Platoon at the footbridge, causing several casualties. Among the dead was the platoon leader. Captain Bowers remembered talking to a wounded lance corporal who called the situation desperate and "pled for immediate reinforcements . . ." With the permission of Lieutenant Colonel Rockey, Bowers hastily formed a provisional platoon of about 30 men and placed it under the command of his assistant, Captain Gound. According to Bowers, he pressed all the available men in the CP into the platoon including mortarmen, radiomen, recoilless rifle men, and even a chaplain's assistant. He told Gound to take his makeshift force and attack across the bridge and relieve the embattled 3d Platoon.⁴⁰

According to Bowers, when Gound's troops departed, the only people left in the CP were Lieutenant Colonel Rockey and himself. The battalion commander "carried the Division Tactical net radio and monitored the artillery nets." Bowers carried the battalion tactical net radio, monitoring the forward air controller net as well as the company's tactical net. When the provisional platoon arrived at the 3d Platoon's position,

Captain Gound radioed Bowers and asked for 81mm support against enemy troops he could see to his front. Bowers ran to where the mortars were guarded by one mortarmen who told the Marine captain that "he was a new replacement ammo humper, who had no idea how to aim and fire the mortar." Captain Bowers told the man to help him break out the ammunition and then for about half an hour, the two "provided overhead free gun, dead reckoning, zero charge fire support to Captain Gound's platoon," while the latter "adjusted the fire by saying . . . 'a little right,' a little closer,' and so forth." This broke the enemy attempt to overrun the Marines at the bridge.⁴¹

With the support of artillery, air, and mortars, together with their individual weapons and claymore mines, the Marines of Company I broke the back of the enemy attack. According to Gundersen with the 1st Platoon, "the sounds of the arty, the rockets, the mortars, the grenades combined with the eerie swaying of the illumination on their parachutes created a hellish vision. Never before, or since have I been in such an acute state of fear." The fight, however, had gone out of the VC who began to disperse into small groups and tried to make their escape off the island. Captain Bowers recalled that under the light of the flares, the Marines reported "what they described as 'hundreds' . . . of heads of swimmers attempting to escape across the river to the east." On the other bank of the river, however, the small task force from the 3d Amphibian Tractor Battalion blocked their way. The amtrac troops rounded up in the water about 105 detainees fleeing the island.⁴²

On the morning of the 31st, the Marines of Company I, now reinforced by the ARVN and the AmTrac Marines, surveyed the results of the fighting and continued to mop up the remnants of the enemy force. At dawn, near the positions of the 1st Platoon, John Gundersen remembered "bodies of the enemy soldiers were strewn about not more than 15 meters in front of our perimeter, swelling indepth in front of the machine gun to as much as six deep. I was awed by the sight of all those bodies." He observed that the VC never realized that the Marines had moved from the fighting holes in the lower path and they "spent the whole night and their lives attacking those holes." Captain Bowers related that another "60 or so dead enemy were counted in front of Gound's position." Company I and the small command group remained in the sector until about 1500 on the 31st and then returned to their original combat camp to the south. According to Marine sources, the heavy action on this small island

resulted in 102 VC killed, 88 prisoners of war, 13 VC suspects, and 70 laborers. Apparently the enemy forces were a mixed group from several different units interspersed together. Allied intelligence officers identified members from the *V-25th*, *R-20th*, *C-130th Battalions*, and the *Q-15th* and *Q-16th Local Force Companies*. The Marines failed to determine whether this mixed force had a specific mission or consisted of remnants from units that had participated in the earlier attack on the I Corps headquarters.⁴³

The rest of the enemy efforts in the Da Nang area and TAOR were about as haphazard and relatively ineffective as the fight on the unnamed island. In the northeast, near the Force Logistic Command sector, villagers from Nam O just south of the strategic Nam O Bridge, told Popular Force troops, members of the *Q-4 Combined Action platoon*, that the VC planned to attack the CAP compound. At 0735, enemy gunners fired two rocket-propelled grenades (RPGs) at the compound tower and a VC infantry platoon opened up upon the Combined Action unit. The RPGs missed the apertures in the tower and fell to the ground. After a brief firefight, the VC troops withdrew taking any casualties with them. In a sweep of the area, the defenders found ammunition clips and bloodstains. Local villagers told the Marines that at least one VC had been killed in the brief skirmish. Two Marines sustained wounds.⁴⁴

The most serious ground attack against a Marine unit occurred in the western portion of the Da Nang TAOR just below the Tuy Loan and Cau Do Rivers near the eastern bank of the Yen River. About 0745, approximately two companies or a reinforced company from the *31st NVA Regiment* ambushed a Marine platoon from Company G, 2d Battalion, 3d Marines. At this point, Company G was under the operational control of the 1st Battalion, 7th Marines, which had the responsibility of protecting the western approaches to the Marine base. As the Marine platoon patrolled along the banks of the Yen, a heavy machine gun suddenly opened up. Firing from well-concealed and dug-in firing positions, the enemy machine gunners and infantry took a heavy toll of the Marines. With the enemy too close to call in artillery or fixed-wing air, the Marines radioed for reinforcements. A second platoon from Company G arrived at the site and attempted to maneuver to the NVA flank. The enemy then attacked forcing the Marine platoons to fall back to more defensive positions. By 1100, Marine helicopters evacuated the most seriously wounded and brought in the rest of

Company G into blocking positions on the western bank of the Yen.⁴⁵

The Marines now counterattacked supported by artillery and Marine gunships and fixed-wing air. The North Vietnamese fought a delaying action as they began to withdraw. Later that afternoon, the 1st Marine Division helilifted a "Bald Eagle" reaction force from Company E, 2d Battalion, 3d Marines east of the river in an attempt to close the circle around the NVA. Linking up, under artillery and air cover, the two Marine companies continued their advance until forced to halt because of darkness and then took up night defensive positions. Shortly after 1800, an air observer reported seeing 25–30 enemy troops in trenchlines, bunkers, and fighting holes. In the morning when searching the battle area, the Marines would find "ample evidence of enemy casualties, but only two enemy bodies" Total Marine casualties of this incident on the 30th were 10 Marines killed and 15 wounded. Most of the dead and wounded were from the platoon of Company G that fell victim to the enemy ambush.

The attack on the western perimeter was probably the most serious thrust against Marine positions on the day and evening of 30 January. Throughout the day, however, Marine units throughout the TAOR reported incidents. A Company E, 2d Battalion, 3d Marines squad patrol in its regular area of operations just east of the confluence of the Thanh Quit and Vinh Dien River came under attack from an estimated squad of enemy. A detachment of four LVTs from the 3d AmTrac Battalion quickly arrived, but the enemy had already departed. The Marine squad sustained casualties of one man killed and one nonbattle casualty. Apparently one Marine at the death of his comrade became so distraught that he was unable to function.⁴⁶

In Da Nang City itself, about 1050 in the morning, approximately 500 people gathered at a Buddhist pagoda and attempted to hold a march. The National Police arrested 25 of the crowd and quickly dispersed the would-be demonstrators. This demonstration may have been planned to coincide with an attack on the city which never developed.⁴⁷

South of the Hai Van Pass, in the northern portion of the Da Nang TAOR, in the 2d Battalion, 7th Marines sector, the North Vietnamese were able to close Route 1 temporarily, but failed to penetrate allied defenses. At 0915, a squad from Company G, 2d Battalion, 7th Marines providing road security for a Marine engineer mine-sweeping team on Route 1 just below the pass, encountered a small enemy sapper detachment. Reinforced by another squad, the

Company G Marines killed three of the enemy troops and captured two. The two North Vietnamese prisoners identified themselves as members of the *H-2 Engineering Company*, part of the *2d Sapper Battalion*. According to the enemy soldiers, their mission was to mine and interdict allied traffic in the Hai Van Pass area. Their weapons included AK-47s and B-40 Rockets. Despite the Marine patrolling, NVA sappers, probably from the *2d Sapper Battalion*, blew three bridges and one culvert over Route 1 in the pass area. An entry in the 1st Marine Division Journal for 30 January read "Rt # 1 from Hai Van Pass to Phu Loc closed as a result of enemy action."⁴⁸

On the night of the 30th, elements of a battalion of the *NVA 4th Regiment* attacked an ARVN outpost at the foot of the Hai Van Pass. The South Vietnamese quickly rushed the newly arrived 5th ARVN Ranger Battalion into the area north of Da Nang City. Supported by U.S. artillery and air, the South Vietnamese successfully contained the Communist units in the Nam O and Lien Chien regions. This fighting would continue in a desultory fashion throughout the night.⁴⁹

South of Da Nang, in Hoi An, on the 30th, the South Koreans, reinforced by elements of the ARVN 51st Regiment, tried to tighten the loop and began preparations to retake the city. At 0730, the South Koreans reported about 200 to 300 enemy troops still in Hoi An. An American advisor within the MACV compound reported at 1145 that the VC were digging in the engineer compound and that "numerous boats in river loaded with Charlie." After calling in helicopter gunships, the Korean Marines, at 1320, reached the old MACV compound and linked up with U.S. advisors there. The VC continued to hold the hospital, however, and part of the engineer compound. Although the Koreans and the ARVN surrounded most of the city, the Communist troops still were able to keep their southern flank open.⁵⁰

The Korean Marines sent three companies to close the southern link and then moved forward into the attack. By dark the Koreans had captured the hospital and were in position to relieve the engineer compound. The Koreans kept one company at the MACV compound for security and prepared for a sweep to clear out the city in the morning. During the night, enemy resistance dwindled to sniper fire on the Marine positions. Colonel Franklin Smith, from the III MAF perspective, suggested later that a reluctance upon the part of the South Korean Marine Brigade commander to cause undue damage and to avoid civilian casualties lay behind the slowness and deliberateness of the Kore-

an advance. According to U.S. advisors and to South Vietnamese sources, the fight for Hoi An resulted in allied casualties of 58 killed, 103 wounded in action, 21 missing in action, and 14 weapons lost. The allies claimed they killed 343 of the enemy and detained 195 prisoners. Of the prisoners, the South Vietnamese identified 6 as military, 109 as workers, and the remaining 80 as VC cadre.

Throughout the Da Nang TAOR, the intensity of activity increased during the night. From 1800 to 2400 on the 30th, the 1st Marine Division reported to III MAF over 30 incidents ranging from sightings of large enemy forces, to mortar attacks, and a few infantry assaults. At the same time, the 1st Division had sent out several reconnaissance elements which began to pay dividends. At 1835, Recon team "Ice Bound," positioned in the mountains about eight miles northwest of Da Nang observed an enemy rocket unit prepare a firing position for their missiles. After calling in artillery which resulted in three secondary explosions, the reconnaissance Marines reported seven enemy killed. The enemy launched no rockets from this site.⁵¹

Another reconnaissance patrol, Recon Team "Rummage," about 30 kilometers south of Da Nang in the Que Son Mountains below An Hoa, had even more spectacular results. About 1900, it spotted a column of about 40 NVA at the head of even a larger column moving east along a trail. The North Vietnamese soldiers wore flak jackets and helmets and carried a machine gun, and a small rocket detachment with six 122mm rockets. "Rummage" soon determined that the total number of North Vietnamese troops approximated 500 or more men, moving in two columns. The lead column consisted of about 100 to 150 men, followed by the main body. The main body advanced in column maintaining about three to four feet space between each man. Instead of calling artillery fire immediately, the reconnaissance Marines arranged with Battery K, 4th Battalion, 11th Marines and a detachment of the 3d 155mm Gun Battery at An Hoa for an "artillery ambush."⁵²

After counting 500 men pass their position, Rummage sprung the trap. Landing in large bursts, about 50 to 75 artillery rounds fell on the lead column. Rummage reported about 50 NVA dead with another 100 "probable." Immediately after the artillery shelling, a C-47 Spooky arrived on station and worked over the same area with its Gatling guns. Rummage radioed back that Spooky caught about 50 NVA crossing a stream and the recon Marines could

observe "rounds hitting all around them [the NVA]." Spooky then called in Marine fixed-wing attack aircraft which dropped napalm with "outstanding coverage of target." Darkness prevented any accurate bomb assessment, but the "Rummage" Marines could observe enemy movement when illumination was available. According to the team leader, "We never saw the end of the main body . . . [but] when we stopped the count, there were NVA still in column of 4's as far as we could see with our M49 [rifle spotting scope]."

Later intelligence and interrogation reports of prisoners of war would indicate that the unit that "Rummage" had intercepted was probably a battalion of the *2d NVA Division*. Apparently the division was slow in moving into the Da Nang area and was not in position to support the local forces in the earlier phase of the enemy offensive. According to Marine intelligence sources, Rummage may well "have rendered a reinforced battalion combat ineffective, forcing the enemy to modify his plans at a critical time." In a message to III MAF, General Robertson observed: "Never have so few done so much to so many."

By this time, the Communist Tet offensive was in full bloom, not only at Da Nang, but throughout Vietnam. In the early morning hours of 31 January, Communist forces assaulted provincial and district capitals extending from the Mekong Delta in the south to Quang Tri City in the north. In Thua Thien Province in I Corps, two North Vietnamese regiments held most of Hue City and the Marine base at Phu Bai came under mortar and rocket barrages. Along Route 1 between Phu Bai and Da Nang, VC and NVA main force units on the 31st made some 18 attacks on bridges, Marine company positions in the Phu Loc area, and several of the Combined Action platoons. Elsewhere in I Corps, below Da Nang, around 0400 on 31 January, elements of the *70th VC Battalion* and the *21st NVA Regiment* struck Tam Ky, defended by the ARVN 6th Regiment and an artillery battalion. At daybreak, the South Vietnamese troops counterattacked. According to the South Vietnamese official history, the enemy retreated in disorder leaving on the battlefield, "hundreds of bodies and 31 wounded who were captured." Another 38 of the enemy surrendered.⁵³

Much the same occurred at Quang Ngai City in the most southern of the I Corps provinces. At 0400 on the 31st, supported by local guerrilla forces, the *VC 401st Main Force Regiment* struck the city and airfield and initially achieved surprise, but failed to

exploit its advantage. By that night, with the enemy command and control structure shattered, the fight was over.* The VC lost about 500 killed and some 300 weapons. For its part, the 2d ARVN Division sustained casualties of 56 killed, 138 wounded, and one man missing. The ARVN also lost 43 weapons.⁵⁴

At the American base at Chu Lai, the Communists limited their attacks to mortar and rockets although rumors circulated that the NVA were about to launch a ground assault on the base. While the Americal Division maintained a 100 percent alert, enemy gunners, nevertheless, in the early morning hours successfully launched their rockets and mortars. One 122mm rocket exploded a bomb dump and caused extensive damage. Colonel Dean Wilker, the MAG-12 commander, later recalled that the resulting blast of the bomb dump "caved in one of my hangars and damaged the others."⁵⁵ The two Marine aircraft groups at Chu Lai, MAG-12 and MAG-13, sustained 3 fixed-wing aircraft destroyed and 23 damaged, 4 of them substantially. There was no further ground assault.⁵⁶

In the extensive Da Nang TAOR, the early morning hours of 31 January were almost a repeat of the events of the 30th. Enemy gunners fired rockets at both the Da Nang Airbase and this time also included the Marble Mountain helicopter facility on Tiensha Peninsula. No rockets fell on the main airbase but Marble Mountain sustained some damage. The enemy rocket troops fired in two bursts, one at 0342, followed by a second barrage three hours later. About the same time as the rocket attacks on the Da Nang base and Marble Mountain, enemy mortars bombarded the command post of the 7th Marines on Hill 55 south of Da Nang and forward infantry positions. These included Hills 65 and 52 manned by companies of the 3d Battalion, 7th Marines in the southwestern part of the TAOR and Hill 41 defended by Company D, 1st Battalion, 7th Marines in the central western sector. The mortar attacks resulted in only five wounded and none killed among the Marine defenders. Counter-mortar fire quickly silenced the enemy tubes. The Marine staff speculated that the enemy launched the mortar attacks largely as a cover for the rocket attacks against Marble Mountain. Even at Marble Mountain the damage was relatively contained. The Marines lost 1 helicopter and sustained damage to 29 others. Two

* A U.S. Army historian, George L. MacGarrigle, observed that the attack on Quang Ngai City failed because the commander of the *401st* "was unable to coordinate the action." George L. MacGarrigle, *Historian*, CMH, Comments on draft, dtd 5Dec94 (Vietnam Comment File).

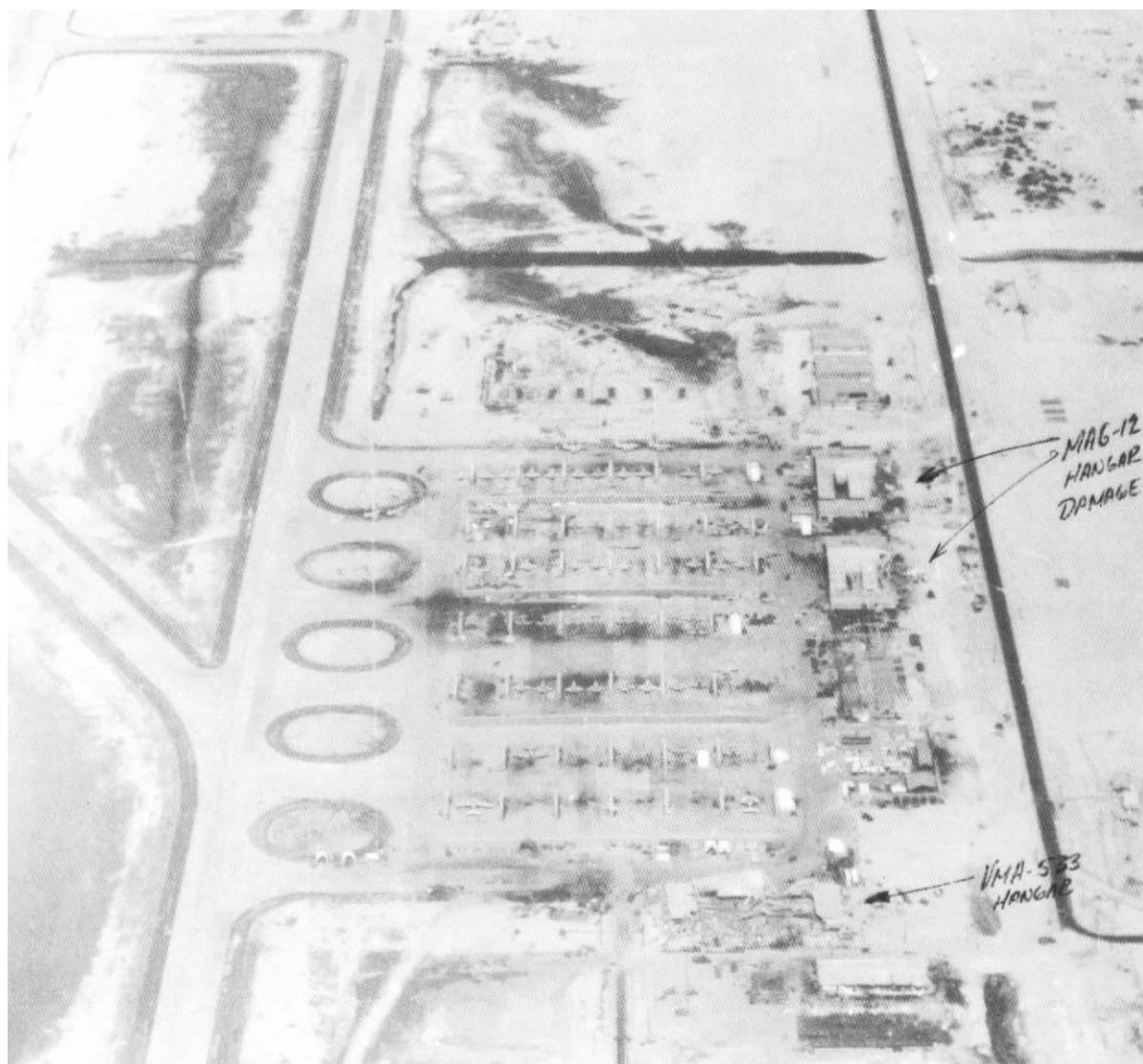


Photo courtesy of Col Robert W. Lewis, USMC (Ret)

Chu Lai airfield is seen in an aerial view after the rocket attack. Note arrows pointing out damage to aircraft hangars at the base.

attached U.S. Army personnel were wounded.⁵⁷

During the day and evening of the 31st, the VC and NVA infantry units pressed the offensive on the ground. In the northern sector of Da Nang, NVA or VC main force troops entered Nam O once again and killed the hamlet chief.* Combined Action platoon

*Mike McDonnell, who was the Northern Sector Defense Command "watch officer", recalled that he tried to warn the "CAPs . . . that there was a battalion of NVA in their ville; we could not raise them, the NVA went into assault and we had to call artillery on their position . . ." He remembered that time as "when the world turned upside down." Mike McDonnell, Comments on draft, dtd 22Nov94 (Vietnam Comment File).

Q-4 there continued to hold out. At about 0740, a crowd of 400 Vietnamese civilians made up mostly of women and children and carrying NVA and VC flags approached the Combined Action compound. The Marines and Popular Force troops fired at armed members of the crowd who appeared to be directing the march. The crowd scattered only to gather on the fringes of the Da Nang base near the Force Logistic Compound near Red Beach. Again the crowd dispersed and this time did not recongregate. In the meantime, the VC harassed with sniper fire both CAP Q-4 and the nearby Nam O bridge security detachment from the 2d Battalion, 7th Marines.⁵⁸



Department of Defense (USMC) Photo A190390

A bandaged VC, wounded in the fighting for Nam O, waits for evacuation. The prisoner talked freely to his captors while he received medical attention.

The Da Nang Northern Sector Defense Command dispatched a provisional company to assist the Combined Action Marines as well as the security detachment. The provisional company linked up with two South Vietnamese Ranger companies that were operating in the area to contain the battalion from the *4th NVA Regiment* which had slipped through the Hai Van Pass the night before. With part of the force establishing blocking positions north of the hamlet, the rest of the provisional company and South Vietnamese Rangers moved through Nam O. By the afternoon of the 31st, the Marines and Rangers had completed their sweep. They collected some 200 people that they detained for further questioning. Some of the VC in the hamlet fled south, but encountered a platoon from Company E, 2d Battalion, 7th Marines coming up to reinforce the allied forces in the Nam O region. In the resulting engagement, the Marines of Company E killed about 13 VC. The enemy unit was from the *Q-55th Local Force Company*, which normally operated in the area. A prisoner captured in Nam O identified a North Vietnamese battalion, probably from the *4th*

NVA Regiment, operating below the Hai Van Pass with the "mission to form civilians for demonstrations."⁵⁹

According to a South Vietnamese account, the ARVN Rangers killed 150 of the enemy and captured another 18 in the battle for Nam O and in other fighting below the pass through 31 January. ARVN intelligence officers speculated that the battalion from the *4th NVA Regiment* was supposed to have spearheaded the attack on the city of Da Nang the previous day, but arrived too late to influence the battle.⁶⁰

In other sectors of the Da Nang TAOR, the Communists also maintained the pressure on the allied forces. For the most part, the VC and NVA limited their attacks on the Marines to mortar bombardments and harassing small arms fire. Although agent reports and other intelligence indicated continued enemy assaults north of the Cau Do River against Hoa Vang and Da Nang City, most of these came to naught. The 1st MP Battalion completed three sweeps of the airbase perimeter and the areas just southeast, southwest, and just north of the airbase without incident. The battalion's Company B, however, in an operation with a Combined Action platoon in two hamlets on the Tien-sha Peninsula or Da Nang East, surprised a VC force in two hamlets north of Marble Mountain. The Marines and Popular Force troops killed 22 of the enemy and took another 23 prisoner.⁶¹

There were two serious incidents in the 7th Marines sector. In the 3d Battalion, 7th Marines area of operations, about 2,000 meters west of Hill 55 on the other side of a bend in the Yen River, a squad from Company L at 1145 ran into what eventually turned out to be a fairly large-sized enemy unit. Reinforced by the remainder of Company L and two platoons from Company M together with two tanks and a LVT, the Marines engaged the NVA. Company L, 3d Battalion, 5th Marines set up blocking positions on the east bank of the Yen. Able to establish clear fields of fire in the rice paddy where the heaviest firefight occurred, the enemy prevented the 7th Marines elements from closing with them. After dark, both sides withdrew, the Marines to night defensive positions and the NVA to the west. In the engagement, the Marines lost 5 killed and 12 wounded. They counted 34 enemy dead. Noting the new web gear and weapons with the North Vietnamese bodies left on the battlefield, Marine intelligence officers believed the North Vietnamese unit to be from the *31st NVA Regiment*.⁶²

About 5,000 meters to the northwest, later that night, a squad from Company C, 1st Battalion, 7th Marines encountered an enemy force possibly from the

same NVA regiment. The Marine squad was about to establish a night ambush site when an enemy force of about 100 fired upon them. Two other squad patrols from Company C in the vicinity quickly joined the first squad. Another platoon from the Marine company also reinforced the engaged troops about an hour later. Finally the enemy broke contact at 2000 and disappeared. The Marines took the worst in this uneven battle. Initially surprised, the first squad sustained heavy casualties. All told, the Marines lost 12 killed and 6 wounded. They later found three enemy bodies at the site. The dead enemy troops were wearing black pajamas under their green utilities. According to a Marine report, "it was evident that the enemy was prepared to masquerade as Vietnamese civilians in the process of infiltrating the TAOR and that he was attempting to infiltrate his forces in small units."⁶³

The greatest danger to the TAOR at this juncture, however, was from the south in that area defended by the Korean Marine Brigade and the 51st ARVN Regiment. Although the Koreans and ARVN in a combined operation finally cleared Hoi An, enemy units to the west, south, and north of that city continued to press the attack. At 0920, enemy forces attacked the district towns of Dien Ban, just above the Ky Lam River, and Duy Xuyen below the river. At Dien Bien, the 51st ARVN reinforced by Korean Marines contained the attack. At Duy Xuyen, however, the Communist troops overran the town, forcing the district chief to flee and take refuge with the Koreans. Americal Division artillery operating in the Que Son sector took the Communist forces under fire, but did not shell Duy Xuyen town because of the civilian population there. The III MAF Command Center later that evening radioed MACV in Saigon: "Although the enemy has suffered heavy losses within his local and main force VC units during the past two days, he still possesses a formidable threat utilizing NVA troops poised on the periphery of the Da Nang TAOR."⁶⁴

While the Communist forces continued to harass allied positions on the night of 31 January–1 February 1968, the intensity of combat did not match that of the previous two nights. Still enemy gunners just before 0100 launched 12 122mm rockets aimed at the Da Nang base and blew up two ammunition dumps, one for napalm and the other for flares. While making for a loud and colorful pyrotechnical display, the explosions caused no casualties and no damage to any of the aircraft. There were no other rocket attacks that night.⁶⁵

Again during the day of 1 February, the number of incidents between allied and Communist forces fell from those of the two previous days. Enemy gunners, however, continued to be active and shot down a Marine CH-46 attempting to insert a reconnaissance team into a landing zone in the hill mass in the western sector of Da Nang below the Tuy Loan River. The helicopter burned upon crashing, but the crew and most of the patrol were able to get out. While Marine fixed-wing aircraft flew strike missions against the enemy gun emplacements, another helicopter evacuated the survivors. Of the 13-man Recon team, dubbed "Dublin City," one was dead, nine were injured, and three escaped unscathed. According to Marine pilot reports, the enemy had approximately 250 men in the area equipped with automatic weapons, including at least one .50-caliber-type machine gun. After the fixed-wing aircraft and evacuation helicopter cleared the area, the 11th Marines saturated the area with artillery fire.⁶⁶

A Brief Lull and Renewed Fighting

On 1 February, General Robertson began to refine his defensive dispositions at Da Nang so as to counter any further incursions on the part of the NVA regulars and the VC main force units pressing on the Marine TAOR. Robertson wanted to "canalize enemy movements in order to develop lucrative targets which could be exploited." Given also the enemy rocket threat, he still needed to maintain extensive patrols in the so-called Rocket Belt. The 1st Marine Division commander decided then to move Company M, 3d Battalion, 7th Marines from its fairly remote position on Hill 52 in the far western reaches of the Vu Gia River Valley above the An Hoa Basin to the more centrally located Hill 65. Because of the location of Hill 65, just above Route 4 about 4,000 meters west of the district town of Dai Loc, and below Charlie Ridge, where the VC had heavy machine gun emplacements which precluded any helicopter lift, the Marine company had to make the move on foot. The company arrived at its dispositions at 0100 the following morning. A contingent of South Vietnamese Nung mercenaries from the Special Forces CIDG Camp at Thuong Duc took over the defense of Hill 52 from Company M.⁶⁷

Still the Marine command believed the new positions of Company M not only covered the approaches to Dai Loc, but provided the division with another reserve force. Further to the east Company G, 2d Battalion, 3d Marines, at the battalion's command post

about 500 meters north of Dien Ban town, remained as the division mobile reserve mounted in LVTs and supported by tanks. It also served to block "one of the principal avenues of approach to Da Nang from the south." The only other Marine reserves available to the division were the provisional companies of the Northern and Southern Defense Commands.

For the next few days, there was a relative lull in the Da Nang sector, at least as compared to the last two days of January. There were still ominous signs and actions that the enemy push on Da Nang was not over. Although most of the enemy activity was restricted to small-unit contacts, on the night of 2–3 February, enemy gunners again rocketed the Da Nang base. From firing positions southwest of the base, 28 122mm missiles fell on the airfield, destroying one aircraft and damaging six others. Marine counter-rocket fire from the 11th Marines and 1st Tank Battalion resulted in five secondary explosions.⁶⁸

While from 1–5 February, the enemy ground assaults on Marine positions appeared to diminish, Marine spotters in the tower on Hill 55 reported the constant movement of small groups of enemy troops in the western portion of the Korean Marine area of operations. Marine commanders and staff officers could only speculate that the enemy was probably infiltrating north in small groups to "predetermined rallying points" for a further assault either on the city or on the base. Other disturbing intelligence tended to confirm this analysis. On 2 February, the Marines received a report that the *2d NVA Division* had moved its headquarters four miles north, to a position above Route 4, from its previous location on Go Noi Island. Two days later, Marine intelligence officers learned that the *21st NVA Regiment* was in the Go Noi area. Finally there were rumors that the other two regiments of the *2d Division*, the *1st VC* and the *3d NVA*, had infiltrated even further north. In fact, elements of both regiments had reached jump-off points just south of the Cau Do River. As Lieutenant Colonel John F. J. Kelly, an intelligence officer on the III MAF staff, remembered, III MAF had expected the *2d NVA Division* to have participated in the attack on the 30th and 31st, "and it was waited on with bated breath, we knew that it was coming."⁶⁹

The Marines did not have a long wait. On the night of 5–6 February, the Communist forces began the second phase of its Da Nang offensive. At 2000 on the night of the 5th, a Marine platoon ambush from Company C, 1st Battalion, 7th Marines intercepted about 60 North Vietnamese troops about 4,000

meters south of the Tuy Loan River in the western sector of the area of operations moving northeast toward the river and the base with mortars and automatic weapons. Calling artillery upon the enemy troops, the Marines then swept through the area and recovered about 17 60mm mortar rounds. They later found four enemy dead. While the Marines successfully thwarted this attempt, between 0100 and 0500 on the morning of the 6th, enemy gunners mortared or rocketed all of the command posts, fire bases, and company combat bases in the 7th Marines sector. In the attack, the enemy gunners fired 122mm rockets at Marine artillery positions at An Hoa, Hill 55, and Hill 10. Twenty rockets fell on Hill 10, manned by Battery G, 3d Battalion, 11th Marines which resulted in 23 casualties, including two dead. The remaining rocket attacks were ineffective. Two of the mortar attacks hit the 1st Air Cavalry Division helipad near the Force Logistic Command area in the Red Beach sector. These destroyed two of the Army helicopters and damaged eight others. The mortar rounds killed one U.S. soldier and wounded two.⁷⁰

On the ground in the 7th Marines sector, North Vietnamese units hit several of the Combined Action platoons, especially in the 3d and 1st Battalion areas. One of the major attacks was against CAP B–3 in the hamlet of Duong Lam (1) just below the Tuy Loan River. Shortly after 0100 on the 6th, enemy gunners opened up on the hamlet with intermittent mortar rounds and small-arms fire. About an hour later, North Vietnamese troops who had infiltrated Duong Lam rushed the CAP compound. While successfully beating back the enemy onslaught, the Combined Action leader called for help. At 0240, a squad from the 1st Battalion, 7th Marines, supported by two tanks from the 1st Tank Battalion, moved to assist the embattled CAP unit. The reaction force itself came under automatic weapons fire and enemy rocket-propelled grenades disabled the two tanks. About 0330, two more Marine tanks from the district town of Hieu Duc arrived at the northern fringes of the hamlet. The armored force pushed through the hamlet and encountered only occasional small-arms fire. Joining up with the squad from the 1st Battalion, 7th Marines and some newly arrived ARVN troops, the tanks then relieved the Combined Action garrison. The combined force then swept the general area where they found two enemy bodies and took three prisoners. According to the prisoner accounts, they were from the *3d Battalion*, *31st NVA Regiment* and confirmed that "... Da Nang itself was the ultimate objective."⁷¹

The heaviest action occurred in the 3d Battalion, 5th Marines and 4th Battalion, 51st ARVN sectors along Route 1. Corporal Igor Bobrowsky with CAP D-2 located near the Thanh Quit Bridge along Route 1 remembered being besieged in his compound by North Vietnamese regulars. As he recalled suddenly the enemy was there and forced his Marines and PFs to take refuge in the compound together with many local villagers: "We were running out of ammunition and everything else, so that was a big fear." According to Bobrowsky, the NVA suddenly disappeared as quickly as they had appeared. He later conjectured that "what saved us from being . . . taken out totally was the fact that they had bigger fish to fry, they were headed to Da Nang."^{72*}

The bigger fish was the 4th Battalion, 51st ARVN Battalion base camp about 5,000 meters north on Route 1 above the Thanh Quit River. At about 0300, two North Vietnamese battalions struck the ARVN compound. Two LVTH-6s from the Marine 1st Armored Amphibian Company attached to the 11th Marines responded to a call from the U.S. Army advisor attached to the ARVN unit. Firing 290 105mm shells, the tractor artillery reportedly killed about 80 of the enemy attackers caught in the open.⁷³

About 0900, Lieutenant Colonel William K. Rockey, the 3d Battalion, 5th Marines commander, ordered a small command group and two companies, Company M of his battalion and Company F, 2d Battalion, 3d Marines attached to his command, to the relief of the ARVN camp. Accompanied by tanks and LVTs, Company F maneuvered to the north of the ARVN base. Company M advanced toward a hamlet to the south of the ARVN. Both Marine companies encountered heavy small-arms fire and rocket-propelled grenades as they approached their objectives. The Marine companies then pulled back and called in artillery and air. Lieutenant Colonel Rockey then directed Company G of the 3d Marines, also attached to him, to move up along the banks of the Bau Xau River toward a blocking position southwest of the ARVN base "to seal up" any escape route in that direction. As Company G

began its redeployment along the river route it ran into enemy forces attempting to retreat in that direction. Rockey then ordered a platoon from his Company K to reinforce Company G. By the end of the day, the elements of the four Marine companies had established their night positions. During the day's fighting, Rockey's battalion killed 107 of the enemy and took two prisoners. His Marines sustained casualties of 11 killed and 53 wounded.^{74**}

The fighting continued during the night and into the next day. From their night positions, Company G observers saw large numbers of North Vietnamese approaching them from the north. The Marine company called in mortar and artillery fire. Battery F, 2d Battalion, 11th Marines alone shot off some 1,200 rounds. Even in the face of the artillery, the North Vietnamese continued their advance upon the Marine positions. Company G repulsed a number of probes throughout the night until the enemy broke contact at dawn. The 3d Battalion, 5th Marines together with Companies F and G, 2d Battalion, 3d Marines then began methodically to eliminate pockets of enemy resistance in the general area. In one contact about 1645, Company M, 3d Battalion, 5th Marines met a force of 100 enemy troops. The Marines and VC in the ensuing firefight fought at a range as close as five meters from one another with the Marines achieving the upper hand. According to the Marine after-action report, Lieutenant Colonel Rockey's battalion and the attached two companies from the 2d Battalion, 3d Marines accounted for more than 320 enemy dead in less than 36 hours.

By this time, Major General Robertson, the 1st Marine Division commander, was worried about the ability to contain the enemy offensive south of Da Nang. The VC R-20 and V-25th Battalions had struck again at Hoi An, engaging both the Korean Marine Brigade and the 1st and 2d Battalions of the ARVN 51st Regiment. North Vietnamese battalions from the 2d NVA Division had eluded the Korean and ARVN defenses in the southern sector and had penetrated the defensive perimeter of the 2d Battalion, 3d Marines and 3d Battalion, 5th Marines just below the main base. While the Marine battalions successfully kept these initial assaults on the night of 5-6 February in check, General Robertson was not

*Igor Bobrowsky commented on the "audacity (stupidity) of the NVA at the start of their push, when—as in our area, they moved in such numbers, openly and in the broad daylight that until they began to fire on us our only thought was that they must be an allied unit that strayed into our area." He added that although the NVA main group moved out they left "a blocking force behind to keep the CAP under fire . . ." He believed these troops "were deliberately left in place to serve as stepping stones along the line of retreat—in the event of a withdrawal." Bobrowsky Comments.

**Igor Bobrowsky with CAP D-2 remembered that Company M was "ambushed in the streets near the north end of Thanh Quit . . . A good number of M Company that survived the ambush got down to us, along with some of their dead and a lot of wounded." Bobrowsky Comments.



Photo is from the Abel Collection

Marines from Company M, 3d Battalion, 5th Marines move through tall grass in a hamlet on their way to relieve an embattled ARVN base camp near the Thanh Quit River.

sure how much longer they could. The fighting during the preceding week had drawn down the strength of the ARVN and the two Marine battalions and the enemy division still had uncommitted units that it could throw into the fray. General Robertson shared these concerns with General Cushman, the III MAF commander.⁷⁵

On 7 February, this request led to a strange confrontation, if there was a confrontation, between General Westmoreland and General Cushman. On the previous night as well as attacking at Da Nang, North Vietnamese troops overran the Special Forces Camp at Lang Vei, south of Khe Sanh.* Believing that III MAF should have relieved the camp and fearing that the enemy was about to launch the much-heralded attack on Khe Sanh itself, the MACV commander called for a special meeting on the morning of 7 February of the senior U.S. commanders in I Corps. At the meeting itself, he became even more upset as he learned about the situation at Da Nang. As he later confided, “the VC were getting closer and closer to Da Nang Airbase. There was an absence of initiative by the CG III MAF, in dealing forcefully with the situation.”⁷⁶

According to General Westmoreland’s account, he acted rather abruptly and made his displeasure known. Shocked at what he considered things left undone, he ordered “in exasperation” Major General Robertson of the 1st Marine Division and Major General Samuel Koster of the Americal Division from the room. The MACV commander told the two generals “to return only when they had worked out a viable plan for closely coordinated offensive action against the enemy threatening the airfield.”⁷⁷

Apparently, however, although conscious of Westmoreland’s sense of urgency about the tactical situation at Da Nang, the Marine commanders were unaware of Westmoreland’s unhappiness about the arrangements. According to both Generals Cushman and Robertson the meeting was not acrimonious. General Robertson remembered that he briefed the MACV commander on the enemy and stated that he needed more troops. Westmoreland then turned to Major General Koster and merely said: “Sam, you let Robby have two, three, or even four battalions if he needs them.” The MACV commander then dismissed Koster and Robertson from the meeting “to go out and work out the details.” General Cushman later commented that he did not normally order the movement of Army units until he and General Westmoreland “got together and agreed

*For the overrunning of Lang Vei see chapter 14.

upon a plan." His view was that the purpose of the meeting was to obtain Westmoreland's approval for the reinforcement of Da Nang by the Americal Division.^{78*}

Despite the mixed perceptions about the meeting, the various parties quickly worked out a plan of action. Colonel Smith of the III MAF staff, who sat in on the conference between Generals Koster and Robertson, remembered that after studying the situation map, the conferees "came to the conclusion that the best way of stopping this attack was to interpose an equally strong force between the 2d NVA Division and the Da Nang Vital Area." The idea was to stop the enemy division from entering the Vital Area rather "than pushing him from the south and in effect pushing him" into the sector. The planners decided to send a two-battalion Army task force from the Americal Division into the northern sector of the 3d Battalion, 5th Marines near Route 1 south of the Cau Do.⁷⁹

The afternoon of 7 February, General Cushman issued the orders for the movement of the Army units to Da Nang. Major General Koster was to deploy one battalion immediately and to send the task force command group and remaining battalion the following day. Upon arrival at Da Nang, the Army units were to be under the operational control of the 1st Marine Division. The mission of the Americal task force was to "block enemy movement to the north, deny enemy access to the Da Nang Vital Area, and destroy enemy forces."⁸⁰

According to plan, late in the afternoon of 7 February, Marine helicopters brought the lead Army battalion, the 1st Battalion, 6th Infantry, 196th Light Infantry Brigade, commanded by Army Lieutenant Colonel William J. Baxley, into a landing zone near the hamlet of Duong Son (1) just off the old railroad

tracks, about 2,000 meters south of the Cau Do. The Army troops quickly moved into night positions and encountered only harassing sniper fire or an occasional mortar round.⁸¹

The night of 7–8 was relatively uneventful throughout the Da Nang TAOR until about 0345. At that time, enemy mortar rounds fell into the CAP E–4 compound in Lo Giang (1) hamlet, about 2,000 meters northeast of Duong Son (1). While beginning with the mortar bombardment, the enemy soon escalated the fighting. By daylight, enemy ground forces surrounded the CAP hamlet.

At that point, to ease the pressure on the CAPs, General Robertson about 0700 deployed the Army battalion to Lo Giang (5), about 1,000 meters north of Lo Giang (1), just below the Cau Do. The Army troops soon found themselves engaged with another enemy battalion. The 1st Marine Division commander then reinforced the Army unit with two Marine companies, Company G, 2d Battalion, 3d Marines and Company I, 3d Battalion, 5th Marines. This fighting continued to rage until late afternoon.

In the meantime, CAP E–4 continued to hold out against overwhelming odds. A small Combined Action headquarters detachment of 15 men from Hoa Vang also attempted to reinforce the embattled CAP, but never reached Lo Giang (1). Only 1 of the original 15 men survived. By mid-afternoon CAP E–4 was nearly out of ammunition. At 1550, under cover of helicopter gunships and fixed-wing aircraft, Marine helicopters successfully evacuated the Combined Action platoon out of Lo Giang (1). In Lo Giang (5), the action lasted for another hour and a half, when the NVA/VC forces tried to break contact. In that fighting, the soldiers and Marines killed over 150 of the enemy.

By that evening, Army Task Force Miracle, under Army Colonel Louis Gelling, the commander of the 196th Light Infantry Brigade, had been established in the Da Nang area of operations. Gelling, the task force headquarters, and the 2d Battalion, 1st Infantry, under the command of U.S. Army Lieutenant Colonel Lyman H. Hammond, Jr., had arrived from Chu Lai that afternoon. Establishing his command post near Duong Son, Colonel Gelling assumed operational control of the 1st of the 6th near Lo Giang (5) and placed the 2d of the 1st in blocking positions below Lo Giang (1). During the following day, while the 1st of the 6th mopped up in its area, the 2d Battalion, 1st Infantry attacked north. The latter battalion ran into a North Vietnamese battalion and engaged it in a nine-hour battle. Pulling back its assault elements, the Army unit saturated the

*General Westmoreland commented that he was "critical of Cushman's lack of initiative in responding to an immediate tactical situation," not of the command arrangements. He assumed that Cushman "appreciated that the Americal Division was under his tactical command." Gen William C. Westmoreland, USA, Comments on draft, dtd 18Oct94 (Vietnam Comment File).

Marine Brigadier General John R. Chaisson, the head of the MACV Combat Operations Center, who also attended the meeting, wrote to his wife about "recriminations" at the meeting, but these related to the Lang Vei situation. BGen John R. Chaisson, ltr to wife, dtd 8Feb68 (Chaisson Papers, Hoover Institute). Cushman related that he was "criticized because I didn't send the whole outfit from Khe Sanh down there [Lang Vei], but I decided . . . that it wasn't the thing to do." Cushman Intvw, Nov82, p. 31. General Earl E. Anderson, the III MAF Chief of Staff, also attended the meeting and agreed "that it was not acrimonious." Gen Earl E. Anderson, Comments on draft, dtd 18Dec94 (Vietnam Comment File). See also Chapter 14.

area with artillery. They later found 46 enemy bodies and took a wounded man prisoner. Intelligence indicated that the enemy unit in the southern hamlet was from the *3d Battalion, 31st NVA Regiment*, and the units in Lo Giang (5) were from the *1st VC Regiment*. In the meantime, that day, on the eastern flank of the Army units, on the east bank of the Vinh Dinh River, the 2d Battalion, 3d Marines encountered two companies from the *1st VC Regiment* and killed about 90 of the enemy.

The enemy offensive in the Da Nang sector had spent itself. During the next few days, Task Force Miracle conducted sweeps in its sector and encountered relatively little resistance. Both the 2d Battalion, 3d Marines to the east of the Army task force, and the 3d Battalion, 5th Marines to the south, also reported relatively little enemy activity in their sectors. Only the 7th Marines to the west experienced an increase in incidents as North Vietnamese regulars and the VC main force troops moved through the western TAOR to return to their mountain strongholds in *Base Area 114* and through Charlie Ridge into "Happy Valley."^{82*}

To the south, in the Korean sector, the ROK Marines with the assistance of the ARVN again drove Communist forces out of the Hoi An environs. According to an enemy NCO from the *31st NVA Regiment* captured in the fighting, the mission of his unit was to "attack Hoi An, five times if necessary, and set up a liberation government." Hoi An still remained in friendly hands. In the Que Son Valley on 9 February, the Americal Division engaged elements of the *21st NVA Regiment*, the only regiment of the *2d NVA Division* that had not been in the Da Nang sector. The *21st* was also in retreat.⁸³

According to Marine intelligence reports, on 9 February, the *2d NVA Division* moved its headquarters back to the Go Noi from its more forward positions. The following day, the same sources indicated that both the *1st VC* and the *3d NVA Regiments* had also withdrawn to the Go Noi. On 11 February, General Cushman observed the *2d NVA Division* "appeared to be withdrawing from contact southward" and ordered his subordinate commanders to continue to press the attack. He, nevertheless, released TF Miracle from the operational control of the 1st Marine Division and returned it to its parent command. The task force headquarters and its two battalions returned to Chu Lai

the following day. The battle for Da Nang was largely over. Despite limited attacks later in the month, these were largely, as a report stated, "an attempt to maintain the facade of an offensive."⁸⁴

During the Da Nang Tet offensive, both sides experienced heavy casualties, but the Communist forces proved to be no match for the allied forces. According to III MAF figures, from 29 January through 14 February at Da Nang, Marines sustained 124 killed and more than 480 wounded. Army forces in the Da Nang area including the troops from Task Force Miracle suffered 18 dead and 59 wounded. South Vietnamese and Korean casualties probably equalled or slightly exceeded the American. U.S. estimates of enemy casualties ranged between 1,200 and 1,400 dead. Colonel Smith believed that the *1st VC Regiment* alone lost about 600 men. The *2d NVA Division* still remained intact, but obviously was not about to renew the offensive.⁸⁵

From almost every account, the Communist attack in the Da Nang TAOR was very inept. Despite the thinness of the Marine lines and the ability of both the NVA and VC to infiltrate, the enemy never capitalized on these advantages. According to a VC after-action report early in the offensive, the writer complained that the "commander did not know . . . [the] situation accurately . . . and that orders were not strictly obeyed." In a 1st Marine Division analyses, the author commented that the *2d NVA Division's* approach was "along a single axis of advance so that his eventual target was easily identifiable." Moreover, once the NVA units arrived south of Da Nang they "made no further attempts at maneuver even while being hunted by Marine and Army units, and when engaged, seldom maneuvered, except to withdraw." General Robertson, the 1st Division commander, observed that the delay of the *2d NVA Division* into the picture may have been because the Communist forces "got their signals mixed . . ." The VC were supposed to be inside "when the NVA division came marching down main street. You get your timing off and you've got problems." Another possible explanation was that the Da Nang attack may have been a secondary assault—to cause as much damage as possible and divert allied forces from the almost successful effort of the Communist forces to capture the city of Hue.^{86**}

*Igor Bobrowsky with CAP D-2 remembered the "retreating NVA/VC were certainly more pathetic on the way back out to their lairs than they were coming in on us. At the same time though, they were . . . somehow scarier—because they were so clearly desperate in trying to get away, like small packs of cornered rats looking for holes to scurry through in a burning building." Bobrowsky Comments.

**Brigadier General Paul G. Graham who was the 1st Marine Division Operations Officer (G-3) at the time disagreed with the last statement, writing "Hue had no military value to the NVA/VC. Da Nang was the prize—for success in that endeavor could have had a serious effect on the Allied efforts in the III MAF area." BGen Paul G. Graham, Comments on draft, dtd 20Nov94 (Vietnam Comment File).

CHAPTER 9

The Struggle for Hue—The Battle Begins

The Two Faces of Hue—The NVA Attack—Redeployment at Phu Bai and Marines Go to Hue

The Two Faces of Hue

As the former imperial capital, Hue was for most Vietnamese the cultural center of the country. With an equal disdain for both northerners and southerners, the religious and intellectual elite of the city held themselves aloof from active participation in the war. Instead they advocated local autonomy and traditional Vietnamese social values that led to a distrust of the central Saigon government and its American allies as well as Communism. In both the 1963 Buddhist uprising and the 1966 "Struggle Movement," the monks from the Hue pagodas and students and professors at Hue University provided the informal leadership against the successive Saigon regimes.

Despite the city's reputation for dissidence, the Communists failed to take advantage of the Hue protest movements. Both the South Vietnamese Army and Viet Cong troops for the most part refrained from any show of force in the immediate vicinity or in the city itself. With a sort of unspoken truce in effect, Hue afforded both sides a certain respite from the war.* With a wartime population of about 140,000 persons, Hue retained much of its prewar ambience. Divided by the Huong or Perfume River, the city emitted a sense of both its colonial and imperial pasts. It was, in effect, two cities.

North of the river, the three-square-mile Citadel with its ramparts and high towers gave the appearance of a medieval walled town. Built by the Emperor Gia Linh in the early nineteenth century, it contained the former imperial palace with its large gilt and dragon-decorated throne room. Within the Citadel walls lay formal gardens and parks, private residences, market places, pagodas, and moats filled with lotus flowers. Buddhist bells and gongs as well as the chant of prayers resounded through its streets.

South of the river lay the modern city. Delineated by the Perfume River and the Phu Cam Canal into a rough triangle, southern Hue was about half the size of the

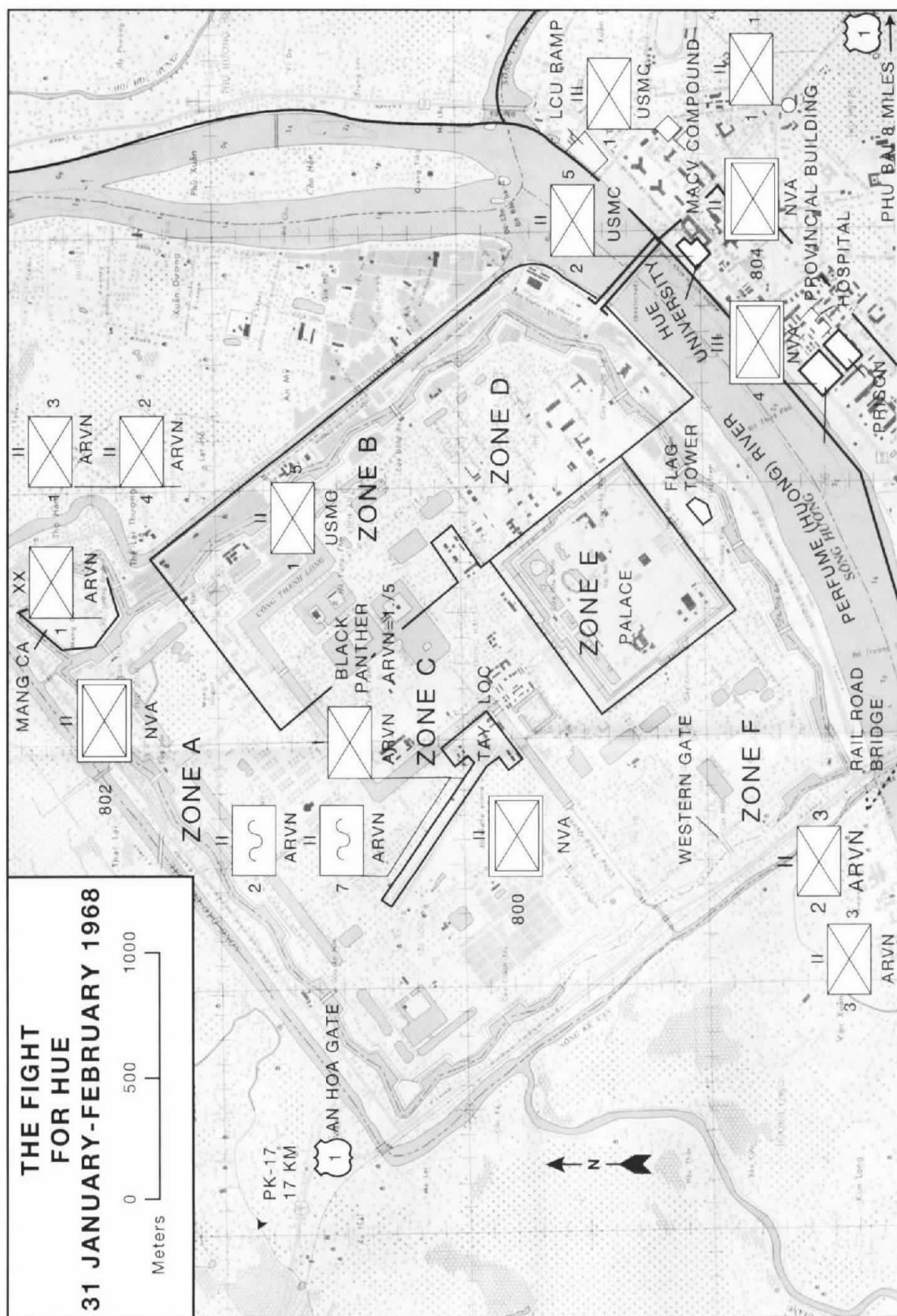
Citadel. The university, the stadium, government administrative buildings, the hospital, the provincial prison, and various radio stations were all in the new city. Attractive Vietnamese schoolgirls dressed in the traditional *Ao Dai* bicycled or walked along stately Le Loi Boulevard, paralleling the riverfront. The *Cercle-Sportif* with its veranda overlooking the Perfume River evoked memories of the former French colonial administration.

In January 1968 as the Tet season approached, however, a certain uneasiness lay over the city. The cancellation of the Tet truce and the enemy attacks on Da Nang and elsewhere in southern I Corps dampened the usual festive mood of the holiday season. On 30 January, Brigadier General Ngo Quang Truong, the commanding general of the 1st ARVN Division, canceled all leaves and ordered his units on full alert. Most of the troops, however, already on leave, were unable to rejoin their units. Moreover, the only South Vietnamese forces in the city itself were the division staff, the division Headquarters Company, the Reconnaissance Company, a few support units, and Truong's personal guard, the elite "Black Panther" Company. The division headquarters was in the walled *Mang Ca* military compound, self-contained in the northeast corner of the Citadel. General Truong positioned the Black Panthers on the Tay Loc airfield in the Citadel, about a mile southwest of the division compound. In the southern city, the U.S. maintained a MACV compound in a former hotel which served as a billet and headquarters for the U.S. advisory staff to the 1st ARVN Division.¹

The NVA Attack

Although allied intelligence reported elements of two NVA regiments, the 4th and the 6th, in Thua Thien Province, there was little evidence of enemy activity in the Hue sector. Indeed, the 1st ARVN Division dismissed any conjecture that the enemy had either "the intent" or "capability" to launch a division-size attack against the city. U.S. order of battle records listed the 6th NVA headquarters with its 804th Battalion in the jungle-canopied Base Area 114, about 20 to 25 kilometers west of Hue. One battalion, the 806th, was supposed to be in the "Street Without Joy" area in

*Peter Braestrup, then the Saigon Bureau Chief for the *Washington Post*, observed that this informal truce only applied to Hue. Peter Braestrup, Comments on draft, n.d. [Jan95] (Vietnam Comment File).



Phong Dien District, 35 kilometers northeast of Hue, successfully evading ARVN forces in the sector. American intelligence officers believed the remaining battalion, the 802d, to be about 20 kilometers south of the city or with the regimental headquarters in *Base Area 114*. According to the best allied information, the 4th NVA Regiment was in the Phu Loc area near Route 1 between Phu Bai and Da Nang.²

Unknown to the allies, both enemy regiments were on the move towards Hue. The 6th NVA had as its three primary objectives the *Mang Ca* headquarters compound, the Tay Loc airfield, and the imperial palace, all in the Citadel. South of the Perfume River, the 4th NVA was to attack the modern city. Among its objective areas were the provincial capital building, the prison, and the MACV advisors compound. The two regiments had nearly 200 specific targets in addition to the primary sites, including the radio station, police stations, houses of government officials, the recruiting office, and even the national Imperial Museum. The target list contained detailed intelligence to the extent of naming suspected government sympathizers and their usual meeting places.³

On 30 January, some of the enemy shock troops and sappers entered the city disguised as simple peasants. With their uniforms and weapons hidden in baggage, boxes, and under their street clothes, the Viet Cong and NVA mingled with the Tet holiday crowds.* Many donned ARVN uniforms and then took up predesignated positions that night to await the attack signal.⁴

By this time the 6th NVA Regiment was only a few kilometers from the western edge of the city. About 1900, the regiment had assembled on a slope designated "Hill 138" for its evening meal. According to a North Vietnamese Army account, the troops ate a meal of "dumplings, Tet cakes, dried meat, and glutinous rice mixed with sugar." The commander and his officers inspected the men's gear and many of the soldiers



Department of Defense (USMC) Photo A188251

Top, picture taken in February 1967, long before the battle, shows the elaborate entrance and part of the surrounding wall to the Imperial Palace grounds in the Citadel. This wall is separate from the walls of the Citadel itself. Bottom, the Golden Throne of the former Vietnamese Emperors is at the heart of the palace, which the North Vietnamese used as a headquarters during the fighting for the city.

Photo courtesy of Alex Wells, Jr.



*Colonel John F. Barr, who as a lieutenant colonel, commanded the 1st Field Artillery Group, had recently arrived at Phu Bai as part of Operation Checkers. (See Chapter 6) Barr remembered that on the morning of the 30th, he visited Hue "to effect command coordination between the 1st Field Artillery Group and the ARVN artillery commander in the Citadel. While into and through the city, I noted the unusual number of young men in civilian clothes; unusual in that most Vietnamese youths were either drafted by the ARVN or off in the hills with the Viet Cong. I mentioned this upon arrival at the ARVN artillery headquarters. I was assured by the artillery commander that it was customary for local farmers to come into Hue to celebrate the Tet holiday. Since he was a thoroughly professional soldier with eight years combat experience in the province, I accepted his explanation—to my subsequent regret." Col John F. Barr, Comments on draft, dtd 24Nov94 (Vietnam Comment File).

“changed into new khakis.” At 2000, the regiment “resumed its march.”⁵

At this point the *6th NVA* divided into three columns, each with its particular objective in the Citadel. At 2200, about four kilometers southwest of Hue, the commander of the 1st ARVN Division Reconnaissance Company, First Lieutenant Nguyen Thi Tan, was on a river surveillance mission with about 30 men, when a Regional Force company to his east reported that it was under attack. Remaining under cover, Lieutenant Tan and his men observed the equivalent of two enemy battalions filter past their positions, headed toward Hue. Tan radioed this information back to the 1st Division. The two battalions were probably the *800th* and *802d Battalions* of the *6th NVA*.⁶

Despite Tan’s warning, the enemy troops continued toward Hue unmolested. In the enemy command post to the west of the city, the NVA commander waited for word that the attack had begun. At approximately 0230 31 January, a forward observer reported, “I am awake, I am looking down at Hue . . . the lights of the city are still on, the sky is quiet, and nothing is happening.” Anxiously, the NVA officers looked at one another, but no one voiced their doubts. A few minutes later, the observer came back upon the radio and announced that the assault was under way.⁷

At 0233, a signal flare lit up the night sky above

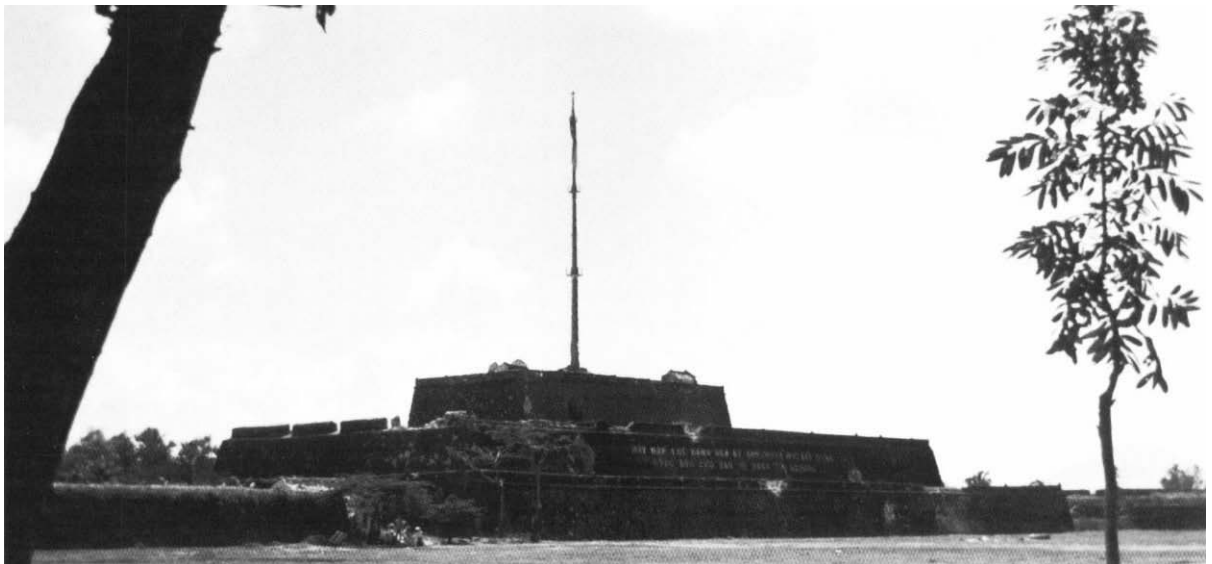
Hue. At the Western Gate of the Citadel, a four-man North Vietnamese sapper team, dressed in South Vietnamese Army uniforms, killed the guards and opened the gate. Upon their flashlight signals, lead elements of the *6th NVA* entered the old city. In similar scenes throughout the Citadel, the North Vietnamese regulars poured into the old imperial capital.⁸

The *800th* and *802d Battalions* pushed through the Western Gate and then drove north. On the Tay Loc airfield, the “Black Panther” Company, reinforced by the division’s 1st Ordnance Company, stopped the *800th Battalion*. Although the enemy battle account stated that the South Vietnamese “offered no strong resistance,” the NVA report acknowledged “the heavy enemy [ARVN] fire enveloped the entire airfield. By dawn, our troops were still unable to advance.”⁹

While the fighting for the airfield continued to see-saw with first the ARVN having the upper hand and then the Communists, the *802d Battalion* struck the 1st Division headquarters at *Mang Ca*. Although the enemy battalion penetrated the division compound, an ad hoc 200-man defensive force consisting of staff officers, clerks, and other headquarters personnel managed to stave off the enemy assaults. General Truong called back most of his Black Panther Company from the airfield to bolster the headquarters defenses. With the reinforcements, the division headquarters remained secure. Nevertheless, by daylight, more than

The southern gate to the Citadel, with its flagpole, is where the North Vietnamese raised the Viet Cong banner.

Photo courtesy of Col Talman C. Budd II, USMC (Ret)



60 percent of the Citadel, including the imperial palace, was in the hands of the NVA. At 0800, North Vietnamese troops raised the red and blue Viet Cong banner with its gold star over the Citadel flag tower.¹⁰

Across the river in southern Hue, much the same situation existed. U.S. advisors to the 1st ARVN Division in the MACV compound, a complex of several two- to three-story buildings, including a former hotel, awoke in the early morning hours to the sound of bursting mortar and rocket rounds. The Americans grabbed any weapons that were at hand and manned their defenses. Like the 1st Division staff, the advisors successfully repulsed the initial enemy ground attack. While not mounting any further ground assaults, the NVA maintained a virtual siege of the compound with mortars, rockets, and automatic weapons fire.¹¹

The *4th NVA Regiment* with the *804th NVA Battalion*, supported by local force companies and elements of the *Hue City Sapper Battalion*, had launched its offensive against the modern city. Divided into several attack groups, the enemy sought out key civil and military facilities. Even according to the North Vietnamese official account, the enemy actions and preparations in the new city lacked the cohesion and timing of those in the Citadel. The North Vietnamese author wrote: "The attacks on southern Hue were carried out by many forces which employed many very different forms of tactics." One unit lost its way in the darkness and did not arrive in the city until 0600. Despite confusion and some reverses, that morning, the NVA had control of most of southern Hue except for the prison, the MACV compound, and the Hue LCU (landing craft, utility) ramp on the waterfront to the northeast of the compound.¹²

In the Citadel, on 1 February, the embattled General Truong called in reinforcements. He ordered his 3d Regiment; the 3d Troop, 7th ARVN Cavalry; and the 1st ARVN Airborne Task Force to relieve the pressure on his *Mang Ca* headquarters. Responding to the call at PK 17, the ARVN base located near a road marker on Route 1, 17 kilometers north of Hue, the 3d Troop and the 7th Battalion of the Airborne task force rolled out of their base area in an armored convoy onto Route 1. A North Vietnamese blocking force stopped the ARVN relief force about 400 meters short of the Citadel wall. Unable to force their way through the enemy positions, the South Vietnamese paratroopers asked for assistance. The 2d ARVN Airborne Battalion reinforced the convoy and the South Vietnamese finally penetrated the lines and entered the Citadel in the early morning hours of the next day. The cost had been

heavy: the ARVN suffered 131 casualties including 40 dead, and lost 4 of the 12 armored personnel carriers in the convoy. According to the South Vietnamese, the enemy also paid a steep price in men and equipment. The ARVN claimed to have killed 250 of the NVA, captured 5 prisoners, and recovered 71 individual and 25 crew-served weapons.¹³

The 3d ARVN Regiment had an even more difficult time. On the 31st, two of its battalions, the 2d and 3d, advanced east from encampments southwest of the city along the northern bank of the Perfume River, but North Vietnamese defensive fires forced them to fall back. Unable to enter the Citadel, the two battalions established their night positions outside the southeast wall of the old City. Enemy forces surrounded the 1st and 4th Battalions of the regiment, operating to the southeast, as they attempted to reinforce the units in Hue. Captain Phan Ngoc Luong, the commander of the 1st Battalion, retreated with his unit to the coastal Ba Long outpost, arriving there with only three clips per man for their World War II vintage M1 rifles.* At Ba Long, the battalion then embarked upon motorized junks and reached the Citadel the following day. The 4th Battalion, however, remained unable to break its encirclement for several days.

South of the city, on 31 January, Lieutenant Colonel Phan Huu Chi, the commander of the ARVN 7th Armored Cavalry Squadron attempted to break the enemy stranglehold. He led an armored column toward Hue, but like the other South Vietnamese units, found it impossible to break through. With the promise of U.S. Marine reinforcements, Chi's column, with three tanks in the lead, tried once more. This time they crossed the An Cuu Bridge into the new city. Coming upon the central police headquarters in southern Hue, the tanks attempted to relieve the police defenders. When an enemy B-40 rocket made a direct hit upon Lieutenant Colonel Chi's tank, killing him instantly, the South Vietnamese armor then pulled back.¹⁴

Redeployment at Phu Bai and Marines Go to Hue

The first U.S. Marines to bolster the South Vietnamese in the city were on their way. They were from the 1st Battalion, 1st Marines, part of Task Force X-

* Although the U.S. was reequipping the South Vietnamese Army units with the magazine-fed automatic 5.56mm M16, most South Vietnamese Army units in February 1968 were equipped with the semi-automatic, 8-shot, .30-caliber clip-fed M1. See Jeffrey J. Clarke, *Advice and Support: The Final Years, 1965-1973*, United States Army in Vietnam (Washington: CMH, 1988), p. 284.

Ray, the new command just established at the Marine base at Phu Bai, about eight miles south of Hue.¹⁵ As part of Operation Checkers, the Task Force X-Ray commander, Brigadier General Foster "Frosty" C. LaHue had opened his command post on 13 January.* Two days later, as planned, he took over responsibility for the Phu Bai base from the 3d Marine Division. LaHue, who had been at Da Nang until that time, serving as the 1st Marine Division assistant division commander, had barely enough time to become acquainted with his new TAOR, let alone the fast-developing Hue situation. This was true as well for most of his commanders and units at Phu Bai.¹⁶

With several changes making the original Checkers plan unrecognizable by the eve of Tet, LaHue had under him two regimental headquarters and three battalions. These were the 5th Marines, under Colonel Robert D. Bohn, with its 1st and 2d Battalions, and the 1st Marines, under Colonel Stanley S. Hughes, with its 1st Battalion in the Phu Bai sector. While Colonel Bohn had arrived with Task Force X-Ray on the 13th, Colonel Hughes did not reach Phu Bai until 28 January. The 1st Battalion, 1st Marines, under Lieutenant Colonel Marcus J. Gravel, began making its move from Quang Tri about the same time. His companies C and D had reached Phu Bai on the 26th while his Company B, and Headquarters Company came three days later. The battalion's remaining company, Company A, deployed on the 30th. Captain Gordon D. Batcheller, the Company A commander, remembered that while most of his troops were at Phu Bai on that date, two of his platoon commanders "had mistakenly stayed at Quang Tri" and the third was at a "Division Leadership School . . ." ¹⁷**

On 30 January, the 1st Marines assumed from the 5th Marines responsibility for the Phu Bai area of operations as far south as the Truoi River. At the same time, Colonel Hughes took formal operational control of his 1st Battalion. Companies B, C, and D of the 1st Battalion, 1st Marines had already relieved the 2d Battalion, 5th Marines at various bridges along Route 1 and other key positions in this northern sector. When Company A arrived on the 30th, it became the Phu Bai reserve or "Bald Eagle Reaction Force." Captain Batcheller years later recalled that the company actually was to "stand down" until 1 February when it was to

assume security of the LCU Ramp in Hue itself, just north of the MACV compound.¹⁸**

In the meantime, the 2d Battalion, 5th Marines had moved into the Phu Loc sector and took over that area south of the Truoi River and as far east as the Cao Dai Peninsula. The 1st Battalion, 5th Marines remained responsible for the rest of the Phu Loc region, extending to the Hai Van Pass.¹⁹

In the Phu Loc area on 30 January, about 1730, a Marine reconnaissance patrol, codenamed "Pearl Chest," inserted about 3000 meters south of the town of Phu Loc, observed a North Vietnamese company moving north armed with three .50-caliber machine guns, AK-47s, and two 122mm rockets. "Pearl Chest" set up an ambush, killing 15 of the enemy troops. The North Vietnamese fell back and surrounded the Recon Marines, who called for assistance. Both air and the artillery battery attached to the 1st Battalion, 5th Marines at Phu Loc responded to the request. The fixed-wing aircraft, however, could not "get a fix" on the enemy troops and were unable to assist.²⁰

At that point, about 1930, Lieutenant Colonel Robert P. Whalen, the 1st Battalion commander, sent his Company B to relieve the Recon team. As the relieving company approached the ambush site, they heard Vietnamese voices, movement, and someone threw a grenade at them. In return, the Marines hurled grenades of their own and then moved in where they had heard the commotion. The enemy was no longer there, and the Marine company advanced cautiously. Lieutenant Colonel Whalen asked Colonel Bohn, the 5th Marines commander, for reinforcements so as not to uncover his defenses at Phu Loc itself.²¹

At the direction of Colonel Bohn, Lieutenant Colonel Ernest C. Cheatham, Jr., the 2d Battalion, 5th Marines commander, who had just established his command post on the Cao Dai Peninsula, sent his Company F to reinforce the 1st Battalion. Captain Michael P. Downs, the Company F commander, later recalled that the North Vietnamese ambushed his company as it moved into the 1st Battalion sector. Approximately around 2300, on the 30th, about 1,000 meters southeast of the Cao Dai Peninsula along Route 1, enemy troops opened up on the Marine com-

*See Chapter 6 for the establishment of Task Force X-Ray at Phu Bai.

**Batcheller related that the platoon leader at the division leadership school was there "as a student, although already nominated for a Silver Star! . . . Battalion could not refuse to fill a Division quota." Col Gordon D. Batcheller, Comments on draft, dtd 10Dec94 (Vietnam Comment File), hereafter Batcheller Comments.

***It is not clear that the 1st Marines planned to assign a company permanently to the LCU Ramp. According to the Task Force X-Ray operating orders, the 1st Marines had the responsibility to ensure the security for road convoys enroute from Phu Bai to the LCU Ramp. It is probable that Company A was to be assigned to road convoy security to the LCU Ramp. See TF X-Ray OpO, dtd 26Jan68, Encl, 1st Mar ComdC, Jan68.



By 2400 on the 30th, the engagement south of Phu Loc was about over. The Marine command did not want to commit any more troops and ordered the Recon Team “to break out and move to the north.” Lieutenant Colonel Whalen then directed his Company B to return to Phu Loc, which it did without incident. The results of this activity including that of Company F were 1 Marine dead and 5 wounded and 16 enemy dead, 15 killed initially by the Recon Team, and another by Company B. Colonel Bohn, the 5th Marines commander, believed that this action prevented a full fledged attack upon Phu Loc itself.²³

On the night of 30–31 January, the same time the North Vietnamese struck Hue, the Marines had their hands full throughout the Phu Bai area of operations. Enemy rockets and mortars struck the Phu Bai airstrip and Communist infantry units hit Marine Combined Action and local PF and RF units in the region including the Truoi River and Phu Loc sectors. At the key Truoi River Bridge, about 0400 a North Vietnamese company attacked the South Vietnamese bridge security detachment and the nearby Combined Action Platoon H–8. Lieutenant Colonel Cheatham ordered Captain G. Ronald Christmas, the Company H commander to relieve the embattled CAP unit. The Marines caught the enemy force beginning to withdraw from the CAP enclave and took it under fire. Seeing an opportunity to trap the North Vietnamese, Cheatham reinforced Company H with his Command Group and Company F, which by this time had returned from its abortive venture to Phu Loc.²⁴

With his other companies in blocking positions, Cheatham hoped to catch the enemy against the Truoi River. While inflicting casualties, the events in Hue were to interfere with his plans. At 1030, 31 January, Company G departed for Phu Bai as the Task Force reserve. Later that afternoon, the battalion lost operational control of Company F. Captain Downs years later remembered the company “disengaged . . . where we had them [the NVA] pinned up against a river, moved to the river and trucked into Phu Bai.” With the departure of Company F about 1630, the NVA successfully disengaged and Companies H and E took up night defensive positions. According to the casualty box score, the Marines of Second Battalion 5th Marines in this engagement killed 18 enemy troops, took 1 prisoner, and recovered sundry equipment and weapons including 6 AK-47s, at a cost of 3 Marines killed and 13 wounded.²⁵

While the fighting continued in the Truoi River and the Phu Loc sectors, the 1st Battalion, 1st Marines had begun to move into Hue city. In the early morning hours of 31 January after the rocket bombardment of the airfield and the initial attack on the Truoi River Bridge, Task Force X-Ray received reports of enemy strikes all along Route 1 between the Hai Van Pass and Hue. All told, the enemy hit some 18 targets from bridges, Combined Action units, and company defensive positions. With Company A, 1st Battalion, 1st Marines as the Phu Bai reserve, Colonel Hughes directed Lieutenant Colonel Gravel to stage the company for any contingency. At 0630, Colonel Hughes ordered the company to reinforce the Truoi River Bridge. All Captain Batcheller recalled several years later was that “we were roused up about 0400 on the 31st and launched south on trucks to rendezvous with and reinforce . . . [ARVN] forces about a map sheet and a half south of Phu Bai.”²⁶

According to Captain Batcheller, the truck convoy carrying his company was escorted by two Army “Dusters,” trucks armed with four .50-caliber machine guns, one at the head and the other at the rear of the column. When the convoy reached its destination, there were no ARVN troops to meet them.* On their way south on Route 1, the compa-

ny had passed several Combined Action units, whose troops told them “‘boo-coo’ VC moving towards Hue, but none had been hit, and all bridges were up.” Batcheller then received orders from Lieutenant Colonel Gravel to reverse his direction, either to reinforce an Army unit north of Hue or, on the other hand, to go to the assistance of a Combined Action unit just south of Phu Bai.** In any event, whatever the case, this new mission was short-lived. About one-half hour later, about 0830, the company again received another set of orders, presumably from Task Force X-Ray, “to proceed to the Hue Ramp area . . . to investigate reports that Hue City was under attack.”^{27***}

Up to this point the fighting for Hue had been entirely a South Vietnamese affair. General LaHue, the Task Force X-Ray commander, actually had very little reliable intelligence on the situation. All he knew was that Truong’s headquarters had been under attack, as was the MACV compound. Because of enemy mortaring of the LCU ramp in southern Hue, the allies had stopped all river traffic to the city. As LaHue later wrote: “Initial deployment of forces was made with limited information.”²⁸

With this “limited information,” Company A continued north towards Hue. As the convoy proceeded along Route 1, it met up with four tanks from the 3d Tank Battalion. The tanks had been on their way from Phu Bai to the LCU ramp at Hue for embarkation and transfer north to the 3d Marine Division at Dong Ha. These tanks had happened upon some of the burnt-out hulks of the 7th ARVN Armored Cavalry Squadron and had decided to return to Phu Bai when Company A “came up behind them.” Batcheller remembered that he talked over the situation with the major in charge “and he agreed to join us as we moved towards the MACV compound.” According to the Company A commander, a short time later, Lieutenant Colonel Edward J. LaMontagne, the 3d Marine Division embarkation officer,

**Batcheller remembered that Gravel told him to reinforce the Army division, which would have had to have been the 1st Air Cavalry Division located at Camp Evans, 12 miles north of Hue. On the other hand, the 1st Marines Command Chronology states that at 0805 “Bald Eagle (A/1/1) [was] diverted from Truoi Bridge to the location of CAP A-3 . . . to investigate reports of NVA activity.” Batcheller Comments and 1st Mar ComdC, Jan68, p. III-A-4.

***Batcheller later wrote that he had “never heard of Task Force X-Ray, or General LaHue.” As far as he knew, he “was working for Mark Gravel and Major [Walter D.] Murphy,” the battalion operations officer. Batcheller Comments.

*These trucks were not actually “Dusters,” which refers to the Army M42 tracked vehicle mounting 40mm antiaircraft guns. Battery D, 1st Battalion, 44th Artillery, U.S. Army at Phu Bai was equipped with both the trucks equipped with the quad .50-caliber machine guns (M55) and the M42s. The Marines referred to both vehicles as “Dusters.” See 1st Mar AAR, Opn Hue City, p. 12 and Shelby L. Stanton, *Vietnam Order of Battle* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. News Books, 1981), pp. 104, 278, and 355.

accompanied by a Navy chief petty officer, sought him out and "made the valid observation that we were moving too slow." Batcheller stated that he was "never clear" about the status of LaMontagne, "who never tried to assume command," but offered excellent advice. Actually LaMontagne was on the way to the LCU Ramp to supervise the loading of 3d Marine Division (Rear) equipment and personnel who were still redeploying from Phu Bai to Dong Ha.^{29*}

As the Marine company approached the southern suburbs of the city, they began to come under increased sniper fire. In one village, the troops dismounted and cleared the houses on either side of the main street before proceeding. The convoy then crossed the An Cuu Bridge, which spanned the Phu Cam canal, into the city. Caught in a murderous crossfire from enemy automatic weapons and B-40 rockets, the Marines once more clambered off the trucks and tanks. Sergeant Alfredo Gonzalez, a 21-year old Texan and acting 3d Platoon commander, took cover with his troops in a nearby building. When enemy machine gun fire wounded one Marine in the legs, Gonzalez ran into the open road, slung the injured man over his shoulder, and despite being hit himself by fragments of a B-40 rocket, returned to the relative safety of the building. Responding to orders from Captain Batcheller, Gonzalez rallied his men, who were on the point, and the column was again on the move.³⁰

This time the Marine convoy only advanced about 200 meters before Communist snipers again forced them to stop. The enemy was on both sides of the road with a machine gun bunker on the west side of the road. A B-40 rocket killed the tank commander in the lead tank. At that point, Sergeant Gonzales, on the east side of the road with some men of his platoon, crawled to a dike directly across from the machine gun bunker. With his Marines laying down a base of fire, Gonzales jumped up and threw four grenades into the bunker, killing all the occupants.

*Lieutenant Colonel Karl J. Fontenot, who at the time commanded the 3d Tank Battalion, remembered that the 3d Battalion was in the midst of displacing from Phu Bai to Quang Tri and that the last four tanks, two gun and two flame tanks, in the battalion were slated to go by LCU from Hue to Dong Ha. According to Fontenot, LaMontagne was to supervise the loading of these tanks at the LCU. Fontenot recalled that he happened by chance to be at Phu Bai on the 31st, and was informed that the MACV compound was under attack and that the 1st Battalion, 1st Marines was going to Hue. He claimed that he radioed these tanks and "briefed them on the enemy threat and advised them to load and prepare to fight." LtCol Karl J. Fontenot, Comments on draft, n.d. [Dec94] (Vietnam Comment File).

As the Marine company cautiously made its way northward in the built-up area, Captain Batcheller maintained "*sporadic* radio contact" with Lieutenant Colonel Gravel at Phu Bai. For the most part, however, he heard on his artillery and air radio nets nothing but Vietnamese. The convoy reached a "causeway or elevated highway in the middle of a large cultivated area," and once again came under enemy sniper fire. Batcheller went to the assistance of a fallen man and was himself wounded seriously in both legs. Gunnery Sergeant J. L. Canley, a giant of a man, six feet, four inches tall and weighing more than 240 pounds, then took command of the company.

As Company A engaged the enemy on the outskirts of Hue, Colonel Hughes, the 1st Marines commander, requested permission from General LaHue to reinforce the embattled company. The only available reinforcements were the command group of the 1st Battalion, 1st Marines and Company G, 2d Battalion, 5th Marines, which earlier that morning had become the Phu Bai reaction force in place of Company A. Lieutenant Colonel Gravel, the 1st Battalion commander, remembered that there was no intelligence on the situation in Hue and that his own battalion was "strung out" in the Phu Bai sector with elements still at Quang Tri. He had never met Captain Charles L. Meadows, the Company G commander, until "that first day." Gravel said the only planning he was able to accomplish was to give the order: "Get on the trucks, men." For his part, Captain Meadows recalled that his task was to "get into the trucks with . . . [his] company, go up to the 1st ARVN Division headquarters and escort the CG [commanding general] back down to Phu Bai." The mission should "take no longer than two to three hours."^{31**}

Crossing the An Cuu Bridge, Lieutenant Colonel Gravel's relief column reached Company A in the early afternoon. With the linking up of the two forces, Gravel kept the tanks with him, but sent the trucks and the wounded, including Captain Batcheller, back to Phu Bai. The vehicles returned without escort, just "truck drivers and the wounded. Some of the wounded could fire weapons." Lieutenant Colonel Gravel determined that this was the only feasible way to evacuate the wounded because "we weren't going to get

**According to the 1st Marines account, Colonel Hughes directed Gravel to reinforce Company A at 1030. The 1st Battalion, 1st Marines Journal shows that the command group departed Phu Bai at 1243 that afternoon. 1st Mar ComdC, Jan68, p. III-A-4; 1/1 Jnl, 31Jan68, Encl, 1/1 ComdC, Jan68.



Department of Defense (USMC) Photo A371336

A Marine M48 tank moves in one direction on one of the broad streets of modern Hue, while a group of South Vietnamese citizens flee the fighting in the other direction. Marine tanks from the 3d Tank Battalion supported the first Marine units to enter the city

any helicopters in there” According to Gravel, this “was a terrible longshot . . . but it worked”³²

With the tanks in the lead, then Company A, the battalion headquarters group, and Company G following in trace, Gravel’s makeshift command made its way toward the MACV compound, arriving there about 1515. By this time, the enemy attackers had pulled back their forces from the immediate vicinity of the compound. Lieutenant Colonel Gravel met with Army Colonel George O. Adkisson, the U.S. senior advisor to the 1st ARVN Division. According to Marine accounts, Adkisson told the Marine battalion commander that the “Citadel was in fine shape,” but that they needed assistance in evacuating American nationals.³³

This contradicted an earlier telephone conversation between the South Vietnamese I Corps and the III MAF command centers, both located at Da Nang. General Lam, the I Corps commander, had heard that the ARVN troops in Hue were surrounded and out of ammunition. The Task Force X-Ray commanding general, Brigadier General LaHue, remembered that

reports came in that the 1st ARVN Division was “in trouble” and “we were ordered to go across the river to relieve some of the pressure.” He relayed these orders to Lieutenant Colonel Gravel.^{34*}

Leaving Company A behind to secure the MACV compound, the Marine battalion commander took Company G, reinforced by the three tanks from the 3d Tank Battalion and a few South Vietnamese tanks from the ARVN 7th Armored Squadron, and attempted to cross the main bridge over the Perfume River. Gravel left the armor behind on the southern bank to provide direct fire support. As he remembered, the American M48s were too heavy for the

*In a personal letter to Captain Batcheller, Lieutenant Colonel Gravel expressed his anger about the order: “We proceeded to the MACV compound then were gifted with the most stupid idiotic mission to cross the Perfume River Bridge and go to the aid of the CG 1st ARVN Division.” He stated that he told “Task Force X-Ray” about his concerns, but was ordered to “go anyway.” LtCol Mark Gravel ltr to Capt Gordon D. Batcheller, dtd 24Feb68, Encl to Batcheller Comments, hereafter Gravel ltr, Feb68.

bridge and the South Vietnamese tankers in light M24 tanks "refused to go."³⁵

As the Marine infantry started across, an enemy machine gun on the other end of the bridge opened up, killing and wounding several Marines. One Marine, Lance Corporal Lester A. Tully, later awarded the Silver Star for his action, ran forward, threw a grenade, and silenced the gun. Two platoons successfully made their way to the other side. They turned left and immediately came under automatic weapons and recoilless rifle fire from the Citadel wall. Lieutenant Colonel Gravel recollected that it was late in the afternoon and the sun was in their eyes: "We were no match for what was going on . . . I decided to withdraw."³⁶

This was easier said than done. The enemy was well dug-in and "firing from virtually every building in Hue city" north of the river. Lieutenant Colonel Gravel radioed back to Colonel Adkisson "for some vehicle support . . . to come and help us recover our wounded." According to Gravel, "the trucks didn't come and they didn't come . . ." Becoming more and more agitated, the battalion commander took his radio man and an interpreter "to find out where in the hell the vehicles were." They came upon some U.S. naval personnel and a few of the American advisors in two Navy trucks and brought them back to the bridge. In the meantime, the Marines commandeered some abandoned Vietnamese civilian vehicles and used them as makeshift ambulances to carry out the wounded. Among the casualties on the bridge was Major Walter D. Murphy, the 1st Battalion S-3 or operations officer, who later died of his wounds. Captain Meadows remembered that he lost nearly a third of his company, either wounded or killed, "going across that one bridge and then getting back across that bridge."^{37*}

*Lieutenant Colonel Gravel in his letter to Batcheller gave the number of Marines from Company G that were wounded as 44. Eric Hammel in his account gives the casualties for Company G as 5 dead and 44 wounded, which probably does not include Major Murphy. Colonel Meadows, years later, commented that "to my recollection LtCol Gravel did *not* join us on the other side of the bridge. I remember calling him on the radio and giving him my sitreps and eventually the urgent need for vehicles." Gravel ltr, Feb68; Eric Hammel, *Fire in the Streets, The Battle for Hue, Tet 1968* (Chicago, Ill: Contemporary Books, 1991), p. 90; Col Charles L. Meadows, Comments on draft, dtd 13Dec94 (Vietnam Comment File).

By 2000, the 1st Battalion, 1st Marines had established defensive positions near the MACV compound and a helicopter landing zone in a field just west of the Navy LCU Ramp in southern Hue. On that first day, the two Marine companies in Hue had sustained casualties of 10 Marines killed and 56 wounded. During the night, the battalion called in a helicopter into the landing zone to take out the worst of the wounded. According to Lieutenant Colonel Gravel, "it was darker than hell and foggy," and the pilot radioed "'Where are you? I can't see.'" The sergeant on the ground, talking the aircraft down, knocked on the nose of the CH-46, and replied, "Right out here, sir." Gravel marvelled that the sergeant "had a knack about working with helicopter pilots . . . He brought it [the helicopter] right on top of us."^{38**}

The American command still had little realization of the situation in Hue. Brigadier General LaHue later commented: "Early intelligence did not reveal the quantity of enemy involved that we subsequently found were committed to Hue."^{39***} General Westmoreland's headquarters had, if possible, even less appreciation of the magnitude of the NVA attack on the city. Westmoreland cabled General Earle G. Wheeler, the Chairman of the U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff, that the "enemy has approximately three companies in the Hue Citadel and Marines have sent a battalion into the area to clear them out."³⁹

**One of the co-authors expressed doubts about the accuracy of the above account: "Not very long ago, I stood on an LZ trying to communicate with a CH-46 pilot through the helicopter's own IC [internal communication] system. Impossible, and this helicopter was on the ground, at low power. A hovering helicopter is louder by at least a magnitude. I have been under them . . . when they are less than 10 feet off the deck and I can tell you that I don't believe this story for a minute. Having said all this, I still feel it's too good to pass up." Maj Leonard A. Blasiol, Comments on draft chapter, dtd 30Jun88 (Vietnam Comment File).

***General Earl E. Anderson, then the III MAF Chief of Staff at Da Nang as a brigadier general, recalled that he was in "constant contact by phone . . . [with] Frosty LaHue . . . , neither of us sleeping more than an hour or two a night." Gen Earl E. Anderson, Comments on draft, dtd 18Dec94 (Vietnam Comment File).

CHAPTER 10

The Struggle for Hue—The Second Phase

More Reinforcements—The Beginning of the Advance 3–4 February—Block by Block 5–8 February

More Reinforcements

By the morning of 1 February, the actual situation was becoming only too apparent to both the South Vietnamese and American troops in Hue. In Da Nang, General Lam, the I Corps Commander, and General Cushman, CG III MAF, agreed that the 1st ARVN Division would assume responsibility for the Citadel while Task Force X-Ray would clear that part of the city south of the Perfume River. General LaHue, the TF X-Ray commander, ordered Lieu-

tenant Colonel Gravel's "bobtailed" 1st Battalion, 1st Marines in southern Hue to advance to the Thua Thien provincial headquarters building and prison, a distance of six blocks west of the MACV compound. Still unaware of the extent of the enemy forces in both the old and new cities, LaHue told a group of American reporters at Phu Bai: "Very definitely, we control the south side of the city . . . I don't think they [the Communist forces] have any resupply capability, and once they use up what they brought in, they're finished."¹

Marine infantry advance cautiously under support of the 90mm gun of a M48 tank in street fighting in Hue. Even with the tank support, the Marines found the enemy resistance difficult to overcome in the first days of the operation.

Department of Defense (USMC) Photo A190400



At 0700, Gravel launched a two-company assault supported by tanks towards the jail and provincial building. As a M79 grenadier from Company G, 5th Marines recalled: "We didn't get a block away [from the MACV compound] before we started getting sniper fire. We got a tank . . . got a block, turned right and received 57mm recoilless which put out our tank." The attack was "stopped cold" and the battalion returned to the MACV compound.²

By this time, General LaHue realized the enemy strength in Hue was much greater than he had originally estimated. Shortly after noon, he called in Colonel Stanley S. Hughes of the 1st Marines and gave him tactical control of the forces in the southern city. In turn, Hughes promised Gravel reinforcements and provided him with the general mission to conduct "sweep and clear operations in assigned area of operation . . . to destroy enemy forces, protect U.S. Nationals and restore that portion of the city to U.S. control."³

North of the Perfume River, on the 1st, the 1st ARVN Division enjoyed some limited success. Although the 2d and 3d Battalions of the 3d ARVN Regiment remained outside of the Citadel walls unable to penetrate the NVA defenses, the 2d and 7th Airborne Battalions, supported by armored personnel carriers and the Black Panther Company, recaptured the Tay Loc airfield. About 1500, the 1st Battalion, 3d ARVN reached the 1st ARVN command post at the *Mang Ca* compound. Later that day, U.S. Marine helicopters from HMM-165 brought part of the 4th Battalion, 2d ARVN Regiment from Dong Ha into the Citadel. One of the pilots, Captain Denis M. Dunagan, remembered that the call for an emergency trooplift came in about 1400. Eight CH-46 "Sea Knights" made the flight in marginal weather with a 200-500 foot ceiling and one mile visibility, arriving in an improvised landing zone under enemy mortar fire. The deteriorating weather forced the squadron to cancel the remaining lifts with about one-half of the battalion in the Citadel.⁴

In the meantime, Marine helicopters had completed a lift of Captain Michael P. Downs' Company F, 2d Battalion, 5th Marines into southern Hue. Captain Downs, whose company had relieved Company G as the Task Force X-Ray reserve the previous day, remembered that on the 1st he reported to Major Ernest T. Cook, the 1st Marines operations officer, who told him he was going into the city and be under the operational control of the 1st Battalion, 1st Marines. Although coming under machine gun fire from the Citadel walls across the river shortly after 1500, the Marine CH-46s

carrying the company landed south of the LCU Ramp "with minimum difficulty." Upon arrival, Lieutenant Colonel Gravel told Downs to relieve a MACV communications facility surrounded by a VC force. Downs remembered that nothing he had been told back in Phu Bai prepared him for the situation he encountered. The company "spent the better part of the afternoon" trying to reach the isolated U.S. Army signal troops and "never made it." According to personal records that he kept, Captain Downs stated his company sustained casualties of 3 dead and 13 wounded.⁵

Company F then returned to the 1st Battalion, 1st Marines command post at the MACV compound. Lieutenant Colonel Gravel prepared to renew his effort to reach the jail and provincial headquarters. At 2300, Lieutenant Colonel Gravel requested air support "to suppress heavy resistance . . ." The tactical air observer reported that the low ceiling precluded any aviation support. Gravel received orders to remain in his night positions.⁶

At Da Nang, General Cushman continued to discuss the situation with General Lam. The two commanders decided against the employment of fixed-wing aircraft or artillery in Hue. As Cushman later related, "I wasn't about to open up on the old palace and all the historical buildings in there. I told Lam he was going to have to do it." While the South Vietnamese would remain responsible for the Citadel and the Marines for the southern city, Cushman made plans to cut the enemy lines of communication to the west.⁷

With the concurrence of General Westmoreland, the III MAF commander made arrangements for

*Former captain and now retired Brigadier General Downs remembered that he received orders after returning to the MACV compound to take his company and a couple of tanks to the jail. He stated that he "found the order no more reflective of what the situation was in the city at the time and questioned the sensibility of it." Lieutenant Colonel Gravel agreed with him and sent a message drafted by Downs to Task Force X-Ray suggesting that the order be rescinded. The order was rescinded. As far as the air support, General Downs probably correctly observed that the rules of engagement at the time probably would have prevented any use of air support in the city. BGen Michael P. Downs, Taped Comments on draft, dtd 11Dec92 (Vietnam Comment File), hereafter Downs Taped Comments, Dec92 and BGen Michael P. Downs, Comments on draft, dtd 19Dec94 (Vietnam Comment File), hereafter Downs Comments, Dec94. Lieutenant Colonel Gravel described the order to go take the provincial jail slightly differently. He stated that when Company F arrived he was given "another stupid mission. Go down and secure the Provincial prison. Well I didn't go, I finally convinced them that we didn't have the power and that the prisoners had been released on 30 January." LtCol Gravel ltr to Capt Gordon D. Batcheller, dtd 24Feb68, Encl to Col Gordon D. Batcheller, Comments on draft, dtd 10Dec94 (Vietnam Comment File).

bringing the newly arrived 1st Cavalry Division (Airmobile) into the Hue battle. In late January, the 1st Air Cavalry with two of its brigades had relieved the 1st Marines at Camp Evans, about 12 miles north of Hue. Since 31 January, the division's 1st Brigade, reinforcing the 1st ARVN Regiment, was committed to the fight for Quang Tri City. On 1 February, General Cushman then alerted the 1st Air Cavalry commander, Major General John J. Tolson, to be ready to deploy his 3d Brigade from Evans into a sector west of Hue. By 2215 that night, Tolson's command had asked III MAF to coordinate with I Corps and Task Force X-Ray its designated area of operations in the Hue sector.⁸

Tolson's plan called for the insertion of two battalions of the 3d Brigade northwest of Hue. The 2d Battalion, 12th Cavalry was to arrive in the landing zone first, followed by the 1st Battalion, 7th Cavalry and the 3d Brigade headquarters. Attacking in a southeasterly direction, the two battalions would then attempt to close the enemy supply line into Hue. An attached battalion from the 101st Airborne Division (Airmobile), the 2d Battalion, 501st Airborne, would cover the Camp Evans base area. The 1st Brigade would continue to operate in the Quang Tri sector.⁹

Under difficult circumstances, the "First Team" began its movement into the Hue area. Peter Braestrup of the *Washington Post* remembered that he dined with General Tolson a week later and that he "heard and saw how the bad weather was hampering . . . [the] newly moved division's logistics buildup and its efforts to move down on Hue."¹⁰ In mid-afternoon on the 2d, the 2d Battalion, 12th Cavalry arrived in a landing zone about 10 miles northwest of Hue and then pushed towards the city.¹¹

In southern Hue, on 2 February, the Marines made some minor headway and brought in further reinforcements. The 1st Battalion finally relieved the MACV radio facility that morning and later, after a three-hour fire fight, reached the Hue University campus.* Although the NVA, during the night, had dropped the railroad bridge across the Perfume River west of the city, they left untouched the bridge across the Phu Cam Canal. About 1100, Company H, 2d Battalion, 5th Marines, commanded by Captain G.



Department of Defense (USMC) Photo A371126
Marines of Company A, 1st Battalion, 1st Marines lower a wounded comrade from the rooftop of one of the buildings of the Hue University campus.

Ronald Christmas, crossed the An Cuu Bridge over the canal in a "Rough Rider" armed convoy.¹²

As the convoy, accompanied by Army trucks equipped with quad .50-caliber machine guns and two Ontos, entered the city, enemy snipers opened up on the Marine reinforcements. Near the MACV compound, the Marines came under heavy enemy machine gun and rocket fire. The Army gunners with their "quad .50s" and the Marine Ontos, each with six 106mm recoilless rifles, quickly responded. In the resulting confusion, the convoy exchanged fire with a Marine unit already in the city. As one Marine in the convoy remembered, "our guys happened to be out on the right side of the road and of course nobody knew that. First thing you know everybody began shooting at our own men . . . out of pure fright and frenzy."^{13**}

*Although the 1st Battalion, 1st Marines Journal makes reference to securing the University at 1630 on 2 February, Brigadier General Downs recalled that the battalion did not secure the University that day: "We got to Hue University. Had a tank hit and didn't get any further. We were then ordered back to our MACV positions." 1/1 Jnl File, dtd 2Feb68, Encl 1/1 ComdC, Feb68; Downs Comments, Dec94.

**General Downs recalled that his company was shot at by one of the Marine convoys that entered Hue. He believed, however, this occurred on 3 February rather than 2 February. Downs Comments, Dec94.



Department of Defense (USMC) Photo A190816

One of the collapsed bridges across the Perfume River connecting the new city with the Citadel. The NVA destroyed the Perfume River bridges, but left standing for a time the bridge over the Phu Cam Canal leading into the new city from Phu Bai along Route 1.

Within a few minutes, the guns were silent. Neither of the Marine units took any serious casualties and the Marine fire had suppressed the enemy weapons. One rocket, however, disabled a truck and the Marines successfully towed the vehicle to safety. Two journalists, Cathy Leroy and Francois Mazure, both French citizens, took asylum with the convoy after their release by North Vietnamese soldiers.¹⁴

About mid-day, Company H joined Lieutenant Colonel Gravel where the 1st Battalion had established

its toehold near the MACV compound. The NVA, however, continued to block any advance to the south. An enemy 75mm recoilless rifle knocked out one of the supporting tanks. By the end of the day, the Marines had sustained 2 dead and 34 wounded and claimed to have killed nearly 140 of the enemy. As one Company G Marine remarked, the unit spent the day "hitting and seeing what was there." The battalion consolidated its night defensive positions and waited to renew its attack on the following day.¹⁵



Department of Defense (USMC) Photo A371335

Machine gunner PFC Dominick J. Carango, Company H, 2d Battalion, 5th Marines, provides covering fire for advancing troops of his company with his M60 machine gun in the Hue street fighting. His assistant, with bandoliers of 7.62mm ammunition rounds wrapped around him, crouches beside him

At Phu Bai, during the meantime, Colonel Hughes prepared to bring his headquarters group into Hue. On the afternoon of the 2d, Colonel Robert D. Bohn, the 5th Marines commander, called in his 2d Battalion commander, Lieutenant Colonel Ernest C. Cheatham, three of whose companies were already in Hue. According to Cheatham, a big man who had played professional football, Bohn told him, “saddle up what you need . . . [the 1st Marines] headquarters is going to Hue tomorrow. There’s problems up there . . . We’re going to put you in . . .” The battalion commander remembered, “and so the next morning we went. We went blind. And that was it.”¹⁶

On the 3d, both the command groups of the 1st Marines and the 2d Battalion, 5th Marines arrived in Hue in another “Rough Rider” armed convoy. The weather had taken another turn for the worse: a cold 50 degrees with constant precipitation in the form of fog, a fine mist, or rain. Although the Marine trucks came under enemy sniper and mortar fire, they safely reached

the MACV Compound in the city. Colonel Hughes established his new command post there and held a hurried conference about 1330 with his two battalion commanders. While Lieutenant Colonel Cheatham then took control of his three companies already in the city, Gravel retained command of his Company A. The regimental commander gave the latter the task to keep open the main supply route while Cheatham was to continue the attack south from the University towards the provincial headquarters.¹⁷

At this point, Hughes, a pre-World War II enlisted Marine, who had been awarded the Navy Cross for action on Cape Gloucester in the Pacific campaign, turned to Cheatham. According to the 2d Battalion commander, Hughes told him: “I want you to move up to the Hue University building, and your right flank is the Perfume River and you’re going to have an exposed left flank . . . attack through the city and clean the NVA out.” Cheatham expectantly waited for further clarification of his orders, but the regimental comman-

der gruffly stated, "if you're looking for any more, you aren't going to get it. Move out!" He then softly added: "You do it any way you want to and you get any heat from above, I'll take care of that."¹⁸

The Beginning of the Advance 3–4 February

Establishing his command post at the University, Lieutenant Colonel Cheatham ordered a two-company, tank-supported attack against a complex of buildings—the public health, the provincial treasury, and the post office—just across the street from his positions. While Company G remained in reserve, Company H was to capture the public health building and Company F, the post office and treasury facilities. Like Lieutenant Colonel Gravel before him, Cheatham discovered there was no quick solution. The thick walls of the treasury and postal buildings appeared to be impervious to the Marine bullets and LAAWs (Light antiarmor weapons).^{*} According to Lieutenant Colonel Cheatham, the battalion tried to take the post office and treasury buildings about five or six different times: "That means mustering everybody's courage and energy up. . . . You'd assault and back you'd come, drag your wounded and then muster it up again and try it again."¹⁹

Although Company H reached the public health building by evening, it had to fall back to the University. As Captain Christmas later explained, the Marines just did not have enough men. The frontage for a company was about one block, and with two companies forward "that left an exposed left flank" subject to enemy automatic weapons fire. The battalion stayed in its night defensive positions and waited for daylight.²⁰

In the meantime, Company A, 1st Battalion, 1st Marines maneuvered to the southeast of the MACV Compound and captured an abandoned South Vietnamese police station against nominal resistance. The Marines found 30 carbines, 2 Browning automatic rifles, 10 M1 rifles, 20 60mm mortar rounds, and 40 cases of small arms ammunition. At 1900, the battalion reported that the nearby International Control Commission (ICC) team was safe and that "no USMC personnel entered ICC building," thus not providing

any grounds that U.S. troops violated the terms of the 1954 Geneva accords.^{21**}

The following morning, 4 February, Colonel Hughes discussed the situation with his two battalion commanders. Lieutenant Colonel Gravel was not surprised to learn that the 2d Battalion, 5th Marines was "exactly where we'd left them" the day before. Believing "that there perhaps was some second-guessing down at headquarters on the inability of 1/1 to attack," Gravel now felt somewhat vindicated. In any event, Colonel Hughes decided to place the 1st Battalion on Lieutenant Colonel Cheatham's exposed flank and continue the push against the enemy defensive positions.²²

As the 1st Battalion began to clear its objective area, Lieutenant Colonel Gravel had only one infantry company, Company A, now under First Lieutenant Ray L. Smith, who had relieved the wounded Captain Batcheller. Lieutenant Smith recalled that from the 2d, when he arrived in Hue,^{***} until then, the battalion had basically held its own near the MACV Compound. Now on the morning of the 4th its first objective was the Joan of Arc School and Church, only about 100 yards away. According to Smith, the building "was square with an open compound in the middle and we found by about 0700 that it was heavily occupied." Smith's Marines found themselves engaged in not only building-to-building, but room-to-room combat against a determined enemy. Lieutenant Colonel Gravel remembered that in the convent building "in these little cloisters that the ladies live in . . . we went wall-to-wall . . ." One Marine would place a plastic C-4 charge against the wall, stand back, and then a fire team would rush through the resulting gaping hole.²³

In the school building, Sergeant Alfredo Gonzalez' 3d Platoon secured one wing, but came under enemy rocket fire from across the courtyard. The Marine sergeant dashed to the window and fired about 10 LAAWs to silence the enemy. A B-40 rocket shattered the grilled pane and struck Gonzalez in the stomach, killing him instantly. Lieutenant Smith credited Gonzalez for taking out two enemy rocket positions before he was killed. Sergeant Gonzalez was

^{*}The M72 LAAW was a 66mm single-shot rocket-propelled anti-tank weapon with an effective range of 325 meters. The launcher tube was discarded after firing. It can penetrate 36 inches of concrete. Brigadier General Downs, who commanded Company F, 2d Battalion, 5th Marines in Hue, commented that despite what the manuals say, there was "no way" the LAAW could penetrate 36 inches of concrete. Downs Comments.

^{**}The International Control Commission was created by the Geneva Agreement of 1954 to ensure the provisions of that treaty. It consisted of Polish, Indian, and Canadian members. Although by this time, the Commission was unable to enforce anything, it still retained facilities and personnel in both North and South Vietnam.

^{***}Lieutenant Smith had arrived in Hue in the convoy with Company H on 2 February.



Top is Department of Defense (USMC) Photo A374463 and bottom is Department of Defense (USMC) Photo A371436
Top, a Marine from the 2d Battalion, 5th Marines from a classroom at Hue University returns fire with his M16 at a NVA sniper in a building across the street. The 2d Battalion, 5th Marines made its command post in the University. Below, Marine Sgt Reginald Hiscks, Company A, 1st Battalion, 1st Marines, wearing an unauthorized beret, fires his M3A1 submachine gun. Strapped to his back are four extra clips of .45-caliber ammunition.



later awarded the Medal of Honor for both his actions here and on 31 January.²⁴

After securing the school, Smith's Company A maneuvered to the sanctuary which lay among a grove of trees and houses. Gravel wistfully recalled that it was "a beautiful, beautiful, church." As the troops advanced upon the building, the NVA threw down grenades, killing or wounding several Marines. According to the battalion commander, "They [the enemy soldiers] were up in the eaves, the wooden overhead; and they were in there and we couldn't get them out." Reluctantly, Gravel gave the order to fire upon the church. Marine mortars and 106mm recoilless rifles pounded the building. In the ruins, the battalion found two European priests, one Belgian and one French, both unhurt, but according to Gravel, "absolutely livid," that the Marines had bombarded the building. Believing he had little choice in his decision, Gravel thought the clerics in their dark clothing were fortunate to escape with their lives as the troops were "braced" to shoot at anyone in a black uniform.²⁵

At 0700 on 4 February, Lieutenant Colonel Cheatham's companies renewed the attempt to take the public buildings across from the University. Captain Christmas' Company H blasted its way through walls and courtyards with 3.5-inch rockets, employing squad and fire team rushes, and captured the public health building. From there, the company was in position to support Company F's assault upon the treasury building.

Captain Christmas recounted that his company employed the 106mm recoilless rifles to cover its movements. At first, the Marines attempted to use smoke grenades, but the NVA clearly saw through this tactic. As if on signal, "everything that was on our flank just opened up on that street." To counter the enemy ploy, the Marines would "pop smoke" to ascertain the enemy machine gun position or positions and then "here would come a mule-mounted* 106 and those Marines would wheel that thing out. Go through the full drill . . . crank off" a .50-caliber spotting round and then the 106mm round. The backblast of the 106 raised a cloud of dirt and the recoilless rifle shell forced the enemy troops to keep their heads down. Taking advantage of the opportunity and the dust cover, the Marine infantry dashed across the street. Christmas then explained, "once we got across that street . . . that first lead element could direct its fire back toward that automatic weapon [or weapons]."²⁶

*The mechanical mule was a small flatbed four-wheeled drive vehicle which often was used to carry a 106mm recoilless rifle.



Department of Defense (USMC) Photo A190301

Top, A Marine from Company A, 1st Battalion, 1st Marines, armed with a M16 and with two LAAWs (light antiarmor weapons) strapped to his back, runs for cover. A Marine 106mm recoilless rifle on a trident can be seen in the gateway to the house in the background. Below, the ruined interior of the St. Joan of Arc Church appears after its capture by the 1st Battalion, 1st Marines. LtCol Marcus J. Gravel, the battalion commander, reluctantly gave the order to fire upon the sanctuary, remarking that it was a "beautiful, beautiful church."

Department of Defense (USMC) Photo A190474





Department of Defense (USMC) Photo A371216

A Marine 106mm recoilless rifle team set the weapon on its tripod in one of the Hue University classrooms, to take out an enemy machine gun. According to one of the gunners, "we fired it with a lanyard where we knocked out our objective—we kind of knocked out the building that the 106 was in too, but it didn't hurt the gun, once we dug it out."

According to one of the NCOs, the recoilless rifles teamed up with both the 81mm mortar crews and the infantry. The 106s would blast "holes into the back of buildings so that units could get in without using the normal exit." Marine recoilless rifle gunners flushed out the NVA and then forward observers for the 81s called in the mortars: "Blowing the buildings open so that the infantry could get through." Sergeant Terry Cochrane, the platoon sergeant of the 2d Battalion's 106mm platoon, remembered that the gunners even fired one recoilless rifle from inside one of the University buildings. Unable to position their weapon to knock out a machine gun that blocked the battalion's advance, Cochrane and his gunners took their 460-pound recoilless rifle "inside . . . and we fired it with a lanyard where we knocked out our objective—we kind of knocked out the building that the 106 was in too, but it didn't hurt the gun, once we dug it out."²⁷

The North Vietnamese, nevertheless, were still in force inside the treasury building. With its thick walls and large steel door, the structure remained impervious to Company F's repeated efforts to force its way into the

building, despite the use of recoilless rifles and tanks. The NVA covered with fire all avenues of approach. At this point, according to one account, Major Ralph J. Salvati, the 2d Battalion's executive officer, suggested employing CS (a variant of tear gas) against the enemy. Salvati told Cheatham that he had seen a stack of E-8 CS launchers in the MACV compound and proposed that he go and obtain them. Lightweight and compact, one launcher could fire 64 CS canisters in four volleys of 16 each. After a jeep trip in which he acquired the launchers, Salvati joined Captain Downs in an abandoned school near the treasury.^{28*}

Putting on their gas masks, Salvati and two enlisted Marines ran into an adjoining courtyard and set up the launcher. After a misfire, the Marine major hooked up a battery to the trigger mechanism. This time the E-8 launcher hurled the gas canisters into

* According to a member of the 1st Marines staff, Colonel Hughes "stressed the use of the E-8 CS dispenser until no more were available." Maj Ernest Cook, Comments on draft ms, dtd 20Oct69, Donnelly and Shore, "Ho Chi Minh's Gamble" (Vietnam Comment Files).



Top picture is Department of Defense (USMC) Photo A371122 and bottom is Department of Defense (USMC) Photo A372950
Top, Marines from the 2d Battalion, 5th Marines wearing gas masks are about to flush out enemy soldiers holding out in a stronghold. The Marines used CS (a variant of tear gas) to disable the enemy and curtail casualties. Bottom, a Marine M48 tank is stationed next to the blown An Cuu bridge. With the bridge down, the main land resupply route into the city from Phu Bai was closed.



the treasury compound and within minutes produced a huge chemical haze. With the gas permeating the building and under the protective fire of 81mm mortars and 3.5-inch rockets, goggle-eyed Marines of Company F pushed forward in their gas masks. According to Captain Downs, once the Marines got inside the building, "the NVA wanted no part of us and they exited the building as quickly as they could."²⁹

Until 4 February, the An Cuu Route 1 bridge over the Phu Cam Canal still stood and permitted the Marines to reinforce the troops in Hue. On the morning of the 4th, Company B, 1st Battalion, 1st Marines arrived in a "Rough Rider" armed convoy and joined Lieutenant Colonel Gravel's command. That night, however, North Vietnamese sappers blew the bridge, effectively closing the land route into the city. This left the Marine command only two alternatives to resupply the Hue forces—river traffic and helicopters. With the continuing mist and overcast, every helicopter mission was a hit-and-miss venture. More than once, heavy enemy 12.7mm antiaircraft fire forced Marine pilots to jettison their loads of ammunition slung underneath their low-flying helicopters. The river route also presented problems. Taking advantage of the narrow ship channel up the Perfume River from the sea, the enemy subjected allied craft to both mortar bombardment and automatic weapons fire.³⁰

In the interval, nevertheless, Task Force X-Ray had taken advantage of the reprieve to build up the combat stocks of the 1st Marines in Hue. On the 4th, Marine trucks from Company B, 1st Motor Transport Battalion brought in enough rations to sustain both infantry battalions in Hue for two days. The following day, a Navy LCU from Da Nang braved the NVA crossfire from both banks of the Perfume River and docked at the LCU ramp in the city. In Hue, the 1st Marines now had enough rations to last through 16 February. With the arrival of a second LCU on the 5th, and another landing craft three days later, the regiment experienced no shortage of ammunition despite its expenditure at 10 times the normal combat rate in Vietnam.³¹

Block by Block 5–8 February

The Marines in Hue began to adapt to the street fighting, so different from the paddies and jungle of the Vietnamese countryside in their previous sectors. As Captain Christmas of the 2d Battalion later

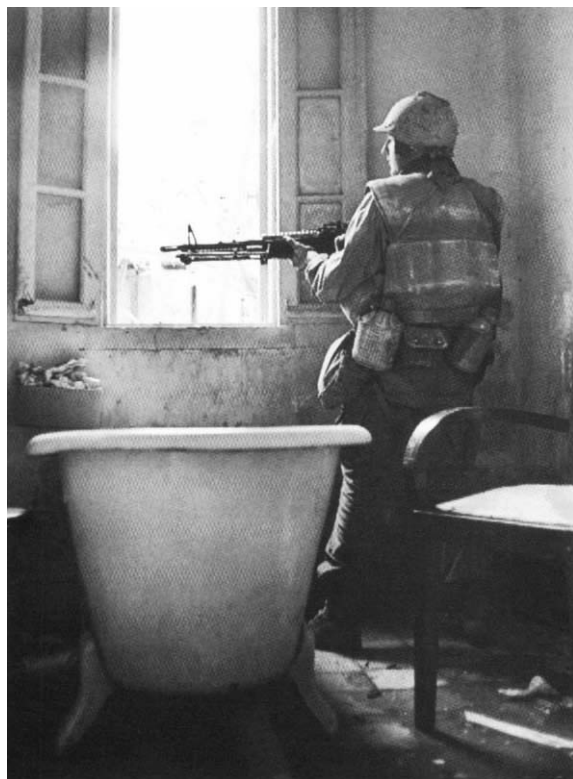
observed, "street fighting is the dirtiest type of fighting I know." Although one Marine fire team leader agreed with Christmas that "it's tougher in the streets," he also remarked, "it beats fighting in the mud You don't get tired as quickly when you are running and you can see more of the damage you're doing to the enemy because they don't drag off their dead."³²

One of the immediate problems caused by the change of locale from the countryside to the urban was in orientation. Both Lieutenant Colonels Gravel and Cheatham complained about the inadequacy of their maps. Originally their only references were the standard 1:50,000-scale tactical maps which showed little of the city detail. As Captain Meadows, commander of Company G, observed, "you have to raid the local Texaco station to get your street map. That's really what you need." Both battalions eventually obtained sufficient maps, which numbered the government and municipal buildings and prominent features of the city. Cheatham and Gravel and their commanders used the numbers to coordinate their activity.^{33*}

Prior to that time, Lieutenant Colonel Cheatham and his commanders used colors to designate their positions. Captain Christmas later related some of the resulting confusion. He would radio Captain Downs and yell, "Hey, I'm in a pink building." Downs would reply, "Hey, that's fine. I'm over here in a green building." Then Captain Meadows would chime in with "Good! I'm in a brown building." At this point, Lieutenant Colonel Cheatham would come up on the network and ask, "Where the hell are the green, brown, and pink buildings?"³⁴

By this time, Lieutenant Colonel Cheatham had a firm idea about the extent of the task that his battalion faced. The 2d Battalion had an area of operations about 11 blocks wide and 8 to 9 blocks deep. As the battalion commander later declared: "It wasn't that big [but] it looked plenty big at the time." He recalled that he "attempted to . . . attack with two companies up and keep that third company of mine back, protecting our left flank." Cheatham admitted that usually he had to commit his reserve: "The area was just too large for one infantry battalion, minus a company, to attack."³⁵

*General Downs commented on the map situation as follows: "Chuck Meadows may well have taken a map off the gas station wall but the ones we used were 1:12,500 AMS [Army Map Service] maps. They were most valuable. Initially, I think there were only three in the battalion with only the company commanders having one." Downs Comments.



Department of Defense (USMC) Photo A371220
A Marine from Company H, 2d Battalion, 5th Marines, holding a M60 machine gun inside the bathroom of a private household, looks out the window for enemy forces in house-to-house fighting in Hue. Strapped to his back is an apparent ammunition box.

With little room to outflank the enemy, the battalion had to take each building and each block "one at a time." According to Cheatham, "we had to pick a point and attempt to break that one strong point . . . and then we'd work from there." After a time, Cheatham and his officers noted that the enemy "defended on every other street. . . . When we would take him off one street, we would usually push through the next row of houses fairly quickly and then hit another defensive position."³⁶

The close-quarter combat and the low-lying cloud cover prevented both Marine infantry battalions from depending upon air and artillery. Fixed-wing close air support was out of the question. Both units used artillery only occasionally and then usually later in the operation and for interdiction missions on suspected enemy approach and escape routes. As Lieutenant Colonel Gravel explained, "artillery in an area like that is not terribly effective because you can't observe it well enough. You lose the rounds in the

buildings, in the streets . . . and you have a difficult time with perspective."³⁷

Supported by the four tanks from the provisional platoon of the 3d Tank Battalion which arrived with the 1st Battalion, 1st Marines on the 31st and a platoon of Ontos from the Anti-Tank Company, 1st Tank Battalion, the Marine infantry advanced methodically against stubborn enemy resistance. Lieutenant Colonel Cheatham had reservations about the employment of the tanks in his sector. He later commented, "you couldn't put a section of tanks down one of those streets. The moment a tank stuck its nose around the corner of a building, it looked like the Fourth of July." The enemy opened up with all the weapons in its arsenal from B-40 anti-tank rockets to machine guns. According to Cheatham, one tank sustained over 120 hits and another went through five or six crews. The battalion commander observed that when the "tankers came out of those tanks . . . they looked like they were punch drunk."³⁸

The Marine infantry commanders were much more enthusiastic about the Ontos with its six 106mm recoilless rifles. Despite its "thin skin," Lieutenant Colonel Cheatham described the vehicle "as big a help as any item of gear that we had that was not organic to the battalion" An even stronger backer of the Ontos, Colonel Hughes, the 1st Marines commander, later commented "If any single supporting arm is to be considered more effective than all others, it must be the 106mm recoilless rifle, especially the M50 Ontos" Hughes believed that the mobility of the Ontos made up for the lack of heavy armor protection and that its plating provided the crew with sufficient protection against enemy small arms fire and grenades. From ranges of 300 to 500 meters, the 106mm recoilless rifles rounds routinely opened "4 square meter holes or completely knock[ed] out an exterior wall." Even at distances of 1,000 meters, the recoilless rifles proved effective. Because of the Ontos' vulnerability to enemy RPGs and B-40 rounds, Lieutenant Colonel Cheatham

*Colonel Robert C. V. Hughes, who as a lieutenant colonel commanded the 1st Battalion, 11th Marines in artillery support of TF X-Ray, commented that while use of artillery was limited, especially the 105mm howitzers, "the heavier more accurate, 155mm and 8-inch were utilized more effectively." He declared that his battalion's fire support coordinator with the 1st Marines "from an OP [outpost] on the roof of the MACV Headquarters building, called and adjusted fire missions. He was able to accurately 'walk' rounds along streets disrupting enemy troop buildup and sniper emplacements." Col Robert C. V. Hughes, Comments on draft, n.d. [1995] (Vietnam Comment File).



The top picture is courtesy of LtCol Ralph J. Salvati, USMC (Ret) and the bottom is Department of Defense (USMC) Photo A371125

Top, LtCol Ernest C. Cheatham, in forefront of the picture, directs a target for a Marine Ontos equipped with six 106mm recoilless rifles, along Le Loi Street. The Perfume River can be seen in the background as well as the Citadel across the river. Bottom, Marines from Company H, 2d Battalion, 5th Marines take cover behind a partially destroyed brick wall in heavy street fighting in Hue City.





Department of Defense (USMC) Photo A371124

A Marine from Company H, 2d Battalion, 5th Marines carries an elderly woman patient out of the hospital complex to relative safety. During the heavy fighting, the Marines evacuated the patients from the hospital as best they could.

employed the vehicle in hull defilade, "even if the defilade was only behind a brick wall" ³⁹

Lieutenant Colonel Cheatham reserved his greatest praise for his own battalion's organic supporting weapons, including 106mm recoilless rifles, the 3.5-inch rockets, and mortars. He especially liked the 3.5-inch rockets that could penetrate 11 inches of steel and "that thing would pop these walls." He specifically remembered one firefight that lasted for nearly two hours between Marine and enemy gunners shooting 3.5-inch and B-40 rockets at one another at a range of 50 meters. Cheatham recalled "hundreds and hundreds of rockets going out . . . And the same thing is coming back at us. But we had more ammunition than they did." ^{40*}

Company F's commander, Captain Downs, recollected the similar use of 81mm mortars at extremely

close quarters. He regularly brought his own mortar fire within 35 meters of his men: "We were on one side of the street and the 81s were fired on the other side of the street." Cheatham compared his battalion's application of 81mm mortars to a sledge hammer: "If you put enough 81 rounds on top of a building, pretty soon the roof falls in." Captain Downs remembered that his orders from Lieutenant Colonel Cheatham were that "if we even suspected that the enemy were in a building to blow it down." In Down's opinion, this was when "we really became serious about retaking the city." ⁴¹

On the morning of 5 February, both Marine battalions resumed the attack in a southwesterly direction toward the city hospital and provincial headquarters. On the right flank, Captain Christmas' Company H advanced along Le Loi street, paralleling the riverfront. The two companies of the 1st Battalion, 1st Marines secured the left flank. Lieutenant Colonel Gravel tried to keep a two-block front, which he later explained, "is simple enough. But when you realize that there's no one on your left . . . you've got to expand this out" This took troops, "resources that we were very, very short of." Lieutenant Smith later wrote that 5 February was "an extremely rough day"

*Brigadier General Downs, who commanded Company F in Hue City, wrote in 1994 that Cheatham should receive credit for bringing the 3.5 rocket launchers and ammunition into the city with him: "He collected them from the 2/5 company supplies at Phu Bai. We had not been carrying any with us." Downs recalled that the manuals stated that the 3.5s and the LAAWs were similar, but "in fact the 3.5's were far more effective." Downs Comments, Dec94.

with the battalion sustaining 19 casualties and advancing “only 75 yards.” Gravel remembered, “The going was slow. We would go, maybe a block. We fought for two days over one building.”⁴²

Although both battalions encountered “moderate to heavy” enemy resistance on the 5th, Lieutenant Colonel Cheatham’s 2d Battalion, 5th Marines made somewhat faster progress. About 1630, Captain Meadow’s Company G secured the main hospital building after a 90-minute firefight supported by a M48 tank, 106mm recoilless rifles, and 3.5-inch rockets. The Marines removed the civilian patients as best they could from the line of fire, killed 4 NVA soldiers, and took 30 wounded prisoners. For the day, the three companies of the battalion accounted for over 70 North Vietnamese dead and 40 captured enemy weapons.⁴³

The following morning, Cheatham’s battalion continued clearing the hospital complex with all three companies on line. Two of the companies, H on the right and G in the center, met with relatively minor resistance, and quickly consolidated their positions. Company F on the battalion’s left flank, however, took heavy fire from its front and pulled back to call in both 81mm mortars and for one of the few times, even 105mm howitzer support from Marine artillery forward gun sites. About 40 high explosive 105mm shells fell upon the enemy. By late afternoon, the NVA broke contact under fire and the Marine company secured the last of the hospital buildings. Down’s company sustained 4 dead and 11 wounded, but killed over 20 of the enemy.^{44*}

In the interim, Captain Meadow’s Company G, from the hospital complex, launched its attack against the provincial prison, just to the southwest. While the 1st Platoon provided protective fire from the second story of the main hospital building, Marine mortarmen and 106mm recoilless rifle gunners blasted a hole in the prison walls. One Marine corporal remembered that the Marines fired CS canisters into the gaping hole, hoping to force the enemy troops out, but “they threw it [the CS] back against us.”⁴⁵

* Then captain, now Brigadier General Downs, recalled years later, that after securing the hospital complex, his company entered a nearby building by the Perfume River. As Downs joined his men, one of his platoon sergeants “had two Vietnamese spread eagled up against the wall.” When the company commander asked who they were, the sergeant answered that one of them was “trying to tell me that he is the mayor of Hue.” One of the Vietnamese turned out to be Lieutenant Colonel Pham Van Khoa, the South Vietnamese Thua Thien Province Chief who had been hiding until then in an attic cubby hole with his body guard. Downs Taped Comments, Dec92. See also Chapter 12.

Believing the NVA were also equipped with gas masks, the Marine infantry, wearing their masks, cautiously searched the rooms and cells of the prison beginning with the top floor. As a Marine squad leader, Sergeant G. B. Zachary, related: “Clear the top deck and work your way down.” Second Lieutenant Michael A. McNiel, Company G’s 1st Platoon commander, described the taking of his unit’s first prisoner, an NVA sniper, equipped with both a SKS and a M1 rifle and eight grenades. Although McNiel had a Thompson submachine gun in the man’s face, the prisoner tried to jump Sergeant Zachary and take one of the latter’s grenades. The Marine lieutenant wrestled the NVA soldier down to the floor with a “half nelson” and then bound his hands behind his back. Yet, the Marines “had to carry him down, with him fighting all the way.” According to McNiel’s account, his platoon took eight more prisoners, who threw “down their weapons, raised their hands and came walking out.”** In the capture of the prison, Company G killed 36 NVA at a cost of only 1 Marine wounded.⁴⁶

On the 2d Battalion’s right flank, Captain Christmas’ Company H encountered tough going after it left the hospital and pushed forward toward the nearby provincial headquarters. Like its sister companies, Company H employed mortars, gas, and 106mm recoilless rifles to soften up the objective. A Marine driver of one of the flatbed mules mounting a 106mm recoilless rifle later stated:

[The] NVA threw everything they had at us. We took incoming mortars and rockets and automatic fire. We had to push the mule out, fire, and pull it back in under heavy sniper fire while we were firing. We opened up the way for the ‘grunts’ [the infantry] to take the building.

Two Marine tanks came up to support the attack. One of the tanks took two direct hits from B-40 rockets but continued to fire. In addition, the Marines expended over 100 81mm mortar shells, 60 recoilless rifle rounds, and 4 E8 CS launchers in support of the assault on the headquarters. Wearing their gas masks, the tired Marines of Company H, in midafternoon, finally overwhelmed the NVA defenders in the provincial headquarters. They killed 27 enemy soldiers, took

** Lieutenant McNiel’s version is somewhat at odds with the official after-action report. The report shows only two prisoners captured in the fight for the prison. If the report is accurate, McNiel may have confused the five ARVN soldiers and two South Vietnamese prison officials who were liberated in the battle with North Vietnamese soldiers. 2dLt Michael A. McNiel in LCpl Charles D. Bedford et al., *intvw*, 10 May 68, Tape 2673 (Oral HistColl, MCHC); 2/5 AAR Hue City.

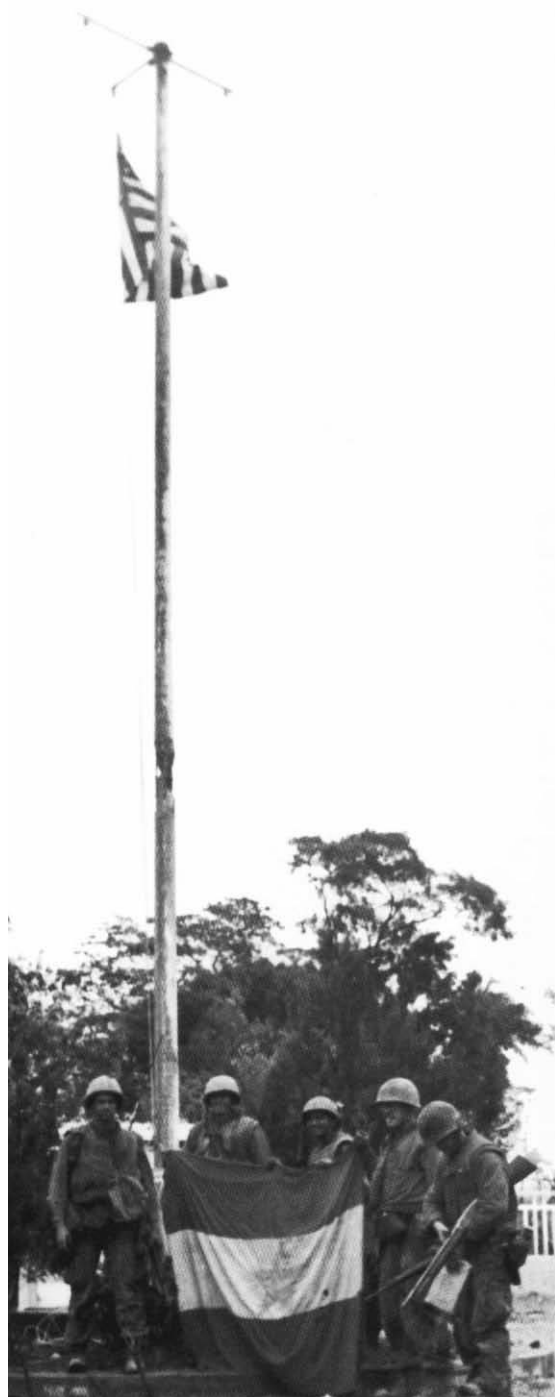


Photo is from the Abel Collection
Happy Marines from Company H, 2d Battalion, 5th Marines display the Viet Cong banner that flew from a flagpole in the courtyard of the Provincial Building. The Marines raised the American flag in its stead, ignoring for a time a MACV directive that forbade the display of the U.S. flag without the South Vietnamese flag beside it.

3 prisoners, and captured an assortment of enemy small arms and ammunition. The company sustained 1 dead and 14 wounded in the fight.⁴⁷

The province headquarters had served as a symbol for both the NVA and the Marines in the modern city. A now-frayed flag of the Viet Cong National Liberation Front had flown from the flagpole in the courtyard of the provincial building since the NVA initial takeover of the city. Immediately after the capture of the headquarters, two Marines rushed into the courtyard and hauled down the enemy ensign. Gunnery Sergeant Frank A. Thomas “vaulted through a hole in the wall” and ran to the flagpole clutching an American flag. As a CBS television crew filmed the event, Thomas raised the Stars and Stripes on the pole.* According to Thomas, “We never knew exactly where the flag came from, but when we said we wanted an American flag to raise, one of our Marines produced one a very few minutes later.” For this one time, the Marines ignored the MACV directive that forbade the display of the U.S. flag without the South Vietnamese national banner beside it.^{48**}

The capture of the provincial headquarters was more than symbolic. The building apparently had served as the command post for the 4th NVA Regiment. Once the headquarters fell to the Marines much of the enemy organized resistance in southern Hue collapsed. Lieutenant Colonel Cheatham remarked on the enemy’s lack of maneuverability. Once the Marines overcame a NVA strongpoint, although a gap might exist between the Marine companies, the enemy troops “never enveloped, they never came back around behind us or anything.” As Lieutenant Smith from the 1st Battalion, 1st Marines wrote, from 6 February forward “[Company] A began to roll and although we took more casualties, we never had a day to match” the earlier fighting. Lieutenant Colonel Gravel was even more emphatic:

He [the NVA] seemed to lose his stomach for the fight . . . once we started rolling . . . the main force sort

* Former *Washington Post* Correspondent Peter Braestrup commented that as the flag was raised, “NVA soldiers in covered foxholes were discovered at the same time—and shown on CBS film.” Peter Braestrup, Comments on draft, n.d. [Dec94–Jan95] (Vietnam Comment File).

** Brigadier General Downs, who commanded Company F in 1968, related that in September 1991 when the Aegis Cruiser CG 66 *Hue City* was officially commissioned, “The first flag raised on that ship was the same flag that was raised in front of the Provincial Headquarters Building on 6Feb68 and the flag was raised by Gunny Thomas and the two Marines who assisted him.” Downs Taped Comments, Dec92.

of evaporated . . . and left some local force—rinky dinks . . . when his defense crumbled, it crumbled.⁴⁹

On the morning of 7 February, both Marine battalions renewed their offensive. On the right flank, Cheatham's battalion with two companies on line and one in reserve made rapid progress. According to the battalion's entry for the day in its after-action report, "it became quite obvious the enemy had retreated leaving bodies and weapons behind." On the left flank, the 1st Battalion, 1st Marines also moved forward, but at a slower pace, and met pockets of heavy resistance. The NVA knocked out an Ontos supporting the battalion with a B-40 rocket, killing the driver and wounding the vehicle's commander. After a firefight, a platoon from Company B retrieved the damaged vehicle, evacuated the wounded Marine, and recovered the body of the dead man.⁵⁰

By 10 February, despite some desperate efforts by isolated groups of NVA and the occasional sniper, the two Marine battalions had reached their objectives. With the Marines in control south of the Perfume River and the NVA still holding fast in the Citadel north of the river, Hue was now indeed two cities. Three days earlier, North Vietnamese sappers had blown the main bridge across the Perfume, literally dividing the city in two. Marine engineers destroyed the Le Loi Bridge at the end of Le Loi Street to prevent the enemy from bringing reinforcements into southern Hue from the west. At the same time, the 1st Battalion, 1st Marines, reinforced by Company G, had secured the northern end of the wrecked An Cuu Bridge over the Phu Cam Canal. Lieutenant Colonel Cheatham and the remaining companies of the 2d Bat-

talion prepared to cross the Phu Cam and enter a new area of operations south of the city.⁵¹

In clearing the modern city, the Marines took a heavy toll of the enemy, but at a high cost to themselves. The Americans had accounted for over 1,000 enemy dead, took 6 prisoners, and detained 89 suspects. Marine casualties included 38 dead and about 320 wounded. Company H had been particularly hard hit. Every officer, including Captain Christmas, and most of the staff NCOs had sustained wounds. Corporals were now squad leaders. One Marine from Company G observed, "we would start getting new guys and it just seemed that every time we got new guys we would lose them just as fast as we got them." Another Marine from the same unit remarked, "the stink—you had to load up so many wounded, the blood would dry on your hands. In two or three days you would smell like death itself."⁵²

With the Marine lines secure, the South Vietnamese authorities assisted by U.S. military and civilian advisors began to bring some semblance of order into southern Hue. They established a refugee center at the University for the hapless civilians unexpectedly caught in the middle of a war. The National Police began to take harsh measures against both civilians and ARVN troops participating in the wholesale looting that occurred behind the Marine advance. By 13 February, Marine engineers had built a pontoon bridge alongside the destroyed An Cuu span and Marine truck convoys brought in much-needed supplies and food for both the troops and the civilian population. Although the battle for southern Hue was largely over, the fight for the Citadel had just begun.⁵³

The Struggle for Hue—Stalemate in the Old City

A Faltering Campaign—Going into the Walled City—The Fight for the Tower—Continuing the Advance

A Faltering Campaign

While the Marines cleared the new city, the South Vietnamese offensive in the Citadel had faltered. In the first days of the campaign, the 1st Battalion, 3d ARVN Regiment had cleaned out much of the northwest corner of the old city while the 1st ARVN Airborne Task Force, just south of the 1st Battalion, attacked from the Tay Loc airfield towards the western wall. To the east, the 4th Battalion, 2d ARVN Regiment advanced south from the *Mang Ca* compound toward the former imperial palace grounds, enclosed within its own walls and moats.* The battalion made excellent progress until enemy resistance stiffened about half-way toward the objective. By 4 February, the 1st ARVN Division reported that it had killed nearly 700 NVA troops in the Citadel.¹

At this point, General Truong, the 1st ARVN Division commander, decided to make some readjustment in his lines. On the 5th, he moved the airborne task force's three battalions into the northeast sector, relieving the 4th Battalion, 2d ARVN. Assuming responsibility for the airfield, the 4th battalion, on the following day, pushed forward all the way to the southwest wall. At the same time, the 1st Battalion, 3d ARVN Regiment recaptured the An Hoa gate in the northwestern corner of the Citadel. South of the Citadel, just north of the Perfume River, the remaining three battalions of the 3d ARVN Regiment, futilely butted against the southeastern wall of the old city in an effort to roll up the enemy defenses from that direction.²

On the night of 6–7 February, the NVA counterattacked. Using grappling hooks, fresh North Vietnamese troops scaled the southwestern wall and forced the 2d Battalion, 4th ARVN to fall back with heavy losses to the Tay Loc airfield. That afternoon, the cloud

cover lifted enough for South Vietnamese Air Force fixed-wing aircraft to drop 25 500-pound bombs on the now NVA-occupied southwest wall of the Citadel.³

With the NVA pouring reinforcements into the old city, General Truong once more redeployed his own forces. He ordered the three battalions of the 3d ARVN Regiment south of the Citadel to give up the apparent hopeless effort to force the southeastern walls and move into the city. On the afternoon of the 7th, the 3d ARVN Regimental headquarters and the three battalions embarked on South Vietnamese motorized junks which landed the troops at a wharf north of Hue. The 3d ARVN units then entered the Citadel through the northern gate and took up new positions at the 1st Division *Mang Ca* compound. By that evening, General Truong had inside the Citadel four airborne battalions, the Black Panther Company, two armored cavalry squadrons, the 3d ARVN Regiment with all four battalions, the 4th Battalion from the 2d ARVN Regiment, and a company from the 1st ARVN Regiment.⁴

Despite the ARVN troop buildup in the old city, General Truong's forces made almost no further headway against the enemy. For the next few days, the ARVN ran up against dug-in NVA who refused to be budged. The North Vietnamese still controlled about 60 percent of the Citadel. Infiltrating well-fed and well-equipped replacements each night into the old city, the North Vietnamese continued to hold their own against the ARVN.⁵

To the west, the U.S. Army's 1st Cavalry Division (Airmobile) was having about as little luck as the ARVN forces in the Citadel against the North Vietnamese. Major General John J. Tolson, the division commander, recalled, "I was to seal off the city from the west and north with my right flank on the Perfume River." Tolson observed, however, that the weather and low-ceiling of 150–200 feet combined with the enemy anti-aircraft weapons "made it impractical and illogical to contemplate an air assault by any unit of the Division, in the close proximity of Hue."⁶

As the vanguard of Colonel Hubert S. Campbell's 3d Brigade, the 2d Battalion, 12th Cavalry started out on foot the early morning of 3 February in a cold driz-

* Col Arthur J. Poillon, the operations officer of Task Force X-Ray, recalled that the term Citadel caused some initial confusion as it was "sometimes used to identify the old walled city and sometimes to identify the palace grounds." Col A. J. Poillon, Comments on draft ms, 30Oct69, Donnelly and Shore, "Ho Chi Minh's Gamble" (Vietnam Comment Files). In the present text, Citadel is used to refer to the entire old walled city.

zle from its landing zone, some 10 miles northwest of Hue. With the mission "to move towards Hue, make contact with the enemy, fix his location, and destroy him," the battalion advanced southeastward along a route paralleling Route 1. About 1000, the American troops saw a North Vietnamese battalion setting up defenses in Que Chu, about 500 meters to their front. A tree-lined and thickly vegetated hamlet in a model Revolutionary Development village called La Chu by the South Vietnamese and the La Chu Woods by the Communists, Que Chu extended 200 meters north and south and was about 75 meters wide. Armed with machine guns, AK-47s, and recoilless rifles, and supported by mortars, the North Vietnamese occupied positions originally prepared by ARVN troops. Under cover of rocket fire from especially equipped helicopter gunships of the division's Aerial Rocket Artillery (ARA) Squadron, the American infantry attacked. Finally after several hours, the 2d Battalion cracked the enemy defenses and established a night perimeter in northern Que Chu.⁷

After a relatively uneventful night disturbed by an occasional enemy mortar round, the 1st Cavalry unit faced a fire storm early the following morning. Under cover of darkness the enemy had moved up reinforcements in regimental strength and, after a heavy mortar barrage at daybreak, launched a counterattack. Surrounded and outnumbered, but supported by artillery and the ARA helicopters, the 2d Battalion repulsed several of the enemy efforts. Forced into a shrinking perimeter, the 2d Battalion had sustained casualties of 11 dead and 51 wounded in the two days fighting for Que Chu. The battalion had accounted for eight known enemy dead and captured one prisoner. In assessing the situation that night, General Cushman's III MAF headquarters informed MACV, "it is believed that the 2/12 Cav is blocking a possible exfiltration route for the [NVA] forces involved in the battle of Hue City."⁸

At this time, Lieutenant Colonel Richard S. Sweet, the commanding officer of the 2d Battalion, more concerned about the enemy overrunning his positions rather than blocking any exfiltration route from Hue, held a hasty conference with his staff and company commanders. Although the 3d Brigade headquarters and Lieutenant Colonel James B. Vaught's 5th Battalion, 7th Cavalry had arrived in the landing zone to the north, the 2d Battalion could not expect any reinforcements until the next day. Sweet and his officers decided upon a night march to elude the enemy and set up their defenses in a more favorable terrain. Believing the

North Vietnamese would expect a breakout toward the north, Sweet decided to move to the high ground, 4,000 meters to the southwest, overlooking a secondary road and the Song Sao, one of the tributaries of the Perfume River. Under the cover of darkness, the battalion slipped out of Que Chu at 2200 unnoticed by the North Vietnamese. Slogging its way through the wet paddylands, the battalion arrived at the hill mass, Nha Nhan, by 0700 the next morning. Dominating the approaches to Hue six kilometers to the east, the exhausted men of the 2d Battalion established their new perimeter. As one of the troopers later related: "We had gotten less than six hours sleep in the past 48 hours. We didn't have any water and the river water was too muddy to drink."⁹

While the 2d Battalion remained on Nha Nhan, the 5th Battalion, 7th Cavalry advanced into the Que Chu sector on the afternoon of the 5th. Patrolling the area west of the hamlet, Lieutenant Colonel Vaught's men encountered only token resistance. In the meantime, Lieutenant Colonel Sweet's 2d Battalion believed it stopped all enemy daylight movement "by calling down artillery on the plains before them." Major General Tolson even gave thought to move the 2d Battalion back to Camp Evans. Tolson later stated: "At this point, . . . I was faced with a couple of situations that strained my resources. . . . when Hue was occupied, my main land supply line was out." Concerned about protecting Camp Evans and his helicopters and supporting his 1st Brigade at Quang Tri City, Tolson believed it "obvious at the time I was told to attack towards Hue that I already had at least three missions that I felt had to be carried out."¹⁰

For the time being, General Tolson dismissed any idea about bringing the 2d Battalion out of the fight for Hue. On 7 February, just northwest of Que Chu, Lieutenant Colonel Vaught's 5th Battalion, 7th Cavalry encountered a strong NVA force that had reoccupied Que Chu. Unable to push the NVA out, Vaught called in ARA helicopters and artillery. The next morning, the Army troopers renewed the attack, but were forced back in the face of NVA automatic weapons fire, RPGs, and mortars. In frustration, the American battalion dug in for the night.¹¹

At this point, the 3d Brigade commander ordered Sweet's 2d Battalion to deploy off its hill and come in behind the enemy, squeezing the NVA between the two American units. On the morning of 9 February, the 2d Battalion troops departed their positions only to bump into a North Vietnamese battalion in the hamlet of Bon Tri, about 3,000 meters south of Que Chu.

Like Vaught's unit, Sweet's battalion had little success against the strong enemy defenses.¹²

For the next few days, the 1st Cavalry units west of Hue, like the ARVN in the Citadel, faced stalemate. They were able to hold their own, but did not have the wherewithal to push the NVA out.* During this period, the North Vietnamese command maintained its "own support area outside the western wall [of the Citadel] . . . capitalizing on the failure of friendly forces to isolate the Hue battlefield." As Peter Braestrup, the *Washington Post* correspondent, later wrote, "sealing off an eight-mile perimeter [west of Hue] would have demanded far more troops . . . than were available."¹³

With the clearing of southern Hue by the 1st Marines, General Cushman prepared to bring more forces into the fight for the entire city. After the arrival of General Abrams and the formal establishment of the MACV Forward headquarters at Phu Bai on 12 February, Cushman met with the Army general the following day. They both agreed that the "successful conclusion to Operation Hue City was the number one priority in ICTZ." The III MAF commander relayed this concern to General Tolson, who still wanted to return the 2d Battalion, 12th Cavalry to Camp Evans. Cushman admonished the 1st Cavalry commander to give up any notion of withdrawing the 2d Battalion from the fight. The Marine general stated that the battle was about to reach a climax and ordered Tolson to keep his forces in position to prevent the enemy from escaping to the southwest.¹⁴

In the interim, General Westmoreland and the South Vietnamese Joint General Staff had sent reinforcements to I Corps. The 1st Battalion, 327th Airborne Regiment from the 101st Airborne Division had arrived at Phu Bai and came under the operational control of Marine Task Force X-Ray. Another battalion from the division was on its way by sea. The South Vietnamese flew the first elements of the Vietnamese Marine Task Force A to Phu Bai from Saigon to relieve the battered Airborne Task Force in the Citadel. At Phu Bai, on 9 February, Brigadier General Foster C. LaHue, the Task Force X-Ray commander, had ordered his 1st Battalion, 5th Marines to prepare to move into Hue.¹⁵

Going Into the Walled City

At 0700, 10 February, Company A, 1st Battalion, 5th Marines departed the battalion's Phu Loc operating area south of Phu Bai for the latter base. Reaching Phu Bai about 1100, the company came under the direct operational control of the 5th Marines regimental headquarters. Colonel Robert D. Bohn, the 5th Marines commander, ordered the company into Hue city to reinforce the 1st Marines. Approaching the An Cuu Bridge that afternoon in a "Rough Rider" convoy, the Marine infantrymen dismounted from their trucks, crossed the broken span, and entered southern Hue on foot. At the same time, the 1st Battalion's Company B arrived at Phu Bai as did the lead elements of the Army's 1st of the 327th Airborne. The Army battalion made ready to relieve the remaining companies of the Marine battalion in the Phu Loc sector. The 1st Battalion, 5th Marines, in turn, was about to expand the Marine Operation Hue City into the old Citadel to reinforce the ARVN.¹⁶

Simultaneously, the Marine command attempted to improve the coordination for artillery, naval gunfire, and other supporting arms for the Citadel fighting. Earlier on 8 February, the 1st Field Artillery Group (FAG) at Phu Bai, the artillery command for Task Force X-Ray, deployed four 155mm howitzers of Battery "W", 1st Battalion, 11th Marines to firing positions at Gia Le, about 3,000 meters west of Phu Bai, to improve supporting fires for the forces in Hue. Two days later, the 1st FAG sent two 4.2-inch mortars from the 1st Battalion, 11th Marines to the stadium in southeast Hue to provide CS (teargas) and heavy mortar support for the forces in the Citadel. About the same time, a 105mm howitzer battery from the 1st Battalion, 11th Marines entered the city across the newly established pontoon bridge over the Phu Cam Canal. From its positions in southern Hue, the battery was in position to support the Marines to the north and to the west.¹⁷

On 10 February, the 1st FAG commander, Lieutenant Colonel John F. Barr ordered two officers on his staff to the Citadel area as forward observers. One of the officers, First Lieutenant Alexander W. Wells, Jr., the S-2 [intelligence officer] on the FAG staff, remembered that he received word that morning that the "colonel" wanted to talk to him. Barr informed Wells that he had volunteered the young lieutenant "*for a 24-hour mopping-up mission* [emphasis in the original]" to General Truong in the Citadel to coordinate supporting fires. Wells, whose tour in Vietnam was about over,

*As U.S. Army historian George L. MacGarrigle observed, "the enemy probably was content to contain him [the Army forces west of Hue], rather than risk a major fight should the weather clear, giving the 1st Cavalry an opportunity to 'pile-on.'" George L. MacGarrigle, *Historian*, CMH, Comments on draft, dtd 5Dec94 (Vietnam Comment File).

indicated he would rather stay where he was, but Lieutenant Colonel Barr gave him little choice.¹⁸

Shortly after 1630 on the 10th, Wells and his radio operator flew by helicopter to the Tay Loc airfield in the Citadel where the Marine lieutenant was to provide support to the 2d Battalion, 4th ARVN and the Black Panther Company, which had just retaken the field. As the aircraft approached Tay Loc, the enemy took it under sniper fire. The two Marines leaped out of the hovering craft and ran into a Quonset hut, near the airfield tower, and “full of Australians [advisors to the Vietnamese units there] playing cards and drinking scotch.” At that point, Wells recalled he was told that General Truong wanted to see him at the *Mang Ca* division headquarters compound, about a mile to the east.¹⁹

Upon Wells reaching the division headquarters, General Truong briefed him upon his new assignment as a forward observer with the “supporting remnants of an ARVN Airborne battalion pinned down in a forward area.” Wells remembered that he “was shocked to learn that the [1st Battalion,] 5th Marines had not arrived yet and that he and his radioman would be the only Americans in actual combat with the ARVN.” The Vietnamese general pointed out to Wells, on a large wall map, the location of his designated outpost, surrounded by enemy troops. Truong explained the Vietnamese unit required “his ‘big guns’ immediately to break the siege.” According to Wells, “Truong emphasized . . . that the Emperor’s Palace of Perfect Peace and the Royal City itself were in a strict no-fire zone, but H&I [harassing and interdiction] fires could be designated on the outer wall surrounding the Palace grounds.”²⁰

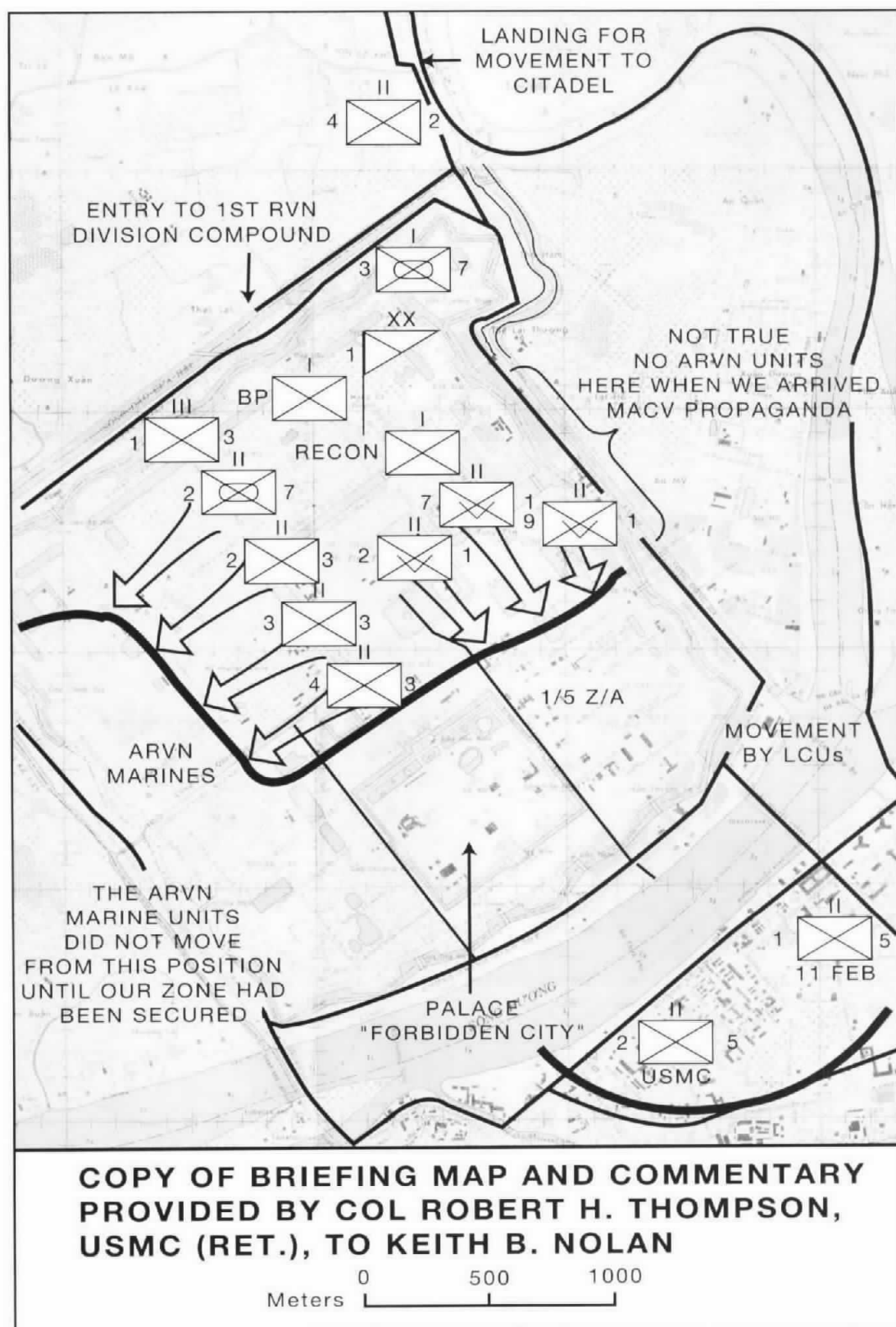
After the briefing, two ARVN soldiers, whom Wells remembered as rangers, escorted the Marine lieutenant and his radioman through the dark streets and alleyways to the ruins of a Buddhist pagoda, about 500 meters west of the Dong Ba tower. Wells recalled it took him about three hours to negotiate the half-mile distance from the *Mang Ca* compound to the pagoda. Inside and around the courtyard of the temple only a short distance from the Imperial Palace were about 100 Vietnamese troops. According to Wells, they were surrounded by North Vietnamese forces. Given his ominous circumstances, Lieutenant Wells nicknamed his refuge the “Alamo.” For the next two weeks, Wells called in Marine supporting artillery and naval gunfire from ships off the coast, adjusting his target selection by reference to his map and to sound.²¹

In the meantime, General Truong revised his plans for the battle of the Citadel. With the arrival of the South Vietnamese Marine Task Force A at Phu Bai, he proposed to have them replace the battered Vietnamese airborne battalions in the eastern sector. The airborne units would then return to Phu Bai and be flown back to Saigon. Through the chain of command, he asked for Task Force X-Ray to provide him with a U.S. Marine battalion. The U.S. Marine battalion would then relieve the Vietnamese Marines and attack to the south. After the arrival of the American Marines, the Vietnamese Marines would push to the west and then turn south, advancing along the western wall. In the meantime, the four 3d ARVN Regiment battalions would continue to clear the northwest sector. Eventually the allied forces would surround and isolate the NVA forces, holed up in the former imperial palace

Vietnamese Marines deploy after U.S. Marine helicopters, in the background, have brought them into a landing zone near Hue. While not depicted in this photo, on 11 February, Marine helicopters had brought one company and the Task Force Headquarters directly into the Citadel.

Department of Defense (USMC) Photo A422067





grounds, which separated the Vietnamese and American Marine sectors.²²

As was often the case, events overtook the plans. Although the Vietnamese Marine Task Force A and its 1st Battalion arrived at Phu Bai from Saigon on 9 February and came under the operational control of the 1st ARVN Division, the Vietnamese Marines remained at Phu Bai. In a meeting with the Vietnamese Marine commander, Major Hoang Thong, at Task Force X-Ray headquarters, Brigadier General LaHue suggested that Thong deploy immediately to the Citadel. Major Thong, however, declined until the rest of his command joined him. The Vietnamese commander explained that he "was acting under written instructions promulgated by the Vietnamese Joint General Staff which prohibited piecemeal [commitment] . . . of his force."²³*

The support elements of the Vietnamese Marine Task Force reached Phu Bai on the night of 10 February from Saigon and Major Thong began his preparations to move the 1st Battalion into the Citadel. On the morning of 11 February, U.S. helicopters started the helilift of the Vietnamese Task Force headquarters and 1st Battalion into the Citadel. Low ceiling and drizzle forced a halt in the air movement of the Vietnamese Marines with only the task force headquarters and one company of the 1st Battalion in the old city. General LaHue proposed to Major Thong that he order the remainder of the battalion be trucked to southern Hue and then board LCM (landing craft mechanized) for the trip downriver to a landing site north of the Citadel. The Marines would then move on foot into the city. Again Major Thong refused "as he did not feel that either route was sufficiently secured." It would be two days before additional units of the Vietnamese Marine task force joined the one company in the Citadel.²⁴

In the meantime, the 1st Battalion, 5th Marines began to go into the old city. Shortly after 1045 on 11 February, Marine CH-46 "Sea Knight" helicopters lifted three platoons of Company B from the Phu Bai airfield to the *Mang Ca* compound in the Citadel. Enemy gunfire wounded the pilot of the helicopter carrying the 3d Platoon, forcing him to abort the mission and return to Phu Bai with the troops still on board. Later

that day, Company A with five tanks attached from the 1st Tank Battalion embarked in a Navy LCU at the ramp in southern Hue. After their relatively uneventful cross-river passage, the Marine company and tanks joined the two platoons of Company B at the 1st ARVN Division headquarters.²⁵

On 11 February as well, Major Robert H. Thompson, the commanding officer of the 1st Battalion, 5th Marines, and his command group accompanied his remaining companies from the Phu Loc sector to Phu Bai. Only 10 days before, Colonel Bohn, the regimental commander, had chosen Thompson, who had served with him before as a battalion operations officer, to take over the battalion after the wounding of its previous commanding officer. Before assuming command of the battalion, Thompson, a lieutenant colonel selectee, had been the III MAF Embarkation officer.** The NVA had prepared a rather undignified assumption of command ceremony for the new battalion commander. Thompson recalled:

The moment I stepped off the helicopter [at Phu Loc] we received mortar incoming. My first 15 minutes with 1/5 was spent at the bottom of a muddy fighting hole with my baggage and several Marines piled on top of me.²⁶

When Major Thompson arrived at Phu Bai, he reported to General LaHue. The Task Force X-Ray commander told him that the 1st Marines had largely cleared southern Hue, "but that the 1st ARVN Division was having a very difficult time in the Citadel." General LaHue stated that Major Thompson's battalion would be given a zone of action in the Citadel to assist the ARVN in cleaning out the remaining NVA forces from the city. LaHue expressed some concern about Thompson's rank or rather lack of it. According to the battalion commander, LaHue feared that "since I was only a major, I might be dominated or overly influenced by General Truong." General LaHue even suggested "making me a brevet colonel." Major Thompson replied that he did not believe that unusual action would be necessary, since he did not usually wear rank insignia in combat. The battalion commander had the impression that "no one seemed to know

*Colonel Talman C. Budd II, who as a major served as an advisor to the Vietnamese Marine Task Force at Hue, commented that Major Thong was correct in that Vietnamese Armed Forces "policy precluded the piecemeal commitment of an operational unit so waiting until the other battalion (the 5th) arrived was appropriate." Col Talman C. Budd II, Comments on draft, dtd 30Mar95 (Vietnam Comment File).

**Colonel Rex C. Dillow, who served as the III MAF G-4 or logistic officer, recalled that Major Thompson had headed the III MAF embarkation transportation section and had the responsibility for shipping of resupply to Marine units. According to Dillow, Thompson had always wanted an infantry assignment, but still had done an "outstanding job" for him. Dillow stated that he, therefore, "offered no objection when Colonel Bohn wanted him for the 5th Marines." Col Rex C. Dillow, Comments on draft, dtd 10Nov94 (Vietnam Comment File).



Department of Defense (USMC) Photo A194565

A Marine M48 tank in support of the 1st Battalion, 5th Marines enters the Citadel. On the front turret is an ironic commentary on the war and the anti-war movement reading, "The Original Flower Children."

what the actual situation was in the Citadel. I can remember General LaHue commenting that it shouldn't take more than a few days to clean up the Citadel affair."²⁷

After concluding his conversation with General LaHue, Major Thompson and his command group, together with the 3d Platoon of Company B, departed Phu Bai by "Rough Rider" convoy to Hue. Like the other 5th Marines battalions, the 1st Battalion came under the operational control of the 1st Marines. Upon his arrival at the 1st Marines command post in the former MACV compound in the new city, the battalion commander immediately discussed the situation with Colonel Stanley S. Hughes, the 1st Marines commander. According to Thompson, Hughes ordered him to "move up the Perfume River in LCUs, land and enter the Citadel from the north." He then was "to seek out General Truong and advise him of my intentions." Thompson recalled that he was to launch a three-company attack southward "within a zone of action that extended from the inner palace wall on the west to the Citadel Wall on the east."²⁸

Major Thompson and his advance group spent the night of 11–12 February in some damaged Hue University buildings. Just before he retired for the night, the battalion commander remembered that "an Army major appeared before me in full battle dress, including a .45-caliber pistol." The man identified himself as Father Aloysius S. McGonigal, a Catholic chaplain assigned to the MACV advisory group. He understood that "my chaplain had not accompanied us and asked that he be allowed to accompany us to the Citadel." According to Thompson, he gladly accepted the offer.²⁹

The following afternoon Companies C and D from Phu Bai joined Thompson and his small advance party at the LCU ramp in the new city. He transferred Company D to the operational control of the 2d Battalion, 5th Marines. Thompson then completed his preparations for the crossing of the river to the Citadel side. After some delays because of enemy mortar and sniper fire on river traffic, Major Thompson's headquarters group, the Company B 3d Platoon, and Company C embarked on board a Navy LCU for the river passage. Although encountering an occasional RPG round or enemy sniper fire from both banks of the Perfume

River while on board the Navy craft, the Marines landed at the ferry landing north of the city without incident. As the troops were about to start their march to the Citadel, Major Thompson later related that “villagers warned me that the NVA had set up an ambush along the route I had chosen.” The Vietnamese civilians guided the Marines along another road. Upon entering the northern gate into the Citadel, the battalion was met by Captain Fernandez Jennings, Jr., the Company B commanding officer, who had arrived the previous day, and some ARVN officers. After some misunderstanding, the battalion commander convinced the South Vietnamese to permit the Marine battalion to come into the 1st Division compound.³⁰

After his arrival at the *Mang Ca* compound, Major Thompson met with General Truong and the staff of the 1st ARVN Division. According to Major Thompson, General Truong “was very eager to accommodate our plan of attack or anything we wanted to do, for that matter.” The staff briefed Thompson on the situation, advising him that “an ARVN Airborne battalion was holding a position in the vicinity of where we wanted to launch our attack from and that they would hold that position until we passed through that morning.”* Thompson then prepared his plan. He remembered several years later that he proposed “to move from our assembly area [in the division compound] at first light the next morning in a column of companies to make contact with the Airborne battalion which was to serve as our line of departure [LOD].” The battalion would then advance “with two companies abreast” and one company in reserve.

Again the actual situation differed from what was supposed to be. Apparently when the one Vietnamese Marine company came into the Citadel the previous day, the Vietnamese airborne units departed for Phu Bai and Saigon. Unaware of the interruption in the airlift of the Vietnamese Marines, Major Thompson radioed Colonel Hughes late on the night of 12 February that he had no information on the whereabouts of

the two Vietnamese Marine battalions but, “unless directed otherwise, intend to commence attack at 13 [February] 0800 . . .” Thompson also did not know that the Vietnamese airborne had departed the Citadel.

The Fight for the Tower

As planned, on the morning of 13 February, the 1st Battalion, 5th Marines moved out of the *Mang Ca* compound with two companies abreast—Company A on the left and Company C on the right. Company B would remain in reserve. From the outset, the Marines encountered “enemy elements of squad and platoon [size] in well prepared positions and bunkers dug in built up areas and along the Citadel walls.” In Major Thompson’s words, “[within] fifteen minutes . . ., all Hell broke loose. There was no Airborne unit in the area and Company A was up to their armpits in NVA.” Under fire from automatic weapons, fragmentation grenades, B-40 rockets, mortars, and AK-47s, Company A, within minutes, sustained 35 casualties. Among the wounded was Captain John J. Bowe, Jr., the company commander.³¹

At that point, Major Thompson ordered his reserve, Captain Jennings’ Company B, to relieve Company A. First Lieutenant Scott A. Nelson’s Company C resumed the attack with Company B on its left flank. With two tanks in the lead, Company C advanced about 300 meters before heavy enemy fire from an archway tower along the Citadel’s eastern wall leading to the Dong Ba Bridge, once more stopped the Marines. The NVA had dug in at the base of the wall there and “tunneled back underneath this structure.” While protected by the thick masonry from allied supporting fires, the enemy could use the archway to bring further reinforcements into the Citadel. With the Marine battalion about 75 meters short of its original proposed line of departure, Colonel Hughes radioed Major Thompson to hold his positions, “reorganize and prepare plans for continuing attack indicating type fire support deemed necessary and desirable.”³²

Unable to budge the enemy with his present resources, Major Thompson replied that he required the entire arsenal of allied power to support his attack the next morning. Thompson wanted “to walk the artillery in front” of his advancing troops and close air support missions to soften the enemy defenses. He also asked that his Company D, still in the southern city, be returned to his operational control in the Citadel.³³

On the morning of the 14th, the battalion resumed the attack. Offshore, Navy cruisers and destroyers

*In a copy of a map that Colonel Thompson received in his briefing and which he in turn provided Keith Nolan, three ARVN airborne battalions are shown attacking south in the eastern sector of the Citadel. The four battalions of the 3d ARVN Regiment supported by an armored cavalry company are attacking towards the western wall. Another armored cavalry company, the division headquarters, the Black Panther Company, and the division reconnaissance company are in the *Mang Ca* Compound. The 2d Battalion, 4th ARVN Regiment is outside the Citadel protecting the northern approaches. Map attached to Col Robert H. Thompson ltr to Keith W. Nolan, dtd 16Sep80 (Nolan Papers, MCHC).

opened up with their 5-inch and 8-inch guns. Marine 8-inch and 155mm howitzers from firing positions at Phu Bai and Gia Le added to the bombardment. For the first time in several days, the cloud cover lifted for a brief period and Marine F-4B Phantoms and F-8 Crusader jets flew support missions. First Lieutenant Andrew C. Delaurier, a Crusader pilot from VMF-235, observed that as his two-plane flight arrived over Hue City there was "extremely heavy air activity everywhere." They had to make two runs to acquire the target, the Dong Ba tower. Once they had it, his wingman "proceeded with one run with zunis and snakes and I followed up with the napalm."* Although enemy antiaircraft fire hit Delaurier's aircraft causing him to leak fuel, he made his way safely back to Da Nang.³⁴

Despite the heavy bombardment, the tower still stood. As Major Thompson later explained, the naval guns "were accurate, but of little value because their flat trajectory either hit the outside of the Citadel wall or passed over the wall and any targets that we might have had inside the wall." Thompson also praised the accuracy of the Marine artillery, but with the battalion on the "gun target line** . . . it [was] virtually impossible for us to lean into our fires." In other words, with the Marine artillery firing at extreme range and parallel to the direction of attack, the shell dispersion could cause friendly casualties. According to Thompson, the NVA also moved forward when the Marines fell back to use their supporting arms, "so when the fires were lifted we had to fight to retake more ground."³⁵

The Marine attack soon stalled. On the right, Company C advanced about 100 yards, destroyed an NVA rocket position, and captured an enemy soldier who walked into the company lines. But on the left flank, Company B made no progress against the enemy-occupied tower. After several futile attempts to take the tower, Major Thompson ordered both companies back into night defensive positions.

Earlier that day, Captain Myron "Mike" C. Harrington's Company D had reverted to Thompson's command. Harrington brought two of his three platoons to the LCU ramp in southern Hue for transportation down river to the Citadel. At the ramp, there were two LCUs, but fully loaded with supplies for the



Department of Defense (USMC) Photo A373668

In the fighting in the Citadel, a Marine grenadier fires his M79 grenade launcher. Apparently he has modified his jacket to include a belt pouch for grenades. He also has one grenade stuck in his helmet strap.

1st Battalion. Harrington squeezed on board one of the craft with his headquarters group and one infantry squad. Although taking fire from NVA gunners on the Citadel wall, the Navy craft safely made the trip across the river. Harrington and his small force jumped off and waited for the LCUs to make a return trip with the rest of the company.³⁶

At the LCU ramp, the remaining two platoons boarded the Navy craft to join their company commander and his small detachment. Again as the LCUs made their way across the Perfume, NVA gunners took them under fire. On the opposite shore, two Marine 4.2-inch mortars responded with both high explosive and CS shells. A sudden shift of wind brought the gas fumes back on the Navy boats, blinding and choking both the sailors and Marines. The two LCUs returned to the southern ramp. The ship commanders decided against another attempt to cross the river. Fortunately after several hours, a Navy Swift boat arrived with three Vietnamese junks in tow. Armed with a mounted .50-caliber machine gun, the Swift boat commander agreed to take the Marines on board the junks and tow the small convoy to the other

*"Zunis" refer to 5-inch Zuni rockets, an air-to-surface unguided rocket with solid propellant while "Snakes" pertain to 250- and 500-pound bombs configured with a special tail called "snake eyes."

**The gun target line was an imaginary straight line from the guns to the target.

side. After the Swift boat left the junks at a point off shore, the Marines rowed them to the northern landing site where an impatient Captain Harrington was waiting for them.

Arriving in the Citadel while it was still light, about 1800–1900 on the 14th, Harrington and his command joined the remainder of the battalion. That night, Major Thompson briefed Harrington on the situation and told him that it would be Company D's turn to go against the tower the next morning. Harrington returned to his company and prepared them for the coming attack.³⁷

On the 15th, Marine artillery and naval gunfire once more hit the enemy positions. Under the pounding this time, part of the tower gave way. With another break in the cloud cover, two Marine A-4 jets darted in under the gray skies and dropped 250- and 500-pound bombs on the target.* Backed both by tanks and Ontos, the Company D Marines pressed forward with Company C protecting its right flank. The North Vietnamese, nevertheless, defended their positions tenaciously and Major Thompson ordered Company B, which had been in reserve, again into the attack. After six hours of hard fighting, including hand-to-hand combat, Harrington's 1st Platoon established a foothold at the base of the tower. According to one account, Marine Private First Class John E. Holiday made a "one-man charge" against an enemy machine gun bunker on the wall, firing his "machine gun from the hip, 'John Wayne' style." The rest of the company followed him and captured the tower.^{38**}

The capture of the tower came at no small cost. Thompson's battalion lost 6 men killed and sustained more than 50 wounded, while claiming 20 enemy dead. That night, Captain Harrington left one squad in the tower and established his CP in a damaged house below the wall. In a surprise night attack, the NVA retook the tower for a brief period. According to Harrington, the Marine squad fell back without orders and the company commander at the base of the tower suddenly saw North Vietnamese soldiers crawling over the rubble of the tower. Laying down a base of fire from his

defensive positions, Captain Harrington led another squad in a counterattack. The tower finally remained in Marine hands.³⁹

Continuing the Advance

On the morning of the 16th, the battalion continued to push southeast along the Citadel Wall. Major Thompson's Marines immediately made contact, "engaging the enemy at extremely close range." Despite heavy enemy resistance, the 1st Battalion advanced about 150 yards. At that point, Major Thompson called a halt to allow fresh supplies reach the battalion. In the days' fighting, the Marines accounted for another 63 North Vietnamese dead while sustaining casualties of 7 killed and 47 wounded.⁴⁰

For the next few days the 1st Battalion met the same close-quarter resistance from the enemy. In contrast to the enemy in southern Hue, the battalion discovered that the NVA units in the Citadel employed "better city-fighting tactics, improved the already formidable defenses, dug trenches, built roadblocks and conducted counterattacks to regain redoubts which were important to . . . [their] defensive scheme." Major Thompson later observed that the older city consisted of "row after row of single-story, thick-walled masonry houses jammed close together and occasionally separated by alleyways or narrow streets." The Marines encountered "hundreds of naturally camouflaged, mutually supporting, fortified positions." Moreover, according to the battalion commander, "both of our flanks were exposed to enemy." To the east, or left flank, four- or five-story houses stood outside the moat from which the "NVA were able to dominate the top of the Citadel wall with observation and fire." To the west, or right flank, the "imperial palace provided the enemy a haven from which he could deliver small arms, rocket and mortar fire." Eventually Thompson received permission to fire mortars and on a "few occasions to have the ARVN fire artillery for us inside. . . the palace walls." As Major Thompson wrote in 1980, the enemy "had everything going for him."⁴¹

Thompson countered the enemy fixed defenses with heavy artillery, naval gunfire, liberal use of riot control agents, and when the weather permitted, fixed-wing support. Major Thompson observed, however, "there was slow, misty cold rain falling constantly. I don't recall seeing the sun during that period and the cloud cover broke enough to allow close air support on about three brief occasions." The Marine battalion commander depended largely on his unit's own firepower, espe-

*In 1980, Colonel Harrington in his comments to Keith Nolan recalled only one air strike while he was in Hue and that was while he was attached to the 2d Battalion, 5th Marines. Harrington Comments on Nolan ms, dtd 24May83 (Harrington Folder, Nolan Papers). The battalion report, however, mentions that the battalion controlled a flight of A4s against the Citadel wall. 1/5 AAR, Opn Hue City.

**A search of award recommendations failed to locate any prepared for Private First Class Holiday for this action.



Department of Defense (USMC) Photo A190588

During a lull in the fighting in the Citadel, a Marine takes time out to clean his M16 rifle. Marines had discovered through bitter experience that the M16, if not cleaned regularly, was prone to jamming.

cially his mortars and automatic weapons, and the tanks and Ontos that reinforced his battalion. He placed both the tanks and Ontos under the control of the attached tank platoon commander. The infantry provided a screen while the mobile Ontos or tanks furnished direct fire support. In order to enhance observation, the tank or Ontos commander together with the infantry commander would reconnoiter the target area, generally a building blocking the Marine advance. The tank or Ontos commander then returned to his vehicle, prepared to move forward at full speed as the infantry Marines laid down a heavy volume of fire: "Upon reaching a position where fire could be placed on the target, the vehicle commander halted his vehicle and fired two or three rounds into the target then reversing his direction, returned quickly within the friendly front lines."

At first, the M48 tank's 90mm guns were relatively ineffective against the concrete and stone houses; shells occasionally even ricocheted back upon the Marines. The tank crews then began to use concrete-piercing fused shells which "resulted in excellent pen-

etration and walls were breached with two to four rounds." Although casualties among the Ontos and tank crews were high, the tanks themselves withstood with relatively little damage direct hits by the enemy RPG rounds. Major Thompson compared the tankers to the "knights of old sallying forth daily from their castles to do battle with the forces of evil . . ." One Marine rifleman stated: "If it had not been for the tanks, we could not have pushed through that section of the city. They [the NVA] seemed to have bunkers everywhere."⁴²

From its firing positions in southern Hue, the two-tube 4.2-inch mortar detachment from the 1st Battalion, 11th Marines supported the battalion's advance with both high explosive and CS rounds. One of the Marine gunners, Private First Class Edward M. Landry, remembered several years later, "I did my job . . . on the mortar, followed orders, was scared . . . the whole time, and took care of my buddies." Landry recalled, "we had one sergeant in charge . . . and no officer. Which we didn't need anyway as we knew our job." On 18 February, he noted in his diary: "Firing a CS



Department of Defense (USMC) Photo A371377

In heavy house-to-house fighting in the Citadel, a Company C, 1st Battalion, 5th Marines machine gunner, with his assistant close by, fires his M60 machine gun on its tripod at an enemy position. Both Marines are laden with bandoliers of ammunition for their weapon.

mission across the river again today. The air is full of gas. . . . We are almost used to it unless it is very heavy. We then use our masks." In the Citadel, the 4.2-inch CS shells proved more effective than the E-8 dispensers. The rounds penetrated the tile roofs of the buildings and "concentrated the full power of the round in the building rather than relying on the infiltration of the CS gas from outside." Enemy prisoners testified to the demoralizing effect of the gas on their units, although some NVA officers and senior NCOs carried gas masks with them into battle.⁴³

After heavy fighting on 17 February, Major Thompson called another temporary halt to the advance. NVA mortars sank an LCU attempting to resupply the battalion in the Citadel. Facing shortages in food and ammunition, especially in 106mm rounds for the Ontos and 90mm rounds for the tanks, Thompson rested his exhausted men until the supplies reached his battalion. The attack was at a standstill.⁴⁴

An exhausted Marine crew member lies on top of his Ontos tracked vehicle among its six 106mm recoilless rifles.

Department of Defense (USMC) Photo A190767



CHAPTER 12

The Struggle for Hue— The Taking of the Citadel and Aftermath

*The Struggle in the Western Citadel—An Estimate of the Situation and Mounting the Offensive—
Closing Out Operation Hue City—A Summing Up*

The Struggle in the Western Citadel

While the American Marine battalion fought for the Dong Ba tower and painfully inched its way forward, the Vietnamese Marine task force also entered the battle. After several delays, on 13 February, U.S. Navy landing craft ferried the command group and the remaining companies of the 1st VNMC Battalion and the entire 5th VNMC Battalion from the LCU ramp across the Perfume River to the northern landing site. At his *Mang Ca* headquarters, the 1st ARVN Division commander, General Truong assigned the southwest sector of the Citadel, west of the Imperial Palace, to the Vietnamese Marine Task Force.* According to Truong's concept of operations, the following morning, the task force would pass through friendly forces south of the headquarters and then attack first to the west and then make a left turning movement with the 1st Battalion on the eastern flank and the 5th Battalion on the western.¹

As planned, at 0900 on the 14th, the Vietnamese Marines left their line of departure, but both battalions immediately ran into strong enemy forces. From 0930–1200, the 5th Battalion engaged in heavy house-to-house fighting until it reached its first objective. In its sector, the 1st Battalion failed in its mission to secure a small school, stubbornly defended by the NVA.²

According to a South Vietnamese reporter who accompanied the 1st Battalion's 4th Company, a Vietnamese Marine platoon leader, Third Lieutenant Nhut, led his men supported by a tank into a pagoda from which to launch the assault on the school. After a sup-

porting air strike on the enemy positions, Lieutenant Nhut suddenly dashed forward toward an abandoned house, halfway between the school and the pagoda. Enemy automatic fire cut the lieutenant down. The company commander shouted over the radio: "I never told anyone to charge ahead yet. I told everyone to wait . . ." He then reported to the battalion commander "the loss of a 'big child'" [referring to a "comrade in arms"]. During a lull in the fighting, a small group of Marines recovered Nhut's body and equipment. On the helmet was the inscription "Live beside you, darling, die beside buddies." The reporter later learned that this was the slogan of the 4th Company. During the 14th, the 1st Battalion took casualties of 9 dead and 24 wounded. Repulsing early morning probes on its positions on the 15th, the 1st Battalion counterattacked and finally captured the schoolhouse that afternoon. In two days of heavy fighting, the two Marine battalions had advanced less than 400 meters.³

To the north of the Vietnamese Marines, the 3d ARVN Infantry Regiment in the northwest sector of the Citadel also met with setbacks. On 14 February, the enemy forces broke out of their salient west of the Tay Loc airfield and cut off the 1st Battalion of the 3d Regiment in the western corner of the Citadel. It took two days for the ARVN to break the encirclement.⁴

By this time, the enemy also had its problems. On the night of 16 February, the ARVN troops at the "Alamo" with Lieutenant Wells, monitoring enemy radio frequencies, intercepted a transmission ordering "an attack of battalion-size reinforcements into the Citadel through the 'west gate' and over the moat bridge." Wells immediately called upon the Marine 155mm howitzers at Gia Le and all available Navy gunships on station to "'fire for effect' at the on-call targets around the gate and bridge." According to the Marine lieutenant, the howitzers "and a 5-inch mount from one of the destroyers responded simultaneously within three minutes and continued firing for approximately 10 minutes." Lieutenant Wells remembered that after approximately 100 rounds, "there was

*For purposes of control, Truong had divided the Citadel into six zones or areas of operations: Zone A was the *Mang Ca* compound; Zone B was the area immediately south of the headquarters and under friendly control; Zone C was in the northwest sector and given to the 3d ARVN Regiment; Zone D was the sector of the U.S. 1st Battalion, 5th Marines; Zone E was the Imperial Palace and grounds still occupied by enemy forces; and the Vietnamese Marine sector was to be Zone F. Pham Van Son, *Tet Offensive*, pp. 257–58.

screaming on the radio." The enemy had received a direct hit on the moat bridge, killing a high-ranking (possibly a general) North Vietnamese officer and blowing several enemy troops into the water.^{5*}

About midnight, the ARVN intercepted another enemy message from the commander of enemy forces inside Hue to his immediate superior. The NVA commander in Hue announced that his predecessor had been killed, that he had assumed command, and that "many other men had either been killed or wounded." He recommended that his troops be permitted to withdraw from the city. The senior officer denied the request and "ordered the new cmdr [commander] to remain in position and fight."^{6**}

An Estimate of the Situation and Mounting the Offensive

At the same time, the U.S. command feared a buildup of NVA forces in the Hue sector. Earlier on the 16th, General Abrams, the MACV (Forward) commander, had talked to Major General Tolson, of the 1st Cavalry Division, and then flew over the Army division's objective area west of the city. According to his observations and information, the NVA had at least three battalions still in the city: "They are resupplied nightly from a base camp 18 kilometers west of the city, generally through the west gate. They have plenty of 60mm mortar and B-40 rocket ammo." Moreover, allied intelligence now identified a new enemy battalion west of the city and a new regimental head-

quarters two kilometers north of the city with at least one battalion. Abrams radioed General Cushman to expect "a renewed attack in the Hue area at any time" and that "we must seek every means to reinforce the 3d Bde [Brigade] of the 1st Air Cav [Air Cavalry] Div to bring additional forces to bear north and west of Hue." According to the MACV (Forward) commander, "we should make every effort to move against the enemy, now, straining our logistic base to the maximum to include air supply if required."⁷

Later on the same afternoon at Phu Bai, General Abrams hosted a meeting with Vice President Nguyen Cao Ky and Lieutenant General Hoang Xuan Lam, the I Corps Commander. Lieutenant General Cushman, the III MAF commander, and Brigadier General LaHue, the Task Force X-Ray commander, also attended the conference. The MACV Forward staff and General LaHue briefed the Vietnamese dignitaries on the Hue situation. According to Abrams, Vice President Ky stated that his intelligence sources concurred with the American assessment of an enemy buildup west of the city. Ky voiced the opinion that the North Vietnamese were willing to sacrifice "thousands of men to win a slight political gain." The South Vietnamese Vice President declared that the U.S. forces should not allow the enemy use of pagodas, churches, and other religious symbolic buildings to deter their advance and that he would "accept responsibility" for any destruction.⁸

The following day, General Westmoreland, the MACV commander, met with both Generals Abrams and Cushman. Westmoreland concurred with their belief that the enemy was about to launch a major operation with Hue as its target. He also accepted the judgment of both of his field commanders in I Corps upon the need for further reinforcements. The American commanders decided to place under Task Force X-Ray the 1st Brigade of the 101st Airborne Division with two battalions. They also agreed to reinforce the 3d Brigade of the 1st Air Cavalry Division with two more battalions. According to the allied plans, the 1st Battalion, 1st Marines and the 2d Battalion, 5th Marines would continue mopping up in the modern city and expand operations to the east and south of Hue. The 1st Brigade, 101st Airborne would block avenues of retreat to the south and southwest, while the 3d Brigade, 1st Air Cavalry Division pressed the NVA from the northwest.⁹

In the Citadel, itself, General Truong, the ARVN 1st Division commander, prepared for the final thrust against the entrenched and determined enemy forces. He assigned the Vietnamese Marine Task Force, now

*Wells was convinced that the 155mm howitzers hit the bridge since the enemy message about the attack "came just after I heard arty rounds coming in." Wells, "Excerpts from Combat Report."

**According to a recent Vietnamese history, the Communist Central Party Military Affairs Committee issued instructions that the Citadel must be held until 18 February. On the 20th, the local *Tri Thien Region Party Committee* suggested to the Central Party committee that it permit the withdrawal from Hue. The Central Party then instructed the Communist military region headquarters to: "Strive to hold, you will be supplied, including by air." The Vietnamese account then goes on to state "From the night of the 20th through the 23d of February IL-14 aircraft of our Air Force flew parachute resupply to our forces in Hue. Although the effectiveness was low, the resupply by our air force stimulated the fighting morale of our troops and people on the battlefield." *Tuan Khu No. 4 [Military Region 4], Lich Su Khang Chien Chong My Cuu Nuoc (1954-1975) [History of the War of National Salvation Against America (1954-1975)]* (Peoples Army of Vietnam Publishing House: Hanoi, 1994), pp. 236-38. The authors are indebted to Mr. Robert J. Destatte of the Defense Prisoner of War and Missing Personnel Office, U.S. Department of Defense, for the above translation. The authors know of no source that confirms or mentions the Vietnamese claim of an airlift to the NVA forces in the Citadel.

reinforced by a third battalion from Saigon, to clear the southwestern wall.* With the Vietnamese Marines on the western flank, he placed the 3d ARVN Regiment in the center with orders to attack south towards the Imperial Palace. The Vietnamese general placed his Reconnaissance Company on the right flank of Major Thompson's 1st Battalion, 5th Marines, which renewed its assault in the southeastern sector.¹⁰

From the 18th through the 20th, the American Marine battalion and South Vietnamese units in the Citadel continued to meet dogged resistance from the enemy. If the NVA in the Citadel were now fighting a rear guard action, they contested nearly every piece of ground. Even with mounting casualties, the North Vietnamese continued to throw replacements into the fight and their supply lines remained open. During the early morning hours of 19 February, two enemy battalions attacked the South Vietnamese Marines in the southwestern sector of the Citadel. Although the Marines, supported by artillery, beat back the enemy assault, several high-ranking NVA officers and political leaders used the "diversion" to make good their escape from the city.¹¹

In the southeastern sector, on 19 February, after regrouping, the American Marine battalion resumed the offensive. With Companies B, C, and D in the vanguard, and Company A still in reserve, the 1st Battalion, 5th Marines only made nominal advances against its stubborn foe, holed up in the rubble, structures, and walls of the Citadel. Major Thompson, the battalion commander, later remembered that one particular building, "a large, two-storied administrative building (the largest in the Citadel)" was of particular concern to him. From it, the enemy had excellent observation and fields of fire. According to Thompson, he "felt that if we could take this position, the rest would be easy." By the 20th, however, Thompson believed that most of the companies had run out of steam and that some new approach was needed.¹²

* Colonel Talman C. Budd II, then Major Budd and advisor to the Vietnamese Marine Task Force, remarked that Major Thong, the Vietnamese Marine Task Force commander, maintained his command post with his 1st Battalion commander, since they were close friends. According to Budd, he did so because Colonel Yew, "the ceremonial Asst. Commandant, was sent up to Hue to oversee the TF 'A' operations." The Task Force Commander "resented that Col Yew had been sent up to Hue so rather than locating the TF CP [Command Post] in the vicinity of the 1st ARVN Division where Colonel Yew was . . . [he] chose to move his CP forward with his old friend the 1st Battalion commander to keep Colonel Yew out of his hair." Col Talman C. Budd II, Comments on draft, dtd 30Mar95 (Vietnam Comment File), hereafter Budd Comments.



Photo is from the Abel Collection
Walter Cronkite, the CBS Evening News anchorman, is filmed covering Marine operations in Hue. The battle for Hue provided dramatic footage for the TV cameras which Americans at home could view almost the next day.

At Phu Bai and Da Nang, both Generals Abrams and Cushman shared Major Thompson's concern about progress in the Citadel and American casualties. News correspondents with the Marines in the old city filed dispatches and film about the intensity of the fighting in the old city that American audiences viewed and read almost the next day.** One dramatic picture showed a Marine tank with a makeshift litter on its rear, carrying wounded from the 1st Battalion, 5th Marines back to the battalion aid station. Reporter Lee Lescaze wrote an article entitled "Shortage of Men, Air Support Slows Marine Drive in Hue" that, on 19 February 1968, appeared on page 1 of the *Washington Post*. According to Lescaze's account, the battalion had only advanced four blocks and still were two blocks from the southern wall of the Citadel. He quoted Marine company officers asking "when are they going to get help." Lescaze described the lead companies "trying to keep on line as they maneuver through buildings and rubble of Hue." In some instances, corporals were acting

** Two of the news correspondents, Alvin B. Webb, Jr., of the United Press and H. D. S. Greenway of *Time Magazine*, were wounded when they and Charles Mohr of the *New York Times* pulled a wounded Marine to safety in the Citadel. Braestrup, *Big Story*, I, p. 238.

platoon leaders taking the place of wounded or dead company officers. One officer remarked, "We don't have enough men, enough air support, or enough artillery to do this thing quickly" ¹³

On 20 February, General Abrams radioed General Cushman that he recognized the efforts of everyone "to reduce the siege of Hue and that the weather has had considerable impact." Abrams, nevertheless, considered "the measures so far taken to be inadequate and not in consonance with the urgency of the problem or the resources you command." The Army general considered it "essential that we bring to bear every available means at our disposal in firepower and support to eliminate the enemy forces in Hue." He directed Cushman to give priority on artillery fires to both the ARVN and Marine units in the city. Abrams declared that General Truong should coordinate "all outside support rendered and we should be responsive to his requests." He told Cushman: "In accomplishing all the above, I direct that the resources owned by the U.S. be unstintingly committed to the support of the Vietnamese forces of all types cutting out all the red tape and administrative procedures that in any way hinder the conduct of the battle." According to Abrams, "this is one battle and anything anyone has that is useful should be committed to its early and final conclusion." ¹⁴

At the same time he radioed Cushman, General Abrams also sent a message to General Tolson of the 1st Air Cavalry Division. He told Tolson: "You have a priority task to clear the northwest, west and southern approaches to Hue within the next 48 hours, using all resources at your disposal" Abrams then ordered General Tolson to "make personal contact with BG

Truong . . . , assess the situation within the city . . . and report personally to this headquarters with your proposed plan of action." The MACV (Forward) commander then promised Tolson that he would issue the "necessary orders" to General Cushman "to insure that all available resources are placed at your disposal to accomplish this mission." ¹⁵

Despite the note of anxiety in Abrams' messages, the battle for Hue was in its last stages. On 20 February, reenforced by the 2d Battalion, 501st Infantry and the 1st Battalion, 7th Infantry, the 1st Cavalry's 3d Brigade, now four battalions strong, prepared to clear the Que Chu area. With clearing weather and both air and artillery support, the 3d Brigade advanced against stubborn enemy forces, who fell back towards Hue. By the end of 22 February, the Brigade was within 2,500 meters of the city walls. In the two days of the attack, the U.S. troops had killed more than 120 of the enemy. The brigade was about to close the western approaches to Hue, cutting the enemy supply route into the city. On the previous day, U.S. Army Brigadier General Oscar E. Davis, the assistant division commander of the 1st Cavalry, had become the coordinator of supporting arms fire in the Citadel with his headquarters collocated with General Truong at the *Mang Ca* compound. ¹⁶

In the Citadel, Major Thompson had decided on another tack to get his battalion moving again. On the afternoon of the 20th, he held a conference with his company commanders. Thompson stated that "to continue the attack as before would be sheer folly" and suggested the possibility of a night attack. According to Thompson, most of the company commanders "were not very enthusiastic . . . they were willing to try, but I could see that their hearts were not in it." He understood their reluctance, "they had endured a great deal during the past two weeks." On the other hand, a few days earlier, he had given his reserve company, Company A, to First Lieutenant Patrick D. Polk. In a brief period, Polk had revived the morale of the company, which had taken horrendous casualties on the first day of action in the Citadel. Thompson believed that "Pat Polk and Company A were ready to go." According to the plan, a platoon from Company A was to seize three key facilities, including the two-story administrative building, flanking the North Vietnamese positions during the night. At first light, the rest of the battalion was to launch the general attack. ¹⁷

As planned, the 2d Platoon, Company A, led by Staff Sergeant James Munroe, moved out at 0300 on the 21st from the company perimeter. Divided into three approximately 10-man teams, the Marines cap-

*The 1st Marine Division responded to obvious concern by higher headquarters. Although not disputing the accuracy of Lescaze's article, a division message stated that of the 10 platoons of the battalion in the Citadel, three were commanded by lieutenants, one by a gunnery sergeant, two by staff sergeants, two by sergeants, and two by corporals. In its message, the division observed that weather permitted fixed-wing support only on three days, 14–16 February 1968. Because of the need for accuracy, the division stated it used only 8-inch howitzer and naval gunfire in support of the battalion. It admitted that "1/5 casualties have been high. During past week, priority of personnel replacement has been given to the 5th Marines." 1st MarDiv msg to CGFMFPac, dtd 21Feb68, Encl 14, 1st MarDiv ComdC, Feb68.

**Brigadier General Paul G. Graham, who as a colonel served as the G-3 or operations officer of the 1st Marine Division, believed that this message, "was simply a case of a frustrated Abrams trying to direct one of his subordinate commanders to hurry the Hue campaign which would relieve him of some political stress caused by the Hue attack." BGen Paul G. Graham, Comments on draft, dtd 20Nov94 (Vietnam Comment File), hereafter Graham Comments.



Department of Defense (USMC) Photo A371416

Marines of Company L, 3d Battalion, 5th Marines use walls and the sides of houses to cover their advance on a key North Vietnamese position in bitter street fighting in the Citadel. On 21 February, the company reinforced the 1st Battalion, 5th Marines, relieving the 1st Battalion's Company B.

tured all three buildings with only minimum resistance by the enemy. Major Thompson later speculated that the North Vietnamese withdrew from the buildings during the night to sleep elsewhere. In the morning about daybreak, the enemy troops started to move back, providing "a turkey shoot" for the Marines of Company A. According to one of the Marine enlisted men, "Hell, the first thing in the morning we saw six NVA . . . just standing on the wall. We dusted them all off." According to Major Thompson, "this threw the NVA into utter confusion and . . . gave our other companies the spirit they needed to continue the attack with zest." Despite the initial success, the North Vietnamese "defended the ground within the zone of action with tenacity." By the end of the day, the battalion had killed about 16 North Vietnamese, taken 1 prisoner, and captured 5 individual weapons at a cost of 3 dead and 14 wounded Marines. The battalion was still about 100 yards short of the southeastern wall.¹⁸

The end, however, was in sight. On the 21st, Company L, 3d Battalion, 5th Marines had relieved Company B, which received a well-earned rest. The following morning, the 1st Battalion prepared for the final assault on the southern wall. Lieutenant Polk carefully briefed Company A, which this time was to be in the vanguard

of the attack. At 0930, the Marines once more pushed forward. Except for some scattered snipers and an occasional mortar round, the enemy seemingly had melted away. Upon reaching the southeastern wall of the Citadel, Lance Corporal James Avella took out a small American flag from his pack and fastened it to "a sagging telegraph pole." The battalion's after-action report documented this event with the phrase, an "element" of Company A "hoisted our National Ensign."

Upon the securing of the wall, Major Thompson ordered the new company under his command, Company L, to capture the southern gate and the immediate area outside the Citadel leading to the bridge across the river. The company commander, Captain John D. Niotis, made his preparations for the assault. Major Thompson set up his temporary command post in a building about 300 meters from the objective so that he could witness the attack. Thompson recalled it was "a classic combined arms effort that could not have been executed better on a blackboard." The sun was out for the first time in two weeks and Marine fixed-wing aircraft dropped napalm within 800 meters of the advancing troops. A M48 tank provided suppressive fire to the company's rear at enemy positions on the palace wall. At



Top is Department of Defense (USMC) Photo A801236 and bottom photo is courtesy of Col Talman C. Budd II, USMC (Ret)
Top, on 24 February, South Vietnamese soldiers from the 212th Company, 3d ARVN Regiment raise the South Vietnamese flag over the Citadel. Below, Major William P. Esbelman, the senior advisor to the 4th Vietnamese Marine Battalion, is seen at the CP of the 4th Battalion along the West Wall with Vietnamese Marines.



one time, the tank turned around and trained its 90mm main gun directly at the building occupied by Thompson and his command group. The tank fired but according to the battalion commander "the round hit a stone archway between us and exploded." Again, the tank opened fire, raking the building with its .50-caliber machine gun, but Thompson's operations officer "had the presence of mind to get on the radio and get the tank from firing at us." Major Thompson later related that the tank commander, the tank platoon sergeant, "was very embarrassed about taking his battalion commander under fire." Without any other major incidents but sustaining casualties of 3 dead and 30 wounded during the day, by 1800, the Marine battalion succeeded in attaining all of its objectives. According to the battalion's report, "enemy contact . . . was lighter than any previous offensive day." One Marine observed, "Hey it's Washington's birthday."¹⁹

To the west of the American Marines, however, the North Vietnamese continued to fight for nearly every inch of the old city still in their hands. In the Vietnamese Marine sector on the 22d, the enemy fired 122mm rockets followed by ground attacks on the Marine positions. Although forced back, the North Vietnamese maintained the pressure on the Marine task force. On the 23d, the Vietnamese Marines "were in moderate to heavy contact" throughout the day and "no advances were made . . ." Venting his anger at what he considered the slow progress of the Vietnamese Marines in a message to General Westmoreland, General Abrams threatened to recommend to the South Vietnamese Joint General Staff the dissolution of the Vietnamese Marine Corps. He complained to Westmoreland that the Vietnamese Marines in the last three days "have moved forward less than half a city block," although being the "strongest force in the Citadel either Vietnamese, U.S., or enemy."^{20*}

*Colonel Talman C. Budd II, a former advisor to the Vietnamese Marine Corps, commented that the criticism of the Vietnamese Marines was unjust. He claimed that U.S. commanders were critical without understanding the Vietnamese limitations. He remarked that the Vietnamese Marines were basically light infantry with their battalions numbering about 400 to 600 men and "were standing toe to toe with the same NVA with far less resources than the Marine units had. The VNMC had a battery of 105mm howitzers; no tanks, Ontos, or other supporting arms." According to Budd, "the battle in the western sector of operations was in many respects more difficult and ferocious because the enemy had the unrestrained ability to replenish his forces and supplies with impunity through the west wall." Budd admitted, "the Vietnamese could have been more aggressive under some circumstances but I'm still not sure that Hue City was one of those cases." Budd Comments.



Department of Defense (USMC) Photo A800450

A Marine sergeant from the 1st Battalion, 5th Marines sits with his weapon on the throne inside the Imperial Palace. The palace was recaptured from the North Vietnamese by South Vietnamese forces, not by the U.S. Marine battalion.

Notwithstanding Abrams' frustrations, both the 3d ARVN and the Vietnamese Marines were about to close out the chapter on the battle for the Citadel. On the 22d, the 3d ARVN Regiment had assisted the Vietnamese Marines in quashing the enemy attack and mounted a counterattack spearheaded by the 1st Division's Black Panther Company. ARVN and American artillery, on the night of the 23d, spoiled another NVA attempt to break through South Vietnamese defenses in the western sector of the Citadel. The 2d Battalion, 3d ARVN then launched its own surprise attack along the southern wall. At 0500 on the 24th, soldiers of the ARVN battalion pulled down the Viet Cong banner and raised the Republic of Vietnam standard in its place on the Citadel flag tower. By 1025 on the 24th, the 3d ARVN Regiment had reached the southern wall and secured it. General Truong then ordered the Black Panther Company and the 2d Battalion, 3d ARVN to assault the Imperial Palace. Meeting little resistance, the ARVN troops, by late afternoon, recaptured the palace with its surrounding grounds and walls by late afternoon. In the meantime, the Vietnamese Marines took the western wall. By nightfall, only the southwest corner of the Citadel remained under enemy control. Under cover of darkness at 0300 on the 25th, the 4th Vietnamese Marine battalion launched a surprise attack and eliminated this last pocket of North Vietnamese organized resistance in the

Citadel. Outside of the eastern walls of the Citadel, a two-battalion ARVN Ranger task force cleared the Gia Hoi sector, a small enclave located between the Citadel and the Perfume River that had been under NVA control since 31 January. Save for mopping-up operations, the fight for the Citadel was over.²¹

For the U.S. 1st Battalion, 5th Marines in the Citadel, except for isolated skirmishes, its last significant action occurred on the 22d with the seizure of the southeast wall and its approaches. Major Thompson had hoped to participate in the taking of the Imperial Palace, but as he later ruefully observed: "For political reasons, I was not allowed to do it. To save face, the Vietnamese were to retake the 'Forbidden City'" Marine tanks, Ontos, and recoilless rifles, however, provided direct support for the assault on the palace. On 26 February, ARVN forces relieved the Marine battalion, which departed the Citadel to join the 2d Battalion, 5th Marines in a two-battalion sweep east and north of the city.²²

Closing Out Operation Hue City

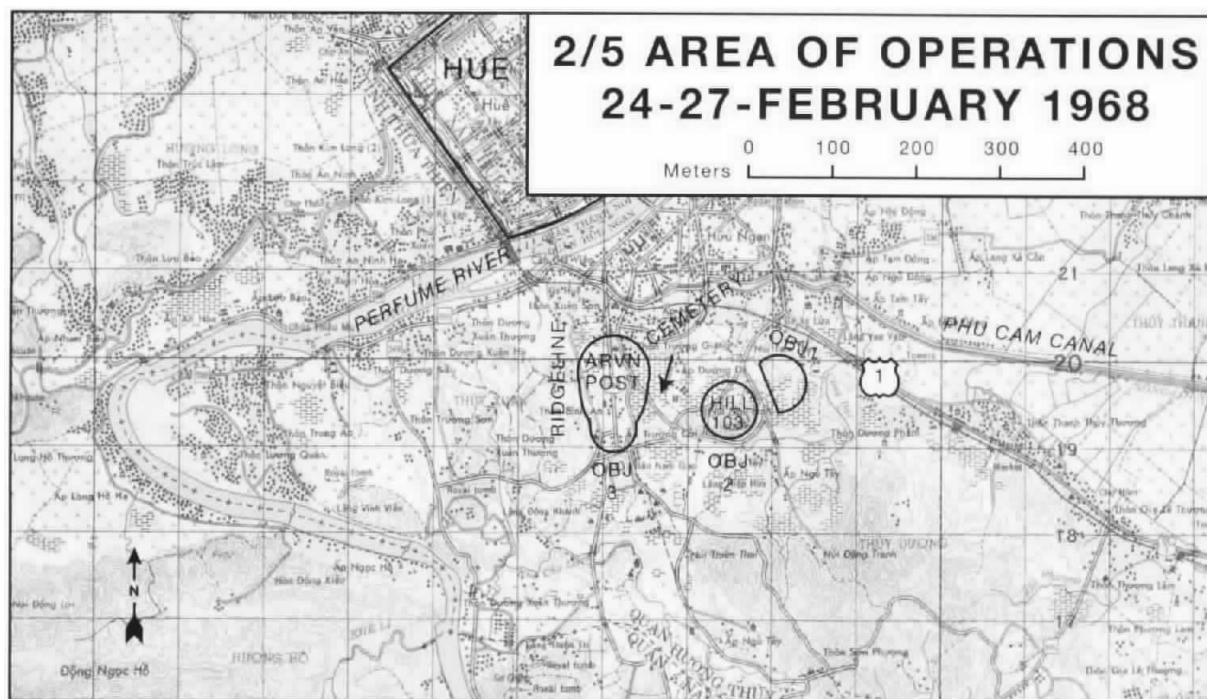
For the Marines, the operation, now officially called Hue City, lasted about another week. While the 1st Battalion, 1st Marines essentially mopped up in southern Hue,* the 2d Battalion, 5th Marines, since 12 February, had conducted numerous company and platoon-size combat patrols south of the Phu Cam Canal. The battalion relieved the 101st ARVN Engineering Company that had been surrounded by NVA just southwest of the new city. On 24 February, the battalion began a

three-company sweep south of the city in conjunction with the two battalions of the 1st Brigade, 101st Airborne Division. Under cover of darkness at 0300, the battalion advanced south of the Phu Cam Canal along Route 1 and then swung west and easily took its first objective around 0500, a piece of high ground 1,000 meters south of the canal and west of the highway. About an hour later, Company F secured its second objective, Hill 103, another 1,000 meters south, again without meeting any resistance.** On Hill 103, Lieutenant Colonel Ernest C. Cheatham, the battalion commander, established an outpost manned by an artillery forward observer team, a forward air controller, and an infantry squad from Company F for security. He then prepared to advance through a Vietnamese cemetery upon his main objective, an ARVN engineer battalion compound, about 1,500 meters to the west. The engineers had held out against repeated VC and NVA assaults since the beginning of the month.²³

Close to 0700, with Company G on the right, Company H on the left, and Company F following in trace, the battalion began its attack to secure the ARVN compound. Enemy mortars and automatic weapons fire forced the Marines to take cover among the tombs. After the battalion called in artillery and mortars on the suspected enemy positions, Company G, about 0830, reached the perimeter of the base and tied in with the ARVN engineers there. After discussing defensive arrangements with the ARVN base commander, the Company G commander, Captain Charles L. Meadows, reported back to Lieutenant Colonel Cheatham about the situation. The company commander warned Cheatham that the ARVN engineers had extensively mined the approaches to their compound and that a guide was required to pass through safely.

*First Lieutenant Ray L. Smith, the acting Company A commander, recalled that his company on 10 February together "with a militia of cooks etc., that they called 'B' Company," returned to the MACV compound and "began pushing east." At first, the battalion encountered little resistance as it covered two blocks and reached the soccer stadium. Smith remembered that they had a road to cross east of the stadium and "we bumped hard again." According to Smith, an ARVN major, who had been on leave and hiding from the NVA, joined them and informed the Marines that a North Vietnamese battalion headquarters was next door to his house. With clearances obtained from the Vietnamese authorities for "unobserved fire . . . for the first time," the Marine battalion called in supporting artillery and mortar missions. The following morning, the Marine infantry "went in" under a CS gas cover: "We had some fairly heavy resistance, but we cleared it out easily . . ." Smith remembered, "we found where they had their battalion headquarters," but the enemy bodies had been cleared out. After the taking of the headquarters, Smith wrote that Company A got some rest "and were used mostly for security until we left." 1stLt Ray Smith to Capt Gordon D. Barcheller, dtd 25Mar68, Encl to Col Gordon D. Barcheller, Comments on draft, dtd 10Dec94 (Vietnam Comment File). Unfortunately, the 1/1 Command Chronology and journal file is silent on this incident. 1/1 ComdC, Feb68.

**Brigadier General Michael P. Downs, who as a captain commanded Company F, 2d Battalion, 5th Marines, recalled that on the 24th, his company passed the remains of a Marine convoy that had been ambushed earlier in the month in an attempt to bring supplies to an isolated Marine artillery battery located at the Rock Quarry across the Perfume River from Phu Bai. Two men from his company who had been wounded and trying to rejoin the company were among the casualties: "It was a demoralizing site." BGen Michael P. Downs, Comments on draft, dtd 19Dec94 (Vietnam Comment File), hereafter Downs Comments. Colonel Robert C. V. Hughes, who had commanded the 1st Battalion, 11th Marines, recalled the same convoys. He wrote: "All the vehicles were disabled and remained at the ambush site until control was reestablished later in the month." According to Hughes, the Marine artillery battery was not attacked during the entire period and occasionally initiated counter battery fire on enemy rocket launching sites in the Phu Bai sector. Col Robert C. V. Hughes, Comments on draft, n.d. [1995] (Vietnam Comment File).



Despite all precautions, the Navy corpsman with Cheatham's command group triggered a mine and was seriously wounded.²⁴

Throughout the remainder of the day, the Marine companies in their defensive positions in the compound and around the perimeter came under mortar and automatic fire from a VC-held Buddhist temple to the immediate south and a ridgeline to the west, overlooking the ARVN base. Cheatham observed that the Communist gunners had preregistered their mortars and automatic weapons fire on the key Marine defensive positions and terrain objectives. Deciding upon much the same tactics as he had already employed, the battalion commander planned upon enveloping the enemy's positions under cover of darkness and coming upon him in the morning.²⁵

The enemy, however, was not taken in by the Marine stratagem. Companies F and G moved out of the perimeter as planned and then waited for artillery and airstrikes to soften the enemy defenses. At 0700 on the 25th, the two companies launched their attacks to take the ridgeline and were met by mortar salvos and continuous and accurate automatic weapons fire. As one Marine infantryman with Company G observed, "everyplace we'd go they would mortar us." With supporting artillery fires, naval gunfire, and close air support, the Marine infantry finally reached the crest of the eastern portion of the ridgeline. In their efforts during the day, the two companies sustained casualties of 1

Marine killed and 11 wounded. The Marines, in turn, killed three of the enemy and took one prisoner. In the meantime, Company H, which had cleared out a hamlet in support of the Army airborne brigade operating to the south of the Marines, joined the other companies on the eastern ridgeline.²⁶

On the morning of the 26th, the Marine battalion continued the attack to clear the ridgeline. In scattered skirmishes, Companies F and G on the ridgeline killed about 20 NVA and took casualties of 2 Marine dead and 13 wounded. About 500 meters to the north, Company H, supported by air and artillery, maneuvered to take the last hill on the ridgeline, where the enemy remained entrenched in fixed positions. About 1330, enemy defenders, using mortars, machine guns, and 57mm recoilless rifles, forced Company H to pull back and call for an air strike. In the fighting, the Marines sustained casualties of one dead and five wounded and later counted six North Vietnamese bodies.²⁷

Resuming the attack after the air strike, Company H once more pushed forward. Again, the Communist troops doggedly resisted the Marine advance. About 1620, once more unable to make any further headway, the Marine company called upon air to take out the enemy defenses. Two flights of A-4 Skyhawks came in low and dropped their ordnance. Although the bombs knocked out two enemy mortars and two machine guns, killing about 20 North

Vietnamese troops, one fell short and burst near the Marines, killing four and wounding two. With darkness coming on, Lieutenant Colonel Cheatham recalled the company and waited for the next morning to renew the assault.

On the morning of the 27th, Marine air and artillery bombarded the enemy defenses. After the last fires had lifted, all three companies of the 2d Battalion rushed forward. Reaching the crest of the hill without encountering opposition, the Marines discovered that the enemy had departed during the night. Strewn around the hillscape were 14 enemy bodies. The Marine battalion then completed its sweep south of the new city the next day and prepared for a joint operation with the 1st Battalion, 5th Marines to the east and north of Hue.

Leaving the southern sector to the 1st Brigade, 101st Airborne on the 29th, the two Marine battalions entered their new area of operations to cut off any NVA forces trying to make their way from Hue to the coast. Although encountering few enemy forces, the two battalions uncovered “fresh trench work along the route of advance, 3,000 meters long with 600 fighting holes.” Captain Michael P. Downs, the Company F commander, remembered a trench complex that “traveled in excess of five miles” with overhead cover every 15 meters. As Downs remarked, “that had to be a way to get significant reinforcements into the city.” The search for significant North Vietnamese forces proved fruitless. Lieutenant Colonel Cheatham observed, “we couldn’t close it [the loop around the enemy]. To be honest, we didn’t have enough people to close it.” On 2 March 1968, the Marines closed out Operation Hue City.²⁸

A Summing Up

The battle cost all sides dearly. Marine units of Task Force X-Ray sustained casualties of 142 dead and close to 1,100 wounded.* U.S. advisors with the 1st ARVN Division in Hue reported 333 South Vietnamese Army

troops killed, 1,773 wounded, and 30 missing in action. According to the U.S. Marine advisors with the Vietnamese Marine task force in Hue, the Vietnamese Marines suffered 88 killed, 350 wounded, and 1 missing in action. The 1st Cavalry Division (Airmobile) listed casualties of 68 killed and 453 wounded for their part in the battle while the 1st Brigade, 101st Airborne showed 6 dead and 56 wounded in its battle account. Thus, all told, allied unit casualties totaled more than 600 dead and nearly 3,800 wounded and missing. Obviously the enemy did not escape unscathed. Allied estimates of NVA and VC dead ranged from 2,500 to 5,000 troops. According to the South Vietnamese, captured Communist documents admitted to 1,042 killed and an undisclosed number of wounded.²⁹

Just as speculative were the size and number of units that the allies engaged in the one month battle. The allied command, however, knew that the enemy was in Hue in force. South Vietnamese and U.S. intelligence officers initially identified at least three North Vietnamese regimental headquarters controlling subordinate units during the early fighting. These were the *4th*, *5th*, and *6th* NVA Regiments. Later, American and South Vietnamese units confirmed battalions from at least three more NVA regiments—the *29th* from the *325C* NVA Division and the *90th* and *803d* from the *324B* Division. The 1st Air Cavalry Division reported prisoners from yet another regiment, the *24th* Regiment, *304th* NVA Division. Allied intelligence estimated that from 16 to 18 enemy battalions took part in the battle for Hue in one form or another, not including VC local force units. It would be a safe bet that from 8,000 to 11,000 enemy troops participated in the fighting for Hue in the city itself or the approaches to the former imperial capital.³⁰

Until the battle for Hue, the allied order of battle estimates carried the battalions from the *29th* and the *90th* NVA as part of the besieging force at Khe Sanh, approximately 45 miles to the northwest. The *803d* Regiment was supposed to be in the eastern DMZ, another 45 miles to the north. One prisoner from the *803d*, captured on 23 February by Vietnamese Marines, told his captors that his unit on the night of 21–22 February made a forced march from Gio Linh District to the Citadel. Although wounded himself, he spoke of the high morale and fairly low casualties in his unit. On the 23d, he stated that his unit received orders to withdraw, but did not know why. In the hasty departure, he lost his way and ran into the South Vietnamese troops.³¹

*The breakdown of casualties among the Marine infantry battalions are as follows: The 1st Battalion, 5th Marines sustained 67 dead and 403 wounded. The incomplete 2d Battalion, 5th Marines after-action report does not show total Marine casualties, but the battalion’s command chronology for February shows 65 Marines killed and 421 wounded. It can be assumed that over 90 percent of these casualties occurred during the Hue City fighting. The 1st Battalion, 1st Marines did not submit an after-action report for Hue, but its command chronology for February reflects 17 dead and 154 wounded. Again it can be assumed that the bulk of the casualties occurred in the Hue City fighting. 1/5 AAR Hue City; 2/5 ComdC, Feb68; 1/1 ComdC, Feb68.



Photo courtesy of Col Talman C. Budd II, USMC (Ret)

The South Vietnamese Marine Task Force Alpha commander, the officer on the right holding a map, confers with officers of the 1st Vietnamese Marine Battalion west of the city, after leaving Hue.

The allies remained unsure about the North Vietnamese command and control for the battle of Hue. U.S. after action reports referred to a division-size force, but never identified any particular enemy division headquarters. Lieutenant Colonel Pham Van Khoa, the South Vietnamese Thua Thien Province chief, who remained in hiding until rescued by American Marines,* accidentally overheard a conversation among some enemy officers. According to Khoa, the North Vietnamese mentioned a division taking part in the battle and the division headquarters was "in an unknown location south of the city of Hue inside a pagoda." Khoa could not remember the number of the division, but recalled that it ended with a 4. In all probability, however, Khoa confused the division headquarters with the *4th NVA Regiment*. Given the disparity of so many regiments from so many different divisions, allied intelligence officers believed that a forward headquarters of the *Tri-Thien-Hue Front* under a North Vietnamese general officer directed the NVA Hue offensive.³²

Given both the resources that the North Vietnamese put into the battle and the tenacity with which they fought, it was obvious that the Hue campaign was

a major component of the entire Tet offensive. According to an enemy account, the North Vietnamese military command in planning the offensive took into consideration that the U.S. and South Vietnamese had concentrated their forces in the north, expecting an attack along Route 9. It viewed Hue a weak link in the allied defenses in the northern two provinces. As the North Vietnamese author wrote: "The enemy knew nothing of our strategy; by the time our forces approached the city of Hue, the enemy still had not taken any specific defensive measures."³³

Once in Hue, the North Vietnamese were there to stay. The Communists established their own civil government and their cadres rounded up known government officials, sympathizers, and foreigners including American civilians and military personnel in the parts of the city they controlled. After the recapture of Hue, South Vietnamese authorities exhumed some 3,000 bodies thrown into hastily dug graves. In all probability, these were the victims of the Communist roundups. Although the North Vietnamese admitted the tracking down and punishing of "hoodlum ring-leaders," they claimed most of the reported civilian deaths were the result of happenstance, exaggerations by the South Vietnamese, or caused by the allies. The true sufferers in the battle were the people of Hue.

*See Chapter 10.



Top is Department of Defense (USMC) Photo A190581 and bottom photo is courtesy of Col Talman C. Budd II, USMC (Ret)
At top, a bound North Vietnamese prisoners captured in the fighting for Hue are waiting to board the Army "Huey" helicopter in the background for evacuation and later interrogation. In bottom photo, a South Vietnamese Marine colonel, the Assistant Commandant of the Vietnamese Marine Corps, briefs the press on the battle for Hue and prisoners captured by the South Vietnamese Marines.



Some estimates held that over 80 percent of the structures in the city sustained damage or were destroyed. Out of a population of about 140,000, more than 116,000 people were homeless and 5,800 were either dead or missing. According to most reports, Hue was a devastated city.^{34*}

From the allied perspective, the struggle for Hue was a near thing, especially in the first few days. Only the failure of the North Vietnamese to overrun the *Mang Ca* and MACV compounds permitted the allies to retain a toehold in both the Citadel and the new city. With the holding of these two positions, the Americans and South Vietnamese were able to bring in reinforcements to mount a counteroffensive. The battalion commander of the 1st Battalion, 1st Marines, Lieutenant Colonel Marcus J. Gravel, observed that the enemy had oriented his defenses to fend off forces coming into the city: "When we got in and were able to stay in there in strength . . . we fought him from the inside out." Even then, if the enemy had blown the An Cuu Bridge across Route 1 on the first day, the Marines would not have been able to bring in their initial battalions and supplies into the city.³⁵

Fortuitously for both the Americans and the South Vietnamese, the 1st Air Cavalry Division had arrived in northern I Corps before Tet and was in position to commit eventually a four-battalion brigade to the battle. Overcoming strong enemy opposition, including elements of three separate regiments, on 25 February, the 3d Brigade reached the walls of the Citadel, closing out the enemy avenues of approach to the city from the west. By this time, the American and South Vietnamese forces had overwhelming superiority and the North Vietnamese units, fighting a rear guard action,

abandoned the struggle to hold on to the city. Major General Tolson, the 1st Cavalry commander, remembered that General Truong told him that if "I could ever get the Cav to the walls of Hue, the enemy would 'bug out.'" The problem was that it took 22 days for the 3d Brigade to fight its way there. Major Talman C. Budd II, the U.S. Marine advisor to the Vietnamese Marine Task Force, later wrote that if the 1st Cavalry had been reinforced or replaced "to enable sealing off the west wall sooner, . . . [it] would have shortened the struggle to reach the south wall."³⁶

Although the Viet Cong and the North Vietnamese harassed ship traffic in the Perfume River and the other water routes into the city, they made no serious attempt to close the waterways. Even with the An Cuu Bridge closed for over a week, the Marines had stockpiled and brought in enough supplies by LCU to support operations in both the Citadel and southern Hue. By 14 February, with a pontoon bridge in place over the canal, the road network into the new city, at least, was once more open. On two occasions, nevertheless, because the NVA sank one LCU and temporarily shut down the boat traffic on the Perfume River, Major Thompson in the Citadel stopped his battalion's advance because of a shortage of 106mm and 90mm rounds for his recoilless rifles and tanks.³⁷ If the enemy had made a stronger effort to cut both the water and land lines of communications, the outcome of the struggle for Hue would have been less predictable.

Despite marginal flying conditions that curtailed resupply missions and the haphazard attempts of the enemy to cut the lines of communications, the Marines eventually built up their logistic facilities in Hue. Marine helicopters eventually lifted more than 500 tons of all types of supplies into Hue while five Navy LCUs brought in another 400 tons. After the opening of Route 1 on 12 February, Marine trucks from Company B, 7th Motor Transportation Battalion carried the bulk of the resupplies into the city. More than 100 truck convoys made the round trip from Phu Bai to Hue.³⁸

The 1st Marines first established its logistic support area (LSA) in the city next to the LCU ramp. Because of the LSA's exposure to enemy mortar fire and snipers, the Marines moved it to a South Vietnamese government complex next to the MACV compound. With the stockpiling of supplies resulting in a premium for space, the 1st Marines then relocated the LSA to the Tu Do Soccer Stadium several blocks to the east of the MACV buildings. On 22 February, Force Logistic Sup-

* Former *Washington Post* reporter Peter Braestrup, an eyewitness to the battle, cautioned in his book against overdramatic comparisons that appeared in the media of the Hue battle with World War II battles. According to Braestrup, "to the uninitiated or imaginative observer on the ground, it [Hue] suggested Seoul or Stalingrad. . . . Actually Hue got off fairly lightly by World War II or Korean War standards for three-week urban battles." Braestrup, *Big Story*, vol. 1, p. 202. For contrasting views of the Hue "massacres," see Douglas Pike, "Viet Cong Strategy, New Face of Terror," and D. Gareth Porter, "The 1968 Hue Massacre" in Hue Tet Folder, A&S Files, Indochina Archives. William D. Ehrhart a former Marine who served with the 1st Battalion, 1st Marines in Hue and has written extensively on the Vietnam experience, commented that he personally saw a lot of dead civilians, killed not by intent, "but only because they were in the midst of some of the fiercest fighting of the war." While admitting he did not know "what actually happened," Ehrhart believes "there is more room for doubt than your account (and most others suggest)." William D. Ehrhart, Comments on draft, dtd 23Nov94 (Vietnam Comment File). The authors of this work feel no need to change the description in the text.



Top is Department of Defense (USMC) Photo A190503 and bottom photo is courtesy of Col Talman C. Budd II, USMC (Ret)
The fighting for Hue caused extensive damage in the city. Top, the ruins of the Hue market place can be seen, while below is a view of the south wall of the Citadel taken from the west wall. The devastation upon the homes and buildings in between the two walls is obvious.





Top photo is courtesy of Col Talman C. Budd II, USMC (Ret) and bottom is Department of Defense (USMC) Photo A190492
After the destruction of the bridges Marines depended upon river traffic for resupply. At top is an aerial view of the river after the battle with several damaged river craft. The picture was taken from a helicopter whose machine gun can be seen in the forefront. Below, Marine infantry have M16 rifles and M60 machine guns at the ready to return enemy sniper or harassing fires from on board a LCM (landing craft, mechanized) carrying 105mm ammunition.



port Group (FLSG) Alpha took over from the 1st Marines the running of the LSA.

In his after-action report, General LaHue, the Task Force X-Ray commander, observed that his command made few if any logistic innovations, but implemented some procedures “which were necessary and effective.” According to LaHue, these usually “involved force feeding and preplanning.” Because of the nature of the fighting, the 1st Marines and the committed battalions found it almost impossible to anticipate their needs in advance. The result was that their “requests escalated quickly from routine, to priority, to emergency.” Based on the experience of the first four days of combat, Task Force X-Ray then prestaged a “balanced package of usually needed supplies. As soon as higher priority cargo was delivered, these would then be delivered without a request.” The Task Force commander credited the logistic support with enabling the infantry battalions to clear the city.³⁹

With the low ceilings limiting the number of helicopter flights, medical support and evacuation also operated under different and more difficult circumstances. It soon became apparent to the 1st Marines for the need of forward medical facilities. Colonel Hughes established the regimental aid station at the MACV compound with eight doctors. The regimental facility provided “definitive” emergency care and control and coordination of all medical evacuation. It also served as a battalion aid station for the 1st Battalion, 1st Marines. The other two battalions, the 1st Battalion and 2d Battalion, 5th Marines, each had its own aid station. Lieutenant Colonel Cheatham, the 2d Battalion commander, declared that medical evacuation was “a throwback to World War II. [I] Had my doctor . . . one block behind the frontline treating the people right there.”⁴⁰

The Marines used trucks, mechanical mules, and any available transportation to carry the wounded back to the treatment facilities. According to the 1st Marines account, it averaged about two to three minutes to bring a wounded man from the battle site to an aid station. It took another two to three minutes from the aid station to the helicopter landing zone for further evacuation if required. Eventually, the regimental surgeon established two categories of wounded to be evacuated by helicopter—Class I, emergency medevac, weather permitting; and Class II, immediate evacuation. Army helicopters assisted in Class I while Marine helicopters had sole responsibility for the emergency Class II, “which they accomplished under severe weather conditions, and with great risk to the heli-

copter crews, often times flying with a 100-foot ceiling and 0 visibility.”⁴¹

On the south side of the Perfume River, only two casualties who arrived alive at the forward aid stations died. These were two men from the 2d Battalion, 5th Marines who died minutes after their arrival, one of gunshot wounds (GSW) to the head and the other of a wound to the neck with “severance of both carotid arteries.” Across the river, where the 1st Battalion, 5th Marines was dependant upon air or water evacuation, six men died “after emergency care while awaiting helicopter evacuation during severely inclement weather.” The battalion surgeon declared, however, that four “would have died regardless of evacuation because of the nature of their wounds, and of the remaining two it is equivocal whether they could have been saved if evacuated quickly.” In the Hue City battle, like all operations in Vietnam, despite the problems with helicopter evacuation, if a Marine reached an aid station alive, his chances of survival were close to 99 percent.^{42*}

One other problem that the allies faced was population control. With the widespread destruction in the city, the estimated 116,000 homeless had to be fed and temporarily housed. Much of the population just fled the city and took refuge with relatives and friends in the surrounding villages. After the initial confusion, both U.S. and South Vietnamese agencies began to set up refugee centers. U.S. Army Major Jack E. Walker, a subsector advisor, recalled that his superior about a week after the NVA struck told him that he was now the “CORDS ‘refugee man.’” According to Walker, he surveyed the situation and discovered that he had 5,000 refugees in a Catholic church and another 17,000 at Hue University. Another 40,000 displaced people were in the Citadel sector. Walker initially concerned himself with three tasks: restoring city services including water and power; eliminating health hazards including burying the dead; and securing food. With the assistance of the local Catholic hierarchy and American resources and personnel, Walker and his people began attacking all of these problems. By the end of February, a full-time refugee administrator was in place and local government slowly began to function once more.⁴³

*Brigadier General Michael P. Downs observed that the 99 percent chance of survival after reaching a battalion aid station was probably true after 4 February. He stated he had at least two Marines of his company before that date die of wounds after being evacuated to an aid station. Downs Comments. Those two Marines, however, may have been the two who died referred to in the text.



Top photo is courtesy of Col Talman C. Budd II, USMC (Ret) and the bottom is Department of Defense (USMC) Photo A372930

The civilian population of Hue was caught in the middle of the battle. Top, survivors from the house-to-house fighting in the Citadel attempt to make themselves as comfortable as possible on a dirt embankment, apparently in one of the parks of the old city. Below, Marines lead and assist South Vietnamese refugees carrying what belongings they can away from the combat area.



In the first two weeks there was hardly any semblance of public order. The authors of the South Vietnamese official history of Tet wrote: "Thievery and looting were widespread. War victims stole from their fellow sufferers. All deserted houses were emptied of valuables. Robbed victims sought to steal from others." At least one Marine battalion commander, Lieutenant Colonel Gravel, complained about the "ARVN looting behind us."⁴⁴

More serious, from an American perspective, were reports that U.S. Marines were also involved in the looting. The Associated Press was supposed to have a photograph of an American soldier or Marine carrying a large painting under his arm. A Swiss newspaperman reported to MACV that he saw "numerous breaches of discipline which would not be tolerated in the Swiss Army." He claimed that a Marine tried to sell him a Longines watch and that he saw other Marines help themselves to photographic equipment from a partially destroyed store. The newspaper man came across another group of Marines near the Royal Palace manning a strongpoint, and "drinking whiskey, cognac, and beer, and cooking chickens." Moreover, he observed several Marines "amusing themselves by shooting at dogs, cats and chickens." A CORDS official told Ambassador Ellsworth Bunker that Marines vandalized the offices of the manager and deputy manager of the Hue power plant, alleging they took as well "whiskey, piasters, and dollars."⁴⁵

On 26 February, General Westmoreland ordered both Generals Abrams and Cushman to give their "personal attention" to this potentially explosive issue. In turn, General Cushman asked both the commanding generals of Task Force X-Ray, Brigadier General LaHue, and the 1st Marine Division, Major General Donn J. Robertson, to inform him of all measures taken by members of their commands to avoid such incidents: "Looting obviously cannot be tolerated, and we must insure that every step is taken to prevent it. Officers and NCOs must be held responsible for looting by their subordinates." For his part, General Abrams assigned the MACV (Forward) staff judge advocate to begin a formal investigation. At the same time, General Robertson sent an attorney from the 1st Division legal office, Captain Bernard A. Allen, to Hue to assist in the probe.⁴⁶

On 2 March 1968, General Abrams reported to Westmoreland the results of the investigation. He first disposed of the question of the Associated Press photograph. According to the AP Bureau heads in Vietnam, they knew of no such picture. They did remember a

photograph taken before Tet of a 1st Cavalry soldier carrying a religious painting of the Virgin Mary in a sector south of Da Nang. After interviewing all commanders, newsmen, and CORDS personnel, the investigators concluded that "probably some small articles were looted by the Marines . . . however, these reported incidents were in extreme contrast to extensive and systematic looting by ARVN troops and civilians." Captain Allen learned that ARVN troops employed trucks to carry away their booty. Colonel Khoa, the Thua Thien Province Chief, had received no formal complaints from South Vietnamese citizens against the Marines. General Abrams observed: "At this time, investigation has failed to produce sufficient evidence upon which to base prosecution for any instance of looting by U.S. personnel."^{47*}

Abrams generally commended the Marine commanders. He observed that Colonel Hughes of the 1st Marines very early took "positive measures to deter looting." On 4 February, Hughes told all officers and NCOs that "looting and pillage would not be tolerated." He directed that battalion and company commanders carry out periodic "shakedowns" of personnel. Many valuables were turned into the regimental CP and returned to the rightful owner. Hughes did authorize the commandeering and "cannibalization of vehicles as it became necessary to transport casualties."^{48**} He also ordered the shooting of dogs, cats, and pigs because the animals were "eating bodies, both of U.S. and [Vietnamese] . . . which could not be immediately retrieved because of the tactical situation." Lieutenant Colonel Cheatham stated that in the University his men used blankets and broke windows "to avoid fragmentation from incoming rounds." General Abrams concluded "Marine commanders appear to have taken reasonable measures to prevent looting and needless destruction."⁴⁸

Obviously in a fluid situation and close-quarter street fighting such as Hue, commanders did not have absolute control or know all of the activities of their men. One Marine lance corporal reported, "anything that was of any value we took . . . to keep for souvenirs and stuff." He mentioned random destruction caused by Marines in the University of microscopes and other

* Brigadier General Paul G. Graham, the former 1st Marine Divisions Operations Officer or G-3, commented that looting "was not a problem as far as the Division was concerned . . ." Graham Comments

** Peter Braestrup, the former *Washington Post* reporter commented that he remembered reading a sign "'Hotel Company Kicks Ass' . . . on a seized van, used to haul supplies." Peter Braestrup, Comments on draft, n.d. [Dec94-Jan95] (Vietnam Comment File).

laboratory equipment. The lance corporal was particularly amused by the troops seizing stray vehicles such as motor scooters, trucks, and even jeeps: "A grunt . . . would just jump on it and start riding it around the streets . . . that was pretty funny—right in the middle of this war riding up and down the streets in motor scooters and even a 1964 black Mercedes goes flying down the street filled up with a bunch of Marines in it." A Navy corpsman with the Marines recorded in his diary: "Looting is widespread. The ARVN's wait until the Marines secure an area and then move in to loot. The Marines do well for themselves also."⁴⁹

Although admitting to the validity of some of these accounts, Marine commanders in Hue believed that their men acted with general restraint considering all the temptations confronting them. Five years later, Lieutenant Colonel Gravel recalled, "we took things to our use; I wouldn't kid you about that. I saw some things and I saw that they were returned." He remembered: "We used bedding, we used food, we used alco-

hol that was there; but there was no looting to one's own advantage. There were a couple of attempts at it, but word got around and I daresay there was damned little, if any." In a similar vein, Lieutenant Colonel Cheatham and his company commanders made much the same case. At the Marine Corps Schools, in July 1973, Captain Meadows, the Company G commander, related: "We did take things for our use . . . blankets, food, water. We must have taken every candle in that side of the city for illumination for our own use at night. These things—you want to call it looting? O.K., we looted." Despite some admitted pilfering of small items such as watches and money, all of the company commanders denied there was any real problem. As Captain Meadows concluded: "Your troops don't have time to pick up big things to carry them around. They have other, more pressing things [to do]."⁵⁰

Some independent accounts supported the contention of the Marine commanders that their troops acted with reasonable forbearance in the city. The

Marine PFC James M. Jones from Company H, 2d Battalion, 5th Marines assists a Vietnamese child to climb out of a window of her house to escape the house-to-house fighting in the new city. Marines did what they could for the hapless civilian population caught up in the fighting.

Department of Defense (USMC) Photo A371127



Washington Post carried one story describing Marines holed up in a residence that obviously belonged to a wealthy man. The house contained a fully stocked liquor cabinet, furniture, television set, and various other furnishings. About 0700, as the Marines sat around eating their breakfast of cold C-Rations, the owner's servants arrived with a note asking permission to remove the household goods. It took four servants three round trips to carry out the items. The only things that were missing were the beer that the Marines had drunk and one broken bottle of Johnny Walker whisky. In another report, an American volunteer worker, who had been visiting Vietnamese friends in Hue when the offensive erupted, described his rescue by Marines from Company B, 1st Battalion, 5th Marines. His friends provided him with sanctuary in their house while the North Vietnamese held the city. As the fighting intensified, the "family heard soldiers firing nearby" and hid the American under one of the beds. According to the newspaper account, one Marine reached the side of the house and shouted: "Are there any VC in there?" The volunteer scrambled outside and identified himself. An unbelieving Captain Fernandez Jennings, Jr., the company commander, wondered aloud about the Marine asking if there were VC inside. When assured that was the case, Jennings muttered to himself, "It's a great war."⁵¹

The suddenness and the extent of the enemy offensive in Hue caught both the South Vietnamese and American commands offstride. At first underestimating the strength of the enemy in Hue, the allies sent too few troops to drive the attackers out. Although the South Vietnamese and U.S. commands in I Corps eventually deployed additional units piecemeal into the Citadel and the southern city and inserted the 3d Brigade, 1st Cavalry Division to the west, command and control and coordination remained a problem until the last weeks of the operation. In a sense, Task Force X-Ray, the 1st ARVN Division, and the 3d Brigade all fought their own battles in isolation from one another. Outside of General Cushman of III MAF and General Abrams, MACV (Forward), there was not even an overall American, let alone single commander of the Hue campaign. Both Cushman and

Abrams were at too high a level and distracted by Khe Sanh to focus much of their attention, except periodically, to the Hue situation. From his headquarters at the *Mang Ca* compound, General Truong, the 1st ARVN Division commander, did control the South Vietnamese effort in the Citadel. Major Talman C. Budd II, the U.S. Marine advisor to the Vietnamese Marine Task Force A, observed, however, that the lack of an overall commander resulted in no general battle plan and competition for supporting fires, air, and logistic support. A Task Force X-Ray staff officer sardonically remarked that by the time Army Brigadier General Davis of the 1st Cavalry Division became the Hue coordinator, "he didn't have anything to coordinate, but he had the name." The command relationships in northern I Corps under MACV (Forward) were tenuous at best.^{52*}

With the date approaching for the end of his stay at Phu Bai in early March, General Abrams provided General Westmoreland his assessment of the enemy situation in the north. Abrams was less concerned about Khe Sanh, but worried about the NVA using the A Shau Valley and Route 547 leading from the valley to "turn our flank." He also expressed some anxiety about the recent move of the 803d NVA Regiment into the Hue vicinity. Abrams stated that and the "continuing movement of [NVA] replacements to coastal plains supports my belief that Hue is the objective he [the enemy] would most like to have." The MACV [Forward] commander acknowledged, however, that the NVA might "settle for an objective of less importance should the opportunity present itself." He believed both sides were fighting for time and that "both sides require time to overcome manpower and logistical deficiencies." In the long run, however, he believed that time was on the allied side. General Cushman and General Westmoreland concurred in Abrams assessment. All three American commanders believed that the recapture of Hue was only a lull before the North Vietnamese launched another wave of attacks.⁵³

*See Chapter 13 for further discussion of command relations in northern I Corps.

PART III
AFTER TET,
KHE SANH,
AND MINI-TET

CHAPTER 13

Post-Tet in I Corps

*The Immediate Ramifications of the Tet Offensive—Readjustment in I Corps
Readjustments in the U.S. I Corps Command Structure—Planning for the Future
March Operations in the DMZ Sector—March Operations in the Rest of I Corps—Regaining the Initiative*

The Immediate Ramifications of the Tet Offensive

By the end of February and the beginning of March with the securing of the city of Hue, the enemy's countrywide Tet offensive had about shot its initial bolt. According to American estimates, the Communists lost about half of their attacking force, more than 40,000 from an estimated 84,000 men. In I Corps alone, from January through March 1968, Lieutenant General Robert Cushman, the III MAF Commander, later calculated that allied forces killed over 30,000 of the enemy, the equivalent of 74 infantry battalions.^{1*}

The Communist command, itself, admitted to several shortcomings. As early as 1 February 1968, the Central Office of South Vietnam, the Viet Cong governing body, issued a circular to its subordinate commands. According to the Communist leadership, "we failed to seize a number of primary objectives and to completely destroy mobile and defensive units of the enemy." The memorandum blamed the Viet Cong military forces for failure "to hold the occupied areas," and, moreover, held the political cadre accountable for not motivating the "people to stage uprisings and break the enemy oppressive control." In *Military Region 5*, which included both Quang Ngai City and Da Nang, the Communist headquarters conceded that its troops and cadre within the cities were not strong enough to assist the main force units outside of the cities. In an official history, the Communist author acknowledged that the Viet Cong and North Vietnamese attacking units "did not meet the basic requirements that had been set forth." Contrary to the enemy expectations, the South Vietnamese Army had not disintegrated and in many sectors acquitted itself reasonably well, especially on the defensive.²

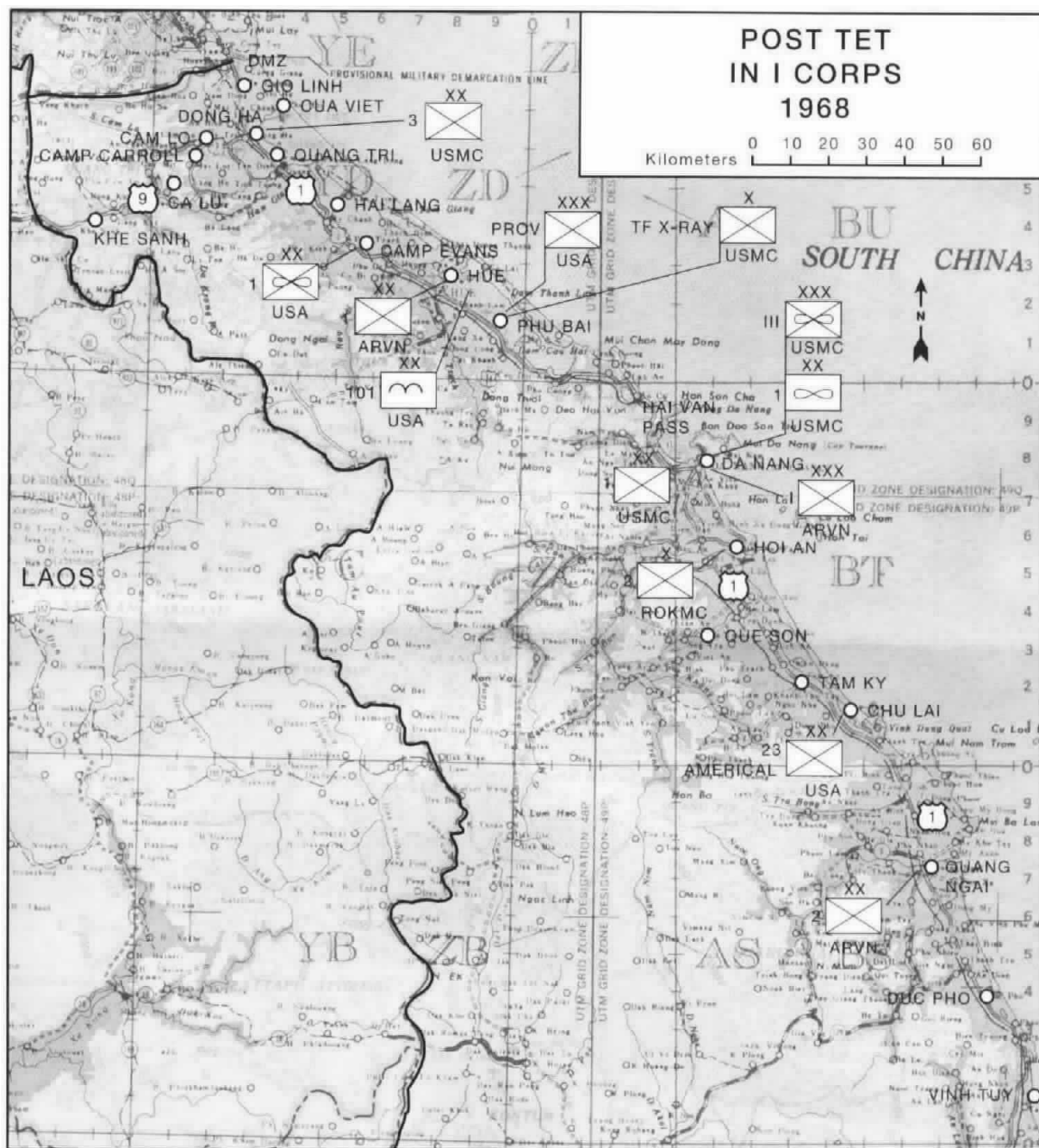
Still the tenor of the Communist communiques was one of defiance. They all claimed the achievement of

great victories and made references to final victory for their cause. At the same time, however, the enemy leadership warned their supporters: "Our people's struggle has stepped into an extremely tense and fierce phase and is developing very rapidly." They no longer spoke of a short-term campaign, but that "the General Offensive and General Uprising will not last for only a few days, but that it is a phase of a general attack against the enemy." One phase was over and another was to begin.³

The American military was also examining the consequences of the enemy's offensive. While confident that Tet was a major military defeat for the Communists, U.S. commanders were well aware of the cost to their side. Allied casualties during the fighting totaled in excess of 12,000, with about two-thirds suffered by the ARVN. The battle of Hue was a near thing, especially in the first few days. While expecting an attack, especially in the north around Khe Sanh or possibly the DMZ, General Westmoreland and the MACV staff had underestimated the breadth and extent of the enemy general offensive. Some 600,000 civilians were now refugees, about 100,000 in I Corps alone. The pacification effort had sustained a major setback. In mid-February, Marine Brigadier General John R. Chaisson, the director of the MACV Combat Operations Center, observed in a letter home, "the damage in the cities and to the economy is staggering. ARVN will be somewhat less than effective for weeks." He then wrote, however, "... there is a general tightening up of everything, and if the guys on top don't panic this could be the turning point of the war—even though he [the enemy] initiated it for us." Chaisson expressed the sentiments of many of the MACV commanders including both Generals Westmoreland and Cushman.⁴

In Washington, the Johnson administration also began its reevaluation of the Vietnam War in light of the enemy offensive. Other factors also clouded the situation. On 23 January, North Korean gunboats captured the U.S. intelligence ship, *USS Pueblo* (AGER-2),

*Cushman's statistics include figures before and after Tet and, therefore, give a somewhat distorted picture of the enemy's Tet casualties. It, nevertheless, is indicative of the intensity of the fighting in the I Corps sector during the Tet period and of the enemy's losses.



off the Korean coast and took the officers and crew prisoner.* In response, the administration called up 14,000

*The North Koreans claimed territorial waters off their coast up to 20 miles, while the U.S. only recognized Korean territorial waters of 3 miles. According to the official inquiry the *Pueblo* was boarded approximately 15 miles off the Korean coast. CinCPacFlt, Findings of Fact, Opinion, etc. of Court of Inquiry, Case of *Pueblo* (AGER-2), n.d., *Pueblo* File, Post 1Jan46 Comd File (OAB, NHD). See also Center of Naval History, Comments on draft, dtd Dec94 (Vietnam Comment File) and VAdm Edwin B. Hooper, *Mobility, Support, Endurance, A Story*

Navy and Air Force Reserves, so as not to divert any active forces from the Southeast Asia battlefield. Continued domestic opposition to the war, often led by influential members of his own party, also served to distract the President's attention. Although forewarned about a possible enemy offensive, "it was more massive," than President Johnson, like Westmoreland, "had anticipated."⁵

⁵ *of Naval Operational Logistics in the Vietnam War, 1965-1968* (Washington: Naval Historical Division, 1972), p. 219.

If possible, the mood in Washington was grimmer than that in Saigon. While the President rejected proposals by the Joint Chiefs to intensify the air war over Haiphong and Hanoi, he was willing to rush ground reinforcements, if necessary, to prevent the fall of the Marine base at Khe Sanh. On 3 February, at the behest of the President, the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs, General Earle G. Wheeler, asked Westmoreland, "if there is any reinforcement or help that we can give you." In reply, Westmoreland only requested another squadron of C-130 cargo aircraft and air-drop equipment. At the same time, Westmoreland asked his staff to make a study of the long-range requirements. At this point, Wheeler rather tartly observed that the long-range could wait, "we can handle only one major problem at a time." The Chairman emphasized that the Joint Chiefs and the President were concerned about Westmoreland's "immediate requirements stemming from the present situation in Vietnam." In another cable, Wheeler warned the MACV commander: "The United States Government is not prepared to accept a defeat in South Vietnam. In summary, if you need more troops, ask for them."⁶

These exchange of messages between Westmoreland and Wheeler developed into a strange colloquy in which the Chairman eventually maneuvered Westmoreland into requesting significant additional forces which would require a callup of the Reserves. On 12 February, at a meeting at the White House, however, President Johnson delayed his final decision, but approved the immediate deployment of a brigade of the U.S. Army 82d Airborne Division and the 27th Marines to Vietnam. Both the Army Brigade and the Marine regiment were to reinforce General Cushman's forces in I Corps.^{7*}

Readjustment in I Corps

By the end of February, the reinforcements for I Corps were in place or on their way. On 10 and 12 February, the 1st Battalion, 27th Marines, commanded by Lieutenant Colonel John E. Greenwood, at Hawaii embarked on board three Navy ships, the USS *Vancouver* (LPD 2), the USS *Bexar* (APA 237), and the *Washburn* (AKA 108). Originally scheduled to participate in two landing exercises on Okinawa, the newly formed BLT received a change of orders while at sea on 13 February, as a result of the President's decision, to

proceed to Da Nang. Between 14 and 21 February, the rest of RLT (Regimental Landing Team) 27 deployed by sea and air from Camp Pendleton, California to Da Nang. U.S. Air Force Military Airlift Command planes flew more than 3,300 men of the regiment together with 1,196 short tons of their equipment from California to Vietnam. By 17 February, the 27th Marines headquarters, under Colonel Adolph G. Schwenk, Jr., together with those of BLTs 2/27, commanded by Lieutenant Colonel Louis J. Bacher, and 3/27, under Lieutenant Colonel Tullis J. Woodham, Jr., opened their command posts at the Da Nang base. The forces arriving as part of RLT 27 also included personnel from the artillery battalion, 2d Battalion, 13th Marines, under the command of Lieutenant Colonel Rhys J. Phillips, Jr. On 21 February, the USS *Thomaston* (LSD 28) departed San Diego with the surface elements of the RLT, some 200 personnel and over 5,000 tons of equipment for Vietnam. By the end of the month, the 1st Battalion had joined the other two battalions of the regiment at Da Nang. General Cushman later declared that he had not known the 27th Marines was available and that he had not requested them, but that they arrived in "response to overall requirements set by Westmoreland." As the 1st Marine Division assistant division commander and Task Force X-Ray commander, Brigadier General Foster C. LaHue, remembered, however, III MAF was "happy to get them [RLT 27]."⁸

Throughout this period, General Westmoreland continued to deploy U.S. Army units north. From mid-January through the end of February, MACV reinforced III MAF with over 20,000 Army troops in I Corps, including support units. The combat forces included the 1st Air Cavalry Division headquarters and two brigades, two brigades of the 101st Airborne Division, and the 3d Brigade of the 82d Airborne Division, which, like the 27th Marines, had just arrived in Vietnam from the United States. First located at Chu Lai in Quang Tin Province under the Americal Division, elements of the 82d Airborne brigade then joined the 1st Marine Division Task Force X-Ray in the Phu Bai Vital Area in Thua Thien Province.⁹

By the end of February, III MAF numbered nearly 129,000 officers and men, an increase of nearly 12,000 over the previous month. These figures included over 82,000 Marines and nearly 45,000 U.S. Army personnel. In Quang Tri Province, encompassing U.S. units at Khe Sanh, the DMZ sector, and south of Quang Tri City, there were 16 maneuver battalions (infantry, amphibian tractor, and tank), 13 Marine and 3 Army.

* Chapter 27 will go into further detail on the manpower decisions of February 1968 and the question about the activation of the Reserves.

Sixteen battalions, 12 Army and 4 Marine, operated in Thua Thien Province. Seven Marine battalions, including the 3d Amphibian Tractor battalion, stayed in the Da Nang area of operations while five Army battalions from the U.S. Army Americal Division continued Operation Wheeler/Wallowa in the Nui Loc Son sector. Of the remaining eight battalions of the Americal, four were at Chu Lai and the rest split between Quang Ngai and Duc Pho.¹⁰

With the possible exception of the Khe Sanh sector and continuing harassment of Marine positions along the eastern DMZ, by the end of the month, the enemy tempo of operations throughout I Corps had diminished. Even along the DMZ, the intensity of the NVA attacks no longer matched those at the beginning of February. In fact, the number of ground assaults in February actually declined while the NVA confined most of its activity to artillery, rocket, and mortar bombardment. Taking advantage of the apparent lull in the North Vietnamese and Viet Cong Tet offensive, the American commanders continued to make adjustments and to take the fight to the enemy throughout the I Corps sector.¹¹

In southern I Corps, the Americal Division continued with Operation Muscatine in Quang Ngai Province. For the most part, the Army units experienced relatively light contact except for two significant clashes with a VC battalion. In the first, on 12 February, Americal Task Force Barker conducted a combined operation with the 2d ARVN Division and engaged in a five-hour firefight. The Americal task force reported killing 78 of the enemy with the loss of 1 U.S. soldier. Eleven days later, on the 23d, Company A, 3d Battalion, 1st Infantry apparently encountered the same enemy unit with almost the same results. The Americans claimed to have killed 68 of the enemy at a cost of the lives of 2 U.S. soldiers. For the entire month, the Americal Division in the operation killed over 270 of the enemy and sustained casualties of 13 killed and 124 wounded. The division also reported recovering 35 individual enemy weapons and accidentally killing 8 innocent civilians caught in the crossfire between American and VC units.¹²

Further north, in the Wheeler/Wallowa area of operations, the Americal Division also accounted for a significant number of enemy casualties. On 9 February, in the Que Son Valley, elements of the division engaged a battalion of the 29th NVA Regiment. In little over seven hours, the American soldiers killed more than 200 of the enemy and recovered 53 individual and 13 crew-served weapons. Near the end of the month,

1st Squadron, 1st Cavalry and a troop of the 7th Squadron, 17th Cavalry ran into another fairly large Communist unit and accounted for 148 enemy dead and recovered 32 individual and 9 crew-served weapons. For the month, the Army units in the operation sustained casualties of 98 dead and 455 wounded while in turn killing nearly 1,200 of the enemy, taking 24 prisoners, and recovering 274 individual and 37 crew-served weapons. The division acknowledged that 92 "innocent civilians" also inadvertently met their death as a result of the operation. Despite the two battalion-sized actions, Operation Wheeler/Wallowa mostly involved numerous contacts between American and NVA/VC small-unit patrols.¹³

The war in the 1st Marine Division Da Nang area of operations, especially after the repulse of the 2d NVA Division's offensive in the second week of February, also reverted to a small-unit war. For the Marine units in the TAOR it was a period of retrenchment and readjustment. By the end of the month, the newly arrived 27th Marines took over the sectors formerly held by the 3d Battalion, 5th Marines and the 2d Battalion, 3d Marines. Lieutenant Colonel Bacher, the commander of the 2d Battalion, 27th Marines, remembered that when he arrived he was met by a

A Marine combat engineer carefully disarms a booby-trapped 105mm artillery round south of Da Nang.

Abel Collection





Department of Defense (USMC) Photo A708081

Mines and explosive devices were among the greatest dangers to Marines at Da Nang. Two members of Company C, 1st Battalion, 7th Marines administer to a fallen comrade who had just tripped a "surprise explosive device."

lieutenant colonel from III MAF who took him to headquarters, "where I was given orders to report to the 1st Marine Division." At the same time, "troops and equipment of 2/27 were being trucked southwest of Da Nang to the CP [command post] of the 3d Battalion, 5th Marines." After about three or four days, the 3d Battalion departed for Phu Bai and "2/27 assumed the mission and TAOR" of the latter battalion. The 3d Battalion, 27th Marines relieved the 2d Battalion, 3d Marines which also left for Phu Bai. Lieutenant Colonel Woodham, the 3d Battalion commander, recalled that his unit's main responsibility was the patrolling of the Rocket Belt.¹⁴

The 7th Marines and the Korean Marine Brigade remained responsible for the southern and western area of operations, including An Hoa. At An Hoa, Colonel Ross R. Miner, the 7th Marines commander, later remarked that his 3d Battalion there was "barely keeping its head above water." The enemy had closed the

land lines of communication and resupply could be carried out only by air.¹⁵

Indicative of the demoralizing characteristic of the 1st Division war in the Da Nang TAOR, nearly 54 percent of all division casualties in February were as a result of mines and explosive devices. Lieutenant Colonel Woodham later observed his area of operations contained "the highest saturation of mines and booby traps in the history of land warfare."^{16*}

*It must be remembered that the percentage figure above relates to all 1st Marine Division casualties, not only those at Da Nang. For February 1968, the 1st Marine Division suffered a total of 369 KIA and 2,400 wounded. Of that total, 142 of the dead and 1,100 of the wounded were sustained by TF X-Ray in the battle for Hue City. Mine warfare and explosive devices played only a small role in that battle. It would be safe to assume then that the percentage of 1st Marine Division casualties at Da Nang as a result of enemy mines would be even higher than the 54 percent quoted above. 1st MarDiv ComdC, Feb68, p. 7. See also Chapter 12.

With the securing of Hue in late February, Task Force X-Ray at Phu Bai prepared to take the offensive to open Route 1 between Da Nang and Phu Bai, which had been closed since Tet. On 26 February, Colonel Robert D. Bohn's 5th Marines began Operation Houston in the Phu Loc and Hai Van Pass sectors. To carry out the operation, Bohn received the two battalions from Da Nang relieved by the 27th Marines, his 3d Battalion and the 2d Battalion, 3d Marines.* In addition, Brigadier General LaHue, the Task Force X-Ray commander, provided the 5th Marines with operational control over three U.S. Army battalions, the 1st and 3d Battalions, 327th Infantry and the 2d Battalion, 502d Infantry.¹⁷

While the infantry provided security in Operation Houston, Seabees, Marine engineers, and the U.S. Army 35th Engineer Battalion worked on the repairs of Route 1 and its bridges and culverts. According to Marine reports, the VC and NVA during the Tet offensive had damaged or destroyed 20 bridges and 26 culverts along Route 1, largely between Hai Van Pass and Phu Bai. Oddly enough, the enemy pioneers and demolition teams caused relatively little damage in the Hai Van Pass itself, where Route 1 was most vulnerable. On 29 February, the engineers completed the repair work on the final section of Route 1 between Hai Van Pass and Phu Loc. Technically Route 1 was now open throughout the entire length of I Corps. III MAF, nevertheless, postponed the first road convoy from Da Nang to Phu Bai until March.¹⁸

With the end of Operation Hue City in sight, General LaHue planned to use the 1st Marines to operate along the area northeast of Phu Bai in order to secure the water route of communication from the mouth of the Perfume River to Hue City. Although the NVA and Viet Cong during the battle for the city, occasionally harassed river traffic along the Perfume River, they never succeeded in cutting this vital logistic lifeline for the allied forces in the city and at Phu Bai. On 12 February, Task Force X-Ray had taken over from the 3d Marine Division the responsibility for the protection of the Naval Support Activity at the Col Co/Tan My LST ramp at the mouth of the Perfume River. From the LST ramp, supplies were either transported by truck to Phu Bai or loaded on board LCUs and smaller river craft for delivery at the LCU Ramp in Hue City. During the month of February, enemy

gunners struck 44 of the smaller naval craft and destroyed two LCUs.¹⁹

With the closing of Route 1 during much of February and the continuing arrival of Army units in Thua Thien and Quang Tri Provinces, resupply by sea became even more critical. One Marine staff officer later remembered that when the 1st Air Cavalry and the 101st Airborne units first deployed north, "it was touch and go." Fortunately, the Army's 1st Logistical Command together with III MAF and a Navy pontoon causeway unit had already made preparations for the development of a logistic over-the-shore facility along the coast running parallel to Hai Lang in southern Quang Tri Province. Army logistic planners estimated that the Army forces would require, "3,600 tons of supplies daily in an area where existing supply lines were just barely able to keep up with requirements." While work began in February, the new logistical facility, called Wunder Beach, did not become fully operational until mid-March.²⁰

During February, the 1st Air Cavalry Division continued Operation Jeb Stuart in northern Thua Thien and southern Quang Tri Provinces. While operating to some extent in enemy *Base Areas 114* and *101*, the division confined most of its activity to the battle for Hue City, the establishment of Camp Evans, and the buildup of its forces near Quang Tri City at Hai Lang.** Indicative of the growing influence of the Army in this sector, the 1st Air Cavalry took over more of the 3d Marine Division area of operations. On 16 February, the Cavalry's 1st Brigade assumed operational control of the 1st Battalion, 3d Marines and responsibility for the 3d Marines' former Osceola II tactical area near Quang Tri. While the 3d Marines, with only rear echelon troops attached to it, still remained accountable for the interior defense of the new Quang Tri base and airfield, the Army's 1st Brigade now provided the protection to the approaches for both the Marine base and the new Army bases at Hai Lang and Wunder Beach.²¹

**During the month, the 1st Air Cavalry consisted of its 1st Brigade at Hai Lang; the 2d Brigade, 101st Airborne Division at Camp Evans; and its 3d Brigade taking part in the battle for Hue, although still nominally part of Operation Jeb Stuart. The division's participation in the battle for Hue, which was included in its overall statistics for Jeb Stuart, accounted for nearly half of the 1st Cavalry's 1,167 casualties for the month as well the reportedly 2,000 losses it inflicted on the enemy for the month. The 1st Air Cavalry's 2d Brigade was slated to relieve the 101st Airborne's 2d Brigade at Camp Evans in March. III MAF ComdC, Feb68; Waldron and Beavers, "The Critical Year, 1968," pp. 19-20. See also Chapter 12.

*The other two battalions of the 5th Marines, the 1st and 2d Battalions, were attached to the 1st Marines in Operation Hue City. See Chapter 12.



Photo is from the Abel Collection

A Navy LCU (landing craft, utility) arrives at the Dong Ha LCU ramp laden with drums of asphalt. Although the NVA made some attempts to close the Cua Viet, the Navy had established Task Force Clearwater to convoy river traffic from the coast to Dong Ha.

Another reason for the relief of the 3d Marines at Quang Tri was to free the regiment to assume control over the ground operations to safeguard the vital Cua Viet water passageway to Dong Ha. With the interdiction of much of Route 1 during and after Tet, the lifeline of the Marine forces in the north depended more and more upon the sea and to a somewhat lesser extent upon air resupply. During February, III MAF sent by ship from Da Nang to Dong Ha over 45,700 short tons of material as compared to 342 tons arriving at Dong Ha by air. With the disruption of the land lines of communication and the occasional enemy interdiction of the Cua Viet, the 3d Marine Division reported that the "division's [supply] requirement fell short." The division especially lacked communications equipment and repair parts. In order to meet the division's needs, III MAF limited shipment to those supplies considered

"combat essential."* With the approval of MACV, General Cushman also curtailed the shipment of "Dye-marker" material and halted all construction work on the barrier. Still Major General Rathvon McC. Tompkins, the 3d Marine Division commander, recalled that in mid-February at a very critical juncture, the division received for three days large "shipments of cement and culverts from Da Nang." According to Tompkins, he sent an angry message to III MAF to "delay the culverts and cement in favor of food and ammunition."²²

* Lieutenant Colonel Otto Lehrack, who as a captain commanded Company I, 3d Battalion, 3d Marines, commented that during this period resupply was difficult for the Marines of his battalion: "We took helmets, flak jackets and boots off our dead. I knew a Marine in Graves Registration who was my only reliable source for compasses." LtCol Otto Lehrack, Comments on draft, dtd 19Nov94 (Vietnam Comment File), hereafter Lehrack Comments.

Despite certain “snafus” such as the unwanted cement, the American command quickly took steps to ensure the logistic support to its forces in the north. In the Cua Viet sector, on 24 February, the Navy established Task Force Clearwater under III MAF to coordinate river traffic and convoys of Navy craft from the Cua Viet facility to Dong Ha.* During the month, enemy gunners killed 7 sailors, wounded 47 more, and damaged 27 Navy vessels. On 27 February, for example, an enemy B-40 rocket-propelled grenade struck an LCU on the Cua Viet laden with explosives resulting in the disabling of both the LCU and an escort patrol boat. Most of the convoyed vessels, however, completed the trip without incident.²³

The 3d Marine Division also took measures to safeguard the Cua Viet and attempt to keep North Vietnamese regulars and VC main force units out of the northeastern quadrant of Quang Tri Province above the Cua Viet. On 29 February, Major General Tompkins combined the two operations in the sector, Operation Napoleon and Operation Saline into one operation, Operation Napoleon/Saline under the control of the 3d Marines. Colonel Milton A. Hull, who had assumed command of the 3d Marines on 18 February from Colonel Joseph E. Lo Prete, moved his command post on the 29th, from the Quang Tri airfield to the Cua Viet facility and collocated it with the 1st Amphibian Tractor Battalion.²⁴

While Lieutenant Colonel Edward R. Toner, the commander of the 1st Amphibian Tractor Battalion, during February nominally had operational control of both Operations Napoleon and Saline, his concerns were mainly with the activities of his own battalion. In February, during Operation Napoleon, the amphibian tractor battalion, with one attached rifle company, limited itself to patrols generally around the Cua Viet Naval Facility at the mouth of the river. While ground contact remained light, the enemy subjected the base to heavy incoming rocket and artillery fire and continued efforts to interdict

the river with uneven results. For the month in Operation Napoleon, the Marines sustained casualties of 4 dead and 30 wounded while accounting for 79 of the enemy.²⁵

The SLF Bravo battalion, BLT 3/1, under Lieutenant Colonel Max McQuown, in Operation Saline, operating for the most part above, but occasionally below, the Cua Viet, on the other hand, continued to encounter elements of the *803d NVA Regiment*.** In February, the battalion killed over 270 of the enemy, took 18 prisoners, and recovered 72 individual and 35 crew-served enemy weapons. According to both Marine and ARVN sources, since 29 January, the allies had killed 1,000 enemy troops in the Cua Viet region and had prevented an attack on Dong Ha.²⁶

While the watch on the Cua Viet remained somewhat tenuous, the enemy forces continued to mount pressure on Khe Sanh and still posed a threat to the Marine positions south of the DMZ in Operations Kentucky and Lancaster II.*** As one 3d Marine Division staff officer remarked, the NVA in the border region, “always had someone pressing us somewhere.” In the 4th Marines Operation Lancaster II, after an ambush of a convoy near Camp Carroll on Route 9 in early February and a company engagement near Ca Lu, the North Vietnamese forces largely limited themselves to artillery and mortar bombardments of Marine positions. On 28 February, a NVA antiaircraft gun shot down a Marine CH-46 not far from Ca Lu resulting in the death of 22 Marines. For the month

*Task Force Clearwater consisted of 20 river patrol boats (PBRs), reinforced with monitors, armored river craft, PACVs (Patrol Air Cushioned Vehicles), landing craft, and minesweepers. The Task Force was responsible not only for the Cua Viet, but also the Perfume River further south which provided access to the sea for the city of Hue. It maintained its headquarters at Mobile Base II, a floating barge complex, located first at Tan My and then moved north to the Cua Viet. Edward J. Marolda, *By Sea, Air, and Land, An Illustrated History of the U.S. Navy and the War in Southeast Asia* (Washington: Naval Historical Center, 1994), p. 188. See also Chapter 28.

**See Chapter 7 for description of the BLT's activities during late January and early February in Operation Badger Catch/Saline. In the final stages of the battle of Hue, the South Vietnamese Marines captured North Vietnamese troops from the *803d NVA Regiment*. See Chapter 12. Colonel Max McQuown, the then BLT commander, later recalled two significant operations south of the Cua Viet. In the first case, the BLT attached reconnaissance platoon, operating south of the river, sighted NVA formations. Employing LVTs and LCUs to cross the river, the rest of the battalion supported by tanks surrounded the NVA in a village. With the tanks lighting up the area with their Xenon lights and after an artillery and mortar bombardment, McQuown launched a night attack and secured the hamlet. While the battalion remained south of the river, the reconnaissance platoon spotted another group of NVA in a neighboring village and the battalion secured this hamlet as well. Before the BLT returned to its base area north of the river, the Marines searched another village and collected a large number of young males in civilian clothes. Suspecting they were North Vietnamese, the Marines turned them over to the South Vietnamese. Col Max McQuown, Comments on draft, dtd 22Nov94 (Vietnam Comment File), hereafter McQuown Comments.

***See Chapter 14 for description of operations at Khe Sanh and Chapter 7 for Operations Kentucky and Lancaster II in early February.



Top is Department of Defense (USMC) Photo A801311 and bottom is Department of Defense (USMC) Photo A650034
Top, Marines from BLT 2/4 taking part in Operation Lancaster II exchange fire under smoke cover across an open field with North Vietnamese troops about 2,000 meters north of Camp Carroll. Below, Marines from the same battalion and operation rush across open ground with two of the troops carrying 3.5-inch rockets.





Photo is from the Abel Collection

A Marine M48 tank from the 3d Tank Battalion rumbles past a battle-damaged church just east of Con Thien. Marines from Con Thien outpost had spotted three North Vietnamese tanks north of their position in North Vietnam.

in Operation Lancaster II, the Marines reported killing 85 of the enemy and sustained casualties of 58 dead and 321 wounded.²⁷

In the 9th Marines sector in the Kentucky area of operations, the Marines confirmed the presence of the 320th NVA Division which had replaced the 324B Division in the DMZ war. The North Vietnamese maintained a screening force south of the DMZ and the Marine outpost at Con Thien, on 16 February, observed three North Vietnamese tanks north of their position and called in air. According to Marine reports, the North Vietnamese had two armored regiments, the 202d and 203d NVA, each with 80 tanks (40 T-34s and 40 PT76s). Although not knowing the location of the two armored regiments, American intelligence acknowledged the capability of the enemy to use tanks in areas where he could secretly mass his forces "and overrun friendly outposts with little opposition." The Marines prepared anti-mechanized plans.²⁸

For the most part, the ground action in Kentucky slackened after the first two weeks of February. In one of the sharpest encounters, however, on 16 February, a 3d Battalion, 3d Marines two-company sweep of the

southern DMZ encountered NVA infantrymen in bunkers, but no tanks. With the assistance of air, the Marines killed approximately 20 of the enemy at the cost of 4 Marine dead and 6 wounded.* While the enemy mounted no major offensive against Marine positions in Kentucky during the latter part of the month, the NVA continued to deploy forces in and through the DMZ.²⁹

As in the Lancaster area of operations, the enemy intensified his artillery, rocket, and mortar shelling of Marine positions and base areas in the Kentucky area. In one of the more spectacular instances, on 26 February, the North Vietnamese gunners fired some 400 artillery and mortar rounds and scored direct hits on the Dong Ha airfield and the Force Logistic Support Group Bravo complex located there. While casualties were relatively low, one dead and several wounded, material damage was heavy. The shelling destroyed two light Army observation aircraft, an

*Lieutenant Colonel Otto Lehrack observed that his Company I was the only one of the two companies involved that had contact in this particular action. He remembered that the contact took place in the northern sector of a prime enemy infiltration route. Lehrack Comments.



Photo is from the 3d MarDiv ComdC, Feb68

An officers' quarters in the 3d Marine Division command post sector at Dong Ha has been completely demolished by a direct hit from a North Vietnamese 122mm rocket.

ammunition storage dump, and 20,000 gallons of diesel fuel. In Kentucky during the month, the Marines sustained casualties of 89 dead and 267 wounded. During the same period, they reported killing nearly 400 of the enemy and capturing 39 prisoners.

While the bombardment of the Dong Ha base exposed its vulnerability to enemy weaponry, some relief of the logistic situation for the allied forces in the north was in sight. The new Quang Tri base, which was for the most part out of enemy artillery range except for mortars and the occasional rocket, was about half completed and could begin to share part of the logistic burden. By the end of the month, the remaining 3d Marine Division rear echelon forces still at Phu Bai prepared to shift their operations to Quang Tri. At the same time, FLSG Bravo at Dong Ha moved some of its equipment and ammunition still in exposed storage sites to the Quang Tri base. The new Wunder Beach facility also was nearing completion. While the North Vietnamese forced the allies to convoy naval craft along both the Cua Viet

and Perfume Rivers, the supplies were getting through. As the III MAF commander, Lieutenant General Cushman, five months later explained, "with the increased forces in Northern I Corps and logistic support problems . . . , we had to move cautiously until our logistics pipeline was capable of supporting a bold and aggressive campaign throughout ICTZ."³⁰

Readjustments in the U.S. I Corps Command Structure

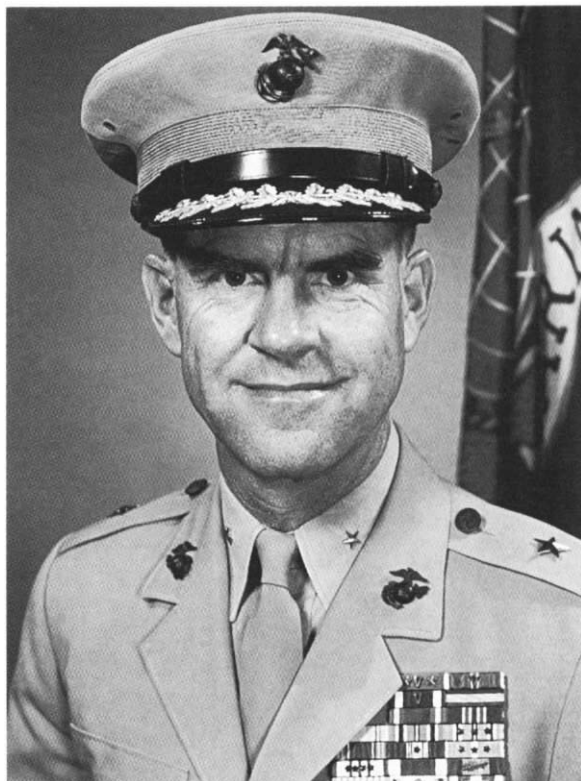
With the arrival of Army forces in northern I Corps, MACV and III MAF continued to readjust the command structure in the north. From the beginning of the year, General Westmoreland had his doubts about the capability of the III MAF and Marine division staffs to control the expanding war in the north.* In early January, he convinced the new Marine Corps Commandant, General Leonard F. Chapman, who was on a visit to Vietnam, that both the 1st and 3d Marine

*See chapter 1 for the discussion of Westmoreland's doubts about the Marine Corps command structure.

Divisions required an additional brigadier general assistant division commander. According to the MACV commander, the "wide dispersion" of division units dictated that the Marine Corps adopt the Army practice of two assistant division commanders "for most effective command and control." General Chapman concurred as did Admiral Sharp, the Pacific theater commander. By mid-January, the Defense Department authorized each of the Marine divisions two assistant division commanders.³¹

With the new authorization, General Chapman immediately set out to fill the new billets. On 19 January, he informed both MACV and Lieutenant General Krulak, the FMFPac commander, that he had ordered Brigadier General Jacob Glick, the former commander of the 9th Marine Amphibious Brigade

Right, BGen Jacob E. Glick, here in an official portrait, relieved BGen Louis Metzger, who was about to be promoted to major general, as Assistant Division Commander of the 3d Marine Division. Below, from left, MajGen Rathvon McC. Tompkins, the 3d Division commander; Gen Leonard F. Chapman, Commandant of the Marine Corps; MajGen Metzger; and LtGen Robert E. Cushman, CG, III MAF, hold the two-star flag of newly promoted MajGen Metzger.



Department of Defense (USMC) Photo A419340

3d MarDiv ComdC, Jan68



on Okinawa, to Vietnam as the second assistant division commander (ADC) for the 3d Marine Division. Chapman was "searching for another brig gen for 1st MarDiv and will send him earliest."³²

Actually Brigadier General Glick relieved Brigadier General Louis Metzger, whose tour of duty was about to end. Metzger had controlled the 3d Marine Division (Fwd) headquarters at Dong Ha until Major General Tompkins had moved his command post there from Phu Bai.* Tompkins wanted Glick back at the division rear at Phu Bai to supervise the transfer from Phu Bai to the new 3d Division rear base at Quang Tri. The enemy's Tet offensive, however, delayed the move and through February General Glick shared space with Brigadier General Foster C. LaHue's 1st Marine Division Task Force X-Ray headquarters at Phu Bai. According to Glick, he looked after the logistic support forces there while LaHue controlled operations.³³

Brigadier General Carl W. Hoffman, who arrived in Vietnam a few days after Glick, in fact, became the second assistant division commander of the 3d Marine Division. With the greater emphasis upon the 3d Division area of operations which included the DMZ and Khe Sanh, General Cushman delayed until February appointing a second assistant division commander to the 1st Marine Division. Indeed, when General Hoffman, who had just served as Military Secretary to the Marine Corps Commandant, landed at the Da Nang Air Base, Cushman first thought to place him temporarily in a special III MAF billet. According to the III MAF commander, he considered establishing a "III MAF War Room (Fwd) at Dong Ha" and making Hoffman his personal representative to the 3d Marine Division. General Westmoreland's decision to create the new MACV (Forward) headquarters** at Phu Bai under his deputy, General Abrams, made the idea of a forward III MAF headquarters superfluous. Brigadier General Hoffman joined General Tompkins at Dong Ha as the 3d Marine Division ADC for operations.³⁴

By this time, it was clear that III MAF was to become truly a joint command rather than basically a Marine Corps headquarters. As General Hoffman several years later remembered, "at that time we realized that the United States Army was moving to the north in earnest." In mid-January, General West-



Department of Defense (USMC) Photo A414846
BGen Carl W. Hoffman became the Assistant Division Commander (ADC) of the 3d Marine Division for operations. The 3d Marine Division now had two ADCs.

moreland assigned Army Brigadier General Salve H. Matheson, the former commander of the 1st Brigade, 101st Airborne Division, to Lieutenant General Cushman's staff as Deputy Commander, Army. In a reclama, the III MAF commander asked Westmoreland for permission to change Matheson's designation to "Deputy for Army Matters." As General Cushman explained, Marine Major General Raymond L. Murray was already Deputy Commander for all U.S. forces in III MAF. Cushman wanted to use Matheson as a "point of contact for major Army commanders" and as an advisor to the III MAF command as to "Army capabilities in both the operational and logistical fields." Westmoreland agreed to the change, but stated that in the meantime that Matheson would temporarily be made the J-3 or operations officer for the new MACV (Forward) headquarters at Phu Bai.³⁵

From the Marine perspective, the activation of the MACV (Forward) headquarters at Phu Bai did nothing to ease the command relationships in the north. If anything, it added to the problem by laying an inter-

* See Chapter 3 for the move of the 3d Marine Division headquarters north to Dong Ha in January.

** See Chapter 11 for the establishment of MACV (Fwd) at Phu Bai.



Photo courtesy of U.S. Army Center of Military History
In February 1968, MACV established a forward headquarters at Phu Bai under U.S. Army Gen Creighton W. Abrams, Deputy ComUSMACV, which caused some resentment among Marine officers.

posing headquarters between III MAF and MACV and providing an additional layer of command from above. According to General Cushman, "when Abrams came north, oh Christ, we got messages all night long, in the middle of the Goddamned night and everything else."* Colonel Franklin L. Smith, a member of the III MAF G-3 staff, recalled: "They [the MACV (Forward) Headquarters staff] were located up there and forgot that they were a senior headquarters to III MAF on one hand [by not keeping III MAF informed on its actions] and remembered very well on every other hand because they began to inter-

*General Earl E. Anderson, who served as the III MAF Chief of Staff, remembered: "More than once I had to go to General Cushman's quarters to awaken (not an easy task as he was a very sound sleeper and had a hearing loss suffered at Pearl Harbor when he was aboard the *Pennsylvania*) and ask him to come to the command center to take a call from Abrams on the scrambler phone, which he hated to use. While General Cushman respected Abrams as a combat officer, Abrams was very opinionated and often abrasive." Gen Earl E. Anderson, Comments on draft, dtd 18Dec94 (Vietnam Comment File).

pose themselves between III MAF" and subordinate units. Cushman concluded, "as would be expected, having the senior commander's agent in the battle area resulted in his exercise of more command influence and direction of III MAF Forces . . . than is customarily exercised by the senior command."³⁶

The creation of the MACV (Forward) headquarters also caused resentment among Cushman's subordinate Marine commanders, if not Cushman himself. Major General Murray, the III MAF Deputy Commander, later stated that he assumed that MACV established the forward headquarters because it did not trust III MAF to control the situation. The 3d Marine Division commander General Tompkins was even more blunt: "I thought it was the most unpardonable thing that Saigon did." Despite the disclaimers on the part of MACV that it had still utmost trust and confidence in Cushman, Tompkins declared, "you don't move a MACV (Forward) up in a combat area unless you're very, very, very worried about the local commander, afraid he can't hack it. . . . it's tantamount to . . . a relief of a commander."³⁷

On 14-15 February, the sudden relief of Major General Murray because of illness by Marine Major General William J. Van Ryzin, who arrived from Washington, only compounded the confusion. Rumors circulated in Saigon about a shakeup in the Marine command, which was not the case. On the 14th, Murray informed General Cushman of his incapacity and turned himself into the hospital. Van Ryzin received the news on the morning of the 14th and was on an aircraft for Vietnam by 0600 the following day.³⁸

By mid-February there was an obvious need to clarify the command relations in northern I Corps. On 17 February, at a meeting at Phu Bai with Generals Abrams and Cushman, Westmoreland announced that he planned to form a provisional corps (which would formally be called Provisional Corps) in northern I Corps sometime in early March that would consist of the 1st Air Cavalry Division, the 101st Airborne Division, and the 3d Marine Division. The MACV (Forward) headquarters would then be deactivated and the new Provisional Corps would be subordinate to III MAF. General Westmoreland stated that he hoped to appoint U.S. Army Lieutenant General William B. Rosson to head the new command. Rosson, the previous spring, had commanded the U.S. Army's Task Force Oregon which later became the Americal Division at Chu Lai. Having enjoyed excellent personal relations with III

MAF, Rosson was an ideal selection.* To further allay Marine suspicions about the proposed command relations, the MACV commander told Cushman that he might ask the Marine Corps to provide a major general as deputy commander for the new Provisional Corps (Prov Corps). While the 3d Marine Division would still receive close air support from the 1st Marine Aircraft Wing, the whole question about air control still remained unresolved.³⁹

For the time being, however, III MAF and MACV concentrated on working out the wrinkles for the establishment of the Provisional Corps. On 20 February, General Abrams sent out to the various interested parties a proposed letter of instruction (LOI) for the new command. According to Abrams' proposal, the commander of the new corps would have operational control of all units in the northern two provinces of I Corps with the exception of the Hai Van Pass area of Thua Thien Province. The corps would be similar in organization to the U.S. Field Forces I and II, with the exception that it would operate under the Commanding General, III MAF, General Cushman. Cushman would still remain the Senior Advisor in I Corps and maintain his relationship with the CORDS organization. III MAF would not have operational control of Seventh Air Force units in I Corps. The U.S. Army, Vietnam would provide a headquarters to coordinate logistic support in the two northern provinces. Furthermore, the Prov Corps commander would have the authority to have direct liaison with General Lam, the I Corps commander and with the ARVN forces in his sector.⁴⁰

In their comments on the proposed directive, General Cushman and Rear Admiral Kenneth L. Veth, Commander, Naval Forces, Vietnam took exception to or wanted further elaboration on some of the provisions. Admiral Veth desired assurances that he remain in the operational chain of command over the naval forces in I Corps including the Naval Support Activity, Da Nang and the Seabees. He also assumed that the Navy would retain the responsibility for common items of supply for all U.S. forces in I Corps. General Cushman suggested that the tactical situation determine the boundary between the 1st Marine Division



U.S. Army Center of Military History,
Top, U.S. Army LtGen William B. Rosson, Provisional (Prov) Corps Commander, is seen with South Vietnamese Col Quang Toan, the commander of the 2d ARVN Division. Below, Marine MajGen Raymond G. Davis, a holder of the Medal of Honor, was made Deputy Commander, Prov Corps. The new command replaced MACV (Fwd) and was a subordinate command of III MAF, which helped to smooth relations between the Marines and MACV.

U.S. Marine Corps



*At the time, Lieutenant General Rosson was then Commanding General I Field Force Vietnam. According to General Westmoreland, Rosson would retain his position as commander of the I Field Force, so as to retain his third star while serving in a subordinate position. His deputy would become acting commander of the I Field Force command. Westmoreland msg to Abrams, dtd 26Feb68 (EO Files, Abrams Papers, CMH.)

and Provisional Corps. He also opposed any proposal to place Task Force X-Ray under Prov Corps or any change in operational control or coordination in relation to other U.S. or South Vietnamese forces in I Corps. The III MAF commander also asked that there be no diminishment in his authority over the 1st Marine Aircraft Wing to support both the 1st and 3d Marine Divisions. Relative to the logistic setup, Cushman recommended that the III MAF FLC and the Army Logistic Command at Qui Nhon support their respective Services and that they work out an agreement on mutual support.⁴¹

The proposed letter of instruction for Provisional Corps continued to be refined. On 27 February, General Abrams sent a revised draft to General Westmoreland that incorporated some of the wishes of the Marines. The new draft still called for the establishment of an Army logistic headquarters in I Corps and left unresolved the boundary between the 1st Marine Division and Provisional Corps. It also failed to mention the command relationship between Task Force X-Ray and Provisional Corps. In a message to General Westmoreland, General Cushman asked for a clearer demarcation of his authority. He wanted the letter of instruction to state specifically that Prov Corps would exercise operational control "of only ground tactical units" and that III MAF would retain control of all wing assets in I Corps. Again Cushman argued strongly that the 1st Division retain operational control of Task Force X-Ray and that its area of operations include the Phu Loc District as well as the Hai Van Pass sector of Thua Thien Province.⁴²

On 3 March 1968, General Westmoreland finally issued the letter of instruction for Provisional (Prov) Corps. The final approved version designated Lieutenant General Rosson as the commanding general and 10 March as the effective date for the formal establishment of the new command. Marine Major General Raymond G. Davis became the deputy commander under General Rosson. General Westmoreland also incorporated into the directive most of the changes recommended by General Cushman. Still, Westmoreland's final directive clearly indicated that there was a special relationship between Prov Corps and MACV. Although General Cushman was to be his immediate superior, General Rosson was to submit reports "simultaneously" to MACV and III MAF "to insure timely reporting." On the cover sheet of the III MAF copy of the LOI, a III MAF staff officer wrote, "I wonder why they don't want 1st Div and Americal Division reports direct?" General Cushman initialed the routing slip

without comment. He had already lost one major battle. On 7 March, General Westmoreland ordered, "all Marine fixed-wing strike and reconnaissance aircraft, and their associated Marine air control assets, be assigned effective 10 March 1968, to the mission direction of Deputy for Air Operations, the Commanding General, Seventh Air Force."^{43*}

While assured, at least temporarily, of the primacy of his authority in northern I Corps, at least over all ground forces, and despite denials to the contrary, General Cushman and his staff still harbored suspicions about the Army's, if not Westmoreland's, motivations.^{**} As Brigadier General Hoffman later declared, "it became necessary, or it became desirable, from our viewpoint to be sure that the Army didn't take over everything that we'd built up in that particular area." Colonel Franklin Smith of the III MAF staff remembered that the transition of MACV (Forward) into Provisional Corps was rather painful. The PCV staff was largely composed of the same personnel that made up the forward headquarters and "they tended to carry over the authority they had as MACV Forward people." According to Smith, "we would have from time to time to pick up the phone and say you can't do this." Aware that the PCV G-3 was to be a brigadier general, Cushman assigned Brigadier General Hoffman temporarily to be the III MAF G-3.^{***} As General Cushman concluded, III MAF was a Marine command only in relation to Marine peculiar things, "but for tactical operations it's a joint command."⁴⁴

* See Chapters 23 and 24 for discussion of the Single Manager issue relative to Marine aviation.

** In his interviews, Cushman supported both the creation of MACV (Fwd) headquarters and the establishment of Provisional Corps. At the same time, however, his remarks indicated a suspicion that the Army was attempting to move into northern I Corps and that he took measures to guard against this. See Cushman Mar69 intvw, pp. 459-60 and 465-66 and Cushman Presentation, tab F, pp. 18-9. Army historian Graham A. Cosmas observed: "It seems clear that Westmoreland expected a much bigger Communist offensive in the north than actually developed. He did not trust III MAF to handle it and wanted Abrams on the scene with a headquarters to control the battle if necessary. Westmoreland authorized Abrams at MACV Fwd to give tactical direction to III MAF's subordinate units if the situation required. ProvCorps did ease III MAF's span of control problems, but its presence raised Marine suspicions, although Rosson evidently did a good job of smoothing out relations with III MAF." Dr. Graham A. Cosmas, CMH, Comments on draft, dtd 23Nov94 (Vietnam Comment File).

*** Hoffman nominally continued to be 3d Marine Division assistant division commander, but was carried on the 3d Marine Division rolls as TAD (temporary additional duty) at III MAF. 3d MarDiv and III MAF ComdCs, Feb-Apr68.

Planning for the Future

With the new command structure in I Corps largely in place at the beginning of March, the allies began to plan the counteroffensive. As General Cushman later explained, the idea was to go "after the enemy first in the coastal areas in a series of short duration operations, using the mobility of our forces to fix and destroy enemy forces which had escaped from the major Tet battle areas." On 2 March, at a meeting at III MAF headquarters in Da Nang, Generals Cushman and Abrams approved the planning concept for the final phase of the offensive, Operation Pegasus, the relief and breakout from Khe Sanh.⁴⁵

On 10 March, with the formal establishment of Prov Corps, Lieutenant General Rosson* at his headquarters in Phu Bai outlined for both Generals Westmoreland and Cushman his full plans for the counteroffensive in the north. The first effort would be the continuing operations against enemy forces in the Con Thien-Gio Linh forces north of Dong Ha. At the end of March and the beginning of April, the 1st Air Cavalry Division and the 3d Marine Division would give priority to the opening of Route 9 and beginning Operation Pegasus for the relief of Khe Sanh.** Following the relief of Khe Sanh, Prov Corps would then undertake a reconnaissance-in-force into the A Shau Valley southwest of Hue.⁴⁶

At the 10 March meeting, General Westmoreland approved Rosson's concept and also directed General Cushman to undertake a broad-based study to estimate the future requirements for the defense of northern I Corps. General Cushman turned the task over to his acting G-3, Brigadier General Hoffman with a due date of 1 April. For planning purposes, Hoffman's study group was to assume that the political aspects of the war would not change and that there would be no further refinement of the rules of engagement. The planners were to assume that by 1 September Khe Sanh was no longer in danger and that Route 9 would be open from Khe Sanh to Dong Ha. By that date, one of

the Army divisions, either the 1st Air Cavalry or the 101st Airborne, would have been detached from I Corps. Also included in the scenario for the study were the assumptions that the enemy would not have made any major reinforcement of his forces in the north and that the situation elsewhere in I Corps would not have required any depletion of the remaining units in the northern two provinces. According to MACV's guidelines, Hoffman's group was to look especially at "the pertinent aspects of the dyemarker system" relative to Khe Sanh and the DMZ strongpoints. Westmoreland directed that the analysis be "'wide open' and not constrained by past policies or precedents."⁴⁷

Hoffman's group completed its study within the designated time and made several proposals relative to the war in the north. Given their guidelines, the III MAF planners concentrated on the future of the barrier, the strongpoints and allied forces along the DMZ, and the base at Khe Sanh. As far as the A Shau Valley, the group recommended only the establishing of a fire base in the approaches to the valley, and limiting operations to artillery and infantry raids. In probably one of its more controversial conclusions, the panel suggested the abandonment of Khe Sanh in favor of a much smaller base at Ca Lu. The group argued that the defense of Khe Sanh would require a force of at least 10 battalions. Relative to the barrier, the Hoffman panel observed that the enemy threat in the DMZ sector was "*invasion*, as opposed to infiltration." The study group contended that the barrier strongpoints actually assisted the enemy by placing Marine and allied forces in fixed and static positions within NVA artillery range. Still the III MAF study advised against cancellation of Dyemarker because a "major conceptual change at this time might not be politically or psychologically acceptable." Instead, the III MAF panel suggested an "indefinite *deferral* of further Dyemarker SPOS [strong point obstacle system] while maintaining current positions with a reduced number of forces." While most of its recommendations were not immediately implemented, the III MAF study clearly outlined the future prospects facing the allied forces in the northern war.

March Operations in the DMZ Sector

While the American command planned to take the initiative from the enemy, the North Vietnamese still maintained formidable forces in the field, especially in the eastern DMZ sector in Operations Kentucky and Napoleon/Saline. In the Cua Viet region, in early March, this became increasingly evident. In Operation

* Although General Rosson did not assume command of Prov Corps until 10 March, since 1 March he had been the Deputy Commander, MACV (Forward). Waldron and Beavers, "The Critical Year, 1968," p. 19.

** According to General Rosson, he first wanted to mount a major offensive in the center and eastern portion of the 3d Marine Division and then sometime later follow with the Pegasus operation. He wrote that both Generals Cushman and Westmoreland overruled him "in turn based on what I was told was President Johnson's insistence that Khe Sanh be relieved soonest." Gen William B. Rosson, USA, Comments on draft, dtd 27Feb95 (Vietnam Comment File). See also Chapter 14 for the Pegasus planning.

Napoleon/Saline, on 1 March, Company M, BLT 3/1, supported by two engineer LVTE-1s and two howitzer LVTH-6s from the 1st Amphibian Tractor Battalion, crossed Jones Creek just above where it emptied into the Cua Viet for a sweep into the hamlet of Mai Xa Thi (West).^{48*}

Earlier, the LVTEs and LVTHs "swam down the Cua Viet to a position a few meters south of the village and west of Jones Creek. From there, the LVTEs shot line charges over the houses fronting the river, levelling the structures and "clearing the way for the follow on Marines." The LVTHs fired canister rounds into the village and then moved to new positions off shore to support the infantry. While still on the LVTs carrying them across the river, the Marine company came under accurate fire from the western bank of Jones Creek.** Lieutenant Colonel Max McQuown, the BLT commander, immediately ordered his Company I to secure the left flank of Company M and the southern portion of Mai Xa Thi. In heavy fighting that lasted until nightfall, the two companies killed 36 of the enemy and took 3 prisoners. During the next two days, BLT 3/1 operated in the village and secured a small island, just below Mai Xa Thi, in the Cua Viet River. The battalion uncovered 83 more bodies and captured another prisoner. Marine casualties were also heavy—27 killed and 81 wounded.

In this renewed fighting for Mai Xa Thi, the Marines learned that elements of the 320th NVA Division were coming into the Cua Viet sector to replace the 803d NVA Regiment which had the previous month moved south into Thua Thien Province. While most of the enemy dead were from the 270th Main Force Regiment, which had long operated in the region, two of the prisoners, a lieutenant and a private, were from the 52d NVA Regiment, 320th NVA Division. Up to this time, the 52d had been in reserve above the DMZ in North Vietnam, while the other two regiments of the division, the 48th and 64th had moved into the Kentucky and Lancaster areas.^{49***}

* This was to differentiate it from that portion of the village of Mai Xa Thi on the eastern bank of Jones Creek.

** Colonel McQuown noted as a safety precaution "against mines and RPG rounds," the Marine infantry rode on top of LVTs rather than inside when they were used as troop carriers. McQuown Comments.

*** Colonel McQuown related that he turned over his prisoners together with weapons and documents to the 3d Marine Division: "These NVA troops were fresh, mostly young males, and carried brand new weapons . . ." including a flame thrower and a "fragmentation grenade launcher 'far superior to its U.S. counterpart'." Relative to the flame thrower, McQuown observed, "this was the first and only time we had seen one in the hands of the NVA." McQuown Comments.

Under questioning, the two prisoners declared they were part of a small detachment from a heavy weapons company and an advance party of their regiment. Their mission had been to provide RPG (rocket-propelled grenade) support for the 270th unit in Mai Xa Thi against Marine amphibian tractors and tanks in the Cua Viet sector. Both prisoners claimed that the bulk of their regiment was to infiltrate south on the night of 1–2 March, but gave conflicting accounts. According to the lieutenant, the rest of the regiment was to cross the Ben Hai River, just west of the so-called "Freedom Bridge" into South Vietnam and that the final destination of the regiment was Quang Tri City. The private, on the other hand, related that the regiment would cross the Ben Hai by boat near the ocean and then infiltrate into the Cua Viet sector. Although cooperative, the 18-year-old enlisted man had little other information except that "they had orders to remain close to the Cua Viet." While the lieutenant may have known more of the big picture, his Marine interrogators were suspicious of his testimony. They reported that "the captive continually tried to lie throughout the interrogation" and that "his reliability could not be determined."⁵⁰

While the intelligence of a new North Vietnamese unit in the Cua Viet pointed to the continued presence of enemy units in this vital area, the Marines had already started their own buildup in the sector. With his new command post at the Cua Viet base, Colonel Hull, the 3d Marines commander, had just taken control of the operation. The forces in Napoleon/Saline included both BLT 3/1 and the 1st Amphibian Tractor Battalion. On 4 March, Hull's 1st Battalion, 3d Marines joined the operation, moving up from the Quang Tri base to the Cua Viet sector. The following day, there was another adjustment of forces, but this was an exchange of missions rather than a reinforcement. BLT 2/4 under Lieutenant Colonel William Weise redeployed from the Lancaster II area of operations to the Napoleon/Saline operation, replacing BLT 3/1. The latter battalion then took the place of the former in the Lancaster area of operations.^{51****}

**** Colonel Bruce F. Meyers, who at the time commanded SLF Alpha, observed that BLT 2/4 remained under the administrative control of the SLF commander for medical evacuation of casualties and "a significant portion of logistic support," even while under the operational control of various regimental commanders. He recalled that the embarked SLF helicopter squadron, HMM-363, helilifted BLT 3/1 to Camp Carroll and in exchange brought BLT 2/4 to the Cua Viet sector. Col Bruce F. Meyers, Comments on draft, dtd 20Feb95 (Vietnam Comment File).



Department of Defense (USMC) Photo A194604

Marines of BLT 2/4 ride amphibian tractors (LVTs) in the Cua Viet during Operation Napoleon/Saline. Note the sandbags on the tractors to protect the Marines from explosive rounds. The BLT redeployed from the Lancaster area to the coastal Napoleon sector in early March.

Even with the enemy reinforcement in his sector, the addition of another battalion to his forces permitted Colonel Hull to undertake expanded operations on both sides of the Cua Viet. While at the beginning of the month, the North Vietnamese continued their attempts to interdict the river, they eventually limited these efforts to attacks by fire. On 8 March, the Navy announced that the Cua Viet was open and that allied shipping no longer required convoys.⁵²

Still the enemy was far from quiescent. On 10 March, enemy artillery hit the Cua Viet base, igniting 150 short tons of ammunition. The resulting explosion and fire caused the death of one American serviceman and injuries to several others. It also destroyed a mess hall, a communications van, and 47 out of the 64 sites holding 10,000-gallon POL bladders. By the end of the month, the base had only repaired or replenished 60 percent of the sites, equipment, and supplies destroyed in the attack.⁵³

In several sharp encounters north of the Cua Viet during the month, Marine infantry sweeps also met with stiff resistance. Lieutenant Colonel Weise's BLT

2/4, just arrived in the sector, bore the brunt of this fighting. On 18 March, one of the bloodiest actions occurred in an abandoned hamlet about 1,000 meters southwest of Mai Xa Thi (West). Supported by artillery north of the DMZ and with well-designed fields of fire for their small arms and machine guns, the entrenched enemy held off three companies of BLT 2/4 throughout the day. With the assistance of their own artillery and close air strikes, the Marines finally forced the enemy to withdraw. After entering the hamlet the next day, the Marines found 72 bodies and captured 4 prisoners. Other sources estimated that the enemy death toll may have been as high as 130 as a result of the airstrikes on the retreating forces. The cost had been high to the Marines as well. BLT 2/4 suffered casualties of 13 dead and 110 wounded. For the entire month in Operation Napoleon/Saline, the 3d Marine Division reported to have killed more than 440 of the enemy while sustaining in turn 65 fatalities and over 450 wounded. According to Lieutenant Colonel Weise, the Marines were doing the best they could in a "very active area." Weise praised Colonel Hull, the 3d

Marines commander and in charge of the operation, calling him, "an extremely competent Marine, a good leader," but "frustrated as we all were without adequate resources to do the job . . ."⁵⁴

During the month, there were also continued clashes to the west of Napoleon/Saline in the 2d ARVN Regiment sector and in the 9th Marines' Kentucky area of operations. Located between Napoleon/Saline and Kentucky, the 2d ARVN operated largely east of Route 1 and west of Jones Creek. For the most part, the ARVN regiment gave a good account of itself. In their most significant engagement, on 12 March just east of Route 1 and about 2,000 meters below Gio Linh, the South Vietnamese unit claimed to have killed over 200 of the enemy at a cost of 4 ARVN killed and 15 wounded.⁵⁵

Further to the west along the DMZ front, the North Vietnamese remained active in the 9th Marines' Kentucky sector. Most of the action centered in the area between Gio Linh and Con Thien. On 3 March, in one of the more significant of the encounters, Company L, 3d Battalion, 3d Marines intercepted an NVA battalion attempting to infiltrate the Marine positions. The battalion maintained a two-company outpost on Hill 28 just north of the A-3 Strong Point, manned by Companies I and L. On the morning of the 3d, Captain Roger Zensen, the Company L commander, accompanied his 2d Platoon on a reconnaissance patrol to the northwest. Just before noon, at one of the patrol checkpoints, the Marines "spotted an NVA soldier about 800-1,000 meters to the north. He appeared to be an officer with binoculars scanning the terrain to the south in our direction." Zensen recalled that the platoon sergeant asked him for permission to shoot at the man with a M16, but the company commander denied the request so as not to give away their position. Captain Zensen later wrote, "Oh if we only had our snipers, it would have been a sure kill." Instead he had his enlisted artillery forward observer call in a fire mission. The Marine platoon then checked out the area "right along the southern edge of the DMZ." While finding no enemy casualties, there was "obvious evidence of recent activity."⁵⁶

At that point, the Marine platoon came under rifle and grenade fire. The Marines returned fire but the enemy troops continued to close and Captain Zensen requested reinforcements. The only available forces were two platoons of his own company on Hill 28, 600-800 meters to the southeast. At the same time, an air observer called in fixed-wing airstrikes and helped to coordinate artillery missions. Zensen remembered that the enemy "moved in close to avoid the air strikes" and

also "circled our right flank." Another 20 or so enemy troops took up position to the Marine rear, taking cover in a bomb shelter. With the assistance of machine gun fire, the platoon prevented the NVA from advancing any further until the "AO was able to direct the fire of Huey gunships at the enemy and silence" one of the positions. By this time, the two other platoons arrived and reinforced both flanks. As the company disengaged, enemy artillery fired upon them, but "fortunately was not on target." In the skirmish, the Marine reports showed over 100 of the enemy killed at a cost of one Marine dead and 13 wounded.* Zensen called it "a hell of a fight and a scary afternoon." He observed that lucky for the Marines the enemy force "was apparently on the move and had not fortified their positions."

A few days later, on 16 March, again near the A-3 Strong Point, Companies M, 3d Battalion, 3d Marines and C, 1st Battalion, 4th Marines clashed with another battalion-sized enemy force. The two Marine companies called in artillery and air upon the North Vietnamese troops. Under the supporting arms bombardment, the bulk of the enemy battalion disengaged, but left a company behind to fight a rear guard action. North Vietnamese artillery from north of the DMZ answered the American supporting arms with a 400-round barrage of its own on the Marines. According to one Marine report, because of the "inaccuracy of the hastily delivered enemy artillery," the two Marine companies "assaulted into the enemy trenches, killing 83 NVA before contact was broken at 1530." Marine casualties were two killed and nine wounded. For the entire month in Operation Kentucky, the 9th Marines reported over 400 enemy dead while Marine casualties were 37 killed and more than 200 wounded.^{57**}

*Lieutenant Colonel Zensen commented that he believed that the official listing of enemy casualties was exaggerated, but stated that "it is hard to know just how many enemy soldiers were killed." The reports also indicate that Marine snipers killed the enemy officer with binoculars, which was not the case. LtCol Roger Zensen, Comments on draft, dtd 4Dec94 (Vietnam Comment File).

**Lieutenant Colonel Otto Lehrack, who commanded Company I, 3d Battalion, 3d Marines, observed that Company M, earlier on 6 March, in the same area as Company L on 3 March, encountered a sizeable enemy force with the Marines sustaining casualties of 15 dead and a number of wounded. [For a detailed account of that action, see LtCol Otto J. Lehrack, *No Shining Armor, The Marines at War in Vietnam, An Oral History* (Lawrence, Kansas: University Press of Kansas, 1992), pp. 243-52.] Lehrack then observed that all of these actions including the one of 16 February took place along a major infiltration route which included Route 561 and an area that the Marines called the "Marketplace." He believed that the battalion "forays into this area presented the NVA with little choice but to fight." LtCol Otto Lehrack, Comments on draft, dtd 19Nov94 (Vietnam Comment File).

Further to the west, in the 4th Marines' Lancaster II operation, the tempo of enemy activity remained relatively low. For the month of March, the regiment reported killing nearly 60 enemy dead and capturing 2 prisoners while sustaining 13 killed and over 140 wounded. An enemy ambush of Company K, 3d Battalion, 9th Marines in the hills 3,000 meters west of Ca Lu caused most of the Marine casualties for the month, accounting for all of the dead and nearly half of the wounded. After completing an unsuccessful search for suspected enemy mortars on the high ground, the Marine company had started down towards Route 9. Enemy 60mm mortars caught the company in the open resulting in 13 killed, and over 40 wounded. Among the more seriously wounded was the company commander, Captain Alexander K. Ward. While evacuating all of the wounded, the Marines had to leave behind eight of the dead. A reconnaissance team finally retrieved the bodies four days later.⁵⁸

In northern I Corps, nevertheless, by the end of the month, especially along the DMZ front, the situation

for the allies had improved dramatically. For the most part, with the notable exception of that portion of Route 9 from Ca Lu to Khe Sanh, the supply lines were now open. With the opening of Route 1, Brigadier General Glick moved the rest of the 3d Marine Division (Rear) from Phu Bai to the Quang Tri base. During the month, Marine and allied trucks made over 2,000 resupply runs between Phu Bai and Quang Tri. In the last week of the month, III MAF moved over 3,866 short tons of supply from Dong Ha to Ca Lu. All told for March, 162 American truck convoys carried over 12,690 short tons of cargo in northern I Corps. The sea lanes and river routes also remained active. With the opening of Wunder Beach and the installation of the pontoon causeway there on 17 March, the allies landed more than 10,000 short tons. All of the ports in the north during the month registered record tonnage unloaded. The logistic situation had improved to the extent that III MAF lifted the limitation on equipment and material beyond just the combat essential. In fact, while not bringing in additional construc-

A Marine Sikorsky UH-34D Sea Horse helicopter is about to land with supplies as U.S. Army troopers from the 5th Armored Cavalry Regiment watch from their armored personnel carrier. The Army unit was under the operational control of the 3d Marine Division for a joint operation with BLT 2/4.

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PHOTO IS FROM THE ABEL COLLECTION





Department of Defense (USMC) Photo A371414

A Marine M67A2 flametank in a blocking position and in support of Company I, 3d Battalion, 27th Marines aims a streak of fire at suspected enemy positions in the Da Nang area of operations. The 27th Marines, newly arrived in February, began conducting small unit operations in late February and early March.

tion materials for the barrier strongpoint system, Marine engineers completed the strongpoint bunkers on Con Thien, made some minor repairs of bunkers damaged by artillery, and installed an additional minefield for the strongpoint at Gio Linh. At Ca Lu, Marine and Army engineers and Navy Seabees had started the building of a major base to include an airfield, ammunition storage facilities, bunkers and helicopter reverments, and a supporting road network.⁵⁹

By the end of the month, the allies in the north were about prepared to launch their counteroffensive for the relief of Khe Sanh and to alleviate the pressure on the DMZ front. On 28 March, the 1st Air Cavalry Division took over from the 3d Marine Division and the 4th Marines in Lancaster II the responsibility for the combat base at Ca Lu. While the 3d Marine Division complained that the construction of the facilities at Ca Lu and the effort to keep Route 9 open from Dong Ha to the base restricted its mobility to a certain extent, the division still prepared to carry out its own limited offensive. As a counter to any enemy tank threat in the north and to provide the Marines on the DMZ a more potent armored punch, in March, MACV had attached to the 3d Marine Division the U.S. Army 3d Squadron, 5th Armored Cavalry Regiment reinforced by a company from the 2d Battalion, 34th Armored Regiment. On 29 March, General Tompkins formed, under the

command of Colonel Hull, the 3d Marines' command, Task Force Kilo, which consisted of the Army armored cavalry squadron and BLT 2/4. The following day, in coordination with the 2d ARVN Regiment, Task Force Kilo mounted an attack in the Gio Linh sector as a cover for the Pegasus operation. The allied counteroffensive in the north was underway.⁶⁰

March Operations in the Rest of I Corps

By the beginning of March, the enemy main force units, outside of Thua Thien and Quang Tri Provinces, pretty much lay low. In the Americal Division operation Wheeler-Wallowa in the Que Son Valley, the 196th Light Infantry Brigade accounted for about the same number of enemy dead as the previous month, while sustaining about a quarter less casualties. As far as the Americal Division's Operation Muscatine south of Chu Lai was concerned, III MAF listed it among several operations that "did not have any significant combat." Still, as General Cushman observed, the Communist forces in I Corps had largely won the countryside "by default" as the ARVN, South Vietnamese militia forces, and Revolutionary Development teams during Tet fell back to defend the cities and

⁵⁹See Chapter 14 for further discussion of Task Force Kilo and its relationship to Operation Pegasus.



Top photo is from Abel Collection while the bottom is Department of Defense (USMC) Photo A372933. *Top, Marines from a 60mm mortar section of the 3d Battalion, 7th Marines run from a landing zone in the "Arizona Territory" southwest of Da Nang. The last man has the mortar base strapped across his shoulders while the mortar tube can be seen carried by the Marine in front of him. Below, Marines during Operation Worth form a chain to move supplies out of a landing zone in "Happy Valley."*



towns. According to U.S. measurements, GVN control in the countryside reached its lowest point in March.⁶¹

In much of southern I Corps, however, the American and South Vietnamese forces in March began to reenter the hamlets abandoned to the Viet Cong. Lost in the reporting of these numerous engagements was a 16 March 1968 United Press dispatch describing an operation by Task Force Barker of the Americal Division's 11th Light Infantry Brigade in the hamlet of My Lai, called "Pink Village" by the American troops. According to the news report, "'Pink Village' had become 'Red, White, and Blue' Village." A U.S. spokesman reported that the American troops had killed "128 Communists." The 128 "Communists," however, turned out to be all villagers, mostly women, children, and old men. It would be nearly a year later when the details about the My Lai massacre surfaced.^{62*}

In the large Da Nang area of operations, the 1st Marine Division faced many of the same circumstances that the Americal Division did—a low-level war fought in the surrounding hamlets and villages. In regimental reserve, the newly arrived 1st Battalion, 27th Marines spent much of March getting acclimated and adjusted to its new mission. Second Lieutenant William R. Black, Jr., a platoon commander with Company A, remembered that his company conducted a lot of patrols to keep "on our toes tactically while getting our act together." Lieutenant Black admitted that the battalion was still not too effective as the troops were still unfamiliar with their sector and not yet battle-hardened. While the other two battalions of the 27th Marines were more active, their great concern remained surprise firing devices. Overall, the regiment undertook over 2,900 small unit patrols throughout its TAOR resulting in about 310 contacts, 182 initiated by the Marines and the remainder by the VC.⁶³

The Communist forces made only one serious attack on the Da Nang base in March and that was limited to a series of rocket bombardments. On 4 March, beginning at 0100 and lasting until 0255, enemy gunners fired some 50 122mm missiles onto the base. Nine landed near the 7th Communication Battalion, six on the FLC compound near Red Beach, and the remainder at the Marble Mountain Facility. The rocket attacks resulted in 6 deaths and nearly 30 wounded. They also destroyed 1 CH-53 and damaged 37 other helicopters and observation aircraft. Lieutenant Colonel William S. Fagan, commander of the 1st Battalion, 7th Marines at the time, remembered "our primary and overriding mission . . .

was to prevent the enemy from firing his 122mm rockets toward the Da Nang vital area." His battalion sent out squad-sized patrols and ambushes "every day and night with emphasis on night." He estimated that "virtually half of our infantry squads, with normal attachments, were on ambush every night." According to Fagan, the enemy was able to fire only a few rockets successfully from his sector, but there "was fairly continuous enemy contact with casualties on both sides."⁶⁴

Based on intelligence that the Communist forces continued to work on upgrading their road network from *Base Area 607* northwest of Da Nang and possibly infiltrating units south into "Happy Valley" and the "Arizona Territory" (named after the U.S. western badlands), the usual approaches to the base from the mountains to the west, the 7th Marines launched two spoiling attacks. In the first, Operation Rock, the 3d Battalion, 7th Marines conducted a one-battalion sweep on the peninsula formed by the Vu Gia and Thu Bon Rivers, the so-called "Arizona Territory," about 6,000 meters northwest of the battalion's base area at An Hoa. During the four days of the operation, from 6–10 March, the Marines encountered only small units, sustaining casualties of 3 dead and 24 wounded while killing about 35 of the enemy. On 13 March, in the second operation, Operation Worth, the 1st and 2d Battalions, 7th Marines supported by tanks of the U.S. Army's 3d Squadron, 5th Armored Cavalry, entered into the anything but "Happy Valley." In the nearly two-week operation, which ended on 26 March, the Marines and Army tankers only met scattered resistance. Still the Marines took casualties of 27 dead and 89 wounded and killed an estimated 160 of the enemy.⁶⁵

In March, while the Marine units at Da Nang continued to hold their own, to the north, Task Force X-Ray consolidated its area of operations and made the necessary adjustments with the Provisional Corps. With the formal end of Operation Hue City on 2 March, General LaHue, the Task Force X-Ray commander, started to bring the respective battalions under the 1st Marines back to their own sectors. The two 5th Marines battalions that participated in Hue City, the 1st and 2d Battalions, rejoined their parent regiment in the 5th Marines' Operation Houston in the Phu Loc District. LaHue assigned the 1st Marines the defense of the Phu Bai vital area and Col Co/Tan My naval support activity with two battalions, the 1st Battalion, 1st Marines and the 2d Battalion, 3d Marines which moved up from Operation Houston. At the same time, the two Army battalions in Operation Houston, the 2d Battalion,

*See Chapter 29 for further discussion of My Lai.

502d Regiment and the 1st Battalion, 327th Regiment reverted to Army control.⁶⁶

While trying to build up the defenses of Phu Bai and protect Route 1 and the vital water routes, General LaHue also wanted to expand operations into the approaches towards both the base and the city of Hue. On 3 March, giving the 1st Brigade, 101st Airborne Division, two battalions—the 1st Battalion, 1st Marines and the 2d Battalion, 327th Airborne Regiment—LaHue ordered the Army brigade, still under his operational control, to conduct an operation in the old Cumberland area, along Route 547, the gateway to the A Shau Valley. Lasting only four days, from 3 March until 7 March, the two-battalion operation, code-named Mingo, had little to show for the effort except for five dead VC and two captured rifles. Faced with the changing command relations with the establishment of Provisional Corps, General LaHue cut short the operation.⁶⁷

On 8 March, two days before the activation of Prov Corps, III MAF implemented the agreed-upon change of boundaries between Task Force X-Ray and the new command. Task Force X-Ray retained responsibility for the Phu Bai vital area and Phu Loc District with the 1st Marines in the former and the 5th Marines in the latter. General LaHue returned the two U.S. Army brigades under his operational control, the 1st Brigade, 101st Airborne Division and the 3d Brigade, 82d Airborne Division, to Army Major General Olinto M. Barsanti, the commander of the 101st, who had just established his command post to the west of Phu Bai. The 101st was to take over the expanse between the 1st Air Cavalry at Camp Evans and Task Force X-Ray at Phu Bai. This included the area around Hue, Route 1 north of Phu Bai, the Col Co/Tan My area, and Route 547 towards the A Shau Valley.⁶⁸

With a smaller area of operations and with five infantry battalions under his operational control, General LaHue decided upon a three-phased operation to the east of Phu Bai. The first phase, Operation Ford, was to be a two-battalion sweep of the Phu Thu Peninsula which had long been a staging area for the *804th Main Force Battalion*. He gave the mission to Colonel Stanley S. Hughes, the 1st Marines commander, and coordinated the operation with the 1st ARVN Division Lam Son 194 to the north of the Marines. On 14 March, Marine helicopters deposited in landing zones, the 2d Battalion, 3d Marines on the northern, and the 1st Battalion, 1st Marines on the southern part of the peninsula. The two battalions then began to advance towards one another. In

several sharp clashes, the two Marine battalions killed 145 of the enemy and captured 5 prisoners. The Marines lost 14 men dead, including a Navy corpsman, and sustained 113 wounded. On 20 March, Task Force X-Ray closed out the operation. General LaHue canceled the planned second and third phases of Operation Ford.⁶⁹

By this time, the planning for Pegasus, the relief operation for Khe Sanh, was in full swing. The 1st Air Cavalry Division prepared to close out its Operation Jeb Stuart and move to its new staging area at Ca Lu. With the westward deployment of the 1st Cavalry Division, the 101st Airborne Division was to move to a new operating area some 18 miles northwest of Hue. At the same time, the 1st Marines with its 1st and 2d Battalions, reinforced by the 2d Battalion, 3d Marines, was to join the 1st Air Cavalry in Operation Pegasus. Task Force X-Ray was to take over then the area vacated by the 101st Airborne Division.⁷⁰

Brigadier General LaHue, thus once more, was to expand his area of operations, while at the same time having fewer troops to do so. At the end of the month, Major General Donn J. Robertson, the 1st Marine Division commander, provided some relief by transferring one of the 27th Marines' battalions, the 1st Battalion, from Da Nang to assume the security of Route 1 between Hue and Phu Bai and the protection of the ColCo/Tan My base. The battalion relieved the remaining Army units still there and operated almost to the suburbs of Hue. At the same time, General LaHue expanded the 5th Marines' Houston area to include the remaining portion of the X-Ray TAOR, excluding the area occupied by the 1st Battalion, 27th Marines and the Phu Bai Vital Area. At the same time, the task force commander ordered the 1st Battalion, 5th Marines with two companies to take over from the 1st Marines the protection of key outposts and bridges, especially the Truoi River Bridge on Route 1 southeast of Phu Bai.⁷¹

While Task Force X-Ray made these various adjustments, the Communists were not slow to take advantage of what they perceived as possible chinks in the American defenses. On 21 March, in a relatively minor attack, enemy gunners fired some 20 mortar and rocket rounds on the Phu Bai Base, which resulted in two Marines wounded and some structural damage to a building. Five days later, between 0300 and 0330 on the morning of the 26th, however, 108 122mm rockets and nearly 80 82mm mortar rounds fell upon both the airfield and the

Phu Bai compound. This barrage resulted in 4 dead, 2 Marine and 2 ARVN, and 46 wounded, most of whom were Marines. Despite hitting the airfield, the Force Logistic Support Group sector, and an ARVN training area, the rockets and mortars caused only relatively light damage to three aircraft, two helicopters and a C-117D transport, and destroyed two 10,000-gallon fuel bladders.⁷²

Instead of further bombardments on the Phu Bai base, on 31 March 1968, under cover of a mortar and ground attack, enemy sappers successfully placed demolitions on the Truoi River Bridge and a smaller bridge, designated Bridge No. 4. The K-2 VC Battalion with three companies reinforced by three sapper platoons had simultaneously attacked the two bridge outposts and a nearby Combined Action Platoon, CAP H-3. Alerted by one of their ambushes, the Combined Action Marines repulsed the enemy attack after it reached the outer wire. The bridge outposts were not so lucky. Both the Truoi Bridge and Bridge No. 4 sustained substantive damage with both bridges impassable for motor traffic and Bridge No. 4 to foot traffic as well. Company C, 1st Battalion, 5th Marines had placed two squads on the smaller bridge supported by a machine gun and a recoilless rifle and a platoon supported by two machine guns and two mortars on the Truoi River Bridge. The attacking force on Bridge No. 4 killed eight Marines and wounded seven more. On the Truoi River Bridge, the Marine platoon sustained casualties of 6 dead and 23 wounded. The Communists lost a total of 12 men in the attacks. In an investigation of the attack, Colonel Bohn, the 5th Marines commander, reported "the strength of the security forces was adequate." He blamed the success of the enemy attack partially on the fact that the company was new to the sector and had only occupied these positions the day before.⁷³

Although the Marines improved their defensive dispositions and coordination of supporting arms and placement of reaction forces, Task Force X-Ray at the end of the month was hard pressed to maintain any initiative. Originally Task Force X-Ray had planned to expand operations in April, but General LaHue admitted that he had postponed the detailed planning for these undertakings. Any new offensive actions "were contingent upon the developing situation and what economies of forces can be instituted . . ." Still if the war had reached a stalemate in the Task Force X-Ray area of operations, the allies

were ready to launch their major counteroffensive in the north.⁷⁴

Regaining the Initiative

While the much-heralded relief of Khe Sanh, Operation Pegasus, grabbed most of the attention, the allies in April appeared to have regained the initiative in most of I Corps. According to U.S. pacification statistics, 7,000 more civilians in I Corps were living in secure areas than the previous month, marking the first increase since the enemy Tet offensive. In what amounted to a corps-wide offensive, III MAF conducted 17 major operations of battalion-size or larger, resulting in over 3,500 enemy casualties. The South Vietnamese were also active. In Quang Tin Province, for example, the 2d Battalion, 6th ARVN Regiment opened up 15 miles of road between the district town of Tien Phouc and the province capital of Tam Ky. For the most part, however, in the three southern provinces of I Corps, the Communist forces avoided battle and limited most of their activity to scattered guerrilla attacks and mines and boobytraps.⁷⁵

At Da Nang, as in the rest of southern I Corps, the 1st Marine Division reported that "irregular activity . . . continues to inflict more casualties than actual contact with the enemy." At the same time, however, the division for the first time since Tet began offensive operations about 12 miles south of the airbase in the Go Noi Island, formed by the channels of the Thu Bon, Ky Lam, and Ba Ren Rivers. From 10-14 April, the 3d Battalion, 7th Marines conducted Operation Jasper Square in the western Go Noi. In the four days of the operation, the battalion killed 54 of the enemy at the price of 6 Marine dead and 30 wounded. While the operation ended on the 14th, the 3d Battalion remained in the Go Noi "with all units becoming part of the Da Nang TAOR."⁷⁶

In the interlude, Marine and Army radar imagery aircraft and "Stingray" reconnaissance patrols reported continued enemy improvement of the enemy road network leading through Charlie Ridge into Happy Valley and also into the Arizona Territory and Go Noi Island sectors. The Marine reconnaissance teams not only observed enemy troop movement, but also directed artillery and air onto the enemy forces. For example, on the morning of 7 April, one Stingray patrol with the radio call sign "May Fly" from its perch on a ridgeline looking into



Photo courtesy of LtCol Charles E. Mueller, (USMC) Ret

Prior to Operation Allen Brook, MajGen Donn J. Robertson briefs syndicated columnist Joseph Alsop on the situation at Da Nang. Trudging up the hill to view the terrain are LtCol Charles E. Mueller, the commander of the 2d Battalion, 7th Marines, in the lead, followed by Gen Robertson, then Mr. Alsop. Two of the Marines are carrying what appears to be a briefing map.

the Arizona spotted some 200 main force troops wearing green utilities, helmets, and flak jackets. The Marines called in helicopter gunships and an artillery fire mission. "May Fly" reported 51 of the enemy killed. During the rest of the day and through the night of 8 April, the reconnaissance team counted nearly 170 more enemy troops in nine sightings which resulted in an estimated 70 enemy dead. Later in the month, from 23 April through the 30th, two other Marine Stingray teams, one overlooking the Arizona and the other the Go Noi, in 17 sightings, reported nearly 370 enemy troops moving through the Thu Bon and Vu Gia River Valleys and claimed 191 of the enemy killed by Marine supporting arms.⁷⁷

On 27 April, III MAF organized Operation Quick Track, under Lieutenant Colonel John F. T. Kelly, of the III MAF G-2 staff, to track the 2d NVA Division. According to Marine intelligence, the enemy division had retreated southwest to the Laotian border after the failure of its Tet campaign, but was planning now to mount a new offensive in

the Da Nang area of operations. With his command post on Hill 55 south of Da Nang, Lieutenant Colonel Kelly's task force consisted of a small headquarters, the provisional company of the 1st Reconnaissance Company, a detachment of Sub-Unit 1, 1st Radio Battalion with signal intelligence capability, and the U.S. Army Special Forces 14th Company, Mobile Strike Force and the 245th Surveillance Airplane Company, 16th Aviation Group. The 1st Marine Division and 1st Marine Aircraft Wing would provide support when necessary. Task Force Kelly, named after its commander, began its first inserts on 30 April and continued the operation into May. According to Kelly, Operation Quick Track reflected Lieutenant General Cushman's "innovative use of intelligence to track ahead of the enemy rather than report history."⁷⁸

With the obvious movement of enemy regulars into the western and southern avenues of approach to the Da Nang base, General Robertson decided upon a series of preemptive operations. In the first, Operation Ballard, on 29 April, the 7th Marines sent one

battalion into the Charlie Ridge area. At the same time, both the 7th and 27th Marines prepared to conduct a two-regiment operation, Operation Allan Brook in the Go Noi. This would then be followed by another 7th Marines operation, later called Mameluke Thrust, into both the Arizona and Happy Valley regions. As one regimental commander observed, these operations reflected a III MAF "change of emphasis . . . to go after the enemy in his base camps, rather than attempt to interdict him by patrols close into the vital area."⁷⁹*

In April, however, the capability of the 1st Marine Division to conduct these expanded operations was fairly limited, especially in the Task Force X-Ray sectors at Phu Bai and in Phu Loc. As Brigadier General LaHue, the Task Force X-Ray commander admitted, whenever the division mounted such an operation it was taking a chance of reducing the density of operations. With four of the nine infantry battalions of the 1st Division assigned to X-Ray, LaHue stated that he had adequate forces to "do assigned operations . . . [but] not adequate . . . to go after the enemy" According to LaHue, he could "keep Highway 1 open, aggressively patrol, and keep after the enemy in some strength." His tenure at Phu Bai, however, was about over. On 7 April, Brigadier General John N. McLaughlin relieved LaHue as the commander of Task Force X-Ray. The latter returned to Da Nang where a week later, Brigadier General George D. Webster replaced him there as the assistant division commander.⁸⁰

The Phu Bai forces under McLaughlin operated much the same as they did under LaHue. The 5th Marines continued its expanded Houston operation. On 13 April, in a no-name operation, literally called No Name No. 2, the 1st Battalion, 27th Marines ran into two North Vietnamese companies, probably from the *804th Main Force Battalion*, in a fortified hamlet along a small canal north of Route 1 and a few miles east of Hue. According to Second Lieutenant William R. Black, Jr., of Company A, "the enemy [was] in [a] great situation to fight us off" When Black's 2d Platoon reached the hamlet, the company's 3d Platoon, under Second Lieutenant Roger Charles had already been hit hard and trying to withdraw. Black later wrote his family:

In retrospect, I now know I should have written up Lieutenant Charles for a decoration. He had advanced as close to the enemy as he could get. He had lost his radio to enemy fire. He was taking care of the wounded man near him. He guided the rest of us as we arrived at this position to help, & he continued to fight the enemy. At the time, I was naive enough to think that this was expected of us, as routine combat performance by a good Marine.

The Marine battalion lost 24 dead and 37 wounded while accounting for an estimated 60 of the enemy. On the following day, Easter Sunday, the Marines picked up the dead. Lieutenant Black several years later remembered the scene as a macabre "Easter Procession—pulling dead bodies back in ponchos."⁸¹**

From 19–26 April, in a rice-denial operation, the 2d Battalion, 5th Marines supported by two ARVN battalions conducted Operation Baxter Garden on the Phu Thu Peninsula. During the seven-day operation, the Marines engaged enemy platoon-sized forces, but for the most part met up with scattered enemy groups. Most of the Marine casualties were the result of triggering enemy land mines. The Marines sustained 13 dead and 125 wounded while killing 55 of the enemy. At the end of the month, Task Force X-Ray continued to be responsible for an expanding area of operations with limited forces.⁸²

While the 1st Air Cavalry Division ended its participation in Operation Pegasus on 15 April, the air-mobile division and the 101st Airborne Division undertook the long-postponed offensive in the A Shau Valley.⁸³ For some time, American commanders had viewed with concern the activity of the enemy to improve his lines of communication leading from the A Shau into Quang Nam Province and also towards

**William Black commented that "in the Episcopal Church, where I grew up, the Easter 'procession' is a glorious parade by the choir, acolytes, priest, and children into the church at the beginning of the Easter worship service. It is a vivid and joyful celebration of Christ's triumph over death. Hence the irony that hit me that Easter morning . . ." In his letter to his parents, he remarked upon battlefield discipline of the enemy: "He not only took with him his own wounded (& did *something* with his dead if he did not take them too); he even gathered up his spent cartridges and took them. In the very trench that he had fought us for five hrs, we could hardly find a spent cartridge! The enemy knows how to discourage us. We found bits of meat in trenches where direct arty hits had destroyed the enemy, but we only found *two* enemy bodies." William R. Black, Comments on draft, dtd 4Jan95 and attached ltr to parents, dtd 20–21Apr68 (Vietnam Comment File).

***The 2d Brigade of the 1st Air Cavalry Division, however, remained at Khe Sanh under the operational control of the 3d Marine Division. See Chapter 14. For the earlier planning for A Shau operations, see the discussion of the proposed York operations in Chapter 1.

*See Chapter 17 for coverage of Operations Allan Brook and Mameluke Thrust.

the approaches to Hue. For example, on 28 March, an aerial photo reconnaissance mission over the valley revealed the existence of what Marine intelligence officers dubbed the "Yellow Brick Road," a newly constructed corduroy road extending from the A Shau through Laos and *Base Area 607* into Quang Nam Province. Beginning on 19 April, after two days of B-52 preparatory strikes in the valley, the 3d Brigade of the 1st Air Cavalry and the 1st Brigade of the 101st reinforced by an ARVN airborne task force began Operation Delaware in the A Shau.⁸³

For about a month, units of the two Army divisions conducted a series of "leap-frog" helicopter assault operations throughout the length and breadth of the A Shau. While initially encountering heavy antiaircraft fire, U.S. supporting air and artillery eventually silenced the enemy guns.* The Army troops met mostly local enemy rear echelon troops and engineers, but occasionally fought engagements with regular infantry. At the end of the operation, the Americans reported killing 735 of the Communist soldiers, while suffering 142 dead and 731 wounded. The ARVN task force lost 26 killed and 132 wounded. As General Cushman observed, the A Shau was "not a . . . a fortress of combat troops . . . , but . . . a highway, you might say, for logistics supply and for the movement of reinforcements and replacements." The allies captured huge caches of enemy weapons, equipment, ammunition, foodstuffs and other military supplies including more than 70 trucks, two bulldozers, and a destroyed PT-76 tank from the *3d Battalion, 203d Tank Regiment* before the operation concluded.⁸⁴

To fill in the gap in the forces in the north during the Delaware A Shau operation, General Cushman, with the concurrence of MACV, transferred the Americal Division's 196th Light Infantry Brigade to the operational control of General Rosson in Prov Corps. In turn, the Prov Corps commander assigned the new brigade to Camp Evans as the corps reserve under the operational control of the 1st Air Cavalry Division. About the same time, on 18 April, after the close of Operation Pegasus, the 26th Marines moved

from Khe Sanh to the Quang Tri base and took over the area of operations there. Further north at Dong Ha, the 3d Marine Division had established a small division reserve built around an armored task force, called Task Force Robbie, after the nickname of its commander, Colonel Clifford J. Robichaud, the former division inspector.^{85**}

For the larger part of April, the three 3d Marine Division operations along the DMZ, Lancaster II, Kentucky, and Napoleon/Saline, continued with most of the same forces as they had the previous month. As a sub-operation of Lancaster II, from 12-16 April, BLT 3/1 carried out Operation Charlton in the Ba Long Valley. The battalion captured one crew-served weapon and held 56 detainees, but sustained 11 wounded. While in April, the 3d Marine Division reported higher enemy activity in the form of artillery, mortar, and rocket attacks on Marine positions on the DMZ front, the number of American and Communist casualties in Operation Kentucky were actually lower than the previous month. In Operation Lancaster II, however, at the end of April, the North Vietnamese increased their artillery bombardment of Camp Carroll to about 40-50 rounds a day.⁸⁶

In the Cua Viet sector at the end of the month, the enemy posed the greatest threat. On 27 April, the Navy's Task Force Clearwater warned III MAF that the enemy was apparently preparing to interdict the waterway. North Vietnamese artillery and rocket attacks on the port facilities at the mouth of the Cua Viet and the offloading ramps at Dong Ha also increased. On 29 April, the ARVN 2d Regiment engaged an NVA unit from the *320th NVA Division*. During the night of 29-30 April, enemy machine gunners opened up on Navy patrol craft in the Cua

* Lieutenant General Richard E. Carey, who served in Vietnam in 1968 as a lieutenant colonel and as a squadron leader, observed that during Delaware, the 1st Marine Aircraft Wing "provided massive fixed wing and helo support for an entire day." He recalled that the Army lost several helicopters in several minutes and required the Marine air since the Army units were out of range of Army heavy artillery. LtGen Richard E. Carey, Comments on draft, dtd 12Dec94 (Vietnam Comment File).

** According to Lieutenant Colonel Karl J. Fontenot, Major General Tompkins established Task Force Robbie in mid-February. Fontenot while still commanding the 3d Tank Battalion also served as the executive officer of the task force. He recalled that General Tompkins "briefed us personally on his expectations which essentially was to form a very flexible organization ready for employment in any direction at any time." The task force made its headquarters at Cam Lo since it was a centralized position. While the task force organization was flexible, it usually consisted of a tank company; two Army M42 tracked vehicles mounting twin 40mm antiaircraft guns; two Army truck companies with trucks equipped with quad .50-caliber machine guns (M55); other assorted motor transport; an engineer detachment; and usually one rifle company. Fontenot wrote "TF Robbie made itself pretty visible in the division area with rapid moves over the roads to Camp Carroll, Dong Ha, etc." LtCol Karl J. Fontenot, Comments on draft, n.d. [Dec94] (Vietnam Comment File).

Viet from the Dai Do village complex about 1,000 meters north of Dong Ha. Colonel Hull sent BLT 2/4 to clear out the enemy. In fighting that would last nearly a month, the battle for Dong Ha with the NVA *320th Division* was joined and the enemy had begun a new offensive on the eastern DMZ to counter the allied thrusts to the west.^{87*}

From late February through the end of April, the allied forces in I Corps had regained the initiative. From Quang Ngai in the south to Quang Tri Province in the north, allied troops had taken a large toll of both enemy main force and guerrilla units. Still the cost had been high, and the enemy was far from defeated. Outside of the battlefield, events in Washington and Hanoi were also to influence the course of the war. On 31 March, in a televised speech to the nation, after a relatively poor showing earlier in the month in the New Hampshire primaries, President Johnson in a surprise statement announced his decision not to stand for reelection, to restrict the bomb-

ing campaign over North Vietnam,** and to authorize only a limited reinforcement of American troops in Vietnam. On 5 April, unexpectedly, the North Vietnamese Foreign Minister Nguyen Duy Trinh declared that his government was willing to negotiate with the Americans. The following month a North Vietnamese and American delegation met in Paris. In the meantime, with the arrival of the two Army divisions, the 101st and the 1st Air Cavalry, III MAF and Provisional Corps had entered the foreboding A Shau for the first time since 1966 and most importantly earlier had broken the siege of Khe Sanh.⁸⁸

**U.S. Army Colonel Bruce B. G. Clarke wrote that according to Army sources, at the time of the President's speech the 1st Air Cavalry Division was preparing plans for its next mission, Operation Delaware, after Operation Pegasus. According to Clarke, the planners developed a concept "to press west into Laos and then turn south along the Ho Chi Minh Trail into Laos to enter the A Shau Valley from the northwest rather than the east." Apparently "General Tolson shut off this planning by noting that the planners obviously hadn't heard the President's speech and what they were proposing was politically impossible." Col Bruce B. G. Clarke, USA, Comments on draft, n.d. [Apr95] (Vietnam Comment File).

*For the fighting at Dai Do and its aftermath see Chapter 15.