



Photo courtesy of LCDr Francis C. Brown, USN

Lessons learned from North Vietnamese artillery fire were put into effect by the 3d ARVN Division and MACV Advisory Team 155. South Vietnamese engineers constructed the division command bunker in the Quang Tri Citadel using sand bags and steel matting.

Pictured are captured Communist tanks from the two armored regiments that supported the attacks in Quang Tri Province. Closest is a Chinese Type 59 and in the rear is a Soviet T-54. Both have been marked with "TQIC" by their captors, the Vietnamese Marine Corps.

Photo courtesy of Capt Edwin W. Besch, USMC (Ret)





North Vietnamese Army Photo

Despite reliance on armor and motorized forces, the North Vietnamese Army's infantry displayed a greater degree of crosscountry mobility than their opponents. An NVA infantry unit crosses a stream carrying individual and unit equipment with it. The soldier in the foreground is holding a pair of "Ho Chi Minh" sandals, the common footwear used.

still standing Cam Lo Bridge. After more than two weeks of rain and dense cloud cover, the weather broke allowing a massive air effort to hit every suspected enemy position and staging area. Increased numbers of B-52 Arc Light strikes as well as hundreds of tactical air strikes were flown each day in support of ARVN ground forces.²⁴

On 14 April, FSB Bastogne, southwest of Hue City, fell to units of the 324B NVA Division, giving General Lam worries other than retaking lost ground. The 324B was now in position to attack Hue City, considered by the Vietnamese and MACV to be "the focal point of history and culture" for all of Vietnam. Critical fighting occurred between the 1st ARVN Division and the NVA for control of the Bastogne and Birmingham fire support bases. In spite of the concentrated allied air offensive, the enemy moved his units into position, ready for the attack. This put an end to General Lam's optimistic desire for a counteroffensive.

On 16 April, FSB Jane was attacked by infantry and artillery, catching the 5th VNMC Battalion out of position. The battalion's Bravo group was surrounded and

had to fight its way to the base under the cover of air strikes controlled by Major Price from Jane. As had happened a week earlier, Captain Wells was with the cutoff unit, having a radio shot off his back, and collapsing from exhaustion. Major Price played an important role in getting the survivors back to the fire support base, earning a Silver Star Medal for his actions. After dark, Wells and the other serious casualties were evacuated by helicopter. Jane held, but the battalion had suffered and Colonel Chung, the brigade commander, relieved them the next day with the 7th VNMC Battalion. The enemy began to pressure the Marines of Brigade 369 on their hills as North Vietnamese gunners "blew the tops off the bases" with artillery fire.

On 18 April at 1830, the 304th NVA Division struck all along the western front moving toward Quang Tri City. At the same time another NVA force of the 308th NVA Division moved south passing through Camp Carroll and Mai Loc towards Dong Ha. The 5th Ranger Group, with the 20th ARVN Tank Battalion in support, confronted an enemy regiment southwest of Dong Ha along the Vinh Phuoc River. As the inten-

sity of the battle increased, desperate ground forces, naval gunfire, along with diverted B-52 and tactical air strikes, stopped the NVA forces. VNMC Brigade 258, with a troop of 20th Tank Battalion tanks, experienced a strong enemy attack along its western front. The ARVN tanks, although they were continuously sniped at by enemy antitank teams, enjoyed excellent results. Bravo group of the 1st VNMC Battalion took heavy casualties, but by midnight all was quiet again.

As the enemy withdrew, the 6th VNMC Battalion

captured a tank and a prisoner. The tank was practically new and the prisoner had a fresh haircut, new uniform, good equipment, and an extra pair of shoes. It was believed that the enemy had placed a high priority on first hitting Ai Tu combat base, but had shifted his emphasis to the attrition of South Vietnamese troop units. These fresh troops and supplies indicated to Major Warren and Captain Wischmeyer, with the 6th VNMC Battalion, that the enemy felt the tactical situation was worth the investment of additional men and materiel.²⁵

CHAPTER 6

Exodus from Quang Tri

*Drive from the West—Confusion at Quang Tri
Team 155 and General Giai Depart—VNMC Brigade 147 on Its Own*

Drive from the West

While the ARVN defenders held the Dong Ha positions, the concentration of the battle, both offensively and defensively, had shifted to the western approaches of the Ai Tu and Quang Tri areas. Thwarted at Dong Ha, the enemy continued to advance from the west along Highway 9 and had crossed over the river at Cam Lo. This maneuver rendered the defenders of Dong Ha vulnerable to enemy moves to sever QL-1 between Dong Ha and Quang Tri City.

On 22 April 1972, VNMC Brigade 147, which had been at Hue City for a period of rest and refurbishing, sent its 8th Battalion north to relieve the 3d VNMC Battalion at Ai Tu. The next day, the remainder of VNMC Brigade 147 relieved VNMC Brigade 258 there. Under 147's operational control were the 1st, 4th, and 8th VNMC Battalions and the 2d VNMC Artillery Battalion. The brigade headquarters, the artillery battalion, and the reconnaissance company set up within the Ai Tu Combat Base with the 4th VNMC Battalion responsible for perimeter defense. The 1st VNMC Battalion was deployed approximately 3,000 meters to the southwest between Ai Tu and FSB Pedro. The 8th VNMC Battalion was positioned one kilometer to the northwest of Ai Tu.¹

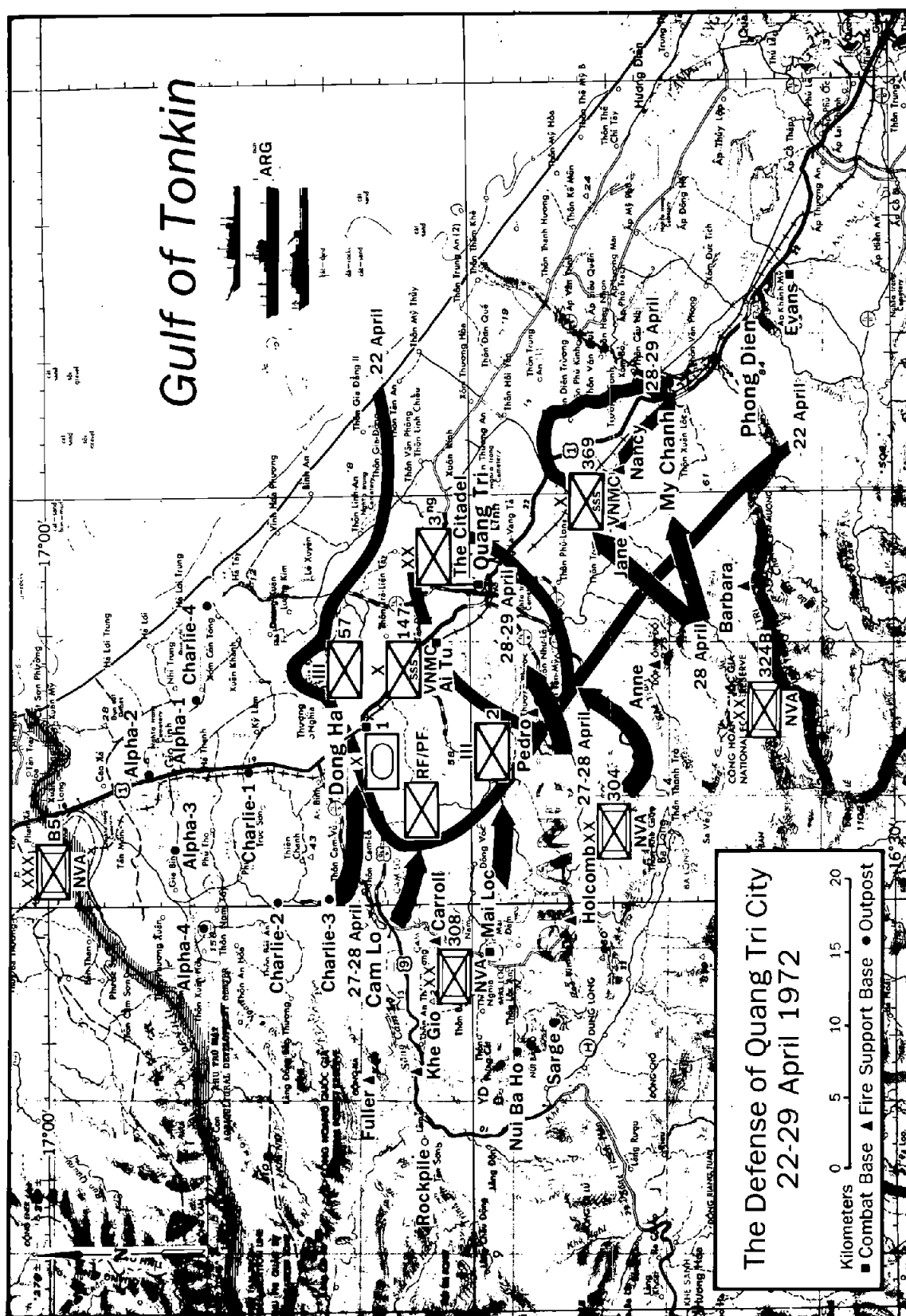
The 1st ARVN Armored Brigade was responsible for the area from QL-1 to five kilometers to the west, bounded by the Cam Lo River to the north and the Ai Tu Combat Base to the south. The brigade, in addition to its organic units, controlled the 57th ARVN Regiment and the 4th and 5th Ranger Groups. The 2d ARVN Regiment had the area south of Ai Tu to the Thach Han River. The 1st Ranger Group was located south of the Thach Han River, VNMC Brigade 369 was still further south near Hai Lang, and the 3d ARVN Division's headquarters was at the Quang Tri Citadel.²

During the period 23 to 26 April, on orders from the 3d ARVN Division, VNMC Brigade 147 conducted operations to the west searching for enemy units. Several times, the Marines spotted the enemy and called for artillery fire on him. The 8th VNMC Battalion spotted two tanks, and turned them away with artillery fire.³ For the first time AT-3 Sagger wire-guided antitank missiles were used against M48 tank

crews along Highway 9 west of Dong Ha. The ARVN tankers "seemed fascinated by their flight and would stare at them, rather than firing at the readily identifiable firing positions or moving."⁴ U.S. Army advisor Lieutenant Colonel Louis P. Wagner reported that the forward deployed M48s were particularly vulnerable to NVA teams armed with the Sagers and B-40 rocket-propelled grenades.⁵

At 0630 on the morning of 27 April, the 304th NVA Division launched an attack on the Ai Tu area from the southwest. The enemy, supported by 130mm artillery fire, attacked VNMC Brigade 147 and the 1st ARVN Armored Brigade to the north of the Marines. In VNMC Brigade 147's area, the 1st VNMC Battalion, with Major Robert C. Cockell and Captain Lawrence H. Livingston, made the first contact. Although hit with more than 500 rounds of 82mm mortar fire within the first two hours, as well as artillery fire, the battalion stopped two ground attacks while suffering only minimal casualties.⁶ During the late afternoon, Communist tank and infantry forces attacked both the 1st and 8th VNMC Battalions. Artillery and the ARVN M48s, in direct support of the Marines, destroyed 15 enemy tanks and drove back the infantry. By nightfall, the two outlying battalions were pulled in closer to the Ai Tu perimeter. Enemy 130mm fire, however, struck the base ammunition dump and destroyed most of the brigade's ammunition stockpile.

At the 3d ARVN Division headquarters in Quang Tri, ANGLICO's HM1 Thomas E. Williamson was manning an improvised dispensary that had been established with Navy Lieutenant John M. Lapoint, HMC Donovan R. Leavitt, HM2 Francis C. Brown, and HM3 James Riddle, from the Naval Advisory Unit in Da Nang. They had been able to provide treatment to ARVN wounded who were unable to be cared for at the swamped provincial military hospital. They had also assisted with injured Americans, including the "BAT-21" airman. As the situation deteriorated on 27 April, Williamson heard that a seriously wounded American advisor with the 2d ARVN Regiment was cut off from air and road evacuation. "Doc" Williamson loaded a medical bag and with a U.S. Army sergeant, Roger Shoemaker, obtained an ARVN armored



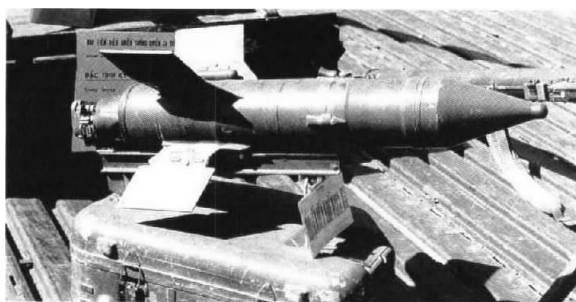


Photo courtesy of Capt Edwin W. Besch, USMC (Ret)
Although South Vietnam's armor held out well against the North Vietnamese tanks, it proved vulnerable to the Soviet-built AT-3 Sagger wire-guided antitank missile. The missile was manpacked and had a maximum range of 3,000 meters. At right is a SA-7 surface-to-air missile, another weapon encountered during 1972.

personnel carrier to take them north of the Thach Han River through small arms and artillery fire. They were able to evacuate the seriously injured Lieutenant Colonel William C. Camper, saving his life.⁷

This pressure on Ai Tu from the west led indirectly to the collapse of the South Vietnamese lines at Dong Ha by 28 April 1972. Responding to a penetration from the west which threatened to cut logistical support from Ai Tu Combat Base, the 1st ARVN Armored Brigade commander recalled the 20th ARVN Tank Battalion from its supporting positions in Dong Ha and along the Cua Viet River and sent the unit south-

ward to deal with the threat. The 57th ARVN Regiment, seeing the tanks pulling out, broke from its defensive positions and retreated in disorder toward Quang Tri City. That morning, a massive traffic jam quickly occurred at the northern gate of Ai Tu. The Marines refused to let the panic-stricken forces through the gate. Finally brigade commander, Colonel Bao, after talking with the officers of the retreating units, let them through rather than have a milling mob destroy the tactical integrity of the northern perimeter. That afternoon, Major Jim R. Joy sent all his advisors, except Major Emmett S. Huff and Captain Earl A. "Skip" Kruger, to Quang Tri City to establish a new command post to support a possible withdrawal.⁸

The 3d ARVN Division sent the 369th brigade's 7th VNMC Battalion north to reinforce Brigade 147, leaving FSB Jane unoccupied. Enroute to Quang Tri, the battalion made heavy contact with the enemy, and only two companies succeeded in breaking through to Quang Tri City, arriving at Ai Tu shortly before dark. After dark, 10 M48 tanks which had previously been sent to the south of the river to reopen QL-1, returned to Ai Tu led by the 20th ARVN Tank Battalion commander. The tanks were back in direct support of the Marines.⁹

At 0200, 29 April, the NVA launched a tank and infantry assault along the 2d ARVN Regiment's front

Inside the Quang Tri Citadel at the MACV Advisory Team 155 compound adjacent to the 3d ARVN Division headquarters, the congested and crowded conditions did not lead to efficiency and provided the North Vietnamese artillery a lucrative target to hit.

Photo courtesy of LCdr Francis C. Brown, USN





Photo courtesy of *Leatherneck Magazine*
Marine Corps medical support came from U.S. Navy personnel. HM1 Thomas E. Williamson, with ANGLICO's Sub Unit One, treated American and South Vietnamese wounded during a critical period while working from the Quang Tri Citadel. He is wearing a Marine Corps uniform with metal naval rank insignia; the name tags were a locally used modification.

and the Thach Han River, securing the north end of the bridge leading into Quang Tri City. Forward air controllers operating under flare-light brought in strike after strike on the enemy's position. Three of the five enemy tanks were destroyed northwest of the bridge, but the enemy still controlled the north end. At first light, Brigade 147 assigned the two companies of the 7th VNMC Battalion the mission of opening the bridge to Quang Tri City. Supported by the tanks from the 20th battalion, the Marines routed the NVA from the bridge's defensive bunkers, killing 12 enemy soldiers and taking two prisoners.

The 4th and 5th Ranger Groups, which were supposed to secure the re-established bridgehead, had crossed over to the Quang Tri City side of the bridge and kept going. Finally, Colonel Bao, unable to find any ARVN troops, and no longer confident of the division's ability to keep it open, assigned the 7th Battalion units responsibility for holding the bridge. As this occurred, the defensive positions north of Ai Tu, which had held against the enemy for almost a month, continued to crumble. The ARVN infantry broke from their positions in an unauthorized withdrawal and flowed south in disorder across the Thach Han Bridge.

Late in the afternoon of 29 April, NVA artillery again hit the Ai Tu ammunition dump. Fires and explosions raged among the remaining ammunition stocks until the morning of 30 April, reducing the Marines to less than 1,000 rounds of ammunition for their howitzers. It had become evident to Major Joy, the senior brigade advisor, in view of the mass withdrawal from the north, that Ai Tu was no longer defensible.

Early Sunday morning, 30 April, an ARVN soldier who had been captured at Camp Carroll by the NVA and had escaped made his way into the area of the 8th VNMC Battalion. He reported that a regimental-sized enemy force supported by 20 tanks was in assembly areas southwest of Ai Tu. Up to this point, artillery and tanks had stopped the attacks, but now, ammunition supply was critical and the 20th ARVN Tanks had been ordered south of the Quang Tri River to establish a defense around Quang Tri City. Naval gunfire could not be used against the staging area designated by the ARVN noncommissioned officer as it was near maximum range and the friendly forces were on the gun-target line.* The Marines called in tactical air with sorties striking so close to the front lines that the enemy troops fled into the defensive wire in an effort to escape the napalm and bombs.

At first light on 30 April, Colonel Chung of VNMC Brigade 369 sent his 5th Battalion north up QL-1 to open the road to Quang Tri. The battalion was mounted on M48 tanks and M113 personnel carriers. Just south of the O Khe River Bridge, the battalion was hit by heavy automatic weapons and recoilless rifle fire. "The Marines continued to advance on foot, driving the enemy skirmishers back," recounted the battalion advisor, Major Donald L. Price. As the battalion commander and Major Price moved forward for a better view of the bridge, they heard the sound of an NVA tank engine starting up on the north bank of the river. With the possibility of a tank ambush, Major Price began what he called a "duel between forward observers."

Major Price, on the south side of the O Khe, called for naval gunfire, concentrating on the vicinity of the tank engine noise. Meanwhile, the NVA on the north side of the river called in 122mm and 130mm artillery fire, apparently on the roadway to the south. This duel

*A "gun-target line" is drawn between the weapon and the target and is used in fire control to make corrections to impacting rounds. The possibility of error is greatest along the axis of this line at extreme range, in some cases rendering supporting fire impractical due to the risk of hitting friendly forces.

went on for more than an hour until Major Price was able to prevail with a series of accurate airstrikes that resulted in secondary fires and explosions in the enemy position. The 5th Battalion then remounted the armored vehicles and attacked across the bridge with the M48s in the lead, firing rapidly into suspected ambush locations along the road.

Another bottleneck was reached between the bridge and Hai Lang, where the NVA had installed themselves in former ARVN outposts alongside the highway. Major Price called in air support, including that of an AC-130 gunship, "to blow the target away." As the 20mm Gatling guns and the 105mm howitzer of the Spectre opened up, tactical aircraft arrived on station and followed the AC-130 attack with devastating accuracy on the now-smoking target. Hit by a lethal combination of MK82 high-explosive bombs and napalm fire bombs, surviving NVA infantry attempted to escape in all directions, "most being shot down by 5th Battalion Marines." With the destruction of this enemy force, down QL-1 "came an exodus of refugees fleeing south." Despite this, the battalion's prospects of linking up with units in Quang Tri City faded. They were now overextended, low on ammunition, and unable to move up the road into the flow of refugees. Colonel Chung ordered the battalion back to the O Khe Bridge and to hold it open for a breakout of units from the north.¹⁰

Confusion at Quang Tri

Even heavy air attacks could not save the untenable salient north of the Thach Han River. At noon on 30 April the 3d ARVN Division's commander, Brigadier General Giai, made the decision to withdraw the Marines from Ai Tu Combat Base and to bring VNMC Brigade 147 to Quang Tri City to provide a defensive force and to concentrate on securing his lines of communication to the south. Lacking secure communications to all his subordinate commands, General Giai called all his unit commanders to a meeting at the Citadel. He explained his rationale for a relocation south of the Thach Han River: the expectation of a renewed enemy offensive; shortages of fuel and ammunition; concern for artillery pieces being captured; the real possibility of being cut off by enemy action; and constant enemy fire at helicopter flights going into Quang Tri and Ai Tu. Under this closely held plan, the security of Quang Tri City would be maintained by VNMC Brigade 147, the only tactical unit remaining in any condition to hold the northern approach to Quang Tri City. General Giai's senior American advisor, Colonel Metcalf, felt "It would be

our last-ditch defense" against the attacking *304th NVA Division*.¹¹ The remaining ARVN and Ranger forces would form a defensive line on the south bank of the Thach Han. The armor and armored cavalry would be committed to open the highway to the south toward Hue.¹²

Colonel Bao, along with Major Joy, attended the meeting at the Quang Tri Citadel. When they received the order to pull back, Bao and Joy tried to telephone Lieutenant Colonel Nguyen Xuan Phuc, the deputy brigade commander, who was at Ai Tu with Major Huff, and inform him of the decision. Secure voice communications could not be established, so the deputy commander was ordered to report to Quang Tri for a briefing. While awaiting his arrival, Colonel Bao and Major Joy conducted a reconnaissance of the city.

Upon the arrival of Phuc, Bao briefed him on the division withdrawal plan. Although Joy had attempted to persuade the brigade commander to return to Ai Tu personally to oversee the withdrawal, Bao felt he could exercise better control from his new command post in the position formerly occupied by MACV Advisory Team 19, the U.S. Army advisory team for Quang Tri Province.¹³ While the brigade deputy was enroute back to Ai Tu, 3d ARVN Division received intelligence that indicated the NVA planned a division-sized attack on Quang Tri City that night and ordered Ai Tu to commence the evacuation immediately. The plan had already been explained to the subordinate commanders north of the river and began smoothly as the Marine brigade headquarters and its artillery battalion departed first. The 1st VNMC Battalion comprised the main body, followed by the 8th VNMC Battalion in trace, covering the western flank. The 4th VNMC Battalion closed the column as the rear guard.

Prior to leaving, Major Huff and Captain Earl A. Kruger destroyed the secure voice radio equipment and other classified material. The American advisors, having finished their destruction duties, joined the 4th VNMC Battalion just as it was clearing the southeastern perimeter of the Ai Tu Combat Base. Captain Kruger, later awarded the Silver Star Medal for his actions, effectively directed and controlled tactical air strikes, and artillery and naval gunfire missions, slowing the pursuing NVA and permitting the brigade's orderly and covered withdrawal.

As VNMC Brigade 147 moved south from Ai Tu, Major Huff requested fire missions from ANGLICO's Major Glen Golden, who, in turn, relayed the requests



Photo courtesy of 1stSgt Jimmy D. Evans, USA (Ret)

Armored units, forced to leave the highway because of enemy action, and refugees had to brave the demands of crosscountry travel. At this fording place east of National Highway 1, 20th ARVN Tank Battalion vehicles are lost as they bog down in a river bed.

to the ships. At that time there were 16 naval gunfire ships responding to Golden's requests. These ships included the 8-inch cruiser USS *Newport News* (CA-148), three 6-inch cruisers, and 12 5-inch destroyers. Golden attempted to keep gunfire between the brigade and the NVA, and to provide some form of continuing fire support. In the existing situation, he was concerned that he might have to walk out of Quang Tri City on a pair of arthritic knees.¹⁴

The withdrawal was going as planned until the Marine column, approaching Quang Tri City, discovered that ARVN engineers had destroyed both bridges across the Thach Han River. The Marines tried to tow their artillery across a ford, but the swift current and soft bottom frustrated their efforts, forcing them to destroy 18 howitzers and 22 vehicles. Fortunately, 16 of the 18 remaining tanks of the 20th ARVN Tank Battalion were able to ford the river one kilometer north of the bridges. Two tanks were lost, one to a mine and the other to recoilless rifle fire. Marine infantry swam and waded the river at the bridge site and moved directly into their defensive positions. While wading

the river, Captain Kruger narrowly escaped drowning as a Vietnamese Marine, losing his footing, panicked and grabbed Kruger's arm. Twice the advisor went under, but he maintained his hold on the radio floating on an air mattress. Major Huff pushed the air mattress toward Kruger, who then pulled himself to safety.¹⁵

By dark, the brigade had occupied its planned defensive positions in Quang Tri City: The 1st VNMC Battalion had an area west of the city; the 4th VNMC Battalion guarded the eastern and southern approaches; and the 8th VNMC Battalion defended the north. The headquarters and the remaining units occupied a location inside the Citadel compound.¹⁶

Team 155 and General Giai Depart

The 3d ARVN Division command post, within the Citadel, was having a difficult time coordinating the maneuver elements of the division. Command integrity had completely dissolved. Infantry units along the river, seeing the tanks continuing to move south, abandoned their positions. All types of vehicles began to



David Burnett Contact Press Images

The ARVN went south to dig in and fight again. This M48 pulls out with its turret pointed north towards the enemy. On board are wounded and other escaping soldiers.

run out of fuel and were abandoned. Major Golden, the MR 1 naval gunfire officer, who had arrived at the 3d ARVN Division command post a week earlier, found little cohesion between the ARVN staff and its U.S. Army counterparts. According to Golden, two bunkers inside the Citadel served as the control center of the division. One bunker housed the combat operations center (COC) of the ARVN division; the other, 50 yards away, contained the command center of MACV Team 155. The only interchange that existed was at the highest level between Brigadier General Giai and Colonel Metcalf. Other counterparts did not talk to each other and the 27 maneuver battalions reported, if they reported at all, as individual units.

On his own initiative, Golden installed a direct telephone line between the ARVN artillery officer in the ARVN combat operations center bunker and himself in the advisor bunker. As he received fire requests from Marine advisors withdrawing with their units, or from ANGLICO aerial observers flying in U.S. Air Force

OV-10s, he was able to fire several massed time-on-targets with ARVN artillery and American naval gunfire. There was no formal fire planning, but air, artillery, and naval gunfire managed to keep pressure on the enemy. Golden received his first and only guidance from Colonel Metcalf, who pointed to a map and said, "everything outside this circle around the Citadel is a free fire zone." Although Golden requested thousands of naval gunfire rounds in support of the withdrawal, he later stated "the only thing that saved the entire situation, the only thing that slowed the NVA down, was American tactical air . . . We had so much of it."¹⁷

The enemy, however, had routed the South Vietnamese in the north and wanted to maintain pressure on the city. On 1 May, General Giai decided that further defense of Quang Tri City would be fruitless, and to protect "the lives of all of you," he decided to pull all units back to a defensive line at My Chanh.¹⁸ Intelligence reports indicated that the city would be hit

by a 10,000-round artillery attack beginning at 1700. At 1215, the 3d ARVN Division's chief of staff walked into Advisory Team 155's bunker and, using American radio circuits, called all the subordinate commanders and their advisors and said "General Giai has released all commanders to fight their way to the My Chanh River!" This came as a complete surprise to all Americans in the tactical operations center. Within 30 minutes, the I Corps commander, Lieutenant General Lam, or a deputy, issued a counterorder to "stand and die." This directive apparently was from Saigon as Lam was reporting directly to President Thieu.¹⁹

At this point, General Giai's subordinates refused to obey and said he could withdraw with them or be left at the Citadel, "a threat they proceeded to carry out."²⁰ All across the northern salient, commanders had already begun their withdrawal and a mass exodus had begun. Unit commanders did not acknowledge the change in orders or openly refused to deviate from the original command. Within hours the entire area was in chaos and confusion reigned.²¹

The end comes for the Americans with the 3d ARVN Division at Quang Tri. An Air Force noncommissioned officer burns classified documents to prevent them from falling into enemy hands at the Citadel. Other equipment and material was left behind during the rapid withdrawal that followed shortly afterwards.

Photo courtesy of LCDr Francis C. Brown, USN



No orderly withdrawal plan was promulgated or even suggested. It was every battalion for itself. Any identifiable sense of unity crumbled. The confusion of orders, combined with a month of constant bombardment and harrowing combat, destroyed the last traces of cohesion among the ARVN troops and advisors. A frightened mob poured out as a "tidal wave onto Highway 1" and fled southward toward Hue. Only Marine Brigade 147 remained under control. Shortly afterwards, Colonel Metcalf called brigade headquarters via secure radio and said, "The ARVN are pulling out; advisors may stay with their units or join me" for evacuation. Major Joy responded that the Brigade 147 advisors would remain with their units.²²

Brigade 147 withdrew from Quang Tri, destroying excess equipment in the process. This orderly destruction included large amounts of communications gear left by advisory teams which previously occupied the position. A little after 1300, the brigade headquarters and artillery battalion headquarters moved to a point southwest of the Citadel, where they expected to be joined by the 3d ARVN Division commander and staff, and then to push on to the south to link up with VNMC Brigade 369 at My Chanh.²³ In a letter home, a U.S. Army captain who was serving as an advisor with the ARVN, praised VNMC Brigade 147 for its coolness:

As bad as I hate to say it, thank God for the Marines. The ARVN regulars, rangers, and militia ran, and I do mean ran, away from the NVA. However, one brigade of Marines not only stood and fought but damned if they didn't launch a counterattack while everyone else ran away. Without doubt they saved us . . .²⁴

General Giai had loaded his remaining staff officers on three armored personnel carriers and had roared out of the Citadel in an attempt to break out along with his retreating men. The departing M113's left behind about 80 Americans and Vietnamese of the advisory compound. Colonel Metcalf called General Kroesen for rescue helicopters in accordance with pre-arranged plans with FRAC and said, "Now is the time."²⁵

General Giai and his staff, unable to break through the encircling enemy and link up with VNMC Brigade 147, came roaring back into the Citadel, adding at least 40 more people to be evacuated by helicopter. By 1500 the helicopters had not arrived. Major Golden had lost radio contact with VNMC Brigade 147 as it moved out of range. At this time, as he was destroying all radio equipment and weapons, the telephone rang: the commercial telephone circuit to Hue con-



North Vietnamese Army Photo

As the forward defenses crumbled, the Communists moved in for the final assault. "Nguyen Thanh Binh, a valiant and resourceful scout" leads his small unit into Quang Tri City in this North Vietnamese picture. Shown is the relatively small amount of personal combat equipment carried by the NVA infantryman.

tinued to function.* In spite of the urgency of the moment, with flames leaping around the burning war material, Golden answered the call in the precise military manner that professionals use in telephone conversation. All at once it felt good to do something normal. The feeling, however, did not last long, for the voice on the other end, the naval gunfire officer at Hue, casually asked how everything was going up there. Infuriated by the "social" call, Golden ripped the telephone from the wall and hurled it into the fire.

At 1635, U.S. Air Force search and rescue helicopters arrived to remove the 118 persons inside the Citadel. U.S. Army gunships escorted the helicopters and U.S. Marine and Air Force fighters provided air cover. The first helicopter landed and quickly loaded 40 people,

*One item of equipment lost at this time was the naval gunfire beacon, a transponder that allowed the naval gunfire ships to compute accurate firing data, especially important considering the lack of landmarks along the coast of MR 1.

including General Giai. The second helicopter landed in trace, and after taking on about 40 more people, flew away. Sixteen Americans remained in the Citadel in addition to the remaining 3d ARVN Division staff. After a seemingly interminable wait, a third HH-53 came in low and settled into the landing zone. Hurriedly, the remaining survivors clambered on board. Colonel Metcalf and Major Golden were the last Americans on the ground at the Citadel. As the last helicopter lifted off, a lone enemy rifleman entered the compound and fired several rapid shots at the aircraft. The hazardous rescue mission had been completed with no time to spare.²⁶

VNMC Brigade 147 on Its Own

To the south, Brigade 147 had been waiting for Giai and his staff to arrive for the move to the My Chanh River. Major Joy had been talking with Colonel Metcalf earlier in the afternoon to coordinate the effort. After being unable to break through and join the brigade, Metcalf radioed Joy that the linkup could not be made and that the advisors with the brigade should resort to their own devices. In what had to be taken as a gesture, Metcalf reiterated that the Marine advisors, who included Majors Huff, Charles J. Goode, and Thomas E. Gribus, and Captains Kruger and Marshall R. Wells, could rejoin him for the helicopter lift-out. Major Joy declined the invitation, saying the advisors would remain with their units. The departing Team 155 senior advisor replied, "Good luck." Major Joy saw the "Jolly Green Giant" helicopters going into the Citadel. He then realized that there was only enemy to the north.

Brigade 147 proceeded east for approximately 2,000 meters and then turned south. After making several difficult stream crossings, the column arrived at the Hai Lang area, 10 kilometers south of Quang Tri City. The enemy had engaged the fleeing ARVN forces just west of the Hai Lang District headquarters, halting all movement to the south. An NVA corporal with a mortar unit reported, "The people were moving on bicycles, motorbikes, and buses . . . No one was able to escape."²⁷ The NVA attack on this road, by artillery and infantry weapons, earned Highway 1 the title "Highway of Horror" for the estimated 2,000 civilian and military dead left along a three-quarters-of-a-mile stretch. "A solid wall of military and civilian rolling stock of every description, bumper-to-bumper and three vehicles abreast," remained on the road. Personal effects, individual equipment, and bodies were piled in the vehicles and lay strewn alongside, and to the



Government of Vietnam Photo

Once again civilian and military refugees fled from the fighting. These civilians, walking along National Highway 1 south of Quang Tri City near Hai Lang, blocked the road south.

east, where individuals had attempted to flee to safety.²⁸

Colonel Bao, the Brigade 147 commander, after a long and heated discussion with his battalion commanders, decided to establish a tight perimeter for the night and resume the march the next day. In the course of the conference it became clear that all units in the brigade were still well organized and combat effective. Ten M48s, however, had been lost in the vicinity of the Nhung River. Four were destroyed by enemy recoilless rifle fire, while six had been lost trying to ford rivers. Only six tanks remained of the 42 that had arrived at Dong Ha on Easter Sunday. Major Huff, assisting the brigade operations officer, prepared the night defensive fires and requested that a forward air controller, one of whom had been in contact with the column since it had departed Quang Tri City, remain on station throughout the night. An AC-130 gunship also was made immediately available by I DASC should any contact be made during the night. Major Joy, on VNMC Brigade 369's tactical net, contacted Major Robert F. Sheridan, that brigade's senior advisor. Major Sheridan had followed his fellow advisors' radio traffic closely in the days preceding the mass exodus. Sheridan gave Joy a thorough briefing on the situation and the area into which VNMC Brigade 147 was moving.

One by one the M48 tanks of the 20th ARVN Tank Battalion were lost in the defense of Quang Tri Province. This one was destroyed by Communist antitank missiles on Highway 1, south of Quang Tri City.

Photo courtesy of 1stSgt Jimmy D. Evans, USA (Ret)





North Vietnamese Army Photo

The Communists attempted to cut the withdrawal route from Quang Tri City by fire and maneuver. North Vietnamese forward observers called artillery fire in on civilian and military highway traffic to close this link to the fleeing 3d ARVN Division and its units.

Major Sheridan had advised Colonel Chung to keep Brigade 369 moving, including his 105mm howitzers. The constant shifting of positions, never spending two nights on the same piece of terrain, served to keep the NVA artillery and infantry off balance. Captain George Philip, with the artillery battalion, felt the brigade was the "bull's eye" for the NVA artillery. "A favorite target was the VNMC 105mm batteries which were woefully outranged and usually easily observed" by the NVA from their elevated positions to the west. The Marine batteries had to displace four to five times a day to survive, saved by the "extremely slow" way in which the NVA observers tried to get a bracket.²⁹ It was still a helpless and frustrating experience. Recalled Major Andrew D. DeBona, "We were continually on the move, rarely staying over one day in the same spot." He did note that the digging of new fighting positions did not suffer, as "nothing enhances your ability to dig like incoming."³⁰

Without a battalion at FSB Jane, the brigade had been unsuccessful in its attempts to keep open the road between Quang Tri and Hue, but it had inflicted exceptionally heavy losses on the enemy in close

combat.³¹ It was estimated that at least a reinforced NVA regiment now held QL-1 at Hai Lang, but that a horde of intermingled civilian and ARVN stragglers prevented maneuver on the highway.

Brigade 369's efforts were now directed at keeping the bridges over the O Khe and My Chanh open to the withdrawing troops and civilians. With Quang Tri City lost, Colonel Pham Van Chung decided that VNMC Brigade 369 would be hit by the NVA the next day at first light. In planning for the defense of the O Khe and My Chanh River lines, recalled Sheridan, "He ordered antitank mines to be emplaced immediately along Highway 1, that naval gunfire and artillery be registered," and that battalion blocking positions be established along the highway.³²

At dawn on 2 May, VNMC Brigade 369's "whole world came apart" as it was subjected throughout its area to massive artillery fire. Major Sheridan stated that "we all just got deeper in our holes and called NGF on the suspected routes of advance." The brigade's two forward battalions, advised by Major Donald L. Price and Major James D. Beans, were hit by tanks and infantry and had to fight their way to the My Chanh River, a mile or so to the south, "destroying NVA troops along the way." At the My Chanh River, the brigade dug in astride QL-1 to hold the bridges at My Chanh. As Sheridan watched, thousands of civilian refugees, interspersed with troops, passed over the bridges.³³ Major Price recalled that there was great concern that NVA armor would pursue VNMC Brigade 147. This concern was focused on the large highway bridge, adjacent to the long-destroyed railway bridge, across the My Chanh River.

Communist tanks attempting to pursue the ARVN south of the O Khe River bridge, were met by the 9th VNMC Battalion. The lead tank was hit by antitank rockets and the following vehicle piled in behind.

Photo courtesy of 1stSgt Jimmy D. Evans, USA (Ret)





David Burnett Contact Press Images

Incoming artillery and antitank rounds took a toll from those within armored vehicles. These ARVN crewmen drop inside their personnel carrier to escape from enemy fire. The interior of the vehicle is crowded with engineer material and personal possessions.

Further to the north, early on the morning of 2 May, after an uneventful night, VNMC Brigade 147 prepared to move out as planned. At 0500, tank noises were reported to the west, near the 1st VNMC Battalion's area. Brigade headquarters placed the entire perimeter on 100-percent alert. By 0600, no tanks had appeared from the west, but the 8th VNMC Battalion reported tank rumblings due south, in the direction the brigade was planning to cross the O Khe River. At 0715, units began receiving small arms fire from the northwest, followed by a heavy volume of small arms fire from the vicinity of Hai Lang to the east. The brigade and its remaining 20th ARVN Tank Battalion armor, with assorted ARVN and civilian stragglers interspersed, was surrounded.

Simultaneously, enemy armor supported by infantry and 57mm and 75mm recoilless rifle fire came from the north, west, and east. The ARVN tank and APC drivers panicked and fled in their vehicles to avoid enemy contact, breaking without returning a single shot. None of the remaining M48 tanks reached the My Chanh River; all were believed to have become casualties of the terrain. With the bolting of the armored task force, effective command and control of VNMC Brigade 147 evaporated as anxiety gave way to hysteria.

Majors Joy and Huff jumped off the command APC

as it broke from the column. Joy yelled for the other advisors, riding on the following vehicle, to jump also. An American civilian evacuee, Jerry Dunn, a communications technician from the provincial CORDS advisory team, joined the six Marines. Two U.S. Army advisors remained on the APC and were swallowed up in the dust and confusion. The Marine advisors, moving at the end of the column, continued to call air strikes on the Hai Lang area where the attack had originated. It was soon apparent that the advisors were hopelessly separated from their counterparts, who had remained on the APCs. While on the move, Major Joy told Major Huff to contact the forward air controller flying overhead and to request an emergency helicopter evacuation. The air controller acknowledged the request and then reported that there were enemy tanks moving toward the advisors from the east and south. It appeared that in less than 10 minutes the NVA tanks would be on top of them.

At 0945, the advisors heard a helicopter overhead. Major Huff gave it a bearing and, as the pilot started a downward spiral, Major Joy popped a smoke grenade and stood up to guide the helicopter into the landing zone. The helicopter landed in a deluge of artillery, mortar, small arms, and recoilless rifle fire. The instant before touchdown, the aircraft commander, Cap-

rain Stanley A. Dougherty, USA, shifted his approach 90 degrees, thus turning the port side toward the senior advisor, but denying the remaining members of the group easy access to the hatch.

Under fire from all sides, the advisors scrambled by panicked ARVN stragglers who were grabbing onto the helicopter. The helicopter unexpectedly lifted off with Major Huff astraddle one of the skids, holding on to Captain Kruger with one hand and onto the aircraft with the other. At about 50 feet altitude, the pilot, seeing Kruger dangling below his aircraft, set back down in a hail of fire, permitting the two Marines to board.

With rotors turning furiously, the pilot attempted to take off once more. Finally, after kicking all but four ARVN soldiers from the skids, the aircraft gained some altitude, only to go into a 45-degree plummet toward the earth. At tree-top level, the now-smoking helicopter pulled out of the steep dive and picked up speed. As they skimmed south over the My Chanh River, the Marines discovered that they had been rescued by FRAC's Brigadier General Thomas W. Bowen, Jr., USA. Bowen, who had been flying in the area, had ordered his pilot to make the courageous rescue attempt. Six Marines, one civilian, and four ARVN soldiers had literally been plucked from imminent capture or death.³⁴

After a desperate march south, most of VNMC Brigade 147 eventually straggled into the lines of VNMC Brigade 369. Once across the My Chanh River, VNMC Brigade 147 reassembled at the Hue Citadel to regroup once more.³⁵ As the day ended, the flood of refugees across the bridges became a trickle and oncoming units were directed to cross along the coast to the east.

On orders from Colonel Chung, Major Price destroyed the My Chanh River Bridge. A squad of Ma-

rine engineers attempted to render the bridge impassable. With only a limited amount of explosives, they set off a charge under the center span, but succeeded only in destroying a few wooden cross members and dislodging others. Realizing that this easily could be repaired by the enemy, Major Price had the engineers siphon fuel from the tanks of their vehicles. Forming a "bucket brigade" with the engineers, using their helmets to hold the fuel, they soaked the wooden road bed and supports in gasoline and diesel fuel. Major Price set the bridge on fire with signal flares. The smoke from the fire lasted for days as a beacon along QL-1 for attack aircraft. Commented Sheridan, "although not as spectacular as our friend John Ripley's Dong Ha Bridge, it nevertheless had the same result." Chung's VNMC Brigade 369 held the key terrain and he stated "No Communist will cross the rivet and live." Prisoners captured that day confessed to being surprised by the resistance they met; they had been told the road to Hue City was open.*³⁶

VNMC Brigade 369 had access to the vast array of American firepower from the air and at sea. That evening Sheridan tried to coordinate fire missions on the visible NVA tanks and infantry north of the My Chanh River, and was frustrated by an air controller who would not clear air strikes because the FAC could not see the targets. Chung did not care, so long as the air support continued north of the river. As Sheridan called Lieutenant Colonel Turley at the Marine division command post for help in resolving the impasse, he recalled, "I was knocked to the ground and bounced around for what seemed to be an eternity." Six B-52s dropped their bomb loads just on the other side of the river. When the concussions ended, a disheveled Colonel Chung got out of his collapsed bunker and said with a smile, "That was very good. Do it again."³⁷

*Marine Division casualties through May were 764 killed, 1,595 wounded, and 285 missing.

PART III
THE CEASEFIRE CAMPAIGN

CHAPTER 7

The Defense of Hue City

*Holding the My Chanh Line—Fleet Marine Force Support—Truong Takes Charge
The Vietnamese Marine Division—The Marines Attack—The North Vietnamese React
Operation Song Than 6-72—In the Balance*

Holding the My Chanh Line

South Vietnam reeled from the setbacks of the past month. By 2 May 1972, the entire province of Quang Tri, including Quang Tri City, had fallen to the NVA. Elsewhere in MR 1, the invaders threatened Hue by occupying Fire Support Base Bastogne. The populace of Hue was in a "near state of panic."¹ In MR 3, just northwest of Saigon, NVA tanks rolled into An Loc and were held there only by bitter fighting on the part of South Vietnamese forces. The South Vietnamese and American governments had to react to a critical situation and, within less than a week after Nui Ba Ho had fallen, the Americans responded with a rapid build-up of air power within South Vietnam and with forces offshore. ARVN unit equipment losses were staggering, but American trucks, tanks, howitzers, aircraft, and additional advisors began arriving at Da Nang.²

Fleet Marine Force Support

In response to General Creighton W. Abram's desire for direct American support, CinCPac and the Seventh Fleet deployed elements of III Marine Amphibious Force (III MAF) into the combat area. Marine Aircraft Group (MAG) 15, with two fixed-wing squadrons, operated from Da Nang in defense of Hue. The 9th Marine Amphibious Brigade (MAB), as the landing forces component of the Seventh Fleet, had also responded rapidly to the invasion. Elements of the fleet's amphibious forces were in the Gulf of Tonkin.³ The initial tasks of the fleet's amphibious forces had been to provide MACV security and emergency evacuation for U.S. forces should the need arise. By the time MACV and the South Vietnamese recognized the extent of the enemy invasion, the U.S. had four amphibious ready groups off Vietnam, totaling 16 ships under the command of Rear Admiral Walter D. Gaddis in the USS *Blue Ridge* (LCC 19).

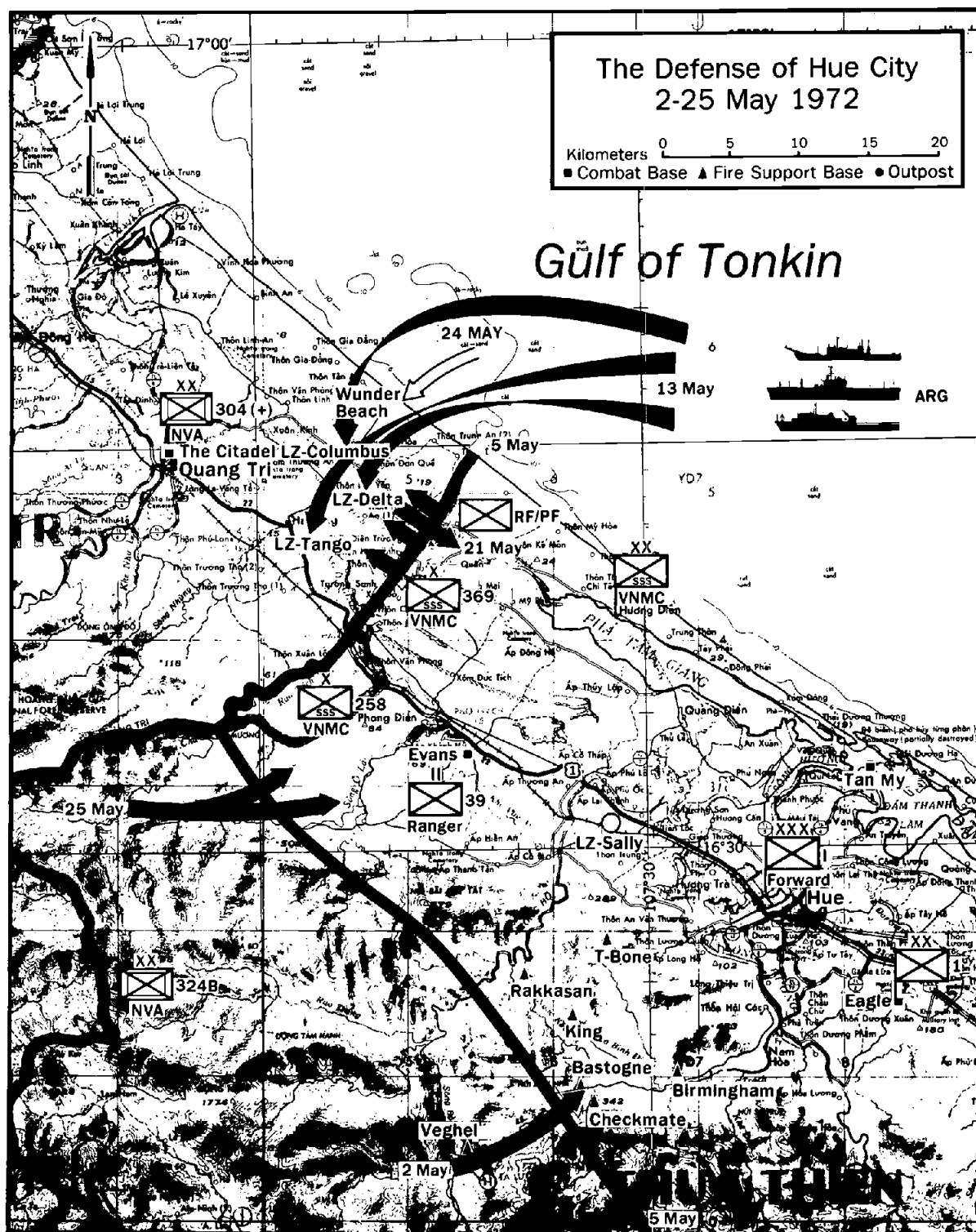
After the loss of Quang Tri City, ANGLICO's Sub Unit One regrouped its shore fire control parties in MR 1 and established new arrangements for air observation teams at Phu Bai, Da Nang, and Chu Lai. By now, liaison/spot teams were deployed in three of the South Vietnamese military regions. On 2 May, Lieutenant Colonel D'Wayne Gray, of ANGLICO, sent

a message to FMFPac requesting additional naval gunfire officers, air observers, and enlisted communicators. Within 48 hours, more than 200 Marines had reported to MACV Headquarters in Saigon. These specially trained Marines were from FMFPac units in California, Okinawa, Hawaii, and Japan. Lieutenant Colonel Gray formed the incoming personnel into naval gunfire spot teams and deployed them with the ARVN Airborne and Marine Divisions. For Gray, this response to a request for help was "heartwarming."⁴

Lieutenant Colonel Gray had serious misgivings, however, about the handling of supporting arms during the previous month in MR 1 after receiving reports and listening to the needs of the commanders of the 1st ARVN Division and the Vietnamese Marine Division.* He informed Brigadier General William H. Lanagan, with MACV J-3, that the defense of Hue required "an effective commander for I Corps," who could command the respect of his division commanders. Moreover, the Americans needed to replace the South Vietnamese artillery and tank losses. He strongly argued that priority of American firepower must be given to the defense of Hue. Gray believed that effective targeting and coordination centers for the total fire support effort needed to be established and this "will require strong American action; the Vietnamese do not know how to do it." This could happen only if General Abrams personally intervened at once with the senior U.S. Army advisor and the Air Force commander. General Lanagan forwarded these concerns to the MACV chief of staff, stating that the crux of the problem was obvious, "the almost total disconnect between the air war and the ground war . . ."⁵ The Americans had to get their houses in order before they could hope to help the Vietnamese.**

*Gray had maintained a continuing relationship with the Vietnamese Marines from a previous advisory tour and from Vietnamese classmates in Marine Corps Schools at Quantico, Virginia.

**In 1975 the Center for Naval Analyses studied this period, concluding that the presence of moderately sophisticated antiaircraft weapons hampered U.S. abilities to provide close and direct air support, adverse weather during April 1972 severely degraded what close air support was available, naval gunfire played a vital role in compensating for air support, and trained and experienced fire support personnel were essential to coordinate these supporting arms. (CNA, Hue&QuangTri, pp. 1-2.)





Department of Defense Photo (USMC) A800720
Taking command during the battle was LtGen Ngo Quang Truong, shown here in front of the I Corps forward headquarters at Hue. He wears the ARVN uniform with both Vietnamese and American senior parachute insignia from tours with airborne forces.

Truong Takes Charge

Abrupt changes in the MR 1 and FRAC command structures strengthened the organizational unity of the South Vietnamese forces. On 4 May, the South Vietnamese Joint General Staff replaced General Lam with Lieutenant General Ngo Quang Truong. Truong moved his main command post to the Hue Citadel, a move that reflected a change in purpose and focus for operations in MR 1.* His immediate task was to stabilize his forces and to make effective use of available American support through FRAC. Major General Frederick J. Kroesen, the FRAC commander, recalled that General Truong's first actions and concerns were "consolidation of the defense of Hue." He had to restore the ARVN command structure and organize a reliable logistics system for his front-line units.⁸ Truong's available forces included the Marine and ARVN Airborne divisions responsible for the northern and northwestern areas of Thua Thien Province, the 1st ARVN Division south and southwest of Hue

*Previously, General Lam operated from both Hue and Da Nang.

City, and the 2d ARVN Division in MR 1's southern provinces.

On the same date, command changes also affected the Vietnamese Marine Corps. While visiting Marine division headquarters at Hue, President Nguyen Van Thieu announced that the Marine Commandant, Lieutenant General Le Nguyen Khang, had been promoted to Chairman of the Joint General Staff for Operations. The President named General Khang's deputy, Colonel Bui The Lan, as interim VNMC Commandant. Thieu's order of the day was that the My Chanh Line would hold; there would be no further withdrawals.⁷

The Vietnamese Marine Division

For the first time since the Spring Offensive had begun, the VNMC Division had its own tactical area of responsibility.** Its battle line extended from the Gulf of Tonkin, westward across QL-1, and on into the foothills of the Annamite Cordillera. The division forward command post moved from Hue City to the village of Huong Dien near the coast north of Hue. Colonel Joshua Dorsey's Marine Advisory Unit found itself fully committed to field operations with the VNMC Division, establishing a combat operations center, a fire support coordination center, and a communications center in the village school house. Colonel Dorsey abolished the battalion advisory billets and increased the brigade advisory teams to six officers, including a fire support coordinator. Frequent task organizing of the brigade teams still provided advisors to the battalions when required.⁸

In order to support the division, elements of the Amphibious Support Battalion were deployed to MR 1 from Saigon to operate with the ARVN 1st Area Logistics Command at Hue with the rear headquarters of the Marine division. To control the infusion of American supporting arms, the division needed critical support in the form of communications equipment, operators, and fire-support coordination personnel drawn from ANGLICO, 1st Radio Battalion, the Air Force's 20th Tactical Air Support Squadron (TASS), and the Army's 14th Signal Company.⁹

As the NVA offensive halted at the My Chanh River,

**The creation of a division-sized force of Vietnamese Marines was the advisory unit's major goal for a number of years. Designated a division in 1968, the personnel strength was not attained until September 1970, and specialized support and service units were still lacking in 1971. In March 1971 during Lam Son 719 a division command post deployed to control VNMC brigades involved in the incursion into Laos with mixed results. By 1972 the desire to field the VNMC Division as a unit was high on the list of advisor priorities.



Department of Defense Photo (USMC) A800666

The Marine leadership for the defense of Hue included, from left, BGen Edward J. Miller of the 9th Marine Amphibious Brigade; Col Joshua Dorsey, Senior Marine Advisor; and BGen Bui The Lan, commanding the Vietnamese Marine Corps. Gen Lan's use of the nametape "Laan" was as an aid for pronunciation for the benefit of the Americans.

The deployment and conduct of operations by the entire Marine Division required command and control facilities near the front lines. The location of the division forward command post was the small coastal village of Huong Dien within the local school building. The building housed the combat operations and fire support coordination centers.

Department of Defense Photo (USMC) A800660



everything to the north was declared a free-fire zone. The 1st Regional Assistance Command believed that the Communist forces were capable of launching a new offensive in Thua Thien Province. The 304th, 308th and 324B NVA Divisions, the 202d and 203d NVA Armored Regiments, and supporting units were all available to the enemy. The NVA also could hold Quang Tri Province with two divisions, supported by artillery and armor.¹⁰ From 5 to 25 May, the NVA probed the river-edge defenses. Losses sustained in previous weeks did not permit full-scale offensive actions, but the enemy's intentions were clear. Hue was the target and a major assault of the My Chanh Line was imminent.

On 5 May, VNMC Brigade 258 displaced its headquarters north from Hue to Phong Dien on QL-1 to relieve the headquarters of VNMC Brigade 369. It was a shift of headquarters only, as the respective battalions remained in place and the 39th ARVN Ranger Battalion assumed control of Camp Evans. Brigade commander Lieutenant Colonel Ngo Van Dinh concentrated his 2d VNMC Battalion at the junction of QL-1 and the My Chanh River in order to prevent any reconstruction of the bridge by the enemy. Dinh heavily reinforced his western flank as he anticipated the all-out attack on Hue to originate in the nearby foothills. The area to the west, due to thick canopy and rolling hills, was well concealed from aerial observation. The Marines of Brigade 258 were thinly spread over a large area, but Dinh was confident. He kept his units moving, effectively employing the principle of economy of force by concentrating his forces only as enemy threats developed. Static defensive positions did not suit him; he was anxious to push north. He told his advisors, "give me 20 tanks and a diversionary attack from the east, and we will be in Quang Tri City in two days."¹¹

VNMC Brigade 369 assumed operational control of the eastern half of the division's area of the My Chanh Line, including the Regional and Popular Force units responsible for the area near the coast. This drastically reduced VNMC Brigade 369's area of responsibility and the My Chanh Line was stronger than ever. Colonel Pham Van Chung, who commanded Brigade 369 during the withdrawal of South Vietnamese forces from Quang Tri City and to the My Chanh River, became division chief of staff (forward). Lieutenant Colonel Nguyen The Luong then assumed command of the brigade.

VNMC Brigade 147 remained at Hue with the 4th and 8th VNMC Battalions, replacing personnel and

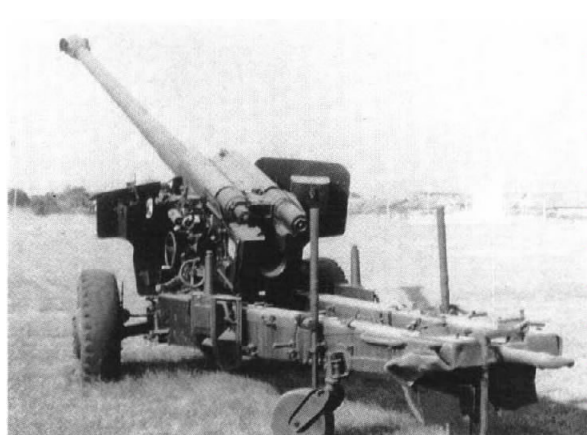


Photo courtesy of Capt Edwin W. Besch, USMC (Ret)
Superior Communist artillery equipment continued to provide the North Vietnamese their main long-range weapon. Its concentrated fire proved devastating to the ability of the South Vietnamese to fight in MR 1 from positions designed to withstand rocket and mortar attacks only. This 122mm gun is a Chinese Type 60, used along with Soviet D74 artillery pieces.

making up supply losses directly from U.S. Marine Corps stocks. Lieutenant Colonel Turley assisted Colonel Dorsey in these resupply efforts. New anti-tank weapons arrived to augment the Vietnamese Marine capabilities to defeat armor on the ground.¹²

North Vietnamese 130mm guns, however, continued to trouble the Marine defenders along the My Chanh River. The ARVN 175mm guns, which outranged the enemy artillery, were back in action. The reorganized Marine division fire support coordination center (FSCC) at Hue made every effort to provide lucrative enemy targets for the 175s. NVA heavy artillery was well deployed, making it difficult for the air observers to get a fix on firing positions. Due to the SA-7 anti-aircraft threat, airborne forward air controllers, forced to fly above 9,500 feet, could not readily spot enemy gun flashes. The enemy guns had no more than two platoons (two to four guns) in any one position. These were spread all over the northwest portion of Quang Tri Province. As FACs flew over suspected enemy gun positions, the guns obviously would cease firing and another platoon would open up from a different sector, linked by an efficient communications network.¹³

The Marines Attack

Using his Marine and airborne units in MR 1, General Truong conducted a series of limited objective attacks and raids. These were a combination of heliborne and amphibious assaults together with



Department of Defense Photo (USMC) A800686

U.S. Marine direct support arrived from the 9th MAB for the defense of Hue. Here Vietnamese Marines board a Boeing CH-46 Sea Knight from HMM-164 for the first of a number of helicopter assaults behind enemy lines flown by the Americans in the spring of 1972.

ground attacks that provided the South Vietnamese time to prepare for their counteroffensive and succeeded in keeping the NVA off balance. The South Vietnamese gave the code name Song Than (Tidal Wave) to these operations.¹⁴

With two usable bridges and available air, naval gunfire, and artillery support under his control, Colonel Lan began planning for operations within his area. Colonel Dorsey suggested a heliborne assault into the Hai Lang District. The commanding general of MR 1, General Truong, fully concurred with the Marine recommendation and asked General Abrams for Seventh Fleet support from the 9th MAB. Under the guidance of their commander, the Vietnamese Marines began planning a helicopter raid. Within 72 hours of final approval, the raid, named Song Than 5-72, was underway.

During darkness on 12 May, the first Marines to go north since the NVA invasion clandestinely crossed the My Chanh River. Captain Luc of Brigade 369's reconnaissance company, First Lieutenant Thu Xuan, the

communications officer of the 9th VNMC Battalion, and a small group of other Marines swam the river to establish a communications site to assist command and control of the operation the next morning.¹⁵

In the first instance of direct support from the 9th MAB, CH-46s and CH-53s from HMM-164 lifted 1,138 Vietnamese Marines into attack positions. To move the two battalions, 60 Vietnamese Marines were carried by each U.S. Marine CH-53 and 20 by each CH-46 in two sequential waves. Lieutenant Colonel Edward C. "Ed" Hertberg of HMM-164 planned to provide the maximum possible lift capability in each wave and to reduce possible losses. Operations officer Major Donald C. Brodie explained that the "helicopter assault routes were flown at 'nap-of-the-earth' height," contrary to then-current practice. The CH-46s were to be 30 to 40 feet off the deck (above ground) and the CH-53s only slightly higher.¹⁶ A single wave of helicopters was used for each of two landing zones, reducing the exposure time to NVA antiaircraft fire.

Major Frank S. Bells' maintenance crews on the USS

Okinawa (LPH 3) made the aircraft ready for launch and began their long wait for recovery. The first helicopter launch from the offshore amphibious ready group went at 0800, 13 May, and within 40 minutes all helicopters were in the air and enroute to Fire Support Base Sally to load the 3d and 8th VNMC Battalions, the assault force from Lieutenant Colonel Luong's 369th Brigade.

Six AH-1Gs, two OH-6As, and a UH-1 of the Army's Troop F, 4th Cavalry (Air Cavalry) flying from Hue/Phu Bai provided armed escort. Brodie commented that the transport helicopters were free to employ whatever evasive maneuvers they felt the terrain and enemy threat presented: "Troop F would adjust their flight paths as necessary to avoid us and attack the targets or areas of potential threat. With our 'jinxing' flight and their escort service, I always thought it looked like snakes crawling through a kettle of spaghetti."¹⁷

The two landing zones received devastating fire from the air and sea. As a result, touchdown in Landing Zone Tango occurred at 0930 without opposition in a cloud of dust and smoke. The Marine helicopters returned to the ships for fuel then flew back to Fire Support Base Sally for the second wave at 1055. As the lead aircraft touched down in Landing Zone Delta at 1136, Major David J. Moore, the squadron executive officer, radioed the "LZ is hot from here on in" as moderate small-arms fire was received. Immediately, the Army commander of the escorting gunships shifted the landing to the southern portion of the

zone. "Troop wave continue . . ." was the order passed to the flight.¹⁸ The enemy hit three CH-46s and Marine airmen left one CH-53 in the zone with a damaged tail rotor. The crew of the downed Sea Stallion returned to the ship with the other helicopters, having had to destroy the aircraft to prevent its capture. Colonel Sumner A. Vale, the 9th MAB chief of staff, recalled "We received the report that one was down due to mechanical problems and it was known what the problem was . . . The squadron wanted to go in to repair it or lift it out." General Miller denied the request because of the tactical situation.¹⁹

During the day's fighting, U.S. Marine helicopters flew 18 wounded Vietnamese Marines to Hue and also delivered supplies from FSB Evans. The 9th MAB's naval gunfire spot element of Detachment Bravo, HML-367, flew support for the landing from the USS *Denver*. By 1250, the assault was complete and the 9th MAB Marines were back on ship. One brigade helicopter was lost, another crashed at sea, and a single squadron Marine was wounded by enemy fire.²⁰

Once on the ground, the two VNMC battalions swept south and attacked toward the My Chanh River. Shortly thereafter, the 9th VNMC Battalion crossed the My Chanh and attacked north toward its two sister battalions. The *66th NVA Regiment* was caught completely by surprise. Captain Richard W. Hodory, assistant battalion advisor to the 3d VNMC Battalion, landed with one of the assault companies. As the Marines debarked from their helicopter the enemy released heavy automatic weapons fire. Captain

Armed helicopter escort was provided by U.S. Army air cavalry units operating from Da Nang and Hue-Phu Bai. This is a Bell AH-1 Cobra gunship flying over the flat, sandy, coastal plain in support of operations with the American and Vietnamese Marines.

Marine Corps Historical Collection





Department of Defense Photo (USMC) A800663

Other American support arrived in the form of new weapons to counter the armor threat. Here a Vietnamese Marine commander and American advisor supervise the installation of the TOW wire-guided antitank missile launcher. Though effective to 3,000 meters, the system was considered too heavy to be manpacked by the individual Vietnamese.

Hodory moved with the Marines as they assaulted across 400 meters of open rice paddies toward an entrenched enemy. This aggressive action drove the NVA from their positions, but as the Marines consolidated, heavy enemy mortar, automatic weapons, and small arms fire began raking the area. Captain Hodory immediately called for and controlled supporting artillery fire. In the face of this fire the enemy broke as the Marines counterattacked. Hodory then called for air strikes and naval gunfire, inflicting severe casualties on the withdrawing forces, and earning himself a Bronze Star Medal.²¹ As the battalion then marched south to link up with the 9th VNMC Battalion, it uncovered large quantities of combat equipment and freed more than 150 civilians who had been detained by the enemy.

Although the operation lasted only one day, Song Than 5-72 worked. The Marines owed much of this success to the element of surprise and to the heavy fire support. Elements of the division FSCC had displaced to the brigade command post at Phong Dien to support the attack. The U.S. Air Force representative directed tactical air support from the main divi-

sion FSCC. Major Golden, MR 1 naval gunfire officer, flying over the battle area, and three ANGLICO spot teams moving with the ground elements, controlled naval gunfire and ARVN artillery. The joint efforts resulted in reports of 240 NVA soldiers killed, three enemy tanks destroyed, and two 130mm guns put out of action.

The North Vietnamese React

Stunned by this attack at the rear, the NVA quickly rallied and, on 21 May, mounted a full-scale armor and infantry attack on the My Chanh Line. Contrary to what Colonel Lan and his staff had expected, the NVA attacked due south down the coastal highway, Route 555, moved across the My Chanh River, and penetrated Brigade 369's defensive area. The Regional Force troops fell back, exposing the flanks of the 3d and 9th VNMC Battalions. Vulnerable to the overwhelming armor threat, both battalions withdrew. After an all-day fight, however, the two battalions, assisted by close air strikes and ARVN armored cavalry, began pushing the enemy back towards the My Chanh River. The Marines had suffered heavy casualties, but by nightfall, had restored the line. The ene-

my remained determined to gain a foothold on the south bank of the river.

At 0100, 22 May, the NVA launched a tank-infantry attack against the 3d VNMC Battalion. They had the initiative and could "smell blood," one American advisor reported.²² The numerically superior force, supported by 25 tanks, overran the forward battalion, but not before the Marines had destroyed eight tanks with M72 LAWs and direct fire from 105mm howitzers. Continuing their attack through the early morning darkness, the enemy penetrated deeply into friendly territory, hitting VNMC Brigade 369's command post at first light. Inside the command bunker was Major Robert D. Shoptaw, an advisor with the division staff, who recalled Major Regan R. Wright, the brigade artillery advisor, "getting a crash course on how to fire the LAW from a young Vietnamese Marine." The brigade advisor, Major Robert F. Sheridan, directed Major Donald L. Price to see if the newly arrived antitank weapons could be used. A U.S. Army sergeant fired the TOW (tube-launched, optically-tracked, wire-guided) missile system from atop the command and control center bunker. Vietnamese Marines cheered as a PT-76 burst into flames and then as a second missile demolished a heavy machine gun nest. This action marked the first time the ground TOW system had been fired in combat.²³ Five enemy armored vehicles came within 400 meters of the command post before being destroyed. By 0930, a total of 10 tanks and armored personnel carriers had been destroyed. As the 8th VNMC Battalion counterattacked, the enemy fled the battlefield, leaving their dead and wounded. The NVA had paid a heavy price and gained nothing; the My Chanh line was intact.²⁴

Operation Song Than 6-72

The VNMC's next offensive action, a spoiling attack, took place using the 4th, 6th, and 7th Battalions of VNMC Brigade 147. This time, the Marines used both surface and vertical assaults. From planning to execution, the amphibious assault took less than 36 hours. On 23 May, the 7th VNMC Battalion and its advisors moved by truck to the Tan My naval base where it boarded landing craft for the short trip to the ships of the U.S. amphibious force—the *Schenectady* (LST 1185), *Manitowoc* (LST 1180), and *Cayuga* (LST 1186), and the *Duluth* (LPD 6).

*G-4 advisor Major Robert D. Shoptaw, noted, "Since the TOW was large and the Vietnamese were small, they didn't favor it. This was the same attitude they harbored about carrying 81mm mortars. Despite the field advisors pleas . . ." efforts were made to obtain vehicle-mounted systems.



Department of Defense Photo (USMC) A800643
South Vietnamese load an American landing craft mechanized (LCM) at Tan My naval base northeast of Hue. These "Mike" boats took them to the amphibious ships of the Seventh Fleet for surface assaults on the Communist flank. The boats were manned by sailors and Marines of the amphibious forces.

The VNMC G-3 operations officer, Lieutenant Colonel Do Ky, and a small division staff went on board the *Blue Ridge* with Colonel Lan to coordinate the assault. The amphibious assault, known as Operation Song Than 6-72, was conducted with VNMC Brigade 147 Headquarters serving as landing force headquarters. Detailed planning and close coordination were required with Brigadier General Edward J. Miller and his 9th MAB, the U.S. Navy amphibious ships of ARGs Bravo and Charlie, the American B-52 Arc Light strikes, and the largest assembly of naval gunfire support ships in the Vietnam War. Early on the next morning, the VNMC Division's combined surface-helicopter assault took place at Wunder Beach—the former "Street Without Joy" area, a few miles southeast of Quang Tri City.

On the *Cayuga* and the *Duluth* the Vietnamese Marines were assigned to boat teams and lined up on deck in order. The Vietnamese Marines stayed in place until called away to load the amphibian tractors. Final coordination and briefings were completed by the Vietnamese and American assault units. Major Walter

E. Boomer, with the 7th, recalled that the most of the Vietnamese Marines had never made an amphibious landing before, and spent the night on the open flight decks of the landing ships.²⁵

As the Vietnamese stretched out along the deck and ate their evening meal, curious U.S. Marines came over and struck up conversations in halting phrases. Some advisors, Vietnamese Marines, and American Marines of the landing force had served together previously. As old acquaintances were renewed, the Vietnamese invited the Americans to come along with them for the assault: "Together they would kill many Communists! Sat Cong!" Ritual landing preparations continued throughout the amphibious task force, undertaken with the routine of an exercise, creating a feeling of life imitating art for those not actively in-

involved in the landing. Yet previous enemy artillery hits on naval gunfire ships and resistance to the first helicopter landing showed the Communists could and would inflict damage offshore.

The landing began the next morning, 24 May, with artillery, air, and naval gunfire strikes on Red Beach and Landing Zone Columbus. Lifting off the *Okina-wa* at 0750, the helicopters of HMM-164 headed towards Tan My to pick up the VNMC assault troops. Elements of the 4th and 6th VNMC Battalions met Lieutenant Colonel Hertberg's aircraft on a highway which served as the pick-up zone. Loading some 550 Vietnamese Marines, the helicopters took off for their objective.

The LSTs launched 20 amphibian tractors, with Marine crews and VNMC assault troops, from a release

A landing craft approaches the open stern of an amphibious transport dock (LPD) where South Vietnamese forces will embark for the Wunder Beach landing. The well deck can accommodate a number and variety of landing craft and allows the transfer of ground combat forces without the more time-consuming and dangerous use of nets and ladders.

Department of Defense Photo (USMC) A800675



point 3,600 yards off Wunder Beach. Watching from the *Cayuga* was company First Sergeant Robert S. Ynacay, who commented "It was a beautiful day for a landing, nice and clear . . ." ²⁶ The LVTs formed into two waves, the first consisting of First Lieutenant John T. Paparone's LVT Platoon, BLT 1/4, and the second by First Lieutenant Robert L. Williams' LVT Platoon, BLT 1/9. As the "Amtracs" closed within 2,000 yards of Red Beach a final B-52 Arc Light placed a string of bombs down the length of the beach, raising a curtain of fire and sand. The tractors hit the beach at 0832 and were met by scattered NVA infantry and artillery fire. Lieutenant Williams commented:

We approached the beach as the first mortar rounds went off. As soon as they hit, a Vietnamese Marine tried to crawl up my leg and out the hatch. We beached, dropped the ramp, and literally threw Marines out the hatch. ²⁷

As the Vietnamese Marines consolidated and moved off the beach behind continuing air support and naval gunfire, the U.S. Marines turned their amphibian tractors into the water and returned to the ships. It was the first combat experience for nine of every 10 Americans involved.* While launching the surface assault, the *Duluth* and the *Cayuga* were fired upon by a NVA artillery battery. The destroyer USS *Hanson* (DD 832) immediately joined the other gunfire support ships in returning fire and silenced the NVA battery. ²⁸ On the *Duluth*, BLT 3/4's Lieutenant Colonel William R. Von Harten remembered that the ship "made black smoke and we got the hell out of shore fire range." ²⁹

Initial reports from the landing force indicated that the 7th VNMC Battalion had secured its immediate objectives, killing at least 50 Communist troops in the process. As they quickly moved over the sand dunes to the south, the Marines encountered only token resistance from the surprised enemy. Later field messages reported large amounts of enemy weapons, ammunition, and food caches captured.

At 0940, 18 CH-46 and CH-53 helicopters from HMM-164 lifted elements of the 4th and 6th VNMC Battalions into Landing Zone Columbus near Quang Tri City at the road junction of Routes 555 and 602. Artillery smoke was laid west of LZ Columbus to screen the helicopter movement from enemy artillery fire and the Army air-cavalry division gunships marked the zone with suppressive fires. No enemy fire was encountered by the Marine helicopters as the Vietnamese Ma-

*A combat cargo officer had initially refused to issue contingency ammunition (L Form) to the "Amtrackers" until overruled by the BLT 1/9 commander of troops on the ship, Captain Dennis R. Kendig, who cited the authority of "common sense." (Kendig Comments)



Marine Corps Historical Collection

While the amphibious assault was underway, other Vietnamese forces were carried into the attack by HMM-164. LtCol James A. Poland, a division staff advisor, uses hand signals to guide CH-46s to the highway landing zone established to pick up the Marines.

rines unloaded. Soon after landing, however, both battalions made heavy contact with elements of the 18th NVA Regiment, 325th NVA Division.** Two enemy soldiers captured by the Marines stated that their regiment had just arrived in the area in preparation for an attack on the My Chanh Line.

All the battalions of Brigade 147 returned to the My Chanh position, terminating the second offensive action by the VNMC. For the second time in 11 days, Vietnamese Marines supported by the 9th MAB and Task Force 76 effectively countered the Communist threat to Hue. In addition to the two prisoners of war, 369 enemy were believed killed, three tanks were destroyed, and more than 1,000 civilians were freed from Communist control. ³⁰

While VNMC Brigade 147 was engaged on the coast, the NVA executed an attack of its own. ³¹ One day after the landing, at 0530, 25 May, a numerically superior NVA tank-infantry force hit Brigade 258 in the western portion of the VNMC division's large area of responsibility. The regimental-size enemy force made a stubborn attempt to break the My Chanh Line.

**325th NVA Division: 18th Infantry Regiment; 95th Infantry Regiment; and 101st Infantry Regiment.