#### **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

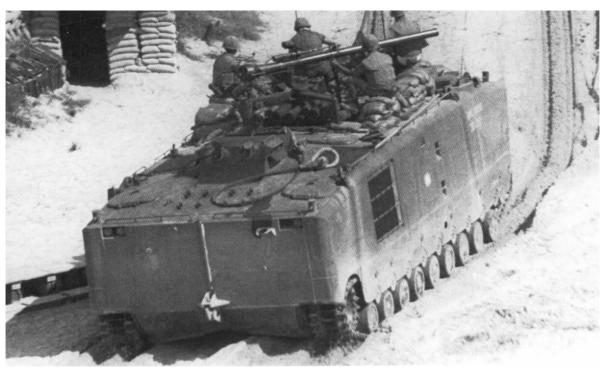
By the time of Tet, Operation Checkers had ended and at Da Nang the situation was precarious. With the departure of the 5th Marines, there was only one Marine infantry regimental headquarters in the extensive Da Nang tactical area of operations. Colonel Ross R. Miner's 7th Marines with all three of its 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 Battal-

ion—Company L, 3d Battalion, 5th Marines and Company H, 2d Battalion, 7th Marines—to cover its extended area.<sup>1</sup>

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 Kv 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."

## 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 Huev 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

<sup>\*</sup>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

<sup>\*</sup>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 Ciry 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.1400

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

<sup>\*</sup>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.

<sup>\*\*</sup>Colonel Broman C. Stinemetz, who as a lieutenant colonel, commanded the 1st Reconnaissance Battalion, telated that "in preparation for the Tet stand-down the 1st Recon Battalion deployed the largest number patrols ever at one time. These coveted 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. Stinemetz, 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 head-quarters.\* According to Murray, ". . . from then on until Tet was over, there were just constant attacks." <sup>16</sup>

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 Tiensha 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



<sup>\*</sup>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.<sup>18</sup>

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.<sup>20</sup>

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.<sup>25</sup>

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 head-quarters 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,

<sup>\*</sup>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 hattle 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."<sup>27</sup>

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

<sup>\*</sup>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 subsector 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.<sup>29</sup>

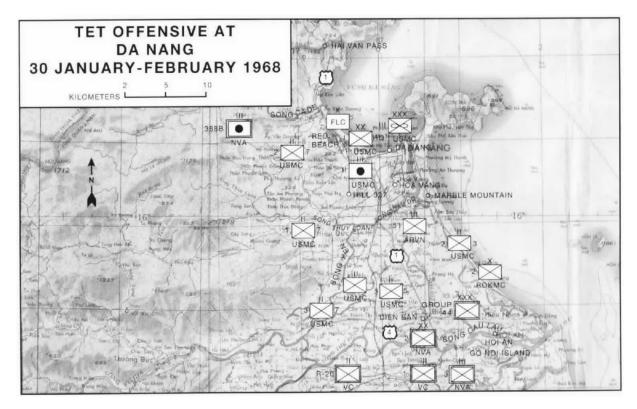
The Korean Marine Brigade deployed six companies around the city and the South Vietnamese 51st Regiment prepared a reaction force. In addition, the 1st Marine Division alerted one company to participate in the relief of Hoi An, if needed. According to Communist documents, captured later, the two VC assault 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-

<sup>\*</sup>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.<sup>32</sup>

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.<sup>34</sup>

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.<sup>35</sup>

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.<sup>37</sup>

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,

<sup>\*</sup>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.

<sup>\*\*</sup>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."<sup>38</sup>

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.<sup>40</sup>

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 mortarman 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.<sup>41</sup>

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.<sup>43</sup>

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 wellconcealed 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.<sup>46</sup>

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.<sup>47</sup>

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.<sup>49</sup>

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.<sup>54</sup>

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." The two Marine aircraft groups at Chu Lai, MAG–12 and MAG–13, sustained 3 fixedwing 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. Countermortar 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

<sup>\*</sup>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).

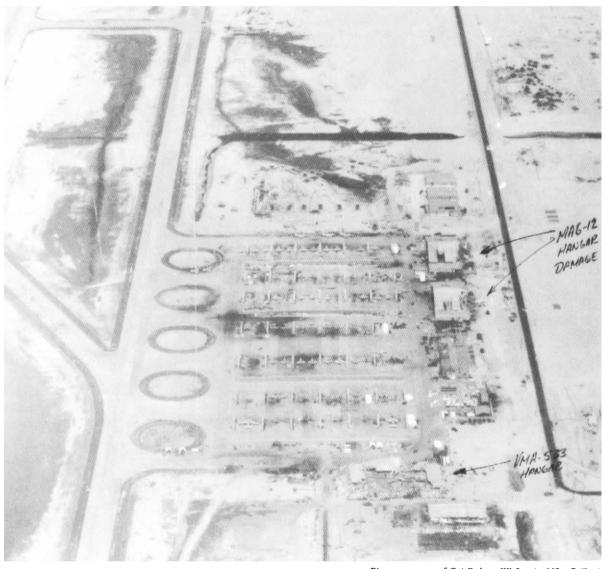


Photo courtesy of Col Robert W. Lewis, USMC (Ret) Chu Lai airfield is seen in an aerial view after the rocket attack. Note arrows pointing out damage to aircraft hangars at the base.

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

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

<sup>\*</sup>Mike McDonell, 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 McDonell, Comments on draft, dtd 22Nov94 (Vietnam Comment File).



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.<sup>60</sup>

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 Tiensha 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 Lat 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.<sup>65</sup>

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 socalled 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.<sup>68</sup>

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.<sup>73</sup>

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.<sup>74\*\*</sup>

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

<sup>\*</sup>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.

<sup>\*\*</sup>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.<sup>75</sup>

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

<sup>\*</sup>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.<sup>78\*</sup>

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.<sup>79</sup>

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.<sup>81</sup>

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

<sup>\*</sup>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."

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\*\*

<sup>\*</sup>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.

<sup>\*\*</sup>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

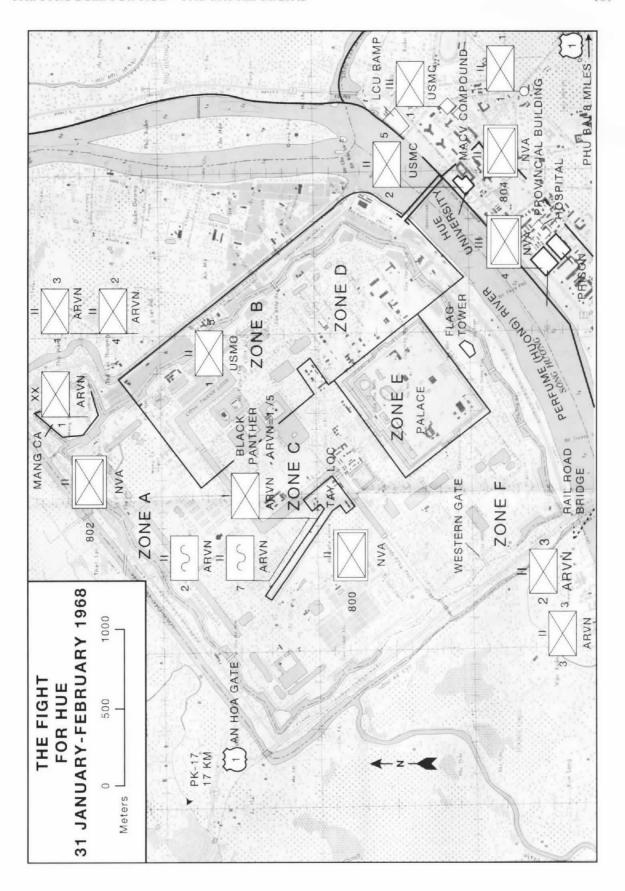
\*Peter Braestrup, then the Saigon Bureau Chief for the Washington Post, observed that this informal truce only applied to Hue. Peter Braestrup, Comments on draft, n.d. [Jan95] (Vietnam Comment File).

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



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.<sup>2</sup>

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.<sup>3</sup>

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.



<sup>\*</sup>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."

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.

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.<sup>11</sup>

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.<sup>13</sup>

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-

<sup>\*</sup>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.<sup>15</sup> 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.<sup>16</sup>

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.<sup>18\*\*</sup>

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.<sup>19</sup>

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.<sup>20</sup>

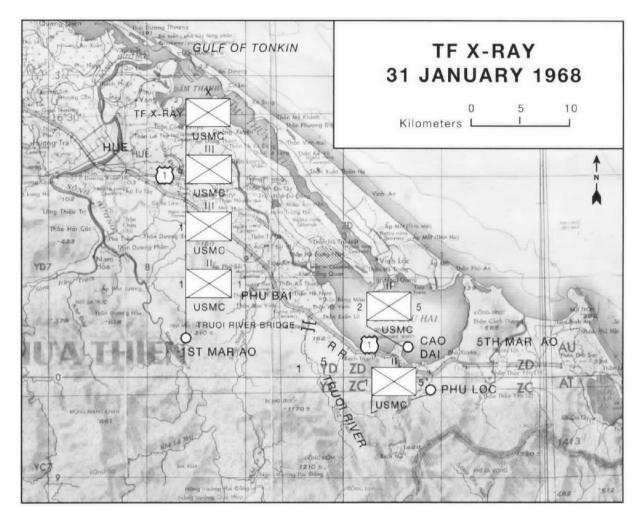
At that point, about 1930, Lieutenant Colonel Robert P. Whalen, the 1st Battalion commander, sent his Company B to relieve the Recon team. As the relieving company approached the ambush site, they heard Vietnamese voices, movement, and someone threw a grenade at them. In return, the Marines hurled grenades 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.<sup>21</sup>

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-

<sup>\*</sup>See Chapter 6 for the establishment of Task Force X-Ray at Phu Bai.

<sup>\*\*</sup>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.

<sup>\*\*\*</sup>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.



pany from the railroad tracks which paralleled the road with both automatic and semi-automatic weapons, killing one Marine and wounding three. After the initial burst, the NVA broke contact and the Marine company secured a landing zone to evacuate the wounded. Company F then returned to the 2d Battalion perimeter.<sup>22</sup>

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.<sup>23</sup>

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 Batalion 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 rousted 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." <sup>28</sup>

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,

<sup>\*</sup>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.

<sup>\*\*</sup>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.

<sup>\*\*\*</sup> 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.

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.<sup>29\*</sup>

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 21year 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.

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

<sup>\*</sup>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).

<sup>\*\*</sup>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 . . . ."<sup>32</sup>

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.<sup>33</sup>

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.<sup>34\*</sup>

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

<sup>\*</sup>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 then 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\*

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." \*\*\* 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." <sup>39</sup>

<sup>\*</sup>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 ltt, 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).

<sup>\*\*</sup>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).

<sup>\*\*\*</sup> 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."

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.



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.<sup>2</sup>

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."<sup>3</sup>

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.<sup>5</sup>

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 fixedwing 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.<sup>7</sup>

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

<sup>\*</sup>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 Itr 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." 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.

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.<sup>12</sup>

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."<sup>13\*\*\*</sup>

<sup>\*</sup>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.

<sup>\*\*</sup>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, Dec 94.



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.<sup>14</sup>

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.<sup>15</sup>



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.<sup>17</sup>

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."<sup>18</sup>

#### 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.<sup>20</sup>

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.<sup>21\*\*</sup>

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.<sup>22</sup>

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 roomto-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

<sup>\*</sup>The M72 LAAW was a 66mm single-shot rocket-propelled antitank 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.

<sup>\*\*</sup>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.

<sup>\*\*\*</sup> 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.<sup>24</sup>

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



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



<sup>\*</sup>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 A371216

A Marine 106mm recoilless rifle team set the weapon on its tripod in one of the Hue University class-rooms, 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 460pound 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.<sup>28\*</sup>

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

<sup>\*</sup>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."<sup>29</sup>

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.<sup>31</sup>

## Block by Block 5–8 February

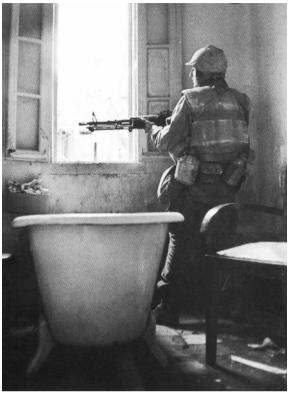
The Marines in Hue began to adapt to the street fighting, so different from the paddies and jungle of the Vietnamese countryside in their previous sectors. As Captain Christmas of the 2d Battalion later observed, "street fighting is the dirtiest type of fighting I know." Although one Marine fire team 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."<sup>32</sup>

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.<sup>33\*</sup>

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

<sup>\*</sup>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

<sup>\*</sup>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 . . . ."<sup>39</sup>

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."<sup>40\*</sup>

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"

<sup>\*</sup>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."<sup>42</sup>

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.<sup>43</sup>

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.<sup>44\*</sup>

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

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

<sup>\*</sup>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.

<sup>\*\*</sup>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.<sup>47</sup>

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

<sup>\*</sup>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).

<sup>\*\*</sup>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.<sup>49</sup>

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. <sup>50</sup>

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 Battalion prepared to cross the Phu Cam and enter a new area of operations south of the city.<sup>51</sup>

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.<sup>53</sup>

#### CHAPTER 11

# 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.

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.<sup>2</sup>

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.<sup>3</sup>

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 antiaircraft weapons "made it impractical and illogical to contemplate an air assault by any unit of the Division, in the close proximity of Hue."

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

<sup>\*</sup>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."

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.<sup>11</sup>

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.<sup>12</sup>

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,

<sup>\*</sup>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 fadvisors to the Vietnamese units there blaving 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

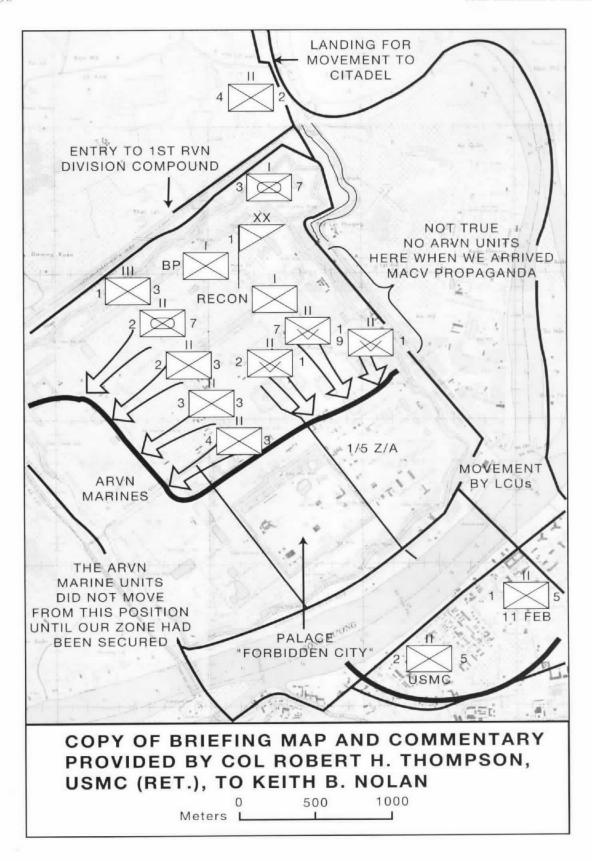
After the briefing, two ARVN soldiers, whom Wells remembered as rangers, escorted the Marine lieutenant and his radioman through the dark streets and alleyways to the ruins of a Buddhist pagoda, about 500 meters west of the Dong Ba tower. Wells recalled it took him about three hours to negotiate the 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

Department of Defense (USMC) Photo A422067

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.





grounds, which separated the Vietnamese and American Marine sectors.<sup>22</sup>

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.<sup>25</sup>

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.<sup>26</sup>

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

<sup>\*</sup>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).

<sup>\*\*</sup>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."<sup>27</sup>

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.<sup>29</sup>

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.<sup>30</sup>

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.<sup>33</sup>

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

<sup>\*</sup>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 Itr 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.<sup>36</sup>

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

<sup>\*&</sup>quot;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."

<sup>\*\*</sup>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.<sup>37</sup>

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.<sup>39</sup>

#### 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.<sup>40</sup>

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-

<sup>\*</sup>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.

<sup>\*\*</sup> 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."<sup>42</sup>

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.<sup>43</sup>

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.<sup>44</sup>

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

